

S at the beach

By K. Patrick

The air hadn't moved for nine days in a row. It was supposed to be autumn but summer had not stopped. Waking up each morning was depressing, like I was living inside a prolonged ending. Did poets invent the seasons. Confused, wasps were dropping to the ground, born faster because of the heat, then dying sooner because of the heat. Mostly I did not see them in the air but half-dead on pavements, abdomens still pulsing.

C called offering to drive me to the beach. I knew the one he would want to go to, on the other side of the new motorway. A spot where the city tampered with the boundary of the national park. Only C could feel sexy in this heat. I imagined he knew other people who would be there and was hoping for a Sunday hookup. I felt my hangover spin and almost said no. My dog had started looking at me in a new, sad way.

C arrived, pleased about something, driving his mum's car. You'll be happy you came, he coughed and put a pair of sunglasses on my face. There was no air conditioning so C rolled down all the windows by hand and accelerated quickly. I admired C's new piercing. At slow traffic lights he began to paint his nails. When they switched to green he used his elbows to drive. The tarmac on the main road was sticky under the tyres.

Houses passed like houses. Here we are, go knock on the door. C gave me a look. Knock, he demanded. Before I made it through the gate, they came outside to greet us. Jesus C that engine sounds unwell. They were tall, handsome. Hi, I'm S. I let my thumb touch a popped vein on the back of their hand. C beeped the horn. You can meet each other inside the car, get moving, you twinks. Don't call me a twink. Sorry, bois.

S sat in the front. I think those are my sunglasses, they reached around and pulled them gently from my face. C winked at me in the rearview mirror. The drive wouldn't be too long. S pulled their seat forward even though I did not need the space. Just before the motorway C spun the car into a U-turn. T wants to come, we're going back. T and C used to date. Horns pounded behind us. Jesus C take it easy. S gripped the sides of their seat. I looked at their veins again and realised I already knew them.

Once C had showed me S's Instagram. I spent an evening zooming in on them to make certain moments bigger. I took books into the bath and forgot to read them. Who can get through a chapter without thinking of themselves. I scrolled through S and considered the disaster of dropping my phone. A wasp floated on the water and I couldn't retrieve it. The convex pressures of my fingers kept pushing it away.

Now S was in motion, sunglasses slipping down their nose. I could see the actual size of their gestures. Their knuckles. They peeled an orange and the smell was startling. Thick air parted around each segment. I wished I had an interesting question to ask them. I could have prepared for that in the bath. What had I been doing my whole life. Not reading, even though the pages look read. That was just because I'd reached over the books with a wet hand, looking for something else.

T lay on the pavement outside his place. Shall we run him over, C joked. Instead C poured a little water on T's chest from the car window. That feels good, do it again. C emptied the whole bottle. T was still in his grey work clothes. He peeled off his shirt and got in beside me. I need this, T spoke through his eyelids, I hate my job. We all hate our jobs. S cupped their hands and breathed in the orange peel. C took a piece and rubbed it behind his ear. An erotics of clean-living.

C plugged in his phone and played big pop songs. I could only see the sides of S's body from my seat. Their palms rested on their thighs with a weight I envied. T had fallen asleep on my shoulder. His head heavy and damp. He woke up and requested an ice lolly. S's chin stained red and sticky but I didn't say anything. They offered me leftover sunscreen and I smoothed it into T's bare chest. I wondered how much hair I could grow. Testosterone gel, applied to the clavicle, feels delicate.

Where's the ocean. C parked dramatically. It's just down here. S took off their shirt. Fine hair made it all the way down their navel. Yeh, S has body-ody-ody. C winked, satisfied, with how hot the company was. Don't be so obvious. The path to the shore was all dust and downhill. We walked alongside a beach full of umbrellas, tinny speakers and blood

relatives. The city smoking close by. I cut my foot as we climbed over the rocks at the end of the beach. Careful, S touched my shoulder.

The city had disappeared. A lizard posed on a stone, craning its neck. Birds were dramatic with small bells in their throats. Cockatoos, maybe. T stretched out a moan, this is what I needed, putting his arm around C. People stood waist-deep in the ocean, talking, pulling their fingers through the small waves as they broke. Let's lie down, I need to lie down, C rubbed his ear lobes. S handed him some water. You've got ice lolly on your chin. S rubbed their face with a towel.

Where shall we lie down. Not here. S grinned. I looked over and saw a cis man ready to touch himself. His dick tilted into the side of his thigh. Catching me looking, he twisted his hips so his dick rhythmically tapped the inside of each thigh. Too sexy. Exactly. S laughed deep. We walked further down, moving slowly. The beach was busier than usual. C took off his sandals and threw one at T. There are too many people here for any of them to be interesting.

Beside us a group were reading and eating slices of watermelon. S crouched down and cleared away small stones and sticks, throwing them into the bushes behind us. They smoothed the sand with their hands. Grains rolling, resisting, clinging to their wide palms. A few went in my eye. C and T handed over their towels so I did the same, blinking. S laid each one out with precision. They did not put my towel next to theirs. Instead I was left between C and T.

