

Creative Writing Samples

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Flash Fiction

101st

If you ever pass the entrance of Maya Mall shopping centre in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in the early hours of the morning, then you may notice the speckled and humming helmets of cyclists who gather there. This is the spot where the greatest rides begin.

That particular morning, we were tackling Doi Inthanon. The highest mountain in Thailand and one of the hardest cycling climbs in the world, Inthanon had acquired a mystical quality in my imagination and loomed with empirical stature at the forefront of every ambitious spirit. Following a 70km flat ride to the base of Inthanon, a 40 kilometre incline awaits, reaching to 2,565.3341 meters above mean sea level.

Chiang Mai is a city where the change in traffic lights is swiftly followed by a satisfactory succession of clicks, whereby cyclists flip their pedals and jerk their heels and shoes snap into place. Clip-in pedals lend a psychological persistence to a ride, due to their inescapable mechanism. If you do not keep moving, you will fall over.

The 7 Eleven shops which litter the Thai roadsides are famous among us Western cyclists - the Sprite here is the best in the world. Hands grip glass bottles of coconut nectar, oily fingers poking out of bike gloves, and eventually 7 Eleven is replaced by pop-up shacks or vendors at rickshaw contraptions as you leave the main roads.

Doi Inthanon introduced itself as an invisible and immeasurable force, covered in mist while throwing its shadow upon our nerves and provoking anticipation, fear, and bold curiosity. I felt almost blind from sugar consumption as we began the climb. My blood was heating and pulsing through my legs, which burst wildly with the urge to shoot up the beautifully smooth, tarmac surface rising gradually beyond us, padded by moist greenery and shaggy tree-tops. The rain soon began to fall, and we stopped talking.

Everyone knows about the last 10 kilometres of Inthanon. 'No chance to enjoy the surroundings - you'll be too busy suffering.' The landscape of that brutal section presented itself like a scene from *The Lord of the Rings*. Sprite-less, I felt the wind howl and whip like a sharp Irish sea breeze. Mist shivered along the diabolically elevated road, which continued winding in a hallucinogenic maze through the sky. Mere metres later, the seasons changed and the sun struck my back, and a quick glimpse caught the golden tip of a temple looming against precipitous rock faces which shimmered with moss and humidity. My wheels inched forward in agonised vibrations, never appearing to make a full turn.

The hardest part of Inthanon is the 101st kilometre. I could no longer see in front of me, and stumbled off the bike to lie in the ditch for a few seconds. My knees felt as if they were bleeding from the inside.

At the summit, a ginger and sugared tea sped like liquid magic through my body. Only 130 km remained ahead of us now, 40km of descent and then the road home which no one ever considers pre-departure, yet comfortingly filled with the trusty sustenance of 7 Eleven.

Short Fiction

White Noise

If you continue half a mile down the street, past the arts center at the crossroads, and on again past the pretentious French restaurant - though, admittedly, the decor and exterior are attractive - you'll reach a silent area near the river. High rise, luxurious, amenity-filled apartments share a gaping, wide angled view of the city on the other side.

If you strain your neck slightly, from the pavement, you can just about see inside their kitchens and living area, well enough to admire the interiors, and wonder whether it was the inhabitants who designed them, or whether they paid someone else to do it. Inhabitants who are one of two types: those rich enough to afford an interior designer, and lack the creative ability to do the job themselves, their brains so fried from finance; or, the extremely successful artists and creative directors, who turn their living quarters into bougie havens by instinct. They plan it out, on a software program, pulling lines and joining dots and shifting block outlines around their laptop screen, adjusting dimensions, designing for function and aesthete. Or else, arrange their belongings and purchases gradually, during a brief pause of their busy lives, perhaps with thoughtful adjustments here and there, a keen eye, and a pre established sense of style and order.

Either way, it's motivating.

