Cool Escape

“I thought it would be nice to have it framed, since it’s the only one that’s half-decent,” her mother says, nodding flippantly at the newly hung frame on the wall. Anna looks at the photo with a quizzical eye, etching each detail into her memory. Her mother was the focal point – the sun of this solar system. With her bleach-blonde hair tied up in a neat bun, a glint of light streaming in from the living room window, bouncing off the tinsel on the tree and shining on her perfect cream skin, she looked the embodiment of youth. It was unnatural for her.[[1]](#footnote-1) Anna moves her gaze to me, attached to her kneeling body, defined as ever in the brightness[[2]](#footnote-2). Speckles of her mother’s light filter onto my dark, empty figure, stretching along the tile and carpet to the window. She turns to go outside.

The clouds brew around the sun for days[[3]](#footnote-3). They stare down at Anna with relentless eyes as she whirls, the humidity sticking to the slow-drying parts of her skin, shining menacingly against the worn-out blue plastic. I sink beneath her[[4]](#footnote-4), water filling my not-lungs and burning my not-throat. She feels the rumble of a storm; more than one.

When the first comes, Anna sits next to her sister on the lounge, the taste of bitter iced coffee lingering on her tongue. A precursor to verbal atrocities. Her mother stands above them with her hair wound back in snaking waves, a tower, and she screams. About nothing, about everything.

"I'm going - sell - stupid plastic pool - throw away! So many footprints - dirty floors!" She continues, airy syllables flung from her lipstick-covered mouth. Anna does not cry. She looks down at her feet, and pictures herself as floor beneath her mother’s blood-red shoes – pictures me. I cry the tears for her, two pairs of feet pressing firm and hard against my not-chest[[5]](#footnote-5).

The sun sets into the pit of Anna’s stomach, emptiness enveloping it and her and I. She sits on her bed and looks at the sliver of light under the door – it’s icy, even in the heat of the summer night, and the frost eats at my not-body as she stares. I am soundless while it gnaws. Whisper-yells echo downstairs, a mirror of the day’s earlier events, and when the light dies, Anna enters a dreamless sleep. Her polyester sheets scratch at her skin and I stare out at the pool. The thought of weightlessness gently sways at my still-cold not-feet like a tide, memories of desperate hands breaking the water surface and breathless giggles filling the air[[6]](#footnote-6).

In the early morning, as the sun creeps into the sky and shines over a sea of barren yellow yards and rickety corrugated fencing, it’s discovered. Anna wakes up to the ghost-like presence of her father, sitting on her bed, his arms crossed softly against his chest.

“I’m afraid you won’t be able to swim today,” he says delicately, a slight tension in his brow, “somehow a bird’s ripped a bloody hole in it.”

Anna looks at him. He avoids her gaze, “I don’t know if we can fix it.”

No, they probably couldn’t. “I’ll see what I can do.” He turns to her and gives a strained smile. They both know it was a viper, not a bird[[7]](#footnote-7).

“Oh well,” her mother exclaims at the breakfast table, her voice high and grating, like a balloon still deflating, “maybe now your father will get a *nicer* one.”

That afternoon Anna takes down the dry towels and togs, not a hint of damp on any. She lays her towel down in the spot where the pool once was, the patch of slightly lighter yellow grass sticking through the cheap fabric and pinching the bottoms of her legs. The sun blazes against her skin, angry, and she quickly retreats inside again, scared to test the limits of its singeing power.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is early morning when Anna makes the next trek, desperate to savour the freedom of the grass patch, even if it is nothing like the cool escape; the weightlessness of floating. The air is heavy and I am dragged across the sharp, golden grass, Anna’s towel reaching down to touch me with each stride, until she stops. In front of her, a new pool is standing tall, chest puffed out to impress, full enough to dive in. A smile gently tugs at the edge of her mouth as she drops her towel[[9]](#footnote-9), turning to run inside and hurriedly change into her bathers.

When the second storm finally hits, she's still in the new pool, spinning alone, relief washing her over her with each tide. It starts slow at first, the rain dropping in a quiet symphony, grey clouds covering me up like a blanket. But it grows stronger, water splashing, leaving fleeting little dimples in the plastic.

