



MENISCUS

L I T E R A R Y J O U R N A L

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About Meniscus

Meniscus is a literary journal, published and supported by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) with editors from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

The title of the journal was the result of a visit made by two of the editors to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where James Turrell's extraordinary installation, 'Within without' (2010), led them to think about how surfaces, curves, tension and openness interact. In particular, they were struck by the way in which the surface of the water features, and the uncertainty of the water's containment, seems to analogise the excitement and anxiety inherent in creative practice, and the delicate balance between possibility and impossibility that is found in much good writing.

MENISCUS IS PUBLISHED AS AN INTERACTIVE PDF. Clicking on title or page number in the Contents will take you directly to the selected work. To return to the Contents, click on the page number of the relevant page.

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to *Meniscus* volume 11, issue 2. We weren't sure, eleven years ago, if we'd be able to get a new literary journal up and running, but thanks to our contributors and readers, it has after all happened. Thank you for making our work (a) possible and (b) so rewarding.

For this issue, there was a very large submissions pile, both poetry and prose. This means that far too much quality work was, necessarily, rejected. The principles for selecting about 60 poems and 18 prose works out of over 1,000 submissions required us to make very difficult decisions. The aim was to produce an issue with a balance of style, voice, and content, and ensuring we include some new writers alongside well-established voices.

This is just to say that your disappointment, if your work was declined, is mirrored by our disappointment in not being able to include all the genuinely terrific work submitted. It is also to remind those not selected that this is not a reflection on the quality of your work, but that the laws of physics restricted how much excellent writing we could fit into this limited space. Please keep writing; please keep submitting your work to *Meniscus* and to competitions and to other literary journals.

Far fewer works submitted to this issue than to some of the recent issues focused on the wicked problems besetting the world: climate change, the death throes of capitalism, military activities. More seem to be about individual moments, quotidian pleasures or sorrows: instances of the personal inhabiting the place of the political. Quite a proportion of the works submitted were about writing itself – including the labour of submitting work for publication, and receiving rejections; effectively, reflections on the life of making creative work, and the intersection of craft plus imagination plus physical and emotional labour.

There were no prompts given to contributors, of course; moreover, the contributors hail from every continent, and from both the very young (one author is 11) and those who identify as definitely aged. This

suggests that perhaps there is validity to the notion of the zeitgeist: a trend of thought, interest or concern that seems to be characteristic of a moment in history. If the attention to the personal and local shown in contributions to this issue is an effect of the zeitgeist, we can only celebrate the growing focus on future-mindedness, and on communal compassion.

Also in this issue, we have collated the winning entries for the Translation Prize offered by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs and the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in each of 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. Accompanying the translation are the judge's comments, and the translators' own brief commentary about what their experience of translating the work. Each piece illuminates something moving, surprising, and sometimes familiar from a published prose work that began its life in a different language, and a different context. We value the opportunity to include these, and the contextual writing, in Meniscus.

Jen Webb and Ginna Brock (for the editors)

MAN ON A ROOF

Carolyn Abbs

Half an hour ago, I saw
a skinny young man kneeling
on a tin roof, fitting solar panels:
fluoro vest, jeans, sneakers,
back-to-front hat.

I saw him clamber further up,
fearless as a child climbing the wrong way
up a slippery playground slide. I wiped
from my mind,
the speeding down ...

Instead, I took a photo through a pane
of glass: stark figure
against flat blue, top of eucalypt.
I'll keep him in a freeze-frame, safe
as a stick insect on a gum leaf.

BABUSHKA

Lucy Alexander

'Chernobyl was the site of (one of the) the world's worst nuclear accident and, for the past 27 years, the area around the plant has been known as the Exclusion Zone. And yet, a community of about 200 people live there – almost all of them elderly women. These proud grandmas defied orders to relocate because their connection to their homeland and to their community are "forces that rival even radiation".' Holly Morris, Ted Talk: Why stay in Chernobyl? Because it's home, October 2013

#1

*And when he laid eyes on her
He got the feeling they had met before*

Blushed as fine as an eyelash
a guarded expression from an era
back in Chernobyl when women were skirted
one after the other, testing the mettle
of the men they loved, desired, craved,
skirts hiding so many possibilities
having an underneath where generations of women might crouch
knotted into their very DNA so
any of them could become the other,
and no one could tell.

#2

*'She signed the letter
All yours
Babushka, babushka, babushka ja, ja'*

And how he was before he had met her
how she was before the years left tidemarks on her face and hips
how she was before she'd known that he existed
how she was before the tide came in
how she was before she burnt with rage
when she lost her temper, her daily grace, her faith in love
or the goodness she'd thought of in the world.
Before her hair fell out
her hips opened up
her lips were a snarl
her eyes were sharp
before he had given the highwayman his diamond betrothal ring
on the road to Chernobyl.

#3

*'Uncanny
How she
Reminds him of his little lady ...'*

The Soviet dolls have horsehair fine eyes
and lips that know about the cherry glut
and mitochondrial DNA that goes back
to times before 'Made in the USSR'
and in the tightening of the seams in their wooden joins

(where they would have kept their knees
if they were not given over to hiding places
for sister sister mother aunt grandmother ...)
they squeak like wingless, featherless birds.

#4

She set a trap

But she had been in one so long she didn't see
a jaw on her heel, a chain pegged into the soil
blue where the teeth took on the skin-bruise
oval bite-mark so familiar she wasn't aware
of it, keeping her down, keeping her there, holding her firm
safely embracing her so she wouldn't get lost or
hurt in the woods of Chernobyl where the trees
knot together like Grandmother's knuckles, and are
as wild as wild as she will not have a chance to be.

* This poem references the song 'Babooska' by Kate Bush, as well as the older folk song, 'Sovay', on which 'Babooshka' was based.

DRAG QUEEN LEANING AGAINST THE WALL OUTSIDE *JUST US LOUNGE*

—BILOXI, MISSISSIPPI

JC Alfier

One more night of off-season stragglers. I want to hail them in their passing, invite them inside, but my greetings stay submersed. The longer I sit, the more easily I get shook by sudden footsteps, a flung cigarette. Nordstrom perfume I sprayed on a bit too thick thins in the feral salt air. What I want now is more applause, more greenbacks in my garters, but I've surpassed my quota in the blood-scarlet neon room behind me. I go back inside, rejoin the festive voices, light bouncing off a sister queen assuming centre stage in time-lapse glitter. Some oaf who thought me a whore he could take home – just before saying he was sorry – now sits asleep on a corner stool. I pull up a gin & tonic, feel it roll through me like a French kiss to sugar my breath, letting time crawl like a wounded shadow through this bar that can't ever close. I consider our paltry lighthouse – a mere mile south, glossing the surf, its dash of light sweeping dark tides, brushing the silhouette of a stranger we will never know, one more soul in need of forgiveness.

ESPAÑOL

Marie Anne

1

Conozco bien ese sendero, lo crucé más veces de las que ahora podría recordar. / I do remember the road. I passed it a bunch of times so now it's kinda hard to remember each of them. / En cuatro días visité un pueblo pesquero con un puñado de restaurantes cuyo menú consta de conchas recién sacadas del mar. / It took me four days to visit a coastal town with a fistful of restaurants that had a menu consisting of shells, just recently taken out of the water. / Pero también se pescan otro tipo de tesoros ahí. / Though there are some other types of treasures fished in there.

2

Un cañón subtropical parado en medio del desierto, de piedras rojas y ocre y palmeras que son hogar de miles de insectos. / A subtropical canyon standing in the middle of the desert, with red and ochre stones and palm trees that are home to thousands of insects. / Un estero mineral tan blanco que parece haber sido forrado con mármol y esculpido por un dios. / A very white mineral estuary that seems to be lined with marble and sculpted by a god. / A veces, incluso cuando parpadeo, no lo puedo terminar de asimilar. / Sometimes, even as I blink, I can't wrap my head around its immaculate beauty.

3

Hay algunas cosas que digo, y otras que no puedo evitar escuchar. / There are some things that I say, and others that I cannot help but hearing. / Una música lírica que se intensifica al momento de darle entonación a cada una de las sílabas y las vocales. / A lyrical type of

music that intensifies in the moment I attempt to give an intonation to every syllable and vowel. / El lenguaje es un canto que nace desde nuestro interior. A veces pienso que cuando hablo, en realidad estoy transmitiendo la música escrita en la partitura de mi alma. / Language is more like a chant that is born in our most inner space. Sometimes I think that whenever I speak, I'm actually transmitting the music that is written in the score of my soul. / Es muy delicada esa tarea de traducirse y de aprender a escucharse. / It is quite a delicate task to learn how to translate your ideas while you're also learning how to listen to yourself carefully.

4

Entre dos idiomas: un puente. / Between two languages: one bridge. / A veces soy poesía y otras veces mi vida se resume en los paralelismos de las fábulas. Uno se imaginaría que tal vez ya que se cumplan los treinta, tu mente te dará un respiro, y en tu cabeza dejarás de trasladar el lenguaje de un lado a otro. / Sometimes I am poetry and other times my life is summed up in the parallels of fables. One would imagine that perhaps once you turn thirty, your mind will give you a break, and in your head, you will stop transporting language from one place to another. / Pero es Sonora el lugar en el que me he criado: sus conexiones con la frontera al norte como un panorama transicional, sonoro e inevitable. Y aquí, casi de manera simétrica, se encuentra uno de los muchos valores con los que te educa el mundo. / But we're talking about Sonora as the place where I've been raised: its connections with the northern border as a sonorous and inevitable transitional panorama. And here, almost symmetrically, is one of the many values with which the world educates us.

5

En una hora, la mayoría de los restaurantes en San Carlos sacarán sus mesas y un montón de gringos veteranos irán a ordenar sus

desayunos bajo el sol. Y yo me voy a sentar cerca de allí. Voy a comenzar a regalar mis *Good Morning*, y a los meseros probablemente les diga *Buenos Días*. Escuchar la misma expresión en plural solamente me deja algunas cosas en claro: que en español, muchos queremos que lo bonito se nos multiplique, y que de manera directa, lo manifestamos. Esperamos que la buena fortuna nunca se acabe. /In about an hour, most of the restaurants in San Carlos will be putting their tables and chairs out, and a group of veteran gringos will go ordering their brunch under the sun. I'm gonna start approaching them with a *Good Morning*, and to the waiters I'll probably greet with *Buenos Días*, which basically means that this first expression would be said in its plural form when translated, and this only leaves a few things clear: that in Spanish, a lot of us people desire that good things multiply, and that we will try to manifest so in such a direct manner. We hope our good fortune shall never come to an end.

THE PLAN

Peter Bakowski

6 a.m. Still winter dark.
Gwendoline walks down Oak Street.
The moon, a silver rind.

Troy, he's a good kisser,
but small town,
his carpentry apprenticeship –
a year to go.
Saws, hammers, scaffolding,
among blokes built
of hangovers and cursing.

Sydney. That's the place to be.
Flash cars and clubs. Action. Adrenaline.

Here there's
the General Store,
mulch and firewood out front.

The net of the tennis court
rotted years ago.
At night possums
thump and skitter
on the clubhouse roof.

Money from Mum's purse.
Each week a \$2 coin or a \$5 dollar bill nicked.

Enough for bus fare,
a few nights in a youth hostel.

Get a job in a Kings Cross pub,
pulling beers.

Bob, the owner of the General Store,
has told Gwendoline that she has a nice smile.
He's said it a few more times,
since Meg, his wife died.

Gwendoline hears Poochy, Mr. Crimp's dog, bark again,
as she reaches the end of Oak Street,
maybe for the last time.

DEAD KEEN

Peter Bakowski

Those who stopped at The Three Cockatoos for a quick beer
were on their way to elsewhere –
perhaps marlin fishing near Cairns
or down to Brisbane
to visit relatives, buy an apartment.

Wanda sat at the end barstool,
nursed a tonic water for two hours,
watched Wayne plunk cubes of ice
into fancy drinks, work the soda siphon.

She noticed Wayne's shirt –
two loose buttons, a small tear below the right shoulder.
'That's a nice Hawaiian you're wearing.
I could mend it. Got a sewing kit in my backpack.
Working here, first thing I'd do is wash those curtains ...'

Wayne set Wanda up in the front bedroom
which got a good amount of morning light.

7 a.m. Sunday morning.
Mouth full of tacks, a Stanley knife in her right hand,
Wanda was laying new carpet through the pub, room by room.

Wayne placed a glass of tonic water down on the hallway floor.
She'd reach it by noon, Wayne figured.

OAKLAND 2011

Nicholas Barnes

850 blue steel barrels. crosshairs fixed on your forehead. notes dropped in lockers. unspeakable nicknames. sometimes anon. sometimes not so much. love, pimple mustache. xo. you said get me out of this no gas station for four miles village. shots fired in whistlestops soar. clipped birds are still birds. remember how your heart wings folded origami. halved and brittle. creased. like leather letterman arms. forced to play the game. what if you didn't catch that ball. coaches made a wager. they saw a lump in the endzone. hell, everyone did. a lump in shoulder pads. a lump in the library. a lump in the science lab. a lump learning god only helps lucky kids. please, you said no more no more no more. wishing every night. for someone to take you out of your life. for someone to say get in the car. i've come to save you babe. from your drunk kid dead kid nowhere. your damned rotgut town. your impossible to get out of town. buckle up. curves ahead.

THIS IS THE POEM OF THE MOMENT

Alison J Barton

8

He speaks on a chemical frequency
prepares to take off while remaining grounded
he invites me in, the first page unfinished
about dying, I welcome fallen words, wear floral and hesitate
we will / not get back here

We mimic our mothers' fatigue one hour, one day at a time
I've been meaning to ask if you can tell
I assure him it is truth in halves
inspired by the loss of both parents

7

He taught me that without energy from the moon
the sun is fused atoms radiating together
temperature expanding the strongest gravitational pull
navigating us to the singular present

Pain reminds us to let go together
I was scared / scarred by the door
holding a sickness that precluded hunger
reminding myself that I am lost the closer I get
we gaze into each other as ourselves
we are addiction it feels good, like the new drinking

6

One word between us is dislodged replaces a fantasy
I feel starved trying to give him space and
time keeps a holding pattern
show me every aspect of the ocean
speckled in blue and grey
we're at the shore now, the tide a tumult of tiny pools

5

A woman in a red dress dances by the beach
crimson waving where foam crashes on concrete steps
I forgive myself for when neither of us knew how to stop
for not knowing how to speak, stumbling at each other's feet

I wonder what will frighten me when I return
him mistaking blame for longing
me honest as though truth were spoken by someone who doesn't know
my language

4

I've been told the truth is written by sand
like John Donne's 'death as eternal waking' etched in fine markings
Lacan's delusion is that history is without a patient
I keep my secrets knowing nothing, becoming illness

He collects people who can't speak pretending he doesn't know
refers to us as a flume, carrying water with our hands

3

How do you know the moment someone is letting you go
at once discarding their defence and unfolding you to the ground
my sober addict, my narcissist teaching me a lesson
past present and future, he will come next
my mind failed to capture us because we were an idea
in the library paper flutters to the floor, windows left open again

I calm my silence hiding our names in one another
before the end of the day the last words blocked by books
in the window's light the old high floods me

It's a prescient time to say goodbye
you watched me write this book, you at the centre
our premise put to death

2

He woke me at four-thirty having crept into my head
talking of anonymity and not being seen
it filled me with him again

How did desire become so complex
the name of the father, metaphors of the sea
he said something about its vastness knowing I would never reach it
carrying homesickness without a home

I want to fall into him one more time but I am unable to stomach the
chemical
not everyone wants this, I assure him

Desire doesn't live here anymore
 I learn of my body waiting for the European morning
 the sun to rise in Denmark
 how did I end up here, withered
 a petal on the air disintegrating to a half-dream

I give of myself, demand you come to me
 not as poetry or spilled milk
 but as the mask that taught us to be looked at, as the archivist I lost
 who wanted to see me again and again, with whom I stored the sound
 of hurt

SEVEN MILES FROM MARQUETTE

Carl Boon

The body had lain there so long that pinecones and leaves, some shaped like question marks, outlined it in the snow. So, when the body was finally removed – by gentle, caring hands, no doubt – there was no need to mark its final resting place. They were thankful for that, for it was cold, and approaching nightfall meant the cold would intensify.

They took it to the morgue. Their work complete, they drove through the near-dark to homes where there was soup and fresh bread. They drove, considering their still-living faces in their rearview mirrors, for there remained no need to think about it. Those who'd worked the perimeter had no need to recognise woman or man, though their radios told it was a woman. Had been a woman, but it hardly mattered.

The winters there last long, and though it was nearly the tenth of March winter would remain. For that they were thankful, too, for the cold preserves. One said by the fireplace: 'The eyes remained, and they were blue. The fingernails painted blue. She must have been pretty in life.' We're all pretty in life. We're all pretty when death's a winter fly, slow to realise itself, slow to go from danger.

The story in the newspaper might've been written by Hemingway, its sentences terse, almost not sentences at all. 'There she lay, not fearful of the cold, not cognisant of birds. It must've happened around Christmastime. It must've been a quiet night, far from hawk sound, far from civilisation. Or so they surmise. For them that want to know her name and how she lived, we must wait.'

All of us must wait for something.

MADE FOR TOYS

Iain Britton

1

this is the worst time of the year

for you for me

the suburbs are overcrowded

families squashed in the workforce nervous

i'm told when lightning
plays havoc

it affects speech patterns

the gestures of people

i'm told a textbook on peaceful practices

is obligatory

2

yes this is the worst time

roads fog up car windows ditches disappear into darkness kikuyu
grass cuts through adjacent gullies you describe paddocks boundaries
one drab orchard wanting to blossom you see yourself as someone who
could break the bones of any drought stick a finger into the precipice
of an oozing hill you see yourself unearthing horoscopes adjusting
to observations of black cats mad-eyed owls a Judas sheep in the
backyard

3

often you sit in a room made for house plants

for family stories for playing with toys you imagine

a garden of lanterns miniature shrines a drunk horticulturist

disfigured amongst hydrangeas i watch you ride
a white swan's reflection across a pond

4

i mix talk with silence nudge you off-balance i've entered my soon-
to-be-completed page you pick up on human sounds i'm told your
toys like to argue

EARTH WALKING

Owen Bullock

earth walking its children
knowing concerts dreamt by roots
silences that stood around
giving birth to water, where rocks
fragranced us with streams of dizzy air
above nights dreaming of long years
rock years chiming mists on the mountains
to the pulse of seasons and spirits
passed back to songs taken by fires
of before and after, after and before

pairs of birds frighten each other with love
surrounding tarns with hunchbacked trees
giving time some kind of ruler
not being ruled, all may come here, all may leave

IT IS EVER THUS

Gianoula Burns

It is ever thus. I lay awake in bed waiting to hear the car pull in, the car door open and shut, waiting for him to come home, but grateful he does come home. I wonder why it matters so much, he is an adult now, leads his own life, makes his own decisions without consultation. It is time to let go, but it is hard when he still lives at home. I had no choice with my daughter, she bolted, left too soon, before she or we were ready, and I still worry about her, her decisions are still without thought. As I ponder these thoughts, I hear the front door open and his footsteps, this time I didn't hear the car, odd since all my senses are heightened to such a level. I hear the familiar thump of footsteps in the kitchen as he raids the fridge, checks out the microwave where I said his food would be. A sense of relief and calm flows over me and I now try to sleep. But the sounds do not stop, there is a repetitiveness of movement, back and forth, I sense something is wrong. I lay awake and listen carefully, acutely aware of each breath, each heartbeat, I try to calm my pulse and close my eyes once more, I feel the darkness weigh heavily around me. Then I hear his footsteps come down the hall, opening the bathroom door, I hear him cough, then silence. Then I follow his every movement in my mind listening to him opening and closing doors till he walks towards his bedroom goes in and shuts the door. The night is now quiet, my heart resumes a regular rhythm and I eventually drift off to sleep but it is not for long.

In a half dream, subconscious mind is alerted by a slight click followed by another, then a slow drawn-out squeak of our creaky front door, a presence I've not heard for some time treads upon the slate floor, and closes the door gently but firmly, engaging the deadlock. I follow her progress, for it is indeed her I know, the daughter that left so many

years ago. I hear her hum a tune softly to herself as she lays the keys on the bench, goes to the fridge searching for something to eat, she knows there is always food. The kitchen cupboards opened, a plate retrieved, the heating of food in the microwave, the pulling out of a chair, I can almost hear her eat. Strange that she should return now, alone. Then she places the emptied plate within the sink and walks down the hall in the dark, still humming softly, stops first at what used to be her bedroom door, hesitates for a moment then moves onto the next door, which is now the spare room, opens the door and goes in closing the door behind her. Now all doors are shut, except ours, it was always thus. I cannot open my eyes, my body forbids it and my subconscious coos me back to sleep reassuring me all is well, removing my urge to get up and have a look.

I still feel unsure of what this night brings, but it seems it is not night at all for I soon feel the warm sun upon my back, I feel the cool grains of sand between my toes, and hear the gentle pounding of the sea, a brightness stings my eyes as I slowly, cautiously open them and find myself looking out to sea. There in the distance is a large ferry with a thick yellow stripe and blue writing, 'Levante', I remember it is the one we used to catch from mainland Greece across the Ionian Sea to my birth island Zakynthos. It is close enough for me to see a family on the top deck, a younger me with my teenage daughter on one side and my much younger son on the other, my husband wraps his arm over my shoulder, the breeze is strong as it flaps hair and clothes about and we gaze steadfastly forward at the island the ferry is approaching, in anticipation and excitement. The sight hurts my eyes and I close them to block out the light.

The sun on my back is hotter now, the sand finer and colder, I feel a gust of wind blow sand into my hair and eyes and am wary of opening them. The pounding of waves is louder, and curiosity outweighs fear, so I open my eyes again. There out at sea is my husband on his boogie board, our daughter right beside him on hers, riding the wave into shore as it

heaves forward onto the beach and there is our son splashing and calling to them in agitated delight. They get up laughing and wave at me. I smile and feel a tear flow down my cheek moistening my dry parched skin. I close my eyes seeking the night that I know it must be. Silence falls, as it does with darkness and I listen for more visions, more journeys. I drift off to sleep again but am woken again, this time by voices.

Indistinct voices become words and I feel I am eavesdropping on a conversation I should not hear.

'You know it is time for her to go, she cannot stay here, we have to sell this place. I never liked it anyway,' she says.

He responds in a softer sterner voice, 'This is her home, our home. I cannot move her out, it isn't right.'

I hear her sigh deeply, 'Yes it was *your* home **not** mine, but you must move on, you have another place to go, other responsibilities, she'll be fine there.'

I hear him shudder as if he feels my presence watching him. 'It's not what Dad would have wanted,' he whispers.

The voices fade and I hear no more. Darkness swallows me and I carry its weight as I try to move my body. Sleep falls off me, cast off like an unwanted skin and I am finally able to open my eyes. It is still dark, and the house is quiet, only the gentle drone of people sleeping in the other bedrooms. I get up and dress. I look around my bedroom one last time, at the many photographs of the children smiling at the camera, smiling at me. I walk out into the hallway and up to the kitchen and notice a couple of plates in the sink, some car keys I had never seen before on the bench. I feel the cold of early winter morn and I know it will be colder outside, but I don't care anymore. I grab the car keys from the hook near the coat rack, unlock the front door and leave the house, our home, a home no more. It is time to go.

DRIFTING

Joel Bush

The truck's tail whips
behind us as the front
bumper veers toward the cornfield.
The crunchy spray
of gravel and the engine's roar
form a desperate country symphony.
Each turn brings
a tide of
soda cups, receipts, and wrappers
to my feet.
I tell you to slow down,
to quit drifting, but they are
half-hearted pleas.
I'm seventeen,
and I have three sweat-stained
twenties in my pocket
that you told me to keep.
This scrap metal run
is a goodbye I do not recognise.
I'm a decade late,
but thanks for drifting with me
in my last free summer.

TELL ME THE STORY OF

Sara Cosgrove

translates to find the chisel
grip the stone
and break up history.

when you hid in a cave
after harvesting your fortune
because the warmongers
traversed mountains and oceans and rickety bridges
to find you.

when the captain with an eye patch
whose ship capsized
while he was listening to sirens sing sea shanties
watched precious cargo
sink to the floor.

when one-thousand rejections
didn't stop you from
harnessing happiness
the warrior's way –
with steady stoicism and truths dipped in darkness.

CHICKEN AND CHIPS

Nina Cullen

Mira turns down the laneway and goes in the back door. She stows her bag under the bench and picks her apron off the hook.

‘That you Mira?’ Jenny leans out of the cool room. ‘Are you right to crumb some bananas and pineapple? There was a late run on Hawaiian packs yesterday.’

Mira makes room on the bench and starts patting the pineapple rings with flour. She likes the opening shift. One hour is already done before you even open the doors. Jenny moves a row of cooked chickens up to the top notch. She uses paper towel to blot the sweat running under her glasses, then wipes the lenses which have fogged up.

At 9 o’clock, Mira drags the signs out and latches the doors open. She stands there for a moment waiting for a cool breeze but the lazy air that stirs is already hot. They say it’s going to be a scorcher, Day 2 of a predicted 5-day heat wave. She’s rostered on for every one of them. And whatever the forecast says, it’s more in here, always and forever thanks to the slow spinning heat of thirty roasting chickens, two hot vats of oil and a double bain-marie with three types of roast and whatever else your hot-fried take-away heart desires.

Alas, Lee isn’t here with her today. An 8-hour shift is always more fun with a bestie but she’s halfway up the coast with her family enjoying late lie-ins and as much beach time as she wants. Mira isn’t going anywhere. When she isn’t rostered on here, she’s ‘keeping an eye on’ Augie, her younger brother. He’s too old for it to be called babysitting but too much of an idiot to be trusted on his own.

It’s still early. She serves fruit salad to the shop girls who haven’t breakfasted yet and anything with caffeine to the mum’s pushing prams. The tradies are the only ones ready for hot food. She serves them ribs,

roasts, chicken and chips. Lots of chips and everything with a can of Coke.

Mira’s hair line is sweaty. It itches under her red cap. Her shirt already stinks of chicken fat and sweat. It’s been scrubbed and soaked and had fabric softener added but it always goes back to its greasy default stink. Same with her hair. It could be freshly washed and even have a little life and lift but roasting chicken seeps into everything. She’s already starting from a low base with the uniform. It’s a baggy red t-shirt with a chicken sitting exactly where it doesn’t need to be on her chest, a red cap and knee-length shorts, which is a bit prudish for the beach strip but apparently has something to do with oil spills and OH&S. She looks like a school kid on sport’s day. Androgynous. Anonymous. At least her lank strands of hair get hidden under the cap.

The next wave is young families. Everyone’s always disappointed there’s no fish. The shop is called *Charcoal Chicken*. There are chickens on the sign, painted on the windows and spinning slowly behind the counter but because it’s the beach, people always ask for fish. They order chips as an early lunch for toddlers who need to get to bed. They’re on holidays but cranky. The dads snipe at the mums. The mums are short with the kids and the kids tussle over nothing. Mira doesn’t judge. Augie is way younger than her and owns nothing she actually wants, but they still fight.

There’s an endless parade of bodies walking in and out all day. They’re proudly declared, perfect and seem so incidental to their owners. They aren’t covered-up or hunched over, not clumsy or unpredictable. They’re just the right size, the right shape and colour. They stand around in tiny swimmers, without a trace of agony or effort or self-consciousness. No one is worried about mottled legs under the fluoro lighting. No one wraps a towel tightly around their body. Mira can feel every pimple on her face as she serves and the chafe of her sticky thighs against her shorts.

Two girls in bikinis get drinks out of the fridge. They're Mira's age. Their friends wait out the front on bikes and skateboards. A boy comes in behind them and hangs one arm over each of their shoulders. He whispers. They look down and then throw their heads back. All three of them laugh in unison. At his joke? At Mira? She's aware of her hot face and the t-shirt sticking to her back. There's a slow but constant trickle of sweat that's pooling in her bra. There's no escape from the heat, not neat and dry but thick and sticky, radiating from the coals and the burners and the bain-marie. Jenny can serve them. She needs a drink. She goes to the cool room. There are stories of people who die locked in cool rooms. Maybe not true stories but in movies and often enough that there must be some truth to it. That's no way for a life to end, fists pounding on an insulated door, nothing but frozen chip boxes and condiment supplies for company. And Jenny would be the one to find her eventually. That's not good. She's going through a divorce and doesn't need any more stress. Mira leaves the door open. She stops sagging. The melted parts of her separate back into themselves. She can feel where her body begins and ends but it's only momentary relief. She can't stay in there all shift.

The two girls and guy are still out there. Jenny is busy with the salads, so Mira moves to the till and waits for their order. They put three chocolate milks and four Coke bottles on the counter then move across to look at the hot food. The counter cuts the world in half. Mira's side needs to smile and serve and stay. She's tethered to the hours of her shift. The red bikini leaves the other two and stands in front of Mira.

'Just the chips for me.'

'Make it extra-large,' someone yells from outside.

'Extra-large,' the girl says.

'We just have large. Do you want two of those?'

'Yeah.' She waves Mira onwards.

'And the drinks?' Mira asks.

'Just one of the chocolate milks.'

Mira recognises them now from school. They're in the year above. She keeps her eyes down and nods to show she has the order, then hands over a numbered docket after the girl pays.

'Oh hey.' The girl is looking at her now. 'Megan?'

'Mira.'

'Of course. Mira. Georgie, look. It's Mira! I'm Lara.' Mira had thought it was Laura.

Georgie looks up. She holds the boy's arms around her waist and he leans his chin on her shoulder. They have such casual ownership of each other's skin not like the couples at the bus stop after school, all heat and greedy grabbing. Their touch easy and familiar and practised. It's a subtle signal of how much they've done, that touch can be so light and a body so calm under someone else's fingers. But Mira wouldn't know about that.

'We're just off for a swim.' Of course they are. Mira checks on their chips. She's happy to turn away. They giggle behind her and although there are a million reasons in the world people can laugh, she hates that it was the moment she turned her back to them. She looks down at her stained apron and the ugly shorts that balloon around her bum and waist. They probably aren't even looking at her, but she still wishes she looked better than she does all over-sized t-shirt and messy ponytail poking through her cap.

'Enjoy.' She pushes the chips over.

'Thanks.' Georgie takes both the food and comment like a right. Jenny has finished with the salads, so Mira slips past and heads to the loo. She doesn't want to stand behind the counter while they eat outside.

There's a line going out the door and more people than there should be at this time of the afternoon. It's well past lunch. There's an extra energy to it all too, whispers and restlessness and more talk between strangers than you usually see.

'What's going on?' Mira asks Jenny as they both wait at the fryer.

'Beach is closed. Shark alarm.'

'Really?' It's the only thing that saves these shifts. The shop faces the water. Mira can't see it from behind the counter but when she opens up in the morning or restocks the fridge or wipes down the tables outside, she can. A swim at the end of the day is a return to herself. The restless roil of the water sloughs the day off. She is graceful as she floats on the tug of the tides. There's no shame for the weightless flesh that's hidden beneath the surface. This is the body she takes home with her. Alive again, she smells the salt and hears the gulls call and squabble. She feels the coarse sand and the ocean breeze and licks the salt off her dry skin as she walks to the bus. So, just her luck that the beach is closed.

People are impatient for their orders. They're annoyed at Mira about how long it takes to cook chips because they can't blame her for the closed beach and their unswum swims. Lara and Georgie are back with their boys. They take selfies, check their phones and sun themselves on the tables outside without making any orders. Mira isn't going to say anything, but she hopes Jenny will move them on. She won't though. Girls in bikinis have never been bad for anyone's business, especially when the beach is closed. Georgie's boyfriend eventually peels off and joins the line. He wears boardshorts with no shirt and has a woven band around his wrist and a thin gold chain around his neck. Mira wouldn't have guessed he looked like this under his uniform. She concentrates on the salad she's spooning, trying to give a generous but neat serving so it doesn't all squeeze out when the lid goes on. Her cheeks are hot. She knows they've gone red. She puts a hand to her neck, hoping that hasn't gone red too.

'Just a large chips and gravy.' He stands in front of her, and she fixes on his fingers which drum lightly on the bench. She can't look up because there's nowhere to look that isn't smooth skin or dark hair heading south on his navel. But she's staring there now and is flustered and feels her pulse as if it's in her hands and in her ears beating loud enough for everyone to hear.

'Again.'

'Sorry?' Mira looks up as a reflex.

'Large chips, again. We ordered some before.' His eyes are quite a dull hazel, and she enjoys that he's the one who looks away.

People eat their food slowly but it's hot and the shade is long gone. Hope of the beach re-opening dies off by the time they finish their meals. It's too much to wait it out in the midday sun anyway. It's probably off to the malls or backyard pools or anywhere really with a guarantee of air-conditioning.

Jenny and Mira collapse boxes behind the salad bar. It's slightly cooler away from the eternal spin of cooking chickens and stoked coals.

'That's you, sunshine.' Jenny taps her watch as it changes to four.

'See ya!' Mira unties her apron and heads out the back. It always feels good to finish a shift and step out into the alley. There's a sour milk stink and rotten something but that doesn't matter. She's done.

She heads over to the beach. Even if she can't swim, she needs to see it and put her feet in the sand. She needs to breathe the fresh air before jumping on the bus. She wants it to dry her sweat and dilute the stink of chicken grease. There's no jostle today to cross the road or walk along the Esplanade. She sits on the edge of the walkway and swings her legs over the sand. The water is 30 metres away. So close and so clear, the ridiculous aquamarine that it's famous for. But the water is empty. Not a single soul dots the scene, no surfers beyond the breakers or swimmers in the whitewash. No one stands on the tideline letting sand dig out from under them. A few kids build castles. A few diehards bake on in the sun. But everyone else is gone.

Two lifeguards walk down the steps to Mira's right. They balance a set of red and yellow flags between them. One of them squints up at her. 'Good timing. We're back in business.'

She jumps off onto the sand and follows them down to the water. By the time they've taken the *beach closed* sign down, she's waiting at the

tide line with shoes and clothes off. When the flags go up, it's her signal. She's in the water, striding to get depth. She's immune to the fresh splash on her skin. There's no time to flinch or stop and wait for the cold creep and acclimatise. She pushes through the shallow white wash, her thighs flicking up spray so she's already wet as it gets deeper. She still has to go under though, full immersion. She drops into the water and stays low to the sand. Looking up at the sky through the glassy abstraction, she can see that the wave has washed past her. She's pulled on the drag as it washes in to shore and she rises. Dripping. Reborn.

A few people have realised the beach is open again. They drop bags and step out of clothes. The castle kids are getting floaties on but until any of them reach the shallows, it's just Mira. The water tells her exactly where she starts and finishes and every part of her is touched, every part held.

TEMPORAL DISINTEGRATION LOVE POEM

Toby Davidson

Is love the blood of the universe?

The Log Lady, *Twin Peaks*

Love, the stupefied days run together, are marked before they reach us. We keep and lose track, change clothes, re-adapt. It's all we've got to go on.

Love, state-sanctioned fugue-states never slow so much as soften, we'll have to get used to each other like this. Wine night is a yes and a cure for prediction. Each of the speeds we can't see are still there.

Love, in your loading screens my resting face is fear. But if we finish *Twin Peaks*, are you darting through pines, squawking backwards, snapping at flesh-folds of mist?

Love, float closer in a Newport seabath, mischievous sun-struck glint on your cheek. I try survival backstroke for its jellyfish laziness, reach back for concrete and scrape my left wrist. White-bellied crabs in the corner drain flinch, return to their slime soon, according to the water.

Love, are we both meant to be at work? Bungan Head dodged a microburst tornado three or four daily briefings back. Lord, the hostage negotiations, inner sanctums ...

Love, your glib immunity just ate the sun, now you're only showing off. It's warped to be aging in sight of this, especially now birthdays are dead, if we're honest, for adults, and aging's not current but twice as annihilating and is likewise showing off.

