



MENISCUS

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

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About Meniscus

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

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

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EDITORIAL

This is something of a bumper edition, filled with excellent works in prose and in poetry. We found it a very powerful work to edit, with a definite trend toward writing that engages with and/or critiques the contemporary world.

The poems submitted this time—both those selected for publication, and those regretfully declined—had a strong focus on a world that is wider than the merely human. There are poems about dogs, and rocks, about the ontology of storms, or the aspirations of birds and clouds and trees. There is growing evidence of empathic connections between humans and the rest of this planet, and that empathy is definitely present in so many contemporary poems—so many that we are tempted to say there is no real need to talk about ecopoetry now because so many poems are living and breathing in that framework.

For both poems and prose, there was also a very clear tendency to write in ways that reflect on connections between humans; or on the relationship a person might have with their own complicated multiple selves; or on the relationship between the ancient (or more recent) past and the present; or, in a few works, the anguish of brutality, from personal insult to the horrors of war.

The use of form also captured our attention, in prose and in poetry, with the presence of a kind of material poetics in both forms. Authors presented prose poems, haiku, and sigo; features of flash fiction, experimental language; and the exploration of the use of white space around the black type of the words. It's almost as though the gap between prose and poetry is disappearing, or at least becoming more diffuse.

What we particularly love about editing *Meniscus* is that each issue puts on record the sorts of social, human, ecological, and political issues that are inflecting our shared experiences of this wide world. In this issue, again we see the impassioned, engaged, and highly diverse ways in which authors claim a space to speak.

Jen Webb and Deb Wain, editors

A POEM IN CONVERSATIONAL MODE

Carolyn Abbs

I clip on his lead. Breeze sweeps us out the gate.
We flimsy light as paper down the street; hair brushed
from my face. Drizzle fuzzes the morning like my brain
before a poem. It's weeks since my dog was attacked,
but we're still cautious.
He sniffs at every tree and weed; pees repeatedly.
I note cracks in the paving, then my eyes cast ahead:
no big dogs, clear sky coming from the sea. We walk on,
tree branches spray rain on my hair; my eyelids flicker,
trigger a rhythm. A gust of wind shifts us left, enjambment
into an alleyway, first line of a poem. Foliage filigrees
a wall with shivering images. Ravens strut the top
in consonance: *squawk*, whack of black skirts.
A couple at number nine feed them bones. We pause
in caesura, then race ahead to a second stanza, climb
steps to the park, a waggy welcome. *Hi, Hello*.
Our loud vowels fly like kites in sea air.

DON'T LET ME KEEP ON WALKING

Nina Baeyertz

It's closing night.

We clutch at cheap drinks—cask wine in plastic glasses, third-rate beer cans—and bustle from foyer into performance space, chattering, laughing.

On entering, there's a faint hummmm of a soundtrack, a deep modulating vibration at low frequency, like something has been slowed down.

We slow down.

In the middle of the space, a thin catwalk protrudes at hip height, with broken glass shards sticking out of the floor. Footlights glint on each edge.

The hum increases in volume and the ambient room lights go out.

Our bodies move around awkwardly, scratch, shift back in our seats, stand up straighter.

Spotlight. The performer enters at one end of the catwalk.

A sleek silhouette, her body is hugged by a tight short black dress, legs shaved and shiny and standing us to attention. We follow the legs up, then down. Barefoot.

The first step into the footlights and we hold our breath.

Her second step gets closer to the shards and all our eyes are on the soft flesh of the soles of her feet.

She pauses. We scan up her body and notice that she's carrying a bottle. Clear glass, like the shards, clear liquid inside. She takes a sip. Shudders. We shiver.

The bottle swings down to her side and she takes another step forward, right into the spears that could slice her feet.

Is this a trick? How does she not get hurt?

She takes another step, and another, missing the glass every time. She doesn't look down. Only lifts her arm to drink out of the bottle every few steps. When she arrives at one end, she simply turns and goes back the other way, like a human typewriter, back and forth.

We want her to make a mistake.

No.

No, we don't. Not really. Of course we don't. We couldn't. No blood. Can't we get her to stop somehow? It's making us uncomfortable.

Some put down their half-drunk cans, others feel the plastic rims of their cups cutting into their lips.

She continues, becoming slower, until the whole bottle is finished, then she stops at one end and faces out towards the audience. Makes desperate eye contact, then turns away and throws the bottle against the wall.

Blackout.

Silence.

Lights up. Music starts playing. The tinkling of a piano through the speaker. Strings—broad violin bow strokes in staccato rhythm. We recognise this intro.

'Walking on, walking on broken glass.'

Piano chords. The beat comes in. So upbeat. It breaks the spell.

'Walking on, walking on broken glaaaaasss.'

As we exit, laughing in release at what we think is the irony of the song, talk spills over: Was she really drinking that much? That was crazy, way too dangerous—someone could have gotten hurt.

The music in the room behind us plays to itself. The performer is offstage, out of sight.

'You were the sweetest thing that I ever knew...'

THE GUESTS AND THE PET

Sarah Barr

The worst thing about it was that you seemed to think it was our fault, or our pet's fault. But I'd warned you he could run and that there were gaps in the fence. I warned you! We were in Brittany and knew nothing about the disaster until we got home, exhausted from the driving and ferry crossing, all with sore throats and feeling run-down.

The rented gite was spartan, uncomfortable, the drains blocked from day two. There was no garden, and it was on a straight narrow road that cars and trucks bombed along at over 100 kph. Think about that with three kids under six!

You didn't have children back then; you only had yourselves to think of, and we let you stay in our lovely house—free of charge—for two weeks, eating the food in the fridge and drinking all the wine. You hardly said thank you and you never said sorry.

You said he disappeared so quickly.

But I warned you! He had very energetic legs and could outrun you, no doubt. You only had to care for one pet, and you failed.

Consequently, we then endured a decade of different pets in an effort to make up—two rabbits that kicked the kids, three guineapigs, a goldfish that died, a kitten that had to be returned due to allergies, a dog that had to be sent away because it bit everyone. Some of these could have been avoided if you hadn't lost our beloved Toto.

The children cried.

You said you'd had a miserable time staying in our house, arguing every day. That's hardly our fault. You left the place pretty grubby.

And the tortoise never came back.

HUMP DAY

Jason Beale

Though the globe
is round, the horizon
we see is flat as hell,
and the wings of the day
are scarred by clouds.

Over the city streets
foreshadowing doom,
the sound of a giant
cracking his bones
unfolds across the sky.

While standing by
a rubbish bin, a fallen angel
in the rain is talking
like a man possessed,
on a Wednesday afternoon.

IN THE WEEK FOLLOWING A DEATH ON A LOCAL STREET

Victor Billot

For Michael Steven

With the police finished,
the tyre marks on the grass
start to fade.
Back in town, I pass by uneasy
at the arbitrary borders of life.
The slow dripping of rain on tin.
Above the old cemetery,
long rows decrepit, completed
by the bones of those gone on.
The week of my fiftieth birthday.
No longer young, I remain for now.
The few still in the streets
look up, brief, furtive,
moving with insular intent.
The city decked in detritus
of late winter, empty cans,
wet cardboard and weeds
pushing blindly through dank earth.
Investigations are continuing
and a name in the newspaper
is unfamiliar.
Later in the day,
the clouds draw apart
and a blue opening summons.

CASUALTIES

Brent Cantwell

gravel grating roof un-
zipping
half a cabbage shaken
in a pot—
the last wheel-jerk of the mind:
dad's gonna kill me—
daddy—
the buzz-dull sound of insects—
nothing to be done—
 but the reporter's there
 eyeing casual
 angles
dragging some body's
last intimate
moment
 to the middle-of-the-road:
 sad-attractive-young-female!
wondering if
 HIGH SPEED CAR CRECHE
 or the *reckless-teenager* tag
is going too far—
 iodine is applied
 to gravel-ripped edges—
a body's swabbed clean
 cut by cut—

*

turned on at six
the news establishes today's casual-
ties early—
you won't remember her name—
you will be half-drunk by the time
she's back at yours—
there will be anticipation
though it's a done deal—
it will be emphasized
that youth and beauty
make tragedy much,
much worse
that attractiveness bleeds
across so many frequencies
and you will only know her after
she's gone
viral—

ROCK TIME

Linden Carroll

Rocks do not need watches.
Time for them is a slow roll
up a steep hill, dew-painted.
Time takes something from you,

but it is mostly skin cells,
flustered by air.
Rocks shave their beards
with decades at a time.

Rocks do not need SMS.
Their conversations are luxurious
back-and-forth for centuries.
5pm is not a deadline,

it is a setting on a clockface.
Rocks understand sunsets.
How blinking quick is the slow
drip of honey across the ocean,

as our red orb sinks like a stone.
Time is a stretched gum, snapped
into the mouth of babes.
Time ends so fast.

Rocks do not worry about destiny,
or complain about dreariness.

They do not stop to think.
It is a constant mulling movement,

as snails whip by, heady
with the scent of success.
The ambitions of individuals
are limitless, inconsequential.

Rocks are split in instants
millennia in the making.
Two millennia for us to see the effects.
Rocks will become dirt.

I too will become dirt.
From whence, to whence.
Rocks do not care how I spend my time
between dirt days.

SKY CURTAIN

Anne M Carson

From afar a grey curtain is pulled across the sky
porous chiffon that lets light through

but casts a pall blousy billowing as if wind puffs
 then lets go deflating

Back and forth the cloth is drawn opening closing
Up close I see it's a flock of ravens sweeping the sky

darkening as they clump to wheel together
a peloton in tight for the corner then thinning

as they traverse only to thicken at the turn
The way they swing across the road

set on plans of their own the way
they drape and darken moods descending

in the mind the body
darkening clumping pulling the heart tight

then lifting again of their own volition

KNOCKING ON THE DOOR, SCREAMING

Emilie Collyer

scrolling videos on facebook and there is the sketch where women try to name one male celebrity who has been charged with sexual assault and the whole sketch is naming names and the women get depressed and the next video that comes up on facebook is 'the one with brad pitt' which is the episode of the tv show friends where brad pitt was the guest star and monica opens the door and there is brad pitt and he is smiling like only one of the most famous men in the world can smile and the live audience scream they scream and scream because it's brad pitt and the list of names goes on of male celebrities who have been charged the list is endless the punch line of the sketch is that the list never ends and the algorithm is so smart like it's winking like it knows something about why male celebrities have been able to because brad pitt opens the door and smiles and the door knock punch is the line of the sketch the one where he is at the and the list is so long and the door knock punch is endless the screaming desperate and he is smiling the way only a famous man can smile when knocking the punch at the bodies smile screaming knock open the door list don't open the door please don't open the

SAD WHILE TEACHING

Emilie Collyer

Today I feel sad while teaching. I want to tell them I don't know why they should, or would, write poetry.

I didn't sleep well, and this could be contributing. I'm not sure why. I ate chocolate and blueberries late at night too close to bedtime.

Before class, one of the students gets into the same elevator as me. I smile but he avoids my eye. In class, he gets involved and has intelligent things to say about other students' poetry.

Also at night, I have been tending a wound on my partner for many weeks now and sometimes I wonder if the wound will be open from here until the end of time.

After class, a different student asks me about places to submit work and it takes all of my willpower not to say: *don't bother*. I am disconsolate.

In the small hours, I saw a writer I know doing an ASK ME ANYTHING on social media. Someone asks her about how she got to where she is, writing for theatre and television.

I buy a package of cardboard salad from a place at Melbourne Central shopping centre called Nourish or Sustain. The server asks if I want dressing and I opt for lime mayonnaise.

She says she had to work other jobs for a long time before she got here. don't know her exact age but she is a peer of my -daughter who is 27.

I have to wait for many days on Platform 3 until an announcement eventually announces there will be no trains on Platform 3 this year due to a system error.

Last year we tended to his psychic wounds. I'm not sure which I prefer.
I have to admit I have come to dread the resistance of the dressing as I
tear it away from his skin each time.

We traipse up the escalator to the concourse and then back down to Platform 2 where supposedly a leer jet will be arriving to take us to Flinders Street station at any moment.

My in-box is a winter swimming pool of rejections. So many pieces to try and scrape up off the tiled floor with that long, long pole and the unwieldy net at the end.

Only those who can produce their feminist discourse credentials will be allowed on the jet, so I pull my laptop out of its old grey carry case and search for evidence.

I don't write to win awards or get published; I remind myself in italics on my phone while trying to remember if this is a wound-dressing day or a day off.

About half of the passengers are wearing masks. Many carry backpacks. There are a few groups of young men, an older couple, short and stumpy dressed in black.

In two different shows, I have seen this week, masculine bodies are in unitards and there is no visible sign of genitalia. I wonder if it is tucked away or if I am misgendering the bodies.

A young woman pushing a pram, being pursued by an older woman. Pursued could be too strong a word. I feel I will be able to outdo all of them if it comes to citations.

Years ago, when a man I was in a relationship with revealed infidelity and I got angry, he asked if I was going to cut his penis off. He seemed genuinely afraid.

But when it comes to lived experience, who knows what the Metro Transit Guards will be looking for as they vet our applications to be permitted on the jet bound for Flinders.

This was some years after Lorena Bobbitt cut her husband's penis off, but it lingered in the zeitgeist and had taken hold in the imaginations of many men.

I spend more time observing and conclude the older woman is related to the younger woman and the child in the pram. She was not in pursuit but simply walking behind them earlier.

In my twenties, I worked as a personal care assistant. One client was a couple. The man, P, had severe brain and spine injuries from a workplace accident.

I see my main threat as these women, the three students with backpacks who I take to be Indian, but they could be of any South Asian heritage, and the old couple.

P had assistance daily to shower and dress. The carer who trained me explained that once he was undressed and soaped up in the warm bathroom, P liked a few minutes alone.

Why would the old couple be a threat? A fair question. They are so short and stout and look like they have weathered many of life's storms and won't be cowed by Metro Transit Guards.

He would masturbate but rarely reach orgasm, he just liked this small amount of private time. Often when I went back in, his penis would be
bobbing up amidst the suds.

I finish my terrible salad, chewing on the chickpeas that feel like metal pellets in my mouth, and walk past all my rivals to discard the packaging into a rubbish bin.

P's wife turned forty while I worked for them. She had a big party and celebrated. Before his accident, P had, by all accounts, been a big living bloke, into cars, sports, and fishing.

A further announcement informs passengers that the track issue has been resolved and trains are running again on Platform 3 and thus arises a dilemma.

His wife said many people praised her for sticking with P once his body and personality changed so much. She said he was her husband and she loved him.

Do I race for the elevator and try to get to Platform 3 in time for the train or do I wait it out here and see what happens?

She wore a sexy red dress to the party. When I told her I was a writer she said I had to toot my own horn, that nobody else would ever do it
for me.

In the end, I don't get either. I sit on the tracks in the dark and rub my hands on the stones. I am trying to remember the name of a song and artist I heard recently and liked.

I played the saxophone when I was younger and after leaving school I auditioned for a few bands.

I did Shazam the song but it has disappeared. I scroll my saved tracks but I can't find it and I can't remember the name. I am cold and this makes me worry about my future.

I drove out to Ringwood for an audition and afterwards, once the other band members left, the main guy and I flirted, then we had sex on the floor of his living room.

The jet comes in and my body dissolves momentarily into its sonic boom. The rush of wind is wild as it howls from my mouth. I fret that I should have got on when I had the chance.

Did we flirt? I don't know the word for what happened. He was a lot older than me. I was keen to be liked. He pressed me onto the carpet, with not a no, but not exactly a yes.

As the leer jet flies away, I see the baby in the cockpit. It reminds me of the short story by Ali Smith about the angry baby a woman finds in a carpark and feels she has to care for.

We had a phone call or two after that and things went sour. I didn't join the band. I did join a reggae band for a while. It was called *Banana Republic*. They were ordinary, nice guys.

I have left myself no options but to walk. There are others also walking. We don't speak, there is no need. If someone stumbles the group pauses and then we carry on.

My saxophone sits in its black case, underneath the electronic piano. I rarely toot this horn anymore. Now and then I fish out a Bach fugue and fumble through it on the keyboard.

I wish I had brought the Wagon Wheel that is sitting next to my computer at home. I concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other and not thinking about my hunger.

I used to disappoint my school piano teacher every week when I went through a phase of forgetting lessons and she had to come and find me each time.

The terrible salad with the metal chickpeas was weeks ago. Who knew that would be the last meal I ate before entering this protracted time-space vortex?

In winter I would soak my hands in warm water before practicing my morning scales so my fingers could find the shape of the keys.

I keep looking for the song that I can't remember. I think it may have dropped out of my Shazam app onto the train tracks.

I pick up music faster by sight reading than by listening. I see the notes on the page and can find them quickly whereas when I listen the notes fall through me slipping like water.

I hope it might be lit by its blue Shazam symbol but when I get down on my knees all I find are pieces of old chewing gum stuck to the underside of the metal.

My teacher tried to get me to put more emotion into my playing, but I couldn't channel them easily which is also why I was an okay comic actor but not a great dramatic actor.

The most surprising thing I find is a pair of white, leather, ankle boot roller skates, the kind that Olivia Newton-John wore in the movie *Xanadu*.

In the school production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* I played the Stage Manager, who narrates the play. The director told me to pause between the words: *Listen. Listen.*

Luckily, I taught ONJ everything she ever knew about roller-skating, so I pull the roller skates on and start gliding along the train tracks. Others do this too.

The drama room was downstairs, a small, airless room with grey carpet and a pole in the middle of the room, along the same corridor as the Year Seven classrooms.

I am mostly relieved none of us have been invited to speak on any panels in the underground festival that is taking place. I still feel like crying and don't have anything articulate to say.

It was classroom A where I bled through my underpants and school uniform onto the wooden chair. I only remember that part and not what I did next.

I am aware the students will be expecting another class in less than a week and I want to tell that one keen, worried student to please stop calling me Miss.

It must have involved scurrying to the bathroom to try and scrub away the evidence. This was not a time of friendships where incidents like this could be shared and laughed about.

I have to let go of this thought and concentrate on the movement of my legs, pushing down through my thighs and kicking out wide with each roller stride like they do in the movies.

I stopped going to choir practice because I wanted to hang out with my friends and maybe they didn't like singing, anyway the choir leader told me she was very disappointed in me.

From one of the panels as I skate by, I hear a writer use the word seminal and the entire audience begins to howl, wonderful and fearsome: *DON'T USE THAT WORD!* I do not stop.

In the Elwood art deco flat, years later, I took private singing lessons from Alix with an 'I' who made a cabaret show called Alix with an Eye.

At another panel the writers are talking about lived experience and an irritated audience member says *ALL experience is lived what do you mean by this term?* I do not stop.

Alix also tried to get me to connect with emotion as I learned songs from musicals such as 'I dreamed a dream' from *Les Misérables*.

A light appears above and some of us know it is time to emerge to the surface so we say our goodbyes to those who will keep roller skating and we make a human ladder.

Alix explained that I should ground the note in my gut and keep pulling its origin deeper while the actual note soars high into my head.

It is this tension that creates the emotion.

We have to be quiet as we pull ourselves through the small, circular trap door, as we are, of course, backstage in a theatre and there is a performance taking place.

On a stage, in the little performance space in Collingwood, I was improvising my heart out as we all knew the Working Dog production company talent scouts were in the audience.

The technical team have all come down with an illness and they need us to fill in, providing props and quick changes for the actors and operating cameras that are integral to this show.

I never did well in audition environments as I would always overthink, and a kind of grey hue would come over my performance.

It is the same show I attended with affect theorist Sianne Ngai when it was on in Melbourne, it was a huge hit: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

That was how a theatre peer described me to me once, that when I was on, I shone, and a light came from me but when I doubted it was like I was casting myself in a shadow.

The show starred a female actor who had come off many terrible years embroiled in a public defamation case about a famous male actor.

I travelled to the USA and spent four weeks doing various improvisation workshops and courses and met a man who was named after a tree.

She had taken a private complaint to a theatre company about him, and this had been leaked to the press who ran a headline: King Leer. The actor sued the newspaper and won.

Another theatre peer once described improvisation as a driftnet for losers. He included himself in this cohort and he meant it was a place to belong for people who didn't belong.

This show, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was a grand comeback for the female actor after she was dragged into the male actor's court case and effectively put on trial herself.

At a school improv workshop I ran in Bendigo, a student threw a chair through a window and there was no teacher in the room at the time even though there was supposed to be.

This is all in the past and now I find myself thrust into the position of learning some very complicated camera manoeuvres for the show that I have to immediately implement.

At another workshop I worried about a boy who spent the lunch break on his own and he ate an apple very slowly as if it was the most important task in the world.

I am glad Sianne is here. After an initial awkward conversation where I tried to quote her own writing about affect theory to her, we both enjoyed the show, sitting in the darkness together.

At another workshop I asked the students for a type of animal to start a scene with and someone called out Bush Pig! And everyone laughed except for one girl.

There are other theorists here too. I see *Hélène Cixous*. Luce Irigaray. Sara Ahmed. We are introduced quickly but there is no time for small talk. Or any talk for that matter.

At another workshop there was a calm silence, with just the soft scratch of quiet writing, and from outside I heard one of those birds whose call sounds like singing into a cup of water.

These scholars take their career shifts seriously. They are extremely dedicated to the efficient operation of this theatre production which now has a different person in the lead role.

At another workshop I was jetlagged and out of my depth teaching poetry and I regretted saying yes to the job and hoped the students got something out of it.

