MENISCUS

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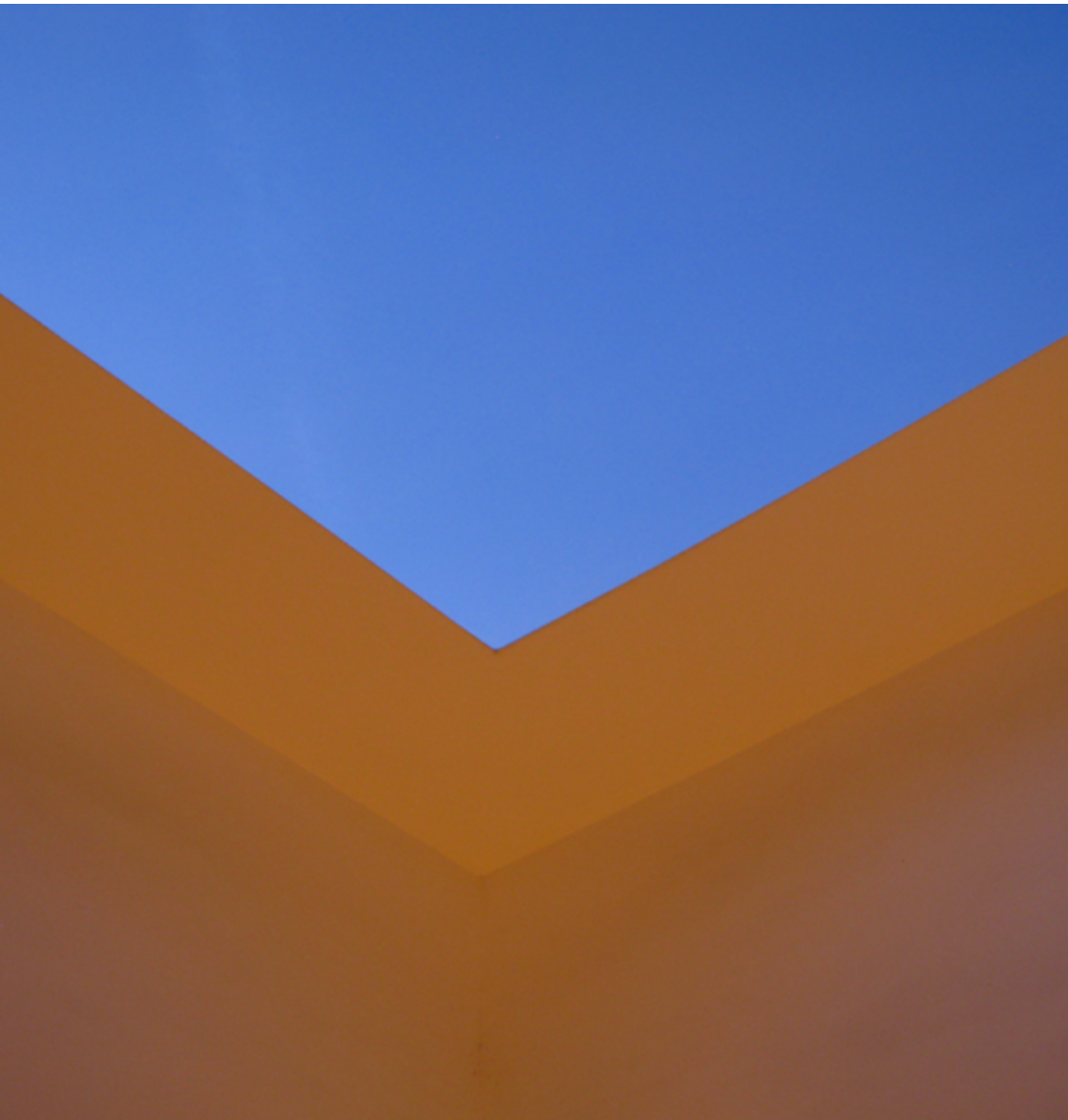

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About Meniscus
Meniscus is a literary journal, published and supported by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) with editors from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

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

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EDITORIAL

This year marks our tenth volume and in this edition for the anniversary year we have welcomed writers from USA, Canada, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and UK, to contribute to our initial and ongoing aim of offering *Meniscus* as an international journal. This issue has been edited at the bottom of the world by two New Zealanders, Sandra Arnold and Gail Pittaway, who took on the challenge of working through nearly 600 submissions. Though hard work, it was a joy to see the range and scope of themes and forms. It's also been encouraging to see several of the writers who have offered work in previous volumes continuing to submit work to our literary journal, through to 2022. Looking back at those earlier issues it is clear that not only has *Meniscus* grown in volume, with increasing numbers of writers added to later issues, it has also grown in geographical scope and reach. We proudly publish several authors for the first time and encourage those whose efforts couldn't make it to this volume to keep sending in work and to persevere.

This issue could be called the CE issue, from the Covid Era rather than from the Common Era. Lockdowns are now over in most countries, but caution continues as the Covid Beast is still at large and mutating like a fictional life form. At least in creativity there is respite from the bad and fake news. Each work has its own distinct qualities, but each poem or prose poem selected for this issue has impressed with a freshness of voice, with the quality of image, suggestion of narrative, or simply the capacity to make us look from a different point of view. Submissions reflected the usual diversity of subjects and styles, but in the poetry there was a strong focus on surviving, sustaining, taking strength from the natural world and each other. As ever, selections were made based on writing which arrested and diverted, which reassured even while it disturbed and we offer this anniversary issue in celebration and gratitude to all contributors. Thanks too for the wonderful support

of Jen Webb and Shane Strange to publish and disseminate it to the world.

Gail Pittaway, Poetry editor

There were several hundred prose submissions for this issue of Meniscus, but it was a joy to read them all and find so much excellent writing. This, of course, made the process of deciding on the final acceptances much more difficult, but we are happy with the result.

There is a range of stories here from new writers as well as the established. Themes cover identifiable situations to the strange. They include memories of lockdown, being lost and trapped, broken relationships, family rifts and secrets, violence among school children, reflections on history, the joys of eavesdropping on conversations heard on public transport, travel and nature. The stories vary from the experimental to the traditional. We hope you will enjoy them as much as we did.

Sandra Arnold

Prose and flash fiction editor.

TWILIGHT SHIFT

Enne Baker

The silver factory demonstrated
Quite the assembly line—

Knives on the right hand side,
Forks on the left,

Spoons next to them.
I polish them to gleam and glisten,

Their grey, illuminating, aluminium
Light gives shine,

The knife,
Petting a shark's fin,

Forks—
Sickles.

My rag, rubbing between my double jointed thumb,
Against the metal crescent shaped spoon,

The men with their white undershirts,
Splattered by black oils from greased cleaning machines,

Inkblots morphed in stressful foldings
When working before sunrise,

And after sunset.
The warehouse lights swing back and forth

From the opened smokers window,
Whipping the backs on these men,

Reminding them how much darkness is often
Misunderstood—

Sleep,
And feeding,
The lights of automation blinks
With fax.

AFTER LOVE

Madeleine Bazil

Waking up into our desire, still, after all those months—
I found unsurprising. But tender. Like waking up to rain
falling in sheets. We stayed in bed. You offering so much.
Touching my face before I could touch yours; always,
this soothing inequity of tenderness.
I never asked for your love or your resentment.
Nonetheless, before that: warm patter on the windowpane,
my cheek on your concave chest, everything
sluicing between us as I thought we both wanted.

SOME WANKER

Kate Bowen

The old man clunks, slops around
the world,
as shoes in a washing machine
clunk and slop
clunk and
slop.
What a pigeon, look how he flits
in front of oncoming traffic;
drunkard has forgotten
his fucking wings again.
Or maybe you're just not trying hard enough.
Crispy poverty face
and green milk eyes sour
from crack is my first thought,
he picks himself up by
his wet noodle trackie dacks
looks left
looks right
and waits for robodebt
under the Christmas tree;
and the trap is set.
As if that wasn't enough
(it never will be)
some wanker will probably
write a glorious poem
about him
and get famous.

NOSTALGIA

Patrick Breheny

It was night and he was standing on a wooden ledge, wide enough, maybe 18 inches across, to hold them, four stories up on the side of a wood frame building. Light was coming from open windows above them. His back was to the outer world, and facing him from against the wall was a pretty blonde woman whose head was on his chest, her arms around him holding tightly. It felt as if she was keeping him from falling, though nothing was holding her up but him.

On another ledge to the right was a kid, maybe twelve years old by size, darkness where he/she was, too much so to determine boy or girl. The kid might have grabbed the sill two feet above and pulled up, but that was risky, and body language showed frozen- catatonic-with-fear. The people inside had lowered a board, same dimensions as the one they all stood on, and secured it lengthwise along the child's body, like a straitjacket, with straps from windows above and below. The kid wouldn't fall, but seemed no less terrified.

He and the woman couldn't move because of each other. He was holding on to different flimsy grips he alternated between. One felt like plywood, another weaker like a section of linoleum. Whatever was going on with this building, there seemed to be renovation, there were planks stacked on a balcony to his left, from where the people above got the ones holding the kid up. Any one of those boards would be sufficient to let him move along the building to the balcony railing, but the people inside wouldn't talk to them. They looked ethereal from the dim light above, like silhouettes, and wouldn't answer questions, just spoke among themselves. He thought he understood their reasoning. You discussed the solution to a problem, you didn't talk to the problem. He'd heard one say to the other, 'They're coming', by which he surmised assistance

had been called for, but they'd been there a long time, they were hungry, it was getting cold, and if they'd just lay that plank across. The side of the building had a grainy stucco texture, that was nothing to hold on to, but it seemed an advantage over a slick finish, maybe could help.

One of the shadowy beings was above him, and he tried conversation again. He asked if they could lay one of those boards over from the balcony. He was again ignored, but the woman grabbed him so hard he knew he wouldn't be crossing any plank unless they did it together.

If municipal help had been summoned, they were very tardy. The secured kid was as stiff as a petrified totem pole, but at least couldn't fall. He wondered where the kid came from. Where did the woman come from? He was getting comfortable with her face against his chest. He had no sexy urges, considering their plight that was understandable, but along with the physical connection he was feeling another one. He was getting attached to this situation. Their dilemma had continued for so long it was becoming what is a kind of temporary status quo. He didn't want to fall, but he wasn't sure anymore he wanted to get rescued either. Maybe they could just stay put.

He heard her snore. That secure with him, she'd fallen asleep. He was exhausted too. Just a couple of winks himself? If he could just doze a little and still keep his grip. Dangerous. He shouldn't... drop off... pushed that pun away... but... as he was almost transitioning... to a trance... he abruptly... CAME BACK... because the plywood he was holding started to loosen.

He moved his fingers along to find a firmer spot, but his arm and hand were now in an awkward position, and he was just clutching another section of the same plywood held by the same adhesive. How much longer before that started separating too?

His start awake had awoken her too, and she brought one hand back from his shoulder long enough to rub her fingers along his chest and

smile up at him, as if to say this has been going on for so long it would just all be okay.

He looked down once, then quickly away. It was a drop. If anyone was coming, where were they? Much as he thought he sort of liked this, it was getting colder. They couldn't really sleep. They had to eat. He was thirsty. If no one came... he was beginning to consider the possibility that no one would... they'd have to fall. Only the kid would be left, secured and alone, safe and trapped.

Suddenly they were awash in light. It came from below and above, motors grumbled, a rotor blade swished the air. From the windows above they dropped nets and harnesses, and when he and she had a net around them they helped each other fit the harnesses on, then were pulled up in them. After a net was around the kid, they released the restraints, but the kid was panicked, couldn't get the harness on, so they pulled the net up with what could have been a captured wild animal scrambling frantically inside.

The responders were very business like. That's to say, they did answer questions but didn't engage. Made promises. She said, 'I'm thirsty,' and one replied, 'We have some water for you,' but didn't offer any. The kid said, 'My feet are numb,' and another said, 'The doctor will look at you.' Wherever the doctor was.

He said, 'I lost my shoe.' Just now he had. It fell off, but he couldn't see it anywhere.

Another of them said, 'We'll find it,' though nobody seemed to look for it.

They were at another location, back at a house where they resided with a lot of other people, like roommates. He had some kind of trauma amnesia. He couldn't remember what the living arrangement was, nor any of the people, including her. Especially her. He missed the physical closeness to her, wanted that back. An EMS medic in a spotless white

starched uniform had come back to this house with them, and he understood she might have to ask him some questions, but he didn't like that she talked so nicely to him, nor that it seemed to him he was being unprofessional with his handsome smiles.

He needed his shoe. He asked the good-looking smiley EMS guy what the address they'd been at before was. He told him it was 2112 Haupthaus. His radio was blaring static, growling voices that sounded indecipherable adding to the racket, but somehow he understood the transmission. He said he had another call, and was going to have to go. Goodbye! Goodbye, but he knew there were a thousand more like him.

He asked if she would go back with him to get his shoe. She smiled sympathetically, but sighed, 'Tonight?' He said he needed it. She said, 'I don't have it in me to go back now.' Seeing his disappointment, she offered, 'Maybe tomorrow?'

After work tomorrow he'd be near 2112 Haupthaus. He could get his shoe then. He did have others but these were his tan-to-almost orange leather semi-boots, expensive and classy, a pair he wore so often they seemed a part of him. If he came back here to get her to go back with him to look for it, that would be a lot of unnecessary travelling. It was okay with him, but would she know he'd done that? Did she know where he worked? He could only remember some things, like where this house was, and where Haupthaus was. Did she have a boyfriend? A job? She must do things that didn't include him All he knew was that he'd held her up, and she should help him look for his shoe. Yet though she wasn't secured to anything she'd been holding him up too. He wanted her head back on his chest. He wanted her clasping him for precious life, even as he knew it was because she wasn't doing it now that it was so important to him.

He'd been falling in love while she… she'd fallen into a survival reflex. Still he wanted that moment back when he asked for a board to cross alone to the balcony, and she'd embraced him with a drowner's

clinch. He realised now that at that wonderful instant when she woke up, smiled up at him and rubbed her fingers along his chest, it was because of embarrassment to recognise she'd been acting on instinct.

He wished they were still on the ledge. Of course if they were, they'd have fallen off by now, but so what? He had fallen anyway. They had that shared experience, and she'd have to remember too, but he would re-live it often, forgetting he'd been cold and hungry and thirsty, losing feeling in his arm from holding on, and impatient at the uncaring pace of a rescue arrival. All of that was inconsequential, none of it was part of the snapshot he'd recall, a lovely lie captured by his mind to be viewed and felt any time he wanted to put it on his screen. What a time it was.

TO DREAM OF WOODPECKERS

John Brantingham

Jenny, who has been home for two months helping her father to die painlessly, wakes up the morning after her father passes to a knocking on the wall, which she thinks is her father asking to come back inside, until she has risen and understands that it is a woodpecker trying to work its way into the warm insulation of the house through its outer wall. In this half-dream, she thinks that she'll go out there and bore the wood wider, filling it with pieces of blanket. In this half-dream, she imagines that she will be a part of the animal's family, at least indirectly. When she rises, she feels the weight of her father's absence. She finds some steel wool in his workbench in the garage. She stuffs it into the hole knowing that this is the end of a beautiful dream, that beautiful dreams are always ending, that they are meant to be there for a moment and then pass, and that the dreamers should move to the next one almost immediately.

VICTORIA BRIDGE

Rohan Buettel

So many structures at this site are lost,
timber succumbing to marine woodworm.
Iron stanchions of a centipede crossing
carrying horse-drawn carts — washed away.
The cast-iron cylinders and bracings
supporting electric trams — demolished.
Each successor fewer piers,
longer spans, a single abutment remains.

Its lines clear and sharp, etched in blue sky
are flourishing curves sleek and elegant.
Three concrete spans, but below all that water:
brown, turbid, its force split by two piers,
power boats slicing through turbulent flow.
Days end and always the river has its way.

LAST PAINTING: WAITING AT THE STYX

Adrian Caesar

(After Arthur Boyd)

Late afternoon, the man in the blue canoe
rests on his paddle. We imagine
a slow drift. From our vantage
high on the other side, the kayak
seems to merge with the river;
our explorer could be half-
submerged, but he is so still
we know this cannot be.

Above him, the white rock rears;
cubist angles accentuate
slender pencil lines - eucalypts
striving towards the sun-stained blue.
Heat presses, but on the water may be
a cooling breeze. At the base of the cliffs
a dark arch beckons, tempting passage
to the cave of all or nothing answers.

But the man in the blue canoe
is relaxed, unperturbed. He wears
an old felt hat, jaunty cone
redolent of holiday, ringed
with tiny flowers, stars of earth,
feather-crested, nature's casual
detritus: the colour of flight.
Nothing moves. He sits and breathes.

This is said to be his last painting—
drunk, he confided to a friend
the saddest thing: 'Art is just
another racket.' And then, as if
to prove there was something more,
he undertook this final journey,
brush-stroking towards a restful pause,
before the tide, himself the ferryman.

Note: The painting, 'Waiting at the Styx', c.1997, and Boyd's remark about art as 'a racket' appear in Darleen Bungey, *Arthur Boyd: A Life,* Allen and Unwin, 2007.

A FEATHERED THING

Brent Cantwell

for Ukraine

In the shadow of a Siberian Pine,
I found a feathered thing, dragged there,
dismembered but still seeing
the wind in the bleak-green needles,
a Pacific Loon, or Watercock maybe,
its wing smudged by black-sole boot
after boot after boots on the ground—

but worse, its wing looked pinned back
so cold access was easy,
so, a Pacific Loon, or Watercock maybe—
one of its own—could reduce it
from flying and seeing and hope
to anatomy,
to a pecked-at collection of disconnected names—

it is easy to claw out a heart—
it is easy—if you have the stomach—
to mess these intestines—
you'll have to soldier-dumb its mind though
with a black-sole boot,
if you want it to see as you see:
the blood or black of lose and win;
the no-good-place of a featured thing—

A SONNET AFTER HARWOOD

Megan Cartwright

She wakes to the grind of a garbage truck,
a metallic, heaving clang that spews forth
an eruption of glass and fetid fruit.
Gulps down the acrid bile that coats the throat.
The room is stale, suffocating, soupy,
anesthetising the morning—and thought.
Gritty panes strain strands of early daylight,
trailing tattered fretwork across the rug.

And all the while the world, once an open
newspaper is clutched tight against her chest.
Like trying to restrain a feral cat
within a pulpwood cage of yellowed print.
Brittle shards shatter; hardened confetti.
The relics of a ticker-tape parade.

A PIGEON AT HYDE PARK

James Salvius Cheng

I watch a pigeon at the lake's edge, feet sinking into silt.
An ungainly thing, curved body and neck buckling
to reach the wrinkled water as it sips. I am surprised
that in her gracelessness she does not fall and drown.
She holds the art of flight and that should be enough to drink
without death, another victory.

I walk the same paths, my steps planted so densely with the passing of years
that there is no place where foot does not align with foot. Lost friends
call through the warm spring air and fall into dust, flickering in the setting sun.
The pigeon leaps into the air, mud slipping from its toes to rest in the dim grass.

A SHORT AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A MOUTH

T. Clear

Before the mask, I was a mess
of worry & frown, tightly drawn,
never certain which lip was up.

A'quiver. Quick to fatigue
in a gala of introductions,
the howdy-do's and pleasure-to-meet-you's

stumbling from the face—
a clown-mug of raging raisin,
toasted truffle beauty-counter shades

inexpertly applied. Bleed lines.
The downward droop from either end,
gravity gone south. Years and years

before this wonder of fabric strung
from ear to ear, pleated swaddle
meant to restrain salival spume

but now: my shadow-lair, my hideout.
Pucker, pinch, crink, crumple—
an all-day sulk or glower, smirk or grin,

my very own party of one.

WAITING FOR A TRAIN

Oliver Comins

Watching them pass, I see the distance
from top of head to feet on ground
is different in every case. The same
appears to be true for their lower halves.
Even if they have two legs of precisely
equal length, none of them has legs
the same length as any of the others.

Looking at the profile of their faces
I know the intervals from eyes to mouth
are significantly inconsistent and those
from chin to top of hair even more so.
Skin pigment from one to the next
is never the same, even in those cases
where a surface colourant is present.

Some people passing turn their heads
to look at me: the eyes are all dissimilar,
in colour, shape and tone. One glance
and we are (mostly) pleased to look away.
The sample size may appear to be large,
but the presence of these individuals
in this place is not, strictly, random.

CIRCADIAN COURTSHIP RITUAL

Sara Cosgrove

I am the uncaged magicicada,
humming my courtship song
before opening night.

The nymph stage is over
and we've emerged
after 17 years underground
to mate for a month
until we perish.

My translucent wings
shield you from mortality's torrents
as my spool of saffron unravels.

I stitch a patch
with our initials
onto your cracked ribcage
and keep sewing
until I can strum my favorite guitar
to play my six-string serenade.

LANDSCAPE WITH COLONIAL GIRLS

Mary Cresswell

Daffodils all speak RP
and tootle trumpets voluntary
sweetly sheltered from the sea
cutely by the estuary

Ticks and spiders burrow next
to sand dunes on a brindle beach
spiked with silver spinifex
where marrams mumble each to each.

Note: Based on a comment by a linguist who should have stayed home from the conference.

TANKA

Anne Di Lauro

On the water's skin
A shower of silver pins
shooting and falling
Flashing school of fingerlings
Imagine that leap, that strength

NEURODIVERSITY

Anne Di Lauro

This heteroclite, this irregular
declension, rule-breaker,
walks through the world and knows
only what he knows;
is baffled by the secret language shared
by all the regularly declined,
but bravely keeps on selving
anyway, sings out the song
that only he can sing
that wrings the heart to hear.

RIVER'S EDGE

Adrienne Eberhard

She sees them, like a procession of ghosts, come out of the forest, faces lit with rain and a quality hard to define. Something brought about by time spent camped on the banks of a rising stream, surrounded by the slick, green arms of rainforest plants. They hesitate at the river's edge. She sees how their hair is plastered to their heads, and their black japaras hang like bedraggled crows' wings. There is a rope strung across the river. It is this at which they stand and stare.

A shriek of laugher and the woman turns her head away to see her two children rolling the mud of the bank into balls. They load these into the backs of the matchbox cars — utes — they have brought packed with the picnic. She watches them scrape deep into the fluorescent moss, turning up thick orange clay in which they delight. Her youngest strips to singlet and shorts, covers his feet and legs with mud. It's intrinsic, she thinks, this scraping and hacking at the earth. It begins as body decoration, then transmutes to something else. He is rolling in it now, slipping, sliding, face shining with the thrill of this transgression. And what follows, she wonders? This digging that becomes building and some kind of need that moves beyond kinship and communion, to dominion. It is here, right here, where the river tumbles over the rocks, on, on, in bright, white bubbles and clear water that the trucks and dozers lined up less than twenty years ago.

The group of people still hesitates at the riverbank. The river, she sees now, is a raging torrent, not the fluid stream at whose edge her children play. It is dark, cold, uncompromising. It rushes past in a dangerous flurry, gathering everything in its path, tossing leaves, bark, branches, as though they are as light as children's toys. The group seems spell-

bound at its edge, frozen in the act of deciding what to do. To watch and wait. To send someone out, edging into water that has metamorphosed into a wild, shrieking creature. To test the water.

If she left them here, what would happen to her sons, she wonders. Would they continue this transformation from civilised children to half-wild creatures, familiar with the ways of the bush, living off berries, roots, fern hearts, their young bodies toughening into hard knots of callus and muscle? Would they know to find warm, hollow places at night? To cover themselves with fern fronds and woolly tea tree? Would they remember the tiny, sweet fruits of the native cherry? How long would they last?

Would this ancient forest with its huon pine growing at the water's edge, its glossy sassafras and native laurel, the cascades of cutting grass, blackwoods and towering eucalypts, accommodate her boys? Make room for them? Allow them to flourish? She shakes her head. It is not a thought process she ought to follow. Her boys, lost in the bush, this unforgiving, cold, wet, southern bush where rivers rise overnight, and rain falls for days, where wet permeates everything and food is almost impossible to find. Where wars have raged over the value of the bush. Trees for dollars or trees for forest.

She looks away from the writhing red body of her youngest, past the group still standing waiting on the other side, deep into the green veils that interlock like lace or jigsaw pieces. The greens that at their heart are rust, orange, cream, brown, yellow, olive, red, emerald, but coalesce into green tapestry. She closes her eyes and the splash of the river builds to a roaring, reckless tumult that is both invigorating and terrifying, and she is standing in the middle of the group on the other side, dripping with rain, open-mouthed and awe-struck.

'Is this where we crossed yesterday?'

'Yes.'

'Look at it! Jesus, it's fast. And deep. We'll never get across!'

'Yes, we will if we stay calm, and use the rope. That's what it's for.'

'I don't think I can,' says the one woman in the group. She is wet through, shivering, worn out, defeated by the rain's constancy.

The two men become brisk and authoritative.

'You'll be fine. Just don't let go of the rope. We need to get across, need to get the kids back to their parents. We've got no way of contacting anyone.'

The kids stand around, chatting excitedly. There are eight of them, and it seems like a glorious adventure, this bushwalk that has become a rain walk, the track knee-deep in water on their way out. As the river rages past they see only the thrill of a chest-deep crossing, not the awful potential for loss.

'Who's going first?' one of the kids asks.

'I'll go first,' says the more senior of the two male teachers, then you kids and Miss Roberts. Mr Marshall will come last.'

'What happens if we let go?' one of the girls asks nervously. There are four girls and four boys. Fifteen years old. Part of the bushwalking club at school. Last night they'd camped at Judds Cavern, on mounds of ground next to the winding contortions of the river. They'd had a fire, toasted marshmallows, but in the end, been defeated by the rain, and retreated to their tents. She'd shared a tent with her best friend, and the boy she loved had joined her with his bright red sleeping bag and his warm, brown hands. They'd lain there, listening to the rain for most of the night, and she'd taken his hand and placed it on her breast, through the worn white wool of her jumper. After so many careless washings it had shrunk, was almost like felt.

