

## Striker

JANE DOWNING

He headed around the back to the laneway behind the shopping centre. Banks of car parks blocked one side – the understoreys of towering sightless apartment buildings. And on the other, a storm water drain dictated the route of the path – the original creek a trickle of water hanging on from the last rain at the bottom. The oval of the Catholic school stretched beyond the drain. Empty at this hour. A car in the closest car park winked itself locked. Silenced. Eyes closed against the night again.

Bats creaked open the starlight to the left. Were gone. The last witnesses.

Someone, years ago, had planted trees on either side of this back path. Neglected, left unchecked, they gave luxurious shade on summer days, dappled light shows at dusk, and a tunnel of darkness now.

The way was shorter than following the road home from the shops.

He stuck his AirPods in, cranked up the metal and set off, his bulging shopping bags swinging from each arm like Jack and Jill buckets, heavy weights getting heavier, dead weights by the time he'd get home. Best not to dwell.

The throb of the metal fuelled his stride. It took a while to realise 1/ there was a figure further along the track and 2/ he was gaining on them. Now he was back on planet earth he couldn't help notice the figure speeding up even as he gained on them. A slight frame, a glow of fair hair in the light falling from an apartment above. But no matter how she accelerated, her pace was nothing on his natural stride.

He stopped abruptly when the analogy formed in his mind – this was like a predator gaining on its prey. When he understood what she must be feeling.

*I'm not going to hurt you!*

No! He couldn't call that out. Because that is exactly what a predator would call out to pacify its prey. He stayed silent. Except for his breathing.

In less than a minute he could overtake her. He imagined that minute for her. Alone in a dark laneway with no escape to left or right – a brick wall and a cement chasm forbidding any attempt.

What were her options? Flight, fight, paralysis. Even if she had no trauma to re-imagine, she'd have the stories of friends accumulating and overwhelming.

His mind calculated. As hers must. Though his scenarios were of a different kind. The muscles in his upper arms ached – what were they called – biceps? triceps? Home was just short of two kilometres distant. There was beer in the fridge and a mate-from-work's Netflix password remembered. And a flatmate waiting for the shopping. There was no way he was turning back to take the long way round. The only way was forward.

Less than a minute until he could be beside her.

One minute, he could overtake her and be home all the quicker.

One minute for him. Against a lifetime flashing for her.

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He started walking again. But not to overtake her. Not to loom. Accelerating, then slowing,

until he'd calibrated to her pace. No gaining on her. One foot in front of the other in lockstep.

And yet, still, he feared his footsteps in the night were sending out a notice not of his composing. He wanted his footpads to beat out a message in remorse code: *I am here. But I am not coming for you.* Would she be able to hear that in the static? Her back was as rigid as a figure in a woodcut. To shout anything now with his deep, metal-ready voice would be even more threatening than earlier.

Thank Christ on a bike, the crossroad glimmered ahead, the mica in the asphalt catching the stars. She'd reached it. The chance of freedom from this tunnel of fear. The door to safety.

He saw the moment she allowed herself a backward glance. The swiftness of her snapped neck to banish the sight of him – a huge, hulking man, bulked up in the shadows into a giant. How was she to know it was a supermarket shop widening his girth?

He swore out loud when she turned to the right out of the laneway into the quiet suburban road. The way he wanted to turn. His quickest way home.

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A left turn, the wrong way, would take him up past the ambulance station, through the winding trail of the new wetlands to complement the old ugly stormwater drain, around another bulge in the path to accommodate a few swings and labelled a playground. Then a double-back up a steep incline to rejoin his normal path from supermarket to home.

His arms ached. The weight doubled as he walked, still at her pace though she'd now turned the corner.

"Fuckety, fuck, fuck," he muttered in time to a clash of guitars through his AirPods.

Just go home the normal way, just overtake, he told himself. What did it matter? It wasn't as if he was going to hurt her. It's only one minute in two lives, a flash and he'd be gone. His obligation was to the comfort of his flatmate waiting for his return, not to this figure who had slipped out of sight now at the ninety degree turn onto the road's raised footpath. Who might indeed, he tried to convince himself, be under headphones too and oblivious to all his concerns – lost in a Bubl  bubble or an audio book of 'War and Peace' or a podcast on unsolved true crimes filling her mind with lurking, smirking, stalking...

