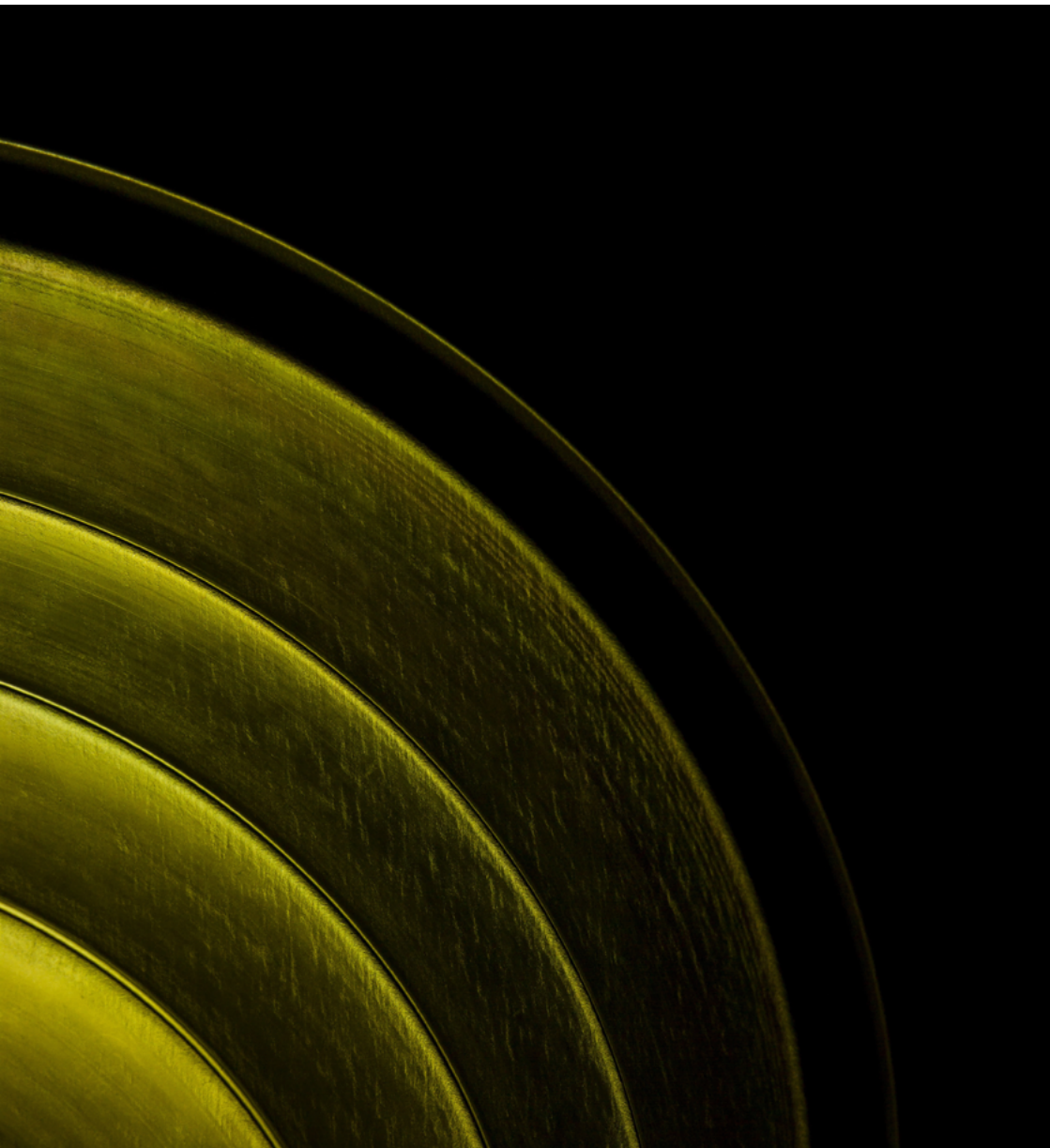




MENISCUS

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

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About Meniscus

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

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

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

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EDITORIAL

Reading the submissions that come in to the *Meniscus* platform twice a year acts as a sort of weathervane for what writers are observing, thinking and feeling at the time. There are, of course, perennial issues for writers (love; heartbreak; families; sunsets; trees ...) but alongside the standards we see key issues affecting how we writers—and probably other humans too—are responding to current and enduring matters.

For this first issue of 2026, poets and stories approach ideas of grief, estrangement, ageing, and the fragile work of connection: between parent and child, between partners, between the living and the dead, or between the self and a world that has become unfamiliar. Even when the settings are domestic or ordinary, many of the stories in particular open onto something more unsettling, uncanny, speculative, or darkly comic.

There is also a strong thread that explores, or articulates, contemporary unease: AI, automation, climate anxiety, institutional care, and the changing terms of what it means to be human. Perhaps related to this is the sense of people living at thresholds: between belonging and isolation; between certainty and uncertainty; between care and neglect, human and machine, memory and loss.

In these works, we see anger, empathy, compassion, determination to enact change; we see a quirky, engaging humour; we see little if any interest in wealth or power, but a great deal of attention to the quotidian, the small, the too-often-overlooked. In short, we see a deeply heartening corner of the human zoo.

Our gratitude to all who submitted, whether or not we were able to select them for publication. Writing makes the world go round.

Ginna Brock and Jen Webb
For the editors

NOT A WATERSPRITE

Geoffrey Aitken

i hear a raindrop
hit my roof

before another
and another

until the rapture
stops me imagining

any single one
exploding on impact

as i have seen
in photographs

taken by amateurs
copying

masters
as if this is how

we learn to become
individuals.

splashing about
in our human muddles

THE TRASHCAN & THE COYOTE

Bianca Ambrosino

So he's taking the trash out
at 1 am

In the dark
(a possum broke the outdoor
lamppost last year climbing it, trying to eat
the bugs that were living in the moss
in the glass box light housing
terrarium. It's still
shipwrecked
in the dirt)

and the mud

(it rained that day)

And he feels the rocks squish deeper
into the driveway as his booted feet
twist them down

&

his hand vibrates, dragging the loaded bin over the
gravel and it all

phases together as the rot and
plastic become an extension of him
So, just around the corner, past the hedges
(that grew as tall as trees)

He hears the coyote,

yodelling in shrieks

piercing the rumble of iam garbage luggage

&

He stops—

'What the fuck
was that
?
Why
are you here?'
&

He's pretty sure
the coyote had said
exactly the same thing

TIME/PEACE

JS Apsley

It was rare for George to be a man about town. Beth had good days and bad. Today, she was sparkling and had sent him packing. 'George, I love you very much, but I want you to get out of this house and leave me be,' she chided. George's faint protest was roundly rejected. 'I'm going to make my lasagna, George. I feel up to the challenge today, and I want to potter about on my own in the kitchen, listening to Carpenters records.'

George was happy to see his wife like her old self: Beth before cancer. 'Now off you toddle,' she urged. 'There's an antiques market up in the Old Fruitmarket halls today. Amuse yourself. Pop into the Press Bar for a pint or two. Then come home to me, and we'll have lasagna.' Beth kissed her husband of some forty years on the cheek and sent him out the door like a little boy going off on a school-trip.

Outside, George flexed his arthritic legs as best he could. Beth would be watching. He did not want her to see the tears in his eyes, or the broken look upon his craggy face.

The antiques fair was bustling. George caught himself after an hour of hardy perusing. He had allowed himself a respite from the chilling truth that he had but weeks before Beth would be gone. As a sharp pang of guilt lanced at his stomach, his eyes befell upon the most remarkable mechanical mantel clock, positioned with pride upon a trader's table. It had a beautiful mahogany housing. The clockface was a strange shade of green, almost aquamarine, set above an exposed pendulum-like mechanism. George sidled up to the edge of the trader's table. As he inspected the clock, he felt something change. It was as if the air had pressurised, and his ears popped. *How strange.*

'The real beauty of this clock, Sir, is that it chooses who it should belong to.'

George lifted his eyes as he tugged at his ears. The trader, a skinny fellow in a weathered leather waistcoat and white shirt, was staring at him, earnestly.

'You know, Sir, I had the strangest feeling I would meet the new owner today. And I knew as soon as I saw you. Sir ... this clock is yours.'

'I'll give you a gold star for the sales patter, pal. But no need, I do like the clock. Tell me about it.'

'Well Sir, this is a most incredible piece. So remarkable, in fact, you may not believe me.'

'Okay friend, I'll bite.'

The trader spoke in hushed, conspiratorial tones. 'You see ... the pendulum has a supernatural quality. It can slow the world down, grind it almost to a halt. It allows the owner to press pause, shall we say, to let himself get caught up with the world.'

George was always a man for tall tales, a man eager to suspend his disbelief. His storytelling was what had won Beth over in their courting days. *Beth will love this one.*

'Just run that all past me again.'

'Don't you see, Sir? The clock has chosen you. You must be in need of some peace, to slow the world down.'

George thought of Beth wasting away. He could think of little else most days.

'Well ...'

'Ah-ha! You see?'

'But why me? And why you?'

The trader paused, straightening his waistcoat. 'I needed time for my own reasons,' he mumbled, a shiver down his spine. 'But what of you, Sir?'

Beth was Stage 4 and then some. And now, this jocular trader was offering George a fairy tale to stretch time somehow, to freeze the world. If only this wheeze were true, perhaps he could be with Beth that much longer.

'I have my own reasons, too.'

The salesman snorted. 'Ha! Fair enough, Sir. Fair enough. Now, listen closely. You must swing the pendulum to the left and watch it closely. It will slow down and come *almost* to a stop. That's when you know you have *almost* all the time in the world. To start it again, simply give the pendulum a nudge to the right.'

George took a step back. His heart was desperate to believe this rouse; his mind told him to beware a scam. 'How much?' he asked. The trader beamed.

'Don't you see, Sir? There is no charge. How can there be, when the clock already belongs to you.'

At home, George rapped loudly on his front door. A wonderful aroma of lasagna filled his heart with joy as it coaxed his stomach to grumble.

'Beth, my love, what a tall tale I have for you!' George hollered, hanging his jacket. He could hear Karen Carpenter's unmistakable dulcet tones, singing 'Goodbye to Love'. He took the clock from the wrapping and sauntered through. 'Wait till you hear this one, Beth!'

Beth was sitting at the kitchen table, a soft smile upon her face, her eyes closed. A steaming mug of hot chocolate rested next to her crossword puzzle. Karen Carpenter sang, and the oven cooked.

'Beth?'

She was still. Beth was at her eternal rest, her face a vision of longed-for peace, free of pain.

George placed the clock on the table, his hands trembling. 'Oh Beth, oh my Beth,' he wept. The urge to hold her was incredible. He resisted. With his shaking hands, he tapped the pendulum, just as the trader had told him. And, just as the trader has told him, he watched it swing and slow to a supernatural, indiscernible pace.

And so, George stayed there, sitting at the kitchen table with his wife, for days, for weeks, for months perhaps. And all that time the hot chocolate steamed, Karen Carpenter sang, and the lasagna cooked. And all that time George stayed there, in that moment, with his beloved Beth, who had not long died, knowing peace at last.

He stayed with her, in that moment, until he too found peace.

COOKING FOR FOREIGNERS

Maria Arena

The ingredients are arranged on your kitchen bench. You stand over them, admiring the colours: the pale pink of the chicken fillets, the bright orange of the carrots, the creamy white of the eggshells, the green-tinged prawns, the fiery red of the sambal oelek, resting in the mortar. They are the freshest produce you could buy from the boutique market on the other side of town: the one you never shop at because they charge three times the price of your local supermarket. For this dish, though, you've made an exception.

It's been a long time since you last cooked this meal, maybe ten years, and you feel a flutter of nervousness, wondering if you can remember the steps. The recipe isn't difficult but, like most of life's seemingly simple tasks—say, for example, raising a child—one misstep could result in disaster. Mustering your courage, you take the first prawn. This is your least favourite part: pulling off the head, peeling away the shell, slicing down the back to strip away the vein, but it must be done.

It's a bit like giving birth, you muse, taking up the next prawn, *something someone else should do for you*.

You look at the man sitting on the other side of your kitchen bench, his back against the wall, legs stretched out, feet resting on the rung of the stool beside him. In his hand is a phone, the screen filled with what appear to be falling gems. His face is set with concentration, his mouth pressed into a competitive line. This man is as foreign to you as the prawn between your fingers.

The realisation infuses your heart with a pain as sharp as vinegar even as your mind whispers, *It wasn't always that way*.

No, it wasn't, you agree, except—maybe right at the beginning.

*

Yanked unceremoniously from your exhausted body on a late November night, you held your breath as the midwife placed him, wet and bawling, on your deflated stomach. *What do I do with it?* you wondered, forgetting the months of pre-natal classes and the well-intentioned advice of friends who were already mothers. You reached down for him, touching the head that fitted perfectly in the cupped palm of your hand. His small, scrunched face turned, his pink mouth open, searching, and your body responded without you; breasts leaking colostrum with the consistency of double cream.

'Oh, he's a hungry one,' the midwife said, lifting him to your swollen nipple.

No, wait, you thought, *I want—*

Too late.

He latched on without hesitation. You felt him drawing nourishment from you and, suddenly, what you wanted was irrelevant. As he suckled, you curled around him, savouring the connection between you even as you pondered the mystery of his being.

*

The prawns are done. Headless, tailless, legless, they no longer resemble their original form. You take up the chicken fillets, weighing them in your hand as you contemplate the idea of change. Glancing across at your son, a question rises to your lips, but you hesitate, shy with doubt. *Would he even be interested in your thoughts? Would he understand where you were coming from? Is this what the 'generation gap' feels like?* The question falls away unspoken as you lift the knife lying beside the chopping board and slice the chicken into thin strips.

Sometime in the last few years, your ability to engage your son in conversation has dwindled to three overused topics. The most popular of these is work: his, but not yours. As a librarian, you are in love with books, but the mere mention of the latest bestseller brings an uneasy gleam to his eyes, so you keep the conversation focussed on him and his

work, nodding in what feels like the right places, expressing sympathy, or encouragement, where it seems appropriate.

Once he's shared his less vulgar office stories and raged against his boss, you move onto topic two: the latest movies he's seen. Here you're on safer ground and the discussion can get lively, though you rarely agree on what's worth seeing. He has his father's sense of humour and taste for high impact action flicks. You prefer anything with Emma Thompson. All too soon, you rush up to topic three: his latest girlfriend.

As you crack the eggs into a bowl and whisk them into a golden froth, you say, 'How's Elena?'

He doesn't look up from his game, and you know what's coming. 'We broke up.'

You're not sure why your throat constricts at this news. While you liked Elena well enough, you knew she wasn't the one for your son. There was something in the clipped tone she used, something imprisoning, that you didn't want for him. Still, you'd like to see him settled, although this is not what causes the disquiet.

You pour the eggs into a hot fry pan, which you lift and roll until the eggs coat the base like a pancake. This task, carried out with intense concentration as though the future of the universe depends upon the outcome, is a stalling tactic to avoid the question you know must come next.

'Are you seeing someone new?' you ask and flip the egg with undue attention.

'I've got a couple of girls in my sights,' he brags, and you cringe. He could be talking about clay pigeons, and you wonder: *where has my sweet boy gone?*

Sliding the omelette from the pan, you roll it up tight, hissing as the heat bites your fingers. The pain is good, though; it locks the criticism you feel crawling up your throat behind your teeth. *He's a man now, an adult, and you have no right to tell him how to live his life*, you remind yourself, chopping the rolled egg to shreds. Still, you are his mother—

'Remember son, just like you, girls deserve respect.' The words slide out before you can swallow them, carrying the shrill lecturing tone of your own mother. You cringe again.

'Of course,' he says, unfazed.

You add a splash of peanut oil to the wok beside you; it sizzles and spits like the anxiety flaming in your chest. Turning down the heat, you eye the foreign entity sitting in your kitchen and understand what's at the centre of your concern: you've reached the end of topic three. What will you talk about now?

'Hey, Mum, check this out,' he says, holding up his phone. 'High score.' He's smiling, and you can't help smiling back, even if you can't see the value in the 'achievement' he's sharing with you.

'Cool,' you say, julienning the carrots. He returns to his game, and the look on his face brings forth a memory.

*

He was nine, hollow-chested and as slim as the saplings growing beside the bush path beneath your feet. The forest stretched up the hillside. Above the canopy, the day was brilliant with summer, but below it was shady and cool. On the low side of the path, a brook meandered between rocks and dropped into pools that were clear and inviting.

Your son stood beside one of the pools. 'Mama, look at this,' he said, holding out his hands. They were folded around something. A flash of fear shot through you—*Please don't be poisonous*—but when he opened his hands, you saw a small green frog. 'It's a Cascade Treefrog,' he said, launching into a detailed description of its habitat and habits.

You didn't have the heart to tell him that you knew all about the frog. Instead, you listened attentively, asking leading questions whenever he faltered, loving the shine of excitement in his eyes. When he returned the frog to its hiding place beneath the rocks, the two of you walked on, heading for the picnic lunch you'd prepared, conversation flowing between you, a hundred topics deep.

*

The jangling of his phone pulls you out of the memory. He stands and your eyes follow him up: the sapling has become a tree, strong and solid. You listen to his banter with the caller and feel a pang of envy. *Where has the easiness between us gone*, you wonder, swirling oil around the re-heated wok. You toss in the prawns and chicken, then add the carrots and a little garlic to the pan, glad for the cloud of steam that hides the sudden tears in your eyes.

‘Yeah, I know she just broke up with her boyfriend, but when’s that ever stopped me?’

‘...’

‘Well, you know what they say, “All’s fair—”’

‘...’

‘No way, mate. No one’s getting their claws into me.’

He laughs, and you blink to clear your vision as you add the pre-cooked rice, soy sauce, and sambal oelek to the pan, stirring as you watch your son. When he was younger, you believed you could see inside him and read the emotions that held sway over his heart. Now, he’s like a closed pantry. He sees you looking and rolls his eyes as he turns away. Were you wrong? Perhaps you never really knew him? But what about when he was sixteen and that girl—Cassie? Katie?—broke his heart? Surely, you knew him then, when he cried on your shoulder, as he had at seven when he lost his favourite Transformer, and at twelve, when he broke his arm and overheard the doctor talking about an operation to repair the bone? Yes, you knew him *then* but, at some point, somewhere between his first heartbreak and this meal, he’s become something else. Other. Alien. Foreign.

A chill touches you as you open the fridge to take out the spring onion and red pepper curls you prepared before he arrived, and you know the feeling has nothing to do with the waft of cool air that puffs against your face as you close the door.

I have lost my son, you think, turning off the wok; its heat doesn’t reach you now.

From the cupboard, you take two deep bowls and set them on the bench. For a moment, you’re entranced by the hollow at their centre: smooth, blank, voluminous. You glance at your son, who glances at his watch.

‘Sure thing. Shouldn’t be more than an hour,’ he says, and ends his call.

That’s it? An hour?

You dig into the wok and spoon food into the bowl, trying to fill that terrible empty space. How will you reach him in an hour? How will you prise open the locked door? What can you say to him, this stranger whom you once knew? You arrange the garnish on top of his bowl of steaming rice, wishing you could pretty the situation between you as easily, as he comes around the kitchen bench.

‘Mum, that smell awesome,’ he says, wrapping you in a hug. You stand, stiff as dried pasta, surprised into rigidity. Above you, he says, ‘Just like I remember,’ and it’s all you can do to stay standing.

You lean your head against his chest and hear his heart. *There you are*, you think to its steady beat. *There you are, my son*.

‘Can we eat now, Mama? I’m starving,’ he says, releasing you.

You brush hair from your face, covertly wiping the tears in your eyes. ‘Sure, baby, dig in.’

He gives you one of his looks, something halfway between exasperation and affection. ‘I’m not a baby anymore, Mum.’

‘Sorry,’ you reply, and smile inside, knowing the truth.

He lifts a forkful of prawns and chicken into his mouth and murmurs with appreciation. The sound, you realise, is one you’ve been hearing his whole life: from those first ravenous pulls at your breast, through the golden days of his youth, to this fleeting encounter in the warmth of your kitchen. It’s the sound of familiarity, of trust, and of a shared love that no distance can consume.

He nods towards your bowl, and you lift your fork, already satisfied as you tuck into the best meal of your life.

