Alecia Simmonds is a regular writer for Fairfax Media’s *Daily Life* and a postdoctoral fellow in law at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her columns have been published in the *Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, Arena, Womankind* and *The Guardian*. *Wild Man* is her first book.
‘This inquest has focused on a 48-hour period of a 33-year life.’
– Paul Johnson

‘Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.’
– Immanuel Kant
A MAN IS SQUINTING at me from a photograph in the newspaper. He has stubbly brown hair, pock-marked skin, a lipless smile and yellowing teeth. He’s wearing a grey Hard Rock Hotel t-shirt that’s offset against the green ferns that fan behind him. The editor has cut out the child that he’s holding on his hip (except for a chubby leg and white sock), which has the effect of leaving the man’s body strangely arched: his shoulder curls to the left and his head swings to the right. He’s waving a gigantic hand at the camera.

The headline calls him the ‘wild one’.

This image of Evan Johnson first appeared on 17 April 2012. By then he had been dead for two days. It continued to be used by newspapers during the coronial inquest into his death in November 2013, which is where I learnt that the photo wasn’t accurate. Evan only shaved his sandy curls once and, aside from a scar on his cheek, there was nothing pock-marked about his skin. In fact, he was an exceptionally good-looking man: six foot tall, athletic and with an impish grin. The photo simply worked well with a story about ‘psychopaths’.

You probably don’t remember Evan’s death, or even his inquest, but I bet you would recognise his story. It’s made with the bones of every species of Australian horror.
In April 2012, campers gathered at a festival on a farm in far-northern New South Wales. At around the same time as the festival, the owners of the farm, Andrea Messina and Jan de Smet, planned for Evan Johnson and his fiancée, Cynthia Hoffmann, to go pig-shooting on their property. Over the course of the weekend, Evan took a concoction of drugs that combined with sleep deprivation and a history of mental illness to trigger delusions. He thought he was God and the campers were devils in need of slaying.

The weekend bristled with moments of aggression that came to a head on Sunday evening. Evan punched a woman who was drumming, threatened to eat a man’s dog and chased another man into the bush, roaring: ‘It’s hunting season; you better get running.’ It was a siege. The campers tried to calm him but nothing worked. Eventually, four campers drove to Tenterfield police station for help.

In the period between the campers leaving and the police arriving, Evan almost drowned Andrea in the creek, claiming that she was unclean. The police arrived to find Andrea on her hands and knees, and Evan standing over her with a knife. At first Evan obeyed instructions to drop the knife, but then declared the police to be in breach of international law and disappeared into the bushland.

Rather than chasing him, the police organised the campers into a convoy and were just about to leave when Evan appeared with a crossbow. A cat-and-mouse game ensued around the vans until fatal shots were fired. Like all Australian antiheroes, Evan’s last words were memorable: ‘Ya shot me in the arse, ya fucking cunt.’

I was suspicious of newspaper reports about Evan Johnson when I first read about him in April 2012. It was the year that NSW police were
celebrating their 150\textsuperscript{th} anniversary and things were not going smoothly. Just a few weeks before Evan’s death, Roberto Laudisio Curti, a 21-year-old Brazilian student, had been tasered to death by police on George Street in Sydney. Curti was handcuffed at the time and of no threat to anyone (other than possibly himself), yet the police used three cans of pepper spray and repeatedly ‘drive-stunned’ him, releasing the taser directly onto his bare skin. He died instantly. Curti was killed around the same time as Darren Neill, a 34-year-old man who was wielding a knife when police shot him dead in Westfield shopping centre in Parramatta. Then came Evan, aged thirty-three, shot dead at a property in northern NSW. Three men in four weeks.

The civil libertarian in me was outraged. I was teaching a university course at the time called the Foundations of Law, which examined how Western civilisation had sought to constrain state power, and I shared my concern about these men with my students. Police are not executioners, I explained. We do not delegate to them the power to take life. So why are we so complacent in instances of police shootings? Why are police never prosecuted for criminal negligence? When vulnerable people come into contact with police, shouldn’t they be protected and not killed? Our discussions were predictably indignant. I could see my students thrilling to curious new arrangements of words that brought power into stunning relief. \textit{So the police are the coercive arm of the state! The police have a monopoly on force.}

Evan’s story gripped my imagination for other reasons as well, less morally righteous, less savoury. His story, quite simply, brimmed with the bizarre. I read that he was killed on a property ‘run by an organisation called the School of Happiness’; that the property ‘may or may not be described as a commune’ (which clearly implied the former) and that the people on that commune had met for a spiritual gathering.
His last Facebook status update said that he was 'going hunting' and would be 'back when I have enough food for winter'.

Had he gone hunting for hippies? Scenes from *The Island of Doctor Moreau* filled my mind.

I tracked down every article that was written about Evan and read each one with fascinated horror. He was the son of a famous Rugby League player, Paul Johnson; the spiritual festival was in fact a six-week alternative lifestyle ‘Rainbow Gathering’; there was a historic hut on the property called ‘the love shack’ that burst into flames a few days after the shooting; the police officers who killed him were a de facto husband-and-wife team. One of the newspaper reports had a photo from a previous year’s Rainbow Gathering of a circle of singing and stamping dreadlocked guitarists, mud-caked urchins with cheesecloth garments and shoeless children with matted hair. I stitched this image into the sparse narrative threads from newspaper articles and let my imagination weave a frightful story. Evan, the football-loving hunter, attacks a group of effeminate ferals at a festival and holds them under siege as they dance and drum for their lives. I imagined them responding to his knife and crossbow with a kind of helpless pacifism. *Whoa, man, that crossbow is really cramping our vibe.* And then I saw the police blasting in and killing him, without warning, as the flames from a burning hut licked the night sky a fierce black-orange. One night I awoke in a twist of sweaty sheets, gulping for air. Evan had appeared in my dream, aiming the crossbow at my head as I danced a deathly dance with the hippies.