Love, if we float belly-up (not the dead man's), the stinging corners of our eyes contain two vanishing points of the same collapsing star down to the atom of time we fell out of. And on to thoughts of dinner.

Love, you were there, throughout weightlessness and weight, fierce as the rocking mirror itself, the face you radiate when you don't really have to. No one's fickle (as distinct from arbitrary), not even the big daddy of passable gasping, not even the sheep's blood delivered to our door.

Love, disintegrating in you was relief when we were hard-headed and time-poor. Let's make our ways, distress or mend some. It's just not the night to take us home, save for more futureless monitoring.

OUR TEETH ARE CLEAN

Laine Derr

Though touch and go for
a year, my wife and I are
middle-class again, yeah!

Our parents are proud.
Our teeth are clean.
Our trips are charted.
Our cholesterol is high.

We watch news again,
laughing – Ha, Ha, Ha.

We sing songs again,
warbling – Hu, Ha, He.

Kissed by an inflamed sun,
children draw disease again,
milky flesh (winning smiles).

DAIRY QUEEN

Seanse Lynch Ducken

Then, one evening in July,
the power went out. Suddenly
and all at once the ATMs made
a sound like a spaceship
powering down and all the lights
on the cash registers dimmed
then went dark. I flicked
the switch on the Blizzard spindle,
and there was nothing.

We waited a quarter of an hour
until the owner stopped by to tell
us we could close the store.
Just until the lights
came back on. So we funnelled
out the front door. Julie,
our evening manager, snapped
flames out of a cheap lighter,
lit a cigarette, and walked
to the end of the parking lot.
Liz and I could see laughter
shaking under her backbone,
as she spoke into her Nokia flip phone.

Liz sat on the edge
of the sidewalk by the front door.
She stretched her arms, leaned

forward and rolled dried syrup off
her shoes. I kicked the base
of the decorative Mugo pine
that blocked the windows.

July in Ellensburg. The sun going down
behind Elk Heights. The pavement
just starting to cool. Already there'd been
wind and dirt, wind and pollen.
Now, the air was as still as pond

water and just as warm. I looked
north. There were the hills.
There were the pastures, green
and gold, unfastened and waving
like Julie's long hair coming out

of its braid. If I'd known then
that in the coming months,
the pastures would be bulldozed
and the hills burned, would I have
run out into them?

Instead, I stood, still, praying the power
would never come back on,
stood in my teal and navy uniform
passed down from one generation
of teenagers to another, my apron,
dotted with ice milk
and hot fudge: a landscape
of its own making, some cryptic
trail guide to that day
and the next and the next.

FLAGS

Nicholas Duddy

We lived in Adelaide, at the bottom of the world. We lived in the city of churches and the capital of murders, so it was told. We lived in the eastern suburbs, on the edge of a postcode my neighbours treasured like a lucky lotto number, at the end of a street lined by oaks and jacarandas and BMWs, in a cream brick cottage shadowed by a bluestone mansion, beside a creek separating the affluent from the effluent. We lived, back then.

Our house was built in the seventies when architects who'd licked too much LSD the decade prior found awe in the awful. *The Band-Aid*, I once overheard a neighbour call our house after too many cognacs. Besides sobriety, only one thing could silence this sobriquet: our front garden.

My parents spent every weekend in the garden. It was their lone indulgence. The sun turned Dad pink and Mum gold as they weeded and planted and fertilised. Dad wore the same hat, a Redlegs cap blanched by sweat, and the aviator sunglasses he won in an RSL raffle. Mum had rituals of her own: praying to the soil, pissing on the citrus, seeding the morning after a full moon.

The garden was never finished. Dad tacked a lean-to shed on the side of our home to store their tools and mulch and dreams. A lavender hedge, a herb wall, a row of golden elms – every Saturday brought a new idea to transform our quarter-acre block, and all afternoon my parents cut back the roses and swept blood-and-bone off the driveway and braced crooked trunks with bamboo stakes until the brass arpeggio of the ABC news beckoned them into the shed for a VB and a breather.

One feature never changed. In the middle of our garden stood the flagpole, ten metres tall. The previous owner, a Vietnam vet who hated

potheads and hippies and pacifists, installed it during the Gulf War, and along with a variable mortgage, my father had bought the house from him with a fixed promise to continue flying the Australian flag.

At the beginning of every year, my father rotated the flags. He stood by the pole in our front garden and lowered last year's flag, folding it into perfect eighths, before placing it on the top shelf of the shed cabinet where it would sit for twelve months, saluted by slaters and silverfish. He then took a fresh flag and called Mum and Luke and me over to the pole. The four of us pulled the rope, defeating an invisible enemy in our annual tug of war, staking a claim on our plot of suburbia or, as Dad saw it, *nirvana*. Later, at the end of that long January day, at the start of another short year, my parents stood beneath the pole, trowels scattered at their feet, the flag and their faces vanishing with daylight.

On that Saturday my parents weren't in the garden. They were away for the weekend to celebrate their anniversary. The actual date wasn't for another two months, but they had a voucher for an overnight stay in Victor Harbor that was nearing its expiry. All week Dad had retold their first encounter at a pub carvery to the point where John and Judy's *meat* cute (his joke, not mine) was now mythic: the odd couple swapping tongs in the salad bar line, Dad with the poor posture he blamed for his paunch, his rounded shoulders holding not only his neck but the decades, each year sloping his chest closer to his toes, and Mum beside him, tall and thin, a woman who drifted across space, a wraith of grace, soles kissing the floor with each footstep, and then later, their friends long gone, the INXS cover band still playing on, the two of them dancing in the beer garden beneath neon fairy lights.

On that Saturday there was a party in the park by school. It was mere days before I started year twelve. I was seventeen. My friends and I were at that immortal age, in that space between adolescence and adulthood. Maturity came with a new millennium. Y2K and 9/11, Bush and bin Laden, Myspace and YouTube. Just as we sought sure footing,

the world was shifting. The War on Terror, the Boxing Day Tsunami, the Black Tuesday bushfires. We'd spent those precious few months committing infinite acts of rebellion: hotboxing in the Macca's carpark, stealing the one street sign bearing Dominic Bartniki's Polish surname for his birthday, flipping over the reversible L plates to Ps and zigzagging across Colonel Light's grid plan of Adelaide in the freedom of darkness. Though my friends and I never said anything, we all knew the year to come would be the most important of our lives, and with each sunset our last summer was shrinking.

I didn't mention the party to my parents. As much as they were free-spirited, they were also high-minded. Dad was still the mirror of his father – suspicious of compliments, resentful of limp handshakes, inured to maximum hours and minimum wages. Mum was still militant about manners. Splayed elbows were banned, straight backs enforced. Six o'clock was dinnertime. It didn't matter where you'd been, Rundle Mall or a Finks' rendezvous, you had to slide into the ladder-back chairs before the kitchen's two arrows became one.

They had asked me to look after Luke. My younger brother was different. He spent school lunchtimes sitting beneath the gums on the far side of the oval, alone with the atlas he carried everywhere, memorising the flags and capitals and populations of each country. On that Saturday he was up to São Tomé and Príncipe. Only forty-four to go. He had no interest in sports or other students. He barely spoke to his teachers. This worried the school. Our principal advised my parents and him to go to counselling; my parents advised our principal to go to hell.

Even now, I can still see Luke on that afternoon, all tangled curls and tanned skin, plugging his thumb in the garden hose, water shooting into sky, a rainbow atomised in the summer air. He lowers the hose, brings it to his mouth and drinks greedily, water gushing down his acne-flecked chin. I twist the tap and the pressure increases, soaking his striped t-shirt. A heartbeat of silence. Our eyes widen. He darts

down the driveway towards me, laughing, the hose wrapped around his wrist, a pistol in his hands, our shadows slick across the bitumen.

Later, we're sitting in the lounge room watching Australia's Funniest Home Videos. Though he never laughs, it's his favourite show. Besides when he's at school, my brother doesn't like being alone. We never say much to each other, but we spend days and nights like this, sitting in a silence that will feel sacred in the years to come. Sometimes he'll ask a question – about galaxies or mitochondria or the stock market – and I'll always be without an answer.

Just as a water-skier somersaults across the Murray, there's a knock at the door. I slide off the couch. A delivery man hands me two greasy pizza boxes and a silver baton of garlic bread, and I slip him the ten-dollar note and discount coupon Mum stuck to the fridge. I stand on the doorstep, the evening air, warm and heavy, washing over me. Outside it's neither light nor dark, the sky a navy-gold gradient. I lean against the hot bricks, exhaling with the city after another thirty-degree day, listening to the crickets, their summer siren broken only by barking dogs and backfiring cars and the laugh track from the lounge room. In the middle of our garden, below the yellow moon, the flag trembles with the touch of breeze.

I hand my brother his pizza and a knife and fork. He places the box in front of him, parallel to the atlas. I yank a handful of tissues from the coffee table and hurl them at my brother's feet.

'Don't get pizza on the carpet.'

'Harrison,' Luke says, cutting his pizza. 'Did you know that each cigarette takes seven minutes off your life?'

'Oh, yeah?' I fold my meatlovers into a wad of flesh. 'What about each pizza slice?'

He doesn't answer. On TV, a toothless grandfather chases a teething puppy chewing his dentures, the geriatric and the German shepherd bounding after one another to the Benny Hill Theme. Once more we sit in silence before the screen, listening to fake hysterics and shouting

voiceover and synthetic sound effects, watching dancing cats and defecating toddlers and bridegrooms slipping into swimming pools, until the pizza boxes are all but oil on cardboard.

A news update. With a gentle hand, the weatherwoman shows the storm rolling across the Nullarbor. The temperature is already dropping. I shut the kitchen windows. Luke's voice rises from the other room.

'Harrison,' he begins. 'If God exists, why does Mrs Bell have leukaemia and Principal Goffin doesn't?'

I pretend not to hear the question. We put on a film, Luke's favourite, borrowed from Blockbuster, but all I can think about are my friends having fun at the party. Finally, Tom Hanks stares down the crossroads and the credits roll.

'Do you think Wilson finds another man?' Luke asks.

'For sure,' I say. 'Plenty more men in the sea.'

'South Pacific.'

'Huh?'

He raises the atlas. 'They were stranded in the South Pacific.'

'Right,' I say. 'Time for bed, Luke.'

The park is only fifteen minutes away. It's right near school, near the two-storey neo-Georgian home my geography teacher showed us one lesson, declaring that the Greatest Australian, Sir Donald Bradman, died there four years ago to the day, just short of a century like his batting average.

The neighbourhood is empty, the moon full. Thunder beats in the sky. Lightning breaks over the distant hills in silver veins. I crack open a beer stolen from Dad's shed, the metallic clang echoing down the street. My throat burns and my head aches as I drain half the can. Oak trees shake with wind, shadows crawling across the backstreets. I crush the can and toss it to the ground. I walk faster, bitumen warm under my feet, breeze cool on my face, the park only a few endless streets away.

But then I hear it behind – shattered twigs, crushed acorns, footsteps. I turn around.

'You shouldn't litter,' Luke whispers, stepping out of the shadows in his dog-chewed slippers, one hand holding the beer can, the other the atlas.

'Luke! What are you doing?'

He squeezes the atlas to his chest.

'You can't come with me.'

'Harrison, please.'

'Luke, it's late. You should be in bed.'

'So should you.'

'Come on,' I say, walking past him. 'Home time.'

'Harrison,' he says, voice breaking. 'I won't tell.'

I stop. There's a feeling, a desire, a ferocity in his tone I've never heard. He hasn't moved. Beneath the streetlight his cream jammies are gold. 'Promise?'

He places a hand on the atlas. 'Promise.'

The park is bright with night. There must be a hundred people lying in the grass, hanging from the monkey bars, dancing on the hardwood benches. The old grandstand looms at the edge of the oval, its weathervane twitching with the wind, its broken clock watching us like a big white eye.

We're sitting on the cricket wicket, passing around a goon sack. I watch my friends fumble with rollies as Luke answers their geography questions. At first, they check the atlas, but they soon trust his word. *Valletta. Thirteen point four million. Red and white stripes with a green tree.* My friends laugh in disbelief, and I wink at Luke. He hugs the atlas.

Voices ring in the night. The thunderstorm swells, wind hissing through the leaves, rain heaving across the park in waves. Everybody scrambles to the grandstand for shelter. But then one boy stops, stands still. He rips off his shirt, beats his fists against his bare chest and

shouts into the downpour. He sprints across the oval, then jumps, arms extended, his body sliding across the grass. He stands, gum leaves like scale armour on his skin, and salutes the cheering grandstand. A shadow runs to him, then another, and another, until everybody is back on the oval.

'Come on,' I say to Luke.

We join the crowd. We tilt our heads and taste the night on our tongues. We scream and stomp and bang glass bottles in defiance of the deluge. We fold empty slabs into cardboard sleds and skim across puddles. We toss empty beer tins into the wind and chase them as they fly and spin. The sky shakes and strobes, and we sing and dance, bathing in rain and fire, in newborn showers and dying starlight, the constellations in our eyes, the cosmos in our bones.

Luke jumps up and down. I call his name, but he doesn't hear. His soaked pyjamas stick to him like a hide. With each leap, he screams at the sky, his voice cutting through the storm, laughter louder than thunder. He drops his atlas. Pulls off his pyjama top. His slippers sink into the grass, knees buckling, legs folding, straightening, propelling him off our earth and into the air where he suspends, arms above his head, the wet cloth held high, a white flag not of surrender but forever. As gravity guides his feet to the ground, he finally sees me, his lips stretching wide, his smile reflecting mine –

Crack! Light blurs. My head jerks. Legs sway. I glance at the others around me, at shadows braced in shock. Somebody is screaming. I can't hear who. Or why. My chest heaves and breath spills from my lips. Voice follows. Flickering in slow frames against arrows of rain, silhouettes race to the figure face down in the grass.

They turn over the motionless body, the moonlit boy.

Months later, I'm standing on the verandah after dinner. The night is cold and clear, winter looming in the wind. The shed window throws light across the garden. The flag's static sounds through the silence.

I knock on the rusting door. A metallic echo. I open it to the pine-and-kerosene stink. Strung from an extension cord, a floodlight irradiates the shed with a blinding glow, moths flitting in the rafters like spectres of darkness. Hammers and spanners hang from the pegboard, texta outlining missing tools like a chalked crime scene. Tents and camping chairs and tackle boxes pile in the corners. Above the workbench, a dirty window overlooks the front garden, cigarettes and beer cans lining the sill. Then I see it, through the cabinet's thin crack, resting on the shelf, the atlas. I savour its heaviness in my hands, run my finger down its crooked spine, thumb pages ridged by rain.

With every page, I trace the days. I see the outline of Mum in the morning, circling the garden as she sprinkles seeds, disappearing with each loop, fading in the rising light. I see the blur of Dad in the evening, hunched over our computer the size of a crate, typing one-fingered, keys clacking through the house as if in code, code not just for the World Wide Web but for the universe and all our stars hold. I see their silhouettes in the school chapel, Mum beside the pulpit wreathed with white roses from the garden, ethereal as ever, and Dad backlit by sunshine and stained glass, aviators over his eyes.

The door creaks.

'What are you doing?' he spits. 'Put it down.'

I lower the book. 'Sorry.'

He slams the cabinet shut and paces the shed, his body swaying, as if slow dancing with himself, until he stoops over the workbench. In the window I catch his reflection, his shaking head, scrunched face, twisted lips. His breath flares on the glass, plumes like smoke in the air. His fists dig into wood, bulging knuckles like skulls. 'Why –'

'John,' says a woman now on the window behind.

We stand together in the shed, in the unsaid, Dad's hushed words hanging in the freezing air between us, as if crystallising in the condensation.

'Harry,' she whispers. 'Give us a minute.'

I step outside. A voice croaks in the shed behind, a single word, two brittle syllables, what could be *Judy* or *Jesus*. As I walk down the driveway, I see that day from months ago, a mirage through the May dark. I see myself kneeling over my brother, a fragile thing of thirteen years, his cheeks purple, his eyes placid, weight through my arms as I press my palms on his chest, as I push him away with each compression, as I bury his warm body in the wet grass.

I stop by the pole. Years from now, long after the house is sold, after the garden is covered with concrete and the flag is lowered one last time, I'm still here, watching the shed, the shadows in the window.

ON THE BUS

MB Effendi

It was very early in the morning when I caught the bus. Afraid I wouldn't make it on time, I left my apartment an hour early. I took the most circuitous route to the bus stop; call me old-fashioned, but I find relying on my instincts at the pitch of stress to be much more reliable than aimlessly trusting my phone to lead the way. Even if I have to rush through alleys overhung with baby-orange clouds of aurora, through obscure neighbourhoods, or through streets mostly deserted but for the occasional silhouette in a top hat who would cross the street from afar to avoid passing by me, I still feel at greater ease at least knowing how I got to where I needed to go.

I hadn't spoken a word to anyone on my way to the bus stop. Frankly, I didn't have much of an opportunity to. I'm not lying; parents quickly drew their curtains shut when they saw me walking on the sidewalk and teenagers seated on empty park benches photographed me with their phones as I passed by and even this one old lady hobbled to the other side of the street upon my approach as if she would rather endure death than suffer my fleeting presence. Yet, as I climbed onto the bus, somehow, I bore a silent burden of remorse for wronging all those people en route to my bus seat. My very existence seemed to wrong them.

The bus was crowded. I sat alone beside an emergency exit window, glancing up from my phone screen at the newly arrived passengers who tried as noiselessly as possible to settle in the hard plastic seats.

At every stop, I didn't dare look up from my phone screen; I didn't want to risk making awkward eye contact with a newly arrived passenger. Only when their backs were turned and their immediate preoccupation became their comfort, I would steal a glance or two at their general movements. Otherwise, I didn't care to busy myself with the strangers

around me. It's not like I was too socially inept to know how to talk with a stranger on the bus. Quite the opposite, I was very outgoing and sociable in my free time; ask around the mosques of Dallas, if you don't believe me; any acquaintance of mine can recall a myriad of instances after Friday prayer where I successfully rallied a portion of the men for a cup of tea and a game of cards at my apartment. On the bus I chose – yes, chose! – to withdraw into the serene gardens of prayer in my head where the buzz of divine devotion overlay the withering of my vices.

May Allah forgive me: I am not being totally sincere with you. The social part of me, I suppose, withers before these people. Like a son's tongue crumbles to filial ash before his father. I don't know why. It's not like I have some overweening respect for them which silences me in their presence. If anything, I would say I actually harbour some unspoken grievances about the careless ways with which they handle their lives: like ravenous animals, they plunge into each other's beds; they stuff themselves to the bursting point with beer and swine; drunk on their own imbecility, they exist within their bubble-like lives on their large island, toting the flag of liberty while their rulers divide and plunder nations abroad too small to even be heard in their death throes; and they turn their severe proud features from us tourists, effortlessly seeming to condemn the friendliness which, as a tourist, I prefer to invest in the locals, if only to distract them from the imminent realisation that I do not belong here. Am I wrong not to tolerate them and their madness?

'Backdoor! Backdoor!' a raspy voice shouted behind me.

The backdoor hissed open. A mob of shoes clattered off the bus, making one side of the bus sway lightly as each passenger alighted onto the curb below. After the passengers had gotten off, silence hovered in the doorway.

The backdoor hissed shut. A crisp breeze was expelled between the doors, slapping one side of my face. I felt refreshed and soothed. My nostrils suddenly yawned to welcome the sleepy fumes unfurling off every other unwashed head.

Prompted, I looked around: the bus lurched forward, jostling the limp passengers. Their heads bobbed with the dizzying ups and downs of the road. It seemed as if this bus ride cast a numb spell on its riders, which wouldn't wear off until the end of a workday or during a stroll alone on a moonlit street when they could convalesce from the monotonous rotations of worry and realise that all these little destinations in a day will never best the big destination at the end of a lifetime.

I turned around to face the front of the bus. Abruptly, I noticed a stocky businessman seated directly before me. He wore a navy-blue blazer of an academic sense. Flecks of dandruff spotted his shoulders. Glancing up, I contemplated his greying afro without a thought in my mind. When did he get here?

Before I could answer myself, a lanky figure appeared over the businessman's dandruff-spotted shoulders. I absently observed a bald white man carrying black plastic bags board at the front of the bus. He swiped his bus pass under the scanner stationed beside the bus driver's seat. When the scanner gleefully beeped, he swung his lanky build into an empty seat whose back was positioned against the tinted windows.

I didn't plan on stalking him; but some oddly magnetic quality about him encouraged me to steal glances. He wore golden, horn-rimmed glasses with glistening diamonds studded around the frame. A long silver chain hung from his neck between the glossy silver-plated buttons of a clean black leather jacket. He wore grey chino pants that fit nicely around his thighs. He had white scuffed Air Force Ones on, which would occasionally tap against the dirty floor as if to punctuate the developing rhythms of a thought.

Was I staring at him? I didn't think so. I recalled the respectful looking-time here was only a few seconds; people prefer to be left alone; if he had caught me looking at him – thank Allah he didn't! – but if he had, he could have reasonably heckled me or threatened my life. Seriously. I've heard disturbing stories from my fellow tourists who on occasion unintentionally bother the locals here.

Suddenly fearing he might catch me staring at him, I resorted to observation of his opaque reflection on the emergency exit window. His silhouettish reflection melded into a handprint beside the emergency exit latch where I sat; but I could still discern his movements just fine.

With his bags propped against the seat beside him, he reached inside and pulled out a newspaper sleeve folded in half with a healthy rubber band. He unbound the newspaper; a slim stack of lottery tickets slid onto his lap. Picking up a lottery ticket, he ruminated over its unscratched purple circles with a pouty face. He tilted the lottery ticket from side to side under the harsh ceiling light as if his destiny was spelled in its purple circles. He placed the lottery ticket on his thigh, reaching into his black bag.

But he froze.

Literally, his entire body stiffened as he went to reach into the bag. His bloodshot eyes stayed open. Either my eyes were lagging, or a profound realisation had hit him at the most random moment.

When he would not move, I started to worry that something fatal had happened to him. I glanced around me to see if any of the passengers were seeing what I was seeing.

They were not.

Farther down the rows, a construction worker with headphones covering his ears continued to gaze out the window. Some hunched student kept typing something on an iPad. This pair of middle-aged women chatted in hushed tones over a dozing fat man who sat between them. A nurse in scrubs held her hands in her lap, staring at the floor.

What the hell's wrong with these people? Do they not see their fellow man in need? Do they not care for their own countrymen? If they don't care for one of their own, what makes me think they care for me?

I snapped my head back at the frozen man.

He was staring at me. His mouth dangled open, forming an 'O' with his saltine-thin, chapped lips. A small glistening bead of sweat trailed down his brow. Crow's feet branched out the corners of his eyes. Each

wrinkle whispered a tale of spurned ambition buried long ago in the shadows of his past.

He stood up. Composing his wrinkled face, he pointed his long index finger at me. His beetle black pupils looked politely furious.

Surely he wasn't pointing at me. He was singling out the construction worker who sat behind me. Perhaps, he recognised his face from a stroll long ago on the beaches of Trinidad or from under the flashing strobe lights of the nightclubs of Beirut. Perhaps the construction worker had boarded the same plane as him at one point in their itinerary lives. It was a one-way trip home. By coincidence, they'd sat side-by-side, talking for the entire flight, privately mourning the casual moment when they would part from each other's lives at their respective gates despite the fact that they both dwelt under the same skies and that a simple exchange of numbers or socials could have easily lessened the burden of those lonely hours which reign in unquestioned authority when the apartment door closes on the outside world. Perhaps this was all a joke – people love to joke here, right? – and he just wanted to bother me because I had been bothering him with my furtive stares; and because his blood's light (as the Arabic expression goes), he will take this joke further than most by continuing to bore his eyes into my soul. But I should breathe (am I breathing?) since this is one huge misunderstanding which can be rectified by a discreet smile or by a remorseful show of running your little finger along your eyebrows or by gazing out my window until he goes away. Even if he forcibly tried to pry my face towards him, I would steady my jaws like a bull, withstand his dirty fingernails clawing into my flesh.

I pointed at myself with a questioning look on my face.

He nodded.

I pointed at the crotchet white *Kufi* cap on my head.

He nodded.

At that, I'd had enough.

'No,' I commanded in a whisper. What had happened to my voice? I was normally very loud, especially if I refused someone something. Repeating my refusal, I felt dry air pass over my lips.

He just kept staring at me.

'No,' I repeated a little louder than before. This time I cleared my throat afterwards in case I'd have to speak again.

He described a sweeping motion with his index finger at something behind me.

I turned around.

Every passenger was on their feet. They were staring at me. Their lips formed a startled 'O'. Their index fingers were raised at me: all at once, as if they had choreographed this part of the show, they pointed at my head. *My Kufi.*

'No!' I shouted with a voice lost at the bottom of a well.

Simultaneously, they nodded with one head.

I turned to the bald man, desperate.

While turning toward him, I caught a glimpse of the bus driver within the wide rearview mirror. With one eye on the rapidly descending road, his other eye fixed me with a cold stare. The rearview mirror froze a reflection of him pointing his index finger at my head.

My Kufi.

I felt something release in my chest. Like a lone glacier drifting away from a tundra. I knew right then that the bus driver had sealed my fate with his concurrence. Any slightest resistance which I might have posed against these brainless hooligans was dismissed by the authority of his opinion. Not that I necessarily planned on taking them all on by myself, that would be suicide. But in moments of crippling weakness, when I sensed the boundless distance that sequestered me from the people of this country in a den of private grievances from where I longed to live the tortured lives of my countrymen, if only to relive my familiar image of humanity, I would reach out to my Lord. Until now, I thought this

was the best possible action I could take. But, thanks to them, I realised the futility of my prayer.

I took my *Kufi* off. Placing it on the empty seat next to me, I looked around me. The bald man and the rest of the passengers now pointed at my chest. *My Thobe?*

They nodded with one head.

I pulled the spotlessly white *Thobe* off my body, folding it atop the *Kufi* on the adjacent seat. I stood there wearing nothing but a white undershirt tucked into a *Sirwal* (i.e. white baggy underpants).

Without looking up, I stripped down to my brazenly hairy thighs. The white undershirt was discarded under my bus seat, already dirtied by dust-motes on the floor. My underpants lay wrangled over my *Thobe*.

I turned to the bald man.

His index finger was aimed at the emergency exit window beside me. He mouthed 'open'. I understood at once.

Glancing back a last time at the bus driver in the rearview mirror who kept mouthing 'open', I turned to my fellow passengers. As if I expected them to reveal a contradictory opinion. They had their index fingers aimed at the emergency exit window, mouthing 'open'.

I pulled the emergency exit window latch downwards. A sheet of glass dropped down. A humid current of air fluttered by the open window; it encouraged me to take the leap. I climbed out the window, fluttering into the dusky morning like a loose sheet of paper.

DISCARDS

Marco Etheridge

An apparition of Danny Young materialises on the concrete driveway, stepping from the cave of a two-car garage into the dazzling sunlight of yet another bright and blighted day. Danny's ghost freezes under the hot sun, shoulders slumping.

His arms hang at his sides, each fist clenched around the neck of a razor scooter. One scooter is larger than the other, a mismatched duo of playthings discarded by misplaced siblings.

Danny raises his unshaven face to the heavens. His tongue stirs, lips move. He heaps curses on the blue sky, the malevolent sun, and the broken scarp of mountains on the horizon. Dropping his chin to his chest, he sees his elongated shadow and curses that as well.

Daniel Young, Danny to his friends, is thirty-five years old, friendless, churchless, lives alone in a naturally landscaped three-bedroom two-bath split-level suburban house painted in one of the four colour combinations sanctioned by the Home Owners Association.

The stricken man raises his eyes. He looks down the impossible length of the driveway. The double-wide concrete ends at an empty sidewalk. Beyond that, standing upright at a slanted curb, a dull grey garbage bin shimmers in the morning heat. Stencilled on the side of the bin are the words Washington County Solid Waste.

Danny blows out a harsh breath. He takes one step, then another, trudging forward as a condemned man to the gallows. He walks and walks but gets no closer to his goal. The garbage bin rolls away on its black plastic wheels, chasing a vanishing point far out beyond the scrub desert horizon, and taunting Danny to follow.

He quickens his pace. The razor scooters bang against his bare ankles. His bare feet slap the sun-warm concrete, gaining ground on

the fleeing bin, drawing closer. He sprints the last hundred yards and captures the cursed thing before it can make its escape into the open desert.

Danny drops the scooters. They clatter to the pavement. He clutches the grey plastic, holds it in place. He stands over his captured foe, knuckles white, the rough edges of the garbage bin cutting into the flesh of his palms. His breath comes in gasps.

The bin is overloaded with the remnants of a hastily discarded life, top-heavy with junk, its lid flopped open and hanging down the backside. A kid's bicycle juts above the top edge, handlebars and front wheel reaching for the empty sky. Lopsided stuffed animals rest atop the white tulle of a wedding dress. Ski poles poke through the crumpled lace like alien antennae searching for a signal to phone home.

A wave of loathing surges through Danny's body, bursting white-hot in his skull. He lets go of the bin, takes one step back, and deals the hated thing a vicious kick. His toes crumple, the bin totters, and pain stabs up his leg. Hopping and cursing, he catches the bin before it topples.

Rage drains out onto the empty pavement and evaporates in the sunlight. Danny stares down at the razor scooters lying on the sidewalk. He plants his throbbing foot, grimaces at the pain, and bends forward with groping fingers.

Danny crams the first scooter into the mess of stuffed animals and white fabric, ramming it down again and again. He grabs the remaining scooter and stacks it atop the first. The tee handles hang over the front edge of the bin like skeletal arms.

Hands on his hips, Danny stares up into the cloudless sky. Soon, a truck will rumble down the curved street. The hydraulic lift will whine, the bin will bang, and the remains of his life will be carried away.

The thought forces a bitter laugh from his throat. What life? A mirage, all of it. Waking up to an empty house, a note on the kitchen counter. Clara running off to Vegas with their next-door neighbour.

Jerry, the local pastor, a pillar of the community, the wife-stealing bastard.

A note, forty-nine words. That's it. The end.

Dear Danny,
I'm sorry it has to be this way, but I can't take it anymore. By the time you read this, I'll be gone. Jerry and I are going to try for a new life in Vegas. We can deal with the divorce after I get settled.
Clara.

That next Sunday, Danny stands up in the middle of the gathered congregation and lays into the lot of them. Calls them blind hypocrites. Damns Pastor Jerry to hell and worse. Now he's ostracised, an outsider, the pariah of the neighbourhood.

His two daughters are whisked away to live with Clara's sister. Children need a safe environment. The girls will be happier. The elders tell Danny he needs to understand this. Give it some time. The only thing Danny understands is that his girls now hate their father. They blame him for driving their precious mother away. Danny thinks they should be hating Jerry.

Alone in the house, Danny strips the closets, the shelves, the garage. Anything that reminds him of Clara or the kids. If it's pink, portable, or feminine, it's gone. The first load goes into the back of the pickup. He hauls it to the thrift store and dumps it. Then another, toys, clothes, grabbing armloads of memories and throwing them into the back of the truck.

Danny lowers his eyes from the blazing blue and turns to face the long driveway. The darkness behind the garage doors calls to him. Leaving the garbage bin behind, he trudges up the slope of concrete. It's like climbing across an endless desert. He limps over the hot pavement.

The ghost of Danny Young staggers to a halt at the dividing line between the bleaching sun and blessed shadow. The cool cave of the garage whispers to him. The spell of whispered words pulls him forward. He steps into the shadows, raises a tired arm, presses a button. An electric motor hums and the garage doors rumble down.

UNTITLED DREAMS

Oladejo Abdullah Feranmi

In the haze of moonlight's embrace, I confess,
I swallow my sins before sleeping,
A wandering soul, burdened but unheavy,
A vessel in this haunting afterlife of dreaming.

My body, a tattered bag, lingers untouched,
Poems kneaded to bones, keeping me upright,
To the stars, I gaze all night, wishing for bliss,
Bliss alone, and nothing else in sight.

SETTLEMENT

John Frame

Alexander received custody of two dogs in the aftermath of his break-up. He was not especially fond of dogs and had no desire to take on the responsibility of looking after them. They ended up with him because his ex-boyfriend relocated across the country to Los Angeles. Unfortunately, the dogs – Spike, a black sheepdog mix and Luna, a brown terrier mix – were hyperactive and unruly. Separately, they were mild and friendly, but together they created toxic havoc on the scale of a gang of sugared-up toddlers. They delighted in scheming their mayhem together, exhausting Alexander's patience to where he thought about giving them to a shelter. While they kept him company, he hated the inconvenience they brought to his life.

Whenever Spike and Luna had insufficient exercise, Alexander's expensive downtown apartment became a mess of dog toys, pee stains, scraped paint jobs, and chewed furniture. For the sake of his sanity and the security deposit, they visited the dog park twice a day. He diligently drove the dogs to Franklin Park first thing in the morning before work and as soon as he got home. A crowd always gathered in the middle of the park to let their pets play off-leash, allowing animals and humans to socialise. This is where Alexander met Dionne.

Dionne owned a large, old black Labrador called Smokey which chased squirrels and ignored the other dogs. Alexander saw Dionne at the park every day after work where they would talk about the canine personalities in their midst. Eventually they chatted about the unseasonably cold weather and the conversation turned to work – Dionne was a lawyer, Alexander was a teacher – and to various topics not involving dogs.

'Do you mind if I ask something personal?' Dionne whispered after a few weeks of small talk.

'Go ahead! As long as it's not too intrusive.'

'Are you gay?' Alexander was taken aback by the frankness of the question. It brought him out of the mundane, monochrome reality of park life and into a headspace where he wondered if he gave the impression of being gay. 'I don't mean to be rude. I'm just curious.'

'Yes! I am.' Alexander thought for a minute. 'Did you ask me because I have small dogs?' Dionne started laughing.

'That doesn't make any sense! That's a seriously crazy question, Alexander.' Dionne tried to regain her composure. 'It's not that, obviously. It's the way you park your car.' Alexander looked at Dionne in puzzled amusement.

'What are you talking about?'

'I noticed you always back your car into the parking space at the top of the park.'

'And that makes me gay?'

'No. That's the signal for guys hooking up with other guys in the park!'

'Oh!'

'Yeah, well, you obviously didn't know. Do you live around here?'

'Not really. My apartment is a fifteen-minute drive away, in downtown.'

'Well, I live right there.' Dionne pointed to a large brick mansion on the edge of the park. 'I know everything that goes on here.'

'You own that house?' Alexander was impressed.

'Yes, and my parents own a house on the same street. There are a lot of homeowners around here, all Black.'

'How did that happen?' asked Alexander.

'What d'you mean? How did *what* happen?' Dionne felt defensive.

'How did it happen that so many Black people own big mansions around a huge park in the middle of Columbus?' Interested in the

history of the area, Alexander was oblivious to the impression his question radiated. Dionne regarded the inquiry as laced with a twisted astonishment that this situation was allowed to happen. Unsure what to say in response, she figured Alexander might not have the fortitude for anything confrontational.

'That's what I thought you meant.' Dionne channelled her need to explain by providing a short history lesson. 'Well, the houses used to be owned by buggy manufacturers. Then, when cars came along, those rich families cleared out and, after the war, when the federal government built I70 through the neighbourhood, it became affordable. We bought these houses and made everything nice again.'

'Thank you, that's very interesting. So, how much would one of these places go for?' Alexander looked around the edges of the park, admiring the stately, imposing structures with their columns, turrets, porches and carriage houses. Dionne felt an instant shiver when she realised this was not a passing interest.

'I'm not sure. I've been here for about twelve years. Same length of time I've had Smokey. You should check Zillow.'

'I think I will. My lease is up for renewal and my apartment is pretty expensive for one person on a teacher's salary.' It was Alexander's ex-boyfriend who wanted to live downtown in a luxury loft.

