

Story for performance #937  
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Source: Ali Khalil, 'Bush gets warm welcome from Gulf ally', *The Australian online*, 13/01/08.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [home](#), [sound](#), [intimacy](#)  
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In the heat of the day she lies in the shade that is offered by the white cedar; a canopy of layers, leaf over leaf, branch on branch, that gathers all that is not lit by the sun to itself. And today if relief's to be had it is here that it will be found. Not inside, it would be impossible there.

Unusually the house is empty. No children punctuating the lulling insect pulse with sharp cries brought on by hurt sustained, wrongs committed, revenge extracted. For now all she can hear is the irregular banging of almost-closed doors, riding the day's breath backwards and forwards as the house heats up, room by room. The hottest summer on record, again, and apparently we all knew why, we just hadn't said so until now, suddenly sobered up by the scorched leaves of our cut-leaf maples.

All week she has been here by herself. An unexpected holiday at home leaving her with spaces to rearrange, gaps to fill, and of course the work to be done. She considered again the over-heated prospect of rebuilding the chook-house; all feathers, shit and husk.

She had the tools, that wasn't it. And her neighbour down the river had offered whatever left-over building materials she could scrounge from his now permanently abandoned life-change bungalow. He said he was gone. That much she knew. He meant for good. They had built the first chook-house together.

New to town, arriving at more or less the same time each recognized in the other something of the same forces at work. The ones that prompt the big changes. She set up house in the rural backblocks, taking the kids out of their schools in the city. It was a big change for all of them.

But he arrived alone. No trace of a connected life dangling from his pockets, or strewn on the floor of his car. Just there, living on his uncleared bush block more often than not. For the first year she mostly heard him, the noises he made, or gave cause to make, as first a shed and then a house itself rose from the dirt. The generator would rev into life, puckering the air before its repetitive mechanical thump knitted itself into the skein of bush sounds. And when the generator putt-putt-putted out of life, it left little hollowed-out silences in the summer din.

He later told her that what he had heard, and what he remembered in the generator's absence, was the occasional delighted shrieks of her airborne children; rising and falling as they bounced all together on the trampoline. An illicit activity she knew from

experience produced more injury than the rest of their lives put together. But the screams and recriminations that followed those shrieks were strangely absent in his recollection.

Once, and this one mattered as it brought them face to face for the first time, the last remaining sash cord in her dilapidated house, the last one at least, still attached to both the window frame and its hidden, pendulous, lead weight, so that the top half of her bedroom window remained more or less counter-balanced, broke. Its soft fibres ceasing, at that precise moment, to support anything except dust and air.

Abandoned in mid-air the window plummeted to the bottom of the sill. Wood, glass and metal exploded with a force that loosed a scream from her, that twisted and turned, that arrived at his ears intertwined with the sound of the still-disintegrating window. What it sounded *like* he could never say, like nothing on earth. Like nothing he knew.

In her room the children had somehow been sucked into the vortex of catastrophe and were instantly at her side, wonderstruck, even as the last shards of glass arrowed down and embedded themselves in the floorboards at their feet. The air now had been completely stripped of all other sound and there were just tiny echoes from the trees and the branches and their leaves of what had been. Hidden somehow in this utmost silence was the steep braking of a car, bunching down over its front wheels before sliding to a stop. The last shards were still gently trembling when in the long grass that grew right up to the side of her house, framed by the window, stood her neighbour, an axe held in both his hands poised above his head, mouth open and face contorted with time-dissolving adrenalin.

Slowly he lowered the axe to the ground, and through the smashed window frame and the one good one still left at the bottom, she introduced herself, and her children.

He stayed for lunch; carefully working his mouth as he chewed, recovering from his fear of what might have been, the fright long gone from her and, in truth, never in her children. Slowly, later that afternoon he walked to his car, then turned to face her, walking backwards, smiling, axe in hand. They both knew that soon there would be a time when he would not be leaving, and there would be a time when he would but that was unknown to them then.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Grant Hilliard.*