



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 analogue 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

Each set of new submissions seems to illuminate the concerns of the moment / month / year; and the works of prose and poetry submitted to this issue of *Meniscus* shimmer with a sense of change. This seems appropriate, since many of them were submitted at the turn of the year, and are being published at the turn of the season, but we suspect they also gesture toward a broader sense of alertness to current global events, shaded with the memory of both delights and griefs from the past. Not that it's all doom and gloom; a number of pieces included in this issue of the journal have tongue firmly in cheek, or are actively humorous or wry. Writers look at the world, after all, and reflect on it, and in the voices of these writers – who are located right across the globe (a majority of them based in Australia or the USA, but with representation from every continent except Antarctica)—we see the many perspectives that can be brought to bear by people skilled in observing, thinking, and crafting literary works.

We are trialling a different organisation of the issue, on this occasion. Traditionally, the works in *Meniscus* have been set in alphabetical order, by family name; for this issue we have attempted to find threads, patterns and moods, and to organise the pieces along these lines. We trust you enjoy reading them as much as we did; and can linger over the pieces and taste their flavours.

Jen Webb and Deb Wain

For the editors

CAPTCHA ME IF YOU CAN

Thomas J Misuraca

Select all the images with

YOUR SCHOOL BULLY

Click verify once there are none left.

Frank blinked at the screen. He couldn't be seeing what he was seeing. Four tiles across and four down of faces. Most strangers. But the others ...

The others were faces it'd taken him years to forget. Faces that snarled and spat at him. Faces whose fists pounded him. Faces whose feet kicked him when he was down.

He clicked on Buck, who used to chase him home from school. Ted and Randy who taunted with names like 'dork' and 'faggot' as he walked through the school corridors. Sam stole his lunch money almost every day. Mel broke a pen inside his math book. Tammy forced him to show her his homework to copy. Conner smashed his Halloween art project.

His heart thudded inside his chest like a person pounding to escape a locked room.

VERIFY

Select all the images with

WOMEN WHO BROKE YOUR HEART

Click verify once there are none left.

The tiles transformed to sixteen lovely ladies of all ages. Many he recognised.

Staring at those faces at first brought back the feeling of love he once felt for them. Quickly washed away by the anger and hurt in the memories of the actions of these women.

He selected Shelley, who turned down his invite to the Children's Ball. Laura only went to the Junior Prom with him to spy on her ex-boyfriend. Bonnie, the friend who told him all about her horrible boyfriend, but never saw how much he loved her. And Samantha, the wife he learned had been cheating on him for years.

His heart weighed heavy in his chest like a corpse hanging from a noose.

VERIFY

Select all the images with

YOUR WORST MEMORIES

Click verify once there are none left.

Sixteen new images appeared. Some he recognised as moments from his life, looking like movie stills. Before he could even comprehend how these images were taken, he was overwhelmed with uncomfortable memories.

He could barely look at them as he selected wetting his pants in first grade. Then being caught cheating on a spelling test. Falling down the stairs in college. Being berated by his boss in front of the entire office. His dad hitting his mother. His mother dying.

His heart tried to crawl out of his throat like a rabbit clawing through a burrow.

VERIFY

I'm not a robot.

His shaking hand clicked the box next to that phrase.

'I wish I were,' he mumbled through his tears. 'I wish I were.'

YOU'VE BEEN VERIFIED

from QUATRAINS

Ken Cockburn

Cowboys

A crocked knee has me stretching on the floor
level with chair legs, remembering cars and cowboys

moving across the carpet, and somewhere up there
the strange, mannered world of the tabletop.

Election

We first kissed on election night—I'd meant
to vote but it was only at first light

with Naughtie summarising the results
that I drove back dazzled across the bridge.

Ideal

If all our ideals are formed in childhood
mine must owe something to that street

book-ended by school and railway—
the chance to learn and a means of escape.

Shadow

In the sunlit landscape within the frame
propped against the pot geranium

only the artist (passing two trees,
sketchbook under his arm) cast a shadow.

Tenant

A broken pane of glass—come to fix it
the landlord unpicked the windowframe, piece

by rotten piece, replaced the glass and then,
piece by rotten piece, resolved the puzzle.

WE HAVEN'T LISTENED

Samuel Gilpin

we are
ourselves walking off,
as if we're going somewhere
worthwhile,
the dark clouds
erasing horizon,
distant
in the sense of division—

it is only an image of the grass blowing, in its moving
and you can see it, in its measureless dialogue—

madly,
the sea pushes
upon the land,
madly,
this commonness
overwhelms,

there is no reason for amusement,
no,
there is nothing
made for care
or circumstance,
the mind is split
and mended,
bothered by the ease

of touch
and the architecture
of space—

how thin this fabric
stretched thin,
stretching in only one direction,
only discomfort
marking the boundary
between us,
still uncertain
of where we dwell—

there will be no silence,
no darkness,
no edge
or description maiming
the dry wind
through the cold
morning air,
we can say nothing
about ourselves,
cells divide
and reproduce
and we go on reproducing,
cold and flimsy
blown into the shade,
the hard shell
of certainty
made unbearable—

CLOUD OF DUST

Mark O'Flynn

The doctor's house in Somerset Drive is an impressive, whitewashed edifice with a huge liquidambar in the front yard. It is by far the largest house in the street, as you would expect, being the doctor's house. Dean's mother has often told him how she grew up in this house, how her memories are as vivid as if her tenancy were ongoing and the doctor still alive.

After mass, at his suggestion to jolt them out of their routine, he has bundled his father, Sam, into the passenger seat, and gone for a *Sunday drive* around the old haunts of Albury and Wodonga. The day is clear and sparkling, oppressively dry. His mother is full of girlish excitement. His father more concerned with how Dean is driving, instructing him not to go so fast, turn left, turn right, and so forth. It is a worthwhile feeling, being able to do something useful, so he puts up with it. Dean has come alone to visit them this time because his children, Gracie and Aaron, have flatly refused. They say there's nothing for them to do, that visiting their grandparents feels like they are drowning in old people. That's hardly fair, he tells them, you'll be old one day.

'I'll kill myself before that happens,' says Gracie.

Nevertheless, Dean makes up an excuse on their behalf. His wife, Shona, doesn't need an excuse.

His father's Zimmer frame is folded up and stowed in the hatchback, so for the moment he is helpless, apart from the attitude. In recent years he has become more and more reliant on others to help him get out and about. Not that he would admit it. He has also become, according to Dean, increasingly belligerent and downright ornery. No wonder the

kids are slightly afraid of him. In his words you can hear his mind hating his body for letting the team down. Dean wonders when the appropriate moment might be for a son such as him to broach the subject of parents such as them getting to the stage when they can no longer look after themselves? Never, he anticipates his father's response, dismissing it peremptorily. It is never appropriate. Forget about it.

They drive for half an hour out of town to see how the countryside is going, travelling through dun-coloured paddocks. The drought gets a lot of harsh analysis. Dams empty. Trees dead. The poor lambs.

'Tell me,' his mother asks from the back seat, 'do you ever see that person from school? What was her name?'

'Do you mean Jo?'

'Yes. Was that the name?'

'No. I haven't seen her.'

'Oh, good. I never liked her. Shona is so much nicer.'

Dean says nothing. In time, they return to the parched outskirts of Albury. Established palm trees filled with mynah birds line one side of Dorset Road as they turn into Somerset Drive. This, you can tell, is the moneyed end of town. Not a frond is let fall than a council pickup truck arrives to catch it. These names have formed part of the mythical substrata of Dean's childhood, these, along with the repetition of anecdote and weird nomenclature, and a general preoccupation with little things. What memories might Grace and Aaron drag with them into the future? Abigail Street? Dead bats on the lawn. At the very least he ought to bring them down this way, by coercion if necessary, to visit Lil and their cousins. Show them things can exist beyond a screen.

'How's Lil?' he asks.

'You don't need to worry yourself about Lil,' says Sam.

'Lil's wonderful,' says Laurel, 'and so are the kids. Wonderful.'

'Unlike some people.' Sam puts a full stop to that conversation.

They pass a bluestone alley, and his mother launches into another story he's heard previously. Freddy Bell. Even if he says—you've told me this story before, Mum, she replies, 'Have I?' and tells him again anyway. Sam appears to be immune. Nothing makes his mother happier than to be talking about the past. The retelling amuses her endlessly. Why begrudge it? It continues, how, when Freddy Bell, a railway clerk, came to propose to her, she laughed at him.

In the front seat Dean's father snorts, 'Freddy Bell didn't know anything.'

It is a journey of recollection and nostalgia. Dean swallows his gall and makes a good son's effort to get his parents out of the small world of their house and garden. They turn into Somerset Drive. She counts down the street numbers: 'Forty-eight, forty-six—'

'Slow down,' says Sam.

'Forty-four, forty-two. Here it is ... Well I never. Look how high they've let the hedge grow ...'

They pull up and idle outside. The house is larger than she recalls, but also smaller. The whitewashed walls capped by black slate tiles. The several chimneys. The liquidambar shooting into the blue. Dean knows the story of the liquidambar. A sign on the gate proclaims Bore water in use, which explains the verdant greenery. Dean switches off the engine.

'Do you want to go in, Mum?'

'What for?' Sam snaps.

'Ooh. I don't know. Do you think we could?'

'I'll come with you.'

'Count me out,' says Dad. 'I'll wait here.'

He sits hunched in the front seat like a cement gargoyle.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between his sleeping and his waking state.

Dean opens the door for his mum and escorts her up the steep path to her childhood home. She *oohs* and *aahs* at every pace, as he holds her by the arm, the height of the tree, the length of the grass. Absences, additions.

'Where has the garage gone, I wonder?'

Up the steps, Dean rings the doorbell. They cannot hear it chime. She examines the knots in the floorboards with great interest. Whose pot plants are these? Whose outdoor furniture? Isn't it smart.

Soon a man in tortoiseshell glasses is standing there, 'Yes?'

Suddenly Dean has a speech to make, 'Hi, sorry to interrupt, my name's Dean Sutherland and my mother was born here—'

Mum steps forward declaring, 'I'm Dr Blewit's daughter.'

'Really! Dr Blewit. Well, we've heard of him. What a surprise. Please ... please come in.'

He holds open the door and ushers them into the shadows.

This is easier than I thought, Dean thinks. He was half expecting to be given their marching orders.

There are introductions. His name is Travis McAughey, which for some reason Dean finds hard to believe. He drags his wife out from somewhere to meet them. She is a hairy, taciturn woman, like Miss Havisham in floral slacks. Her face is wrinkled from not smiling. Her name is Pru. Dean has never met anyone in his life called Pru before, although he does not say this. He is merely following the ghosts of his mother's memories. Pru offers them a cup of tea, or perhaps a sherry? Mum defers to Dean, wondering if they have time, but he's in no hurry. Sure. His mother can sock away the sherry with the best of them.

'Well, all right,' she demurs, 'just a poofteenth, as my brother Dennis used to say.'

Pru looks to Dean for clarification. He shrugs his shoulders and nods, holds his finger and thumb a small way apart: just a smidgin. He

has lived with a poofteenth as a general yardstick for measurement all his life, although he has never used it himself. He understands why his children cringe.

Before the tea comes, she's up examining the walls, launching into her remembered glory.

'There used to be lions here,' she declares, 'over all the architraves. They were beautiful lions ... And blackbirds on the wallpaper ... Mr McCaughey—I mean Travis—tell me, what happened to the garage?'

'That was before our time.'

He opens a door and, carrying their sherry glasses, they slowly follow him, meandering through the refurbished part of the house. 'It was closed in some time during the sixties I believe. We've made it into an extra bedroom.'

And they have. He shows them. There are socks on the floor. Travis looks as if he wants to kick them under the bed. Mum sniffs at a wedge of garden visible through the window.

'All this used to be the stable hand's quarters,' she says, 'Adam, his name was.'

Dean finds it a little awkward listening to his mother talk in terms of stable hand's quarters.

'Adam used to sleep there. He was a penniless old swaggy. Dad took him in off the streets. Gave him a job looking after the horse and trap. I used to visit and bring him cakes that Elsie the maid used to bake. He moved on when the car arrived, and Daddy took to parking it in here. It was a Crosley.'

'What happened to Adam?' Travis asks.

'He moved on.'

She moves on, 'There were three bedrooms then. This one Mum had converted into a small chapel, but I see you've made it into a girl's room.'

Not a bedroom, a girl's room.

'Yes. For our daughter, when she comes home from uni. There are six bedrooms now. No chapel, I'm afraid.'

'And you've covered over all the lions.'

'No,' says Travis, 'that happened before us. I'd be interested in uncovering them.'

'That would have been Dr Little. He moved in after Dad died. Dad loved Bach. In between patients he would come out to the parlour and improvise Bach on the piano. He was very good, although not as good as Mum, who was a concert pianist. And the maid's quarters were off the laundry. And there used to be a door through here. And, and ... A country doctor could not not have a car. It was a Crosley. Do you have many birds?'

It takes Travis a moment to keep up with all this.

'We have a fair few birds,' he says eventually, still leading them through the house.

'We used to have hundreds of birds, thousands, everywhere, blackbirds and swallows, wrens and lyrebirds.'

'Lyrebirds.'

'Yes!'

They move past Elsie the maid's room, which has had a wall knocked out and been incorporated into the kitchen with its high pressed-tin ceiling and its lions plastered over.

'They're right behind there.'

Dean thinks, There are lions, there were lions, there will be lions.

She is very interested in the differences between the old house she remembers, and what the new house has become. Travis has plans for a billiard room.

While Mrs Sutherland is admiring the ceiling, Pru rejoins them.

'There's a man at the door. He says he needs a doctor.'

'That'd be Dad,' Dean remembers. 'He doesn't really need a doctor.'

Dean follows Pru down the wide hallway. Travis follows, Mum follows him, and the ghosts follow her.

Dean's father is standing on the verandah, hunched like Quasimodo over his walking frame. How did he get it out of the car? How did he get to the top of those steps? He'll break his other hip if he's not careful. He looks past Dean to Travis who holds the wire door open like a Beefeater.

'You'd be the doctor then?'

It is barely a question.

'No, I'm not a doctor.'

'This is a doctor's house, isn't it?'

'Three generations,' pipes up Mum.

'It used to be a doctor's house,' says Travis, '1905. But we're not doctors. I'm a chartered accountant.'

'Come on, Dad,' Dean says. 'We're just about finished here. I'll take you back to the car. It's time to get going.'

'I can manage.'

He turns on his trolley and nearly falls down the steps. Dean leaps to catch him. Sam's arms and shoulders are thin in Dean's hands, like a child's bones covered in rags. Dean wonders, how does he manage when I am not here to catch him? Together they steady the ship. Disaster averted. Dean breathes another sigh of relief.

On the verandah his mother says, 'Look at that tree, Travis, my goodness that tree has grown.'

'It's a beautiful tree,' says Travis gazing proudly at the liquidambar. 'We love it. And I bet you can tell me its history.'

She can. Dean concentrates on turning his father around and easing him down the steps, then the steep path, so that his trolley doesn't run away with him. It's got good brakes, Sam reminds him, believing that Dean's fussing is largely superfluous, and that every technological advancement since the invention of the wheel is designed to prolong

his longevity. He has told Dean time and again he is going to hang on to every scrap of life he can by his fingernails.

The tree was planted after the letter came announcing Mum's brother, Dennis, missing-in-action during the war. The doctor was inside improvising his Bach and Elsie, the maid, took Mrs Blewit by the arm and said, *Come on Missus, let's grab a spade off of Adam and we'll plant a tree.* And they did. They got their hands dirty. Young Laurel helped with the digging. It was a *styraciflua*. When Dennis finally came back from the war, they showed him the tree and he carved his initials in it. And now look how tall it has grown. Impervious to the drought, initials buried deep within like calcified scar tissue. If only Dennis could see it now.

Dean has heard this story, too, so many times he can't remember. He also knows that he will miss its telling terribly when it is gone.

Half-way down the path Sam stops his walking frame.

'I have to take a leak.'

'Hang on, Dad. I'll just go and ask Travis.'

'I don't need permission.'

Dean sprints back up the path to where his mum and the liquidambar are in full flight.

'Excuse me, Travis. It's my dad. I wonder if he could use your toilet?'

'Of course, of course. I understand. Bring him up. The closest one is probably around the side.'

Travis is magnanimous. Strangers arriving on his doorstep wanting to use his toilet—no problem. Dean dashes back down the path to Sam who is standing staring at the ground.

'No worries, Dad. There's a toilet just round the side.'

'I can't hang on.'

'Really?'

He's not joking. 'Then at least come over here by the hedge.'

'No. I can't hang on anymore. You've left me sitting in the car all this time. I have to take a leak right now.'

With that he unzips his fly, pincers out the wrinkled penis with his bony fingers, stretches it, and pisses like a draught horse on the ground beside the path. His amber stream bubbles and froths on the grass.

Dean stands frozen.

Back on the verandah Laurel is pointing to the height of the tree, which represents the life of her brother. Pru and Travis, themselves frozen, beside her.

A couple of kids ride past on Christmas bikes, watching Dean drowning in old people.

His father finishes and tucks himself back in. Dean manages to shuffle his father back to the car.

'I can do it,' Sam barks.

They sit in silence, waiting for Dean's mother. An old man's surly defiance. There is no sense of shame, only rebellion, resistance, relief. How does he manage when Dean is not here to catch him? Is it his responsibility to catch him? Whose responsibility will it be to catch me? Will I inherit this decrepit physicality, or my mother's befuddled confusion? It's inevitable, this gradual withering. Which imposter will give me the last rites?

Soon his mother returns.

'And how was your doctor friend?'

'They're not doctors,' says Mum, still basking in the refulgent glow of her reminiscence. 'Imagine, the first people to live here who weren't doctors.'

Dean is not allowed to start the engine until they are all buckled up. Mum waves towards the house, but the verandah is empty. Its shadows glower down. The hedge recedes behind them as they drive back into the drought-stricken afternoon.

'These doctors,' says Dean's father, 'they don't know anything.'

LEARNING HOW TO SAY MY MOTHER'S NAME

Rowan Tate

how little i know

about love, about the way bread

rises, about how grass grows wild and

tangles its roots with the trees'. how little

i am under the sleeve of god, this bowl of oranges knows him better than i do.

i want to apologize to great questions for

my small answers, to distant wars for my crying

over food, i want to apologize to all the humans

i didn't know how to love because i

didn't how to love myself. i am picking flowers

and i am picking at my wounds.

i am not beautiful but i could be: there is so much life
all over the place.

GRIEF IS A JOURNEY

Nkasiobinnaya Mbonu

My father drew the maps of my town under my feet
And said to count my steps backwards if I got lost,
But I got lost in a different town,
Where the one-eyed man is the king of the blind
And the sailors never make it home.
The walls are designed in chaos
And the floors are marbles of history,
The type is forbidden in school.
There are no coffee shops or bus stops,
The market did not whisper stories,
The lighthouse eats memories.
Here, I learned to be different things
Sometimes, I am the delivery man,
Other times, the piper that chooses the tone,
The people pretend to burst into life in its sound
And I pretend to deliver their miracles,
But they are dead, like scars
It all began with the journey with my father,
After he gave sermons about the crown and gold palace,
And if you fight the good fight,
You will walk the streets wearing a gold crown
I was a child,
A reminder of his battles
That says I too was a constant war,
I have become a scar, a map
To all the old places I ever called home,
Like my father's grave.

FLYING OVER BIRRPALAI COUNTRY

Teneale Lavender



Figure 1: Plane and Clouds taken by Teneale Lavender

QF126—let me sing to you.
Will you listen?
Come closer, my voice is only a whisper, over the roar of the engine.

A flying kangaroo.

Iconic.

Do you know we are flying over sacred land?
Can you hear her heartbeat?

The strength of country, a gentle hum
Beneath us.
Always.

Soaring over Gadigal, Dharug, Darkinjung and Awabakal lands.
Taking me home,
Calling me back,

to Birrpai country.

Gravitational pull, thrust and drag.
Much more than gravity, aerodynamics—white man's science.
How to put into words?

This country's pull.
Like a fish who took a vacation.
In the desert.
Thirst.

This Birrpai country.
Feels familiar,
Like I have been here,

Before.

I know these gums.
How their leaves float,
As they drop from their host.
A blanket, scrunching underfoot.

A sister melody.

Cicadas in the summer.
The suffocation of a humid February.
The taste of salt water on cracked lips.
Deep tangerine coloured clay.

What do you see?
Beneath the wings and the clouds and the haze?
Dense bush?
Impenetrable in your eyes.
No good for farming, I heard 12B say.

Bush.
Harsh.
Dry.

I see life.
A palette of green, grey, and brown hues.
Medicine, food, shelter.
Stories and kin.
Healing.

I see,
Me.

I walked this country with Uncle,
His country.
Yarning of medicine, waterways, meeting points.
Stories—so many.
Assessing white man's destruction.
Us both, dreaming of her revival.

Singing. Calling,
Country.

Can you see the signs of her resistance?
Her grasses, returning.
Thousands of baby gums, sprouting through Lady Macquarie's lantana.
Fighting back.
Ochre found, colour of ghosts.

Her children—goanna, koala, wallaby, possum.
Returning
Home.

‘Look after my country, girl,’
He turned,
waved.
His car’s tyres kicking up thick dust as he drove away.

I will, I whispered.
I will.

BREAKING THE MENISCUS

Margaret Bradstock

Breaking the surface of anything
is hard. In springtime
the water still like ice, a frozen convex skin
as you jump in you acclimatise
suddenly euphoric. Stay too long
you become hypothermic
chilled, dazed, hallucinatory.

Some days, beneath the surface
wild tides stir the water a swirling fog
or mist no sun can penetrate
no sense of time or depth.
Towards shore, the tangle of seaweed
enmeshes, grasps at your ankles
hauling you back.

In Melbourne, swimmers survive
the dark euphoria of their bay
in twelve degrees or less all winter
some without wetsuits.

They say it's good for them.
Yet, beneath the membrane's tension
a darker past takes hold.

Unanchored, I envision again
the furthest southern coast of Tasmania,
looking out towards Antarctica

nothing but ocean
 waves beating against cliffs
at the bottom of the world early sailors
 fearing they'd drop from the edge.

THE TASTE OF BLUE

Finn Brown

The porcelain of the bath is cold on my chest, colder than the water on my neck, over my head, over her fingers in my hair. The bathwater is barely blue, so light it's hard to see, ghostly. Dampened by water, a siren passes with softened urgency.

When my legs start to shake against the bathroom floor, I push upwards but her hand is firm on my head. Behind my eyelids, colours rush into each other, pink and yellow and white, and then all of it goes softly black. My body relaxes, limbs going down.

'Kori? Kori?' Fran's face comes into vision slowly like it is loading. 'Kori?' she says again.

The bathmat is damp under my bare spine. I can hear the sound of the bath draining. Fran must've pulled the plug out. Done for the night.

'Your hair curls when it's wet,' says Fran, twirling one of her long fingers around a strand. She strokes the side of my face, traces her fingers along my collarbones, between my breasts.

Above me, she is all I can see.

In bed, Fran puts *The L Word* on the laptop and moves her palm along the inside of my wrist. 'Four minutes and thirteen seconds,' she says. She looks pleased with me.

I watch two characters kiss and struggle to remember their names. 'I passed out,' I say.

'Don't worry,' says Fran. 'You'll do better next time.' She smiles and moves her head into the space between my neck and shoulder. She points at the laptop. 'I can never understand their relationship.'

On our first date Fran had asked me what I wanted to do.

'Don't know. Don't know, yet. All sorts of things. All sorts of things I'll never be able to do.' Repeating yourself is a bad habit, my dad would've said.

'Like what?'

'I swim. There's a lido near my house and I go there most days. Sometimes I imagine doing that faster. The fastest. In all the seas around the world.'

Fran's eyes were wide and the red corners of them stretched with her face. 'You must,' she had said. 'I'll make sure you do. That's a fucking promise.' I liked the way she said 'fucking', tossing it into the middle of a sentence casually like it had no reason not to be there.

At the lido I swim along the bottom of the pool and feel the tiles against my belly, my thighs. The tiles here are dark, a blue that has more to do with depth than any colour you might find above the surface. This half of the pool is in shade, and the water feels thicker here, richer. You could eat it by the spoonful.

On the other side, light spools down through swimmers. Chunks of water become so white-lit they close to disappear.

I practise holding my breath and watch legs kick and churn above me. Someone overtakes someone else. A bright pink swimming costume flashes on a small body. Before I met Fran, I was one of those swimmers, surface-bound moving back and forth from one end of the lane to another.

Up there you can hear children shouting, each stroke made by each body, a lifeguard's whistle. Just below the surface it starts to muffle. Such a small amount of water it takes. The only thing you can hear down here is the water moving, and it is very loud and it is very quiet.

That evening, I make tea because Fran has asked me to, as she fills up the bath with cool water. 'It's good for you,' she is saying, shouting through the wall, 'to follow submersion with drinking something hot.'

'What kind of tea would you like?' I peer around the doorframe, and she is leaning over the taps, her face flushed and reflected.

'Do we have any chamomile left?' she asks. 'I'd bloody love a chamomile.' She grins and the piercing on her eyebrow moves upwards.

When I come back in with the tea, Fran holds her arms out towards a bathmat which is brighter than our old one, and thicker. 'Look what I got for you,' she says. 'For us. It can be killer on the knees sometimes.'

I put the cups of tea on the toilet lid and we kneel next to each other. 'Three, two, one,' she says. She strokes her hand from the small of my back along my spine as she counts, up my neck, and then she pushes my head down.

That night she sits behind me and kisses my parting as we watch *The L Word*.

'You were right,' I say, 'about the tea. The heat in my throat afterwards. It felt good.'

'I'll always look after you,' Fran says. 'You're special. The average person can hold their breath for ninety seconds. You made five minutes look easy. Special,' she repeats into my skull.

The first time Fran held me under it wasn't for long. We were treading water around the silver steps, middle of the day, sun on our shoulders. She was telling me a story about her mother, who had lived a difficult life and been a difficult person because of it.

Then she put her palm on the top of my head and pushed.

I came up gasping, shocked, and she was laughing. She rested her elbows on the edge of the pool and kicked her legs out in front of her. 'If you want to swim properly, you'll need to be able to survive longer than that. Some oceans have waves as tall as mountains, did you know that? You'll need to be able to survive a mountain of water, swim through it breathless. I've been reading about it so I can help you. I'm going to help you. Come on. Again.'

I wave Fran off to work, change into my swimming trunks and go to the lido.

At the deep end, I sink. It is cold down here and my ears ache from the pressure, but I acclimatise to both sensations. I float with my face down against the indigo tile and wonder what a blue that dark would taste like. With my tongue out, I wonder how far into the sea you'd have to swim to find it, how much water you'd have to be buried by to get a mouthful of it.

Then the water shifts around me and there is yellow and red and orange on either side of me, and I am being dragged to the surface.

'You're safe,' a woman says to me when we hit air, looping my arms around the orange lifebuoy. Another woman is behind me, her hand on the small of my back as she treads water. 'You're safe,' the first woman says again, and puts her hand towards my face.

I try to fight them off me.

The woman behind me grabs me around the waist and holds me against her. 'We've got you,' she says. 'You're in shock,' she says.

'I wasn't drowning,' I shout as they wrestle me to the side of the lido, pull me over its lip and haul me onto the side.

People watch us: two elderly ladies standing in the shallow end, beehives wrapped in florals, swimmers in black lycra cold water gear, teenagers touching each other.

Someone wraps me in a towel that isn't mine. There is a hot drink in my left hand and a lurid sports drink in my right and I am being told to drink both. 'Heat and sugar,' says one of the women, bending down next to me.

'Don't worry,' says the other. 'The cold water can creep up on you. We don't always know what our bodies can take. Don't worry.' Their eyes meet over my head.

'That must be it,' I say, and they both look relieved.

I run my tongue over my teeth and think about gulping in blue.

When I come to, I am on my side in the bathroom and I belch water across the bathmat.

'Shit,' says Fran. 'There you are.' Gradually, I can see her feet. She is sitting on the toilet lid and her heels are bouncing up and down. She comes down to the floor and helps me upright, leans me against the tub. It is empty, drained. No evidence of a drowning.

Fran sits next to me. 'I went too far,' she says. 'I couldn't stop.' She looks at me with her face really close to mine. 'You're okay, though,' she says. 'You're okay.' She breathes out and her shoulders get lower next to me. Then she moves my face gently towards hers with a wet hand. 'Can I just ask you, what did it feel like?' Her eyes are greedy.

'The beach,' Fran says, when I ask her why she is packing our towels into a duffel bag. She is trying to apologise. I make a picnic.

We take the train out to Folkestone and set up our umbrella on a sandy bit of beach under a cliff. You can see all the way to France from here, and the waves don't look mountainous at all. It's a nice day but cold, a few families out and a dog walker or two.

'Go for it,' says Fran, spreading her palm out like she is birthing this watery body for me.

The salt hits me first as I stride out into it. I open my mouth wide and dive into the white edge of a wave.

The bottom of the sea is different to the bottom of a pool. I float under the surface and look at the way the sand shifts. Beige fish move around me. Moss clings to stones, strange to the touch. Distantly, there is the sound of wind and barking and an aeroplane overhead. The water is green here, light-polluted and shallow. I swim further.

It's as deep as the lido now, and the sand grazes my belly as I slide along it. Above me I can hear the waves breaking.

On and on, and the space between me and the air gets bigger and now it is the waves forming that I can hear. The blue begins to thicken gloriously around me, just the way I had hoped it would. I can feel it

between my fingers, holding them apart. I can feel it pulling against the hairs on my legs and my underarms. I can feel its weight on my tongue, coating the back of my mouth.

Tasty, but I know I still have a way to go.

I come up for air one last time and look back. I can see an orange dot on the beach, a horrible fleece Fran's aunt bought for her that droops down to her knees. The dot is still. Fran will be reading, or eating the best bits of the picnic. She was never one for goodbyes.

I lick my lips, breathe in and swim deep.

I TAKE MY DEAD MOTHER TO THE PUBLIC POOL BECAUSE SHE SAYS SHE MISSES THE OCEAN

Rhiannon Conley

My mother speaks through the shape
of a summer day, her words are moons of dandelion
calling up little peridot grasshoppers
that rise through the lawn to sit at her feet.
Just once she acknowledges them,
calls them puppies, then never again.
What joy she finds in sweating through her blouse
though her glands have long abandoned her.
I do not question this. She has always perspired,
always glistened in damp air. Even now
she finds a way, pushing pearls
through the pores of her forehead.
Between her and my kids (whose legs
are so brown I no longer feel responsible
for the routine of sunscreen—let the sky
take them) I am a bit jealous, a woman
hot and burnt only, under some monstrous hat,
still insisting on hot coffee for want
of a fall morning, an excuse to be so pale.
Even the pool water won't cool me,
but how they frolic, all become fish
and flash, jumping in and out of the water.
My mother even tries a diving board
now that she no longer fears death.
Her yowl cuts through the air

and when she climbs back up the ladder
she is laughing, but says, 'Okay,
I'm done', landing back beside me.
Grasshoppers crawl through the fence
to be beside her. She is glowing again.
Having kids hasn't made me an outside person,
but I'm learning to be, I say, and she laughs.
I'm sizzling out here! My mother turns
and lays a little ray of herself on my thigh.
It is warm and she gives me a squeeze
before wiping a sweaty strand
of unwashed hair behind my ear. She flicks
a grasshopper away. 'You're a cool summer',
she says. 'Maybe something in the night.
But you belong here as much as me.'