Back down the street, in the other direction, turning back now, towards the apartment, the crossroads bustle, as you emerge from the silence (as if from underwater). The occasional mini-van rattles along - or a delivery truck, on its way to to the post station around the corner. Some cars and motors rev unnecessarily, from time to time: more often than irregularly, though infrequently and constantly enough to provoke irritation. There is no flow to their passage, they arrive in jerks, inevitable yet unpredictable. The listener is always on edge, if you are a sensitive type. Outside the apartment, a circular ramp takes the force of the passing tyres and lets out a sharp, cranking echo, which travels upwards and disappears sharply - though never for long, always to be replaced, soon to reoccur.

That afternoon, inside in the apartment hallway, a white plastic hanging rack (the kind which wavers unsteadily, yet takes on your hanging garments bravely) was standing against the wall, empty. These hangers always look so cheap and sparse without clothing - though, it does depend on the clothing, especially the color coordination, and where in the room

you place the hanger, and how big the room is. Behind the bedhead is nice, though at the end of the bed works too, if the room is small, and the bed ends up taking over one whole wall. They're quite ugly, actually, those clothing racks, but can be completely transformed by nice clothing, and they're admittedly very practical if you don't have a closet. You could even hang a plant, or some baubled fairy lights, from one end of it.

There was a box placed beside the clothes hanger. The packaging told us it once held a blending appliance, it seemed - now, threads of a grey woolen scarf poked out, and the cardboard bulged at the sides. A paper bag, also full, the white nozzle of a plastic bottle striking upwards out of it, lounged beside the box.

A girl had just entered the hallway. She strode to the back, towards the stairs, and stopped behind the end of the clothes rack, closest to the stairs. She could just about make out two figures, a boy and a girl, leaning against the wall by the hall door, feet crossed behind them, propped against the wall. They were chatting - something about Maine and road trips, and not trusting people from Maine - something about a show, maybe the boy had seen it, or planned to.

The other girl, at the end of the hall, in the dark space beside the stairs, crouched down. She swung her backpack round, zipping it open - it was a red, Patagonia bag, not quite a rucksack, but too adventurous to be considered a backpack (assuming a backpack is smaller, black and square with thin straps - or eclectically colorful, made from cheap, soft fabric which falls apart eventually, bought at a market stall for \$3 in Morocco - also with unreliable straps). She zipped open the bag, crouching to the side of the white clothes hanger, slightly in the dark of the shadowy little nook to the left of the staircase, at the end of the apartment entrance hallway, and rummaged through it.

It was humid and hot, even at 6pm - she was wearing well-fitted black leggings and a black and white striped top, which flared at the ends, though the material looked quite thick.

Combined with the black leggings she must have been sweating, uncomfortable.

She must have been the one who moved into the apartment upstairs on the fourth floor the night before. At 11pm. A slightly inconvenient time to move - an odd choice. It was a Thursday evening, too - why not just wait until the weekend? True, you waste a whole Saturday, that glorious free day when you don't have to go into the office, and can fill with whatever activities you choose - but an evening move, mid-week, is stressful. She was possibly one of those over-motivated, stimulated, "get it out of the way quickly" types. Just get it done and over with, without thinking about or engaging with the process.

The whole scene had certainly indicated as much.

11pm, both entry doors rattled open, propped ajar by the red Patagonia backpack. Movers always either forget, or lose, their door stops.

In the hallway, the beginnings of the struggle could be traced. A suitcase stood at the base of the stairs, piled with a duvet and sheets - and there was the white plastic clothes hanger, too. She was tearing up and down the stairs like a maniac. No one enjoys moving. But in most cases, the process is languid, because people are lazy, and not often motivated by the urgency of their frustration. A week or two is spent packing everything into many labeled boxes, stacked; furniture is taken apart gradually, the mover booked well in advance - sometimes even a team of them, or at least two strong, robust men - ready to take charge and responsibility of the tortuous load. This, at least, is comforting, and worth the astronomical fee to shift everything, and dump it all (maybe in a more organized fashion than how they found it) in the next empty space. The mind is psyched by it all - an indulgence, as you let it be so.

