

No City Fun

ALEXANDER BENNETTS

I hadn't left my unit in close to a week. I woke up just before PM, did my best to shake off the feeling of silt that collected in my skull, and walked the ten metres to my car. The clouds were out like pack animals, huddled and stalking me — still no sun on my shoulders. I drove to Costco to stock up.

Out of the window, I could see the Melbourne Star across the road. I thought about the promise Ferris wheels make of revolution. We're not carried up or down, just temporarily suspended, like a satellite in orbit. When we disembark, we hope to have changed in some way: reinvigorated by the view, by the switch in perspective. That's the promise, anyway.

The spotty man at the checkout asked me for my membership card, so I handed him Heidi's. I'd been meaning to give it back, but she hadn't wanted to see me. By the time she decided she did, she was travelling through Italy. Timing wasn't one of our strong points. I took my bags (bulging with, among other things, Sultana Bran, several individually

packed containers of hummus and a box of canned tuna) and walked across the Costco forecourt.

Then the sun washed in. My bare arms prickled with electricity, the way good memories feel. I walked across the road, towards the giant white Ferris wheel. *Why not?* I told myself. *Why not?*



I'd been stuck in elevators before. Twice, actually.

As a kid, maybe eight years old, out shopping with Mum — it was just after we'd driven across the country, had a little flat out in Preston, just the two of us. Mum said we needed new clothes, but what kid gets excited about clothes? I wandered off, deciding to look at the toys and bikes on the next floor. But the elevator just... didn't go anywhere. The doors closed; the elevator didn't elevate. I sat there crying until the door finally opened and a stranger helped me find Mum.

←P “Untitled (I say we take off and nuke the entire site from orbit)”, 2016, C-4 explosive and detonator, dimensions variable’ is by Steven Christie (23), who is blowing up right now.

That's not how it happened according to the way my mum tells it, though: I just sat in there for almost ten minutes, not pressing any of the buttons, *thinking* it was broken. It was fine all along. Would a kid really do that?



Across from Costco was Harbour Town, the breezily named outlet mall that housed the Ferris wheel. Harbour Town was all open air and discount Sportsgirl. I walked past an empty shell of a building, sitting disused. All the fittings of a restaurant had been installed, but there was nothing else inside it — nothing, that is, except a dead pigeon. I watched it from behind the glass, a museum piece. First I watched it hoping that it would shuffle back into life, and then I watched it out of simple, morbid curiosity. How long does a dead bird have to sit there before someone moves it? I looked around, but the landing was empty. Just the bird and me.

I walked over to the entrance to the Star and paid for my ticket. The ascent was gentle, like the state between having drunk one beer and two. I watched as the city — the business district, with the people, the fun — crept into view. I never knew why you'd build a Ferris wheel in a place so lifeless. The cusp of the city sits, invitingly, just over there, but the outer ring of high-rises form a kind of palisade. You can see it but you can't see *into* it.

They built this land on a swamp. Why would you do that? When I think of swamps I think of crocodiles, mud up

to my knees. Or maybe it's alligators. I always get them mixed up. After it was a swamp it was an industrial estate, a shipping port. A lynchpin in the city's logistical empire, where so much of the food came in. But even the dockworkers didn't like the place. Then they decided its proximity to the city destined it to be an upmarket residential space — so they laid out the concrete, put up the towers, then the rent.

The council wondered why no-one was coming. Was it its past? Its future? They built monuments to tourism. Still no-one came.

But I turned up, evidently. I looked down, into the outlet mall. It was a sunny day, good for it, but the bodies were scattered and few. The only people who seemed to be out were tourists: you could spot them by their backpacks, the way they moved in slow clusters, curious about shops that no-one should be curious about. At the centre of the outlet mall, hidden from the view of shoppers, was a small apartment complex, with a courtyard situated between the flats. Each apartment was painted in salmon, with a balcony that looked out onto the mall.

In the Star, the speakers rattled with a man's voice. He called the trip an *experience*, and promised that I'd see the city with a *new perspective*. Each time I thought he was about to stop to let me contemplate what he'd just said, he launched into another spiel about the *world-class* qualities of the city. The café culture. The art galleries. The sports stadiums. *Did you know that Australian Rules Football is one of the oldest codified sports in the world?* He sounded so smug

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with his dime store trivia. What a real cool guy. I raised my middle finger to the bulbous security camera watching me – and hey! It worked. The haughty narrator stopped talking mid-sentence, and all was peaceful inside the pod, hanging in the sky.

And then it all went to fuck.

