

The Canberra Anomaly

by Amelia Paech

“I feel like some people need to learn the value of peace and quiet,” I said into the void of my bedroom, as my family crashed around downstairs. They’re getting ready for my older sister’s graduation dinner, getting pretty or whatever.

I rose from my bed with a sigh, gently placing my hardcover copy of *The Lord of the Rings* on the side table. I had already promised Mum that I’d leave my books at home, in exchange for this brief moment of alone time. The price of solitude is steep in this house.

As I heard footsteps in the hall outside my room, I moved to open my door before Josie can knock on it with the subtlety of a jackhammer. Mum tells me she’s in her ‘loud phase’. Whatever that means.

“Mum says you gotta get downstairs Maaaa-li!” Josie said, before turning on her heel to run down the stairs. After making sure my door clicks shut behind me, I followed her at a more reasonable pace.

“Mali, what are you wearing?” Dad asked when I reach the bottom of the stairs. I looked up at him and down at my clothes. They’re clean, unwrinkled, and not scratchy. My best clothes. I informed Dad of this. He sighed and continued with what he was doing.

My other little sister, Emma, rounded the corner and threw clothing in my direction. “Mum says wear this.” I picked it up off the floor and dusted it off. A purple dress with lots of lace detailing. And *sequins*. Perhaps I could take my book in exchange for wearing this. Not likely.

Once everyone’s ready, we piled into the car to go to Nan and Pa’s place. Emma’s elbow dug into my ribs from her middle seat and I pressed myself against the car door to get away. The detailing on my dress made my armpits itch.

I tried to retreat to The Shire in my head. Plenty of time to read and a cosy hobbit hole to ignore the Sackville-Bagginses in. Perfection.

As soon as the car had stopped, I'm out. I beelined for the backyard, through the old gate. I was struck with immediate regret for my swift entrance, as I was swarmed with hugs and welcomes. My older sister, Lucy, was already there, soaking up all the graduation glory. I saw my brother, Theo, over in the corner too, back from uni for the week.

Though I assumed that the attention is sufficiently diverted to my siblings, I was soon proven wrong. A couple of aunts lingered nearby, after the initial onslaught of hugs.

"You must be so proud of Lucy, getting into uni. Have you decided what you're doing after next year Mali?"

"Lucy studying biology, Theo becoming a chemist, you could be a family of scientists!"

"What do you like doing, Mali? What are you good at in school?"

In my efforts to conjure an answer, my mind went blank. I attempted to find the box in my mind where the information might be hidden but had no luck. Desperation setting in, I struggled to even form a sentence. Why were there suddenly *so many questions*?

My hands moved towards the sequins on my dress, anxious to get my fingernails under something. The conversation continued as a mumble in the background. I closed my eyes tightly and tried to retreat from the pressure. I fixated on the questions, trying to answer at least one, before blurting out "English!"

The room went silent, so I mumbled, "I am good at English at school." For a moment, I was enveloped by the silence. It pressed into my sides and I huddled up to myself against the pressure. Then, I was suddenly surrounded by new noises. Frowning, I slowly opened my eyes.

I was standing in a large room, full of people. Very tall people. Trying to avoid eye-contact, I looked up and saw silvery wave-shaped lights hanging from the high roof and ramps going in all different directions. I took an involuntary step backward and bump into a pillar. Turning around, my eyes were assaulted by a mess of distorted blue and white checkerboard patterns. I turned away, resisting the urge to throw up. Not good.

Where am I? How did I get here? I twisted left and right, searching for something familiar. No luck. Where did the party go? Maybe if I closed my eyes, I'd go back. Nope. I searched around again, looking for something like a bathroom sign or an exit. The people around me were so tall, I still couldn't see anything. I had to move.

I headed towards one of the window-covered walls, watched my step and hoped that no one would try to talk to me. The people crowded around me, distorted and suffocating. I felt my heart beating faster. Fight or flight. Always flight. I followed the wall and found a way out. Finally.

