

HELEN GILDFIND

AT KATHARINE'S PLACE

This is her favourite kind of day: dry, but cool, and even from inside this cave of blanket and floor, in this dark dusty space under her bed, she can hear every crisp crackle movement outside. She can hear each blade of grass twitch about, itching with the change, and she can hear every single bird, the biggest and the smallest of them, chitting and chatting, competing with that stupid crow that's wailing over everything like it's about to drop dead. Drama queen, queeny crow. The gums, she can see them. Though she's under the bed and behind the draped blanket, her ears can see their great bursts of leaves rustling up a dry storm out there, a daytime galaxy glittering at the end of each twisted branch. How is it, she wonders, that the flat mat leaves of drought-struck gums can sparkle like that? She can hear the kids next door, playing, yelling; fighting sometimes, laughing sometimes, silent sometimes. Their radio blares more loudly than it should. On Saturday, the father was singing along to David Bowie (*If you say run, I'll run with you...*) and when she'd stuck her head round the side of her cabin and looked up the slope to see just who this fellow thought he was, she only caught sight of the back of him. He was tall and built, hair buzzed short around the back and squared at the top, like an American GI. His checked shirt flapped about him as he wiggled to the tune and the early morning sun made a halo of the blonde hair sprouting out from his bare brown legs. He'd been breaking the law, topping up his pool with the hose like that, and she'd watched the back of him as the stream of water gushed down from between his legs, sparkling, swaying side to side, dancing with him as he sang. She'd laughed out loud, watching him, though she didn't realise till he turned and she'd pulled her head – quick smart – back into the cabin. Today, a weekday, she's thinking he must be home too because the kids would never turn on the Golden Oldies and if it's a weekday why are the kids home? It must be school holidays and how come these

songs are called Golden Oldies when they're from *her* childhood. She must be a Golden Oldie too, a GO. Yes, there he is, she can hear Dad now from her cubby, giving it a burl again, *E-ee-vil wo-man, da da da da da da DA. ... E-ee-vil wo-man*. It's the only line he knows because it's the only line he sings though he hums and dum-di-das the rest of the tune. One of his kids yells out in pain. *Watch it, idiot!* Silence. Then screaming, clattering, tripping, laughing and there's an enormous splash, and another, and another, and another. *E-ee-vil wo-man*.

She pulls the blanket aside like a curtain, and squints across the room and out the window. This is holiday weather. This is the kind of weather that stupefies people, makes their clothes fall off as they wander out into the light, their putrid winter flesh glaring back the bright. This is the kind of cool cool breeze that makes you forget the sun, and before you know it you're burnt so bad that sheets of skin are left stripping off you for weeks. The light, well she doesn't quite know how to describe this light except to say that it is *light*, it sits lightly on things, letting things show themselves up in their every fleck and flicker, each minute detail of each minute animal plant mineral asserting that *it* is the most intricate amazing important building-block of Life Itself. That's the kind of light it is. From under her bed, looking out, she can see every knot and twig and newborn tip, every fly and ant walking on every blight-blistered, edge-chewed gum leaf. She's listening, looking, but she's drifting in and out of sleep till, suddenly, she hauls the covers off the mattress above her, throws them onto the floor and crawls out from the dust trap she's been lying in all morning. No! Can't waste the day! Can't waste *this* day! She gets up, gets dressed and wanders out of her cabin and up to Katharine's place.

People are around, answering phones, organising competitions and publications and meetings. She says hello but she doesn't want to talk. She doesn't know what to say. She musters up her most pensive face and tries to look like a Real Writer whose throbbing mind is 'elsewhere' – which it is – because she is focused on the cookie jar. She hasn't got a cookie jar at home and when people aren't in the kitchen she is filling up her pockets with Kingstons and Scotch Fingers and Monte Carlos. She makes a cup of sweet instant coffee. Hello, Hello. People come and go, and she wanders out of the house and back down the slope of Katharine's garden. She picks between the knee-high weedy things, and trips a zigzag trail to the back fence at the bottom. Three neighbours' gardens frame

Katharine's: one on either side (including the GI's) and one along the bottom at the back. She stands by the bottom yard now, a cookie in one hand, her coffee in the other. She is letting the sun bore into her face and her chest. *Don't do that!* her mother always says, watching her sunning herself when she visits. *You wanna end up with this?* her mother always says, plucking at the loose pink skin on her own neck so that it wobbles and wobbles from side to side, *just like a turkey*. Yes, she'll kill herself sucking up this sun, and these cookies will kill her too, but she likes cookies and sweet cheap coffee and the sun much much more than she fears or loathes papery-skinned, turkey-necked old women.

