MENISCUS

LITERARY JOURNAL

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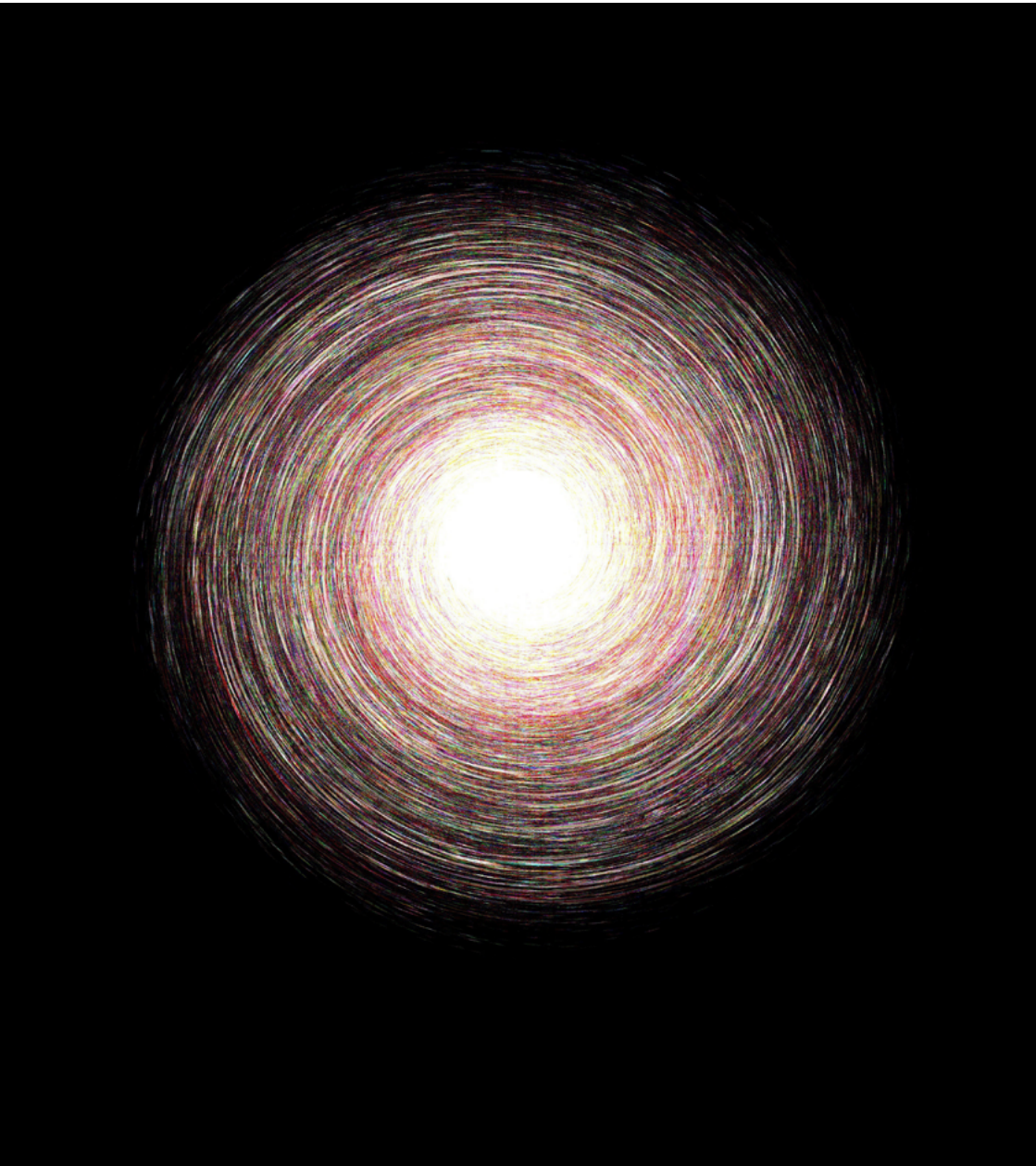

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Meniscus, an online literary journal featuring poetry and creative prose, is published twice a year.
The editors read submissions twice a year; for details, please see www.meniscus.org.au.

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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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AAWP/UWRF PRIZES

2024

EDITORIAL

The second issue of *Meniscus* for 2025 features writers from around the globe composing short fiction, flash fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry and experimental works exploring and expressing aspects of being human, being in society, and being in the world. Some pieces deploy humour, some are manifestly tragic, some are imagistic and highly evocative. A surprising number of the contributions hone in on what it is to live with, or care for, someone with a serious illness (cancer and dementia being at the front of the line). Others pick up on how we live in both natural and built environments; on families, meals, and memories; on how our collective and individual pasts inform our present; and—perhaps inevitably—on conflict, and the corrosive nature of contemporary politics. As a set of prose and poetry works, they show how deeply satisfying is writing that combines sharp observation, a grasp of writing techniques, and a deep sense of empathy.

Also in this issue are the winning works from this year's prizes offered by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs in partnership with the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival including the winning entries of the Emerging Writers' for Prose, Emerging Writers' for Poetry, and the Translators' Prize. Congratulations to all who were shortlisted too, whose writing is well worth the reading.

Sarah Giles, Deb Wain and Jen Webb, editors

no answer

Geoffrey Aitken

records show
she spent years
packing

cartons
boxes
with eggs
parcelling goods
toys
neatly
tirelessly
expediently

before a nausea
grew
into an emptiness

a hollow
bringing her here

for care
long term patient rest
and repair to the breakages

that now confuse her

unlike the jigsaw pieces
she puzzles over daily

banging each one into place
regardless of the finished product

THE GOOD 'OLE FOLKS OF THE SAN FRANCISCO TENDERLOIN OR WHAT WE CARRY IN OUR SHOPPING CARTS

Brendan Alpiner

Grief. So much grief. So much grief it becomes a third arm and opens doors we've never wanted to open. Pipes. Rocks. Stones. Children. Children's toys. Children's diapers. Children's graves. Resolution. Or half of what resolution is. Maybe a fraction of what resolution is. No resolution solidified as resolution. Cracked phones. Broken phones. Phones that only call the past, which we're trying to avoid. Knowledge we've never wanted to acquire. Knowledge no one should ever have to acquire. Drugs. Lots of drugs. Dreams. Dead dreams. Striving dreams. Lighters. Batteries. Shopping carts full of all we've earned in this lifetime like diplomas, wedding shoes, memorial pictures, family albums, etc.

Oh, and our hearts. How could we leave that one

behind?

WHILE LISTENING TO FIREWORK BY KATY PERRY

Adeleke Babatunde

Girl, you are not a firework
where is the dignity in shining so
bright for a second and then become the
colour of night in the next?

Where is the pride in burning
yourself to the ground for those
who will not say thank you?

Girl, you are not a firework.
No one should be.
No one should spend flickers of their
short time here seeking to blow and
then fade, never to be remembered
by those they exploded for.

RECALIBRATE

Olivia Baume

again. memory of a goldfish. forget all the times

I'd recalibrated, after the rupture. the end of things.

wrote the eulogy. then heard the death bell, the

knock on wood—still kicking. quick to laugh at

myself, chalk it up to teenage melodrama, but I

can't call it that anymore, even if it's how I feel

inside. remember to listen to the warm hum of

the fridge after a blackout.

and

melt the candle stubs together into a strange,

oblong shape.

and

put the bent spoon back in the drawer,

it still works.

if the world ends before lunch, I'll be fine by

dinner. memory of a goldfish.

I've done it before, do it

again, done it before, do it

JOURNEY'S END

Jason Beale

Inside the old retirement home, the walls
are painted puce and brown—tidy rooms
and healthy views, a poster proudly claims.

The windowpanes reflect the sky, while those
of us with cloudy eyes—the unremembered
residents—reflect a sense of dull surprise.

Each morning we accept the day, and move
towards our chosen goal, for some a void,
for others more—a vision of eternal love.

But feelings sing another song; at journey's end
we mope and moan. A simple sprain takes weeks
to mend, and joints and tendons ache with pain.

As time extends we convalesce, and wait
for things we can't explain; our bodies formed
of breath and clay—half in darkness, half in light.

———ROUTE 66———

Howard Bellido

he had never heard of route 66
duh bitch he's from japan
fat man little boy he knew those names
hiroshima
the girl with the thousand cranes (her wish in the trash with the cranes)
haikus geisha ganguro japayuki
avoid eye contact marlboro reds

together we drove the american dream skipping arkansas if you saw us youd understand
on the menu:
two faggots
one puerto rican: comes with green hair short shorts tattoos bellbottoms
one filipino: comes with long hair ambiguous gender scientifically perfect face dark skin

like celine dion we drove all night all day
route 66 americana
a staggeringly important facet of our incredibly short lived mayfly american history

holy fucking shitballs this country is segregated
the importance of beale street james baldwin
negated by open carry alcohol laws
the invisible man and his lightbulbs[1]
you mean in your state black people only live in one area
is this integration
separate but equal sounds like some white folk mumbo jumbo bullshit
fuckkkkkkk oklahoma was white
but the sky
that fucking sky

little howie reminisced on his first musical stopped the car ran into
the road spinning and singing the opening song
mami elsa[2] showed me the musical while
i waited for her to finish administering
some final exams its like she always knew
and she was happy she knew i could do
it she knew i was smart enough so she
showed me how beautiful the gay boy
inside me could be.
i saw

oklahoma.
we arrived exhausted but still agog from the beauty. they owned a
yellow house in a sunflower field
the black souls of their seeds reaching
for what?

this?

fuck, they believe in that here too?
and they say it's just a belt.[3]

and then wow.
big rocks.
(insert another sarcastic wow)

okay grizzly bear your song about colorado?[4]
(raspberry)

my niece her mini van and the edge of the mountain were too closely related
because the earth happens to be dark

but the feet are white pink beige and wearing what i think heterosexuals call shoes
so integration means black people live in one city while white people take the rest of the
rocks
who the fuck wants rocks

oh ... rocks are natural dividers
preventers of passage a feigned ignorance of the connotation and denotation

kansas
flat and expensive.
and dorothy's house was nowhere near 66

66 is dead.
america never really tried.
integration failed.

so we drove back home in our energy efficient japanese car
to the most integrated place in america
where we colour with all the crayons
not just black and fucking white
we're just going to sit on the sidelines and watch this war destroy everyone
because when youre not black and youre not white
and possessing of enough self awareness to see the tennis match of race
eventually you sneak out to watch rhythmic gymnastics

aren't you people bored yet? i mean literally the rest of the world is.

Notes

1. Reference to James Baldwin's book *The Invisible Man*

2. Mami Elsa. In Puerto Rico, it is common to say Mami in front of the grandmother's name. It is a term of endearment.

3. Bible Belt. An extremely religious section of the country dominated by conservative Christianity.

4. Grizzly Bear is an indie rock band. 'Colorado' is a slow melty psychedelic song of theirs. I recommend listening to it as a soundtrack to the poem.

TO THE BONE

Raymond Berthelot

We start from the out and work our way to bone. Diseases and worms work their way from within towards the light. The result, same.

How can it be that they've taken 10 litres of fluid from you in two weeks? To remove that much, perhaps only the sea will never notice the cosmos are not quite right.

The eyes, jaundiced windows offer a view upon your embodiment. The soul is dim and deep, a yellow shroud stretched too thin, but there none the less.

Sometimes it's hard to tell who suffers more, the caregiver or the patient. She is stubborn and refuses to back down.

Yesterday was a good day. We ate, sang, drank and the breeze was cool on the skin, and yet we knew that the sunset was only time away. The sun is low in the sky.

RAW EDGE

Tony Beyer

how sharp the knife must be
to slice identical portions

of clouded glass-like sashimi
served on a long narrow plate

as if by abracadabra
or one of those small miracles

no one specifically prays for
but everyone's pleased to receive

DESAPEGO

Cecile H. Blanc

When I came home from lunch, the flat was clean and Mercedes was gone. On the paper in our typewriter, a handful of words had stayed behind, typed precisely as follows:

> El desapego es el acto mas doloroso y a la
> vez, mas elevado del AMOR INCONDICIONAL.

Earlier that morning, she had called me into the living room. I generally do my best to get out of her way, to give her full leisure to organise the cleaning as she sees fit. ('Leisure' is a misnomer. Cleaning someone else's house is hard work.)

I always fill the water filter jug before she comes. I pull out two glasses: on one I write my name with the blue Posca pen, on the other I write hers. We are the same, you and I. I imagine this kind of touch to be the fair target of light-hearted banter between the people who clean other people's bathrooms, who carry their groceries all the way up the stairs, who look after their children.

My children are 'not easy'. These are the words of my mother-in-law, for whom 'easy' is the highest compliment one can give a parent about their child. But I heard a child psychologist explain once that the most common trait of victims of sexual abuse is the compliant belief in all adults' inherent authority.

It is a tightrope, and the object of daily deliberations: how do we get our children to comply, when they should?

When Mercedes called me into the living room, it was to tell me in broken English that the typewriter sitting on our console, which I had found online that week, was the same one she had trained on as a girl.

(Actually, 'Broken English' is a lazy stock phrase which implies someone messed up. English can do with a little breaking, if you ask me—just a few cracks, so fresh seeds can get in.)

I pulled out the paper holding the story my sons and I were in the middle of writing, full of magic and monsters, and inserted a fresh sheet for her.

With her hand on her heart, she started typing her name, and made a typo.

Started over.

I left her to it and headed out, unrolling the usual 'thank you' and 'take care' and 'see you next week', which she echoed.

Her words were waiting for me when I got back.

My husband and I spent a minute trying to translate the mysterious note. I was especially intrigued by the capitalisation of AMOR INCONDICIONAL, and the preceding double space. She was trained in typewriting. Surely, after a few trials of the metal triggers—trr, trr, trr—the muscle memory had kicked in. It had to be a deliberate double space, a run-up before a big leap of faith.

Our investigation was quickly interrupted by the demands of the evening protocol: feeding, cleaning, reading. In our parental bed that night, my husband whispered that he had had a good evening, that he loved the three of us.

But this morning, our sons were not easy.

We call them 'les oursons', which patches together 'our' and 'sons', but also means 'bear cubs' in French. It is both affectionate and accurate: at seven and ten, they would still scoop honey with their bare hands and lick their plates. Their playfulness leans towards distraction when discipline is expected, especially on their Saturday activities—to the despair of their father, who real-time reported by text messages from the front.

We take it personally when our sons misbehave. It might be our

education, it might be cultural. My husband noted once that the only parents shouting at our local swimming pool were shouting in French. Raising our children in London is a constant balancing act between where we come from, and where we want to be. (It is probably why it is called 'raising': each generation aims to do better than the last.)

On a whim, I looked up the translation of Mercedes' message, and sent it to him. He answered that he had all the words, except 'desapego'.

'What does it all mean, do you think?' he texted. I know he was interrogating the origin of the note: why did Mercedes leave these words? But reflecting on the translation, I answered it probably meant we should let the boys mess up and learn on their own, from time to time.

'Your children are not your children.' wrote Khalil Gibran. I had learned this poem by heart for the baptism of my cousin, but I was a child myself then, barely the seed of a mother.

At the end of their activity my husband texted again: 'I asked the coach, he said poor focus today ...'. And right after, he followed with a one-word message: 'Desapego.'

It has now entered our lingo. When you do not wash your hands of it, but take a couple steps back.

Earlier this week, my eldest son went grocery shopping alone for the first time. I was to shadow him, stay a few steps behind, and wait outside. I could see the excitement reverberating in his not-so-small body, as people walked past him, and surely he told himself: 'They think I'm out on my own!'

Back home, I caught a bit of glee overflowing from his still chubby face when he shrugged that the butcher gave him a discount, because he was so polite.

'Desapego': a leap of faith.

I have cut the little paper sentence holding the gift of this new word, and inserted it in the frame of the painting of our family as bears, under the words 'Les oursons d'amour'.

The English translation is:

> Detachment is the most painful and at the
> same time, the highest act of UNCONDITIONAL LOVE.

#40, from THE WIDE STARLESS SILENCE

Peter Boyle

The sky is full of tiny holes
where the rain has fallen through.
From behind a cloud
an elongated eyeball holds me in its sights.
These are not the gods,
just the bored and aimless great-grandchildren
of a violence to which I too
am heir.
In the distance
a hill bleakly wanders off into the sky's
gaze. I am still listening
for whatever comes next: *our viscera*
in the vases after flesh and sleep.*

* Gérard Macé, 'The Balconies of Babel', *Wood Asleep* (trans David Kelley), Bloodaxe Books, 2003, p. 91. My thanks to Dr Suzanne Fairless-Aitken of Bloodaxe Books for permission to use this quotation.

AT THIS HOUR

Faye Brinsmead

of frost and kohl-lined trees,
people caught in my window
are scissors: dark legs-and-feet
cutting cold breathing air.
My eyes track their snip, snip,
hardly aware of the handle-heads
dictating short sharp rushes
across the watching park.

If we were only blades,
would we wound each other
less? My hand
on the windowsill,
older than yesterday,
bears a new red cut
that bloomed in the night,
mysterious.

IN BERN

Rohan Buettel

Seven bells ring out on Sunday morning
across the cobblestones
of the empty *Münsterplatz*,
and sonic waves resonate
in the cavity of your chest,
while your hands protect your ears.
No wonder the plaza is empty,
the locals know what to expect.
For the visitor, the deep peals
lift and shake your trunk,
creating a visceral earthquake,
like nothing you've ever felt.
In Bern you walk the ancient streets
down to the bridge across the Aare
to the bear pit where an animal paces alone.
You look down the well from the walls above
and feel a deep sadness for the captive bear,
the city's symbol, pinned in its coat of arms.
You continue up the hill through the rose garden,
rest awhile in wan winter sun,
then walk the *Alstadt* until evening,
living the medieval city, experiencing
the medieval world.

OCTOBER REVELATIONS

Max Bufkin

It's been six years since Timothy left my body—began to exist outside of it—outside of me.

He has hair now, curly blonde locks that sprout from the top of his head like the roots of an onion. When I picked him up from school the other day, he told me about how plants eat sunlight. But today, there is no school, and our morning routine is in full swing. I set the table with bowls of cereal with colourful marshmallows in them. The TV is talking to us from the living room, and the dog is asleep. Timothy and I sit across from each other at the kitchen table, eating quietly.

'I want to be a princess', Timothy says.

'You don't want to be a prince?' I ask, chewing. 'Nah', he mumbles with that child-like bluntness.

I look at the empty seat at the head of the table, wishing someone was sitting in it—someone who could tell him the things I can't.

'Why do you want to be a princess?' I ask.

'I don't know–just do.' Timothy says, licking his bowl clean. 'Can I go watch TV now?' I nod, and he jumps off his chair, thundering into the living room, laughing loudly.

I take our dishes to the sink and submerge them in the soapy water. From the kitchen, I can see Timothy sitting on the rug in front of the TV, mouth ajar, eyes unblinking. An animated princess moves across the screen, dancing and twirling with a dog-like beast in tailcoats.

Timothy, still getting used to his new limbs, rises unsteadily onto his legs and mimics the princess, holding up the ends of his shirt to courtesy. I methodically wash the dishes and stack them on the drying rack, listening to Timothy sing along with his animated companions. Once the kitchen is clean, I walk into the living room and switch off the

TV, watching the princess's smiling face disappear, replaced by my pale grimace in the reflection.

'Time to go', I say.

Timothy scrambles to the door, throwing on a sweater and boots from the closet. Our yard is full of dead leaves, and the porch is decorated with plastic pumpkins. It's Halloween today, and Timothy wants to go to the store to buy a costume. The sky is dark and weeping, so I have to turn on the windshield wipers while I drive. Timothy runs ahead of me in the store, waddling through the aisles until he finally finds the children's costume rack.

You can tell he's focused because his tongue is sticking out from the corner of his mouth. Methodically, he shuffles through the costumes, inspecting each one and shaking his head disapprovingly. Finally, his eyes light up, and he smiles wide enough to see the gaps in his teeth. He reaches out and takes a pink princess dress off the rack. The sequins sparkle under the fluorescent lights, dancing in his pupils.

'This one', he says, holding up the costume.

'No, you have to pick a different one', I say firmly.

'Why?'

'Because.'

'But I want this one.'

I pull a superhero costume off the rack and hold it in front of him, kneeling so I'm on his level. 'Why don't you just wear this one? You love superheroes', I say, trying to soften my tone.

'No, I want to be a princess!' Timothy yells, stomping his tiny foot.

I can feel the other customers gazing at us, whispering behind their hands. Their eyes are glued to me, my son, and the thing in my son's hand. I can hear their carts hesitate as they pass by, pausing momentarily before turning down the next aisle. My face is flushed, and my body feels hot, burning with embarrassment.

Ever since the chair at the head of our table's been empty, I've been trying to fill it. I thought we'd be in this together, but we're not. Every

photo hung up in the house has a crease in the corner, covering the face of a man I don't know anymore—that maybe I never really knew. There's no one to rely on—to tap into the fight when I'm beaten and tired. I'm supposed to be an adult. All the books I bought tell me I have to speak gently and patiently with Timothy, but instead I just yell at him like a child, *'You can't!'*

'Why?' Timothy asks, his eyes filled with tears.

I open my mouth to speak but I don't have an answer. I can't tell him that his father knew what he was—or suspected it, at least. That he had seen what I had; the way Timothy looked at the princesses in movies. Even before we knew what was growing inside of me, his father made it clear that he wanted a son—someone he could turn into the same kind of man he was; who played football in college and hit on women in bars and never let anyone, not even himself, ever know how he really felt. But Timothy would never be any of those things, and so his father left to find a woman who could provide him with a proper son.

Timothy's sob breaks my train of thought. Two streams run down the sides of his flushed face, dripping off his wrinkled chin. Staring into his red, swollen face I realise something I should have known all along; he's perfect. Everything about him, inside and out, is miraculous. That I made him and yet he isn't mine. That he could be or do anything, and I would still love him. Timothy isn't the reason he left. Neither of us could have satisfied such a creature.

I put the superhero costume back on the clothes rack and wipe away his tears, letting him blow his nose into my sweater.

'You can be a princess if you want to', I say.

'Really?' he asks, sniffing.

'I'm sorry. I was … scared. And sometimes people act badly when they're scared.' I try to explain. He puts a hand on my shoulder.

'These costumes are pretty scary', he says, nervously eyeing the clothes rack. I laugh.

In the dressing room, I help him slip on the pink princess dress; it's

a perfect fit. He giggles with joy, twirling the ends of the dress while looking at himself in the mirror. He goes to open the dressing room door, but the handle is too tall for him to reach. I hesitate but then smile, taking his hand into my own, and open the door.

THE DRUMMER

Owen Bullock

he takes a solo
never losing the groove

toms always a phrase
in the melody

he's still grateful
to have a decent kit

not the plastic food containers
he started on

like I know I'm rich
owning a saxophone

I'll never need to upgrade
no longer a peasant

who can only afford
a tin whistle—my C cost

twelve dollars
thirty-five years ago

I paid for it
hundreds of times over

busking—I still love
the rolls, smears and crans

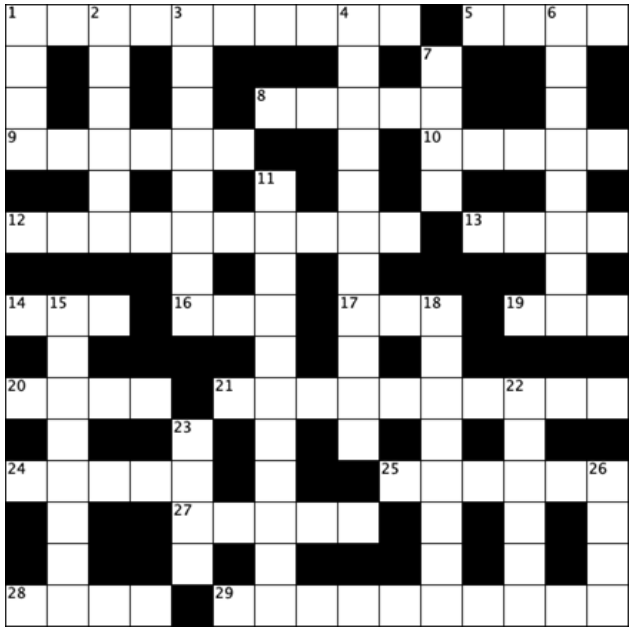
but now there's Bach,
Haydn, Beethoven

Breton, Scandinavian and Greek tunes
Herbie Hancock, Sonny Rollins

funk!

CROSSED WIRES

Michael Burrows



ACROSS

1. Small-paw. Dad's nickname for me. (10)

5. 22a Loftus Street when I'm at Dad's. 84 Acacia Avenue with Mum and Dan. I stay with Mum during the week, and see Dad on the weekends. (4)

8. My best friend since kindergarten! Also a country in Asia, I think, with lots of people and spicy curry. Dad made a Vindaloo once, and it was so hot we all had to drink a glass of milk after, and Mum said, 'My mouth is on fire!' (5)

9. Word fixer. Dad does this at the newspaper, but he mostly works on the crosswords. (6)

10. The Yes-shop. Where Dad and I go shopping sometimes to pick up a DVD, or a blow-up bed, because the first time I came round to Dad's new place for the weekend we realised there was nowhere for me to sleep. Then Dad forgot to buy a foot pump, so he tried to blow up my bed by himself, and his face was all red and we had to lie down on the half-blown up bed for a while, and it was so weird, like lying on a pool toy that's sinking. (1-4)

12. The bad guy in Little Red Riding Hood. But really he's just acting on what my book about wild animals calls his 'natural instincts', to eat an old granny or whatever. Sometimes I make Dad tell the story differently, and Dad says, 'What if Little Red Riding Hood arrives at the house and finds Granny and the wolf in bed together! And Granny says, 'Wait, darling, it's not what it looks like.' Wouldn't that be funny?' (3,3,4)

13. Milky tea with spices and cinnamon. Mum makes the best cup of it in the world when I can't sleep and I miss Dad. (4)

14. The best. She puts me to sleep and makes me chai and gets my stuff ready for school and tells me not to be scared and explains stuff like 'divorce' in a way that I understand, and when I'm sad she tucks me up in the doona and says I'm a little burrito and she's going to eat me. Then I start laughing because I can't get out, and she says, 'Needs some guacamole', and puts a pillow on my head, and I forget why I was even sad. (3)

16. Mum's new friend. He has dreadlocks and his hair is almost as long as mine. Dad says he smells like patchooly or however you spell it, but I reckon he smells like Fremantle Market. Dad says he's never had a real job, but Mum says he works as a carpenter on houses. 'Like Jesus?' I said, because we learnt about him in religion, and he had long hair and a beard too, and Mum couldn't stop laughing. Dad laughed too when I told him on Saturday. I think they both would have laughed if I told them together, and then they would have realised they still love each other and I wouldn't have to swap houses all the time. But then there wouldn't be a Dan and that would make me a little sad too, because he always says I look pretty even when I come home covered in paint. (3)

17. The best. He can lift me over his head, and he taught me to ride my bike, and even though his lunches aren't as good as Mum's (sometimes we have pizza for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, which Mum says is unhealthy, but I like) and his house is smaller, he still made me my own room and bought me the blow up bed. He says 'divorce' is what happens when two people grow apart, and one of those people moves on with a hippy, and one of those people is a big dummy. I don't really know what a hippy is. Anyway, I know they still love each other, because they both talk about each other all the time. (3)

19. Lock unlocker. Dad gave me one for his new place, and I attached my West Coast Eagles

keyring to it so I wouldn't lose it. Dan has one for our house too. Sometimes he sleeps over in Mum and Dad's room, even though it's only Mum's room now. I told Dad and then he said he had some dirt in his eye, and that night we ate ice cream straight from the tub and watched 'You've Got Mail' which I didn't really get, because they didn't have iPads. Dad said, 'You're the only person I ever want to have a key to my house.' And I said, 'Thanks, Dad, but what about Mum?' And he didn't reply. (3)

20. Cosy, fluffy boots that Dad and I wear all the time. We call them our toaster feet. (4)

21. Alternative lady. Mum watches a TV show called this, where two ladies are both in love with the same man and they yell. It is really bad. But sometimes I wonder if I'm one too? Because there was Mum and Dad, and they were happy, and then I came along, and now they live in separate houses. I asked Dad and he said 'No, you're not the "other woman". You're the only girl for me!' But he said it with sad eyes. (5,5)

24. What Dad calls Dan, and Collingwood supporters. 'Now she's got that redneck sleeping in our bed? I don't like it one bit,' he said to Uncle Tom when he didn't know I was listening. But I quite like Dan, he makes Mum and me laugh, all the time. Like Dad used to do. (5)

25. Sounds like a carnival, but it's when one person in a marriage falls in love with someone else. Dad told Uncle Tom that, 'it was the last straw. The camel-back-breaking one.' We don't have a camel, which I think Dad was really upset about, because Uncle Tom gave him a big hug, and Dad doesn't normally hug Uncle Tom for that long. He needs Mum back I reckon, because they used to hug all the time, and then they didn't do it as much. Maybe hugs recharge your love batteries, and when you're low you just need a longer hug? Tomorrow I'm going to give Dad a big hug. (6)

27. West _____ Eagles, the best footy team in the world according to Dad, even when they lose. Mum says, 'Did he take you anywhere else besides the footy?'

and when I say, 'Yeah, we went to a pub with Uncle Tom and I ate two whole bowls of chips,' she just shakes her head. But she smiles when she does it, which makes me think Dad can still make her laugh. They used to shout so much, and now they don't because they live in different houses, but they don't smile as much either. (5)

28. Me! (4)

29. Like a kangaroo paw, maybe? I picked one from the communal garden at Dad's place, even though everything is all overgrown and no one goes out there, and I'm going to give it to Mum and say it's from Dad, and maybe she'll come over and they'll talk, and Dad will make her a chai, and she'll say, 'How much sugar did you put in this!?' But she'll be laughing when she says it, and she'll take Dad's hand, and maybe, hopefully, they'll be friends again. I miss that. (10)

DOWN

1. Lots of violent emotions, initially. Fewer of those same emotions, ten years in, with a toddler running around and no sleep. Eventually, it disappears entirely. (4)

2. Maiming takes Ma out for tea at certain point. Once Issy was older, things really started to unravel. That's not to blame Issy at all, she is and always will be the best thing we ever did, but I think Nic and I would both say we started to grow apart about four years in. Small things at first: sex became a chore, something to get ticked off the weekly to-do list, and date night disappeared entirely. We used to love finding new restaurants and trying them out, no matter how bad the reviews, like we were explorers in a new country, but we started going to the same old Italian place, and eventually even that was only once a year, on our anniversary, when we were just keeping up appearances. (6)

3. At theme park, Legolas switches Stanford for Notre Dame? I had this crazy idea that one day I could take Nic and Issy to Denmark, and we'd go to the real theme park. Not just for me, mind, though I do love the little

coloured blocks—I think they help with the crosswords, weirdly. And not just for Issy either, though she really loves Lego. I bought her the giant Hogwarts castle and she has it set up in her bedroom—at Nic's place now, annoyingly, but maybe I could get a Death Star model or something for my flat. No, in truth, Nic loves Lego as much as both of us. We used to buy each other little sets for birthdays and anniversaries. I don't remember why we stopped. (8)

4. So redialled, redialled for aged females. I used to tell Nic I had a thing for mature women because she's older than me; that she had a wisdom I could only hope to achieve when I reached her age. And now she's dating the dreadlocks dude. I'm not convinced that extra six months of maturity she has on me has helped at all. (5,6)

6. Wedded bliss? Carriage had a 'mare, and swapped heads. Nic and I got married when we were both 25. Maybe that was too young, but we were in love and nothing was going to stop us. Having seen the messy behind-the-scenes of marriage through this whole divorce process, I don't think I'll ever remarry. There's something beautiful and stupid about believing you've found the one perfect human for you, and promising never to mess that up seems like inviting disaster. But hey, don't let me stop you, we had an amazing ten years, some of them better than others, and we got Issy out of it, which makes every argument, snipe, and cold shoulder worth it. (8)

7. Have it and eat it too? Impossible! We had a strawberry and whipped cream monstrosity at our wedding, which I realise now was a portent of the disaster to come. Nic chose it, and I didn't have the nerve to say no. For ten years. (4)

11. If newsagent in no doubt of reorder. This shit is bananas! Now I'm this angry, bitter, single dad, thinking back to his glory days. We used to go out, and party, and see bands. Rolling Stones. Matchbox 20. We saw No Doubt when they were still good! We went to music festivals. We'd

get drunk and fool around in parks. Then you blink and you're changing a messy nappy. Before you know it, you're trying to remember your multiplication tables to help with homework. We used to be a team, and then at some point the team lost track of which sport they were playing. (4,7)

15. Toaster feet. Our little in-jokes. That goofy little laugh Issy gets when we muck around or she tells me a joke she's made up. 'Hey Dad, what's round and also square and also pointy?' and she's thinking intently about the answer, looking so serious, so I say, 'I don't know, Iz, what?' And she's already laughing as she says, 'Your butt.' She's definitely my daughter. Other times she's so Nic it hurts: the little eyeroll when I tell her it's bedtime, the early morning grumps, the constant, never-ending chatter. That goofy laugh, roaring through the apartment. (8)

18. Sounds like Spooner's foundall, before the end. We both knew we were in trouble. We were sleeping in the same bed, but never touching. I'd be gone before she was properly awake, then at night once Iz was asleep we'd watch some stupid show with too many glasses of wine, on opposite ends of the couch, barely talking. She went out with the girls, I'd go for a beer with Tom. Anything to avoid talking about it. And Issy, bless her, would draw us all together with love hearts, as a happy family. So I started spending longer at the office, actively prolonging going home. I think that's what Cecilia was doing too. (8)

22. She owes me a dowry, partially, in an unseeded lea. I want to say I was pushed towards it by the crumbling marriage, but honestly, I think it was just the fact that Cecilia gave me her full, undivided attention. So I just never said no. One weekend I booked a hotel and told Nic I had a work thing out of town, and felt like a cad. As soon as I came home I told Nic everything. The straw that broke the camel's back. But honestly, you start to wonder if sometimes the camel is just waiting for it, hoping for that

last straw. Well, I mean, longing
to finally stop carrying straw,
not longing for a broken back,
obviously. Look, it's not a perfect
analogy. (6)
23. Take a mile before giving one,
the exchange rate is terrible. I
know Issy is still hoping we'll
get back together, but honestly,
I think Dan is great for Nic, and
he's amazing with Issy. And I feel
like I'm closer to where I'm meant
to be. And Nic seems happier
than I've seen her in years. And we
are talking again. A few sentences
when we drop Issy off, but it's a
start. (4)
26. Bizzaro art, contains angry
yell about state of the world. And
actually I'm not even that angry.
I did a stupid thing and hurt
someone I care about, and it was
the wrong way for it to end, but
I think I'm a better parent now
than I was. And I think Nic is
happier. I think I might be too.
And we've got Issy, our littlefoot,
who makes the world bearable,
and forgives us so readily for our
imperfections, and who makes me
laugh and smile and sing, every
day. So, maybe 'angry yell' isn't
quite right. It's a bellow of joy as
much as frustration and hurt.
Approval as much as pain. With
a whole lot of Issy's goofy laugh
mixed in. (4)

FRACTIONS

Ray Carey

Only because he is still alive and near where it happened
He remembers again how he had pulled himself out in time.
With St John's Pill nearby he is as convinced as ever
That his boots are still there. He knows he was close to death.

