

MULLET

Manx and I sit under the swamp oak
on the west bank of Coraki Lake.
A howler blows from the south
clearing the lake of gulls and egrets,
spiking sand into our ankles.
Manx picks up a tree branch
and snaps it over his knee.
He draws an outline in the sand.
'I'm a mullet in the lake,' he says.
I can't help but laugh because
Manx's haircut *is* a mullet:
scraggy on top,
long and lank at the back.
'I'm cruising in the shallows,
hungry for lunch.'
Manx glares across the water,
before continuing,
'I'm stuck in a geriatric unit for fish
when I should be tackling the ocean.'
'There's sharks in the deep,' I say.
Manx draws a school of fins in the sand.
'I swim in crazy circles
desperate for an escape.
My eyes pop,
my mouth gulps,
but I end up butting my stupid head
against the sand wall,
wondering who stole the outlet.'

He hurls the stick into the lake.
'You're stuck here forever, Manx.'
Manx sinks to his knees.
'Then I'll flop onto the sand –
a mullet suicide.'
He rolls onto his back and
stares at the clouds.
'You might meet another mullet,' I say.
'A cute female
lonely and lost, missing her school.'
Manx laughs.
'Yeah, Coraki Lake needs
another twenty baby mullet,' he says.
'Think of it as a community service,' I say,
'for the pensioners with nothing to do but fish.
You can feed them your children.'

A car horn blasts on Lake Road.

Manx jumps up.
'Fish and chips for dinner!
You want some, Jonah?'
Manx's dad must have closed the servo early
and bought takeaway.
I shake my head.
Mum and Dad
shouldn't be left alone for too long
or they'll shout the house down.

Manx scampers up the embankment.
His dad leans out the window and says,
'Always plenty of food at our place, mate.'

The Holden blows smoke down the road
as it follows the curve of the lake
to their house near the swamp.

CORAKI LAKE

Coraki Lake is fed by Turon Creek
through the swamp near Manx's house.
The lake used to be linked to the ocean,
but three years ago
a storm dumped a levee of sand
damming the outlet.
A few locals still go to sea,
but drive all the way
to the ramp at Balarang Bay
ten kilometres north.
They launch fibreglass boats
with outboards and ice-loaded eskies
as if certain of their prize.
At night they return with sunburn,
a hangover
and just enough fish
to encourage them again next week.
My neighbour, Mr Crewe,
and his mate, Mr Huth,
fish from the rocks
under the lighthouse
one eye on their lines,
the other on freak waves.
They glory in the taste of whiting
lightly crumbed and quick fried.
The rest of us circle the lake,
each with our own special place,
and the town joke is

who will give up first –
the hundreds of procreating fish
or the pensioners and teenagers
casting a line
and hoping.

The storm of three years ago
left us without an ocean view
from the flat ground.
It dammed the lake,
and damned the town.

CATCH THE WIND

I remember years ago,
when Manx's dad used to dump his tinnie
straight into Coraki Lake
in front of their house
on the marshy side of Lake Road.
He'd power it straight through the outlet
with Manx and me,
ten-year-old kids
holding tight at the front of the boat
as we pitched over the breakwater.
We'd get soaked by the spray,
and Mr Gunn would
toss me the life vest.
I'd look at Manx
and wonder how we'd share it
if the boat should sink.
'Put it on, Jonah,' Manx's dad would yell.
'My boy can swim
better than a mullet.'
I'd pull the vest over my head
and sit low in the boat,
my hands gripping the sides.
Manx would lean forward,
his face to the sun,
laughing and raising his arms
to catch the wind.

MANX

Manx and I have lived here
since we were born.
His dad runs the petrol station
in the shadow of highway gums.
It has four bowsers, a pot-holed driveway,
a besser-block toilet covered in graffiti
and a neon sign flashing
P TROL.

The only customers are
truckies like my dad
and goggle-eyed tourists
who missed the all-night service centre
on the four-lane at Balarang Bay.
Manx's dad sleeps at the station
as often as in their fibro shack
beside Coraki Lake
where Manx has the front room,
and a fishing line dangling out the window
ready to go at a moment's notice.
In their backyard is a twisted clothesline,
a shed full of rusting tools
and a '67 Valiant up on blocks.
Manx and his dad are working on
dropping a reconditioned engine in,
ready for his seventeenth birthday.