JUST TALK

Hanna Carney

I moved into a small house on Linden Drive only a few days before I met The Barlowes. They have always been gracious neighbours. The woman stopped to say hi while I was moving boxes around the front yard. She goes on a walk around the neighbourhood every day with her dog. The husband doesn't join. I've only seen him a couple times in the front yard lugging around a rain barrel and poking around some of their plants, which I haven't been able to identify. He's nice enough, too. He once brought over some squash he'd been growing in his backyard. We talked about the trouble I'd had growing basil indoors. He gave me some tips and said I'd have to come over and see the garden sometime.

It wasn't until a few years later that I was invited to their summer Dinner Party. By then, everyone on our street had gathered that I was pretty much alone. I had no spouse, no children, and they wouldn't know this, but I had lost my mother two years ago. And my father and I didn't see each other anymore; we saw no need for formalities. I had few visitors. No extra cars in the driveway, no coffee chats on my front porch. My porch swing has never been used.

But this was not a pity invite to the Barlowes' Dinner Party, I am sure. It is well known that they welcome only an exclusive handful of interesting people each year to imbibe and indulge in fascinating conversation. Only a few are lucky enough to be regulars, including the electric bassoon player from down the street and the linguistics professors one lane over.

It became obvious when I arrived that I was overdressed. Mrs Barlowe's eyes went to my tie when she opened the front door wearing jeans that were a bit too big and a flour dusted sweater.

‘Come in! Come in!’ she said. ‘Make yourself at home.’ She was using one of her legs as if to and hold the dog back from running out the front door. Behind her sat a dog with a grey face and frail legs that looks like it hadn’t moved with zeal for quite some years.

I stepped through the threshold and awkwardly held out a bottle of wine to her. I didn’t think to announce the gift, but she smiled and took the bottle graciously.

‘Thank you. Ethan and I were just saying how we were probably short on wine for everyone. You can just head through the kitchen out to the dining area. I’ll lead you.’ Their house was beautifully decorated. Full of eclectic art and strange portraits on the walls that were all the slightest bit crooked. The kitchen was nice and looked much newer compared to the rest of their house, which had a weathered charm. There was a large marble island at the centre and a nice gas stove. Mrs Barlowe slipped the wine bottle into a low cupboard, already full of wine, as I was admiring the kitchen. ‘The dining room is just there,’ said Mrs Barlowe, gesturing to a doorway past the fridge.

The chatter died down when I stepped into the room, but the group was welcoming. Everyone offered hellos and handshakes. Mr Hart gave me a hug with a forceful pat on the back that I could still feel after he took a step back.

‘How are you? I’ve been meaning to stop by and say hi with the wife.’ I kept a smile on my face. Not once has Mr Hart stopped by with his wife in the four years that I had lived on Linden. I also noticed that she wasn’t sitting around the table with everyone else.

‘Oh, was she not able to make it today?’

Mr Hart’s smile tightened. ‘She’s out with her parents this year. She’s got some tough family stuff going on. You know how it can be.’

‘Right, yes.’

He sat himself back in his seat, clearly finishing our conversation. I shuffled around the table to make my way to an open seat. It was a tight

squeeze, as the table was large and rather close to the walls. Only a few people made an effort to scoot their chairs in so I could pass.

I ended up next to Kat. Kat could usually be seen wearing all black and wire frame glasses that rested at the end of her nose. I’d seen her visiting various neighbours down the block. As soon as I sat down, she leaned in to talk. There was a greyish-purple eyeshadow filmed over her silvery eyelids, where the skin was thin and folded.

‘Don’t play Jim any mind,’ she whispered with a thick Long Island accent, so it really wasn’t a whisper at all. ‘I know that his wife is leaving him. Real sad story. They were so good together for so long. Real cute couple. They moved into Linden in their twenties with the new baby. Precious thing. It was their first house, too. So beautiful. And they got it for about ninety thousand. Can you believe that? You can’t get a house like that so cheap these days. Built in the 1800s. Beautiful.’ She didn’t seem concerned that anyone might hear her over their own conversations.

‘Are you guys close, then?’

She laughed. ‘No, doll. I just talk. Don’t you?’ She turned toward the appetisers and stabbed at some cheese cubes and salami. I glanced at my empty plate and began to do the same.

Mr Barlowe announces from the kitchen that dinner will be ready in twenty minutes, and the group around the table had exaggerated reactions to this, giving a joyous cheer in unison, as if drunk, but there were only waters around the table. Then chatter continued. Kat turned to Tate, one of the linguistics professors, each of them speaking in low voices and nodding.

I felt awkward that everyone seemed to be in conversation with one another except for me. I was grateful with the attention switch to our applause as the Barlowes came in carrying a breadbasket and large serving platters. Mr Barlowe gave a brief toast, mentioning friends and lively conversation while surveying the room behind his blue-rimmed

glasses. He started passing around the salad with a tea towel draped over his shoulder.

Over dinner, conversation never truly wavers. Glasses clink and forks scrape ceramic plates, but someone interesting is always telling a story while the rest of us sip our wine—special bottles of red gifted to the Barlowes from some friends in Spain, they assured. Occasionally someone affirms that the food is ‘really good’, and we all nod in agreement and chew until it is our turn to be interesting.

‘Hey, Dave. Do you remember when Laura called the cops on Deb?’ Mrs Barlowe is gesturing toward Dave with her wine glass. “‘Illegal childcare” she called it, or something like that. So funny.’

Dave rolls his eyes with some smirk of delight on his face. He’s been called upon. ‘Such a brat. She got the only good daycare around us shut down. All the parents on Linden were scrambling, and Brett and I had to hire some teenager to watch Asia. Imagine a fifteen-year-old in charge of a five-year-old. God help us.’

‘And you know Laura doesn’t have any kids either.’

Kat chimes in. ‘Word on the street is she’s pregnant.’ The assured glint in her eye tells me that Kat knows this is no rumour but confirmed fact.

‘Well, Brett and I won’t be helping babysit.’

Mrs Barlowe nods and tilts back her glass, and her husband is ready to pour more once she’s done drinking.

Amy down at the end of the table is friends with Laura. I know this because I can sometimes see them talking over coffee on Amy’s back porch, and we, sort of, share a backyard. But from the genuine laughs Amy is offering the table, she has no intention of sharing this conversation with Laura. I imagine that Amy has finally formed a concrete opinion about Laura, deciding to reserve a distaste for her along with Dave and Mrs Barlowe solely because of their conversation.

‘You know,’ Kat says, ‘Laura’s standards are way too high. Back then your parents would dump you in front of anyone who had eyes. My dad used to have our Uncle Jonny watch us all the time, and he used to get into some real trouble, and we all turned out fine.’

‘He didn’t get into “trouble”, Kat. He was in the mob.’

I perk up. ‘Your uncle was in the mob?’

‘Oh yeah, honey. My dad, too. It was so funny. I didn’t know for the longest time. My mother and I would be walking on the street, and men would tip their hats to us. It was so funny. My mother knew, but I didn’t. I asked her, “Why do they always do that?” and she shrugged!’ Kat was laughing so hard, her eyes were crinkled behind her cat-eye glasses. ‘But my father was an important man back then, let me tell you.’

‘There were these beautiful silver spoons that we would use sometimes when I was younger. They were sort of heavy and had a design on the handle that I liked. And they were all engraved with the initials U.S.N. I thought they had been in the family a long time, you know. And I always talked about how I wanted those spoons when I was older. A few years after my father passed, God bless him, I asked my sister about them. She said, “Kat, you know those were stolen, right?” And of course, I didn’t know, because nobody told me anything. And my sister said, “Yeah, they raided some ship”.’

Mr and Mrs Barlowe were laughing. Kat frequented these gatherings, so they knew the ending to the story.

‘It was later that my brother told me it was a US Navy ship.’

Kat wipes tears of laughter from her eyes, Dave claps his hands together in delight and a few people are hunched over, they’re laughing so hard. Glasses clink in cheers and people sip their wine. The story is over, and everyone has acknowledged it as a satisfying one.

‘Where are they now?’ I ask Kat.

‘What honey?’ She’s still catching her breath from laughing.

‘Where are the spoons?’

‘Oh, someone gave them away or something. We don’t know where they are now.’

I thought that was a shame. I would’ve liked to see those spoons, and I wonder why nobody else seems to care. Perhaps it’s because they’ve already heard this story, or maybe that’s the humour in it. The spoons are funny in a short and expendable way, and the material value of them does not matter here. We go back to eating.

‘Well, what about you?’ Mr Hart was looking directly at me. He startled me a little, as if I forgot I was visible.

I took a second to think. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Your story.’

‘Oh. I moved here a few years ago. I work down on—’

‘No, no. Sorry. I think we all know your background. I just meant do you have anything to contribute to the conversation?’

I thought that this was strange. I didn’t think anyone knew much about me, and I wondered if my life had been a topic at previous dinners. And to have this man observe me and acknowledge that I was not being particularly social or interesting was demeaning. Some people looked at me expectantly. Others, including Mr Hart, sat back and sipped their wine as if I wasn’t worth any attention.

I thought about the people who convinced me that they were interesting. They told stories. They often talked of others who weren’t present: the neighbours, the dead. They traded stories that I was never entirely sure were theirs to trade.

And so I decided to be interesting. It was really that simple. I tell a story that a friend had told me many times. So many times that it could have been mine. Maybe it was mine.

I only exaggerated a few details. But it was all true if I remembered it right. Everyone was quiet when I talked. They leant in and mindlessly swirled their wine, sometimes nodding in understanding or laughing when they are supposed to. It was nice to talk, to be listened to. I considered telling them about the death of my mother. It was a story that

could have been funny, had it happened to someone else. But I decided it’d be best to save for next year. I fully intended on being invited back, and I wanted to have something prepared.

FANTASIES AND REALITIES

Abdalmueed Balogan

I keep telling you, it's crucial, like tending to a deep
Knife-induced wound, to always reserve some love
For yourself, as you offer piece by piece yourself

At the services of others, but you never listened.
Of course, the world in your dreams is an elysium
But thankfully you're blessed, wise enough to discern

There's a mighty ditch between fantasies and realities.
I know you to the core, for you wear my obsidian face everywhere
You go, whenever someone calls my name you turn your aching neck,

And whenever someone pulls your earlobe as it to rend it apart
Like dishrags, I always feel a swift pang clutching against my fragile chest;
So it's suffice to say I know you love knocking on formidable doors, love grabbing

The phalluses of slumbering uncaged lions. I know, regardless, you will never
Droop your head like boughs gravid with blossoms, though the pointed knife
Of remorse is just always an inch away from perching like a wren on the twig your heart,

After having butchered your fantasies & clubbed the living daylight out of your soul.
You are an ardent believer, which is what I hate about you. About me. About us.
You always feel without an iota of doubt snaking through the trenches of your veins

That this world, our acrimonious world, will one day evolve into a saint overnight
And suddenly at dawn beckon with lunar winks at universal love for an everlasting matrimony.
Someone, seated in a rocking chair on the balcony of a thousand years from now, reading

This might file in on the queue of one of your shimmering school of thoughts: the world will one day
Be liberated from the chains of darkness; & I agree with you on that too, for what's truly
The fuel of existence's rusty engine if not the radiance of hope?

But even in a billion years from now, what you'll never have by your side,
You can have everything else, is someone hawking with sunny smiles on any street of the world
That adulterated belief that keeps droning like bees on your street of thoughts

Which I've exhorted you on multiple nights to renounce but never did, that god-damned—save them,
Save her, save him—believe that's been constantly endearing you to your end.
I know you because your face homes my dauntless scars, and whenever someone calls your

Name I yield like an edelweiss yielding to the soft caress of sunrise, so it's suffice to say,
Regardless of how much you strive, dear self, you'll never save everyone
On this drowning ship, but you just won't listen.

HAPPY

(after Diane Seuss)

Kylie A Hough

How can you be so happy? My only question is whether you're faking it. My only fear, my fear that you're not. Once, I remember, I was that happy. My daughter, tipped water over my son's head, not even two years old, crinkled nose, girl love, newborn home from maternity, tiny hands, boy love. Even as I bathed, bred, babies, I rehearsed stories, imagined captions, what, how I would express my bliss. This is happiness, so the story went, my life complete or on repeat, truth is, it was both, complete on repeat, until it wasn't, no one pinched me, only, one day I stopped lying, started crying, then, couldn't stop, until the sink filled, the tub spilled over, the pool flowed along the hedge and into the ocean. I made no threats, had no status. Went to war with myself, instead. You are your own worst enemy, apparently, well, yeah, so, maybe it was me. Jealousy. I could only lie to myself for so long, after that I realised I'd been fooling everyone, year after year after year, you attract what you fear. Misery loves company, you never would've said, then, He'll love you when you love yourself, I thought I heard you say, lost in your children's smiles.

JONAH SYNDROME

(after Diane Seuss)

Kylie A Hough

He'd lived with desertion since father walked in, found mother with the mate. Dad never said so, but I imagine he sang to her, hacked his five-year-old heart, begged her to take him with her, demanded to know where she was going, when she'd be back. They lived nearby, withdrawal and him, neighbouring suburbs in the Melbourne CBD, never saw her again, he'd say when asked if mother ever came home, so comfortable was he with vanishings, when grandmother walked into the Yarra, the phone call from the police to notify father his mother was gone didn't well an eye. Dad knew what it was to miss women, mother, wife, daughter, reverberations felt in surges, grief gathering behind a ribcage, congestive heart failure, pooling cavities, drowned lungs. Couldn't say I was surprised when on the ward, hooked to a drain, pumped morphine for pain, he told cousin about going away, he couldn't care less. It wasn't dying, ghosts or departures that scared the shit out of him. Turns out, she said, he was only ever afraid to live.

ASSIGNMENTS

Leo Vanderpot

Final Exam at Freedonia U.

The written part of your final examination asks you to choose one of the following topics and write your answer in as brief an essay as possible.

Extra credit will be awarded if any of your essays/answers, or any part thereof, appears as a sonnet, or in the style of a writer, an actor or a politician.

Notwithstanding the aforesaid, no extra credit will be given for answers that imitate the 'style' of Ernest Hemingway.

1/ Compare and contrast visuals you have recently seen on the Internet with drawings made by cavemen. Be specific about the Internet; cavemen's drawings can be mentioned in relation to the framed art hanging on the walls leading to our gym.

2/ Defend or refute this statement: 'It's not a good way to choose a husband or wife, or even a pair of shoes or a beer, but to settle for the least-dreadful is an O.K. way to choose a movie or a President.'

3/ Provide three alternatives for the investments called 'Futures' as used in this statement and tell why your alternatives are superior: 'Futures are as misleading as warm clothes just out of the dryer.'

4/ When asked about a recent debate, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives responded by saying that he had 'Wiped up the floor' with his opponent.

(a) What does this say about the respondent?

(b) Discuss the possibility that the respondent was a woman.

(c) Support the notion that the respondent knew or did not know he or she was offering a rather good pun in his or her use of the word 'floor'

5/ What will academia teach (if anything) about either (a) Robert Frost or (b) John Ashbery in the year 3024? Why?

Extra credit awarded if you provide the name of any singer who recorded the song, 'A Hundred Years from Today.'

6/ Make believe you are (a) an insect; (b) a world-class tennis player. Or describe which you would rather be and why, i.e., what's wrong with who and what you are?

7/ Discuss the eighteenth-century belief that a college can replace and even improve upon the family as a means not only of financial support, but as a reliable substitute of emotional life and even friendship. Alternatively, attack this option on the exam, as too academic and too dumb for words. Give examples from your experience at Freedonia.

CERTAIN MUSIC

Ian Ganassi

I remember pineapple juice from a can.
A little later we turned them into drums.

A hundred years hence, a better playground.

Do you want I should bop you with this here lollipop?

Give the frog a break as he turns into a janitor,
Having been kissed by the cleaning lady.

She liked to dance, any time of the day or night.

She wore a jasmine bouquet,
And later clusters of grapes
Beneath the Banyan tree.

So many varieties of grape,
It takes one to know one.
Leave him in the trenches,
We'll pick him up in the morning.

She's so happy.
And she's having so much fun.

'Irony, the opposite of wrinkly.'

Isn't that a little childish, Mr. Ostrogoth?

Don't mind if I do.

Grow up, it's mighty cold out there.

He said it was immature
But had a certain music about it.

It's too easy just babbling scat—

You should learn your solos something more unique.

CHROME ALERT

B. P. Gallagher

It is good to be back behind the wheel.

It judders in my grip like a thing alive, the thrum of the diesel engine mingled with the throaty rumble of tires chewing asphalt. Road signs flash by in blurry jumbles of letters: junctions, exits, interstate. I aim for the big swath of wide, open road promised by the latter and head north up the coast.

This wasn't the plan. There is no plan. The older I get, the more my impulse control goes the way of my vision and hearing. Age steals everything from a man if he lets it, his autonomy most of all. Today, I claw a small sliver of my freedom back.

Mindy and the kiddos will have noticed my absence by now. At this very moment they'll be asking the pertinent questions of one another back at the rest stop:

Have you kids seen your granddad?

I haven't.

Courtney? You haven't seen him either?

I wasn't watching him, I thought he was with Kyle!

I had to go to the bathroom too! What, was I supposed to drag him in there with me?

He's not in the car. I just checked.

Well, he can't have gone far, can he? Spread out and look for him!

Goddammit, Dad. I was afraid of something like this.

This last I imagine Mindy muttering to herself under her breath. And somewhere from the pell-mell of concerned adults and grandkids arises the most pertinent question of all:

Hey! Who the fuck took my truck?

Any moment now they'll connect the dots, put two and two together. But by then I'll have fifty miles on them and if you think you can haul Granddad down to Florida like a load of freight, good luck boy, you got another think coming!

This, I understand, is my last hurrah. I know and am at peace with the fact. My final charge down the lonely highway of a life well-lived, astride a purebred steed of chrome and American-wrought steel. Some stunt to pull on the way out. Reckless? Sure. There's that waning impulse control for you. But when the chance for one more go at the wheel of a big rig presented itself, how could I say no? I've always been a drifter at heart, never happier than while caught in the flow of freight, the undertow of traffic.

No self-respecting trucker leaves his keys in the ignition. A guy like that, well—I'm doing his employer a favour removing him from the talent pool. As for the truck, they'll recoup their losses in no time. Starting with the salary my incompetent, indeliberate benefactor would otherwise have been owed. The thought brings a twinge of guilt. Then I step on the accelerator and lose myself again in the road.

I keep to the right lane and match my speed to the trucks around me, or try to. My limbs aren't as steady as they once were, and it's hard to keep uniform pressure on the gas pedal. But I've never trusted cruise control, and the newfangled tech staring back at me from the dashboard is too inscrutable to try even were I so inclined.

I pass two speed traps that I notice—probably more that elude my impaired peripheral vision—but no one flags me down or tries to pull me over. Until word of my abscondence jumps county to county, I'm just another trucker headed home after a long haul. Without a trailer, I'm not even obliged to stop at weigh stations—not that I would were I so encumbered. I move now with the implacable inertia of age. In the cab, at the wheel of this red and chromium machine, a marvellous change occurs. I am young anew.

When Mindy first sat me down like a child and told me it was time to think about assisted living, I agreed with her. A strange role reversal, lectured by your eldest daughter. And although it felt uncomfortably like cuckoldry to admit that I was no longer man enough—no longer able enough—to care for myself, the evidence had mounted until it became undeniable. There was, too, the small matter of the spreading shadow in my lung.

So, I agreed to sell my house, and to tour the assisted living facilities in Florida that Mindy picked out. A road trip, she called it. An opportunity to spend more time with my grandkids. *While you still have the chance*, went the unspoken subtext.

Never mind that at their age the kids are more likely to remember how often my swollen prostate begged for the restroom, or how often I retold the same stories, or how often and loudly they needed to repeat themselves to be heard. Tweens are neurotic by nature, and old people make poor travel companions.

But behind the wheel of this big rig, its chrome grille grinning like my own face, I shed the years. I am smiling and crying in equal measure.

I drive for over an hour before I see the first warning, blared in two-foot-tall letters from a digital road sign on the overpass.

SILVER ALERT: RED PETERBILT SEMI TK; MN LICENSE #...

In a passing minivan, two children, a boy and a girl, make the universal hand signal for a good time. Why not? I think, and reach up to tug the handle. The horn blares once, twice. The kids go to pieces, gleeful. I smile.

The kids' parents look over and their expressions change from startled to dumbfounded. In the front passenger seat, Mom glances at the LED alert, then back at me. She pulls out her cell phone and starts to dial.

I step on the gas and switch lanes, smooth as butter.

A pair of state police cruisers pull out behind me as I blow past another overpass. Their lights switch on, red and blue and white in my rear-view. I don't stop, don't slow down. Don't speed up either. They've got me pegged for a senile old coot, and maybe I am. But if that's so, I'll be damned if I don't lean into it.

The staties flank me on either side, and out of the corner of my eye I can make out their blurry shapes gesticulating at me to pull over. I fix my eyes straight ahead and ignore them like I haven't got a care in the world. At this point, I don't. Even when they start bleating and buzzing at me with their sirens, I play deaf and plough on ahead.

Just then, a voice speaks from the static ether: 'Driver, if you can hear this, pull over the vehicle at the next opportunity.'

The voice of God?

'Do you copy? Over.'

No, not God, at least not yet. It's the 'over' that jogs my memory, draws my hazy attention to something far more terrestrial: the CB radio, or whatever the equivalent is these days. Internal communication.

'You must be almost out of gas now, driver,' the level male voice on the radio intones. 'Either surrender on your own terms, or putter out and get swarmed by cops, and nobody wants that. Your call, copy? Over.'

I glance at the dashboard, which I've somehow forgotten to do until this point in the drive. The gas light glares back at me, a baleful yellow eye. It occurs to me for the first time that the trucker might have stopped at that rest stop not just to relieve himself, but to fuel up.

I grab the overhead mic, click the button and say into it, 'Copy, operator. This is Bryce Dugan. Over.'

There is a pause, then: 'You used to be a trucker, Mister Dugan? Over.'

'That's right, sir. Twenty-five years for Milton and Sons. Until the company went under. Over.'

'Then you know we can't afford to lose that rig, Mister Dugan. Over.'

'No, I suppose not.'

‘So, I need you to pull over, sir. With all due respect, you’re a liability out here. Over.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t do that,’ I say.

The three-lane highway narrows to two lanes as I pass over state lines into Pennsylvania, headed north. The cop cars dogging me are forced to fall back, joined by a growing pack of emergency vehicles.

Granite Quarry, 2 mi, reads a sign, with an arrow pointing off to the left.

The radio operator blabbers away, trying to talk me down, talk me off the road. Appeals to my veteran trucker sensibilities fall on deaf ears.

The engine starts to sputter and cough, running on fumes.

Granite Quarry, 1 mi.

The voice on the radio is talking me onto an emergency off-ramp. A mile and a half up on your right, big gravel landing strip. Can’t miss it. Coast into home plate, and everyone goes home alive and happy.

Alive maybe, but free?

First, they take away your license to drive, then the years rob you of your license to do all else. If I let it, the shadow in my chest and the treatments thereof will rob me of all remaining vitality, condemn me to a long, bedridden death. Drown now or drown later, suffocated in your own phlegm.

I pick a turn and take it.

Even the cops pull back now, alarmed by my recklessness.

Ah, well, I think as I barrel without slowing through a gate, a chain-link fence, another gate. *A life well lived*.

As the gleaming red-chrome cab of the semi-trailer sails over the brink of the old quarry, I grip the wheel and watch the horizon like a shroud drawn over my life.

Below, water sparkles in the failing sun, turquoise and jade.

BENEATH THE MACHINE

India Turner

Broken down by the sugar cane crop

Flat tyre and arid dirt on hands and on the tyre

A farmer runs his combine-harvester across the land

Sometimes sunlight tries to pool between the sugar cane and make small swamps

Brown snakes are swimming like hands through the vegetation

A magpie nests above on a branch

Though the tyres carry onward.

Man’s hands and arid dirt and spare tyres in hand

Gathered a dress up into soft palms

Cotton strange beneath engine oil

A harvester continues along in the distance

Man says,

‘Big car for a little girl.’

Just to try and take the dust off

To watch soot turn the magpie black.

ELEGY IN THE MAKING

Every elegy is two elegies. One for the dead; one for the living. – DA Powell

Daniel Brennan

November, such a gutless time of year. Sitting soiled and still. Hanging from
my mouth like the line off a fishhook. It dreams in past tense. It holds
the perfume of soft, dying things. It reminds me, in fits, of my father,
born at the start of the month. I think of him when I hurry down 10th avenue,
where everyone stands bracing against the cold, waiting for the traffic lights
to blink in permission. Cigarette smoke pocks the air, floating across
the dappled sunlight cast by the gum trees. Children shriek inside the local park,
limbs dangling, tired ribbons clinging to the jungle gym. November,
relentless in coming and going. My father is well into his seventies. My father
moves slower up and down his cabin's stairs these days. My father is becoming
past tense, too. I let my body split down the centre; missing him and the anticipation
of missing of him. Every November should be his last, his doctors say.
Every November is a knell caught between our teeth. Slate like the sky canvased

behind Downtown luxury towers. Watch how the hours sink these days, falling
into the Hudson faster than I can save them. This used to be my father's city.
He used to be a boy, so I must believe, limbs capable of shielding his
body against the cold that builds in crescendo. He was gentle, once, I must also believe,
the fruit of a cynic not yet come to ripen. November, clipped of the extra day
its predecessor clings to. It's no wonder this month should be shorter than the last,
as if it's been telling me all this time how there is never enough of it.
The fallen leaves make a truss of copper hair along my block. These wondrous
decaying things, waiting for me, a bed, an invitation, a premonition. In this silence,
I tell my father I can forgive him for not knowing how tenderness should speak.
In this stillness, I am counting down the days as they fall from each
branch overhead. I think of what has come and what is gone; my father
standing in the doorway with a time-worn smile, as if he's known
all along he is an elegy in the making.

UNTITLED ('NOTRE VIE UN', BY HENRI
MESCHONNIC)

Gabriella Bedetti and Don Boes (translators)

our life a
story that only begins each time at
the next sentence
we cannot follow only
breathe but
when we do speak
the body rejuvenates
we drink to you to me the table
holds and the life between us
creates space that matches our rhythm
we can start again we
listen to one of many stories
we already know
the voice

(published in *Légendaire chaque jour*, Gallimard, 1979)

UNTITLED ('TELLEMENT JE SUIS À VENIR', BY
HENRI MESCHONNIC)

Gabriella Bedetti and Don Boes (translators)

my future is so bright
that I barely live in the present
so completely do I lack a place
that I can't be found there
where I am yet I move
here what I need and I speak
like everyone with a mouth
full of what does not exist
yet and I am not
in exile exile places everything
in the past even the future
from here it inhabits an elsewhere
it dwells in a familiar place
the desert I come from
is crowded I can no longer play
with the grains of that sand
because I am made of sand I prefer
to see eyes that hear me
before I find the words
we never know when to
leave

(published in *Voyageurs de la voix*. Éditions Verdier, 1985)

Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009) is best known worldwide for his translations of the Old Testament and the 710-page *Critique du rythme: Anthropologie historique du langage*. His poems received the Max Jacob International Poetry Prize, the Mallarmé Prize, the Jean Arp Francophone Literature Prize, the Guillevic-Ville de Saint-Malo Grand Prize for Poetry, and the Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Two lines from one of his poems—'Those who speak have a country they have / a voice joyous with language'—set the tone for Meschonnic's significance and influence as a poet for whom displacement is a means of rebirth. The poems are concrete and striking. Their embrace of language is poignant. The soothing openness of movement induces a calm space conducive to being with oneself and the world. The subdued oral quality of his poems intrigues and evokes a desire to examine. In our nation fraught with dissension, these poems engage language to interrupt existing conditions and begin anew. They serve as intervention, disrupt our mindset, liberate us from chaos and clutter. Meschonnic is that rarest of poets: an agent of civilisation in a cultural climate of upheaval, treating the most essential questions of life within the shortest poetic forms in the most common language.

PSYCHOTROPICS

Jane Downing

It was said only mercenaries, missionaries and misfits come up to the islands. Carol wondered if this still held true. If so, she decided she'd prefer to stuff herself into the misfit box. She took her Zolof with a slug of bottled water on the wharf and looked around.

There were so many ways to become unstuck in the Pacific.

Rex had rushed her at the hotel as if he'd forgotten this sort of thing triggered her anxiety. It was already hot. She combed her fingers through her hair and coiled it atop her head. Secured the bun with an arsenal of bobby pins from her skirt pocket. The nape of her neck would be lobster red by the end of the day. She got Rex to stand still so she could check her reflection in his sunglasses.

'No-one will be looking at you,' he said as he walked away. 'We're here to see the actual ruins.'

Which she thought was unfair. Carol didn't think she was old, not yet. Only thirty-five. Only three years older than him. She swallowed the insult without water and replied obligingly with their chosen mantra. 'Last chance to see,' she said brightly. Last chance, with existence on the edge, with existential dread rising.

'Carol, come on. Get a wriggle on,' Rex called above the thrum of the tour boat's engine warming up.

She blamed his mood on his hangover. The boat ducked about on the out-going tide, a beast tethered to the wharf. On which a child lay, belly to the timber, looking into the water shouting, 'Look, look.'

A woman bent to put the pre-schooler on its feet, a dowdy mothering-type in a muumuu too often laundered and left to dry in the unforgiving sun. Missionary chic. The child persisted in its demands to look. Carol peered over the edge of the wharf and saw nothing. Water. And nothing.

When she returned to the group of tourists on the dock, the mother was administering sunblock. She painted her child whiter than it already was, her hands massaging up and down, making it difficult to see where she ended and the child began. After squirming and resisting limb by limb it said, quite clearly, 'Thank you, Mummy.'

'Well, that's fucked the day,' Carol muttered. She figured everyone else must also see how sentimentally nauseous the mother-and-child tableaux was. Besides, really, who'd bring such a young thing on a boat the size of the one in front of them, the one they were being invited to board for the trip around the island to the actual ruins: the archaeological wonder of Nan Madol. Her spurt of anger got her off the wharf and onto the deck in one fluid movement. The lurch of the boat underfoot brought her up straight. An exclamation mark at the end of a cranky sentence.

Rex took her hand, belatedly, and steered her to a seat on wooden slats. The captain called out something about safety equipment being stowed under this seating, but the tour guide in his branded t-shirt was already handing out cold bottles of water and thirst trumped drowning any day. The plastic bottles perspired, wetting hands.

'We'll be wet all-over soon,' Rex observed as a man opposite with immaculate fingernails wiped one hand down the side of his ironed shorts and held the *Dasani* at arm's length with the other.

No-one introduced anyone. Presumably missionaries, mercenaries and misfits. Ten passengers, three local crew including the spry guide. Carol recognised the Argentinians from the hotel: two men, tall, brothers, lovers, friends or colleagues? Whichever, clearly drinking buddies.

The waves splashed Carol's cheeks as the boat nudged off a pylon and hit the open sea. The wind dried her face, left her feeling like a salted peanut. Rex stood over her, talking to the fastidious bloke who was now, indeed, equally sea-splattered. Kindred spirits, Rex and this man, as they soon discovered. Both government consultants selling their neo-

liberal wares to island nations as the ocean gobbled up their lands and their future, and trickle-down wealth was but a drop in the equation.

The stranger pronounced his current employer as the local Pohnpei government. Carol couldn't be less interested. She tuned her ears beyond his voice to that of the tour guide. If he was an archaeologist—as the marketing for the tour company boasted—she was Boudicca. He was explaining how the ancient ruins of Nan Madol were built. By aliens.