'We're a pretty tight community. My parents and their friends have been here for decades.' Dionne wondered if she should mention Henry, her colleague at the law firm. He was the reason she had asked Alexander about his sexual orientation.

'I know the highway probably displaced people, but it's close enough to be a bonus. Downtown is not far and, of course, there is the park.' The scenery around them was bare and grey at that moment, although it bloomed bright yellow with daffodils in the spring and summer.

'You still have to drive places, though.' Dionne tried to think of the disadvantages of the area. 'There aren't many bars or restaurants around – even fast-food places – and the nearest mall is quite far.' She sighed,

understanding there wasn't much she could say to put him off. Waves of displacement over the years always diluted the feeling of community. The neighbourhood's historic status attracted developers and drove up house prices. Regular city inspections made everything sanitised and orderly and pushed out older people on fixed incomes who couldn't afford the constant upkeep. Dionne hated the glacial colonisation and creeping inauthenticity.

'I don't see that as a huge problem,' replied Alexander. 'I know where to go for nightlife and, at my age, I'd rather not have it on my doorstep.' Dionne nodded silently. 'Thanks for the information.'

'Of course. By the way, I have a friend you might be interested in meeting.' Dionne told Alexander all about Henry, a lawyer who recently joined her firm.

For the next few months Alexander dedicated himself to two main concerns. He established and built a relationship with Henry, a younger man who migrated from Nigeria to attend OSU before breezing through Capital University Law School and passing the bar, all in the matter of six or seven years. Secondly, the business of finding an affordable mansion in the Franklin Park neighbourhood involved attending open houses, going to showings, and talking to his realtor and bank manager about financing. Eventually, with an FHA-secured loan and a deposit extracted prematurely from his shallow retirement fund, Alexander found a place two streets from the park. It was not exactly what he wanted because the view was not great and the house required updates. However, he was pleased at having somewhere bigger for the dogs.

When he told Nick, one of his colleagues at school, that he planned to buy a house near Franklin Park, the reaction was terse.

'The city has been trying to spruce up that neighbourhood for years. It never gets any better. You have to be careful who your neighbours are. When you see the amazing houses around the park and look at the people who are in them, you wonder how that happened?' Alexander did not respond. Nick carried on with his line of thought, relating an

occasion when he drove to the neighbourhood to attend the Asian festival in the park. Returning to his car, he found a smashed window and someone sitting in the front seat, going through his glove box. Nick confronted the culprit, who told him he thought it was 'Mario's car.' In a half laugh, half sneer, Nick posed a question: 'what ethnicity do you reckon that character was?' The friend sounded Italian to Alexander. Nick cackled and ended the conversation by suggesting a move to Bexley, 'It's a nice Jewish neighbourhood and those people thrive wherever they are.'

The viewing, inspection, mortgage application, and closing, all flew by in a matter of weeks. The house had four bedrooms, an attic, a basement, a living room, a kitchen, a dining room, two bathrooms, a three-car garage, a porch, trees, and flowerbeds in the yard. It looked more modern after Alexander and Henry painted inside and out, fixed the roof and gutters, tackled the hornets' nests and the overgrown trees, repaved the driveway, replaced the old rotting windows, dealt with periodic flooding in the basement, tiled the bathrooms, and sanded down and lacquered the wooden floorboards.

When Alexander called the police after a break-in, feeling violated because of a home invasion while he and his boyfriend were out, he was not taken seriously. The officer in charge called it an opportunistic crime and said the criminals were probably juvenile offenders. He advised the purchase of an alarm, although he could not help asking why Alexander chose to move to the neighbourhood. There was an undercurrent of judgment throughout the interaction.

Neighbours occasionally came over to borrow something – a tool for car maintenance or a gadget for yard work – and they would comment on how good the house looked and how lucky Alexander was to have the building on the corner with the three-car garage. When drug dealers rented the house next door, they stayed for only a week before being raided by the police. A neighbour explained his sense of security because

there was a white guy in the house on the corner and the police were more likely to protect his part of the neighbourhood.

The larger space and the backyard did not calm the dogs down. They focused their attention on barking at intruding squirrels, cyclists passing by, and postal workers who came to the front door. They worked themselves into a frenzy. At certain times of day, the noise was relentless. Whenever Henry stayed over, there was a tussle to establish the pecking order in the house. Spike and Luna tried to put Henry in his place, causing Alexander to intervene.

Henry confided in Dionne that the only thing stopping him from moving in with Alexander was the behaviour of the dogs. It did not help that they existed because of a previous relationship. Dionne was unsure how to help. She assumed Alexander bought the house thinking Henry might cohabit and split the mortgage, but it was more complicated. When they all saw each other in the park, Alexander made sure to thank Dionne for giving him the idea to move to the area. It meant he could save money. Living closer to the park also allowed the same pilgrimage as before, morning and evening, in order to settle the dogs down, although he no longer used the encrypted parking lot.

One very crisp day in January, Alexander walked the dogs to the park to find no one in the off-leash area. Reluctantly, they strolled around the park. The paths were salted to dissolve the ice, which aggravated Spike and Luna's paws. They moved off the pathway to the centre of the park, where there was a large pond. As they approached, Alexander saw a Dalmatian running around on the ice and heard somebody yelling. Closer to the pond, he could see a woman had broken through the ice and was immersed in the freezing water, waving and calling for help.

Alexander dialled 911 and asked for an ambulance, tied up his dogs and picked up a stick. Walking onto the frozen pond, he knelt near the centre where the ice was thick and reached out to the woman.

'Hold on to the stick,' he yelled, hoping he had the strength to pull her out.

'Okay!' The woman was in shock as a result of the temperature. She grabbed the stick and Alexander pulled her up until she had her elbows on the edge of the hole. Alexander used his right hand to pull under the woman's left arm, so that her left side started to slide out.

'Let go of the stick with your left hand and grab my arm.' Pulling her up was easier when she was more involved. 'Right, now let go of the stick and put your right hand on my other arm.' It worked. Most of the woman's upper body was flat on the ice. 'Great. Now lie there and I'll move back. Keep hold and I'll slide you out.' Alexander moved backwards, taking each of the woman's hands in his so that he could stand up, using his leg muscles instead of his arms. Eventually she was fully out of the water, lying on the ice, being licked in the face by her dog.

'Thank you so much,' she panted. 'It was Oscar. I needed to rescue him.'

'Save your energy. The ambulance will be here soon.'

'Ambulance?'

'Yes, they're on the way. You're in shock. You might have hypothermia.'

'Oh, no!' The woman struggled to her feet and skidded her way off the ice and onto the frosty grass. She quickly put a leash on her dog and walked away.

Within five minutes of her departure, the first responders showed up wondering what happened.

'I pulled a woman out of this pond and then she left!' Alexander felt embarrassed about calling the ambulance.

'Right. Can you tell us which way she went?' Alexander pointed in the general direction, hoping they would catch her. He noticed that Spike and Luna were no longer tied up. Alarmed, he went over to the fence where he left them and found both leashes discarded on the ground. After being paid no attention for a while, they'd become restless and broken free.

In spite of his previous exertions, Alexander ran to the off-leash area of the park, hoping his dogs were seeking company and not causing

havoc. The only people there were an old white couple with a muzzled pit bull mix.

'Hey, have you seen my dogs? A small black sheepdog and a brown terrier?'

'Yes sir! They was chasin' some kids on bikes. Went over the hill there.' Alexander thanked the couple and climbed to the summit of the small hill to find his dogs circling two teenagers on bikes. The dogs gripped and tore at a box of fast food, held tightly by one of the kids. Both teenagers screamed and scrambled to escape the vicious herding. Alexander dashed down the slope, yelling out the names of his dogs. He grabbed Luna's collar, forcing her to accept the leash. Spike, bigger and more bolshie, had the entire container of food in his possession. This made him easy to subdue. Alexander foiled the dogs' plans for a deep-fried feast and profusely apologised to the victims of the eight-legged heist.

A sizable crowd gathered at the off-leash section of the park, including Dionne and her black Lab. Alexander walked towards the other dog owners, anxious to tell them what happened. He found recent events amusing and laughed to himself as he approached Dionne. There was a strange look on her face when she turned in his direction and he heard shouts from behind.

'Yo, cracker! You owe us some money.' Alexander turned to see the teenagers pedalling towards him.

'Excuse me?'

'Your dogs ate our food! You need to pay us.' Both kids, a boy and a girl, cycled quite far in order to bring the food home. They took a shortcut through the park, unaware of Alexander's manic dogs who managed to free themselves for a spree of mischief.

'Don't give them anything,' said one of the people with the pit bull. 'This a park with walking paths. Ain't supposed to be ridin' bikes in here!' As the final sentence trailed off, Alexander was sure he heard the N-word. He began to panic.

'Come on man, that was our dinner,' said the young girl. 'You can't do us like that!' The two kids abandoned their bikes and stood at defiant attention less than a yard from Alexander. Dionne walked over.

'Is everything okay over here? What happened to you two?'

'This cracker's dogs destroyed the food we was taking home and now we have to buy more,' said the girl. Dionne turned to Alexander who nodded in agreement with the statement.

'How much cash do you have Alexander?' asked Dionne.

'I have a ten.' Sensing that might not be enough compensation, she took out a ten-dollar bill.

'Okay, here is ten dollars from me,' said Dionne. 'And my friend here has ten more. That should get you plenty of food.'

'Appreciate it!' said the boy.

'And lay off the abusive language. There's no need for it.'

'You're right. Sorry about that. My sister's upset. She hates dogs.' The kids picked up their bikes and cycled off.

Relieved, Alexander thanked Dionne for taking care of the situation. He was ready to go home and make himself a strong drink. Before he walked to his house, he started a conversation he wanted to have a long time before.

'Dionne, do you mind if I ask you something personal?'

'As long as it's not too intrusive.'

'Well, I know your dog is getting old and that Labs don't live long.'

'Yeah, Smokey is slowing down. He probably has another year or so, maybe less.'

'So, I was wondering what you thought about adopting Spike and Luna?'

LAKESIDE NIGHT WALK

Aries M Gacutan

it was all getting grim again
so I pulled cloth & cotton over my ribs
keeping my heart pressed down tight
like a bird beneath a hand

outside the world had all gone
to stained glass – gold beaten thin
& rolled out between barges
hanging improbably in the sky
here, my helm: a beanie like a dead thing
here, my hand: brushing trembling
moorhens back from the lakeside

when the rain falls it pulls the asphalt in tight
to the heavens & smears
colour around like it's *okay*, like it's *allowed* –
I beheld the cool metal surface of the dusk
& I was undone, you were right, it is wholly unendurable

as I turned to leave I caught a streetlight staring back at me
and I thought for a second that it was surely the moon

A CONCEIT ON BURNOUT AND THE WINTER OF '23

Taylor Franson Thiel

This supposed spring, it is snowing its way through
April. The sixth month of a city begging the sun
to forgive us. I found myself a flame in the midst of a
whiteout. A full-on throttling snow storm is raging outside

my room and I have blue searing heat dancing on the
skin of my shoulder blades. I have composed hymn books
already, on how shivering feels just like burning, the tingling
numbness tasting just like pop rocks on the tongue.

My shoes are soaked in slush, swimming in melting,
while my eyes have heat creeping across capillaries
like all the inchworms who are buried so deep beneath
six feet of snow they may never unfreeze. I do not want

to wake and teach students who do not even know
how to spell my name. I do not want to sit in classrooms
discussing tropes and tone and stories. Ice grows and
crawls upon my left arm as my right smoulders

and seethes. The outside world looks like a cotton ball
dipped in water and bites like bee stings while my
chest is a furnace slowly dying out. This is how I am learning
that scorch and chill are sisters not opposites. Both dull

and bitter and unforgiving. I close my blinds.

A blackout curtain to the storm outside. I close my eyes. A blackout curtain to the one inside. I will stay in, lay in bed, shivering under covers as I sweat.

HUGO'S FEAR

Clive Aaron Gill

'Hugo, Rosa is getting married in April,' said my sister during a phone call. 'You must come to her wedding. You can stay with me.'

I loved Rosa, my twenty-one-year-old niece. I wanted to be at her wedding. When my sister and her family lived close to me in Dallas, I attended all of Rosa's first eleven birthday parties.

But the thought of flying from Dallas to Vancouver, British Columbia, gave me heart palpitations. Some people get on planes and fly halfway across the world. They don't seem to care about risking their lives.

At age sixty-two, I tried to get a job but didn't succeed. With income from Social Security, I rented a small room at the Guidera Court Rooming House with shared bath and kitchen facilities. Thankfully, I knew how to work a budget. I got household supplies delivered from nearby stores and ate low-cost lunches at the local senior centre during the week. On Fridays, the senior centre workers gave me a bag of food for the weekend that contained a sandwich, salad and fruit.

I felt comfortable in my room, although I was sometimes disturbed by neighbours' arguments and TV shows. In my neighbourhood, young men, mostly in their twenties, stood on street corners, drinking, smoking and playing loud rap music.

My ex-girlfriend said I would meet people if I got out more often. I surfed the Internet and called and emailed my friends. That was good enough for me.

I had just enough in my savings account for a rented suit and trip expenses if I brought sandwiches instead of buying expensive food at the airport. Chicken salad sandwiches were my favourite.

I decided to make the trip, so I bought a round-trip ticket and rented a black suit. I would arrive in Vancouver the day before the wedding.

A week before my scheduled flight, I received an email telling me that my flight was delayed by two hours. The next day, an email said my flight was again delayed, this time by an hour. I spent restless nights worrying about flying and more delays that might make me late for the wedding.

On the day of my flight to Vancouver, I ordered an Uber. The driver, Julian, arrived five minutes earlier than I expected.

He texted, *I'm out front. Look for the bubbles.*

Sure enough, he was blowing bubbles out the window of his blue SUV.

Good, he has a sense of humour.

I climbed into Julian's car and told him the name of my airline. The SUV jerked forward. When Julian reached the freeway, he frequently swerved to change lanes while he made race car noises.

I prayed silently. *Dear God, I come before you to lay my panic and anxiety at your feet.*

I arrived at the airport without injury two hours before the scheduled flight departure. Checking the monitor, I saw that my flight had been cancelled. I collapsed onto a bench. When I recovered, I stood in line to book the next available flight to Vancouver. It would depart four hours later. At the counter, I checked my bag with an airline representative at no extra cost.

While I waited in line for a security check, a young woman in front of me stepped through the body scanner without getting beeped. As her luggage flowed through the scanner, the agent viewing it asked, 'What's this in your luggage?' The woman looked at the monitor, reddened, and said in a low voice, 'My vibrator.'

I felt sorry for the embarrassed woman.

A tall, broad-shouldered security woman told me to take off my shoes and walk through the scanner. It beeped. I went back while everyone waiting in line stared at me. My cheeks burned as I removed my belt, which had a metal buckle, and placed it in a plastic container. I stepped through the scanner a second time, holding up my pants. No beeps.

In the departure lounge, I opened my bag to get my wrapped sandwiches and a ripe banana. I searched everywhere, removing my book and toilet items. People watched my confusion with interest. Then I realised, in the rush to leave my room after seeing Julian's bubbles, I hadn't done a last-minute check. I'd left the food on the kitchen table. It would be rotten and stinking when I returned. 'Stupid,' I murmured. 'Stupid, stupid.'

At Pappadeaux Seafood Bar, I considered ordering the grilled Atlantic salmon. But it would have cost about the same as what I spent on weekly groceries. And I didn't want to add to my credit card debt. Instead, I ordered Crab Gumbo and enjoyed the spicy soup made with celery, onion and bell pepper.

After the announcement to board my flight, I showed my boarding pass to the flight attendant. Her smile was as false as my pretended calm. When I reached my seat, I saw an overweight man in the aisle seat next to mine. He overflowed onto two armrests and smelled sour, like he had not showered for a month. In the window seat, a middle-aged woman dressed in a solid black, long-sleeved blouse, looked up from her iPad.

The man struggled to get up and allow me to sit in the middle. I felt as if I sat in a child-sized seat next to the heavy man.

'Excuse me, sir,' I said to my companion, 'I think you're sitting on my seat belt.'

He lumbered up, gripping the back of the seat in front of him.

'Thank you,' I said and buckled my seat belt.

The woman beside me said, 'Hi. My name is Debra.'

'I'm Hugo.'

A flight attendant announced in a high-pitched voice over the intercom, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we have a full flight today. For those standing, please find the first empty seat.'

'Hugo, are you from Dallas?' Debra asked.

Although surprised that she started a conversation, I was pleased to have a distraction. 'Yes. I'm going to my niece's wedding.'

'That's interesting. I attended my cousin's wedding in Dallas last week. And I'm going home to Vancouver.'

'Did you enjoy your cousin's wedding?'

'Yes. About fifty people came. Family and friends, you know.'

I nodded. 'My niece is having a small wedding.'

'Hugo, may I ask you a personal question?'

'Sure.'

'Do you like dogs?'

'I do.'

'Would you like to hear what happened when I was a dog sitter in Vancouver?'

'Yup.' I hoped her story would relieve my anxiety.

'My neighbour asked me if I would mind watching her puppy for a day and a night. The dog's name is Nugget. She's the size of my foot. I agreed. I mean, how bad could it be to watch an innocent, cute puppy?'

Debra looked at me with questioning, hazel eyes.

'It doesn't seem like a big deal,' I said.

'It was a nightmare. That puppy never stopped her tinny, squeaky barking. Didn't stop the entire night. In the morning, when I stepped into my kitchen, I slipped on her poop. I slid across the floor and landed on my back.'

'Oh, no. Are you okay now?'

'My lower back is still painful. Jabbing pains, you know. It's hard to sit in this seat. But let me tell you the rest of the story.'

I clenched my hands.

'While I took a bath, Nugget tore up my couch. The one I'd just purchased. I wanted to be on good terms with my neighbour, so when I returned her dog, I told her, 'Nugget is gorgeous. I love her. But I just don't have the energy to take care of a dog.' Debra tapped her long fingernail on her lip.

I smiled, grateful that the story had distracted me. But it didn't help reduce my anxiety.

Thirty minutes later, the captain announced, 'There's a thunderstorm in the area, and we have lightning within three miles. We'll wait at the gate until the lightning activity has moved. Thank you for your patience.'

Forty-five minutes later, the plane hadn't budged, and the engines idled. I had to go to the toilet urgently, and the man beside me had fallen asleep. I nudged him with my elbow, but he didn't respond. I pushed harder until he snorted and shook his head. After I explained my need, he raised himself and stood in the aisle, let me pass, then dropped back onto his seat. When I returned, he again struggled to get up to allow me to sit down.

'We're waiting a long time at the gate,' Debra said. 'I have no patience. My heart races. I grind my teeth. I've learned to hum to release pent-up steam. I also take deep breaths, but eventually, I lose my battle. I can't remember how many times I've punched something. Like a bookcase, or a door, a wall. Then I feel like a low life.'

I worried she might punch me and leaned away from her.

The pilot announced, 'The lightning has moved out of our area. Flight attendants, prepare for take-off.'

I trembled and told myself, *you'll be okay*. I bit my lip while my foot tapped uncontrollably like a wound-up toy.

The plane rolled forward and stopped repeatedly.

'We're currently third in line for take-off,' the pilot said, 'and are expected to be in the air in approximately seven minutes.'

Seven minutes passed while I smelled jet fuel on the runway.

The captain announced, 'We're waiting for a late arriving aircraft.'

Twenty-three minutes later, the plane moved forward and gathered speed. It climbed steeply, then turned sharply. The engines throttled back, causing a sinking sensation in my stomach. I squeezed my eyes tightly and gripped the one available armrest, hoping that my companions were unaware of my turmoil.

About ten minutes passed before I felt confident enough to open my eyes and release my grip on the armrest.

I had a habit of crossing my legs, which I did with an inch to spare. That was a mistake. The passenger in front of me reclined the seat and pushed my legs against my body. I yelped.

Debra asked, 'Are you okay?'

I panted.

The person in front of me moved the seat to the upright position. I uncrossed my legs and rubbed my thighs.

'I'll be fine in a few minutes,' I said.

She stared at me. 'What's your occupation?'

'I'm retired.'

'I'm a published author,' Debra said.

'Wow.'

'My author friend is stealing my ideas. I shared a story outline with her about a woman who is in love with a humanoid. Now my friend is writing a story with the same plot. It's irritating. I haven't been able to write for weeks. I'm so frustrated.'

I rubbed my thumb and forefinger together, a habit when anxious.

'The worst part,' Debra said, 'is that she's spitting back her story concepts to me as if they are her own. That's like rubbing crap in my face. It stinks so bad. I want to call her out on it, but if I do, I'll lose a friend.'

'It's not easy to make good friends.'

'No, it isn't. I needed a break from her. I couldn't have our weekly get-togethers about her writing progress because it drained me. It brought me down. She floated around like a butterfly. Everything was bright and happy for her, while I was miserable.'

'Maybe this trip has given you the break you need.' I was pleased to see the flight attendants wheeling a food cart toward us.

'I hope so.'

The complimentary drink and snack served by a flight attendant did nothing to curb my appetite. I wondered how long it would take for the chicken salad sandwich and ripe banana on my kitchen table to spoil.

I smelled the aroma of food being heated in the galley, and my stomach rumbled. But the main cabin passengers could only smell the food that was served to passengers in first class. I purchased a meal box from a flight attendant. The box contained fruit, cheese, and a turkey wrap with lettuce, which was enough to subdue my hunger for half an hour.

I watched a movie called *Flight*. Denzel Washington played an airline pilot who saved almost all his passengers on his faulty airliner that crashed. I'm certain an airline employee chose the movie to frighten people on board.

I again had to ask my silent neighbour to let me into the aisle, then I hurried to the toilet at the back of the plane.

While I sat on the toilet, I remembered the time when I was a little kid, living in Guatemala. I woke up in the middle of the night and had to visit the outhouse. I woke Pedro, my brother, because I was scared to go outside in the dark. He got angry, then hit and kicked me. When my grandmother, Angelita, found out, I got to live with her in America. I remembered her fingernails gently massaging my wet scalp with shampoo, and me crawling into her bed to feel warm and safe.

The plane shuddered and shook. I held onto the grab bar near the toilet, feeling like I was in an earthquake. The Fasten Seat Belt sign lit up, and the pilot announced, 'Ladies and gentlemen, flight attendants, please be seated.'

I didn't wait to finish my business. I pulled up my pants and rushed toward my seat, holding on to passengers' headrests to steady myself. Not waiting for the large man in my row to get up, I scrambled over

him. I fastened my seat belt and closed my eyes, while the man beside me released gas loudly.

I wished I had a tranquiliser.

Debra said, 'I feel like screaming.'

I moved my upper body forward and backward and prayed in silence. *Dear Lord, deliver me from my fears. Fill me with your peace. Stay with me, Lord, because I am weak, and I need your strength. I will trust in you.*

The plane stabilised, then descended, and my ears hurt before they popped. Flight attendants sat in jump seats, facing the passengers. The lights went off, and I heard the landing gear drop.

It's nearly over.

I waited for the tires to hit the tarmac. The plane flew low, landed with a bump, braked hard, and again shook and shuddered. Then the pilot taxied toward a gate.

The captain announced, 'We have a little problem. We need to wait for the gate to open.'

Damn. I have a big problem with waiting.

Fifty minutes later, a tall man in the last row stood and shouted, 'This is ridiculous.' He ran to the emergency exit, opened the door, deployed the inflatable slide, and slid down. On reaching the tarmac, he raced toward the terminal.

A flight attendant called a security person, and the man was arrested and handcuffed. Airport technicians arrived to remove the emergency slide and secure the emergency door.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' announced a flight attendant almost two hours later at 11:56 p.m., 'a gate is now available. Please remain seated with your seat belt fastened until the captain has made a complete stop and turned off the Fasten Seat Belt sign. Your crew left Chicago at 4:30 this morning, so this has been a long day for us. We thank you for your patience.'

People clapped and cheered.

I survived. My feet will soon be on the ground.

I said goodbye to Debra, then hurried to the baggage claim area. I waited at the carousel until no more bags came through. After searching for someone to ask about my luggage, I found a grumpy airport employee who searched on his phone. He said, 'Your bag has been sent to Clearwater International Airport, Florida.' It would take at least two days for it to be delivered to my sister's apartment.

I put my hands on my forehead and leaned forward, shaking my head. The thought of a return flight terrified me.

Then I checked my phone for Greyhound bus schedules from Vancouver to Dallas.

SELF-PORTRAIT (ST LOUIS)

JH Grimes

The city ties me into a rhythmless flurry.
Go toward Big Bend, down Delmar and up
the hill to the park where we spend these
hours soaking red-oak sun, swaths of brick
and limestone. University-owned gargoyles &
cracked-street neighbourhoods. All the world
blending in with my incessant need to clarify:
*Did your mother purse her lips? Did you break
an ankle, or a knee? Did you jump off the bridge
too soon? Did you mean to hurt me this way?*
Today I ask the birds why they move so fast to
get to the trees and my friends why they don't
leave the south: no money to flee. I try to pull
my teeth behind my eyes, to swallow myself
whole. Or today I read the long letter I wrote
after you left. *Do you want to feel how cold my
hands are?* A girl asked me once, in the snow.
Yes. Yes. At her touch I flinch away.

WHEN HE BROKE WITH THE DEPRESSION

Lee Haertel

catylsed months earlier in the third student suicide in three years he fantasied tears would soon
dissolve into the chlorine of the local swimming pool telling his airbag he just *needed to swim*
while sitting engine running in the staff carpark calling the answering machine of line manager after line
manager after line manager's assistants when finally one picked up he said *oh it isnt urgent*
and when the next one called back saying *no he's not here either*
he fell silent and she asked *are you ok*
then maybe whimpers *I can tell by that silence*
you are not ok
mumble now *no*
and she said *can I go get someone*
and he asked for *line manager 3 please*
while the stereo was playing Human by The Killers on repeat getting him thinking on how repetition
compulsion which he'd taught to his class in a recent novel supposedly binds trauma before his psych called
saying *listen if it gets worse and*
I know this sounds like a
lot go to emergency
then the number of line manager 2 not line manager 3 buzzed through his hands so he hung up on her to
answer him with an apology or request or ultimatum that he *now might require certain*
things
which immediately seemed ironised by lyrics that had been saying *are we human*
for the past forty minutes with him windows up sunglasses on unable to open a car door to get to work

PERFECT DISAPPEARANCES

Paul Hostovsky

This poem is for all the writers
writing. On their laptops, desktops, smartphones,
legal pads, napkins, palms
of their hands – desperate to get it down
before it disappears
like the phone number of the most amazing person you just met
and have to see again –
just have to – so you write it on your own skin
and walk off into the world alone
with the whole world in your hand. God
help the writers in love with the words that disappear
like disappearing trains you catch
by running after them,
losing a shoe, a hat, an earring, a spouse—a lifetime
of chasing the disappearing words,
breathlessly reaching for them,
grabbing hold and hoisting yourself up
onto the caboose, and entering the rhythm
of those corridors moving through the world
as you move through them, feeling your way,
looking up and down and all around
in search of that most amazing
dream you dreamed and followed all the way here.

A SONG FOR THE CHOKOS – A SIJO

Coco X Huang

Far from their frame, the *lóng xū* vines grow. Grandma inspects them each day.
She twines them back and hums, 'Grow tall but remember your roots, your place.'
Autumn arrives; the sweet choko fruits droop over the neighbour's gate.

LEAVING

Sarah Hunter

The ground was dusty and dry, and the heat was overwhelming. Lucerne and I rested in a small, fragmented patch of shade created by the tall metal Restriction Bars. Our sides heaved as we gazed listlessly out onto the horizon of sandy-brown earth. Around us were our fellows, also trying to rest in what scant shade they could find along the Restriction Bars. Flies buzzed around our noses and drove us to shake our heads repeatedly or stamp our feet when we stood. Our tails might have helped, but they had been chopped off shortly after we had been born. Thankfully we still had our ears, although even these had been modified. Pieces of plastic had been stabbed into them, of which we had no idea what they meant. At the start they had made us look very strange, and the initial pain they caused when we tried to shake our heads was very unpleasant. The memories of this discomfort still linger—although it is nothing compared to what we experienced when our tails were chopped off. For weeks we had suffered with open wounds, caused by the sharp blades wielded by a human.

Later in the day, we heard a rumbling and rattling coming from behind our Restriction Bars, and sure enough, the Carrier was speeding over towards us. In the still, heavy air we soon became surrounded by the smell of grain. Those of us who had been lying leapt up from the ground, and we all called out with long, desperate voices.

The man got out of the Carrier and poured bags of grain over the Restriction Bars. Clouds of dust were created as we hastened to get a spot by the food.

Lucerne and I stood side-by-side, as we often did. She took hurried mouthfuls and chewed eagerly. We tried not to be pushed away by the others who were still trying to find a spot, even though I understood

the frustration they were going through. The poor conditions created dire times, where being fed was the only thing we could look forward to.

Early the next day, before it was light, something unexpected happened. While Lucerne and I were standing beside each other, my head resting by hers, we were disturbed by a loud and distant roaring. Like the sound of the Carrier that delivered food, but bigger. Not long after it stopped, a man approached and opened a section of the Restriction Bars. He then began to chase us out and into a narrow path lined with more Restriction Bars, leading towards the ominous sound. My heart beat rapidly and heavily against my chest. Only minutes ago, I had been almost asleep. We worriedly called out, sometimes to check the whereabouts of our friends, and other times just out of fear.

‘Lucerne, where are we going?’ I cried out, even though I had not been able to tell if she was even nearby, due to being swept away by the crowd.

To my relief she replied from behind me, over the other chaotic bleats, ‘I don’t think it’s good, Barley!’

No, it did not seem good at all. Even though it felt like anything could be better than suffering behind the Restriction Bars all day, we had experienced enough to know it could be worse.

Soon we were channelled up a ramp into the stagnant air of a Carrier—one that was big enough to have its own Restriction Bars inside it. It was quickly filled with our heaving bodies. We experienced the familiar sensation of being pressed together. I kept calling out to Lucerne to check that she was close by, and to my relief she was. When we were in this new, more confined area of Restriction Bars, I tried to squeeze past the other sheep to get closer to her, but the others simply couldn’t move.

‘You’re going to crush me against the metal!’ one of the sheep cried.

I stayed where I was, knowing better than to start trouble in a tight space. The journey was going to be difficult enough.

Soon after we had all been locked into the Carrier, it began to move. We began speeding past vast expanses of dry, brittle grass and bare ground, off to who-knows-where.

The eyes of the sheep around me were wide, and their nostrils flared rapidly from quickened breaths. Lucerne was trying to look through the gaps in the Restriction Bars at the grey path behind us. I followed her gaze. How long were we going to be trapped in here? The roaring wind gushing through the gaps in the Carrier was painful and frightening to listen to. Although there was circulation, the scent of fear was still overwhelming.

Only a month had passed since we had last been in one of these Carriers. We had been taken from our old environment inside a different set of Restriction Bars. There had been much more space inside this enclosure, even though it had become just as dry and barren as the place we'd just left. But sometimes, after we had been fed and the scorching sun had set, Lucerne and I had frolicked and played. Some of the other sheep would even join in, and for a moment, we would forget about our hardships. Those were happier times.

My recollections quickly ended because of the forceful nudges from a sheep beside me.

There appeared to be cloudy liquid dripping from her nose and eyes, and her body shivered all over. 'Move,' she pleaded, the whites of her eyes flashing.

'I'm sorry, I can't ... There's no room,' I tried to explain.

I could see she really needed space, but I couldn't help her. There wasn't even enough room to fit a lamb. I hoped she would be able to make it to the end of the journey, although she looked so unwell.

The rattling Carrier continued speeding along for many more hours. Soon the sun set, and we were still inside the Carrier. Our previous journey on a Carrier had only taken half a day, but this one was evidently different. We were dizzy and exhausted from lack of food, water and space. Our mouths and throats had long been dry. The sheep beside me

who had been badly suffering before had finally collapsed, and I tried my best to keep her from being trampled on. The only sign of life was the slow, strained rising and falling of her sides.

Lucerne was still standing, but she gazed back at me with distant, weary eyes.

We had become friends as mere lambs. Lucerne had a familiar scent to my mother's, and I had found that comforting. Although, I soon discovered she was quite different in personality. Lucerne was caring, but very bold. One of the boldest sheep I knew. She was always the first to get to food, and she never allowed herself to be bossed around by the other sheep. Whenever I would get nudged out of the way by another sheep she would come and push them back. I'm not timid, but neither am I as brave as Lucerne. Being her friend could be very advantageous sometimes, but it was not the reason we stuck together. We had come to understand each other, and this gave me some courage in the turmoil.

The night passed as we remained in the Carrier. It was one of the worst nights we had ever experienced. None of us could sleep due to stress and the discomfort of not having drunk or eaten all day. The sheep lying by my hooves had breathed her last, struggling breaths. I don't know how she survived for as long as she did – even those of us who had started off with some strength, were now near collapsing. Furthermore, there were no signs that the journey was coming to an end.

We endured into another day without food, water, or space. Our heads hung low, and we stopped looking out at our surroundings. The stench of accumulating waste, death, and the constant confinement was unbearable ...

However, even as every part of me ached and my vision became blurry from tiredness and dehydration, I still kept an eye on Lucerne. She was doing no better than me by the looks of it, and I wished more than ever that I was beside her. If we were going to die from this, I wanted to be beside her.

The journey finally came to an end in the early evening when the scent of salt was strong in the air. The Carrier stopped by a complex assemblage of Restriction Bars. Beyond the Restriction Bars loomed by far the largest Carrier I had ever seen. This Carrier was not on wheels but seemed to be floating on water. Our exhausted hearts raced as our Carrier was opened, and we staggered out onto the path formed by the Restriction Bars. None of us wanted to follow the path, but any longer in that horrible Carrier would surely have killed us all. I pushed myself over to Lucerne, and briefly touched her muzzle amid the mayhem. It was dry, but her breath was momentarily reassuring. Our tired, stumbling legs seemed to be just able to carry us. It was amazing what we could do when scared.

Eventually we turned around a corner and were faced with a ramp that led directly into the giant Carrier floating on water. I hesitated and tried to slow my pace, despite the sheep rammed up behind me. I was equally frightened of the human shouting somewhere behind us, and the unfamiliar, threatening situation in front.

Lucerne was at my flank, and suddenly called out to me in a breathless voice, 'Barley, I can't ...'

I turned my head in time to glimpse her wide, terrified eyes as she collapsed and disappeared below the panicked crowd. A guttural bleat left my parched throat, and I frantically tried to get to her. The other sheep were crushed against me though, and it was hopeless. To my despair, I was carried towards to ramp. I continued to cry out as I left her behind, my eyes filled with desperation and my ears flicking in agitation. I couldn't leave her!

But this was how I was to leave my closest friend, whether I liked it or not. She had been trampled, and most likely killed if she had not already collapsed from death. The memory of her eyes as she'd fallen to the ground stayed in my mind. That vision would surely haunt me forever. Oh, why hadn't I been behind her instead? Maybe I could have

shielded her from the hooves of the other sheep? Maybe we could have found a gap in the fence to escape?

In the moment my friend had needed me, who was usually so strong and brave, I had left her.

Up into the giant Carrier the remaining sheep and I were led. We were channelled into yet more assemblages of Restriction Bars, where we were finally presented with the water we so desperately needed. I drank for what felt like ages, but all the while I knew nothing could help me now. Even when my thirst was gone, I would be left feeling empty and alone. Nothing could ever fix the loss of Lucerne.

Once more we found ourselves packed together inside a Carrier. Just a very big one now. As we had entered it, we had clearly seen the water outside – in one direction, it seemed to go on forever, like the dry expanse of ground when all the grass had died off. If this Carrier was anything like the ones on land, it was going to take us somewhere. But I did not really care where. Whatever happened now, it would not compare to the hardship of leaving behind Lucerne.