Both of us have settled into a kind of relaxed sadness.
He recalls how his head had been pushed against a blackboard
Once. *What kind of lesson?* I ask. *Fractions* he replies sadly.
We look up as a group of foreign visitors arrive in the lobby.

He goes on to tell me how he never thought he would sink
Down into the mud. He had kicked his ball into the river.
The ball was the world to him. And he went in to retrieve it.
Only for that one branch he would have disappeared forever.

What do you do with disillusionment on a sunny afternoon?
I see these visitors trying to pull themselves out of the mess
Their land is in. The goodness they are holding onto.
And the Wellingtons that they had to leave behind in the mud.

CLAIRE

George Davey

Your hair is earth, the taste of malt and salt—
my breath begins the moment that I rest
against your chest, a little mollusc held.
Where is my seawater? I do not ask.
For all your hair, those fourteen breaths are mine,
now holding fast, my anchor in the glow.
You rub your nose along my briny scalp
and lick me clean with spittle, slick and slow.

And twenty years have passed; Queen Square, I wake
to colourless, cold air, with wires that snake
my limbs—adrift and bare. I see
you standing there, Mother, your tired face,
half-washed by sterile light, with hands as calm
as morning tides, you wipe my brow—
and whisper softly to my waiting ear,
a voice I knew before the world was clear.

A' SEÒLADH CÒMHLA

Eartha Davis

my mother milks the moon with storied hands / my mother husks
the musk
from memory / trains
the spirit
to topple
tarry
hemispheres / ferries
charred
songbirds
towards
love's
pulse-plush
shorelines / my mother
sings
for
river / chants
with clusters
of unflinching
kindnesses / pops
the bulbs
of seconds
& re-laces
breath
to
bone / my mother
forgives
the fangs

of
past / the teeth
of
then / backstrokes
through
ancestral
waters
with
a daughter
in her
arms … / my mother
searches
for
lanterns / for
the birthplace
of touch / for
the truth
that is
togetherness / the knowing
that is
muscle / the faith
that is
wing / (is
light) / list-
en: my mother
unlaces
concrete
moan / re-laces
the soggy
strings
of our
chests

to
kite,
to
sail—

THE TRAVELLER

Odette Des Forges

Eileen told her grandchild she was a soul traveller, and this would be another mission, which she had chosen to accept.

'But where do you actually go, Gran, on these missions?' Lara asked. She was an only child—just gone four and brimming with whys, wheres and hows.

'I never know, little one. It's wherever the waves take me', Eileen replied as she stroked Tiny, her Scottish Terrier, as they lounged on the settee together. Out of the speaker, Louis Armstrong crooned about Satchmo's Lullaby, and through the bay windows the Queensland winter sun streamed in and toasted Eileen's bare feet.

Lara squirmed and hopped in front of her—the antithesis of Eileen's repose. 'What waves?' she asked.

'Brain waves,' Eileen replied and let her head fall into the back of the settee and her eyes close. Her constant headache pulsed and squeezed, and she focused on her fingers touching the soft hair around Tiny's ears.

'And when are you leaving on this mission?' Lara asked.

'Next Tuesday.'

'But that's your birthday, Gran.'

'I couldn't think of a better time to leave. It will be a going away party and a birthday party all in one.' Eileen gave her granddaughter a knowing smile as Eileen's daughter, Marie, flew into the room, picking up discarded books and toys with quick hands. A living room twister of cleanliness. 'Come on, Lara, let's leave Gran alone for a little while. She might like a rest', Marie said, picking up the little girl with one swift movement.

'I'm okay, love. Lara was about to help me plan my goodbye party.' She winked at Lara and the little girl wriggled free of her mum's arms and

jumped up and down and hollered. Eileen watched Marie's conflicted emotions reflected in her face like grey clouds eclipsing egg yolk sun, and Eileen decided she would talk to her daughter later and try to make her see sense in her plan.

During Eileen's six weeks of living with Marie, they'd coveted rare private moments when they could share a pot of Earl Grey tea without the constant movement of small arms and legs. That distinct Earl Grey flavour tasted like alfoil—smelt like smoke—to Eileen now, but she'd never tell Marie that. They'd use the fine China previously only taken out on special occasions and they'd speak of old friends and family and cultural events as though everything would stay as it always had been. Eileen knew it was easier for Marie to deal with it like this and didn't push her daughter into corners she didn't want to go.

'How about you go with your mum now, Lara Bell, and later in the afternoon we'll have a top-secret meeting to make our plans', Eileen said. 'I think your mother is right. I can barely keep my eyes open.' And she gave an exaggerated yawn wide enough to swallow a swarm of flies.

When she was alone, Eileen let Billie Holiday's soulful voice wrap her in a warm, familiar hug and she closed her eyes and imagined her fingers working the piano keys she no longer had the coordination to do. Tiny jumped onto the back of the settee and barked at a posse of magpies cavorting under a sprawling fig tree.

Eileen thought about the mission in front of her and melted into the idea. A hot shower after a brisk ocean swim. She'd been on missions before—smaller ones, blots of time devoured by darkness and then the fussy haze before re-emergence. It was in the fussy haze stage—the in-between of consciousness—that she travelled beyond: whirling dervishes in Istanbul, piano bars in Paris, hot springs out of Reykjavik. Kind eyes, smiling lips. The scent of spices and coffee and the most fragrant roses she'd ever smelt. The taste of salt and acid and sugar on her tongue. Freedom. Movement and madness. Yes, Eileen knew this

mission would be different, but she was not afraid. She was ready.

'Do your friends go on these missions, Gran?' Lara asked Eileen as they drew their plans in coloured crayons on a yard of butcher's paper later that afternoon. Eileen had written across the top in bright pink, 'Gran's Going Away Party—Top Secret', and Lara had scrawled a slathering of strokes and swirls she called streamers and glitter.

'Yes, some of them,' she'd replied and thought about Louise, the inspiration for her last mission. Louise had been one of those people who always strode around in her bowling whites even when she wasn't on the green, and she embraced the peppered grey of her hair without resistance. Twenty years ago, when Eileen's parasitic husband had left her for a work colleague, Eileen had become a dragon aflame with humiliation and rage and Louise had been the only one out of their social group who dared to walk into the fire. She'd arrived at Eileen's door with a container of chocolate brownies and instructed Eileen to put the kettle on. Over the sugar-drenched chocolate squares and strong black tea, Louise had said in her usual no-nonsense manner, 'Don't let his actions change who you are. If you do, you're letting him win in more ways than one.'

When Eileen had last seen her old friend, Louise had withered to skin-sheathed bone and her eyes had taken on a milky tint, but her mind was still sharp, and she'd been decisive in her decision. Eileen had admired that.

'Do you ever see your friends when you're travelling?' Lara asked. She pushed the blue crayon into the paper, back and forth over the same spot, tearing the paper a little.

'I hope so', Eileen said at the same time Tiny trotted in and barked at the older woman. 'Oh dear, I forgot your dinner time', she said to the terrier.

As the dry biscuits landed in Tiny's steel bowl with a clatter, she heard Lara singing,

Ring-a-ring-o' roses
A pocket full of posies
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
We all fall down

Two days later, they were out buying decorations in a large shopping centre with stores that all looked the same to Eileen but purported to sell different wares. In a cheap department store chain, the three generations of females browsed the shelf for party decorations. All the bright colours and iridescent objects seared into Eileen's eyes and her head throbbed.

'Can we get this?' Lara asked as she pointed at a sparkling banner that read, 'Have a great trip!'

Eileen laughed through the screwdriver tightness in her head at the irony, but Marie's face remained pinched, the tension in her eyes showing like a possum surrounded by burly tomcats. Eileen placed it in the trolley.

'My friend had a sign like that at her birthday party last week', Lara said. She skipped down the aisle, head swivelling from side to side at line after line of similar packaged products. In the next aisle a man berated his toddler for touching everything. A brief silence was followed by the child's wails.

Lara ran back, stopping an inch before Eileen and Marie. 'Gran, are we getting a cake?'

Eileen glanced at Marie and couldn't help but smile at her daughter's horrified expression.

'I don't have much of an appetite for cake these days, Lara Bell', Eileen said.

'But we have to have cake at a party.' The little girl stood her ground, folded her arms and lowered her eyes.

'Okay, we'll get a cake the day befo—', Eileen started but couldn't finish. The grey walls and floor swirled around her, the motion

punctured by speckles of greens and purples and blues—shiny silvers and golds and hot pinks—and the fussy haze descended like fog.

She was no longer in the cheap department store; she was back on her family property 100Ks west of Brisbane. Her eight-year-old self sat on the edge of the deck, swinging her legs beneath her while she sucked on a mango seed. That sweet tang filled her mouth. Ahead of her the sun dove towards grazing cattle in the distance, leaving hues of peach and pastel pink. Footfall creaked against the old wooden slats, and she turned around. Her dad stood there, looking out, and then his farmer's face crinkled into a smile. 'Can't beat that, can you, Leeny? Just beautiful.'

A flash of darkness and it was all gone, and Eileen woke to Marie shaking her, repeating, 'Mum, Mum, Mum,' as car crash enthusiasts stared at the scene with hungry eyes.

A day before the party, they went to buy a cake. It was a boutique cake shop nestled between a homewares shop and a designer dress shop.

'Do we need to buy such an expensive cake?' Marie had asked as they drove through tight streets, occasionally pulling to the side to let other cars through.

'They did the cake for my 70th and it was well worth the money', Eileen replied. Marie nodded but didn't say anything else.

In the back seat, Lara had been silent for most of the journey but piped up as Marie attempted to reverse park.

'Do you go on a plane, Gran?'

Eileen thought for a moment. 'No, not a plane, but there will be a pilot, and I'll count backwards like a rocket about to burst into space.'

'Cool', was all her granddaughter said.

The scent of sugar and chocolate and vanilla greeted them as they opened the door, a slight warmth to the air from the oven out back fighting with the whoosh of air conditioning. Eileen was thrown back to Marie's seventh birthday. Marie had asked for the castle cake in

the Women's Weekly cookbook, and despite not having the knack for baking, Eileen had given it her all, but unfortunately the finished structure had looked more derelict than erect, and the white icing had somehow turned grey. Marie hadn't said anything, but her face crumpled when she saw it as if fighting tears and Eileen had gone straight out and bought her the biggest castle cake she could find.

While contemplating her cake, Eileen dropped her purse three times. Eventually Marie swooped it up and said she'd look after it. Eileen decided on a lemon-yellow iced cake decorated with small pink sugared flowers and as she and Marie watched them place it in a floral cardboard box, Eileen looked over at her granddaughter, who was staring at rows of birthday cakes with tears sliding down her cheeks.

'What's wrong, darling?' Eileen asked.

'I'll miss you, Gran', the little girl said in a small voice.

Eileen knelt and hugged her as tight as her joints allowed, 'I'll miss you, too', she whispered, and the older woman found herself crying as well.

On Eileen's birthday, they drove to a large impersonal building and caught a lift to a floor with long, impersonal corridors to find a white impersonal room.

'Why aren't we having the party at home?' Lara asked as she climbed up on the bed in the middle of the room.

'Because I need a special space to launch off on my mission', said Eileen, the words falling out quickly. 'Now, help me get this room ready for the party, please.'

Lara's father lifted the little girl up so she could hang the banner across the window. Marie set up the cake and a stack of plates in the corner of the room. A handful of Eileen's friends wandered in with overflowing flower bouquets, which were placed on any spare surface. Lara's father pulled a speaker out of the bag, programmed Eileen's requested playlist, and Nina Simone belted out about feeling good.

An old friend had snuck in with Tiny in a duffle bag and Eileen stroked the terrier's head and kissed his snout, told him he'd be taken care of, before Tiny had been snuck out again.

They sang happy birthday, and Eileen pushed the knife into the cake with trembling hands, making sure not to touch the bottom for fear of bad luck. Marie finished cutting it and everyone took a plate though only Lara would finish her slice. With a smear of yellow icing on her cheek, Lara lunged towards Eileen and clung to her. 'I love you, Gran', she said. 'I'll love you always and forever', Eileen replied.

And then a woman in blue pants and white coat entered the room with a silver trolley and asked Eileen if she was ready. Eileen nodded, hugged everyone in the room, holding Marie and Lara the tightest and longest, and then slid onto the bed. Lara's father took the little girl to the vending machine for a lemonade, and when it was time, Marie gripped her mum's hand and tried to fight the tsunami of pressure in her chest that threatened to burst. From outside the door, Lara would hear her Gran count down from 10 but only make it to seven and she would complain to her dad they missed Gran's departure.

It would be several years before Lara understood why her mum's cheeks would be peppered with tears on and off over the next few weeks. It would take a lot more years to realise the enormity of what her gran had done—the courage it took. But what she knew then and stayed with her forever, was that her gran was a soul traveller, and one day they might meet again somewhere in the in-between.

THIS IS A BURIAL CEREMONY WHERE I TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION THAT

Evgeniya Dineva

a dead tree can remain standing for years;
dolphins bring up calves to the surface so they can breathe.

I've pictured your death so many times it's become a sanctuary of guilt,
where every inhale resembles a scream.
I am still not sure how many times I have to avenge the past
before I become the violator.
Dolphins are trying to keep the dead afloat, for days sometimes,
but nowhere does it say at what point they give up.
We always remember the first person we saw dead—
what about the last?

WHEN RAIN BECOMES WATER

Ross Donlon

It's been a long dry spell, and when rain comes,
rattling along gutters, whistling down pipes,

I think of the coming of one-by-one saviours
who can find a way over anything on Earth.

Today the detritus of leaves, twigs and dust is easily
dispersed and rain fills the tank where I sit listening.

It always finds a way, rain, and when I walk in it
during my own empty time, the shower of drops

comforts the land of my mind, soothing a spell
that blights sunny days and threatens the future.

When we say, *At last, there was a shower of rain,*
it's as if a blight was lifted from all living things,

the way rain turns itself into water, an old magic
that washes away the past so life can begin again.

FALLOUT

Jane Downing

How the End Begins

The nurse proffered two tiny white pills in the palm of her hand. They were pretty against the blue of her nitrate glove. Her voice was kind.

'Just pop one in each cheek, yes, stick them down toward the jaw.'

Her eyes tracked Sofie's fumbling hands as they disappeared into her mouth, exploring as she'd never had to or thought to before. Sofie stared into the nurse's eyes all the while, using their movement as a guide. Both pills, simultaneously and symmetrically, lodged.

'Now, don't chew or suck, just let them dissolve. The taste might be a bit yuck, but hold tight.'

The nurse may have been smiling under her Daisy Duck beaked mask. She nodded. Sofie nodded.

'They'll work to dilate your cervix,' the nurse assured her.

Dilate. An important word in the lexicon of pregnancy, and now at the very opposite end of biological possibility.

The books, from the gentle birthing guides to the starkly illustrated pamphlets in the doctor's surgery, had all assured Sofie that her body would accommodate birth, that a woman's cervix dilates to 10 centimetres—the cranium of the newborn being limited to that.

10 centimetres. That's a third of the length of the ruler they had in the classroom, used to draw margins and to thwack the naked shins of friends and enemies alike. And for that craze in the last year of school. Sofie remembered lying down on her bedroom floor, taking the ruler and placing it across her hip bones. She remembered the satisfaction that the thin length of wood balanced there like a bridge. God forbid a girl's stomach mound higher than her hip bones. God forbid she be teased and called Fat Cat, the star of folktale, that greedy-guts podge of

an animal. Lying on the pink carpet of childhood, Sofie hadn't wondered how all the *ting og sager*, the bits and bobs—her mother's term to cover all things gynaecological—fitted into her body.

That wonder came the year after graduation when her stomach did start to grow and hope took root and love filled her heart. It was like something out of a wellness gratitude poster.

Later she blamed hormones for rendering her brain dippy. She looked back on her old self with shame. With pity.

The little white pills began to dissolve in her cheeks. She resisted the urge to probe them with her tongue. Was it the taste that made her shudder, or the chalky, gritty feel of them?

She put her protective mask back on and closed her eyes as the nurse moved away, feeling like a supplicant at Mass after the administering of the Host. The love of God did not wash over her.

She knew the curse of Chernobyl would never lift.

How the Beginning Started

Generations have their touchstones. Each in turn will be able to say where they were when JFK was assassinated, John Lennon shot, the Twin Towers fell, or the Boxing Day tsunami hit. Whether they were at the beach when they heard the news, or in Pop's shed fetching the lawn mower, or making school lunches in the kitchen. Then there was Chernobyl. The news about the nuclear accident leaked out at a far slower pace than the radiation. By the time warnings came on the radio, there was nothing to be done.

Sofie had no need to check her diary to work out where she was on 26 April 1986 at 1.23 in the morning. She'd have been in bed when it all started to go wrong, like everyone else in Copenhagen. There was some small chance she was feeling her way to the toilet at that moment, aware of her baby growing and shifting her normal bodily rhythms though she was just out of her first trimester and had only started telling people about her pregnancy that week. Talking had made it real. The three

months of silence hadn't meant the foetus wasn't there, but breaking the secret was a magic trick giving her permission to turn the bunch of cells into her child. She had crossed a threshold, just at this inauspicious moment in history.

On a hero's journey, the hero passes over the threshold and the adventure begins. On a hero's journey there is no returning home without overcoming challenges and temptations, facing death and rebirth and transformation. And reaching a moment of atonement.

She would have woken on the morning of 26 April 1986 at the sound of her alarm, cycled to the shop, counted the float of coins and notes, opened the shutters. Over the next nine days, unbeknownst to the millions going about their daily lives, radioactive contamination fell across the USSR and Western Europe.

Once the secret was out, there was panic. Because the damage had already entered the food chain. And the waves of fallout just kept coming.

What Happened Now

Across the waiting room, a woman was casting around, her eyes darting left and right above her mask. The constant hum and harrumphing from the TV mounted on the wall had lost her attention in the ad break. Sofie looked up from her book and accidently became ensnared in direct eye contact.

'Women's problems?' the woman asked. 'I saw you got the dilation pills.'

Sofie couldn't deny it. Could not pretend she hadn't heard.

'That was me last month. Surgeon found uterine cancer in my biopsy, the whole dilation and curette business, so now I'm here for a hysterectomy. My son said, *but mum, you'll never be able to have any more babies*. As if. He's twenty-three. We had a laugh.'

Sofie did not laugh. The woman was right, of course. Not that Sofie's generosity extended to telling her that. Sofie did indeed have women's

problems. And Sofie, too, would have no need of a uterus should the tests come back with bad news. The piece of blue fabric across her face masked the sour downturn of her mouth—which had become a fixture decades before.

A man chuckled into the gap in the exchange between the women. He had a huge black arrow on his forehead pointing to the eye needing surgery. What had set him off was unknowable. *The Morning Show* was back on the screen. Some silliness in the studio was as likely a candidate as the 'joke' made by the mother of a twenty-three-year-old, who also went back to staring at the shifting pixels. Both preferring to zombify the waiting minutes like the seven others in the way station.

While they stared at the TV, Sofie stared at her feet. To distract herself the night before she'd found something trivial yet imperative to panic about—better to stress about slippers instead of a cancer biopsy. When she'd reread the hospital pre-op instructions for the umpteenth time, she'd realised she was required to take a pair of these anachronistic footwear. She didn't have any. Emil had finally dug an old pair of his from the bottom of the wardrobe, not used since their last Christmas trip back to Copenhagen. *Where are yours?* he'd asked, forgetting she'd left her Uggs with a great-niece because they were more Aussie, and hugely more attractive to a young Dane, than a toy koala. So, Emil's felted slippers with rubber soles bottomed off the pre-op ensemble Sofie had to wear as she waited. The hospital supplied garment, too, was embarrassing. All the patients in the waiting room had the same identical cotton shifts which tied inadequately at the back.

Each patient was taken away in turn. Her husband's floppy slippers went under the hospital gurney beside Sofie's bag of street clothes when it came her turn to be loaded up. Sofie felt like just another piece of luggage, positioned and repositioned to centre her on a pillow that crackled plastically under her head.

Brakes off, she travelled backwards towards the theatre to a performance she had no interest in attending. The ceiling flashed

past in frames, doorways seemed impassable, like sudden cliffs in this disorienting, upside-down world.

What Happened Before That

They were so young. Sofie heard her *tante* and her beloved *mor* whispering and though she never knew what they said, her future was suddenly something up for discussion rather than assumed.

Her boyfriend had a chance to study in Australia. They were childhood sweethearts. These older heads, her mother and aunt, stuck the couple firmly in the puppy love category—in other words there was absolutely no reason for her to follow him, baby or not. It was 1986 after all, the year of the emancipated woman—one had even been selected to go into space. No need to remember how the launch of the Space Shuttle Challenger ended.

Defiance was part of Sofie's next move. She followed Emil to the other side of the world once he'd set up an apartment in St Kilda. They celebrated her 19th birthday at a wobbly card table in their otherwise empty dining room. Defiance was only part of her decision though. Escape was a big part of it too. The other side of the world was almost far enough to run. Almost.

Together, she and Emil took the chances offered. Their world had already been turned upside-down and they figured the move would set them upright. Emil insisted he thanked their lucky stars—a term they learned in the advanced English classes on arrival.

Only now and then a smell, an image out of the corner of her eye, a situation, could jolt her back in time.

The hospital gurney stopped. The brake beneath it ground into the locked position. The next waystation housed the anaesthetist. There was a pause between his peppered questions, a tiny gap but not small enough to keep the past at bay. She tried to stay in the moment, to resist the spiral back to another anaesthetist, another 'procedure.' But Sofie felt the twin forces of fear and anger surge in her chest.

The fear had swamped the anger at the time, but not anymore. The anger surged up from a bottomless well. It travelled faster than a jumbo jet and was already in St Kilda when she'd arrived and she turned it on herself like a weapon, as a punishment for listening to the fear and not continuing a true hero's journey.

How the Beginning Ended

No one who hadn't lived through it understood, despite the talk of the pandemic being society-changing and the first years of this decade being a time of unprecedented disaster. No one would even consider the idea of nuclear power plants in Australia if they understood. In 1986, it hadn't just been the airborne radiation spreading out from Chernobyl doing damage to those who breathed it in. Fear attached itself to the aftershock in new and fiendish ways. The afterlife of fear is almost as long as that of anger.

A more accurate account of Sofie's decision than memory later allowed could be found in her therapy notes from that year. She often wondered how coherent even they would be. All she remembered was looking out the window into the fog and the buildings opposite bleeding grey into the misty white.

Fragile new life was incalculably vulnerable to radiation damage. The word 'dilate' was the least of it when it came to the new vocabulary she learned in the month after Chernobyl. Microcephaly with accompanying mental retardation, congenital heart disease, jelly babies born without bones. Deformities, anomalies, freaks and frights.

Sofie had sat opposite the counsellor, numb. She was a little girl who'd been too greedy imagining every kind of happiness growing inside her—the most beautiful baby ever. They would be the perfect family. Her womb could encompass all that was good in the world.

Turned out she really was like greedy Fat Cat of folktale who'd gobbled up all he came across and had to have it cut out of him, including the old woman and the birds and the seven girls dancing and

his owner's iron pot.

The abortion was very simple. Clinical in every way.

What Could Not Happen

The operating theatre's lamps were collected into one all-seeing eye above her. A nurse removed Sofie's hospital mask and fitted an oxygen mask. For two seconds, between the two, Sofie breathed normally. Then the oblivion of the general anaesthetic. The bliss of time passing without the knowledge of time passing.

All she knew was she was suddenly in another place in the hospital. She willed herself to linger in the hazy brain fog of coming to. Tried to imagine her daughter waiting outside in the car park to take her home. In a green jumper knitted by her *mormor* back in Denmark, with Sofie's grandchild on her hip tugging at her mask to see mummy smile.

How There is No End

A different nurse in the same sort of duckbill mask offered Sofie a cup of tea and some sandwiches. Sofie almost said no—a reflexive self-denial. The clock said 5 pm. She hadn't been allowed eat before coming in. It was well and truly time to break her fast.

The bread was soft and the cheese bland. The triangle of sandwich was the ambrosia of the gods. Sofie held it in her mouth, feeling like a child being fed nursery food, feeling cared for. At the end of the blanket draped across her, she could see Emil's Danish slippers already on her feet. Her left big toe poked through a rift in the felted fabric. Emil always left it to the last minute to cut his toenails.

As she swallowed the first and then the second triangle of unexpected ambrosia, she remembered the night they'd first noticed the hole. It was on a visit home—there was no reason to wear slippers in their new Australian home—as he was clearing away the *gløgg* glasses, dripping dregs of the mulled wine as he attempted to carry them all at once. Sofie, curled in her mother's favourite armchair in front of the

open fire, hadn't attempted to help.

'Look, your slippers are ruined,' she'd observed.

'They'll do,' he'd contradicted her.

She'd complained about his pedicure habits and felt the jetlag sharpen her tongue. Until her sister in the chair opposite laughed.

'If that's your only grounds for divorce. Consider yourself queen.'

So, Sofie had pretended to laugh with her sister and mother and aunt. It was always good to be back with her family—for about five minutes.

In more ways than one, she wasn't so alone in Copenhagen. There was solidarity in numbers. About 400 other women had made the same choice and aborted their babies during the rage of 'radiophobia' in those wretched months after the Chernobyl disaster. A study later reported upwards of 200,000 excess abortions had been performed across Europe for the same reason. Sofie was a statistic.

Here, now, she tried again to convince herself that all 200,000 procedures had been nothing more than the one she'd just had as a menopausal woman—simply a dilating and a scraping out of the errant contents of the uterus.

No wonder it was all coming back now. A third triangle of cheese sandwich was not going to soothe the ache of tears rising past the bread in her throat. Her body carried the scars and they were a time vortex back to that moment, cursed to relive it, to be unable to change it.

The Next Step Ahead

There was no daughter waiting to pick Sofie up in the hospital car park. There was only a lifetime of imagining how her aborted child would have progressed to this point. The miracle of conception, so accidental that first time, had failed in her useless womb from then on. She didn't fear the biopsy results. Best rid of her uterus, she told herself.

The tears formed in her eyes and nostrils. Sofie sniffled. No one would catch her being emotional. But, unfortunately, the recovery room was set up for observation. The cup-of-tea-nurse came past, offered her

another and said, 'try not to worry. The results won't take long, only days, and best not to cross that bridge until . . . '

Sofie made no attempt to explain she wasn't upset about today. She reassembled her stony face, the one that was born following the procedure in 1986 and forged through years of imagining that the foetus had been developing normally. Or had not been. Or had. Or not.

