

Story for performance #976
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Source: Dan Box, 'Kovco mate denies lying from fear', *The Australian online*, 21/02/08.

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Bella tries not to think of the 15 hours of sunlight that lie ahead. She can't remember the last time she's lived through the longest day in either hemisphere. In their motel on the edge of the western Utah desert she is too hot to sleep. Mark has no such trouble. He's been working hard to get her here to Sun Tunnels, an installation of concrete pipes in an X formation that conduct sunlight at sunrise and sunset on this one day of the year.

She knows that wanting to be in the mountains in winter is a disease, but she's lived with the symptoms for so long she no longer seeks a cure. Today she feels the urge to fall back to sleep, to dream of the moon under a flood of snowflakes and to stick out her tongue to taste the powdery freshness. Her desire for snow is like a childhood crush.

She could find relief from the heat simply by walking outside and throwing herself in the motel swimming pool. But she is in one of her masochistic moods. She wants to feel the raw ugliness of the room pushing her back down into the bedcovers, hot like white iron, ripping at her skin until she moans.

She lets her mind off the leash for a moment.

*Every night when I go out, the monkey's on the table.
Take a stick and knock it off...*

She's 11 years old again, a strong swimmer, a regular beachgoer loving the sensation of the waves sweeping over her head and the cool rush of the sea water. Today, like most days, Bella is in the surf with her mother.

When she was a baby she used to squeal with joy when her mother held her high above a crashing shore breaker and made games of saving her from danger. As her mother jumped she would sing 'Pop goes the Weasel'—a nonsensical song about knocking a monkey off the table—strangely comforting when her mother would leap over the waves right on the word 'pop' and the baby was safe again.

Older now, Bella is able to dive under the little dumpers that are breaking right on the shore and coming back up, spitting the surf spray and spittle and singing the Weasel song, loving the special swimming language that her mother still saves just for her.

One more dive, one more dumper and up she comes. But just beneath the surface the sea begins to whisper: Do you have any fear? What day will death play? Who will lie languid on the ocean's floor?

She shakes her head and tries to empty the memory from her brain, as if the tilting and shaking motion will make it fall out her ear.

Bella has not been in the surf since that day, the southern hemisphere summer solstice of 1988, the last day she had a mother.

She fears the summer solstice is unlucky for her, but that's always been easily settled because she can be

half a world away from it if she chooses. She and Mark have skied half the world's mountains. Now she owes him. He's been asking her to the Sun Tunnels every year since they hooked up.

She bites her lip so hard it bleeds. Another regressive act. For this one, she blames her father. She remembers trying to settle into a new school—a Catholic one—in Grade Six. She'd moved schools because a Federal election had been called and her father objected to the Teachers Union at the public school sending him advice on how to vote. She cried in class every morning for three months, until her teacher Mrs Simpson said: 'That's enough Bella, no more crying.' So she started biting her lip instead.

In her early teens she also began to bite the inside of her cheeks and the rough skin at the end of her left thumb. Her cheeks were sometimes so concave from the biting that her face looked deformed.

Now here she is in western Utah, facing the longest, hardest, hottest day, preparing for sunrise at Sun Tunnels.

She takes a cool shower and sits naked at the laptop checking her emails in the dark, trying not to wake Mark. There's a new one from her father titled: Rowdy Moving On And Happy. What is he talking about?

Rowdy is the family dog and has been with them since Bella was 11, just a few weeks before her mother drowned. She's a black and white border collie with a touch of husky, and she would have made a magnificent farm dog. She's strong, obedient, agile, intelligent. Everyone loves her, even those who don't like dogs. A mongrel from down the road jumped the fence and made Rowdy pregnant when she was nine weeks old. The vet said the puppies would be deformed, so he aborted them and neutered her at the same time.

Twenty years later, Bella's dad is emailing her to say that Rowdy's got some health problems emerging from that early desexing. She's incontinent and can no longer be in the house. The farmer who gave Rowdy to the family in the first place has offered to take her back. She can live outside with the other work dogs and constantly pee without messing up anyone's carpet.

Bella's father has taken a last photo and has attached it to the email. It shows the farmer strapping the dog into the front passenger seat of his ute. There's a slightly uncertain Rowdy, still looking at the photographer with unconditional love and loyalty but with big blue Husky eyes full of water.

She should have had puppies, thinks Bella. And then she cries for a long, long time, something she's always been too scared to do.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Lisa Lord.