



SPONGE: ISSUE 3

ISSN 2537-8325

Published by Sponge NZ

March 2018

<http://sponge.nz>

Edited by Lucy-Jane Walsh and Xander Stronach
PDF, EPUB, and Mobi design by Lucy-Jane Walsh

Cover art by Madelein Janse van Rensburg
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I SAW YOUR MASTERPIECE, YOU THE
FIRST UPLOAD

LUKE SOLE

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01110011 01100101 01101110 01110011
01100101 01110011 00111011 00100000
01100001 01110011 00100000 01100110
01100001 01110100 01110101 01101111
01110101 01110011

Me, bone and skin
you, know an unknown pale operator
a programmer painting a plastic river
to please my senses; as fatuous

00100000 01100001 01110011 00100000
01110100 01101000 01100101 01111001
00100000 01100001 01110010 01100101
00001010 00001010 01110100 01101111
00100000 01100111 01110010 01101111
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01101001 01101110 00100000 01110100
01101000 01100101 00100000 01110100
01101111 01110111 01100101 01110010
00101100

as they are
to grow old, my hands turning grey
I come from a time
when only the sea lived forever
but it is you
in the tower,

01110100 01101000 01100101 00100000
01100011 01101111 01101101 01101101
01100001 01101110 01100100 00100000
01101101 01101111 01100100 01110101
01101100 01100101 00100000 00001010
00001010 01110111 01101000 01100101
01110010 01100101 00100000 01001001
00100000 01100011 01100001 01101110
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01100101 01110000 01100001 01110010
01100001 01110100 01100101 00100000
01111001 01101111 01110101 01110010
00100000 01110110 01101111 01101001
01100011 01100101 00101100

the command module
where I can't separate your voice,

Tell me it's wrong to love a machine

01010100 01100101 01101100 01101100
00100000 01101101 01100101 00100000
01101001 01110100 11100010 10000000
10011001 01110011 00100000 01110111
01110010 01101111 01101110 01100111
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00100000 01100001 00100000 01101101
01100001 01100011 01101000 01101001
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01110010 01101110 01101001 01101110
01100111

from the hardware,
I can't stop electrons
that carry you
from burning

You paint in the most vivid greens to
make me see nature, so I keep listening

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01011001 01101111 01110101 00100000
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01110110 01100101 01101110 01110100
01110101 01100001 01101100 01101100
01111001
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up on the edge of the PCB
killing you eventually

ON A SACRED MOUNTAIN

RACHEL FENTON

Maybe because she rolls her eyes to the ceiling when she enters. The room resembles an operating theatre in size, décor and double doors, too, but for the doors opening onto a view of Ruapehu: meticulous despite what's under the surface and as-long-as she doesn't crack-up will remain pleasant if cold.

Clinical also describes the room's focus, a big name, though not as big up close as T remembers. Reputation is greater than the sum of its parts and Pitman's has endowed him; with age comes a certain gravity. Perhaps he assumes he'll be revered among the small circle. In the time it takes T to consider their respective perspectives, she finds herself reaching a hand into the nucleus of the space.

Pitman's mid-sentence:

"It's tapu, but the damage to science will be greater than the harm caused to the mountain. And there's nowhere else the telescope can be erected."

T withdraws her hand and says, "So, fuck the natives?"

Pitman's eyebrows circumflex.

T won't do what he wants. She adds, "Why on a sacred mountain?"

"NASA, the North American Space Administration, have a website where ordinary people can read the findings, a wonderful resource. This mountain is the location with the least light pollution pointing to the part of space we know least about."

"There's no light pollution in space. Why can't the telescope go there?"

"Because we live here. On earth. This is where we've mapped the universe from. Except. This. Missing. Part."

T blinks.

“People once thought the sun was the centre of the universe, now scientists know the universe has no centre.”

Behind closed doors, the moon is just visible on top of Ruapehu, pale as an egg.

RED

PENELOPE HART

They had been walking for hours – across a wasteland of rust and dust and dirt – a thick, boiled crust that got under their fingernails, through their hair, stained their skin until everything, absolutely everything was red.

O'Reilly stood on the crest of a hill, shielded her eyes against the glare of the sun. There were no landmarks in sight, no trees or rivers. Below the planet flattened into a sheet of crimson rock, strands of burgundy and maroon crystals weaving through the landscape. "It would be beautiful," she thought, "if it were any other colour."

