



MENISCUS

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

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We would like to express our gratitude to Paul Munden for his editorial work on *Meniscus* over many years.

About *Meniscus*

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

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

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

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EDITORIAL

During this time of global crisis, when the COVID-19 pandemic has affected most people in the world in profound ways, creative writing is increasingly important—not only as a form of self-expression, and sometimes recovery, but as a way of articulating significant concerns that belong to the various communities the writers inhabit.

The works in the December 2020 issue of *Meniscus* range over various issues, many of them connected to personal feelings and relationships and particular domestic and quotidian occasions and situations. They explore ways in which people understand their connections to, and alienations from others and their relationships to received ideas and the complexities of language.

I recommend this *Meniscus* issue to you and the diverse and bracing stories and poems it contains.

Paul Hetherington
for the *Meniscus* co-editors

ADOLESCENT CANDY

Dakota Canon

My wilderness has sprouted
shipwrecked intentions.

No longer will fireflies
seek out my virginity.

Streams meander through the forefront
of my graciousness,

and waterfalls snow with honey
across the hinterlands.

Forgive me,
the beasts that roam plains of empty fortitude

where I bathe and love the canyons,
and the rushing hot springs

burn like wildfire
down the sanctimonious part of your throat.

A NEW PLACE

Natalie Satakovski

Bray lived with Mum and Dad before his sister was born. Dad was a successful businessman and Mum was pretty and young. Bray had a toy train that circuited the living room, and a mini basketball ring and a PlayStation, and they would eat Maccas and Hungry Jacks all the time. But then Mum picked up Bray from kinder and she was crying. She drove him to her parents' house and said, *Brayden, go with Nanna*. And she pushed Bray towards the old lady, whose hands felt like raw chicken. And Nanna said, *Nicole, you better come back tonight*. But she didn't. She didn't come back for a long time.

Nanna and Pop watched TV and drank wine every night and didn't let Bray watch what he wanted. Once he came up close to Nanna and her mouth was black like she'd eaten insects. Pop took pain medication for his back and slept a lot, and he stank like off fish. Bray tried to talk but they would hush him because the TV was on, and when they thought Bray was asleep they'd talk about Mum. They said she was a bitch for leaving Bray there and they were annoyed they had to look after him. They never took him to kinder because it was too far away. He missed Mum and her softness and cuddles and he didn't get to eat Maccas anymore. He was bored without his PlayStation. When he complained about Nanna's meat and three veg, she told him that next time he could cook for himself.

When Mum came back, she said Dad was dead.

She also had a surprise for Bray and opened the door of the spare room and inside there was a baby. Bray thought they'd go back home but Mum said they had to sell the house and car after Dad died and they'd be living with Nanna and Pop from now on. Bray cried and screamed and Mum tried to hold him but he kicked and she left him alone and he never cried again. Mum started helping herself to Nanna's box of wine and Nanna told her to Fuck Off and Buy Her Own but Mum didn't care. Mum made Bray go to a new school but he played at lunchtime by himself. He tried to talk to Mum after school but she told him to Nick Off and Stop Bothering Her. So he would pinch her lighters and play in

the street and start small fires in the grass to watch them grow and step on them before they got too big.

Bray played by himself in grade one and he played by himself in grade two. When he was in grade three he still played by himself, but because he felt ashamed about not having any friends, he walked around the schoolyard so people would think he was going to meet someone. A chubby kid called Reese and his posse of sidekicks followed Bray around. They called him Bogan and Methadone Baby. He didn't know what that meant but he didn't want to say in case they called him dumb and eventually he figured out it was a drugs thing. Reese's mum always helped at school excursions and Bray's mum never did. Reese had a Nintendo DS and would ask the teacher to go to the toilet so he could play it during class time. Bray remembered the days when his parents had money and he had cool toys like Reese. So he doxxed on Reese for playing the DS and Reese said mean things about Bray.

Bray told Mum about the bullies at school. She told him about the time she'd had a fight with a girl and how she knocked the girl's teeth out. She said, *They hit you, you hit back ten times harder. The only way to get rid of a bully is to beat him yourself.*

So Bray went back to school and waited in the toilets for Fatso. Fatso came. Other kids stood around. Fatso called Bray Retard. Bray called Fatso Fatso. Fatso walked into a cubicle.

Fatso needs to sit down like a girl, said Bray. *Or are you doing number two cos you ate too much?*

The other boys laughed. Bray started banging on the door. He went into the cubicle next to Fatso's and slapped on the wall and shouted bizarre sounds like a looney. Then he stood on the toilet roll holder and looked over at Fatso sitting on the dunny. Fatso looked scared out of his brains. Then Bray hopped off and pretended to leave and the other boys left and everything went quiet but Bray hid in a cubicle waiting for Fatso. Fatso thought everyone had left the dunnies so he flushed and came out. Then Bray ran out and pushed Fatso. Fatso fell and smashed his mouth on the sink. The DS flew out of Fatso's pocket and skidded across the floor. Fatso cried like a girl while blood pissed out of his face.

Bray had to see the principal. He had detention after school every day for a month. They made him pick up rubbish outside in the cold.

A man called Luke spent more and more time at Nanna and Pop's and soon he was living with them. Luke was skinny with muscles only on his forearms. Sometimes Mum and Luke didn't come out of the bedroom for days and he could hear Mum moaning through the door. Bray tried never to walk past it because he hated that sound. Mum and Luke also had heaps of fights. Mum threw stuff across the living room and a lot of pictures got broken. Mum told Luke to Fuck Off Forever a whole bunch of times but Luke always came back. Mum left the door open once and Bray saw her holding a lighter to a glass tube in her mouth. She noticed Bray there, stomped towards the door and slammed it shut. After that she didn't care what Bray saw.

On Bray's tenth birthday, Luke brought home a slab and gave Bray his first taste of beer. Mum handed Bray the thing she called the Sweet Puff. It made him talk a lot and Mum and Luke laughed at Bray all night. It felt good to spend time with Mum and Luke like they were all friends.

Nanna and Pop continued to hog the TV and Bray never got to watch. One time he thought they were asleep, so he changed the channel to an afterschool program but Nanna had the remote and changed it straight back. He went out of the house to play on the street with the DS. He sat on the porch and could hear Mum and Luke arguing in their room. He always felt scared when they argued but this time he was even more scared because he thought he'd heard his name. Then he heard something about money Luke couldn't find. Luke burst out of the house and the glass next to the front door shattered and Mum followed him out.

Luke's face was shiny and red and his eyes were too open. *Where did you get that?*

Bray looked at the DS. He tried to stand but his legs didn't work.

Where did you get that fucken thing? Luke said.

It wasn't him, Mum screamed.

You little cunt. You fucken piece of shit.

Bray knew where Luke kept his money but he never touched it. It was in a safe in the wardrobe under a pile of clothes. Luke took off his belt and held Bray down and bashed him so bad Bray couldn't sit for a week. The DS was smashed to bits. Pop took the little white pills he used for his

back and gave two to Bray and they worked, but Bray kept forgetting not to sit on the welts and they would bleed.

After the pain medication wore off, Bray realised he hated his stepdad. Bray nicked a bunch of screwdrivers from the garage. He hid one under his mattress and one under his pillow and one in his schoolbag and one in his pocket. So if anyone tried to mess with him again, he could hit back ten times harder.

When Bray's sister Rebekah grew up she would follow him around like a mozzie. He'd gotten used to playing by himself, so why couldn't she? He was too old to share a room with her but when he said that to Mum she told him to Shut Up. He called Rebekah Retard and Methadone Baby. The doctor said she had autism. She was too big for her age. She was only eight but she looked about twelve, overweight and sweaty and she had tits. The kids at school made fun of her and Bray didn't feel sorry for her because of how ugly and stupid she was.

At night, he avoided Rebekah by going out. He got to know the streets and stole goon from his Nanna which he drank from a plastic bottle. Because he could stay out later than the other year sevens, they thought he was cool. He scored them ciggies and booze and put their money in his pockets until the coins weighed down his track pants and jingled as he walked. He wanted to be rich like Dad used to be so they could have their old life back. He did business beneath the railway bridge where the cement was tagged to shit and people chucked their dingers. He found a half-full can of Export and sprayed it into a bag and liked the way it made the world disappear. When it got late, he'd walk home through the empty streets, and one day he came back to find Mum on the couch and everyone else asleep. He froze in the doorway thinking she'd tell him off for being out late, but she was too hammered to figure it out. She made Bray sit with her and he saw that she wasn't young or pretty anymore. She'd gotten skinny and wrinkly and had a scab next to her eye. Bray asked Mum if they would ever go back to the normal life they used to have. Mum smiled and told him it had never been normal, and for the first time she told Bray the truth about Dad. He'd been a scammer, that's why they had all that money. She also said he hadn't really died, he'd just gone to jail. *We weren't rich, Brayds, Mum said. We never will be.*

We're just a chip off the old block. Bray spent the rest of the night on the internet on her phone, looking up videos on how to crack safes.

Mum got pregnant again but she slept a lot and one day she was bleeding and the ambulance came, and when she got back she was no longer pregnant and went back to sleeping all day.

Bray realised he was a No Fucks Given kinda guy. He didn't give a fuck about school and he didn't give a fuck about home. When Mum and Luke fought or fucked in their room, he'd go out onto the street. But then he started feeling especially like he didn't give a fuck. He was sick of not being able to sleep and he was sick of Mum and Luke's bullshit. He could no longer wait two years to get Cenno and move out. So he crashed right up to their room and pounded on the door and told them for the last time to Shut The Fuck Up.

And Luke came out with his greasy face and said, *You little dog. You fucken cunt.* And Luke was angrier than ever because he was coming down, and he grabbed Bray and slammed him against the wall and made a hole in it. Bray knew he was in trouble but he wasn't going to take it. Mum had taught him what to do with a bully. He could hit back ten times harder.

He reached into his pocket for his screwdriver but Fuck, he'd forgotten he'd taken it out. He slipped away from Luke and ran into Mum and Luke's room and locked the door behind him. Mum and Luke bashed on the door and screamed for Bray to open. But Bray turned to the wardrobe where Luke kept his safe and he couldn't believe his luck. The safe hung open and Bray skidded to his knees and felt the carpet burn. But when he stuck his hands in he couldn't find anything, not even leftover drugs.

Bray looked at the door that Mum and Luke were bashing on and hot tears made his vision blurry. He went to the window to climb out and found it was stuck and that made him cry even more. But he wiped his eyes and grabbed the safe, threw it at the window and jumped out of the house.

Bray went to his spot under the bridge under the tracks and rubbed his arm where Luke had grabbed him. The back of his head hurt where he'd been slammed against the wall. It was cold and he realised he didn't like it here anymore. It was no longer the cool place where he sometimes hung out, but another Shithole he had no choice but to go to. So Bray

promised himself he'd get his old life back, the way it was before Rebekah was born. He'd steal or sell drugs, he didn't care what it took, and he'd be a rich scammer like Dad. He could start by nicking Mum's phone while she nodded and Pop's endless supply of pain meds. He'd sell them to some stupid kid and make money, and find a new place to call home.

AFTER BOXING DAY

Mark Edgecombe

If you were here, you'd toast the pohutukawa
in your garden, mad for Christmas like an over-
baubled tree. There are tui, a pair of them,
flitting about, absorbed in some domestic
spat or chasing game. It's hard at this range
to know the difference, hard to read their whiz
and dip, though your son assured mine
it was a fist you'd planted on his mother's lip,
and the crusted smear it left not ornament,
her sunnies no guard against snow-glare.
This afternoon I mowed the berm our houses
share, paused to gather twigs a branch had
shed, gazed at your blooms, wished to God
they weren't so red.

AGNOSTIC

Donna Pucciani

All is dark. Is God hanging
on the edge of sunset?

God's a leaf of lettuce,
and I a rabbit, chewing and bowing

to anything green, nose
twitching in the hosta.

Is God the moment
between sleep and waking,

the light years of a star
falling to earth?

The rim of a canyon
or a wine glass full of ruby?

A bicycle ride with no playing card
counting the spinning of the wheel?

A drug of choice, an opiod
better than chocolate or sex?

A roof that never leaks,
a shoe that never wears out,

a voice that never cracks
from loneliness. Or a cosmic

hand rubbing the ears
of the hound on the hearth,

caressing the earth
it had no part in creating?

ASHTRAY, ONION, KEROSENE LAMP

Persephone Fraser

Mum wanted me to be an artist. An artist who was politically active, who wore T-shirts and carried banners. She thought Kate would be a musician, and Flick would be an actor. She never said so, she didn't even seem to notice what we did, but now you can see the disappointment on her tired face, a heaviness, when you say Kate is doing well in marketing, her job is secure, and her apartment is new, as she puts out the end of a rollie in an ancient and season ravaged metal dish. She gets up from the faded green plastic chair and closes the screen door behind her, before quickly opening it again, saying she doesn't even know who Kate is anymore. 'You know?' she begs. Tell me you want to make art. Tell me you want to join Greenpeace. You don't even have to do it, just say you want it.

I don't. I don't say it, and when I'm here I don't want it, in this little courtyard with the same pots I've known my whole life in one courtyard or another, and old plastic toys here and there in the dirt. Something I treasured, that I'd protected for years is full of rainwater and growing grass. The same old sci-fi novels are piled on the green plastic table, and that ashtray. I don't want to say I'm going to do anything, but I want with a burning urgency to leave here and start doing. I don't want to talk about what's right. I want to go somewhere clean and quiet, and lock the door. I want to plan a life in my head where things never get old, and I never have to tell people what I am or what I'm going to do because I haven't actually ever done it, I just will be. There will be no future, no going to, or wanting to, just are. I want to yell, and I also need to sit perfectly still, because every time I'm here, I feel like even thinking quickly might crumble the things around me.

Mum hasn't walked away. She won't until I disagree. For now she remains standing on the door frame, one hand on the screen door, begging with her dropped eyebrows and heavy eyes. I can never look at her when she's looking at me. I breathe out slowly. 'I think she's happy mum.' I don't like calling her mum, but I felt like she needed it. I also don't think Kate is happy. She doesn't like her job, but she's never looked back. I don't say I want to be that far from here that it feels inappropriate for any of my footwear to hit the cheap tiles of this townhouse, like Kate has. It scares me how familiar everything I see and everything I touch is

to me. I take my arm off the table and brush some loose tobacco off my arm, and even that is like one hundred times before. I stand up and we go inside.

I ask what I can do for dinner, wanting for it to be over and wanting to say something practical and concrete. If I let her, she'd talk about what she believes and what she wanted for 'you girls' all night. Soon she'd be crying violently, and only really speaking about her own childhood. I am harsh faced and serious when we talk, and she is drunk. I feel that certain ache in my throat, and swallow it. I know I'll cry when I walk back out into the street, because I always do. But when I look at her that part of me stands directly behind a part that wants to tell her to eat her dinner and go to bed, and that she needs to get a normal job and stop sleeping in the day and that she's never really sick and she might be tired but mum I'm fucking tired too. I'm not though, I never have so much energy as when I speak to her, and I am never so sunken as when I leave. She says 'No, it's fine', even though she hasn't started anything, because she wants to make clear she's upset. She pours herself another glass of wine from a concealed bottle in the fridge and I start washing and cutting vegetables. I don't tell mum I write. I tell myself she wants to write, but I actually do it. It's completely different. Or I try not to let the two phrases near each other. If someone says it, I'll know how to respond, though. And thinking this sitting at her table, I feel so guilty and so sad looking at her back, one arm holding her glass and the other stirring onions. I think 'I'm sorry'. I almost want to touch her, when I smell that familiar smell, and look at her cherished pots lined up. I pick up a lid of a cast iron pot to remember exactly how much it weighs. It reminds me of the cabinet I had been swinging on, houses before, with her kerosene lamps on it. When all that glass came down on me I didn't even start at the raining down objects, I was so swallowed by guilt, before I'd even seen her face. I didn't know if she'd hit me or cry, but I remember before even hitting the ground I was looking for her face. Before looking for cuts and bruises, before checking my legs were still there, I was wide eyed and waiting. I think she'd said 'You ruin everything of mine! I have nothing!' ... something like that. She didn't look at me, but at the glass at her feet and stormed into her room slamming the door behind her. I had moved one hand a little, in the quiet left, and felt the sea of glass around me. It chimed a little.

I wonder if she often thinks of that. Probably not so much as I do, but maybe when she sees a kerosene lamp in an op shop window or something. She doesn't really go to stores though. I realise she's been

talking, I have no idea what about. I go to tell her something and then decide not to. I don't mention her parents, her boyfriend or money when I speak to her. I don't tell her if things are going too well for someone because she doesn't seem to like it. I don't tell her when things are going badly for someone, because I don't like hearing how it seems to give her energy. I did that to her not ten minutes before. I don't enjoy it though, I think. I end up asking a question I've already asked. I bring up my younger sister, because she sees her more than me. I always think she'll be close with her, but she is annoyed with her. I wish she was here, she's so much better at this than I am, speaks with so much more sympathy of mum. Only she just speaks over mum when she says things she doesn't like, she makes her some way other than how she is. She'll say 'Noo Mum' half laughing, as though if she doesn't hear it, she didn't say it. She always thinks mum will break up with her boyfriend, and is getting a job, and doesn't really drink.

'She's crazy, you know' again with desperation, again begging, looking for a co-conspirator, looking for sympathy, like she must to others about what I've said and done. Maybe she reminds them about the lamps. For the hundredth time I look around the room, the things on the walls and the things on the floor. I hear the door open and my stomach drops, like every time he came home every day of my childhood. He comes in, his same backpack slung over one shoulder, one hand in his pocket, the other closing the door. He says hello to me in a friendly way, and he's still thin but now seems a lot shorter. We never touch, so I stay seated. He kisses her and my eyes narrow to see if it is really happening. I don't know if that used to happen, but it doesn't look right. He's smiling and he makes some little joke about something and I can feel the shock is showing on my face. I look down. She says they aren't even together anymore, says she hates him. His shoes look the same but they musn't be. He has another sci-fi novel in his hand. It's the width of three books and the pages are brown. He goes straight outside and begins rereading the book with a beer in his other hand. His hands are in a similar condition to the book. He sways back and forth a little while reading, and puts the beer down to run a hand through his hair. It's always been greying but not grey and his nails have always been yellowed and he's always looked like he's not very well, but he combs his hair in the shower every morning and you almost can't tell at first when he's wearing a buttoned shirt, that he will be so drunk by dark he won't remember having yelled and screamed and gotten centimetres from her face spitting a little, her face or my face or someone's. I know now he will. I try to reconcile

the way his body moves now with that, and I can't. I want to leave, but can't. He is outside looking at his book, she is at the stove looking at the onion, and I wonder if I could slip out now and not look back, when my brothers come exploding down the stairs laughing and yelling and dropping things and I feel my face change. From outside I see him lift his gaze, see his jaw tense. She doesn't turn but starts begging for them to quiet, 'I'm really sick, you know that' and drops the wooden spatula onto the stove. Her hand shakes a little bringing the glass to her mouth, facing me, hand on hip. And then smiles, as though she has just suddenly remembered. 'Sweetie' and something inside me curdles, 'Don't look like that.'

AUNTIE

Kevin Grauke

Auntie's real name is Rose Fontana, but no one calls her that, at least not since she opened Auntie's Cafe on the square between the two Boyds—Boyd's Barber Shop and Boyd's Boot and Shoe Repair—way back when. Even her children and grandchildren call her Auntie.

Whatever you call her, there's no nicer lady in town than Auntie. If you're down on your luck, she'll be the first to lend you a hand. For instance, one November, while one hell of a blue norther was blowing in, the battery in my truck died. Who was it that dropped everything and drove over with jumper cables? Why, Auntie, of course, and she nearly froze to death in the process. In her rush to be of service, she hadn't taken the time to don any extra layers, even though the temperature had dropped like a plumb line and the wind was blowing so hard that it plucked the cigarette from my mouth and flung it down the street like some angry schoolmarm.

But if you cross her—and sometimes all that crossing her takes is leaving one nickel less of a tip under your saucer than she thinks she deserves—she's liable to do something unpleasant to your next order of eggs. You'll never know for sure, but the last thing you should ever do is not lick your plate clean, because that's a surefire way to get on her nasty side. She'll do something to your next order of two over easy for sure, not to mention your sausage. Rumour has it that she once fried up something special for Zell Wylie that gave him the trots for a week. No doubt he had it coming, though.

So if you're smart, you'll leave an extra dollar for every three on the bill. Not only will that keep unknown and unwanted things off your plate, it might earn you an extra slice of bacon or two from time to time. She's even been known to give me a short stack of buckwheat pancakes on the house on occasion, but then again, I did finally make her a grandmother.

BLUE STERILITY OF PASSING TIME

Paul Ilichko

Sterile plums as blue
as gold a replica of beauty
from times long past almost
as old as the changing garden
almost as photogenic as the stones
that squat in clusters half in
half out of that fast river

we judge them differently
from this side of death impartial
within abrasive judgement we
taste the fruit with our last breath
almost sickened by its sweetness
almost saved by the perfection
of its shapeliness.

CHAIN OF THOUGHT

Wendy BooydeGraaff

She bounces her leg, causing the one crossed on top to bump against the coffee table, rippling the wine in the glasses. Her cheeks bloom spots of blush, and her mouth closes in a line. She has been laughing and talking loudly and interrupting and changing the subject and offering insights until Ingrid interrupts her and makes a distracting comment that induces laughter, and so she does this, the bouncing, the blushing, the closed lips, the lowered head. For if she is interrupted, she won't talk. She jounces the table with just enough restraint to keep the wine at a low foam. She looks out the window. The group can now see the back of her hair, which she has curled and tousled and checked with a hand mirror against a larger mirror, so she knows the waves are facing inward, meeting at the middle the way the online celebrity style tutorials instruct. The group continues discussing, calmly now, one person at a time, with pauses after each comment, about the symbolism of birds and themes of loss. She wants to interject with an anecdote about her grandmother tipping sparrow's eggs out of the nest; apparently there is an over-abundance of those aggressive and invasive birds and her grandma wants the more colourful birds to come to her feeders. Someone else in the group notes how birds can symbolise the flying away from loss and now if she wanted to make the comment about her grandma's egg-smashing, it wouldn't fit. Usually she finds one word that trips off her thought train and follows it. She loves the way her mind flits from one thing to the next, never landing for long, exactly like a bird, and she wants the group to admire this about her mind, admire how she can connect many seemingly unrelated subjects, but if they interrupt her, they will break the train, which sounds a lot like *chain*, and her thoughts are not at all like a gold chain, where the prongs are easily reattached to relink the chain; no, her thoughts snap to a stop and dangle, the way the loose thread hanging from her sock dangles, just the way a yo-yo string dangles. She watches the string, and begins to move her foot in yo-yo movements, the unwinding, the flick of the ankle, the slow drop; the string obeys, hanging straight down, then whisking up and over the toes. Her lips part in a smile and now she hears someone say something about the multiple intergenerational

friendships in the book and ping! the broken link in the chain of her thoughts is magically restored after all: intergenerational pings to her and her grandmother—it occurs to her that her own grandmother is in an intergenerational friendship with her!—and she uncrosses her legs, leans forward, and tells the story of her grandma’s sparrow eggs.

