



PESTS

by Angelina Sokolsky

Foxes were killing rabbits, but the majority of creatures prefer the passive, indirect voice. So, the rabbits were being killed. *It's really about the rabbits*, the foxes would say. Graceful, solemn martyrs, waving their paws, *it's not about us*.

The rabbits were ushered into the shed, mumbling and fiddling their whiskers.

When an animal witnesses another one of its species slaughtered, they understand—next in queue; loud and sharp; slipping on vulnerability, melted at their heels, as their feet thump on the floor.

"Death is one of the most severe social events that can happen in a social species" (Dr Swift, BBC Earth).

They filed back out, murmuring *this is all I know*. Afterward: alert, quick thinking, always escaping, reminded they are waiting, haunted by the shed, by foxes who assure them *not all foxes hunt rabbits*, hearts drumming against hot bones like a frantic orchestra. *Five so far this week. I heard it was more like nine. Where did you hear that? Saw it, the shed... they boarded up the windows, but we could see through a slit.*

"When mourning, animals behave in a variety of ways that are simply not useful to survival: withdrawing into solitude, retreating from socialising, sleeping less, eating less, foraging less, mating less, and if spending time tending to a corpse, exposing oneself to pathogens and making oneself vulnerable to predators" (Zoe Cormier, BBC Earth).

How have you not heard? The numbers have gone up. Their spatula feet were always thrumming the dirt. Suede noses shrugged up-down-up-down, about to sneeze. *Something in the air.* Tall ears twitched back, scanning the pines for red tails.

"There is value in paying attention to your dead to teach you about ways you might die yourself—so you avoid these things" (Dr Swift, BBC Earth).

Could have done differently—yourself a target—avoid avoid avoid—did you make sure—well, what were you—really shouldn't have—thinking?—silly—next time—that'll teach her.

Thirty more rabbits would be killed in just a fortnight.



Escape to the Country

by Angelina Sokolsky

Cicadas rub legs, orchestrating cream-white noise. Trees grow amber, stretching red-brown shadows, a translucent toffee batter. They're all watching the young woman below, starting up the hill. Magpies remain at their high posts, adding to the tally of days she has returned. She wears a sickly green hoodie despite the humidity. A tremble here and there—overheating, under stress, food poisoned, foaming at the mouth, or just excited about her new Spotify playlist titled whimsical. Scoffed down dinner so she could get out quicker, clattering the fly-screen door with too much attitude, but that won't matter soon. She's gone now. Goin' for a walk.

At the foot of the hill, suburbia ends and the bush looms above. Tchaikovsky swims breaststrokes through her AirPods. His splashes echo off the concave walls of her ears. With her hands wedged in the front hoodie pocket, no one can see how her fingers are interlaced and posed as if she were about to enter a ballroom. Black Asics are now patent leather and unwashed hair is roped into exotic twists. I will not live here. She marches toward the bush and listens to the tick-ticking of centuries clocking backward. Five minutes south of the hill, a Nine News special drools blue light on her silent family, as the journalist reports how the woman's body was later found in her workplace bathroom, next to a hammer. But her mother isn't watching. She's staring placidly at her phone, reading of hundreds more dead in Gaza. But she isn't scrolling further. She's cursing herself for eating two snacks today, instead of one. Too much unsaturated fat.



At the crest, the young woman stretches her arms to form a T, while the light sinks into a cool blue for the night. She's moved on from Swan Lake to the Nutcracker. Crows join the magpies on high branches to watch the illusion swallow her. She's somewhere else, one says. A notification vibrates her pocket. A text message appeal from UNICEF. She presses the volume button one, two, three times and Tchaikovsky pulses like lightning, exhausted. It's enough to make her jump and a feather falls from her. Pulling off her hoodie, it gets stuck on her beak. When she's free, she flies to the darkening branches and perches across from the other birds. With the sun completely gone now, the glossy eyes of the birds watch each other, and the white AirPods, left on the ground, are wedged in the dirt like teeth.