The child crouched nearby, and as she half-listened to this fantastical history, Carol watched it spooning saltwater from one cavity between the frames of the hull to the next, each transfer undertaken in the lid of its mother's water bottle. Was the child more Sisyphus or Tantalus, working on a task that never ended, standing in water up to its knees? Carol couldn't use a search engine to verify Greek myths. No internet out there. No mobile coverage. No nothing.

The night before, she'd read the collected and simplified myths of their destination Nan Madol, called in the literature the Venice of the Pacific—comparison to something more famous being an aid to recognition. She'd kept to the hotel room while Rex was downstairs with the Argentinians drinking *sakau*, the kava of the north Pacific—comparison to something more famous ditto. Theirs was 'men's business' with the local mind-altering drug, which, according to the same guidebook, 'inspired myth and magic'. And loud snoring as it turned out.

Carol looked over at the tour guide. Made a diagnosis: he must have taken too many psychotropics for too long. Alien theories of construction? As if! The guidebook was clear. The civilisation who'd built the ancient ruins they were now motoring towards had flown the basalt building blocks through the sky by *magic* not alien technology. She checked the sky for flying columns. Returned to the mesmerising water, this time the ocean outside the boat's hull.

'Look, look,' she screamed. On reflex. Unfiltered.

The child was beside her in an instant. Hanging over the side, staring to where her finger pointed. Its mother had it by the elastic of its pink

shorts.

‘Flying fish,’ the mother squealed when she too spotted them leaping above the waves. Sleek silver bodies with cruciform wings.

‘Flying fish,’ the child tested, bringing the two words together for the first time in its life.

‘Braxton, aren’t we lucky?’ the mother sighed.

It was a boy child then.

Nan Madol loomed. The absolute blackness of wet basalt contributed to the looming, as did the great girth of the blocks in profile, the height at which they were stacked, and the weight the tour guide kept mentioning. Up to fifty tonnes. Carol wondered what that even meant. No handy comparison to something more famous was offered to calibrate. How many elephants? Or how many full bottles of *Dasani*, *Evian*, *Iceland Pure*?

Despite the theories of magic construction in last night’s book, it seemed no-one knew exactly how and why the site was built, not the locals who lived on the main island, not the archaeologists, not the conspiracy theorists. In the absence of adequate explanation, awe was given full range. Even Rex shut up in the face of the sublime.

The captain throttled back the engine and the boat carried on the wash, soon negotiating the narrow canals between the manmade islands. Manmade islands in an ocean of islands? Again, why? Carol reached out and let her hand brush the stones, dislodging moss, sending a green lizard scurrying into a crack.

Yet how quickly humanity falls from glimpses of the sublime to base biology. After they disembarked, Carol watched her companions turn from looking at their stunning surroundings and back at themselves. The tourists—the adult ones—were becoming fractious under the palm trees as they waited for the promised picnic. The crew brought ashore eskies the size of treasure chests which took millennia to excavate.

They’d tied up near the steps of Nan Dowas, the high temple in the Nan Madol complex, where ancient history met sailors’ logs. Newer oral traditions claimed pirate booty was hidden under the altar smack centre of this square-built island. The boy-child was small enough to shimmy into the gap beneath the large stone slab. He returned from the gloom no less disappointed for want of gold. There were spiders-and-lizards-and-a-hermit-crab, he told his mother, all in one-big-mashed-up word.

Carol turned away from his enthusiasm, yawned, catching the contagion of *sakau* and bourbon hangovers. Her husband was doing a circuit of the island, and the mother had settled at the foot of a breadfruit tree. There was not much shade from the yellowing foliage, sickened by the constant inundations of saltwater. Sea rise. See the sea rise. She’d organised herself into the stump of midday shade that the trunk cast. The boy-child stopped his exploring and climbed onto her. The idea of a warm body touching her sweating skin sent a paradoxical shiver through Carol. She turned away from the pair.

A hand on her bare shoulder sealed in her sweat; as uncomfortable as she’d just imagined. Rex had finished his circuit. He guided her to a shaded spot at the edge of the canal between Nan Dowas and the next island, Dau. Carol said what she’d been thinking. ‘The temple, the buildings, looks like they’re made of that toy, Lincoln Logs.’

‘I had Meccano and Lego blocks when I was a kid,’ Rex said. They had culture clash. Early in their marriage it’d been fun. But explaining allusions and references got tiring.

However, his hangover had miraculously lifted, as if this was indeed a magic place. ‘A molly before lunch?’ he grinned. He held out his right index finger, a tab on the end, a petal of temptation.

‘Where the fuck did you get ecstasy? Are you mad?’

He was too relaxed to pick up on which of them was mad, but he did point out, ‘It’s no different from the drugs you pop.’

‘Mine are doctor-prescribed.’

‘And I am sure the bloke handing these round is a doctor too.’ He nodded to the shadows of men hard against the shade of the temple walls. Grinned again. ‘A Doctor of Engineering. Designing seawalls on the atolls.’ He nodded to the distant islands beyond the beyond, the ones which lacked the saving height of the main landmass of Pohnpei. His head kept nodding, toy dog on the back shelf of a sedan. His finger found his mouth, eventually.

‘How many have you taken?’ Carol asked, her hand going out.

He pulled her into a kiss, his tongue exploring her mouth, like a treasure hunter at an ancient alien altar. She wasn’t fooled. Felt the transfer of the drug onto her tongue.

But why not? She’d foregone having children to protect them from the end of the world—so why not give into the hedonism of the last days? Follow her mate. Travel in his wake. Fill the void. Be a god rising above the island on a mild-altering substance ...

The molly started to dissolve in her mouth. She remembered her mother with a wealth of nursery rhymes to pass on. Mini oral histories that had come down the family line and would abruptly stop with Carol. As Rex walked away, Carol sang the uppermost in her head. About Miss Molly who’d had a dolly. Who was sick, sick, sick.

‘So, she called for the doctor to come quick, quick, quick,’ she sang aloud. Then she spat, spat, spat into the calm, reflective water here, away from the surging ocean. The scrap of drug drifted to the depths. She couldn’t remember if the doctor in the nursery rhyme came in time to save Miss Molly and her doll.

The smell of charred crab and soy sauce drew them back—the ten passengers, the three crew—to cluster around the grill sitting across a pile of burning branches and brush. Plus an extra tourist. The father of the boy-child had pulled up in a small tinny, propping the outboard motor clear of the water and throwing his child into the air, catching him.

Rex soon got it out of him that he was a real archaeologist, just as he’d winkled out that the Japanese man was a banker, and the Argentinians were film consultants scoping out settings for an upcoming movie. The new arrival had a contract to document sites on Chuuk, an island to the west. He’d brought his family across to Pohnpei to see the Eighth Wonder of the Ancient World and obtained a special permit to do a little nosing about off the tourist trail. Because: last chance to see.

‘Mummy, Mummy,’ the child tugged at her muumuu. She was listening to the father of her child not him. He astutely swapped to calling out ‘Patricia, Patricia,’ to which she responded and took the barbequed round of breadfruit from his pained grasp.

‘And this is Coral.’ Patricia introduced her at the same time, because as a parent, she’d learnt to multi-task.

Carol did not correct her. Coral, coral everywhere out here in the islands of the Pacific... She moved as far away as polite, and possible, on a manmade islet, to eat her crab kebab, while surreptitiously watching the little family. Not missionaries after all.

The other mercenaries and misfits were finding meaning in aliens around their atavistic fire. ‘The same ones who built the pyramids?’ the archaeologist asked politely. The tour guide roared with laughter.

Everyone joined in on the joke designed to delight and hoodwink them. But wasn’t it a perfect theory, Carol decided, as she picked flesh from between her front teeth. Blame aliens. Blame them for everything, so humans are entirely innocent of doing anything, of fucking up anything. See the sea level rising. See the alien ruins inundated. Oh, well.

The water around Nan Dowas was rising perceptively. The tide coming back in.

Carol noted their captain and crew had returned to the boat, were lounging under the canopy, smoking—fumigating the air. What they must think of the rich foreigners descending to harvest stories to carry into the future while their own was so uncertain.

They didn't look like they'd be starting the engines anytime soon. Meanwhile the perfect family waved goodbye as their tinny surfed out toward the horizon, and the foreign men continued to stand around shooting the breeze until it was stone hot dead. The haze of the tropical heat swamped the wits anyone had left about them. Mad dogs and sundry foreigners out in the midday sun. The air sat heavy on Carol's skin. As heavy as a hand.

The map in the guidebook last night had shown how the artificial islands connected to the actual. They could have walked here, the lot of them. Coming on a boat was only the more spectacular route. To make it a round trip she only had to head east toward Temwen Island. Mangroves clogged one direction off Nan Dowas, to the left, a fallen palm shot out like a gang plank from the basalt battlements.

She thought, I should have put on more sunblock after lunch, the one with the mosquito repellent in the formula. She slapped her ankles. Stepped down off the island. Immersed the burning itch in the rising water.

Everything depended on the tide.

She called out to Rex. He didn't turn. He was clearly on a different plane of existence. She tried again, taking a leaf from the boy-child's playbook and attempted goodbye at a different tack. '*Kasalehlie*,' she called in the local language. Still no response.

Moving was good. It gave a sense of purpose. Straight ahead. That was the way. The huge pandanus tree in the distance must be rooted on the mainland she decided. The keys of fruit glowed, tiny spots of orange against the unremittingly brittle foliage of the trees. But they didn't seem to be getting closer and she was in swamp now. And then she was wet up to her thighs.

Some of the pandanus roots looked like legs, skinny legs picking their way over the terrain. They made better progress than Carol. She

couldn't get across the next canal, not without swimming anyway. She turned north.

The people—the humans—who'd built Nan Madol must have tramped this way again and again. Somehow the lack of magic in this fact made the construction of the site even more spectacular. That all this could have been built by human hands with human ingenuity. What had the guidebook said: that it was a complex of a hundred islets, filled with stone and coral—no coral—spread over eighteen square kilometres. How many Olympic pools or football fields was that? Carol felt she'd traversed too many.

Exhausted, she only then remembered the curse also mentioned in the book, spine-cracked, back on her hotel bed. Nan Madol had been uninhabited for centuries. The locals left it alone because to spend a night here led to certain death.

Reading this the night before, it hadn't sounded like such a bad thing. The gods of the place had every right to be very angry at us, she thought. Gawpers, voyeurs, what right did any of them have to be here?

The sun had moved and was no longer above her. But it was a long way from night. Time enough to find her way to the mainland. Besides, it was the tide she needed to watch not the sun's kiss on the horizon.

The profile of the basalt building block she leant against was almost perfectly hexagonal. Like all the other building blocks on all the other small islands in every direction.

OXFORD SUMMER SCHOOL

Meghalee Bose

This place isn't built for summer.

Pubs with low ceilings cornering the heat inside. Domes sunbleached and white. Parched lawns, desert hues. Locals sweating like salmon on the benchtop.

This place is steeped in history. I raise my chin to admire its dreaming spires. The heat drizzles off the walls of architectural marvels, people scuttling to shade in order to breathe. Flocking to trees only fifty years old, while buildings from the 1500s boil away unseen.

This place apologises to me repeatedly for the weather. The hottest in a hundred years it seems. It offers me ten quid fans in white-lit Tesco's. It can't seem to understand my undisturbed sleeps. The heatwave, it says, the heatwave. Meaning something short-lived, something advancing. Something that would not, could not be here to stay. Whatever else might be truthful about this place, thirty-three-degree weather could not be it.

I feel like an invader. I am comfortable in the heat. I feel like English officers of old may have felt, strolling centuries ago along my hometown's streets. Away from the burning Indian plains, the Englishmen sought relief in its cool pine trees. They called it Scotland of the East. They stayed until they were driven away. I leave this place in a week.

SECOND CLASS

Oz Hardwick

Subway posters advertise sunshine, education, and the experience of a lifetime, but it's getting late and all I want's a train. When it comes, nosing oily air before it like an old dog with a slipper, the first carriage is packed with candy-striped deckchairs, the second with wooden desks, and the third is blacked out with heavy velvet drapes. I burn easily and have always been of a scholarly bent, so I take a seat in the middle carriage, having left my bag and my phone at the door. There's a sign for silence and everyone's careful not to meet each other's eyes, so I set about scratching my initials into the desktop as I wait for us to pull away, linking them in neat hearts to those of the first girl I loved from afar, and who I've not even thought about for years. I can barely picture her, sprinting for the tape on a school sports day, all gangly limbs and long blonde hair flailing in the sunshine, but I remember the ache that kept me awake night after night through that pre-teen summer. Doors close, the train moves off, and a voice through the Tannoy tells us to turn over the papers which, in those distracted minutes of recollection, I hadn't noticed until now. Question 1: What was in the third carriage? Question 2: How much do you regret your choice?

1967

Anne Di Lauro

some french boys come up
from the negev
bearing gifts from the desert
hashish, love and peace

and in our community
all is pruning apple trees
and love and peace
until the news of coming war

then we move back across the sea
as we had come with others like us idealists all
aboard a swell-borne ship
throb of engine smell of ropes and oil and love and peace

we leave behind the gordian knot
of the middle east
in the shady garden of a greek taverna
in that moment all is peace

GOOD MORNING BLAISE CENDRARS

Phil Brown

rediscovering Blaise Cendrars in *A Moveable Feast* recently
I realised I had never actually read anything of his, although I had meant to
I have a clear memory of a cold Toowoomba morning in 1976
seeing him peering out at me from the pages of *Paris Review*
that battered visage, a cigarette stuck to his lower lip
I thought this Swiss-born French novelist and poet was Beat cool
and reading Hemingway recently there he was again, in Paris
at La Closerie des Lilas, a café where poets apparently met
'But the only poet I ever saw there was Blaise Cendrars,
with his broken boxer's face', Hemingway wrote
recalling that the one-armed writer and war veteran
had his empty sleeve far too obviously pinned to the front of his shirt
an affectation, according to Hemingway
that took me back to that winter morning
reading the *Paris Review* interview with Blaise Cendrars
marvelling at his adventures while sitting on the steps
of that dilapidated mansion on James Street—my own shabby Courland Penders—
bathing in the insipid morning sunshine after being up all night
all the long freezing fucking night, hammering away on an old Remington.
living the dream with a cigarette hanging off my lower lip
a little too much like Cendrars actually, or Kerouac, or someone else,
labouring over poems that seldom came out right
I had just finished one comparing my room to Calvary, imagine that
my poems had become spare and sinewy at this juncture
and I guess you can blame DH Lawrence for that
because I was in love with his poem *Snake* at the time
and was working on my own derivative style, sans the consumption

I was working on an ulcer too although I didn't know that yet
Or that my first crack-up was just around the corner
I burnt much of the verse I crafted there in an old incinerator in the back yard
thought of Jim Morrison watching it become a funeral pyre
watched the poems burn and dissipate in the flames
a vision of hell quite early in the piece

THE SWING

Vasco Pimentel

The roar of aeroplane engines complemented the mid-morning busyness of the most remote city in the world. A blinding summer's day sun shone through the family's SUV tinted windows. The hum of the V8 in the Land Cruiser reverberated in mechanic synchrony as its off-road tires attacked the curb of Perth's airport kiss and fly area. She put the car into parking and looked over at her husband.

'Love you, honey. Call me when you get there,' she said with a melancholic smile on her thin lips.

'I love you too,' the husband replied, taking off his sunglasses and reaching over for the usual drop-off kiss.

'Bye, Daddy!' shouted the boys in unison from the back.

'It's only a couple of weeks boys, so you be good to your mumma now, or else!' The father said with a smile, stretching his toned right arm into the back seat to tickle the kids.

'We will,' they replied with mixed emotions. 'See ya!'

'Bye, honey,' he said one last time before reaching for his gym bag and leaving the car. 'I love you.'

The man in a yellow vest whose sole purpose is to tell people to move on walked towards them and she mumbled a last goodbye, casting a final glance at her husband as he walked away in his reflective mining attire, bag over his shoulder. This FIFO-wife routine was one she was now perfectly used to but that never failed to stir her from within. She could feel the amounting distance growing between them as she repositioned her sunnies before putting the SUV into gear and driving away from terminal four.

The husband walked through the automatic glass doors without looking up at the flight schedule. He went to the café and ordered an

extra strong long black with a dash of milk from a lady who knew him by name. He sat down and scrolled through his phone casually, sipping from his take-away cup.

When the final boarding call echoed through the wide-open space, the husband looked down at his silver watch and got up, coffee in hand. He picked up his bag and walked through the same glass door he had walked in from and lit up a cigarette. The airport man in the high-vis vest walked past him and gave him a nod of the head, which he returned. The sun seemed to feed and thrive on its own relentlessness across Perth's sparse skies. The husband took a long, deep breath, enjoying his cigarette. As he did, a white sedan pulled up into the kiss and fly area, and the beautiful woman driving it honked the horn. The husband chucked the coffee cup and dropped the cigarette in front of his right foot, crushing it under his boot.

'Hi, honey. Welcome home!' the woman said through the open window. The toddler in the back seat squirmed in excitement.

'Hi, babe,' the husband said as he entered the car. He kissed the mother of his child whose thick lips curled in joy.

'Hey, baby. I missed you!' he said, looking back at the toddler and tickling her excited little legs.

'How was it?' she asked.

He exhaled.

'Long. Feels good to be home.'

She put the car into gear and drove away.

CREEP

Loren Walker

A streetlight flickers, stuttering in place, as we slink over
chain-link fences and wind through ivy vines. Huddled by
the orange-blue crackle of the campfire made with twigs
and paper from the trash bin, sand clings to our legs,
and we shiver under the roar of the waterfall, the hiss
of the blaze, the hesitant snap of tabs and bottle caps.
Barely freshmen, we've gathered a haul: warm wine
coolers, vodka in water bottles, but cradling plastic
cups, we're working to ignore the silence. There are
no voices shrieking, no cars swishing, and so,
worry prickles: maybe we made sounds while
sneaking out; maybe we left windows open
by mistake, and with every minute that
passes, we're smothered by more stars,
the Milky Way bearing down on us
as the water snarls, closer and
louder, until finally we scatter,
dump sand in the fire, but
the sounds of night draw
deeper, and darkness
sighs, turns over,
and swallows us
whole.

THE BAPTISM OF BILLY ELLIOT*

Dance until you shatter yourself—Rumi

Maureen Martinez

Christmas day lunch with my husband and three sons devouring a charcuterie of various Italian meats and cheeses on an antique table with extended leaves, which we received from Vinny down the street who died mere weeks after his deceased wife Lisa to whom he was married for over 60 years.

Going through baby photos in no particular order stored in a box marked Grab if house is on fire!, holding one I pause to laugh and hand it to Jack of his 2-year-old self, dancing in the middle of church; floating alone in the aisle above the blue runner just before his cousin's baptismal ritual, his radiant smile mixing with the stained glass spotlight pooling around him.

Wait, is that Nana in the back? Jack asks.

Sure enough there was my mother, recessed in shadow, standing beneath an appreciative Jesus, captured mid-clap in her navy-blue jacket, toe-tapping a rhythm for her spirited grandson to the beat of her apt benediction:

Soar like Billy Elliot, Jack, and always dance til you shatter yourself.

**Billy Elliot* (2000) is an award winning British film and adapted musical about a working-class boy who discovers his passion for ballet.

Rattle Prompt: December 27, 2023

Look at an old family photograph and find an object in the background that you hadn't noticed before.'

THEY HAVE GONE

Jena Woodhouse

They have gone
from the seaside house
with windows facing east,
where light welled
with the morning tide
as bright clouds
rose like yeast.

She has polished
thin glass panes
with tears for one last time,
wrapped their memories
in homespun kerchiefs
with a token coin,
an obol for the gatekeeper
to shield the sleeper's
might-have-been
from desolate awakenings
on unimagined streets.

SHOOT OUT

Melanie Kennard

The ball arcs gracefully through the air, landing on the immaculate emerald pitch at my feet with a dull thud. Well, I assume it's a dull thud. With the roar of the crowd, almost 150,000 strong, it's kinda hard to hear. Blood pulses in my ears as I dribble the ball a few steps, delicately side-stepping the other team's Number 18 before I pass the ball to Tesha, on my right. She rushes towards the goal, dark curls bouncing as she boots the ball, sending it flying towards the back of the net. No luck though, the other team's goalie intercepts, landing on her knees and rolling onto the ball. She rises, kicks it away, back into the possession of our opponents. The score remains tied 1-1. Only five minutes left.

It won't end in a deadlock. We'll go to extra time, or even a penalty shoot-out. That is the worst way to win a game; the worst way to lose. Nobody wants to face defeat by way of ordered shots at the goal. We want the frenetic energy of gameplay, the stabbing of elbows into ribs, the piercing shriek of a whistle. That way, if we lose, we can blame it on something else. Something other than a mistimed kick, a misaimed ball. No-one wants to see themselves dropped like that. Because that's the only certainty in this game. Whichever team loses, one of their players will be dropped. Done. Finished. I just have to hope—no, have to work—to make sure it isn't one of ours.

They say it's random which player gets dropped. There's a computer at the sidelines, comically large, called a Random Player Generator. Each player's name and photo are entered at the beginning of the match. Selection is meant to be arbitrary, unpredictable. This doesn't stop people betting on who might end up face-down in the grass come the final whistle. I know there are bookies up in the stands, right now, contributing to the frenzied buzz as they call out odds, encouraging

punters to bet money they don't have. I wonder, briefly, what my odds look like today. Normally I try not to think about it. Definitely don't check. Last thing I need is that omen hanging over my head like an axe.

We've got possession again. Brianna's running the ball back down the field, Manda to her right, me ahead and to her left, there if she needs. At this point in the game, we're all getting desperate. Our blossom-pink shirts and grey shorts are smeared with large green grass stains, as are the periwinkle and white of the other team. Manda's head is bandaged, covering a split eyebrow, hastily wrapped during half-time. An opposing player claws at Bri's shirt, adding another tear to the sweat-damp fabric. Bri flings an arm backwards to dislodge the player as she passes the ball off. The walloping kick is blocked by Bean, who, amazingly, has time to shoot Bri a flash of dazzlingly white teeth—one of her sponsors is a toothpaste company—before dribbling the ball forward. If anyone can get us a goal now, it's Bean, her unending optimism rivalled only by her skill. I keep sprinting forward, ready to assist. Not that Bean needs me. She shoots as the chaos of the crowd crescendos. It's too hard, misaimed. The ball bounces off the goalpost and out of the endlines.

I cringe. That's going to affect Bean's odds, I think, as I stop beneath the bright stadium lights, panting under their searing heat. Brianna scored our first goal, in the thirty-seventh minute, so she's pretty much safe. For the rest of us, every choice, every missed shot, counts. They might say it's random, but we've all been doing this long enough to know that's not true. Innumerable factors affect your chances of walking out of here should your team lose. Things that count, like how well you play the game, which is why we all go our hardest every match. But there's also the more sinister, insidious aspects that might lower your chances. Sponsors matter somewhat, which is why you've gotta be careful what brand you'll slap your name on. How pretty you are, or the colour of your skin are two big factors. It's pretty messed up, but blonde-haired, blue-eyed, tanned players with legs up to their necks almost never get dropped. How many followers you have on socials counts, though if your

following is too big you might be dropped just for the extra outrage it'll cause. After all, there's no such thing as bad publicity.

My odds aren't the worst; they aren't fantastic either. I'm not the tallest, or prettiest, but I am white... though in this heat, my skin is probably more a blotchy, unattractive red, covered in a thick gloss of sweat. I do play hard though, earning myself the reputation as a bit of a human punching bag. Better covered in bruises than a hole to the head. My social followings are average, only a couple of million, and my sponsors are just okay. This season, my biggest sponsor is a company that makes sports bras and period underwear. Hardly the glamorous world of sports drinks and deodorant—those belong to Brianna and Manda—but it's better than the offer I had my first year. A craft store wanted to sponsor me on account of the hair ribbon I wear each game. Fortunately, I wasn't dumb enough to say yes. A sponsor like that would've surely seen me dropped the first match we lost.

Play slows as the ball is thrown back from the sidelines for the other team's goalie to kick. I take another deep breath, readjust today's ribbon. It's pink and grey checked, to match the uniform. Tesha tied it into my hair as we stood in the tunnels, bouncing with nerves, waiting to be led onto the pitch. Each game I wear a new one, making sure to bring an extra for whichever over-eager, heartbreakingly naïve child will be holding my hand as I walk onto the field. Back home, at team HQ, where we all live, breathe and sleep football, I pin these ribbons to the wall above my bed, each marking another game survived. I've only been playing three years; there's eleven ribbons so far. We've lost four of those eleven; we've seen four of our own unceremoniously dropped. The ribbons were my Oma's idea, when I was first drafted. Wear a ribbon each game, she implored me, so I know which player you are. I told her she'd be able to spot me by my name—Riley—and the giant 17 plastered to my back. But Oma insisted. I knew she wasn't happy about my decision to join, not with so much at stake. She wanted a way to stay close. Even with the ridiculous salary I make for doing this, Oma

will never come to a game, though I could afford to fly her anywhere, first-class. She won't risk that. She needs the comfort of the television's off button in case we lose.

I hope Oma's watching today, though I can't even remember where we are, what time zone we're in. Would it be day or night back home? This is the first of four matches in a tournament, ahead of the World Cup in six months. None of the team was impressed when we were told, not even Coach. But they want to hype the cup and the best way is by getting people good and bloodthirsty in advance. Coach wanted to make the matches friendly, so that no-one would be dropped. But friendlies haven't happened in years. If we lose all four games, we'll be down four players in a matter of weeks. Winning will only see our life insurance payouts increase. One million for each game played, regardless of the result, that's what we're guaranteed. For our families if we do end up dropped, or as a payout when we finally age out. If I make it through the entire tournament, I'll be up to fifteen million, on top of my regular salary and sponsorship deals. I'm twenty-one—four more years until I age out. If I ever get there, I'll never have to work, or think, again.

Tickets to these games cost a minimum two hundred dollars. And that's for the bad seats, so far back you can barely see the pitch. This doesn't stop people from buying them, from gushing into the stadium like blood from an opened artery. And everyone watches on TV. Either at home, if they can afford the electricity, or on the giant public screens. Women's sports used to be a joke, until they upped the stakes. Now we're the main event, and most people couldn't name a male athlete, not even with a gun to their head. Which is kind of ironic.

We don't do this for the fans though. It's the money that motivates us. Money and that slim shot at glory. With everything so unaffordable, so many people having to make tough choices about which bill to pay and which necessity to go without, women's football is a fast track to something resembling security. Brianna's one of seven—she plays so her siblings can go to school. Tesha has family overseas, climate refugees

stranded in a camp somewhere—she plays so she can afford to bring them here, one by one. At team HQ, I room with Bean, who never stops talking, not even in her sleep. When I first met her, I couldn't make sense of the nickname. Bean's stocky and muscled, like a staffy, not long and thin like a string bean. Then she explained to me that it's because she's full of beans and suddenly the name made more sense. In the three years since, I haven't learnt Bean's real name. I don't really want to. With her sturdy build and glinting grin, I can't imagine her as anyone else. She joined the league to keep her family farm afloat, devastated by relentless cycles of flood and drought. Most players have similar stories; they join out of necessity. Me, I signed up simply because it was the only way I was ever going to get to play the sport I love.

A sign is held up. We've been given three minutes of stoppage time. Three minutes to sort this thing, to avoid that half-hour of extra time or the dreaded penalty shoot-out. The ball's in our possession again. Heidi passes to Oliana, who passes to Ada, who knocks it back to Myla in goal. We need to stop this ridiculous time-wasting and push forward. Though I can't hear Coach yelling over the raucous crowd, I can see he feels the same. His eyes bulge out of his head as he waves his arms wildly. He keeps removing his sports cap, running his hands through his hair, before ramming the cap back on. He only does that when he's really nervous. Say what you might about the organisation, we all know Coach actually cares about us and not just about the money we can make. That's why he encourages us to do other things, outside of training and socials and sponsorship deals, to prepare for life after football. It's sweet that he believes any of us will have a life after this.

Myla boots the ball downfield. It lands at Tesha's feet, but she can only scotch it a couple of metres closer to goal before three opposing players are on her and she has to pass it off to me. I shoot forward, weaving around an opposing defender. Her nose is red, swollen, most likely broken in an earlier collision. I might be a mess of bruises, but I give as good as I get. I look towards the goalbox. Bean's there, trying

to back me up, but there are too many players on her. I'll have to take it in myself.

It's a risk. If I miss this goal and we end up losing, I'm as good as dropped, no matter what my odds or the bookies say. There's maybe a minute left before the ref blows her whistle. One minute. Now or never. I'm not going to extra time. I'm not going to a shoot-out. I'm about to send the ball flying in a neat but frantic parabola towards the goal when there's a slicing pain in my ankle, the uncomfortable grating of studs grazing the skin through my sock. I go flying, land on my stomach in the penalty box. The whistle shrieks, a yellow card goes up. The ref books the other player, the defender with the broken nose. I stay on the ground, embrace the heavy scent of scuffed grass and foreign soil. It smells like opportunity.

'Onya, Ri!' Bean exclaims, pulling me to my feet. Her grin reaches her ears, slices her face in two. She's twenty-four, only one year left until she's out for good. I want Bean to make it out almost as much as I do myself. My ankle throbs in time with the chanting of the crowd. I have earnt us one final shot, one last chance. Not a penalty shoot-out, but a penalty all the same. Bean boots it into the far-left corner of the net. No hesitation, no faffing about. That's not Bean's style. She cartwheels across the field in celebration. It's kind of her thing. We all have them, these little nuances to make ourselves stand out. I have the ribbons. Bean has her cartwheels. Ada likes to cup her hand behind her ear, to encourage the crowd to cheer louder. It's these things that make people like us, that help keep us safe.

The team rushes Bean, knocking her to the ground mid-cartwheel. They rush me, thumping my back with the force of a bullet. They envelope us both in constrictor hugs. Someone, I think it's Oli, plants a sloppy kiss underneath my left ear. No time left to restart play; the ref blows the whistle. We are triumphant.

The crowd roars, my heart soars. I wrap my arms around Bean and we hold each other tight, shuddering with both joy and dread. Tense with

the knowledge of what could have been. Across the field, the opposition's players are crestfallen, but they do not crouch with their heads in their hands, nor do they weep. They stand, immobile, decrepit mannequins, drifting listlessly away from one another, the few metres between each of them a distance as impassable as an ocean. There's no rule that a losing team has to create this space, or that they must act with dignity. But they always do. Pitching a fit is no way to get dropped. I want to squeeze my eyes shut, to focus on the feel of Bean's shirt against my skin, on the salty, gritty scent of her sweat. I don't want to watch. But I have to. We owe this, at least, to our opposition. Particularly Bean and me. We're responsible for this final goal. We must bear witness to the other team's loss.

A player's photo appears on the giant screens around the stadium as a guard marches onto the pitch. He—it's always a man—reaches the defender with the broken nose. Of course. If Bean and I won our team the game, then she lost it for hers. Guess she won't have to worry about getting that nose fixed. The guard raises his arm, black gun but an extension of his hand. He drops her neatly, the firing bang of the bullet inaudible against the staccato bursts of fireworks, jaunty pop music and the crowd's endless adulation. The defender falls to her knees, as though in celebration, before dropping face-first to the ground. Blood spurts from her head. Her eyes no longer see, but mine do. I watch this, this cost of what we do.