She couldn't wait to get outside. She hadn't seen a window all day and had lost her inner compass. It could be summer, winter, wet or dry, beyond the door. A bushfire could have darkened the sky, a new virus could have arrived on their shores. Sofie stayed marooned indoors once the secret of Chernobyl was out, regressing to a cave dweller. Living in fear before anger arrived.

'Can I go?' Sofie called across to the duck nearest the door.

She knew she was still on her quest. She couldn't return home because she was lost in the woods unable to find the paths between death and rebirth and transformation. She was no hero. She couldn't save anyone because she couldn't save herself. Try pity? Try forgiveness? They'd drown her. Only the ravening angry wolf could keep her moving.

'Soon, soon,' the nurse told her. 'Just a little longer for final obs.'

Sofie stuffed the last triangle of bread in her mouth to stopper the rising bile.

THE INTIMACY OF BATS

Alison Eastley

After the summer of pollination, the noise of dying insects
is nothing but a thin tremor for a clique of circling wings,
this strange ceremony of long-eared bats hanging up
side down in the backblocks behind thin-skinned paperbarks,

I remember saying *melaleuca, melaleuca* as if milk,
honey and wine could incite dangerous sensations
away from my hymn to egg-shaped leaves, how I stripped
the paperbarks until my fingers bled and once,

we carried torches and a glass of red under a galaxy
of stone-pocked silence too heavy to survive
another hibernation. It's too cold to decipher far
fetched forgetfulness, to reach your overstretched truth.

It was the nightmare of your lies paralysing
the earthbound flight of my desire that kept me wishing
I could be more like a long-eared bat, how they save
their breath every winter and lose all interest in sex.

FOUR HOLES

Kari Ann Ebert

after Patrick Donnelly

One

The light above my desk buzzes and dies; I
thumb the hole in my sweater, unravel its wool.

Two

Our marching band needed extra practices Our lines
looked more like rubber band finger pistols or
a Walmart necklace we couldn't untangle. Mr Wade
barked at the colour guard: *You're not cold Stop
shivering!* Told the clarinettists if they thought
of Hawaii they'd warm up. *Roll step Roll step!* Jason
and the trumpeters drifted off their geometry:
unravel of pinwheel careening.

Mr Wade told me to play louder: *Make the guy at the top
of the bleachers scared.*
I readjusted my embouchure. Used the faux smile
technique. The next day
in math class, I circled the initials E.M.
round and round,
pressed
so hard I circled down and down
through each page to the back of my notebook.

A perfect pit:
symmetrical as the drumline in rotating-
wheel formation.

Three

Vicki dared me to dig in the dirt
piled up by the new addition.
She declared my dolls dead. Needed to be buried. Couldn't be
brought back. *Everyone dies*. She whispered
lowering each on a length of yarn
into its grave.

I wake some nights unnerved by the vanish
of light. Feel like I'm looking up from the bottom
of a chasm. As if I am the secret
even my sister can't
untangle.

Four

the way the earth
disrespects a boundary

the way light dies once the
door is closed

the way my shoe gives up
trying to keep out the cold

lets itself be split open
from too much pressure

BURNT SIENNA

Lana Eileen

Burnt sienna pigment portal spilling spinning splitting into paint
on paint on canvas on wood on skin on memory of burnt sienna of
reddish-brown the colour of earth of blood of rust of

fox fur of terracotta of dead leaves of desert of clay of deer hide of heat
of dust

of the eyes of someone you loved once long ago in the before this with
burnt sienna on your hands on your cheek on your mouth on his mouth
at the edge of the world where the sky turns burnt sienna and the stars
shake your hair was

burnt sienna in the aching dismissal of evening raking light and
everything fell to its knees in burnt sienna.

EVENING SHIFT

Lena Fransham

After the park there are no more trees, but the plastic bags are everywhere. Caught on powerlines, waving from fences, filling and emptying like lungs. The wind shreds them steadily. They're trying to ban plastic bags because they're choking the waterways and plastic is in our bloodstreams now.

The wind roars down Willis Street, pushing me before it in the blocky shadow of the high-rises. On a balcony, a small, bent woman is watering her geraniums and nasturtiums with shaking hands. Red and gold flowers overflow across the concrete and through the rails. I wonder how they can bloom so brightly when it is so cold.

When I arrive at the office tower I put on my work face. It's like a plastic bag; suffocating, but if I don't wear it I might spill out in front of everyone.

In the glare of the kitchenette lights, Tom's eyes flick over me and back to his reflection in the glass door. He pats at his hair and turns to his coffee. He was my trainer; I should try harder with him.

—Hi Tom.

—Hi, how are you going.

—Good thanks. How's it been since your promotion?

But Tom has taken his cup and is already in the corridor.

I get a desk near the toilets. I make forty-one calls for the cancer research fundraiser. Most people don't mind donating to cancer research if they can afford it. Only two people abuse me in the first hour. There are some twenty-dollar donors. A man with a quiet voice says he can't afford it and I don't push any harder. I hope the manager isn't listening. An old woman called Dodie offers fifty dollars before I ask and tells me what a wonderful job I'm doing. She speaks in hurried bursts, all her

words jostling to be heard. Her husband and son died of cancer, and she had it too so she only has one real breast now. I made the other one myself, she says. I'm lucky to be alive, even with my knitted boob. Her laugh is girlish.

—You have such a nice voice, she says. I can tell you care. I wish more people were like you.

I can't hang up after she's said that, so I talk to her for too long. Latisha got laid off because her calls weren't time efficient. But she said it was really because she turned the boss down when he tried to grope her in the lift.

Tom, Anita and Gary vape on the steps, talking about Tom's promotion. I drink coffee by the door as the light fades from the sky. I wonder if I can pay for Erina's school camp with the power bill money. I try not to think about the look on her face when I said she could go, like she didn't want to hope too much.

The big guy from the Rescue Services line, Kahu, comes out and stands beside me in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, watching the traffic. His eyelids are heavy. He did a double shift yesterday too.

After the break I am on the Child Poverty line by the east windows. I sit next to Tom and look out at the peak hour queues on the highway, the lights coming on in the Ministry buildings.

The first two calls are hang-ups. Click, buzz. Click, buzz. *Stop fucking calling me.* Next guy shouts that he's not going to subsidise parents who buy drugs instead of feeding their kids. I have to interrupt him so I can move on to the next call. Click, buzz. A woman says she will donate a twenty if I promise not to call her again. When I've taken her details and said goodbye I pause the autodial and close my eyes. Breathe in and out. Picture geraniums and marigolds on a balcony. Wonder what Erina's doing at home.

I go onto the next call, a woman who says her husband's sick in hospital and she can't afford any extras this week. I'm so sorry, she says. I'm supposed to push her to take the pensioner special option, but I

can't do it even though I might lose my bonus and the rent will be tight. And Erina's camp money. I rub my eyes and then see Tom looking at me across the divider. He's listening to my calls.

The old woman sounds sleepy when she answers.

—I'm so sorry dear. You seem very nice, but I don't have enough today. My heating bill was really high and I've got to cut back.

I take a breath, recalling the patter Tom taught me.

—I understand what that's like, believe me. But I tell you what. Because you're such a caring person I'll do you a special raffle ticket deal, just for the sake of those hungry kids. They need people like you. I don't offer this to just anyone. You never know, you might win a boat.

—But I—

—You're so kind to be doing this. Those kids going to school with no breakfast are lucky to have people like you. So what was your credit card number?

I hear her resolve collapsing. Her voice grows faint as she reads out the numbers on her card. I wonder if she's going to fall behind in her rent too.

The next guy to pick up begs me not to call again. Click, buzz, next call. The woman who answers interrupts my spiel and says *parasites like you should be wiped out*.

No one else cries in the office. I have to go into the bathroom for a while. After I come out Tom avoids my eyes, but he leans over and says the boss wants me.

I hang up my headset and walk past the kitchenette and down the corridor to the white room. The boss sniffs and doesn't look at me.

—Some serious issues with your calls today. He shifts his glasses on his nose, gazing out at the lights on the quay.

—I know.

—If you're going to have leisurely chats, you have to make them lucrative. Every minute's a dollar. You keep letting the pensioners slide. Our charities need us.

—I know.

—You need to pick up your act or the bonus isn't the only thing you'll lose, I'm afraid.

I go to the bathroom and count to ten. The bonus isn't much anyway. I'll save money by walking home instead of taking the bus.

I listen to the next woman talk about her late husband, and I don't push her to get the pensioner special. The next guy's voice strains against his wheeze. His grandson is staying with him because the boy's mum's in hospital. His grandson is twelve and doesn't read very well but he builds model planes. He worries about his mum too much. She's got heart problems.

I don't ask him for money. I watch the stream of headlights on the highway and listen.

—Boy's going on school camp the week after next. I had to pay for it because his mum's been off work. That's why things are bit tight for me this week. You got any kids, love?

In the lift Kahu asks me if I'm ok. I fumble my words as the doors open on the foyer. He touches my shoulder.

—I used to cry sometimes too. You get better at hiding how you feel.

He raises his hand in goodbye and strides out across the road to the bus stop. I walk up Willis Street, counting the plastic bags hanging from the road signs and waving from the wires. In the still dark, they are barely a twitch in the air, a colourless rustle.

The shortcut saves me half an hour, but I stay on the side of the road furthest from the park because there are no lights in there. The words *parasites like you* echo in my head.

The flat is cool and quiet. The familiar bulk of Erina's coat over the armchair, the glint of a bowl on the table where she's eaten. Her room is dark but I can hear her slow breathing. She mumbles in her sleep and turns over. Sometimes she gets scared when I'm not home at night. I lie down behind her and stroke her hair for a while.

I have eight hours till my shift starts. I lie awake thinking about the woman who called me a parasite. Then I remember Dodie and her knitted boob and Kahu's hand on my shoulder, and I listen to Erina's soft snores, and when I sleep I dream of a gate in a wall and behind it a garden bursting with red and yellow flowers so beautiful I can hardly bear to look at them.

FOLDING EACH OTHER'S UNDERWEAR

Lee Fraser

15 years married today. Not
what I expected. No BFF
starstruck *you complete me*
business. The violins, those
twirling candlelit gazes
are the domain of the screen
not our living room.

I tip my veil to the ordinary,
committing no filigree platitudes
to parchment, but each time
we fold each other's underwear
a signature. I hereby remain
through the liturgy of evening
TV and supermarket bulbs.

That day—your suit, my dress, our
best guess dreams, long shelved
as part of some other life—quietly
reborn as defiance of disposable
relationships. As good; enough,
whether or not hope's arms
eventually uncross to clasp my face.

ALABASTER DREAMS

Leone Gabrielle

streetlight
eye
glistens

he
—fragments in my run for years

in
ten
days
he
will
be
dead

two years

our-body lives in my bones

lung-full i nose his
shoes in cupboard

his air gone

he is
over

i have-to understand

HAIKUS

Renoir Gaither

three days on the road
hotel fridge hums 'om',
belly empty, wide-eyed

windowed mannequins
flower-clad, staring into night
weeks-old half-price sale

she, a highway
i, soot
no off-ramp in sight

pomegranate seeds
bowled on cold, stained sink—
too late to floss

THE CLOSED SPACES

Angela Gardner

will it always
come down to two men fighting? First with enormous weapons
then grunting hand to hand. *Two Figures in the Grass*,
a Francis Bacon painting. Fighting or fucking? It's hard
to tell the difference. I look back at the Amy Sillman essay
on diagrams (I am at the chess club in the church hall).
Around me it's the end game. All looks hopeless.
The white king avoids the corner, avoids the closed spaces,
avoids his opponent, until the distant past, with its random
and excessive elements, resurfaces in the form of a knight
relentless, bloodied and with intermittent flares.

MY DAYS ARE MARKED

Claire Gaskin

by the opening and closing of the blinds the caw of the shiny night crow and that of my neighbour's an hour later the overbreeding lorikeets drunk on the overplanting of red flowering gums from Western Australia in Victoria the butcher bird sings on the clothesline knowing what it's like to live in this body that was the site with grey socks and stained slippers the trees mistake the wind for reason it has no reason just the incense as the clock whirrs under the weight of marking time for the jade plant in a rusted tin a lampshade made of broken glass and copper wire a closing of the drawer full of out of date medication betrayal as intimate as sand in my teeth a full moon over peak hour traffic the crane

TANNED FINGER

Rich Glinnen

Compared to the rest on my hand,
my index finger is tanned,
as if it just got back from vacation,
while the other four picked up the slack.
You should've seen them
trying to point the finger
when something fell through the cracks.

LA ISLA SE MUDÓ

Alessandra Gonzalez

Cuba did not stay behind. She carried over in the Spanish lullabies sung by the wind in the mango trees in the summer, folded herself into rosaries and diluted into violet waters, stamped herself into passport pages with holographs of hope shining through the cover. She left in the 80s on a raft in the saltwater on your great grandfather's feet, in the damp cigar stuffed in his coat pocket. She left on a plane with your grandmother's dreams rolling around in an empty suitcase, creased into the family photos she managed to stow away in the chaos. The island built herself anew in Little Havana, in Hialeah, in your kitchen smelling of pulled pork and garlic and the aggressive smacking of dominos on the kitchen table. She mellowed into the foam on the very top of espresso cups, the golden-brown crunch of ham croquetas, the change from *homeland or death* to *homeland and life* proudly escaping from every immigrant's lips. Cuba moved with her people, she dances to the rhythm of the bongos through memories of sepia beaches and peeling pastel buildings. The island changed her address—moved into our kitchens, our music, our new soil that remembers the taste of mangoes even in the winter.

EVEN AS A CANNIBAL

Ashley Graegin

A few days ago, he told me that if we started a family, he couldn't think of a single reason he'd leave me. *Unless you were a cannibal,* he added.

Days later, when he told me he loved me, I asked: *Even if it happened once? At a funeral for a stranger, in an empty room, six months ago—if I confessed, ashamed, and asked for help?*

I spun the scenario to make myself sympathetic. We laughed even when he said, *Yes. You're eating people. It's wrong.*

It's not wrong, I argued, citing cultural relativism. He said it was like *Would you break up with me if I were a worm?* I said it was *Would you break up with me if I had a psychotic break?*

We went quiet, then apologised.

He said he'd love me unconditionally and that he should have stopped when he realised where this was headed instead of fixating on the part about cannibalism. I said it was a stupid question. I hadn't realised how much I cared when we started. (We'd been arguing for twenty minutes.)

He said the real disagreement was our stance on the morality of cannibalism—only it wasn't.

And the truth is, it's okay to have limits and leave if I become unrecognisable. But doesn't 'unconditionally' mean, even as a cannibal?

FUNDAMENTAL CONSTANTS

Soramimi Hanarejima

Standing underneath Millie's favourite tree, I look up into the splay of branches and squint at the sunlight streaming through the canopy. Once my eyes have adjusted, I scan the boughs for any that are unusual—one leaning heavily on another or, less likely but more telling, a branch that has an ear/thumb/ankle/any vaguely human-looking feature. But I keep spacing out, my mind asking over and over, 'How am I going to manage while you're away?' because I'm desperate to know what to do when it's just Millie and me for not just the day but days on end. With no one to give me a break from her and everything she can become, I'm guaranteed to be completely exhausted by the end of each day, if not well before.

A breeze jostles the leaves above me and brushes my hands with cool air. I put them in my coat pockets, my right hand pressing up against the little jacket that's been balled up since we got to the park—a reminder that I have to find her before she gets cold. So I scrutinise the branches as intently as I can. Still, I have to sweep my gaze around the tree's crown three times before I'm satisfied that she isn't here.

Briskly, I make my way across the field since there's no way for her to hide in this wide open space. If there were dogs playing here with their owners, she might be a golden retriever or black labrador sauntering about, waiting for me to figure out that she doesn't belong to any of the dog owners. But no one's here, and the field feels especially empty without you and Millie running on the grass, switching roles of pursuer and pursued whenever one of you catches up to the other, all the while transforming—giraffe and wolf, then ostrich and pony, then jaguar and manticore—shrinking with distance. Once you're thousands of miles away, that will leave only me to chase her and be chased by her—a weak

substitute for what's by far her favourite activity.

As I draw closer to it, I scan the little playground abutting the field. Nothing seems out of place there either. No extra equipment, no additional trash can. Nothing that gets my attention, except a toddler at the top of the slide with his mother waiting below. I half expect him to become an armadillo or pangolin, to ball up and roll down the slide for his mother to catch. Of course that's not going to happen, but it's become second nature to think about kids the way I do with Millie—always anticipating the next transformation.

Rarely is it the other way around. Millie only truly strikes me as an ordinary kid when she's riding in the car, mesmerised by the scenery scrolling by outside the window. Otherwise, she seems ever perched at the cusp of transforming. Even so, seldom do I ever wish that her appearance would only change with a Halloween costume or age. The last time I felt that way was a couple of weeks ago, when she became an ankylosaurus and tore her new purple sweatshirt—then asked me to buy her another one.

Besides the mother and child, there's only one other thing that's not part of the playground: a stroller sitting by the empty swing set. That must belong to them. It's too complicated a shape for Millie to make. So unless she's lying on the ground trying to blend in with the wood chips that carpet this part of the park (which would be gross even to her 4-year-old mind), she's got to be somewhere else.

Bearing left, I head for the garden where she could be disguised as a rain barrel or bag of mulch or even a hose coiled up on a reel. The range of objects she can mimic has expanded tremendously in the last month and now impresses even you—surpassing your expectations for what's possible at her age thanks to all those weekday evenings and weekend afternoons you spent channelling her excitement for becoming animals into the disciplined practice of turning her hand into a lobster claw or tiger paw, her skin into wrinkled linen and plaid flannel, her erect body into a marble column. She's a fast learner when she's motivated, and

what could be more motivating than seeing you become a polar bear?

Before we know it, your pupil in the art of transformation won't be limited to turning into things she's seen. Like her teacher, she'll be capable of becoming creatures and objects of pure imagination—albeit only roughly at first, probably neglecting to change one of her eyes or toes as she often does with new forms. I don't know what I'm going to do if she makes that leap in ability while you're away. We've already put away the books with pictures of things we don't want her turning into (which includes mermaids, because even though I'd love to see her as one, she'd want to swim in that form at the rec centre pool or at least splash her tail in the tub for who knows how long). But no matter how vigilant we continue to be about what she sees in magazines and videos, the sky's the limit for what she could dream up with everything from sleek robots to chimeric monsters within her morphing grasp. Fortunately, the damage she could do would be limited. She'd still have to concentrate to become whatever she's imagined, and since she can't focus on transforming when she's upset, her tantrums will just be a raging little human, her own kind of monster.

In the garden, I find only plants. Tulips in full bloom and fruit trees leafing out. No new birdbath or compost heap. I'm about to head to the obstacle course when something catches my eye. The last shrub in the hedge by the garden's gate. Smaller than the others with not a single gap in its foliage to give even the tiniest glimpse of the street beyond it, this one has to be her. So I walk over and tickle this shrub, my fingertips agitating leaves that are too warm for any kind of plant. With squeals of laughter, the little mass of foliage and twigs morphs into her, crouching and naked. And yet again I'm thankful that hardly anyone comes to this park on weekdays.

Once the laughter has ebbed to leave her merely grinning, I take out her jacket from my coat pocket and get her to put it on. The weather is warm enough that she doesn't feel cold, but she's been losing body heat the whole time I've been looking for her. I get the jacket zipped up, and

I'm about tell her to make herself look like she's wearing pants, but she changes into a monkey. That of course means it's back to her favourite tree and it'll be a while until we go home for lunch. Which is fine with me. I never get tired of seeing her up in those branches. And climbing on top of playing hide and seek means that she'll nap soundly for a while this afternoon—a calm couple of hours when I can just check on her every half hour or so, maybe find her a panther cub or kangaroo joey or coyote curled up on the bed, maybe come up with a plan for what I can do while you're away.

TOUCAN

Jane Hider

6 am

The text arrives overnight. Two words and a date and time. She mutes her phone and places it face down on the bedside table. She doesn't wake him because it's Sunday, the only day he gets to sleep past dawn, and she doesn't wake her daughter because she doesn't know what to say.

Instead, she goes to the bathroom, stands barefoot on the cool tiles. There's a chill in the air. She's promised herself not to turn the heating on until May, no matter how cold the autumn is. Above the toilet, a photo in a gilt frame. The subject is leaning forward and laughing, auburn hair in face framing waves, a silk scarf around her neck, beige skivvy, cigarette angled between the tips of her fingers, the burning ember close enough to be dangerous. On the edge. That was her way. It's only now she realises that this image, all of it, gazing down at her as she's sat here over the years, was a sentinel, a reminder of the worst that a person can be.

She should cry, but there aren't any tears. There's nothing. Nothing but a brittle relief, cool as a sea breeze.

She turns off the light and leaves the bathroom.

Everything is packed away in a vacuum-sealed bag at the top of the hall wardrobe, and when she pulls on the handle a blanket lands on her head. She kneels on the floor and twists the seal open, expecting a spurt of dust, something to signify the years, but instead there's a soft sigh as the bag puffs up, as if she has detached the oxygen tube from a space suit. She leans forward and breathes in the powdery air, then vanilla and myrrh wafting up from their tomb.

She should have accepted her brother's offer to store these items for her. They're taking up a lot of space. She reaches her hand inside and

pulls out a burgundy resin bangle and a crisp linen shirt, a little yellowed at the collar. What are these items, anyway? A trophy? A ransom? A relic? The scent is filling her nostrils, making it difficult to breathe.

She stands and stumbles away, back towards the bathroom.

9 am

Mia holds a necklace of red beads aloft in one hand and a silk scarf in the other. The scarf is orange and sapphire, a section of the hind leg of a horse visible in one corner, and the necklace has a large ceramic toucan dangling from the centre.

'Mum, this stuff is amazing. Can I wear it? I found some kind of jumpsuit, silk, a fuchsia colour, I could wear it to the silent disco at the end of term, although it smells a bit like ice cream, and there's this skirt, short with flouncy layers …'

'It's called a ra-ra skirt', she says, exchanging a look with her husband. 'It's my mother's stuff, darling. I unpacked it this morning, and …'

'Piled it up neatly in the hallway', he says, eyes focussed on his toast and the thin squares of butter laid out on it. 'Would you like me to move it? Tripping hazard and all that.'

'Can I?' Mia says. 'I could sort through it, pick out some things, and …' she raises her eyebrows expectantly. No lounging around in pyjamas for Mia, she's dressed for the day, in her usual, taupe pants and a cream tank top, bland and form fitting, a kind of reality TV star uniform. Mia's tall for her age, and only just starting to develop, but it's pretty obvious she needs to be fitted for a bra. Her own experience of this milestone consisted of a fifty-dollar note being shoved at her along with an instruction to catch the tram into the city and sort herself out.

Mia leaves the room and returns with a waterfall of ombre sequins draped over her arm. A slip dress of some sort, the bronze paillettes reflecting in her daughter's eyes, held out like an offering.

She forces a smile. 'You can have what you want, darling. There's a couple of other boxes in the hall cupboard, one's got hats, the other shoes.'

'But why is it here?' Mia asks.

'Oh. Well, when my mother moved into Shellhaven, there was no room.'

Her husband clears his throat.

She finishes her coffee in one bitter gulp. 'Mia, I have some news.'

12 pm

Before the tight morning smile, before the false concern across the dinner table about her hairstyle or weight gain or eyeliner colour, before all that, there was a woman who glittered in the candlelight and went out every night, to charity events and dinner parties, in towering, strappy heels, her toenails scarlet, legs smooth and olive, leaving her children with a drab babysitter who made them go to bed at eight and never heated up the lasagne properly.

Each night she sat on the dressing room floor, watching her mother apply powder and mascara and choose a handbag to match her outfit. She played a game in her mind where she tried to cloak herself in silence, sitting, immoveable, like a giant boulder. That way, her mother would forget she was there, and she might even catch a glimpse of the real person, the one underneath the foundation and coral lipstick, not the one she disappointed daily. Someone else, someone who loved to hug, who smiled because she was happy to see her children and expected nothing of them in return.

This person never emerged.

She finds herself wandering, dazed, around the house, until her husband points out it's after midday and they should think about food, and perhaps he could make something simple, spaghetti with garlic and chilli and parsley and lots of parmesan. It sits before her in an oily, unappetising puddle, and she averts her eyes from the food, and from Mia, who arrives at the table in a metallic striped turtleneck in clashing tones, the one her grandmother used to wear at Sunday lunch, and a prairie skirt which reaches down to her ankles. She's put the toucan

necklace on, and it gazes, dead-eyed, down at the meal.

'When's the funeral?' Mia asks.

'This Thursday.'

Her daughter frowns. Thursday is netball practice, and she's just been selected for the under-14 A team. Practice is important, and a failure to turn up puts one's spot at risk. She watches her daughter rearrange her expression. She makes a choice. 'So I'll have to miss practice then.'

'Actually', she says, reaching for the bottle of Reisling and refilling her glass, 'we may not be able to go to the funeral.'

Something dark and unforgiving crosses her daughter's face. 'What? We have to. It's Granny.' Her daughter hasn't seen her grandmother for five years, since a visit crammed into the back end of a drive home from Sydney. They were hot and tired, and her mother was sitting regally in the hospital style bed, wearing a pale pink bedjacket and a string of pearls, frowning at the grimy inadequacy of her little family's appearance. This was before it got bad, before the demands to return home to the long-ago sold childhood house to locate the spanner in the kitchen junk drawer and the refusal to shower until her once shiny auburn hair hung in lank greasy sections down her back and the stealing of the remote control from the centre's activity room and the constant, endless questions, mostly asking after long-dead or long-despised people, enemies from her mother's past, villains in the story of her life, once glamorous and hard-edged, now so pathetic and soft.

'Mia', her husband says. 'Some things are complicated.'

'How?' she says, swinging around to glare at her. 'Mum? What does that even mean? It's not complicated, it's simple. It's your *own* mother's funeral.'

They watch as Mia leaves the room, stomping a little and then, as if to apologise, closing the door gently behind her.

'She'll come around', he says.

'You think? We need to make an excuse. It is a long drive, four hours at least. Shall we go with that?'

He leans across and rests his hand on hers. 'Have you thought about telling her the truth?'

She recoils. It has been many years since they've had this conversation. The problem of her mother was solved, she thought, by her absence in their lives. Truth is an irrelevant consideration. Mia, on the cusp of adulthood, who still sucks her thumb and cries about their kitten who died when hit by a car last year, who has only ever known warmth and interest around the dinner table. Her Mia. She will not open that side of the world to her.

Not now.

Not yet.

She feels suddenly hot. She removes her hand, wipes her forehead. 'I can't do it.'

3 pm

'How can you die of dementia?' Mia asks, looking up from her phone.

She wasn't sure herself, had to google it in light of the unconvincing nature of the gerontologist's explanation, but then again, it was all second-hand, issued by her brother in a long voice mail message this afternoon. 'You don't die of it, but it weakens your immune system. She had aspiration pneumonia, caused an infection, and she couldn't fight it.'

'Sophie's grandpa has dementia', Mia says. 'She told me he sometimes walks in the street in no pants. Granny was okay when we last visited, wasn't she?'

'Yes, but that was a few years ago, and it, um, accelerated.'

'Did she have friends in Shellhaven?'

'I expect so, Mia. It's a nice place, and she was a talkative person. I'm sure she had lots of friends.'

'Will they go to the funeral?'

'If they can, sure.'

She nods, seemingly satisfied with the answer. 'And Uncle Rob?'

Her brother, all sandy hair and freckles, the star sportsman, the star

student. He got the best of their mother, each and every time. 'Yes, Uncle Rob will be there, and your cousins.'

For a minute she fears Mia is going to ask if she could go with them, and she thinks, *that would be fine*. She will not stop her. But instead, she nods again. 'The most important thing is that we are together, isn't that right?'

'That's what I've always said. Look, I'm sorry. I promise one day I will explain it all to you. How about we get Rob to get us an extra copy of the order of service, just for you. It will have a nice photo on the front.'

Mia smiles. 'That would be good.'

6 pm

He makes dinner, a toasted sandwich with lots of siracha and butter, the cheese stretching into strings as they eat it. Mia has removed the stripey turtleneck and is wearing a chunky Aran knit, an item that triggers memories of weekends in the snow at Lake Mountain, slipping in the slush.

Mia tells her parents that she's going to make a pile of Granny's things and store them in a special location in her cupboard, along with a scented sachet of lavender.

They both nod agreeably.

Once Mia has left, they sit in silence.

'Do you think we made a mistake with Mia?'

He shrugs. 'How can you ever know? What's the counterfactual?'

'You don't have to be such a lawyer. Of course we'll never know, but honesty's important, and I've hidden so much.' She looks down at her lap, realises she's still in her pyjamas. She hasn't brushed her teeth or hair and there's a stain down her front. Cheese, or maybe olive oil.

'Okay', he says.

'You know my mother always did exactly what she wanted to do. Am I any better?'

He frowned. 'You're a completely different person.'

'But I'm depriving our daughter of her right to closure, to farewell a family member. I mean, what difference does it make if we're there or not? She's dead.'

'That's exactly why you should look after yourself first and not worry about how it looks or seems.'

'I've tried so hard to keep it simple. I just do the opposite thing to what my mother would do. Seems to me it's a good guideline.'

He reaches for her hand, rests his fingers on the inside of her wrist, on the three round scars, silvery and puckered, usually covered by the long sleeves or her special foundation. In spite of the care she takes, sometimes people notice, in meetings or in a shop, and their eyes widen as they look away, shocked and embarrassed. She's not sure why she hides them anymore. They're an injury, nothing more or less, unavoidable and inevitable. The shame was always misplaced.

He nods, his eyes on her hand. 'Yes, it's a good guideline.'

REMEMBER THE FUTURE

D.A. Hosek

I remember the future
and this is not it.
I have no robot maid no
flying car no
life with you.
Facetime and Facebook and
free online shipping are
no compensation for
the loss of what we should have had.

FIRELINE

Ella Jeffery

Poincianas mince sunlight
onto the running track. Leopard trees
excitable as wedding guests
send me off in a froth of green,
path I take each day past lemon trees
short and calm as princes, rubbishy
little bushes slick with black ants
or patched with rags of lichen, fig trees
with roots like raised staples, reeking
where some slanderous juice
lacquers the upper branches. Hooligan
jacarandas graffiti the clean suburbs
and camphor leaves stream
into empty parks where people
say the king brown swims.
Green mangoes braise in gutters,
bats embezzle loose fruit in a backyard
tree. I duck an embarrassment
of storm-shorn wattles, their ruined fur
soaked to my runners. Paperbark
shellacks parked cars politely lined
streetside, now scarcer here,
where footpath dissolves into grass
white as butcher's paper beside
stockless pasture, and I run
on the cat's-tongue drag of tar.
At the line of burnt gums I stop

to find the dram of a stem, to settle
my mind on the roan leaves now
forcing past each tree's shell of char
and, turning home, a spray
of grasshoppers flash up from ash
and bark—tiny, sudden, green.

