

**Welcome to Pod People, Issue Two of Story To... On the following pages you will have the chance to peruse words and artwork by some very talented young Australians. For this issue we asked for submissions that highlighted the many stories surrounding commuters everyday, at every hour, on their respective public transport journeys. We hope that it encourages our readers to turn off their iPods, put down their PDAs, and take a look at what's going on around them. You never know what you might discover.**

# THINGS YOU MIGHT MISS IF PREOCCUPIED ON A TRAIN: A BIRD, A PLANT, A PERSON

BY **ESTELLE TANG**  
ESTELLE.TANG@GMAIL.COM

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## Welcome Swallow / *Hirundo neoxena*

The Welcome Swallow has glossy blue-black feathers where its mane would be, if it were a lion, and rust-coloured plumage on its face and chest. At adult size it reaches 15 centimetres; in terms of birds (and most things) this is considered small. It has a forked tail and a proud white chest. Swallows are generally gregarious, but don't be tempted to think that a Welcome Swallow would be enticed to laugh at sordid jokes about its name. You might think you've never seen one, but it is a common bird, often spotted in cities and residential areas. Look for these acrobatic birds on Victorian train station utility wires, or sometimes on the ground. They make pleasant sounds unless alarmed (then, a piercing 'si-erp').

## Hairpin Banksia / *Banksia spinulosa*

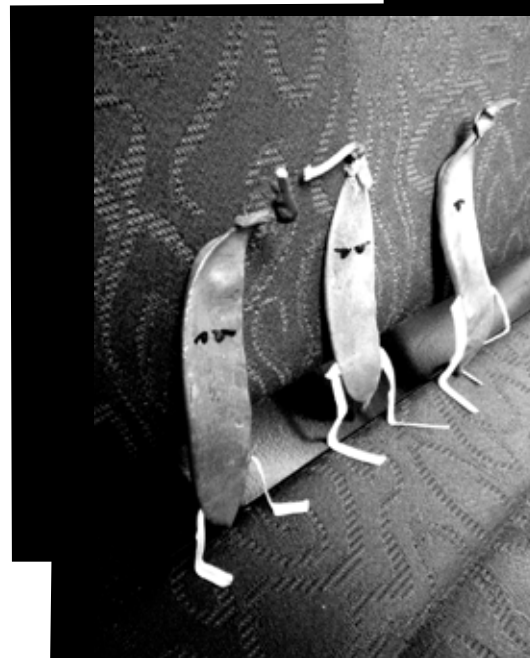
The Hairpin Banksia is, well, you know what a banksia looks like, don't you? Its 20 centimetre flower spike features hundreds of individual flowers clustered together in a cylindrical shape. The flowers are gold to orange in colour and feature black styles, hence the 'Hairpin' name. Styles are part of the flower's female reproductive system - if you're not sure what these would look like, imagine a corn cob with fake eyelashes along every row. This species was taken by Joseph Banks to the United Kingdom, where it can suffer iron deficiency when planted in insufficiently acidic soil. In Melbourne, though, the flower can be found along the coast as well as in gardens. A specimen may be just outside the window when you're stopped just outside the City Loop - take a look.

## The person sitting closest to you on the train / Marta? Min? Thom?

The person sitting closest to you has several characteristics which you will, I trust, already have construed as belonging to a person. They have had a whole life before sitting next to you in the train. What colour is their hair? It's easy to find out, but try not to scare them. It's quite impossible to know just by looking how much you have in common with this person. But there is at least one thing: you are going in the same direction today. When the breeze floats in from the ocean towards you, it will brush past the two of you mere seconds apart. What is their favourite smell in the world? They are travelling, just like you are. Wonder if they have noticed the colour of your hair, what your favourite smell is. Smile at this person when one of you leaves. If they see you, they will be less scared than you think. If they don't, that will be a good and great secret; remember it.