People pushed past me on their way out. I squinted my eyes against the sun and covered my ears to escape the sound of traffic. So loud. The signs deemed the building 'Questacon'. Nothing I'd ever heard of before. The sun and the sounds closed in on me. I scratched at the skin near the lace and sequins of my dress. Everything was pain. I dropped to my knees, landing on the edge of my dress and breaking the forward fall with my hands. My eyes watered. It was too much. I curled up. I closed my eyes.

A light tapping on my arm brought me back. I opened one eye cautiously, then the other, sitting up. I was in the same place, but it had changed. My surroundings were distorted by mist that has formed and the area was empty of people. It was just me and the source of the tapping – a magpie. We stared at each other for a moment.

“Hello.”

I jumped, looking left and right for the source of the greeting. Focused on the magpie again.

“Don’t be alarmed, new human! It’s me, the magpie.”

Definitely a dream. Maybe I fainted at the party or something. I asked the magpie for life-changing wisdom, so I could hopefully wake back up again sooner. The magpie squawked and it sounded very much like a laugh.

“This isn’t a dream, young human. You’ve wandered into Canberra.”

Not possible. Canberra isn’t real. I glanced around, perhaps there was a portal back into the waking world. I don’t much like dream worlds that pretend they’re real. I got to my feet, and tried my best to ignore the talking magpie, as I put my arms out in front of me and searched the air for a way out.

After what seemed like hours, I came to the conclusion that I was stuck here. I turned back to the magpie, who had followed me around patiently. Asked for its name, as if that would make anything better.

“You can’t pronounce my magpie name, unfortunately. But other humans have called me ‘Grubb’ before I could talk, and I’ve admittedly become fond of the name.”

I scrunched up my nose. Personally, I would have chosen something more poetic. I told it my name was Mali and asked it again why I’m here.

“You’re only the second tourist to pass through here, so your guess is probably as good as mine. I’d be happy to show you around though if you’d like?”

I sat down on the edge of the concrete path and told him that I’d think about it. While I was in a relatively calm state, I decided to really take in my surroundings.

The ‘Questacon’ building that I had just come from was covered in white tile, which shimmered between colours like a holographic picture on a children’s book. Looking through the windows, I saw bright décor amongst the several ramps leading to upper levels. Outside, I

was surrounded by natural and man-made wonders. Various trees of rich shades, with branches curling in abnormal directions, alongside abstract statues that managed to reflect the feel of the trees. The mist blurred my vision further out, but I could see the outline of another building a short distance away.

It was so big and strange, I found that I had curled back up into a ball. Grubb was still nearby and tilted his head at me.

“You’re not like the other tourist.” He says.

I told him every human is different. Perhaps all magpies are the same.

“Fascinating!”

I played with the lace hem of my dress. Once I had determined that Grubb wasn’t going to say anything else, I asked him when I can go back home. He clicked his beak at me. I frowned, wondering what I had said wrong.

“The other tourist didn’t want to go home. In fact, I had to force her back. Don’t you want to explore?”

I shook my head.

“But this is the Canberra of legend! Are you not even a bit curious?”

I looked down into my lap. Was there something wrong with wanting to return to familiarity?

“Huh. I didn’t think this would take much convincing. No matter, you should come for the tour anyway, then I’ll find a way to get you back, deal?”

After everything that had happened today, that was probably the best deal I could get. I stood and brushed myself off, disturbing sequins and lace which grated across my skin and caused my whole body to shiver. Just as I was about to ask Grubb for a change of clothes, I found that I was already wearing my best outfit from earlier – loose shirt, jeans, and sneakers. I started to follow Grubb again, swinging my arms gratefully against the soft fabric.

Recalling the crowds that I had met when I first appeared here, I was suddenly struck by the way our footsteps echoed off the path. Looking around, it seemed that we were the only two living things here. I felt odd, trusting and following a magpie, and the utter emptiness of the world put a pit in my stomach that I couldn't escape. I didn't want to be here. I needed to get out. Let me out. My body became too heavy, I fell to my knees.

“Are you ill, Mali? Should I get help?”

I shook my head, staring at the ground. I focused on my breathing.

Once I was in control again, I asked Grubb if he knew where all the people have gone.