When they'd emerged from their tents the next morning, they hardly recognised the place. It was an altered landscape, a drenched, soaking, drowning world. Tents were perched perilously close to a river that seemed to have no other imperative than to wash everything before it – tents, billies, bushes, branches, people.

The teacher, Miss Roberts, looked haggard. Her eyes, normally lustrous with mascara, were worried and unslept. She's afraid, the girl thought, she's not done this kind of thing before. The kids are fifteen. They have their lives ahead of them. They are immortal.

All the way back they sloshed and sploshed, knee-deep in cold water. The bush had taken on a damp, dark hue. It seemed less inviting, more threatening. Miss Roberts, Jennifer as the girl thought of her, walked head down, her bright cheer, her questions and conversation, erased by the world's rain. The girl was oblivious to nearly everything but the boy. His brown skin, his smile, his fingers that brushed her own. They could have been on the Ark, just the two of them, saving the world.

'Don't let go!' shouts the male teacher. 'Remember, don't let go!'

The girl can hear Miss Roberts' sharp, intake of breath, she can see how she is shaking. It's curious; she doesn't feel afraid at all. It's as if she and the boy have entered a different world, a new realm, or he has taken her there. She feels capable of anything. She has lost touch with the others too, oblivious to their reactions, absorbed only by her own skin and the boy's.

And so they cross, male teacher, students, best friend, then Miss Roberts. The girl is left waiting on the other side with the second male teacher and the boy. They hold hands, their faces glistening with rain. She knows they shine with something else as well. Possibility. Hope. Beginnings. She watches as the female teacher steps towards the river. She can see her hesitation, her fear. She is shaking as she takes hold of the rope, moaning as she steps out into the river, out into the raging, spitting, screaming, leaping torrent. She is shaking like a leaf. All the way across Miss Roberts has her eyes closed. She is keening. The sound of madness. Halfway across she stumbles, misses her footing, screams as she lets go of the rope with one hand. The girl hears her scream. Feels the sound lift into the sky, ripped away by the wind, bruising the

light with its sound. Everything slows down. Life compressed to one moment. The girl sees the river thundering past, but it does so as if having practised every move: its swirling skirts and wild-eyed look, its arms that leap and catch, yank and pull. Brown depths, filled with the dirt and sediment of rocks, banks, leaves, moss, twigs and branches. It is dirty, swollen, oblivious to everything. Just a river on its tumultuous journey from mountain to sea. Filled with rain, still filling.

The girl watches, amazed, as the other male teacher shouts at Miss Roberts, then lunges back across to her aid. He hauls himself across on the rope, the water grabbing at his hips and waist, trying to prise him off, wash him away. The river is a roaring torrent and in his eagerness to reach her he falls off balance. As he wobbles in the water, he keeps on yelling, trying to shock the teacher into action. She is flailing. Sobbing. He reaches out to her, tries to grab her. He yells at her to hold on and keep moving, but she is a puppet, completely at the mercy of the river. It buffets her, tugs at her. She hangs and shakes, her whole body a quivering mess of sobs. Her screams rend the air, they break through the overwhelming sound of water taking over the world.

Miss Roberts has forsaken herself. Her tears are the rain, the river. The girl watches fascinated, horrified as the mask of teacher, an adult in charge, disintegrates in the face of chaos. She holds her breath then shouts to her to grab the rope, to reach out, to take charge. She has never really liked this teacher with her heavily mascara-ed eyes and patchouli perfume. Now, though, the girl finds herself yelling, cajoling, urging with every cell in her body. She sees the male teacher reach out once more, forcing Jennifer to take hold of the rope again. She watches as he talks her across, hand-by-hand, foot-by-foot. Miss Roberts is a puppet on a string. Loose, forlorn, helpless. She is beyond terror; gone into a different realm where there are no students, no people, just water, the rushing, sucking roar of water. But the male teacher is persistent. He won't give up lightly. And little by little he reduces the distance between them and the bank. When she reaches the other side, she collapses in

a heap on the muddy shore. The other girls rush over, talk to her, chafe her hands. The male teacher yells over the raging river, 'Come on. Next one. Don't worry. Take it easy, slow and steady.'

The woman turns back to look at her children. They are shrieking with delight. The cars are loaded with mud, their wheels are deep in it, dragging with the suck and weight of it. The boys are wild creatures. They have mud in their hair, up their arms, on their stomachs, all over their legs. She watches as her youngest hurls himself down and rolls over, coming up grinning with his face caked in it.

'That's enough,' she says, sharply, and her child looks up at her, crestfallen.

'But Mummy, we're painting ourselves,' says her eldest.

'You're filthy!' she hears herself saying angrily, and then she catches herself and says, 'I'm sorry, it's okay. Go on, keep playing, but you'll have to wash it all off before you get in the car.'

'Oh, Mummy, can't we stay like this forever?' her youngest asks.

She has the grace to laugh at him. 'No, you can't. I'm not having that mud all over my car.' She suddenly remembers her friend Jean's mother; her inability to enter that space of childhood, her constant need for control. Don't let me be a Mrs Carruthers she thinks to herself. If she was a real mother she wouldn't care about the state of her car. Let them rub their little, feral bodies all over the insides of it and not complain at all. Let them be wild and free because it will all change before they know it. They'll learn soon enough that the world isn't like that when you grow up. Your body, your beliefs, your actions, all constrained by something so much bigger than they can ever comprehend at their age. Even at fifteen.

She glances across to the other side of the river and sees herself standing there, mesmerised. She is watching the swirl and eddy and bubble of the river. The sheer, colossal intensity of the water as it surges past, cold, dark, deep, like the crossing to Hades.

'Go on, Myra, you'll be fine,' the teacher says.

She looks at him and he smiles at her.

'Go on, you won't even have to think about it. Easy as walking down the street.'

She laughs at him. The boy squeezes her hand. She doesn't need him to say anything, it is enough to know that he is there, enough to have the memory of his hand on her breast, his fingers pulsing heat and love. She turns back to the river. It is her turn now.

Is this me, she wonders. She feels no fear. The scene with Miss Roberts she has just witnessed doesn't affect her in the slightest. She feels only exhilaration at this madness. She steps off the bank and into the maelstrom. It feels like she has grown wings. Like she can fly. As she moves further away from the bank, she starts to feel the water's surge, its power and intensity. It seems as though the river has arms and legs that wrap around her, tightening their grip slowly but surely. For a brief moment she starts to panic, feels her own grip loosen on the rope, her feet stumble on the stones. But then she hears the boy's voice, lending her courage, and she sees his face in her head, his blue eyes looking into hers, she feels his palm on her breast through the white wool, that moment that seems sacred when they'd found each other, surrounded by rain and the rising river, and as she reaches along the rope, hand after hand after hand, she knows that she has something that Jennifer does not, and her feet are steady, her body strong.

The woman sighs and shakes herself. The sun is starting to go down and the air is cooling. It feels like cold fingers on her skin. The water must be icy. She watches it swirl and eddy and bubble. She ought to strip off her clothes and join them. Roll her flesh in the orange mud. Smear it all over her face. Then run shrieking into the icy depths of the river and soak it off. The thought makes her shiver. What has happened to her since her fifteen-year-old self crossed that raging torrent, the blue eyes of the boy she loved, urging her on? She had stepped out, confident

and laughing, knowing that she was safe, ready to take on anything knowing that he was there, his warm arms, his warm heart.

She can hear the dozers, imagine their passage through the bush. The tearing, shredding, shrieking of great trees being brought down, the thump of animals in flight. Why didn't I stand in solidarity with the forest, the river, the sky, she wonders. Protest the devastation, the desecration. Here, of all places, where the course of my life was mapped out, where hands and eyes and skin and trees and the full force of nature combined? This place, where years later, she had returned with the boy and discovered a hand stencil, high up on the wall of the cave, a print stretching across the rock in the same gesture as the boy's hand on her breast when they were fifteen. His touch that was a meeting ground of spirit and flesh, just like the stencils on the wall, just like her boys now, communing with the earth by covering themselves in sticky mud. She can't fathom why she'd not joined the protests, lent her voice to the anger at this sacrilege, only knows that she didn't. And yet, despite her lack of action, the forest, this forest of their beginning, was saved, given a second chance. She is surrounded by it, stretching on and on like an imaginary world. The wonder, of course, is that it is real. It inhabits her mind but grows here, rich and thick and undulating with secret life. Here she is, with her boys on the bank of the river, and in every direction, bush stretches, green and glistening, intimate, teeming.

She watches her boys. There is no past or future for them in this moment. No regrets, no longings, no need of second chances. They are so in love with the mud, the trees, with themselves, with life. She watches them, sees the boy in their blue eyes, in their strong, supple bodies. When she looks again, she sees her fifteen-year-old self launching into the river, her belief that she could do anything mirrored in their actions. She reaches down, unlaces her boots, pulls off her socks, inches her feet forward into the sticky mud, stands on one leg to take off her jeans, stretches up and peels off her jumper and shirt.

'Mummy, what are you doing?' her eldest asks. He and his younger brother are standing watching, open-mouthed.

She doesn't reply, simply turns away from them and strips off her underclothes, turns back, kneels down and with a smile on her face, reaches for a handful of mud.

THE FIRST BLOWFLY OF SPRING

Steve Evans

Fresh from some delicious decay,
your fuzzy siren rides
a breeze into our house,
a buzz that turns
from distant conversation's hum
into a radio off-station, right here.

Dressed in your own inelegance
you are so Yes, an optimist,
a little zig-zaggery diesel
and slow as a bovver boy.
You were steampunk before steam or punk.

What else? Noisy winged brooch,
clumsy engine of pure purpose.
You go, dark crumpled foil,
little black tin drum
sheened as kerosene,
telling me Spring has arrived,
then off to spread the news.

THE BERET

Annette Edwards-Hill

When Ian got out of bed that morning he had great hopes for the day. The skies were clear and even lying in bed with the curtains still closed he could feel the sun warming the air. He didn't bother with breakfast and packed his easel and paints into his satchel.

He was pulling the door of the sleepout shut when he saw his beret sitting on the chest of drawers. It looked flat and empty. He re-entered the room and pulled it over his head.

Looking in the mirror, he noted he had colour in his cheeks, his moustache was a rich brown. He pulled the beret to the side of his head, admired the new angle it sat at and left.

In the courtyard outside the sleepout, his landlady, Mrs Parsons, was hanging out the washing. Ian could see the sunspots that crowded the back of her hands. She wore the same dress every day. It looked like it was made for a person with a waist. She'd look better in trousers. He looked at her face, the wrinkles gathering over her cheeks. She was the oldest person he'd ever seen. Ian looked at his own hands, pale and the dark fine hairs on his fingers, artist's hands. As he shut the gate he called out that he'd be home for dinner.

Ian had seen the girls in the field a week earlier. He'd been on the bus, on the way to a doctor's appointment. There were three girls, one taller wearing a long dress and the other two in shorts. All had white blonde hair. Sisters he supposed. The two younger girls had been trying to fly a kite, running with it dragging behind in the grass. There wasn't even a hint of a breeze. The older girl stood pointing at the sky shaking her head. But the two younger girls kept running, trying to lift the kite into the windless sky.

As the bus approached the field, Ian could see it was empty. He still rang the bell and got off at the stop. He would wait, the girls might come back, and he could paint. Reaching up to touch his beret, he found it had slipped on his head. Thinking about the sunspots on his landlady's hands he sat in a shady spot underneath a tree. He set up his easel and started sketching the long lines of the poplar trees on the other side of the field.

He put his paint brush down when a buzzing started in his ear and the white lights started creeping into the side of his vision. Stretching out underneath the tree he used his jacket as a pillow. He thought about the girls, the lightness of their steps, the lilting laughter. How he would paint them as the lightest touch on the canvas, as a dabble of sunshine, a smudge of fluff. He felt himself quiver then whimper like a dog in a dream.

He woke to the sounds of voices. Opening his eyes he could only see flashes of movement, the swirl of a pink skirt. He heard barking. As his eyes adjusted he could make out the three girls and a large dog, some lanky thing with a bushy tail. One of the girls looked in his direction when he coughed to clear the gunk in his throat that had collected while he was sleeping. Putting his hand to his head, found his beret gone. It lay on top of his jacket. He pulled it back over his head and rolled onto his knees and feet as he picked up his paint brush.

The paint had dried. When he put the tip of his brush into the paint on the palette the paint had the texture of glue. He looked back at the girls, but their bodies blurred with the green of the grass and trees.

The doctor couldn't explain the shifting colours and lights he saw sometimes when he stood on the porch outside the sleepout at night. He didn't know why sometimes Ian would twist and shake in his sleep, waking up with his tongue swollen and dry. The doctor said it might be the heat.

He squinted again in the direction of where he thought the girls might be and light flooded his vision. He closed and re-opened his eyes. The girls were sitting underneath a tree. Ian put down his paintbrush.

The trees cast dappled shadows on the girls. The older one looked to be asleep. The younger sat leaning against the tree, light reflecting from her golden hair lying over her shoulder. The dog lay next to her. The other girl stood a little way away; she was holding the kite; the breeze had died off and it lay slack at her feet. Ian thought he saw her head turn in his direction as he stood, standing on dry leaves that broke under his feet.

He stumbled as he started walking towards the girl, clouds of dust rising between them. All three girls looked up at him as he approached. The smallest one got to her feet. The older girl rubbed her eyes as she met his gaze, her golden hair reflecting light into his eyes. He reached his hands towards her, felt the fabric of her dress underneath his hands, softness and then a sharp pain in his shin. The middle girl had dropped her kite and grabbed her sisters' hands. The three girls ran across the field towards the road, the dog at their heels. The kite floated off into the distance.

Ian didn't remember packing away his easel or picking up his beret from where he'd dropped it as he'd fallen forward when the girl had kicked him. He didn't remember getting the bus home. Back in his room, he found he was wearing his beret. It sat straighter on his head than the last time he'd looked in the mirror, when he'd got dressed that morning and left the house. He pulled the beret down over his ears.

He lay on his bed in the late afternoon, the sun spilling its warmth on him. His left leg ached, he rolled up his trouser leg and there was a dark purple bruise where he'd been kicked. The lights in his eyes were less intense now. There was the drone of traffic outside and the noise of Mrs Parsons sweeping the courtyard. There was the screech of the tap being turned on as she filled her watering can. She always waited until

the sun was lower in the sky before watering the plants. He could hear the transistor radio she carried with her, beeping as the news bulletin started. Ian half-listened to the news, his eyelids felt heavy and he wondered if he might sleep. Then he heard the newsreader say 'seen in a beret, masquerading as an artist, police would like anyone who saw…'. He sat up on the bed, his beret falling to the floor.

They couldn't be looking for him. They were looking for someone who was pretending to be an artist, not a real artist. He looked at the painting he had started working on in the field, expecting to see the shapes of the group of young girls. But there was only a green line crossing the bottom of the page.

He heard plastic shattering and the noise from the radio suddenly stopped. Ian looked outside and saw Mrs Parson's back as she retreated into the house. The transistor radio lay on the concrete in pieces.

The police didn't use their sirens and they parked on the other side of the road. Ian waited at his window watching the officers as they crossed the courtyard and went to the front door. There were hundreds of lights in his vision now, in every colour of the rainbow. Mrs Parsons stood in the doorway and pointed at his sleepout. Ian pulled his beret over his head.

THE PLASMA VENDORS

Joel Robert Ferguson

after "The Bee Meeting" by Sylvia Plath

Who are these people, in their white robes
waiting for me, what shall I call them?
Druids, doctors, technicians? They are

all smiles and hospitality, inviting me
to mark the register, show my papers
and identify myself, to step up and be weighed.

I stand against the wall and my photo is taken.
A token from the bowl of sweets is given.
My health is inquired of and the first opening made,

a fingertip drips, a vial spins to be tested.
Around the corner, the crooks of my arms
are slapped and worried at, a second opinion

is called in to gauge the viability of my veins.
I'm escorted to a cubicle, challenged
to prove my purity. Have I sinned in the flesh,

strayed too long among barbaroi, eaten tainted meat,
lain with proscribed peoples?
I hope they will think me good, use me

for their purposes. Yes, I have answered correctly, and pass
to the next room, am told to strip and change
into a slit-backed gown. More questions are asked,

my knees are tapped with a rubber hammer,
I walk the line like a drunk, touch my nose.
It is fine, I remain the one they want.

Clothes restored, I sleepwalk sock-footed at last
into the blooded fields. Show me to a reclining bed,
plant me among the young and old,

ask me which arm I'd prefer, I will respond.
The smell of swabbing alcohol, cold and quick to dry.
The walls are adorned with inspirational posters

showing me myself in icon or effigy, accompanied
by text that affirms and assures the profit motive
and altruism don't have to cancel each other out.

A robed one comes to officiate. I'm given
a pre-paid credit card, a blue foam ball to squeeze,
to send blood through the tubing, self-milking,

to the centrifuge that winnows plasma from red
then pours it into a canister, returning the red
to me cut with the saline that will give such a chill.

I am harvest, I'm making money, I must turn
my head, I can't be allowed to see the blade.
The needle strikes true on the third try.

CLEAN SLATE

Lynn Gilbert

This stark wind
propels the snow straight sideways,
though the sun is shining in places.
Should there be a 'snow-bow?'
Apparently they don't exist,
or at least I've never seen one,
but for as long as snow stays white
and smooth as blank paper

it's welcome. Mornings, before rising,
I check the light level around the blinds
for that extra brightness that signals
more snow overnight. Eventually
it will shrink to soiled rags under evergreens

but for now it's a whiteboard cleaned
of all the old errors.

THE BEGONIA AND THE BLUE JAY

Ryan Harper

Alight on the jardiniere
the bird sings down the morning
after the storm—the sear
the whine the liquid
note on a bent rim.
Bluing the iron
harmon mute strains
the breaches in the garden
wall the jay announces

its day shares
into the flower's discs
arrayed, collecting
in reflection the arriving
light—some satellite
in bloom, its faculties
fierce with transmission,
screeds of the converters
level, clean as teeth

the jay and the begonia
in morning lay their take:
come round back the storm,
come round before the ask
and tell of a rain-washed day,
a song let go, a leaf dampened,
a low gloss a revelation.

SPEAKING

Geoffrey Heptonstall

Before we could speak there was noise
making no sense, but a stumbling
of tongues from toothless mouths.
All was known beyond a feeling
that we would come to see
the essence of things in view.

We might reach out to touch
the other land across the sound,
only to be caught in the current
under the monstrous roar
of words wildly searching
for an understanding voice.

We seek to speak what we hear within,
an echo of the word first spoken
making a universe of sense
of which at last we can speak
and be heard as easily
as the moment of time passing.

CREEK BED

Glen Hunting

This country's not my own
and mine's too far from here,
so now my arms and legs are like
the boughs and roots that probe
this empty channel, where I sit.
The deepening mauve
of dusk should be the blush

of dear ones reaching back,
without the hints I drop in codes
too new to know belonging.
And anyway, there's no damn
signal here, so why not move?
But if I always place the call

I'm bound to lose my shape
and colour; as it is, my trunk
and limbs are like the other relics
in this river—sapped of water,
bled of colour, blown to ashes.
Any place can be the stage

for self-intended bleakness,
or the land may well chameleon
its menace, just for you.

So do I see, or only say the silt
is a cruel parchment, sifting fibres
out from under me, and petrifying
hunger with its drought?

FLIGHT

Jane Hider

I ate my first snail at the age of twelve. I was sitting at our usual table in a bluestone steak house at the western end of King Street, a well-mannered block away from the nightclubs and strip joints. To expand our palates, my father proposed a game. He chose the dish and my brother and I would describe what we tasted. We'd begun with the simplest items, like iceberg lettuce salad (*crunchy water*, I said) then progressed to dishes like eye fillet with peppercorn sauce (*firecracker tsunami*).

Last month, we had oysters on rock salt served with lemon halves wrapped in muslin. A *kelp gulp*, I suggested. My father stared past me as if searching for the right response, although I suspected he was probably monitoring the bartender, whom he'd often called feckless, which I knew was a specific sub-category of laziness. I knew by now what would happen next: sensing my father's gaze he would quickly pick up a glass and start polishing it. Satisfied, he turned to smile at me. 'You could be a poet,' he said.

I imagined myself taller, full of poetic thoughts, my freckles faded, cheekbones chiselled, ponytail swept up in a chignon.

My brother slouched beside me. He'd long since lost interest in both the game and in what my father had promised us would follow, one day, if we behaved ourselves: we would be allowed a taste of one of the foamy pastel cocktails the lazy bartender was assembling for the grown-ups.

I can still taste that snail, its similarity to snot was too gross to even articulate, but we both thought it, my brother and I. Our eyes met as I stuck the miniature fork into the striped shell, the texture and flavour almost, but not quite, masked by the puddle of garlic-flecked oil in which

it sat. I can also still feel the poke in the ribs delivered by my brother as he told me dad had probably picked them out from under our rose bushes that afternoon.

'They're tinned,' my mother told me the next day, when I described our dinner. 'From the French Alps, collected after a rainfall.' I pictured the villagers, gathering the storm spattered snails; the little molluscs deprived of their shell-homes and then their lives. It seemed mercenary, verging on genocidal. Perhaps I would become a vegetarian, a mysterious species of person, so marginalised I'd never even met one, and loathed by my parents. They were *attention seekers*, according to my mother.

And why did they have to be French? 'We could have local snails,' I suggested helpfully, recalling my geography class on Australian Made.

'Don't be absurd,' she scoffed. Mum believed Australian things were suburban and unsophisticated. Most of our food came from tins (ovoid tomatoes, saffron corn and faded petit pois) or an Italian delicatessen in the wilds of the inner northern suburbs where we obtained rations of unsliced salami and pyramids of parmesan. My mother would rather die than eat the dusty powdered cheese or the plastic-wrapped pink slabs of bacon sold in the supermarket.

I rarely took her views about food seriously. For a start, she didn't own a restaurant, like dad. And she didn't even cook for us, it was left to the housekeeper to deliver plates of rissoles and lamb chops with sugary tomato sauce to the table each night at six o'clock.

The only food mum prepared was for her Friday night dinner parties, eccentric, painterly concoctions. The week before the snails: cherry soup topped with a quenelle of avocado mousse. She called the main which followed (chicken topped with crushed pineapple mixed with mayonnaise) *chicken surprise*. 'They'll be surprised all right,' my father muttered as he ran a piece of lemon peel around the edge of his martini glass.

My father wasn't around much, perhaps understandably given the cherry soup, but still, his absences were confusing, somehow abnormal. As he challenged me to eat the snail, his eyes narrowed, a new hypothesis slotted into place. He was a spy, a conclusion confirmed by his very appearance; the glamorous skunk-like streak of silver at his left temple, chunky gold watch and trench coat.

Restaurant ownership was a brilliant cover story.

My brother whispered some hex into my ear and dad held up his hand like a traffic policeman. 'Give your sister some space. Let's hear her opinion.'

As it slipped down my throat I noticed my brother had pushed his own plate to the side, disclaiming ownership.

'I love it, dad. *Muscular slime*.' It was the best I could do.

'That's my little plum.'

And then he was gone. Dead, or as good as. For weeks, hushed voices, visits from men in suits and deliveries of flowers and wine in green bottles and a pungent rock-hard meatloaf my mother said was disgusting.

He was avoiding the tax office, she said, an inappropriate agency which was engaging in a campaign of persecution. He couldn't return to Australia until things were resolved.

The tax story was an unlikely explanation. We had plenty of money. It was something else, a burning ember, a creeping dissatisfaction with his life, with us, with me. My mother's face crumpled like pastry when I presented my theory. 'Shush,' she said, 'what rubbish, he loves you more than anything.'

At first, the postcards were evidence. A fugitive's zig-zag across Europe, bougainvillea-wrapped, terracotta-stained messages of I miss you I'll be home soon its warm here I can't speak French that well but

there are plenty of *escargots*, my little plum, and I think of you every time I eat them.

'Perhaps mum will marry another dad,' my brother said.

We were eating dinner on our laps in front of the TV, an activity previously forbidden, but no one cared any more. Beef shasliks with boiled vegetables. *No way*, I thought, watching the diaphanously clad genie emerge from her bottle. Mum didn't have any time to meet new people. I'd watched as she worked through dad's rubble, her face a pale frown, hollowed out with fatigue. The restaurant was sold, as was the metallic sports car and the motorboat and the beach house on the dune, and finally, our day-to-day house, as my mother called it.

We would live in a new, smaller home, tucked in behind a railway station, she told us, using her new bright tone of voice. We sat in uncomfortable silence as we absorbed this news. I wondered if I would have to share a room with my brother. He snored and made fun of my freckles. This fate could be even worse than being fatherless.

'I don't want to move,' he said through clenched teeth. 'You can't make me.'

'What about Coco?' I asked, imagining the tax officers, robots with giant hands, scraping through our belongings, looking for things of value. My cat didn't like change.

She avoided our eyes. 'They don't care about that kind of stuff. Pets aren't assets.'

She sat down at the island bench, ran her fingers across the black marble and addressed the mango tiled backsplash. 'Also... I've got a job.'

My mother, the socialite who dazzled from the grainy pages of the *Herald Sun*, hair in improbable platinum waves, defined by the sharp corners of her blazer and the curve of her straw hat, would now become its diametric opposite. A *worker*.

I heard her crying at night, at least that's what I guessed the gasping sucking sound was, although it had to be said, it sounded mostly like astonishment. 'She's in shock,' I heard one aunt tell another aunt as they sat by the pool drinking wine from the green bottles.