Evan’s story stayed with me for the next few weeks, the surreal and the political jostling for attention. I found an article in the *Sunshine*
Coast Daily that added another dimension to the case. The reporter had posed questions about Evan’s mental health based on his self-description in the ‘about me’ section of his Facebook profile: ‘Evan is lost in a forever changing world. Need internal [sic] GPS to get to hell so i can fight the devil and save my trapped friends and family!’ He was clearly unwell. His friends nicknaming him the ‘Wild Man’ assumed a dark inflection; symptomatic of an undiagnosed mental illness, or one that no one took seriously. It made me wonder about the relationship between masculinity and madness; how myths of larrikinism, of wild men, work to convert male wounds and suffering into humour. The fact that police were unable to deal with his mental illness without killing him also seemed like a common, yet relatively unreported, occurrence. According to a 2013 Australian Institute of Criminology report, there have been 105 people fatally shot by police since 1989–90, and of these 42 per cent had a form of mental illness, with schizophrenia, at 59 per cent, being the most common. In other words, it means that close to half the people shot dead by police since 1989 had a mental illness.

I was determined to tell this story, partly because I thought it mattered and partly because, on a personal level, I was craving something real. I had just completed a PhD on a topic of divine public irrelevance: the role of friendship and love in British imperial expansion into the Pacific. I had spent years holding archival séances with eighteenth-century voyagers. Now I wanted to debate policy. And here was the perfect story to discuss a compelling political issue: should police be given the power to inflict fatal force?

And yet I did nothing.

I told people at barbecues that I would write something on the
issue; I printed out newspaper articles, put them in a folder and forgot about them. Life tends to get in the way of lofty intentions.

Around one year later, a criminal lawyer friend called Peter invited me to his house to watch the cult film *Wake in Fright*. ‘I know of a case coming up at the coroner’s court that’s just like this,’ he said during the opening sequences, and promised to tell me about it after the film. The screen flickered its ghastly vision of the outback: leathery men, kangaroo-shooting, and the amiable violence that laces the request to ‘have another beer’. It made me think of how the gothic played out in Australia compared to in Europe, where hidden rooms in castles were the most obvious settings. Here our sense of the gothic is in the bush. From *Picnic at Hanging Rock* to *Mad Max* to *Wolf Creek*, we have made the outback the site of our darkest fears.

As the credits rolled, I pressed Peter to tell me about the case and heard once again the story of Evan Johnson. I told Peter about my previous interest.

‘You should write something about it. It’s basically fallen into your lap,’ he said.

I agreed. ‘It is a bit of a page-turner, but there are probably enough books out there that contribute to stereotypes of people with mental illnesses as crazed psychopaths.’

Peter nodded, soberly. ‘Police are so ill-equipped to deal with mental illness.’

‘Why did they have to *kill* him?’ I asked. ‘Could’n’t they just have disabled him? It was clear that he was delusional.’

I left Peter’s house wondering what this story would look like if we told it from Evan’s perspective; if we made the so-called psychopath human.
The next day I called the coroner’s court to find out the date of the inquest. It was in one month.

I mulled over whether it was worth showing up. I didn’t want to write a sensationalist thriller, but nor did I want to write a boring political tome about police killings. I also doubted whether the story was the right vehicle to discuss police killings; Evan had threatened the police with a crossbow, after all. What were they meant to do? But perhaps these doubts were precisely what would make it a good story: it was a case at the limits – less obvious or black and white than that of Roberto Laudisio Curti. If I genuinely believed that police should not have the power to take life, then why not test the theory on a case that seemed like the perfect argument for the opposite?

And so, on 24 November 2013, a day bloated with rain and gloom, I rode my bicycle down Parramatta Road to the coroner’s court in Glebe for the opening address of the coronial inquest – only to be told that it would be held in Parramatta local court, thirty minutes away. I gasped, didn’t wait to find out why and rushed to the train station. I reassured myself on the train that court-time is elastic. It’s always about waiting. Once there, I pedalled madly from Parramatta train station to the Coke-bottle brown courthouse, where I chained my bike to a pole near the entrance. I leapt up the courthouse stairs, elbowing my way past the ragged tide of lawyers, suspects, witnesses, friends, family and retiree volunteers, until I arrived outside the heavy, narrow black door of courtroom 1.4, just on 11.15am.

I took the closest seat inside, in front of a woman with a perfect grey bob. As I rustled around in my seat, getting my pen and paper ready, pushing my backpack under my feet, something sharp hit
my shoulder. I jumped and turned to see a tall, shiny-headed police officer holding a black crossbow encased in plastic above my head. It would have spanned from his hips to the ground and been wider than his outstretched arms. What an evil-looking thing it was! Alive with diabolical intent, designed solely to inflict pain and death. The police officer mouthed an apology to me then passed the crossbow over my head to his colleague, who placed it carefully, with frightened reverence, against the defendant’s glass cage in front. I sat staring at it for a few minutes – awe-struck – with the famous Chekhov trope in my mind: the gun on the wall in Act I of the play waits to be discharged at someone’s head in Act III.