It's nice, the little cabin she's staying in. She turns and looks back up at it. It's built on stilts, to make up for the slope, so that when she looks out her window she's looking right into the branches of a silver-skinned gum. She feels like she's in a tree house when she's sitting at her big important desk trying to think big important thoughts that she can build into a big important story. And she likes that, sharing her space with the bees (a hive in a sap-weeping wound in the trunk) and the magpies and the occasional moronic galah. Sometimes, there's a black cockatoo or two, and most nights a couple of kookaburras stir the garden up until – if she closes her eyes – she's sure she's in an African jungle with monkeys scream-laughing at each other across the hysterical sweating green. Then there are the twenty-eight parrots that she's never seen or heard of before and for a while there she wondered how everyone knew they'd seen exactly twenty-eight parrots in a tree, or flying overhead. Covertly, she studied people as they pointed them out to one another, 'Look, twenty-eight parrots,' and she'd look too but could only ever see one or two or three of the bright green, black-capped, yellow-collared, blue-tipped things. Then someone explained it to her: *Listen*, they said, pointing to one of the birds in a tree, *there's one twenty-eight parrot, sitting in a tree*. *Oh*, she'd said, *I get it*. *What a stupid name*, she'd said, and the person had got all offended and humphed away.

Down here, at the bottom, looking back up at the cabins and the trees and Katharine's house there's a sudden bluster of barking. Another bloody mongrel. Only yesterday she'd walked up the street and noticed what she'd thought must be another local quirk: a pony in a front yard? She'd stopped to look and the pony rushed at her, barking and snarling and lunging through the slipshod fence: an enormous rottweiler. She's braced now, her eyes searching for the danger, and there it is. Through the holey

wirey neighbour's fence, a barrel-bodied mustard-coloured pint-sized mutt. He's grey in the face, barking like he means it but his tail is giving him away, throwing itself from side to side with every woof woof woof. She clicks her tongue, trying to sound friendly, though maybe, just maybe, she wants to provoke him – tease and torment him – for ruining her peace and it works and he howls up to the sky. *Ahhh-ooooooo*. And again, *Ahhh-ooooooo*. Then he goes back to his tail-beating bark.

The radio suddenly gets louder. Dad's turned it up, shushing the kids because he knows this song (*worn out places, worn out faces*). Perhaps he knows that the cabins backing onto his chicken coop are for writers (*going nowhere, going nowhere*). Maybe that's why he's blaring the music. Maybe he doesn't like writers (*no expression, no expression*). Maybe he'd like to feed writers to the rotty down the road (*no tomorrow, no tomorrow*). Or maybe he's just got a day off and this is his heaven. His heaven: cool wind, a hot sun, a swim, his boys and his Golden Oldies (*And I find it kind of funny, I find it kind of sad, the dreams in which I'm dying are the best I've ever had*). She looks up again at his house and next to the pool's fence she spots them. There they are, a pile of arms and legs tumbling about on a trampoline. A head, another head, a turning of limbs and Dad's head appears for a second then disappears into a mishmash of skin and board-shorts and bum-cracks and chlorine-fluffed hair. Muffled grunts and laughs and hands and feet flying till suddenly they stop and they all just lie there, all belly-flopped and water-bombed out. She tells herself to stop staring and looks across the other way. There, three goaty-looking sheep or sheepy-looking goats in another neighbour's yard. One's white, one's black and one's brown and the white one suddenly gets up and hobbles across to the fence, looking at her. The others follow (they must be sheep) and they just stand there, three old geezers, looking at her with their suedey lips chewing circles round and round and round. The eighties blare on (*it's a very very, mad world. Maaad world*) and that stupid crow careers overhead again, the rise-and-fall of its forever wail of misery tracing curves and arcs in the blue ice sky.

She ignores the stupid sheep (baaaa-d world) and kicks around the soil at her feet. She loves this red soil and wants to understand it, wants to know what makes it red and wants to know if the redness is good for growing anything other than these pretty flowered weeds everywhere. There's some sort of stone broken through it, big palm-sized chunks of white glittery stuff that might be quartz, though she doesn't know a rock