→ Tuning Strings

→ by Angelina Sokolosky

Medical room holds me in cupped walls like calloused hands. Dr Sunscreen-Is-Bad-For-You places stickers on my wrists, forearms, elbows. Wields an electric rod, zapping my artificial freckles. Estimated test duration: 40 min. If you don't have your health, you have nothing, she says. I've inhaled the last of the room's oxygen. A mosquito on the peeling wall eyes me. In Winter? You shouldn't be here, in this season, I mouth. It replies, cocking its needle neck, you shouldn't be here, at this age. The room adjusts its grip on me in apology. Air con heats, panting, uncertain, overthinking what temperature would most aggravate the symptoms of the motionless girl on the thunderstorm-blue leather bed. Dr Have-To-Listen-To-This-Podcast pauses to help take off my sweater. Tendons and nerves strain, pinching my arms like rusting viola strings. Dr Sunlight-Heals-Your-Mitochondria chirps about holistic health. I nod, I know. She digs her rod in my elbow, shoots me. I jolt. If you don't have your health, you have nothing, she recites to herself. Yeah, I laugh, polite. She catches herself, flicks nervous eyes to mine, there is hope, darling. Mosquito watches me shuffle to the glossy money-eating desk like a one-night-stand walk-of-shame. Estimated out-of-pocket total: la-la-lalalalalalala.

SOMETHING BLUE

Irene Joseph

On my way back from uni, I looked up. The sky was that particular shade of blue that I like to call 'Australian blue' - bright and perfect. Sometimes it's hard not to imagine I'm living in a snow globe. If I stare long enough, I swear I can see the fingerprints on the dome.

It was so hot I could feel my nose waiting for the nosebleed to happen. I tried to ignore it and hopped on my phone to check my texts again. No reply from either of them.

I didn't want to admit it, but the silence was more painful than the heat pressing down on me. Like the sky was holding its breath, waiting to see what I'd do next. And me? I was stuck between the ache of knowing it was my fault and the numbness of not knowing what exactly I was losing – the friendship that was fading, the love that slipped through my fingers, or both; I did not know. To an extent, I blamed myself for everything that happened around me. If I wasn't me, if I had a bit more of a voice...

I don't know what hurt me more: seeing them together, or the fact that I wasn't there with them. The fact they saw my texts and still decided to ignore me. I don't know who to hate – me, her or him.

The 'ping' of her text jolted me from my thoughts.

'I know you don't care, so why are you pretending to?'

Anything but that. I felt the emotions swelling up in my throat. I was choking, trying not to cry in the middle of the street. A doomsday alert wouldn't have made me feel worse than this. I don't care? *I don't care?* All I do is care. Even when I pretend not to be upset by small things, I care. I care about all the small, stupid details. I care about it all, and they think I don't? I don't know what to feel anymore. Sadness? Anger? Something else, something I can't quite name.

I typed. Deleted. Typed again. Every word felt wrong. Everything I wrote sounded too desperate. Desperate for her validation. Like I was begging. My head felt hot. My nose started to dribble and the metallic taste of blood hit the back of my throat. Jesus, not now. I tilted my head back, eyes on that too-perfect Australian blue sky, and for a second, I wished the snow globe would be shaken until everything was splintered into debris.

I waited. The world didn't explode. Everything stayed calm, like a still pond, untouched by wind. I wiped the blood away. Maybe it was the right thing to happen. I always knew I wasn't enough. He still hasn't texted me back. I didn't expect much anymore. I was fading away. What used to be me, him and her, was now only them. And the hardest part was accepting the cruel truth that I never truly mattered.

The Mountain

By Max Arnold

The man looked down at his feet, staring at his shaven legs and shin-high socks, and shifted his feet in his shoes. He'd found them in a charity shop and figured \$15 was better than \$300. Wrong choice. A leaf brushed his face and he glanced at the snow-tipped mountains that stretched along the horizon, their caps blending with the pale sky. A town sprawled behind him. Houses nestled in between rises in the ground and lined the top of shallow ridges that had been placed there thousands of years ago.

Ahead of him, the road led into a forest. The trees stretched above the road, tall and old. A car blasted past him and he snapped out of his daze. He had better get going. While it was early, there was still a way to go and the weather up high was unpredictable. He rocked back on the bike's frame and stood to settle into his seat, searching for comfort on a seat that was not made for comfort. He clipped his left foot into his pedal, leaning to the right, taking one last look around and set off on the steep gradient. On the road beneath him, occasionally flashing by, were faded words of encouragement from races gone by, painted by crazed fans. Now, the roads were empty and he trundled along, alone. He was fresh and didn't feel as if he would struggle anytime soon. He'd completed rides of this caliber many times before without issue. He'd studied his route and knew that the forest stretched on for some time before opening into a vast, open landscape. His shoes didn't feel so intolerable now. Only while he was still did they hurt. Good thing he wasn't still.