This is the order that it happened, as I remember it. The voiceover dropped out first; then the air-conditioning cut out too. It took me a minute to realise we weren't moving – in fact, we were swaying ever so slightly backwards, like the Star was about to reverse its rotation. I pressed the emergency button, and then again when there was no answer, and then again. No answer. I looked across to the capsule down from mine, where a woman with a sunhat had pressed herself against the glass as if to survey the dock.

That's when it happened. A hyperyellow light gushed over the horizon, and then flickered like a strobe. I cupped my palms over my face and laid down on the floor of the capsule. There was no sound to match the light – lightning? With no thunder? Except within a minute it was all sound, every sound. Sirens, horns, yelling, eruptions, sirens, sirens.

When I stood up, all the bodies below me were moving. Not in any particular direction, but with a pace uncommon for tourists buying clearance-sale Levi's. Behind us, the railway bottlenecked, the screech of emergency brakes. People lined up against the balustrade of the upper floor of the mall, tried to peek over the horizon.

I slammed my fists into the hardened glass exterior. I felt a ball inside me,

a marble of panic rising like the fizz in draught beer. I looked up at the infrastructure that held this Star in the sky. Around it hung a metal ladder, the whole three hundred and sixty degrees. I wondered: could you climb that? I pressed my hand against the glass door; it was bolted from the outside.

And then the people started to file out. The emergency button still didn't work; nobody seemed to be watching through the fish-eye camera. I sat down on the island bench with my bulging plastic bags. The highways to the south spilled over with cars, all trying to exit the city at once. My phone was getting no reception, no internet. Even the motor yachts set sail. What do you call an empty dock? A basin?

Eventually the sun went down, over that same horizon, and the glass of the window became cool to the touch. I looked at my bags of food, and then across at the woman in the sunhat, alone in her capsule.



The second time I got stuck in an elevator, I was in Christchurch, New Zealand. I was there for a conference; so was Heidi. At the time, I thought she was a Kiwi, but apparently her voice just does that when she's anxious. We were stuck for two hours, oxygen thinning. She was the first person that I'd cried in front of in almost a decade. *It's going to be OK*, she said, a hand on my arm. I enjoyed her touch; I gripped it for strength. *You're not alone, you know*. That's what I remember. I'm sure she used other words, but's that how

I remember it.

We had looked at buying an apartment together, right by the wharf. From where my capsule stopped, I can almost see the building. It's hiding just behind a block mid-construction, a sky blue canvas hiding its innards. I try to remember the interior of the place: the cream leather couch, the fake plants draped from the curtain rods. Even most of the light was artificial — one of the windows looked straight out onto another high-rise, a trap of shadows and glazing. She led me to the balcony, held her arms wide as if to encompass the dock before us. *Don't you just want to wake up to this?* She'd recently been promoted to a new office, not a few hundred metres from the apartment block. Lines of motor yachts bobbed on the water like toys in a bathtub. It did look pretty, from up there — you couldn't see anyone's expressions. I think that's what did it.

I've been on the Melbourne Star for days now. A nearby apartment building — a twenty-storey thing, wharf views — just started burning, in the middle of a sunless day. It was curved like a speedboat, because of course it was: when you are this close to the water, why would you want to remain docked? Even so: spontaneous combustion. Boom.

I don't know how it started. Maybe it had just hit its expiry date — I'd heard stories, from before, about these apartments being built too quickly and cheaply. Firetraps. I don't know if this is true, because as with everything about the Docklands it came through rumour or hearsay, but I'd seen a news item once, about how a landowner had overcrowded

a building with international students, and one of the upper floors just went up in flames. Too many shoulders rubbing up against each other, I suppose.



A week. The Woman and I have started revealing our bodies to each other. We strip down, press our skin against the glass. I did this as a small kid, with a family friend. We snuck off into a bathroom, *I'll show you mine* and all that. We were still friends for years after until we both independently realised what our bodies were actually for.

At first I love it — being seen by another human. It's affirmation, you know: *you still exist*. Except she has binoculars, and I don't, and she's been watching me more often than not. Like I'm an endangered animal that needs to be studied. Maybe she just got bored of the view, or maybe she's mouthing something, hoping I'm a lip-reader. I'm not a lip-reader. She puts her clothes back on and slaps at the curved glass.

But I have food, and she doesn't. I try not to think about it. A construction crane snaps and sends a colony of birds into the sky. It brings down telephone wires and makes a fissure in the tram tracks.



