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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.

Contents:

Meniscus, Vol 12. Issue 2 2024

EDITORIAL	11
EVERY JULY TILL	13
Léa Abi Zeid Daou	
IN THE MEANTIME, EXPECTANTLY	14
Richard James Allen	
A DUSTING OF SNOW	15
Logan Anthony	
PASTURE STATUES	16
Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi	
THE STORM GLASS	21
Emma Ashmere	
OBEISANCE	23
Annah Atane	
GREAT GRANITE DAMN	25
Ani Bachan	
THE FUTURE IS HERE	26
Eugen Bacon	
SINGAPORE GIRL	27
Iqbal Barkat	
THINGS WE DID IN PREPARATION	32
Hannah Behrens	
PORTRAIT OF A DOG	34
Aurora Bodenhamer	
DRIVING	44
Margaret Bradstock	

WINTER MEDITATIONS ON AUTUMN MEDITATIONS (2)	46	VAMPIRES OF DISCOVERY	87
Lachlan Brown		Ed Go	
DAYDREAMING	47	WHEN A BED IS AN ISLAND	90
John Paul Caponigro		Megan Gordon	
LE CINÉMA	48	THE ESCAPIST	92
WH Chong		Hei Gou	
GEORGE, REMNANT	49	OUTSIDE THE INSTITUTION	99
Stephen Coates		Lázaro Gutiérrez	
PRODUCT LAUNCH	55	THREE FICTIONS	100
Aidan Coleman 55		Djuna Hallsworth	
IN WHICH THE GRIM REAPER RUNS ON FOUR FEET	56	AFTER	106
Mary Cresswell		Nicola Hamer	
DEATH IS DROOLING ON MY SHOULDER	57	UMAMI	107
Michael Cunliffe 57		Kristin Hannaford	
BALLAD OF THE STRANGE CAFE	6o	ELSEWHERE	113
Andrew Darling		Kirwan Henry	
DEVOLUTION	61	A SONG OF BATHSHEBA	116
Sunday Dutro		D.A. Hosek	
RICOCHET	62	THIRTEEN WAYS OF WATCHING MY GRANDFATHE	ER'S
Susan Fealy		FUNERAL ON FACEBOOK LIVE	117
A GLORIOUS MESS	63	Christine Imperial	•
Jen Francis		THE LAGOON	120
HYPOTHESIS HOUSE	65	Keith Goh Johnson	
MK Francisco		THE VIEW FROM THE ROCKS	129
DANIEL BOYD'S RE-TELLING	67	Dorothy Johnston	
Marcelle Freiman		CLEAN PANTS CHAIR	138
4 TORNADOS - DREAM	69	Elaina Knipple	
Leone Gabrielle		CHINESE SUN	139
PUDDING AND DAVE	7º	Alex Kudera	
Alicia Gadd-Carolan		EACH ONE TO FASTEN SOMETHING TOGETHER	147
FOND LOVE	78	Ella Kurz	17
Penel Gibson			

NOVEMBER	148	AS A HALF-READ BOOK	192
Wes Lee		Kristian Patruno	
AURORA MECHANICA	150	THREE HAIKU	193
Hugh Leitwell		Michael Pettit	
WITCH ASH	158	ŠU GI	194
Samara Lo		Annamaria Rossana Quaresima	
TRANSMETTRE	162	QUINTET OF BLUE HAIKU	196
Chrisanne Lombard		Simon Ravenscroft	
THE BREAK	164	SELF-PORTRAIT AS A SHOPPING TROLLEY	197
Rowan MacDonald		Kathryn Reese	
A SATURDAY EXCURSION IN NOVEMBER	170	THE HONEST FACE OF SADNESS	198
Blair Martin		Radoslav Rochallyi	
BLIP	171	CONNECTIONS	199
Kate Maxwell		Sharon Rundle	
PANIC AT THE GENDER	173	LOVE, WHICH WAY IS HOME?	207
Hannah McCann		Abhijit Sarmah	
H ₂ O: RAIN, OCEAN, TEARS, ICE	174	BIRTHING	209
Jane Messer		Leni Shilton	
NIGHT DRIVE ALONG THE BAY	178	GOLDEN HEART CITY	210
Michael Mintrom		Zeke Shomler	
CHOPPING	179	STICKYFINGERS	212
Sam Morley		Cheryl Snell	
TO SHOW THAT AN IDEA HAS A HISTORY IN	ORDER	PICTURE THIS	213
TO RECLAIM IT, BY OWNING MIRANDA MEL	LIS'	Daan Spijer	
DEMYSTIFICATIONS SERIES	180	MISDIRECTION INDEX	215
Tendai Rinos Mwanaka		Liam Strong	
RESISTANCE	182	CLOUDS THAT EMBRACE THE SKYLINE OF THE FIELD	D 216
Nathanael O'Reilly		Brett Thompson	
FLOWERS BLOOM IN ANTARCTICA	183	DRIVING TO THE CONDITIONS	217
Thomas Page		Isi Unikowski	
A SETTLING	184	THERE IS NO BODY IN MY CAR	219
Emily Palmer		Chelsea Uthayaseelan	

MOTHER'S DAY	221	WATER CASTING	252
Chelsea Uthayaseelan		Jane Crowley	
WEEK THIRTEEN	223	AAWP/UWRF POETRY PRIZE FOR EMERGING WRITERS:	
Amelia Walker		JUDGE'S REPORT	262
GRIMOIRE	226	Dominique Hecq	
Angela Williamson		CIRCLE TIME	263
LONELINESS	228	Joanne Ambrose	-
Dugald Williamson			
FROM THE WINTER BRIDGE	229		
Jena Woodhouse		THE GARY CREW AWARD	26.4
ALL MY HEART	230		264
Richard Yaxley		Ross Watkins (competition organiser) A GOOD CUP OF TEA CAN FIX ANYTHING	26-
CRAFT AND WATCH	239	Adam Brannigan (winning prose entry)	265
Steven O Young Jr		TWO POEMS FROM THE COLLECTION FRAGME	INTS OF
WILLOW BRANCHES	240	DESPAIR: LOVE LOST, MINDS UNWOUND PT 1	266
Ty Zhang			200
EURYDICE	242	Emily Obst (winning poetry entry)	
Samari Zysk			
		BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES	268
AAWP/UWRF PRIZES		DIOGRATITICAL NOTES	200
2024			
TRANSLATORS' PRIZE: JUDGE'S REPORT Dominique Hecq	243		
INFORMAL ABSTRACTION	244		
Adriana Lisboa, translated by Alison Entrekin and st			
TRANSLATORS' STATEMENT	249		
AAWP/UWRF SHORT STORY PRIZE FOR EMER			
WRITERS: JUDGE'S REPORT	251		
Dominique Hecq	<u>~</u>).		
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EDITORIAL

Dostoevsky writes, 'but how could you live and have no story to tell?' (White Nights, 1848). In the post-pandemic, economically-challenged arts community, it is heart-warming to discover that the hardships we are collectively facing have not dampened our combined passion, and capacity, for literary output.

For the editors of *Meniscus*, every new submission period brings a wealth of narratives, images and ideas into our lives, and we really value the senses, and the insights, gained from this global network of authors. Submissions frequently illuminate specific issues that are, we imagine, currently part of the zeitgeist, and are commanding the attention of authors all around the world.

This issue, in particular, showcases a significant body of work with a deep—and ever-growing—focus on our shared environment. There are profoundly moving pieces that attend to the breakdown of the natural world, and the creatures who inhabit it—whether birds, animals or plants. There are wickedly (even bitterly) funny satires on what we humans are doing, or failing to do, as well as writings on the sly ways the human condition continues to snag us.

There are several pieces attending to relationships—many tell of the important roles of companion animals in our lives, and others of the diversity of roles played by other people, with love found, lost and, occasionally, found again. Many of these pieces tell that several of us—too many of us—have lost someone we love over recent months, with both prose and poetry elegies to this effect.

However, as in life, there are also delightful stories, often in the form of memoirs in both prose and poetry; and a surprising number of poems, especially, about pregnancy and childbirth. These perhaps allow a touch of optimism to infuse what might otherwise be a pensive, sometimes sad, collection of writing.

This second issue of 2024 has welcomed submissions from both established and emerging writers, with many sending experimental pieces that play with voice, form or layout. We are so pleased to be surprised by your work and, as always, we implore you to keep those cards and letters coming.

Camilla Cripps and Jen Webb (for the editors)

EVERY JULY TILL

Léa Abi Zeid Daou

Every July till I die will be the hottest on record.

I make myself an island, I make an island of myself.

Sidestep not to go anywhere, seagrass on the skyline.

The trees get sick and their stories forgotten.

IN THE MEANTIME, EXPECTANTLY

Richard James Allen

Silence is a trusted companion, like a dog.

We wait together for the necessity of words, pretending that forever is soon enough.

On endless walks, it pants up at me, tongue tumbling sideways out of its mouth, tail conducting masterpieces of polyrhythmic potential.

A DUSTING OF SNOW

Logan Anthony

and nothing more coats the ground.
you walk across the yard.
crunch underfoot faint, but there.
trees leafless. your chest nearly lifeless.
hollow breaths ring you out.
it is not the cold that worries at you.
not the stagger of the forest.
not the white, cloudless sky reaching
down to demystify the river's water.
it is the silence come to find you
in this barren, winter world.

[14]

PASTURE STATUES

Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi

Millie mooed

Cate mooed with her.

The cow stared at them.

Millie giggled at the old joke, a pure, authentic song.

Cate giggled with her, exaggerated, trembling notes.

The cow stared at them.

Millie continued to pet the cow's cheek. Cate stroked the other, looking for signs of impatience in the otherwise stoic animal, searching its blank yet somehow knowing eyes for knowledge of her charade. What made her want to release the scream that had been lodged in her throat for inconceivable minutes was how Millie, sitting comfortably in her numb arms, was so far away from screaming—Millie, who had every justification for adding her shrill voice to the one behind them.

She hadn't asked Millie if she was all right; doing so would have given her the impression something was wrong. She hadn't asked Millie her actual name; as far as the little girl's amiable behaviour indicated, they had known each other all their lives, and names didn't matter. She hadn't asked Millie her age; from the moment she took the little girl into her arms, she could tell the small human being was no older than her career.

Three-years-old, Cate mused again, as she transferred Millie from one desensitised arm to the other, careful not to break contact with the cow. Three years, and once again she imagined the retirement banner, growing longer and larger as the idea cooked in her mind, advertising the pitiful number.

Cate was grateful for the brown-and-white animal's presence. Moreover, she was grateful that the cow was the first thing Millie had noticed. She wouldn't have thought to mosey on over to the cow; instinct—training—would have told her to immediately transport the dishevelled little girl to her car and there they would have waited for the next routine steps. And then she would've known something was wrong, she thought. And then she would've started screaming.

A scream perforated the ambience, a cocktail of pain, fear ... and perhaps a note of anger.

'Mooooo!' Cate issued her loudest impersonation yet. Millie echoed her sentiments, prolonging and exaggerating the bovine language until it devolved into more giggling.

Another scream smothered the laughter and, for a terrible moment, Cate thought she felt Millie stiffen; thought she saw registration on the little girl's suddenly sagging face.

'Moo mooooo moo moo moo mooooo moo,' Cate interjected, the single word spoken in the rhythm of conversation. She fixed upon Millie's eyes, hoping the little girl would take the bait, ready to shift her little body should she decide to go peeking behind her back, towards the scream.

Millie's bowed lips glistened, saliva pooling as she gathered her thoughts about the conflicting sounds. Cate readied her own lips with another string of nonsensical cow-speak, when Millie broke out of her trance, and fired off a meaningless statement of her own: 'Mooooo mooooo'—laughter—'mooooo moo moo moo.'

Relieved, Cate kept the dialogue flowing for as long and as loud as was necessary to block the intermittent screaming from Millie's ears. As their banter rose and fell with the outbursts behind them, she imagined how the others must have seen them: vulnerable backs; a revolving red light highlighting Millie's arms wrapped comfortably—*Or is she in shock?* Cate couldn't decide—around her neck; mooing from unseen lips; the cow itself unseen, blocked by their combined bodies. How unreal it must have appeared to others.

How grotesquely real it was to her.

How beautifully real it was to Millie.

A terrible thought returned Cate to their cozy huddle: *This is your first time, isn't it?* The scream she struggled to keep deep down in her gorge threatened to erupt. It occurred to her that *this* cow—not the pair grazing further down the fence, dangerously close to the break; not the calf flanked by several adults; not the others standing nonchalantly, laying nonchalantly, living nonchalantly; not the countless others that might have been a blur in Millie's passenger window—but *this* cow might very well have been the *very first* cow Millie had ever seen.

Cate mooed and wondered if Millie could detect the underlying melancholy. You don't need to meet a cow, she desperately wanted to assure the little girl. Not now. Not like this. She was certain that, when Millie was one day no longer a size fit for one's arms—there's no guarantee of that, Cate sadly reminded herself—she might learn to hate the cow. All cows. The way Cate hated them for what they had done to Millie. To her.

To Millie's mother.

The human sounds behind them were less frequent now, quieter; the pain, the fear, the anger—if ever there was—giving themselves to realisation. Cate hoped Millie's mother would soon forget how to scream; hoped her mother forgot her daughter's name. This line of thinking was drenched in selfishness, but Cate had accepted it ... for now; guilt may torment her later. It was just that she, and—more importantly—the cow, had worked so damned hard to keep Millie occupied.

Or are we keeping the cow occupied? Cate thought for the first time.

She looked into the animal's eyes, glossy black islands surrounded by thin halos of bloodshot white. Pulses of red light, rotating like an angry lighthouse—an eye of its own—searched those eyes, much as Cate was doing now, for knowledge.

Do you see the red light? she mentally transmitted to the cow. Do you understand it? Did you see what happened before the red light? Do you understand what happened?

The cow stared.

Do you understand that this little girl I'm holding, the one mooing at you, the one petting your face ... do you understand that her mother is the one who killed your calf?

Based on its indifference, she couldn't tell if the calf was blood-related to the cow. Would he or she—Cate couldn't tell which—bite Millie if it understood the situation behind them? Would he or she reconsider biting if it understood the whole thing had merely been a matter of a broken fence? Would he or she refrain from seeking revenge upon Millie if it understood that the calf had wandered through the broken fence, onto the asphalt, and before Millie's mother's car? Would he or she rethink their potential bite if it understood that Millie's mother had, from the looks of the finale, done her best to avoid the calf, but instead clipped its behind, sending her speeding vehicle into the ditch? Would he or she accept that the calf had been mercifully put down, quickly and painlessly, unlike Millie's mother, who found herself wrapped deep within her metal womb, gasoline-for-placenta everywhere, unable to be reached or moved, lest she perish sooner?

The cow stared.

Cate focused on Millie's silhouette within the animal's sheeny eye: *Do* you *understand?*

A voice answered the question. Cate couldn't make out the words, only the harshness of the voice. She sensed an approaching presence and immediately understood what was happening. In a voice tailored for Millie's benefit, Cate said, 'Please, don't come any closer,' and resumed mooing along with Millie.

'Officer?' The voice didn't sound so harsh. Perhaps it hadn't been at all. Perhaps, Cate decided, she was prejudiced against voices outside of her and Millie's precious bubble.

Cate sensed the intruder take another step forward.

'I said don't,' Cate said in her rosiest voice.

'Officer, I need to examine the little girl,' the soft voice said.

The well-meaning plea incensed Cate. She's fine. I checked her when I pulled her out of the car. Some scratches, a few bruises, but she's fine. I checked her. And I named her. She knew someone close to Millie must know her real name, but for tonight, in her arms, the little girl would take the name of the first girl Cate had lost on the job.

Footsteps crunched behind them.

'Don't, Cate emphasised, momentarily breaking her character of utter serenity. Before the intruder could interject, she added: 'I ... just give us a few minutes, okay?'

And then what? she thought.

Once again, she caught Millie's silhouette in the cow's eye. Do you have a father? Grandmother? Grandfather? Uncles? Aunts? Anybody? Do you know your name?

What would become of Millie when Cate decided enough "few minutes" had elapsed?

What would become of the little girl when the cow was gone?

The intruder's footsteps—a paramedic just trying to do her job—retreated, but Cate sensed she hadn't gone far; Millie did need to be examined.

Cate realised the screaming had died. It made sense to her, not because the outcome was inevitable, but because the paramedic now had time to check on the only survivor.

But they still had a few minutes.

And so, Millie mooed.

Cate mooed with her.

The cow stared at them.

THE STORM GLASS

Emma Ashmere

On the grey serve of beach where seagulls screech the air is thin. So thin she can see everything: the clouds purpling, the dark dot of the island, the white of waves crashing over it. If she'd brought her father's storm glass, there'd be crystal filaments threading up. But there was no room for it in her rucksack and her sister was worried it might break.

The teacher forms them into a human chain to load the yacht. Currents push-pull at her legs. A carton slips from her hands, disintegrates. Someone swears. But her dead father is smiling from the jetty and she can hear her sister saying, *no need to tell anyone if you think you see him again*.

The yacht thumps towards the island, penguins, thornbushes, rocks, a hissing cove. The other kids set up camp or prepare dinner in the rusted hut. She lies in an old canvas tent listening to the kicking wind, the others singing around the fire. It's her first time here—to bring her out of herself—since her father died and there's a chill in her bones as if they're his.

The teachers make them swim every day, fair, foul, fuming. Seals move beneath her, onyx-eyed. Whenever they vanish, somebody shouts *sharks*.

They wade chill shallows to another island; *slide your feet, stingrays here*. One flaps off in a spray of sand. Everybody laughs but she's stranded in the what-if.

In the darkening air, silent lightning spears the horizon. Masts of old ships stutter and scatter against the lights of the mainland town. How far away it is. How close. So many voices on the wind. A coincidence this is the place where her father stepped off solidity into infinity. Or is

it fate? Or, like the storm glass, another myth to shelter in.

Dawn. A pummelling wind. A teacher readies the yacht to sail across and restock supplies. Another teacher shouts *No, it's too rough. We'll wait it out.* She runs down, clambers aboard. As soon as they're out of the cove, the wind grabs her by the hair, the world tottering, seesawing on mountain swells. Someone shouts *watch out for the jib!* A thud, falling, the silence. The sky becomes the sea becomes the sky.

She's hanging upside down, face-to-face with the foaming deep. Someone's trying to haul her up but her life jacket is jammed between cabin and mast. A shadow is down there, in the darkest part of the depths. *No, not yet. Swim back up.*

Nothing is broken but they carry her up to the hut. A girl is there. This girl lights the fire, brings soup, warms her shivering hands, turns them over, whispers *I can read your palms if you like*. While the teachers argue the girl traces the heartline and lifeline, shows where they splinter and realign, asks what it's like to almost die. But she didn't die. And she knows her father won't sail this way again.

OBEISANCE

Annah Atane

Behind a small brick fence, a child buries her face in her little palms rhyming her breath with distant gun fire.

a bullet is stuck in her mother's heart like a song struck on the wrong note

She is beseeching with rheums & innocence in her eyes speaking in foreign tongues

they can only mean
Wake up ma!
Walk!
take my hands & run with me!

but ma can only walk & run to her grave.

Again, she screams at the top of her voice Grinding

the ears of the walls, hoping to summon help from the strolling clouds.

Mumbling – to a God only she could see &

I am somewhere behind the curtains, at a distance

watching her pain, stirring her grief – scooping them for a poem.

I am like a vulture, robbing a grave – feeding on cadavers. but I have not lost my soul.

GREAT GRANITE DAMN

Ani Bachan

The message, gummed up in your requests, only says 'hello'. She asks about yourself, your family, complimenting the body you have managed – she keeps it light. You have long considered yourself 'over it' but her words batter your mouth and smack sour on your palate – they stick. And maybe the stickiness is what beats your butterfly fingers against an amber keyboard to the rhythm of *wax near me*. The day has come, you've decided: you're going all the way.

The lady is nice. She warns you about the wax, its harsh drag, praising the sugar for its gentle pull. When you decline because of the extra charge, she uses it anyway (you remind her of her daughter). Afterwards, you tell anyone who will listen that this was the most unnatural thing; your rough stripped smooth as pearl, wrenched visible.

You are not sure why you did this, but you are certain you will never do it again. You wonder why she found you *againandagain*. You can't figure out her nonchalance, her casual perch on your granite dam – have you always been a fountain? You can't remember when you last dripped*loosenedejectedspurt*; you have been running a tight ship, pushed to the helm of yourself, aware of how easily a body could be steered off course, then righted by sharp direction, her gentle pull, her stern yank, her command of sugar, how it shucks a shut body, bare.

THE FUTURE IS HERE

Eugen Bacon

Silence blots out the jay's cheh, bubble, rattle.

The telly wobbles then unmutes itself louder than normal.

A journo tells, between gasping, the woes of a slashing inside a mall in broad daylight right in the belly of the city. Fade.

No image, head or gesture

– just snow lines on the screen, now a scarlet spatter.

No closed captions or ticker scroll.

The future is here.

SINGAPORE GIRL

Iqbal Barkat

'Oi! Come here!' Yati shouted.

The boy bowed his head and pretended not to hear as he rushed away.

She dashed after him. 'What's wrong with you? Deaf?'

The boy stayed silent.

'Dumb as well!'

The boy shook, not knowing what was coming next. In his mind, he was already making his escape, thinking of places he could hide. They were in an open area some distance away from the small lanes that he knew well. The best spots were the shared latrines conjoined to the houses but most of these would be padlocked. He thought hard about which ones were always left unlocked. Except, she'd know them too. She would have hidden in many of them to escape her father's cane. It would not be easy to outrun her. Yati was fast. Fat, but really fast. He glanced at what she was wearing. Pyjama pants. No chance he'd get away. Desperate tears welled in his eyes.

'Why are you bothering me?' he asked.

'Who? Who's bothering you? Me? How dare you accuse me.'

'No. No. Sorry.'

'I only called because I wanted to give you chocolate.'

She retrieved a small red Van Houten bar from her bra and held it out to him.

He did not take it. What trick was she up to? She nudged the bar closer. He did not move.

Yati exploded. 'Don't want?'

He took the bar.

'I want to go home,' he whimpered.

'Eat first. Don't be rude.'

He tore the wrapper. Oil was already oozing out of the foil. He opened it, not knowing what to do next.

'It's too soft.'

'Lick it, la,' she commanded.

He licked the foil. The chocolate tasted sour, of sweat. He retched.

Yati laughed and walked away.

He spat out the chocolate and ran home.

The boy did not know why Yati was so cruel to him. She glared when he walked past. When he played with one of her brothers, she would cut them and tell him to bugger off. Once, when he refused, she pushed him so hard that he fell and hit his head on the pavement. He felt his bleeding forehead and cried. She laughed. He avoided her if he could. But she did not let up. Worse were her taunts.

'Mother Chinese. Father Indian. How come son came out Malay?'

All the kids laughed with her. He pretended as if it did not affect him.

'Mother milk. Father coffee. How come son became tea?'

What did that even mean? He was confused.

There was no point stopping her. Yati was known for her wickedness. Everyone said she was mad. She did not go to school and when she got really out-of-hand, her father would shackle and chain her to the wall of the house.

His pleas to Ma and Pa went nowhere. They refused to intervene. 'Just avoid her,' they both said. 'I've tried,' he retorted. 'Why don't you do something nice for her?' Pa suggested. The boy did not respond. As usual, Pa was wrong. Pa reached out to touch him. He jumped back in irritation. He studied his arm, where Pa had touched. It was the colour of rust. Then at Pa's taupe, hairy arms and Ma's ivory face. They were all different. The upper primary boys had explained to him and the other lower primary boys about sex and making a baby, describing in lurid details how their parents sought each other after the children were asleep. He did not fully believe them, but sex explained his skin

colour. Brown, when black and white were mixed. Maybe Yati did not know about sex?

In school, during English period, he wrote a composition for Yati. His English was good. The teachers said so. And he knew the spelling of so many words. First, he described how she was the fastest runner in the village. Then he explained sex and how he came to be the colour he was. Miss Tan's eyes bulged through her prism specs and she threw the exercise book at his face. 'Dirty boy! You're not even eight.'

He waited till the afternoon before he sought Yati out. Her three younger brothers would have returned from school, finished lunch, and gone about their scavenging through the village. The three elder brothers, all working at construction sites, wouldn't be back till much later that night. Her father's cart was not outside the house. It was safe. If things went bad, there'd be no witnesses to laugh at him.

Yati was sitting on the bench outside her house watching as he cautiously approached. He stopped, with enough distance for a quick escape.

'I wrote a compo at school for you.'

He would have to explain what a compo was. She certainly could not read English. He would offer to read it to her. But would that be rude?

'Would you like to read it?'

She screamed, 'I cannot read. I've not been to school since my mother croaked!'

His first instinct was to scram. But self-pity overcame him and glued him to his spot.

'Nobody wants my compo,' he wailed.

He walked away sobbing uncontrollably.

'Come back'.

He moved closer to her. She stared into his face, rubbed away his tears and stroked his hair.

'Do you want to see something?' she asked.

'What?' he replied, a little unsure.

'I have a shackle.'

It was obvious under the sock of her left ankle, but he nodded.

She pulled off the sock and lifted her sarong. Her legs were covered in welts and bruises from multiple canings. Many were still pink, others crusty.

'No pain?' he asked.

'No, la!' she proclaimed proudly.

'Why are you looking up my legs? I only wanted to show you the shackle on my ankle.' They laughed.

'The wounds look bad, but I never cry when I'm beaten. You can touch.'

'No,' he said, disgusted. He quickly added, 'They may become worse. Maybe start bleeding again.'

The boy felt bad.

'You've hidden the iron really well,' he lied.

'Ya, I know. These socks are so itchy but at least nobody can see the shackle.'

A year later, upon reaching her sixteenth birthday, Yati found a job at one of the Japanese electronics factories that had recently sprouted on the island. The boy seldom saw her. But when she received her first pay, she walked around the village, announcing to everyone that she was now a Singapore Girl. The tight-fitting batik sarong *kebaya* that Pierre Cardin had designed for Singapore Airlines hostesses was now available in the market. Yati had bought herself a set, complete with a pair of sandals whose toplines were made of the same fabric.

As she modelled the outfit, she sang, 'Singapore Girl, gray way to lie.' The boy corrected her, 'Singapore Girl, great way to fly.' But she continued shouting the tagline how it sounded to her. From behind her, a thick cane lashed the centre of her back with such force that she collapsed. Her father screamed as he whipped her again and again. 'Whore! Whore! How dare you spend your salary.'

'Get up!' he shouted. Yati lay motionless but her eyes remained open. He bit down on the cane and pulled her by the feet, dragging her across the rough, uneven pavement. Her head bumped against every rock. There were many witnesses but no one stopped the man. Outrage was not common in the village and was often quickly tempered with advice from anyone present: 'Seek forgiveness,' 'Patience is our faith,' or 'Say the Shahada.' If the villagers said anything at all, it was only as weak whispers in their hearts. Everyone accepted that Yati was stubborn and crazy.

When the boy went to her house a few hours later, he found Yati sitting outside. She was still in her ruined Singapore Girl outfit. Sections were torn. She looked hard at him. Without saying anything, she took his hand and led him inside, shutting the door behind them.

This was the first time the boy had stepped into that house. It was dark, with sharp lines of sunlight streaming in from holes in the zinc roof. Mattresses and pillows were piled high against one wall. The room smelt heavy of sweat but it was neat and clean. Did Yati do the cleaning? She led him to a small space cordoned off by curtains that hung about a foot above the floor—clearly her room. All along the wall were different kinds of tiny plastic baby dolls. Many with milk bottles in their mouths.

Yati lay on a mat on the floor and gestured for him to come down to her. He knelt beside her. She tapped her chest and he understood that she did not want him beside her but on her. He lay on her for a long time and she held him tight. He was really uncomfortable, but he also felt stirrings of pleasure and remained in place. Finally, Yati shoved him away. As he was leaving, she asked him accusingly, 'Who do you think you are?'

Many years later, he found out that he was Yati's brother. Pa had bought him as a one-year-old baby from Yati's father. They had nine children. One was stillborn. He was their youngest and their mother had died delivering him. He knew them all, but his father and siblings never acknowledged him.

THINGS WE DID IN PREPARATION

Hannah Behrens

A love letter to the women in our family

We weren't sure if we wanted us.

We measured the causality of our birth, and the graceful growth that triggered our panic.

We armed our bodies with antibodies, while unsureness hacked away at our autonomy.

We accepted maternity as a possibility of our being, taking the consequences along with the knots of sadness that grew inside us.

Our bellies started to show, as we imagined worlds of better worlds.

Our children were us, and we had a full litter of reasons, to feel alone; worrying restlessly for no one's sake. We gave birth to us. And in those blank spaces we flourished for ourselves.

PORTRAIT OF A DOG

Aurora Bodenhamer

I resented the tin-can coffee I'd been loyal to since my early fifties. My doctor told me to keep ingredients used daily up high, which forced me to stretch my body. I kept the sugar and flour on the countertop to spite him, but the coffee was growing horns on the second shelf. I imagined opening the cupboard and that smug nerd's weekend-vacation tanned head yelling at me about the state of my arthritic body. Dr Fresno can go to hell. I added two teaspoons of sugar and, sometimes, a dash of whiskey. At my age, booze in the morning had the same adventurous gamble of a slick shower while home alone. Fixating on the dangerous nature of a mundane activity had become a pastime.

My girlhood loneliness became general loneliness, only less sexy. Actually, loneliness wasn't sexy at all. At the age of sixty-eight, loneliness wasn't accompanied by pouting expressions or flirting with suicidal ideations. Instead, it was walking the mall, alone, staring into lingerie stores and wondering what the perky, young employees would say about my breasts as they took my measurements. I'm pretty sure it's in the handbook for them to call me beautiful. My fear of others' perceptions of me was a constant frontrunner in my thoughts. When I walked around alone, I always had the suspicion that everyone knew I was lonely. When I was younger, I formed an intentional individualism; now that only staged a life of isolation. Walking the mall kept me young—like hearing bad news and basking in the overwhelming comfort of 'Thank god, it wasn't me'. Just last week, a woman slipped and cracked her hip in two places. I overheard this from the women who usually walk with her—they typically traveled as a pack, and I felt unsettled when I saw them as a duo. I always walked at a distance. Close enough to hear their

conversation but far enough away that they would not think I wanted to join in. I practised declining their invite, rehearsed this encounter in my head: played my age and acted like I couldn't hear them. I was more interested in viewing them from afar and watching them wobble back and forth in their wide-soled sneakers.

I categorised the different types of mall-walkers in my mental Rolodex.

Some of the walkers resembled battle-worn soldiers, limping even with the company of mobility equipment like canes and walkers. When I'm feeling funny, I'll salute them as I walk by. Every once in a while, I'll receive a salute back. I catch it like a kiss.

The hens—cackling women—talked loudly into the canyoned mall, their voices echoing from the movie theater. Which, I must say, installed lovely new seats and is now far more suitable for viewing double features.

One of my favorite groups, the gym rats, appeared to be suspended in the air when I stared at them for too long—their bodies gracefully floating in the temperature-controlled air-flow—but my eyesight is illusive, going cross-eyed when I focus too hard on something. I often got carried away, imagining their bodies' once rounding bases or pivoting from the grasp of a tight end. Now, they wore down their knees on epoxy-coated flooring and inhaled the remnants of yesterday's cinnamon-bun kiosk grease-fire. I envied them, realising that I didn't have any glory days to spend today on. My ex-husband only watched sports obligatorily, usually as often as we went to church. Was it the Cowboys that always played on Thanksgiving? I never cared. Hopefully, he was still okay, in whatever bar he was frequenting now.

Most mall-walkers were like me: wandering around, often alone and usually quiet.

There was one man who walked cautiously. His stride was more of a meander. I nicknamed him the *Janitor*. He didn't appear to have any physical ailments, could've just been a bit slow, mentally. He wasn't

always there, but when he did show up, he'd take a good look at all the stores and his head stayed in one place as his body led him forward.

I asked him once what he did for a living. The shit-ton of keys looped around his belt would jingle on impact as they hit his thigh. 'I can hear you jingle all the way from Sears.'

He just smiled. I think he acted like he couldn't hear me. I got a good look at his mug and tried to subtract the age from his face. I needed a better understanding of what he looked like thirty-to-fifty years ago—he had to have been doing the same with my body. I found him to be interesting enough, estimating that he was around seventy and untouched by any American war, or ex-wife.

Once all the stores' security gates lifted and the public started showing up, I knew it was my cue to leave the mall. I tried to conjure up reasons to carry on with my day. I played make-believe on my drive home and created a life. I must bake for my grandson's birthday (I don't have a grandson). I must clean out the fridge (I already did that twice this week). Alice asked to borrow my sewing machine, so I must service it (Alice is a bit of a bitch and I wouldn't lend her anything). I have a jealous husband and I can't leave home for too long (all of my ex-husbands were jealous men but I am single). I must make sure Dr Fresno doesn't spawn out of hell and feast on my cat (the only reasonable sentiment).

I didn't realise how much time I had lost to fantasy until one day I woke up in my sixties. What did the Janitor do with his days? He had to have some sort of purpose. Perhaps he was like me, finding reason in fantasy. He could be an avid reader; he looked bookish. Probably lived in a chair all day, heating up deli meat in a skillet. Watching it hiss and bubble. Flipping it before it shrank to an inedible crunch. Feeding small bits of it to a dog while he cooked. Opening locks all day with that racket of a key ring.

The next morning, I put on my makeup, my favorite pair of earrings and a few spritzes of Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds. I decided to wear a shirt I'd purchased on a cruise to Istanbul. I went there last summer with my singles group and had an incredible time dining and dancing. A brief romance with a man from the eastern side of Washington state. We email sometimes but, when he doesn't respond, I worry that he has passed.

I don't feel too old to date around and play the field. I was on my way to a third marriage by the time I was thirty, with multiple plans and routes of escape but they've only led me to being alone.

A cardigan went over the shirt, pearl buttons, nothing special. I just wanted to look interesting.

I kept to the blue tiles as I circled the mall. I worked on swaying my hips; focused on putting one foot directly in front of the other. Thinking only about my steps for my first lap. I had a tendency, since girlhood, to fixate on things: what were my fingers doing while I walked? Were my eyelids open wide enough? Symmetrically?

The hens were talking about the new bakery over by Sears. Specifically, its barista—was it boy or a girl? The women themselves looked just as pretty as any man that walked the mall. I spotted the Janitor sitting on a bench along the north wall of the department store.

The last time I stopped at Sears was to get a new hairpin for the valentines' gala. It was memorable, but not for any motion-picture romance reason. I was cross—no one said anything about my new hairpin and, when I went home that night, I threw it on the road so the sharp point suck straight up. I watched through the window for someone's car to drive by, for the hairpin to cause chaos. I wanted a show: firetrucks, police cars, an ambulance, all lined up outside my home; a real situation. Something I would talk about to strangers for the next couple weeks. It was late, I grew tired. The hairpin was gone the next morning; I must have slept through the explosion.

The Janitor was unaware of me approaching. I didn't want it obvious that I had been staring at him since I'd passed Sbarros—I quickly averted my eyes as I walked by, looked at my reflection in the glass storefront.

'You ever buy anything from this place?'

I looked over my shoulder to see who he was talking to. There was no one else. He wiggled his eyebrows towards a shop spruiking movie memorabilia, swords and knives.

'I haven't actually—'

'Perfect.' He cut me off abruptly. I wasn't sure if he was going to say anything else, so I lingered through a few moments of silence. They didn't seem to make him as uncomfortable as they did me.

'Can you do me a favor, sometime?' he asked.

I didn't have much else going on.

'Yeah, of course.' I decided to agree with everything he said from here on. I had always been curious about this man, could even call it the sputter of a crush. I'd never directly tell him the level of loyalty I had decided to spend on him but, if he ever asked, I would only respond honestly.

The Janitor reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet. Opened it up and flipped through it. He stopped at a photograph and showed it to me. It was of him, posed, a small blonde on his lap and a large sword in the opposite arm.

'I used to have this sword hanging in my foyer.' His fingers trembled as he held the wallet. 'It was forged by a modern blacksmith. He did most of the swords for the trilogy.'

'Oh, so it's biblical?' I asked.

'No, not the trinity. *The Trilogy*. I'm unsure about Jesus' stance on swords; I would probably have to call my brother.' His gaze wandered down and then back up to my face. 'It's the Herugrum sword that was used in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Théoden wielded it.'

I nodded my head to signal that I followed. I was familiar with the

series. I had dated a guy in college that had a season of reading Tolkien and CS Lewis. I tried to think of some sort of talking point regarding the little knowledge I had on the topic but, luckily, he broke the silence again.

'Anyway, my ex sold it off to the shop owner. The guy won't sell it back to me. Doesn't matter how many photos I show of myself with it, or the amount I offer. He says it's for display only.'

I sat down on the bench next to him and tried to lean into him, subtly, as he continued. I shook my head at the appropriate times, sighed when he had distress in his voice. He clutched the photograph, and I briefly looked down at the blonde-haired woman. He closed his wallet.

'We're considered strangers, right?' His face turned serious, and the patina of his eyes made it hard for tears to break the surface.

'Um, yes?' I wasn't sure how to answer that question.

'Okay, I think so too. It's important we stay that way if we're going to make this work.'

We exited via different ends of the mall and met at his car by the Golden Corral. He had a shoebox in his trunk.

'This is an exact 1:200 scale of the store.' He faced away from the trunk as if he was dealing arms out of his car. 'It's important that you go nowhere near the store until the day of the heist. We cannot create any sort of suspicion.'

I caught a glimpse of my ankles in the sunlight and tried to teeter onto my toes more. I had my grandmother's ankles. She took diuretics, thinking that most of her weight was because of water retention instead of a high sugar diet.

'Sorry, I still don't know your name—not sure if we should even exchange those,' he said. I looked up at him, realising I had missed most of his explanation about the replica store, with its hand-painted plastic swords lined up on the walls. This was what he did with his time.

'It's important that I point out to you where the cameras are, and

where they face.' He pointed with his pinky. 'This one faces the register and the one on the north wall faces the exit.'

I wanted to do a good job on this mission. From his posture, and from what I've gathered of his obsessive nature, I could tell that the loss of his sword had created immense grief. When he stopped talking, I decided this was the best opportunity to say something. 'You know, I understand what you must be feeling. I was so sad once, I forgot how to walk.' I shifted my weight to my toes again. 'I laid on the couch for a week and tore my rotator cuff crawling. The only thing that got me out of my depression was the DHL man. He literally lifted me up from the lawn and handed me a package.' I realised there wasn't much of an audience for my story, as his gaze remained fixed to the shoebox store replica. Still, I persisted. 'I forgot I had ordered a sweater while on a singles' trip to the Big Apple. I thought the Chinese vendor was a fraud—guess I was wrong—ha!'

He closed the trunk of his car abruptly.

'Alright, I have to go now. We've been in this parking lot a little too long,' he said, and handed me a sealed Tracfone. 'Call me from this phone in the next couple days and I will give you more details.'

Still no first names, but I wasn't comfortable disclosing the nickname I had given him.

His phone number was on a sticky note—taped, for extra security—to the back of the Tracfone. He answered and, before he put his ear to the phone, I heard him shuffle around. He spoke in anecdotes and didn't ask me many questions about myself.

'You know that painting of a group of dogs sitting around a table and drinking, laughing and playing poker?' he asked. I had never seen the painting and shook my head, then realised he couldn't see me through the phone.

He continued, 'I always felt like a portrait of a dog playing solitaire, alone.' The shuffling noises continued and I heard a can opener begin

to clank against tin. 'I don't think I need much in this life but, as I get older, I do find myself enjoying my things more.' I heard the scrape of a can and the descent of something into his mouth. The Tracfone was cordless, thank god. I walked to the mailbox. He continued talking. 'I've only felt unwavering companionship when eating a McDonald's hamburger in my Chevy. It's bullshit that we're taught to seek joy from each other's company. I like my stuff, and I can't wait to have my sword back.'

The potted rose by the mailbox had fallen over and was now barren. I lifted it upright.

'I would invite you over, but I'm afraid we will get caught. I do enjoy your voice coming through my phone as I eat my beans.'

Dirt had gotten all over my hands and I wiped them on my pants. 'Yeah, maybe after the big day,' I said, sincerely.

'I don't have much seating. I know you're fit though, so we could just stand. But, yeah, if everything goes to plan, would you like to come over and stand around with me?'

Nothing in the letterbox but bills and grocery ads. 'Yeah, I look forward to it.'

