

Ad - VERSE - ity!

A verse novella by the students of Collingwood
Alternate School in collaboration with published poet
Amelia Walker.

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Ad-VERSE-ity! - Collingwood Alternative School's Verse Novella

On **Friday 1st June 2007**, Reach Out! presented the first episode of 'Ad-VERSE-ity!', a new verse novella by the students of Collingwood Alternative School in collaboration with published poet Amelia Walker. Told through a series of linked poems, 'Ad-VERSE-ity' follows the journey of T.J. - a sixteen year boy struggling to understand and cope with his older brother's mental illness. The story was told over fifteen weeks, with a new episode appearing every Friday.

'Ad-VERSE-ity' explores the myths and misconceptions that surround mental illness. It also portrays the reality: the practical and emotional challenges faced by people who experience mental illness and their families, and the ways in which people with mental illness and their families can find help to triumph over tough times.

Writing is an excellent tool for maintaining good mental health, as are all forms of creative expression. The verse novel is an increasingly popular form of fiction, in which every chapter is a poem. Australian writers, particularly Dorothy Porter, have been active pioneers in the development and proliferation of this exciting, often experimental literary form. The term novella means "little novel". Our verse novella is just that: a little novel told in poems.

Collingwood Alternative School is an annex of Collingwood College. It is a small school of approximately thirty students, with a focus on building community, promoting improved numeracy and literacy, learning through practical activities and establishing pathways towards future education and training options.

Amelia Walker is a 23 year old poet and spoken word artist whose writing has been published in Australia, the U.S.A., New Zealand, Canada, Germany, Norway, the U.K. and online. She has performed at festivals and events across Australia, including the Queensland Poetry Festival, the WA Spring Poetry Festival, the This Is Not Art Festival (NSW), the Overload Poetry Festival (VIC) and the 2003 Adelaide Big Day Out. To read more about Amelia, visit

http://poetryandpoeticscentre.com/index.php/Interview_with_Amelia_Walker

The project is supported by the School Focused Youth Service (<http://sfys.infoexchange.net.au/>) and the St Vincents Mental Health Early Intervention Initiative.

Episode 1: Scattered Secrets

I take a breath:
stale smoke swims in my lungs
as I open the door,
step inside Vincent's room.
The sight grips me
like an anaconda: furry mould flourishing
on plates of food, half finished
(his latest science experiment?)
fist shaped holes, staring like black eyes
and bloodied sockets in every wall.

From down the hall, my mother's voice
on the phone to Aunt Janet:
"The police are looking.
They said to stay calm.
Stay calm!" the words ricochet.
I shut the door, shut out her sobs.
An old pizza box crunches like a snail shell,
grease sticks to my socks
as I tip toe across the wasteland
of my brother's life.

On the bed, a shredded photograph:
incomplete puzzle pieces
of two boys in blue shorts
and striped school shirts -my first day.
I remember how the older kids pinned me
face down in the sandpit,
how Vincent appeared
like a comic book hero,
my big brother, my best friend
-but not lately.

I climb onto the mattress,
pull my knees to my chest and gaze
at the curled edges of old X files posters,
18th birthday cards sticking out of the bin,
textbooks in the corner, gathering dust.
Something sharp sticks into my side
-a book- brown leather binding,
white pages blackened
with scrawled words, strange code:
1st June 2007. It's time.

Episode 2: 2am Phone Call / Egyptian Wakemare

Woken from the dead at 2am,
my heart sinks in quicksand
as Mum tells me the news:
Vincent's in hospital.
Veering down dark streets,
this drive is drowning
in the world's longest river.

Our destination casts shadows,
even in blackness:
a looming monolith
filled with spells and secrets,
snakes and snares
-pyramid of life,
pyramid of death.

Triage: screams of hyenas
echo off cold stone.
We riddle with the Sphinx,
she nods, presses a button
and the sealed doors part;
we enter the limestone antechamber
where the boy king waits.

Priests and Priestesses approach,
conjure sandstorms of words
like *found* and *wandering*
and *confused* and *psychiatrist*
and *tests* and *natural response...*
He sits, a shadow in chains of white,
plastic amulets on leg and wrist.

His eyes are glazed,
expression fixed -embalmed.
The High Priestess enters,
adorned with stethoscope
-a gleaming medallion
of ancient bling. She coughs.
"Can we have a word?"