Bean squeezes my hand, tight. I feel the blood pulsing in her palm, throbbing in time with the beat of the music, the thrum of the crowd. We're only a few metres from the dead defender, we can see urine leaking from her shorts onto the pitch. They'll leave her body there for a bit, let people gawk, take photos. There's no respect for the dead here; they only remove the body once the stadium empties, sweeping it away as though it were mere detritus. That dead defender could have been any one of us. In this tournament, in the World Cup, or any of the games that follow. Those are our options now. Age out or be dropped.

We all know dropped is more likely and one day it'll be our corpses
leaking urine onto the field.

The stands remain full. Not one spectator has begun to file out, not
even those with kids. The crowds don't come to see who wins. They
stay to see who loses. To bet on our misery, our misfortune. On the deal
we've made. My eyes fall to the dead defender, her periwinkle jersey
now stained red. Nobody forks out stupid sums to watch a game or to
marvel at our skill. They come for the crumpled body of a woman, not
much older than me, staining the pristine pitch with rust. The sound
of their celebrating screams in my ears.

This is what we play for.

This is what they pay to see.

THE FLOOD

Madeira Miller

We've all been operating
under the assumption that God
meant it when He said He'd
never flood the earth again,

but, shit, remember lying
in bed next to the first man
you ever loved—every fibre
of your being aflame,

achingly alive with the holy
sensation that the sleeping
form beside you was the most
exquisite, remarkable being

to walk the Lord's green earth—
do you still remember
the symmetrical freckles
on each of his earlobes?

The promises you made
like vows? How he walked
out of the life you built
like an ark, then a shipwreck,

around loving him?
Do you recall how your

best friend swore to God
that it would always

be the two of you?
All you have left of her
is her location, a silent
ghost in your phone,

Polaroids in a box
hidden beneath a film
of dust in your closet.
All those empty, broken

promises like eggshells
scattered around
your room, crunching
beneath your feet

when you drag yourself
out of bed. Think about
the rapturous abandonment
which left you bedridden

for a month last summer.
The swimming Godlike
eyes that you now avoid
religiously. Forgive me,

Father in Heaven, for
this lack of faith
in the people You crafted
in Your image. Forgive

me, Father, for the raft
in my garage and the way
I put on my life jacket
every time it rains.

SOME ADOLESCENT THOUGHTS

Lorraine Gibson

1969. A strangely hot Scottish summer. I was thirteen years of know-it-all immortal—occupied with the heat of budding adolescence. Old Sarah Fraser sat in the kitchen; her pillowy-bosom (the delight of sleepy toddlers) propped on our red formica table. Her floral frock with its bouquet of blue-hollyhocks and pink peonies bloomed with sweat. And Sarah was keening for her daughter—*Moya, my Moya*. And Nana was, *shsh-shushing* and *there-there'ing*, giving me her *leave the room* look. I breathed the uninvited smell of adult frailty—the air charged with unknowns. I listened to the tale of Moya (thirty-two), Sarah's only child, struck down while shopping at the Market Cross. I pictured the berry of crimson blood, bursting, flooding her brain, saw her felled by the enormous dose of hormones in the 'Fabulously Freeing' new contraceptive pill. And I thought—Why the tears. Wasn't thirty-two a pretty-good innings? Oh, and the jealousy. Not of Moya. No. Her passing offered a frisson—a story to be shared—at school. I was jealous of Moya's daughter. Let's call her—*Helen half-an-orphan*. My friend Helen—fellow ballet dancer. We used to dance with flowers plucked from a fuchsia bush. Grown-ups said I was 'The bonnie one'. Channelling Margot Fontaine—I held my pink and purple fuchsia aloft: this tiny petalled ballerina pirouetted under long-imagined, longed-for spotlights—on point, in her bright silken tutu. But here comes *Helen-half-an-orphan*. Helen, so sad, so very plain, so now the bloody centre of attention.

WRITER'S BLOCK EXIT

Dotun Jide

The pounding of the stick
on the hide, speaks loudly
to the worried ear.

káre, káre

The crowd, wild,
run helter-skelter
from the masquerade's whip.
The attendants follow suit,
flogging the ancestral being:
groaning and swaying swiftly,
halfway through this world and the next.

Káre: Yórùbá word for 'well done!'

FIRST MEETINGS

Mrityunjay Mohan

You unwrap me, turn, twist the paper that holds my heart / break it /
two chunks of what it means to be human / beats at the hollow space
between my dried lungs / like raisins / like clouds in the winter /
stretching / compressing / folding / like metal chairs after an / event /
rings of wrinkles / broken lines that / swim through skin / that assigns
an age to your / face / your body

I am ageless / floating between the wrinkled clouds / between /
sentences that threaten to become real / between nightmares that
blend with sensible thoughts and / practical lives / I fall on each cloud
/ every wrinkle caressing my body / holding me like / I am its infant
child / or its lover / my face to its breasts / kissing at the bud of my
nose / the cloud's tongue slips into my / mouth / like candy that melts
/ that cannot hold its shape

On the call / my mother's friend tells her to stop begging for money /
she doesn't know how to stop / the clouds float under me / with wings
or not, I am not sure / on the call / mother's friend tells her to fuck off
/ to hide in a closet full of / dirty clothes / to never return / on the call /
mother's friend tells her that her prayers are fruitless for she is / impure
/ mother falters / falls beneath the clouds

You say a name / ask for mine / I do not possess any / name / my body
is one without a / label / with clouds askew / under me / like clothes
on a metal hanger / I am a hanger / clumps of ageless flesh and skin
and blood my shirt / that augur to flow into you / corrupt you like it did
/ me / and although I didn't choose the / name I was given / I choose

the name I tell you / and I fade in / splotches of colour / turn into a
technicolour movie from the time before / my body aches / you peel
the paper / the wrapper / I think about mother

I want to say I caught her / but / I cannot / she dips into the sunlight
like water / mother's body a casting of mud that threatens to cover
every surface / in contact / my face / the clouds / the bodies that are
buried and lost / stuck under tombstones and flowers / I cannot hold
her because I simply have nothing to give / I reach my hand out once
but / my fingers return to me with streaks of mud / and dust

My candy skin burns / you twist until my skin comes undone / wrapper
scrapes against my chin / your fingers split open my / flesh / the
wrinkles around the other bodies smooth into a clump / flashes red
and white and grey / becomes ash / you do not touch my flesh as you
/ unwrap the skin / around my mouth / you want to know me / about
what I am not sure of

Is this how first meetings / begin / I want to ask you to listen to the /
voices I hear / I want to use your mouth to talk because / mine doesn't
work anymore / I talk about my mother / her mottled flesh and
pockmarked skin / scars like dust / scars like a river / it flows between
her eyes, past her neck and waist and knee / it aches / you tell me to
stop talking about her / to tell you about me

I tell you I am ageless / that I float in the clouds / you say that isn't
possible / age scars across my skin / I want to pull away when you
kiss me / but my mouth opens and / I kiss you back / I want to push
you into the river of wounds that I inhabited / but I don't know how
to get there or / to leave / I want to take you through the candies and
wrappers / but I am unwrapped before you / I don't know how to cover
myself / anymore

My mother weeps / the clouds part / mist fogs up windows like the
 lens of a glass when breathing through a mask / I hold your fingers
 and count the seconds until I can start telling you about her / cheekily,
 you ask if you'd need her approval to love me / I don't know what to
 say because I will seek for her approval before I could ever / love you /
 before I could ever show you the rest of me

First meetings are a / tedious thing / I don't know what to talk about
 / so I tell you about my mother / about my sister and father / she's in
 the clouds, I tell you / she's somewhere with a river of scars / you look
 / blank as a chalkboard in school / tainted and black and twisted like
 an anklet / like a wrapper / I can find her / my mother with her river of
 scars and broken clouds / with hearts made of paper planes

I tell you I am just like her / that when I am refused / I fall apart / you
 say you wouldn't refuse me anything, but / I know a lie more than I
 know any truth / you had already denied me my mother / you had
 already denied me to talk about twisted wrappers and / ageless skin
 and / the clouds underneath my material body and / my mother's river
 of scars / you had already denied me something sacred / I fall / rise
 again, but speak no more of her / you ask why I am sullen / I am quiet

You tell me about your mother but / she is nothing like mine / she
 doesn't sink between clouds / she doesn't smell of turmeric in the
 mornings / she doesn't have a river of scars that mottle her frame /
 I listen anyway / you stretch your arms / I wonder if it can reach the
 clouds / if you can float like me too / if you'll sink like mother / you try
 to kiss me again but / I shake my head

Food arrives in china plates and cups / I sip at the tea / I nibble at the
 rice / it is nothing like the scar I house in my kitchen as I cook / it is

nothing that screams of familiarity / of love in the mornings and /
 resentment in the evenings / of enforced bed times and / old warped
 belts / I don't tell you about the time I was looked at nude / I don't tell
 you about the time I thought I needed no protection / I save it all for
 another time

DEAR PARKING INSPECTOR

Jane Downing

Dear Parking Insector

I refer to your ticket of the 11th of the month just gone.

I would like to start out by apologising sincerely for any inconvenience caused by my inadvertently parking for longer than the prescribed time in this obviously prime parking zone.

I only pulled in on the off chance without the slightest intention of parking for more than a moment. The storms of life can be unexpected and overwhelming, as you would probably know only too well in your official capacity as guardian of our streets. If only we had such vigilant inspectors on the other side of the garden gate. I'd thought marriage was a *No Parking At Any Time* zone for cruising predators, but what would I know? Maybe the signage was changed outside my house while I was busy and vigilant guiding my children through our over-trafficked world. Your colleague the lollypop lady is a beacon of hope every afternoon.

You will undoubtedly be muttering about now, and quite rightly so, that I should have read the signs. It clearly says *15 Minute Limit* around this intersection. (Fifteen years for marriages apparently). But in my defence, you would have noticed from the angle of my Bob Janes to the curb that I had other things on my mind. You should never turn your back on a heaven-sent opportunity. Seize the day they say. The chance may never come again. The gods are fickle.

Her front door was ajar you see. (When is a door not a door? When it is a jar! This was my oldest child's first funny joke). I can admit all that follows here because my actions were legally far from prosecutable—this was no *Break and Enter*. An open door is an open invitation; one never before offered. Yes, that does mean what you think. I have been

known to cruise down that street on occasion. It's not stalking. He is my husband. And yes, maybe I should have read the parking regulations on a previous drive-by, but you try making out philandering shadows behind upstairs lace curtains in a moving car. (I kid you not: he is playing away with a woman who chose *lace* curtains). There is little time in these circumstances for taking in roadside signage however subsequently important.

I only wanted to look. That was always and only my intention. There's no harm in looking, my father used to say. Look and don't touch and all that. (Not a philosophy my husband adhered to.) I ran in as fast as I could. I was going to be quick. But you wouldn't read about it ...

Well, seeing you've come with me this far in my letter, dear Parking Inspector, perhaps you will. I've imagined you a man to this point, but it strikes me now that with *Equal Opportunity Policies* the way they are, you might not be. Maybe you are a woman and will understand my pain.

The first thing I saw was the shelf of Mills and Boon romances. Really. It goes without saying my hackles were up. I may not be adept in reading parking prohibitions but give me a little credit for some intellectual capacity. The book must have jumped out at me. Next thing, *An Abiding Love* was in my hand, pages open at a particularly apropos, and as my beautiful children would describe it, particularly irksome, *icky kissy bit*.

Is it my fault that books are so like birds? When they fly, their wings spread and flutter. But not altogether like birds I discovered. Gravity takes them eventually. At my bidding the whole shelf took flight and plummeted. The mock-avian carcasses on the lounge room carpet (thick, a pinky-mushroom shade of shagpile) filled me with a rage I cannot begin to explain to you, or myself. All those pathetic, spine-cracked romances. I sat and wept.

Maybe you were writing ticket ref no. 157261 at just that moment. And at just that moment, my baby decided this was the opportune time to arrive. I stepped carefully over the heap of books on the carpet, and,

you'll please forgive me if I admit this, I ignored your parking ticket when I got to the car.

Then a woman, a random woman my oldest would call her in the parlance of the playground, coughed behind me as I struggled with the door between contractions. She insisted on driving me to the hospital. She said little else, my saviour. She may have said something about understanding. Between the contractions I asked her to keep to the speed limit as I flung your ticket unopened in its plastic sheath onto the dashboard.

No need to dash, I said. *I've attracted enough official umbrage for the day.*

It has taken me some weeks to write this. In former times you would have come to this conclusion without me having to say. There would have been the changes in ink (black to blue to black again), the changes in script denoting my mood (the scribble compared to the heavily formal crossing of 't's and dotting of 'i's). But computers are emotionless beasts; they draw in our pain and spit out uniform 12 pt Times New Roman regardless.

I was having an odd feeling as I came to the latter section of my apology to you (see above: and the apology is sincere, believe me). The feeling was like the tingling you get when the milk is coming in. If you are a woman you will understand, if you are a man you may have to come up with your own simile. It was not milk, of course; it was a thought coming.

A thought about my prettily plump saviour who left me and my car at the maternity section of the hospital and disappeared un-thanked. The thought is still just there out of reach. I need more sleep.

My newest, tiny, vulnerable, perfect baby finally sleeps beside me as I write this. Her hands spasm as she dreams, and she makes mewling noises like a kitten. For the moment I am so in love it surprises me. As it did with each of the children in their turn.

Now I feel a need to thank this Good Samaritan who drove me away from my illegal park. That out-of-reach thought niggles ...

My deepest apologies continue for my prolonged calls on your attention, dear Parking Inspector. Luckily, I have not had the wherewithal to post this letter so I can add more apologies—and thanks, now that I have met you in person.

Your kindnesses are manifold. The coffee you supplied me with, gave a lift to my morning, though perhaps your good ear as I followed you about your business with that handy-computerised-fining-system had more effect on my spirits.

Obviously, I had to go back to the scene of the crime—for crime it was in your Dear Parking Inspector eyes. (I resolve never to overstay the time limit, double park or in any way breach your regulations again.) But, since we are speaking of crimes, I assure you I was not the hasty stalker this morning when our paths crossed on the street of the *15 Minute Time Limit*. I was the considered detective. I had parked over at the shops.

When I made my way to the street, I found, sure enough, that the parking situation is the nightmare I remember. It looks as though only residents can do it with impunity. My husband's car is now there on a regular basis in a reserved section with a special *Resident's Sticker* for good measure. The unfortunate scratch along its passenger side indicates it is not the most salubrious spot to park in our fair town. Such a scratch requires the sharp edge of a fifty-cent coin, but let us not speak of crime again ...

How had my Good Samaritan found a park there? I hope I did not cause you even more work and that she did not receive a ticket from you while she was away being my helper.

I should have asked you about this when you appeared near my husband's freshly scarred vehicle. You were shorter than I expected, if you don't mind me saying, though your uniform made up for any wont

of stature. The slouch hat is particularly symbolic of your fight against the open civil disobedience on our streets. And, of course, I never expected you would smile so please do not feel in any way obligated on that account.

The sun was our friend, was it not? You must enjoy your work on days such as those. The rhythm of the pace along the footpaths, the sneaking peaks into tended gardens and through open doors; the precision of the rules. With the baby nestled in a sling next to my heart and the takeaway coffee warming my hands I could have done your rounds with you all day. I only left to get back to the mall's parking lot before your professional expertise was again required.

Your wisdom stays with me. Your comfortable silences, and your supportive comments.

You said that there are no coincidences, only fate.

I keep forgetting to pop this letter into an envelope before I go out. But when I go out, I do remember to look for you. I see the fluorescent colours of the modern road worker in the distance and imagine it is you every time.

Yet, such fluorescent markers have not led to you for days. Where are you? Is there a particularly bad spate of overdue shoppers down around the mall? Did you pick up a cold? There has been a nip in the air, lurking under the sunshine.

So, I—needs must—will have to continue our correspondence instead of delighting you in person. Because you were right about coincidences and fate. You will be nodding as you read this. *Of course, of course.*

Coincidence is for parlour games. The intersections of fate are for the Great Novels of the twenty-first century. At the time, I willed myself not to say *I don't believe this*. Forgive me, for I did nevertheless shout it very loudly.

You see, I have met the other woman. And I have not thanked her.

You seemed to have guessed already, aided by your superior knowledge of local parking by-laws no doubt, but you were so subtle in trying to alert me with your talk of coincidence. It was like a pantomime. You could see the villain backstage. Maybe you should have screamed, 'Look out. She's behind you!'

Now I know. I looked into the face of my husband's mistress and recognised her as my helper that day.

And she appears to be offering to send my husband back. To park his car in my driveway and his slippers back under the marital bed. The children were pawing at the bottom of my skirt as she suggested this on my front doorstep.

'You need him more than I do,' she said.

Her Good Samaritan streak cannot be entirely natural. Do you think drugs? Or were the manly bristles left in the sink too much every morning, the dirty socks on the floor, the atonal snoring?

I am without words. No wonder I can't even organise a trip to the post office to send this letter to you.

Dear Parking Inspector. I have forgotten what I hoped to achieve by writing this prolonged letter. My tired mind is like that these days. Now I come to think about it though, you will obviously not be able to see your way clear to forgive me my *Financial Punishment*. Ticket ref. no. 157261 doubtlessly will not be ripped up and binned.

Thank you therefore, for your time, and for the extra time I took illegally. I have made a bank transfer for the appropriate amount to cover the fine.

Dear Friend—does the above conclusion sound quite formal enough? Shall I now finish my letter with a jaunty *have a nice day*? Though surely that cannot be the correct end to an official letter, can it?

There are never any real conclusions of course. Or at least, that is the kind of wise thing I'd expect you to say. I am glad I ran into you

again, though I must add to my already long list of apologies a genuine, heartfelt sorry for the bruising. You have such lovely firm legs, and... But that is a subject we can canvas at dinner tonight. Let us just agree it is lucky the trousers of your uniform are so thick and protective, though it was also just as well to get them off to check your skin. No scratches on the bumper of my car to speak of either.

I appreciate your concern and agree it would be best I leave my car at home tonight. I await yours pulling into the drive. I await. It is a nice precise sentence.

Sincerely Yours
As I Await

鬼地方 UNHOLY PLACE

MICHAEL CHANG

u try so hard for everyone else, wut abt doing something for urself

google search: charlie puth height

brodsky claimed that birds in poems = the poet themselves

more likely: birds in poems = carl phillips

i'd rather get squished by a tank than write abt tiananmen

shush, sanctimonious cathy

change the label, still sewage in a bottle

i'm a serious child, ur an ekphrastic of an ekphrastic

when i was a preteen & closer to death

i was ashamed for the boy & his bike

huge, shiny & new

so practiced at lifting my legs, separating from reality

shaft me gig economy

i rely on a strength, it comes from inside

i wait to walk behind u, stare gratuitously

u have the same idea, so clever

i look twice

there is dignity in work

like piss hitting the back of a statue

soon ur breathing on me

elevator in limbo: 16th floor

knowing how to proceed: another kind of surrender

QUESTIONABLE TROPISM

Leo Vanderpot

Look here, not there, see not the hat what he wears and what he thinks
but what he wats in a moment of Sartreian intensity—*‘Don’t let this
happen’*—as his friend from his neighbourhood days returns now in
the face of a stranger walking toward him on the western sidewalk of
Fifth Avenue, cool Fall day uptown-bound and now wacked-aware of
how much he’s missed W/O admitting it—friendship an asleep topic
in him awakens life ... will he keep this spark, jump a step on time’s
demands or opt for slippage into compromised lessnesses?

SUPERTARGET

In memory of Allen Ginsberg

Liam Flake

Walking all night through green belts and highways
and crosswalks I arrive at your monument—

taller than Babel, blinding neon burning
your asphalt fields and the waiting dark;
how bright the unblinking promise of
Commodity™ beaming through glass faces.

In labyrinthine aisles I dream endlessness:
plasticine mirage, anything possible
in depths of colossal freezers, dredging trophic
transcendence in the produce. In

clarifying fluorescence I rove past bath
towels and tables and coat hangers—

was 3.99 now 2.89, was 1.99 now 77¢

shelved cereal boxes of every variety,
blenders disinfectants holiday display;

iPads, dollar section near the doors;
novelty waffle makers art supplies
& bubble bath. For a while as a kid
the awaited experience of August
was school supply shopping here
with my grandmother; now

in atrophic aisles I shop with her ghost.
Scaling your unfathomable heights
— so much empty air — I lose footing
in the crags and topple upon cardboard

and plywood at once sweep out
in oceans of options and plastics;
drown in decisions. Is this the consumerist's

sublime? Oh I am devoured
in your sales and offerings consumed
in superlative space. My feet recall
the ritual of your aisles & endcaps
as they have since middle school
when I would wander here with friends
after class three days a week—the only
the only destination in a walkable radius
for a handful of preteens. In your eye
I am apostrophic, possessive; ecstatic
in accumulation. yet here at 3:00 A.M.

— alone, outside your doors —

I am unlatched in negative space, inconsolably
singular in the still and nothingness. A few miles away

the highway warbles its restless lull; the countless
monuments of the sprawl lay bare to the catastrophic
quiet flooding the wide vacant spaces. The status symbols
slip from their prophetic fallacy and the lonely highway
warbles on.

ORPHANS OF THE STORM

—a eulogy

Vincent Brincat

We'd sheltered so long under the cover of your umbrella,
that we had forgotten how drenching the rain could actually be.

Orphaned . . . as we are, we stare out of a dust clad window.
The sunlight's glare causes our eyes to squint as we try to make sense
of that which lies just beyond.

Uncertain, we retreat within ourselves clinging to what we know
and shrugging off that which threatens.

There is a kind of peace in solitude, yet, no reprieve.

A storm that circles overhead will have its way;
it gathers and tugs at emotions that remain as frail and fragile
as a layer of thin ice, stretched across the surface of a pool of water
on a crisp winter morn.

NAMING

Angela Costi

When he wakes he will notice
the sapling is no longer a sapling
not a tree yet, but something

months ago, in the corner of the courtyard
sprouting from soil devastated by human and dog waste
the growth commenced a daring entrance

a new green
a colour to hug a brain harnessed to keyboard surfing
he'd approached its shoots as if he'd found a baby in mud

quietly crouching to study how the fern
if it was a fern
had vertebrae so strong, had fingers so soft

when the *Something-green* met his eyes
with a spinal cord moving like a wave
he murmured *Hello*

This morning the window is smudged
with his breath
as the frame is engulfed by a swaying mountain

an expert claiming to be more than gardener
named it a *Jacaranda*

until it defied blooming purple

after weeks of trying to name it
to find the word that will give it sense
he landed on *Acacia*

no wattles will birth
though there are elongated branches of long-haired fronds
marching or dancing, depending on the wind

he is a man who carries worry in the swell of his flesh
walking towards *Something-green*
hovering above his carport without any need of him at all

A WRITER'S RESOLUTION

Merrill Hatlen

I don't usually make New Year's resolutions, knowing full well that I'm likely to fail, but this year is different. Having finally established my identity as an author, with my first novel under my belt, I've resolved to get out while the gettin's good. A bit of an overstatement, I suppose, as I may be one of the worst selling authors of all time, but I never suffered from any delusions of becoming famous. Nonetheless, I had no idea that being an author could be such a slippery slope, inclining me toward an abyss of envy and greed—arch enemies of genuine satisfaction.

For writing, I've discovered, is just like traveling. No matter how far you go, how much ground you cover, and how many sights you see, it's never enough; *more* becomes your watchword. To my credit, I have curtailed my expectations. I've come to the realisation that my first foray into historical fiction isn't everyone's cup of tea. If anything, I have always prided myself on being above the mass market, clinging to the pretext of being an author of literary fiction. In that respect, my greed is relatively self-contained. No one expects a sophisticated man of letters to crank out books like sausages. Suffice it to say, I'm no Agatha Christie.

Truth be told, I didn't anticipate the social consequences of outing myself as an author. In that respect, I'm not quitting while I'm ahead, but cutting my losses. I no longer see the world through rose-coloured glasses, but through a glass darkly. My dim view is underscored by the dearth of friends who have bothered to read my book; I have to stifle the words which I want to blurt out like Cesar, *Et tu, Brute?* I can count the number of friends who have even said anything to me about my novel, other than congratulations. I want to say, 'Congratulations on what? On finding a publisher who was such a sucker for yet another book about Shakespeare?'

The worst part, of course, is the inevitable question that I get: ‘What next?’ as if it’s perfectly alright to put me on the spot. Obviously, such boors fail to appreciate that it’s not kosher to ask a writer about what they’re working on; tantamount to showing a fool a half-finished house. What makes anyone think that they can pop such a probing question to an author? Most people know better than to ask a doctor or a therapist about a patient; authors, on the other hand, are considered fair game. So, in this season of holiday wishes, please pardon my platitude: be careful what you wish for.

RESONATE

Owen Bullock

my life reaches
a scary new level
I spell Nietzsche
correctly
without looking it up

*

going for it
world record
for the mile
in the rain
with a triple rainbow

*

talking
assemblage theory
she says
I can imagine you
as a rhizome, darling

*

they’ll give us
compensation
if we stay silent . . .
a pelican glides
across the water

A STORM PASSES

Ross Donlon

A night storm passes, grumbling
like the last bus, cranky motor
rumbling past the wakened moon.
Faulty wiring flashes a warning
to anything still sleeping in the sky.

Wheels throw plumes into spray,
headlights roam innocent houses,
peer in bedrooms and rotate walls.
X-rayed trees turn pale then skeletal.
Then the whole thing rumbles
through an intersection, two intersections,
without stopping to look each way.
Lights flicker their calligraphy in the sky,
that older form of frightening.

Heedless of anything left after dark,
the bus smashes through a flyover,
an ignorant town whose streets won't fit.
A bridge becomes a sieve, cars caught in the mesh.
St Somebody's Cathedral gets smashed by diamonds.

Then the event pauses, as if checking its notes.
OK. Home. Floor it.
Revving, the storm grips stars with a snarl,
then heaves on its way, intent flashing in neon.
A shrinking horizon thinks about hiding

but the storm seems tired now, dragging a chain of sparks.
Bad tempered farts bang out from the rear.
There could be trouble later tonight if it loses GPS,
can't find the depot in the dark.

HOT BREAKFAST IN ANCOATS WHEN I'M DOWN & OUT

Blossom Hibbert

After I wake on a muckpile of sleep & draw the
threadbare coat round me till it becomes three
hotel walls & the second I rise, as imperfect as an
uncooked egg or heartburn or worrying about my
soldier's wet socks under ready salted bombs.

Lupus flower on the bed side table unblooms itself
& pips of heaven chuck down outside a very clean
window Heave up with empty rooms inside my thorax
now wander around white marrow of Manchester
knowing there are pretty wooden cottages in the
mountains somewhere & painted churches on a hill &
quiet venereal diseases to be caught from one's
beloved.

Order first hot meal for four or five days of
travelling. If you were here we would be guessing
the lives of other cafe Goers & whether they are
Bad people. Breakfast legs folded or postcards? No
one said it would turn out this way fearing
newspaper ink clutching overpacked rucksacks now
Dive into an art gallery on mosley street & witness
an explosion at the local cucumber factory.

IN PLAIN SIGHT

Maggie Brookes-Butt

Although your legs stick out under the sofa,
we say, 'Oh no! We've lost her!' and ask 'Is she
in the toy box, or behind the door, or in the fridge?'
ignoring your delighted giggles, and we feign
astonishment when you pop out, for we are practised
at not noticing. The emperor's new clothes are
everywhere. We didn't see the world getting hotter,
the rich getting richer, seas bobbing with plastic,
kindness ebbing like water through sand—it all
just jumped out on us. We were busy looking
behind curtains and under cushions for a better world.

THE LAST OF THE JUDGES

Hannah Ratner

Three months before I was born, my father got up and left one spring morning. I imagine that it was a foggy day, the air very still and heavy. Ma cried and cried, and Olive did too, though she was too young to know what they were crying about. And Ma prayed that I would be a better and stronger man than my father. She named me Samson because I was meant to lift her up from her grief, to be her strength. I didn't know any of these things, of course, when I was born.

By age six, I was already over five feet tall. Olive, three years older than I, was much smaller. On more days than not, Ma didn't leave her bed until the late evening; I would hear her clatter around in the kitchen as I chased my own sleep.

In my earliest memory of Ma, I was four or five. I had come down for water in the middle of the night to find her asleep at the kitchen table, a partially eaten slice of chocolate cake on a plate in front of her. I remember the lilac of her eyelids.

I crept quietly towards her. Her hair was tied back, and I reached out and let the bottom of her ponytail tickle my hand. Then I stretched a hand toward the chocolate cake on the plate and pressed a loose crumb under my finger. I brought it to my mouth and licked the cake off. And then Ma lifted her head and looked right at me.

'Samson?' she said, and I startled and backed away, my finger still in my mouth. 'It's okay,' she said. 'It's okay.' Like she was coaxing a small, scared animal.

'I'm sorry,' I whispered. I turned and ran from the kitchen.

Ma never mentioned that night to me. Maybe she thought she'd been dreaming.

Because of Ma's condition, it was really Olive who raised me. For several years, the three of us ate scrambled eggs, pasta, and peanut butter and jellies, because that was all that Olive could make. Ma was an only child, and both of her parents had died by the time she was twenty-five, so we had her modest inheritance to live off, and the small amount of money she made on occasion when she sold a poem she had written to a magazine.

Every Tuesday Olive and I went to the grocery store on our way home from school. In the morning Olive would venture into Ma's bedroom before school and come back with two twenty-dollar bills. Sometimes, if Ma was having a good day, the money was already there on the counter when we came down for breakfast. Olive always handled the money because she was older and better at math, but I could carry more than her, shopping bags heavy with milk and cans of soup two to an arm. Once, when I was sick, Olive took three hours to walk home from the store because she had to stop to set the bags down so often.

It was Olive who taught me how to hold a pencil. Standing on a step stool in front of the kitchen sink, her dark hair in a bun and arms covered up to the elbow in soap suds, she watched me practice my letters, and gently chastised me when I held the pencil wrong. It took me two years to get used to writing with the pencil balanced between pointer and middle finger. I missed the secure feeling of the pencil enclosed in my fist.

I remember the day I asked her. Olive was doing the dishes after dinner, and I sat at the table, struggling with my first-grade addition worksheet. I watched her scrub a plate and asked my question over and over in my head, trying to decide how exactly to say it. Then I opened my mouth and just let the question come out before I could push it back in again. This, I'd found, was the best way to say something when I was afraid to.

'Why am I so big?' I asked.

Olive looked up from the plate. 'You're growing. All kids grow.'

‘But why am I bigger than all the other kids? Why am I bigger than you?’

‘You were just born that way. Hasn’t Ma told you?’

And that’s when Olive told me about my father, and Ma crying and praying, and that when Ma went into labour, I was so big that they had to cut her open to get me out. She said that the doctor put me in Ma’s arms and brought Olive in to see me, and Ma said that now she had both her peace and her strength, Olive and Samson.

After that, Olive said, I grew twice as fast as other babies.

‘So that’s why you’re big.’

‘But I don’t want to be big.’

‘Well, Ma prayed for it.’

I remember thinking about this. Maybe I could handle being different from the kids at school, if I knew it was what Ma wanted.

‘How big will I grow?’

‘When Ma is strong enough, that’s when you’ll stop growing.’

Three years later, I was six feet tall. My sister and I attended a K-12 school a half an hour walk down the hill from our house. We lived in a town of a few thousand, which shared a public school district with two neighbouring towns. There was no bus system, so students whose parents couldn’t drive them walked, a few from more than an hour away. Though our walk home was steep, I wouldn’t have traded our house on the hill for anything. When the cherry blossom trees which lined the walk up to the house bloomed for those few short weeks in May, and the green of the grass seemed infused with new life, I liked to imagine that I was a forest sprite, with my own peaceful mountain, and acorns and berries from the trees that lined the hill as my sustenance.

