

## Biological Determinist

Have you heard about bugs? Heard of the way  
they eat and drink themselves and procreate?  
Whoa, nature can be fucking brutal, ay.

The mitey weevil makes little headway  
—it's not phoresy but a parasitic state.  
Have you heard about bed bugs? Of the way,

featureless females having no vajay,  
males must traumatically inseminate.  
Whoa, nature can be fucking brutal, ay.

Lacking blood, bravery and vertebrae,  
heartless *A. triangulatus* penis-altercates.  
Have you heard about bugs? Heard of the way

the jewel wasp of the Ampulicidae  
zombifies cockroaches to incubate.  
Whoa, nature can be fucking brutal, ay.

I gots to stab, devour, manipulate  
this chelicerate, proliferate, decay.  
Have you heard about creeps? Their techniques?  
Whoa, nature can be fucking brutal, ay.

# Tina Cartwright

## Octopus

'Muum!'

Cath swivelled from the caravan sink.  
Her eyes and hands felt dry. The crack  
in the side of her finger hurt under the  
glove.

'How many brains do octopuses have?'

'Eight?'

'Close. They have nine brains.'

Her son's eyes flashed, showing the  
incredulity of it. His feet, shoes on, were  
tucked under him atop the plaid caravan  
seat. Her husband hated that. Shoes were  
meant to be left at the door. She hated  
how he got so furious at the little things  
but left her to deal with the big things.  
Like what they were going to do.

*Up to you*, he'd deliver with a shrug as  
though they were discussing what to have  
with the sausages for dinner.

'One in their head and eight in the  
arms.' Her son waggled his arm out  
toward the window, as if feeling a brain  
in his fingertips.

'What if one of the arms wanted to  
take over?' His hands framed the sides of  
his face, moving it from side to side, in  
the silly side-show clown gesture that she  
disliked.

'Surely, they work together, like a  
family. Don't they?' She slotted the last  
dish into the rack. About to suggest  
he grab a tea towel and dry, the words  
stopped on her lips. A face bobbed at  
the window. Her son's friend Brad was  
outside. Her son let the book slide to  
the floor and raced through the awning  
and outside, not even glancing at her for

permission. She was too tired to yell after  
him.

She could hear the girls slithering  
in their sleeping bags through in the  
awning. She filled the kettle, striking the  
match with a sizzle to light the gas. On  
the bench seat she pressed her hands  
together between her legs, laying her  
thumb over the red crack in the side of  
her finger.

Last night again, she'd tried to tell her  
husband the extent of her exhaustion.  
She was teary now, thinking of it. It'd  
been on her mind all day, how to say it.  
She'd tried before and she didn't know  
what she'd do if she were dismissed  
again. They'd left the kids chatting and  
reading and strolled through the dark  
around the campsite. Yellow lights, and  
silhouettes showed in caravan windows.  
The air was cold. She'd thought he might  
lay an arm across her shoulders, pull her  
to him.

'I've been trying to tell you how  
exhausted I am.'

He kept on walking, but she waited.  
His eyes glowed in the dark. He came  
back, toward her. Her body folded,  
anticipating an embrace. But suddenly  
his hands made an angry grasp at the  
night air.

'Don't you think I am? I work ten  
hours a day on my feet. This is my only  
break. Two weeks off, all year.' He spun  
away, searching out into the dark. 'I don't  
know what you want from me, Cath.'

And off he went toward Dave's cabin

for a beer. She imagined wandering off into the night, ending up by the side of the highway in her stained tracksuit pants and knitted pullover. She had a cry, adding her glistening tears to the night.

In the morning the sun was glorious and the exhaustion was still there. The goat bleated from under the plum tree on the hill. A boat on a trailer blocked her view of the campsite and then reversed down the camp road. When was the last time she'd truly felt love for him? The Netball club dress up do. He'd worn her long black skirt and glossy, high boots. They'd helped one another get ready, she pressing socks into her own bra forming them into breasts on his chest. Painting his face, making his cheeks blush and his lips outlined in red. She'd worn his gumboots and a brown Driza-Bone that hung to the floor. They were Harry and Daisy from the Blimey cartoon. He'd loved the attention, opening her coat and stepping in, closing it around the two of them. For a moment the world was just them. At the party he was drunk and obnoxious. They were all her friends. He was terrible around most people. He had a knack of finding the one thing they didn't want to talk about and going on and on. He'd told Jenny Barry that city folk were up themselves, wouldn't know a day's work if it slapped them in the face, knowing full well that she was from the city. To Frank, he'd challenged an arm wrestle, to prove that being a dentist made you soft. Frank had a lovely home with a pool on the north side of town. Why was her husband so threatened by others' success? She'd dragged him

home, bristling with rage, stopping herself from saying, my one night out, the way he would have.

The girls were up, jostling one another over cereal and milk.

'What are you going to do today?' she asked Cara, who plonked down beside her. Cara rolled her eyes.

'Dunno, I just got up.'

The girls exchanged a look about her. She felt like crying. Then she remembered last Friday.

'We could go out on the boat?'

\*

They flicked the brown and orange deckchairs open, setting them under Lorna's canvas veranda. From there she could see two of the kids dragging blue fishing crate lids up the clay slip on the hill.

'Down at the Point. He's there on Friday afternoons,' Lorna said between sips of chardonnay. Cath couldn't drink during the day. It gave her a headache. The type that burrowed in for the night.

'Two for ten, fresh off the boat.'

It *was* a good deal. Lorna was on about her crays. She was obsessed. Every day she found a new recipe: bisque, crayfish mornay, barbeque lime and chilli, burnt butter sauce. Cath wasn't fussed on them.