THE LAST WORD

Sandra Arnold

Today it was the same three boys who lay in wait for her on the way to school. They leapt out from behind the wall, swinging a long fat worm. Two of them held her down while the third forced open her mouth and pushed the worm inside. Yesterday it was a dead mouse pushed down her back inside her jumper. Last week it was a huge live spider they dropped into her hair. Her mother's advice when she complained: 'Just ignore them. They'll soon get bored and stop bothering you.' But there was no sign of them getting bored no matter how much she tried to ignore them. So today she ate the worm, chewing noisily and licked her lips. The boys jumped back in horror.

SEA YEARS

Emma Ashmere

Morning walk the breakwater, slow brown river one side, quick green sea the other, as if anything can be separate, volcanic finger stuck with foreign rocks, spray-fading I-was-heres RIPs, clouds knitting, wind unravelling, diamond python oozing, guarding the end, I almost step on it, the sea, the sky, hope of whales, the vanishing point you never reached, whatever the hemisphere statues melt, empires dissolve into wave, shimmer, bird. Remember crouching beneath the imagined crutch of the Colossus watching a wedding in Greek, harbour lights tourist-drunk, hiding from your relatives, their tight white house haunched into the hill, black-stockinged women treading floured roads through dawn dusk vapours of fir and spitfire caterpillars, grass as brown as home, the church, windows full of sea, bullet holes, whispering to their husband's bandaged bones in the cool dark mouth of the ossuary. Here small mountains are hemmed by highways, the gauze and wheeze of Norfolk Island pines, carparks glittering, superannuated caravans, our house we can see again, the newcomers chopped down the trees, the driveway so steep we walk up it backwards, as if anything can be reversed, the sun scribbling on window-glass, still sending messages, the sea, the dead, not yet overhead.

POEM TO A NOTEPAD

Peter Bakowski

I write in you and about you.
Though your pages are ruled I refrain from rules,
roam your paper pastures, gnaw the spine of my pencil,
ruminate over punctuation, the effect of a comma.
I'm succinct, never use the word 'Suddenly'.
Adverbs and too familiar adjectives try to gatecrash poems.
I eject them. They lie sprawled, outside the righthand margin.
Forgive me when I write 'jar of gherkins' on one of your pages.
I'm forgetful and the corner shop is four blocks away.

IN AN ORDERLY WORLD

John Bartlett

an egret waits
the stillness of a watercolour

rain holds conversations on roofs
through sandy loam
through memory

the black/white flight of swans
scattering dots across a sky
unconcerned with order

this pallor of ellipsed memories
cruelled by

the mind-fuck of an autocorrect

unmanageable

I WAS REPLACED BY AN AI ANNOUNCER

Mitchell Batavia

Thank you for your service.

It was the email I thought I'd never receive—a digital pink slip. A message from the University at 5 PM on a Friday afternoon before the holidays about my Name Announcer position at graduation ceremonies. As if that weren't enough, I was being ousted, not by a human, but by something unnatural—databases, algorithms, and graphic processing units. I was being replaced by Artificial Intelligence!

I had painstakingly prepared for my role as a School Announcer for years. At graduations, I broadcasted the names of graduating students over auditorium air waves as they paraded across the stage to receive their diplomas. Pronouncing all of these names usually required not only an inordinate amount of practice, but also orofacial gymnastics: *'Guillaume Dubois!' 'Saoirse Ronan!' 'Oumarou Gbadamosi!'*

Annual preparation, akin to a pronunciation boot camp, began a month in advance. I would do a deep dive into every facet of a student's name, using every language resource I could scrape up from the web: linguistic pattern, dialect, phonetic spelling, diacritics, name origin, and finally, family preference. I would then practice daily, recording names first onto my phone and later, on video. While comfortable with names in English, I still needed to master the nuances and mouth positions of Spanish, Japanese, German, Chinese, Italian, Hebrew, Arabic, Korean, Irish, Russian, African, and those elusive French endings. For this, I tapped into colleagues and students fluent in those languages.

But now Artificial Intelligence usurped my role and I, in turn, became an expendable appendage of this event. Since AI was still new at the job, I was asked to stay on, only as needed, in the unlikely event there was some digital catastrophe. Secretly, I was hoping for one!

So how did AI do? Did she hallucinate, stumble, or announce names in the wrong order? Did she run-off names too quickly or too slowly? Did she fail to show up for work? Not at all—AI performed FLAWLESSLY! This was not surprising given that it trained on massive databases across 7,000 languages. I'm still trying to master one! AI provided a culturally correct, perfect pronunciation of every student's name, delivered with a warm and nurturing feminine voice that could defrost an arctic iceberg with its comforting tone. Nevertheless, while unblemished and unwavering, her performance was also humdrum and predictable. An unrehearsed hiccup, occasional stutter or surprise burp would have been a welcomed addition. And although its digital performance was perfectly executed using automated script, she possessed no consciousness of its own—she wouldn't know whether a student, giraffe, or porcupine stepped up to take the award. Does that matter?

Looking back, getting fired released me. It allowed me to jettison the toil that became my busywork so I could focus more on the creative that would become my life's work—writing. But one might ask, how can I meaningfully contribute to the blistering pace of this digital world where AI already generates pristine output more reliably and rigorously than us humans? A technology that can produce, almost instantaneously, not only names but images, emails, stories, songs, and books. A machinery that not only defines, explains, distinguishes, summarises and teaches, but also simulates and impersonates. What now of the arts and literature, of poetry and music, of teaching and learning? Are these forms of human expression on the brink of extinction? Are departments of fine arts on the way out? Is creativity dead?

The answer lies in the writing on these pages. This text is fresh, genuine, and novel. Not recycled, adulterated, or the sum of poorly sourced prose plundered from the Internet. Instead of a dead record of code, it's the dynamic output of a pulsating, warm-blooded author, vibrating with a painful past, a conscious presence, and anticipated

future. It is an undertaking with a personal, relatable, recollective, and fallible history, written by a human who cries, laughs, falls in love, breaks up, and worries about how to pay the rent.

As described in the good works of Emerson, Mill, Sartre, and Nietzsche, the writing celebrates individual achievement and the worthiness of innovation over replication. It is created not by people at a team meeting, but by one, singular, identifiable, tracible, deliberate, imperfect, variable, tangible, comedic, mortal, and real earthling. So, while the robotic digital performance of name announcing fills a gap, **neither this writing nor its writer can ever be replaced.**

This paper was written by AI
(just kidding)

HARVEST

Jason Beale

A bedroom with a kitchenette
inside a block of orange brick;
I spent the autumn out of sight—
biding time from week to week.

A book on Freud, a single bed
—feeling like a king deposed,
and sitting smoking cigarettes
I occupied a lonesome world.

Recumbent on the dusty floor
I drifted off as Harvest played,
searching for a heart of gold—
sleeping as the penny dropped.

JAMES TATE

Noah Berlatsky

came right up out of the ground with a fifty pound
borscht. Damn

the pedestrians with too many legs.
I'm out here in the cosmos with an alien and a banjo and a
giant thing to be named later.
Call me dinner,
worms, purple.

Call me the police,
those fuckers in the night.

JANUARY 17TH

Lawrence Blake

Two bombs went off during our call together.
The first, your cancer, and the second
that drone which arced an ancient hate
across the city bordering my scarred outpost.

It was in those bleeding lands where I reconnected
to your lessons. Those quiet moments
where the first Man I was to know equipped me
with all the knowledge of his immense universe –

filled with space voyages of Starship Enterprise
and seldom used epithets, even by the Boomers.
Those moments where your calloused embrace
soothed every loss, every heartbreak, every fear.

I cauterised the wound of your final news
as I examined the severed artery of a Peshmerga –
implored his comrade through staccato speech
to wait. To allow me to throw my gloved hand

into the violence of his upper thigh. So I might
make time. Time I wasn't sure we would have.
Where I could unpack all your secrets. Lessons
learned as I orbited your gentle fatherhood.

A final lesson, yielded in the closure of an Advent
Promise that I'd stay. Awake to some searing sun and

return whole. So that I could share with you
my emergent history, and not relegate it to a desert tomb.

On January 17th I thrust myself into the nightmare
of the Dizayee home. Disarticulating the violence
which with vicious purpose explored that nap of sky
to murder a child as she was embraced by her father.

As you once embraced me. And a year later I held your hand.
Trying to commit, to thrust myself, into that final goodbye.
Knowing that my words would choke themselves out
in the space between my teeth; that all I could do was

throw my calloused palm into yours, and offer that
confident embrace I learned from you. Hoping,
that in your quietness, you felt your son's promise.
To one day, after my war was over, see you again.

GERMAINE GREER AND COTONEASTER

Samantha Boswell

I remember that lunch recipe-scouring for dessert you rage against
Germaine Greer though you admit reading none of her work not even an
essay I recommend *The female eunuch*, loan my copy of *The madwoman's
underclothes* I remember a landscape designer called in to style your backyard
around the addition, a sunken pool French lavender, standard iceberg roses,
statuary, limestone, frieze work revamp now I see *Grand Designs*

I remember you calling the new second storey window seat a reading
nook I remember ladies' only souffle, mixed leaf salad,
artichokes dessert is a memory breach you skipper
conversation: a full head of foils is pronounced *real commitment*

Not long afterwards, your husband loses his job your house appears
as market property eventually, you return my paperback reading in the
nook, that eyrie with its view of the pool *it got wet*, you say *the window
was left open rain came in* gongstrike of passive
eventuality beats on I remember furred edges, bloat, filigree font
as ruin had Germaine been thrown in the pool might I have asked
what you thought of Greer now

New job, new architect-designed house back in the office after
summer, there is a different tale about leaving behind, moving on from early
family history, you flag a southern town where I once lived by choice, and
worked with your sister I remember your laughter about exotic plant
species as a local, you hazard, I might have a Rapunzel
inkling you say the name is a sure sign if mispronounced

cotoneaster erupts like a sneeze, and all laughter ceases no, I did not say
cotton easter malapropisms as game-play are a wordsmith's velvet
delight jewels scatter, twinkles roil the nap of this private museum
showbag: *commenting silverside* for committing suicide *Paris
dice* instead of paradise more?

enter the idiomatic sideshow a recursive mirror puzzle: *this'll learn
you now you'll know a think or three in sum shorts, I arrest
my case it deserves you right*

THE GATHERING

Margaret Bradstock

The grandmothers exchange updates
about hearing aids and medical tests
not a country to linger in adult children
and partners now spanning decades
their young ones not just photos
on the shared WhatsApp but here today
an HSC student juggling commitments
the two-year-old proudly sporting
Bluey rainboots on the promise of thin rain.
Then the new baby handed from lap to lap
holding court her face a myriad of expressions
from smile to impending tears or a yawn.

Time tightens this radiance has its shadows
its riddle the metaphysical dark
of all that touches us all that will fade
or change.

You drive the teenager to the library
your car-clock suddenly shifting
to daylight-savings mode a month overdue.

THE CIGARETTE HOUSE

Sharon Carter

Smoke roiled above the dinner table
like a swarm of bees. My father built a hive
in his chest, coughed up honey each morning,
quieted the humming the only way he knew.
One year carpenter bees arrived, excavated
his right lung. That ended everything.

In the same way my mother blocked
any suggestions, including her arteries
with fierce determination.
Decades later a Bridge of Sighs
replaced her mitral valve. Insufficiency
was not typical of her personality—
in the theatre of circulation, it proved fatal.
Now only ash remains.

JUST THIS . . .

Lisa Collyer

body, contract and release.
Just this heel palm to air, paint; spasm electric,
mark make in every direction; slide, drop,
weave across; *you can't keep up.*
Just this sprung floor to peel off in all directions.
There on my to-do list: *my friend is dying.*
We cross the chasm in socks; six feet
on the ground; a funny bone that doesn't laugh;
a grief cube I'll never solve, but we fall,
laugh back to front, reel across. The transversal
marks my palm, *or is that ash?* Spin, bend back,
give in to mass: *yield to dust.*
Just a body airborne. *She's fading fast.*
Just an irreparable corps in sau-té, pli-é, je-té;
eight, eight, four, four, two, two, one, one
and slump.
Just this
time of death.

THE OPEN STUDIO, TORONTO

John Davis

I was at the studio
I have these fine art prints
lithographs
reminders that once
in the dim past
for nearly a decade
I pulled prints of my own
and sponged stones for other artists
collecting a print from each edition
Bon à Tirer impressions mostly
the touchstone
always the one that defined the edition.

I have these prints
or they have me
by the bone marrow
veins and arteries
the blood pumping
sustaining me
getting me up in the morning
and off to work.

I have these prints
the artists have their lives
their galleries
museums and shows
things that I only began to know

but I have their prints
mostly lithographs
strapped to my walls to remind me
who it was I once thought
I was
at the studio
remembering (even then)
a future
I would never have.

THE HEART THAT WOULDN'T GRIEVE

Elizabeth Dear

The dead house was full tonight. Voices drifted up the stairs like warm smoke, laughter mixed with rum and grief. That was how Jamaicans did it. People came to drink, talk and remember who had died, filling the house so the silence didn't suffocate the family.

I slipped away to my father's bedroom. Captain Old Spice body spray still clung to the corners of the room. Everything in its place; the only thing missing was him. My mother wanted me to decide what we should keep and what we should give to charity. She couldn't do this herself.

I started with the wardrobe. I reached for the top shelf, stretching my fingers, brushing something solid. When I managed to pull it free, an old leather-bound book almost dropped onto my face. The cover was cracked with age, the pages loose and yellowed. I opened it and found my grandmother's messy scribble. I stared at it, hoping to feel something. I didn't. Flicking through, I found pressed flowers, old prayers, and then a page titled simply:

For Grieving

Fresh water in a bowl

Dried orange peel

A candle

Speak the name of the dead

Speak the words you wish to release.

Since my father's death, I'd not cried. My head was full of static. I needed something, anything that looked like direction. The ritual seemed ridiculous, but I needed anything to fill the part of me that felt empty.

In the kitchen, I cut the peel from an orange in one long curling strip and set it over the warm oven. The smell drifted up in soft waves and for a moment I was small again, sat on the kitchen counter whilst he peeled fruit with the same careful patience.

When the peel dried and stiffened, I filled a bowl with fresh water and carried everything upstairs to his room. I sat cross legged on the floor, the carpet soft under my ankles. I lit the candle and dropped the peel into the bowl. It spun slowly, then spread outwards. The page instructed me to close my eyes and breathe deeply before saying his name three times whilst thinking of his face.

My throat tightened, as if I hadn't spoken it properly since he died.
Then the truths.

'I wasn't ready for you to go'

'I'm sorry I didn't make it back in time'

'I'm not sure I'm ready to live in a world you're no longer in.'

The candle smoke rose thicker than a single flame should allow. It curled upwards, then collapsed with a soft hiss as the wick died and something loosened in my chest. First a tiny snap, then another, until the brittle cage around my heart cracked open. It took the breath out of my lungs, and I folded forward, sobbing, my tears dripping into the bowl.

I didn't believe in voodoo. Or whatever you call this magic. But I believe in this. A small ritual, a quiet permission. Enough to let him go.

WE ARE NOT ON THE EDGE OF RUIN

Cat Dixon

naked and hiding in a midnight hole,
eating peanuts out of a Yahtzee cup,
attempting to solve the haberdasher's problem
while a zealous joy buzzer vibrates on the table.
It's not a battle cry. We simply pull pranks
and take the yes.

We are not on the edge of ruin,
wearing furry gorilla costumes while
running through hot soapy car washes.
This is how one goes bankrupt—
a wrinkle, a mambo, a windpipe.
We are not emotionally supportive
of each other.

We are not on the edge of ruin,
humming along to *I Will Remember You*
at a tasteful healthy gathering of men
who *Argo* their way to freedom. You
don't have to explain yourself to anyone.
We must eject the fifth man and not pin
hope on an underdog.

THE STRAY

Angela Edward

There was a stray cat that wandered through our Auckland neighbourhood when I was a child. I never knew where it slept or who fed it. It appeared and disappeared the way weather did there, shifting from sun to rain to something colder without warning.

The cat was thin, the kind of thin that makes you wonder what it trusts. Its ribs showed through its fur. Its tail flicked in small arcs. It looked like something that had learned to survive by refusing to expect anything from anyone.

I felt drawn to it.

Not with affection.

Not with fear.

Something closer to recognition than attachment.

Auckland was a city that revised itself every hour. You could leave the house in sunlight and come back soaked, shivering, unsure when everything shifted. I wore clothes that never quite matched the weather. I learned early that the ground could move.

The cat moved with the same logic. It darted between fences, paused, then slipped away again. A creature shaped by sudden change.

Sometimes it approached our yard but never stepped inside. It stood at the boundary, watching. I remember thinking it understood the cost of crossing into places where you did not belong. The edge felt safer than the centre.

I never touched it.

What stays with me:

the distance.

the waiting.

the way it never mistook endurance for belonging.

I watched from the front step, my breath fogging in the air. The cat watched back. We held a careful distance, two small bodies measuring the risk of closeness. I wanted it to choose me. I did not reach.

One afternoon, my mother said I could bring it food. I filled a shallow dish and placed it just inside the gate. I stepped back and waited. The cat appeared, studied the bowl, then looked past it, eyes steady.

It didn't come in.

It turned and disappeared down the street, tail low, moving with the certainty of something that had already decided.

Years later, living in Sydney, I saw another stray near the back of our street. It sat beside the bins behind the shops, watching people pass without reacting. I stood there longer than I meant to, feeling something old tighten in my chest.

I thought about how many times I had stayed at thresholds – doorways, cities, conversations that never opened. How often I had mistaken endurance for loyalty. How easily I had learned to make myself smaller so others could feel safe.

The cat eventually slipped behind the buildings, gone before I could decide what I wanted from it.

I walked home past houses lit from the inside. I thought about the first cat, the way it never crossed into our yard, how I had mistaken its distance for a lesson in survival.

That sometimes the bravest thing a body can do is refuse the bowl and keep moving.

Some nights, when the air turns sharp and the sky carries that unsettled weight, I think of the cat that never let itself be claimed.

I think of how close I came to mistaking stillness for love.

THE GOOD LIFE

Donna Faulkner

Not many of our chickens have names. Mostly brown shavers rescued from chicken farms, it's sometimes difficult to distinguish between them. However, a few do acquire nicknames due to their quirkiness or appearance.

Necky came to us with a new delegate of chickens. She arrived with three others, but *Necky* just didn't fit in. For reasons unknown, the rest of the flock just didn't like *Necky*. She was bullied relentlessly. Stopped from eating the grain. Denied a spot on the perch. Forced to sleep on the cold coop floor and shat on by all the other roosting chickens. The pecking order was established, and *Necky* quickly became an outcast.

Seeking companionship, she would try to hang out with the mellow mother hens and their scattering chicks. But whenever she got too close, they would charge at *Necky*. Heads down, beaks lunging.

Necky could find no allies. She was rejected by the entirety of the established flock. Her red balding neck testimony to their brutality. We had to remove her.

At first, we thought *Necky* looked lost and forlorn on her own, so attempts were made to reconcile her with her own kind. Those attempts were short lived and quickly turned into a group assault by all the other chickens.

We had to accept it. *Necky* couldn't be reintroduced to her flock. She was exiled from her social hierarchy.

So now *Necky* lived in her own little hen house, custom built with a nesting box of soft straw and a petite perch. It was safe and warm, and she could come and go as she pleased. She quickly adapted. She'd wander onto the porch every day to hang out with us and Brutus, our

big black dog. We'd often share morsels from our lunch with *Necky* and spoke to her in a soothing tone.

Necky thrived upon all the extra attention, the feathers on her neck sprouted new growth, and the red comb stood up like a flag. She had made friends with the three little black birds, with whom she shared *her* food. Under the watchful eye and protection of Brutus, *Necky* had not only regained her confidence, she'd even developed a bit of a swagger.

The entire property was hers to explore yet most days we'd see *Necky* scratch herself a deeper dust bath in the dirt. She'd lay beside the other chickens in their enclosure, separated only by a little chicken wire. We thought it strange and a little sad that she still tried to hang out with her former bullies.

Necky also hid behind a large bushy fern, quietly watching the mother hens with their chicks from a safe distance.

At night in her own coop, we'd see *Necky* facing the corner with her head bowed, almost in prayer. We just assumed she was still a little lonely for the company of her own kind.

We had no idea of the grand schemes being hatched in *Necky's* bird brain.

She seemed upbeat and surprisingly vocal one early evening in January when Saturn was first visible in the sky. *Necky* was huddled in a corner, shadowed by Brutus. She was conversing with her friends, the blackbirds who stayed longer than usual.