GENEROUS AS CLOTH FALLING

Jill Jones

after Sappho, Dickinson, Stein

What does the heart say as wind shakes the far trees
A chair is a hope, a table is welcome

Each purse is tender in its folds
A line hides an ardent place

What is more frantic than a blouse
A box as a double

Colours of clothes are enclosures
Shoes leave slowly

Why heft fate, why not tread through moonlight
The fire is in between

Did my mind follow its dark valley
Or do I trample to forget

The sky whirrs with wings
I'm still a child of spring even when I forget my quiet mind

Dusk peels day from its books and pencils
At last, there's no puzzle in your beautiful hair

Not even the ghostly dead tonight
A feather is more than a sound

The apples as we fell, the leaves as we slept
Cloaks as haste, when we arose

Touch is given in tender for another
No regrets, as one rose says to another

I am scattered as dawn through trees
Sky's torn by light

THE NARRATOR'S CONVERSATION WITH A FIGMENT OF HER IMAGINATION— AFTER HER FINAL RETURN FROM THE UNHOLY LAND, 2023

Louise Katz

If you're going to talk about this, says my Figment, about your most recent visit to Jerusalem, then don't even consider any sort of craven shillyshallying around the edges, no hedging.

I don't hedge.

Okay. You do have a stance. Not always stated as clearly as it might be … but never mind. I also have a second instruction.

Instruction. I don't get instructed by Figments.

Yes you do, and so does everyone else. Figments invented you as vehicles of transport. Think of yourself as a flesh-cart for our ideas and desires. And if you ignore us or try to silence us, we have the power to drive you mad, we can become insurgents messing with your head like the Aetoleans who fought back from within their hidden tunnels in the mountains of Greece against the Roman siege of Ambracia …

What you talking about? *Ambracia?*

Google it. And later, a bit further east, the Judaeans used the same methods against the Romans. In more modern times it was the Vietnamese against America, the Palestinians against the Once Were Judaeans … We Figments don't go away, we tunnel, a stealthy and effective measure when you have nothing else. And so, my second instruction: Don't barge in. You'll just get exploded.

Don't barge and don't shillyshally? And should I execute this feat of subtlety while balancing a bottle on my nose?

Yes. I mean, avoid false humility and bombastardry, both.

Figment has a point: I re-read what I'd written and yes, I was shillyshallying. I wasn't always like this, was never cautious, measured. What happened? I used to be brave and stupid; now I'm just anxious. I get in the way of what I think, what I might write about Palestine, about Israel. How vain. In both senses of the word. And full of vinegary understatements about a horrible ongoing campaign against the existence of an entire people. I might understand about obscene cruelty and its wretched victims—but this writing, this calm, distanced writing of the agonies of others is wrong. How can you be methodical and neat when writing about state terror—or terror terror—or about anguish and inconsolable grief that will certainly be carried into the next generation, and the next, and so on for decades, for centuries.

Oh, Figment's right to warn me and I can feel his irritation as a sort of crackling sensation behind my eyeballs as he paces among particles of my neural matter making a sound like dead leaves on an icy autumn footpath. But the wide, flat roof where I started this essay was not cold and there were no leaves. No: the air was dry and hot. I was in that magnificent nightmare city, Jerusalem, a dream and real, the centre of one of the world's most enduring horror shows. There, not so long ago, I remember how the sun was seeping through the haze of a sky that was dull pink with fumes from the city, and with dust blown in from the Hebron Hills where men and boys with guns drive goatherds away from their flocks and chop down groves of olive trees and terrorise villagers, killing and stealing, as it ever was. But now it's sanctioned by a government whose thug-ministers are proud of this work, boast about genocide on mainstream news and all over social media … The land, *haaretz,* they see as their birthright, while those others who've lived there for generations have no right to remain, let alone return. What am I saying? No right to *live* …

Why do you keep going back there anyway?

Fair question. But I won't be going back again.

Figment is silent for a beat. Then he says simply: So, tell me what's on your mind?

What are you, Facebook?

Don't be rude, he snaps briskly, then returns to scanning what I've written. After his perusal he says, This reads like a coagulation of reactions, all tamed down, hardly a decent thought amongst them.

Why do you hate me so much, Figment?

I don't hate you. It's just that whatever it is you're offering is limited by your own ignorance …

I'm not so ignorant.

… Which is impressive.

Impressive ignorance. Thank you. Nice to be good at something.

East Jerusalem. I'm on the roof of my hotel in the old city with my laptop and a coffee and my impressive ignorance, and as I'm not an architect I won't say anything about the maze of stony streets below and because I'm no linguist I won't speak of the snippets of conversation in several languages I'll hear when I go downstairs in a little while. Nor will I speak of the bright, cheap tat on sale everywhere because I'm not an economist with a deep understanding of how global trade works—or local trade for that matter—and I won't mention how the ageless cobbled alleyways are filled with the smells of incense, drains, cinnamon, roasting lamb, baking bread, cumin, because I'm not a perfumer or a chef, just an ignoramus, Figment, and besides it's been described many times before. It's been described for millennia. I won't talk about hatred or yearning, endless yearning, seemingly the default emotion of so many of the Jewish people living elsewhere in the world for this city who, every Passover cry, Next year in Jerusalem! and when they get here they want this Eastern nation to be Western. And obviously, if this is irony I can't say as I'm not a rhetorician. Though I did read something about it recently. Irony. That barbarians don't mind it. They just crush it up and use it as their salt.

Okay, *enough!* interrupts Figment.

And why discuss the revisions made to Judaism in order to re-form it into the realisation of nationalistic aspiration instead of a religion? Or those brutal Zionists who despise their forebears for their passivity and *worldlessness*—as the brilliant mind of Hannah Arendt framed the lonely mentality of those who share no enduring systems of meaning with others. I won't talk of invasion, annexation and erasure of the land of Palestine, and I won't talk of the willed ignorance of so many to this callousness that has been enacted ever since the Israeli state was invented, alongside the slavish adulation of so many Jewish Israelis of a Europe which not so long ago did its best to annihilate Jewish people utterly, and may try again. What is going on? It's not new. It's old, old, old. It's the creation of nations, all nations; it's 'civilisation'. But I won't speak of complications racial or cultural or territorial as I'm not an anthropologist, historian or geographer. I won't speak of the carnage ongoing as I write. No.

Only now do I stop, take a breath to detail my immediate surrounds at the time I first drafted this letter to anybody who'll listen. The roof of my hotel, built into the ramparts of the Damascus Gate of the Old City. These battlements have been stormed ever since the Iron Age. Jebus, Al Quds, Beit al-Makdis, Yerushalayim, *Jerusalem*. Built of desire, of ferocious dreams, of savagery and stone that turns to gold at dusk, as imaginary as it is real. I look down from the perspective of a giant reindeer made of neon tubing (which has been up here since last Christmas—and exactly how many reindeer are there in this plateau between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea?). A reindeer that's looking over steeples, minarets, the recently re-opened Tower of David, and the sweetness of this innocent uncritical display of mythic thinking makes me want to cry. So I do.

A very long time ago, my first visit, I was staying at my uncle's kibbutz when news came through of the massacre of thousands of Muslims by Lebanese Christian phalangists in the Palestinian refugee camps

of Sabra and Shatilla in Beirut. The kibbutzniks were horrified. Then, maybe an hour later, I was setting out platters of tomatoes and onions in the communal dining room. We learnt that the Israeli army had known this was going to happen—then saw it happening—watched it happening. At this news, the kibbutzniks were silent. They looked down and away and went on with their chores. I saw these good, idealistic, kind, socialists turn a collective blind eye. And so many of these people, my friends, continued this wilful un-seeing over the decades until today: wilfully un-seeing their government arming Hamas to undermine the possibility of peace, now arming new jihadi militias to undermine Hamas. Perpetual war.

Still, I did come back, many times over the years. To the kibbutz, and also to Jerusalem. These were places of fascination. There were people I loved.

Figment murmurs, Okay, so you answered my question. I see why you won't be returning.

I've spoken in phone calls to my erstwhile friends, and to my uncle, who argued with me as if they were the victims in this debacle, had always been the victims, always would be, as if victimhood is a badge of honour and an unassailable, indelible marker of identity. Then in anger I said, You can't be the victim *and* the military and surveillance superpower backed by the most formidable empire in the world! You're not only murdering tens of thousands directly and the rest through starvation and disease, you're desecrating all that you—and the world—saw as good and wise and kind in Jewry, killing your own hearts in a hate-building exercise whose consequences will endure for centuries yet (if we have centuries yet). As Israel destroys Palestine it is also disembowelling itself—Jewish seppuku?—gutting Jewry's legacy of radiant storytelling, of art and of cultural commentary, crushing the critical tradition whose thinkers were trained in the art of subtle disputation and gloriously boisterous dialogue, and the foundational Jewish value of social justice, of *tikkun olam*, no longer an impetus to

'world repair', but a joke (how do you say *tikkun olam* in Hebrew? Haha). A dark joke, dark as hate.

And now I'm thinking of the kabbalistic mystics who imagined the Lamed Vav, or the 36 just people who exist quietly in the world, without whom—even just one of these anonymous 36—the world would come to an end.

Perhaps one of the Lamed Vav is missing?

GAPS

Robyn Lance

Our conversation snags
like threads pulled
in your jumper.

One month on
the threads unravel
into a gap where words

fall through and cannot
be hooked back
into the sentence.

More holes open up
Our speech becomes
staccato.

It sounds like
a crocheted rug
until, towards the end,

we're entwined
in spider web
wisps of wool

where spinnerets
swing free
trying to connect

my thoughts with yours.
Not interrupt
but intersect.

Stuck in Beforetime.
Too much time.
All the time.

No now.
Less future.
Less sight and sound.

Less
    and less
        to say.

Mute is dementia's oration.

OLIVE PITS

Catherine Lapey

The fluorescent lights hummed wrong. Joel noticed that first. Everything here was engineered to eliminate shadows, which made sense because they hated shadows.

'Tell me about when you met her.'

Joel pressed his thumb against the table's edge until the pressure sang through bone.

'No.'

The woman across from him blinked. First time in seventeen minutes.

'I won't tell you about that. But, I can tell you about a year ago today.'

The memory arrived sideways, all edges.

'August 14th. 2:47 pm. She texted me about olives.'

The woman's pen hovered, uncertain.

'Not philosophical olives. Not metaphorical olives. Actual olives. From Sahadi's.'

Joel's thumb found the table's sharpest edge.

'She'd discovered castelvetranos. Wanted to know if I'd tried them. Called them "butter incarnate".'

Nothing moved except dust motes in the wrong light.

'I was in a meeting. Venture guys explaining why suffering was scalable. My phone buzzed. Her name on the screen like a defibrillator.' He laughed—a sound like tearing silk. 'Butter incarnate. Who says that?'

The woman wrote something down. Her pen scratched small surrenders.

'I left the meeting. Went to Sahadi's. Bought seven varieties of olives. Spent forty-three dollars on things I don't eat.'

His eyes tracked patterns in the ceiling tiles.

'Texted her photos of each container. Described their personalities. The kalamatas were "brooding". The cerignolas were "trying too hard".'

'Did she respond?'

'She sent a laughing emoji. Then nothing for three hours. Then a photo of her desk covered in olive pits.'

Joel's thumb had carved a small trench in his fingertip.

'Said she was building a "pit-based economic model". Said late capitalism needed more fruit waste.'

The lights hummed their frequency of forgetting.

'That's how she was. Even her jokes had substrata. Even her grocery texts contained critiques.'

He shifted, bones rearranging themselves around the memory.

'I still have the olives. Unopened. Forming their own ecosystem in my refrigerator.'

'Why keep them?'

'Because that was before she started buying pre-pitted ones.' The words came out raw. 'October. She switched to pre-pitted. Said it saved time.'

The woman's pen stopped.

'That's it. That's when her frequency changed. Not some job. Not some betrayal. Pre-pitted olives.' Joel's voice cracked like good ice. 'She started looking at me like I was wasting her time. Like my tangents were detours instead of destinations. Started checking her phone mid-sentence. Started saying "anyway" to pull us back from wherever my mind had wandered.'

Silence except for the wrong humming.

'She doesn't text about olives anymore. When she texts, it's efficient. Clean. No more 2:47 am discoveries.' His thumb throbbed its small anthem. 'Sometimes I open my refrigerator at 2:47 am. Those seven containers have turned into science experiments. Proof that I bought into something that was already over.'

'That seems … small.'

'Everything true is small.' Joel stood. 'You know what she said last time we talked? That I "make everything a metaphor". Like that was a diagnosis.'

The fluorescent lights hummed wrong, but that was fine.

He knew what butter incarnate meant. He knew why she'd needed new words for old things. Before the pre-pitted olives. Before efficiency became her religion.

'I know what you want. The story about meeting her. About the laundromat at 3 am. About what she said to the man trying to steal quarters.'

He moved toward the door. 'But I won't give you that. That's mine.'

'Then what will you give me?'

Joel turned, watching how the bad light made everything honest.

'Olives. I'll give you olives.'

from *DARK DEEDS*

Tasos Leivaditis, translated by NN Trakakis

Those who set out to search for us disappeared on the way
and those who finally found us, found a simple name scrawled on the wall.
But those who bore the weighty day were the ones who always carried us along
like women carrying panniers of swaddling clothes.
Until the trials of the day came to an end with the coming of dusk,
which from one year to another you experience with new anguish.

Όσοι δοκίμασαν να μας αναζητήσουν χάθηκαν στο δρόμο
κι εκείνοι που τελικά μας ανακάλυψαν, βρήκαν ένα απλό όνομα γραμμένο στον τοίχο.
Όμως αυτοί που δέχτηκαν τη βαριά μέρα, αυτοί μας κρατούσαν πάντα
όπως το πανέρι με τα σπάργανα οι γυναίκες.
Ώσπου η δοκιμασία της μέρας τέλειωσε κ' ήρθε το δειλινό,
που από ηλικία σε ηλικία μ' άλλον πόνο το γνωρίζεις.

Thanks to Stylianos-Petros Halas, copyright holder for Tasos Leivaditis' works, for permission to publish this translation.

MY FATHER SINGS ALONG TO JOHNNY CASH

Vek Lewis

My father is driving too fast
on the red dirt road. He's driving
& singing along to
Johnny Cash. My brother's
in the front seat, I'm in the
back, prone, giddy from the dangerous
moves he makes. The car jerks
under the speed, like an animal
being broken in. This is what
my father does for fun
when we head down south
to Walpole for holidays. He drinks
beer after beer & we watch
TV from a tiny grey screen, bored shitless
until suddenly he says, *let's*
go for a ride, I'll take you for
a spin, gotta learn about cars
sometime. For him
it's not rules
that matter.
The engine groans & then charges
like a killer, dust clouds
bloom from the tyres
& my brother cheers him on in
a mixture of glee & fear. My father is
red from excitement, the red of raw
meat. He asks if I'm watching,

but my expression is a warning.
And for years I won't listen
to Johnny Cash, because of
my father's sweaty voice, because he
reminds me too much
of my father himself—old, big, slurring, tragic
while he sings from too many
sessions down at the local,
drowned in soft pain.
But in the car, my
father kicks on, like it's his last chance
at freedom, while *Folsom Prison Blues*
plays on in the background.

PAS DE DEUX

Vek Lewis

I see him in the library. He is ferreting around the magazines, hoping not to be seen by the passing stern-faced librarian, but I can feel his gaze on me, momentarily, like a warm hand.

He is fingering my neck, furtively, the tilt of my head, the shaved hairline, the crop of stubble broken out along my jaw. I can feel him savouring each glimpse as though it were something with a taste. The burnt toast of the dark of my eyes, the slight perspiration on my skin tart as lemon, the coconut sweet flavour of my cologne. The irresistibility of that gaze, unanswered, and therefore the most prized. I am young, he thinks. Suddenly my image before him assumes the iridescence of flowers on an overcast day. The light in here is unnatural, I wonder how anyone can read, it is particulate and diffuse, that mid-morning light that makes glass out of every surface.

I look back. He has his face buried now, behind that magazine. I often sense him here; he has a stolid walk and he breathes harshly, with the sound of an animal scratching at straw in a cage. He wears the same tweed jacket with a handkerchief in the breast-pocket, where he also keeps his spectacles when he's not looking around, seeking me out. Whenever he gets too close, like now, in the Phonology section where I have sought refuge, I catch that whiff of dog hair, a dog after it's come in from the rain. In the delirium of the library his movements ghost mine. How old is he? He is at home here, among the ageing books that smell of mould spores, he is as old as the leather-bound thesaurus which dates from 1929.

Occasionally he will attempt to pass me, and in doing so, slide his body against my young and quite unavoidable skin. His gaze is a rehearsal for this.

His own skin is the exoskeleton of some frail insect, with the dryness and sharp edges of paper. He has lips, though, that remind me of cod liver oil—greasy and dark from cigarette stains. He is beautiful.

He doesn't know that I, too, have loved him like this, from afar, and up close. As close as we get without drawing notice. He thinks this is solitaire. He is unaware how I monitor him—the blue-black blood vessels that course under his pale hands when he reaches for his membership card—just as he is trailing off, desire blowing in his face like car exhaust. He doesn't realise this is a pas de deux.

I imagine him as young himself. I remember how unique this attraction is; one which I myself have found hard to confess. He loved once, and no longer does, except in secret. My friends would laugh off this exchange we have, which bewilders and empties the air of its oxygen, empties the world of its cacophonous flux and reduces it to inflections, textures, a drowned landscape, a mirage.

HOW TO PICK APPLES

Harsheni Maniarasan

you are adjusting
the glass bauble
on a Christmas tree

like you are pulling
Rumi's *Gold*
off a high shelf

like you are picking up
a tin of all-butter
shortbread biscuits

like you are reaching to touch
the petals of
the tallest sunflower

like you are pointing at
your first sighting
of Cassiopeia
in the night sky

like you are a toddler
holding out for
your father's hand.

CORRECTING

Christopher Mariotti

Ada makes eye contact with her new phone for twenty seconds, shaking her head slowly, then nodding according to its instructions before placing it on the table next to her old one. When the data transfer is complete her new phone flashes the company logo before displaying the exact same lockscreen display and widgets as her old one.

The new phone Ada has bought is slightly wider than her last—so wide that it doesn't sit comfortably in Ant's hand—and he says I don't know how you'll ever get used to this, even though after using it he feels his own phone is just a bit too small. The phone packaging is so beautiful Ada has slid the parts back together and put it in her bag to take home. Ant knows he would do the same thing, as if the longevity of the packaging would guarantee the longevity of the product.

It has stopped raining everywhere but from the lips of roofs and trees. A wheelie bin overturned and unclaimed is pollinating the footpath and road with fast food packaging and plastic bottles. Ada starts taking pictures and comparing them to her old phone's, which they both agree look flat and colourless, though neither can say why. The new phone looks much better but automatically brightens the photos' colour so that now the city looks like a diluted copy of Ada's screen.

Pose Ant, Ada says and before she turns the phone to show him, she frowns and says huh that's so weird. Look, your pimple didn't show up in the photo. Oh, what? Ant says. Unaware he has one in the first place he raises his hands to his face, eventually locating the sharp nub of it on his nose. It must be a new feature Ada says and Ant nods, taking the phone and zooming in on the smooth swatch of his skin as if it's been displaced somewhere else on the surface of the screen.

At least it's not *adding* pimples huh? Ada says later on the train and then shows him a video of an Instagram post of a Tumblr screenshot with 15 seconds of viral music looped over it. Do people even use Tumblr anymore? Ant wonders aloud. Uh, they must, isn't it funny? Ada says and Ant remembers and says oh yeah, yeah it is.

In the bathroom Ant squeezes and picks the pimple until it starts bleeding and then rubs the blood away. Ant waits for Ada to go outside to smoke to take another photo of his face with her phone but when she goes an hour later, she takes it with her.

They say AI is getting so good that potentially a deepfake could unlock someone's face ID on their phone. We're so close to all our personal info being compromised he repeats to his mother into the speaker of his phone while scrolling through Instagram stopping only to scrutinise a post liked by a celebrity he'd been in love with in year 12. It's just a video of a cat Ant. He imagines his mother's face sighing and feels bad and then feels worse remembering that in year 12 he'd uploaded a photo of the celebrity and himself into a 'what would your child look like' generator. When his mum finishes, he says just be careful. Ada and I have Band-Aids stuck over our laptop cameras. It's just safer. There's blood under his fingernails and he realises he's been touching his face. He dabs at the sore saying I know I know, unable to remember the conversation topic. Sorry I might need to hang up Ada's about to get home.

Ant types am I unloveable into his search bar, wondering if anyone depressed would do something so flagrantly clichéd and that therefore he can't have anything wrong with him. Scrolling through his Instagram close friends list he counts ten people who definitely love him, subtracts Ada, adds her again, swipes back to the search engine and types am I depressed. Then adds: buzzfeed quizzes. He has to scroll past three

helpline websites before he finds a quiz titled 'How Sad are You' by user Catlover521. Each question in the quiz presents four categories curating a proto-nostalgia that invokes a historical time such as Ancient Greece where everything could be separated into four elements. Or Harry Potter. The quiz presents stock photos of a woman crying (close up), a man standing in the rain (black-and-white), a wilted rose, and a pug wrapped in a blanket. Ant picks the wilted rose. What is your favourite animal? Ant thinks of the creator of the quiz and imagines what it must be like to be able to distil yourself to the love of a certain thing, to attain a chemical joy from viewing one of these AI-generated animals over the other. Ant picks the dog, the closest looking picture to any notion of a real animal, wondering how that will affect his score. Ant begins picking whichever category seems the most depressed. Pick a: Favourite Beatle? Ringo. Horseman of the Apocalypse? Ant picks Death, then Famine. Phase of the menstrual cycle? He looks them up then selects Luteal. He scores 'Somewhat Sad' on the Sad-O-Meter and scrolls through the comments, through a long argument about the Palestinian genocide, until he stops at a comment by Antlover116 which says, 'I feel really alone'. Ant types out a reply before realizing Antlover116's comment had been posted 5 years ago, and that the user would be named after the insect. He closes the tab.

Ant downloads two dating apps across which he divides his personality: one profile, carefree, funny and creative, the other serious, political and academic. It is most important that neither personality reveal his crippling predisposition towards anxiety that he justifies omitting due to it only recently reaching medical concern. Maybe you should see a psych? Ada said after she had caught him exfoliating his nose in the bathroom at 2am until it bore the characteristics of a third-degree burn. *Don't worry it'll go away* he thought. I will he said. If most people's definition of therapy today was asking an AI chatbot for advice, he was surely fine for having done a manmade Buzzfeed quiz. The dating apps

involve a casual, recursive objectification that's hyperpornographic, he thinks. Then he wonders if there's a word for reducing someone to not an object but only an image. The AI overview heading his browser suggests 'objectify'. Care-free Ant asks a self-proclaimed 'film guy' on the app who says 'Its practically Baudrillardian. The greatest extinction in our time is that of reality. We're so saturated in the production and consumption of media based on our own lives, and the obligation to live up to our own representations that we've *become* media. It's like McLuhan's 'global village' has become the 'global Love Island villa'. Later, he copies and pastes this text into a conversation Serious Ant is having with someone, stopping only to apostrophise the first word.

The first time he sees the profile of someone he knows on the app, he twists his phone away as if they can see him, which he immediately realises they definitely can and almost certainly already have. He considers deleting social media entirely several times and is stopped only by the fear of knowing people will still post pictures of him. He preoccupies himself with perfecting a fantasy where the atomic bindings between the particles of his being separate and his body rapidly distributes itself across the world. He does this by flexing and unflexing one hand, then two, then his toes, visualising the dissolution of his form that becomes thin enough to pass through any wall or person, held back only by gravity, a state of being at once everywhere and nowhere.

The other day I read, no saw online someone talking about manmade art, Ada is saying while Ant tries to figure when the last time Ada has spoken to him in person; whether she likes him, or just values his familiarity as a cohabitant tenant, whether his most important trait is compatibility. On an app they both use that compiles their Spotify usage and generates an AI summary Ada has spent five times the amount of time with her top artist than with him. Including sleeping time in their home. He knows this through another app they share called Brothers,

which tracks all their friends' locations, daily movements, coexistences. How many apps do Ada and he share? He wishes he could look it up. Isn't that funny? Ada finishes and Ant laughs. Why are you laughing, I thought you'd hate that Ada says. Ant feels his burnt face grow redder. Sorry can you say that again? I was saying how in one year manmade has gone from meaning artificial and unnatural, to natural. There's no longer just natural and manmade. There's something else beyond that now.

Ada's summary: listening to local bands, while browsing bookstores like the main character of a rom-com.

Ant's summary: crying at the movies by yourself but treating yourself to fast food afterwards.

Ant gets asked to see a movie by the film guy and has to cancel because his face is still plastered. The guy is actually attractive too, and when Ant found his Instagram he had no mutual followers that he could've probed for information about Ant beyond that of his profile. Minutes after he cancelled his phone received a long text saying sorry, but you clearly don't want anything to do with me. You haven't put any effort into planning this date and you're seriously going to cancel the day before the date? You haven't even asked for my Instagram. I'll go see the movie by myself. Thanks for wasting my time.

In the following weeks Ant falsely spots the guy in public eleven times and becomes petrified of being recognised by him or any other user of the app. He agrees to go on a date with another person and suggests they see a movie for the sole purpose of reducing the amount of time they might be seen together. The date suggests they see the film Ant had missed seeing, which in the intervening weeks had become a viral subject of discourse and memes. The discourse mostly revolved around

whether the film's villain was morally reprehensible or not and whether the ethnicity of a minor character should've been changed from the subject material. Ant is disappointed to find the film has little else to it besides the six or so scenes he's seen posted online, wonders if the film has been produced for this effect or whether its virality is accidental and diminishes any artistic quality. Ant is disappointed to find his thoughts on the movie have not changed at all after watching it. His date is cycling through different interpretations of the film and Ant fights the urge to draw attention to his nose by itching it. Isn't it funny how the brain knows to ignore it, has the ability to see past something until you're like hey, there's actually something that's meant to be there.

The phone of his date leads them to two bars where his date summarises and draws in sustained commentary on various other sci-fi media releases of the current millennium, frequently fact-checking himself with Wikipedia. Ant knows it's somehow rude to lift his own phone from his pocket onto the table and feels each vibration itch his nose more. When his date leaves to get a second drink Ant sees that his phone had been on the whole time, and two of the three notifications were low battery warnings. When his date has finished his latest Wikipedia page regurgitation Ant tells him sorry, I might have to head home now, my phone is about to die.

He lifts the Band-Aid off and rubs a finger across the surface. Without taking a photo, or looking in the mirror, the only sign is the smoothness. All he has is the way his finger speeds up passing from one side to the other, one tiny efficiency amongst others that is so slight as to evade any notice at all.

Angling his head towards it in the dark the phone lights up and hesitates before emitting its negative vibration. By its light Ant reaches across through a web of cords to switch on the bedside lamp, clicks the phone

off, on, tries again. He moves his face closer to the phone until it asks him for the passcode. The phone automatically switches off long enough for him to make out the shape of his face, but not his features, in the dark glass. Then it lights up again, responsive to some shaking movement of his wrist, or perhaps nothing at all.

FUGUE

Irfan Master

Céleste Albaret, Proust's devoted housekeeper, would often walk miles in the middle of the night to find him ice cream. A cathedral is living stone. *Memento mori, memento vivere*. We remember, remembering.

Nina Simone's left hand could span immeasurable distances on the piano. We observe this universe simply because it's the one capable of producing observers.

Truman Capote claimed he could only write lying down, and only with yellow paper and pencils. We are trapped within language, within human cognition, within our particular dimensional slice of spacetime.

Yellow was the last colour Borges could perceive before total blindness overtook him. Space is filled with cosmic events—supernovas, colliding galaxies, pulsars—yet retains a silence so profound that sound itself is tangible.

When Kant died in 1804, his last words were simply 'Es ist gut'. Happiness is subjective and difficult to measure objectively. The poverty of language means we use one word, happiness, for a dozen different states. There's no view from nowhere.

RE-KINDLING

Glenn McPherson

The dams are pretty much
The same depending on
The seasons, and
The ABC weatherman,

Constantly speaking
Of isobars. Cracks that
Look a lot like great bits
Of ancient skin.

Grass parrots come to drink
Early, tilting their heads
Back for a fight. Something
Incredulous has made the

Fence hole wider
Than last time. Eels like
Those we once caught
On hand lines with ribbons

Of sheep gut or shrimp trapped
In an old paint can filled with holes
Still live
Underneath all that. It is surprising,

The size of these dams.
Hard to believe anything
Could have lived off such meagre water,
Even full, but back then, when death

Wasn't really an option,
The whole world came along
Black pipes,
Irrigating rectangles of crops

And some cattle with a rattle
As if stuck in an effort to get
At words after a stroke,
A dogged approach to letting go.

What men
Spoke of beneath corrugated iron,
What women, wearing cool verbena dresses,
Said is forgotten—

Left behind years ago
Anything in this country of note.

THE LONELIEST MONK

Patrick Meeds

Forget what you've been promised.
Mag-lev technology. Cold fusion.
The longer lasting orgasm.
Give it up, they ain't happening.
Be happy you got the player piano.
The old-fashioned taste of spiderwebs.
Newspaper is good insulation.
I reserve the right to orient myself
using the sun. To navigate via the stars.
To memorise the bus schedule
and thank you kindly bus driver
for delivering me. Everything
comes from somewhere else.
Remember the earthy smell
every time we neared the sinkhole?
The way the television glowed softly
through the window of the house
across the street at three a.m.
My bouncy house, my rules
says the birthday girl.
She hired me to paint her kitchen
so I painted her kitchen.
Nothing stays pregnant forever.

JISEI STEPLADDER

Tim Metcalf

Summer evening:
from the leafless branch one last
kookaburra laughs.

A truncated haik–,
an imperfect reflection:
crossing the water?

Empty frame looks out
and sees nothing, says nothing:
the perfect haiku.

Yellow flower mass!
Felling Cootamundra trees:
beauty kneels in weeds.

Far away, my home
of old, where winter wattle
never bloomed amiss.

Clinically dead,
then spring again! How many
jisei must I write?

Space! Nothing matters!
Non-attached, a desert wind:
room at last to move!

No seasons in space:
my jisei on re-entry
can bury themselves.

No traction in space:
my smile's frozen on. A laugh
might blow me backwards!

Hey you! Get back here!
Your jisei mate! It simply
wasn't good enough!

Jisei (pron. 'gee-sir') are Japanese Zen haiku ideally composed just before dying, and recited from a sitting posture. I am not expecting to achieve this, so my jisei are prototypes, in case of incompetent death.

FROM A CONFERENCE OF RUBBISH TRUCKS

Michael Mintrom

Mostly we're unseen, performing rhythmic night work,
thumping alley-to-alley, percussive, rattling bins and drums.

Making music others dismiss as noise. There are joys
in breaking glass, bottle-against-bottle jingle jangle

our plain song echoing down sleepless granite streets.
We are as elegant as swamp birds. And have you seen

how birds flock to us? There's grace in our movement. Watch
the way we glide beside the tranquil marsh

exhaust fumes swirling heavenward on the morning breeze.
Every day we embrace discarded things, squeeze them tight.

