

Superior

Here in Twilight Village, certainly no writers' colony, the tale I tell could be about our bands, the gigs, chemicals, songs we wrote, the ebb and surge of our success, but it would be second-hand, invented. Or, along that path; a woman's laugh, ripe lips, hot breath, her body. Maybe she is lonely, missing, or endangered. All made up. Instead, my main protagonist is a Gordon, or an Ian, someone reduced now, living like a guppy in a bowl it circles, manipulating the condescending staff's evaluation as best he can. Gordon, or Ian – they are just names – types sentences in paragraphs, half-turned on a chair listening for the medication round's interruption. This tale, a segment, experiences recalled or rearranged, could be called *Superior*.

While polar ice caps melt, nothing changes here, not counting death's gatecrashing. Death, our *bete noir*, is like the top team your team never beats. No poetry anthologies can be seen except the writer's. Colourful tracksuits, too large? Yes, worn because dressing and undressing can be painful for those sharing this glut of recycled hours. The best thing here is the end of housework. Gordon gazes outside at visitors leaving, escaping TV's ramped-up laughter, their stride brisk in the cold, good deeds done, consciences eased. His imagination grandiose, striving to rise above all this, he slides again into time vanished. Fashionable ladies trip along white streets past tall buildings in their long boots, skirts swishing in a snow scene by Utrillo. Bare beauty in a world quieted, leafless trees eerily lit, the wonder of muffled sound, reminds him of a boy skipping to the bus stop with his anxious mother.

Our Gordon feels the icy sting of his hand snow-ploughing a fence. A marcasite brooch he gave his mother for Christmas glitters on her lapel. He jogtrots to keep up, tyres yowling along the road past his school. In town snowflakes duel with gravity, then a wonderful sawdust smell, the pet shop, his favourite, the puppy carried home in a box through a frosted realm illuminated by daytime headlights. A cold house, ghostly, looms in this tale, English post-war rationing, old gas masks in the cupboard under the stairs. That pet, dying of distemper, trembles before a stove's feeble warmth. The op shop Utrillo print hung in Gordon's Australian beach shack years after his transient mid-life crisis including an escapade hitchhiking with a backpack across Canada's vast silence to Alaska kidding himself he was a new age Marco Polo. Although he has forgotten many things, this he hasn't forgotten.

During four hundred miles tracking the lake so deep, so cold, it never yields its dead, hours drifting, radio crooning low, curves and gradients offered sombre glimpses of black water as day dimmed into twilight. After Gordon took over driving the growly Camaro his sleeping hungover benefactor's head lolled out the window in cold air. Stopping for gas at Old Woman Bay, Gordon became aware of Camaro man's reluctance to talk, any hoped-for camaraderie strictly not on their agenda. His avoidance of eye contact, ignoring Gordon's explanation about removing the dragging rusted muffler from the exhaust pipe because of alarming sparks it showered, disturbed him. After all, he was Gordon, not *Mad Max*.

Remembering warnings about travellers stranded beyond Wawa, too few settlements, too much road, Gordon pictured the distant Rockies' gothic sublimity contrasting with the prairies. Late that night in Thunder Bay's dimly lit industrial back streets Mr Loquacious Camaro finally found his voice, wanting payment for the long ride. Gordon's budget resembled what his late mother called 'the smell of an oily rag'. He had been warned about bears, but not men. Now, stirred by unfolding memories, considering metaphor and cliché, he traces the scariest part of that journey when he risked not reaching this old age. Emerging at daylight from exhausted sleep in his pup tent pitched in necessary darkness he discovered his grassy camp was an island surrounded by a sea of dew in full view from the highway.

He recalled lifting his map to his nose years later, smelling its secrets, olfactory time travelling to when his heartbeat pounded. He sees the scene when he woke to the rumble of the Trans-Canada as a canvas in diffuse light painted by a latter-day Utrillo. Perhaps, swiftly dismantling that tent, he thought of pushing on to his dream, on through the Yukon to Alaska's melancholy grandeur while still able, even one day writing about his magical disappearance in Thunder Bay after the menacing guy left him alone in the car while he called on an acquaintance, whereupon Gordon melted into the unknown's shadows? These and other fragments of the zesty past shore Gordon with a rapture, a longing, and satisfaction for not having frittered life before it runs dry.