“To be honest, I'm not entirely sure where you put them.”

Where I put them?

“But I can find someone to bring them back, if you want them back?”

I considered the idea. I had never particularly enjoyed being around people. They all just seemed very different from me and I often misunderstood them. Yet the absence of people in this world was unnerving and I found myself wishing for the background hum of people talking again.

Rising to my feet, I nodded at Grubb and asked him where we have to go.

“Well, you have to go back into Questacon. There's someone in there that can help.”

I froze. Grubb wanted me to go back in? But I hated it in there, my brain couldn't process it. And what if there were people hiding in there? I thought they would be waiting to jump out and scare me like my siblings do. Perhaps that's why Grubb wanted me in there. He was playing a game with me. Well, I wasn't interested in playing. I told Grubb that I didn't want to go back in.

“But you must! The people of Canberra are depending on you.” He says.

I asked him why he couldn't do it.

“Oh... I’m afraid I’m banned from Questacon. I went in there before I could talk and caused quite a scene. I fear it will always be etched in my memory.” Grubb lowered his head.

I understood. Social convention is difficult to navigate at times, I couldn’t imagine what it would’ve been like for a standard magpie. With a new, but weak, level of resolve, I asked Grubb where I needed to go.

“Go up the ramp and find Gallery 3. You should find someone in there that can help us.”

I moved cautiously toward the Questacon entrance, wary of any surprises that might lie ahead. The empty foyer echoed with the sound of my footsteps and I tried to tread lighter. Doing my best to ignore making eye contact with the nausea pillars, I made my way to the ramp and up to the floor with the galleries.

As I located Gallery 3, I could hear the quiet hum of electricity in the room. I took slow steps and made sure my head swivelled across the room frequently. I’d learnt that that was the best way to win laser tag, so it worked in keeping me focused on finding Grubb’s friend. I approached a cage that appeared to contain several Tesla coils.

As I approached, the exhibit suddenly activated, and the coils fired their lightning. I jumped back and bumped into something. Turns out, it was actually a someone, and that someone grabbed me and held me, pushing me back towards the coils. I tried to struggle and scream, but my body was weak, and my throat was dry. My captor was unyielding, as she pushed my face up against the cage.

Tears streamed down my face. Why was this happening? My legs gave way, but my captor held me up. They pulled me back from the cage slightly and the lightning from the coils stopped. I blinked the tears from my eyes and tried to gain my footing again but was forced to my knees.

“How did you get to Canberra?” a high-pitched voice shrieked into my ear, drawing a fresh set of tears from my eyes.

“Tell me! You don’t belong here!” my captor continued.

I tried to cover my ears but found that my hands had been tied behind me. My breathing quickened. All of my instincts told me to curl up into a ball, so that is what my mind did. It curled up inside itself, as my body couldn’t.

The captor let out a ground-shaking shriek and a bright flash of light blinded me, followed quickly by a loud crackle. The coil lightning had begun again, brighter and louder than before. My captor pushed me roughly to the ground and held me there. I could feel the electricity from the coils moving towards me, ready to strike. I closed my eyes tight and prepared myself for pain.

“Wait! Stop, Your Greatness!”

I recognised the voice but, in my fear-addled mind, I couldn’t place it. Though the electricity from the lightning continued to crackle, it didn’t seem to get any closer.

“WHAT?” shrieked my captor.

“I have made a mistake. This girl is not the one you want.”

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the light behind my eyelids dimmed dramatically and I gently coaxed my eyes to open. I couldn’t see in the dim light but that didn’t stop me from trying to look around.

As my vision slowly came back, I could see a young woman talking to a bird. A magpie! Grubb had come into Questacon after all. I wanted to go over to him and beg him to take me home. My voice was still dry and scratchy like sandpaper. I hoped that I could move again, now that I couldn’t see anyone holding me down. However, I found myself to be just as stuck as I was before. I could do nothing but move my eyes around and scream inside my head.

Eventually Grubb looked towards me, then the young woman flicked her hand lazily at me. The tension in my body was released and I curled up into a ball, sobbing uncontrollably. I had almost *died*.