In each city, the role is taken by a female actor who has endured a difficult time, which is to say the role is taken by every female actor in the world which makes for a long night.

After that workshop, which was held at The Wheeler Centre, I walked through the afternoon sunlight to Melbourne Central train station and made my way to Platform 3.

We are still here, and I am slowly getting the hang of my job. It may be some time before I can make it back to class. I have a wig in my hand and the cue is coming up.

DISEMBARKING

Megan Coupland

I remember
the woman next to me
in the aisle seat, she's
coming home and she's
saying as we land that it's
not at all like the map in
my hand would have me
believe, that the park lands
circling the city are, in fact
March-bleached-boiled-dry—
the colour of bone. She
tells me there's not enough
water to go around, that
the trees, unheeded, are
dying. So I move through
the terminal, misplaced
in an inked space on the
page I pocket: a moss-damp
promise like a sudden
grasshopper on bark.

ST VINCENT'S HOSPITAL, AUTUMN 2022—A SIJO

David Edwards

A leaf from the maple tree falls on the windowsill at dawn.
From my bed I see it perform a palliative yoga,
twisting in breezes —from downward dog to one last half-moon pose.

TREASURE

Indigo Eli

*after Mother is My Monarch by Julia deVille
viewed on exhibit at the Art Gallery of South Australia*

... still, we are all born animal
at times bejewelled, stripped of our insides

We learn to match like with like, to gather
views on the world, pick a tribe, shape an image, stuff ourselves back in

I am of the ilk who most prefer patterns
You handle things differently, seek to find soft

Mother, I
never saw you as a giraffe
but realise now ... you stuck your neck out
taught me, in your own way, how to stand tall

My knees knew wobbles and dislocations but I grew up
in awe of callipers, ventured out and with a friendly giant, learnt
to mould my own metal into stilts

Mother, I could see over the fences babied by sky!

... still, I am over looking at the edges of continents and subdivisions
over planting pretty patterns in poetic metaphors ... they can trip you
up

...

I never matched with matriarch.
I fell. I lost the ring ... need to re-set

need time with those who find treasure with the dead;
 skeletons and
 exo-skeletons,
 birds post-flutter,
 bones, and
 beaks, and
 unlaid eggs

time ... with those whose hands, too, dream
of beautiful oddities ... of human quirks and whimsies ... of
the angry letters now stuffed in the hide of South Australia's museum
exhibits ... holding unsaid stirrings

...

It can take years to celebrate the stories we hide

... first we must learn to delicately unpick our skin and reach in
for those things known ... yet forgotten?

...

We lost something.
An early thought. An eye still open. A soft *and* patterned gem.

It called. And we had no voice to answer.
Our hands too busy searching, full of guilt and grief
... couldn't keep it, had to let it go

A giraffe born asleep
Mother, couldn't nudge a sound

...

One lone frozen breath ... held for decades.

...

Until,

Baby ... welcome home
Treasure, won't you stay?

STORM

Jack Forbes

small, naked branch
fights in thrashing wind,
clawing up at the night's sky
like a little lightning bolt
wanting to go home.

CURTAIN CALL

Susan Francis

Like a troupe of avant-garde dancers, men take flight from the storm, leaping off Elizabeth Street, mounting the footpath, pirouetting across Esther's feet, stamping over her groceries. In leather shoes, men prance through puddles, snapping shut oversized umbrellas.

Jammed against the dirty subway tiles outside St James' station, Esther touches her hand to her bounding heart, pounding out of rhythm. Standing in the Sydney rain resolves that no matter how ill she feels, or the little consequence she's seen to hold, she *will* be acknowledged. Cocky young stockbrokers deserve the space no more than she.

After the sour smell of wet wool, and the smacking, cracking laughter disappears on the wind, Esther's train and the one following it are cancelled due to bad weather. It's past nine o'clock before she unpacks the fruit and veg in her small kitchen. Nine-thirty when she drops the oranges, nearly trips over her own feet trying to pick them up as they roll across the lino. Rubbing the tears off her face with the back of her hand, she marches into the ill-lit bathroom in search of the clippers she'd once used to trim Harry's hair. Her friend Margaret had warned her that this would happen. Esther would rather be dead than have it happen to her.

Fumbling through the drawers, she pounces on the razor, wields it like a weapon at the faded woman in the mirror. Silver feathers flutter to the floor and in the dark, Esther runs a withered hand over her naked head.

On Saturday morning, she drives to Denise's house, crossing The Bridge, speeding a little along the leafy back roads of the upper north shore. Denise's steaks taste better than what Esther ever wins in the raffle at the Bowlo and invitations from her daughter aren't always forthcoming these days. Perhaps it's worth tolerating that flippin' brown nosed son-in-law for some decent tucker?

Oliver doesn't care for her either. She'd overheard him say so in the restaurant last Christmas Eve. She's selfish. Apparently. Her whole life lived in pursuit of attention and applause. Even more self-absorbed since old Harry carked it, Oliver muttered.

'For Goodness' sake, mother. We've got the appointment with *Gladewoods* on Thursday!' Standing in the new extension, Denise claps her hand to her mouth. 'How could you?'

Good. She'd wanted to shock some sense into her daughter.

But Oliver, wearing his old rugby shirt from Sydney University doesn't react. Not in the way Esther had hoped. He shrugs. Makes a face at his wife, *I told you so*. Jogs off to play football in the backyard with his sons; a thud as someone's foot connects with leather, a hoot of laughter.

Esther eases her body into the recliner. Too late, catches herself smiling at the freshly painted walls of an empty room. They want to put her away. In this Gladewoods place. After Harry's unexpected death, Denise suggested that her mother might use a little extra help around the house. Now, suddenly, she'll do herself damage if she remains alone. She can almost hear Denise, between sips, griping about her to 'the girls' at the weekly get together: *Honestly, the responsibilities are tearing me apart. Oliver. The boys. Work. And now mother. I only want what's best for her.* Esther imagines greedy service providers patting

Denise's knee, assuring her it's the most sensible decision, *even though it's hard on everyone.*

Pressing her lips together, Esther searches for something to drink. In the last few weeks, she's convinced herself a cancerous growth has developed in her throat. Old actresses, and old drama teachers tend to acquire these frightful tumours, and this is a lump she can't seem to swallow.

'Denise' she calls out, 'can you bring me a glass of water, please?' And Esther clicks the remote control. The roar of an engine winding up. A child screaming. His skinny arms reaching for his mother across the guard's set-square shoulders. The woman, hustled by a second man stumbles up some metal steps, black eyes rooted on her boy.

Fumbling for her glasses, pushing them onto her face, Esther squints at the words underneath the footage: *Last night, Thali refugee, Roshida Hasse and her one-year-old son, Ibrahim, were transferred to the Fitzgerald River Detention Centre in the Northern Territory. Human Rights spokesperson Dr Jillian Brown, says supporters are refusing to give up hope, despite the camp being previously used as a final destination before resettlement back to Thalimaar.*

Esther stabs buttons and watches the story a second time on a different channel.

'Mother,' Denise seizes the remote, 'Don't upset yourself! Or us if you can help it.'

Esther snatches the remote back.

'Oi!' The middle grandchild throws open the sliding door, almost driving it off its tracks, wrestles the remote out of Esther's hands, turns to his mother. 'Jesus, Mum, the main game's about to begin. The Grand Final!'

One month later, Esther tugs on her pink bucket hat, packs the boot of the Honda: George's old fishing esky stacked with corned beef and pickle sandwiches, a thermos of coffee propped inside the rim of the spare tyre. Steering the car westwards into the sun, the rush of tyres smooth on the highway, Esther heads towards the border. Past the stone face of Thunderbolt's boulders, past the yellow fields of floating Canola. Between townships hundreds of miles apart, she limits her water intake because toilets aren't available. Wednesday, or is it Thursday? Somewhere between Cobar and Wilcannia, she holds on too long, till her belly aches as if she's giving birth. The blessed relief of gushing warmth, pooling in the seat beneath her. Well, who damn well cares? Changing her underpants behind a crown of gum trees Esther sits on a beach towel until the next motel.

More days pass. Broken Hill. Oodla Wirra. Coober Pedy. One morning a cloud of white cockatoos erupt from a Paperbark tree into the thunderous sky and it becomes easier to ignore the calls from Denise. At a cheap hotel in Alice Springs, a drunken backpacker falls at Esther's feet. He clutches at her calves. Sings a song she remembers from a long time ago, *When I'm Sixty-Four*. She eyes him uncertainly. Catches him winking at the people gathered in a semi-circle around them. Is he laughing at her?

But Esther nods her head, a little too eager to join in the celebrations, clapping to the sound of his voice while he blunders to his feet, goosestepping around the edges of an empty swimming pool. His face is the moon when it's blurred by cloud.

The city of Darwin is invincible under a strong sky. The good-humoured chatter of excited tourists lined up to board the buses for a day in Kakadu. The drive was endless. Dizzy on her feet in the heat Esther has

mislaid her medication. Outside the Information Centre, not watching where she's going, she unzips her bag and bringing it up to her face, peers inside. She works her fingers like spider's legs crawling through the dark folded depths: used tissues, a spare tube of lipstick, an old comb with a broken tooth.

In the bank, a woman tapping on a keyboard, refuses to acknowledge Esther.

'Excuse me.'

Taking her time to look up, 'How can I help you, darl?'

Darl. Pet. Love. Once, she might have demanded a conversation with the girl's superior, *she's not to take that tone with me, she needs to show some respect*, but she's on a schedule and she needs the cash if her plan is to work.

'I want to withdraw from my savings account. The sum's too much for my, um, what do you call it?'

'You mean your daily limit?'

'Yes. That.' Esther licks her lips which feel burnt dry.

The teller arches her eyebrows when Esther announces the amount. 'Are you sure you have that right? Perhaps I can call someone on your behalf?'

'No. Thank you.'

Esther crosses her arms. Just as Margaret had predicted. Eventually the young woman hands over a brick of money, and twitchy with humiliation, Esther speeds out of the city.

One hundred kilometres southwest of Darwin, a rutted track traverses flat grassland, tumbleweed blows beside the Timor Sea. Beyond a patch of red dirt lies an impenetrable bank of mangroves, the thin strip of

coral beach runs pink. Esther parks the car in the shade of a grove of coconut trees in front of a timber house, collapses back against the seat. Like always, she's taken on too much, but she's here now.

The slate-coloured water reminds her of the lead pencils she'd favoured for marking, and she snorts and shakes her head, recalling a classroom of giggling girls uninterested in Steinbeck. They sat as potato sacks while she tried to initiate a discussion: should George have shot Lennie? Was Lennie's death an act of mercy? Is compassion more important than following rules? By then, her teaching, more unorthodox with the passing years was under scrutiny from Head office. *Perhaps we can consider Lennie's death in the broader context of mortal sin* the supervisor assigned to her classroom had suggested helpfully. *No one has the right to take the law into their own hands. Remember your commandments. Remember that thou shall not kill.*

Jamming on the bucket hat, Esther lugs her suitcase up ten steps, pausing to catch her breath on the fourth step and the seventh, fumbling with an electronic key lock, before entering a wide hallway. She drops the luggage on the polished floorboards and inspects the sparse kitchen. Pours a small tumbler of whisky from the bottle the owners of the house left on the sideboard. Rocks a while in a chair placed beside the living room window with its view of the flat ocean and trees heavy with star fruit.

All that unexpected stillness, emptiness, makes space for the greedy dog of dread. He leaps around her legs, snarling and nipping at the delicate skin at the back of her ankles, wet slobber drooling from his open muzzle. Inside his mouth, behind the sharp teeth his tongue and lips are an unholy red. The brightest crimson of blood, valentine roses, peeled back flesh. If she falters at the final moment? What then? What if the pain of death proves unbearable? And afterwards? Does she simply disappear? Or will she burn in hell for eternity, like the old men in their fearful black hassocks had promised?

Esther rocks and stares out the window. A sudden breeze shifts shadows across the surface of the water. If her plan fails, she'll wake up in the place she fears most. She'll slide into endless invisibility dressed in diapers, dribbling down a terry towelling bib. Despair smelt amongst loose faeces. Desperation sniffed between spoon-feeds of mashed peas and potato. Amongst the blinded kitten cries of folk slumped in lounge chairs she'll reek of stale urine while everyone looks the other way and jollies her along as if this life is acceptable.

Esther draws the phone from her pocket.

'Hello, Denise.'

'Mother? Where on earth are you? We're all worried sick.'

'I'm safe. You're not to fret.'

'Mother, don't. Just don't. The children are anxious and Oliver's ringing from his Singapore office at least every thirty minutes.'

Esther's unsure about what to say. She loves her daughter. But she doesn't believe this nonsense. She steadies the rocking chair, placing her feet flat on the floor. The first night after George had died, she'd imagined that she might never shift from her bed again. But soon enough she'd brought herself to rights. She will this time too.

'Mother? Where are you?' Denise's voice screeches unattractively. 'If you don't tell us where you are, Oliver knows someone who can track your phone. We'll find you, Mother.'

The sea breeze makes Esther shiver. She fumbles the explanation.

'Think of those union players Oliver admires. What is it they always say? Better to exit with fans remembering you at the top of your game, and if you can score a goal on the way out, that's even better.'

'Mother, I don't understand.' Denise is crying. 'How can you be so inconsiderate? I'm ringing the police unless you tell me where you are this very minute.'

The cicadas whirr outside.

‘Mother?’

Esther turns off her phone. Hobbles down to the sea and throws the thing as far as she can, out into the great blue.

Next morning, driving to the detention centre, she practises her lines. It was always one of the things she was good at. Other actresses could barely remember a page, and Esther had always prided herself on not ever needing a prompt. But no one exists in this land of sand to question a hairless, old woman. The facility manager, housed in an office that hasn't seen a refurbishment since 1976, couldn't care less. Belly shelved over a brown leather belt he accepts her proposal seemingly without thought. He nods at the guard who ushered her in. ‘Joe'll take you downstairs.’ Grudgingly, ‘The woman might appreciate some female company.’

Esther follows Joe through silent corridors, beneath flyblown fluorescent lights. Down echoing concrete stairs, puddled with murky water and through countless doors that bang shut with awful finality behind her. It's a long time before they reach ground level, and she must stop and rest many times. Trailing Joe across an empty basketball court, the sweat runs off her forehead and stings her eyes. Then through a chain wire gate, they enter a paddock, the grass punctuated with prickles shaped like stars. Two tin Nissan huts take a beating from the sun.

‘They're in there,’ Joe indicates with his thumb. ‘Take as long as you like.’ He scratches the back of his neck. ‘I'll wait over there by the door of that second place till you're done.’

Nodding, she watches him shift away and lower his weight onto the steps. Tug his cap down over his crewcut.

Now is not the time to forget the script, Esther darling.

Every day for a week, she drives to the detention centre to visit Roshida and Ibrahim. She explains who she is using gestures, unfinished phrases, Thalimaarn words that she'd learnt. Every day Joe leads her up and down the empty corridors. Up and down the stairs. The pain in her heart is more insistent and Esther makes him stop every fifty meters or so, tells herself that if she'd lost that bit of weight this could have all been easier. During one of their many breaks, she says, 'Have you worked here long, mate?'

'Nine years. Not a lot else on offer round these parts.'

Another day. 'Do you enjoy what you do?'

He shrugs. 'Wife can't manage the business on her own. We take white fellas fishing on the river. Show 'em the crocs.' He wipes his hand backwards across his eyes. 'The lot who own this joint? They let me do shift work. Means I can make a wage and support my people. But I feel bad for the kid locked up all day like that. Boy ought to be out playing in the open air.'

In the blind spot between security cameras, she offers Joe the five thousand dollars hidden in her handbag, 'Tell the bastards I gave you a sip from my water bottle, because you were feeling the heat. That it must have been drugged.'

Joe nods and swallows the sedatives.

'Get out the back way.' He hands Esther his keys. 'Hide the money under the front seat of my car. The white Holden in the carpark.'

An hour up the road, and Esther turns and taps Roshida on the shoulder. 'Here's good. Please, stop.'

Roshida jams on the brake.

Esther fumbles with the seatbelt and climbs out of the car.

Roshida stares up at her in horror, but Esther can't be dealing with the poor woman's stage fright. She's done what she could. They both need to be brave now.

Esther points at the seat. A map with the road to Darwin highlighted in red and a heavy bag of cash. Then Ibrahim cries. In the back seat presses his little face against the glass. Esther wants to kiss her fingertips and seal a wish against the windowpane, but instead, she bangs her hand on the roof, her fingers trembling. 'Go on,' she says.

The Honda charges up the road, dust rising from beneath the tyres. Roshida veers in and out of the gravel, scattering the stones. After a long while, Esther loses sight of them.

What remains is an unfamiliar landscape, the distant blue hills traced with ancient evening light, a single hawk dipping and squealing through the sky. In the middle of the track, Esther opens her arms out wide. Throws her head back. The pink bucket hat falls into the sand and she stomps all over it, her arms and legs working furiously, an old bald woman dancing in a circle. 'Me,' she cries in a faint voice. 'This is me.'

The hawk disappears into the north sky. Esther kneels. Runs a hand under each eye, wiping away tears that immediately dry on her skin. When the police car fishtails around the bend, she watches horror spread across the young men's faces, one holding the windscreen with his hand, as if that will somehow avert the accident. The other slams on the brakes. She's sorry that the young men must experience her trauma, but not sorry enough to alter her plans and walk out into the desert. It needs to be quick. The outcome certain. She hears the car shush and slide in the dirt and a great heat spread across her body, the terrible sound of an irrefutable thud.

More silence than Esther had ever imagined and under a billowing sky she rests her head against the warm earth. She uncurls her fingers in the sand.

THE HOUSE IS AN AQUARIUM AT NIGHT

Jane Frank

I wake when river stones bump against my feet.
The current is strong—sometimes I fear being lost
 in the lines the swirling water makes in the dark.

My boys never sleep—they swim in the kitchen, sleek
with their backbones of silver, their tortoiseshell
 eyes. They speak in bubbles, dart joyously around,

sway like kelp to Coldplay songs. Sound echoes
off invisible walls. There are caves of cuttlefish stacked
 alphabetically and a gleaming floor of shells. Three

giant mantlepiece squid guard a tinderbox that won't
ever light. There is no way of telling nights apart:
 it is all khaki-blue. Floating above like pale

kites—I try not to look—are all the beautiful souls
we've known. Is it their memories that keep us from
 sleep or the far-off crash of waves?

*

Are thinking and sleeping the same? Both are flow states:
I spin in eddy-hours, predators

looming in the shadow garden, their eyes huge through
keyholes, their oily scales

slick, the stamp of their cruelty clear in this new world
of high tides and drowned islands.

Night is when everything changes: the dog can hold his
breath, the whip bird learns underwater music.

*

My boys always wanted to keep fish as pets: these nights
deliver them a dream within a dream. Their fin-babies—
fed every hour—grow bigger at the chime of twelve

like the swimming pool-sized orange fish in the story
I always read to them. But they have no regrets. The living
room is so crowded sometimes that this watery house

can feel as small as the goldfish palace ornament
they showed me online, tank sides stretching convex.
Insomniac habits, like houses, can feel strangely empty

even when there's a teeming of love and thoughts and phyto-
plankton. I glide back to my waterbed: first cascading sun-
light from above reminding me that the past is gone forever.

JASMINE

Marcelle Freiman

For months, smell has eluded, olfactory
blankness dull as dishwater,
or something chemical—nothing

I know, or ever knew.

Try to remember how it was before
says the therapist of what occupies
our being in the world,
or, when I report a stirring, a specialist
says sometimes our brains hallucinate—
says nothing of memory, yet I try
to find echoes—cinnamon, mint, eucalyptus
deep between my eyes, back of the
bony spaces of my frontal skull—distant
as coins dropped deep in a well—
a smallness that offers some light.

Then, one morning, opening a window
a sudden rush of jasmine—then gone. I breathe, will its return—
come back, I beg—
then, the ping of a faraway call
then gone.

Outside the budding creeper has started
its opening sprays and falls of spring—
pushing my nose to the blooms—nothing—
am I trying too hard?

I pick bunches to take inside—want
to catch jasmine memories: a garden,
lying on the grass, a clear sky, spacious
unbounded times to come—a world
afloat with beginnings.

Now in a glass on my desk, flowers move
in currents of breeze, perfumed traces waft
half-resonant—breathe in, this
has to be enough for now—
perhaps a slow waking of nerves,
their fibres white as whitish petals,
a body reaching into the airy world
augmenting as it draws in, and in.

CARNATION

CL Glanzing

I paid the witchdoctor £7000. She only accepted cash.

Her office was squeezed between the laundrette and the stationery shop, up a set of stairs stained by paint dribbles and bin juice. It was converted from an unsuccessful dental surgery.

The receptionist's thumb scrolled over her phone, barely acknowledging me as I slid my envelope of cash across the counter. 'Room three,' she said, snapping her gum.

I clutched Mum to my chest as I walked down the hall and drew back the curtain to the clinically white consultation room. Rubber sheeting covered the floor.

A tumescent, umber egg pulsed on the reclined chair. As large as a sleeping bear.

Through its translucent membrane, I could see the outline of a spine, curled. The width of thighbones tucked under a thin skull. There was hair too, wafting in the fluid.

The egg sweated a noxious stench from pin-prick pores—something between freon and linden trees.

The witchdoctor breezed into the room, her orange hair in high bunches, her cats-eye glasses dangling on a chain around her plump neck. She wore a rubber apron, and her crocs squeaked on the parquet. But some of the old customs remained. Her fingers were dipped in indigo. A crescent stain of madder crowned her brow.