Her questions burrow -wily hooks
extracting our tarry organs
of answers, cramming it all in glass jars.
Appetite? Hygiene? Sleeping?
She scratches strange hieroglyphics,
unlocking the Rosetta Stone
of my brother's mind.

What about family history?

A cobra rears forth
-the trap is sprung-
scorpions sting at my throat
as I stumble blindly
through this maze of corridors
out into the arid street.

Lighting a cigarette
-a torch to find my way-
my hands tremble,
the desert is freezing at night.
I'm out of the pyramid
-for now- but this feeling
is a curse I can't shake.

Episode 3: MC Battle

(TJ arrives at school the next morning and is challenged to an MC battle against Eton, the school bully...)

Eton:

Yo gutter rat!
Step onto da sandtrap, brat,
your bro's whack,
he aint comin' back.
Fool, you goin' down
like a sack.

TJ:

I aint goin' down, clown,
I abound in sounds profound.
Push me round, I'll rebound
like a boomerang, confound.
You might live on da up side a town,
but I can knock your crown to da ground.

Eton:

Are you on a trip?
You make me sick!
You're so thick.
Real tough? Yeah, like my Gran.
You're psycho, mofo
-same as your ol' man.

Episode 4: Where are you when you're lost?

My mouth puckers with the taste of defeat
like day-old dregs of watered-down beer.
I've got to get away.
The wind laughs in my face,
raindrops spit in my eyes,
making everything blur
as I storm towards the bike shed.
I'm on overdrive.
My legs are pistons, firing with fury
as I ride down alleyways, sharp corners,
heading anywhere,
heading nowhere.
Instinct pulls me like a bat at dusk
and I find myself scrambling
up the hill behind the cemetery
-as I always do
at times like this.
Clambering through the cyclone fence,
a stray piece of wire slices my arm.
I watch the beads of blood
bubbling like lava,
but I can't feel it. I'm beyond pain.
Rows of tombstones grin
like crooked, crumbling teeth.
Tree branches creak, leaves shush
and mutter like old gossips
as I charge across the sodden earth,
my body a hurricane of shivers and sweat
-frozen on the outside,
burning up within.
I halt at the feet of the cracked, crooked angel
whose concrete tear drops still cling, mid-cheek
after more than sixteen years
atop my father's grave.

Episode 5: SMS SOS

hey dad um i dunno where to begin... id just like 2 say i really miss u & i wish u were here with me atm enjoying life 2 the fullest, we could achieve so much...

i turned 16 last april an me an vincent arnt dat close nemore, i dunno wot has happened 2 him... im not old enuf 2 drink but i do, hope yr not mad...

i wish u were here. i want u 2 b proud of me. i try hard, but sometimes it doesnt work. vincent was always the clever 1... now... who knows?

every now an then i 4get u, which is weird coz i never knew u... im sorry...

im ment 2 b at school rite now, but i cant stand it. i was in an mc battle against this kid eton. i felt i beat him, but evry1 saw it differently.

he said u were a psycho mofo. wot did he mean? how could ne1 b so rude?

i used 2 ask mum ???s about u an she always just cried. i dont ask nemore. is it my fault? i luv her but i dunno wot 2 do. can u giv me a sign?

vincent is in hospital. mum an i went 2 c him. it was 2am, the doctors dunno wots wrong yet. he looked really scared, not himself nemore.

he an i used 2 go everywhere 2gether. he stood up 4 me. then he changed, he started sayin go way snitch. now everythings fallin apart.

i just want my bro back the way things used 2 b. an i really wish u were here, now more than eva, u might no wot 2 do.

Episode 7: Mokita

(a poem in 2 parts)

(1)

Stuck in traffic on the way to the hospital,
I wonder why there are so many emotions
the English language forgets to name.
Like right now, I'm happy about seeing Vincent,
but upset about the situation we're in.
What does that make me? Hapset? Upgry?
If Vincent can get better, fabulous,
but that this has happened at all is total crap
-Frap? Crabulous? A Miseracle? Or a Piseracle?
Perhaps just plain Marvelously.

