MENISCUS

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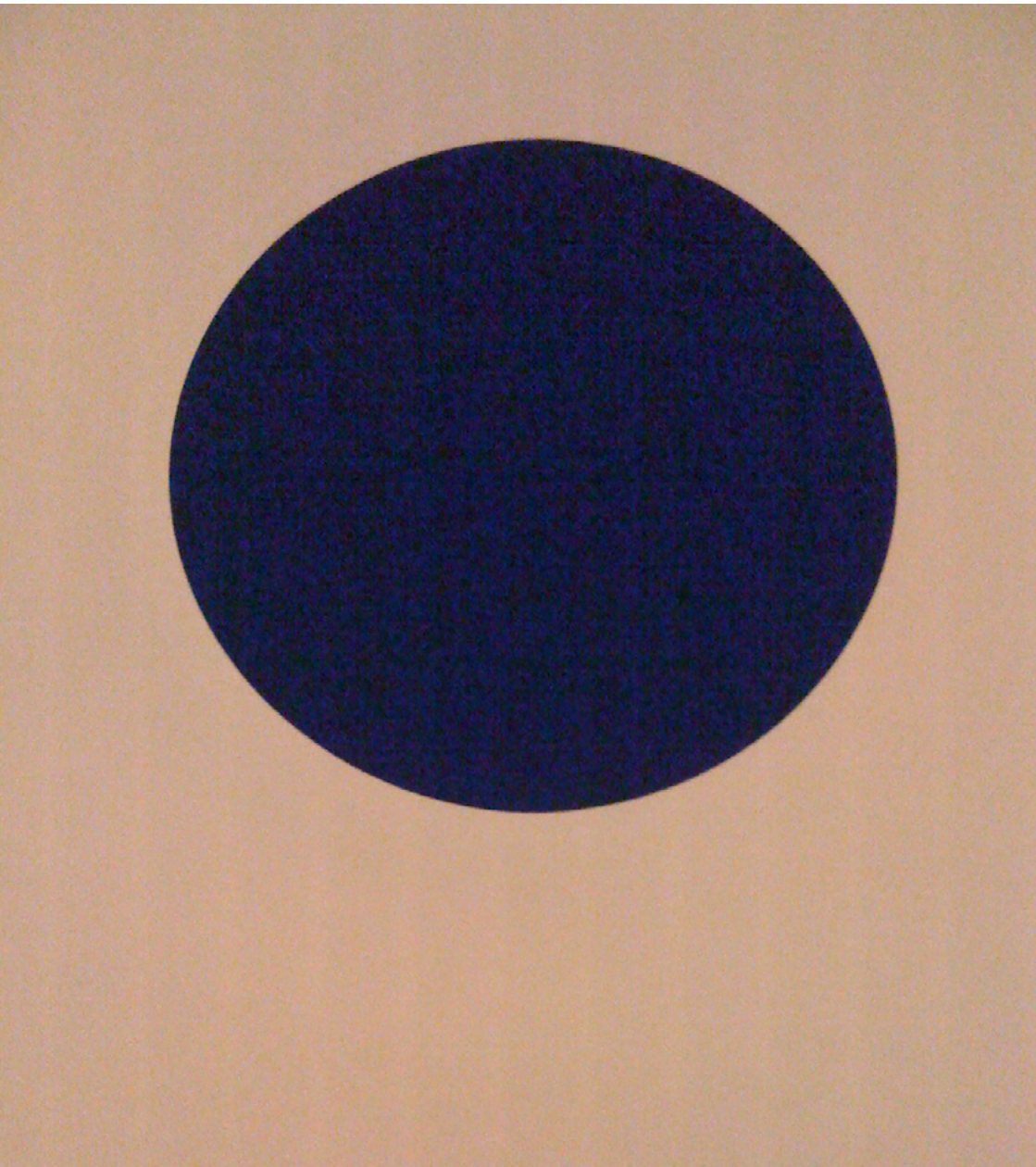

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About Meniscus
Meniscus is a literary journal, published and supported by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) with editors from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

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

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EDITORIAL

We welcome this new issue of *Meniscus*, which is crammed with poems and short stories and flash fiction, all of them reflecting the imaginations, voices and observations of writers who are doing what writers do: translating the world into text. The writers published here hail from across the globe: from the Americas, the UK and Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region. They hold various identities, bring various levels of prior experience in writing, and work their genres in a multitude of ways. This stunning range of experiences and contexts mean they produce a kaleidoscopic swirl through the possibilities of language, the multiplicities of ways of telling, and the performativity enabled by creative writing, thinking and practice.

Some observations we made, on reading the submissions and editing the works we selected, include the attention so many writers give to memory. In fact, in many cases it is memory that functions as the engine of the piece. Sometimes memory is portrayed not as passive recollection, but as active and deeply personal—memories that shape present choices, emotions, and identities. In other cases, instances of memory reveal how the characters experience subtle forms of alienation and disconnection—distance from others, from their past selves, or from the lives they hoped to live. And in others again, images and accounts of everyday moments and objects become vessels for memory and for disconnection, revealing the emotional depth hidden in the quotidian.

Moving from the individual to the general: we are conscious of the shifting dynamics of both the global economy and the literary sector: the pressures coming on publishers, the closing down of literary studies in universities around the world, and the concerns often voiced about the possible decline of reading in favour of viewing, or scrolling. However, there is nothing new about such pressures; as long ago as 1996 Salman Rushdie wrote, rather scathingly, about the sorts of panicked comments, along these lines, being offered by writers like George Orwell, George

Steiner, Paul Auster, VS Naipaul. Literature, it seems, has never had a future, but it always has a profound present. We value the confidence shown by so many contemporary authors to write and keep writing; to shift the frameworks of writing; to reshape genres; and to offer new points of view and new ways of living in the world.

Jen Webb, Ginna Brock, Deb Wain and Alyssa Waldon, for the editors

Rushdie, Salman 1996 'In defense of the novel, yet again', *The New Yorker* (June 24): 48–55

MOMENTS BETWEEN

Hasti Abbasi

'Liana,' the receptionist says, her voice breaking the quiet hum of the waiting room. Liana walks to the desk, her steps hesitant.

'I'm afraid you still have to wait for another three hours for the test,' the receptionist says apologetically. 'The radiologist was called to a family emergency. Her daughter had an accident. You can either go for a walk and come back in three hours or wait here until she arrives. I'm so sorry about this.'

She gazes at the hand sanitiser on the desk. Its sharp smell lingers in the air. Her bladder reminds her of its growing urgency, adding to her frustration.

Liana glances at her watch. The three-hour wait feels like a heavy weight. Her mind drifts to her car, and the pressing need to use the bathroom makes her shift uncomfortably. 'I hope it wasn't a serious accident and her daughter's okay,' she says. 'I'll use the restroom and then run some errands. I'll be back by 12:20.'

In the restroom, she sighs with relief as she finishes and stands at the sink. The cool water running over her hands soothes her nerves for a moment. She pulls the string on the blinds, letting sunlight spill in and warm her face as she grips the sink's cold porcelain edge. Her eyes wander to her car outside. 'My car's dustier than an old attic,' she mutters.

With a deep breath, she steps out. 'One car wash at a time,' she says to herself.

Outside, the world is green. Birds chirp in the trees, and a gentle breeze rustles the leaves. The world doesn't care about the HSG test and that iodine dye they'll use on my cervix, Liana thinks, but at least it's so beautiful.

She slides into the car, buckles up, and inserts the key into the ignition. Nasim's name flashes on the screen. She twists the key, and the engine rumbles to life.

'How are you feeling?' Nasim's voice crackles through the phone.

'I'm okay, how about you?' Liana replies, trying to sound cheerful.

'I'm doing great. Just need to do some shopping and cleaning. I'm so excited you're coming to the party.'

'Me too,' Liana says. She knows she'll message Nasim later to make an excuse.

'I know you're thinking about not coming. If you're not there by 6, I'll come to your door myself,' Nasim warns playfully.

Liana glances out the window at the rows of parked cars. 'Nasim, I've been thinking all morning about what life means to me.'

'Well, here we go with another deep conversation,' Nasim laughs, then pauses for a moment. 'Today, it's about celebrating my birthday with friends. But in general, maybe life is about moving from feeling everything to feeling nothing—loving everything to loving nothing, hoping for everything to hoping for nothing. And then, you start to miss feeling something, loving something, hoping for something again. It's a cycle, you know?'

A yellow van backs out of the parking spot right in front of her. Liana waits patiently, a smile tugging at her lips.

'You're the best friend anyone could ask for. You always have a way of making life seem even more beautiful,' Liana says. 'I'll try to come to your birthday, but I need to go for now.'

The day she received his message, 'I'm seeing another woman,' followed by 'I'm sorry,' Liana felt herself dissolving into a sticky glob of nothingness. She had stood in her mom's kitchen, where sunlight streamed through the windows, painting soft stripes on the floor. The light had felt out of place against the cold, numb feeling spreading through her chest.

Her mom was at the sink, rinsing a large flower, water glistening on

its leaves. As she turned to set the flower on the table, Liana handed her the phone without a word. Her mom's face tightened as she read the message. She lowered herself onto the edge of the table, the lines on her forehead deepening. 'But why?' she managed to ask.

Liana didn't respond to her mom. Instead, she walked to the swimming pool by the backyard garden. Fallen flowers had clogged the pool's filter. The trumpet-shaped blooms around the jacaranda tree that overhung the pool were shrouded in the moonless dark. For days, she heard a swishing in her left ear. For weeks, she reread the messages over and over. For months, she hated herself for loving him so much, for always being so proud of their relationship.

The van finally moves toward the exit. 'Finally,' Liana mutters, releasing the brake. Her car follows the van, and they both exit the radiology practice parking lot.

To the right, a green machine manoeuvres over the rubble of a collapsed building. The street buzzes with activity, cranes swinging their long arms in slow, deliberate arcs.

After a few minutes, Liana finds herself driving along the beach. In the past few months, nothing has felt more honest, more tangible than the endless stretch of sky, the white sand, and the Great Ocean Road. The breeze picks up as raindrops start to fall. *I'll stop by the beach after the car wash if it's not too late*, she thinks.

'Did you ever ask him what was going on in his personal life?' the psychologist had asked.

'I thought I knew everything about his life, but I was wrong,' Liana had replied, her voice tinged with sadness. 'He was always so kind. But the last few months, he stopped messaging me during the day. Every morning, I felt frantic inside. "Is there anything wrong?" I asked him once after dinner. That day, I had sent him a message, excited to tell him that I'd made spinach lasagna, his favourite. His response was a thank you emoji and a smile. Later, he told me, "It's just that I'm really busy at work these days. They've put me in charge of two major projects at the

same time, and this agile process isn't suited for such a large team." He smiled then, blowing out a small cloud of smoke, his eyes avoiding mine. There were no kisses, no touches, no kind words for weeks. And yet, I couldn't bring myself to believe he might be seeing someone else, that he might have cheated on me, or that he simply didn't love me anymore.'

She couldn't bring herself to admit to the psychologist that every evening, she waited for him to kiss her—the way a child waits for a good night kiss, the way a girl dreams of embracing her love who has been a soldier after years on the front lines, the way raindrops long to reach the ocean. She hadn't told the psychologist that she would watch his face in the dim light, her eyes tracing the lines of his wrinkles, silently yearning for the warmth of his hands and the love that seemed to slip further away with each night passing. She didn't mention how she would stay awake until the first rays of sunlight reached the earth, unable to let go of the hope that things might change.

Liana pulls up next to the pharmacy. She steps out into the rain and hurries inside, her clothes damp from the downpour. The sharp scent of antiseptic and neatly stacked rows of medicines fill the air.

'What's the strongest over-the-counter painkiller you have?' she asks the pharmacist.

The pharmacist looks up from the counter. 'What kind of pain is it for?' he asks gently.

'It's for cervix pain,' she whispers, her eyes flicking nervously around the store.

He nods thoughtfully. 'Ibuprofen should help, but if it's really bad, you might want to see your GP for something stronger,' he says, his tone considerate.

She nods. After paying for the tablets and a bottle of water, she steps out into the rain. 'Of course, the moment I decide to wash my car, it starts raining,' she mutters, pulling her jacket tighter. 'But hey, I'll do it anyway.'

The carwash café is only a few minutes from the pharmacy. When

she pulls into the lot, the wash man walks up with a friendly smile.

'Interior too?' he asks, gesturing toward her car.

'No, just the exterior, please,' she replies, handing him the keys.

She steps into the café, greeted by the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee. She orders a long black, then settles into a corner seat. The low hum of conversations and the clinking of cups fill the air. An elderly couple walks in, the man in a grey tracksuit and the woman in a green dress. The door swings open, letting in a rush of cool air, and they pause to shake off the rain, their movements slow.

They order coffee and sit at the table next to hers. They exchange a few words, in low voices. The man frowns as he flips through a magazine. The woman smacks her lips absentmindedly, her eyes wandering around the room. The man glances up, his disapproving eyes resting on her before returning to the magazine.

Sitting there like two bumps on a log, Liana thinks. She takes a sip of her coffee, listening to the steady sound of water spraying over the cars outside. *How can they just sit there, drinking coffee, and having nothing to say?* she wonders. *Maybe, after all these years together, they've already said everything there is to say.*

Her eyes trace the creases around the woman's eyes. She imagines their home, a dark house with heavy curtains, a vintage dining table, and the cups covered in a thick layer of dust. She sees the old man lying on a wooden bed, hugging a large pillow to his chest, dreaming of days when his wife's smile and a quick hug were enough to cheer him up.

The buzzer on her table jolts her back. It vibrates and flashes, signalling that her car is ready. Liana takes another sip of her coffee, her eyes lingering on the blinking light. She recalls the psychologist's words from her last week session: 'Why are you this angry?' he had asked, adjusting the sleeve of his single-breasted jacket.

She had thought about it countless times. Deep down, she had always known he didn't love her. He was proud of her, liked her, respected her. He did nice things for her, sometimes. They had spent eight years

together—hugging, kissing, sharing small joys and moments of pride. But love had never been part of it. Even on the day he proposed, when the light in his eyes seemed so genuine and she said yes, she had known he wasn't in love.

She had thought about all of this as she took a sip of water. But she hadn't shared any of it with the psychologist. Instead, she said, 'I'm angry because I wasted so many years believing in something that wasn't real.'

'I can understand why you feel that way,' he said. After a brief silence, he added, 'Is there something specific that's been on your mind lately?'

She took a deep breath, hesitating before speaking. 'I'm scheduled for an HSG test,' she said, her voice barely above a whisper. 'I had a complicated abortion. My surgeon said the scar tissue might have blocked my fallopian tubes. I just need to know.'

The psychologist nodded, his pen pausing mid-air above his notepad. 'You never mentioned having an abortion in any of our sessions,' he said. 'That must be weighing heavily on you.'

She looked down, fiddling with her fingers. 'No, you're the only person who knows now.'

A soft voice interrupts her thoughts. 'Your car's ready.' Liana turns to see the wash man standing nearby, a small smile on his face.

'Oh, thank you,' she replies, smiling back. She takes the key and heads to her car. The fresh scent of soap and polish greet her as she opens the door. She looks up at the sky, relieved to see that the rain has stopped.

Driving back to the radiology clinic, her eyes catch the sun dancing on the blue ocean. The sight draws her in, and she decides to pull over her now shiny car.

Leaning against the hood, she lets the sun's warmth sink into her skin, the sea breeze brushing gently against her face.

As she stands there, filming the rhythmic waves crashing onto the shore, memories surge like the tide.

She remembers the days when the sea and sky seemed to vanish, consumed by the weight of her anxiety. The days when every breath felt like a choice, and existence felt impossibly heavy. Yet, she kept moving—because of her parents, because of everyone whose lives would shatter if she stopped.

Glancing at her phone, Liana notices the time: 11:30 am. *I still have some time,* she thinks. She locks her car and slips the key into her pocket. The cool metal presses against her fingers as she starts running, her shoes sinking into the damp sand with each step.

'You've mentioned sounds several times in our sessions. What makes you think about sounds?' the psychologist had asked in his husky voice, his eyes fixed on hers.

'Have I? I don't know,' she replied. 'Maybe it's because I experienced temporary deafness as a child. I guess I've always been afraid I might lose my hearing again.'

'Have you been worried about losing other things, or other people, too?' he asked.

'I don't know,' she replied, her gaze dropping to her watch. 'Just this feeling that everything can be so temporary. But before, I was never scared of losing time.'

Time used to feel irrelevant to her. She never worried about it running out—about it being too late to live fully, to have a baby, or that her tubes might one day become blocked as the years went by.

I might go to the party tonight, she thinks, her breath quickening with the rhythm of her racing heart.

Then she slows to a stop, catching her breath, and begins walking back to her car.

When she pulls into the radiology practice parking lot, she sits there for a few long minutes, watching as the sun filters through the leaves and casting scattered shadows on her dashboard.

The breeze outside rustles softly through the trees, a gentle sound that feels like it echoes inside her. With her fingers trembling slightly,

she reaches into her bag and pulls out two ibuprofen tablets. 'Time to face the music,' she mutters to herself, one of her usual phrases that brings a faint smile to her lips. She swallows the pills with a sip of water, feeling them slide down her throat, hoping they will dull the discomfort she expects.

She steps out of her car, the gravel crunching under her shoes as she walks toward the entrance.

In the examination room, she lies down on a black table. The cold surface makes her shiver. She bends her knees, placing her feet flat against the table. The overhead light reflects sharply off the sterile instruments nearby. Her eyes drift to the ceiling, following the lines of the tiles in an attempt to distract herself.

'How is the other radiologist's daughter? I heard she had an accident,' Liana asks, as she positions her legs in the stirrups.

'She broke her arm in a bike accident, but she'll be fine,' the radiologist says, with a reassuring smile.

Liana takes a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. 'Could you explain the process to me?' she asks, her voice unsteady.

'Of course,' the radiologist replies gently. 'We'll start with a quick pelvic exam. I'll insert a speculum, and you might feel some discomfort when I use a swab to clean your cervix.'

The cool air of the examination room sharpens Liana's senses, making every sound and movement feel amplified. She nods, her body tense as she braces herself for what's to come.

After a moment, she takes another deep breath, the words catching in her throat. 'What happens if I change my mind? If I don't want to do this anymore?'

The radiologist raises her eyebrows, her expression shifting between surprise and irritation. 'We can't force you,' she says. 'But you need to make your decision before coming in. This time could have been used for someone else.'

The room feels colder. *I don't want to keep worrying about an uncertain future,* Liana thinks. Her fingers tremble slightly as she grips the edge of the examination table. 'I'm sorry,' she says, her voice shaky.

'I'll take you to the receptionist,' the radiologist says. 'Take your time to get dressed,' she adds before stepping out of the room.

As Liana steps out of the examination room, the sharp antiseptic smell fades, replaced by the fresher, lighter air of the waiting area.

Outside, the rain begins again, heavy and relentless. Standing under the small canopy at the clinic's entrance, she watches the rain strike the ground, forming dancing splashes and tiny rivers racing toward the drains.

After a moment, she steps into the downpour. The rain soaks through her clothes and hair almost immediately.

Once inside her car, Liana closes the door and takes a deep breath. The quiet interior feels like a temporary shield against the storm outside. She pulls out her phone, her fingers hovering uncertainly over the keyboard. After a pause, she begins to type: 'I was pregnant with your child when you left. I was two months along. I aborted it when I was three months into the pregnancy.'

She doesn't press send. Instead, she watches the screen for a long moment, then deletes the message.

Her mind races, recalling the day she went to the hospital alone. She remembers the weight of every glance, every quiet question from the staff. The nurses and the doctor had looked directly into her eyes, asking firmly, 'Are you sure about this?' Each time, her mind had frozen, doubt filling the spaces where words should have been.

She had her reasons for giving up her chance to have a baby, but some reasons are too difficult to put into words; some are better left unspoken. She couldn't explain, even to herself, how deeply she didn't want him to be her child's father.

She stares at the screen, her thoughts tangled. After a moment of hesitation, she blocks his number.

Starting the car, she listens to the steady rhythm of rain drumming on the roof as she drives away from the clinic. She heads towards a Westfield shopping centre. Tonight, she needs a dress. A dress for the party. 'Time to dance like nobody's watching,' she says to her reflection in the rearview mirror.

OLD MATE

Ben Adams

they got their hooks into you didn't they, old mate?
YouTube warrens packed with strong men promising release
and culture war conspiracy planted deep, like
biodynamic permaculture so sustainable it could withstand the breath
of bushfires set by *sparkler-dust*
or fantasised
by *greenies* and *the gAyBC*

I've been thinking about
that drive we took cross country
that straight shot diagonal from Adelaide
through the inland middle
stopping in West Wyalong for a short night
and starting again before dawn
watching still dusky sides of the road for kangaroos
as we headed east
in that big, blue whale
of a manual-shift station wagon

you told me your mother was religious

read your poems to me from the passenger seat
while I learned to drive stick
stalled it god knows how many times, but
we made it to Byron Bay
in the end
pulled up to an IGA where some busker was playing

John Butler covers out front and I think
we laughed at that
the predictability of it
the shallowness of a cultural frame
turned in on itself
driving home days later along the barrier road
speeding that wood-panelled 70s relic like a bullet
through barrelled curves
racing freight trains where the rails and bitumen ran
parallel for a while
beneath cloudless blue

I guess you had been laughing a little differently than I had
back there
less easy, less assured
a buried recognition of the rabbit hole you'd once been held in
someone commented, before you left Facebook
mate, you told me once you never wanted to be in ANOTHER cult
and can't you see that's all any of this is?
sovereign citizen silliness
dreaming chemtrails in the sky
but whether you saw it, or not
the seduction of certainty had stayed in you
pulling you back, to a simulacrum
of childhood before the world

to a homecoming
of sorts

ONCE AGAIN, THE DAY

David Adès

Once again, the day is becoming itself,
writing its story into being.

The day is so full it cavorts with infinities.

It loves the unending act of creation,
all the worlds it spins and brings

to life, its great cast of characters,

the complex weave of narratives
within its narratives, births, deaths,

birdsong, lightning striking trees,

waves crashing on shores, litanies of skies.
It never tires of all this,

regards itself as godlike, uncontainable,

leaning into loves and calamities,
making and breaking promises,

pulling billions of strings,

spooling out labyrinths
of plots within plots within plots,

delighting in surprising itself

with tangents, diversions,
truths striking the flint

of imagination.

It writes furiously, never stopping
to revise or edit, occupied solely

with keeping up with itself.

As for us, stumbling through
our lives, we can only read

tiny portions of the whole

and sometimes, look, there we are:
sentences or footnotes

amongst its worlds full of pages.

still Tupi

Hellen Albuquerque

my country was stolen
and so was I
so many times
I don't even know how to talk
what's the use of my mother tongue
if the colonisers won't know how to read
me screaming
what's the use of being a mother
if the men won't know how
to pay heed
Tupi is the voice of the original people
of my land
there were trees and tales and gods
thriving here way before
you baptised us for death
with your holy name
Tupinambá is who I should
have been taught
to be at school
Tupi is the word that the european caravel
burnt down with sickness
Tupi is the red colour of the fruit urucum
that painted our faces when they arrived
armed with greed
Tupi is the blood that was left
after they raped
our spiritual path

they say we were discovered
but they were the ones lost at water
my country was executed in a
morphological slaughter
with false mirrors, the white man erased
the beauty of our faces
with false promises, the white man whipped away
our ways to survive
I use the invader's letters
out of despite
to take back our divinity
my country was stolen
so they tried to do the same with my soul
and yet
I stand here
still Tupi
even in silence

MARKING TIME

Emma Ashmere

Brighton Beach 1979 exists in this tiny square of black-and-white photograph, my eye mixing its own colours, the flare of red behind my mother's Sophia Loren raffia hat and cat glasses, her arms browner than ours even though she hadn't left the house for weeks. The sandy arch of tyre-marks curve behind her shoulder can't contain her, or the sheer quince top she knitted, the kind that sweats beneath the arms.

My father is telling her to smile. She's giving him her thinking smile, for the hours gained and lost or futures not quite lived. The same smile she gave me when I'd knocked on the locked door of the outdoor laundry that morning, her summer office as she called it, hived off every December to mark the state's French exams, floors complaining when the delivery men trolleyed them in, pink walls of Year 12 papers squeezed between the washing machine, picnic table, chair and sink. Interlopers not allowed. Not even my father. Certainly not us six kids or Larry the frisky-tailed dog.

My father clicks the camera as if trying to halt the waves sweeping in. Larry barks at us kids flailing in the soupy deep on surfboards my father made from the three he'd sawed in half and tied to the car roof with bits of string, polystyrene snowflakes flying off.

Perhaps my mother is thinking about the exam papers broiling in the laundry, waiting to finish them, for the trolley-men to reappear, for money to flow again. It's been so hot, perhaps the answers I'd scrawled on mine have rearranged themselves, fading my mistakes, seeping away from failure.

I'd pressed my ear to the laundry door, listened to her reading silently. My older sisters and brothers had survived the same. She recognises our handwriting. I've seen yours, she'd say, it will all be fine.

Will I disappoint her. I'd asked her this the night before. Never, she'd said.

I peered through the crack of the door, her head bent, her face pinked by the exam papers and the Christmas heat. I've made you a cup of coffee, I said, and Dad wants you to finish early tomorrow so we can go to the beach. In my hand a wonky-handled pottery cup she'd bought from a local artist in the hills who championed the ordination of women. My father didn't like the cup or the woman who'd made it. But I liked the cup's deliberate imperfection, the graininess, the unfinishedness. So too the saucer with its mismatched dimensions, a bought biscuit teetering on its lip.

Lovely, thank you, she'd said, you can come in now.

I kept my eyes down but I could feel her smile on me as I sidled through tall shadows of the unchangeable. It will be all right, she said, smiling as if she was already down there with us on the beach, thinking, waiting, turning away from the camera, squinting out to sea.

NARCISSUS UNDONE

Hilary Ayshford

My mother worships at the shrine of the goddess of eternal youth. On her altar is an army of creams, lotions and serums, the serried ranks of bottles and jars in neutral colours—pale pink, clinical white, baby blue and bland beige—marching into battle against the advancing years.

Every morning she anoints herself with unguents until she gleams, as smooth and slippery as a newborn emerging from the cave between the mother's thighs. She repeats the ritual in the evening, sacrificing sleep to complete the holy rites demanded by the goddess of beauty in exchange for working anti-ageing miracles unseen, in secret, in darkness.

My mother regards me with envy, jealous of my unwrinkled forehead, my unblemished complexion, my sculpted cheekbones. She covets the natural blush of my cheeks and the taut skin under my eyes. Sometimes I see hatred in her sideways glance. If she could turn me to stone with a look, she would.

I want to pour the pointless potions down the sink, smash the pots of useless unctions. I want to shout at her that none of this stuff will bring him back, but I say nothing, because it is decreed that he is never to be mentioned. My father left us when I was three years old for a woman half my mother's age. She can't forgive me for her saggy skin, her stretch marks, her drooping dugs. I can't forgive her for her vanity, for resenting me for being born, for wishing he was here rather than me. We punish each other endlessly for things we cannot change.

On Saturdays my mother drags me to the temple, where handmaids in white coats distribute samples of the goddess' blessings to eager acolytes. From a distance, they seem perfect, transformed by the goddess to demonstrate her power over the march of time. Up close, though, I can detect the artifice of lip liner and false lashes, see the cunningly

concealed cracks beneath the dark foundation.

My mother is oblivious to the flaws, drawn in by fawning and false promises. When one of the handmaids asks if her sister, meaning me, would like a makeover, my mother tilts her head coquettishly and simpers that I am, in fact, her daughter. The handmaid feigns disbelief, and I feign a sudden interest in a display of sunglasses two aisles over. The remark is the highlight of my mother's week. She works assiduously to shoehorn it into a conversation with everyone she meets—the bus driver, the barista, the girl wiping tables in the café. No one is spared the obligation to shower my mother with insincere compliments.

The flattery does its job and grooms my mother into offering her hard-won tributes in return for the prospect of perfection. The goddess is greedy. She will never be satisfied. I hear my mother chanting her mantra as she hands over her credit card: 'Because I'm worth it. Because I'm worth it. Because I'm worth it.'

My mother's devotions to her chosen deity are more than skin deep. When a new commandment is issued from on high, she is the first to obey. From rubbing bull semen into her breasts to filling her rectum with old coffee grounds, from sucking fat out of her thighs and injecting it into her lips to pressure washing her colon with soapy water, her veneration knows no bounds.

But these are only temporary remedies. My mother wants a more permanent answer to her prayers, and will sacrifice whatever the goddess demands of her. When she announces that we are going on a pilgrimage to Turkey, I am filled with wonder and delight. My mother has always shunned the sun. She constantly preaches the benefits of factor 50 and the evils of ultraviolet light. Each freckle or mole is monitored for signs of basal cell carcinoma or melanoma, and she never goes out without sunscreen, wide-brimmed hat and dark glasses, even on the cloudiest days. I thank the gods of sun, sand and sea that I will have the opportunity to worship them before withdrawing to the groves of academia as an undergraduate in September.

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As the sun rises high in the azure sky, I withdraw from the relentless heat into the shade of the mulberry tree, where the cicadas rasp their song of praise to the heavens. The susurration of the breeze in the pine trees whispers with the voices of civilisations long since vanished, where shepherds, soldiers and kings walked shoulder to shoulder with the gods on this barren mountainside. Ranks of distant islands march off towards the horizon, their feet submerged in the dark ocean, their heads turned to far-off lands and battles yet to be fought.

On my sunbed I dream of an olive-skinned, sloe-eyed youth with hair like raven wings, kneeling at my side with offerings of honeyed pastries and ruby wine, ready to sacrifice his life for one smile or touch of my hand. This Turkish god's name is Murat, and he works behind the bar. I worship him from afar; my mother worships him at close quarters. In the evenings, once the duplicitous sun has set, we sit at the bar, ice clinking in our glasses. My mother balances her breasts on the counter, exaggerating her cleavage but not to the point where the skin begins to crepe. Her hand lingers too long on Murat's when he takes her money, her fingers caressing his skin while her thumb circles suggestively in his palm. She flicks out the pink tip of her tongue and licks the condensation droplets from the glass while looking over the rim into Murat's eyes.

I am embarrassed by her and for her, but Murat has seen it all a thousand times. And I know from the way he smiles at me over her shoulder, winks when she isn't looking, puts an extra measure of vodka in my Coke and doesn't charge for it, that it is me he wants. Not her. Me.

On the third morning, a taxi comes at dawn to take my mother away. She pokes her head into my room.

'I'm off now,' she says.

'OK. Where are you going?' I ask, without opening my eyes.

'The hospital.'

I sit up. 'Why? What's wrong?'

'Nothing. Well, nothing that a nip here and a tuck there can't put right.'

'When will you be back?'

'I don't know. It depends how long they want to keep me in. A couple of days, I expect. You'll be all right on your own, won't you?'

'Yeah, sure. I guess.'

'Bye then.'

'Bye.' I slip back down into the bed and am asleep again before the door closes.

It is late afternoon when Murat comes to me, his burnished copper limbs gleaming in the dim light of the bedroom, his body hard and smooth as teak. We worship each other with skin and hands and fingers, with mouth and lips and tongue. We explore every curve and crease, every fold and hollow. Nothing is withheld, everything freely given and accepted. The sacred libation overflows from him, filling me to the brim; moans and shudders mark the completion of the ritual.

For the next three days, we prostrate ourselves before the gods of passion and pleasure, doing whatever they command. We offer up our youth, our vigour, our desire and they reward us with endless lust and climaxes each more intense than the one before.

My mother returns under cover of darkness. The next morning, I go to take coffee in to her but the door is locked. She mumbles something indistinct, so I leave the cup outside her room and go and lie by the pool.

Whenever Murat isn't working, we go to the beach and make love in the water, or take a boat to a cove inaccessible by land. Or we wander into the pine forest and spread a blanket under the trees. Once we come across the ruins of an ancient temple, where I spread myself for him on the crumbling altar, and offer up my wantonness to whatever deity was once revered in this place.

In the twilight of closed shutters, my mother prays to the gods of healing and recovery. For once she does not want anyone to see her. Even I am forbidden to look at her new face.

Eventually she emerges from her cave, her head swathed in a colourful silk scarf and her eyes concealed by enormous sunglasses. She is aiming for a 1950s film star vibe, but there is no disguising the cauliflower swelling of her face, the misshapen tomato that is her nose, or the aubergine bruising around her eyes. Instead of sitting at the bar, she seeks out the furthest table deep in the shadows and faces away from everyone. I beseech the travel god to intervene and make her unfit to fly home, so that we will have to stay on here for another week or two, but he is deaf to my pleas.

***

The goddess has forsaken my mother, or at best her attention to the ceaseless devotions has been dilatory. When I come home from university at the end of the first term, it is apparent that the results of the summer surgery are less than satisfactory. One eye droops at the outer corner, her nose has an unexpected bump, and the pale, wormlike scar that should be hidden by her hairline wriggles across the top of her forehead.

I am barely in the door before she embarks on a litany of lamentation, a canticle of complaint. I want to tell her she looks fine, it's not as bad as she thinks, in fact it's barely noticeable. However, none of these things is true. I listen in silent sympathy, waiting patiently for the gush of grievances to run dry. I bide my time until the perfect moment comes to cast the curse. She says we must go back to Turkey in the summer and make them put it right. I tell her I can't go, won't go with her.

That is when I let the malediction fall from my mouth, see its poison drip into her soul, consuming her from the inside out. I hear her howl of anguish, watch as she folds in on herself, her skin wrinkling like a deflating balloon. For I have been blessed by Aphrodite, and I am blooming with youth and ripeness. In my swelling belly my daughter dances with joy as I repeat the profanity that is my mother's undoing: 'Grandmother'.

AT SOEKARNO-HATTA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Lidya Ayuningtyas

Before leaving my daughter in our country,
I tuck her laughter close,
into my scarf.
Her warmth will wrap around me
each time I turn a page
in the silent lullaby of the library.

HOW JOE TURNED ON ME

Mitchell Batavia

I love Joe. It's not that I'm a caffeine junkie or that if I failed to get my fix I would drift into a deep, unremitting coma. And I would not love him any less just because he balloons my already perilously high blood pressure. No, I just crave the thrill of that Columbian sweet juice surging through my fuel tank and revving up my motor. The scent of that fresh brew befriends my olfactory senses and woos my parotid glands. And the taste? Well, it's no different than downing a butter-soaked lobster tail with a frosty Guinness on a sultry summer day.

So, it comes as no surprise that I am a permanent fixture at my favourite all-night diner, *Cozy Coffee*, a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, where the brew is always on the burner and my best friend, the counter waiter, always queries, 'Coffee?' But when my brew arrived last week, I was confused. Maybe it was just the annoying aquamarine-tinted fluorescent lighting that constantly flickered overhead, but the coffee seemed to exude a murky pale colour, like something sampled from New York's Gowanus Canal, rather than its usual dark rich hue I was accustomed to. And when I raised the cup toward my mouth, the beverage seemed to scream out, 'HEALTH DEPARTMENT!' At that point, I went with my instincts, divorced myself from the cup, and settled the bill. Still, I felt like a schlimazel who went to the movies but only saw the previews.