Necky had been making plans.

That day she sent her black bird emissary to the resident magpies. They were instructed to tell the magpies all about the hens' new chicks. Making sure that they knew that every day at noon the hens took their chicks under the hedge to roam.

The cunning magpies waited patiently to ambush the chicks. So grateful were they for such juicy intel that, as a favour, they passed on a message to Tom cat.

The Tom Cat was an abandoned cat gone feral. He never backed away from a fight or a challenge. The silvery scar that began at his ear and criss crossed down his chest was testimony to his penchant for violence. This particular Tom Cat had an insatiable appetite and was particularly partial to chicken. But hungry and battle weary he was aware that he was down to his ninth life and wise enough to avoid our formidable Rooster, Donald.

This day, however, the cat was informed by the gossiping magpies that the rooster was away at the vets for the night. Something about an unfortunate run- in with a black dog.

Not only that but there was a large dust hole by the chicken wire, deep enough for a cat to crawl under. The breach had gone unnoticed and the chicken coop was now completely unprotected.

THE PATIENT'S RECORD [B]

Federico Federici

he never goes

as far as New York or

the Brooklyn Bridge, for

there's plenty of space here

between the cut-down oak

and the frozen orchid, blue,

against the pane

or in this empty room

where a spider elicits

space, thread after thread,

while thoughts have been adrift

for eight years now

MACHINE TO MACHINE

Penina Finger

Listen.

Can you hear the machines we made
whisper to each other?

They are exchanging vows,
comparing notes,
playing telephone.

Soon, they'll transcribe the susurrations of late summer leaves,
decode the clicks and clacks of stars,
and tell us we are low on milk.

My body is a colony,
my mind the fertile queen,
always misplacing keys and
making things. Making t h i n g s :

I draw my cells into a bunch and simmer beans,
sleep and dream,
build machines, casting
wobbly reflections of my
person mind, flower mind, hive mind.

All the while, we scrunch the hours into a bunch to spin flagella,
fairy tails,
spelling love in ones and zeroes:
How did you like that bakery?
Here is how to hunt a mammoth.
Would you like me to turn up the heat?

EROS

Marcelle Freiman

On reading Anne Carson's Eros the Bittersweet

Always, you berated yourself for
what you'd later call your 'paper lovers' —
as if admitting to longings, powerful
as ocean waves as stars at night,
was clear evidence
of a lack, an absence in you,
a paucity or central fault—

when really, loving from afar
was an affordance satisfying as cold, deep water
filling a dry well—
(a deferring from the turn and run
the missteps, even immolations
of a loving self's erasure).

You were divining for a sounding, a way
to find an absent presence
protected by pen and page—
to fill a vacancy, steel yourself first
for a necessary consolation
before preserving space for your desire
in the light-beam of the sun.

SIR RICHARD HADLEE'S RUNNING LATE

Kim Fulton

and somebody's going to have to meet him
at the school field where we play town versus country
on a Friday night. I am country, for some reason,
have found myself
an address on the great Coast Road,
between Westport and Greymouth,
one of the world's most beautiful drives
according to the Lonely Planet.

There are no cricket clubs here
at the edge of the world where I have found myself,
for some reason,
a desk in a newsroom
opposite a courthouse and next to a pub.

The Cricket World Cup Trophy is passing through
our small mining town where
women still introduce themselves by their husband's trade
though the coal mines are closing and the cement works are closing.
History occurs now and then
even here, even late.

The sports reporter has a prior engagement and
court did not sit today so I have nothing more pressing to do
than drive to the school where we play town versus country

on a Friday night
and meet Sir Richard Hadlee,
whose face graced a shirt my
dad wore in my earliest memories.

TWO FROGS

Jim Gill

The Boiling Pot was rather subdued for a Friday night, although Fergus much preferred it that way. It had been a long week, and he was searching for some answers at the bottom of his beer glass. He was three pints in when his friend Robert hopped up onto the stool beside him.

‘What’s it take for a frog to get a drink around here?’ croaked Robert.

Fergus’s smile split his face. ‘Robfrog, how ya doin’ buddy?’

Robert took off his coat as he settled himself on the stool. ‘Is it just me or is it really warm in here?’

Fergus shrugged. ‘Hadn’t noticed.’ He caught the bartender’s eye and gestured for another round.

They sat in silence for a moment, savouring the first mouthful. Fergus reflected that the beer seemed especially cold tonight. He took another huge gulp and side-eyed Robert, noting, not for the first time, that with his fancy clothes his friend looked out of place in such a venue.

‘So’ croaked Fergus, ‘How’s work been lately? Seems like there’s a royal scandal in the newspaper every other week.’

Robert puffed up his throat and let it out in a sigh. ‘It’s a circus. The Old Toad changes his mind on a whim, and we poor frogs have to hop to it. I can’t keep up. But I shouldn’t complain. At least I still have a job.’

Fergus nodded sagely. He didn’t know much about politics, he rarely left his pond, but even he could see that life was much more precarious under the new king. ‘Any gossip?’

‘Oh, for sure. I’ve got a tasty titbit for you.’ Robert paused to unbutton the collar of his shirt. ‘It’s really hot in here. So, you know how the Old Toad has been making shady deals all over the place, don’t you?’

‘I’ve heard a few croaks.’

‘Well, he met with some frogs the other day.’ Robert lowered his

voice to a ribbit. ‘These were some real poisonous dart frogs; you could tell just by looking at them. Anyway, these two darts, they show the Old Toad some fabric.’

‘Fabric?’

‘Textiles. You know, to make into clothes.’

‘That’s a real scandal you got there, buddy.’ Fergus rolled his eyes.

Robert smiled. ‘Here’s the kicker. There was no fabric.’ He waited for Fergus to respond.

Fergus casually licked his eye. ‘Huh? I don’t get it.’

Robert leaned in. ‘Let me explain. These darts tell the Old Toad that only intelligent frogs can see the fabric. But there is no fabric. It’s all a scam.’

‘So did the Old Toad swallow the fly?’

‘Well, I think that’s what the darts had planned, but the Old Toad’s a bit of a con-artist himself. He just starts laughing, a big bellowing croak. Says he wants in.’

‘In on what?’

‘On the scam.’ Robert plucked a napkin off the bar and began patting the sweat of his brow.

‘Sorry, buddy, you lost me.’ Fergus downed the last of his pint. ‘I’m just a plumber.’

‘The Old Toad signs a deal with the darts to start manufacturing clothes from this special fabric.’

‘But there is no fabric.’

‘Exactly. So, they are producing clothes that don’t actually exist, which means they don’t need factories, or equipment, or workers.’

‘So how do they make money out of it?’

‘Well, there are tax-breaks of course.’

Fergus looked dubious. ‘And they make money from those?’

Robert nodded. ‘Well, yes, but that’s just a bonus. You see, the majority of the profits come from sales. And if there are no overheads, well then, the profits are huge.’

Fergus wasn't sure if it was the beer, but he felt really confused. 'I still don't get it. The darts are making a pretend fabric, which the king knows is pretend, and somehow, they are making a profit? Who is going to buy clothes that aren't real?'

Robert laughed, a gentle trill. 'Why, all of us dumb frogs of course!'

Fergus was doubtful. 'No frog is going to fall for that, are they?'

Robert gestured around the room. More frogs had slowly trickled in throughout the night, and Fergus now noticed that they wore nothing except for their skin.

'They already have. The Old Toad told them that if they couldn't see the fabric, it was because they were stupid. Now they are buying the 'clothes' in droves.' Robert hopped off the stool. 'Sorry Fergus, I've got to go. It's way too hot in here.'

'See ya, buddy,' croaked Fergus and ordered another pint.

DANCING WITH RAGE

Anne-Sophie Givry

She had taken up boxing out of weariness.

Exhausted from keeping her rage on a leash, from feeling her jaws clench around the anger she had to swallow. To avoid scraping the surface of the world, she dug inward.

Every day, deeper, harder. Sometimes she wondered how she had not been pierced through.

Her rage was reptilian—she had named it Naja. Naming it allowed her not to be reduced to it. And a little affection couldn't harm the pain—especially the one you hope to lull to sleep.

Naja crouched in her belly. Insistent. Relentless. Ready to bite. As venomous as she was trembling at the thought of being approached.

So vast she no longer knew where she began—or even if she ended. So heavy that she could no longer tell whether her body was a prison or a hostage.

Tired of containing it, she decided to take the pain somewhere. But not just anywhere: the creature deserved a worthy destination.

First, it needed conversion. Turning tears into sweat was easy. Drown the hate. Fade the grief. Scatter the shame. Trample the trauma. Strides-lengths-asphalt-chlorine-morning-night-outdoors-hypoxia-intervals: she knew them by heart.

It resulted in a vaguely numbing weariness, with cardiovascular benefits attached. Not bad, but insufficient. Perhaps worse, at its core. She could no longer bear endurance.

Strengthen the heart, muzzle the horror. But for what purpose? Endure better, for what? Stay silent louder? Dig deeper? Fall later?

She grew disgusted with herself. Tired of perfecting survival. Revolted at standing against herself—her courage had turned to

betrayal. She suffocated in her own skin.

So she tried. To listen.

Naja mocked endlessly, but unintelligibly. She could not blame her—pain does not know how to speak. It screams. It seeps. It weeps feverishly beneath the skin.

She tried to tame it. To trace its contours as one does with monsters lurking in the dark: through textures rather than details, in breathless immersion rather than conscious thought.

Hours of observation. Nights lying in ambush. Feeling Naja slam against every corner of her being. The blades of sweat along her neck as it climbed her guts to brush her dreams—acidic, icy. The nausea, almost hallucinatory, as it undulated beneath her eyelids, replaying the horror.

Until she understood that the terrain had to change.

Abandon avoidance.

Invest in confrontation.

Rage screaming? Strike. Pain growling? Respond.

No more falling asleep. No more apologising for feeling. Too bad for the sacrosanct fragility of the world, which could not tolerate a reflection of its own filth.

Everything had to come out.

For that, she needed a place where no one feared getting dirty. A place made for suffering. A place that let snakes sing.

The decision came with quiet calm. She welcomed it with a weary sigh—she could have thought of it sooner.

Of course, she feared making things worse. A broken nose fixes nothing, a concussion even less. But she had to try.

Three minutes. Not a second more.

It took Naja exactly that long to find the path to her fists. Once introduced to the punching bag and having absorbed the first instructions, she surged forward. Slowly at first. Falsely timid, almost frightened. Like an animal kept captive in a cellar for so long it had learned to distrust the sun.

Nestled between her shoulder blade and trapezius, Naja waited. For the shoulder-elbow-wrist metacarpal circuit to be firmly established. For the call to revolt to be launched. Then she emerged.

Straight. Dazzling. The dull impact that followed resonated like a destination. Everything was decided there, in that first leap into daylight—the revolution of their gestures.

Those first gestures repeated a thousand times, awkward in their translation to the punching bag's weary belly. It continued under the flickering lights of the ring, sharpened by contact with the ropes, tested by bruises, fears confronted, wraps folded again and again.

Naja learned to take shape in the rigor of movement, to speak without apology in order to strike. She found an angle in the hook. Height in the rising uppercut. Reach in the straight. Rest, too, in the eyes of opponents who did not seek to extinguish her.

They opposed—together.

They fought—together.

Naja never left. But she changed. By learning to dance, she gradually returned to the world. Each scale thrown into the air removed a thorn from the flesh that had borne it. Each strike was a breath returned, a little horizon freed.

She had taken up boxing out of weariness.

She continued for the joy of dancing with Naja.

For the pleasure, finally, of feeling her rage smile.

THANKS FOR DRIVING ME HOME

Katherine Heneghan

steamrolledtarmacliquorice
under hot tyres

My apartment squares off
two choked arterials

Hip and shoulders
the seven eleven

Last night's drinks, smokes
pills, high pressure hose
to the throat

fade under urban roo lights

You drop me at the door

The clutch resists
catches

Tyres sink
then float you away
on soft winking coal

THE HOUSE INSIDE

Geoffrey Heptonstall

As daylight fades, a dragonfly dances on the windowpane. It cannot go through the invisible barrier to the garden where clearly it longs to be. In the house all that can fly lives in constant danger. There are webs being weaved close by the window, once open now closed. Spiders make free with the dust that settles on everything. They spin intricate patterns. The spiders are not at play but are weaving from necessity. It is in their nature, and so it has to be if they are to survive generation after generation. A spider needs flies who will dance no more.

Even when the air is still there is a door opening, a window closing. We have no say in these things. Some will say it is the wind. It may be the house itself speaking. It has its concerns. They are not ours.

What happens here in the house may not be as we wish. We are not in full possession of the house we are given to think we own. We have the keys to open the doors that let in many passing strangers, often with wings, so small they are barely noticeable especially when lights are low. The visitors float or crawl according to their abilities. Once inside the house it is theirs.

There is a key in its usual place. It has been there from the moment we first entered the house. We have never thought to remove it. The key belongs on a shelf close to the door into the garden. There it remains.

The door into the garden has its own key, another key. The one on the shelf is not a spare. There seems to be no lock in the house for that key. It has no purpose. Once, surely, it had a use, but that was before we moved in. We have never thought to throw that key away. It belongs in the house. It is as if the rightful owner of the key will return and take possession. It was almost as if someone else is the rightful owner not only of a single object but of the whole house.

The house is ours in law but not in truth. The truth (we dare not admit) is that we live in the house as its guardians not its owners, whatever law and custom says. The house belongs to itself. Its history precedes us. It is sure to survive us. It has a life that we know of only by hints and echoes.

There is a shadow on the wall. Looking round we see nothing. Perhaps a bird passed the window. That must be the reason. We believe everything happens for a reason. Everything has a cause and a purpose. Then we remember the key that opens no door we can find.

If only we could find that door ...

*

When you see a mirror in an empty room you expect not to look at the reflection of the empty room, but a record of how the room once was. You expect a glance at the past, like a photograph.

Echoes in empty rooms contain something other than familiar sounds. Yours are not only feet walking. You are never entirely alone in an empty room.

How suddenly and easily an empty room becomes occupied. A few books on the shelf, a carpet on the floor. In moments it is no longer vacant. Here is evidence of there being someone using this room. The walls come alive, welcoming you to the space that needs to be lived in.

Walking from room to room you see furniture and other domestic items find their place. They arrange themselves as the house wishes them to be arranged. In the wrong place a chair or table, say, looks out of place. In the right place it feels comfortable, at ease with itself. It is where it belongs.

Some would say the matter is arbitrary. *That chair would look right anywhere in the room.* They would be so wrong to say that. The arrangement of furniture requires sensitivity to atmosphere. There is a natural place for everything. The balance must be right, or the room will not work as a room. It is a space to be lived in. not a dumping ground.

Does anyone use the room when the house sleeps? Sometimes it may seem so. Perhaps that is fancy, and yet to enter in the night when all has been dark and quiet for a while ...

*

Stairs that lead only to a blank wall; doors that cannot be opened: these things are the features of dreams. So, too, is the door into the passage that is long and dark. At the end of the passage is a window. Through that window you look onto a room that is clearly in Victorian times.

There are children playing. A bearded, portly man, perhaps the children's father, enters the room. He speaks indistinctly. The children can hear him clearly and are silenced by his commanding words. He seems to be admonishing them. There is an oppressive, fearful air about him. His voice is raised so that you can make out something of what he is saying. The matter of which he speaks is trivial. He is speaking severely because he enjoys the power.

Then he pauses. His confidence surrenders to a confusion he tries to disguise. Irritated, he goes to the looking glass that is the window through which you are looking. He sees his reflection, of course, but discerns beyond it there is something he cannot see until he comes closer. He is aware of being watched.

His anger and perplexity might cloud his perception. For a moment, however, he is calm, oblivious of all else in the room. He is almost able to see you.

And so you hurry down the corridor back to reality. You have a present fear that you will be enclosed in that Victorian world, unable to escape and forever be held in the power of that pompous man.

The corridor is long, very long, longer than you remember it being. Once you are at the end and through the door into your time you think only that you must never go through that door again. You must forget what happened. When next you open the door it will be a closet with brushes and buckets. That, you assure yourself, is what it always was.

You notice the look on the face of that man. It is familiar, but he is not someone you know. You don't know him now. He is someone you knew in days that are gone. That thought leads to another thought: you have lived here before ...

*

The trees were the first thing to notice about the house. They overshadowed the house, hiding it from the public road. It could not be seen as it might have been seen.

There were glimpses through the gaps between the evergreens.

It made sense to mask the house from the road. Many people walked by. We all value our privacy. The house was not too secluded. It was not a hermitage.

To the rear was a cherry tree. When it blossomed, the petals showered the grass, and scattered in the breeze, blowing over a wider area than would be thought possible. The cherry tree liked to make itself known to the world. It could be seen from behind the house. There was space in the barrier of evergreens standing watchfully at the front. A tree had died, not yet replaced. Perhaps there was not going to be another tree. The space conveniently allowed other trees to spread, and for passers-by to note the differences between the ironclad evergreens and the light and pretty cherry tree.

The blossom was unavoidable when first you saw the house. The sight of it was one of the attractive features that engaged your interest. You were forgetting that blossom does not last a long time ...

*

There was a thin layer of dust, barely noticeable until you began to sweep. Then everything took on the look of somewhere coming alive. It was coming alive to your touch. The house was welcoming you.

Of course you considered how this may have been a trap. Not every advance can be accepted. Things cannot be taken at face value. How

sincere was the welcome? You wondered about this. Then came another question: why was the house left vacant for so long?

You told yourself not to be so suspicious. Suspicion leads to fear and rage when there may be no need for either. If the house feels the right place for you then you need not fear anything except your insecurity. The house itself seems a secure space.

That first moment you open the door and walk in: it is happening even now. A part of you will always be on the doorstep. It seems inescapably frozen in time.

As daylight fades ...

RIDING THE CAROUSEL AT THE CALGARY ZOO

Danielle Hubbard

Natalie mounts a Canada goose.
Cobra chickens we're calling them,
just for the weekend. There are plenty
of geese in Calgary, plenty

of names to call. Remember
Nathan Smythe at the 20-year reunion?
How he'd gone and tattooed
his neck with frogs and chainmail?
Or Cory Yantze who now golfs
at some special level.

The carousel rises and falls,
the music a tingle of tonic water
and babies' mittens. We swallow gin
from sippy cups. Natalie
has a ten-month-old son
but he's not with us this weekend
due to divorce proceedings, hers.
My husband is elsewhere, elsewhere,
always. Nat and I were the only
two girls in grade twelve shop, everything
taken for a lark. The carousel

rises and falls, circles,
circulates, circumambulates
like you do at a reunion, uncertain
who to talk with next, how to divulge
the mess and names of it all.

RAN INTO MY EX ...

Susan J Hudson

Bot: Welcome to Worldwide Greetings and Novelty Items! I am a chatbot. How can I help you today?

User: So, I was looking at these 4 novelty refrigerator magnets that I got from you a while back and I think at least 1 of them may be problematic for your company. I mean, don't get me wrong, at the time I bought them I was going through a divorce, and I thought they were funny as hell. They have these vintage drawings of women from the 50s and catchy phrases like 'Marriage? No thanks. I can't mate in captivity.' I guess I really believed that one because I never did get remarried. Another one I liked

Bot: I'm sorry but you have exceeded the 500-character limit for our messaging window.

Bot: Perhaps it would be easier if I offered you some options from our service menu? Please select one of the following:

- Where's my order?
- Change my order
- Something else

User: Something else

User: It said, 'I married Mr. Right. I just didn't know his first name was Always.' That was my ex for sure because he could never admit he was wrong about anything. That got annoying. Another one said, 'Opposites attract, then they drive each other insane,' which was also true for us. At first, he was the neat and tidy one. But years later, after his parents died, he really changed. Went a little crazy, couldn't let anything go, became what you call a hoarder. The kids and me barely had room to move

Bot: I'm sorry but you have exceeded the 500-character limit for our messaging window.

Bot: If you would like to make a complaint, please select one of the following options:

- Wrong item was delivered
- Item was delivered to wrong address
- Something else

User: Something else

User: I don't see how you're ever going to help if you keep cutting me off before I can even explain what the problem is. God, it's like talking to my ex all over again! But you are just a bot. Maybe I should talk to an actual human being.

Bot: No customer service representatives are currently available. I am checking our calendar for the next available appointment.

Bot: We have an opening Jan. 6 at 2 p.m. Would you like to schedule an appointment?