I'm trying to prepare myself
for what this place will be like.
I'm picturing barbed wire, burly guards at the gate;
I'm picturing padded cells, no windows;
nurses with starched caps and puckered frowns;
patients screaming out, naked,
drooling and rolling their eyes.
What if they put Vincent in a straightjacket?
Or give him electrocution? Or cut out his brain?
I've got to make sure they realise
my brother's not **crazy**
-he's just not a hundred per cent sane.

(2)

We must be in the wrong place
-the door's not even locked.
The words in my throat dissolve like sugar cubes
as a girl walks towards me.
She has green eyes,
hazelnut latte skin,
she moves like the branches of a weeping willow
in an autumn breeze
-no white cap, no puckered frown-
"Hi. I'm Caroline."

"I'm Ella and this is T.J.
We're here to visit Vincent."
I smile dumbly while Mum does the talking.
"Oh!" Caroline's eyes light up
like fluoro sticks in a pulsing club.
"He's in the courtyard. Come through".
She leads us through a lounge with pale blue walls
where some guys Vincent's age are chilling back
watching MTV.
It's more like a home than a hospital.

The courtyard smells of flowers,
a fountain dripples
like someone singing in the rain.
Vincent is sitting alone,
knees to his chest, rocking
like a child on a wooden horse.
On another bench, some weirdo with a mohawk
is clutching a rolled cigarette
between black polish fingers.
He's got enough ink in his skin to tag a whole moving train
enough metal rings to build the Sydney Harbor Bridge.

I sit down next to Vincent.
Making conversation is like trying to walk
through a brick wall,
a feeling that sinks in like cement.
Caroline sits down too,
but she's called away to answer the phone.
I can't help staring at freakpunk's tattoos.
He's even got one on his neck:
it says *Mokita* -what the heck is that about?

"The truth all know, but none can speak",
he whispers, his voice like a volcano
on the verge of eruption.
My face burns and I wish I could disappear.
He takes another drag of his rollie, then adds,
"it's a Papua New Guinean word
-and also a great metal band."

I nod, then look down as I fumble
for a cigarette of my own.
Spark it up, puff and blow...
let the nicotine molecules float like bloodstream butterflies.

Caroline returns, her face red,
black rivers streaming from her eyes.
"Pierre", she says to freakpunk,
"I'm feeling that way again."

The two of them disappear inside
and I watch as he unlocks a cupboard,
disappears momentarily, then rematerializes
with a little white tablet and a glass of water.
She swallows it down
like it's the first food she's seen in years.
My jaw plummets,
"What the--?" I exclaim.

Then a strange sound bubbles up
like jets in a spa.
It's a sound I used to hear all the time,
a sound I'd nearly forgotten
-Vincent is laughing.
Mum soon joins in -the two of them cacking
just like old times.
I'm too stunned to feel foolish
-Caroline is a patient and freakpunk is a nurse.
My world does a belly flop
knocks the wind out of everything I thought I knew.

Episode 8: Wildcards

It's two weeks now, since Vincent disappeared.
It feels like two days, and at the same time two years.
Playing cards skim across the table like soft skinned snakes
as Caroline deals the first round.

She's wearing a white hoodie;
it pinwheels light, makes her red lips shimmer.
Her glass bead bracelets chirrup like wind chimes
and I am drawn, a bower bird towards their ocean light.

Vincent's other new friends are Yianni and Stefan
-and Mandy, Stefan's girlfriend, who visits every day.
That surprised me. I didn't think girls dated guys in psych wards
-especially girls like Mandy.

She has dawn light locks and lorikeet eyes,
her voice is a windmill dancing with the breeze,
her smile wider than the moon's orbit
-plus she makes a mad chocolate cake.

Stefan is tall, dark hair gelled into a murder of spikes,
leather jacket unbuttoned, effortless, oozing cred.
Save for a broken arm, he seems like the guy who has it all
-so what is he doing in here?

Yianni's the gangsta type -baggy hoodie, baggy jeans-
his frail body a lone minnow in an ocean of fabric.
He has cheeks like deflated basketballs, eyes afloat in deep oil wells.
Maybe he's been on the streets, maybe it's smack?

I remember the corn chips in my backpack.
Vincent's eyes gleam like crystals.
Nacho cheese and flame throwing salsa
-old favourites. We hoe in.