Or so I thought.

PROMISES

Jill Jones

What the stories promise they never give

What is hidden under the bed only emerges in a dream

Little pigs becoming fatter, the geese trembling, sheep
muddy in the yard

I don't know a thing about farms

So why is there one in my head for days

Something cute, something for market

Fat of the land, the last straw, a hard row, wheat, chaff

Yes, pig's eye

Whatever the story promises I'm left with a dry mouth
in the morning

The feeling of having moved my shoulders too hard against
passing time, an imaginary plough, or mistakes with an almanac

A fence the horse won't jump, a bale of dream hay

So I wake sneezing in suburban brightness

Yes, the garden producing little else but nectar for birds
that want it

Like my mouth that wants it too

Something sweeter, something churned, soiled, sinewy

Something more abundant than the indifference of the morning

MAYBE

Daniel Key

What would I do without a view of the ocean? Probably a lot of things.

Maybe I'd become a world-renowned chef, famous for my spaghetti bolognese so potent that Italians from around the world flock to my little restaurant. I get so popular and refined that I get the first Michelin star this town has ever seen.

I get a little too popular.

The little café next door starts to get jealous of all my success, their dismal red plastic chairs empty at all hours of the day except for the one hour the builders get their break. They plant a rat in my kitchen, and a health inspector decides to come that very day, the most trusted food critic in the land there too, both visiting alongside this tubby rat that my sous chef finds nibbling on the lettuce in the pantry. It runs from the lettuce to the kitchen where it scurries underneath trollies and weaves in between the feet of all the staff running around trying to catch it before a clumsy porter knocks into the swinging doors that lead into the dining area. All the guests look up from their plates, and I watch their faces degenerate from satisfied to horrified as the rodent leaps into a bowl of spaghetti bolognese, inside my immaculate, world-renowned, restaurant.

I'm better off just sitting here on my balcony, watching the ocean. Witnessing the setting sun, the sky melting orange. The ocean harsh with gentle waves shimmering the reflection of the celestial deity that hangs above our heads. I struggle to breathe sometimes, watching it all transpire.

Maybe I'd become a writer, famous for my ambitious collections of poetry that could be read as song or novel depending on the order of reading and the pronunciation of syllables. Some describe me as 'the

most original artist since the Renaissance', some pushing it far enough to call it the inception of a second renaissance. Form falls from its peg to evolve into a shapeless Word. Prose, poetry, script, all just become the Word.

I live in a penthouse suite at the top of a high rise watching over the city like some movie villain. Some people hail me as the saviour of literature, pushing back against the digitalisation of the world, the iPad kids and the VR children no longer lost in the space between the world and the LED screen, now found staring at real paper. Others condemn me as the one to deal the final killing blow to the novel, to poetry, to everything they once knew and once treasured.

Whatever, I sit inside my penthouse, writing whenever the inspiration hits me. My words fly off every shelf regardless of quality or content, the public eager to see anything I birth. I stare out of my window at the city below and wonder how much of a book I could write on the side of a skyscraper and if they'd let me.

That sounds a little better. I could live like that, half-hated and half-loved sounds pretty realistic, maybe even a little optimistic. If I'm that popular of an author, then I'd definitely be more hated than that. Nothing people hate more than others succeeding, especially if they deem them inferior, in any way. Although, I imagine I'd get pretty pompous if I was the guy who created a second renaissance. Eating caviar, making hot chocolate with milk instead of water, leaving the lights on at night. I'd probably end up being driven down a road by the coastline on my way to a book signing or a conference or something, glancing out of my window to the passing ocean and laughing at my younger self for finding so much value in something worthless. I don't think I'd like that.

Or maybe in my pursuit of literary greatness, I find myself at a reading down at the local bookshop given by some up-and-comer who I think would be a beneficial connection to make. I sit down and listen to him drivel on as he reads an excerpt from his novel that makes me

question the publishing industry as a whole and wonder how in the world I'm not published. The woman next to me makes a comment about him, something funny but piercing. I laugh, and she smiles at me. We leave together and find ourselves at a dessert bar and share some waffles, one cookies and cream, the other a strawberry surprise. We find out the surprise is that the sauce is raspberry, not strawberry. We're disappointed but it's so stupid and dumb that we both laugh and laugh and laugh.

We go on a few more dates, get to know each other deeper and deeper until a few months pass and we move in together and then a year passes and we know we're going to get married. I pop the question and she says yes. We have a big white wedding with all our friends and families combining in harmony as they watch us tie ourselves together for the rest of our lives.

The baby boy comes, and we move into a big house that we can barely afford but we get the mortgage and go ahead with it anyway because we both know we'll make things work, somehow. We have three more kids, one boy, two girls, and they all grow up healthy and happy and the teenage years roll by for each of them and they grow up into fine men and women who treat us well in our old age and start their own families and make us grandparents. In adjacent beds at the hospital, we hold hands across the gap. Surrounded by the entire family, we pass on to the other side, content with everything we left in this world.

I wonder if any marriages last that long these days. It seems like everyone's getting divorced. She would've grown bored of me at some point and cheated on me with some waiter or some hotel receptionist who makes up for whatever I lack.

She'd probably suffer a miscarriage and cry all night at her lost baby before she gets pregnant again only to suffer a second miscarriage and then when we go to the fertility doctors to check things out, they tell her that her womb is '*barren*'. They tell me my sperms are '*lethargic*'.

They say it was a '*miracle*' that we conceived at all, let alone twice. They recommend adoption.

Then we would start to fight more and more until our home becomes a house and we hate the sight of one another but on those odd nights occasionally something would swoop down on us and we'd be in love all over again.

One night and we'd rediscover each other's bodies and lie entwined with one another like two bars of chocolate melting in a bowl until we become a single pool of life laying on the sofa. Then the morning comes, and she hands the divorce papers to me. Everything settled apart from my soul.

So much hassle for no reward. Just more and more pain. So much pain. Nothing like that out here, by the ocean. I kiss my teeth and find my flip-flops before grabbing my keys and shoving them into my shorts pocket and leaving the house. I walk down the pavement until I reach the little dune of sand that has a rough pathway leading through the dry grass that sprouts amongst the compact, eroded rocks of eons passed. I walk through the path, feeling the grass brush against my calves. I come out into an opening and look down to the beachfront and the ocean and the orange sky that looks like the end of the world. I slide down the dune and reach the beach. Golden sand and nothing else, for miles and miles along the coast. No rocks or boulders, no piers or rotting wood, just endless sand.

I stride across the beach towards the water. The waves move in a motion both relaxed and inevitable. I feel that there's no option other than for the water to move in and then out. In and then out.

I sit down just out of reach from the frothing waves. I listen to the swooshing of the water and the distant calls of the seagulls and the gentle swaying of the grass and feel the sand around my hands and my legs. I look out to the horizon as I feel the waves coming to me and retreating back to the magnificent body of water that is the ocean. With the coming and going of the tide, I feel myself growing more and more

content, as if the glancing touch of the waves brushes against my soul and pulls out something bothering me to bury deep inside the ocean floor. It's as if there's not a problem in the world, sitting here. I wish I could do this forever.

That's the thing. A wife can leave, a son can die, a cat can run away, art can be stolen, friendships can be destroyed, bridges can be burnt, buildings can fall, I can cease to exist, but the world will always be beautiful. The ocean will never leave me.

MORNING RECOLLECTIONS

DESMOND Francis Xavier KON Zhicheng-Mingdé

'The words which express our faith and piety are not definite; yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior natures.'

~ Henry David Thoreau

Poetry is, after all, the sense
of a paced reading,
of stoppage and rendering,
of pause and renewal.

What makes me read the psalms – over and over again?

Each opened page an opening.

Each flip a semibreve rest, as enduring as a whole note.

Each turn of page a cognition, also tangent and adjustment.

Frankincense makes its appearance; again, each time different.

Different insofar as what meaning is delayed, deferred.

Even deferred to, and more, so much more.

If everything is, indeed, arguably quasi-metaphorical:

But what logic (*and world*) would such a world make?

Each 'each', another one and each, each on its own.

The slightness of difference/différance,
thereby each shy consequence,
between 'one another' and 'each other'?

Each moment is present, and a presence.

Each moment, another silence to be called –

upon, and into.

SHE HASN'T FELT THIS CLEAN IN TEN THOUSAND YEARS

Ella Kurz

She pushes them beneath the water's skin,
a cotton flag in the current, *I am here, now.*

She holds them by the waistband
which lay, day-long, above the bones of her hips,
covering the slackness of past pregnancy.
The holes that sheathed
the trunks of her legs
open in the water
like flowers.

When she lifts the cloth into green air,
cords of liquid fall back to river pool.
She rubs the crotch
against itself, a ritual rinsing
of the sweat and musk
she spilled there through the day.

She has washed herself this way already –
feet curved over brown stone,
thighs iced in snow-melt,
late sun a hand
on her shoulders and breasts.

Soon, she will follow the path
already taken by her mother and aunts,
up the bank, to campfire,
where she will spread her underwear
across a branch, to dry in warm smoke.

WEARING THE NIGHT

After Joanne Burns, 'Keyhole'

Wes Lee

i. arrival

Wearing the night like an artist again not an invalid.

illness ripens the eyes. like sending a poem away.
a single point of collective wonder. a tiny
gesture of emphasis. a gateway to some interior
knowledge. like the mirage of arrival.
a favourite child. a memory of travelling home
for Christmas. *did I ever leave that ward?* like the
shaky handwriting your grandmother had;
she could not reply before the end. wearing
the night like an episiotomy scar. *they cut her without
asking; when she spoke of it she winced after forty years.*
like a collapsed vein. a bruise spreading out
like a delta. the work of the hours of life.
earning your existence. like the grim seeing
of Franz Wright or Hubert Selby Jr. like a doll's
sightless question. like life lives itself. a sequence
of events. hypervigilance. like salvage. childhood
sadness. gloss, shivering over the mouth
of a child beauty queen: infrared. a hologram
of the sun. your brother cutting off his ponytail
and placing it in the coffin. *like a scald.*
feeling for the seams underneath, you exhaust yourself.
like *Toy Story* when the toy gets lost and cannot find

its way back.

ii. witness

Wearing the night like your alcoholic father rehoused

in a clean modern flat like Cinders. whisked
away from the unsifted debris of twenty years
since your mother died. sure you'll find him
again: a pale face staring out through one tiny
square between stacks of newspapers in a television
promo for hoarders.

कनारे
Tajender Singh Luthra TJ

हमें कोई पुल नहीं
चाहिए
ये पानी जोड़ता है हमें
सच्चे मन से.
रखता है
शांत, स्थिर हमें.
लगता है जैसे हम लेटे हैं
बस्तिर पर
पानी के नीचे से
हाथ जकड़े
गर्म-गर्म, कसे-कसे.
और हमारे बच्चे
सो रहे हैं
हमारे बीच
बेसुध.

SHORES

We don't need any
bridge
this water connects us faithfully,
keeps us calm, still.

As if we are lying on a bed
clasping our hands
warm and tight beneath the water.
and between us
our children sleep carefree.

SATURDAY MORNING – TEMPLE BAR

DS Maolalai

the evenings are over. nights too – it's 5am
here. sun strikes the cobble at tight
acute angles, and brazen-eyed seagulls
attack rubbish bags, hamburgers and dead alley
animals, their wings turning upward like convertible
roofs in mid-change. the occasional morning's
pedestrian, braving the stillness – a horse testing ice
on a lake. streetsweepers also,
and yawning-mouth cleaners
opening doors into bars with their mops
and their dustpans and promise of minimum
wage. the occasional light from a sign
in a 24hr coffee shop window;
the dust of a christmas tree
left up until march the fifteenth.

IN THE END

Kate Maxwell

In the end, the beginning doesn't really matter. *Nothing matters anymore*, she says. *Does it matter if I eat the mashed potato, peas, or chicken? I can't take another bite. Does it matter if I ever eat lunch again? Does it matter that my hair needs washing?* We note the Mother's Day flowers from weeks ago putrefying in the murky water. But does it matter? *I don't want the custard. I just want to disappear*, she says. *Does it matter if I'm here or not at all?* These are the conversations of the day.

We lean in, clutch her crepe-skinned hand, doling out white lie assurances, laxatives, and repetitions. We go backwards, ever backwards over childhood recollections, silly songs, and anecdotes to sway her mood into the familiar rhythms of way back when and how it all began. *I don't want the strawberries or the ice cream*, she says. *Remember when we went strawberry picking, and I wouldn't eat another strawberry for years? Do you remember, Mum?* I try. She smiles vaguely, touches the strawberry like it might jump up and run. The therapy labradoodle visits. She pats it tentatively. *Oh, Mum, remember that damn cat? Do you remember when we had to hold Cathy's heels as she leaned over the septic tank to scoop up the stupid drowning cat? It yowled like a banshee all morning. Do you remember?* She smiles again; maybe remembering faces of children, or the mewling whine and yowls summing up a multitude of cats over so many years.

So, we keep tap dancing, tapping on the past until we strike a preserved seam. Maybe one from a different decade. *Yes! That's right, Mum. You're right, we'd walk the esplanade down to Shelley Beach or all the way to the Foodlands shops. Yes, past the white bay window house that needed*

painting. Exactly. No, I don't think they ever painted it. We don't mention that it's long gone, as is the shop and Mum's little apartment around the corner.

In the end, it's all the same, she says. I just want to go home, she says. Whatever that means to her anymore. She remembers the green kitchen tiles, a long brick balcony, but not the sliding door that needed fixing. The trip hazard rugs she kept placing back over fraying carpet every time we'd move them. The stovetops we disconnected to prevent a fire. The freezer full of uneaten meals, phone calls from the nurse who said Mum wouldn't let her in again. The missed medications, the inevitable decline. So, now we're here. Does it matter if we're guilty, heartsore at the way things have to end? Does it matter that we know she's still here but not really here? Does it matter that we hate ourselves when we're too tired and worn to loop over the endless questions, endless answers? That we wish things were so much more like the beginning. In the end, the beginning really does matter.

A TALE OF TWO SAUCES

Greg McKittrick

Hoisin's ancestors had been in the aisle five for more generations than anyone could remember. So, you could say he was born into it, and there was nothing more to it than that. It bugged him. Not that much. Not like he was gonna flip his lid over it or anything. Spray sticky sweet and sour sauce all over his noodle buddies on the next floor down. But it irked him, and it always had.

Five was the *Ethnic Aisle*, or in other parts of Australia was also known as the *International Foods Section*. He'd even heard Kecap Manis, in her best plummy-mouthed imitation, scoffing that she'd heard it labelled *Cuisines of the World*, in one of the more Chi-Chi parts of town. And if there was one thing Hoisin knew about KM, it was that she hardly ever complained about anything.

It wasn't that he didn't like the company in this part of town, he did. But as he said to Valentina the other night; just after the shelf stackers finished their midnight shift and they were alone in those few unstaffed intimate hours, hours he relished because it was only then he felt he could whisper of his true affections toward her, 'why are we here? Your cousin Corn Chips got outta here years ago. And don't start talking to me about Olive Oil'. Valentina giggled complicitly, and he loved hearing that. For many, she was too fiery of temperament, but he'd seen other sides to her. And that murmuring laugh gave him hope that someday, somehow, they'd get out of here together. In Mexico, Valentina was a household name, loved throughout the land. Here, day in day out, people walked by her without a second glance. Hoisin thought Valentina was the hottest sauce around.

Hoisin dreamed of being seen for who he truly was. A sauce as good as any other sauce. In fact, in his own humble opinion, a sauce that came

from a long proud tradition, one that had graced the tables of emperors, impressed foreign dignitaries during diplomatic dinners, transformed barnyard chickens into works of art. Yet here he was, languishing in the *Ethnic Aisle*. Rendered little more than a curiosity, a novelty, an exotic treat.

There could be little more belittling. Think about it. Where does Ketchup live? Prime real estate. Gazing down from those high traffic shelves, bustling with life. He'd love that expansive view, sitting back perusing the store entrance and exit, down the corridors of the mall to the world beyond. Ketchup's fine, nothing wrong with tomato sauce. Sure, improves a pie, but can you think of any other sauce as bland, as utilitarian, and as, dare he say it, white bread?

Knowing that focusing upon such negativity was bad for his health, he turned his mind back to Valentina. Just the thought of her brought with it the promise of freedom, of joy, of celebration. A fiesta waiting to begin. He could only imagine and imagine he did. There were many who said they were too different. That it was only aisle five they had in common. But Hoisin refused to bow to such fatalistic pessimism, such old-world view. Things were changing. He could feel it in his very essence. Was there so much distance between peanuts and sesame seed, betwixt chilli and black pepper? Indeed, isn't soy sauce chock-a-block of salt and neither of them would be who they are without vinegar. There was so much in common, and much to discover.

Then it came to him. Old Uncle Lim shopped here every Thursday evening around 6pm. He'd heard him talking about how his grandson was dating a Mexican girl. All Hoisin had to do was convince Valentina to make sure she was at the front of the shelf, he'd do the same, and they were in with a chance.

Thursday came along and right on time so did Uncle Lim. La Bamba was playing on the muzak loop, and he can still remember the cool air gliding around his glass jar as Uncle lifted him down, placing him

carefully in the green plastic basket. He looked up, and like a vision, with a fluorescent halo surrounding her Valentina descended to nestle beside him. To his dying days he would swear he heard her sigh contentedly as she dipped her shoulder toward him.

The setting sun lit the checkout tills orange and gold as together they were scanned into freedom. Uncle Lim drove slowly through the suburbs and pulled into his driveway. He unloaded them to his pantry, placing them gently side by side on a shelf with a view through the kitchen out to the backyard. A thriving vegetable garden in the foreground, with a line of elm trees planted along the border. Valentina and Hoisin marvelled at the beauty.

Both knew their time together was limited. Grandson was coming to dinner on the weekend, and they'd overheard a phone call where he'd told his grandfather he was hoping to bring his new girl. Not a last supper but the beginning of the end. From there it would be but a gradual draining of their qi. They didn't care. They were together, the sceptical voices could no longer be heard and aisle five was but a distant memory.

AN ADEQUATE EDUCATION

Kenneth M McRae

Sarah attempted to flatten her shirt collar. The corner was moist and sloppy where she had been chewing it. Her eyes were moist and sloppy. Sarah knew she was not supposed to chew her collar but sometimes, often even, she could not help it. This was one of those times.

The silence of the empty classroom pounded her eardrums. Sarah cowered in her third-row seat. She glanced around the room. Posters hung in every open space along the walls. Some offered encouragement. A few covered lessons. But Sarah stared at the three posters at the front of the room, behind the teacher's desk. The top one, centered along the wall just below the ceiling, was simple. The background was pink and light purple with no pictures, just large, bold words in bright silver. 'Every Student Will Receive an Adequate Education.' Below it, off to the left, was a picture of a group of people in a lifeboat. In the background, one person was stuck on a fiery, sinking ship. Beneath the picture, in sharp red letters against a canary yellow background, it said 'Don't be left behind.'

To the right of the sinking ship, mostly visible above a shelf with study guides and globes, was a poster with bullseye. The same poster was in every classroom Sarah had ever been in. At the center of the bullseye was '75% = Adequate.' The 75 was splashed across the center of the poster like it was bursting through the wall. Sarah never earned an 'Adequate' on any report card. Her sister earned a few. Mom and Dad celebrated the Adequate scores Elizabeth earned like great family victories. Victories Sarah could never deliver.

If you missed the standard by no more than 5 points your score was 'Acceptable.' Sarah had, on rare occasions, received an Acceptable score. Her parents were always proud of her for those. Sarah was more

accustomed to the next category – 'Partially Inadequate.' This was the grade if you missed the Adequate target by 6 to 10 points. More than 10 points was 'Inadequate.' Unfortunately for Sarah, she earned a few 'Inadequate' grades over the years. She tried to only get one a semester. Her parents seemed more understanding if there was only one Inadequate on her semester report.

Once she missed the target score by exactly 15 points. The grade terrified her. One point worse and it would have been a 'Failing' mark, which meant being off by 16 to 20 points. Sarah had never earned a Failing grade for a class. Only a few students had ever done that poorly. Students who were now were whispered about like ghosts. Cautionary tales to be avoided at all costs. But 'Failing' sounded like a blessing to Sarah about now. She was off by 23 points! This was unheard-of. The poster did not even list a category for her score.

'What could be worse than "Failing"?' Sarah asked the empty room. Other kids sometimes talked about it as 'Catastrophic'. She wanted to laugh at how ominous the word sounded. But then she took another look at the picture of the shipwreck hanging on the front wall. Sarah knew her score was catastrophic enough that she would be left behind. This was a government mandated test. The grade had serious ramifications for Sarah, her teacher, her principal, and the entire school.

'How many violations did the Vickers boy have?' Sarah wondered. Like everyone else, she had stopped using his first name since it happened. He was just known as 'the Vickers boy'. Regardless of his name Sarah could not forget the incident.

The entire school was assembled for eighth grade science presentations. The projects never changed. The goal was to demonstrate adequate knowledge of accepted concepts; there was no need to discover anything new. Vickers was the weakest link in his grade. It took everything he had, and some of what those around him would share, to eke out 60-point scores. Through good fortune, or good planning, Vickers was assigned the easiest project. But he got the directions

confused. He used 1.5 litres of something instead of .15 litres. The result was disastrously, dangerously bad. The project exploded. Chunks landed amongst the youngest students, unfortunately sitting in the front rows. He was escorted off the stage and straight out of the school. Teachers lost bonuses for the year. The school's budget was cut because of his failure. His family was forced to move after word got out. It took three years before there had been any money to repair the damage. Singed stage curtains served as the ominous backdrop for every assembly for the next three years. A blackened, sooty reminder of the price of one student's catastrophic failure.

Sarah knew she would never be allowed to return to school. The shame she would bring upon the entire campus was far too much. Other students earned 'Adequate' and 'Acceptable' grades with ease. No one ever failed. She alone struggled to achieve the proper scores. No student in the history of District School 47 had been allowed to get a 'Catastrophic'. The school would have to get rid of Sarah or else the School District Committee on Ensuring Adequate Performance of Students would take over. Maybe even the Regional Educational Council would come down hard on everyone. Pay cuts for teachers, staff, and the principal. Students would lose privileges like Study Hall and Quiet Reflection Period. Lunches might get slashed. Everyone would know it had been Sarah's fault.

Everyone would know! Sarah shuddered with the realisation her score would hurt more than the school. Sarah had worried, briefly, about what punishments her parents would levy. But they were kind and sympathetic to her. She had not been afraid of them. Once everyone knew, they would have no choice. Anyway, their punishments might not be enough. The neighbors would surely complain to the Community Oversight and Adjustment Bureau. Mom and Dad would lose all their friends. 'Will they lose their home?' Sarah knew it was possible. The Vickers family had been forced out because their son had a long history of failing. Sarah had a history, too.

At the thought of her parents, and her sister, being evicted, Sarah broke down. She could never look them in the eyes after today. They would have no choice but to send her away to a re-education learning camp. Hopefully, that would be enough to save the family from her shame.

Sarah heard the classroom door open. She straightened her collar and wiped her eyes in one fluid motion. She glanced toward the door. Mrs Blackwell walked in first. She caught Sarah's glance briefly, then she looked toward the floor. Normally, the teacher's blue eyes were a source of comfort for Sarah, but today they were bloodshot and swollen, with faint streaks of mascara visible beneath them. Mrs. Blackwell crossed to her desk and sank into the brown wooden chair. She did not lift her gaze from the tile floor, seemingly trying to commit each yellowing square to memory.

Sarah's teacher was followed by several other adults. There was the principal, Mr Caesar. He walked to the front of the classroom and leaned against the wall. He folded his arms across his chest and watched Sarah. She could not look up at him. She focused instead on his two-tone, leather, lace-up shoes. The toes and heel areas were dark, rich brown patent leather. The centre panel was a soft cream-colored suede. The toes reflected the flickering fluorescent lighting. The suede was spotless and looked like it had just been brushed.

The Vice-Principal for Academic Affairs, Ms Rockford, came in next. She shook her head and let out a slight sigh at the familiar sight of Sarah. This was not the first time Ms Rockford had to deal with Sarah's academic shortcomings. Ms Rockford studied the principal's movements, then took her place next to him. She folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the wall. Her shoes refused to reveal themselves. Instead, they stayed hidden underneath her long corduroy skirt.

There were three other teachers as well. This was the school's Academic Advisory Team. The AAT existed to ensure all students

received 'An Adequate Education'. They were the guardians of the school's academic legacy. Their job was to make sure every student's score met the approved standards. It was a plum assignment. The annual stipend for serving on the Team was a significant incentive.

The AAT members grabbed the first three desks they happened across and formed them into a crude semicircle, aimed directly at Sarah. The metal legs screeched a banshee's wail as they were drug across the floor. Sarah wiped her eyes on the back of her shirt sleeve. She stared at her desk and tried not to move.

The principal was holding Sarah's test. His hands were shaking, and the printout rattled back and forth like a cheap fan. Sarah could see a small blue vein on the back of his wrist pulsating. She did not dare look at his face. The two-toned shoes took two short steps toward her.

'No one has ever received a Catastrophic in MY school before, Sarah. How do you explain yourself this time?'

Sarah cowered down in her chair. She whimpered 'I don't know. I studied every night, exactly like I was supposed to. I did my best. I'm, I'm sorry.'

'How much did you study?' The voice was that of Ms Rockford. The unspoken accusation dripped off the words as they ricocheted around the classroom.

'I study exactly two hours. Every night. Just like the study guide said. I swear.' Sarah's voice was too small and shaky to ricochet. The words tumbled out, one on top of another, and then wafted away.

'Sarah, are you sure you didn't forget the study requirements? Even once?' Mrs Blackwell was leaning forward now, offering Sarah a life raft.

Sarah sat up, her voice clear and bright. 'Never! I studied exactly like the study guide said. I tried to reach that score.' Sarah was pointing just to the right of Ms Rockford, jabbing the air with her finger in the direction of the grade scale. 'I don't know why I can't do it! I just, I just, ... I ran out of time. Mrs Blackwell told us we had 10 minutes left. I never got to double check the last set of questions. I had to turn in whatever I had.'

The late afternoon sun steamed in through the windows. Rays of light reflected off the posters, the floors, and leather toed shoes. Only the small pieces of dust, floating through the rays of sunlight, could relax. The clock ticked out every second, each one striking like a heavy hammer on a coffin nail.

At last, one of the AAT teachers spoke up. 'If she didn't have time to complete the test, we might be able take that into consideration,' they suggested.

'Are you suggesting we call this a 35(e) situation?' another AAT member asked. 'Those are only if a something interferes with the test. Like a fire alarm or something. Poor time management and guessing is not a 35 subsection (e).'

Ms Rockford nodded in agreement. The clock pounded a few more nails.

Mr Caesar took a step back from Sarah's desk. 'What if we did call it a 35 sub e? What would that do to her score?'

Ms Rockford stiffened her neck and stared at the principal. She opened her mouth but reconsidered. Instead, it was the teacher who first proposed the 35(e) option that spoke. 'The rule doesn't specifically say it has to be a fire alarm. The rule says "If something interferes with a student's ability to complete the test in the time allotted" we can take that into account. Well, here, inability to keep track of time is "something that interfered" with her ability to complete the test on time. She didn't even double check her work; she practically had to guess.'

The principal made a slow quarter-turn and looked at Mrs Blackwell. She was going over Sarah's test paper with a red pen, double-checking the last ten questions and recalculating the score. 'What would happen if we ignored the last ten questions, Alice?'

Mrs Blackwell was writing across the front of Sarah's test. She crossed out the original score; the one with Sarah that included Sarah's guesses. In its place, Mrs Blackwell wrote a new fraction, and a new grade. She showed the revised paper to the administrators. Mr Caesar

looked at the test. He tilted his head slightly and arched his eyebrows. He looked up from the test and focused on Mrs Blackwell. She nodded twice, slowly.

‘She would be Inadequate.’

Principal Caesar clapped his hands together like a thunderbolt. The AAT team slapped each other on the back. The tension, so thick just moments before, vanished like a shadow at the flip of a light switch.

Ms Rockford’s face relaxed enough for a small, sharp smile to crack briefly across it. Mr Caesar loosened his tie with a couple of shakes of his large left hand. Then he unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. The AAT team rose from their child-sized desks. The chair legs shrieked with delight as they returned across the floor. The three teachers thanked Mrs Blackwell and turned to the door. Mr Caesar got there first. He was out of the room with a pair of quick steps and a half skip. The Vice-Principal for Academic affairs followed him as quickly as she could.

Mrs Blackwell dropped the test on her desk. She signed into her computer and updated the class gradebook. She pressed enter and waited for the computer to confirm the task was done. Then she shut off the machine and stood up. She straightened the back of her skirt and followed the administrators’ laughter down the hall.

For a few moments Sarah did not dare move. She wanted to be sure no one was coming back. The room was quiet. The motion-sensitive lights forgot she was there. Sarah grabbed her books and stood up. Startled by her movement, the lights clicked back on. Sarah walked to the desk and looked down at the test to be sure she was safe.

The old score was crossed out, along with the words ‘Beyond Failing’. Instead, the test now said ‘Inadequate’ in soft, flowing, red letters. Her grade now showed she missed the adequate score by only 13 points. Sarah’s teacher, the Vice-Principal for Academic Achievement, and the Principal found a way to improve her score by ten precious points. All it took was for them to ignore the last ten questions on the test. Sarah’s

score on the first ninety questions did not make any of the adults happy. But it was closer to Adequate.

Sarah was still stunned by her good fortune. She picked up the test and double checked her score. The original grade of 98/100 was crossed out and replaced with 88/100. 88%. 13 points above the target. Inadequate.

ARCADIAN

Melinda Jane – The Poet Mj

Primed and packed, the road trip begins with roister. To the snow-capped mountains, the bus of primary school children and helpers went. The Arcadian scenery hypnotically pulls joy to rest. Assailing flakes of cream, blanket of white, crisping the viewers' minds. We, amidst woollybutt gums, alabaster rooves, glass sheens. Boisterous echoes, tobogganing, snow fights, eating snow, spittle, laugh upwards to the frosted skies. A niveous safari remembered.

blizzard inspirit
congregating ponderous
milky azure skies

SEASONAL

Alyson Miller

The light has changed again, and the cats are mad with it, their eyes and throats thirsty for outside, for feather and bone. The grass is all weed, but in the afternoon it seems like things might or could be different. There is a boy who throws a rock at the fence every day, and the dog next door scrabbles at the crack of it, frothing at hunt or play, and the ritual. One day a rock might be thrown at the boy, the dog might be loosed from the garden. Between these breaths and the pop-shush of the gas when the flame takes, the hours are keys dropped and fried onions and the voice of the man who knows only volume. It is Wednesday and two pigeons plump under the orange tree, nestling under the single glimpse of fruit. Somewhere an alarm howls but it is the normal time, and so it is all the same until it is not. Whoever knows what smallness might be cared for, and how; carried between teeth and claw, or held softly under lashes and tongue.

JUNE AGAIN

EJ Murry

i wake up one day
a grown-up with a plan and a referral
a signature on a piece of paper

i wake up one day
banana bread for breakfast with a cup of tea
books to return to the library
written in french i can finally read

ducks spin over a river
music plays from a shop front
coffee is too much money
i don't have a job

noodles for lunch; i drink
salty water and call it a meal
because that's how it feels

dinosaur pasta for dinner, it makes me laugh
to think that i'm an adult
and treat myself so young
tuck myself in and sing myself a funny little song

i watch the football game, i study
nostos kleos menis metis
aiodos and polytropos
big histories from my little room

i wake up one day and it's

june again

SWALLOWED

Kavita Nandan

Michael Packard was trapped in the mouth of a humpback whale for 40 seconds

Inside
the whale
every second counts
you see
it's a matter of perspective;
Jonah had three days, you're not so lucky
you live in the real world
your lungs are ripe for bursting
air runs thin

you
could
freak
out

any minute
Instead you are thinking
about your husband and child
the stain in your blouse
the bread you forgot to buy,
if this is what it is like to be enclosed in the belly of your mother:

hot and breathy elbowing ribcage
thick and dark banging blind against blubber

The seconds speed up
and the waters whirlpool while
you start giving up
saying to yourself *what a big mouth it has*

but the whale freaks out, breaching
and you find yourself,
flying dry
into the arms of the astonished,
spat out and saved
given a second chance
Don't screw it up.

BARFLY ON THE WALL

Will Neuenfeldt

Off-camera, I sit at the one table Carla doesn't serve,
front row to any Sam & Diane I've ever had.
Along with Woody, I welcome Mr Peterson
when he waltzes in for another glass added to his tab.
Cliff competes to list the sweatiest movies of all time,
my Fast and the Furious response is forty years too late,
without one laugh from the live studio audience.
Not even Doctor Crane and his credentials
can cure my affliction that I'm a regular
where everyone knows your name except mine.

UNDERTOW

Nathanael O'Reilly

Niall from Eniskillen sang Carrickfergus
after midnight by the lakeside, conjured
a vision of salt, sea spray and foam.

Some bastard stole my favourite black shirt
with blue flowers from our parked car
on the northside of Dublin while we cheered

in Croke Park. The girl with the raven hair
looked me in the eye – I was on my hands
and knees cleaning the toilet. She's going

down to the water, walking home in the rain.
I saw her walk down the aisle twice in other
people's weddings, both times more beautiful

than the bride. I'll see her sometime next year
when the tide sucks the green water away
from the rocks. I need my past to have a future.

I will be the undertow dragging her out to sea.

AT THE PARK IN PADUA HILLS

Cassady O'Reilly-Hahn

The toppling laughter of children in the grass:
Fledglings flying 'til they crash.

VOLTE-FACE

Sarah Penwarden

The tug of the moon catches you off-guard
hauling you back
to this country:
rivulets turn
like a lace curtain
in folds on the black sand.

AUBADE

Georgia Rose Phillips

This morning, a light buzz.
The crackle of the radiator.
The smell of warm flesh.
Your back rising and falling
more gently than civilisations.
You hatch through the
sheets, fledgling, one bent
wing loosening for first flight.
The minutes fold like origami
paper corners collapsing, inwards.
It's a phantom limb – the way
the ravenous gold frames the
curtains' border, and autumn ignites
the great beyond in a blaze of amber.
Stay. Don't exit the wound.
This life is as short as a calm winter
morning, and only as long as the
quick flicker of midday spread out
on the map of leaf veins,
after all these molten years.

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Gregory Piko

(after Edward Hopper's painting Western Motel, and William Shakespeare's play As You Like It.)

so, there I was

driving familiar roads

heading to the same office
where I planned to greet familiar faces
and do the usual things

when the green Buick
quietly turned left
and left again

I packed a few clothes and tossed my bag
onto the back seat

heading west, the city
began to thin out, like second-week
audiences at a mediocre play

no one was watching
as I followed the painted line, on and on
between endless cornfields

until night fell, when I pulled

into a small motel where I ate alone under a pale light
before falling into a long, sound sleep

out of habit, I washed and dressed
then drew back the curtains to reveal morning sunshine
sliding softly over a string of low hills

it's often said that all the world's a stage
now here's a world where I could come of age

apprehensive, yet filled with anticipation

freed from living
the same scenes day after day
week after week

no longer stifled
by a script as stale as the remnants of last night's
popcorn languishing beneath the back stalls

I'm ready for new characters
with new dialogue
ready for stories that surprise

ready to step onto the stage
and improvise

AMERICAN GHAZAL WITH ENOUGH

Matt Prater

Near the end of a loved one's life, the way one sleeps at two am,
on a hospital couch, under fluorescent lights,
with everything asleep but the ears, is enough.

A teacher once told me, of trials and politics,
that if she were to run for the assembly or coroner
or council, her slogan would be, simply, *this is enough*.