You who ignore your detritus would place us out of sight,
honk horns, and never stop to ask:

Where the devil does everything go? We're here, oozing life.
Every tract we visit is wholly holy ground.

HOME AGAIN

Avril Mulligan

How strange it was, to be back after all this time.

Eleanor took in the bush, the ocean, the island, as though looking at an old familiar face. One she hadn't known she'd missed, or even remembered. But on seeing it again, she experienced a jolt of recognition; something that had been sleeping, now awake.

She stood on the veranda for a long time, reacquainting herself with the landscape of her birth.

Then she turned from the view and went back inside the house, leaving the door open behind her. The house belonged to her old friend Tim, and he had given Eleanor the use of it while he was away. It was large, and old, and stood at the top of a hill. There were many rooms, but not many of them could be considered habitable. Tim was more of a traveller than a homemaker, and most parts of the house were in varying degrees of disrepair. Eleanor, always practical, had set herself up in the room nearest the only functioning bathroom.

On the bed, she had laid out the dress she would wear the next day. Eva was getting married tomorrow. And even though it was for the third time, and Eleanor hated flying and so avoided it whenever possible, she had felt an obligation to be here for her oldest and dearest friend. Who may have made some questionable decisions over the years, particularly around men, but whose heart was good, and whom Eleanor had loved since she was twelve years old.

Eleanor sat on the bed next to her dress and texted Archie.

All settled in. So weird to be here.

Archie would have his phone right next to him. He would be sitting in his armchair in front of the TV, eating something obscenely unhealthy, because she wasn't there to shame him with a glance.

Great. Missing you already.

Nonsense, she replied. He sent back a green love heart.

Eleanor grinned. Archie would be perfectly happy with four days to himself. But it was nice of him to pretend. She tossed the phone onto the bed and the grin faded from her face. Now that she had unpacked, and looked around, and messaged Archie, and all the business of arriving was over, she was left only with the descending night and the deep, deep quiet of the surrounding bush. Eleanor didn't like the night. She especially didn't like being alone with it. She got up and closed the curtains of the bedroom window.

***

Eleanor jerked awake as the book dropped into her lap. She was momentarily disoriented, sitting in the single pool of light from the reading lamp, unhinged from time and place.

Then, placing herself—Tim's living room, Eva's wedding, time to go to bed—she lifted herself out of the armchair and moved to lock the doors of the house.

But there was no lock on the door that led to the veranda. Eleanor stood there a moment, still sleep-fogged, looking at it. Why was there no lock on the door? She checked again. But there was no keyhole, and no latch. A worm of unease moved in Eleanor's stomach. She was not sure how she could possibly sleep, alone in a different house, without feeling like the night was locked outside.

She picked up her phone. *There's no lock on the veranda door.*

It was silly to text Archie. Pointless. He was all the way on the other side of the country. It was also instinct. She waited, phone in hand, until it lit up with his reply.

it'll be fine norrie. it's tassie.

She sent back a frowning emoji, tossed the phone onto a side table, and walked quickly across the living room towards the smallest armchair. Squatting in front of it, she pulled it in a huffing shuffle

towards the lockless door, and wedged it under the handle.

In the bedroom, Eleanor changed into her nightdress and got into bed. She was still breathing a little heavily, from the effort of dragging the armchair across the room. She lay straight and still on her back in the unfamiliar bed, and applied all of her effort to not following the train of thought that would allow her to find out why that door might open, or who might be doing the opening. The doona, pulled up tight under her chin, smelled like someone else's perfume.

The first night will be the worst, she told herself. And then it will get better.

But Eleanor wasn't used to sleeping alone, and sleep wouldn't come. The bed was too hard, and when she stretched her hand out across to the other side of it, Archie wasn't there, and Archie was always there, had been for more than thirty years. The night ahead suddenly felt so strange, and too long, and all the hours of travelling, and the weeks of planning before that; all of that outpouring of energy arrived like a heavy weight, and Eleanor felt that she might cry. She wanted, with a fierce urgency, only to be home among familiar comforts.

'Stop it', she said, and sat up.

At the bedroom window, through a small gap in the curtains, Eleanor looked out at the night. The moon was a thin crescent lifting itself up from the horizon. The ocean rolled its waves up onto the beach. Nothing else stirred. It was a night like every other night, no matter what side of the country she was on, and no matter who was by her side. It was just a night.

She went to the bathroom sink, and sipped some water from her cupped hand. Pushed the armchair more firmly under the door to the veranda. Then Eleanor went back to bed, got under the covers, and finally, slept.

***

When she woke again—suddenly, with a jerk; a noise from outside, or something from within a dream?—the night was still carrying her towards its deepest parts. Eleanor could feel it with an animal sense, the still-long distance from dawn. She lay still, ears straining into the dark, unsure why she had woken so suddenly. Her breathing was loud, ragged, filling the room. Fear, like a living, hibernating thing, had woken with her. Now woken, it settled in, and made itself at home in her body.

She poured her focus towards the door, strained her ears towards it.

Some people, in the grip of fear, will run towards danger. Others will lock into position. Eleanor knew exactly which kind of person she was. She stayed where she was, sweating under the perfumed covers, waiting for … what? Some kind of violence to be enacted upon her? Yes. That was exactly what her body was bracing for.

Just last month there had been a home invasion two suburbs away from her and Archie's house, the elderly owner hit repeatedly with a hockey stick before they could crawl away for help. And then, the friend who was waiting at a traffic light on the drive home from a night out, who was held up with a hammer at the car window. Eleanor knew all the details. She understood all the reasons to be afraid. The night could hold such terrible things. Things that needed to be locked outside the house. With proper locks on proper doors.

She lay pinned to the bed, riding the waves of her own adrenaline, each panicked breath feeling as though it was progressively emptying the bedroom of air. Turning her head to the side, she read the time on the glowing bedside clock—1:43pm. Which was surely not possible, unless this particular night could warp and shift, time stretching and lengthening at will, moving with impossible slowness.

There was no bedside lamp. The light switch was by the bedroom door. Eleanor stretched out her hand and patted along the bedside table, feeling for her phone. But she must have left it by the couch in the living room.

'Fuck', she whispered. The she said it again, louder. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck.'

And, as is often the case with a well-executed swear word, Eleanor felt a small break in fear's hold; felt it pushed aside by a brief flash of anger. But it was enough. Twenty seconds of bravery. That was all she needed. Then she could go back to being scared of everything, all of the time. She threw back the covers, launched herself towards the bedroom door, and fell on the light switch mostly by accident.

In the sudden light, Eleanor blinked rapidly.

Then she slowly turned the handle of the bedroom door, and opened it a crack.

There was the shadowy shape of the armchair, still wedged under the handle of the veranda door. Everything was as she had left it when she came to bed that eternity ago. No one was in the house with her. And, most likely, no one was lurking around outside either, waiting to prey on the middle-aged lady in the nightdress in Tim's house on top of the hill who was trying to get some sleep before her friend's wedding the next day. Fear was so … full of its own self-importance.

Eleanor had a sudden urge to laugh hysterically. But maybe that was just sleep-deprivation. She felt along the wall and switched on the living room light. All the shadows rushed back to their corners, and she stepped out of the bedroom, deciding in that moment that she would deal with this night with extreme wakefulness. Nothing could take her by surprise if she was awake. She would make tea, and read once again in the armchair, and she would not tell Archie about her childish fear of the night, or how useless she was at sleeping without him. At the wedding tomorrow, all of her years would show on her face, but she would fortify with three cups of coffee before she left the house.

Eleanor flicked on the kettle, rummaged for a tea bag, and moved to the window while it came to boil. She was still a little jittery, as though only pretending to be a grown-up who could be awake and drink tea at 2am, instead of hiding under the covers in the bedroom.

And she thought it was maybe a paradox, to keep finding herself looking out from windows of the house at the night that she was

supposedly so afraid of. But maybe that wasn't a paradox. She was always getting that one confused. Maybe it was just a contradiction? She was probably full of those. Maybe she just liked to look at the night, because she liked it, but only when there was something between her and it. Hmm. This was one way to deal with fear—analyse the crap out of it.

When the kettle clicked off, Eleanor poured, added milk, left the bag in the mug, and wandered around the living room with it in her hands, feeling the house moving and breathing around her. Like it was a person in itself; a character in a story. The Story of Eleanor and the House. Or, Eleanor and the Impossibly Long Night. She gave a small nervous laugh, and imagined, just for a second, what it would be like to be brave enough to feel the night without anything in between her and it. Felt, for a moment, the immensity of it, then gone. Knew that she used to; would still; but not alone. Not without Archie.

He would not be huddling inside this house. Archie would be out on the veranda, soaking up the stars. Yes; he would. Eleanor smiled into her mug. Archie was afraid of things. Just not the same things she was afraid of. She imagined him next to her now, what he would say. She understood, in that moment, the courage that she borrowed from him, that he gave freely.

'Come on, then', she said. 'Come on.'

She put her tea down on the side table. Got down onto her knees and shuffled the armchair back away from the door. Then opened it, just a crack, as though the dark could only be witnessed through small openings.

'Come on, then', she said. 'Come on.'

And she felt Archie right beside her as she got her hip into that armchair and pushed it back further, away from the door, so she could open it wider, so she could slip through to outside, the imagined Archie next to her. She stepped out barefoot onto the wooden decking of the veranda, released in that instant from the containment of the house; suddenly naked without its walls around her, as though she had been

wearing it like a skin.

Eleanor craned her neck, and looked up. The air rushed forward and nipped at her bare arms, her cheeks. The outside world was large and foreign, the familiar objects of the day now only changes in the shape and texture of the darkness.

Here she was, out among the dangerous hours.

Out among the things that hid in the night.

She glanced back at the door, felt its pull, the safety of the idea of the enclosed space. She could step back inside at any moment. But as Eleanor stood on the veranda, all senses now awake and alert, the fear that had been coiled in her belly loosened, unfurled, and slithered away. Leaving in its place something calm and open; a stillness where before had been relentless movement.

In her mind she saw the chair that Tim had placed at the top of the hill behind the house. She left her imagined Archie on the veranda, taking in the stars.

Back through the house she went, to the door that led that way, not picking up a cardigan against the chill, not slipping on shoes. She unlatched the door, stepped through, and closed it behind her.

In the hours that Eleanor had been wrestling with the long strange night, the sliver of moon had been busying itself only with its path across the sky. It had made it to this side of the house, and was waiting at the top of the hill.

Eleanor began to climb towards it. Her nostrils twitched and flared, taking in the new smells. Her skin spoke directly to the air, each dip and rise in temperature, the faintest brush of a breeze across it. Her ears unfolded to receive the messages of the night, grew larger, wider, more capable. It was as though she were made for this, all of her dulled down city-dweller senses just waiting to be activated; as though an ancient human still lived inside of her, the one who read the signs of the stars and the moon and the seasons and the play of light. All of it still alive, waiting, intact, ready to be used. As though no time had passed at all.

And her fear, that beast of a thing—it must have stayed behind in the house. Without it, Eleanor hardly recognised herself.

At the top of the hill, she lowered herself gently onto the chair. It was wet with dew. She looked up. *Oh*. She had never seen the stars like this before. Whirling and dancing above her in their great starry orbits. She didn't know the name of any of them; with nothing for her mind to hold onto, she fell into wonder instead. Still craning her neck, she wriggled her feet in the grass. Things were soft and wet here. Once, it had been her place. Did it still know her?

'Can you feel me?' she whispered. 'Can you feel me, home again?'

She curled her toes and dug them into the ground a little.

She was so tiny in the night. Such a little speck, on top of the hill, behind the big old house, underneath the ancient stars. Just one of billions, nothing to anyone. No, that wasn't true. She may not be someone to everyone. But she was everything to some.

Eleanor stood up from the chair, cool air meeting the wet seat of her pants. Inside her had begun a gentle thrumming, as though she were a song to be played, and she closed her eyes and began to sway with the tune of it. She let a great and beautiful longing fill her.

As she danced, feet on this earth of her birth, Eleanor felt as though she had laid down a great burden. All of the things that she held so tightly, and all of the things that had happened to her, in a life long enough to have had things happen to you, and she felt—just for a moment, or a series of moments—what it meant to be free.

And she knew that when the morning came—when that sun came up over the ocean horizon, and she may well be there to see it come—she would put all of it back on again, of course she would, all of the things that were hers to be and hers to carry, and she would go to Eva's wedding in her new dress, with bags under her eyes, and once again be somebody's friend and somebody's wife.

But for now, all of that was laid at the ground at her feet, and she was dancing, making friends with the night, as free as a child.

AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Maryam Nesvaderani

Look at this photo of an Iranian woman in a bikini on the beach (circa 1960)
Look at this green mountain
My feet have never touched even a grain of sand you have to believe me
Look at this shopping mall where there isn't a hijab in sight
Look at the Paris of the Middle East
Look look look look
What I'm really trying to ask you is
Are we human yet?

LIGHTER DAYS

Gukhui Noh

At the corner bakery, they weigh the pastry
The silence has its own scale

Buen día, Gracias—
A few words are enough for my routine

At the bus stop in a monsoon countryside
my face was veiled in foreign characters

The middle-aged woman turned away,
speaking in a long-winded way

Tangled with sweat, secret letters slipped
down to my skin in muggy air.

I couldn't interpret her words but
remembered the grandma next door

She brought her only son's letters,
asked me to read, watching my lips carefully

When the silence breaks, the word
fits in the crack—few and far between.

A little kid passes me, 'Hola!'
the word fills my entire day.

MY GENDER IS A POET

Marina O

MY[1]

gender[2]

is[3]

1. My—English for *moy, moya, moyo*, e.g. in expressions like *moya istoriya*.

My story, I suppose, could have been one of coming out as a truer version of myself within a more permissive or— if you wish—a more 'progressive' space afforded by my new and second language. But my wavering commitment to a notion of a life unfolding towards a predetermined destination of a true(er) anything along the linear continuum is at an all-time low. Instead, I have been envisioning our co-occuring histories as starling murmurations.

2. I venture, now, after Judith Butler's done their work, it became a commonplace banality to talk of gender as performed, *citational*. However, the questions of where to source your script and how to approach it remain of interest.

I would also note that Butler's own experience on stage comes relatively late in their career: their notable performance at NYU took place in 2013.

Anne Carson, when invited to discuss her recently completed play *Antigonick* (a not-so-close-to-original translation of *Antigone*) with JB on stage in front of audiences, quipped: there was *nothing*, apparently, she would enjoy less. Instead, Carson proposed to stage *Antigonick* and cast Butler as Kreon, king of Thebes, the tyrant. Judith would thus perform the gender and its adjacent powers.

3. Another playwright Jen Silverman, in an essay for the *Paris Review,* considers what options we have when deciding what follows is in a sentence like this one. Jen tries to describe their gender first as color (*denim* or *sun lower yellow*), but settles, in the end, on what seems, to me at least, the most logical approach—a reference to someone else's stand-out interpretation. *My gender,* writes Silverman, *is Masha Gessen*. And who is Gessen? Should I include their photo here? Masha is a journalist, who knows a thing or two about moving between languages. And between genders.

a poet[4,5]

in an

4. The poet, in this case, is Anne Carson—the above-mentioned translator of Sophocles and of Sapho's fragments also. Carson who once dropped: *the* floating *gender we* all *wish for doesn't exist*. Emphasis all mine. But why?

5. Another poet is Zinaida Gippius, who opted to sign most of their work with the gender ambiguous initials: ZG.

Zinaida wrote (a century ago) in Russian—a language I am now so reluctant to speak and write and one in which gender-neutral expression of a kind now so common for English is harder to achieve.

The Russian nouns are all, grammatically speaking, gendered, and all adjectives, pronouns, numerals, as well as sometimes verbs have to morph and conjugate to remain in agreement. Of the genders, —fem., masc. and neuter— subjects only have a choice of two, while neuter is reserved for objects only. This seems, of course, like an unfair limitation—*unless* you are a gender poet. Like Gippius.

In their poem *You*, the addressee shape-shifts through metaphors in sequence as they are compared to a crescent (masc.) and then a moon (fem.). From one line to the next, their gender—marked by the inflections—behaves like *mayatnik,* a pendulum.

Compare this to Gippius's very own practice of wearing a dandy-like attire one day, and a deeply femme dress the next.

Oscar

Wilde[6,7]

suit.[8]

6. The first line of Anne Carson's *Sonnet of Addressing Oscar Wilde* sets the pendulum in motion too: *Who's that man next to George? I don't know, but she's kind of cute.*

In many interviews before and after she's written this, Anne would admit to childhood desire *to be Oscar Wilde*. Never, in her view, achieved. Note the absence of the preposition 'like' in that sentence. I checked, I didn't miss it. In the *Sonnet*, she arrives at gender as a kind of a room one walks (or pivots) in and out of. Lingering at thresholds: *If it is gender, hesitate. All genders are hot, although the one you are in/ will generally seem less hot than the one you are out.*

She leaves it there.

7. In N. Teffi's *Demonic Woman,* the central character (reportedly based on Gippius) wears items of jewellery and costume on all the wrong body parts, like you would if you were having a good time, sporting *a portrait of Oscar Wilde on her left garter.*

There is a photograph of Zinaida posing in a dandyish suit, and a photo of them in a white floor-length dress making them appear ghost-like. I can find no photograph of the said garter, perhaps, a fruit of Teffi's imagination? Her sarcasm manifesting in overly-literal representations of poet's known allegiances?

8. In the same performance of *Antigonick*, Carson casts herself as Chorus—the voice of crowd (also referred to as *the Wife of Brain* elsewhere in her writing). She performs in a suit featuring a long coat with white stitching along the lapels—she calls it her *Oscar Wilde suit*. Did she finally *become?*

I don't blame her. Who would choose to come on stage as your usual self when you can finally *be* Oscar Wilde. And Wife of Brain, in suit. This is how we rework the folds of history to suit our needs.

HEAT WAVE

Mark O'Flynn

Against the dry canvas sky (forty
four in the shade), eleven starlings
spread along the staves of five melting
powerlines. The semi-quavers and crotchets
of a lilting trill. The wires sway with the vibrations

of the breeze and the starlings' old song:
All my family come home
forage no further, the world too vast,
here, eat of my age and my memory
if that is what you need.

Each note of their suspension
rejoices in the dusk. After the day's heat,
solid as an anvil's heavy work, they rest
on wires, note by note in chance
harmony, murmuring in time.

WALKING ON WATER (DRAGONFLIES AND WATER STRIDERS)

Anna Oh

his reflection blinks back blankly, a steady, unwavering gaze in
the face of terror. it gives the illusion of an empty emptiness, a hollow
hollowness, a glamorous existence to cover up the pain.

it looks nothing like him, all eyebags and dark circles, sunken shoulders
with haversacks slung over, heavy feet, heavy mind, and heavy heart.

he blinks again.

it blinks back.

he breathes, expelling a deep-rooted poison from his lungs.

it does not breathe back.

he touches the surface of the water, letting it sweep past his hands,
smooth and silky.

it touches the surface. the water does not react.

he sweeps it away.

TAKING STOCK OF PAST LOVERS

John RC Potter

Recalling, taking stock,
with pencil in one hand;
those years, the lovers,
those lives, those lies.
#1: the sun at our dawn;
#2: dust dancing for me;
#3: silent as the night;
#4: a sketch half-drawn.
#5: sun and moon as one.
Asunder, and in a tether;
        a ready smile, unmasked;
dark eyes, and yet you
        had hidden half-truths.
The fifth, no symphony, but love had a flame.

IRON IN THE MORNING

Shaheer Pulikkal

I wake before the sun cracks the horizon.
The coffee is black, no sugar.
The handle of the shovel is cold,
and my palms remember the weight of work.

The street outside smells of diesel,
men in faded shirts nod without a word.
You learn to speak with your shoulders,
with the sound of boots on gravel.

My father's voice still comes in fragments—
'Don't bend your back for nothing
that doesn't feed your house.'
The kind of advice you can sharpen a blade with.

At noon, my shirt sticks to me
and my heartbeat is a steady drum.
It's not about winning.
It's about showing up tomorrow,
and the day after that,
until the job is finished,
or you are.

THE WEIGHT OF STEEL

Shaheer Pulikkal

I have carried steel beams
on my shoulders,
and the silence of empty rooms in my chest.

The first weight taught me strength.
The second taught me endurance.

A man doesn't often talk about loss—
not because it's small,
but because it sits in the ribcage
a lodged bullet.

At night, I run my hands over
the smooth edges of the tools on my bench,
remembering the ones who swung them before me.

Every hammer has a ghost.
Every scar has a story.

TIME ESCAPES THE HOURGLASS UNSIEVED

Vaishnavi Pusapati

With my back to the day,
as the hurried seconds needle runs, breathless,
I sit and my shadow is downcast
before me, giddy, moving and tethered. I sit embossed.
There is a book between my hands,
open like a speakeasy mouth,
pages turning like sides of pancakes,
like petals on a wilting flower
disengaging one petal at a time
from the drooping sleepy crown,
and just like that it is too dark now.
I close the book, pinning it between my palms
like a wish en-centred within a prayer.
My eyes accustom to the darkness.
The darkness accustoms to me.
I accommodate my past and the present.
There is no future.

My shadow is lost and the cup of tea is cold
like the night that has spread around us.
Someone asks me what the story is.
I answer in three sentences. Yes, the
journey to these terse
three sentences took an evening and more.
I look forward to forgetting it: the three sentences,
like sunglasses on the beach, like
sweaters on overworked café chairs,

like the buttons and the missing left socks.
So that we can go back for them and thus go back
to the beach at sunset, for another croissant at the café.
Until the open mouth gapes again
in my palms, like an outstretched yawn,
as if it were new again. I wait to be
swallowed into the darkness, in one sweeping gulp.

LIGHT BENDS WHEN IT HITS A MIRROR COVERED IN BLOOD

Radoslav Rochallyi

$$\text{Sin has come dressed up as justice,the sky is empty,and manure reigns}^{x}$$
$$= \text{The victim is the aggressor against those weaker than her}$$
$$+ \frac{\text{Today's news is full of stories about people in Gucci belts}}{\text{who are doing their part to meet the quotas of the righteous in the squares}}$$
$$+ \frac{\text{Even if you scream,no one hears,everything is just sound}^{2}}{\text{another white noise!}}$$
$$+ \frac{\text{Black flags on white walls}^{3}}{\text{Whose voice is singing the anthem?}} + \dots,$$
$$-\infty < \text{It sounds true,but it tastes like a lie} < \infty$$

BIRDS

Mykyta Ryzhykh

birds in sakura branches
sugar feathers glisten
in the sunlight

ADVANCED DIAGNOSIS

Yvette A Schnoeker-Shorb

If you want the electricity
of existence,
swallow your death,
and walk into the storm,
those crystal shards of reality.

Did you think you would live
forever?
It takes half a lifetime
to understand, to determine
we are not immortal,
and that lady in the mirror
knows this.

HOW IT WENT

Jessica Seymour

How it started
on a cool, sunny day
by the shore of a lake
cradled by the city
sunlight flows down on the ripples.
ducks and turtles float around
as she stares at the reflection
so much promise! so much potential!
her future turning in her hands
camelia branches make music.

How it ended
at the denouement of winter
surrounded by skyscrapers
designed to destroy her
a reflection peers up from the water
the soldier returning with hollow cheeks
gripping a dead-cold coffee cup.
so many new silver strands in her hair;
bloody chalk dust in her cuticles.
turtles float like corpses in the water.

RIVER

Ibtisam Shahbaz

Poseidon takes a rolling pin, and presses the ocean like dough
Waves rise and fall in gentle motion
On a ragged deck, we fall asleep in the Nile
I could take my mother's hairpin and tear this dream apart
But I won't follow that current down
I let the thought float like a leaf in running water
Terracotta skin burns to brown
As I dream of better days
Where blood will rush in my cheeks
the bell on my bike ringing as I wave to a neighbour
the whistle a lullaby to tired ears

I remember it like it was yesterday
Sandpits and soiled scarves
Where a friend was free,
And rumours costly
So much has changed, while so little remains

The boat sways in the afternoon sun
my father prays on a fraying mat
In this dusky Cairo haze
I feel at home again

ANONYMOUS WAS A CHILD

Hibah Shabkhez

Arbre tronc ouvrir. I am reading your scrambled words, clumped like pistachio shells glued to toffee wrappers in a collage thumb-pinned to an art room softboard. The pure chaos of crossed-out words and smudged carets tells me: today, anonymous was a child. *Il y avait la porte lumière avec ébloui,* I read, and I wonder: if you were here now, retelling face-to-face this story of a tree trunk that swings open to reveal a secret garden ruled by a wish-granting magic king, would I wrinkle my nose at such arrant agrammaticality, or just nod and bid you go on, and once the arid business of boxing the set text into your own halting words was done, would we ponder together over the important things, whether Julie had frizzy hair like you or covered her head like me, if Tom was nuts to follow a stranger into a dark forest, and most importantly, what the birds and the fish and the ants said to Tom after he learnt to speak their languages? Which language would we speak, the two of us? And how much would I long to be the teacher who might one day make you able to say all these things in fluent French? But this is research, all grown up and académique, so I slice up a month's worth of productions écrites into predications instead, assigning yours to the incomprehensible category, and all your gloriously grotesque islets of sense instantly become *Reformulations Non-Interprétables*. Were you doing the same thing, though, when you wrote this? Consigning me to the realm of things to be dealt with and shrugged off, thinking only of getting a golden star, perhaps, or of being finished with this already and eating your brunch under the desk in peace?

SWEATER WEATHER

Beth Sherman

Winter and I met at a speed dating event in the basement of the local community centre. Flat soda and stale chips. A boom box playing the soundtrack to *Frozen.* A general air of last call desperation. We sat on rickety metal chairs and sized each other up. I didn't think we'd hit it off. I hate to ski, loathe driving when it's below freezing, and my hair gets mashed down in an unattractive way when I wear woollen hats. It helped that women outnumber men five to one in our town and I hadn't dated anyone in 18 months.

Truth is, Winter beguiled me with his talk of ice-blue sunsets, bare branches etched against a slate sky. *Bleak beauty*, he called it. He took me skating at the pond, where our breath puffed into clouds that vanished seconds later. We couldn't hold hands (his touch causes freezer burn), but we glided side by side, as geese flew above us, rushing south. If I slipped through the ice, I knew he'd find a way to pull me out. *Are you always such a worrier,* he asked, and I debated whether to reveal my insecurities so soon. But I decided to be truthful. On a chairlift, overlooking a quilt of fresh snow, I'm the one calculating whether I'd die or become a paraplegic if the cable broke. *I hear you*, Winter said. *I've been responsible for my share of avalanches. Not intentionally, of course*, he added, which I admit, warmed my heart.

You're probably wondering where this is headed. If Winter and I could make a go of it. My mother certainly hoped so. I was 38, not getting any younger, as she liked to remind me. *It doesn't matter that he can be chilly until you get to know him. We all have to compromise*, she said, knitting him a pair of mittens that I knew would be too small. Still, I couldn't stop thinking about the coming spring—whether I'd have to follow him to a cave in the Arctic wilderness like a modern-

day Persephone. Did loving Winter mean consigning myself to a life of perpetual frostiness? I broke it off. The cold only reminded me of what I'd lost. I avoided sleds, icicles, scarves, the scrape of ploughs on asphalt. I felt numb, bereft. The wintry landscape was dreary—snow stained yellow from piddling dogs, mounds of slush on every corner.

One morning, I looked out the window to see a giant snowman on the lawn. The storybook kind, with carrot nose, top hat, and eyes of coal. A heart had been traced in the snow, with my name inside it. Winter appeared from behind a maple tree and started serenading me, an up-tempo rendition of 'Cold Weather Blues'. The sun snapped its golden fingers in time to the music. What can I say? Winter has become my favourite season.

HARMFUL OBJECTS

Joshua Lee Shimmen

Olivia is asleep, her neck jammed awkwardly against the arm of the couch. The TV is on in the lounge room and the sounds of daytime talk shows are worming their way into her dreams. *This is the worst I've seen her live in.* She rolls over. There is a crick in her neck. *THWACK THWACK.* A steady slapping rings through the house. Olivia sits up. Opens her eyes. It's light, although the blinds are shut.

It's hard to get close to people when you can't have them over for play dates.

Dr Phil, in grey moustache and matching suit, is nodding, trying hard to look empathetic.

The slapping sound keeps coming. Faster. Harder. *THWACK THWACK.*

Olivia launches herself off the couch. She crashes into the coffee table. A trio of identical green sippy-cups fall onto the carpet. She crawls along the floor. Loose crumbs, hard from time and oxidation, press into the palms of her hand. A low scream rings out. The slaps beat faster still. *THWACK THWACK.*

Her son is curled over himself in front of the television. His small hands wrapped around a picture book. He beats it against his forehead. His soft mousy hair jumps with each whack.

It brings on an enormous amount of shame.

She knows she is to Stay Calm in these moments. It is part of The Strategy.

She wants to ask him what's wrong. But she doesn't. He has no words to answer her.

Stay Calm. Change the Environment. Remove Harmful Objects. Provide Alternative. Praise Your Child.

The remote is on the floor atop of a pile of scattered Lego. She reaches for it. Shuts the TV off. Dr Phil goes quiet. Environment Changed.

She shuffles behind him, behind Ethan, with a leg on either side of him. She squeezes him between her thighs. Her hands grip the book, and she pries it away, gently. Harmful Item Removed.

He is still groaning. Rocking. There is a red fuzzy car plushie beneath the coffee table. In one movement, she grabs it and slips it into his hands. Alternative Provided. Ethan bangs it against his head.

She wraps her arms around him, squeezes him, rocks with him.

'I love that you let me give you Lightning to hold.'

Child Praised. Slowly, a calm comes over them both.

Then the phone rings.

She tries to lean back, to reach out with one arm and shuffle towards the couch, but Ethan needs the pressure. He groans and rocks his head back violently, just missing her jaw.

Touched out. Her skin is tired. A charge makes her want to pull away, but she fights it. When he was born, wrinkled, pink and palm-sized, she wouldn't let the nurses pry him away. The sweet milk smell of him. Derrick squishing himself into the hospital bed next to her, so they could both be close. What kind of mother recoils from her children?

She gives up on the phone for now, continues to squeeze him tight. To rock slowly.

Her own mother will come next week, she thinks. Flying all the way from Queensland. And hasn't she heard about it. But there will be time then to wrest herself free. Time for showers without worrying about him running through a window, or getting concussed, or strangling himself in the curtain cords. The downside is a week with her mother, but still it seems worth it—just.

Two more calls are missed in the time it takes her to settle Ethan enough to move.

It is 3:35pm. Derrick, his father, was supposed to pick him up at 3pm. Derrick, his father, has left two voicemails. Derrick, his father, is

'I don't care about your plans, Derrick. I need to do school pick up. To pick up your daughter. I can't do both—he needs routine.'

The thumb presses harder still. Olivia can feel the grease coating her hair.