She watched her son's distant figure, in his dark brown shorts and a blue striped t-shirt, a hand-me-down from Barbara Musselwaithe on the corner. He reached the top of the slip, a clay-coloured gash in the green hill, plonked onto the blue crate lid and whooshed, squealing, to the bottom.

'They can do that for hours.' Lorna

noted her gaze.

Cath nodded. She was figuring out a way to ask Lorna about Bill, Lorna's ex, and how she'd left him. What Cath really wanted to know was, *how had she found the courage? and wasn't she afraid?* She didn't think she could manage on her own. Her life centred around her husband and the kids, every single little thing. Growing up in the sixties all she wanted was to get married and have kids. Now, she was Mrs Fraser. Who would she be without that?

'Lorna?'

Lorna had gone inside for some ice. It was hot. Lorna's spot was on the upper level of the camp; a dry field that stretched between the hills to the right and in front, the road to the left and the lower camp behind. Lorna poked her head out the caravan door. She could say it now.

'When you...'

Marney passed on the road, stopping when she saw Cath. 'I've got a message for you, wrote it down. Back at the store,' she said. Marney wore two low, dark pigtailed that sagged down her back. Cath sat up, nearly spilling her lemonade.

'Who from? Do you know?'

Marney's jandals stirred the dust. She puffed air through pursed lips, trying to recall. 'Ahh... polite, young, Amanda? Sandra?'

'Cassandra!?'

'That's it.'

'What did she say?'

Marney shaded her eyes. She straightened, noting Cath's excitement.

'Sorry, Ray was talking to me and we had customers. I scribbled it down. I got

the number.'

Cath already had the number. On Friday she'd ironed her white blouse with the tiny violet flowers, teamed it with her straight black skirt, tried to flatten her large, bouncy curls and walked down to the newsagents with her elbows out so no sweat could form under her arms. She'd done it herself. All of it, the letter of application, the CV, the interview. She told no one. In the interview she'd been so nervous that she decided to pretend to be someone else. The most self-assured person she knew was Barb, so that's who she'd been. When Cassandra queried her lack of experience Cath had nodded and agreed, *however*, she'd gone on. She had been the Treasurer of the Netball Association for ten years straight. She was secretary of the Parent Teacher's Association. She ran the cash register at the A & P Show. On and on, she went, some of it true, some exaggeration and some borrowed from someone else's life.

'Come on,' Lorna said behind her, looking at her watch. 'They'll be coming in now.'

\*

From the road above the boat shed they saw Dave in his blue towelling hat and black and red chequered shirt. He tipped blue tubs into other blue tubs and layered the fish with ice. Her husband was not there. They waved down at Dave. He waved back and pointed out toward the boats in the bay. Near the point a dark figure in a dinghy rowed through the dazzling water.

'That Dad?' her eldest asked.

'What's he doing?' Her son looked up at her.

'Checking the nets ... I think.'

On the point they stood all together on the big red cross of the helipad, looking out to sea. The dinghy was far out. She couldn't tell if it was coming closer. Under the clear sky the water stretched, flat and turquoise. In the bay the orange sand beach spelled C. She recognised the blue hull and red lettering *Marina*, of Murray Bell's fishing boat but she didn't know the two white boats, rocking beside it. Below, the little beach was sludgy with brown kelp whips and blackening sea lettuce. On the tip of the point the windsock haunted and hid. The wind pushed their voices back into their mouths. Her son yabbered anyway. He pulled at her sleeve, pointing out to sea. Together they struggled forward against the push of wind.

'What's he doing?'

'Dad!' Her son dashed forward. Cath's hands shot to her mouth.

'Oh God!'

Her eldest pulled her son back. Cath huddled him against her.

'He'll be ok ... He's alright.' She said aloud, telling herself.

Her husband stood up in the boat. He rocked dangerously. It was her eldest that clarified.

'Octopus.' She squinted into the wind then looked back at Cath with bright, panicked eyes. 'It's got him!'

'Dad! DAD!' Her son broke free, waving and running to the edge. The eldest caught him, holding him back. His hands cupped his mouth and he yelled hard.

'Hit it between the eyes! Between the eyes!' He jumped on the spot.

They could all see now. The octopus

anchored an arm on the side of the boat. It's free arms wrapped around her husband's ankles, trying to pull him overboard. He wielded the oar, driving it down, trying to whack the octopus.

They heard a cry of pain. He buckled. He had hit his own leg.

'Dad!' Her daughter covered her face with her hands. The boat tipped and her husband went over.

They waited, holding their breath and scanning the water.

'Mum,' her son whimpered.

But he did not surface.

'Run, run for Dave,' she told the eldest.

'He'll be alright,' she said to the others, but her voice was all funny and her lips were shaking.

\*

Later, after her mother had come and taken the kids home, Lorna came down and helped pack up the campsite. The plan was to pack up tonight, stay with Lorna and help with the search tomorrow. Cath could tell Lorna didn't know what to say. They sat outside in the awning with the battery operated lamp on the camp table between them. Sleeping bags stuffed into their sacks, striped canvas bags and boxes filled with food lined the awning walls. It smelled of grass and bodies.

Lorna placed a shandy on the table in front of Cath.

'Thanks.'

Cath felt the note in her pocket. Cassandra had given her the job, wanted her to start on Monday. Cath had agreed. She had not mentioned her husband.

'They'll find him. He'll be alright,'

Lorna said, as though it were certain, but her face and her voice didn't match. Cath pictured herself smiling behind the counter at the newsagent. She thought of the kids, of her mother, of what she would say. *My husband was taken by an octopus.*

'You know they have nine brains.'