"Anna! Get in here!" Her mother calls, a hint of anger hissing from beneath her high-pitched tone, "Get inside!"

Physically, she hears, but she’s so tired of listening.

The rain continues to drum rhythms in the water, so she listens to that instead. The yells pale in comparison, and I feel a warmth. A tiny flicker of brightness. Anna is smiling, feeling the rain as it hits her eyelids, sticking to her long eyelashes. Tears spill, slowly and gently, from the corners of our eyes[[10]](#footnote-10).

1. The use of vivid and fluid description is a prominent aspect of Kennedy’s writing, helping to craft a sense of place and communicate abstract ideas, in example, the establishing description of the first attempt at the family Christmas photo, in which Anna’s father was just a “silhouette” which conveys his absence and perceived lack of significance within the family. In this section, a similar technique has been adopted to represent an expectation of the perfect nuclear family, indirectly suggesting that the reality of this family has far more complicated as a result of Anna’s mother’s perfectionism. Contextually, this is also an analysis of the Australian dream, including the specific roles of each parent and the wishes of many middle-class families to be richer or more perfect, reflected in Anna’s mother’s consistent referral to her honeymoon cruise, in which she met many people overseas. By referring her as an “unnatural” sun, the reader is positioned to consider how class and gender roles influence the desire to be more perfect. Later, the metaphor of the “sun” is included to exemplify Anna’s mother’s position as the central actor within the family unit in order to characterise her as a person with great power and explore a contrasting symbolic representation – while the sun is often presented as something that shines and as a symbol for happiness, in this context it is suffocating and contributing to the destruction of the family. Everyone else, including Anna, is required to “orbit” around her to avoid being a victim of her “power”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This narrative is told from the perspective of Anna’s shadow, an abstract symbol for her inner-psyche and emotions. This decision was made in order to emphasise the separation of self into ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ that has occurred as a result of the emotional mistreatment Anna has endured, with the idea that the inner-self is unworthy of relief or sympathy, and is thus sentenced to isolation. Furthermore, this perspective allows for Anna’s low self-worth to be explored by the figure that is experiencing the negative impacts of it, her shadow self. The short structure of the final sentence in this paragraph highlights the uncaring attitude Anna has towards her shadow/herself, solidifying the starting place of this relationship, and to further emphasise the changes that will occur throughout the remainder of the text, inviting the reader to scrutinize the way in which one’s relationship with oneself is of utmost importance for wellbeing and survival. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The repeated reference to the sun as a metaphor for Anna’s mother in this context enables for the reader to understand her mother’s emotional turbulency and almost explosive nature – the negativity “brews” around her, leading up to the release of emotion in the form of a “storm” as mentioned in the following sentences. This positions the reader to recognise the “singeing power” which Anna is in many ways unable to “defy”, except through her indulgence in escapism through the swimming pool, further conveying the importance of the pool as the barrier between Anna and her mother’s power. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The idea of “sinking” portrays a growing feeling of invalidity or unimportance that Anna’s shadow is feeling, due to the lack of recognition it receives for ‘holding’ the emotion that Anna herself is not able to. Additionally, it gives insight into the weight both Anna and her shadow feel as a result of the emotional mistreatment they are both experiencing – Anna is floating, clinging onto momentary relief from the pressure, while her shadow is forced to lie underneath her and hold it all. This highlights a domino structure of power that Kennedy explores in “Whirlpool”, originally as Anna’s sister mimicking her mother, and then as they play whirlpool with the neighbouring children with the idea that they must “learn their place.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. When reading ‘Whirlpool’, the use of iced coffee could be interpreted as a symbol for poison, emphasised in the “sickly smile[s] of concurrence” iced coffee forces upon Anna and her sister, so this was embedded into the narrative to mirror the duality of Anna’s mother – her tendency to draw Anna in with the sweetness, or iced coffee, and then perpetrate harm against her with “tenderness… [that is] treacherous”. This encourages the reader to analyse how power and love interact, especially in the context of a parent-child relationship. In addition, the use of “not” body parts in reference to Anna’s shadow helps to enunciate both the symbolic nature of it as a primary perspective, and the power dynamic between Anna and her shadow, depicting the emotional neglect experienced by the shadow as something that is “not real.” This also invites the reader to recognise the perfectionism that is projected onto Anna by her mother, which makes *her* feel fake and "animated,” as well as to consider the relationship between self-worth, perfectionism and isolation; the reader may be inclined to question how striving (or being forced to strive) for perfection can negatively impact our self-worth and mental health in general, and how this creates isolation within one’s own mind and body. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. By separating the description into Anna’s physical body, herself and her shadow, the reader is encouraged to further explore how our identity is shaped from different elements of both our physical and mental existence. This is inspired and built of Kennedy’s exploration of identity as something that can be lost, broken or manipulated, for example: Anna’s need to remain “offhand” in order to avoid being the “subject of attack”, portraying how the continuous performance of personality can cause an individual to feel isolated or incomplete, as Anna presently is. However, this is the first reference to a mutual experience between Anna and her shadow, representing a subtle shift towards creating a slightly more balanced power dynamic between them. This shift is also briefly represented in the depiction of Anna’s “breathless giggles” in the pool as something her shadow can appreciate and reminisce about, highlighting the contrasting nature of self-worth as a human experience in the eyes of the reader; we are often able to accept the ‘easy’ and ‘happy’ parts of ourselves, and not those that can be destructive, saddening or complicated. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This reference to a viper is a continued characterisation of Anna’s mother as a serpent or snake (“snaking waves”), encompassing various negative connotations that emphasise her destructive nature, and again, the way she “poisons” (see footnote 5) Anna. Through this symbolic representation of Anna’s mother, the reader is positioned to analyse power dynamics and how the desire for power can surpass empathy and logical thinking, building upon Kennedy’s subtle suggestions of power-based aggression in the original text through the “weight” of Anna’s mother’s presence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In this section of the narrative, emphasis is placed on Anna’s efforts to replace the “weightlessness” with the same techniques Kennedy displays her father as using to escape her mother in the original text. However, Anna’s attempts to savour the freedom are “burnt” by the sun, – a motif representing her mother – depicting the increasing level control her mother now holds over her and emphasising the importance of the pool in her “defiance” of that power. This is also further reflection of her father’s situation, he has become a “ghost” for ignoring his own importance, both in caring for himself and his daughters. Furthermore, what differs between Anna and her father in this response is Anna’s attempt to defy “sun[s] blaze” again, which demonstrates a shift in the relationship between herself and her shadow, it is also a method of conveying themes such as hope and rebirth; the “trek” Anna chooses to make with the hope that something may have changed, but also her recognition of the importance of the relief the pool gives her and perhaps even the realisation of the weight she has been putting on her shadow as she starts to experience more of the emotions herself. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Kennedy’s own writing, she often utilises phrases with dual meanings and connotations such as the description of the pools as “cool and shadowed,” conveying its conflicting nature within the family. In a similar manner, within this paragraph the use of positively connotated words (“gently tugs”, “standing tall”) in contrast with negative ones (“sharp”, “dragged”) acts as a form of foreshadowing and a method to convey the slight change in perspective and relationship that has taken place for Anna and her shadow as a result of the loss of the pool; the relationship has become more balanced, holistic and far less self-destructive through the disappearance of Anna’s ability to exert power and control her shadow by “drowning” it. This encourages the reader to consider the small actions one can take to shift their perspective and the importance of mindset when it comes to self-worth, suggesting that one can find fulfillment, or simply just hope, even when things seem dire. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The final section of this narrative is heavily designed to mirror that of the original story, with a shifted tone to reflect a more positive future for Anna that involves emotional expression, and the letting go of the “cool and blue and chemical” power she once desperately clung to. This is conveyed through both the use of “our” to describe Anna and her shadow, expressing their connectedness as one being, and the once “unshed tears” now being “spil[t]”. These choices emphasise the feeling of relief felt by Anna and her shadow, working to elicit a similar emotional response in the reader. Furthermore, the use of the storm as a repeated metaphor with a different meaning, once represent scorn and now relief or hope, is similar to the shifts illustrated in Kennedy’s writing, including… employed as symbolic representation of the relationships within the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)