Manx has a chipped front tooth
and one of his ears is missing a bit on top

where a dog nipped him when he was six.
Manx told me he'd never seen so much blood.
When he ran indoors to show his mum
she covered her eyes
before fainting theatrically on the lounge.
Manx's dad ignored her
and raced his son off to hospital
where the doctor stitched up Manx's ear
and told him not to play with animals.
That was years ago
before Manx's mum left
on a summer Saturday
when we were out on the boat.

The weekend after she left
Mr Gunn tossed everything he could find
that reminded him of his wife
into a bonfire
and he told Manx to
fill her spare trunk with soil
and plant seeds of lettuce and cabbage
so that something good would come
out of Manx's mum
leaving town.

TURON

The sun drops below Sattlers Hill
as I walk home along Lake Road.
My town wins the prize
for being the only place on the coast
that doesn't have a safe beach.
A treacherous rip replaced the breakwater
where the outlet used to be.
A thicket of blackberry bush
and a jumble of slippery rocks
stretch south from the lighthouse.
Tourists crowd the curve of sand
at Balarang Bay
and leave us to risk it off the rocks.
The brave – or foolish –
creep to the sandstone edge,
watch the incoming swell
and judge their time to dive.
Manx has mastered it.
The rest of us swim in the lake
jumping off the pier.
Or we ride our bikes
on the track through Morawa National Park,
our shortcut to Balarang Bay.

Once a week in summer
a car will pull up beside Manx and me
as we walk along Lake Road.
The passengers wind down their windows

and, with curled lips and a frown ask,
'Is this Balarang Bay?'
I tell them they took a wrong turn
and should head back to the highway.
Or sometimes, Manx says,
'Yeah, this is it.
Enjoy your holiday.'
We walk away quickly
to hide the smiles on our faces.

DROOPY, LOOPY AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD DOGS

I turn into our dead-end street
away from the blackberry-infested coast.
Our house, the last before Sattlers Hill,
is built of timber that needs painting.
The roof is more rust than iron,
but it doesn't leak,
so Dad isn't changing anything.
Mr Crewe, the old fisherman who lives next door
mixes a batch of concrete
and trowels it onto the base of a garden gnome.
He plops the gnome on the brick front fence.
Sixteen gnomes stand to attention,
each painted red or green,
a jaunty line of dwarf sentries
guarding the property.
Mr Crewe sees me counting and smiles.
'Quite a line-up, Jonah,' he says.
'The paper should do a story on it,' I reply.
He laughs.
'They can print a picture of this old fool
sticking his head up
between Droopy and Loopy any day.'
He wipes his brow with the back of his hand
and slaps down the last piece of concrete mix.
'Two reasons for this display,' he says,
steading the gnome into place.
'One, so people keep thinking
I'm a batty old man

with not much going on up here.’
He taps his wrinkled forehead.
‘Two, the stray dogs
have been using my rose garden as a toilet.’
He winks at me.
‘Let them jump the fence now.
They’ll have a garden gnome stuck up their arse.’

Raised voices burst through
the front window of my house.
Dad’s yelling at Mum
and she’s giving it back at double the decibels.
‘It’s been going on for a while, son,’ says Mr Crewe.
‘Something about the Magna breaking down again.
Not that I’m eavesdropping.’
‘The whole street can hear,’ I say.
‘I’ve got a pot of soup on the stove
if you want to camp here for a few hours.’
I shake my head.
When I walk into their arguments,
they go quiet for a while.
I pretend to do my homework
at the kitchen table
and they act like nothing’s wrong.
No-one says a word
when I’m around.

TATTOOS AND HAIRNETS

'I've got no idea how you're getting to work
if the car's—'
Dad stops yelling
as I walk into the kitchen.
They both look at me.
Dad leans against the sink
wearing shorts, a t-shirt and
his trucker's cap, worn and sweat-stained.
On his forearm is the faded tattoo of a woman
wearing a red-and-white polka-dot bikini;
a dare when he was seventeen.
He reckons it's Mum when she was young.
Mum doesn't wear bikinis anymore.

She sits at the kitchen table,
still dressed in her blue uniform
after an eight-hour shift on the filleting line
at the SeaPak factory in Balarang Bay.
She looks tired,
her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail,
her hands cracked and worn from
wearing mesh gloves all day.

Mr Crewe told me
that every man in town sighed
and hit the pub
the day Mum married Dad.
She was the prettiest girl around.