JORDI KERR  
WRITING.BUC@HOTMAIL.COM



# WELCOME TO THE CIRCUS

BY CRYSTAL ANDREWS  
ANDRECOI@STUDENT.UWA.EDU.AU

Attention pod people! While embarking upon public transport in a private music bubble will obliterate extraneous train chatter, a visual assault is more difficult to arm against. Keep your eyes peeled, pod-passengers, seven kids from Perth are going to make your \$1.40 ticket worthwhile.

Aggravated by zombie-like Perth commuters, Connor, Sean, Steafan, Caitie, Jamie, Chad and Kyle laid out an inspired idea. "Public transport is a nuisance... it's boring," is a gripe shared by the friends, "what we did was fun!" Hearing the zest with which they speak about their adventure is contagious; the picture they paint is both clear and ridiculous.

Imagine sitting lifelessly in your seat, earphones shielding you from the world, when your empty gaze suddenly lands upon a mouse and a penguin boarding your carriage and proceeding to set up and play a game of chess. Unbeknownst to you, today passengers in four other carriages are seeing a similar bizarre sight.

As the train chugs along to Fremantle, a dog, bear, moose, panda and a gorilla join the chess duo. The moose is touting a handycam and the bear is reading the paper, ideas which Connor, the bear, says "[is] the most interesting stuff. Animals doing shit that people kinda do. That's why everyone loves watching David Attenborough shows."

But, as a bunch of boundlessly energetic boys would know, there is nothing as secretly enjoyable as watching a fight.

The panda bumps the chess table and the penguin rises, shrugging questioningly. Gob-smacked commuters look on as the mouse stands to an impressive height (Steafan, at 184cm) and shoves the defiant panda. "I think this was my favourite bit to see," recalls Caitie/moose, "it was like [the passengers] couldn't move and they didn't want to either."

What unfolded next can only be described as an animalistic free-for-all. Apparently, seeing a mouse drop a gorilla (Chad) to the ground on a leisurely train ride can elicit an array of entertaining responses. "Yeah, that bit was the genius of this plan," Sean says of having Caitie sit, as inconspicuously as a moose can, in the corner filming passengers' reactions. After seeing re-enactments of the most memorable facial expressions, I am inclined to agree.

As you could imagine, most people evacuated soon after the animal throw down erupted, leaving the gang to exit the train without incarceration. They could have been arrested easily enough, however, "people do way worse things on trains. Like listen to The Veronicas."

When asked if the enigmatic gang would ever pull a stunt like this again, the answer was a unanimous yes, with the hint that there might even be something already in the works. There is not a better incentive than that to start taking public transport again! Listening to their enthusiastic recollection of that fateful train ride instilled in me a longing desire to have seen the tale unfurl. So, I asked to see the footage of the passengers' reactions. But, alas - someone had taped over it with Kyle's nudie run in December.



# TINSEL DREAMS (TRAM MOMENT 1)

BY ANGELA MEYER  
LITERARYMINDED@GMAIL.COM

Liquid gold jacket  
flecks of black -  
that hollow-cheek-seeking  
made-up male alien  
fluorescent as the tram handle  
swinging and melodic  
as the song that exists on  
in sleep hours eluding one  
tinsel dreams and  
contextualising influence  
such as 1973  
when I was not yet swimming.  
Ring, ring  
I wait  
and am alone again  
relying on text  
and the beneath  
like Leavis's 'life' entity  
third realm aesthete  
understood in intimate looks  
like the mentor's  
who believes  
humanist thoughts  
amongst cab-merlot  
and the scent of aged carpet  
in a mountain retreat  
fearlessly looking into  
and blowing off the dust  
that can settle early  
and hum-drum along  
a perfectly ambitious being  
embellishing them in comfort  
of baby talk and houses  
that don't have legs or wings  
let alone a voice.  
Ring, ring  
I'll see another gold-jacketed  
similar spirit of androgyny  
some transcendent  
and I'll continue to smile  
into the air  
let the businessman stare.



# GORDON

6426 3651

BY KATHRYN LEDSON  
KLEDSON@OPTUSNET.COM.AU

I sat on the scummy toilet, pissed off. Pissed off because I was in the train station dunnies where customers chucked used toilet paper on the floor rather than in the bowl. But mostly pissed off because I needed a shit and nothing was coming out except loud farts which, come to think of it, kind of suited the atmosphere anyway.

