

‘The twenty-first-century bright young things in Thomas Vowles’s very impressive debut novel are aloofly beautiful and nonchalantly evil. It’s a rush of a read, pleasurable and disturbing in equal measure.’

Christos Tsiolkas

‘Thomas Vowles has written something sui generis – a heaving, sinister, sweaty vision of contemporary queer Melbourne. *Our New Gods* is a gay Bildungsroman with a knife’s twist: I was hooked and couldn’t look away, even when the seediness of obsession and unfounded desire made me desperately want to. Reading this is like watching a car crash in slow motion but you’re the driver and you meant to do it.’

Madeleine Gray

‘The publication of *Our New Gods* is cause for celebration, for it signals the emergence of a gripping, unique and unexpected voice in Australian literature. Thomas Vowles is the real deal.’

Sophie Cunningham

‘Enthralling, dark, elegant, sexy, electrifying. This taut debut has it all. Thomas Vowles is a thrilling new talent in Australian fiction.’

Emily Bitto

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Thomas Vowles lives in Naarm/Melbourne. As a screenwriter, he's worked with production companies based in Los Angeles, London and Australia. He released a collection of short stories as an episodic zine, and is a graduate of Central Film School, London, and the Faber Academy.

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Our New Gods

THOMAS VOWLES

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For my brothers, Ben and Zach

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1

I hesitated outside the house where thumping music was mushrooming onto the otherwise quiet suburban street. A hand-drawn map taped to the front door instructed me to enter through the back gate. The cobblestone alley led to a backyard, where fairy lights trailed through a scraggly eucalyptus, transforming those gathered underneath (talking, drinking, smoking) into softly angelic figures. How cool they were, with their jagged haircuts and dexterous fingers as they rolled cigarettes without breaking conversation, everyone in on something I'd have to learn. And I had learnt certain aspects, adopting bits and pieces (the silver chain I was wearing over a plain white t-shirt) – though I didn't have any tattoos, though I wasn't yet familiar with the venues that they referenced in stories of their cooked nights out. My hands were shoved into my jeans pockets, fingernails digging into my palms, an outlet for my unease – what if someone confronted me

for being an impostor? But I was also where I wanted to be. If only me from a year ago could see me now, I thought. At last, I had a life I could build by design.

A dim and crowded kitchen contained no sign of James, so I wove through the bodies and their different perfumes, following the music down a hallway. A small living room. Here was the DJ; here a disco ball threw shards of coloured light across everyone as they danced, including James. He was with someone, a woman; he jumped around to grind against her crotch and saw me, then smiled and waved with both hands as I wedged my way over. I admired his outfit: a sheer pearl-coloured top with long sleeves ruffled at the cuffs, his gold chain.

Yay, you came, he yelled over the music, his mouth close to my ear. I grinned and gave him two thumbs up.

I asked him and his friend if they wanted a drink and handed them beers from my backpack, which I then placed against the wall. James's friend thanked me and introduced herself as Evelyn, her open, generous face gleaming beneath a pink cowboy hat.

I'm Ash, I replied.

Come get some air, said James. I followed him out of the dank room and back through the house. It was different now, everything, now that I was here with James. He fanned his shirt to air it out. Evelyn and I sat on a sagging couch, and she began to roll a cigarette. The backyard was pumping; many more had joined the party in the short time I'd been inside.

Is your boyfriend here? I asked James.

Shut up, he's not my boyfriend.

You and Raf, hey? said Evelyn, before running her tongue along the paper.

You heard about that? said James.

He's so fucking beautiful, she said as she lit her cigarette. Like Jesus in an old oil painting.

I expected a quip from James – he always had something to say – but he just chuckled and kind of withdrew.

Wow, I said, and then someone changed the subject.

I first saw him when we returned to the dance floor. Evelyn was right; he did remind me of Jesus in an old oil painting. His ringlets of dark hair were even crowned, though not with thorns but with a circle of flowers. We were partying because he'd ordained it – Raf had taken over as the DJ, and as he nimbly attended to the decks it felt as though he'd summoned us all here. I was dancing with James but also wasn't really, Raf was a distraction; I kept trying not to focus on him but would inevitably be drawn back. He raised his arms, crossing his wrists above his head and swaying his hips to the music. Then he was staring back at me, pinning me to the spot. But I was wrong, I realised when I could eventually look away; he was staring at James, who was behind me. They'd been eyeing each other.

Raf left the decks and wrapped his arms around James, kissing his neck as James pretended not to like it, then running his tongue up the side of James's face. He laughed as James shoved him away and dried his face with the back of his hand, mock angry. Raf's body had a softness to it, a furry belly nudging out from under a pink tank top.