'Ashes, dearie?' she said.

I handed Mum over in her silver urn, nervous of the lady's brusque hands. She poured Mum into an elder bowl, and began adding the

necessary powders and lacquers from a refrigerated cabinet. Angelica stalks, salamander bile, vixen sputum, mugwort, and knotted marjoram.

‘Do us a favour and sign those forms while I mix this up,’ she said, indicating to the clipboard and pen resting on the windowsill cluttered with fox skulls. I lifted the photocopied pages and initialled where indicated. *Dis-Possession Liability Waiver. Re-Death and Damnation Waiver.*

‘What’s this clause here?’ I asked, pointing to the last page.

The witchdoctor smeared Mum’s paste over the egg. ‘Sometimes bits get lost in the transfer. Not my fault, love. Just happens.’

‘Bits?’

‘Think of the soul going through a sieve.’

She lit a violet candle and wafted the smoke over the soggy egg with the jawbone of a horse. With the other hand she scrolled through the text displayed on her iPad, which rested on a wooden cookbook stand declaring in curly pyrography: *Life is too short, lick the bowl.*

She spoke the incantation, a clash of syllables in a language I did not recognise. Not even distinct, identifiable words, but a rumble of noise that vibrated all the marrow in the room.

The egg twitched and bulged.

The witchdoctor blew out the candle. The egg split like a rotten melon, splashing its bowels over the chair and onto the floor.

The contents unspooled, a slippery arm raising, a knee straightening. The body came to sit, sticky hair clinging to a delicate spine, arms resting demurely in a naked lap. It coughed and spluttered, drawing some hesitant first breaths.

‘Well,’ said the witchdoctor, waving me forwards with blue-tipped fingers. ‘Go on and hug your mother.’

I hesitantly did as I was told. It felt too good to be true. And slimy. But the horror did not stop me wrapping my arms around this feeble creature, the sludge clinging to my jacket, my hands, my cheek.

‘Darling?’ said the body. And I knew my Mum was home.

Her grey curls were gone, the gentle roundness of her cheeks, the liver-spotted hands. The blue eyes that crinkled with kindness and joy. Those were never returning. Neither were the cankerous knots that swelled in her chest wall. Stronger than the radiation. Curling like weeds beneath the puckered scars where her breasts used to be.

Instead, my Mum’s soul was now sucked into this donor body—a wiry, fatless waif. At least fifteen years younger. With a waterfall of ruler-straight blonde hair. Her spirit animated every new capillary, sinew, and tendon. Her brown eyes searched mine, wide and confused.

I paid an additional £50 for the one-size coveralls and booties, because I neglected the foresight of bringing any of Mum’s own clothes from home. They wouldn’t fit her anymore, anyway. The taxi driver looked at us as if we had just finished a prison-break.

During the drive, Mum pointed at shops and began to chatter, exactly as if continuing our last conversation. The yolk slime began to dry on her chin, creating a waxy glow.

‘Oh, what a shame that florist closed. They always had nice arrangements.’

And:

‘Gingerbread lattes already. Where does the time go?’

And:

‘Did you phone Auntie Alice on her birthday? No? Never mind, she’d just go on and on about her hernia.’

Her voice was sharper than I remembered—as perky as a piccolo. But the content was still the same. My Mum’s interests, her mind, her

reasoning. Sprinkled like sand on the burning remains of my grief, which I once thought would be a permanent cataclysm in my life.

I returned her to her little two-up, two-down in Watford. Before I could even get her re-dressed, Mum began dusting tables, windowsills, and skirting boards. We changed her sheets, and beat rugs. But Mum did not want to stop there. There was a vigour in her I had never known before.

‘I feel like a new person,’ she said, laughing.

We wheeled her hospital bed into the alley for the bin men. We exorcised the relics of her disease. The painkillers, the antimetabolites, the cytotoxics. I popped each blister packet with my thumbs, sending the rainbow of medication swirling down the toilet.

‘Should have kept the hydromorphone,’ she said to me, smiling from her yucca-infused bath. ‘Could have had some fun with it in a younger body.’

Now this did not sound like Mum’s words. But I dismissed the remark as the product of a long journey. From some place I could not imagine, and one which she could not recall at all.

My father, long since divorced and living in Cornwall with his new ladyfriend, did not want to meet New Mum. I knew he was uncomfortable with the idea. But I had not sensed his anger until I called him with the good news and tried to hand the phone to her. The sudden dial tone did not deter me, I thought he may change his mind.

I rubbed night-phlox into her shoulders and arms before bed, to keep her donor skin subtle. And to stop Mum leaking from the pores through which she had squeezed.

‘I hope I won’t get wrinkles,’ she said. I clicked my tongue at her, but still smiled as I drew the quilt up to her chin and kissed her soft cheek.

‘I’m too excited to sleep,’ she added, as I turned off the light.

I tucked up in my old room, beneath the granny-square blanket that we had stitched together. Two of the four hands that create these twists of yarn were now cremated. Could the new hands remember? Could they learn?

I remembered when we had picked the yarn together in Hobbycraft, stroking and squeezing the fibres. Mum tickling a lavender skein of chenille against my cheek. After indulging in a brief fantasy of bamboo and angora, we selected our colours from the metal bargain bin. I picked a seafoam acrylic. 'Matches your eyes,' said Mum. 'Our eyes.'

In the morning when I came downstairs, Mum was resting on the arm of the sofa, staring out the front windows at the people walking to and from the proximal train station. Her knee jiggled like a nervous whippet. 'Good, you're awake!' she exclaimed. 'Let's go to Westfield.'

I rubbed my eyes. 'How long have you been up?'

'Oh, I never seemed to drift off. Come on, get dressed.'

'What about breakfast?'

'Not for me, thanks. I'll get you something at that juice bar.'

I wanted to indulge her. Celebrate her return and offer her pieces of the world she had missed for seven months. I thought we might spend the Sunday baking fork biscuits, then go for a walk to her favourite bench in the park. Perhaps get a head-start on the Christmas wrapping paper with potato stamps while watching Inspector Morse. But it was her day.

The shopping centre was already crowded. Families with buggies and children running in circles around tired parents' knees. Teenagers sipping milkshakes.

Mum was giddy, drawn to the clothing displays as if the brightness from the windows offered to warm her solar plexus. Her eyes widened with delight. I had assumed the colour and textures would offer a tame

stimulation. Until she did not just want to caress the fabric of sleeves and hold hangers up to her shoulders. She wanted to buy. And buy and buy.

‘I can’t decide,’ she said, weighing a metallic jumpsuit against a daffodil skirt that would barely cover her knees. ‘I’ll have to get both.’

I saw the way she had looked at the drab dress we had belted tightly for her this morning. The threadbare cardigan sagging over her new, thin forearms. I wanted to help her celebrate her returned life. I was just surprised by her method. It seemed uncharacteristic. Unconventional. Unlike Mum.

We returned home with her new clothes, a juice press, yoga mat, and home manicure set. Just as I had put my feet up, she said she wanted to go down to the Queen’s Head.

‘We just got in,’ I protested.

‘Well, stay and put your feet up. I just want to say hello to some of the neighbours. None of them have seen me with my new face.’ She angled her fingers under her chin like she was posing for a 1960s catalogue.

‘You shouldn’t go by yourself,’ I said.

She laughed, tossing her hair from her eyes. ‘Don’t be silly, I’m a grown woman. Twice grown. I can take care of myself. Besides, you have work in the morning.’

‘I said I would work remotely for a while.’

‘Oh, darling, you don’t need to fuss over me so.’

It was her impulsivity that frightened me. She was a cirrus cloud wafting in the wind.

She kissed my crown and exited the house wearing the new metallic jumpsuit and a pair of red kitten heels that I did not remember her buying. *Clip-clop, clip-clop.*

I tried googling her symptoms. Scouring internet forums. Signs her soul may have become sieved. The more I dug and inquired about

her restless spirit, the more overwhelmingly ungrateful my complaint seemed.

Your expensive blackmarket repossession not completely the way you expected? Fuck you, I'd give my right arm to have my wife back again.

I shut my laptop and turned off the light. A few hours later I stirred, sensing that the door may have opened. But drifted off again, mistaken.

I did not see Mum until afternoon. My texts had been unanswered, and I had nearly called the police. She stumbled in the kitchen door, her shoes dangling from their straps across one finger, a plastic carrier bag in the other. Her hair reeked of sour cigarette smoke. She wore a giddy smile.

'Morning, darling,' she said, her breath carrying notes of gin.

'Where the hell were you?'

Mum looked a little sheepish. 'Had a lovely time at the pub—met some truly interesting people, you would have liked them—'

'I was so worried about you.'

She pressed her plump lips together. 'I'm sorry darling.' From the carrier bag she produced a bouquet of flowers wrapped in cellophane. From the sticker, I could see she got them from the petrol station across the street.

'Pink carnations,' she said, handing them to me. 'Mother's love, remember?'

My hostility melted. Of course I remembered our long summer days gardening in a patch of moist earth. My tiny hands digging with a trowel where she pointed, learning to squeeze the cylindrical soil and fibrous roots from their pots. Each time I pointed to another flower and demanded with a pudgy finger: 'And what does that one mean?' Daisies for innocence. Basil for wealth. Hyacinth for loyalty.

And she remembered too. Despite the strange face looking at me, Mum was there, somewhere beneath the unfamiliar dimples and walnut eyes.

I helped her arrange the flowers in an hourglass vase on the kitchen table.

'I was scared I lost you again,' I said.

She put her arm around me and squeezed me to her cheek. 'Oh, honey. You brought me back.'

'You won't leave again, will you?'

Her smile stiffened, the colour washed out. 'Well, you cannot expect me to lie around the house all day like a potato. The Jorgansens invited me on their boat trip to Bruges. And Sandra and Jimbo are doing ayahuasca yoga in New Forest next week and I said I'd bring the tent. Also, my silversmith course in Devon starts soon.'

My mouth hung open, as if that would help absorb the new information that was just prattled off like a grocery list. Characters and places I had never heard her mention before.

'This isn't like you,' I said, helplessly. 'I think there was something very wrong with your transfer.'

'There's nothing wrong with me,' she said, offended.

'You're not acting like my mum.'

'I was your mum for twenty-three years, aren't I allowed to be something *else* now?'

I pursed my lips together, trying not to feel barbed or abandoned. 'Of course you are,' I said. 'But can't you be both?'

She sighed, sadly. 'You're right. I'm sorry, honey.' She brought me in for another tight cuddle.

That evening, we cooked cottage pie, dicing the vegetables in quiet synchronicity. White hot chocolates for dessert in front of *Sense &*

Sensibility. Afterwards, she asked me about my job, the colleagues I liked the most, the manager I despised.

When I tucked in for the night, she sat on my bed and drew the covers to my chin. She stroked my hair and turned off the light. She wished me sweet dreams and I knew in my marrow that I would have them.

But in the morning, she was gone. A note by the kettle that said, *I'm sorry, Darling xx.*

I tried returning to the witchdoctor, but her office was boarded up. Newspaper covering the windows.

The carnations began to wilt, their dusty petals sprinkling onto Mum's best tablecloth.

THE TUTOR

CR Green

for Veresha

'Fingertips are one of the most sensitive areas in our bodies,' her massage tutor explained. She pulled one dark, thick hair from her head, placed it on a page in the middle of a thin, open telephone book on the table. She turned a page to cover the hair and moved her fingertips slowly over the area where she had placed it. Her voice was like warm milk.

'I'm feeling the hair beneath the page,' the tutor said and turned another page, then another and another, feeling and turning, feeling and turning. Christa lost count of the pages, layered like the microscopic skin cells they learned about earlier in the course. The tutor stopped, passed the book to the student next to her and instructed each to do the same.

'Soon,' she promised, 'you'll be able to feel the hair through twenty pages or more.'

Sometimes Christa wasn't sure why she had started this course. It was hard learning new stuff after so many years. Her evenings were now spent hunched over her computer studying or taking breaks to delete pictures of herself with the husband who had asked for a divorce.

He was right. I did get really fat.

Then she would feel rage remembering his words telling her when she lay down all the fat went away.

I've probably got so many deep, dark unknowns hiding inside me. Will I ever sleep peacefully? Will I ever stop waking up crying? Will I ever forgive him for all the little things?

Christa lay prone, unclothed, covered only with a towel, her face cradled in the headrest, the guinea pig for the demonstration on deep tissue massage.

‘Memories are held in our deeper muscle tissues.’ She heard the tutor’s voice from above. ‘Your client may cry. Even experience nausea. Do no harm. Cause no pain.’

Christa felt the tutor’s hands move confidently over her back, manipulating her muscles, rubbing against the fibres. Christa was surprised when the tutor found the exact tight spot that had been killing her by bedtime every day.

‘The muscle may or may not let you in,’ the therapist said. ‘Wind in slowly, clockwise for ten seconds. The slower you go, the more deeply the muscle will let you in.’

Fast. Fast. It all had to be fast. His first kisses were eager, hungry, desperate, like a nursing infant’s. I felt so needed, desired.

‘Hold for ten seconds.’ The tutor applied gentle pressure and Christa yielded to the fingertips.

Why did he become so demanding? His ways only, always. My world, getting smaller.

‘Wind out,’ the therapist said, ‘anti-clockwise for ten seconds.’

Give it up. It’s past. It’s finished.

Christa felt almost lightheaded the rest of the day, not hungry, but more thirsty than usual.

No studying for me. No going through pictures. I’m going to bed early.

When Christa woke the next morning, it was still dark.

Too soon to be up.

She stretched her hands high in the air and wiggled her fingers. She let her hands run over each arm, aware of new strength in the muscles she was using to touch others.

I'm different. Did I even dream?

She lay still, expectant, as dawn arrived slowly, luxuriously.

Finally, she lifted her fingers to rub the sleep from her eyes, each tiny grain a shard of glass.

DOG WALK

Matthew Green

A patter of feet on the patio
and he's a blur past me—
rabbit, hopping over
the threshold inside
and at the front door waiting.

The afternoon is pleasant;
the sky isn't any
magnificent colour in particular.
No dusk clouds shatter
but it's cool out and walkable.

Elvis wears a white and black
spotted jumpsuit, a white and black
spotted head of hair. A storm-scared
growth on his little cranium
above the left eye like a piercing.

His skinny legs
kick the dirt, cleaning up.
He mangles a bush.
The small chain link
comfortable and slack.

He licks cold water
from his bowl.
He is an old gentleman.
And by the hot doggy breath

that nips the air round
my ankle, I know he is happy.

A LINE OF SMOKE

Stephanie Green

A line of smoke above the chimney and an empty glass, unsteady at midnight, ready to count the rainy hours till dawn. Water everywhere harrowing ground. If you put words on paper in this weather they'd run down the margins and out of the house. Away. Altogether. Lost. Leaving only the smell of burnt sausages in the kitchen and a stale loaf of bread. So, now, instead, you're waiting for the paleness of sky beyond the door you won't open. Hoping for Mozart and marzipan chocolates. A red paper flower reduced by rain. Coffee spilled on the night table. A gritty residue. That too sweet sensation on the tongue. Words you want to spit out. The creeping mould of sadness and regret. Rinse with sweet water. Take the bridge over the litany of the stream. Listen to the singers standing in cathedral darkness. Watch the candle's burnished glow until the hush and sweep of the great wooden door renders sleep. Latch it softly as you leave.

WHITE SHEEP

Matt Hetherington

every morning i have to wake up to myself
and the haunting between the dream, the sheet
and the bright angles that mangle your heart
 you can break me like a promise
uglier than a stepped-on cockroach
 some days not even bothered by knowledge
 there are babies floating on oceans
 sure makes you thirsty, though
there once was a place in melbourne
 called 'LAMBS GO BAR'
i never went there, on principle
 puns are pus, to me
but you're not a smart-arse unless you know you're not
 stuck six feet from the platform
 the same old stationary train of blame
 or an electric saw shrieking through a tree
chokers and jokers, scummy blokes on smoko
 bleating sheer conceits, a shame-job
napping on it, and civil lies
 we rode on the back of 'em
so long, now we've become them

FRIDAY NIGHT DINNER

Kathryn Imray

Not long after sundown, as families gathered in the golden glow of a well-completed week, somebody knocked at the door. She held still, bent over in the ensuite basin with a towel around her head. No, she wouldn't answer. Anyone but Terry would go away.

He knocked again.

'I'm coming,' she shouted. 'I'm coming.' Couldn't have one minute to herself, not one minute. She huffed into the hall in two bath towels, fully intending to tell Terry what he could do with his bespoke knocker and misplaced keys. Just go, she would say. Go for good.

But it was not her husband knocking. Terry was a broader man; the person beyond the frosted glass hardly filled the frame. She considered ignoring her previous words and pretending the house was empty, but the figure, it seemed, had tracked her heavy footsteps down the lighted hall, and it raised its hand in a most familiar way. She re-tucked the towel around her.

Through the chained and cracked door, she saw it was a stranger wearing her father's face. His trim beard was freshly oiled, not one bristle out of place, his eyebrows almost flat lines over disappointed eyes. He was as she remembered him, only more so.

'Hello, Bridgette,' he said in his own voice.

'Hello, Daddy. Dad.'

'Won't you ask me in?'

Bridgette unhooked the chain and stepped back. This man smelled of her father too. He closed the door.

‘Come in,’ she said too brightly, grasping the shrinking towel with both hands. ‘I should get dressed. Give me a second. Go through to the living room. You remember where it is?’

His smell followed her. She went quickly, on tiptoe, tried not to lunge into the safety of her bedroom, tried not to slam the door, clicking the lock as it closed, so he wouldn’t hear and know.

Her wet hair didn’t show the greys. They would come out as it dried, but he might not stay that long. Her track suit pants sprawled across the bed. All day she’d longed for their soft waist band. He’d have noticed already that she’d put on weight. He’ll say something about looking more like her mother. Might even make hand gestures if he’s feeling playful. She pulled jeans and a dress shirt from the wardrobe. Comfort could wait another half hour. It isn’t every day a person receives a visit from their father, ten years dead.

No sound came from the hall. His clean brown boots didn’t appear in the gap under the door. No one burst into the room when she twisted the knob, thumb over the lock to silence its release. Nothing happened. The hall was empty, the front door closed, the chain re-engaged. She moved silently to unlatch it. Just in case, she thought into the empty house. Just in case.

He was seated in her favourite chair, his fingertips curled over each padded armrest. His eyes lingered first on the gap between her buttons, then on her bare feet.

‘You look well, Bridgette.’

Was that a euphemism? Did he mean she looked fat? ‘I am well,’ she replied, and shrugged. ‘You know, well enough.’

He nodded.

‘You’re looking well too, Dad.’ Above the carefully oiled beard his cheeks glowed firm and pink. ‘How have you been?’

‘I’ve been dead, Bridgette.’

‘So you have,’ she said into her chest. And about that, she wanted to say, does this mean you’re alive now? Why did you come to see me? But these questions seemed too personal, and she asked instead, ‘How’s Nanna?’

‘She’s good. Says hello.’

‘Ah, good. Say hello back.’ She edged around the kitchen island and pulled a knife from the block. ‘Can I make you something to eat? You’d be hungry. You must have come a long way. Where do you live these days? I never could keep track of your houses.’

‘I’ve been in the same place for a while,’ he said.

She forced a hostess smile. ‘How about some food then? Are you staying for dinner?’

‘If it’s no trouble.’

‘No trouble,’ she said to the man who looked like her father. ‘It’s only us tonight. They’ve gone to shul. Leftovers good enough?’

She poured wine and set his on the coffee table just beyond his reach. It was thick wine, good quality. Its legs clung to the inside of the glass. His flat eyebrows pulled together and he shifted suddenly, sliding forward to reach for the wine, placing it precisely on a coaster, then resettling in the chair.

The pasta turned in the microwave. She chopped a carrot and a tomato, and washed four leaves of borderline lettuce. At the halfway timer she gulped the last of her glass.

From his seat in her favourite chair he inspected the walls and furniture. ‘What’s the value on this house now?’

The pasta needed rotating. ‘I don’t really know,’ she answered.

‘It must have appreciated over the years.’

They’d always called him money hungry. She’d defended him. No, not money hungry. It’s that he likes to count. ‘I’d say so. Most of the other houses on the street have.’ Why did she say that?

'If you're planning on selling, you'll have to clean it up before it goes on the market. And cover this up.' He plucked at the frayed upholstery.

'We're not planning to sell.'

'But if you did.'

'If we did, they wouldn't be interested in buying the lounge suite.'

'I mean for home opens. No one wants to buy a dingy house.'

Dad, she whined in her head, but didn't bite. Her house wasn't dingy. Lived in, comfortable, but not *dingy*.

He twisted in the chair, first one way then the other, looking for something. 'Where are the candles?'

'I didn't do it tonight. We don't always. Sometimes, not always.'

'So it was a phase.'

'It wasn't a phase. I just,' she trailed off. There's no need to explain to him. He isn't interested anyway. The microwave said another three minutes. If she'd pulled the container from the freezer this morning they'd be eating by now.

The white tablecloth was buried in the bottom draw, under home delivery menus and unwashed placemats. She swept Terry's newspapers to one side of the dining table. For a moment she pictured herself snapping open the cloth as a waiter might, but she set it down on the wood and unfolded it slowly, arranging the fabric until it covered half the table.

From the kitchen she gestured like a flight attendant. 'When you're ready.'

