



**Darebin
Arts**

Between Birth And Baboon

By Nathan Power (*Highly Commended*)

My parents walk in to find my brother hitting me. A series of gentle smacks, each followed by an apology.

SMACK. *Sorry brother.* SMACK. *Sorry brother.*

In amidst the ingrained Christian guilt is the knowledge that an apology brings absolution. In a three-year old's mind the joy of smacking the newest member of the family justifies the sin.

I spend the next ten years surrendering to my brother, until the day our neighbour gifts him a baboon. The baboon's name is Harry and he comes complete with a chain, a collar and a screech that echoes throughout the house. He makes a lot of noise as he scurries around the backyard, using his chain to skip and perform elaborate backflips. He pulls tricks for fruit, and when he's full he flings the remnants over the back fence.

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I wait till my brother leaves the house and sneak into his room to pore over crinkled copies of *Thrasher*. I memorise lists of words - *ollies* and *kickflips* and *goofy-foot*, trying to tie the terms to pictures to physical movements, imagining what they could look like in the real world.

I save my pocket money for the summer and excitedly buy a skateboard the month after he buys his. I sit on it and watch as he rides up and down the ramp out the front of the house. That afternoon he falls off and fractures his ulna, tears flood as he hugs his forearm and runs into the house. My skateboard career disappears into the back shed.

I sit in the corner of the room when he and his friends listen to music, trying to embed the names of the songs that crackle past. After they leave I pull open the tape deck to see if I can decipher his handwritten scrawl. In the process of pulling the cassette out, the tape gets caught inside the machine and for a worried minute I battle with a pencil to twist the cogs and suck all the tape back into the cassette. I leave the room clammy-handed humming pop-punk anthems.

This top-secret teenager intel becomes the basis of my own friendships. I proudly spread the name *Blink 182* across the playground and revel in the knowledge that I'm cool, not for my sport prowess or looks or personality but because I am the bridge to the older kids.

Later I sneak in again and use my parents' double cassette deck to transfer his mix-tape to a tape of my own. In the process I manage to cut the end off *All the Small Things*. Even now when I listen to that song I expect a static hiss and the end of tape thump to come in halfway through the last chorus.

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We love the beach together where I spend my days rolling in the white wash, pushed down by the waves against the sandy bottom. He finds his way to the rocky outcrops, casting lines to the deeper water and I do my best to follow him. I buy my own tackle box with its assortment of squid jigs and spinnies, but I never quite master the art of tying knots. I get distressed the first time I actually hook a fish and have to whack its head against a rock to stop it flapping about.

My tacklebox disappears into the back shed where he pilfers most of its contents to stock up his own, but it takes me years to notice. He discovers spear-fishing and acquires a speargun and a snorkel. He dives deep to shoot grouper on the reef, bringing them to the beach to roast over coals. I stay along the shoreline, catching waves on my boogie board.

He takes up music, then discards it when he discovers animals and converts our backyard into a menagerie with flocks of pigeons, guinea pigs and rabbits. The menagerie spreads into the house with a salt water aquarium stocked with sea slugs and a collection of fish pulled from the ocean. Shortly after this the neighbour arrives with Harry, much to my parents' dismay.

I retreat inside to borrow the guitar he abandons, promising I'll buy it off him when I have enough money. Instead I stash it under my bed until he forgets it was ever his. Squatters rights, played out in brotherhood bedrooms. With time and enough pressure on my parents, the guitar is joined by a xylophone, a second guitar, and then a drumkit. Our dual lives together separate into inside and outside worlds.

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Our Christmas tradition is to invite our partners to leaf through the family photobook. Baby brothers bathe together in a bucket. Mum, Dad and the sons all perch on a single motorbike in the streets of Pakistan. Two boys squint into the sun next to a pyramid.

Halfway through the book these photos diverge into separate images of us.

In one picture Harry picks through my brother's sun-bleached hair, pulling out little flecks of dirt to eat. In another Harry holds his hand and they smile together at the camera. I gaze out of the darkened corner of my bedroom, hugging my brother's guitar.

I stopped surrendering somewhere between birth and baboon.