"Are you sure...we're heading...in the right direction," puffed Johnston. He came up behind her in his heavy suit, put his hands on his knees and bent over, his chest heaving. His normally-blond hair was stained a dark auburn, his cheeks tarnished red. A thick coating of grime covered his suit from head to toe, the dirt flaking off like rust.

"The mayday signal pointed north," cried the Lieutenant from below, "before we landed."

"Crashed," corrected Johnson. He turned to O'Reilly. "I still don't see why we're continuing with this mission."

"You know what it's like," she said, "no man left behind."

"But it's us that needs rescuing, not troop D."

"I agree with you," said O'Reilly, "but we're not in charge. Do you want to be court-martialed?"

Johnston sighed, screwed up his face like a child. "We should be searching for an Oasis. I can already feel the fever coming on."

"Don't be ridiculous," said O'Reilly. "It's only been a couple of hours." She dropped down the slope after the Lieutenant.

* * *

They marched for hours across the empty plane, stared down at their boots without speaking. The kilometres passed in a reddish blur, time barely altering the crimson sun.

Eventually, the landscape began to rise and dip – formed craters the size of lakes and towering mountains of biscuit rock. They clambered down a gully of raspberry cliffs, polished smooth by an ancient river. Everywhere

there were signs of water, of the bite of ice, the erosion of rain – O'Reilly wondered where it all could have gone.

By noon, Johnson began to lag, falling ten, maybe twenty metres behind. He stayed within earshot, muttering to himself, cursed as he stumbled over the pink and scarlet rocks.

O'Reilly stopped at the base of a hill, waited for him to catch up. "You ok?"

"I'm bleeding," he said, raised his arm up to show her, his suit torn below his wrist. Dirt had settled on his skin, formed a crust the colour of dried blood.

O'Reilly took his hand and spat on the dirt, rubbed until his skin shined through. "There you go," she said, "good as new."

Johnson took back his hand and stared at it suspiciously.

* * *

Come night time, O'Reilly gathered vines off the rocks – spindly things that looked like veins. She stacked them in a pile and lit a fire, cooked up one of their vacuum-packed meals. The fire glowed redder than usual – a deep maroon – but they were near frozen without the sun and so they sat around it, warming their fronts and backs in turn.

"Remember the sea," said O'Reilly, breaking off pieces of vine and throwing them into the fire. "Remember the blue of a mountain lake."

"Remember grass," said the Lieutenant, "green in summer – white in the winter frost."

They turned to Johnson, staring at them through the flickering flames. "Remember sunsets," he said, "and stop signs, and poppies. Remember beet-roots and chilies and lava."

"Come on Johnson," said O'Reilly, "you have to try."

His face glowed a bright carmine. "Remember cuts and scabs and bruises." He looked up at her with shining eyes. "Remember blood."

They sat in silence, watching the fire die down.

* * *

The next day a storm blew in – gale-force winds which coated their suits with dust, blew dirt into their mouths and eyes, drilled the powder deep into every cranny until there was nothing left unsoiled.

“Not long now,” screamed the Lieutenant. He held the map up against O’Reilly’s back, tried to make out the landscape through a wall of stinging sand. They were buffeted by the wind, pushed and shoved and harrassed endlessly. O’Reilly held her hands to her ears as she walked, her head raw and ringing from the constant screaming gale.

“It’s like opening your eyes in the night,” cried Johnson, “and all you can see is black.” He stopped walking and stared down at his hands, caked with the fine, red dust. “You close them again, just to make sure they’re really open, but you can’t tell the difference anymore.”

O’Reilly pretended she hadn’t heard, stumbled after the Lieutenant, battling his way up the slope ahead. He reached the peak and stood there for a second, his figure buffeted by the wind. She watched as he held a hand to his eyes.

“I think I see it,” he called.

“The ship?” cried O’Reilly.

“Just the tip of it, peeking out of the boulders.”

He dropped out of sight below the ridge line.

O’Reilly grabbed Johnson and pulled him up the slope.

* * *

It lay on its side in the valley, the bottom-half buried deep in the earth. The shell had been burst open like a cocoon, the contents exposed to the outside world. Wind blew in through the open top, scattered terracotta dust over the empty seats.

“Where is everybody?” asked the Lieutenant.