He carried his untasted wine to the table. Lifting his nose, smelling the newspapers and the drawer-scented cloth, he asked, 'Where do you usually eat?'

'In front of the TV like normal people.'

Her portioned lasagne looked smaller than his, and she soothed herself with the promise of a second serving once he left. The lettuce was flat and unattractive on the plate. She dragged a slice of tomato from it, eating the salad first, to show she could.

‘You’re quite hungry,’ he said.

‘I haven’t eaten since breakfast,’ she lied.

He touched his fork, turned it over twice before picking it up. He pushed its tines into the lettuce leaf, retracted them, and pushed them into the pasta. He set the fork down.

‘You don’t like it?’

‘I’m not so hungry.’

His eyes followed her loaded fork. She opened her mouth for the pasta but, unable to open it as widely as she would if he weren’t watching, the food caught on her upper lip, toppled from the fork, and bounced off her chest onto the tablecloth. With a tissue from her sleeve she wiped her greasy lips. She forked the lasagne from the table to the place for fallen and unwanted food on the side of her plate.

‘Are you going to just sit there while I eat?’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s bad manners.’

‘Listen to that.’ His eyes glistened. ‘Since when is it bad manners to have a sit-down family dinner?’ The skin beneath his beard now matched his rosy cheeks.

‘That’s not what I meant. I meant, it’s bad manners, I mean it’s rude, for me to eat in front of you when you aren’t eating.’

He didn’t respond.

‘But if you don’t mind, I don’t mind,’ she told her plate.

He laid his fingers on the table’s edge and put on one of his inscrutable expressions. The lasagne could be finished in five bites. It wasn’t so large.

She leaned over and cut it in pieces. As quick as she could, feeling his eyes burning the crown of her bent head, she scooped the lasagne from the plate into her rapidly chewing mouth until there was nothing left but the untouchable fallen piece.

This is only one dinner in a lifetime of dinners. She didn't need to feel sad. There would be others to enjoy. And once he left—.

'You have mine.' He cut into her thoughts. Slowly, with one finger, he pushed his plate across the table.

It was only one dinner in a lifetime of dinners. And she wanted it. A treat for a hard week at work. Compensation for the loss of her evening. She deserved it. He hadn't touched it. She could eat it. She shook her head.

'Eat,' he said. 'I know you're not full. This Little Piggy always wants an extra serve.'

Her childhood name on his waxen lips robbed her of her indecision. She pushed aside her empty plate and pulled his plate before her, bypassed the salad to cut the corner of his lasagne, and lifted it to her mouth. She chewed another piece, and another, under his silent eyes, the only sound between them that of her gumming, and the gulp as she swallowed each lump.

Her stomach, sore now, stretched tight against her jeans. If she were alone, she'd unbutton them. If she were alone, she'd be in her tracksuit and wouldn't have to. She laid the fork across the plate, tines down as his mother had taught her. Leaning against the chair back she said, 'I couldn't eat another bite.'

Each bristle in his brown beard quivered in enjoyment. The lips, alive and pink in their frame, almost smiled. 'You're still my Little Piggy.'

Did this mean something different than before? Did he mean to say she was as much his daughter now as she had ever been, or that even though she hadn't finished the second serve, she was nonetheless a pig?

This all began to feel somewhat unreal, and for the first time Bridgette wondered if perhaps she were dreaming or unwell.

He brought a paring knife and an apple from the kitchen. ‘Dessert,’ he said, and began to peel it. The green skin came away in one long curling piece. He cut a slice and held it out to her. ‘Scuse fingers.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t,’ she said. His fingers on her food made her feel, was it disgust? ‘I’m too full.’

He wriggled his hand. ‘Dinner isn’t complete without dessert.’ The smell of the apple and his own dusty citrus scent wafted to her nostrils. ‘Go on, Piglet. My arm’s getting tired.’

She took the piece from his hand. He cut a second for himself. Bridgette held her apple, and he held his, until he mimed for her the act of eating. His glistening red mouth opened and closed, and his tongue, hard as a bird’s, pushed out to receive the food.

At first, she heard nothing over the crunching in her ears, but as the apple softened she caught the final moments of the garage door, grinding open. Car doors slammed, the garage door ground down and in her mind she traced the path from the garage to the front door. ‘Terry’s home,’ she cried, rising from the table as though he’d catch her doing something untoward.

His keys jingled at the lock. He’d open it, find it unlatched, and lumber into the kitchen. She heard him throw his keys into the plate on the entry table, and his tread, heavy and slow, start down the narrow hall.

‘Terry,’ she called, not shouting, he didn’t like shouting. ‘We’re in here.’

The heavy steps continued, but a faster, lighter tread ran toward her, until Terry rumbled something, probably ‘No running in the house,’ and father and son came out of the hallway together.

She moved toward them. ‘Terry, look who’s come to visit. Dad, you remember Terry.’

‘George,’ said Terry. ‘I’m, I’m not sure what to say. We haven’t seen you in a while.’

Her father gave a shallow nod.

Bridgette moved behind her son to rest her hands on his bony shoulders. ‘And this is Terry junior. Junior, this is your grandfather.’ She squeezed his shoulders and prompted, ‘Say hello.’

Junior whispered to his mother, ‘What’s wrong with his face?’

Across the room, her father pressed his hands on the table and stood. It seemed, for a moment, that something important was about to happen. The air between them thickened. He looked at Terry, and at Junior, before settling his eyes on his daughter. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’m off.’

‘Have you had enough to eat?’ asked Terry. ‘We can pack you something for the road.’

‘Not necessary,’ he replied. He checked the buttons on his brown suit jacket, then indicated with a tilt of his head that they should clear the way. He moved compactly by them and up the hall.

They followed him in silence. What could she say to say goodbye, in a normal way and not a strange way? She would never normally say ‘Thanks for visiting.’ Nor would she say, ‘Nice to see you’—that strayed too close to emotion. Every farewell she thought of she discarded. Any farewell would draw attention to the strangeness of their evening.

He didn’t look back at them. The decision made to leave, he left. As he crossed the lawn, she called out to him. ‘Bye, Dad. Say hello to Nanna.’

BREAKING THE WALLS OF SILENCE

Anju Jha

To my daughter

Wading from the terrains of
silence to mapped territories of sounds
my yearning grows to break the realms of quietness
to train my ears to listen to the cadences of the nightly choir
from the groove of rioting birds.
Listen. I do to a lilting gush of rain
falling steadily and gently on the tin roof.
I listen to every echo of wave that crashes against the turbulent shore.
Under the tangerine sky, I stand in awe to listen—
through my bionic ears to the hushing world.

Note: In my poem, 'Breaking the walls of silence' refers to when her cochlear was first switched on.

CHILDREN OF SUMMER

Melanie Kennard

Snow crunches beneath my boots, a feeling like nails on a chalkboard against thick rubber soles. How I hate this snow. Conditioned from years of Hollywood movies, I always imagined snow to be light, fluffy, like walking on marshmallows. It's not. It's horrible stuff. Not just because of the cold, though that's a factor. It's the way it sticks, coating my boots, saturating the legs of my trousers. The way it makes walking—such a simple act—an impossible chore. Gone are my Hollywood dreams, buried beneath an avalanche of reality.

I blame you for this, Micah, even now. You were the one who insisted we couldn't stay holed up on the farm after the freeze came. After that impossible cold swept over our sunburnt country, turning it into a barren tundra overnight. In a way, I suppose, we were lucky. With our tenuous internet connection, you'd seen the warnings online and prepared for what I dismissed as yet another conspiracy. Over that scorching summer, you did what you could to prepare us. You stocked up on the essentials like some godforsaken hoarder on our monthly trips to the shops. Chopped firewood under the stars when the sun couldn't burn you raw. All the while, I went about our usual jobs, making jokes about the extra work you added to your own load. 'It's called global warming, not global cooling,' I'd laugh, watching you from the front porch, cuppa in my hands, as you cleaved log after log. Even at night, you huffed and sweated beneath the stifling summer heat. But you ignored my comments, split another log.

Why then, after all your careful preparations, Micah, did you insist we leave? Was it the sight of our farm—our home, our hope—frozen, stopped in time? The bodies of our cattle, dotting the snow-swept landscape like immense boulders? The night the freeze hit, you built

a massive fire, insisted we move into the living room. Reluctant, still not believing you, I helped you pin quilts over our old, definitely not eco-friendly, windows. I laughed the whole time, going along with your plans to build what I called a home sauna. Dismissed your panicked calls for Peg, our old kelpie, when she wouldn't come inside. I wish I hadn't ignored you. Wish I'd gone out, found the stupid mutt. Though I probably would have frozen to death alongside her for my efforts.

I think you insisted we leave simply because it was unfathomable that we could be the only ones. The only ones, or one really—because you did all the work Micah—who had heeded the warnings online, had realised that the unseasonable cold snap—as the local weatherman called it—was actually so much more. As firewood and food grew low, you made the decision for us. Prepared, just as you did before the freeze, to keep us alive again. The petrol in the ute had frozen solid so that even without the knee-deep snow, there was no way we were driving. So you fashioned a sled out of old pallets. Dug out our snow gear, bought in a supermarket sale in the hopes that someday we might make it to the slopes. Found tennis racquets and figured out how to strap them to our boots, to stop us from sinking. I reluctantly helped you load the sled with our remaining food, blankets, coats, and matches. All the while wondering what your plan was, where you were leading us. 'The sea,' was your optimistic response.

The sea. Had you lost your damn mind, Micah? I suppose, after months hidden indoors, venturing outside in blizzards to collect snow so we could melt it over the gas camping stove for water, shivering alone beside me, you must have. We both must have. Which is why, I guess, when you decided it was time to go, I didn't argue. You'd kept me alive once before, I trusted you to do it again. We bundled ourselves in as many layers as we could feasibly wear and still be able to move, until we were veritable Michelin Men, topped with beanies on our heads and scarves wrapped around our faces. At the last minute, you decided to add weapons to the sled. Our one rifle, long unused, had been rendered

useless, either by neglect or the freeze. So knives it was, along with the axe. I wanted to object to this but knew the sense. After all, I'd seen enough movies to know that where there's disaster, bad guys follow.

It was still snowing when we left, pulling the sled behind us, wrestling with it as large flakes stroked our shoulders, tangled in our eyelashes. We were children of summer, Micah, born of flesh, of blood, of warmth. What were we doing venturing into the snow like this? We made it no further than the neighbouring farm that first day. When we saw what was inside—our neighbours, their children, frozen blue—we decided to camp in one of the sheds. When had we last seen them? Only a day or two before the freeze hit, when they'd come round to discuss a shared fence-line. The children had run through the house, their bare feet slapping against the slate tiles. Inside their own house, their feet stuck out from beneath their sheets, frigid, never to slap against tiles again.

Soon temperatures began to drop, so much so that it stopped snowing. We moved slowly, glacially, some days barely making it more than a couple of hundred metres from where we began. The snow froze solid and we stopped sinking, so we abandoned the tennis racquets, deciding that they only slowed us down. Every night, we made camp where we could, sometimes in houses, or outbuildings when we couldn't stand the thought of lodging with yet another body. Sometimes we slept beneath the eucalypts, which creaked and groaned with the weight of so much snow upon their shoulders. Like us, Micah, those trees were not suited to the cold. We built fires from their shattered branches, strung empty cans between their trunks. Some kind of warning system was needed. The further we got from the farm, the more people, both living and dead, began to appear. Only your indomitable optimism kept us moving forward. Your insistence that it wouldn't have snowed this much on the coast. Still, every night I was woken by visions of the sea frozen solid.

The knives were needed, were necessary. The people we encountered, usually alone, they weren't really people anymore. They were the worn-out husks of humans, shadows, ghosts of who they had once been. That was your take, Micah. I'd been less poetic, less empathetic. Ferals, I called them, with their snow-crustrated beards and their eyes driven wild from having seen those they love freeze, gone but preserved beneath a thin sheet of ice. Then again, maybe we'd turned a bit feral too. We must have, Micah, to do the things we did. I was better at it than you. I remember when I first stabbed someone. The hiss of her blood as it splashed against the snow. How it had shocked me. Soon, though, it became commonplace, and I lost my distaste for it, this piercing of cold flesh with even colder steel.

Then it happened. We were hunkered down for the night beneath the stars, lying next to each other atop our sled, near to the fire for warmth. How close you felt to me then, Micah. How long had it been since I'd seen more than just your eyes? Since I'd done anything but curse you for sending us on this unendurable trek? How long since I'd run my fingers through your hair, my hands over your body? How long, Micah, since you'd done anything but abhor me, for my stubbornness, my anger? How long since you'd stopped coaxing me through the snow and started dragging me instead? In those frozen hours, we'd become separate from each other, Micah, distant, lost. That night, with the fire bright, you were so close to me physically, yet still so impossibly far. We were both just about asleep, lethargic with exhaustion when I heard it. That sickening crunch of crackling, crumbling snow. You heard it too. Moved away from me. Reached to your side where you kept the axe. But it was too late. We'd forgotten to string up the tins.

'Don't even think about it,' a voice came, stopping you as your hand closed around the axe's handle.

From behind the fire, a man appeared, his beard a knotted mess, his eyes glinting dangerously in the flickering light. He had a rifle, pointed at us. At me. That's what stopped you, Micah. Our own rifle,

long forgotten at the farm. We thought the freeze had made it useless. But that didn't mean that this one was.

The man gestured for us to stand up, to step away from the sled. We did, not wanting to risk it. Possessions could be replaced, especially with the number of dead no longer needing clothes or food or blankets. But then the man looked us over, a gleam in his eye.

'I'll be taking her, too,' he said, pointing at me with the rifle. 'For warmth.' He barked out a laugh at that, as though he'd said something incredibly witty.

My heart stopped in horror. But yours didn't, Micah. No, in a moment of white-hot rage, your own heart sped up. You rushed the man, covering the distance between you and him before he could react, could pull the trigger. From your pocket emerged your knife, as you dove at the man, knocking him off his feet. You fought so fiercely, Micah, but he was bigger, stronger and far more feral than you. Realising that this you could not do alone, I entered the fray, pulling my own knife.

I don't remember much of what happened next. One second we were fighting. The next, I felt my knife slide in that sweet spot between the man's ribs, just as there was an almighty bang. At first, I thought it was another branch snapping from a eucalypt. Then I realised: the gun, it wasn't useless at all. I moved from the man, panting but relieved. Relieved until I saw you, Micah, flat on your back, hand covering the blood that blossomed thickly through the layers you wore. I got the man, Micah, but not before he got you.

I remember the sound I made, upon seeing you shot. It was wild, an aching moan of desperate grief. I couldn't lose you, Micah, not after we'd come this far. I rushed to your side, dragged you to the fire, manoeuvring you as gently as I could. A few metres away, your killer gurgled as he drowned in his own blood, alone.

'You'll be okay,' I repeated, again and again, as though sheer willpower could keep you alive.

You, Micah, you weren't so naïve. In all of this, you'd never been naïve.

'Burn me, Ellia,' you croaked, your eyes meeting mine as I pulled the beanie from your head, stroked your forehead, your hair. 'Burn me. I want to be warm.'

I stayed with you, easing you into death, part of me dying alongside you. Then, when it was done, I cut a lock of your hair, so long now, and wove it about my wrist in a bracelet. I did as you asked, Micah. I demolished our sled, feeling warm for the first time in months as I tore it apart, before refashioning it into a pyre.

'Fire is bright and fire is clean.' I remember reading that in some long-ago book that I studied at school. At the time, I hadn't quite understood what it meant. Coming from a land of raging bushfires, of skies turned black with smoke, I couldn't. But as you burned, Micah, I understood it. With the grey ashes of your body peppering the pristine snow, I finally got it. How cleansing fire can be.

Now, I walk alone, my boots crunching through the snow, your hair about my wrist. Am I going in the right direction? I don't know. But I trust that I am. Trust that each day, I am closer to the sea. Maybe that's just me being naïve again. You'd know, Micah, if we were headed the right way. It should be you making this journey, not me. You'd finish it alive. But still... I think it's begun to warm up, if only a bit. Yesterday, it snowed for the first time in months. So maybe that's a good thing. Maybe it's just your fatalistic optimism, alive now in me, that makes me think that. Or maybe it's real. Because things will get better, won't they, Micah? Things will get better, when we reach the sea.

DAILY FEED

Linda Kohler

An early pew in suburbia—eggs—and I hunger the moon singing itself into sunrise, hurtling in on a prolific smoker's ritual screed. Instead, the unravelling of morning news scrolls like billows of toilet paper emptying from their reels until the flimsy dregs tear, uncertain as clouds. Sunset offerings, the same. Today, I looked for bees in hopes they'd swarm the clamour sweeter. I think of dipping my spoon into a sticky well and inking out elixir. Sinking the raw gold onto my tongue—like Communion—to purge the rubbish. Later, at a tree-lined bakery—as if fresh from my wishing pot—holy sup, hallowed like prayer. A thick pastry dusted with timeless yeast, spilling into view, rising and levelling in rites, screeching leading statements of the non-GMO kind, crumbling the trifle with ancient grain. Our daily bread. Corellas. In the circadian tide.

AS I UNDERSTAND THEM

Allan Lake

He often repeats his open door policy.
Free to go anytime. Claims he'd pay
her airfare to anywhere, if need be.
Once, both were legally locked into some-
body and neither would have that again.
Even angels can be a pain in the axiomatic.

She misses mythic sun-soaked Sicily,
would like to be near family, sip wine
on a balcony overlooking Mediterranean.
He looks forward to intercourse with ravens
while walking in frosty Tasmanian rainforest.
No child, cat, dog or debt equals freedom
to part without customary tears or blame.
She would not key a memo on his car,
addendum post time invested/regretted.

They are bound only by spidery threads:
whim, inertia, lack of foresight—
all the above plus animal love.

APPLE-ESQUE, OR YOU'RE LIKE MY FIRST CELEBRITY CRUSH BUT BETTER

Michael Leach

Dear,
i think of your perfections
& am reminded
of one

who

adores flora & fauna
abhors social media

pens pained lyrics
laced with humour

prefers solitude
over company

reflects
wavelengths strikingly

fractures moulds

sings out her hot heart & made mind
even when the words wound

is oft pissed off
at this bitter

Michael Leach

-sweet
spoilt

world

i think
of your perfections and
am reminded of
Fiona

CROSS-STEPPING

Earl Livings

Laetoli, Northern Tanzania, 3.6 million years ago

for days, that blazing mountain
spews ash and soot
over the plain, then come storms

you need to be on the other side
swing back foot around
in front of the other across
the steaming gluggy mud
a catwalk gait the future
will think belongs to a bear

with big toe, long second toe
wide heel, you are no animal

another upright seeker
strolls to the same horizon
skin bag over the shoulder

maybe you wave and shout
in welcome and relief
that someone else endures
this puzzling paradise

or flinch and slow your walk
a hint this taller sturdier rival
will endure more than you

will become us, who riddle
fate from footprints, always striding
into shining hope, as you did

ON THE TRAIN TO BALLARAT

Rose Lucas

Jolting and snaking out of the city
across drenched winter countryside
I glimpse my face in the flecked light of the glass
watching undulation and rivulet slip by when

in a sudden rift of memory a curve of hillside peels
open in the rain spattered fabric of green-ochre-grey
and I am a girl again on the cusp of
something blurred beautiful maybe

I travelled with a school friend to her
grandmother's house outside this same country town
everything was smaller then the cold and damp swirled
just beyond the laid luncheon table

at the very edges of what a kerosene heater
could do in an old weatherboard
uncertain girls we helped to dry the dishes
faded tea towels plates stacked heavy silverware

put away and the old woman not much older than
I am now turned from the sink
in her house dress and apron her eyes
crinkled in kindness and wondering

just catching mine—
while outside

beyond the stippled glass
a sodden field the rising smell of

soil and dung the eucalyptus breathing of trees—
and something in me stirred
incipient particles momentarily coalescing
the merest flicker

like a warm and weathered hand that has unobtrusively
sustained me all through what I couldn't yet see—
the wonders the turbulence
the wild ride of the world's everyday unfolding

WHAT WE BUILD

Rose Lucas

I am the house that waits
for you

from the comings and goings
of this much travelled street

the old timbered door
is propped wide

while a screen swings
and our fingers are

pressed gentle to fingers
love builds

or finds
the spaciousness of this corridor

this unfoldment of rooms
mansions of what might be

possible like these vines
curling across the veranda

flecking a season's shifting notes
they ruby us into autumn

THE WAYS WE WILL KILL OURSELVES WHEN OUR FATHERS DIE

Elizabeth MacFarlane

Content warning: suicide, violence.

You will jump off the Westgate.

I will stand in front of a train.

You will find a way to procure a stockpile of sleeping pills and one night watch the movie you watched with your father when you were thirteen, taking one pill at a time every minute, and then a big handful, until you go to sleep and dream briefly of your father laughing with you at some stupid Tom Cruise line and getting the feeling that you might not be a kid anymore.

I will take the transcript of my father's best sermon—the one on Galatians 5, when Paul declares openly that since Christ the laws of the Old Testament are no longer relevant—I'll take it into the bathroom, and put a razor into my arm, drag it across, until the pages pool with blood.

You will walk into the sea.

I will just stop eating.