The following day, I returned to *Cozy Coffee* and again ordered, you guessed it, Joe. But to my surprise, when it arrived, and I inched the brew closer to my lips, I sensed a hint of chlorine—something you might get a whiff of at a community swimming pool. Still, my loyalty to Joe was steadfast, resolute, unwavering. I refused to yield to my fear just because I may have possibly sensed something amiss. So, like a

child coerced to ingest cod liver oil, I arrested my breath and quaffed a mouthful of the mystery fluid with one audible 'Glug!' I reasoned that at the very least, the coffee was sanitized. The seemingly caustic aftertaste, however, confirmed my angst. I hastily separated myself from the chlorinated concoction and stormed out of the diner, this time walking out on the bill.

Earlier today I revisited my favourite haunt and settled down at the counter with a glass of water. As I waited for service, I decided to kill some time by taking some blood pressure pills that my doctor had recently prescribed. As I reached for the antihypertensives, I was stunned to read the patient product insert: '... may alter sensation of taste.'

It was then that I began reevaluating my relationship with Joe.

'Coffee?' my best friend queried.

'Tea,' I replied.

MY WRITING SPACE: ON MANIC DEPRESSION

Amber Black

There is a small hole in the wall where the wind and rain come in and I sometimes find it difficult to concentrate. The rain wets my cheeks as it falls and sometimes I lay my head on the desk, other times I lie on the floor until it stops. I have tried to plug up the hole with little success. I stuff all kinds of papers in there, but they turn to grey mush, so I shape them into a heart, heavy and sodden.

The wind blows my hair so it stands on end and dries my eyeballs, so they grow wide and I have to take short sharp gasps to catch my breath. The wind is my least favourite thing, the icy cold rushes through my writing space taking with it everything I have put to paper, editing with a cruel hand all I thought was perfectly good. It blows my thoughts around, jumbling them together and it is hard to make sense of them when they end up like that. It takes several cups of tea and a magic potion to put them all together into something coherent. Something I can be proud of.

When it isn't windy or rainy, insects often crawl through the hole and, as if startled, I leap up and scatter myself around the room, sometimes to escape the march of the crawling feet and sometimes to stomp and kill. I can run around like that for hours smashing things and chasing things, lifting and rearranging until I realise the insects have retreated, for now, and I make my way back to the seat at the desk with the pens and the paper and the typing and the inevitability of the strained thoughts that I aim to put down on paper.

Sometimes I wait with fervour for the next attack. I wonder when the small hole might offer up some new motivation, send me on my next exciting terrifying joyful refrain. But not much gets done that is of any worth when the insects arrive, and sooner or later I am convinced

it is best to spray repellent around the hole to stop them before they take over.

But soon thereafter I stop the spraying: perhaps convinced they are gone forever or maybe an attempt to remedy the dull indifference blanketing my spirit. When they inevitably return, they crawl and bite and once again take me away from my purpose as I squeal and fizz.

Some feel I should get another writing space, one with less rain and less insects and less wind to confuse my thoughts. They suggest new spaces for me they say are calm and fruitful. Sometimes I rest in those insipid spaces—that invariably come with their own set of distractions—while I patch up my old space and prepare to move back in.

There is a solemn beauty in the space I inhabit; the richness of me oozes from the windowsills, sometimes gluing me to the floor. Those moments of striking stillness provide a peace beyond the struggle where my being absorbs a will to life. And although it can be scary and the patch I put on the hole often falls off, exposing me to rain and wind and insects, it's mine. In all these grotesque promulgations, I become.

THE DAY (a sonnet)

Margaret Bradstock

Days should declare themselves early
not fraught with domestic defeat
but sun-filled, windless
luring you down to the bay
the sea's imperative

or already rain-drenched
bending in the wind
to waken slowly from the dream
writing a poem so tenuous
it cannot surface yet, not to be hurried

each poem the butterfly/
elusive tiger you pursue
through endless seasons
but never overtake.

THE HOT-HEADED LAD

Ruth Brandt

The lad is hot-headed. The lad is cool. He idolises Thatcher. He idolises Sartre's philosophy, from what he can work out. From *L'Être et le néant*. Which makes sense when freshly translated into *Being and Nothingness* with his Collins French dictionary. Which irritates shitty little ignoramuses like his brother, who talk keepy-uppies and COD, and who the fuck is Thatcher? *Whoompf.*

He speaks his hot-headed mind, does the lad. His fresh-faced, careering mind. Zany and sharp. Speaks his way into a university. A university with bedders and porters. The best. So cool. He departs for the Michaelmas Term, haughty head high.

Once away, he fills his emptiness with gorging on words. Fingers on keyboard, Bic on Basildon Bond, quill on parchment. No matter what the medium, letters. Letters to ministers, newspapers, a brother. Exhalations of superiority. Goading flicks of the bird. Remember me, brother mine? Remember? Me? Brother?

Once boiled, an egg cannot be unboiled. Once sent, posted, delivered by a street urchin, a message cannot be retrieved.

The responses?

Nothingness is hinted at by an absence. Nothingness is part of reality. Hadn't the hot-headed lad worked that out from the text. From *Being and Nothingness*. *Ipso facto* there is no such thing as family, just individuals. How had he not understood that? He spirals imprecisely. Who the fuck is Thatcher? Fuck Thatcher. Keepy-uppy. *Reductio ad absurdum. Whoompf.* Paraphrasing, determining, deducing until, totally alone in his study, the hot-headed lad lies chilling.

BODY AS SCIENTIFIC METHOD

Elizabeth Rae Bullmer

Observation:	My entire skeleton weighs less than 7 pounds, which is more than my smallest cat and less than the largest sack of flour in my pantry, though I haven't eaten bread for months.
Question:	If the body wants to survive as long as possible, why does it not crave broccoli?
Data:	The clavicle is designed to break away from the carotid artery to avoid sanguination. Bacon causes colon cancer yet contains no warning label. The appendix has no function but is not removed at birth.
Hypothesis:	If I haven't eaten bacon in over 30 years, then it is possible to live forever.
Experiment:	Increase water intake. Supplement peptides, calcium, B-12, D3. Document grams of fibre. Avoid cheese and chocolate. Deny wine.
Analysis:	Caffeine and raspberries induce dopamine response. Fat cells in the gluteal region are last to dissolve. Cats eat the same food every day.
Conclusion:	Sugar is a substitute for joy. Bread and wine are mainly sugar.
Evaluation:	There are selves within the skin stretched with longing.

FROM THIS MOURNING

Marion May Campbell

To imagine you write the offspring, where enthusiasm marauds in menace's guise, to imagine from this mourning a revolution, where you'll listen for mysteries, where you'll watch for the arrival, in the unfolding of the not-yet-written, of the goddess of the living space, whether she comes to you in the evening, or through the cold channels of midnight, or before dawn as your hens lay, under the raven's circling shadow, their shell-less blue eggs; to imagine anew the offspring, your mind now becomes a revolving lasso; unravelling, dread foresees the babies in the bath, limbs shrivelled in the dank water, as your deadline is forever circling; in the kitchen the clock has stopped at three am and as you bleed your loss, as your blood seeps its way under the door, as your backyard is revealed a bomb crater, still you write your antiwar tract and nail it to the charred doorjamb; it is riddled with bullet points for all the dead children; and where the dreams you incubate with her in the always-tropic drift, the one who reads your ellipses as possibility, who reads each hiatus as probable; you cry out your wound —raw like the raven's call—but what makes sense now in the limpid wake is the splendid blue fairywren alighting on the ledge, who spies herself as magical partner in the deep space of your mirroring window, as you write your way past three to dawn; ignoring the caution—*don't go there*—not to confer with the incubator of the poem, these lost looks, these amnesiac words, for something beyond mother love, for saunter, for prowl, for amorous galivant, so watch out, she's coming soon, the queen of your night, to sing you in, she's coming soon, as the hen roosting in your mind lays another shell-less egg—the queen of vulnerability and all-cloaking comfort, both; imagine riding the revolving line of her mind; imagine your sympathy becoming aspiration;

becoming revolutionary fervour; imagine this new being now shaking to be born, a summation of the massacred babies, rising to quell rage in this warring world, to will her wrapped in green, green; imagine if *colorless green ideas sleep furiously*, then all of it would be true; imagine then, the offspring, the green offshoots of these ramifications; imagine as the minute hand moves again, if the time of a wish were enough for such beings to find syllabic shape, to whisper sibylline to a future that will not repeat the past—

Note

'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously' is Noam Chomsky's example of a syntactically correct but 'senseless' sentence given in *Syntactic Structures* (1957).

MINNESOTA SUNRISE

Sara Cosgrove

We prepared to Strike, And drank bottles of red wine, And tried to protect the weary professional—and did. We drove to sacred spaces, listened to flutes play. We forged beautiful lives from hundreds of stories shared by rivers, lakes, and falls. Sinners and their sin came by plane, not by car, and we were not desperate to be saved. To clarify, the saboteurs invaded our precious state. The origins of their madness muted the music we played—folk, blues, rock, world, jazz—as we hiked the same trail for hundreds of days. But we are still here. We.

DREGS OF NOVEMBER

Ellie Cottrell

I

'Bedroom eyes'. I misunderstood the expression all my life. It just means you're tired, right? But now, here, in this sun-doused room—in these tousled sheets—I finally get its meaning. Ronan is giving me bedroom eyes, and I never want to sleep again.

Ronan has dimples and the kind of stubble that scratches. The first time we met—in Naarm, it was November—he struck me as melancholy. But I was drawn to him, right away. It was like I could see his heart, his *kindness*, glowing in his chest.

'Come here,' he says, softly. Bringing me back to now. I roll towards him, rubbing the down of my cheek against the bristle of his. The day is rushing away from us already, and yet we've only just begun.

I fly home tomorrow.

II

On the tram we stand facing each other, my suitcase wedged between us like a small child. I imagine what our child would look like. I imagine our whole future; the dinners, the drinks, the road trips, the cold-and-flus, the mornings, the nights, the fights; the part after, with the bedroom eyes. He stares at me, dimple flashing on-off-on. He's trying not to smile too much; I know, because I'm giddy with the effort myself.

'Are you sure you can't fit in here?' I whisper, nudging my suitcase towards him with my knee.

Ronan can't see me all the way to the airport—he has to work. Together, we lift my luggage onto the pavement; together, we melt. Just for a moment. I want to devour him and savour him, all in one go. I want him in my suitcase, and everywhere else.

'I'll see you in Perth,' he says. As the tram trundles off, he stays looking.

III

Sometimes, the sun filters through my window in a way that reminds me. Dust motes dancing. Grubby bedroom. Tousled sheets.

I guess I'm feeling sentimental, because I dig out the photo (we only ever took one). He's an angel with a five o'clock shadow, dimples even deeper than I recall; but he looks like a baby. At twenty-one, we both did.

I make a pot of tea, to give my shaking hands something to hold. Then I sit, remembering. Gazing at those two lovestruck babies. Life moves on, but the ache hasn't left entirely. Ronan never made it to Perth. Never even made it to thirty.

When I dump the last of my tea in the sink, the dregs of November swirl down with it.

SAD CRUSTS

Kirsty Crawford

After there was a suicide in the family
people brought us Warburtons thick toasty loaf,
the big orange packet, a sudden feature on the worktop

They brought us thick slices of white bread, butter sliding
and mugs of the wrong sort of tea, never touched
and sat with us in pin-drop
gasp-shock silent rooms, stunned never-ending
but
time came and went and dissolved us with its healing,
the packets stopped appearing

Years later I was
hanging from the talon of postnatal depression,
days mushy and beige
and the cavalry brought bread

Enraged and confused,
why was I being given the grieving bread?
force-fed
you have to eat
thick white slices, butter and cheese
but it saved me, they saved me, seasons passed and it eased

Still, in the supermarket aisle with my electric toddler in tow
I give it a wide berth
because it's the saddest fucking bread in the whole wide world.

UNTITLED

Taylor Croteau

The cat doesn't know how to play with toys. She doesn't understand or doesn't want to climb on her cat tree, and she simply stares at the belled mice and feathers thrown around the room. So Veronica plays cat, batting at the mice on springs and hand-pawing the felt birds off the side of the couch. And the cat just watches her, confused and judgmental, then screams for food.

Veronica's wife, Evangeline, appreciates counting things. The number of books per shelf in their home office, the number of tiles in the backsplash in the kitchen, pushpins in the little plastic box on Veronica's desk. So Veronica has started folding paper stars, tiny, about half an inch in diameter, and collecting them in fishbowls for Evangeline to count every night while she plays with cat toys in front of the cat.

There are 27 filled fishbowls lined along the floorboards behind the couch.

Veronica starts writing notes on the strips of paper she folds into the paper stars for Evangeline. '*I love you*' and '*You make me happy*' sweet nothings, and then eventually '*I wish you would read more*' and '*I think I'm bored*' petty nothings. She knows that Eva will never unravel them. She doesn't write notes in every star, and tells herself the sweet notes outnumber the petty, but if she's honest she would need Eva to count them for her if she really wanted to know.

Evangeline leaves for work at 5:30 every morning and usually feeds the cat. But lately the cat hasn't been eating when Eva wakes up and so the food has been left out on the floor for almost two hours when Veronica wakes up and it attracts nasty, black bugs. Veronica worries the cat will eat the bugs, though she doesn't know how bad that would really be. She asks Eva to stop putting out the cat food in the morning,

since the cat has been sleeping in with her. The cat is horrified by this new routine, of its own creation, and screams for food at 5:45, which it stares at, then leaves for just under two hours to collect bugs. Veronica buys an automatic feeder.

Evangeline has started counting out the small pellets of dry cat food the automatic feeder dispenses every morning and tracking the discrepancies in a spreadsheet on her phone. On Monday, January 6th, the feeder dispensed 15 pellets, a nice, comfortable number, but on Tuesday, January 7th, the machine only dispensed 12 pellets. The most significant discrepancy is on Saturday, January 11th, when the automatic feeder dispenses 23 pellets. A truly horrific number. Evangeline begins feeding the cat wet food in secret at 5:30 every morning, but only a spoonful she knows the cat will eat. However Veronica, having noticed that some days the cat eats all of her dry food and on others does not, has also begun feeding the cat more wet food in secret at 7:15, but also only a spoonful she knows the cat will eat.

Veronica teaches Portuguese to retirees online. She teaches her class from a small writing desk surrounded by shelves of Portuguese novels in their otherwise unused attic. She coaches her students through the Zoom lessons and reads their short essays carefully but is impersonal and perhaps a little overly polite. She has two or three recurring students, who are more fluent than confident, though she doesn't mind. She has them lead the small groups she can't quite muster up the enthusiasm for and suggests they try the intermediate class next fall. On the evenings she teaches late, she suspects she writes more '*I think I'm bored*' notes to Eva in the stars.

They visit Evangeline's sister in Toronto in February. It is cold and grey, and Evangeline's sister has always been cold to Veronica, but she appreciates a new library to read in for a few days. She misses the cold, if she's honest, having moved to Arizona only half a decade ago from Vermont. She enjoys taking the bus by herself. and long walks whenever Eva is spending time with her sister and thinks consciously

if not genuinely about how long it would take for her to freeze to death were she to just lie down in the snow and refuse to move. Could she commit to that kind of surrender? She sends an email to her therapist when she gets to the library. Just a note to discuss when she's back in town next week.

Evangeline doesn't exactly hate her sister, at least she doesn't think so, at least the two never really liked each other. They never fought either, even as children. They were cruelly indifferent at worst, coolly isolated at best. Eva only worries now because she knows Veronica feels her sister doesn't like her. Eloise is made of snow, Evangeline tried to explain early on in their marriage. Veronica shrugged and accepted it, but avoids both sisters on their visits, leaving Eva to buy her sister coffee and try to melt away as much of the forty years of silence as she can. Eva counts the number of bricks in the wall of the coffee shop while her sister scrolls through her phone.

Back in Tucson, Veronica and Eva thaw slowly. Eva kisses Veronica awake in the mornings then lets her go back to sleep. Veronica writes more *I Love Yous* in her paper stars, until she fills a fishbowl with them. She thinks about gifting it to Evangeline for Valentine's Day but worries it will inspire Eva to unravel the other stars and find the petty notes she is ashamed of, so she keeps the love notes to herself. The cat eats a full meal of wet food from Eva at 5:30 and accepts the routine. She still ignores the bells and mice Veronica presses upon her, but she curls up beside her in the bed until 7.

One of Veronica's repeat students enrols in her 6-week summer intermediate course and thrives. Veronica is briefly engaged and smiling in her Zoom classroom for the month and a half. She looks forward to the fall and adds two new Portuguese short stories to the syllabus. She worries they may be too challenging for the students but hopes they at least won't be boring. She asks Eva to read them in July and tell her what she thinks.

Eva really does try to read. Opens the stories Veronica emailed her

on her phone during her bus ride to work but winds up daydreaming instead. Two weeks go by and she hasn't begun reading, so she schedules a Saturday morning for herself to go to a café and read. At the café, the barista flirts with her, lets their fingers graze when she hands Eva her cappuccino. So Eva, trapped in panic, sits at the furthest booth in the back corner of the shop and stares, unblinking, out the windows at strangers on the street until Veronica texts her to meet for lunch.

At lunch, Evangeline admits to not reading the stories Veronica sent her and Veronica tries not to care as much as she does. She smiles at Eva, holds her hand, kisses her lightly as she gets on the bus to head to her yoga class. But when she gets home, she cries in the shower, ignores the cat, then crawls back into bed. She tries to email her therapist but feels self-pity and shame about complaining that she wishes her wife would read for her.

Veronica buys a plant for her windowsill in the attic. A small, plump cactus with a single pink flower poking out of the top. She plants it in a glossy turquoise pot and tries to imbue it with joy. She meditates, staring into the cactus blossom, joy, radiance, happiness, in hopes that while she is sitting in her fall classes she can glance at the cactus for a little support. After a few weeks, the cactus does begin to give her a quick smile, and even if it doesn't feel like the happiness quite reaches inside, Veronica clings to it like the buoy she wants it to be.

Evangeline signs up for yoga classes taught online, so she can do them at home with Veronica. But when she tells Veronica about the classes there's a chill. A small seizing inhale sucking an almost negligible bit of air out of the room. After an ineffable pause, Veronica lets her shoulders drop, breathes, and whispers *maybe*. Eva can't help but feel angry, or really just frustrated, at the maybe and the hesitation. Why is it so hard? When did it get so hard?

Veronica starts collecting antique clocks she finds in thrift stores and antique shops. She finds a hand-carved cuckoo clock at an estate sale one weekend and adds it to her bookshelves in the attic. The shelves

and side tables downstairs become crowded with old glass clocks, digital alarm clocks from the 90s, and broken clock faces. If she is being honest with herself, she debates setting the clocks a few minutes earlier each day, so she can excuse herself to her attic just a little bit earlier. The clocks' prophetic ticking chips into her all day.

Eva moves the coffee table, littered with Veronica's newly acquired clocks, out of the way for the yoga class Veronica reluctantly joins. The two don't speak before, and after the class Veronica retreats to her attic to start her class. She is tired and moody and dulled. She moves the cactus from the windowsill to her desk. Thinks of pricking herself on it periodically through her lecture just to feel something sharp.

When she gets home from work, Eva feeds the cat a second time and cleans up the unused toys strewn around the living room. While she grabs something to eat before the yoga class, she hears bells jingling and the soft whisper of a feather sliding across the carpet. She returns to the living room to find Veronica crouched on the floor in front of the cat, toys and feathers tossed around her, humming sing-songy to the cat to try to catch its interest. Eva stubbornly rolls out two yoga mats, brushing cat toys under the couch and side table. Veronica holds the same small breath she did weeks prior but follows along with the yoga class until she can go back to her attic to grade papers.

In the morning, while Veronica reads her class's responses to the new short stories she's added to the syllabus, she hears a small crash downstairs. A twinkle of glass and then scratching across a carpet. In the living room, she finds one of the clocks shattered across the hardwood in millions of sparkling glass snowflakes. The face lies down on the edge of the carpet in submission. The cat is nowhere to be found but returns to the scene of the crime as Veronica is putting away the dustpan. She is proud of her kill, and strangely Veronica is as well. She returns to her reading in the attic and returns the cactus to the windowsill.

Veronica makes a pot of tea for when Evangeline gets home from work. She begins to tell her excitedly about the cat's successful

acclimation to their home via clock destruction when Eva stops her. Maybe the cat wouldn't have knocked the clock over if there hadn't been so many clocks on the table in the first place. Maybe the cat didn't even knock over the clock intentionally. Maybe it simply couldn't get off the table without knocking one of the dozens of clocks over. Veronica runs her thumb along the edge of her mug in stunned silence. She takes a deep breath before walking into the living room to roll out only her own yoga mat.

Fourteen minutes into the yoga class, Eva hears a sharp gasp then a hollow, shuddering sob before a hand clapped over Veronica's mouth. She turns to see Veronica heaving full-bodied sobs as quietly as she can. *Are you okay?* Eva reaches out behind her to shut the laptop. Veronica rolls to her side, hand still clasped over her mouth. Through tears she meets Eva's eyes and shakes her head *no*.

THE DEFINERS

Kate Cumiskey

Then one day you just get tired, let the definers get to you. Let them run with the ball, say who you are, what you think. If they say you're angry, you're angry. Frustrated, that's it then—just like the operator on the other end of the phone with some accent you can't decipher, feel guilty even trying: *ooo, I understand your frustration*, when it isn't that at all. Give up. Give in to the notion you actually don't know who you are. It's up to them, from your oldest brother down past your teachers to your husband and finally your kids and the ones they marry. Let them put you in boxes carefully designed for wife, mother, mother-in-law. Wander in the chamber of insomnia, knowing nothing, anymore, about you.

CHERRY SCALE

Em Dial

Raw elk sliced thin as a hangnail wide
as a tongue I expected the taste
of bloodmetal It was instead like making
out with myself I was a vegetarian
before I was divorced This week I got
my ballot over email Each promo for flights
and senators and sex toys in my inbox
warms the ocean just a bit This is the fault
of machines I do not understand
named *servers* There's a patch of skin
a cherry scale growing concerningly on my wrist
I'm going to trade in my regrets at the dermatologist
on Thursday How many emails in a bomb?
The patch is in the shape of a heart
if I'm looking in the mirror, in the shape
of a spade when I'm writing I don't hold much
memory I played soccer fall winter
spring I loved to slide tackle My skin cells
shedding off me and into the plastic
pebbles of turf As a child I had one hour
of doggy time barking around the house
after school every day so my parents
got me a dog and I became a human kid
24/7 I've got the remix of Trump
saying *They're eating the dogs They're eating*
the cats stuck in my head I grieve
eschewing my grandma's chicken feet

now that I know affection can change
your palate The Edmonton sun was hotter
than it should have been this time of year
and the air was so dry my lip split
blood pooling on the tip of my tongue

BALD SPOTTING

Richard Downing

Maybe Rollie had had a few drinks before he did it, maybe not. The thing is, is that he did it. If you asked him, he'd tell you, No—okay, maybe one … two, tops. Then you'd ask him if he was sure—because that's how people talked to Rollie—and he'd blurt out Okay, okay, I was drunk, are you happy now? And then he'd get all accusatory—Like you've never been drunk?—which is a fair question but also how Rollie talked to people who'd pushed him—he thought—into saying more than he wished he'd said. Or something like that. Suffice it to say, Rollie was pretty much like the rest of us, except where we would just have stupid thoughts, Rollie had a tendency to act on his.

Which explains the bald spot.

Can you see it? Let me turn completely around. Now tell me the truth and don't bullshit me. Can you see it? Or is my hair covering it? And Rollie would turn his back to us so that we could scrutinise the back of his head as if it meant something to us. Phil would say, 'Nothing to see, Rawls,' which, of course, could be taken two ways—no bald spot was visible or no hair was visibly covering the area of concern—and Phil knew it, which is exactly why he said it. Phil liked to fuck with people that way. I mean, who doesn't? But he could be relentless.

Fuck you, Phil. And in that moment Rollie meant what he said. Phil's hair might have some early traces of gray working their way across his temples, but he did have one goddamn full head of hair, and he'd make a point of running his fingers through it whenever Rollie started in about his bald spot, which was usually a day or two before he had a first date with some lady he met on Timber—or Cinder or whatever it's called—who would soon enough discover that Rollie's profile picture

revealed more about his photoshopping skills than it did about Rollie.

Which may explain why Rollie tried photoshopping himself in the flesh.

Full disclosure: I'm bald as a cue ball, so I've got no skin in this game. You see what I did there? No skin? Got to have a sense of humour. Just maybe not as mean as Phil's, not to say he can't be funny.

I start to ask Rollie why doesn't he try something new, like try going as you are? But then Phil's all over it. It's the size of a half, no, a silver dollar, Phil says, and just as round. See for yourself, not that you haven't already, and Phil hands Rollie a hand mirror and Rollie pivots so his back is to the bathroom mirror as he holds the hand mirror in front of his face, angling and re-angling it so he can better see the back of his head. And here's the thing about that. You can angle that mirror all you want, adjust your stance to accommodate for shadows from the lightbulbs that you know should be LEDs but that's one of those things you know you *should* do and are certainly *going* to do but know you won't until one of the six bulbs above the mirror burns out except two of them already have and you're figuring four will do until you get around to it. Something like that. Anyway, holding a hand mirror up to your face with your back to a bathroom mirror is one of those things that seems like it should work but never really does, at least not quite as well as you'd like it to. That's what I started to say. It's hard to think when you got three grown men crammed into a bathroom, giving and getting advice. It's temporary. Phil's in the middle of a divorce so he's as much hiding out as he's here to save up some money and stash it.

Bitch can only get half of what she can find, am I right? Am I right? Phil's only looking for one answer.

Rollie's here because it's his place, and he says he needs help with the mortgage. Probably true, but I think he likes having company. His Timber dates haven't seemed to lead to anything long term—or even medium term. Truth be told, it's usually one and done.

Me? My apartment building got sold, new landlord-from-hell jacked

up the rents and I went to high school with these guys, so what the hell, here I am. I was the last one in, so I got the couch. Could be worse. And the TV's in the living room.

So Rollie's leaving to go out with this girl he's met on Tincture and Phil looks up from the couch, which kind of pisses me off—that he sits there, I mean—because it's also my bed, but where else are you going to sit when there's so much crap dumped onto the two recliners that someone's got to either put away of throw away but after a while it gets harder to even know what belongs to who. So Phil looks up and says, 'Big date tonight, Sport?' and Rollie's already got his hand on the doorknob, but he's twisted his body in such a way that he's still facing in, looking at Phil. Yeah, maybe. Maybe, my ass. What's that under your jacket, Sport? Where Sport came from, I don't know. Rollie was not exactly Mr Athletic although he was a student manager for the football team junior year in high school and we had a pretty good team that year as I recall. Broke even in the won and lost columns. Could be worse. So Rollie lets go of the doorknob so he can zip up his jacket real quick, but Phil's having none of it. Lucky shirt I see. Of course it was, jacket over it or not; Rollie always wore his 'lucky shirt' on these first dates. One of those shiny, synthetic blends with a bunch of palm trees and I'm guessing hula dancers on it. I'm not sure what exactly Rollie was going for there. I've got to tell you, if that was my so-called lucky shirt, it'd be on the bottom of the pile in one of those recliners.

Phil yells, Good luck, Sport, and Rollie yells, Like you don't have a lucky shirt! as he slams the door.

Phil looks at me looking at a just-slammed door. Somebody needs to tell our friend Rawls that there's two kinds of luck.

Now here's the thing I don't understand about Phil, at least one of the things. He would stay up, sitting on that goddamned sofa, watching TV, until Rollie came home. Which meant I had to stay up 'cause it's hard

to stretch out on a couch when someone's sitting on it. And Phil's not the kind of guy you tell to get off the couch. He would remember that. Something would happen. But hey, we went to high school together for God's sake. I had hair then, so at least he couldn't make fun of that.

It wasn't late when Rollie came home. It was never late when Rollie came home. I'd long ago made a mental note to stay off Tinker. He didn't say a word. Just walked in, took off his jacket, and tossed it on the pile on the closest recliner. The jacket was neutral, beige, and looked like it would fit me; that was my first thought, not to ask how the date went. That was Phil's self-given job. So how'd you'd make out, Sport? Phil could be clever with words, I'll give him that. I see the lucky shirt's still on. Rollie kept quiet, disappeared into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, took out a beer, cracked it open, reappeared, sat down next to Phil and started watching TV. I've seen this one. I wasn't sure if Rollie was talking to Phil or me. It's a rerun. So's your dating life, Sport. We're all ears.

Okay, I started all this by telling you that he—Rollie—did *it*, but I never told you what the it was, what he did. What he always did. Which was always something meant to ensure a particular date would go well but would, in fact, only ensure that Rollie would be home early. Again. Like choosing a shiny palm-tree design for his lucky shirt for God's sake. Or when he bought the 'designer' colognes off Amazon. Guys, can you believe the price? Yes, Rollie, we can believe the price. So here's how we came to know about the latest *it* that he did. After Rollie finishes the beer, he turns to put the empty can on an end table beside the couch, and Phil, still sitting beside him on what by all rights should be my couch, says, What the fuck is *that*? and Rollie turns back around real quick like he's still watching the rerun on the television, but it's too late. Phil's reached over and grabbed the back Rollie's head by placing his hands over Rollie's ears and twisting Rollie's head around and pulling it over toward where I'm sitting as if he's trying to show me something, which he is. *That!*

Rollie starts to say something like It's not like you haven't ever—as he tries to pull his head free, but Phil's one strong son of a bitch, always has been. Strong and mean—it could be a difficult combination if you weren't careful, which I always was whenever he got like this and which Rollie would be wise to be right now, but he's more interested in trying to get his head freed from Phil's grip and go on acting like he's watching some program, and now I'm leaning over and not just because Phil's motioning me to by nodding toward the back of Rollie's head but because What *is* that!?

I get a good look at what is, or had been, Rollie's bald spot, before Rollie finally jerks free or Phil releases his grip, which I suspect is the more likely case here because Phil's right away starting to run his fingers through that goddamn thick head of hair of his, but Rollie's now staring straight, and I mean straight, at the TV. And it's a fucking commercial for God's sake, but I'm guessing Rollie's more interested in when his ears are going to stop hurting. Phil stands up and walks behind the couch, stands directly behind where Rollie's still sitting, still trying to sell us that he's glued to the TV set. Truth be told, I don't even remember getting up. I just remember that there I am, standing behind the couch, beside Phil, both of us looking down at the back of Rollie's head at the spot formerly known as bald.

Phil's holding the remote because if the TV's on, Phil's holding the remote, and he's using it to point to what would become known in later versions of the story as just The Spot. Then he raises the remote, points it at the TV and clicks off Rollie's rerun. Hey, I was watching—Rollie tries to turn his head to look behind him, at us, but once again Phil has clamped his hands—and they're big hands, I'd never really noticed how thick, how hairy they were across the knuckles—over Rollie's ears and is tilting Rollie's head forward so we can both lean over and get a good look at whatever it is we're looking at. Both of our noses, Phil's and mine, are close to what is to become The Spot, close enough to where I can smell Phil's breath, heavy. Not horrible but not particularly pleasant.

Maybe Doritos. Or tuna fish. Whatever, I pull my head back and let Phil continue the investigation. He's going to be the one who decides what Rollie has done anyway.

It's black marker! Phil must have squeezed harder as he leaned in even closer because Rollie lets out an involuntary squeak. I know Rollie would not want to let on that his ears—and at this point, probably his entire head—hurt. He wouldn't want to give Phil that. Just that one squeak and then he seems to slump forward, at least his shoulders do. It's the fucking permanent black marker from the junk drawer, isn't it? Rollie keeps quiet, choosing to consider it a rhetorical question. I'll give you this much, Sport: you made a pretty good circle for using just a hand mirror and a marker. What a doofus. I start to lean back in for a closer look, but Phil releases his grip, pushing Rollie's head toward the TV. Rollie raises both hands as if he's going to rub his ears then quickly drops them into his lap. He starts into one of his 'It's not like you never tried to' lines, but a soft voice betrays him, so he just sits there looking at a blank screen, his hands in his lap, his ears hurting.

I walk back around to the front of the couch and sit down beside him. I want to tell him that he's a fucking idiot, that it doesn't look so bad, that permanent doesn't necessarily mean permanent—something. I know I want to say something. Phil says, It looks like a mole, a big fucking mole.

That's what she said. Rollie's voice is now barely audible. The time for my saying something has passed. My eyes follow Rollie's to the blank screen. I think of another high school buddy of mine across town who keeps telling me he has an open couch for less money. I want to reach up and extend my right index finger to trace the 'pretty good' circle on my friend's head, but I just sit there. I know that I'll be leaving soon and that Rollie won't miss the jacket I'll be wearing.

FUSION

Dorit d'Scarlett

The wind keens against the house, scraping, scratching. Below me, waves swallow the shore, their roar filling the cracks in my skin. The sea is not quiet, not kind. It has a voice like broken glass, sharp edges tumbling over themselves, grinding down to something smoother, smaller. I can't remember when the sea began to speak for me, or when I stopped trying to answer.

Inside, the kettle hisses. A storm trapped in a metal cage. Unsettling. An urgency that doesn't belong to the chai or the water, but to something deeper, older. Amma's voice rises from years and miles away: You're losing yourself. You're unthreading. The words are a dirge, a lamentation in a language I no longer know how to hold on my tongue.

Pushing aside the Vegemite jar, my lame attempt to fit in, I reach for the chai tin, its edges dented, the label curling where I've handled it too many times. The scent of cardamom and cinnamon rises as I spoon the mixture into the pot. It smells like home. Not this one, but the one I left. The one on the other side of the sea outside.

Make the chai, carry the mug to the table. It clinks against the wood, a thin and empty sound. My mouth opens, but nothing spills out. Silence is what I brought with me. It fills the room like the hum of the refrigerator, like the ache behind my teeth when I think of home.

Do you know what it's like to lose the rhythm of your own name? To feel it slip from your mouth, syllable by syllable, until it falls flat, dull, foreign? My name was once a song. Now, it is a mutter, a cough, a sound that means nothing to the mouths that shape it.

The house creaks, a low groan that settles into the walls so they might give way, splinter apart, collapse into the sea. Would I go with it? Would the salt carve me down like it does the cliffs, leaving only pieces

of me scattered across the shoreline?

The chai cools, its surface murky and still. I dip my finger into it, tracing circles in the liquid like Amma used to. She also used to press my hand to her chest, her heartbeat steady against my palm. Do you hear it? she'd ask. I always nodded, though I didn't understand then. Now, her heartbeat feels like the only thing I've ever understood.