It's the first time in ages I've shared food with Vincent
-or seen him eat anything at all.
He's starting to look healthier, thank goodness,
losing the feral rat look.

I wonder if I should offer some to Caroline.
She looks kind of thin -maybe it would upset her.
I offer the others: Stefan and Mandy accept with smiles,
Yianni recoils as if it's a bowl of snails in acid.

"Yes please!" Caroline pipes up,
leaning across to grab a handful.
"I gotta eat up", she giggles between crunches,
"lost too much weight while I was manic".

"Manic? What's that?"

"Part of my illness. Imagine depression, but the total opposite."

"Wouldn't that be a good thing?"

Caroline and Stefan exchange knowing glances.

"It's a ride on the Zipper",

Stefan's voice is the shade of a bruised and bursting cloud,

"until you manage to break an arm

-not to mention my bank balance."

He sighs. "I was saving for a trip to Eurpoe,

then I walked past this motorcycle shop and I had this sign

-I was meant to buy it. I thought I'd do stunts.

I'd never even been on a bike before."

I choke on chilli and curling corners.

"That's awful", I splutter. Stefan shrugs.

"Some people get Diabetes. Some have Asthma attacks.

I have Bipolar. Least now I know."

He grabs another chip then picks up his cards.

I'd forgotten the poker. I check my own hand and groan.

It's a love-hate see-saw, this game.

You can never predict what the next round will deal.

Episode 9: What's Beneath All This Junk?

Warriors armed with garbage bags and buckets,
we creep into the dark, gloomy room.
The air hasn't gotten any fresher since last time
I closed this door, near on a month ago;
the same pizza box sits, mouth open
like a sprung trap, a starved, toothless skull.
Everything is such a mess
-where do we begin?

This time it's not intruding: Vincent gave Mum the ok
for us to sort out the chaos, all this rank
that's been festering in the shadows, unchecked.
In two days he's coming home;
we'll make a fresh start, all of us, together.
Things will be better, they will, they have to...
Everything is such a mess
-where do we begin?

We shoot streams of spray and wipe
like archers' arrows -every surface is a bulls-eye;
cut through dust as if our cleaning rags were swords.
His scattered possessions pose thornier questions:
What's dirty? What's clean?
What to throw out? What to keep?
Everything is such a mess
-where do we begin?

I open a high cupboard, searching for space.
Perched on my toes, I see a square of darkness
stabbed with red -an abstract painting,
the oil paint smeared thick,
clumping off the canvas like congealed blood.
Who did this? Where did it come from?
Everything is such a mess
-where do we begin?

I grab for the painting, frantic as an explorer
who has just unearthed a new discovery.
As I grasp this strange new clue to our history
a square of cardboard slips from the backing
and flutters to the ground like a brown leaf.
It's a photograph: a man, a baby, and a small child...

Everything is such a mess
-where do we begin?

He's sitting on a park bench, in his dressing gown.
His skin is pale, flaccid with excess flesh; dark circles arc
like car park skid marks, doughnut-ing his eyes.
He holds the baby in rigid arms, as if unsure what to do.
Round his neck, a shark's tooth necklace
-identical to the one around mine.
Everything is such a mess
-where do we begin?

What is this photo? Where did Vincent get it?
Why has he kept it stashed here? It's years old,
judging by the faded colours, by the way the corners curl
like yellow nails on bunioned toes.
I want to tear it up, burn it, scatter the ashes in the sea.
But could any amount of water wash this image from my mind?
Everything is such a mess
-where do we begin?

Mum comes to see why I've stopped. "TJ, what are you---"
her words shrivel like snails raped of their shells.
The puzzle pieces are falling into place,
but this isn't the picture that was promised on the box.
My face is hot. My hands are shaking. I can't breathe.
I think I'm having an asthma attack.
Everything is such a mess,
such a hopeless mess.

"Dad was sick too", I hear myself mutter.
It's like listening to somebody a million miles away.
"Dad was sick too. You never told me. Why not?
And how come in this photo he's so overweight?
You said he played football, in all the other photos he's fit...
what else haven't you told me, Mum?"
"I wanted to... sometimes... but I didn't know.
I mean, when? how? You were so young when he died,
and I wanted you to believe..."
-"A lie", I spit, my breath on fire-
"To believe your father was special. He was.
And he did play football. He did all the things I've told you
-but that was before his illness got bad."
-"What illness?"
"Schizophrenia."

