

# Aaron Blaker

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## Road Kill

**Yesterday, the final Sunday of the autumn school holidays, my park received a facelift. Two pakehas turned up in a council truck weighed down with equipment. Beginning at eight in the morning, they measured, dug and erected with only a few cigarette stops throughout the day. The construction work yielded two wooden tables with benches, a metal slide coming out of a plastic tower with a black and red flag, and most significantly: a set of shiny new swings. The truck roared off at four o'clock, leaving in its wake a haze of bark dust and dried grass seed. Kids started streaming in from all directions. By five, you could barely see the play equipment for warm brown bodies. The atmosphere of careful industry that had accompanied the construction was a distant memory; by dusk, dusty children ruled. It was very a much a Lord of the Flies sort of rule. I watched all this from my conservatory, at work on my neighbour's cockatoo, now and again my attention taken with a spiralling hawk or river-bound heron.**

Yesterday, my water tank reached a critical low point. The months of rainless days had already reduced my routine to a solitary weekly bath, but yesterday morning even that wasn't possible. By evening, after an unrewarding day with the sinewy cockatoo, I could no longer tolerate my aching joints, the odour of arsenic soap. I laid down my scalpel. I stepped into thick corduroys, a merino long sleeved tee shirt, a knitted cardigan. Over my head I pulled my possum skin beanie. I also squeezed into lambswool socks and handmade leather moccasins. It is surprising how much heat is lost through the feet. I stepped out of the conservatory, a grand word for what is in effect a glasshouse tacked onto the kitchen, and into the cooling public air. Dinner was having the life fried out of it in the state houses bordering the park. Lawns were getting their weekly mow. I sealed my nostrils to the aroma of dead sausages, dying grass. I looked ahead. Primary school children were clustered about the swings. I could see that one of the seats was empty and I willed it to remain so. I trod the pavement a little less slowly. In my wake, I left the rising perfume of squashed feijoa. The swing

lay still and empty. My stomach sickened a little, the muscles in my thighs and arms began to tense up. I am not exaggerating.

Despite my desire, I cautiously crossed the road and moved down one side and up the other of the deep drainage ditch separating the road from the park. Twenty-one metres of dry grass remained. Then a little body scuttled into my line of vision, travelling as fast as my eyes could follow. The wires of nerves that stretch through my body tightened. My adrenal gland released a spurt of cortisone. This translated to the taste of lead in the back of my throat, the drying up of saliva.

Sambuca.

Cutting across my path in feral flight, she leapt the ditch like a cat fleeing the logging truck's wheels. I mentally surrendered the beautiful new swing, let it go with a soft click. I turned to take in the follower. Brother Regal. As our eyes met he slowed down, came to a stop at the edge of the ditch. Sambuca's feet flew on. Regal and I looked at each other across the divide. His eyes were bloodshot, a consequence of never wearing goggles in the school pool and exposure to the blue smoke that filled the family home. He lowered his gaze into the dry, dusty ditch. A thrush lay half-buried amongst the dead leaves and empty cigarette packets. Regal scuffed a bare foot in the grey dirt and stared at the thrush. Solid, meaty, his limbs like overstuffed sausages, Regal had little in common with the desiccated bird. He weighed sixty-eight kilograms the last time he stood on my bathroom scales. His skin is darker than that of his six siblings. He gets a hard time for this, for his lumpy frame, for his name: lager backwards. The constant mockery has squeezed out any empathy I have tried to help him develop. Now I surveyed the contours of his down-turned face as he interpreted the dead bird.

Coming to his conclusions, Regal looked up and gave me the nod – a tilting of the chin, a pursing of the lips, a raising of the eyebrows. "Mister Korako."

"Regal. How are you?"

"Sweet." He was looking past my shoulder at his sister.

"You're a bit old to be chasing your little sister, aren't you, Regal?"

“Eh, Mister Korako, she took my Chuppa Chup and I was jiss gettin it back.” His eyes flicked back and forth. “It was from that box you gave me.”

“I suggested that you share those with the other kids though, Regal.”

“Yeah, but she jiss took it. Didn’t even arks.” He raised his voice. “When you come down, you gonna geddit, bitch.”

I turned around. There she was, not on the swing, but far above, straddling the horizontal bar that formed part of the axis of the frame. She knew that heavy Regal couldn’t get up there. She also knew that this was a temporary nest and that she would have to go home at some point to accept the bruises that were handed down like used clothing. I noted the unclaimed swing before turning back to Regal.

“Why don’t you cut her some slack, Regal? She’s just a kid.”

“Yeah, whatever, Mr. Korako. Like you can talk.” Then he was walking backwards slowly, across the road, eyes fixed on his perching sister. “See you at home, Sambuca,” he said, then turned and trotted heavily up the cracked cement driveway alongside his home. I made my way to the swing.