Every morning we left for school at seven sharp, closing the door quietly so as not to wake Ma. During the milder months, these walks were pleasant. I would run ahead of her and then wait, breathless, against a tree for her to catch up to me, the morning air cool and whispery in my lungs. When it was colder, we bundled ourselves in

multiple hats and scarves, and took turns with a small blanket that Ma had knit for Olive when she was born, wrapping it around our faces.

Then there were days when the cold was almost unbearable. We could walk over a mile looking down at our feet with next to no idea how far we’d gone, trying to protect our faces from the sudden gusts of wind. Sometimes I cried from the cold. We must have looked strange, Olive trying to comfort me, wiping the freezing tears from my cheeks with her little gloved hand; I had to bend down so she could reach.

‘Look, Samson,’ said Olive. ‘Like ripples across a pond!’ She blew on the thermos of soup in her hands, tilting it towards me so I could see.

‘Not really,’ I said. ‘More like it’s vibrating.’ I blew on my own soup. ‘See? Like how a big sound moves water.’

Olive and I liked to disagree about what things looked like. We were in the upper-elementary school’s courtyard, where students were allowed to eat lunch under the watch of the art teacher, Mrs Hill. It never occurred to me, at the time, that Olive might want to eat her lunch with her middle school friends. We ate lunch together in the courtyard every day until it got cold, because lunch was the only time during the school day when we could be together. I didn’t have any friends of my own age to eat lunch with, but among the kids in my class I wasn’t bullied so much as ignored. When it got too cold to eat outside, I sat alone in the cafeteria and listened to kids talk about things that were foreign to me: TV shows and Top 40 radio and Star Wars. We’d never owned a TV, and the only music I really listened to was Ma’s collection of old classical music CDs. Sometimes I sat so near a group of kids that I might have looked like one of them, and they never seemed to mind. But I never joined their conversations.

Mrs Hill was a nice lady, and a good art teacher. I tried hard in her class, and maybe for that reason she liked me. I liked when we did drawing; my big hands didn’t seem to get in the way like they did when we made sculptures. I liked to fill a page with tight scribbles and swirls,

in pencil and crayon. *Primrose. Dandelion. Fern. Robin's Egg Blue.* I chose each crayon meticulously. My favourite was *Wild Blue Yonder*, a greyish blue that felt like its name.

Mrs Hill always wanted to know why you had drawn something. The nice thing about this was that you didn't have to make something that looked like anything, as long as you could tell her why you'd made it. When Mrs Hill asked me what I'd drawn, I'd look hard at the paper until some thought or feeling came to me. The game Olive and I played of saying what things looked like had trained me to see things when I wanted to.

'It's the day I turned seven,' I'd say. 'This is what it felt like.'

A lot of things are harder when you are bigger than everyone else.

At eleven I became very curious about kissing. I imagined what it would be like and thought that I would have to kneel—I was a foot and a half taller than the tallest girl in my class. When the kids in my year started dating and going to dances together, I knew that I was excluded from that world, that no one would ever ask me which girl I liked or share with a knowing whisper which girl might like me.

Until I was fifteen, I entertained the hope that I'd simply stop growing before everyone else did. If Ma had been well enough to take me to see a doctor when I was younger, this hope might have been quashed earlier. The reality was that she wasn't, she never seemed to be getting much better at all. Finally, Olive enlisted her friend Mollie to drive us to a nearby paediatrician's office.

I remember that the paper gown the nurse gave me barely covered me, so that I made myself sit very still with my hands in my lap in case it moved. When I got up on the examination table, I felt it creak under my weight. Then a kind-eyed doctor came in and took some blood and x-rays of my wrists. There was nothing wrong with my hormone levels, he told me. Whatever was causing my abnormal growth wasn't evident

in any of the tests he ran. What he could tell me was that I wasn't done growing—in fact, my growth plates indicated that I probably had a few years of growth left in me.

I cried in the parking lot. Olive wrapped her small arms around my waist as Mollie stood off to the side and examined a spot of dirt on her red Honda Civic, her hands shoved deep in the pockets of an oversized denim jacket. When I was done crying, we got back in Mollie's car and rode back up the winding path to our house on the hill where Ma was surely still in bed.

When we pulled into our driveway Olive twisted around from the passenger seat to face me. 'Mollie and I were gonna go see a movie in town. Are you okay going in alone?'

'Yeah.'

'You're sure? Look at me, Samson. If you're upset and you want me to stay with you, you can say so.'

'I'm fine.' I could see Mollie's eyes, downturned, in the rear-view mirror, and felt heat rise to my ears.

'Okay. Check on Ma when you get inside, okay? I'll be back soon.'

'Sure.'

Olive didn't go out often, and without her the house was unnervingly silent. I hesitated at Ma's bedroom door, wondering whether to knock. There was no reason to wake her, I decided. I was just meant to 'check on her'—for exactly what, I had never been sure.

Ma's bedroom was tidy—Olive saw to that—but had its usual sour stench of sweat and unventilated air. The curtains were drawn over the windows. Decorations were sparse: a photo of Ma in her early twenties performing in a ballet, next to a framed newspaper snippet of the article that had praised the beautiful young soloist's 'languid and easy grace'. A photo of Ma's brother, mid-laugh, his arm thrown around Ma's shoulders at her wedding.

Ma's breathing was heavy and steady—she seemed to be deep asleep. The peanut butter sandwich that Olive had made her that morning lay

half-eaten on her night table. Nestled underneath her blanket, her dark waves splayed out on her pillow, she looked peaceful, and not very sick at all. I knelt down beside the bed and watched the blanket rise and fall with her breath.

‘It’s Samson,’ I whispered. She shifted slightly and I froze, watching her until I was sure that she was asleep. I couldn’t let her hear me; she couldn’t know that I was having trouble being strong for her. ‘When will you be strong enough, Ma?’

I was starting to cry again so I got up and left the room, closing her door quietly behind me. If she woke up and found her sheets damp with tears, she might wonder.

On the day before my twentieth birthday, I went home to visit Ma. I was settling into my life and myself, with a small apartment and a job as a furniture mover that kept me fed and made me feel like my size was good for something. With things starting to fall into place for me, I suddenly felt guilty about Ma living all alone in that house on the hill, and I thought that I should visit her.

When I let myself into the house, I found her sitting at the kitchen table. It was strange to see her there; in all the years I’d lived at home I could only remember a handful of times that she cooked or sat down at the table to eat. Her hair was pure white in what I considered a very refined way, and her face was still surprisingly youthful.

‘My Samson,’ she said, and a bit of pink even seemed to light up her cheeks. ‘Come in here, Samson. Let me get a look at you.’

I ducked under the kitchen doorway and stood there awkwardly in the light. I felt like I was being inspected by a stranger, but she was a stranger who I loved, and that was a hard thing to hold in one place in my mind. ‘How tall are you now, Samson?’

‘Seven-foot-ten, Ma.’

‘And still growing?’

‘No, Ma. I stopped growing at eighteen.’

‘I see.’ Her gaze was appraising, and I couldn’t tell if she liked what she saw. It had been two years since I’d seen her, and even more since she’d seen me in full light. ‘Your father was a rather small man, you know. Not the most gifted in stature.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you see your sister often?’

‘Yes. I saw her last week.’

‘Tell her to come visit me more.’

‘Alright, I will.’ I happened to know that Olive visited Ma and helped her with chores every Wednesday, and I thought that was better than Ma could have hoped for. Resentment started to bubble in me, not so much for my own sake but for Olive’s, and I pushed it down. *She’s sick, I told myself. You can’t see it, but she is.*

Ma told me about the renters who were moving into Olive’s and my old rooms, and how sometimes in the early afternoons she sat on the porch in the sun, and how she was listening to her favourite concertos again.

‘I’m so glad, Ma,’ I said, and I really was. I half expected her to say something, something about how it was all because of me that she was finally getting better, that I’d done well, that I’d been strong for her. But she didn’t. *Eighteen years, I wanted to say, eighteen years I was at home, and you never got better, you were never there.*

‘You know, Ma,’ I said, ‘they could never tell why I grew so big. They could never find a reason.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean it’s not normal, you know. People aren’t supposed to grow this big. And the doctors could never find a reason.’

‘It’s just how you are, Samson. Who told you it’s not normal?’

I was getting exasperated. ‘It’s just not, Ma, okay? No one had to tell me.’

‘Well, it’s normal to me.’ I looked at her and tried to read her, to decide whether she was pitying me or apologising or something else.

No, I decided, she really did just think it was normal. In my whole life, I realised, she might be the one person who didn't see me as a freak of nature. Even Olive, who loved me more than anyone, saw me as different from everyone else.

I must have looked pitiful staring at the floor and working these things through in my head, because she softened a little and clucked her tongue.

'Come here, Samson,' she said. 'Come sit with me.'

I'd wished to be smaller many times, and for many reasons, but for the first time, I wished that I was smaller so that she could hold me in her lap.

MINE SHAFT, GOLD REEF CITY, 1983

Gauteng, Johannesburg

Marcelle Freiman

You've returned, a tourist now—
the country on the verge of Emergency

somewhere beyond your sight line,
you enter the clanking cage—the lift descends

half a mile, walls of black rock: a theme park
mimicry of the plummet five miles down

in darkness for workers on the mines—
your helmet lamp still dimmed to the real

labour on which this city of your birth
and education was built. Down, further down—

heat in the air, silence—a taste
of something brutal, cruel.

Later you will venture descents more honest
than this close-to-the-surface gazing—

might even touch a hidden core, unearth
to broken light what was lost

of human warmth when you lived
on these hard stony ridges

alongside black workers—no right
of place, the riches denied them.

The rock walls glitter—intermittent
as stars: how you came to be here

where your immigrant forebears had settled:
theirs was part of a great story of survival,

yours, the country ringed with fences, dust
clinging to fingers touching the walls.

Remember 1976—you were the white
generation with freedom to leave,

you could sever from your unbelonging—
the skin of complicity if you stayed.

Later, from another country you'll watch
the coming of freedom, truth telling

never completed—will learn how truth
died languageless in black holes

of torture cells: and you will not forget
the old Reef shafts—the mines, the lure

of gold seam buried in rock underground,
dry air and shanties—a city hardened,

sundered by its griefs: and always
your compulsion to descend—to want

some small, misshapen nugget,
its surface pock-marked, like bullet holes

in whitewashed walls, in hands of dust.

Note: Gold Reef City, a theme park at the vast Crown Mines in South West Johannesburg, was opened in the early 1970s by the owners of Gold Reef Casino who also later funded the Museum of Apartheid, opened in 2001. The Crown Mines are still partially operational. Visitors go down only to level 5 of the mine's 57 levels.

LA TIENDITA

Erik Peters

I step off the searing street into a dusty courtyard overshadowed by the many-statued walls of a colonial-era church. High above, the stone saints watch serenely from ledges carpeted with local flowers. Beneath my sandals the flagstones, worn glassy by forty generations of soles, radiate warmth.

In the corner, outthrust from the church wall like some low-flying buttress, stands a *tiendita*. Little more than a table-and-awning lean-to, it grows out of the flagstones, as much a part of this secluded world as they are.

I wipe my brow.

How can anyone survive this heat?

As my eyes adjust to the shade, I see that the *tiendita* is full of life. Behind the table, an aged woman, leathery-skinned, reclines against the church wall, mimicking the figures high on the edifice. Her fingers work with amazing agility, winding coarse thread through beads to make a rosary like those spread across the stall table. Beside her sits a woman, young only by comparison to the rosary-maker. Two still younger women sit beside her: one winds a bracelet while the other nurses a bundle of bright-patterned fabric. I am suddenly aware of semi-clad toddlers playing with dust and straw or watching ants march past the church door and around the *tiendita*. Nahuatl and Spanish dance up and down the echoing walls, splashing on the stones at my feet.

I rub my eyes.

They're so camouflaged, so much a part of the place I hadn't noticed them.

I reach into my pocket and retrieve a fistful of American bills.

'A-hem.'

All activity in the courtyard world ceases. A dozen pairs of eyes lock onto the pale interloper.

The aged woman smiles and motions for me to join them. Seconds earlier I could not have imagined anything warm could be so welcome. But North American mores are not easily ignored. I shake my head.

'Um, er,' I cough. 'Uh, here,' I extend the fistful of greenbacks to the nearest child.

He glances at his mother who nods. Unsteady feet advance and sausage-link fingers take the strange papers.

'Uh, los necessitas mas que yo,' I stammer. *You need these more than me.*

The child looks curiously at the crinkled bills then back at his mother. She smiles and shrugs.

'Gass-ass!'

'De nada, senior.'

I bow awkwardly and turn toward the gate.

Those poor kids. I wonder...

As I reach the street, a peal of laughter cuts through the hot air followed by a concourse of shouts whose universal meaning draws the adoring eyes of parents to their children's accomplishments. I spin around.

The children have folded the banknotes into shovels and are scooping dust, straw, and ants with newfound efficiency. They wave their inventions proudly in the air. The four mothers lean over the *tiendita* table, laughing along with their little ones. The aged woman laughs so hard, tears run down her leathery cheeks.

GRIP

Geoff Sawers

This one poem landed me in a cell. The cops were kind but their hands were tied: I tried to explain that its voice was not my own but my own just chanted the poem so they banged me up. The judge ordered a medical referral so I burned down her school. Why on earth would you tile a floor? It seems like expecting the worst. I wake up with my face on the floor and the rest of me on the bench. The magistrate orders the complete removal of my shoelaces so I burn his boots right there in the courtroom. The stenographer, looking puzzled, points out that my poem, in her shorthand, resembles a willow-pattern plate.

a tabloid took up the story
and apparently that equates
to a full psychiatric assessment
I asked to go on the Civil List
but a Tribunal sub-committee
found my story in the school magazine
I argued that our lost decade
was an effective full amnesty
since no one genuinely remembers
who they once genuinely were

I got a conditional pardon, free lunches, and a go on the swivel chair but my lawyer had now eloped. Or evaporated; that bit was never clear. I woke up with the judge in my face—a willow-pattern poem is my constitutional right. Privileges for good behaviour, sure, but they won't give me back my voice.

WHEN MY BRAIN TUMOUR LOST ITSELF

R.C. Thomas

Rain whipped dank mud into a slop
as it pushed through rough locks of brambles.
'Where are you going?' it asked itself.
A sheep rolled its eyes. A cow turned its back.
A hawk left the patch of a birch stump
it had nursed dry. My brain tumour trudged,
wrestled the wind upon the heath,
kept on and on for the mist in the distance,
forlorn and cursing, 'I'll lose myself there.
Let the white cloth cover me. This tightly worn
plight of mine is not needed here.'

It stopped and took stock of its whereabouts.
The sheep gone. The cow a fly tickling the horizon.
The hawk flying low, timing swipes, keen
to clamp down on the raw tumour meat,
heartier than an earthworm, more sour
than a shrew. The taste buds zing. It's enough
to make a beak clench and grimace.
'Maybe meat is all I am, after all.'
It had come to feel too rotten for the brain
and had begun to see its oversight.

The slip of the sodden grass pleased it.
One misled step, careless, and the granite
would become the bed it expired on, trodden,
mushed into the muscovite by the moor's

callous hoof, left to pool. 'It wouldn't be so bad.
I'm not a friend here. They told me I'm trouble.

I'm a fool. To think I thought I could have made
a home there in the brain's stem, a life for myself
from the life of a young boy with life ahead of him.
Should have thought things through. I'm benign.
What did I expect when they found me?
I lacked the belly to bite back at the eviction notice.
Pathetic.' Atop a tor, coughing bile, choked by cold,
my brain tumour laid, cinched by mist,
the hawk circling it into hypnosis, sleep, deep sleep,
dreaming of the cancer it knew it never could be.

TEMPLEMAN'S WIN

Ed Walsh

It was a long and lazy day, the day Templeman had his win. Most of the days are long and lazy. It started with me, lying in bed staring at some old porno magazines. It was early but the sun was already shining, and my room was already hot. I know I should close the curtains, keep the place cool and allow me a couple more hours' sleep; but soon I'll be asleep a long time and I never could bare to have closed curtains.

So, the duvet was in a heap on the floor, and I was staring at Sally aged nineteen, a hometown girl from here in Saint Comer. She wanted to work in the airline industry; she didn't say what exactly in the airline industry, just the airline industry. I've noticed these kinds of publications aren't usually too fussed about the specifics. In the meantime, she was working in a toyshop out at the new retail park.

After admiring Sally for a while, and seeing I had nothing in particular I needed to do, I started wondering how to spend the morning. Some days there's something that requires my attention, like seeing a dentist, or collecting my cheque, or sometimes even work. But this day, the day of Templeman's win, there was nothing that couldn't wait. There's not usually much that can't wait.

I could hear my landlady moving about downstairs, getting breakfast for the others. Me, I'm not the breakfast type. In fact, except when I've been in the hospital and they've kind of insisted on it, I can't remember the last time I put food to my mouth before three-o'clock. Sometimes I go past seven before I get myself a burger at the van, or something from behind the bar at Vincent's, although nobody could call the menu at Vincent's extensive; a cheese sandwich is as good as it gets and even then, it's not always available, just depends on whether whoever's behind the bar has remembered to bring any in. Last time I was required to see

the doctor she told me I should start eating more regularly, and maybe more the kind of meals you eat sitting down at a table; that, among other useful hints for my welfare, none of which came as news to me. My landlady used to say pretty much the same sort of thing most days.

My landlady. That's Evelyn Shelley. The others call her Mrs Shelley because they don't know her as well as I do and she's not the sort to encourage familiarity. They're mostly fly-by-nights anyway, here for a night and gone the next morning, people travelling for their work and suchlike, just passing through. But me, I was a long time in that corner room, with one or two gaps when she had thrown me out.

Last time, before the final time, was when she found out that I had been sleeping with Priscilla. Priscilla was her help who came in early to serve the breakfasts and clean the rooms. Seeing as I was a late riser compared to the others, she often came into my room to do what she had to do while I was still in there. And me and Priscilla hit it off to the extent that we sometimes got into my bed in the middle of the morning, following which she would continue on to the empty rooms. But when Evelyn found out, she got rid of Priscilla and told me to scoot which I did, and I spent a few nights in the hostel two towns along.

She always took me back though after she cooled down, and she never let the room to anybody else in my absence. The thing is, we're cut from similar cloth, me and Evelyn. We're both from elsewhere but been in this town a long time, both from good families, both educated to a decent level, and both took a tumble early on and didn't get back on our feet the way our families hoped. Good families too, mine at least.

And the thing was, me and Evelyn also had a night together once, three or four years back, after Priscilla left. I came in from Vincent's at about two after she had a couple of her women friends around. 'That you, Mr Edwards?' she shouted as I was making my way along the hallway. Still Mr Edwards after all that time, even though she must have had an idea about my first name. So, I put my head round the door. She was clearing away the glasses and emptying the ashtrays.

'Nice evening?' she asked.

It had been an evening like most others at Vincent's—or *Vincent's Lounge* to give it its full name—the usual people and the usual talk; maybe not the sort of place which would make you think of a nice evening. That was I suppose one of the reasons why the regulars spent so much time in there—it was a place of few surprises. They had had their fill of surprises most of them, and their surprises were rarely good ones.

There was hardly any sight of the younger element in there, by which I suppose I mean those on the sunnier side of forty. Some young fellow, not knowing any better, might put his head round the door; but then, seeing the pallid faces turned toward the light he had let in, he would look elsewhere for a drink. You might occasionally see a younger woman, accompanied by one of the older fellows, it being assumed by the others that he would be paying for the privilege. Otherwise, the habitués were comprised mainly of those who may in early manhood have had vague designs on a different kind of life, but upon whom the truth of their temperament and situation had long ago settled and made itself at home.

So as to Evelyn's enquiry, I said, 'Yeah, okay I suppose. You look like you've been enjoying yourself?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'Had friends round.'

'So I see. You need a hand?'

'No, thanks. I'm done. Have one?' she said. 'There's a few drops left.'

She held the whisky bottle between her thumb and middle finger. There were more than a few drops left in there.

'Why not,' I said, and I stepped into her part of the house for the first and last time. And so the night stretched out further than I'd expected. Even in her bed it was *Mr Edwards*, even when she was losing herself. I must admit to finding the formality of hearing my name like that a big turn on.

I went back to my own room while she was still sleeping, and next thing I heard her and Anna—Anna who had replaced Priscilla—getting the breakfast things ready. And we haven't referred to it since. That was

eight years past St. Jacob's Day. After that, I just went back to being Mr Edwards the lodger and not Mr Edwards the lover, which was just as well. It doesn't do to complicate things more than they need to be complicated. I needed the room more than I needed a relationship with the landlady.

Anyway, I lay there until about ten, reading and listening to the radio, which always made it sound like there was only mayhem and misery in the world and nothing else. I've never yet switched the radio on and heard them say the world's about as good as it can get and getting better, and most people are squeezing at least some pleasure out of their life. Even the people in Vincent's get some pleasures, even if it's just drinking, but you wouldn't think it to hear the news.

I took a sip from my cabinet before I showered, a small one just to ease me into the new day. Then I went down, got a few slices of bread from Anna, and went out onto the street. By then it was just past eleven and too early for Vincent's—only a couple of the old fellows are in at that time and they're not the most stimulating company. They're only there because their wives died or divorced them, and they can't think what else to do with themselves. Come to think of it, that applies also to most who spend so much of their time there, whatever time of day or night it is. Not to me though, I've never been married, so nobody's had the chance to divorce or die on me.

Evelyn's place—which for a reason I never asked about is called *The Stoneygate Suites*—is on the junction of Kivlin Street and Sykes Street, diagonally across from the English Park; it is at the corner end of a row, at the other end of which is Vincent's. The two places are separated by a line of 1920's apartments and inexpensive shops. I could finish my last drink in Vincent's and be in my room in less than three minutes. A while back, I worked it out that in the previous six months I hadn't been beyond the boundaries of the far side of the park and a few hundred yards either way from Vincent's or Evelyn's. After working that out, I took a bus to the nearest city, which is Grover, about twenty miles away.

There, I wandered around for an hour, and then I got the bus back. That seemed like adventure enough.

Anyway, that morning I went across to the park with my bread in a bag. The preacher was at the gates. The preacher is almost always at the gates; a fellow who must be in his eighties standing next to his messages, that day's being: *The Only Hope is in Christ. Zephaniah*. Like most others, I didn't want him to catch my eye, so I walked past him looking off in the direction of the children's zoo. Then I bought a coffee in Trevor's café and from my seat next to the window I saw Templeman on one of the benches by the lake. He was wearing the big red sweater which he wore no matter how hot the day was. He was reading one of the racing papers.

From what anybody could gather, Templeman had been an academic of some sort, but it had all gone wrong. There was talk of him having an affair with a student, and other talk of his wife going off with one of his college pals, although whether that talk was from him or somebody just making stuff up, I don't know. Nobody knew the full story, and nobody would care much if they did. Something going wrong for somebody in there was no big deal, especially when it involved women. In there, women were a favourite subject, along with whatever bullshit had been on the news that day. And nobody knew whether anything anybody said was the truth or not and nobody cared.

I took my time over the coffee. I didn't want Templeman to see me and then for us to feel obliged to try having a conversation. Nodding to each other in Vincent's was one thing, but meeting outside in the daylight was another. But luckily, he didn't sit there long. On his way out he stopped to talk to the preacher. He was one of the few people I ever saw talking to him, although I have to allow for the possibility that the preacher drew huge crowds when I wasn't around.

After Templeman went, I mooched around the park for a couple of hours, fed the ducks with the bread Anna had given me, and I watched some mothers with their kids in the park. And watching those kids,

swinging on the swings and sliding down the slides, put my mood on a downturn. I don't know why, but it crossed my mind that I might stay out of Vincent's that day, that I might stay away for a while, or even for good; maybe get on the Grover bus again and straighten myself out, please my family. I started seeing the look on my father's face the last time he came to visit me in the hospital.

By that time, he had given up on the pep talks and just kept to normal conversation, or as normal as it could be between the two of us. So, he just told me how things were out where he was living at the coast, and how much he was missing my mother. And for once when he mentioned my mother, I didn't get the feeling that he was blaming me for anything. And when he told me how my sister and her family was doing—it seemed her husband was a rising star in the world of finance—he just told it matter-of-fact as if I might be interested, not as a lesson I could learn from.

I guessed he still cared, otherwise why would he have come all that way—two trains, on one of them more than four hours—but the fact was that all of his care had gotten neither of us anywhere. And thinking about that last time, and him gripping my forearm and telling me he loved me when he went, and me watching those kids and thinking about everything that they might have in front of them, made me want to cry. I didn't, but I could feel the water pressing behind my eyes.

So, I went back to my room and didn't go out to Vincent's until around six, by which time there was a buzz because Templeman had had a win at the *Prix de l'arc*. They had watched it on the small television above the door which leads out to the back alley. Nobody asked how much he won, but they knew it came in on the back of a *twenty-five to one* shot, and they also knew that Templeman was not the sort to place small bets. He didn't bet every day, but when he did, he went big.

Apparently, he made no fuss about his win, there was no cheering his horse—*Cerise Noir* if I remember right—over the line. But they knew he had won a handsome amount because he bought everybody in there a

spirit of their choice. There were only four or five in, which maybe puts the generosity in its place, but it was an unusual gesture in Vincent's anyway. In fact, I can barely recall anybody ever buying anybody else a drink, not even at Christmas. Certainly nobody ever bought me one or made the offer, and likewise back. It wouldn't have seemed right somehow, would have given a wrong impression of the place.

That night, the night of his win, Templeman left just before me, so that must have been round the one-thirty mark. After that, he wasn't seen again at his usual position at the bar. It was assumed by those who thought it worth mentioning that he had gone off somewhere to blow his winnings. He had done it before. One time, after a big win in a small race, he went off and spent a month with a pal of his in Spain and came back with a suntan, and with his winnings mostly gone.

But this time it turned out he hadn't gone to Spain, or anywhere else for that matter. The reason being, he was dead. A few days after his win, his landlord had found him lying in his room. He had had a heart attack and there was three-thousand-plus lying on the table by his bed.

The next week, some of the fellows, the older ones at least, stood outside as his car passed, and those that wore them took their caps off. Like I said, I didn't really know him, he was the other end of the bar from me, so I just kept to my stool. I could still see the street easily enough though, and I raised my glass up off the counter when he passed. That seemed to match up with how well we knew each other.

I noticed there were no other funeral cars following him, just a gap and then the usual afternoon traffic. Maybe he didn't have family, or if he did, they didn't see fit to come to his send off, that is if they knew anything about it. Nothing strange about that I suppose; I'd be pretty sure a lot of the regulars had family who knew nothing about where they were or what had become of them. At least my family knew where I was. They may not have been too happy about it, but at least they knew where to find me.

Anyhow, those that had been out on the street filed back in. ‘That’s Templeman,’ one of them said, and nobody disagreed. Somebody put his favourite song on the jukebox: *So Happy Together* by The Turtles, which I thought was a respectful touch. After that though, except for somebody to wonder what happened to his winnings and nobody knowing the answer, I can’t recall his name being mentioned.

Doesn’t seem a lot to hope for, does it? To have your name mentioned once in a while after you’ve gone. But if Templeman’s name was mentioned again, I didn’t hear it, and pretty soon his spot at the bar was taken by somebody from out of town. And pretty soon after that, Evelyn threw me out for the last time, and I moved across to the other side of the park. From there, it was too far to walk to Vincent’s so I didn’t go back.

GOLDEN RECORDS, 1977

Ad Astra Per Aspera

Alicia Sometimes

Outside our heliopause, flung far from home
phonograph records on twin Voyager probes soar

copper etched, gold-plated, sealed in aluminium
each cover with ultra-pure source uranium-238—

Sounds of the Earth mixed on thirty-two-track tape:
string quartets, an EEG of someone falling in love

whoosh of a pulsar, sawing, Bach, voluble surf, Johnny
B. Goode & images of DNA, continental drift, page six

of Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*
instructions to play these gliding archaeological discs

Now silent in sleeping riffs of space, craving any stylus—
distant human forged allegories, yearning to be turned on

AUBADE

Matt Hetherington

really need you babe like a boring mug
or another drink for a worn-out lawn
when i'm hungry i yawn at someone
oh something pours the oxygen in as if
all the mornings i fed you as a self
and all the help i can't say now means
you're so far away but still so fine
to wake from and savour our blood

i know this is where things get difficult but
every damn dawn a hand scrapes my tongue
like a brain recalling ancient ways of sand
and calling through the gravity of dreams
even night is not afraid of light so rise now
there you are again like pain that's good

CROWN JEWELS

Meghalee Bose

The London sky is pissing rain. Suchi stares at the glazed sign of the exhibition and intones, 'No.'

'It'll be warm in there,' Abhi reminds. The wind shivers up Suchi's wide-legged jeans and she gives up.

She isn't that committed to her principles. The last time they were at the Tower of London, she'd been put off more by the queue snaking out of the Crown Jewels building. Today the velvet rope outside languishes without any school kids to corral. The warm and musty air calls out, siren-like.

They slip in. Abhi vanishes in the dark, and Suchi dawdles in front of a case of sceptres or whatever. She soaks in the warmth. Her eyes skip from placard to placard, Georges and Elizabeths and Charleses. Silver, gold and rubies, like a dragon's hoard if dragons filched from kingdoms to bejewel their own horned crowns.

She smirks. Dark passage leads on to dark room, a brick-and-mortar cave. There's a long, rectangular glass case bearing pride of place. She meanders down its length and comes to an unwilling halt right before the end.

The Koh-i-Noor diamond is one of the most famous diamonds in the world. Probably originating from the Golconda mines in central southern India...

She remembers it from class nine History. The might of the East India Company versus a ten-year-old boy on a throne.

The diamond looks smaller than in the textbook. It is set into a hard and shiny platinum frame padded by purple velvet. The end product resembles a grandma's crown. Cosseted in her cabinet, boxy and gaudy, next to the rest of her gilt treasures.

A symbol of conquest, the placard reads. Owned by Mughal Emperors, Shahs of Iran, Sikh Maharajahs... the passive voice is exemplary. As though the diamond's presence here, a hundred-and-seventy-five years later in a British crown under the Tower of London is but part of a larger pattern. Everybody is a dragon.

Suchi slips her phone out of her pocket. She aims the camera at the crown. The Instagram caption might read: *Who here likes ethical heists?*

A shadow materialises out of the black walled cave. Suchi startles. The woman is tall and has skin like crushed, undyed cotton. There's a rose red crown embroidered onto her woollen poncho.

'You can't do that here.'

'Sorry!' Suchi shoves her phone back into her jeans, the rivets straining. She smiles apologetically.

The woman doesn't budge. Pursued lips like her tea had gone cold and she's fishing the slimy bag out.

Suchi drops her eyes to her laces. She starts walking.

Outside the exit, the wind stabs at her ankles like icy needles. She looks at the poured concrete sky and remembers standing on the escalators in Paddington Station. Someone in a Burberry jacket shoving past and biting out, 'You're on the wrong fucking side.'

When Abhi finds her, she's got her fists shoved into her pockets, breath perforating the air in seething bursts. She doesn't feel the cold at all.