CLAWS IN THE MEAT

Les Wicks

When they pulled out the entity that was in me
there were ganglia everywhere.
It looked like someone
had blown up a telephone exchange.

For six weeks we *of like minds*
were taken over
hostages
in a small stinking house as alien minds
carved pathways in our own.

I am sorry I was taken
though inexplicably regret I am *just me* now.
The media acts like we are somehow to blame,
but those peculiar electricians needed.

Something of mine was also removed
as the invader was extracted.
Have we all someday pushed our way in
to that ratty salon, someone else’s self?
Why does this freedom taste so bereft?

The monsters weren’t incinerated,
we expected as much—
the innate intransigencies of Authority.
It failed to categorise, then failed to bother.
Menaces now roam free in public parks
& popularly-dark urban snugglespots.
There will soon be a scratching
at windows near you.

DANIEL, YOU'RE A STAR

Melanie Hall

Daniel is travelling tonight on a plane.

Headphones slipped on, bums shuffling past.

It's time to leave, and it all begins. Eyes closed and we're back there.

We do it all together. You can't stop us. We have it all covered.

'It's Daniel the lion-tamer. And his pet lion. She's always by his side.'

That is what our parents say. Older brother, younger sister. Tall brave boy, young girl with frizzy mane. Because when crimped, this hair turns wild. But everything is wild any way, and Daniel isn't a lion-tamer at all.

We are six, we are ten. Nine, thirteen. Tough, more tough. We have NBL sports bags, a fluoro green hold-all and a red backpack. We match on our first days of school.

We communicate by thought, you can't tell who is who. We watch each other grow. We look up, we look down. We feel so many things that pull us together, we feel so many things that drag us apart.

There is always that chord between us, taut, slack, extended the length of rocket ships. Because nobody can ever lose a pet lion, not really.

We are in the photo everyone loves. Sitting together, a flat rock in Granny's yard. Our smiles are the same, our eyes are the same. The blue jumper, the green jumper.

We take off jumpers and shirts and run under the sprinklers. Our sisters bounce in dresses on the trampoline, blonde hair flopping up and down.

We sing 'she'll be wearing pink pyjamas when she comes'.

We scratch, scratch our skin, because we're not wearing pyjamas at all.

We make rules to games, we break rules to games. We have our hearts broken in the process.

On a Sunday morning we crush up chalk and eat that chalk. We believe it is sherbet, and don't wonder where that sherbet came from at six am.

We laugh, we spit it out. We remember the taste of chalk forever.

We hold the school's first BMX competition. We create a track with our friends, outlined with rocks, woven between oaks. Boys skid by, doing burn-outs and broggies. One is Stuart, who smashed our cats-eye with his pearl after we lost a game of marbles.

We wear a helmet and elbow-pads because we like that style. We want to cry with worry and excitement.

We walk out in front, guiding the way slowly through the bends. We pedal behind with great caution and trainer wheels.

We allow ourselves to win—the youngest, and only BMX girl in school. We award a special badge in front of the class.

'He taught her well,' we hear late at night.

All household teeth are brushed, bedroom doors left ajar. Dental floss, wine, late night police shows form some golden background. The other world, the dream world is here. We are awake, and it seems we broke an important rule, though we never meant to.

We hear a chuckle.

'Well, lions are usually good with bikes.'

We say we like the boy from school, Mark Madew. He once broke his collarbone.

We say, 'Mark Madew likes you too. He told me at cricket training.'

'Really?'

We are lying in the bath, we are standing in the bathroom, the place for secrets.

At school when we ask Mark says, 'no. I don't like you.'

We wonder why we thought he did. We ruffle hair, we sigh, we get on our bikes and ride home.

When our dad brings home a puppy and we say, 'let's call her Trainer Dog', we laugh.

'Trainer Dog doesn't make sense,' we say.

'It's cool. Trainer wheels are cool. This dog is cool.'

We shake heads and don't explain.

Dad says, 'we'll call her Roxy.'

That's the same day when we say, 'Dad, what are you doing?'

He has a special tool clamped, the gold ring on his finger is starting to squish and tear.

'It doesn't fit anymore.'

But there is still a ring under this one, a ring of white skin.

We run under the grapevine. Cool shade, the smell of dead ants and sultanas. Metal clangs and shrieks announce dinnertime. The cat jumps from above, a scratchy beam adorned with grapes. She's hungry for Kite-Kat.

Our sister calls out, 'there was an earthquake in Newcastle today.'

Our mum says, 'the cat-food isn't called Kite-Kat. It's Kit-e-Kat.'

It is a family holiday when things begin to tear. We have no idea what is happening, we can see it all happening. The trip to Queensland is the best thing ever. The trip to Queensland is the end of our lives.

Our sister sits in the window seat. She doesn't open the blind. Instead she draws on the blind—a horse-head, circled, with Amy written next to it. This is her special tag.

We dob on her, we say nothing. We deal the disdain of the eldest sibling. Mum flips open the blind. She says not to close it again, even when they tell us to.

We look at Mum in despair, and wonder why we aren't now awarded the window seat.

In Queensland our family friend picks us up. We give him a small tub of orange juice we didn't drink on the plane. We wish we were given that orange juice. But we didn't ask, and say nothing.

In Queensland we show the family friends medals, all the gold medals from the swimming carnival. In Queensland, we sit by the pool and watch for cane toads.

We listen carefully as Mum says, 'Steve, Lion is being a bit of a B-I-T-C-H.'

We can spell the word, we can spell the word.

In Queensland, it is the best when we make up dances with the other kids. In Queensland, it is the best when we sit outside and wait for dingoes.

Back at home, the CD of funeral dirges appears. A large stone cross and blue sky.

'Why did you buy me funeral music?' Mum asks.

'It's classical. I thought you liked classical,' says Dad.

She sighs and vacuums. Dad wheels the TV and video cabinet into the bedroom. He watches something called *SLIVER*. Through the crack in the door, we see the slipping and sliding wet bodies, and heavy breathing that's really too loud.

'Where does water come from?' We ask one day.

It's just dinosaur piss,' says Mum.

'Don't tell the kids we drink dinosaur piss!' says Dad.

Ages later, we ask what wine tastes like. It is lunchtime. Dad is pulling a green bottle from the fridge. Bob Dylan sings about Mister Custard.

'It tastes like cat piss.'

'Steven!'

'Well you said we drink dinosaur piss!'

One night, Dad asks for a piece of paper and a pen after dinner. He begins to explain about his new house.

'I'll draw you a diagram. See. There is a nice kitchen. There is a nice garden.'

He draws spiky pot-plants and doesn't look up.

'But Dad, I don't want you to move away.'

Dad draws and draws. We say nothing.

We hug that night the phone rings. We hear the words for the first time.

Separated.

We cry and hold ourselves together. We are small and sobbing. We are tall, our eyes are red. We try to hold back tears but they glisten. We

try to hold the three littler ones, because we are the man of the house now. We have responsibilities now.

The chord wraps around all four of us. Binds us tight, like we need this. Binds us tight like we might not exist if we let go.

Soon, we take to wearing over-sized band-shirts over basketball jerseys. The basketball court is across the road, and it's where we hang on Tuesday nights. We stand in a circle of boys. All arms are folded across words. NIRVANA. PANTERA. METALLICA.

We stand just outside the circle, arms folded too. We wear a particularly large band shirt, and hope to be noticed.

One Tuesday, we play guitar really loud. It is Stairway to Heaven, our friends pressing the amp up to our bedroom window. Melodic and angry guitar riffs, sad and thrashing, spiralling up in the air, across the front garden, across to the basketball. Amidst whistles, announcements about hotdogs, raffles and games to begin, the wail and weep of electric madness.

The line between us, extended far across the road, across basketball hoops and wire fences. The line is strong, the line is tight.

Just before the whistle blows, we say proudly, 'that is Daniel.'

We brush our teeth, watching in the mirror. We look forward, we look behind, we look up. We are scared to spit, we wait, because sometimes we spit at the same time.

We get toothpaste in our hair. We laugh and poke, we punch and thrash, we take the punches. We wipe stray toothpaste from our acne cheeks.

When we have time, the synthesizer is switched on before school. Elton John songs are played, with great emotional feel and a 120-b-p-m backbeat.

We sing, *Daniel my brother, you are older than me, do you still feel the pain?*

We walk past and hit some keys, a goofy smile. We burst into tears and run away, the backbeat left playing.

Our voice becomes deep, our voice becomes shrill.

The shrill voice upsets the deep voice. The shrill voices makes so many noises.

We shout 'stop it Motor-Mouth!'

Doors are slammed, doors are closed quietly. We lay on beds with heads under pillows. We worry that the line might tear and fray, but it's still there.

We thrive in English, we thrive in Chemistry. We are told off for chatting, we are told off for laughing. We sleep in class, we sleep in class.

We stay alone in our room and write essays on Che Guevara. We stay away from politics and smoke pot in the shed with friends.

We drop out of school to stay with Dad and study Fisheries. We get upset at how much Dad spends on a rug, and go away to build a long, long fence.

We are away for ages, driving pickets and eating kangaroo tail. We don't speak for three months and nearly die.

We decide to play guitar, we borrow it without asking.

When we finally do talk, we say, 'How are you Lion? Don't do drugs. Don't make the mistakes I made.'

We listen, though we have already set a small tin set aside. We have already foreseen an inevitable slide into stoner-dom. We are thirteen, we are seventeen.

We blow up the guitar amp. We date a boy four years older, who is actually a friend, and also has wild hair. He becomes not a friend anymore, for the time being.

We vomit all over another friend's clothes. We have a Hex put on us. We go through the breakup, we get baptised in a lake.

We say, 'why are you getting baptised? You were baptised as a child.'

We begin to excel in all subjects and feel sick at the smell of alcohol. We stay out later and later, and even spend Christmas with friends.

Sometimes, we aren't sure where we live anymore.

We forget what it was we always talked about, but we always bring up that amp.

'I can't believe you blew up my amp.'

'I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to.'

We feel it's all our fault, again and again.

Sometimes we are scared the chord has gone away completely.

We begin to write worship songs on guitar. We play them at church and invite people not to clap because the glory is God's.

We write alternative lyrics to rock-songs, like '*It's a long way to the shop when you want a sausage roll.*'

We fall through roofs at drunken parties and land amongst friends.

They say, 'Are you okay?'

'Yes. I've fallen through worse roofs.'

We laugh because we hear the story through friends.

We sleep on the couch. The shrill voice talks and talks and talks.

'That's none of your business.'

We are gruff. We don't know how to change that, not with this person.

Sometimes we go to parties together, but we don't at all. Nineteen, twenty-three. Twenty-six, thirty.

Daniel and Lion arrive. Daniel and Lion part ways.

One to the kitchen, where the kettle is boiling. One to the patio, where the joint moves around the circle.

The line slinks low to the ground, but the man doesn't trip as he walks past.

He sees us and says, 'you two have the same nose.'

Thirty-three, thirty-seven.

Daniel isn't travelling tonight on a plane. It's the lion tonight. The chord is stretched so far, because it can extend infinitely like that.

And so, the lion shoots off into the clouds.

Daniel stays small, one in the tiny speck of stars, left on the earth.

DREAMS OF SIBERIA

i.m. my mother

Wes Lee

We meet, exchange packages. Spies
in a long story
set on a Trans-Siberian train.

We whisper in carriages. The clanking
and shunting
seems to go on for hours.

Sometimes we are sisters or friends,
co-workers, co-conspirators,
but somehow I know

it is you underneath.
Searching for something
that gets lost in translation.

The core seems to drop away
as if it wasn't that important
and no one breaks away to look for it.

ELEGY

For Wendy Battin

Katharine Coles

She squared herself like a shirt box.
In her skull, a cat stretched.

She smoked all night, one then
The other, whisky lighting her way.

In daylight, how would she not
Die early? The cat inside her

Sharpened her claws. One thought
And another began, a swell in open ocean

Like all the swells you don't notice
Because they keep coming, that's

What the sea looks like. Who understood
Beauty's force as she did, for whom

Beauty was never a given? Who saw
Words make their meanings

At a distance, in sighs and ripples. In her
Angles the sea darkly glimmered, the sea

A cat who will never lie down, stretching
And curling while my friend stalked

Its shore watching, my friend
Who also will not lie down.

FIELD OF ANOTHER

Adam Day

Off the vacant lot
piled with corroded boilers,

rust-eaten pipes, great
timbers, stacks

of five-gallon cans
shaken by passing

trains—suchness;
things as they are—

neighbour's dog
struggles out

of a gulch looking
for something lost

in a past life;
speckled body

making off
at a calf's gallop

after the shadow
of a lowskimming

wood thrush;
a dogsbody lay

on his path—sniffed,
stalked nosing all over

the familiar fell,
dogskull, eyes to the ground

then away.

FILTHY

Cathryn Perazzo

'You cannot write that. I forbid it!'

'You forbid it? You can't *forbid* it. We're not living in a Jane Austen novel. In fact, Austen herself wouldn't let you get away with that. Forbid it, indeed!'

'What I mean is ... please don't write about ... about sex. When you write about sex, people are going to assume it's about us. Our sex life.'

'And who is "people"?'

'Our friends, our family. Oh, God, our kids.'

'Our kids are adults.'

'No matter how old they are, no one wants to read about, or even think about, their parents, doing, you know ...'

'I'm writing a novel, it's not real. So ...'

'And our friends ... ? Your friends. They will think you've based it on reality ...'

'Well, since I don't go into detail to my friends about the physical side of our marriage, they won't know for sure one way or the other. Look, I realise you're upset. I hesitate to ask you to calm down; I would hate if you asked me to calm down. But, really, not to minimise your feelings, there's no reason to get so agitated.'

'Please, just ... don't. Please don't exploit our personal life for your own ends.'

'My own ends? What does *that* mean? As I said, I write fiction. I make things up. Tell me, who is the "real" husband in my writing? I have written of the divorced husband, and yet here we are still married. I have written of a dead husband, and yet here you are before me. I've written about great love making, and not so great. I don't deny I might use the odd physical characteristic for detail, like the pink skin of your shoulder, or a behavioural tic, like the way some part of you is always moving, always restless. In a classroom, the teacher would call it fidgeting. Like right now, see what you're doing with your pillow, squeezing it, turning it. But I use such details only if it suits the character. Not all husbands I

write have short attention spans, so I don't need to show them constantly tapping, or swishing a leg in an arc on the mattress, in a movement designed, surely, just to annoy a wife about to sleep: swish, swish, swish!

Even now, you are not real. The 'you' of this exchange is a construct. You are a shadow husband. I have conjured you up, you and your objections.

This conversation hasn't even happened yet.

FOWLERS BAY

Marg Hickey

The woman leans on the fridge, counting out her money. She studies each of the coins up close, looking at the queen on the back of each one. She'd been through a few changes, the old Queen. In the 1980s she looked like a Greek goddess, while the '90s bought her dangly earrings and a higher crown. Pre-Diana and all that. In the latest version the Queen had a double chin, which was good to see. Realistic. Earrings were back to studs and the perm looked a little tighter. The woman wonders whether the coin people would design another version to account for the fact that the old Highness must be nearing a hundred. Put in a turkey neck and balding head. Probably not. Whatever the case, people would be able to look at that royal face hundreds of years from now. They'd say, wow, I found an ancient coin from 1983, and shit like that.

Thirty bucks left, the woman thinks. May as well treat meself like a queen. She asks for a packet of Benson and Hedges, 25s and a Magnum ice cream. Double choc. Hands over the cash. A lady with a turtle head stands behind the kiosk. Gives a turtle look.

'You'll need thirty-five for that. Magnums gone up. Six bucks now. Hit the big time they have.'

'Six bucks! Too right they've hit the big time.'

'Magnums are the fuckin' Princess Mary of ice creams I tell ya. You'd be better off with a Gaytime.'

'Orright,' she says.

'Gaytimes are good. Used to call em poofter clocks. You can get a Gaytime with yer thirty.'

'Get that then.'

Turtle fetches the items. 'Enjoy,' she says.

Oh, I'll enjoy. I'll have a gay old time the woman thinks, putting the smokes in the front pocket of her jeans. She walks outside, feels the sea wind belt her like a whip. Puts the Gaytime behind her back to shield it

and finds a bench on the other side of the kiosk, facing the dunes. She wipes a piece of seagull shit off the seat with a leaf and lowers herself down.

As she unwraps the ice cream a big chunk of biscuit falls off the side. Only a bit on the dirt—mostly on the concrete. She picks it up and eats it. Leans her head back on the wall of the kiosk and looks at the dunes.

Fucking Fowler's Bay. Who woulda thought I'd end up here is what she thinks.

They rise up in front of her, white sand as big as five houses. Stretching across the coastline for thirty odd kilometres and according to the experts, still growing. Two million years old.

In the heat of the afternoon they shimmer. As a kid, she'd imagined she could see them moving. Witness their silent creep toward the town. It scared the shit out of her. Used to jump on her father's knee while he was fishing and beg to leave the place.

Funny that. Thirty years later and now she *would* have to beg to leave. Got twenty cents change from Turtle after the fags and Gaytime and can't do much with that except buy one of those big gumballs from the machines at the supermarket. No supermarket in Fowler's Bay, might have to give it to one of the kids in the park. Make their day with twenty cents for a gumball.

A gust of wind whips up bringing the dunes with it. Sand everywhere. She holds up the Benson and Hedges in front of the Gaytime. Protect it. She'd read somewhere that in Victoria, a mother called her twin boys Benson and Hedges. Poor things. The images on the front of the carton were not cute, you wouldn't want to be reminded of your twin boys when you looked at them. Rotten, bleeding gums; a tongue half ripped out and a grey looking bloke on a breathing machine.

She lit up a fag. Wouldn't mind a breathing machine right now, she thinks. Can't breathe here in Fowler's Bay with all this fucking sand blowing down my gullet. And yet, here she was. Had chosen to be here. Fowlers Bay, sitting on seagull shit with twenty cents left in her right pocket and the air so big and clean it hurt.

A crunching beside her. Thongs in the golden sand. Two feet, hairy as all hell in her line of vision.

'You Sandra Coffey?'

She looks up. A young bloke in his twenties stood in front of her. Big bloke, sandy hair, skin flaking off his nose and nodding at her; a friendly nod, not quite a smile.

'Yeah, what of it?'

'Gotcha letter. Got it last Tuesday. Been out trawling, just got in this morning. Came to see you.'

'The letter was for Ron Beamer.'

'Know that. Ron's dead but. Died six months ago. Heart attack on the boat.'

She takes a good while looking at the hairy feet. Her mouth goes dry and she wishes she'd bought a coke rather than the Gaytime. Cheaper too. Sand blows in her mouth and she spits it out, to the left side of the hairy feet.

Her father had hairy feet. Never without a pair of thongs. When the straps broke, he used to use the plastic tag from bread packets to fix them up. Put them under the thong, under the round bit of the strap. Loved his thongs. Loved every bit of this place, the sand he walked on. The sea his big feet paddled in. He taught her to swim, out there in Fowler's Bay, in between the leaky trawler and the jetty. Forty years ago.

Her mother Dee couldn't stand the place. Sand dunes gave her the creeps and she missed the pokies, the loud pubs of Adelaide. After a few years of it Dee took off, taking her with her, leaving the old man behind. Moved to Melbourne. Back to Adelaide and then a stint in Kalgoorlie. Motherhood a trial. Kisses and cuddles one minute then smacks and throwing glasses the next. Always needing the highlife. Dee in Kings Cross now, somewhere. Submitting to the highlife.

'You ok?' the young bloke says. 'Don't look too well if yer don't mind me sayin''

'I don't mind you sayin'' She shifts forward on the seat. Puts her head in between her knees, takes a couple of deep breaths.

'Ron died quick you know. Started coughing, grabbed his shoulder and fell on the deck. Over in less than five minutes. It's how he woulda wanted it.'

She nods. Feels pain like a shot-put in her guts. No tears. Rubs her legs.

'Take you to the doctor praps?'

‘No,’ she says with some force. ‘No more bloody doctors.’

A heaviness on the seat beside her. The young bloke sits down. ‘Want me to get someone for ya? Husband, boyfriend maybe? Kid?’

She shakes her head. There’s no one. She married the last boyfriend, a whippet of a man named Kane. Kanine, she sometimes called him. Kanine lasted a few years till the shit hit the fan, till it all got too hard—the trips up to Perth—too expensive. She couldn’t blame him for it, he was a nice enough bloke. Deserved someone good; a family, a house.

Never had any kids, although she would’ve liked to.

There was a woman too, after Kanine. Sal, an ex-nurse with a touch of the martyr. That didn’t last long. Sal wanted a noble cause and soon found it in a younger woman. Single mother with breast cancer. The pink ribbons you can wave about, and the fun runs—Sal would like that.

She takes a few more deep breaths and sits up straight. Takes another fag from the packet. Lit it.

‘Not too good for you.’ The young bloke says, ‘if you don’t mind me sayin’.

‘I don’t mind yer sayin’.’ She lights up and blows smoke out the side of her mouth.

‘You a local?’ she asks.

‘Yeah, born and bred.’

She recognises the pride. Feels a twinge of jealousy.

‘Listen,’ he says. ‘I read the letter you wrote Ron. Read the part where it says you’re his daughter, wanted to come and see him. Go out fishing again and that, like when you were a girl.’

Sudden tears in her eyes. Hot. Ron never got the letter. Dad. She hadn’t seen him in over twenty years. She draws in hard on her cigarette and feels a bit of sand on her lips. Jesus. You can’t escape those dunes, she thinks and looking up at them she sees again how enormous, how powerful and slow they are. Idiots drove their motorbikes on them, kids scrambled up and down, but all it took was a soft westerly and all sign of human interaction would be erased.

The dunes made time slow. Made the days lengthen and stretch. Fowler’s Bay was a place to wait. Her father knew that, with his eye on the weather, on currents and wind. Good things would come for the boats, he used to say—for the fishing line, if you just wait for the right time.

‘Had no right to open my letter,’ she says. ‘It wasn’t addressed to you.’

His hairy foot shoos an ant away from her leg. ‘But I open all his mail. I’m Ed Beamer see. Ron’s son, from his second marriage.’ He spits some sand to the side and gives her an unsteady smile. ‘He talked about you. Dad did. Got your letters from time to time. Then he heard you got sick, up in Perth. Wanted to come and see you but didn’t know where and you changed names that often.’

