

Reflective Commentary

In this piece I transposed the themes of lonely desperation and rebirth from Tim Winton's short story, *The Water Was Dark and it Went Forever Down*, into a distinctly outer suburban Melbourne scene of my own. In the original, the landscape acts as a metaphor for the pursuit and attainment of peace. The island, being a sanctuary for emotionless life and death, is embraced by Winton's young girl as she confronts her mother's failures and affirms her wish for freedom. Winton places a great emphasis on landscape in his writing and it is at the beach where the audience follows the young girl's transformation into a woman devoid of emotional sensibility, at the risk of her physical existence.

To highlight my interpretation of the impact of loneliness and desperation on a character, I have alluded to Winston Churchill's description of depression as a "black dog". The dog that leads my young boy to the place of his suicide symbolically disappears as the depressive enters the height of his emotional vacillation that leads both to his psychological re-birth and physical destruction. I employed Winton's spare and unadorned factuality and attempted to match the tone of his piece, but chose to subvert his narrative. In resisting *The Water's* central theme that to live and survive is, 'the same thing...no difference', my character begins, rather than ends, his life in a mechanical and unfeeling state of pure survival. Rather than the cold, methodical physical action of swimming, the listening and singing to music, illustrated in sporadic lyrics, pulls him out of his emotionless stupor as he rejects the notion of 'survival' in favour of living. While Winton's girl is inspired by the 'web of life' that ensures that the, 'sick and weak died and the young and strong thrived', so too is my boy compelled to fight for freedom as the lonely white seagull does against its black feathered opponents. Rather than tearing himself away from another person it is in the act of shaking off his 'black dog' that he finds happiness and flight, finally free.

I have incorporated in my story the same detached narration and conclusion that defines Winton's style. In addition, I have adopted *The Water's* structure which combines long and short paragraphs as well as detailed descriptions of the landscape. Like the original, a series of one word paragraphs followed by a long, descriptive and emotionally charged sentence ambiguously ends the story and my characters life.

The Black Dog and the White Seagull

The boy left the rented apartment by himself and went down to the empty street outside. He walked along the footpath, passing the street lamps which, with their yellow glow lit nothing but the cold cement and the black dog that trotted silently in front of him. He was tall for his age, and years of eating only what he had to ensured he was thin. His hair was long. His cheeks were gaunt. His eyes were dark from years of restless nights. He just wished he could get away from his life, find a friend, and come outside into a world where the sky was free of clouds and dogs and medication, but the boy knew he had a better chance of being happy than of changing his lot.

The boy was a victim of circumstance. In another time or place or region or country he very well could have been helped, saved even, but the boy was where he was and lived his life, in loneliness, and continued to follow his dog to where he knew he was always going to go. The sky was dark. Clouds moved in semisolid mass all in the same direction, to where he was going. He felt like they had been there his entire life, much like his peculiar companion in life. Years before, when he closed his eyes and felt free from the world, when his clothes were stained red, and he smiled the kind of smile that only peace and freedom can bring, the boy was told he was either stupid or sick.

When he left the hospital it was dark and rain clouds filled the sky. He was given a small orange bottle and his instructions. He was quite alone when he left, felt no freer, but his black dog kept him company and he knew it always would. He kicked his newest prescription and it bounced along the empty road, echoing in the darkness. The black dog took no notice. He sang.

Sun in the sky, you know how I feel.

Following the curve of the freeway, he saw the Westgate - high, cold beams of light - and he wondered how far out it was.

The boy was so sick of just eating and breathing and surviving. He was ready to stop worrying, that he wasn't smart enough, or tough enough, or popular enough. God, to be *free!*

All the thoughts that dominated his life flowed through him. 'You have no-one,' he would tell himself, 'You have no-one and are no-one.' 'What is the point? Just end it.' 'Why bother?' 'You're not worth a thing.' The black was dog was next to

him now. These thoughts came up when he least expected them. When he was nearest to peace. At school, walking home, and when he desperately needed to sleep. Over and over. He would scream them but for his fear of doctors hearing. Music could sometimes free him from it.

Birds flying high, you know how I feel.

Cold rain fell from the sky, from where the colossal dark mass of clouds stood, threatening the place with their silent menace. The boy would sometimes wish he could climb high enough to be enveloped by them.

‘You’re gonna send me crazy’, he said.

The boy was used to the company of his black dog, and he didn’t know who he was without it being by his side. He could escape it now and then, with a clear mind, see what was real - he would sometimes take out his iPod when he was alone with his dog, and sing out loud, at the top of his lungs.

*Oh freedom is mine
And I know how I feel*

The boy stopped dead. He was so sick of it, he wanted to be free of his quiet, screaming loneliness. What he needed was to escape; to be at peace.

By now, the Westgate was across the road from him. There were no cars, the whistling wind and rain were constant.

The black dog stared at the boy panting quietly. With a smile, he ran off the footpath and jumped the barrier of the bridge and ran.

He ran hard. He ran for his soul. He had waited for this. He ran and sang all the songs he knew, at the top of his voice.

The bridge was desolate. He slowed down his pace and took a deep breath, as though all his life he was drowning in a sea of depression, and wondered across the bridge’s smooth surface. There were signs and warnings. The eighty kilometre speed limit advertised itself to none but him. Its metric flashing lighting up his face. His headphones hung from his shirt. The frayed windsock fluttered weakly in the breeze and it was quite calm on the bridge. He could hear his footsteps; dragging on the wet cement and he looked to the edge. The fence there was made of thin wires. It wasn’t a tall fence. Maybe two metres he guessed, or less. There was whistling in his ears which was fading and rising with the windsock. A speed camera stood redundant, attached to the monolithic cold grey light posts, shining a powerful beam that attracted scores of insects. Seabirds filled the sky; they chased each other and shrieked

and fed. Stitching and soaring above him, with claws outstretched they hunted their prey, then ate it, clutching their kill in black claws and devouring it, still in flight and ready for more. Hunting, feeding, flying, fighting, dying. There was something relentlessly single-minded about the whole business.

After a time, he noticed a single small white bird in a sea of black feathers and a dull grey sky. It flew without purpose, but flew with a greater speed and strength compared to the other birds. It soared higher than the other birds in its freedom, so preoccupied were they in their mechanical system of existence. Other, bigger birds dogged it until, seemingly overwhelmed, it dived, wings firmly against its body. With speed and confidence and freedom and faith in the world it dived. Over the boy's head and straight down over the fence he watched it soar forever free and against the blackness of the water below he saw that there was no consideration of its height or speed or strength. In this open expanse of space there was nothing with which to judge it by. It was free and perfect.

The boy got up and saw that his black dog had finally come to join him, blue and red lights flashed in the distance, and then he cried out in triumph and placed his small white headphones into his ears.

Turn it up. Stop existing. Start living. Don't hesitate. Set yourself free.

Running out, he knew that it was time for him to find peace and leave his dog behind. There was no room. He had to start living for himself, leave his sadness with his pills. There wasn't time enough anymore for accepting all this craziness and sadness and depression, cutting, running, medicating, surviving.

Be a bird.

It's a new dawn

But he faltered.

It's a new day

Don't think, fly!

It's a new life

He turned up his iPod, drowned the loudspeaker.

For me

No, you pigs. I want to live.

And I'm feeling good.

He ran across the road and filled up full with happiness and sought freedom and prepared his wings.

Sing.

Dance.

Live.

Love.

That body danced and sang its own song, flew, soared, wings spread, laughing at the world, felt its own happiness, and all the way down was smart and tough and popular and free in the cold darkness.