

The Water Strider by Terence Zhou

By the time she leaves her house, turns and clicks glass pane and flyscreen, it is past ten o'clock. The sun has risen high on Eden, and the tarmac is the colour of crisp honeycomb. The properties enclosing the road are flat and wide, a cascade of Dulux-coated shale that eventuates into open sea.

She is wearing light make-up. It is a perfunctory gesture, one that has simply always been part of her routine here, much like black coffee with one sugar or biannual cancer check-ups. At least she has learnt to don active-wear (already darkened and slippery), leaving the traditional midnight blazer in her office wardrobe.

This is the only part of the day that she has learnt to enjoy, this heat-stinking walk into the town. The streets are muted by wild noises: mating screeches, wind crackling on dry grass. There is no movement in any of the houses. Men had left for the boats and forests before dawn, and the children had already emptied out into the schoolyard. Whoever was left was surely sleeping away, pillowed by the inching shade and plastic fans. This is the only time of the day where Eden feels *light*, like how she first remembers it long ago, a mirage that blossoms into vision as you clock in your sixth straight hour down the Princes Highway, something sharp and vivid that jolts you back to life, that punctuates the abstract blur of blue and brown and dust.

But she soon reaches the used vehicle dealer, smoked and salt-flecked, and now she is at Imlay Street. The dream evaporates. There is the smack of flip-flops across pavement, the faint burn of seawater in the air, cars skid about, and it is all some puzzle that bubbles and froths, but whose answer lies deep, deep inside those whaling waters. Finally, she arrives at her office. Red-bricked. Single-storey. Her name stretched thin and peeling across its roof. She enters.

Right, it's settled then.

No Michael. Pay attention. Settlement is in a month. I still need to check the titles, calculate adjustments, and so on.

Yeah, but look, I got the cash ready to go now.

Just hold onto it.

What if someone nicks it?

Well you can give it to me, and I'll keep it in the trust account.

Michael looks at her in disbelief. He has the physique of an old shed, one that has survived battering storms and hail. Cropped hair, wife-beater and a shark-tooth necklace: he is completely out of place in her simple, monochrome office.

Michael has known her longer than many of the others, but that is not long. He remembers how she had appeared one cold August evening, swept in with the rushing floods that strummed and blew until they retched right back into the sea. Marge's baby daughter. Just shed herself of a bad-egg husband. Don't bother the Tribune none, another refugee from the city. And when Marge soon passed, she remained inside the place. People said it stunk now. Never could shake off the fumes. A few tongues clucked, and the house was removed from the Eden circuitry, the rotating line-up of locations for afternoon baking sessions, bridge games, wholesome quiet.

She sits opposite Michael, absentmindedly doodling circles in her diary. Crowded House stirs from the tabletop radio. She is tired of trying to explain legal principles to men like him. Her law operates with an invisible force, unconsciously shapes paths, pushes and drags along the everyday, is as inescapable and silent as your own breathing. But the people of Eden do not deal with the incorporeal.

She glances at Michael's broad and stock-still frame. No, she has learnt that thick in their blood is still that ancient law between human and nature. The people here have always taken from the land, have always been woodcutters and fishermen. Certainly, their machinery has now grown monstrous, but they are still bound by that biblical promise to uproot earth and plunder the seas. The promise to seize everything that is *heavy*. She imagines that Michael does not coast out on his rust-and-cream trawler every

morning because he enjoys it, or simply because his family have always been fishermen. It is because he needs to be able to feel their mucus-coated weight in his arms, to let his chalky boots impress onto the deck.

And then there is her: a witch who draws up invisible boundaries, then makes a living out of erasing them, duplicating them, transferring them. The conveyance of a seaside cottage is fragile: two signatures and a swap of paper.

No way. This little cheque sticks with me until I can rest these sack-of-shit legs on that damn veranda.

That's fine, I expected as much.

Bloody right you did. That it?

I think so. Thanks for coming in, Michael.

Any time, so long as the air-con keeps at it. You coming to Shaz and Lucas' later?