Shock. I'd never seen her cry, she would have been concerned about appearing fallible, about messing up her make-up. But our life had vaporised, so the shock part, yes, that I could understand.

I didn't sleep much in the months after he disappeared, and as I lay in bed I thought about the curly-haired boy I saw on the tram each morning. Although we'd never spoken, I was in love with him, an emotion confirmed by the ripping, shifting feeling inside when he smiled at me one day. When I saw him kiss a girl at the tram stop I'd thought it was the worst pain I would ever feel. But I was learning there were different kinds of pain. The Dad Pain danced and skipped like an imp inside my heart, leaving a bruised, breathless feeling which I worried would never be gone.

He'll come back, I told myself, like a prayer, each night.

The postcards started to trickle like a creek in drought. Monthly, then seasonally, then just birthdays and Christmas. And then one day, they stopped.

We'd been forgotten.

From Victoria Street it looked like a laundromat. The panes of glass were grimy and covered with photos of the menu dishes and sunsets over Halong Bay. The lighting was fluorescent, our table laminated, greasy and so tiny our knees touched. His face was an assembly of unreadable planes, eyes dark as a dam. The *pho* was not as good as his mother's, but then, hers took five days to make. The *xoi ga* was just okay.

'But here,' he said, eyes flashing. 'This is my favourite. Duck tongue.'

I gazed at the plate of fried strips of brown sinew, the scattered lawn of coriander not quite verdant enough to disguise what lay beneath.

'How exciting,' I said, wondering how I had reached the advanced age of thirty-five without knowing ducks had tongues. Our eyes met. A failure to enjoy this alleged delicacy might affect the balance of the evening. I'd been looking forward to what I was certain, until that very minute, would come later, an entwining of limbs as our breathing synchronised into the silence of the night. I could almost feel his sheet of dark hair between my fingers.

'I should warn you, there's a tiny bone inside. It's soft though.'

'I'm a food warrior,' I said, picking up my chopsticks.

'What's that?'

'It doesn't matter.'

The tongue was tendon-y with an intense, pure flavour. *Duck to the power of ten*, I thought.

We finished the plate in no time and he smiled and reached across the table, resting his fingertips on the back of my wrist, five warm circles imprinted in my skin.

'Let's go.'

Decades after the postcards stopped an email arrived. He'd found me, not a difficult task, especially for a spy. He had the same first name, but a different surname, something Italian ending with 'o'. Made sense, and explained why I'd never been able to find him, not that I'd tried that hard.

The first line read: Little plum, it's me.

I deleted it without reading the words which followed.

When I was fourteen my mother dumped a shoebox of some official-looking papers and a few striped ties into a metal garbage bin and lit a bonfire which burned for hours. When she turned away from the flames to pour herself another glass of prosecco I retrieved a photo. It had faded with the years to a toffee-brown, his hair blowing in the sea

breeze, magnetic gaze focussed on something out of shot. By that time the scandal died down, my mother had stopped hiding the newspapers from us and I'd caught the occasional story about my father. A tax cheat who hid millions and was holed up in a Polish castle. Other stories located him in penury in southern Italy, making ends meet by helping the local mafia with their finances.

'He's dead,' my brother told me one Christmas, after we'd both married and had children, and there was still no word. 'I just know it.'

I didn't think he was either alive or dead. To me, he resided in another dimension; a pixilation, no more real than a cartoon. With each email deleted, another pixel vanished. Soon there would be nothing left.

How old was he? I didn't know. Nor did my brother, and I couldn't ask my mother.

She was confined to a beige, soft-cornered room in an aged-care facility. Each time I visited she asked if I would take her back to the old house, the one we lived in before we *went down in the world*, forgetting, once again, it had long since been demolished and replaced with a neo-Tuscan apartment block. Last week she'd handed me an eggplant with a ribbon tied around its rotund middle ('perhaps you can make dip?' she said) which I figured she had somehow managed to steal from the facility's kitchen.

He was eighty, I guessed. Old. Old enough to have regrets, questions about the gouge he'd made in our lives, whether sorry would be enough, or was even required.

The emails kept coming, and I kept deleting until, one day, curiosity expanded inside me, stilled the finger hovering over the keyboard, precursor to the click consigning it to its place in the clouds. What was he saying? I double-clicked, read it, then put it in a desktop folder I named 'The Spy'.

He lived in Milan. He'd worked as some kind of consultant, but was retired now. He walked for miles each day, passing pinstriped

men on their scooters, neoclassical mansions, lush green courtyards glimpsed through wrought iron gates. His favourite food was risotto with gorgonzola, and he was partial to tripe.

Odious innards, I thought.

I stared at the illuminated screen, feeling a leaden pressure at the top of my stomach, a constriction in my throat. Across the floor, someone called out *good luck*. The office had emptied out, my firm was running a working from home experiment for the next week, preparation in case the virus got a hold of the country, an unlikely scenario, we all agreed, but management was conservative, and we had to play our part. I knew we saved deleted emails in case of litigation, they sat on a server somewhere. I asked IT to find his emails and move them to the folder, which I quickly renamed 'Milan Correspondence'.

I packed my most important documents into an archive box, unplugged the monitor and loaded up my car. I had to hurry or I would be late for my own birthday dinner.

Toorak Road was as quiet as Christmas, the bistro almost empty. The proprietor told us he'd had ten cancellations that day, people were panicking, about China, about the virus. I glanced at our children, busily tapping their screens, disinterested in adult conversation.

'Are you worried?' I asked.

He shrugged. In the drop of his shoulders I saw centuries of obliterated villages and mud-trodden bones and dead dreams. His eyes crinkled as if remembering. '*Oui*,' he said. 'This will be like a war.'

We told him we were sorry, and ordered *escargot* and steak frites and a bottle of champagne.

Our daughter was ten, and she would have the snails too, thank you very much, her jaw set in an-oh-so-familiar manner.

Our son was not interested in anything other than the crusty bread which he spread with the pale butter, biting his bottom lip in concentration.

The snails came without shells, sitting in a plate with twelve little dips and covered with garlic foam. Our daughter chewed and swallowed. 'Weird,' she said. 'Like an *oily slug*.'

Perfect, I thought.

My husband told her she was a champion, and she beamed, her face soft and shiny in the candlelight.

I sometimes thought of my father as I tucked the children in, smoothing their hair away from their foreheads. He had never tucked me in. He wasn't that kind of father. At twelve, I'd thought I understood why he did it. Running from someone who was trying to catch him, just like the game we played every day at school. A rational reaction. As the years passed I understood it less and less. The exile, perhaps that was explicable. But his silence, I could not explain that. An absence which over decades took up so much space in my mind I sometimes couldn't move until I let it replenish, fill up with loathing, shame and anger. His postcards, which I'd memorised, had a forced tone. As if he was making himself maintain the familial connection until one day, he just ran out of energy, couldn't pretend to care anymore. Why was he contacting me now, after so many years? I wanted him to remain fictitious, two dimensional.

I'd set up a temporary home office in the dining room we never used, and after we'd put the children to bed I re-read his last email. I hadn't paid attention to the final paragraph. Emergency departments were overwhelmed. Milan was being locked down. Schools, shops and restaurants were soon to close. Case numbers were doubling every day, hundreds were dying. Elderly people were particularly at risk, they thought. *PS, I don't feel old*, he wrote.

I could barely remember what I wore yesterday and yet, as I thought about the clattering trams of Milan, I recalled with cinematic clarity the day we drove alone to the house on the dune, the car top off, sea wind whipping my hair until I resembled an electrocution victim, stopping at a fish and chip shop in Tootgarook for potato cakes (like *salted warm wax*), my father telling me, *this will be our secret*, because we both knew my mother disapproved of deep fried food.

My husband stood behind me as I sat, staring at the email until the words blurred. He pressed the knots at the base of my neck.

'What if he dies over there?'

He said something in Vietnamese.

'What does that mean?'

'My grandmother used to say it. Doesn't translate that well into English. It's about a crane which flew so fast it forgot what it was flying from.'

I pressed reply and started typing.

IN STRIFE

Srishti Jain

Hands, write a disaster
write the story of your homeland, write the barbed wires pressed onto its chest by the great men by children of the great men by the rich by the high born by other since-forgotten classifications of men by god himself
write the 6 feet by 2 feet of land that was left unclaimed for you to bury yourself in, write being burnt to ashes instead because the god of your ancestors writ so
write your dust being immersed in the river which runs down your town then through the borders then into the sea none of which belong to anyone neither did you write your people who are all bad but good at heart really and intent and pray daily and touch their mother's feet
write any of the gods whose names are so weak they break when infidels utter them gods upon whose heads bodies are sliced gods that watch in silence do all your gods just watch in silence?
write the men that watch in silence, write the men that are silenced
write these disasters make them known surely these disasters are known then wilfully unknown
write your excision from this malignant home this shrine of deceit can they see when
they close their eyes they pray to their own deceit?
write the sprain in your neck from constantly looking back looking eastwards, write what you see what you don't what you can't anymore can't ever again, write what you avert your gaze from
write the relief of having escaped, write yet the pain the nostalgia the longing the lack of belonging, write the lies memories tell
write returning only once only as a stiff carcass ready to be burnt please let me be burnt and merged with my homeland one more time but this time it won't hurt
write being immersed in its river sinking into its bed until the end of time or until

the sun burns too bright and spits fire on the land if the children of great men
don't get to it first
hands, write something god this is a disaster

IN LIFE'S FRAGMENTATION WE TRAVEL TOGETHER

Stefan Jatschka

Indonesia 2018

Flying foxes emerged between the giant rock cliffs of the Ngarai Sianok Canyon. First, I noticed just one. As my eyes adapted to the dusk, I got better at spotting more giant bats gliding through the sunset. With every inch the sun descended behind the rugged trees growing on the flat surfaces of the mountains around me. The skies spewed out swarms of black dots, scavenging for food. The flying foxes disappeared somewhere into the horizon just as they appeared – fast little dots, blending into the sky.

I watched the twilight spectacle from the top of an old viewing tower located a few hundred metres into the National Park, still very close to the entrance where I'd had dinner. I had never seen bats fly past me so close. The way their head is connected to the rest of the body and how their tiny hands are attached to the top of their wings seemed too odd, but that's how they function and it keeps them moving forward. Even though I kept travelling forward I always ended up somewhere in the past. My mother's past and my own past, my childhood, reliving memories of my relationship with my mother. I didn't just leave because I didn't want to be home anymore. It was more than that. I grew up with a mother who could never stop talking about travelling. In my memories of growing up, she always seemed on the verge of leaving. Leaving our hometown, her family, me. But she never did, although she came close to it once or twice.

I became a traveller because I wanted to see where the pictures on the walls of our living room came from. I used to rush past those exotic paintings of trees and foreign landscapes that were hung on the white walls in the hallway of our house every morning when I was getting ready for school – but deep down I wanted to go to those painted places. I wanted to meet the men and women who captured scorpions and butterflies there just to put them in a glass box. For other Austrian children, scorpions and tarantulas only existed in books and horror movies. For me they were real. They reminded me to leave and to seek adventure without regard to when I'd return. I wanted to satisfy this longing to get lost on purpose and wander on streets unknown, like my mother once did. I used to cuddle soft toy camels she had bought at a market in Jordan instead of teddy bears when I couldn't fall asleep. Instead of posters, the walls in my bedroom were covered in Chinese crafts my mother brought back from a trip to Shanghai. On my first day of high school, I rocked up with a wooden wristband created by the Himba People of Namibia that my mother brought back from Africa. Growing up in a house that felt more like a museum than a home, made me a traveller a long time ago. When she read from her travel journal she kept of her own journey through Indonesia in 1979, I never stopped dreaming about the journey I wanted to go on as an adult. A journey to my mother's past. The past that made her stay and made me leave.

Indonesia 1979

We drive to the Ngarai Sianok Canyon and go on a hike with our driver. We have to cross a few rivers and get pretty wet, but we don't mind because of the frequent tropical showers that keep surprising us on our hike. We take a break in a small hut and drink coffee with a local family. Our coffee is brewed in a grime-covered pot over an open fire in the kitchen.

They offer us delicious flat cake. Barbara is curious and peeks into a few pots. All of a sudden, we are being served something indescribable. A jelly-like dish…

Indonesia 2018

The viewing tower overlooked a small cemetery. Colourful tombstones with lively floral murals painted all over were scattered around me. In front of me, I stared into the endless gaze of the canyon and saw the roofs of small villages at the bottom. The lush green forests of the valley changed as nightfall cloaked the jungle in darkness. The temperature fell and a light breeze brought a touch of life to everything that went stagnant during the heat of the day. The jungle sounds around me spread as the town noise dimmed down. Crickets were sending out mating calls, the screams of monkey mothers warning their children and the chirping of cautious birds dominated the air I breathed. Cars, tuk-tuks and mopeds had disappeared from the winding roads that led through the hills of the valley. During the day, the canyon and the jungle seemed to be taken over by civilisation, like every other part of the world. At night, though, the jungle around the canyon claimed back its space. The unexpected equilibrium of humans and nature, the co-existence of two opposites, fulfilled me with content and I almost didn't realise how dark the day had become in that moment. The last dying rays of the day's sun shone through thick rain clouds over the distant mountains, providing me with just enough light to climb down the narrow metal stairs of the viewing tower. A flickering light in the distance caught my attention. A small house, deep in the jungle of the valley, between rice fields, hidden past a big water lily field, hadn't embraced the call of the jungle yet. I wondered if that was Wes' house, whom I had met earlier in the day.

Indonesia 1979

> … a jelly-like dish which we eat with a forced smile. Even though we don't speak the same language we get along very well and have a good time together. To show how grateful we are we give the old guy in the hut our only lighter. He's thrilled.

Indonesia 2018

The jungle was quiet during the day, but for most of my hike through the valley of the canyon I felt as if someone or something was watching me. I tried to avoid an encounter with the macaques who roamed the popular tourist paths throughout the canyon. I'd heard of monkeys holding unsuspecting tourists hostage until they got what they wanted – food. One traveller I shared a room with in my hostel told me that a monkey had stolen her car keys and wouldn't release them until she had given the perpetrator the two bananas she was carrying in her backpack. She thought she'd never see her car keys again, but the monkey handed them over, almost taunting her – rewarding her for her compliance. I saw a few macaques jump from tree to tree as I hiked through the canyon, but they seemed uninterested in me and I wondered if they had hunted early in the morning or if another traveller before me had already fallen victim to their schemes. They paid no attention to me, except for a few curious glances to see if I dared to make eye-contact with them. I knew better. A risk I didn't want to take. I reached the Great Wall of Koto Gadang in the heart of the valley of the canyon and rested for a moment.

'Pst.' Someone's voice invaded my deep thoughts. I looked around me, but I couldn't see anyone.

'Psst.' A tall man with washed-out red curly hair had climbed over the lowest part of the wall. He wore blue shorts that didn't match his

brown button-up shirt. His shins and toes were covered in tiny scratches from walking through the sharp grass around us.

His name was Wes.

'Look!' Wes pointed at nothing. 'I'll show you something.'

I didn't want to be rude and naively followed him around the wall.

'What are you trying to show me?' I asked him, still following with slight hesitation.

He didn't answer and just kept pointing and walking ahead of me, leading the way.

We hiked deeper into the jungle, no longer following signs and paths. My Converse sank into the muddy ground of the thick forest brush. I could feel sharp blades of grass and spikey thorns scratching my legs until I bled, attracting mosquitos that I tried to fend off while following Wes. I held onto big tree roots that had been unearthed years ago, but still managed to grow. I reached for vines to pull myself up a few steep hills. I tried to keep up with Wes, but I kept slipping, looking up and down, tracing his steps. I still didn't know what he wanted to show me and I was only certain of three reasons why I was still following him: it was too late to go back now, I depended on him, and I definitely wouldn't be able to retrace our steps and find my way back to where I decided to abandon my gut feeling and blindly follow a stranger. I thought he wanted to show me a frog in the grass or a plant behind the wall where he'd met me, instead I found myself somewhere unknown, something my mother might have experienced.

I had read my mother's journal many times before I went to Indonesia. It had led me to Sumatra, and with it in my heart, I wandered through the Sianok Canyon, surrounding the ancient city of Bukittinggi. When I ate lunch at my hostel earlier, I remembered that she'd written about how much she liked the food in Indonesia. Without her journal, I would never have tasted Gadu Gadu, a delicious tofu-based meal my mother had written of a few times. The remains of her journey, which I was

carrying within me, allowed the calmness of the jungle to let my heart flood my brain with a contentedness that ensured my worrying soul that everything was ok – even if that moment would only last for a short while and even if that feeling kept pushing me, slowly and unexpectedly, out of my comfort zone.

Wes and I reached a small gazebo in an opening of the dense forest. Next to it, was a handmade fireplace, with grey bricks around it. Wood still smoking. Wes showed me a small pond with fish behind the gazebo.

'Is that your home?' I asked.

'Yes. I sleep here. You want rest?'

'A rest before we return? I actually just wanted to...' I couldn't finish my sentence because he'd entered a cabin behind the gazebo. I'd follow him – one last time, I told myself.

He was boiling water in a burnt pot over an open fire. Smoke filled the small room and escaped through a crack in the door I had left open. Every time he blew into the flame, little specs of ash settled over an old mattress that took up two-thirds of the room. He poured ground coffee beans from an old plastic container into a silver mug. We sat in awkward silence. I didn't want to talk and he just enjoyed his coffee in my company. I took three tiny but respectful sips of coffee and handed him back my mug with a smile that said I was ready to head back. Unfortunately, he'd decided to continue his tour through untouched paths of the canyon and I realised that he wanted me to take a rest because this had only been the beginning of a longer tour.

We crossed the dried riverbed I saw from the viewing tower at the entrance of the park during sunset.

'It's better without shoes.' Wes pointed at his bare feet.

I took my shoes off too and put them in my backpack. I kept getting stuck as the dry riverbed gave under my weight, like quicksand. I felt like I shouldn't have been there, but I had no other option than to move

forward, to get lost in the jungle with Wes and ruminate on my mother's past that had somehow led me here.

Indonesia 1979

> We're buying postcards when we met Werner, a funny guy from Switzerland. He tells us that he's been travelling for seven months and that he's just arrived from India. We have dinner with him in a coffee shop where the waiter speaks German. What a great night. On our way back to the hotel Werner shows us around the city and the bell tower of Bukuttinggi. We spend the evening writing our journals and watching the stars.

Indonesia 2018

It's hard to write on paper. I'm left-handed, cursed to smudge the ink of my pen. I must think longer about the words I'm going to write on paper. I shape them in my mind and think of a dozen other words I could use instead of that one word I had just written. Why? To sound more sophisticated? To prove I can express myself in ways my mother couldn't? Or is it my insecurity or inability to express exactly how I feel that's holding me back? Once a word is written on paper, it's there permanently. The ink giving the paper purpose. Sure, I could always cross it out or attempt to cover it with white-out, but the marks will still be there to remind me of the mistakes I'd made. Something I could have done better or shouldn't have done at all. Small reminders of the lack of connection with the world I'm creating. Typing stories on a laptop isn't easy either. The flashing cursor keeps my attention on every second that goes by without having hit any of the black keys in front of me. I

wish I could disable the delete button somehow; those mistakes I hate making when I write on paper, are the raw versions of my thoughts that represent my soul most accurately. The unfiltered stories my heart desires to write. But my brain keeps interfering.

I was re-reading my mother's journal on my way to Lake Maninjau. The hostel owner had organised his friend to drive me to the lake and back on the same day. In Sumatra, people seem very helpful and entrepreneurial almost. Every time I wanted to go somewhere, someone would offer me a ride or organise a family member, friend or neighbour to offer me a lift. Of course, I had to pay for it, but the price was always fair – less than a taxi and much less than professionally hired transport. On our way to different destinations, we always picked up other travellers – locals and tourists – who wanted to be dropped off along the route, for a small fee as well.

My mother's handwriting wasn't like mine. There were barely any corrections or mistakes. A few times, she had taped a small snippet of paper over a spelling error and wrote the correct version over it. I turned those pages over and held them against the sunlight to perceive what exactly she didn't want to be seen. The glue, almost forty years old, had lost its adhesiveness and after a while, the little white piece of paper had fallen off the pages like leaves off a tree during fall at home. I barely had to touch the paper. The errors she hid were banal. One snippet covered an illegible letter 'a' that could have been mistaken for the letter 'd'. Another had been stuck over the prefix of a word she deemed unnecessary. I had tried to peel off the white paper to reveal what was hidden underneath some of the snippets the first time I read her journal, but I couldn't bring myself to commit such a violent act. Not to her, not to the page. I felt like I was violating her privacy, invading her raw, unfiltered thoughts, the mother I never knew. I was excited when the glue failed to keep her secrets.

Her handwriting underneath the snippets was different from the handwriting of the rest of the journal. I could see it when she realised

she had made a mistake. I could see it in the ferocity of her penmanship. The rest of the journal was written with gentle, smooth strokes and precisely measured lines – her handwriting almost seemed dull to me. A reminder of the mother I grew up with. Hiding. Trying to blend in. Contouring her emotions as much as she could. Although, we both knew, what was boiling under the surface of our facades.

The minivan took up both lanes of the street and only slowed down when cars tried to pass us. I closed my mother's journal for now to avoid getting carsick and to forget her for a moment.

THE ANTIGRAVITY OF NOTHING FAMILIAR

Alison Jennings

She'd like to move to Tokyo, not knowing anybody
or the language, just to feel the float of anti-gravity,
of nothing familiar, no attachment to surroundings.

She wants to set a motorcycle ablaze, to accessorize
its flame decals, but recognizes there is some frisky
fuel that would singe eyebrows in a fearful whoosh.

She imagines shrieking at a vapid "customer service"
representative, who says her call's important but who
puts her on hold with teeth-grating backdrop music.

She envisions kicking that smug ferry worker, far
too ungrateful in his government gig, where he gets
to smell seawater and watch the waves all day long.

She plans to sleep forever, only waking up to drink,
eat, and eliminate, water houseplants, check email,
feed the cat, then return to a sheltered somnolence,

where her dreams
make more sense
than this pointless life.

TWO HUNDRED AND SIXTY-TWO DAYS

Catherine Johnstone

During the first year of the disease I won't name, I felt like a creek bed in a drought. Luckily, the nearby Merri Creek was full.

Day 20.

The Melbourne lockdown rules said we were not allowed to travel further than five kilometres from our homes. Do not pass go. Stop at the invisible barred gate that towers into the sky. A miasma of dread drifted around everybody. To keep everyone safe I was not allowed to see an ocean tumble or a mountain soar or snow tremble. Inside me a squawk a quiver a mottled sky an empty hand a frozen drop. I walked Audrey along the creek. Her poodle ears flopped as she barked and ran. I studied the concrete path. I barely registered the trees, plants and birds.

Day 41.

I found a new grassy trail closer to the creek. The ground was soft. In Bonwick Street, I took a wide berth around a tattooed man on a bike. My heart clattered, but he smiled and said my dog was gorgeous. He had just bought a moodle for his lonely friend. She loved it so much; it made him cry. I turned upside-down with softness. When I passed the football field, two women I knew from the before-times clutched the leads of their two white dogs and waved at me. That wave was as exciting as a big night out. In the newspaper, the little girl pressed her soft face against a window and her grandmother kissed the glass like it was skin. Health workers in scrubs sang, *I'll stand by you*. The cafe gave free cannoli on Fridays. A woman knitted a rug of irregular blue

and violet squares and dropped it off on my porch. I wrapped it around me like a hug. I wasn't allowed to feel flesh and blood arms.

Day 47.

Audrey and I walked further along the grassy trail in misty rain. A gum tree leaned across the path, its trunk gleaming with colour like paint splashes. Oranges and greens, reds and creams. I touched its bark and said, help me. Little hopping birds jigged around the path, but I did not know their names. The cemetery was within five kilometres of where I lived, so I visited thousands of dead people. I wandered among graves, mausolea and crypts. I wondered if I would get the unnameable disease and end up between 'Giuseppe Natoli, you will always be remembered in our hearts' and 'Sally Hudson, a life cut short'.

Day 71.

No short cuts today. Audrey and I went to the wild side of the creek. It took three hours to get to the next bridge and return to the beginning. We fought through dead fallen branches and an invasive plant that grabbed my legs and hid the holes in the ground. On the way home, I hid with others in our masks as we lined up for coffee in the takeaway line. I couldn't see smiles. Half of every face was a blank. When it was my turn, I tried to keep the conversation going beyond 'soy cappuccino, no sugar' with an in-depth analysis of the likelihood of rain. Later I watched a crow drop an empty Subway carton from a height onto the gutter and swoop down to pick it up. It sat on a telephone line holding the carton in its beak. Even the crows were desperate for takeaways. On television, some people weren't hiding. In not-Melbourne places, they ate and drank and laughed wherever they liked. Everything was back to front. A tree was climbing me. The puddle stepped on me. The clouds flew among the birds. The only thing that didn't feel back to

front was holding a pen. It didn't hold me. Though maybe my writing was holding me.

Day 103.

It was hard to get up today, but Audrey thrust her wet nose into my hand, so I went out as usual. I listened to the trip of the creek. Sometimes there was a plop as if a platypus had dived into the water. Near the rocks, the water gulped and plonked. A man near the bridge ran up the hill carrying a plastic crate of small archive boxes. What was he doing? Exercising with the crate as a weight? Coming or going from a workplace? He puffed out a farting sound as he laboured up the hill. When he reached me, he told me he was training a dog to avoid snakes by zapping it. In the crate, Eastern Brown snakes had their venom removed. You never know who you'll meet on a walk along the creek. I didn't know whether to feel sorrier for the dog being zapped or the snakes. I don't know why he was doing this during the disease time. When I got home, I read that Eastern Browns hide in hollow logs or under rock crevices along creeks. I was glad Audrey never chased one and I hoped the man wouldn't catch any more. I knew we had to fight the disease, but I wasn't prepared for battle, for hard borders and soft borders, orange zones and red zones, don't go past five kilometres or you'll be fined. I didn't want the eighty-year-old woman next door or the laughing toddler down the road to drown with liquid lungs, so I did everything I was told. But that didn't make the rules any easier to obey.