I pushed, willing it to come, imagining it working its way down from bowel to bowl. Visualisation, I think it's called. I felt my face turn red. Nothing. I tried another tack - ignoring it instead. I looked around the cubicle. Syringes poked out of the used-syringe box. One needle had blood on it. I winced and looked away, rubbing the crook of my arm. I could never be a junkie. There was smeared shit on the wall. Graffiti poo. I wondered if the artist shat into her hand and then applied it, or if she fished it out of the water. Then I wondered if she washed her hands after, which made me think about the nut shop up the road where the guys stand outside, grinning at passers-by, holding out little tasting bowls of nuts and the like.

I stared at the brown word: Natalie. No more sharing nuts with strangers. Not me. Never again.

Blue ballpoint was the preferred tool. Most handbags wouldn't contain a selection of graffiti applicators, but most have a blue pen. One person had spouted romantic verse, at the same time challenging Carly the Whore to some kind of duel. I tried to imagine how it would work. Would the writer shove Carly's head in the toilet and flush? Would Carly in turn smear her face with Natalie's poo?

My focus returned to the situation at hand. I listened to other commuters farting and pissing, toilets flushing. I was jealous. I yanked on the toilet roll and scrunched a big wad of it in my hands. Wishful thinking.

I looked around the walls and read some more. There were lots of sluts and hot guys. Many phone numbers for free blow jobs and the like. I wondered who, sitting in this cubicle, would call about a blow job.

Then I noticed a neat hand had written a man's name and phone number in red ink, and underneath that: I'm so sorry to leave you like this, but I can't live another thousand years in this nightmare. I love you. Kim. There was a time and date written next to Kim's name. It was just this morning. I looked back at the bloody syringe and my stomach lurched. Success, at last. I stood and flushed, and zipped up my jeans. Then I got out my blue ballpoint pen and wrote on my hand: Gordon 6426 3651.



RICHARD IBRAHIM  
WWW.RICREATIVE.NET



# THE PODLESS YOU

BY JAMES C SPINKS  
JIMY\_SPINKS73@HOTMAIL.COM



You stand silently on a gritty redbrick platform. A plastic bag of new clothes nudges the side of your right knee. There are two stainless steel benches fixed back-to-back in front of you. You take a seat behind an elderly woman and her grey ponytail presses against the back of your head. Sandwiched between a fat man and a girl with greasy brown hair, you gaze at your shoes. Your shoes only bore you, so you stare at the greasy haired girl instead. You are drawn to a build-up of makeup around the corners of her nose. Her eyes flash towards you. Instantly you return to your shoe-gazing, shoulders tight, heartbeat slightly raised.

There is a flat cigarette butt wedged in-between two bricks at your feet. You push it forward with the toe of your shoe until it comes loose from its crevice. You kick it away from you, though it does not travel far. Silence begins to peck at you, a sharp full peck, so pressing that it causes you to blurt out impulsively: "We can all talk, so why can't we all talk?" Everyone studies the ground awkwardly. No one says a word. You lower your head and rub your eyes in the thorny quiet.

The fat man starts to fidget; he dries his palms on his trousers. You can just see his red pumpkin face, anxiously fixed on yours. You pretend not to notice. "I'd..." he punches the thick silence. "I'd like to talk..." A weak blow. No one responds.

Now seems like a fair time to re-examine the girl's makeup so you pseudo-casually cross your legs and turn your head towards her. Two eyes meet two eyes. Hot. Her presence bores into you for a half second that feels like ten. Your bones tighten and you whip your head away accordingly. She taps her foot. You bite your nails.