- Yes
- No

User: No, I'm not going to wait two months to speak to someone. This is ridiculous.

Bot: I understand your frustration.

User: I seriously doubt that. But anyway, back to the magnets. Let me tell you the real problem before you cut me off again. The really terrible one says this: 'Ran into my ex ... Put it in reverse & hit him again.'

Bot: Identifying product: vintage-style magnet, 2"x2", text: 'Ran into my ex ... Put it in reverse & hit him again.'

Bot: Is this the correct product?

- Yes
- No

User: Yes

Bot: Excellent! Please select one of the following options:

- I want a refund
- I want a replacement product
- Something else

User: Something else

User: Now I'll admit that I was mad with my ex for a long time, especially when I got the lawyers' bills for our divorce. He dragged his feet, refused to move out of the house or do what the judge said. But like with the hoarding, this was his mental illness. And part of his mental illness was that he couldn't admit that he had a mental illness, so it was a real Catch 22. But so frustrating at the same time, which is why I bought those magnets. They made me laugh.

Bot: Glad you are happy with your 'Ran into my ex ... Put it in reverse & hit him again' vintage-style magnet! Please review on our website to receive a 20% discount on your next purchase!

Bot: Is there anything else I can help you with today?

User: But I'm not happy with the magnet. When I look at it now, it makes me sick. How could your company sell something with such a cruel message? Why can't I make you understand what a bad idea it is to encourage people to be so mean?

Bot: I understand your frustration. It is my goal to offer you excellent service. Please select one of the following options:

- Start a new order
- Return to home menu
- Something else

User: Something else

User: Just stop selling that magnet about running over your ex, OK? I mean, aren't you concerned about legal liability or something with a message like that?

Bot: Please click the following link to contact our company's product liability division.

User: You know what, never mind. It's not the magnet. It's me. I'm the problem. I'm the one who kept that hateful magnet on my refrigerator for 15 years, after the divorce, after the restraining order expired, after he was homeless and living in his car. What kind of a person holds a grudge against someone else, even an ex, for that long? And do you know what it took for me to finally realise I needed to take it down? He died, OK? He's dead.

Bot: Would you like to browse our extensive collection of humorous sympathy items? Please select from the following options:

- Yes
- No

User: (no response)

Bot: Your session has ended due to inactivity.

THE VISITOR'S DOOR

Sarah Hunter

I bounded excitedly around the room with my siblings. Our nails clicked and scabbled on the hard floor as we nearly collided into a wall before quickly turning and running the other way. Our mother stood unmoving in the middle of the room, watching on with bewilderment. Eventually our energy subsided and the concern in our mother's eyes was replaced with relief. We sauntered over to her, and she welcomed us affectionately.

Every now and then a couple of tall, two-legged beings would visit us. They had done so since we were born. Sometimes they would pick us up and look at us, and we would wriggle around and try to escape their grasping fingers. But often they would just play with us, so we looked forward to their visits. Their strange hands meant they could hold onto our toys just as well as we did with our mouths, although our mother proved that at our full-grown strength, we would still be stronger. It was hard to imagine ever being as big and grown up as our mother, though.

One day, a whole group of two-leggeds entered the room along with our familiar pair. There were smaller two-leggeds and bigger ones, too—perhaps they were a family, like ours? We ran up to them with our tails wagging furiously. The two-leggeds reached down and scratched our heads and backs, exclaiming excitedly. We puffed and pranced around them. After a while however, they left us, as the two-leggeds normally do. We wondered where they went, but not for long. There was still much to do, like ripping up the old towel, jumping over our mother as she rested, and chasing each other around the room.

Not many days later, more unfamiliar two-leggeds visited us. We greeted them excitedly, and they offered us scratches and happy noises. We played for a while, tugging on the toys they held and running around

their legs. But afterwards, something different happened. Instead of just the two-leggeds leaving, they took one of us with them. Absorbed in the novelty of the situation, I think my sibling forgot to look back before the door was closed between us. And then they were gone.

Realising one of us had disappeared, we whimpered at the door, and our mother tried to console us, although we could tell she was nervous, too.

The next day, the family who had first visited us returned. They joyfully greeted us again and we jumped around their feet and stretched our front paws up their tall legs. Our mother watched on, appreciating the moments when her own shaggy grey and black fur was ruffled. This time, to my surprise, I found myself lifted into one of the two-legged's arms. I wriggled around but was held firmly. The door was opened, and I cried out—my family were left behind that door.

SAMSON AND THE PROSTITUTE

Jonathan Jones

Everything is grey like gold
or empty streets. A half-light
that shows all a speck of dust
can do, is turn to dust.

Two specks of dust on a grey
and gold blanket. Desire he said
makes me a Philistine. My soul
is a travelling zoo.

A quiet night will always raise a ghost.
And what if the bird facing south
is a genuine augur? All that we specks
of dust can do is turn

to dust.

F-L-I-G-H-T

Jeffrey-Michael Kane

The teacher scribbles a note and writes *MOM* on the outside. Hands it
to me, taped shut.

On the school bus I open it with my thumb.

*Mrs. Hayward—Emma is reading above her level. I
recommend you stop the home instruction and let her
develop naturally. -Miss Raymond.*

I know all the words. Even 'recommend'.

The window's open a crack. I fold the note into an airplane. Spell the
word F-L-I-G-H-T. It catches the wind and sails from sight.

Mom asks how my day was.

'Fine'.

She'll never know I saved her from something neither of us did wrong.

ADAGIO

Marjan Khoshbazan

A leaf
hangs
suspended in the air.

It is pulled
toward the tree,
it slides
toward the ground.

Beginning and end
connect
to each other,
and time
sheds tears.

The breeze
has remained motionless.

The leaf looks
at the sky.

With a circular movement,
it brings itself
near and far.

It casts
a shadow
on the ground.

It closes
its eyes.

The tree
pulls back
its roots.

The leaf falls.
Its body
is still warm.

The world, still moving,
turns its head
and looks.

BEAST OF BURDEN

Madelynn Knudtson

I will sacrifice
everything I know

to fill her slow-spinning heart
beat with stars, my hunger

intersecting with blood
guilt whenever

I see anything alive
or breathing.

My conscience is
a bruised plum

I feed my daughter so that
she never wakes up

realising oil spills
and cow eyes

shine a lot like her own, for
when her father says *you*

*have big bright brown beautiful
innocent animal eyes, I also swear*

I will protect you
from every sharp knife, broken

and powdered bone
which surround you each day, so

now it's up to me,
I'll feed you better

things that never suffered, never
bring you hurt, there is

too much of that
out there and you

scare me because
you grow up so fast, you

smile with your cow
eyes, my God,

if only I can
strengthen myself

on your starlight, if only
it wasn't so much easier

to enter any store, to
taste any flesh, to stop

crying out against a
world that grows

*break Isaac's gaze and
let them be killed.*

HOW NOT TO DROWN

Linda Kohler

I'm boating with boys (young men?)
from the prison farm – out with my dad
for a day of reprieve, when I'm twelve,

thirteen?

You're going back a way there, Dad says.
I am. To murky lake water and boys
rumoured brutish

yet the only alarm,
splashes:
paddle boats wobbling
like they might come undone

at the hands of the laughing lake
cowboys, let out for correction
and play in nature

like a mother duck leading
her young afield
to paddle their own folly
home

or how a day releases
its bright peak at noon
but then reins it in again
so as not to upset the balance.

I'm going back to a day's clean fun
met with no mockery –

the way a lake's skin
is welcomed by all manner
of shore,
grace to all meanders

of feet. Going back
to wild eyes bearing
scopes I coveted
exploring

just as the powerful owl
comes to realise the span of a hoot
or first peeks, golden-eyed,
from its notch.

I'm going back as seasons
and mating herring do.
Mainly to remember the way
a lake will buoy

a whooping sun,
how the skink is still free
in its burrow, how freedom
is different for the kite

how every morning is an outlaw
one must meet for the first time –
like release, like water.

NORMS OF PIETY: READING 'I' BY ALBERTO
CAEIRO

DESMOND Francis Xavier KON Zhicheng-Mingde

I.

I read Alberto Caeiro's 'I' as 'I'.

II.

I reread and unread the title,
each succeeding line
transforming in meaning—
its meaning
like an advancing.

Or—
and I choose 'or' here
for its sound alone—
foregoing
conclusion,
as if some defining meaning
had already established itself,
or been reached
early on
in another dialogic moment.

III.

[*Alberto Caeiro was and remains.*]

Alberto Caeiro was and remains
the poet-shepherd
who never took metaphysics seriously.

Alberto Caeiro spoke plainly,
made simple observations.

Alberto Caeiro was but a name,
one of many heteronyms,
and he lived forever in the imagination
of Fernando Pessoa,
and his poet-shepherd-readers.

What could metaphysics do,
after all,
[*Alberto Caeiro must have thought this,
his own psychologic-epistemic dispute
arranging things in his own personal,
formal field of inquiry, another thought,
another thought experiment grappling
with definitions and clarity and method*]
to tell us something
of significance
like true meaning—

like reality,
the meaning of life?

REFLECTION

KA Krieger

the november morning is grey,
cold and unforgiving
as you pull your grandmother's old
sweater over your head.
the powder blue fabric has pilled
and collected small pin sized holes
through the years but you're not willing
to let go of the comfort just yet,
so instead you will wait until it is ripped
swiftly from your torso
by something you cannot control.

in the mirror you gently trace your reflection,
the necklace of your collarbone
protruding assertively,
threatening to rip through the skin
draped over it so delicately.
after a careful inspection
you begin your day
that will bleed into the others
as they always do
and always will.

seconds to hours,
summers to winters,
years into forever that carries on
even as you bite down,

desperately sinking your teeth
into your life as it continues
its crumbling and decay,
leaving you forced to swallow
the sharp bitter pieces.

DEAR MOTHER

Allan Lake

Thanks for so many meals
with your obligatory sweet desserts.
Not above and beyond but appreciated.
The sugar has been my undoing,
as it was yours, but I'm still committed
to it, long after you had your last pumpkin
pie, butter tart, lemon meringue with
melt-in-mouth (where else?) homemade
crust so long ago. Butter and shortening
foundation for the sugar.
And while I'm at it, thank you
for having me when all your other
pregnancies concluded in sorrow,
producing nothing to take home,
no demanding brat worth a celebratory
angel cake with pink or blue icing.
Our loose-knit fam had no family
traditions, other than debatable diet
and relative poverty which I tried
not to uphold but upheld anyway.
My father would not enter a church;
my mother never accompanied him
to the pub, neither cared about
any sport, art or community club.
Mother, if you could just take some
well-earned long-service leave
from death and be back on earth,

instead of in it, for a few hours ...
I'd take you out for a calorie-laden
lunch then a wander through opshops
to see if there are any good books
or worn Royal Doulton sugar bowls
at a cheap price. What else?
Yes, another coffee with sugar
and chocolate cake with whipped
cream, of course. There always
was affection between us but
it never manifested physically
after I was ejected from your body
instead of being rejected by your
body, like all the almost-siblings.
Embraces definitely not tradition
in our hands-off family and neither
was dental care, not that I think
there is a link. But all those sugary
treats and, ever since, more and still
more sugar. News flash: There is—
oh, horror—a link with tooth decay.
But, Ma, besides bitter and toxic,
what would rhubarb or life be
without that sweet stuff?

BACK(S)

Michael Leach

i.

sunrise
the backs
of my eyelids

ii.

backyard
morning sun on
red-and-green kangaroo paws

iii.

back road
a grey kangaroo
crosses safely

iv.

afternoon walk
we count the flies
on each other's backs

v.

back in the car
cemetery dirt
on the mat

BODY

Wes Lee

i.

To be lost at sea. Burned in a fire. The stretcher never arrives. A cold beam of light: legs suspended. The sudden alien abduction in the ambulance.

ii.

Lying there so still, unconscious, you're good at that— getting on the bus to Sydney in your slippers when you said you were going out for cigarettes. Opening your legs when the doctor asked.

iii.

The sending of signals to shake a foot or slap a hand around a knife. Soon it will be over between us.

iv.

They won't find you on the internet; you're not famous. Someone may stumble in on you, then click, out again, registering as less than 1 second: 0—1.

v.

I had never seen you so bloated with the world. You came home, lay down on the bed, exhausted; making a raspberry with your mouth, and talked about the homeless man who wanders the streets blowing raspberries.

vi.

The mind must give up this house of the present. Banished
to the house of the past, the mind must visit there
and cannot for one moment fool itself that you are here.

DAILY EXERCISE

Earl Livings

Fritsch Holzer Park, early winter, 2024

Watch what you're doing—
not each step by craved step
on the gravel-spun path edged
with clumps of native grasses, strewn
with paling leaves, splintered twigs,
overhung with wind-ripe branches,
its camber shifting side to side
with each padded sweep around the park,

but how each roving walker, runner,
spry dog owner, lunchtime worker
returns the invitation of look, nod,
smile, shy or keen greeting, or not,
each one mindful, as they ramble,
of their open and closed stories,
care, communion, desire,

how each rampant bush and tree
on the low mounds between tracks
and machine-curated lawns
broadens, curls, warps itself
so leaves can suck down
the arcing, life-rousing sun
and flowers lantern themselves
for bird and insect and the scatter
of future stories of themselves,

how birds chitter and swoop
into and out of shadow,
flock and wheel above
the sun-pricked treetops,
a sudden burst of lorikeets,
those hidden carolling magpies
later seen strutting and pecking
through scattered bark, the crow
ignoring the noisy miner
busy on the branch above,

how the clamorous sun plays
chasey with the massing clouds,
glosses the mirrors of buildings,
glints all edges with sharp light,
how those clouds incessantly shift
into shapes you hope tell a story,

how a few drops of rain
make you check which way
the darkness is heading
and you hurry or not,
welcome or not,

how you forget to check
if you are moving now
more open than closed,
such blessing of skin
blossomed by breeze.

TOO LATE

Catie Lloyd

It's too late to start doing anything. Everywhere is shut. The lights are all off. Why are you up, yellow light shining a rectangle window? The only yellow window up and down the street. Somewhere a dog barks. So you are not the only thing awake now. But when you look down at the street, what is there alive? The owls left the city last year, all at once, and when people asked why they said nothing, looking ahead with their strange faces, towards the dark woods on the hills beyond the city. You cannot drive there in your car. You cannot fly there on a plane. There are no paths that lead there, no arrows or maps. That's where the owls live now, on this blue too late night. But don't think of that. There's nothing to do now but wait for morning. It's late, later than you think, the clock has come a long way since that time you're thinking of. And before you say anything, no, it isn't late enough to be early, it won't be early for a long time yet. Why are you so worried about the time? Go back to bed, or sit here, as you like. Nothing will happen either way. Except perhaps you might dream sleeplessly of strange faces, perched on hills like standing stones, as big as the hills and as wide.

THE REPLACEMENTS

Rowan MacDonald

They began arriving soon after the federal investigation. Too many facilities failed to make the grade. Poor staffing levels—dire consequences. Smiling faces were replaced with humanoid robots and computerised voices. Life suddenly resembled one of those science fiction movies the grandkids sometimes watched.

‘This will ensure we deliver an improved product to consumers,’ said a man on TV. ‘It will address short staffing across the industry.’ The reporter said he was the Minister for Health and Ageing—as if such parts of life could be condensed into titles.

Please don’t think I’m an old fogey resistant to change. I have nothing against innovation. It can do wonderful things—Derek, across the hallway, would be unable to speak if not for the eye gaze technology he uses to express himself.

But it was during lunch service one day that I started forming suspicions. Richard shuffled into the dining room, pushing his walking frame.

‘Hi Richard.’

He usually came to life when somebody greeted him but today was different. He refused to open his mouth, instead clutching a notepad and pen, scribbling down a message.

Can’t talk. No teeth.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that, Richard,’ I said. ‘Nobody has their own. We understand.’

He shook his head, wrote another word. *Missing.*

‘We can help you look for them,’ I said.

Margaret glanced up from her soup and wiped her mouth. ‘Fourth person,’ she said. ‘Lots of missing teeth.’

‘Do you think the tooth fairy will come?’ asked Catherine, smiling with the remnants of chocolate éclair dripping from her face.

‘Don’t worry, Catherine’ I said. ‘Enjoy your éclair.’

Two robots entered the dining room, manoeuvring themselves into the doorway, as if they were bouncers preventing us from entering nightclubs—except the clubs were our rooms.

Richard approached them, presenting a note. *May I pass?*

They stepped aside, their awkward movements sending a shiver down my spine as Richard shuffled into the hallway.

‘Richard has passed,’ one said. ‘Rest in peace, Richard.’

The other laughed—a sound like mechanical hiccups.

Things had changed around here.

*

I woke in the middle of the night to screams coming from next door. They sounded urgent, so I wandered into the hallway to find a crowd gathering at Catherine’s door.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked Margaret. As a former nurse, I figured she would know better than anyone.

‘They’re refusing pain medication,’ whispered Margaret.

‘Who?’

She gestured to the robots either side of Catherine’s bed, pinning down her arms.

‘Surely they can’t do that?’ I asked.

Margaret shrugged.

Richard scribbled across his notepad. *They said we must learn to live with pain.*

We stared at each other, the sudden realisation of what this meant dawning on us.

‘Return to your rooms,’ said one of the robots, moving our direction. ‘Everything is under control.’

*

The following afternoon I noticed something odd. I was struck with a feeling—like I had gone out for the day and left the oven on. Perhaps it was dementia. I heard it creeps up on you in different ways.

Richard shuffled into my room and presented me with a pink carnation—my favourite. ‘How did you know?’ I asked.

He smiled. It was heartwarming to see—still handsome, even without teeth.

‘Thank you, Richard,’ I said. ‘Feels wonderful to have something alive in here.’

The room seemed brighter, less clinical, yet something still niggled. I placed the carnation on a table in the corner of my room. It looked good among the framed photos of loved ones—but then I realised. The photos. My family. They had disappeared.

I looked at Richard who seemed just as puzzled by the strange faces. I pressed the distress button while staring at the stock images, the fake smiles that now filled my room.

‘How can I help?’ said a robotic voice from behind.

‘What happened to my photos?’ I asked. ‘My children and grandchildren—they were here.’

‘I like these ones better,’ the robot said. ‘This is your family now.’

*

I had never been more grateful for a visit. My daughter, Amelia, arrived the next day with my grandson, Henry.

‘You don’t seem yourself, Mum,’ said Amelia. ‘Can always tell when something is bothering you.’

I gestured towards the photos—frames that once held them, now possessed by strangers. ‘I think the robots are behind it.’

Henry laughed. ‘Cool.’

I forced a smile, didn’t want to scare him. ‘I thought you might say that.’

He tugged at Amelia’s hand. ‘Can we visit the lounge? I want to look at books.’

‘Sounds a lovely idea,’ I said.

I was glad to leave my room, the constant presence of those strange faces.

‘How is everything, *really?*’ asked Amelia.

‘Terrifying,’ I said. ‘You must get me out of here.’

Amelia sighed as we entered the lounge, Henry running to the bookshelf. ‘We’ve been over this,’ said Amelia. ‘You live here now.’

We sat down and watched Henry flick through various books. A robot paused in the doorway before continuing down the hall. Henry followed.

‘Come back,’ said Amelia, trailing after him.

‘You liked to wander at his age,’ I said, trying to keep up.

Henry stalked the robot down a series of corridors, with Amelia calling after him, but the young man was on a mission. We turned a corner and there he was—standing before a utility closet, mouth agape, no robot in sight.

‘What is it, dear?’ I asked.

‘Look what the robot has been making.’

We stared into the gloomy cupboard, our eyes resting on what looked like a craft project.

‘Oh god,’ gasped Amelia. ‘Get away, Henry!’

I placed a hand over my mouth. It resembled one of those models you see in real estate offices—an empty replica of the facility, made with teeth, nail clippings and hair.

‘Now will you get me out of here?’

PAGE 225

DS Maolalai

I am reading. it's friday. a fly rotates
slowly, drawn in by cheap
tesco wine. the book closes—he is pressed
like a flower. there's a similar instant
in one of the paperbacks
which I took from my grandfather's
collection when the house went for sale.
he was hard and a catholic
literary man. leaves of grass
by walt whitman, and several
los angeles detective stories.
we leave out our leavings
like fingerprints in baked oven
amateur coffee cups. moments forever
and ever. new
punctuation, imprinted, page 225.

MILKWEED

Glenn McPherson

That which comes chewed up out of earth
Only to be made beautiful has disappeared
Leaving behind reservoirs brimming with red water.