Day 155.

Audrey ran and sniffed, but today I committed a crime at the creek. I lowered my mask. I smelt eucalyptus and peppermint instead of my own stale breath. Audrey showed me how to raise my nose to the air. I was lucky to have the internet. My laptop and mobile glowed when I spoke and listened and zoomed. Those screens contained a world. Brother,

sister, friend, writer. Not faces in physical proximity, but whole faces, nonetheless.

Day 160.

Today I was allowed to go ten kilometres to see a hospital consultant. Other streets! Other people! Other sights! But outside the tram windows, everything was dead, as if I'd ventured into a post-apocalyptic world. No-one strolling the streets or eating in cafes. Closed shops. Few cars. In the hospital, the triage nurse spoke softly to me. 'What's your address, lovely?' 'You take care, lovely.' 'Go and sit over there, lovely.' My new name, 'lovely' washed over me like a blessing. I waited on the plastic bucket chair flanked by other taped-off chairs. The song, *Danny Boy*, echoed down the corridor. The pipes, the pipes were calling me. Someone must have had a portable amp. I checked around the corner near the lifts. A musician plucked a harp beside a singer: *Don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day.* Before I saw the consultant, I brushed away the tears below my mask.

Day 208.

At the creek, waves dimpled the tannin stain of the water. Bubbles fizzed around a clump of reeds. A new rule said I could be in a social bubble and visit one person in real life. I sat with my friend on her deck and basked in her three-dimensional smile. Tiny dabs of light glowed on her lime tree.

Day 210.

Google told me the name of the bird that dipped its beak into the red grevillea flower in my back garden. It was a honeyeater. I knew that word too, but I didn't know it was the name of the bird in my very own garden. At the creek, I studied the scribbles on a eucalyptus trunk. Back

at home, I discovered the scribbly patterns were from the feeding trails of moth larvae. In the afternoon, I listened to Audrey's paws tick-tocking on the wooden deck made from a living tree.

Day 220.

I found out the name of the little hopping birds. They were willy wagtails. I'd seen that name in books, but I didn't know those creatures darted around my very own creek. Light and shadow spun across the floor in the shapes of my lemon tree branches. I knew it was called a Meyer lemon because it had a Bunnings label.

Day 261.

The label belonging to the turquoise and white bird at the cemetery was sacred kingfisher. I walked on sacred ground. Wurundjeri country. On the bark path beside the cemetery creek, the weeping willow wept its branches onto the ground. The cemetery was not just a home for the dead.

At the beginning, this is what I knew. This is a bird. This is a tree. This is a plant. I still do not know the names of everything beside the creek or in the cemetery, but I know their shapes and sounds. This plant has grey leaves with a soft underside. The bark of this eucalyptus tree sings in the sun. The sound of one bird is like the twitching of twigs and another one gurgles as if its throat is trembling with water. The creek plinks and plonks. It surfs the rocks with white flourishes and curlicues.

I do not want to dwell on the cold 'C' words that dominated those two hundred and sixty-two days of absence. Instead, I learnt about a world that warmed me with presence. It was filled with names that flitted with colour, spun with light, vibrated in soundscapes. This is a

rainbow lorikeet flashing with colour. This is a she-oak shushing in the wind. That noise is a growling grass frog. This is a correa dipping its red tubular flowers. That sound is a hardhead duck taking off from the pond. At the creek, the frogs join in the paean with sounds that echo my own: 'Greet creek, greet creek, greet creek.'

“SAN DIMAS TRAIN STATION, 1933”

Meghan Kemp-Gee

after Millard Sheets

The drifting of the sky beyond the station
clouds over. A kind of settling. Something is coming.
Looking back, the man in splayed lamplight appears
in another light. We draw out lines like

clouds over a kind of settling. Something is coming,
hung in the sky, split into the horizon.
In another light, we draw out lines, like
these futures gesture at our living one more time.

Hung in the sky, split in two, the horizon
honors the future, draws it east, gestures home.
These futures gesture at our living. One more time,
all inbound, these pasts quicken and split. This incoming

honors the future, draws it east, gestures home,
looking back. The man in splayed lamplight appears.
All inbound, these pasts quicken and split this incoming,
the drifting of the sky beyond the station.

SOMBREMESA

Kara Knickerbocker

There are words that don't translate in English yet, like the Spanish word *sombremesa*, which means that moment after eating a meal when the food is gone but the conversation is still flowing and if I had my say, the photo next to it in the dictionary would be the one where Julia, Martina, Melanie, Andrea and I sat next to the Guadalquivir, the only navigable river in Spain, and we sailed it— back to conversations of childhood, and what religion has become in the light,

our parents' names and how we're growing into them, love or something like it— although we'd all only just met, after stopping near Casco Antiguo to listen to a band called Jukebox Munich sing Daft Punk and suddenly we were up all night and already lucky— gathering at the bodeguita for flat beer poured into shiny plastic cups, and we sat there on the curb under the yellow glow of streetlights, until Melanie said it's 8 in the morning, and we almost didn't realize the sun had spilled across the pavement and the pigeons were squawking among the jewels of litter and we decided to get breakfast, because it had been hours since we ate and I had a train to catch at one and we only have so many hours in day (don't we always) and I learned *trasnochar* how we

stayed up all night and Julia said if you fall asleep with a spoon in your hand, the moment the spoon drops is when you're having the best sleep of your life, and I said what about the best night of my life? And they agreed, and we cried and ate tostadas and drank coffee, watched a street artist paint by La Giralda and we took her brush and we painted this night into our young and growing hearts, all yellow and rose and free thundering with a word that describes this that doesn't exist yet but I'm still writing it—

SINCLAIR

Tiffany Lindfield

We named you Sinclair, because you were covered in oil, and
Upton Sinclair tole' us all about oil,
Pulled from the ground, sloshed in the faces of
Strong men, their bodies slick, parting the mouths of women,
Uttering desire for men at work.

Dead dinosaurs, and other such things, buried, resurrected,
Into the pockets of men, wearing suits and gold watches; men
Watching the stock market and building trains...

... Plastic trucks, doll faces, Tupperware, heart catheters.

You looked like death on stick legs, feet on hot, filthy concrete.
A bird-zombie. A poor man and his crew of other poor men
Smoking in the alleyway–a break from cooking food in oil–
Called out to us: "That bird there needs help. Been baking like a
Biscuit in dis' heat all day."

You blinked eyes coated in oil; we picked you up,
Carried you. And
Gave you a bath of soap and water, Your black feathers
Fluffed out. Your yellow beak popped, and your gray feet stood.

We, pretending to be mother birds, Emin and I,
Fed you steak tips, dried worms, and then sweet potato. We made you a nest of
Soft towels, and let you sleep with cool water on your tongue.

You sat on our fingers like they tree branches, and considered us
Mother. We considered you *victim* of our
Greed for oil, and thought sparing you was poetic justice,
Cosmic justice, on the scale of a bird your size, the size of a small crow. But you aren't a
Crow, but a Phoebe; but you certainly wore (still wear, we imagine) the

Smirk of a Crow.

We let you go, to be bird, to scratch the skies above with beak, and claws. We stay on
Land, drowning in the
Oil still pulled from below the soil,

Remembering Sinclair.

WONDERLAND

Margaret Marcum

when i sent you away you left the key on the table
but i had grown so small i could not reach it
my tears drowned the whole apartment and also your voice
telling me it is only just a dream
and the cat's smile is not the only thing
not quite all there
i wonder at the time inside walls
and how the tea has not gone cold
despite all the chatter—i wonder
why i cannot speak over the flowers
where are you and how
will we ever get out

UNTIL THE COWS COME HOME

Kate Maxwell

The 'cow room' was the first stop every time we visited the gallery. I'm sure the room was numbered or named after some benefactor, but we just called it, 'the cow room.' After almost an hour of stops and starts in a carriage stinking of sweat and skin-rubbed metal, we tried to make the most of our city trip; lunch at the David Jones Cafe (always a bonus if you got a cushioned booth seat) and then a tree-shaded stroll to the sandstone building of grand columns and ceilings to see the cow painting.

Mum would stand quietly in her good shoes that hurt her feet, her hair set for the occasion, as she gazed into the canvas. The farmhouse and cows, the glory of a spring morning: all only an arm's length and a lifetime away. And even though it wasn't her farm or her particular memory, it seemed enough. Close enough to bring it all back. Back before a beloved husband, acres, and endless sky were replaced with weary widowhood, a paint-peeling fibro cottage, and way too many ordinary disappointments.

We never loitered long. She'd fuss about in her handbag, straightening well-pressed lapels to signify when she'd had enough. Sometimes we stood, softly outraged before a blank wall, a little printed message declaring the painting was 'taking a break.' Out back in the storerooms, the cattle must have stood: chewing cuds, flicking tails, far from public gaze. We'd get a little braver then and explore different rooms and old masters. Too much colour, flesh, and too much new. Nothing that offered her a moment again in the front paddock: the rattle of the gate chain, clouds of breath preceding each crunchy gum-booted step, as she strode out to meet the cows.

And yet, this memory likely wasn't even hers. Most mornings she'd have been nowhere near the paddock. She'd be setting out breakfast, preparing school lunches, maybe rushing into cool air to throw a scrap bucket to the chooks. Not strolling through the quiet reverence of a frosty spring morning.

Years later, we bought a large print, framed it, and hung it on her kitchen wall. But the smell of dew-wet grass, sparkle of sunlight, and snorting bovine breath seemed to only linger in the gallery.

The old, faded print now hangs in her room, above her walking frame, beside her meals trolley. But it's a pale and withered representation. She used to tell the carers, 'That's my favourite painting,' but I'm not sure she even sees it now. I chatter on about years and people past, hold her frail hand, and wonder—when she closes her eyes—does she still feel the fresh bite of that imaginary morning and see a glint of grace in the air? Maybe even those memories, thin as her crepey skin, as fragile as her bony wrists have wafted outside her frame. So, we sit together and wait. Waiting to go home.

DUST

Amanda McLeod

'Charlie. There's no one here.'

Charlie ignores me, grabbing the cuff of his sleeve and rubbing it hard against the dirt-smeared glass panel in the door.

'There is. I saw someone moving around in there.'

'This place was abandoned years ago.' I look over my shoulder. The dust swirls up the main street in red dervishes, past the handful of weatherboard buildings still hanging on out here. Coarse tufts of desert grass have taken over, forcing their way up through the few slabs of concrete in search of the blistering sun. I don't know how they survive. It doesn't look like it's rained out here in a million years. As soon as I step out of the shadow of our four-wheel-drive I can feel my skin starting to burn, right through the sunscreen. I have no idea why people ever decided to live out here.

'I'm telling you, Evie. I saw someone back there.' Charlie's eyes are wide under the brim of his hat. 'Maybe this place is haunted.'

God, he'd bloody love that.

I laugh. 'It's the middle of the day, Charlie. Ghosts don't come out in the daytime.' I snort. 'If they even exist. Which they don't.'

This whole trip is Charlie's idea. He wants to explore the dying towns of country Australia for his thesis. Mining and agriculture caused all these places to sprout and bloom, and fade just as fast. So here we are, two twenty-something post-grads, out on what he calls reconnaissance: looking around to see if there are enough of these places, and enough people who remember them, for it to be feasible. I think that's crap. I think Charlie's using it as an excuse to be a dark tourist. We've stopped

at half a dozen places so far that are on their last legs, but we were told this place was completely dead – nobody left. Charlie's eyes lit up when he heard. Every single one of the people we spoke to said coming here was a bad idea. Even all the signs meant to direct us here were pulled down or painted over. But Charlie, in pursuit of academic distinction, threw caution to the wind.

I leave Charlie scrubbing madly at the glass and step out into the blinding sun again, making my way down what was once the main drag. As I walk, I count off the familiar small-town facilities: café, pub, general store, police station, post office. Each one is shuttered, with red dust piling up in the corners where boards meet window ledges. Between the spaced-out buildings I can see what's left of the houses that used to be here. Most of them are down to a few bits of frame and stump and the odd sheet of rusted corrugated iron, but a couple are built of sterner stuff and have withstood the baking heat and dry wind. I've been out here ten minutes and I already feel dehydrated. I trail back to the Landcruiser, dragging my feet. The fine dust clouds up to coat my ankles and boots. Sweat trickles between my shoulder blades as I down the best part of a litre of water. It's not quite eleven in the morning. Bloody hell.

I take the water bottle with me back to the old service station. The clapped-out sign out front has a few chipped metal numbers, still swinging in the wind. Apparently the last pours were 57 cents a litre. Maybe the two in front has blown away. Charlie is still pawing away at the door.

'Here,' I pour a bit of water on the edge of Charlie's sleeve and he presses it straight to the glass, dissolving the built-up grime. We both peer into the gloom behind the door. 'See? Empty.' Charlie is still staring in through the window as I walk back to the cruiser and start the engine, shutting out the heat and letting the frigid air conditioning blow right in my face.

We've got a tent with us, so we can go anywhere – again, Charlie's idea. But as the day goes on the wind picks up. It's what I think being in a sandstorm might be like – there's a wailing, and the dust and grit is prickling against my legs. I should've worn pants, but after days spent stewing in my own juices I needed shorts on today like I needed to breathe. We've spent the rest of the day poking around some of the old commercial buildings here, with regular retreats back to the cruiser to cool off and rehydrate. But now the shadows are lengthening, blurred by the flying dirt. I tried earlier to convince Charlie to head back, but he wasn't having it.

'There's still so much to see here,' he gushed. 'If I can get into some of these buildings and really look around... it's like this place is frozen in time. I'll get a real window into what it was like.' He's like a kid in a candy store. 'If we overnight here, we can get started early before it gets too hot.'

So we've got the tent out and we're trying, but the wind gusts are so strong now I can't hold my end of the tent down, and the pegs are just sliding back out of this fine red earth like they've been oiled. We struggle for twenty minutes before Charlie admits defeat. He rolls the tent up as best he can and shoves it into the back seat. He leaps into the driver's seat as I land in the passenger's, the doors slam and we look at each other.

'Now what?' I ask. Charlie squints out through the windscreen into the dirty gathering dusk.

'A couple of those old houses looked reasonably solid. Let's chuck the sleeping bags in one of those. At least we'll be able to cook – the gas won't blow out if we're inside.' I raise one eyebrow.

'Well, nobody's gonna come bust us for trespassing, are they?' he grins.

'Fine. But tomorrow night we *are* staying in a motel.'

'You got it.'

We drive the cruiser along the unpaved streets, looking for houses that look like they might keep the wind at bay. Without the sun, the temperature drop is sharp and I'm wishing for those long pants again. The first place we find is no good – the door is facing right into the wind, and once we've broken in there'll be no way for us to keep it shut. Our second guess is the same, until we twig that the houses on the other side of the street will be facing the right way. Number three is ideal, but even when Charlie and I both put our shoulders into it, that door is not giving way. It's attempt number four that strikes gold. Charlie goes for his cop-show door kick, and it flies right in. We aim our torches at the floor and walls. No big spiders, no snakes. Every surface has a thick layer of red-grey dust, just like everything else in this godforsaken backwater. But it's out of the wind, so it'll do. We roll out our sleeping bags, and Charlie measures water carefully into some freeze-dried meals and cooks them on the jetboil. With our lantern on the floor between us, it's almost cosy. Almost.

There's a dull ache in my lower abdomen. I need a wee.

'I'm going to find the bathroom.'

'It won't flush.'

'I know that,' I sigh. 'But it's not like there's going to be anyone else, except maybe you, who'll use it after me.' I grab my torch and shuffle off through the house. The wind is making it creak like arthritic joints. I take slow steps, shining my torch on the walls and floor of a hallway. The first door I try is locked. The next one is already open, but it's just an empty room. A bedroom, maybe. The toilet is at the end of the hall. I should've known that. They usually are.

There's no water in the bowl, but that doesn't surprise me. It probably evaporated years ago. I check for snakes, spiders, and other figments my imagination suggests might live under the rim of an abandoned loo. It looks safe. I shimmy down my shorts and sweet relief arrives in short order. I can hear Charlie yammering away to himself out in the front

room, about god knows what – I can't make out the words over the wind. Then, with my shorts halfway up my thighs, I freeze. Charlie's voice has just inflected up, like a question.

And someone else has answered him.

I ease down the hallway, raising and lowering each foot as though I'm walking on nails or razorblades. When the lantern light spilling out from the front room is enough to light my way, I shut off my torch. My head eases around the doorjamb, and Charlie clocks me straight away. His eyes are gleaming, and he has that almost-constrained look he gets when he's had an epiphany.

'Here she is.' He gestures in my direction. The figure sitting on the floor opposite him turns to look at me. She's wearing a faded pair of loose canvas pants the colour of nothing, and a blueish long-sleeved shirt that looks a few sizes too big. Her hair is a short, dark bob, and there are dark circles under her eyes. The intensity in her gaze makes me hold my breath and I feel my ribcage tighten around my heart. 'Evie, this is Katherine.' Charlie's eyes are like saucers. 'She used to live here.'

'When I was younger,' she clarified.

When she was younger? She doesn't look any older than me. I'll give her early twenties at the absolute most. She stares at me and coughs. I realise I haven't spoken.

'Um, hi, Katherine,' I manage.

'She's come back to visit,' says Charlie, 'walk down memory lane.'

'This is — was — my house, actually,' says Katherine.

Is there a coolness in her voice? Should I be worried?

'But it's fine for you to stay here. My family are all long gone, and this place doesn't get many visitors.' She sighs. 'It used to be really different.'

'How long since you lived here?' I'm looking at her, doing the maths in my head. Thinking about how long this place has been empty, and how old she looks.

'Oh, years and years,' she says, noncommittal. 'I left before my mum. She was one of the last to go.' She shifts in her seat and coughs again.

Leaving a town like this, and your parents, usually means one thing. Boarding school. Which would make sense, out here. The boarders at my all-girls school were rural kids, sent away from their families to get educated. I remember one girl I was close with, Claire, walking into class one day, pale-faced and stiff. The drought had caught up with her family, and the farm had been sold out from under them. She'd never see her family home again. I wonder if I should ask Katherine about leaving but remember Claire's face and think better of it.

'What brings you two out here anyway?' asks Katherine.

I look to Charlie. He can answer this one.

'I'm doing a thesis on abandoned towns. You know, ghost towns left behind after industry moves on.'

Katherine's been fidgeting with the hem of her shirt, but I swear she stiffens when he calls this place a ghost town. I step in to defuse.

'Do you live around here now, Katherine?'

She waves a vague hand. 'Yeah, down the road a bit.'

I chew back a smile. Claire used to talk about visiting her neighbours 'down the road'. It was a three hour drive each way. Odd that Katherine's out here this late, though. Especially with that cough. She's having a good hack now, like she'll bring up a lung.

Charlie steps in and asks her to describe what this place was like in its heyday. Katherine smiles and launches into a vivid explanation. She weaves a great story, too. Really detailed. It's like something right out of the seventies. Charlie listens, enraptured, scribbling in his notebook and interjecting with questions. This is the kind of primary research source he lives for.

I don't say anything. The hairs on the back of my neck are standing on end.

Eventually I have to speak up.

'Charlie, we really need to get some sleep if we're going to be up early.' I slide into my sleeping bag and look over at Katherine, hoping she'll take the hint.

'Where will you bunk down? Do you live close enough to get home?' Charlie must think she's from one of the few properties still left out this way. She doesn't look like a station-hand to me. Too small and pale. All the cowboys out here would look like tanned leather, I reckon.

'I'll stay here.' I go to object but she cuts me off before I can get the words out. 'I mean, it's my house.' She coughs again and stands up. 'My room's the first one on the left. I'll keep to myself. Good night.' She disappears through the door.

Charlie and I look at each other, and simultaneously fly to our feet and peer into the hallway. It's deserted.

'She must be tired too,' says Charlie through a yawn.

'Not surprised. She doesn't sound well, with that godawful cough. I hope she doesn't keep us up,' I grumble.

'Oh, she'll be right.' Charlie yawns again. 'I'm bedding down, but I doubt I'll sleep. Too much going on my brain. Night Eevs.'

Charlie edges back to his own bag and tucks in as I do the same. I don't hear Katherine at all, but Charlie's usually quiet snores are audible above the shrieking wind outside in no time. I reach out and pull the lantern closer to me. I'm not ready to turn it off yet. In my head, I'm trying that door over and over again, the first one on the left. The one that was locked. Or maybe just stuck.

I don't sleep. The house sways and groans with the wailing wind all night.

The pale dawn finally chases the wind away and by the time the sun is halfway above the horizon it's completely still. The day holds

the promise of being a furnace again. I sit up and pour some water into the jetboil, rummage through my pack for a coffee sachet while it heats up. The smell of instant wakes Charlie, and he stretches back on both elbows before last night floods back to him.

'Have you seen Katherine yet?'

'Good morning to you too.' Exhaustion makes me grumpy. 'Nope.'

'Maybe she left already.' He peels himself out of his bag and heads for the hallway. Knock, knock. 'Katherine?' Then a jiggling. He reappears. 'The door's locked.'

'It was locked last night, when I was looking for the toilet.'

Charlie stares at me for a moment, then disappears back into the hall. When he returns, his face is pale.

'There's a back door, but it's boarded up. She must have slipped through here in the early hours.' The front door is still propped closed with a case of full water bottles against last night's wind. 'Or maybe she hopped out the window.'

I can see Charlie's mind going places he doesn't want it to. He shakes the dust out of his sleeve and coughs into his elbow.

When we open the front door to start packing our stuff back into the cruiser, the overnight wind has coated everything with a new layer of red dirt. Even the windscreen is covered with an even coating.

There are no footprints.

We don't stay to poke around in the buildings.

Back in town, surrounded by people and modern conveniences, I relax a little. Charlie doesn't. He heads straight for the civic centre, muttering about research. I agree to meet him in a few hours at a café.

I'm tucked beside a window under the blessed draft of an air-conditioning vent, halfway through my second flat white, when he charges in with a pinched expression.

'I found her.'

'Sorry?'

'Katherine. I found her. In the library.'

See? screams my logical brain. *Ghosts don't exist*!

'She must've come back to town last night then.'

'Not exactly.'

He flops down into the seat beside me and holds out a handful of papers – library copies, things from microfiche. I push my cup aside and flick through them. Articles about lung disease. Something to do with mining and the air. And then one about 'secondary victims'. People who got sick from washing contaminated clothing. Or who lived downwind of the pits, or who didn't dust their houses regularly. A page of funeral notices. There are photos. Katherine stares out at me from under that neat haircut. *Tragically taken. 1972.* I look at her birthday and do the maths. Twenty years, seven months and nineteen days old. Then the last one, a newspaper article from a few years ago. Something about someone getting sick after twenty-four hours.

Charlie's eyes are empty, his mind far away. I don't know what to say. Then he coughs again, deep and wracking.

'Charlie.'

He nods, wordless.

I pick up my phone and send a series of emails, cancelling the rest of our trip. Then I stir my coffee and take a sip, look out towards the horizon. The dust swirls and eddies in the distance.

MY BROTHER'S HEART

Rachael Mead

'Step' kept him at arm's length.
He was a flash of gold wire. I remember
playing Falklands War. From the doorway,
he'd hurl his munitions: stuffed bears,
staplers, rulers. Crouched in my trench
between bed and desk, I'd lob mine back:
plush hippo and that giant eraser I got for Christmas.
He called it 'The Mortar.' We wore bruises like medals.
He spent hours at his desk pooled in golden light,
sketching Sea Hawks and Harriers, bedroom walls
plastered with posters. Australian Test teams,
grins under the baggy green. He knew all
their batting averages with his gatling gun
spatter of stats. Cricket ball kisses
on bat and pads. We suffered each other's initiations
but failed to form a club. His room pulsed
with The Police and Dire Straits while I dreamed
of George Michael, sang 'Karma Chameleon'
into my hairbrush. Divided by more than plasterboard.
More than blood. I remember his first heart attack.
Him lying there, middle-aged in a row of old men,
shadow-eyed but trying to make light of it.
His laugh, ageless in the face of decades,
all of us sallow-skinned under ICU lights.
I remember sandy hair, toffee eyes, his bike
Of gold with handlebars curled like horns.
Jason riding the golden ram. I never thought

about his heart. About all the things sliding
about in his body's dark, knowing their role.
Until now. His love beats loud in the chests
of his sons. I used to think of our childhood
as one long wait in a terminal, ready to leap
on the first bus out. Now here we are,
back in that disinfectant fug, waiting,
the taste of metal in our mouths knowing
someone must die for him to survive.

SUMMER RAIN

Marcelo Medone

The rain falls gently and soaks the eager and parched soil, raising vapours at noon that finally become less sultry, nature revives euphoric and optimistic, I can already hear the croaks and trills of celebration that resound through the four corners of my garden, while I go out to receive with my palms turned to the sky this feast of water, while my gray and long hair, my withered eyelids, my unkempt beard and my untidy clothes get drenched thirsty while my bare feet splash through the incipient puddles, my brain resonates with a triumphal march with fanfares, ancient drums and cymbals from the Far East and I start dancing and spinning like a madman escaped from the asylum for the only time, with my old bones indifferent to the humidity that mistreats my joints, I am a tiny and light bird that flutters joyfully and endlessly until I fall exhausted and happy on the grass and I lie contemplating the leaden summer sky that continues to offer me its wonderful gift of fresh water, while my fingers come together in communion with the mud.

ELEGY

Cindy Milwe

Someday your father
will die of brain cancer
and you will have to
sort the stories.