A gritty black train approaches the platform. You consider abandoning your seat, sprinting forward and leaping in front of the stampeding locomotive. It is not far at all: from your seat to the tracks. You could turn this whole scene upside down in three seconds if you wanted. This would surely give little miss make-up and the others something to talk about. But you haven't the energy. You haven't even worn your new clothes yet. You slouch back and let out a sigh of defeat. The train stops and the doors open. Passengers rush out onto the island, form haphazard lines, and hesitantly bustle through the platform exits. The fat man and the girl with the make-up board the open train. You remain seated as they sway together into their separate futures.

You and the lady behind you sit back-to-back on the redbrick island. Stray hairs from her ponytail tickle the skin on the back of your neck. You stare absently at the stones on the track. And like this you sit and wait. In silence. A lame silence. A lame breeze on your cheeks and a bag of new clothes at your feet.



**SUDEEP LINGAMNENI**  
WWW.COLLABORATESTUDIOS/BOYNAMEDSUE



## STATIONARY IN TIME, LOST IN SPACE

BY SIMON SMITHSON  
SMITHSON.SIMON@GMAIL.COM

If Catholicism has it right about the levelled tiers of the afterlife, and the unbaptised have to make a thousand-year pit stop on their way to an eternity of hanging with Jesus (and Mr. Cooper), then Limbo is going to look something very much like a train station.

All public transport stops have this property of being a kind of no-place, rather than somewhere in their own right, somewhere transitory and forever adrift in between two other places. While this is true of bus and tram stops as well as train stations, when waiting for a bus or a tram the effect is lessened by the fact that you generally take up a position on the side or middle of the road, still part of the rest of the world. On a train platform, though, you're on an outcropping of concrete and brick; a little section of space entirely separate from the streets and lanes around it.

This can make train stations sullen places in the greyness of the morning as they crouch in the middle of the commuter rush (although it's not like anyone else is overjoyed at the prospect of the day ahead). At night, platforms become keepers of secrets as darkness falls over the tracks and the bright overheads cast pools of light amidst the shadows. There are few better places for smoking than at a train station on a cold winter night (especially if the night is cold enough to drive the muggers indoors).

This sense of being removed from the rest of the world, of being a step out of sync with other places, is a hidden one, only noticeable under certain conditions. A group of people large enough will be too caught up in discussion to feel it, although during a pause in conversation one or two might throw a glimpse down the track and catch a twist of wonder in the pit of their stomachs. Someone lost in a book, a magazine, an iPod, will be too distracted to let the knowledge settle across them, and blithely continue on their journey. And in the mornings the arrivals and departures come in such quick succession that anything beyond the ticking of the clock is unnoticeable.

But in the middle of the day, or in the evenings, as services wind down, when you're by yourself, and the booths and stands have closed, and there's nothing to do but sit, or stand, or pace and wait, then the knowledge that this place, the train station, is neither a beginning or a destination, can close in on you, and there's nothing for it but to light a cigarette, or check your phone, and hope that the time until the next train will move just a little bit faster.



CHRISTOPHER GRAY  
WWW.MYSPACE.COM/MIDDLE\_BRAINS



KELLYANNE GENTLE  
WWW.KELLYGENTLE.COM

## THE LATE NIGHT RIDE

BY SEAN GREENHILL  
MASONBRODIE@YAHOO.COM.AU

May looks to his eyes; so deep, blue and reassuring. 'Do you like working in the city?'

The moment that he becomes aware of her focused attention, he suddenly smiles broadly. 'I don't really like it or hate it,' he replies with a shrug of his shoulders. 'I don't like having to catch the last train home when I finish at one o'clock in the morning or five-thirty in the morning to get in to open the store at seven. But it's no big deal really; the train only takes an hour each way.'

'Don't your parents worry about you?' There is a look of incomprehension on John's face. 'Worry? They're the ones that sent me for the interview. And besides I think it's different for guys anyway.'

It would have been easy to accept that it was just a difference in sex. Easy for her to believe it is just another obsolete double standard. But she wondered how he had coped the first time he had made the trip, when he had been her age. She moves her seat closer to his, her mind filling with all the movie portrayals of semi-deserted late night trains populated with drunk derelicts and violent, strung out addicts. 'But don't you get scared?'