My ability to let my eyes glaze over merchandise without alerting any store employee of my presence has saved me from hours of interaction. Disappearing into the nowhere that occupies my head is the same as a trained muscle. I've lived entire lifetimes in perfume bottles while staring into the display cases at Macy's. I've lived with the perfume-counter girls in a mansion on a hill with our geriatric boyfriend. We've had pool parties and never worn clothes. We've had the time of our lives. An amber scent once took me back to a date-night outfit thirty years ago. Something tight with the right amount of shoulder padding.

For today's heist, the Janitor told me to wear something "modern and provocative". I found a dress that a girlfriend had complimented (more of an acquaintance, really, after I realised she was a bit of a whore

and had slept with the majority of the veterans in our singles club). The dress—a dark burgundy piece—looked ready for sex and crime, or faux seduction and wrong-place, wrong-time.

When I walked into the Broken Dagger, I made sure to look as normal as I could. I kept my heels off the ground to give my rump a bit more lift. I grabbed a dull-looking stone from a table and held it up to the light. It was as dark and nondescript as an iron shit. The air in the store filled with the smell of Rockstar energy drink and damp-aged laundry basket. The store owner stepped into my line of sight, a late-thirties lump of a man. Whiskey-burnt face and kitted-out in a knit polo that needed a lint roller.

'Those are BOGO today.' The man was focused on me, rather than the entrance, and I saw the Janitor creep in. His face was covered with a pair of pantyhose and his glasses pressed into the nylon as if they would rip through at any moment. He wore an out-of-state Dodgers cap designed to light-up on CCTV.

I eyed the shop owner. 'Oh hi! Thank goodness, someone is finally here to help me. I have this, um, problem with my soul. I have been having dreams where I am brutally murdering my doctor. Anything I can get my hands on in the house goes straight into his head. Real vicious stuff. I think my soul is bad. So, I'm hoping to buy some ... rocks ... for it. This one looks good—tell me about it. Do I put it under my pillow, or what?'

The owner staggered back. 'I think I would recommend a dreamcatcher.'

'I want a rock, actually.'

A swift streak, the blue Dodgers cap darted out of the store. I placed the rock down. 'You know, maybe I will just buy a candle or something.' I lingered around the front of the store, tried on a couple of beaded necklaces and watched as the owner stared at the computer monitor at the counter. Only a few moments later, the clank of metal rang through

the mall, answered by the thud of a hundred and thirty pounds of flesh hitting the floor. This was followed by a harsh guttural noise, which sounded like it had escaped from one of Tolkien's midgets.

I exited the shop and turned in the same direction as the Janitor. A few stores down, a crowd had gathered. I peered through the crack of two women's bodies and made eye contact with the Janitor. He was on the ground. The sword was driven through his gut. He didn't move but someone murmured that he was still breathing. A man across from me was on the phone with 911 and described the scene to the emergency dispatcher. He called the sword a saber—the janitor shuddered.

Later, I took off my dress and removed my makeup. I turned on the news but there was no coverage of the incident. I kept the Tracfone on my kitchen counter but never received a call on it again.

DRIVING

Margaret Bradstock

Driving home from the old suburbs
of my several lives –
Eastwood, Top Ryde through Gladesville,
across the ever-changing approach
to Anzac Bridge – new concrete bollards
more traffic-filled lanes, enigmatic road-signs,
I lose myself in darkness

a sense of half-remembered angst, welcome the final appearance of Eastern suburbs' tree-lined avenues (those that remain) their canopies of green, a sojourn I now recognise as though on hold, like someone waiting for a departing train.

Most mornings I ride (almost blindfold)
to the Heffron bike path, past Waverley cemetery
where crumbling gravestones, winged archangels
carry the gift of death, memento mori enough
(if one were needed) for another day:
Je ne regrette rien (but there it is,
the past laid bare)
poets and songwriters vanishing
into the monument of their own archives.

People ask *How <u>are</u> you*? as though the answer might surprise, handle me like Etruscan glass, a museum piece.

There are advantages. I'd just as soon project
a different version, a feisty avatar perhaps,
a jaguar, surfacing from jungles of the past
never changing my velvet spots.

Always driving, somewhere outside time.

Living between the cracks, it reappears asking my own not-self

what was I?

WINTER MEDITATIONS ON AUTUMN MEDITATIONS (2)

Lachlan Brown

After Du Fu

Late caffeine sets the angle of the sun across distressed brick wall paper. Each night the city lights stretch into sky so we're always looking at city. I send three friends a gif of monkey king typing on a laptop. Infinite mission accomplished. Eighty stock tips collect in my junk folder with promises of fortune. You can't sleep on every decision; there are bits of sound prompting us to act now. I navigate each room with my smartphone screen, gathering clothes, books, a charger biting into a wall-socket.

DAYDREAMING

John Paul Caponigro

In the ship's library, I sail past snowy peaks, reading ancient histories that chronicle the ages frozen in the world's largest desert.

Turning pages forward turns back time. Glaciers melt into forests where dinosaurs feed their frenzy.

Resurrected in my mind's eye, the past is projected onto the present. I can't unimagine, can't stop reimagining what I've read. History's prophecy. Then, no ice, no us – now, ice, us – soon, no ice, us?

LE CINÉMA

WH Chong

'Il y a assurément un autre monde, mais il est dans celui-ci.' Paul Éluard

I love movies around noon when no one else is about

I lean back in the daytime darkness and let my eyes and ears fill up

'There's another world & it's in this one' a surrealist joked. Yeah, I'm in tears

GEORGE, REMNANT

Stephen Coates

George first learned of his death when his mum put a black ribbon on her Facebook page. He logged on to check the arrangements for his parents' wedding anniversary, but instead found her social media in mourning. The funeral, apparently, was the previous Saturday. He'd spent most of that day in bed with a hangover, but it was still insulting that he hadn't been invited.

It had to be mistake. Her account had been hacked. An April Fool's joke, even if it was September.

He visited his sister Angela to make sure. It didn't go well. As soon as he walked up the path, his nephew screamed and buried his face in Angela's skirt. She turned her back, glaring at him with that familiar curl of the lip.

'This is so bloody typical. It's all about you, isn't it? We held a wake and everything.'

It was official. He was deceased.

Well, he wasn't going to take that lying down. He wanted his life back. It might not be much—data entry job at the council, online jigsaws, takeaway burritos on Friday evenings—but it was his.

In the early hours of the morning, there was a channel devoted to the needs of the recently departed, so the next night he sat in front of the tele with a supply of energy drinks by his elbow. Since his demise, he felt neither hunger nor fatigue, but old habits die hard.

As each infomercial came on, voiced by hyperactive men with gleaming teeth, he did a quick Google search on his phone. The reviews of ZombieU on Amazon were terrible. Nor was he tempted by Frankenstein's Baby, despite their website's insistence that the risk of electrical fire was vanishingly small. Resurrecto, which promised

complete rebirth with no side effects, was the safest option but, given his former lifestyle, divine intervention seemed unlikely.

In the end, he opted for I-Reboot (The Factory Reset for the Soul), with an endorsement from Will Smith. For an additional fee, the company even offered a Disk Clean-Up that would delete any undesirable memories, but George decided that his new life should be as close as possible to the old, warts and all.

On the day of delivery, he fidgeted in the living room, keeping one eye out for the postie. After all that anticipation, however, the process was rather dull. He spent three hours in front of his computer with electrodes strapped to his skull and cables plugged into his hard drive, watching the progress bar creep slowly upwards. For twenty minutes, it stalled at ninety-seven per cent, and he was resigning himself to an error message when the screen changed to a pale face with piercing blue eyes.

He didn't feel any different, so he went to bed as usual—not so much asleep as in sleep mode.

The following morning, he was knotting his tie when it occurred to him that he no longer had a job to go to. He pictured the manager making a short, sombre speech at morning tea, before everyone tucked into the scones and forgot all about him.

Deprived of purpose, the day stretched barren before him. He went to the Funky Bean for a cappuccino. He'd been a regular for years, but today no one came to take his order. The woman behind the counter whispered to the barista and sniggered. He brandished his certificate from I-Reboot to prove he wasn't dead, but to no avail.

Screw them, he thought. Just because their nearest and dearest had never declared them *persona defuncta*, they thought they were superior. He left a one-star review on Yelp and stormed out.

Down at the supermarket, it was the same story. The aisles emptied, other customers shunning him like an extra from *Shaun of the Dead*. He grabbed some crumpets and a six-pack of cider and marched to the

express lane. The young guy on the checkout glanced in his direction, eyes wide, and then slapped the red 'Sorry Closed' sign on the conveyor belt. George shrugged, put his wallet away and carried his purchases to the exit.

He arrived home to find a truck outside his gate and four burly men going in and out of his front door. All his worldly possessions—his clothes, his TV, his collection of action figures—were stacked in a heap on the lawn. George waved his arms and shouted, but they paid him no heed. He picked up the coffee table to lug it back inside but, by the time he had wrestled it up the steps to the veranda, the workers had already made two more trips.

After they finished, he wandered through the house, surveying the shell of his life. Dust bunnies in the corners, scratches on the floorboards, that fist-sized dent in the wall he couldn't remember making. He spent the next three days lying on the carpet where his bed used to be, staring at the ceiling and thinking about his funeral service. How many mourners had attended, and what did they say? In his head, he tried composing his own eulogy: 'Last New Year's Eve, played Minesweeper—alone—for fourteen hours straight. Once adopted a stray kitten, which turned out to be the neighbour's.'

On the weekend, he was invaded by a young couple with a toddler and a cat, which hissed at him until he ran away. He found a ledge under a bridge near the hospital.

Yay, he thought. I've turned into a troll.

He occupied his days by walking. Starved of conversation, he soon fell into the habit of talking to himself—'Jeez, look at the belly on that bloke!' or 'I'd kill for a chocolate brownie.' The first time it happened, George clapped his hand over his mouth, but then recalled that people—normal, 'living' people—were determined not to see or hear him.

That Thursday, he strolled through the suburb where he flatted as a student and noticed that a familiar landmark was missing.

'Hey, they've knocked down—'

And then nothing. His voice stopped, his legs stopped.

Bugger, he thought. I'm buffering.

He wasn't certain this was the proper term, but he knew the frustration of sitting at his desk and waiting for his system to unfreeze. He could almost see that beach ball of death spinning inside his brain.

'—the fish and chip shop.'

His mouth and body started working again. He should have read the I-Reboot instruction manual more carefully. Insufficient memory may affect performance, and periodic maintenance is essential—or something like that. Of course, they omitted to mention how to do that when he no longer had access to a computer.

His perambulations began taking him to the botanical gardens. It was common knowledge that a community of the Remnants (the Undeparted, the Stubborn) hung out there, on the grass around the monkey-puzzle trees. He wasn't lonely, he told himself, just curious.

For a week, he spied on them from the azaleas. Thirty-odd people, maybe forty, chatting quietly in small groups. On fine afternoons, there was often some kind of organised activity, which George watched with envy. Joining-in had never come easily to him—even at primary school, when the kids picked teams for dodgeball or bullrush, he had hovered on the fringes, desperate for an invite but too shy to approach.

One man in particular, who seemed to be in charge of games, caught his attention. With a Crusaders cap, the sturdy build of an athlete and a ready smile, this man moved from group to group like a scoutmaster, laughing, chivvying, cajoling.

One Sunday—it had to be Sunday, because of the bells—while observing from his usual place, he froze again. Right in mid-stride, left knee raised so that he lost balance and toppled into a patch of purple flowers. As he lay there, drool trickling from the corner of his mouth, he imagined the leader approaching and panicked. Then, the buffering ceased, and he clambered to his feet and scuttled off.

This couldn't go on. He went to see Angela again. She was out, so he sat cross-legged on her doormat and waited. As her Kia turned into the driveway, he stood. She slammed the car door, stalked up the path and stopped, hands on hips.

'Why?' he said. 'Why did everyone—'

Her nostrils flared. 'Seriously?'

He spread his arms. 'What did I do?'

'You're unbelievable, you are. You have to ask?'

'You could at least have talked to me.'

She snorted and rolled her eyes. 'Like that would have worked. You think we wanted to? Mum's heartbroken, you know that?'

'I can fix it. I'll make some friends. Join a choir.' He mimed singing, a silent tenor, slightly off key. 'Take up pétanque.' Tossing a metal ball, though he suspected his technique was dicey. 'Hell, I'll even come home for Christmas dinner and promise not to fight with your stupid husband.'

'That's not what I mean.' She shook her head. 'For God's sake, won't you for once accept responsibility?'

'It's not my fault.'

Angela clenched her fists. 'Not your fault? Are you freaking kidding me? All those lies, all those crappy choices, they were someone else?'

'You don't get it. You were always smart, and pretty. It was easy for you.'

'Easy?' She dashed to the car and snatched up her shopping bag, pulling out a bunch of bananas as she ran back towards him. 'You know those five stages of grief?' She tore one banana from the bunch. 'Well, right now I'm at anger.' She flung it at him, striking him in the chest.

'Hey,' he protested.

Another banana whipped past his ear, thudding into the brickwork. George fled, pursued by fruit.

For the first mile of the trek back to his bridge, he was fuelled by indignation at her baseless accusations. By the second mile, however,

a faint, internal voice was whispering that perhaps Angela had a point. In the past, he had avoided thinking too much. Introspection, he found, lead to self-awareness, and self-awareness lead to self-loathing.

The crashes grew more frequent. One morning, while he was watching the ducks squabble over scraps of bread on the river bank and wishing that he felt that strongly about anything, he blanked out as a squall blew in, leaving him soaked to the skin. When he recovered, he started shivering violently, because that was what humans did in such situations. He worried that he might have caught a virus.

As he squelched his way to the public library to dry out, he spotted the date on a large calendar in the window of the post office. Yesterday, he realised, had been his birthday. Or maybe he'd acquired a new one when he installed I-Reboot, the twelfth of September. That would make him a Virgo. A different star sign, it seemed, had not improved his personality.

No one should spend the day-after-the-day-after-their-birthday alone, so the next afternoon he returned to the park. A conference of the Stubborn was taking place in the clearing. He crouched in the shadows, studying his shoes, listening to the erratic hum of his CPU.

'Hi there, friend.'

He looked up to see Crusader man grinning at him. George's joints clicked as he pushed himself upright.

'Thought I saw you lurking here,' said the man. 'We're one short for rounders. Why don't you join us?'

George took a hesitant step forward, then back. His left hand smoothed the front of his shirt, while his right rose to his cheek before dropping to his side once more. His voice came out as a croak.

'Yeah. No. Are you sure it's all—'

He stepped forward, and then back. His left hand smoothed the front of his shirt.

'Yeah,' he croaked. 'No.'

PRODUCT LAUNCH

Aidan Coleman

an Ern Malley Terminal

For our logo we chose a kestrel
white in the blue expanse.
For the campaign a new dance
gestured toward ancestral
worship, with a free wraith
mask to hide your emotions.
Some on the panel preferred notions
of quality or sturdy faith.
It is not without risk!
These lofty surveys attempt
to fool the brisk
shopper in their contempt
for lingering, rewards cards for the unwary
in their bumpkin innocence – fresh from the prairie.

IN WHICH THE GRIM REAPER RUNS ON FOUR FEET

Mary Cresswell

We're a dog, incorrigible, we don't end we don't even feel final for Fridays just one last go, mutt by mutt ... if some soul's in the offing

We're what you are – zipped, abandoned, can't charge, can't chew together we're all a lunchroom bag of choices abandoned after behaving nicely

Don't you feel like a dog slobbed through clinics zipped up for some reason?

You can't chew embarrassment You can't put a rainbow at the end We're just in for a last lick of some soul's final gaze.

The roster is posher when the wind is a buster:
We know it, though you don't:

Go with the wind, mutt there's time, there's time.

DEATH IS DROOLING ON MY SHOULDER

Michael Cunliffe

for Bukowski on 'death is smoking my cigars'

Forty-five goddamn minutes waiting, watching that fucking little blue circle spinning around and around in the corner of the screen.

If I still smoked cigarettes
I would have gone through
five
and the room would be thick haze.
Instead I guzzle

beer.

I was only going to have

a few

but I'm through two and a half cans just waiting for the spinning to stop, and for some

and for so

fuckwit

on the other end of the

chat box

to answer a question about my

electricity bill.

Over the phone it could have been like sex, done and

satisfied in sixty seconds.

I feel the end standing over my shoulder watching, he hacks at phlegm in his throat and I feel a spool of his drool unwind onto my shoulder.

Goddamn summer heat
making me sweat,
I'm wearing no shirt, now death's drool
is running down my
shoulder blade.
He checks his watch.
I feel him looming over me.

I hear him snicker under the ooze of Eddie Vedder's gravel-crooning, 'This is not for you, oh, never was for you, fuck you.'

Finally I shut the damn

browser window down and open Netflix. If I'm going to get fucked up tonight it's going to be watching light sabres or nudity, not a fucking little blue circle spinning around and around in the corner of a screen while a fuckwit on the other end of the electron stream chuckles, gulping down another mouthful of lukewarm instant coffee,

'fuck him, he can wait another five.'

muttering,

BALLAD OF THE STRANGE CAFE

Andrew Darling

Approaching derangement, we stop for a bite to eat. Articulation of teeth, amplified. Eyes becoming oceans and slow winter dawns. Lips woken by wind wandering in for company. In this stale heaven of fluorescent light, everything is tarnished and obscene, malicious and decrepit. The waitress's lipstick is paint slapped on ruin. A silent couple spear each other with hostile think-bubbles, never looking up. Awkwardness becomes a kind of ferocity. We are voyeurs of a self-denial worn like cloying perfume or aftershave, we see unrequited dreams aching with verdigris, breath clogged with death. Descendants of Atlas everywhere, hauling along their heavy lives. We feel everything like it's inside us. The juggernaut of the past mowing down the future. The grasp and strangle of unsaid fear. The elegy of bottomless night. We are strangely and miraculously free for now – the kind of jailbreak freedom you know is fleeting but feels imperishable.

DEVOLUTION

Sunday Dutro

The entire process borders on insanity, and yet here we are. Mornings in the dark, a laptop on the couch: writing, editing, submitting. The rejections come in, one, two, three; the submissions go out, one, two, three. This is my life now. I ought not complain, it's what I've said I want to do after all. 'Congratulations!' I'm told. 'What do you get?' I'm asked. 'Published,' I say. 'That's it? Do you get paid?' 'Not yet.' People are baffled. Sports figures and actors get millions. Even teachers pull a salary. While the writers slowly go crazy: write, edit, submit, repeat.

[6o]

RICOCHET

Susan Fealy

four foxes chase a calf until its legs tip over foxes they chew cows' ears don't they? he found a clutch of tags behind his shed he said the foxes cried when a deer released her fawn behind his shed four foxes red fire engines. merry christmas to you and you let children ride high through rural streets - who calls emergency and why? 90% of infected rabbits die four foxes red fire engines a howl of sirens somewhere he held a mouse with shattered wings – sheltered it inside his hand they catch in ceiling fans only kindness left to do four foxes red fire engines a howl of sirens they called her a fucking moll four foxes blue tags red a howl

A GLORIOUS MESS

Jen Francis

I pull up at the kerb and switch off the ignition. As always, I need a moment, a breath, before opening the door. Even though it's early, the Queensland sun already promises the kind of baking heat that melts the tar on the roads. Distracted, I've forgotten my sunglasses.

The beloved garden is wild with the urgency of early summer. A tangle of callistemon and cordyline, agave and acacia, lomandra and lilly pilly crowd the front porch. In a sunny corner, a rose bush with a single, bursting bloom.

'It's a glorious mess, isn't it?' Hiss, click.

'Christ, Dad! You nearly gave me a heart attack.'

'I just like to sit out here and hide a while.' He grins and points. 'See the rose? Only planted that one last year. I knew she'd do well in that spot.' Hiss, click.

I sit next to him on the love seat and give him a quick hug. It's like holding a marionette in a sweater.

'Everything you plant grows like weeds, Dad. You've got the touch.' 'Ah, well. All needs a bit of cutting back, though.' Hiss, click.

'Greg and I could come round and do that next weekend. Like a working bee. You could sit here with a cuppa and give us instructions.'

He squeezes my hand. 'That'd be real nice. Your mother would appreciate it. She'd like to tear the whole lot out and put lawn here. Maybe she should, later.' Hiss, click.

Bees hum in the acacia. A vacuum hums in the house.

'Hey, guess what? We measured-up before school today. Will is taller than me now.'

'Billy-boy! He'll be happy about that. Got to be taller than your mum, that's for sure.' Hiss, click. 'How's he settling in at school?'

'Good, I think. It's been a tough patch for him though, being new. But you know him. He'll talk to anyone. He's just like you in that way.'

Dad smiles wryly. 'I hope he's not too much like me. You'll never learn to lead until you learn to follow. That's what Mrs Wickham told me, the old bat.' Hiss, click.

I smile. It's his favourite story. 'Ah, you turned out alright, Dad. Will just needs to grow up a bit. He'll be fine by next year, you'll see.'

The sunlight is suddenly too bright. My eyes prickle. My ears hum. The bees hum. The oxygen machine hisses and clicks. We sit together, holding hands in the glorious, living mess.

'Bill, what are you still doing out here?' Mum bustles into the pause. 'Come on in, we've got to plug you in or your battery will go flat. Hello, Ally love. Have you come for a cuppa? I've just been doing the housework. It never ends. And just look at the garden. It's driving your father crazy. I'll go in and put the kettle on.'

And just like that, life goes on.

HYPOTHESIS HOUSE

MK Francisco

The turf longhouse recreated as an idea of what settlers desired ages ago peers over a cliffside graveyard buried under months of snow. // Roots of living sod grow into a network that ties the roof together. A manmade web of minerals and bog preventing rot, connecting the structure. Turf knives cut turf walls into soil that reads like a book. Orange flickering light bulbs in the crouching dark conjure cooking fires sparked by pollen or horses hoof fungus. // A beetle infected birch forest means they moved into a new territory. A skeleton suddenly exposed means the river receded. Recorded the physical sediment/psychic sediment. Photographed the frozen faces in the half-finished house. // Besotted by the practical saws. Sang out of their mouths Bend me to thy will. This sounds like a lie. They did not bend to any will. Recognise any greater will. // The pastor said if this/then that. We don't need any more men like him. Discomfort in your skin or your full body, your ill-fitting of concepts. Resurrected a 30,000-year-old amoeba virus from the melting permafrost still able to infect its host. Ideas without practical use in the bird's eye distance. // The boy who destroyed his hollow core bedroom door with a baseball bat is now a father. Time lapsing your soft prednisone teeth and crumbling jawbone. Fog settles into the earth and sky. Hiding in the airspace and waiting to attack. Looking away sometimes a tell. Pay attention to location. People are less relatable when you can see them.

DANIEL BOYD'S RE-TELLING

Marcelle Freiman

Boyd's 'Untitled (ZVDG) 2014' (AGNSW) is based on an engraving of an 1898 Portuguese painting showing Vasco Da Gama's meeting with the Zamorin of Calicut, painted in the artist's signature style of employing tonal graduations and dots to give a sense of shifting light. Boyd refers to these dots as 'lenses.'

Vasco Da Gama in 1498
making his claims in India:
an image of this landing overlaid
with pearly dots, tiny lenses
forcing the eye to recognise
the blind, glassy opacities of its gaze.

Wide empires of seeing fragment like scattered salt – stories never permitted to be whole again.

The Portuguese explorer, I'd learned, was the first white man at the Cape: from then on, history came shrunken backwards through a thick telescopic lens.

Now the artist holds up a mirror: the two-way glass disrupts what we were taught was clarity, commands attention away from its custom to fall into default embedded in the body and the mind. History: the broken tiled mosaics of our completions – narratives fed to white neophytes in the colonies handed back, broken, true, incomplete –

yet the lights of the canvas
are lucent –
they compel us to know
what we were taught not to see:
whose lands these were – the story
gifted hard, untitled – its language
rusted mesh across a windowpane.

4 TORNADOS - DREAM

Leone Gabrielle

We all know it's going to be a big one. People scuttle spider soldier legs, in erratic sea-saw indecision. Blows in from the ocean. I calculate bricks, hanging debris, things that could act as spear, club. We are in that before light. The great white elimination, the truth is on its tiptoes. Hansom-light, wild vivid, cuts sharp shadows cut through my home bound heart pumps me alive, being becomes real becomes active. The sea takes the dark as does the land, the earth colours are almost absorbed in the abyss about to be unleashed. Only whites shine, before the fold of black stirs into a rage. Ice wind raises me awake. Rain yet to slice. We scurry, quarrel mutely about spots about surge, no right place to hide. We keep moving, buildings too tall, ceilings too high, iron too loose. We are a small group among others, pressed against each other. Groups act in their own haste. We keep moving, no place right, we're on a road heading inland. On a hillock I turn back, four tornados, in the hammerhead shape my father the sailor had drawn, they are white pink, glide on horizon. I have a long lens camera, I am statued taking photos of titans, my company scream. This camera will be wet, worthless in less time than I can comprehend. These photos will never be seen, I want to record this in my mind. My friends are far along, do I turn ... is there ever a right place.

[68]

PUDDING AND DAVE

Alicia Gadd-Carolan

Every Friday I go to visit the rats.

Their names are Pudding and Dave, each a blend of white and deep brown, with little flipper hands built for digging. Noah bought them for \$10 off some guy on Facebook Marketplace right after we broke up and, not long after that, he had the cage set-up, the toys, the food, the medical equipment. Outside of his door there's a bird's nest on his power box and I say, Noah, did you know there's a bird's nest on your power box? Yeah, it's happened a few times, he says. I kept removing it, but now I just leave it there because the bird keeps coming back. He moves inside and says, anyway, come and see. Pudding's got loads of energy today. He opens the spring of the cage, and tiny fists emerge from the depths that are spewing with flesh and hair. Noah puts them down, Dave in my hands and Pudding on the couch. I watch as Dave sprints across the top of the couch and halts, ready to launch off the end. We've got to watch them so he doesn't do that, says Noah.

We started dating three years ago, during a summer much hotter than this one, and I spent a lot of the sticky evenings driving across town to his house. Kings Way curved through the city, the big moon crouching among the buildings, lurking near the skyline. Lights blending into road blurring into night-time. I remember the air smelling like honey. He lives somewhere else now, in one of those damp Melbourne apartments where mould grows in Birkenstocks in winter, but it's in the same suburb and I thought I was sick of that drive but my wheels seem to keep finding the road.

There are remnants of the time we spent together all over the place. Post-it notes he'd stick in my books, chipped plates, a scented candle I gave him. The bed frame I gave him for Christmas stood in pieces against the wall, dismantled because it squeaked at every roll, and I knew that it was already too noisy when I bought it second-hand but we'd put up with it for two years. I used to think it was funny, the way he'd groan at the sound it would make under me when I flipped over. We used to lie awake all night, me thinking about all the things that have gone wrong in the world, in my world, in his, then explaining them to him in intricate detail under the guise that communication was the most important thing. I realise now it's a lot more peaceful to never let him know what's happening in my head. The milk in the fridge going bad, the oceans turning into acid, the ways people in my life seem to inevitably drift away. I told him I used to fall asleep to the 9/11 phone calls between the people on the plane and their loved ones. The voice messages left from people in the towers. Then I'd look up the Columbine Wikipedia page and I'd read all the comments on YouTube commentary videos until Noah put his hand over my mouth and tried to push my eyes closed.

Pudding begins to sniff at my skin, so I let him crawl up my arm, twisting at the wrist then the elbow so he has a smooth and clear path upwards. My body is the trail and the Sherpa at the same time. He arrives at my shoulder and observes me benignly, eyes glazing and jaw chewing down on his teeth, making that comfortable little rat noise that's like a purring engine. I pick him up by tummy and place him on my chest, tapping on his head a few times to feel his skull, making an O with my hand so he'll put his face through it, nose first. Across the room, Dave holds a Cheerio in his paws and sniffs it. I look at his bag of rat food and wonder how it tastes to him and whether he enjoys the taste at all, and I think about the place Noah and I had dinner that one time. Expensive dinner turned sour half-way through. I couldn't bear

to sit there with him after an hour of gloomy small talk and thought if this is what the next year was going to look like then I didn't want it anymore. So, I stood up without paying and left. I went to his apartment, which was a 5-minute walk away, and drank wine on his torn-up couch until he came in looking down-trodden and angry. I couldn't make him understand how stupid he looked to me then. Yet here he was before me now, a few months later, rat-fisted and a bit older around the eyes. Safe.

We take them for a walk to the park, Dave in my pocket, bouncing a little, and Pudding in Noah's hood, bouncing a lot. From his perch, Pudding observes the world, the scenery, the air, and seems to approve. Noah tells me about the dates he's been on already, and how they went, and what he said, and what they said, and what he said back to what they said. I only really liked one of them, but I kissed them all he says. The one he liked has dark hair like me but she's going through her own stuff right now. She's a dancer. Or she's interested in dance. I hum. I blink into the sun. I talk about this new kind of cheese I recently tried. Perhaps you'd like it, I say to Pudding. No, he's moved far beyond cheese, Noah says. But you haven't really, have you? I tell the rat. We flop around on the swings and spin a few times so the chains rub together, and we rock a little to make the rats feel like they're flying.

Across from the playground there's a man and woman meeting for the first time. He holds the handlebars of his bike while she looks at him and around him, talking and smiling (her eyes go from tree to cloud to him—eyes, ears, shins, eyes, hair). After a few minutes, she goes to the bathroom and his eyes dance around her. He has a nose that swoops up like a skateboard ramp at the end.

Come on, says Noah. Pudding's getting tired, we should probably take them back. A tear-stained face flies by on an old bike. I put Pudding on my head, and I imagine I can feel his supremely delicate whiskers on my hair. The woman from before passes us as we're meandering slowly home, picking her nails, walking by herself. I look around for the man she met, the one with the swooping nose, thinking he must be a few paces away, waiting at the bus stop maybe, lost in the blankness of the white sky, but I don't see him. I see a dog with its ears pulled back and a man holding a crate full of lemons trying to cross the road, waiting for a break in traffic. A bottle of Sprite in a back pocket.

When I leave Noah's house, I throw the nest from his power box into his garden. I detach it like I'm hoicking a Christmas wreath off a door. I peer into it before I throw it and my heart cries out a small pang because there are dimples in it made to hold and mould soft little bodies, little bird puddings, to protect them from the wind and the cold. Then I imagine them burnt and crispy. Battered and fried. I wonder if Bird the Builder watches me as I launch its home across the garden and, with it, their hopes for the spring and the treasures they'd accumulate, thinking of how to rebuild, where and how to start over. It might be magpies I'm thinking of. I don't even know what kind of bird built this.

The next time I go over, there's a new nest where the old one was. It's bigger this time, covered all over with twigs like there's hair growing out of the house. I don't know why the bird keeps coming back. The power box sizzles in my mind. I picture all the electric currents running through it, crackling, popping, tiny sparks and flames. Noah opens the door without saying hello, where it bumps against the frame, not quite closing, he's distracted, and I feel like it wouldn't matter if I were standing on the edge of the earth, about to fall into the abyss. He wouldn't see me.

He tells me Pudding has developed arthritis. His back legs and the bottom of his spine is all stiff, I can feel it, and he can't wiggle as energetically as he used to. He can't clamber up my arm, now he just

shits on my jumper. He's the same colour as my jacket so, when he burrows into it on my stomach, I can't see him. I hold him up and kiss his little nose, and he looks up at me with nothing but red in his eyes. Still, Noah tells me that he's heading for decline and there's a beat of silence. The rat noise fills our ears. Grinding down. We go for another walk along the beach, and he says he tells me he's having trouble talking to people lately. It's like there are doors closing everywhere, he says. Pudding's in his big hoodie pocket, and there are two women sitting on the solitary bench that overlooks the ocean, holding each other, facing away from us. Their hair breathes softly in the wind. The moon's face is beaming.

Then Noah leans over to kiss me, and it's not really right. I think about the time he made me brush my tongue before he would touch my lips with his, all because I'd had too much garlic in my pasta. I remember looking in the mirror thinking how humiliating it would be to be doing this if my breath wasn't really that bad—how embarrassing to have stood there flossing naked in the mirror if he was really just not attracted to me anymore. But still, I go home with him, back to his cage, liking when he kissed me again, harder, when he lifted one of his arms like an octopus and wrapped it around me on the couch, being hit with that familiar feeling—like I'm sliding into water. Everything goes sliding out from under me. The way he holds his cup of coffee in his other hand reminds me of the way he'd clutch my arm as I untangled from him and slipped out of bed in the mornings.

We lay together in his deconstructed bed and I touched his face a little, feeling that we were two different-sized balloons rubbing against eachother and making static, that I'd been rubbed all-wrong. I put my head on his shoulder, hoping all the words that could describe how I felt would spill out of my ears onto his shirt, everything I thought about the ways he did and didn't care for me. Then he rolled me over and pulled me in close to him, closing his eyes on my shoulder. Commencing sleep.

I lay awake through early morning thinking this ought to feel a lot better than it did. Looked at him, at his resting face, long nose like his dad's and pale eyebrows, totally relaxed, almost blissful. Passing cars lit up the window with their headlights.

I keep finding mice in the traps at work. There's mouse shit near the bin, which I don't touch. So many domestic brown mice, their tiny little bodies hanging limp by the tail when Alice picks them up, wraps them and dumps them in the bin. Whenever there's a funny smell from behind any of the other shelves, I think there's a baby mouse behind it. Sniffling, snuffling, trying to escape or just crouching in the darkness, alone. I think about Pudding and his frail bones, and the bird that keeps coming back to the power box. The traps we set for ourselves.

When I went to Spain a couple of years ago. I spent a lot of time watching the city breathe. Before I met Noah, before I began to feel like I've already lived my life a million times over. I was staying at an Airbnb with a pool on the ground floor and I would venture onto my little balcony as afternoon moved into evening. I would notice the clouds, if there were any, and where the streets sprinted and slowed, and then all the mannequins that were standing on other balconies across from mine, arms out and bent, reaching. Gazing out at the city with blank eyes, feeling plastic and shiny and still, my face between the metal bars, I thought, this is what I'll do. When I'm older and more certifiably me, I'll sit on my balcony and watch the people pass. Watch the lights of the rental bikes switch from red to green. Watch the man across the street wipe down his dinner table. Watch the flocks of brides everywhere, the doors that look painted on, and all the tiny people doing that slow walk fit for European cities and galleries, gazing up and around, slow steps, hanging hands.

[74]

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Alicia Gadd-Carolan

Then one day Noah texts me when I'm on the train: The rats are passing. The sun is going down over South Yarra. Passing? I text back. Passing away. There's a hazy yellow glow bouncing off the windows. A couple in the carriage, arguing, fighting, whatever. I used to say that I never really fought with anyone but maybe I should've. I would cry though. The tears on your nose are little cars. Look at them, it's like they're cruising over the Westgate. He watched me while my eyes scrunched up, squeezing out tears and feeling them slide down my face, over my nose and onto my sheets. I felt him pinch my nose, soft, tight, and I spluttered on a sob and laughed it out of me. The girl is wearing a brown skirt down to her ankles and bangles that clang quietly together when she storms off to sit in a four-seater, her back to him. My dog does the same thing, puts his back to me to show he's upset. The guy follows her, eyes dark and head heavy. Silence and mutters, muffled voices, controlled grumbles. Heads in hands. You strain my heart, she says.

Pudding succumbs to a mysterious illness and then so does Dave, to fragility, to old age. I think of their hard little bodies lying still and immediately miss the feeling of their paws on my palms and their noses twitching on my face and their soft, pliable ears. They passed away together so that one wouldn't have to spend even one unbearable day alone in the cage without the other. I ask Noah if I can come over for the funeral. I'll dust off my blacks. I'll iron for you! But he tells me it's happened already. He buried them in the sorry patch of land he has out the back. Did you read them something? I ask. I just said whatever I could think of in between crying he says. But he sends me pictures of them sleeping together, resting and curled around each other, nose to foot to paw, covered by a blanket. It must have felt as massive as a tidal wave to them. I look at them over and over, swaddled in my own bed while the sun goes down. In the night, I message him to ask if the bird is still on his power box. He replies, No, not for ages lol.

The day after, I go to an exhibit at the NGV, full of people and statues, alive and dead, with sweet faces and sunken eyes, thick calves, tender palms, white torsos ripped in half. Some of the sculptures have no hands or feet while others have faces entirely reconstructed in plaster. Figures torn apart, broken, standing alone when they should've stood together. There's a woman, brown leaking out of her hollow haunted eyes like tears. I could sleep in the folds made by the drapery of her gown. Across from her is a male figure, fractured, headless, trapped in stone but looking like he's emerging out of smoke. A wash of red and a crumbled nose. Walking around, I feel this room was full of minute heartbreaks. I feel like I've walked it before. I feel myself heading for the tram, to Noah's house, but I stop myself. I have no reason to go over anymore. No reason to stand in front of him, where he'd be sprawled on the mattress, and I'd be waiting for him to say something. I'll fuck you here if you want. The crumbs on the carpet looking like tiny jewels. No, that's not what I want. The rats are dead and the bird is gone.

I imagine I'm back on my balcony again. With two rats in my hand and that bird in its nest with its babies, and an Aperol spritz by my feet. I'm breathing with the city, nameless, it's wherever. There could be anything under me. I look down and see a tall figure in a short black dress pulling a phone out of a tote bag to take a picture. A woman stands watching a busker, the wind blowing through her skirt so I can see the imprint of her legs. Legs, hands, hair. Then she's eclipsed by the sickly fluorescence of a passing public bus, and the 10 o-clock strike of the city's clock, and everything gets louder, blurring out of focus. Cartoonish steps and rotund bodies, murmurs and birds, the sky darkening to the tune of a man whistling for his dog. The thinnest moon I've ever seen—the slightest fingernail on an enormous hand.

[76]

FOND LOVE

Penel Gibson

Dawn climbs pink in the sky as Rose knocks down the dough and forms it into loaves ready for the oven. She opens the front door and picks some rosemary from the nearby shrub—one sprig for each pie—and begins on the pastries. Soon the bakery is rich with the smell of sausage rolls, pies and tarts. The steam from the oven mists her glasses, which slip down her nose because they're too large. The optometrist said they made her eyes look bigger.

Next, she removes some of the cakes from the refrigerator and places them behind the glass of the counter. The cupcakes and jam tarts will go first, along with the vanilla slice, all popular with the tradies for morning tea breaks. The local women, who will come by at around eleven oʻclock, prefer the yo-yos, and the muffins, especially the orange poppyseed and, her speciality, rhubarb and apple.

After breakfast, she puts more loaves into the oven and starts on the day's meals for the few townsfolk who, because of age or illness, now depend on her for a meal. She's startled by the tinkling of the bell and turns in annoyance—it's not yet seven—but her mood changes when she sees Keith at the door, his long face that's always strained now, and his hair that's beginning to thin; the awkwardness of his stance, brought on by carrying bricks as a careless builder's apprentice.

'You're up and about early.' She smiles at him.

'I'm sorry. I wanted to let you know that—' He blinks, swallows.

'Oh, Keith. Is Mavis worse?'

He looks away. 'She's got no appetite. She can't eat anything.'

Rose puts a hand on his arm. 'I'm so sorry, Keith. What does the doctor say?' She feels such a rush of affection for him, but there's an ache as well. 'You still need to eat, man. You can call-in any time and

I'll have a meal for you.'

He squeezes her hand. 'Thank you, Rose. I'm sorry—' He shrugs helplessly. 'You see how it is.'

'I do.' She steps up and gives him a quick kiss on the cheek. Impulsively, he hugs her and leaves without another word.

During the morning, between customers, her mind keeps returning to the conundrum. Herself, Keith, Mavis. Keith. She can't help smiling when she thinks about him. Despite everything.

'You're looking happy this morning.' The door squeaks as Delia makes her way in on her walking frame, and scans the shelves. 'Had a busy morning?' She takes in Rose's appearance. 'Your hair is a different colour.' It sounds like an accusation.

Rose shrugs. 'It's a rinse,' she says. 'Just for fun.'

'You've got new glasses too.'

'I needed a new prescription. What can I get for you, Delia?'

'I'll have two of those white chocolate and raspberry muffins, please.' She watches as Rose uses the tongs to place the muffins into a paper bag. 'How is Mark going? Is he still delivering the meals for you?'

Rose nods. 'He's doing a good job, too. He's very reliable.'

'He's lucky to have you,' Delia says. 'Otherwise, things might have gone very badly for him. He drives that truck much too fast, though. He's still got that wildness in him.'

'Would you like anything else?'

'A sliced white loaf, thanks. Sandwich.'

While Rose slices the bread, she thinks of her own wild boy, grown up now and living on the other side of the world. He's channelled his wildness into leading adventure tours for a small tourist company. He sends her photos of steamy jungles, rocky cliffs of an impossible height. He spares her the details. She'd rather not know.