I will quit my job, move into a low-rent flat, and go back to uni to study botany for three years, and theology for four, so I can reconnect with my dead father through the things he loved. I will write a thesis on the life of a particular algae that blooms along the eastern coastline of Tasmania. I will marry a sick woman and bear her three children and care for her during her terrible depression and care for the three children too and go to work and cook the meals and repair the car and sweep the house and build the children a cubby and drink to get to sleep at night. I will watch my three children blossom and leave home. I will watch my sick wife grow sicker and do everything for her. I will buy night-lights that plug into outlets and light a path to the bathroom every evening so my wife, who has become incontinent, does not smash into a wall or fall over during one of her four nightly trips to the toilet. I will play with my grandchildren when they visit, say yes every time they ask me to kick the footy or fill a bucket with water or read them a book. I will play with them until my sciatica flares up. When my wife has a stroke I will install a handrail beside the back steps, and another in the shower. I will lose contact with my siblings. And then after my wife finally has her last heart attack and goes to heaven, I will close all the doors and windows. I will sit in the dark house. I will sometimes read a few pages from Kant or the Bible. I will play with my grandchildren when they visit. I will call my children on their birthdays. I will reconnect with my siblings. I will tend to my jacaranda and nectarine trees. And then one morning, when my mind is drifting to my own father who died before I was twenty-one, I will fall to the floor and stop breathing.

And you, well you will marry a woman who is wrong for you, and then another one who is right. With the wrong woman you will have a child. The child's younger years will be the happiest of your life. You will buy the child an electric train set, and take him to see musicals, and keep all the theatre brochures in a brown leather briefcase, along with the

child's drawings, and his flattened showbags and the comics he cuts out from newspapers. You will study therapeutic arts at a small patchouli-smelling academy: massage therapy, naturopathy, hypnotherapy. You will excel in hypnotherapy. You will practice the art of being in two places at the same time. You will heal your grandmother, though she is one hundred kilometres away. With the right woman you have married, you will open a private practice. You will speak quietly and eat tiny portions. You will never ever feel older than twenty. And then in late middle age you will fall in love with one of your patients, even though you have a right woman and your patient has a man too, though not the right man, and you both have children and step-children and homes and mortgages and it couldn't be more fucking complicated. But love is love and she's all you can think about, so the house and mortgage and the right woman, you will leave them all and live alone until the time is right. But the time never seems to get to be right. The patient never leaves her man. You will clean the house at three in the morning when you can't sleep. You will become addicted to the chiming of your smartphone. You will dance to embarrass your son. The academy you lecture at will fold into debt. You will take your hypnotherapy workshops on a regional tour of Victoria, and in Shepparton a mosquito will bite you and transfer to you its Ross River fever. You will stretch out for ten more years, with aching joints and constant fatigue until one day you will lie in bed for thirty-two hours and at the end of the thirty-two hours you will breathe a last breath.

You will quit your job and move to Los Angeles. You will marry a local to gain citizenship, and train for four years to join the LAPD. You will kick down doors and have your cheekbones smashed in by drug dealers. You will spend your evenings in bars drinking whiskey and taking cocaine and having rough sex. You will be the one to beat criminals up during

underground interrogations. Your eyes will be permanently bloodshot. You will piss off the wrong drug lord and one day you'll step out of the bar at 4am and see a gun aimed at your face from a car.

I will retrain to be a zoologist specialising in primates and move to Cameroon to study territorial groups of chimpanzees. A mad genius will at the same time be unfolding his plan to unleash an army of genetically modified primates in Central Africa, killing and enslaving humans in order to recreate a tropical Paradise with a thriving pre-human ecology. While I am observing my chimpanzee subjects from within a camouflaged hide, a huge, crazed ape will locate me with its heightened olfactory sense-nodes, grab me from my hidden copse and tear me limb from limb.

You will tie a noose to a rafter in your garage and hang.
I will plug in my hairdryer and take a bath with it.

Without your father, you will feel yourself set adrift, loose, unanchored. Unanchored but sinking. It is not exactly him you will miss, but what he gave you. An open door. A cup of tea. An answered call. A sounding-board. Someone who would laugh at you and tell you that you were being moronic. Someone who knew when a platitude was the right thing to say. Someone who would back the fuck off when you were spinning out of control. And still be there when you spun back home. Without your father, you will stagger to the depths of yourself and find no answer. No repose. Nothing solid. So you will drift and drift and drift and find nothing waiting at the end.

Without my father, I will not know who to call when the panic drives its drill into my lungs. I will gasp for air like a fish and my fingernails will leave blood on my palms. Who can I call? Who can I call? Who can I call? my airless brain will seethe. I will call Lifeline but it is not my father who answers. It will be someone who is more like a lover, with a slow calm voice, who tells me to count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Who tells me to name: three things I can see, three things I can hear, three things I can touch. Without my father, I will hold myself at a clinical distance, make motions like a patient in a bed. I will do this for as long as I can until I am automated. Dead and alive.

THE SCIENCE OF SEDUCTION

Pam Makin

Maggots

Breeding maggots is not what I had envisioned as a career. All the glamour once wrapped up in the word ‘scientist’ seems to have washed out of my greying white lab coat. As I pinch the fat little bodies in my tweezers, I think about Margot.

Ice

The genetically dyed fruit is on ice in the cooler—food for maggots, food for fruit fly. It is the same kind of cooler that fits six beer cans snugly. Six cans—four for me, two for Margot. I should have known better than to have the fourth. I am not stupid, but I am sometimes thoughtless. Especially after three beers.

Daggers

Perhaps I am stupid. I cut the dyed fruit into chunks and set it among the ordinary offerings. I should have offered Margot something less ordinary. Beer is not a romantic picnic beverage. Beer is a barbie-with-the-mates bevvie. I should have offered white wine, and a cheese board. But Margot likes beer. She had looked daggers at me when I took the last one.

Fluorescence

The maggots burrow into the soft flesh of the fruit, ingesting the fluorescent markers that will make them glow as flies. Easy to spot, easy

to track. They will become so interestingly beautiful that everyone will see them, not just a dull greying scientist.

Questions

What can we learn about humans by studying fruit flies?

Is standing out an evolutionary advantage?

I wonder if Margot likes strawberries.

SORT OF. NOT QUITE.

Kate Maxwell

‘It smells a bit like winter. You know, like apples or something.’

I’d read the same few sentences of my novel repeatedly, but the words danced their spindly font symbols in my head and refused to settle into meaning. Dragging my eyes from the page, I now shifted on the lounge and sat forward to face her. The front of her body, sprawled over the dining table—arms splayed, resting her right ear on the wooden surface and flicking her pencil back and forth in fidgety fingers. One leg was tucked beneath, another stretched out to the side. You could hardly call it sitting. It was more like an attitude of potential movement. My daughter had never enjoyed stillness.

‘What are you actually asking me?’ I tried again, reluctant to move.

‘You know—stuff you put in cakes and stuff.’ She pushed her lips out, crinkled her forehead impatiently.

I was obviously meant to understand her intention instantly. I was the one she’d get cross at in seconds. Scorned for not knowing the unknowable, not packing cheese sandwiches when she’d eaten vegemite for years and never indicated a changed preference. Annoyed at for not alerting her each morning to the fourth step on the back porch. The same fourth step that had been there since her birth. The same step she twisted her ankle on rushing to get to basketball one Saturday morning.

I placed my novel face down on the couch. Foolish to assume I could squeeze in a chapter while she did her homework.

‘Flour?’ I suggested.

‘What? Are you kidding? Did you even listen? Like winter, I said. Like apples.’

She was rolling her eyes and neck like a possessed horror movie character.

‘Okay, hold on. Be clear. Are you asking me what goes in cakes?’

‘No!’ Her eyes rolling even more violently now. ‘It’s like it’s the same or something. The question says list examples.’

Now I was truly confused. I stood with a sigh and walked over to her schoolbook spread over the table. Scanning the printed page she’d stuck so haphazardly into her book, I couldn’t find any information on cakes or winter.

‘Show me the question.’

‘Here!’ she jabbed her pencil at question number three. ‘See! List four cinnamons for cold. I told you already.’

It took me a second or two and then my mouth crept up at the corners.

‘Oh, you goose. It says synonym. A word meaning something similar, not cinnamon.’

‘Yeah, I said that,’ she added defensively. ‘Smells like winter or apples.’

‘No, but they’re not the same word, Hon.’

She just looked at me like I was the one with comprehension issues. But I couldn’t shift my smile. My eight-going-on-eighteen girl was still staring at me with that same spaghetti sauce-stained expression from infancy.

‘It’s okay.’ I squeezed her arm. ‘Squish over and I’ll show you.’

I could finish my chapter later. This chapter still needed my attention and one day soon may claim to not even want it anymore.

OUTBACK STORM

Angela Mckean

Everything is tilted, off kilter. You've gone. The wind tears at the edge of the roof which lifts, lurches convulsively, as if trying to plummet onto the red earth below. Down the dirt road, sparse telegraph poles lean at random angles like demented things trying to wrench themselves out of the ground.

The splintering hammer of the rain on the tin roof deafens me, my ears, my thoughts, all gone. The light flickers and there is a distant crack of thunder. I look around, greedily gathering as many images as I can before the power flips out again: the old bottle-gas cooker, which lost a foot years ago, and now leans companionably towards me; the table we made, wider at one end than the other. We couldn't find a rectangular bit of timber, and now it narrows away from me in a crazed Van Gogh perspective. I want you to come back. The one sturdy chair, the only item which has kept its rectangular proportions, now looks oddly misshapen among the skewed outlines of the surrounding sticks of furniture.

The light flickers again. The wind rises to a shriek. My eyes fix on the boomerang hanging off the far wall, its perfect lines and curves. The only object that looks as if it belongs here. I widen my eyes, hold the boomerang fiercely in my dreamtime gaze. It flares into gold as lightning strikes. Then, darkness. You're not coming back.

MOORABBIN, SONG OF EXPERIENCE

Michael Mintrom

Steam off pipes, no kids, no cloud,
another sunny morning in winter.
A man in a suit, white shirt, black tie
slips past light industrial buildings.
He's taking his trumpet for service.
People inside work at God knows what.

Try walking in Moorabbin
thinking of America,
Bitches Brew and *Kind of Blue*,
Miles Davis changing the world,
Jackson Pollock, lyrical and loose,
haunted by Berryman's *Dream Songs*.

Unmarked vans sit idling,
their exhaust fumes curling through trees.
The line for injections grows longer.
Medics appear in protective gear.
A truck collects bins
for the furnace.

STEWING

Melinda Jane—The Poet MJ

The submarine in ultramarines
swims in maritime waters
marinating its nuclear devices.

ON THE RUG

Sam Morley

By chance we come together
in child's pose, on knees
and forearms, our flanks finally
touching as our snouts are drawn
to the dog lying there, curling
the night inward. His breath
is open and we loosen into
that holy interval in our day.
We have nothing he wants now
except our palms behind each ear
and when we do that he becomes
even more beautiful
lifting his crown so softly
as if he has reached that place again
only children and animals know.
And as all dogs have done
he stays his masters right there
frail in a moment a little less
slender than his own.

SPINNING

Lara Munden

When we were young, I'd follow you
And copy everything you'd do.

I wanted the same dress and shoes.
Why were mine green when yours were blue?

We'd run and play all afternoon
And soak our socks in summer dew.

I'll never be as old, that's true,
I could not spin as fast as you.

SPEEDING UP THE WORLD

Nathan Nicolau

Drink your coffee at 2 a.m. and read the news before
anyone else. That way, you'd be the first to comment
before they put another stopper on you.

Never look at clocks—they haven't changed much.

If you're like me who was never good at math,
you would think clocks would go by events, not intervals.

Instead, sit out at the park with a loved one,
and assess all your hopes.

'Assess' might be too clinical, so try prayer instead.

'Prayer' might be too uncertain, so maybe fall asleep
after that 2 a.m. coffee and wake up a day faster with no more
worries for tomorrow.

The truth is that we're all bullets for someone's gun.

So, send those postcards before the first one grazes us.

A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN

Damen O'Brien

From a long line of stubbornness,
persuaders of stair-stuck donkeys,
out-waiters of stones, out-starers
of the sun, from a long line of
breath-holders, blue on the floor,
both of them capable of keeping
the jinx indefinitely, not acknowledging
the elephant. It was never going
to work: she said yes and he said
yes and each child was yes, yes, when
it should have been no. The biggest
fight was their marriage, which lasted
50 years. Cold single beds, warm
microwave meals, until he popped off,
mid-sulk, as it were, cutting off
all the come-backs he'd been brewing
in his arm-chair over that time,
withering her rejoinders she'd waited
to spring. She's still not speaking
to him and he won't say a word.

OCEAN OF STORMS

Mark O'Flynn

Regarding the moon:

Now we're talking. Conflict is drama. The swirling
whirlpools, tempest-tost island villages,
tsunamis and hissy-fits, these disturbances
on the head of a pin, across the width
of the world lift up your complacencies,
dash them against our own bony attitudes.
Where else but at the bottom of the deepest
trough would we spout such platitudes?
The cruellest, coldest, bitterest nadir
less known than the floor of the basalt sea,
is the sac of the human soul where air
and water exchange their vows.

SEA OF MOISTURE

Mark O'Flynn

Regarding the moon:

A single drop would be miraculous. Sleet, rain, drizzle, or hail the size of lemons. Snow by any other noun would smell as nearly sweet. So too the film of milk on the baby's upper lip, the sweat at the nape after running. Flood, torrent, downpour draining into the dark sump that is another name for progress. The opposite is also true, drought, neglect, forgetfulness. A system of transforming healthy boulders, river beds and glaciers into primordial gravel. Signs of life in the cosmos. Whatever.

A GREAT SILENCE

Denise O'Hagan

'Now my heart turns this way and that, as I think what the people will say...' (inscription on one of Hatshepsut's obelisks, Karnak)

Your story lies slabbed in yellow stone, the mystery of you compacted into terraces and chiselled into colonnades. Busloads of tourists disgorged at the entrance centuries later and crawling its floors make no more impression on it than ants over a baked earth. Through the sweating of centuries and layering of dynasties, your Holy of Holies walls up a great silence. We stare at the rubble remains of your temples and tombs, at your fractured legacy in glass cases in museums and know we're looking at damage, at a hatred nurtured for decades. Gathering around the cracked ravine of your skull, your blistered forehead and the crushed slope of your cheekbones, we recoil at the foul blur in a corner of our minds of arms raised and instruments poised. There are theories, of course, yet the riddle of you shimmers bright as a mirage, the bedrock of fact turning quicksand.

Note: One of Egypt's most successful pharaohs, Hatshepsut was the first female to reign as a male with the full authority of pharaoh. Her long reign (c. 1479–58 BC) was marked by relative peace, prosperity and extensive building, of which the 'Holy of Holies', her mortuary temple, was the crowning achievement. The impetus behind the vicious attacks on her monuments and statuary at the end of the reign of her successor and stepson, Thutmose III, remains a mystery.

TWENTY FRAGMENTS ON WAITING

Gemma Parker

All waiting is a joke in which you are the punchline. If you refuse to ridicule your own plight, if you decide to reject the absurdity of suspension, you must replace it with something else. Madness, fury, delusion. Godot does not arrive, of course. But he *might*.

Here is the simplest form of waiting: waiting for something you are certain will arrive, something with a predetermined arrival date. A package you have sent yourself: some linen sleepwear, perhaps, in dove grey. Fun fact: a person who has ordered linen sleepwear in dove grey is not going to wait serenely. This person is attempting to *purchase* serenity. The degree of impatience attached to waiting will be determined by the extent to which you believe that you, personally, will be improved by delivery. Will this sleepwear improve your outlook, your mood, your mettle?

You can also wait for objects that may or may not arrive—unpurchased objects, say, like an inexplicably heavy gift from your mother or a missive from an unrequited love. This may depend on how often you receive gifts, or letters—the height of the expectation that you have attached to waiting for the unexpected. Perhaps an empty mailbox is an insult to you. Maybe you check it compulsively, scowling at the empty

chamber three times a day as if it is mocking your lack, delighting in your unresolved ache, Derrida muttering *attendre sans s'attendre* in your ear. Again, in this example, it is only the object that will ever arrive, or not arrive.

You can wait for a reply to a declaration. You can wait for return on any kind of vulnerability, any kind of exposure you may have made. This can be the most excruciating and the most exquisite type of waiting: if you are feeling stagnant, this will make you feel unbearably alive. You will marvel at your self-control in not pitching yourself headfirst down a flight of stairs. You will contemplate online gambling—anything in which the return is immediate, the destruction palpable. Like gambling, though, this kind of waiting can become addictive—the rush of return, the despair of silence.

You can wait for someone, either at a predetermined place you have agreed to meet, or without their knowledge, because you have memorised their schedule and know that on Tuesdays they have a break between classes and usually head across the bridge to the main campus for lunch. In the case of the latter you must hide your waiting. You can do this by stopping to look for something in your bag, or strolling slowly whilst gazing in the direction opposite to which you expect them—preferably at the mountains in the distance, low and misty in the last days of autumn. It is not difficult to pretend that you have not been waiting; what is hard is to engage the one you have waited for in an interaction meaningful enough to alleviate the shame of the concealed waiting.

Your waiting may also depend on how you were treated as a child; whether or not your mother and aunt spent afternoons trying to get your attention so that they could win a point in the game “Who is the Baby Looking at?” when the music stopped. This sort of thing, as an example, might skew your expectations as an adult—enthusiastically vying for a baby’s regard could result in that baby believing, as a grown woman, that she is the deserving and enduring focus of all adult attention. Any deviation from this blueprint might be unsettling; could lead to irritable waiting for a return to the native state in which she is the centre of all conscious attention.

You can wait for bad things to pass; you can wait for bad things to happen. These types of waiting seem different, and we give them different names—one of these is forbearance; the other anxiety. But they share a skin, and they slip between states.

You can forget that you are waiting until you open your phone to find a text from an unknown number that begins *It is almost impossible to admit but ...* and have cities collapse within as, shaking, you open the text only to find it is an invitation to a birthday party and the text continues *... I am about to turn fifty and want you to join me to celebrate!* The note is certainly not a declaration of reciprocated yearning from a confusing past hurt, a ghost you have tried to forget, a married colleague from many years ago that you were not supposed to fall in love with, whose

schedule you were never meant to memorise... In a case like this, the waiting has been going on behind the scenes, has learned to be silent. This kind of waiting can congeal with time, can form a plateau that seems solid enough to build upon. You can construct a world on top of all that silenced anticipation, and you won't even know until one day a text creates an earthquake and swallows it all up in a heartbeat. And then you will see the ravenous maw of wait, and know that you have to starve it back underground again.

Waiting is a mood, a delusion, an insult, a harbinger, a tangle, an embarrassment. It is a cocktail of entitlement and fear, a suspended relapse. It is a yearning for violence, it is both concave and repellent. It is an impatience, a gnawing inability, the lurking threat of both becoming and unbecoming.

Waiting is breathtaking, transformative arrest.

You can wait for confirmation. For mysteries to be solved. For the track to be selected, for the random order of things to make sense. You can wait for patterns to be revealed, for the other shoe to drop. You can wait for wars to end, for plagues to end, for embargoes to be lifted, for sentences to be served, for presidencies to terminate, for cases to be dismissed. You can wait for a narrative arc to emerge, for direction, for any kind of foothold.

Waiting can ruin your life, if your life needs ruining.

Waiting is a form of impatience with the status quo—it is a restlessness for something that has an unknown tense—a sort of conditional *perhaps* / *not yet*. All waiting is internal—it comes from a perceived lack, a deficit. But you can also wait for things that can only happen inside of you: to heal after grief, or to get over someone, for example. You can wait to be an instigator, to clarify your curiosity, to make the first move, to get things right. To be honest and upfront about your feelings. This may seem more like prevarication than waiting, but it's not. Sometimes you have to be a different person to get things right, and that sort of waiting can last a lifetime.

You cannot speed up waiting. You cannot terminate waiting. Waiting is an unwanted state in which you have zero control. There is nothing to be learned in waiting, except dogged perseverance of the waiting, and a kind of gentle awareness that you should not think too much about that game that your mother and your aunt played when you were a baby, and how that may have now ruined all of your attempts at love. Waiting is not the time to interrogate yourself about why you couldn't admit that you were waiting for him, or why you lived for years longing to know how he felt yet refusing to ask, refusing to hint. Because an affair would have just been a different type of waiting, and nobody should ever fall in love with waiting.

Waiting can be very passive, to the point of apathy. You can wait for financial stability, as if one day you will wake up as someone who values financial stability. You can wait for your body to change, holding onto the jeans you bought fifteen years ago, as if you can change the disposition of your body and the allocation of mass. You can go even further than this and wait for things that will never happen, waiting for Dwayne Johnson to ask you to ghostwrite his autobiography. Only the very arrogant, however, would label this a form of waiting.

You can wait to give birth. That is every type of waiting rolled into one.

You can wait to be a better kind of person, a better wife or mother or daughter. This is particularly internal and particularly passive, because motherhood, especially, does not come easily to everyone, and the waiting can feel senseless, unachievable. In these instances, endurance can be a more useful framework than waiting. Sometimes you simply need to make a thousand vegemite sandwiches and bathe them fourteen hundred times and help them hold their pencil before the cog finally engages and shifts that behemoth mechanical structure to emit the required torque to make a mother.

I need not say that this sort of waiting is more profound than waiting for a package of linen pyjamas in dove grey, but also, by the time it happens you can forget that it was ever a lack, was ever something you yearned for, was ever a way in which you felt inadequate. Sometimes it's nice to just order something and know that it will arrive; some things you wait for don't.