The word socks me straight in the gut.
-"Is that what Vincent has too?"-
Mum draws a breath. Several seconds become forever.

"The doctors can't say yet. They're just calling it psychosis."
My head hurts. My temples pound as racing thoughts crash
and burn around my head.
-"Schizophrenia doesn't make you gain weight..."-
"No, but the medication your father took did."
The centre of the puzzle is still a black hole.
-"How did he die, Mum? How did he really die?"-

"It was a car accident. I didn't lie about that."
-"Did he do it on purpose?"-
"No. I'm a hundred per cent certain of that."
-"How can you be?"-
"The coroner found afterwards that he was dead before impact.
He had a heart attack behind the wheel."

Reality knifes me straight in the chest,
I stumble across the un-vacuumed floor
where our tidying efforts have unearthed grotesque stains.
"How can I believe a single thing you say again?"
I scream at Mum, before slamming the door.
I've got to get away, I've just got to get away.
Everything is such a mess
-where can we begin?

Episode 10: Broken Surface

Scrambling through un-straight lines of memory
-defaced tombstones, smashed in smiles.
Above me, the clouds close over,
sealing the lid of this deep well I've fallen down.
Dad, where are you?
My thoughts are small white canaries
fainting in their cages.
I can't breathe,
I'm drowning,
my mind is being erased.

My heart is going like a drum machine
with the D.J. on acid. A voice spins
into my ear drum as if through an effects unit,
a distant am broadcast crackling in
and out of comprehension,
"TJ, TJ, please come back. It's cold..."
The words bounce and echo off the damp walls
of this cramped place, repeating,
repeating 'til they lose all meaning.
Who is it? How do they know my name?

I want to hide in a corner,
but there are none
-only deeper to sink in these icy depths.
I'm cold as Headless Nick,
shaking like someone gripped by seizure.
Maybe that's what this is,
maybe I'm epileptic,
maybe I'm dying.
The walls of the well are straining under pressure
-now crumbling, waves crashing in.

It's the ocean now, miles from land,
storms rage round me,
electric jellyfish reach out
-they want to strangle me, to pull me down.
Filthy salt water fills my mouth, burns my lungs.
I gasp and splutter, spit clumps of brown weed.
Just when I think my life is spiraling,
a hand reaches out
-from where I can't tell-
but it's here and it's warm. I take it.

"Just breathe slowly, you'll come through",
I hear through water-logged ears.
Maybe these are instructions from an angel,
maybe the hand is my father's.
I don't know, but I hold on.
I just hold on,
waiting for light like rain in a drought.
Time is taking a smoko

-is it ten minutes,
or ten years since I ran from the house?

The storm is easing,
and as the clouds part I see what I think is the sun
breaking through murky waters, sending warmth
to my body, limp and lifeless on the ocean floor.
But as I come to, I realise it's just wet grass I'm lying on
in the cemetery, not far from Dad's grave.
The voice and hand were Mum's
-she's been waiting here this whole time, shivering.
Her cheeks shine damp with dewdrops
-saltwater pearls gleaming in the full moon.

Episode 11: Snatches of Truth (A modified Ninjin Renga*)

Engine growling,
Mum chain smoking menthols,
Vincent beside me, heading home

Walking up the steps to the house,
sparrows gather twigs for their nest

On the roof with Vincent,
memories flowing,
faces glow in the gobbled moon

Smell of lasagne filling our house,
table set for three

* * *

Birds chirp outside,
Vincent straightens his Maccas cap,
gives himself a dirty look

School holidays, smell of popcorn,
screenful of cars in flames

Sweat's sweet reek,
rhythmic clink of weights,
Vincent red-faced before we've begun

Halloween Party: Vincent as Jekyll
turns Hyde when I suggest fewer sweets

Vincent's clothes expand,
my brain shrinks,
cramming for exams

Sunlight brightens my room,
my brother shines light on algebra

Scent of burnt roast turkey,
our whole house an oven,
candle lit for Dad

Tis the season for over-eating,
Vincent turns his mirror to the wall

Last day of year,
sand, stars, laughter,
floating away in my Jim Beam

Awake, dry mouth, cold kitchen floor,
how did I get here?