'I'm usually too tired to be worried about anything. I have to close up the store on Friday and Saturday nights and I have to make the last train or wait till four o'clock the next morning for another one,' John admits, dismissing the suggestion. 'I fall asleep by the time we get to Central. The only thing that I worry about is waking up at my station. There isn't a train back in the other direction for another two hours.'

'So nothing's ever happened? 'You've never been mugged or anything?'

'Oh, you know...' John says flippantly, not looking at her. 'Things happen, but it's nothing that's worth talking about. I've never been hurt and I've never had anything taken from me. Technically I haven't been mugged.'

'But people have tried,' May persists, seizing on his admission. His almost off-hand attitude seems somehow almost too casual, as if he is striving hard to convince her of something he does not believe. 'What happened?'

'This is so boring.' John announces languidly, his forced smile at odds with his tone. 'Are you sure that you really want to know about it?' He sighs softly when she nods her head. When he continues, it is in a quiet, flat monotone, as if reading from a technical manual. 'Let's just say that I'm not the nicest person when I'm woken up.' As she watches grey steel floods over the blue of his eyes and his face hardens, frightening her. 'Sometimes the passengers aren't the ones who have to be scared. Sometimes it's the muggers who do.'

**WORDS...**

**Crystal Andrews  
James C Spinks  
Simon Smithson  
Estelle Tang  
Kathryn Ledson  
Angela Meyer  
Sean Greenhill**

**IMAGES...**

**Sudeep Lingamneni  
Jordi Kerr  
Kellyanne Gentle  
Richard Ibrahim  
Co-founded and edited by...  
Kate Nicholson  
Beth Keating**

**DESIGNED BY...**

**Christopher Gray**

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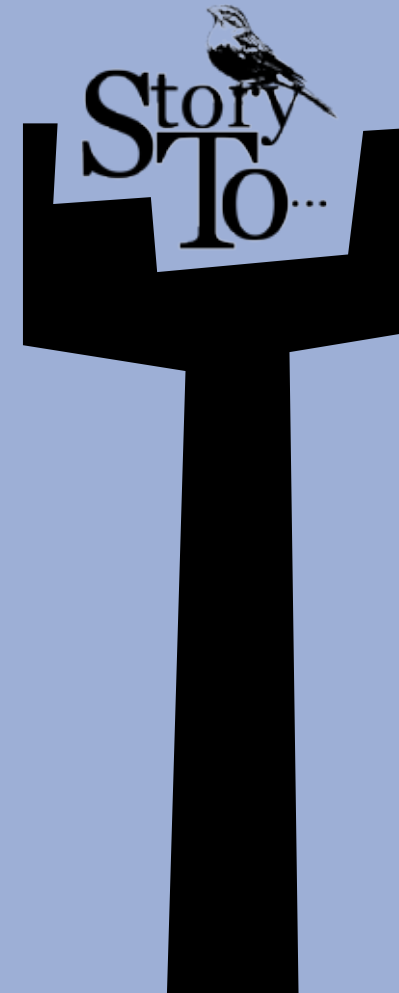
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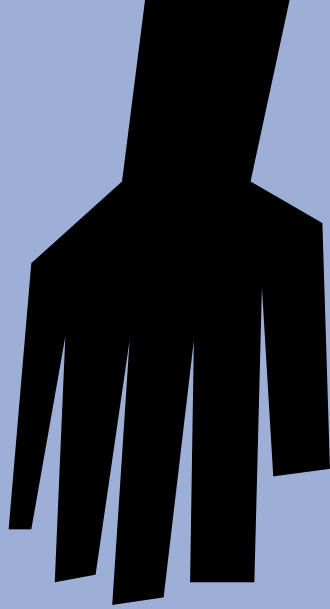
**[www.storyto.wordpress.com](http://www.storyto.wordpress.com)**

**EMAIL US AT...**

**[storyto@storytomagazine.com](mailto:storyto@storytomagazine.com)**

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PLEASE DONT THROW  
ME AWAY. GIVE ME TO A  
FRIEND OR STRANGER.