This move, however, was different. All the lightest items were carried in first, and poised either in the hallway, or on the first landing. Each flight is short, eight of them all the way to the fourth floor - two flights of steps to each floor. The mover was tall, lanky, and moved painfully slowly. Beyond the first landing, he would not go, and carried small amounts at each trip. If a long-legged man could plod, he plodded, dragging his feet underneath him, arms dangling lazily by his side.

In a fury, after thundering down from the top floor (of course, the top floor) for a third time, throwing her eyes frantically and critically at the scant affairs lying waiting in the hall - "Can you just bring the heavy stuff in first? I want to get them over with!" She was either about to lose her sanity, or was in complete control of it. "Take the mattresses in, would you!"

"I'm gunna need your help to carry them in!" He disappeared back outside.

She completed another two trips, up and down the stairs, practically at a jog - mind disconnected, a bodily machine, clearing the objects waiting in the hall.

This was not a case of organised boxes. A couple of paper bags with mixed items, beginning to rip in places, a mirror without a case, a stray foam roller, a blue mini hamper basket filled with socks and scarves - and the white plastic clothing rack, standing helplessly, yet guiltily embarrassed about its clear inability to improve the situation.

She came back down again, paused at the end of the stairs, as if observing a small fact she knew already to be true, and shot out the door. Her voice was like a faraway tinned echo, outside in the street.

"You could have been taking in the mattress during this time!"

"I need - "

"What are you talking about - look, I'll do it - "

Entering and thundering back down the hallway in a swift, wave motion, propelled by the onward gravity of the mattress twice her size, bracing and clutching it by her side, she began the ascent, now deep within her mission, the realization on her face that this was it, right now was immersion in the worst, and it only had to be done with minimal psychological recognition and engagement. An unflattering determination, from the most stubborn of souls. At what point might she have thought, or told herself, “See, it’s not that bad or difficult, is it,” or, “We’re almost there, it’s almost done,” before remembering the other mattress yet to follow, and the useless, incompetent, imbecile of a mover, whom she would once again have to confront and argue with about its transportation.

Back outside again, “Why didn’t you start moving the other one inside already??”

“It’s too heavy!”

“But you saw me, I just took the other one by myself!”

“This one is much heavier! Here, you take this end -”

“It’s much harder with two people -”

“Take this side -”

The two of them shuffled through the hallway, navigating past the white plastic clothes hanger. For several seconds, their concentration and focus was diverted from how they felt towards each other (her, clearly grappling with intense impatience, unimpressed by the mover’s acumen - and he, well, it was not entirely clear) - their attention diverted towards the sudden magnified task of getting the mattress past the white plastic clothes hanger. A moment of mutuality, the only commonality they would ever share, as they both realized the nonsensical move of having taken the hanger in first, blocking their passage and presenting a physical obstacle.

She charged ahead, at the front, gripping the mattress. This one was much thicker and heavier than the first, stuffed with metal springs.

“I can take it myself, look, it will be much quicker!”

“You have to stop at each turn, and flip it over, like this -”

“No, I did it this way with the other one, you just have to -”

“The other one was much lighter! Here, stop! No one one knows how to do this better than me - I do hundreds of mattresses, I’ve moved hundreds of them, no one knows how to do it better than me!” She did not respond, raised an eyebrow, his claim not inspiring confidence.

The mattress flipped around at the stair corner - the mover expert hauled it forwards. The front corner walloped her in the face. A doomed silence and heavy pause ensued. She stopped, and glared at him across the top of the mattress.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

They continued the climb with the mattress in strained silence.

Pieces of the wooden bed frame lay in the hallway, and on different levels of the staircase, propped against the wall, waiting to be moved along. It looked like a bed which belonged in a cottage, in a fairy tale or a story book, with a patterned quilt thrown over it. The mover trudged down again, floating past the trailing bits of furniture, the white plastic clothes hanger, paper bags, and the pile of blankets and pillows piled on top of a suitcase at the base of the stairs. He shuffled out the doorway, his long lanky legs with their lengthy canvas overalls brushing against each other as he strode lazily out the front door.

It was past 11pm now, and dark outside.