I looked over to Grubb and the woman through my tears. They were still talking, but I couldn't hear them. The woman stamped her foot and Grubb bird-hopped backwards. She turned and left the gallery.

“Hurry now, Mali,” Grubb called to me. “She won't be gone for long.”

My arms shook as I struggled to push myself to my feet. When I was standing, my legs wobbled, and my head spun. I had never felt like this before and I never wanted to again. Leaning on walls and displays, I staggered to the door and followed Grubb down the ramp.

Once we had escaped the foyer, I began to feel my strength returning. My limbs stopped trembling and my balance became much steadier. Grubb took flight to set the pace in front of me. I quickened to a light jog to keep up and asked him where we were going. I hoped that he would tell me that I could go home. Unfortunately, I wasn't so lucky.

“We're going to The Know's library. Your ex-captor's powers can't reach us there.”

At that moment, I recalled two things. First Grubb had sent me into Questacon to find someone in Gallery 3, where I was subsequently captured. And secondly, Grubb had been adamant that he was banned and couldn't possibly go with me. I stopped on the spot, ready to ask all of my questions, but was hit with a wave of force from behind.

My arm scraped painfully on the concrete, as I landed and was propelled forward onto my forearm. I bite back a scream and quickly got up again. Grubb had fallen to the ground ahead of me and I scooped him up as I started to run again. I felt a pit in my stomach and shivered. My former captor would not be so lenient if she caught me again.

We reached a small fountain, set in front of a building that seemed to be producing mist. As I set Grubb down and approached, I saw a figure emerging from the mist. It let out a low caw and Grubb answered with a call of his own.

I watched as the shape in the mist became a large crow. It appeared to be slightly dishevelled, but otherwise seemed trustworthy enough. But, then again, I thought that I could trust Grubb not to lead me into danger too.

“What brings you to The Know’s library, children?” The crow said, in a low voice that coursed through my body, sending shivers up my spine.

“We wish to see The Know, so my friend can bring back the Canberrans that she has hidden,” Grubb replied.

The crow clicked his beak and gestured behind himself with one of his dark wings. Grubb nodded and quickly walked forward, disappearing into the mist between two of the massive stone pillars. The crow cawed and took off, leaving me to stare into the mist.

A feeling of unease overtook my whole body and reminded me of the capture that I had left behind. Anxious to avoid that pain again, I moved to follow in the direction that Grubb had disappeared. My hands began to shake and reverberated deep inside me.

I entered into The Know’s library and the mist thinned out before me. The room that I had entered had a different kind of quiet than outside. Perhaps the walls lined with books absorbed the sound. If I wasn’t so far away from home, I’d say that I was in book heaven. The way that things were, though, I wouldn’t be surprised if this Canberra was some sort of purgatory.

The inside appeared to be much more modern than the exterior, more like a contemporary mansion than an old stone library. I started as Grubb appears at my feet and was ready to follow when he took flight in front of me. The air from beneath his wings whispered into the deepest corners of the room.

Though I felt that my sneakers scuffed along the hard tile floor, they didn't make a sound. I tried to ask Grubb about the silence but found that the rest of me was silent too. I felt a scream building up and let it out like a breath. Yet, it was still silent, and I searched frantically inside my mind for the familiar sounds that I knew I was missing.

Peace, child. My library walls shan't contain you for long.

I stopped abruptly. The words had pierced my mind, sinking deep into my being. I shivered involuntarily. Grubb landed beside a doorway ahead. I hoped that he understood what was happening more than I did.

A force pulled me forward, as much as I tried to pull away. Suddenly, I began to feel light and carefree, like I was floating rather than walking. I moved towards Grubb's doorway, which seemed to emit a glow. How strange. I fought again with the force that drew me forward, but it was futile.

A wave of calm washed over me, though I was confused by this change, rather than reassured. What did I have to be calm about? This place was so unfamiliar, and I didn't like it. I had no intention of giving up my thoughts to the fake calm, but I couldn't control how my body relaxed in this new room.