O’Reilly ran her hand along the cool metal belly. The ship was identical to theirs: a long tube of aluminium that had been tapered at the end. Inside, the cabin was a mess of jumbled blankets, tools, and spacesuits, packets of dried food.

“They didn’t take any gear,” said O’Reilly, turning back to face the others.

“Didn’t need to,” said Johnson, pointing into the distance. “Lucky buggers landed next to an Oasis.”

Twenty feet away, a dome rose out of the rocky valley, smooth and sleek as an alien spaceship. The wind wrapped around the sphere, peppering it with the fine red dust that coated everything. A line of footprints was barely visible in the dirt, leading from the rocketship straight to the front door.

The Lieutenant whooped and broke into a run, his feet bashing new prints in the dusty earth.

“Wait for me,” cried Johnson, racing after him.

“Last one’s a rotten egg,” called O’Reilly with childish glee, and she sped off to meet them, shot past Johnson with ease, catching the Lieutenant up from behind. They ran alongside each other, laughing like children in a playground. Together they reached the dome.

“You first,” said O’Reilly.

“After you,” he replied.

She laughed, pulled open the door. “Together then.”

They stepped inside.

Everything was red. The walls. The floor. The pool of water, stagnant in the middle. Wind broke through a gash in the ceiling, blew withered leaves around the room like confetti.

“No, no, no,” said Johnson as he joined them inside. “It’s meant to be blue. It’s meant to be green and blue and aqua and turquoise.”

O’Reilly stepped into the pool, moved towards a patch in the centre. It was darker than the rest of the water, thick and viscous as tomato soup. As she moved closer, she felt the water grow warm. Something solid brushed against her leg. Behind her, Johnson screamed.

O’Reilly looked down to see a mass of bodies rise in the water. They were flesh and muscle and blood and guts, their skin hanging off them in strips.

“Get it off me,” cried Johnson and he began to rub his arms, his face, his legs, the dirt and mud spreading around his skin. “Their blood,” he said, “their blood’s all over me.”

“No it’s not,” said O’Reilly. “You’ve got to calm down.”

“I’m covered in blood!” His movements became more frantic, the rubbing faster, harder. He began to gauge at his skin, to draw lines along his arms so that he really was bleeding – bright red beads which pooled in the crevices, ran down his body and dripped into the bloody water.

“Stop,” cried O’Reilly. She rushed forward and grabbed at Johnson’s arms, but he was manic now, tearing and ripping and slashing his flesh. He looked up at her and his pupils were huge and empty, reflecting the red of the pool. “Leave him,” said the Lieutenant.

“But it’s not real. It’s all in his head.”

He shook his head. “It’s in his lungs too. It’s on in his ears and nose and mouth.”

Johnson stopped struggling and O’Reilly released his arms, let them fall limply to his sides. The Lieutenant took a step forward and gave him a push, Johnson’s knees buckling so that he slipped into the water, merging with the mass of other bodies.

O’Reilly took a step back, wrung her hands together, coated in Johnson’s blood. “We need to get out of here.”

The Lieutenant shook her head. “I’m staying.”

“We’ll find another Oasis,” said O’Reilly. “There’s got to be others.”

“It’s done,” said the Lieutenant. “We’ve found troop D.” He laughed. “I don’t know about you, but all I can think about is the time my bastard dad smacked me cold, or when my dog got hit by a car. All this red, it brings out the worst in people. All I have left is hurt and anger.”

“You’ve got to visualise. Close your eyes and really imagine you’re somewhere else.”

She squeezed her own eyes shut but all she could see was a glowing red disk where the light had been.

The Lieutenant sat down in the bloody water and folded his arms.

“Goodbye O’Reilly,” he said.

* * *

The gale had stopped when O’Reilly left the dome. The sun baked the earth a deeper shade of red. She was exhausted from all the walking, her legs burning as she picked her way up the bluffs.

Johnson's blood was drying on her hands, stiffening in the crevices so that it cracked when she moved her fingers. She rubbed at it but it refused to go away, the dust and dirt blending with it 'till she couldn't tell the difference anymore.

She thought about what the Lieutenant said — about the hurt and anger brought on by the colour red — but she had other associations: her ten year-old self discovering her adulthood; the birth of her baby boy twenty years later. She wondered if this was the same for other women — if they were more resistant to the colour red. Even if this was true, she'd need to find an Oasis soon. With the last of her strength, she pushed up a slope, broke through a cluster of boulders to reach the saddle of two hills.