She followed back down the stairs, something bunched in one fist, and skipped outside, down the front steps, assumedly over to the van parked by the pavement.

“Ok, thanks, here, have a good night.” Stiffly, and with effort.

“Thank you.”

She appeared in the doorway again, a silhouette this time, and turning with the door as it hinged around, leaned against it and outside into the darkness of the road. A UPS truck rattled past, a motorbike revved around the near corner, crunching the stubbled gravel of the road, the truck revving now also. She peered out swiftly, as the mover called,

“Hey, I thought we’d agreed 65?”

“We’d agreed 70,” she mumbled under her breath - then, louder, yelling slightly, “Hey, you were three hours late, you barely did anything, it was all ready for you, you didn’t have to go up any flights, I did it all, it was all there ready waiting for you, on the pavement - you didn’t show up!”

He replied, she didn’t hear, as he pulled off onto the road. She closed the door, and took the stairs two at a time, picking up what was left on the stairs of the bed frame, coming back again for the pile of sheets and covers, and again for the suitcase. One last heaval, though it wasn’t significantly large or heavy.

The door on the fourth floor clicked shut behind her. The white plastic clothes hanger remained in the hallway.

There she was the next evening, crouching next to it, just after 6pm, the sky still bright. The hallway was parsed with warm light now, yet cool, in the shade, and dusty. These were old apartments, the staircase steps black and sloping in the middle, drooping.

She was rummaging through her rucksack. Not finding what she was looking for, she straightened her back, zipped it closed again, throwing a glance towards the pair at the door, still chatting. Maybe they hadn’t seen each other in a while, acquaintances, rather than good friends. Like when people just “know” each other, and when they meet, it’s not

just small talk, but rather a friendly exchange, shaped by youthful smiles, moved by past adventures, snapshots, polaroid images, vintage filters - the last stages of innocence when all we want is to have a good time and be happy. He spoke again about his road trips, she enthused in response, asked questions, throwing in a few comments and experiences here and there, nodding. She had a cropped pixie cut, wore denim summer overalls (the short kind), and a white t-shirt. He wore a flannel red shirt.

“...very Minnesotan” (their conversation had turned homewards now), he laughed, and she did too. “What does very Minnesotan mean?” “Oh, you know - flannels. I build stuff. My family has a cabin in the woods. I own red wing boots. I phrase everything positive in the negative.” “Oh, very nice - the cabin in the woods, I mean. And what are red wing boots?” “They’re boots made in red wing Minnesota. They’re construction boots - but hipsters love them.” “So, are they like those, “Irish setter boots” ?” “Sort of - same company, except one is made in Minnesota - and one isn’t.”

By the stairs, crouching in the dark beside the white clothes hanger, their observer glanced up towards them, possibly catching snippets of the conversation, maybe curious, maybe wondering did they live here too. Staring into the nothingness of the hallway shade, towards the space before the door, as if contemplating her next move, yet not over-thinking.

That evening, early summer, the heat had reached the neutral throb which precedes the sunset, permeating its surroundings, resting silently now, expanded and full, yet in stasis. A garbage truck turned at the crossroads, revving sluggishly down the street past the apartment and grinding over the black, uneven, grainy surface of the road. The trees lining the path sprouted bunches of bright green leaves, like paralysed feathers, breezing calmly above the flat rooftop edges, peeking over them towards the city skyline. Cars and the occasional truck bounced noisily over a ramp in the middle of the road - you always wondered, holding your breath in anticipation (without realising), if the vehicle’s tyre would hit the middle of it, letting off a clunk. You always have to be prepared for it. She had left the hallway and sat outside on the apartment steps now, elbows resting on her knees, hands clasped between them, her red bag on her back. Her gaze was turned to the left, not looking anywhere, brows showing a furrowed frown as she sat in a state of accepted patience. A few cars clattered past, thumping the circular ramp. She took out her phone, consulted the screen, beginning to flick mindlessly, looking up again - placed it on the steps beside her and clasped her hands in the same fashion. This was much calmer than the night before - she now appeared almost stately, as if she didn’t possess the ability to speak, or fluster, panic, react, yet thoroughly engaged with her surroundings - always part of a present moment, which occurred elsewhere than the current reality.