He's the reason she agreed to take Mark on, as part of his community order. He's a good boy at heart. Having your apprenticeship cut short after you find your boss dead in his own garage would be enough to send anyone off the rails.

Delia launches into her latest news.

"... apparently her daughter's got postnatal depression ..."

Rose shuts her ears and hands the bread over. As she leaves, Delia turns at the door and says, 'How is Mavis going? I haven't seen her for a couple of days. Perhaps I should call in.'

Rose bites her lip. 'I don't think there's much change. If you'll excuse me, I need to get the meals ready for Mark. He'll be here shortly.'

At 4.15 pm, Rose locks the shop. It's her regular practice afternoon in the church, and she's looking forward to the peaceful space that is hers alone.

It's cold when she opens the church doors and she's greeted by a familiar musty smell; late afternoon light comes through the windows, pale and grey, flickering into shadows as clouds move overhead. Whenever she comes to the empty church, she feels as if someone has just left, and she waits a moment before switching on the lights.

She makes her way forward to the organ and switches it on before settling herself, hands and feet positioned, ready. She loves this moment when the music begins, the powerful swell of sound. This new upgraded model can even replicate the voices of many different instruments, from the horn to the oboe to the flute and even a violin. After she finishes practising for the Sunday service, she turns to the adagio from an oboe concerto. It's the music she'd chosen for her husband's funeral. Twelve years ago now, and she still feels his presence as she plays.

It's consoling; beautiful but sad. When it's over, she sits for a moment, thinking, before beginning the second Minuet from the Royal Fireworks music. The music of hope and joy.

She moves on to Vivaldi's Gloria, and she sings as she plays. She's the source of the music, and she's also the beneficiary. It's a little like being in love: loving and being loved in return. Her heart gives a little kick at the thought.

She turns to the Bach Toccata and Fugue that she's yet to master. Something makes her look up, and she sees Keith sitting quietly at the back of the church. She keeps playing, trying to concentrate. Finally, she gives up and turns to speak to him, but he's gone.

It warms her to think that she might have given him a moment of peace. But she wishes he'd stayed.

She prepares a meal for him as usual, but he doesn't come for it. Another day goes by before he appears again at her door, late. It's after dark when she opens the door to him. He looks exhausted.

'I had to take Mavis to the hospice in Ballarat.' He pauses, looks away. 'They've taken her into palliative care.'

Rose puts her arms around him, and he leans his head on her shoulder.

'She's so frail, Rose. There's nothing of her.' He holds her for a moment, then lets go. He waits while she fetches his meal.

She puts her hand on his as she gives it to him. 'Take care of yourself.' After he's gone, Rose leans in the doorway looking at the night, her arms wrapped around her shoulders.

Her period is heavy this month. Her back aches, and she's tired all the time. She lies in bed at night and cries, for Keith, for herself, for Mavis. The next day, she finds everything an effort. She hasn't seen Keith for days. The reverend has told her that Mavis hasn't long to live.

Should she contact him, offer her sympathy? Or might he misinterpret that? The last thing she wants to do is to make things harder for him.

Complaints begin about the bread, the pastries, and not only from Delia. Too salty, too yeasty, no flavour in the pies.

Pull yourself together, Rose, she thinks. Drop him a note, let him know you're thinking about him.

Hi Keith, sorry to hear from the Rev that things aren't so good with Mavis. She scratches it out, tries again.

So sorry to hear that Mavis isn't doing well at the moment.

Of course she isn't, she's dying.

I miss you

No!

Thinking of you at this difficult time. It's a bit formal, a bit premature as well. That's what you say when someone has died.

In the end she writes,

Thinking of you, Keith. I know how hard this must be.

And of course, she does. Those last days and weeks of waiting, for no good outcome.

Come for a meal whenever you need to.

She thinks for a minute and then adds Fond love, R.

She drops it in his letter box on her way home from the church. Was that sign-off too forward? But she wants him to know that he's aways welcome, however long he stays away.

Finally, there's a brief note from Keith saying thank you, he's staying in Ballarat for the time being. Things must be near the end then.

She sends flowers to Mavis with a note of love and concern. Mavis and she were never close—the older generation still expected to run the town, without any help from the younger women.

Younger she might be, but she hasn't the energy to cook another meal for herself, so she heats up one she'd prepared for Keith.

She lays a tray for herself and, just as the microwave pings, there's a knock at the door. She almost doesn't answer it, but she can see his familiar shape there and her heart lifts.

'Keith. Come in. I'm just heating up the meal.'

He folds his arms, takes a step back. 'How did you know I'd be coming?' There's a rough edge to his voice.

'Well ... I'm ...'

Then his eye falls on the tray laid ready. 'It's your meal.'

She blushes and laughs. 'You can share it with me. If you like.'

'Thank you,' he says, folding into a chair. 'I would like that.'

He watches as she cuts bread and chops rosemary.

'That smells lovely.' He begins to tell her about the hospice.

'She was glad to be there,' he says. 'She's very peaceful now, they take really good care of her. But—'

'You feel guilty?'

'Yeah.'

She nods. 'More bread?'

She wants to put her arms around him and tell him it's okay to be torn. But maybe he's not. Maybe he's not thinking about her at all.

He gives her a smile and takes the slice of bread she's offering. 'This is delicious.'

'Feed the inner man,' she says. 'You'll need to look after yourself. You'll be travelling a lot to Ballarat, won't you?'

As he leaves, she tells him to keep coming to collect a meal. 'Or you can eat with me, if you need company.'

His stands awkwardly in the doorway. 'You're so good to me, Rose.'

'Take care of yourself,' she says, and shuts the door behind him. Through the glass pane of the door, she sees him stoop towards the rosemary plant and break off a piece.

A week later, Mark asks Rose, 'How's Mavis?'

She's a little surprised at his interest. 'She's hanging on.' She turns to the fridge for the meals. 'Why do you ask?'

'It must be hard on Keith.'

Rose looks at him sharply. 'Very hard.' She hands him the meals. 'Seeing someone you love fading away—it's awful.' She clears her throat and says, 'He still needs meals too, but he picks them up himself, since he can. Saves you the trouble.'

'I nearly ran over him the other night. Gave me a bit of a fright.' He finishes packing the meals in his satchel and says, 'Righto, I'll be off.'

'I hope you weren't driving too fast, Mark?'

'As if.' He gives her a cheeky grin. She's not convinced.

'My boy was like you when he was young. Before I moved here. Nearly killed himself a couple of times, but now he's settled down. Mark? Are you listening? This is important.' She can see she's lost him. 'Think before you act, okay?'

After he's gone, she's uneasy. Has he seen Keith leaving her place? And why did he nearly run over him? Was it due to his own recklessness? Or Keith's? She wants to talk to Keith. She wants to tell him she loves him.

A week passes with no sign of Keith. After two more days, she learns from Delia that Mavis has died peacefully in her sleep. Rose waits for Keith's visit—a phone call, even—but she hears nothing. She can't decide what to do. Why hasn't he contacted her—about the music for the funeral, if nothing else.

At last, she rings him.

'I'm so sorry, Keith. You've had a tough time.'

'Thank you, Rose. Not as tough as Mavis.'

'What about the music?' she cuts in. 'What would you like me to play?'

'I'm sorry—I'll have to call you back.'

'Of course. You must have—'

But he's hung up.

The next time she sees him is at the funeral.

She parks some distance away from the church, where the road bends, and sits for a moment, trying to still her anxiety. The tree beside the road is bent by the wind, and she wonders if it is still alive. Perhaps termites have hollowed it out.

Keith is reserved when she offers her hand in condolence, and he doesn't return the pressure of her hand. Of course. He's observing proprieties. That's why he hasn't been to see her.

She sits where she can see him during the service, which is quite difficult as a surprising number of people have turned up, many of whom haven't lived in town for some time.

The service is short and, to her mind, dreary, with no music. She wishes she were up there playing the organ, finding an outlet for the hammer of emotions in her heart.

The eulogy is delivered by Mavis's brother, emphasising how devoted she and Keith were as a couple. Rose's mind wanders to her fantasies of herself and Keith and then feels ashamed. She hopes no one else has noticed her blushing.

When it's over, she waits with Mark's parents for the hearse to leave the church, and wonders why Mark is not with them He's standing at a distance, behind the rest of the mourners with a young man she doesn't recognise.

'Perhaps it's one of the Marchant boys, back home for the funeral,' Gwen says. 'It's been a hard time for Keith. Her heart just wouldn't give up.'

Rose is hungry for news of him. 'I suppose he's been staying in Ballarat this last week.'

'Oh. No, I don't think so. We saw him at home the other day. There was some work for the shire that couldn't wait.'

'Oh.' Rose watches Keith step into the car to follow the hearse to the cemetery. He doesn't look at her; he looks directly ahead.

As she walks to her car, she sees the Marchant boy ahead of her with another young man. They're talking across a car as he unlocks the driver's door.

'He's not that badly off.' He ducks into the car and reaches across to unlock the passenger door. As it opens, Rose hears him say, 'He's got another one lined up already.'

'Go on. How'd you know that?'

He stands up again and says, across the car, 'Mark told us he nearly ran over him one night, coming out of the house next to the bakery. Crafty bugger.'

She doesn't hear any more because the passenger gets in and slams the door shut. She hurries to the safety of her own car, and fumbles as she tries to open it, her face on fire. Finally, she sinks into the seat and leans on the steering wheel to hide her face in her arms, when she hears an ominous crack and looks up at the branches of the tree. She can't stay here. It's always on the still days that they fall.

VAMPIRES OF DISCOVERY

Ed Go

you know, Ed, the thing that takes the forgotten years /
to twist our baseless knowledge of / when vampires don
their leather capes / & fly forth to discover
as captain cook / did to hawaii &—by george!
what is that?—a weapon?—could it be that Ed Go
is going on the warpath?

yes - warn the others

Ed Go indeed is **going on the warpath**: others who wish to join the party must let go the years lived w/ distorted histories & let go vampiric hero-worship; we now don leather capes as we depart like st george to face the dragon – not vampires – discover

these for what they are: that anything can be discovered that the rise of one must accompany the fall of the other we accept when jerry says to george his favorite explorer was magellan years turn to centuries & we still accept don

magellan as the first to go

the **full circumference** but he never went

all the way, you know, he had stopped to discover

what others already had – don

lapu lapu put him in his place yet others

would have us believe the solidarity of years

has solidified a belief in the madness of king george

[i have **confounded** my companion—which george

do you mean? – there were vi] remember that time we'd gone

fishing at some lake upstate all those years

ago, you fished up a videotape & on it we discovered

an episode of gimme a break

in which nell carter says search me & special guest star don

rickles replies search you!? that'd take a month!

don

rickles was one funny motherfucker lake george

i think it was just us & 17 others

who wanted to get away from knowledge i'd go

back if i couldn't go forward we discovered

everything needed that weekend & in later years

when we'd donned leather capes & gone

& by the way, george, de soto didn't discover the mississippi – others beat him to it by several thousand years –

WHEN A BED IS AN ISLAND

Megan Gordon

Your wadded head, your memories loose, soupy, like the frayed edge of a jumper or the crumb-scatter of banh mi eaten keenly on pavement. The first *I love you*, the last time you kissed your son's forehead. The soaring soprano of your favoured aria, turned up punk-loud, opera shaking the speaker's black heart. The feel of gelato's drip, as it makes a chocolate river system of your wrinkles and finger valleys. The weight of your grandson's doughy limbs, legs you won't see stretch into strength or stride.

This is the world you're about to leave – the sky blue, then pink.

We gather round your mouth-shell, hold our ears near to snatch evidence that life still tips and roars. Let it be painless, it be painless, be painless – the mantra, the parlay between nurse and us. Your pain can't be scrubbed, etherised to silence, the smell of near-death still there beyond bleach and the rattle of your long final breath. The twitch of your med-heavy body. The loose then tense grip of your papery hand. As we sit marinating in memory, what ifs, this cut still so moist it's just a throb and not a dull thump, yet. A wish for it to be over, but for it not to be.

This is the way your world ends – the bleat-slap of machine.

I lie in the marshland of my own bed and listen for the aubade of summer outside, evidence some things still grow, sing. The eternity of morning just beyond the mattress: coffee grinds, email trills, a package at the door, the hot thrill of shower-water. Today, each nerve alive and its own palette of sensation, a flood of colour after weeks of numb. My own mini big bang, a re-explosion of everything from white. You've moved in, lodged yourself there in the fleshy, material folds of my cortex. A streak of electricity between cells. A lifeline. I try not to forget to pay that bill, to remember.

This is the world now – you as steam between these lines.

THE ESCAPIST

Hei Gou

There was a moment of peaceful confusion before reality overtook the dream: things were not as they were meant to be, but they were comfortable and warm and there was no need to scrutinise the situation too carefully. But that sense of strangeness gradually solidified, transforming from a sweet, enveloping cloud into a shrill little diamond, a sharp stone that didn't sparkle but, instead, screamed. She awoke with a start, opened her eyes and sat up. She felt as if she'd been asleep for a long time. It was dark but the light coming from the window allowed her to see the outline of the room, which, as far as she could tell, was an ordinary bedroom, containing a wardrobe, a nightstand and what looked like a wicker basket. There were two doors: the one in the wall facing her was open, while the one opposite the window was closed. She had a feeling that she'd been in this room before, or one like it, but she wasn't sure. The pillow, the sheets, the light—they felt familiar, but not intimately so.

She sat still and remained as quiet as possible as she tried to remember how she'd come to be there, in this unfamiliar bed and unfamiliar room with this unfamiliar man (though his face and body were buried beneath sheets and blankets, she could tell he was a man from the smell). She tried to picture herself getting into bed, lying down and preparing to fall asleep, but the images that came to her seemed more like scenes from a movie she'd watched long ago than something she'd experienced. There was a woman like herself, resembling her in appearance and demeanour, in a house that could contain a room much like this one. The woman changed into pyjamas and tossed her clothes into a wicker basket not unlike the wicker basket that sat in the corner of the dark room; she removed her make-up and brushed her teeth in

front of a mirror that hung above a basin in an en-suite bathroom that might have resembled the en-suite bathroom attached to this room, the door to which was slightly ajar; then she closed the door and turned off the light and instinctively made her way towards the bed, where a man was waiting. It all seemed quite plausible. Almost too plausible, in fact, to have been real. It was like a scene from an educational film, designed to teach people how to prepare for sleep, or perhaps a scene from a historical documentary, demonstrating the routines of common people in this era; certainly not something that had happened to her.

How could she have come here, then, and not remember it? Had she been drugged? She wasn't drowsy, but it did seem that a large chunk of time was unaccounted for. The man beside her was snoring softly. She carefully peeled away the blanket and exposed the side of his face; in the dark, his profile looked like a supple white ball. He appeared familiar; she'd seen him before, although she couldn't say where. Staring at that pale blob, she would go so far as to say that she knew the man, but no further. He wasn't someone she'd share a bed with, that was for sure. What had happened the night before? Had she gone out, met a man at a party or a bar? Perhaps she'd had too much to drink, though she was usually careful with alcohol. She couldn't remember, and nor could she recall what she'd done the previous day. There were images, vague, bright and unclear, like pieces of a dream she'd forgotten. There were snippets of childhood, her parents, a park, trees, a dog, but they were bleached, blanched like photographs exposed to years of sunlight. Words and phrases floated loosely in the dark, unhinged from time and space, individually understandable but lacking a cohesive meaning. She remembered the phrase crush his skull, for instance, but not where she she'd heard it or to whom or what it referred.

The man didn't stir as she recovered his face with the blanket. On the nightstand, a phone was plugged into a charger beside the lamp and a framed photograph. A quick tap activated the screen, its blue

glow illuminating the right side of the room. The phone requested a pin number that she didn't know and hadn't expected to know but which she somehow knew wasn't one of the obvious combinations like 1234 or 9999. Worried that the light would disturb the man, she flipped the phone upside down, so that its screen faced the surface of the nightstand. She took up the framed photograph and examined it, angling it so the light from the window shone on to the picture. It showed a man and a woman embracing on a beach. The man may have been the man that lay beside her, although it was hard to say for certain since she'd only seen the side of his head. He had the same pale complexion, at least, and maybe the same hair colour as well. The woman looked like her, but it wasn't her. Like the man, the woman was familiar but not overly familiar, someone she might have encountered once or twice, a friend of a friend, perhaps, or a waitress at a local restaurant, someone she could talk with briefly but probably couldn't befriend. She found it hard to connect with women like that, women who were older and more assured, she remembered saying or hearing once. The man beside her abruptly dug his head into the pillow and cleared his throat. Grasping the picture tightly, she held her breath.

She wouldn't have gone to bed with this man, not in a normal state of mind. She must've been drugged. There were countless stories of such things: a woman goes out for a drink, something is sprinkled in her glass when she's not looking, and she awakens the following day with no memory of the intervening period. Perhaps the drugs had worn off early. She'd always had a fast metabolism, hadn't she? She recalled hearing the phrase, recalled hearing someone remarking on the speed of her metabolism, or perhaps she herself had said it, perhaps she had been explaining that she had a fast metabolism, though she couldn't recall the rest of the conversation or why it might have come up or whether it was a conversation she'd participated in or merely witnessed. The man may have intended for her to remain under the influence of his drugs until the following morning, when he would repeat the dosage and prolong

her trance. He may have intended to keep her in a state of compliance indefinitely. Had she been here for a long time, a prisoner so heavily sedated that she didn't know she was imprisoned? It would explain why she couldn't remember anything, why it seemed as if she'd been asleep for so long. For months or even years, she may have been kept in this house, benumbed and bewitched, trapped in a haze of placidity until this night when the spell had suddenly abated.

The thought was terrifying. It meant losing everything: time, memory, personality, friendship, family. It was like waking from a coma, but even coma patients receive solace from the knowledge they were cared for while they slept, whereas she could only guess at the abuses she'd suffered and might continue to suffer, since this lapse might only be temporary; in the morning, the potion would be administered again, and her captor might realise the previous dosage had been insufficient, an oversight he'd be sure to correct in the future. There might never be another chance to escape.

The light from the window wasn't moonlight but, instead, the dirty-orange glow of a streetlamp, which meant the house was built close to the street and probably situated in an urban neighbourhood, besides other, similar houses, containing people who might be able to help. She returned the photograph to the nightstand and wrapped her hand around the base of the lamp. It was smooth and sturdy and made of stone; a black chord led from the bottom of the lamp to a power outlet behind the nightstand. This is a solid lamp, she recalled. Without leaving the bed, she could bend over, unplug the lamp, lift it up and bludgeon her abductor. The first blow would take him by surprise, and perhaps the second as well—but would that be enough? Two hits might disable the man and allow her to escape, or they might merely wound and provoke him. Fully conscious, he could easily overpower and subdue her, and he was sure to be enraged and violent. She'd been told she was a strong girl or strong for a girl, she couldn't remember

which. And nor could she remember whether it meant physically strong or strong-willed or resilient or stoic. She could stealthily unplug the lamp, remove it from the nightstand, clamber atop the man and bring it down repeatedly. Multiple strikes might succeed in rendering him unconscious or killing him, though the risk remained that he'd awaken and disarm her after the first hit.

Instead, she could creep towards the door, which probably wouldn't be locked; after all, if the man was so confident in his chemical fetters that he slept beside his prisoner without physically restraining her, what need would there be to lock the door? She pictured it clearly: the door would open on to a hallway hung with photographs; she would turn left and find a staircase, at the bottom of which would be a green wooden door leading to the street; although the door would be locked, simply twisting a brass knob would be enough to open it from the inside; then she'd be free. The image was too precise to have been invented in an instant: it must've corresponded to another house she'd stayed in, a house that might've contained a bedroom like this one. She wasn't sure where it was or when she'd visited such a place or whether she'd visited it at all, but it seemed like a plausible house, a house that could exist somewhere. It might have been this very house, or it might've been another house entirely, in which case the house containing this room might be completely different from what she imagined and escape not so straightforward. There might be other captors or other obstacles. The exit might be barred or hard to locate, disguised as part of the wall or hidden at the end of a maze of tunnels, and the street might not be an ordinary street but a road within an enormous walled prison complex, infested with armed guards and rabid dogs. Thinking of these perils, her breath quickened. This respite from sedation may be inconsequential. The prison may be much larger and more intricate than what she perceived from the bed; it may be pervasive, resilient and powerful, a vast network of rooms and doors and walls and jailers. Was escape even possible? Perhaps she'd tried to flee in the past, only to be caught again and again, her vain efforts serving as nothing but minor amusements to her captors, who were perhaps watching her right at this moment, observing her through devices so small and subtle that they may as well be invisible.

A car drove past outside. It was close to the house and moving slowly, a patrol car, perhaps, completing another uneventful circuit of the jail. If its laps were regular, they could be plotted and pre-empted, but there may not be enough time for that. The man might awaken soon. She had to calm herself and think clearly. Nothing could be worse than losing herself and remaining in this prison, and now was the best time to flee, just after the patrol car had passed. The door was her best shot.

She swivelled to the right, stepped out of bed, and crept to the door. Her movements were slow and staggered, as though her efforts to exert precise control over each of her limbs resulted in her being able to command only one at a time, an impairment that transformed the act of creeping into a bafflingly complex process, consisting of countless tiny, individual stages, each of which took a long time to complete. Lifting her hand as she approached the door, she became aware of a small metal ring. Despite its size, the ring was quite hefty, and she wondered how she'd failed to notice it before. She wasn't one to wear jewellery, she recalled. Sensing that she was thinking too loudly and too freely, she glanced back to the bed. The man was looking right at her, his face concealed in a pocket of darkness. She seized the doorhandle but refrained from turning it, afraid it would produce a noise and rouse the man, who may have already been fully awake and watching her or partially awake and looking at her in a daze, unsure if he was dreaming or not, or asleep and coincidentally facing her (though that was unlikely since he hadn't slept in such a posture before). Paralysed with fear, she stood at the door, staring at him, unsure if he was staring at her. She imagined his questioning look, wondering how his slave acquired the determination to leave the bed. He was lying down, beneath the blanket and the covers. There was still time to rush to the nightstand, seize the lamp and crush his skull, although now that he was awake—if he was awake—the risk of his fighting back was greater than ever. Her gaze rapidly alternated between the patch of darkness on one side of the bed and the lamp on the other. She hated the man and wanted him to die or, better yet, to have never existed.

She turned the handle and, as she'd expected, the door came open. She ran into the hallway, turned left, rushed down the staircase and, instinctively, without being able to see clearly, twisted the brass knob on the green wooden door and leapt into the cold, quiet night. The street was narrow, clogged with parked cars and lined with identical townhouses. She turned right and sprinted, her bare feet almost silent against the concrete path. The street seemed familiar but not overly familiar, and she had a sense that she'd travelled like this before, barefoot, on a cool concrete path, following the course of a narrow street in the middle of the night, though she couldn't say whether it was this specific street or this specific path or just a street or a path that resembled it, whether it was something that had actually happened to her or just something she'd dreamed or observed, perhaps in a film.

OUTSIDE THE INSTITUTION

Lázaro Gutiérrez

The memories I keep of the institution are deteriorating like a shipwreck at the bottom of the ocean of my mind. I was a child without laughter when I left and what is left of my memories is encapsulated by the cold waters of dissolving photographs. There are abstract pieces left behind of little girls and boys I used to know. Smiling back is the boy I used to be when us children knew nothing. There are scenes I once remembered but can no longer see in vivid color. These are the remnants of a life split in half. It is another dimension from which I escaped. What became of my hometown - I do not know. But I do know that it is rapidly growing with abandonment, its streets filling up with the ghosts of the people that once walked them. Who did the little girls and boys become? Mothers and fathers, and doctors and scientists, and writers and artists. Outside of the limited world we were raised in - I hope they found themselves, I hope they found peace like I did. I hold fond - albeit faded - memories of our childhood days. I treasure the innocence of our naïveté, of what we did not know, of what our parents kept from us to keep us in the illusion of happiness. I hope they all found the true happiness of freedom. Outside the black walls of the institution there is a garden filled with fragrant and beautiful flowers. A congregation of natural beauty yet unscathed by the touch of the tyrant. Protected by those who value the choices in freedom. Outside the institution the fruits are sweet and there is room to grow. Outside the institution there are no glass walls keeping us from reaching our fullest potential. Outside the institution they don't call you crazy for wanting what you rightfully deserve, there is respect for humanity, there is purpose, there is a chance to keep fighting when the garden dies because it can be regrown. Outside the institution the children laugh carelessly. The children laugh like children.

THREE FICTIONS

Djuna Hallsworth

The silver box

I open the tarnished silver box just one more time, hoping the now-familiar words inked onto the tattered, lined paper will, finally, rearrange themselves into something that makes sense. That an elaborate code has been concealing the true meaning of my mother's last words to my sister and me. That the key is already within me, and all I need is a spark of brilliance for something to click in my mind. That I will crack the cipher to uncover the hidden message that will restore the capacity for intimacy and trust that I lost fifteen years ago.

Courtney isn't interested in the letter. 'There's nothing more to it, you know,' she told me the last time she caught me re-reading it. She knew I was looking for an explanation—a better one. 'Dads leave all the time, right? I mean, *they* don't need a reason. They just wanna do different things, or be different people.' She shrugged, as if she could almost empathise.

'Yeah, but mums don't.'

Even though she's only two years my senior, Courtney gets this worldly look about her sometimes, and she had it then. 'Well, some do. Ours did.'

So, I stopped reading the letter. I put it in the tarnished silver box mum used to store her brooches and hair slides and rollie papers, and I put that into the plastic tub where we stored the rest of her things. Then we put the tub in the garage where it stayed, untouched, for twelve years.

But now dad wants to move—he wants to *downsize*. He wants us to go through our stuff: take what we want to keep and chuck what needs

chucking. He doesn't want to touch mum's things, though, and Courtney wants to send the lot to the Salvos, so I nobly volunteer to go through it, like I'm not itching to rifle through the artefacts of a family life I never had. I'm supposed to determine what can be donated but I find myself thinking about that letter, and what the perspective of adulthood might bring to it. Maybe she left clues that were too sophisticated for my young mind, or I didn't get the *intertextual references*; mum taught me about those right before she took off. Or maybe I was just reading it was all wrong—too fast, or too slow—and so I was missing something in the rhythm: were certain words emphasised? Was I rushing over important phrases and mulling over insignificant ones? I need to read it again.

The creases in the paper are almost perforations now; I've folded and unfolded it that many times. A shot of adrenalin pulses through me as I scan the first line, but then I stop. I already know what it says. I place the silver box in the Salvos pile, and the letter I put in the pile with the homemade mixed CDs, burned-out candles and all the other things I have no use for.

Alias

'What's your name?'

'... Mary.'

'What? No, not your *real* name!' The girl in the latex boob tube and hotpants stops in the middle of the drab corridor and glances around like a startled animal. Then she laughs brusquely before turning to me with what looks like sympathy. Her expressions change so abruptly that her face reminds me of those flip-books I played with as a kid.

'Don't let people around here know your real name,' she mutters.

'Sorry.'

She shrugs because it's my anonymity at risk, not hers, and resumes

marching down the corridor, her stilettoed steps slicing through the persistent buzz of the overhead neons.

'So?'

'Oh. I'm not sure. What's the thing people do? Your first street and first pet or something?'

'Gross. Mine would be Dexter William. Fuck that.'

Laughter bubbles up my windpipe but I swallow it, unsure of whether the girl who goes by Cherry-Lee is genuinely offended.

'How did you pick yours then?' I ask with unconcealed curiosity; I have no idea how to choose a sexy-sounding alias.

'Bus stop,' Cherry-Lee replies without looking at me.

'You—' I try to rearticulate her answer into something logical. 'thought of it at a bus stop?'

'Nah. Hey Gigi! That's Gigi.'

But we've already passed the open door of the room that Gigi is apparently occupying. Without breaking stride, Cherry-Lee continues, 'The film. With Marilyn Monroe. The guy, Beau, meets the girl, Cherie, on a road trip. I was going to be Cherie Beau. Cool, hey? So, I told one of the other girls who started at the same time as me.' She shakes her platinum blonde wig and inhales loudly through her nose. 'Next thing I know, *she's* Cherie Beau. The snake stole my name. Hasn't even seen the film.' She scoffs.

I adopt a sympathetic expression that Cherry-Lee doesn't see because her gaze is fixed straight ahead.

'Anyway, I compromised. Whatever. I'm over it. In here.' She makes a sharp turn and now we're in a long room with dressing tables lining one wall and the strong scent of perfume.

'This will be busy later.'

She gestures with one intensely manicured hand for me to take a seat on a worn-out red leather stool as she does the same.

'Girls start arriving from 4 pm. You'll have to fight for a space then.' I nod. 'And does Cherie Beau still work here?' I ask tentatively.

A roll of the eyes tells me that, yes, she does. 'I'll warn you about the ones you need to watch out for. We call them "the tsunami" because they're so forceful. Try too hard. Make a mess of everything.'

'Okay, thanks,' I murmur. My nervousness must be showing because Cherry-Lee cocks her head to the side and looks at me properly for the first time.

'You okay, hun?'

I nod again.

'You'll be fine,' she reassures me.

I hesitate. 'How do you know?'

Cherry-Lee smiles a knowing smile. 'They can't touch you here. *For once*, they can't touch you.'

The system

I knocked again.

'It looks abandoned.' Dave frowned, perplexed.

I checked the address on my scanner: 89 Gum Road. The pile of mail on the weather-worn doormat showed the same street name and number. 'It's definitely the right place,' I confirmed.

My burly colleague examined the cobweb and dust-coated windowpanes sceptically. He cupped his palms around his eyes and tried to peer through the cloudy glass into the front room of the dilapidated house.

'See anything?' I asked.

'Nah.' Dave exhaled loudly. He pulled back and turned to look at the rickety wooden furniture that was scattered across the veranda. Some of it looked like it would collapse under the weight of his withering gaze. 'Why do people hold onto this junk?' Dave muttered, his tone characteristically disdainful. In the eight months I'd worked with the

hulking man—my opposite in almost every way—I'd never known him to mince words.

I shrugged. 'Who knows? Might be antique.' Who cares, though? I thought. Anxiously, I checked the time on my watch, eager to get going. We weren't being paid to stand about wondering if anyone lived at 89 Gum Road, or why they'd forked out \$10 for same-day delivery to such a neglected residence. I'd happily deliver to a prison cell or a grotto if it had a place to safe-drop; I didn't care, so long as we got our \$1.50 each, plus travel allowance. We weren't paid to think, we were paid to do. Quickly.

'Leave it and let's get outta here,' I suggested, but Dave's attention was fixated on some distant sound. All I could hear was the wind whistling through the gum trees, but Dave's worried expression suggested I was missing something.

'What if the order was just to lure us out here?'

'What for?' I asked, incredulous. 'To jump us?'

Dave nodded solemnly. 'Exactly. To steal our parcels.'

Unconsciously, I gripped the package for 89 Gum Road a bit more tightly. 'What, you think a gang of highwaymen are hiding in those trees?' I tried to make a joke of it, but I'd heard the stories about drivers being robbed in broad daylight, and only some of them were myths. 'We should definitely hurry up, then!'

Dave had just opened his mouth to speak when the sound of several locks clicking behind the front door made us both start. Dave grabbed a broken chair leg and slowly lifted it over his head, ready to strike. I froze solid.

The hinges squealed as the door opened to reveal a tiny, wrinkled man.

'Greetings, gentlemen,' he rasped. 'Thank you for coming.'

Dave lowered his weapon. 'You live here?' he enquired incredulously.

'On some weekends,' the man affirmed. 'And when I'm testing the system.'

'What system?' I asked, bemused.

The man studied me. 'Our system, naturally. To see if it's truly as *universal* as I claim. It appears so.' He beamed. 'But you'd best be going. I don't pay you \$1.50 per package to chitchat to customers!'

AFTER

Nicola Hamer

after this disaster

there will be more

they will gather like mice in the cellar of a haunted house or bad decisions in the darkness just before dawn

but something will remain in what's left of the forest

to hear the songs of the fallen

trees

there are always remains

monstrous in their ability to endure

the grief will be almost unbearable

but something will bear it so

something more can be born

and remember the songs of the fallen trees

songs full of hope

like this one

that we must try to deserve

UMAMI

Kristin Hannaford

The resort is submerged in liquid, inky blackness. Tom wheels through the darkness, past signs that list room numbers and parking instructions. Vague, shadowy outlines of reception centres, accommodation wings, and thatched-roof gazebos stare out into the darkness. So quiet. Hemmed in by walls of wire fencing and red and yellow industrial footing, the place reminds him of a housing commission estate. Shadows of trees disappear into the sky like tentacles.

The once-famous Iwasaki resort in Yeppoon, Central Queensland, is an empty city—a ghost town. Out across the bay, it's the same on Keppel Island; the once-infamous marketing campaign 'Get Wrecked at Keppel' is now an ironic truth chewed by hordes of goats. In the 8os and 9os, Yeppoon was the home of the postcard summer. Quintessential Queensland. 'The Japs', as it was known, was as much a resort for the locals as it was for visitors. Everyone, including Tom, had a story about nicking a blue and white towel from the activities desk and quietly slipping onto a banana lounge. His mother used to sit drinking coffee and cocktails while he turned pink under the sun. The place used to hum. Now everything's been gutted; all that's left is an exoskeleton, an empty holiday carapace.

Tom takes the last corner and swerves to miss a red hatchback driving without its lights on. He catches a jarring bolt to his testes. *Jesus*. It hurts. The pain radiates and stings deep within his torso. Instead of a glorious arrival, his dismount ends, and he shuffles the last hundred metres like an old man. A green-lettered 'EXIT' flickers off and on in the distance. A south-easterly trips through Tom's fringe as he looks towards the sea.

Tom walks gingerly to the foyer entrance and shines a torch through the glass. That framed photograph of two men shaking hands is still on the wall; they wear a 70's fat-tie kind of happiness all over their faces. Joh Bjelke-Petersen and Yohachiro Iwasaki, men who shared visions of golf courses, swimming pools and halcyon days beside the Great Barrier Reef. The foyer walls appear golden, and blue-chequered carpet squares vanish down a corridor to the right. Below the photo, a red-carpeted sign with gold lettering advertises the Japanese restaurant, *Tsuruya*. Strangely, even though the resort is closed, it seems the restaurant is still functioning in the bowels of the old complex. Tom hadn't planned for this. For other people being here. Faint scents of miso and seafood probe his hunger. Tom imagines the kitchen staff inside cleaning up after the diners. He turns away; he can wait for the moment.

Emerging from the foliage outside the main entrance, a thick-kneed curlew triggers across to the roundabout in the centre of the drive. The bird dips its head, and an unearthly keening penetrates the dark. Weeeeerrraaaa, Weeeeerrraaaa. Feathery, graceful and awkward all at the same time, the curlew's noise makes Tom uneasy. The colour of sand, the bird assumes a pose and stares at him, leg poised. Tom turns away. It feels like the bird knows him.

Tom had been to the resort the week before for a reconnaissance of the place. Left work early on the pretence of a medical appointment. He had some temporary labouring work on a building site, assisting with the installation of new air-conditioners at the state high school. All the time Tom was there, he felt the memories of the place eating at him. Like he'd never really escaped, never left the taunts behind. He couldn't stay. The site manager was happy he wouldn't have to pay him for the afternoon.

The room he wants is at the front left of the building, facing the sea. A small palm tree has taken root in the corrosion of the balcony's concrete. Although it has taken Tom just half an hour to ride out here,

he's fantasised about this moment for months. Years of shitty, irregular work; hassles living at home with his parents; an assortment of arsehole 'mates' who drifted in and out of his life. People who meant nothing. With each rotation of his bike wheels, he senses the distance emerging between him and his past; his mind feels clear.

Tom stashes his bicycle under a pump shed near the tennis courts and digs out a pair of bolt cutters from deep within his backpack. Beneath him, the court's cushioned surface buckles and cracks like scales of black skin. Two chairs made of white plastic tubing sit empty. He cuts the first chain to the laundry access stairwell and goes to the upper levels. Like a dream. Clean. Easy. A fluoro flickers heavy with moths at the end of the upstairs passageway. He kicks open the door to his chosen unit.

The room—number 106—is dusty but tidy enough. Glass doors open to a balcony and let in the warm night air. Tom smiles and thinks this must be what it feels like to live in an apricot. Everything is a pale shade of the furry-skinned fruit. He inhales deeply. A metal track across the floor indicates where the carpet once lay. Bedroom. Open plan living space. He stretches his sleeping bag out in the middle of the room and vows to look for a mattress in the morning. Textured cement ceilings remind Tom of spitballs of toilet paper. He suppresses thoughts of school. Deeply tired, he listens to the tide as it comes into Farnborough Beach east of the dunes.

In the morning, after a breakfast of dried noodles and an apple, Tom sets out to investigate the resort's pools. Standing at the edge, the hollows remind him of missing body parts in a child's game of Operation—a wishbone, water on the knee, a butterfly in the stomach. He shudders. It required precision to win. At the deep-end, there are puddles of tannin-coloured water. Shadowed with palm fronds and leaves, it smells musty and of decay. A towel lies murkily at the bottom. A smile tugs at the edge of his lips as he jumps into one of the hollows and walks along the

pool floor. A depth measurement of 1.3 M is printed on the wall behind him. Tom has it all himself—the pool that was, at one point in history, the biggest in the Southern Hemisphere.

Tom loses count of the days and nights. His days are filled with small expeditions—visits to the chapel, golf course and the beach. He walks the roads to the wetlands and sees a crocodile sunning itself on an old golfing green. He climbs over fences and breaks into poolside bars and conference spaces. No one comes. He thinks about what he came to do. Calculates how much time he has left.

Hunger is the only thing that permeates; the stockpile of canned and dehydrated food is low. He does not want to return to town. Not yet. At night, the view of the grounds is surreal. Alive. Ropes of shadows outline the giant Moreton Bay fig in the garden. Fruit bats squawk and shriek above and throw desiccated globes of fig as they defecate. Kangaroos graze in groups of twos and threes. Bathed in golden light, they remind Tom of the dollar coin he spins in his pocket. He decides, *Tsuruya*.

The next evening, he stands at the restaurant door and waits. A collection of snarling Shinto masks stares aggressively back at him.

A young Japanese woman hovers a pink highlighter above the list of the night's bookings. 'You have a reservation?'

His mouth is dry. "No. I thought I'd be lucky. Be able to get a table."

The blue and white waves of her dress threaten to swallow him. Maybe this isn't a good idea. As if to confirm this, an old woman suddenly calls out from behind a serving counter in the kitchen. Something in Japanese. Shakes her head at the girl. 'Yūrei!' It sounds harsh, like a warning, like the sound of the curlews on his arrival.

Confused, the waiter smiles apologetically and ushers Tom to a table nestled in a corner. A towering casement of traditional pottery and artwork hems him in. A window opens out into the garden. A seat for one.

She sighs. 'I don't understand her, sorry. Normally, she doesn't want me to sit anyone here.'

Tom's lips crack a little as he reads her name badge: Mika.

'You're okay here?' she asks.

She stares at him and waits. Tom gets the sense that she is not asking about the seating arrangements.

He lies. 'It's perfect,' he says.

Tom can't remember the last time he ate this well. He eats soup from a little teapot, tender sliced beef sashimi, and plates of tempura vegetables and seafood. He eats quickly, ravenously. Salty sweetness coats his tongue. After the meal, he self-consciously wipes his mouth clean and, for the briefest moment, as the waiter clears his plates, he imagines kissing her. Mika raises her eyebrows as if she has read his mind. She walks away and calls back to him, 'You pay at the door'.

The thought of what comes next makes Tom feel sick. He sits there and considers how best to make his escape. He visualises doubling over in pain, asking where the toilets are and disappearing into the night. Yet, when Mika tallies the bill, he has an idea.

'Can I charge that to my room?'

The restaurant falls quiet as if listening.

Mika looks into Tom's eyes; her face tilts slightly like a young pup trying to work out a command. The restaurant resumes its hum.

'Sure, just let me make a note. What room number is that?'

Tom remembers the gold numbers on his unit's door. 'One-oh-six. Third floor.'

As the waitress records his details, the old woman from the kitchen appears and whispers something at Tom. It sounds like a prayer.

Mika extends a smile; the pair blink, bow gently and return to work.

In the warm night air, a young man is suddenly overcome. He is on his back, flat on the asphalt. Stars are spinning slowly and gently; they stream blurry streaks of light—white and blue and red—across the sky as if he is trapped within a long-exposure photograph. A commotion has erupted from behind the restaurant's heavy glass doors. An old woman's face is fixed with grief and worry; she is half-crying as she runs out of

the building. She runs to him with urgency and athleticism. Her hair falls out of a tight whorl of bun at the nape of her neck and streams wildly about her face. Fragmented words erupt as she desperately talks to someone on her mobile. 'Hai. Come, come quick! Emergency. A car. Young man, he hurt.'