The relationship between reality and delusion can be impossible to ascertain in waiting. That's part of the discomfort. How can you get a grip on how realistic your expectations are without calling into question your own sanity? Waiting can be split open, like a mandarin, but how can you tell which segment you are holding? Waiting as comedy. Waiting as anticipation, as expectation. Waiting as exposure, or longing. Waiting as pathological. Waiting as the result of fear. Waiting as an illusion, as a mood. Waiting versus 'change as constant'. Waiting versus 'closure as myth'. Waiting as both nihilism and opportunity. Waiting as perfect failure. Waiting as acceptance or, waiting as entitlement. Waiting as procreation. Waiting as inevitable. Waiting as clumsy transference. Waiting as delusion—waiting as life-force. Waiting can be a trial, for and against your talent to identify what is reasonable and what is, effectively, madness.

It is not impossible that waiting unhinges you precisely because your hinges were so loose to begin with. Your mother dug a trench to shock you out of your overdue womb, a ten-foot trench with a pick-axe in the wide heat of Queensland's tropical summer. She smashed through the earth, her belly swinging in an arc, until you came along. Which you

did. Came into a world of abundance and wonder, in which you lacked for nothing: not for love, not for food, not for company, not for a wild mother who would teach you how to hold on to your own rage, your own furious fate. You were born to wrangle with waiting, to resist the cage of quietism. No small wonder then, that you hate to wait.

SUNRISE

Belinda Paxton

Bark is eggshell blue,
leaves are dripping yolk, morning
literally broken.

PLAYING CATCH

Belinda Paxton

Dog twists, muscles catch
the sun. She catches ball. In
shade, I catch my breath.

TIME IS RELATIVE

Belinda Paxton

Gun-metal river.

Mullet wend toward ocean.

Slow moving bullets.

MIST ON BLACK MOUNTAIN

K. M. Preston

The air is cold, water-dense, white tendrilling fingers
weaving through the red box and scribbly gum where

each breath, oxygen replete with stringy bark,
catches the lungs with ice in the winding ascent

as in the distance magpie descants welcome the dawn,
and wattle birds' throat blush glimpse between branches.

There is toughness here, resilience to fire, to frost,
but mist is gentle, fragile, transitory and soon

by early afternoon will disperse and be forgotten
by the red-bellied black snakes coiling in the sun.

INDUSTRIAL HABITAT/ARCHITECTURE FOR BIRDS

Kristen Roberts

Morning breaks clean
after last night's sky bruise
and cloud fight,
 no sounds near home
but the breeze's making. At the end of the block
the factory sits unskinned,
ribs visible, bones clad in horizon.

We're still not sure why the developers haven't returned.

A crow leaps from steel truss to hardwood batten,
batten to truss as it would through a tree,
 save the inconvenience of twigs and foliage,

and crosses its beak on an aching joist.

Its series of precise swipes

to groom or to mark, I've never known

is interrupted by a currawong swooping through un-leaved branches
to confront it.

The crow maintains its stance.

I can't quite reconcile a thriving life in this pared habitat

(around here,

 the council's recent curation of trees

 provides only juvenile support)

but I suppose they have adapted to its offerings—
a pair of pigeons huddle plainly on the powerlines,
a magpie declares its interests
from a fecund verge
 —all content, all thriving,
 even territorial
over this poor substitute.

Across the main road,
in a suburb where trees are large enough
to lose limbs in a storm,
where industry doesn't impinge on suburban freedoms

tor where houses aren't huddled against its flanks

gardeners have selected bird-attracting species
for their impact and hardiness
 but the factory now claims these traits too,
 and the birds in its boughs
 have the greater view.

DISQUISITION

K Roberts

Question 1.

I'm nobody, Emily Dickinson said. Are you nobody, too?

'If Christopher Isherwood was a camera
I am a mailbox' —
that's what I said. Signed it in cave-icicle green,
with three rat-tailed flourishes.

Flap-jawed me. Flag-armed me. You notice me
not? Oval that opens
only for dentists, aah, nothing but air inside.

A humbling of hedgehogs follows:
taxidermists stuffing parkas
with permissions to ferry.
Rain or shine, U send U home.

F my F shouts, Y no Z? An essay can't be
one sentence long. —*Sez you*, I'm thinking.
Christopher inked limericks across starched arctic linen
for his Cambridge exams. Tests, ask not
what your country kin do. No mailbox yearns
to be empty.

GEOPOLITICS

Bruce Robinson

The tide comes in, thinks
better of it, goes out,
leaves behind a shoe
or two, or stones, or bones.
Or something with a plunger
in its hand decides
when if and where
to disappear its doubt.

STILL

Vanessa Rose

On seeing Justine Clarke in Griffin Theatre Company's Girls & Boys

Behind me a woman was coming undone:
sobbing; the sharp gasps we make when the body
betrays us. Unbridled hurt on display. And someone,
her friend, was consoling, whispering: It's upsetting,
isn't it? Perhaps reaching for her hand. This, right
at the point where Justine Clarke, in character, says:
I have no idea what he did. And we, the audience,
are fixed with horror. We are one beating body,
conceiving pain when a few rows in front, a woman
screams: *Steven, Steven, Steven!* Her voice rising,
and we stir gradually, realising this is not
a child murdered but a man slumped forward
in his theatre seat. The stalls are lit, people call out,
those with medical training pick their way over
to the couple, a stage manager directs the exit
of 500 people and Justine Clarke is still.
Downstage. An incline in her posture just
observable toward Row M. Her face had been knotted
with grief. Now masked with calm concern. Body:
composed, alert; even when someone yells right
at her, through that fourth wall, to call an ambulance.
When the paramedics arrive in the half empty
theatre hauling their equipment between the aisles,
she summons movement and gently, deliberately,
walks to the wings, as if holding the moment within.

GREY MATTERS

Margaret Owen Ruckert

low cloud an afternoon caught
in weather's uncertainties all week
the sky has taunted the people cumulous
and its shadow rising like a vast city
beyond help radar check we're on the edge
of blackness a storm thunder to the north
not a time for escape the ritual
walk to rewind our minds delayed
in exasperation we're not alone
there will be others desperate for colour
for light the antidote to absence
fat water drops hammer the ground
till exhaustion the rain shower loses its show
we step outside make our own news

THIS CITY

Mykyta Ryzhykh

He won't return anymore_

After all, the whole morning cit_

At this moment hi_

In his ey_

In general to escap_

There are more important reaso_

This city is too small for this kind of love

The falling recitative of firs

Falls into the airy expanse of autumn

Firs are silent Firs are silent Firs are silent

Overcoming the bekars the cod of the fire

Deafening and exposing everything that surrounds them

Throwing out your whole soul

Hit me out of thin air like a dice

like a random rustle in the bushes

Life without bonds without body movements without all that

What makes you a real autumn

Autumn be real autumn

Be true autumn

Earn cancer and die

For the arrival of a burning winter

Drop me from the air of firs

Man fall fall man

WRITING TRAUMA

Jessie Seymour

Writing trauma¹. Writing *to* trauma². Writing *through* trauma³.

Creative practice as catalyst for catharsis.

The mighty pen slices through aporia,⁴ illuminates the abject,⁵ complicates and (re)enacts the past.⁶ Tear-stained manuscripts witness an urgent purge. A wound that cries out and makes public the private, ragged, half-healed scars.

Trauma shatters; the writer re-forms.

Creative practice as cause for doubt.

Writing *to* trauma – no, writing *is* trauma. The crucial process to understanding.⁷ Contaminated.

I haven't opened any of the files we worked on together. Every terrible thought about my own talent was confirmed in our correspondence. A second pair of eyes were called when yours were uncertain; the second pair found a flaw the first pair claimed to have seen all along.

A new story is offered.

One week, the premise is delightful; the next, unconvincing.

Emails reek of eyerolls. Zoom meetings: a steady beat of frustrated sighs.

'It's *your* story.' (it's unsellable) (it's problematic) 'It's wonderful writing!' (it's not good enough)

And I wanted to apologise for wasting your time. All those hours you spent editing and reading and thinking and planning, only to spend even more time coaxing some stubborn little brat into seeing things your way.

How did it feel when the brat finally gave in?

A willpower battered from years of patient (re)minding, finally relenting.

How did it feel when the brat told you she would write anything you wanted?

What was it that made you baulk?

A six-year relationship. Ended in an email.

Creative practice as calamity.

Anxious nights tremble at the periphery. A miasma like bleeding ink that blots and warps the page. My fingers stick and smudge and hesitate.

It's not an editor's job to tell the author what to write.

Only what they can't write.

'It's *your* story.' Not anymore. (not for years)

My story is scarred and ragged and unrecognisable and everything I had to give.

You watched me split myself apart and write myself together over and over and over and over; relentlessly pursuing the compromise.

And then you wished me all the best for my future.

Writing *to* trauma.

Writing *through* trauma; fighting through the urge to hide my face from illuminated keyboards. Forcing my black, sticky, frozen fingers to press pen to paper. Cringing and scratching against the grain. Recoiling at the scent of ink. Wincing as the laptop boots up.

Emails are agony. Blog posts are a bloodletting.

Trauma shatters; the writer cuts herself on the pieces.

¹ LaCapra, D. (2014). *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (updated ed), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

2 Haylock, B., & Hermanoczki, S. (2017). 'Introduction: Writing Trauma: Traumascope', *TEXT* 21 (Special 42): 1-6.

3 Micciche, Laura R. (2001). 'Writing through Trauma: The Emotional Dimensions of Teaching Writing'. *Composition Studies* 29(1): 131-41.

4 LaCapra, D. (2002). *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

5 Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (trans L.S. Roudiez), New York: Columbia University Press.

6 Van der Kolk, B.A. (1989). 'The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma: Re-enactment, Revictimization, and Masochism', *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 12(2): 389-411.

7 Haylock, B., & Hermanoczki, S. (2017). 'Introduction: Writing Trauma: Traumascope', *TEXT* 21 (Special 42): 1-6.

CARDBOARD SOLES

Joshua Lee Shimmen

Frank Bailey was the first real communist we'd met. An English fella. He'd been to college in London. And he told us all about the Tories, and the aristocrats, the ruling classes who demanded every man, woman and dog tug the forelock to them when they passed in the street. And the whole lot of them were nothing but rot through and through. It was the first time we'd heard the word *depression*. The first time we'd heard about the Labor party. About a day when somebody might take over the government and share everything out fair, rather than holding back the wealth of the land for reasons nobody could grasp.

Every night for weeks we sat and listened to Frank talk. Davy, me and the ten or so sussos who had been drawn to the fire under the high piers of the Fitzroy River at low tide. He'd stand preaching with his back to the water. Talking loud with big working man's hands. He knew poems from memory, and he'd make a big show of closing his eyes and taking off his rat-chewed cap and placing it over his heart. He had this wild head of hair, and it stood straight up like an army of soldiers at attention.

And he'd speak all slowly, like he was grappling with every word, like he was channelling each little sound from some place bigger than this one: *God is our guide! From field, from wave, from plough, from anvil, from loom; we come, our country's rights to save, to speak a tyrant faction's doom.*

Then he'd open his eyes again and smooth back his hair and replace his cap and sit down like he'd exhausted himself. Like it was harder to get the words out than it was to haul pig feed, or shift iron, or shovel muck or whatever work we'd gone and picked up that day. none of them men, haggard and tired-eyed, would've been let into no respectable town church on a Sunday morning, they'd have been chased straight

out by the local jacks and beaten with waddies all the while, but none of them needed to bother now, because Frank Bailey was there by the banks of the river, not feeding their stomachs, but feeding their souls.

By then Davy and me knew what it was like to be hungry. Up until the turning of the year we'd been counter jumpers back home at a little shoe shop in Hobart. And then the whole town went broke—first slowly, then all at once. Every day I'd walk up Elizabeth Street to work and some bloke'd stop me and tell me he'd got the sack. And then I'd walk in the shop door and Davy would be standing there shining the same pair of brown dress boots that had been sitting in the window for months. Still, we never thought it'd happen to us. Not even when all the youngfellas we knew started walking round on cardboard soles. And then we were out on our arses too.

I had this motorbike back then: Lewis precision twin. Eight horsepower twin-cylinder. B&B carburettor. Sturmey archer three-speed gearbox. Brooks saddle. Dunlop tyres. The whole lot. A real beauty. I sold her for forty pounds to some sheep farmer's kid and rolled up the money in the sleeve of an old shirt, stuffed it into my swag and me and Davy tramped straight up the east coast in a frost-ridden mid-July, setting down at night in stables, stinking of wet straw and horse-piss. Thankful the old boss had re-soled our boots as a going away present, cause if we would've been walking on cardboard, our feet probably would've frozen and stuck straight to the ground.

We knew one lad up in Launceston who reckoned his cousin could get us passage on a steamer to the mainland in exchange for trimming coal. I'd never seen a steamship before and when we saw her sitting at the docks, I couldn't believe the size. Huge white and black thing with two coal chimneys puffing smoke. And I thought there wasn't enough

coal in the whole world to keep her fed and moving. And the water was darker than death and four times as violent and the wind was pushing her back and forth in the harbour. And Davy reckoned her name was Loonganna from some local word meaning *to fly*. And I told him that if the wind kept blowing, we really would be flying across the strait.

We crept on as quiet as we could with seventy-pound swags on our backs, but the captain caught us straight out and sent us packing. Luckily this young sailor ran into us heading back to town and asked us where we were heading.

We were trying to head to Melbourne, but that bastard captain booted us off for nothing, Davy told him.

Tell you what, said the sailor, *if you got something to eat and don't mind sharing, I'll get you on board, but you'll have to work through the night. They cut our rations near in half and haven't paid an honest wage in weeks.*

Davy pulled out a run of sausages he'd stashed in his swag and draped them around the sailor's neck, right there in the street. And that night we cooked them on a shovel that we held in the burner's flames and stripped down to singlets and trousers and spent the whole night firing that big beast. Loonganna. And damned if I didn't feel like we were flying.

But Melbourne was the come down. We asked some lad at the station to watch our swags while we spoke to the conductor about what train was going where, and when we come back, he'd off and left and taken the swags with him.

That's what we get for trusting mainlanders, Davy said.

And we were still dressed in nothing, but our singlets and Melbourne was just as cold as Tassie, but the conductor pointed us to a train bound for Albury and having no money for tickets we run up and out the station and down the line and hopped on the siding as it rolled past. Ended up in a box loaded with sheep and when we jumped in, they all ran down the other side. Which was great for a while till the guards came creeping

and it was all the sheep up one end and me and Davy up the other going *baa-baa* and hoping like hell we wouldn't get caught.

It was dark when we pulled into Albury, and I'll be damned if it wasn't the coldest place on earth. We headed through town watching our breath and shivering something terrible.

I said to Davy, *We'll die if we don't get warm soon.*

And he said, *It might be a mercy.*

And I said, *That's no way to talk even if it is just kidding.*

Then Davy spotted this fella sleeping out on his veranda and he had blankets stacked on top of him and he was snoring so loud you'd think everyone else in town must stay awake while he slept. And on top of the blankets was this big old wagga rug patched every colour you could think of and lined with hessian sack. Davy snuck right up to him and pinched it and we set to running down the road till we ran across this burnt-out model A, and we curled up in the back under the rug and we were like babes in the womb we were so happy for the warmth. Then Davy started snoring something shocking himself and I had to elbow him awake and told him to quit it and he said he thought it was me snoring and then we figured it must've been the fella still dozing on his veranda and we couldn't sleep the whole night for laughing 'bout it.

In the morning we asked around and managed to get a few weeks work on a farm putting in irrigation pipes, but it didn't last long. No job did. So, we headed north again. And that was the pace of life for a while. Work a bit and gather a stake and then head north. We broke some horses up in the Razorbacks and sold them for a few bob. Boxed a little in the tents up in Rocky and didn't do too bad neither. But we'd always end up broke. Even ate a few magpies when times were really tough. And

damned if I wouldn't have rather eaten the stringybark they perched in, 'cause you couldn't taste the difference between them if you tried.

That's why when we heard Frank Bailey on the banks of the Fitzroy River we sat and listened. 'Cause he was telling it like we didn't have to keep moving. We could build something wherever we were. If only the bastards would let us.

And try to build something we did. Hell, it wasn't more than a couple of tin shanties by the pier, but we made it work. For a while there was always a spot of work moving cattle. And if you got lucky you might get a day or two in the new gold mines they were digging. But mostly they were union jobs, and you can't pay dues if you can't afford to feed yourself. But the dole had kicked in by then and we were getting rations in town once a week. And we got good at trapping rabbits. Plus a few blokes would go bandicooting round the local farms at night. We always had a communal pot going. Used to collect up the cow pats from the farm and dry them out and stack them up and then we'd use them to keep the fire going. They burnt low and slow and lasted longer than the timber and you got used to the smell quicker than you'd think. And we'd all sit around of an evening and Frank'd tell us stories. Tell us all about the enclosure acts. And the Tolpuddle Martyrs. About how in Russia the workers had overthrown their king and started building a new world where everyone got their equal share.

One night Frank stood up and took off his cap and rested it against his chest like was his habit to do. And he said to us we could start our own union. A union for those without jobs. All we had to do was set our price and stick to it. No man would work for less than the agreed rate and then the bosses would have to pay it.

And it even worked for a while. A new man would roll into camp, and we'd tell him what the go was. And he either agreed to join or we'd run him out.

But new folk came by road and train every day and we had no chance of recruiting them all and soon there were more workers than work and we had to head north again.

Davy was sick of it by then.

All this talking and what have we got to show for it, he said. *Nothing but fairy tales*, he said.

Reckoned he was too grown for it.

I think really, he just missed his girl, who was back home helping her family with their boarding house. And so, he decided to head back south to Rocky to get a stake to go home.

Me and Frank went north to a pig farm near Mackay, where we'd heard there was work for those who wanted it.

We dived off the overpass at Yaamba and landed in a bed of coal hurtling along the rails. Coal dust kicked up like mad and you could've seen the black trail sailing for miles around. Not that there was anyone around to see it. And when we got to the pig-farm, we were covered top to toe. There were these state kiddies there working. Orphan types. Never knew shoes the whole time we were there, and I doubt if they ever had. Skinny buggers in rags and they damn-near made you want to cry to look at them, but they didn't know any different. They lost the plot when Frank and me came strolling up the road.

Hey misters, aren't you a bit big to be sweeping chimneys, they said. And dropped their spades and fell to laughing in the muck.

The boss there was a hard man. Which wasn't surprising cause he was farming the wrong kinda pigs. I'd learnt a bit bout farms by then and I knew these were foraging type pigs and not the type that'd just fatten themselves up on feed and swill. But I didn't tell him this. He was mighty proud of them. Reckoned some English fella had shipped them in special. Heritage breed or some such thing. Frank told him he recognised them from the mother country, laying the accent on extra thick, and told him he'd had plenty of experience with these types back home. The boss was hesitant, but he put us on anyway. Paying ten bob a week, which was the same as he was paying the kiddies.

Nights, we used to sit around the fire and Frank would tell the kids stories 'bout Captain Swing, in his usual way with his hat over his heart and his hair standing on end. He told them 'bout the threshing machines that came. Mechanical beasts with many teeth that could do the work of a hundred men in half the time. And the farmer whose labourers used to eat at his same table and who he suddenly had no use for and all the children who only ever had enough tatties to go to sleep with tummies half-full. Them state kiddies would be wide-eyed, lit orange by the fire, under stars, hanging off every word.

Then one day the letters came, Frank'd whisper.

And then in a booming voice, If you don't put away your threshing machine against Monday next ye shall have a swing.

And without fail the kids'd always let out a big gasp, like they didn't know what he was gonna say. And Frank'd get quiet and tell how the farmer paid the letters no mind 'cause he was too busy enjoying his new found riches. And then in the night Captain Swing would come. And set fire to those big machines. And cut down all the grain. And spread it around the villages so that wheat grew freely everywhere on the commons and every man laboured only to feed his people and never

to put wealth into the pockets of another. And some mornings when we went to clean out the sties, we'd catch the kids with the farmer's scythe, chasing each other this way and that, taking turns at playing the Captain.

Things were alright there for a bit. But then one morning we got out to the sties and the boss reckons he wanted all the shit and shavings carted off by lunchtime. Which was half the time it normally took two men working flat out. And Frank reckoned it was 'cause he was low on coin and trying to run us off without losing face. But I was a Tasmanian. And back then Tasmanians worked twice as hard as mainlanders. So, I said we'd give her a crack. And you would've thought we were steam-powered to watch us work. Slop flying this way and that at speeds you'd never seen. But we had this old wheelbarrow with a wooden wheel that wasn't quite round enough, and it kept falling over and we'd have to shovel up the spilt shit all over again. By lunch we had cleared near two thirds of it and were rounding on the last third when the boss came out. And he blew his top. Talking about how it wasn't good enough. Calling us bludgers and skivers and every name under the sun. And then he pushed me in the chest. And something went wrong with me. And I grabbed him by the coat and rolled him over the sty. And before I knew it, I was on top of him bouncing his head in the shit. Bouncing it so his eyes were rolling about. And there was this dull thud come cutting through the rage and I couldn't quite figure what could be making that sound, till I realised it was his skull whumping against the earth.

When I snapped out of it, Frank was flour pale.

All he could say was, *What'd you do that for?*

And there I thought if anybody'd understand it ought to be him. And if he didn't understand then nobody else will. And I didn't even say nothing. Just turned and ran. Hitched the first train heading south.

My boots were worn through by then. And I hopped off the train somewhere outside Rocky and first thing I did was pick up a paper to check if anybody had died, but there wasn't anything about it.