Someone turned onto the steps from the pathway - the Minnesotan, with the cabin in the woods.

“Hello!” She looked up, barely, though with an air of surprise, “Hi” - in a crystal tone, clear, like a bright echo. He passed by her, opened the front door, and passed into the mailbox area, taking out his keys and letting himself through the second door into the corridor - still dark, yet streaked by the tinged yellow of the late sun which slanted through. It cut awkwardly across the floor - like a distorted rod when placed halfway into water - missing the white plastic clothes hanger and ending before the foot of the stairs.

She was still sitting there, doing nothing, not even waiting (but maybe she was waiting), just placid and accepting. Almost similar to how she had been that moment the night before, after the mattress had struck her in the face - a pause of silent, palpable fortitude, before descending back to normal ground, though now bearing a higher level of consciousness. Disconnected, yet aware - in control, not controlling.

The door behind her opened again, and the girl with the pixie haircut clicked down the steps in her sandals. She was eating something held in her palm, with a spoon in the other, and wore a little black bag on her back.

“Hey there!”

The other girl looked up. Something seemed very new, almost unusual, to her. “Hi!”

“Isn’t it a gorgeous evening?”

“Oh, amazing. So hot.”

“I’m just off to a bar down around the corner.”

“Ah, I see. Seems like you have the right idea. I just moved in last night, actually.”

“Really!”

“Yes. I forgot my keys though, this morning, couldn’t find them last night...I think I must have lost them. At some stage of all the unpacking in the room. Though I was sure I’d dropped them outside the door...anyway, they’re not there now. I’m just waiting for my roommates to get back to let me in.”

“Oh, gosh, that’s the worst. Welcome to the apartment, though!”

It was an avocado, that’s what she eating, a very green, perfectly ripe avocado. Just one half, the stone pip removed, eating it with the spoon, scooping out morsels. At first glance, it looked like a small tub of mint ice-cream, with an eclectic hint of food coloring.

“Do you know when one of your roomies is swinging by?”

“I don’t.” She shifted her feet. “And this is the second time in two days that I’ve locked myself out. Last night I let the door close behind me on the landing when I started packing away my things-”

“You only started packing last night?”

“Yes, well, I don’t have all that many -”

“And you locked yourself out!”

“I did...the door slipped shut behind me. Ended up waiting for three hours for someone to come back. You know how it is. There’s always someone fussing around the apartment, blaring the tv, chatting, cooking, when all you want is some peace and quiet...and then, when you lock yourself out, no one’s there for hours...”

“I’m Carson, by the way!”

“Jess. Nice to meet you.”

The ramp clattered behind them.

“Sorry, I missed that?”

“Jess! It’s pretty noisy on this street, isn’t it? I mean, there’s not a lot of traffic, but the road...”

“Oh, it’s just awful at the moment. They’re doing some sort of construction work on it - or, at least, I think they are.”

“I think I got about two hours sleep last night. I usually wear ear plugs but I couldn’t find them. I’m such a light sleeper though.”

“You should try a noise machine! I need both the noise machine and the fan to fall asleep.”

“No, I haven’t, I keep hearing about them. I did try putting a white noise soundtrack on, though.”

“Nah, it’s not the same, the noise machine is great - really works for me. Anyway, I’d better head off - I hope one of your roomies turns up soon! What floor are you on?”

“The fourth floor. At the top.”

“I’m in 3L! I’ll probably see you around - I sometimes take a beer on the roof, especially now that it’s summer.”

“There’s a rooftop?”

“Yeah! The ladder should be right outside your door, I think.”

“Oh. I didn’t know there was a roof.”

“There is! Well, it’s not a proper rooftop, but it’s a roof...”

“I’ll have to check it out.”

“It’s an awesome roof, I think.”

They smiled and said goodbye. Carson continued on down the road, scooping out small spoonfuls from the avocado.