This is Ash, said James, his hand on my shoulder.

Hey! I said.

Hello, sweetheart, said Raf. We hugged. He was taller than me, around the same height as James. When Raf pulled away I was left with the not-unpleasant smell of his sweat.

You having fun? Raf asked James.

Yeah, though the music's kinda shit.

Raf frowned.

I'm joking!

And what about you? said Raf, turning from James. Are you having fun?

Yes.

You can stay, he said to me. To James, he pressed a finger against his chest and said, you, you can get fucked, following it up with a word I didn't know, something in a foreign language, perhaps an insult or a term of endearment. Raf returned to his spot behind the decks, and James and I continued dancing. I dared not wonder what Raf had that I didn't, or what he didn't have that I did, but I knew it was more than the difference in the way we looked or acted – the answer was deeper than this and loomed within everything, taking the shape of the room and its furniture and the partying strangers whose faces now shone with menace.

James had gone to the bathroom and failed to reappear, but it didn't matter; I'd relaxed and was enjoying myself in a way that I hadn't for so long, maybe forever. It was a different version of me, the new version. Evelyn and I were back on the couch, which had become our spot. She was smoking again. I gazed around with a saintly benevolence. This is the beginning, I thought. One day, the possibility I'm feeling right now will make sense.

We were passed by a woman in a leather harness, black tape crossing her nipples. I wish I could dress like that, I said.

Hot, called out Evelyn. The woman turned and gleefully poked out her tongue as she was absorbed by the house.

I mean, not exactly like that, I added with a laugh. But everyone here is so free.

You can, said Evelyn. She was smiling. Dress like that, I mean. Good, right?

Being able to do whatever I want?

Ha! I didn't say that.

I got the confused idea that I'd disappointed her somehow and sought a different topic of conversation. Where's Raf from? I asked.

Brazil, she said, looking at me sideways in a manner that made me feel I'd exposed myself. How do you know James?

Grindr, I said. It sounded tactless, like I was trying to claim him. My shame silenced me long enough for Evelyn to laugh knowingly and say, got it.

I mean, that's how we met, I said. Like, nine months ago, when I first got here, to Melbourne. Now we're friends.

Evelyn stood and asked if I wanted to meet some people, but I'd revealed a part of myself I'd been trying to keep hidden and now her offer felt fake – as though she was only being nice because James's disappearance had left her stuck with babysitting duties. I told her I'd get another drink first, but my backpack with the beers was still in the living room and I found that I couldn't bear the thought of being subsumed by the coagulation of bodies oozing from the house. Instead, I slipped through the back gate and into the alley, where bats screeched from a neighbour's fig tree shrugging over a wall. A few people were standing around,

chatting in the glow of their cigarettes. I walked down the alley, away from them, and rested against a brick wall, sliding down and sitting on the cobblestones.

The party thrummed to my right, and to my left I could hear the dull roar of the ocean. I was neither here nor there but suspended in liminality, existing within contradiction. I turned to the starless sky. But what I'd taken as the ocean couldn't be; I was nowhere near the coast. The crash of waves must be traffic from a nearby road, a busy one. I didn't mind. I made the sound the ocean again.

Faces took shape in the darkness. None of them were James. I stepped into the mouth of the house and was engulfed by swimming heat and the smell – sweat, and alcohol. The dance floor was denser still, the room throbbing to the music as people whooped and hollered. James wasn't here either; he was probably with Raf, who was no longer DJing. Someone grabbed my hand and initiated a dance, but my heart wasn't in it.

If I couldn't find James, so be it. People glanced towards me as I passed them in the hallway. They seemed to whistle with their eyes.

The front door closed behind me and I regretted leaving so hastily. I wondered if that was it, if I should just go home. But I remembered I had a joint in my backpack: I could smoke while I cycled and see where I ended up. It would all be for me, the night and its billowing city.

And then I heard it. I was unzipping my backpack to find the joint, amid the deep shadow of the porch, when the sound unfurled from the night, so soft as to be almost indistinguishable from the music beating against the inside of the house. It was a gentle and intermittent whine, impossible to place, both what the sound was and where it was coming from. The window behind me was ajar, and I brought my ear to the gap but the room inside was silent. The sound was coming from the street: once I grasped this it was obvious. The street was hidden behind a tall hedge that lined the front fence. I crept down the garden path, deciding that the sound was certainly an animal; was it the whimper of a dog? I'd found a game, a little adventure that would see me into the next phase of the evening.

