

Story for performance #288
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Source: Suzanne Goldenberg, 'Freed hostage denies empathy with her captors', *Guardian in Sydney Morning Herald online*, 04/04/06.

Tags: [countryside](#), [child/parent](#), [music](#), [travel](#)
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One cat and dog, two cat and dog, three cat and dog, four cat and dog, five cat and dog, six cat and dog.

I had met her five minutes ago, she sang for me and there was time. There need be no rashness, or desolation. The whole landscape was alerted and listening: each chafing insect, scorched layer and particle; each jagged nail, curl of paint and plaster, visible and invisible, was emboldened and moistened by that part-of-a-song.

One cat and dog, two cat and dog, three cat and dog, four cat and dog, five cat and dog, six cat and dog.

The town had been saved, but the bushfires had made the plain beyond severe and boundless in every direction. Under low cloudcover the earliest morning air still rattled faintly with soot. Or so it seemed to me as I sped through, past vacant truckstops, boarded-up windows, stony ditches.

One cat and dog, two cat and dog, three cat and dog, four cat and dog, five cat and dog, six cat and dog.

I was the first customer of the day, that long Saturday of driving home. The café seemed to occupy the oldest building on the main street; I noticed the majestic verandah, diligently restored, before I noticed that it was open, open already. It was 7am, and a conversation might be difficult, but not unwelcome.

Her name was Cassandra, but she was scarcely interested in introductions, background. She said, this is my weekend job and it's cool. I wait to carry the orders, but while I wait I can do my exercises.

One cat and dog, two cat and dog, three cat and dog, four cat and dog, five cat and dog, six cat and dog.

I ordered coffee and toast from her father who wore a striped apron and ached to be busy. He talked nervously about the marmalade, then advanced into the kitchen.

Cassandra waited by my courtyard table, and told me that she was fourteen and going to be a singer. I couldn't have estimated her age, but it was clear that she still knew what she liked; still lost track of staring at others; hadn't yet tried too hard to be offhand, or attracted to boredom. She was very slender, pale and freckled, and wore jeans and a short apron, tied at the waist. In a month or two she would be tying it at her hips.

I write my own songs, she declared, her hands folded behind her back, adding, I've begun singing lessons and I can do my exercises whenever, they're to improve my

line.

One cat and dog, two cat and dog, three cat and dog, four cat and dog, five cat and dog, six cat and dog.

Cassandra sang for me. Of course her song was about love, the words were rather indifferent, but she stepped forward and sang at 7.20 that Saturday morning entirely confident that her ideal was *within her power*. She wanted to be signed to a record label and recorded, and heard on the radio, counted on the charts, and she was singing to compress the natural resonance of her new voice, so as to seem ready for broadcast. Even so, she and her father and I heard something else before that, something both sophisticated and shy, entirely unadorned and unbreakable, about her relationship to our sore world.

I had met her five minutes ago, she sang for me and there was time. There need be no rashness, or desolation. The whole landscape was alerted and listening: each chafing insect, scorched layer and particle; each jagged nail, curl of paint and plaster, visible and invisible, was emboldened and moistened by young Cassandra's part-of-a-song.

Whatever could, in the vacant truckstops, behind the boarded-up windows, in the stony ditches, allowed itself to remember gently how it was to be fourteen. How it was to begin to want to reject the purity of born innocence in favour of one chosen, defended, made bravely into responsibility.

My father's under constant strain, she said, as I sat delaying my journey, observing her presence. But I'm going to be a singer. My breathing exercises are really easy, see, one cat and dog, two cat and dog, three cat and dog, four cat and dog, five cat and dog, six cat and dog. She stood tall and counted through the length of her breaths in precise whispers. Unshakeable.

The café screen-door sprang shut behind me, and I climbed back into the car and struck out again into the haze and the history and the determination and my choice. One cat and dog, two cat and dog, three cat and dog, four cat and dog, five cat and dog, six cat and dog.

I marvelled at Cassandra's father as he stood in his striped apron on the footpath, shading his eyes, watching. His charming daughter was fourteen, and hadn't felt blamed for someone else's discontent.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Cynthia Troup.