Don't think I was invited.

Course you were, it's an open thing. They posted it on the FRC Board. Come, it'll be a good lark.

We'll see. But thanks for letting me know.

Aight, cheers.

Michael grabs her hand, his grip hard like stone, and she tries to pull away, but he does not let go. For a moment, he thinks to take her now, just as he takes thousands of skipjacks every morning, just as he feels pleasure seeing solid flesh pressed against the net-mesh. But after a moment, his grip turns into a clumsy handshake, he releases her hand, rises, and walks out of the office.

There are no other appointments today. She lunches alone at her desk. Tomato salad and canned tuna. The office is small but clinical: two cabinets of black folders take up the left wall, and a small painting (oils, dancing women, vaguely European) centres the right. It is the only spot here which is hers. After all this time, she still calls it Marge's house.

How did Marge do it? she wonders. They had both come here for the same reason: tossed aside by callous men and too tired to continue matching the whirring cogs of the city, they had fled south; cowards. Eden was waiting. Beautiful Eden, balanced on the border, as violently enchanting as crumbling cliff-face. Here, in this old world, her mother had replanted herself and flourished. Marge grew flowers, great heaps of waxflowers, birds of paradise, larkspur, and handed them out in the dozens. She opened the doors to visitors and closed the venetian blinds to the sun; poured tea, shared shortcake. Marge had learnt how to grow heavy with the rest of Eden; she has not.

Through the single dusty window, she watches the town languidly roll and flicker in the mid-day heat. Imlay Street, according to her and the government registry. But that name was barely tethered to the town, a road sign floating atop a leaning steel pole. Tourist aid. Directions here took the language of a terrible smattering of history and people – where the old Anglo’s frame was hammered, next to Jimmy’s landing, may his soul rest in heaven, across the Great Swish. Indeed, she felt that everything, from the low-swaying powerlines, the river-wide roads to the green shrubbery, all of it gave the impression of a squashed and deliberate flatness, as if most of the town itself was hidden beneath, burrowed inside cool, loamy earth. Eden is an ancient town, but it is an Australian ancient, which means that its history still echoes and squawks and bleeds into its present, including the loudest voice of them all: *fuck off, strangers*.

She finishes her meal, and neatly tucks the tupperware back inside her handbag. Perhaps she will go to Sharon’s party tonight. She has resolved to die here. At the very least, she should try to ensure that her grave will not be shallow.

The air has cooled now, and the mosquito coils are half-ash, but Shaz still feels hot and pink. Guests clump around the garden; resting on rattan chairs, leaning against poles, trampling half-torched grass underfoot. They spill over a bit to Gary’s, but fences here are low; ornamental. The chatter is loud and harmless.

But Shaz had not expected her to come. She wore some svelte little maxi dress, all pastel and grace. Shaz didn’t appreciate that. But they beamed and hugged, it’s been a while old girl, everyone’s welcome, nah you didn’t need to bring a gift – but then, Shaz thought, leading her in, who does she sit with? Not the women, who at every meet-up

resumed a conversation that stretched back decades, generations. And it would be outrageous to throw her in with the men. So Shaz did what she thought was the only logical thing. She took her to the circle of green plastic chairs by the sunflower patch. There sat the old folk, warm and milky, cups of tea in hand.

She lingers there quietly now. The grandmothers and grandfathers are smile and babble, but they do not know her. They sit as if they have always been there, as if they were the fruit of some prehistoric plant whose roots have long wrapped around Eden's substructures.

She tries to speak, but her remarks are met with deafness, the occasional chuckle. The topics slide into further obscurity: grandsons, neighbouring towns and rust. One of them asks her to fetch her more tea and she obliges. But as she returns with a hot mug, she thinks that their circle has grown tighter, her single chair jutting out of formation.