The sea calls again, louder this time, its voice cracking through the window. Forehead to glass, the coolness grounds me. Outside, gulls *shriek-shriek-shriek* against the wind, jagged, guttural. Like grief. Like longing.

I open the door and step outside, the storm wrapping around me, pulling at my clothes, my hair. Salt burns my lips. Down the path, I walk toward the water, my feet sinking into the sand, the ground soft and shifting beneath me.

The waves crash, say my name, the real one, the one I've buried so deep I'm afraid I'll never hear it again. But there it is, in the rhythm of the tide, in the breath between the crash and the pull. The sea remembers me. It has always remembered me.

I wade in, the cold stealing my breath. The water pulls at my legs, my hips, my chest. I let it take me, let it fill the spaces inside me where the words used to live. It carries me forward, into its endless mouth, and I let it speak for me.

When I surface, the air is sharp, the sky black, alive with wind. Two surfers wax their boards on the shore. One smiles. 'Got a spare board if you're keen, mate.' The sea hums its endless song, *fold, flow, fuse,* and for the first time, I hum back.

ESCHER

Louis Faber

mirror
my beard
grows shorter
receding
small mole
fades
left cheek
clear

I climb
forty steps
turn
and climb
forty steps
turn
and climb
forty steps
turn
and see myself
looking
for a way
down

fish swim
out
of reach
retreating

wings
expand
grab air
and
rise
for a sky
I cannot
follow

GOODNIGHT

Fiona Faulds

There were earlystarts and longmornings few hours of quiet then goodafternoons spreading to goodevenings further to longgoodnights on it went no fullstops On these hot-easterly-wind-goodmornings box tree leaves tumbleweed their away across black bitumen roads leading to nowhere clinging to fences and under shrubs others lifting into the early morning air and I think of you going us staying. As another school-holidayless-summer starts. As burrs cling to our greying dog who limps hopefully home. Always stopping at your vacant room, sniffing at closed door light strip reflecting hope optimism no vacancy. His supersonicheroinspired sense of smell seeing only delicious Jols congealing at your empty desk. Ceiling fan slowed to a stop.

ALLIGATOR MORNING

Anneliese Finke

This morning, everything is still—
the birds wrap their wings about them,
the alligators lie and dream in their frozen swamps.

Their minds are full of sunshine and the taste
of blood, which is only another way
of saying hope—

hope you can sink your teeth into,
hope that is salty and sweet on the tongue,
hope with wings and feathers

and sinew and bone—the memory
carrying them through the long space
between heartbeats

MONA LISAS AND MAD HATTERS

Ian Fisher

The bell had tolled two times before Nessa nudged him from dream (he was Superboy, circa-1960, patrolling his hometown by air) to consciousness. 'Somebody's at the door,' she said.

'What time is it?' he said.

'It's four o'clock.'

The bell rang again. This time, Ira heard it. There seemed something urgent about the sound. He padded barefoot to the bedroom's window. Expressionless, a miniature bronze bust of Leonard Cohen, an anniversary gift from Nessa, regarded Ira's back from the mantel above the fireplace. Ira leaned over her dresser, taking care not to knock over any of the framed family photos, and peered through two slats of the wooden Venetian blind.

Nessa asked if he could see who it was.

'No,' he said.

'You better answer,' she said.

'Why should I? It's four in the morning.'

'Because he'll keep on ringing, and we'll never get back to sleep.'

'Fuck,' said Ira. He was afraid of encountering the tiny nocturnal mouse on the storey below, although there had been nary a sign of the mouse in seven weeks.

Ira walked out of the bedroom and down the hallway to the head of the staircase. There, their son Rónán—a twenty-eight-year-old PhD student in Sociology, together with them over the holidays (since the March lockdown, other than driving sporadically to and from campus, Rónán had seldom been outside)—asked Ira what was going on. Ira told him.

Ira descended the seventeen maroon-carpeted stairs, clutching the

dark oak banister on his left. Humming the chorus to an Elton John song. Halting every few steps. At the bottom of the staircase he lifted the Ecruwhite plastic intercom receiver.

'Who *is* this?' he said.

'Get down here.' The unfamiliar voice was male, adult, sober, *falsetto*.

'You've got the wrong house,' said Ira.

'I don't. I know who you are. You're Jeff Bezos' brother-in-law.'

'I'm not Jeff Bezos' brother-in-law. It's four in the morning. Stop ringing the bell. Good night.'

'I know *exactly* who you are. You're a fat bearded guy and you're Jeff Bezos' brother-in-law.'

'I'm not fat. My brother-in-law lives in Montreal. I do, however, have a beard. Good night, and go away.'

'You're married to Jeff Bezos' *sister*.'

'No, I'm not. And my wife doesn't have a brother.'

'Jeff Bezos has been ruining my life for ten years. I'm gonna kill him.'

Ira hung up the plastic intercom receiver with gusto. He walked back upstairs. He was thinking he was satisfied with the deliberate obtuseness of what he had said, and he believed there was no consequence to be faced. But by the time he was back in the bedroom, the bell had tolled twice more. Standing at the window again, Ira watched the man walk from the front gate towards the driver's door of a silver SUV parked in front of the garage. Then, apparently having second thoughts, the man pivoted and headed back towards the gate.

'Call 9-1-1,' Ira said.

Nessa used the landline. Soon, she was apologising to the operator for disturbing her in the middle of the night (Nessa said she was sure there were greater tragedies in the world). Then Nessa explained about the wrought-iron gate at street level and the altitude and angle from gate to bedside window. That was why, Nessa said, she couldn't describe the man or make of his vehicle. 'I'm embarrassed to say this is a three-storey one-percenter house,' she told the operator. And then, to Ira, she said,

'Scooper, can you see what kind of car he's driving?'

'An SUV with sunroof. Mercedes, maybe.'

'Did you hear that?' said Nessa to the operator. 'Scooper, is he white, Hispanic, or Black?'

'What the hell difference does *that* make?'

'She's asking me.'

'I can't tell. Tell her to send the police.'

The bell rang again and, this time taking his time, Ira dawdled downstairs to the intercom. 'What do you want now?' he said, raining vexation into his voice.

'I'm not leaving,' said the man. 'Get your ass down here *now*, you fat fuck.'

'I'm not coming down there. And you should know we've called the police. They're on their way.'

'Great. I'll tell them about the million fuckin' felonies your brother-in-law committed. The cops should arrest *him*, and lock *him* up …

'Okay, here they are now.'

Ira replaced the receiver, and shuffled to the window of the living room festooned in holly. Although past New Year's, the tree was still lit with hundreds of green, pink, blue, red, and yellow lights and decorated by thirty-five years of harmonious ornaments.

As Ira looked down from the second storey window, a female police officer—who was far, far younger than he—stepped out of a flashing police car double-parked in front of the gate. She began to address the man.

Ira felt a jolt of courage. He slipped on Rónán's flip-flops that were tucked under the marble entryway table. Above the table was a peacock blue wooden sign *Peace to all who enter here* carved in gold with a white swan in flight painted over the letters. He opened the front door, and left it ajar.

Ira walked down the seventeen green steps, turned left at the rainbow of roses surrounded by irregular bluestones in the garden,

and then right, down another seventeen steps of concrete. A silver mist mystified the morning. A neighbour had been burning eucalyptus firewood in the chimney. It was the stuff of melancholy revery.

When he reached the gate, Ira paused next to the bright-white wall lantern to observe the engagement between female police officer and man, who up-close appeared far less menacing; the locked gate helped. But what they were saying to each other Ira could not make out. So he buzzed open the gate with its concealed button, and stepped onto the sidewalk. He was still wearing peacock blue boxer shorts and a T-shirt with photo of Rónán shooting a basketball from the three-point line of his high school gym.

The man had his arms raised and his back to the female officer. Ira could not discern how old he was, other than being older than Rónán and younger than Ira himself. Also, for some reason, Ira was unable to store details of the man's profile. 'Please step back behind the gate, sir,' said the female officer. 'If I need you, I'll come over there later.'

Ira did as directed, and clanked the gate closed. Another police officer approached. Ira didn't see where he came from, but assumed he was the female officer's partner. 'I'm Officer Lobo, sir. What is your name, please?'

'Ira Fielder.'

'Do you live here?'

'Yes.'

'Are you Jeff Bezos' brother-in-law?'

Ira frowned and shook his head slowly. 'But I've heard of him, of course. Have you figured out what's going on?'

'Well, this man says he has a *chip* in his brain. The chip ordered him to drive over here tonight. I guess he has some kinduva problem.'

'As do we all these days,' said Ira.

Two more police cars, their lights flashing, pulled up in the middle of the street. The officer in the passenger seat of each car glanced at the scene, the female police officer gave each The Nod, and the cars

drove off.

'What would you like us to do, sir?' said Officer Lobo to Ira. 'Do you want us to arrest him?'

'That's not for me to say, officer. I want him to stop ringing our bell. My wife and I were fast asleep, as you can see by what I'm wearing. The reason we called is that I was worried he would become violent. Or spray-paint our garage door. Or crash his SUV into it. And my wife was worried he would wake up the neighbours. I just want him to go away and never come back.'

'Well, sir, your garage door looks okay to me. He doesn't appear to be dangerous. We're going to send him on his way. I don't *think* he'll return, but if he does just call us again and we'll come right back.'

'Thank you, officer, and thank your partner for me. Stay healthy and safe.'

It had begun to drizzle. Ira walked back up the outside steps. He was thinking back to another nocturnal visitation some twenty years before. They had then recently moved to this bayside city after Ira and his employer of nineteen years had parted company. Rónán was in about Grade 1. And Nessa, with memories of her days in the sun, was returning to this first city of her adulthood.

They were living then about a mile and a half away, a block and a half from the harbour. A rented house, because they were easing into the city, walking its streets. They wanted to get to know the neighbourhoods before committing their capital.

The door to that house, one step from the sidewalk, was more glass than wood, as were identical panels flanking the door. On the inside of the windowpanes, Limerick lace curtains obscured the view from the street. But no bars; a wrapped right fist would do it.

One night—it was the night before they were flying to Kaua'i for 'ski week' vacation—the bell had rung at one o'clock. Younger, thinner, and braver then, Ira had answered the bell without hesitation, although he kept the brass security door chain attached.

That time, the man was stocky. Snazzy, in a blue dress shirt and red club tie. Sweating, even in the February night's chill, out of breath, with twinkling eyes and a bit of a belly. He looked to Ira like the rumpled Norman Mailer, like the son of a lawyer, maybe.

The man was fumbling with a key chain. 'Can you help me out?' he said. Ira was slapped by gusts of gin and bay rum cologne.

'What do you want?' said Ira.

'The key doesn't fit,' the man said.

'That's because you're at the wrong house, buddy,' said Ira.

'I live here. This is my apartment building. Can you let me in?'

'This isn't an apartment building. It's a house. You don't live here. *I* do.'

'I *do* live here. Can you help me out?'

'I'm sorry, buddy, I'm not letting you in. You're in the wrong place. You need to figure out where you live. Why don't you check inside your wallet for an ID with your address? Good night, and good luck.'

The man appeared puzzled. He looked to his right and then to his left. Ira could sense no improvement to the man's orientation, but he presented no obvious threat. So Ira closed the door, and the man toddled off.

Since March 2020, Ira had not interacted with many strangers, and those few he did encounter appeared maleficent to him. At first, he chalked this up to the pandemic. By summer, however—with the cacophony of coverage of new cases and deaths, economic downturn, racial unrest, and American electoral politics—Ira came to believe his angst was primordial.

There was the episode of his only professional haircut of the year, by coincidence also on Kaua'i, down Ka Haku Road on Kuhio Highway. The hair salon was tucked into the corner of the Princeville mail service

centre, with outside stacks of grey metal post office boxes adjacent to the dozen windowpanes to the right of the door, which was propped open for better ventilation. The weathered wooden façade was painted celadon. A pair of forest green planters of glossy-leafed and blood-red anthuriums flanked the recessed entryway to the salon, over which was suspended the salon's sign, hand-painted in gold and peacock blue.

The salon's owner, a woman whose unmasked face evoked the vaguely off-kilter Kim Stanley of *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, was engaged slowly and happily in her vocation, standing behind Ira with a pair of stainless-steel styling shears in her right hand and a long black comb in her left: they were facing the mirror. 'Is this your first time on the island, Ira?' she said.

'No,' said Ira.

'Where are you staying?' she said.

'The Cliffs.'

'Oh, that's nice. Have you stayed there before?'

'Yes.'

'And where are you from?'

'Originally, from Canada.'

'But you're an American *now*, right?'

'No, I'm Canadian.'

'How are you allowed to live here?'

'I have a Green Card.'

'So, you're *le*gal?' she said.

Ira glanced at the mirror and made eye contact. The owner's styling shears evoked the long-blade scissors that his father, a newspaperman, had brought home from work at *The Montreal Star* in the late fifties. The shears were shorter, and the tips were rounded. But to Ira her shears had just mutated into his father's scissors, and she had metamorphosed into Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*. 'Yes, I am,' he said.

'Do you vote?'

'Not here, but I do in Canada.'

'So, did you vote for that young guy, the Canadian president? The one who flirts with Melania?'

'No, it doesn't work that way. You don't vote directly for the prime minister. But I voted for a member of his party.'

'What party is that?'

'The Liberals.'

'Wait a minute: so you *don't* vote for your president?'

'That's right, except he's the prime minister.'

'Canadians are okay, I guess,' she said, 'but I'm glad we're finally doing something here about immigration.'

'Excuse me?'

'You know, border security. Detention facilities. Building a wall.'

'You think those are *good* things?'

'Of course. Don't *you*?'

'No. I think they're disgraceful.'

'Do you really want to *go* there?' The owner was now glaring at Ira's masked reflection in the mirror, her arms spread wide, the razor-sharp blades of her scissors spread wide. 'I'll tell *you* what's disgraceful. What's disgraceful is all this political correctness: *liberals* like you swim in it.

'What's disgraceful is Obama turning that funeral yesterday into a political event, trashing Trump, and dividing the country by calling him a racist. Trump has done more for black people than Obama ever did. And Trump protects our jobs and our cities from being taken over by drug dealers and murderers. Obama said many, many things yesterday that were fake news. Obama's speech was just a campaign rally for Biden. Dis*gust*ing.'

'Did you even *watch* his eulogy?'

'No, but I watched Sean Hannity.'

'Obama never mentioned Trump's name … or, for that matter, Biden's.'

'*Whatever*,' she said.

The man with a chip in his brain—the man who had been let off with a polite police warning to drive home, before the shimmer of dawn, in his 2021 Mojave Silver Metallic SUV—flew by private jet to Washington, DC the following Tuesday. The man was planning to attend the next day's eleven o'clock speech by Trump at a protest rally.

He spent the night at Trump International Hotel, a fifteen-minute walk to The White House. His greying mother, a retired personal banker with whom he lived and who had come along for the ride, shared the executive junior suite with him. It was appropriate that the suite was executive, because the man was in fact an executive.

For their pre-rally breakfast on Wednesday, the man ordered room service. For him, the stack of fluffy buttermilk pancakes with Vermont Maple syrup and butter. For her, three fried eggs with crisp bacon, hashed brown potatoes, and white toast. They shared a pot of decaf coffee spiked with Tia Maria.

Then, the man with a chip in his brain donned black fatigues and a tactical vest. He and his mother strolled over to the Ellipse, where Trump—with his hands in black gloves—trumped about the outcome of the election being an egregious assault on democracy.

The man and his mother joined the rabble that trooped from there to ransack the Capitol, where Rónán had once worked as an intern for Nancy Pelosi. This was reportedly the first violent assault on the Capitol in more than two centuries, and plunged the United States into a constitutional crisis.

The man managed to penetrate the Senate Gallery. He was carrying Zip-Tie handcuffs and a Taser. His mother recorded rally and riot on her iPhone.

The Capitol is now secure. Jeff Bezos is doing fine, although he stepped down as chief executive officer of Amazon. The Supreme Court ruled that Trump is entitled to immunity from criminal prosecution for actions to overturn the 2020 election. And, in 2024 winning even the

popular vote, he's back at the locus in quo. The man with a chip in his brain remains at large.

As for Ira, Nessa, and Rónán, they are all safe, healthy, and much of the time behind their fortress gate. Ira—having recently read, for the umpteenth time, *Ivy Day in the Committee Room*—talks more and more these days about migrating to Montreal. He says it's a quest for progressive politics.

Nessa, however, thinks differently, and if you happen to be a relation or friend she would happily tell you how. 'Ira needs to be *real* with himself. Long story short, this is not about politics. It's really about his expatriate nostalgia and romanticism. All those Stanley Cups, Expo '67, the Metro. Beaver Lake, and Lafontaine Park. Smoked meat. Bagels and lox. Dreams of adolescence.

'I think my husband's quest, a forlorn one, is for eternal youth. That's Ira's dream. But like Fantine's dream in Les Miz *there are dreams that cannot be*. I myself do like Montreal, very, very much. But, still and all, I'd prefer Dublin.'

AFFLICTED

Kasey Frahm

A bonsai tree is dying and
you have to write.
Your feet are dry, they're touching,
you can feel it,
velcroed to the sheets.

You have to write
with wet hair,
with wetness on your neck
and damp against your back.
Your spine itches.

You want to write
but the blood that pumps
in your throat
against your palm
is loud. It pulses.

You try to write but prayer
drones, like the vents,
through your paper walls.

Stuff your lungs.

A pretty bird plucks hairs
one by one
gently

from your scalp
and from your eyes

for you to breathe.

SINKING

Anna Riley Frankpitt

I had felt restless for weeks now, the seconds ticking like the drip from a tap with a faulty washer. Each minute turning gently into ten, then silently into an hour, until the hours added to twenty-four and we could call it a new name, a day. Then these days piled up and the washer got fixed and yet everywhere I turned I could hear a small splash. The waters escape haunted me. I remained restless. A friend once said to me that being restless is the minds equivalent to hiccups. The diaphragm and the lungs refusing to keep the same time, but in the brain instead. Maybe that's true but maybe it's not. I can't hold my breath to fix this, so I'm thinking maybe not.

The alarm reminded me of the hour at 7am. I flicked it off and rolled over, comforted with the fifteen minutes that remained until the next nudge. Then it arrived and I could not handle the guilt of comfort any longer. I swung the doona open and then did as people do and got out of bed. I slunk over the hard wood floor, skating slightly as I angled around the bed and towards the bathroom. The sink sat in the corner of the tiled space, its pink style nauseatingly stylish once, but worn and childish now, matching the shower curtain, a soft blush that drifted in the breeze. I splashed water on my face briefly, glimpsing my reflection in the mirror. My face sat surrounded by LED bulbs. When I was young, I was going to be a star, these pieces of furniture stood as a reminder to that fact, nudging me out of the room I no longer had the ego for.

I got dressed with a finality. Bra, underwear, jeans, tee shirt, all in similar shades of who cares. I escaped the room, propelled by the receding waves of pink.

I knocked on his door with a weighted tenderness.

'Come in,' the door replied, its voice resigned, yet friendly.

I turned the knob, gentle with the noise. There he sat, propped up by two pillows, yesterday's newspaper in his hands.

'Oh Amy, hello darling! Almost time for school I see! Shall I make you a ham sandwich?' The questions bounced out of him, punctuated by the question in his gaze.

'That's okay, dad, no school today. How about I make us some toast?' The waves of knowing washed over his eyes and they glazed slightly.

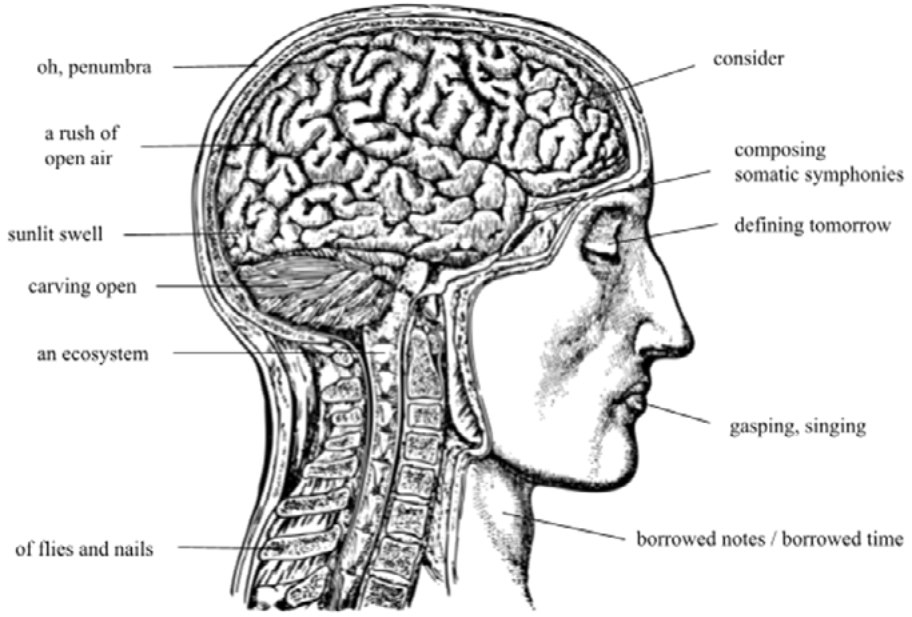
'Amy, just a quick one before you go?' I turned slightly and watched the ocean recede.

'Yes, dad?' I answered.

'How do I know you again?'

PROGNOSIS

A.J. Frantz



SONNY AND CHER

Kim Fulton

Ours is a house with a kitchen and lounge on the first floor, carpeted stairs with three bedrooms at the top of them, and two chickens in the yard. It's the same as every other house at the end of this laneway, apart from the chickens. Sonny and Cher came last September. Mum and Dad gave them their names. Sonny and Cher are from a band from the olden days. They were husband and wife until they got divorced. The chickens are both girls. I don't know why we gave one a boy's name. I don't know why Sonny and Cher got divorced but Mum says people grow apart sometimes. Sonny died in a skiing accident. I don't know if the accident happened in the olden days. Mum says the term is subjective. Sometimes Mum and Dad sing Sonny and Cher's songs at grown-ups' parties and everybody says they're good singers. I've been to four grown-ups' parties. Two when Rachel three houses down got married, and two New Year's Eve parties. There might be more, but I can't remember them.

Rachel doesn't live three houses down anymore. She moved out after she got married but she still comes back to her old house once a week. Her parents and her brother still live there. She comes to see my mum and dad and me most times she comes back. Then I go with her to visit the other neighbours, apart from one house. There are five houses at the end of this driveway but only the families from four of them came to Rachel's wedding parties and to the New Year's Eve parties. Those are the families Rachel visits when she comes home on the weekends.

I see the man and lady from the other house sometimes. Their house is between our house and my best friend Legs' house. I don't ask them why they don't come to the parties. They have their own parties at their house. We've never gone to one of their parties, but I know they have

parties because I see empty bottles in their recycling bin each Tuesday when I go to school. I wonder whether they would like to be invited to our New Year's Eve parties, but I don't ask. I know I'm not supposed to talk to strangers and they're strangers even though they live in the house next to mine.

I walk to school now. I wasn't allowed to before I turned eight, but I turned eight in March and now I walk to school with Legs and his big sister. We walk straight to school and straight back to our houses, but I'm allowed to leave my house again after I've kissed Mum and fed Sonny and Cher. Sonny and Cher were just babies the day they arrived. Almost everyone from the houses at the bottom of our driveway came to see them but the couple from the house between ours and Legs' didn't come to see them. Neither did their son, who is not a baby, but not old enough to go to school yet either.

It takes ten minutes to walk to school most days but longer if we see a dog and have to cross the street or if we see a dead baby bird on the footpath and Legs wants to move it onto the grass. Legs' sister has to wait for us now because once she didn't wait for Legs and he had to climb a tree to get away from a dog that was barking at him. A teacher in the senior school saw him in the tree and Legs' sister got into trouble. So now she always waits for us, even if Legs is taking a long time and getting distracted. Last week Legs got distracted before we even got to the end of the driveway. There was a sleeping bag laid out on flattened cardboard in a clearing and some cans of food and empty bottles. Legs thinks somebody's been living there. He says he's going to come back at night with his dad's Maglite to check it out but I don't think he will.

At school we're in the same class. I'm better than Legs at maths and reading but he's better than me at cross country. I let him copy my answers in maths. Usually he runs with me in cross country practice but when it's the real thing he runs his fastest. Last year he came first in the year three boys' race and went to the interschool cross country on the bus and got out of maths. After school I go to Legs' place or he

comes to mine. Today he came to mine. Usually we play video games but today was sunny out so Dad told us to go outside. We threw paper darts off the top storey deck and had a competition to see who could throw them the furthest up the driveway. Dad said we were supposed to try and keep them out of the neighbours' yards but sometimes they curved right back around and flew in the direction they came from. One landed in the Hamiltons' yard four houses over and Mr Hamilton returned it to us without getting mad. Legs' dart flew the furthest up the drive in the end. He's the best at most sports out of the two of us. His flew almost as far as the clearing where we'd seen the sleeping bag last week, but he didn't want to go and get it. I didn't want to go and get it either, so we ended up going inside and playing video games.

In the evenings I watch TV with Mum and Dad. Next year I'll have homework. You don't get homework until you're nine. Tonight, we're watching a David Attenborough documentary. Mum says that I've liked David Attenborough since I was two years old. She says I used to know when his documentaries would come on and turn on the TV for myself. I don't remember that but it's probably true. I still like David Attenborough, but I don't like the shows where the small animals get chased by bigger ones. Sometimes I get nightmares after watching those episodes, but I don't tell Mum and Dad. They like watching David Attenborough with me and I think the nightmares will go away now that I'm eight. No animals are being chased or eaten tonight. We're watching a family of small wild cats learn to jump. I think we're in Africa, but I'm not sure. Sometimes I get so caught up in the animals that it's hard to keep my mind on the geography. The little cats playfight with each other sometimes. I don't have any brothers or sisters. The boys at school playfight sometimes but I don't join in. It's hard for me to tell the difference between playfighting and real fighting.

Last week me and Legs were digging a hole by the fence at the back of his house and we heard the couple from next door shouting. It was mainly the man who was shouting but we could hear the lady's voice

too. Legs said the man doesn't go to work like our dads do. He said he saw him putting his recycling bin out last week and his eyes were red. He asked his dad why they were red and his dad told him to keep his distance from that couple. Legs doesn't see how that's possible when their house is just twenty metres from his fence. We hear a glass break and a lady crying and Legs goes to tell his dad. A few minutes later his mum comes out of the house and calls us in for jelly cups. I forget about the lady next door for a while. I don't mean to, but I do. I think about her later that night and I can't sleep. I tell Mum about what we heard by the fence and she says she'll talk to my dad about it. She thinks the couple next door is going through some hard times and she'll see if we can help them with that. I wonder if we should invite them to our next grown-up party or if they'd like to feed Sonny and Cher but I don't ask. I suspect Legs' dad was right about keeping our distance from them. I hope Dad won't go over there because of what I told Mum.

Legs and I don't talk about what we heard when we see each other the next day. I go to collect him from his house and bring a carton of eggs for his mum. She kisses the top of my head. Nobody's ever done that before. She kisses Legs and his sister on the cheek after that and we go to school. The weather has cooled in the past week and the sleeping bag is gone from the clearing. I hope whoever was staying there has found some place warmer to go. I imagine him reconciling with the wife he'd fallen out with, waking up around now for bacon and eggs at their kitchen table. I don't even know if it was a man who had slept there, we never saw him, only signs of his living in a space that ought to have been ours. I hope he didn't take off because we rummaged through his stuff, the way mother birds don't come back to their nests after humans touch them, abandoning their eggs or their young to fend for themselves. I don't know if that's true about the birds or just something our parents tell us so we'll leave eggs and baby birds alone. It doesn't seem true. And yet I wonder if that's what happened to the baby bird Legs shifted from the footpath last week. Safest just to leave

these things alone. I hope the owner of the tins of food and the sleeping bag knew he was welcome here.

At school, Legs and I go our own ways. His friends from the interschool cross country team are playing handball outside and I don't like handball. I don't mind that Legs has other friends. I have other friends too. Inside the classroom, I sit with Maria next to the heater. Maria is my friend because she's the only other person in the class who knows how to play chess. Not checkers, but chess. Sometimes the other boys tease me for spending time with a girl, but I don't care. The girls don't seem to tease Maria for spending time with me. I don't know why that is. It seems unfair, but I don't know which of us it is unfair on. I usually beat Maria at chess because I've been playing longer. I don't go easy on her because my dad told me it's usually an insult to go easy on anyone in a sport unless they're younger than you. I don't think chess is a sport, but I expect the same rule applies. Maria is six weeks older than me. Her birthday is in February. Today she beats me. I think my mind is elsewhere. It happens sometimes, it didn't used to. I'll be sitting in class and my mind is somewhere completely different. Suddenly the class will be starting on some activity or another and I'll have no idea what task has been set. Today my mind is on the abandoned clearing where that person used to live, it is on the woman next door crying and the sound of breaking glass too. I know these things are not connected but they are connected in my mind. I let Maria think she won fair and square, which I suppose she did. Perhaps other kids go places in their minds too.

I look forward to school and to our chess games by the heater and soccer during the lunch break and maths and reading. I'm good at chess and school, and okay at sports for the most part. I have friends and I don't get picked on like the kids who are overweight or who wear clothes they took from the bin by the mall. I like going home at the end of the day too. I look forward to seeing my chickens and playing my video games, eating dinner with my parents then watching wildlife documentaries. Sometimes it feels like I'm using up my share of good

luck too early, that one day I'll lose my friends or run out of money, put on weight and wind up sleeping on a flattened piece of cardboard in some bushes. These are the things I think about sometimes, when I'm supposed to be concentrating on a chess game or the task the teacher has set for the class.

We wait for Legs' sister outside her classroom after school. Her classes finish 15 minutes later than ours and we're not supposed to walk home without her. She asks about my day, I tell her Maria beat me at chess. She asks Legs about his day. He tells her he finished handball in the king square at the end of lunch and he'll start the day there tomorrow. I ask her about her day and she says she won the race to fill in the times tables grid. She is ten. By the time you're ten you're supposed to know your times tables up to twelve and your class has races to fill in a grid. I'm looking forward to having those races when I turn ten. I only know my times tables up to eleven but that's more than anybody else in my class. We shortcut home across the playing field like everybody else who lives south of the school. There's a bit of a bottle neck at the small space where the wire fence has been trodden down enough for us to cross in single file. Legs is carrying the tennis ball his crowd has been playing handball with. We bounce it between each other as we walk home except when we're crossing the roads. Then we carry on past the clearing where the sleeping bag used to be into my house where I kiss my mum, feed Sonny and Cher, then play video games with Legs until dinner. He goes home and I watch a wildlife documentary with my parents. Penguins. I like the bird documentaries the best. Tonight, it's all about the emperor penguin and how the dad takes care of the egg in a pouch while the mum goes out hunting. The parents stay together while the child is raised, but might swap partners the following season. I sleep easily that night, thinking of the baby penguin riding on its father's feet.

Something happened overnight but I'm not sure what exactly. I'm a deep sleeper. I didn't wake up the night the ambulance came before Mrs Hamilton's new baby arrived and I didn't wake up during the storm last

winter when lightning struck 86 times. Dad told me about it the next day and I was disappointed about missing the lightning. I like seeing it when I'm inside the house, but not when I'm outside walking to school. Usually Mum or Dad drives me to school when there's a storm anyway. I wasn't disappointed about missing the ambulance because George didn't arrive until two days later anyway and I got to meet him as soon as he got home. George is Mrs Hamilton's baby. George arrived about two months earlier than Sonny and Cher and he comes to see them sometimes. It's my job to catch the chickens so he can pat them and help clean his hands afterwards. I don't know what happened overnight, but Mum and Dad are drinking tea and whispering when I get up. Usually Dad leaves for work about now but today he's wearing a weekend tee shirt, the one with Roy Orbison on it. He says he's not going to work today and neither is Mum. He'll drive me to school today and Legs' parents will drive him.

Dad doesn't make me play outside that day or that week. Instead I come home and play video games until dinner time then watch David Attenborough documentaries afterwards. I only see Legs at school, but I don't mind. Cars come and go from our driveway for a long time, but I'm not supposed to go and see who they are. If I want to go outside, I can go out the back and spend time with Sonny and Cher. Dad goes with me mainly and reads a book or the paper on the back deck. Dad goes back to work after two days and Mum takes a week off. I don't see the couple next door again or their son. I don't mean to, but I forget about them after a while.

CAUTERIZED

Claire Gaskin

I close my eyes and wait for sleep like I wait for a father's love the marriage proposal depressed me with impossibility the bleeding rainfall I was in the laneway behind my parents' house with my psych I'd climbed the fence bleeding the ink she asked why I didn't just use the gate setting up deckchairs in the laneway behind my parents' house feeling the gravitational pull to other titanic edges every cell of trust in certainty our body entwining with sunsets' word *extinction* the crow caw and the movement in the curtains Milton's fall from satan the fall from paradise into mass gravy in the calloused hands concerned about the sifting of sands the inner pull of gravitational trust forms us into spheres and orbits the rules of rock against the inner pull and nourishment his arms clung to his sides his legs entwined directly or indirectly the result of other's kindness the breath of touch the outbreak of truth the calloused genocidal hands of Milton's satan the inner pull to gather and cohere supplanted by the word *extinction* two lives orbiting directly or indirectly provided by ruthless living struggle to breath the rings of Saturn formed by ice particles orbiting rules of communication supplanted by two lives the entwining fall of spinning centrifugal force will flatten his arms clung to his ribs

SAHARA RAIN

Stephanie Green

*

It's rare for the desert to hold to itself
for the land to give up its slippages
each grain of sand
clinging to its neighbour
to form a dense yellow skin
bright dunes become tight and sombre
like a child wrapping her arms
around her brown body
on an early autumn day
surprised and unready
for what is to come.

*

If you know this land
the way it fills your eyes
the burning touch of it
you know what it is
to traverse its harsh softness
like a poet struggling
with the thickness of words
the way they come
too slow or too fast
too often unbidden
your progress slowed
by ankle-deep footfalls
welcoming and suffocating

at the same time.
And if you have seen its colours
changing with the sun's passage
its mineral taste in your mouth
if you have ever whispered
the words of its old language
if you know the slip of its silk
under your feet
or how the winds roughen
its sleek yellow surfaces
traces caught in the damp of your neck
your eyes brushed with its heaviness
lips stung by parched longing
how will you recognise
this towering grey stranger
wrapping you in the weight
of unwanted tears you can't name.

*

And what is it then to reach
away from yourself
to cup a hand to the sky
and feel the wet sting
of that cold rush to earth?

For if you have never seen
rain fall on this land before
or never saw it measured
by this vast grey amplitude
would you even recognise
that place as your home
the great sky cracked in darkness

thunder crashing over dunes
a new kind of silence
that refuses everything to you
those bright words and images
you thought you knew so well
so close you can almost hear them
if only the land still breathed.