My dad promised to give up
the interstate trucking runs for good
if only she'd say, 'Yes'.
Eighteen years is a long time
not to keep a promise.

THE SIGH OF A SEA BREEZE

I wake in the night
to the sound of the television
and snoring.
I walk to the lounge room
and find the lonely flicker
of an advertisement
for WonderVac:
'Five payments of \$15.95 per month!'
Dad's asleep on the lounge,
one hand flung across his eyes.

When I was young
Dad told me
that if the day ever arrived
where he spent more time
with the television
than with his family
he'd fetch his surfboard
from the shed,
paddle into the ocean
and not stop
until he reached Chile.
I asked him how far that was.
He looked at me
with something resembling a smile
and said,
'It's further than heartbreak
and somewhere past caring.'

On the side table is an empty beer bottle
and the Balarang newspaper
open at the employment section.
Nothing there but jobs
for kids leaving school
to become kitchenhands in cafes
or shelf stackers at the supermarket.
Dad has one boot on;
the other has been kicked across the room.
I don't know how he sleeps
with his feet above his head,
the blood running the wrong way;
as if blood ever gets a choice.
I gently remove his boot,
pick up the other and
put them both behind the lounge
where he won't trip over them
should he wake
and stumble to the bathroom.
I find the remote under the coffee table
and switch off the television.
The room darkens.
The only sound is Dad's heavy breathing,
the call of a curlew
and the sigh of a sea breeze.

THIS EMBARRASSMENT

In the morning,
I walk to the bathroom
and stare into the mirror.
My reflection
is all long nose and full lips
and, when I smile at myself,
my teeth are too big for my mouth.
I've seen photos of Dad
at my age
and I can't tell us apart.
I cup my hands in the water,
splash it through my hair,
grab a towel from the shelf
and scrub my head dry.
My hair spirals at awkward angles.
In primary school, my friend Rachel
would gently pull each curl
and giggle when they popped back into place.
'Like a spring,' she'd say.

Outside the bathroom window
a cat creeps along the fence
stalking a wren
nesting in the black wattle.
I open the window.
The cat leaps to the ground
and scurries away
as the wren adds another twig to its nest.

Dad snores from the lounge.
I take my embarrassment of hair
to the kitchen for breakfast.

BREAKFAST

I lift a bowl from the dishwashing rack
and wipe it on my shirt
ready for Weet-Bix.
Dad walks in, grunts hello
and sits down to tie his steel-capped boots.
'The Magna's blown a head gasket,' he says.
He looks out the back window
to where the car should be.
'How will Mum get to work?' I ask.
The door to their bedroom is closed.
Mum's still asleep –
or tired of arguing.
'We're working that out,' he says.
'Where you going today?' I ask.
'Adelaide,' he answers.
I offer him the Weet-Bix
as if it's enough to get him
across the Hay Plain.
He shakes his head.
'Steel girders, west,
bottles of wine, east,' he says.
'And a chance to get drunk
in the middle of nowhere,' I joke.
Dad smiles, reaching for the pan.
'Scrambled eggs, buttered toast
and the risk of a heart attack,' he says.
'What do you think about out there?' I ask.
I imagine Dad driving the rig across the plain,

a storm cloud on the horizon,
flocks of cockatoos in the fields,
music on the stereo.
'Whether the bloke driving towards me
is about to fall asleep,' Dad replies.
He stirs the egg mixture with a fork
and pours it into the frypan.
'And how many miles
before I pay off the truck,' he adds.
'I could get a job over the holidays,' I say.
Dad slides the spatula under the mixture,
flipping it before lifting the pan away
from the heat.
He tips the eggs on toast
and pulls back the chair before sitting.
I pass him the salt
and he smiles.
'Work is forever,' he says.
'Enjoy school while it lasts.'

THE ENDLESS HIGHWAY

I promise Dad I'll do the dishes
before Mum wakes.
He returns the egg carton to the fridge,
then leans down
and kisses me on the cheek.
His stubble grazes my skin.
I try to remember
how long it's been
since he's done that.
'Go easy on your mum today,' he says.
He doesn't meet my eyes
before walking from the kitchen,
a duffel bag
slung over his shoulder.
I jump up from the table
and, at the window,
watch him wheel his pushbike
out of the shed
into the weak sunlight.
He checks both tyres
before throwing his leg
over the seat
and pedalling down the driveway.
I don't know why,
but I rush through the house
to watch him
turn onto the road
without checking for cars,

knowing that no-one is stupid enough
to be awake this early.
I imagine the smell of the sea
filling his nostrils
before he rides towards the workshop
to exchange a bicycle
for a lonely truck cabin
on the endless highway.