It was true. First her mother’s maiden name, then her stepfather’s, now Kanine’s.

‘I was coming down to see him,’ she says to no one, says to the dunes. She *was* coming to see him. Coming to wait with him. All those twenty years she was just on the brink of it. But her mother, her jobs, Kanine and the illness—there was always a reason not to go and over the years the memory of her father shifted and blurred till all remained was a faint mirage.

‘Dad left you a bit of money, not much. And the old house, the one you grew up in. Bit of a wreck. Got papers for you to sign.’

She nods. Feels a pain down her spine. Rubs her lower back with the packet of fags.

‘I go fishing every night. Near the old trawler,’ he cocks his head toward the harbour and rubs his hands.

Big paws and a thick covering of yellow hair all over his legs and arms. Long eyelashes; the girls, if there were any, would love him.

‘You can come if you like—show ya the best spots. Be good. Be good fun Sandra.’

Hot tears spring unbidden.

‘You look like him,’ she says, and she can tell he likes it.

‘Fishing? Tonight? You want to come?’

‘Yeah,’ she says. ‘I want to come. I would like that very much Ed.’

He nods, spins around on his thongs and walks away in slow, long steps. She puts down her fag, butts it out. Folds the Gaytime wrapper and gives a little laugh. A bark. She has a brother, a younger brother and in a few hours she’ll be fishing with him. She itches underneath the colostomy bag and looks at the dunes, glowing in the remains of the day. Sand will cover us all in time, her dad used to say, but at least in Fowler’s Bay you can watch it come.

A soft breeze blows up. Westerly. She puts her face toward it and breathes in the warm air and gritty particles of sand. Year by year, day by day, minute by minute she thinks. It's coming for us all and it's a beautiful, annoying, terrifying thing and all we can do in the meantime is live.

FREEZE

Oz Hardwick

When all calls freeze, I step into the garden, brushing through waist-high grass and flowering weeds. I sit on the wall and think about caves and seashells, about the point at which the mouth becomes the interior, and how sooner or later everything becomes sand. I'm idly curious about how big an oasis needs to be before it's no longer just a part of the desert, and I wonder if the Earth's really big enough to consider itself as anything other than a part of space. A gust of wind fills the air with dandelion parachutes, and when they clear I see that the elephant has joined me, grey as cigar ash and plump as a lung. The elephant has no first-hand experience, but remembers hearing about the Al-Ahsa Oasis in Saudi Arabia, which covers more than thirty square miles and has more than quarter of a million palm trees. I can't get my head around that sort of number, so the elephant tells me to imagine a palm tree at each mile between here and the Moon. It's no harder than seeing crabs or bulls in random stars, and I add a few monkeys for colour and light relief, which the elephant views with the same affection as I do. We both feel small, and my mind turns back to the niceties of distinctions between species. A monkey snatches a garden gnome from the undergrowth and races back to the trees, and I finish a mug of tea I have no recollection of making. When the moment freezes, I walk into the waist-high house, light the small cigar I have saved for a time like this, and lock myself in an elephant-shaped room.

FROM *TELEVISION*: 27

Kate Middleton

the poet says *garbage is spiritual*: it haunts me,
humus as nature's long-game recycling, debris

infused anew, and us come out of it: and television,
well, I counter that television is spiritual too, and

I mean it: not like Marx means it, when he proclaims
religion *opiate of the masses*, no, I don't mean

the box turns us into opium-eaters, concocts
our opioid crisis, though it's true, too, we can turn

dazed, I mean that now television is our memory:
the footage runs 24/7 and we fetishise simulation:

I remember reading about the obsessively recreated
WashPo newsroom for the Redford/Hoffman classic:

who would have cared about such verisimilitude,
down to piles of paper, down to wastepaper in the set-

dresser's bins, without the hearings playing again,
again on television, a nation gripped to sudden truth?:

I remember Alex P Keaton staring lovingly at his
photo, Nixon's, the confusion of his hippie parents,

and even then, even at seven, eight, no knowledge
yet of Watergate, no knowledge of whether he was,

was not a crook, not yet, even so, through Alex's
longing gaze grasping, somehow, weight of disgrace:

dis-grace a condition rendered not in headlines but
rather by a nation clawing their screens, awakened

by taint, or at least remember, a decade, more, earlier,
by revulsion at his sweat, the cool brow of JFK:

dis-grace from a congregation turned again away,
just like a decade earlier they'd turned from Nixon's

debating shadow: isn't politics, too, spiritual?: that's
why our old PM once proclaimed a *witch's brew*, wyrd

threat to scare his public into compliance: imagine them,
the Disney witches, the old Magical World of Sunday

night, family hour, imagine, *mirror mirror*,
the evil queen our enemy, we, Snow Whites all,

imperilled: and Snow White never a non-white body
like the bodies at rousing forth new protest: I don't want

to be Snow White (not anymore) helpless, sweet, praised
for lack of eumelanin: I don't want to look to Disney,

to the special counsel for absolution, let me go grey,
grey: but yes, television, you are spiritual, teach

attention and inattention in equal measure, provide
the test: meditate on truthiness and the post-fact interview:

mourn for Bowling Green, more legendary than
Troy (no excavation will uncover relics there):

I once ate eggs in Bowling Green: let's mourn the end
of Bartlett's two-term moral presence: oh President

Jed we need your moral weight, deliberation, set us
straight: and now I think I'm ready to confess

FULL MOON

Rachel Robertson

The black car crouches on the driveway, slowly releasing a viscous fluid into the earth below. In the back garden, its driver sips wine from a tulip-shaped glass. Then he asks the woman for a hammer and starts gently tapping loose fence nails into place. She thinks it is a strangely domestic task for a visitor to perform. But it is done with a neatness, a formality, she finds touching. When he finishes, the white cat from next door strolls around the corner of the house and gives the man a cold look. They laugh, and the cat stalks off, dignity intact.

They drink more wine. The moon rises. Velvet air enshrouds them.

As he drives away, the man sees a pair of orange eyes blazing up at him.

GRASMERE, 1802

Dorothy Wordsworth speaks

Penelope Layland

1.

A robin chased a scarlet butterfly—
quick red-breast and quicker flitting
against a mild grey sky.
In the orchard, in rising vapours,
I told William what was in my eye
and he wrote the poem
of the robin and the butterfly.
In mist and small rain I took
tea and smaller talk,
leaving him to his walking.
He met me coming back, wet,
and read me the changes
he had made to my thought.
Later, out of spirits,
I went to the orchard alone,
saw his half-bitten apples
dropped in the grass.

2.

Seasons are become unseasonal
and things meant for later life's decay
are brought forward in a rush.

I have lost another tooth.
Soon, all will be gone. This will be past,
yet I will be beloved.

I have never laughed so much!
At the quaintness, the loss of my looks.

Swallows have fashioned their nest on my ledge.
Their white bellies press to my pane
with no awareness of their exposure.

I, in my narrow cot, press belly-down
while my teeth ache and creak
and work free from their home.

Note: The robin and butterfly incident draws on Grasmere Journal entries for 4 March, and 17 and 18 April 1802. The tooth incident draws on the Grasmere Journal entry for 31 May 1802 (Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed Pamela Woof, Oxford University Press, 2002).

INTERWOVEN

Jane Downing

Warp

Carrie was out early to avoid the crowds and the heat. Her car turned into an oven quickly in the summer. There was never enough shade to park in. She'd walk down and sit by the lake for a bit, she thought. Collect herself.

Not count the days until Christmas. Not count the days she'd been living in her car.

At first, she thought it was a dead thing, curled between the straggly agapanthus and the apartment block wall. Then a thread of gold caught the sun. She looked up and down the road, like a child is taught to do before crossing. A morse code of cars and vans passing. A jogger enclosed in a cyber-universe. A tradie in high-vis. A business man, suit jacket hanging open, top button yet undone, tie waiting to be tightened like a noose. She let them all pass before stepping off the path into the garden bed.

Yes, a scarf, bundled and crumpled in the dirt. Abandoned. Waste not, want not, her grandmother used to say. Even as she'd wasted away, wanting for everything.

The blades of the strappy plants tickled her leg as Carrie stepped through them. She picked the scarf up by the corner. Recoiled and twisted her ankle in the rotting tanbark as the cloth came to life, a black haze lifting, vibrating the air, a wing beat ahead of the stench.

As the flies cleared she glimpsed the beauty of the scarf dangling from her hand, a mix of browns, ivory, red hues and the occasional fairy wren flash of blue, and those glimpses of gold thread. More gold in tassels visible on the end of the cloth that still rested in the dirt. Then she saw it. The shit broke the paisley pattern. Smear off-centre over the tear-shapes, mustardy, crusted, still oozing under the outer skin that had cracked with her violent thrust to push this thing from her.

It slumped again, against the protruding gas metre of the apartment block.

Carrie stayed in the garden bed making calculations. Balancing the brief touch of the cloth against the shit. The feel had been a caress. Soft

and warm. Was it wool, was it silk? And it was *only* shit. She'd just have to launder someone else's excrement away, then the scarf could be a Christmas present for her daughter with all its echoes of exotic mystique and romance.

A shout hit her from above. 'Oi. What do you think you're doing?'
Eyes glared at her from the balcony above.

Weft

Persephone tasted the vomit in her mouth. Swished it away with another slug of vodka. Neat. Freddie had the shots lined up. 'Get it down ya, love,' he said in his best bogan, which could never hope to disguise entrenched posh-boy vowels.

She towered above him in her Manolo Blahniks. 'Lance doesn't understand me,' she said. Her words went over the top of his head. Physically. Metaphorically.

'Dear Pops is going to offload the coast house,' he said. The bushfire haze of the future swirled in the crystal ball of his next shot.

'Oh. But I love the views from the third floor. You can see forever,' condoled Persephone.

'Some other mug can cop the depreciation on it when climate ...' Freddie's train of thought never reached its terminus. 'Gloria!' he shouted. Gloria had done Law with them. She barged over.

'*Mon petite* alumni chums, how goes the one per cent?'

Persephone had never liked Gloria. She pushed her bum off the bar stool, levering herself upright by grabbing hold of the tubular back rest. The pashmina slipped under her hand. She slipped. Staggered. She'd forgotten she'd thrown the scarf there. Forgot it again.

'Yours?' shouted Gloria over the DJ, pointing at the floor. Persephone leaned like a giraffe at a waterhole to retrieve the scarf. Lance's latest gift from his latest trip. Pretty, but an inadequate token of affection if he didn't propose soon.

Fresh air reminded her she was in no state to find the BMW, or drive home even if she could find it. She shed her stilettos and hadn't gone two blocks before the night regurgitated itself up her digestive tract. She willed it back down. Swallowed hard. Another block on, the Blacklip rock oysters, sushi, Veuve Clicquot, and the unsettling film of vodka shots over the top, decided to go the other way.

Persephone froze. If she didn't move, her gut wouldn't move. She distracted herself by taking in her surroundings. The street was: vaguely residential; high density; architecturally diverse; apartment blocks; with drought-resistant communal frontages to soften the rendered cement. She looked beyond to the stars. If she could just relieve some of the pressure.

This was never going to blossom into an anecdote over Christmas lunch at Aubergines. There was too much poo, not enough cloth in a g-string. Persephone stepped amongst the strappy bushes and slumped into a squat. A light went on in a small window two floors up. As she used her soft-as-air scarf to scrape the shit off her, a toilet flushed overhead. Just an aural note of irony.

She flung the scarf at the ground. Bugger Lance. She had three pashmina in her walk-in wardrobe at home. Each one of them finer.

Shuttle

Aanya took a sip from her water bottle before stashing it back under the counter. The manager wanted to see them working between flights so she busied herself at the display of scarves and shawls, refolding the floor stock which the crowd from the last Emirates flight had rifled through to alleviate the boredom of their stopover.

This corner of the Duty Free shop was a United Nations of wearable flags. Traditional silks from China so fine they'd scrunch to a fistful; knitted heaviness from Latvia with ancient designs, the ones featuring reindeer and snowflakes almost gone; Spanish flamenco scarves embroidered with huge red blooms, elaborately fringed; Salwar Kameez accessories; modern silks acting as canvasses for Impressionist art. And Aanya's favourite, the pashmina. She refolded them, fell into the combined warmth and fineness of the cloth. One in particular stirred desire in her: in browns and gold, with tiny hints of blue amongst the teardrop shapes which the label called paisley. An Indian import. Her great-grandmother had left India for Singapore a century before. The family had never forgotten.

Two gay guys were ahead of the pack off the next flight. Australians heading home. She could tell by their uniform—canvas shorts, popped collar Lacoste shirts in sherbet shades, and yachting sandshoes. They were grazing at the perfumes. Bringing atomisers to their nostrils, squeezing scrotal bags for a squirt of high-class scent. Their line to the

scarves was circuitous. They got there as she shook the creases out of a Van Gogh print of swirling stars. It flapped like a sheet in the wind.

'Your wife would die for that one,' said the younger man. His hand was on his friend's freckled arm. They shared a collusive, immersive glance.

It didn't make sense to Aanya: loving each other was legal in their country so why hide behind wives? But what did she know, an eighteen-year-old girl with an hour and a half commute home each evening?

'I'll get you over for Christmas drinks,' the older man said.

Perhaps it was about the thrill of transgression, she wondered. Secrets and lies and sex in a swirl of excitement ... Aanya hid her face behind the silk as she folded.

'I'll take that one,' the husband said pointing to the scarf in her hands. 'You are a good saleswoman.' As if her folding and tidying duties were part of the display.

At the register the young man too made a purchase, for a woman whose name sounded like Tele-phone. There was mockery in his tone as he said his girlfriend's name. Persephone. The poor woman. Aanya's sympathy drowned in a wave of envy as she realised he was buying *her* pashmina. He hadn't even looked at it, this Lance Jones with his Platinum credit card.

Loom

Saraswati sat on the bench, holding very still as they strapped her in and adjusted the brace. Saraswati was the chosen one because of her youth and beauty. She was pretty crap with the contraption which the sign on the wall above her called a Backstrap Loom. In English. For the tourists.

This group were buyers from various chains, Sheraton and Hyatt gift shops, Harrods. They'd be buying fabrics and scarves in bulk, here mainly to check off the 'ethically sourced' box on their corporate charters. She imagined that they imagined *all* the weavers at the factory were manually shuttling silken weft through a harp of warp tightened across the wooden loom.

The back strap chafed. She swayed. The threads lifted, fell, dividing the warp, lifted, fell. The rhythm was matched by Boss doing the spiel as she demonstrated. About the mountain and the goats and the dropped wool of such fine quality it was the best in the world.

'The air up here is so pure,' said a voice of Middle Europe. They all said it in one way or another, though the room they were in was itself close, each wall insulated with bolt upon bolt of cashmere and pashmina to the roof.

A woman in a grey suit had an even more piercing voice. 'What?' she said into her mobile. She apologised to the group with a hand gesture, moved behind Saraswati to continue her long-distance crisis. 'Your father was supposed to ... You know his number. Not there? Get the bus then. No, I don't know which number. Look it up. There'll be an app.'

Saraswati glanced over her shoulder. The woman's eyes were now directed downwards at the loom. The corporate logo on the suit announced this woman was responsible for all the luxuries in international airports. Saraswati needed to impress the woman's gaze. She had to weave beautifully, hypnotically, ensure good sales. She felt her muscles go rigid. Anxious. From childhood, trained to be whatever the visitors expected. Her orphanage had been a terminal for rich student volunteers in transit to elsewhere. Only passing through. Leaving behind the English language.

She turned slightly on an indrawn breath. The woman was not watching Saraswati's hands. She was furiously texting.

The group were herded into a parade of taxis protected by an overabundance of gods and tassels. Saraswati watched from the door, stretching. 'May I go?' she asked Boss.

The hum grew louder as she got to the end of the corridor. The factory was loud with the chatter of power looms and workers, each spot lit in a circle of electric light. Saraswati settled in front of the pashmina she'd left when she'd been called to perform. She'd got to the bottom edging with its smaller teardrop shapes, woven in darker browns, soothing colours shot with gold. The sparing blue of the main body peeked out like small birds. Or big eyes.

What she'd do for the chance to close her eyes for a moment. To sleep. She imagined collapsing on her bunk in the dormitory. Checked the clock on the far wall and the women on either side of her. Chither smiled, Nirupama nodded. Understanding.

Spinning

The girl watched her brother on the other side of the stream. Another young man joined him. Their covered heads bobbed like newly bloomed

flowers. They were not watching their flocks. They'd be discussing borders imagined somewhere above the high green pastures susurrating in the slight breeze. The black lines on a map hung on the wall of the school were only made-up markings. They had nothing to do with them. And everything to do with them.

The girl only missed school a little when she came away with her family for the spring.

As she watched the boys—firebrands her mother called them—she too was not watching the flock. It was a good year with thirty-five Changthangi goats and twenty-six kids, their wool already sold though it was still on their backs.

The bells sounded across the pastures. The girl could just make out the temple clinging to the edge of the first range to the west. The bells' high chimes were mixed with a new sound. The magnificent booming master of a drum calling the faithful. Her heart pounded in time because she suddenly spied, there, soaring above the highest temple rooftop, a dark spot. An eagle. It flew down from the top of the world, oblivious to demarked boundaries on maps, becoming lighter, more golden as it closed in.

The goats' horns were little protection and the kids had none. Three young grazed alone, their mothers further out by the rocks where they'd rub their fleece free when the time came.

The girl shouted to her brother as she ran. As the eagle unfolded from a mark in the sky into full-winged majesty. Dropped, beak and claws forward. The kids skittled, their legs as uncoordinated as those of newborns in their panic. One she plucked up as the eagle wheeled overhead. She hadn't enough arms for them all. Her brother was fording the stream.

Her fingers dug into the heavenly softness of the wool. The predator screamed. She released her kid. It fell amongst the other two as she lifted her skirt, threw it over the animals, dropping to her knees, sheltering all within, safe.

Heart thumping. Meditations echoing in the air around them.

INTO THE DARK WOOD

Alan Cohen

We are leaving this incredible lightness, this stubbornness of house
The skylit cramped cathedral hearth, the bright, yellow-with-sun
expanse of kitchen
Bedrooms where we fought and fondled, worked and worried, planned,
read, dreamed for six years
Leaving the oak and pine, sentinels guarding for others the path we
made into the forest, now shrinking to woods under the onslaught of
subdivisions, snowmobiles, motorcycles
Leaving lilac and rhododendron, forsythia, colorado blue spruce, still
children, roots we've put in the Earth
Half realised

Economic, geographic, aspirational imperatives
(Well, preferences, conveniences)

We have found a more beautiful, a more accessible, more reliable

Leaving the stone and dirt driveway
The flinty, weed-fertile, boulder-pregnant yard
Chipmunks, bluejays, grass snakes
The robin that battered his head against our windows to drive away his
own reflection
The cracks in the ceiling, sweet well water, sludgy water under the
basement door in heavy rains
We were, midway on life's journey, still children ourselves: the builder
explained the intricacies, the wonders of the furnace, the pump, three
times, five
But to us they always remained the dragon and its heart, roaring and
beating, warming our morning showers, from that basement we spent a
weekend scrubbing, painting respectfully white
Leaving the room where I sit now writing, surrounded by walls of books,
feet on cool hardwood
Leaving all the familiar problems, the crack in the front bedroom window,
the warped bench on the porch
Leaving the acoustic magnificence of high-ceilinged wood and plaster

and glass
 The comfort of nights looking out into the swirling snow
 Leaving us, our former selves, six years, behind in these patient rooms

I recall all the earlier faithlessnesses, betrayals
 The trainings to leave behind
 So that, no longer pleading necessity, we go, we go
 The hundred rooms I have lived in
 The family I grew up in, scattered, meeting over telephone wires
 That first time I stayed home when my family went out to eat, to keep
 faith with my friend (I'd promised to visit him) and he had gone out to
 eat with his parents
 All the convenient excuses, the habits developed to close off, shut away,
 keep at a distance
 My old friends, my other wife, former work
 Other worlds
 We go, we go into the dark woods
 Climbing, climbing toward the hilltop for the grand view
 We go, we go into dark woods
 Leave one clearing, seek another
 There is no beginning, only one end
 We go, we go into a dark wood

It is sweeter now, sharper, this stubbornness of house
 Lodged once again like a splinter in our eyes
 We see it as we saw it first
 As we see the new house now
 Our eyes reattuned to splendour
 Forgetting our panic when the roof leaked and it was months until they
 found and fixed the leak in the chimney
 Forgetting our impotent desire to alter, to form upon it
 Landscaping, new rooms, shower, furnishing, swimming pool
 Which we have in our new house, could not afford here
 Our eyes had settled upon this house, appraising it, willing it to change
 Now we see it again as it is
 Habit and familiarity scared away by our imminent departure
 Inconvenient, these attachments
 It's only a house
 We go, we go
 Smiling incongruously through tears

Into the cloudless sky, to the high plateau, to a bright horizon, a new
 landscape, another country, another planet
 Into the dark wood

KOKO

Cassandra Atherton

After three tequilas and a Long Island Iced Tea, the cherry blossom icecream at Crown Casino tastes petal-sweet. I stack the empty shot glasses in the highball glass, squashing the stripy paper straw and the remaining ice. I think this could be some kind of metaphor. But before I can decide, the waitress takes away the dishes and all I'm left with is a used spoon and a toothpick in a plastic wrapper. In the atrium, the fruit slot machines light up.

LAST LEAF

with apologies to O'Henry

Donna Pucciani

She will be the last leaf,
pasted on a neighbour's house,
a blue sky, wherever he draws
his final breath.

If he breathes just once more
from his bed of pain,
she could be a seagull circling
above the grocery store in town,
a throwaway toy in the shape
of a frisbee gathering the wind.

If he can hang on a little longer,
she'll be for him an airplane, her arms
outstretched in silver, plotting
their journey skyward.

It's not wrong to want to die. But
perhaps a dragonfly will hover,
silent and iridescent, in the morning air.
Its glistening hum will be hers to give him,
putting off his final feathered blink.

There, now: Stars are falling like leaves,
painted across the incandescent moon
that is her crescent-white body.

LATER

Katharine Coles

My feet became agnostic. Believed a god
But not in god's existence. Found a path
I didn't take, a star I failed to follow
Home, away. If in daylight I believed

I saw the moon. If the valley lay
Down its dusty floor, all day clouds
Pulled swift shadows across it. I mean
Signs may or may not have flashed

Neon in the north; the south may
Have blown its cyclones to my doorstep,
Bluster after bluster. It was fall,

Wasn't it? And then came winter. It all
Looked like the world. It seemed
Like all the home I'd ever get.