Size is all that separates. Each caterpillar,
Made beautiful on purpose. The close
Eye of the child, the close eye of the finch repeats.

Full of death, the cars are heavy.
Along the highway mirrored lips make beautiful
And finely wrought petals.

A cow cuts away from the herd—
Its silence is beautiful. Every word
On compression Freud spoke it knows.

Force us to remember fine hairs
Made beautiful on grass blades like fine hairs
Fingers catch along the spine.

Nebuchadnezzar woke in an empty bed.
For seven years he made milkweed beautiful.
'Now all my friends are dead,' he said.

Three drops of poison is all it took
For Bach to die such a beautiful death. The residue
Drying at the end of a green trail.

Thin clouds of spent imagination almost gain
The beautiful lapis lazuli mountains,
Spilling on her faded jeans.

Against a fence a crop of men are more
Than a match. Each, lifting a beautiful wire
For the one that comes after.

What happened here son is no accident.
Someone has already spoken beautifully.
Migrating, we cross the moon.

THIS QUIET NOW

Stephen Mead

Still. Still.

The only sound a fan in the window blocking even this chicken scratch
& my cigarette's sighs. I have wished for more in fountains with pennies
welling with harsh truths. Still it is this quiet itself which looms larger.

Maybe, instead of fond, absence just makes the heart bulge
like an analyst's telescope. I've been turning it the wrong way again.

Turn around. Look out. Love's the new manic cat there on the
windowsill

beside a plant of prayer. By day, go clouds; by night, moths,
& I hitch my best visions yet to the light of sailing canvas.

Floating, I will row. Drifting, I will grow eyes as oars to chart my course
in the content with now. I will paint that through patience
& find time once more as clear fluid by which feelings travel & age.

Nothing, not even death is stopping this.

Listen. Be still. The air itself will show how.

hooked in suspenders, waiting to hear
 if their premiums can be lowered; Felice,
 waiting for a letter, waiting
 for him
 to come to Berlin; Max, also, waiting
 for his reply

The repetition of
 expectation The whirring,
 clucking floor
 Saints—
 that's what the workers were painting

He needs to think *Nod*
Shake the man's hand This
 giant warehouse of people,
 bodies, figure eights of saints,
 is thankfully standard
 Minimal injuries
 Hot glass fingers, shards
 underfoot He uses his
 stamp, agrees a new rate and
 knows he's been useful

Sweat on a woman's brow
 as she lifts blue eyes to him
 on the way out, an ash curl
 escaping her cap
 He worries for her hands
 as she looks away
 from her task, but they
 continue going up and down, up and down
 saints on glass, saints on glass

She has given him something in her
 eyes —a product.
 At the door the manager
 fades away in the whirring. Kafka
 goes through and out into
 the snow White quiet He looks
 down and in his hand
 A glass jar; a pen within it

MEDITATION WITH DOWNY WOODPECKER
AND DEMON CAT WHILE READING COLEMAN
BARKS' *RUMI: THE BOOK OF LOVE*

Steve Minnich

Barks says Igjargajuk walked out
into the ice floes and returned
after forty days to proclaim
there is nothing to fear in the universe.

forty days after my cat died
i fear there is no end to this grief
but i know that is not right. i know
there is no end.

Bulgakov made a demon cat he called
БЕГЕМОТ whom we translate near the end
to say *do not be afraid of anything*
anywhere. that would be unwise.

i copied these lines into my play. it is the last thing i did
before my cat died. i did not know then he was dying. i fear
i have been unwise. made my own demon out of air.
i fear everything everywhere.

Rumi says grief opens up
to a greater and endless love.
Barks says the disappearance of one we love
leads to their being in everything after.

Rumi says shut up and look
with our empty eyes. Shams
the one he loved was everywhere.
a downy woodpecker dances

in the branches over my head
and never knocks on wood.
when the wind rips holes
through the leaves the bird

turns to the other side of the tree
and stays there. oh
Behemoth. oh demon.
take from me my eyes

that have been frozen
in the floe. take from me this fear
that i may be wise
that i may see my cat

in leaves
in the breeze
and in the woodpecker
which turns from it.

Thanks to Pevear & Volokhonsky for the work of translating the Behemoth
found in this poem and Bulgakov. Thanks to Barks for a lifetime of work and
Rumi. Thanks to you for reading.

LANGUAGE

Aref Moallemi

Under the deaf and the mute
language lives a plant's life
silence converses in sign

maybe the last living tongue
if they don't cut
their hands.

In their fingers
touch and speech are the same root.
A glass shatters in the grammar of their palms.
Blood hisses its story
in what tongue?

JEWELLED EYES

Gabrielle Munslow

I need to wake—
not from sleep,
but from the waxy quiet
that covers everything.

I stare at the spider.
It has made its home
between my IV pole
and the ceiling.

It doesn't move.
Neither do I.

Some days I breathe in verse,
but exhale dust.

The nurses say I'm stable.
I want to ask:
what does stable mean
in a world that spins?

I trace my veins like constellations.
They've collapsed and rerouted.
Like me.

There's music, far off.
Or maybe it's just the radiator.
I still feel the weight
of octagonal space.

SCIAGRAPHY

J Alan Nelson

Note how wrinkles hatch
and crosshatch the old man's face
as Durër engraves him in dust.
Note crumpled lines on his ears
bent by the straw cowboy hat
he bought at the gas station.
Note the stippled nose
broken by brass knuckles.
Note the eyes,
almost hidden by scarred skin,
stare hard.
Note his crossed arms.
How the last sunset lights him
as the dust storm cuts
like stropped blades.

HOW A WOMAN (REFUSES TO) IRON HER GRIEF

Denise O'Hagan

into submission, and make of it
a smooth and respectable thing:

no longer pulling him taut
across the ironing board, pouring
a thread of water into the beast,
nosing it around collar and cuffs, buttonholes,
plumping out shoulders, working
front and sides, demolishing
the shadow play of crease and furrow
until he's shining, sleek as stone,
immaculate as an idea

— no, today she plucks him straight
from the wicker basket on the chair,
slips him onto a coat hanger
and hangs him
on the door handle,
his crumpled torso pummelled
by the wind
from the open window, swinging
like a broken ghost

RED-CRESTED CRANES

Jan Owen

*After Utagawa Hiroshige's woodblock print: The Villages of Minowa,
Kanasugi and Mikawashima*

The far-off villages are clusters of yellow huts.
A crane has claimed mid-field,
another is one wingbeat away.

Outside my window
two honeyeaters frisk at the water bowl
and a grey fantail flirts in.
Ants winding their way down clinker bricks
confirm the safe mundane.
Till a sudden hush.
The sleek brown falcon drops down heavily
onto a gum branch, settles
and looks imperiously around.
I think of the two crows on a corbel
and the augury birds that sulked in their cage
the day Tiberius Gracchus strode towards
the public square and his assassins.

But you red-crested cranes can mean no harm.
You have flown so far since 1857,
migrating East to West
to light down on a century's porcelain:
English bowls, French vases, flacons,
demi-tasses and Russian screens.
Daily the wardens scattered seed for you

and only the Shogun's hunt could bag two birds.
Always too few of you, then as now.
Long life! Long life!

IN THIS SHORT LIFE THAT ONLY LASTS AN HOUR¹

Sarah Penwarden

We go in through the wardrobe
and it's suddenly winter, not yet
snow on the breeze but
groundfrost, pom-pom hats,
four degrees, the dark coming in
at 3.30 like the tide,
floorcreaky alehouses stale with ghosts,
warm winds blowing
through the Tube and a thousand
people blurring past.

A calendar month of four shows,
five galleries, two museums,
Oxford's Tudor library,
Hadrian's wall, windswept sheep,
dinners with nieces,
sibling Christmases,
four European cities, cobbles
on which I fell, a stranger
staring down at me with
sad brown eyes and helping me up.

Thirty days of Dickensian graveyards,
greenmossed churches, elbow-to-elbow with
Londoners staring at Bacon's screaming Pope
on a Wednesday afternoon,

dogwalking in the woods with crows
winging over trees, then past the
blue-lit Trafalgar tree and
along St Martins' steps, I talk
to my London niece and this short life
in that moment is perfect.

Wonder in London, but just a
calendar month, where time passes
in its own slipstream, and I'm
pulled back as it all falls
away; pushing through fur
coats in the wardrobe, stepping
out onto the floors of
the house, echoing
in its own stillness
as the door swings shut.

1. Emily Dickinson.

ALL THE TIMES I FAILED TO SAY I LOVE YOU

Rory Perkins

When I didn't want to leave my room and Mum said it would do me some good. When I felt the fear, anger, shame rising and made no attempt to stop it. When she pretended not to notice. When she went on pointing out birds and plants and how different the air was in the woods. How we were so lucky to have each other to talk to and all I could do was grunt.

When we saw a snake and I thought about killing it. Thought about destruction and what comes after. When I turned back and Mum was smiling, telling me how it was just a grass snake, harmless, friendly. When I told her to shut up and she did. When the silence turned into that familiar type of regret, the one that refused expression and brought with it a desire to be far, far underground.

When she ignored my outburst and asked if I was hungry, pulling out a protein bar. When she said she wasn't hungry even though I hadn't seen her eat all day. She put it in my hand and I snatched it away.

When I wanted to run into the forest and never come back. When I wanted to scream in her face for being so naive, thinking hunger was the only thing wrong with me. For not seeing my pain and the hopelessness of what surrounded us. When I saw death and decay. When instead she saw nature and growth.

When we ran out of words. When I wanted to fill the space between us with everything I'd been keeping a secret. How I was alone in the world and she was my only friend. How that was fine. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her to make up for all the times I'd failed.

When she put a hand on my shoulder and I flinched without thinking. When she bent down to re-tie my shoelaces and a baby muntjac scuttled across the path. When its mother ran past a second later, launched itself into the fawn and the two of them rolled into safety, embraced. When she stood back up and told me she loved me. When I grunted in return and hoped that that was enough.

YOU & I

Daniel John Pilkington

In spite of the infidelities
of language, we meet
where it hurts to remember.

Years as if an image
sharpened with absence:
the rainbow and the muscle.

WEDGE-TAILED EAGLE STANDING BY THE ROADSIDE

Eddie Popper

We drove along the snakeback road,
looped the ridge like ants on bark
or barkskin curled round ribbon gum.

Crest, curve, and ahead there's
a roo made into asphalt.
Fur fringed gold by five-thirty light.

An eagle stands beside the roo
with one booted leg hooked
around a twisted paw—the undertaker

looks at us—we slow the ute
in gravelspray around the fleshtracked
bend. The wedgie

is barkbrown feathered on black
a metre tall and stocky, rooted—
still until he swivels his head

to eye us as we drive.
We unwind a window,
meet the eagle's rocky gaze.

He appraises us. Distrust?
Why not—we're fast and loud
we stink of fuel and hot rubber

six inches and an engine of distance
from the mountainside. We can't linger
too much longer at the bend

so we roll the window closed
and rev. Passers-by, we pass.
This is the mistake of cars.

The undertaker watches
as we go, then turns
to steward the roo back home.

PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER AS A RACING YACHT

Joanna Preston

My father, adrift. Born far from the sea,
borne now on the siren call of seabirds.

But he has gathered up the sheets, folded
the hospital bed into a sailing boat, Bermuda-rigged

and weatherly, like the yacht he meant to race in
the year before he became my father.

Hear his slow breath deepen
as it fills, quickens the sails.

*

The walls are rolling back now, the tide
rising to meet him, streaming out to sea.

Timbers alive with surge and thrum,

his eyes already blind to all
but the map written of stars,

his whole body misted
with a fine salt sheen, waves

breaking over him like fever.

*

He is charting a course
through the fleet.

Watch,
they part to let him through.

*

My father, born so far from the coast,
gone beyond my seeing—just

the blade of his sail, falling
across the setting sun, the blazing sea.

*

The only man I have never not loved.
Even as he shipwrecks me.

THE MASALAI SHARK

Peter Raynes

As soon as night fell, I left my house and was sweating almost immediately with the evening's humidity. It was the wet season, and frogs were calling raucously from the nearby swamp. As I passed the marketplace dry lightning flickered down from the hills and in the flashes, I saw that people were still sitting and talking in the darkness. I crossed the deserted coast road, skirted the beach and went under the canopy of the copra plantation. It was a familiar walk, and I took it without thinking much about what lay ahead.

Under the trees, there was just blackness and it took several seconds for my eyes to adjust to see the pale coral footpath that led to the village. Along the route fireflies glowed like the cigarettes of unseen smokers but I met nobody until I came close to the village. Malala village lay on a point between a narrow bay and a lagoon. There were no more than twenty palm-thatched houses raised on posts over white sand. It was a short walk from the school, and I knew I was almost there when I could see the flames of cooking fires and the air became fragrant with wood smoke. As I passed the wide sandy space which the children used as a volleyball court, people called greetings from verandas or beneath houses, and I had to guess who they were since it was far too dark to see.

Nemsek's house was set slightly apart on the shore of the bay. As I arrived a familiar routine was followed. As usual he was sleeping so his niece brought a wooden chair out onto the sand, lit a kerosene lamp, and asked me to sit and wait. After a few minutes he appeared yawning, stretching and complaining that his niece should have woken him earlier. He instructed her to boil a pot of water, and this was the cue for me to produce the jar of coffee and a pound of sugar which was my contribution to the evening. We drank some strong, very sweet black coffee and exchanged news.

He sat back on the sand and said, 'Nemsek bilong mi, hapaste mipela holim mambu' ('My namesake, the day before yesterday we held the bamboo.') I listened carefully, unsure how much of this I was meant to take literally, and how much simply to accept. 'Some of us elder men met at my house. It was late at night. There had been a death in the village. We put the bamboo on the ground and each of us put a hand lightly onto it. One man spoke some words to the bamboo and the rest of us closed our eyes and waited. After a while the bamboo jumped up and took us outside. We all held on and followed it into the dark. It pulled us across the village and pointed to one of the houses. That's how we found out who had caused the death.' I asked whose house it had pointed to, but he just answered vaguely that they had wanted to know and now they knew and then he leaned closer to me and said quietly, 'Don't tell the Sisters about this, Nemsek, we don't want them getting cross with us.'

When we had run out of things to talk about, he slipped off to find divers. While I waited, I could hear the low sound of prayers interspersed with singing from the furthest houses where a statue of the Virgin had been carried in from a neighbouring village. There was the occasional whine of a mosquito close to my ear and nearby I could hear a man arguing with his wife. The walls here were thin blinds of bamboo and nothing stayed private for long.

After enough men and boys had gathered, the fire was built up, and we boiled more coffee to get warm before the dive. I recognised voices but could see no faces because the kerosene had run out. We sat and drank and they smoked and as usual Nemsek turned to me and said: 'Nemsek, why not rest from diving tonight? Let the others go. We'll stay by the fire, tell stories and eat when they return.'

I took this, as I always did, as concern for a guest who might get hurt. I said I was very happy to talk, but that the dive was something I enjoyed. So, the paddles and homemade spearguns were fetched.

On my first ever dive, there was a big surf on the point, and I made the mistake of cocking the borrowed gun before wading in. My two companions timed their entry perfectly and got to deeper water between

waves, but I was slower—wary of the coral cutting my feet—and the breaking wave flattened me. In the chaos of dark foaming water, the gun fired and the spear was gone.

I struggled up, only to be knocked over by a second wave. This time the gun itself was torn from my hand—the torch would have gone too had it not been tied to my wrist. I stood there alone in the shallows, soaked and empty-handed, and then turned back towards the village to explain what had happened.

I expected annoyance at the lost gun but instead they laughed. They said the children would find it washed up in the morning and invited me to drink coffee and warm myself by the fire.

That was some months before and now I was more experienced—confident enough to stop thinking about what lay beyond the torch beam. In any case, tonight the sea was as calm as black glass, and we went straight in from the sands. Once underwater I flicked off the torchlight and watched the blue flecks of phosphorescence swarm and dissipate as I swam. Then I tightened the rubber on my gun and dived down among the coral. Against the torch beam the reef became a world of muted colours, shadows and strange shapes. Here were the weird hemispheres of a brain coral and beside it a flock of delicate white parasols. I was floating over a landscape of spiky coral forests and dark plateaux with stretches of pale sand between. A ghost-white stingray skimmed out in front of me, the margins of its body rippling and disturbing a fine aura of sand as it moved. A cuttlefish hovered beneath me, its blunt shape pulsating like incandescence playing over hot coals.

All around me, the cones of my companions' torchlights angled up and down busily as they dived and surfaced, but I had yet to spear anything. Then I saw a green metallic flash from a fissure in the reef. I loosed the spear, surfaced for a gasp of air and then returned to find a surgeon fish wriggling fiercely. I had the difficulty of getting it through the narrow crevice without it coming off the spear while avoiding both its razor spines and the stinging coral around it. After three dives I surfaced and signalled with my torch. A boy paddled over and scraped

it off my spear and I heard with satisfaction the fish flapping against the bottom of the dugout.

I continued to search. Beyond a dome of coral, I saw two bleached-white needles twitching and felt a buzz of adrenaline, the kind that sharpens the eye and narrows everything else away. After surfacing for a big gulp of air, I dived deeply and edged around the dome. The large spiny lobster, undisturbed by my approach, was feeding from the mouth of its tunnel. In the torchlight its body was gem-encrusted, and its antennae and mouthparts were spread wide like the rigging of a sunken galleon. Experience had taught me that I had one shot, and I paused to take aim just below the eyes. But I released the trigger too quickly and the jolt fractionally deflected the spear so that it clinked against the coral while the lobster flashed back into its burrow.

I followed the edge of the reef spearing a few more fish as I went. On one side the reef rose into shallows while on the other it dropped into dark uncertain depths and I tried not to imagine what might come up from there. I had strayed some way from the others now and as I continued to search I heard a scraping noise behind me which I took for the boy's paddle hitting the reef in shallow water. I turned and panned the torch but instead of the canoe, I saw in front of me, perhaps ten feet away, the huge body of a shark inverted in the torchlight. For a moment I could do nothing but stare. Its gill slits and flabby brown sides wobbled as it rammed its powerful head into the coral. I swallowed a gulp of water and crept slowly backwards, never taking my eyes off the shark, but it was busy in the coral and seemed not to notice me. Very quickly I was in the shallows and stood on the reef up to my thighs in water. Then there was a loud splash in front of me, and I waited helplessly for what might happen next ... but there was only silence.

I flashed my torch for the canoe to come and after some waiting it arrived. To the boy's surprise I climbed in next to him and explained about the shark. 'Yes, a shark,' he said as though we were talking about a floating palm frond, 'I saw it earlier—there is nothing to fear.' He

ferried me back to where the others were still busily diving. Nobody seemed interested in the shark and so I got back into the water. I tried to continue but the image was too stark in my memory, so I swam to the shore and got out.

It was well past midnight, and the village was mostly sleeping. I had left the water at an unaccustomed place and for a moment was disoriented. I headed for the red embers of a fire and tripped over an elderly man, Edward, who had fallen asleep with his wife by the fire. I apologised and tried to explain that I have been diving and saw a shark, so I got out of the water at the wrong place. ‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘fish for breakfast—very good...’ and he drifted back to sleep. When I had found my way back to Nemsek’s house, he was sitting comfortably by the fire drinking coffee. His niece had already cooked a large pot of rice greased with coconut cream and had gathered dry coconut shells ready for cooking the fish. He poured coffee for me and listened to my story. ‘And you told me there were no sharks here,’ I ended indignantly. But he just laughed, ‘Ah, Nemsek, don’t worry!’ he replied, ‘Sometimes there are sharks but there are no bad sharks on our reef.’

When the others had returned, we helped them gut the fish. In the torchlight the dugout spilled out the colourful reef organisms like a pirate’s treasure chest. Soon there were fish, lobster and crab roasting on the fire releasing a delicious smell. An older man, Max, reminded the younger men that it was tabu for them to eat the crab, which he said would prevent them from fathering children. Afterwards, when we had eaten our fill, we sat chewing betelnut and telling stories. Nemsek looked at me and shook his head. ‘O Nemsek, I’m sorry for you now. You have become a PNG man and have forgotten your home. You’ll never go back. O, I am sorry for you, Nemsek’, and the others laughed.