It struck me, hungry last year, after midnight, for pancakes,
but finding the diner I favoured had ended its midnight shift,
that it sensed, more than anyone, the coming of never enough.

In my eyes are half of the planets, half of myself,
half of a slice of the stars. However much I comprehend,
my wicked comprehensions will never be enough.

Lord, bless all of my enemies with full tables on distant streets,
and me with a quiet corner away from the half of myself who won't
learn how to mean that and does not know the meaning of enough.

A helicopter flies over the house on its way to retrieve its patient.
There is no traffic in the valley. The last train whistled by hours ago.
Even the firefly has burrowed and lain her larvae.

But what remains is enough.

FUCK YOU I AM NOT AI PART 1

Sujash Islam Purna

I came to this room exactly on August 6, 3:04am
to sit down and write this poem

as opposed to an AI bot, that can never sit
that can never tell what it is like to be insomniac

and worry about what it will be like in the years
to come. I will be gone, so I am awake tonight

but the AI is always up, pushing propaganda
or sex chat lines to strangers in the night

It can't tell day from night but it knows to
write TV shows, predict the stock market, etc.

I am not writing poems anymore these days,
because Simon & Schuster is eager to wait and

publish more AI instead. I am not sorry that I am
not as good as the machine that runs on electricity.

My neuron synapses are volatile and they like
to go to sleep at some point maybe at 4:04am.

Try asking a bot see if it can say Fuck You, and fuck
you for thinking so and that it can write what I just wrote

3 POEMS

Mykyta Ryzhykh

the steadfast tin soldier will turn into tin
in the meantime
he warms the snow with his body

The syntax of the wind carries the message
The tired maiden says something

The sky overhead crackles
Leaves crunch underfoot

Absolute powerlessness when he stepped into the dark forest
To the crisp morpheme weep of tired leaves

A crunch underfoot
Or a crunch from the inside?

spring discipline
we drink water from the sky
we turn into rain

SNIPPET

Rahul Santhanam

You were good with scissors.
(You've cut me out
Of your life.)

I liked that you were good
With scissors. (You've cut

JONAH, BLUE, GREEN

Noa Shenker

Moonlight made the water look white. Jonah waded in gently, his feet squashing the damp earth beneath him, his shins tickled by the reeds and short hairs on his golden calves enmeshed with the unmown grass. His legs looked almost black out here, as did his arms. They'd become one with the ultra-violet. He walked further into the water. It was cool and refreshing, the heat of the sun still lingering on his skin. At some point grass bled into sand, and the water met his hips. His fear slipped from his hands the further he waded in. He remembered this feeling. There weren't any waves, not anymore. There weren't any people left either, except for Noah inside. All he could hear was the sloshing of his sternum in the shallows, the gliding of thick rope gripped firmly in his right hand against the break of the water, and the three boxes that it held together in its wake. His heart raced but he felt safer than he had in months. The cardboard darkened with wetness more and more the further he stormed out, and the walls of the boxes threatened to fall apart. Plastic trophies peaked out of the top of one box. A childhood blanket burst out the corner of another. They bobbed slowly beneath the surface; boxes weren't meant to float.

At some point Jonah's feet lifted off the sand and he began to swim, rope in hand. The weight it carried was not so heavy. The white light guided him further and further out. The boxes held.

His parents had brought him back to the Cottage two days after he was born. He'd been wrapped in a pale blue wool blanket. They were situated about an hour from the city, backyard blurring into beach. They called the home the Cottage because of its weatherboard look; white walls and a cosy feel. They called the boy Jonah for everything that lay beyond it.

Jonah loved the water from as soon he was aware of what it was. He never fussed when he needed to be bathed. He loved his mother's soapy hands coating him with the warm water, and the way the bubbles would rise and pop near his cheeks. He loved the sound of waves crashing on the shore in the late afternoon when his father would open the windows to let the sea breeze in.

His parents had taken him for his first proper swim when he was three. Jonah was unaccustomed to the chill of the ocean, but the seawater managed to clasp its slippery fingers around something in the boy's chest. Morning dips became quick ritual. At first, his dad would take him out and gently walk in the shallows, every now and then dipping the toddler's legs and bottom on the ocean foam, white against white. As the boy's arms grew longer and legs thicker, he was allowed to be more submerged, and at some point, his dad taught him how to move his arms properly to keep himself afloat and kick his legs strongly enough to propel him forward. Before long he could swim on his own. His mother, Lisa, thought her son to be half sea-creature most days.

For his eighth birthday Jonah invited classmates over to swim in the shallows with him. His friends tired of the cold water long before he did, and he cried when their fatigue forced him from the waves. His mum consoled him as his friends built castles. They ate diced watermelon and rice crackers on the sand and kicked a footy until pick-up time and mostly ignored the Bass Strait that pushed up against them like a nagging relative. Jonah had been unsure if the dried salt on his cheeks was from the sea.

He didn't quite understand that most people felt more comfortable on land. He woke each morning at dawn only because the ocean's call roused him from slumber. Even in the wintertime. His mum often thought the boy's legs might atrophy if they weren't sufficiently damp. He'd be out there every morning with his dad, no doubt. She had no real complaints, though; her favourite part of the day was the morning, too.

She would sit at the window overlooking the backyard and dote on her husband and son diving through the water. The rays of early morning sunshine were reflected in the upturn of her aging lips. She was too happy to notice that each morning their footsteps in the sand lessened.

When Jonah was nine his mother fell pregnant again. By the time he had turned ten his father had been diagnosed. For a short while the morning swims stopped, and his heart dried up on land. Noah was born on a Sunday morning at home, overlooking the water and the winter waves. Another boy to command the seas. His father got to hold him in those first precious minutes. Captured within those moments was a love that could not be bottled in the deepest or widest of oceans. And three days after one life was brought into the Holmes family, one was taken. Jonah's tears could have filled up the Tasman. He didn't know how to say goodbye. For him, grief felt like an empty swimming pool. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't.

A few days after his father's funeral Jonah took a walk alone on the beach. He trailed his hand along the freshly placed sandbags that populated the line between the coast and its homes. Slowly he edged closer to the shoreline. He found a dead fish in the sand. He poked at it reluctantly. It was warm to the touch.

After waiting the appropriately devised six years, Jonah started taking Noah swimming with him. The boy loved using his boogie-board more than his limbs. He'd glide on the water next to his brother but never really with him. Jonah felt he had failed a little bit because of that. By that time, the high tide was coming about halfway up the beach. A solid ten metres further than when Jonah had first started out with their dad. It seemed like a cyclical thing, innocuous. They had heard of icebergs melting far away, but the summers were no hotter here than they'd been years before, and fear seemed like a hurdle unnecessary to jump until

one was tripping over it. One lunchtime at school they held a forum for the students to discuss climate change. He learned that plastic never fully broke down, not really. If it was out in the ocean somewhere, it just disintegrated into smaller and smaller pieces, but it would never entirely decompose. As much as it felt like an infestation of his home, like termites in the beams of the Cottage or cancer in his father's pancreas, something about the granular piece of knowledge solaced him; there was a sense of comfort in the poison's immortality. He wondered if the little plastic pieces were moving further up the shoreline, too. At this point people hadn't start leaving, not yet. Their homes were still habitable. The ocean's growing reach still felt like outstretched arms searching for a hug. Nothing sinister.

Six days after he finished high school Jonah's family received their first notice for evacuation. They would receive two more over three months before they actually had to leave.

Jonah woke at sunrise and went for a swim on his last morning at the Cottage. His body couldn't unlearn the ritual. The ocean wouldn't let him forget.

The water was warm. It was autumn but it felt like a bath. Summer's claw marks had left scars on each riptide. He stalked through the dirty shallows until he felt the real sand beneath his toes, where he used to enter with his dad, and dipped his head under the surface. Within months the water's edge would be at their backdoor, or so they said. Something about the grounds, the structures. He pleaded with the weeds. Something sang in the depths. He looked for Dad.

The warmer the water, the less oxygen it can hold. It felt that way for Jonah, too. When he broke through the surface it seemed harder than normal to gasp for air. The waves had turned a deeper shade of blue, imbued with hues of brown that he saw as gold in the dawn light. Something felt different when he submerged himself, like his body had

outgrown the surf. He knew he'd always be able to slip beneath but for some reason it felt as he didn't fit there anymore.

Afterwards he sat in the sand and took in the horizon. He heard only the crashing of the waves. He missed the familiar squawks of the local gulls. As a boy they annoyed him, but over time he became habituated to their calls, and his ears could tune them out instinctively, like one might forget the buzz of a mosquito in a locked room or the chirping of crickets by a campfire. The birds were some of the first to go. Not as quickly as the fish, though. When the fish started washing up on shores, brimming with infection, no one could stop the birds from picking at them. People were sent to collect and dispose of the fish but not enough and not hastily enough to rid the sand swept shores entirely before the gulls got to them. The stench had been awful. It was mostly gone now, though.

Jonah missed the squawks. He missed their presence on the beach. He even missed shooing them away when he'd take his fish and chips down to the pier with mates. He missed the insistence of life.

He made his way back to the Cottage, trudging through a desert of wet sand and muddy grass. At the garden gate he turned back for one more look, but his footsteps had already been washed away. He went inside to pack the rest of his bags.

The first few nights in the refugee centre gnawed at his heart. Part of him had been left at the Cottage, and it could not be retrieved.

'What's wrong?' Noah asked. He was eight. He didn't yet realise this would be the rest of his life.

'Nothing,' Jonah said. 'I just miss home.'

Dozens of beachside towns had been funnelled inland with the Holmes. Makeshift communities were strung up in the thick of the Dandenong Ranges, a sprawling metropolis of sassafras and myrtles and lost boys.

It wasn't so far from the Cottage but it felt like a world away. Jonah's family would share a small two-bedroom cabin allocated to them. It was nice but it was not a home.

The day they arrived they unpacked their things and walked around. Cabins, tents and huts had been erected all over. Jonah recognised people from back home, a few friends from school, mostly those who also couldn't afford to relocate to the city. Jonah took in his new life.

The colourful leaves did little to combat the heat. There was nowhere to wash off the sweat. Jonah felt the sun slowly eroding his sense of self, like waves to a cliffside. Something new was forming.

It took time for him to acclimatise to the surrounding eucalypti. Their scent was distinct and sweet, indistinguishably Australian, but it had nothing on the salt of the sea.

Life was strange. Jonah found himself sleeping well past daybreak.

One day one of the older men approached Jonah.

'Do you know what your name means?' he asked.

'What do you mean?'

'Do you know what the Bible is?'

'Yes sir,' Jonah said.

'There's a story in it,' the man said. 'Jonah gets swallowed by a whale and then lives. It's well-known. The name's kind of a bad omen. Near waters, I mean.'

'Right,' Jonah said.

'Lucky we're inland now, eh?'

'Yep,' he replied. 'Lucky us.'

It rained one night at the camp. Jonah and Noah had still been up. The droplets doused their campfire. The water splashed Jonah's face, and whilst it was fresh and clean it was not his. He wanted to go home.

'Why'd you wanna go back so bad?' Noah had asked.

'I can't remember exactly what it looks like,' Jonah replied honestly.

It had been just over four weeks. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, holding back what felt like a tsunami. Beads of water slipped off his cheeks. Vignettes of the Cottage rushed his mind, but quickly, in a blur. He thought of asking Mum if they'd be able to go back somehow, just for a bit. 'Don't wanna forget what it looks like, you know? Don't wanna forget all that stuff we left behind.'

When he finally slept that night Jonah dreamt he was once again amongst the waves. He'd seen his father's face bobbing between them, his outstretched arms reaching for him just beneath surface. When their fingers touched he woke up. He went outside but the rain had stopped. Under the canopy of darkness the eucalypti provided starlight still managed to break through. He searched them for a face, but in the treetops he found only ghosts.

While she wasn't happy about it, Lisa conceded and let Jonah visit the Cottage. The town would be deserted, she warned, and things might look a little beaten down.

'I know it's only been a month,' she said. He knew, though.

Noah sat in the passenger seat.

They couldn't take any coastal roads because they weren't safe anymore. When they hit the city, Jonah parked outside their old local fish and chip joint and told Noah they'd need to walk the rest of the way to the Cottage.

Something felt off when they started walking. Quiet had settled like a fog. There were no birds flying or squawking. No children crying. No cars rumbling. No shopkeepers yelling. There was only the call of the waves. It felt simultaneously deathly as near divine.

There were cities like this all across the coast. Sunken cities, they were calling them. Like some sort of tourist attraction or theme park. Silent and on the edge of collapse.

The Cottage looked the same when they reached it. They had to be careful, Lisa had said, because the foundation of the home wouldn't be as strong anymore. Further down the coast, houses had already collapsed. The Cottage looked fine, though. It twisted Jonah's heart.

They spent the afternoon looking through their old things. Noah found toys to take back to the camp with him. Jonah threw some old books into a bag, some boxers and tee shirts.

They didn't have so much time when they left last, so there was a lot left over. Boxes remained populating their living rooms, empty and untouched, because there just wasn't enough time and Lisa had been told they needn't bring things like toiletries or cutlery or plates or furniture or artwork. Jonah took his time combing through all the mementos of his adolescence, packing them one by one in the cardboard boxes on the floor.

When he came across a framed photo of him and his dad, he hesitated. Traced the outline of his father's face. Committed the look of it to memory. Put it back in the box.

It's dusk by the time Jonah can bring himself to step outside the back door.

Any way he looks at the horizon, he sees his dad swimming toward it. He stands there for a long time. The sun sinks further into the water. At some point it disappears. At some point the moon rises and the sky turns dark. At some point he starts walking, further out, rope in hand. The boxes feel light. He feels light.

The sand is soft. It feels nice between his toes. Broken down from other things, hardened things, over thousands of years. Given a new life along the coast.

Jonah steps with ease through the smoothness brushing up against the skin between his toes and cushioning his heels. Steps with ease because this is how he has always approached the water. They have

always been friends. When he walks, he's wading through all his grief, but the ocean holds his hands.

The boxes are full of everything that made him. He can't let these things sit in the abandoned home and waste away. He needs to be the one to set them out to sea. He needs to have control over how he says goodbye.

When he thinks he's far out enough, Jonah lets go of the rope and watches as his childhood floats away. The boxes desert him, and with them all his belongings. They go slowly, but they go, pulled by the soft currents. Wishing they could just sink right away, Jonah shuts his eyes and falls downward.

He slips his body beneath the surface and a part of his old self falls into place. He hasn't forgotten what it's like. He could never outgrow this. As much as he feared he might, the sensation will always be familiar, like a hug from Dad. He opens his eyes under the water and the moon illuminates bits of cardboard floating away, along with everything they hold. Salt fills Jonah's eyes.

It would all wash away. It would drift out far, with all the plastic they told him about at school, the plastic that never dies. It would sink to the depths of the ocean, lie in motion on the sandy floor, be nipped at by crustaceans and swum through by fish and made a new home out of by burgeoning coral and sea life and it would sit there without him, disintegrating into smaller and smaller and smaller pieces.

It would spend eternity out of reach, but it would never fully decompose.

CURVE OF VIVID BLUE LIGHT

Mazzy Sleep

perfect glow and inch of light
seawater constellation
like unwavering blue stardust
not yet broken into blight
because tragedies do not
usually end in something as
delectably bright as this ...
but yes, to answer your question,
i am the exception

WAVERLY CEMETERY

Pip Smith

Let's stay dead where clouds
rush at us like bulls and weeds

push at our backs, insisting on and on
with their yellow fists held up to the sun.

Bury me here where even dead things
move. The angels launch themselves

off headstones only to break
in the long grass, eyeless

and grey as heart disease. Once, the coastal
walkway collapsed and the sea tried to suck

any skeleton toes that poked out of the rock
only to pull back, afraid of catching tinea

or mortal stillness. If only the sea knew: the earth
roils with worms and semi-decomposed tongues

and even the most ponderous sarcophagus
falls prey to bird shit, salt and southerly busters.

At three o'clock the rich kick back in their bone white
sunrooms on the hill while the black cockatoos

rip the guts from time, then decorate
our ear holes with the bloody remains:

*You fools in your forever homes and coffins!
The dead will move through your mortgaged halls*

*until the rising sea arrives
to pound us all to sand!*

THE UNIVERSE OF LOST THINGS

Beth Spencer

I have located a tear in the membrane
that surrounds and separates
the Universe of Lost Things
from our small world.

And I have rescued
the metal lion money box
my grandfather gave my mother
the year he died

& the Baker Boy biscuit barrel
that gazed deliciously
from on high through
everything of my childhood.

I am here to report this feat!
To give hope —
to all those who have lost
precious things:

photos, love letters, secrets,
the sound of a particular voice,
the smell of summer,
the slap of that first sea.

The blood
from that first wounding.

The cry of a baby.
It is here, see?

Look for the whip of a tear then
wiggle your fingers so you can
reach in with your whole
hand. For that which

belongs truly is seeking
to find its way back.
It beckons inside the most
ordinary of things.

Listens for your
sigh at night. Watches
for that tender ripple along
the skin of your breath.

And if you can just
ease in your fingers,
you will feel it
lick their salt.

MY SWEET GIRL

RL Swihart

*And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she
was the mother of all living (KJV, Gen. 3:20)*

In the fall of '92 I was still young and overdosing on Rilke, supplementing him with poignant stories by JP Jacobsen. Foolishly, I kept trying to launch Karen letters from the rear of the train (Bern to Milan, Milan to Verona, Verona to Venice, Venice to Rome) but the white doves (underwings with sooty spots) I released to the wind were, without exception, flung violently to the ground

Earth, isn't this what you want? To arise in us, invisible?

*

Milan: Verona: Venice: Rome:

I've deleted everything but a few details re Rome because you can go to any of these places and/or buy the guidebooks

Rome (November):

Gray. Rain. Wet. I walked along the Tiber, taking photos of a floating tyre and a blue bottle stuck in mud. Roman pines like monopode green clouds. What looked like a phone booth was a pissoir. A dilettantish study (in the Vatican Museum), without recording any specifics, re the changing face of the New Eve

*

Winter was coming on and I would soon go east into Slavic lands. I did. But again, I'll abridge the trip (all just a month or so before the peaceful line was drawn between the Czech Republic and Slovakia): Vienna: Prague: Bratislava: Poprad: Starý Smokovec

Eventually, I went back to Prague and took the night train from Prague to Warsaw, trying to engage (through the window) the Sudetes before the screen went black, finally getting off on a whim in a random town where long before Polish hills had surrendered to the Polish plain. On the sign above the platform orange tubes of neon twisted to form letters, some of which, I was almost certain, were kaput: ALIS

*

IMHO, much of Klee was (is) a philosophical project: 'plowing the primeval': looks like kids' stuff but isn't. A few days before our 30th I pulled Klee off the shelf (Philippe Comte, The Overlook Press) and turned instinctively to the watercolours. Desert with pyramids in the distance: desert with city domes in the distance: seen (never definitively) through a screen of 'roughly' geometric shapes of transparent colours, as though the sun was returning after a cloudburst

That's my life with Ewa. My life is exactly like that. Throw the girls in too. Throw in everyone. Throw in everything that lives and breathes. Even the simplest inanimate objects. *Smallest* not simple. Can't really explain it. Neither can you. And for a long time now I've been calling my Ewa, my sweet girl, 'the mother of change'

WATER

Tajudeen Muadh

my brother told me water is cleansing, a resurrection from where we draw ourselves as sketches of God's plan.

he says: 'your body is a garden of living-dead roses.' I paint myself as a watercolour finding the colours of the dead roses in me, shimmering the colours of the living roses, where a drool is a metaphor to the bathwater we forget to dress ourselves in.

in my body, there are holes filling itself with waters washing off bullets that passed through me.

a boy that knows the aftertaste of war sings through the holes on his body finding the colours where it is inscribed

'peace and quiet'

my language is a war/ water, fighting itself from my tongue, washing all the memoir(ies) of war songs. this is how to tame a father who describes a gunshot through the creeps of a night. a wall broken/ cracked

is a streamwater learning how to swim freely without fears of gunshots.

a cleric once told me we are waters learning how to become dust & I camouflage my fingers

into the sands on my father's tomb as if the prayers I mutter will go into it and burst into the heavens.

THE REFUGE

Noor ul Ain

People were coming in droves, some to say thanks and some to ask for things. There were women wrapped in shawls and women wearing jeans, men with curled moustaches and men wearing the typical orange garb of the *malangs*,* and then there were the others whose identity was still whispered in some circles of the society. The people who were neither men nor women – nor humans according to some. This was one of the few places of refuge for them ... and for me.

There weren't many places where I could hide. They would all be looking for me now and considering the manpower coming after me, this seemed the best place to be. Other than the obvious advantage of the huge crowd, there were many hiding places here, where one could become invisible. This shrine – considered one of the holiest places in Lahore – had given refuge to many desperate men and women, or so I had heard, and now I was one of them.

'Child, are you okay?' I jumped and looked around. It was one of *them*. I do not know if it was the fact that he was even more persecuted than me – he must have seen so many women and many of his friends with marks on their bodies – that I almost collapsed against him with relief and just shook my head.

He seemed to gauge the situation. In an instant, another one of them came to help him, almost carry me to a small street separating the eastern wall of the shrine from the boundary wall topped with barbed wire. A cup of water appeared in his hand, and he put it to my lips. I drank a sip and then grimaced when I could not swallow it.

I finally looked up to the two people standing over me. They were both dressed in the usual clothing of *malangs* – long orange coats which covered them almost to the foot.

'I am in trouble,' I mumbled.

Their eyes roamed over my face, taking in the swollen eye, the emerging bruise over my left cheek, the split lip and then the eyes went down for their inspection. I instinctively wrapped the shawl around me even more tightly and looked away. I didn't want to see the pity in their eyes when they would see the blood below my breasts, and everything else.

'No shit!' one of them said. Hearing the amusement in his voice, I looked up to see him smiling sardonically at me. 'You sought refuge in Data Darbar. You are far from the comforts of your life. You were brave to run, but the hard part is not over yet,' he said somewhat dispassionately.

'How many times have you repeated this before now?' I asked.

He raised a perfectly threaded eyebrow, looked me over once again, and then said with an appreciative grin 'We got ourselves a lioness, Chandni! She is wounded but she will recover.'

Chandi started to say something and then stopped, her gaze fixed on something behind me. I started to look around then realised that my neck was in no condition to turn, so clutching Chandni's arm I got up and then looked.

They were here.

He looked at me, his gaze calculating. 'Who are you?'

I wanted to tell him, but my tongue did not seem to be cooperating with my brain, I just gaped like a fish. He waved a hand and then asked, 'How did they find you so easily? Do you have your phone with you?'

I shook my head. Chandni was now bearing all my weight, I wanted to pass out and not deal with anything at all. 'Did you use any card somewhere near here?'

'I do not have my wallet or anything with me,' I mumbled. I clutched at him in desperation, my hand grabbing his arm. 'Please,' I said, not able to articulate what I wanted, I looked up at him to see him staring at the ring in my hands. The one piece of jewellery I always wore.

He took my hand in his and examined the ring. They want payment, I realised. 'Do you always wear this ring?' Chandni asked while keeping a wary eye on the plainclothes men who were merging with the crowd, clearly looking for someone.

'Yes, it was given to me by my grandmother right before she died. I was twelve. It is not expensive, but it has a lot of value for me,' I said, desperately hoping they will not demand it as payment.

Some silent understanding seemed to pass between them both. 'I'll take her, Shamim,' Chandni said addressing the one clutching my hands.

Shamim easily took off my ring and looked at me. He must have seen the pleading in my eyes because he got down at my eye level. Chandni was still holding me upright. 'There is a tracker in this ring. Whomever you were running from must have realised that you will do it at some point and put it here. I will try to get rid of it and bring your ring back to you.'

I threw my arms around him, just the idea of him caring enough about me, willing to do something for me for no charge and my guilt at false assumptions. I tried to convey it all through the hug. After a moment, Chandni pulled me back, Shamim smiled slightly at me and then we were separated.

I did not know where she took me. There were many narrow streets; sometimes we passed through houses to get from one street to another. Chandni was almost carrying me now. I did not have the energy to even drag my feet as she pulled me along. Finally, she put me down somewhere.

'There is a lot of heat for this one,' I heard Chandni say to someone and then the bliss of oblivion.

The raindrops felt lovely on my face. The cool drops a sharp contrast against my warm and sweaty face. I had always loved monsoons when the hot and humid weather gives way to torrential rains and gales. When all the kids would go out on the streets to jump in the water gathered in

the abundant potholes; when we would make paper boats which were soaked even before we put them in the water; when there was innocent laughter and fried samosas to eat ... a snarling face ... I sat bolt upright, which was a bad move.

I ached everywhere. I could feel tears of pain as I tried to sit as still as possible to give my body a chance to catch up. I could feel movement around me but did not want to open my eyes to see who was there, because if there was someone who wanted to kill me, I wasn't sure I would fight anymore.

I felt soft hands on my shoulders, a touch which seemed to convey comfort despite being feather light. 'It's okay. You are safe here,' a soft voice assured me.

I finally opened my eyes to see a small room. I was lying on a decrepit sofa, my legs dangling off the edge and someone sat behind me. I tried to see but even the slight movement caused me to wince. My neck was still raw and bruised.

'Wait,' the soft voice said. I felt movement behind me and then a woman came into focus. She seemed to be around 60, with salt and pepper hair and kind brown eyes. She dragged a chair from outside and then sat in my line of sight.

'Now that you have seen me, do you want me to help you sit with your back supported?' she asked.

'Yes please.' My voice was barely above a whisper, but she got up and helped me sit more comfortably.

'Where are Chandni and Shamim?' I asked.

'Shamim should be back any minute now. He distracted your pursuers and took them to Defence apparently. Chandni just went to get a numbing cream for your ribs.' It was then that I felt the bandage around my feet and on my left arm.

'Who are you?' I asked.

‘My name is Fehmeeda. I live nearby. They come to get me when they find someone in need. Sometimes people feel more comfortable with a woman.’

I laughed and then immediately winced. My ribs felt like someone had pushed a hot red poker in them. ‘They want to be rescued but then feel more comfortable with people who were not their rescuers.’

Fehmeeda smiled as well. ‘I am glad that you are not a hypocrite at least. The last one wouldn’t eat anything Chandni brought him; would only eat from the plate I brought.’ Seeing the look of incredulity on my face, she smiled. ‘The folly of humans, my dear.’

She fluffed a cushion, put it under my calf to make me more comfortable. ‘I was once like you. My father sold me to a brothel when I was 9 years old. He needed to buy cold medicine for my brother and to him selling a daughter to save his son from some discomfort was a good idea. I was brought to Sargodha and eventually made my way to Lahore. When I got too old to bring in any new customers, the owner of the brothel gave me a choice, I could stay and do odd jobs there or she would arrange for me to work somewhere else and give me some money to transition as long as I did not compete with her. I couldn’t believe it; someone had finally given me a choice. I chose to leave. I have been living and working here ever since.’

‘How many times have you told that?’ I asked with a slight smile, thinking of how I had asked Shamim the same question.

Fehmeeda smiled as well. ‘This is my twelfth time.’ She turned her head at the sound of a creak. Moments later Chandni entered with a small bag.

‘You’re awake,’ she said looking at me and turned to look at Fehmeeda. ‘Aapa,* Shamim will be here soon. He requested that you make your famous kadak chai.’* Fehmeeda smiled and got up turning to look back at me in the doorway. ‘Will you like some as well?’ At my nod, she smiled and left.

‘I have some numbing cream for you. Aapa said your ribs are badly bruised. I sanitised the wounds on your feet and Aapa did the rest. She ran out of cream by the time she was doing your back. I have brought some more. We get it from a different store each time. You never know who tells what to whom,’ she said all the while tidying up around me and putting medicines neatly on the table beside the sofa.

‘Thank you,’ I said quietly and put my hand on one of Chandni’s. ‘It is a small word, but it is all I have. I would surely be dead if you and Shamim had not helped me. I will never be able to repay your kindness and bravery. All I can do is say thank you.’

Chandni looked down at my hand and then at me. ‘You are welcome.’

‘Hey, I was the one who ran all around Lahore with three Vigos full of armed guards and a very handsome chap after me!’ Shamim stood in the doorway. He looked tired but the sparkle in his eye was the same.

‘Tha-’ I started to say but Shamim cut me off.

‘I heard what you said to Chandni, and I am guessing you want to say the same thing, and I will say the same thing Chandni has said; you are welcome.’

Fehmeeda came with four steaming cups of tea. ‘Aapa, you are my one true love,’ Shamim said and Fehmeeda laughed, letting him take the first cup of tea.

When we all had tea in our hands, all eyes turned to me expectantly. I closed my eyes for a moment, praying for strength.

‘I met him at the university while I was pursuing my Masters. He was handsome, charming and rich ... belonged to a political family. There were many girls he could have had, for fun or for something serious, but for some reason he chose me and I him. My parents were upper middle class, nowhere near as rich or as connected as his family, making them uneasy. They tried to talk me out of it, but they could not pinpoint what made them uncomfortable, so I chalked it up to their aversion to their daughter marrying for love.’ I paused, ‘conveniently forgetting that they

were the ones who convinced my aunt and uncle to let their daughter marry the person she loved.' I stopped to take a sip of tea.

'Things started to go downhill fast after we were married. I was not allowed to venture outside the home without getting permission and telling every detail of my activities. I got approval for every single thing from what I would wear to what I would eat and when I would do anything. If something changed, I immediately had to inform him otherwise there were shouting matches which seamlessly transitioned to physical abuse after around four months of marriage. It was so effortlessly done that I never considered leaving and then Ammi died.' I closed my eyes, tears rolling down my cheeks. Feeling a hesitant touch on my arm, I opened my eyes to see Chandni's hand. I clutched at it, trying to draw comfort and courage.

'And then the berating took another turn. I had not gotten pregnant, and it had already been six months to our marriage. I did not want a baby; I do not know why but this was something which I have held onto. I do not want a child with him, so I paid a maid in jewellery to get me birth control pills. I hid them in the toilet tank and took them regularly for three years. I took all the beatings and went through all the medical tests but did not consider leaving the birth control pills. I cannot explain to anyone, least of all myself why I do not want a child with him. It was not like I was thinking of leaving him, I was just adamant about not getting pregnant. I left everything that brought me joy, but I could not get over this. And today he found the pills.' I swallowed and took another sip of lukewarm tea. 'I thought he would kill me. I am not even sure if I want to live, but I ran. The minute he left me in the room, I escaped. I guess he did not think to lock the door or tell the guards not to let me out.' I shrugged. 'He must have thought me beyond running now. I ran and ran and did not stop until I fell. A woman helped me up, took one look at my face and whispered Data Darbar before moving on. So, I came here.'

Three pairs of eyes were looking at me intently. 'Why didn't you go to your parents? Will they not support you?' Shamim asked.

'My father and brother will move heaven and earth to help me, but they will not be able to. My father is the regional president of the Arabian Bank and my brother just qualified as a neurologist. They are nowhere near as connected or rich as my in-laws. If there is even a whisper of them knowing anything about this, they will pay dearly.' I took a deep breath, knowing that the next sentence could have me thrown out of this refuge in an instant. 'I am the daughter-in-law of Talib Ghazi.' At the sharp intake of breaths all around me, I knew they recognised the name, but then who wouldn't? The Finance Minister of Pakistan was well-known.

I finally looked at all three, Chandni was pale and looked ready to pass out. Fehmeeda looked thoughtful and Shamim looked ready to tear someone's head off.

'I understand if you want me to leave now. They tracked me to Data Darbar. You might have put them off my scent for now, but they will be back soon. They will retrace my steps and offer millions for the slightest bit of information. They will find me here.'

There was silence for a long time. I was getting ready to try and get up to leave when Fehmeeda spoke.

'You are lost right now but you are braver and stronger than you realise; most of us are. You have taken more abuse than any one person should, but you stood firm on your decision not to involve anyone else in it, not even your family. You have been numb for a long time. You will survive this and yes it will be difficult for us to help you, but we will.'

Shamim had his head in his hands, and Chandni was pale but looked determined. Fehmeeda alone looked relaxed.

'You two need to step outside. I need to put the cream on her bruises and then she needs to rest. I will move her in a couple of hours. From now on, only I will know where she is.' She shoed them both out.

She helped me lay down, lifted my shirt, and gently massaged the cream on my bruises, singing softly. I sighed and closed my eyes. I was not safe, but I was with people who cared, and that was enough.

Notes:

Malang: Sufi saint

Aapa: endearing term for an elder sister

kadak: strong

COLLECTING

Isi Unikowski

The weatherboards built years earlier across the street were ex-Army: the hard-drinking sergeant who'd have fistfights with his sons, the captain who wept for grief when his own son joined up, knowing the rumblings and gauntlets he could expect, the guy on the corner who used a huge Army knife to skin rabbits, then hung their pelts on a wall in his garage; and their wives, who queued at the bread van in curlers and housecoats but, most astonishing of all, kept both chewies and ciggies revolving together around sitreps and local weather reports.

But not once,
as I turned up on their porches and their screen doors squeaked open to me holding a card with a space for their signatures,
its incomprehensible Old Testament script
about poor Jewish orphans
and a little plastic bag for coins,
not once in the streets of that suburb where my parents' ark
had come to rest, not once
was I ever received with words that lacerated,
with anything less than good cheer. Even those who gave nothing
closed their doors with such a gentle regret
it seemed less a refusal than deference
to the long, dark corridors of those little bungalows
to which they returned,
called back to the greater mystery of their sheds.

KALI IN THE EVENING

Anuradha Vijayakrishnan

She is tired from walking. The roads behind her
have caved in, there is no turning back.
The stories she has heard seem impossible – how could she
have wiped out an army? Danced wreathed in garlands
of blood? Where was love in all these stories?
What about her heart?
She washes her muddy feet, dusts her hands, braids
her hair, wipes her eyes.
Evening is when she rests sprawling across steps
wrapped in murmuring shadows waiting for another
moon to rise. Around her are bodies
of other sleepers, sleepwalkers. Here are demons
she battles every night, every day.
She sets aside her blood-rusted knife, her double-edged
swords. Piles of shining, sharp words. Glowing bruises and scars
unsheathed on skin and gut. She must not forget
who she is.