Bucketful of crabs,
sand squeaking beneath our feet,
Vincent running, laughing

Summer days stretch long and lean,
Vincent's clothes hang loose once more

* * *

What a nightmare!
Tip toe to the kitchen tap,
Vincent scribbling in a book

Perfect day for a surf,
Vincent in bed, "go 'way snitch"

Backyard, Vincent chewing soursobs,
alfoil lining his cap -why?
"They're my thoughts, you can't have them."

February heatwave,
so many tears I can't cry

** Renga is a Japanese form of collaborative poetry that traditionally uses multiple linked haiku to show the passing of the seasons.*

There are many different varieties of Renga. We have based ours upon the Ninjun Renga, which contains 20 haiku verses, alternating between 2 and 3 lines each. The 3rd verse of the Ninjun Renga should reference the moon and the 19th verse should reference flowers. Traditionally, Renga does not contain a narrative, which is one of the reasons why we call this poem a modified Ninjun Renga.

There are two main schools of thought concerning haiku in English: one school of thought is that the haiku must have a strict number of syllables (5 in the 1st verse, 7 in the 2nd, 5 in the 3rd); the other school of thought, which we apply here, is that haiku should present striking and meaningful imagery within 2-3 economically-written lines.

Episode 12: Becalmed Before the Storm

Up all night, asleep all day,
talking when there's no one in the room,
weight falling off him like leaves in Autumn,
my brother is balanced
as a fish on rollerskates,
grounded as a supernova,
consistent as Brittany Spears' hairdo,
together as a broken heart.

And as for me? I'm calm
as a tsunami,
certain as a prayer for rain,
comfortable as a pair of woolen undies,
adequate as a false-toothed lion.
I've got to ask Vincent the truth -but how?
Life should come with a user's manual,
someone backstage to prompt the right words.

Boom! Clank! Blang!
The soundtrack to his nightly ascent
starwards like Anakin.
My mission, if I choose to accept it:
to bring my brother back to Earth.
I scramble up the side of the house,
fumbling for handholds as my body shakes
and invisible ropes tighten round my chest.

"Can you roll us a cigarette?" I venture,
plonking myself beside him. He grunts,
thrusts me the Drum and Tally-Ho's.
I'm no good at this.
Glue smears my sweaty palms.
Click and hiss: my lighter flickers
in sync with a spark on the horizon -lightening.
"Do you think it's close?"

No reply. I count to fifty
and breathe out as the thunder grumbles
like a kitten with indigestion.
"Vincent..." I begin, my voice steady
as a tortoise on a tightrope,
"I don't know any other way to say this:

I'd give up everything for you,
I'd fight for you, I'd die for you...

...but i know you're off your medication".
Another blue Z knifes the bruised sky;
Vincent pounces towards me,
eyes like lit coals, hands outstretched.
I stumble, corrugated iron clatters

like a series of gunshots
and it hits me:

we're
right
on
the
edge...

Kaboom! This time it's no kitten
-more like a cheetah
racing the north wind, hunting us down.
"I think we should get inside",
my words swirl like broken kites.
Vincent's face is red,
his breath like stale cider,
as his arms stretch towards me -and

He grabs my hands,
pulls me towards him. We hug
for the first time since he left hospital.
It's not just rain that wets my shoulder
as my brother howls,
"I'm scared. I don't want to get sick again,
but I hated gaining weight.
I hated being on those drugs."

The sky illuminates,
"we've got to get down from here!"
I start the slippery climb,
but Vincent doesn't
move, just gazes
about like a lost
child "What are you doing? Come on!"
he shakes his head

I haul myself back up, |
grab his hands again,
practically shatter them.
"Vincent, please, you're my brother
and i love you. This is serious
-we're not safe." He blinks,
finally his eyes meet mine.
"You're right. I'm coming down."

Episode 13: Verdict

(1)

The secretary cracks her knuckles,
casts her gaze across Vincent and I
like an eagle hunting its prey
as we join the back of the queue.

The walls are cracked,
the carpet torn;
it reeks of antiseptic
with a soundtrack of rain.

A half hour wait takes ten years
trapped in this maze with no exit.
Finally, Vincent is called in
and I am left to think

of every bad doctor I've ever seen
in bulk-billed battery cages,
on blinking TV screens:
Doctor House and Doctor Nick

("Hi everybody!")