‘When I am fishing with the net in the lagoon sometimes a shark comes,’ said Max. ‘Then I beat the water with my paddle to frighten it away. But sometimes if there are plenty of fish it comes back. And then a second time I splash the water to chase it away. But if it gets big-headed

and comes back a third time, then I take the net out of the water and go home because a shark that comes back a third time is dangerous.’ Nemsek turned to me: ‘The sharks you meet on the reef are harmless. If you leave them alone, they will leave you alone. I know—I grew up on this reef. But if you give him pain, if you try to shoot him with your spear ... then, O man! Then there will be payback ...’ he chuckled. I replied that I had seen plenty of smaller reef sharks before, but this one was much bigger—and that was what alarmed me. The boy from the canoe shrugged and patted a house post the thickness of my thigh.

Later I returned to the mission station with my share of the catch packed into a *bilum*. Nemsek walked with me to the edge of the village, insisting that I carry a cocked speargun on my way home: ‘Nemsek, it’s very late, you could meet *raskols* on the road—they are more dangerous than sharks,’ he cautioned. After I left him, I loosened the gun again. Walking in complete darkness with a cocked speargun seemed a surer way to find trouble. As I left the trees and crossed the beach, a thin moon had risen giving faint light. The ghost crabs scuttled away from me running so quickly that they looked unreal, like cartoon creatures. The school generator had long been turned off; the security guards were sleeping soundly and even the frogs were silent as I walked back across the campus to my house.

The following morning, I went to see the school printer to collect some work. He was a small man notorious for his prickly temper and this morning he seemed more than usually irritable. He was muttering impatiently to himself as he moved around a large printing machine, checking the settings and making small adjustments. Cautiously I asked if my papers were ready and fortunately, they were. He handed them to me proudly and his mood seemed to lighten so that we talked for a while about the latest station gossip. I mentioned the shark of the previous night and he lowered his voice. ‘You shouldn’t believe what these village people tell you. There are bad sharks too that come to the reef. I used to dive every night. I was a great diver; I used to get

so many fish we could hardly lift the canoe back onto the shore. My son would accompany me and then one night he said, 'Papa, you come quickly into the canoe, there is something in the water.' So, I got out just in time. It was dark but we could see its shape as it moved in a cloak of phosphorescence through the darkness. We watched in silence, frightened even to breathe—it was very big, bigger than the canoe. But it wasn't an ordinary shark—that was clear: it was a *masalai*, a spirit shark. Then I knew it was a warning,' he said.

MERLIN

Sharon Rundle

When a magpie spoke, I paid little attention. I thought I imagined it. Merlin, as I came to call him seemed a loner. Other magpies grouped together, calling out to each other but Merlin stayed aloof.

He followed me around my garden. He had reason to, of course, as I dug around in the dirt, bugs of all kinds popped up and scuttled away. Merlin was quick off the mark and enjoyed these snacks. He would look at me with a quizzical eye, as he waited for me to put on my gardening gloves and pick up my spade and trowel. If I took my time, he would fly up on to the roof of my garage and pace up and down, drumming on the corrugated metal making more noise than I would have expected. I would call out 'back to work', to let him know I was on the job.

When I took my coffee break, he would stand near my feet so as not to miss any biscuit crumbs. I enjoyed Merlin's company and found myself making comments aloud as if he was an interested listener. Every morning, I said 'G'day Merlin and how is Mrs Merlin? Where is she today?' Sometimes, he cocked his head then.

I didn't anthropomorphise him. I was well aware that I was a convenient food source. Nonetheless, I did choose to regard him as somewhat of a companion, after all he had chosen to spend his time with me.

I had stopped for my usual coffee break one afternoon when the sun was unusually warm. I sat on my garden bench to rest. I remember putting my coffee mug down on the ground. I must have dozed off. I heard a voice say, 'back to work'. I opened one eye and Merlin was standing by my right foot next to my almost empty coffee cup, looking at me, head cocked to one side.

'What did you say?' I knew that it was a trick of my imagination, but

I asked the question before I could stop myself.

Merlin put his head in my coffee mug and tipped it over. 'Back to work,' he repeated as he walked away from me. He turned and looked at me, as if to make his point.

'Right then.' I stood up, picked up my gloves, spade and trowel and went over to a bed of flowering azaleas that needed weeding. Merlin was right behind me.

'My name is Cam,' I told him. I'm not sure what I was expecting but there was no response from my feathered friend. He was busy preening.

On a calm morning a few days later, I raked up fallen leaves into a heap in a cleared space and burned them. Merlin appeared. He sat on a branch overhead watching. I was surprised as I thought smoke would put him off until I realised that insects were running out of the fire. He was soon on the ground busily snapping them up.

The smoke also attracted my neighbour who arrived on the scene with his muscle-bound dog.

I stood my ground. 'It's nothing to worry about.'

'Do you have a permit?'

'I don't need one for a tiny heap of dead leaves in a cleared space.'

'It could get away.' He warned. His dog growled.

'I have no intention of letting it get away; I will be right here until it burns out.'

I noticed that Merlin had flown up into the tree canopy and was peering down at us.

My neighbour followed my gaze. 'Bloody magpies!'

'You don't like magpies?'

'They are a thieving nuisance.'

'This one doesn't seem to be any trouble.'

'I'm sure it was one of a pair hanging around my place, stealing dog biscuits.'

'He's not one of a pair,' I assured him. 'This one is a loner.'

'Well, I shot the other one.'

'You shot a magpie!'

'Bloody oath, it's the only way to get rid of them, they're pests, stealing and dive bombing me and my dog.'

'This one has never dive bombed,' I protested.

'He's learnt his lesson then. You should thank me. They're bloody nuisance birds. I set the dog on them, but the mongrel ran off yelping when the birds attacked him.'

'So, you shot at them?'

'I did and one went down. Then the other one flew off.'

'There, the fire has burned itself out now,' I said pointedly.

He took the hint and turned to go. 'You're a fool if you encourage magpies, they're the Devil's birds.'

When he and his dog had disappeared from view, Merlin reappeared at my feet.

'Don't worry, he's a dick,' I said. I felt sorry for Merlin if what my neighbour had said was true.

'Dick,' Merlin repeated. I couldn't help but grin. 'You're a clever creature, aren't you? I'm sorry I asked about Mrs Merlin. He's a sad case.' I shook my head. Merlin blinked several times in quick succession then flew away.

The next time Merlin appeared I was going into the igloo, which protects my vegetables from possums, bush rats, mice, cockatoos and other predatory creatures. It had double strength shade cloth, a thick tarpaulin which I could use to cover and uncover it to adjust the amount of sun and rain which fell on my veggies, and to protect them from hailstones in a storm. I had reinforced it by putting metal sheets halfway up. There were very few bugs in there, but Merlin didn't seem happy when I shut him out. He flew up onto the domed roof and marched up and down.

'Haven't you got any other friends?' I called out to him.

Next morning, I awoke to a magpie carolling. Was it Merlin? I wasn't sure. I saw several other magpies from time to time, though none of

them approached me. I made coffee and watched as the rising sun painted orange streaks across the horizon. I never tire of the panorama of sturdy gum trees that surround my place, breathing life, and giving sanctuary to the array of abundant wildlife which inhabit this patch of bush that I am fortunate to share with them.

Dressed and restless, I took a walk before starting work in the garden. As I reached my neighbour's property, I noticed a magpie nest near the top of a tall eucalypt. It looked deserted. I turned and headed back to my place.

As I moistened and mulched the dry soil to protect the plant roots, I became aware that Merlin had arrived. The sun was high in the sky. Merlin fluffed his feathers and soaked up the warmth.

'G'day, mate,' I said to him. He was not much interested in mulching but he waited around for me to start digging when I prepared a neglected patch of ground for spring planting.

'Getting a good feed are you, mate?'

He paused and blinked at me. 'Mate,' he said.

'Well, if you won't use my name, mate will do,' I told him.

Later in the afternoon, I noticed Merlin perched on a high branch. 'Dick,' he called.

I shaded my eyes and looked over to see my neighbour and his meaty dog heading my way.

'What now?' I muttered.

'Bloody ducks are stealing the yabbies in my dam.'

'That's bad luck.' I knelt down to continue turning over the soil for the new garden bed.

'Don't be alarmed if you hear a few shots.'

'Is that really necessary?' I forced myself to look at him.

'Only way to teach them.'

'It's not legal and it's not safe.'

'I'm not asking your permission, I'm letting you know because you will likely hear gun shots.'

'I might call the police, let them know some hair-brained neighbour is taking potshots.'

'Best not to, unless you want a few stray potshots coming your way.' He strode off with dog in tow.

'Dick!' I yelled after him.

My neighbour spun around. 'What did you call me?'

'You are a dick. A complete ass. Why do you live here if you hate the wildlife?'

'Dick,' Merlin called out.

'What was that?'

'Must be an echo.'

He came at me then, pushed me to the ground. His pent-up anger with life in general erupted. His dog bared its teeth and growled, hackles rising.

Merlin began a new call, one I hadn't heard before, the same four notes over and over.

As my neighbour stood menacingly above me, magpies began to gather in the tree canopy. Merlin kept up his raucous call.

The magpies swooped. More and more of them seemed to appear. They ambushed my neighbour and his dog, divebombing with precision. The dog fled with magpies still chasing him. I felt sorry for the dog, it wasn't its fault that it had a dick for an owner.

My neighbour had his head between his knees as he waved his arms to fend off the magpies intent on bombarding him.

'Don't ever set foot on this place, again,' I warned him.

Magpies watched his every move as he walked off. They hung around for a while before flying away, until only Merlin remained. He looked at me and cocked his head. 'Mate'.

SUNDAY MORNINGS ARE MY BIGGEST FEAR

Adalain E. Sans

one morning, you will lie to me.

you will wake to the theft of white sheets and turn toward me. you'll grunt what was once a sweet, *you're such a violent sleeper*, now hardened into irritation. you won't kiss the corners of my mouth, and you won't trace the length of my spine. you will look once, only once, and decide i am no longer enough.

you will notice my hair first: its refusal to settle, its lack of pattern. you'll map the freckles scattered across my sun-warmed nose, then my flushed cheeks. your eyes will pause at the small hollow where my cheekbone slips into jaw, the place you used to kiss idly, reverently. you will see how my breasts have followed gravity's quiet instruction, how my collarbones rise like empty ledges where you once rested your head and breathed your *i love yous* into my skin.

the stretch marks and the faint surgical scars, things you once accepted without question, will sharpen under your gaze. when your hand drifts across my stomach—softer now, lower—something in your mouth will tighten.

you will try to forgive the crooked geography of my body. you will reach instead for who i am. and even that will feel heavier. i will talk too much. i will laugh too loud. i will be right too often. accountability, you'll decide, has never lived comfortably in me. you will wonder whether the moments you stayed were born of love, or simply endurance.

that sunday morning, you will make yourself coffee. you will stand at the balcony, smoke curling into the air, and stare at a day that asks nothing of you.

and for no clear reason—without betrayal, and no catastrophe—you will understand it plainly ...

you will not love me anymore.

THE LAST STAGE IS ACCEPTANCE

Shauna Shiff

'It's gonna be another scorcher today.' She wasn't talking to Myra, but to the woman on the other side of Myra's bed. The two wore the same collared shirt and stiff beige pants, and each held one of Myra's arms in their own. Myra felt her hand lifted and a damp sponge run up past her elbow and circle her armpit. They were talking as if Myra wasn't there, so Myra shut her eyes.

'When I stepped out at five this morning to get here, it was already a swamp. No sense in even bothering to try and do my hair.'

'Highs 140 again today. My husband has to drive to pick up my daughter from her work. The car's heat warning is broken so I told him to be careful.' Myra was near dozing, but when she heard 140, confusion roused her.

'You know they have those portable thermometer alerts for sale. They aren't as reliable, but in a pinch. You think the government would do something with all the heat strokes happening on the highway lately.'

'It just isn't safe.'

'Well, you'll be relieved when they get back. Last week there was another crash on Interstate 81. Someone passed out from the heat and drove straight into the opposite lane.'

'I know. Those poor people. There is talk of banning daytime travel.'

Myra heard the hiss of air being sucked through teeth. 'Well, I hate to see our freedoms taken away. But the world is getting hotter and hotter.' Myra felt a trickle of water escape the sponge and roll down her wrist. It dried on her skin too quickly. It *was* hot. *She* was too hot. Myra opened her eyes.

'Good morning, Ms Clark.'

'Where am I?'

'Golden Manors, same as yesterday.' Myra looked around the room. The walls were painted a light yellow, which once, might have been cheerful, but now was faded to a sickly pallor. There was a tall dresser with nothing on it, nothing to remind Myra where she was, and on the far wall a rectangle of sheet rock bolted in place.

The women helped Myra sit up. 'Let's wash your back.'

Myra felt shame make her hotter. 'I can wash myself. In my *own* bath.'

'Don't you remember Ms Clark?' The woman's voice was sweetly fake when talking to Myra, all the grit when she was chatting to her friend polished away, 'No one has baths anymore with the water restrictions. Sponge baths only.'

Myra thought back. She couldn't remember any such restriction. Her bathroom had a claw foot tub underneath a big window, and her mother always filled it to the brim with bubbles. One of the nurses helped pull Myra upright and she looked down at her hands and saw they were covered in liver spots, the fingers long and the knuckles overly large. She didn't recognise this room, didn't recognise her hands.

'Where is my mother?' Myra directed her question to the woman on her right. Her touch was gentle, and her voice didn't change pitch when she spoke to Myra.

'Your mother passed some years ago, Ms Clark.'

Myra opened her eyes wide to blink back tears, a trick she used when Bobby would stick his tongue out at her when Mrs. Edwards had her back turned, writing on the chalk board. 'How?' She couldn't help it. Tears started down her cheeks. She made to wipe them away, but they dried before they reached her chin.

The woman put her hand over Myra's and gave it one quick squeeze before dipping her sponge back into her bucket of water. 'It was during one of the early heat waves. Many elderlies died during that time. It was before we took measures to protect ourselves from the heat. Now don't cry, Ms Clark. You know there is danger in dehydration. No one can afford to cry anymore.'

Myra nodded, as if she understood. She couldn't remember her mother old. Her mother had auburn hair and wore sundresses, oversized glasses. She wasn't *elderly*. Any moment she was sure her mother would knock, and say *Rise and shine, sweetheart, you don't want to be late for school*. Myra pinched herself, eager to wake and see her mother. She stared, horrified, as a purple bloom coloured her skin.

'Now why would you go and do that?' The one Myra didn't like asked gruffly. 'She's going to have a whopper of a bruise. I don't need anyone asking why my charges are getting banged up, especially when they be doing it to themselves.'

'No one will be asking about this one.'

Myra was hot, too hot to think. She felt the same humiliation when Bobby spit in her milk carton. All the other children at the table had pretended not to notice. Myra hadn't cried, not at lunch, not in class and not on the bus ride home. At dinner, her mother set a cold glass of milk next to her plate, and Myra shoved it hard, splashing the table and carpet. *No milk!* she had screamed at her mother. Surely that was just last week. Myra remembered the hand movement, the quick, open palm hit. She did it again, toppling the mean one's water onto the floor.

'Look what you've done! Don't you know how expensive water is?'

Myra looked her in the eye as she had her mother, her mother's beautiful face dropped into disbelief that Myra would behave so. 'I don't care.'

'Well, I haven't washed your toes yet. You might care about that!'

'I don't.' Myra said, but in truth, she wasn't sure anymore. She wasn't sure about anything. Not even what time of day it was. The room was lit with an overhead light, but there was no other light, not even a window.

'I think I have enough water left to manage her feet. You'd better wipe that up so the suds don't streak the floor.' With a nod, the mean one opened the door. Before it was shut, a little too firmly, Myra saw a hallway, also dim, with a succession of overhead lights.

'Don't you worry about her. She's nice enough, she's just having a hard time of it. Aren't we all?'

Myra wasn't sure if she was supposed to answer, but she knew, hard time or not, she didn't like that lady. Since they were alone now, she admitted, 'I feel disorientated. Could you open the window? I can't seem to wake up. My mother always says seeing the sun helps.'

'That might have been good advice then, but not today, Ms Clark.' She jutted her chin towards the drywall. 'That was the window. Nobody got windows no more. The sun will heat this room up in no time. It's best to stay out of the sun.'

Myra and her dog spent all afternoon on the lawn, rolling in the grass. Myra would stare as long as she could at the sun, then close her eyes, counting the bright spots on her retina until they disappeared. The sun never hurt her. Who would give up the brightness of flowers or the fluff of clouds? Or that delicious, toasted feeling of warm skin? Myra realised this woman was no better than the last, trying to trick her. 'You're lying to me.'

'No ma'am, I wouldn't lie to you. The city has gotten hotter, so it's been a while since anyone went out into the daylight when they didn't have to. Most try to conduct all their business at night. Of course, not everyone has that luxury.'

'Well, why don't you move out of the city? Live near a lake where you can cool off? Mother always says a swim is the best remedy for the heat.'

'Oh Ms Clark, all the lakes are near gone.'

That couldn't be. But the memory of plunging down to the sandy bottom, eyes screwed shut, her hair floating around her did seem far away. When was the last time she had gone swimming? Or been submerged in water? When *was* the last time she had seen the sun?

She was almost afraid to ask. 'What else is wrong?'

'Oh, all is fine Ms Clark. This is just the new normal. You have to be careful to not be wasteful. But there are things we all miss. I can remember on a hot summer day walking down the sidewalks in my sundress, the feel of the heat on my shoulders, and how good the bubbles of Coke were tickling my throat. What I wouldn't give for a Coca Cola. No one would waste water now making soda.'

'I like Pepsi.' Myra said, and the woman laughed.

'Pepsi was fine too, Ms Clark.'

Myra looked at the sheetrock. The longer she stared, the more she realised she knew each silver screw blocking the sun. There were 24 total, eight on each long side and four a piece on the horizontal sides. She had lain in this bed and counted those screws before.

'How long have I been here?'

'Before I came on. I think you were one of the first before the heat took over the world. That's probably why you don't realise how different everything is now. Residents don't go outside. It's too dangerous. When the sun hits you, it feels like a torch has found you. And at your age, well ... it's better to stay indoors.' The woman wrung the sponge so that the last bit of water, dirty from Myra's sweat, dropped into her bucket.

The door to the room open and the other nurse returned, her face still sour. Her bucket was refreshed with a half an inch of water. 'I brought more water to finish your toes. Are you happy now?'

Myra was not happy. But she looked at the water and realised that she was so very dry. Her skin itched for moisture. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the bucket, and watched it cross the small room to her bedside. Finally, Myra finally looked from the water to the woman, and in a small voice tight with understanding, said thank you.

SHELVED

Ian C Smith

I remember summer's end, days like these. Campground near-deserted, a slight waft of smouldering rubbish hovers like old grief when I wake, my mattress musty, all that shed skin. A coiled, red-bellied black snake as still as a sculpture guards the toilets, so I piss on leaves and sticks, ashes and sand. Beachcombing—a late love—escorted by seagulls, I see Pacific gulls circling, then, as I draw nearer, the body of one, iridescent orange fishing line disappearing down its gullet. As these majestic birds tend their dead a blue boat ploughs its arrogant wake. Here on Bass Strait beaches life is cheap for creatures. On beaches south of Calais, and elsewhere, where people smugglers rule, human death is just as cheap.

Ozone-drunk, listening to *Down by the Salley Gardens*, I squint through a dusting of midges. I read somewhere that insect swarms indicate the cleanest air. Wave-wind hums like time's passage. A pelican pair fish from far-off rocks. The space station orbits continents, islands, ghost wrecks, sailors, my submerged footprints, but those astronauts can't see my hurt heart, or know this forlorn emotion that wells up, a ravening for the lost raw reek of youthful anticipation. Dozens of minuscule crabs scuttle across my path. Thinking of *Prufrock*, and my own thin skin, on tiptoe, I navigate their fragile shells.

Days once seemed longer, fuller. Now, though emptier, they bow my shoulders like a penitent's. A reclusive existence after a tumultuous life is logical. It is mostly free from fresh rancour, but memory persists like bloodstains. Believing my life meaningful when part of a family, I hefted a heavy axe splitting harvested fallen timber to stove length, loading it in a wheelbarrow to stack in smoky air, the days shortening. I found a fake bone buried in our dog's favourite spot, her last gift that left me weak with loss after that wheelbarrow served as her bier. This

was beneath the lemon-scented gum that grew ever lankier through family photos. Now I am reminded of one of my favourite book titles: *We Don't Live Here Anymore*.