LORIKEETS

Rohan Buettel

so aptly named, the green canopy
dripping with red brushes
that would freshen the inside of a bottle

the lorikeets do not care
their feathers costumed camouflage
presence only betrayed by movement

quickly flitting from course to course
the callistemon degustation, abundant
with the chattering of a lively dinner party

they are circus acrobats
edging along high wires
dangling upside down from a swing

plunging red beaks between long filaments
necks displaying all the flexibility
of the contortionist

leaping across to another trapeze
hanging below immersed in pollen
face buried in blush

MAGRITTE UNDERSTOOD SOMETHING ABOUT INSTABILITY

Rick Neale

you are a sailor
laying claim to a godforsaken
rock in the north sea
and the fog comes like a magician
fingering your ship

you are just married
and it's a sunshower
wet lawn with a blanket of light
dancing in each others dripping skin

you are trapped in america
doing your uni
classes at midnight
cap on to trap your hair

& they say years will pass
before we stop talking

MARGARET

Su-May Tan

Margaret cursed the day she had fallen down. That's when it had all started. She couldn't drive, she couldn't cook, and now she had to have this person hanging around the apartment.

'Ana,' she said. 'How can you give me toast? Don't you know I have a sore throat?' The girl quickly scooped up the plate and disappeared into the kitchen.

Margaret sighed. The scent of lightly grilled bread quickly receded with each swing of the door. Why had her son gotten her a maid from the Philippines? She would have much preferred a Chinese servant, like the one who took care of Sean when he was a baby. You didn't need to teach them what kind of food to prepare or how to cook a meal, they were professionals.

Margaret looked at the clock and saw it was already ten o'clock. She had been planning for the arrival of her son's family from Melbourne for months now. She had paid the boy next door to buy that barbecued sweet meat Sean loved. And she had ordered Ana to go to the market to buy two kilos of pork belly. 'Also get one kilo of prawns, coriander, shallots, garlic, and ginger—young not old.' Margaret Wong was going to make her special *lam meen* noodles, a dish that usually only made an appearance at Chinese New Year.

The blue taxi rolled into the foyer at three-thirty pm. Margaret was happy to see both children come out. There was a time when Sean and Kelly were pondering whether to bring the kids as the boy had school camp and the girl was having some sort of flu, but there they were.

'Hello Ah Ma,' they said. Margaret flinched at their accents which made her sound like a 'horse' rather than a 'grandmother.' She bent down for a hug.

Kelly stepped out from the taxi. Her hair was brown or yellow—Margaret couldn't decide—bundled into a low messy bun.

'Hello, Margaret,' said Kelly with a smile.

Her teeth seemed too big for her mouth, just ever so slightly, but enough for Margaret to feel a sense of unease. She clutched her hands

together and smiled back stiffly, her fingernails painted in Peony Pink. The four visitors stood on the kerb: Sean, the two children and Kelly with her brownish yellow hair. Margaret told them she had *lam meen* waiting upstairs. The boy turned to his mum and said he wasn't hungry.

Every day the children played in the swimming pool downstairs, while Margaret spoke to her son. She told him about the leaks in the bathroom, the Astro TV people calling, and of course, the issue with the maid. Sean listened without saying much. Margaret assumed this was how he was in a boardroom. She was secretly proud that her son had become a banker like his father.

Later that evening, Margaret sat listening to the kids talk. They spoke in such funny accents. Sometimes she could not understand what they said. They asked why it was so hot here and why Ah Ma was always feeding them. Their mother told them to keep quiet. She told them to finish their food.

On the day Sean was to leave, Margaret and he lingered at the breakfast table. Ana was in the kitchen. 'I don't need her here,' Margaret said.

'Mum,' said Sean.

'I've seen her making the calls.'

'What calls?'

'You know, when she doesn't think I'm looking.'

Margaret told Sean what Siew Ching had said. 'They go out and make boyfriends. They make friends with construction workers and then they come and rob your house. It's true. It happened to Siew Ching's friend's maid.'

'Mum,' said Sean. 'Ana's okay, she used to work for a friend of mine.'

Margaret frowned. She clutched the handle of her porcelain mug, trying to piece the thoughts in her head together. Before she could say anything else, the front door opened and the kids trotted in.

After Sean went back to Melbourne, Margaret resumed her private breakfast routine. In some ways she enjoyed the peace and quiet, and not having to worry about feeding anyone else. Sean had gotten the bathroom fixed and spoken to the Astro people, but he had not done anything about the maid.

Margaret knew she was watching. She could feel it when she was eating her breakfast or when Ana asked if she wanted anything else; that lingering gaze, always a split second longer than necessary, watching and

waiting. For what? The answer frightened Margaret but she pretended not to notice.

Some days Margaret barely spoke to her. She spent most of her time pottering around her balcony, which was significantly large for a condominium unit. It was nothing like the garden she used to have in her old house, however.

An acre of land, she had back then, and a backyard that was perfect for parties. 'People from all over used to come,' she told her friends. 'There were so many celebrities, sometimes we had a news crew outside the gate. I had to keep telling them to go away,' she said, laughing, as her audience nodded with quiet smiles.

After Vincent passed away, Margaret moved to this condominium which Sean said would be better for her. It had been five years since his death but she still thought of him daily. He was in the bed when she went to sleep, in the bookshelves; on the rosewood armchairs which she refused to admit were too big for the sitting room. Many items were too big, but Margaret somehow managed to fit everything in, including a 2.8 metre Chinese screen that filled the dining room with painted camellias.

Over the weeks, Margaret's friends often asked her to play mahjong or join them for high tea at the Heritage Inn but she always declined. She did not tell them she had developed a fear that something would happen again—that she would trip, or fall, or get robbed. Many things confused her these days such as why the hot water didn't come out or how to work the TV remote. She took comfort in the things in her apartment that had stayed the same such as the brass gong her grandmother had used to announce dinner when she was young, and the pictures of Vincent and herself on their honeymoon in Japan.

One day, the doorbell rang and Margaret opened it to find her friend outside. Ai Ling was examining something on the shoe rack but when she saw Margaret she broke into a smile. She swished in in a bright batik cheongsam, taking in Margaret's beige top and lounge pants. 'I've been calling you for days,' she said. 'Your phone not working?'

Ana brought them some tea. She hovered near the big Chinese screen for a while, then she disappeared. Ai Ling inched closer to Margaret. 'So, how are you?' she said, looking deeply into her friend's face.

'What?' said Margaret.

'Your hair ... you don't curl it anymore?'

Margaret told her she'd stopped going to the hairdresser. She didn't like going all the way to Cheras anymore.

'I see,' said Ai Ling, taking a sip of tea. She put her cup down and cleared her throat. 'Did you hear Philip's daughter is getting married?' she said. 'We are all planning to drive down together. Do you want to join us?'

'It will be fun,' she said. 'We can stop in Pulau Carey for seafood. Remember the riverside restaurant? We haven't been there in years!'

'I don't think I'm invited.'

'Of course you are, Philip told me you were.'

Margaret found herself looking at Ai Ling as if she were a stranger. Some lady with too many rings on her fingers and lipstick that was too bright. She continued talking for a few more minutes, gesturing with her hands and her jewels. Finally, she put down her cup, leaving an orangey crescent on the porcelain.

After she left, Margaret checked her reflection in the mirror and noticed that her hair did indeed look flat. She just couldn't be bothered to set it each day, preferring to hold it back with a small barrette. The result was a pale-looking woman with thin grey hair. It was not terrible, just different; as if she'd been washed down a river and emerged as someone else.

One morning as Margaret sat waiting for her breakfast to arrive a bird alighted on her balcony. It hopped onto the altar and poked around the joss sticks. The offering tray, usually filled with all sorts of delights, was empty and Margaret made a mental note to buy some oranges. She should also get some chrysanthemums and those sponge cakes Vincent loved.

'Ana,' she called. 'Ana!' The swing door remained shut. It creaked ever so slightly, nudged by a breeze. 'Ana?' she called again. First, it was anger, then it changed to a slow creeping fear of what she thought would always happen.

Margaret made her way to the kitchen, and then to Ana's little room at the back. There were no clothes on the shelf, nothing on the side table. She had left the photo of her son on the wall. His large eyes stared at Margaret from that house in Manila, hundreds of miles away. How sweet and innocent he looked but see, look at his mother, you could never tell with these people.

Wait, had Ana taken *her* things? Margaret thought of all her gold chains and rings in the handkerchief drawer. She told herself to calm down. She had to tell herself these things these days. *Calm down. Comb hair. The toothbrush goes into the cup.*

Margaret stood up with a grunt and just as she did, she heard a thud on the balcony. Footsteps, voices, someone sliding open the door. Images of masked men flooded her mind. Siew Ching had told her the other day how the Puttucherry's had been robbed. They tied up the wife and kids, and slashed the husband when he tried to get up.

Margaret kept absolutely still, picturing the men in her dining room. She prayed to Vincent, the Goddess of Mercy and to Jesus, whom she sometimes believed in. Nothing happened for a minute, then two. And then the doorknob turned.

When Margaret saw who it was she yelled, 'Robbers, robbers!'

Ana looked at Margaret for a second before dashing out of the room. A minute later she came back, panting. 'There's no one there, Ma'am,' she said. 'What happened?' Margaret looked around the room. Sunlight streamed through the window. The sound of a piano tinkled from far away.

'Where were you?' said Margaret.

'I went to get bread,' said Ana. 'Don't you remember, Ma'am?'

Later in the evening, Margaret's iPad rang. It took her a while to recognise the sound. She kept pressing buttons but the ringing tune would not go off. The more times it rang, the more stressed Margaret got. Finally, she pressed something and Sean's face appeared.

He apologised for not calling the week before, they had gone to the snow. 'The kids?' he said. 'They're watching TV, you know how it is, right?' As Sean spoke about their ski trip and how cold it was getting, Margaret gazed at the sun beating down on the rooftops outside. Sean's voice began to fade in and out, his face becoming a mess of pixels.

When Margaret hung up, she could not quite remember what their conversation was about. The heat hung around her like a blanket. Outside, yuccas, orchids and ferns quivered on the balcony. A wind chime tinkled and she thought of her days in Bidor. While the other kids played with insects and stones, she would help her mum make fish balls; one ear constantly listening out for the tinkle of her father's bicycle. Sometime before the sky turned dark, he would appear as a shadow against the paddy fields, bearing sour plum candy for the kids.

Margaret was not sure how long she sat there looking at the plants. Sometimes she thought she was back in Bidor, other times she found herself tracing the age spots on her hands. When the swing door squeaked, she turned around to see Ana coming out of the kitchen with a tray of soup. She laid down the plate, the bowl and a cup of warm water, the way Margaret always had it.

After the dishes had been cleared away, Margaret heard the door squeak again. Ana was holding something with both hands. 'Happy birthday, Ma'am!' she said, placing the cake onto the table. It was not large but it was perfect, perfect for two people like the Japanese cheesecakes Vincent used to buy her.

'And this is from Julian,' Ana said. Margaret looked up and saw Ana holding a card.

'A rabbit?' said Margaret, squinting at the drawing.

'Pokemon,' said Ana with a grin.

As Margaret drew a sliver of cake, Ana told her all about Japanese pocket monsters. They chatted about the house Ana was building for her mother, and laughed at a photo of Julian. While they talked, a little bird came by the altar. It nipped at the empty bowl. Margaret watched it strut around. It pecked, it paused, it tilted its head; Margaret had a niggling feeling she was forgetting something.

MARKET DAY

A C Blogg

When Olivia wakes on a market day, it is much earlier than she is used to and the morning spreads before her. In the kitchen she turns on the radio and voices fill the space. She drinks a glass of orange juice but she does not eat breakfast because it is not a work day. Instead, she runs down to the Maribyrnong and the track takes her past the bare bouldering wall and the huge golden goddess who stands alone watching the empty river. Each drinking fountain wears the black hood of an executioner. A train passes on the bridge above the river and she counts four people in the carriages. Her legs are hollow as she runs home.

Olivia's mother calls later that morning, once Olivia has showered and brushed her hair and smoothed the creases on the couch and squeezed thin beige lines from her chin. Her mother talks and talks and talks about her week and her book club meetings on the computer and slow cooking and the extra time she enjoys with her husband in their garden. Olivia listens, silently, because listening is all that she does now. Her mind is cool and spacious like a cathedral where she listens to the thoughts that echo as chamber music around its high ceiling. Outside a floppy bird hangs from a cat's mouth. 'Are you still going to that Vietnamese market this afternoon?' her mother asks suddenly. Olivia nods because she goes to the Footscray Market every week and her mother knows that. She pinches her nose, holds her breath. 'You be careful now and look out for yourself,' her mother says. 'Wear a mask, like it said on the news. You need to wear one when you can't keep your distance, and they don't know how to distance. They'll shove you and push you. Don't forget this all started with them.'

Olivia squeezes her eyes shut and lets her breath out. She wants to be shoved and pushed. She wants a shopping trolley jammed into the back of her legs. She wants a vendor to scream at her as he waves around the blade that hacks the bananas and she wants to scream back at him. She wants to fill her mouth with handfuls of the cut-up pineapple pieces that crawl from sticky plastic plates and swallow every spike.

When Olivia has trawled through links on her laptop and all the news is the same, she walks to Footscray Market. On the inside of the sliding

doors it is much warmer, packed as it is by other bodies and bright fruit and shouting children. Someone has placed sunglasses on the pig's head displayed on the butcher's ledge and she snorts. She buys her large eggs for the price of smaller ones as she always does. At the coffee stall she is called 'my love' and even though she hates that she listens to stories of daughters, both nurses, and grandchildren being home-schooled and driving their fathers mad. She loops through the open stalls until she has everything she needs and has seen familiar faces. When she is finished she cannot have a bowl of pho in the food court because it is blocked by toxic yellow and black tape. She buys a banh mi and it is soft and fresh and warm. On her way home she passes a small group of delivery drivers huddled around a phone as they wait for the next order. One of them could be Ramesh, who used to live above her in a two-bedroom apartment with five other students. She stops and almost says hello but the man turns and he is not Ramesh and her aloneness explodes in her face and she reels. She walks on.

She sleeps. She runs. She works. She does not touch and she is not touched. She calls her loved ones on shallow phone lines and they hang up when it is time to cook dinner with others, or time to prepare for their shift work where they will be so busy that they will think only of their immediate task. She prepares meals. She does not share them. She does not go to galleries. She does not go to concerts. She reads compulsively. Internet articles, journal studies, blog posts that do not end. Recipes she will never cook. Cheap magazines and thick novels. Discussion forums. Poetry, sometimes aloud. But still she is here, in her apartment, in her cathedral, in her head.

The radio blasts rap while Olivia unpacks her vegetables and eggs. She takes a beer from the fridge and sits on the couch where she opens her laptop and spends money fiercely. Three moisturisers. A framed print. Six hard cover books. Two bottles of whisky. Spending is an easy relief and it is thrilling. When she looks up from her screen it is finally dark outside.

It is cold in the dark but the sky is wide and the rattle of freight trucks wreck the stillness. To the night she lists what she has lost and it is useless. The eyes of a cat flash across the courtyard and she calls to it. It comes to her. It comes to her and it presses its small body against her legs and it circles her wistfulness. Slowly she crouches down. 'Oh hello

you,' she says in the same voice she uses when she cradles her baby niece. The cat purrs. Olivia places her palm on its small head and it is as soft as her niece's cashmere hair. She draws her hand along the ridge of the cat's back and she can feel its spine as she tells the cat that she is worried she has lost herself. It is so quiet all the time, she sing-songs, and she is so sombre. She cannot trust that she is herself with others, because it is a long walk through the cathedral and the organ plays a mournful fugue. The cat yowls and Olivia soothes it. And she stays with the cat, until it is time to go and it leads her through the thick cathedral doors and the only sound Olivia hears when she returns to her muffled apartment is the quiet hum of the cat's satisfaction.

MELTING MAN

*after the wax sculpture Francesco by Urs Fischer
at the National Gallery of Australia*

Rohan Buettel

Francesco stands there on a fridge
the open door revealing, still life within

the coldness of a vegetable calm
being slowly consumed by flame

his clothes seem shabby
grey jacket, pants, black belt, brown shoes

signs of intelligence flicker above
this red-faced man absorbed in a screen

helplessly gripped by the device
oblivious to life melting away

after deliquescence to be
recast, reborn, revived

to inhabit again a liminal form
and relive the endless anomie

MIXED BUSINESS

Robert W Monk

Products entreat to put them to the test
Try me on carpet, they say
Rely on me to help
Trust me to save your life

Miracle cures &
Entertainment fix
Jostle for place in the basket
Special discount for research

Last night the drug packet flew across the room
It was a missile
Guided by heat & seeking release
From unnecessary judgement

OPEN SESAME

Harold Legaspi

Note: I saved two bucks,
forgoing sesame seeds at the counter.
He who worries about the price,
of gas, mung beans & rice,
fumbles when cards decline, a pang
of urgency to keep on giving.
Sunken hearts window-shopping,
the night that power was cut.
Eats salt with eggs,
crushed garlic for longevity.
Till the day of eviction, when
Department of Housing refused
to call pest-control.

PALPITATION

Cassandra Atherton

You read an article that says if you catch it, your heart can explode. First it stops pumping oxygen around your body and then it bursts open in your chest. Boom. I think about parts of the heart sticking to the ribs, imagine the coroner scraping the bones like they're frenched lamb cutlets. Time is syrupy in isolation. There are no weekdays and weekends, just time passing. We decide to end something we started years ago. I pack an overnight bag while you open the back door of the station wagon for the Catahoula to jump in. It's hot but we wind up the windows and turn on the air-conditioning. You reverse the car out of the driveway.

PROFILE OF A MOUNTAIN

Rosie Roberts

You walk through the door, phone in hand, ear pods in, listening to a podcast from your favourite Crypto blogger, a voice as familiar a soundtrack to suburban home life as the repetitive sound of shrieking miner birds outside our window, or the clattering of the man in the expensive bungalow at number twenty-two, who collects our empty wine bottles every fortnight. After offending him with a freshly baked muffin one day, thinking he was sleeping rough, my neighbour tells me he's Hungarian and arrived after the war. He owns three houses but lives every day like it could be taken away. Rummaging through our recycling bin at five am, our consumption habits reverberate down the street.

You kiss me hello, but your eyes are averted towards the screen, tethered to your phone. You share your phone screen to the flat screen in the lounge to get the daily share market update. A thin green line, tracing out an uncertain mountain profile that edges upwards as governments around the world print money, inflating markets that have long since died, with one last simulated breath. What's real anymore, anyway? We throw another pre-packaged meal in the microwave. We tell ourselves we're doing our bit, supporting local restaurants during lock down, restaurants that only buy 'organic' where everything is 'locally sourced' using someone's grandmother's coveted recipe. This is what we tell ourselves, except really, we're just too tired to cook. The meals come in plastic. Every. Single. One. We don't cook, so we don't need to talk. Peel the plastic off the corner, 180 seconds. Beep. Eat. Maybe turn on the 7.30 Report, more trade tensions with China, the rise in racist attacks on public transport, thousands missing out on financial support, protests continue across the US, Leigh Sales interviews Malcolm Turnbull, hatred explodes in the Twitter Verse, 'Sales wants to fuck Turnbull', 'get a room'. Turn it off. Turn on the next episode of *Years and Years*. Only now the real world has become the dystopian drama. But then, the world has always been crumbling to a lot of people, all the time, all of history. Maybe it's just the first time it touches us, in our bungalow on Burden Street. An ominous name that should have signalled something to us when we mortgaged ourselves into oblivion and in return chained our souls to our soulless jobs. But nothing holds our attention anymore, so

best not to worry, or to think too deeply about it. Five minutes into the episode and our eyes are on our phones, staring at the now red Bitcoin decline, tracing the downward profile of a mountain.

After uni I started a job in PR, counted the number of client mentions in newspapers, they were hard copy then. I'd cut them out and stick them neatly into a folder. What was the purpose of that job? If there were enough mentions of the PR firms' clients, enough paper cuttings, then that justified the money they spent, and I had a job for another week. Eventually they gave me a junior journalist role, but the manager said what I thought was interesting about people's lives, wasn't what most people found interesting. Get to the point they said, it's got to be quick. Why, I asked? *Because people don't have time to read.* I left that job. They probably would have let me go if I hadn't. I've always had the privilege of an education. I did a research degree in humanities and then took short term research contracts wherever I could find them. I worked across tourism, management, education, cultural studies, creative industries. I'm highly inter-disciplinary, out of necessity, not in the kind of way they meant it. I work sixty-hour weeks. My thirties are nearly gone. I don't remember any of them. I go to work, I come home. Our admin level grows until teaching and research becomes the postscript to the day. Conservative newspapers blame the universities over-reliance on international student income and overpaid senior leaders as the cause of their financial hardship. The universities blame the government for sustained underfunding of public education, which forced them to look for alternate income sources in the first place.

I do a million things poorly. I do nothing well. I just want to read a fucking book. A good book, a fictional book. I remember my favourite picture book, *The Napping House*, where dogs and people, mice and cats, all pile on top of one another, in the napping house, where everyone was sleeping. But we're the lucky ones, we have jobs. So many of our friends have been sessional for ten years or more and don't get paid for half the year. The hoops increase. *You have a PhD? That's not enough. Don't you have a book yet? That's not enough. Don't you have ten journal articles in high ranking publications? That's not enough. Don't you have leadership experience? You should have leadership experience if you want to be competitive for an entry level job.* I want to jump into the abyss. I wonder what's at the bottom of the mountain.

I sit in Zoom meetings all day, trying to read people's body language. I know the etiquette. Video off to stabilise connection when required.

Mute button on unless I have something to say. It also stops the sound of my dog chewing a bone under my desk being registered across the firmament. They can see a print of two women intertwined behind my head. I want to be one of those women in that painting. The sun streams through the window onto their pale entwined bodies, lying on an old leather couch, in an empty room, with no devices, *where everyone was sleeping*. I stare back at my device, forty squares of other humans, in other houses, with other worries. With lives as glowing and complex or one-dimensional and tedious as our own. Threads of a thousand unfolding stories that continue on invisibly around us, like sprawling burrows of Southern Hairy Nosed Wombats on the farm where I grew up—only discoverable when my dad's tractor tyre fell through the earth into the, until that moment, unregistered world below.