The young man feels the day's heat rising from the tar beneath him and hears the insistent cry of a wailing curlew. *Weeeeerrraaaa*, *Weeeeerrraaaa*. His bike lies twisted under a bush to the side of the road. There's a pain throbbing in his shoulder and in his chest. A younger woman appears and kneels beside him. He hears a rush of waves and knows that her dress is making the sound, a wave pattern rising and swallowing him. She cups his cheek as he tries to tell her about the taste in his mouth, the thick metallic fluid filling all the spaces around his teeth like juice. He tries to touch her face, but his arm won't move; it's angled strangely and torn. It takes all he has to read the sharp outline of letters on the girl's name badge: *Mika*.

The old woman whispers to her, to him: *They're coming*. And, as the sirens rise through the air, he understands it all, that he's failed again, that there was no escape. He finally remembers the name for all this salty, sour, bitter-sweetness, the taste of mixed-up disappointment and wonder as Mika leans forward and breathes into him: *Umami*.

ELSEWHERE

Kirwan Henry

I

We left the South West midweek like moving states was workday routine. 'The good coffee place' opened early so we drove down to the foreshore while the rest of Albany stirred at its edges.

We deconstructed the dogs around us. Which one would we take for the road? Which one would we take to our new home? I wondered if they would help me on days when my thoughts are sore.

Yachts were white moths on the water, wings folded, yet to wake. They dipped on the sea's slow blink and roll, its salty exhalation.

II

The cabin at Norseman was clean, tired and cheerful.

We searched the main strip for postcards to tell friends important things – who gets the top bunk and the high stakes for spotting a mallee fowl.

I wondered if precious elements passed beneath our feet – remembered iron-belted cemeteries abandoned somewhere past Kalgoorlie – sheets of earth bound by metal.

Digging a grave wore down a man's will like a small series of mishaps. I imagined the scree collected in the tread of my children's shoes added up to a life worth living.

Back at the cabin we sat low-slung.

Liquid pink sank between scant branches in a heavy-set sky.

My children tried lying upside down. The suitcases stayed in the car.

III

Somewhere past Balladonia we settled into the landscape. Flocks of silver-fleeced saltbush grazed across reefs of gold – shabby hay left on the stem.

It was the wrong season for whales but we turned off at the Head of the Bight. I silently assessed the penmanship of lines scribbled somewhere towards Antarctica.

Small birds flew below cliffs, cutting and clipping air.

Google gave fun results to 'Birds of the Nullarbor' –

avocet, greenshank, white-browed babbler. My best guess was finch.

I wondered where they built their nests. If babies were tucked away in the torn hem of a country, what would they be – born of the land or of the sea?

Nundroo Roadhouse was fly-speckled and steeped in dust. We ate our lunches standing by the car, tossing heads and stamping at the insects freckling our skin.

IV

Summer had caught up with us by the time we reached Port Augusta. A hot slack wind stalked the hills, turning the tidy rows of wind turbines as they waved us into town.

We pressed our bodies into a hotel pool that reminded us of deep green days. My daughter announced the need for somersault scores and laced her limbs through the water beneath me.

At Red Hill Lookout we kept to the path.

I imagined hollows where warm bodies woke under eremophila roots wiping grains of sand from pouched skin and round dark eyes.

We waited and watched as two falcons flew cursive between the sun and moon. My son counted 98 carriages heading west.

A SONG OF BATHSHEBA

D.A. Hosek

How like a man,
To ravish me,
Send Uriah to death,
And think this
Makes him
Suitable.

THIRTEEN WAYS OF WATCHING MY GRANDFATHER'S FUNERAL ON FACEBOOK LIVE

Christine Imperial

i. I am watching my grandfather's funeral on Facebook live.

ii.
While lying on an air mattress
I watch a stream:
my grandfather's funeral on Facebook live.
I am among an audience of fifteen watching a procession of a hundred.

I'm late because I do not memorise the time difference. Makes no difference. *I am a small part of the pantomime.*

It's absurd to watch one's grandfather be buried on Facebook live. It's absurd to watch your family grieve – The stream is supposed to be a bridge. A round-trip ticket from San Francisco to Manila costs about \$3,000. Heart emojis flood the screen as the priest performs a homily.

v.

On my laptop, I watch soldiers transport my grandfather's urn to the family grave site my father purchased ten years ago. I recall billboards advertising early bird discounts.

vi.

Twenty minutes after the mass for my grandfather begins, I send a message

To my sister: "Where is link 2 funeralmass?????" For a moment, Her grief means nothing.

vii.

In a poem, I write 'All I do is witness'.

My family hired a crew to livestream my grandfather's funeral on Facebook Live,
I should be grateful.

viii.

Apparently, there are two streams of my grandfather's funeral.

I do not know which to prefer.

I wish to be a small part of the pantomime.

ix.

How long does it take the spirit to transmit itself across the Pacific? My grandfather is a godly man. My grandfather is a retired general. My grandfather is ash in an urn. х.

The stream is glitching. During the last interaction with my grandfather, I couldn't tell if he heard me through the phone speakers or if he was asleep.

xi.

If I really wanted to, I could play my grandfather's funeral on loop. Truong Tran writes, 'metaphor is a shelter'.

xii.

I am an absence at my grandfather's funeral.

xiii.

It is absurd to watch.

THE LAGOON

Keith Goh Johnson

The lagoon was mentioned in the advertisement, but the reality was more than Sally anticipated. Its large, gloomy expanse extended from the back of the property like a bad dream. From that dark mass, all kinds of sounds emanated: coos and caws, growls and grumbles of things living on the islands that floated like dark clouds in the brackish water.

'What do you think?' Robbie asked her enthusiastically, evidently not feeling the same way she did.

'I expected a pond, not this. What are we going to do with that?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Fill the lagoon with fish, I can paddle-board between the islands. Maybe we can keep chickens on the big one in the middle. It'll be great.'

It was a miracle they were still together. After all, it was only natural for things to fall apart. Passion fizzled; bodies became familiar and less desirable. Most of their friends were splitting up. Maybe she still loved him, though a lot of why she stayed, she had to admit, was inertia. It wasn't as if she was immune to the bouts of restlessness that seemed to infect people in their late thirties; she was just too lazy to do anything about it.

Even so, she hated how he barged into the bathroom during her morning shower and stood astride the toilet, pissing though his limp dick, his hairy buttocks with their hollowed-out cheeks quivering expectantly like panna cotta. She was revolted by the level of complacency they had reached where he felt he could piss in front of her with impunity. She glimpsed her own body in the mirror above the sink. She still looked good, even if she was going to be forty in three years. Nothing had started to sag yet, thank goodness. Her boobs were pert and tapering to pink arrowheads, not yet discoloured by age or

motherhood. Robbie, on the other hand, was starting to get a bit flabby in the middle. It made her shudder to think of it.

When the pandemic came, they couldn't understand why they were working so hard for so little. The move up north was supposed to mark a new chapter. Robbie would give up his job in project management to make surfboards, while she could work from home. With the extra time cut from the daily grind, she would have the opportunity to discover what was meaningful to her—whatever that might be. But Sally, in truth, had not looked forward to the move. The move sounded like a lot of effort for nothing. That was her inertia raising its hand in objection.

But Robbie didn't notice her ambivalence because he was happy from the get-go. Before they had even had a chance to unpack their bags, he had already claimed a space downstairs for his war room. He was in there for hours going over the possibilities for the yard. Ripping out the Kentia palms and planting fruit trees: bananas, pineapples, avocados, if you could plant avocados in this part of the world.

She left him to it; glad he had something to keep him busy and out of her hair. She decided to pick up a hobby, something that she hadn't done for years. Before she knew Robbie, her life had been pretty rich. There had been flamenco classes, French cooking and Japanese lessons. She had read Kafka and Joyce (God knows why).

She settled on learning a language and decided on French, which she had done in high school. The women in her book club had told her of an online platform that delivered language lessons in the comfort of your home. The platform had a forum where she could correct other users' compositions and share ones of her own. She stared at the cursor winking back at her for what seemed like more than half an hour without coming up with anything to say and so turned her attention to the discussion board.

SlyFace wrote, Dec 5, 2022, 7.00*PM*:

Recently I stopped using social media due to atmosphere filled with sarcasm and trolls. I don't understand why people attack each other

for no reason. I know I could do nothing but focus on myself. I find my peace by focusing on myself.

It wasn't bad, she thought. But the choice of words gave the game away: the author was clearly not a native speaker. 'Due to atmosphere', 'my peace' were perfectly grammatical but malapropisms. She wrote back, typing on the keyboard in quick, rapid bursts, like machine gun fire.

Sallyinyouralley wrote, Dec 5, 2022, 10.00PM:

Good effort, SlyFace! No grammatical errors as far as I can see. But, maybe try something like: 'I recently stopped using social media because of all the cynical trolling. I don't understand why people need to needlessly attack each other. With the 'suddenly' ... are you more concerned about how quickly people turn? Or that they do that without reason?

Btw, your post resonates. I've also started focusing on myself more recently. What did Sartre famously say? 'Hell is other people'? That makes social media a kind of purgatory, lol. I really should move to an island. What am I saying?? My husband's bought one, in our lagoon.

She posted it and quickly forgot all about it.

A few weeks later, Sally was drinking coffee in the kitchen when she was surprised to see a large FedEx truck turning up their drive. She went to open the front door as the delivery men got out and came towards her, pen and clipboard in hand.

'Can you sign the invoice, ma'am?'

'Robbie!' she called out.

He appeared soon enough, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and grinned.

'Oh right,' he muttered. 'I forgot these were coming ...'

He signed the form and the men opened the back of the truck. They started unloading box after box, carrying them inside. She glared at him.

'What's all this then?'

'I just did a little shopping,' he said, a little sheepishly.

'A little?'

'It's just stuff we need for the island. Solar-powered lamps. Small refrigerator. I should have told you. My bad.'

'Is there going to be electricity on your island?'

His eyes lit up. 'That's a good idea. We can put in a generator.'

She laughed. 'Why don't we just build a bunker?'

It was supposed to be a joke. She expected him to laugh and think it funny, but the look he gave her was deadly serious.

'Ok. Raw nerve. I get it,' she said and tried to forget it.

Over the next couple of days, more boxes arrived. Robbie moved the car out of the second garage to make more room for everything. He often stayed up late at night, ordering things online and Sally began to worry. She had never thought Robbie would be one given to conspiracy theories. He was an engineer after all.

There was a new message posted to her discussion board. Sally opened and read it.

SlyFace wrote, Feb 1, 2023, 7.00PM:

I quit social media and I am never happier. I am free to see world. I learn people tell a lot of lies. You cannot trust anyone. Not even your husband.

She was a little taken aback that SlyFace said out loud what she had just been thinking. But she always had the intuition that SlyFace was a woman.

Sallyinyouralley wrote, Feb 1, 2023, 10.00PM:

How right you are, SlyFace. I came home this afternoon and found my husband had ordered boxes of toilet paper and cans of dog food, in bulk. We don't have a dog. This is not who I thought my husband was and I can't think where he got these ideas from. She hesitated before she posted it. She hadn't expected a reply. After all, all she had done was correct SlyFace's composition and made some encouraging comments in the chat. But SlyFace had replied to her, nonetheless. It could still have been a coincidence. But she could feel an agitated eagerness creeping under her skin to know what would happen next.

Catching up on work at the kitchen counter the next day, she kept checking every fifteen minutes if there were any new messages. And finally, it came.

SlyFace wrote, Feb 2, 2023, 6.00AM: You should watch out.

From the bedroom window, she could see him in the tinny he had bought, moving back and forth between all the scrubby islands in the stagnant water. It looked aimless but she couldn't be sure. She stood watching until the boat return to the bank. Robbie hopped out, secured the boat to its mooring and headed towards the house.

She found him sitting doing sums at his desk in his room. He had dozens of pieces of paper laid out in front of him—quotes from excavators, electricians, carpenters and plumbers—and was scribbling the fees onto a pad with a pencil clenched in his hand. She paused to watch him silently from the door.

'I guess things have moved on from the chicken run,' she said as casually as she could.

'Do you want to see?'

'If you like.'

He had let his imagination run rampant. At the centre of the main island, there really was a bunker with two exits that could be disguised from the surface. It was built of reinforced concrete several inches thick and which could survive any bomb blast. There would be electricity and gas and running water, a separate phone line so they wouldn't have

to rely on their mobile phones (these could easily be intercepted, he explained), and food stores to last them months, possibly indefinitely.

'We've got to be prepared, you know,' Robbie said.

'For what?'

'For anything ... nuclear fallout, another pandemic.'

'The apocalypse?'

It was the type of comment that would have shut all this down in the past by teasing a laugh out of him. But no laugh came. He kept staring at her, sweaty and bug-eyed. When had he turned into this? she wondered. How had he been changing without her realising it? He couldn't have been like this all this time.

'I think I'll go upstairs,' she said.

SlyFace? Sally typed into the computer, SlyFace are you there?

She waited for a response. It was ridiculous to think that SlyFace was just sitting there all day waiting for her to reply. She got bored after ten minutes and started looking up random things. She read about the waves of Spanish influenza, of avian flu, of bubonic plague. She stumbled on a webpage about psittacosis and learned about the link with bird STDs, and then spent another half an hour looking at fibrotic lungs. She wondered if it was caused by pigeons. They found pigeons nesting in the roof at her work, she remembered, just before lockdown. OH&S had got into quite the flap about it.

There was the sound of a crash in the attic and her eyes immediately darted upwards. *Oh God, what now?* She groaned and made her way to the attic stairs.

It was sitting there on the windowsill, evidently flying through a window that someone forgotten to close. There was no knowing how long it had been there, but it had made itself quite at home. Bird poop was splattered all over the floor. One malevolent beady eye was fixed on her, like she was the intruder. Its tiny body had grown hideously

corpulent on hot chips and refuse from bins.

She moved forward, flailing her arms in front of her, to frighten it away. 'Shoo! Shoo!'

But the seagull didn't move. Instead, it puffed up its feathers defiantly. It rose into the air and came back at her with a loud squawk.

She panicked and fled downstairs with the seagull in angry pursuit behind her. She ran down the second flight of stairs, past a bewildered Robbie who emerged from his study, his mouth open in surprise.

'What the fuuu—'

And down across the lawn.

She glanced back and the bird was still flapping behind her, an angry ball of grey and white feathers, letting off high-pitched cries.

She reached the tinny at last, pulled the loop of rope off the wooden post, and started the motor. The tinny slipped away from the bank.

The island rose in front of her out of the steaming water and hovering mosquitos. She resigned herself to it. There was nowhere else to go.

The boat scraped the muddy bottom. She jumped ashore and beat her way into the tangled bush.

Robbie had been here before her, she knew, but he must have been the only other person. The island was surprisingly much larger than it had appeared from the shore. There were no paths. The bush grew thick and prickly, making it hard to move. As she moved, she kept looking out for any small angry puffs of feathers, listening for shrill cries. But to her relief, she heard nothing.

She sensed that she was nearing the centre as the bushes thinned around her. And, to her relief, she stepped out into a small grassy clearing where one lone paperbark reached its gnarled fingers up to the sky.

She stopped and sank down with her back against its trunk, breathing heavily, listening to the reverberations of the insects around her. She shut her eyes but opened them again to the sound of flapping wings.

It came—the bastard—swooping serenely above the bushes she had pushed through with so much effort, and it settled on a branch above her head. Once more the bird fixed her with its red, covetous eye. And then Sally felt some sticky mess against her cheek—warm and runny like a freshly laid egg—as it shat on her face. Then, as if pleased with the point it had made, it flew off into the sky.

Robbie was waiting for her in the darkness as she brought the tinny into the shore. He reached out his hands to grab the rope and secured the boat to its mooring. Covered in dirt, shit on her face and twigs in her hair, she was glad to see him. She gave him a hug, pressing her face into his shirt, breathing in his familiar smell, feeling all the familiar bulges and hollows of his body. She started crying and couldn't understand why.

'It's okay, baby,' he said gently, stroking her hair. 'It's okay.'

A few months later, Sally found out that the council had plans to drain the lagoon. She learned about it from some protesters she passed on the main street one day, who didn't want to see the destruction of any natural habitat. *It's not just a lagoon you're destroying, but an entire ecosystem*, they'd said. But Sally was secretly pleased, she went to the council chambers to make sure the motion passed without objection.

She stood with Robbie looking out at the dark trees sinking into the still water.

'How can they get rid of this?' he cried.

'For health reasons. Global warming is heating the planet. Tropical diseases are moving south. You don't want to get dengue fever, do you?'

She hadn't gauged the extent of his ambition. He had envisioned the lagoon as a kind of natural defence, protecting them from god-only-knew-what. His lower lip trembled; his eyes moistened like he was on the verge of crying. In fairness, he was crying for both of them. But she felt no pity and only twisted in the knife.

'We should fill it in when they drain the water. You wouldn't want

a big hole in the backyard,' she said, and it struck her that this was the first time that she had considered the lagoon as part of their backyard. They could landscape it. It was big enough for mini golf.

'When?' he stammered, like a child.

'Any day now,' she said.

It was, in fact, two weeks. The residents got notices in the mailbox with an apology from the council for the disturbance. Sally spent the day watching the council workers in their Hi-Vis vests cordon off the area and dredge the water out. They worked all day until the trucks came in the evening with earth to fill it up.

Things seemed to go back to normal after that. Robbie started going out surfing again and playing indoor soccer, and Sally went back to her book club, which was now virtual, every Tuesday night.

Her French classes were progressing well. She could hail a cab and tell it where to go, reserve a room and sit for a basic job interview. None of this was useful. She had no plans to go to France, not even as a tourist. She studiously avoided the discussion boards when she was online. But one evening, sitting alone in the house, she gave into temptation and had a look.

SlyFace wrote, April 8, 2023, 7.00PM:

There is news today that I need to tell everybody. Recently, someone become very ill in my village. Their family falls ill. Other people in village fall ill. The government send men to close village off. They close border. No one can get out. People start to panic. They go into shops and buy up toilet paper.

She closed the page. Was it coming, or was it already here? She checked the news sites and couldn't find anything. But of course, they wouldn't tell you. She went online and ordered a dozen boxes of toilet paper.

Outside, the island was still visible, a rough patch of trees and grass in a sea of earth.

Dorothy Johnston

Irene liked to walk on the rocks at low tide. Now that Josh, her husband, was seldom home for dinner, she studied the tide times and, when the tide was right, walked on the rocks after work.

She walked with no particular purpose in mind and made her way, eventually, to the outer limit of the rock shelf, the point from which the sea never receded. On the days when a big swell was running, it was dangerous to stand there. Freak waves swept people into the water. Drownings weren't uncommon. Sometimes, skilled swimmers drowned trying to save those not so skilled.

During storms, great masses of kelp were washed up onto the sand. In the rock pools, the weeds were green and brown and floating, the water magnifying every strand. Tiny black mussels made a home there.

Irene knelt and lowered her hands into the neutral water. She stayed like that for what seemed like a long time, until the tension in her neck and shoulders obliged her to move. She leant back on her hands, feeling the edges of the rocks beneath them. It was good to know where the rocks ended and her skin began.

That evening, she did not wait up for Josh to come home but lay in their cool bed and thought of strings of grape-shaped seaweed, and of water running gently through her hands. She thought about the sunlight and how it made the water come alive with colours. In the shallow, sandy pools closer to the shore, the wind made ripples, each one catching the light.

Irene imagined lying down with the water barely washing over her, and of how she might wait to feel the rush and flurry of the in-coming tide. Sudden, the tide would be, the colder water from the deep places out beyond the rocks.

She pretended to be asleep when Josh finally came home.

Cold weather hung on into spring and then the tea-tree blossoms came out all at once. The bushes were covered with flowers, white like snow or a wedding.

When school went back after the spring break, Irene's daughter Rachel made a new friend, a girl from the north of the state whose parents had given up their farm. Her son David seemed calmer and more settled. He went to soccer training most nights and came home starving. He did his homework with the minimum of effort and then went to bed.

Irene enjoyed her work more now the dread of going home was lessened.

She didn't ask Josh where he went in the evenings, or with whom.

On the sand below the low, crumbling cliff was a single red rose. Irene hadn't noticed it on her way out across the rocks, but saw it on her way back. She went over to take a look. Why a single flower? Why just there? Surely it could not have been dropped accidentally.

Irene didn't know whether to pick the rose up or leave it. She couldn't take it home; home wasn't the right place for it. It needed to be put into water.

She walked on until she came to the nearest rubbish bin, then scavenged through it until she found a container that might do. She cleaned the container, filled it with water from a tap, and carried it back to the beach. She put the rose in fresh water and placed it inside a crevice of the cliff, on a narrow shelf at shoulder height.

The container barely fitted and the effort caused Irene to scrape the back of her hand. When she stepped away, there was blood, a graze.

She walked to the water's edge and washed her hand in seawater. It felt cold and sharp. She was satisfied that she'd done what she could.

The sun picked out each tiny fissure in the cliff face. Irene's path down to the rocks was further along. She hadn't really studied the cliffs before.

They looked black above a certain height. The upper sections were pitted, gouged and creviced. They would be rough to touch and hard to climb. A whole world was there, clefts and holes and gaps of air that would one day be fallen in on, but for now marvellously held up.

Irene thought about how often people were pressed into action by contrary emotions, and how, for the time being at least, the rose was safe.

Later, when Rachel said, 'Mum, you've cut yourself', Irene replied that it was nothing.

She was surprised because Rachel rarely noticed anything about her mother. Irene felt that she could walk into the house with her arm in a cast and neither of her children would say anything. She could have worn two heads, or a third eye. The absurdity of it made her smile.

Rachel was looking at her strangely. It might have been the smile, or the word "nothing", its tone harder than was usual.

Suddenly the rose, the crevice, the scrape on her hand, all were precious. She would not share them with anyone.

The rose was there, in its crevice in the cliff, when Irene went back the next day. She was afraid someone might have found it and tipped the water out. She thought of the rose—thrown into the sea or discarded, wilted, on the sand—but it was right where she had left it.

Irene's heart gave a small leap. She reached her hand into the crevice and brought the container out. The rose did not look to have aged by so much as a day. Irene had brought a vase from home. She filled it with clean water and replaced the container in the rubbish bin.

That day, Irene did not walk out onto the rocks. She wanted to stay close to the crevice. She looked up at the cliff, noticing the way uneven weathering made holes and columns, curlicues and spirals. She stayed for as long as she could and went home in a calmer frame of mind.

She wondered about the person who had left the rose. It had looked so fresh, so newly cut. There were wedding ceremonies on the beach. Irene had sometimes stood and watched a strong south-westerly fling the bride's dress this way and that. She had listened to the bridesmaids' laughter.

In such conditions, a rose could easily become dislodged from a bouquet.

The crevice held a world in miniature, hidden from view of even the smallest human being. A child could reach further back into the cavity than Irene could, but not much further. At the end was a wall of rock, solid and protected from the wind and sea by a fragmented outer layer. This outer layer, when you stopped to look at it, was colourful. From a distance it appeared black, but up close it was shades of brown—tawny, mid and red-brown.

Whole cities were there, a wealth of building. Irene wished she could make herself as small as an ant so that no one would notice her comings and goings. Even her hand was too big; it wobbled to and fro and scraped the edges.

She felt she had chosen the right place for her rose, even though it was a struggle to get the vase out, to fill it with fresh water and put it back again.

David helped with the washing up. When they were finished she asked him how his day had been.

Instead of answering, he asked, 'What's up with Dad, Mum?'

'I don't know.'

'Have you asked him?'

Irene was tempted to lie, but resisted the temptation. 'No,' she said.

'Why not?'

It was unlike David to persist.

What could she say? That even if she asked, Josh wouldn't tell her? That he would tell her when he was ready and not before? That she didn't particularly want to know, because bad news would find her soon enough without her looking for it?

She said, 'Whatever it is, it's not your fault, or Rachel's.'

David turned away, unconvinced.

Next day, Irene changed the water in the vase. The rose looked just the same. She did not want to go home. She imagined guarding the rose, which needed no guard because no one would think to look for it; nobody but herself knew it was there.

The following afternoon, Irene changed the water again. The rose was still alive. Irene breathed out with relief. She knew that the life of a rose, once picked, had to be numbered in days. Yet strange things happened; she was aware of that as well. It was strange that a perfect flower, no longer a bud, but fresh—its petals not bruised or worn—had been lying on the sand.

Irene read about flower ceremonies in different countries of the world. She thought about how flowers were placed on graves and at roadside shrines. She continued to wonder why her rose had been left on the sand. What was to commemorate there, between the rocks and cliff?

Time spent tending the rose had a beginning and an end, but it was not the same as other routines, other duties.

The next day, the tide was in too far for her to reach the cliff without getting her feet wet. She clambered and slipped, relieved that her crevice was well above the tide mark. The worst storms would not reach it; she felt that she had chosen well. But she was aware that she looked ridiculous, with her slipping and sliding. She'd brought a change of shoes with her in the car so that she need not get her work shoes wet.

Josh came home late, after the evening meal had been cleared away and the children were in their rooms. He looked at Irene and seemed about to speak. Irene had put the jug on to boil. She hadn't been thinking of her husband. She felt disconcerted by his sudden appearance and his open mouth.

'Have you eaten?' she asked.

'Thanks, but I'm not hungry.'

'Would you like a cuppa? I was about to have one.' Irene felt foolish for stating the obvious.

'Irene—'

'Yes?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I'm listening,' she said.

Josh smiled in a sad, bewildered way.

Irene felt anxiety pricking at her outer edges and wished he wasn't there. She wanted to sit at the kitchen table by herself and drink her tea and think about the rose. She felt that if only she could tell Josh about it then the barrier between them would come down.

The jug turned itself off. The silence in the kitchen was almost unbearable.

'Goodnight,' Josh said gently. He turned in the doorway to add, 'I think I'll make myself up a bed in the study.'

Irene nodded. 'Goodnight.'

She got up early, after managing a few hours' sleep. On waking, she had looked across to the other side of the bed, then remembered what had happened.

The study door was ajar, the bedclothes put away. Irene looked for a note, but there wasn't one.

All that day, she kept expecting Josh to call or text her, though he never called her at work, just as she never called him.

The rose was dying. Irene looked at it in the dim light of the crevice and saw that its petals were drooping, turning brown. They hung down whereas before they had held themselves proudly. A kind of dance they'd

made inside the cliff, where the light—muted and unstartling—had a sort of uplift about it.

Perhaps, if she could just go on looking at the rose, the very act of witnessing might keep it alive for a little longer. She took the vase out and studied it in the clear light of the late afternoon. She thought, for the first time, about the bush the rose had come from. Was it nearby, or far away? She did not believe it could be too far.

Finding the rose had been an accident, fortuitous and strange, a period of grace, a few days only, yet seeming more than that. Time had seemed to stretch inside that small crevice in the cliff.

Irene thought she might go for a walk after dinner. She would not go far, around the block perhaps, or two blocks, if the evening stayed fine. She knew all the landmarks and did not need to think about where to put her feet.

A dog barked in the distance. Irene listened to it, and to the silence after it had stopped. She thought that, when she got back from her walk, she might knock on Rachel's door, and David's, and ask if they would like her to make them a hot chocolate. She imagined sitting at the kitchen table drinking something warm and comforting, the three of them together.

Irene thought it would be nice if Josh came in while they were drinking their hot chocolate.

The higher rocks of the cliff face were black, excoriating, and Irene thought that was a good thing. Nobody would think to climb there or put their hands inside. She took the roughness into herself, made it part of herself. That night she slept better than she had for weeks. Josh did not come home at all.

The conversation, when it came, did not cut her as she'd believed it might.

Josh had thought it through. He presented Irene with a plan. He would move in with Sally, who had been his lover for the past six

months. Again, what ought to have been a shock was not. Only the name was news. Irene was not at all curious about this Sally. When Josh told her that Sally was divorced and had two grown-up children, Irene merely nodded.

There would be time to work out what to do about the house; there wasn't any rush. Rachel and David should stay with her, that would be for the best. They could spend time with him and Sally at the weekends.

Irene called in sick to work.

She did not feel guilty about lying to her boss. He told her to get well soon.

Josh had spoken to David and Rachel the evening before. Irene hadn't been there. Josh had asked her if she'd wanted to be and she had said no. He'd gone out again, after telling her that it was okay, that they'd taken the news calmly.

After Josh had left, the three of them had sat at the kitchen table. Rachel had given her a hug and David had said, 'I'm sorry, Mum.'

'Sorry for what?' Irene had wanted to ask, but this would have been rude.

She didn't know if they would be hurt by their father leaving, or rather she did not know *how much* they would be hurt. They had kept so much to themselves, and their father had been absent in his heart for so long.

The tide was half-full. The pulse, the strength of the high tide was beginning, the force that would take the seawater right to the bottom of the cliff. Irene thought that she would wait until that happened, wait and watch the thrust and feel it in her blood.

The black lines were never straight, but bent and twisted, turning in on themselves, then opening unexpectedly into further holes. It did not occur to Irene until that moment, when she'd run away from work and home, that she could enlarge her hiding place.

She could rub her hands raw on the sharp edges. Did she want David and Rachel to see her hands cut and bleeding? Of course not.

On Saturday morning, Josh and a friend collected a carload of his clothes and the belongings he needed for day-to-day life. With the car loaded and running, Josh hugged David and Rachel before leaving, the pair standing in the driveway until his car was out of sight. It felt as though he was going away for work, not leaving to live somewhere else.

Alone that night, in the bed she had all to herself, Irene lay awake and thought about where her marriage had gone wrong. She could sleep on either side, but chose to stay on the side by the window, which had always been hers. There was no beginning to the wrongness between them, none that she could put her finger on. She got up and drank half a glass of milk, then went back to bed again. She would have preferred to sleep.

Irene told the people at work in as few words as possible. She and Josh had drifted apart. which was as good a form of words as any. She shrank from explanations. Her colleagues saw this and did not ask for any.

It does not matter, she told herself, staring at the cliff face. It doesn't matter how often I come here, or how long I stay.

Irene thought about what love was, how unexpected love could be. She could believe that Josh had not gone looking for it, but that, all of a sudden, it was there.

In the evening, at low tide, she stood on the outer limit of the rocks and looked over the sea.

The layers of the cliff face drew her eyes towards them. Her eyes rested on them, and she felt rested in her mind and heart. Soon it would be warm enough to swim in the sea again. She was looking forward to that.

CLEAN PANTS CHAIR

Elaina Knipple

Clean-pants chair, dirty-pants chair, clean pants, dirty pants, clean.

Wear these earrings for a good day. Last time these dusty things got worn bad day bad day bad things happening.

And I'm dirty you're clean or I'm clean and you're dirty we cannot be normal I cannot be normal.

I spray germ-x on my phone. I spray Lysol on my carpet. I spray essential oils on my bedding. I spray bleach on my tongue. I tell my psychologist father about these things and when I say them out loud I laugh at myself and he laughs too. I understand, I am self-aware, understand, self-aware fixed. I am fixed. I am fixed in position. I am stuck. Frozen, caught in the midst of laughing at myself wondering if God is mad that I don't trust his divine power. That I trust luck, good luck bad luck superstition littlestition many-headed mythological symbolic beast.

Every day I drive into town I face two roads—two roads that connect back together after one-hundred feet. The roads that connect to the same place eventually mean different things. Two-millisecond longer road is for emergencies: for being behind a slow vehicle, for quick passes—bad luck exempt in such situations. Short road is for everyday that I want to be a good day which is every day. And every day at the stop sign that separates them, I take half a moment to decide whether or not to flick my turn signal on. I try to convince myself I could go either way and be fine—but I'd rather not push my luck.

CHINESE SUN

Alex Kudera

Head down, I did my best to avoid Xi'an, China's searing sun and the men selling socks on blankets over pavement. They were partly protected by the thin branches of small trees but still exposed to the heat. As I strode ahead, my mind bounced backwards two or three decades. I was wandering in a busy shopping area off the beaten tourist track in France. I remember it as near Les Halles, but not Les Halles; at the time, I didn't know precisely where I was. An Algerian busser, one of my coworkers, had sent me to buy my uniform—a white shirt with black plants and bowtie. This was in Paris—or I should say on the outskirts of Paris. Les Banlieues, or not *les banlieues*? The shopping square was wide and packed tight with brown and pale Arabs. There were Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, and others. They were thin and poor, yes, but doing better than they would be back home. It was crowded—we were moving within inches of each other, even rubbing shoulders, as we walked up the wide boulevard. No cars but too many pedestrians.

I felt something behind me. I felt tugging. When I turned around, I saw that a tan hand was attached to a guy. He was taller, darker, and thinner than me, and he had been fiddling in my book bag pouch. He stared, shrugged, and then slightly grinned before extending his open palm to reveal and then return my watch. I don't know why I kept it back there even if it wasn't worth much. There was no question of me calling police in that crowd. I received stolen goods and kept walking.

That was quite a *wingding*, yes. Wingding—the word—was only in my brain because I had Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* with me for the entire trip. The novel was quite a gas. This was in China, not Parisback-then, or at my dad's house as a child in West Philly. In France, I'd found a UK edition of Thomas Pynchon's *V*, and I'd also read Melville's

Moby Dick. The latter was a Penguin edition I'd brought from home. I knew I had to read if I wanted to write. Now let's suppress the urge for a 'kids these days'; we were kids, too, once; we were lucky to be alive. But with me in Xi'an, I had the Bellow and a few others at the bottom of my suitcase back in my wife's shabby apartment—narrow rooms, no window screens, a hot pot and range, but no oven or fridge. Inside the apartment, we had a wall unit, and we were away from the sun.

*

Further down, in the bowels of the subway—yes, back to Paris, the Metro, and so on—a wide blonde girl bent down to snag her dropped ticket. She was overtly American. A French suit with a blank stare pinched her rear as he walked straight toward me. His face and flat lips were still even as his thumb and forefinger were firm in their resolve. A tidy maneuver in a crowd. I was on a landing ten feet above the platform and about to descend stairs. The pincher was staring straight ahead and saw that I saw him, but I said nothing. What would I say? 'Stop! Pervert!' He was a man in a mob; he could pinch as he pleased and escape free. She chirped out loud—'Ooh!'—looked around, saw it was hopeless, and rushed to board before subway car doors closed.

Beyond the subways, there were the trains. I was leaving Paris at midnight from Gare de l'Est. So long ago I can't remember, but I believe I had my eye on Basel in Switzerland; I would have been interested in where Nietzsche died. I was tired, not feeling well, but I was intent on getting the most of an unlimited pass good for two months on continental trains. I could save money on lodging by selecting night trains with sleeping compartments. Aboard my car, I was patiently navigating down its narrow corridor. Directed at the man pushing ahead in front me, I heard in French, 'All I need is the ticket.' A gentleman facing us beckoned with a blade.

The transaction ended; no one got hurt. But that was enough for me, so I returned to my friend's floor. She said, 'I knew you'd be back.'

There was romance in her voice, but I was queasy and sick. Desperate for rest, I soon fell asleep. I ruined her toilet in the morning.

The knife on the train was far more dangerous than the 20-something exposing her abdomen—a summer halter top; midriff exposure—on a subway car in Seoul, South Korea. Every passenger stared while pretending to look away. Or the time on a bus—in Xi'an, again—a young woman changed clothes; she threw her uniform over a bra. A small bus, fewer commuters to share a stare. Covered breasts in an inland city. No visible nipple, no tit.

But then there were the huge Sag-Harbor houseboats attached to an owner-occupant taking up five-sixths of a two-seater back in Philly on a bus or trolley. *Childhood in Philadelphia! What could do more damage than that?* A hometown special—sweaty tee-shirt, damp seats. In exhaustion, a second party would sit on the extant corner of public seating. I saw this more than twice.

My whole life, I've found that I could keenly observe any manner of mammary—standard issue feminine or slumping off an obese male. It couldn't be disputed; all of us ought to be valued as we were—unique, irregular, weird, or askew. Of course, I would never pinch anywhere, and the ones attached to thin-wasted women were most precious and rare. Back on SEPTA, we considered ourselves lucky when the trolley or subway car didn't smell like fresh urine or stale perfume.

*

Blame not the Xi'anese with socks on blankets for any of this but, more than twice, I've found sidewalk cash—twenties and tens—once near a busy corner in Philadelphia and a fold of at least four fivers at the entrance of a supermarket in Nowhere, Suburbia. There were other times that involved no currency—like when my dad's cat jumped out of the second-floor window or the daughter of that cat, as a kitten, fell three flights down the opening in the stairwell.

But upstairs, there were ledges comfortable for sitting and the roof

above the front-door awning. I was on one as a child at my father's friend's house. He had a son, too, but we never played together, not even at these hippy gatherings or parties. We were on the ledge together, but we weren't going off it. We were relaxing, maybe resting, but we could hear our fathers talking inside. 'He's contaminated.' I heard my father agree. They were talking about the other son, not me. Were they describing a medical condition? Or were they speaking about his relationship to society? It is one of those memories that has stayed with me, this fragment of discussion, but what did it mean?

Yesterday, I quit this writing because I needed to determine, in a way, if I was contaminated, too. In lieu of a colonoscopy, I had to send a stool to a lab in Wisconsin. Why, yes, of course, my own, and through the mail as modern as that sounds. My father died of colon cancer, not from selling socks in the shade while customers passed in the blazing sun. He was only sixty, but then again, I've already lost two cousins in their early fifties and last week one at sixty-six. Would I be dead soon?

My doctor had placed an order, so the lab sent me a small box with supplies and instructions. They needed a full sample, not merely a smear in a baggy. A hard plastic apparatus needed its wings tucked under the toilet seat I sat on. It was included to hold the plastic cylinder that would catch the turd. A simple but remarkable feat of engineering and imagination. Mine would stand up against an interior wall, but I'd pooped entirely inside as required. From opening the box through reviewing the instructions to securing the storage unit to making silly kaka and repackaging as required, it took me most of the late morning to complete the mission. Even as I stood in line at the UPS Store, I doubted the seal on the airtight container. As the clerk assured me that the box was properly fastened, I was already imagining that I'd write about this experience. I'd make it fit in this *everything but the kitchen sink*; thank god I hadn't left stool by sink drain.

This life, its shit, the anxiety—the unbearable urge to continue interrupted so frequently by the need to piss. After peeing in the

bucket left for linen and other refuse—the cheap plastic kind people leave by the dryer—I washed it as best I could and remembered, again, my father's exploits. Once, when driving a date to her home, it felt as if he has been invited inside, but he had to go so badly that he politely declined and peed his pants while seated behind the wheel of his 1983 Buick sedan. This was at some point during his sober California days. As soon as he saw her disappear from her porch, he let loose through his slacks and cloth car seat. He couldn't hold it a moment longer. Anxiety, the land of plenty, the great flood, a moment of joy!

As a child, he took me to a wedding in distant suburbs, farm country, and everyone got trashed as his friend the photographer got married. He stopped the car to urinate at least five times on the ride home. Years later he would tell me that he may have been stopping the car to clear his head. Drunken driving was more socially acceptable then, and the penalties were not as severe. He was suggesting that not everything revolved around the need to pee, but I knew better.

And I also knew that we were not the only ones engaged, frequently, in urination; my college torturer, captain of the team, once urinated atop the dirty dishes. A thick stream then, but it would be a year before he shoved his dick at my throat. I saved my tonsils by running to a room with a better friend. It was Bellow with only the good parts; plagiarise yourself, then do it all over again. This was in the kitchen of that house, not the apartment where pee splashed against porcelain and glass. The dick shover would become a tenured professor—what could be more obvious that that?

And in the middle of it all, my leaking life, the Secret Service popped in! A substitute teacher doubling as a daughter's escort. A government-contract employee had found her way to our school. I was flopped in my teaching chair after a two-hour class. *Ready for lunch or a nap; too tired to talk or suck*. She lingered to snag the digits after sitting with her legs splayed under a desk chair. *A sampling of her sex parts, Sir, before your*

evening commute? Was I ago for a heart attack after dinner date, Cialis, and a friendly ending dessert? What a delicacy! Federal hole for the good of the schools? Fair and full funding with perfect climate control! Food for thought, indeed. But I begged off. I was married. I was close to death, or at the very least within proximity to such nearness. I told her I had to rest. A good minute more, and she left. I lived.