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The intersection arrived before his decision. Any such hope of her being oblivious to the stranger in the night was dashed as he arrived at the road and looked right. She was still in sight, her shoulders now bowed. Racing. The brave back she'd been putting on now a headlong scuttle. She looked two foot shorter, bent into the oncoming wind in her mind. Was she the same woman? Yes. The same pink, plush cat baubled off the zip of her backpack.

He'd forget the incident soon enough. Maybe there'd be a flash of recognition on a distant autumnal night, traversing the same path, the twitter of a bat inciting a return to a memory lost in the vast flow of the day-to-day. The quotidian mire. He'd get home and give Em her tampons so she could go on her date with Rachel and he'd remember to take his meds, the ones that had a name like a character from 'Lord of the Rings.'

What, he asked himself, would a hero do?

But he just wanted to be home eating some of the thick fruit and cream yogurt that had been on special.

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He turned reluctantly onto the path less taken. Past an ambulance gleaming on the apron in front of the station, across the road, he trudged onward. He tripped on the uneven gravel path down through the wetlands. The large pond sparkled under the solar-powered light that rose

up in majesty near the bridge. He slowed at noises from the left, slowed right down, losing the momentum of his swinging, overburdened arms. If he believed in a cosmic force for good as some did, he would have seen this next brake to getting home as a reward: a pair of swamp hens emerged from a bush by the water and paraded their chicks across the path in front of him. Two slick, noble long-legged birds herding a couple of black pompoms with tiny red beaks thrusting out of the fluff.

They were the stuff of his conversation for Em as he pushed through their front door. The woman on the path only resurfacing as he tried to sleep, a mantra treading his head, I'm sorry, *I really am sorry, I am.*

#### **Author**

Jane Downing's stories and poems have been published around Australia and overseas, including in *Griffith Review, Big Issue, Antipodes, Southerly, Westerly, Island, Overland, Meanjin, Canberra Times, Cordite, Best Australian Poems* and previously in *Social Alternatives*. In 2016 she was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. She has a Doctor of Creative Arts degree from the University of Technology, Sydney, the creative component of which, 'The Sultan's Daughter,' was released by Obiter Publishing in 2020, and she taught at Charles Sturt University, Albury until she retired. She can be found at [janedowning.wordpress.com](http://janedowning.wordpress.com).

### **from "October Sequence"**

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Obbligato pries its way into thought process  
As the windows in a row spritz flecks of landscape  
Seen from train in daylight then at dusk  
Before night tamps down to a quiet pause  
Feelings rash with threat and buildup  
Of a posse of views potentially ideas  
Fraught with depth perception narrowed  
To blinders as protective curse the glass  
Rubbed clean of asterisks subtitles and gray text  
Living beyond the mind and streaming toward  
Enclosures at a glance as if  
Some military bayou pretexted something  
To fear or to believe the troops with zilch  
To do but listen obey and nod repeatedly  
Awaiting plastic policies pure procedures vaunted  
By routine assuming mensch like qualities  
Where there are none but giving in to fantasy  
Learned young like the soft blue book  
Replete with dogma in arrears  
Appearing daily to resemble corruption dressed up  
In a silk suit with plastered smile  
Purporting to be warm and fatherly

**SHEILA A MURPHY**

### **Asylum Seeker\***

For I am human, Yet I dare to exist.....  
How could a life could be easily dismissed?

Everything I built pulled from beneath my feet,  
Facing the end, retreating to defeat  
Ever feel like you speak but no one hears,  
It feels as if the rest of the world has blocked their ears!

Mother Mary weeps her tears,  
The wind carries the echoes of wailing innocence lost,  
Escaping the war comes at a cost!  
Asylum, a plight that many thousands seek!

Far away lands that promise peace from the rage,  
Why are we welcomed by being locked up, like a bird to the cage.

**TAMMY LEE COAD**

*\*Commended entry from the 2022 Seeking Asylum Poetry prize.*