from a stone or a stone from a pebble. Then she spots something lying next to her ugg boot. It looks like a chrysalis. It's grey and dusty. Lines lightly trace up each side, and it's symmetrical but for a tapering off at one end. She picks it up. It feels heavy. She wonders if the caterpillar still needs to come out or if it died in there. She's unsure whether or not to break it open, to see if there are clues inside and she chews a Monte Carlo while working it all out. She holds it, the chrysalis, there in her palm, a contrast next to her half-bitten cookie. From next door, *For Chrissakes Gaz, turn that crap off!* and someone's turned the music down and she looks up from her cookie-chrysalis-palm-held-still-life, up at the trampoline. They are still there, the boys and their dad, sprawled out in the heat so it must be Mum who's had enough. She turns back to her hand, eats the cookie, finishes her sweet cheap coffee and puts the mug on the ground. Hell, she'll open it. It'll be dead, whatever it is. Gently, with the tips of her winter pale fingers, she breaks the chrysalis open. It snaps and crumbles, like a piece of old chalk. But it's not a piece of old chalk. It's an old, dried up piece of dog turd and down by the bottom fence the ancient hound is howling up at her, running circles, laughing his head off. *A turd! A dried up old turd! Woof woof! Gotcha!* Oh well. She thinks of the cookie rubbing shoulders with the turd, there, in her hand. She thinks of the cookie in her mouth. She shrugs.

Enough now. The blistering sun is weak now. Clouds are coming up from somewhere and three magpies have decided that they don't like the upright, two-legged, two-armed, clothed look of her. One swoops down, straight at her face, and then arcs up to a low knotty branch. A warning. The maggie hops about, cocking a red-brown eye at her and she keeps an eye on him as she leans down and picks up her mug. She backs away, turns, and begins walking up the slope. As she walks on and up, the dog quits barking and the sheep settle down on their own patch of dusty red. As she walks on and up, looking, the arms and legs and hands and feet and heads on the trampoline suddenly bounce up and reassemble themselves into a man and three skinny little boys. The radio turns off and it must time for dinner. The boys run inside but the man turns. He's noticed her. She cringes.

He half-waves.

She half-waves back.

Nice day for it. How's the writin' goin'?

She shrugs, embarrassed.

What ya got there? he says, nodding at her hand.

She didn't realise she was still holding it. *A dried-up turd*, she says, palm out and up, towards him, though he probably can't see it from where he's standing. *I thought it was a dried-up chrysalis*. And for a second she's not sure she said it right, and his screwed-up face makes her wonder: Did I just say, 'a dried-up clitoris'?

He stares at her a moment and then barks. Just like the mustard mutt, he laughs, gruff and deep and right from the bottom of his bare blond-hairy belly. *You bloody writers*, he laughs, *always seein' somethin' where there's nothin'!*

She laughs too. But she's embarrassed because he's right he's right he's right.

The man turns and starts fussing around his slipshod chicken coop. She keeps walking up to her cabin, looking at the dried turd in her hand and wondering why she thought it was something else and why she's holding it close to her like a treasure. But then something magical happens. Her arm slowly raises itself and catapults the broken turd up and over the fence. Both pieces hit the man square in the back of his big square head and she's the one laughing now, skipping around the corner of her cabin, laughing, laughing, laughing, slamming the door behind her, hearing him going *Huh?* and then *Wha?* and then he's laughing too while the drama-queen crow wails across the sky and the dumb old dog woofs to a voice yelling from inside somewhere, *Shudd-uuup*. A chicken starts squawking and it sounds like it's laying an emu's egg and it's cooler now, darker. Even inside she can feel it, how the right light, the right heat and the right breeze have gone now. She puts her blanket over the edge of her bed and crawls back into the dark dusty cubby that she has made. This is what she has made. Her eyes try to pick out the criss-cross of wire that nets the mattress. She's meant to be up at that big desk, writing writing writing, but she'll just lie here a while, till the right words come. They let her come here, to find the right words, but now that she's here she just wants to be out, jumping jumping jumping, flipping summersaults in the blue with those kids and that man and the crow and the magpies and the egg-stuck chicken and the senile dog and the pony-eating rotti and the goaty-looking sheep and the red soil and the weedy flowers and the cookies and the coffee and the turd; the turd that's just a turd. She just wants to jump about on that trampoline with everything – with all of this too much everything – turning tricks in the sky, higher and higher, turning in to the sun while looking down and over Katharine's place. ■

Notes:

The song lyrics used in this story are from:

'Let's Dance' by David Bowie;

'Evil Woman' by Electric Light Orchestra (ELO); and

'Mad World' by Tears for Fears.

HELEN GILDFIND has had short stories, poetry and essays published in *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, *Westerly*, *Hecate*, *Veranda*, *Idiom*, *Poetrix*, *antiTHESIS* and *Voiceworks*. In 2009 she was the emerging Writer-in-Residence at Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in Perth.

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