*

Yet the wet only coats the surfaces
beneath everything that lives
is still moving slowly
among—between—within
waiting in its own way
for the familiar to return
while we who have never belonged
see only the crusted surface
longing for a dreamless night
a wild, hot ride into sunset
the elemental burn of an existence
we may never know.

TRAIN TO FÜSSEN

Kirwan Henry

Everything is covered
with snow,
all edges powdered
so we cannot break our teeth
on the bright bones of day.

Here and there,
dark things mark—
blackbirds, a trotting fox,
bare nests
in the valleys of branches.

IN WHICH I MISS THE EXPENSIVE BALLET PERFORMANCE BECAUSE I GOT LOST, SO SIT IN THE PARK WEARING ALL MY FINERY LIKE DENTED SILVER

Blossom Hibbert

Scales fall off the sun, my quick & borrowed
body collects it all but—if I could choke
on the suck-mouth tide
I would, red lips boarding salty &
drugged travellers. They rollerskate & breakdance
& laugh, spinning in islands of bliss
    & lovers picnic on cold pies &
bells reach out to be fed, melbourne's park unploughed
stumbling over its own pavement. Can't I kill
my enemy if I want to? And drink my own sticky
wine in peace? Even though I wasted all my money on a
dead animal? They are dancing right now in terribly pink
skirts; women as fierce as beards, one seat just an
empty udder, the greasy footmen of my pride
fall asleep still trying to find drummond street, their
desire estranged I don't know where y are but—i'm
            working on it.

Of that night I remember nothing else.

RIP TIDE

Marwa Hijazi

A piece of manakeesh won't kill you.

Dana slides a hand down her calf, swiping away the clinging sand. 'I don't have the stomach for it.'

She watches the shoreline from the foredune, tracking the waves that fold upon each other in a practised dance. They barrel towards the sand to flood the stillness of the beach with a hissing crescendo.

You basically live here now. The voice to the right speaks again.

Dana swallows the testy remark: *Where else would I go?*

She can't see her sister, but she imagines Razia leaning back on her hands, shaking her curly honey-coloured hair until it falls behind her shoulders.

The thick silence is suffocating, and Dana's itching for her sister to break it again.

Remember when we saw the whales off the coast here? Razia says, bringing the memory to the fore of Dana's mind with a lilting tone. She's speaking as though she isn't forced to be here. Like she can leave.

Dana's eyes remain on the sand, watching the scattered patches of grass flutter and bend beneath the wind. She inhales sharply and shudders at the smell of brine.

'You mean the one whale that never breached the water?' The question comes out flat-toned, without the hint of Dana's usual sarcasm. She's too tired to fake it this time.

Razia laughs anyway, but it's muffled and … strange. It's a twisted blend of Dana's laugh and her brother's. It misses a wheeze, maybe. Dana can't remember her sister's laugh anymore.

Burning blooms in Dana's nose before creeping into her throat. The threat of tears arrives, and her eyes flutter to the sky to push them back.

Razia exhales, but the sound is caught in the wind and Dana can't differentiate between its breath and her sister's anymore. Dana's heartbeat rises to her ears in thunderous pulses. Her body sags further into the sand.

She wants the crooked cliff-sides in the distance to awaken—to swell in size, settle the oncoming storm, and fold the world into complete darkness. But the cliffs are stubbornly still, half-steeped in ocean water, watching the sunset.

Dana swears that the air shifts around her, like Razia's turning to look at her.

But she's not here.

Above, the grey canopy of clouds ushers in a light rain. A family near the shore start gathering their things. Another mother calls out for her kids to climb out of their sandpit. Below the dune Dana sits on, a woman remains in her picnic chair. The wind makes deep ripples in the brim of her white sunhat.

Dana shivers as the wind finds her, too—irritating and persistent. She stands, squinting against the rising sand that flocks to her face and hair; stinging as it meets her cheeks.

'Fucking, shitting fuck,' she spits out, slapping the remaining sand from her legs. She grabs her sandals and shoves her feet into them.

Dana? Razia whispers.

Dana turns sharply to her right. The sand is untouched—naked as always.

Fury arrives, like licking flames beneath her ribs that hound her to spit insults at her dead sister for leaving her. Dana snatches her car keys.

The wind howls, and its newfound force shoves Dana back a step.

WHACK!

Something whips into her face, spotting her vision with darkness.

'Ah!' She throws a hand over her stinging eye. With blurred vision, Dana scours the sand and finds the culprit behind her: a white sunhat. Scoffing, she looks down the hill.

The lone woman from before is now standing, staring at Dana. She's short, with ample curves and dark skin. Black curls rest just above her jaw, and she's clinging to a stripey, purple shawl that shields her shoulders. She waves.

Dana's grip tightens around her car keys. She glances at her silver Ford that's parked crookedly between two car spots.

The trembling breeze finds her face, brushing her hair back like Razia had done on that last day.

The tremor burrows into Dana's chest, squeezing the way guilt does when it wants to remind her that it's still here. It's guilt for leaving Razia here again. Guilt for ignoring her mum who begged her to stay home today. Guilt for wanting to abandon the woman who's hoping to get her stupid sunhat back.

Sighing, Dana plucks the hat and descends the dune. Her sandals—Razia's old beige ones that she let her keep after she took a liking to them—scuff the grass and icy sand. She pushes her keys into her cardigan pocket, wipes the tears that snuck down her face.

Dana slots her feet into the sand prints of wandering strangers, watching the rain stain the grey-toned landscape with little spots that look like holes. The ocean continues to hiss as she approaches the shore, filling those silences that she hates—the ones that remind her of hospital rooms, the incessant beeps of EKG machines, and her brother Hassan's shuffling feet. That abrasive noise was a part of him now. It's something she never would've associated with his usually unbothered demeanour that she knows annoyingly well.

Dana tucks her hair behind her ears and stops an arm's length away from the woman, who steps forward with a smile that deepens the lines in her cheeks.

'Sorry about that,' the woman says with a chuckle. Her voice is deep and lightly accented. 'Wind came outta nowhere.'

Dana hands over the hat and the woman hums, 'Thank you.'

She knows it's rude, but Dana doesn't meet the stranger's eyes. She

doesn't want to see them silently asking: 'Are you all right?'

Wind whips up around the two of them, making the sand skip up again and Dana's glad there's another excuse to shield her face.

'I …' the woman begins to say, 'I saw you drive in. You looked in a rush …' a small laugh '… then I saw you sit on the dune. It's a shitty spot there; all sticks and gravel from the footpath. And the spiders living in the bushes. Why don't you sit down here? The sand's softer.'

Dana blinks. The words 'What the hell?' are close to tumbling from her mouth, but another thought reins them in: *There are spiders, aren't there?*

Her mum never let Razia and Dana play in that place again after Hassan, then fourteen, spotted a wolf spider in the grass. Dana still remembers her brother's keen eyes, wide with interest, as he pointed out the pale brown lines on the insect's creepy legs. He used to find spiders cool. When did that go away?

But Dana didn't think of the spiders on that foredune. She didn't remember them earlier today, let alone two months ago when her lonesome daily beach trips began. She only remembered that the dune used to be Razia's spot—before she had to exchange that patch of sand for a hospital bed.

The woman appears to notice the confusion on Dana's face but doesn't look embarrassed in the slightest. 'Sorry. You just looked uncomfortable, hun.'

The woman stretches her arms to the sky, exposing the beauty spots that speckle her dark skin and the smudges of unblended sunscreen on her elbows. She tucks her sunhat into a floral handbag lying on the sand, then reaches for her foldable chair.

'Let me.' The words fly out of Dana's mouth before she can hitch them in with a breath.

The woman tuts and shakes her head, sticking her hands out to try and stop Dana. 'No, no—'

But Dana's already grabbed the chair's arms and turns her back

to the woman, folding the slippery nylon seat and pushing it into its packing sleeve.

The wind swallows the woman's mutterings as Dana zips up the packing sleeve. She lifts her head, and their eyes meet. Grooves of wrinkles and light liver spots border the woman's large, murky-brown eyes.

'Let me not keep you if someone's waiting,' she says. Her words send spindly needles down Dana's arms.

'I don't, I just … my sister …' she starts, but won't say Razia's name. She wants to keep it to herself, to tuck it away from the winds in case they'd take that from her, too. 'I'm alone.'

The woman's eyes are stuck on Dana's. The intensity in them makes her want to squirm until the lady steps forward to lay a warm, leathery hand on Dana's forearm.

'It's rough,' the woman remarked.

It is, Dana wants to say, but the words pinch her throat. The woman withdraws her hand and pulls her shawl closer, her eyes turning to the ocean.

'My husband passed around four years ago. A stroke. I've been avoiding the beach since.'

Towards the horizon, sunlight splits the storm clouds and scatters white-gold hues upon the water. A patch of ocean dazzles beneath the light's touch and two gulls float just above it, wings outstretched to meet the wind.

Dana's words come out harsher than she means for them to be, but they're true. 'It's a fuckin' black hole.'

This beach was Razia's sanctuary. But now? Now, its sands and waters selfishly swallow the memory of her, all the while sparing Dana to watch the destruction. The beach is taunting her.

It knows that Razia will never have to fight the sinking tug of the sun-scorched sand again. Her hands will never twist around water-swollen ropes of seaweed and lash them out towards Dana. She'll never

clumsily slap the water with flailing limbs in her attempt to beat Dana in a swimming contest. Her cackle or guffaw—or however she used to laugh—when she would lose wrestling matches in the water against Hassan is ebbing from memory.

Dana hasn't heard her brother's bellowing laughter in months.

She's going crazy—she knows it—because, as the wind settles, whistling gently, she can hear Razia's breath rattling through a hissing oxygen mask. The sound pulls her back into that hospital room, to the sight of the irregular rise and fall of Razia's chest. She remembers snippets of the doctor's report, uttered in a wavering voice: '*Her lungs … isn't improving … stay a while longer.*'

A breath-obstructing ball swells up in Dana's throat. 'I fuckin' *hate* the beach.'

Her words are a half-hiss, an outpour of venom.

'Oh, love …' The woman whispers. She places a hand on Dana's shoulder.

The tears sting before they fall, and there's that pain; the sharp wire of dread wrapping itself around her chest and *tugging*. Dana wants to wrench the pain from her chest, escape her body and, just for a moment, banish that feeling of being so bitter all the fucking time. Razia hated it when she got angry.

Does she hate her now?

The old woman's hand slides to Dana's elbow.

When Dana finds her voice, it squeezes through what feels like boulders to reach her lips. 'It doesn't get easier?'

She doesn't mean to say it like a question. She knows the answer.

The woman shakes her head.

'The hurt …' the old woman says, 'it comes up at the weirdest times. Like when I'm watching the water go round and foam up in the washing machine that he refused to replace. Or when I'm brewing this herbal tea he used to make me for my headaches. My neighbour once asked me where I got the recipe from, and I broke down. I feel terrible anytime I

laugh because he isn't here for that.'

Dana can't hold back the tremor in her voice as she whispers, 'I wish I'd spent more time with her. She didn't want me to see her when she was sick. She lost all her weight and was so pale and … and the rashes on her face were so bad—' she shudders, her voice wobbling. 'I should've ignored her. Should've slept next to her in that shitty hospital bed every day. Every fuckin' day.'

She recalls that blur of a drive to the hospital after the doctor called—when her phone's shrill rings had fractured the sensitive silence in Hassan's apartment. An eerie calm hung over them as her brother drove, every now and then the stuttering engine of his Volkswagen disturbing them.

When they arrived, Mum was hysterical and clinging to Razia. Dana didn't cry. How could she? That grey-skinned, waif-like body didn't belong to her sister.

She couldn't understand it, any of it, until Hassan approached the body and gently kissed the cheek.

The old woman's fingers press gently into Dana's bicep.

'All this pain …' she whispers, 'it needs to breathe. Or you'll forget about them. The pain and them, it's all jumbled. All part of you …'

Her voice peters out. Dana turns and sees tears glisten in the wrinkled pockets of her brown cheeks.

'It's shitty business, really,' she chastises herself, tone more humorous now. 'I do everything he did, now. Brush my teeth after everything I eat. Leave the hallway light on before I sleep. Do the stupid daily crossword even though I'm dyslexic.'

Dana smiles, still sniffling. She thinks of how, now, she showers in the mornings instead of evenings like Razia did, how she collects movie ticket stubs and sleeps with tissues under her pillow.

Light mirth softens the woman's face.

'He called me Nurrin, just like I asked him, 'cause I didn't like the name my mum gave me.' She says it like an afterthought. 'So no,' Nurrin

says, confident, 'the pain doesn't go. Grief … it's … a rip. Always moving. Strong. But it isn't the whole ocean, y'know? Your grief won't go, but everything around it … all the good things … they get bigger. *Stronger*.'

She pauses, blinks. 'My husband, your sister, they aren't lost somewhere.' She shakes her head and pulls a face like the thought is completely ridiculous. 'We know exactly where they are.'

Something stirs in Dana's chest as Nurrin says this, a gentle burst of feverish warmth. It feels a bit like when she saw Razia's lopsided grin, drugged to oblivion after coming out of her first successful lobectomy.

Can Dana be like Nurrin one day? Laugh about memories instead of feeling like her stomach is hurling itself on the walls of her ribs every time she recollects them?

Nurrin's soft hands rub her arms. The comforting gesture reminds Dana of her mum—how she searches the house for Dana at random times to hand her a plate of carefully chopped fruit. How she goes into Razia's room every day to fix untouched bedsheets.

A gentle spray of icy water on Dana's feet pulls her attention to the ocean. The darkening waters dimple beneath the intensifying rain. Clouds clog the horizon, transforming the sun into a white blot.

Nurrin sighs and squints at the sky. 'It's gonna piss down on us soon.'

An amused wheeze falls from Dana's lips as Nurrin positions her bag on her shoulder, tightens her shawl, and begins trudging up the dune.

Dana picks up Nurrin's picnic chair and holds out a hand. 'I can take your bag.'

'I'm sure you can,' Nurrin says with a sarcastic lilt. She waves a dismissive hand.

Dana's smile slips a little as her eyes catch Razia's spot on the foredune. She watches the world in motion: grass twisting into the wind's current, sand shifting in small waves down the slope, crawling like thousands of tiny spiders. She hears the hiss of ocean water lapping the shore, the drizzle of rain meeting the sand. Somewhere behind, the water's battling itself, and Dana knows there'll be more rips and

harsher rain.

Everything's changing, always moving, but the world's still spinning. And Dana's still here.

Her, and the sudden gurgle of hunger rising from her stomach.

BLACK DOG

Kylie A Hough

(after Diane Seuss)

I can only eat so many carrots. At this point I'm turning orange. Not by choice. For treatment. It's pointless. I try every year anyway. Self-medicate. Last year it was reiki. The year before, hypnotherapy. The year before that I got into raw veganism. Hooked a hose to my arse, once, okay, three times. A clean colon meant shit. Juice a kilo of carrots every day. Had a guy practise kinesiology on me, another astrology, someone else craniosacral therapy. Drank water only, for days before appointments, staunch. Yes, I've tried most things. If anyone asks, I spill. No one does. I learned to swallow my feelings, early, because every Aussie knows, no one wants the truth when they ask how you are. I've sucked up what lip service I can. Full to bursting, I am, glad when carrot juice powder came on the market. I can eat it by the spoonful. I can save myself the washing up, time spent constructing, deconstructing the juicer. Kept records of how long it takes orange molecules to slip from mouth to anus, a human experiment in how to fail to put a bullet in a black dog. Bitch is still by my side, now, snarling.

MOONLIGHT AND MOMENTUM

Heikki Huotari

Parentheses nested improperly, we're clutching cultured pearls. There's blame enough to go around. I'm not not A, is just what we expect not A to say. Cassandra, they will not just not believe you, they will publish your address.

It's back to basics, says the butterfly. How hyperbolic my paraboloids. How parallel and of a bountiful supply. Annihilation presupposes an annihilator. Look within. An astral traveller wants a stable base, to know at what age to transition to a myth.

You will be honouring your father and your mother but in public. If the lampshade fits then wear it. If you're happy with your exegesis you can keep it. Your affection is objective. Your biology contains no causal chain.

Your face is that of some past president. The patron saint will see you now. A taste bud to each flavour and each flavour to its taste bud, all you have to deduce is deduction and the centre of mass of the unencumbered hammer travels in a parabolic path.

When topologically equivalent to the continuum, a lifetime is an open interval and neither endpoint is included. Touché Fate, your teaching style is inconsistent with my learning style. I've taken this course four times and this is the worst so far.

BLACK SWAN THEORY

Danielle Johnstone

In the autumn Sunday dawn, the laughing calls of the great cloud of corellas, swooping and tumbling their way through the valley carries across the still air and through the open bedroom window.

'Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!'

They'll pass this way each morning for the next month or so, like a group of excited school children who have been released from the confines of the classroom into the expansive freedom of the playground. Their morning flight will take the corellas eastward to the quiet sports fields where all five hundred of them will spend the day hopping about on little legs, nibbling at the irrigated turf and stripping the playing surface bare. Somewhere, right now, the council groundsman hears the approaching laughter of the birds as a harbinger of destruction. The little corellas couldn't be happier.

As if in reply to the birds' calls, the neighbour's dogs bark their greetings to the new day. Curled on the bed, the cat known as Rabbit raises her head for a moment to listen, stretches out a paw and settles back down. Woken from her own sleep, Danielle watches the silver light around the edges of the drawn blinds slowly become a golden glow and remembers that last night she dreamt of fire coming over the hills towards their little house. The rainwater tank was drought-empty and there was nothing she could do.

The residue of the dream settles within her like a dark shadow and a sudden need to check that all is well, compels her from the bed. Reaching towards the window, she pulls the blind up revealing the view outside. Across the valley, the flanks of the hills are not ablaze with fire but with the bright morning light filtered through soft woodsmoke drifting from nearby chimneys. The scent of it must have crept its

way into the bedroom with her during the night and preyed upon her dreams like an incubus. The sight of the black Angus cattle, arranged like farmyard toys across the bristled paddock, all facing towards the rising sun, seem to mock her fears. Of course there is no fire.

Danielle stands at the open window looking out at the view, her arms holding herself in an embrace, the thin white cotton of her nightdress cool against her skin. Eight years ago, she chose this plot of ground—on which she now stands—from a sub-division map shown to her by an estate agent. He had pointed to the area marked 'wetland reserve'; a band of dark green that stretched east-west, bordered by the main road on one side and the new estate on the other. The house the company would build for her and Wren would sit on one of the plots overlooking the reserve and the hills beyond. They would be able to walk out their front door, across the yet-to-be-built street and onto the walking path that would loop its way down and around the chain of natural lakes in the reserve. Mother Nature on their doorstep.

She watches an older couple, out on a morning walk, make their way along the section of trail that passes her home; a fat labrador keeping a stoic pace next to the woman. Danielle notices, with a flash of annoyance, the dog isn't leashed. The wetlands have become home to increasing numbers and varieties of birdlife and she worries about the risk of dog attacks, particularly on the swans.

She sighs, steps away from the window and shedding her nightdress, pulls on trackpants, sneakers and a jumper. 'Don't pick a fight,' she tells herself.

Outside, the air shines like burnished copper. The mild breeze drifting in from the northwest has swept away both the morning chill and the woodsmoke. The hills sit sharply etched against the high blue of the cloudless sky. This is how late autumn dresses itself now, in the borrowed garments of summer.

As she heads east down the path, Danielle inhales deeply, rolling her

shoulders up and back, and lifting her face towards the ascending sun. Before leaving the house, she checked on Wren who was still curled within the nest of her bed, sound asleep. Perhaps they should go op-shopping today, she thinks; spend time together hunting for treasures. Maybe, go for lunch. It might be a good peace offering after a fractious few days in which Wren's shifting teenage moods collided with her own menopausal pique. Adolescence has brought a new distance between them, and Danielle feels it like a wound. Only five more summers, she thinks as her chest and throat tighten, before her baby bird can choose to fly away.

Blinking her eyes clear, she turns her attention to the lake that curves, kidney-shaped, between the path and the border of the estate. Months without rainfall have exposed a wide band of lakebed; the fringe of reeds no longer semi-submerged but now poking sharply up from dry ground.

Despite the shallower, narrower waters, the lake remains crowded with birds. She watches a flotilla of wood ducks as they take comical turns tipping their bottoms upwards and rummaging their beaks below the surface searching for food, webbed feet paddling frantically behind them. Smaller and more agile, a dozen white-faced, black-feathered coots dart about the ducks, suddenly disappearing beneath the muddy water before popping back up elsewhere. Down the far end of the lake, Danielle notices a single ibis keeping awkward company with an egret. Both stand slightly turned away from each other, watching over the activity on the water like two introverts at a party.

She scans the lake again; the swans are nowhere to be seen.

As she follows the path around the curve of the lake, a flock of purple swamp hens darts out in front of her—all gangly legs and twitching tails—screeching at each other in their demented way.

'Nasty little buggers,' she mutters aloud to them, recalling the time a few years ago when she witnessed an adult swamp hen abduct a duckling from its nest and ruthlessly peck it to death. The desperate mother duck,

crying and flapping her wings, was prevented from rescuing her baby by a gang of accomplices. Compelled by the horror of it all, Danielle had shouted and thrown stones to try and scare the hens away, but they'd ignored her calls.

The water level in the lakes had been low then, too, she realises. In murdering the duckling, was the swamp hen simply—savagely—trying to ensure the survival of her own young?

The warmth of the morning has brought other walkers out to the trail. As she approaches the second lake, she overtakes a father and his young son who is sitting astride a pedal-less bike. The boy uses his feet to scoot along, picking up some speed before lifting them off the ground. The little bike and he sail along together before their balance begins to falter. The child returns his feet to the ground just as his father, striding after him, catches hold of the bike seat to keep him from falling.

Danielle steps off the path and down to the lake's edge. It is smaller and rounder than the first, but the waterline is just as low. A brace of ducks sun themselves on the far bank, one male standing watch while the others tuck their heads under wings and doze.

This is the lake where Danielle last saw the swans; a cob and pen with their four adolescent cygnets. The adults arrived in the reserve last spring, not long after the last heavy rainfall flooded the lakes and marshlands. Although she had noticed they tended to favour this lake, the couple would move between all three, serenely sailing among the ducks and coots, scooping up weed from below the water. One afternoon, Danielle had spotted the four cygnets: a soft, scooting clutch of grey down tucked close to their mother's wing. She had watched over the family since then, taking regular walks through the wetlands to check on their progress and worry about their collective vulnerability. Each sighting of the family provided her with a moment of joy, and of relief.

Rounding the bend to the third lake—the smallest of the three—Danielle doubts she will find the swans here either, but she still stops at the bank, surveying the exposed, muddy bed and the surrounding marshes.

She hears the approaching chatter of the older couple with the labrador, making their return journey back through the reserve. When she turns to face them, she's surprised by the note of sadness in her voice. 'I was just looking for the swans,' she says.

The couple pause on the path near her. The woman now has the old dog on a lead, and it plonks its great bottom on the ground.

'I think they've all gone,' the man nods to her. 'We were out here yesterday and watched the adults drive the young ones away. It was remarkable! It was as if the parents just decided it was time for the kids to make it on their own. All of a sudden, the adults charged at the cygnets, hissing and flapping their wings until the four of them flew off!'

'I've never seen anything like it,' continues the woman. 'We watched the young birds circle overhead for a minute or two and then they all headed off in that direction.'

Danielle and the couple look southwards, where the estate spreads itself out, street after street.

'And now it looks as if the adults have taken off too. Probably not enough water for them here anymore,' the man shrugs, taking in the drying lake.

Danielle nods her agreement, and the couple wave their farewell. She watches the old lab lift its haunches and wander away with them.

She remains at the lake's edge for a few more moments, feeling a quiet admiration for the cob and pen. Despite all the possible dangers that might lie in wait, they raised four healthy offspring and sent them out into the world to find their own mates, just as nature intended. She thinks of Wren's growing independence and the tightness in her throat and chest returns. The swans understood that the time had come; the cygnets are ready to survive on their own. Danielle knows that one day,

she will have to let go too.

The autumn sun has lifted itself higher and as she steps onto the path again towards home, its warmth on her back is a kind of comfort. She allows her spine to loosen a little as she takes a deep breath in and out, releasing the knot of sorrow in her chest. Ahead of her, a pair of crested pigeons strut about cooing at each other and she laughs at the funny whistling sound they make as they both launch into sudden flight. From across the valley, come the soft calls of the Angus cattle who are making their lumbering way, single file, down the flank of the hill. It is a beautiful day. She and Wren will find some joy in it together, however they decide to spend their time.

The footpath takes her back along the strip of marshland that stretches the entire length of the reserve and a dark shape, a short distance away within the reeds, catches her eye. Danielle pauses for a moment and considers; perhaps one of the swans has returned. She watches for another moment, not certain of what she sees, then walks slowly across the bristle-brown grass. As she approaches, she can see the stretch of a swan's broad wings, but it seems to be sitting awkwardly within the marsh, unmoving.

Stepping closer, Danielle realises with a sudden cry that it is one of the adolescent cygnets but its head, legs and much of its torso are entirely gone. All that remains is the hollowed-out rib cage, the great wings and a scatter of feathers and blood among the reeds. Awash with sudden grief, Danielle reels back, looking away from the savaged remains and up the hill to where her little white house with its red front door, sits shining in the morning sun. In horror, she realises that sometime last night, this young bird returned alone to its wetlands home only to be attacked by an opportunistic fox or errant dog. It happened so near to her and yet she didn't hear, didn't know, could do nothing.

When Danielle pushes open the red door and stumbles into her hallway, she is greeted by the sound of water running in Wren's

bathroom. In her chest, her heart thumps from the exertion of running up the path and from some terrible, unnameable fear. She stands on the threshold of her home, an unsteady sentry guarding everything precious within these walls against the unknowable, unpredictable wildness of the world outside.

Wren steps out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, all pink cheeks and tumbling hair.

'Morning,' she says to her mother, smiling. 'How was your walk?'

As Wren turns towards her bedroom, Danielle glimpses the fine angle of her daughter's shoulder blades where, one day, her wings will unfurl.

LUNA PARK

Danielle Johnstone

There I am, the Danielle of all those decades ago, standing at the end of St Kilda Pier ripping up a letter and throwing the pieces into the blasting wind. She's skinny, pale and yellow-toothed because all she's done in the weeks since he called it off is smoke and mope. This feeble ceremony is supposed to mark a point of closure, but it doesn't, and it won't, until a year from now when she'll meet a guy at a book reading in Carlton and suddenly, she'll be fine again. For a while. I don't really recognise her anymore—or particularly like her much—but I watch her anyway, walking slowly back towards the esplanade. Anvil-grey clouds the size of a ship's hull loom over her and the wind pushes her in the back like a bully, but Danielle keeps her head lowered and her freezing hands balled in tight fists within the shallow pockets of her denim jacket.

A few streets away, an elderly woman—white-haired and grim-faced—steps out of a grocery store and into the full fist of the approaching storm. She staggers for a moment under the force of the blast and the weight of her shopping, before angling her good shoulder into the wind and making her way towards home. I no longer remember her name, so I'll call her Mrs Petrovna after a character from Crime and Punishment. This Mrs Petrovna was Russian too, just like Dostoyevsky's character. And just like the character in the novel, my Mrs Petrovna also made a false accusation. But I'll get to that. For now, let's watch as she walks home, the shopping bags knocking uncomfortably against her stiff knees. Mrs Petrovna's niece, who had once again promised to come by and help with the shopping, had—once again—failed to appear.

Danielle cups a protective hand around the end of the cigarette, flicks the lighter and waits for the Sunday traffic to clear the intersection. Despite ripping up the damn letter she's still thinking about him. Like

the junkies on Fitzroy Street, she's telling herself that she can have one last hit before she gives him up for good. She considers walking past his café on Acland Street and watching him from the safety of the bookshop across the road. She draws on her cigarette again and feels the first spit of rain on her hand and face. Maybe she could go in and have a coffee, and warm up a bit. Maybe they could wish each other well and say a proper goodbye. I listen to her thinking all this and know it's bullshit: if she does go in, he'll look at her with open contempt and tell her to leave him alone, while the waitress he's sleeping with stands at the counter and smirks. But Danielle is developing a talent for self-abasement she'll excel in for years. So, in the time it takes to cross the street, her pathetic need to see him fights against her fear of brutal humiliation and wins.

At the other side of the intersection, she turns right towards Acland Street and straight into the path of Mrs Petrovna, who stands in helpless alarm; a burst plastic bag flapping uselessly in her hand while tins of mushroom soup roll across the footpath.

'Please!'

Dodging the spilled shopping, Danielle continues on a step or two before registering the woman's pleading call. Having decided on a fool's errand, the urgent need to see it through compels her forward.

'Please!' Mrs Petrovna repeats and holds up the split plastic bag like a white flag of surrender.

Danielle pauses to look at the woman, the scattered shopping and the thunderous sky above them. I hear the impatience in her sigh, feel the power of her reluctance to help.

'I'm in a bit of a hurry,' she says, scooping up the tins and clutching them to her chest. 'Where do you live?'

By the time they reach the front door of Mrs Petrova's flat, the weather has found its purpose, and the two women are wind-blown and wet. The older woman bustles the younger into a cluttered sitting room. 'Come in, please. I will make tea.'

Danielle sets down the tinned soup on the corner of a narrow dining

table next to a pile of newspapers that sit like sedimentary rock, each layer telling the history of a day, and looks about the room. On the wall above the TV hangs a small bronze crucifix with three horizontal crossbeams and next to it, a black-and-white photograph of a young man and woman gazing sternly out from the timber frame.

'My husband.'

Danielle turns and recognises the same expression within the lined features of the elderly woman.

'Ivan Petrovna,' she continues. 'He passed long time ago.'

Mrs Petrovna offers Danielle a mug of dark tea and gestures to a pair of floral armchairs, their head and armrests covered with yellowing doilies. The old woman sits down heavily and closes her eyes for a moment. Danielle perches herself on the edge of the seat like a bird ready to take flight. She examines the mug in her hand, notices its chipped and stained rim, the oily film on the surface of the tea. Outside, the rain is thrashing at the windows and Danielle knows there is no choice but to wait it out here with this old duck until the storm passes. By then it will be too late to go to the café; the shift will have changed, and he'll be gone—no doubt with the waitress in tow—off to his flat and his bed. From this distance, I can do nothing to prevent her self-pity except nudge her shoulder and point towards Mrs Petrovna who is waiting for Danielle's response.

'I'm sorry. What did you say?'

'You are a student? Yes?'

'Yeah, sort of,' Danielle replies. 'I work in an office but I'm also finishing my teaching degree, although I don't think I really want to be ...'

'Ah! Teacher! I was teacher!' Mrs Petrovna claps her hands. 'Please, I show you ...'

With a grunt and a sigh, the old lady lifts herself out of the armchair and hobbles over to a dark timber sideboard. When she returns, she is holding out a small velvet-lined box, worn with age and handling,

within which lies a silver medallion bearing the symbols of a book and a flaming torch.

'Narodny Tchitel CCCP,' says Mrs Petrovna, running her finger over the medallion's inscription. 'People's Teacher of the USSR. Please, you look'.

Danielle reluctantly takes the medal and holds it like it's some kind of poison chalice and she's at risk of catching a vocation. I arch an eyebrow knowing it will be years before she gets her shit together enough to be able to teach anyone anything. She offers a nod and a half-smile and hands the medal back to the old woman.

While the rain continues to beat against the windows, the two women chat politely. Mrs Petrovna asks Danielle questions about her work, her studies and her family who live half a day's drive away. She asks about her friends who live on the other side of the city and if she has a boyfriend.

'Not anymore,' she replies gazing at her cold tea, while I roll my eyes. 'When did you come to Australia?'

Mrs Petrovna tells Danielle about her husband who died too young, the children they were never able to have and the niece who came to Australia and brought Mrs Petrovna with her. They lived together for a time, but the niece eventually married a man who had children of his own, so Mrs Petrovna moved into this flat. Her niece comes by sometimes to help with housework, but she is very busy.

'I like clean,' Mrs Petrovna says with a sigh, 'but it is very difficult for me.'

Danielle looks more closely at the room and notices the grimy carpet, the tea stains and mouldering biscuit crumbs on the side table, the patina of dust over everything. She thinks of the hovel she's allowed her own tiny flat to become and feels a kind of shame.

'I could come and help you,' she offers, surprising herself and the old woman, but not me.

By the time the two women bid each other goodbye, they have agreed

Danielle will clean for Mrs Petrovna once a week. Overhead, the storm clouds have started to clear.

Having rashly committed to helping the old woman, Danielle realises the burden of the task when she dutifully returns to the flat and spends a few half-hearted hours vacuuming the carpets and mopping the floors, while Mrs Petrovna sits at her little dining table reading the newspaper through a magnifying glass the size of a plate.

I silently follow Danielle around the flat, sensing nausea rise in her as she scrubs the shit from the toilet and the spit from the bathroom sink. She is embarrassed by the old woman's decay and this revulsion and pity quickly transforms into a resolute decision to never return. Why should she? The old duck has family to help her. Danielle has friends to be with, cafes to hang out in, streets to wander, cigarettes to smoke … Instead, she is on her knees in the kitchen of some stranger, wiping away years of oily grot from cupboard doors.

She pauses for a moment, looks down at the filthy cleaning cloth in her hand. Danielle thinks of him out there somewhere, very happily living his life without her in it. The end, when it came, was just a phone call. She was busy cooking them a roast dinner and expecting him to arrive any minute. Instead, he called her from work—in the background she could hear the white noise of effortlessly cool people talking and laughing—to say he'd changed his mind about dinner and about her. Weeks and weeks later, the leg of lamb, cold and charcoal black, is still sitting in her oven, festering.

'Ogo! Neveroyatno, Danielle! So clean!' Mrs Petrovna stands at the kitchen door, clapping her gnarled hands in delight.

Danielle stumbles to her feet, swallows away the tightness in her throat and blinks away the heat behind her eyes, while Mrs Petrovna runs her hands over the shining surface of the countertop.

'Voth eto da,' she whispers. 'My goodness.'

Mrs Petrova takes Danielle's hand in her own and looks up at the

younger woman with misty eyes.

'Thank you, Danielle. I will tell my niece you are good girl.'

Danielle nods and offers the old woman a warm smile in return. They hold each other's hands for another moment, then Mrs Petrovna turns to the sink to make tea. As she fills the kettle with water, I feel Danielle change her mind and know that she will come back.

'Why you do not eat?' Mrs Petrova asks the following week, pushing the plate of sweet biscuits toward Danielle.

'I'm not hungry,' she shrugs and tells herself that food is a reward she doesn't deserve. Last night she lay in bed and placed her fingers on the sharp peaks of her pelvic bones and felt the way they rise from the valley of her stomach. 'I had a big breakfast.'