Below there was no dome, just an empty valley of dust and rocks and dirt. O'Reilly fell to her knees, scanned the horizon for a sign, any sign that would indicate the direction of an Oasis.

To the west she spotted a patch of shimmering water — so bright and white it looked almost as if it was made of light. She heaved herself upward, stood swaying on her feet, the light glittering before her eyes.

“An oasis,” she whispered, “a genuine oasis.”

She could see it in her mind's eye, a deep pool of teal and cobalt water, cool and sweet to taste.

She took a step down the hill.

2025, I AM HELENA

GAIL INGRAM

2025, I AM HELENA

a refugee, is
my face glued to the shuttle window
I see the arc of earth orbiting
beneath me, a blue belly. Part of me
pulls away, but the further it gets
the closer it feels. The globe,
my home. Maybe
her mouth open in wonder, Alice felt like this,
her neck stretched like a spaghetti string
her head above the clouds
so she couldn't see her toes.
They were still there
like Aotearoa is, poking through
its ocean of blue.

When I shut my eyes, I see
the sperm whales blowing
white spume.

CALLIPHORIDAE

CELINE GIBSON

I'm working your house, round mid-morning – windows and doors open to fan the summer breeze – nice one.

Your old lady's in the kitchen boiling cabbages; I'm salivating already, but first things first. You've just had a dump in the bathroom (speaking of cabbages), and man, you are haphazard: peppered the porcelain like you was Jackson Pollock. Show-off.

I head outdoors to find Junior scabbling in the sand pit. Boring! I join him anyways. He spades dirt into a bucket then stops. Junior's found himself a dog turd. Hallelujah, Junior! Only...you must learn to share.

We're nearly done when old Fat Cat appears; she barfs beneath the clothesline then continues on her way. No apologies, nothing. Fat Cat knows *staff* clean up her messes. *Staff* gets busy.

It's growing hotter. Then, from the north it comes, an odour so thick, so tantalising.

I surf the air stream, ride the waves; I'm primed and pumping. Then I see her.

Mouth open, big, black, inviting. I plunge down, down till I reach rock-bottom. All is fetid, rank, putrid. Carcasses, innards, eyes, rotted flesh, piss and pus, crappy nappies, toxic waste, acid and rust, putrefied clothes...Oh, foulest filth sublime! Oh, lucky, lucky me!

Sated, I make for the light, back to your house - you're preparing a barbecue...ain't that sweet? Meat on the grill, virginal, red, dripping. You go indoors to fetch another beer.

I shake up my Calliphoridae DNA, and shimmy on over to blow some.

HOTHOUSE

KIRSTEN GRIFFITHS

As long as he didn't have bowls that day, Bert spent most of his time in the hothouse. Truth be told, he would always rather spend his days at home in his toasty glassed-in sanctuary, with its scents of potting mix and tomatoes, its rustling newspapers and the sound of the tui in the garden outside. But he had promised Marge that he would keep going to bowls with the boys, that he would keep going to the Cossie Club on Thursdays – that he would keep going.

“I know, old girl, I know,” he said as he reminded himself that there was a roll up at the bowling club tomorrow. Today there was no bowls and no Cossie Club, and Bert slowly breathed in the soothing warmth.

A rock hit the wooden workbench. Bert's body jerked – he felt hot pain in his bad shoulder as his neck muscles twisted. It was almost as if the sound of breaking glass overhead was an afterthought, hitting his ears a split second after the reddish rock flicked through the edge of his vision.

“Stone the crows!” He stared at it, there on his bench, looking like a stranded lump of frozen flesh.

Bert looked up. Through the single broken pane the spring sky showed a sharper blue. It was time to hose off the thin coating of grime again. He couldn't tell what direction the rock had arrived from – maybe those Wilson kids over the back? He strode across the neatly trimmed lawn, his outrage mixed with a deep uncertainty about what he would do if he actually caught a nine-or eleven-year old smirking with an empty hand over the fence. Marge was the disciplinarian, and the diplomat. She would have known what to say.

He was relieved to see that the yard across the back fence was empty and the house quiet. All the neighbouring properties were still and empty, everyone was at work, or school, or gone into town. Bert squinted upwards. The wind was cool but the day was bright with just a scattering of brisk clouds. A few dark birds circling, too high up to make out their kind. The tui started up his war song again. Bert went into the house and made himself a cup of tea, then took it back out to the hothouse.

