



Source: Oliver Burkeman, Ewen MacAskill, Kim Willsher, 'Pessimism on deal amid clashes at UN', *Guardian Unlimited*, 10/08/06.

Tags: [dystopia](#), [home](#), [water](#)

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Em was bleeding. She woke at dawn in sheets sticky with it. She was ashamed. She bundled the bloody sheets up and took them into the laundry. She rinsed them till the water ran red. Her wrist would not stop bleeding.

From the rag bag she selected a strip of fabric, rebound her wrist and held her hand high as she finished rinsing the sheets. She could hear her family moving around upstairs, the clank of pans as her mother got breakfast.

Em went into the kitchen.

'You know they won, don't you,' her brother glowered at her, hunched forward on splayed elbows. Rodge was wearing his red Mambo shirt again, the one their father hated because it had a picture of a dog farting on it.

'Yes, I thought they would,' Em replied.

Her parents and brother had sat up late watching the election.

'Marvellous, isn't it?' said her father.

Rodge muttered something under his breath. His father glared at him. Em's mother served them all eggs. Em sat with her bleeding wrist under the table, in her lap. Rodge's arm whipped out like a snake, stabbed one of Em's eggs with a fork and whipped it back to his plate.

'Fuck off Rodge!' said Em. 'Give it back!'

Em's father whacked her on the side of the head. 'Don't swear!'

'I'm still growing,' said Rodge. 'I need it.'

'Cook her another one,' their father said to their mother.

'What are you doing today?' said Rodge to Em, as though nothing had happened.

'Looking for work,' she replied.

'In Cottonwool I hope?' said her father.

'Of course,' said Em.

'Good,' said Em's mother, sliding another egg onto her plate.

The sharp black smell of oil drifted into the windows from the direction of the beach. Em sat there dutifully eating, holding her wrist in her lap. Nothing wrong with a bit of embellishment. The truth was that Em was hopeless at washing dishes; she couldn't do hospital corners, she had been sacked from five cleaning jobs already. All she could do was dance, which her family disapproved of. But she would take her tap shoes out again today and try to make some money busking. The thought of trying to find cleaning work in Cottonwool made her feel ill.

Em went out after washing and rebinding her wrist. The hole was tiny and it was amazing how much fluid could flow from such an aperture. No matter what she did, it wouldn't stop bleeding. She found therefore that being outdoors was best. Then, if blood spilt it wouldn't stain a family possession, she could walk away from it, she could pretend that the blood wasn't hers.

She could also enjoy the sensation of release. The life, the feeling.

The smell of oil was stronger outside. A sou-easter was blowing it shorewards. The wind through the she-oaks sounded like surf. Em lingered beneath the trees, hoping it was the surf, that the ocean was moving again. Maybe she would see heaving blue-green from the top of the hill.

Em grew excited, but the smell was too strong, and the closer to the sea she drew the further away the surf sound became—it was just the sound of the wind in the she-oaks. Then from the corner of Campbell Parade, Bondi Bay spread black before her. Em walked down the street with her face averted, staring into the shop windows.

She passed a stout woman with fluffy hair that poked out either side of her head like muffs.

'You're bleeding!' said the woman, with a mixture of concern and recrimination.

'Sorry,' said Em. She stood there holding her wrist, feeling awkward.

'You'll have to go to Cottonwool,' the muff-head woman said. 'They'll fix you there.'

Em began to move away.

'Did you know they won the election?!' the woman said brightly.

Em crossed the road to get away from the shops and people. It was true that she had begun to bleed much more profusely. She was leaving a red trail all along Queen Elizabeth Drive. The ocean heaved beneath its thick coat of oil. Closer to shore it was a flat mass pimpled by the carcasses of fish and birds. Why had she come down here anyway? She could not wash her wrist in that black sea, and the showers had long been turned off. And it stank.

She walked past a brown park. A hippy was there, singing to her crystals. She looked over at Em with violet, crazed eyes.

She said, 'You're bleeding, aren't you love?' Em ignored her, and kept walking. 'You'll end up in Cottonwool,' the woman called after her. 'We all will.'

Em walked faster.

Em headed up to Ben Buckler; passed a man pissing on the Aboriginal rock carvings. He grinned at her and waved his dick around.

'They won!' he crowed. 'Hooray!'

Em kept walking. West now.

There was a spot here, on the other side of the Junction, far enough away from Cottonwool, where she could set up her plate and busk. There was a pub nearby where she could sneak into the toilet and wash and rebind her wrist during breaks. The passers-by were reasonably sympathetic. She could earn 20 dollars a day if she were lucky.

But when she reached the bottom of the hill she noticed that everything had changed. The new development was complete. Everything was white, everybody was white, everybody had blonde hair. Everything was soft and muffled and clean.

Em was determined. She set up her plate and put on her shoes. She stepped onto the plate and began to dance. She tapped her shoes this way and that, but no sound came. She sang, and from her mouth issued silence. There was a softness, a thickness, a sickly sweetness in the air. It wrapped around her like a poultice, descended into the depths of her lungs. She couldn't breathe. She saw that she had stopped bleeding. She felt nothing.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Fiona McGregor.*