From the small Australian press dedicated to promoting new voices in fiction, the *Sleepers Almanac* series is an annual anthology of the press’ top short stories. This year’s installment, *The Sleeper’s Almanac 8*, is a collection of stories in which characters seek out their own singular identity, succeeding as often as they fail. While such a statement might sound like a general formula of the short story or the necessary element of every plot, these voices do so against the post-global anxiety that the distinguishing features of values, voices, cultures and identities have been blurred by the homogenising mechanisation that John Tomlinson identified over twenty years ago in *Globalization and Culture* (1991). And this anxiety over sameness is a legitimate one: critics of previous *Sleeper’s Almanac* editions have cited a lack of diversity among the represented voices that has not been significantly remedied in this edition. Furthering the lack of diversity, most stories here lack any real sense of place; despite the occasional reference to Melbourne or Perth, the various settings might easily be the American city of Chicago or the suburbs of Tokyo. There is no conscious attempt to define what it means to be Australian or the ways in which Australian culture participates in or resists global homogeneity. Which is fine. In fact, this collective blurring of place and voice is rather the point, providing a backdrop for this anxiety that everything has become the same, beige boringness that each individual must actively resist, carving out his or her own individual niche or risk being blurred into boringness along with everyone else. The similarities of voice and place might then actually be necessary in order for this collection to do what it does best: successfully imagine a broad spectrum of distinct subjects that stand in relief to this homogenous landscape, ranging from a Serbian immigrant to a Chinese expatriate to an Australian housewife.

Perhaps the story to most directly grapple with the anxiety of cultural homogeneity is Rhett Davis’ ‘Salad Bar’, the very title of which recalls the various post-colonial food analogies used to describe mixed cultures. This story examines the loss of singularity when personality does not stand in relief to homogeneity, but rather is defined by it. The protagonist is George, a man who, due to some predecessor’s overly zealous reproduction, shares the same unfortunate physical traits as hundreds of others in his small town. George is, essentially, a mass-produced product. Initially, his homogenized appearance does not encourage our protagonist to set himself apart in any way other than to isolate himself from any meaningful relationships. He has no interest in carving out a unique persona, but rather despises and isolates himself from the rest of the Georgeish-looking population, shutting himself in his office and avoiding his responsibilities as a restaurant owner, father, and husband. Yet, ironically, this homogeneity becomes the means of connection and solidarity. When George defends himself against an aggressive customer by spraying him with pudding, George recognises his own features and traits in the pudding-covered man. This recognition of Self in the Other enables him to connect with not only his antagonist, but prompts engagement with and celebration of his surroundings and the people within. George helps the man wipe off the pudding, delegates the duty of managing the restaurant to his competent head waiter, and goes home to move his wife and children off to live near
the Dordogne where he imagines a future in which they will participate in and celebrate the distinctness of the region and each other: returning daily from the morning markets with ‘pungent cheeses, sweet pastries, golden potatoes roasted in duck fat and a hundred variations of raspberries and where I will grow, maybe, to know them’ (75). This final imagining is rich and also distinct, suggesting not only an ability to identify and ‘know’ one’s own self and family, but also an intense desire and hunger to do so.

Not every story adopts this ironic acceptance of homogeneity. While Davis’ definition of self emerges in the escape towards a specific and distinct culture, Isabelle Li’s ‘Narrative of Grief’ loses definition via too many escapes. Lili, a Chinese transplanted to London at the early age of 5, feels herself the product of too many cultures, lacking the distinction that of any of them provide. And while settling in Vancouver just as easily as Beijing might initially seem worldly and exciting, it also creates a profound ambivalence of space and of Self. Lili can only identify herself as ‘a person with no first language’. She is essentially without nationality or identity. And in this way, she is also another version of Davis’ George, a product without any distinguishing features. Yet, as she mourns this fact, the reader is distinctly aware of the strength and intelligence of the voice belonging to this character. And while the abilities and freedoms are enviable, she spends much of the story mourning her rootlessness.

Admittedly, in many of these stories, the future is unclear because it is limitless, the characters facing as many possibilities as there are international airports. These are essentially ‘first world problems’ that coalesce to create an amorphous cloud of opportunities serving to intimidate rather than empower the characters. The result is a collection of people in limbo between homes, devoid of a distinct place to connect to or identify with. They are products of everywhere and nowhere. And if place is what shapes personality, they themselves are in danger of becoming vague and featureless.

Perhaps the story that plays with and resists featurelessness in the most entertaining way is Helen Adison-Smith’s ‘Flatpack’, which trails two hipsters browsing that pinnacle of globalised domestic consumerism, Ikea. Like most hipsters, they are amusingly ironic, but apathetic in their search for and definition of self. And this apathy causes them to become lost in and imprisoned by the vastness and sameness of the store. The story is funny and idiosyncratic, standing alone well. Though it also emphasises the anxiety of cultural homogeneity wherein the few individuals who do have singular personalities do not actively seek authentic definition, but only laugh at and become trapped by a society readily lulled into complacency by chain stores and complimentary meatballs.

While the stories seriously examine a reaction against a growing anxiety, this examination is performed through an idiosyncratic lens: there is Davis’ use of pudding as a weapon, a white substance coating and further obfuscating any distinguishing features. Likewise, Adison-Smith marches an intimidating and hyper-sexualised Ikea employee through her text, one that interrupts and undermines the corporate entity while simultaneously frustrating and thwarting the consumers. Even the stories that initially seem less interesting are themselves experimentations in constructions of meaning-making, or the ways that different cultures ‘make sense’ of issues. Michelle Radtke’s ‘Happy Monday,’ presents a depiction of beige normalcy that many readers might find dull: tragedy has limited the protagonist’s life, forcing her to occupy the domestic sphere, everyday brushing against the unlikely hope of escape. It is a familiar

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enough trope. But the story successfully disrupts this familiarity with a plague of frogs, a beloved addict, and at least one body to dispose of.

Largely, these stories are a call to create one’s own identity through the agency of engaging with and participating in one’s immediate surroundings. And if those surroundings aren’t engaging enough, well then, find some that are. Move to France or to Vancouver, find solidarity with your own personal antagonist. Or kill them with a shovel. The world is small enough. One choice is as plausible as another. Your greatest obstacle is selecting from that mountain of options.

Jennifer Marquardt