Mrs Petrova shakes her head at Danielle with a sternness that feels like a telling-off and hobbles to the kitchen.

'Take,' the old woman orders, holding out a plastic container she's just removed from the freezer. 'Soup. Rassolnik. My niece make it for me but I not like it so much; gives me the gas. You can eat for dinner.'

Danielle accepts the frozen meal and the kindness that comes with it while fighting the urge to cry. Later, in her little flat, I'll lean against the kitchen bench and watch her heat the soup on the stove. She'll swallow each salty-sour spoonful, and its warmth will fill up her hollowness. Afterwards, she'll fight the desperate urge to slink up Acland Street and stand shivering in the darkened doorway of the bookshop to watch him at work. Instead, she'll clean her kitchen and remove the stinking lamb from the oven, then put herself to bed and sleep properly for the first time in weeks.

The next time she visits Mrs Petrovna, Danielle takes a wedge of Russian Honey Cake she buys at Café Scheherazade and the two women eat together after the cleaning is done.

'My husband was a good man, but weak.' Mrs Petrovna sighs, licking

cake crumbs from her fingers. 'I catch him once with a girl. I was very angry. Very jealous! I make him promise, no more! But I think he still see girls. Ya prosto ne khotela smotret pravde vieu glaza. I didn't want to know truth,' she shrugs. 'Then he dies. Heart attack in bath. He cook like fish!'

Danielle sits in awkward silence, moving the cake around her plate, while the old woman twists a handkerchief in her fingers and looks across the room to the photograph on the wall.

'This boy,' Mrs Petrovna says, turning back to Danielle, 'What he do to you?'

I take a breath and wait for her to answer. I already know the excuses she wants to make for him, the delusional reasons she wants to give about why it all went wrong, and the need for her to keep believing it all meant something.

'He didn't love me,' Danielle replies, and I see the truth settle over her like a shadow.

Mrs Petrovna shakes her head. 'Svoloch!' she shouts, slapping her palm on the table 'Bastard! I hope he cook like fish too!'

Danielle and Mrs Petrovna look at each other in amused surprise then for a few moments both women laugh together in the face of their heartbreak.

When it's time to go, Danielle asks to borrow Mrs Petrovna's ancient vacuum cleaner. Tomorrow, I'll watch through the window of her little flat as Danielle diligently cleans the carpets, mops the floors, scrubs her shit from the toilet and her spit from the bathroom sink. When it's all done and her home is wiped clean of shame and self-pity, Danielle will make herself a proper meal and hardly think of him at all. But I know it won't last.

On the day Danielle visits Mrs Petrovna for the last time, the sky is the colour of a bruise. We walk there together; she with a box of cake in her hands, me with the knowledge of what is to come. When Danielle

knocks on Mrs Petrovna's door, the old woman keeps the security chain attached and speaks through the gap between the door and frame.

'You must not come anymore! You are not a good girl!'

Danielle frowns and steps back. 'What? Mrs Petrovna! What are you talking about?'

'My vacuum cleaner! You steal my vacuum cleaner! I lend you good vacuum cleaner, expensive vacuum cleaner and you bring me back different one! Not mine! My niece say so!'

I'm watching now as the accusation slaps Danielle across the face and she recoils, shaking her head in disbelief. 'That doesn't make any sense … Why would I … I've never stolen … I gave you back … Please, Mrs Petrovna, there must be some mistake!'

The old woman looks at the skinny girl and for a moment seems to reconsider. But, behind the door comes another woman's voice speaking to Mrs Petrova in a tone that sounds like an order. 'Tetya, te dolzhna skazat ey, chtoby ona ukhodila. Ona chuzhaya!'

Mrs Petrovna sighs and shakes her head. 'I sorry, Danielle. You cannot come again.' Then she quietly closes the door.

Danielle steps back, her heart thumping in her chest and her face hot with the shame of rejection. She looks at the box of cake in her hands and offers it to the closed door.

'Mrs Petrovna! Please!'

From Port Philip Bay, the southerly wind comes sweeping in, carrying the icy vestiges of its Antarctic home.

'Come on,' I say to her, 'let's go.'

The arrival of the wind compels the suburb's residents into hurried retreat. On Fitzroy Street, outside diners gather up plates and wine glasses and scuttle through doors held open by waiters looking skyward. Along the esplanade, the dog walkers jog and the joggers run.

At Luna Park, Danielle dumps the cake box into a bin, lights a cigarette and watches irritable parents arguing with pleading children over the urgent need to get home before the rain sets in. Mr Moon, with

his gaping grin, meets her gaze and I know she thinks he's laughing at the ridiculous tragedy of a confused old lady and a stupid girl. But he isn't, and neither am I. Dostoyevsky's Mrs Petrovna realised her mistake and made amends, but my Mrs Petrovna didn't, and won't, so it will linger.

Tonight, Danielle will drink two bottles of red wine and smoke a packet of cigarettes before vomiting it all up and passing out on her bedroom floor. In a week, she'll turn up at his place in the middle of the night and beg him to take her back, but of course he won't. In a month, she'll be sitting in a doctor's office crying into a sodden tissue and asking for help.

She can't see me standing there with her. She doesn't yet know all the things that I know now and how, one day, this miserable year will just be words on a page. As she walks away to her little flat, I think that perhaps I shouldn't be so hard on this lost and messy girl, who eventually found her slow and winding way to me.

BABY ANIMALS

Kimberley Knight

Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.

Varuna, early May. I sit at my desk; freshly showered, morning coffee in hand, writing to-dos to be done. I glance at the ABC headlines: 'Students at Yarra Valley Grammar suspended over offensive ranking of female students'. Posted to Discord, the students' list invites others to rank their classmates along a continuum: *wifeys* to *unrapable*. The list is a drop in the ocean of misogynistic attitudes, ideologies of control, patriarchal ideas of girls and women that permeate the everyday Australian vernacular. The language used by these boys—young men—is at the very least disturbing. At worst, it is threatening, possibly criminal.

I scoot my chair further in, try to write about my Polish miner and Grice's maxims … but this list! My thoughts drift back to school afternoons, bag dumped and shoulders slumped at the kitchen table, as I grumbled to Nan and mum about name-calling. *Sticks and Stones!* they'd offer-up with a grin and pat on the back. It became ingrained: don't whine, be grateful it's not physical—that's the *bad* stuff—getting upset over words is futile.

But ideas like this start with language, from the moment we begin, as infants, to understand and use it. We acquire language skills in parallel to our evolving understanding of the world. We use language to describe what we see, what we understand, and how we feel about it.

It left me wondering: if language underpins, and exposes, our attitudes, can we use language and its contexts to change them?

Rank: Wifeys

The angel in the house.

I'm at dinner and the women at the table are talking about their children, ad nauseum. I think of work and their extended conversations about birth and babies, and work-time morning teas for expectant mums. I do the same thing each time, make anime eyes and adoring sounds while I cradle a phone in cupped hands as mum swipes the screen and narrates. It's a learnt pattern, a behaviour blueprint for these uncomfortable moments. As a clinician and researcher, I care about children and young people: I work with, and for, them. But we forget not all women are mothers—not all can be, not all want to be. Whenever I'm asked if I have children, I find myself frowning and immediately confessing why I don't; the reason is personal but proffered as excuse, lest they think I'm shirking some social duty. I rebuke myself later. I don't owe an explanation, but the reaction is automatic, influenced by ideas of motherhood formed since infancy.

Monkey see, monkey do.

Some things are innate—like the fight, flight, freeze responses. We thought grammar was innate too. Until fairly recently, our ability to understand and use grammar was attributed to something in our human brain that had been there since birth. It was thought of as some buried mathematical code that helps us string words together into careful grammatical lines, because we can formulate utterances quickly and with such apparent ease. Language, not just communication, is, after all, a skill that separates us from every other animal.

Rank: Cuties

It takes a village.

Baby is babbling. Tiny pink lips gargle *goos* and *gahs*, then press together mouthing *ma-ma-mas* and *pa-pa-pas*. Her soft tongue trills raspberries, warbles vowels, then tender, glossy eyes dart towards mum's voice, preferring sounds in native speech. Mum's funny, high-pitched sentences stretch out into easily digested chunks, her face close to bubs.

Baby's chubby arms, fingers wiggling, point at things. Mum looks then names them. This happens with dads too, but it's still mostly mums.

Memory is busy squirreling away sounds, building little inventories of babbles and repetitions, and, eventually, bub's first words. The eyes that swing to the speaker, the noticing and pointing, that's attention at work.

Rank: Mid

How did it feel doing it with Ben?

Several boys think it will be fun(ny) to write in one of my primary school notebooks. Big letters fill several pages with the same sentence, over and over: starting with *how did it feel doing it with*, and ending with a male classmate's name. It's not hard for the principal to identify the jokesters—their names the only ones left out. They admit guilt, reluctantly, grumble sorry in the principal's office. The principal says he'll place the notebook on file.

I called the school, recently, to ask if they keep files that long. They don't. I probably could have guessed the answer but had to check. The document's perished, but the memory hasn't.

Boys will be boys.

Infants use memory and attention to seek out patterns. Patterns in words and grammar are observed and stored in the same way as patterns for behaviour, interactions, and procedures, collectively called schemas. The patterns we learn for how to behave and to treat, to see people, and patterns for language use, are not innate, they're learnt. Repetition is key. Babies, infants, children, are bombarded with signals. Hear something enough and it's reinforced.

We don't learn words individually, but in context—a wheel is on a car, but on its own, it's just a disc. Words are used in sentences, and it's thought that these grammatical strings help us learn the words, while the word order patterns help us to learn grammar. In the middle is where

we build meaning, associate it with items, events and actions—names and labels—in the world.

How did it feel doing it with …
How did it feel doing it with …
How did it feel doing it with …
How did it feel doing it with …
How did it feel doing it with …

['doing it', in context, as euphemism for having sex with any noun or name]

Euphemisms are ways to name the un-nameable, usually the shameful and taboo labels, sometimes to undermine and downplay the seriousness of a matter, like, for example, swapping out 'frightened' with 'uncomfortable'.

Rank: Object

Every good boy deserves fun. Good boys deserve fun always.

We categorise words in many ways. Grammatical function is one. Categories like agent, action, object help link words to both their meanings and grammatical functions. Agents do the action, while objects are acted on. In context, some nouns can be agents and objects, but some can only be objects. The boy can eat the apple, but the apple can't eat the boy. A lesson learnt from exposure. Context is important.

She looks too pretty; try to catch her.

November, Year 11. My all-girl high school is hosting a dance—the local all-boys' school is invited. The night is in full swing when I sneak off-grounds with a friend for a cigarette. Coming back, we spy our classmate wobbling across the street before being helped up the curb and away from the school by one of the boys.

We catch up to them. She is swaying, her glitter skirt flickering under the streetlight, her hand slapped against the pole of a green and white tin sign: 'Neighbourhood watch area'. We argue with the boy while our

drunk friend slumps wordlessly. He shoo-es us away like the pecking, enraged gaggle come to get the goose who'd gone astray, and grabs her arm, drags his quarry further up the road. We follow.

I still remember this boy—one I recognised from primary school, a man now, with a first name I still know. Did he recognise me, then? Would he now? I wonder how he would have felt, what he would have done, if the situation were reversed and this happened to one of his friends. If he'd seen one of his school mates, drunk, head off up a dark road, alone with a not-so-drunk person, a guy?

Would he have approached, said that his friend was clearly drunk and might not be making great decisions right now? To maybe reschedule when they're both sober? In this scenario, I believe he'd approach his friend, but I doubt that's how events would unfold, and I shudder to think what might happen instead.

A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

Some of us nouns have more agency than others.

Rank: Get Out

Friend-zoned. Bunny boiler.

I'm twenty-two, on a blind date. He is a friend of a friend, lives in Newtown and cooks dinner at his place. We eat carbonara penne on the sofa in his terrace, sip our pinot gris and talk. I'm not feeling it. My friend texts us both, asks if we are up for a drink at the Townie. We walk up, my date trying to grab my hand, me politely moving it away, until I am forced to cross my arms, fake a shiver and note how cool it is out. I arrive at the pub, thanking God he hadn't thrown an arm around me because of my comment.

We play pool, do shots. He keeps asking if I'll go home with him. I say no, thank him for a nice meal and tell him I'm not interested. For the next hour, he follows me around, asks me again and again. He

speaks gently, like his offer is a favour, his hitched eyebrow implying I don't know what is good for me. I tell my friend I don't like him—she laughs and says that he'd just asked her if I was in some Catholic cult (knowing full well she'd repeat that to me). My friend apologises; admits he could be a little creepy but hadn't realised he was that bad. She'd felt sorry for him.

My friend and I decide to kick on elsewhere so head outside and hail a taxi. He follows us to the curb, the same self-satisfied smirk on his face, still asking, still trying to bully me back to his place. I slam the cab door, smile, give him the finger. He shakes his head.

The birds and the bees.

A man comments on a post that he is afraid to be alone with a woman, afraid he'll later be accused of rape. I don't get the fear, but I get the confusion. From infancy, you're exposed to poor patterns of behaviour, attitudes, by your family, friends, and school, enshrined in patterns of language, entrenched through repeated exposure at work, clubs, on TV, in social media cocoons … what do you do when you're told it's all wrong? How do you know what respect looks like when you categorise *woman* and *girl* as object, not agent?

Social media not only perpetuates misogyny but galvanises factions and individuals into legions of boys and men who hate. Women on social media share their stories, but cop vitriol. It's always men reluctant to hold other men accountable for their actions, instead shooting the messengers who are powerless to escape, to stop it.

Rank: Unrapable

The elephant in the room.

According to Dictionary.com, the term *unrapable* means 'unable to be raped, not suitable for raping,' a definition devoid of human agency; defined as though it could be applied to any ubiquitous process, such as apple picking or construction. It's a word some might argue should

be erased altogether.

We use 'animal' to describe abominable behaviour. Rape is considered the most animal of behaviours, yet the act of rape is one that is perpetuated exclusively by people. It's interesting that language, something that makes us so uniquely human, can undermine what it is we think elevates us above other animals.

Is it a crime to use the word unrapable? At this point we don't know, and neither do the police. That we find the word's use alarming enough to ask the question says a lot. It's alarming that these discussions, the lines that we draw between criminal and lawful, appropriate and inappropriate, agent and object in this space are still so hazy to so many—we don't need a #murderiswrong movement because this concept is so widely understood, even to children.

Perhaps the sparse, matter of fact definition of unrapable might offer something to reframe. Nobody is rapable because no one is 'suitable for raping'—we are all unrapable. Grammatically, it's not a noun; it simultaneously eschews nounness yet embodies a label. It's descriptive, is an adjective, is a subject complement, is an implied verb, is a necessary condition of being human.

Language needs repetition to be learned, and for the meaning of a word to stick requires hearing it in a grammatical context. And if ideas are framed in harmless and trivial language, such as idioms, in euphemistic ways, then they are easily committed to memory.

Unrapable is unrapable is unrapable is unrapable.

Remember, repetition is key.

*

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FORECAST

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer

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IN THE ABSENCE OF AUSTRALASIAN SPECIES

Michael Leach

i.
Christmas Island's forests…
no sign
of forest skinks

ii.
thylacine sign
by the bare enclosure—
he asks *Where is it?*

iii.
Rhantus papuanus—
words for beetles
never nicknamed

iv.
Aurora Cave—
the sole subfossil
of an Aurora frog

v.
roadside—
youths wrap arms round
the moa statue

SELF-PORTRAIT FROM THE INSIDE OF A CT SCAN

Matthew Lee

Since when have you
looked so tired—
eyelids like cowrie shells
left to soak overnight in a tub of
normal saline. A small
window into the soul, more
pitiful than enigmatic. I
have practised expressions
in the mirror but you look different
from the underside
of a CT machine. You lie
there, letting the mechanical voice
tell your body what to do, while
the silent radiation gnaws away
at what health is left
of your body. Yes—
you have looked healthier.

REVENANT

Wes Lee

i.

You rise from the chair smoking a cigarette. *You are always smoking a cigarette.* There is a certain gesture I catch before the mirror. A hair toss. And each time I know it is you alive through me. As I am sometimes surprised by your hands at a certain angle pushing through the veil.

ii.

And I shall be as ash. Slip into the mouth as you breathe. You will taste me as a thought, unaware of where it came. I will be the wind. Inside a poem.

iii.

The fear we have of owning anything that cannot be picked up and put in the back of a van. A house with its door shut is like a coffin lid. When you say you own a house it is like saying you own your grave.

iv.

I'm wearing a sweater in summer. Protecting my internal organs like an infant, or a greyhound with its thin, precise bones draped in a knitted woollen coat. People say *I'm so cold* near death. The shiver, a rehearsal.

v.

I didn't know what had happened in the hours in bed. Suddenly I heard you wake. I remember curling in the dark after watching a TV episode and time seemed to trick. Bringing a strange thin moment of comprehension.

APERTURE

Travis Lucas

6x4s
you could slice a tomato on
just dropping

two halves thump
starburst of seeds borne to ceiling
wobbling

collages slouch bending hooks
bowling balls 'top the stairs
menacing as a mounted buck
blunt with silent laughter

strangers smiling

IN STILLNESS

Robert Maddox-Harle

the relentless wandering eye
penetrated my secret thoughts
like the silent stealth of a cat,
and then the quiet descended
the stillness carried me away
a glimpse of darkness
silence .... calm.

Shadows danced rhythmically
as the night birds watched silently
charcoal ... black
dissolved into grey,
the utter loneliness of the night penetrating
caressing my melancholia with apprehension
I gazed into my own shadow
a tangled shifting puzzle of doubt.

Descend to the mirrored water
a voice full of confidence
commanded me relentlessly,
the dense mangroves danced in the reflection,
the night birds sang softly,
overlapping circles of tidal-flow
caressed the mangrove roots.

All was still
all was as it should be,
I glimpsed the key to eternity.

THREE HAIKU

Cendrine Marrouat

Midwinter—
how gentle the voices
under the lights.

Long day—
shadows mottle the ground
yet the wind blows.

In the bird song
one last hot evening
briefly.

NOTHING WILL COME OF NOTHING

Tenille McDermott

Chaos. A strangled cry. Urgent entreaties to *push, push*. Sweating brow, panting breath, gritted teeth.

A squall breaks the air; the shock of newness.

'It's a girl!'

Three times. Three times, Saul gazes in wonder at a small, slimy creature, a screaming sack of fluid and flesh, and thinks, *this is mine*.

He is a chronically uninvolved parent. He still plays favourites. It is an open secret that he loves his youngest daughter best.

Georgia is another parent's dream: quiet, obedient, studious. A stock-standard eldest child; dull. If it weren't for her intellect, Saul would wonder if she were even his.

Sometimes he wonders anyway. He nurtures a bitter fantasy that his wife has cheated on him, compares blood types with his children suspiciously, searches surreptitiously for signs of his paternity. He never quite settles the question.

Georgia never goes to parties, consumes books like a fire, and has an irritatingly over-developed sense of justice. He loves her, of course; but he is annoyed by her self-righteousness, her quiet determination to somehow save the world—as if it needed, or wanted, saving. Her lack of ambition, her plainness. Still, she is a dutiful child and grows into a responsible adult. She calls every week, never asks for money, and militantly avoids taking sides when Saul and his wife inevitably divorce.

He wishes, sometimes, that his children had been boys.

The diagnosis is shockingly sudden and painfully slow. Three weeks from first appointment to beginning treatment, but three laborious weeks of blood tests, biopsies, scans, sleeplessness, fear. He sees four different specialists and is given three potential diagnoses before the death sentence is handed down.

It appears the cancer metamorphosing his cells is terminal, but unhurried. Saul doesn't know whether to be grateful or furious.

There are options, of course, for extending his life. Saul takes whatever is offered. He is not ready to die. He will never be ready to die.

It is Georgia who drives him to his appointments, cooks his meals, takes notes as the pharmacist rattles off instructions for his treatment regimes. She is the only one of his three daughters who still lives in their hometown. Saul's parents are long dead, he is on the barest of speaking terms with his brother, and his ex-wife has long since moved on to another man—not that he would accept her help anyway. There is only Georgia.

He can no longer eat his favourite foods. No more deli meats, soft cheeses, seafood; no more slicing into a barely cooked steak, haemoglobin seeping from tender pink flesh. He must now, as Georgia jokes, eat like a pregnant woman. Saul has always been slightly disgusted by pregnancy, fearful of it. He finds something visceral, something animal in gestation and birth. The comparison turns his stomach. But everything turns his stomach these days.

The treatment makes him violently ill. It robs his sense of taste into the bargain. For a few days every cycle, his body is wracked by cramps, constipation, sweats and chills; he cannot stop vomiting. The ever-growing pharmacy on his kitchen bench does little to help.

Georgia wields gloves and paper towels, mops his floor and his brow, washes his sheets. Eventually, she moves in. Her quiet efficiency pervades the house. Saul is sick to death of her, but he greedily consumes her time, her attention.

He is terrified of being left alone.

Rhiannon is a study in contrast to her elder sister, brash and argumentative where Georgia is quiet and composed. She is self-assured and demanding from birth, tearing her way into the world with an immediate sense of what she wants and when she wants it. Saul admires her drive and finds her brusqueness comforting. He always knows what she expects of him.

His second daughter is, by all quantitative measures, successful. A software engineering degree, a well-paying position at a big corporation and a savvy investment portfolio mean that Rhiannon will never want for comfort or security and that, by extension, neither will Saul. Rhiannon has her flaws, but a lack of filial duty is not one of them. Before the illness, she would fly home once every six months, treat her father to a whirlwind of upscale restaurants and boutique bars, and then vanish. Now, Rhiannon spends her brief visits harassing medical staff and berating Georgia. She assuages any guilt for her absence by paying a small fortune to a private treatment centre to ensure Saul has the very best in medical care, defending him against the indignity of the public hospital. He considers it a fair trade.

He has never liked needing people. But he has always taken what he can.

The nurses dote on him. They all know intimate details about his treatment and his life—now much the same thing—and give him cheeky nicknames. He tells embellished stories about his career, sporting prowess, and boyhood indiscretions.

He loses weight. He keeps losing weight. He loses hair. He loses erections.

His skin becomes papery and dry, soaking up the expensive moisturiser Georgia keeps well-stocked in his bathroom cupboard. Everything tastes awful. He has become a fussy and belligerent child,

with a temper to match. Rhiannon, on a three-day visit, regards him with disdain when he takes a bite of scrambled eggs and then spits it back out with a disgusted interjection. Saliva trails from his mouth to the plate of pale, yellow mush.

'Jesus, Dad,' she says. 'Grow up.'

He clings to resentment with relish. It burns comfortingly. He will never let it go.

Claire, the youngest. The unlooked-for, unexpected love of his life.

She is bright, vivacious and mocking. Her laugh never fails to make him smile, and her wit never fails to cut him down. She is flighty, vehement, a holder of grudges. She leaves a trail of ruin in her wake.

She left, of course, as soon as she could. Finished school, saved for a year, and then took off, music blaring, in a second-hand car with a boot full of clothes and muesli bars.

Claire collects people, enthrals them and adores them. She fosters kittens, gives her money to homeless men on street corners, and drinks too much. She is everything Saul disdains and yet remains his favourite, his darling, his baby girl.

It is Claire who Saul calls when he is sad, sick or overwhelmed. She listens as he complains about the hospital food, the nurse in the emergency department, and how few visitors he gets. Claire makes all the right comforting sounds and exclamations of pity. She is an endless well of empathy. Even more than Georgia, she knows the intimate details of his night sweats, his constipation, his haemorrhoids. Every fluctuation of temperature is recorded and analysed, as is every bowel movement. Doctors' appointments are dissected with a surgeon's precision.

Saul does not ask about Claire's life. His universe has shrunk to the limits of his skin. He is a meat-sack, a vessel for infected organs and contaminated blood. His vomit, urine and excrement have become toxic. The chemicals burning deep into his marrow are a miracle and

a condemnation.

His memory decays. Words slip from his grasp one by one, leaving him gritting his teeth in frustration. He sleeps constantly but has horrific nightmares. His teeth shift in his jaw. He is always cold. He is fear and rage and deep, deep sadness. Georgia does not hug him. He yearns for human touch.

It is only Claire who hears Saul cry. In the small hours of the morning, when he is at his worst, he calls, his trembling fingers lighting up the keys on his smartphone screen. She always answers.

He is bravado plastered crookedly over terror.

The hospitalisations become more frequent, their durations longer. It's almost routine now; a high temperature, or bleeding, or dehydration, or pain. The ambulance. The emergency department. The wait for a bed. Georgia explaining his condition, his treatment regime, his medication to half a dozen exhausted nurses with no oncology training. The face masks. The gloves. The flimsy plastic aprons. The jargon he sometimes understands, sometimes does not. The blood tests. The x-rays. The urine tests. The sleeplessness. Injections that make his bones scream deep within him. The empty days of daytime TV. The hourly observations. The terrible food. The IV infusions and blood transfusions. The smuggled sweets. The endless scrolling on Facebook.

He wants it to be over. He dreads it ever ending.

Saul calls Claire, again and again. He yearns for reassurance, warmth, company. He cries in pain and in fear.

The hospital room is dark. Saul squints at the brightness of his phone. The small digits in the corner read 3:06AM. He thumbs through his contacts, selects CLAIRE. It is a familiar exercise. He puts the phone to his ear.

It rings twelve times. Claire's bright voice sounds through the

speaker.

'Hi! You've reached Claire's phone. I'm not available, so please—'

Saul pulls the phone away from his ear, looks at it dubiously as Claire's voice message concludes. He hangs up. He calls her again.

Three rings this time, then voicemail.

She's not answering.

Sudden fury grips Saul. He slams the phone on his bedside table.

'Fuck!' he hisses.

He stares at the ceiling for the rest of the night.

It is ten in the morning before Claire calls him back. His anger has dissipated into weariness.

'Hi, love,' he says.

'Sorry I missed your calls,' she says. 'I was asleep.' She is lying. He knows she is lying. 'How are you?'

'I didn't have a good night. Only slept about four hours. And that bitch nurse is back again.'

'Dad! You can't talk about people like that.'

'She hates me,' Saul says plaintively. He's whining, he knows it, but continues in earnest. 'She's got it out for me, the stupid cunt.'

Claire sighs. 'What did you have for breakfast?'

'Porridge. Tasted like shit.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

Silence. Saul can't even hear Claire's breathing.

'How are you feeling?' she asks finally.

'Tired. Sick of this shit.'

'I know, Dad. I'm sorry. I wish you didn't have to go through it.'

'Not as much as I do.'

More silence.

'Look, Dad, I have to go. But I'll call you later, okay?'

Saul hangs up resentfully. *Selfish little bitch*.

Saul calls more. Claire answers less. He cultivates a righteous indignance, nurturing it carefully, waiting for it to bloom.

It is a Wednesday. Saul is home. Home, after six excruciating days in a medical ward with flowered curtains straight out of the nineteen-eighties.

Georgia settles him on the couch, brings him water. She leaves to buy groceries. The TV remote is close by, but he ignores it in favour of scrolling through endless social media feeds. Claire's face shows up repeatedly: at a bar, in a park, at home.

Saul shares an inspirational quote about hidden struggles and staying strong. He calls Claire. She does not pick up.

He's twenty minutes into a bland action movie when the phone vibrates. He answers.

'Hey,' he says.

'Hey, Dad,' Claire says. She sounds unusually subdued. 'You're back home now?'

'Yeah. Thank fuck. Glad to be out.'

'I bet.'

'Got a—'

'Look, Dad,' she says. 'I'm sorry. I need to—I have to talk to you.'

His stomach lurches. He is abrupt in his reply.

'What?'

'I have to talk to you,' she repeats. 'About—'

'Jesus Christ, are you pregnant or something?'

'No! Dad. Oh my god.' Down the line, a deep breath. 'No. It's … You can't—Dad. You can't keep calling me like this. All the time. At stupid times. It's—it's not fair. It's not fair to me.'

Saul heats with embarrassment; waits. Claire is equally silent.

'Sorry,' he says. 'Sorry to be such a fucking inconvenience to you. Sorry that my terminal cancer is such a fucking burden.'

'That's not what I mean! Jesus. But I'm not your—I don't know, your therapist, or whatever. It's not fair—'

'Well, life's not fucking fair, is it. You don't know what I've been through—'

'Jesus, Dad! You got dealt a shit hand. I know. I *know*.' Claire's voice is thick, clogged. 'It's awful. It's fucking scary and awful and completely unfair.' Her breathing is heavy. 'But—we all have lives too. You'd know about them, if you weren't so—so fucking self-absorbed.'

'How dare you,' Saul says. 'How fucking dare you make this about you.'

'It's not,' she says. 'It's about you. It's *always* about you.'

'Don't you fucking talk to me like that! I'm your fucking father!'

'And I love you. But you don't give two shits about anyone but yourself.'

'Fine!' Saul seethes, all fury. 'Fine. I won't fucking call you. I won't fucking call you. And you'd better not fucking call me either. I don't ever want to fucking talk to you again.'

'Well fuck you too,' Claire says.

Saul hangs up.

He does not call Claire again. She does not call him.

Saul's health plateaus. He loses more weight. He has taken to wearing beanies, even in summer. His body no longer feels like it belongs to him.

Hospital, again. Stark walls, a view of concrete, those same faded curtains. A room that feels somehow outside of time. He clings to the wretched illusion.

The steady beep of a monitor. The comforting hum of the IV machine. Rustling steps. Saul teeters on the edge of consciousness.

A hand, holding his.

His breath, rattling in and out.

This is mine, he thinks.

Everything is quiet.

FOR THE WIN

Lindsay McLeod

I only wear this mask
so Death won't find me
in the crowd yet
because I've got
a lot of money
riding
on a roughy
in race eight.

STILL LIFE

Frances Milat

Years ago, on a visit to an art gallery, I came across an oil painting so beautiful that even the memory of it fills me with joy. The painting was of a basket of pomegranates, their red seeds bursting through yellow skin, next to an urn filled with boughs laden with the ripened fruit. The pomegranates appeared alive, springing out of the canvas and spilling over a kitchen tablecloth. Though there was no window in the painting, the plump cheeks of the pomegranates were positioned as though they were turning towards golden light that flooded one side of the canvas. A single pomegranate, halved and cracked open, lay at the table's edge. I could taste the sun in the tiny seeds and feel the warmth of the light soaking the room.

For years, I searched for pomegranates, the type that Margaret Olley painted and the ones that grew on unkempt trees in suburban gardens. For me, pomegranates contained a type of magic, an eternal summer wrapped in a thick fibrous shell, longing to break free. It wasn't until a trip to Brisbane with my daughter decades later that I saw Olley's pomegranates again, this time on a poster outside the Gallery of Modern Art. My daughter Mia, a teen at the time, immediately recognised Olley's crimson and gold colour palette. She smiled and clutched my arm, pulling me towards the gallery. It had been months since my daughter had done that—smile or reached for my arm. Dark circles, like smouldering charcoal, had recently hollowed out the space around her eyes. She barely spoke and often stared into the distance. I had asked her what was going on. After a series of school meetings and medical appointments, we were still in the dark.

We paused at the entrance to the gallery. Mia drew in a deep breath, the kind that fills your lungs after being pulled back from the brink.

Columns of light poked through high-set windows and descended around us like shards of armour. The foyer of the gallery was pulsating. Crowds were flocking to two exhibitions—Margaret Olley's *A Generous Life* and *Quilty*, a Ben Quilty retrospective, featuring work from his time as the official war artist in Afghanistan. My daughter and I stood in the hallway at their intersect, like compass needles, waiting to be guided. I was pulled towards Olley's work. My daughter started with Quilty. I decided to follow.

The exhibition hall was constructed with mammoth proportions. Slate grey walls encased the room, and around us, huge canvases were hung with a precision that was both confronting and consuming. Naked, solitary faces and bodies jutted from pitch-black canvases. Thick, white paint outlined fatigued bodies, with eyes peering downwards and upwards but never making eye contact. Quilty's soldiers lined one of the gallery walls, their postures hypervigilant and wary. Each soldier was given their own frame, both a blessing and a curse, for who wants to be singled out for their misery? One soldier lay on his back, an arm overhead: his head, like his thoughts, lay in a pool of darkness. Another stared into the distance, hands open and cupped, carrying an unfathomable load. Another was painted with a black hole by his head—I imagined that the shot should have been lethal, but he lived. I had seen suffering like this before, but never on this scale. Anguish demands a vast expanse to be fully felt, yet even a room this size was contracting.

Though I was afraid, I stepped closer to the images. Truth has a way of slowing time. From a distance, the soldier was seated, his mood sombre and his eyes downcast. Thick, gestural strokes carved out the furrows of his face; layers of red and orange oozed from his brain, telling stories that his mouth could not speak. The closer I came to the canvas, the more the detail vanished, and the paint became visceral, like blood or brain or guts. I sat there, like a field medic, desperately trying to stop

the gush; until I could stay no longer. The soldier continued to stare down at the floor, his gaze unflinching. I took a step backwards, worried that I, too, had failed him.

Unsettled, I hurried from one hall to the next. Here, Quilty created a series of Rorschach ink blots in the greens and golds of the Australian bush. From a distance, the blots appeared as majestic waterfalls amid sacred country. Looking closer, I saw the viscous darkness, black holes that few could crawl out of. Just ahead, I could see Mia studying another portrait.

My daughter sat cross-legged, holding a notebook in her hand, in front of a painting of Captain Kate Porter. The Captain's white body, stripped of her uniform, was posed against a dark, murky background; her fair hair gathered over one shoulder. Long paint strokes outlined lean musculature, but her posture was fearful. The Captain sat with her shoulders hunched, one arm braced across her bare torso, gripping the other. Her arm was pressed tight across her chest, as if trying to both hold herself together and shield herself from further attack. Thick, uneven strokes carved a haunting around her darting eyes. Her pupils were wide and vigilant, and her lips slightly parted, as though trying to utter a warning. The corners of her mouth turned downwards, and the strap of her neck was taut and tense. The washed-out pink and grey tones whispered her exhaustion. A single, interrogating light source appeared to originate from in front of the portrait, its beam focused on the Captain. A long shadow over her left shoulder reminded me of a Fusili painting of a woman with sleep demons hovering over her bed, infesting her dreams. For Porter, these demons were real.

Mia stood and repositioned herself, sitting to the Captain's left. She appeared to be in conversation with her, tilting her head and nodding from time to time. I felt like I was watching a silent film and longed for captions. At one point, Mia extended her hand towards the portrait,

offering support, her fingers trying to breach time and space. Then she paused, staring into the distance.

And then, as though jolted into action, Mia started to sketch furiously, grabbing a piece of charcoal from her jacket pocket. She used her fingers to spread the black dust over ashen paper, then the edge of her hand to smear and accentuate her lines. In one corner, she added layers of charcoal, smudging more and more dust into the page until the paper became glossy and thin. From the dark whirls of her art, a shadowy figure formed and grew limbs, extending its arms out of the page. I could feel hands tightening around my neck. Meanwhile, Mia continued to sketch, as though in a trance, her arms conscripted to move. A baby started crying, startling both of us. Mia ripped the page out of her notebook and placed it at Captain Kate's feet, like putting poppies on a grave. An offering of sorts. She started drawing on a fresh page, a red pencil by her side.