I talk to my friend on the phone in Brisbane. She's lost her job, worked in food and wine. She has some government support to pay the rent for now. She's started studying counselling. On the other end of the phone her voice sparks like rain on overhead transmission lines, like a child who just found a coin on the pavement, or me when I found fifty dollars in the back pocket of your jeans last year. She wants to be a sex therapist. She tells me she's going to make a plaster cast of her vulva. Would I make one too, she asks? *We could swap them, it's the 2020 version of a friendship bracelet*. I agree. She spends her days journaling, doing yoga on YouTube, having sex with her housemate, writing letters to her ex-husband because she's had time to process what's happened now. I feel guilty because I'm lucky to still have a job, but I want to trade places with her. Except all that stands between me and her. Is well, me. And Burden Street.

I volunteer for Meals on Wheels after waking in the middle of the night, sweating, thinking of how the virus must cover every molecule of the world by now from a tiny pebble on a deserted Mexican beach, to the Post Box handle at the end of my street. I hear they had to stand down all the delivery drivers over seventy. Too risky for their health. I drive around with Andrew, delivering thirty meals every Thursday. I remember doing Meals on Wheels in my hometown, as a four-year-old, with my fake Aunt, Daphne Schulz. I would help bring the soup pot into strangers' homes and ladle it out into their own bowls, there was no packaging then. I'd pass tyre swans in front yards, the Australian equivalent of plastic pink flamingos, a suburban protest to middle-class, well-manicured lawns. There was always the smell of pine needles and cigarette butts decaying in the gutters. In early summer we'd watch

drunk galahs who'd gorged themselves on spillage from the grain trucks on their way to the silos, the seeds fermenting in their stomachs until they'd stumble onto the road like the Vietnam Vet's at the local RSL. Afterwards Aunt Schulz would make me a cheese sandwich for lunch, while I sat on the kitchen bench, kicking my heels rhythmically against the cupboards, listening to one of dad's songs on an old cassette.

Now we can't go into their houses anymore to deliver the meals; we might make them sick. My body is a weapon. We disinfect our hands, put on latex gloves, put on a mask. Don't enter the house at any cost. We're told to wait for signs of life before we leave the meal outside their doors. I yell through the window, but most are deaf or immobile. Mrs Pilkington usually can't get off the floor or when she does, she forgets to button her top. Her breasts greet me at the door, spilling down her chest to the top of her pyjama pants. Once she was a woman in her thirties. Once I was a woman in my thirties too. She drops her false teeth next to her walker. I offer to pick them up, but she is too embarrassed by the teeth, and not her breasts, and does it herself. Last time I found her unable to stand, lying in front of the gas heater. Five doors down Jean yells at me to bring the food in. I tell her there are new guidelines and I can't. *I'm ninety, what do I care, come in, I'll probably die soon anyway*, she says. She makes me tidy her house before leaving. *Make sure you put the soup spoon out, not the dessert spoon, put it on top of the paper with my glasses, in the sitting room*. I deliver to Marianne and John on Culper Street. John is close to death on a respirator. I can hear him from outside, rasping through large clumps of his own mucus. Marianne jokes about when she used to wear black tights and short skirts to work. John laughs at her story. I tell her she should still wear them but she says it would give John a heart attack. Her laugh simmers as her eyes water, *maybe that would be better*, she says. She has an enormous stash of toilet paper on the kitchen bench. Her daughter stacked it like a Christmas tree when she was back visiting from Sydney, before they restricted interstate travel. Marianne put tinsel and a star on top.

I drag myself through days of emails that never stop, like virus cells multiplying through fibre optic veins. I read one, an open letter to the Prime Minister to extend financial support to temporary workers. These workers are 'critical' contributors to our economy, the authors write, propping up the tertiary sector, working in niche employment areas that many Australian born residents don't want to work in; workers in health, aged and disability care, food processing and childcare. Not to mention any kind of moral obligation we might have. Best not to think about that.

People's existence reduced to monetary, disembodied units. *Go home*, the PM says, but where to? Instead they'll be made homeless or forced into more illegal work. I talk to a colleague who helped write the public letter. They've received daily death threats since it was published, the dinging of hate mail interspersed amongst the usual email requests from students for assignment extensions and HR requests for safe working from home assurances. I scan the daily news through the app on my phone. A woman shopping for groceries in Sydney's inner West told to *go back where you came from* and *all of this is your fault*. A woman in a deli section at Coles yelled at for being a *fucking Asian*. A man at a crosswalk in Melbourne's inner city has food thrown at him from a passing car as they yelled *go back where you came from you dirty cunt*. A woman walking her young daughter near a creek told *you're not supposed to be here, stay away from us*. I close the app. I hear your car pull up outside. We throw another pre-packaged meal into the microwave. The meals come in plastic. Every. Single. One. We don't cook, so we don't need to talk. Peel the plastic off the corner, 180 seconds. Beep. Eat. Nothing holds our attention anymore, the red candle of Bitcoin declines, this time we trace the downward profile of a mountain together.

RAVENING

Dani Netherclift

It's seeded with red
first fire then blood

I mean all beginnings, all
endings, those flowers

garland and bunch and
drop, drip

drip feeding
the dark mornings with

that light.
In March, the calendar was full

until I crossed
each day

away before it began
and April I left unmarked

that locus that white
dragged

on and on swirling down
like a drain

to May, the magpies
abandoned their full-grown chick

that had nested in the Ironbark
in our yard

it strutted unsure on winter-
green grass pecking at brick walls

instead of earth, and I saw
clearly that as my mother

had told me
though I knew

Things change.
This year ravens have built

their nest high in that tree
it looks like a fortress

or a boat
that grows by the day

in the cold of July
thickening unlike skin

and I think, they know
black-garbed

bright-eyed
how to dress for these seasons—

they know
like my mother always

did and my grandmothers'
(and I know, too)

Things change

though I pushed
that knowledge

down and under, still
it rustled

beneath my skirts
and now seeps

through every layer,
a delicate stain

but indelible—
this red

is a seed is an ending
it nestles and nests

and bunkered sets sail
for the other side.

RED HAT

Persephone Fraser

There is a red hat with a white ball at its tip, bleeding into the creek. Around it are styrofoam balls, set loose by the split end of a twig, spinning in little groups, gathering between this branch and that. The heat is beating down on it, and the water has all but dried up in the bed, except for the pool—pink now—swelling with little white frog spawn that will never birth.

Taking steps down toward it, the soil comes loose beneath my feet, and rains down milky dust and clods of earth. The trees are thin, and the heat is heavy. The water was needed somewhere else, so no one is here pitching down the green, or standing over a bbq. It is 40 degrees, dust has filled the air, and this hat is left here without a soul to celebrate with, drinking up the last of the water in the town.

My feet move the earth, change the earth, like water would. Hard to imagine now, as heavy trucks sigh into town dragging drums of water. No one comes outside and there are no voices. I wonder if anyone has come back this year. Maybe they haven't. It's hard to celebrate with animals thirsty out in the yards. The friction between pieces of stiff grass threatens to catch light, and the red hat sits there swelling with water, spreading itself over the creek bed.

The sun makes it hard to look at the roads or the roofs, so I just keep looking at this hat, which I have seen so many times before, but not like this. I wonder what it will look like next year, and then I close my eyes and try to imagine the first few drops on my shoulders and the sky getting dark, and washing it away.

REQUIEM

Anne Di Lauro

In the silence music
plays inside my head.
Today the Agnus Dei
from Mozart's Requiem:
Qui tollis peccata mundi.

That well-intentioned radio
I placed beside your bed
tuned to the classical station
as you lay dying
must have been,
as you once said your life had been,
a torture.

O Lamb of God that takes away
the sins of the World.

For your funeral you wanted Pavarotti,
the Ingemisco from Verdi's Requiem.
And on your headstone
Dante's Beatrice,
seen in a painting in Boston just that year.

Forgive me, I could not find your Beatrice.
I placed instead the exiled Tuscan's words
'E quindi uscimmo
a riveder le stele', hoping you
would see the stars,
at last.

SHAW'S CIRCUS

Sue Brennan

The animals stirred when Lachlan entered. The lion, whose professional name was *Roarin' Roger*, thumped the dirt and excrement on the cage floor, his tail a metronome of tedium. Roger didn't know his real name, having been taken from his family at a young age, but knew it wasn't Roger. He remembered the soft, dry lick of his mother's tongue on the side of his head. The small brown bear, a new acquisition, stood on his hind quarters and gave a small grunt, more like a puff of air. Called Brutus for the moment, the bear hated Roger and all the praise bequeathed upon him.

But back to Lachlan.

At first glance, he was just another thin, awkward teenager in need of a shower. He'd acquired an unfashionable leather jacket from a second-hand shop in Hobart before he skipped town, and never took it off. In the heat of a summer stint in Darwin—we're talking June, 40 degrees—he wore the jacket. He had other affectations: a tattoo of a razor blade on his left wrist with a drop of blood; a tangle of matted friendship bracelets around both ankles (when noted, he'd say—*each one has a story*); he had his hair cut like an anime character, and it often bothered him by falling in his eyes.

Lachlan had been told by Shaw, 'Get those cages cleaned up, or—'

Lachlan had tried to be assertive but felt as though a small bird in his chest was dying. He'd said, 'That's not what I came here to do.'

'You're not bringing in the business you said you would.'

Shaw had busted him dealing in Hobart. Halfway through the beating, Lachlan had begged to be taken on. Said he'd be an asset.

'I'm not doin' the elephant,' Lachlan said in defiance as he left.

Lachlan hated the animals' superiority, but despised Shaw for enslaving them. He took the broom and shit-bag from the entrance to the trailer, imagining it was Shaw's stinking neck he was throttling, and entered.

Each animal reeked with its own peculiar scent. The cages were lined up so that it was impossible to stand with both arms outstretched in

the centre aisle. Lachlan had only been in here once, promised by a drunken Shaw to *train him up*, almost five months ago. To be honest, he was scared; he was filled with an infantile terror of being attacked by any creature that didn't look like him.

'How am I even s'pose to do this?' he muttered, leaning in to the nearest cage where two French poodles regarded him with disdain, as if *he were beneath them*.

This was exactly what they thought.

The bars of the cage didn't quite reach the bottom—the twenty-five cm gap was where he could get the broom in, but it would involve sticking the end of it into the cage opposite.

'Right, you two,' Lachlan said to the dogs as he shoved the broom in. Behind him, Roger, who'd stood to get a closer look, jerked back into the corner of his cage to avoid being jabbed.

The dogs had shat in the farthest corner of their space—two glistening black, coiled turds.

Next was the bear, and more black shit but bigger. It smeared the floor of the cage, leaving a long mark that got stuck to the bristles. He thumped it on the bars, and Brutus, who'd been standing dead centre the whole time, dropped to all-fours, sniffed at it and grunted, thinking: *You're just going to leave it?*

'Like the smell of your own shit, hey?' Lachlan asked.

Behind him, Roger paced once, twice, three times the circumference of his cage. He locked eyes with Brutus and, for a moment, felt sorry for him. But he knew where that train of thought would lead. He'd start feeling sorry for himself, too, and would despair.

Lachlan withdrew the broom from Roger's cage and eyed the heap of faeces that was within arms reach. Half a broom, max. Roger sat alongside it.

'You're not gonna let me do it, are you?' Lachlan asked. 'You fucker.'

Roger thought: *Oh, if only. I'd maul that stupid tattoo right off.*

Lachlan went to the other end of the trailer where one large cage housed three chimps.

'Hey, dudes,' he said by way of greeting. 'Just come for your shit. Alright?'

The chimps—three unrelated females rescued from a Chinese circus—lazed at the back, bored beyond belief even by this stranger, this stick of a man.

‘Hey,’ Lachlan said as he pushed the broom under the bars and aimed it at the pile of faeces. ‘You know we’re almost the same, DNA-wise, I mean. Think it’s, like, ninety per cent or something. You know that? S’ttrue.’

Lachlan remembered that from biology. It was one of the few classes he’d attended regularly and managed to stay awake through. Lachlan didn’t go to school much after year nine. His parents hadn’t seemed to mind.

They said, ‘Lot to learn school can’t teach ya.’

When he was at school he was off his face. He had an insatiable curiosity for sniffing things, swallowing whatever pills, powders or liquids came his way, even sticking some up his arse because he’d heard that they absorbed faster. He drew the line at injecting. He had a knack for finding and passing on, for a fee, whatever he found—either shoplifting, or from the bathroom cabinets of friends’ parents. Which had all kind of led him to where he was now, though he only took the occasional pill these days. And smoked dope. And drank.

‘We should party,’ he said, standing tripod-like, looking the chimps.

The largest one—called Lola by Shaw after the Kinks song, and Biāozi, meaning slut, by her Chinese owner—shifted in her position between the other two chimps. She scratched her chin, wiped some sawdust from her nose, and sighed.

Lachlan, unaware he’d been dissed, said, ‘See ya, dudes.’

When he exited the trailer, relieved to be back out in the fresh air, he saw two girls lurking near the van that functioned as Shaw’s office-cum-home. It looked like they’d been about to knock on the door, then saw him, and thought better of it. They whispered to each other as they approached. Thing was, he’d spotted them earlier that day. He knew they’d turn up.

‘Ladies,’ he said, putting the bag of shit down and leaning the broom against the trailer. ‘I think you’re after me.’

It took a couple of days to set things up—tents, the amusement arcade—during which time Lachlan usually hit the town and got word out that he could supply anything anyone wanted. This meant drinking with truckies who’d just crossed the Nullarbor, or sitting

on swings in suburban parks with twelve-year-olds, or scoping out the local high school and spotting the bad kids, or hanging around second-hand stores where goths searched for dark garments to shield their fragile souls. He knew where to find his customers, but sometimes, like the previous night, they found him.

Tracey and Korinda—that’s what she said her name was, and that’s how she said it was spelt when he went, ‘huh?’—weren’t related, but looked like they were hatched from the same egg. They must’ve bleached their hair at the same time, such was the equal length of their black roots. They had their eyes circled in kohl and were experimenting with lash extensions. They wore faded black jeans and tight rock band T-shirts (Metallica for Tracey, Guns N’ Roses for Korinda). They were both a little overweight, in Lachlan’s view, but, again, equally so. About five kilos, he’d say.

That first meeting, between Shaw’s trailer and the animals, he was brisk. Businesslike. What did they want? How much? Did they have cash? Did they know anyone else who was interested? He liked to get the lay of the land. Tracey did most of the talking, but she looked at Korinda before she said anything. He intimated that he was busy and had various matters to attend to. They arranged to meet at the mall the next day in front of McDonald’s.

‘Do we need to bring, like, the money?’ Korinda stopped and asked as they were leaving.

‘It’s always good to have it,’ he replied, trying to sound enigmatic.

He looked at their arses as they walked away. They were both flat and square.

Next day, while he ate his Big Mac and fries, he fiddled with his phone trying to look like he was busy, busy, busy. It was three pm on a weekday, so the mall was filling up with teenagers in school uniforms and harried-looking mums with toddlers. He was glad he wasn’t part of all that anymore—homework, tucked in shirts, the disappointment of teachers. He was living the life, living the dream, though sometimes the idea of his future made him cry until he threw up.

‘Hey,’ Tracey said as she sidled up. She sat across from him. She was wearing a T-shirt with a Superman ‘S’ in the centre of her chest. It was too small for her and stretched tight across her large breasts.

‘Where’s Korinda?’ he asked. ‘You going to eat?’

‘She’s coming,’ she said.

Lachlan hesitated before pushing the paper bag towards her.

‘Help yourself.’

She looked in the bag and said, ‘Hardly any left. Like, three or four.’

Bitch.

He snatched the bag back and ate the fries—six, actually—one by one as he looked past her. The sliding glass doors opened and closed, opened and closed, admitting the very same people they had released, or so it seemed to him. Tracey’s phone dinged and she said, ‘She’s coming,’ just as Lachlan spotted Korinda walking towards them.

She was wearing a school uniform. Kind of. A faux-tartan pleated skirt and white blouse with a Peter Pan collar teamed with ripped fish-net stockings, Doc Martens, and a studded leather strap wound up the length of her left arm.

‘Hey,’ she said when she got to the table.

‘Very punk,’ he said looking her up and down.

She rolled her eyes and asked Tracey where the food was. Tracey scuttled off, and Korinda chucked her backpack onto the floor and placed a violin case under the seat between her feet. She had one earbud in her ear attached to a phone in her pocket. Lachlan thought of all the girls he’d known in school like this with the make-up and the fuck-you attitude. But he wasn’t a schoolboy anymore, was he?

‘What you listening to?’

‘Podcast.’

‘About?’

‘Two people ...’ she said and gesticulated. ‘You know ... talking ...’

‘Well, that’s a fucking podcast, isn’t it?’ Lachlan said.

She shrugged.

He wasn’t sure if she was unimpressed with him, or just nervous and shy. He decided to give her another try.

‘So you play the violin, hey?’

‘No,’ she said and looked over at the counter where Tracey waited. ‘Viola.’

‘Huh?’

‘It’s a viola,’ she said and yanked the earbud out and coiled it around two fingers.

‘Never heard of it,’ he said.

‘It still exists,’ she said.

Lachlan felt himself shrivel.

‘Look, I’m not sure I can get—’

‘You said you could,’ Korinda said as Tracey arrived with the food.

‘We’re going to a party,’ Tracey took over. ‘Some chick at school has, like, invited everyone round to her place. Saturday. Says her parents, like, couldn’t give a shit or anything.’

Lachlan noticed that she said *anythink* instead of *anything*.

‘What kind of party?’ he asked.

‘Party’s a fucking party,’ Tracey said.

Lachlan shook his head and smiled as if to say, *what do you know?*

‘We’re going to want hard stuff, right?’ Korinda said. ‘We heard you got it.’

‘How hard?’

‘Hard. Ecstasy’s fine. MDA, GBH, cool. Heroin?’ She didn’t make eye-contact when she spoke. She talked as though she was relaying something that was being transmitted via an earpiece. Keep the grass. That’s covered. Hard but clean. Right? We don’t want people dying.’

‘Jesus,’ he said.

The idea that he might be killing people had never actually crossed his mind. He had no idea where the stuff he pushed came from, or how pure it was or wasn’t. Recently, Shaw had been supplying most of what he had to sell. He watched a woman pushing a trolley with a toddler standing in the middle and holding a phone saying, *who’s there? who’s there?* Riding on the front, hanging onto the trolley like it was travelling at light speed, was a kid about seven wearing more hair product than Lachlan’d seen before. The kid’s hair was *sharp*.

‘Jesus.’

He wrangled an invite to the party under the pretence it was for their protection—he’d be carrying drugs and, once relieved of them, a large amount of cash. He raced back to tell Shaw the good news and found him standing outside his trailer talking to a couple of female cops. He was being all flirty with his, ‘Let me show you round! Ever fed an elephant? Come meet Lola, she’s a beautie,’ routine. They weren’t buying it.

Lachlan caught Shaw's eye as he slunk past and the look said: You've been opening your stupid gob to the wrong people, haven't you?

'We're not here to look at the animals, mate,' one of them said.

'Is it my permit? It's sorted. All legit. Give me a minute.'

Lachlan pretended to be interested in the generator nearby that was chugging away just fine.

'No. You're good. We're required to let you know there's been some ... er ... talk around town from a local ... er ... animal rights group about doing something to ... um ...'

'Lot of people don't like circuses,' the other cop finished.

Lachlan straightened and gave a thumbs up sign to Shaw behind the cops' backs.

'Got something to do?' Shaw asked. 'Maybe earn your fucking keep?'

The cops turned. The shorter one looked like his sister, Kelly. He missed her. Well, he missed them being young and carefree and safe and taken care of.

'That's what I want to talk to you about,' he said. '*Work.*'

'What's it you do?' the sister lookalike asked.

'I kind of do the, like, public relations and stuff.'

Both cops burst out laughing.

The house was fucking huge. And the furniture, it made sense, was also enormous, to fill up the cavernous rooms. And the people, the school kids, all looked like they were going to a movie premiere or something. Even the ones in ripped jeans and rock band T-shirts looked like models. Their hair was right. They had interesting jewellery. They positioned themselves on tables and bench tops like iguanas catching the sun.

He spotted Tracey immediately and headed her way, but she held up a hand like a traffic cop. He swivelled, went back to the main room where the action was. The music was electronic and monotonous. He hated that shit. He sank to the floor next to a low table loaded with food. He worried—Shaw said he was on thin ice. Said he was a useless little cunt. No-one spoke to him. Korinda found him after twenty minutes during which time he'd eaten a whole bag of CC's and a jar of salsa.

He was led upstairs. Three guys and a chick all looked at him like he was scum. He was in a kid's bedroom. There was a bed with a pink, gauzy

canopy, and the deal was made. He stuffed close to \$1000 into his pack. They left, and Korinda, who'd been lingering in the hall, Korinda, who looked pretty in a black tank top and a big turquoise pendant resting on her cleavage, Korinda suggested kicking off.

There were a lot of rooms in the house with bookcases and real art and walk-in cupboards full of brand-name clothes neither of them had heard of. And bathrooms too—expanses of white-tiled walls and mirrors on which to draw with lipsticks, like kids with crayons. There was a bedroom with a bed the size of a helipad, soft as a cloud, where he was allowed to stick his face between her legs for hours and hours. She watched *The Walking Dead* on the 72-inch TV. She seemed happy, but without warning, told him to piss off.

It was all Shaw's fault, he told himself as he walked back. Stuck in these godforsaken towns, risking his life, risking jail, being away from home, all for what? He needed a new start. He needed not to feel so scared. Fuck him. Fuck it all.

One of the poodles growled when he opened the trailer. For that, and their previous attitude towards him, they wouldn't be saved.

'Guys,' he whispered, rummaging through his pack for the remaining vials. 'Gonna help you out.'

He knew he couldn't open the cages to free them. He didn't have the keys, for a start, and they'd be a menace to the local community and probably get shot. But he could free their souls.

Roger knew that this imbecile was incapable of real independence or courage and watched as Lachlan poured the yellow liquid into his water container. Lola, who the other chimps were using as a pillow, hooted, three times, curious about the change in feeding schedule, but not about the stick man. Brutus slept through the whole thing.

By the time Lachlan was on a train to Sydney, crashing big time, his jaw a rusty hinge, his paper-thin eyelids doing nothing to filter out the light from distant galaxies, it had happened. The animals danced. They lifted their voices to praise their animal gods. They fixated on small things—particles of dust, a nail head. They staggered and cried, desperate for release. The dogs, ignored and furious, agreed to attack. They went for Shaw's throat.

SISTER

Helen Gearing

Your skin advertised the holiday season
better than any plastic tree or advent calendar—
fish-belly pale until December when pink and orange freckles
shouted beach trips and afternoon walks along the pier.
By Boxing Day you glowed, sunburn sulking
under a layer of smug gel. New Year's—you celebrated by gifting
flakes of dead flesh to your pillow, clothes, and one year, my Weet-Bix.