You will need to buy
two houses: a shed
and a mansion—
the first for the time

you and your baby sister
hid in the beige bounty
of your mother's closet
and turned off the lights,

squeezed yourselves
into two tiny girl-balls
beneath her row
of blouses while

your father hit her
over the head with a bottle
of Wish-Bone salad dressing,
or set the kitchen on fire.

The shed would house
the gambling debts

and the nightly stumbles
from the fridge to the bed

the crooked trail
of potato chip crumbs
or translucent peanut skin
particles, disintegrating

like pencil shavings
in his wake. The shed
would hide his threadbare
pajamas and his curled out

penis from the unsnapped flap,
the Athlete's Foot between
his hammer toes, the worn
leather of his black slippers,

and the smoke rings that floated
through the house like small
ghosts, the shapeless stench
of old tobacco landing invisibly

everywhere. The mansion
would glisten with his collection
of Rolexes, his prized
Patek Philippe, giant bottles

of Johnnie Walker Red
and Black, Stolichnaya,
Nyquil, Benadryl, Valium,
the ricotta cheesecake

his “pretty secretary”
brought to his bedside
that Christmas he lay flat
in traction, their holiday

ease and laughter gurgling
through the halls as they
shared sips of Amaretto.
The mansion would burst

with mail-order steaks,
his Corvettes and Porsches,
the country club trophies,
the extraordinary amount

of money he offered my sister
to lose weight at college,
the last steps I saw him take
a year before he could no longer

walk—long night-strides from
the lounge chair at the hotel
pool to his water-view room
after yelling at me that my son

was too fat. The moon was full.
I was 52, but I may as well
have been eight, crouched
with my sister in the dark

of my mother’s closet—
her Lucite drawers

like a mausoleum
of underwear; the faded

red carpet dry ground
for the dead animal
pelts dripping from
her mink jacket.

THE CREEK RUNNING

Cat Moore

BENJI

Sees the bird is sifting, flinging out the leaves. All golden-brown they toss across the wet green grass to land, the bird, its back turned, seeking. A worm, a grub, it flicks the thing and catches in a beak uplifted, swift, it's back to sifting.

Benji watches, 'cross the lawn, his ball clutched tight his toes curled tight in sneakers getting wet already. It's been raining now for days. Behind him, in the house, he's left Mum crying. Hears the sobbing through the kitchen window, closed, he knows, it's happening a lot now.

Benji kicks, then scoots to get the ball, and aims a careless kick toward the creek. He half-hopes it will go in, all the way, but finds it wrapped up in the weeds, all green and clinging. His shoes already soaked, the ball all muddy, he is waiting for a game to find him.

Sometimes school is better, though it's too loud and it's hard to make good friends, when you are frightened all the time. The teachers tell you what to do, and though he's often not great at it, things are clear, at least, you Sit, and Walk, and Line up. Write and Add and Hand up, Voice down, Eyes up, Feet down. Sport's the best, when balls and bodies fly across the court, when he doesn't need to try because it all comes easy, easy, and when he has the ball the kids now are his friends. Sport, with Mister Mike, that smiles like he means it, and the air all clean around him on the courts.

In the classroom, things clog up his lungs, it's hard to breathe. In here the air is thick the light is loud and there's too much to listen to, and not enough. It is confusing, in the class, but it is better than at home,

where just his mum can fill the house, all huge with sadness, and the nights come dark and frightening in his room.

They have agreed not to remember. It doesn't need to be said, they both know, to keep the silence. But. The nights have different rules, and in the quiet words hiss quick and mean inside his head. He makes them wait for morning, if he can, and wakes all heavy-eyed and dumb, he wakes and he remembers.

Now, the creek is singing, rushing with the rain and all the sadness falls. Behind him, in the house, his mum is crying. But the creek it doesn't care and runs on anyway; it calls him. He runs into the trees beside the creek and seeks the greenness waiting. Soaked now, past the knees, he pushes onwards, singing. With the fresh of it, the joy, beneath the trees.

He's him, right here. He's him. Not mum's not theirs not anyone, just him, and all the trees just see him. He's a plain thing, easy in the trees, he's reaching into ease. Joints move smooth and quick, his legs belong beneath him. Pushing into forest now, the house behind, he's seeking out a way. Through bracken, weedy blackberry, through sedge and fern and weeds. He's charging downstream now, towards the sea.

MEL

Is looking for a way to stop the tears.

There's bills beside the plates, upon the bench. And washing on the floor, and lists. There's firewood needing chopping now, it's cold too cold to go without a fire another day. She lists it in her head: dishes dinner wood fire washing bills bed. And he probably needs a shower, after being in the rain.

Remembers then, and looks. Out to the green, where lichens bloom all sudden on the trees, and birds eat worms amongst the leaves, she sees

No sign of boy.

She starts—where did he go? Beyond the gate? No, he knows he's not allowed, he knows the rules, he never wanders. Shit, she thinks, and drops the dishes in the sink, wipes her hands on jeans (there are no towels clean) and she's out and into gumboots, thinking, how she'll die now if he's gone, and after everything.

She isn't a good mum, she knows, she tries but cannot seem to keep the wheels on. She doesn't drink—a miracle, she thinks, and dinner's always made eventually. He goes to school. She tucks him in. It's not that bad, she thinks, is it? She pushes past the gate, and into trees.

It's just, she can't stop crying. Cannot concentrate, or keep the fire going clothes clean fridge full house clean. She cannot go to school things, cos they scare her. Knows she should, but can't get past the door, or can't get dressed, she can't make friends with other mums. There is the space between too big between them, and the teachers. God, the teachers, they are something else. Well-meaning, so superior, they are. The experts on your kids, they are the knowledge-holders, standard-setters, are as scary as the mums at gate, at end of day. She waits within the car park, sunnies on, pretends she's busy with her phone. She drops him off and runs, as if she has some place to be, aside from home.

She's not a great mum, God, but she's a loving one. The way she loves is fierce and wakes her in the night, it punches in the guts, to think how blessed she is to have him, and how precious.

And he's gone. (He's gone he's gone he's gone).

Her thoughts bump on beside her feet, they set a cracking pace, she doesn't even see the trees.

And she comes quickly to the creek. It's huge, with all the rain.

And there's his ball

Beside the brambles.

And it pulls her to her knees, it punches air from lungs it stops the thoughts except…

His ball (his ball his ball his ball) and beyond the rushing river, all the rain has turned the creek into a maelstrom, into something wilder so much fiercer so much stranger than the creek she thought she'd bordered on this block.

She sees the foam of it, and feels a sickness sinking into everything she is.

It would have been so easy. To slip, and sink, and snare. To go down gasping at the air and…

It was her fault (her fault her fault her fault). It was all her fault for getting all distracted. It was all her fault for feeling when she should have just been doing when she should have just been with him. Who gave a shit about wet washing, when this life was hers and needing her protection? She should've been there, in the garden, with the ball, beside him smiling. In the rain—the rain, she hasn't felt, she's soaked to skin and shivering.

She's utterly out of ideas out of options out of everything.

She flops herself to ground, her head to mud, and weeps her way into the soil. And she remembers. Who she was once, back before it all. She had plans back then, she once had friends. She went dancing and she walked home late at night and unafraid. Because she hadn't found the fear that came from always being ready for the hate, and always so responsible.

The rain pours on, above the creek. The ground's entirely got her. And the soil, it smells like something she can't find the words for. It smells like hope, and sounds like singing. It is softer than it seemed, this ground that hugs her.

She weeps a new way, now, into the mud, into the river. She weeps a way back home, to who she once was, when the world was made for her and it was magic. She lets her body sink into the mud, and it feels home.

MIKE

Is doing dishes at the sink and singing.

YouTube on, a favourite song, he's belting out the lyrics, not to think. Of school the next day, and the next, all stretching. All the kids he cannot help enough, and then the work. Piled up at night, behind him on the couch. Reports he hates to write. Cos how d'you fit a person into categories, like 'performing at standard?' and his favourites often aren't, and anyway. He misses the school he started in, it isn't long ago, but Liberal governments have cut and cut again at what wasn't even there until there's nothing left to give kids what they need, and even a PE teacher feels it, Jesus, how the class mob cope, he cannot even fathom, though a quick look round the staffroom would suggest they don't, and shit no bloody wonder.

He opens his eyes as the track ends, just in time to see a skinny-legged kid, walk right across his yard. Along the creek edge, off towards the next-door fence. Look out, kid, that's Crabby Mrs Blair, he thinks, your life is in your hands.

Then he realises, it's Benji. His favourite student. Not for his achievements, oh no, this kid, he can barely read and write, and yet. He has the sweetest smile a bloke has ever seen, and this uncanny way of looking. Past your face and into something you don't know you have yet. He's got the wildest way of running, out at lunch, amongst the crowd, it's like he's somewhere else entirely.

And there he is, out in the rain, beside the creek, he's puddling his way downstream beside the weeds. He is dripping with the trees and shivering.

What the hell, Mike thinks, just what the hell. And opens, calls through window, hey! The kid can't hear, of course, above the rushing creek and rain. He walks on, past Mike's garden, disappears.

Mike stands a moment, thinking, of the evils here and how to weigh them, before deciding he would rather seem a creep than hear a kid got washed to sea, while he just did his dishes.

So, he's into gumboots into garden and he's striding to the creek that leads next door, and down to wetlands waiting, leading to the sea.

Mike thinks, mate this is crazy that kid's crazy do you always have to get so caught up with the crazies? Cos it isn't like the first, he has a thing for these eccentric hurting kids, wants to help them wants to be the one that reaches through and teaches them, and changes something in their lives, it is the reason he first started teaching, and it gets him still, the way some kids just suffer too much, though they shine bright from inside. And he never can get past the injustice, the way some kids just cruise their way through, all protected buffered all the way, and this one. Jeez. He's up against it, you can see, and yet the smile. Oh man, Mike thinks, if he could change it, this whole system, kids like this would shine and thrive and

There. The kid, he's standing at the edge, the river pounding. And he's face up to the clouds he's...

Singing. Shit, he's singing. Eyes shut face raised hands out, he is calling down the rain, Mike thinks, he's calling up some mercy from the sky and he is singing all his heart out.

Now what? Mike stands and watches, cos he cannot interrupt, but shit it's too cold to just stand here, and if someone sees, well, it looks weird, and...

Then he turns, the child, and sees. And weirdest thing, he smiles. He just smiles. As if the whole thing's normal, like they're dry and quiet and not standing in a downpour on someone else's property, like the whole thing's just... okay.

And suddenly, it is. Mike's smiling out the biggest smile he's ever felt, and bubbling up a mental laugh, a shiner, he is feeling somehow free.

The kid's a wild one, alright, and he's holding out his hand, he wants to show his teacher something, in the creek. Mike peers and leans, and sees. Fish sliding in the stream — he's never seen that, not in this creek, all suburban as it is, and there's so many and he knows it isn't really the boy's singing, but…

The silver-slick of them is something he will not forget, across the rocks and shallow bottom skimming. Galaxias, he thinks, and spotted. He watches while they pass, a sudden downpour of scales and shining light, and vanish.

Hey kid, he says, you know it's raining? And the boy lets out a wild laugh, and lets himself be led, back through the garden, and the fence, towards his own place. He's babbling now, about the fish, and he seems all normal and just chattering like any child. Mike's never heard him say much, but the rain, and fish, have freed up in him some voice he probably never knew he had, and there's no way now to stop the talking or the listening.

Benji leads the way, he knows the trees and creek that lead him. The words pour from him as he tells his teacher all about it, Mister Mike, the one who's magic with a ball and now he's listening, here, to Benji, as he tells his tale, and suddenly. They're back.

This is his bit of creek now, his own garden, there's his ball, and…

Oh. There is his mum, all huddled hunched into the mud and…

He's upon her, sobbing out a sorry and she looks up, stunned, to see him standing in the rain. A stranger there beside him, and alive.

He is alive, she thinks. We are alive.

After all of it, we are alive.

A something slithers from her ribs to leave a space just big enough to breathe into.

Mum, he says, can Mister Mike come in for tea, as she hauls herself up from the mud, and dazed she sees them all. Just standing in the rain, and she looks crazy as all hell, they all do, so…

Well, sure, she says. Why not, and leads them up the bank towards the house. Which still holds all its piles of clothes and wood and plates, which don't seem so important now that he's alive. And she's alive again, beside him, in the rain. She didn't lose him, and she never let him down, she knows it now, the toughness of them both, and still the loving. It's worth much more than a tidy house, it's something of a hard-won miracle, and it's all hers, so when they get there…

She just says, come in

And leads the way—yes for a stranger—

In across her threshold to the mess

That is her life

I'll put the kettle on.

THE RIGHT SHOES

Avril Mulligan

The elderly couple approached first.

He looked so dapper in his long black coat and broad-brimmed hat; she held onto his elbow and shuffled slowly beside him. They lifted their heads and smiled as people passed them on the path, then continued across the platform to the rail in one steady advance.

Maybe, thought Lizzie, as she watched from her carefully chosen position out of the wind, momentum was of utmost importance once you reached a certain age. That once you were moving you must keep at it, otherwise joints and muscles might stop and not start again. Or maybe once you had lived enough years you lost your fear of great drops and thundering swells, surprises and sudden noises.

She watched two young girls saunter along the boardwalk and join the elderly couple on the platform. 'Oh, cool,' they said. 'Wow.' They leant far out over the rail, unfazed by the roaring swell below them, holding out their phones to capture their own faces alongside the view.

Good luck to them. Lizzie wasn't going anywhere near that treacherous drop. She could hear the water slamming into the rocks and sucking back out, before surging in again for another swipe at the cliff face. People had died down there. She knew exactly when and how because she had googled the stories the night before.

But the four strangers seemed exhilarated by the danger right below their feet. They made space for each other at the rail, and passed each other their cameras, saying, 'Would you mind taking one of us right here?' They cheerfully accommodated to each other in the way of people on holidays; in the way of people who have found themselves thrown together on man-made platforms above dangerous drops to the ocean

at the southern-most tip of their state. During global pandemics. When they can travel this far but no further.

Lizzie looked away from the small group and scanned the rocks further along the bay until she found Scott and the girls, getting far too close to that unpredictable southern ocean. She could barely bring herself to watch. It was all so... boundary-less down here. The girls were never quite where she had left them; instead they were clambering over rocks and up scrubby hillsides, peering over edges and into hidden places. And the wind, did it ever stop? It was like an unwanted gift straight from Antarctica. Even tucked behind the shelter of a boulder, Lizzie could feel it moving up and under her thin layers of clothing, causing her skin to goosebump.

She pulled her thin cardigan closed across her chest and moved her eyes away from her precariously perched children, onto something more comfortable and predictable – the carpark filled with camper vans and SUVs. Close to where their own green Volvo was parked was a small jeep with a barking dog inside, even though the sign coming into the car park had very clearly said, 'If you have a dog in your car, turn back now'. Obviously, they hadn't. More cars were pulling in as she watched, jostling for parking spaces. It was school holidays, and the place was crawling with families, couples, old and young. But mostly families, made up of responsible adults trailing kids behind them like kites, and no screens in sight.

A family of four spilled out of a big four-wheel drive, camping equipment strapped to the top. Lizzie watched as they walked towards her along the path, her eyes running involuntarily down their legs to their feet. Of course they had exactly the right shoes – those outdoorsy camping we-are-so-comfortable-in-the-great-outdoors ones; god, she didn't even know they came in such small sizes, let alone where to find the shops that sold them. The shoes, she was learning, were always a dead giveaway, and she was quickly becoming an expert at dividing people into categories according to their footwear. She looked back

at her own children in their strappy sandals and pink leggings, then tucked her own sandaled feet underneath her as the family came past.

Yesterday, they had left their Airbnb at some ridiculous hour and driven the 50 kilometres to the popular walk trail that led people to the top of the ranges. The girls were excited, popping out of the car like released springs as soon as it stopped and ricocheting all over the grassy park at the bottom of the walk trail. She and Scott had pulled the backpacks from the car, along with hats, water bottles, the insect repellent that she sprayed in the general direction of the fast-moving girls, sun cream, the snacks for when they got to the top… She had heard a couple whisper as they passed them, 'Well, *they* would normally be in Bali,' in a proprietorial tone. As though they owned this part of the south-west and Lizzie's family had no right to be here; were in fact intruders with no claim on the place. Because they didn't have the right damn shoes.

Well to hell with it, she *would* rather be in Bali. She would. Or in some foreign city. They worked so much better as a family in a city. All those straight lines and edges and days broken up into orderly chunks involving cafes and organised events where the kids were strapped into something or led somewhere by someone other than her and everyone knew what to do and how to behave. Really, they were all so much more comfortable in those places, and as soon as the borders opened up again and they could travel, the better. She was tired already of these 'nature snobs', these 'down-southers'.

But as she looked back over at her small family – they were approaching the viewing platform now, of course they were, and Lizzie felt her heart leap to instant attention – she had an alarming thought. What if it was only her that was so uncomfortable out here among all this nature? What if Scott and the girls actually… loved it?

In her mind was a sudden and very clear picture of a future Scott packing their girls into the car, ready to head off to some new hike or

camping trip; the girls waving goodbye happily to Lizzie as she stood in the driveway and they headed off into the wilds without her.

She watched them now. Was she really going to sit here and let Scott take them up there? Weren't they afraid? But even though her own fear was trying to kick her into action, she didn't move from the rock. She kept her cardigan pulled tightly around her as the wind whipped her skirt around her legs. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and kept her eyes on her girls.

They both had their hands firmly in Scott's. But now look, Bonnie was slipping her hand free and walking forward on her own. She looked so confident from here. Her small lean body under her own command. Lizzie could see the exact moment the sheer drop became visible beneath her daughter's feet, and she held her breath as she watched. Bonnie paused, but only for a moment. Only to look back at her dad, who was close behind her, with a nod and a smile, before she continued on alone to the rail. Lizzie exhaled, and fizzed with something fierce.

Bonnie was always feeling for the edges of her independence, her courage. She was her father's daughter, and they shared something Lizzie was not a part of. May, on the other hand kept her hand firmly in Scott's as they stood on that platform; she stayed tight beside him and didn't leave, twisting once to look back over her shoulder. Lizzie knew she was looking for her, making sure she was still on the rock where May expected her to be, still within sight and running distance. May would always be Lizzie's. She raised her hand and waved, wondering if she was witness now to the way her girls would always approach the world and its dangers.

As a child, she could not remember ever being held by the hand and shown how to approach something large and formidable, as Scott seemed to be doing so naturally with their own girls. She could not remember her mother or her father ever having left the comforts of their well-constructed life to take the time to do that with their children.

They certainly hadn't gone camping, or on road trips. They went to expensive resorts with organised activities. They brought friends, to cover up the fact that no one ever spoke to each other. These days, alcohol was the lubricant they used to make interactions with her family bearable. It loosened the tongue so nicely. It softened her mother's barbed comments about her 'lack of discipline' with Bonnie and May, and it dulled her anger at her father's passive drifting around the edges of the room. Their once a week obligatory visits had stretched to fortnightly, and more recently, to once a month. She knew she couldn't stretch them any further apart without risking a confrontation with her mother.

Lizzie realised she didn't actually know if Scott had ever come down here with his family when he was a kid. If he had, had he liked it? Imagine if all this time, he had been going along with her to the holidays she had wanted, keeping the peace – which was just like Scott – when what he had really wanted was something quite different... that what he had really wanted was to be among these wide-open, untamed spaces, this large formidable land. Well, that was an unsettling thought, and Lizzie pushed it aside impatiently.

She was ready to leave now. It was strange, watching her family from a distance like this; to see them move and interact so completely without her. The rain was coming in across the ocean; she could see it moving towards them like a steadily advancing wall of mist. People were leaving quickly, calling children and taking their hands and moving with a sense of urgency. She sought out the elderly couple from the viewing platform; saw them stand and look out towards the incoming rain, then turn and walk with the same unhurried elegance towards their car.

And here was her family now, running towards her and then past her, Scott grinning like a madman, squeals coming from his armpits as he carried a girl under each arm like a torpedo, and suddenly Lizzie was no longer an observer but among them once again.

'Mum, come on, follow us! We are going to find baby cinos!' May's head bobbed uncontrollably as Scott ran, and her words came out bumpy, which made her laugh even more. People were turning to look at them as they passed, breaking into grins at the sound of the two children's infectious laughter.

'Bonnie!' May shouted, even though their heads were close together and that kind of volume was completely unnecessary. 'Try to talk! Say something to Mum! It sounds so funny!' All of her short phrases were punctuated with exclamation marks, and it was the last one – 'Mum, I think I peed my pants!' that made Lizzie jog to catch up, a lightness bubbling up in her at the sight of her two daughters' bobbing heads in front of her, their wind-tousled hair, their unbridled happiness. In her mind she was already booking them into the chiropractor when they got back home, to remedy all this joggling around. And did they even *have* spare pants in the car for May? Scott hoisted a girl onto each shoulder and slowed to a walk. They reached the car together, and Lizzie reached into his back pocket to pull out the keys, clicking the unlock button. The dog was still trapped in the nearby jeep, and still barking.

Maybe these trips weren't so bad, she thought as she dived into the car to finally escape the wind. Maybe she could come again. As long as the girls were happy, and she didn't have to do all that climbing and frolicking business with them. Of course, they would have to get the right shoes, and maybe some of those puffy windbreaker jackets, she couldn't bear being this cold for too long... She turned in her seat to look back at Scott as he buckled the girls in. He was so damn good with them. She looked more deeply into his face, as though trying to discover the source of this thing that he had, and that she knew she did not; but he was just a more wind- tousled and relaxed version of the man she knew, and maybe more... happy. He looked happy. He climbed into the driver's seat and grinned across at her, holding his hand out for the keys. She grinned back, and reached her hand over to rest it on his thigh.

'For god's sake,' she said. 'Get me out of this wind, and find me a decent coffee.'

YUCCA AND MOTH

Robert Savino Oventile

Hesperoyucca whipplei typica: Above the bristle of gray-green rapiers the stalk rises like a small cell tower, hundreds of creamy-white flowers gracing the top third. *Tegeticula maculata extranea:* The moth has wings about a half to three quarters of an inch in span.

The female moths, these yuccas' only pollinator, lay eggs only in yucca flowers. The larvae feed only on yucca seeds, only a few. During their week of winged life, these moths mate yet do not feed. The yuccas sprout their stalks, flower, go to seed, and die.

For tens of millions of years, across geologic periods, epochs, and ages, living on through untold days and nights, such yuccas and moths have practiced a tight symbiosis. Regardless, the yucca and the moth remain distinct in their fates.

Egg rich, pollen bearing, scant of days, the moth takes flight, imbibing what music the wind yields, her black wings carrying her far to the citrus aroma and dreamy glow of new yucca flowers, her existence attuning to moments of charm, of pleasure, of jubilance.

Late in summer, all green has left the yucca. A light desert khaki, the rosette's swords rustle mutely in the arid wind. The sun-bleached stalk sways, and from the dry, split pods black winged seeds scatter, float-dance down, earthward.

DREAM CATCHER

Sarah Penwarden

Sitting upright against the picture window, cushion at her back, Eve watches the city unfold. Above the trees with peeling bark and shiny leaves. Above traffic lights and a swoop of birds off towards the Waitakere ranges. Near to the world, but far. She stretches out her legs. She's a dreamer, her mother always used to tell her teachers. Eve could remember hearing the trace of an apology in those words. She knew her mother had found it irritating at times to have to nudge her back to the present day. But as an adult, Eve liked that she could still do that: fall into her imagination and exist in a vivid inner world. And a reading nook was a perfect place for that.

The window seat was what sold the place for her. There were three bedrooms if you counted the study. It felt cramped at times with the three of them renting together — Tom and Celia sharing the same bedroom. But the view was something else. While Celia and Tom were still doing their hospital shifts over lockdown, as she worked from home, Eve could take time in the day to relax in the window. To watch Ponsonby going on behind the trees.

Couples walking their dogs, carrying takeaway cups. Cars in rows of red tail-lights.

It felt like being in hibernation, which was weird, as the word bubble conjured up something quite different. Hollow and light, lacking solidity. Transparent, disappearing. Oily circles which shimmer with rainbows and pop. It felt more like burrowing deeper into a shredded paper nest. Deeper, in the close of the walls of the apartment, deeper inside herself. Her heartbeat growing louder, her breathing more distinct. It felt so comfortable.

Leaving the house for a trip to the supermarket still felt like she was behind glass. She developed the habit of squeezing her nails into the palms of her hand to remind herself that she was flesh. In the supermarket, strangers in masks and gloves avoided her, moving around her, not meeting her eyes. She felt as if she was floating. But then she glimpsed herself in the mirror behind the cashier, and she came into view again.

Eve sighs. It's her turn to make dinner for the flat. Celia was a stickler about that, liking a tidy flat and a set routine. Celia, with her hair pulled tightly into a ponytail, each strand falling straight.

Eve settles her weight deeper against the cushion in the nook. Her eyes close.

A hospital room appears. Not Celia and Tom's hospital, but another one. Another country and time. Looking out that window, they are high above a city with grey houses, slate roofs and narrow streets. Looking back to the room, it's her father in the bed in front of her, waxen. Her mother is sitting near his bed, next to her. The man in the bed next to them groans in pain. Eve is holding her father's hand. Her stomach contracts.

Her mother and her are each holding one of his hands, as he drifts into a morphine sleep.

'We can't do anything, you know, love,' her mother says, quietly, under her breath. The words tumbling out. 'But just be here for him. There are some things you just can't change. It's about accepting it. Or trying to. It's all we can do now.'

