

# Home

Short Fiction by Dallas John Baker

**Affiliation:** University of Southern Queensland

## Author biography

Dallas John Baker is a Senior Lecturer in writing, editing and publishing at the University of Southern Queensland. He has published dozens of scholarly articles and creative works, including poetry, short stories, memoir essays and travel writing. Both his creative and scholarly writing have been published in journals such as *TEXT*, *New Writing*, *Writing in Practice*, *Lodestar Quarterly* and *Polari Journal*, among others.

His writing has also appeared in numerous book anthologies, including: *Dumped* (Black Inc, 2000); *Bend, But Don't Shatter* (Soft Skull Press, 2004); *When You're a Boy* (Gay eBooks, 2011); *Offshoot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice* (UWA Press, 2018); *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and *Sensual Travels* (Bruno Gmuender, 2013).

Dallas has also published a number of short scripts in various respected journals, including 'Bedside Manners' and 'I'm Going to Set You to Boiling, Baby', both in *TEXT*, and 'Bath Party' in *Polari Journal*. A number of his scripts have been produced, most recently *Ghosts of Leigh* was staged at the historic Empire Theatre in Toowoomba (February 2018).

Dallas is convenor of the Scriptwriting as Research Symposium and a special issues editor of *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, the peak journal for the Creative Writing discipline in Australasia. His most recent books include *America Divine: Travels in the Hidden South* (Phosphor Books, 2011), *The Tree: Voodoo, Murder & Secret Love* (LineWright, 2016), *Ghosts of Leigh and Other Plays* (LineWright, 2018), *Publishing Studies: Research, Pedagogy and Practice* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, forthcoming 2019) and, as co-editor, *Recovering History through Fact and Fiction: Forgotten Lives* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) and *Publishing & Culture* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, forthcoming 2019). Dallas's writing has been favourably reviewed in *Text* and *Lambda Literary Review*, among others.

## Contact

University of Southern Queensland

West Street, Toowoomba, Queensland, 4350

Ph: 61 477 994 672

Email: [dallas.baker@usq.edu.au](mailto:dallas.baker@usq.edu.au)

*Darling Downs, Winter, 1982*

Marc watched, disturbed, as his mother steered the car with one hand and wound down the window with the other, angling her face to let the cold air dry the tears that rolled freely down her cheeks. They just kept coming and she'd grown tired of wiping them away. It was one of the saddest things he'd seen in his whole life. Even though he was only eleven years old, he was sure he could live to a hundred and not see anything that sad ever again.

The road ahead of them sparkled in the morning sun like a strip of black diamonds. 'Holy Mother Mary', Marc muttered to himself in the backseat, 'it's beautiful here'; even though he knew that the sparkle was just the glitter of millions of tiny shards of glass from broken headlights embedded in the bitumen. The highway curved between low hills blanketed in wild grass, separating the paddocks on one side from those on the other with a glittering, dark slash. The paddocks stretched back in every direction under a rich blue sky. Every now and then, far off in the distance, a lonely farmhouse sat on the horizon, watched over by a lightning-struck gum tree. There's always a burnt out gumtree, Marc thought, always.

Their black Holden Premier rode on the sparkling blacktop almost silently, like a sleek hearse, the noise of the engine dissipated by that empty landscape. With the window down, the temperature in the car dropped quickly. His mother, Anne, seemed not to notice, but her fingers were blue when she turned on the radio and cranked up the volume. 'I love this song,' she said quietly, still crying as she tapped her fingers on the wheel to *Don't You Want Me* by The Human League. Marc's grandmother, asleep in the passenger seat, grumbled without waking at the increased noise. She tugged at the buttons on her cardigan in her sleep and pressed herself deeper into the white seat, as if trying to sink into the leather and away from the noise and cold. Her medication made it so that she could sleep through almost anything. She'd only roused once so far, waking with a yelp just as they crossed the border and muttering one word over and over again: Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead. Anne had pulled to the side of the road and patiently settled her back down, saying, 'Quiet mum,

quiet now.’ It took twenty minutes before they were on their way again, the black tires of the Premier almost silently spinning on the glittering asphalt.