I don't think the Woman can hear me, even when I scream at her. My teeth are beginning to hurt. Heidi always berated me for never going to the dentist. Except I

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don't think this is a dentist thing, a tooth-care thing. More likely it's just the decay setting in.

There's a fibreglass tyrannosaurus below us, cabled off in red like a visiting king. There's no internal logic to any of this — is the Docklands just the recycling grounds of the city? I imagine the dinosaur once sat in the middle of Myer, where families with small children would flock to take photos with the display, before buying LEGO and moving on.

Air comes straight off the sea, so that wind tunnels form in the gaps between each high-rise building. Heidi told me that. *That's why you could get blown over just walking down the street*, she said, a thrill in her voice. Well, that and the fact that the concrete never heats up because it's always in something else's shadow, I reckon. But there are no schools around here. She liked that about the place, actually. *It implies it's for adults*, she'd said. *For grownups. For partying.* For whatever.

Maybe my eyes are playing up, but I think I've seen helicopters. In the early mornings, they float over the distant city before disappearing again. There must be people in the city. The Woman in the other capsule has stopped playing our game. She mustn't have eaten anything since we stopped moving. I wave at her but she doesn't respond.

The next morning, she's not there at all. It's an empty pod. Did she find a way out? I look to the ground below us, and there's nothing there either, no clues. I gaze into her capsule, and notice there's something behind one end of the wide island bench — a boot? A knot of hair? A

dress? Whatever it is, it never moves.

How did she escape?



I think I've been stuck up here for two and a half, maybe three weeks now. I lost track after my phone died. How long ago was that? What does three weeks feel like?



The blown-ins, who have been taking shelter in the gauche pink apartment complex nested inside the outlet mall, have divided into two groups. Watching them split has been like watching an amoeba forcing itself to evolve — except both sides are armed and voracious. The courtyards fill with waste, and then with people, all branding makeshift weapons above their heads.

I can't tell if they've divided themselves along lines of class, race, age, ideals, or something else. Maybe it's meat-eaters against vegetarians. But it's difficult, from my position, to discern any division in physical appearance or etiquette. How does one side tell the other apart? Maybe they don't; maybe that's the point. By afternoon, their numbers have halved. The survivors stoop back to their apartments. I don't see them again.

I have to remember to stand up. If I don't stand up and walk my circles, my legs get numb. I have bruises all along my torso. There's a discomfort behind my eyeballs, too. It's been raining nonstop. When I'm not sleeping, I press my palm

against the window and the coldness feels healthy and natural. I lick the perspiration off the glass.

I feel like I'm living in a space shuttle that someone forgot to launch. And now I've run out of Sultana Bran.



A fly has found its way into my cabin. It's found its way behind my ear, where it sleeps, where it buzzes, where it keeps me awake.

The fly has stopped. It must be dead, now. It must be dead. The silence is even worse than the buzzing.

I don't think the view was worth it.



A man's voice echoes around my head. I think he's talking about laneways. About shopping destinations, and a *vibrant creative culture*. I just want to sleep. *Time to go exploring*, the man says. Is it my father's voice? What did he sound like? *Thank you, he says. Please disembark safely.*

Then: a breeze. I follow it and I stumble out onto a steel platform. I lie on my back and let the wheel spin before me. The breeze gets in my eyes and into my skin. It's dusk by the time I've groped my way to the ground. Solid ground, concrete.

Lying on my side — away from the wheel, towards the shops of the outlet mall and the fortified apartment complex within its walls — I try to make out the shapes that flit past the windows. Just birds, I think.

I manage to gather my limbs and stumble to the mouth of the mall. I walk along what's left of the tram tracks, trying to not think about the state of my head, my guts. Through the gap between two office towers, I see the apartment building that, several months ago, we inspected together. I try to recall the details. The plastic fern you surreptitiously brushed a hand against as you passed by. The kitchen taps that lit up, LEDs, and someone laughing. The back of your head as you slid the balcony doors open. How, with self-conscious amusement, you pointed out the Ferris wheel just over there: *we could go on that someday*.

The breeze dies down; I turn back to the road. A lion strolls through the main street, like he's done this dozens of times before, a flâneur of a rubbled kingdom. His mane is caked in mud, and I can only imagine he's escaped from the zoo. Below me churns what's left of the swamp, unsteady, uncertain. I sit down, my legs crossing as I turn to glance at the wheel behind me, rotating ever so slowly, spinning, spinning.

VW

Alexander Bennetts (24) is a blunt pocketknife.

His work can be found in *The Lifted Brow*, *Stilts*, and *The Grapple Annual*.