Bang! A bird had smacked into her bedroom window. It happened just a week after she had moved into the apartment. The bird falls, leaving a stain on the glass. She doesn't have time to comfort it; to hold it in her hands and nurture it back to life. It's just a falling bird, too shocked to remember how to fly. She can't reach easily the spot on the window to clean off, and every time she goes into her bedroom when

the sun is in a particular place, she sees it. And imagines a clutch of feathers. The glassy yellow eyes.

A third image. This time of Ben, standing under a streetlight staring at her. The talk that started out as a disagreement during their night at a bar, has become a state of the nation talk. It's over for him. He thinks so. Her stomach heaves. She feels like she's looking down from some high place. A groan escapes her lips. It's over. It can't be over. He's leaving her.

He can't leave be.

Her eyes snap open.

She looks around the room and takes in the things that are solid: the coffee table, the sofa, the bookshelf with cascading plants. Swinging her legs down, she feels the cellphone in her pocket, and remembers the unsent text to Ben.

After the break-up, they agreed they could still keep in touch occasionally. Until either of them had met someone else. Then all contact would cease. Being in touch with him meant he was still single. It meant there was still hope.

She'd drafted the text carefully. Weighing each word as if on a measuring scale.

She'd been sitting with it for a few days. A carefully-worded invitation.

She's hanging in mid-air; not sure where she'll land.

Finger hovering over the button. She presses send.

She checks her phone and there's nothing. It lights up and fades to black. She won't send him multiple texts, she won't ring him, she won't overdo it. It's a delicate business.

The next time she checks, a tiny icon of his face comes up against her text.

He's read it.

After dinner, sitting at the table, while the others watch TV, she switches off her phone. In the quiet, she notices how the light in the room changes. At night, the apartment turns from white to gun-metal grey. Not black. Even in the small hours, there's always light pollution from the city. A blizzard of streetlights. And then the brighter shapes. Rising up between the buildings, the Sky Tower, a silver needle far off, appearing and disappearing in the clouds.

The Hopetoun bridge, iridescent as fish scales.

When she wakes she switches on her phone and waits for the vibration of his text. Nothing. She sighs, gets up and tiptoes around the kitchen so as not to wake either of her flatmates. Pulling on her leggings, sneakers and hoodie, she slips out towards the park. Large roots of trees buckle the earth. Mossy and slippery. Birds click and trill. Dogs chase each other in circles across the white bowl of lawn. The silvery remnants of frost.

In her mind, images again.

That hospital.

Her mother has just gone out to the bathroom and her father is still dying. Eve holds his hand. Veiny, thin skinned. He is a ghost of his former self; shrunk into the bed, grown whiter and fading, fading.

She tries to remember him as he was. She makes herself remember. The time when he shaved off his beard; the woody smell of his cologne; the red veins on his cheeks.

He is still here. She reaches out to smooth one of his eyebrows. Still here.

There are other birds. Hiding in trees behind the flat leaves. Pigeons roosting on power lines that bisect Ponsonby road. Sparrows, starlings. One brown dove. But not this bird, *this* one, who has just smashed into the glass and fallen six storeys.

'It's not you… it's me,' Ben is saying, standing under the streetlight on the corner outside the bar. He is on the verge of tears. He rubs his fringe and then his cheek.

'I just don't know what's happening with me,' he says looking away. He reaches for words, for something. 'I might go overseas.'

'You haven't met someone else?' The words are out before she can stop them.

'No,' he says abruptly, and meets her eyes again. Her stomach lurches. Too much love.

An excess of it.

The crunch of stones on the path. Leaves under her shoes. She comes back to the present, and the life of the park around her.

Her phone buzzes.

She takes a breath and makes herself read his words very slowly.

Celia's brewed coffee and is sitting up at the breakfast bar with Tom when she returns. Eve takes out her earbuds and walks towards her bedroom. She can feel Celia's eyes on her.

'Nice out there?' Celia says.

'Yes… it's pretty quiet still. No one much around. Suits me,' Eve says and smiles slightly.

'This does suit you, doesn't it?' Celia says.

'What?' Eve asks.

'You know. The whole thing. Not seeing people. Withdrawing,' Celia continues. 'Whatever you want to call it… being in lockdown… living entirely in the apartment. It suits you. That's all.'

'And?'

'There's nothing wrong with that. You just like being in your own world…' Celia's voice trails off.

'Yes,' Eve says, 'I like it. I've just accepted the whole situation. And there's some good things about it. I'm getting to know myself better... what's in my head. Even my dreams are more vivid now. It's weird... the things you think about when you have so much time on your own.'

'I couldn't do that,' Tom says with a shudder. 'All this time on your own. I hate being in my own head. And I'd end up doing nothing... just watching my life go by.'

'It might look like I'm going nowhere,' Eve says warming to her theme, 'but I can work from home really well. And all this time on my own, it just makes me realise what I really want from life... And I'm not giving up on that.'

Tom and Celia both stare at her for a few seconds, slightly surprised at hearing her fire up. Then they start talking to each other — about PPE gear and shifts and how they are both too tired to think straight.

She wakes up and it's still grey. It's there again in her belly. A yearning for him; for his voice and his face. She opens her eyes and gets her phone. Scrolling back, she reads the texts again.

Her invitation. His cautious reply.

So easy to misinterpret. So easy to allow oneself to be too hopeful. But as she reads, she feels a warmth curl inside her and move from her stomach down through her legs. Settling back down on the pillow, she waits for sleep. On the edge of it, she hears the city's sirens, a bird call. Then the hush.

VELVET LADY

Gregory Piko

An oversized hearth dominates the sitting room. Five
or six strides wide, taller than a man, and so deep

the rear wall seems lost in the darkness of a deserted cloister
on a medieval night. The angled granite sides each contain

a rectangular recess, packed tight with enough logs for a couple
of days, or maybe more. Behind the brass screen, a small fire

gives an occasional spit, the way pumpkin soup erupts
while waiting patiently on a simmer.

Gathered round are several opulent armchairs and one long
sofa upholstered in slightly faded crimson fabric.

A velvet lady stares, unblinking, from above the mantelpiece
while the small jewelled cross he gave her hangs from a golden

chain drawn tight against her neck; her youthful demeanour framed
by a broad relief of oak leaves and acorns.

The family's prized chandelier falls from the centre of the ceiling,
dripping with strings of faceted baubles; its time-stained candles

rarely used. A hush of photos, arranged haphazardly on the timber
dresser, descends through several more recent generations

of mothers and daughters. Each of the smiling faces caught
in a pleasantly candid moment.

After all these years, the lady in the velvet dress remains thankful
her painter was so prescient as to recommend she look directly

toward him. For today, as every day, her gaze makes its way
steadfastly across the room, navigating the shining prisms of glass

to reunite with her husband, so proud in his tights and white lace.

END OF THE AFFAIR

Mary Pomfret

The magpie was smarter than us.
Maggie knew the congealed mess on the butchers' paper
Spread between us on the park bench
Was worthy of attention.
Hot chips gone cold.
But the flapping bird knew
Something left was worth saving.

Our Fridays and fish and chips.
A paper package smelling of salt and the sea
Delighted us for a while.
But our tastes had strayed to more sophisticated cuisine.
Oysters Kilpatrick, Spaghetti Marinara,
Sometimes grilled barramundi or smoked salmon,
Became the order of day.

One fateful Friday we tried our old favourite one more time.
Sad to say our taste buds had dulled and we sat silently side by side,
unable to eat
What once had been such a joy.
But Maggie knew better.
Without so much as a thank you or a goodbye,
The feathered observer fluttered and swooped and stole a chip,
Soared upwards and flew away.

BACK TO THE VALLEY

Tony Press

Larry had barely come off the plane when his mother rushed forward to hug him. Estelle Rodgers had feared, though had also prayed daily, she was wrong, that the government would never allow him to return, that he would remain 'a draft-dodging criminal' and threatened with immediate imprisonment for the rest of his life. She wasn't sure, as she merged politics with the personal in her communications with the Lord, how her priest might view such efforts, though she admitted she didn't know how Father William had felt about Larry's decision. Father William played his cards close to his vest, both during his homilies, and when he played poker with Estelle's husband, Lawrence, and Lawrence's brothers.

Lawrence, standing behind Estelle at Gate 14, didn't know what to think. He'd been shocked when the new president announced that draft resisters could come home, just like that. Lawrence had voted for Jerry Ford, but hadn't thought Carter would do anything as rash as this. He'd been President what, all of twenty-four hours? Yes, he was glad to see his son again, right here in Phoenix, Sky Harbor Airport shiny and busy as ever, but he wasn't sure if justice were served. He loved his son, he did, no one could say he didn't, but Lawrence had served in Korea – not by choice, but because it was the right thing to do. Worse, Lawrence's nephew Ronnie, his sister's only child, had obeyed the law, had stood tall and proud when he was sworn in. The photograph of that moment was framed and hanging on their living room wall. And then Ronnie was killed, in a stupid jeep accident in Saigon exactly ten days before his scheduled end-of-tour flight out of there. His body was assigned to a different plane.

Mom and son hugged. Dad and son shook hands.

Mom had visited him once in Vancouver, in 1975, for three days, but Dad had not seen him since he left Arizona. Dad didn't remember the exact date Larry had fled, but thought it was probably October of '72. Mom knew better: June 6, 1972, the date permanently etched in her memory.

Larry felt taller, which seemed unlikely, but was certainly thinner than when he had lived here in the Valley of the Sun. He'd been in Canada almost five years, working in a cannery for the past three years, packing all manner of seafood into cans and cartons, many of which ended up on supermarket shelves in the U.S. but Larry and two of his line-mates were stuck in Vancouver forever, or so they had thought. They had been more surprised than his father when they saw the television news, telling them that 'all was forgiven' – Larry didn't believe it. Neither did his buddies. It's a trap, they thought, it has to be. But after reading everything there was to read, and consulting with counselors in Vancouver who really did know what was going on, he was convinced it was real. Jimmy Carter had opened the door – they could come home. Two months later, in March of '77, on a wet Tuesday morning, he caught a cab to the airport.

On the flights today, first from Vancouver to SFO, and after a stunningly easy trek through Customs – maybe it was forever the 'Summer of Love' in San Francisco, no matter the month or year – then on a second plane to Phoenix, Larry tried to write his thoughts in a notebook, but nothing came. He resorted to scratching out a list, a list that remained more in his head than on the page:

— Go back to Scottsdale Community College.

— Figure out a major. A life.

— Find out what he needed to do to transfer to the University of Arizona (Arizona State was closer, so that wasn't going to happen). Visit Aunt Janie. The worst part of Vancouver was the day of Ronnie's funeral. They had played little league together, fished together, talked

about girls together. He had written to Aunt Janie twice, and then a third time a year later, but she never wrote back.

— See if Mary Ellen would speak to him. They had traded letters for a few months, but her father had found out, and ordered her, she said in her last letter, to cease contact. He still wasn't sure how true that was.

— Figure out where to live. He couldn't stay under his father's roof. It had been hard enough in high school, and during his one semester at SCC. He'd been supporting himself 100%, so he wasn't worried – though he didn't recall many seafood canneries anywhere near Phoenix.

Dad drove, Mom sitting in front, Larry behind them with his pack and single suitcase. From the airport it was only five miles to West 10th Place in Tempe, to the only house he'd known, until everything had changed. He watched for the Salt River, which occasionally held water, but didn't today. Larry was pretty sure it was a new car, but didn't care to ask. His dad was the king of replacing the family car every two years. He didn't want to give him the satisfaction of noticing.

Dad was remembering when *he* came home, in 1953, to Chariton, Iowa. No band played, but there was recognition and respect, too, the day he returned. Honour.

Mom was remembering when Larry was eight, when she joked with him about 'The Valley of the Sun' and 'The Valley of the *Son*,' and when he was 'playing Army' with his cousins and the neighbour boys, racing around the dusty yard with toy rifles, toy grenades, toy helmets. Harmless fun.

Larry was remembering the night he left, slipping from the house at midnight, having scrounged a ride all the way to Boulder, Colorado. After two days in Boulder, he was in somebody else's pick-up truck, continuing north, to and across the border, into the province of Alberta. Then the city of Medicine Hat, 150 miles from the U.S. of A. Until that week, he had never been farther than the Grand Canyon.

He saw the playing fields, then the classroom, of Gililland Middle School, still his favorite place in the valley. His dad steered the car one block further, crossed Mango Drive, and pulled into the familiar driveway.

Everything felt different, each would have agreed, had they been speaking. Three car doors opened and closed, and three individuals approached the front door.

THE REENACTMENT OF SHILOH

Niles Reddick

Monty left Tupelo dressed in khakis and a button-down shirt and steered his Tacoma toward the camp at Shiloh on the Tennessee River. His Union uniform was pressed and hanging on the hook, and his polished boots were on the floor mat. Over 300 men would camp around the fire, bond like Bly, eat Brunswick stew, and sleep in tents in sleeping bags. They planned to reenact the battle at Shiloh for a small crowd, mostly a handful of tourists and family members of the reenactors, all cheering for the Confederates, as if the reenactment might change the outcome of the past.

Monty didn't mind his role as a Union soldier because as part of a New South, he realised the Union had been right all along. He felt his ancestors who'd fought for the Confederacy would roll in their graves if they knew a descendent was dressed as a Yankee. Almost 24,000 had died, were injured, or missing in the battle, and while slavery had been the central cause to the war, states' rights, slavery expansion to the West, opposition to the newly elected Republican President Lincoln, and the Southern states seceding from the Union were also factors leading to war.

After the stew dinner, listening to stitch counters (men who felt they were experts) and sharing stories about the Battle at Shiloh named for a log cabin Methodist church that was destroyed, Monty decided to zip in for the night and hoped the temperature didn't drop too much.

The next morning, he didn't feel good when he came out of the tent. He'd forgotten to bring his blood pressure and diabetes medicine, felt a little dizzy, and was nauseous. Once the reenactment started, Monty was surrounded by the smoke from cannon and gunfire blanks, became confused, and toppled over before his allotted time to pretend he'd been

shot in the abdomen. Someone called emergency medical technicians who'd set up a first-aid tent.

Monty hadn't had a stroke, but his blood sugar levels were high, and they gave him a shot of insulin.

'Leave your medicine at home to make the experience more authentic?' One of the EMTs asked. 'Most do, so it will be like the old days, but back then, they'd be dead.'

'No, I left the medicine on the counter. My wife usually reminds me, but she was getting her hair coloured.' Monty's wife had suggested it as a hobby since he'd been a thespian and in a couple of plays in high school.

Since Monty felt better and could drive, he left. Monty knew reenactments had roots in ancient Rome, but he decided he'd take up fishing. He was happy he lived in a modern world, where odds were against his grandchildren fighting, where wars would likely be settled through negotiation before lives were lost, and where technological drones would prevent fighting. He wondered what reenactments of the future might be like.

TER-MINE-NATION DAY

Seth Robinson

The beat of a helicopter's blades kills the silence on our last morning as a country. I try to find it against the glaring blue sky, but with the sun overhead I have to squint. It's little more than a dragonfly in the distance by the time I spot it.

'Do you think they call them choppers because they cut up the sky?' Ellie asks.

'Machines like that have cut up the whole world.'

'Assholes.'

She's always had a way with words, my sister.

'Do you think it's one of theirs, or ours?' I ask.

'What time is it?'

I glance down at my – well, Dad's – watch.

'11.08.'

'Ours then. The radio said it'll start at midday. Apparently, they've promised us the airspace to evacuate the miners until then.'

'Christ, you'd hate to be on site now, wouldn't ya? Cutting it a bit fine.'

She shrugs.

'At least they've given us the warning.'

'Yeah, it's a very civilised invasion.' I think my words are dripping with sarcasm, but Ellie looks at me, incredulous.

'Civilised invasion' sounds like an oxymoron, but I suppose for the invaders, bringing their own version of 'civilisation' is what it's always about. They see themselves as saviours. This country has history in

that department already, although there are plenty of people who still try to deny it.

'We've got about 45 minutes then, I guess we should go?' Ellie says.

We shoulder our packs and set out, water bottles in hand. We're entering the hottest part of the day – the sun will be absolutely blistering soon – but we're not the only ones on the road. Nobody wants to miss the show.

History was my favourite subject in school. I liked the idea of looking at time as a story, seeing the flow of cause and effect. I liked looking at big moments on the page, and trying to figure out when the dominoes were set up; how all the little things stacked up and made it happen. This is different though. It's one thing when it's all there written down for you, but when you're living through it, there are blind spots. It's hard to pick the beginning of the end for us. You could probably make a case for the Industrial Revolution, or skip forward to 1987, when they published the Brundtland report on climate change. There are markers every five years or so from then on where you can see another decision – or lack thereof – was made that kept us on course for destruction. I think the moment it became apparent to most people though, was with the publication of a photograph, from the last Climate Summit.

A man stands in the middle of that photograph. He's moonfaced, with thinning hair and a doughy body. As always, he's wearing an expensive suit with a blue silk tie, and as always, it doesn't look like it fits him properly. In the photograph, he's reaching out, trying to get the attention of another grey-suited man and a woman in a red blazer, but they've turned their backs on him. There are more people in the photograph, but they've *all* turned their backs on him.

It would be sad. You would feel bad for him, except for the look on his face. His eyes are narrowed, his lips are curled, one side of his mouth

pulled back in the same smirk he's worn on TV and across every front page for the last three years.

It says: 'I don't give a fuck.'

Later, he gets up and delivers a speech to those same world leaders. Not many of them show – they know what he's going to say – but he gives the speech to a near empty room anyway. The gist is much the same as the smirk. He gets up on that stage and tells the rest of the world that we're going to keep on burning coal, and if they don't like it, he'll mail them some next Christmas with instructions on where they can shove it.

What comes in the following months is no surprise. Satellite images of the mines and damning environmental assessments. There's quiet outrage overseas, but the last word there is the important one: *overseas*. In our little island nation those places seem very far away.

Their policies and opinions don't carry much weight. We have an election, and the moonfaced man is returned to power. Employment, dollars and cents are the mantra of the day. The fear of rising fuel prices and energy bills wins him the election, but the media reports no congratulatory calls from other world leaders.

It's a short-lived victory.

Soon after, the story begins to unfold across websites and front pages, the real estate previously occupied by that same smirking politician. He still gets coverage, but there's no more time in front of the camera. The media outlets have the only photo they'll ever need of him now.

The words they use to tell our story are ones that we're familiar with from reading about other countries. When they start being used in relation to us – to our failings on the world stage – there's confusion.

'*No, not here.*'

'*Not in this country.*'

The chorus echoes out from critics on the small screen and in the comments section.

There's a disconnect between what's being said about us and the stories we've always told ourselves. The words that trouble us are ones like 'Sanctions', and 'Coalition'.

But the moonfaced man has to hold the party line. He has election promises to keep. When no yield comes, and the denial stays strong, things don't get any better. Soon those words evolve, into 'Embargo' and 'Invasion'.

Ellie and I join a parade of people moving out of town, like a line of ants on their way to a picnic. Some people have hampers, others sun shelters and camping chairs. I spot more than a few eskies and even a couple of guys wheeling a BBQ. It's a weird vibe. Everyone, it seems, is determined to turn the impending invasion into some kind of holiday. Another trend where our country has already set a twisted precedent.

There are others too, though not as many. *The Deniers*. They wear masks and wave flags plucked from old world Europe. There are a handful of them who chant from the side of the road as we pass, but their words are slurred, their war cry lubricated with morning beers. I wonder where they'll go when the clock strikes 12. Whether it will be into battle – as promised – or if the retreat is scheduled for 12.02. Either way, I suppose it explains the beers; liquid courage, or commiseration.

'Phil.' Ellie nudges me with her elbow, then nods at a woman walking in front of us. There's a folded newspaper sticking out of her backpack, the headline visible over the zip.

TER-MINE-NATION DAY.

It takes me a second to figure out the play on words. There are a few ways it can be read, but when it clicks, it conjures a grim smile.

'That's a good one.'

Ellie nods.

'I wonder if we'll start calling it "T-Day".'

'Sounds a lot like "today". Every day will be "Termination Day".'

'Well, isn't it? Isn't that why they're doing this? Last chance and all.'

'Good point.'

We fall into silence, keeping step with the line of people moving towards the ridge. I can hear another helicopter in the distance. A few people look up to the sky, but we can't find anything. I glance down at my watch, 11.40, there's still time. We pass a man dressed in high vis miner's overalls. He's stopped for a breather – sipping from a can of energy drink – and he has his radio on.

'*The Prime Minister has officially stepped down this morning, making way for the soon to be formed Regulatory Council, which will be composed of representatives from Climate Coalition Nations and will assume all executive authority at 12pm. He states he: "hopes it marks the beginning of a peaceful transition of power and a fresh start for our still great nation".*'

It's not a war. There was never going to be a war. That much was clear as soon as the Coalition was announced. Our government insisted that we were a country capable of 'punching above our weight', and that we were right to continue digging up coal and gas. They said that technology would lead the way and it was in our economic interest to keep going as we were, but as soon as the Climate Coalition was formed and military action was raised, they backed down.

Our six submarines weren't going to cut it, apparently.

The newsreader gives way to Men at Work and a playlist specially tailored for 'T-Day', and someone in the march behind us cheers. Ellie chuckles, but she's shaking her head as well. I suppose that might be another clichéd tagline for the day: 'if you don't laugh, you'll cry.'

We reach the top of the ridge and split off from the rest of the crowd, moving away from where most people are throwing down picnic rugs

and setting up on the grassy flat. If the Deniers manage to make it all the way up here they're likely to start some sort of shit, and neither of us wants to be in the thick of it. We find a boulder at the edge of the clearing and clamber up to the top. From there, we can see down the hillside, and across the mine.

It's an open cut – a gaping red wound in the earth – stretching out beneath the bluewhite expanse of the too bright sky. Its nearest edge is almost twenty ks away, but the sheer size of the hole means that even from up here, it seems close. It's bigger than our town. It's the entire reason our town exists.

At least, it was.

Ellie pulls a pair of binoculars from her pack, glances through them, then hands them across to me. I make out the yellow bodies of machinery and earth movers that look no bigger than Tonka Trucks, but really have wheels bigger than our house. Six months ago, if you came up here you would've seen those trucks climbing the roads that spiral up and out of the pit. Soon, that machinery will all be underground.

'Do you think this is too close?' Ellie asks. I shrug.

'Honestly, I don't know. They say the strikes are going to be targeted, apparently the bombs are really precise. And nothing is nuclear.'

'Still...'

'We can go if you want?' I check the time. It's 11.55. 'We've got a few minutes.' She shakes her head.

'No, I don't want to miss it. I feel like I need to see this.' She glances towards the crowd. 'Besides, there's enough people here, hopefully they can see us from the air.'

At 11.58, the national anthem plays over a dozen scattered radios, marking the end of the nationalist playlist. It's a recording that sounds like it was made in the 80s, crackly and muted, ripped from a cassette tape for digital. There's a moment of dead air when it ends, then an

automated voice kicks in as the national emergency system hijacks every radio in the country.

'Be advised. The International Climate Coalition has assumed jurisdiction. All previously identified targets and strategic priorities are now being engaged. Civilians are advised to clear all target areas.'

That message plays on repeat, five, maybe six times, before there's a scatter of clicks from across the clearing as the radios are turned off. The chatter, the laughter, it all follows suit, and soon a hot, heavy silence blankets the clearing.

'It's hard to believe it's got to this point,' Ellie whispers.

'I know what you mean.'

She and I have had this conversation already. I think most people have, but this time, I allow the words that usually form the latter part of that statement to remain unspoken. Today, it feels wrong to say them out loud, a bit like kicking when the entire team is down.

But it's better than the alternative.

Ellie fumbles in her pack again and pulls out an aluminium water bottle, now full of vodka. She raises it in mock toast.

'To the future.' She takes a sip, then scrunches her nose. 'Ah, that's gross.'

'I don't know why you thought warm vodka was the right choice for this.'

'Shut up and drink.'

She hands me the bottle, and I mimic her gesture.

'To saving the world.'

Ellie didn't do justice to just how bad the vodka is. It makes my whole face tighten into a pucker. In the end I barely force it down, and hand the bottle back to her.

'Yeah, thanks, but no thanks.'

I glance around at the crowd. A few of them have beers. I wonder if anyone else is toasting the impending destruction. These people are the ones who would've voted for the Prime Minister. Their livelihoods depended on this mine, same as Dad. It put food on their tables and kept the lights on – same as it did for Ellie and me when we were growing up – but I can't believe anyone *wants* to see the world burn. No one wanted it to get to this point.

At 12.20, we hear a rumble on the horizon; what could be a summer storm. A moment later, the klaxon cry of an air raid siren somewhere down in the belly of the mine rings out, confirming the jets are on their way. I wonder if that alarm is automated, or if there is some lone worker down there in the pit, now making a break for his life. I imagine a hard-hatted man scrambling to escape and feel a jolt of panic.

'It must be connected to some kind of network,' Ellie murmurs, reading my mind.

The rumble becomes more defined, a supersonic ripple in the air. I have to stick my fingers in my ears. Ellie shouts over the engine noise and tries to point at something in the sky, but again, it's too bright, and the jet is too fast. I never see it, but I see the explosion.

The first bomb hits the far wall of the pit. I feel it before I see it, a concussive wave that makes my bones jerk back in my skin and my teeth clink in my mouth. There isn't the bloom of flame I expected; it's no Hollywood fireworks show. Rather, it's pressure, enough power to force the air and the earth apart. Where I thought I'd see fire, it's red earth, dust and rock, thrown sky high and across the pit. The sound makes my head spin as millions of tonnes of earth come loose and the entire far side of the pit slides inwards.

The second bomb hits moments later – in the middle of the mine – launching that same ground upwards again. There are people in the crowd scrambling now, suddenly scared of debris, but it doesn't seem to reach us, just the haze of the dust, drifting over the bush and scrub.

The jets make a second pass a minute later, dropping bombs three and four. It's hard to see the explosions this time – through the dust clouds – but we feel them, hear them, even with my fingertip ear plugs.