Doctor Mary, always preaching,
poking paddle pop sticks down my throat;
Doctor Anvil, with his snooty superiority
and lollipops tasting of whale fat.

What if this Doctor gets angry at Vincent?
What if they decide to lock him away?
What if these feelings mean I'm getting it too?
What if there's no cure?

Mum is at work, I'm here alone
in this room full of sickness and strangers.
"The boss won't give me time off,
but you're strong, TJ, you can support Vincent..."

Glad someone thinks so
'cause I feel capable as a paralysed snail.
How can I support Vincent
when I can barely support myself?

I've got to be flawless and strong,
got to keep my head on,
support Vincent and Mum,
got to hide the tears -the truth:

I can't help him,
I can't keep doing this,
it's too hard. I think I'm crashing
down the well again.

The world is falling apart,
the walls are breaking down.
All I can see are blank spaces,
all I can hear is rushing feet.

I'm sweating like ice on a hotplate,
shaking like I'm naked in the snow.
Everything's about to come crashing down
when suddenly, a voice breaks through.

"Are you alright there?"
I can't answer, my lips are sewn up.
"It's ok", the voice is gentle,
"you seem to be having a panic attack..."

(2)

Sitting in Doctor Noonan's office
with a mug of hot chocolate
and a foolish smile.
"Good thing I looked for you when I did",
her tone is soft,
the room smells clean.
"I wanted to know how you were going
-psychosis is a big deal for the whole family."

"Am I getting it too?" I blurt,
feeling an odd sense of relief
in finally voicing these words
which have bled through my mind for months.
Doctor Noonan shakes her head,
"I don't think so. However
you do seem rather anxious
-completely understandable for your situation."

"I want Vincent to be healthy,
but I don't want him to die
like Dad because of the drugs..."
Doctor Noonan's eyebrows shoot sky high
as Vincent's jaw hits the deck.
"What are you on about, TJ?"
his voice shakes, "it was a car accident".
"No, it was a heart attack, from the weight gain."

Doctor Noonan gives a knowing nod.
"How long ago did your father pass away?"
"When we were both young... sixteen and a half years."
"Things have changed a lot since then;

better medications have been developed,
and we know more about how to use them.
Your brother and I have just discussed
how he didn't like the weight gain on Zyprexa...

...so we're going to try Risperidal
which usually offers superior results
though there are many, many options
and other factors too -good food and exercise..."
Doctor Noonan's voice warms me
like a campfire on a freezing night.
She tells us how her own sister has bipolar,
but is happy now, running a successful restaurant.

"Is that your sister?" I point to a photo
of Doctor Noonan and a very beautiful woman.
She laughs. "No, that's my partner."
Vincent rolls his eyes,
"TJ's always jumping to conclusions."
Doctor Noonan nods. "I can see that.
Most conclusions are harmless
but some can cause anxiety, even panic attacks..."

...like your concern Vincent would die,
in CBT we'd call that fortune telling."
"What's CBT?"
"A technique for managing upsetting thoughts
-I can give you a book if you'd like."
It's the first time anybody has said it's ok
for me to feel scared about all this,
to share those feelings, even ask for help.

I feel I've been rescued from a deep hole;
there's sun on my skin for the first time in months.
When Mum arrives home in the evening,
eyes puffy, and asks, "How did it go?"
I'm able to smile and stand tall,
put my arm around my brother
and answer, our voices in unison,
"it was hard, but things are gonna be ok."

Episode 14: The Flowering Gums

Summer days pass like fickle girls -all smiles
then gone. Soon school will start again:
I'll be in year twelve, Vincent at uni.
The new medicine seems to be working.
I've got my brother back -but not just that-
we're stronger than ever before.
I'm learning about anxiety
and how to be its master, not its slave.

There are still moments
when the panic rears forth
-a wordless monster with fire for hair
and arms, so many arms:
arms growing out of its arms,
each breaking off into another set
of arms, multiplying like cancers,
stretching out, engulfing...

but the fact is, it has no hands,
no fingers that can touch me.
When I remember this, the arms snap off,
become dust and swirl away;
the fire sizzles to ash
and underneath it all there's no monster
just a beady Chihuahua
which runs yelping to the safety of its kennel.