In the back seat directly behind his mother, Marc was only able to see the top of her head; her blonde hair haloed by the morning sun. The cold air brought the scent of her back to him – a supermarket-bought perfume mixed with discount shampoo. The smell reminded him of their bathroom back in Sydney, a room he’d never see again.

Wearing a white cable-knit jumper and maroon jeans, his mother looked stylish in her own subdued way. Marc was dressed similarly in red corduroys and a cream cardigan. People said they looked alike, Marc and his mother, even though Marc was a boy. Because he loved her, Marc played on that and tried to dress as much like her as possible, which was not the smartest move for a boy already bullied for being bookish, wordy.

‘Look out there, Marc.’ Anne motioned with her head out to broad skies and acres of golden grass. ‘Isn’t it beautiful?’

‘Yes.’ Marc had to raise his voice over the wind flooding in the window and the noise of the radio. ‘It’s lovely, very picturesque.’

‘What, honey?’

‘Picturesque. It’s an adjective. It means beautiful, like a picture.’ Marc was always explaining words to her. Unlike his father, who loved words, his mother was awkward with them. She treated them like spiders she’d swallowed in the night; unpleasant things scuttling inside her mouth, desperate to get out and away from her.

‘Oh, yes, it is like a picture. Like a picture from years ago.’ She gazed back out over the landscape and swallowed a small sob, shaking her head from side to side to help the wind dry her tears.

Anne was going home, back to Toowoomba, back to her childhood home, the house Marc's grandmother still owned that had been unoccupied, abandoned, for a decade. Whether Marc and his grandmother liked it or not, she was taking them with her. Marc had never been there before. He'd lived in Sydney his whole life. His mother had moved there before he was born, when she married his father, but she never felt she belonged there. And now she never would. Just two weeks ago Marc's father and twin sister, Stevie, were killed in a head-on collision with a drunk driver. It was a Friday night, around six. They were on their way back from getting take-away Chinese food. Stevie loved Chicken Chow Mein.

Everything Marc knew about his mother's hometown he learnt from the back seat of the car on that long, sad drive. What he'd learned was this: Toowoomba sits on the rim of the Great Dividing Range, on the border between two very different landscapes. On the range, endless undulating grasslands—deep-rooted in black soil—spread to the west, to the very edge of the desert. Below the range, cultivated farmland fills the river valleys all the way to the sea.

The direct route from Sydney follows the east coast then cuts straight west from Brisbane and mounts the range immediately below the town. Going that way, the Warrego Highway cuts through the broad, cultivated Lockyer valley and then rises steeply up the range to emerge right in the midst of hundred year old weatherboard houses and shady streets lined with camphor laurel and plane trees. They didn't go the direct route. Instead, they veered inland straight after crossing the Queensland border and headed for Cunningham's Gap, the original pass over the range into the high plains beyond. Going that way made the trip longer, but Marc's mother wanted him to have his first glimpse of the countryside she knew so well.

To reach the Gap, they passed through the patchwork farmland of the Fassifern Valley, with its perfect squares of a dozen shades of cultivated green alternating with pastures of rippling yellow grass. Here and there, breaking up the endless green, were patches of black where the ground lay fallow, allowing the rich volcanic soil to rest under the sun in preparation for another season. With Anne's window rolled down, the fertile aroma

of those fallow fields filled the car. Leaning back into the firmness of the Premier's white leather seats, Marc took long, deep breaths, drawing the strength of the ground into himself.

The Fassifern valley ends abruptly at the foot of the Great Dividing Range. From there they took the road that winds up through Cunningham's Gap for a slow 15 miles of eucalypt forest before reaching the cusp of the range and the Darling Downs beyond. For Marc, coming out of the shade of the wooded slopes into the brighter light of the Downs was like opening his eyes from a pleasant dream to find himself in an even better one. The Downs stretched out before them beneath a broad sky; an expanse of low, rolling hills and fields of butter-hued wildgrass, barley and wheat. The farms up there were much larger than those in the river valleys below, spreading from the road to the horizon, broken up now and then by large paddocks of stalky grass. Flocks of sheep and Hereford cattle shared those paddocks, gathered like unlikely friends under the scarce shade thrown by tall, grey-trunked gum trees.