I spent the next two days looking for Davy but couldn't spot hide nor hair of him. All the camps and shanties had been busted up. And the army and navy were recruiting flat out. There was hardly a swaggie in town.

Eventually I ran across a mate from the tent boxing circuit and asked about Davy.

He took a dive, he said.

And I said to him, *What do you mean took a dive?*

The jacks hassled the sussos every night after you left, he said. Trying to move them on. Ripped down tents and burned them, threw swags in the river, he said. Davy got sick of it. Took a dive off the river bridge at low tide.

He had been part of the crew they paid to drag his body out. Said it used to happen so often there was a regular crew of guys that pulled the bodies out, but he had been just filling in for the day.

Later, I met an army recruiter on Quay Street who was offering six shillings a day to enlist. I signed up on the spot. And of all the smart talk I'd heard of governments and economies and politics, nobody had ever told me about the cycle that goes boom, and then bust, and then war.

LONELY SHOES

Kim Silva

Through heartbeats she speaks with her son. No blight on his sunlight, he smiles, teeth gleaming; shoulders broad for his lonely mother, who's shoes are tight and pinched and won't come off no matter how much she tugs at them. He says, oh mother I love you. But the shoes stay on.

Other mother's shoes have slipped off easily, no longer needed. They're elephants; the babies are orphans and destined to wrestle with African nannies who act as their foster mothers. The babies cuddle with them and refuse to sleep apart from them at night. White birds fly from the babies' trunks and whistle in the darkness softly saying *mother mother mother*. Where are you, mother ...

The son walks with his mother, whose shoulders are bent; saying, come little mother. I'll carry you.

Mother elephants fly from their sky grave. They sigh a trumpet call from a far-off place called death. To their babies' nannies, they say, *play, wrestle, lean against our little ones. Make them strong*. Invisible shoes scabble in the red dust, staining the socks red. Shoes walk without legs. Without air. Without tears, eyes glassy and staring. Only the babies make sounds, go barefoot, walk backward in their search for home.

The son says, mother, you're so light I could feed you to the air.

Along with their African nannies, the babies stare into a mirror. The reflections begin to multiply. Soon there are many babies and nannies. With their big heads they pound their nannies. The kaleidoscopic nannies are gentle. They go the way that the babies go, swaying along with them, like robust flowers, wild flowers from which tears flow.

The babies are flowers, flowers that stack atop each other and lean together side to side. Gray flowers with wrinkled knees that kneel in the dust sucking for water and mother's milk.

The son walks with his mother; years ago he nursed from her; he was fat and full.

Holes walk alone. A baby is a shoe without a foot. Mothers call from hard packed earth, their ribs crowning the baby blue sky. Mother lies still, bones packed into the red dirt. Tusks disintegrating, a mirage, whistling faint calls in rainless clouds.

Lonely shoes walk with the son and his mother. Mother growing tiny, tiny, the shade swallowing her.

TO THE SURGEON

Jane Simpson

Pardon my impertinent breast
speaking out of turn.

It heaves with the weight of history,
carries the freight of fantasy and dream—

sculptors in the Parthenon carving goddesses
as human beings, with classical restraint
and in sensuous lines of drapery
drawing the eye to their idealised forms

to Praxiteles' Aphrodite—known only
in Roman copies—her hands tease
and cover, fingers flare over, almost
touch the breast,

living on in Napoleon's Empire line
in graceful dress, in my son's drawing
when seven imagining mine
were Mary's globes,

Queen of Heaven—a girl
surprisingly well-endowed.

MR CHAMBERS

Lui Sit

Despite the early hour, the Australian sun was hard at work, resulting in blooming sweat patches beneath Susmita's arms. She remained under the harsh glare, smoking a menthol cigarette while scanning the cream building bordered with flowerbeds sprouting carnations, roses and lilies.

'Old people flowers,' she thought, stubbing out the fag with her shoe. She picked up the butt and pocketed it. She couldn't litter on her first day of work at a nursing home.

Merrill, her new manager, was on the stout side, her chest arriving in a room before the rest of her. Susmita thought she looked like she belonged on the prow of a ship.

After a welcome which Merrill delivered without any enthusiasm, there was a knock on the office door. A short lady with dark hair entered.

'Ah Carmen,' Merrill said. 'Just in time. Off you go.'

Dismissed out into the hallway, Susmita returned Carmen's smile.

'Come on,' her new colleague winked. 'I'll show you *everything*.'

After she'd donned the staff uniform—a baggy blue coverall that reminded Susmita of nuclear plant workers—Carmen piled a stack of linen into her arms.

'Follow me.'

For a short woman, Carmen had a very long stride. Susmita struggled to keep up as they marched down a series of corridors, coming to an abrupt stop outside Door 19.

Carmen pushed the door open without waiting for a reply to her cursory knock.

‘Good morning, Maggie,’ she trilled, approaching the figure on the bed. ‘Let’s get you up, shall we?’

Maggie sagged against the wall of pillows behind her, the tip of a burning cigarette hanging from her lips. Scorch marks decorated the bed sheets and the ashtray beside her was full of butts. Further cigarette burns marked the carpet around the bed and the whole room smelt of stale smoke and piss.

‘Fuck off,’ Maggie croaked, the fag clinging onto her cracked lips as she spoke.

Susmita stood in the doorway, her arms aching from the weight of the linen. She watched Carmen coax Maggie to her feet, helping her into a pair of pink slippers and matching dressing gown.

Moving at speed, Carmen pulled out a toiletries bag from the bedside cupboard before stripping the bed, leaving the dirty linen heaped on the floor.

‘Make the bed fresh while I take her for a shower,’ she instructed Susmita. ‘And change the towels. Put the dirty stuff in the laundry bag near the staff room kitchen.’

Maggie’s rheumy blue eyes followed the direction of Carmen’s voice, taking in Susmita hovering in the doorway. She hobbled over, her skinny white legs poking out from beneath the dressing gown, the spangled blue of her varicose veins speckling her goose pimpled shins.

She walked until they were face-to-face.

Up close, Susmita could smell Maggie’s smoker’s breath and see the cataracts clouding the pale blue eyes that were now staring into

Susmita's brown ones. The cigarette butt, defying gravity, stuck tight to her thin bottom lip.

'You,' Maggie wheezed, jabbing a gnarled finger into Susmita's shoulder.

'Yes,' Susmita stammered, looking over at Carmen who was emptying the rubbish bin.

Framed by a halo of tobacco-stained white curls, Maggie's face crinkled, her gaze fixed on Susmita as liquid streamed down her legs, pooling into the carpet. Susmita gagged, turning away. Maggie cackled. She pulled the butt from her lip, waving it towards Susmita's face. 'Fuck off,' she rasped as the butt fell from her fingers onto the sodden carpet. 'Go back to where you came from.'

As they continued on the morning rounds, it became obvious to Susmita that Carmen was popular among the residents. Her no-nonsense manner was well tolerated, and she radiated a confidence among the elderly that Susmita doubted she would ever acquire.

'Don't worry about Maggie,' she said once they'd left the old lady showered and tucked into a clean bed. 'She hates being here.'

'It shows,' Susmita replied, still shaken.

Carmen flashed her a smile.

'Mr Chambers is next. Room 23. You'll like him.'

Within fifteen minutes of meeting him, Susmita learned that Mr Chambers was raised in an orphanage. As an adult, he'd worked the railway tracks, providing the manual labour that had shrunk the desert space between the west and east coasts of Australia. Then, his face lighting up as he spoke, he'd met his wife in his late sixties, an age when he thought marriage and children had passed him by.

'Where is she now?'

'She's in another nursing home. There wasn't room for both of us in the same one so I'm on a waiting list at hers, and she's on the waiting list here.'

Susmita squeezed his arm.

'I hope you can be together soon.'

'Come on you two chatterboxes.' Carmen appeared with his robe draped over her arm. 'Let's go.'

In the shower cubicles, Carmen pulled a wad of plastic from her coverall pocket, offering it to Susmita who unfolded a pair of plastic gloves and shower cap. She put on the gloves but stuffed the cap in her pocket. Carmen shrugged.

'It's up to you, but you should always wear the gloves.'

She turned on the shower faucet, testing the water temperature against her wrist.

'Are you ready Mr Chambers?' She offered her arm to the frail man waiting in his robe, helping him towards the shower recess.

'Susmita is going to shower you today. Is that alright?'

'I am?' Susmita stammered. 'But ...'

Carmen cut her off. 'It's the best way to learn.' Her tone softened. 'Don't worry, I'll help you. Now in you go,' she said to Mr Chambers, passing his robe to Susmita who tried not to scrutinise his wizened frame. Carmen handed her a bar of soap and sponge, nudging her forward.

'Um. Is the water okay?' Susmita asked, passing him the soap, the easy space between them filling with awkwardness.

'Yes, fine,' he replied, attempting to lather the sponge but the soap dropped to the floor.

'Help him,' Carmen urged. 'His left arm is weak from a stroke.'

Lathering the sponge, Susmita soaped the back of his neck, moving across the span of his shoulders before working down towards the dip of his sacrum where the sponge glided over three dark moles clustered there.

She paused, glancing back at Carmen who nodded encouragingly. She squatted, droplets of water splattering against her face as she continued across his buttocks and the length of his hamstrings which she imagined once must have been muscular and firm. She traced the curve of his calves and soaped the tops of his feet, noticing that his toenails needed cutting.

‘Is this okay?’ she asked him.

‘Fine thanks,’ he replied, his eyes trained down at the tiled floor.

Susmita glanced at the faded tattoos inked on his biceps and forearms. She imagined those arms swinging a pickaxe as they built the railroads, now unable to lather a bar of soap.

‘Now his front,’ Carmen instructed. ‘Always keep an eye on them. Because one slip is all it takes.’ She made the gesture of her throat being slit.

Re-lathering the sponge, Susmita worked over his pectorals where a tattooed angel named ‘Sonia’ hovered. She lifted one arm and swiped the grey fuzz in his armpit, then the other. She dabbed the area beneath his chin, swallowing as she skimmed over his Adam’s apple and the edge of his still firm jaw.

The sponge dripped steadily as she trailed to his stomach, a small conflation with an outward bellybutton. Their heads were close as she leant in.

‘Okay?’ she repeated.

‘Yes. Fine.’

Her hand wavered near his groin and she looked to Carmen who took the sponge from her and handed it to Mr Chambers, who daubed the area between his legs. Carmen fetched his robe and held it open wide.

‘Well done,’ she said, handing Susmita his slippers so she could help each foot in. She glanced up to see him meeting her gaze.

‘Thank you.’

Susmita grinned.

‘Shall we?’ she asked, offering him her arm to exit.

By the time her break was due, Susmita had learned how to use the industrial dishwasher in the kitchen and how much the residents hated activity hour, a scheduled time where they had to endure board games or charades.

When she entered the staff room, it was already full of people sitting around a long table containing large platters of sandwiches. Carmen waved, patting the empty chair next to her.

‘Take your coverall off,’ she suggested, pointing to hers which was slung over the back of her chair. ‘Eat.’

Susmita’s mouth watered as she realised how hungry she was.

‘How’s your shift been so far?’ Merrill asked from the far end of the table. ‘Is Carmen looking after you?’

Susmita nodded, cheeks bulging.

‘Mr Chambers is nice,’ she said, picking out another sandwich.

‘So, you’re at university?’ Carmen asked.

‘Yes, I’m studying part-time and working.’

‘Good, means you won’t do work like this all your life. Lucky you.’

Susmita watched Carmen stand up, stretching her arms above her head. The nursing home was the third job she’d taken on to support herself while studying. She hoped Carmen was right.

‘You wanna come for a smoke?’ Carmen threw her coverall over her shoulder. ‘I saw you outside this morning.’

Susmita nodded, grabbing two more sandwiches.

‘Come see me when your shift is over,’ Merrill said as they walked to the door. ‘We’ll have a chat.’

Carmen’s shift ended before Susmita’s so she gave her the final task of delivering clean laundry back to each residents’ room.

‘Each pile of laundry has a room tag on it. You just put it away for them in their cupboard. Okay?’

Susmita nodded watching Carmen pull off the blue coverall, revealing her jeans and t-shirt underneath. She smiled, slinging her handbag over her shoulder.

‘See you next time. You did well today.’

‘Bye, and thanks,’ Susmita waved as Carmen strode away.

Humming she made her way to Room 23. All the other laundry had been delivered, with only one pile to go. She’d left Mr Chambers to last on purpose, so that her first day would end with a resident’s smile and not a snarl.

‘Hello.’

She entered and saw him lying on his bed.

‘Whoops, sleeping,’ she thought, slipping his folded laundry into his cupboard. Turning to go, she saw that his eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. ‘Mr Chambers. Sorry, did I wake you?’

Mr Chambers remained motionless.

‘Mr Chambers, are you alright?’

He blinked and she saw tears roll down his face. Alarmed she grabbed his hand which felt dry and stiff.

‘What’s wrong? Should I get help?’

She watched his mouth move, emitting a faint rasp.

‘What’s that? I didn’t hear you.’ She leaned her head down close to his.

‘The wife.’

‘Your wife?’ She squeezed his hand. ‘What about your wife?’

His head turned a fraction and stopped.

‘She.’

‘She?’ Susmita held her breath.

‘She’s dead.’

Susmita stood in front of Merrill’s desk.

‘I’ve had good feedback from Carmen about you. Are you happy to stay on?’

Merrill smiled at her for the first time that day, pushing a pile of papers towards her.

‘These are time sheets and a contract. Now,’ she said, turning towards her computer, ‘I’ve got three shifts for you next week. That okay?’

She waited for a reply, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. Susmita cleared her throat.

‘Mr Chambers.’

Merrill looked up. ‘Yes?’

‘His wife. He was waiting. She’s dead.’

Merrill swivelled her chair around to face her. ‘I know.’

Susmita waited for more words to follow from Merrill, but none did. ‘But,’ she said at last. ‘It’s so sad.’

Merrill tilted back in her chair. ‘It’s life. To work here, you’ll need to get used to it.’

‘But I don’t want to.’

Merrill shrugged, the smile now gone. ‘You can’t get attached. They come here to die.’

Heat rushed to Susmita’s cheeks but Merrill hadn’t finished.

‘This is a business. They come. And then they go.’

Susmita chucked the blue coverall in the dirty linen basket. At least she wouldn’t have to wear that ugly thing again she thought as she grabbed her backpack and headed towards the exit. Her chest felt tight from the confrontation with Merrill. She’d said things, horrible things that made her cringe as the words played over in her head.

She took a deep breath, wondering how she was going to cover rent next month. As she approached Room 23, her feet slowed. She pushed the door open, hearing low voices talking as she entered. Mr Chambers was lying on his bed and sitting by him, holding his hand, was Merrill who raised a finger to her lips.

‘Shhh.’

GAZAL

Eva Skrande

First the birds, knowing, flap their wings.
Then playful orchids are called home as if for dinner.

Stars go out like someone closing a book
and turning off the light before going to sleep.

The wind walks lost through the world
hungry for bread.

O crying trees of the park inside me. O mist
turning the blaze of lampposts into white questions.

Look, already before the dawn, birds
tap at the window of the next world.

The sounds of a guitar in the distance. Shall we dance—
what light remains of you, and myself?

DINE & DASH

Barnaby Smith

'Poverty has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought.'

– Walter Benjamin

the cable company doesn't care about that
neighbourhood—not even in cold early evening
light when ball physics level out tempers & red
plastics on wheels split puddles & dusk

the A380 passes over town schematas; in nervous
cahoots mother & boy point out of our universe,
point out our universe, & their polyphonic needs
dissolve into the calm sultry atmosphere of people
coming home from work

streetside interiors coveting food behind glass a
test of civic cupidity for the Sheridan & its cubist forms;
the porous space of stairwell carnivalesque
brings release—& so the happy life is joy in truth pulled
from words & wallets, ringfenced & tickled pink

time of year for mould in thin dusty homes &
courage to stay in one place; dust gathers on reams
of receipts she holds close—in that neighbourhood
summer thoughts in winter collect themselves
to renew the blind faith of the block

RUBY APPROACHES A CELLO

Elizabeth Smither

Half-time at the Baroque concert.
We stay in our seats. A little group
forms around the principal cellist.
Ruby gets up, straight as a wand
to be snapped over an interment where
women and girls are not allowed.
The cello is all these miraculous curves
and when a woman or a girl plays it
it looks like horseback riding, mane
and tail far flung to music.

I see Ruby's hand steal out—she asks
permission to touch the golden bounty
as if it is the future of her body. She
asks if she can hold the bow and it seems
as if the cello has taken off its hair
and she is holding in her hand a comb.
With deep reverence she hands it back.
Interval is over. Ruby resumes her seat
for Monteverdi, Corelli and Rameau.

SNORKELING WITH MY DAUGHTER

Stephen Smithyman

Entering the sea backwards, with flippered feet,
crowned by a plastic mask and dangling snorkel,
we feel ourselves awkward, if not obtuse, creatures
of another element. But once we lower ourselves,
gliding forward, suspended, a whole six inches
above ribbed sand, we become what we desire—
sleek, fish-like denizens of another world ...
and what a world! It opens to reveal its treasures
beneath us: rocks and weed of many different colours,
sponges, anemones, shellfish and the fish themselves,
solo or in schools, swimming slowly through bars
of sunlight or disappearing suddenly into shadow.
We dive down, pursuing them—that flash of life,
so alien to us, yet so uncannily evocative
of our own beginning, adrift in the amniotic sac.

Our world is inverted. We raise our feet towards the sun,
lower our heads towards the sandy bottom and descend
into the depths, where we pursue the fugitive flicker
among waving weeds and under rocky shelves.
Our ears pop with pressure, we stir with our arms
and flutter our feet, fighting flotation's upward urge,
like the little anemones, clinging to their rocky support,
or those larger jellyfish we saw, back-paddling helplessly
against the current, which carries them from the depths
onto the shore.

Finally, unable to resist any more ourselves, we rise to the surface, lungs bursting, to taste the sweet air of our native element. We are well-satisfied with our return. We have been out of our element, we have seen strange beauty and we are reborn.

LAMPETIE

Ed Southorn

I put my hand on your face
The sacred act of touching

Folds pleats veils
Conceal a slow stream

Dark syrup under the bark
Sticks on my raw fingers

Warm and thick these
Folds I will lick so deep

You cannot be exposed
My time of dying is

Longer than your living
Here before and hereafter

My face tells no time
Your conscience like my face

Grows or wilts in good time
From the upturned palm

Lovers gift me their names
My skin like feathers or fur

Marble or washboard
Hard or soft as seed

Engulfs them all
A constellation shuffling

In my own orbit I am
Strong enough to bind

The weight of the world
Nodding to the slightest ripple

I look up and see your
Hair floating wild

Shining green and free
Waving in the dark

Washed by the moon
Blown up and out by

All the great storms
To make us quiver

BLACK STUMP

Ed Southorn

Did not even turn the other cheek
When the Devil came with his red whips
Peeling bark like skin torn to make eagles
Cry above black Venus arms
Lost where greed has broken spoil
To call them headless martyrs
Insults their dignity who among us
Would die and stand so tall
In a brown paddock of cold wind

MY IDYLL

Hrishikesh Srinivas

Lush strings, green in the ear,
That can gently close the eyelid
Forsaking appreciation

Like the river tapped to a drip
Bathing one stone for years in
Camphorous scents of summer nights.

DONNERS

RL Swihart

His app said only rain. Hers predicted snow. In the morning they showered and coffee'd (his review would include: *Lose the Hamilton Beach and get the Keurig*). Then he started the engine and packed the car. She cleared the thick wet snow off windows and hood

The 395 was closed. They'd have to go through Sacramento. Just getting out was the thing. They followed her GPS Girl (past the Himmel Haus, behind the giant snowplow, along the rising South Fork American River) and finally got to the 5

He kept looking to the left and right. Through the cataract of rain, he saw small blotches of white in a flooded field. He tried to focus: a hundred (if not a thousand) downed snow geese. A small band took off but was quickly forced to land. 'Pull over if you want a pic,' she said. 'Of course, that would be impossible,' he said

Story interruptus:

My initial impulse was to 'donner' this couple up a bit and turn the trip home (10+ hours) into a Netflix Original post-holiday noir (starring Jack Black and Zooey Deschanel). After all they did take a day trip to Truckee

Though only a character in my story, she caught wind of it and called it what it was (for her): A Big Lie. 'Sure, I bridled here and there,' she said, 'because of the impossible weather. Being stuck in the car. The boring drive. His stupid comments. And BTW: HE WAS NO DIFFERENT. And BTW: I NEVER TOOK A BITE'

'*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa,*' I chanted. 'You're right, I'll fix it.' So I 'undonnered' them and expiated myself in terms of food. *On the road* their choices were very few

They stopped in Santa Nella for Andersen's pea soup (they didn't say 'with bacon' so didn't get it). He browsed the baked goods behind the glass (nothing he needed). They both went to the restroom (separately). He paused at the selection of Danish Xmas ornaments before they left

They stopped before the Grapevine (they both admired the caressing clouds like smoke playing on the mountains) and had Double-Doubles at In-N-Out ('I haven't had one of these in years,' he said, wolfing it down, a splash of sauce dripping down on the tray)

By the time they reached Home Sweet Home (she stayed in the car while he went into Ralphs for a gallon of 1% milk), they were exhausted. They looked around (gathering some shreds of warmth from the interior) then plopped into bed with an appetite for sleep and nothing more

LIGHT BLIND

Jake Tarasenko

I got a christ with scabs
and hanged man blue eyes the sun
spits indifferent glories down

he leads an apocalypse horse, bareback
beside concrete waters where storm surges
kill them in their cars

we know the minimum
safe distance between betrayed and saved
—two thirds the time it takes to blink
through dirty fight sweat, and luck

SPRUCE TREES ON A WINDY DAY

Jena Woodhouse

Spruce are moving with the autumn
wind at Hawthornden—a slow pavane,
the heavy foliage synchronised,
they sway from side to side
like dowagers, their youth revived,
having learned the movements
in their sapling days,
when they were lithe and pliant,
ardent in the arms of air.

