



MENISCUS

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

Volume 6, Issue 2 2018



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Contents:

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About Meniscus

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

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

Australian Copyright Agency

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EDITORIAL

A literary journal only slowly establishes itself, finding out what it is, and for whom it exists. Each journal has its own accent, its own diction, and though the audiences of both contributors and readers overlap significantly, each journal nonetheless will find its own community. *Meniscus* is now reaching the age where it is pretty sure about who and what it is, thanks to the generosity of our contributors, the input of our guest editors, and the range of communities in which it is finding its feet. In this, as in previous years, there are both familiar names and voices, and writers we'd not met before. As in previous years, the contributors come from across the world, from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, from both the emerging and the very established, and from both the very young and the very mature. As always, we are delighted to include in this issue a number of writers whose work explores difference – be that of voice, of perspective, of form, of culture, or any other differences. Each work has its own discrete qualities, and in each case the editors were impressed with a freshness in the voice, the quality of image, the narrative traction, and the capacity of the work to make us look at the world from a different point of view.

The Copyright Agency Ltd Cultural Fund has again provided financial support for the best prose and best poetry published in this issue. The poetry editors unanimously selected Elanna Herbert's 'Aubie: Kokoda: 1988'; and the prose editors settled – as Sandra Arnold notes, below – on a joint win, with Heather McQuillan's 'A post-traumatic god' and Erica Plouffe Lazure's 'Lost and Found' sharing the honours.

We look forward to receiving submissions for the next issue of *Meniscus*, and welcome both traditional and experimental modes of writing; and we are pleased to let contributors know that the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, the publisher of this journal, has been able to cover the Submittable annual fee from a different source, and is waiving the \$5 fee previously charged to contributors.

Jen Webb and Gail Pittaway
for the Meniscus Editors

Guest editorial - Flash Fiction

I looked for stories that resonated long after I'd finished reading and which made me want to read them again, slowly, to absorb them, or to savour the beauty of the language. The 16 stories I selected accomplished that. They may focus on a moment or a series of moments, but because more is alluded to than is made explicit, each word carries its own weight, leaving the unstated to the reader's imagination.

Flash is sometimes described as living in the space between the traditional short story and the prose poem. Charles Baudelaire's prose poems with their compressed descriptions and psychological subtleties are considered to be a significant precursor to contemporary flash fiction. However, while flash may utilise the semantics, rhythm and elliptical leaps of prose poetry it needs a narrative arc to place it within the realm of fiction.

Flash fiction has its origins in ancient forms such as oral traditions, parables, myths and fairytales. The form became established in the 19th century. By the 1920s the form was known as the short-short and in the decades following it appeared occasionally in print literary magazines and anthologies. It was not until James Thomas titled his 1992 anthology *Flash Fiction: Seventy-two very short stories* that 'flash' became the accepted term.

The internet has been instrumental in increasing the visibility and accessibility of flash. In the last two decades the form has risen in popularity with more literary journals publishing it and new journals devoted entirely to flash appearing online and in print. Although flash takes less time to read than long form prose, an oft-cited opinion that its popularity is due to reduced attention span or time-poor readers does not correlate. Flash is an exacting form that requires more, not less attention from its readers. The best kind of flash is well worth the effort.

Congratulations to the 16 writers whose accomplished, engaging stories appear in this issue.

Sandra Arnold
Guest Editor



ELANNA HERBERT

'Aubie: Kokoda: 1988'

ELANNA HERBERT

Aubie: Kokoda: 1988

after the ambulance
the final rush from home
swept up by your past
your breath your war
the coma begins. short.

sharp. rattles of phlegm
covet the vastness your
unchosen experience your
retelling untold

crinkle sheets hospital sterile
wrap the remains of memory
around a wasted body. coma

inductions strong as birthing
surface pull terror up clutching
clots of humid night thoughts your
war distils over a horizon
seeps into whiteness a
Canberra Hospital room cold
beyond the July freeze. we wait
slowly. occasionally fidgeting. drawn

into fear your life's end echoes
battle foetid Kokoda
Ioribawa Oivi
Gona strange murmurings

mates' cries your reply
their unheard calls our
witness. your chosen
breath shouts. sharp.
short. useless as pain at lungs
drowning lungs
dying is never that
moment. you prepare.



HEATHER MCQUILLAN

'A post-traumatic god'

HEATHER MCQUILLAN

A post-traumatic god

Tāwhirimatēā tried to stand his ground but was outnumbered. The ground he stood on was his mother's unstable belly, doughy and stretched from so many sons. She let him down in the end, as all mothers do. Let go of his hand.