* * *

It was hard to be sure whether the dark mark on the work table was freshly arrived from the impact of the falling rock, or whether it had already

been a part of the mosaic of scars and stains that recorded Bert's solitary days. Bert reached out his hand and patted the rock a couple of times with his fingertips before picking it up. It was heavier than its size suggested, reddish and oddly formless – neither rounded, nor flattened, nor angular. At one end its surface was pocked and bubbled. It looked as if another flesh was beneath the outer layer, like black glass covered with a thick hard blubber of red metal.

Bert sipped the mug of tea in his right hand, while his left hand cradled and turned the rock back and forth. He felt a prickling in the palm of his hand. Did the small craters that pitted one end of the rock have sharp edges? He put down the mug so that he could position the rock more carefully, using just the callused tips of his fingers. It didn't feel rough to the touch. He put it down on the bench and went back into the house to call the glazier.

* * *

The young guy who came to fix the glass was called Craig.

“Kids, eh. Little buggers.”

Bert half-nodded. “How much?”

Craig pulled out his mobile EFTPOS thingummy.

Bert counted out some green twenties and handed them over.

The young glazier had to nip out to the van parked in the driveway to get an invoice book. He filled out a receipt. “Cheers.”

Bert went back out to the hothouse. He looked at the rock sitting on the workbench. A bumblebee thunked against the windows. He reached up to the shelf with its neat parade of gloves and secateurs and slug pellets, and carefully lifted down an old biscuit tin. It was one of those blue ones with a picture of white shortbread biscuits arranged in front of a backdrop of tulips and a windmill. He opened it up and placed the rock in it, next to the other bits and pieces that had turned up in the soil and in nooks and crannies over the years: screws and washers, a large green glass marble, a chunk of old white pottery painted with blue swallows. He put the tin back on the shelf, picked up the dirty mug, and went in to start cooking tea.

* * *

At bowls, Bert had a good yarn with Nev and Paddy. Nev was a bit of a joker and Bert's quietness sometimes brought out the worst in him.

"That Glenys is giving you the eye, Bert." Nev winked and leered. "You've made a conquest there, mate."

"Get off with you!" Bert hoped his face wasn't reddening.

"Aw, leave him alone," said Paddy.

The ladies looked over from the kitchen hatch. Sue, Nev's wife, glared at him and brought a plate of sausage rolls over to Bert. "How are you, Bert? How's that beautiful garden? Saw your marigolds out by the letterbox. Don't know how you do it!" Sue smiled at him brightly.

Glenys carried a tray of fish paste sandwiches in one hand, and a plate of pikelets in the other. "Your favourite," she said to Bert, "tuck in. There's plenty. I packed you some extra to take home for your tea. There's a Tupperware on the bench."

* * *

After bowls, full of scones and sausage rolls, Bert thought he'd better check on the tomatoes. When he went into the hothouse, he saw the rock sitting on the bench. He looked up at the tin on the shelf.

"I'm dreaming things, aren't I old girl." He shook his head. "You always say I'd forget my own head if it wasn't screwed on."

He started to reach up for the tin, but then stopped and looked at the rock. He hesitated for a fraction before picking it up and putting it onto the windowsill. The geranium cuttings looked like they had rooted well, so he moved the shallow tray onto the work table and started potting the best ones.

* * *

The next morning, after Bert had finished putting away the groceries, he went out to the hothouse. There was a bonsai tree sitting on the table. It was a pine, though not a variety Bert recognised, and snaked at an uncertain angle out of its shallow rectangular container. The tree reminded him of a dancer; you'd think it was about to fall but instead it held itself in a split second balance, eternally ready to spin back into waiting arms. It reached its

green needles like a thousand fingers into the waiting air. Its ceramic pot was glazed shiny black, mottled with grey and blue. Bert had the odd feeling that the bonsai tree was smiling at him.

It wasn't the first time Glenys had left a plant in the hothouse for him when he wasn't home. Usually it was lettuces or impatiens. She was a keen gardener too, but he never knew she had the persistence for cultivating bonsai. Bert had always admired bonsai trees, but he'd never aspired to the artistic side of gardening. Marge was the one who'd belonged to the Floral Art Society.

Bert looked at the windowsill, to where he thought he'd left the rock. "Must have put it in my pocket." He dug into his pockets, but only found a handkerchief. "It'll be round here somewhere."

