

When the pandemic started Billy had moved back in with their parents in Northcote. It seemed to them the obvious decision considering their parents' large, well heated house and deep pockets. Home was warm, safe and comfortable. They tried to remember that their peers were having different experiences out there, with insecure housing and shit, underpaid jobs that either forced them to keep working or took said work away, but the longer the pandemic wore on, and the less they saw of these people, the less they were able to care. They drifted away into the beige blankness of the movie room, into the naturally restricted boomer conversations of their loving parents, into the paws of their family dog, a greyhound called Molly who had been medicated on Xanax for half a decade and who had creamy, wet eyes like marbles.

When they felt guilty they reminded themselves that the government wanted everybody to drift away from one another. Really, they were just doing what they were told. Sometimes this made them feel like a citizen and sometimes it didn't. The opportunity to come to Casino had come up by chance, at the first and last art opening Billy had been to since the hard lockdowns began.

The mood of the openings at this particular Brunswick gallery depended largely on the weather. In regular times, when it was hot, people sprawled on the road like lions in loose, penetrable rings. They drank beer and smoked cigarettes, rolling lazily aside for the cars that only very occasionally slid past. On this evening the road was mostly clear. It was cold. It was a state of emergency. The people stood apart from one another in smaller groups, in a mostly orderly fashion along the pavement, close to the gallery entrance. Some, but notably not all, wore masks. The breath of the unmasked pushed out towards one another like clouds, sometimes meeting and mixing, sometimes passing each other by. Everybody wore puffer jackets or long coats, sometimes paired with matching scarves, wrapped tightly around their necks like nooses. Billy knew the scarves, they were designed by the same artist, a beautiful and unnervingly tall girl called Mia, and came in two colours, deep purple or navy. They said something on them, though the words were always creased, or hidden by hair, or the strap of a bag, and so Billy was never able to make out exactly what it was they said.

The show was made up of a series of paintings by two artists. Nia was one of them, which was why they were attending. The other artist was somebody Billy didn't know, someone by the name of Guy. Billy couldn't help but wonder, with a slight hint of paranoia, what this Guy's relationship was to Nia.

The paintings to the right were tall but slender works made up of yellows, pinks and blacks. They knew immediately that these belonged to Nia. Because of their blotchiness they

reminded Billy of Rorschach pictures, dreamy and subconscious, quite dark but very calm. Alternately, the paintings to the left, Guy's paintings, had a strange sort of panicked circus-like energy to them that was frightening. One of the works was so comically elongated it spread from floor to ceiling, leaving barely a millimetre in between, which made Billy think it had been made especially for this gallery. The thought of this custom canvas surprised them, because it was a very small unfunded gallery that they knew didn't make anyone any money.

They approached a very young person with oily black hair for an overly full cup of cheap red wine in a plastic cup of such poor quality that it bent beneath their fingertips as they gripped it. It was cash only. The youth watched them fumble with their phone coolly from behind a N95. It seemed since the pandemic people had gotten younger while Billy had only gotten much, much older. It didn't really bother them, it was just interesting.

Outside the gallery, Billy pulled down their mask in order to sip their wine, which tasted not unpleasantly like cold maple syrup and berries, pulled it back up, and skimmed the crowd. They couldn't see Nia anywhere. There was that Bridey with her even longer-than-ever hair. They remembered with a twinge of regret how she had once rejected their offer to go home with them from a party. And over there was that girl who had famously and drunkenly tried to play that prank on a friend involving a baseball bat and a bush. They couldn't remember the name of the prank-gone-wrong-girl, and come to think of it they weren't so sure Bridey's name *was* Bridey, and not Bridget or Bianca or some other B name, which suddenly presented them with the fear that they wouldn't be able to remember anybody's name, not even those who they had actually had good natural conversations with prior to the pandemic.

The B was talking to someone they couldn't quite make out, and seeing Billy looking near her she waved them lazily over, flicking her heavy layered hair over her shoulder, where it settled like a feather boa. As Billy came closer they were able to recognise both the face and remember the name of the person B was speaking to, and put them together to form a person. Billy had once done an online quiz that had confirmed that they had a strong preference for other transgender people. Tree was sly and funny and wore clothes that Billy had never been able to tell were cool or not, like those cheap, loose polyester K-mart singlets, which were always aqua or pink, which she wore with jackets with wooden corks for buttons. Tonight under her Birkenstocks she was wearing fluffy woollen socks with different coloured baubles attached to them like swollen ticks, as well as stockings, a long boho-like brown

dress, and a black puffer jacket. She also wore a very ineffective but stylish black fabric mask.