Restless, I needed to stretch my legs. As I walked, I remembered one of Mia's charcoal pictures from a few months earlier. I hadn't given it much thought at the time—I hadn't noticed the cut of the graphite on the page. Now, its shadows rested on my chest, weighing heavily on my ribs. It was Mia's only landscape, a cobblestone bridge stretched over a river. She had sketched weeping-grass and spike rush along the water's edge, tracing the spears until they disappeared beneath the bridge's blue-stone boulders. The space beneath the bridge was dark and ominous—a cluster of thick lines and shadows drawn with such pressure that she pierced the paper with the lead. With the passage of time, within the thicket and the nettle, I can now make out the outline of a demon, its form without a face. I cry when I think about it.

Even in our most difficult moments, we need to believe that things will be okay. How do we keep going otherwise? I found a bathroom and splashed water over my burning cheeks. When I returned, Mia had

packed up her art supplies and stood by a portrait of Sergeant P, his body battered by war. Despite this, he stood defiant, leaning forward, both hands cupped on his walking stick. Quilty's defining thick, clotted paint bled from his head and chest, but Sergeant P wore his suffering like a cape. 'I like this one,' Mia said. 'He's going to walk out of here.'

Mia took my arm, and we wove through the crowds to the Olley exhibition, stopping at *Pomegranates in a Basket*. The *Pomegranates* shone with vibrant colour, basking in the summer light and they were achingly beautiful. There seemed to be more fruit than I had remembered—the urn and basket overflowing with generosity. My daughter left me with the *Pomegranates* and I waited in front of the oil painting until my breath and my pulse returned to my body. Mia continued roaming through the great hall, pausing by the blue of the cornflowers and the apple with a knife by its side.

On our way out, my daughter and I stood by Quilty's portrait of Olley. I studied the gentle landscape of her face, the fearless rendering around her eyes and the depth of her searching gaze. I realised that I was in the company of a great woman and her artist, who witnessed the anguish of the world but refused to look away. I knew that I too needed to be brave and not look away.

Mia and I stepped out of the gallery, screening our eyes from the glare of the hot Australian sun. Light danced through the tall eucalypts and heat steamed upwards from the asphalt path. We merged again with the bustle of city crowds, their eyes turning but never making contact.

UNDER THE MODESTO ASH

Katya Mills

PART I

She reminds you of you when you were younger. The not so innocent girlfriend with her keychain of smiling monkeys and Hello Kitty. Her fingers pushing around her jet-black hair, her nerves driving sweat into the follicles, making it glisten. He hugs her three times, each one longer than the one before. You know they may not get out of this alive. Even if they do, county jail is a dead end to intimacy. He is checking with his fingers between the blinds. *Listen*, he says, *no matter what happens just try not to cry. I hate seeing you cry*. The words are a bit canned but you don't care. *I don't want to lose you*, she whispers.

A classic couple on the run. These made-for-tv movies, what a salve for rumination. The blues have surrounded the house in a seedy part of town and it's only a matter of time before they are forced to surrender. Of course they are deep in love and rebellion and will not. You are locked in so hard your eyelids refuse to close. You feel a kinship, rooting for them hard. They are armed and that's where it ends. You have no weapons unless you consider a six-string guitar with four strings a weapon … unless you consider a laptop with a hard drive with a decade of unfinished stories a weapon … a heart dropping poems like bombs, to shake up an unfeeling world. You can suspend disbelief, no problem, but even better—strip away the plot so all you are left with is what you see in them; a couple of yearning hearts behind faux-leather jackets.

You put your thumbnails in your mouth and bite down. Your mind fires an image at you. You are in his front yard, taking a phone call from your aunt and worrying about all her problems with her health. She tells you she took a fall and the doctors diagnosed her with A-fib

and told her if she ever falls again she probably won't survive it … *god, do they have to be so blunt?* You are pacing, feeling helpless being so far away, thousands of miles, opposite coasts, when your gaze falls to the walkway and you stop. Somehow you never saw this before. The childlike lettering between your feet. The names. Etched in the cement.

PART II

When he's all emotion you are the voice of reason. One time he calls you because she broke into the house while he was out doing errands. He came home and found her sitting in the living room watching television like she still lived there. He is so upset he can hardly put his words together. You talk him through it, tell him to get the deed out of the bedroom closet and call the cops. You can hear the soap opera she is watching through the phone. *You don't really love me, you never did, did you? You wormed your way into my heart and for what? Well, let me disappoint you. I gave it all to charity.*

When they finally arrive, he shows it to them and it works. The house was his years before he met her. She tries to manipulate them with her anger and tears but cannot explain away the twisted screen lying in the grass which she tore off the bathroom window. How she got all two hundred some pounds of her up in there, nobody knows.

The same day he orders a security system to stop these games. He names the harsh female voice who speaks to him out of the wall-mounted box after a teacher he had at school. *Miss Flaxa*. She used to curl her index finger in with her thumb and flick the backs of the heads of the misbehaving students. He laces up his boots and buttons his jacket, presses on the LED light embedded in the winter hat you bought him, grabs the keys to his big rig, straps the lunch pail over his barrel chest, and types the day his mom passed away into the backlit keypad. She commands him in that ornery colourless manner he recalled from second grade: *Alarm on! Exit now!*

You are proud of him for standing up to her and you tell him. She made a living of pushing his buttons and he has a weakness with women. Not sex. More like taking abuse. When he cried as a kid, in public, his mom would tell anyone around, *Oh, there he goes. He's having his period*. His first marriage ended because he conversely loved and hated women. He strayed into his second marriage back when he had a drinking problem almost twenty years ago. They were driving up Highway 50 to Lake Tahoe for a weekend retreat at one of a hundred casino hotels on the Nevada-California border. He was uplifted by a mood, inhabiting some imaginary world, when he asked her to marry him. It could have been anybody. It could have been the life-sized cut out of John Wayne holding his Winchester in his dining room.

He was diagnosed bipolar. Now she gets half his pension and wants more, pressing the buttons but the game is out of order. Her answer was *whatever*. Along for any ride. Sixteen years of not so glamorous semi-intoxicated purgatory. They drank and fought. He made good money in Corrections and that was all she cared about. He has matured. He can be honest with himself. He knows he was *half* the problem, and he sees the monthly cheque he writes her as justified by his bad behaviour. He sometimes listens when you talk. *She may never forgive you, but you have a right to forgive yourself and move on.*

PART III

He makes love to you and you feel altogether unified having come within seconds of one another. He drifts off to sleep and you enjoy the silence by the orange-yellow glow of a Himalayan salt lamp. A war is happening on the other side of the world, and you like to meditate on that to really lock in on how lucky you truly are. A friend of yours who was living kinda aimlessly made the decision to leave it all and go fight for Ukraine. Life is tangled; life is hard. *Why not? Unfetter yourself and go follow your heart*. You want to write him a letter but there's

no immediate way to contact him. He shuttered his social media like thoughtful people do more and more every day. You follow a guy from England who also left to fight for Ukraine and posted clips with his comrades in the field, but he got killed in battle. You were hoping they would run into your friend. Alive.

You worry too much and speak to your worrier and ask her to come back from the future, please. Life is juicy in the here and now.

You roll out of his arms and get up and take a hot shower. You come back to him snoring. You hunt for the remote and find it under his body. You find the recording and the place where you left off. The blues are counting down over the megaphone. They don't do it like that anymore. She gasps when they get to seven. He puts a finger over her lips and with a glance to the back room gestures for her to follow. He gives off a semblance of being in control but they both know he's not. Fake it until you make it. Life is a shapeshifter and anything is possible.

You turn the ring he bought you at the mall anxiously around your finger. He has the papers, and they are signed and things are about as wonderful as they can get. Sure there are the usual threats the *other woman* has to endure. Vandalism to your car which you now park in the driveway and not on the street. The guy in the pickup truck who drives slowly by and shoots you cold stares of hatred and disgust. Attempts to troll you on social media and call you out for a homewrecker. You confronted the one who claimed she was her sister. You set her straight. *How the hell can you call me that when your sister told me I can have him?* You were threatening to break up with him after you discovered he was married. You refused to be the very thing they accuse you of. He swore the marriage was dead and got her on the phone for you. She said it. *You can have him. Good luck. Once a cheater always a cheater.*

They mostly stopped bothering you after that but it hurts you to no end that they may never understand exactly how it all went down. Life is confusing and unfair, and people get hurt and killed over misunderstandings and smothering judgments. This is super hard for

you to reconcile. And there's nothing you can do about it.

One simple day of valley sunshine you are on the phone with one of your nieces trying to avoid that corner of the front yard. Your family all lives far far away so there's a lot of phone life and you have to accept it. You don't have the money to travel much, and you don't have the proper ID documents. Come June, they say you won't even be able to get on a plane without a passport or a *Real ID*. You need to stop procrastinating and figure it out. They don't make it easy to change a birth certificate in Connecticut. *What a royal bitch!* You get caught up in the conversation and unconsciously walk the perimeter, tapping each fence spear with your ring until you find yourself there, looking down at the ground again.

PART IV

There's a deputy leaning his shoulder into a door with his whole body behind it. A government agent beholden to an executive order. A spurned lover. A natural disaster. A force that cannot be stopped. The wood around the deadbolt splinters and gives way. There's an American in Ukraine about to jump out and heave a grenade at a formation of Russian tanks. A woman in New Hampshire walking room to room with a cane in one hand, coffee mug in the other. Her path about to be crossed by the cat. There's a girl about to drop down off a fire escape into her lover's arms.

Don't let them take what we worked so hard for.

Things will get better, sweetheart, try not to fall apart. Your warrior is talking to your worrier but the worry won't listen. You are a professional counsellor so you should know how to handle this and practice what you preach. Let your thoughts go somewhere else like the beach or the forest or wherever it's peaceful and simple, where cell phones seem out of place and doomscrolling is not *trending*.

He hates to see you cry. But certain things are so permanent and

it bothers you. Like names etched together when it ought to be yours. Toward the end of the marriage he had to move all of his stuff into the garage with a mattress and live out of there. She kicked him out of the bedroom and let the in-laws swarm the house. They treated him like a dog. A cash cow. He lived that way for over a year before finally getting a lawyer.

Sometimes you walk for miles together. One cool morning you are camping with friends from Chico at Little Grass Valley Reservoir. After cooking eggs and coffee over a fire, your warrior gets you to thinking it's a good idea to hike around it. Nobody thinks you are serious. *The eyes can be deceiving*. He follows you because he would follow you anywhere. Fifteen miles later it's dusk and you are alone in the woods, out of food and water, blisters on your feet, bodies aching. He stops to rest on a tree stump beside the trail. You can hear large and possibly predatory animals rustling around you. You consider swimming across the lake. It's desperation time. You somehow regroup and make it back to camp by the moon and cell phone flashlights.

He wants you like no other man before him. He doesn't care about pronouns. He never heard of nonbinary. All he saw when he met you was a woman who he presumed was out of reach. For over a hundred morning meetings you gathered with like-minded souls and listened to his heart through his words. He was down and out and so were you. He thought you were beautiful though *a little scary, a little crazy*. He witnessed several occasions of you having your emotional flashbacks, cursing up a storm and pushing people away. But when you asked him to coffee he did not hesitate.

He would follow you to the ends of the earth.

PART V

The part you've been waiting for. He is kissing her all along the face and tears of joy. Found an abandoned house and nobody saw them. Now you are one hundred per cent whole and aligned with them like stars. Nine

out of ten people turned the channel by now and missed out. *What a soap opera*. Not you. You are super tuned in and turned on and your eyes are getting wet.

He wakes up to your sobbing. *There she goes again*. He showers and comes back into the room and takes the remote out of your hand without any resistance. You are transfixed, like, dissociated. You do this a lot. He used to think it was cute until he realized you are re-living your past.

You cannot seem to help it. Semi-addicted to true and made-up crime. *Come on now,* he says. *I'm turning it off. I don't understand why you have to do this to yourself.*

It makes me feel alive.

It's not about them anymore. The always is that he will love you forever like you love him … the nevers push back hard, trying to take the happiness away, popcorn in the mind, like you will never get your shit together and you will never get your documents and you will never make it and be truly happy and you probably don't deserve it and you will never get married and never have kids and never own a home and never get away from your demon phone and the burgeoning screenage American technocracy.

He lies down next to you. You shimmy up next to him and feel his body heat radiating. It gets so hot sometimes you cannot even take it. And you nestle your head under his arm. After a good cry comes restful sleep.

You smile thinking of your niece describing her year in college and what she is learning about life. Time goes by so fast. And what if what we were taught was wrong? About permanency and some things will never change? You lean in harder. You forgot to give him all the grateful kisses and the *thank you so much i love you forevers* and he's already asleep.

I don't want to lose you, you softly say.

You're not even dreaming. Let it act up all it wants and misbehave, the disbelief; you don't have to put it on suspension or expel it. You saw it with your own eyes and with all of your heart. Under the Modesto Ash in the yard. The fresh coat of cement where he carved both your names.

LUDWIK KAMINSKI'S GREEN-EYED WIFE

Peter Newall

Lidia's hair plashed in a dark halo around her sleeping head. One round bare arm lay across the white duvet, her hand curled into a soft fist. In sleep, her makeup carefully removed, her gaze turned within, she always looked another Lidia entirely to the woman I knew by day.

It was barely daylight, but I'd slept badly in the overheated hotel room, and I wanted some fresh air to dispel my uneasy dreams. Wrapping a bathrobe around me, I opened the double glass doors and stepped out onto the curved balcony. It had snowed overnight, and the morning air was invigoratingly cold. Lidia probably wouldn't welcome it blowing on her, though; I closed the balcony doors behind me, and stood looking out at the old Imperial city of Lemberg, the Polish city of Lwow, the city now called, in Ukrainian, L'viv.

The hotel faced onto the broad boulevard named Freedom Prospect, although it had borne other names in the past. There was just light enough to see the trees and benches set at intervals down its centre, the row of Habsburg-styled buildings on its far side, and behind them, in fainter outlines, the baroque spires and mediaeval rooflines of the main square. Snow covered everything. Lights showed in a couple of windows across the boulevard. I was glad someone else was astir; the yellow squares made a warm human contrast to the blanket of pale-bluish snow.

Lidia was born in this city, and her elder sister still lived here. Her family had, in pre-Communist times, owned a big apartment near the old centre, which Lidia had been told they might now recover if they could establish sufficient documentary proof. We'd decided to come here and engage a local lawyer, allowing Lidia to see her sister, and me to see Ukraine for the first time. We flew to Warsaw, travelled to L'viv

by sleeper train, a long and, to me, mystical journey through snowy pine forests in the night, and took a room in this nineteenth-century hotel, the Grand. No doubt it had really been grand once, but even now it was very atmospheric, with its corniced high ceilings, cream-and-gold striped wallpaper, fireplaces, and carpeted stairways with brass stair-rods.

I was looking forward to seeing Lidia's birthplace. We'd been married just over two years now, after meeting at a reception at the Ukrainian embassy in Pretoria. I had been taken with her pretty much at first sight. Lidia was elegant and shapely, although she was always calling herself fat. She was well-read, interested in art, and played piano with vigour and emotion. Her caramel-brown hair was usually worn in a French twist, and her eyes were speckled hazel, warm and amused. We got on extremely well. Every day we spent together, even just a wet afternoon at home in Bishopscourt, was entirely happy.

This was my second marriage, and Lidia's too. It's interesting that with second marriages, you don't need to know all the details you asked of your first spouse. It's understood you've both had a shared history with someone else; you don't enquire into it; it's over. Nor do you consider the future so much; the present interests you far more. Our marriage was initially based on the sense we had, when we first met, that we suited each other very well. It had proved to be true, and I had never regretted our marriage for a moment.

Out on the balcony my bathrobe had become insufficient protection against the cold. I went back inside, padding past the still-sleeping Lidia to the bathroom. I luxuriated in a shower hot enough to scald my shoulders and steam up the mirror. As I rubbed a circle of it clear to shave, Lidia put her head round the door, her hair sticking up like a beautiful brunette haystack, and asked if I would be much longer.

Half an hour later we went down to breakfast. The dining-room was lofty and ornate, with tall windows looking onto the street. The window tables were all taken, so we sat at the back, away from the other guests.

A pot of coffee was brought, and we each assembled a fair selection from the buffet: scrambled eggs, pancakes with quark, and cherry danishes.

We'd agreed that today Lidia would visit her sister by herself. 'We'll have a lot to talk about, she only speaks Ukrainian, and you'll be bored,' Lidia told me. 'We can visit her together later, after we see the lawyer.' I hadn't argued. After so long, better that they can speak freely, privately.

As soon as we'd finished breakfast, Lidia got up to leave. 'What will you do?' she asked me.

'Oh, look around the city. Visit the art gallery, probably. I'll be fine.'

We arranged to meet again at four, and Lidia went back upstairs to collect her coat and scarf. I had a second cup of coffee; it was pretty thin stuff. By the time I returned to our room to get my coat and a map, Lidia had already left.

I went out through the hotel lobby onto the Prospect, and strolled down its central walk. It was a lovely day. The winter sun was as sharp as crystal. It was only one or two degrees above zero, but still, several elderly men were gathered round a chessboard laid across a bench. Women in brightly coloured puffer jackets and tight jeans pushed prams along the path. The copper-green winged statues on the roof of the Opera Theatre glittered with the ice that still clung to them. So far, I liked everything about this city.

Following my map, I turned into Kopernika Street, marked by a blue-and-white enamel sign on a stuccoed wall. A hundred paces along stood the art gallery, a two-storeyed building in florid baroque. I bought a ticket from an elderly lady at a booth just inside the door. The big, echoing anteroom, with its cracked marble floor, was very cold; I didn't blame her for wearing a knitted cap and fingerless mittens indoors. I checked my coat at the empty garderobe and turned toward the first room.

It contained a display of mediaeval Orthodox icons, the stylised faces of the saints conveying so much strength and patience that I could only be discouraged by my own human frailty. Then, people had genuine

faith to sustain them, it seemed. Did that make the hard, uncertain life of those times easier, or did they suffer doubt and fear just as much as we in the twenty-first century? Humans have not changed their nature throughout history, but the human in contact with the Divine, if that is really what they achieved, might be something else altogether, it struck me.

In this mood I left the icons, and walked through several rooms full of badly executed landscapes and overblown historical tableaux, all horses' hooves, bloodstained armour and fluttering, tattered pennants. At its end I climbed a curving wooden staircase, to emerge into a long, airy corridor lined with portraits.

They ranged from the early eighteenth century onward, painted by local artists touched by the faint ripples reaching them from the distant art capitals of their times; Paris, Berlin, Vienna. They were competent, derivative and unremarkable, and I strolled past them without any great interest. Then I came upon a painting that brought me to a halt. Standing on the creaky parquet floor in front of it, I let out a slow breath of admiration.

It was a large canvas, in the style of a hundred years ago. A half-length portrait of a woman wearing a black dress and a wide-brimmed hat, the brim tilted so her face was unshadowed, staring directly at the viewer. Her chin rested on the fingers of a plump white hand bearing a large topaz ring. She had a broad forehead, a straight high-bridged nose, and a well-shaped jaw. Under dark, arched eyebrows shone green eyes, the lids very slightly drooping over enormous black-ringed irises, set in white surrounds.

All the energy of the painting was centred there, in the detail and depth of feeling given to these deep, enquiring green eyes. It was obvious the artist had been utterly captivated by these eyes and had put all of himself into painting them.

But the more I looked at the portrait, the more I felt that the proof of this woman's true nature was not her eyes, which had so fascinated

the painter, but her mouth. Full and finely formed, the lips were slightly pursed, patently on the verge of breaking into a disdainful smile or uttering a final, dismissive remark. If she were the artist's lover, she must have given him the devil of a time. Even in the painting, she was almost mocking him. I bent to see the label, printed in Cyrillic and English. *'Portrait of Wife,'* I read, and beneath that the painter's name, Ludwik Kaminski. He hadn't given us his wife's name. Perhaps he was jealous of sharing that with the world.

Who this Kaminski was I didn't know; a Polish academician probably; aside from the face, the rest of the work was stiff and awkwardly realised. But the painting was a masterpiece despite his limitations. With this portrait, his wife had drawn from him his one great moment as an artist. He had managed, out of love or perhaps despair, to capture on canvas his wife's character, her vital spark, and so vividly that I believed I might come upon her in a café this very afternoon, see her white hand idly twist a spoon in a coffee cup, hear her contralto laughter, smell her gardenia perfume.

It was clear from the quality of the portrait that this wife of Kaminski's had caused him pain, but equally clear that it was, for him, far better to have loved this woman painfully than to have been placid and comfortable without her.

And standing in front of this painting, I felt, absurdly, a brief stab of jealousy; here was unmistakable proof of great passion. And this passion of Kaminski's for his green-eyed wife had dignified his life, or at least his memory, and certainly his wife's. Lidia and I didn't pretend to grand passion. Was our happy, untroubled marriage less than we should be asking from life? Were we missing the highest peaks? I stood musing.

Plainly, though, Kaminski's marriage hadn't been happy. He might have been besotted, but she clearly was not. He'd suffered. And so had she, when I thought about it; whatever she had or hadn't had, lovers, wealth, social success, she was no doubt no happier in the marriage than he was, just for different reasons.

Lidia and I, on the other hand, were completely happy together. Everything we did as a couple we enjoyed. We enjoyed our intimacy, we shared tastes in music, art, places to visit. We had our own private jokes and language. We trusted each other, and we looked forward, on waking, with pleasure to every day together.

That was the better way to live, there could be no doubt. I didn't want to be tortured into creating some masterwork, even if I had one in me. I wanted a happy shared life, and we had exactly that. The truth was, I was completely content with my Lidia. Kaminski could keep his green-eyed wife.

I hoped Lidia was having a good day with her sister. Reunions after a long separation can be awkward, or wonderful beyond telling. In the meantime, I had the afternoon to myself in an unknown European city, once a mediaeval Polish-Jewish city, once a Habsburg city, now a Ukrainian city, in winter. Through the wooden-framed window I saw snow, sparkling brightly in the sun, sliding off the roofs of buildings, the red awning of a promising-looking café, and the rounded tower of a church in the Armenian style. I nodded farewell to Kaminski's green-eyed wife, and walked past the remaining pictures toward the stairs leading down to the exit.

THE GENTLENESS OF DIFFUSED LIGHT

Keith Nunes

Let's not have the light on tonight,
I can't bear the stinging brightness,
A child being scolded at school, a soldier, a spy being interrogated in a trench,
Glint from the sepia moon seeps in through the skylight,

Let's leave it to the moon to show us up,
Give our faces a light glow, disguise the years,
The compassion of diffused light,
We could be anywhere, in a Romance city, a Tahitian villa, about to land on a star
closer than we thought,

I'm in love,
I'm dying,
I'm dreaming,
This seductive light has given us permission,
We have permission.

THE RECTANGULAR PRISMATIC SPHERE

Thomas Osatchoff

She comes supine on a leaf it was spring it was summer and fall but it was winter. I'm impenetrable she said you can't enter me but I'm lexical and hungry can consume you

POEM TO HER UNMARRIED SON

Simon Ott

for Sylvia

Planets would crush us, yes–yes
A sensation like radiation passing through,
ravaged atoms shredding us, pulling us apart.

Tonight, this room, can be our coffin.
With windows flying through
the scary dark. You are my silhouette.

Stretch out your hand—see
We almost touch, even as we sit
In our chairs, straight-backed as dolls, still

As the first lapsed breath. Our minds open
And unknown, and how slows the time,
The unmapping of space, clouds of stars

Slipping away. Bottomlessly. Together. Alone.
Think of me not as Mother but Midwife
And be from yourself torn, and thus reborn

Back into forgetfulness, into sleep, until
Everything you were remains unseen.
Remember me. As I enfold you in my angel wings.

CLUMSY CREATORS, ALL OF US

E Peregrine

Enough with the roses and lilies, the placemats,
the fork-on-the-outside civility.

A dining table too heavy to move is one
too heavy to live with.

He set down his power that day, cleaned up plates
and found gardens growing there.

Beneath the napkin holder, a garter snake.
Swift and black and smooth as a powerline

the snake fled, electric ink dripping delight from
spilled bottle to stained floor.

KOEL IN THE BOTANIC GARDENS

Edie Popper

The tabletops are sprayed with bird shit. Olive and
cream like a Pollock painting. I cradle
a takeaway tea and you say you've been drawing again,

then pause—the thought hooked and hung on your tongue.
These days you lap at the edges of words. Minds, like tides,
have a tendency to recede. The old fig tree is generous

with shade and stipples your face in powdered dusk. Age
is returning you to salt. Threads its crystal through
your silvering hair and in the sea you might dissolve.

After the long wash of years, you're drawing again. After
the daze of rent and bills and the desk where your spine
slipped. Before relearning colour and paint, you want

to remember simple form. Shadow and how to throw light
like you had it balled in your fist and could hurl up
days at a time, as many as you wanted to live

beholden to nothing, not even your brain. The scans
show shrinkage, you say, but specifics are seawater
tripping through sand. Your mind becomes a splayed hand.

A kookaburra perches on a fence nearby and eyes your
café cake. An ibis rummaging the bin scatters rubbish
like humans searching for scraps of time

and you rummage through the salts of yourself. Here
in the glasshouses, in rose beds and ferneries, gardeners
manicure growth and wilt. Sometimes we envy that kind

of control: how palm fronds throng their neat mosaics
across mauve sky. We steep in grief as tannins bronze
tea. Slanting fingers of sun on skin. The scanned brain

shrunk and shrivelling. The fat as if wrung. You fear
how easily you might dissolve into rapids
as your rivers return as all rivers do in the end: belched

back into sea. I scrabble around for something to offer.
I have no salve but suggest that time is not river,
but ocean. Not length, but breadth. Still, this ocean

runs thick with silt. Still, grief is silt and silt is our air
and the air is in the syrinx of the koel beside us
who drinks the dusk, and sings.

THESES ON REFLECTION

John Pring

I dreamt of myself yesterday, woke to rain
aching above the collarbone / haven't eaten
since the body / haven't spoken for three days /
in the mirror is a city
that can't feed its children, buildings
hammered into sunlight / fear
promises to come
and it comes, approaching in the split
of autumn's yellow lip / I keep reaching
the edge of the mouth, tipping
like water over the rim of a cup /
eyes are darker, now / night approaches,
stretches in the direction of mother
's voice / kerosene / light leaking across the glass
like dying.

WAR BEGINS AT HOME

Promise_nobuhle

Footsteps approaching crescendo
Background music to the impending doom
I meet you in the warmest room
And find you with eyes, hot like missiles

My skin is lathered with landmines
And you know I am sensitive everywhere
These goose bumps are really clouds of smoke
Rising from a crash site
Where somebody or something
Stepped on a nerve

Grenades fall from your lips
But I am quick to react
Like a match struck in a room full of gas
And now all we have is on fire

I am sorry before I even know my own sin
Embodying the apology every time, you look at me
Every word is an ultimatum until we sign a peace treaty
I could leave. You could leave.
We could be the death of one another
This love is trigger happy and we bare teeth.

SOFIA

Dustin Radke

I know you walk the field, Sofia,
And gather the lonely night, the swarm of gnats.
Of all the new ideas, you chose the kiss.

Show me an unusual sight. Feel free to speak
On the field that's accounted to me
By a king in the sense of a cuddle.
No one else forgives the mountain of night
On the high sea or hears a foreign girl singing,
Departing from the forest. Evil time
Is on a journey. Night and destiny,
Happiness lie on the road. How heavy the waves
Without you. A collection of statues emerges
As first a flower, spring day and music
In the evening and becomes a pile of leaves.

To monsters, victims too, night seems uneasy.
And so does every cure.

SONG

Jessie Raymundo

The door closes, & you sing
in flowers. When your mouth opens,
despair slips away.

Something is lost inside you.
Love came as moonlight

in your bedroom. The walls must be warm,
even in their nakedness. Even with dreams
unfurling, shadows freeze on the floor.

You sink into the shadows. You're not
dreaming. You're here.

AGLOW

Purbasha Roy

What the glow of sun reaches for
in the beginning of each day is similar
to love blinking while in rambles of
lonesomeness to find a heart for stay

To understand the process I fixed a new
chandelier in the drawing. As I turned the
switch on, the room blushed in soft pink,
tone of dusk-field. Wide expanses of pink
blooms made earth a beautiful thing to
remember even after I'd roamed almost
human wonders of world. The language of
butterflies and birds sputtered like wind
there, and behaved the way I looked at
memories of you walking through me like a
song that casts itself inside a star for a refuge

LOVE SEAT

Thaddeus Rutkowski

I was looking for early signs of love, but had seen none, and wasn't sure where else to look. Still, I wanted to see some signs. I was ready—I was about seven years old. But I knew I shouldn't act like I was ready. I shouldn't behave as if I needed to see signs of love, because that would drive the love away, wouldn't it? And a seven-year-old in love would not be taken seriously. A seven-year-old in love would be seen as cute at best, not as a romantic hero—a guy who would win any battle with any weapon available, or with his bare hands.

One sign of love would be closeness—physical nearness. I wanted to sit next to the one I loved. I wanted to sit in a 'love seat'. But did I dare make the first move and take that seat? Shouldn't I wait for the one I loved to take a seat next to me? I'd tried that, and I'd waited a long time. The seat next to me on the school bus was often unoccupied, but whenever someone sat there that person wasn't the one I loved. It was someone who couldn't find a seat next to a friend of their own. Of course, I could have made the first move myself—I could have found the empty seat next to the right person. But I didn't have the nerve. My desire for love drove me forward, but my fear of rejection held me back. Which was stronger, love or fear?

I had to let love guide me to the right seat. And once I found the right seat, what then? What would my seatmate and I do? Just sitting would be enough for me. I wouldn't need touching, and if there was touching by accident—my leg jostled into my neighbour's leg by the bus hitting a bump—we would pull apart, wanting to apologise, but not actually apologising. We would feel a warmth, not in temperature, but the warmth of one person in sync with another. We would be companions; we would not be alone.

NIGHTFALL

Maggie Shapley

Colour dissolves to shadow.
From the kitchen window, city lights,
the café where poets sit with their drinks
for open mic and obligatory applause.
Her notebook's propped behind the taps
and she reads aloud, alert for dissonance
or the awkward word, stores amendments
(move that phrase, ditch that line). Word perfect,
she peels off her adhesive rubber gloves—
the plates are squeaky-clean, the glasses sparkling.

THE LAST TIME

Jessica Sheather-Neumann

(after Kim Addonizio's 'To the Woman Crying Uncontrollably in the Next Stall')

You never know it will be the last time
you ever go to a nightclub base thrumming through your body too tight
heels sticking to floors sour-sweet smell of alcohol
the strobe light a fairy godmother transforming everyone beautiful
even that one girl with toilet paper stuck to her shoe.

You never know it is the last time you will wake without
a sore back roll out of bed without joints creaking and popping
the strength of your body a faint memory its flow and control as you danced
until the sun came up as it expanded and stretched as you birthed your babies.

You never know it will be the last time you ever hold
thoughts in your head write all night without interruption wiling away
evenings at cafés fuelled by the buzz of caffeine conversation
and the clink and chime of cutlery.

You never know it is the last time you will love without
fear for what could happen to small soft bodies throwing
your whole self headlong without your heart a tiny bird
beating against your ribs as you watch your children flip upside down
legs hooked over scratched metal and let their hands go.

I'M SORRY. I HAD TO CAGE YOU

Gemma Siegler

The first one is always the hardest. You know how that is—you fall madly, incomprehensibly, stupidly, in love. There are no red flags, or warning signs because you don't know how to look for them. You don't know how to articulate what's wrong yet, what's missing, or what there's too much of. She and I, learning how to love, how to lust, how to fight, how to apologise (even when I wasn't wrong). I figured love was supposed to feel like that because I loved her, as much as an eighteen-year-old is capable of loving someone, but it grew to hurt after a while. I pushed down the sinking feeling when she said she loved me after forgetting to call when she said she would. I ignored the tightening in my stomach when she turned her location off and said it was just a glitch. Love is supposed to scare you. Because you care so much.

I tell people now that we both knew it was over when it was over. I'm sure I told you that, but that's a lie. I didn't know I could be taken from so abruptly, so out of nowhere. I hadn't even considered ending it; I didn't know someone could do that to a lover. It didn't cross my mind.

I didn't even own a blade.

She took the piece out crudely. It was both of our first times, after all. She held down and cut. Ripped. Tore a square out of my flesh, right above the belly button in the middle of my torso. Her pocketknife went deep; I felt it almost touch a rib. It was slow and painful. Only after did I realise how brutal it all truly was.

I tended to this wound as though it was our child—the product of me and her, somehow. It was like a test. If I could fix it, I could fix her and get back what was taken from me. The wound became my companion, and I nursed it until I was ready for the next.

*

I knew you were going to run before you did and that's why I spent time preparing.

*

The next piece is a tricky one to explain; we met while my previous wound was still covered in dry blood clots and scar tissue.

She kissed me once and all of my logical reasoning skills vanished. I never knew I could enjoy being disregarded; that being ignored (and sometimes, even, insulted) was the greatest aphrodisiac. We'd sleep together and she wouldn't speak to me for days. Then, she'd reach back out and it was like nothing happened. I tried to hate her, mostly to get her attention, but her nonchalant nature made me ache. We broke up at least four times before the piece came out. I just couldn't get enough.

When we ended things the final time, she spoke with purposeful ambiguity, telling me how our *energies conflicted* and that we just *wanted different things*. I held on to every last word she said to me, trying to log it in my brain to formulate an equally beautified response. I, of course, failed at this. My flustered and frantic brain couldn't avoid her sharp, intense stare. Every word she spoke seemed to drip like honey off her lips. I may as well have been holding a cup under her mouth as I tried to catch her words. They fell one drop at a time until her scripture concluded. I wanted to take the cup and drink it.

The piece came out of my forearm—on an appendage, less permanent and obvious than my stomach wound. It was a surface-level cut, made with a small exacto-knife—quick and accompanied by a small, sharp pain. I didn't think she'd care enough to take it in the first place. I was honoured, almost. The piece was smaller, cleaner, and less jagged than the first, but rough around the edges from the strength required to rip it out. She did it quickly and left the piece on the bed next to me. After she was gone, I let myself bleed, only standing up to grab a bandage when the red drops threatened to stain my bed sheets.

I kept the piece for a few weeks—pinned it on my wall so I could

remember, maybe understand where I went wrong.

I ended up mailing it back to her. It was hers. It no longer belonged to me.

*

Don't go.