Years before, there'd been solemnity after restaurant meals. With an old friend, I walked out of Chinatown. We were two blocks past the Arch—evening hours near The Gallery shopping mall. Dozens of homeless luxuriated near a subway entrance. They slept or commingled under the stars. My accomplice walked among them with his dollar bills. He handed them out, 'Here, Sir, have this dollar,' and 'Please take these, Ma'am.' This was after work in spring weather. Not too hot or cool. Was the show for him? For them? For me? He knew he'd been an asshole for most of his life. Or so he'd told me an hour previously over wontons and kung pao. Now it was time to make amends. My friend with his dollars, the thief with my watch. Was most of the world not desperately poor? Was my insured flying fecal sample not luxury goods? Flying first class across the skies from one climate-controlled environment to another? Would bandits intercept the mail and poach my poop? What was that worth on the black market? Who would pay? Was I not an asshole, too?

I didn't have all the answers. I never did. I couldn't say. I could say that there were all these times that were memorable, and no few pertained to money. Often in small quantities. At my father's again, five dollars, found cash outside, crinkled green and grey on a corner of broken brick—gas money to Hershey Park! I belonged or I didn't; these moments and happenings piled up in an unorderly heap. Coherent lives were for presidential candidates, losers, breeders, or men of the cloth who never strayed. I lived like the rest of us, you see.

Father, yes! With the kitchen sink, throw him in again. Autofiction's for assholes; some bury dick in the middle, some don't. For assholes, everyone knows it. It's too easy to blame Dad for most of it. The rootless

wandering; the almost never getting married and rarely getting laid. No doubt how I wound up scorched and socked in China. You can't swing a cat without hitting a dead dad. Specimen *x* was good at employment, bad at money. Like many American men, he dabbled in divorce and had hardly a pot to piss in at too many points in his life. His childhood memories were of a small pat of butter and a big bag of rice; his parents fighting over his brutal father's 'allowance' for the weekend binge; or the last outhouse on his block in Jersey City—where my dad shat in his earliest years. Like my wife, my father had known scarcity—from the original outhouse to efficiency apartments as a full-grown man. He'd splurge recklessly, but he knew how to shop for a bargain.

A good while before I ever owned an automobile—perhaps at 23 or 19—my father took me to look at aged Jeeps—now disposed of and on sale at the post office. They were pale and dirty. Four-speed manual transmission. They sold for five hundred bucks and were missing a side door or window. Dad thought that would be a bargain and a car I could drive. It didn't seem appealing to me at the time, but then decades later during a morning at the barbershop, a woman with the mail appeared. Her vehicle was parked right out front.

As she left and drove away, one of the barbers said, 'I'd like to own one of those one day.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. Maybe because they're different.'

Different or merely lazy we were—father and son—more inclined to walk about and observe the world than stick our noses in the grindstone of life. This weekend, though, I attended to household chores while pushing ahead at various day-job tasks I'm obliged to complete. The ongoing struggle to survive, to not die of cancer, and so on. I accomplished very little; nevertheless, Monday morning—a school day no less—I rose with confidence and a single sentence concerning my father, deceased since four days after 9/11, that I wanted to add to one of two short works in progress—writing we labor over, rarely so

easily dashed off as a status or update—but, alas, in the process of gaining momentum between washing dishes and preparing coffee, I lost the thought. For now, like Dad, it's gone. A stray memory that seemed critical to add to this writing when morning was little more than a dream.

*

Coda: Late at night, as I was preparing these memories and finalising my edits, I wondered how I chose my topics, and why I wrote the way I did. I was lost in thought about how Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe was 55 at the start of The Lay of the Land and John Updike's 'Rabbit' Angstrom was 55 when Rabbit at Rest opens in the Orlando airport. They were both my-age-and-a-year. American life expectancy is sinking fast. Interrupting my reverie, an old family friend hit me up by online DM to get my permission. His communiqué concerned marijuana from 1973. Nixon weed; Vietnam green. It had been my father's batch from the mountains. My friend's dad, my dad's friend, had preserved seeds and was growing in 2024. He wanted to use Joe and a last initial, but Pocono Joe sounded better to me. My father has been dead for twenty-three years. It made me feel good that an old man in California remembered him fondly after all these years. This was a truth of his life; this was a truth of my life, too. His last nineteen years in AA, but memories of his Sixties had remained.

EACH ONE TO FASTEN SOMETHING TOGETHER

Ella Kurz

- 1. On the train, you leave your seat early, bag high, ready to leap over the darkness inbetween the lowest train step and the hard station lip.
- 2. He'll be there. He'll take your bags, drive you the half hour more through the night.
- 3. She'll have soup ready, baked crêpes in the oven and a new book on your side of the bed.
- 4. In the morning, the house will hum the way it always does. You are allowed to call him in for the morning tea, even though your voice was always little and he is already deaf.
- 5. Later, the same café. Cinnamon toast for you, milky coffee in a glass for her.
- 6. And then the fabric store. You pick buttons for the dress she's sewing. They rest in clear tubes, each marked by their own offering; a plastic marigold, a pocked-brass oval, a bright fleck of paua shell. Rows and rows of buttons. Each one waiting to be sewn on a piece of cloth, to fasten one piece to another.

NOVEMBER

Wes Lee

It is coming up to the month when she fell asleep in the afternoon and did not wake. She was reading a book. And my father said her face looked peaceful, which I saw as being reported from an unreliable source.

ii. Real Estate

Some of them look like forensic photos. As if someone has died there ... empty rooms, you can almost imagine the position of the body curled in its foetal shape. You know I think about that at night. I am curving like the earth back to the beginning.

iii. Radical Lives

The middle-aged woman who comes through the cafe each morning to use the bathroom. Wearing a belted raincoat. Keeping it together. Silent. Weaving through the tables. I have seen her sorting through rubbish tins. If I had not seen this and the morning ablutions, I would think she was like everyone else.

iv. The Swimming Pool Within Me

I long to go there. To stay with the image for a long time. It is a mirage, you say. The fear in my heart as you say it. You were always the optimistic one. You lifted me when doom would tumble from my mouth. And now you are saying. And now you say this.

AURORA MECHANICA

Hugh Leitwell

There are already more than six-thousand satellites orbiting Earth. Half are out of commission. They were sent up there with a *no returns* policy, to work until they can't, and then simply languish in obsolescence. At least when an astronaut shits, they gather it—toilet paper and all—and fire it back into our atmosphere to burn up. I wonder what might happen if, one day, their aim is off and the shit shoots right through the hole in our ozone. Some poor unsuspecting day-walker will have clambered for hours to the summit of a mountain—somewhere in Tasmania, maybe. Man, what a view! He'll think as he throws his arms wide, tilting his head up to the sky. His eyes will close for a brief second, overwhelmed by the expanse that lays before him and, in that very moment, down it will come.

Mr Pierce told our eighth-grade science class that there's no new matter, that every chemical reaction only rearranges the exposed atoms. He held a woodchip to the open flame of a Bunsen burner. Our class watched it burn to his fingertips until it was just ash, soot and smoke. I'd like to ask an astronaut what they think is left floating above our heads right now: faecal-soot, frozen bacteria and a bunch of decommissioned satellites unable to escape our gravitational pull?

Maybe I won't bring that up. The timing's not right and you'll think I'm juvenile.

You've been shorter with me since the agent called. Ironic, because you're so much taller than me. I spend my days looking up past the crescent shape of your nostrils and my nights with my nose buried between your shoulder blades.

So, I'll sit here quietly. I'll stir the remaining ice around my glass with my metal straw, diluting the orange juice and cheap bubbly to

get that very last, flat mouthful. I'll watch you read the newspaper, absentmindedly moving your fork to my plate. This gesture as much a part of our routine as coming to the same café at the same time every Sunday. I'm just not sure whether your appetite has increased over the years or whether I've learned to leave you something to finish.

*

You were practically vibrating as we left the open house on Wednesday. I guess I was too. You reached for my hand and told me, 'This is it. This is where we're going to grow old together.'

'I think you might be right.'

I was so glad when you laughed and agreed that the street trees looked like giant heads of broccoli. A channel had been carved through their crowns to accommodate the overhead powerlines. Some of the trees adapted, their branches reaching back to embrace the lines in a tunnel of foliage. Others grew further apart.

You spied him first, the man across the street. He sat on a weathered, green plastic chair, tugging at the couch grass and dandelions that grew where his fence met the sidewalk. The sculpted, white rose bushes behind his shoulder were curated precisely in the foreground of a central fig. Heavy with green fruit, the tree was bundled in off-white netting. Even the nature strip was as it should be—just so. I decided I would like this man when I noticed scars of coloured twine woven into the loose mesh, where he must have mended a tear from an earlier harvest.

He leaned forward on his chair and used his arms to press himself off the seat. You dropped my hand, and we slowed.

Just beyond his bare toes, a stray piece of discarded plastic shuffled, catching and bouncing the sunlight back at his shins. He bent down, snatched it up, crossed the concrete driveway that separated the neighbouring stretch of nature strip—not nearly as well maintained. Here he stopped and laid the rubbish down again.

'Someone else's problem, I guess,' you whispered.

*

The house wasn't that great on reflection. One half of a cinder block duplex at the end of the street, built economically in the nineties. It did its best to blend in with its neighbours, mimicking the peaked rooflines of the workers' cottages and Californian bungalows. But it was stunted like an awkward adolescent. The arse-end of an air-conditioning unit hung out of the front window. The corrugated iron roof blushed rust in patches and dribbled stains from its edges. You found it endearing and praised its thermal integrity.

The suburb wasn't that nice. It was further out than we'd planned, filled with young families and front yards littered with enclosed trampolines and rope swings. We knew we would be compromising centrality for affordable housing prices and a short drive to the beach. I wondered how long we had before the shoreline would come knocking.

Caught in the tide of the same faces we'd seen at all the other open houses, we drifted through the two bedrooms and open-plan kitchendining. You eyed the carpet and the furnishings with indifference, as if to set loose an infection of distaste among our fellow hopefuls. Then you whispered, 'If we save hard, we could rip up the carpet. Polish the concrete. Make this our own little bunker.'

I was in on the act now. With my chin aloft, I ran my finger over the laminate kitchen countertop.

'Scorch marks,' I announced, catching the rising corner of your smile. I wanted to run my tongue over those turned lips.

You stepped behind me and cooed in my ear, 'Black Caviar; Oboe D'Amore; Ferry; Lambs Ear Quarter.' Your hand wafted imagined swatches over the sand-beige walls, and accent tones over the built-in joinery. My neck bristled as you deliberately carved out every last syllable.

I called and made our offer the next day. The agent said she would

take it to the owners but that it was early days and interest had been better than she'd expected. She called back two days later to ask if we could go higher.

'How could we have ever raised a family with only one bathroom?' you soothed. But I had already begun retreating inside myself. I sat on the couch, watching the walls of our one-bedroom apartment close in, millimetre by millimetre. In the background, the AM radio droned on.

*

The line to the club stretched along the block.

'They're children,' I chided as we took our place at the end of the queue.

'Shh, the children will hear you. Please try to have fun; we need this.'

You were right. Sometime in the last decade we became serious—we swapped our tight jeans for elasticated waistbands and lost track of our party friends.

Ahead of us were tight torsos in tank tops. One boy wore light blue jeans that hung low on his hips. As he stood smoking a cigarette, he adjusted the white waistband of his jockstrap, creating a fabric window to the soft fuzz that spread across his lower back. He took a deep drag and flicked the remaining butt at a garbage bin by the curb. It missed the thin opening and bounced pathetic sparks on the concrete. I watched the paper continue to burn and thought about how long it had been since it last rained. The music grew louder as we shuffled slowly ahead. By the time we were close enough, the cigarette had burnt itself out. And still, I stepped my foot out and ground it into the sidewalk, just to be sure.

Finally, we were inside. The beat reverberated through my entire body, begging my heart rate to follow. You beelined past the barflies to a conspicuous woman in a tricolour synthetic tracksuit and came back grinning with a cap between your teeth.

I placed the other—already tacky from the sweat of your palm—under my tongue and waited for the acrid taste to spill from the dissolving gelatine. I rinsed my mouth clean with a vodka, lime and soda and checked my phone for the time: 11:27 pm.

We danced within a cluster of glistening, sweaty backs, chests and shoulders. Closing my eyes, I thought about how our mid-century sideboard would have looked in the hallway and how you said the second bedroom would make a pastel-perfect kids' room. In the moment, I agreed. But, as I scanned my eyes over the disco lights and inhaled the artificial fog, I felt hot and short of breath.

'I'm coming up. Do you feel it?' you yelled at me.

I smiled to reassure you. 'I'll be right back. Just need to gather myself.'

You closed your eyes and went back to slowly rolling your shoulders one at a time. I navigated through the dancefloor, apologising every time I was bumped by a rogue hip and sent ricocheting through the belt of bodies.

I found a seat on a bench in the corner of the smokers' area. Next to me was a pot plant, filled with cigarette butts and a near-stripped fake palm. The metal wire that held its shape tore through the closest plastic leaf. It felt aggressive, so I bent it back on itself.

'Are you having a good night?' One of the twenty-somethings from the line sat down beside me, riffling through a pouch of tobacco for a filter.

'Yeah. I just needed a minute, you know?'

'Totally.' He pulsed his chest softly forward and back to the muffled thuds.

'What are you thinking about?' he tried again, licked the paper and rolled it into a perfect cylinder.

'I heard on the radio today that cockatoos and lorikeets are in a turf war over nesting hollows.'

'Fuck. That's shit, man.'

'Yeah, I guess we're not the only ones in a housing crisis.'

'I guess not. You here with anyone?'

He leant forward and looked deep into my eyes. His irises were eclipsed by inky black pupils.

'He's in there somewhere.'

'Are you open?'

'Nah, sorry.'

'Shame. Your energy is heavy, man. I would have liked to make it a little lighter.'

The boy leant his back against the wall, took a deep inhale and blew it up to the fan that spun above us.

'Can I ask you something?'

He closed his eyes, smiled and nodded.

'Do you ever think about who you'll leave all of this to?'

'I hope to have nothing to leave behind.'

'I found you!' You sandwiched yourself between me and the group gathered around my twenty-something companion. They barely noticed and continued bombarding one another with professions of eternal love.

'I'd like to go home now.'

'Say no more,' you purred.

*

I'm not sure I remember it well. But after you'd fallen asleep, I found myself watching a woman who was standing out on our balcony. She was so at ease, I almost felt as if I was a trespasser in her apartment. She wore a dressing gown and held a tea towel to her mouth. I didn't recognise her, nor the plastic chair set cramped in between the glass sliding door and the railing.

The landscape was all wrong. Our building and the neighbouring towers stepped up a mountainside, as if the city had dragged itself into the high country to keep its feet dry. The dusk sky was hazy with smoke. I could just make out the sea over a mosaic of slate and terracotta roof tiles, corrugated iron and solar panels.

'Are you all finished?'

You're smiling at me now. The newspaper is neatly folded. You make off towards the counter to spend a fraction of our would-be house deposit to pay our bill. In the doorway is a line of couples leaning against the brick exterior. Some are absorbed in conversation. Others stare blankly at our emptying table, impatient to take our place.

Even through the closed door I could hear her perfectly. She kept chanting, 'Thank God. Thank you. Thank you, God,' over and over again. We both watched the wind lead a bushfire away from the mountains and over another distant patchwork suburb. Someone else's problem. I felt for the weight of you on the bed beside me and found nothing. I thought of you somewhere in the embers and ran for the apartment door. It swung open. I stopped at the threshold. Where I expected the hallway, I found the narrow entrance to the house that was almost ours. I knew it was the same, though the walls were stripped back to patinaed concrete.

A girl sat at a loom where the kitchen should have been. She passed a shuttle of threaded plastic through the spread warps, beat it back against the others, and passed the shuttle back through again. On and on she repeated the same process. The fabric pooled in iridescent folds over her knees and onto damp carpet. I gathered what I could from her feet and brushed its fibres against my face. It was soft like fleece. She raised her hands to trace my receding hairline. The colour of her eyes, the crescent shape of her nostrils; they could have been yours.

I'm not sure where or how long I searched, but I found you. You told me you wanted to take me away from the city, so we travelled to the shoreline. There was no sand, just a slab of concrete that rose and fell with the tide along great steel pylons. The ocean had swallowed the streets below and hid its spoils under styrofoam surf.

The night's sky was sick with light pollution. And yet, we stopped and waited for the first inevitable collision of ancient satellites. Their magnetic rapture bloomed like figs filmed in time-lapse, green to pink, bruised purple, occasionally infected by pockets of cloud cover that glowed with the heat we fled. Flashes of fluorescent white sped past overhead—chunks of metal and plastic attempting re-entry. We were both silent. You stood absorbed in the moment. I stared at you, struck by how beautiful you looked in your woven elastic clothing; how the coloured spray reflected in your wet eyes.

WITCH ASH

Samara Lo

Aria knelt on the glass floor and dug the sharp bone into the smooth surface. Her hands shook as she scratched in the first point of a pentagram, careful not to lift the ivory tool. For the magic to work, she needed a perfect star, drawn with a continuous line.

Thump. Someone banged against the window across from her. She heard the soft *chink* and her stomach leapt before she took in the families gathered on the other side. They peered back at her, some stuffing themselves with cotton candy, while others munched on popcorn.

A boy in a backwards cap and striped jersey struck the glass again and yelled, 'Do something!'

Aria dropped her gaze and breathed the stale air. Concentrate.

Another thump. Another crinkling sound. This time ringing a little louder inside her pen.

'Hey, did you hear me? Do something already!'

She gritted her teeth and counted slowly in her head.

One. Two. Three was a good number. Three was a strong bind. Three was the members in her coven—

Pain lanced through her squeezing chest. Three was gone. She could no longer hear the twin hearts of her sisters beating with her own. All she knew were their tears that haunted her dreams, their screams that lived in her nightmares and, in her waking moments, their silence.

'Witches are boring,' a teenager in the back muttered.

'Bet she can't even do magic.'

Aria clenched the bone tighter. They wanted a show. She would give them one. An incantation to sever their heads. Another to bleed their hearts or her favourite: summon hellfire and turn the world to smoke and ash.

'Back in the day, witches were hunted for their magic.' The crowd leaned in, drawn by Nathan's baritone voice and charming smile. 'It was discovered that the ash left from cremating a witch contained great power that could be turned to spheres of glass. These spheres could be used by a non-witch to cast a spell or even create an enclosure, such as the one here, to nullify another witch's powers.' He rapped on the window.

Aria flinched. Four. Five. Five were the points of a pentagram. Five were the years in her prison.

'However, as with all things in high demand, witches became endangered. Cauldron is their sanctuary now.' He gestured at the theme park around them. Animal exhibits with mock trees and rocks gave the impression of a natural habitat, but Aria could see the carousels between her exhibit and the elephant safari. She could hear the roaring rollercoasters and the comforting laughter from the ghost house.

'What's she drawing?' asked an old woman in sweatpants. A few people pressed against the glass. *Crinkle*. *Crinkle*.

Aria held her breath. Drawing. Counting.

'Ah yes, a pentagram. You can see she's covered almost the entire floor and back walls with them. They're used to amplify a witch's powers or even to cast complex incantations.' Nathan's voice rumbled through the glass. Aria didn't need to look at him to know he was pushing his spectacles up his nose. She'd watched him do it so many times. Traced the frown lines across his brow. Asked him where he'd gotten the scar above his lips.

'Aria here was an advanced magic user. She could conjure an entire inferno that could raze a city. It took quite an effort to contain her.'

'Shouldn't you stop her from drawing those then?'

'We're perfectly safe behind this glass. Her exhibit is designed to nullify her magic.'

'She doesn't look dangerous,' a little girl mumbled between licks of a giant lollipop.

Nathan chuckled. 'Neither does a lion until you stick your hand in its cage. But Aria understands we're doing this for her own good. Don't you, Aria?'

She finally met his gaze. Bubbling heat raged in her belly. They were his eyes that she'd trusted in. His eyes that had reflected the flicker of flames as her sisters burned at the stake. There was warmth in his gaze still, as though he'd never lost a night of sleep over what he'd done.

'Witches are boring. I wanna see the monkeys,' a little boy whined. *Thud.* The boy with the cap kicked the glass. 'She's still not doing anything.'

Crinkle. Crackle. The sound grew louder, but the crowd was too distracted by the flashing lights and carnival fare to notice the crack forming in the bottom of the glass.

But Aria hadn't missed it. She'd noticed the first tiny chip months ago when a girl had rapped her knuckles against the glass and asked, 'Were you always that ugly?'

The glass had reverberated with a new sound then. A soft *tink*. A whisper of a promise.

Aria had smiled at the girl and whispered, 'You haven't seen ugly yet.'

Aria closed the pentagram and sat back, staring at the boy. He wrinkled his nose and jabbed the glass with a finger.

Aria hurled the bone at the glass. *Thunk*!

The boy jumped back, yelping loud enough to draw another crowd. Nathan shook his head. 'Now, Aria, that's no way to behave before our—'

Crinkle. Crack. Crack! The glass shuddered and webs spread across the surface. Inch by freeing inch. Nathan's eyes widened. The crowd backed away. Then with a crash the wall shattered.

Aria stood and the pentagrams around her burst into flames. Screams filled the air as everyone turned and fled. Everyone except Nathan and her little, impatient saviour.

'Aria, let's stay calm.' Nathan raised his hands. They shook. Colour leached from his cheeks.

Aria's gaze slid from him to the little boy with the backwards cap. She winked.

'Boy, do I have a show for you.'

TRANSMETTRE

Chrisanne Lombard

From that first soft syllable your romantic tongue made me stammer.

Your complicated speech collects consonants and vowels and strings them around itself – glittery pebbles – unable to let go of any of them

whisper sweet nothing letters into me

Along our way I've picked up a gooey glottal stop here and a difficult diphthong there. I stumble around feeling for familiar shapes.

let me take your trinkets make them mine

So far, I can't converse

but I can confuse native speakers with my confident cacophonie
I can impersonate your grand-maman
I can say:

not in the mouth!

touch not!

Symbiosis has reformed my voice

- without you I don't make any sense we've merged at the core.

I cannot say croissant in English anymore.

THE BREAK

Rowan MacDonald

We hitched a ride; a farmer took us to the end of the dirt road. We trekked the rest, handwritten napkin all that guided us. We heard it first, the break. It soon emerged through dense jungle: violent swell, white sand.

'Is that a severed leg?' I asked. A local approached us, bent down, examined it.

'Old Chompers!' He beamed.

That's how we learned of the resident shark.

*

Nadia knew a guy who told her about this place during her stint working the slopes in Whistler. She always knew a guy. Thought we had lost her to those lovable Canucks and their snowboarding, but she eventually found sense, came back. She told us about it during her first night home.

'Nobody knows about it,' she said.

'Well, old mate in the bar in Whistler did,' I replied.

She described it as the ultimate break, surfed by only a handful of lucky renegades; those foolhardy souls mad enough to think such a place existed, and those determined enough to find it.

'I don't know,' sighed Charlie. 'Sounds rather mythical.'

If anyone should've believed in this place, it was him. Space-cadet Charlie. That's what they called him, due to his love of weed and his dislike of sleeping anywhere that possessed a physical roof. 'Makes me feel trapped, man,' he said. 'I prefer the stars.'

So, it took convincing, but eventually we came around. I'd just been sacked from my job at Franco's—not for working most nights drunk but, ironically, for being hungover, missing a lunch shift. I needed a change of scenery, a reset.

It was ramshackle and had seen better days. Cheap rent, though. Closest we could find to the break.

'Looks like it should be knocked down,' I said. Charlie clutched his tent and smiled.

'It will be fine,' said Nadia. 'Look at the view.'

She was right. Rundown cabin with a beautiful outlook beat a nice cabin and ugly view any day. Palms hung across the small wooden structure, coastal shrubs either side, our water source a rusting pump out back. The front yard was filled with pristine white sand that flowed down onto the beach. Wooden chimes jangled over old decking.

'This is living.' I smiled.

Charlie erected his tent, began waxing his board, lost in his own world. Distant roar of the breakers mixed with cicadas and chimes.

A barefoot man in shorts was carrying a bucket, walking our direction. 'Big storm coming,' he said.

I gazed up at bright sunshine, cloudless sky, shrugged my shoulders. Never believed him.

*

Mother Nature was angry we had discovered her patch of paradise. We never stood a chance. Water cascaded through the corrugated iron roof, leaks everywhere. Sound of a locomotive barrelling towards us meant we had to yell to be heard.

'This is fucked!' screamed Nadia. We huddled together in a corner of the small building, including Charlie, who retreated inside. We stared at what was left of the ceiling: the roof flapping violently in the gale, making unnatural sounds.

'Should we run for it?' I yelled.

'Where the hell to?' replied Nadia.

Storm surge brought the ocean to the entrance of our cabin, everything soaked. Lightning cracked nearby.

'Inland, away from the coast!' I suggested.

'It's all jungle, man!' yelled Charlie.

We grabbed our packs and boards, forced ourselves through rain and lashing wind, structure crumbling as we fled.

The jungle grew thicker as we escaped the violence flooding the shore. Our ankles cut to shreds by invisible debris, Nadia with shrubbery attached to her blonde, windswept hair. Locals appeared in the distance, chickens in cages aboard a dinghy, manic flapping. Remains of a wooden fence flowed past in a rush of water. Falling trees, yelling voices: nightmare in paradise.

*

Charlie had the fattest thumbs this side of the Pacific. Took him a while to master the hammer. Never did a hard day's work in his life but was now helping reconstruct a village. They sheltered us when they had nothing, fed us when food was scarce. The least we could do was help them sort through this mess. We had practice sorting through the mess of our own lives.

A guy called Kai supplied Charlie with local ganja for his part in rebuilding. 'Fine herb that,' said Charlie, ever the connoisseur.

It was Kai's dinghy we saw loaded with chickens the night of the storm. He promised to take us out once we finished repairs. It would take weeks for the waters to return to their original beauty; sand and debris had brought a murky hue. It reminded us of the river back home after the local paper mill dumped chemicals into it. Charlie later received a fine via the magistrate for spray painting obscenities across the white BMW that belonged to the mill's President. The community rallied around Charlie, held fundraisers, paid the fine on his behalf. It was that community spirit we were witnessing again, on another scale, halfway around the world.

We swam each morning, embraced new waters, felt an ocean welcoming us as it glided over our skin. Helped local fishermen pull nets

in the afternoon, then sang songs in languages we didn't understand around campfires that illuminated faces of once strangers, now friends.

We wore the landscape around us; salt and sand embedded in our skin, the taste of ocean smeared on our lips. Never thought of sharks, figured there was enough water for all of us.

*

Niuhi—that's what locals called him when talking among themselves; the times foreign words flowed into conversation. Kai cranked the outboard motor of his silver dinghy, its smoke carried away by sea breeze.

'Why Old Chompers?' asked Nadia, straining to be heard above the noise.

'Tourists,' said Kai, smiling.

Nadia raised eyebrows. 'Tourists?' she asked. 'Place is hidden. We haven't seen anyone besides locals.'

'Maybe they don't like Niuhi.' Kai shrugged. 'Or maybe Niuhi doesn't like them.'

We looked at each other. 'Don't worry about men in grey suits,' said Charlie.

We soon heard the break forming over distant reef. The dinghy rose with waves as we left the river mouth and entered open water.

'Makani,' explained Kai, pointing to the break.

The difference in conditions was immediate. The village was in the comparative shelter of the bay compared to out here.

Charlie grabbed his board, jumped over the side. Nadia and I followed.

'I'll be back,' said Kai. 'Going to check nets.'

The waves roared towards us like some angry monster daring us to take it on, to rise to the challenge. We paddled until we reached an area safely outside the impact zone. Sat up, breathed in the view. Salty vapour lingered in the air, forming its own weather system.

It wasn't the biggest break, yet its mystical qualities left us mesmerised. The perfect formations, the rolling sets. A few wrong moves and it would spit us out over the reef, shredding us to pieces. We needed to finally experience our reason for being here. We could feel the electrifying buzz flowing up our legs, kickstarting adrenaline through our veins; the high we craved and forever chased.

Nadia had dibs. She brought us to this place, finished on the podium in surf comps. She was already paddling into a rolling blue wall beside us. We watched in awe; the effortless way she popped up, goofy stance holding her in place. The way she became part of the wave, disappeared into the barrel then out over the crest; triumphant.

Charlie kicked out, his wetsuit missing half the right leg. We never knew what happened to it. He once mentioned a wombat, then something about an encounter with macaques in Bali. I gazed across at him, thoughts drifting to the severed leg on the beach and whoever it belonged to.

Nadia smiled, gave a thumbs up, in her element. Sunlight flickered through the heaving mass of liquid as it curled over in front of us. In that moment, a weird sensation flowed through me. The feeling of another being having joined us.

My legs dangled either side of the board and, for a second, I sensed movement somewhere below. I turned and saw the shadow: dark and fast.

Nadia yelled my direction, puzzled expression. Wind pummelled my ears. I couldn't hear. The shadow came again, circling. She saw the look on my face. Desperation. My arms and legs cut through water, propelling me towards the reef and shallows. The creature grew larger, glimmer of dorsal. Nothing.

Heart thumped and lungs burned. I hoped to grab a smaller wave, anything to take me further away. I looked for Nadia, could no longer see her, only the shadow. Sense of freedom held ransom by something bigger than all of us.

Sound of the distant outboard moved closer. I wanted to dive under; search for whatever lay beneath, to face it head on. But I also wanted to live, to see another day, and surf with my friends.

'Kai!' I yelled.

My body skimmed the ocean, waves pulling me forward. The hit. Car slammed me from the side, knocking me from my board, tumbling through foam, sandpaper ripping my thigh. Water rushing ears, somersaulting, churning wash, awaiting demise.

I surfaced metres from my board; motor revving full capacity, Kai's arm outstretched. I fell into the dinghy, clutched my bloody leg, amazed the wound was shallow. Gulls squawked and circled in the blue sky above. Gratitude seared through my body; relieved I hadn't become berley, astonished I was intact. Mother Nature had again reminded us we were guests in her playground.

'I see you met Niuhi.' Kai smiled.

I wretched heavily, coughed up sea water. 'Something like that,' I gasped.

'He was checking you out,' he explained. 'Seeing if you were worthy.' 'Yeah?' I asked. 'What did he decide?'

'I think you will be fine next time,' he said, grinning. 'You're one of us now.'

A SATURDAY EXCURSION IN NOVEMBER

Blair Martin

1. The soothing heat my ungloved palm absorbed when it rested in the hollow of your back's curve,

2. last month's relic: the thin-boned skeleton's hands gripping the antique tractor's wheel,

3. the quiet dignity of the elderly man's stick-straight figure, clad in a brown coat, as he pushed a brimming orange cart down the sidewalk,

4. our shared laughter at the abundance of the pumpkin-honey smear you applied, concentrating in religious reverence, to your weekly bagel,

5. the thirty seconds that elapsed between setting down the coffee shop's free whipped cream in front of our dog and the last lick it took him to devour it,

6. the bag of disturbed grapes I found smashed behind the trash can at the riverside path, none left round, none left whole,

7. the shop of saltwater fish you wished to liberate, separated as they were from their natural habitat by a thousand miles of prairie,

8. the casual innocence of our morning bike ride, basking in a brief respite from the chill the day before your accident, and

9. the faint beats of jazz from the lounge's propped-open service door, silhouetting the silly smile you gave me when I, clumsy with love, knocked over your steaming cappuccino.

Kate Maxwell

The body hit the bitumen in a noiseless, loose-limbed thud. Third from the lights—encased by cars and a scarlet glow demanding inaction—my eyes processed the possible death ahead. It took a moment longer before my mouth released a gasp of shock. All I could see was a set of denimclad legs spread flat on the road ahead. Boots were still and unmoving: one pointing away from the other as if they'd had a disagreement.

I stretched my neck and squeezed against the window glass. Still, only the legs were visible. Then, after a car door up ahead was opened, all that remained visible was the boots. Thick, black boots. Other figures had moved from the closer cars. Much shuffling and scurry, but I couldn't make out faces or what they were actually doing.

Nestled in a funnel of sunshine and talkback radio, the mindless chatter bounced about my paused journey.

'You telling me you've never stood anyone up? Never faked an emergency to get out of a lousy date?'

'Oh, maybe a fake text from my sister to tell me Aunty Betty was in hospital.'

'Ahh, see! You're a bloody player. Knew it!'

'Come on, that's ok. A little white lie to save someone's feelings ...'

And so, it went on. Laughing. Squealing. Mock horror. The rest of the staged battle of the sexes muffled into the background of an approaching siren.

The boots had still not moved but the lights had turned green. Somebody honked ahead of me. Across the double highway lanes, at least two cars, one motorbike, and one body that had briefly known the wonder of flight and now lay motionless on the road, were blocking the way. Obviously, we weren't moving yet.

'I pretended to be my brother once on a hookup. We're almost like twins, you know: dark and brooding types.'

'Yeah, right.' A derisive snort.

'He had to work the last minute so I said I'd stand in. She was a bit of a fugly so he didn't miss much.'

'Charming! Serves you right. Went home lonely, anyway.'

'Who says I went home alone? A bit of fugly doesn't faze me.'

A red and white van, flashing lights like a disco strobe, moved into the middle of the intersection. More honks from behind now. Like that would speed the inconvenience of someone's life-altering moment or ending. I switched off the ignition, completely incurious to the culmination of Bazza and Kylie's banter. Touched my hand to my neck. Pulse, warm and humming.

The unmoving boots ahead were now obscured by the crouching forms of two paramedics.

I'll be late for work, my pragmatic voice stated. He may never arrive, my heart said.

Bright blue morning sky above. Warm sunlight through the window. A few gulls soaring overhead. Fellow drivers—hands tapping steering wheels, necks pressed into headrests or hunched over and texting. Capsuled in our little metal worlds, waiting.

Waiting for the end.

PANIC AT THE GENDER

Hannah McCann

Cut down the bronze of childhood idols / let red paint drip down statuary feet / quit the search for flattering word smocks / it's all dysphoria there is no little black dress. I truthfully joke over beer that we should both come out, be received like gender debutantes. Butler is still imagining impossible coalitions, we ought to listen. But god how I ruminate on intentions. Morrissey is a white supremacist. As a child did you learn the road to heaven is paved on stolen land, never ceded? What do you do when the words that work were forged in a fire that won't stop smoking?

H2O: RAIN, OCEAN, TEARS, ICE

Jane Messer

To be read individually, or as a set

Old like rain

It's always warm in Urunga, up north of Sydney just forty minutes by air. My father is not travelling much on his own anymore, so I fly with him to visit family there. Dad's nephew is at the handkerchief airport to meet us. I watch them as we walk to my cousin's faded, 80s Mercedes. He's telling us about the rivers, his house, the shed where he and his wife sell their artworks. Both men are slightly tipped forward, pointing down towards the earth that soon enough they shall meet. Their ages total 172 years. They're older than the town itself.

Before it became a timber town, it was Gumbaynggirr land. The Gumbaynggir lived on the two rivers, fishing, trapping, harvesting native honey, until the rosewood and cedar loggers and settlers came. Descendents live there again, have returned after being removed, circling back to country.

That afternoon, my father and I walk to the beach from the house we're renting. We take small, slow steps. I notice each footfall. We walk so slowly it could be a meditation. We talk about his nephew, and how it might rain later. Above us, our sky is a bright and cloudless blue, but over there, east, there are darker clouds.

We reach the last street, then the caravan park entrance, then do the short walk over the grass, and we're there. On the white sand.

Mangroves curl around the bay's edge. The water is flat and smooth and welcoming. A grey striated heron flies low across it. I swim to the pontoon, climb up. The rain soon comes, just as we thought it would, then thunder, lightning. I see my father, buoyant, swimming unhurriedly back to the sand. A kind of breaststroke. The rain is fine but fast, and sunlight falls brightly upon him through the clouds. The droplets fall and bounce on his gleaming head. I turn my face upwards and feel the same many sweet, tiny stings of rain that fall upon this water, upon us and the earth. I climb back down the pontoon, launch myself back into the warm sea, into the thousands of pinprick splash points of rain. When larger droplets hit the surface, an infinitesimally small circle of water rises and surrounds each fall.

My father's chin is low and close to the water's surface. He's tiring. I quicken, swim to him, help him stand and leave the water. Rainwater and sea run off him as he stands, down his thin loose skin, the weight of the sea almost pulling him back in. He's so old, like rain.

Around the world, you're on your own

You're sitting in an airport for hours, your plane delayed. Trolling the shops where you buy nothing, the toilets where you pee almost nothing, but cry copiously. Sitting back in a different chair again, you stare at the departures board with its list of places and times. Clicking, shuffling, repeating.

You've known for half a day now. Your now ex-lover got a credit for their flights, they said, when they phoned late to tell you. Blinking through the tears, you believe this is the end, though there are no sirens, no one running. No one but you seems worried that the destination board has shuffled all flights, destinations and times to Cancelled. You're so scared you can't move except to check your phone repeatedly. There are no messages for you. Not from the airline explaining the cancellation. Nothing from your lover to explain their cancellation of you.

Then the departures board is back, all flights are on time.

The world was not bombed. The malfunction is over. But you still feel dunced, and your heart has been beating so hard for so many hours it might just stop. It's your lover who is gone, not dead, though you're dead to them. The lover that is not with you. You could hear their relief as they pretended remorse, knowing that in just a few hours you'll be gone. You consider giving up and going home. You're prepared to forfeit your flights. All that money. All your self-respect. You get up, take another walk past the same stores.

A sales rep yawns at you. There will be others like you.

The layover ends, and you board. You realise you're walking up an aisle, alone. Then shed a wan smile; the joy of a pun. You booked a window seat, and all alone as the plane lifts, you turn your wet face to the clouds.

The night game

Streetlamps are flickering on and the air has snapped cold. They're walking in twos and threes, a couple at the back in a hurried shuffle, the few others more quickly, stopping and waiting for their slower friends to catch up. 'Oh, keep us from falling,' sings one. 'Keep us from falling, keep us!' the others chorus, with frosty breaths. The hair of one of the women hangs down her back as stiff as a sword. Then there's that sudden drop, like a punch in the throat, which they call the deathly cold. They gasp, and their voices halt.

Petri strides back towards Marta. With an inclination of her head, she takes Argent back with her. Together, they get old Marta up into a piggyback. 'You don't have to,' Marta whispers, but Argent just hoists her higher. Curled over Argent's shoulders, Marta's white, stiffened hands look like claws. Petri crouches down for Gael, another oldie. She feels him strain to spread his knees.

The lamps are still flickering, so that's a good sign. They've lost a lot of points for piggybacking. With Gael on her back, she jogs to catch up with the others.

It is a cruel game they are made to play nightly, getting home before the oxygen is turned down. The group lurch forward silently in a tight pack, the dribble of tar, the finish line, now visible. The cold snaps electric around them. The air is brittle. Thin plates of ice are forming on the path. These last metres are precarious. The streetlights shine upon the fallen, those who don't make it in time. Petri and Argent do not know who started the game or when, none of them know, but they are determined to hold each other until they drop.

NIGHT DRIVE ALONG THE BAY

Michael Mintrom

Winter brings these cold, clear, evenings when things we'd otherwise do in daylight we do in darkness. A night drive.

In this city of immigrants, of amputees, towers in the CBD toss light on the bay. I see rows of explosions, twisting.

Of ourselves, coming here, we lost so much – friends, family, familiar stuff of weeks, of weekends. Always weighing the losses.

Floating. I look at the bay and everything is floating. How do we stay afloat, so far from home? Now I'm thinking of currencies and banks –

how money travels, gets splashed about. Some people make money by floating. My ophthalmologist says my eyes have floaters.

I see things that aren't there – black squiggly lines, clustered dots. All through life we see things that aren't there.

Night driving along the bay. No curfew. Wondering about what's here and not here. So far. Thankful the wars are so far away.

CHOPPING

Sam Morley

Wielding body blows, I like it when the limbs start lying about, like an abattoir floor – cream fresh, flesh pink. Under leaf shade, I get serious. Take off my shirt and take on a stack, slam my field holler and work songs into the sky. Splitter head after splitter head hinges into logs and divining red gum, I read lumber for rings and the quiet loops of O.

I learnt to hit on the grain, near the edge. Perfection is a game of angles in the unskinning of trees. But each swing won't cut the scent of spring and leaf after leaf pixels black across my arms. Meanwhile stove-sized blocks fly past a tessellated shin. I haven't cut a load like this since I was 16. When it was so cold inside the woodshed the hickory handle slipped

from my shiny hands into a mound of bark dirt. Winter always made me numb from the wrists down but I did it for the way I got to stand – proppy-tall, tumble-prone, shell-curved. I still love a fire, the way it makes logs stop being logs. I wish each blow I land now is a clean crack a one shot with the smell of ant spray and splinter shriek. That each hit shouts out *hit*.



