

## NATALIE SUTHERLAND

### *Glass Stars*

We both lie on the roof of his apartment building in the city's west, watching the stars. Below us, dots of street lights sparkle in the dark view and he tells me that if you slowly tilt your head up, it all merges together, encompasses you, a place of stars. "They look like they're made of glass," he says, sipping at his beer, "like something broke in the sky."

I smile contemplatively, staring upwards and think back to the last time we sat up here together. He had just gotten back from Adelaide and I hadn't seen him in a long time, almost a year. He rang me up and told me he was home, asked if I wanted to come and see him. I said that I did and left my house quietly and caught the train over.

His hair had grown much longer, down to the middle of his back and he'd gotten another tattoo on his arm, the fifth. I can count all his tattoos, I know exactly where they all are, why he got them, how old he was. I don't think I've ever learnt so much about anyone from their tattoos.

He has one on his stomach, a small red one just beneath his scar, my favourite. It is the face of a girl, of me, I think. Her arms are wrapped around herself and she is looking up. I kiss her sometimes, but it always troubles me that I can never really know what she is gazing at from her place on his skin. And when I look at her, she doesn't look back.

He takes another sip of his beer and passes it to me. I've never seen him drink anything else. It tastes just like him, like it is him, in a strange way. Once in a while, when I'm out with my friends, I have a beer and close my eyes and remember what he's like.

"Do you want to go back in?", he asks. I smile gently and tell him that I do. He finishes the last of his beer and pulls me to my feet. He holds my hand and we go back down the stairs and when he opens his front door, he lets me walk in first.

Silently, we move into the bedroom, undress and lie down together.

He likes to be above, like the sky, his face buried between my neck and the pillow, muffling his groans. Sometimes I feel his tears as they fall down on my face and quietly, I cry too.

There is a music box with a glass lid in the shape of dome, like the ones that astronomers study the stars from. He bought it in Los Angeles for an old girlfriend of his that left it behind when she walked out. He keeps it for me on the dresser and plays it when I come over. "Why do you keep it?" I remember asking him. He liked the tune, he said. It reminded him of LA. "Then how come you came back?" I said.

"The stars look different there."

The dome is divided into five pieces by five lines of silver paint that join together in the centre. Sometimes, when I'm in bed at night, or in the shower, its tune falls into my mind, a sweet, minor melody that I've memorised from my moments with him.

He presses his forehead against mine and closes his eyes, kisses me lightly on the lips. I feel myself inside of him, can see out of him, see the stars. Through five glass fragments, they glint in the dark sky. He starts to move more intensely.

The stars seems to change over me, the patterns shifting in each piece of the glass, each piece of him. Revolving ... swelling ... changing ... resplendently, wonderfully. The music box plays louder. If I close my eyes and breathe, I can feel what it is like to be him, I can see myself beneath the stars, looking up, crying.

After it's over, he goes to sleep on his side, his arm tucked around my waist and I gently close my music box so it doesn't wake him.

I brush his long hair back from his face and gently touch my favourite tattoo. He stirs a little. I sit up and lower my feet to the floor where there is a shattered drinking glass. Softly, I walk across the room and when I step onto the cold bathroom tiles and turn on the light, I realise it has cut the soles of my feet.

I turn on the shower, hot, and climb in. The water falls lightly on my skin, like rain, like stars from the sky. In my head, I can hear the music from the dome and I sing to myself, but only in bits and pieces. I stay in the shower until the water has washed all the blood from my feet.

When I get out, I put on a nightgown and a pair of slippers and go into the lounge-room.

The coffee table is still on its side, the bottle of beer it was holding has soaked into the rug and his stereo lies in the corner, smashed and dented. The things from his shelf, books and ashtrays, CDs and old 21st gifts, are all scattered and broken, a tragic mess. Something he keeps inside had upset him again and I knew that when he called me, he had been crying. There is glass all over the floor, showered over it in fragments and stars. "He just gets upset," I explained to his mother once, "and he breaks things." But she wouldn't listen. When she left and slammed the door behind her, I almost burst into tears.

I bend over and pull the coffee table back on its feet. The beer has added a stain to the carpet and I pat it down with an old towel, trying to absorb what's left. I pick up his stereo and push it back onto the shelf and place all his books and CDs around it.

He comes out of the bedroom and stands in the doorway, naked and watches me appreciatively. I sigh at him and smile. "Go back to bed," I say softly and he does.

I kneel down and slowly begin to sweep up the glass with a dustpan and broom. An array of "clinks" sound discordantly as they are swept up. My feet are stinging again. I pause for a moment and look towards the bedroom. I can hear a tune, inside and out. He has opened my music box again, for me. I smile and sweep, an amazing melody with an accompaniment of glass. It is late now, the stars are closer.

Before the sun comes up, he drives me home, it's not that far. I ask him if he wants to come in but he only smiles and touches my cheek, pulls me in to kiss him. "Thank you," he whispers and kisses me again on the forehead.

I step out of the car and watch him as he drives away. It is still dark and the street lights are still out. I can see them for miles from the view on my driveway. I lie down on the cold cement and look up at the stars and lose myself inside them.

*Natalie Sutherland*