

Pawns, 1978

Come Sundays, Aaron Auslander and his sister perched on Dad's armchair and watched him verse his friend in chess. The men puffed on pipes, blue smoke curled above the board.

Dad played hide and seek with his children, mowed his soft signature into the lawn, and built a path to the lookout, where Aaron negotiated win-wins with the future.

Two police tapped on the front door. They palmed their caps, bowed their heads. Aaron's sister yelled – *Wrong house, wrong dad, ours home soon, macaroni cheese for dinner.*

Aaron smashed the chess board on a rock, tossed the pieces into the flower beds, hid in the jacaranda treehouse before climbing out of its window and up to flimsier forks.

Mourners mingled on the terrace below, their grief rising – talk of a careening truck hitting a vehicle driven by a father replaced by a void.

White Dimples

Aaron Auslander's golf ball flies into the trees.
His schoolmates offer consolation and march
along the fairway. Aaron carries a club into the
rough and hunts for those little white dimples.

He finds a majestic Xhosa man, who neutralises
Aaron's club with one expansive hand and
raises the other high, knuckles in the offing.
Aaron quakes in his Nike shoes and turns

a shade paler. The man indicates the boy's wrist,
the watch ticking there, but not for long.
Bowing low, the new Seiko owner smiles warmly
and says, *Run along now, little boss.*

Inner Trial #1 – 1990

My client has suffered, Defence says, setbacks in childhood, his father's death – we must show clemency, your honour.

Oh, please, says the prosecutor, Look at him – Aaron Auslander, unblemished, in his prime!

Sitting alone on a Hyde Park bench, Aaron tries to enjoy the grass, the fountains, the birds toying with the water.

The inner prosecutor sneers and rounds on his subject. *How do we measure suffering?* he asks.

When last were you hungry or humiliated?
By you, now, the defendant says.

The prosecutor mock-claps, *Ha, ha, quite a funny guy.*
He slams his fist on the bench – *And you call this suffering?*

Parkside, Aaron rests his head on his knees.
He considers the flow of the years, the shape of his soul.

Judge and jury, the prosecutor continues, Aaron Auslander stands on the shoulders of Apartheid,

white skin a magic suit conferring all manner of perks – big house, lawns, in-ground pool.

After his schooling, the army summoned him to do his stint in shoring up white privilege. And what happens?

His mother whisks him out of the country. To comfy Australia. Away from Apartheid the spin, away from army service the gall.

Aaron lurches past picnicking families to the fountains.
He dunks his head in the water for a short-lived adjournment.

Cliff Climbing – No Rope

If Aaron falls from the crux, he breaks a leg,
any higher and the grim reapers will be busy.
He manages the hard moves and commits to the arête.

Josie on the ground tells her lover one last time
to use a rope, like any sane man.
But why? His mind is clear, the sandstone soothing.

Nearing the summit, he stretches for a hold, misses
by a sliver, backs off and rests by alternating
his feet on a hold the size of a domino.

A tremor starts in one leg, and the reapers
get word. They arrive whooping,
pile out of the hearse, and prepare the undertaking.

Last time Aaron completed a solo, the black dog
backed off. Relieved, he craved sky-drenched love
with Josie. She recoiled and delivered her ultimatum.

Drops of sweat bead his temples. Death flirts with
his fingertips and licks the soles of his Sportivas.
Trees below appear tiny, Josie, too, not looking.

Must get the feet higher, Aaron whispers. The rock
exudes a gun-powdery warmth. His tremor eases,
the reapers curse. He executes the final moves

and collapses onto the summit slab of rock, arms wide,
imploping bliss. Nothing. He scans the void –
no Josie. Then he spots her – soloing the pathway out.

Grandmother

She slows near a rusty gate – kind of familiar, it's hers.
The worn path meanders to her gaping front door.
Shadows press close and chaperone her to the attic.

Gran fingers relics, thumbs through albums
showing her unscathed, eyes suggestive of someone home.
She hurls a paperweight and topples a filing cabinet,

drawers slamming open. The shadows swoop
and excavate, cart away memories in dying light,
leave dim tracks and a calling card – blank on both sides.