There's a woman's voice in the background of the call. Samantha. The new girlfriend. Samantha, who does not fall asleep in the middle of the day, unless she chooses to. Samantha, who does Pilates and has her own dog-grooming business and has time to wash her hair and doesn't have day old Weetabix hardened to the crotch of her tracksuit pants. Samantha, who is kind to Ethan. Who lets him pet the gentle dogs.

'I did try', says Derrick. 'I'm sorry. I just can't. I'm not good at this like you are.'

The bricks refuse to part. Ethan launches them across the room. The screaming starts again.

She hangs up.

Plastic bricks are raining down. On to the couch. On to the coffee table. On to the floor.

Stay Calm. Change the Environment. Remove Harmful Objects.

#

It's past four when they pull up to the school. Ethan thrashes in the car seat in the back. He is too large for it. His sprawling legs look like a baby giraffe's. But she can't trust him with the normal seatbelts. Of course he has learnt to unclasp them. She thinks of all the things she wants him to learn. Of all the things he can't. Of course, you can't say *mum*. But you can do this. She catches herself. Admonishes herself. Bad mother. Bad.

The seat has seen better days. The buckle jams and needs to be pressed firmly to get it to hold. The grey fabric is stained with brown splotches of God knows what. The Wiggles play on the speakers. *Toot Toot Chugga Chugga*. The school has called twice. There are no children outside the green gates. The Kiss-and-Go sign stands alone under the she-oaks.

calling again.

'Where are you?' she asks.

'Where am *I*? Where are *you*?' he replies.

Incredulous, typical. She watches Ethan carefully line up green Lego on the floor.

'*I* am waiting for *you*. *We* are waiting for *you*. Ethan's appointment is in ten minutes', says Olivia.

'Well, you should've thought of that before you left me waiting outside for half an hour. I called. I honked. You've got the curtains drawn in the middle of the day', says Derrick.

Her neck is still stiff. She massages the base of her skull, hard, with her thumb.

'I fell asleep', she says, and regrets the words before they're out.

A pause.

'You're having a nap? You're meant to be watching him. You sit him in front of the TV half the time anyway. What do you have to be tired over? If you're going to sleep all day, you should just bloody send him to school', Derrick says.

She digs her thumb in further.

Ethan is struggling to separate a green brick from a blue brick. Her breath catches in her chest.

'I didn't mean to fall asleep—he's on a modified timetable—you know this', says Olivia.

'I'm not taking him now. I have plans', says Derrick.

Olivia tries to remember the last time she had plans. Lunch with the school friends last March? Cafe near the park around the corner. Stale focaccia. Dirty windows. Café she insisted on because it was five minutes from home. Just in case she needed to pop home to help Derrick with Ethan. Which of course she did. And of course, they were all so lovely about it. *Such a dedicated mother,* they all agreed.

The blue piece and green piece are not coming apart. Ethan is rocking again.

Gracie will be in the office with the other forgotten children.

And don't the office ladies love her? And she loves them. Olivia can never remember their names. But she remembers the red-haired one with the old lady blouses. Who all the time tells her that Gracie is just so grown up. Like a little adult.

She told us today that she makes her own packed lunch. How do you get her to do that?

Yes, Olivia thinks. I get her to do that. It's not because she was tired of me forgetting to do it for her.

And then of course she looks in at Ethan, eyes closed, bound in his too-small kid's seat. And then it comes. *Oh, you poor thing.*

Olivia finds the school's number in her phone.

Hello, this is the worst mother in the world. I'm just calling about the child I've abandoned this afternoon. Yes, that's right, again.

It rings. She grimaces.

'Hi Olivia. Do you need us to bring her out?' the receptionist asks.

The phone beeps. Another call is trying to come through. Mother. Not now.

The Wiggles keep singing. *We're going to drive the whole day long.*

#

'Why is he here?' asks Gracie, pouting in blue gingham school dress. 'And why do we have to listen to this?'

She sits with her body turned towards the back passenger window, her schoolbag on her lap.

'Because he's your brother and he's allowed to be here and this what he wants to listen to', says Olivia.

'What about what I want to listen to?' replies Grace.

Olivia clenches her jaw. The black BMW in front of them refuses to get within 10kms of the speed limit.

'We can listen to what you want to listen to when I pick you up tomorrow.'

'That's what you said today, when you dropped me off. It's not fair.'

It's not fair. She is right. Of course she is right. Which is why it's so annoying.

'I just need you to stop, okay?' says Olivia.

The car behind them is tailgating. She can see the driver. Red-faced. Ranting in her rearview mirror. She throws her arms up as if to say, what do you want me to do? It's not me, it's him. I can't make him go faster. Her neck spasms.

'Fuck.'

'Mum! Don't swear', says Gracie.

The car behind honks. Ethan startles. Arms fly out. Hitting the door. Hitting the seat backs. Hitting Gracie.

'Owwww', she screams.

'Don't exaggerate, Grace,' Olivia snaps.

It's 4:13pm. The clinic is another three minutes away. That means they can still make the last fourteen minutes of Ethan's appointment. Olivia knows nothing will be achieved in fourteen minutes, but the no-show fee is more than the appointment itself and the funds in Ethan's plan are already running low.

The clinic is almost in sight. Detached brick houses line the road on either side. A mother walks past with a stroller and a designer-oodle on a leash. A little girl trails along behind her in a blue and gold princess dress. She's holding a dandelion. Smiling. The afternoon sun casts a golden light over her.

Olivia realises she's scowling.

The traffic is barely moving. *Big Red Car* is on its seventh rotation.

Gracie is sullen. Her head resting on the window.

Olivia takes her phone from the cup holder and passes it to the backseat.

'I need you to call the clinic, so they know we're almost there.'

The car honks again. Ethan screams and flings his arms harder.

Gracie squeals.

Stay Calm. Change the Environment.

Olivia taps the break.

Tyres screech.

She watches the red-faced man jerk forward in the rear-view mirror. He grows wide-eyed. Silently yells. Speeds into the opposite lane and passes.

Remove Harmful Objects.

'Grandma's calling', says Gracie.

'Don't—' starts Olivia. But it's done.

'She wants me to put her on speaker.'

'Olivia? Can you hear me? I started watching this documentary. And I really think you should watch it too.'

Olivia grips her forehead with one hand. Squeezes her temples. She can see the clinic. Whitewashed render walls. There is a big sign on the side of the building. A grinning brown-haired boy in prescription goggle lenses.

'That's great, Mum. I just can't really—'

'No, Olivia. I'm telling you; you need to watch it. It's about fluoride. Have you heard about this stuff? It's in the water.'

She reminds herself to breathe.

Gracie is grinning in the rear-view mirror. She is enjoying this. Olivia knows it.

The car turns into the carpark.

'That's great, Mum. I just don't have time right now to—'

'And I was thinking', the phone says, 'maybe that why he is how he is, you know. They're saying it does things to brains, sweetie. To their development.'

There is a sharp pain in Olivia's chest. Rising acid. She reaches back and snatches the phone from Gracie. She hammers the screen. Throws it into the passenger footwell. Remove. Harmful. Objects.

She looks up. The woman with the stroller is on the pedestrian crossing in front of her. Olivia slams the brakes. The three of them lurch

forward. The buckle on the car seat bursts open.

'What the hell', the stroller woman mouths through the windscreen.

Ethan is wedged between the footwell and the passenger seat.

'Mum!' Gracie yells.

The screaming starts again.

The Wiggles are still singing. *Toot Toot Chugga Chugga.*

#

Olivia has to carry Ethan inside the clinic. His eye swollen from slamming against the passenger seat. They stand at reception. She catches a glimpse of herself in the reflection of the clinic window. His legs hang past her knees. Her too-big boy. Hanging limp. Gracie beside her hugging her schoolbag.

The young girl at the desk greets them with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. Smacking gum.

'I know we're late. It's for Ethan', Olivia says.

Before the girl can answer, the therapist is there with a green popping toy and a red sports car. He's about Olivia's age, but baby-faced. No trace of a beard. A Dorothy the Dinosaur lanyard hangs over a grey sweater. Knows his audience. Broad-shouldered too, Olivia notices. Appreciates.

Ethan wriggles free.

She fixes her hair back into her claw clip. Tries to wipe the dried Weetabix from her trackpants. No use.

'Oh, we have a lump', the therapist says.

'I've been practicing the strategies', she says, quickly. Maybe too quickly, she thinks.

He smiles. Hands Ethan the toys. Then they're gone, into the consulting room.

'Just so you know, we are mandatory reporters here', the girl at the desk says, trying to sound cheerful.

'That's really nice', says Olivia.

#

The waiting room is quiet. Sterile fluorescent lights buzz above them. Episodes of Mr Bean play silently on an old tv in the corner. They are alone except for a grey-haired woman with a walker a few seats away.

There are eight minutes left in Ethan's session. Gracie takes an exercise book from her bag and starts practicing sums. The book has been wrapped in a self-adhesive covering. Pink. Sparkly. Olivia remembers buying the roll of it. But not putting it on. The edges are perfectly straight. There are no bubbles.

'Who helped you with that?' she asks.

Gracie scowls. Her little eyebrows thin and furrowed. 'Nobody', she says.

This is their time together, Olivia thinks. Seven minutes left.

'How was school?'

Gracie sighs. And it's a world-weary sigh. Almost funny on such a small girl. 'I'm trying to do my homework', she says.

Olivia pauses. Stares at her lap. Picks at the dried Weetabix some more.

Six minutes.

She reaches out a hand to stroke the girl's hair. Her little ponytail held tight in school-uniform-approved navy scrunchie.

'Mum. Stop', she says. She stands up and walks herself across the room. Kneels on the floor, and using the green fabric seat as desk, begins her work again.

Five minutes.

Stay Calm. Mr Bean hangs from a diving board by his fingertips.

The woman with the walker moves closer. Sits beside Olivia.

'It's hard when they're this age', she says. Breath like stale Nescafe. 'But it gets easier. As they get older. They can stay at home by themselves. And yes, teenage years can be a handful. But then they're graduated and gone. And you really miss them.'

Olivia can feel the tightness in her neck. She places a hand on the back of her head and pulls it down towards her chest trying to stretch it out.

'But being an empty nester, you know. Then you have the time for the things you want to do. Travel. Hobbies.'

You dithering crone.

Is what she wants to say. There will be no trips to the French Riviera. No caravan around Australia. No paint and sips. No pottery classes. There will be no graduation. No magic year all this ends. There is only this eternal toddler-phase. And if, by some miracle, he makes it through school, without being sent home every other day, for spitting. Or hitting. Or biting. That will be the day it gets scarier. Because there won't be a place for him to go, for even a few hours, so that I can just survive.

But she doesn't.

She turns. She forces a smile.

'Thank you', she says. And stands and walks to the chair beside where her daughter is studiously practicing her times tables.

Two minutes.

She picks at the Weetabix again. Scratching at it now. Hard. Nails dig into her leg.

Gracie stops. Stares at her mother. Reaches up and wipes Olivia's eyes.

'You're crying', says Gracie.

A pause.

'I'm sorry', Olivia says. 'I guess I am.'

The girl doesn't say anything. She sits beside her mother on the chair. She doesn't reach out to hug her. And Olivia is grateful not to be touched. Touched out. What kind of mother does that make her?

One minute.

'I had a good day at school', Gracie says, quietly.

The consulting room door opens. The therapist walks out. He's looking down at Ethan who is clutching the red toy car to his chest.

Olivia stands to greet them.

'Ethan', the therapist says. 'Do you want to show your mum what we were practising?'

His big eyes look up at her.

'Car', he says.

Olivia's breath catches. This time she knows she is crying.

SHOW ME A CITY WITHOUT GHOSTS BEGGING AT THE GATE

Naomi Shuyama-Gómez

for Darlene, Joan, Juniper and Mahanoor

pedicabs we took to pilgrim's landing. past the harbour spare with light, where i'd photographed a tangled mass of feathers and rot, a seagull once, planting heels on stone. we followed the moon, she picks

days of fruit and blood. but this one, nestled closer to earth, algonquin-named after a surge of sturgeons during her supermoon pull, she is the reason we ventured out. along the breakwater gleamed piles of shells at intervals suggesting communal dining.

dune and foam whirled between the concrete slabs, in gaps wide and jagged enough to splinter an easy catch. choosing a disc from the jetty's spine as our resting place to sit and talk, sip beer, smoke or think about smoking, think about drinking, we squatted between tides like

starlings that earlier joan'd confirmed, *already have made their way to alaska*. i've seen their murmuration, an undulating hive blotting vision, each dot a winged heartbeat. nests they lined with crumbs and sprigs of

yarrow, what i'd been taught to call *plumajillo*, meaning little feather, in the book of changes i read about its use for divination. i never managed to gather sufficient stalks to build a hexagram, but i wouldn't doubt cleromancy as the five of us circled the geographic accidents and personal tragedies that'd brought us here, to view the sturgeon

moon. she's simple, buttery and warm, polar to the city and tower behind us. she spread an elegant column, fractured a line in ink like our parts swept a section of dark hair to either side. a second moon we'd have worshipped all night, if not for the susurrating

high tide that rushed to crescendo. we rose when joan said, *better head back, now*. almost running, staggering graceless and cross-faded, i wondered, had it been time or mistreatment that scalloped cape cod into an arm, scythed and flexing? why'd this feeble discharge of shore been given safe harbour instead of the sturgeons we'd driven to near extinction, and about the leaping fish, fecund and fearless, in their ascent can they cause severe injury? are they the sort of animals capable of holding grudges or females down for copulation? you know, god, i'm not really discussing sturgeon. these

days i keep heading north. i bathe alone, remain unconvinced that there exists enough of a difference between babbling and blabbing to warrant distinction. i stare at a blank wall like a page trying very hard to want nothing. fail. failed again the night i heard the sink of ocean

gasp as it drained. our pace quickened. twenty minutes out from the gate, our luck curdled when from both sides trays of water smacked over igneous rock. stranded, we evaluated the situation until joan knotted us into a chain and led the scramble across submerged granite. yes, the water we entered was a cold slip to the knees but
scraping ground under the sturgeon moon, did we resemble those species of intelligent birds that craft, then bury their instruments?

BAMBI ON THE TURNTABLE

Sara Sowers-Wills

Survivor retraces his steps
through cities each
a variation on living
room decor. A range
of sofas and area rugs, lamps
standard in shape, end
tables. Temporary. Wires cross
lovers in distant cities
like the magnetic fields
of Sun and Earth.

Patterns repeat
into unrecognisable obscurity—
it's hard to see
when a baby turns into its mother.
Survivor drives off in a convertible
stuck in a cul-de-sac,
meets each day new
legs splayed and wobbly.
Skipping records.
Skipping records.
Skipping records.

GLOSA BEGINNING WITH TERMINAL ACROSTIC (FOR KATE)

D. Frederick Thomas

The code
consists in noticing
the particular shade
of the staircase
—Barbara Guest

At the gallery, I look
for a long time at a
portrait
of Jean Appleton, the
surface of which
makes no
distinction between field and sitter. You
tell me you fling
caution to the wind, rough
the code

into the material
when you paint. I call
that writing, but I
suppose the result is the same.
Our friend who keeps telling
us he doesn't understand
art likes the strange painting
of the man astride a horse
with an incorrect face. / Just as dreaming
consists in noticing

the moment when rhyme
emerges out of broken con-
straint, he brings me back
to the room in which the
image is displayed
and explains his captivation.
Later, back home, I'll
find myself unable to stop
recollecting the impression made,
the particular shade

animating the lifeless
configuration, motionless
forms. The shade of my attention
lurks behind my shoulder
at every turn, apace
with my inability to
finish anything worth
finishing—I see it there now,
leering up at me with its face that is my own from the bottom
of the staircase.

BUY ME A SUNRISE

Angela Townsend

Oscar wants me to buy him a sunrise. He told me this after I gave a speech to 120 people in taffeta hats and seersucker pants.

'Now, listen.' He didn't need this preface. Oscar's eyes look like the Earth from space, and they have consumed 87 years to the last crumb. I always listen.

But he said it, and I nodded.

'You're a writer.' It comes out half-admiration, half-accusation.

'I am.' I will accept this from Oscar. I would accept a burning coal or a quest from Oscar.

'So that's why I'm telling you this. That, and you're Daisy.'

I'm Daisy, and Oscar is Oscar, and we have both given up on understanding why that explains us to each other. Oscar started volunteering at the arboretum ten years ago, and I loved him from the first time the light caught his smooth head.

I write PR for maples, and Oscar says my newsletters sound like a psalter. When I got divorced, Oscar cried and offered to assemble all his friends who had ever laid track. When I think of the people I would save on my ark, Oscar is in the top ten.

'I'm not a guy who has dreams.' He didn't realise he was lying, so I let him. 'I don't hear the big voice, you know.' He steadied himself, railroad retiree knuckles around my wrist. 'But something came to me the other night.'

Oscar's native language is 'jaunty'. He makes ghoulish faces over donors' shoulders to get me to laugh. He writes me a PG limerick every birthday. But he is serious as autumn tonight.

'I heard it clear as a bell. "Write a song".'

I am a babbler, good at my job but bad at letting people finish trains

of thought. I let Oscar finish.

'Write a song, and call it *Buy Me A Sunrise*.' Oscar is astonished. He clutches me like a sapling.

'I love it already.' I do. I love anything born of Oscar.

But Oscar is loamy soil and prose, and we both know it. 'I don't write lyrics.'

'That makes it all the more powerful that you were chosen', I protest. 'If the big voice tapped you on the shoulder … '

Oscar shakes his head. 'I'm just supposed to get it written. You're a writer.'

'I'm the fundraiser for the Wickham County Arboretum.'

'That's your costume.' Oscar is poorly disguised tonight, too buoyant for his sports jacket. We are celebrating 100 years of green. I have just told our 'leadership donors' that they are the tree of life on legs. I have summoned 1 Corinthians to link leaves to love. I have officiated a marriage between generosity and gratitude. People feel good about their goodness tonight. This is what I do.

'You're a writer.' Oscar is not interested in my business card. 'You're a lover.' He gets quiet. He's in on the conspiracy. 'You're a preacher.'

I'm in a pink dress with three-dimensional feathers. I am forty-two at the prom. I am poking my pointy shoes in the topsoil to see what zestful beasts might still wiggle between the layers.

'I'm a creature.' We are not going to talk about my first career here, the ill-begotten year at a church before I realised I belonged east of Eden.

'You're Daisy.' Oscar is better with words than I am. 'Anyway.' He does not have time for weeds tonight. 'I need your help. *Buy Me A Sunrise*. This needs to happen.'

'You want me to play around and see what I can come up with?'

'I want you to write it.'

Oscar still does contract work for the railroad. Last month, he painted his front porch white, and stencilled black cats on each step after his Ruthie saw something cool on Pinterest. He already owns more

sunrises than King Solomon.

I want to offer Oscar a club-sized package of comets instead. I want to tell him about sun dogs and moon haloes and halls of rainbows. I want to give him all my books about the night sky, my coffee table castoffs from the thrift store. I lie on my belly at night in pyjamas no one sees, reading about neutron stars dense enough to hold things down. I put meteor showers on my calendar but don't go out to see them. I sketch the gibbous moon when donors get long-winded on the phone. I sigh relief when the sun sets.

I want to force Oscar to admit that I don't know anything about music. That should be abundantly clear.

'*Buy Me A Sunrise*.'

'Why me?'

'Because you're a writer.' He will repeat himself as often as necessary. Oscar will not turn this into a doxology on Daisy's gifts. He affirms with his eyes, not his words.

'I don't know, Oscar.'

'I know a few things.'

The donors are eating canapes. They are talking about my speech. I watch a man in a vest pontificate, unaware of the mayonnaise telling jokes down his chin. I watch a woman in black sequins stare long into the light. I watch the oaks appreciating our efforts. I watch for winged things with gentle agendas. I listen for permission to know little.

'Listen to me.' Oscar shakes my branches. '*Buy Me A Sunrise*.'

I can't tell Oscar what I know, that he was sent to convince me the hour is not late. He thinks he's here to mulch willows and make jokes. He thinks it's swell that so many people love the earth.

'I'm not a musician.' I am telling the truth. 'But what if I mess around with lyrics, and you see about a melody?'

'Deal.' Oscar is not a musician, either, but he trades seed packets with many gardeners. 'Hey.' His eyes are marbled with land and sea, quest and jest. 'If we make millions from this, we split it 50/50, okay?'

'Absolutely.'

'You're gonna donate your cut to the trees and cats and refugees, aren't you?' Oscar is generous in other ways. 'At least get yourself a Lambo?'

He's laughing before the word falls, a helicopter blade of silly syrup.

'OK. A pink Lambo.'

'I'll hold you to it.' He's solid earth again. '*Buy Me A Sunrise*. You won't forget?'

'You have my word.'

Ruthie has returned from giving a tour, and she riffles my feathers with a grandmother grin. 'Is he up to no good as usual?'

'We're making deals.' Oscar is six inches shorter than his bride of forty years.

Ruthie has no need to respond to this. 'You're a vision tonight, Daisy. Your speech was all soul. The donors are so happy. You reminded them why this matters.'

'She took us to church.' Oscar has sent God birthday and Christmas cards for seventy years. This is the extent of their correspondence.

'The speech wrote itself.' I tell the truth. 'The trees, the kindness, the light, the donors. I just stand still and catch the words.'

'You need to write more,' Oscar is holding my wrist and Ruthie's at the same time. 'You're a writer. You have work to do.'

'Let the girl enjoy the party.' Ruthie pets my feathers. She has been the brown sparrow in the pink costume before. She found Oscar on the far horizon of her hurts, after forty, after civil twilight.

'You have work to do.' When Oscar winks, I wish I could copyright winking so no one else can use it. 'Don't forget.' He pats Ruthie's arm. The conspiracy has concluded. 'I need one of those bacon things now.'

'They're not very good.'

'I'll be the judge of that.' Oscar looks at me, and I am not afraid. 'Remember.'

'Sunrise.'

He puts his finger to his lips. 'Between you and me, willow tree.'

LOST ON PURPOSE

Christine Vartoughian

When I was little, my father used to take me to toy stores and lose me. On purpose.

He would wait for me to get distracted by something shiny and then would duck around the corner where he watched and waited for me to realise he was gone. I was too young to know it was a game. He was playing on his own.

Sometimes it would happen right away, sometimes it would take a few minutes. This would most often occur during the Halloween season when aisles were filled with promises of little princesses and ghosts, two of my favourite things. Enamoured by skulls and slimes, I can still remember one particular glow-in-the-dark candle featuring a skull with a cute purple worm crawling out of its eye. I would covet it every year, way in advance of my teen witch phase. These treasures were distractions, but sooner or later my attention refocused and as the creeping, crawling, prelude panic approached, my wide eyes would scan everything around me, only to find myself either completely alone or amongst other strangers shopping. It was most often the former. My father didn't want anyone else in on this game.

Only when my fear would quickly escalate and turn me into my own crying, wailing mess of a monster would he come around the corner and say, 'I'm here! I'm here! It's just a joke!'

Upon seeing him, it would take me a minute to stop crying, and even when the tears on the outside dried, my insides still howled.

'I was watching you the whole time', he said, trying not to sound too disappointed. 'I just wanted to see what you would do.'

THE MUSICIAN

Les Wicks

She kept on breathing
into the beak
of a brittle firetail.
Pressed the minute breast
CPR—hear the ribs creak.
Took the body out into the wind
feathers ruffled she aspired, threw
this dappled habit of flight towards the angophora.
Plop.

There was a song about last hope.
Some court case over chords
& a paltry parliament promising more art.
She'd seen it all before
Thinks *Can't be alone,*
it's not in anyone's interest.

Who can say when a wing has flapped enough?

SWEET NOTHINGS

Emma Wilkins

I have coffee with a friend whose youngest child just started full-time school. Afterwards, she sets off for the pool—alone! Only herself to strap into the car, to change. No tantrums, no complaints—bliss! At three, the school bell rings. As we embrace our little loves she tells me how, post-swim, standing in the shower, she felt an intense loneliness. All those years we long to be alone, just for one minute, one hour. All those years our children cling to us and then, we leave them—six hours, five days a week. We leave them and, are left.

100

The sky blooms orange in the morning. Through still streets I walk, head tilted up, eyes gazing at the theatre overhead. The orange fades. The day moves on the way days do. Afternoon arrives. Standing, barefoot by our back fence, I move to tip a bowl of scraps into our compost bin. Looking down, I see the morning sky again. Clouds of mould have bloomed. The hue that tinged the sky above now tinges wisps of white below. I pause, reluctant to destroy the scene, and then I compromise. I take out my phone, I snap a photograph, *then* tip.

100

I'm listening to a song play in the car. I'm waiting for the moment when the music swells and with the swell, my heart. And I'm thinking of the joy of knowing what comes next. Mystery and uncertainty have their place. Not knowing what might lie ahead can spur us on, or spare us premature grief. But, when you *do* know what is coming, when what's coming is a melody guaranteed to thrill you with delight, knowing what comes next is quite the treat. Sure satisfaction, a promise made and kept, a balm. Knowing what comes—knowing joy comes—next.

100

I start collecting thoughts I want to keep. 'Curios' of sorts. I make a rule: 100 words, not more, not less. When I'm close, I count. How many words must I subtract or must I add? I reword, rearrange, recount. When I reach my goal, I hit the ENTER key. I type 100. I press ENTER again. Such satisfaction! Knowing the goal, knowing when you've reached it, knowing when to stop. Is this why some love numbers so? In a world where we can't know how many years, let alone days, we might have left, the certainty is utterly unique.

100

I start asking friends if they would, if they could, travel to space. A mechanic, usually the silent type, says sometimes he imagines that's precisely where he is. He has to fix an engine urgently. What if he drops a vital part, must watch it float away? Back on earth, I picture his puzzled colleagues, studying his face. Why is their workmate screwing on that bolt as if the future of the world depends on him? They don't know he's travelled far away, beyond the workshop walls. A machine's inner workings can be examined, explained; less so a colleague's mind.

100

My mother tells me how, when my great aunt turned 80, a relative examined her income and her costs. He did some calculations, the result: she had enough to live on until she turned 100. No need to calculate beyond, everyone thought. What were the chances she would live a century? My great aunt is now 103. This was not the plan. So, at 100, she had to sell some shares. That same aunt, when asked about her longevity, said she never married. She had never been too happy, or too sad. Never too besotted, or disappointed; never too vulnerable.

100

We re-watch a '90s movie with the kids. When a lower-class family, oblivious to what they lack, thrilled by what they have, learn their home will be 'compulsorily acquired', the father mounts a fight. A retired barrister decides to help. Eventually, they win. The father asks the barrister to join him for a weekend, fishing at their humble shack. Some would think the lawyer smarter, richer, 'better'—with better things to do; and they'd be wrong. He accepts that invitation, also, later ones. He loves the father. He loves the family. I find the revelation beautiful, I blink back tears.

100

A teacher on the radio describes her childhood home. It wasn't a safe place. She's raising her kids differently. She says she is a 'cycle-breaker'—and plainly is. She's helping adolescent boys make welcome packs for a nearby women's shelter. She speaks about the children tenderly, with pride. Of their own accord, they started adding to each pack a note. She knows the words by heart: 'We're glad you're safe and we've got your back.' Her voice threatens to crack. 'It electrifies me, the possibilities,' she says—of shifting cultural norms from violence to care. Many despair. This woman hopes.

100

I am away from home for work. In a hotel bed I dream about a friend from France I haven't seen for years, but emailed recently. I dream I have arrived at a hotel in Lyon. She's the manager, and she's sprinkled yellow petals on my bed. I wake to an email from my friend. I write back: 'You were in my dream!' I describe the petals on the sheets. She replies with a photograph: a white cotton cushion cover, with leaves she's stitched atop with yellow thread. It's not a sheet, they're not petals, it's not dreamed—and yet…

100

I am walking our youngest child to school. In the gutter, a rose petal is spinning alongside us in the wind. Spinning, not in air but along ground, rotating like a wheel. When it stops, we bend down, we make it spin again. I use my phone to record the small, surprising spectacle. I will file it with another spinning sight: washing on our clothesline, viewed from below, on a bright, breezy day. Clothes flapping, sky rotating, sun warming. And, in the background, children talking. Small moments from ordinary days. Small proofs that ordinary life is nothing short of wonderful.

100

My son is at the skatepark, learning a new trick. He tries five times, he tries ten times, he tries I-don't-know-how-many-times—and then starts to succeed. I realise, though it's not been his intention, he's been learning how to fall as well as skate. I marvel at his willingness to stumble; trip. Look, to some, a fool—then try again. Trying, not in private, trying in a public place. Falling not once, repeatedly. Falling, rising, falling, rising. This and not the trick takes guts. This is what I need to learn, to practice, too: how to fall and try again.

100

I'm at a discount chemist, child on lap, waiting for medicine. We sit under fluorescent lights, amid armies of screaming discount tags and ads. My sister calls, we appear on one another's screens. She is on holiday: day one. She is on the coast in Italy. My surroundings make hers even more desirable. I love the absurd sight of our contrasting locations side by side. I ask how much luckier it makes her feel, which makes us laugh. *Glad to be of service!* I declare. And I am. She's been of service, too: adding laughter, sweet escape, to our wait.

100

A friend who owns a coffee shop tells me that when customers' t-shirts salute a certain band, they put a song by that band on. Sometimes the

customer pipes up—*I love this song!*—or just starts moving in time, instinctively. Once, a girl had no response. It turns out she didn't know the band, just liked the top. Meanwhile a friend who had a stroke has a t-shirt featuring a scan of his poor brain. You needn't be a doctor to see damage. Sometimes the friend can't speak or act as he intends. The t-shirt says: What's your excuse?

100

A book I'm reading mentions kidney stones, mentions carelessly, casually that, these days, those stones are sometimes broken up with sound. Stones inside the body, broken using waves of sound? A fact mentioned in passing makes me halt mid-page. What a thing the body is, what wild ideas humans conceive. Test. Put to work. What power sound must have. Not just to move our hearts and bodies via rhythm, via melody. Not just to educate us, bind us (and divide us) via speech. But to travel through us, alter us, physically, within. Water can smooth stones. Sound can break them.

100

My mother tells our youngest child that he has Viking heritage. He comes home thrilled, transformed, inspired. So much can change within a day, I think. But this 'Viking heritage' is news to me. I text my mum and say as much. 'I think I got confused,' my mum replies. Turns out there is no Viking heritage. 'Venetian, not Viking,' my mum corrects. I anticipate disappointment. 'Bad news,' I tell our youngest child, then break the news. 'But Nanna said!' I tell him Nanna got it wrong. So much can change within a day, and so much can change back.

100

I keep dreaming I have done something I can't ever undo. The details vary, but piercing regret when I see I can't go back does not. I can't fathom my transgression, how I didn't realise, in the moment, didn't stop while I still could. In one dream I think: *If only this were a dream,*

if only I could wake up. I can't. I conclude the nightmare is reality. The feeling when I wake, when it dawns on me it really was a dream, is bliss. I've been given back my life, escaped. The impossible was possible, the irreversible reversed.

