Train
Josephine Rowe

There is no distinction between the water and the sky, as though the city is laid out under a scratchy woolen blanket, suffocating, its face damp with its own breath and the buildings jutting out like broken teeth.

The 7:52 train to Flinders Street has been delayed. It is now expected in six minutes. A prerecorded message apologizes for the inconvenience. Windsor Station shuffles, clears its throat, shakes its many heads and returns to silence.

My head is still sleep-slow but my fingers are fast, working at the inside seams of my coat pockets and worrying through to the lining. My hands close around pocket-things that went missing years ago—loose change in foreign currency and hairpins and what feels like a plastic monkey from a cocktail glass, though I can’t be sure.

A round me the platform fills with people who drill steadily from the old houses behind Chapel Street. They make no sound, save the closing of umbrellas and the occasional stifled cough.

I tried once, a long time ago, to whistle, to show that the silence didn’t apply to me, but the whistle came out sounding nervous and out of key. I don’t whistle this morning. I keep my hands in the lining of my coat, my face as still as a lake.

The man beside me has his jaw set so tight that it ticks when he yawns, which makes me think of clicker beetles, though it’s the wrong time of year for those.

Between us the air is heavy and grey and has the smell of cold, of early mornings and damp woolen coats. Our breath catches in it, hangs there in front of our faces, waiting to be taken back in.

Another train is delayed, then cancelled. Nobody complains, not out loud. I scrape the toe of my shoe along a patch of loose gravel.

The 7:52 arrives at 8:15, and although the platform is swarming, the silence remains. As the train doors open, the crowd drifts to the edge of the platform and crushes into the carriage in an orderly manner.

There are no available seats, nothing free to hold onto. I place my palm flat against the ceiling and open my book to where it is marked with yesterday’s train ticket. I read the same sentence, over and over. I pick at it slowly, taking it one word at a time. But each new word eats the word that came before and I can’t make any sense of it, can’t lift it from the page. I replace yesterday’s ticket with today’s, and close the book.

The train stops midway between stations, on the bridge that crosses the river. There is another announcement. A delay of some kind. Apologies for the inconvenience. Beneath us the water flows moon-boned, its surface raked with light rain.

Josephine Rowe (22) is an acupuncturist. She has requested the emergency exit, and is drinking smuggled champagne. The champagne isn’t very good, but there is adequate tea room.