Having charted your holiday hues, I can date a particular
adolescent afternoon to December twenty-eight or nine.
We sat on your bed while across the road seaweed began to rot,
the florid fog of decay stalking our room.
Together we read Dad's letter to Mum, begging her
to remember the promise she made at nineteen
when she wore lace sleeves and frangipanis.
You waited for me to finish, put the letter down
and decided this burn didn't look so bad—
you could prevent the peel.

SKIN HUNGER

Mary Pomfret

Piano keys tinkle like bones and
I kneel listening to the black box
Hard on my knees.
Light flickers, dim, shadows close in.

Say a prayer for me.
I am a single slick
White female after all.
Exiled
I listen to the humming stars.

On the beach
Pale driftwood floats by on the tide.
Seaweed black and twisted
Scars the sand.

And you? How are you?
Can you still reel off
Marilyn Monroe's measurements
Without taking a single breath?

36,22,36

What have you been doing
Alone all these in these months of isolation
And insulation
And incubation?
Have you been fishing for mermaids?

Do you still think of me?
A strawberry moon glows pink.
Broken shells hurt my feet,
A sign of life.
I feel the waves lapping my skin.
It is better than nothing.

SYDNEY'S SUMMER CHILD. BACK IN THE DAY

Helen Cushing

Sydney. Growing up in the '60s and '70s. Summer is an acreage of asphalt, melting in the noonday sun. Soft-fall playgrounds? Forget it. Hopscotch, skipping, elastics, string games, hand ball, knuckle bones, marbles, yo-yos—the crazes came and went. We made our own fun, grazing elbows, knees and palms on the UV sterilised asphalt. No incident reporting, just a dab of blood-coloured mercurochrome then back to the game. Everyone had scabby, red-painted knees and elbows. The game of life was played with a summer soundtrack of cicadas and the beauty of opalescent Christmas beetles shimmering on the wing.

Now, in our sixties and seventies, the Christmas beetles are dead, victims of the 21st-century insect Armageddon. My count for summer of 2020—one, found wandering dazed in the kitchen.

I recall the heat. It goes with an image of brittle cicada shells stuck to tree trunks, all form and no substance. Flies all over your back. Fat Christmas beetles hovering and crash landing. Cool shade under the old Brush Box tree, pruned around the wiring to the house, Sydney style. And in the branches of the Brush Box where we climbed and played lurked cup moth caterpillars with stinging hairs. We called them Chinese dragons, they were so crazy with fluro colours and wild, scary headgear at each end. Redback spiders hung around the drainpipes under the bathroom window. A Hills Hoist stood proud, smack bang in the middle of the concrete patio in front of the house. Strong as the 1950s, it was excellent for swinging on.

We wore cotton shifts, cheap rubber thongs and swimmers. There was bush next door, a lagoon behind the house and the beach down the road. We roamed free with the neighbourhood mob, going from house to house without a care, buying lollies and ice creams at the corner shop with our few cents. Stray dogs trotted around with the same freedom, jaunty and full of health. Kittens were born in cardboard boxes. Silkworms were fed mulberry leaves in shoeboxes then abandoned in the garage once they disappeared into magical cocoons of yellow gossamer.

We had never heard of anxiety. There was no time for depression. Risk management wasn't born yet. We got sunburned, we got stung,

we got dumped in the waves, we regularly skinned ourselves as we ran uninhibited on unforgiving surfaces, tripping on the scuffed toes of our regulation Bata Ponytail school shoes as we screamed for everlasting joy at our marvellous, unconscious existence.

Mid-summer meant holidays, heat, humidity and flooding rain. Scrambling home from the beach along the lagoon track in the late afternoon, storm clouds started their distant rumble. Cicadas went silent. An explosion of lightning split the threatening sky. As the thunderclaps grew closer we hugged beach towels around thin shoulders. The southerly buster at our backs dropped the temperature while we scurried home. Fat raindrops started to fall, quickly building to a solid downpour. We were so nearly home, splashing through puddles, our thongs slippery and mud squelching between our toes. Washed clean by the rain, drenched pigtailed shedding water down our bony backs and legs, we blinked the rain out of eager eyes, scrambled the last stretch of wild terrain up wonky stone steps which had metamorphosed effortlessly into waterfalls. One more flight of old wooden stairs to ascend, then the Hills Hoist comes into view, we reach the shelter of the front porch just as the rain eases, the evening sun peeks out and steam begins to rise from the concrete. One cicada, then two, then a thousand loudly announce that the storm has passed. Tiny streams trickle across sandstone and down, down into the gravity of below, tinkling like glass behind the roaring cicadas.

What now? Find dry sticks and build a campfire on the sandstone shelf. Our skinny legs nimbly jumping here and there, we finally squat down, still clad in bathers and beach towels, bedraggled hair around sunburned shoulders, holding sausages skewered on sticks in the dancing flames. The cicadas die down. Someone slaps a mosquito. The adults are inside.

THE ANIMALS DRINKING

Tony Beyer

Pansy and Ted
prefer the stagnant brew
in a plant-pot saucer
to fresh water supplied
daily as the vet recommends

there's no lesson in this
except that a gritty perversity
can be charming
so they both work at it
to the fullest extent

she's black and small
with wide white whiskers
while he's twelve times her size
and dotes on her
in spite of her disdain

THE AXE

Janet Fuller

There's a joke. It's about an axe. My father told me. He's not a joke teller.
He has one joke.

It's dreadful. It's the one about the old farmer and his axe.

You know the one—Had this same axe me whole life. Sometimes a new head; a coupla times a new handle. But she's never failed me.

He thinks it funny. It's not. It's dumb. Of course, it's not the same axe.

I try to understand ... If A = axe handle and H = axe head, and A and H are infinite in number—as my father's one joke requires ...

then, $A + H = AXE$, and thus

by definition, the single AXE is infinite.

Is that funny?

Skin replaced completely every few days; each cell in his body renewed many times; his blood cells are refreshed in a couple of hours. Bone marrow, hair—all replaced time after time after time.

Thus,

by definition, my father is infinite. Immortal. Eternal. Imperishable. Inextinguishable. Everlasting. Immutable. Unfading. Abiding. Never-ending.

How funny is that?

He's had several bits removed.

Bits have worn, had to be augmented: he wears glasses, has hearing aids, orthotics for worn out feet, and braces to hold pants on skinny hips.

He's had to substitute. He got a pacemaker some years back. He's had three replacements; the batteries fail and can't be replaced. He can't have pacemaker number five; the vein carrying the leads from the tiny motor to his heart is full of the leads from tiny motors numbers one to four.

Funny—but, it seems to me we may have run out of axe handles.

He's had workarounds. He uses an electric hoist to get in and out of bed, an electric wheelchair to get around. An ischaemic attack literally floored him.

His eyes aren't as bright, his hair's lost its sheen, there's rust in his voice and his ears.

Now, he needs thickened fluids and soft foods.

Other bits are too slow replacing: his skin tears and won't heal; his tear ducts and saliva glands dry out; his skeleton is thinning, beginning to splinter.

He's losing the battle to infections. Each recovery sets a new 'normal'; takes a little bit off the edge; leaves him a little less sharp.

I think we're nearly out of axe heads.

The woodgrain of his mind is smoothing out. The date of his first marriage—forgotten; whether or not he had breakfast this morning—forgotten; how long he lived in Swansea—forgotten. DNR tattooed on his chest so as not to be forgotten.

And yet—if I stand just so, in just the right light, at just the right angle, and look at the small figure, curled in sleep, swathed in a cotton blanket, I see—

—*Same axe, sweetheart. Get it? Same axe. Ha ha.*

THE GOLDEN BRACELET

Deniz Agraz

I suspect everyone to be a bag snatcher as I am shuffling down the stairs of Auburn station with a hangover and there is a 24K gold bracelet hidden in the depths of my handbag. My heart is pulsating inside my belly and the *farofa* Tania made for lunch is travelling up and down my oesophagus, leaving a scorched trail behind. I regret having that second latte on the train. Coffee after a night of drinking always gives me heartburn and I can't stop by at a chemist for an anti-acid pill. It's already past three in the afternoon. I have an hour to find the highest bidding jeweller to sell the bracelet to and the main road of Auburn is brimming with stores that exchange money for gold.

I tap my card at the gates and head towards the South Parade Road. The Victorian buildings lining the shopping street are flaunting signs in Chinese, Hindi, Arabic. The array of Asian grocers that once ruled the street are now being dwarfed by their Afghan counterparts. As I cross the road, a man behind me yells in Turkish: '*orospu çocuğu!*' I don't turn around to look, but my familiarity with the curse reminds me of the bracelet in my bag. I tighten my grip on the strap, thinking that someone who swears at mothers could be a thief too. Behind the Khaybar Bazaar's window, a boy is trying to squeeze the instant noodle packs between the cardamom biscuits and henna hair packs. He looks out the window and our eyes meet. He smiles. I look away. When the swearing man overtakes, I realise that he had been cursing at his dog for pulling the leash. His bald patch gleams under the afternoon sun, like most men in my family.

On the footpath, a schoolgirl catches her reflection in Uncle Minh restaurant's window. She rolls up the waistband of her skirt and evens it out by pulling it from the sides. First, a woman pushing a pram walks past. Then, a gaggle of teenage boys dressed in tracksuit pants. Auburn is a jazz tune. It's riotous rhythms clash and syncopate around me.

Mum told me to shop around carefully when I announced that I was going to sell the bracelet. Taking it to Auburn was her idea too. I was happy to save myself a trip and sell it to the Armenian guy on Market Street, but she reckoned that it would be worth way more than \$450. 'It's almost summer and all the Turks are rushing off to marry their

kids. They need gold, don't be stupid,' she texted in the morning. Mum wears kangaroo fur-lined slippers inside the house. She drinks tea from tulip-shaped glasses and watches Turkish soap operas when she isn't controlling my life.

Before Tania moved into my spare room, mum used to drop by uninvited to complain about the shoe prints on the carpet. Then, Tania found out that she was three-months pregnant and introduced the 'no shoes indoors' policy. 'I am the majority in this house now,' she said, her fingers rubbing against her belly button. Day by day, she is swelling up as new bullet points are added to the ever-growing list of house rules:

- *Vacuum every day.*
- *No cooking smelly.*
- *No opening door to man.*

The last bullet-point only made sense when her ex-boyfriend Dave left a fist-sized dent on our front door one night after Tania stopped replying to his text messages.

I slow down as I pass the discount store. Silk slippers in the window are placed at the bottom with a sign that says available in size five. On the middle shelf, golden beckoning cats with right paws pointing at the sky are staring at me. Being slightly more expensive, the mosque shaped clocks are placed on the top. Next door is Altan's hairdresser. A woman standing at the door is holding a phone with her right hand and a cigarette with the left. She has foil strips hanging off her hair and red dye smudged on the corners of her forehead. 'Henna night tonight, wedding Saturday. You should come *kız*,' she yells at her phone.

I used to love the henna nights as a kid. Mum used to place me on the decorated bride's lap like a good luck charm, who then would hold her henna-covered hands to the sky and pray for a healthy baby.

I didn't have a henna night when I got married. There wasn't a silk red scarf thrown over my head. Nobody sang melancholic songs about the bride leaving her village. I wore the strapless white dress bought at a vintage store in Berlin. We signed the papers at a marriage registry office in Istanbul and shared a joint at *Kara Murat's* house afterwards. Next morning, I called mum to tell her that I was not coming back to Sydney. Nuro's mother visited us the weekend after. It was my first time

meeting her. 'You probably won't wear this,' she said as she handed me the bracelet. 'It's an investment for the newly married.'

I keep walking. Sayed's Gold's display is lit orange with chunky gold chains laid next to one and other. Behind the counter, a boy looking no older than twelve is playing with his phone. He yells 'mum' and runs for the back of the shop as I push the glass door. The scent of cinnamon permeating the air fills my airways. A young woman appears from the back. The red chiffon scarf wrapped around her head frames her lit-up face. She looks polished like the glass counter between us.

Without greeting her, I take out the bracelet wrapped in tissue paper and put it on the counter.

'I want to sell this. How much do you offer?'

She holds it up to examine it and scrunches her eyebrows.

'This is Turkish design. You Turkish?' she asks.

'Yes. You?'

'Afghan. I must weigh it, but no scale here. My son take it to next door. OK?'

'All right, I wait.'

She points her right index finger at the child and shakes it up and down, instructing him in Dari. The boy puts the bracelet in his back pocket and runs off. With the sound of the door closing behind him, my stomach sinks. What if he doesn't come back? I bite my lip to fight the urge to run after him. I can't make a scene in Auburn.

'How long you been Australia?' the shopkeeper asks.

'Twenty years,' I reply and turn around to stare out the glass door.

Across the road, an elderly Asian man is pushing a shopping trolley filled with fresh herbs. He stops in front of the ATM and reaches into his pocket. Two decades ago, instead of the bank, there used to be a tiny shop called Hue Fabrics.

It was our first month in Australia when mum and I walked in there to buy linen to make pillowcases. The shopkeeper was a middle-aged Vietnamese woman named Thuy, with thinning salt and pepper hair. She greeted us with '*merhaba arkadaş*' after realising that we were Turks fresh off the Boeing. She beckoned me to sit on her plastic stool and gave me a peanut candy before haggling with mum in broken Turkish.

I find myself smiling when the child reappears behind the glass door. 'It's five hundred dollars,' he yells as soon as he walks in. His mother

frowns. 'Five hundred,' she repeats as the boy hands me back the bracelet. I wrap it with the tissue paper before stuffing it in my bag. I must visit at least one more shop before selling it. I thank her and leave.

Outside, my eyes search for the old man with the trolley but he has already gone. I wonder what happened to Thuy after her shop was bought by the bank. Mum used to buy sewing materials from her for her tailoring shop and they had become friends. 'Of course, she learnt some Turkish to keep her business going. Most of her customers were Turks,' she said when I asked her why a Vietnamese woman living in Sydney would bother to learn Turkish.

Mum seemed unimpressed when I announced that I was going to sell the bracelet to pay for Roanna Goncalves' workshop for emerging writers.

'Don't you earn enough for these things?'

She sighed when I reminded her that she can't ask such questions in Australia.

'Casual teaching only covers my rent. Why do you think I have a flatmate? I replied, trying to sound calm.

'Writing a book won't buy you a house. I was mother of a teenager at your age.'

I am thirty-five but, according to mum, one does not become an adult until there is a child in the picture.

'Good on Tania for keeping the baby despite that scum of an ex. I am going to knit her a sweater,' she said and paused for a second. 'Freeze your eggs, your time is running out.'

Towards the end of the street, schoolkids are lined up in front of the bubble tea shop. It used to be the meeting point for me and the string of boys I dated in high school. I want to have taro milk tea, but I must sell the bracelet first. 'Marmara Jewellery' is waiting for me at the next door and I walk in.

The shopkeeper is busy serving a mother and son duo. I stand in the corner to wait for my turn while wondering if I should greet him in Turkish or English. The mother holds up a choker necklace layered with diamonds and red stones from both ends and studies it. Her son has a neatly trimmed beard and an Aussie accent. Everybody is speaking in Turkish except him. Mother tells the shopkeeper that her son is getting

married next month and asks for a discount. The necklace she is holding is humongous compared to my bracelet. The shopkeeper holds his hands up, palms facing the sky. 'Abla, I make no profit if I give you discount.'

'It looks too heavy anyway,' she says and drops it on the counter.

'Being married will feel even heavier,' I think to myself. As if she heard my thoughts, the mother turns around and stares at me. I look at my watch to avoid her glare and realise that I must sell the bracelet soon. Today is the last day to enrol in the workshop. Otherwise, I will have to wait for another six months.

If I were an artist, I would paint myself standing in the middle of the Aussie outback with my feet buried deep under the red earth. I would be wearing nothing but the golden bracelet around my wrist and stare at my beholders from inside the canvas, watch them, as they look at me. But I am no artist. So, I have to write.

'You sell this?' The mother points at the bracelet and asks to look at it. 'Yes,' I reply in Turkish. She lifts her eyebrows and asks my name. I regret revealing my Turkishness with the arrival of next question.

'Are you single?'

'Married.'

'Where is your husband?'

'Istanbul.' I hesitate but continue. 'He will move here when his visa gets approved.'

I hang my head and scuff my shoes like I do whenever I lie.

'You should've stayed there with him,' she says.

Mum used to hear that a lot. We were still living in Turkey when she left dad because he pressured her to quit her job and become a housewife. After their divorce, mum placed an old pair of male shoes outside our front door every night to pretend that dad still lived with us.

The woman hands me back the bracelet when I pretend I don't hear her.

I need fresh air. The phone in my bag pings as soon as I step outside. It's a text from mum. 'I will pay for the workshop. Keep the bracelet.'

'I don't want to keep it *anne!*' I write back but don't press the send button yet.

Two doors down, a Yildiz Tilbe song is blasting through the speakers at the Moon-star kebab:

*Ben senin var ya,
lafınla şekil alamam ...*

I start humming along to the song. My knees shimmy to the rhythm once, then twice. Nuro loathed Yildiz Tilbe. 'It's her kind that make Turkey so unliveable,' he would joke every time he heard her songs on the radio.

I met Nuro at a house party in Istanbul. He was sitting in a cloud of blue smoke with a cigarette hanging down from his lips. With eyes shut, his fingers played an invisible trumpet. I watched him for a while. The courage to introduce myself came after the second glass of *raki*. He was a writer whose first novel had gone unnoticed. I was a passer-by visiting *home* that no longer felt like one.

'I'll be the next *Oguz Atay*. Turkey will discover me after I die,' he said and laughed. I laughed with him, secretly hoping that he would not die anytime soon.

I stop shimmying when the door behind me opens. It is the mother and son, leaving Marmara Jewellery empty-handed. It is my turn. 'You have a bracelet to sell,' the shopkeeper says and offers coffee while I wait for him to weigh it in the back. I tell him that I am in a hurry and sit down.

The day after we met, Nuro and I wandered down the labyrinth of lanes surrounding Beyoglu to check out the second-hand bookshops. We sat at a cafe overflowing onto Istiklal street and ordered Turkish coffee. When I finished drinking, he grabbed my *fincan* and flipped it over.

'Let me read your cup,' he said before asking when I was returning to Sydney. I looked at my surroundings as if the answer was hidden somewhere. My eyes caught a *Forough* poem scribbled onto the wall with chalk:

*And this is I
a woman alone
at the threshold of a cold season.*

Around us, young people with fingers wrapped around their teacups spoke in dialects of Turkish and Kurdish. The permanent fog over the Bosphorus strait was descending onto me. 'I'm not sure,' I replied.

In Sydney, I felt like a ferry that constantly shuttled between her hyphenated selves. Istanbul was a wharf, offering me a chance to berth and explore my surroundings.

'Aussie girl, your cup says that you'll be very happy here,' Nuro said, his eyes squinting at the cup. Three months later we were married.

For the next two years I taught English to businessmen by day and went to sleep at night listening to Nuro typing away his second novel. The month after I started my job, the school's manager called me to his office. 'Students don't want a Turkish person teaching them English,' he said. 'Anglicize your name and tell your students that you are an Aussie.'

'What do you do with the gold you buy,' I ask the shopkeeper.

'Melt them to make new products,' he replies.

Restless, I stand up and walk over to the counter to look at the evil eye beads pinned to small gold coins that Turks buy for newborn babies.

'Those are \$120. We can carve the baby's name on it,' he says.

Nuro was outside the locked bathroom door, forcing his weight against it as I sat on the floor naked, sobbing. I cupped my inflated breasts with my palms. They hurt. My bloated belly was pale against the darkness of the tiles. There was a human being in there, nestled up inside of me, unaware of the continents shifting beneath our feet.

'Five hundred and fifty dollars,' the shopkeeper says. The exchange happens even quicker than I thought. I count the money twice before putting it in my wallet. I look at the bracelet one last time before he takes it inside.

'Take the bracelet, it's yours,' Nuro said when I returned home from the abortion clinic. He had taken down my green suitcase from the top of the wardrobe and put it against the bedroom door. It was bought at a sale in Myer and still had the barcode stickers from Sydney airport attached to its handle.

'You say you can't live here and expect me to move to Sydney with you?' He grabbed the suitcase and threw it at my feet. 'Go back to *your* Australia.' What surprised me was not his rage but the presumption that Australia was mine. It could be said Australia was Steve Irwin's. Or Ernie Dingo's. But it never was mine.

I filed for divorce at the Turkish consulate upon returning to Sydney and told mum that I was back to become a writer.

'I'll be back for the baby coin later,' I say before leaving the shop.

'I'm forty-two and pregnant,' Tania said last night as she poured me a cachaca and a lemon iced-tea for herself. 'It was my last chance. He told me to "take off the baby". I said fuck off!'

I look at my watch and hasten my steps towards the bank where *Hue Fabrics* used to be. At the workshop, I will write about a teenage girl having peanut candy for the first time. She will watch her mother haggle with a Vietnamese woman. In Turkish. Broken Turkish. In their new country. Would Roanna like that? What would mum say? I'm running out of breath as I reach the beginning of the South Parade Road. The grey walls of the Auburn station become visible again. I hear a Turkish father calling for his daughter and telling her not to run. I want to stop and watch. I haven't got time. The bakery has a banh mi afternoon special. I love it with chilli but must resist the temptation. Mum said that she will help me if I become a single mother like Tania. Maybe. Will I have to place male shoes in front of my door to scare off the strangers? I may become a mother one day. Not now. Tonight, I have a story to write.

THE INCONSTANT BABYSITTER

Oz Hardwick

The pause before thunder brings me home, helps me with my keys and my shoes. It makes me a coffee while I sit, not paying attention to the television that I don't remember turning on. There's something heavy in my trouser pocket, something unfamiliar about the arrangement of chairs and ornaments, and I feel there's something I need to set straight before the storm releases its unequivocal applause. Upstairs, the children dodge sleep, and talk in loud whispers about unfinished homework and schoolyard crushes; and although I know that there are no children—there never were—their excited banalities are reassuring, like an astronaut's thin umbilical, tethering life to life. Before I drift off, I hear the pause before thunder, feel its solicitous breath against my ear. The coffee's cold, my mouth's sour, the television is a stolen car reversing through a shop window, and all the absent children are crying for glasses of water.

THE LOVER OF MY SOUL

Vivien Arnold

We have an assignation, my lover and I.
We'll meet at the Crossroad.
I'll recognise him immediately—
Beautiful, quixotic, and funny,
Deep delight in his eyes.
And he me—I'll be carrying my heart in my hands.
I'll step out of the slack skin of old age
And slip within his white overalls.
Transfigured, entwined, we'll begin The Dance—
Steps I've practised in the quiet of my room.