This he remembers: darkness humid with sweat and the sourness of spilt milk, the hau, the beat, the pulse, pressed tight between his parent's renditions of love, their keening drone, beneath the shouting of his brothers and the TV turned up too loud.

This he remembers: the rupture, the coming into the blue lights and sirens and the whero of eyelid blood when he closes them against the glare. His mother convulsing, his father gone, brothers scattered.

This he remembers: a stranger's hand on his shoulder. The weightlessness of feet that have nowhere to stand. The weight of swallowed words deep in his belly while they click Bic pens.

In resting he is jolted. Thought spirals into cyclone cones – always back to the eye of the storm. He's tried the recommended doses but they don't work for him so he pulls sharply from the bed he shares with a thin-boned woman, takes his clenched fists away from her frail flesh and he runs. His feet tread heavy along his mother's backbone, along the length of the coastline out to the headland, where he howls at a cloud-black father-sky and slaps his chest until the skin burns.

This he knows: cold air and the taste of blood in his throat and the taste of endorphins that will bring him, finally, to rest.

Tāwhiri sits on the paint-peeled seat outside the takeaway shop. He is waiting for the skinny woman to fetch him back in her beat-up car. Sweat stains the curves of his white singlet. His father is hazy today. His mother has not rumbled for some time. His brothers are pencilled scars on the horizon.



ERICA PLOUFFE LAZURE

'Lost and Found'

ERICA PLOUFFE LAZURE

Lost and Found

If my walk down on the river this afternoon is reflective of the state of things, then there are too many lost gloves in the world. Too many lost gloves on benches, knit hats, stuffed bunnies, scribbled-on colouring books bloated and distorted from the overnight dew. Under the benches, children have placed coloured rocks with funny messages, a geocache hunt for the pre-school set. Other children find the rocks, get their mommies to post a photo to a hashtag site, and the world, in this moment, feels just a bit closer, a bit more connected. Usually the salt river holds its share of mallards and herons, an occasional beaver. But today, a seal, far too upriver for its own good, searches for fish in the murky depths below. His slick brown head peeks out onto the horizon, incurious, then wrestles with an eel, and then he is gone. Once, someone left a LL Bean windbreaker and a pack of unopened cigarettes on a bench, a dingy Red Sox ball cap that no fan would ever want to touch. Everyone, from the morning solitary joggers, to the tri-clusters of hearty walkers, let it be for about a week, wondering after its owner. Someone eventually folded the coat, placed the cigarettes in the cap, as if to convey to passers-by that the items were accounted for and awaiting pickup of the owner, so *please do not touch*.

Last fall, when a kid from town went missing, a high schooler out on a run, the entire town searched for him. They combed the reedy boarders of the river, finding empty discarded ice cream cups and plastic spoons, a nest of turtle eggs, a magazine blown under a fence. They waded the trail along the parkway in tall galoshes, peering up into the trees, following the path of the river through businesses and backyards toward the forest, as the helicopters circled overhead, looking for a body in the water, a lone figure wandering, a dark-haired boy in running clothes. In every building they looked, at home, in school, finding surprised kids hiding their sweethearts in closets and under beds, but none of those was the kid who went missing, the one whose name and photo was on every TV and Facebook feed, and as the story of him spread, everyone

felt connected, a bit closer to each other, pitching in to find the kid as though he were our own. In the end, they found him, not along the river or in the park or at school but in the stacks of the town library, asleep, red-faced, ashamed by the attention. And everyone, relieved, returned to their lives, returned to littering plastic spoons, forgetting their mittens on benches and hats in crosswalks as they searched for painted stones and signs of wild life along the river.

JESS KILBY

Le plafond

There are pink index cards taped to everything in the apartment. Pink cards, grubby beige strips of masking tape, my handwriting in black sharpie. *Miroir, porte, ordinateur*. We are learning French, in the lazy, haphazard way that we do most things. We are learning French in case we really do need to flee to Canada, because it increases your score on the immigration test. We are learning French because it's a three-hour drive across the border to Lac-Wallace entirely on back roads.

I bought a six-pack of beer tonight and didn't realise until I got home that there were only five beers in the pack. I've started smoking again. Though I can't find my lighter – have you seen it? A black Bic, with a pink index card taped to it? It's kind of hard to miss, except that everything in this place has a pink index card taped to it. *Briquet. Je cherche mon briquet*.