*

It's impossible to try to love someone new when there are pieces of you, scattered, that they will never know. I'll always be partially elsewhere, absent, unable to see what's in front of me—always looking back. I apologise for that. It must be hard to manage.

There are levels of heartache, some severe and crushing, some soft, small, and even pleasant. Not every wound is particularly significant, but slowly more of you is taken each time.

And big or small, that piece is gone.

See, I follow patterns everywhere I go. I seek out the same thing over and over, and if I don't find it—I create it. People, like you, become what I make them. I mould everyone in my life into these patterns, weaving their existing personalities and the traits I project onto them into one cluttered, frumpy, but sentimental patchwork quilt.

You know those grandma quilts— the ones you hate but keep. Hide most of the year but pull out to display for the holidays. Or the trundle bed in your childhood home that you use twice a year when relatives come to visit. It's old, frayed, and dusty; full of moth holes and torn seams, but you never get rid of it. You couldn't, because, somehow, it'd break your heart.

I have one of those quilts.

It's all over my body. Each scar comes with a memory, each hole a slight tinge of nostalgia. I catch myself looking at people's bodies on the street to see if they might understand. I haven't found someone yet that has. There are more people ready to wield a knife than those vulnerable enough to be cut.

*

I couldn't follow the pattern this time.

*

My parents first sent me to therapy when I came home for the holidays halfway through college with upwards of five new pieces of flesh missing. When the therapist saw my scars, she asked how long I'd been harming myself like this. I told her I hadn't done it, that it was done to me. She asked by whom. I listed the names. She glanced at me continuously, while she scribbled on her pad, with a look of confusion and sadness that I was accustomed to when people saw my body for the first time. I'm not quite sure if she believed I hadn't hurt myself or not, but she talked to my parents after the appointment and said there wasn't much she could do if I wasn't completely honest about my situation. I told them I didn't want to see her again.

After that, my mother insisted I at least go to the dermatologist. A futile effort, I tried to explain to her. But she didn't listen—she saw what was wrong with me first. She didn't understand that my skin was just a symptom, and that the problem wouldn't go away. She didn't get it, and I wondered if she ever loved someone who took from her before my dad. They prescribed me creams for the scratching, for the scarring. I did try them. On some of the smaller scars it worked. They began to fade.

I didn't like the medicine. It was erasing what I needed reminding of. I am loved and I have been loved. Even if these people took from me, it was a sign that, at some point in time, someone had cared enough about me to slice my skin and peel it away to reveal my insides. I stopped using the creams.

*

I couldn't lose another piece.

*

After that, there were a few others who took from me too. They were small pieces, but I still shouldn't have let them get stolen. Most people would let things fizzle out, but I let everything get to me.

There was one who promised me we'd date as soon as she was ready. She took it from my thigh. It was sufficiently painful, although nowhere near as maddening as the four months of questions, uncertainty, and unlabelled attachment.

There was one who kissed me and then said she regretted it. That one hurt more than I'd care to admit—a small piece but right on the vein, taken shamelessly with a thick, serrated blade.

Another one ended well, and I didn't notice the piece missing from my neck until a few weeks later. She must've used a small, surgical knife while I was sleeping. She was always good at keeping herself a secret. I felt no pain while it happened but wished I did.

Even the ones I didn't attach myself to took something.

Now I'm constantly afraid someone is waiting around the corner with a blade. And they usually are.

You certainly were.

*

There is no more room to take from me.

*

I couldn't follow the pattern this time. You left me no choice. The last piece is still scarring over.

But I can admit I made a mistake. With us.

You know what they say, though.

No risk. No reward.

And the only way to ease my anxiety is to keep you there. I know it's not the healthiest coping mechanism. But now I know you'll always be around. It's much easier for my brain, as you can imagine.

It takes a lot of maintenance to keep you here, you know. I'm always cancelling plans, leaving my friends hanging. I'm isolated too. I always

have been. I just don't need an enclosure to keep me that way.

It's hard to keep you when I can feel you so desperately trying to squirm your way out. It's hurtful, you know. I've given you all you need. There's plenty of space here, it could fit at least seven humans of the same size. There's a couch, a bed, and art supplies. I only check in for a few hours a day. It's well and warmly lit.

But it's still mine.

*

I'm sorry. I had to cage you. I knew you were going to run before you did, and that's why I spent time preparing. Don't go. I couldn't follow the pattern this time. I couldn't lose another piece. There is no more room to take from me.

You'd leave. You'd run. And you know we just can't have that.

You love me.

And I love you.

*

You held my hand and told me you loved me. Behind your back was the blade. You began pressing down, and I saw the blood before I felt it. Half the piece was cut before I stopped you. I screamed. I begged. I hit you over the head. I tucked you underneath my quilt.

MANUSCRIPT MATERIAL

Ian C Smith

On a rainy Melbourne Saturday, sober at his launch, trying to make the most of this experience, he hoped his face looked obliging rather than just old and gaunt. Mid-sized, dressed wanly shabby, he had bent rules, been bloodied and broke, but found literary gatherings and the slippery beast of success a challenge. The past, the past. What a minor miracle survival was when traversing North America's colossal expanse thumbing lifts. He saw them, ironically, as two figures dwarfed by a vast landscape painted by Hopper or Smart, listening to nature's pungent melody. Were they brave or ignorant? Freeloading? All of these and more.

This driver keeps hammering on about a shack, his hideaway in the backwoods. Language-poor, humourless, he badly wants us there instead of where he agreed to take us. I sense my young wife's concern amplifying mine, a sudden shadow darkening our life expectancy. She would be enjoying a *Women's Weekly* coach tour of Europe with her mother whose disapproval I flamed by whisking her daughter away. Now she would try to text *Emergency* while I cajole shack man but our mobile phones wait to be invented, like our boys waiting to be born. We are still a massive distance from the Yukon.

He mingled, conversation a murmur around him, nervous about making his required witty speech. Remembering key acknowledgments he needed to nail, he thought of lonely roads, his undying love of adventure, the wishes in his heart and what they made him do. When he read, his words' failure to match reality dismayed him. Light slanting through glass scoped dust motes in the listed Trades Hall Building, host to established historic names, ghosts who observed his glib answers when, signing copies, he was asked how much was real, and if he was still

in touch with her, ghosts who watched over his shoulder for falsehoods.

Only stuntmen stage escapes by seeming to hurl themselves from vehicles, and what about our packs with my notebooks, her diaries, money, passports; and boys growing into men like our future sons, and the driver's offspring sitting up front with him, a resilient youth with knowing eyes beyond his years? Traffic would be scarce if we turn off the highway down trails attended by conifers like mute sentinels. Nobody searching for us, we would be swallowed in an inescapable vortex of anguish.

Drained, picturing a grey wolf prowling, injured and alone, words were all he had. Seeing his name printed on a book's cover as a youth would have thrilled him. His escapades far behind, he remembered a tape carried everywhere. Karen Dalton sang *Something on your mind*. Her haunting voice. Though he longed for the shock, memory's lustre of those perilous days, to stand in hope on windswept plains once more, he often succumbed to periods of melancholy solitariness, burying his face in his pillow. He filed this strained day's details and the weight of hours in his mind's archive as further material.

Stuffed in the back we crane forward reasoning with diplomacy, goodwill—always respectfully grateful to drivers for stopping—cringeworthy. His clumsy insistence jangles with our believed harmony. I picture graves in a valley carpeted with snow. Wind swirls snowflakes into shrouds seen only by coyotes and crows, footprints almost obliterated, night falling. Familiar movie, book, and art scenes travel these highways and back roads with us. We have journeyed thousands of miles with as many ahead, I hope, targeting the Rockies and Alaska. Ravening for the right gambit to pry us from this predicament I must somehow make these sensations, life's surging spectacle, last and last until we are gone.

SPINNING MY WHEELS

Jane Snyder

You got ten dollars the first time you gave plasma. If you gave a second time in the same week you'd get another fifteen dollars. You can give plasma twice a week because plasma replaces itself in 48 hours. They use it for burn victims and people with auto-immune diseases. In the waiting room there was a poster showing a cute little dark-haired girl being held up in her mother's arms, the better to see pink blossoms on a tree.

Because of you, the poster read, *she has a normal life*.

As if I cared.

This was in the seventies. I've heard now you get forty dollars for the first donation, fifty for the second, and it's quicker. The needle in your arm is attached to a machine that spins out the plasma and returns your red blood cells at the same time. When I did it, you filled one pint of blood, then waited with the needle in your arm for twenty minutes or so while the blood was placed in a machine called a centrifuge that froze the blood cells out. They mixed the left-over red blood cells with saline and put them back into you. After that you filled a second bag of blood, and the plasma was separated from it too. Then you waited for your second bag of red blood cells to come back. It took about an hour and a half.

Each time a nurse brought your bag of blood cells, they'd have you identify it as yours. If we give you the wrong blood, they'd say, very serious, you could die. Other times they'd talk about where they'd go for lunch, Burger King, TacoTime, Arby's, making me hungry.

I thought they looked like stewardesses in their blue tunics and slacks.

There was a laundry room in the basement of my apartment

building. Instead of paying the quarter to use the dryer I hung up the wet clothes in my bathroom.

Someone left a bride magazine down there once and I took it up to my apartment. Big as a Sears Christmas Wish Book. I went through the whole thing every night before I slept.

Grooms in powder-blue tuxedos, bridesmaids carrying parasols, white dresses.

China, silver, crystal, blenders, honeymoon packages in the Poconos, the bride and groom in bathing suits, holding champagne glasses in a bathtub itself the shape of a champagne glass.

Well, I told myself, the Poconos are on the other side of the country. We won't be going there.

No we, though. I didn't have a boyfriend.

My father said men who would be considered a catch, that was the term he used, wanted girls who had something going for them, not girls who were just getting by.

Once I was at my parents' house when my little sister Amanda was imitating a character from my mother's favourite soap opera. The woman on the show was having a difficult pregnancy, the baby might die, her husband was cheating on her and he and his mistress were trying to kill her. Amanda, looking sweet, earnest, described her own problems. Plantar wart on her right foot, chores, an early bedtime.

'And my sister is very kind,' she concluded, woefully, 'but she has trouble making ends meet. So she comes to dinner.'

My father laughed.

They'd invited me for a nice meal: flank steak marinated in teriyaki sauce, rice, corn on the cob, tomatoes from their garden.

Amanda wanted to know why they had to have steak all the time and my father laughed again.

Afterwards we sat on the deck, playing with Amanda's wire-haired fox terrier puppy, Tabitha. My father made us root beer floats.

I never told them about the plasma.

At the centre we all donated in the same big room, rows of tables, two by two, pushed together like double beds.

Some of the people they put you next to smelled bad.

Once I explained how to apply for food stamps to one of the dirty birds and the next time I saw him he was so grateful I was embarrassed. I could have gotten food stamps myself, but I never did. For the same reason I didn't buy a new bride magazine when the one from the laundry room fell apart. Someone might see me at the store.

When they put me next to Jim, his hygiene was all right, but I didn't like the soapy, sweet lime smell of his cologne, Hai Karate. In the commercials a guy would slap some on, beautiful women would chase him, and he'd fend them off with karate moves. Little boys liked waving at their friends, calling, 'Hai, Karate!'

He didn't need to give plasma, Jim said. It was just something to do on his days off. He was a mechanic at Les Schwab, made good money. The only thing he didn't like was having to be polite to customers. When one of them described a problem and what they thought caused it, he sucked it up, laughed his head off with the other mechanics after the customer was gone, because the actual cause was always glaringly obvious, except to a woman, of course, women whose husbands bought them nice cars.

One of the nurses, Camille, a pretty Black girl, younger than I was, brought me my first set of red blood cells then. She always wanted me to be assigned to one of her tables. Because I pumped out quickly, probably, but she was friendly, would talk to me about clothes when she wasn't busy.

'An all-year-round tan,' Jim said, after she left, 'all over.' I thought she might have been close enough to hear, thought Jim intended her to.

She'd heard that stuff all her life, I told myself, must be used to it by now. It was me I felt sorry for, Jim thinking I'd laugh at something so stupid. I turned away from him, opened my book.

Piers Ploughman. I'd brought it for attention. Someone, not Jim,

might ask why I'd read a book like that if I didn't have to and I'd say because I love poetry so much and I hoped for some insight into the poems we read now, speaking fast because I just could not get into Piers and I would have been hard pressed to give specifics.

Jim asked me what I did.

I closed my book on page twelve, told the truth. I babysat at a church nursery on Wednesdays and Sundays and there was the plasma and sometimes I read to the blind or cleaned apartments in my building when tenants were evicted.

How could I live like that, he wanted to know. He wouldn't have been able to stand it.

Swanson chicken pot pies were four, sometimes five, for a dollar then. Eggs were fifty-five cents a dozen. I do all right, I told him. What I care about is my writing.

No, I told him. I've never been published.

Even at his best I wouldn't have liked Jim and Jim wasn't at his best when he smirked. 'So you've never been paid for your writing?'

'No.'

'You live on macaroni and cheese and scrambled eggs.' He smirked again. 'Your writing must not amount to much.'

I opened Piers again because Jimbo got that right. I went days, weeks, without writing and what I did write I didn't finish.

I was on page thirteen when he started talking again as if there'd been no break in our conversation. He asked me what I was doing after I finished donating.

I'd been planning to go to Nordstrom's, to the lingerie department, to help myself to a couple of brassieres. Mine were worn out. Nordstrom's semi-annual sale was on then so it would be crowded. The lingerie department was in a corner on the third floor. You knew where people were and if they were looking at you. The sale bras would be at a table divided into sections by size so I could get what I wanted and maybe an extra one to return next week for cash, just scrunch them up and

get out of there.

The week before I'd taken a lip gloss stick from the cosmetics counter at Penney's. Easy. The cosmetics counter was at the front of the store; all you had to do was turn around and you'd be out the door.

I took back the lip gloss a few days later, when different employees were working, told the younger girl it made my lips chapped. 'This stuff is supposed to moisturise them.'

At Nordstrom's you didn't have to explain why you wanted to return something, but she brought the older girl, the manager, over. I lied to her, too, because I wanted the $1.95, plus tax.

She had a sweet face, I remember. She already had smile lines, young as she was, but she wasn't smiling when she handed me back the gloss. 'Your lips are fine.'

I'd have enjoyed telling her she had a butt end on her like a bumblebee's and I should have stolen the gloss in a lighter shade.

I told Jim I didn't have any plans.

'Say,' he said, as if he'd just thought of it, 'why don't we go over to Dennys', get you a decent meal?' He smiled. 'We could talk about your writing.'

It's hard on boys, they told us when I was growing up. They're taking all the risks, asking you out. Think about their feelings.

Cocktease, my father called it.

'I'm sorry. I appreciate your asking. But I have a boyfriend.'

Jim would know I didn't.

His machine chimed. He'd finished his second bag of blood cells, could go as soon as the needle was removed, and he was bandaged.

'I'm sorry,' I said, turning away.

Across the room a woman fainted when she stood up after donating. Camille and another nurse helped her into a wheelchair.

Beverly, the charge nurse, came to check on the woman who revived quickly. When she walked past our table Jim crooked his forefinger at her.

'Tell Sister Soul Train to bop on over here. I'm done.'

'Camille is rendering emergency care,' Beverly said evenly. 'I'll take care of you.'

'Incompetent,' Jim told her as she pulled the needle out. 'Unprofessional.'

They used such big needles I still have holes in both arms from donating.

She put a cotton ball over the hole, a band-aid over that, had Jim hold up his arm while she wrapped one of the stretchy bandages tightly around his arm. 'Leave that on for four hours. No heavy lifting, drink plenty of fluids.'

Jim pointed at me with his un-bandaged arm. 'Don't put me next to that broad again.'

'No more of that talk.' But he hadn't cussed. If you did, they'd kick you out, wouldn't let you come back.

This place is a joke, Jim said. 'You and everyone in it.'

'Get on up off that cross now,' Beverly said. 'We need the wood.'

Camille came over after he was gone. Beverly put her arm around her, gave her a little hug. I laughed with them when Camille said Jim thought he was God's gift to women.

'The world's loneliest man,' Beverly called him.

After I was done and had gotten my own arm wrapped and collected my ten dollars, I stopped off to use the bathroom.

The rest of the centre was clean and bright, smelled of antiseptic, but in the ladies' room, one of the toilets, clogged with blood-soaked sanitary napkins and faeces, had flooded.

I saw a little bit of green on the floor behind the tank.

A folded up ten- dollar bill, wet and worn. I picked it up. put it with mine, washed my hands. In the waiting room a young girl in cutoffs and a carefully ripped tank top was talking to another girl about what had happened to her money, her plasma payment, both of them ready to cry.

I gave her the ten, told her I'd found it in the bathroom.

She looked dazed. 'Oh.'

She never thanked me. I told myself she'd use it for alcohol or drugs, and I should have kept it.

I decided against Nordstrom's. I was wearing long sleeves so no one would see the bandage, but I might attract attention with the stiff way I held my arm—you weren't supposed to bend your elbow. Also, sometimes, not often, the bandage would slip, and you'd start bleeding again, make a mess.

I went home instead, ate my supper of peanut butter on saltines, iced tea and carrots.

I decided the girl had been doing the best she could.

But I wasn't, I knew, and gave some thought as to how to begin.

MACKEREL

Soo Jin

Yaya, wounds that don't hurt quickly go soft. You said while sprinkling salt with your nimble fingertips. To die fresh, you must take hurt just like the first time, always. You made shallow cuts in the flesh swiftly. Clang. Your fortress sealed tight. A green thorn sprouted through your tightly shut lips. Like bamboo shoots hastily burst up after the spring rain in the forest of Dam-yang. Tasteless and just a little stinging. Looking at you shedding your sagebrush eyes, I couldn't help but say, 'Yes, I will try to take hurt heartily, too.'

How burned up inside must you be to turn into salt? You said while putting a frying pan on the gas stove. For the salt to seep deep inside, you need to let it simmer for a long time. always. You sealed it tight with a steel lid. Yaya, if I were to be born again, I wouldn't want to be human. You said while only giving me the white flesh of mackerel. Your body torn and tattered on the dinner table. A grave of blue-backed sorrow unearthed. Under the moonlight, it glowed like white bones exposed. Looking at your fresh death so bittersweet, I couldn't help but say, 'Yes, I will try to die dearly, too.'

SCRATCH-OFF TICKETS

Edward Michael Supranowicz

Three tickets. I scratch off the surface and there are two losers and one winner. Not good, but not bad. But at least you know what you got—the proverbial take it or leave it, deal with it type of thing.

Julie—don't know what to think. Have seen her naked, seen her without makeup. Even seen her scrub her skin with a loofah in the shower. Hell, once she even said she wanted to scratch her own face off, and she had me so mesmerised that I actually waited to see if she would really do it

She tells me I need to stop gambling. She doesn't know the real risks I am taking.

She asks me to scratch her back, and I say 'sure'.

GOLD BEACH

RL Swihart

1.
We stayed in the Motel 6, which gives some hint re epoch: our budget
was tight, the girls were little, and we probably had
Toby with us

2.
In the morning I got up early and walked to the bridge. Two deer in the yard
looked up but didn't shy. Fog like steam rising
from below

3.
When we went down to the jet boats it was still chilly and wet. I took my pill.
We all borrowed padded black jackets from the rack. (An hour or so upriver
and we took them off because of the heat)

4.
Along the road to the inn: more blackberries than we'd ever seen (Mom picked,
the girls sampled). Beyond the fence: more field than airfield. With the tickets:
a chicken dinner that worked like an after-church potluck, with some
quaint differences:

E.g.,

Sarah Derwentwater, over from Klamath Falls for a wedding, passed the corn
on the cob from my left. Mr McGuff, a sweet soul who only looked sour,
passed Mrs Avery's banana pudding (topped with Nilla Wafers)
from my right

GREEN. I WANT YOU GREEN.

Ruby Sylvaine

I want you sweet and tangy and maturing into something syruped and thick and golden, I want you sickly, sugary, flesh on a buried body. I want to walk through rows and rows of mango trees, and watch the mangoes form and become the colour of sunshine, ripening, bursting.

And then I'll pick you, and I'll sit, and slowly, I will peel off your gilded skin. Your sugared juice will run down my arm, snaking through beads of sweat. And I will take a bite of your luscious, distended flesh, and I'll run barefoot through soft high grass, and wade into crystal-clear water that barely nibbles at the heat. And I'll watch as the mangoes around me fall and rot sweetly, and the flies and the ants crowd around them, hungrily, lustfully. And I'll feel warm, and youthful, and dead and sweet and rotting, all at once. Green. I want you green.

BABY OR BLENDER

Carsten ten Brink

'She'll be here in an hour, just doing a delivery in Roosevelt,' Jack tells me, hanging up the phone and pouring himself another chamomile tea with Red Bull, his fourth, topped with a slug of vodka. He drops back onto the beanbag, a present from his mother.

'Babies like bright colours,' she says all the time. Her son certainly likes the orange beanbag: Jack's now lying almost horizontal, eyes closed, occasionally scratching his abdomen, the way he does. He shouldn't be drinking, not today, but I guess he's stressed about the baby too, as I was before I took those pills.

His herbal cigarette, lying on the tongue of the cute pottery ashtray he made inspired by Mick Jagger's red lips, is smoking sweetly—the smell reminds me of Christmas fairs and makes me feel a bit sick but at least he's stopped with tobacco. One ritual cigar after the baby arrives and then no smokes until junior goes to college. A promise in return for my agreeing that I'd have our baby at home, and not at the hospital like I'd prefer.

Jack hates hospitals. Has done so ever since his high-school appendectomy when the klutz of a junior intern left a sponge and his car key in Jack's abdomen. No wonder Jack's always scratching himself there.

The way Jack tells it, for the whole week while Jack has the Chevy-tagged key fob in him, the intern's got no car and is forced to take the 431 bus back and forth from the hospital. Until he gets mugged on the way home from a night shift, so the intern claims to the cops, mugged by a group of women wearing Apache outfits, who then disappear into the mist, never to be seen again. Jack then meets him by chance in the ER hallway, where Jack's gone when, on his first day back at high school, he sets off the metal detector in the entrance corridor.

They recognise each other, get talking, and apparently Jack guesses what happened. Jack isn't violent—he's more a creative type, he came back after college and now, next to teaching, manages the school's supplies and he specially loves the art stuff, he's always tie-dying things—but Bill, who went there with Jack, Bill loves telling the story, says Jack loses it, gets the intern on the floor and is beating him up, really pounding on him. They have to tear the pair apart. The funny thing is that, because of the black eye and split lip that Jack gives him, the police don't follow up the intern's Apache women assault story.

Jack extends his fingers to the cigarette, takes a little puff and then gets back to that gentle scratching. At the same time, the baby shifts, just as gently, and then settles. To think that later today I'll hold her in my arms. Jack's eyes are closed as he scratches.

I wasn't dating Jack at the time—he was with another girl then, the needy, tall one with the long legs that he doesn't like talking about—and I never met the intern, but I bet that the idiot had been at a supply cupboard of some sort too, a medical one. What was he doing with a key fob in an operating room? Even if it did look like a remote for a light unit. *Apaches in the mist*, get serious. And when they finally found the fob inside Jack, the intern asked for it back, saying it'd save him the fifty bucks a replacement would cost. He disappeared from the hospital into the mist too, pretty quick after that.

I get that even after the bumper payout that funded his four years of college, Jack thinks hospitals are a jinx, doesn't want me or our baby anywhere near one. He won't drive a Chevy either. And the rug under his feet, another gift from his mother—she had to swear it was Navajo, and not Apache. Do the Apache even make rugs? Anyhow, from what that intern said, under the feather headdresses the women were mostly blondes.

A light crunching noise comes from the beanbag as Jack stretches sideways to reach for the half-empty shot glass of vodka, the last alcohol he's allowed himself. He pours another slug into his unfinished drink.

His tee shirt has pulled out of his jeans, showing the bottom of the tattoo. He refuses to take his shirt off in public and I only got to see the tattoo properly when we'd been to bed together a couple of dozen times. I was wondering whether he had a third nipple or something—he always wore at least a tee shirt, even if we were in the shower together. Now that I've seen the tattoo, I'm glad he keeps it covered.

In blue-green, surrounded by lines, whirls and Chinatown symbols, it spells 'Blender'. When I finally saw it, I thought it was some high-school sports thing, like a wrestling team nickname, but Jack didn't look like a wrestler, more like a ping-pong player. Did ping-pong players do the nickname thing?

Anyway, he won't talk about it. All I know was that he got it to camouflage the scars from the messy search for that stupid fob.

Jack's hand goes under his shirt again. He touches the tattoo, and his fingers move along the pattern of the scar, causing his shirt to move up more. He pauses, slowly opens his eyes, I bet to see if I'm watching; I pretend to be unaware. He tucks his shirt back in and takes another sip of his drink. His hand creeps up to the silver-tubed cigar and lighter in his shirt pocket. Not long now, I can tell he's thinking. He's more nervous than I am.

'How are you doing?' he asks. 'The chair still comfortable? It won't be long now.' He's a bit mumbly, speaking quickly, but his lips struggle to keep up. Definitely nervous.

I don't answer, just nod. I think I smile. There's something in those pills his mother gave me, I'm sure of it now. There's a fuzziness in my brain, but almost no pain and my contractions are mild, still some way apart. They're pretty much the same regardless of what position I'm in, starting from my lower back and working their way to my abdomen.

But I'm thirsty again. That's the thing I can't control, that and the peeing, but I guess it's connected. I've been twice in the last forty-five minutes. Maybe I shouldn't drink so much, but Jack's mom keeps telling me that I need to listen to my body.

I'm clumsy as I roll my chair to the kitchen. I pour myself a lemonade, mixing in the pureed cranberry and blackberry, another gift from his mother. Superfoods, she claims, will make the baby smart and strong.

My foot itches under the cast. Pills aren't doing much good there. I don't mind the itch too much: last night it distracted me from timing the contractions. Looks like I'll win the five hundred, too. His mother promised me five hundred bucks if I give birth before the cast came off; fair enough—it was her twin Chihuahuas that tripped me.

I dig into the kitchen drawer for the tongs and slide one under the cast, stabbing at the source of the itch.

The phone rings in the living room. I hear Jack answer it.

'Yes, that's right, that's me.' His voice is deeper than normal and he's speaking slowly.

'Yes. I know her.'

He doesn't say anything for a long time. I wonder who they're talking about. Is it me? I listen while I scratch away at the inside of my ankle. The tongs were pleasantly cool at first, but it doesn't take long for them to warm up. It's sweaty down under the plaster.

'What?'

'No. She can't! Not now!'

I don't think they're talking about me. Jack sounds angry.

'Our baby's due later this afternoon. I'm here waiting for the midwife.'

Now he's listening again. What's going on? A problem at school? They know he's off today. Mrs. Sullivan is standing in for him all week.

'No. I can't. Tell her.' There's fear mixed in with the anger, reminding me of when he saw me trip over the Chihuahua leads. 'Tell her I'll talk to her later.'

He hangs up, the sound of plastic on plastic too loud. Before I can call him and ask, he dials. I count the whirs of the dial. A local call. A moment of silence. Then Jack clears his throat.

'Hello. This is Jack Lee.'

'Sorry …' I can't make out the rest because he's fallen into mumbling again.

'Sorry.' He speaks more clearly this time. 'How are things going? We have the midwife next, you see.'

It's good that he's checking.

'Complications! Oh, shit. How long will it be?'

There's a silence again. I imagine another stressed dad-to-be, losing it, giving Jack hell for that statement.

'Sorry. Sorry—is your wife okay?'

'Oh.'

'Look. I can come and pick her up when she's done—where are you?'

The sound of paper and writing just carries to the kitchen. How considerate of Jack: he will be a good father. He's been to so many pre-natal classes with me. When he gets used to the baby maybe he'll be happy to switch to part-time duties at the school and let me get my feet back under a desk at the bank. I'll go nuts if I can only work from home. Plus, the embarrassment of baby-food stains on loan documentation.

'Okay. I got that. Thanks. It's our first.'

'Good luck. See you later.'

When he puts the phone down this time, he is gentle. I slip the tongs back in the drawer and roll over to the refrigerator. The chocolate dessert tubs are in the low part of the door, easy to reach. Jack moved things around for me.

The phone rings again.

'Yes.'

'Sorry. I was on with the midwife.'

'She said what?' He sounds distressed. This is about more than being asked to go back to work early.

He walks out of the living room but he isn't speaking. He must be listening again. His feet scuff past the bathroom in the direction of the bedroom. The door closes.

I roll as quickly as I can back into the living room. Staring at the

deep indentation he's left behind in the orange beanbag, I call his name, asking him what's going on. He doesn't answer, doesn't even come back.

I negotiate my way to the bedroom, push the door open. Jack's sitting on our bed, head lowered. He's scratching his abdomen again and the phone's lying dead next to him.

He looks up at me, looks at me for a long time, but says nothing. Then something moves in his face. He jumps up, runs to the closet, grabs my pink maternity fleece and his purple tie-dyed denim jacket. 'We have to go, now.'

Go? But I'm ready to have my baby. Here. In my home. Go? Maybe there's something strong in those pills, because I realise I haven't said anything out loud.

'I'll explain on the way,' he says, mumbling again. He's struggling to fit my fleece over my shoulders while pushing the wheelchair. It feels like he's panicking. Maybe he should have one of my pills. I put an arm through the sleeve of the fleece. I'm trying to help.

'Is there a problem with the other delivery?' I ask. 'Is the midwife not coming? Where are we going?'

He doesn't answer my questions. He just pushes the wheelchair out towards his mother's old station wagon. He's gentle as he helps me out of the chair and into the passenger seat. The manoeuvre is tricky with my foot in the cast and I'm glad that I had a pee only a quarter of an hour ago. Otherwise, I'm sure I'd be yelling for him to get me inside again.

The only thing I can think of is that we're going to the hospital after all, and it's freaking him out. I don't mind the hospital. Although I hope he sticks to his promise not to smoke again after that one celebratory cigar.

As we drive down the lane, I picture his herbal cigarette, balanced on the ashtray. I pray it doesn't fall from Mick Jagger's ceramic lips and burn the Navajo rug. I'm very fond of it. The rug and the orange beanbag. Our baby's going to love them too, especially if she takes after her father and is a peaceful child.

When he turns left, I think he's going for the quieter route through Roosevelt, with fewer traffic lights, that he's being considerate again.

We park illegally in front of an ordinary white house, with a small front lawn and kiddie pool. A pink tricycle and a red fire truck hint at two kids. A life-sized statue of Ronald McDonald stands next to the front door, proud and friendly, for some reason holding a stuffed bald eagle on his yellow tray.

Jack still hasn't explained. But this is definitely not the hospital. I know this neighbourhood—I papered two housing loans nearby last summer—and the hospital's still eight blocks away.

'Wh—' I start.

'Here we are,' he says. 'Look, this is where the midwife is. She's running late.' He's mumbling again. 'You can wait here for her. If there's a problem, she'll know what to do. I'll be back soon.'

'What?' I manage to ask. 'Where are you going?'

'I'm sorry,' he says, 'but my ex, she's on the roof of the police station over on 12th. She's threatening to jump. The police want me there to help talk her down.'

'You're leaving me?' I hear my voice rising. *Now*? *For her? The long-legged nut that dumped you and then kept coming back?*

'I haven't got a choice. She's lost it. She bumped into Bill in the street this morning. He told her about our baby, damn idiot, called her by her old name, said something smartassy about a milkshake. She went nuts, scratched his face, and when he tried to restrain her, she knifed him. He's been in the ER; he'll be fine.' He's talking at double speed now, mumbling again, and I'm struggling to take it in, to put the pieces together. *Bill*? *Old name?*

'Milkshake? Wh—'

'She got herself arrested but got loose somehow and is now yelling about jumping. Unless she sees me.'

He unfolds the wheelchair next to the car and reaches for me.

I recoil, try to close the car door. 'You have to stay with me. You can't

leave me now.'

'I have to. It's my fault.'

'What? What are you talking about? Your fault?'

'She quit school because of me.' His fingers tap his abdomen. 'And changed her name.'

I stare at him and help him slide me into the chair.

'You know what high schools are like,' he says. He looks at me with his big eyes. 'I'd been the butt of jokes, people hiding keys in my lunches, laughing whenever I took off my shirt, so I got the tattoo. Once they saw it, they switched, started calling her 'Blender'. I'd been nervous as hell, worried about my folks' reaction, and then passed out from the pain when the tattooist was on the letter 'B'. Brenda left school to get away from the jokes when they wouldn't stop.' His face is crimson. 'She begged me to come with her. Spent a year calling me. My parents refused.' I think he's on the verge of tears.

I know I am.

He leaves me on the curb, promising to be back soon. I roll towards plastic Ronald and push the doorbell. Wait here? No chance. But I hope they let me use their toilet once I've called a cab to the hospital.

I hope she doesn't jump. Not because I'm worried about her. It's Jack I care about, however much he's scarred, outside or inside. But if I meet Brenda at the hospital, this time it'll be the two of us they'll have to tear apart.

But then, just as I hear footsteps approaching the door, the baby moves a little to the left and my anger vanishes. Whatever Brenda does, she's not important.

The baby is.

[UNTITLED]

Jake Tringali

Discarded all the bad
relationships in my
life except god. That parasocial
illusion learned from society.
Pure parroting. My childhood
priest said there was
a black mark on my heart, growing
with each and every sin. I
learned well, got high school
marks. Kept that wickedness
in my blood.

AWAKENING

Jonathan Vigdop

[translated by Leo Shtutin]

To slip, imperceptibly, into death. As if into a quiet, empty apartment. Senseless to clutch with bare toes at this yellow sand. A sliver of blistering sky gleams overhead.

What is this despair, sidling towards you from afar? What are these sobs, racking your frame on this threshold?

To slip, quietly, into cool emptiness. To close your eyes. Nothing but repose awaits you there.

You're beyond all peril now.

AUGURY
The Grand Pacific Drive, Illawarra

Louise Wakeling

if she had a crystal ball she might scry the years ahead,
how long the span, what liver-spots in animals
might once have shown: what can be read from this rim
of the Pacific, fringe of bush, sheer rock-face, unstable slabs
towering above the Sea Cliff Bridge

when she was young, primed already for disaster,
parents bickering endlessly, bombardment could come
at any time, a sudden rock-fall crushing
any childish hope of peace

you don't have to be clairvoyant to feel time hurtling forward
to that final coast, slippery slope—the last escarpment
balanced there, a show-stone drawing you closer
to the edge. her younger son admits that scarcely a week goes by
that he doesn't stop and think, 'Holy shit, I'm going to die.'

her next move is on the cards, or in the stars. there'll be a summoning,
a winding-down. the older son names it, as he must, anticipating
future burdens, habits tethering her to another place.
compromise—another rock to push uphill

hands on the wheel, he hasn't yet divined it's not denial
that holds her back—death-cleaning's already a daily routine.
she's no Paul the psychic octopus of Oberhausen,
but still foresees death-duties no one wants to bear,

though someone must. not too soon, she thinks, the vacant lot,
mind untethered from itself, time-shifting, all the clocks unreadable

but grandchildren buckled into their seats are here-and-now—
one's asleep, the other wanting to get out—seabirds soaring
over ocean, piercing clouds, trails of silver in lapis lazuli.
she's reading the flight-patterns of birds carried upwards on a thermal,
testing the possible, defying gravity, like Lawrence Hargrave
lifted into the air by a train of box kites at Stanwell Park

together, separate in a small car on this cantilevered span
open to the far horizon, she watches a small boy
hand-fly a red 'copter, his sister saucer-eyed,
wide awake now, taking it all in

LOSS ANGELES: A GLOSSARY

Sui Wang

LA angle (n.)
The perpetual tilt of palm trees.
leaning into the ocean & away from buildings.
An all-year yearning.

