

Henry Lawson Prize for Prose
TASTE OF DEATH

One night I dreamt of dying. And when I woke I could taste it on my tongue. It was decay mixed with rusting silver. I ran my tongue around the inside of my mouth but it made no difference. My bedroom was a mess and stank slightly of body odour and stale beer.

Feeling repulsed, I got up and went to the bathroom. I sat on the toilet in a daze, suddenly noticing that my toes were tingling. I flushed the toilet and took a swig of Listerine. Rising up and down on my tiptoes, I tried to relieve the tingling. It was like when your legs fall asleep. And when the numbness begins to subside, before the pins and needles set in – that was the feeling.

The Listerine did nothing. It just made it worse. Because now the death tasted of mint. Minty death. Minty decay. And minty rusting silver. God, that doesn't even make sense.

I staggered back to my room, avoiding the cockroach that darted across the hallway. This is Sydney – I'm used to them now. My bedroom has two windows and I was blinded now, as I stood swaying in the streaming light. I was hot and sweaty and possibly hungover. Though I don't remember drinking the night before.

I surveyed myself in the mirror as I stood in just a t-shirt and undies. My hair was limp and needed a wash, the grease evident in the clinging, matted strands. Maybe I should cut it all off. Or leave it.

I remember a teacher once telling us that his mother never washed her hair. She was Greek and beautiful and her hair just took care of itself. It was an enchanting thought – hair cleaning itself. In my mind it grew and morphed into a separate organism that nestled on her head like some kind of guardian. But while my hair was still my own I would need to wash it, or at least pull in back.

It was one of those mornings where I dreaded showering. As hot as I was standing in my baking room, I was only as dirty as my surroundings. Washing myself meant I had to deal with the growing pile of laundry that spread itself across my room and wedged itself in every crevice. It was not an appealing thought.

Though I was sweating, and could smell the rankness of my odour, I shivered in the sunlight. I don't remember exactly what day it was – it may have been a Thursday – but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was meant to be somewhere.

I shrugged back to the bathroom and showered, holding my head out from underneath the stream of water. I could not be bothered washing my hair. It wasn't so much the washing part that was a hassle, but the drying and straightening that followed it. That day I had neither the patience nor the compulsion – and I have often since wondered if maybe I should have.

I waded through the mounds of heaped and dirty clothes, occasionally sniffing then discarding a t-shirt or a pair of shorts. It was mid-January and already hot at 10:02 in

the morning. I finally managed to find something that didn't smell quite as vile and was only somewhat crushed. I don't even remember what I wore that day but I do remember spraying perfume on to disguise the smell. And finding my roll-on deodorant almost empty.

As I pulled my hair back, I scratched in irritation at my scalp. I'd always had hay fever which made my eyes itch like crazy over early spring and late summer, but this was new. At first I'd thought it was nits and, cursing, had gone to the pharmacy to dose up on pesticide. But it wasn't and I'd been tearing and prodding at my scalp ever since.

Having second thoughts, I went back to the bathroom and dunked my head under the cold tap. I half towel-dried my hair then decided it was hot enough to leave it. I pulled it back into a bun and enjoyed the cool trickling as drops of water ran down my neck and drenched my shirt.

I grabbed my bag and left the house without eating – I didn't have any food in the fridge. And I'm pretty sure there was only dried lentils and a bottle of tamari in the cupboard. I figured I'd get something later. I wondered without really knowing where I was heading, more out of habit than anything else.

I crossed over the busyness of the main road on which I lived and headed to the park. It was leafy and green and cool – an oasis in summer. I avoided the pond where the couples lay tangled in each other's arms, and toddlers noisily chased the ducks, and found a shady spot on my own.

At first I just lay there, not thinking of much. I watched the ducks and the people and ran my tongue around my mouth, trying to rid it of the taste that still lingered. I may have even fallen back to sleep. I'm not sure.

After a while I stirred and pulled a book from my bag. A Passage To India. I'd seen the movie and loved it but was struggling with the book. Maybe we just weren't compatible, E.M. Forster and I. I read maybe a chapter before throwing it aside again. I was now hungry and needed to eat something.

I stood up and noticed a guy riding his bike down the grassy hill toward the bitumen path. I remember that he sat with his feet dangling out to either side of the bike, like a kid, revelling in the freedom of speed. He was wearing thongs and no helmet, and his brown hair blew in the wind as he laughed in enjoyment. For a brief second we made eye-contact. He winked at me, as I was caught, mouth open, sharing in his enjoyment.

Then, as if I'd dreamed it, he hit the edge of the grass and was propelled over the curb of the path. His bike crashed to the ground, and he into a tree. And I watched it happen backwards, wishing in that moment that I could stop him and throw him back onto his bike, and his bike back onto the grass.

I ran toward him, unaware of the people around us and forgetting my book lying in the grass. He'd hit his head when he crashed into the tree and he lay crumpled at its base with blood oozing from his hairline.

Not even remembering that I shouldn't I knelt beside him and drew his head into my lap, stroking his ruffled brown hair. His eyes were half-open and he was groaning. I remember hearing shouts and someone calling an ambulance but I didn't take my eyes off him. I looked at him and he stared back, his eyes unfocused.

My hands grew sticky and red, as did my shorts, and I realised only then how much his head was bleeding. I took a t-shirt offered to me from my peripheral vision and pressed it to his hairline. He seemed to be fading though. He stirred fleetingly and grabbed at me, his right arm flailing as he searched for my hand.

I took his hand in mine and then, as his eyes began to close and without really knowing why, I leant in and kissed him, slowly and carefully. It was soft and brief, yet I sensed recognition in him. As I was pulling away he seemed to shudder before going limp.

And then I tasted it. That taste of death: powerful, and strong, and all-encompassing and I knew there was nothing I could do.

I'm not sure how long I sat there with his head in my lap, covered in a stranger's blood, with death's taste on my lips. Despite the heat I was sure I could feel his body cooling, and mine with him. It may have only been half an hour before the medics came, I don't know.

I felt numb as they pried his hand from mine and lifted him onto a guernsey. I remember my tingling toes from that morning and wished I could feel something beyond his hand in mine and that taste in my mouth. Sensing I was in shock, the paramedics tried to load me into the ambulance as well but I resisted. That wasn't my place – in there, where I knew he was gone even as they pumped him with oxygen and tried to revive him.

Instead I staggered across the park, finding a secluded tree to collapse under. And as the sun beat down for the eight hours following, I huddled and rocked myself in its shade. At first I did not cry and wished I could, racked with sobs that could not quite escape. Like a nagging cough buried deep inside. But then one slow drop emerged, followed by another and soon I could not stop. The tears ran down my face and dripped from my nose, trailing along my neck and drenching my t-shirt.

And there, masked in the scent of Calvin Klein and tasting like death, my tears mixed with his blood. The blood of a boy I never knew nor even spoke to, yet had somehow known was coming.

L.H. Camus