She feels a cold sweat rise up in her, as if she was evaporating now, to become a spray of evening mist. She digs her heels into the grass and closes her eyes, but the shivering does not stop. It is a damp that forces its way upwards through her inner tunnels, a spout of choking energy that strikes her legs first and then her chest, and she is trying to suppress this, push it down, why won't it stop rising, but the muffling continues to climb and now it clots her ears, so that sound becomes a low, whining abstract –

Hey, you came! What're ya doing back here?

She opens her eyes. It is Michael. He is thick and red-faced, beer in hand.

Sorry, I'm not feeling too well. I'm going home now.

What? No way, bloody cake's coming out.

No, I really can't.

...shit. At least let me drive you back.

It's fine, I'll walk.

Nah, I insist. Don't want some other nasties added to the bill.

She does not reply, but simply stands up and lets Michael lead her to his car. She does not say goodbye to Shaz or the other guests. The party continues to unfurl at its previous tepidity.

She enters Marge's house, and Michael follows her in. Little has changed, he observes. He has flickers of memory: skimming across the hardwood whilst his mum ate scones, a packed kitchen that groaned under its ceramics and china, and of course, the garden, shaped like a huge pinwheel, where the boys would play catch and return home smelling of pollen and feather meal. Without waiting for permission, Michael walks through the rooms. The kitchen is empty now, and the garden razed. But traces of their weight remain: the sunken racks above the dishwasher, the soil tattoo of the flowerbeds. She has tried to replace Marge's presence with lightness, and she has failed.

She leads him to the bedroom, and undresses herself. He removes his shirt and belt, matter-of-factly. She questions herself. She hasn't been thinking straight all day, and her mind is vapour. But as she lies down on the linen, spreads like seeds ready to be sown, she thinks yes, this will be how I obtain entry at last. The bedsheets are kicked onto the floor, and she pulls Michael on top of her.

It begins. Michael is simple and forceful: he continues at his task as if it is routine, the same motions he might use to trawl fish. But she begins to feel that this is not right. She imagined that Michael would transfer his gravity to her, to pump her full of weight, but instead, she feels flattened, as if each motion was shaving away at her, disintegrating her into dust. She realises in horror that it is Michael who is swelling with each stroke, growing rounder and rounder. She wanes as he waxes. He grabs her legs now (are they floating away? she wonders) and begins to grunt in exertion. She has lost her voice, if indeed her tongue is still there, and she feels that she may soon tear apart under Michael's strength, to become adrift like Marge's dandelions – but then Michael finishes.

Within a few minutes, Michael has driven away. Even as he pulls out of the driveway, breathing slightly laboured, he wonders if he had not simply dreamed the whole evening.

At three o'clock in the morning, she leaves the house. The lamplights are anaemic, and there is little boundary between road and bush. She makes her way down the same streets again. There is a forced silence in the air, the collective efforts of an entire town to blanket noise, to preserve the final buffer of sleep before dawn arrives.

She walks past Imlay Street, now quiet and geriatric. She turns right at the box-like Information Centre whose pamphlets she had desperately memorised when she first arrived. Finally, she is on the wharf. The boats are all empty. There is a pen-like carpark to gather up the tourists, and fish-and-chips shops barricade each exit. At the start of the parapets, there is a series of low, pigeon-shitted signs that delineate the history of the whaling town.

She sits down by the edge of the water. She thinks of all the whales, sown-up cases of rumbling muscle, that lie beneath. Powerful, early creatures who stay submerged, bodies whipping against the currents. Even when resting, only the rubbery small of their backs would breach the surface. The first thing she had ever learnt about Eden was that the local orca used to guide fishermen to herds of other whales in exchange for their tongues and lips. I have given away mine as well, she thinks, but the whales still did not come.

She leans forward and exhales. Even during daylight, the water was murky and she could only glimpse wriggles and outlines. Now, it is dark, churning cement. A brutish mass. She will not be able to penetrate it. She is certain: she is so light that she will float on top of the water. She will walk and dance, stamp her feet, and still, the surface will be as unbreakable as concrete. She is the lone water strider floating above the whales.

She steps onto the water.

The wharf is empty when the first fishermen arrive in the next hour, but heavy with the slosh of waves against hulls.