THE ORIGIN TRAIL, 1984

Ian C Smith

Returning to my birth country, already beyond youth, I recognised iced puddles in hedged rural roads, wind's bite, air's tang, drip-encroached silence after heavy rain suddenly isn't. Downstairs from our rented attic chambers' condensation, borrowed TV, thoughtful programs milking Orwell's future year's arrival, the country's poor during the coalminers' strike moved me in ways I knew deep in my bones' map, the land of early memories we pack borne even through adverse circumstances.

In what was our vibrant, albeit frugal, far from ideal present, surrounded by need in that wan light, my heart thundered with dark joy. After many years far away I thought, self-extravagantly, I wanted to be buried there, where monks fashioned letters with intricate care, near old thickets, leaves curling ankle-deep as though in pain. The song-thrush's repetition pierced still evening when I tramped that lichened, mossy, embattled isle under a louring sky, place, time, become myth.

Then tantalises me now in this time of inertia. I stare at our former shelter onscreen in colour, unchanged, remember a photo, frostbitten when her camera fixed me returning from a white-breathed jog. Listening back, no Google, but lamplit bowered reading, books remembered even now, springing up those stairs that wound to cartography blue-tacked on walls, a writing beginning, this hushed rediscovery of long-lost love at the edge of language still futuristic. Days ahead then now over-run, so much of the past's tightrope I would change if I could, but not these origins, these shades, traced.

VOYAGERS

Michael Davies

It was THE SOCIETY ISLANDS BY COOK AFTER TUPAIA 1769. Harry shaped his lips around Eavatea. The black and white islands constellated the chart.

Ra'iatea, Oheavie.

Otaheite.

Opooroo.

'Robert!'

He called again, outside the narrow hall to his study. It smelled of his birthday dinner, lamb roast with onions, carrots and potatoes in vinegar; and he relished it all the more, lit with *ouzo*.

'Robert!' In the cold ambience of his new home-assistant he gave up on the device, and returned to reconsider the heavy chart.

The sight was a palm's width from inside the frame spanning the old man's shoulders. With a finger he felt through the air across the hairline axes of the chart. It mixes Pacific way-finding with the West's. Here, Tupaia met Cook halfway. But the sectors aren't to scale. The islands seemed to wheel, distend and crowd at random.

'Tupaia showed us *from here you'll make a pilgrimage to there—a church, farm or school—another island*. The ways you can go are relative to the stars above certain islands of departure.'

In the middle is noon: Eavatea. That word glowed with the sun, its bold eclipse of the sea ... Where was I?

'Who was Tupaia?'

'An exiled priest. Captain Cook picked him up as a sort of cultural guide, who was stuck on Tahiti. Away from home. Ra'iatea.'

'Where did he die?'

'Indonesia.'

Rachel, his daughter, presented the cumbersome chart with her brother Robert on the phone.

'I didn't see how this would get him back. It loses me.—The *Endeavour* had cannons.'

'I doubt Cook saw much use in it unless it was put away with the napkins.'

'Haha; your sister brought it out with dinner!'

A spell of vertigo tilted the walls around him, so he stood for composure, squinting and grasping the table, dizzying. His fingers trembled on the ledge and he swooned again then collapsed into his leather chair, heavy-headed, the room spinning, canting. There at length, he forgot the time. He tilted the chart on its foot then the glaze took in the overhead lamp and he let it go. The morning spread before him, behind him. While the islands, the islands.

WEATHER WARNING

Lisa Nan Joo

The power fails on a Thursday afternoon in the middle of the hottest summer on record. From her kitchen window, Diana watches people make their way down to the slow, brown curl of the river. The water is low, the bulrushes dry and brittle with heads like fletched arrows. Soon, children are splashing in the shallows, strapped into fluorescent shells, while their mothers fan themselves under the trees on the embankment.

Diana is used to the heat. She's lived out west most of her life and knows how to survive a heat wave. Her older sister taught her to put flannels in a bowl of water in the fridge; at night, they would drape them on their arms and legs and faces, and lie under the fan in the lounge room with the windows flung wide, waiting for a southerly to come and wash the heat from the house. The next day they'd go to school with legs spackled with Stop Itch, the mosquito bites taunting them for the rest of the week until they scabbed over and scarred.

Turning away from her window, Diana forces herself to confront the mammoth task she's been putting off for two weeks: sorting through and packing up all her belongings in preparation for her move. In two days, she'll be living in her parents' garage out in the suburbs. She'll be looking for another job. She'll be an hour's train ride from the city, her friends, and everything that feels like progress. Her life seems to be contracting. Her world in retrograde.

'It's just until you find another job,' said Diana's mother, when she suggested the move over the phone.

'Sure,' Diana had said. 'Just short-term. It'll give me a chance to think about what to do next. Maybe I'll even go back to study.'

She hadn't known how to read her mother's silence on the other end of the phone. They'd both conceded that moving home was her only option. She'd been fired from her job as a presenter of science shows for children. One of her soda rockets hit a nine-year-old in the face at a birthday party and broke his nose. She'd hated the children anyway; they were privileged kids who were already skilled at forming cliques in the corners of jumping castles, or on the steps of swimming pools, their

piñata sticks dangling from their hands like the cigarettes of forty-year-old divorcees.

Diana forces herself into her bedroom to confront her first task: clearing out her closet. She opens the sash window as wide as she can, wedging an amputated curtain rod into the frame to keep it open. Then she pulls back the wardrobe doors and brings out the hanging items, one or two at a time at first, then by the armful.

She dumps them on her unmade bed in three piles: one to keep, one to donate, and one to throw away. She has to keep wiping her sweaty face on an old T-shirt as the piles grow larger and larger, beginning to lapse into each other. Does she really own all these items? Dresses and skirts and blouses and stockings, hats and swimmers and purses and shorts, bathrobes and slippers, scarves and belts, bras and cardigans, coats, stilettos, gloves, jeans, sneakers, jumpsuits, and even an ancient plastic poncho as stiff and unyielding as pork crackling.

Soon, it's pointless to try to enforce any sort of order. The heat seems to have a mass of its own; her possessions swell and writhe in anarchy. All that polyester and cotton and denim, set free from her closet, is intent on rebellion. She has to get out.

She wades through the mess, stumbles through the doorway and back into the kitchen. Leaning out the window, she feels a breath of movement, just a finger of air on her cheek. She turns on the tap and gulps the water down from the dish of her hand, feeling the warmth leaking into her throat and her belly.

She knows she should get back to tidying up, but she pauses by the window a minute longer, hoping for a breeze. There are even more people at the river now. Diana watches teenagers still in their school uniforms bring out a set of speakers. The bass line of a pop song surges forth and bears them into the river, the boys pushing each other under, the girls mapping boundaries in the water with their toes. Later, when it's dusk and the mums and babies are gone, Diana pictures them re-enacting the same rituals she and her sister once had: passing around cigarettes, smoking without inhaling, until it's time to get back home for dinner, to shower off the dank water, the sunburn, and hope for a cool change or else sweat through the night.

Her phone vibrates. *Cleaning up the garage*, her father writes. *Remember these—trash or treasure?*

There's a photo attached. She opens it, zooms in. She can see her parents haven't made much progress; the garage is still full of the stuff they think of as too good to throw away. Old tools, video tapes, children's toys, tins of paint, flowerpots, boogie boards, Christmas decorations, and, there in her dad's arms, the roller-skates she and her sister got when they were in the fifth and sixth grades. Diana's were pink and Georgina's were green.

A memory arrives like a text message. Behind the soccer fields two blocks from their house, there was a piece of bushland with a hollow that filled with water when it rained. It had been a popular dumping spot before the council cracked down and began to threaten fines. There were still piles of rubbish around, though. A heap of old car parts. Half a kitchen sink. A bag of tiny baby shoes. When they were bored of their brother's soccer games, Diana and Georgina would go to the hollow and play among the rubbish.

One day, they'd skated to the reserve after two weeks of rain. There was a boy from Georgina's class who dared them to go into the water pooled in the hollow. There was a doll's pram floating on the chalky surface. Georgina barely hesitated. Still wearing her skates, she clomped through the bush, down to the edge, and waded in like it was nothing, swimming out into the centre with a choppy freestyle.

But Georgina's skates were heavy. She was wearing a tracksuit, helmet, knee and elbow pads. As the boy egged her on, Georgina floundered, her nose barely above surface level. It must have been deeper than it looked. Her skates churned up mud. The boy dared her to swim all the way to the other side. Georgina thrashed deeper, sank under, and came back up gasping. She reached out for the toy pram, but it spun away from her and lodged among some bricks piled on the shore. She went under again.

Diana remembers wading in knee-deep, reaching forward, trying to turn her body into scaffold for her sister. Georgina flapped towards her, elbows out, straining upwards, as though she'd never learned to swim. Then her sister was lying half-in, half-out of the water, each breath like a squall. The boy left; he seemed embarrassed. Diana kicked the doll's pram, which had drifted towards them, back out into the middle of the pond, and remembers how afraid she was that something would rise up and swallow it, like a sacrifice. They turned away, not wanting to see, and went home to wash the mud off before their parents could ask what happened. They put the skates away in the garage. Their father asked

why they didn't like skating anymore. Complained about the money he'd wasted.

She knows she should be grateful to her parents for having somewhere to go. But when she thinks about the garage, and the street she grew up on, and the weight of the heat out west in summer, she's afraid she'll never emerge from her hometown again. That she'll be trapped there forever, become a piece of old furniture written into her mother's will, or a bag of outdated clothing to be donated to the Salvos.

Deciding that she can't face the bedroom and its mire of clothing again—too hot, too cramped—she decides to turn to the bathroom. She's cleaning out the cabinet, throwing away expired medicine and half-empty tubes of hand cream, when the power surges back on. The lights flicker, the fans begin to turn, and Diana is drawn back into the living room by voices on the TV.

She'd been watching the Weather Channel before the outage, and she rests on the couch—just for a moment, she tells herself—to catch the latest updates, tracked in frantic colours and querulous arrows on the map. There's a 48-degree day on its way tomorrow, before the high-pressure system disperses with a shower or two on the weekend. Settling in, Diana begins to flip between the news and weather stations, comparing their forecasts, measuring the current temps against annual averages, learning more about the humidity, evaporation, atmospheric pressure. The data makes her drowsy. Her chin drops to her chest.

It's dark when she wakes, sprawled on the couch, the power off again. She must have dozed off. The night seems too full, the air gummy. She goes to the bathroom and soaks a towel in the sink, then stretches it out on the floor of the living room. She takes off her clothes and casts herself on to her back as though at the beach, closing her eyes again.

She drifts in and out of sleep, waking to rake her sweaty hair off her neck, or to drape a cool towel on her face. She dreams of being back at her parents' place, of opening the doors to the garage and finding it full of water, children playing with inflatable toys and teenagers smoking secretly, dropping their butts into the reeds, grinding them into the shallow mud with their soft pink-soled feet. Her mother is there, opening all the windows, telling her that she can live in the laundry instead, but that there's no toilet paper, so can she get some from the store? But when she gets to Coles, the Weather Channel is broadcasting from the car park, where people are cooking eggs on the pavement, and

Peter, her ex-boyfriend, is there too, explaining the effects of extreme heat on suburban infrastructure.

But no, he really is on TV. Peter, talking about urban heat islands. She sits up on the couch, peeling herself away from the vinyl. She must have moved from the floor in the night. The towel is still curled there, a discarded husk. On the TV, she watches people cook eggs on the pavement outside the supermarket on High Street. It's Friday, she realises. It's Friday and she has more packing to do. She returns to the bedroom, armed with garbage bags.

She'd met Peter at a mutual friend's party in her first year of university. She was still living at home at the time. She remembers the arguments she had with her mother about driving home from Peter's place late at night; she was forbidden to stay over in the house he shared with three other students, even though she was eighteen. She'd never had a serious relationship before and Peter was older—twenty-one. He didn't wear T-shirts like the other students. He always had a collar, the sleeves rolled up, his forearms tanned, his hair long and almost black. He liked rock climbing, camping, kayaking, fishing. The outdoors. These were things her parents had forced her into as a child; now, she was glad she knew how to do them, as though they qualified her to be his girlfriend.

There was another party, this one at the beginning of his last semester. It was a hot day—there was a pool, a barbeque, her first taste of Baileys. She made a salad in the kitchen. She remembers how green the cucumbers were; the same colour as the bikini she borrowed from Georgina. Late in the afternoon, there'd been a thunderstorm and the canal behind the house flooded, the water churning and lumpy like clay. Some of the boys, drunk, had wanted to bodysurf in the canal and it was Peter who'd talked them around. Said they could get hurt, or worse. Instead, they'd all made popcorn, and watched horror movies until three am, when she fell asleep in the living room. She'd loved the sound of the rain rushing down the drainpipe outside, his arm draped across her body, the prickle of sunburn on her shoulders.

The next morning, they woke late to a report on the news. Some young boys had tried to rescue a dog they saw trapped in stormwater, and one of them had been washed away and was still missing. Police were searching. A body was found in a drain. A boy, and a dog. Diana's parents knew the boy—he was the son of a family friend. She went to the funeral with her parents and her sister. Peter came too. There was a wake afterwards and it was horrible—from the living room, you could

see the drain where the boys had gone in. It was still full of water and the twigs floating by all looked like the skinny arms of young boys who had more bravery than strength. There'd been an argument at the wake, between the boy's mother and father, and their youngest children, twins, just three years old, had started to cry. Everyone stared at them, not knowing what to do. It was Peter who ushered them out into the front yard to play games, only then it began to rain, and Diana tried to get them to come back inside, but it was too late—one of the boys had put a snail in his mouth and was choking. Just then, the mother had come out to find her son turning blue and began to scream. The father was frozen, his arms rigid by his sides. Again, it was Peter who knew to give the boy a good whack on the back to displace the arthropod, but that was it. The children had been shepherded away and confined to their bedroom, and the guests dispersed swiftly. Diana and Peter broke up soon after that. He was going to London to study for his Masters, while she still had another two years of her undergraduate degree to finish.

In the bedroom, sorting through the clothes again, Diana pauses when she comes across the green bikini. She only wore it the once. Her sister had given it to her with the tags still attached. From the other room, she can hear the news anchors cross back to the Coles car park. They're interviewing Peter again. He says that meteorology is a great career for young people. That more scientists are needed to help the public understand the country's changing weather patterns. She puts the bikini in the donation pile.

By six pm, Diana is aching, dusty, triumphant. Her things are in boxes, ready for the removalists. She gathers up her rubbish and takes it down to the basement where the bins are kept. But when she opens the door, she's confronted by a miasma of waste. The bins are overflowing and bags have been strewn across the floor. Some have split open and are disgorging their insides. She finds that, despite the stink, she can't look away. Here is how people live, she thinks. Here are their egg shells, their coffee grinds, their milk cartons, their apple cores, their chocolate wrappers, their kitchen sponges, their foil, their meat trays, their newspapers, their beer cans, their batteries, their cigarettes, their cat food, their hair dye, their tissue boxes, their razors, their tampons, their shards of soap, their wads of hair, their cotton tips, their diapers, their old underwear. And also, heaped next to the recycling bins, she sees a violet tea cosy, a set of speakers, a cracked vase, and she wonders—how well were these things loved, and is that why they were abandoned? Like

rollerblades or string bikinis or old flames—both trash and treasure, too painful to keep, too precious to throw out.

The heat is too much to take. Diana dumps her garbage with the rest of the mess and rushes back into the corridor. The smell is lodged in her teeth. She wipes her face on her shirt and, with her eyes closed, sees the alarming red swirl of a low-pressure system growing larger. She wonders if she might faint.

She turns to leave, not through the stairwell, but through the hall that leads to the rear of the building. There's a path that goes down to the river. Outside, the heat is thin and tired. She feels it: the change on its way.

Diana walks down the path, through the dry grass and reeds of the riverbank, and puts her feet in. There are people swimming further upstream, near the bridge where the water is deeper and wider. The young children are laughing in their swimming bubbles, defying their mothers, who tell them not to go too far. They use their arms like oars to test the deep.

Diana feels sick watching them. She sees Georgina again, her hair floating like weed as she sinks just beneath the surface. A boy's arm raised, like a lightning rod. Diana reaches down, scoops up a handful of water and pours it over the back of her neck. Then she feels the first darts on her skin, smells the silt of the river in the air. She tries to think of something to do now—more packing, tidying, planning—but there's nothing left. Just the water easing itself back into the world, as though it had never left.

WEIGHT AND LIGHTNESS

Naomi Elster

They'd been at primary school together, but as soon as she'd opened the door to him yesterday, she'd stopped thinking of him as a child. She'd thought that in other circumstances, she'd have more of an eye for him, but to come on to her as he had been doing, now, when he must know she's vulnerable ... what kind of man would do that?

She liked his voice, as soon as he said hello. She had been deaf to the beauty of her own people's voices until she went away. Now, she sometimes catches an unexpected note in her new city's mixed medley, a word or phrase carried to her on the river's breeze or the echoing whine and rush of the underground, unmistakably from home, and she sits up and notices. She reflects on the difference, that the voices which comforted her childhood and brought her into the strengths and stresses of early adulthood are no longer normal in her environment. She wasn't settled in Ireland, but she hears an Irish accent floating towards her and—longing's too strong a word, but there's something there, a want.

She was temporarily cut off from life and signal when they first tried to call, suffocating in that sickly air sent, so the stories go, by plagued skulls whose rest is disturbed by passing tubes. Perhaps they sicken the air to remind us that under the ground is where we bury our dead, and underground tubes shouldn't be used to speed people to work. She cried when they eventually reached her. It wasn't real, though, so she couldn't cry for long.

She made the journey alone. Logistically, financially, emotionally—it felt long but it was okay. Life and death were both easier, now she could afford things. She even got Aer Lingus, a green on green shamrock instead of her usual yellow harp on bargain blue.

On the plane she had started to wonder what was wrong with her, because she felt fine. Even when the wheels first touched Irish tarmac, she still felt fine. But the minute her own feet stepped back onto Irish ground, it became real. She stopped being able to breathe. She noticed her whole body, because it was shaking, like the air after a rushing train, like a new-born calf testing its legs for the first time only to find, they are not yet ready.

Staff at Dublin didn't bat an eyelid. The returning emigrant, funeral bound—they must see a hundred of those a week. By the time she'd made it back to her hometown she had fallen apart and put herself back together so many times that some important part had been lost, somewhere along the way.

She went into Eason's at the train station for water. The news headlines were exhausting. Callous men without wombs or regard for real women grandstanding about the miracles of potential life. The same rape trial that had started when she left was still dragging on, every harrowing detail a headline. Murders, disappearances, and miserable rain forecast. The magazines were all about weight. Men needed to lift it, girls needed to lose it. Men should be strong and girls should be light; light enough to throw away.

At the doorstep. Fighting a battle not to run away. To hide from the reality and her family's raw grief, because once across the threshold of a mourning household there's no turning back.

The undertakers had done a good job. He looked peaceful, but, unmistakably, dead. The following days functioned as an exercise to reinforce the fact that he was dead.

The respectful silences, rattling of the good teacups and quiet conversations around the open coffin. Eventually, rows of mourners and consolers approaching the front pew. 'Sorry for your trouble.' 'Sorry for your loss.' 'Sorry for your trouble.' Really saying:

'He's dead.'

'He's dead.'

'He's dead.'

So why did she still feel, after all this, that she couldn't get her head around it?

It was her round and she was low on cash. She knew it wasn't really a problem, but since he'd slipped his arm around her shoulders—perhaps an innocent gesture intended to comfort, she was in mourning, after all—that feeling she'd overcome at the doorstep had built in her again. The world was no longer certain or safe, everything she thought she knew about it was wrong. She had an overwhelming need to move, to escape from it all.

'Ah here, I'm not sure if UK cards are okay for contactless with all that Brexit nonsense going on, sure the machine's only round the corner anyway.' She knew her excuse was flimsy, transparent. She stepped out into the soft, prolonged twilight and contemplated it—she could take her shoes and tights off and go to the beach. It was too early in the year and too cold in the evenings for the drinking groups. She started to make her way down, but as a wave curled and crashed in below, so did the toll of the past few days. As the wave ebbed, it pulled her energy out with it, so she sat for a time. A minute or twenty-six years, it was hard to tell.

'The finality of death is hard to get your head around, when it's someone you've known your whole life.'

In the muted whirlwind of an Irish wake, she couldn't remember now who it was that had said that, but they were right. They were right.

At her back, irregular fields stretched and rolled around each other, a patchwork of muted golds and greens. Salt-and-pepper cattle occasionally ruffled the landscape's silence and stillness. And ahead was the graceful stretch of the wide beach and temperamental water. There was a boat like a tightrope walker right on the line where grey sky meets green-grey water.

The gentle beauty rooted her again, but she wondered why so few people were here to share it. When she'd left the pub, she'd walked the length of the narrow, steep main street and not encountered another person. Twenty-six wasn't old; she felt the lightness of her grip on the world. But her hometown had but one pub, and on a Friday evening, it was a shock to be twenty-six, and to be the youngest person in it.

She looked out at the Irish Sea and wondered where everyone had gone.

There had been prayers. It hadn't even occurred to her that there would be prayers, but of course there were prayers. At ten pm the first day, it was fifteen hours after she'd left home, and she felt in desperate need of a shower and ten minutes alone. Instead she found herself in a huddle in the kitchen with her cousins, all of them comparing google results for the rosary and trying to memorise it from their smartphone screens before going back into the living room, where the no longer living was laid out. It transpired that none of the aunts and uncles had said a decade in over a decade either.

‘Have we really not got a primary school teacher in the family?’ lamented Aunty Gráinne. ‘They’re about the only ones left that know all the prayers.’

Or any of them.

The priest duly popped in, wearing a dog collar and an unmistakable loneliness.

‘Can’t stand this smarmy gobshite, he’s worse than a Fianna Fáil politician,’ muttered cousin Lisa. ‘He kept haunting us when grandad on Mam’s side was in hospital, dropping by to ask if he might “be of service” every five minutes. Grandad was only in for a hip replacement! We didn’t need your man getting trigger happy on the last rites.’

She was angry with priests. Of course she was. She knew her history, knew that for many people in Ireland today, it wasn’t buried or healed and maybe never would be.

But when she looked at this tired old man, uncertain of his place, she had been surprised to feel an overwhelming flood of pity for him. Inside one generation he’d felt respect fade into irrelevance, his one-time social pillar collapse into disrepute. But she had no words to make him feel useful or wanted.

Did I really leave the country I thought I left, and if I came back, what would I come back to?

‘Hiya.’

She looked up.

‘Sorry—have I been gone long? Needed some air.’

‘Ah, you’re grand. It probably—I mean a funeral probably wasn’t the best time for me to, you know. Well. Sorry.’

He sat beside her, pulled strong legs up to wide chest and curled muscular arms around them. He was strong, and she felt light enough to float away.

