

## T H E R E M I N

All of us are old at this hour, on this beach; the heads in the water are all grey, including mine. Mostly we move gently, we older, early-rising swimmers, the water buoying us in our slow choreography. But if we're all old and stale, still the water smells fresh – somehow like watermelon, and salt. It's glorious, the water in the morning, when it's calm like this, when you can just bob on the surface, like a seal, watching. How *well* it makes me feel, how calm; how light and how heavy at the same time: like heroin – a little bit like heroin.

The waves this morning are gentle, lacking the roll and boom of the afternoon, when the breeze is up and the swell catches and the great mass of water feels deeply oceanic. Now it's silky, almost still. A little wave forms and moves towards me. I concentrate on watching its path, its sinusoidal shape. It breaks on me, gently, and I let it push me under the water, then I push back up and my head breaks the surface.

Looking down – through air, through water – I see myself distorted, my black swimsuit the negative of the pale thin legs extending long below it, and I feel disconnected

from the body and legs I see under the water. From this perspective, I look the same as I've always looked; the water washes the years away, or at least hides them under its surface.

I move my arms in wide arcs in front of me, pushing water out to the sides and back again. I can feel the stretch in my shoulders, the tendons tense and twist. Bubbles form up my arms, trapped in the tiny pale hairs, tickling like the bead in champagne. Moving my fingers in the water effects tiny changes in the waves that effect bigger movements. Action at a distance; just like playing the theremin.

Muscle memory takes over from my conscious brain as my fingers and hands move under the water's cover. I know the movements, not just practised for tonight's performance, but from a lifetime of playing. Under the surface of the water my arms have dropped into the position they adopt to play – right hand raised around shoulder height; left hand dropped nearer to my waist. My hands too are in place – the left hand palm-down, flattened, to stroke volume from the theremin's metal loop; the right with fingers pinching lightly in towards thumb to form an eye, to pluck and twitch in the tiniest precise movements, like pulling the thinnest silk thread, a filament too fine to see.

I let myself sink under the water. Expelling air from my mouth and nose, I hear the waveforms and harmonic intervals of *Aetherwave Suite* rise to the surface in the bubbles, the sound waves mixing in the air and water, undulating, soothing, readying me for the performance tonight.

Music from a theremin can sound like a human voice, or

an electronic scream; like an alien spaceship imagined for a B-movie soundtrack, or like the low thrum and moan of a cello, warm with wood and resin and gut. The best players can tease all of these sounds – more – from the wood and wire and electricity that is a theremin, form a limitless range of notes and sounds. And I *am* the best player – after all these years, old woman that I am, not bettered. I, Lena Gaunt, am a legend.

The inaugural Transformer Festival has been keenly anticipated, written up in *The Wire* and other music magazines, discussed in earnest tones. A music festival offering the best electronica and eclecticica that 1991 can deliver, I'm told. I understand I fall into both categories.

I first heard of Transformer nearly a year ago via an invitation from its organiser, Terence Meelinck, to play at his festival up in the Perth Hills. His pleading, his enthusiasm for the music and the instrument – and, yes, I admit it, his flattery – won me over. And so, here I am, committed – for better or worse – to play tonight at this festival of Terence's. There is my face staring at me from the programme. I look so old amongst the other faces, so old.

I close the programme and place it on the table in front of me, in the campervan that is my accommodation for the night. The van is tiny, but adequate for one. Thankfully I do not have to share it; fame and age guarantee certain comforts. It is parked in a group of vans, large and small, circled at the edge of the festival's compound, far enough for the music from the stage to reach only as a slightly

dulled thudding, distorted through the evening air.

I have already dressed for the stage: silken grey trousers, voluminous and flowing, each leg so wide it could double as a skirt. A simple black tunic, sleeveless, leaves my arms free; its shape reminds me of a mediaeval knight's dress, appropriate for battle. I take a mirror and lipstick from the make-up case next to me on the divan, apply dark red to cover my old lips. My hair is short, white-grey, platinum-grey; it catches the overhead light, like velvet. I stare at myself in the mirror: I will do.

I sit on the divan. There is nothing more I can do to prepare for my performance. I place my feet flat on the floor in their rubber soles, rest my hands on my knees, breathe deeply to still my body. I think of the beach this morning, the gentle waves, the watermelon scent, muscle memory; my fingers twitch lightly on my knees.

There is a knock at the door of the van and I open it to see a young man, the minder Terence has assigned to me. I lock the van on the way out and hand him the key as we slide into the car to slowly drive the short distance to the stage.

Steroidalab have finished their set and are backstage when we arrive. They're in a post-performance huddle, a closed unit as I walk past them at the top of the scaffolding steps that lead up to the stage from ground level. The crew are on stage, busy, packing away synthesisers, computers, microphones, until the stage is almost cleared. I stand where the stage manager tells me to, out of the way, but ready.

I hear Terence on stage. He starts speaking and, even though I am waiting in the wings, even though I know I am

about to walk on to the stage and perform, it takes a beat before I realise: he is talking about me.

*She has been an extraordinary part of the electronic music scene since before most of us were born. She was at the birth of electronic music sixty years ago. She's travelled the world performing on the instrument that started it all, the theremin. She reminds us that nothing we do is new. She's playing for us tonight on irreplaceable vintage electronic equipment. We're truly blessed to have had her back in this country for two decades, and we're honoured to have her here to play for us. Join with me in welcoming to the stage the remarkable, the beautiful, our very own, Dame (beat) Lena (beat) Gaaaaauunt.*

And so I breathe in deeply and step onto the stage to deafening, thunderous applause.

I walk from the wings, legs pushing my trousers to swirl and billow and sweep the floor. When I reach the spotlight, I bow from the waist, my black tunic swaying, the heavy pendant around my neck hanging to almost touch the surface of the stage in front of me.

I raise my head, square my shoulders. The audience is invisible behind the bright spot that shines, reaching in behind my eyes, almost blinding, almost hurting. The spotlight widens around me, my cue to raise my arm to