100

I'm at my sister's in Berlin and she is opening the windows. It's how the Germans ventilate their homes, to fight the damp. We fight mould with absorbent chemicals and cumbersome machines. They open doors and windows. *Lüften*: airing out. *Stoßlüften*: shock ventilation. Pushing moist air out, letting fresh air in. Simple, chemical-free, electricity-free. I love the idea and the words and the elegant simplicity. *Lüften*. *Stoßlüften*. Why buy and run machines when you can open windows, open doors, when you can breathe and let your house breathe, too? What other simple solutions do we fail to see, to share?

100

I'm lying on our bed reading a book. A song enters a window on the breeze. It's sung by rustling leaves that clothe a walnut tree outside. The tree, barely a bush when we moved in, is now roof height. I should prune it, shape it, tame it, but I love it wild and wide. The children are downstairs reading, cooking, making their own fun. My husband's in the workshop underneath the house. I picture our family, between floors, as layers in a cake. The moment is mundane, also sublime. If I could save a slice for later, I would.

100

Writer Kathryn Schulz is being interviewed by Ezra Klein about monks and how hard, and how impressive, focusing the mind can be. He interrupts to joke that, usually, monks don't have kids. Schulz agrees. But she doesn't consider children a distraction. 'They are the essence,' she says. 'They're the thing we are meant to be paying the most attention to.' One of ours enters the room with a white vase. A plant emerges from

its spout. Vibrant leaves with zig-zagged edges cascade down its rounded sides. Once a common weed, now an exotic plant. Once unattended to, now on display.

100

We're watching *The Simpsons*. The whites have been washed with the colours. Homer's t-shirts have been tinted pink. Marg doesn't see the problem—he can still wear them to work. Homer says he isn't popular enough. We claim to embrace difference. But the same outfit can be admired as "alternative" or criticised, depending on who's wearing it. In another episode, Marg has had enough. She needs a holiday ALONE. As her train pulls away, Homer asks housekeeping questions urgently. The last is, 'How do I use the pressure cooker?' Marge tells him, 'Don't!' Such lack of faith, also, such certainty.

100

I'm listening to the radio while making lunch. As I pan-fry vegetables, as I grate cheese, I hear the spinning of the Earth is slowing down—a day in the 20th century was longer than a day a century before. 'It's not a very big difference, it's tens of milliseconds,' Chad Orzel says. But the fact a day can change in length at all, that seems profound. When we can't measure something, Agnes Callard says, we fight, because we can't separate the asking of the question from the answering. We can measure days. But not how many we have left.

100

My neighbour texts me, on a Sunday night, in winter, after dark. She's just finished a book. What should she read next? Delighted to oblige I recommend ten books in a succession of quick texts. When I see one is in the room, I leave the house and cross the road. She hears me at the gate, opens her door. She's wearing her pyjamas. She was ready to start reading, now she can. When she notices my shoeless stockinged feet, I tell her I considered this a 'book emergency.' Maybe I've made her night, maybe not, but she's made mine.

100

I'm collecting a child from a friend's house. It's barely 5pm but it is winter. It is COLD and it is dark. I'm impatient to go home, unlace my shoes, light the fire, close the blinds. The children want more time. I wonder aloud at my impatience, at the difference seasons make. If this were summer, when days stretch long and warm, I'd take my time. The other mother understands, the cold and dark provoke a 'nesting impulse,' she asserts. Two words of explanation, validation, relief. It's time to leave, to drive, to park, and then at last, to nest.

100

A friend tells me of a family member's death and his partner's stoic stance. She didn't want a funeral, didn't feel that it would help her say goodbye. She did take their dog to see the body. She didn't want him searching for his master, wondering where he'd gone, when he'd be back, in coming days and weeks and months. I picture a curious dog entering an unfamiliar room, sniffing a master who is motionless, then sensing that his body doesn't hold him anymore. As understanding dawns his tail stills. Now he can join his master's partner in her grief.

100

I'm reading a story that mentions a heart transplant, in passing, without fuss. One of the children stops me. How can you *transplant a heart*? Doesn't it kill a person, to take out their *heart*? How long can a body live without—be between hearts? How can a *heart transplant* be mentioned in *passing*? I marvel at how familiar the extraordinary can seem. The children are right to be astonished, right to stop, to ask, interrogate, ask *how on earth*? So much that we believe, so much that's true, is so incredible—and so taken for granted. People transplant *hearts?*!

100

Once, I think it was before I started school, my mother left the house without saying goodbye. I don't remember who was minding us. I do

remember asking where she was and being told she'd left for work. I do remember feeling shocked. I only have the memory because every other time she left for work, she always, without fail, kissed me goodbye. My dear, devoted mother who has done so much for me over so many years; who gave so many gifts of time, gifts of attention, so many gifts I've since forgotten—and yet, still I remember, this.

100

A comment one of the children parrots from his teacher stays with me. The teacher told the class it can be harder to *un*learn than learn. I think the context was bad habits, but it got us thinking, talking about what might and might not be hard to unlearn. I realise sometimes *un*learning isn't hard, it's impossible. Once you can walk or swim, you can't choose to unlearn how. Once you learn the meaning of a word you might forget it, but you can't deliberately unlearn it. And once words are spoken, they can't be taken back, can't be unsaid.

100

I think of thunder and lightning and how the time it takes for the sound of light that has entered our eyes, to reach our ears, necessitates two words. Sometimes we speak of just the sound, or just the sight. Then there are clouds, which seem so insubstantial, so transient, yet can beat and bump whole aeroplanes around. If my hand can pass through mist, why can't a plane penetrate clouds with equal ease? Apparently, it's water density. A cumulus cloud one kilometre wide and high, could be as heavy as 100 elephants. I think of elephants "thundering" like light.

100

One of the kids and I are driving to the airport, and he is singing made-up songs. I ask him questions: When does he make these marvels up, and how? He says sometimes he sings when he's waiting for the microwave. It's an appliance that we rarely use. We have such a cluttered kitchen that we keep it in the laundry round the back. To get to it, you

have to go outside. It means that no one in the family can hear you as, while waiting for leftovers to heat up, while watching blinking numbers counting down, you sing.

Note: The opening 100-word fragment of 'Sweet Nothings' was originally published by *Ink in Thirds* under the title 'School Hours'.

1 (FROM MOON)

Charlie Williams

Forgotten things are sad with their dying.
The low rusted fence around the church,
Resisting the shifting ground beneath,
Fears its gradual lean towards the roadside.

But the fence is just the husk of a sadness,
It's the idea that's really dying—newness.
It's things *allowed* to grow old that become
Sad with dying. Those are the things

That people find it hard to look at, so they
Ignore them in themselves. The moon
Stays full one night till it turns, then slowly
Unbuilds, already thinking of another fullness.

Yet we repeat our days without distinguishing them.
Days snuffed out like they're weak as candleflame—
Those votives placed in front of relics in churches.
When all the candles are out the saint is dead in forget.

Days so small they are carried away on the
Shoulders of ants. Days—that are all there is
Of the truly sacred, and we let them go,
Unformed as dreams.

BREAK OF DAY

Jena Woodhouse

Do not look for endings
or beginnings in the river:
you will hear the cries
of rowers as they lean
upon the oars, strive
against the early current
surging to the sea;
you will see late-
summer swallows,
circling before they leave.

Do not look for answers
where the saline and fresh
waters meet, eddy
with detritus from the journey
in mid-stream. The ferry docks,
exchanges passengers,
regains its urgency, and you
are not on board, but sitting
pensive on the wooden seat,
waiting for the light to flood
down-river from the east.

LORD OF MARBELLA DRIVE

Kirby Michael Wright

The boy two homes east is celebrating his new voice. Its deepness stunned me. This voice is somewhere between tween and man, although veering toward tween with a whiney timbre. He plays basketball with his pals when the streetlights flare to life at seven, shouting teases with half-man bravado. They take long distance shots at a basketball net with a base anchored to asphalt by cinder blocks. Sometimes the boy shifts to falsetto, like Frankie Valli. He used to sneak into my open garage and finger everything from plastic Halloween swords to boxing gloves. The boy squared off against his older sister and she drew blood. He ran home weeping.

The ball bounces off the backboard again. Another miss. But the boy's hormones sing with the *bang*. He whistles loud, as if declaring ownership of Marbella Drive and the planet.

HOW IT BEGINS

Judith Yarrow

I'm bent over in the garden, prying out dandelions, pulling chickweed, cursing the snails' damage. A man stops by the gate and says, 'Are you Judith?'

I stand up, hand on my back; it always aches these days. 'Yes, I am.'

'Do you know me?' he asks.

I shake my head. I've never seen him before.

'It's time to go now', he says, and then suddenly, yes, I do know him.

The snails' damage, these resistant weeds, they're all a dream. That angry conversation with my husband this morning, my worries over money, the chasing after fame. This world and the lifetime I've lived in it, all just an hour's dream.

And the messenger at my gate? He's calling me awake.

WINNER OF AAWP / UBUD WRITERS AND RESEARCH FESTIVAL 2025 EMERGING WRITERS' PRIZE FOR PROSE

Judge's report

It is a plague of cats that heralds catastrophe in this sophisticated yet seemingly gentle and moving tale where the author opens up a world of finely observed detail. But soon, the reader realises cats may symbolise wider aspects of human relationships embedded in cultural and personal history.

Beguiling and compelling, 'Cats in Canals' is all the more heartbreaking for the subtlety and tact of its decanted writing: no flurry, no pyrotechnics here. This is the work of a writer with an undeniable gift for language—not as an inert resource, but as a living thing capable of conveying and inducing empathy.

'Cats in Canals' announces the arrival of a great talent on the scene of the short story. Its author has a pitch-perfect voice and a feeling for the precise moment at which to deliver an ending with merciless thwack. Yes, I was not prepared.

CATS IN CANALS

Andrew Carmichael

Lucia arrived at Nonno's on a Friday at 11 pm with her mother. They had driven eight hours to Linton, and—spurred by hunger and the monotony of the vast red country—spent most of the trip fighting. Lucia had focused on how authoritarian it was to pluck her out of school with no warning. Her mother, for her part, spent most of the time reminding Lucia how spoilt she was. A truce had been arranged, but only through the condition of mutual silence.

Despite the hour, the inner lights of every house on Nonno's street were on. Feral cats cried and hissed from all over the neighbourhood.

It had been seven years since they had last seen Nonno. He wasn't there to greet them at the door. But they did hear a loud 'thwack' at the side of the house. There they saw him, bashing the fence with a shovel. Lucia was just in time to see the flash of a thin black tail disappear over the other side of the fence.

Nonno let them inside once he chased the cat away. He gave Lucia her mother's room and gave her mother the fold-out bed Nonna used to sleep on. Everything smelled old; either flowery or sour, like too many piles of dirty laundry. There were photographs of her mother as a teenager on the dresser, and dusty woollen dolls arranged on the bed. Her mother's room felt untouched, but not like it was a shrine, or anything ornate and precious. Instead the room, with its dust and old frilly curtains, felt like something stored in a garage.

Lucia unpacked her bag and found Nonno and her mother in the kitchen. Nonno put a saucepan of milk on the burner of the gas stove and took two brown mugs and a tin of cocoa out of the cupboard. The spoon rang on the cup as he stirred the chocolate into the milk. Then he delivered the two drinks saying: 'Ecco qua, there you go.'

Lucia said nothing. She poked the swirling globs of cocoa with her spoon.

'Grazie, Papà,' her mother said.

'It's not usually this bad,' he said. 'Don't worry, I'll do something about the cats.'

Early the following morning, Nonno roused Lucia and her mother with breakfast—a frittata with chopped tomato—and ushered Lucia into his white Ford Transit. He pushed aside paint cans, electric drills and blankets from the front, leaving Lucia to sit on the paint-stained passenger seat. Then he took her, with the grumbling engine, all along the surrounding streets.

Linton was a flat place. Small houses and sprawling industrial zones dotted large swaths of burnt-red soil. The only places of note were the main highway, and the canal, which stretched in a brown line across the town. Bright green lawns hugged the water, and greying businesses crowded the road on swaths of dusty asphalt.

They spent the morning stopping by people's houses for odd jobs. Nonno introduced her to his clients as his little granddaughter or as la mia bambina. In the afternoon, they bought rat poison from the supermarket. He had also tried to buy her an ice cream, which she refused. Still standing in the freezer aisle, Nonno picked an expensive pack of raw meat from the freezer.

'Cats are picky,' he said, catching her gaze. It wasn't until they got to the car that he spoke again: 'Do you help your mother at home?'

'Yes, we help each other,' Lucia said.

'That's good,' he said. 'She did the same with your Nonna. They were, how do you say, criminals, or co-conspiracies.'

'Co-conspirators?'

'Yes, that's it,' he said. 'Conspirators.'

While they drove back along the canal, he pointed out bowls of cat food by their neighbours' letterboxes. 'They're poison, for the cats,' he said. 'We have to take care that people's dogs don't eat the food. But we

never see the bodies of the buggers; sometimes the odd possum will get unlucky though.'

That evening, they fixed an old woman's dishwasher. Her name was Pina; she didn't pay but lavished them with jars of pickles and vegetables from her garden. She was a small, thick woman with black hair, who when Lucia arrived seemed to preside over Nonno with a beaming smile. 'Why don't you visit your Nonno more often?' she said. 'Look at you, you're so beautiful. Don't you think your Nonno would want to see that face?' Nonno stayed quiet during the interaction, but he encouraged Lucia to give Pina a hug, and carry the grocery bags outside.

On the drive home, while the shopping bags sat on Lucia's lap, a small brown shape darted onto the road. Nonno gripped the wheel and sped up. They struck the creature, and Lucia felt the car lurch up on the passenger side.

The next day, while Nonno was at church, she begged her mother to let her stay home.

'Mama, I can't spend every day with him.'

'He's your Nonno. What can I say to him? *Lucia doesn't like you, Papa*.'

'I don't want to see him. It's horrible here. We ran over a cat yesterday; he just sped up and hit it.'

'Lucia, stop it; he probably didn't see it.'

'He just expects us to do things,' Lucia said. 'You've been doing all the cooking, cleaning the kitchen and the laundry. And I'm just supposed to be available whenever he wants?'

'He's doing his best for us, *amore*; you'll just have to get through it.'

Lucia left the house. It was a cool, sunny day. She spent the morning walking towards the centre of town until she found herself by the canal. It stretched out before her, with grass and thin fencing on either side of it, like a clogged stormwater drain.

There was an octangular pedestrian sign in the water, a white number plate nestled in a bank of sand, and even a bicycle tyre which drifted along.

Lucia followed the path of the tyre until she came to a bench in the shade of a paperbark tree. She heard a tiny meow. It came from a small black and white cat curled up under a low shrub. The cat panted in the shade, heaving each breath out, which made its whole body shudder with effort. Lucia stooped down and moved to touch its face with her knuckle. The cat met her hand with its cheek and purred. She cleared her bag and coiled her jumper into a cushion. Then she took the cat and placed it gently into her bag.

Lucia arrived home, grateful to see Nonno's van was not there. The cat was difficult to hide, so she had no choice but to keep it in her mother's old room.

She called an Animal Poisons Helpline from the phonebook. When she first tried to call, her mother asked why she needed the phone, to which Lucia replied vaguely, 'It's my friend's birthday.' Her mother relented, warning that she expected a call at 6 pm. A man answered the phone. He sounded in his early twenties and spoke with a slow regional drawl. Lucia had the impression he was reading off a script.

'Do you know what the cat ate that made it unwell?' the man said.

'No, what should I do?' Lucia said.

'Well, I can't tell you that unless I know what caused it.'

'All right, I think it was rat poison. How do I help her?'

'Well, if it hasn't been too long since she ate it, make her throw up, but you'll need a vet.

Lucia's mum interrupted. 'Lucia, is that a man on the other end?

Lucia hung up the phone. 'It's nothing, I promise.'

She had one idea for how to make the cat throw up. When she was seven, she used to come to Linton for school holidays to sail with Nonna. The old sailboat still sat in the large backyard. Nonna wasn't a very good sailor. On an outing, towards the end of another school holiday period, Nonna tacked the sailboat, which caused Lucia to be struck by the boom. She'd swallowed so much salt water afterwards that she threw up three times.

She made her way to the kitchen and filled a bowl with water and salt; she knew her mother was watching. The cat was still curled up on her bed. She lifted it and placed a beach towel underneath and then gave it the bowl of water. It drank deeply and didn't stop. A bloom of red came out into the water bowl. Its mouth was bleeding, pooling tiny spots of blood into the clear water.

'Where did you find it?' her mother said from the doorway behind her.

'At the canal, but you can't tell Nonno.'

'Oh Lucia,' her mother said. She sat on the bed, took the bowl away and began petting the cat. 'I don't think it's going to survive.'

Lucia heard Nonno's car crunch on the gravel outside.

'Just go distract him or something,' Lucia said, gently pushing her mother to the door.

Nonno had placed a mass of cluttering things in the kitchen.

Her mother greeted him. 'How was your day, Papa?'

Lucia slammed the door.

'What's wrong with her?' Nonno said.

'Oh, nothing we just had a bit of a fight.'

Nonno chuckled. 'Better get some sleep for tomorrow, Lucia!'

Lucia ignored him and set her attention on the cat. It was shivering, but almost at the point of sleep.

'Lucia, I want to see you out here,' Nonno called.

Lucia scratched the cat's cheek, then she walked through the door and stood in the kitchen. Nonno stood by the table, he had brought home a cake. It was a single-layer honey cake, with pale yellow cream piped into flowers on the top. Her mother started to unpack a bag of fresh eggs and leeks.

'We missed you today,' he said.

'Did you just buy that?' Lucia said.

'Lucia!' her mother said.

Nonno looked at her mother and said, 'What's up with her today?

No, I told you it was someone's birthday.'

'All right, did you call me just for that?'

Nonno clenched his jaw and walked forward to Lucia. 'You shouldn't talk that way to family. Everyone was asking about you today.'

'Why? They don't even know me.'

'You're *mia nipote*. That's why.'

'I'm not *yours*, you barely know me. When was the last time you called us before we arrived?'

'What?' he said. 'I called last week.'

'No, we called *you*. What about when Mum lost her job? Or when Dad left? Did you know, did you care?'

Nonno was silent, then he said, 'I'm eight hours away, Lucia. I can't know if you don't tell me.'

'No, you don't care. We're not convenient for you, so you don't call. Then when we're here you just pretend as if …'

'Lucia, that's enough!' her mother shouted.

Lucia went back to her room and slammed the door, letting her weight lean on it.

The cat stood up on her bed when it saw her enter. It teetered on its front paws then it threw up.

It started to convulse and breathe rapidly. It yowled in a frantic tone. Nonno swung open the door and saw it. Lucia's mother rushed to the front door shrieking, 'I'll get the car keys!' Lucia went to pick the cat up, but when she squeezed, it hissed and bit her.

Lucia dropped it and shouted, 'Nonno, help it!'

Nonno shouted at Lucia's mother, 'Leave that!' then roughly grabbed the creature and took it outside.

'Stay inside,' he shouted.

Lucia's cat hissed from outside their sliding door; Nonno disappeared to the side of the house. Her mother rushed outside still holding her keys, before she cried out 'Stop! Papa!' There was a loud *thunk* of metal on the concrete by the fence, and after a moment's silence, the cats started again.

WINNER OF AAWP / UBUD WRITERS AND RESEARCH FESTIVAL 2025 EMERGING WRITERS' PRIZE FOR PRIZE FOR POETRY

Judge's report

'Before the Rise' catches the eye because of its backward structure—from stanza IV to I. Then for its arresting images from 'greyed ripples of soft blue glow' to 'rocky groyne' and the glorious 'Sunrise like a fresh white peach / poached in an almost empty sky' to 'thrones of rocky gold' and sudden turn to the speaker's experiencing the solstice as 'dark hands curling up my legs' until the final insight 'before the rise'.

Rhythm, however, is this poem's subtle driver. Rewarding and gratifying, it is used to reinforce or underline nuances and inflections through judicious variations. And pauses. The ear attunes to this music-making. Spellbound, it occurred to me that many people say they delight in poetry for its particular concentration. Its compression. Reading this 'backward narrative poem', though, confirmed to me that such sense of compression ironically derives from the way a poet uses silence to highlight particular words or phrases to make the reader re-think language and find new delight in it.
'Before the Rise' will cast its spell on many a reader.

BEFORE THE RISE

Edward Kus

After the annual winter solstice swim at Williamstown Beach

IV
Low tide flow, so still and slow.
Greyred ripples of soft blue glow
hold a mirror to the city, and the sky,
and life unspools in ribbons of memories.
Here I am again at the long end of our elliptical voyage,
the round morning moon yellow and playful;
I watch it glide
below the rocky groyne.
They say it's always smiling,
but I say we've only seen its bright side.

III
Sunrise like a fresh white peach
poached in an almost empty sky.
The sand looks like it should be warm
but it is stubborn, confused and cold.
Meanwhile, the seagulls sit like queens
on their thrones of rocky gold,
regarding us with caution.
We do as we are told,
and the low tide makes the deep water wait
on our long walk out.

II
The bay is patient—
after a whole year
what difference is a few more minutes?
Finally, the winter solstice,
its dark hands curling up my legs,
and higher, past my waist and chest,
those cool hands like a poultice
and I slip inside the mirror
to confront myself, and the things I say,
and the awesome weight of the wintry bay.

I
The silhouette of a container ship,
way over the lonely sea,
reminds me the wheels of the economy
are careless of cosmic symmetry.
But I come to be transformed, or inspired,
like a lump of clay must be shaped, and fired,
and glazed; so I dive in and shut my eyes,
and see this longest of nights with its darkest of dreams.
Perhaps you could say that a part of me dies
at this lowest inflection before the rise.

WALKING HOME

Edward Kus

After the evening penguin tour at Hog Bay in Penneshaw, Kangaroo Island, on a summer solstice

I walk my way around the restful bay,
    my bare feet on the white and still-warm sand,
this cloudless night is leading me astray;
        I hold the endless stars inside my hand—
a slippery skein of all that's yet to be.
    The moon, a quivering pillar of silver sea,
suspends this longest day in front of me

        and pulls me out into the bay with you.
Rivers of memories all connected here.
    Wavelets tickle my back and neck. On cue
you trickle in between my toes. A tear,
        so dark and sweet as treacle flows—this weir
we call a life may stay the river's flow,
    but my bones and blood are in the undertow.

From Frenchman's Rock I look back to the beach.
        The endless waves goodbye, and life reckons
with something big, but just beyond my speech;
      outside my reach, like solstice moonlight beckons
to the sea. The sandy shore and ocean
        smile white and black, just like a crescent moon:
this longest day will come again too soon.

WINNER OF AAWP / UBUD WRITERS AND RESEARCH FESTIVAL 2025 TRANSLATION PRIZE

Judge's report

'Jolie' is a fine translation of a short story by the Italian writer Enrico Castelnuovo portraying a mother's grief in the aftermath of the loss of her young daughter. The translation espouses the original lexicon and diction as well as its intimate psychological register. The translator's approach reminds me of Italo Calvino's statement in *The Literature Machine* where he evokes Homer's mermaids, suggesting that not only do they sing, but also want to be listened to, their singing constituting the extreme point of arrival of writing, the ultimate core of poetic speech. Like the sirens' song, 'Jolie' conjures up the literary representation of creative space. In particular, I detect—indeed, feel—the intimate register of the original text embedded in flashbacks, breaks in rhythm, introspective flashes, ellipses and metaphorical allusions, linking one word to another, one world to another. Despite the ghostly traces of another language, of another time and sensibility, this translation transcends linguistic matter and participates in poetic performance.

JOLIE

Enrico Castelnuovo

(translated by Thila Varghese)

I

'Here I am', said Doctor Cadeo, approaching the medical officer who whispered a few words in his ear.

The doctor nodded in affirmation and added in a low but perceptible voice, 'In fact, that's exactly what I want.'

Then he resumed his place behind the armchair where Clara Falerno sat, with her torso somewhat leaning forward, her bony hands planted on her knees like claws, pale like a ghost, mysterious like a sphinx.

For a week, Clara Falerno hadn't moved from that room. For five days and five nights, without ever closing an eye and without taking anything except what was necessary to avoid dying of starvation, she had kept vigil over her little and most graceful Olga, who was ill with diphtheria. Then, when the catastrophe struck on the morning of the sixth day, there was no way to get her out of there.

They kept repeating to her, in every tone, that she had to think of her other children, her husband far away, and her aging mother, but she replied, with a calm that was frightening, that her other children were fine, they were with their grandmother, perhaps playing, perhaps laughing, that her husband and her mother did not need her … No one needed her, except her Olga.

And Clara, forbidding strangers from touching the little girl—with only the help of Silvia, the maid—had washed her, dressed her, adorned her as if for a celebration, and laid her in the zinc coffin, with her little hands crossed, and her long blond hair flowing over her chest.

Neither tears—the tears that soothe the deepest anguish—had wet her eyelashes, nor had a single moan risen to her lip in the terrible hour of the funeral. Only once had she been seen to quickly bring her right

hand to her heart, as if something inside her had broken. While the maid sobbed with her head leaning against the wall, she, the mother, stood upright and motionless, her eyes following the coffin as it was being smuggled away in the fearful silence of the night. The coffin passed through the empty rooms, dimly lit here and there by stubs of candles, the air thick with the sharp smell of disinfectants; it descended the deserted stairs, was silently loaded onto the black boat, and vanished in the dark canal. No one had come to bid farewell to the girl on her last journey, and none of her playmates laid a flower on the coffin …

Ever since it was known that Olga had diphtheria, the Falerno house had been placed under quarantine. Friends and acquaintances, while sincerely pitying the beautiful little girl and the mother who adored her, limited themselves to sending for news at the street door, ordering the servants not to go upstairs. Others asked for updates through Signora Pino, the grandmother of the little girl who was ill, and the most solicitous and curious ones tried to talk to the elderly lady and get more details from her.

But not even Signora Pino had crossed the Falerno threshold after the first day of the illness. When handing over Olga's two little brothers to her, Clara had said, 'Go, go, look after them, save them, and don't come here, and do not pass along this road until I call for you.' And pushing the children away harshly as they reached for a kiss, 'No, no', she added. 'With Nonna, right away—with Nonna.'

Along with Clara, aside from two servants, only her brother-in-law had remained. He had stayed reluctantly, out of concern for appearances, since among the many fears of Signor Giovanni Falerno, judge at the civil and correctional court, was also the fear of what people might say. And public opinion would have condemned him mercilessly if he, who lived with the family, had slipped away at such a moment. However, in deference to the precautionary quarantine imposed by the municipality, Signor Giovanni had never set foot in Clara's rooms during his niece's illness and had spent his time doing steam inhalations and antiseptic

washes. In fact, he gave off such a strong stench of carbolic acid that one morning the president had said to him: 'Dear Falerno, you're stinking up the courthouse. I am granting you special leave, and if necessary, I'll send work to your home.'

After the child's death, Doctor Cadeo, concerned more than anything else about Clara's condition, turned to the honourable magistrate, as the closest available relative.

'You should do something too … Help me shake that poor lady up … Use your influence … Persuade her to lie down.'

The judge raised legal qualms.

'How do you do it? … Those rooms are still under quarantine. If I go in there and then leave the house, I'd be violating a moral commitment … On the other hand, I can't remain a prisoner here … I've already neglected my duties for too long … Not to mention the risk, not for me, of course, but for the many people I come into contact with.'

The doctor grew impatient.

'Eh, don't bring up these technicalities … I'll take full responsibility with the municipality … And, as for the rest, I promise to disinfect so thoroughly that no microbe will dare to cling to you.'

Cornered, Signor Giovanni had ended up letting himself be dragged along and, trailing behind the doctor, he made a few visits to his sister-in-law. But needing someone to vent to, he quietly blamed his faraway brother.

'When one chooses a career that demands constant travel, one should renounce marriage. It is not right to have a wife and children to then pass the burden onto relatives … Because, I am not saying … of course it'll be a terrible blow for my brother to receive the news in Zanzibar of his daughter's death, but meanwhile, he commands his corvette, he sees new countries, he has a thousand distractions. He won't complete his voyage for another year or two, and by the time he returns after a long time, the worst will be over … The greatest tribulations fall on those who are here, who, after all, have the right to a bit of peace … Sure, even

Cadeo, poor fellow, has been neglecting his patients for seven days to be here at all hours … But Cadeo is a doctor, and part of his profession is to make sacrifices in exceptional cases … And besides, doctors are used to living among misfortunes; they have the authority, and they have the right words for the circumstances … all fine things that I don't have … not even with my sister-in-law.'

And indeed, Clara Falerno—a spirited woman, wife of a man full of fire, energy and courage—had never shown excessive deference to her timid and self-centred brother-in-law, nor had she ever turned to him for advice, during her husband's frequent absences. Rather, being somewhat sarcastic by nature, she often amused herself by making him the target of her sharp remarks.

Now Clara paid no attention to him or to Cadeo.

Faced with their pleas and exhortations, she stiffened into a resistance that only brute force could have overcome; and the prudent physician hesitated to use force.

'I'll come on my own … later,' she would say clinging tightly to the armrests of the chair and speaking mostly to the doctor.

'I know, there's nothing left, there's nothing I can do, but I feel comfortable here … And I even take a cup of broth from time to time … Ask Silvia, doctor … Don't worry. I won't fall ill.'

And on her emaciated face appeared the shadow of a smile.

Ah, how painful it was to see that smile!

The judge tugged at Cadeo's coat.

'Did you hear? She says she will come on her own. It's better to be patient and leave … We are only making her more upset.'

But Clara hadn't kept her promise, and a few hours after the funeral, the doctor had returned to press the matter.

'Listen, Signora Clara, soon the sanitation officers will arrive … You know … In cases of contagious diseases, the belongings and furnishings of the afflicted must be disinfected or destroyed. We'll need to clear out of this room …'

'And why can't they begin in my presence?' Clara interrupted.

'How?' Cadeo exclaimed. 'They'll tear down the curtains, take away the furniture, and would you like to be present?'

She raised her haggard face and said slowly and gravely, emphasising each word:

'Yesterday, they took away something far more precious than the furniture, and I was present, and I was strong.'

'So strong … too strong,' retorted the doctor. 'I don't want you like this. … I want to see you cry.'

With relentless logic, Clara replied:

'If I don't cry in this room …'

And her glassy eyes looked intently at the empty cot.

But the phrase she had uttered struck the doctor like a sudden ray of light. *If I don't cry in this room!* She herself was thus invoking tears, and she felt that out of there, it would be even more difficult for her to shed them! And he (oh, the fine psychologist!) he, to whom a fit of tears deemed necessary, indispensable for her sanity, for her life, was insisting on sending her away!

II

Authorised by the doctor's instruction, the health officer lifted the heavy drapery behind which, in a corner of the room, the child's toys had been assembled.

Clara flinched; her waxy, thin fingers seemed to sink into her flesh through the fabric of her dress.

Cadeo remained impassive. But Signor Giovanni, who was at the back of the room, slipped away silently. Why had they called him? What was he doing there? To him, certain things rent his heart.

One after another, with cruel ostentation, the toys passed from the hands of the medical officer into those of an attendant, who placed them in a tar-coated canvas sack. Nothing escaped Clara.