Connections III, Watercolours, acrylics on fabriano paper, Size: 42cm by 59.4cm, 2022

TO SHOW THAT AN IDEA HAS A HISTORY IN ORDER TO RECLAIM IT, BY OWNING MIRANDA MELLIS' DEMYSTIFICATIONS SERIES

Tendai Rinos Mwanaka

#1

I am that one time when we kicked, with our bran new school shoes, that oddly shaped rock, all the way home from school. Mom looking at our broken, torn shoes with anger that could only commute with sticks, and us standing far away enough, ready to fly away.

#2

I am that Christmas day when we left the cattle in the bushes and went to the local shops to celebrate with others, only to fail to find our cattle by night's fall. They had wandered away. We were the cattle that slept at the cattle kraal learning to sentence our errant selves by staying away from her sticks. We picked up small stones and turned them into soup in our mouths like that old lady of Chivi Shona proverb.

#3

I am the chewed scents of Harare's early mornings as a night shift Fawcett security guard in the Kopje area of Harare, learning that night was created by an error of commission in accounting. It was just a few hours, and then it stayed for 8 more hours commissioned to act for mornings, which is night's duty.

#4

I am that 1990s Zimbabwe hustler into mining spots, into Botswana, into Mozambique, sleeping under the pounding rains, thinking the rains would stop and make a tune that I would hear again in my heart. Surely, one does not need a body in heaven, my skins still throb when I remember about the rains.

#5

I am that boy, fresh out of high school trusting nothing else but his pen, that his pen is everything, trusting in the pentametric round terrains of an Eversharp pen.

#6

After everything, after 4 years invoicing and selling cars, cars, cars, at Amtec Motors, until cars are all I thought I hear, I turned my face in the direction I still remembered was where the pen was, heading to the old beginning ...

RESISTANCE

Nathanael O'Reilly

I wake to blood on my pillow after surviving a school shooting

in a nightmare. Enduring a shooting in my dreamlife, I wake bereft

try to forget blood-spattered desks bereft of students, books, poetry, laughter, hope.

Students talk poetry, laugh, create hope in my classrooms, resist the violence

of American life. Resist the violence, create, experiment, explore, scatter

darkness. Share possibility, scatter secrets, resist the fascist boot in the face.

I resist the fascists' guns and boots, face the fear of blood on my pillow.

FLOWERS BLOOM IN ANTARCTICA

Thomas Page

Icebergs melt away in our clasped hands pouring lukewarm water along the stem pearlworts litter the coves in jaundiced flares begging just for a smidgen of sunlight a slice of ozone pie with creme de sel de mer washing, staining the boots over our feet Isn't it a lovely day to sun on an Antarctic beach watching the polar bears boogieboard from up North on what remains of the Arctic circle scooping up penguins like otter pops while we dry our wool socks on the rocks once covered in glaciers and snow but now, candy stores and souvenir shops selling broken beach chairs dead hermit crabs in tawdry shells and an assortment of tee shirts all professing I survived until the end of the Anthropocene and all that I got was this t-shirt

A SETTLING

Emily Palmer

I dangle my feet into the water. The waves lap against my skin, cool after the scorching heat of the day. If you saw me now, shoulders slumped, linen vest crumpled, you wouldn't believe I was the same person. The person who stood before you, just hours ago. Was it hours? I was straight-backed, then. A posture my mother would have been proud of, would have observed with self-satisfaction, *ladylike*. My flushed cheeks are not ladylike. The sweat that drips, drips, drips, leaving a line in the smooth alabaster mask of my foundation. My profession, too, not what she expected. Intellectualism is not what she wanted for me. *Sharp*, she calls me. *Cutting*. I am a blade, and I am discontent.

The breeze is hot and dry and bitter. It carries the soft snow of ash, fluttering against my lips. The water is grey. I think of you, the chattering students who had brought such enthusiasm, such energy, such life to my classroom. The buzz of it had been tight and insistent against my skin. The pressure of a pimple about to pop. Half pleasure, half pain. You all wanted so much of me. I had wanted to give it to you.

'Natalie.' His voice makes me turn. Makes me curl my feet away from the waves, brush at my ash painted thighs. He is tall and immovable behind me, and I shade my eyes to make out his expression. Unreadable. It had originally drawn me to him. The firm line of his brow, unbending. The downward tilt of his mouth, the stern dimple.

'Sam,' I respond, letting my lips form a smile.

He does not offer me a hand as I rise, instead tucking them into his pockets as I unroll my trouser cuffs and slip into the high-rise stilettos. I might look more like you remember now, except for the heavy mass of brown hair whipping around my shoulders. No sleek twist here. I straighten my vest with a single quick tug. He notes the movement

with the smallest flicker of his eyes; down and up. I control my flinch. His disapproval is the silent crack of a whip.

We met the usual way. The emptiness of my world drove me to seek a relationship, to find purpose or connection or whatever story we tell ourselves. His face had been framed by a little red box on the glass screen: a narrow, interesting, serious face. His profile lacked the braggadocio of others: no mention of sport or height or achievements. Importantly, no dead animals either. There were no qualifications for what *I* should be either; blonde or thin or funny or submissive. In fact, the lack of expectation intrigued me.

His name was boring, predictable, and I liked that too.

Of course, he did have expectations. Everyone does. His just weren't prefaced.

'Shall we?' I ask, because it is clear he is not going to suggest anything at all.

He leads the way back to the car and, instead of measuring the length of his assured stride, I look to the mountains behind, backlit with orange and black. They seem so far away. So distant from my little reality. But day by day, they draw closer. Tower over me, crowd my space. Do you feel the same way, I wonder, do you feel the steady encroachment?

I slip into the car, let the seat cradle my spine. The soft drone of the engine is a reassuring lullaby, at odds with the sick curl of exhaust smoke behind. But I don't look back. I glance at him instead, at the sharp curve of his profile, his assertive grip on the wheel. I remember the times he has held me like that. Fingers pressing into flesh. The pinch as he positions me: this way, that. Pulling me back into him, even as I long for the opposite. To jerk away from his warmth. To disintegrate into nothing.

He considers himself an alpha. Maybe something that could have been included in his profile. My mother likes him, to the extent of her narrow knowledge of him. An impression carefully constructed from stilted dinners and firm, respectful handshakes. My father thinks he is honourable, interesting. This is an opinion based on political conversation. Sam knows about the world, the economy, the leaders.

I hate that I once agreed with them. That maybe, somewhere, I still do.

*

The life I live has been consistently easy. Not in the 'I have never struggled with anything' sense, but in its complete lack of true, worldending, unmitigated disaster. I have cried, I have failed, I have fallen short of my heart's desire, but everything has inevitably turned out all right. It's given me a fatalistic and ultimately passive perception of my own success. My relationship with Sam has illustrated a flaw in this perception. So far, it has decidedly not worked out, but some part of me still assumes it will. My mother pretends to listen to my worries, commiserating about long-ago boyfriends in the gaps and silences of my ashamed confession of unhappiness, but ultimately pushes me to 'give it a go'.

Happiness isn't easy, Natalie, she admonishes like I am an unreasonable, naïve child. She uses cliches unsparingly. Relationships take work. Hard work. Compromise. It can't all be rainbows. Later, you can't be lonely if you're sitting here talking to your mother. This in an accusing tone, and I feel like my vocal cords have been cut. The yawning, soul-sucking void, of course, remains.

The last time I saw a rainbow was likely the last time I was truly happy. Could you see that, through my performance? Through the wide and welcoming smile, as I ushered you in? I certainly wasn't happy with you, sharing information a hairsbreadth from obsolete, considering the world today. When will you ever get to apply it?

It was years ago. Before Sam, before the fires, before you. The flush of colour against an overcast sky; the washed-out shimmer of hope. I sat in a park, still green and lush and water struck, the trees standing tall and unbent. Air pods were tucked securely into my ears as I reclined, staring up into the clouded sky as the latest pop song pulsed through

me. There was no purpose to drive me, no desperation, no relentlessly ticking clock counting down the minutes. I had just *existed*, and so had the rainbow.

I knew relationships weren't all rainbows and happiness and technicolour joy. That sometimes the sparkle dimmed, and you had to use elbow-grease and sacrifice to bring back even half the shine. That I couldn't just lie back in the grass, feeling the tickle of it at my nape, and wait for everything to fix itself.

The worst of my mother's advice: everyone settles for something.

Is this what she meant? The marks on my thighs? The invisible scars that refuse to fade? The slow erosion of everything I told myself I am and could be? The things she taught me have dug deep, have insinuated themselves into the very essence of my being.

Who am I, without her lessons?

Who am I, without Sam?

*

At home, I shed the trappings of my day, stripping down to the bare truth of me. Sluicing off the scent of stale sweat, cleansing the smudge of ash and the stickiness of salt. Now, the satin slides against my stomach and chest. There is lace beneath; an expectation. My lips are deliciously pink, my eye framed by swooping black lines. Blemishes, erased. Womanhood, resurrected. You would have to do a double take.

The metamorphosis wins me a rare compliment. A rare smile. The force of his regard undoes me.

The restaurant hums with conversation. At the single tables, couple lean towards each other as if compelled by a magnetic force. They are links in a chain, joined by intertwined hands and loving stares. An acoustic band plays quietly in one corner, the female singer crooning into the microphone. There is a weight of expectation in the atmosphere. Each twitching finger is aesthetically prepared, tipped with demure pastels.

He leads me to a table. We become one of the couples, caught up in each other's eyes.

'How was your day?' he murmurs, a thumb sweeping across my palm. Goosebumps prickle on my arms. I think of your clamouring voices, the first-day jitters, the nervous laughter at my jokes. You meet people for the first time, share your motivations for enrolment, express your desires to change the world. It is an elusive, near-forgotten feeling for me. As if that desire burned in a past incarnation of myself. I am a pale shadow of you, and yet you admire me.

Sam wishes to hear none of that.

'Wonderful,' I say, giving a blithe tilt of a shoulder. I allow him to lace our fingers together. 'What about you? How did your presentation go?' He's pleased I remember. He would be angry if I didn't.

'Exceptionally,' he says, and I know this to be the truth. Sam is an outstanding asset to his company. He tells me so readily and often. 'I think they're going to approve it. It'll mean the move will be happening in the next couple of months.'

I keep my hand relaxed, even as my chest squeezes tight. 'So soon?' 'It's necessary, Natalie.' His voice is unyielding. 'For my career. For our future.'

I allow myself one, slow blink. 'Of course.'

Our future. It means a move across the country. Away from fragile pillars of support I have built in this city. Away from my friends, the few friends who have stayed, and away from my job. Sam won't want me to get another. He'll want me to give up that last part of myself. He'll want to become my entire world. His shadow will become my sun.

'I'll take care of you.' He reads my mind. The reassurance is clipped and taut. 'You won't have to worry about anything. And—' He pauses, and real warmth fills the dark brown depths of his eyes. 'And we'll be able to start trying.'

I try to quell the silly flutter of my heart. We're sitting in a romantic restaurant, the velvet seat plush against my bare thighs, my lover's hand

slipping away from my own to dip into his jacket pocket. One half of me whispers, *try for a child*, as if it is the accumulation of all my hopes and dreams and desires. The other half chokes out, *try for child*, and it knows that this spells my doom.

'I ... I don't know,' I manage. I envision the lashing heat, the orange flickers behind the mountains. I question how your parents excused it, your birth. Was there still hope back then of a solution? Did they have the same conversations and questions before your inception? And the most important thought of all—did they regret condemning you to this world? 'In this climate? Is it sensible? Can we condone bringing a child into—'

It is a feeble rebellion immediately dismissed by the decisive click of the wooden box meeting the table. I stare at it, disbelieving but all too knowing.

'Natalie,' he begins. I try to remember that I like his stern mouth, the press of it to mine, the way it shapes itself around my name. 'Natalie, the first time I met you, I knew that you were the one for me. You radiated pure joy; the first time you spoke, it was music to me. I know it wasn't the most romantic of circumstances,' he chuckles, and drags a self-effacing hand through his hair, leaving it uncharacteristically rumpled. He is almost unrecognisable like this. His eyes gleam as if wreathed with tears. 'But even in that seedy student bar, you shone. In the years since, I have remained fascinated by you; your poise, your calm, your delight in the world.'

I do not recognise this description of myself, either. Is this who I am to him?

'I cannot imagine a life without you by my side,' he continues, gaze slicking over my face in a near tangible caress. And then he is lowering himself before me, supplicating. My hand is in his; the ring slides coolly onto my finger; catches. A jerk as he forces it over my knuckle, to settle into place like a manacle. The diamond catches the light.

I am enthralled.

I am repulsed.

I wait for a question. But Sam is already rising, already settling back into his chair. I wait for the expected emotions: tears, joy, anticipation. All I feel is a vice around my throat; a vice that clamps tight and strangles any protest. I stare at my future, silent.

'I knew it would look perfect on you,' he congratulates himself. 'You've made me the happiest man alive.'

*

The drive home is punctuated by sirens. He hums along to the radio, fingers tapping out a discordant rhythm. I roll my ring back and forth on my finger. I reach out and jab the *seek* button on the console, the music replaced by buzzing static. I see his shoulders stiffen in my periphery.

'If there's something wrong,' he enunciates with a chilling evenness, 'you should spit it out instead of sulking.'

'What's the point?' I whisper, and flinch as he slams a hand against the wheel.

But his voice hasn't shifted a single octave as he says, 'The point? The point—dearest—is that we should both be ecstatically happy right now, thrilled to spend the rest of our lives together, but all you can manage is a face like a slapped arse. Do you know how much that ring cost?'

'I don't know,' I mutter, and the shame of it wells up, acidic as it streams from my gut, up my throat, pooling on my tongue. I swallow it back. Struggle to keep from gagging. I sound like a chastised child, called in front of their schoolteacher: voice small and weak, shoulders hunched, trembling with mortification.

'More than six months of your salary,' he clips out, shaking his head in patent disgust. 'More than that job values you—they don't, they have never—and yet you treat *me* like a villain, for trying to give you everything you deserve. For god's sake, Natalie.'

We drive in silence again, his rage snapping between us, flaying my senses. It is dark in earnest now, and it gobbles us up as we speed down the road, high beams our only weapon against it. The hills are black, sloping down towards the city without the barest hint of orange flame, but I can see the flickers of red and blue at their feet. Vigilant. My problems dissolve in the face of it; the enormity of a burning, collapsing world.

I straighten my spine, forcing my shoulders blades down and back. I fold my hands in my lap, the left over the right. Ring prominent. Ladylike. I breathe, let my lungs swell in the confines of an all too heavy chest.

Will you grow up and meet a man like this?

Will you feel ungrateful?

Or will the world have been swallowed up long before you get the chance?

AS A HALF-READ BOOK

Kristian Patruno

On a shelf, open and spine cracked, waiting
for your hand to take up and complete me.

Tell me my end / tell me all my pretty language
between covers, as you did, my love; before
I wrote depression into our lives; till dust mounted
to read. Un ...

the printed and blank pages of our destiny.

This dank rubbled library now / of trashed aisles
un.til. the bulb dimmed / ...
since a madman turned over shelves / urinated
on classics of love and high philosophy
in a dyslexic rage at words unintelligible to him.

Among these hard facts, I remain illiterate
as a breath, gasping in the dark for you.

When we ...
were pretty ...

to read. Un ...

or ead. Un ...

til. the bulb dimmed / ...
oun.til. the hour ...
our page ...
of progress / ...
un.til. you left ...
me here – wide open ...

THREE HAIKU

Michael Pettit

exasperated a fly on the windowpane is busy texting

a dog-eared leaf falls let it go – words have seasons abandoned haiku

my squat sentences kvetch like frogs – be still, listen pencil on paper

ŠU GI

₩.

Annamaria Rossana Quaresima

Gilgamesh, in grey bespoke suit, Victoria deep-line, barrow-tube, with other tracks. Vanilla makes good Palace Cake anymore. is better than ever. He pockets Numb aluminium cage, repetitive transitory space, allows him not to than two millennia ago] [felt truly against wind] [grief for old fools] [will come today?] [rusted goads a once-king [he never expected to live exactly that] [groundfull of river – light, floating celestial, how year of craft woven into of his Liverano jacket] chain bracelet; a reminder that he had a mother, once? milken wings old words] [what a thing, 道 郵歌, it's all unspooling; one onto another:

sits on the London Underground, fluoro-lit rolling stock, incompatible & orchid. Gross Michel. No one Ridiculously, the Onion Bread his hands, feels the thrum underfoot. sound, a sub-terranean mundane, think of: [a man he loved more alive, riding in chariots, braced is a tricky thing, even that bookstore parcel Sumerian tongue of earliest suburbi-Uruk] this long] [wished for -shrouded, woke to a sky waving] [8 starry petals many left?] [loves that the perfect shoulders [imported gold of home] [did he dream wild earthen eyes, intrude] [he'll relearn this life] [⊢⊢, spindles

Notes

Šu gi₄: **月** 印象, Early Dynastic IIIb, Old Akkadian, Ur III, Old Babylonian. 1. to repeat (šu "hand" + gi "turn").

Til₃: How Dynastic IIIb, Old Akkadian, Lagash II, Ur III, Early Old Babylonian, Old Babylonian. 1. to live, be alive. 2. revive. 3. to dwell, sit, reside.

Til: → (alternative form → •), Early Dynastic IIIb, Old Akkadian, Lagash II, Ur III, Early Old Babylonian, Old Babylonian, 1. to be complete, completed. 2. old, long-lasting. 3. to end.

QUINTET OF BLUE HAIKU

Simon Ravenscroft

yellow orange, California poppy – your eyes a ray of violet

nightfall, vodka softens the chest smile of indigo

spring light falls on a carpet of forget-me-nots – boy chased by a crow

swallows tumble in the summer blue, I wait

a girl plays in the shingle – the sea the sea is a sheet of glass and the sky a cornflower

SELF-PORTRAIT AS A SHOPPING TROLLEY

Kathryn Reese

And you who were freed – or abandoned – or flung, wheels worn uneven, unbalanced, rattling wild over the rough black emptiness, not choosing your own direction, but following the pull of gravity, trajectory determined by slope and ice and corrugations worn in to the asphalt by cars that enter and reverse between white lines as bees visit between petals – an analogy you can never understand, as there are no bees, no golden-orbed flowers in this winter and concrete scape. Even as you slip, wheels askew, calculate how mass would add to your momentum, you're empty, you're drawn to the massive ball of light, metal to magnet, and if you align aright, that falling ball of ions might come to rest, heavy and glowing, in your belly-basket.

downhill chasing sunset to buy time

THE HONEST FACE OF SADNESS

Radoslav Rochallyi

f (a tear to clear this crowded space)

$$= a_0$$

$$+ \sum_{\text{it/s smiles we must attach}=1}^{\infty} \left(a_n \cos \frac{\text{maybe I'm wrong}}{\text{maybe they're right in their blinding}} + b_n \sin \frac{\text{brilliant light}}{\text{in their mockery of joy}} \right)$$

CONNECTIONS

Sharon Rundle

Alice cannot seem to settle to anything, neither can she relax. She puts on her walking shoes, takes a flask of iced tea from the fridge, then heads off down the track from the house. Clouds begin to drift together but do nothing to relieve the heat. She passes by her new neighbour's barn, and roams what is now his property. She has only met him briefly a couple of times. She wonders what brought him out here. He hadn't mentioned a partner or family. She feels slightly unsettled by her previous neighbours selling-up and a lone man moving in.

She reaches the creek at the base of the steep rise. Downstream, a tree has fallen across, she sits on the tree trunk and dangles her feet in the water that flows from an underground spring and bubbles over rocks. She cups the cool liquid over her head, face and neck. She takes a draught from her flask, which dangles from a strap, and walks confidently along the log, just as she did when she was a child. Once across the creek, she begins to climb the steep slope. It's a long time since she's walked with no particular purpose.

She notes the changes. How dry the bush is, even after the recent downpour. She listens to the rustling undergrowth. She notices birds wheeling across the sky. She climbs nearly two-thirds of the way up to the ridge. Thunderclouds have formed over the ridgetop, so she turns to make her way back down the slope that descends to the creek. A rushing wind streaks through the treetops. Leaves swirl about her head. Heaving clouds are congealing in a dark blue clot, which then takes on a greenish hue. She watches as a seething mass of cloud convulses, coiling and re-coiling, then squeezes up into a kind of mushroom shape; she can see the updraft that forms its stem. She should hurry home; every instinct tells her so. Alice shivers, though her skin is hot and dripping

from her exertions. A thunderclap shakes the earth. Treetops creak and sway, bending before a great gust of wind. And from the earth she can smell the odour of scorched soil before rain. Why hadn't she turned back sooner? Why had she been so stubborn, so driven to walk outdoors? She scrambles down the steep slope, keeping her eyes open for shelter in one of the caves gouged into the ancient sandstone that forms the gully.

She looks up. The heavens are swirling in giddying eddies of grey and indigo cumulus nimbus and, at its massive centre, that weird greenish glow. She stands mesmerised, face upturned. She can't recall ever seeing such an angry sky. Her sense of unease turns to dread. The forces of nature are not to be trifled with.

Find a cave. She knows there are many dotted about these steep slopes. Once, one cave had revealed small hollows with traces of paint, and grinding stones that had crushed ochre, left carelessly as if the artist might return at any moment. Yes, she will find a cave and take shelter. She grabs at a low branch and pauses to take a breather. There is a flash and a crack as if from a monstrous whip. She loses her grip and her feet slide on leaf litter. As she grabs at a sapling and regains a foothold, another brilliant flash throws everything into silhouette for an instant. Another preternatural whip cracks. Then the heavens let loose a deluge that stings as she claws at the earth, slipping and sliding on her hands and knees. She feels splinters of ice before she sees and hears them striking the ground.

Hailstones, gaining in size and momentum, strike her with chilling blows. She grabs at another sapling, pausing again for breath, shielding her head with her forearm, and sees the dark shadow that betrays the opening of a cave.

The ground trembles. Hailstones fall thick and fast. She edges her way across the slippery rock ledge. Stones loosen underfoot and roll down into the gully below as she gropes for the entrance she knows should be there. For a few seconds she panics in case the shadow had been just that and no more, then she feels an edge, a gap in the rock

face, and slips in, out of the maelstrom.

She leans against an interior wall, chest heaving and breath rasping. She hears a creaking sound as if the cave is restless. Lightning flashes into her sanctuary briefly illuminating it. She hears the inevitable thundercrack. More lightning flashes in quick succession. Disembodied hands stretch out as if in warning. A strong vibration travels from deep within the earth right up through the cave floor. Alice remembers a poem by Huldah Turner. She cowers against the rock wall and tries to recall a few lines from 'Mootwingie'. Huldah could have been writing about this very cave. Is the throbbing humming she hears the sound of ancient tribal incantations?

Alice peers out from the cave opening. The wind has gathered force to gale-strength and is lifting tussocks of kangaroo grass, which tumble on the thermal currents. The sky is gangrenous. She sees then, bearing down from the ridge top, some kind of gigantic willy-willy; watches incredulous as trees are tugged, twisted and fall to the ground. Branches and all manner of leaf, bark, stones, rocks, bush litter, tiny animals are soaring through the sky as if the laws of nature have been suspended. The roar is deafening. In a phosphorescent flash, she sees a figure appear. Before she loses consciousness, she recognises who it is. 'Mathew,' she gasps as her chest constricts. 'Mathew, I'm so glad you have come.'

When she comes-to, at first she thinks that she has lost her senses. Then she remembers the cave. It is cold and dark now; in the eerie stillness there is complete silence—when she coughs, the sound echoes. She remembers the storm. She remembers Mathew. She calls his name though she knows he has been dead for years.

'Alice?' A reply comes back.

Alice catches her breath. 'Mathew,' she calls again, her feeble voice full of hope.

'Are you alright?' The voice holds a note of urgency.

It isn't Mathew's voice, she realises. 'Who is it?' she ventures, suddenly afraid, vulnerable in the dark.

'It's Mark. You know who I am, don't you, Alice? Don't be afraid. You fainted. It's only Mark, your new neighbour here to help you.'

'What the hell happened? There was a storm, hail, wind so strong it was snapping the treetops, lifting them and tossing them into the sky, then the lightning struck again and I saw hands reaching out to me.'

'I think you might be concussed. I want to check your pulse, if you'll let me. You've had a fair shaking up by the sound of it.'

'I don't need a nursemaid; I'm fit as a fiddle.' A tremor runs through her body. She has a mental image of people traipsing over her grave. She feels deathly cold.

'Were you dizzy at all before you fell?' Mark, too, is dripping wet and muddy into the bargain, but still warm from his exertions. As he holds Alice's arm, he notices that it's as cold as a cadaver. 'You called out the name Mathew.'

'Yes, I remember. I thought I saw him, my late husband—another trick of the light, no doubt.' She feels the rock shelf hard beneath her and shifts position to get the blood flowing in her veins again. 'I've known since I was a child that some of these rock shelters have a curiously charged atmosphere. Why is it so quiet?'

'The eye of the storm. It's like a moment suspended in time, isn't it?' Even as he utters the words, the wind begins rushing up the slope to howl around the cave.

'I wish we had some light. Didn't think to bring a torch?' she asks him.

'I have a mobile phone torch.' He goes over to the wall of the cave; as he lifts his phone torch up and down, he can see cave paintings. Though unable to light up the whole cave at one time, he can make out handprints and a few faded outlines of native animals. He crouches down. Running the length of the cave wall near the floor are etched long lines of ochre.

As the wind shudders and moans outside, whipping aside branches, tearing away bark and leaves, he can understand how this, together with the lightning strikes, might have affected Alice's vision, giving the illusion of outstretched hands. 'Optical illusion, I'd say.'

As his torchlight flickers over his face, Alice catches her breath. He has Mathew's chin. Why hasn't she noticed this before? The shape of his eyes is also remarkably similar, though Mark's irises were a darker brown. 'Why have you got Mathew's eyes?'

'Are you alright? You aren't seeing things again, are you?'

'I want you to answer my question. You have Mathew's eyes; they are exactly the same shape, with that little droop in the corners.'

'I don't think this is the time. You've had a nasty shock, quite an ordeal, in fact—'

'Don't patronise me.'

'I'm just worried. You've had a fall. God knows what damage you've done and no decent light in here to see and at—'

'Go on. —at my age.'

'Even you have to admit this is not a good situation. It does seem to be letting up a bit outside but even so—' As he speaks the noise of sheeting rain outside drops from a deafening roar to a tolerable din. 'It's a super-storm cell,' he shouts.

'If I'm going to be stuck in this cave until I die, I think I'm at least entitled to ask questions.'

'You do exaggerate.'

'Nevertheless—'

'Nah, yeah, I don't want to go into it now. Not here—not after all you've been through.'

Her knees buckle as she tries to stand up. She feels drained of all energy. Her body is numb.

Mark watches, unsure of what she wants him to do; he makes scuffing sounds as he shifts from foot to foot.

'How can you possibly have Mathew's eyes and chin?' It was Mark she had seen in the cave entrance before she fainted, she realises.

'You've had far too many shocks for one day—and we still have to make our way back, if this bloody wind and rain will let up for a spell. The storm seems to have knocked out the mobile phone signal and my phone battery won't last much longer.' Mark's voice vibrates around the cave. 'I saw you earlier, well saw someone in the distance. When the storm blew up, I realised somebody was out there, you know, on my property. I came out to check. It's pure luck that you picked this cave for shelter. I'd spotted it on a walk last time I was up here.'

'How old are you, anyway?' Alice demands to know.

'What?'

'How old are you?'

'I don't know what that's got to do with anything, but I'm thirty-eight.'

'Then you must have been born before Mathew and I were married.'

'What? You're not delirious again, are you?'

'For god's sake, tell the truth. I can take it.'

'I don't know for sure what the legal marital status of my father was at the time,' Mark says, wearily. 'But you're right, Mathew is—was—my father. I don't know what happened with him and my mother. It's my guess that it just didn't work out.'

'You mean you knew that when you bought the property next to mine?'

'My mother died without revealing the identity of my father. She told me only that he provided for me until I turned eighteen. My mother's sister ended up telling me the truth a few years ago. I've been trying to track down Mathew ever since. Just to put a face to this mystery man. I wasn't sure if I even wanted to speak to him. Just to see, you know.'

'To see if he was worth anything?' Alice says, with contempt in her voice.

'That's unfair. I knew nothing about him or his circumstances. My

mother's only contact was through a solicitor. It's only natural, don't you think, to wonder about your own gene pool?'

'You're a liar!' Her voice trembles. 'You're nothing but an opportunist. I knew from the first, knew it in my bones. I didn't trust you from the start—'

'Calm down, Alice—'

'I'll not calm down!' she shouts. 'I will not.'

'It's the shock, it's just the shock. I'm sorry, I never meant to scare you.'

'You've been scuttling about, setting up your web of deceit, waiting for the right moment to spin your lies.' She leans forward until she is on her hands and knees. 'You inherited Mathew's eyes, that's what you're trying to tell me, is it?'

Mark is silent.

'Well, isn't it? It's all filthy lies—Mathew would never have abandoned a child, not even a bastard child.' She crawls across the floor to where she thinks the opening of the cave should be.

'What are you doing, Alice?'

'I don't feel safe in here with you,' her voice rasps, as she finds her way out of the cave. Out in the open, she feels the soaking rain. The wind blows through her wet clothes.

'Alice!' She hears Mark roar.

Rocks, bushes, even trees, have been loosened from the soil by the rain and hail and the willy-willy to beat all willy-willies. She can take the risk of falling and killing herself—or at least breaking several bones—or staying put. Since she hasn't the wherewithal to move, she decides to stay. She longs for the clouds to part so she can see the Southern Cross; to die under the Southern Cross would at least give her some small satisfaction. She doesn't want to believe Mark's tale. It's a fiction, made up by a con artist trying to trick her. But then there are his eyes—there is no mistaking his eyes. She sinks onto a flat boulder and rocks back and forth.

She lifts her head and mustering what's left of her energy, she shouts into the wind, 'Why did you come here? Why did you buy this land? You must have known there would be complications.'

Mark has heard Alice and squats beside her, but she refuses to acknowledge him.

'I swear I don't want anything from you.'

Alice turns away.

'All I wanted was to have some connection to my father—however tenuous. Is that so much to ask?' Mark is trying to keep his frustration under control. 'You can check out everything I've said with Mathew's solicitor. You don't have to take anything I've told you on trust. Are you at least willing to trust me to walk you home now?'

'Why didn't Mathew tell me? I don't know who I can trust anymore.' There is resignation in her tone. 'I suppose if you hadn't found me—' She feels drained of all resistance. 'What have I got to lose?'

'You don't expect me to answer a loaded question like that, do you?' he asks wryly. He is surprised to hear a dry laugh from Alice, or was it a cough? 'Ready when you are.'

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LOVE, WHICH WAY IS HOME?

Abhijit Sarmah

on this quay of denim memories what confounds his devotion for wuthering winds is a quaint symphony of the spirit,

symphony of the deepening rivers that often daub a helix, symphony articulated in barracks and songs trailing hearses.

A fraying harvest moon means little to a merchant of starlings in pursuit of reaped and threshed remnants, hiraeth for

a shadow town with the dead weight of burning sequins, red hooks afloat in the lustre of a sky working on an infinite etude,

heifers silent as the exit music of spring blasts in the leas. The dissonance between longings of altered kinds only seems

fancy to ones without constellations of grief for softened palms. When allowed, derisions of black winters shadow the splendour

of roiling terns imitating the ceremony of returning, of living with the language of self, of singing sweet madrigals for gulf ghosts

that still lug the memories of serpentine nights of defeat and rue. Must be always loathe his desire to fleck the world in theories,

stories that remain creased in his inner pockets, ones sewn to his body like skin or incantations to melting flint afternoons?

No way should a merchant of starlings know the immensity of this Elysium crafted of minutiae: suffusing clouds, buoyant black birches,

geese floating in ether, surfs squeezing into another, a frisky sun. A muslin-soft wave laves his steps as the symphony dawdles.

BIRTHING

Leni Shilton

There was that time
when she held you as your baby came.
It was a long labour
the baby turning
the wrong way,
keen to start life
with his face to the light,
when all you wanted
was that he tuck himself inward,
to stay curled in the dark
for a little longer.

She held your head your face her soft hands on you her voice quiet in your ear telling you it's okay, you're okay.

And all through the long hours of waiting, she held back her fear, her uncertainty

and trusted this baby, this body.

GOLDEN HEART CITY

Zeke Shomler

This town calls its summer festival Golden Days, not for the never-ending sunlight but for the hungry gleaming river-rocks and all the power they can hold. You and I sit in dappled shade above the Chena River, where beavers dam and gulls float on rain-swelled swift deep current, where everything becomes a symbol of the past. The city's Chamber of Commerce drops 8,000 rubber ducks into the racing water and the winner gets a prize. At this exact moment in July, to so many people in this town, this is as necessary as water, this ritual of the ridiculous, huddling on the footbridge with kazoos - this is entirely true - and buzzing the rubber ducky song beneath the burning sun. The UV index climbs to 4. A leggy beetle lands in your bleached hair. The immutable human needs for intimacy and ceremony manifest as families with blue-stained lips laughing at the spacious gleaming moment. We count the robins, consider sexual dimorphism as represented in their orange-feathered breasts, the impermanence of the present tense, the golden plastic ducks racing guided by the river, which flooded in 1967, as this city so frequently reminds us. The line

between history and warning thins, loses its opacity like old worn fabric. The belltower wordlessly declares America to be 'The Beautiful' and never declares it to be good. You look up at the dark swooping wings of an eagle while I hold a copper beech twig and methodically tear it apart: first the bark, then the tender sapwood, then the firmer, goldentinted heart. I snap the twig, toss it toward the waves. Ask me about this city and I will show you the curved banks of the cold insistent river. Ask me about the river and I will tell you of an immense and powerful dignity. One duck reaches the finish line; the rest are scooped up and stored away for next year. We walk down the footpath toward the archway made of sun-bleached antler and bone. In the hot and omnipresent sunlight, we travel through toward the future, endlessly inscrutable and full of the most necessary and desperate kind of hope, like every wormy vein of gleaming, tooth-soft gold hidden in the hills around this optimistic, mortal, tarnished town.

[210]

STICKYFINGERS

Cheryl Snell

She tosses her purse into the closet. The closet eats it. It's okay, she'll just shoplift. Shoplift until she gets caught. Caught once, and she blames it on the Rev. who says the root of all evil is money. Money can't even buy happiness, and the Rev. could back her up. Could back her up but won't. Won't meet with her either so she goes to church to double-check what it was he said about evil and money. Money, salads of it, circulates in the collection plate while the Rev. intones Thou shalt not steal. To steal some bills is an impulse she suddenly can't resist, though the plate is groaning with what must be the voice of God.

PICTURE THIS

Daan Spijer

Picture this—

Marjory lets the screen door bang shut behind her as she carries a jug of iced water onto to the verandah.

She sits down in the shabby wicker armchair and pours herself a glass. She wipes sweat off her forehead with her sleeve. She contemplates the haze rising from the dusty fields where there should be harvest-ready crops. There is only parched grass and an occasional water-starved tree. Her husband is a thousand kilometres away, working in a mine, the farm having stopped producing income years ago.

Marjory squints to make out the distant hills that mark the extent of their property.

The dog comes out from under the house and sits next to her bowl. Marjory fills the bowl with iced water. The dog crunches on the ice cubes and wags her tail.

Picture this—

Marjory stands at the sink, washing her breakfast dishes. She watches dust devils dance across the land like drunken dervishes. As she dries the last of the dishes, she stares at the hills. At first, she is puzzled at seeing a dust devil on top of the farthest hill, then gasps as she realises it is smoke.

Picture this—

A station wagon, once white, now red-brown with dust. A woman driving, a dog next to her on the passenger seat. The rest of the vehicle is crammed with belongings and there are more tied to the roof rack. A cloud of dust follows the vehicle, mixing seamlessly with the dense smoke.

Picture this—

A burnt-out station wagon, its front squashed under a fallen tree, still smouldering.

Picture this—

A solitary, blackened brick chimney surrounded by twisted metal roofing, burnt timbers, burnt furniture and household paraphernalia.

A man kicks at a deformed dog bowl, tears making tracks down his face.

MISDIRECTION INDEX

Liam Strong

{clawfoot. clawed foot, appendages with talons. pes cavus. plantar pressure, to be planted, grounded, rooted, tied down, bound. unrelated to devil's foot root: mismatch. standing still, motor capability. an angle greater than 4° convex. Charcot. Marie. Tooth. Achilles' callosities, calcium deposits, enriched mining. idiopathic. deformity. cavovarus. the body is only skin-deep. metatarsal fractures, abnormally elevated longitudinal arch, gait disturbances, as in gateway for disease. supination of the bow, uneven, splayed in any direction but straight. lotus feet, without flowering. radiological data, figures 1-999. post-traumatic bone malformation, neurological condition. ataxia in the limbs, mouth, & other invasive bodies. clumsiness, stumbling, sometimes over nothing. invisible obstacles, hypothetical model of weakness. in certain cases, hereditary to the hands. between 5 & 20 years, first appearance. gradual, degenerative, asymptomatic. stone bruises found in all locations of epidermis. likelihood as cushioned footwear. surgery, construction as a form of destruction. rebalancing of bone structure, aimed at correction. architecture of the hollow foot, as in a glass slipper, as in an empty home.}

CLOUDS THAT EMBRACE THE SKYLINE OF THE FIELD

Brett Thompson

I am not at peace with unbecoming like a sheet of newspaper blown with the wind, a mile long smoker passing into the mouth of a darkening tunnel. It is a cold Thanksgiving morning and I want to be happy still. I want to hold the hand of my grandmother just one more time if only to feel the cool metal of her gypsy rings against my palm, the pain in her arthritic wrist would transfer into my own and we would lean into the stillness together. I am so tired was the last thing she said and I know if one cloud can block out the light, so must I.

DRIVING TO THE CONDITIONS

Isi Unikowski

And if travelling even the shortest distance between blank mesas of 'here' and 'there' is a scrimmage between what you're meant to feel and the world looking askance at you – then, before you head off, after everything is packed and you're making infinitesimal adjustments to the luggage

retreat for a few minutes. Pull a book out at random, read neither closely nor deeply (the sound of kids being whacked by one another will prevent that); read from something that never made it to your virtuous stack but waited as if certain of your return.

Read just enough to feel that you have tied one end of a truckies' hitch and pulled it tight

against – what, exactly? That warning stencilled on the wing mirror that the past is closer than it seems? Or, from the back seat, the unrelenting rattle of crockery wandering with no place in the world, dishes a grandmother loved for their maroon rims, last vestiges she clung to of a dowry too rococo now for cohorts who eat food from their laps? Or the wind that tests every corner of the tarp as the road climbs into evening's country

your car a hyphen in the road's hard sentence waved on by solitary windmills, river bights that turn to check if you're following the immense salt-stitched, barbed wire bound mud map and, like the top of a page burned by summer barging through the blinds, canola's runway lights guiding you along the continent's illuminated margins.

THERE IS NO BODY IN MY CAR

Chelsea Uthayaseelan

The woman at the drive-thru asks whether I have seen the man in my passenger seat. He's dead, she tells me, sounding quite convinced, but then I tell her no and she just takes my word for it. I've come to understand that people will believe whatever you tell them if you say it with enough authority. There is no body in my car. She readily accepts this proposition. To acknowledge that I am lying would be most inconvenient. She doesn't want to spend her afternoon with police officers and I don't blame her. Neither do I. I take my shake and my fries, and she keeps her peace of mind.

Outside, the road creeps into darkness. The wipers arc the rain back in broad strokes. I'm not sure what really exists in the world beyond my window. That side of the glass has not yet struggled into creation. I see shapes of things. The usual signposts of a cross-country road trip: highway lines and streetlights and great spears of bush, but I am not convinced that this is not all some kind of projection, like an image playing on a screen. I can only be sure of two things. My own Cartesian existence, and the man in my car.

He leans against the side door in the stiff and shapeless shroud of his own funereal. His collar is wet from the rain trickling in through the side window. His fingers jostle with the braking of the car; his hair with each vibration. I offer him a French fry when we stop at an intersection. A body does not eat, I know, but he looks terribly hungry. The whites of his eyes rolled-back, unblinking. His skin a violent purple. The food is an offering. It is supposed to fall to the ground at his feet and rot. But

when I look at the altar of him, I know that a sacrifice without blood is no sacrifice at all. I wipe the crumbs from my hands and lips.

'You know,' I tell him, 'salt kills spirits.'

I say this confidently, as though the act of verbalisation will create a world in which it is true, but that little trick only works on fresh ears. I cannot author a new trajectory into this story any more than I can journey into a better one or destroy what haunts me with a grain of salt from a cold French fry. The man goes where I go. This has been true for as long as I can remember. He lives in my house. His hair is stuck to my comb. I turn in my sleep and I find him in my bed. Sometimes, I think he is less of an illusion than I am. And yet, if anybody asks—

There is no body in my car.

