

## ► BENEATH THE BAND AID

by Aaron Dries

Here. Here we buried chicken bones in the dirt only to dig them up the following day with toothbrushes, pretending they were bits and pieces of dinosaurs, that we were palaeontologists. You had to wear your wide-brimmed school hat, tie a handkerchief about your neck, speak in an accent. Otherwise none of this felt authentic, the magic would crumble. We assembled bones under the trampoline, which come dark, we'd stretch out on to star-watch. The Saucepan. The Milky Way. And then there were those we named ourselves. Happy until the mosquitos got us. You hear them before you see them.

Here. Here I found the dirty syringe on the way home from school. It caught my eye like a coin at the bottom of a fountain. Danger, it hissed. Don't touch me. Yet I wanted to touch it. Had to. It was that same voice that taunted me to touch exposed wires in a wall, made me want to climb over a balcony railing. The curiosity you know you shouldn't listen to, and later resent. Because the voice is your own, an elemental taunt programmed to challenge your mortality. Holding the syringe, I was surprised by how light it was, having imbued it with such weight. This was in someone. I dropped it and I ran, passing houses that were all eye-windows and mouth-doors, faces I didn't recognise anymore. Scrubbing my hands with Gumption. The guilt over not disposing the syringe safely is a stain that has never lifted.

Here. Here the milk was dropped. Mum sent me to the Top Shop to buy two litres of Lite White. The chequered floor and the smell of bubble-gum. The woman behind the counter handing over the milk in a plastic bag. I hung it from the handle of my bike, only to watch, horrified, as the bag split. The carton busted on the concrete. They say you shouldn't cry over spilled milk, but I didn't cry because of that. I cried because I'd been given a responsibility, entrusted with money, a task I'd failed. The woman behind the counter came out and gave me a replacement, free of charge. Her kind face is lost to me now, as is her name. I remember the relief, though. And the milk, double-bagged, this time.

Here. Here is the sewer grate. I was walking with Nan. A hot day. I turned to her, pointing, and said, "The devil lives down there." She took my wrist, leaned close and told me to not speak that way again. The quiet walk back to her house and the meal that followed, Fanta that dyed my tongue orange. Sliced devon with tomato sauce. Drain devils, unspoken.

Here. Here we dreaded the magpie. I strapped an old ice-cream container with eyes drawn on every side to my head, laced it under my chin with a shoelace from an old shoe. Walking, dreading the swoop. Walking past trees that hummed with bees, the sound an electric warning. The crunch of gravel under my shoes. A swoop that never came. Victory.

Here. Here we put the twenty-cent pieces on the railroad tracks we weren't supposed to go near. Our hands against the hot iron, and the vibrations of an approaching train. We saw it coming through quicksilver heatwaves. It moved slow. Until it didn't. My friend turned to me as the train barrelled down, saying, "I hope we don't derail it." A fist of anxiety flexing at the heart of me as we watched the train zoom by, envisioning an alternate reality where I'd killed everyone on board. The coins were bent out of place. Only I couldn't show them to anyone. Doing so was a kind of admission. I didn't sleep that night.

Here. Here we found the porno stash in the truck graveyard. We passed it around to one another, the pages bleached by the sun and crisp to the touch. The guys laughing at the photographs. The spiders in the truck hub we'd pulled the magazine from. I was sure we were watched.

Here. Here I crashed my bike, chased from school by a kid in the grade above me. He'd beaten me on the jungle-gym—I remember how my head bounced against the planks, as though wanting to meet his knuckles again and again. Pedalling my bike, glancing over my shoulder to see if he was still in pursuit. He was. And then colliding with the parked car on the side of the road. Bending my wheel and smashing the vehicle's taillight. The way the kid who had chased me evaporated into the day. Dragging my bike home, telling my parents I'd taken a corner too fast. A secret beneath the Band-Aids. No scars, though. Unless remembering is a scar.

Here. Here we read the graffiti on the back of the toilet door. Needs and wants amid shit-smears and drawings of open mouths and phone numbers. The wasp's nest in the corner, wind reeking of piss. A crucifix spray-painted on the urinal. Cracked tiles. And a caution from the adults outside that us boys shouldn't play around there no more. Stick to the tennis courts. The thwack of racquets. Someone yelling, "Love!"

Here. Here we found the injured baby bird by the golf course, brought it home. Layered a shoebox with grass for it to sleep on, crumbled biscuits for it to eat. We would nurse it back to health, help it. Do the good thing. We gave the bird a name—a mistake. Because when we checked on it the next morning and found the bird dead, its name haunted us.