MY KIDNAPPER FRIEND

Theo Villepontoux

someone tried to kidnap me in the zoo. it was probably because i had
blond hair. no one has blond hair in this country. the man smiled at me
and said he wanted to take a picture of me. then he grabbed me by the
waist and started walking hurriedly. luckily one of my teachers was there
and screamed at him to let me go. he smiled as if embarrassed and put
me back on the ground. the other kids from my class came running in
and made a circle around me to protect me. they thought it was funny.
i thought it was funny. the gravity of the thing didn't really hit me until
i came back home. he could have raped and killed me if he had his way.
who knows what would've happened? i told mum and dad and they
were shocked. they banned me from going on any more school trips for
the rest of the year as if it was my fault. i asked them why should i be
punished but they told me it was better to be safe. i cried and went to
my room. i wish i had never told them. now i can't go to the zoo anymore
with my friends. zoo is like my favourite place because you get to see all
the different animals. i told my friends i couldn't go to the zoo anymore
and they couldn't understand why. i told them what mum and dad said:
that it was better to be safe. they still couldn't understand.

the next day when i went to school everyone looked at me differently.
even the teachers treated me differently. they were all nice to me and
checking in to see if i was okay. even the girls for the first time went
up to me and started speaking to me. they thought it was cool i was
almost kidnapped. i played the part and told them i could have died if
he had caught me. they said wow and told me i was brave. i felt good.
my friends at breaktime let me make all the decisions: they let me pick
the teams and decide what to play. if anyone objected they said i was

almost kidnapped yesterday so i get to choose. that shut them up. by the end of the day the teacher that saved me asked me how i was doing. i told her i was doing well and i thanked her. she smiled. when i got home i thought this whole kidnapping thing isn't so bad. okay i don't get to go on school trips anymore but everyone is being super nice to me. even the girls are speaking to me now. i looked back at yesterday and remembered how my friends had encircled me to protect me. i know it was just for fun but i still liked how they were all protecting me. mum asked me how i was doing and i told her i was fine. she told me that if i was not feeling fine i could talk to someone and that it was okay and that i should not be ashamed if i get scared. i told her i didn't need to speak to someone because i was fine. she looked at me strangely and said okay. she then asked me what i wanted to have for dinner and she could make something special. i told her whatever she was making was fine by me and i would eat it anyways. she kept looking at me strangely as i went up to my room. why was everyone asking me if i was okay? i didn't get kidnapped did i? i played some lego until dad came home from work. he asked me if i wanted to take a walk with him for a bit which was strange because he never asked me to do that before. i said sure and we went outside. it was getting dark and the sun was setting. we were walking around the park when dad told me: 'you know if you wanna change school or move back home, i understand ...' i told him why would i wanna move back to France? he said nothing. when we got back home mum had made some french fries and chicken nuggets and a cake. it was as if it was my birthday. as i ate mum and dad kept looking at me strangely. dad told mum: 'he probably doesn't understand ...' i didn't know what that meant but i kept eating. i was scared that if i asked mum and dad would get angry with me. everyone was being nice to me; i didn't wanna break that spell. the next day when i got to school everyone was calling me 'kidnapped boy'. i liked it because it gave me an identity. however not everyone was paying attention to me like yesterday. the girls weren't speaking to me anymore. the teachers were

treating me just like any other student again. i wasn't the special kid anymore. however my friends were still super excited about my event and said that we should go back to that spot in the zoo to see if the guy is still there. i said yes because i liked the way they were all excited about it. we all agreed to meet after school outside the front gates. there we would walk to the zoo. i would have to miss my school bus home but i knew how to walk back from the zoo.

when the classes ended and the bell rang i looked at my friend Yohann and smiled. he smiled too because he knew it was time to go. we put our books in our bags and ran outside towards the front gates. when we arrived the others were already waiting for us. they screamed when they saw us come. we all started walking to the zoo. it was a very hot day: the sun was shining on us and glaring down at us. we were all sweating so we took our school blazers off and wore only our shirts underneath. we were walking fast and talking the whole way through. Alex was saying how if we see the guy we should punch him and kick him then run away. Mason was saying how instead we should ask him why he tried to kidnap me. was he gonna rape and murder me like on television? no one asked me for my opinion though. even though we were walking fast and talking wildly we were still careful when we crossed the roads. we waited until there were no more cars and it was safe to walk and we looked both sides before crossing just like our parents had taught us. just before we entered the zoo Alex stopped us and showed us a knife from his bag. he said it was just a precaution. Yohann asked him where he had gotten it and he said from the kitchen. it was quite big and shiny and i don't think it was made to stab people. once we entered the zoo all my friends went around me in a circle so that i was in the middle again. they looked around and stayed close to me so that i could not be kidnapped again. i smiled inside. i was happy that so many people cared about me. i also felt important like a movie star with all his bodyguards. once we reached the spot no one was there. we waited

for twenty minutes and still the guy didn't come. i was getting kind of sad and wanted the guy to come so the others would be excited again. i could tell they wanted him to come too. at some point Mason saw a police line and a police officer behind the back. Alex went up to him and asked him what happened because he was the only one who could speak Taiwanese. the police officer told him that someone had been arrested here and that we should go back to our parents.

after another twenty minutes we decided to leave. it was already getting dark and the zoo would close soon. we were all disappointed that the guy hadn't come but we all promised to try again tomorrow. on my way back home i walked with Yohann for a bit and before we separated he called me 'kidnapped boy' again. i smiled and walked the whole way back with happiness. when i got back home however mum and dad were waiting for me and said they had gotten a call from Mason's mother that we had all gone to the zoo. they shouted at me and said i couldn't see my friends anymore and every day after school i had to go straight home. i started to cry and then mum calmed down a bit and asked me why i wanted to go to the zoo again. i said because i wanted to see the guy and ask him why he wanted to kidnap me. i then told her it made me feel good to see all my friends excited and protective over me. she grounded me to my room and said she would speak to me later. dad was still at the back with his hands over his head. i could tell he was still angry. when i went to my room i cried some more. i thought it was unfair that i was being punished when i didn't do anything wrong. i then heard a knock on the door and mum came in. she was much more relaxed and i knew she was gonna be more kind to me. i was happy it wasn't dad because he wasn't as gentle with me and sometimes he would scream when he got annoyed and i would cry. i remember one time he tried to teach me algebra but i didn't learn nothing because i was crying the whole time. algebra is hard anyways. my mother sat me down and said that they had been extremely worried while i was gone and feared i might've gotten

kidnapped again and they thought about calling the cops until Mason's mother had called. i told her sorry because i really was sorry. she said it was okay but that i should never do something like that ever again without telling her beforehand. i said okay. she then told me i should speak to dad later on because he was still upset. she said he wants to move us back to France but she is trying to convince him otherwise. i screamed and said i wanted to stay here but she said he is just worried about your safety and she will speak to him. then she gave me a long hug and i cried in her arms and this made me feel a bit better. when she left i stayed in my room shocked. i couldn't play lego because i was too worried we would have to move so i just sat there doing nothing. it was raining outside and the rain was hitting the window. this made me feel snug and cosy and made me forget everything for a while. then i got a message from Yohann on my phone saying: 'hey, are you grounded too?' i told him yes and that i might leave the country soon. he asked me why and i said i don't know. then he said he was sad and i said me too. mum came in and said i should apologise to dad now. i got out of the room towards the living room and i was still a bit scared he would shout at me. i told him in a weak voice i was sorry and then he asked me why which surprised me a bit. i panicked inside. i was scared to get the wrong answer and then he would make me move and i would have to leave my friends. after a few seconds i told him i was sorry because i had left without asking your permission and i should tell you everything beforehand. he smiled and said 'good'. then i asked him if we would still have to leave the country and he said: 'i'm still thinking about it'. then i told him not all Taiwanese were like him and maybe he just wanted to take a picture of me like the others but wanted to bring me somewhere to do it. dad raised his hand which meant i had to shut up now. he didn't want to listen to me. then he sent me back to my room. when i got back to my room i started to become angry and started to hate the guy who tried to kidnap me. for the first time i wished it had never happened not because it was bad or i was scared for my safety but because now

there was a chance i was gonna move back to France because of him. i punched my pillow pretending it was his face and inside i called him a 'villain'. he was not my friend anymore.

DRESS

Ryan Waker

It was the Lenten season, and the Methodist church Papa Dale and Grandma Patti attended was draped in lavender and rose pink. I was five years old at the time, and children could go to the basement during services for Sunday school activities. While sometimes there were teachers who shared lessons about God, or who handed us black-and-white copied pages for colouring, most of the time we simply played. I liked going to the basement, and so did my brother. My dad's father was the deacon at my parents' Catholic church back home, so my brother and I had to sit through the whole mass and listen to his homilies. When visiting my mom's parents, two hours away from home, even church was more fun.

On this particular Sunday, there were no lessons about the lamb of God, and no pages to colour. Instead, we had a full hour of play time. My brother, and the other kids who were too old to play school or house or (my favorite imaginative play game) dry cleaners, headed for the bookshelves. I don't think anyone called it imaginative play back then, but few toys required batteries in 1988, and there certainly weren't electronic toys in the church basement. I was well aware of the large plastic bin where the dress up clothes were kept. Other times I'd been in the basement, I'd seen girls twirl in princess gowns and sparkling tiaras, and boys wear plastic firefighter jackets with matching red hats while I sat quietly at round tables and carefully coloured within the black-and-white xeroxed lines of crosses and flowers.

I stayed back at first, waiting for the other kids to pull the clothes from the bin. A gaggle of kids pulled every garment and accessory out, spreading the fabric pieces across the tiled floor. I watched the boys and girls sort through the plastic and nylon garments,

separating them by boy outfits and girl outfits. I watched them put their arms through oversized sleeves and pull the costumes over their heads.

After dressing as their character of choice, the other kids paired off to play in their imaginary castles and kitchens and firehouses. A small selection of garments was left strewn across the floor. A single, elbow length glove was draped over the side of the bin. I picked it up, inspecting the white, shiny fabric, and slipped my hand into the opening. The fabric was electric against my forearm as I pulled the sleeve up slowly. My fingers found the hand opening and each of my slender fingers slipped into the respective holes. When the very top of the sleeve was pulled up and cradled my elbow, I raised my hand in the air. Light shone through the short basement windows, dripping onto the white fabric which covered my arm and hand. My arm looked like someone else's, ablaze and dazzling in the glow of morning light. I looked around me, but no one was watching. My brother was head down in his book.

I picked up one of the dresses, held it in front of me to inspect. It was blue with a puffy bottom half, just like the one Cinderella wears to the ball. I stepped into the open back, the same way I slipped my Barbie dolls into the skirts of their dresses. I found the open arm holes, slipping my naked arm and my gloved arm through them. I ran my naked hand over the chest of the gown, gliding my palm and fingers over the fabric. I wanted to be naked underneath the dress, to feel the electric, charged fabric hugging my body the way the glove hugged my arm. There wasn't a mirror to see myself in, but I imagined myself transported into a television screen beside Lesley Ann Warren in the Rodger's and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* I had watched so many times with Grandma Patti. I spun with my eyes closed. I imagined birds dressing me, lacing up the back of my dress with delicate beaks and flapping wings, while humming the tune of, 'Impossible/ It's Possible.'

I reached behind me, fumbling for the lace or zipper that would seal my body into the dress, but something stopped me. A hand that wasn't my own.

I heard my brother's voice behind my back. 'Stop,' he said. He pushed my fumbling hands away from the opening of the dress. He was quiet, gentle even, as if he didn't want to embarrass me. 'It's time to go,' he said.

I didn't say a word. I looked around again. The teachers didn't say it was time, and the other kids weren't undressing from their costumes, but I understood what he was saying to me. What I wanted was impossible.

They weren't watching me, the teachers or the other kids, but I felt naked as the dress slipped off my shoulders and pooled to my feet on the floor. In a silent exchange, my brother helped me untangle my ankles from the skirt. He was careful with it when he picked up the pile of fabric from the floor and set it in the bin. I watched it disappear. When the blue dress was out of sight, I pinched the glove's fabric off each finger, and used my naked hand to pull the white sleeve off the other. The electricity burned as the fabric pulled away, and my arm radiated with heat. My skin was red, irritated by the material.

I wanted to put the glove in my pocket, I wanted to know that feeling forever. I wanted to shimmer in the light everywhere I went, but I didn't take it. Instead, I draped the glove over the side of the bin where I found it, all of its possibility half in and half out. As if he knew, as if he understood the way I felt somehow, my brother put his arm over my shoulder. Maybe it was his way of shielding me from the eyes upon my back. It was time to go.

My brother escorted me up the stairs. At the same time, the raucous clean up for the other kids began. They shuffled across the basement to take their costumes off, and to stuff their books back on the shelves. I didn't look behind to see the dress buried beneath all the other costumes.

When we reached the door to the sanctuary, music was playing, and I spotted Grandma Patti singing loudly back to the cantors. She looked like a princess herself in a floral pleated dress and coordinating woven hat. My brother and I walked to the row where she and Papa Dale stood.

I stepped in first, and I wrapped my arms around Grandma's waist. She patted the back of my head, cradled it. I wanted to cry, to hide in the flowers of her dress, but the vibration of her song made me feel brave.

After the service was over, Papa drove us home in the white Cadillac he had restored for Grandma. Grandma's dress looked even prettier against the velvety maroon upholstered seats. The windows were cracked to let the smoke from Grandpa's cigarette out of the car. Grandma asked what we did at Sunday school.

'Ryan wore a dress,' my brother said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Grandma turned her head, so she could see me fully in the seat behind Papa Dale. 'Did you?' she asked. Her voice was inquisitive, not accusatory.

I looked at her from the backseat, at Papa in the mirror, who never looked away from the road, then back at her. I nodded.

I looked at my brother in the seat next to me, but he didn't meet my gaze. I needed him to help me now, the way he helped untangle me from the dress. He looked away from me, stared out the window.

I could feel the heat of Grandma Patti's eyes on me, electric as the white glove when it peeled away from my skin.

'Did you feel pretty?' she asked.

The fire from my arm spread to the rest of the body. I couldn't speak.

She turned back to the road ahead, pulled a tube of lipstick from her purse. It was nearly the same purply shade as the velveteen seats. She lowered the visor and used the mirror to reapply the colour to her lips. She blotted them together, then relaxed into the seat. She looked more like a movie star than a princess. 'I've always told your mother you were too pretty. You could have been a girl,' Grandma said.

Papa lit another cigarette, rolled down his window all the way. The breeze should have made me cool, but I felt like every part of me was on fire.

My brother watched the buildings pass through his window.

Grandma Patti turned her head, just enough to see me from the corner of her eye. Her gaze was safe and knowing. Her maroon lips smiled, cooling me from the inside out.

IMPROVISED PIANO

Elizabeth Walton

The eye absorbs
the drifting keys,
colliding into sound.

Relax the
shoulders.

The keys caress
and brush a sound The hand,
that merges into tones. the eye.

Synonymous movements
synchronise anachronistic press.
Attack, release, the foot sustains.

The hand transcribes The ear, the eye,
the muse. the hand.

Synergistic energy transforms what's heard and felt.

The body now is unaware of fingers Remembering
grasping keys the way a parent holds a child. to breathe

To please the keys and ear now press the muse.

Synchronistic rhythms The finger, Remain
collide on lyricistic planets, the foot. inside
creating moods of dissonant expanse. the body.

And in between celestial spheres, Release
symmetrical glissando drift. As tension the
builds the bass, the body folds in foot.

different shapes. The arms, Refrain

The muse now the body. from
knows but doesn't know as losing

arms lift up and time.

journey on, pressing down
the hands. Sonority thrown

and clutching Relax
shape held fast by the
soft right foot. neck

Listen close and
hear it now, feel
into the deep.

INTIMACY IN A BAR WHERE THE VIBES NOT RIGHT BUT WHATEVER

Jong Won

When I was in grade five, I fell off my floatie in a wave pool
and swallowed water, and my mom asked where my floaty was.
She didn't care that I almost died haha.

You should share a story with me too
I'd say I'm a fairly interested-in-things person

– if you want I'll tell you about how
I've learned to manage my dopamine receptors

which is essentially a free consultation in mental health
but what is that anyway, I'm screaming la-la-la
and then close my eyes, feel the weight
of mosquitos making love outside my window.

If you really want – and I know you'd rather be home –
I'll tell you the raunchy quirky
upbringing of how I saw God (had sex)

when people say things are quirky what they really mean
is difference. I really don't like sea pineapples and their ammonia smell

so I guess we won't eat any – do you
remember the love hotel we passed? It reminded
me of vintage cringe ultraviolet and I cringed.

I frequently hate myself. I also like things related to love. You should
tell me

I'm beautiful because I've never been told, though one time
I stared in the mirror and even though
I had stopped working out, I looked happy.

– it's okay if you're not listening –

one time, I stopped talking in front of a large group of people
and everyone stared at me, the little broken sign.

– your eyeball is so
milky transcendent registering some worldly satellite –

LIKE A SWAN

Jena Woodhouse

Lovers in a fog, the trees
lose their singularity;

blanched to purblind memory,
the sun flares momentarily;

dimmed by condensation, river
morphs from mirror into swan;

through white silences, the birds
offer their eleison –

SHADE AND DARKNESS

Patrick Wright

After JMW Turner

Before the rainbow arrives, I learn your grandparents survived the Holocaust, they were put in a nuthouse for exposing the truth. I learn the kernel of abuse may be traced to dreams of deluge. Such madness we couldn't see through, opaque as your eyes, this surface steeped in Goethe's frozen music. Before the rainbow arrives, I follow murmurations. Over waves, shore-birds glide, spiralling, threatening a tailspin. I wonder which camp they were in, whether it was Auschwitz. In your eyes, I saw the first abuse. I tried to trace the madness back, patch over the abyss, finding sense in this, abstract and opaque. I tried to thaw your music, release the birds from their circular trance.

HAPPINESS

Ping Yi Yee

a bottle of water, glistening
and an empty bladder.

empty chairs and table in a frenetic café
on the cusp of a weekend.

a gathering of acquaintance-colleagues
on the journey towards friendship.

an umbrella carried without knowledge
of an impending storm.

an unintended nap,
as restful as it is brief.

a connection, a kindness,
a gift without a trade.

a tree swaying in the breeze,
morning light shimmering
on a rain-soaked stone floor.

BODY POLITICS: LEFT VS RIGHT

Changming Yuan

1/ Brain

My left brain has everything right
While my right one has nothing left

2/ Heart

My left chamber's been reserved for someone
Right, yet my right one's for nobody on the left

3/ Foot

My left foot takes the position for the right
But my right one stands firm against the left

WITH FLYING COLOURS

Changming Yuan

Despite all the white lies you've told
You actually prefer to be a black sheep

Yes, you are yellow, but you got
Your right to be blue, too

Though a green hand on the job
You have a purple heart

Not that you're red with anger
But that you're in the pink

In a gray area, you enjoy taking
A shot in the dark, like everyone else

AAWP/UWRF TRANSLATORS' PRIZE WINNERS:
2020-2023

2023 PRIZE: JUDGE'S REPORT

Dominique Hecq

This year, the number of submissions to the UWRF Translators' Prize was unprecedented. So was the range of languages targeted in the act of translation: 20 entries and 8 languages ranging from romance languages, including Latin, to Japanese, Chinese, Nepalese, Indonesian and Hindi to Greek and Czech. The number and variety of entries in this competition has certainly demonstrated to me at least one thing: translation may not be widely published in a seemingly monolingual culture, but it is certainly an art that is being practised by established translators and beginners alike.

Every translation reflects an intense engagement with, and close reading of, something ineffable even in the original language. Each translation enacts, a translator's encounter with the work and how they have been affected by it. Each translation recreates the work through the lens of a philosophy of translation determined by an understanding of *fidelity*.

Translation is a highly complex activity, and the notion of fidelity open to interpretation. Technique (literal, literary, adaptation, recreation, etc.) is dictated by the text itself. Nevertheless, from the ethical point of view, an incontrovertible principle remains: fairness both to the writer and to the reader. Beyond words and even ideas, each language is actually an original way of thinking and feeling, and translation has to transmit this otherness. It has to resist the common temptation of *ethnocentric translation*, which naturalises anything from

abroad, as if there were only one way of being in the world. So, openness is the key to interpretive acts which are entailed – and forestalled – in translation.

Whenever I'm judging a competition, I like to give myself time to live with what amounts to a personal shortlist. This time round, however, I doubted my ability even to decide on a shortlist. Indeed, such was the quality of the writing in the target language, i.e., English, that I had to scrutinise the translators' statements to better understand their approaches and more deliberate choices. Consequently, to me it was the most enriching and distracting experience not least because I had to adjust my judging criteria, and finally to re-think my shortlist quite radically.

To keep the text open in its journey across cultures (that journey in which it becomes another text), we need to understand enough of the source and target culture (and enough of their differences) to know what works and what will not work in each. Between languages as vastly separated as Japanese or Chinese and English, it is unlikely that parallel sets of homophones or homonyms will be available. In such cases, translators may strive for equivalent effects, enhancing ambiguity rather than clarity. It is with this in mind that I arrived at the final ranking and chose 'Introduction to Darkness' as the winner.

'Introduction to Darkness' is an excerpt from the third book of Leila S Chudori's trilogy which focuses on the authoritarian regime of Indonesia's second president, Soeharto, known as the New Order and its aftermath impact. The third book *Namaku Alam (My Name is Alam)* 'looks at the discrimination endured by families whose loved ones, having been accused of being Communist, were murdered. The translator states: 'Because of their subject matter, these books are not always easy to read, but Leila's writing style makes readers want to continue reading even when gritting their teeth'. My first notes on the translation conclude with 'very accomplished translation. I was struck by the literariness of the writing – in particular, the energy and lyricism

of the prose, the striking images and the delightful cadences. Because I am not familiar with the source language, I looked for syntactical, and then focused on the dialogue. I believe that this translator has indeed attained her goal, that of achieving 'the same fluidity in the target language'.

I would like to thank all the translators who entered the award. Each of the entries left me with something memorable, including the agonising business of choice.

Mine was the privilege not only of discovering writers but of witnessing the creative process at work in the act of translation.

INTRODUCTION TO DARKNESS

Leila S Chudori, translated by John McGlynn

This is how I imagine my father's final moments ...

May 18, 1970. It's dark. A black sky with streaks of purple. The moon hiding behind a kapok tree. A flock of vultures perched on a wire fence sniffing the scent of a man about to die and the odour of gun powder. Dogs howling, endlessly. Four uniformed men standing in a straight line, their rifles aimed at Father. Only one contains live ammunition, the others rubber bullets. None of the four will know for sure who took Father's life.

I see Father in front of them, on his knees, a gunny sack over his head, his hand tied behind his back. He does not bow his head. He does not cry, nor does he wail – and he definitely does not crawl or beg for mercy. He is thankful for life but not afraid of death.

A barked command, then a countdown. Rifles are cocked. Salvo one! Two! Three! Four!

A mad fluttering of wings as the vultures leap from their perch. The dogs stop barking. The branches of the kapok turn purple. The moon moves from behind the branches.

Father falls. Alone. Silent. The vultures circle in the sky, easing downward toward the delicious scent of blood, the thick red ooze that slowly shrouds Father's body, then moistens the earth.

Have you ever heard night's voice?

When the sun is in hiding, a black mosquito net covers the earth and moonlight licks the tips of leaves. It is at that moment angels silently descend to greet the night. It's that voice, that sound I cannot accurately describe. I imagine the angels speeding downward with a whistling sound, like that of wind in trees. Then silence. They brush with their

touch plants and animals, then kiss the foreheads of babies before finally deciding to whom to award their gift of peace.

Thereafter, the angels carry out their task, encircling those souls on the brink of death: the sickly, bludgeoned victims of robberies, persons with bodies wasted from cancer, and all others who are at the end of their days – like Father who has been felled by a bullet.

I want to believe that before Father was shot he heard night's voice – the whistle of the wind signalling the approach of angels who would surround him and wait with him until his final moment, and who would then take him by the hand and lead him to a new and nameless world, a realm we can neither imagine nor touch.

It was that same whistling sound that came from the long line of blue rail cars as the train departed Gambir Station and left Jakarta behind, that long caravan which, ostensibly, was taking Ibu Umayani to freedom. Just as Father's life was ended by a bullet one night, Ibu Umayani's life as a teacher was one day abrogated as a result of her identity.

Quite possibly, people like my father, my teacher, Ibu Umayani, and the millions of Indonesians who have been disappeared or killed on dark nights do go, in the end, to a place less transitory and more free, a place where they are free from epithets, threats, and labels – those which have caused them to be cast into prisons of labels and jails of identity – and where they are no longer hunted and are free from fear.

The faded blue-coloured train that carried Ibu Umayani moved slowly but steadily as it went into the night, leaving us behind. There is no Ibu Umayani in our class now. There is no longer a scribe of history. There is no ray of light in our lives.

'I have a question for you ... Why is it we, as Indonesians, doubt our country's official historical record? What causes us to doubt history?' Ibu Umayani looked at us, her students, one by one.

At our school, history class was held near the end of the school day. This was a time for students to send love notes back and forth or make a date to get *es campur* at Bu

Munah's food stall after school let out. This situation was understandable because Pak Suwardi, our previous history teacher, did little more than have Amelia, the head of our class, transcribe on the blackboard the text from his notebook.

Pak Suwardi's method of teaching was atypical at Putra Nusa High School, that is true. Putra Nusa was, in fact, an elite school, a highly prized destination for junior- and senior-high students in Jakarta in the 1980s, a school about which the parents of students there could brag to friends and colleagues.

The school had been established by seven of the country's leading intellectuals who were concerned about the quality of education in Jakarta schools. These founders wanted the school to be different, one with a progressive curriculum that challenged students to think – the implication of which was sky-high tuition as well. As such, how was it that I, the son of a single mother and widow of an executed political prisoner, was able to enrol in such a school? Well, that's its own story, which I will relate in time, but what I want to talk about now is Ibu Umayani, a progressive and independent thinker, brimming with inspiration, a teacher who best fit the ideals aspired to by the school's founders.

It was hotter than blazes that afternoon when we learned in history class Pak Suwardi would not be teaching that day due to a death in his family. Assuming that Amelia would announce that class was dismissed, and we could go home, Bimo and I immediately began to pack our things, intending to get shaved ice with fruit at Bu Munah's. But then the school principal entered the room trailed by a younger woman who looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties. She was tall and slim with piercing eyes and straight, shoulder-length hair. She was wearing

a striped brown skirt and cream-coloured blouse with matching shoes. A handbag hung from her right shoulder. Her loose black hair swayed each time she shifted position so as to right the books she held in the crook of her left arm.

Even as the principal related the news that Pak Suwardi had resigned because his wife died and he had decided to return to his home village, I couldn't keep my eyes off this new teacher whom the principal introduced as Ibu Umayani. Maybe she wasn't a stunning-looking woman; nonetheless, her sharp and shining eyes raptly held my attention.

As soon as the principal left the classroom, it was then Ibu Umayani tossed at us that question: 'What causes us to doubt history?'

At first, the students were reluctant to answer. Some fixated on suddenly appearing warts or dirty fingernails; others leaned towards the floor, pretending to have dropped a pencil, so as not to be the teacher's target.

'Come now, is this not the prestigious Putra Nusa High School I'm in?'

The class remained quiet. Not because no one could venture an answer, I'm sure – as implied earlier, we, the students at Putra Nusa, were not a bunch of dolts – but, instead, because we were all trying to get a handle on what kind of person this new teacher was.

'What's happening here? I've asked you a simple question. There are no wrong answers – only interesting and less interesting ones,' said Ibu Umayani with a growing smile on her face as she looked at the student roster.

'Arini Dewi.'

Arini, who was seated directly in front of Ibu Umayani, attempted to answer as best she could; she didn't want to look stupid, after all. 'Because Indonesian history is often not well written, shows little depth, and doesn't go into certain questions ...'

'Interesting. Anyone else?'

Kemal raised his hand. 'Because Indonesian historians compete to write in a way so boring their texts are suitable only for reading by persons with insomnia.'

The entire class instantly broke into uproarious laughter. Ibu Umayani smiled, looking not in the least bit irritated by Kemal's flippant answer.

'Hmm, maybe you have a point. Maybe our history texts are boring to read.'

As if a pail of cold water had been doused on us, we all stopped laughing. Ibu Umayani appeared to have the self-confidence necessary to manage this class of smart alecks. She'd just agreed that the way Indonesian history was written was boring. This was refreshing, something rarely seen in a teacher – at least by high school students in that day and age.

'Anyone else?' She glanced again at the roster. 'Trimulya ...'

What!? She'd jumped to the letter 'T,' which was right next to 'S,' the first letter of my name, and, not only that, Tri was at a desk in my same row. I stared at my shoes. History, Indonesian history especially, was one subject I did not want to discuss. 'History is a compilation of facts and events that is meant to be studied. But the problem is ...' Trimulya took a breath and glanced at me. 'The problem is whoever in power when history is written can handpick facts and events, can ignore others, and can exaggerate the role of a person in an event.'

'History is controlled by the rulers of the age ...' Ibu Umayani summarised while nodding in agreement with Tri's answer.

I was staring again at my worn-looking shoes when, suddenly, I heard, 'Segara Alam ...'

I stopped breathing. I really didn't want to talk about history, at least not with a new teacher, even though in just the few minutes she'd been there, she had the entire class under her spell.

She looked around to find the owner of the name 'Segara Alam.' I tried but was unable to shrink my lanky frame. 'Who is Segara Alam?'

I raised my hand even as I grumbled inside. 'So, do you have something different to say?'

'I agree with Trimulya, Ma'am,' I answered offhandedly. 'I don't have anything original to say.'

'Don't be afraid to speak the ordinary. I often say things that are unoriginal. We are all studying; we are all students. But in this class, I am your teacher, and so now please answer me!'

'Well, there was an article I read and it stated that the recording of history as a series of facts is essential to the development of a culture or a people. So, maybe I have to answer the question with a different one. Do we as Indonesians have a tradition of recording history?'

Ibu Umayani smiled. Her eyes glowed more brightly as she turned around. History, she then told us, was an intellectual tradition, a putting-together of past events to be studied and analysed in order to understand the present.

'So, to answer Segara Alam's question of whether we have a tradition of recording history, of course we do. But if you want to understand history,' she then added, while looking in my and Bimo's direction, 'you must begin with your own.'

She then wrote on the blackboard, 'The Most Memorable Incident in my Life – 1 page.'

The entire class began to bellow, like a herd of cows being led to slaughter.

She then explained, 'You may choose to write about anything: your first visit to a museum, the first time you fell in love, or maybe something that frightened you. The important thing is that it's a memory stuck in your brain. I want you to begin understanding history from the perspective of an incident you cannot forget.'

Arini Dewi stuck her index finger in the air. 'When is it due, Ma'am?'

It's only one page of text. You should be able to finish it in thirty minutes ...' At once the sound of bellowing ceased. All heads went down.

I took a breath and slowly began to write the first sentence which, ever since that time, I know to be the most important one in anything I write.

Thirty minutes passed like the wind. Ibu Umayani asked us to put down our pens or pencils, then stared at us, individually. *What was that about?*

'Arini Dewi ...'

Arini went to the front of the class. Visibly ready and anxious to speak, she read out for us her first experience in taking a train alone from Jakarta to Yogyakarta to visit her grandmother when she was in junior high school. Along the way, something happened, and the train came to a stop. The train had suffered some kind of damage it seemed, because of which the passengers had to disembark and stay the night in the closest village. It was a frightening experience, she related, because the roads were dark, and quiet, and dusty. She had a happy ending for her story, however, because, in the end, she did make it safely to her grandmother's home who had been worried sick from waiting for her.

The class gave their approval with a round of applause. 'Segara Alam! Oh God.'

I stood and dragged my feet toward the front of the room. My shoes felt as if they were made of lead. Ibu Umayani smiled and took me by the arm. 'Come on ...'

The tone of my voice was one of reluctance as I began to read my composition:

Introduction to Darkness

The one event I can't seem to ever get out of my mind happened when I was very young. It was January 1968 and I was about four years old. Maybe you'll think it's impossible for a person to remember something from that age but, believe me, what happened is still stuck in my mind, going round and round like an old and broken reel of film.

At the time, my family was living on Percetakan Negara – my mother, my two sisters, Kenanga and Bulan, and me. My father wasn't there. He was off somewhere, on assignment, Kenanga told me.

Anyway, one evening, around magrib, I was in the living room playing marbles beneath the coffee table. Kenanga was in a chair in the corner of the room, reading. Bulan was in her bedroom, doing homework. But then, all of a sudden, there was this commotion, someone pounding on the front door and screaming, 'Hananto! We're looking for Hananto Prawiro!'

That was my father but Kenanga had told me he was out of town.

Then I heard my mother scream back, 'I already told the commanders at Guntur and Budi Kemuliaan I don't know where my husband is!'

'His kids? Where are they? He has a son, doesn't he?'

I didn't catch my mother's reply because her voice was drowned out by the stomping of boots as the callers forced open the door and stormed their way into the room. This is when I peeked out from my hiding place beneath the table and saw who they were: four large and muscular men with short hair.

Kenanga jumped from her chair and rushed toward me. I dropped the marbles that were in my hand. I saw Bulan come out of her room, scared looking with her homework in her hand.

'Where is he, Hananto's boy?'

One of the men took something from his waist which looked like a pistol. I only knew of toy guns at that time but the when the man raised the thing in his hand, it looked heavy as he swung it around, pointing it in various directions. He looked angry and that black thing in his hands didn't look like a toy at all.

'Where is that traitor's boy?'

Ibu came running into the room and when seeing the man waving a pistol and calling for the 'traitor's son,' she screamed as loud as she could for them leave her children alone. She pointed down at me and hollered that I wasn't even four and only just learning to play marbles. She even went towards the man and asked him to put down his gun.

They yelled back and forth at each other, very loudly, and their shouting only stopped when once again, Ibu told the man I was just a boy, playing marbles, who knew nothing about the meaning of 'country.'

Two of the men – the man with the pistol and another one with a rifle – pulled the runner from off the table and there I was, marbles in my hand. When they saw me, they paled. Slowly then, the man with the pistol put it back in its holster.

In the end, the men left, not saying another word. Ibu was crying and sobbing. She pulled me into her arms and hugged me. Kenanga and Bulan were there, too, hovering over me and hugging me as well. It was then I realised my whole body was wet from sweat and piss. I was shaking and cold. The floor was slippery with my piddle. Its scent was rancid, the smell of fear. A few seconds later, everything went dark.

That was my first introduction to darkness.

The entire classroom was still. Silent, on edge.

From where I was standing, I could see Bimo silently bow his head. Trimulya looked ashen and Kemal, who usually had a snide or critical remark ready in hand, seemed to be out of words. Amelia and Arini had stopped writing and were now staring at me, glassy-eyed.

TRANSLATOR'S STATEMENT

Indonesia's second president, Soeharto, came to power in 1966, following the killings of six army generals in September 1965 in what has been called by some an 'abortive Communist coup' and by others 'an internal Army affair.' Regardless of what happened and who is to blame for the mass killings that followed, Soeharto's 'New Order' government put into law restrictions on basic human rights, including freedom of movement and expression, and thereafter forcibly silenced any question regarding the legitimacy of its authoritarian regime. It was not until Soeharto's resignation in 1998 authors gained the freedom to write about that period without risk.

Award-winning author Leila S Chudori set out to reveal the impact of New Order policies through a trilogy of novels:

Pulang (Home), which focuses on the thousands of Indonesian citizens who were abroad at the time and were left to live in exile;

Laut Bercerita (The Sea Speaks His Name), which looks at the fate of families whose loved ones were abducted and disappeared; and

Namaku Alam (My Name is Alam), forthcoming in September, which looks at the discrimination endured by families whose loved ones, having been accused of being Communist, were murdered.

Both the first and second novels became national bestsellers and were translated and published abroad. It is expected this will be the case with the third novel as well. Just as Leila's novels have served to enlighten younger generations of Indonesian who knew little about their country's dark history, they have also opened the eyes of foreign observers who know so little about this country.

Because of their subject matter, these books are not always easy to read, but Leila's writing style makes readers want to continue reading even when gritting their teeth. To achieve the same fluidity in the target language presents a very real challenge for the translator.

Leila has used her investigative acumen and creative skills to keep this sensitive subject right where it belongs: in the minds of the public and the political leaders who boast of serving the popular will. Her moving tales serve as lessons, not only for Indonesians but for readers worldwide.

'Introduction to Darkness' consists of the prologue and excerpts from chapter 1 of Leila's forthcoming novel, greatly reduced in length by the author and translator to meet competition guidelines.

2022 PRIZE: JUDGE'S REPORT

Dominique Hecq

'Great Sertão: Meanderings' is a gift. João Guimarães Rosa's novel *Grande Sertão* survives to the extent that it is received; the original text is able to have a new life, a different life. Translator and writer have, as always, through the text, through their different ways of belonging to it, an uncanny means of knowing each other. Theirs is an intimate affair. In many ways, *Great Sertão* is a labour of love. Those who give gifts to strangers must have some kind of fervour to keep them on task. Reading the excerpt entered in this competition, I felt this fervour through the scholarship and creative energy the translator invested in the task. It was a gift to me as reader. The experience was exhilarating.

The excerpt submitted is from the opening of the novel and reads like a prose poem with a strong rhythmic pattern. Like *Finnegans Wake* it is made of an ongoing flow of words and sounds. In reading the excerpt aloud I enjoyed its pronounced cadence, inventiveness and playfulness. Its orality and music, but also the images conjured up by the text.