Two cis men wearing cockrings strutted past one another, hips to the front. They turned to face one another again after a few paces, crossing each other at precisely the same point. S must have watched me, watching them. After a while they pulled their towel towards mine and sat alongside me, looking out at the same portion of ocean. Nice view. Ha, they'll be fucking shortly. S motioned a fly, hoping for moisture, that landed on their elbow.

I felt as though S was looking at my throat, so I touched it. Tilting my chin upwards. Their gaze didn't drop so I went back and wrapped my whole hand around my neck. T put an

earphone into C's ear, here listen to this. I'm tired of music. But still C wiggled his head onto T's lap, consenting, making up for the lack of cord. These are ancient T, why not get some new ones. S leaned their cheek on their knee. Swim? Sure. I'd scratched myself by mistake.

We swam away from the city and towards the national park. There was a blue haze. Short-wave light rays scattered by dust particles and the oil of the eucalyptus trees. They kept their trunks on, I kept my t-shirt on. The fabric dragged in the water so I moved slowly. Gawped like a jellyfish. S swam ahead, an elegant breaststroke. I watched their shoulder blades clench and release. There's something about you isn't there. We got out of the water and walked the tidemarks. Sand moved like static beneath our feet.

I turned to S, let's go for a proper walk. They laced a few fingers through my few fingers. We went back to the towels quickly. Suncream curdled with brine and sweat. We're going for a walk. Oh, lovely day for it, C pouted at us. I tried to ignore him. Yes, it is a lovely day for it. S shook their hair boyishly, their sea water flicking my face. We walked back to where we'd left the ocean, this time turning sharply into the trees. From their tote bag they produced a slender dildo already attached to a harness.

The dildo was cold, it had been nestled beside an icy water bottle. I gasped when it touched my thigh. S found a patch of sunlight and lay the dildo in the centre, on top of their shirt. We stood to one side, so as not to cast a shadow, and waited for a few minutes. Until it was warm. The ground was sharp with leaf skeletons. Another couple wandered further in than us, where the sun couldn't penetrate the canopy. I swore I could hear their knees creak.

Do you want to go first. No, you. Such a specific chafe, the pressure of the leather was like skin being stuck back on. Their voice was soft and authoritative. So soft I couldn't hear. Bend over? Lie down? Stay standing. I didn't know how to be naked. I forget, momentarily, to take off my shorts. S's chest pressed against mine. Is that OK with you? I nodded. My sex was resplendent with nods, OKs. Press, pinch and throb. When the birds went off again, bells even louder in their throats, we looked up at the same time.

The air twinged. Clouds arrived in that cliched way. There was the creaking of the couples' knees, and the creak of the eucalyptus branches above us, and the close creak of S's harness, which must have been brand new, because I sensed the metal buckles working against the leather. They held me under their tongue like a stone. What's that smell, I love that smell. After heat like this, the earth releases an oil before it rains. In the sixties two Australian scientists labelled it petrichor.

A smell of relief. Petri is ancient Greek for stone, ichor is ancient Greek for blood of the gods. But did Greek gods have blood in their veins or was it some other fluid. New words for old secrets, or old secretions. I touch their chest. Scientists are paid to confuse facts with fantasy. Or maybe they're just looking for a particular permanence in particularly impermanent things. Is there anything you don't know. Eucalyptus leaves are like orange peel, hold one to the light and you can see the white spots of their glands. What if you held me to the light.

S and I gently swap positions. They adjust a metal buckle and it bites my hip. As we walked back to the towels the horizon changed. Lit from behind. Thunder started smacking the sky. Insects sped up. I stood with S as they rinsed the dildo in the ocean, little fish moving like sparks. How long would a dildo last at sea. Made from silicone, which is made from silica, which is actually sand. All silicone is inert. Non-reactive with other compounds and elements. It would sink straight to the bottom and get eternally dragged by the tide.

T and C were already watching the lightning, propped up on their elbows. For once everything was happening far away. That is the best kind of danger, T rolled a joint. S and I lay down with them. Took your time, didn't you. C flicked my arm, then S's arm. T talked about somebody he is seeing, who writes what he calls Hot Person Poetry. Online photographs of light falling a certain way, a hairless forearm, unread books, fingers unfurling. Captions in which overuse of the word tender proliferates, tenderly.

Alongside a photograph, all aphorisms are too real to be true. I filmed S briefly. I wish I could have recorded their voice, but they didn't speak much, at least they weren't speaking, at the moment I opened the camera app on my phone. In the video you can

hear the sand fizz with ocean and a squawk from C, who has seen somebody he might have fucked at a party last week. A storm cloud puts S in dappled shade for a moment, and it looks as though their collarbone has been unbuttoned. Why is there always something that I want.