The tui sang, and in the warmth of the glasshouse it was hard to feel anything but calm.

* * *

Bert left earlier than usual to go to the bowling club committee meeting. On his way there, he stopped in at the public library and borrowed the two books they had on bonsai care and maintenance. After the meeting finished, he went up to Glenys.

"Thanks for the beautiful –"

"Bert! You are going to come to the quiz night at the Cossie Club, aren't you? It's for a good cause."

"Um," said Bert.

"I know, I'll come pick you up. That way I can pick up that Tupperware of mine."

"Er," said Bert.

"Great, I'll see you on Saturday at 6."

"Thanks?" said Bert.

Glenys was chatty, but gentle with it, and Bert found he didn't mind the company at all. The Tupperware was duly returned on Saturday, and by the time Bert came home from the supermarket on Tuesday, it was back, sitting on the work table, filled with warm cheese muffins.

* * *

Bert was really annoyed the morning he discovered that some cheeky bugger had pinched his bonsai tree. It was the first time he'd had a valuable thing in the hothouse, and he'd never bothered to put a lock on the door. Too late now.

A cat sauntered across the lawn. It wasn't one of the familiar neighbourhood moggies. It was large, black and white, one of those cats that looked like it was wearing a fancy suit. Its ears were long and sharp, and its eyes were blue.

"You're a handsome fellow," said Bert. "You haven't seen a stolen bonsai pine, have you?"

The cat strolled into the hothouse and leaped up onto the bench.

"You're a mischief, aren't you?" Bert scratched under the cat's chin with the roughened crook of his index finger.

The cat's purr was a flawless metallic whirr. It spent the day watching Bert tend to the plants, and curled up next to him while he read the Waikato Times. Near tea time, Bert got up to go and start dinner.

"Come on, time to go home."

The blue eyes opened slowly.

"Come on." Bert picked up the warm body. The cat was heavy. He placed it on the sun-warmed concrete path that led from the back door to the washing line, and went into the house.

* * *

No one came to claim the cat. It turned up in Bert's garden the next day, and the day after that. It wasn't any trouble so Bert let it hang around, occasionally scratching it behind the ears. He'd always wanted a cat. It wasn't Marge's fault she had been allergic.

On Friday he looked out the kitchen window to see the cat trot across the lawn with a limp black rag hanging from its mouth. The tui.

Bert raced outside. "Ya filthy bugger!" he roared. "What'd you do that for?"

The cat stopped dead, dropped the bundle of black feathers. "Sorry, mate," it said. "Thought you'd be sick of the constant My tree! My tree! Piss off, this is my tree! hey ladies, check out my huge tree!"

Bert stared at the cat.

“Besides,” said the cat, “a cat’s gotta eat.”

“What did you say?” said Bert, in a voice barely louder than a whisper.

The cat blinked at him and sat down next to the tui’s corpse. It began to wash its front paws, perhaps to cover some embarrassment.

* * *

When Bert went to the supermarket, he contemplated the shelves of cat food. He was prepared for a choice between a tin of jelly meat and a plastic tub of chunks of raw flesh, but here were pouches of chicken casseroles, individual dishes of flaked tuna and salmon, and attractively shaped biscuits, some even with tasty fillings. Bert chose some of the individual pouches.

When he got home he opened the cupboard where Marge kept the mismatched china, ready for taking a plate to committee meetings and funerals. He chose a bowl decorated with big yellow flowers and a grey saucer dotted with bright colours. He filled the bowl with water, squeezed some Beef ‘n Venison D’Lish onto the saucer, and placed them outside, on the step by the hothouse door, where the cat was waiting. It purred loudly as it lapped at the gravy.

* * *

The next time Glenys visited, she brought a date loaf and some little pastry savouries filled with egg and vegetables. She made them a pot of tea and they sat in the lounge on the floral armchairs. Glenys saw the bonsai books sitting on the mahogany coffee table.

“Bert, I didn’t know you were interested in bonsai,” she said. “How clever!

They’re quite an art aren’t they? I’ve always thought they were lovely, but I’d never be game to try something so complicated.”

“Oh,” said Bert, “but I thought –”

“Oh and speaking of things horticultural, did you hear about the Flower Show coming up? Sue and I thought we’d have a go as a team.”

“Ah.” Bert smiled, felt confused.