MOTHER'S DAY

Chelsea Uthayaseelan

'Do you love me?' she asks.

I can't quite manage a response but, as I walk from the room, I see her trembling.

1. I suppose we should start over

My father didn't like large women. As a result, he had never avoided my mother more than during that last trimester, when I had fully taken-up residence in her womb, and the three long months that followed my eviction. After my birth, she had almost stopped eating altogether. This wasn't just to appease my father but also because some of the local women had started giving her looks, as though she was keeping the bump around only as a way of calling attention to herself. At first the baby weight couldn't go fast enough, then it went too quickly, and the additional month she spent in hospital only drove my parents further apart. It didn't help that father had to pay the medical bills himself or that the town knew he had pushed her to the brink of anorexia, although they forgave him quite easily in spite of things.

For most of my childhood, I thought that I had ruined us, either because I hadn't fulfilled the unifying role I was supposed to play in their marriage or because I never had the gall to pick one side and obliterate the other. I had the moral conviction not to stand by my father, but not enough of it to actively defend my mother. I couldn't win his respect by putting her in her place or win hers by putting him in his. And, because I couldn't control the narrative of their relationship, I became subject

to its fancy. In that sense, I suppose I did have my uses.

I used to wish I had been born a girl. I thought then that my father might have accepted my slight build. He might have thought it was a blessing that I was small and bony. He might have even understood why a daughter had no interest in his line of work and loved her all the same. And my mother might have accepted that I couldn't defend her. She might have forgiven what I did to her body as I was carved out like an affliction if she thought that one day my own child might do the same to me. These days, I know it probably would have been worse. Mother would have hated me all the more for being taller, skinnier, not so plain-faced and, instead of the girls I brought home, father would have turned his sly eyes onto me.

The point is that it wouldn't really have mattered. I could have been born with a woolly mammoth's head. Across every possible permutation of events, this story still ends the same way: I grow up and my mother asks, 'do you love me?' and I stand there like an idiot.

And then I say ...

2. I wish we could start over

But by then, I'm all out of words.

WEEK THIRTEEN

Amelia Walker

My body has become a foreign country where I am lost. Borders keep shifting – expanding, the more terrain I gather, the less familiar I am with and to this world. It's not

only edges: internal landmarks, too are jostling, seismically puzzled by developments unplanned – mountains, ravines scarring once smooth plains, riverbanks set to burst.

People keep mistaking me for some other traveller – some woman who dreamed, wanted, saved for her ticket to Happy Motherhood, whereas I was *en route* elsewhere

 passing through and headed to wild spaces that were and are my natural habitats, places I was happy being. No that doesn't mean I'm unhappy here. But I'm sick

of stranger friends talking now like this was always everywhere and everything leading to this – my homelands demoted into waiting halls I drifted through

busying myself with overpriced wines and silly poems while desiring, in secret Meniscus vol.12 iss. 2, 2024

this thing I didn't dare name truth. Bullshit. Those gone lands were gorgeous:

I relished every second there, and always would have, had chance winds not switched my course.

But to say so is poor foreign policy. Already,

The International Relations watchdogs snap –

How will your new citizen feel if they read this poem some day?

I counter-question: Is love lessened by knowing one was not made to plug gaps in sketchy landscapes, rather chosen over prizes desired, won, and released, following a long thoughtful pause?

It's rare for nations my age to undergo such upheavals: normally it would happen far earlier or not at all. Suddenly, my years are at once diminished and overblown,

my name changed, stories wiped as shameful blots if ever more than steps towards here. Now I'm assumed to bear no past, no knowledge

relevant to what's next. Those powerful nations
who once bombed me with slurs
- and still do my friends - now those nations gather round,
assuring me they raid in peace, at last, they marvel

at me, a thing so ancient so early in development, or so young so late in life: withered and fertile at once. All the same, they invite me to join their league of so-called respectable powers,

to share the spoils they hoard.

But creativity is not this. I believe in heterotopias – lands that live always many lives. And so, to such invitations,
I raise my queer flags proud.

GRIMOIRE

Angela Williamson

Time was when you'd have had the magic to save a dying tree. You would have prepared in advance, gathered ungreen sticks in early March – the relentlessness of spring not yet squelched, or relegated to supermarket strawberry sales, the tying of tulip posies. But it's been lost to you, so you are drunk, digging among the roots of a crabapple tree. You have quested the internet, found the line drawings of a long dead extension agent's grimoire demonstrating emergency grafting. You are trying to save your orchard, trees ringed by rodents, cut off from their roots. You must bridge the ground and the sky temporarily, give the trees time to heal. Old drawings show trunks gnarled with scars where the grafts have grown in. You imagine how the agent must have revered the old orchards, bound his bundle of sticks to ward off this disaster. You imagine old men who learned from their fathers the art of binding sterile water shoots, arteries grafted to bypass what was severed. But here you are alone. Only this file found in an internet archive to guide you. So you look up

'bridge arc', find the peer-reviewed journals describing heart surgery. You read them out loud, like chanting, buy medical gauze and tape. You cut. You will not save the tree. The root you have unburied is no substitute for fresh growth. A splice depends on stored energy. You cannot birth yourself from nothing. You must prepare. You must hoard, but you've imagined a future so warm everyone is starving. Your tree field dressed, still blooming in a last show of hope so bold you find a stone to wedge yourself under. You'll scratch from beneath. You'll sever a vein. You'll write in blood.

LONELINESS

Dugald Williamson

The bell's tolling pulse 'argues more and better life'.

—John Donne Devotions, 18

Windows avow it before hurt makes sense. The sweet spot of light: a certain beyond.

The bells, cast for eternity, run along the rim

a promise of more beautiful life; as if to do better

or prove unreal the lower angels that skylarked in the snow.

A child didn't expect things to change like this, or imagine

a soul making tracks on the cold shoulder of the hills,

going solo in a vector of light that their precious blue refracts.

FROM THE WINTER BRIDGE

Jena Woodhouse

This concrete vertebrate that spans tenebrous depth, translucent height, its cables strung against late winter light to tempt the winds like lyres simulates a journey arc, the transitory, earthbound part, beneath a floating shard of lunar ice.

The bridge reminds me of the chart where lives emerge at birth from dreaming that will haunt them all their days to go in search of other worlds.

Hills from this altitude are crocodiles backlit by gamboge skies, and life continues in some subtler body on the other side.

ALL MY HEART

Richard Yaxley

Ginny raised her hand and said, 'This is the page. I tore it out.' From a notebook that she'd found at the back of the drawer, right-side of her dead husband's desk.

Ruth thought that the page, fluttering in the wind and brightened by the steepling sun, looked like an infant bird, one that has struggled to the twiggy lip of its mother's nest and discovered a space that is not as majestic as that imagined.

'I'm sure it meant nothing,' she said.

'You haven't read it.'

'No, but-

'Shall I read it to you?'

Well, yes. Yes, *please*. Ruth really wanted to hear the contents on the page. To listen would be an act almost as thrilling and illicit as this morning's dim-eyed excursion into the bathroom where she had discovered Siobhan astride, but not actually on, the toilet as she urinated a thick, ammoniac stream. Siobhan, her daughter's new friend, a girl who seemed to be all-over wet—wet hair, eyes and skin, wetness pouring from her with enviable strength and abandon.

So, yes—but the gate of no-ness as well because but Ruth didn't really want the inevitable aftermath; Ginny's strident desire for a retribution that could never occur. Oliver, poor fellow, was passed.

Stupid word. Stupid euphemism. Oliver was dead.

'Ruth? I asked you a question.'

'Sorry. I don't know. Do you-

But Ginny had begun in a voice that shot ice through the bee-licked garden.

'Dearest—'

Who? Who could possibly—

'Dearest One.'

Ruth blinked. What strange and private intimacy was this?

Ginny continued, emphatically, precisely. 'Dearest One, I love our times together as we wander and wonder along meandering streams of intellectual passions—'

Oliver, a poet?

'Sometimes against the flow, across many eddies, but always confident in our intentions. We share our imaginings, enthuse in our dialogue and celebrate the joys of our mindful adventures.'

Eddies? Mindfulness?

Ginny paused. 'You see?' she said, before she returned to the page.

'Ours is a loving intellectual exploration of all that may be humanly worthwhile. For me, this is a delight that continues to nourish and fulfil my life.'

Well, thought Ruth. It's done. Out there. A condemnation of sorts but not too damning. Already she could sense the words moving away like a breeze, like the follicles of dandelions.

'There's more,' said Ginny balefully. 'The last line.'

Ruth waited.

'Thank you with all my heart. That's what he wrote. All my heart.'

Ginny's hand dropped, the page with it.

Ruth remembered Oliver's death as she might remember a sharp taste, surprising in its bitterness and continuance. Olives, she thought, small, green and hard. Olives for Oliver. The story as follows: he'd felt unwell, drunk a cup of tea and proclaimed that he felt better, walked to the corner store, died on a neighbouring lawn without having bought anything.

'He said he'd be back,' said the girl at the counter. 'He said he'd forgotten his wallet.' For the benefit of those nearby, she'd wept.

Just sixty-two, was Oliver, in an era when people could be strapped and defibrillated, could ingest chemicals, connect to machines and live much longer. Sixty-two was young! Sixty-two-year-olds were travellers, industrialists, artists, decision-makers. They were doers and shapers, and often consultants, like Oliver. Death at such an age was a travesty. To leave the carnival before the final moonlit ride ... eighty was requisite these days, maybe eighty-five. Anything less was a slight.

Weak constitution, they'd whispered.

Weak person, they'd meant.

Another common acceptance: Ginny would get through. She was strong, certainly stronger than her husband (nice bloke, gentle and generous but a bit, well, idiosyncratic. A bit flaky). Whereas Ginny came from densely knitted stock and had always been well-supported. She had a mesh of friends and colleagues after forty years at St Catherine's, the last twenty-two as Deputy Principal. At the funeral, there were too many people for the chapel to accommodate; they spilled into the glare like lobelia from a pot. The whisper, when it came, was careless. These are Ginny's friends—ex-students, most of the school staff, the ladies from the Walking Society, members of her Rotary Club, the management committee at EduPlace, the Library Advisory Board, mates from her university days. Oliver didn't have ... he wasn't—

Some men just don't connect.

Ginny made a funny speech. Ginny read a poem by Walt Whitman and another by Yeats. Ginny gazed out at the faces, rose with divine grace above Oliver's favourite Bach chorales—'mournful Teutonic shit,' she'd always called them—and told people to hug their own, walk tall, live each moment, cherish, enrich. Ruth, spellbound, had felt like applauding because Ginny had turned her husband's funeral into a homily that made everyone breathe in, nod at this woman's character and sagacity, and silently pledge to better their own existences.

She's marvellous, they'd all agreed.

She's a great example.

Now this.

'All my heart,' said Ginny again. 'It's tawdry, don't you think? Go on,

have a drink.'

She poured wine, one glass above the standard-drink line, one below. Ruth, knowing her due, took the latter. The wine was syrup. It could have been nectar taken from the glands of an exotic, undiscovered creature.

She searched through her mind and said, 'Have you heard from Norbert?'

'No.' Ginny was brusque. 'Don't expect to, he's got his own life.' She held up the page and said, 'I've been transfiguring.'

How like Ginny, to call it that!

'Dearest One is actually Dearest Annabelle.'

Annabelle Travers was Oliver's occasional secretary ... but no, thought Ruth, Annabelle is utterly unintellectual. Not to mention meek, lisp-y, subjugated.

Typing and filing, for God's sake. Silly little sexless rat.

'I can't see that,' she said.

'It's her.' Ginny put down her empty glass. 'You look surprised. That's because you don't know Annabelle. Smart operator.' She expanded: there are women who have the knack of saying nothing original but still telling men exactly what they want to hear. They're reflectors. That's Annabelle, a reflector. Ginny's contention was that Oliver had sent out his sacred light and Annabelle had sent it straight back, allowing him to bask.

'Like a mirror,' she added.

Ruth thought of poor Oliver, waving haplessly from inside a morass of ideas and ideals, nothing-stuff that wouldn't tilt the world, wouldn't gild or even bruise. Given the chance to bask, then why not?

She pointed to the page and said, 'Does it really mean anything? It all seems so—'

'Tawdry?'

'Over-blown,' suggested Ruth.

'Oh, chivalrous,' agreed Ginny. 'Courtly love. I doubt that they were sleeping together. Which is ridiculous. If you choose an affair, then

choose sex. Otherwise, what's the point?'

Ruth couldn't answer. Ginny said firmly, 'They weren't sleeping together.'

Because I have determined it to be thus.

There were mosquitoes rising from the shrubs when Ginny looked at Ruth with dilating eyes, as if seeing her for the first time. She spoke in a voice like that of a young girl, in a bedroom, beneath a bridge, on a rooftop, saying, 'Here's my question. Is making love to someone's mind the same as making love to her body?'

Ruth went home giddy from the wine that she only ever drank with Ginny. Ellen was making fritters in the kitchen. Ruth said, 'Siobhan seems nice,' and Ellen said mm, they were meeting later on, she'd be home late or not at all.

'Movies?' asked Ruth.

'Something like that,' agreed Ellen.

She watched Netflix alone. A man who was married with four children pursued a woman who was grieving and thus, the script seemed to proclaim, open to ruining whatever shreds remained in her bedraggled life. They had sex in his car, then frantically on a beach, then in a hotel room. Ruth was fascinated by the woman's carnal movements, how she lifted her hips as if levitating. She thought that the woman must be extraordinarily strong with a pelvic floor that provided an extra mezzanine strength. Later that night, she lay on her own bed and tried to replicate the movement but her back hurt and her dimpled, fritter-coloured flesh never seemed to leave the sheet.

She thought, was that why?

She turned to the whispering blind and asked, had he wanted a woman who could levitate her hips?

They walked from the carpark down to the river. Ginny said, 'Norbert won't be home for Christmas.'

'Oh Ginny, that's terrible!'

'Not at all. He's got his own life.'

'But Christmas!'

'I can hardly expect him at Christmas,' said Ginny, 'when he's already been back once this year for his father's funeral. I mean, fair's fair. It's a long way, and expensive.'

To fly from Canada, where Norbert did something wildly elaborate and profitable with computers, to Brisbane, where Ginny disciplined wayward girls, sat on boards and committees, organised her coffee club with a panoply of disciples and refused to visit Oliver's tiny little drawer in the crematorium.

They sat on a bench seat and watched the ferries, the people being tugged by dogs, sweat-sodden runners, lovers touching. Ginny said, 'I've put it all together. She was his muse.'

Annabelle, a muse? No; a muse had plumes and curves and the bittersweet musk that some women, luckier women, seemed to naturally exude. Muses were arch. They were worldly and moist.

Siobhan could be a muse.

'They used to sit at the computer,' said Ginny. She lit a cigarette, a past habit recently revisited. 'I thought she was teaching the old sod how to use Endnote. For an academic, he was hopeless with software. That was why he employed her, why I agreed. Someone to type up his rubbish, reference it properly and send it to whichever obscure journal had agreed to publish. That's what I thought but—obviously not. *Meandering* fucking *streams*.'

Ruth said, 'Are you certain?'

'Yes. There was no one else. I'm angry with myself for being blind to the possibility. My husband had an affair of the mind. I failed to satisfy him in that regard so he looked elsewhere.' She squeezed smoke from her mouth and rasped, 'I'm an intellectual cuckold.' 'He didn't actually cheat—'

'What's that?' asked Ginny. 'Oh, I see. He thrusts himself inside her, he's cheating. He *celebrates the joy of their mindful adventures*, he's not? Ruth, don't you understand? It's worse.'

Drops of rain on her hand, her arm.

'No greater betrayal,' said Ginny, stomping, twisting, 'than to judge one mind weak enough to warrant the search for another.'

But no, she thought later, you're wrong. That's not betrayal.

Oliver had found a like-mind. Like? Complementary, at least. They murmured a few ideas, they dialogued. So what?

She fed a carrot into the electric grater. Betrayal was not so ethereal. Not airborne. Betrayal was stark. It was a touchable thing, as cool and clammy as the skin of the sick.

Betrayal, she thought, was being in hospital with your baby daughter at your breast and waiting for him all afternoon, early evening, waiting and telling the nurses that Laine would be here soon, he wasn't far away, work was busy and traffic, you know, the impossible traffic—but knowing that he'd taken the phone off the hook, he'd locked the door, he too was at breast.

She fed chunks of potato, the milky sap mixing with the leftover orange: grated aurora.

Betrayal was knowing that your husband had been there, down-between, with others (who probably levitated) and he'd been doing that thing that he'd never before done with you but now did, the thing that made you freeze because it was obviously obscene but oh the waves, interminable waves, the drunkenness—

Betrayal was locating Her scent. (They were always Her. Everyone had believed it to be a Dearest One, the Her with whom he had eventually lived and bred, but there were Hers all over, Ruth knew that. Hers in the streets, banks, supermarkets and parks, Hers in the pavilions and shrubs, on the beaches, squatted cunningly at playgrounds, thighs

parting and pressing like bellows. Their slim legs, their heated promises. Hers were carnivores, patrolling the febrile, disruptive Earth). Yes, locating Her scent in his hair and skin—not on but in, seeped like an aromatic oil. Smelling Her and yet still submitting to him downbetween, smelling Her whilst he shoved and grunted and she somehow held onto a stupid hope that Her might disappear and they would be alone again: Laine and Ruth, young lovers, dream-filled and drowsy in the delicate light.

The grater spewed thin strips of vegetable like shredded veins.

What's better, she wondered. To be murdered by a single blow or a multitude of tiny cuts?

Ginny was on the phone, offering a luncheon with her and other dauntless grand-dames, next Saturday.

'Um, it's Ellen's graduation.'

'On a Saturday? How post-mod. What time?'

Ruth told her, eleven o'clock at the Convention Centre. She'd had to pay for a ticket, forty dollars to see her daughter receive a degree in Psychology that she probably would never use, given that she wanted to concentrate on her 'art'.

That exhibition, in the Valley. Vulva.

Where she'd met Siobhan.

Ginny said, 'Well, come afterwards. We'll be at Regine's.' She coughed and said, 'Apparently they were writing a book together.'

Oliver and Annabelle?

'I confronted her,' said Ginny. Ruth was wary of the relish in her voice. 'She didn't get it. Stupid cow, she didn't get the betrayal.'

But no.

'Spirituality in economics. Annabelle is a spiritualist, whatever that means, and Oliver liked trends. Hence, the book that no one would ever read. You might as well write about kindness in politics, or intelligence

in sport. I asked her, will you finish it? and she claimed no, that would be disrespectful.'

A pause. Ruth felt a sudden need to wash her hands, face and neck.

'Did you ever hear of anything so stupid?' said Ginny.

They spoke some more before Ginny said, 'Ruth, please come to lunch. I need you there. You are the only person who understands.'

Because of Laine.

Ginny, reflecting. 'He married her, didn't he?'

'I don't believe so.'

'Really? What was her name again? I've forgotten. It was also unusual.'

'Anosia.'

'Anosia! Malaysian?'

'Melburnian,' said Ruth.

She knew that Ginny would keep—and show—the page. For a publicly strong and independent woman, a contrasting dash of victimhood was appealing. I'm vulnerable too, she might have said. Ladies, we're in this together. Walk tall, live each moment, cherish, enrich. Betrayal is our Medusa; she must be continuously, perpetually beheaded.

But you never asked, thought Ruth. You never asked because you were cosy with chivalrous, inoffensive Oliver, and you didn't care that I loved my errant, tilted husband with all my heart.

She lay on her bed, the television lowered to a murmur. Beautiful young people moved across the screen, cooking, renovating, singing, kissing. Ruth closed her eyes, drew up her knees and listened for the wind and the crickets. Later, clad in darkness, she wasn't sure whether the sounds came from the television, from her past or from Ellen and Siobhan, prising, mewling and levitating further down the hallway.

CRAFT AND WATCH

Steven O Young Jr

Let the library host a snot-nosed throng without us. We'll take the concept out on loan. Yarn, scissors, glue. Pockets and eyelids(:) empty material. The library shelves its event in a voiceless corner, a glass echo temple hallowing bike-racked grasps of streetlight. Our books live in risk of everything(.) Our bodies bind and shear. Hunger adapts its own story. Hands tack crochet hooks with popcorn butter. My eyes button to her eyes buttoning eyes made of anything but buttons. Pop bottle eyes. Zinc Lincoln eyes. Eye eyes captive to her needle, my vision fixed. She sees this imitation lacking. There is no film in the library. A conveniently named instructor stands before the class. Her eyes stretch panes in syrupy neon, pedal spoked moons against orbit, unbutton twilight's collar from curfewed tulips. The kids sneak away in catalogue. Their dolls stitch paired books bridging embroidered mouths agape.

WILLOW BRANCHES

Ty Zhang

I lie flat on my back
On the floor beside my bed.

Pressed against the boards, My spine cross-hatches the Earth.

I stare a line from the ceiling To the window.

Outside, the neighbourhood does battle Against thunderous July.

A summer storm has fastened itself To the yard.

I watch the wind whip the willows. The branches sway, but do not touch.

My soul sits on top of my chest A fragile jar.

An intemperate thing, It dips itself in pools of want.

If I got up too quickly, I could break it.

When you sculpted it in your palms, Was it to withstand this?

In the rain, the branches bend But do not touch.

EURYDICE

Samari Zysk

remember me as eurydice. wanton orpheus! – he wrote his melodies across my skin. he pulled me home, tooth by tooth.

he was golden summer, and i split his tongue. the viper that killed me did not kill me.

i brought him pears, skin hewn by sweetness – i wanted this. we bit into the honeyed flesh.

remember me as eurydice, as pores in the skin of my fruit, as the words held in my corpse's mouth: words written on the pears, words written on my thigh. remember me as the sweetness and its lie.

leave his words and let them die – i do not want to know my tragedy without its purpose anymore.

AAWP/UWRF PRIZES 2024

For works responding to the 2024 prize offered by AAWP in collaboration with the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival. The theme for 2024 was 'Words Shape Our Worlds'.

TRANSLATORS' PRIZE: JUDGE'S REPORT

Dominique Hecq

There were nine entries in the Translators' Prize this year, with one entry being an auto-translation and the majority of entries denoting a nostalgic bent in that they tackled long published works rather than contemporary – let alone controversial – pieces, as was the case in previous years.

The winning piece, 'Informal Abstraction', is a collaborative translation of 'Abstração informal' by Brazilian author Adriana Lisboa. It comes first for its accurate and passionate engagement with the original, from the Portuguese collection *Dias de Domingo*. Both translation and statement of intent for 'Informal Abstraction' strike me as the most sophisticated submission in this competition. The translation has style, rhythm, and does an excellent job at capturing the spirit of the original. At the same time, it is an accurate translation, which manages to get certain nuances, and offers welcome idiomaticity in English, where appropriate.

INFORMAL ABSTRACTION

Adriana Lisboa, translated by Alison Entrekin and students

The experiment began one night at dinner time. Someone on the other side of the table asked for the salt, and I even felt the subtle obedience of my right hand beginning to perform the gesture. I had already finished eating and my hand was resting on my lap, but the muscle spasm was almost imperceptible: my hand didn't actually lift. For some reason, I stopped myself there and didn't reach for the salt. But the person next to me, I can't remember who (at this point things are hazier in my memory, which is perhaps natural, given my new situation), the person next to me promptly picked up the salt shaker, clearly not giving it more than two seconds of thought, and passed it to the other side of the table.

It got me thinking. I initially came up with the experiment for my own amusement, like when I was a child and would cross my eyes in order to explore other ways of seeing. The following morning, I left early, explaining in a note that I had a dentist appointment and a couple of errands to run downtown. I left my coffee cup carefully dirty in the sink. When I got back, near lunch time, the cup was still there, along with some plates, glasses, and cutlery. I made some cold sandwiches instead of the usual hot lunch, with the excuse of the intense heat, arranged them on a tray, covered it with a square of tulle with embroidered edges and placed it on the table.

I went to answer messages and deliberately left some unanswered. Then I translated only four of the eight pages I needed to do that day so I wouldn't get too far behind, and spent the rest of the afternoon watching the mourning doves coming and going from their nest on the tree branch right outside my window.

By late afternoon the sandwiches had disappeared from the tray.

I noticed the dirty dishes were still piled up in the kitchen sink, but somehow it no longer bothered me, almost as if it were actually no concern of mine – almost as if I were seeing the image in a film.

I felt hungry. I hadn't eaten since morning. I sliced onions, palm hearts and carrots into rounds, I cut up the broccoli and the cauliflower, all this plus chickpeas and tomato sauce and coconut milk. I took my time with the seasoning – how lovely to smell the air filling with the steam rising from the pot. I made some white rice to go with it and received compliments at the table later on. When I finished eating, I claimed I had a headache and asked them to take care of the dishes. They responded with smiles, they were cheerful. There was a bottle of wine open and the conversation at the table flowed on for quite some time while I, in my room, was happy, with the lamp on and a book I'd picked up to read but didn't because at that moment I felt absolutely no need to. There was an excitement in being alive, there, alone, ignored by everyone.

I remembered my dear late grandmother, who kept a framed photo of Fidel Castro on her nightstand. She would shut herself in her room to meditate, she said it was to meditate, and for an hour we all had to keep quiet in the house. That imposed silence was nice.

My adventures became more and more ambitious as the days went by: not answering the doorbell, not responding to a question while pretending to be absorbed in reading the news, not watering the plants. I stopped replying altogether to the work-related messages that kept on arriving. It was nothing that someone else couldn't take care of in my place. As for the translation, I began to only do three and then two pages a day.

I had less and less of an appetite, which was surely one of the first signs that my experiment was working. I no longer felt a need for the morning cup of coffee that had been my unfailing, sugarless companion since I was thirteen or fourteen years of age. The world without that coffee was somehow turning into a more transparent world. In the

shower, my body felt a little thinner, my hair a little finer and my skin somewhat softer and more porous.

The dirty laundry appeared washed and ironed a couple of weeks later, but it wasn't me. The following Monday morning, the car had a full tank. On the Tuesday, the dog passed me by without any of the usual signs of enthusiasm acknowledging my presence.

The next, bolder step would be to sit at the dinner table and not eat. I was anxious. It was an important step, that one, which would no doubt dictate my following choices. I dressed discreetly, pulled back my hair, sat in my usual place, closed my eyes and crossed my hands on my lap. I waited in silence, unmoving, for the others to sit down and, to my utter fascination, no one spoke to me or asked if I was going to eat or not. They got up after an hour, presumably to make coffee. They tidied the kitchen, removed the tablecloth to shake out the crumbs. I was amazed. I sat there for a long time, acquainting myself with my new condition.

That abstraction of myself was still voluntary. That is: when I addressed other people, they talked to me as they usually did, and whenever I sent the odd message to a friend or colleague, the reply would come as quickly or slowly as always. This gave me extraordinary power. Being in the world, immersed in its thick broth, no longer meant asserting my visible and tangible presence. I could discreetly withdraw to my own space, so to speak, whenever I wanted, and the most extraordinary thing was the fact that my absence went unnoticed. Don't get me wrong: it's not that I was in any way irrelevant. Or that keeping quiet was a gift that I was bestowing. I don't have a problem with self-esteem. What was incredible was that, at those moments, I actually ceased to exist for others.

I spent many weeks wearing my new condition like a debutante of old dancing through the streets in her splendid new dress. Or, better yet, like a madwoman who allows herself to go naked in public without it causing the slightest commotion. What intimacy I was beginning to have with myself. How glorious it was. But I needed to take it even

further - the experiment wasn't finished.

I threw myself into the next, longer phase. I ceased all of my professional activities. A few weeks later I was astonished to read in the cultural supplement that the book I'd been working on was about to be published, translated by a well-known academic. I was amazed to learn that he'd been working on the translation for two years and had travelled to the Antilles to interview the author, a reclusive inhabitant of the isle of Marie-Galante in Guadeloupe. It was an adventure I had undertaken myself earlier in the year. The icing on the cake: a photo of the author and the translator together, with the Caribbean Sea in the background, exactly like the one I'd brought back to illustrate the published book. Only in my case, of course, it was the author and me.

My freedom was almost absolute now. Those who have never experienced it have no idea of the truly indescribable feeling of getting into the shower and having the water pass straight through you – of no longer presenting any resistance to anything at all.

The ultimate test came on the last Sunday, when the flower delivery man arrived with the bouquet of Peruvian lilies I'd ordered as part of the experiment. It was a typical Sunday, each person concretely tending to their lack of commitments, sprawling on the sofa, listening to music, pumping up a bicycle tire. The delivery man rang the doorbell. Someone went to answer it. I sat in the most comfortable armchair in the living room to watch the climax of that meticulous play that I was writing as the scenes and acts unfolded.

The delivery man said my name.

That's odd, said the person who'd opened the door. The address is right, but there's no one here by that name.

The delivery man scratched his head. Maybe someone who used to live here? he ventured.

No, no, we've been here almost twenty years, sorry.

From my armchair, I cleared my throat and announced: I'm here, the flowers are for me. But no one heard.

The delivery man walked off down the sidewalk holding the flowers, which I could see now without the walls being an obstacle. He looked like a jilted lover, with those lilies for nobody. A symbolic image in a world that was more and more abstract. Somehow, in a way I can't explain, I followed the course of his thoughts as his attention drifted from the flowers to the pack of cigarettes in his pocket. Despite the distance, I heard the song someone was singing as they passed him. I felt the hunger in the stomach of a rat in a vacant lot nearby, and the tips of the tiny feet of the ants that were climbing the trunk of an acacia on the corner. Sitting quietly in the armchair in the living room (the address was correct), I flourished, as if a kind of new skin were growing over an original wound.

TRANSLATORS' STATEMENT

Translated by Alison Entrekin and students: Joana Arari, Silvia Düssel Schiros, Cláudia S Cruz, Nicole Soek, Sarah J Johnson, Bianca de Oliveira, Lara Bourdin, Poliany Figueiredo, Lourenço Martins Marques, Gerson Ferracini, Anita Di Marco, Maria Jaqueline Evans, Siân Valvis, Alice B Osti Magalhães, Alexandre Veloso de Abreu, Thomas Nerney.

This was a collaborative translation by sixteen of my students and myself. As Silvia Düssel Schiros pointed out, the story is an allegory for the invisibility of the work of care, usually carried out by women. Once the work ceases, the person becomes disposable. The allegory is teased out over the course of the story, not revealing itself in its entirety until the last paragraph. There is also a gradual shift from real to surreal, beginning with a dinner table scene described with anatomical precision and ending with the nameless protagonist effectively becoming a ghost of herself.

Indeed, that dinner table scene generated some discussion. Many of the verbs used in the Portuguese (*executar*, *interromper*, *estender*) have direct cognates in English that tend to sound quite scientific in English. We felt that they hindered the flow. We worked hard to find solutions that keep the precision without the formality ('perform', 'stop', 'reach').

We added a phrase that isn't in the original: 'I made some cold sandwiches *instead of the usual hot lunch*' because we felt that there's an element of cultural realia that could be missed by Anglophone readers, for whom cold sandwiches might seem perfectly normal and not require an excuse. In Brazil, the midday meal is served hot and the person who cooks it will often spend an hour or more preparing it. The protagonist uses the heat as an excuse not to make a hot meal, one of her many ways

of extricating herself from worldly duties.

We were also mindful of the placement of the words 'carefully' and 'dirty' in 'I left my coffee cup *carefully dirty* in the sink.' It strikes an odd note, and, in a superficial reading, would have been easy to translate as 'I *carefully* left my *dirty* coffee cup in the sink.' But that's not it. The protagonist is careful to leave her dirty cup in the sink as part of her experiment.

Additionally, as Maria Jaqueline Evans observed, the text contains multiple echoes, and there were places where we had to be careful not to pick words that leaned too heavily into single readings. Thus, we translated *ferida original* literally as 'original wound' (instead of something like 'primordial wound') to keep an echo of 'original sin'.

AAWP/UWRF SHORT STORY PRIZE FOR EMERGING WRITERS: JUDGE'S REPORT

Dominique Hecq

Reading the entries for this year's prize had me wondering: should fiction reflect the times we live in? Despite the UWRF's set theme for the forthcoming festival, many submissions were stark and despairing, filled with fear, heartbreak, loneliness and grief.

While many stories were suffused with a general sense of malaise, a few stood out in their laser-sharp attention on particular personal issues. What has been striking is not the way that concerns in both the global and personal spheres have appeared again and again as thematic concerns, but in the stylistic approaches that have been used to communicate these. This is something that I took into account when reviewing my longlist of ten pieces, taking a break of six weeks before first reading and re-reading. In consequence, I made a shortlist of the five pieces that stayed with me for that length of time and chose as winner the one that made the most emotional impact.

I checked myself a week later: was I responding to a personal preference for the smooth run about grief concerning a mother and son in a sparse, exquisitely observed and balanced narrative? No. Pressed to the edge of despair, 'Water Casting' remained for me an empathic, understated and sharp story of palpable grief written by a son witnessing the decline of a mother afflicted with a terminal illness. I love short fiction, the way a writer can traverse both inner and outer landscapes in a fixed quota of words, giving us an open ending – ethereal and tantalising as mist rising above water. This year's winning entry offered such a moment of wonder.

WATER CASTING

Jane Crowley

Dad and I throw ourselves into the vehicle, surrendering our bodies to be taken away. A confused scent of artificial lavender, aged leather and the driver's stale sweat is a strong smack in the face, but it's better than the bushfire smoke, so the windows stay closed.

'Going on holidays or heading home?'

Dad keeps his eyes out the window. He's not usually one to stilt a conversation.

'A holiday, I suppose. To see Grandma in Ireland,' I reply.

'Are you Irish?' The driver directs back to Dad.

'I was born in Ireland, but Australia is my home.'

I know he is wondering if Australia is still his home now that you are no longer here.

We drive slowly past all the familiar sites. The lemon tree on the corner, Joe's Grocer still selling red frogs for five cents, the church market that I would rollerblade to for roasted peanuts and watermelon juice, and the blur of retail shops and cafes lined with dusty Christmas decorations sparkling thoughtfully in the smog.

Taking a taxi to the airport at dawn is a paradoxically alien and nostalgic experience. While preparing for foreign lands, I am confronted by the ties to home I am leaving.

A glaring inflatable Santa flashes its red lights as the airport sign comes into view. Leaning on the 'S' of 'Sydney', he is surrounded by fake white snow, now a hazy bronze.

I wonder if there will be snow in Ireland. A bracing change from the burnt country here. I want to stretch out in it, all starry-eyed and silvery, to feel the ice-cold crystals purge my charred flesh and restore some element of human back into me. We drag our suitcases through the revolving doors to the halls that pulsate with a vastness of humanity. Thousands of individual itineraries are converged unaware of one another, but the feeling of anticipation and journey is collective. Nothing says 'escape' like an airport, and I sense a glimmer of hope for the first time.

Please put a gap between me and my grief, the whole Indian Ocean.

At the gate's waiting area, even those not travelling alone seem alone. A woman in a sharp black suit and holding a leather handbag looks intently at her laptop, violently typing something that seems imminent. She pauses and looks up, but her eyes go straight through me, perhaps already to her meeting in Singapore. An older man with neat navy trousers and bleached white socks is looking out the window, but his eyes are not moving with the planes.

It makes sense for me to be in this space right now, where the lines to both lives at home and at the destination are severed.

Onboard, the crackling tunes of 'Silent Night' break in and out awkwardly between the pilot's commentary and the staff are all wearing reindeer ears. I lean into my cabin window to take in the view of the dark ash-cloud below as we reach height, the true magnitude of the bushfires making themselves known as the cloud swallows the entire east coast. My body separates from it and my lungs relax, protected now.

I think of your lungs, riddled black with cancer and shake myself of the thought before laying back into my pillow that smells faintly of kerosene.

The cloud shrinks the further we separate.

See how small we are.

Large thoughts require large views.

*

The week before you died, I flew north for a conference. The hinterland that I remembered as wet and green was bone-dry and brown. The skies

carried an ominous orange glow from the nearby fires, and the smoke was thick in the air. We were told we were safe, but it was important to wear a N95 mask outside.

There were no phones because we were told to 'disconnect to reconnect'. I felt satisfied by the fact that I was truly immersing myself in the full experience, intentionally attuned to the lifeforces around me so I could sharpen my focus for the tasks at hand. In hindsight, it feels grossly narcistic that I even had the capacity to exercise my mind in that way.

When I phoned you on the last day, you sounded tired and foggy. I assumed you had been sleeping but you told me you had not. I started talking at you anyway, without investigating what else might be making you distant. It was not the first time I played this charade, using humour and distraction to avoid a new hard truth that was trying to scratch its way in until its fingertips bled. This must have made you feel so alone.

So, I told you about the personality tests we did to better understand the different working styles of our colleagues. I told you how my results showed that, although I maintain a calm exterior, I often worry about unpredictable and uncontrollable events. That I prefer to avoid high-pressure situations but am happy to do my part to contribute to the team's success. That I see emotionally charged situations as a threat to my stability and security, so may try and change the topic or just shut down. Ultimately, my most valuable contributions to the workplace were consistency, reliability and my commitment to quality. And these were realised through the role I play as the organiser, the connector and the resolver.

You validated my words with your 'humm's and 'ahhhh's, but this time they were delayed or inserted at strange points of the sentence. I rationalised this as your attempt to listen while not being able to hear me properly. Perhaps the line was bad, or perhaps you were more tired than you realised. I asked how you were and you exclaimed with enthusiasm, 'Good! Pretty good, yeah, nothing new.'

I chose to believe you.

When I got home, you were sitting on the daybed in a sea of prescription packets, fumbling with your diary, ink all over your hands from a leaking pen. Dad was sitting by your side, helping you work through what needed to be taken next.

'Hi Mum,' I interrupted.

Dad's face was weary and relieved to see me. You seemed your normal self, beaming with the smile that showed to the back of your molars. And then I saw the diary. What was a meticulously organised record of handwritten lists against dates and times, was now an unrecognisable and unreadable mess.

I went hot.

'You've got ink all over your hands, Mum. Let me wipe it off.' I jumped up to get a washer.

Dad followed me.

'Is everything ok?' I asked.

'I think so,' he replied, tiredly, as he started cleaning his very-clean glasses. 'She's been a bit forgetful with her pills today. I might grab one of those boxes that organises them by days of the week.'

There was a clear change but perhaps we were not going to talk about it that day.

I headed back into the room and wiped the ink off your hands slowly. The same hands that cleaned mine when I was small. Brown, soft and creased, symbolising a concentration of comfort and intimacy in its most simplified form.

'We were just about to go for an afternoon walk.' Dad followed in.

'I just need to take my pills,' you replied.

'You just took them, love,' Dad said gently.

'Oh yes!' You laughed along, too, with an edge of embarrassment.

When you returned from the park, Dad announced he was making veal schnitzel with lemon silverbeet for dinner, your favourite.

As I was setting the table you asked me, 'Shall we take our pre-dinner walk?'

I went hot again.

I chose to believe that you just felt like another walk with me. So, we headed out.

The smoke from the fires had started to travel into the cities, and the sky over the harbour was coated in a thick brown smog. The wind was dry and warm, and the murky water whipped around in chunks like rocky road. I asked you if you had seen the resident fur seal lately, but you didn't respond.

Your eyes were glazed over, looking very far away.

We found a spot on a bench. I watched the ferry dock into the wharf with a loud clank as the working population disembarked in a line. The normality of the scene punched me in the gut like a bowling ball.

We watched the dogs play in silence. You were smiling.

An owner of two very affectionate dalmatians attempted conversation with us. You smiled along and nodded in wobbles. I wondered if she noticed you weren't there.

We headed back up the hill and your breath was short and wheezy. Your eyelids looked heavy, and your head bobbed around on your neck like a buoy in the sea.

And then you fell backwards.

I caught you in my arms.

What the hell was happening?

Your back leant into my chest as I pushed you up the hill home.

Dad was plating up the schnitzel when we got home. I didn't tell him what happened.

You poked your fork around the spinach. The schnitzel was delicious but the spinach was watery and overcooked.

'You don't have to eat it love. It's disgusting, I'm sorry,' he laughed. I laughed along with him, participating in the charade.

What was this strange performance? Should we have called an ambulance?

I helped you into bed and got out the oxygen. Maybe the smoke outside was too much. Dad sat with you, holding your hand. I smashed around the house, cleaning up after dinner. I wish I did less cleaning and more hand holding but I played the role of the organiser, the connector and the resolver.

Things got worse that night. You were disorientated. Your speech was slurred. You kept sliding off your mattress but then couldn't lift yourself back into bed. We called an ambulance.