I stopped at the mailbox to peer around the hedge. It took me a moment to discern what I had come upon. The street was deserted except for two figures, amber ghosts in the pool of a streetlight. The first figure: my immediate impression was that he'd fallen and hadn't been able to get back up. His legs were in the gutter, his body collapsed on the strip of lawn that ran alongside the road, his head craned back at an odd angle, one cheek flat against the grass. His face was hooded by shadow, but I could see that his eyes were closed. He was young, younger than my twenty-one, his waifish body symmetrical with his small, delicate face.

The second figure was Raf. He was standing still and rigid, his hands hanging limply by his side. I couldn't see his face to know for sure, but he seemed to be looking straight ahead, indifferent to the body that was crumpled at his feet and whimpering with pain. This was the sound.

Before the puzzle pieces had organised themselves into coherence – before I was able to act – the tableau was creased by movement: Raf bringing his hands forward. In my initial shock, the scene had been like a photo, something artificial, but this small action made everything terribly alive. The movement was followed by the metallic sound of a zip, then an arc of piss glinted in the light. When the urine hit his body, the person on the ground blinked sleepily, then his eyes flung open in alarm. He jutted his neck, as if he was trying to drag himself away but didn't have the energy. And he moaned: no, no, no. At that, Raf swivelled his hips to aim the stream on his face. The guy spluttered and something seemed to click inside him; he struggled onto all fours and pulled himself from the gutter, but Raf simply lifted his foot and placed his boot on the guy's spine. He fell easily, curling into himself as he was doused in the final spurts of Raf's urine.

Enough, enough – I moved to intervene, not knowing what I would say or do, but knowing something must be done. As I stepped onto the footpath, the guy tilted his face in my direction, his eyes widening with panic. He shook his head, just slightly: it was the smallest demand, but a demand nonetheless, and I shrank back. Raf tucked something into his back pocket and I gasped – it was his phone; he'd been filming. At that, Raf spun around, and I ducked behind the hedge.

Sticks needled my back as I held my breath. The threat of Raf thrashed towards me, tearing through everything between me and him, not just the distance and the hedge, but also the efforts of society that sought to prevent one from harming another, that ought to prevent Raf from grabbing me by the throat and staring into my eyes as he attended to me with the same hostility that

he'd imposed on the other guy. But I also half hoped that he had seen me. I was trembling with the need to confront him; the heat bubbling through me sought an outlet. I hadn't heard any movement – his footsteps, for example – and only knew he was close when the metal gate next to me screeched as a hand pushed it open. Here he was, blazing and free, stepping onto the garden path and walking to the house, stopping about halfway up, only a metre or two from my hiding place. He paused.

I longed for a weapon; I thought I might very soon need one. The outline of Raf's profile (the curve of his nose, the strength of his jaw) etched the night. It felt as though he was toying with me. I studied him for any signs of awareness that he was being watched. But he strode on.

The front door didn't open. He jiggled the handle.

You have to go around, I said.

He jumped but then turned towards me almost indolently, betraying his alarm by overcompensating with his nonchalance. It was obvious that I'd scared him. I waited for him to speak: him speaking would be the only way to diffuse the unbearable electricity that was charging the air and making it difficult to breathe. Perhaps he knew this, for after considering me (I felt he was considering me, one hand remaining on the door handle, the whites of his eyes glowing) he wordlessly strode back down the path. He halted when his shoulder was in line with mine. I tried to control my shaking; I didn't want him to see how frightened I was. I smelt booze when he opened his mouth, his tongue darting to the corner of his lips. But he didn't speak. He only stared at me, his expression ... what was his expression? Everything could be found in that expression: fear, amusement, anger, even desire. Then, he continued, turning

down the footpath, in the direction of the alley that would return him to the party.

The guy didn't acknowledge me as I approached. Hey, I said, focused on appearing unthreatening. He was sitting on the verge, his feet in the gutter. His arms rested on his knees, which he'd drawn to his chest, his forehead on his arms so that his face was tucked in, towards the ground. Hey, I repeated. Are you okay?

When he didn't reply, didn't move, I sat next to him. I'm Ash, I said. Do you want me to call someone? Or, like, the police?

He mumbled something.

Sorry? I asked.

He lifted his face as he brought a hand to his blond hair and, noticing it was wet, dabbed it with the sleeve of his top. His clothes were simple, almost raggedy, but stylishly so. Sunflowers embroidered the knees of his ripped pants. He pulled his sleeves past his palms and clasped his hands under his arms. He'd given up on drying himself, choosing to ignore the dark patches splattered over his body.

What's your name? I asked, but he was silent. I like your nails, I added, which felt like a stupid thing to say, but it was an attempt at a different approach.

Pink, he said, wriggling his fingers in front of him, his nails sparkling in the streetlight. I'm Booth. What star sign are you? His voice was soft, buttery.

