



FRIENDS

&

DARK

SHAPES

'Astute, wry and
beautifully tender.'
Gail Jones



Kavita Bedford

30. I walk into a supermarket to get some groceries for the house. They are selling trays of Easter eggs and hot cross buns and there are pictures of anthropomorphised rabbits everywhere. I see whipped cream for sale and I remember when we used to buy the cream dispensers, and the gas bulbs separately, back when high school felt like it would drag on forever.

You used to be able to buy nangs from the local supermarket before authorities figured out what kids were doing with them. The soda cream bulbs came from Franklins or Woolworths, and sometimes one of the boys would steal a carton. We wrapped them in jumpers and stuffed them into our school backpacks, because they were innocent enough not to cause direct trouble, but odd enough to create suspicion.

We had once spent a school excursion to Parliament House in our nation's cold capital ducking into corners and public toilets, sucking the gas deep into our chest and heads so our ringing bodies drowned out the noise of politicians telling us we were the future.

One Sunday afternoon we walked the back streets of the inner west after buying two-dollar vanilla ice creams at the big factory that is now a block of boutique apartments, and we sucked and slurped our way to a secret hidey-hole in a

small grassy underpass by the railway tracks. The cream whip dispenser gave off a metallic clang as it fell onto the concrete and we looked around, worried. My hands were still sticky from the ice cream as I grasped the dispenser, but the rumble of trains had disguised the noise and no one had come running after us yet.

We relaxed against the gentle slope of the underpass. One of the guys pushed in the bulb like a silver bullet, and I pulled the trigger so a small hiss sounded as the gas escaped.

The guys worked in pairs. One worked as the ‘loader’ and set up the silver bullets in a line next to him. As the other one inhaled, it was his job to keep inserting the bulbs, one after the other, so the buzz could be maintained for as long as possible. At some point the other one dropped onto the ground, completely out of it and filled with the joyful ringing in every part of his body. I read somewhere later this activity was one of the quickest ways to lose the most brain cells.

The record at that point was twenty-eight bulbs in a row.

Next to me my friends were lying against the grass already numbed out.

We were being told more and more that our grades would affect who we would become, and we were constantly asked by teachers and parents and family friends: who did we want to become? We were looking for a way to push away the creeping reality that was slowly being built around us.

I inhaled deeply, my mouth against the dispenser.

You could hit your hand or head against any surface, nothing hurt; for those two minutes, we could cease to exist

and just become a dizzy vibration, a set of cells pulsing through the air. I dropped next to them as the buzzing reverberated through our skulls and pushed into our limbs like pins and needles.

Tessa lay against the slope, moaning.

It sounds like she's having an orgasm, said one of the guys as he high-fived another.

It's true, she did. But I knew the real reason she was moaning. Time had a way of moving forwards and then backwards while you were buzzing; it felt like your atoms were breaking apart and fluttering through the air and could exist in two places at once and maybe this is what freedom—the kind that our teachers taught in history classes, or that my parents spoke about late at night, but which we could never truly feel in our bones—might actually be like.

But it was so hard to grasp, and any moment you knew that simple bodily understanding would leave you again, so that sound and moaning was the only way to anchor yourself to any trace of that feeling, before we were heaved back into the cold damp of the here and now, by the underpass, with trains rattling above.