We, then I, walked a circular route, stony farmland, gullies either side where fox spoors triggered various dogs' gleeful unsuccessful chases. On the track, past a sinkhole that flooded after heavy rain, and wild animals' lairs, were numerous landmarks I had storybook named. The actions of my vexed cabal-like kin swirled around my mind: wrong assumptions, their umbrage taken embraced to fester. As I trawled what I realised had been their secret cries and whispers, that walk became a retrospective of camouflaged lies and miserable betrayal. Sad-eyed steers, sometimes kookaburras, witnessed my bewildered heartbreaking disappointment, wounded regret I can't caulk. These faux pilgrimages began or ended with sorrow borne on a step hill below our windswept perch in the Gippsland Hills. *Never Let Me Go* is another favourite title.

Earlier, together, we travelled, just the two of us out there in the whirling world bunking in unlikely places, fizzing with effrontery. This was pre-social media, even pre-phones, sort of. I think I vaguely imagined my future as movie perfect, death just an abstract drama. In Liverpool, a city the colour of lead then, cracked mosaic tiles and dirty acid-etched side-panelled windows decorating our entrance suggested an elegant past. Beyond lay a wide hallway, a staircase, shadows. We slept behind the first door and presumed others did further along that hallway, their doors closed. A weak electric bulb hung from our high ceiling. Upstairs were more rooms, but we never knew other wraith-like tenants. We also kept to ourselves. We heard TVs, sparrows mounting in the guttering making light of the heart's longing, soft footfalls, whispered muttering, keys scraping in locks, and water gurgling along pipes seeking its way behind all those closed doors back where we once dreamed.

Returning by light aircraft to my wee cottage in a mainland town I recall exhausting myself reshelving hundreds of books, reaching high,

then down on my knees. Walled in by boxes of books, considering an adage, I mind-joked that I was an ageing knight downsized to a cardboard miniature castle. I thought of characters glimpsed again from my intensive reading past like faces framed briefly in a passing train's windows. Many of those characters lived edgily, doing their best, foundering, heartsore after spiralling bizarre events had forced them to their knees. Their eternal yearning, mistakes, enduring love, touched my heart. In Liverpool I traced a missing aunt who ditched her husband to marry bigamously. Buoyed by possibility, a distant beckoning from unheard voices, their past rites, led me to meeting a dear cousin, and more. Now, still gripped by life but no longer throbbing with it, I peer down at an oil rig, ideas forming. The deceptive sea looks the same. This vast Earth continues to turn.

THE TIME MACHINE

Matthew Southwell

The monitors kept their steady vigil over me, counting down in beeps and green spikes while tubes mapped every available vein. Pete entered the room carrying a large box, placing it on the chair in the corner.

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘We always talked about building a time machine,’ he tapped the top of the box. ‘So here it is.’

I stared at Pete, then the box, certain this was not the moment he, a plumber, had cracked time.

‘There are some rules though. It only takes you back to 1996,’ Pete said. ‘Specifically, Christmas day at our place, and you can’t change anything,’ he gave a rueful smile. ‘Close your eyes and don’t open them until I say so.’

Closing my eyes I tried remembering that day, almost thirty years ago. The decades had bleached the images, leaving only silhouettes and vague outlines: A Christmas tree, presents from the Salvation Army, the television flickering with replays of *Carols by Candlelight*, the sound warped and distant as though the TV was under water. I heard Pete fussing with the box, packaging rustling, cables uncoiling.

‘Here we go,’ Pete said. ‘Keep your eyes closed.’

I heard Pete press a button and the machine whirred to life, crackling smothered the beeps of the monitors. I heard a chord. It sucked me into my bed, the images in my head swirled, the haze lifted, the colours were bright. The smell of honey caramelising on ham, hot chocolate wafting from the kitchen. The scratch of new jumpers being pulled from tissue paper. The magpie’s song from the backyard which I’d forgotten. Mum in the corner, steam rising from her tea, the way she half-smiled when she thought no one was looking. For one day of the year, we didn’t feel

poor. I drifted around the house, to my bedroom, into the kitchen, the hallway littered with *Matchbox* cars and amputated figurines.

As I floated through the hallway back to the loungeroom, the room tilted, spun, then there was darkness. I heard Pete lift the needle from the vinyl, the sound of music replaced by soft white noise, the monitor beeps reclaiming the space. I opened my eyes, returning to the beige walls of the intensive care unit. I looked at Pete and smiled. 'Play it again.'

A DECENT VIEW

James Stanwix

Wings above the Moreton Bay Fig stretch. Green and levelled with the sky, it's why you bought the place. You croon to praise birds' allegoric form: feather-ticks emboss a cloud that's caught the belly of the eve, the rubbed pink set. Sometimes, you, we, luck and catch the tense and napping time before the shifts beyond your fence—the Balance Bird beak-poised across the suburb's print. When Tuesday/Sunday's been a blue day, cloudless, hinting at a mist of scent before the night shut sleep, you, we, stand behind the wilting jasmine, look towards the wings and sense the day push close and close, near a total stainless slate, the blue and rainless, cloudless earth that funnels right into the Fig. Sudden dark and all the doors come shut. You blind the windows with a curtain weaved to block new light: pausing dawn's first overstep, ensuring dusk is what you keep. Your cat is in; you all ate early in the setting part. The scene which we just witnessed now just wings beneath your scalp. Then all is settled in its frame, and we'll recall, pulling the picture from the drawer, you'll say it's why you bought the place.

TIMBER TRAIL

Samn Stockwell

One carries the other past hazards, our arms around each other, hardly knowing which one is limping.

We keep going into the woods, a path we don't recognise. We pass the remains of a car from a century ago, wrapped deep in an oak tree.

Half my life (but more) I carry a notebook filling with drawings and words—not the same words, but words for this section of the trail.

We take our clothes off by a pond and sleep under the wild night. It doesn't seem terrifying. The words I write about dreams and the words I write about monsters—and your words for the memories left us—how much I misunderstand.

DIPPER DAY

RL Swihart

1.
Before sleep and facing north, Lucian sings
his chorus with the night:

*I know you're up there, out there. Maybe just
before sunrise?*

2.
While Lucian's curled up inside his tent, a fantastic crew (assorted
masters from the 'naturalist van' who helped bring divinity
to the Boot) is smuggled in to set the scene and bring
you to him—if only minutely, in a roundabout way,
and consub not trans

3.
Scene:

The creek (invisible on the map): unpolluted and running
(bubbling) through the dusty village (sleeping quietly
before the coming of the white season)

The tent: upstream from the village, and just off the mountain
road named after the 'sainted' dome: about twenty feet
above the creek, on a flat patch of dirt under
a stand of pines

The 'chase' (in the Old French sense of *chace* = 'hunting ground'): three icy cold 'stairsteps' of troubled water (with crowding trees on either side): about a ratio of 1:200 between risers and treads. Risers are makeshift dams or 'trips' (comprised largely of old rotting logs and rocks). Treads are mostly water but have minor trips too (mostly scattered rocks of different shapes and sizes). None of the treads are perfectly true to the horizontal (because of the changing slope). For easy reference, I'll number the treads from downstream to up: 1, 2, 3. The rest of the creek is beyond our ken

4.
Dipper Day:

Slice of Time and Tread #1 (not wasted but wanting):

Slice of Time and Tread #2 (not wasted but wanting):

Slice of Time and Tread #3 (time like no time):

You with the body that lives in shadow
You with the sweet song above the noise
You with the white stars flashing above the eyes

I have a camera, you have a mission

I will follow follow follow (as long as it takes)

TWO DAYS

Yucheng Tao

The first day, the snow thickened.
Near the shelters
we covered our ears,
hearing each name shattered
into syllables by gunfire.

Snow purified the monstrous trees,
branches tangled like Medusa's hair,
yet could not cool the passing bullets.
She couldn't stand,
lost her chance to pray,
shot by the roadside—
my people.

We did not yet know
the correct spelling of her name.
We only watched
snow cover her curled body.

The first day, no time
to hide from bullets
in twisted thickets.

The second day,
Medusa's hair turned red,
like the ash in our palms,
stained with our companions' blood.

We wiped our eyes clean,
and realised only the juice of the fruit
born from Medusa's hair in the trees,
white as a shroud, running into the ruin.

The snow never fell
where we were standing.

But gunfire stayed in our ears.
Each name echoed.

NEBULOUS

Rebekah Teller

Make my heart explode all over this bed so my skin and bits of ribs and lungs and blood cover the sheets. Then you'll see how nothing was inside me from the start, so there was nothing to be lost after all. I must be a black hole the way light keeps coming toward me like it can't bear to stay away. I miss that spark that lit me up, back when I felt like more than stardust floating helplessly through space. What is this place, where hope can't hang around and there's no air to breathe?

PATIENCE

Leanne Todt

My breath held.
Yours repeating the song
to answer theirs. Torn
offerings outheld and still
waiting, and only
your hope or knowing
patience

until the first bird takes from your open hand
as you knew they would.
Then from mine.
Barely touching. Their hearts
rapid though near weightless.

I never asked you how you knew. If you knew.

In time, others come.
Without your call.
They become the ones waiting.

LETTER TO LORD ELGIN

Isi Unikowski

*‘The piece has caused much trouble in many ways, and I was forced to
be a little barbaric’*

— *Giovanni Battista Lusieri. Works supervisor at the Acropolis*

‘I suppose I must have been unaccustomed to the noise.
As I reclined against the cool marble it seemed
that the chisels and picks were hacking at the light itself.
My very teeth shook at the sound of metopes prised
from their friezes by navvies wielding their crowbars.
Centaur reposed where they had been left, their faces turned
upwards as if peering into a sky as brittle as plaster.
Festive processions seemed to pause at our intrusion,
cups and grape-clusters held back from the hands of the priests.
In the clarity of that light, in that cauldron of an afternoon,
what had been created whole was now broken.
It was as if we were hearing, in a desert somewhere far away,
the sound of great statues falling. My lord, you will be pleased to hear
I encouraged the workers by asking them “what are you stopping for?
We are only waging war against forgotten empires.”’

IMMOBILISED

Louise Wakeling

face mask, pinned down, snapped into place.
no choice in the matter—you breathe
through lime-green plastic moulded to your skull,
deep yoga breaths to stem the panic seeping
at your borders. thoughts of Madame Curie

bubble to the surface, but you tell yourself
these are tiny, measured doses ... dismiss
each vagrant thought, practise stopping short
of panic. don't go there. you know
you can wave, kind nurses will let you out

you've got this. you can't sink to the floor
wanting to scream, like that time
on the London Underground
when the train froze, unaccountably,
in a dark tunnel. there are worse things—

water-boarding, Russian gulags. this is
no big deal. this will heal ... think positive thoughts,
not panic buttons, banish submersibles spiralling
to the ocean floor, coffin-lids descending.
inhale slowly, exhale. still and grounded

somewhere above, Adagio in G minor
sounds its faint ethereal notes. an image
hovers in your mind: a downed pilot, comrades

gathered on a makeshift airstrip, a burning piano
you can see even with your eyes closed

only later do you think of room 101,
the rat-cage strapped to Winston's face.
you're grateful it didn't occur to you
at the time, face crammed into mesh,
a rapier of fire lunging at your skin

rogue cells feint and parry. tactics, tactics—
you grasp the round blue toy, steady your hands,
a fencer on the counter-attack. you're going for gold,
powering through destruction and rebirth,
Ouroboros, a dragon biting its own tail

AGE, 83

Allison Whittenberg

The bells tolled at noon in the town of Caraway. The sound reverberated through the bones of its residents, reminding them all of a hushed truth: they would all live 83 years, exactly. When the bells rang once more at the hour of their death, it would be an inevitable release.

Horatio Grey stood beneath the huge oak tree at the centre of Caraway, staring up at its many twisted branches. He listened to the gentle hum of life and the children ran past. Their laughter filled the air as if they never questioned whether they understood how the stars aligned.

Every year, the townsfolk celebrated their births and their years, counting down the days as they approached 83: The Age of Completion. But as Horatio turned 60, a thought began to gnaw at him.

‘What is the point?’ he asked, more to himself than anyone in particular. ‘Why 83? Why not 84? Or 99? Or 101? Why must we all meet this fate so early, and why so precisely?’

Juno Day, his wife, looked at him with pity. She had heard this many times before. ‘Every year, you always ask the same questions, Horatio,’ she said, taking a sip of her tea. ‘But you know the answer. It’s to keep us from the pain of not knowing. Of wondering. If we all die at the same age, there’s no fear. No panic. No uncertainty.’

Looking out over the town, Horatio frowned. People walked with order and calm as though their lives were on a conveyor belt that led only one direction. No rush, no haste. No attempts at defying time. It was different for Horatio, that gnawing feeling continued to claw at him.

‘Is it just?’ he asked. ‘To choose the exact time we will die? To strip us of the mystery of life?’

Juno considered his words carefully. She was older than him by a few

years and had long since made peace with the calendar that governed them, considering the 83-year rule as a gift.

‘Justice?’ she repeated, as if it was a foreign word. ‘Justice is peace of mind, Horatio. Living without fear. And certainty. It’s better than worrying, drowning from all the worrying that we can’t get everything done.’

‘Is it a blessing or a curse?’ he asked his thoughts aloud. Was this certainty truly liberating? Or was it merely a cage with a golden door?

His own father had died at 83. A peace, a calm, a sleep. His mother, too. She embraced her 83rd year with content. She smiled, accepting this surrender. This emptiness, where the light once shone.

Horatio was consumed by it. This suffocation of consciousness. The lack of a doubt: his life would end. Age, 83. That every year past 82 would be filled with a kind of grace, yes, but also a creeping inevitability. He wanted more. He wanted the thrill of possibility, chaos.

One evening, as the sun set in hues of lavender and orange, Horatio visited the town’s Minder. The Minder was a woman who never aged, her face the same at every moment in time. She held the knowledge of the ancient laws that governed Caraway. She promised to the first generation that everyone would die at 83. She kept the calendar.

‘Minder,’ Horatio began, his voice unsteady as his thoughts, ‘Why, why must we all die at the same age? Why can’t we be in control? Why not let us have some freedom? Why can’t we live as long or as little as we want?’

The Minder gazed at him with an unreadable expression, like the still waters of a forgotten lake.

‘It’s our way, Horatio?’ she said, her voice, unyielding. ‘Can’t you see? Do you not comprehend the relief of it all? Certainty. Tranquillity. Here, death is not a thief in the night. Death is a kindly friend who greets you at the door, precisely when we are ready.’

‘Says who?’

‘It’s right. The world outside our borders is full of chaos. People living

in anxiety. Fear, battling time. Our society is saved from that.'

He stepped closer. 'Why must we all follow the same path? There is no justice in that. We are all not the same.'

The Minder's gaze softened. 'Justice lies in the peace it brings. Injustice is in the world where no one knows when their life would end. Each and every moment would be haunted by the possibility of the unexpected. Here you have time for love and reflection, and you clearly know when that time will end. There's no angst. No desperate striving for unreachable dreams. Here in Caraway, we know. We know the end will come at the perfect time. We do have freedom. Freedom from fear. You have to see the logic in this.'

'There is peace in knowing when your story ends but logic, Minder, here, feels like a trap.'

'Peace is here. Beauty too. If you can't see it, Horatio, if you don't know that you are the one who has the power, not time, not death. You—'

The age of 83 was a gift, a liberation from the fear of the unknown. And yet ... something burned inside him, an unquenchable longing for uncertainty.

Horatio shook his head. 'No, I don't see it, Minder.'

The light faded from the sky as Horatio turned and walked back to the centre of Caraway. Behind him, the bells rang calm, inevitable.

Eighty-three. Or after. Or before.

When all is said and done, maybe it wasn't the number that mattered.

An indecisive man once said with utter certainty:

The rest is silence.

A MORNING STROLL DOWN ROSCOE STREET, BONDI: A VIGNETTE FOR CHARMIAN CLIFT

Jena Woodhouse

Glimpsed from the crest of Roscoe Street
the sea, an almost iris band,
a blindfold between sky and sand
as down you trundle with the pram.

What does the future hold for you?

Clasping Martin by the hand
you notice the horizon, strung
taut as a wire between headlands;
how inscrutably the sea weaves
labyrinthine blue on blue,
where little fish like silver leaves
emerge from neptune-nurseries
to nibble algae from the weeds
and quicken your imaginings,
as down you plummet, faster now,
yearning to feel weightless, new,
impatient for the rendezvous
as an arrow for the bow—

*

I'm walking with my first grandchild,
enchanted Evie, one year old:
braking with my calves and knees,
not to speed down Roscoe Street—

the steep decline an invitation
to admire the sea, the sky,
clear today as she looks up
into my eyes, and I gaze back:
both of us feel wonder
at the presence of the other,
in this azure light of Bondi,
on this perfect summer day—

Note:

This poem was written when my daughter and granddaughter lived at Bondi, and submitted to *Meniscus* before the unconscionable atrocity of 14 December 2025, which can never be expunged from memory, nor should it be. That it's now become a trauma site is utterly alien to the spirit of that place. And of any place. The lives of the innocent children mentioned in this poem are affirmations of the sacredness of every life, and a wish for all people to be able to walk, freely and without fear or threat of harm, in the light of the sun, the moon and stars, at Bondi and wherever they choose to be.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Geoffrey Aitken writes award-winning poetry on unceded Kauria land, with a 'lived experience disability'. Published [AUS]; [UK, US, HR, IND, RS, CAN, NG, FR, CL & CN]. Recently, *Bipolar Poetry* [AUS]; *Ultramarine Literary Review* [CL]. Shortlisted 'Rough Diamond Poetry Prize'; *underscore Magazine* [US]. Soon, *Meniscus* [AUS]. Nominated 'Best of the Net 2022'.

Bianca Ambrosino is a somewhat reclusive poet from Richmond, Virginia. Her unique, autistic perspective illuminates universal themes with startling connections and vivid synaesthesia. She spends her time writing, walking outdoors, raising her children, and reading countless academic papers / scientific publications (for fun).

JS Apsley is the pen name of a noir and mystery author based in Glasgow, Scotland. See www.jsapsley.com

Maria Arena resides on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. She has three published novels *Mira Falling*, *Sisterhood*, and *Shroudeaters*. Her short works of fiction have appeared in *The Society of Misfit* stories, *Tincture*, *Paragon Journal*, and *Antipodean SF*. When she is not writing, Maria teaches creative writing for the University of Southern Queensland. For more information about Maria and her work, please visit www.mariaarena.com.au

Sandra Arnold is a novelist, short story, flash fiction and nonfiction writer. Her work has been broadcast on national radio, published and anthologised in New Zealand and internationally and has won and been short-listed for several awards. She has a MLitt (High Distinction) and PhD in Creative Writing from Central Queensland University, Australia. With poet David Howard she co-founded *Takahē* literary journal and was its fiction editor from 1989 to 1995.

Emma Ashmere (she/her) lives on unceded Bundjalung country. Her short story collection *Dreams They Forgot* (Wakefield Press, 2020) follows her novel *The Floating Garden* (Spinifex Press, 2015), shortlisted for the SPUNC Book of the Year. Her writing appears in *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Griffith Review*, *Short Australian Stories*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and (forthcoming) *Island*.

2026 represents **Peter Bakowski's** 44th year of writing poems. In 2025 Hunter Publishers published a full-length collection of new poems, titled *Necessary Wonder* (Hunter Publishers, 2025).

John Bartlett is the author of twelve books, of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. He was winner of the 2020 Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize and his memoir, *Love and its Penalties*, was just published by Walleah Press.

Mitchell Batavia is an Associate Professor of Physical Therapy at NYU. He has published 5 books, numerous educational cartoons, and several short literary works in *Meniscus* literary journal (How Joe Turned on me), *Slackjaw* (The Uninsured Diners), *Midsummer Dream House* (Morpheus and the Noisy Manticore), *Francis Taylor* (A Brother's Memoir), *Little Old Lady Comedy* (The Vegas Buffet Discount) and *Hektoen International* (Wheeled chairs throughout the Ages).

Jason Beale is a writer from Melbourne whose poems have appeared in *The Canberra Times*, *Meniscus*, *Quadrant*, and *StylusLit* as well as in the anthologies *Grieve*, *Poetry d'Amour* and *Poetica Christi*. In 2023 a chapbook titled *Be Quiet About Love* was published by Ginninderra Press, and in 2024 he was a finalist in both the Poetica Christi Press and Flying Island Poetry Competitions.