I've been alone for a week and I think maybe I like it. I think maybe the shadows make better company than the blue glare of your screen, always on. Mine too. Last night I sat on the fire escape and watched the snow fall, big soft flakes drifting down slowly in their own blue light. Silence. It accumulates faster than you think; the roads all disappear. A good night to delay a long drive home.

But today the snow has stopped and the roads are clear, and you are on your way. I have nothing else to do so I write out cards for the obvious things that we have missed. *Mur. Fenêtre. Plafond*. The ceiling is so low that even I can reach it, if I climb up on a chair. *Chaise*. And I am crying, as I tape a pink index card to the cracked plaster ceiling. It won't stick, it flutters down. I remember that my lighter is on the fire escape. I have to look that one up: *escalier de secours*. Stairway of help. Translation is a funny thing.

I hoist up the heavy sill and manoeuvre myself out the window and onto the landing. The sky is leaden, laden. More snow will fall soon. Perhaps you should have stayed, or I should have gone. Perhaps there is so much silence because there is nothing left to say. Or perhaps we just don't know how to say it.

ALEXANDRA GENEVE

Carapace

It was the way her breastbone strained against her skin that troubled me. Like a crustacean carapace.

We met in the corridor that led from the upstairs kitchen to the television room. I was excited by the prospect of someone to share my language. I had almost forgotten why I left Australia in the first place.

‘You’re an Australian’, I said. ‘Hi.’

She looked at me.

‘Hi’, I said again. ‘I’d heard there would be another one here soon.’ I looked around me and then folded my arms. ‘I’m one too.’

She let her large bag fall to the floor. It made a soft thud. I thought maybe she was going to shake my hand. Her face would change. Teeth would appear and she’d say *I’m just so excited to be here*. I’d been watching too many TV game shows.

I kept smiling as she dragged her luggage up the hallway and into the second room on the right. I walked a few steps behind her. She closed the door. I stood there a long while, facing that door. I couldn’t get out of my mind the image of her ribs straining at the thin material of her dress.

The days in the hostel were long. I stayed indoors and wrote all day. It was as though time had no place there, and while I sat at the tiny table and carefully composed my letters home, I would sometimes look up and find that I had been gazing out the window for minutes at a time. Once it was almost half an hour.

My letters home were long and cheerful and I often wrote the lyrics to songs from home in the margins. I felt their words about places I knew gave my identity substance. Something to hang on to. I used them to say some of the things I couldn’t. I used them to relay a message to my family that wasn’t always truthful.

On the days I chose to write my letters, the splendour that was the sun in that part of the country, was often obscured by the sublimity of tornadoes. Twice I found myself standing on the low wall that bordered the roof-top watching as beams of black and sinister barbers’ poles swept the horizon. I wanted to run inside to the depths of the basement, but I had watched too many times the black and white opening of a certain old movie and I knew if I stayed, I would one day identify with that moment on the roof. That juncture when part of you wants to run and part of you needs to stay and see it through.

When I found her standing in the kitchen one grey day, I found myself in a song that said *It’s raining on Tuesday. Got my Doc Martens wet. I caught a cold from sharing cigarettes*. She finished what she was doing, scraping eggs from a pan, put the pan in the sink under a cloud of steam and walked out past me without saying so much as a word. *On Sunday night I saw an old friend. And although I’m only eighteen you know she made me feel young again*.

‘Did you see the tornado?’ I called after her as she reached the end of the hall. No answer.

I decided it would be best if she stayed out of my songs. And besides, she wasn’t even beautiful.

I found out her name was Margrit. Spelled just like that. Margrit. Like something you might pick from between your teeth when you thought nobody was looking. Or scrape from the bottom of your shoe. Something that made you wince.

By the second week of passing her in the corridor, and my futile hellos, I took to making faces behind her back and bending over and pointing to my arse once she had walked by. I made up so many identities for her in my head that it became difficult to tell one fiction from another.

My repertoire of country songs grew considerably once she had come to stay. I seemed to have gathered the words to every song about lonely women leaving their menfolk to go to the lights of the city and the freeways of love.

‘Have you seen the freeways here yet?’ I asked one evening as I caught her handwashing her dress in the downstairs laundry. ‘They’re nothing like LA, but I still wouldn’t want to get stuck on them.’ I pulled myself up onto a washing machine that rumbled and vibrated beneath me.

She found a small stain to scrub on the bottom of her dress.

‘You know’, I said, hugging one knee, ‘I found a great coffee shop when I arrived here. Sort of floorboards, ceiling fans, line-up-to-get-the-best-brew-in-town type place. Gourmet section. Great cheeses.’ My other leg swung from side to side in front of the washing machine.