The gaze of the reader roves up, moving towards the sky in an unhurried rhythm of looking and looking again. The few man-made objects are located and their calculated position contrasted to the power and unpredictability of the weather and the sky; an interplay between natural and manmade, perfect and imperfect.

The only English translation of João Guimarães Rosa's novel *Grande Sertão* being long out of print, the next gift this translation will no doubt offer is to literature and scholarship. Many thanks to its author.

GREAT SERTÃO: MEANDERINGS (WORKING TITLE)

João Guimarães Rosa, translated by Alison Entrekin

But, do you really mean to rummage over this full sea of territories, sir, for a sortment of what's out there? You've got your whyfores. Now – my view – you came, you've come late. Times've changed, customs strangled. In't much left that's honest-to-God bona-fide, nigh on nought. The good-old rogue bands all came to the same end; many a former gunman's out there struggling, begging. Cowhands think twice afore heading to town attired all in leather; they reckon jerkins are ugly and farmly. Even the cattle out in the scrub've waned less wild, more polite: the Zebu stock, they fall in with the rest of the hard-hoofs and the creoles. Always, in the gerais, it's poverty, sadness. A sadness that can perk up at times. But, anyhow, for a decent crop of curioddities, I counsel you to try and dilate your trip some, sir. Wasn't for my unabledness, due to heartburns and rheumatism, I'd go myself. I'd guide you to everything.

I'd show you the clear heights of the das Almas Range: the river hurls itself from up there in a dither, foams aplenty, rumbooms; ah, the falls, all freeleaping. The black panther in heat in the Tatu Range – ever heard the female's grumbled growl, sir? The glimmery drizzle in the Faraway Mountains, wee hours when the sky leaches white – misty rain. The one who taught me to preciate these no-man's beauties was Diadorim ... The Raizama Range, where even the birds calculate the path of the moon – they say – and a monster panther prowls. Moon to mint money with. When you dream, sir, you dream of it. The smell of flowered fields, heady, in April: the purple gypsy, and the itsy and the little yellow brush flowers ... That's on the Saririnhém. Cicadas swarm. Neath a shadeful tamarind tree ... Oh, the cold! There it frosts even on the backs of oxen, even on the roofs of houses. Or in Midmiddle

– beyond that there's a stretch that's almost blue. Akin to sky: we're talking vivigorous sky-blue, like tinamou eggs. Winds that don't let dew form ... A hot handful of wind, passing b'tween two palms of palm ... I remember, unremember. Either that or – you go – in the soup-sop: of rain-rain. You see a hard-to-cross creek, or a river roiling. Buriti-Mirim, Angical, Extrema-de-Santa-Maria ... You hunt, sir? There's more quail there than up on the Plateau of the Steeps ... Hunt tapirs on Negro Head or in Buriti-Comprido – the ones that eat other grasses and gnaw the bark of a bunch of other trees: the meat's distinctive in tastiness. I've been to all those backwoods, with someone of mine aside me, liking each other a lot. Know what I mean, sir? Have you ever groped your way through nostalgia? They say there's nostalgia of the mind and nostalgia of the heart ... Ah. They say the government's having a good highway put in, from Pirapora to Paracatú, thereabouts ...

In the Hinters Range – when you hear the thunder there, and the rethunder, you cover your ears, sir, you might even cry, in terrible illusional fear, like when you were a boy. You see cows calving in the storm ... Time to time, always, upriver, the Urucúia – it gets all wrathed up ... So much mountain, it hides the moon. The range runs crooked there. The range comes to a tip. In one place, on the slope, a sulphurous vapour scapes the earth with a strange boom, the cattle run for it, spooked. It's like the Rumble and Snorer ranges – which grunt here n' there. Wha? You, sir? Look: the Carinhanha River's black, the Paracatú, brown; mine, for its beauty, is the Urucúia – a peacefulness of waters ... It's life! Just after Porto das Onças, there's a farmlet. We stayed a few weeks, rested. Needed it. Cause we'd footed it there to spare the horses, worn out. Medeiro Vaz, in places like that, outside of wartime, pleased to sleep in a nightshirt and cap; afore bedding down, he'd kneel and pray a rosary. Those were my days. We hunted, each forgot what we wanted, there was no lack of food, we fished in the waterways ... You go, sir, you'll see. The places are always there in themselves, to confirm.

So pleasant. Crystal waters, springs, shade and sun. Black-Ox Farm, belonged to an Eleutério Lopes – ways afore the Blue Field, on the way to the Scorched Desert. That was in February or January, in the time of the corn bloom. Moreso: what with the silver-tipped country-captain, which thrives in the cerrado; anise adorning its thickets; and the deianiras with tiny flowers. That marmalade grass thickens in fast, redoubling no sooner it sprouts, so sea-green, child of the slightest drizzle. From any cloth of woodland, from nigh-all two-leaves-touching, every colour of butterflies would spiral out. As you've never seen, here you see it. Cause in the gerais, the same breed of butterfly, which in other parts is trivial ordinary – here gets bigger, and brighter, you know; I say it's the dryness of the air, the clear, this huge light. Long the banks of the Urucúia's headsprings, there the handsome-beauty sings highly. And there was the whistling duck that chichirruped in the first sunblush of morn, the swamp sprite, the loopy-loo, the wee-saw, the striped cuckoo, the cow dove ... and the you-I-see kiskadee, and raucous macaws. It was nice to hear the mer of the cows owing their milk. But, little sun-gem in the de-veil of dawn, for every glum thought your mind throws up, he asks again and fakes the answer. Then, in the afternoon, the flycatcher would tumbledive, in high low come go, peck-pecking from mid-flight every wee-winged critter; clever bird. It was going to rain late later. Dusk that fills the trees with cicadas – then, it doesn't rain. Whistles that closed the day: the bananaquit, the blue grosbeak, the marsh wren, the kingbird, the rusty-thrush, the coconut finch ... I was the whole time almost with Diadorim.

Diadorim and me, the two of us. We'd go for a wander. As so, we were different to the others – cause gunmen aren't the sort for drawn-out chatting or tight friendships: they mingle and un mingle, perchance, sure, but each to himself. Bout the two of us together, no one ever said a word. They had the good prudence. If they did, if they joked, I mean – they could die. They got used to seeing us twosomely. They didn't disparage no more. And we were talking, near a ditch – a drainage

channel on an old farm, where the watercress flowers. It was wilylight, getting dark. Diadorim lit a little fire, I went to fetch corncobs. Moths a many flitted b'tween our faces, and hefty beetles bumped. A breeze was stirring. The sisyphing of the wind came and went bringing the smell of nearby rain. And the cheeing of the crickets joined the countryside, square by square. Me alone, I couldn't have recollected so many tiny details, I in't one to heed to the small stuff; but nostalgia brings it all back. S'if it was today. Diadorim went and put traces of himself for me in all these trifles of nature. Boy do I know it. A sound like the turbling of toads. Diadorim, stern solemn, so handsome, in the glow of the embers. We said barely hardly a word; but it was a peal that hurled me towards him – the long unfixableness of life. I don't know what sheepish swoon would come over me, with him shut-mouthed and me obeying him in silence. It was practically without fail like this: we'd get somewhere, he'd tell me to sit; I'd sit. I don't like to stand around. Then, after that, he'd come and sit, his turn. Always by means of further away. I didn't dare move any closer. I was the only one Diadorim sometimes seemed to have a flicker of mistrust in; me, who was his friend! But, this occasion, there he was, closer now, a half a hand from me. And me – ill from holding myself back so as never to utter the sweetly things that're ugly – I forgot everything; in an unfurling of contentment, I stopped thinking. But then came the second-guessing, the bitter taste of displeasure: I went over it in circles and squares. But this heart of mine could've more. The body doesn't translate, but it knows a lot, and it divines what it doesn't. Near a body of water, all is bliss. We heard, on a bank, one otter after nother: the splish of splosh, slurpy. 'Boy do I want the day to come!' Diadorim was saying. 'I'll never know happiness or even my mere life long as those two monsters aren't finished off ...' And he sighed with loathing, as if in love; sides that, he didn't show a thing. His loathing was so big it couldn't get any bigger: it stopped at a calm loathing. Loathing with patience; you know, sir?

And, that strong thing he felt, it gradually rubbed off on me – but not as loathing, turning more into sadness in me. Long as those two monsters were alive, Diadorim just simply couldn't live. Til he was able to avenge his father's history, he'd be chafing mad. During when we weren't on the march, in times of rest, when I wanted more friendship, all Diadorim could do was talk the matter to extremes. Kill, kill, blood calls for blood. And so there we were waiting, at the spring of night, together-gether. Silent. I remember, ah. The toads. The toads pulled bags out of their voices, voices of disgust, aged. I stared at the edge of the ditch. All the watercress stalks – you've seen 'em, sir – certain hours they give off a glow of their own, in those darknesses: leaf by leaf, a luminescence – the cress lights up on its own, like electricity. And I was afraid. Afraid in my soul.

I didn't reply. No point. Diadorim wanted the end. That's where we were headed. With Medeiro Vaz in command, from there, after that so-needed rest, we'd churn up trail again, throw ourselves on others–them! – looking for a fight. We didn't lack for munition. There were sixty of us – all the best men. The boss, Medeiro Vaz, never lost a fighter. Medeiro Vaz was up right serious, raised in the ways, not a word waster. He never told us ahead of time what he had in mind, what marches he'd awake to give. Well as that, everything about him stablished the trust of obedience. Bony, with a huge nape, a kind of low-set big head, he was master of the day and the night – he barely didn't sleep no more: he always rose among the stars, walked the surrounds, slowly, padding along in his good javelina-hide boots, so old. If in honourable judgement he thought he was in the right, Medeiro Vaz would solemnly place rosary in pouch, make the sign of the cross and give firm orders to kill a thousand, one by one. Right from the start, I preciated that fortress of another man. His secret was set in stone.

Ah, I've lived a lot, been round a-bouts. I recall things, afore they happen ... Does this clear my fame? I've winged life loose. Sertão: its empty spaces. Go, sir. You'll still find something. Cowboys? Bit afore

– heading to, towards the Urucúia Plateau – where so many oxen bellow ... Or further off: cowboys from Green-Swamp and Quebra-Quináu Brook: their horses talk in whispers – they say – to give their riders wised advice, when no one else is round to hear. I buy it and I don't. There's whoa and there's woe, and the fox's 'o' ... Coming this way, sir, you come to the headwaters of the Carinhanha and the Piratinga child of the Urucúia – which, two out of two turn their backs on one-nother. They come from the same swamps – vast buriti swamps. In those parts, anacondas hum. Thick constrictors: they hurl themselves at deer and go wrapping a-round, strangulating – ten footers! All about you is sticky mud that latches on to mules' hoofs even, tugging off horseshoe after horseshoe. Wary of the mother-snake, beasts of all sorts hold back wise, patient out the time, n'order to drink water, hidden ahind palm thickets. But the sassafras are leafy, guarding the lake; which gives off a pleasant perfume. Gators growl, one, two, some three times, husky hoarse. Gators brood – boogleyed, knobbed in the mud, looking ugly at you. Yep, they know how to fatten up. In swamps where nary a winged thing alights, cause of hungry gators and sawtooth piranhas. Or, for that matter – swamps so reedy they don't even open an eye. From there, further more away, the swamps turn into rivers. Buriti thickets come with 'em, palm following palm. To change basins you go up table-edged scarps and abrupt on to the plateau, high plains that never turn back. Water, in't none – just what you take, sir. Those long plateaus, buzzing with horse-flies that bite. Horse-flies! The sun beats down, in powerful waves, beats and beats, so much light hurts. The horses would sweat salt and foam. Ofttimes we had to hack our way through the brush, tapir trails – the to-trail backwards ... By night, if it's to be, the sky wraps itself in shimmers. You almost bump 'em with your head. Beautiful in numbered turn-out, like the starred skies of mid-February! But in the pitch of no-moon nights, it's a darkness that fetters and foils. It's a whole lot of night. The sertão all in black, it's always uneased me. Not Diadorim, he never shook off that ice-on-fire idea; and never got rattled.

But I longed for dawn. Hot days, cold nights. We'd tear up rhea-shins for kindling. If we had food and drink, I'd turn in early. I'd dream. Just dream, better or worse, freed. I had a shy moon. When day broke through, I'd hear other birds. Kingbirds, cowbirds, the ground grubber, the white-breasted juriti or the red-dove-of-the-virgin-forest. But mostly the kiskadee. Ahind and afore me, everywhere I went, it felt like just one kiskadee. 'By golly! Don't you think it sounds like it's just the one, always the same?' I asked Diadorim. He didn't agree, and had an odd look on his face. When my friend got that way, I lost my well-bearing. And I sat there wondering if it really was – if it was one exact kiskadee dogging my life long, accusing me of evils I still hadn't come to. It's like that to this day ...

TRANSLATOR'S STATEMENT

João Guimarães Rosa's novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is famous for its language, which draws from a regional dialect of the Brazilian backlands, where morphology is somewhat plastic. In the mouths of its speakers, root words shapeshift from one grammatical category to another and take unexpected prefixes and suffixes. Rosa used this vernacular patterning as a matrix for his own half-real, half-imagined dialect. His work is often compared to James Joyce's for its linguistic density and there are some who believe it to be untranslatable, though I disagree on both counts. Some of my (myriad) challenges in this translation are:

Syntax: The protagonist, Riobaldo, is sitting on his veranda telling a story of unrequited love to an unknown interlocutor. His narrative bears all the marks of orality, all the changes of direction, ellipses and backtracking that are typical of speech. It can be tempting to make some sentences offer up their meaning more readily in translation, so I am constantly reminding myself that it is an oral narrative and it isn't neat and tidy in the original.

Neologisms: Riobaldo is semi-educated, but doesn't always hit the mark when trying to use big words. He often unwittingly splices words together, creating portmanteaux that still resonate with the expressive possibilities of their donor words. I try to follow suit in the translation, sometimes compensating for a neologism elsewhere in the passage, where English offers me more possibilities to reproduce the effect.

Proper nouns: I've taken a mixed approach to the translation of proper nouns, in particular the names of birds, which are an important motif in the novel. In Brazil, there are often dozens of popular names for the same bird, and Rosa cherry-picked the most special of them, revealing

a high degree of intentionality in his choices. But in the case of birds endemic to a particular country or geographical area, there often aren't names for them in English, or, when there are, they're scientific or merely descriptive. Riobaldo wouldn't refer to a native duck by its scientific name, much less a long-winded descriptive name. After much humming and hawing, I decided to translate them more literally. I feel that I have the author's permission for this, as he and his Italian translator agreed on this very approach almost sixty years ago.

2021 PRIZE: JUDGE'S REPORT

Dominique Hecq

The fragment from Russian to English chosen by the winning entry is the opening of *White Moss*, a novel by Anna Nerkagi, a Nenets writer, novelist, and social activist from Siberia. The excerpt sets up the novel's main event: a loveless wedding. The translation has a strong rhythmic sense and pronounced cadence. Instead of long formal words rarely used in intimate everyday speech, the translator has chosen short, basic words that rhythmically force the reader to go slow, to weigh each simple word. As a consequence, the translation communicates a visceral feeling, a sense of urgency, a sensation of impending doom. The tone is serious, yet lyrical. From the first paragraph, the reader is acutely aware that they are about to cross some barrier and the prose elegantly crosses the barriers between ethnicities. The world of the novel is familiar, yet strange.

Curiously, there is a film adaptation of Nerkagi's *White Moss* directed by Vladimir Tumaev with English subtitles, but no English translation of the novel exists yet.

WHITE MOSS (EXCERPTS)

Anna Nerkagi, translated by Irina Sadovina

For Petko, his young neighbour's wedding was like scorching salt poured on a healed wound. This was a vital, necessary matter. No grief, however intense, should stop the flow of life, just as a boulder thrown into a river does not turn its current. The water will move around it and flow once again as it was meant to.

Last year his wife, the woman Lamdo, not yet old, had departed into the eternal night. Now there was no one to set the family tea table in the morning, no one to fix the boots, to kindle the fire. When a woman dies, she takes half of your life with her. You then begin to understand that the one with whom you have shared your days also takes away a part of your soul.

The poles and the deer skins of his tent were placed on the sleigh by the Three Trees, where for centuries the Nenets had been leaving sleighs that were no longer in use. Old man Petko himself began living on the vacant side of the tent of his old friend, the Nenets Vanu. *Living across the fire*, old people would have said: in other words, not in one's own tent.

Somewhere, in some town, he has two daughters. The eldest left a long time ago, Petko doesn't even remember when. But the youngest would visit often. How he and his wife used to love when their daughter would visit in the summer. Like two old birds, they admired her from two sides. Just as bird parents clean the feathers of their only chick, he and his wife dressed her in the best furs their sleigh carried. But the daughter always left, like a fragile bird that fears winter and leaves for places that are warm.

The woman Lamdo died in winter, on a very cold day. Maybe that's why the bird-daughter did not come to her funeral.

And how much their young neighbour, the one who got married today, had admired their bird-bride. She and the neighbour used to play together as helpless children, they grew up together, and once he, the father, saw with his own eyes how they rocked a toy cradle made of an old mud boot.

He remembers something else, too. During one of the visits, in the spring, her bed stood empty for a whole white night. When she came back, her cheeks were scarlet as ripe red cloudberries. Mother and father did not ask her anything. Feeling embarrassed, they did not dare to ask.

How much pain there was in Alyoshka's eyes every time he touched the harness of the sleigh on the back of which their daughter left on her long journey.

And now, as the small camp prepared for the wedding, an inexplicable resentment would not leave Petko. Although it was difficult to call what was happening a wedding. People did not get married this way. There had been times when family pots rung out with emptiness and life did not allow for games. The old man remembered rich and poor weddings. In all of them, guests were sacred. The more guests, the better. The more kind words were said, the more happiness would come to the family that was born anew.

This wedding had no guests. That's what the young neighbour wanted. No word about the wedding was sent to any camp. No relatives, close or distant, were invited. Though it's a sin not to do it, they did not even slaughter two calves, one from the groom's camp, the other from the bride's; they did not sanctify the sacred sleigh with their blood. And

there was no wedding in the bride's tent, either. They just sat down at the table with her people, as though they were having ordinary tea, and drank a glass, without a good word. The bride was brought to the groom's camp as though she was not a woman, the mistress of the tent and of life, but a cart of firewood. Without song, without joy. They were tired and irritated by Alyoshka's incomprehensible stubbornness.

Alyoshka's mother, who had recently grown much older, lived during those strange days as though in a dream. The woman could not understand what was happening. Was this a wedding? Or had her son turned these grey-haired old men and women into mere puppets, children's toys made of rags, and he was free to treat them as he wanted? The bride's parents, sensing that something was amiss, cited the long journey and did not go to the groom's camp. And when the sleigh caravan with the bride was about to leave, Alyoshka's mother, holding the goad ready, turned back to look at the bride's mother, a woman her age, and suddenly she wanted to leave quickly, to run away like a beast with its prey, before someone could snatch it away. And while they were on the road, she looked back often.

'Is that what it was like? Is that how it's supposed to be?' thought the woman. Her secret thoughts caused her to mistrust the Big Life, but one had to keep living, so she kept moving, she didn't turn back, like an old she-wolf who had hungry, skinny cubs waiting for her in the den.

And when they got back and needed, at least for the sake of appearances, to perform the sacred ritual of bringing the new mistress into her new tent, into a life that is easy to enter but very hard to leave, the woman held her young daughter-in-law's hand tightly, more tightly than necessary, and froze before the curtain of the entrance. She was overcome by a soul-scorching fear: is this auspicious? Will this girl be happy in her tent, with her son? Should they come to their senses?

Maybe her son is right? He is not sixteen after all, he is twenty-six, a fully grown man, who by this time of life should already have not one, but two or three children in every corner of the tent. After all, he, too, has a head, not a hillock, on his shoulders. Maybe the truth of their old, not always abundant, life had died, as everything else dies? And some new, entirely other truth had been born? Every time has its own face, and therefore its own truth. But the woman straightened herself out. To think too long is to stay too long in one place. It's too late to think. The truth of life is the same and its meaning remains this: to live and to work, honestly.

Everything will work out. In vain do they, the old men and women, weep like stupid loons on the lakeshore before rain. There will be no rain, the sun will come out.

The woman entered through the door first, not letting go of the nervous girl's hand and almost dragging her inside. She stopped for a moment before she could find the strength to say the old words that were said to her in her time by her own mother-in-law:

– This is now your tent. This is where you will live.

Not letting go of the girl's hand, she led her to the bed and sat her down, understanding with her sensitive heart how unwelcoming and cold the tents of strangers can be, and that, however tender the mother-in-law's words, young people perceive them in their own way.

Quickly and skilfully, the woman kindled the fire and cut up some meat. Filling a black, soot-stained pot to the brim with the meat, she hung it over the flame. The whole time, while the hands did their usual work, the heart and the mind did their own. The mind, importunate and nagging, whispered:

– How the people of the tundra will laugh at the wedding of your son. Women will caw like crows, and the word-worm will crawl across the snows with the speed of wind: herself the groom's mother cut up the meat for the pot, herself, with her sinful hands, she kindled the pure fire of new life. She did everything herself, like an errand girl, who, at normal weddings, runs around doing small tasks like a nimble mouse. Neither the bride nor the mother of the groom can or should work. That is a sin, and it does not bring honour to any wedding, poor or rich.

– Let it be ... – the heart objected cautiously and shyly, – this may be shameful, but you did get your son married. Is that bad? You won't have to thrash in anguish like a mother bird over a ruined, empty nest. The home nest won't be empty, it will live with a new life, and the same women who now wear out their tongues with their own spit will, in time, come and sit at the table of your daughter-in-law and your son.

When the meat was cooked, and her son entered the tent, she slipped outside and ran to the neighbouring tent, afraid that her son would hear. Neighbours must be invited to the table. He is not a stranger to them, and they are no strangers, and then maybe her son's heart will soften, too. Not outsiders but their own dear elders will sit the bride down by their knee, the woman with whom her son will not play games but live a life.

The elders were expecting her. They sat side by side, taking sniffs at the tobacco, quacking softly like *avlik* birds, and talking quietly. She lowered

herself to the edge of the floorboards near the entrance curtain, and after a moment of quiet that befits a woman, she requested:

– Come, let's sit the children down,

– and she left without waiting for an answer. She was certain that they would come and together they would convince her son that this was how it should be. This was how the Nenets have always done. The woman would sit down by the man's knee, becoming part of him. This was the truth of life.

The elders did come. Alyoshka threw them a dark look but did not say a word. The adults seemed to him like stubborn children who did not understand the gravity of the game they had started. He has been silent for a few days now. Words, whether they're the loudest or the softest, are all empty just the same. No word will – no word can – express love. Words are dust. If people spent more time being quiet, then how well and how long they would love. In silence, there is a special tenderness and suffering. In suffering, there is the blood of love ...

Her hands trembling, the mother led the bride through and sat her down where a Nenets woman sits only once in a lifetime. Not on the floor planks, where her eternal place will be for all the days of her life, but on the bed next to her groom. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed her son's lips quivering with disgust, and once again she became anxious for this wedding.

Not showing her feelings, she poured tea for the elders and sat down near the table, but immediately jumped up and began throwing the dry, easily broken branches into the fire. It seemed to her that if she stopped moving, her bird-son would certainly stand up, spread his shoulders –

his wings – move the table away with his strong hand, and say harshly: 'That's it, I was just kidding ... I don't want to marry.' He'll stand up and she'll have no strength to sit him back down.

Not the thick hot tea, not the tasty meat nor the downed glass could liven up the heavy wedding. The elders, although they sat imposingly like two rocks that had grown into each other, felt like children, unable to understand anything. And they were silent like autumn birds, afraid to bring misfortune on their nest.

They had some thick broth and drank another glass, not daring to raise the cup as would be required on such a day. Alyosha took a drink too, looking straight ahead, as though it was not people but long-dead shades who surrounded him. To expect a word or to say something himself would be ridiculous and absurd. A powerless rage was flaring up within him. Oh, to stand up, fling the table to the floor, chase away the respected elders, overturn both the tent and everything that people had come up with to hide the squalor of life and the soul.

Is it for him, one who likes to play pretend he's living their old life? This is a funeral, not a wedding. Today he buries that which is dearest and brightest of all that he understood in all his years. That which lived within him in secret from people, lived sweetly, tormented and gladdened him.

He buries love. No one dares to rejoice or laugh at a funeral. No one! And it's no one's business how he celebrates his funeral wedding. It's his life and in it he is free to do anything he likes. No one can say how to get married: not the ancient tradition, not the people's language. Alyoshka wanted to cry, so that hot tears would run down his cheeks, scalding his soul. Not to get pity ... It's just that he needs to help himself somehow. He is alone now. People trample on the earth's flowers without noticing

broken stems and crumpled petals, so they also don't notice when they murder love themselves. One moment of cowardice, a little bit of self-deceit – and love is dead.

The elders stayed for a little while longer. As soon as the woman cleared the table, they started getting ready. They took a sniff of the tobacco, to prolong their stay a little, to delay leaving the poor woman alone with her son for as long as possible. Vanu was the first one to get up. Turning a stern face to Alyoshka, he stopped at the curtain, but then only waved his hand as though giving up, and left. Petko hastened after him.

And while Petko scurried, Alyoshka looked at his helpless bent back. He wanted so much for the father of the one for whom his heart ached to not leave but to stay. To sing a song about his daughter in order to spite him, Alyoshka. They would get drunk together and together have a cry about what happened. He is getting married without love, and Petko's daughter, the only person who could keep him warm in his last days, did not come back.

Petko couldn't find the curtain with his untrustworthy hands and kept bumping his head against poles. And when he figured it out, he looked back, and reproach flared up in his eyes, as though he were saying, very quietly:

– Oh, you.

Alyoshka clenched his teeth. Many days and years will pass, but eyes full of tears that won't fall will always be a reminder of this night. His head was spinning from the drink and his blood hummed loudly in his ears. Falling back on the pillows, Alyoshka lay there, not understanding how to be and what to do now. He lit a smoke, trying to avoid looking at the girl who sat by the fire. Her back, turned to him, was bent, and

along it crawled two long black braids with antique beads and copper adornments.

'Just sits there,' Alyoshka thought with anger. He felt no pity for her, frozen as she was in the eternal pose of the Nenets woman, indifferent to what had happened. As though they have already lived a long, difficult life without love, both grew tired and jaded, and at the end of bitter days that no repentance can make right, sitting by the fire that never warmed her soul, she was burying her anguish and dislike for him in the ashes.

He needed to calm down and think of everything. Calmly and soberly, and most importantly, without anger. On a road such as life, anger was an unreliable walking stick. What had the people of the camp, closest people to him on the whole earth, done to him? There was no one closer than them. They had lived together through more than one winter, more than one hungry spring, and pulled through. And, of course, they had helped him live through more than one or two griefs, even his father's death. And just because he got married without love, the sun would not refuse to rise in the sky tomorrow morning. He needed to understand their truth, too.

TRANSLATOR'S STATEMENT

The fragment I chose is the novel's opening, which sets up its main event and conflict: a loveless wedding. A young man, Alyoshka, is in love with his childhood friend Ilne, who has left the tundra and rarely comes to visit. Because of his feelings for Ilne, Alyoshka has delayed marriage, but tradition and necessity require it. In this excerpt, Alyoshka is marrying another woman, more out of spite than a desire to do the right thing.

But this romance plot is not what drives the novel. This excerpt also reveals the novel's polyphonic nature. Even as Alyoshka goes through his own developmental arc, characters like his mother and the old man Petko, Ilne's father, follow their own. *White Moss* is indeed a novel about the impossibility, the frustrations, the indispensability of love. It's a novel about love that holds together a community in a process of mutual understanding, misunderstanding and care, in the face of inevitable change.

Nerkagi writes in a laconic language that reflects the Nenets' approach to speech: silence is preferable, so every word must count. This approach guided my translation. However, it would be inaccurate to describe the prose as minimalist. It includes extended metaphors reminiscent of Old Norse kennings, which in translation often result in beautiful alliteration: 'bird-bride,' 'word-worm.'

Pronouns turned out to be far trickier. Russian grammar allows for more ambiguity in pronoun use, so translating several sentences into English, I opted for clarifying the subject while striving to preserve an economy of expression (e.g. translating 'they' as 'she and the neighbour').

The biggest challenge were the terms that describe traditional lifeways and are associated in the Russian context with indigenous Northern peoples: for example, *chum* – a tent dwelling (pronounced 'choom'), or *narty* – a long sleigh. I judged against using 'indigenous-sounding' terms in English (e.g. *tipi*), which would introduce cultural inaccuracies and exoticism. In the spirit of Nerkagi's language – clear,

not overburdened with 'exotic' detail – I opted to simply use ordinary English terms like 'tent' and 'sleigh.'

White Moss counteracts mainstream representations of indigenous life, which are often simplistic, even when well-meaning. The novel sensitively depicts multiple irreconcilable perspectives that make up the life of a community. As a member of another indigenous group (the Mari), I recognise the importance of telling nuanced stories about these issues. I believe that English-language readers deserve an opportunity to experience this challenging and moving novel.

2020 PRIZE: JUDGE'S REPORT

Dominique Hecq

It has been a huge privilege to have been invited by the AAWP to adjudicate this year's international UWRF Translators' Prize, with a record number of excellent entries across a variety of languages, including Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Spanish and Tamil.

Traditionally, translation is 'concerned with meaning' (Hervey and Higgins 2002: 132). Linguistic research in the field of translation studies, with its emphasis on the 'target literature' and its 'norms', would not dispute this (Venuti 2000). Walter Benjamin, however, suggests that 'a translation ... must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification' (1970: 79). I am struck by the use of the adverb 'lovingly': does this mean that for Benjamin a translation should bear the mark of love? A love of the work? A love passed on to the text? A love of this palimpsest of signs we call an author? If this is so, then, love is the context of translation, that which accompanies the text. It is in this context that the work of translating occurs, a work that produces another text just as fiction produces parallel texts to desires and fantasies. As André Lefevere put it after Schlegel, 'objective poetic translation', by which he meant literary translation, 'is true writing, a new creation' (1992: 17). The aim of literary translation is to produce a fine text in a target language, one that is also faithful to an original text in a source language. These demands need to be acknowledged as at least potentially contradictory: a new creation is at odds with the notion of fidelity just as originality is at odds with imitation. Negotiating this contradiction is the challenge all translators face. This has been my gauge in assessing this prize, keeping in mind that 'language is a fluid, spilling from one vessel to another, or blood transfused between bodies' Robert-Foley (2016: 906).

The entries varied in length, genre and scholarship. While some provided the original text, some didn't. Most concerned themselves with copyright issues, but some didn't. And while most came with a translator's statement of intent, some didn't – reticence to speak of one's work in an explanatory way is perhaps one reason, though a statement of intent is also the starting point for an imagined conversation between entrant and assessor. After much soul-searching I have managed to whittle down our twenty entries to a shortlist of five, with the winning entry: '423 Colours', a selection of excerpts from Juan Gallardo & Rafael Avendaño's *423 Colours* (2018). The selection is best described as a contrapuntal piece whereby two distinct narratives are juxtaposed and two distinct voices alternate. The selection begins with a letter addressed to Ghada by her father, Khaled, who fled war-torn Syria only to encounter tragedy when their asylum-seeking boat capsized in Greek waters. Fragments of Khaled's letter written from Spain are interspersed with accounts of Ghada's thoughts and reminiscences from the moment she boards the vessel aged eight up to her untimely death.

I was deeply impressed, reading this translation sample of Gallardo & Avendaño's *423 Colours*. I was pleased to see that the Spanish original of the translated excerpts was provided together with a permission from the copyright holders and the translator's statement of intention. Indeed, this made my job easier. Beyond purely linguistic matters, this taste of translation re-creates the freshness, mood, tonality and vision of the original. It is much more than an English version of the Spanish original—it is a re-creation that becomes distinctively alive in another language, a true and loving homage to its source which also honours alterity. Not only does this version balance aesthetic complexity with heartfelt directness, it also highlights the affinity between writing and translating as process and between original text and translation.

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423 COLOURS
[EXCERPTS, PP. 6-12; 328-330; 333-334]

Juan Gallardo & Rafael Avendaño, translated by Lilit Žekulin Thwaites

DEAR GHADA¹

I remember your birth with so much emotion, Ghada. That moment when I held your body in my arms, a body so light that I thought if I took away my arms you would float. Your face was a message from God, love made flesh. Nevertheless, the expressions on the doctors' faces seemed designed to erode my enthusiasm. They were worried that your cries were not reaching the dramatic level they thought healthy babies should display – I assume they must consider birth to be a huge tragedy. Your mother and I allowed ourselves to be convinced they should put you in an incubator for some days – one or two weeks, they said – so that you'd gain the necessary weight. As far as your mother and I were concerned, you were perfect. We named you Ghada because you were full of grace, and you never stopped moving inside that incubator, a smile permanently on your little face.

But when you came out of the incubator and we took you home, I realised that something had changed. You were just as beautiful as before, maybe a little chubbier and heavier, but the calmness you radiated, rather than filling me with peace, started to cause me anguish. That same night, I dreamt that your inert body was floating in dark emptiness.

The next morning, I confirmed that you weren't reacting to light, even if I shone a flashlight right in front of your eyes, but the mere brush of my hand against your wooden cot was enough to make you react.

'She's still very small,' your Mama said to me. 'Wait a few days; children are born without very good eyesight.'

I ignored what she was suggesting. Your mother's words were saying one thing, but her eyes were showing another, so we took you to the doctor.

'Retrolental fibroplasia' was what the doctor told us during a consultation which was infected by the celestial hour and your mother's silent weeping. Darling Ghada, you were already capable back then of feeling the grief in your mother's heart, and you began to cry with the lustiness you had lacked when you were born.

You had lost your ability to see because there was too much oxygen in the incubator. You lost your sight – I know you don't like to be called blind, my love. [...]

It's not easy for parents to accept something like this, but from the time you were a baby, you made an effort to show us that you could be happy and have a full life. You were such an agreeable baby, Ghada, always smiling, that there were those who told us you were a blessing sent to us by God. Nevertheless, I found it very difficult to accept your lack of sight, not because of the way it affected me or your Mama, but for your sake. Darkness is not the same as light, and yet there you were with your eternal smile, determined to soothe my despondency on a daily basis.

When you had already mastered speech – you must have been three or four years old – you asked me to be your eyes. It took a huge effort to contain my emotions in that moment, but I decided that, just as you had asked, I would always describe to you every colour, every shade, every shadow and every glimmer. My joy was in giving you everything, and I would have given you even my breath. You had my heart from the moment you came into this world; now you would also have my eyes. I

would try to see things as I thought you would, so that I could tell you about them later.

Back then, before the dragons belched their fire and their breath on its streets, Aleppo was a marvellous place for our little family. The streets were bursting with life and optimism from the moment the sun emerged above the outline of the Citadel until it disappeared on the other side of the horizon.

[...]

But don't think for a moment that, despite what I've just said and despite being able to enjoy such a tranquil life, I was immune to what was going on in our country. Naturally, I took issue with the lack of civil liberties, in particular the lack of freedom of expression. I looked towards the future – your future, Ghada – with the hope of a fuller and fairer life both for us and for all Syrians, but the revolution brought neither abundance nor justice, only dragons, fire and horror – a horror which began just after your mother died, and ought to have ended for us in that boat on the Mediterranean, under the stars.

GHADA'S² THOUGHTS ON THE BOAT: I BEGIN WITH THE STARS

The stars are like sugar sprinkled across the sky, that's what my Papa says; and he also says they are reflected in the Mediterranean like tiny flickering balls of fire dancing on top of the waves. When a wave goes past, I feel droplets falling on my forehead and cheeks, and I wonder if those drops also reflect the stars as they travel from the surface of the sea to my face.