Here is the hoop that Olga (it was just eight days since the last time) enjoyed rolling along the paths of the Public Garden. The hoop bounced on the fine gravel, and the girl, lighter than a butterfly, ran, skipping along with it. Her mother followed her close behind, and people watched them fondly—at the still young and beautiful mother, and the lively, healthy and fine little girl …

Here is the rubber ball which, with its capricious bounces, had knocked over so many trinkets, broken so many glass panes, struck or grazed so many heads, provoked so many harmless fights between Olga and the younger brothers. For some time, however, the ball had lost its former brilliance; it no longer shone with its bright colours, nor did it have its feverish and nervous restlessness. And Olga kept urging her mother to buy her a new one.

'I'll buy it for you, my dear darling.'

Here is the neat little kitchen, here are the small tin plates, where Olga prepared and served frugal meals to *Jolie* … a bit of flour mixed with water …

And here's *Jolie* …

A slight tremor shook Clara's limbs as she saw *Jolie*; her eyelids fluttered, and her teeth clenched.

It seemed like yesterday. Her husband was to leave for Rome in the evening to confer with the Minister before embarking in La Spezia. She had gone out with him and Olga. They had gone into a toy shop and picked out a box of blocks for Mario, and half a dozen unbreakable toy soldiers for Giorgetto, who showed belligerent instincts. For Olga, they had let her choose a doll to her liking. And she, among several, had chosen this one, and had immediately named her *Jolie*, the same name as another doll she once owned, which had met a tragic end in the countryside in the autumn, under the wheels of a cart. With her tow hair, squashed little nose, and silly smile, the new *Jolie* was no image of classical beauty, yet she was not lacking in merits.

She could stand, sit, kneel, move her eyes, and when a spring in her belly was pressed, say 'mamma' and 'papa'. In short, she inspired the kind of trust that people who are physically healthy and, if not refined, intellectually sound usually inspire.

'Will you take good care of her? Will you keep her safe until I return?' her father had asked Olga.

And Olga had promised yes.

To Clara, who remembered the short lives of previous dolls, the promise had seemed rather bold. Yet it was a fact that, in eight months, *Jolie* had not suffered too much damage. A small bruise on the head from an accidental fall, a dislocated arm, paralysis in one leg joint, an internal fracture that made the spring mechanism work slow and difficult to operate—that was all. *Jolie* could no longer stand, sit, or kneel. *Jolie* no longer moved her eyes, and she could no longer say, except in a confused way, 'mamma' and 'papa.' Otherwise, *Jolie* enjoyed good health and maintained the same smile, which is a sign of a serene and peaceful disposition.

Olga loved her passionately. In the morning, her first thought was to ask *Jolie* if she had slept well. Then there was the outfit, which was changed several times during the day, since *Jolie* possessed a rich wardrobe for summer and winter. Then breakfast, visits, lunch, and dinner. Finally, in the evening, Olga would not go to bed without first undressing the doll and putting her to bed, covering her with heavy or light blankets depending on the season. In the girl's mind, *Jolie* had to be part of the family's joys and sorrows. She brought greetings on name days and Christmas, rejoiced at the happy birth of the house kitten, sympathized with the maid's toothache, and added her own regards to those Olga sent to her father … And if her father, in his letters, forgot to reciprocate the polite gesture, Olga felt it as if it was a personal offense and tried to console her favourite.

What else? During her illness, in the brief intervals between fits of fever, Olga wanted *Jolie* on her bed, spoke to her in her weak voice,

apologised for not taking care of her as usual, promised to make it up to her, after she recovered, for her forced neglect. And a few hours before dying, rousing herself for an instant from her lethargic stupor, she had stammered: '*Jolie* is cold.'

Clara remembered all this as *Jolie* disappeared into the large sack, along with the hoop, the rubber ball, and the little tin plates. She remembered it all, and it seemed to her that from the bottom of the sack they were calling out:

'Mamma!'

And she seemed to hear the words again:

'*Jolie* is cold.'

She turned to Cadeo as if to plead for mercy.

'Doctor, even the doll ...?'

'It is necessary, dear lady.'

Clara covered her face with her hands.

'My God, my God!

And yet, little by little, her mute, concentrated, petrified pain began to soften, to melt into an immense pity for herself and for others ... for her husband, her children, her mother, the house... the house where Olga was no longer.

Her eyes were still dry, but she felt the tears rising, like the earth feels the deep waters searching for an exit. The tears rose, gathered in her throat, announced themselves with a spasmodic sob, finally bursting forth—hot, impetuous, and abundant.

'Signora Clara,' Doctor Cadeo whispered gently.

She didn't answer. She took his hand and squeezed it tightly.

'Are you convinced now to come?' he continued.

Docilely she let herself be led away by the doctor and by Silvia.

'And where has Signor Giovanni gone to hide himself?' the doctor couldn't help but ask.

'Signor Giovanni?' said the maid. 'I think he's doing steam inhalations.'

'Coward!

Translator's statement

'Jolie,' a short story by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian writer Enrico Castelnuovo, is a masterful psychological portrait of grief, centred on Clara, a mother mourning the death of her young daughter, Olga. I was drawn to this story for its emotional depth and intimate realism, which does not seek to dramatise loss but portrays it through small, everyday objects such as a doll, a hoop and a toy kitchen. These items become vessels of memory for the mother, and their removal is as painful as the loss itself.

My primary aim in translating 'Jolie' was to faithfully reflect the original Italian short story, preserving its thematic integrity and emotional subtlety. I sought to capture in translation the quiet intensity of Clara's grief without embellishment, maintaining the delicate balance Castelnuovo strikes between restraint and emotional nuance. The story's power lies in its understatement—in how ordinary objects become symbols of irrevocable loss, and how maternal devotion becomes a form of self-denial so complete it borders on self-erasure. Translating 'Jolie' was, for me, a way of honouring this quiet, emotionally resonant depiction of grief, while bringing forward the delicate power of Castelnuovo's literary voice.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Geoffrey Aitken [he/him] writes his awarded minimalist poetry in Adelaide [South Australia] on unceded Kaurna land, with a lived experience for [AUS] & [UK, US, HR, CAN, Fr & CN]. Published recently at *Macrame Lit, Mande Literary* & *Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight* [US], Monash University's 2025 Verge Anthology, *BLUE* [AUS], *STREETCAKE* magazine, *Underbelly Press* & *Stepaway Magazine* [UK], soon at *The Closed Eye Open* [US] & now *Meniscus* journal [AUS]. Nominated Best of the Net 2022.

Brendan Alpiner is a musician and poet from Detroit, MI. As a musician, his work has been acclaimed by American Top 40 with Ryan Seacrest and Earmilk, and has received over a million streams independently. As a poet, his work has been featured in numerous outlets across the US. His debut collection, *The Throes! (2014–2025)*, arrives 5 September 2025.

Adeleke Babatunde is a Nigerian poet, writer, and columnist with the Nigerian Tribune. He believes that words can be used to recreate our existence. He explores various themes and experiences to sharpen his creative edge. His poems have appeared in Erogospel, Kalahari Review, and Springng, and anthologies including Today, I Choose Joy (ACEworld Publishers, 2019), For Those Who Find Love (Inkspired, 2022), and elsewhere. His chapbook Origami was published by Inkspired in July 2021.

Olivia Baume is a queer Australian writer based in London. She usually writes short fiction, but lately poetry has offered a roomier vessel for all the large and unruly feelings. She has a boring day job.

Jason Beale is a writer from Melbourne, whose poems have appeared in journals such as *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.

Howard Bellido: First generation Cuban American artist. Childhood cult survivor. Native of Virginia Beach VA currently residing in Seattle. HBCU educated. But all you really need to know is that he is most fabulous man you'll ever meet.

Raymond Berthelot is a writer and poet and author of the chapbooks *The Middle Ages* (Finishing Line Press, 2022) and *Border Crossings* (Finishing Line Press, 2025). His poems have appeared in *Washington Square Review, The Caribbean Writer, The Acentos Review, Progenitor, Peregrine Journal, Mantis, Apricity Magazine, The Elevation Review, Journal of Caribbean Literatures, the Carolina Quarterly, DASH Literary Journal* and many other diverse literary journals.

Tony Beyer continues his writing life in Taranaki, New Zealand. His poems have appeared in many parts of the Anglosphere over the years.

Born in 1986 in Paris, **Cecile H. Blanc** studied literature and philosophy, then digital media & communication at the Sorbonne. She has been working as a digital marketing executive for fifteen years and is a member of author network Byte the Book. She lives in London with her family.

Peter Boyle is a poet and translator of poetry living on Dharug land.

Faye Brinsmead's writing appears in journals including *South Florida Poetry Journal, Cambridge Haiku Journal, New Flash Fiction Review, The Ekphrastic Review* and *cataloguing poetry magazine*. One of her pieces was selected for inclusion in *Best Microfiction* (Pelekinesis, 2021). She lives in Canberra, Australia.

Rohan Buettel lives in Canberra, Australia. His haiku appear in Australian and international journals (including *Presence, Cattails* and *The Heron's Nest*). His longer poetry appears in various journals, including *Rattle, The Goodlife Review, Meanjin, Meniscus* and *Quadrant*.

Max Bufkin is an aspiring writer from the Midwest. As a mixed-race, transgender individual, they have a passion for creating narratives that feature diverse characters. Their writing often explores themes such as found family, climate justice, and LGBTQ+ issues. They have produced a vast plethora of works, including novels, poetry, and short stories.

Owen Bullock's most recent poetry collection is *Pancakes for Neptune* (Recent Work Press, 2023), following three previous poetry titles, five books of haiku, a bilingual edition of tanka, and a novella. He teaches creative writing at the University of Canberra. His other interests include juggling, music and chess.

Michael Burrows was named a 'Best Young Australian Novelist' by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2022 for his debut novel *Where the Line Breaks* (Fremantle Press). He has been shortlisted for the Fogarty Literary Award, Australian Fiction Prize, and the Double-Take Novelette Award. His short stories have been published all over the world.

Ray Carey is an Irish poet and composer. He was selected by the late Irish Poet Laureate Paul Durcan from a National Competition for his Trinity Workshop Poets. He lives in Waterford, Ireland. Recent poetry: *Southword 47: New International Writing* (Nov 2024); *Argyle Literary Magazine* (Fall 2025); *Innisfree Poetry Journal* 41 (Fall 2025).

Andrew Carmichael is an aspiring writer living in Sydney. He currently works as a scientist and radioanalytical chemist. He enjoys writing short stories with a focus on realism and themes of familial or communal responsibility.

George Davey is a British writer based in Suzhou, China, where he teaches English to kindergarten students. His poetry and prose have appeared in *The Horror Tree, Acumen Literary Journal, Phi Magazine,* and *Anomaly Poetry*. When he's not writing, he immerses himself in the surreal worlds of Haruki Murakami novels.

Eartha Davis is a woman of Ngāpuhi and Celtic heritage living on Wurundjeri land. She is the winner of the AAWP/Express Media Sudden Writing Prize and a 2025 Varuna Residency Fellow for her poetry collection *màthair beinn* (Vagabond Press, 2025) Her work has been published in the *Australian Poetry Anthology, Express Media, Rabbit,* and *Cordite,* among others.

Odette Des Forges has a Master of Writing, Editing, and Publishing from UQ. Her work has featured in publications such as *Womankind* and *Crackle Anthology*. She was highly commended in the Carmel Bird Literary Award and received first place in the Maureen Freer Literary Competition. Her work has been shortlisted in prizes such as the Richell Prize and Write Around the Murray, as well as longlisted in the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and the Furphy.

Evgeniya Dineva is a poet from Bulgaria. Her works appear in *Oxford Poetry Library, The Hong Kong Review, Ethel, Asian Cha* and others. Her debut poetry collection *Animals Have No Fathers* (Ars & Scribens) came out in November 2023. Evgeniya is a fellow of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation for Creative Writing, and the recipient of the Traduki Writer Grant, Tirana 2025.

Born in Sydney, **Ross Donlon** now lives in Castlemaine, Victoria where he is convener of Poetry from Agitation Hill. He has published seven books of poetry, the most recent being *The Naming of Clouds – 50 ghazals* (Recent Work Press, 2025). Winner of two international poetry competitions, he has read at festivals in Australia, the UK, Ireland, Eastern Europe and Norway, and is widely anthologised in both Australia and the UK.

Jane Downing's stories and poems have been published around Australia and overseas including previously in *Meniscus*. In 2016 she was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, in 2023 she won the AAALS (American Association of Australasian Literary Studies) Fiction Award, in 2024 she came second in the Furphy Literary Award and won the Thunderbolt Prize for Crime Writing, and in 2025 she won the NSW Poetry Prize.

Alison Eastley lives and works in Penguin, Tasmania. Previous work has been published in *Stirring* and *Neologism Poetry Journal*.

Award winning writer **Kari Ann Ebert** has been published in journals such as *Night Heron Barks, Free State Review, Philadelphia Stories*, and *Columbia Journal*, among

others. Her fellowships include BOAAT Press, Brooklyn Poets, and Delaware Division of the Arts. Her chapbook, *Alphabet of Mo(u)rning* (Lily Press, 2022) is available on her website kariannebert.com. Kari is a collage & zine artist and takes her antique typewriters to events, writing impromptu poems for the masses.

Lana Eileen is a visual artist, musician and writer. She has undertaken residencies across Iceland, Egypt, Sweden and the Arctic Circle, and had her work as an artist recognised internationally.

Lena Fransham lives on the north-east coast of Aotearoa New Zealand. Her writing has appeared in publications such as *Overland, Takahē* and *Crow & Cross Keys*. She is currently an editor with *Headland* literary journal.

Lee Fraser grew up in Aotearoa New Zealand, was a linguist in Papua New Guinea and Kenya in her 20s, collided with domesticity in Aotearoa during her 30s, and later rediscovered health through poetry. In 2024 she had 20 pieces published internationally, and came 4th in the NZ poetry slam. Her work is in *Amsterdam Quarterly, Consilience, London Grip, Micro Madness 2024, Poetry Aotearoa Yearbook 2025, Stone Poetry Quarterly, Tarot* and elsewhere.

Leone Gabrielle writes in company of succulents and cyclamens, from an old hillside house on Taungurung country. Shortlisted: Minds Shine Bright, Spineless Wonders, La Piccioletta Barca. Published: *Plumwood Mountain, Meanjin, Rochford St. Review, KalliopeX, Meniscus.* Debut chapbook, a collaboration with Lucy Wilks, *L+L Exquisite Corpse Sonnets* (2023).

Renoir Gaither is currently engaged in a self-study of the Beat Generation. A former librarian, he naturally has a penchant for all things literary, particularly literary outsiders, rebels, and rascals. He despises the mundane and the conventional. His work has appeared in *Callaloo, Washington Square Review,* and *South Florida Poetry Journal*.

Angela Gardner is a Welsh Australian writer and visual artist. Her most recent poetry, a verse novel *The Sorry Tale of the Mignonette* (Shearsman, 2021), was shortlisted for Wales Book of the Year 2022, and a UK National Poetry Day recommendation. Poems are published in *The Yale Review, West Branch, Image* (USA); *Poetry Salzburg Review* (Austria); *SoftBlow* (Singapore); *Blackbox Manifold, The Long Poem* (UK); *Southerly* and *Cordite* (Australia).

Claire Gaskin's first full-length poetry collection, *a bud*, was published by John Leonard press in 2006. It was completed in the receipt of an Australia Council grant and shortlisted in the SA Literary Festival Awards. Her subsequent collections are *Paperweight* (Hunter Publishers, 2013), *Eurydice Speaks* (Hunter Publishers, 2021),

Ismene's Survivable Resistance (Puncher & Wattmann, 2021), *Weather Event* (Gazebo Books, 2023) and *Material Witness* (Puncher & Wattmann, forthcoming), completed in 2025 assisted by a Creative Australia Grant. clairegaskinpoetry.com

Best of the Net nominee, **Rich Glinnen**, has had his poetry featured on Rich Vos and Bonnie McFarlane's podcast My Wife Hates Me, and is a mainstay at the Nuyorican Poets Café. His work can be read in over 100 print and online journals, as well as in his forthcoming poetry collection *Front to Back* (PGN Publishing).

Alessandra Gonzalez is a Cuban American poet who dedicates her craft to pinning down the parallels between palm trees. Her work explores the tangled roots of family, memory, and identity, weaving personal experiences with the layered history of Cuba. When she's not writing, you can find her chasing the perfect cafecito, getting lost in old photo albums, or wondering what the ocean remembers.

Ashley Graegin is a high school ELA and creative writing teacher living in Michigan.

Soramimi Hanarejima is the author of the neuropunk story collection *Literary Devices for Coping* (Queer Space, 2021). Soramimi's recent work appears in *Pulp Literature, Apple in the Dark, Black Warrior Review,* and *The Cincinnati Review*.

Jane Hider is a lawyer and writer based in Melbourne. She writes about family, food, love and memories. She is represented by Tom Gilliatt at A4 Literary.

D.A. Hosek's poetry has appeared in *Hanging Loose, Meniscus, Great Lakes Review, Bronze Bird Review, Belt Magazine* and elsewhere. He earned his MFA from the University of Tampa. He lives and writes in Oak Park, IL and spends his days as an insignificant cog in the machinery of corporate America. https://dahosek.com

Ella Jeffery is a poet, editor and critic. Her debut book of poems, *Dead Bolt* (Puncher & Wattman, 2020), won the Anne Elder Award and the Puncher & Wattmann Prize for a First Book of Poems, and was shortlisted for the Dame Mary Gilmore Award. She is the recipient of a Queensland Writers Fellowship, a Red Room Poetry Fellowship and a Mick Dark Fellowship for Environmental Writing. She lives in Brisbane.

Jill Jones' latest book is *How to Emerge* (Vagabond Press, 2025). Her previous book, *Acrobat Music: New & Selected Poems* (Puncher & Wattman, 2023), was shortlisted for the 2024 John Bray Poetry Prize, longlisted for the 2024 ALS Gold Medal and commended in the 2023 Wesley Michel Wright Prize. In 2021 her book, *Wild Curious Air* (Recent Work Press, 2020), won the 2021 Wesley Michel Wright Prize, and in 2015 she won the Victorian Premier's Prize for Poetry for *The Beautiful Anxiety* (Puncher & Wattman, 2014).

Before taking up a position at Sydney University to teach critical thinking, **Louise Katz** taught creative writing at UTS, worked as an educator at Sydney's MCA, and further back, was a visual artist working in whatever employment she could find. Her most recently published novel is the dystopian *The Orchid Nursery* (Lacuna Publishing, 2015). Or find me at https://the-end-of-the-world.ghost.io/tales-from-the-end-of-the-world/

Poetry is a way **Edward Kus** punctuates his life; clarifying and expressing its colour and perspective, and building breathing spaces in the rushes. Ed is a father, husband, lawyer and poet based in Naarm-Melbourne, Australia. Poetry helps him to glimpse and articulate his experience that is all those multitudes combined. You can find more poems by Ed at https://substack.com/@edkus.

Robyn Lance is an imagist storytelling poet writing on Gundungurra land, Australia, who enjoys sharing the wonder and idiosyncratic nature of people and places. Her poems have been stencilled in metal plates in regional NSW and appeared on exhibition walls, telegraph poles & Canberra's ACTION buses. She is published in journals and anthologies, and is chuffed to have won a few prizes along the way.

Catherine Lapey is a writer and Dartmouth College student studying Philosophy, English and German. Her work blends philosophical inquiry with narrative experimentation, drawing on her interests in art, aesthetics, and Central European literature. She has studied in Berlin and Edinburgh, runs a blog called *Lapey's Lens* and served as Senior Editor for *The Stonefence Review*. This flash fiction piece, 'Olive Pits', distils love, loss, and late capitalism into the language of grocery lists and kitchen light.

Tasos Leivaditis (1922–1988) was born and raised in Athens, where he worked as a literary critic while also producing a rich poetic oeuvre that would win him critical and popular acclaim in Greece. The poem presented here is taken from his 1974 work, *Dark Deed*, which reflects the dark years of military dictatorship in Greece (1967–1974).

Vek Lewis is a poet, fiction writer and scholar whose work explores gender, cultural identities, migration, memory, and intergenerational haunting. Born in Australia with Anglo-Indian heritage, her writing inhabits queer, trans, and diasporic margins. Her poetry has appeared in journals like *Scarp, Mattoid, Island, PORTAL Multidisciplinary Journal of International Studies* and *Southern Review*. She is currently finalising a novella called Chiaroscuro and working on a novel called The Red Thread.

Harsheni Maniarasan is an MA Creative Writing student at University of Bristol who possesses a huge affinity for literature and spends most of her time reading and penning poetry. She holds a particular interest in ghazals, narrative poetry and exploring nature through imagery. Her poems have previously been featured in *Chartium, Irshaad Poetry, Thawra Mag*, and a South Asian literary blog, 'Mittai Club'. She presently works as an editor at *The Poetry Lighthouse*.

Christopher Mariotti (he/him) is an emerging writer living in Boorloo/Perth who has been published in *Pelican, Peafowl, Choking Hazard* and *Artery* magazine. He is co-editor of an upcoming zine *Labyrinth* which can be found at @labyrinthzine.mag on Instagram. His work explores the Anthropocene and the fragmenting/interconnecting technology that it spawns.

Irfan Master grew up in Leicester and currently lives on Ngunnawal land. He is an award-winning writer: of novels, poems, performances & projects, often working with sound, visual and text artists, composers, musicians and performers. His work has been presented in books, magazines, on radio and web, at events and festivals, over many years. He is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra.

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).

Patrick Meeds lives in Syracuse, NY and studies writing at the Syracuse YMCA's Downtown Writer's Center. He has been previously published in *Stone Canoe* literary journal, the *New Ohio Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, the *Atticus Review*, *Door is a Jar, Guernica, The Pinch*, and *Nine Mile Review* among others. His First Book, *The Invisible Man's Tailor* (2025), is available from Nine Mile Press.

Tim Metcalf won the ACT Literary Awards (Poetry) in 2024 with his *The Moon the Bone: Selected Poems 1986–2022* (Ginninderra Press, 2023). He was the inaugural winner of the Rosemary Dobson award. He spent decades in the bush and now works as a GP in Canberra.

Michael Mintrom lives in Melbourne. His poems have recently appeared in *Amsterdam Quarterly, Blue Mountain Review, Cordite Poetry Review, Halfway Down the Stairs, Syncopation Literary Journal,* and *Wasteland Review*.

Avril Mulligan is a writer and a teacher from Western Australia. Her short fiction and creative nonfiction have appeared in various Australian and international journals and anthologies, including *Ourselves* (Night Parrot Press), *Aurealis*, and *Verandah Literary Journal*. Mostly, she finds herself writing about wild places, wild hearts and impossible decisions. You can find her published work at avrilmulligan.com

Maryam Nesvaderani is an Iranian–Australian poet living on Dharug land. Shaped by her family's flight from political persecution in Iran, and by her father's service in the Iran–Iraq war, she grew up in a home where politics was always at the centre of

conversation. Her work explores themes of war and radical empathy (looking for the grain of love within the enemy's heart).

Gukhui Noh is a poet and publisher of her indie press, Soyuz, where she has been experimenting with the possibilities of human crafts' sensibility in the AI-driven publishing landscape. She won the New Year's Literary Talent Awards, sponsored by Hankook Ilbo in Korea in 2016. Four poetry anthologies published, including *Vanguard Voices of Poems* (Gyoyubooks, 2023) and *Poets' Dictionary* (Changbi, 2020) and her hand-bound poetry collection, *moonbow* (2022). She lives between Seoul and San Francisco.

Marina O is a neuro- and genderqueer writer and filmmaker of Slavic ancestry living and working in Naarm.

Mark O'Flynn has published seven collections of poetry, most recently *Undercoat: Poems about Paintings* (Liquid Amber Press, 2022) and *Einstein's Brain* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2022). He has also published two collections of short stories, *White Light* (Spineless Wonders, 2014) and *Dental Tourism* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2020).

Anna Oh is an aspiring writer from Singapore who enjoys exploring themes of existentialism. Her other hobbies include avoiding human interaction and finding her place in the universe. She also runs the Critical Thinking Café on Substack.

John RC Potter is a Canadian who lives in Istanbul. His story, 'Ruth's World', was a Pushcart Prize nominee, and his poem, 'Tomato Heart', was nominated for the Best of the Net Award. The author has a gay-themed children's picture book that is scheduled for publication. He is a member of the League of Canadian Poets. Website: https://johnrcpotterauthor.com; Twitter: https://twitter.com/JohnRCPotter

Shaheer Pulikkal, born on 16 December 2001 in Kerala, is a young Malayalam writer and journalist. His creative works—including poems and short stories—have been published more than fifteen times. He is also active as an author and contributor in literary circles, with a growing presence in Indian writing platforms.

Vaishnavi Pusapati is a physician, writer and poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net. She is the winner of the Beyond Words microfiction prize, and has been published in over eighty literary journals.

Radoslav Rochallyi (1980), in the theory and practice of Aesthetic-Logical Minimalism, explores the emergence of a new semiotic order where mathematics functions simultaneously as structure, medium, and content. This enables a transdisciplinary aesthetic where logic, art, and language blend into a single system of meaning

production that surpasses traditional historical boundaries of science, philosophy, and the arts. www.rochallyi.com

Mykyta Ryzhykh, author from Ukraine, now living in Tromsø, Norway. Nominated for Pushcart Prize 2023, 2024. Published many times in literary magazines in Ukrainian and English: *Tipton Poetry Journal, Stone Poetry Journal, Neologism Poetry Journal*, etc.

Yvette A Schnoeker-Shorb is the author of the chapbook *Shapes that Stay* (Kelsay Books, 2021). Her poetry has appeared in the *New York Quarterly, About Place Journal, Grey Matter: An Anthology of Medical Poetry, AJN: The American Journal of Nursing, Slipstream Magazine, Plainsongs*, and elsewhere. She lives in the central highlands of Arizona with her husband, peccaries, tarantulas, and various members of the Corvidae family.

Jessica Seymour is a writer and independent researcher based in Sydney. Over the years, she's tried her hand at journalism, high school teaching, and working in a jewellery store where her tiny wrists made her the perfect children's watch model. She's now an author and poet in her own right with credits in *Voiceworks, Needle in the Hay, Meniscus,* and *HelloHorror.*

Ibtisam Shahbaz is an emerging writer from Naarm. She has contributed to several literary initiatives, including her involvement with Red Room Poetry, Monash University Publishing and Hawkeye Publishing. She has served as the Poetry Editor for *be:longing* magazine, curating voices of artists whose work explores themes of culture. Her writing journey reflects her commitment to contemporary poetry and exploring the nuances of the human experience.

Hibah Shabkhez is a writer and photographer from Lahore, Pakistan. Her work has previously appeared in *Harpur Palate, Stirring, Forevermore, Empyrean Literary Magazine, Good River Review*, and a number of other literary magazines. Studying life, languages, and literature from a comparative perspective across linguistic and cultural boundaries holds a particular fascination for her.

Beth Sherman has had more than 200 stories published in literary journals, including *Flash Frog, Fictive Dream, Bending Genres* and *Smokelong Quarterly*. Her work is featured in *Best Microfiction* 2024 and *Best Small Fictions* 2025. She's also a multiple Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee. She can be reached on social media @bsherm36.

Joshua Lee Shimmen is a reader, writer, and general ratbag. His fiction has been published in *The Big Issue Fiction Edition, Overland,* and *Meniscus.*

Naomi Shuyama-Gómez's fiction and poetry are featured in *The Boiler, Joyland, Denver*

Quarterly, The Margins, Gulf Coast Journal, Michigan Quarterly Review, The Florida Review, the minnesota review, The Cincinnati Review, and *The Journal,* among others.

Sara Sowers-Wills teaches linguistics and writing at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Her poems have appeared in *Pleiades, Interim, Jet Fuel Review, Thimble Literary Magazine, Always Crashing, The Broken Spine*, and elsewhere. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She lives in Duluth with her husband and two daughters.

D. Frederick Thomas is a Brisbane-based writer and artist originally from Philadelphia whose work has appeared in publications such as *FENCE*, *Island* and *Heavy Feather Review*, as well as being twice shortlisted for the Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize (2023 and 2024) and recognised with a 2025 Varuna residential fellowship. Thomas's debut novel *Exhibition Text* (2024) is available from Vagabond Press.

Angela Townsend lives just outside Philadelphia and works for a cat sanctuary. She is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee and 19-time Best of the Net nominee. Her work appears in *Arts & Letters, Blackbird, The Iowa Review, SmokeLong Quarterly,* and *trampset*. Her poet mother is her best friend.

N.N. Trakakis teaches philosophy at the Australian Catholic University, and also writes and translates poetry and fiction.

Thila Varghese is a writer and translator based in Canada, where she works part-time as a writing advisor at Western University. Three of Thila's original short stories have been longlisted in Canadian National Short Story competitions, and one of them was shortlisted and was published in a Canadian anthology entitled *Beyond Boundaries* (Manitoba Writers Guild, 2023). Her translations of Tamil literary works have been published in international journals and magazines. Thila's translation entry was shortlisted in the 2023 Armory Square Prize for South Asian Literature in Translation. Thila received the 2024 ALTA/SALT Mentorship in Poetry from a South Asian language.

Christine Vartoughian is an award-winning Armenian-American writer and film director. Her work has shown at Lincoln Center, MoMI, and her feature film, *Living with the Dead: A Love Story*, is available on AppleTV and Amazon Prime. Her short fiction has been published in *The Bookends Review*, *Quibble Lit*, and other magazines. Her book, *The Only Way Out Is Through the Window*, was published by Rebel Satori Press in July 2025.

Les Wicks' 'career' in poetry has seen him strolling through a minefield, performing at a festival financed by a mob boss & reading to a one-person audience in a remote country town. He's read in a gold mine, a roman empire cistern & a madrasah. 15th book of poetry is *Time Taken: New & Selected* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2022).

Emma Wilkins is a Tasmanian journalist and freelance writer who's been published by magazines, journals and news outlets in Australia and beyond. You can find her at emmahwilkins.com

Charlie Williams (Sydney, Aus) seeks phrases with transformative power.

Jena Woodhouse's unpublished poetry collection, Tidings from the Pelagos: A Polyphony, was shortlisted in the Greek-based Eyelands International Book Awards 2024. Her forthcoming collection is *The Singing Ship: A Study in Resistances* (Calanthe Press), to appear in December 2025. She lived and worked for a decade in Greece, and has spent time in many other countries of Eastern and Western Europe.

Kirby Michael Wright was born and raised in Hawaii. His family land on Moloka'i served as the breadbasket for Kamehameha's warriors while training for their assault on Oahu.

Judith Yarrow has been published in two chapbooks and various literary journals over many years, most recently in *Hedgerow, Raven's Perch*, and *Medusa's Kitchen*. She was the featured poet in *Edge: An International Journal*, and her poems have been included in the Washington State Poet Laureates' collections. She lives in Seattle, Washington. Find more of her work at jyarrow.com

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