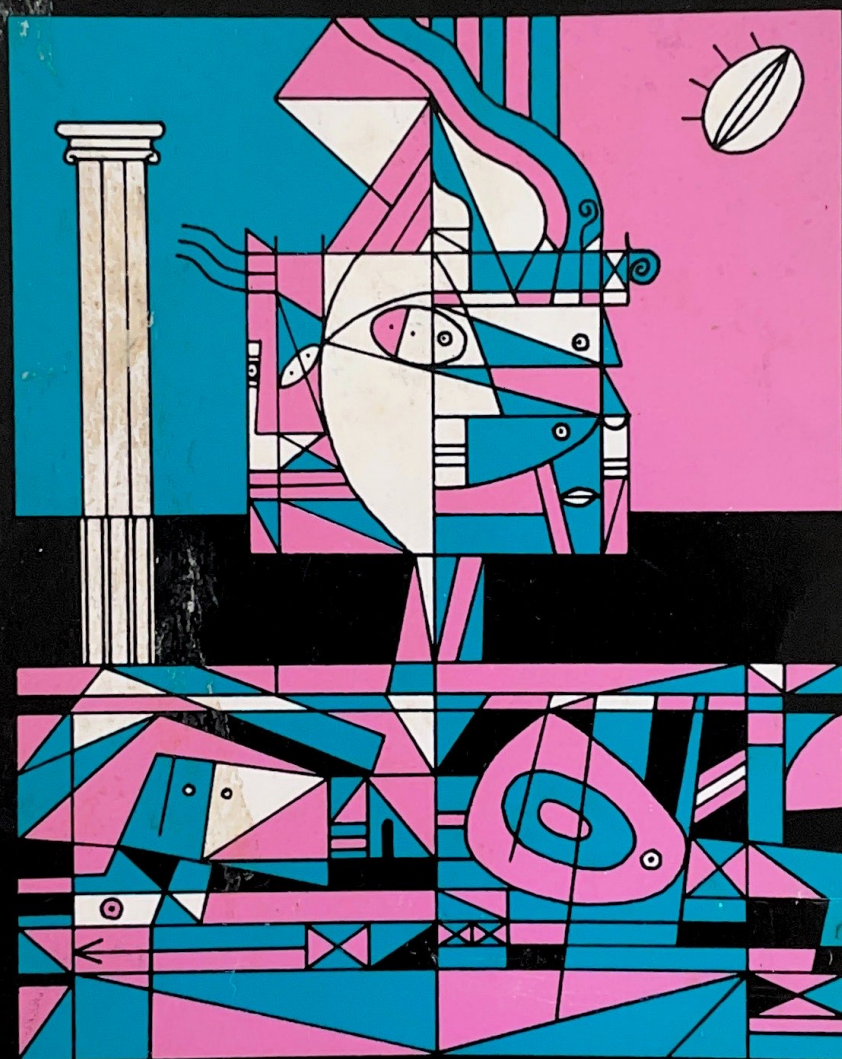


PINK INK

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
australian
LESBIAN AND GAY WRITERS



WICKED WOMEN PUBLICATIONS

My Two Girlfriends

Sue has her camera aimed at the sign, her head tilted a bit to one side, the faint click-whirr, click-whirr, slipping through the wind, sea-spray misting up the car windows. The sky is an incredible blue. I roll the window up as she walks towards the car, mouth open, spluttering as she climbs in. "I thought petty apartheid was supposed to be dead," she says. Her hair is standing up in sweaty blonde clumps, her nose burnt red. "Don't you believe it," I say. My mother stirs faintly in the back-seat, hardly making a dent in the leather. Our Sunday drive, taking Mother out. Smart in cream slacks, her pearls a neat collar around her brown throat. The scenery is irresistible. Mountains everywhere, against the blue sky, floating on the sea, fuzzy yet murderous, axle-breaking, leopard and baboon hide-outs. There are signs everywhere too, sprouting from the sand. 'Whites Only — Slegs Blankes'. They look freshly painted. After all these years it's hard to believe. I look at my watch and start the car. Just after three o'clock. "Too early for tea?" I ask. She shrugs, nibbling her bottom lip. I tap her mouth admonishingly with a fore-finger. My mother lights a cigarette, an ultra-thin 'ladies', which she hopes will reduce her cancer risk. My father died six months ago. He had a brain tumour, but was 'carried off' by a thrombosis. I imagine a wave, a bombora, my father riding for his life, the big one, the Banzai Pipeline. I've given up smoking. Waiting