Easing my assemblage of bones and veins into the freshly cut tire, I observed the slight friction between rubber and corduroy. I closed my eyes and leaned back, savouring a sensation that for some might accompany the first click of the mouse, for others the unsheathing of a cartilage knife. The decisive moment. For me it usually occurs at dusk. Except during school holidays. For then the park becomes a piece of road kill, buzzing with kids, all day and into the night. The swings are occupied. For this reason, I tend to locate and mount a lot of specimens during the school holidays. The process takes my mind off things. I hunt the birds myself. Earn their trust with patience, bread and sugar water. Fantail, bellbird and paradise duck. Oyster catcher and white faced heron. And last summer, the *coup de grace*: two fat kereru and a naïve tui. Protected birds, but no one here pays much attention to the natives.

“You like feijoas, Mister Korako?”

I had forgotten Sambuca. Now I looked up at her. Against a darkening blue sky she looked like a sparrow cut out of cardboard. Her edges were clearly defined in the cool air. She had on her favourite pink skirt and dirty white singlet, perpetual attire regardless of the season. The light was such that I could see the goose-bumps on her forearms, thighs

and abdomen.

“Why do you ask, Sam?”

“Jiss wunnering.” She twisted and looked out over the park, the heads of the kids on their skateboards, the rusting roofs of the township, perhaps all the way to the gravestones beside the sea. My legs began to move. Flex and straighten.

“I jiss had a feijoa milkshake, that’s all.”

“What’s in a feijoa milkshake, Sam?”

“Feijoas, dummy.” Sambuca pulled the lollipop from her mouth with a pop. “And milk.”

“How many feijoas?”

“Three feijoas. And three spoons of sugar. All in a big glass.”

“Three spoonfuls?”

“Aha.”

She started sucking on the lollipop again. I continued to swing, leaning hard on the backward arc, thrusting my neck out in the downward plunge. I felt the thrill, familiar but renewed, and such was my intoxication within the movement of the swing, I considered removing my headwear to maximise the flow of air. Dermis is the premier conductor. I had, in the past, stolen across to the park to swing naked, serenaded by the rustling leaves and insomniac ruru, secure within the darkness of a summer new moon.

A small animal grunt and the sound of skin sliding on metal punctured my reverie. I opened my eyes. Sambuca was hanging by her legs from the horizontal bar. Her dust-filled hair hung almost to my fingertips, which had numbed upon the metal chains. I pictured my fur gloves in the darkness of my dresser top drawer. Sambuca’s skirt hem rested on her chin. Her knickers were pale blue, cotton, the type you might buy in a six-pack from the Warehouse. Her bruises were faded or flaring, shades of blue risen to the surface of her muddy river skin. I couldn’t help myself.

“You should put something on those, Sam. They look painful.”

Sambuca frowned up at her body, pushed a dirty fingertip into her bruised hipbone. She opened her mouth, the lollipop fell. She laughed, swung herself back up to take the bar in her hands, then let go. I tried to stop myself in mid-swing, dragging my shoes through the bark. She landed lightly beside me, her twenty-two kilograms barely indenting a patch of bare earth. She knew that I would startle. Children are not as innocent as you might think.

“Have you got any more of that cream?”

“Arnica?”

“Arnka.”

“Yes. But it’s at home.”

“Home.”

This story was placed second in the *Takahē* Short Story Competition 2011

We eyed each other. The long rays of the setting sun sliced right through her irises, converting the tui black to starling brown. I wondered what she saw when she looked at me. She reached out.

“Let’s go then.”

Her hand was stayed by a tremendous shout from across the road.

“Sambuca! Dinner-time! Get your black arse home!”

A little fantail of panic shivered through Sambuca’s pupils and fingertips. She placed one hand on my thigh. I could feel the coldness of her palm through the corduroy. “Can I come now, Mister Korako?” she whispered. “To play with your toys?”

I felt the agitation rise up through my sternum, spread out into the lining of my ribs. “They are not toys, Sam. They’re instruments and mounted animalia.”

Sambuca’s eyelids fluttered, she gripped my thigh, her voice minute. “You can rub the arnka in again, if you want?”

The sun had descended below the rim of the western ranges, taking with it the illusion of warmth. The clacking of skateboard wheels seemed to amplify in the dimming light. In my head, static began to crackle and hiss. I had not come to my park

to offer comfort to the needy, not today. I closed my eyes and pushed off but in that darkness flickered a pale blue bruise.

“Sambuca! Don’t make me come over there again –”

“Please, Mister Korako? Maybe I could have another bubble bath?”

“Sambuca! Home!”

“Please?” Sambuca was desperate. I closed my heart with a soft click.

I tucked my heavy shoes under the swing then pushed them out, eyes shut, gaining altitude with each pass, shaking off the icy fingers. “There’s no water, Sambuca, go home.”

Higher and higher I rose as the last logging trucks rattled by and the rising wind reached thirty-eight kilometres an hour, began to wail in the power lines. My fingers slowly froze. The final mower died, the last skateboarder departed and when all was humanly silent I opened my lids to witness through watering eyes the streetlights flicker on. A curved blade of autumn moon hung above the public toilets. All along the edges of my park silhouettes moved in rooms lit by naked bulbs, except for Sambuca’s bedroom, which remained as dark as the valley in which the flattened thrush lay.

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