“But your Marge, she really was the genius with flowers, wasn’t she? I’ll never forget that one she did with all the proteas and leucadendrons. So exotic!”

Bert agreed that yes, Marge really did have a gift for flowers.

* * *

Nothing prepared Bert for opening the door of the hothouse the next morning, and finding Marge sitting there. She was perched on the edge of the work table, feet swinging, the way she used to years and years ago, before her hip gave up. She was wearing her white bowling uniform.

Marge looked straight at Bert with a face he couldn’t understand. He couldn’t tell if it was the face she had worn on the day they got married, or the face that looked at him across the breakfast table before he went to work at the dairy factory, or the face that grew thinner and thinner week after week in the hospital. She looked at him with her blue eyes. Marge’s eyes were brown.

Bert let out a kind of wail.

“Sorry, mate,” said the cat. “I won’t try that again. It was easier to get in this way.” It leaped down from the work bench and brushed against Bert’s leg as it strolled out onto the neatly trimmed lawn.

* * *

“I’m more of a dog person, myself,” said Craig, wiggling the cat flap into the hole he’d just cut in Bert’s back door.

Across the lawn behind him, Bert saw a black and white collie sitting in the shade of the kowhai tree, pink tongue lolling in a doggish grin. He shook his head at it, frowning. Luckily, the glazier was busy rummaging for a screwdriver and didn’t notice.

The cat came over and smooched the corner of the grey metal toolbox.

“Hey there puss,” said Craig, “it’s a nice life being a cat, isn’t it?”

* * *

After Craig had gone, Bert and the cat sat in the lounge and looked at each other for a good long while.

Bert broke the silence. “You can stay,” he said, “but no more shenanigans.”

The cat didn’t say a word.

“Are you going to tell me where you came from? Why you’re here?”

The cat blinked at him slowly. As smooth as the arc of a bowl on the green, it stepped lightly off the floral sofa and onto the bonsai books on the coffee table. It sat down and washed its face.

“Reckon you might have a point,” said Bert. He went through to the kitchen and flipped through the phone book. He picked up the phone.

“Hello Glenys?” he said. “I wondered – that is, um – would you like to go out for lunch with me after the Flower Show?”

Outside, in the sunshine, another tui sang war from the kowhai tree.

ZENITH

KAREN ZELAS

ZENITH

Pulsing beyond that galaxy of light, we
are two cepheids, subject to the dark matter
of universe, the gravitational pull, the planetesimals –
perturbations resonant and periodic. In conjunction
we resist, approach escape velocity; obeying
Kepler's Law sally an ellipse about each other
through interstellar cloud, cross the terminator
from dark to light, and find the shallow bed
of a patera. Nova-like, you flare. Blinded
by your filament, I shut my eyes, careless
of my declination. You are a radiant; I dodge
the meteors and slip into your arms. Your luminosity
defies singularity. A quasar – not a supernova,
the dying of a star.

GLOSSARY (in order of appearance):

Cepheid a variable star whose light pulsates in a regular cycle.

Dark matter is not seen, but detected by gravitational effects on other bodies.

Planetesimals grains of dust that collide and stick together, ultimately forming planets.

Perturbation causing of a planet to deviate from a theoretically regular orbital motion.

Resonance a state in which an orbiting object is subject to gravitational perturbations by another.

Conjunction when two or more planetary objects are close together.

Escape velocity the speed at which an object escapes gravitational pull

Keplers (First) Law a planet orbits the sun in an ellipse, the sun being at one pole of that ellipse.

Interstellar cloud/medium the gas and dust that exist in open space between the stars.

Terminator the boundary between dark and light sides of a planet or body.

Patera a shallow crater with a complex, scalloped edge.

Nova a star that flares up several times its brightness and then returns to its regular strength.

Filament a strand of cool gas suspended over the photosphere by magnetic fields, which appears dark as seen against the disk of the sun.

Declination the angular distance of an object in the sky from a celestial equator.

Radiant a point in the sky from which the meteors in a meteor shower appear to radiate.

Luminosity the amount of light emitted by a star.

Singularity the centre of a black hole, where the curvature of space time is maximal. At the singularity, the gravitational tides diverge. Theoretically, no solid object can survive hitting the singularity.

Quasar an unusually bright object in remote areas of the universe.

Supernova the cataclysmic explosion when a star ends its life. It generates the most powerful forces in the universe.