BALARANG BAY

Whenever I miss the bus to school –
like today –
I ride my bike along Lake Road,
around Coraki Lake,
past Tipping Point
and into Morawa National Park.
I ignore the sign that reads:
HORSES AND BICYCLES PROHIBITED
and follow the track
watching for snakes
and swooping magpies.
I make it to school before the bell
if I pedal like a crazy
and forget the brakes
on the long downhill into town
past the billboard of bikini models
trumpeting:
WELCOME TO BALARANG BAY
MILES OF SMILES.

Balarang is Aboriginal for
'place of the swamp oak'
but the council
didn't want to put 'swamp'
on the billboard,
so they chose bikini models instead.
They paid an advertising company
a truckload of cash

to come up with
MILES OF SMILES.
Manx and I would have
accepted much less
and been closer to the truth with:
ACRES OF FAKERS
and the by-line:
WHERE THE UTE MEETS
THE MOBILITY SCOOTER.
Manx told me he's planning
on getting a spray can from the local hardware
to do some creative dental work
on the models in the billboard
to show his civic pride.

MY SCHOOL

My school is surrounded
by a wire fence
and a stand of stringybark
that the council
is debating whether to rezone
for a new housing estate.
Each morning the buses bring
the hippie kids from the hinterland
and us southerners from Turon
into the main car park,
already filled with four-wheel drives
dropping off the locals
too lazy to walk.
Mr Drake, our Science teacher,
is on uniform duty
at the front gate
telling boys to tuck in their shirts
and girls to remove their lipstick.
The first rubbish bin
in the schoolyard
is decorated with red-lipped tissues.

I whizz past him on the bike
and he tells me to stop
and strap my helmet on properly.
Rachel walks through the gate
wearing a pair of trousers
instead of the tartan skirt.

When Mr Drake stops her,
she says,
'Girls are the equal of boys
and should wear the same uniform.'
He says, 'Well, you won't be allowed to class
wearing trousers.'
Rachel winks at me,
turns to Mr Drake
and, in front of everyone,
drops her trousers
to reveal her skirt underneath.
She hands Mr Drake the trousers
as the bell rings
and we all cheer
as Rachel strolls to class.

THE ONLY ONE THAT MATTERS

I refuse to tell anyone –
even Manx –
just how much I like Ella Hurst.
Every period in Science
and English
I alternate between analysing the whiteboard
and Ella's long dark hair.
If there were a grade
for knowing the curve of her shoulders
and the grace of her hips
I'd get an A plus.
Sometimes I miss the teacher's question
and I'm sure my furtive glances
betray my thoughts.

Everyone likes Ella,
from the cool girls to the geeks,
yet she spends most of her time alone
reading a book
or watching the lunchtime football.
I'd have as much chance of scoring a goal
on the school oval
as I'd have of working up the courage
to talk to her.
How can it be
that the companion of attraction
is fear?
No matter how many words

there are in the English language for shy,
the only one that matters is
Jonah.

CAVEMAN AT THE BOTTLE SHOP

It's Friday afternoon and
Angelo, who's in year ten with us,
collects money from
a bunch of his mates.
Rich-boy Patrick
who lives at Tipping Point
doubles the stash.
Angelo presses the bills
into Manx's oversized hand
and says, 'As much beer as you can buy.'

Manx is kitted out in a day-glo workers vest,
school shorts and his father's spare boots.
I reckon he's even smudged
some dirt on his forearms
just to complete the picture.
He walks like a draught-horse pulling a load,
his head pushed forward, chin up
and muscular arms hanging by his side.
His voice is a few octaves deeper than bass,
hands the size of boxing gloves,
dark hair sprouting from each of his knuckles.
The boys call Manx a caveman,
but never to his face.

Angelo calls out, 'The cheapest, okay,'
as Manx turns and strolls into the bottle shop.
I follow him

and walk to where my favourite beer
sits in artfully arranged slabs.
I tap the carton three times and walk out.
Manx sees my choice –
it's not the cheapest.

Manx takes a cut of two bottles per dozen.
He always shares with me.