What? I asked. When he didn't reply, I said: Aries.

I'm a Pisces, he said. His eyes were unfocused, and he was swaying a little. He dug in his pockets and found a baggie, using

the tip of a fingernail to inhale a little of its white powder. His hands were trembling.

He's a Leo, he said, before offering me the drugs. I declined.

Who? Raf?

He sniffed as he rubbed his nose.

Are you okay? I asked.

A Pisces and a Leo, can you imagine? he said, a smile twitching. Imagine. It's no wonder, really.

He seemed to collapse in on himself; his eyelids drooped and his chin dropped to his chest. I didn't know what to do. I again contemplated calling the police, but it felt risky, considering the level of his intoxication, the fact of the drugs in his pocket.

Hey, listen – I said, laying a hand on his back in what I hoped was a soothing manner. His neck jolted upright and he giggled, his laughter erupting into the night.

I knew it, he declared. He turned to me sharply, smiling. You see? You see?

See what?

It's better than nothing.

He laughed as he struggled to his feet. There'd been a shift; he'd found something that was girding him, I felt; he'd been fortified not by the drugs but by something stronger than a chemical substance; he'd found a belief, or a story.

It's better than nothing, he repeated, more sombrely now as he gazed down the street. He stumbled away and I watched him for a moment, made inert by his words as they sank into the blind depths of me, which somehow felt to be the place from which they'd come.

Hey, where're you going? I called out.

He murmured his reply; I didn't catch it. I rushed to his side.

I don't think you should go alone, I said.

I'm fine.

Where do you live? I can get you an Uber. I realised my phone was in my bag, back by the front door. Just wait here, I said. Just a minute.

My phone showed missed calls from James. I ignored them and was hurrying back to Booth when the door behind me opened.

There you are, James said. I thought you'd left. C'mon, let's bounce.

As I drew close, I saw that he was cooked: jaw tight, eyes bug-wild.

Wait, I said. Just wait a minute, I need to –

I returned to the street. Booth had disappeared. I knew which way he'd been heading, and I thought about going after him. I jumped when James slung an arm around my shoulder. Here we go, he said, as a car turned the corner and pulled up next to us.

I need to talk to you, I said. James opened the back door, poked his head in, said something to the driver, then ushered me towards the back seat. I resisted.

It's serious.

At the club, we'll talk then.

No, James –

He kissed my cheek and winked. I relented, sliding into the Uber. After a few moments, I craned my neck to see what was taking James so long, then quickly withdrew. We didn't acknowledge each other as he clambered in next to me. The

driver checked the address and James confirmed it as he took the front seat.

Where are we going? I asked.

Where the hot people are.

Raf leant towards me to see out the windscreen. I furtively observed him, but the mask was secure again; he was acting jovial, sickeningly so, the way he tapped his fingers to the radio as James sang, making the driver chuckle. I met my reflection in the window, imprisoned in the square of night.

Could I make it some kind of dream? At the club I watched Raf and attempted to will what I'd seen into an apparition. James bought us shots of tequila. Its warmth fanned through me as the incident bulged and shrank, bulged and shrank, but proved to be real.

Raf clung to James as we danced among shirtless beefcakes and their kin. When James threw back his head in a gesture of ecstasy, it was Booth, the same angle his head had been tilted on the ground. There was no avoiding it; I needed to speak to James, but I knew now was not the time. I'd find him tomorrow, explain it all when he was sober. I shouted in his ear that I was leaving. He made a sad face and waved goodbye but kept dancing. Raf kept his focus on James, his hands on his waist, guiding James's body.

I was outside, waiting for an Uber, surrounded by flying youths and the homeless with their dogs, when James was suddenly beside me, wiping the sweat from his brow, groping a cigarette I was sure he didn't have to work hard to bum. People loved giving things to James.

Hey, what were you gonna tell me? he asked.

I decided to play dumb.

Before, he insisted. Back at the house.

I'll tell you tomorrow.

Oh no! Don't do me like that! I need to know.

My ride's almost here.

But the ride had been cancelled by the driver. James saw my phone screen and laughed; now I had no excuse. But I was afraid: what if the story was flimsy, what if he didn't believe me? He was frowning as I told him everything, his red-rimmed eyes narrowed as he listened. When I finished, there was a long pause.

I'm sorry, I said.

I don't know what to think, said James. He looked depleted.

Yeah, I replied.

He buried his head in his hands and said, I'm so high. How are you?

I'm ... shaken up. I'm fine. I'm okay.

He hugged me. My belly untwisted as I rested my cheek against his shoulder.

Let's go, he said.

Really?

Yeah, fuck that guy. Fuck him. What the fuck, right?

Yeah, what the actual fuck.