A brilliant orb of cool aqua light was ahead of me, suspended over at least a hundred small mountains of various silver objects, each flashing as the orb pulsed. I drew further into the room, at the request of the force controlling my body, and saw my reflection dancing in the silver objects as I passed. The treasure mounds were resting on theatre chairs, making them rich and throned-like. I got the tiniest feeling that I was being watched, but my unruly body wished for me to twirl and skip beside the rows of chairs. Though I was fascinated by the shimmering patterns that movement made on my skin, I was really beginning to detest the feel of an outer force controlling my movements.

Welcome, child, to the library of The Know.

The voice permeated from the orb and in my mind simultaneously. I was not afraid this time, though I could feel the buried feeling numbly, as if it had been injected with an anaesthetic. I closed my eyes, as my mind pushed to access my emotions again. But my efforts were interrupted by the unknown force, which directed my eyes back towards the orb.

The orb began to transform before my eyes. Textures like patterned lace appeared on the outer layer, cocooning the glowing centre. From this centre, bright shapes grew out towards the lacy bubble. The shapes began to look like a human, curled up in a tight ball. Then, the human-like ball stretched out slowly, revealing a deeper blue light at its core. The form reminded me of a mannequin, yet it fluctuated so quickly that I soon forgot that it had ever looked that way. Human features filled her face, but the eyes were larger and more hollow than I had ever seen before, filled with the same blue light that glowed from her chest. The lacy bubble drew nearer to the being, wrapping around it like improvised skin, while simultaneously draping into hair or a veil behind it. She was human, yet still ethereal. Infinite, in ways that I could only dream of understanding.

Once the transformation was complete, the being descended to hover beside me.

I believe you have a question, Fortis. Speak.

Though she now had a mouth, the orb-person continued to speak directly into my mind.

“Fortis?” I asked.

That is the name of your soul.

I had no idea that my soul had a name. Yet, it was much more poetic than ‘Mali’, so I would consider giving the name to my body too someday. For now, I asked The Know if she could send me home.

No, child, it is not your time to leave. You must right the wrongs of your visit.

The Know walked on the air, as if it were a solid staircase, and returned to the middle of the room with her long veil trailing behind her. Twirling once on the spot, her light cast flickering shadows across the theatre and reminded me that the room was full of silver objects.

These are the people of Canberra. This is where you put them.

The Know captured a ball of her light in one of her slender hands and blew it towards me. My numb mind was suddenly screaming at me to avoid it, but my body remained still, and the ball of light landed in the middle of my chest. I watched helplessly as the small ball was absorbed into my body, leaving only remnants of its glow.

My mind pleaded to my body to take the orb out and, if I had control over my eyes, I would've cried. Why was this happening to me? I was trapped in my body with only my fluctuating feelings to keep me company.

Place your hands out and imagine the tall creatures from Questacon.

My body followed The Know's command, stretching out my arms. The vague memory of the tall people in Questacon came to the front of my mind, as did the overwhelming feelings that I had experienced when I had first appeared in the foyer. These feelings were shadowed by the fear of Gallery 3 and the lightning woman. My arms fell to my sides and, if the unknown force hadn't quickly regained control, I would've fallen to my knees. My body straightened back up.

Again, Fortis.

I felt my arms stretching out again and felt my overwhelming feelings becoming numb. My eyes were forced to concentrate on where my arms were pointing. Slowly, I began to see the outline of something tall, filling with colour as I concentrated. I felt a new wave of fear and unease, but that was immediately forced into the back of my mind. This time, I felt

the ball in my core wrapping around my feelings and holding them back. My eyes insisted that I concentrate.

The tall creature in front of me was not fully human. It appeared to have grey, rectangular legs, which stretched to the height of my chest. I watched unwillingly as the 2D figure became a 3D shape and developed texture. The legs of the creature looked like concrete pocketed with smaller rectangles, while the rest of the body was glossy. I saw movement inside the creature's legs and realised that, somehow, the legs were miniature buildings, with offices and apartments.