I'm not a child anymore.
Sometimes freedom slaps me in the face,
leaves me to the mercy of its sidekick
-Responsibility: a looming tank
in shades and a three-piece suit
who stares down at me, cracked lips
bellowing orders. It's reassuring
as a jail sentence.

So many rules and expectations
-agile trapeze artists, swinging high
above me, out of reach.
Am I really supposed to climb
this flimsy rope ladder
they call adulthood?
To swing and turn somersaults
with no training, no net?

The past keeps hanging round me,
not saying anything, just moping, staring
like an uncool school buddy
-I'm not sure I can say friend,
not sure I can trust this pale, ungainly passenger
who dresses in baggy camo
to hide its scarred, misshapen body,
its swamping excess weight.

Beside it stands the future:
a towering, sharp-nosed gangsta
whose bling blinds me
and sour breath implies I'll hafta pay up
-but what? and when? and how?
That leaves me with the present
who doesn't tell too many horror stories
-but mind you, no fairytales either.

Every new day is an outstretched hand;
every morning I wake up and choose
to take it, to walk this varied terrain called life.
This morning, the flowering gums
applied their lipstick smiles,
each vying for kisses from the birds.
I cut this bunch to lay on your grave
because I'll always love and remember you, father.

Episode 15

Part 1: Lights Out!

hehehehehehehehehe

Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

BOOF!

"OW!

What was that for?"

"Be quiet! He's coming..."

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Part 2: Caped Crusaders, Kryptonite and Cake

Vincent's eyes stretch wide as the wingspan of a 747.

"You guys did all this just for me? I...

...I'm stunned. Thank you. I had no idea."

Our lounge room has become a tropical reef
of balloons and streamers.

The walls shake and shimmy with stereo vibrations

"let's get this party started!"

There's enough food to sink a battleship
and best of all, a triple chocolate mud cake
with white chocolate letters:

Happy 19th Birthday Vincent!

Vincent looks a little out of place

-the only one without a costume.

Luckily our mother -aka Wonder Woman-
thinks of everything:

"Go take a look on your bed..."

He returns a moment later,

sharp as a diamond machete

in his new black coat and shades;

only his smile chips the veneer of danger,

reminds me he is not *really* Neo from 'The Matrix'.

His friends from hospital have all made it:

Yianni as Astro Boy,

Stefan as Leonardo -the blue ninja turtle,

Mandy as April O'Neil

and Caroline as Violet from 'The Incredibles'

-the girl who disappears from time to time.
I'm partway between Clark Kent and Superman.
Tall buildings? No worries.
Ordinary life? Not always straightforward...

The night rattles and roars round unexpected corners
like a rollercoaster, spinning loops, ever charging on
and on. Before I know it, the clock says one a.m.
and I'm dancing to Snoop Dogg
with a girl dressed as Sailor Moon.
"Check out those two", she smiles
and motions to Vincent and Caroline
who have found themselves a half-lit corner
in which to lock eyes and link white-knuckled hands.

My stomach drops, but only for a moment.
I'm happy for my brother -and besides
I quite like Sailor Moon.
Her name is Stephanie, she's Yianni's sister;
she explains how Yianni is recovering from anorexia
-not drugs like I first thought-
"but he doesn't like people to know..."
It's worlds away from Vincent's illness,
but as family members we can relate
many shared emotions, ups and downs.

It's like playing a comic-book hero
-two dimensional, bound to the black and white frames
of somebody else's storyboard, the formula everyone expects.
You put on your costume, sprout your catchphrase,
all the standard lines.
You keep your alias secret, your vulnerabilities
secrets. You keep a million secrets,
you live a million lies
-at least I did, for a while there.
So much has changed in such a short time...

Stefan has saved almost enough money to go overseas
and this time Mandy can go too;
Vincent and Caroline are studying on the same campus;
Yianni said yes to cake.
We're all saying yes to tomorrow,
to uncertainty, to challenges, to life.
We don't kid ourselves it'll always be easy,
but we've beaten plenty of villains in our time.
Music wraps round me like a bright red cape,
fruit punch dances on my tongue.
My brother is smiling, my mother laughing out loud;
all the windows are open, this night
an ever-changing canvas
in shades of blue and silver
-everywhere, stars.