to turn against the traffic, I glance at my mother's face in the rear-view mirror. Thin. Looking out to sea. "All that crap in the newspapers," Sue says, "who do they think they're kidding? There's another one, stop, Cal, over there..." I accelerate slightly. "I can't, there's a car..." It swishes past, a silver Mercedes, too close, tinted windows. "Afrikaners!" my mother says witheringly. She hasn't said a word until now, a blue cloud in the back seat. I open my window an inch. The South-Easter slams in, flinging sheets of sand across the beach road. "Blow the time." I'm dying of thirst. How about Gordon's Bay? Mum, brightly, let her know she's not in the way. "Mmm, yes, I'm parched," she says, bones of some tiny bird in her voice. My father tugs at her, tugging away even in her voice, the fat off her bones, gone but still head of the house. "Imagine seeing those signs," Sue says, "I mean, if you were a black, a black kid..." Fuck, couldn't she drop it, just for today. "Perhaps they forgot to take them down," I say, "the Council..." Sue rolls blue eyes at me. My mother also has blue eyes. I'd kill for a cigarette. We are on the highway and I take the right turn, after all these years, I'm pleased, you don't forget. "I used to love Gordon's Bay when I was a kid," I say, "no surf. Not one bloody wave, heaven." "Poms!" Sue says, looking around, examining Gordon's Bay. It looks awful. They are tarring the parking lot so we inch along the coast road, squeezing past white beach cottages, awnings, nautical wheels painted white. "God, it's so English, so twee," Sue says, "Is it netted?" "No, doesn't need it, you could see a shark a mile off." Flat blue sea, waves just wrinkling the edge of the bay. More sheltered here. "Stop!" Sue yells, my foot jams down, a Volvo brakes behind. "There's one, right there. Stop, Cal." I pull in next to a bronze station-wagon. Family barbecue, radio blaring, kids burning, no sun hats, short back and sides. "One big happy family," Sue snorts. The 'Whites Only' sign a foot away from their esky. "Won't be a sec," climbing out, leaving us in silence. I can't think of one thing to say, every relative, child, pet, event, memory of the family done, done to death. We walk around my father, a meteoric crater. Sue is snapping away, on location. The camera snazzy, fool-proof, from Duty Free. Not holiday snaps, not here. A political record. In Fraser's footsteps, Sue says at night when we're alone. Fraser, the old enemy, storming onto a 'Whites Only' beach with a camera, embarrassing the locals. But we have swum laps in my mother's sparkling suburban pool and drunk the wine of paradise. Nederburg,

Twee Jongezellen, Cape wines trodden by oppressed feet. What's she thinking about in the back seat? She worries about me. Her prickly daughter who can't even get her sex right. My pulse feels heavy, overheated. Sue climbs back in, slamming the door. It's my father's car, still new, and I wince. Sue glares at the over-weight man prodding sausages with a long fork, duelling with him. He leers back, getting the message wrong. I laugh. "You'd think it'd put him off his snags," Sue says. My mother draws in a little breath. I hold my own. Sooner or later things will give. "No-one takes any notice of those signs, anyway Susan," her voice primary-school prissy and I couldn't blame Sue if she went off the deep end. My mother's conscience-soothing. Ah, but I would blame Sue. My mother is an invalid, convalescent. Sometimes evil old woman, sometimes my girlfriend. My first and best girlfriend, as Sue would say. Sue looks at me and I return a 'if you must, you must' sort of look. "It's a wonder there's anyone on the beach today, with this wind," my mother adds before Sue can start. Sue snorts loud enough for her to hear. I'm almost irritated by Sue's restraint. Which is stupid. Do I want them to have the cathartic fight that I haven't the stomach for? I have lost all balance. I am unhinged by this country, I have an ulcer, my father's tumour. My father's car is faster and smoother than anything I've ever driven before. I can feel his pleasure as it purrs along, effortless, the computerised speedometer flashing green figures at me. I wish it was a cool night, and I was curled into Sue, my leg hooked around hers, my hand cupping her left breast. The light sheet, our feet sticking out. The sweetness that vanishes in daylight. There's a large cheerful sign, for a change, and a small parking area. "How about here?" I ask. "Sure," Sue says. "Fine," my mother sighs. I reverse carefully, conscious of the shiny duco. The cafe is very new, very clean and deserted. We arrange ourselves under one of the bright yellow umbrellas in white plastic chairs that are uncomfortable after the plush seats of my father's car. I push the ash-tray towards my mother and she smiles gratefully at me. I feel flustered. I have become afraid to read her face. Is she easing Sue out with that smile? Am I a conspirator? "My treat," she says, "you girls have whatever you fancy." I share a menu with her. Sue looks up from hers and suddenly grabs the camera. "Christ, just look at that," she says, "I'll just get a couple of shots..." The words whipped over her shoulder as she strides off. The waitress looks puzzled. "We'll order in a minute," I say,