A PURE BODILESS SOUND

Tim Mayo

I'm thinking of the skylight in the cathedral ceiling of your bedroom, how you told me last night as we lay there about the moon shining in the night before, and you couldn't sleep. I remember saying, *you should've called me*, but I was at work, where it was almost dead until I gathered up my coat before shutting down my lightless console, and a young woman called. A crisis counsellor. She didn't really want to know if we had a bed for her suicidal client, though that's what she asked. She just wanted to hear a voice without a face, a pure bodiless sound to soothe the strung-out chords of her out-of-tune harp after arguing for hours to keep a boy alive, who wanted with all the anger of adolescence to die. I listened and said a few words to help her get in tune again, to straighten the tired feathers of her wings. I even stayed on the line like a confessor, an emissary from whatever light shines in the dark closet of the confessional. I listened right up to and past the hour when work and I would both shut down, calling it a night, and she, too, would leave the emergency room for home and the reel-to-reel replays she'd dream. The business of poetry is not po-biz.

I want to say that to remind me how
profane the world can be, that even
the world of poetry can have this
life-goes-on side to it, Auden's dogs
going on with their doggy life, a humanity
of *who-cares?* seeping in between the lines.
And lastly, I want to add just one more thing.
I'm not a soft touch poet with a heart of gold,
who works in a mental hospital for love.
In my work boys always fall from the sky.
The trick is to never let them land on the page,
where the moon I didn't see the other night
hangs by its slim thread, but still bright enough
to let me see you tossing in its light, restless
for all we wish for—even that boy's life.

REIGNING IN THE SWAMP

Allan Lake

Grey drizzly day along Elster Creek
and Mister Swampen could care less
about that or not being called a cock.
Nature was in a mood when She created
swampens. Gave them wings they can use
but seem loath to use. Intruders like me?
Long pink legs with claws to run away—
nervous disposition on full display.
Foxes and bad dogs with bad owners
are about so nervousness and that shriek
is justified and alarming. Swampens
look too much like chickens done up
for the catwalk. Feathers black, plumage
shiny blue, downy white arse feathers.
But it's the visage that can cause a pause.
He glares with big unchicken eyes full
of territorial presumption. It's his reedy
swamp; he doesn't want it drained so
flock off or he'll clumsily run into water,
to get to the other side.
And there's his large reddish beak
with that decorative whatever that
extends to top of haughty head.
He doesn't have long eyelashes but
I cannot not see them as he preens,
applies more lip gloss. Even so,
he checks out chicks, his own,

the ones that look like fluffy bowling balls that sprouted legs. Papa swamp-hen is an openly modern Aussie male.

TINY THINGS OF REAL VALUE

Cathy Thwing

I met a god once whose power lay in making everything make sense. This was thirty-five years ago, back when we struggled paycheck-to-paycheck, and the first of the month meant, if we had money left over after rent and bills, we could buy extra groceries.

‘Take nothing for granted,’ my boyfriend said as I headed out to the market on Capitol Hill. I waited at the bus stop near the freeway overpass. Below, a stream of Volvos, Subarus, and BMWs glittered past. Here and there, a battered Ford or Chevy, rust scraping through faded paint, sped to overtake them. The empty express lanes reflected sunlight like granite.

When I hopped off the bus, bricks of the streetside buildings glowed in autumn’s light. At Rainbow Foods, I filled the basket with carrots, apples, broccoli, and frozen pizza, for a treat. I calculated the purchases, \$10.15, counted the cash, \$10.75—just enough left over for the bus fare home.

The god sat on the sidewalk, slumped against the record store near the bus stop. He gazed out of yellowed eyes. Two cans sat in his lap. A sheet of cardboard, a few pieces of change scattered on it, lay before him.

I waited for the bus. City noise grated.

The old god straightened with a grumble of a laugh. A tuned rhythm began, threading the micropauses between engine and siren. Long, block-knuckled fingers drummed the tops of the cans. His lips vibrated while he hummed a melody seeming to rise from the sidewalk, the street, the cement foundations of the stores. He drummed and hummed, connecting cars and pedestrians, pulling threads of a tapestry through the city.

Shoppers raced past, tossing quarters and nickels onto the cardboard. No one stopped to listen. He quit playing. The vibrations unravelled in a din of motors, shouts, and tires—the chaos of city.

The drumming god mumbled, legs swishing past. Abruptly, picking up mid-measure, he began again, braiding the city noise. More coins. More rushing legs. He stopped as suddenly as he started.

I waited for a pattern. He played when I didn't expect it, stopped before I was ready. He never began at the beginning or stopped at the end, instead snatching a ribbon, picking a pulse, weaving a mood. While he played, everything fit together.

He coughed, dry but deep, and crumpled onto the pavement, cradling his cans.

'Hey, what're you sleeping for?' said a tall man, maybe Navajo, in an expensive suit, with a bolo tie and cowboy boots, a red dot at his third eye. 'Aren't you going to play? I was just getting ready to put some money down for you.'

The god sat up with a mumble and a smile.

'You'll get up for that, huh?'

He played a rapid rhythm. The tall man shouted and bobbed, almost, but not quite, in beat.

The drumming god grinned.

'I'll give you these little pieces of worthless metal,' said the tall man, 'and six of these things of real worth.'

He held what looked like a pomegranate seed between index finger and thumb. Sunlight gleamed red through it.

'What tribe you from?' asked the god.

'The Senegal tribe of North Africa, just like you,' said the tall man, smiling. 'That's where these things of real beauty come from.'

He rolled the red seeds on his palm.

'Now, we'll just put these things of real value here in the centre, and we'll arrange these worthless metal pieces with pictures of dead white presidents on them around the edges.'

'Dead presidents,' laughed the drumming god. 'Just the way I like them!'

'Yeah, me too!' said the tall man, striding off.

The drummer played again. On his cardboard, the six tiny red objects clustered in the centre of the coins. The music expanded and he began to sing. The street swelled.

A couple, hand-in-hand, dressed in matching white leather jackets, white fur collars and cuffs, emerged from the record store. One swift step and the man's suede shoe spun the sheet of cardboard. Coins and tiny seeds wheeled off.

The music ceased. Shouts, motors, wheels stopped. All the shoppers stared at the scattered coins.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' said the suede man. He smiled at his wife, and she smiled back. They moved on to the next store, and the shoppers rushed back down the sidewalk.

The drummer sat, cheeks sagging. He lowered his eyelids, and when he looked up again, his eyes glinted red.

I set down the bag of groceries, knelt on the sidewalk, and picked up his coins. The tiny objects of real value felt cold and hard, and when the sun shone through them, I saw they were garnets. I placed them like flower petals in the centre of the cardboard and arranged the coins around them in a concentric pattern.

'They should've stayed where they come from. We should've all stayed where we come from,' he said, over and over.

He stopped mumbling to watch me replace the coins.

'Never had anybody pick up my money before,' he chuckled, 'unless it was to put in their own pockets.'

I slid the cardboard before him.

'Thanks, angel.' He raised his drums. 'I'm from Louisiana.'

'I'm from down the street,' I said.

He nodded and drummed. He played on. He hummed and sang until the street rose beyond the freeway, past my apartment building,

down across Lake Union, and out towards the Olympic Mountains. Shoppers came out of stores and tossed coins onto his cardboard so it shimmered silver and copper, the glimmering red flower in the centre. The drummer kept singing and smiling and drumming and singing, eyes laughing now, clear and bright.

The bus pulled up.

‘’Scuze me while I get native,’ he hollered as I got on board. I watched him play as the bus drove off. From a distance, I saw he wasn’t a god at all, but a man.

LORD OF THE FLIES

Niles Reddick

After lighting the charcoal, I waited for the fire to die down and the coals to whiten before laying the sirloin patties on the grill. The temperature was in the low seventies outside, the ’mums and pansies in the landscape were radiant with fall colours, and marshmallow clouds floated in the sky.

Closing the grill lid, I sat on my late grandmother’s glider I’d repainted last spring. I recalled her sitting in it, a tissue in one hand to dab tears, not from sadness, but from allergies or clogged ducts, and a fly swatter in her other hand to kill flies landing on or near her paper plate of fruit and cheese snacks.

‘I missed that one,’ she’d said. ‘These things are disgusting. Just like that Jeff Goldblum movie. Did you see it?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘Probably before your time. You got to watch them. A swarm of them could carry us off. Probably what hell would be like. Old Beelzebub himself was said to be a giant fly.’

The memories faded and the smoke billowed from holes and spaces in the grill. Flies flew around detecting food. My wife opened the patio door and said, ‘How much longer?’

‘I haven’t even flipped them yet.’

‘Well, don’t burn them. I know how you sometimes burn them.’ She closed the door.

I wondered why she didn’t grill them herself, if she didn’t like the way I grilled them. I opened the lid and smoke rolled, more flies appeared, and I swatted them with the spatula and noticed even larger flies, as large as hawks, perched on the edge of the gutters. ‘Oh, my God,’ I shrieked, and their heads bobbed in multiple directions. Further up on

the roof by the chimney was a fly as large as a giant human, the Bigfoot of flies, its bulging red eyes peering at me and rubbing its front of six legs with gripping claws. Before I could say his name, he had me off the ground with his army headed for a dark cloud flashing hues of red lightning. I looked back as rain began to ping the grill, steam rising, and my wife rushing out, not hearing me, shaking her head in disgust, and collecting the charred patties.

JOY IN THE TIME OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Nupur Maskara

I suck the mint fresh air, flinging the windows open
after a night barricaded from mosquitoes.

The sun treks up the sky. I dervish dance with the leaves
whirling in the wind after a still afternoon. The first

mango this year glows in the sunlight. I bite its flesh,
juice entering my skin. The tap spurts to life after it ran

dry at 2 AM. I drink in the music. Ta da da da—
Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The sky growls.

Rain is here, after a weeklong heatwave. I grab
fistfuls of raindrops, washing the dust off my Sphinx face.

God, grow me a hump, so I can store
skywater, for the drought inevitable.

TIGER ROLL (6PC) (SOY, GINGER & WASABI)

Dorian Winter

furled in the bamboo mat

of our crumpled bedsheets,

i am panko-crumbed ebi

(in a creamy nightshirt of avocado)

enveloped in your plush, sushi rice cardigan.

the perfect act of moritsuke, plated

on a queen-sized serving tray.

a small peek of wasabi

(a sage throw pillow)

frames our drowsy heads,

a tart, ponzu lamplight

dribbling

over snug ingredients.

the final garnish is sweet & simple:

midnight soy curls cascading

over diaphanous, pickled ginger skin.

PAVLOVA

Jane Hider

At the foam-frilled edge of the tinderbox island in the land of the Bunurong people, the house sits on the sandy fringe of the Mornington Peninsula's emerald slipper, decks scrubbed clean by salt-laden air, windows rimed with sea spray, zig-zag roof designed to let the north light in, kitchen window open to the fat blowflies, trespassers in a fertile land. They zoom over the sink, stainless steel scratched with decades of carelessly washed pots, swoop towards the cork floor, past the laminate cabinets, over the tiled kitchen island on which sits a cake stand, proud host to a pavlova, pillows of whipped cream between the meringue layers, topped with ...

'The only fruit permitted on a pavlova is passionfruit,' says Caroline, wiping her sugar dusted hands on a tea towel. 'Possibly mango if cut in cubes of one centimetre or less, but never under any circumstances sliced. Can you close the window, honeybun? The flies are getting in.'

Her mother has strong views about fruit and how it should be purchased and presented and paired and sourced. Pineapple and mint, watermelon and margaritas. No poison sprayed grapes from the US. Raspberries but only if they cost under six dollars, no cherries before Cup Day, fruit salad must not under any circumstances contain melon, whose best friend is prosciutto and don't you forget it, Lola.

This pavlova is mango-free, and the passionfruit sits in random sad blobs, tangy juice pooling next to the gelatinous seeds. It needs to be put in the clanging refrigerator before the cream curdles. She's left it out to show Lola because she takes pride in her desserts, and this lunch is important, each child has received multiple reminders, long form text messages, signed formally Your Mother.

Lola is hungry. She's already had two breakfasts, one hour apart. A banana and kale smoothie and then a bacon sandwich. She casts her eyes about for some fruit or a loaf of bread, but the kitchen bench is spotless, bereft of snacks.

She needs to eat lunch early, or ideally, have two lunches, but she fears they won't sit down to eat for hours. Doug will be late, Clementine both late and grumpy, and as for Aster, who knows if he will make it at all. His views about both Australia Day and the house on the dune are well known. He's a troublemaker, Clem says of their younger brother, a millennial spoiled brat who's never had to make his way, a layabout Arts student, drug-taking, left-leaning, woke and gullible and so on and so on.

Clem knows the value of hard work, and she certainly knows the value of the house on the dune. Doubled, she says, thanks to the pandemic. Mum should sell it before it's too late, before the merciless marine air strips it down to its pale pine bones. She's said this so many times now no one bothers to respond, and the last time she gave her little speech (on Christmas Day, before the flaming pudding) their mother gave an enigmatic half smile and stood to clear the plates.

'Perhaps it's secretly on the market,' Doug speculated when she left the room to retrieve the mince pies from the oven.

'Did you see that weird smile?' Clem said.

'No way,' said Lola. 'She's never selling this place.'

Lola is only early because she's pregnant. The two things shouldn't be connected but she's had to banish so many activities from her life thanks to the murk of exhaustion into which she's sunk that she has no reason to be tardy, and, it turns out, nothing better to do than stand in the kitchen admiring a pavlova.

She feels a tsunami of tears about to engulf her. Imagine getting pregnant at the exact same time you're being dumped by your husband. She always suspected he had flexible morals but no proof, that is, until his best friend accidentally sent her the video footage from the bachelor

party. He was a philanderer, and although her heart has been caved in by his conduct, she rather likes the word, the aptly languorous way it sits behind her teeth then rolls down and out.

Her mother is staring at the dune. The scrubby blue-grey heath bush bent double by the wind, the melaleuca in flower, white stars sprinkled between the wizened branches. There is a thin crease between her eyes and she's lost weight, her cheekbones a sharp swoop up to her hairline.

Lola loathes people who comment on appearances, it's rude but ... 'You've lost weight, Mum.'

'It's the dress,' Caroline says, flattening her palms against the billows of the blue linen. 'It's like a smock.' She smiles. 'So, shall we set the table? Chop chop.' An offensive, racist phrase, Aster has told her this many times. She glances at Lola. 'I mean, let's get on with it.'

Lola starts pulling the rattan placemats and napkins from a drawer in the oak dresser.

Outside, the crunch of rubber on gravel.

Caroline peers across the deck. 'Doug, by himself. Clementine, separate car, by herself.'

Lola is relieved. Doug's wife is boring, always droning on about the cost of things and reality TV. Clementine's boyfriend (although that word is forbidden, he's her partner), works in fintech twenty-four hours a day and is not as interesting as he thinks he is. He's some kind of crypto trader and has the swagger and thousand-dollar ugly sneakers to match. He showers Clem with compliments and expensive gifts, which she brushes off like a particularly persistent mosquito. Lola doesn't like him. Has she always been this intolerant of people? It must be the pregnancy hormones.

The fear was always there, a tulip bulb embedded under a layer of frost, spidery roots pushing down, eager to entwine themselves around Caroline's stray medical conditions like menopausal anxiety, COVID fever, a pulled ribcage muscle.

It never went away, not really. It sat, dormant, waiting for the damaged DNA residing inside her cells to start multiplying again. Five years, ten years, it didn't matter.

It would be back.

She wasn't surprised then, when she developed night sweats of the kind which a flung off doona could not alleviate and difficulty breathing when she walked the Tan.

She did not delay the testing this time. She made a series of appointments and cleared two days in her calendar. She knew from experience that this was how long it would take.

First step, a biopsy. The nurse lowered the back of the vinyl armchair as if she was on a plane in business class, putting on a special sunny tone of voice as she said, *This is going to hurt*.

Afterwards, she sat in a series of pastel waiting rooms and read ancient golfing and fishing magazines, lay in various sarcophagi, listened to banging and whirring and an automated clicking which sounded like the timer on a bomb and subjected her body to what would be the first of thousands of punctures; needles filled with glucose, radioactive dye, anaesthetic, saline fluids and opioids, expensive medications to stop and re-start various bodily functions, who knew, really? At some point she stopped listening because it was not like she was going to do anything other than let this army of white-coated people subjugate her.

Or was she?

Somewhere between Stage II and IIIB, they said. The swollen lymph nodes were *pretty small*, the surgeon noted, in the manner of someone delivering good news. Her spleen, an organ she had never thought much about before and whose purpose was unclear, would be removed. The keyhole surgery was straightforward, he said, but he wanted to take a look at the celiac nodes while he was there, as if stopping in for cocktails on his way to dinner somewhere else. Caroline smiled politely. The air around her was pale, she was surrounded by the white dots, snow in

her lungs, the sponge-like tissue, contracting and shrinking, already choking her.

She didn't believe them when they told her the prognosis was positive. She knew how information was withheld, observed the caveats laid over each concrete fact, the way the nuggets were released in an order and cadence which made little sense, but which she suspected had something to do with ensuring she did not completely, utterly, totally freak out.

Her body, providential combination of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen and nitrogen, was no longer private, no longer hers, but the subject of incomprehensible reports written by strangers in windowless rooms, dotted with adjectives she'd never heard before (the lung lesions were *cavitary*), and endless poking, prodding and piercing.

At the end of the second day she went to bed at seven, and lay flat on her back, a melting puddle of inconsequence, sensing the earth's eagerness to absorb her and bring it all to an end.

Lola was seventeen last time round, in the middle of VCE. She sent Caroline links to online meditation courses and made sure she rinsed her mouth with salty water after each chemo session. As she watched her daughter make her way through her exams with the grim persistence of an endurance athlete, she learned there was indeed something worse than being treated for cancer.

Watching your family watch you be treated for cancer.

More than anything, she wanted control. When the oncologist told her she wouldn't lose her hair, the thought consumed her, as if a wire had been tripped somewhere inside. Would it be possible to have treatment and keep it a secret? She could go to one of those places in Mexico which fed you sunshine and celery juice. The testimonials were breathless, the website slickly persuasive. It's all bullshit, she told herself; charlatans and hoaxers, poltergeists dancing around the edges of conventional medicine, but what harm could it do, she thought, as she put her name down on the waiting list and paid the non-refundable deposit.

It was a week before Christmas, and she still hadn't told anyone.

When would she tell the children?

And how?

As Lola wanders down the steps to the driveway to greet Doug and Clem, she puts the pavlova in the fridge under a glass dome. Her phone pings, a text from her sister, eager for an update.

How did they take it, she will want to know.

She could have chosen a different path. Pulling her children out of their busy lives for a lunch at the beach house on a public holiday culminating in a big announcement seems overly dramatic, almost attention seeking.

A normal person would have telephoned them, one after the other in descending age order, and given the news. But she couldn't. Last year she'd saved a photo against each of their names in her phone. It took hours to sort through her twenty thousand images and find the perfect one for each child.

She thought to call Doug first. He was the oldest, a stolid accountant and least likely to cry. But when she went to press the call button, she couldn't make her fingers work. His image on her phone showed him at three years old, in his favourite denim overalls, rust coloured hair in stubborn tufts, playing some kind of drum set. She still remembers the tinny, discordant noise that thing made, day and night.

Clem's photo shows her at five, flaxen hair in a plait, in a tartan wrap around dress and patent black leather shoes, perched imperiously on the lowest branch of the ginkgo tree in their old back garden, princess of all she surveys.

Lola is holding their tabby Berko in a death grip, hair in pigtails, gap toothed smile. She should have become a vet, rather than a management consultant. Caroline still doesn't know what she actually does, something rather fantastic in which a twenty-seven-year-old tells late middle-aged people how to run their business. Every time Lola

explains it, Caroline has to quickly change the subject for fear she will tell her what she really thinks of her *job*.

And Aster at seven, his mop of curly black hair such a contrast to his siblings, sitting at the dining table building a Lego spaceship, tongue protruding in that way he has when concentrating. The spaceship would be in thousands of pieces as soon as he completed it, obliterated by the Black Hole of their slate tiled floor. His favourite trick, smashing things up.

No, she could not press dial, she could not speak to them individually.

A family discussion, that's what was called for. A forum, a chance to ask questions, debate if necessary.

She hears footsteps on the deck.

Doug is describing the sweaty, bone crunching activities being undertaken by his boys today. The reason for Doug's wife's absence. She feels a guilt-tinged relief. His wife meets many of the key characteristics she seeks for her children's spouses, but is missing a sense of humour, and by some kind of reverse osmosis Doug is beginning to lose his too.

Clem is talking about the roadworks on the M1, asking, 'Why do they always do it on a public holiday?'

Lola is making sounds of agreement, as is her way, the peacemaker.

As she walks out to greet them, she hears the low grumble of a four-stroke engine. Aster, on his carbon friendly motorbike. He swings into the driveway and spins the back wheel, causing the dirt to puff about the tyre in little angry bursts. He's wearing leathers, thank goodness. She hates the bike, it's dangerous and foolish and the accident rate is sky-high especially on the freeways but then, look at her. She's lived a safe life, and look at her.

Lunch proceeds pretty much as Lola expects. She managed to find a blueberry muffin in a plastic container in the pantry which she ate in two mouthfuls standing at the sink while the others were having chardonnay on the deck facing the dune.

Her mother roasted a shoulder of lamb with mint and garlic and olive oil, the same dish she cooks every Australia Day, which prompts the first argument, about Caroline's capture by white Australian culture and what were they even doing celebrating this awful day, this day of mourning, this day of invasion, this day of...

'Shut up, Aster,' Doug says. 'Don't insult Mum.'

Caroline waves her hand at her sons and says something soothing like, *never mind Doug, I don't mind*. As she said the words she stared over the dune again, as if talking to the sea, not her family. Perhaps she's in love? It's been years since Dad left, and she is still young, sixty-two. The thought makes Lola's stomach squelch, but everyone has a right to happiness. She would ask her later, when the others have left.

The second argument is about Lola's useless soon to be ex-husband, who has told her they have to sell the terrace house in Albert Park, it's too big for Lola and he needs the money and...

'What in the actual fuck,' says Clem. 'You need a lawyer.' This prompts a lengthy multi-pronged argument about the Family Court and how gendered the settlement requirements are and how much barristers charge per hour (outrageous, says Aster, the State should provide free legal advice to anyone who wants it).

Lola feels herself sinking lower into her chair. She's failed at her marriage and so quickly too. Just as she feels a fresh wave of tears there is a pulling down towards her hips, a stretching of her belly from the inside, and then, distinctly, a tiny thud.

She smiles. *He kicked*.

The third argument is about gender. Clem starts it. 'There's no difference between sex and gender, it's just a construct, created by people like you,' at which point she cut her eyes towards Aster, who had earlier told them he was taking Gender Studies at university. Lola watches him take a deep breath. Please don't respond, she prays. Clem is staring at him, her navy eyes glittering, head on an angle, already planning the next layers of her argument.

As he opens his mouth Mum stands up so quickly she almost knocks her chair over.

‘I’ve got something to tell you all. Give me a minute.’

Once she’s left the room Aster leans back in his chair, crosses his arms. ‘Something’s wrong.’

Doug frowns. ‘What do you mean?’

Clem lips pull back, it’s almost a snarl. ‘You’re just trying to change the subject.’

Lola was the only one who turned to watch Mum leave the room. She was unsteady on her feet and knocked her shoulder on the door frame. She’s hardly drunk anything at lunch. Lola meets Aster’s eyes. He knew Mum and Dad were separating months before they told them. He sees things no one else can, he sees under the surface, the racing, pulsing emotions. ‘I agree, I think she may be ...’

‘Sick?’ asks Clem. Her face crumples. ‘No.’

‘She looks fine to me,’ says Doug. ‘Actually, she looks healthy. Kind of streamlined.’

Aster looks over his brother’s head at the ocean, his lips pinched together. ‘Please just let her say what she has to say. No arguments, no debating.’

Lola turns to see her at the door, holding the cake stand on which sits the pavlova. She’s poked five flashing sparklers into the thick cream topping. She’s always been afraid of sparklers and their angry bright spitting and hissing.

Her mother puts it in the middle of the table.

‘I realise there are objections to today, to the holiday, to my food, to what it all means and symbolises. So in deference to that, and to you, my children, who I love more than anything, I wanted to let you know that this is the last pavlova I will ever make. Enjoy.’

WAITING FOR SLEEP

James Salvius Cheng

Old night blows into the room,
flinging aside whispering doors
and mumble dry fingers.
Light flickers and falls

from the distant moon to our bed.
Here is a golden apple in the dark,
its teeth tracing the soft thread
beside your sleeping face. Night, stark

naked and useless, raps upon the wall,
a ceremonial guardsman, long welcoming hands
spread wide in a grand gate
keeping nothing out, nothing safe.

AFTER YOU DIED

Cecil Morris

After you died, I plunged alone, a diver
going down and down through water released
from time and loud, a clamorous descent,
the roar of you going, gone, the rending
of time and space, a great hole opening
and me adrift and me sinking and me.
I reach out to you through the void of grief,
the great expanse, that long night without moon
or stars, a cold unlit and vast, a blank,
a black on black or white on white, the time
and you, the past and after, rings around
my astonished heart, space bereft of you,
reverberation that echoes on and on,
a ringing emptiness with nothing filled
but hollow sound, your absence a gong struck,
a bell rung, tinnitus of loss in my ears,
you with me always, auditory scrim
between the world and me, a great white noise,
the sea's incessant roar and rush, a wall
of sound invisible indivisible.
I want to part the ocean's ceaseless wail
and step inside its ache and be with you,
my soul in your body, my heart in you,
reanimating this endless sound as you.

DANCING WITH/OUT GENDER

Finn Brown

My therapist was surprised when I said that, and therapists aren't often surprised. I had said to her, 'Gender is everywhere. It is in the way you talk and the way you walk and your clothes.' And she had nodded at all this, like she too felt the weight of gender in her mouth and her limbs and the fabrics of the things hanging off her. 'It is in the way you dance,' I had said, and her eyebrows had lifted upwards, ready to meet her hairline, commune.

Photos of you dancing as a child are serious, and in black and white. Your gangly legs are deliberate, placed where the teacher told you they ought to be.

Over and over on the television at home, you watch a red-haired woman fail to choose between her love for dance and her love for a person. Over and over you watch a woman dance herself to death. Over and over you imagine yourself as her, dancing endlessly with bleeding feet and the wind in your hair.

A bit older now, you learn, and you are told, that you are not very good. Hard to keep going after that. You give up gradually.

You don't dance again until you start to drink. Lights are colourful and quickly hazy because at that age you drink too much. There is something you are running away from, something you are trying not to see. Easy to recognise that, looking back, although you didn't know it at the time. Bathed in coloured pinpricks that spool out across your body, you hold your hands up in the air and move your hips in a way that is carefully sexy. It draws the eye to your waist, to your bum. Left and right, it highlights. The upward hands, reaching like stalks, pull the skin tight. This too, is intentional. There is always weight to lose.

You would shed your skin if you could, you serpent, you. In these days, you do not understand what people see in clubbing. All this standing around with arms aching to the sky, waiting for the limbs of a boy to wrap you up. Dance like everyone's watching.

The understanding of it must be credited to ecstasy, the chemical kind. Overjoyed you throw your body around, pulling it in all sorts of directions, jumping and reaching, tireless. The following day your body is spent and happy, ready to melt into a mattress whether it was yours or someone else's. You cannot dance, you know it, but you never want to stop.

You do though. A difficult partner wants your limbs to be more contained, wants your hips to move the way they had been taught to at first, because of things that she had been taught at first that were not her fault, but were hard all the same. She likes to watch the shape of you, can't pin you down if you jump.

Some relationships strip you.

Afterwards, you hold onto whatever you can, surfacing only occasionally which is not often enough for the lungs.

Then a lockdown. That transitions us all to sofa-bound stillness. Heavy-limbed we all wait.

Beginning to move again in kitchens filled with queers, tiles beneath our socked feet. Small groups around tinny speakers feeling our bodies again, licking each other's joints alive. By this time your hair is short, you have shed the pronoun you began with and chosen another, you have given all your dresses to charity shops. In stillness you metamorphosed. In these first throes of movement, your legs and your arms start to explore.

We have arrived. Here, black walls sweat, and the lights are occasional. There is mesh and there is leather and there is soft, sweet feather. You dance in a circle with friends, and sober and un-sober, your body moves the same. You are reminded that dancing is stretching. In

ways that are silly and sexy and otherworldly, you move your limbs. All there is to it.

I tell my therapist that I only learnt how to dance like a woman, that recent club floors have become a source of unlearning and relearning, and I am drinking from this source to feed the love of a not-quite-right body.

I like to imagine that, when I leave, my therapist stands on a couch and starts to sway.

#1197: PERSPICACIOUS

for henry yu

bob plainwilder

cognizant
no caveats
no reservations no

slam dunk seeing through distortions
tee tee heeh transcendent
beyond pitfalls opened wide

not possessed by any dawdling
reticence or fear
revelations hatchin mucho
understanding well

perspicacious

soaring through amazing
intuitions blazing bright
your lighthouse light it regularly spun

profound and wise
pulsating love and life

perspicacious

in you glowing whimsicality
flowering ultra fancy free

cleaving to the highest cool
layers of profundity

perspicacious

on the scene
yu played for the brightest team
truly good & ready
yu enabled change

GEORGIE

for Dennis

Pete Levine

Patrick and Georgie were sitting in the grass taking a break from throwing gravel at each other's green army.

'I could run away from zombies,' Georgie said. 'They move so slow. And they're blind. That's why they hold their hands out in front. I'd run if I saw them, and they'd never catch me.'

'Who you kidding?' said Patrick. 'You can't even catch Nan.'

'I can so.'

Patrick took aim at one of Georgie's men—a soldier holding a rifle over his head—and knocked it over.

'No salvos! Single shot only,' shouted Georgie and immediately retaliated.

'You call that a throw, chicken arm?'

'At least I don't cheat.'

'You're not going to win either.'

'Oh, yeah?'

Georgie took three soldiers out of his pocket and arranged them in the grass. 'These are my reserves.'

'Now who's cheating?'

'No way. I won these.'

'When?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I've got reserves too,' said Patrick taking a handful of gravel from his pocket.

'You need them because you cheat.'

Patrick threw three in a row, hard, machine-gun style, but none connected. Then he threw another and hit Georgie in the leg.

'That hurt! I quit.'

Georgie got up and stuffed his soldiers in his pocket. A small oval object dropped to the ground.

'What's that?' said Patrick.

'Nothing.'

'What is it?'

'A toy that Daddy gave me.'

'Let me see it.'

'No.'

In an instant, Patrick was on top of Georgie, had grabbed the toy and was holding it above his younger brother.

'It's mine now,' Patrick taunted. 'Maybe I'll throw it in the lake.'

'You'd better not. I'll tell Mom,' Georgie threatened and kicked Patrick's ankle. Patrick pushed Georgie to the ground and pulled his arm back in a hammerlock.

'You'll do what?'

Georgie's mouth was pressed against the ground, a blade of grass poking at his left eye.

'Let go of me,' he yelled.

'You'll do what?'

'Nothing,' Georgie screamed as Patrick tightened his grip. 'Let me go.'

Patrick smiled and relaxed his hold and in that instant Georgie's hand stole out, grabbed the toy and ran. He ran across the road and into the cornfield, pushing the stalks apart as the cold leaves slapped against his face. He kept running until he felt safe, which was a long time, and then dropped down to hide among the rows of high summer corn.

He lay on his stomach, resting like a soldier with his head on his folded arms, listening for any sound that might be his brother.

Patrick was in hot pursuit and wanted Georgie to know it. He raced into the cornfield cursing loudly, clearing his way through the tangle of corn with both hands, creating a scary ruckus as he approached, hoping to flush Georgie out. What he needed was gasoline and a match to smoke

him out. But it wasn't long before his impatience was overtaken by the even larger feeling of being bound in on all sides by the towering stalks.