Her new acquaintance remained on the steps, as calmly as before. She was maybe thinking of the peaceful street a few blocks down, with the newly built apartments, wondering whether there really were rich creative artists living there, or just wealthy business people. Maybe she wondered if she would actually see Carson again, whether she would ever knock

on her door, to ask did she want to take a beer on the roof (though, she didn't like beer), or whether one of her roommates was anywhere nearby, or arriving soon, to open the apartment door.

The hallway was cool. Someone opened the front entrance, and she slipped back in again behind them. She regarded the paper bag and white plastic clothes hanger.

Eight flights, four floors.

The air was musty. These buildings are old, the exteriors charming, flat roofed, their facades in the Italianate clapboard style, each a different color. This one was green - a flaking, sooty green. Inside felt sooty too. A dry powder stuck to the walls, the staircase was narrow and hollow from passing footsteps. Light streamed down from a clouded sky window at the top, in the center, brightening the passage as it climbed.

She paused outside her door, and looked hard at the floor in front of the entrance, just to the left of the mat, as if trying to figure something out, brows slightly furrowed at the edges, thinking, wondering, then conceding. She turned around again.

She looked to her right, looked, and slowly realized. Reaching her hand out, she wrapped her fingers uncommittedly around the bar of a ladder suspended against the wall, hanging. It was rusted, chipped, made up of auburn patches. She gripped a little harder and shook it a bit. It didn't creak.

The ladder to the roof balanced uncertainly steady and reliable, and a possibly unforgivingly risky contraption. She pulled herself upwards, her small body thrown and swinging in plunges with gravity as she climbed, the red Patagonia bag on her back, craning her neck, cheeks stretched in anticipation and curiosity. The bright, gaping exit at the top was surrounded by a red, corrugated ledge, the closure hanging open, unassumingly, not asking questions, belonging to no one, no bell keeper, letting everyone pass through. Elbows squeezed in by her sides, a moment of balancing as her fingers gripped the edges, she hoisted herself out. She couldn't resist a last short shake of the ladder as she reached the top, checking, would it stay or give way, was it solid or loose.

The roof was flat, sloping, an uneven surface of dirty cream concrete and grey, mottled canvas. A toy store of colored shacks, bundled together, streaked with electric cords and bright windows, sprawled out in front of her. She left her bag by the aerial, spiking awkwardly in the direction of Manhattan, and sat cross legged on the slope. She changed her posture, on her belly now, chin on clasped hands, then sitting upright again.

She faced an oval of city skyline. Why was Manhattan surrounding the water like that, in a curve? The side of Manhattan is a straight line, on the map. From this vantage, here, on the roof, it was like the city was surrounding her on all sides. The lower section of the island

did bulge a bit, and north Brooklyn curved inwards, though. It was all very hard to figure out.

It was quieter up here, on the roof, than in her bedroom, where the sporadic, irregular, unassuming traffic passing below on the road belted in minor echoes around the bright space. Her two windows let in bright light and a cinematic spread of the cityline. That city which takes on a different meaning, holds a different appeal, and represents a different world, almost every different day that we look out on it. Sometimes it is enough to be there, on a roof somewhere, an observer, quiet, just looking out - wondering how integrated the other person feels, on what level, how aware they are of it, what bothers them, whether you are feeling bothered by the wrong things, and not in the *right way*. Maybe she could stay a little longer locked out after all.

The sky was turning a milky orange, stained by the grimy outlines of both diamond skyscrapers and industrial warehouses.

A message on her phone pulsed the screen.

“Oh, I found a pair of keys lying outside in front of the door this morning! I thought someone might have come home drunk last night and dropped them, so I put them under the mat. Sorry!”

She didn't climb back down the ladder immediately. Her face, expressively simple, accepting, turned back to face the surroundings, of this confusing place.

The keys were under the mat. She let herself in.

She was right, then. She had left them outside the door last night. There is irony in cautiousness.

A few days passed. A considered, confident knock could be heard on door 3L. It shifted open.

“Hi. Is Carson there?”

Poetry

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https://issuu.com/icarustcd/docs/icarus1_content