Not for them the light fantastic,
the gavotte, the minuet. Theirs is
a sedate affair: majestic limbs encounter
ether; feet are planted firmly
in the sedimentary base—a pebble-
strewn islet where the brown Esk
bifurcates, and peregrines have nested
in adjacent woods, the fledglings
clamouring for food to make them
fit to fly. The spruce grove, swaying
side to side, grounded by their massive boles,
reach up through their crowning spires
as if they, too, aspire to sky.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Carolyn Abbs's poems appear in *Westerly*, *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *Writ Poetry Review*, *Best Australian Poems 2014*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Axon: Creative Explorations*, *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry*, *Australian Book Review* and other places. Her debut collection, *The Tiny Museums*, is published with UWAP, 2017.

Nina Baeyertz is a PhD student at La Trobe University and is working on queer/ing addiction life writing. She is interested in writing the body in the margins between autobiography and fiction, while exploring how shame works in text to simultaneously conceal and reveal.

Sarah Barr lives in Dorset, UK. She writes fiction and poetry, often about relationships, including our relationship with nature. Recent publications include the poems 'Dartmoor Snow' in *The Best New British and Irish Poets 2019-2021*, poem 'Across the Lake' in *The Frogmore Papers 100* and the flash fiction 'The Shirt' in *The Waxed Lemon* (summer/autumn 2022). Her short story collection *Night Zoo* (Lendal/Valley Press) appeared in 2022.

Jason Beale is a writer from Melbourne whose poems have previously appeared in a number of journals and anthologies. His chapbook *Be Quiet About Love* is published in *Picaro Poets* by Ginninderra Press.

Victor Billot lives in Dunedin, New Zealand. His poetry collection, *The Sets*, was published by Otago University Press in 2021.

Brent Cantwell lives with his family in the hinterland of Queensland's Gold Coast. He teaches high school English and has been writing for pleasure for 25 years. He has recently been published in *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Poetry NZ*, *Landfall*, *Takahe* and *Foam e* and he is looking forward to his first poetry collection *tether* being published by Recent Work Press in 2023.

Linden Carroll is a sometimes-poet sometimes-inhabiting the forests of the Dandenong Ranges. She likes trees, and sometimes humans.

Anne M Carson is a poet, essayist and visual artist whose poetry has been published internationally, and widely in Australia, receiving numerous awards including winning and shortlisting in the Martha Richardson Prize, and shortlisting in the 2022 Newcastle Poetry Prize. *The Detective's Chair* (Liquid Amber Press, 2023) is her fourth poetry collection. She is a PhD candidate in creative writing at RMIT.

Emilie Collyer lives on unceded Wurundjeri Country. Her work is published and produced widely. Her debut full-length poetry collection *Do you have anything less domestic?* (Vagabond Press 2022) won the inaugural Five Islands Press Prize. Emilie is a current PhD candidate at RMIT where she is researching feminist creative practice.

Megan Coupland lives and works on Kurna land. Her poetry and essays have featured in a number of publications including *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Westerly* and *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*.

David Edwards: I am an emerging writer from Canberra. I work across a range of short-form genres, with a focus on flash fiction and poetry. My work has been published in *Westerly* magazine and explores themes of loneliness, mental health and life with chronic illness.

indigo eli is a multi-form poet whose work stems from the urge to document intangibilities and speak the unspoken. Her creations are published, performed, screened, encountered and exhibited. Poems have appeared in *Cordite*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Writ Poetry*, *Poem Atlas* (UK) and more. Indigo likes strong coffee and fluffy clouds. www.indigoeli.com

Jack Forbes is a teacher and writer, based in Melbourne, Australia. As an emerging poet, his work has appeared internationally, including *Schoolcraft College's* 'MacGuffin,' the *Eunoia Review*, and the *Purposeful Mayonnaise*. Later in the year, Forbes' work will appear in *Dreich Magazine*. He is currently working on a debut chapbook of poems.

In 2020, Allen & Unwin published **Susan Francis's** memoir, *The Love that Remains*. Susan recently finished writing her second book, a genre mixed commercial novel set against the backdrop of the Balibo Five executions. Her short stories have appeared in publications including *The Saturday Paper* and *Newcastle Short Story Anthology*. She has appeared on ABC Conversations and SBS Insight.

Brisbane poet **Jane Frank's** debut collection is *Ghosts Struggle to Swim* (Calanthe Press, 2023) where she revisits and reimagines distant and recent pasts and draws on how the natural world sustains her, daily rituals, and her interest in art history. Most recently, her poems have appeared in the *ACU Prize for Poetry* anthology (2022), *Heroines* (vol 4, Neo Perennial Press, 2023) *Stylus Lit*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Live Encounters*, *Hecate* and *Authora Australis*. To read more, visit: <https://www.facebook.com/JaneFrankPoet/>

Marcelle Freiman's three poetry collections are *Spirit Level* (Puncher & Wattmann 2021), *White Lines (Vertical)* (Hybrid 2010), and *Monkey's Wedding* (Island Press). Her poetry has appeared in literary journals including *Antipodes (US)*, *Axon*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *StylusLit* and *Westerly*. She is an Honorary Associate Professor at Macquarie University.

CL Glanzing is an international nomad, currently living in London. By day, she works in healthcare research, trying to use those ridiculous letters after her name. By night, she does heritage crafts and runs an LGBTQ+ bookclub. Her work has been published in *Luna Station Quarterly*, *The Writing Disorder*, *The Quarterl(ly) Journal*, *Jet Fuel Review*, and the *Minds Shine Bright Anthology: Storm*.

CR Green writes from Otautuhi/Christchurch. Her short stories and poetry have been curated by publications in the United States, Ireland, and the UK. This year she is participating in the year-long Hagley Writers Institute and working with tutor, Joanna Preston (Ockhams for Poetry, 2022. Tumble, Otago University Press).

Matthew Green's poems and stories have appeared in *Sledgehammer Lit*, *Boats Against the Current*, and *Paddler Press*. He lives in the northern suburbs of Brisbane.

Stephanie Green has published creative writing in literary magazines, anthologies and journals, most recently with *StylusLit*, *Axon*, *Text*, *Not Very Quiet*, and *Burrow*. She has also produced one volume of prose poems (*Breathing in Stormy Seasons*, Recent Work 2019), a short story collection (*Too Much Too Soon*, Pandanus 2006), and a chapbook forthcoming with Calanthe Press (November 2023). She is currently an Adjunct with Griffith University.

Matt Hetherington is a writer, music-maker, and moderate self-promoter. He has been writing poetry for over 30 years, and his sixth collection, *Kaleidoscopes*, was published by Recent Work Press in September 2020. Current inspirations are: raw garlic, vinyl played very loud through big black speakers, and the Corpse Pose. <https://recentworkpress.com/product-author/matt-hetherington/>

Kathryn Imray is an ex-academic residing in Western Australia. They have previously published articles on topics including comic books, goddesses who kill, ancient-world homicide, Sartrean existentialism, and love poetry. They hold doctorates in ancient Hebrew literature, and in Australian women's literature, phenomenology, and creative writing, and are presently at work on an art-horror collection and a study of the poetics of fear in the ancient Near East.

Anju Jha has published her debut collection of poetry, *Specks of Epiphanies*, on Amazon. It presents a gamut of universal themes representing love, loss, hope and resilience. Anju is a public servant in a large federal government agency and has recently completed a short creative writing course and a poetry workshop at Sydney University with Mark Tredinnick, an Australian poet, essayist, and teacher. She is currently studying Master of Creative Writing at Macquarie University in Sydney. Her short story, 'Spring Sonata', will appear shortly in *Flash Fiction Magazine*. Find her on Instagram: @poems_by_anju.jha.

Melanie Kennard is a PhD candidate in creative practice studying at the University of New England. Her story, '435C32', previously published in *Meniscus*, forms the basis of her creative practice work. She has previously had stories published in Regulus Press' Literary Taxidermy anthologies, including 'Attila the Hen' in 2020 and 'Kit and Nella' in 2018.

Linda Kohler is a mother and former teacher who lives and writes predominantly on unceded Kurna land. Her work appears in *The Saltbush Review*, *Blue Bottle Journal*, *Bracken Magazine* and elsewhere. She stems from the River Murray town of Renmark.

Allan Lake, originally from Saskatchewan, has lived in Vancouver, Cape Breton, Ibiza, Tasmania, Western Australia & Melbourne. Lake has won Lost Tower Publications (UK) Comp, Melbourne Spoken Word Poetry Festival & publication in *New Philosopher*. Latest poetry chapbook (Ginninderra Press), *My Photos of Sicily*.

Michael J Leach lives on unceded Dja Dja Wurrung Country and acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land. Michael's poems have appeared in journals such as *Meniscus* and *Cordite*, exhibitions such as the Antarctic Poetry Exhibition, anthologies such as *Poetry d'Amour 2022* (WA Poets Incorporated, 2022), and his two poetry books: *Chronicity* (MPU, 2020) and *Natural Philosophies* (RWP, 2022). Recently, Michael jointly won the poetry category of the Minds Shine Bright Confidence Writing Competition.

Earl Livings has published poetry and fiction in Australia and overseas. His writing focuses on science, history, nature, mythology and the sacred. In early 2022, Peggy Bright Books released his philosophical fantasy verse novel *The Silence inside the World*. He has also published two poetry collections, *Libation* (Ginninderra Press, 2018), and *Further than Night* (Bystander Press, 2000). Earl lives in Melbourne with his wife and their ever-growing stacks of books.

Rose Lucas is a poet and academic living and working on unceded Wurundjeri Country in Naarm. Her most recent poetry collection is *Increments of the Everyday* (Puncher and Wattmann 2022). She is founding Editor at Liquid Amber Poetry Press.

Dr Elizabeth MacFarlane is a writer and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne where she teaches Short Fiction, Graphic Narratives and Thinking Writing. She is co-director of graphic novel publishing house Twelve Panels Press, and co-directed artists' residency Comic Art Workshop from 2015 to 2019. She's currently Chief Investigator of Australian Research Council Linkage Project 'Folio: Stories of Contemporary Australian Comics'.

Pam Makin is a writer, poet, and performer living on Kurna Land, north of Adelaide. Pam prefers to work in short forms, capturing complex ideas in few words, leaving space

around the work for the reader to explore. Pam draws her inspiration from a variety of sources. Sometimes it's personal. Sometimes it's global. It strives at all times to be human.

Kate Maxwell grew up in the Australian bush. Now a city dweller, her interests include film, wine, and sleeping. Her work has been published and awarded in many Australian and International literary magazines such as *Cordite*, *StylusLit*, *Social Alternatives*, *Meniscus*, *Books Ireland*, and *The Galway Review*. Kate has published two anthologies: *Never Good at Maths* (Interactive Publications, 2021) and *Down the Rabbit Hole* (Ginninderra, 2023). Find her at <https://kateswritingplace.com/>

Angela Mckean started writing when she was six. Poems mainly, but more recently short and flash fiction, which she edits ferociously in an attempt to make every word count. She has lived in England, Australia and France, and has had poems and stories published in various regional and national magazines.

Michael Mintrom lives in Melbourne, Australia. His poetry has appeared in many literary journals including *Meniscus*, *Meanjin*, *Westerly*, *Landfall*, and *Stone Poetry Quarterly*.

Melinda Jane – The Poet Mj: author of the poetry books *Nature's Nuptials* and *Bite Me*, and the children's book *The Currawong and the Owl*. With ninety-four individual works published in international anthologies and literature journals like *Mekong Review*, *Rattle*, *Texas Poetry Review*, *Dime Show Review*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Ginninderra Press* etc. And nominated for Best of the Net in 2019.

Sam Morley is a poet whose work has been published in a number of journals including *Cordite*, *Red Room Poetry*, *Canberra Times*, *The Australian*, *Overland*, *Westerly*, *Southerly*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *takahe* (NZ) and *Antipodes* (US), and has appeared on noted shortlists including the ACU Poetry Prize and the Montreal International Poetry Prize. He is the 2022 recipient of the Tina Kane Emergent Writer Award at the Mildura Writer's Festival. His debut collection, *Earshot*, is out now through Puncher and Wattmann.

Lara Munden was awarded an aegrotat diploma in creative writing from the University of York (UK), following her death from cancer this year, aged 34. Her poetry also appears in *Axon: Creative Explorations* vols 11.1 and 12.2. She worked for eleven years as content developer and writer for interpretive design consultancy Bright White Ltd.

Nathan Nicolau is a writer/poet based in Charlotte, NC. His poetry, fiction, and essays have been featured on numerous websites and magazines. He is also the founder and editor of *New Note Poetry*, an online poetry magazine. Find more about him at nathannicolau.com.

Damen O'Brien is a multi-award-winning poet based in Brisbane. Damen's prizes include The Moth Poetry Prize, The Newcastle Poetry Prize and the Peter Porter Poetry Prize. His poetry has been published in *Cordite*, *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Island* and many other journals. Damen's first book of poetry, *Animals with Human Voices*, is available through Recent Work Press.

Mark O'Flynn: His work has appeared previously in *Meniscus* as well as many other journals. He has published 8 collections of poetry as well as 4 novels.

Denise O'Hagan is a Sydney-based editor and poet with a background in commercial book publishing in the UK and Australia. Recipient of the Dalkey Poetry Prize, and poetry editor for Australia/New Zealand for *The Blue Nib* until 2020, her work is shortlisted in the ACU Poetry Prize, the Robert Graves Poetry Prize and the Plough Writing Prize (UK). Her poetry collections include *The Beating Heart* and *Anamnesis*. <https://denise-ohagan.com>

Gemma Parker is an award-winning poet with work published locally and internationally; she is one of the co-founders and managing editors of the Adelaide-based literary journal *The Saltbush Review*. Gemma is also completing a doctorate in Creative Writing with a hybrid creative-critical memoir. Her recent work can be found in *Island*, *Westerly* and *Overland*.

Belinda Paxton is a lawyer and mother of two boys. She is currently enrolled in a Master of Creative Writing at the University of Sydney. She has published work online, in the *Grieve Anthology* 2018 and in the University of Sydney Student Anthology 2016. Her work, 'On Becoming One', was runner up in the 2019 Deborah Cass Prize for Writing.

K. M. (Kathy) Preston has been writing poetry for over thirty years. Winner of an ACT Writers Centre mentorship and selected participant in the ACT Writers Centre Masterclass, Kathy has been published in *Muse*, *Quadrant*, *Meniscus* and *Australian Choral Anthologies*.

K Roberts is a professional nonfiction writer, a published artist, and a first reader for the literary magazines *Nunum* and *After Dinner Conversation*.

Kristen Roberts is a writer from Melbourne's west with an interest in exploring how to live in the city while maintaining a deep connection with the land. Her poems have been published in a range of journals and anthologies, including *Award Winning Australian Writing*, *Australian Love Poems*, *Cordite* and the *Grieve Anthology*.

Recent work by **Bruce Robinson** appears or is forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*, *Spoon River*, *Rattle*, *Mantis*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*,

North Dakota Quarterly, *Last Stanza*, and *Aji*, and last appeared in *Meniscus* in vol 8 no.1. He divides his time uneasily among several four-footed and sure-footed creatures.

Vanessa Rose lives on unceded Gadigal land in Sydney and is a new poet published in *BlueBottle Journal* and *Rue Scribe*. When not writing, Vanessa is a researcher at a not-for-profit social purpose centre based in Australia, Singapore, the UK and Norway.

Margaret Owen Ruckert is a prize-winning poet and widely published. Two books, *You Deserve Dessert* and *musefood* (an IP Book of the Year), explore café culture. Her latest, *Sky on Sea*, views Sydney waterways through the lens of tanka. As Facilitator of Hurstville's Discovery Writers she presents regular writing workshops.

Mykyta Ryzhykh is winner of the international competition Art Against Drugs, and some Ukrainian awards; laureate of the literary competition named after Tyutyunnik, Lyceum, Twelve, named after Dragomoshchenko. Nominated for Pushcart Prize.

Dr Jessica Seymour is an Australian researcher and lecturer at Fukuoka University, Japan. Her short stories can be found in magazines like *Voiceworks*, *Meniscus*, *Doomsday* and *NeedleInTheHay*. Like many writers, she spends most of her time puttering on novels and curating her dog's Instagram.

Joshua Lee Shimmen is an emerging writer and ratbag. He has recently published short fiction in *Overland* (Online), *The Saltbush Review*, and *StylusLit*. He was joint winner of the Questions Writing Prize 2020 and highly commended in the 2021 AAWP – UWRF Emerging Writers Prize.

Kim Silva is an artist and writer who lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island. She graduated with an MFA from Savannah College of Art and Design, and with a BFA in Writing and Painting from Vermont College. Her writings and artwork appear in publications such as *Litbreak*, *Poor Yorick*, *BarBar*, *Gone Lawn*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Unbroken*, and *Meniscus*. She has been competition short-listed for Short Fiction. A nature lover, Kim loves all animals.

Jane Simpson, a New Zealand-based poet and historian, has two full-length collections, *A World Without Maps* (2016) and *Tuning Wordsworth's Piano* (2019). Her liturgy, *The Farewelling of a Home*, came out in 2021 and she has recently finished writing 'Farewell, beloved', a non-religious funeral service for use in the home. Her poems have appeared in *Allegro*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *London Grip*, *Meniscus* and *Otoliths* and in leading journals in New Zealand.

Lui Sit writes short adult fiction, memoir, non-fiction and children's middle grade. She has been a recipient of the, A Brief Pause, London Writers Award & WriteNow writers'

development schemes. Her short stories are published online and in print journals and anthologies. She has worked in the arts, education and charity sectors in Australia and London. She has a MA in Dance Anthropology and undergraduate degrees in social sciences, literature and drama.

Eva Skrande came to the United States from Cuba. Her publications include *My Mother's Cuba* (River City Publishing Poetry Series) and *Bone Argot* (Spuyten Duyvil Press). Her poems have appeared in *Clockwise Cat*, *SurVision*, *Visions International*, *Smartish Pace*, among others. Recently she was the feature poet at AlternaCtive PubliCations. Currently, she teaches and tutors at Houston Community College.

Barnaby Smith is a poet, critic, journalist and musician living on Darug and Gundungurra land in New South Wales. Recent work has appeared or will appear in journals such as *Blackbox Manifold*, *Stand*, *3AM*, *Erbacce*, *Orbis*, *Marble*, *Molly Bloom* and *Blaze Vox*, as well as *Cordite*, *Southerly*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Australian Poetry Anthology*, *Best Australian Poems*, and more. He is an award-winning art and music critic, and records music under the name Brigadoon, having released the album, *Itch Factor*, in 2020: www.brigadoon.bandcamp.com

Elizabeth Smither: My latest collection of poems, *My American Chair*, has recently been published by Auckland University Press and MadHat Poetry Press, USA.

Stephen Smithyman is a retired schoolteacher who lives in Melbourne, Australia. His poems have appeared in publications such as *Rabbit*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Cordite* and the *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook*. He won the Victorian Cancer Council Outstanding Poem award, 2011, Poetica Christi prize, 2013, and the Glen Phillips Poetry Prize, 2016. Two collections of poems, *Snapshot in the Dark* and *Halfway and Back*, were published by Ginninderra Press, Adelaide, in 2018 and 2020.

Ed Southorn lives at Bermagui on the NSW South Coast. He was a newspaper reporter for 30 years. He has taught journalism at Griffith University and the University of Queensland. His PhD explores contested space.

Hrishikesh Srinivas hails from Sydney, Australia. He is a science and engineering graduate of the University of New South Wales and Stanford University. He enjoys reading and writing poetry, with poems appearing in issues of *UNSweetened Literary Journal*, *Hemingway's Playpen*, *Mantis*, *Otoliths*, and *Meniscus*. He was awarded the Dorothea Mackellar National Poetry Award in 2011 and the Nillumbik Ekphrasis Poetry Youth Award in 2013, also being included in the 'Laughing Waters Road: Art, Landscape and Memory in Eltham' 2016 exhibition catalogue.

RL Swihart was born in Michigan but now resides in Long Beach CA. His work has sparsely dotted both the Net and hardcopy literary journals (*Cordite*, *Pif Magazine*, *The Literary Bohemian*, *Offcourse*, *Otoliths*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Quadrant Magazine*, *The Bookends Review*). His third book of poetry was released July 2020: *Woodhenge*.

Jake Tarasenko is an award-winning musician and failed philosopher, born, raised and mortgaged in Western Sydney. His work is mostly written on stolen land and touches on themes of identity, belonging, lack, and loss.

Jena Woodhouse has book publications in poetry, adult fiction and children's fiction. Her writing has received awards in all three genres. She spent more than a decade living and working in Greece, where she was employed as an arts journalist for a subsidiary of the *International Herald Tribune*, and has also spent time in a number of other western, central and east European countries. She has been awarded creative residencies in Scotland, Ireland, France and Greece. Her interest in archaeology; the arts, languages and cultural history, travel and the natural environment are sources of inspiration for much of her writing.

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