Here. Here we went to do grave rubbings with charcoal and wax paper, where we played hide-and-seek after dark. I remember wondering about the people on the headstones, watched over by concrete angels with their noses worn down to nubs. Looking for the mystery in their stories, universes to fill the dashes between the dates. How the graveyard didn't seem real until someone I loved ended up in it. Plastic flowers with the colour bled free. Notes to the dead sealed in sandwich bags so the rain wouldn't get to them. Learning that we shouldn't play there anymore, that those who'd gone before us deserved better.

Here. Here I had the conversation with my friend on a street I'd been down a thousand times. Every word a paper-cut. My friend couldn't look me in the eye. The street seemed so much longer after that.

Here. Here we swam during summer, watched by parents and teachers. The stink of chlorine, sunscreen, snot, a whiff of shit, grilled steak and onions. Holding your breath as you swam to touch the bottom, surprised by how slippery the surface was. Bursting into air to find the adults yelling, "Get out of the pool!" A storm was coming. Lightning in the air.

Here. Here we waited for Santa on the fire engine. Mums and dads drinking white wine in the sun, wishing for a cool winter to come, one that would only have them wishing for summer again. We were sweaty, flies on flies on faces. Itchy with anticipation. All of us hollering when we heard the siren. The enormous truck rolling to a stop and the skinny Santa in the felt beard tossing bags of lollies. Catching some. Fishing the rest from gardens. Us kids comparing what we got, swapping the sweets we didn't like. The chewy teeth were my favourite. I'd shove them under my gums so the whites pointed out, tried to kiss people.

Here. Here we all sat to watch the house at the bottom of the hill, some with beers. Police crowded around the property. A hostage negotiation. Someone said they thought the man had a gun and his children in there. Eventually, after dark, either the man turned himself in, or the police, who had shuffled us away from the scene, went for him. I remember the people, my neighbours, around me. How they picked up their empty beer cans and folded their plastic chairs in two, the show over and done with. I saw these same people at the outdoor Christmas carols. They brought those chairs with them.

Here. Here I come, year after year. I hungered to leave, once. Now I hunger to return. A lot of the old stores are closed or have changed hands. Top Video, where I had my first job, with its sticky acrylic carpet and the dusty VHS cases is long gone. There are less people around who talk of the '55 flood, how chickens hung from the powerlines once the water receded. The rodeo still happens, or at least I think it does. In all my years living there, I never went. Or maybe I did. There's an image that's just out of reach, of crowds cheering and dropped meat pies and puddles of frothy alcohol in the dirt—but maybe that was a football game. And to many of those people, the friends who didn't move away, I know I'm as difficult to recall, to hold, as they are to me, just fading images from the past. And that's okay. Maybe that's how it's meant to be. We're content to be each other's memory.

Here. Here we ripped ourselves apart trying to be other people. I come back to piece myself together again. Only double-bagged this time.

## ► BRANXTON

by Charles Croucher

When the internet was in its infancy, we used to joke that the only information superhighway we needed ran through Nan's phone.

My grandmother, a telephonist during the middle decades of last century, still wielded her rotary phone like a professional and was constantly up to date with the happenings of family, friends and the entire town.

This was all made much easier by the entire town being either family or friends of my grandmother.

While this may seem gossipy – and on occasion was – the heart of it was sharing the experience of a town like Branxton.

If people succeeded or someone had a baby, we knew about it through Nan and could celebrate with them.

If people failed or someone had died, we knew about it through Nan and fresh batches of scones, slices or grammar pie were hastily dispatched to ease the pain.

This can only happen in small towns.

You often hear "it takes a village to raise a child", I get the feeling our village took this more literally than most.

It was the town where you knew the police officer (and there was only one) by name.

It was the town where the doctor was on constant call and the hairdresser played counsellor.

It was the town where sports, not calendars, marked the change of seasons.

And yes, it was the town with two cemeteries and no hospital.

It's always surprising how smaller towns have bigger impacts on identity.

It becomes part of the fabric, the make-up of a person.

A smaller town makes it so much harder to think of anywhere else as home.

Grow up in place like Branxton and it stays with you.

Not just as the word that was plastered across polo shirts, swimming caps and school report cards, but passports, passwords and passing thoughts.

It took me a long time to get used to seemingly normal things like locking front doors and only politely saying hi to neighbours rather than inviting myself in.

When so many pivotal moments happen in one place it's impossible to forget.

I had my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in the same hall my parents celebrated their wedding.

The local bottle shop announced my brother's birth on their sign.

The local paper gave a 17-year-old a column.

This doesn't happen in other places.

But looking at a any place through rose-coloured glasses and the red flags just look like flags.

A smaller town must also make it harder for people to feel like they can escape.

I'm sure the network of Nans must have felt suffocating for some.

There were only five roads out of town and the train didn't come that often.

As people struggled through the mining strike, struggled through drought or just struggled, the extra eyes were not always welcomed.

It's a point worth noting, as time separates recollection from reality.