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an apologetic smile. The palm trees across the road whipping to and fro, a group of teenagers barefoot, toughing it on hot bitumen, trailing indian-file after Sue. I'd forgotten Bikini Beach. Twenty metres down the road there's a fork, a 'Stop' sign, a hand-operated metal boom and a huge green and white sign. Sue has her camera poised, steps back a bit, swivelling her head for cars, settling the camera again. The boom swings up, floats high over a battered Volkswagen. Sue's having trouble fitting it all in. The black kid operating the boom looks past her to the red sedan with surfboards on top, waiting to go through next. The barefoot kids trot around the metal barrier. The boy tips the boom over the red car, almost clipping the surfboard, and the car eases over the speed humps. Sue walks back towards us, rolling the film on. She frowns, slumps into a plastic chair. "Shit, I've run out of film. Would you believe it," she says, tucking the film carefully into its box. "You've probably got enough, anyway," I say. Something in my tone makes her eyes spark. "Enough. Did you see what was on that sign?" she squints, trying to remember, word for word. "That portion of the sea-shore, the bed of the sea and the sea, etc, etc...exclusive, whites only..." Loud enough to make my mother's eyebrows knot. "I'd forgotten Bikini Beach," I say, "I thought it was miles further on." "God, you'd think they'd employ someone else, a white, for that. The humiliation, sitting there all day, letting those white bastards in..." I clear my throat and nod over Sue's right shoulder. "We'd better order. Mum?" The waitress, freckle-faced, infinitely patient, her pad at the ready. "Apple pie?" I ask Sue, but she shakes her head. "Just tea," huffily. "Are you sure?" I ask, "it's Mum's treat," giving my mother a smile. Sue's eyes flick over my mother and away. "Tea'll be fine," she says. "I'll have the Topsy Tart," my mother says, "Do you want cream or ice-cream with the apple pie, Carol?" warming to me. Sue hasn't finished. Of course she's fucking right. Do I want cream or ice-cream? Do I want to drive under that boom and belong, just for a moment? While we wait, I add some kerosene. "I used to swim there a lot. There's a fishing harbour just next to the beach. I saw a couple of dolphins once, diving under the boats." Conversationally, including my mother. "You always loved the beach," my mother responds, "couldn't keep you out of the water. Dad always said you'd grow fins." I remembered. I could have reached out and touched him on the sand, hanging onto his neck in the deep water, scared, thrilled, out of my depth. I nodded, my mouth

moving. "Was that sign there then?" Sue asks. Yes, of course it was. It's always been there. We just didn't look at it. We should have broken it, burnt it, destroyed. We should never have walked on the hot fine sand, the sea so warm, so crystal, this side of the Cape, not the other cold Atlantic side. I nod. "Didn't you notice it?" Sue says. "When you're a kid..." I begin and then shrug. The tea things arrive, the freckle-faced girl, clattering everything, fussing over serviettes and hot water for the tea. The season will soon be over, has already peaked, soon no-one will drive under the boom. The cafe will fold for the winter, perhaps forever. When did I read my first sign? The yellow umbrella flaps suddenly, billows in a strong gust of wind. The apple-tart is enormous, smothered. Sue looks away towards the boom, up and down, up and down, squinting, serious, sipping her tea. My mother plays with her tart, seeking attention. "I don't know how you could have swum there," Sue says. My mother finishes her tea and rummages in her hand-bag. She peers down, compact in one hand, lipstick in the other, tracing a bright red outline, filling in, pressing her lips firmly together to seal them. She pushes her sunglasses back onto the deeply indented bridge of her nose and waits. My father always told her what to do. Now she waits for me, her eyebrows sleek and raised a little expectantly. "Come on, then," I say, "let's have a snap. Glasses off." I grab the camera. My mother's eyes blink up at me, large, very blue, some frail marsupial, endangered, drought thin. "Oh God. The film," I remember. My mother subsides, reaching for her glasses. I thump the camera down in front of Sue. God, I hate her. A thousand official signs. My mother will be an old woman, withering, six thousand miles of static on an OTC Christmas line. For year's she's been a transparency. Sue grows more solid, more real, each year. We're growing into each other, blurring. This might have been the last photo. I am infantile, absurd. I have disappointed her again. Again. "Never mind," she says faintly. She pays and we unfold ourselves from the chairs, the freckled girl happy with the tip, pulling out my mother's chair for her. My mother claims her bag, straightens, turning. She glances away, across the road, towards the boom and groans, a stretched quavering noise. "Oh, no," turning away almost at once. My head whips round, Sue freezes, camera gripped. A white poodle circles dizzily in the middle of the road, cars honking, lead trailing, panicked, silly. "I can't bear to look," my mother's whimper. A middle-aged blonde bending down, scooping the dog into her arms,

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climbing back into an expensive car. I watch it bump, bump, under the boom, over the speed humps. "It's okay," I say to my mother. She exhales, pushing her sunglasses into place and gives me her arm to take.