The jet sounds drift away, their engine pulses turning into the low rumble of thunder as they move on to their next target. I'm sure they have a busy day ahead of them, there are plenty of mines left in our country.

I reach down and give Ellie's shoulder a squeeze. Her skin is coated red-brown, like she's been dusted with cocoa powder.

'It's over,' she says.

I look out towards the mine, squinting through the cloud of dust. Its walls have caved in. Where once there was a pit, like a Martian crater, there is loose sand and gravel. The open wound of the mine cauterised with explosives. I wonder how long it will take before the bush reclaims it, or if it will stay that way forever, a scar on the crust of the Earth.

ARGUS DIES

Mark Saunders

Then one voice, one familiar scent suggests
deer slaughter, alerts the head

where no man sees him
out here, slung over mule dung and bleeding
into ticks, in exile still,

still waiting for the hunt.
He alone picks up
two decades roused and dead
ahead, his short tail faltering

to rise; the eyes becoming blind
faith, become myth, became
him silent, dream-twitched; rest in peace.

Ulysses goes in hungry to the court, to pray.
Argus dies down, unknown. His heart is run to earth.

BILATERAL GYNANDROMORPH

Geoff Sawers

That's me out there on the stage
split down the centre, working the crowd
Portia dressed as the learned doctor
one half is hers, the other hers too

She's not myself tonight, I can tell
it's a scattered squall of blackbird song
it's the bassline from *Hounds of Love*
dropping like the gentle rain

into a paper cup, across the vast terraces
that line your inner ear
the star-wheel turns, the waves break
on the apron, draw back and break again

these are odd fifths, and sevenths, these aren't
harmonies I can hear, straight down my middle
there's a crack, a fissure, and she
can't leave without me in tow although

if you can imagine the way we have to talk
the way we, I mean, all of we
the way we're supposed to be
monocultural, monolingual, imagine

the space between our skins, imagine
half a butterfly rising on a warm spring night
launching into a thousand-mile migration
never imagining what it lacked.

Even a shattered self is better
than a life of self-justification.
Of course we're a plural subject
the first step is opening our mouth

a singular body, a heavier isotope
you're invited in to try on
this coat of leaves and throats
become the night becoming not just

a bundle of loose tropes and refusals
a squeal of bats in the dusk and
our toes dabbling over the edge as
our tideline harbours a string of words

no one will dare to stutter
quantum stitching to reverse heat death
under the hot lights we start to spin
it's just a glimpse of something you want to hold

and the audience stills and hushes
they were only seals anyway
but their deep soulful gaze burns into us
one lifts me onto her anthropomorphic knee

takes up a cello bow in one flipper
and saws me in half
that's us in quarters now
four steps to a square-dance if only

balanced with a darker rhythm
marching out of the red-eye dawn
tenderly tasting the whisky sea at last and
marching across the page until it meets

THEY ROUSE YOU BELIEVE IT

Jeff Schiff

from rural sleep
woodboring beetle larvae
their click click

tunneling through felled heartwood
boreal chorus frogs
stridulating crickets

and surely a plague
has been visited upon us
rasping katydids

semisocial coons without doubt
chewing the literal fat in our crawlspace
their purr chitter snarl

whimper and screeching incessancy
ditto for sandhill cranes
their piccolo trumpets blasting over lake chop

and of course barn owls
themselves perturbed and puffed
and asking *who who* dare ruin the deepening night

THE TREATMENT OF INJURIES

Simon Smith

The first eight months of 2019 bring Chicagoans a minor celebrity claiming he is the victim of a racist hate crime, a five-foot alligator nicknamed Chance the Snapper, marooned in the Humboldt Park lagoon, and a summer marred by over 1,500 shootings. It's hard to say which one gets the most publicity. In any case, it is with this treacherous knowledge that I head back to work in the fall. September signals my nineteenth year of teaching at a westside high school wedged firmly inside a gangland border responsible for half of those dreadful gun blasts.

Some of the scars the students present are physical. Danny Weathers has a huge purple welt on the back of his calf from where a bullet came and went, but not before leaving behind a warning that will never stop reminding. Others have mental wounds they drag around like lead balls of the mind. Roshonda Givins, a former class president, now shuffles down halls the way a sleepwalker shambles through a house with nobody home to notice.

In the midst of these calamities Principal Banks turns to the healing energy of music. She has heard about other schools in cities like Baltimore and Trenton, New Jersey, she says, places where the same strategy achieved some degree of success. She tells us about a band director in St. Louis, Tobias 'Something', who gives glowing reviews, and the whole staff goes along with the plan, scepticism be damned, because we don't have the steam or stamina left to think up any brilliant alternatives of our own. The idea is to pump soft, soothing melodies into the hallways through the PA system. Songs by artists like Gladys Knight and Bruno Mars are meant to sweep the students up in their calming embrace and carry them off to a more tranquil time and place.

For a couple of days the measure appears to be working. By the middle of the week, some students are nodding along to songs like 'Focus' by H.E.R. and mouthing the words to Solange's 'Cranes in the Sky'. A few students even join arms and dance from room to room.

Standing in the doorway to my classroom, I have to smile as two girls come giggling and twirling through the entrance. Yes, there are other students who prove impervious to the method. A mass of boys still huddle by their lockers each morning looking agitated, as though the gimmick has caused a reverse effect, further inflaming their swollen anger. The music, they seem to be saying, is like an older sibling responding to their temper with a simpering, 'Aw, poor baby'. Still, I think, name a single remedy that has ever appealed to every teenager in the world.

On Friday, as I wait by my door for fourth period to begin, a boy drops his books with a bang and squares for a fight. He puts both fists up in front of his face and slithers forward, leading elbows and knees-first. The scowl on his face is business-like and fearsome. His demeanour is so arresting that it takes me a few seconds before I even notice the object of his fury. His opponent flashes into sight, a skinny boy with a crooked flat-top, only to be mowed down immediately with a crashing right hook to the jaw.

'Hey!' I shout. 'Hey!' My pleas, feeble as they are, only serve as one more stick of kindling on the fire. 'Security!' I yell. 'Help! Help!' Each frightened cry sounds weaker than the next.

The security crew can find no port of entry. A wall of students on either side of the melee has already formed, a premeditated arrangement cooked up by children overdosed on adrenaline and sapped of sympathy. Overhead, the rumble is scored by another song seeping from the speakers. The soulful Marvin Gaye croons.

The juxtaposition of stirring vocals with clashing bodies is jarring in a way that sucks the breath out of me. As more and more kids pile into

the brawl, I can't bear to look. I watch only out of some mechanical duty I've been commanded to fill. I do not dare enter the fray myself. I have my own life to consider, a wife, a child, a list of frailties, medications delicately prescribed by my Forest Glen doctor for my own battered heart. The sight of bodies smashing into lockers and slamming to the ground is horrendous. One boy's head, velvet do-rag and all, goes bouncing off a concrete wall. And yet the song plays on. This time Tammi Terrell's vocals join the duet...

Rows of students hold their phones aloft, capturing the blows to later share and diagram with eager friends. Their camera lights, designed to illuminate the tussle, instead brighten their own giddy faces. A girl in a ripped T-shirt brings her adversary closer in front of a phone, tilting her chin upward toward the screen for the perfect angle before head-butting her in the nose. My stomach flops. I am sickened by their looks of delight as classmates crumble to the floor, some bloody or unconscious. Even as a child violence always made me nauseous. It's an irritant I've had the luxury to avoid most of my adult life. These students though... their thrills, I know, are borne from a desire to glimpse and harness power, to feel they can control or dominate each other even if they can subdue nobody or nothing else in this brutal world. This is a different kind of dance, their actions tell us, one of friction, half against destiny and half bending toward it. If one didn't know better, they might think it was choreographed. Here a tug-of-war for someone's backpack blurs into a waltz, there a ducked punch becomes a rhythmic bop nobody would ever orchestrate. But this ballet is not created for your standard theatre crowd down on Randolph Street. This is a westside production, a warped sideshow meant to accompany the end of the world.

I can see the nurse, Ms. Hanley, trying to ram through the wall of castled bodies. She is attempting to reach a young man with an ugly gash above his left eye. I watch her try a mole technique, coiling herself into a ball as she burrows low through a gate of thighs. As she gets closer, a group of kids surround the wounded boy, herding him into a corner

where a young lady has her own idea. She has removed a lace from her boot and is tying it around the boy's brow.

Another friend takes a piece of bubble gum and mashes the tie into place. I'm helping Ms. Hanley gain traction, trying to yank her through the knotted limbs of teenagers. When the kids see our coordinated efforts, they double down, pivoting and retreating as fast as they can.

'Trust none!' I hear one of them holler. A resounding 'hell yeah!' echoes back in response. 'No snitchin'!' somebody else yells, and a cheer erupts. The refrain repeats and overlaps. 'Trust no one, Hell yeah, no snitchin'!' over and over, layering in harmony and cadence like the beating of a drum.

The ballad fits perfectly with Chicago's appetite for illusion. It is a façade, just like our stable of 'liberal' mayors we trot out every four years, or the eternal promise of 'next year' on the lips of every diehard Cubs fan. But this is much more serious. We, the entirety of America, have never been properly trained for this anguish... this mayhem. But why should that matter?

Why get tripped up by the details? We won't. As usual, Chicago's shoulders will bear the brunt. Our backs will strain under the weight of history's heaviest corruptions as the rest of the world watches our frailties unfold on the six o'clock news. We listen to pundits and peons shout opinions from the sand as an extraordinary seiche pummels ancient, unmanned boats a dozen miles offshore. What understanding could ever be reached without a full immersion program, without a sailing school for already sunken vessels?

One of the freshmen, no older than fifteen, has broken his arm. He ignores it not out of toughness but out of shock. It dangles at his side like a snapped tree branch. Still he staggers forward, thirsty for more abuse. Loose coins skitter and slip under foot as he struggles for balance. Soon he will go down, thrashing and begging for revenge, oblivious to the cause.

A new cluster of kids appears in the centre of the ring. They have come to show off the different contortions their fingers are capable of performing. Three of them raise their arms in unison, each bending the fingers on both hands into what look like disfigured crabs. They wave them side to side in front of their faces. A look goes along with the gesture, a menacing mixture of frown and grimace. They suck their teeth inside their lips. Never let them see your teeth. Smiles have teeth. Never. What comes next is a second crew of hand flappers. A different clique of hardnosed boys with covered teeth and curled fingers. These guys have something original of their own that they can't wait to flaunt. They make a sideways three with their thumbs, pinkies, and pointer fingers, kind of like turning a pair of horns into a pitch fork. They brandish them at the first group, and then they joust. They lock fingers and gyrate around in circles, each one more determined than the next to retain the precise contours of their symbols. The first one to drop the signs and engage in actual fisticuffs or compromises loses. They slap and stab their fingers at one another like blunt scissors, grinding nails to flesh and knuckles to muscle. A few of them seem to forget how their claws were originally formed so that a couple of times they accidentally reverse the finger positions and end up on opposite teams momentarily.

The music, like the other palliatives found in our country's distorted past, is a lie we tell ourselves. We all, in our own maniacal ways, convince ourselves that cosmetic fixes are marrow deep and biochemical – the fresh trees planted along Michigan Avenue look pretty in spring but do nothing for our twisted, tainted roots. The kids, pushing and pulling at the same time against their rotten fates, are confused about the birthplace of their emotions.

Someone has ripped a shoe free from a mangled foot. I watch as a shiny white Nike goes soaring across the hall. Some students laugh and raise their phones higher, careful to catch the shoe at its crowning point of flight. They ooh and ahh. What a show! I think about how the trajectory would make a perfect snapshot. What are those short videos

called that all the students keep making? Vines? Reels? Snaps? The clips that keep replaying over and over again, back and forth, back and forth…

Imagine, I think, if they made an app that could keep going back, rewind hundreds of years of history, a single shoe hurtling back through time and space, back to the docks of Providence and Newport, Rhode Island… Farther still, all the way back to the golden isles, the Windward Coast and the Guelowar dynasties of Senegambia. What if we could all look upon one gigantic panorama of our nation's sins, every last one of us together, at the same time, and never look away, never be allowed to stop looking, until we could prove, each of us, old and young alike, that we saw precisely what we had done, that we stretched our stubbornness and our spans of attention beyond their snapping points, and that we acknowledged the gruelling but necessary work ahead… then what song would we sing?

POPLAR LEAF

Cathy Thwing

In a mossy cup, lined with dandelion
fluff, a single egg, a word,
white, tiny, undiscovered.

In the office, no one saw you.
Photos of hummingbirds lined
the steel cabinet behind

your desk. You disappeared
into them, hidden beneath
a slow poplar leaf.

The sparrows chattered around
the table, quick beaks pecked
at the memo you didn't get,

gossiping, but not about
you, mute within
a spot of sunlight unbidden

but golden, breaking through
shadow. Like that, the clatter
and hum of white noise shatter.

Then release, escape—
a ring, a posy. We're
all sent home, and there

you're always in the garden
nestled in soft down,
the poplar leaf in your crown.

NEWTON'S CRADLE

Isi Unikowski

I know that there will be a night when we
will lie like this together for the last time.
If it should be years from now
it would still have come too soon.
But should it be tonight,
if tonight some inattentive or distracted cell
should plough wantonly through
the busiest cardiac intersection
drive the wrong way down a one way synapse
belief is not enough to hold me
in the blue and red flashing lights of henceforth;
there is no promise for me
in perfection's gilt icons.
If it must be tonight
only in the indifference of science
am I reassured
that the first law of love can be proven
in the manner of a high school science teacher
who knows that the class is lost to him,
has turned from him toward the world that beckons
through small screens and large windows;
yet he's still forced by their beauty
to proclaim equations on a grimy whiteboard
for the wave
that taps through spheres knocking on his desk
the way my shocked soul—

in its sudden check and backward arch
like a crash dummy stopped, slapped against
the test wall, the ballooning bag,
while fate in its white coat checks a stop watch
—will be propelled forever forward into your future,
love remaining love
when it most alteration finds.
And so I begin my psalm, my chorus,
I too write my equations on the whiteboard:
'the conservation of love is given by the following statement…'

WHO SHALL SIT UPON THE THRONE?

Walter Weinschenk

Somehow I came to believe that there was a throne waiting for me, somewhere there was a throne, an ancient throne, meticulously cast out of silver and gold, its weight perfectly distributed among steadfast feet, intricately ornamented with precious stones too numerous to count but aligned in perfect order along fluted edges. I imagined arms of a throne decorated with insets depicting deceased kings and deities and an apron adorned with ribbons of lapis lazuli. The seat would be striped and comfortable and the back would flow along elegant lines culminating in a scalloped arch that blossomed in the air. This throne would be engineered in such a manner as to be strong enough to bear the weight of any one person — anyone, that is, whose birthright it was to take his or her place upon it — and would conform perfectly to the body of that one person but no one else. It would sit beneath a bright red canopy held high in place by elegant gold posts. Bear in mind that this throne might resemble others in certain ways so that, for example, the length of its legs and the slope of its arms might seem typical but, despite such similarities, would be unique and occupy an echelon reserved for it and it alone.

Over the course of time, this throne, though exceptional, would come to be considered antiquated and obsolete. It would, therefore, be removed from public view and stored away. It would, essentially, be hidden. In all probability, it would be brought to the storage room of some museum in which case it would be seen and handled, for the most part, by some surly custodian who would not only have the job of lugging it to the basement but would be required to move the throne from one room to another as each filled with relics. No one would have reason to know such a throne even existed except for the custodian and,

of course, the museum curator who would, on occasion, search for it among basement closets and cold storage rooms crowded with artifacts that were no longer of interest or consequence. She might find it packed in with some statues and broken equipment and, upon rediscovering it, she might then stare at it for a quick moment, pick up an old rag lying on a desk and wipe off the considerable layer of dust that had accumulated upon its surfaces. The curator might take a step back and study that throne, admire it and picture it as it might have appeared in its original state, situated at the edge of the desert and she might pity it in the same way one might feel sympathy for someone who had been forced to leave his native country, at least to the extent one can feel pity for an inanimate object. She might even consider climbing over sundry chairs and tables to sit upon it, albeit briefly, before continuing her rounds. If she felt such an urge, it would be an impulse she would surely resist: she would know in a profound way — a way, perhaps, that no other person could know — that it would be wholly inappropriate for her to seat herself upon that throne. She would, invariably, back away and toss her cleaning rag, now caked with dust, behind her, march hurriedly toward the exit and practically trip over old paintings, stacked one atop another, into the hallway. She would lock the door behind her and climb the long staircase leading to the gallery.

Over time, the throne's gold surface would turn dull yellow, the once-bright scintillation of its jewels and stones would be quieted and it would continue to sit in storage for decades, centuries or more, forgotten by humanity. The curator, the last to touch it and the last to know of it, would herself be long gone and forgotten, her delicate imprint upon the ancient arm buried beneath mounds of dust that would continue to collect unabated.

The throne that I came to believe was waiting for me might have been the same throne that some ancient king had sat upon many years ago. Were that the case, such a king would have sat high above the throng of subjects from whom he drew his power, high above the

servants he directed and soldiers he commanded and the myriad protectors, advisors, wives, sons, daughters, aristocrats, criminals, poets and shepherds who inhabited his world. He would have spent a lifetime gazing out upon all who passed by or before him and he would have studied their lives. He would have carefully considered this great mass of wretched souls who were his countrymen and would have understood that they craved peace and deliverance above all else. He would know that he had been chosen to deliver them and might even have noticed the degree to which each member of that multitude watched him, eagerly at first, but then patiently as hope dwindled over time, and he would sit upon that throne and peer out upon the people and feel the great weight of responsibility bearing down upon his shoulders. He might have felt helpless as those citizens lay prostrate upon the ground, chanting and praying for relief from suffering. It would be a suffering, however, that had no name: it would not have arisen out of hunger or sickness but would have been borne of some undefined, dire cause. There was no answer; nothing could be done. This song of suffering would continue over the course of years and people would die, of course, but they would be replaced by others and the suffering would continue without pause.

The one who sat upon the throne would sit, seemingly unmoved, but, in fact, would be wriggling with guilt in his heart and mind until, no longer able to cope with the sound and sight of it, he would seek an answer in the distance and crane his neck to look forward, far beyond the abject horde before him, seek direction beyond the columns and temples and edifices he had commanded to be built, beyond even the feeble huts and tents situated in the deep cavity of the desert, beyond the acid yellow sand that one tries so hard to overlook and beyond the farthest aspect of the space that borders the discernible world. In that moment, he would see something that resembled an answer though he couldn't be sure: it would be something no one had ever seen, something that lay thousands of miles beyond the vague crease along which the sky

meets the earth, much like the edge of an overlarge curtain that gathers upon an uncertain floor. Having seen the thing that cannot be seen, he may have turned away, uneasy and alarmed by the disconcerting sight of what may have been the burnt sienna edge of the wheel of time running roughshod past the desert horizon, throwing off glints of white light, moving forward or away (for it would be impossible to tell) but moving, nonetheless, as would a hungry animal.

That king, hypothetically speaking, sitting upon that throne and staring far across the desert sand, having seen something that had never been seen, would realise with agitation and self-pity that time was rapidly running short, that he would soon succumb to the heat of the desert and the slow pitch and yaw and depressive force that retards the inertia of life and causes it to veer off a well-worn course, entomb itself in dust and sand, wither and be no more. He would realise, in his final hours, that even his own vision is limited, that he can't see the whole, that the panoramic entirety he thought he saw was nothing more than a glimpse, limited and disproportional, like a reflection. Now, at this juncture, he couldn't be sure of what he had seen and he would be compelled to spend his remaining time peering into the distance, desperate to confirm the reality of that vision until a moment finally arrives at which he has no choice but to end his search as sand dunes rise around him. He would know that his throne would outlive him and, at that moment, the throne would tower over him and might even pity him, at least to the extent an object can feel pity for a living being. He would realise, at that moment, that thousands of years would pass until someone would lay claim to it, someone who would wait until time's end to be born. And as time ran out, he would wonder who would take his place upon that throne. Eventually, someone, like myself, might stand transfixed in its dim shadow and wonder who had sat upon it.

FRANKSTON LINE

Imogen Lenore Williams

I board the half-empty train at Flinders Street. There's a white-haired woman sitting in the corner, and I can hear the smacking sound of her tongue inside her cheeks as she sucks on a lozenge, perhaps a barley sugar. She's alone, reading her book. I cannot see the title, as she's gripping a Readings bookmark in front of the cover. A man with dreadlocks and a bicycle sighs as he yanks apart the glass double doors to the next carriage. The train lurches, jolting him as he awkwardly manoeuvres his bike through the corridor connection to the next carriage.

Now arriving at Richmond, change here for Alamein, Belgrave, Lilydale and Glen Waverley services.

A young woman with round glasses and a tote-bag boards. The bag is merchandise from a NGV exhibition I guarded two years ago. With her is a young man wearing a tidy mullet and a cream skivvy under a denim jacket. They're probably Arts students. They walk to the other end of the carriage, and sadly out of earshot. Just before the doors shudder shut, two women rush in. They're in their thirties, one with her hair dyed red and the other dyed pink, but the dye needs re-doing, the roots show through for them both. The pink-haired one is merely chubby, but the other is fat, and the sudden dash to reach the train has made them breathless. They're breathing carefully, trying to suck in as much air as possible without revealing to the other how unfit they really are.

Now arriving at South Yarra, change here for Sandringham services.

Listening to conversations on the Sandringham Line is as exciting as watching a nasally woman sing the praises of a mattress

on daytime television. So, I catch the Frankston Line instead. More interesting characters live down these tracks. I hear my phone buzz in my work bag, a text. I ignore it. So many young people believe that one must stare at a phone to appear detached, but I know that I can simply pretend to be staring out of the carriage door windows, or even put my sunglasses on, if somebody looks my way and suspects I am eavesdropping, which I most often am. I check my bag to make sure my sunglasses are there. They are.

The woman with the red hair gains her breath back first and, as the pair settle in their seats, she continues their conversation.

'Well, what I was saying, I feel I know Dave, and I don't know him so well, but it's like we do, you know, that's where we're at. I think he's a bit dependent on me though. He bought me a full seventy-dollar bottle of conditioner as a present. Like, how long have we known each other? Since April? It's May. He's got manic-depression though, sometimes he forgets to shower, but it's okay. I'm going mad for a guy right now. Crazy...'

Now arriving at Hawksburn.

'But I almost don't like that. The money he spent and those gifts he gave me. It's probably just all part of his bipolar, when he's manic, you know, but I still told him to stop because that's what my parents did. My whole family did – still do. They never really showed anything to me, any love or feeling, but that's how they showed it, buying me presents.'

The pink-haired woman replies, 'Yeah, that's the only way they knew how to show you they loved you.'

I feel sad that I missed the earlier part of this conversation, the lead-up to discussing Dave who doesn't shower, though I perceive that this pudgy pair still have plenty more gossip for me. Red Hair woman speaks again.

'Yes I know, and I did that too. I remember I bought you so many presents for years, and everyone else. Somebody would be going through

a hard time, and I'd just give them a fucking gift. That's not it, I couldn't be there for them, they needed someone to talk to, but I just bought them presents, that's not friendship, that's not love.'

Now arriving at Toorak.

I glance at Red Hair to see her staring expectantly at Pink Hair, waiting for a response.

Pink Hair considers, 'I didn't really mind all those presents, to be honest.'

Red Hair snorts.

Overheard conversations are wonderful. I could block out the real world by putting in headphones, only hear Spotify or ABC Listen, but those words are curated to create a processed emotion, a precise audience reaction so listeners tune in again. Instead, I tune into the intimate conversations of those sharing my carriage. We are strangers, until I get to know them as they unwittingly divulge their life story.

The elderly woman turns a page.

Now arriving at Armadale.

A pre-recorded announcement crackles indistinctly over the speaker system, '*Good afternoon passengers*,' or did they say customers? Then the voice mumbles unintelligibly and ends with, '*please ensure you are wearing a fitted face-mask at all times while you travel*.' I must complain to Metro about their speakers.

Pink Hair woman is whispering, but I can hear because she is leaning right back in her seat which is at a right-angle to mine. I'm sitting in the disability seat — there's nobody in need of it — and from here I could easily pull apart her greasy bun.

'... but the first time I had it I felt so sick! It was about a year into the relationship with Phil and I was so sick he had to take me to hospital, and I needed two needles.'

Red Hair sitting opposite interjects with a 'Wow,' and continues with her own issues, 'You know I've stopped it, I drank lots of water, to flush the addiction out. I'd never do that shit again. I don't smoke now too. I was smoking a few years ago when things were really bad — my anxiety and depression – I just went running all the time then, I couldn't sit still I had to be walking or running, I just couldn't be still.'

Now arriving at Malvern.

She should start running again, she could do with losing a few kilos. I wince at myself for thinking that; this poor woman has been ill.

Three teenage girls in school uniforms enter further down the carriage. They loosen their ribbons. The western sun strikes their hair that falls to hang around their breasts – don't look – and I notice that one girl has copper highlights in her dark hair. The sun on her face is making her squint. I always travel prepared for such problems. I double check that my sunglasses are still in my work bag. They are. It is easy to hear the girls' conversation as their shrill voices reach a peak.

'I know! Oh God, but so many interesting things happened on that camp,' the girl with copper highlights laughs, 'Like when Danielle, you remember? She said to Mrs...' but then she quietens down, so I don't get to find out what Danielle said. I notice the Arts students staring at the girls with disdain.

I listen again to Red Hair.

'I was having panic attacks, constant panic attacks. When I didn't have a ciggy in my hand or was drinking, I was just panicking. So I became an alcoholic. Yeah, I guess I did.'

'And of course the alcohol just made the attacks worse,' Pink Hair nods sympathetically before Red Hair interrupts again.