But it also feels character building.

Resilience – a word that gets thrown around with some air of mythology these days – becomes second nature.

It makes apathy impossible and empathy impossible to avoid.

When you see houses from your town, churches from your town, even simple street lights from your town it evokes memories.

They are the places we grew up, the homes we hung out in, the cars that took us all over the region.

It's the church that held weddings and funerals and christenings and a priest that played upon the generosity of the community.

Looking at those places brings memories that turned into stories that probably turned into exaggerated fables back to life.

Sure, physically you can only see the pieces, anyone that grew up in a small town can hear and feel and taste those pictures as well.

Hear the music, the coal trains and the accents in the voices of people long gone.

Feel the warmth of summer, the sunburn and the dry winds that would blow through every Christmas.

Taste the baking, the Chinese restaurants and the eight-course of afternoon tea even though you said you'd had enough three courses ago.

The memories are vivid and visceral.

I often wonder if people who grew up in the city, grew up locking their doors and grew up not knowing everyone in their school or town, feel the same.

And I wonder how Nan's network would go in modern times.

Would the phone calls or bingo games or Friday night raffles still carry the same currency when so much of life is being played out online?

Would she understand an era where people send friend requests rather than sending friends dinner invitations?

Filters go further when you don't see people every day and the conversations Mum had in the supermarket were so, so, so much longer than a tweet.

It may be the ultimate, enduring legacy of growing up in a small town.

It makes you honest.

Country folk are often said to "not take any shit".

They tend not to dish it out as well, there simply wouldn't be any point.

It's a long way removed from the faster paced, faster changing, computer driven communications we can all fall prey to these days.

Conversations over the fence or over cards or over dinner carry more weight than those over the internet.

Like the memories, they become tangible.

It's hard to pick whether the small towns keep people honest or it's people's honesty that keeps towns small.

Regardless, I'm thankful.

I'm thankful for those memories, thankful for the network of nans, and I'm thankful that Branxton will always be my home town.

## ► My Brother calls this place God's Country

A poem by Todd Fuller

Welcome to Branxton, we have two cemeteries and no hospital.  
This was the corner where I caught the bus.  
Leave our bags in a pile, buy sweets, walk home. Repeat.  
Don't talk to Peter, he threw rocks at me last week.  
That house belonged to Nana Dries, that one to Aunty Rita. The Thomas's. The Thrifts. The Daggs. Wave to Rocky.  
I don't know who lives in that one now, but I do know her dog barks at night.

One day the police sat at our corner just to breath test our neighbour.  
One day the Olympic torch came to town. School closed early, we made signs, we cheered.  
One day I slept on the trampoline and Dad saw a shooting star.  
I didn't.  
The first time my Mum let me ride to school on my own, I fell into that ditch.  
I got stitches.  
There is a scar.

When the floods came, we sandbagged that pub. Houses too, but after the pub.  
Some of the footy team watched and drank from behind the sandbag wall.  
We filled the bags with sand.  
Dad's back still aches.  
The waters came and they went. Dad's backache remains.

Here my brother is the coach. He does a mean meat raffle on Friday.  
He played rugby in the Watson's yard, cricket on Railway Street and soccer everywhere else.  
He plays to win and calls this place God's Country.  
Now he lives up the road.  
There is only one way he will leave.

The council locked up those toilets for a while, especially at night.  
The story goes that Brent interrupted two men in there.  
Strange things happened after dark.  
I remember a night when a man stood in our front yard. He barked and swore and yelled.  
I tiptoed to the back door and reached for the thick stick.  
We would play murder in the dark.  
Sometime after Chinese take-away. But only when the horses won.

Somehow Santa comes to Branxton every Christmas Eve.  
Not by sleigh but by firetruck. This year, he looks like Mister Stevenson.  
A woman in an elf's hat drives past the bus stop.  
She throws catalogues out the window.  
She waves and smiles. How is it already hot?  
Marco Polo, tag you're in.  
When I go home Kyle still talks about the time Ashley farted.

That house belonged to the priest.  
A cold shiver, it always makes me feel ill. I remember the yellow windows.  
The coal train whirrs in the distance.  
The bell calls for Sunday Mass, the school, the churches, one, two, three.  
We would ride bikes when the evening sun drew long.  
Actually they used to chase me on my bike. Until that night I was late for dinner.

At the end of my street are the railway tracks. One train in, one train out.  
When I first left that train would bring me home.  
All the rest are just coal.  
When I was little my dad and I would walk the track, I learnt to count to big numbers from those coal carriages.  
Thirty-seven, forty-two, once there were fifty.  
Now my niece squeals with delight. She too counts the carriages. She too loves the trains.

Welcome to Branxton, we have two cemeteries and no hospital.  
Please drive carefully.