Anne turned off the highway as soon as she could, taking them down crisscrossing dirt roads that cut between open pastures and ploughed fields. As the miles clicked over, she occasionally stopped crying long enough to point out a landmark, or tell Marc something about the scenery that was passing by the window. They coasted past windmills that pumped water from far underground, and rusty old woolsheds long since abandoned that seemed to still echo with the bleating of sheep. They crossed rickety wooden bridges over winding creeks that flowed westwards into the sluggish Condamine and Maranoa rivers; rivers that Anne said took the water and the fertile mud of the Downs southward, where it enriched pastures in far-distant places.

'When I was a kid,' Anne said, 'I hunted for yabbies in those creeks.' She scanned the muddy banks as if to find an echo of herself there. The yabby holes in the red mud were like eyes looking back at her from the past.

Seeing the Darling Downs through his mother's eyes made the landscape seem both strange and beautiful to Marc, perhaps all the more beautiful because his heart was just as broken as hers, his senses wide open as a

result. Strange because he felt he should know this place, it was the outer terrain of his mother's inner being. Should it not feel like home to him too? When Toowoomba finally came into view, it wasn't what he'd expected. He wound down his own window and watched it grow larger as the Premier carried them over the last low rise before town. Approaching it from behind, Toowoomba appeared to huddle close to the very edge of the range, as though afraid of the vast downs that began right on its back doorstep. It looked a leafy, quiet place; not a small town, yet not a very big one either. Green and park-like, it seemed a world away from the golden, rolling hills they'd just driven through. As they dropped speed and came to the first few houses, Anne peered back at Marc through the driver's side mirror.

'Toowoomba's up pretty high,' she said. 'I think it's more than 2,200 feet above sea level.' She smiled softly, keen to tell her son about the place where she grew up. 'The winters can be really cold, a lot colder than it is now, with biting westerly winds. It even snows here sometimes, but only once or twice every hundred years.'

Marc pictured drifts of snow landing over that park-like place, and settling in heavy mounds back behind them on the endless Downs.

'People come from interstate to see the parks and gardens,' she added, 'and the historic homes. There are some beautiful old houses.'

Marc peered out the window, wanting to see for himself what those interstate visitors came all that way to see. Toowoomba looked to be both a typical small town and like something transported from an altogether different place. On the whole, the houses were mostly timber and mostly old. There were a lot of parks and gardens, much more than in most towns, but it was different on a deeper level – the air was thinner and cooler, and there was a strange, penetrating quiet.

'It hasn't changed much,' Anne said, glancing down each street as they passed by. 'There are more people, more cars, but that's about all. It's still the same old town.' She pointed to the large trees lining many

of the streets, saying, ‘Those big old trees give really deep shade in summer. Even though we’re high up, it can still get hot.’

Marc found this hard to imagine with the window down in the middle of winter, his cheeks burning from the cold.

‘In the spring,’ she continued, ‘jacaranda flowers carpet the streets and get stuck to the soles of your shoes. Every time you put down your feet, you feel like you’re walking on pillows.’ Her voice was so full of the memory of those flowers that Marc could almost feel them under his own feet. He pressed his heels into the floor of the car, imagining that it was carpeted with purple flowers. ‘Then,’ she said, ‘in the late autumn, a lot of these street trees change their leaves to yellow and gold and red. It’s like something from the other side of the world, not tropical Queensland.’ Another small smile formed on her lips. The thought of autumn leaves seemed to ease her pain a little. Before they came to the first intersection it was clear to Marc that his mother deeply loved this place. In her heart, she’d never moved away.

As they came to the main street in the center of town, Marc remembered that his father hadn’t liked Toowoomba at all. He’d thought it was stuck in the past, that it was insular and backward-looking. The main street certainly looked like it hadn’t changed for years, maybe decades. On either side of the street were long rows of brick and plaster buildings, all two stories with Italianate facades and post-supported awnings.

Marc’s father liked to make fun of those old buildings, calling them ruins, but really it wasn’t the town that bothered him, but Anne’s feelings for it. He knew that Toowoomba was a competitor for her love and he couldn’t quite work out how he could compete against a whole town, her whole childhood. Because of the drunk driver, it was a competition he’d finally lost.