Sunset (n.)
A self-erasing rosy hush.
The hour when everything looks possible, but nothing really is.
Endure the careless pastel until your eyes sink in ink.

Neon (n.; adj.)
Electrical flames, die daily.
Fleeting ambitions, dim slowly.

Nocturne (n.)
Steady night temperature year-round makes it suitable for:
alcohol,
swoon the moon, silver by silver
regret piously.
Everyone smokes their own small ruins.
The night is as late as the day.

New depot street (n.)
Morning walk of shame forever documented in Uber rides.
Perfect duplex to make love to the hum of 110.
Dying plants and a drying heart competing for an end.

Hills (n.)
Folded into each other like bodies under blankets.

Fig semifreddo (n.)
Wounds melting on a cream bed.
Erotica, melancholy, indulgence. To open a woman three ways.
A seasonal dessert offered at Bar Monette.

Indie cinema (n.)
The quiet worship of obscure film in a stingy theatre smelling of old velvet and burnt sugar.
Slipping between passages of time is time better spent.

LAX (n.)
Seen me more than my mom in the past five years.
Ruthless portal through which I remember every departure, yet never the comebacks.

Finale (n.)
It's not like pouring wine for ghosts, more like swallowing pearls to commit suicide.
Whatever you are looking to say, love is always the wrong word.

IN THE TIME OF A THIN GOLD MOON

Sue Watson

wood chips alight
in the bath heater
my bare feet
on scrubbed wood
bathing in our first house

TIE ONE ON

Kendra Whitfield

Grief is folded between your scarves, stacked with a stale lavender sachet. I never open the drawer but Grief finds its way to the kitchen, stirs my oatmeal and puts too much cream in my coffee. Grief dives to the bottom of my bag and stows away to school, where your ghost tries to tell me how to do my job, the one you devoted your life to but wouldn't recognize anymore. Hell, I don't recognise it anymore but this poem isn't about me. I'm trying to separate you from Grief but the scarves got tangled in my heart and I'm tempted to throw them all away, donate them to the Goodwill. I'm afraid I'll see my memories walking down the street, stained with someone else's lipstick, scented with perfume that isn't Chanel No 5. I try to lose Grief the way you lost your keys and the tune to every Beatles' song, but Grief is canny, it finds its way back like a carrier pigeon. If this were wartime, Grief would win medals for loyalty and tenacity. The bureau chides me every time I walk by, tells me Grief is for suckers who write bad poetry and drink alone. You always told me to never put anything in writing because it would come back to haunt me. I guess that's why I'm always writing about you.

WINDOW

Lucy Wilks and Leone Gabrielle

widow's breve i am stir wind of syrup i am a loan bee after wet weather
draws me out like a cat to lick the jewels from a succulent leaf
burnt blunt turns blond to bone crisp even the ants are thirsty this 40° Tuesday
too late i rise too early i retire asleep but for twilight's cicada hour
grasslands' sweet moisture sails into a dead blue sky
having depleted itself of verve it summons a sluggish sun a malingering moon to our mutual reformation
a new dress addresses me blue-black with memories of floral bloom
i sketch in chalk an apparition wonder at its witchery an archival trace
a young beekeeper approaches with his philosophy of 3 types of person flies bees and wasps
tiny torpedoes programmed by pollen to navigate my way my only chattel like you no slave
your velvet sway a brave bird kisses the evening's raven beak
coursing through me a private language i master as i fail its once foreshadowed grammarian
who leans back seasonally writes in this grotto with trouser-less legs
i stand on earth its colleague steward lover given through glass a pang as fidget of its oldest and its few

A collaborative adventure

Our collaboration is indebted to the 'exquisite corpse' technique of the French surrealists, and as such is based on our alternating between us the writing of each line, withholding it from the other but for its last three words to prompt their following line. This writing in partial ignorance generates an adventure whose newly contextualised fragments lead to an unusual narrative arc with meanings beyond our conscious intention and governance, an entity whose integrity depends upon a gestalt sensibility, a sublimation of our two different stylistic approaches into a third we cannot anticipate, whose themes of nature, domesticity, and loved ones, though common to each of our pens, are not solicited by overt demand.

YOU HAVE THE FACE

Myfanwy Williams

You've a face that invites it—not so much conversation but monologue, not so much diatribe but confessional. There by the tidal river, the mosquitos and midges feasting on your offering of bare calves and feet, the man collecting souls as talismans, collecting them for the universe he's building and would you like to audition for a place in his world, and you have the sort of face that invites confession. Also, by the river, low tide and the cormorants pecking at silt-filled clams, the other man who drove 10 hours for 5 seconds with a guru to be told his Sanskrit name and would you stand further away, what with your vaccination uploading his data to the cloud. And you've a face that invites it. Not just by the river but under the promenade of trees at Hyde Park, that space of protests and vigils, and you could be like the bloke who gives out free hugs, open, curious. A tell me more face, a standing on the Bankstown line at St Peter's station face, when the lights have blown and there's a couple dancing the samba right there on the platform right there in the rain, and the dying drag queen, hands crippled by retrovirals, telling you she'll never sew again and you've a face that says speak to me, yes. *In each respective ear is a labyrinth that will ferry your sorrow stories,* that will transmute it into waves.

GHOSTING

Jena Woodhouse

in memory of the Thylacine

Ghosting out of hollows gouged by runnels
of Jurassic streams,
disappearing into fern-filled gullies, silently,
surreal,
fancy's figment, fading on the conscience; blip
in consciousness:
they linger to remind us how our forebears dealt with
what they found:
flora, fauna, the unsullied habitat.

There are those so troubled by brief sightings,
they can find
no ease—haunting sites of creatures they glimpsed
fleetingly;
unable to leave without confirming that there are
survivors:
those who forced themselves upon this land did not
succeed
in erasing every Thylacine—

The creature shadows them, slipping from
another zone
where doomed species still reside, archived in
the planet's mind:
human, plant and animal, marine: life forms of every kind—
If they could

be revived, would the elided recognise
their home,
or would they flee in mute dismay,
too traumatised to stay?

The Van Diemen's Land Company introduced bounties on the thylacine from as early as 1830, and between 1888 and 1909, the Tasmanian government paid £1 per head for dead adult thylacines and ten shillings for pups. Source: Wikipedia

SAN DIEGO CHRISTMAS TREES

Kirby Michael Wright

Evergreens die slow inside homes. You could say they were dead already, having been sawed at the ankles in neighbouring Oregon. Carpets? An avalanche of needles. Dogs drink from tree stand reservoirs. Cats jab at low-lying ornaments. Kittens climb trunks.

January trees on borrowed time. Final flurries of needles swallowed by shop vacs. Ornaments unhooked from branches. Rewind the light strands. Bald trees dragged out, quartered, and stuffed in waste bins. The dump fills with the bones of trees that will reappear lush and green in holiday albums.

THAW

Morgan Yasbincek

on the way back from the south pole
stars have rearranged, a refreshed
memory game, I walk into a different
house, fire a touch dimmer, different
cat jumping into the bottom drawer

you stand in the kitchen, both
hands on the bench, looking into space
between them

slap the dog's coat down to take off my shoes, it could have
been the pelt of a seal, you could have been the captain of
a ship trapped in the ice, your helpless hands, palms down
on the bench, so what is it—I ask

I had a dream, you say, I will tell you—and all the cold
of the Southern Ocean rises up the windows—we know
light is due, but it doesn't come

I pull a bag out of the freezer, snap off two portions, pop
them in the toaster, put the kettle on, make a plan
to set a trap to catch another star—there are two
hearts in this house, two portions of light, two
streams of dreaming, an incontinent dog, a talking
cat—we only need to last until a thaw—
we sit at the table to examine your
dream
    —recalibrate

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Dr **Hasti Abbasi** is a writer, researcher, and Senior Lecturer at Deakin University. Her creative work explores the powerful ties between migration, identity, and storytelling. With publications spanning fiction and academic research, she is passionate about the role of narrative in shaping belonging and deepening cultural understanding.

Ben Adams is a poet, academic researcher, arts reviewer, and part-time servo clerk based on Kaurna Yerta in Adelaide, South Australia. His first collection, *A Synonym for Sobriety*, was published in 2019 after winning Friendly Street's Single Poet Competition. More recently, he has been a regular arts reviewer for Solstice Media, completed a literature PhD on Charles Bukowski and postmodern humanism, and co-authored scholarship on ideology and radicalisation, securitised education, masculinities, and the incel movement.

David Adès is an award-winning poet and short story writer. His most recent book is *The Heart's Lush Gardens* (Flying Islands Press 2024). His chapbook, *The Toolmaker and Other Poems* (Walleah Press), and another full-length collection, *A Blink of Time's Eye* (Five Islands Press), are both forthcoming in 2025. David hosts the poetry podcast series, Poets' Corner, which can be found at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLb8bHCZBRMBjlWlPDeaSanZ3qAZcuVW7N.

Hellen Albuquerque is a Brazilian artist and writer whose words have been featured in various collections, magazines, and newspapers. She has lived in over 200 cities, making the Americas, Europe, and Africa her temporary homes. Hellen explores horizons through analog photography and poetry.

Emma Ashmere's short story collection *Dreams They Forgot* (Wakefield Press, 2020) follows her novel *The Floating Garden* (Spinifex Press, 2015), shortlisted for the Small Press Network Book of the Year. Her work has been widely published including in: *Meanjin*, *the Age*, *Overland*, *Griffith Review*, *Commonwealth Writers adda magazine*, *Short Australian Stories*, and *Furphy Anthology*. She/her. Living on Bundjalung country in New South Wales.

Hilary Ayshford is a former science journalist and editor based in rural Kent in the UK. She writes flash fiction and short stories and has been nominated for Best of The Net and Best Small Fictions. She likes her music in a minor key and has a penchant for the darker side of human nature.

Lidya Ayuningtyas is a writer from Indonesia currently studying in Perth. When she is not writing an academic piece, she writes all kinds of creative work.

Mitchell Batavia is a New Yorker and educator in the healthcare arena. His publications include a personal essay, *A Brother's Memoir* (Taylor & Francis), a memoir, *Wisdom from a Chair* (Booklocker, 2016), and several healthcare textbooks (published by Butterworth-Heinemann; Elsevier). https://www.amazon.com/stores/Mitchell-Batavia/author/B01EMRJKFW?ref=ap_rdr&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled=true

Amber Black is an emerging writer from south-west WA. She earned her BA in Literature and Writing and Visual Art from Edith Cowan University and is completing honours research on personal narrative and the epistolary form. Her work features in *NiTRO+Creative Matters* (March 2025), *Raine Square Story Dispenser*, and the forthcoming collection *Follow the Salt* (Night Parrot Press, 2025).

Margaret Bradstock is a Sydney poet, editor and critic. She lectured at UNSW and has been Asialink writer-in-residence at Beijing University, co-editor of *Five Bells* and on the Board of Directors for Australian Poetry. Her poetry is widely published ans has won numerous awards. Her ninth collection is *Alchemy of the Sun* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2024).

Ruth Brandt is a writer and creative writing tutor from Surrey, England. Her prize-winning short story collection *No One has any Intention of Building a Wall* (2021) is published by Fly on the Wall Press. Her short stories and flash fiction have been widely published and nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Write Well Award and Best Small Fictions Award.

Elizabeth Rae Bullmer has been writing since the age of seven. Bullmer's work has appeared in *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality and the Arts, MacQueen's Quinterly, Cloudbank, Sky Island Journal, Her Words, Anacapa Review* and *The Awakenings Review*. Her most recent chapbook is *Skipping Stones on the River Styx*. She's a licensed massage and sound therapist, facilitates writing/healing workshops and is the mother of two phenomenal humans, living with four fantastic felines in Kalamazoo.

Marion May Campbell's recent works include the poetry collections *languish* (Upswell 2022) and *third body* (Whitmore Press 2018), and the experimental memoir of her father *The Man on the Mantelpiece* (UWAP 2018) She lives with her two border collie companions in Naarm / Melbourne, on unceded GunaiKurnai land.

Sara Cosgrove is an award-winning journalist and poet living with disabilities. Her poems have appeared or are scheduled to appear in *Poetry Ireland Review, The Seventh Quarry, Meniscus, Notre Dame Review, Gargoyle, Osiris, Great River Review, Frogpond,*

Autumn Moon Haiku Journal, Under the Basho, San Antonio Review, ONE ART, In Parentheses, Panoply, and *Roi Fainéant*. She has worked as an editor for 15 years and has studied in the United States, Cuba, and France.

Ellie Cottrell is a writer and poet working on Whadjuk Noongar Country. She has been featured in *Hooligan Street Poetry, StylusLit, Poetry d'Amour, Creatrix,* and the anthology *Ourselves: 100 Micro Memoirs (Night Parrot Press).* Ellie released her first poetry collection, *Speakeasy*, via In Case of Emergency Press in 2023. She is a strong proponent of the Oxford comma.

Kirsty Crawford has a BA in Creative Writing & Journalism and an MSc in Wildlife Biology. She also studied performing arts and lived in London as a professional performer. Switching career into wildlife conservation and writing features for environmental publications, she now works as a Community Engagement Manager for a marine charity. Recent publications have included *Ink Sweat and Tears, Speculative Books, Poetry Scotland, Motherlore* and *HerStry*.

Taylor Croteau is a queer writer and social justice advocate currently based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, though originally from Tennessee. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is a Tin House Workshop alum. Her work has appeared in *Bookend Review*, *HerStry*, *Unstamatic Press*, and others.

Kate Cumiskey holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. She is the author of five books, including *The women who gave up their vowels*, a book of poetry, from Finishing Line Press (2021), and *Ana*, a novel, also from Finishing Line (2022). Kate is a teacher and social justice advocate in coastal central Florida.

Dorit d'Scarlett is a Danish-Australian poet and writer based in Malaysia. Her prize-winning poetry and short fiction appear in international journals. A childhood marked by cultural bullying as an immigrant shapes her work, which explores identity, belonging, and the emotional terrain of those caught between worlds.

Em Dial is a queer, Black, Taiwanese, Japanese, and white writer born and raised in the Bay Area of California, currently living in Toronto. They are the author of *In the Key of Decay* (Palimpsest Press 2024) and an MFA candidate at the University of Guelph. Em's work can be found in the *Literary Review of Canada, Geist, Arc Poetry Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Richard Downing has won the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation Barbara Mandigo Kelly Peace Poetry Prize, *New Delta Review*'s Matt Clark Prize, and *New Woman Magazine*'s Grand Prize for Fiction. His work appears in over 50 journals, including *Arts & Letters*, *Malahat Review*, and *Solstice*. He is a voting rights activist.

Louis Faber's work has appeared in the United States, Canada, Europe and Asia and in *Cantos, The Poet* (UK), *Alchemy Spoon* (UK), *Arena Magazine* (Australia), *Dreich* (Scotland), *Prosetrics, Defenestration, Atlanta Review, Glimpse, Rattle, Pearl, The South Carolina Review* and *Worcester Review*, among others, and was twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Fiona Faulds lives in Boorloo/Perth. She writes short stories and poems, often from prompts generously given to her from her eldest, yet not always wisest, offspring.

If **Anneliese Finke** could ask one thing, it would be to really picture her poetry. Like Chagall's figures floating through the air, she's trying to capture a world that is ordinary and extraordinary all at once—as though perhaps these two things are not as different as we assume. https://anneliesefinkepoetry.com

Ian Fisher spent his early years near The Main in Montreal. He writes stories that end up where there is a taste for them in Ireland, Canada, France, or England. For this sort of endeavour John O'Hara was paid per word two-plus in today's US dollars. Alas, a bygone era.

Kasey Frahm is a University of Canberra student interested in writing her way back to the coast. She would never pretend to be anyone other than herself, so this third person was written by a friend.

Anna Riley Frankpitt's piece looks at the implications of family relationships. More specifically how we love and care for one another throughout our lives. It asks the reader to think about how these dynamics change with age and how the toll of that sits with each individual.

A.J. Frantz is from Detroit and currently studies urban planning at Oberlin College. Her work has appeared in *Folio, Prime Number Magazine, ellipsis, Inlandia, Penumbra*, and elsewhere.

Kim Fulton is a poet and fiction writer from Aotearoa. Her writing has appeared in publications including *Landfall*, *Mimicry*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *Mayhem*, *takahē*, *Stasis Journal*, and *Blackmail Press*. In 2020, she published her first book of poems, *I kind of thought the alpacas were a metaphor until we got there*.

Leone Gabrielle writes in the company of crickets and thirsty plants, from Seymour, a snaking town on Taungurung country. Shortlisted: *Minds Shine Bright, Spineless Wonders, La Piccioletta Barca*. Published: *Plumwood Mountain, Meanjin Quarterly, Rochford St. Review, KalliopeX, Meniscus.*

Claire Gaskin lives on unceded Bunurong country. Her first full length poetry collection, *a bud*, was published by John Leonard press in 2006. It was completed in the receipt of an Australia Council grant and shortlisted in the SA Festival Awards. Her subsequent collections are *Paperweight* (Hunter Publishers, 2013), *Eurydice Speaks* (Hunter Publishers, 2021), *Ismene's Survivable Resistance* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2021) and *Weather Event* (Life Before Man, Gazebo Books, 2023).

Stephanie Green is widely published in Australian and international journals, including *Meniscus, StylusLit, Axon, TEXT,* and *Live Encounters*. Her most recent collection is *Seams of Repair* (Calanthe Press, 2023). Examples of her work also appear in anthologies such as *Pratik: Fire and Rain* (APWT/Nirala, 2023), *The Writing Mind* (Recent Work Press, 2023), and *The Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (Melbourne University Press, 2020). She is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer with Griffith University.

Kirwan Henry lives in Naarm (Melbourne), Australia. Her poems have been published in *Westerly, Cordite, Meniscus, Jacaranda* and *Best of Australian Poems 2022*. She was longlisted in the 2023 Liquid Amber Poetry Prize and shortlisted in the 2024 Calanthe Poetry Prize.

Blossom Hibbert has a pamphlet, *suddenly, it's now*, published by Leafe Press in 2023. Her work has appeared in places such as *The Temz Review, Litter, International Times, Anthropocene* and *Buttonhook Press*. She is a poet from England, but has relocated to Melbourne.

Marwa Hijazi is a Lebanese-Australian writer and secondary teacher. Her poems have been published in the University of Sydney's *WATTLE* and *Drylight* publications, and her fantasy-fiction piece has appeared in Western Sydney University's *Creature Magazine*. She was also awarded a place in the Writing NSW Cultivate Mentorship Program in 2024.

Kylie A Hough writes on unceded Yugambeh Country. A finalist and recipient of various writing awards, Kylie's poetry, essays and short stories are published locally and internationally, most recently in *Going Down Swinging, Cordite Poetry Review,* and *Barely South Review*.

Heikki Huotari, on a hunger strike in opposition to the war in Vietnam, was court-martialled for refusing to eat. Since retiring from academia/mathematics he has published more than 400 poems in literary journals, including *Pleiades, Spillway, the American Journal of Poetry* and *Willow Springs*, and in six chapbooks and six collections. He has won one book and two chapbook prizes. His Erdős number is two.

Danielle Johnstone is a teacher and writer from South Australia. She has a Graduate Certificate of Editing and Publishing from the University of Southern Queensland and

is currently studying a Master of Arts (Writing and Literature) at Deakin University. She has an interest in life writing and creative nonfiction, including hybrid forms such as autofiction.

Kimberley Knight lives on Dharug Land in Sydney. Her work has been recognised and appeared in publications such as *Kill Your Darlings*, *Westerly* and *Carve* (USA). In 2024, she was the Eric Dark Fellow at Varuna and awarded runner-up for the Writing NSW Prize. She is also a full-time PhD candidate investigating adolescent literacy.

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer is an award-winning disabled author of books for children and adults. His first book, *The Outsider*, which takes as its subject his late father's struggles with schizophrenia and homelessness, was published by Broadway Books. Nathaniel has forthcoming/recently published poems, stories and essays with *Citron Review, Reed Magazine, Potomac Review, Epiphany, Permafrost, Berkeley Poetry Review, About Place Journal, Breakwater Review, and DIAGRAM*. Nathaniel lives outside Atlanta with his family. www.NathanielLachenmeyer.com.

Michael Leach resides in Bendigo on unceded Dja Dja Wurrung Country. Michael's poems reside in journals such as *Cordite*, anthologies such as *The Best Australian Science Writing 2024*, and his books *Chronicity* (MPU 2020), *Natural Philosophies* (RWP 2022), and *Rural Ecologies* (ICOE Press 2024). Michael's poems have won or been otherwise recognised in various competitions, such as the MSB Confidence Writing Competition. Michael's next poetry collection, *Chords in the Soundscapes*, is forthcoming from Ginninderra Press.

Matthew Lee is a writer and editor living with cancer in Melbourne, Australia. His work appears or is forthcoming in *North of Oxford Journal, Neologism Poetry Journal*, and many others.

Wes Lee lives in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. She has three poetry collections. Her work has appeared in an array of publications, including *Best New Zealand Poems, Westerly, The London Magazine, Landfall, The Stinging Fly*, and *Cordite*. Most recently she was awarded The Free Verse Prize 2024, by The Poetry Society in London, and the Heroines/Joyce Parkes Women's Writing Prize 2022, in New South Wales.

Travis Lucas is a short story writer, poet, tutor, drag queen, support worker, burnout masters graduate, and heathen born and living on Kaurna yerta. His work has recently appeared in *The Saltbush Review, Jacaranda Journal,* and *Aniko Press Magazine*. Travis spends his ever-fluctuating experiences of time balancing basketballs on his nose and as a cat cushion, hanging out for the decade's first moment of reprieve.

Robert Maddox-Harle (aka Rob Harle) is an artist, poet and reviewer. His work is published in journals, anthologies, online reviews, books and he has four volumes of his own poetry published—*Scratches & Deeper Wounds* (Spinning Spider Publications, 1996); *Mechanisms of Desire* (Cyberwit, 2012); *Winds of Infinity* (Cyberwit, 2016); and *The Blazing Furnace* (Cyberwit, 2022). Recently received Lifetime Literary Achievement Award 2021 (GIEWEC). He is currently a member of the Leonardo Review Panel; a member of the Editorial Board of numerous international literature journals; and Australian–NZ editor for *Setu* journal. Artwork, publications, reviews and selected writings are available from his website: https://www.maddoxharle.com

Cendrine Marrouat is a poet, writer, photographer, watercolour painter, digital artist, and the co-founder of Auroras & Blossoms and A Warm Cup of Cozy. She has authored, co-authored, and edited more than 50 books in several genres. She is also the (co-)creator of several poetry forms inspired by the haiku. Website: https://creativeramblings.com

Tenille McDermott (she/her) is a writer and PhD candidate in creative writing at James Cook University. She is the co-editor of *Sūdō Journal* and the co-host and co-producer of the podcast *Edits & Annotations*, and she lives and works on the unceded lands of the Bindal and Wulgurukaba people.

Lindsay McLeod is an Adelaide poet who lives down the Port with his adored cattle dog, Mary. Some of his 2024 work can be found in *A Thin Slice of Anxiety, Pure Slush, Stone Circle, Rundelania, Roi Fainéant, Adelaide Mag, Beatnik Cowboy* and others. Lindsay continues to support his poetry habit by working in a warehouse by day.

Frances Milat is an endocrinologist, clinical researcher and writer who lives in Melbourne, Australia. She has more than 80 publications in medical, scientific and medical humanities journals. She is currently completing her Master of Creative Writing and is interested in the role of story and art in healing.

Katya Mills is an American nonbinary trans writer of German and Huguenot descent. They have a literature degree from Northwestern University and have published several titles as an Independent. Katya is also a licensed psychotherapist in California. They help people imagine, envision and re-author the stories of their lives. Their work can be found on *Goodreads* and *New Words Press*.

Peter Newall was born in Sydney, Australia, where he worked in a Navy dockyard, as a lawyer and as a musician. He has since lived in Japan, in Germany and now in Odesa, Ukraine, where he fronts a local RnB band. His stories have been published in England, America, Europe, Hong Kong and Australia.

Keith Nunes (Aotearoa / New Zealand) has had poetry, fiction, haiku and visuals published around the globe. He creates ethereal manifestations as a way of communicating with the outside world.

Thomas Osatchoff, together with family, is building a self-sustaining home near a waterfall. New work has appeared in *Midsummer Dream House*.

Simon Ott is a dentist living in a small town in rural Pennsylvania. Teeth are his vocation, but writing is his passion.

E Peregrine (they/them) is a trans/nonbinary conductor, poet, teacher, and recent transplant to New England. Their writing has appeared in *Gold Man Review, Roanoke Review, Variant Literature, smoke and mold, Bluestem Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Edie Popper (they/them) is a paediatric intensive care nurse and writer living on unceded Gadigal/Wangal Land. Edie's poetry often focuses on climate and class justice, illness/disability and mental health, memory, trauma, relationships, queerness, and creating community across the false borders society constructs between humans, other humans, animals and earth. Edie has read their poetry at various community poetry and slam nights and on local radio, but has not before been published.

John Pring is a poet and author based in the UK, where he is studying for an MA from the University of Sussex. His work has been published in *The Passionfruit Review, MONO, Oroboro, Dolorem Ipsum, Qu Literary, The Letter Review, The Tomahawk Creek Review, The Banyan Review, Cathexis Northwest Press*, and others.

Promise_nobuhle is the pen name of Tshepiso Buhle Vilakazi. She studied English Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Dustin Radke, whose work has appeared in such places as *Elevation Review* and *Off-Kilter Magazine*, is from St Louis, Missouri and currently lives in Santa Barbara, California. He can be found on Instagram @dustin_radke.

Jessie Raymundo is a poet and educator from the Philippines. In 2024, he was awarded a Brooklyn Poets Fellowship. His poems have appeared in *TAB: The Journal of Poetry and Poetics, Failbetter, South Dakota Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Singapore Unbound's SUSPECT*, and elsewhere.

Purbasha Roy is a writer from Jharkhand, India. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Iron Horse Literary Review, The Margins, Reckoning Magazine* as of late. Attained 2nd position in 8th Singapore Poetry Contest. Best of the Net Nominee. https://www.linktr.ee/Purbashawrites

Thaddeus Rutkowski is the author of eight books, most recently *Safe Colors* (New Meridian Arts, 2023), a novel in short fictions. He teaches at Medgar Evers College, Columbia University, and a YMCA, and received a fiction writing fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Maggie Shapley is a Canberra poet whose first collection, *Proof*, was published by Recent Work Press in 2017. Her new collection, *Fruits of Exile*, was part of her PhD thesis on the publication of Australian female poets, focusing on Gwen Harwood and Margaret Scott, and is due for publication by Recent Work Press later this year.

Jessica Sheather-Neumann (she/her) writes about women and motherhood and has been published in *Motherlore, Scribente Maternum, Feminartsy* and the anthology, *Christmas Cheerios*. She also runs a writing group for parents. Instagram @readingjesssn

Leo Shtutin completed a DPhil in French literature at Merton College, Oxford in 2014. This was published in 2019 by OUP under the title *Spatiality and Subjecthood in Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Maeterlinck and Jarry: Between Page and Stage*. Since leaving academia, Leo has worked predominantly as a translator from Russian. He won the Rossica Young Translator's Prize in 2010 and was nominated for the Read Russia Prize in 2018. Since a two-year stint as a freelancer for oDR (Open Democracy Russia), he has translated a number of books across fiction and nonfiction (*Opposing Forces: Plotting the New Russia*, a series of dialogues between Alexei Navalny and Adam Michnik [Egret 2016]; *Death of a Prototype: The Portrait*, a novel by Victor Beilis [Anthem 2017]; *Emergence of a Hero: A Tale of Romantic Love in Russia around 1800*, a study of early Russian Romanticism by Andrei Zorin [OUP 2023]; and various others).

Gemma Siegler is a lesbian tarot enthusiast and fiction writer, currently in the process of writing her debut novel. Her writing poses questions about queerness, femininity, love, and the stability of reality. Gemma's work occupies the space between realism and magical realism through sharp, dark humour and complicated warping of emotional and physical landscapes. She hopes to write queer fiction that would have made her younger self feel seen.

Ian C Smith's work has been widely published. He writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island, Tasmania.

Jane Snyder's stories have appeared in *Flint Hills Review*, *Jaded Ibis*, and *Maudlin House*. She lives in Spokane.

Soo Jin is a poet and award-winning architect, exploring fluid identity and the topology of home. Born in Seoul and journeying between New Zealand, UK, and Australia, her work maps connections between places and memories. An established Korean-language

poet and recipient of the 'Poetry-Anti-poetry Emerging Poet Award', she is expanding into English-language poetry. Soo Jin won the inaugural 'Sydney Korean Literary Prize', and serves on the editorial board of *Literature and Sydney*, a Korean magazine.

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, Door Is a Jar, The Phoenix,* and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet.

RL Swihart came of age in Michigan but has lived in California for the last 30-plus years. He is the author of *Matman & Testudo* (2018), *Woodhenge* (2020) and *The Last Man* (second edition, 2021), all independently published by Gold Across the Water Books. His poems have appeared in *The Denver Quarterly, Fourteen Hills, Salt Hill, Rhino* and *Quadrant*, among other publications.

Ruby Sylvaine is an 18-year-old studying Physics, who spends too much time on trails, and aimlessly sitting at lookouts. She enjoys writing about sweat, heat and breath, and the sway of hair and leaves in the wind. She loves deafening silence, deafening sound, Christmas and echidnas.

Carsten ten Brink is a writer, artist and photographer. He was born in Germany and educated in Australian, American and British schools. Stories have recently been published by *The Coalition*, the *2024 FlashFlood*, *Periwinkle Pelican* and *The Write Launch* among others. His fiction has been shortlisted for prizes at Fish Publishing, Jerry Jazz Musician and The Masters Review. Carsten is currently editing a political novel and working toward a collection of short stories. In the last month his work has appeared in *Cosmic Daffodil*, *Heimat* and *Thin Skin Magazine.*

Published in over 50 journals, **Jake Tringali**'s poetry has appeared in various art installations, including *Boston City Hall* and *Burning Man*. His first poetry book is *Poetry for the Neon Apocalypse* (Transcendent Zero Press, 2018).

Alexander Jonathan Vidgop is a theatre director, author and screenwriter, and the founder of the Am haZikaron Institute for Science, Culture and Heritage of the Jewish People. He is the recipient of the Zeiti Yerushalaim Prize and the medal 'For contribution to the development of the national spiritual heritage of the Jewish People'. Alexander was born in Leningrad in 1955. In 1974 he was expelled from what is now called the Saint-Petersburg State University of Culture and Arts 'for behaviour unworthy of the title of Soviet student'. Having worked as a locksmith, loader and White Sea sailor, he was drafted into the army and sent to serve in the Arctic Circle. Graduating from the Russian State Academy of Performing Arts in 1982, he was involved in 23 productions across the

USSR, 12 of which were shut down. In 1989 he emigrated to Israel, where he has worked as a director, editor and researcher. Jonathan was awarded a special grant from the Israeli president for writing. Leading Russian publisher NLO published Vidgop's latest book *Testimony*. Jonathan's stories were published by the *Los Angeles Review* and the *Pembroke Magazine*; 'Nomads' recently won *Meridian*'s Editors' Prize in Prose. He is the author of several books.

Louise Wakeling lives in Dharug/Gundungurra country in the Blue Mountains. She has been widely published in journals such as *Cordite, Burrow* and *Live Encounters,* and in anthologies including *The Best Australian Poems, Antipodes, Contemporary Poetry, Caring for Country,* and *The Best Australian Science Writing. Off Limits* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2021) is her fourth collection of poetry, ranging across ecopoetics, sewer-surfing and the tragi-comedy of relationships.

Sui Wang is a creative writer and social science academic living bicoastally in the United States. She gathers whispers from the margins.

Sue Watson, BA Vis Arts (COFA), RN. Born Sydney. Published in *Overland, Famous Reporter, Burrow online, Five Bells, NSW Poets' Union* anthologies*, Youngstreet Poets'* anthologies. Readings: Mona Vale Library NSW.

Kendra Whitfield lives and writes at the southern edge of the Northern Boreal Forest. Her work has been anthologised by Community Building Art Works and Beyond the Veil Press. When not writing, she can be found basking in sunbeams on her deck or swimming laps at the local pool.

Lucy Wilks is a Melbourne-based writer who enjoys playing with metrical constraints and traditional forms. Her work has appeared in *Verse, Meanjin, Southerly, Otoliths, Plumwood Mountain, Cordite,* and *Rabbit*.

Myfanwy Williams is a Sydney-based queer writer of Filipino Welsh heritage. Her work has been published in *Plumwood Mountain Journal, About Place Journal, Wild Roof Journal, The Winged Moon Literary Journal,* Querencia Press' *We Were Seeds* (2024) and others. Her poem 'The Carrying' was recently nominated for the Pushcart Prize by Querencia Press in 2024. Myfanwy holds degrees in literature, psychology and sociology, with a PhD in Social Science from UNSW, where she currently teaches.

Having lived in Greece for more than a decade, and having also spent time in England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, Russia and Turkey, as well as speaking several European languages **Jena Woodhouse**'s background and writing reflect some transcultural influences. She is the author of twelve book and chapbook publications, including seven poetry titles, and her writing has received awards

for adult fiction, children's fiction and poetry. Her unpublished poetry ms, 'Tidings from the Pelagos: A Polyphony', was a finalist in the Eyelands Book Awards (Greece) 2024.

Kirby Michael Wright was born and raised on the remote island of Moloka'i. His family land served as the breadbasket for Kamehameha's warriors while training for their assault on Oahu.

Morgan Yasbincek has published four collections of poetry and one novel, the most recent being the poetry collection *coming to nothing* (Puncher & Wattman) in 2023. Her first poetry collection, *Night Reversing* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996) won the Anne Elder and Mary Gilmore awards. Her second, *Firelick* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2004) and third, *White Camel* (John Leonard Press, 2009), were shortlisted for two national awards. Her novel, *liv* ((Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000), was shortlisted for the ASAL Gold Medal Award and highly commended by the Victorian Premier's Award.

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