Georgie heard it all, the stomping and the cursing and—at long last—Patrick's crunching retreat. Only then did he open his fist and let the toy lie undisturbed in his palm.

Deceptively simple in design, the small oval toy was a test of skill. Beneath its clear plastic cover, two small metal balls rolled freely. At each end was a tiny hole. To win, one needed to land both balls in the holes. Georgie had known this as soon as he had been given the toy. But it was not easy. He could get one ball in but not both.

There was a trick to it and his father had shown it to him. If you flicked it with your finger, it would spin around and when it stopped both balls would be in their holes. Centrifugal force his father had said. Georgie wondered if his father had figured the trick out by himself or if someone had told him.

Georgie tried spinning the toy on his hand. It was hard to get the flick right. The first few times he knocked it off his hand. One time it went flying off and for several worrisome moments he feared he had lost it. After that, he tried a gentler touch. But it wouldn't spin properly.

A drop of blood fell on his hand and then another. Georgie turned on his back and pinched his nostrils together. The corn towered over him like a forest and the empty blue sky dazzled his eyes. He knew how to deal with his nosebleeds. He closed his eyes and held his breath, counting silently to himself for sixty seconds before he loosened the grip on his nose and exhaled. He lay there with his head on his arms, the toy resting on his chest. Looking up through the mesh of stalks he saw a crow and beyond it, the sky.

All afternoon he listened and watched, the toy resting on his chest. He watched a caterpillar for a long time as it inched its way across the ground. He watched as it moved onto his leg and continued toward his chest, moving toward the toy. He wanted to wait to see if it would

reach the toy, but he badly needed to pee, so he shook it off and got up to relieve himself.

There was a flat rock. He saw it and put the toy on it and with a flick of his middle finger gave it a perfect spin. Equilibrium. Both balls in their holes.

Using the rock, he dug a hole, placed the toy in it and then covered it with dirt. He flattened the dirt with his sneaker and then placed the rock on top of it. The gnats were beginning to bite, but he waited until he saw the first star of the evening. Only then, in the darkness, with his arms stretched out in front of him like a zombie did he start walking home.

DEAR MR HEMINGWAY

Michael McLaughlin

Dear Mr Hemingway,

I am sorry, but we are going to pass on your book, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Basically, the story does not meet our standards for modern creative fiction on many levels.

Mr Hemingway, may I make some careful observations.

The book is too short, and nobody has published novellas since 1979. Quantity may not be married to quality, but they are kissing cousins. We can't charge thirty-seven dollars for a glorified short story. It's Amazon's fault. They have ruined the book business. People today think they are writers once they publish anything on Amazon.

You have the old man hook a 'marlin'. Marlins are an endangered species, and your choice of fish would not work with the environmental crowd who are also big book readers. Could the old man catch a giant carp or catfish?

You have him catch a 1500-pound (today we use kilos not pounds, I might add) fish with his bare hands and fight the fish for three days. Really? That is not physically possible; no one would believe an 'old' (your word, Mr Hemingway) man could fight for three days with a 1500-pound wild animal. That aspect of your book is the closest side of impossible. It is beyond macho; don't you think Mr Hemingway? You would need the old man to wear a cape to accomplish that feat. And God NO to anymore superhero stories.

Also, the word 'old' in the title is pejorative in this day in age. Most readers are millennials. Perhaps you could update the story to the not-so-old-man. And where is the old man's phone? Everyone carries a phone nowadays. With GPS I might add.

At the beginning of the book, you have an interaction between the old man and a young boy. Sorry, but that is taboo for the modern reader—an old man and a young boy. Thank God you didn't have the old man with a young girl, that would have gotten your book banned by every library and the entire Christian world ... who I might add are people who fish too.

Maybe you could have a fish out of water (no pun intended) story like a *young* fishing boy, who is also a computer hacker existentialist—the boy finds redemption in the catching of a really big fish? During the fish battle a stigmata appears on his hands and ... Well, the rest is up to you.

There is no love interest in the story. Most of the readers in the world are women. Women in this modern era run the book business, in case you have not noticed. I am not saying you change your story where the old man finds an old woman and they have pornographic sex in a small skiff on the ocean in the moonlight. Although that does have cinematic possibilities.

Finally, the ending to the book is not satisfying. This 'old man' is a loser. Having fought the good fight is not good enough today, Mr Hemingway, unless you have the old man die at the end. Sort of like the movie *Moby Dick* where Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab, his body lashed to the white whale—the obsessed becomes part of the obsession. Our 'old man' is hanging on to the giant Marlin in much the same way. Man and nature in a symbiotic relationship—a love/death embrace?

Good Luck,

The Editor

KITCHEN BLIZZARD

Pam Sinicrope

Wider than my paper, whiter too. Why must I look beyond a single pane of leaded glass—beyond the pileated woodpecker hanging upside down, stubbornly tasting the woody buckthorn, flexible, strong enough to hold on even in the cold, so cold, no one is singing. The sky is white. The ground, white. The space inside my eyes—a wet white. The horizon is endless, a desert of endless nothing. The nothing which consumes my pupils, seeps into my soul. I want to see beyond the glare, to what comes after. I want to bend upside down and taste the bitter wood, that because it has a taste, could also be sweet. I want to bake cookies that smell like the sun quivering over Spring, that flood my mouth with hope. If only I could see beneath it. Through it. I set the oven to June. The butter is hard but softens in my hands. White sugar spins with the butter like revelation into the stark metal of April. The brown sugar sticks to the bowl's ribs like grit, but finally gives in to bright vanilla scented yolks. Vanilla reminds me of my mother. Flour, baking soda, and salt sift, a warm snow binding us all together. The horizon is too far away for concern. I won't look.

ALL OF IT

Edward Michael Supranowicz

He told her to pour her heart out. You can't mean that she says. Yes, do it. And she starts, and there is a dust storm and a swirl of giant cobwebs. She starts to stop. No, go on. And there are dark rain clouds with hailstones of frozen rage and teardrops of bitter acid rain. Go on. Go. And there are empty bags of chips and melted ice cream, flip-flops and stiletto heels, one-night stands and gold rings with broken bands. And she puts her hands on her chest. It hurts. It hurts, but there is space there now. You know, a couch might look nice in that corner.

WALKING SHADOW

Olive Cotton's The Photographer's Shadow (1935)

Vanessa Proctor

Mine is the space between light and shade.
Behind the camera my body lacks substance,
it has the texture of cirrus clouds, of wind-
blown swells rolling in from Chile and Peru.
I move unnoticed over the hot sand,
always alert to the image, shifting between
shadows as vibrant as light,
shaping, framing, reframing.
There is power in the click of the shutter,
in choosing the focus, the moment.
Prospero-like, cocooned in the darkroom,
I am consumed by the alchemy of my art,
projecting my shadow over what I find,
slowly becoming my own subject.

FRIED EGGS

Rebecca Douglas

The walls were whispering. Sweet nothings into the part of herself where fried eggs trickled down the kitchen door, the baby shrieked until it gurgled into silence, and the carving knife was missing from the block.

She stared out the back window, saw nothing but condensation hazing the glass, droplets clinging and occasionally streaming into pools at the bottom. She balled a fist into her nightgown sleeve and smudged the condensation off in clumsy streaks, but the world outside was nothing but fog. All silent, then the dispirited caw of a crow.

Gone, the weeds, the henhouse with the chickens long since dust. The rooster's infernal cock-a-doodling that clamped her teeth at the death knell of night after hours grinding until her jaw ached. The rotting wooden fence spilling creeper vine into the back neighbour's yard. They were not good people.

Still, the whispering. She could not see them in the yard, but she knew they were there. Watching, waiting. Ready to steal her eggs if she wasn't careful. The lights that shone pierced her eyes, turned seeing into stabs of pain. An insult, an injury.

She would not stand for it. Couldn't stand very well, in any case, these days. Her knees gave way under the slightest provocation, or none at all, and she tumbled down. Each time she staggered to her feet and stood swaying, hands clawing nearby surfaces for purchase.

The fog kept rolling across the yard, shrouding all. It danced, celebrating a funeral she couldn't remember. She recalled certain things—chasing down the Mr Whippy truck in her dad's white van, turned beige with dirt. The Murray magpie who pecked inside the holes in your shoes and sat on the clothesline while her mum hung out the washing. They named him 'Boydie'. A circus unfurling plumes of candy-

striped tents beside the dilapidated train tracks. The time before city life and adult consciousness. So very small, so unaware.

Now, she was awake. They couldn't fool her. They were stealing her eggs, and she was onto them. She caught snatches of hissing words from the walls. Hatching plans, calling her name, and keeping secrets from her, just out of earshot. She smacked her gums and eyed the swirling white. There was a burnt smell in the air, but she didn't know when she'd last cooked, or last eaten. She slid her gaze towards the kitchen, countertops buried under piles of yellowed newspaper curled at the edges.

The carving knife was missing from the block.

DREAM SONG

Travis Stephens

not a lullaby, not a goddamned tune,
dream is an open window,
dream the sound of tyres on blacktop,
the harsh kiss of a shotglass.
In the night the foxes pause
to sniff the day's passing. Owls
keep their eyes open while
turkeys mumble like pear-shaped,
red-eyed insomniacs stuck in a tree.
Maybe moving to the mountains
was a mistake.

At the beach house, salty tongued,
I have closed my eyes and tried
to imagine waves, one after another.
But they form a silent relentless flood.
Night with a tooth of foam, the
shoulder of god, a wet crash of thunder.
Is that the tide? Every six hours
another inhalation.

We can blame this on age, maybe,
shrinking bladders and achy bones.
I read somewhere that babies and
elderly don't need as much sleep.
Or maybe I am wrong and it is proven

infants and infirm need MORE sleep.

Whatever.

I just know that if you go under in darkness,
pray you are sleeping.

PELICANS

Suzanne Verrall

The pelicans bought the property behind mine, a dirty bit of scrub not worth a damn at the end of a twisty broken road. Not that my place is much better, but at least it's got a dwelling on it, and septic, and a generator for when the solar quits.

No sooner had the sold sticker gone up on the board than the pelican family moved in. I heard them arrive, the dignified *THOOFF THOOFF* of their wings as they came into land. There were a lot of them, but they travelled light, and they made no other sound. If I hadn't been home at the time I reckon it could've been weeks before I noticed. It's not like they strung up party lights.

Though there's a presence that wasn't there before, something prehistoric. That sombre *THOOFF THOOFF* like a struggle, like an old dog panting, then the neighbourhood settling like bones.

They don't play music, don't have visitors. The kids don't yell and scream. They don't hoon, don't smoke, don't have the television up loud. They're not pushily sociable. They tuck themselves into themselves and roost when the sun goes down. They're early risers, gone mostly before I'm fully awake. They take off, *THOOFF THOOFF*, slowly gaining altitude then riding the thermals to work or to school or wherever they go each day.

But I can't shake it, that mindless *THOOFF THOOFF*. The old dog panting and dying. It's crept into my unconscious. It's affecting my work. The old dog who wasn't always old. Who I grew up with and told my secrets to. It's coming and I'm not ready.

COLLINS ST 5 PM

(after the painting by John Brack)

Rohan Buettel

Five pm, a uniform drudgery
disgorges from office buildings to street,
where a centipede of blank faces crawls
along the footpath, its sole intent
to get to home, or pub before the swill.
White-collar working life, the muted palette
of a Melbourne winter—brown, black and beige
brings grim expressions: thin lipped and lined;
long noses, black-rimmed glasses, narrowed eyes;
a world of pork pie hats, short back and sides.
A keystone in the arch of a financial heart:
yet, the only visible sign is the Bank
of New South Wales. The only consolation,
Paris too is misery on a wintry day.

THREE DISTINCT KNOCKS

Anthony Lynch

They were not random wars in a neighbouring apartment. Not foggy
envoys of incidental gunfire drifting from afar. Not even the staccato
of insect-driven birds rapping at his window.

They were three distinct knocks, rising from his wall.

A sketch of a boy grasping an apple adorned the wall. The apple,
uneaten, sat gently in the boy's hand like a delicate world globe.
Whenever he gazed at the picture, he wondered why the artist drew in
soft blue pencil.

But now this peaceful sketch said something new to him. The
knocking had sprung from behind the picture. Or from the picture itself.

He waited. Seconds, half a minute, a minute passed. Perhaps he was
mistaken. The picture had led his senses astray. The adjacent wall rose
blankly, silently. He stood, turned to his front door and fixed one eye
on the peephole. A blurry nothing. With the security chain attached,
he urged the door open to a rake of light. Closing the door, he released
the chain, reopened the door and inched his head out. The corridor
receded in either direction.

Returning to his black couch, he stared at his surrounds: spare
walls, toy-like kitchenette, single bed, door leading to a cupboard-sized
bathroom.

A kitchen calendar with a photograph for every month of the year
showed a woman cycling along a waterfront. Behind her the sun lurched
over ocean, casting the woman's shadow to the viewer. A sphere-like
helmet circled her head, her pants were rolled at the cuffs. He liked the
photo, had not turned a page of the calendar since he didn't know when.
The photo was for the month of May in a year long gone.

He looked back to the sketch. Something unwanted, a dull nausea or worm of unease, entered his body. Was the knocking meant for him?

The following days produced nothing but the muffled sounds of an outside world that did not belong to him. Vague movement from the floor above, muddled calls from elsewhere in the building—animal, human, he couldn't always be sure. Baying of car horns, steel whine of trams rounding a turn, voices from a distant beyond. Closer, the rowdy ghosts of other occupants blundering down the corridor and past his door, violently present then gone.

For hours he sat absorbed in the dirt-coloured carpet that spread beneath his feet, bending sometimes to twist between finger and thumb a small synthetic tuft.

A week later, the knocking forgotten, three knocks wrenched him from a daydream. Startled, he looked around, as if his room had been suddenly reconfigured. The knocks, he thought, came from the same wall, where the boy with apple returned his gaze.

Quickly checking the door, he again found only the empty, windowless corridor. Once a week a box of groceries was left at his door, but today was not the day for groceries. And even on such a day, its appearance was never announced, the box was always just there. He closed his door, turned back to his room, which offered nothing. The sketch stared empty back.

Three evenings later, the knocking came again. Three knocks, evenly spaced and pitched. They came, he felt sure, from where the sketch hung.

He removed the picture and placed it on the floor facing the opposite wall.

His days became vigils, sitting, mapping his room and waiting, surveying one surface then another. A ceiling light hovered above, a tired, indoor sun with two blurry globes behind a grimy glass cover. Dead insects clouded the bowl. His bed crouched in a corner, cloaked in a grey floral quilt.

Despite its modest functionality, his accommodation had the solidity and constancy of a small but comforting universe. It gave him little to complain of.

But now, of a night, he juddered in his bed and waited.

When the knocking returned, it only confounded him more. The light beyond his window had grown dull gold with dusk; he had drifted into half-sleep. He heard one knock, then another. By the third, his body, electrified, brought him upright.

But the wall opposite rose in silence. The sketch sat on the floor. A pale rectangle ghosted where it once hung.

Two nights later, in the dead hours, it came again. From the depths of sleep he registered the first knock as a foggy call from another world, the second and third as waking alarm. Prone in bed, he found the wall with one hand while raising himself with the other. An absolute dark. He located his bedside lamp, and a sphere of hard light flooded wall and ceiling.

From that night on, his sleep was utterly broken. Night was hours of unborn day, day forebodings of impending night. Darkness undid him. His body had nowhere to go, and his mind set off on courses of its own, never travelling far. Where did the knockings come from, what did they mean? Were they incidental, or sounding for him? We may love the call of a bird, but it calls for another. Stars do not shine for us.

Sometimes he had a notion the knocking sounded from this wall or from that, but over time he became less sure. Was it even a wall? Could it not be from the ceiling or floor? He clamped an ear to each cold surface. No, the wall, a wall was more likely. So he thought.

He strove for normalcy. Of a morning he rose, washed himself and donned clothes for day. Come night he dressed for sleep. He collected the box of groceries placed weekly at his door, returned the empty box to the hallway for the unseen handler of produce. Ate simple meals and washed clean his simple plate.

Every morning he wiped the glass top of his small coffee table, gleaming above a wicker base. The surface had once been dust-covered, broken only where a cup or glass left its signature. Now he rubbed as if his sanity depended on it.

Long ago, the fluorescent light above his sink began to shudder and blink, scratching at the edge of his vision. Mounting a stool, he had loosed the dying tube from its fitting so that a steady dark ensued. He placed the tube outside his door along with the empty food box, and one week later a new tube had appeared.

Now the cold tap in his washroom had begun a slow drip, but there was no putting the tap out with his empty box. Nor could he consider intervention by a plumber, one with his well-meaning clutch of spanners, wrenches and screwdrivers.

So the tap would continue to drip, a metronome quickening time. There was nothing for it but to close the bathroom door.

Three days later, the knocking returned. There was no confusing it with a drip.

It came in the night, then the day. From this wall, then that. Or so it seemed. From the floor, from the ceiling. By the time he'd woken from half-sleep or, if day, turned in the direction of sound, it had ceased.

He shifted his bed to the middle of the room.

Shufflings, openings and closings of doors, muffled voices of his neighbours; day and night he was a sponge for sound. Once more he put an ear to a wall, the floor, listening, wondering if this neighbour or that had knocked. He recalled in a misty past someone (himself?) knocking on a wall to locate a beam, a stud, a form within. Knocking as a search for structure.

He knew no visitors.

The walls were white thanks to a thin layer of paint applied with a roller—jagged flight paths ghosted each wall—under which crept shadows of grey. A long-gone previous tenant had left hooks on the wall, and over the years they'd held up nothing but air. Hooks on which the

blue sketch and calendar hung had also been in place, higher than he'd prefer but acceptable.

In the wall beyond the demounted sketch, the closed door folded away his bathroom—a cold, shadowy cube despite its tunnel of frosted window light. He kept the door closed against the refrain of dripping water.

Slim points of reference marked his days. Scratches on the arms of the chair infected with light, the dripping tap, a spray of curtain dust. Overlaid with the pronouncements of knockings, the spaces between.

He distracted himself with thoughts of taps and plumbers, blue overalls, grey water, scents of shaved metal and sweat. He turned the small green knob of the cold tap, red knob of the hot, absently tested the flow.

Other nights he anticipated the knockings by moving from one space to another, thinking to arrest the sound in this corner or that, from this wall or that square of floor. Guessing wrongly, he would, he believed, swivel mid-step to apprehend the knock before its third sounding. He paced with ever greater speed, working himself to a frenzy. At night he knew no rest, all his attention given to roaming, listening, waiting.

Yet still the knockings came—all the more urgent, ever insistent—and they eluded him. They arrived when distraction or fatigue overtook him, when sleeplessness threatened his grasp of a tangible world.

The picture of the boy, slim fingers clawing the apple, remained propped where he left it, unsettling despite facing the wall.

He forgot to eat, found he'd apparently eaten, a half-consumed meal of no substance before him. He lost track of when to collect his hallway food box, when to set the empty box out.

He neglected to bathe, was met with foul body odour when he staggered from one dank corner of the flat to another. He lay exhausted for hours with his head anchored to the floor or buttressed to a wall, listening. His head throbbed, weighed so much he wanted to detach it. But it was already detaching; he was of himself and at a remove,

observer of a lurching figure that merely resembled him. Why did that man not see to himself, what was he doing, endlessly roaming that room? There was a knock, then another. Where was he? Where was he to put his head?

The calendar with lone cyclist had crumpled to the floor, time folding in on itself.

He, too, eventually folded into his narrow bed, and he slept for what must have been a very long time. He knew not how long, he recalled turning once in a while, a small voltaic alarm of thought lighting his body before sleep dismissed him again. When he finally, fully woke he knew neither day nor night. Morning perhaps; his blinds glowed with muted light.

A food box sat before his door, how long it had sat he didn't know, but he ate. Barely recognising the gaunt, shadowy figure in the bathroom mirror, he bathed and found clean clothes. Opened a blind, thin light shining through, promising longer days. Sat on his black couch. Waited.

Sounds of daily life reached him: car engine igniting and drifting into distance, magpie turf wars, a man's indecipherable voice rising from the street, an equally indecipherable reply.

Days passed. He rose in the morning, made his bed and straightened the floral quilt. Washed, ate, gazed out the window at distant figures trawling the street before retiring. Wiped the glass tabletop, rinsed his cups and plates.

He put the blue sketch of the boy back on the wall, rehung the calendar with its long-gone year.

They came one afternoon. Seated on his couch, calm of mind, his eyes resting on the wall between sketch and calendar, he saw them rise, as if visibly, from that blank space. Clear, unmistakable. He rose, stepped forward, gaze fixed on the wall. He knew exactly where. Reaching the wall, he lifted his hand, made a fist, and for a brief moment before returning the knock he knew nothing but certainty.

MEASURING TWICE

Dugald Williamson

He worried that he knew from the war how to kill a man. Even though this was different: some neighbour's bullying. *No shot in anger* reverberated. And could he, really?

When he came to your door that summer's day,
I was too green to understand why
he would be shaking, and barely shook,
and just said to you, so-so.

In the autumn, he took some of us kids
with rough ideas from woodwork through
the scaffolding of a house on the hill,
and how to square the timber.

Paths crossing, years later, something
fell into place when he just said, the way
you used to listen gave him space
to get things straight again.

TAKING A PULSE

Charlotte Waters

in the final days,
our grief will be measured
by the body of a child
with their fingertips pressing
on the warm earth in their backyard
as if taking its pulse.

halving a carrot, my knife
slips. the skin splits
instinctive as a half-gasp
reflected in a deep slit
perpendicular to the nail. inertia pools
into a bright, pulsing berry
then, at the end of its breath
collapses, sighing into flatness,
weeping all the way
through the bunched-up tissues
that will sit on the kitchen counter,
heavy as piles of unworn veils.

father cuts eyes that look like his
into every tree, so he can be sure
it is watching him, always
watching it, waiting
with a gun tucked inside
the elastic of his underwear.
these fearful days

he can read only anger
in the ridges of a tremoring body.

daughter is still awake
raw-boned, wide-hearted.
yawning into the new season,
she collects the sweet bright berries
that dribble over the fence
and the dust that sticks inside
the fur of a sunned cat.
shaken out from between
leaves and follicles, the liveliest

soil, in the end, will be found
stuffed inside the nails
of the small fingers
that bear witness to a grief
with no eyes or tongue
or home to go to
when the vein is cut,
a grief that can only count
the number of heartbeats
stretching between
itself and heaven.

WINTER LIGHT

Thomas Lowery

The rays of summer intrude like jagged knives. That is why I like the light in winter best. When the sky is grey and the trees are empty, the light responds in kind. It asks for nothing and takes nothing in return. When it passes through the kitchen window, I follow its subdued glow along the chipped wood floor to the soft blue walls to the lines of your face as you copy out recipes at the table. The winter light is kind and unsentimental. A suggestion, not an expectation. An invitation without strings. And so, I pause with the light and welcome it as the ticking of the clock drifts into oblivion. I could stay with it for a while, simmer. Fade into the look and feel of things. Become a picture in a frame. I bolt upright. There's food to cook, friends to call, dogs to walk, books to read, songs to sing. Let the light go. It will be back soon.

BROOM

*A Poem Written in Praise of a 95-Year-Old Grandmother Who Defied
Police Arrest by Wielding Her Broom*

Siobhan Harvey

carries us back to our antiquity, old moon, sage shrew, when we birth rituals like midwifery, medicine, meditation and magic, summon spirits, scribe apotropaic marks, scry mirrors, divine meaning cast in lots, cards, smoke, sky transits, upon a new moon incant love-spells, upon a waning moon hex melancholy, sweep away the dead-skin detritus and evil spirits vexing the home, twig the dangers of moly and monkhood, taglock poppets to heal the sick, temper fractious dogs and feral cats, spoiled stews and brats, and sour bad lovers, cutting them loose, wisdom we bestow as our herstory

carries us on to a dark age, death moon, bedlam beldam, when we become muse for *Malleus Maleficarum* and *Daemonologie*, the 'what' and 'why' of the witch grow wretched, our begging pins, needling neighbours and turns high on flying ointment, misogynists twist with pilliwinks and branks into lies as monstrous as succubae, evil eyes, Sabbat revels and devilish couplings, then haul us aloft the gibbets at Berwick, Pendle, Würzburg, Torsåker, where an unkindness of ravens takes flight, and we—shapeshifters, augurs—rise, as our herstory

carries us on to an age of uprising, red moon, fierce fury, when we bristle with injustice, raise staffs skyward at Versailles, Peterloo and Copenhagen, bear our besom-handled banners for suffrage at Christchurch, Adelaide, Helsinki, Manila, Santiago, for equality at Alabama, Dagenham, Soweto, for liberty at Cairo, Prague, Gdansk, Berlin, Tiananmen; wherever, whenever, there's injustice, we're Mops on the March, Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, mothers and daughters of Greenham, the Gulabi Gang, Clapham Broom Army, wahine

of the Hikoi, Bastion Point, Mashhad, Qom, Kabul, and sharp-teethed activists at Pride, #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #WontBeErased, Climate Strike, as our herstory

carries us on to this age of chaos, cold moon, vilified virago, when we backtrack, renew age-old battles over our bodies, sexualities, autonomies, reproductive rights, refute new acts denying us education, speech and movement, and chant, no more hexing us with your fetishes, no more bewitching us with your lore; we're as strong as a 95-year-old grandmother who brandished her brush, taliswoman for all who stave off haters, silencers, trolls, detractors, gaslighters, rapists and more, and our sisters, matriarchs and sibyls who keep broom in our corner, as our herstory carries us on . . .

FOOLPROOF

Benjamin Hollo

The Globe heaves with more first-years than usual for a Thursday. Green pendant lights drift through smoke clouds. My butt squeaks across the tight leather of the armchair, and it lets off an oaky scent. It's just been replaced. Something wears out around here, and they buy a new one. Most of these kids think the whole world works like this.

Jackie leaves a red lipstick smear on her pint. She blends in even less in this pub than I do—heavy eyeshadow, leather miniskirt, hairspray galore. She'd get a better reception if she toned down the townie look and mimicked the campus girls' sweaters-tucked-in-jeans aesthetic.

Matt passes, gripping two beers.

'Hey, join us?' I sit up to get his attention.

'Can't, dude. Got a bio study sesh.'

Jackie's fire-engine lips tighten like she's constipated. When Matt's gone, she blows smoke across the table. 'Why do you talk to that trust fund baby?'

'His dad's a big-time attorney. You know Jacob?' I gesture to Matt's table.

'You mean that little weasel in the vest?'

I laugh, but compose myself. 'Matt helped him score an internship last summer.'

'So?' Jackie examines her shiny red nails.

'I'm not wasting another summer at the bookstore.'

'Well, good luck getting an in. You're not one of them.' She squints at my khakis, my cashmere sweater—understated but quality items from Gravely's. 'You can't fool them either.'

A sudden itch around my neck. 'I can try.'

The waitress drops the bill between us.

Jackie belches. 'Your turn!'

'How's that fair?' I gesture to her line of empty shot glasses.

'As if it's your money.'

I smirk. Glancing around, I catch a glimpse of Matt's table, all laughing and smacking backs, not a bio textbook in sight. So much for the study sesh.

'Our days are numbered anyways,' Jackie says.

'What? Why?' My neck muscles tense.

'Kim says they're coming to install computers, scanners, cameras—the whole shebang.'

My last sip of beer goes down bitter. 'When?'

'Week after next.'

'We gotta pinch as much as we can before then.'

Jackie stubs out her butt. 'I don't want to draw heat.'

'Our system's foolproof.' Suddenly, Matt's table thins out. 'Now's my moment.'

There's a twitch in Jackie's cheek. 'I've got a history paper due tomorrow. Any chance you could help?'

'No can do. I have a window.' I drop a \$20 bill on the table.

I head over to Matt. 'Hey, you want another round?'

Later that night, I follow the throngs of drunk students towards rez but slip down a little path towards the bus station at the campus's edge. I stop in front of Gravely's and linger there for a moment, manoeuvring my windowed reflection into the grey overcoat I've had my eye on. Not a bad price for Italian craftsmanship. It's like Matt's, but it'll look better on me. The colour will bring out my blue-grey eyes.

The next morning, Jackie isn't behind the till. I find her napping in the break room at the vast oak table. Even the furniture's classy here, in the university bookstore's staff lounge, where the plebs congregate. Everything on campus, so carefully considered. Unlike the rest of town.

I nudge her awake. 'Sorry I didn't help with your paper.'

'That's alright. Maybe I need to crash and burn before I get my shit together.' I wonder if Jackie means that, though. She's always desperate for my help. 'So, did you get your internship or whatever?'

'I can't exactly come out and ask for it.'

'Why not?'

'They can smell desperation a mile away.'

Yawning, she passes me an empty pack of Marley Lights.

I peer inside. 'Nice haul.'

'I can't believe how many of them don't want receipts.'

'Why would they? Returns aren't worth their hassle.'

The door swings open. Jackie flinches. In walks Kim and her frizzy perm, straight to the kettle. 'You two flirting again?'

Back on the floor, I wheel around my cart. It's wooden and sturdy, top quality. I load up the books. Chem. Bio. Psych. A week's salary right there. The publishers are the true criminals; not us.

When Kim's out for lunch, the books begin their journey to the break room, one by one, every trip looking accidental. In a stack on the oak table, they simmer until the most vulnerable moment. If this scam were a flight, we'd be landing now. I funnel the books into my backpack.

Lunch break. On the stone steps of the beaux-arts rotunda, the sun leaves no shadows to hide in. But campus doesn't mind; she isn't shy. The buildings are treasures, grey monoliths built to last.

Along comes Steve, right on schedule. He hands over a crumpled paper bag. 'For the smartest guy I know.'

'Blast from the past.' I remove the misshapen donut and take a bite.

'The best, yeah?' He tucks his stringy blond hair behind his ears.

'You bet.' There are superior bakeries near campus, ones Steve would never frequent. He's fiercely loyal to the neighbourhood, so loyal he'll condemn himself to life there.

I put away the half-eaten donut and heave the textbooks out of my backpack.

‘Hell, yeah.’ Steve’s breath is worse than usual. Maybe it’s that rotting tooth.

He shuffles through the books. ‘Can’t you get that expensive one again—*Physics?*’

‘Nobody’s bought it lately.’

He frowns like a kid who’s dropped his ice cream.

‘We can’t control what they buy, Steve.’ I hand him Jackie’s pack of Marley Lights, stuffed full of receipts.

‘I know, I know.’ He lights up a half-smoked butt and hauls the load back to Jackie for a cash refund.

Ten minutes and he’s back. We divvy out his cut.

Later at the bookstore, I gesture through the window at the cash register for Jackie to meet me out front.

She lights a cigarette and rips her cut of the proceeds from my hand. ‘I’m out.’

‘We’ve still got two weeks!’

‘Kim’s been eyeing me like nuts.’

‘Kim’s a dumbass townie.’

Jackie scoffs, ‘You’re a townie.’

‘I’m enrolled here, aren’t I? Aren’t you?’

Down the street, I notice Matt and his friends entering the Globe. ‘You gotta think like them,’ I whisper to Jackie. ‘Take what you want from the world. How do you think their parents got so rich?’

Jackie flicks away her cigarette. ‘Easy for you to say. You live at your mom’s. If I lose this job, who’s gonna pay my rent?’

The next day, I wait for Steve at the rotunda. The reddening trees around campus bathe in the late afternoon sun. Those old trees—I imagine how deep their roots grow.

Steve wobbles up the rotunda’s stairs, bony knees poking through ripped jeans.