‘Toowoomba is an odd old place,’ Marc’s dad had said once. ‘Full of “characters”, so full of them it’s home to Bailey Henderson Hospital, one of the largest asylums in Queensland. That’s why your mother’s family were so at home there,’ he’d joked, winking. ‘It’s a run-down old town, kind of tired, like one of its

Carnival of Flowers queens at the end of a long night – her pretty make-up smudged, her up-style coming loose, sash lost, one high-heel long gone. Yeah, that’s exactly what Toowoomba is like, like a show queen at the end of a big night, disheveled, but doing her best to hang on to her dignity.’ Marc wound the window back up, shutting out the town that had come between his parents.

The memory of his father, the clever way he spoke, made Marc’s chest hurt; as though the echo of his voice were tugging at his heart muscle, urging Marc to follow him into the grave. But Marc couldn’t follow him, no matter how much he missed him. Who would his mother have for company then? Just his grandmother, who was medicated most of the time and not good company at all. Not that his mother was good company herself, not anymore. She barely spoke and when Marc tried to talk to her she often accused him of being strange, of using big words just to show off. She wasn’t like his father, who didn’t find his way of speaking strange at all. His father had loved words and books as much as Marc did. He understood Marc’s fascination with language. Who would Marc talk to now that his father was gone? He could barely breathe when he thought about that.

‘Here we are,’ Anne said, jolting Marc out of his thoughts. ‘I know it’s not much,’ she added quickly as she parked the car out the front of her childhood home, ‘but we’re just going to have to make do.’

Marc looked out the window at the house and, shocked, mumbled, ‘Holy Mother Mary, it’s a total dump’. He absent-mindedly scratched at a tight feeling in his chest. His grandmother’s house had been empty and neglected ever since she’d left to live with them in Sydney, just after he and his twin sister were born. It sat in the deep shade of large camphor laurels behind a leaning picket fence and a rusty gate. It was only slightly better than a shack. A small weatherboard cottage on low stumps, its paint had long since peeled away, leaving the exposed boards cracked and grey. The corrugated iron roof was painted red and had darkened in places with rust. The redbrick chimney had a slight lean to it, as though it were about to topple to the ground. Some of the windows were broken, sealed up with thick plastic and tape. The rickety wooden stairs went only half way up, the remaining steps having long since collapsed.



Marc sought his mother's face in the rear-view mirror. She was gazing at the house as though it were a palace. He turned back for another look at it. All he saw was a falling-down shack with an overgrown yard. He guessed you needed her eyes, her memories, to see it the way she did.

'Holy Mother Mary, are you serious, mum?' he said, already missing their nice brick house back in Sydney, even though it was only a rental and now full of painful memories.

'What do you mean?' She didn't turn to look at him, knowing, Marc supposed, that if she did she'd see the look of disgust on his face.

'We can't live here. Look at it. It's derelict, which means a falling down dump—'

'Just stop!' she shouted, making herself flinch just as much as Marc. She calmed herself. 'I know what *derelict* means, Marc. We'll make it comfortable. Besides, home is where the heart is.'

'That is a platitude and an all-too-common misjudgment,' Marc mumbled.

She huffed, feeling vexed, Marc assumed, by the compound adjective. 'Marc,' she warned, 'that's enough.' She opened the door and got out of the car, taking a deep breath of the thin air and stretching. After a minute, she turned and smiled at her son, his use of the compound adjective now forgiven. She tapped on the back window, so Marc rolled it down again and she leaned in.

'We're going to be happy here,' she said, so close to Marc's face that he could see the salty trails where tears had dried on her cheeks. 'Really happy.'

Marc smiled back at her, feigning agreement but thinking, I really doubt that. His grandmother chose that moment to mumble in her sleep, 'Dead, they're all dead, dead, dead, dead.'

Marc smirked at the absurdity of it all, at the long, sad journey, at the dilapidated house, at his medicated grandmother. The smirk died on his mouth when his mother stepped away from the car and whispered to herself.

‘We *will* be dead, if this doesn’t work out. I’d rather kill us all than go back to—’ She stopped when she realized what she was saying and that Marc was listening. She forced a smile—a wan, guilty thing—then turned and walked toward the ruined house; her golden hair catching the morning light and shining, just for a moment, as if on fire.