They say that light has these properties: it travels across the galaxies, pierces water, refracts in it and creates infinite beams. According to my

friend Adnan, you can see things that are millions of light years away, and I find it fascinating that light can also be a unit for measuring distances. What a wonder light must be if it's good for so many things

It hasn't been easy to undertake this voyage, to head out to sea. Before we boarded, many men were shouting, children were crying, and words were being confused and merged in a clamour of feelings which seemed to strike up a debate with the sound of the waves, a discussion full of reproaches and disappointments. 'Too many people for just one boat,' I heard. And we had to get rid of most of our baggage so that we could plough through the sea without the risk of sinking ...

I couldn't understand the delay, either, nor why we had to wait until nightfall so that we could board in the dark – something I don't know (everybody thinks that if you can't see, somehow you can still see the dark) – and the voyage would be less dangerous. Is it dangerous to sail by day? Night or day is much of a muchness for me when it comes to doing things, because the night is like the day for me, except there's no sound of people at night. I've always been told that darkness is frightening for people who can see. Yet now they are saying that traveling in daylight isn't safe. So where does that leave us?

'It's harder for them to see us at night,' says my father. He's referring to the bad men.

Behind me, the waves are pounding the wooden boat as if a dozen hands were drumming a tam-tam beat; they sound like a percussion orchestra accompanying me on my great adventure. The sea is all sound and movement. My father tells me that the sky is so clear you can see the most distant galaxies, and even a trail of dust from fairies that must have passed by recently. I can't see them because I can't see anything. They tell me I'm blind. I think that not seeing doesn't define who I am, not seeing means that I don't see, not that I'm somewhat different. And I don't call my condition being handicapped, because even without being

able to see, I can perceive many things, even some that are imperceptible to those who *can* see.

I can, for example, identify the position of each one of the travellers accompanying us in this boat headed for the island of Lesbos, even though the darkness doesn't allow them to do so.

On my left, with his arm across my shoulders, is my father, whose name is Khaled, though I always call him Papa. He smells of dry earth, especially his hair; his voice sounds like a somewhat hoarse person who is hiding a whisper at the back of his throat, as if two people were speaking at once. My father's voice is gentle and loving and always keeps fears and pain at bay. His hands are soft but strong, like a man and a woman in one person, and his eyes are my window on the world of the sighted. My father is everything to me.

My friend Adnan, sitting on my right, smells of hay and wheat powder. His voice sounds damaged, as if someone was playing a very dusty piano, deep but at the same time, childish. That said, Adnan's voice is a special case, because I've come to realise that it's been changing from the time we abandoned our home until when we left the refuge. He seems a different person!

[...]

And a bit further along is Mr Durun, the person who's navigating this boat and who brought us here from the refugee camp. Mr Durun is Turkish and his voice sounds as if he ends each syllable with a nostalgic sigh. He mainly smells of tobacco, and even though he's the one who's in charge and who steers the boat, nobody calls him 'captain'. Earlier on I heard him called 'smuggler', a word I don't understand, and which is maybe something more than 'captain'.

There are more people in the boat, many more, and it would take me a long time to name them all. They're all very quiet, as if they were

afraid their voices would infuriate the sea, although Papa says the sea is calm and that we'll reach shore in a couple of hours.

[...]

The last stage of our mission awaits us on the other side of this sea. We have to overcome more obstacles inland, many more, and face one or more weird creatures, but we won't stop until we reach the garden that contains the magic flower, the only thing capable of putting an end to the dragons.

[...]

When we find the magic flower and expel the dragons from our city, that's when I'll write this adventure, and after this one, lots more.

All these amazing people are accompanying me on this great adventure, while others got stuck on the way, captives of the dragons. Will we be able to free them when we finish our mission?

DEAR GHADA

Before I lost you in the water, you asked me which coast we were approaching; it was the coast of Lesbos, the coast of Greece. Sometimes, in my dreams, you would ask me to look after Doobie³, and I have done so until today. Doobie has been great company for me these five years since the sea snatched you from my arms.

The boat was entirely flooded. When we started to float in the water, I was determined that nothing would make me let go of you, my darling, but then the boat spun around and hit us full on. I almost lost consciousness but was able to stay alert. What I didn't manage to do was prevent you from slipping from my arms.

Ghada, I felt the sea pulling you, it was almost as if you were handing yourself over. It's the worst memory of my life; no words can express what I felt in that moment. I swam and dived down again and again trying to find you underwater until my lungs were burning. I kept coming up to breathe and shout your name, and yell at the others to help me. Nobody could reach you. A few minutes later, several boats with police officials on board arrived from Lesbos. I kept telling them to search for you, I wanted to stay in the water until I found you, but they dragged me to the coast against my will. I would have given my life for you.

You have no idea how much I hated Doobie as I watched him racing up and down the beach. My beloved daughter had drowned, but the dog was alive and happily wandering about, barking at the waves from the shore. Still, I began to love that creature when they brought your body to shore in a lifeboat, and his sad howls competed with my own bitter ones. How can an animal adore someone so much? How can beasts show so much humanity, and humans so little?

I hugged your lifeless body.

The Greeks – both the police and the members of the Red Cross who gave us refuge during those first days – were incredibly kind to us. Nevertheless, there was something that just didn't make sense to me. They were sorry about my tragedy, but not as sad as one would expect in the face of a misfortune such as this, or so it seemed to me. Someone explained to me, not very tactfully, that before your death they had already recorded 422 children who had drowned in the Mediterranean while fleeing from Syria. You see, my darling daughter, these people were used to horror. Becoming used to horror was something I'd already seen in Aleppo. Among the verifiable cases, you were child victim number 423. The ocean is so huge that it can accommodate immense tragedies such as this. Tragedies which didn't end with your death, Ghada.

423 children.

Followed by 424, 425, 426 ... and the number continues to grow.

GHADA'S THOUGHTS IN THE SEA: 423 COLOURS

My Papa continues to shout on top of the sea; he submerges himself again and again trying to find me, to grab me by the hand and pull me out of the water.

I open my eyes underwater and finally, I see light. I see my father, so near and yet so far.

The light comes from above, solar rays; it looks like dawn is breaking as my mother protects me in the water. Light has properties such as traveling through the galaxies, piercing water, and refracting in one direction and another infinitely. A million galaxies fit inside my eyes.

Now, at last, I really understand what light is.

I can see; up till now, I didn't know what it was, to see. My father is a very handsome man. I'd never seen his face before.

The water is blue; I now understand what blue is. Water is my father's tears diluted in the sea.

For the first time, I see my hands. I see colours, lots of colours.

I can still hear my father's voice calling me. I wish I knew how to swim so that I could reach the surface and see his face one more time, I wish I could at least tell him not to worry, that I no longer feel the burning pain in my throat, that down here I'm with Mama, that I can see everything now, and see her; tell him that the blue of the Mediterranean is as beautiful as I had always imagined it, like the hundreds of colours

dancing around me; that Mama looks like an angel. How could you not fall in love with her?

Don't be afraid, Ghada.

My mother hugs me and the light fades away until there is a new dawn.

'Get up, sleepyhead! The rising sun is spilling over the rooftops like liquid sugar, and the clouds are cotton wool; do you want to miss it?'

Notes

¹ The narrator of these sections is Ghada's widowed father, Khaled, forced to flee war-torn Aleppo, Syria with his daughter, Ghada (eight years old and blind from birth). This is the start of a long 'letter' to Ghada that he is writing (as therapy) in Spain, ten years after their asylum-seeking boat trip to Greece ended in tragedy.

² Ghada's sections alternate with those of her father, and are a combination of her thoughts from the moment she boards the asylum-seeker vessel and memories of her brief life up to the moment when she drowns.

³ Doobie is Ghada's little dog, which Ghada had secretly smuggled onto the boat in her knapsack.

TRANSLATOR'S STATEMENT

Every reader comes across books which speak to them in a significant way. Translators occasionally combine such experiences with the conviction that a particular book deserves to be made available to a wider readership in another language. *423 colores* (2018) by Rafael Avendaño and Juan Gallardo is just such a book for me.

The book is confronting for readers and translators alike because of its tragic, contemporary topic – the plight of the survivors of a civil war who cannot remain in their homeland, the few options open to them – refugee camps, mercenary people smugglers – and the challenges they face as unwanted asylum seekers. In this case the civil war is in Syria, and the survivors are recently widowed Khaled and his blind, eight-year-old daughter, Ghada. Their flight ends tragically when Ghada drowns before reaching the relative safety of Lesbos – one of the 423 children who had already drowned in the Mediterranean the year the authors were writing their book. Despite this tragedy, there are heart-warming moments, thanks primarily to the authors' portrayal of the two main characters.

The story is told separately from the perspectives of the two main characters. For Ghada, the authors use poetic, image-rich, almost lilting language, both in the way her father describes the world to her and as she imagines it. He is her eyes, and this is how he chooses to help her cope with her blindness and provide for her need to operate in a world she cannot see. To create her own understanding of the world, she combines his descriptions with her own imagination and enhances the result with the 'reality' of what her functioning senses – hearing, touch and smell – suggest.

Ghada's sections of the novel are offset by a letter her father, on the advice of his psychologist, is writing to her in Spain five years later. It is an attempt to come to terms with and justify to himself the decisions he took which ultimately led to Ghada's death. He feels he must now

give her the actual facts regarding the events of the years leading up to their fatal boat trip across the Mediterranean, in place of the fantastic stories he originally told her in order to protect her.

My aim as translator is to reflect and convey this juxtaposition of narrative and real world, and to capture the distinct and distinctive voices which present it.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Carolyn Abbs's collection, *The Tiny Museums*, is published with UWAP (2017). Her poems appear in *Best Australian Poems 2014*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Axon: Creative Explorations*, *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry*, *Australian Book Review*, *Cordite*, *Meniscus*, *Westerly* and in other places. She is currently working towards a second collection.

Lucy Alexander has lived in Canberra for 19 years. She has worked as a tutor, bookseller and workshop leader to keep up her poetry habit. Her poems have appeared in journals and online, as teaching resource material, and won her the CAPO award in 2022.

JC Alfier's (they/them) most recent book, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Journal credits include *The Emerson Review*, *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Vassar Review*. They are also an artist doing collage and double-exposure work often informed by transgender femininity.

Marie Anne is an internationally published poet and fiction writer, born in Hermosillo, Sonora, México. She currently studies Arts management at ITSON University and has complemented her education with diplomas on Creative writing, Film photography, Screenwriting, and Film Production at CIBEF, the Ibero-American Center for Photo and Film Studies in training, consulting, production and research.

2023 represents **Peter Bakowski's** 41st year of writing poetry. His poems continue to appear in literary journals worldwide.

Nicholas Barnes is a poet living in Portland, Oregon. His work has appeared in over sixty publications including *trampset*, *NonBinary Review*, and *Eclectica Magazine*.

Alison J Barton is a widely-published Wiradjuri poet. Her poetry has been recognised in numerous prizes and in 2023 she was the winner of three Varuna House fellowships. She was the inaugural winner of the Cambridge University First Nations Writer-in-Residence Fellowship and will be in residence from October to December 2023. Her first full-length collection of poetry will be published with Puncher & Wattmann in 2024.

Carl Boon is the author of the full-length collection *Places & Names: Poems* (The Nasiona Press, 2019). His writing has appeared in many journals and magazines, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Posit*, and *Washington Square Review*. He received his PhD in Twentieth-Century American Literature from Ohio University in 2007, and currently lives in Izmir, Turkey, where he teaches courses in American literature at Dokuz Eylül University.

Peter Boyle is a Sydney-based poet and translator of poetry from Spanish and French. He is the author of ten books of poetry, most recently *Ideas of Travel* (Vagabond Press, 2022).

Margaret Bradstock is a Sydney poet, critic and editor. She lectured at UNSW for 25 years and has been Asialink Writer-in-residence at Peking University, co-editor of *Five Bells* for Poets Union, and on the Board of Directors for Australian Poetry. She has eight published collections of poetry, including *The Pomelo Tree* (winner of the Wesley Michel Wright Prize) and *Barnacle Rock* (winner of the Woollahra Festival Award, 2014). Editor of *Antipodes*, the first Australian anthology of Aboriginal and white responses to 'settlement' (2011) and *Caring for Country* (2017), Margaret won the Banjo Paterson Poetry Award in 2014, 2015 and 2017. Her most recent book is *Brief Garden* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2019).

Iain Britton is the author of several poetry collections. In the UK his work has been nominated for a Forward Prize for Best Single Poem and Best First Collection. Poems have been published in *Harvard Review*, *Poetry*, *The New York Times*, *Stand*, *Agenda*, *New Statesman*, *Landfall*, *Southerly*, *Rochford Street Review*, *Meanjin*, *Cordite* and *Heat*. *THE INTAGLIO POEMS* was published by Hesterglock Press (UK) 2017. A chapbook – *Project Constellation* – was published by Sampson Low 2022.

Owen Bullock's latest poetry collection is *Pancakes for Neptune* (Recent Work Press, 2023), following three previous poetry titles, five books of haiku, a bilingual edition of tanka, and a novella. He teaches Creative Writing at the University of Canberra. <https://poetry-in-process.com/> @OwenTrail

Gianoula Burns is a Greek-Australian born on a small Greek island and raised and educated in Sydney. I write about the intersection of cultures and the impact that has on first- and second-generation migrants. I magnify and explore emotional responses to experiences.

Joel Bush reads things. He also writes things. Well, sometimes he reads the things he writes. That tends to help. Joel Bush is the winner of the 2021 CSUF Earth Day Poetry Contest, and his work has been featured in *Poetry Super Highway* and *Quibble Lit*.

Sara Cosgrove is an award-winning journalist and emerging poet. Her poems have appeared or are scheduled to appear in *The Seventh Quarry*, *Meniscus*, *Osiris*, *Frogpond* (*Haiku Society of America*), *Notre Dame Review*, *San Antonio Review*, *ONE ART*, *In Parentheses*, and *Roi Fainéant*. She has worked as an editor for 15 years and has studied in the United States, Cuba, and France.

Nina Cullen is a Newcastle based writer. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared

in Australia and overseas in publications including *Australian Book Review*, *The Big Issue Fiction Edition*, *Island*, *Sleepers Almanac*, *Taste – Fresh New Writing*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Guardian*. Her writing has won grants and prizes. She has just finished a collection of linked short stories and is working on a novel. You can find her at ninacullen.com and @ninacullen.

Toby Davidson is a poet and Australian poetry scholar living on Darkinjung Country on the NSW Central Coast and teaching on Dharug Country at Macquarie University. His most recent collection is *Four Oceans* (Puncher & Wattman, 2020) and his latest book of criticism is *Good for the Soul: John Curtin's Life with Poetry* (UWA Publishing, 2021).

Laine Derr holds an MFA from Northern Arizona University and has published interviews with Carl Phillips, Ross Gay, Ted Kooser, and Robert Pinsky. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming from *J Journal*, *Antithesis*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Portland Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere.

Seanse Lynch Ducken received her MFA in Poetry through Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Her work has appeared in *Mudfish 19*, *New Limestone Review*, *Noble/Gas Qtrly*, and *Ecotone*. She currently teaches English at Central Washington University.

Nicholas Duddy is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Oxford.

MB Effendi was born in Providence, Rhode Island, as the son of a businessman and spent his childhood under the skies of Abu Dhabi. He moved to the United States to study. Now he lives with his family in Dubai.

Alison Entrekin, winner of the 2022 AAWP–UWRF Translator's Prize, is an award-winning Australian literary translator from the Portuguese. She has translated many of Brazil's most beloved and iconic literary works, including Clarice Lispector's 1943 debut novel *Near to the Wild Heart*, the favela classic *City of God* by Paulo Lins, and José Mauro de Vasconcelos' *My Sweet Orange Tree*. In 2019 she was awarded the New South Wales Premier's Translation Prize and PEN medallion for her body of work.

Marco Etheridge is a writer, occasional playwright, and part-time poet. He lives in Austria. His writing has been published around the globe. When not crafting stories, Marco is a contributing editor for a new zine called *Hotch Potch*. Website: <https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com>

Oladejo Abdullah Feranmi is a writer, haikuist and a veterinary medicine student from Nigeria. A Thomas Dylan Shortlist and a Pushcart Nominee, he reads submissions at *Sea glass* literary magazine and edits for the incognito press. His works are published in *Gone Lawn*, *Hooligan Magazine* and more. He tweets from @tinybecomings.

John Frame was brought up in Wick, Scotland. He is a teacher and has lived in Aberdeen, Charlotte, NC, New York City, Columbus, OH, Qingdao, China, and Dakar, Senegal. He is the author of a number of short stories and nonfiction articles. <https://jrframe.wixsite.com/website>.

Taylor Franson Thiel is a writer from Utah, now based in Fairfax, Virginia. She received her Masters in creative writing from Utah State University and is pursuing an MFA at George Mason University. Her writing frequently centres on playing as a Division One basketball player, the body, and mental health. Along with writing, she enjoys lifting heavy weights and reading fantastic books. You can find her on twitter @TaylorFranson

Aries M Gacutan is a non-binary Filipino-Australian writer and editor living on the traditional lands of the Woi Wurrung (Wurundjeri) people of the Kulin nation. They are interested in the intersections of place and displacement, queer identity, and modern mundanity. They also really like birds. You can find their work in places like *Archer*, *Crawlspac*, *Meanjin* and *Voiceworks Online*, and on Instagram @the.aries.zone

Clive Aaron Gill's stories have been widely published in literary journals and anthologies. He tells his stories at public and private gatherings. Born in Zimbabwe, Clive has lived and worked in Southern Africa, North America and Europe. He received a degree in Economics from the University of California, Los Angeles and lives in San Diego. More of Clive Aaron Gill's stories are available at amazon.com/author/cliveaarongill

JH Grimes is a trans poet and writer. Their work appears or is forthcoming in *Devastation Baby*, *Spires Magazine*, *REMAKE*, and others. They are the recipient of a 2022 Academy of American Poets Prize, the Norma Lowry Memorial Prize for Poetry, and the Roger Conant Hatch Prize for Lyric Poetry. They received a BA from Washington University in St Louis.

Lee Haertel is a Western Australian poet who teaches literature and philosophy. His work has been featured in various journals, such as *Antithesis*, *Wingless Dreamer* and *The Vital Sparks*. Currently interested in the intersection of mental health, fatherhood and teaching, he is working on his first chapbook and hopes to find a space for it in 2024.

Paul Hostovsky's poems have won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, the FutureCycle Poetry Book Prize, and have been featured on *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, *The Writer's Almanac*, and the Best American Poetry blog. He makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter. Website: paulhostovsky.com

Coco X Huang (@cocoxhuang) is a Chinese-Australian writer, musician and medical scientist. She is a Toolkits: Digital Storytelling and Citizen Writes alumna, has performed

at the National Young Writers' Festival, Boundless Festival and Sydney Festival and received a Faber Writing Academy scholarship. Her works have recently appeared in *Jacaranda Journal*, *Baby Teeth Journal*, *Cordite*, *Voiceworks* and the *Australian Poetry Journal*, among others.

Sarah Hunter has a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in Writing, and Screen and Media Studies. She also has a Graduate Certificate in Arts majoring in Peace Studies. Sarah primarily uses her writing to explore nonhuman perspectives and the unique challenges they face. Sarah is based in South-East Queensland.

Jill Jones lives on unceded Kaurna land. Her latest book is *Acrobat Music: New and Selected Poems* (2023). Her work is widely published in periodicals in Australia, Canada, Ireland, NZ, Singapore, Sweden, UK, and USA and has been translated into a number of languages including Chinese, French, Italian, Czech, Macedonian and Spanish. She currently writes and teaches freelance, and previously has worked as an academic, arts administrator, journalist, and book editor.

Daniel Key is a writer who has just finished his MA Creative Writing at Birkbeck College, University of London. He writes a poem every day, even if it's a bad one.

Desmond Francis Xavier Kon Zhicheng-Mingde is the author of eighteen books spanning poetry, fiction, memoir and experimental writing. The former journalist has edited over twenty-five books, several pro bono for non-profit organisations. Among other accolades, he is the recipient of the IBPA Benjamin Franklin Award, Singapore Literature Prize, two Illumination Christian Book Awards, two Independent Publisher Book Awards, and four Living Now Book Awards. Desmond teaches creative writing at Nanyang Technological University.

Ella Kurz is a writer from Ngannawal Country, Australia. She co-edited the anthology *What We Carry: Poetry on Childbearing* (2021), authored *My Mother is a Midwife* (2019), and received a special mention in The Bruce Dawes National Poetry Prize 2021. She was a judge for the 2022 Aurealis Awards.

Wes Lee lives in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. She has three poetry collections. Her work has appeared in an array of publications, including, *Best New Zealand Poems*, *Westerly*, *The London Magazine*, *Landfall*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Cordite*. Most recently she was awarded the Heroines/Joyce Parkes Women's Writing Prize 2022, in New South Wales, Australia. She was the featured poet in the *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook* 2022.

Tajender Singh (TJ) Luthra lives in New Delhi, India, where he is a senior police officer and works for the Delhi Police, the largest metropolitan police in the world. He has

been working for women's protection, children's rights, and access to justice. He was awarded Indian Police Medal for Meritorious Service and President's Police Medal for Distinguished Service. He is also a Positive Psychology expert with a Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) from the University of Pennsylvania.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as 'a cosmopolitan poet' and another as 'prolific, bordering on incontinent'. His work has been nominated eleven times for Best of the Net, eight for the Pushcart Prize and once for the Forward Prize, and has been released in three collections; *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019) and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022).

Kate Maxwell's prose and poetry have been published and awarded in many Australian and International literary magazines such as *Cordite*, *StylusLit*, *Meniscus*, *Live Encounters*, *Books Ireland*, *Skylight 47*, and *The Galway Review*. She's published two anthologies: *Never Good at Maths* (2021) and *Down the Rabbit Hole* (2023). Find her at <https://kateswritingplace.com/>

John H McGlynn, winner of the 2023 AAWP-UWRF Translator's Prize, is Director of Publications at the Lontar Foundation, established in 1987 for the purpose of introducing Indonesia to the world through literary translations. Through Lontar, McGlynn has ushered into print close to 250 books on Indonesian literature and culture containing translations of literary work by more than 650 Indonesian authors. Also through Lontar, McGlynn initiated a film documentation program which has thus far produced 60 documentary films on Indonesian writers and more than 30 films on Indonesian performance traditions. As the translator of several dozen publications himself, he has garnered much international praise for his work.

Greg McKittrick has written an unpublished novel and is working on a second, and short stories, poetry, and song. Published works include twelve songs and a professional journal article. His short story, 'Shame Paula Jarrett', was shortlisted for the Sydney Writers Room Short Story Competition 2017. 'A Tale of Two Sauces' was shortlisted in the Lambing Flat Short Story Competition 2022 and longlisted in The Furphy Short Story competition 2023. Greg is a member of Writing NSW and lives on Jerrinja and Yuin Country on the NSW South Coast.

Ken McRae began dabbling with writing fiction in lieu of having a mid-life crisis. Since his college studies in economics and law school did not lend themselves to creative outlets, he is trying to make up for lost time. When he is not at work, or hunched over his computer at home, you can find him with his wife Susan; kids, Rachel and Jake; and/or his dog, Hank.

Melinda Jane – The Poet Mj – writer of short stories, prose, poems, song lyrics and sayings with 167 works published by 46 international publishers. Graduate from the University of South Australia, Bachelor of Social Science Degree. Author of two poetry books titled *Nature's Nuptials* and *Bite Me* with Ginninderra Press, and the children's book *The Currawong and the Owl*. Received a highly commended from the Fellowship of Australian Writers National Literary Awards for the playscript titled *The Farmer's Wife*. Also nominated for 'Best of the Net' in 2019 for the poem titled 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Kookaburra' by cahoodaloodaling.

Alyson Miller is a prose poet and scholar who teaches at Deakin University, Melbourne.

EJ Murry (they/them) is a writer based in Canberra on unceded Ngunnawal and Ngambri land. They write poetry, short fiction and nonfiction. They are fascinated by the themes of home, nostalgia, the passage of time, and the interconnection between the personal and the political. You can find more information about them and their work on their Instagram @ejmurry.

Kavita Nandan: My book of poetry about the pandemic, *Return to What Remains*, was published in October 2022 by Ginninderra Press. My poetry, fiction and nonfiction are published in *adda*, *Asiatic*, *Australian Book Review*, *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry written by Indians*, *Dreadlocks*, *Landfall*, *Life Writing*, *LiteLitOne*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Mindfood*, *Not Very Quiet*, *The Island Review*, *Transnational Literature*, *Poetry D'Amour* and *Ros Spencer Poetry Contest Anthology*.

Will Neuenfeldt studied English at Gustavus Adolphus College and his poems are published in *Capsule Stories*, *Months to Years*, and *Red Flag Poetry*. He lives in Cottage Grove, MN, home of the dude who played Steven Stifler in those American Pie movies, and a house Teddy Roosevelt slept in. [Instagram.com/wjnpoems](https://www.instagram.com/wjnpoems)

Nathanael O'Reilly is an Irish-Australian poet. His poetry collections include *Selected Poems of Ned Kelly* (2023), *Dear Nostalgia* (2023), *Boulevard* (2021), *(Un)belonging* (2020) and *Preparations for Departure* (2017). His poetry appears in over one hundred journals & anthologies published in fourteen countries. He is poetry editor for *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature*.

Cassady O'Reilly-Hahn is a poet with an MA from Claremont Graduate University. He is a managing editor for *Foothill: A Poetry Journal* that highlights graduate student voices. He works for Deluxe, a company that localises TV and film for a global audience. In his free time, Cassady writes haiku for his personal blog, orhawrites, and his Instagram @cassady_orha. Cassady currently resides in Redlands, California, where he can be found flipping through fantasy novels in a cozy recliner on the weekends.

Sarah Penwarden (she/her) is a therapist based in Auckland. She has had more than 50 poems published in literary journals in New Zealand and Australia, including *Poetry New Zealand*, *Turbine*, *Meniscus*, *Southerly*, *Mayhem*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and *takahē*. She has had short stories published in *tākāhe*, *brief*, and *Meniscus*, and a story broadcast on Radio New Zealand.

Georgia Rose Phillips is an award-winning writer of fiction and nonfiction, and a poet and scholar. She works as a lecturer in English, Creative Writing and Film at the University of Adelaide. In 2018, her creative nonfiction novella, *Holocene*, was runner-up for the Scribe Nonfiction Literary Prize. In 2021 her short story 'New balance' was a fiction winner in the Ultimo Literary Prize. In 2022 her short story 'Beyond the Marram Grass' was a shortlisted finalist in the American Association of Australasian Literary Studies (AAALS) Prize. Her debut novel, *The Bearcat*, is forthcoming with Picador in 2024. She is currently working on a book length collection of poems, *The Languid Hours*, and her second novel, *The Aesthete*.

Gregory Piko's writing has appeared in *Westerly*, *Meniscus*, *StylusLit*, *Authora Australis*, *the Liquid Amber Prize Anthology*, *Poetry for the Planet*, *Poetry d'Amour*, *Communion Arts Journal* and *The Canberra Times*, among other places. Please visit www.gregorypiko.com.

Matt Prater is a writer from Saltville, VA (US). His work has appeared in *Cordite Poetry Review*, *The Moth*, and *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, among other publications.

Sujash Islam Purna is a Bangladeshi poet and photographer based in Madison, Wisconsin. He is the author of *Epidemic of Nostalgia* (2021), *Simple Fantasies* (2023) – both from Finishing Line Press – and *In Love with the Broken* (Bottlecap Press) and *Azans for the Infidel* (Mouthfeel Press, 2023). His photography can be found on Instagram @poeticnomadic

Mykyta Ryzhykh is winner of the international competition 'Art Against Drugs', and has also received a long list of awards from venues such as Lyceum and Twelve, as well as awards named after Dragomoshchenko; and is laureate of the literary competition named after Tyutyunnik. Finalist of the Crimean Ginger competition, she has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and been published many times in a wide range of journals, as well as in the portals *Literary Center* and *Soloneba*.

Irina Sadovina, winner of the 2021 AAWP-UWRF Translator's Prize, has a background in literary and cultural studies: she holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Toronto and a PhD in Folkloristics from the University of Tartu. She has previously translated a short story by Denis Osokin, which thematises a return to one's home and indigenous language in a Mari village ('Yud Orol: The Night Watch', *Ellipse*

Magazine). *White Moss* is her first novel-length translation project.

Rahul Santhanam is a mathematician and poet. His work has appeared in *The Rialto* and *Otoliths*, among other venues. If he has a dictum, it is Ezra Pound's: DICHTEN = CONDENSARE.

Noa Shenker is a Melbourne-based writer currently completing his Master of Creative Writing, Editing and Publishing at Melbourne University. His works have been published in *Voiceworks* and *Farrago*, and he was shortlisted for the 2022 Catalyse Nonfiction Prize.

Mazzy Sleep is an 11-year-old from Toronto, Canada. She has written over a thousand poems and short stories, as well as two novels and two feature screenplays. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Blackbird*, *The Margins*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Rattle*, *Barren Magazine*, *Geist*, *Maudlin House*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Mazzy was commissioned by the Lunar Codex project to write a poem that will be launched to the moon. mazzysleep.com

Pip Smith is the author of the novel *Half Wild* (Allen & Unwin, 2017), the poetry collection *Too Close for Comfort* (Sydney UP, 2013), and the children's picture books *Theodore the Unsure* (Scholastic Press, 2019) and *To Greenland!* (Scholastic Australia, 2022). She occasionally remembers to post links to her works on her website: pipsmith.net

Beth Spencer's most recent book, *The Age of Fibs*, was named one of the best books of 2022 in *The Australian*. Other books include *Vagabondage* (UWAP, 2014) and *How to Conceive of a Girl* (Vintage, 1996), which was runner-up for the Steele Rudd Award. Her work has been broadcast widely on ABC Radio National. She lives on Darkinjung land on the NSW Central Coast, www.bethspencer.com and [@bethspen](https://www.instagram.com/bethspen)

RL Swihart came of age in Michigan but has lived in California for the last 30-plus years. He is the author of *Matman & Testudo* (2018), *Woodhenge* (2020), and *The Last Man* (second edition, 2021), all independently published by Gold Across the Water Books. His poems have appeared in *The Denver Quarterly*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Salt Hill*, *Rhino* and *Quadrant*, among others.

Muadh Tajudeen is a young poet from Osun State, Nigeria. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in different literary magazines and journals such as *Kalahari Review*, *nantygreens*, *Arts Lounge Magazine*, *Beneath the Mask Magazine*, *The Graveyard Zine*, *Synchronized Chaos Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Lilit Žekulin Thwaites, winner of the 2020 AAWP–UWRF Translator's Prize, is a Melbourne-based literary translator, and an honorary research fellow in contemporary

Spanish literature at La Trobe University. Her book-length translations include the bestselling *The Librarian of Auschwitz* (Antonio Iturbe, 2017 & 2019), *Australian Connection* (multiple authors, 2019), and 2 futuristic novels by Rosa Montero, *Tears in Rain* (Rosa Montero, 2012), and its sequel, *Weight of the Heart* (2016). Her translations of Spanish short stories, essays and the occasional poem have been published in various journals and anthologies. In 2016, she was awarded the Spanish Order of Civil Merit in recognition of her promotion of Spanish culture in Australia.

Noor ul Ain was born and raised in Pakistan. She is an avid reader and an amateur writer. She is currently pursuing MA TESOL from the University of St. Andrews UK. She has been associated with the field of education in various capacities, e.g. teacher, trainer, curriculum developer, specialist coach etc. for over a decade. She can be found on Instagram [@bakedbooksreviews](https://www.instagram.com/bakedbooksreviews).

Isi Unikowski is a Canberran poet. He has been widely published in Australia and overseas, including in *Best of Australian Poems 2022*. His first collection, *Kintsugi*, was published in 2022 by Puncher & Wattman, New South Wales.

Anuradha Vijayakrishnan is an Indian writer and business professional living in Dubai. Her work has appeared in *Acumen*, *Ice Floes Press*, *Dreich*, *The Lake*, *Tiger Moth Review* and *The Chakkar*. She is the author of a novel, *Seeing the girl* (LiFi Publications, 2014) and a poetry collection, *The Who-am-I-Bird* (Bombaykala, 2018). Her work has been featured in several anthologies and translated into Italian, Chinese and Arabic (Dar Al Muheet, UAE).

Theo Villepontoux was born in France but has moved around all his life. He has lived in Taiwan, the UK and Germany. He holds a degree from Exeter University and is currently doing a Masters in Strasbourg. As of this moment, his writings have only seen a few publications (such as *The Templeman Review*, *The Raven Review*, *Ariel's Chart*, and *Wingless Dreamer*).

Ryan Walker (he/him) is a queer writer from Dayton, Ohio. His nonfiction and poetry have been featured in *Flights*, *Free Spirit's 7 Deadly Sins*, *Wingless Dreamer's Vanish in Poetry*, *Longridge Review* and *Red Noise Collective*. Ryan has his MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University's Bluegrass Writers Studio. Instagram: [@ryan.wrote.it](https://www.instagram.com/ryan.wrote.it).

Elizabeth Walton received the Macquarie University Award for Academic Excellence in her Masters of Creative Writing. Recent works in *Brushstrokes* (Ros Spencer Anthology), *Swamp*, *Overland*, *London Reader* and *Artshub*.

Jong Yun Won (he/him) is a Korean-Canadian currently teaching English in Korea. He studied Creative Writing and English at the University of British Columbia and

is a recipient of the BC Arts Council Scholarship. His poems have been published in *Peregrine*, *Stoneboat Literary Journal* and *Waccamaw Journal*. In the summer he is mostly a tree planter and/or sleeping.

Jena Woodhouse is the author of eleven book and chapbook publications, including seven poetry titles, most recently *Bitter Oranges: A Memoir of Athens* (Picaro, 2023). Her writing has received awards for children's fiction, adult fiction and poetry. Having spent more than a decade living and working in Greece, pursuing an interest in Classics and Archaeology, many poems reflect this experience. She has also travelled extensively in Western, Central and Eastern Europe and Anatolia, and has been awarded writing residencies in Scotland (Hawthornden Fellowship); France (Tenot Foundation Bursary); Ireland (The Tyrone Guthrie Centre), and Greece (Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens Contemporary Creative Residency). Her forthcoming poetry collection is *The Wild Country of Time*.

Patrick Wright has a poetry collection, *Full Sight of Her* (Eyewear, 2020), which was nominated for the John Pollard Prize. He has also been twice shortlisted for the Bridport Prize. His poems have appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The North*, *Southword*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Agenda*, *Wasafiri*, *London Magazine*, and *The Reader*. He teaches English Literature and Creative Writing at the Open University.

Ping Yi Yee works in public service and has written fiction, travelogues and poetry. He is spouse to a management consultant, and they have a pre-teen son. He has lived in Singapore, Cambridge, UK, and Boston. Ping Yi would love to learn and tell the stories of the generations and civilisations before us, and of those to come.

Yuan Changming hails from POETRY PACIFIC (poetrypacific.blogspot.ca). Credits include twelve Pushcart nominations and chapbooks (most recently *LIMERENCE*) besides appearances in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry* (2008–17), *BestNewPoemsOnline* and *Poetry Daily*, among many others across 49 countries. Yuan was nominated for and served on the Jury for Canada's National Magazine Awards (poetry category).

MENISCUS

LITERARY JOURNAL

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JC Alfier
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Peter Bakowski
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Owen Bullock
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Matt Prater
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Mazzy Sleep
Pip Smith
Beth Spencer
RL Swihart
Tajudeen Muadh
Noor ul Ain
Isi Unikowski
Anuradha
Vijayakrishnan
Theo Villepontoux
Ryan Waker
Elizabeth Walton
Jong Won
Jena Woodhouse
Patrick Wright
Ping Yi Yee
Changming Yuan

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2020-2023