'Yeah they got worse, and then –'

Now arriving at Caulfield, change here for Pakenham and Cranbourne services.

When there are multiple people speaking at once it can be hard to follow, but it's fun to try. I can choose which conversations to drop in and out of. Though it's also good to hear entire conversations. At work I will only hear snippets as people pass through the exit. Sometimes I will get an awkward, 'Hello', and when I need to question someone, their response is just defensive, 'No, I promise that I paid for it at the gift shop. I don't know where I've put the receipt,' or even 'I didn't put that in my bag!'

I pick up Copper Highlights' voice, 'and Dad was like, "You have a rash, down there?!" and I'm laughing like it's so awkward, but I had no clue who to tell!'

We are still sitting at Caulfield, there must be some delay. A boy in shorts and a hoodie comes into the carriage and looks up and down. He has headphones in, but the music is so loud I can hear it. Not just drums and bass, but lyrics as well. With a pang, I recognise the song, one of those upbeat, hopeful love songs that were so popular twenty years ago. I am surprised he is listening to it, as it's more my time than his. I suppose the sentiment still appeals to naïve youths, not yet scorched by love's harsh reality. The elderly woman looks up from her book at the boy and he walks back out of the train. We leave the station.

Pink Hair is finally doing the talking, 'So now Andrew is back with him and –'

'Good afternoon customers –' I'm sure it sounded like customers this time, and then there is the same message about face-masks. I pull mine up as it has slipped down my nose. I note that I need to trim my beard before bed tonight, as it's getting too bushy and feels uncomfortable with the mask on.

I hear Copper Highlights.

'...so I had to tell this guy that wasn't what's happening, and he was so sad like I don't know what he was expecting! What the Hell did he want?'

'Oh you know what he fucking wanted!' one of her friends replies, and they all laugh.

The old lady snickers.

Now arriving at Glenhuntly.

Pink Hair adjusts the way she's sitting, 'Imagine what they hear though, what he thinks about all of that. Though you never know it,' she mumbles a little so I miss it, 'but we could be talking about anything you know, and that's what's crazy like it doesn't even matter.'

Red Hair and Pink Hair fall silent.

Now arriving at Ormond.

The conversations quieten as we pass under North Road. The teenage trio lean into each other, whispering. Emerging into the light, they stop and lean back. Copper Highlights examines her nails. The girl opposite her unzips her schoolbag and pulls out a tall, canned drink.

'Are those Seltzers nice?' Copper Highlights asks.

'Yeah they're pretty alright.' She pops the ring-pull and takes a sip.

Now arriving at McKinnon.

School students surge onto the train from the platform, but none of them choose my carriage. The elderly woman hasn't turned a page in a while. The bookmark has now moved, revealing the book's title: *The Land Before Avocado*, emblazoned on a piece of toast. She would remember when avocados still seemed exotic, maybe she's reading it for a nostalgia trip. Her reading glasses are hanging on their chain and dangling askew over her breasts – I definitely don't look at *those* – how can she see? I realise she is staring back, and she smirks conspiratorially at me, then looks back to her book. Seems she's eavesdropping too. I can see her scalp through her thinning hair, and I remember that I need to buy more black hair dye. I'm pushing 50, but it's still not obvious that I am colouring my greys, I hope. The date palms beside the trainline flash past like years.

Now arriving at Bentleigh.

A KFC Go Bucket rolls to my feet. My eyes follow the arc of chips and popcorn chicken pieces littering the floor. I look up into Pink Hair's eyes. She has turned in her seat.

She looks down at the remnants in the bucket and chuckles, 'Wonder if we should eat that?'

I smile at her, 'Maybe not,' then she turns away. I poke at the KFC bucket with my foot, to distract me from the discomfort of suddenly interacting with this woman who I've turned into a character.

Now arriving at Patterson.

Two PSOs enter through the doors in front of me. I reach for my Myki, but they don't ask for it. Instead, they head through the glass doors into the next carriage. Maybe they're looking for someone.

'Thank fuck,' I hear the third teenage girl mutter under her breath.

There is silence again in the carriage, people tapping on phones and staring into space.

Now arriving at Moorabbin.

Hearing that announcement, the old lady closes her book, slipping the redundant bookmark inside its cover. She gently tucks the book into her bag and, once the train has come to a complete halt, she stands up and disembarks, giving me a nod as she goes. The coloured-haired women are still silent: Red Hair is looking at her phone and Pink Hair is watching the teenage girls, who are laughing together at something on one of their phones. I suddenly realise that Tote Bag Girl and Neat Mullet Boy are no longer there; they added so little interest to my journey that I didn't notice their departure.

Now arriving at Highett.

I wonder if the schoolgirls are getting off at Southland for some after-school shopping. I bet the dyed-hair druggies are going all the way to Frankston. Thank goodness I've never needed drugs to cope with

life's struggles. I think of my brother, poor sod, then hastily focus my attention on the map of the trainline on the wall.

Now arriving at Southland.

I was right, the schoolgirls swing their backpacks over their shoulders and mosey down to the door. My stop is next. I hope there won't be a long wait for the bus from Cheltenham Station to Beaumaris, as I am eager to smell the sea breeze as I walk home to Rickett's Point. I love that house with its view of the sea. My parents left everything to me, even Vincent the cat, but I gave him away because of my allergy. I wonder what he's doing at the moment, and if he's still alive?

Now arriving at Cheltenham.

I stand up and give the women with coloured hair a last glance, then I press the green button and the doors open. A gust of wind hits me.

It's quiet on the bus. I check the text message, it's just my boss asking if I can take an extra shift tomorrow. I shoot back a 'Hi Dee, of course I can'. I remember the leftover pasta in the fridge – yes – I'll reheat that for dinner. Maybe add some peas.

Thank you to Richard Glover for permission to mention his book, *The Land Before Avocado.*

DAVID IS A DIVER

Francine Witte

Head first, arms straight out. He cuts into the water like a gorgeous knife.

He dives in fully dressed. Doesn't even take off his shoes. Madge, his blood mom, has been calling again. *I'm sorry, Boo. But I was 17.*

Now, David is 17. He would never leave *his* flesh and blood on a supermarket shelf. Buried between the baked beans and the *SpaghettiOs*. That's where Carla, the night cashier, found him. Heard his baby whimper and snuck him home. Told everyone she'd been hiding him all along.

Carla took finding the baby as a sign. That this would change her rotten, one-room-over-the-supermarket luck forever.

And that's exactly what happened. The very next day, Carla struck it rich. Scratch-off ticket she bought on a whim. Quit her job and bought a mansion on the edge of town. Twelve bedrooms, Olympic-sized pool. She named the baby David, and when he was old enough, taught him how to swim.

Everything fine, till a month ago when the papers got hold of the secret she'd been keeping all these years – *Supermarket Cinderella, and the baby she found in Aisle 3*!

Madge sees the papers from a few states away. Doesn't take her long to do the math. And so it begins. Daily calls to David who finally blocks her on his phone and heads straight for the pool. Dives in fully-clothed. The water is deep and cool and doesn't beg for forgiveness.

In the pool, he touches the bottom. Aqua blue and way too solid. He starts chipping at the concrete with the house key he pulls out of his

pocket. If he could wedge open a hole, he could swim down even deeper. Madge would never find him and, in time, she would just give up.

Meanwhile, above ground, Carla knows better. Knows the power of a mother's regret. She knows that when Madge stops calling, she will just get in her car and drive whatever hundred miles it will take to make this right.

Carla thinks of her before-David life. The landlord, the broken broom in the corner of her single room. How finding David changed everything.

She stands at the edge of the pool, chlorine snap and wavy blue. David with his pantlegs flaring out, the soles of his shoes, the scraping and scraping and then he stops. Stops all movement for almost a minute. Whack of panic in Carla's heart. Survival instinct jets him to the surface.

Carla splashed with water now, and David balloons himself up with another breath, dives back down to the bottom. Carla's mouth O's up as if to scream. 'Don't!' she would say. 'You'll hurt yourself,' she would say. She hears a car outside on the street. One day soon, Madge's car will pull into the driveway and what then?

Carla swallows the scream back into her throat.

KICKING BUCKETS

Isabelle Ylo

Last week, I read an article
about this grocery store worker who fell
behind the cold storage,
and they didn't find his body
for ten years. Police said the buzz

of the industrial freezers
would have drowned out
any cries for help.

When I was in college,
this guy in the dorms got high on LSD
and plummeted
from his 11th floor window.

It's been years now, but sometimes
I still think about
a lifetime of potential
splattered

on the sidewalk. Or when
my older sister went to Oxnard Beach
and the sand collapsed,
swallowing a classmate and
crushing his ribcage. (Firefighters came
to dig out the corpse.)

After that, my sister had nightmares
for months. (He was from South Korea.
It took a long time to notify his parents.)

Listen, I've had my head
in proverbial ovens for years. I've
sized up bridges and rooftops and
value-pack sleeping pills
as a matter of course.

But let me tell you,

if the pilot locks
the cockpit door and aims
us towards the mountains,
I'll be the first one screaming.

JOURNEY TO THE WEST

Sophia Zhao

Mountain, my body pressed under,
topography piercing the daybreak
as I assembled towards it.
Unwieldy gestures on a crinkled map—
I shrugged these ripples off &
hoisted myself up with a heavy mast,
then, because no one else was coming,
crowded into a passing band
headed towards the offing
where waves would arrive
& depart. For me, I could not forget
how the sea should gather softly at the feet
& in precise function quickly
fall back—outside the shore, I believed
in no sort of surrender. Just
mercy, more than enough for me.
As we wandered with mist tracing our eyes,
ancient sweat swelling, the sun looked
brightest beyond the valley &
this was what each day coming
made us: travelers wringing out faith
from any blurry shape & the dizzying
weight it held for us. All the while
several thousand miles away,
the mountain continued to posit its place
like a record, a dark mirage watching
me & my relentless wanting—
I smelled the salt of another country,
the decocture that would dry for my wounds.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Enne Baker is an American poet with Montenegrin lineage. His first and only poetry collection is *The White Colossus*.

Madeleine Bazil is a multidisciplinary artist and writer interested in memory, intimacy, and the ways we navigate worlds—real and imagined. Her poetry has been published in *West Trade Review*, *Oyster River Pages*, *Axe Factory Press*, and elsewhere.

Kate Bowen received her PhD in English from The University of Adelaide in 2020 and has since established a career of academic writing about gender and contemporary American cinema. Kate also enjoys broadening her skills by writing poems that dance with urgency and speak from the little voice in her head that is never satisfied.

Patrick Brehenny is an American ESL teacher and fiction writer in Bangkok. He has had numerous stories in U.S. indie mags and university presses. Running Wild Press included his novella *Like a human* in an anthology that was selected among Best Books Of Year 2019 by Kirkus Reviews.

John Brantingham a former poet laureate, has been published widely including *Writers Almanac* and *The Best Small Fictions.* His nineteen books of poetry and fiction include *Life: Orange to Pear* (Bamboo Dart Press). He is the founder and editor of *The Journal of Radical Wonder.* He lives in Jamestown, NY.

Rohan Buettel lives in Canberra, Australia. His haiku have appeared in various Australian and international journals (including *Frogpond*, *Cattails* and *The Heron's Nest*). His longer poetry recently appears in *The Elevation Review*, *Rappahannock Review*, *Penumbra Literary and Art Journal*, *Mortal Magazine*, *Passengers Journal*, *Reed Magazine*, *Meniscus* and *Quadrant*.

Adrian Caesar is the author of twelve books including poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. He was born in the UK but has lived and worked in Australia for forty years. His latest publications are *This Cathedral Grief* (Recent Work Press 2020) and a novel, *A Winter Sowing* (Arcadia/ASP, 2021).

Brent Cantwell is a New Zealand writer from Timaru, South Canterbury, who lives with his family in the hinterland of Queensland, Australia. He teaches high school English and has been writing for pleasure for 24 years. He has recently published in *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Poetry NZ*, *Landfall*, *Takahe* and *Foam:e*.

Megan Cartwright is an Australian writer and college teacher who attempts to make sense of the nonsensical via poetry. Her work has appeared in *October Hill Magazine*, *Authora Australis*, *Blue Bottle Journal* and *oddball magazine*. She also has poems due for release via *Arteidolia Press* and *Quadrant*.

James Salvius Cheng lives and writes in Western Australia. He was born in Myanmar but grew up mostly in Perth, where he continues to live with his wife and dog. When not writing or working he likes to paint pictures and go on long meandering walks with no destination in mind.

T. Clear is a Seattle based writer whose poetry has appeared in many magazines, including *Crannog*, *Sheila-na-Gig, The American Journal of Poetry, terrain.org*, *Verse Daily* and *The Moth*. Her book, *A House, Undone*, is the 2022 winner of the Sally Albiso Award from MoonPath Press. She is an Associate Editor at *Bracken Magazine*.

Oliver Comins lives in West London. His poetry is published by Templar Poetry in the UK, with three chapbooks and a full collection (*Oak Fish Island*, 2018). In Australia, he has had poems in *Axon*, *Meniscus* and *Westerly* and he read at Poetry on the Move in Canberra (September 2022).

Sara Cosgrove is an award-winning journalist and emerging poet based in Minnesota. Two of her poems will appear in Issue 37 of *The Seventh Quarry*. One of her most recently published articles was shared by *The Mighty* and tackled the timely topic of disability inclusion. She has worked as a writer and editor for more than a decade and has studied in the United States, Cuba, and France.

Mary Cresswell is from Los Angeles and has lived on New Zealand's Kapiti Coast for many years. Recent books: *Fish Stories: Ghazals and glosas* (Canterbury University Press) and *Body Politic: Nature poems for nature in crisis* (The Cuba Press). See also: www.read-nz.org/writer/cresswell-mary/.

Anne Di Lauro is an emerging poet based in Brisbane. Her poetry explores concepts of meaning, memory and kinship with nature, through the lens of myth, dreams and archetype. Her poems have been published in *Meniscus*.

Adrienne Eberhard's fifth collection, *Chasing Marie Antoinette All Over Paris*, was published by Black Pepper in 2021. She is working on a new collection, a series of poems/letters between Marie Antoinette and Marie Louise (Louis) Girardin who sailed in Tasmanian waters in 1792/93.

Annette Edwards-Hill lives in Wellington, New Zealand. Her short fiction has been published in New Zealand and overseas. She has nominations for Best Small Fictions and the Pushcart Prize; shortlisted for New Zealand Flash Fiction Day, Micro Madness, the Sargeson Prize; second place in the Reflex Fiction Autumn 2021 competition.

Steve Evans has published or edited 21 books, including *Easy Money and Other Stories* (2019), *Unearthly Pleasures* (2021), and *Animal Instincts* (due 2023). *Water &*

Dust was shortlisted for the Penguin Novel Manuscript Prize. He has won various major literary prizes and formerly ran the Creative Writing Program at Flinders University.

Joel Robert Ferguson is a Canadian poet of working-class settler origins who lives in Winnipeg, Treaty One Territory. His work has recently appeared in *The Columbia Review*, *Prairie Fire*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *Qwerty*, and *Riddle Fence*; his debut collection, *The Lost Cafeteria* (Signature Editions 2020), was awarded the Lansdowne Prize and was nominated the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award.

Lynn Gilbert has had poems in *Blue Unicorn*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Gnu*, *The Huron River Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Light*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *Mortar*, *Peninsula Poets*, and elsewhere. She has been a finalist in the Gerald Cable Book Award (2021) and Off the Grid Press book contests. She reads submissions for *Third Wednesday* journal.

Ryan Harper is a Visiting Professor at Colby College in the United States. He is the author of *My Beloved Had a Vineyard*, winner of the 2017 Prize Americana in poetry. A resident of New York City and Waterville, Maine, Ryan is the creative arts editor of *American Religion Journal*.

Geoffrey Heptonstall has published three poetry collections with Cyberwit: *The Rites of Paradise* 2020 *Sappho's Moon* 2021 and *The Wicken Bird* 2022. His novel, *Heaven's Invention* was published by Black Wolf in 2016. He is also a playwright, essayist and reviewer. He lives in Cambridge.

Jane Hider grew up in a pink house with gingko trees and crab apples in the garden. She writes about her childhood in the 1970s, music and food. She also practices as a solicitor, advising clients on the best way to build bridges, railway stations and office buildings.

Glen Hunting is a writer from Perth, Western Australia (Boorloo, Whadjuk Noongar boodja), now living in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). He won the 2019 Zip Print Short Story Award and the 2022 NT Writers Festival Writing Competition. His poetry has been published in *Plumwood Mountain Journal*, *Portside Review*, *Burrow*, *Creatrix*, and elsewhere.

Srishti Jain is an Indian poet and physiologist based in Dublin. While working towards her doctorate in ovarian cancer, she erratically pursues her lifelong love affair with poetry. Her poetry explores diaspora identity, vulnerabilities as a person of colour, and belonging in a fast, unforgiving world. Her work has been published in Red Ogre Review, Rigorous and The Cancer Researcher.

Stefan Jatschka is an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research at the University of Canberra. His work has been published in *TEXT*

and *Talent Implied.* His short story *Distance* has been published in the *Incompleteness Book* by Recent Work Press.

Alison Jennings is a Seattle-based poet who taught in public schools before returning to poetry. She's had over 70 poems published internationally in numerous journals, including *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Mslexia*, *Poetic Sun*, *Red Door*, and *Society of Classical Poets*, and has been a semi-finalist in several contests. Website at https://sites.google.com/view/airandfirepoet/home.

Catherine Johnstone lives in Melbourne and writes poetry, creative non-fiction and fiction. She was awarded a Varuna online fellowship, *The Writer's Space* (2022), and a fellowship at KSP Centre, Perth (2023). Her writing has been included in *Going Down Swinging* (Issue 10/11) and an anthology, *A Remarkable Absence of Passion*.

Meghan Kemp-Gee lives somewhere between Vancouver BC and Fredericton NB. She writes poetry, comics, stories, and scripts of all kinds. Her debut poetry collection, *The Animal in the Room*, is forthcoming from Coach House Books in spring 2023. She also co-created *Contested Strip*, the world's best comic about ultimate frisbee. Find her on Twitter @MadMollGreen.

Kara Knickerbocker is the author of the chapbooks *The Shedding Before the Swell* (dancing girl press) & *Next to Everything that is Breakable* (Finishing Line Press). Her poetry & essays have appeared in or are forthcoming from: Poet Lore, HOBART, Levee Magazine, & more. Find her online at www.karaknickerbocker.com.

Tiffany Lindfield is a social worker by day, trade- and heart- advocating for climate justice, gender equality, and animal welfare. By night, she is a prolific reader of anything decent and a writer.

Margaret Marcum recently graduated from the MFA program in creative writing at Florida Atlantic University. Her poems have appeared in *Amethyst Review*, *Scapegoat Review*, *October Hill Magazine*, and *Children, Churches, and Daddies*, among others. She was a finalist for the 2021 Rash Award in Poetry.

Kate Maxwell is a teacher and writer from Sydney. She's been published and awarded in many Australian and International literary magazines. Her first poetry anthology, *Never Good at Maths* (IP Press) was published in 2021, and her second anthology is forthcoming in 2023. She can be found at https://kateswritingplace.com/

Amanda McLeod is a Canberra-based author and artist, with a fascination for the natural world. Her work has been published extensively in print and online, most recently in *Green House Literary* and *Gems Zine.* A lover of quiet places, she's usually

outside. Follow her on Twitter and Insta @AmandaMWrites.

Rachael Mead is a South Australian novelist and poet who has an Honours degree in Classical Archaeology and a PhD in Creative Writing. She's the author of the novel *The Application of Pressure* (Affirm Press 2020) and four collections of poetry including *The Flaw in the Pattern* (UWAP 2018). In 2022, she won the Barbara Hanrahan Fellowship in the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature.

Marcelo Medone (1961, Buenos Aires, Argentina) is a fiction writer, poet, essayist, playwright and screenwriter. His work has received numerous awards and has been published in different languages in more than 50 countries, including Australia, New Zealand and the UK. He is a Pushcart Prize nominee.

Cindy Milwe is a writer and teacher who lives in Venice, CA with her husband and three children. For the last 25 years, her work has been published in many journals and magazines, and has been widely anthologized. Her first full-length collection, *Salvage*, was recently published by Finishing Line Press.

Cat Moore is an author and poet who has been writing for twenty years and is finally ready to publish her work. She has lived in Tasmania for over a decade, but is returning home to Perth—Wadjuk Nyoongar country—this year.

Avril Mulligan is a music teacher and a writer of short fiction. She won the City of Rockingham Creative Writing Competition 2020 Emerging Writer Award. Her work has appeared in *Aurealis* and *Grieve*. She lives in Perth with her husband, dog and remaining children who have not yet flown the nest.

Robert Savino Oventile has published essays and book reviews in *Postmodern Culture*, *Jacket*, *symplokē*, and *The Chicago Quarterly Review*, among other journals. His poetry has appeared in *The New Delta Review*, *Upstairs at Duroc*, and *The Denver Quarterly*. He is co-author with Sandy Florian of *Sophia Lethe Talks Doxodox Down* (Atmosphere, 2021).

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

Gregory Piko's writing has appeared in *Westerly*, *Meniscus*, *Poetry for the Planet*, *Poetry d'Amour*, *Authora Australis*, *The Canberra Times*, *Communion Arts Journal*, *StylusLit*, *Verity La*, *Shot Glass Journal* and *The Australian Poetry Anthology* among other places. Please visit www.gregorypiko.com.

Mary Pomfret writes short stories and poems, and her work has been published widely. Her debut novel *The Hard Seed* was published in 2018. She lives and works in Bendigo, Australia. In 2016, La Trobe University awarded her a doctorate in English for her creative thesis on generational trauma. Mary lives and works in regional Victoria.

Tony Press tries to pay attention. Sometimes he does. His story collection, *Crossing the Lines*, was published by Big Table. He claims two Pushcart nominations, twelve years in one high school classroom, and twenty-five criminal jury trials. He lives near the San Francisco Bay.

Niles Reddick is author of a novel, two collections, and a novella. His work has been featured in over 450 publications including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *PIF*, *New Reader Magazine*, *Citron Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and *Vestal Review.* His newest collection *If Not for You* is forthcoming (Big Table Publishing).

Seth Robinson is the author of *Welcome to Bellevue*. His short fiction has appeared in the *Mascara Literary Review*'s upcoming anthology, *Resilience*, *The Ultimo Prize Anthology*, *Everything, All at Once*, and *Aurealis*, among others. Seth is currently working on his next novel, and on completing his PhD in Creative Writing.

Mark Saunders is a writer and teacher living on the Isle of Wight in the United Kingdom, who has previously been published in *Abridged Magazine*, *emagazine*, and by Oxford University Press.

Geoff Sawers has written and illustrated several non-fiction books and maps. Poetry books include *Scissors Cut Rock* (Flarestack, 2005) and *A Thames Bestiary* (with Peter Hay; Two Rivers Press 2008). Born in 1966, he was only diagnosed as autistic in his fifties. He lives in Reading with his disabled son.

Jeff Schiff is the author of *They: A Letter to America*, *That hum to go by*, *Mixed Diction*, *Burro Heart*, *The Rats of Patzcuaro*, *The Homily of Infinitude*, and *Anywhere in this Country*. Hundreds of his poems, essays, recordings, and photographs have appeared in more than one hundred and fifty publications worldwide. He has taught at Columbia College Chicago since 1987.

Simon A. Smith holds a BA in creative writing and an MAT in secondary education. His stories have been widely published, including *Hobart*, *PANK*, *Whiskey Island*, and Chicago Public Radio. His two novels are *Son of Soothsayer* (New Meridian Arts) and *Wellton County Hunters* (Adelaide Books). He lives in Chicago. https://www.simonasmith.com

Cathy Thwing has been teaching writing at community colleges since receiving her MFA

in Creative Writing from Eastern Washington University. Recent poetry publications include *Poetica Review*, *Gyroscope*, *Poets' Touchstone*, and *Thimble*. Gardening, practicing cello, swinging in hammocks, and playing video games fill her life's other nooks and crannies.

Isi Unikowski is a Canberran poet. He has been widely published in Australia and overseas, including *Best Australian Poetry 2022* and shortlistings for the Atlanta Review International Poetry Prize (US) and the Bridport Prize (UK). His published poetry can be viewed at https://www.isiunikowski.net. His first collection, *Kintsugi,* was published in August 2022 by Puncher & Wattman.

Walter Weinschenk's writing has appeared in the *Carolina Quarterly*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The Gateway Review*, *Sand Hills Literary Magazine* and others. His first full length book, *The Death of Weinberg: Poems and Stories* (Kelsay Books) will be available this winter. Walter lives in Washington, DC. www.walterweinschenk.com

Imogen Lenore Williams is currently studying Professional & Creative Writing at Swinburne University. In 2018, she won the Senior Secondary School Short Story category of the *My Brother Jack Awards*, and in 2022, achieved Highly Commended in the *Swinburne Sudden Writing Competition*. Imogen is a regular contributor to *SWINE Magazine*.

Francine Witte's recent books are *Dressed All Wrong for This* (Blue Light Press), *The Way of the Wind* (AdHoc fiction) and *The Cake*, *The Smoke*, *The Moon* (ELJ Editions). She is flash fiction editor for *Flash Boulevard* and *The South Florida Poetry Journal.* She lives in NYC.

Isabelle Ylo grew up and currently resides in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. She received a Bachelor's in chemistry from Northern Illinois University and a Master's in chemistry from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She has a pet bunny named Boe.

Sophia Zhao is from Newark, Delaware. Her paintings and poetry appear in The Adroit Journal, Up the Staircase Quarterly, The Indianapolis Review, The Minnesota Review, and elsewhere. She currently studies at Yale University.

MENISCUS

LITERARY JOURNAL

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