In hospital, you were asking the doctors about your baby. They ignored you and told us you were suffering from drug-induced delirium. It was a sign that your liver was no longer absorbing the medication. They could replace it with another sort that was absorbed by the kidneys, but it was a sign that things were shutting down.

Then you asked Dad if you had lost the baby.

Dad told you that you were not having another baby.

You looked confused and relieved.

You asked us, then, why you were in hospital?

We had to tell you, all over again, that you were in hospital because you had a terminal illness.

And then, all over again, you had to process this as new news, but this time with less time.

We stayed with you until you fell asleep. Then, Dad and I drove over to Bondi. It was late but it didn't matter. We jumped into the ocean with our clothes on. We bought gelato and sat on the beach, dripping, while we watched the waves pound each other. Although the sky was smoky, the moon was still really bright that night, but the ocean was really black.

*

Mountain ridges appear as bubbling volcanos.

An oozing sea of lava edges closer and closer.

Scroll.

Flames leap fifty meters into the air.

Fire tornadoes, ember blizzards and a rain of ash.

Scroll.

Sirens alarm sleepy towns announcing the immanent red glow.

Cars are packed with whole livelihoods.

For some it's too late.

One man takes refuge in his ceramics kiln.

Scroll.

Crowds huddle in beaches ringed by fire, their faces hidden behind gas masks and snorkels.

Some sit in the water, sheltering under boat jetties.

Some are driven further out to sea, floating in dinghies amid the orange haze.

Scroll

Headlines tell us it is unprecedented and at its peak.

The prime minister is on vacation in Hawaii.

Board shorts, beers and shaking the shaka.

I dream of water and ice and snow. I dream of creeks and rivers and waterfalls and lakes and glaciers and oceans and rain. I dream of wet rainforests, soggy marshes, dripping clouds, frosty fields and snowy mountains. And, when I wake in the cocoon of Grandma's guest room in the Irish seaside town of Dún Laoghaire with the rose-embroidered quilt nursing me like a baby, I am there in the wet, too, as the rain lashes the windows. Each day, the coating of water on the house seeps deeper into my skin, diluting my blood, quenching the thirst of my burnt organs and dry bones.

The room overlooks the garden where a Scots pine huddles in the back corner and beds of irises and Christmas roses line the neighbour's wall. The lawn, instead of the rusty husk at home, is forever green and juicy. At certain times of the day, the downpour eases into a gentle pattering and I sit up against the window to follow the drops dribbling down the glass slowly with my finger, watching them melt into one another and morph into something heavier to be dragged down and smash on the sill.

Sometimes I can hear cheerful chatter over the neighbours' wall after school, the father yelling in Gaelic every now and again. Occasionally, there is a faint flutter from downstairs like the hum of RTÉ radio: Auntie dropping in when she walks the dog, or the creak of the floorboards from Dad's room, which signal he is getting up for a meal.

I mostly stay in this room, and I do not leave the house for the first week. It is my burrow, my private shelter. Here, I recall lost images that I can't access when I am with others. The fluorescent hospital rooms, the contorted shapes of your body, which seemed twisted because you had become so thin, and the suffocating layer of thick bushfire smoke. It is not that I enjoy seeing these images again but they make me feel closer to you.

On the eighth day, the rain stops.

A thick, dark cloud hovers low but the windows are dry. I pull myself out of my rosebud, my body stiff and heavy, and make my way downstairs. The stone cottage is much darker on the ground level. The fire is a constant warm glow in the corner but it feels wrong to be intentionally burning anything right now.

There is a peppery scent of black pudding and rusk sausages in the pan, and the sweetness of jam bubbling on the stove. Grandma is in the kitchen, her shamrock apron wrapped around her thick, soft waist as she pours hot liquid blackberries into jars.

Dad sits with her in silence, nursing a pot of coffee and concentrating on the crossword.

He does not look up as I enter.

He has not said a word since we arrived.

'Hi love, how are you feeling today?' Grandma asks as she serves me up a heaped plate.

I push the sausages around with my fork for a while, before sliding them into my mouth one by one, the sweet juicy pork bursting with each bite.

'I am going for a walk this morning' I announce.

I wait for Dad to respond.

'Great idea,' says Grandma. 'Careful on the icy footpaths.'

A wave of glass-sharp air belts me in the face as I push the door open. The lawn crunches like nuts under my boots and I head up the stone path, skidding slightly on the ice when I turn the corner. It turns into a soggy track and I enter a sparse forest of sessile oak, holly and hazel, their trunks dressed head-to-toe in lichen. As the frost melts, a carpet of decomposing autumn leaves is revealed. Bendy, twisty branches burst with colour and I imagine the mythical beasts and magical creatures that are embedded in this place.

The path gets steeper and heat builds in my chest. Thick clouds of mist billow out of my mouth to join the forest fog. And then I think of the smoke clouds at home. Carrying colours of the burnt things in it. Red and black. And how shallow your breath was at the end.

The woods become sparse and I reach for the sky. It breaks open at the top of the hill and I am there, at the edge of the world, gazing over the wide Irish Sea. And I think I can hear the earth turning.

It is after ten but the sun is low and slow to rise, tinting the cones of the mountains behind me. Grandma says it never gets high enough at this time of year to dry anything. I peer over the edge to catch the view of a stony beach underneath. Three women in their swimsuits are

running at the waves. They are tiny dots from where I stand but I can feel their thrill as they plunge into the icy foam.

An obelisk is perched at the cliff's edge. A plaque before it reads '... it was erected to commemorate nothing, but to point out to the stranger in search of the picturesque.' I identify with the searching stranger and take a seat in its shelter.

Beside the obelisk stands a pyramid of steps made of granite and limestone. This must be the wishing stone that Grandma has always talked about. Local folklore has it that, if you walk around each level of the pyramid from the bottom to the top and look out in the direction of the church on an island, your wish will come true.

I make a wish, but I can't find the church or the island.

A man in a red parker climbs over the rocks with his labrador.

'Mornin'!' He beams, his accent thick. His nose is big and pink, and his smile is as wide as a banana.

'Nice day.' I smile as he passes briskly.

'Not for long,' he calls back, 'there's more rain comin'! More than we have ever seen, even for Ireland!'

And then he is gone again.

He seems nervous but I am excited by the thought.

More nourishing wet.

Far away from the smoke and fire.

AAWP/UWRF POETRY PRIZE FOR EMERGING WRITERS: JUDGE'S REPORT

Dominique Hecq

There was an upsurge in poetry entries this year and a marked increase in the quality of submissions in stanzaic free verse; short stanzas of two lines were prevalent. To my delight, formal experimentation, particularly in the area of prose poetry and hybrid forms, was also represented. Although the majority of pieces tapped into the purely personal, some also tackled the social and political. The three top listed entries represent this thematic and formal diversity.

Such has been the variety of submissions that the selection of a winner has bubbled at the back – and then front – of my mind for over six consecutive weeks. The three poems that stayed with me are: 'Circle Time' for its striking image/s; 'After' for the poignancy of its lingering grief; and 'Riddle' for its interpellating urgency.

There were other compelling pieces, of course, but the execution often felt somewhat flawed to me. So, I thought I'd give some advice to emerging poets. In poetry, less is more: work on the conciseness of lines; don't state the obvious; avoid melodrama, clichés and mixed metaphors; and find a snappy title for your poem.

CIRCLE TIME

Joanne Ambrose

The flattened cigarette butts at our feet a telltale sign, smudged traces of the white man's smoking ceremony a group of linesmen held at the Lakeland Roadhouse.

Assorted drive-in drive-out workers stood around swapping stories of their challenges getting the job done in one of the scattered Cape towns or communities.

At Laura a different ritual saw lines of dark men and women painted up with ochre hands placed among cream dots and dashes

wearing grass skirts and loose lap-laps.

They entered the circle in single file in a manner showing casual intent.

Their leader welcomed the crowd and chanted to the dreamtime beat of clacking clapsticks.

The assembled group shared age-old tales giving praise and respect to animal totems and foe, bodies becoming sea eagles, crocodiles, a reclining mob of kangaroos. A soberer finale ensued when a coastal troupe enacted a war dance and cautionary tale, warning against marrying outside the tribe or going fishing on the incoming tide.

or going fishing on the incoming tide.

Brandishing benign spears

Shaking arms and legs in friendly fire
leaving the ring one by one,
the dancers turned their backs on the dust as it slowly settled
In clouds of distant remembering.

THE GARY CREW AWARD

Ross Watkins (competition organiser)

The Gary Crew Award, established in 2010, is a prestigious writing competition designed to recognise and celebrate the creative talent of writers at the University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) in Queensland, Australia. Named in honour of acclaimed children's author and Emeritus Professor Gary Crew, who founded UniSC's Creative Writing programs, the award reflects the values Crew embodies: dedication, persistence, and innovative thinking. The award serves as a testament to the achievements of both established and emerging writers within the UniSC community, fostering excellence in creative writing.

Winners of the Gary Crew Award are typically chosen through a rigorous evaluation process by a panel of judges composed of UniSC's creative writing faculty. Submissions are assessed based on several criteria, including originality, creativity, writing style, and overall literary merit. The judges look for works that demonstrate exceptional storytelling, a mastery of language, and the ability to engage readers through meaningful themes. Both emerging and experienced writers are encouraged to participate, with the goal of recognising diverse voices and high-quality writing. The selection process ensures that winners represent the best of creative writing at UniSC.

A GOOD CUP OF TEA CAN FIX ANYTHING

Adam Brannigan (winning prose entry)

Auntie used to say, there's nothing that a good cup of tea can't fix. I went to her place to cry on her shoulder after the referendum defeat, tired and teary after those long months of campaigning and walking around the town putting 'Yes' pamphlets into letterboxes; getting lip and racist shit yelled at me. Australians all let us rejoice? Nah, this country's gone to the dogs, cus.

We both liked strong black tea, three sugars, sweet, just like our men, eh Aunty, I said. True that, she replied, and we both cracked up. She'd always accepted me for who I was; all my un/certainties. She was the first one to give me a hug when I came out trans at dad's fiftieth. She mentioned that she'd felt off lately, might be her diabetes playing up, she'd go to the health service, get some tests done, get it sorted. I told her she was as fit as a mallee bull, and she'd be around for a while yet.

That was a few weeks before her results came back: stage IV, colorectal cancer. It runs in the family, she said a little bit later, in the hospice, holding my hand. When was the last time you went to the doctor, love?

After our sorry business we were clearing out her place. There were two cups of tea on her outdoor table, gone cold, gone bad, gone real mouldy. I wonder which one of us mob had come to her, after I had, to cry on her shoulder, to be told the same fucken lie—that a good cup of tea can fix anything.

TWO POEMS FROM THE COLLECTION FRAGMENTS OF DESPAIR: LOVE LOST, MINDS UNWOUND PT 1

Emily Obst (winning poetry entry)

Fragments of Despair is a collection of poetry dedicated to the lost souls of the modern world. This dedication explores the inner workings of mental illness, losing your sanity and finding it again, and questioning intangible truths that have been laid across the warping of time.

THE BEAUTIFUL MADNESS OF BECOMING SANE AGAIN

If you are shattered like a glass vase and you only have string left to pull you back together, embroider art onto your skin where the broken pieces are. It is not the same as it once was and the cracks are never gone, but you are grown, and beautiful, and covered in art.

WARPING WORDS

How many times can you rearrange the same words to get across the feeling, the message, the purpose of what you're trying to say without falling into the same old cliché that has left the lips of poets and ordinaries alike, travelling through the air into the ears of those who need to hear it but have already heard it a thousand different ways before.

[266]

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Léa Abi Zeid Daou is a PhD candidate, writer, filmmaker and visual artist.

Richard James Allen's thirteenth book, *Text Messages from the Universe* (Flying Island Books, 2023), reflects a lifelong engagement with Buddhist and Yogic philosophies. A multi-award-winning poet, filmmaker, choreographer and performer, and an Artistic Director of The Physical TV Company, his work has been screened, published and performed widely across six continents. He lives in Sydney on unceded Gadigal lands.

Joanne Ambrose (winner, 2024 AAWP/UWRF Poetry Prize for Emerging Writers) is a Brisbane writer inspired by her travels and experiences in her home state of Queensland and further afield. Her work as a teacher and school counsellor in Indigenous communities and regional areas has provided the opportunity to engage with vibrant and talented people and cultures.

Logan Anthony is an American queer writer and transgender artist from Indiana. Anthony holds a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing & English and works as freelance writer. Find Logan's work in *Thin Air Magazine*, *Hare's Paw Literary Journal*, *The Madison Review*, *Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *The Write Launch*, and more. You can read their work at www.thewritinglog.com and follow them on social media @the_writing_log.

Artisan baker by trade, **Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi** has been published in numerous literary journals. Winner of the Scribes Valley short story writing contest, he has been a Pushcart Prize nominee, and twice nominated for Sundress Publications' Best of the Net. In addition to several short pieces, he is currently working on his debut novel.

Emma Ashmere is the author of *Dreams They Forgot* and *The Floating Garden*, which was shortlisted for the Small Press Network's Book of the Year. Winner of the joanne burns Microlit Award 2024, Emma has been published in the *Age*, *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Griffith Review*, *Furphy Anthology*, and the Commonwealth Foundation's magazine, *adda*. She/her. Living on Bundjalung country.

Annah Atane is a Nigerian writer. Her works have appeared in the *Brittle Paper*, *The Kalahari Review*, *Valiant Scribe*, *Ric Journal* and elsewhere.

Ani Bachan is a Toronto-based student and occasional writer. She has been previously published in *Gyroscope Review, Bear Paw Arts Journal, Phantom Kangaroo*, and others.

Eugen Bacon is an African Australian author. She is a British Fantasy Award winner, a twice World Fantasy Award finalist, and a finalist in other awards, including the Shirley Jackson Awards, the Philip K. Dick Award, and the Nommo Awards for speculative fiction

by Africans. *Danged Black Thing* (Transit Lounge, 2021) made the Otherwise Award Honor List as a 'sharp collection of Afro-Surrealist work'.

Iqbal Barkat, an artist and screen educator based in Sydney, employs participatory arts to explore community stories through theatre, writing, dance and film. Their work, including the observational documentary 'This Is Our School', delves into diasporic narratives and global issues, challenging conventional narratives and fostering progressive dialogue.

Hannah Behrens is a poet, freelance writer, and writing coach. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Colorado. She is a native of Boulder, Colorado, and has lived in the Netherlands since 2016. She is the co-leader of Poetry Critique Group Amsterdam.

Aurora Bodenhamer resides in Washington state (USA.) She is currently working on her first short story collection and publishes interactive stories on her website ilovejumbotrons.com

Margaret Bradstock has nine published collections of poetry, including *The Pomelo Tree* (winner of the Wesley Michel Wright Prize) and *Barnacle Rock* (winner of the Woollahra Festival Award, 2014). Editor of *Antipodes* (2011) and *Caring for Country* (2017), Margaret won the Banjo Paterson Poetry Award in 2014, 2015 and 2017. Her latest collection is *Alchemy of the Sun* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2024).

Adam Brannigan (prose winner, 2024 Gary Crew Award) writes across genres, favouring the surreal, the dis/rupted. His award-winning work has been published in international and Australian anthologies and journals. Adam is a Bardi man but has other bloodlines that whisper their agonies and ecstasies to him.

Lachlan Brown is a Senior Lecturer in English at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga. He has been shortlisted and commended for various poetry prizes including the Newcastle Poetry Prize, the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize, and the Peter Porter Poetry Prize. Lachlan has published two volumes of poetry with Giramondo and has worked on poetry commissions with groups including the Powerhouse Museum and ABC Everyday.

John Paul Caponigro is an internationally collected visual artist and published author. His poetry has been published in over 50 literary journals on 5 continents, including the *Ekphrastic Review, The Connecticut River Review,* and *Blithe Spirit.* He leads unique adventures in the wildest places on earth to help participants make deeper connections with nature and themselves creatively.

WH Chong is an artist and book designer. He has published poetry in *Cordite, Rabbit, Meanjin* and *Griffith Review,* among others. His 2023 book *Portraits* collected 300 of his pictures ('Chong's book is VERY RICH' – Helen Garner).

Stephen Coates comes from New Zealand, although he has been living in Japan for many years. His stories have appeared in *Meniscus* and various other journals in New Zealand and the United States. His story 'Brendon Varney Opens the Door' took third place in the 2022 Sargeson Prize, New Zealand's richest short story competition. He is a firm believer in Terry Pratchett's maxim that 'Writing is the most fun you can have by yourself.'

Aidan Coleman has published three collections of poetry, most recently *Mount Sumptuous* (Wakefield Press, 2020). Aidan is a Senior Lecturer at Southern Cross University (Gold Coast), and the Coordinator for Creative Writing.

Mary Cresswell is from Los Angeles and lives on New Zealand's Kapiti Coast. Recent books are *Fish Stories* (Canterbury University Press, 2015) and *Body Politic* (The Cuba Press, Wellington, 2020).

Jane Crowley (winner, 2024 AAWP/UWRF short story award for emerging writers) is an emerging writer on Dharawal land, having published in *Overland*, *Antipodes* and with independent Sydney press, Spineless Wonders. She is completing her Masters of Creative Writing at Western Sydney University and is currently writing fiction and a personal essay that explores the expression of grief in relation to home, place and solastalgia.

Michael Cunliffe sprouted from an alien seed pod rumoured to have been scattered in the Scottish Highlands by the sons of the notorious Ragnar Lothbrok around a thousand years ago. At an unknown point in time he found himself transported by some little-known form of alien technology to the strange lands of Far North Queensland, Australia. Later in life he became a hippie, grew his hair long, drank schooners of ice-cold beer and listened to articulate neo-Grunge Rock artists. Now he enjoys peace and quiet. And he writes poetry.

Andrew Darling is a poet, singer/songwriter, and jazz trumpeter. He has performed internationally as a musician and is a music educator in high schools. He lives in rural Healesville, Victoria and has issues with sleep. His poetry has appeared in publications such as *Australian Poetry Journal, Cordite Poetry Review*, and WA Poets Inc.'s 2024 *Poetry d'Amour Love Poetry Anthology*.

Sunday Dutro is a creative nonfiction writer with publications in or forthcoming with *Bear Paw Arts Journal, Panorama Journal, Drexel's Paper Dragon,* and *BarBar*. She is a UCDavis, Writing by Writers Manuscript Boot-Camp, and Haven I Writing Retreat alum. Sunday lives in Montana with her family, and is actively working on a memoir.

Alison Entrekin (winner, 2024 AAWP/UWRF Translators' prize) is a prize-winning Australian literary translator from the Portuguese. She has translated many of Brazil's most beloved works of literature, including Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart*, Paulo Lins's *City of God* and José Mauro de Vasconcelos's *My Sweet Orange Tree*. Her students are based all over the world and get together once a week for lively literary translation classes online.

Susan Fealy is a poet and clinical psychologist living in Naarm/Melbourne.

Jen Francis, a doctoral student of written communications at the University of the Sunshine Coast, is investigating matrilineal re-storying to enrich insight into intergenerational Australian feminisms. Jen is particularly interested in the ways that sharing individual lived experience can create connection, provide insight and inform direction for both policy and practice. Jen's had a long and varied career spanning youth-oriented clinical psychology, content production, copy-writing, marketing, and film.

MK Francisco lives in Seattle, Washington. A graduate of the University of Washington MFA program, her work has appeared in *Fence*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *Inverted Syntax*.

Marcelle Freiman was born in South Africa in 1951 and migrated to the UK in 1977, then to Australia in 1981. Her current poetry project is a memoir focused on her family's history and on race. Her most recent book is *Spirit Level* (Puncher & Wattman, 2021). Her poetry also appears in *Antipodes, Axon: Creative Explorations, AP Journal, AP Anthology, Cordite, Mascara, Meanjin, Meniscus, Newcastle Poetry Anthology, StylusLit* and *Westerly*, among others. She is an Honorary Associate Professor at Macquarie University.

Leone Gabrielle writes in company of winter roses and warm fires, from Seymour, a snaking town on Taungurung country. Shortlisted: Minds Shine Bright, Spineless Wonders, La Piccioletta Barca. Published: *Plumwood Mountain, Meanjin Quarterly, Rochford St. Review, KalliopeX.* Leone also loves to knit socks, studies German and rakes paths at her local park.

Alicia Gadd-Carolan is a writer based in Naarm. She recently completed her Masters of Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing at the University of Melbourne. Her work has been published in *Meanjin, Voiceworks*, the *Suburban Review, Stereo Stories*, and ABC Online.

Penel Gibson is a Melbourne writer. Her work has been published in *Meanjin*, *Forty South*, and two editions of the *Margaret River Anthology*.

Ed Go is a Chinese-Filipino-Portuguese-English-Scottish-Irish American writer raised in Massachusetts, Virginia, Alaska, Hawaii and Connecticut. His writings have been

published in various online and print journals and anthologies, and his chapbook *Deleted Scenes from the Autobiography of Ed Go as told by Napoleon Id* was published in 2014 by Other Rooms Press, and 'new machines', a sequence of twenty-one prose poems, in the anthology *Urgent Bards* in 2016 by Urbantgarde Press.

Keith Goh Johnson is a second-generation writer and filmmaker of Dutch and Straits Chinese (Peranakan) descent working on unceded Gadigal land. His work was highly commended in the Forty South Tasmanian Writers' Prize 2023, a shortlisted finalist for The Best Australian Yarn 2023 and longlisted for the Peter Carey Short Story Award and the Furphy Short Story Award. He has been published in *The Saltbush Review, Forty South Anthology* 2023 and *The West Australian*. His short films have screened in thirty-seven international film festivals. He completed a PhD in neurophysiology and a Master of Public Health at Harvard University.

Megan Gordon is a writer and poet from Redfern, Sydney. A former music journalist, she now works as a freelance writer in the arts for events and organisations like Vivid Sydney, the Museum of Contemporary Art and Punchdrunk. Her poetry explores both the personal and the profound, with each line an attempt to create a bridge of curiosity between writer and reader. When she's not writing words, she's singing them in her local choir (or shower) or cooking a curry from scratch.

Hei Gou is from Adelaide, Australia. Their work has appeared in *Overland, Island* and *Existere*.

Lázaro Gutiérrez is a Cuban-American poet, writer, and essayist. His work is found or is forthcoming in *Tint Journal, Snapdragon: A Journal of Art & Healing, Latino Literatures, Discretionary Love, Molecule – A Tiny Lit Mag, Somos en Escrito, Barzakh Magazine, Frontera Lit, Azahares Literary Magazine, SOMOS Latinx Literary Magazine, and BarBar.*

Djuna Hallsworth has a PhD in Cultural Studies and a BA in English and Communications. She has published short-form fiction and photographs in the *Sydney University Anthology* and is the author of the academic monograph, *Danish Mothers On-Screen* as well as several journal articles and book reviews for esteemed journals. She is interested in capturing both the peculiar and the mundane in everyday interactions, and in imagining worlds subtly and comfortingly different to our own.

Nicola Hamer is a writer and researcher currently based in the UK. She is working on a doctoral project about the poetics of ecological grief, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Kristin Hannaford writes and resides in Yeppoon, Central Queensland. When not gardening or bushwalking, she is busy teaching English to high-school students.

Kristin's most recent collection of poetry is *Curio* (Walleah Press 2014). Her work has been published in kaleidoscopic places such as the *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Antipodes*, *Overland* and the *Weekend Australian Review*. She has received awards and has been shortlisted for her creative work.

Kirwan Henry lives in Melbourne, Australia. Her poems have been published in *Blue Dog: Australian Poetry, HEAT, Westerly, Cordite* and *Best of Australian Poems* 2022. She was longlisted in the 2023 Liquid Amber Poetry Prize and shortlisted in the 2024 Calanthe Poetry Prize.

D. A. Hosek's poetry has appeared in Belt Magazine, Door Is a Jar, Exacting Clam, Invisible City, I-70 Review 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.

Christine Imperial is a queer Filipino writer based in Oakland, CA. Her debut book *Mistaken for an Empire* was published with Mad Creek Books as the 2021 Gournay Prize Recipient. Her work has been published in *The Kenyon Review, POETRY, Poets and Writers*, among others. She is currently a Cultural Studies PhD student at UC Davis, and holds an MFA from CalArts.

Dorothy Johnston is the author of thirteen novels, including two mystery quartets. Two of her literary novels, *One for the Master* and *Ruth*, have been shortlisted for the Miles Franklin award. Dorothy has published short stories, reviews and essays in anthologies, journals and major Australian newspapers. She lives in Ocean Grove on the south coast of Victoria.

Elaina Knipple is a student at the University of Missouri, where she studies secondary English education and creative writing. Her work has appeared in the university's literary magazine, *EPIC*, as well as *Same Faces Collective*, *The Sheepshead Review*, and *Necessary Fiction*. She can often be found wasting time by considering the major implications of her existence and playing online solitaire.

Both **Alex Kudera's** award-winning debut, *Fight for Your Long Day* (Atticus Books 2010), and second novel, *Auggie's Revenge* (Beating Windward Press 2016), concern the disturbing—and darkly comic—plight of the pay-per-course academic. His published short stories include 'A Thanksgiving' (Eclectica Magazine), 'Going to Hell' (Soyos Books), and 'Bombing from Above' (Heavy Feather Review). A typical year for Kudera includes teaching, walking, reading, writing, and avoiding calamity as best he can.

Ella Kurz is a writer from Ngunnawal Country, Australia. She co-edited the anthology *What We Carry: Poetry on Childbearing* (Recent Work Press, 2021) and authored *My*

Mother is a Midwife (Library For All, 2019). A number of her poems have been published online and in print.

Wes Lee lives in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. She has three poetry collections. Her work has appeared in an array of publications, including *Best New Zealand Poems, Westerly, The London Magazine, Landfall, The Stinging Fly, Cordite.* Most recently she was awarded The Free Verse Prize 2024, by The Poetry Society, in London, and the Heroines/Joyce Parkes Women's Writing Prize 2022, in New South Wales.

Hugh Leitwell is a queer writer and communicator living and working in Naarm. A graduate of the University of Melbourne's Masters of Creative Writing, Editing and Publishing, and a 2024 Wheeler Centre Hot Desk Fellow, Hugh is currently working on a novella that speaks back to a lack of representation of queer fathering in literature. His work has appeared in *The Monthly, Cordite Poetry Review, Westerly Magazine, The Suburban Review* and *Archer Magazine*, among others.

Adriana Lisboa (author, 2024 AAWP/UWRF Translators' prize) was born in Rio de Janeiro. She is the author of many widely translated novels, as well as poetry, short stories, essays, and children's books. Her 2001 novel Symphony in White received the prestigious José Saramago Prize. Her poetry collection, Equator, was published by Poetrywala in 2019.

Samara Lo is an author from Sydney, Australia, with short fiction published in anthologies *Shadows in the* Water and *Immigrant Sci Fi Short Stories* (both Flame Tree Studio 2024; 2023) *Daily Science Fiction*, the *Heart will Find a Way Anthology, The Saltbush Review* and others. She is the recipient of the CopyrightAgency's WestWords Emerging Writers Fellowship and Residency, and has been an Aurealis Awards judge.

Chrisanne Lombard /krı'zɑ:n 'lombɑ:rd/ is an Afrikaner writing on unceded Ngunnawal and Ngambri country, where she is completing a Bachelor of Creative Writing at the University of Canberra. She left South Africa for Australia when she was 21 and spent her early parenthood years in Finland. Through poetry she explores her connections to place, language and family.

Rowan MacDonald is a writer and musician from lutruwita (Tasmania, Australia). He is a recipient of the 2023 Kenan Ince Memorial Prize for Prose and Poetry, and his shortform fiction is published in *New Writing Scotland, Bright Flash Literary Review, The Ignatian Literary Magazine, Sans. PRESS*, and *Overland* (forthcoming). His dog, Rosie, has been there for every word.

Blair Martin grew up on a small farm in Lancaster County, PA. They received their PhD in Clinical Psychology from Bowling Green State University and teach at Joliet Junior

College. Their work has appeared in/is forthcoming in *Anti-Heroin Chic, New Feathers Anthology, Does It Have Pockets, Knee Brace Press* and elsewhere.

Kate Maxwell grew up in the Australian bush. Now a city dweller, her interests include film, wine, and sleeping. Her award-winning work has been featured in both Australian and international publications, such as *Cordite, StylusLit, Meniscus, Books Ireland, Skylight 47* and *The Galway Review*. Kate has two poetry anthologies, *Never Good at Maths* (Interactive Publications 2021) and *Down the Rabbit Hole* (Ginninderra 2023).

Hannah McCann is an academic and writer living and working on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people. She has published essays in *Overland, Meanjin* and *Sydney Review of Books*, and poetry in *The Vital Sparks* and *Abridged*.

Jane Messer is a writer of fiction and nonfiction, a writer's mentor and developmental editor. The research for her current nonfiction manuscript, *Raven Mother*, is made possible by the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, University of Canberra, where she is a [virtual] Visiting Fellow.

Michael Mintrom lives in Melbourne. His poetry has recently appeared in various literary journals including *Blue Mountain Review, London Grip, Main Street Rag, Meanjin, Midwest Zen,* and *Syncopation*.

Sam Morley has been published in various journals and has been shortlisted in the Montreal International Poetry Prize. He is the 2022 recipient of the Tina Kane Emergent Writer Award at the Mildura Writer's Festival. His collections include *Earshot* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2022) and *You Do You*, out now through Upswell (2023).

Tendai Rinos Mwanaka is a multidisciplinary artist, editor, publisher and producer with over 70 individual books and curated anthologies published in US, Northern Ireland, UK, Cameroon and Zimbabwe. He has 4 music albums, with new album, The Choice is Not Mine (2024) recently released and his music is playing in at least 18 radio stations in US, Canada, UK, France, Israel, Brazil and Australia. He has produced hundreds of paintings and drawings, thousands of photographs, some exhibited, published and sold. His pieces have also appeared in over 500 journals in over 35 countries.

Nathanael O'Reilly is the author of twelve poetry collections, including *Dublin* Wandering, Landmarks, Selected Poems of Ned Kelly, Boulevard, (Un)belonging and Preparations for Departure. His poetry appears in journals and anthologies published in fifteen countries. He is the poetry editor for Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature.

Emily Obst (winner poetry, 2024 Gary Crew Award) is a writer from Queensland who recently won the Gary Crew Award for her poetry suite, *Fragments of Despair: Love Lost*,

Minds Unwound pt.1. This collection delves into the complexities of mental health, the pain of lost love, and the journey toward self-discovery. Emily's versatile writing has also been featured in the anthology Fandomonium with her story 'I'm Sorry'; and her insightful feature article 'From Desperation to Devotion' has been published in Sunshine Coast News and Junction Journalism. When she isn't crafting compelling narratives, Emily enjoys exploring Victoria's scenic countryside, uncovering hidden gems, and sharing unforgettable moments with her favourite people.

Thomas Page is a poet and writer based in Maryland in the DMV metro area. He has just graduated with his MFA in creative writing from the University of South Florida. When he isn't writing, revising, or grading, he likes to travel around the country seeing all the kitsch it has to offer. His work has appeared in *Progenitor, Unstamatic, The Florida Review, Unfortunately,* and *How We Made It Over: Educating for Social Justice in the Spirit of Love.*

Emily Palmer is a lecturer in secondary English education at Edith Cowan University, which stands on Whadjuk Noongar land (Western Australia). Previously, she has been a recipient of a Carclew Project Development Grant, and an Emerging Writer-in-Residence at the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writer's Centre. She has a PhD in creative writing from the University of Adelaide, and her practice-led research centres around the representation of gender, sexuality, and the female body in young adult fantasy fiction. Her work-in-progress examines the ecological practices of witchcraft and taxidermy.

Kristian Patruno is an Australian poet whose works have appeared in *Westerly, Rabbit, Southerly, Otoliths, Australian Poetry Journal, Cordite, TEXT,* and *Meniscus* (forthcoming). Additionally, Kristian's visual poetry was exhibited in POETRY, an exhibition of text-based works that bear a formal relationship to the space they occupy (George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia, 2017). Kristian is currently studying a MA of Writing & Literature at Deakin University.

Michael Pettit is a South African artist – a painter. His short stories have appeared in *The Barcelona Review, The Bookends Review, Thin Skin*, and in various anthologies: WestWord Prize (3rd Prize), Parracombe Prize, Bournemouth Writing Festival Competition, MTP Short Story Competition (Highly Commended), Hammond House Prize (Editor's International Choice award, and also 1st Prize for song lyrics).

Annamaria Rossana Quaresima received a PhD in Psychology from The University of Adelaide and resides in the Gadigal land of Sydney, Australia. Her work is featured in *Inkfish Magazine, Assignment Literary Magazine, The Saltbush Review, Arboreal Literary Magazine*, and *Red Ogre Review*. She enjoys having more hobbies than time, and researching anything.

Simon Ravenscroft lives in Cambridge, England and teaches and writes across a range of arts subjects. He is based at the University of Cambridge where he is a Fellow of Magdalene College. He has been published variously.

Kathryn Reese lives in South Australia. Her poems are published in *Neoperennial Press Heroines Anthology, Kelp Journal, Paperbark, Heterodox Haiku* and *Yellow Arrow Journal*. Her flash fiction, 'The Principal and the Sea', was published by Glassworks and received a Best of the Net nomination.

Radoslav Rochallyi (b. 1980) is a mathematician, poet, and conceptual artist who blends science, philosophy, and art in new ways. His work often looks at the links between logic, structure, and creative expression, with a focus on minimalism and existential themes. Rochallyi's poetry is known for its mathematical precision and philosophical depth. He draws from his extensive knowledge of formal systems and abstract thought. As a conceptual artist, he challenges traditional boundaries between disciplines, creating works that make people think about the nature of knowledge and existence.

Sharon Rundle is an author, editor, mentor and academic, and has lectured at universities across Australia, the United Kingdom, and India. She has co-edited five anthologies of stories by authors from Australia and the Indian subcontinent and encourages international understanding, discourse, and the nurturing of new writing.

Abhijit Sarmah is a poet and researcher of Indigenous literatures with special emphasis on Native American women writers and writers from the northeast of India. He holds an MPhil degree from Dibrugarh University, India, and is currently an Arts Lab Graduate Fellow and PhD student at the University of Georgia, Athens GA. His poems are published in numerous literary magazines, including *Poetry, The Margins*, and *Lincoln Review*.

Leni Shilton is a poet, teacher and researcher. She grew up in Papua New Guinea and Melbourne and lived in Mparntwe | Alice Springs for many years. Leni's verse novel *Walking with Camels – The Story of Bertha Strehlow* (UWAP, 2018), won the 2020 NT Chief Ministers Fiction Book Award; her second book is *Malcolm* (UWAP, 2019). Leni regularly judges national literary awards including the 2020 Stella Prize and the 2021/22 Dorothy Hewett Award. Her poetry explores the intersection of language, place and belonging.

Zeke Shomler is an MA/MFA candidate at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. His work has appeared in *Folio, Sierra Nevada Review, Bicoastal Review*, and elsewhere.

Cheryl Snell's books include several poetry collections and the novels of Bombay Trilogy. Her most recent writing appeared in *BULL*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Book of Matches*, *100 Word Story*, *Does It Have Pockets? Switch*, *Your Impossible Voice*, and other journals. She has work in several anthologies including a *Best of the Net*. A classical pianist, she lives in Maryland with her husband, a mathematical engineer.

Daan Spijer writes poetry, short stories, essays and plays, many of which have won awards. He has had short plays performed in Australia and overseas and has written two YA novels and a YA novella. Daan is a lawyer and mediator. He is also a keen photographer. He lives with his wife and groodle on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria.

Liam Strong (they/them) is a queer neurodivergent cripple punk writer who has earned their BA in writing from University of Wisconsin-Superior. They are the author of the chapbook *Everyone's Left the Hometown Show* (Bottlecap Press, 2023). You can find their poetry and essays in *Vagabond City* and *new words* {press}, among several others. They are most likely gardening and listening to Bitter Truth somewhere in Northern Michigan.

Brett Thompson has been writing poetry since his graduate days at the University of New Hampshire where he earned a MA in English Writing with a concentration in poetry. He has been published in various journals, including *Plainsongs, Tilde, District Lit, The Literary Nest*, and the *Peregrine Journal*. He teaches and lives in New Hampshire with his wife and two young daughters.

Isi Unikowski lives in Canberra, Australia. He has been widely published in Australia and overseas, including *Best of Australian Poems* 2022. His first collection, *Kintsugi*, was published in 2022 by Puncher & Wattman, New South Wales; a second collection is forthcoming in November. He was last published in *Meniscus* in November 2023.

Chelsea Uthayaseelan is an emerging young Australian writer and law student at the University of New South Wales. Chelsea has a keen interest in narratives that explore the complexity of being a woman in the Arts, or simply a woman who loves art. She has a fondness for literary and speculative fiction.

Amelia Walker lives and writes on Kaurna Yerta, the lands of the Kaurna People. She lectures at the University of South Australia and has published five poetry collections, most recently *Alogopoiesis* (Gazebo Books, 2023).

Angela Williamson has won the Lorine Niedecker Poetry Award and the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Prize. She holds an MFA from University of Southern Maine, and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *About Place Journal, Atticus Review, River Heron, The Talon Review*, and other places. She holds the position of poetry editor for *Stonecoast Review* and Lit Fox Books. She lives in the Great Lakes region with her husband and sons.

Dugald Williamson lives in Armidale NSW, on Anaiwan country. His poetry has appeared in publications including *Australian Poetry Anthology, Australian Poetry Journal, Cordite, The Incompleteness Book II, Meanjin, Social Alternatives, Southerly* and *TEXT*.

Jena Woodhouse's writing is inflected by transcultural traces and influences, a legacy of having spent time in England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, the former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Russia, and a decade living and working in Greece. She speaks several European languages, and has seven book and chapbook poetry publications.

Richard Yaxley lives in Brisbane, Australia. He was a recipient of the 2018 Prime Minister's Literary Award and the 2019 ACU Book of the Year Award for *This is my Song;* the 2010 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for *Drink the Air;* the 2019 CBCA Book of the Year Notable List for *The Happiness Quest*; and the 2023 QWC-Varuna Fellow for Established Writers.

Steven O Young Jr is knitted within the United States' Great Lakes mitten, where he earned an MA from Oakland University and occasionally slathers soundstages with his body weight's worth of paint. His latest literary homes include *Revolute, Barzakh Magazine, 300 Days of Sun, Washington Square Review,* and *Sweet Lit.*

Ty Zhang (he/him) is a Thai-Chinese-American law student, writer, and political organizer based in Ohio. He writes poetry, prose, and screenplays.

Samari Zysk, MFA, is a queer Jewish poet, musician, visual artist, and author of *monster* parts, an autobiographical collection of poetry. You can find their other poetry in *The* Hyacinth Review, The Aurora Journal, and Ghost City Review, among others. Samari is endlessly curious, at times hopeful, and filled with love for the written word.

MENISCUS

LITERARY JOURNAL

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Léa Abi Zeid Daou Richard James Allen Logan Anthony Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi Emma Ashmere Annah Atane Ani Bachan Eugen Bacon Igbal Barkat Hannah Behrens Aurora Bodenhamer Margaret Bradstock Lachlan Brown John Paul Caponigro WH Chong Stephen Coates Aidan Coleman Mary Cresswell Michael Cunliffe Andrew Darling Sunday Dutro Susan Fealy **Jen Francis** MK Francisco Marcelle Freiman

Leone Gabrielle

Penel Gibson

Alicia Gadd-Carolan

Ed Go Megan Gordon Hei Gou Lázaro Gutiérrez Diuna Hallsworth Nicola Hamer Kristin Hannaford Kirwan Henry D.A. Hosek Christine Imperial Keith Goh Johnson Dorothy Johnston Elaina Knipple Alex Kudera Ella Kurz Wes Lee **Hugh Leitwell** Samara Lo Chrisanne Lombard Rowan MacDonald Blair Martin Kate Maxwell Hannah McCann Iane Messer

Emily Palmer Kristian Patruno Michael Pettit Annamaria Rossana Ouaresima Simon Ravenscroft Kathryn Reese Radoslav Rochallvi Sharon Rundle Abhijit Sarmah Leni Shilton Zeke Shomler Cheryl Snell Daan Spijer Liam Strong Brett Thompson Isi Unikowski Chelsea Uthayaseelan Chelsea Uthayaseelan Amelia Walker Angela Williamson **Dugald Williamson** Jena Woodhouse Richard Yaxlev Steven O Young Jr Ty Zhang Samari Zysk

and the winners of the 2024 AAWP/URWF prizes & Gary Crew Award

Michael Mintrom

Nathanael O'Reilly

Tendai Rinos Mwanaka

Sam Morley

Thomas Page