‘The whole thing’s done.’ I explain the store’s impending upgrades, Jackie’s latest paranoia about Kim.

His face twists.

‘I’m not happy about it either.’

‘My dad really can’t afford his meds.’

‘Maybe it’s time for you to get a better job. How many years have you been painting houses?’

‘What else can I do? I’ve got no qualifications, no education.’ Steve’s eyes fill.

He’s right, and he needs the money more than me, even more than Jackie.

‘Don’t worry. I’ll fix this.’

Jackie’s smoking in front of the bookstore. Her mascara runs after I recount my conversation with Steve, along with a few embellishments. ‘I can’t believe he and his dad are being evicted,’ she says. ‘But Kim’s watching me like a hawk.’

‘Even if she knew, would she care? She barely makes more than us.’

‘Nah, I gotta keep my head down.’ She sucks on her cigarette.

‘That’s just how they want us—heads down, working for diddly.’

If Jackie isn’t careful, she’ll end up like Steve, resigned to her station.

‘Do it for Steve,’ I say.

‘He’s got a record, remember? Not to mention...’ She pauses. ‘I’m on academic probation.’

‘What? How?’

‘We don’t all have your gifts.’ Skin flushed, she butts out and enters the store.

I wait for two hours until break, fingernails chewed down to the bit. I almost don’t want her to bring me any receipts. If she gets expelled, she’ll never forgive me.

But she does it. She brings me a motherlode.

I lug the booty to Steve—backpack and two shopping bags full. Now I've got the Physics book along with a dozen others.

He completes the circle, bringing the books back home.

I wait at the rotunda for Steve's return with the cash. Sun bathes the old campus buildings in gold. They're grand and elegant, but not excessively ornate. Like every other old monied thing and person, they boast through understatement.

A week later, the weather finally turns cold, just in time for my new grey overcoat from Gravely's. It fits snug, as if personally tailored. Matt and I walk to a dorm party. Yesterday, he mentioned his dad's job, the internship program. I pretended to be surprised. A few more meetings before the big ask.

Rounding the corner, we come upon the bookstore. Jackie and Steve sit on the curb, handcuffed. A cop—a real one, not campus security—huddles with Kim.

Time slows. Too late to cross the street. Jackie and Steve see me but look away. Kim gives me a shrug as in *look what these idiots did*. That's when I know my partners didn't snitch.

Matt and I keep moving, but my legs drag. Though I pushed them into this mess, my friends looked out for me.

'Don't you know that chick?' Matt gestures at Jackie.

'Nah, not really.' My voice falters a little.

'Sucks to be her. Girl like that though, figures.' He tuts. 'And that sketchy dude with her, man, oh, man. Must be townies.'

We pass Gravely's. The mannequin in the window has been stripped nude. I stop in my tracks.

'What are you staring at, dude?'

'It's me who's the con,' I mutter.

'You trippin'?'

'I'll be right back.' On the curb, I leave Matt, mouth agape.

We're all out of interrogation now, released on a warning, and gather on the sidewalk outside the station, but Jackie won't linger.

'Meet up later at the Globe?' I say.

She turns on her heel and glowers. 'It was too much!'

'You're right. I'm sorry. We took it too far.'

'We?' She doesn't wait for my answer.

'Where're you going?' I grab her arm.

She shakes me off. 'To get another job, dumbass!'

Once Jackie's gone, I turn to Steve. 'Sorry.'

He shrugs. 'At least we aren't doing time.'

There's something in his answer that prompts me to take off my jacket and pass it to him. When he gives me a questioning look, I fish the receipt out of my wallet and put it into his hand.

FORM

Todd Heldt

A bird's outstretched wings,
sky behind and above,
hand and negative space.

We lie beneath a tree.

Wine spill on my shirt,
shape and stain but not
its chill upon my skin.

Her face framed by streetlight.

Then her hand in mine,
the whole of us carved
out of shadow and given
over to breath and touch

We become something
else. All of it at once.

NOTHING

Todd Heldt

I am smoke in a bottle,
a bottlerocket's ghost
I am a blackbird's opposite
empty sky

SPARROWS

Todd Heldt

Sparrows on their power lines
creak like hinges. My grief
the live bird I once held in my hand,
its tiny heartbeat, not even that.

DOES IT TRACK?

Drew Pissarra

The phone rings, I pick up, you ask me where
I am since I'm not at home. I've already told you.
I took the train to town, to our pied-à-terre.

You pause. Your silence worse than a stare;
your breathing, mean. I hang up, as if to scold you.
The phone rings. I pick up, you ask me where

the fuck I've found the nerve, how could I dare . . .
I disconnect despite wanting to hold you.
I took the train to town, to our pied-à-terre

because I can't repair the wear and tear.
I must recoup since I cannot remould you.
The phone rings. I pick up, you ask me where

we go from here. It's all too much to bear.
We are the pair unpaired, a new me and an old you.
The phone rings, I pick up, you ask me where
I took the train. As if you were unaware.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Abdumueed Balogun Adewale is a black poet and an undergrad at the University of Ibadan. He's a Pushcart prize and BOTN Nominee. He prays silently in his heart that his verses outlive him. His poems have been published in: *Brittle Paper*, *Poetry Lab Shanghai*, *Soundings East Magazine*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *ROOM*, *Red Cedar Review*, *Watershed Review*, *Decolonial Passage*, *Poetry Column-NND*, *The Westchester Review*, *The Oakland Arts Review*, *The Night Heron Barks Review*, *Subnivean Magazine*, *Short Vine* and elsewhere. He tweets from: AbdmueedA

Gabriella Bedetti's translations of Henri Meschonnic's writings have appeared in *New Literary History*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Diacritics*. She and her co-translator, Don Boes, are circulating *The Butterfly Tree: Selected Poems of Henri Meschonnic*.

Don Boes' first book, *The Eighth Continent*, was chosen by A.R. Ammons as the recipient of the Samuel Morse Poetry Prize (Northeastern University Press, 1993). He has also published a chapbook, *Railroad Crossing* (Finishing Line Press, 2005) and a book, *Good Luck with That* (FutureCycle Press, 2015). Their translations have appeared in *Puerto del Sol*, *World Literature Today*, *Rhino*, and elsewhere.

Meghalee Bose is a reader and writer based in Melbourne. Her work has been previously shortlisted for the Deborah Cass Prize, the Newcastle Short Story Award, the EJ Brady Short Story competition, and others. She writes code for a living and narrative for what makes that living worthwhile.

Margaret Bradstock is an award-winning Sydney poet, critic and editor. She lectured at UNSW for 25 years and has been Asialink Writer-in-residence at Beijing University, co-editor of *Five Bells* for Poets Union, and on the Board of Directors for Australian Poetry. She has nine published collections of poetry, the most recent being *Alchemy of the Sun* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2024).

Daniel Brennan (he/him) is a queer writer and coffee devotee from New York, where he lives in an apartment being slowly overtaken by stacks of books. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and has appeared in numerous publications, including *Birdcoat Quarterly*, *Sky Island Journal*, and *The Pinch*. He can be found on Twitter and Instagram: @dannymbrennan

My name is **Vincent Brincat**. I was born in Sydney. I am a retired teacher of 39 years' experience. I am married, have two children and three grandchildren. Writing has always been a passion with me from a very early age. I have had two other pieces accepted for publication 2021–2022 with *Meniscus* literary journal. I have also self-published a

biography of my family's migration from worn torn Malta to Australia in 1950, which I recently reworked as a narrative, allowing for a deeper and more personal interpretation of their journey and experiences.

Maggie Brookes-Butt is a British poet and novelist whose sixth poetry collection *everlove* was published by The London Magazine in 2021. She is an ex-journalist, BBC TV producer, creative writing academic and Royal Literary Fund Fellow. Her new poems are about being a grandmother in this troubled world. Her Penguin Random House historical novels *The Prisoner's Wife* and *Acts of Love and War* are published as Maggie Brookes.

Finn Brown (they/ them) is a queer writer and maker, whose short stories, poetry and non-fiction have been published in *Queer Life*, *Queer Love 2* (Muswell Press), *The Bombay Review*, *The Bittersweet Review*, *Penumbra Literary*, *Unbound Zine*, *Transforming Being*, *Snowflake Magazine*, *All Existing* and *Texlandia Magazine*. They have performed spoken word at Hay Festival, Last Word Festival and Brainchild Festival as part of the Roundhouse Poetry Collective. They are an editor at t'ART.

Phil Brown is editor of *InReview*, Queensland. As a journalist he has written for a variety of national and international publications including literary journals such as *Meanjin* and *Griffith Review*. He has written a number of books including two 'slim volumes' of poetry—*Plastic Parables* (Metro Community Press, 1991), and *An Accident in the Evening* (Interactive Press, 2001); and his poetry has been published widely. His most recent book is *The Kowloon Kid: A Hong Kong Childhood*, published by Transit Lounge in 2019.

Rohan Buettel lives in Canberra, Australia. His haiku appear in various Australian and international journals (including *Presence*, *Cattails* and *The Heron's Nest*). His longer poetry appears in more than sixty journals, including *Unleash Lit*, *The Goodlife Review*, *Rappahannock Review*, *Penumbra Literary and Art Journal*, *Passengers Journal*, *Reed Magazine*, *Meniscus* and *Quadrant*.

Owen Bullock's latest poetry collection is *Pancakes for Neptune* (Recent Work Press, 2023), following three other poetry titles, five books of haiku, a bilingual edition of tanka, and a novella. He teaches Creative Writing at the University of Canberra. His other interests include chess, juggling and music. <https://poetry-in-process.com/> @OwenTrail

Hanna Carney recently graduated from Cornell University where she studied English literature and psychology. Now, she lives in Atlanta, Georgia and works in non-profit communications and as a writer for CNN. In her free time, she enjoys writing short stories, baking, yoga, and exploring local coffee shops.

MICHAEL CHANG (they/them) is the author of *SYNTHETIC JUNGLE* (Northwestern University Press, 2023), *TOY SOLDIERS* (Action, Spectacle, 2024), & *THE HEARTBREAK ALBUM* (Coach House Books, 2025). They edit poetry at Fence.

James Salvius Cheng was born in Myanmar, though he now lives and writes in Western Australia.

Ken Cockburn is a poet and translator based in Edinburgh, Scotland. After several years at the Scottish Poetry Library, since 2004 he has freelanced, working in education, care and community settings, and often collaborating with visual artists. He also runs Edinburgh Poetry Tours, guided walks with readings of poems in the city's Old Town. His most recent pamphlet is *Edinburgh: poems & translations* (2021). <https://kencockburn.co.uk>

Rhiannon Conley is a poet and writing instructor living in North Dakota. Her work has appeared in *Occulum*, *Literary Mama*, *Longleaf Review*, *the Penn Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *Stirring* and more. Her chapbook, *Less Precious*, was published by Semiperfect Press in 2017 and her newest collection *The Most Common Symptom is Pain* was published with Bottlecap Press in 2020. Find more of her work at <http://admidas.net>

Angela Costi lives on Wurundjeri land. She is the author of five poetry collections, nine produced plays and performance text, and is the co-author of community textbook, *Relocated*. Recently, her poetry and other writing found homes in *Overland*, *Griffith Review*, *Antipodes*, *Cordite*, *Hecate*, *APJ 12.2*, *APA*, *Rochford Street Review*, *Live Encounters* and *Westerly*. She is known as Αγγελική Κωστή among the Cypriot Greek diaspora, which is her heritage.

Anne Di Lauro lives in Brisbane. Born in Sydney and educated in Brisbane, she spent more than half her adult life living and working overseas for the United Nations and other international organisations active in the field of economic and social development. Upon her return to Australia, she trained and practiced as a psychotherapist from a Jungian perspective. She recently self-published a collection of her poems, under the title *In the Shadow and the Light*, acknowledging previous publication of several of them in *Meniscus*.

Ross Donlon lives in Castlemaine where he convenes 'Poetry from Agitation Hill' & is publisher of Mark Times Books. With 5 books of his poems published, he is represented in numerous anthologies in Australia & several in the UK. He has read frequently in the UK & Ireland & elsewhere in Europe as well as festivals in Australia & other readings. He has won 2 international poetry prizes and the Launceston Cup!

Rebecca Douglas is an Adelaide-based writer whose work has been published by *Kill Your Darlings*, *The Guardian*, *Verandah*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Big Issue*, *ABC The Drum*, and various other lovely places. In 2019, her essay 'Sanity Sleuth' won the 'best MEAA member entry' award in the *Overland* Fair Australia Prize.

Jane Downing's stories and poems have been published around Australia and overseas, including in *Griffith Review*, *Big Issue*, *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, *Westerly*, *Island*, *Overland*, *Meanjin*, *Canberra Times*, *Cordite* and *Best Australian Poems*. In 2016 she was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and in 2023 she won the AAALS (*American Association of Australasian Literary Studies*) Fiction Award. Her novel, *The Sultan's Daughter*, was released by Obiter Publishing in 2020. She can be found at janedowning.wordpress.com

Liam Flake is a senior at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire studying English and Journalism. In his work he aims to employ poetry as a bridge from hegemonic lenses to a sublime work, reterritorialising day to day American settings. Flake hopes to continue his education through a Masters of Creative Writing and eventually teach at university level.

Marcelle Freiman was born in South Africa in 1951 and migrated to the UK in 1977, then to Australia in 1981. Her current poetry project is a memoir focused on family history and race. Her most recent book is *Spirit Level* (Puncher & Wattman, 2021), and her work appears in *Antipodes*, *Axon*, *AP Journal*, *AP Anthology*, *Cordite*, *Mascara*, *Meanjin*, *Meniscus*, *Newcastle Poetry Anthology*, *StylusLit* and *Westerly*, among others. She is an Honorary Associate Professor at Macquarie University.

Brendan Gallagher is a PhD candidate in Social-Personality Psychology at the University at Albany. In Fall 2024, he is excited to begin a post as Assistant Professor of Psychology and Culture at Nazareth University. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Barzakh Literary Magazine*, *LandLocked Magazine*, and *The Bookends Review*.

Ian Ganassi's work has appeared in numerous journals, including *New American Writing*, *Survision*, and *The Yale Review*. His first full length collection, *Mean Numbers* (Isolibris/China Grove Press, 2016), as well as his new collection, *True for the Moment* (David Robert Books, 2023), are available online in the usual places. Selections from an ongoing collaboration with a painter can be found at www.thecorpses.com. This project (named after the Surrealist parlour game) is now represented by Jennifer Baahng Gallery, 790 Madison Avenue in Manhattan. Baahng now has exclusive representation for the corpses.

Lorraine Gibson was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and is Scottish-Australian. She is a retired social anthropologist. Her poetry appears/is forthcoming in: *Meniscus Literary Journal*, *London Grip*, *The Lake*, *Quadrant*, *Prole*, *The Galway Review*, *Hecate*, *Eureka St*, *Backstory*, *Live Encounters*, *Brushstrokes III* and others. She was shortlisted for Calanthe Press Open Poetry Prize in 2023. Her book *We Don't Do Dots: Art and Culture in Wilcannia, New South Wales* is published by Sean Kingston Publishing, UK (2013).

Samuel Gilpin is a poet living in Portland, OR, who holds a PhD in English Lit from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, which explains why he works as a door-to-door salesman. A *Prism Review* Poetry Contest winner, he has served as the Poetry Editor of *Witness Magazine* and Book Review Editor of *Interim*. A Cleveland State University First Book Award finalist, his work has appeared in various journals and magazines, most recently in *The Bombay Gin*, *Omniverse*, and *Colorado Review*.

Oz Hardwick is a European poet, who has been described as a 'major proponent of the neo-surreal prose poem in Britain'. His most recent full collection, *A Census of Preconceptions* (SurVision Books, 2022), was shortlisted for a number of international awards but didn't win any, though he feels pretty confident about the upcoming over-60s egg-and-spoon race. Oz is Professor of Creative Writing at Leeds Trinity University.

Siobhan Harvey is a queer author of eight books, including the poetry and creative nonfiction collection *Ghosts* (Otago University Press, 2021), which was longlisted for the 2022 Ockham Book Awards. She won 2023 Landfall Essay Prize, was awarded the 2021 Janet Frame Literary Trust Award for Poetry, 2020 New Zealand Society of Authors Peter & Dianne Beatson Fellowship, 2019 Kathleen Grattan Prize for a Sequence of Poems, and the 2019 Robert Burns Poetry Prize.

Merrill Hatlen spent his professional life in social services and public health, balanced by his involvement in filmmaking, photography, and writing; he paid his dues by typing his first novel on a manual Smith Corona. The course of his life was altered by spending three years in France, which inspired five novels, two screenplays, and a stage play. His most recent novel is *The Bard & The Barman: An Account of Shakespeare's Lost Years*, published by Burton Mayer Books (UK).

Todd Heldt is a librarian in Chicago.

Matt Hetherington is a writer, music-maker, and moderately immoderate self-moderator. He has been writing poetry for over 30 years, and his sixth collection, *Kaleidoscopes*, was published by Recent Work Press in September 2020. Current Inspirations are: raw garlic, vinyl played very loud through big black speakers, and the Corpse Pose. www.matthetherington.net

Blossom Hibbert has a pamphlet, suddenly, it's now, published by Leaf Press. Her work has appeared in places such as *The Temz Review*, *Litter*, *International Times* and *Buttonhook Press*. She hides inside the wet walls of Jerusalem, drinking Turkish coffee and rising before the dawn.

Jane Hider is a lawyer based in Melbourne, who writes about food, childhood memories, sibling rivalry and intersectionality.

Benjamin Hollo is a Canadian writer living in Vancouver British Columbia. He studied creative writing at Humber College and the University of British Columbia. His short fiction has been published in *The Write Launch*.

Kylie A Hough writes on unceded Yugambah Country. A finalist and recipient of various writing awards, Kylie is a 2024 Best of the Net nominee, 2024 NWF/joanne burns Microlit Award finalist, 2023 Pushcart Prize nominee, 2022 Woollahra Digital Literary Award finalist, a 2021 Room Magazine Creative Nonfiction contest finalist and a CA/ASA Award Mentee. Her poetry, essays and short stories are published locally and internationally.

Dotun Jide was born in Ibadan, Nigeria, and graduated from Queen's University with a master's degree in English Language and Literature. Currently, he teaches communications in Saskatchewan. His work has appeared in a few publications which include *The West Trade Review*, *Manhattanville Review*, *The Lamp Journal* and others. When he is not reading or writing, he enjoys listening to music.

Melanie Kennard is a PhD candidate in creative practice studying at the University of New England. Her story '435C32', previously published in *Meniscus*, forms the basis of her creative practice work, and her story 'Children of Summer' was also published in *Meniscus* in 2023. She has previously had stories published in *Regulus Press' Literary Taxidermy* anthologies, including 'Attila the Hen' in 2020 and 'Kit and Nella' in 2018.

Allan Lake, originally from Saskatoon, Canada, has lived in Vancouver, Cape Breton Island, Ibiza, Tasmania, Western Australia and Melbourne. Lake has won Lost Tower Publications (UK) Comp, Melbourne Spoken Word Poetry Festival & publication in NewPhilosopher. Latest poetry chapbook (Ginninderra Press, 2019) *My Photos of Sicily*. Literary journals in 20 countries have now published his poems.

Teneale Lavender is an Aboriginal poet living and creating on the sacred lands of the Birrpai. Her ancestors hail from Yuin country, Ireland and England. She is an academic at the University of New South Wales in the faculty of rural medicine. Teneale writes to understand, to remember, to celebrate and ultimately to heal.

Pete Levine is a filmmaker (<https://pleasantseffect.net/>) and occasional writer. His work has appeared in *StoryQuarterly*, *The Sonder Review* and *Limestone*. He lives with his wife in Haarlem, Netherlands.

Thomas Lowery is a writer from Texas who currently resides in Pittsburgh, PA. He studied literature at The University of Dallas and his work has appeared in publications such as *Bright Wall/Dark Room* and *Open: Journal of Arts and Letters*. In addition to writing stories, he also enjoys long walks and good conversation.

Anthony Lynch lives on Gadabanud country in Cape Otway, and writes fiction, poetry and reviews. His work has appeared in *The Age*, *The Best Australian Poems*, *The Best Australian Stories*, *Meanjin*, *Island*, *The Saturday Paper*, *Australian Book Review* and *The Australian*, and been read on ABC Radio. His books are a short story collection, *Redfin*, and a poetry collection, *Night Train*. He is the publisher for Whitmore Press. A new collection of stories is forthcoming.

Maureen Martinez (she/her) is an emerging poet and New York City secondary school counsellor and educator for 20 years. She holds degrees in communications, psychology and counselling. When not writing or reading on the porch, she is trail running or dreaming about mountains.

Nupur Maskara received the 2020 Orange Flower Poetry Award. Nupur's work has been anthologized in *The Kali Project*, and published on *Wry Times*, *Last Leaves*, *The Gateway Review*, *Rigorous*, *The Loch Raven Review*, *Zoetic Press*. She's authored two books – *Insta Gita* (2023) and *Insta Women* (2019).

Tim Mayo's poems have received seven Pushcart Prize nominations, and his second volume of poems, *Thesaurus of Separation* (Phoenicia Publishing, Montréal, 2016) was a finalist for the 2017 Montaigne Medal and for the Eric Hoffer Book Award. His subsequent chapbook, *Notes to the Mental Hospital Timekeeper* (Kelsay Books, 2019) won Honorable Mention in the 2020 Eric Hoffer Chapbook Contest. He lives in Brattleboro, VT, USA, where he works in a mental institution.

Nkasiobinnaya Mbonu was born in 1994 in Owerri, Imo State. She is a poet and photographer currently based in Lagos, Nigeria. She studied Biochemistry at Babcock University, Nigeria. Writing/photography/editing are more than hobbies to her. She sees the world as millions of frames overlapping each other; most of which are in colours and lines. She is a semi-finalist for the 2020 Grapes Poetry Prize, Runner-up for the Pengician Poetry Chapbook Series 2021, Finalist of the 2020 Atlantis Award, and shortlisted for AWC2021: Stories That Touch.

For 20 years **Michael McLaughlin** founded and performed with an improvisational comedy theatre in Sacramento, California. He has had short stories published around the world. In 2005 Michael escaped the USA to live and write in Mexico.

Madeira Miller is a writer and poet pursuing a creative writing degree at Missouri State University. Her work has been published in various anthologies, magazines, and literary journals, including *ANGLES Literary Magazine*, *Arkana Literary Magazine*, and *Barely South Review*. She can be found online at www.instagram.com/madeiramiller.

Tom Misuraca studied Writing, Publishing and Literature at Emerson College in his hometown of Boston before moving to Los Angeles. Over 130 of his short stories and two novels have been published. His story, 'Giving Up the Ghosts', was published in *Constellations Journal*, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2021. His work has recently appeared in *voidspace*, *Art Block* and *Speakeasy Mag*. He is also a multi-award-winning playwright with over 150 short plays and 13 full-lengths produced globally. His musical, *Geeks!*, was produced Off-Broadway in May 2019.

Mrityunjay Mohan is a queer, trans, disabled writer of colour. Mrityunjay's work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *The Masters Review*, and elsewhere. He's been awarded scholarships by Sundance Institute, Tin House, The Common, Frontier Poetry, and elsewhere. He was a Brooklyn Poets Fellow. He's an editor for ANMLY, and a reader for the *Harvard Review* and *The Masters Review*.

Cecil Morris retired after 37 years of teaching high school English, and now he tries writing himself what he spent so many years teaching others to understand and (he hopes) to enjoy. He and his patient partner, the mother of their children, divide their year between the increasingly arid Central Valley of California and the cool Oregon Coast. He has poems appearing or forthcoming in *Rust + Moth*, *Sugar House Review*, *Willawaw Journal*, and elsewhere.

Mark O'Flynn's collection of short stories *Dental Tourism* appeared in 2020. His recent collections of poems are *Undercoat*, (Liquid Amber Press, 2022), and *Einstein's Brain* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2022).

Erik Peters is a teacher and avid mediaevalist from Canada. Erik's work with marginalised students has profoundly influenced his writing which has been published in numerous magazines including *Coffin Bell*, *Superlative Lit*, *Prospectus*, *The Louisville Review*, and *The Dead Mule School*. Read all Erik's publications at www.erikpeters.ca or @erikpeterswrites.

Vasco Pimentel is a writer and poet based in Fremantle, Western Australia. Born in Lisbon, Portugal, he left his home country at the age of eighteen and migrated 'down under'. Vasco's short fiction has been published by *Spineless Wonders* and featured in the *Student Gallery Magazine* in the UK. It has also been featured in *Free Spirit*. His poetry has been featured in *Wingless Dreamer*.

Drew Pissarra is the author of two short story collections, *You're Pretty Gay* (Chaffinch Press, 2021) and *Public Spanking* (Future Tense Books, 1996); two poetry collections, *Periodic Boyfriends* (Capturing Fire Press, 2023) and *Infinity Standing Up* (Capturing Fire Press, 2019); and two radio plays, *Price in Purgatory* (2023) and *The Strange Case of Nick M.* (2021). A third poetry collection, *Fassbinder: his movies, my poems*, is slated for release some time in the near future.

bob plainwilder is a musician, author, and traveller of a spirit world that has roots in the writings of Alan Watts, Eckert Tolle, Krishnamurti, and Ram Daas. Plainwilder's work has been published in various publications, including *Poetry New Zealand*, *Chronogram*, *The Feathertale Review*, *The Pacific Review*, *The Seattle Review*, *The Boston Literary Review*, and *The Libretto Review*. In the 1990s, plainwilder worked with Allen Ginsberg on a legal battle to defend freedom of speech, which became a cause célèbre and was ultimately won with the help of the ACLU. Their activism led to a landmark and precedent-setting victory for freedom of expression. As a result, thousands of Americans, many of whom were indigent, were freed from Orwellian authoritarian persecution. sanfranreview.com/a-poets-calendar; sanfranreview.com/a-constant-cackling-mockingbird

Vanessa Proctor is a Sydney poet with a special interest in haiku and its related forms. She is the immediate past president of the Australian Haiku Society. Her haiku appear on public art installations in Australia and New Zealand. Her free verse has been published in journals such as *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Island*, *Meanjin* and *Southerly*.

Hannah Ratner is a Boston-based writer. Her work is published or forthcoming in *The Boiler*, *The Smart Set*, *Blacklist Journal*, and *Intercut Magazine*. In her spare time, she likes to hang out with her roommate's cats, read, rock climb, and do all things crafty.

Niles Reddick is author of a novel, three collections, and a novella. His work has been featured in over thirty collections and five hundred publications including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Muleskinner*, *New Reader*, *Cheap Pop*, *Citron Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Nunum* and *Vestal Review*. His newest flash collection *Who's Going to Pray for Me Now?* and his novella *Forgiven* are forthcoming this spring.

Geoff Sawers (he, him) has new work published recently in *Blackbox Manifold*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *Route 7 Review* and *Sage Cigarettes*; criticism in *Culture Matters* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. His paintings are on Instagram [geoff.sawers](https://www.instagram.com/geoff.sawers)

Pam Sinicrope has an MFA in poetry from Augsburg University and a doctorate in public health. Some of her work can be found in *SWWIM*, *Spillway*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *Aethlon*, *Appalachian Journal*, and *3 Elements Review*. Pam lives in Rochester, MN, where she works as a medical writer and is a senior poetry editor for *RockPaperPoem*.

Alicia Sometimes is a writer and broadcaster. She has performed her spoken word and poetry at many venues, festivals and events around the world. Her poems have been in *Best Australian Science Writing*, *Best Australian Poems* and many more. In 2023 she received ANAT's *Synapse Artist Residency* and co-created an art installation for Science Gallery Melbourne's exhibition, *Dark Matters*.

Travis Stephens is a tugboat captain who lives and works in California. His book of poetry, *skeeter bit & still drunk* was published by Finishing Line Press (2022). Visit him at: zolohtstephenswriters.com

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is A Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

Rowan Tate is a creative and curator of beauty currently based in Oxford. Her work has been published in the journal *Mantis*, *the Symposium Magazine*, *the Spotlong Review*, and others. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.

R.C. Thomas resides in Plymouth, UK. His collection, *The Strangest Thankyou* (2012), and pamphlet, *Zygote Poems* (2015), were published by Cultured Llama under the name Richard Thomas. His collection of haiku, *Faunistics*, was published in January 2024. He edited *Symmetry Pebbles*, and helped edit *Tribe*, *Thief*, and *INK* (Plymouth University's creative writing journal). His poetry and haiku have been published internationally.

Cathy Thwing has been teaching writing at community colleges in the Western US since receiving her MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Washington University. You can find some of her recent poems in *Blue Heron Review*, *Thimble*, *Poetica Review*, and *Whitefish Review*. Gardening, practicing cello, and swinging in hammocks fill her life's other nooks and crannies.

India Turner is a 22-year-old poet and gardener based in Avalon Beach, Australia. She is in her third year of a Bachelor of Writing and Publishing. Her pursuits in both horticulture and literature engage with the languages of ecology and ontology, with published works featured in *Vertigo* and *Voiceworks Magazine*.

Leo Vanderpot lives in Ossining, New York. A memory piece about his donation of letters by Dwight Macdonald to the Yale Library, appeared in *Hinterland*, issued by the University of East Anglia. 'John LeCarre Emails Will Smith After Chatting With Emily Dickinson Re Friendship' appeared in *Dribble Drabble Review*.

Suzanne Verrall lives in Australia on Ngadjuri country. She is the author of the poetry collection *One Day I Will Go There* (Vagabond Press, 2022). Her poetry, flash fiction and essays appear in *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Southampton Review*, *takahē Magazine* and others. For links to her work go to www.suzanneverrall.com

Originally from Ontario, Canada, **Loren Walker** (she/they) has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize, selected as a finalist in the Beulah Rose Poetry Contest and the Harbor Review Editor's Prize, and received fellowships from Looking Glass Rock Writers Conference and the Martha's Vineyard Writers Conference. Loren has published two chapbooks: *viscous* by The Offending Adam (2023) and *neverheart* by Dancing Girl Press (2021), and poems have appeared in *Free State Review*, *Black Fox Magazine*, and *Quiddity*, among other publications. Identifying as neurodivergent and queer, Loren lives in Providence, Rhode Island.

Ed Walsh is a writer of so-far-unpublished novels and occasionally published shorter fiction. He lives in the north-east of England.

Charlotte Waters is an emerging editor and writer living on Wurundjeri country in Melbourne. She's currently studying a Master of Writing and Publishing at RMIT University and working in academic publishing. In 2022, they were the creative writing editor of *Farrago*. Her poetry has been published in *Baby Teeth Journal*, along with various student publications including *Farrago*, *Above Water*, and the Bowen Street Press *Bound* anthology.

Dugald Williamson is an independent writer living in Armidale NSW, Anaiwan country. His poetry has appeared in various publications including *Australian Poetry Anthology*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Cordite*, *The Incompleteness Book II*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly* and *TEXT*.

Dorian Winter is an artist, writer, and modern-day dandy. His art & poetry have been published in *Pelican Magazine*, *The Malu Zine*, *Echo Literary Magazine* (and others), with forthcoming work in *Outlander Magazine*. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Antler Velvet Arts Magazine*. You can find him sipping on an Old Fashioned at a jazz bar, or more conveniently at dorianwinter.com.

Jena Woodhouse is the author of twelve book and chapbook publications, seven of which are poetry titles. Her publications span the genres of children's fiction, adult

fiction, poetry, and translation, and have received awards in the first three of those categories. Her poetry has been widely published and anthologised. A new collection in preparation is titled *Wild Country of Time*.

MENISCUS

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