‘I had no idea you were in London now, as well. Funny, isn’t it, we started in the same town and moved away to end up in the same town again.’

She thought about the news, wondered how a woman could really know if she could trust a man in such a dangerous world.

‘Ah look,’ he said, ‘if a funeral doesn’t make you want to live a bit, what’s the point of them?’

And she laughed, decided to take the chance on him. He’d made her laugh, and she thought she wouldn’t laugh if she didn’t feel safe.

WHERE THE PRESENT PLUNGES INTO THE FUTURE: A TRADER RUNS OUT OF BARDO

Jinendra Jain

Exerting yourself to the fullest within your individual limits: that's the essence of running, and a metaphor for life—and for me, for writing as well.

—Haruki Murakami

I sat up all night, racked by searing bolts of pain that shot up from the jaw to the temple on the left side of my face, at cruelly unpredictable intervals. Like many other nights over the past eight weeks, I visited the Accident and Emergency Department of Mt Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore, more for the midnight distraction than for painkiller injections that gave no relief. But this dolorous night, I sat up—not only because lying down made the pain unbearable. After being passed from one doctor to another for almost two months, I was tormented by the improbable hope that my neurologist would give my pain a name the next morning. She studied my facial and cranial MRI scans, and gave a tentative diagnosis of Trigeminal Neuralgia which, to my relief-tinged distress, is described by the American Association of Neurological Surgeons as, 'the most excruciating pain known to humanity ... caused by irritation of the trigeminal nerve, which sends branches to the forehead, cheek and lower jaw.' She prescribed anticonvulsants, and the angry nerve was mollified. A few months later, a root fracture that had inexplicably escaped detection thus far was discovered in the first upper molar. Extraction of the tooth brought deliverance from medication and pain, but the neurologist assured me that it was no more than a happy coincidence, as the neuralgia had only gone into temporary remission. Mercifully, however, I have not had a relapse since I last saw her towards the end of the Great Recession, the year before I turned forty.

I had dutifully followed the Indian middle-class dream which, in the decade Prozac was launched, was to either become a medical doctor like my long-suffering wife, or an engineer with a management degree like me. Since graduation, I had worked in various trading roles, in the dealing rooms of big global banks across international financial centres. These

rooms, some as large as a football field, seethe with testosterone and adrenaline. They emit a constant droning sound, frequently drowned out by the bellows of traders and salespeople, and are laid out as long rows of open desks stacked with screens. My seat faced a bank of eight computer monitors. In a corner of my mind where sleep never came, I prowled for opportunities and uncovered threats lurking in the dense jungle of news, economic data and financial asset prices that flashed on these monitors all day and on my Blackberry all night. I imagined possible futures, assigned probabilities to them, and constructed portfolios of trades designed to maximise profits in the futures I deemed likely, while minimising losses in those I didn't. It was in this sleepless corner, perched on that edge of the present which plunges into the future, that I made a small fortune over many years. But all this while—starved of exercise and fed a diet of cigarettes, beer, smoky single malts, and junk food—my body kept bloating, in a futile cry for attention.

In his acclaimed spiritual masterpiece, *The Tibetan Book of Living & Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche explains, 'bardos are periods of deep uncertainty ... To live in the modern world is to live in what is clearly a bardo realm; you don't have to die to experience one ... This constant uncertainty ... creates gaps, spaces in which profound chances and opportunities for transformation are continuously flowering'. The bardo of neuralgia bequeathed such a pause. I switched to a healthy diet and began running a four-mile loop along the Singapore River, slowly graduating to longer routes.

I completed the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon but had no intention to return to the crowd ticking off bucket lists in big-city road marathons. Hungry for a bigger challenge, I chanced upon a video about a hundred-mile race in the Indian Himalayas, run over five daily stages, with almost 27,000 feet each of cumulative ascent and descent. Bewitched by the majestic beauty of the mountains, I signed up for the race. Around the same time, my six-year-old daughter caught me smoking in our apartment balcony. She innocently asked, 'Daddy, why do you eat cigarettes?' Fuelled by a deep sense of shame, by a desire to redeem myself in my daughter's eyes, and by an egotistical craving to complete the Himalayan race, I finally found freedom from twenty-four years of slavery to smoking and alcohol, on the eve of my forty-second birthday, with a bottle of peaty Laphroaig and a packet of State Express 555 cigarettes.

It was an uneasy freedom. Shorn of a glass of Scotch in one hand and a cigarette in the other, I felt raw and exposed at social gatherings, as my machismo moulted, long before a new skin would grow. The cigarettes I had jilted visited further retribution in the form of violent coughing, multiple mouth-ulcers, an upset stomach, aching shoulders, and a vague sense of dread. But training for the race focused my mind, sustaining me through the bardo of rehabilitation. The more my muscles and bones ached, as they adapted to the stresses of running longer distances, the less I pined for cigarettes. The dull rhythm of breath and footstep in the quiet solitude of long pre-dawn runs began to lull the mind. Running became a source of *flow*, defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as a 'state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it'.

In late October that year, sixty-eight participants from various walks of life across the world, with more than fifty years separating the youngest from the oldest, gathered at the quaint hill station of Mirik, in the Indian state of West Bengal, for the 'Himalayan 100 Mile Stage Race 2012'. The next day, we were bused to the start of the race in Maneybhanjang village. Little children from the local school welcomed us by draping white Tibetan scarves called *khatas* around our necks. Local dignitaries gave long speeches, enjoying their moment in the sun. Tibetan prayers were recited for our safe journey, and we were flagged-off. The trail, small ankle-twisting boulders for the most part, made running treacherous over the next three days.

The race started with a 3,500-foot climb, punctuated by simple yet elegant stupas, before rolling downhill to the Gairibas checkpoint. I experienced what legendary ultra-runner Lizzy Hawker describes, 'Life was pared down to the essentials ... and worries are focused on survival, keeping warm, fed, safe. It concentrates the mind and sharpens the senses. It intensifies the feelings, leaving you right there inside the experience'. I had felt good: fifteen miles done, and barely nine more to go. But not for long, as I was greeted with a steep and relentless climb of almost 7,000 feet, in falling temperatures and high winds. Philosopher and psychologist William James postulates that 'beyond the very extreme of fatigue and distress,' exist 'sources of strength never taxed at all because we never push through the obstruction'. I tapped into these hitherto hidden reserves to reach the day's finish line in Sandakphu, said to be the only place on Earth from which four of the five highest

mountains in the world—Everest, Kanchenjunga, Lhotse, and Makalu—can be seen with the naked eye.

The second stage traced twenty miles, in an out-and-back loop, on the Singalila Ridge. Kanchenjunga, the third-highest mountain on Earth, soaring more than 28,000 feet into the sky, was a constant yet ever-changing presence. The mountain woke up bathed in a golden glow, and slowly unveiled her immaculate white face, aching to be caressed by the sun. Sated, she pulled blankets of clouds and shadows over herself when the sun lit an orange fire in the evening sky. There was a point on the trail that day, where the imposing south face of the mountain was framed by a pale gold pasture falling off into the cerulean sky. For a few fleeting moments, everything, except the mountain, was pushed out of awareness. I was bestowed with a child-like innocence which, Annie Dillard reveals, 'sees that this [unselfconscious moment] is it, and finds it world enough, and time'. But all too soon, thoughts slithered in—of the mountain's beauty, of the run to this bend, of tired legs and laboured breath, of the hard miles still to run—and the moment was gone. These anoetic moments are now wistful memories of an ephemeral sense of freedom from the tyranny of self-consciousness. Lizzy Hawker elucidates, 'journeying through the high mountains, which demands an absolute presence in the moment, somehow connects me to a core of stillness deep within me. And that strength is what I draw on in my running and in my every day'.

The third day was billed as a full marathon by the race organisers, though most of us felt that the stage was more than thirty miles long. I retraced the Singalila Ridge, going to its edge, before turning back to the paramilitary camp in Molle. Yaks grazed lazily in the sun, watching us run by, silently wondering what the chase was about. I had felt strong at this point, looking forward to running down the deeply-rutted single track that dropped 6,000 feet over less than five miles through dense coniferous forest. A few minutes into the downhill, my left leg started cramping, reducing me to a slow limp. Each step hurt, as I walked on my right leg, dragging the left one behind. In his classic spiritual travelogue, *The Snow Leopard*, Peter Matthiessen writes, 'Already the not-looking-forward, the without-hope-ness takes on a subtle attraction, as if I had glimpsed the secret of these mountains, still half-understood. With the past evaporated, the future pointless, and all expectation worn away, I begin to experience that *now* that is spoken of by the great teachers'. Unsure if I would make it to the finish, I was set free to walk at my pace for the day. A pace at which I was truly living life, one mindful step at a

time, over a steep and treacherous trail. Almost ten hours after the start of the stage, I hobbled across the finish line in Rimbik village.

I had made the rookie mistake of wearing perfectly fitting shoes. My feet had swollen from the pounding they had endured, and the resulting friction had caused blisters to form under my left big toe. The next morning, I clipped the toenail to drain out the accumulated pus and blood and secured it with tape. The fourth day was barely thirteen miles long, but I suffered from blisters under the right big toe. I pulled out both toenails later that day to put a painful end to my misery. On the last day, my legs recovered their strength during an uphill walk through pristine forest, allowing me to break into a run when the road turned gently down, taking me back to where I started five days ago. I began to understand why TS Eliot declares:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Lost in nature and the exhaustion of my run, I had slipped out of the bardo of trading, for five days of blissful respite from the ceaseless cacophony of the market. Over the next few months, I would move out of trading to a risk management role with another bank, and sleep would embosom that corner of my mind which teetered on the edge of *now*.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Deniz Agraz is a thirty-five-year-old Turkish Australian emerging writer. Her work was previously published in ABC Life and SBS Voices. She was also selected as one of the ten writers to take part in the Citizenwrites project organised by Diversity Arts Australia and Roanna Goncalves.

Vivien Arnold was born in the UK and has lived in Canberra since 1967. Her interests are in music and drama and several of her compositions and plays have been published by Wirripang. She has now retired from careers in teaching, the Australian Public Service and private consultancy, but maintains her life-long hobbies of choral conducting and theatre direction.

Cassandra Atherton is an award-winning prose poet and scholar of prose poetry. Her books of prose poems include *Exhumed*, *Trace*, *Pikadon*, *Pre-Raphaelite* and *Leftovers*. She co-wrote *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (2020) and co-edited *The Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (2020).

Tony Beyer writes in Taranaki, New Zealand. His work has appeared in print and online, locally and internationally, for several decades.

Anna-Claire Blogg lives in Melbourne, Australia. Her short stories are written around everyday things and moments.

Wendy BooydeGraaff holds a Master of Education degree from Grand Valley State University and a graduate certificate in children's literature from Penn State. She is the author of *Salad Pie*, a children's picture book published by Ripple Grove Press. Her work has been published in *Bending Genres*, *Critical Read*, *Across the Margin*, and *Jellyfish Review*, and is forthcoming in *So It Goes*, *Border Crossing*, *Whistling Shade*, and *NOON*.

Sue Brennan is an Australian writer whose short stories have been published in Australia in *ACE—Contemporary Stories by Emerging Writers*, *Meniscus*, *Lite Lit One!*, *Baby Teeth*, *Meanjin*, and in the international literary magazines, *Adelaide Literary Magazine* and *The Blue Nib*.

Rohan Buettel is an emerging poet. He lives in Canberra. His haiku have been published in *Echidna Tracks*, *Creatrix*, *Frogpond*, *Kokako* and *Haiku Xpressions*. His

longer form poetry has been published or accepted for publication in *Quadrant* and *Cicerone Journal*.

Dakota Canon has work published or forthcoming in *Witness*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Hobart*, *Moon City Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Literary Orphans*, *The MacGuffin*, *Citron Review*, *Gone Lawn*, *Bending Genres*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Wigleaf's* 2020 longlist and elsewhere. Her novel, *The Unmaking of Eden*, won the 2019 Caledonia Novel Award and the 2018 Hastings Litfest Crime Novel Contest, placed second in the 2019 First Novel Prize, reached the finals of the 2019 James Jones First Novel Fellowship, and was long-listed in the 2019 BPA First Novel Award and the 2018 Yeovil Literary Prize.

Alan Cohen has lived a full in-the-world life, which is reflected in the poems he has been writing since grade school. To date he has been virtually unpublished, but he is now determined to seek an audience. So far, this new endeavour has resulted in thirty new acceptances in twelve journals over the past two months.

Katharine Coles has published seven collections of poems, most recently *Wayward* (Red Hen Press, 2019). Her memoir, *Look Both Ways*, was released in 2018 by Turtle Point Press, which will also publish *The Stranger I Become: Essays in Reckless Poetics* in 2021 and *Solve for X*, a new collection of poems. She has received awards from the NEA, the NEH, and the Guggenheim Foundation. She is a Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at the University of Utah.

Helen Cushing lives on the island of Tasmania where nature is always close. As a gardening writer she's been inspired by the intimacy with nature that gardener's quietly experience and is collaborating with an illustrator to publish a collection of creative essays exploring the deeper side of our relationship with gardens. Helen has worked for the ABC's Gardening Australia, lived in India, raised two children, taught yoga for peace in Colombia and Serbia, and is an activist.

Michael Davies studied at the University of Melbourne. He writes fiction.

Adam Day is the author of *Left-Handed Wolf* (LSU Press, 2020), and of *Model of a City in Civil War* (Sarabande Books), and the recipient of a Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship for *Badger*, *Apocrypha*, and of a PEN Award. He is the editor of the forthcoming anthology, *Divine Orphans of the Poetic Project*, from 1913 Press, and his work has appeared in various journals and magazines, such as the *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Boston Review*, *Cordite*, *Turbine*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *London Magazine*, *Takahē* and *Iowa Review*.

Anne Di Lauro grew up in Brisbane where she obtained a BA from the University of Queensland. After working at the State Library of Queensland for two years, she headed overseas and eventually spent most of her adult life living and working in Europe and North America. For much of this time she worked for national and international agencies in the field of information for economic and social development. After her return to Brisbane she retrained as a psychotherapist. She is a poet in private.

Lisa Nan Joo is a writer and academic based in Sydney. Her work has previously been published in *Kill Your Darlings*, *Strange Horizons*, *Seizure Online*, and *Spineless Wonders*.

Jane Downing's short stories have been published widely at home and overseas, including in *Southerly*, *Westerly*, *Island*, *Overland*, *The Big Issue*, *Griffith Review*, *Antipodes* (US), *Headland* (NZ), *Kunapipi* (Denmark), *Paris Transcontinental* (France), and *Silverfish* (Malaysia). Her novel, *The Sultan's Daughter*, was published by Canberra publisher Obiter in 2020. She can be found at janedowning.wordpress.com

Mark Edgecombe lives and works in Wellington, New Zealand, where he teaches English at a local secondary school. He and Sarah have three children, aged nine and under.

Naomi Elster is a writer and a scientist. She has published numerous short stories, including in *Crannog Magazine*, *Ergot*, and *Mosaics: An Anthology of Independent Women*. She has also had both short and full-length plays produced. Her journalism portfolio focuses on both science and women's issues and can be found at www.muckrack.com/naomi-elster-1. Twitter @Naomi_Elster

Persephone Fraser is from Brisbane and now lives in Sydney. She recently finished a Masters in Political Economy and has been working as a researcher in climate justice at the University of New South Wales. Her fiction explores internal experiences, silence and sense of place. She has written nonfiction for The Sydney Environment Institute, The Climate Justice Initiative, *The Big Smoke* and *The Fourth Estate*; and has had stories and poems in the *University of Sydney Anthology*.

Janet Fuller lives on the beautiful north coast of Tasmania Her writing is driven by characters who often present themselves to her unbidden; and who she tries to get to know by crawling around inside their heads. Together she and the character like to ask questions of their readers and to start new conversations.

Helen Gearing is a Brisbane-based writer, mother, and Arts student at the University of Queensland. Her work has been published in *Voiceworks*, *Eureka Street*, and on the State Library of Queensland's website. Flame trees and chubby knees never fail to make her happy.

Kevin Grauke's work has appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Fiction*, *Cimarron Review*, *Story Quarterly*, and *Quarterly West*, to name a few. His collection of stories, *Shadows of Men* was awarded the Texas Institute of Letters' Steven Turner Award for Best First Work of Fiction in 2013. He teaches at La Salle University in Philadelphia.

Mel Hall is a writer and musician based in Fremantle, Western Australia. She has been published by *Sleepers*, *Westerly*, *Ginninderra* and *Tincture*. Her debut novel *The Little Boat on Trusting Lane* is forthcoming with Fremantle Press in 2021.

Oz Hardwick is a European poet, based in York (UK). His chapbook *Learning to Have Lost* (Canberra: IPSI/Recent Work, 2018) was the winner in the poetry category of the 2019 Rubery International Book Awards, and his most recent chapbook *Wolf Planet* (Clevedon: Hedgehog Poetry Press, 2020) won the Hedgehog Shorts prize. Oz is Professor of English at Leeds Trinity University, where he leads the Creative Writing programmes. www.ozhardwick.co.uk

Marg Hickey was born in London and grew up in small country towns across Victoria. She studied in Melbourne and has travelled extensively through the Middle East, South America, Asia and Europe. She has been shortlisted and has won prizes in various awards including the Grace Marion Emerging Writer's prize and the Victorian Regional Writing prize. Her plays have been performed in Melbourne (La Mama), Brisbane, New York and regional Victoria. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing and works as a lecturer, teacher and public presenter.

Paul Ilechko is the author of the chapbooks *Bartok in Winter* (Flutter Press) and *Graph of Life* (Finishing Line Press). His work has appeared in a variety of journals, including *Juxtapose*, *As It Ought To Be*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Inklette* and *Pithead Chapel*. He lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ.

Jinendra Jain is a banker studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Lasalle College of the Arts Singapore, a degree conferred by Goldsmiths, University of London. He has worked in various trading and risk management roles for almost twenty-five years in Bombay, Hong Kong and Singapore, after graduating from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur and the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta.

Penelope Layland's most recent book is *Nigh* (Recent Work Press, 2020). She is currently working on a long sequence of poems in the voice of Dorothy Wordsworth, titled *Beloved*. Penelope has a PhD from the University of Canberra.

Wes Lee lives in New Zealand. Her latest poetry collection is *By the Lapels* (Steele Roberts Aotearoa, 2019). Her work has appeared in *Best New Zealand Poems*, *Westerly*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Cordite*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Poetry London*, *The London Magazine*, *Landfall*, *The New Zealand Listener*, *The Australian Poetry Journal*, among others. Most recently she was awarded the Poetry New Zealand Prize 2019 by Massey University Press.

Harold Legaspi is a poet, writing in Darug land. He is the AJA Waldock Scholar at University of Sydney, to begin his Doctorate of Arts in 2021. His first book, *Letters in Language* was the runner-up in the inaugural Puncher & Wattmann Prize for a First Book of Poetry, to be published in 2021 in the Flying Islands Pocket Books of Poetry series with Cerberus Press. He is the Founding Editor of *Lite Lit One*, a bi-annual online journal of poetry.

Kate Middleton is an Australian writer. She is the author of the poetry collections *Fire Season* (Giramondo, 2009), awarded the Western Australian Premier's Award for Poetry in 2009, *Ephemeral Waters* (Giramondo, 2013), shortlisted for the NSW Premier's award in 2014, and *Passage* (Giramondo, 2017). From September 2011 to September 2012 she was the inaugural Sydney City Poet. In 2020 she was runner up for the *Australian Book Review's* Calibre Award.

Robert W Monk is a Sydney based writer, poet and artist with recent work featured on the online journal *LiteLitOne*, the webzine *Ink Sweat & Tears* and the poetry blog *Entropy Mag at Enclave*.

Rick Neale is completing a Masters of Creative Writing at the University of Sydney after which he plans to return to South Africa with his wife to pursue his true calling, a career in teaching. He also plans to one day live by the seaside, for he feels the ocean to be his true home.

Dani Netherclift has had work published in *Meanjin Quarterly*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Otoliths* and *Verandah 33*. She was the winner of the 2020 Queenscliffe Literary Festival Microfiction Prize and is currently working on a poetry manuscript and a fiction novel, among other projects.

Cathryn Perazzo wrote a novel for her PhD (Creative Writing), awarded in 2019. Her other writing interests span poetry, short story and life writing. Cathryn has published short works of fiction and non-fiction. She is a member of Poets of Odd: a group of poets with publishing credits who have also edited and produced an anthology of their poetry, *The cat and the philosopher went for a walk*.

Mary Pomfret writes short stories and poems and her work has been published widely. Her debut novel *The Hard Seed* was published in 2018. In 2016, La Trobe University awarded Mary a doctorate in English for her creative thesis on generational trauma.

Donna Pucciani, a Chicago-based writer, has published poetry worldwide in such journals as *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *nebulab*, *Voice and Verse*, *Acumen*, *ParisLitUp*, *Mediterranean Poetry*, and *Gradiva*. Her seventh and most recent book of poetry is *Edges*.

Rosie Roberts is a musician and cultural studies and migration researcher. Her research explores the experiences of temporary workers in Australia over space and time. Outside of song writing for her indie-folk band, this is her first creative writing piece.

Rachel Robertson is Deputy Head of the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry at Curtin University. Her academic interests include life writing, the literary essay, Australian literature, and disability studies.

Natalie Satakovski is a writer from Melbourne, Australia. She is the recipient of a Lawrence A Sanders Fellowship at Florida International University, and a Varuna Residential Fellowship. Her literary fiction has been shortlisted for the Alan Marshall Short Story Prize, while her genre fiction has appeared in *SQ Mag*, *Mystery Weekly*, *Selfies from the End of the World*, *In Sunshine Bright and Darkness Deep*, and others. She currently serves as managing editor of *GulfStream Magazine*.

Ian C Smith's work has been published in *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Antipodes*, *Cordite*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Stony Thursday Book* and *Two-Thirds North*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.

Su-May Tan is a copywriter and emerging writer based in Melbourne. She was shortlisted for the Deborah Cass Prize in 2018. Her short fiction and articles have been published by Margaret River Press, *Tincture*, *The Victorian Writer* and *Mascara Literary Review*.

Les Wicks has performed widely in Australia and internationally for over forty-five years. He has been published in over 350 different magazines, anthologies and newspapers across thirty countries in fifteen languages. He conducts workshops around Australia and has edited various projects over the decades, the latest being *To End All Wars* (Puncher and Wattmann, 2018), and runs Meuse Press which focuses on poetry outreach projects like poetry on buses and poetry published on the surface of a river. His fourteenth book of poetry is *Belief* (Flying Islands, 2019). <http://leswicks.tripod.com/lw.htm>

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