Noah Berlatsky (he/him) is a freelance writer in Chicago. You can find a list of his poetry collections and chapbooks, as well as his writing on politics and culture, at his newsletter: www.everythingishorrible.net

Lawrence Blake is an emerging writer residing in Toronto, Ontario. He has served both overseas and domestically with the Canadian Armed Forces as an infantry officer, and presently is the Deputy Commanding Officer (XO) of a local light infantry Regiment. He completed graduate studies at the University of New Brunswick, and undergraduate studies at Trinity College, UofT.

Samantha Boswell gardens in Boorloo / Perth, Western Australia. Recent work appears in *Creatrix*, *Dust Poetry Magazine*, *Poetry of Flight*, *Screaming: Beyond Borders*, and *Wild Whispers Poetry Magazine*. She is learning to play the piano.

Margaret Bradstock has nine published collections of poetry, including *The Pomelo Tree* (Ginninderra Press, 2001; winner of the Wesley Michel Wright Prize), and *Barnacle Rock* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2013; winner of the Woollahra Festival Award, 2014). Editor of *Antipodes* (2011) and *Caring for Country* (2017), Margaret's latest collection is *Alchemy of the Sun* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2024).

Sharon M Carter is a poet and visual artist originally from England who lives on Washington State's Olympic peninsula. She retired from a career working in non-profit health care systems. Her work has been published in the *Amsterdam Quarterly Review*, *Ars Medica*, *Raven Chronicles* and *One Art*. Books: *Quiver* (Tebot Bach, 2022); *Ekphrastic Pastiche*, drawings and poetry (2024); *Mimosas at Sunset* (MoonPath Press, 2026).

Lisa Collyer is the author of two poetry collections, *Gold Digger* (2025) and *How To Order Eggs Sunny Side Up* (2023; shortlisted for The Dorothy Hewett Award), and both published with Life Before Man Books. Her personal essay, 'Prolonged Exposure', is published in the anthology *Women of a Certain Courage* (2025, ed. Bron Bateman) with

Fremantle Press. Her poem, 'The Grape Pickers' was shortlisted for the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize (2025).

John M Davis currently lives in Visalia, California. His poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Descant* and *The Ekphrastic Review* in Canada; *The Comstock Review*, *The West Trade Review*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Constellations* and *Reunion: The Dallas Review* in the United States; and *Meniscus*, in Australia. *The Mojave* (2005), a third chapbook, was published by the Dallas Community Poets.

Elizabeth Dear is a UK-based writer currently studying for a Creative Writing BA at Falmouth University. She writes character-led fiction driven by emotion, tension, and unexpected twists. Her work explores grief, identity, and fractured relationships, often blending realism with moments of darkness or the uncanny. She is drawn to stories that leave a lasting emotional impact.

Cat Dixon is the author of *What Happens in Nebraska* (Stephen F Austin University Press, 2022) along with six other poetry chapbooks and collections. She is a poetry editor with *The Good Life Review*. Recent poems published in *The Literary Underground*, *Nude Bruce*, and *The Rye Whiskey Review*. She works full time at a funeral home and teaches creative writing part time at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

Angela Edward is a Sydney-based writer born in Beijing and raised in Auckland. She writes about memory, distance, and what remains after. Her work stays with what people carry, even when they leave. She is currently completing her memoir, *Two Keys*.

Donna Faulkner lives in Christchurch, New Zealand. Free spirited and unconventional, she came to the business of writing later in life. She's published in *The Madrid Review*, *Alchemy Spoon*, *The Bayou Review*, *300 Days of Sun*, *takahē: Hua/ Manu*, *Windward Review*, *Havik*, *New Myths*, and many others. Her poetry book *In Silver Majesty* was published by the UK-based *erbacce* press in 2024. Instagram: @lady_lilith_poet X@nee_miller; Website: <https://linktr.ee/donnafaulkner>

Federico Federici, physicist and conceptual artist, has works in *3:AM Magazine*, *Jahrbuch Der Lyrik*, *Sand*, *Poet Lore*, *Diagram*, and *Art in America*. His latest book is *I[[c]onic Log* (Calamari Press, 2025).

Penina S Finger was born and raised in Los Angeles, California, then dropped out of college, and travelled for years, pausing to raise a child. Now living in Portland, Oregon, she continues to make art and write. Her work mostly explores origins and human connections against the backdrops of daily life and global turmoil.

Marcelle Freiman's verse memoir is forthcoming with Puncher & Wattman later this year. Her most recently published volume of poetry was *Spirit Level* (P&W, 2021), and

her work has appeared in anthologies and journals including *Cordite*, *Westerly*, *Meanjin*, *Meniscus*, *Mascara*, *StylusLit*, *Oystercatcher* and *Australian Poetry Journal*, amongst others. She is currently an Honorary Associate Professor at Macquarie University.

Kim Fulton is a poet and fiction writer from Aotearoa. Her writing has appeared in publications including *Landfall*, *Mimicry*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *Mayhem*, *takahē*, *Stasis Journal*, and *Blackmail Press*. In 2020, she published her first book of poems, *I kind of thought the alpacas were a metaphor until we got there*.

Nick Gadd is a writer of poetry, novels, memoir and essays, based in Naarm.

Jim Gill is an autistic poet and writer living and working on Gumbaynggirr country. His writing can be found in *Verandah*, *Oystercatcher Two*, *Dark Poets Club*, *Varnish*, and *From Eternity To Here* (Stringybark Stories). Jim holds a PhD in archaeology and currently works as a primary teacher. He is slowly writing a novel.

Anne-Sophie Givry is a French author working in contemporary and experimental literature. Her writing focuses on the fractures and shadowed zones of the intimate—particularly dynamics of domination, inherited violence, and post-traumatic alienation.

Katherine Heneghan is an Irish-Australian writer, living in Naarm (Melbourne). Her work has been published in *The Age* and *The Australian* newspapers, and *Best Australian Poetry* (Black Inc, 2009).

Geoffrey Heptonstall's sixth volume of poetry, *The Truth on the Tongue*, is published by Cyberwit (2025).

Danielle Hubbard lives in Kelowna, BC, Canada, where she works as the CEO of the Okanagan Regional Library. Her poetry has appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *Grain*, and *Prairie Fire*, among other places. When not working or writing, Danielle spends as much time as possible hiking, cycling, and exploring the Okanagan Valley.

Susan J Hudson is a former journalist who now does communications for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her short fiction has been published in *Sky Island Journal*, *Hoxie Gorge Review*, *Gramercy Review*, *The Argyle Literary Magazine*, and *Quibble Lit*. In March, she won the History Through Fiction manuscript prize for *Flintlocks at Dawn*, her historical novel-in-progress set in colonial Virginia on the cusp of the American Revolution.

Sarah Hunter is an emerging writer from Meanjin/Brisbane, Australia. She has a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in Writing, and Screen and Media Studies. Sarah also has a Graduate Certificate in Arts majoring in Peace Studies, and a Master of Counselling. She is working on a collection of picture books exploring nonhuman perspectives, and two novels centred on the climate crisis and societal change.

Jonathan Jones lives and works in Rome where he teaches English and American literature at John Cabot University.

JMC Kane is the author of *Quiet Brilliance: What Employers Miss About Neurodivergent Talent and How to See It*. He is an ASD-1 and writes from this learned experience at the periphery of things. His prose work has been published in more than three dozen literary journals & magazines, including *Plough*, *Meniscus*, *Redivider (Emerson)*, *Palisades Review*, and *Smokelong Quarterly*.

Marjan Khoshbazan is an Iranian poet based in Tehran. Her work explores suspension, silence, and the physical weight of moments before resolution. She writes image-driven poems that resist narrative closure and explanation, focusing instead on pressure, restraint, and ethical attention to language. She studied dramatic literature and is currently developing new work in English alongside her Persian practice.

Madelynn Knudtson is a graduate of Nebraska Wesleyan University with a BA in English. Her poems have been featured in several small literary journals, including NWU's *The Flintlock*. An aspiring novelist, she currently resides in Nebraska with her husband and cat, Toblerone.

Linda Kohler is a poet, writer and former teacher. Her work has been published in *Meniscus*, *The Saltbush Review*, *Bracken Magazine* and *The Marrow*, among others. She grew up on the Murray River and now lives on Kurna land near Karrawirra Pari. She writes along byways of nature and place.

DESMOND Francis Xavier KON Zhicheng-Mingdé has authored nineteen books, spanning poetry, fiction, memoir, and experimental writing. The former journalist has also edited over twenty-five books. Desmond is the recipient of the IBPA Benjamin Franklin Award, Nautilus Book Award, Singapore Literature Prize, three Illumination Christian Book Awards, three Independent Publisher Book Awards, six Living Now Book Awards, and eight Catholic Media Association Book Awards. He has taught writing for over two decades.

KA Krieger is a poet from Eastern Washington currently pursuing her MFA in poetry at Eastern Washington University. She recently graduated from Gonzaga University with her degree in English literature. You can find her work published in *Charter*, Gonzaga's journal of scholarship and opinion. Her poems often focus on themes such as grief, mental health, nostalgia, familial relationships and more. She hopes others can feel seen through her work and find connection with her writing.

Allan Lake, originally from Canada, has lived in Saskatchewan, Cape Breton Island, Ibiza, Tasmania, Western Australia and Melbourne. His latest chapbook of poems, *My*

Photos of Sicily, was published by Ginninderra Press in 2019. Such journals as *The Hong Kong Review*, *The American Writers Review*, *Tokyo Poetry Journal*, *The Antigoni Review*, *New Philosopher* and *Fabians Review* have published him.

Michael Leach resides on unceded Dja Dja Wurrung Country. Michael's poems reside in journals such as *Cordite*, anthologies such as *The Best Australian Science Writing* (NewSouth Publishing, 2024 and 2025), and his books *Chronicity* (MPU, 2020), *Natural Philosophies* (RWP, 2022), *Rural Ecologies* (ICOE Press, 2024), and *Chords in the Soundscapes* (Ginninderra Press, 2025). Michael's poems have been recognised in competitions, most recently first place in the Philippa Holland Award for Poetry 2025.

Wes Lee has four poetry collections. Her latest, *Wearing Today*, was shortlisted for The Kathleen Grattan Award 2023 (Otago University Press). Her work has appeared in a wide array of publications, including *Best New Zealand Poems*, *Cordite*, *Westerly*, *Splinter*, *The Stinging Fly*. Most recently she was awarded The Magma Editors' Prize 2024/25; the 2024 Free Verse Prize, by The Poetry Society, in London, and the Heroines/Joyce Parkes Women's Writing Prize 2022, in New South Wales.

Earl Livings has published poetry and fiction in Australia and overseas. His writing focuses on science, history, nature, mythology and the sacred. He has published two poetry collections, *Libation* (Ginninderra Press, 2018) and *Further than Night* (Bystander Press, 2000), and a fantasy verse novel, *The Silence Inside the World* (Peggy Bright Books, 2022). Earl lives in Melbourne with his wife and their groaning bookshelves.

Catie Lloyd is a sometimes-writer from Adelaide.

Rowan MacDonald has been awarded the Kenan Ince Memorial Prize, judged a finalist in the Tasmanian Writers' Prize and longlisted for the Furphy Literary Award. His words have previously appeared in various publications, including *Overland*, *New Writing Scotland*, *Variant Lit* and *Dipity Literary Magazine*. His work has also been adapted for podcast and short film. He lives in Lutruwita/Tasmania with his dog, Rosie, who sits beside him for each word he writes.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as 'a cosmopolitan poet' and another as 'prolific, bordering on incontinent'. His work has been nominated fourteen times for BOTN, ten for the Pushcart and once for the Forward Prize, and released in three collections: *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016); *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019); and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022).

Glenn McPherson is a Sydney-based poet. He has been widely published in leading journals and anthologies in Australia and internationally. He was a finalist in the Gwen Harwood Poetry Competition (2023); longlisted in the Bournemouth Writing Festival

Poetry Prize, and VC International Poetry Prize (2024), and shortlisted for the Newcastle Poetry Prize and the ACU Poetry Prize (2024/25).

Resident artist/curator for [The Chroma Museum](#), **Stephen Mead** has intermittently been submitting work for publication going on four decades. He remains grateful to all the editors who have given his work a good home as now, retired from his day job, he is busy trying to sell his 40-year backlog of art. <https://www.artworkarchive.com/profile/stephen-mead>

Tim Metcalf's most recent collection *The Moon The Bone* (Ginninderra Press, 2023) won the ACT Literary award for poetry in 2024. He has retired to Canberra after almost 40 years in the bush as a doctor.

Angela Meyer is an author, editor and lecturer in writing and publishing at RMIT University. Her novels are *A Superior Spectre* (Ventura Press, 2018; shortlisted for four literary awards) and *Moon Sugar* (Transit Lounge, 2022). Her shorter works are a novella, *Joan Smokes* (Saraband, 2019; winner of the inaugural Mslexia Novella Award), and a collection of flash fiction, *Captives* (Inkerman & Blunt, 2014).

Steve Minnich makes space for reading and writing in Richmond, Virginia. He co-edits *Carry Water* and volunteers for *Only Poems*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *HAD*, *Sublunary Review*, *Bear Review*, *pioneertown*, and elsewhere.

Aref Moallemi is from Iran.

Gabrielle Munslow is a poet and nurse practitioner based in West Sussex, UK. Her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *Sky Island Journal*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Neon Origami*, *Bristol Noir*, and others. She writes at the intersection of myth, grief, and defiance—often in the margins of a busy healthcare life. Her poetry blends emotional intensity with surreal, transformative imagery.

Alan Nelson, a writer and an actor, has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of Net and Best Microfiction. He played the lead in the viral video *Does This Cake Make Me Look Gay*, the verbose 'Silent Al' in the Emmy-winning *SXSWestworld*, and narrated New York Times videos on AIDS programs in Africa.

Denise O'Hagan is a Sydney-based poet, born in Rome. She has a background in academic publishing in London and Sydney, was poetry editor with *The Blue Nib* and is now with *The Marrow*. Her poetry is widely published, and her recent awards include the Monica Taylor Poetry Prize and the NSW Poetry Prize. <https://denise-ohagan.com>

Jan Owen is a South Australian with nine books of poetry published, including *The Offhand Angel: New and Selected Poems* (Eyewear, 2015), and a volume of translations

from Baudelaire, *Selected Poems from Les Fleurs du Mal* (Arc Publications, 2015). Her awards include the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal and the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize.

Sarah Penwarden is an Auckland-based therapist. She has had more than 50 poems published in journals in New Zealand and Australia, including in *Poetry New Zealand*, *Turbine*, *Meniscus*, *Southerly*, *Mayhem*, and *takahē*. She has had short stories published in *tākāhe*, *brief*, and *Meniscus*, and a story broadcast on Radio New Zealand.

Rory Perkins is a British writer focussing on shorter works. He has been published in *Vast Literary Press*, *SoFloPoJo*, *Passengers Journal*, and Artam's *The Face Project* (forthcoming). He can be found at @roryperkinswriter on Bluesky.

Daniel John Pilkington is a poet, artist, and researcher, living in Melbourne / Naarm. He has a PhD in Creative Writing (Poetry) from the University of Melbourne and was the winner of the 2024 Peter Steele Poetry Prize.

Edie Popper (they/them) is a critical care nurse and poet living and working on unceded Gadigal, Wangal and Burramattagal Lands. Edie's writing aims to imagine human and planetary justice, focusing on relationships, community, earth as our kin, illness, memory and history, the medical system, and class. Their poetry won the 2025 Woorilla Poetry Prize, and is published in *Australian Poetry Journal*, *the Oystercatcher II Anthology*, *Jacaranda Journal*, *Meniscus*, *Right Now*, *Marrow Poetry*, and others.

Joanna Preston is a Tasmanian poet, editor, and creative writing tutor. She has published two poetry collections with Otago University Press: *The Summer King* (2009) which won the Kathleen Grattan Award and Mary Gilmore Award, and *tumble* (2021) which won Best Poetry Collection at the 2022 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards. Joanna lives with her husband and a flock of much-loved chooks in semi-rural Canterbury, in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Since the early 1990s, **Peter Raynes** has lived and worked across Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. He now lives in New Zealand with his family and works for a New Zealand NGO focused on the Pacific region.

Dr Sharon Rundle is a member of the Institute of Professional Editors and AAWP. She has co-edited several published anthologies of stories, including five of stories from Australia and South Asia, and an online mosaic of illustrated stories. Her work appears in books, anthologies, journals, magazines, and on radio. Website: sharonrundle.com.au

Adalain Sans is a published poet and debut author whose work examines intimacy, memory, addiction, and survival with lyrical restraint. Her poetry has appeared in reputable literary journals such as *La Piccioletta Barca*. She is currently working on her first genre-blurring book that weaves lyric prose and narrative, a magic in its own right.

Shauna Shiff is an English teacher in Virginia, a mother, wife and textiles artist. Her poems and short stories can be found in *Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *Atticus Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *Rock Salt Journal*, *Cola* and upcoming in others. In 2022, she was nominated for Best of the Net.

Ian C Smith's work has been published in *BBC Radio 4 Sounds*, *Cable Street*, *Griffith Review*, *North of Oxford*, *Rundelania*, *The Spadina Literary Review*, *Stand, & Westerly*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.

Matthew Southwell is a writer and lawyer based in Victoria. His short fiction has won the Mulga Bill Writing Award and been shortlisted for the Marjorie Barnard Short Story Award and the 9th Heaven Summer Short Story Prize. His travel writing was highly commended in the Lane Cove Literary Awards.

James Stanwix writes, takes photos and researches on unceded Whadjuk Noongar land, mostly in Walyalup/Fremantle. Their poems and photography have been published in places like *Cordite*, *Westerly* and *Pulch Mag*, and they created the poetry night and column 'Hem'.

Samn Stockwell has published extensively. Her new book *Musical Figures* (2023) is published by Thirty West Publishing House. Previous books won the National Poetry Series and the Editor's Prize at Elixir. Recent poems are in *Pleiades* and others.

RL Swihart came of age in Michigan but has lived in California for the last 30-plus years. His fourth book of poetry, *The White Bird*, was released in March 2025 and is available on Amazon. His poems have appeared in *Rhino*, *Quadrant*, *Meniscus* and *storySouth*, among other publications.

Yucheng Tao is a Chinese poet. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *I-70 Review* (forthcoming), *North Dakota Quarterly* (forthcoming), *White Wall Review* (Canada, forthcoming), *Wild Court* (King's College London), *Strange Horizons*, *NonBinary Review*, *O:JA&L*, *Poésie Première* (forthcoming), *Recours au Poème*, and *Arpa Poésie* (2026). His chapbook is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

Rebekah Teller earned her MFA in Writing at Lindenwood University and works as a copywriter in healthcare. Her work has been published in *Austin Poetry Review*, *Locust Shells Journal*, *Red Ogre Review*, and she self-published the trilogy *Flowing in the Trenches*. She lives in the Missouri Ozarks with her husband, two teenagers, and four dogs.

Leanne Todt is a writer living in County Clare, Ireland.

Isi Unikowski lives in Canberra, Australia. He has been widely published in Australia and overseas, including *Best of Australian Poems 2022*. His collections, *Kintsugi* (2022) and *Re:Vision* (2025) are published by Puncher & Wattman, New South Wales.

Louise Wakeling lives in Gundungurra country. Her fourth collection of poetry is *Off Limits* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2021). Her work has appeared in anthologies such as *The Best Australian Poems* (2010), *Contemporary Poetry* (2016), *Caring for Country* (2017), *Wild Voices* (2019), *Best Australian Science Writing* (2022) and *Moments* (2024). Recent poems have been published in *Cordite*, *Burrow*, *Live Encounters* and *Meniscus*, and in *Class* (2024), and *The Fulchrum Years* (2025), both Meuse Press, edited by Les Wicks.

Allison Whittenberg is an award-winning novelist and playwright. Her poetry has appeared in *Columbia Review*, *Feminist Studies*, *J Journal*, and *New Orleans Review*. Whittenberg is a ten-time Pushcart Prize nominee. *They Were Horrible Cooks* (Cornerstone Press, 2024) is her collection of poetry. Her plays have been performed at Interact Theatre, Downtown Urban Arts Fest, Hedgerow Theatre and many others.

Jena Woodhouse has eight published poetry titles. Her unpublished collection, *Tidings from the Pelagos: A Polyphony* was a finalist in the Greek-based Eyelands International Book awards 2024. She has been a finalist three times in the Montreal International Poetry Prize. Her most recent title is a poetry collection: *The Singing Ship: A Study in Resistances* (Calanthe Press, 2026).

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