After the creature was fully formed, it turned around and walked out the door. As it walked away from where it had been recreated, another took its place and followed behind. I expected a loud stomping to come with the building legs but, like my footsteps in the entryway, the creatures were silent. The building people continued to appear in the same spot as the first and proceeded to leave the room in a strict line. I counted to about seventy before I lost count, as they kept spawning. When the final creature left the room, The Know spoke once more.

Now, bring back the others.

The pulse that came from the ball inside of me overpowered all thoughts, leaving me with the intense need to finish restoring the creatures that I had brought here. I remained in The Know's library for several hours, finishing the creation with a hunched zombie-like creature, whose patterned skin reminded me of a business suit, and what seemed to be a bipedal golden retriever.

I knew that I was finished when The Know waved her hand at me and the blue light emerged from my chest. I collapsed to my knees, no longer a slave to the unknown force that had held me hostage for the past few hours. My breaths were laboured, and the tears flowed

freely. I looked up and immediately closed my eyes again, as the room spun around me. I remembered feeling like this when I caught the flu last year.

Time to go, Fortis. Take your body and get out.

The voice in my head sounded angry, but I didn't have the energy to know why. I heaved my body into a standing position, almost tripping and falling back down. I caught sight of Grubb, who had been absent throughout my trial. My distrust in the bird grew.

The walk back through the library was gruelling and my feet felt like concrete. Grubb joined me as I stumbled back through the mist outside. I wasn't thrilled to be walking through mist in the dark, but a tolerable level of noise emanated from the creatures that I had released, so it wasn't so bad.

My eyes drooped and I almost fell asleep on my feet. My bones ached and trying to take any more steps made my knees buckle. I felt Grubb trying to keep me steady around my ankles, but there was only so much that the lone magpie could do except watch as I gave in to exhaustion.

I woke with the sunrise the next morning. My body still ached. As I became more aware, I began to notice the scratchy, damp texture on my bare arms. I sprang up into a sitting position and vigorously brushed off the leaves that had stuck.

“Good morning, Mali. Glad to see you've pulled through.” Grubb said, pushing a hot dog in my direction.

Thankfully, hot dogs were one of the foods that I *did* eat. I devoured it gratefully, unaware of how hungry I had been. I asked Grubb if he thought that I should go by Fortis now.

“Well, you wouldn't be the first human to prefer the sound of their soul name. The Lady Aranea forbids anyone to use her body name now.”

Aranea. Such a fascinating name. It sounded foreign, yet familiar, on my tongue. Perhaps I would meet this woman someday. Though, admittedly, I wouldn't know what to talk about after the initial connection of soul names. Defeated once again by the idea of social connection, I changed the subject and asked if everyone was exhausted by their visits to The Know's library.

“Only the lucky ones come out exhausted. The less fortunate, I'm afraid, come out *dead*.”

I gaped at that. After yesterday's ordeal, I never even *considered* that I could be the lucky one in any scenario. My feelings of needing to escape sharply returned to me. I had been in Canberra for almost 24 hours, yet it felt like a week. I wondered if the people at home were looking for me.

“I have more good news for you, Mali. After the good news of your survival, I have been able to secure you a way back to your home world.” Grubb said.

I couldn't stop the corners of my mouth from twitching into something that might resemble a smile. I thought I heard Grubb chuckling, as I got to my feet and removed the leftover leaves from where they had stuck to my clothes. Eager to get back home, I followed Grubb to a bus shelter about 10 minutes away. Though I still didn't fully trust the magpie, he had looked after me today and my need to get home was so strong that I was willing to take one more chance.

“This should take you back to your homeworld, Mali,” said Grubb, as we approached a waiting bus.

I moved to get on the bus but turned back to Grubb from the first step.

“I thought Grubb was a silly name when I first met you, but really it actually suits you quite well,” I blurted.

“Yes, I did see you scrunch up your nose when you heard it. You don’t have to blush, it’s alright. Out of curiosity, what would you have called me?”

I thought only for a moment.

“Shadowfax.”

“Ah, a fine name too.”

I turned back to the bus and found myself a seat, making sure to wave back at Grubb before settling in for the drive. I fell asleep within minutes.