She began to wring out the dress.

I leaned back and noticed for the first time how tanned she was. Fair skin that should never have seen the sun. Her neck was long, even graceful. But her ribs corrugated the top of her chest, just enough for me to wonder how the rest of her body fared. I followed the line of her breast until it was lost in the gathers of fabric just above her waist. I glanced up to find her looking at me for the first time. I smiled. ‘They have great coffee’, I said. ‘I can show you if you like.’

She placed her dress and two pairs of undies carefully in a bucket. She turned and walked out the door. I jumped down from the machine as it came to a whirring finale under me.

‘You could have told me if you didn’t like coffee’, I said, but she was already halfway to the stairs.

I walk down to Fitzgerald Street

Greg’s Discount Chemist

I buy pseudoephedrine

nasal decongestant

Codral Cold and Flu

I take a night time tablet

I lie down thinking of you

But could you call me pushy? I would never have thought so. Pushy. No, not me. Except maybe with my sister. She’d give way so easily, though. I think I hated that in her. Weakness, like when I’d slam a

door and kick it for good measure once it was shut. Shutting her into silence. Not always even wanting my own way, but rarely ending up with anything but.

But you couldn’t call me pushy. Cowardly perhaps. Without the bony outer shell I probably needed for this life. I had, in fact, thought myself very clever at the time my sister and I shared a room. How old had I been? All of seventeen?

It was then those slammed doors came back to me with all their force.

When Margrit, or whoever she was, passed me in the laundry and I heard the quiet click of the stairwell door, I assumed she’d seen me for who I really was. And had decided not to bother. *I wish I could kill time but time’s killing me. I wish I could walk the line but I can’t feel my feet.*

When I wasn’t writing or spending endless hours over bottomless coffees in the diner on the corner, I made the most of the fine days. Actually fine is too mundane. Effulgent. The sun there almost drew you out of doors and pushed you out onto the street, forcing you to make a decision and walk one direction or another. One day I walked north for blocks and blocks. Down deserted roads with old cracks badly asphalted. Past shop windows, graffitied and advertising dating services that presumably could boast few success stories. No one going in and no one strolling by. I suspected then that I had found areas of the city so forgotten by day that Chernobyl could have happened there and nobody would have been the wiser.

I was coming back from a walk on the east side of town when I found Margrit at the top of the stairs. I hadn’t seen her for days and had thought she must have moved on. It was with a kind of irritation that I saw she was crying. I had come to think of her as a phantom from a song. Incapable of such base emotion. She looked up as I stood on the landing below her. I was just wondering if I had time to turn around and creep back down the stairs. I could always go up the fire escape.

‘I’ve been waiting for you’, she said.

I did nothing more than stand there.

‘Could I talk to you?’ she asked after a few moments. I could hardly

hear her voice.

I climbed two steps. Then another and sat down. She watched me and then slid down two steps herself to where I sat. I saw she was holding a letter. It was torn and creased at the edges like it had been wrung in her hands.

I was silent.

'I just received a letter', she said. 'A letter that tells me ... it says ...' She began to cry again. Wail, almost. I watched, unable to do or say anything as she swayed over and clung to the banister and then to the carved mahogany of the poles, leaving dark prints where her fingers had gripped. She had on that same dress that she wore the morning we met in the hall outside her room. It was floral and it smelled of rosewater. Or maybe that was just my imagination.

I touched her back and moved my fingers lightly in case she threw them off, offended. She wasn't a phantom. She was suddenly real. She straightened her arms and turned her head to look at me again. Then she slowly, painfully moved her head to rest it on my arm. My shoulder.

'My father died', she said.

The view from her room was more lovely than mine. She could, if she had wanted, see all the way across the city to the mountains. If it had been my room I would have dragged the bed, or at least a chair, over to that window just so I could sit and watch for hours the people in the mall and the traffic that made a moving stream of grids across the city. But it wasn't my room, although I was beginning to believe it could be, if I wanted it to be.

'I never knew him the way I should have', she was saying.

I turned from the window, hands behind my back.

'I never believed my father had been all to me that he should have been. He was weak', she continued. 'A weak man.' I walked to the bed and sat down. 'Perhaps –' she swallowed. 'Maybe he was only doing his best.' She took my hand and looked at me. 'Do you think that's possible?'

'Margrit', I said, but she moved toward me and kissed my lips. Almost urgently. I had never been kissed before. Not in that way. From

someone like her.

We lay and watched the sun as it peeped from under the dark clouds that were making their way towards the city. We lay and watched the afternoon turn violet. *In my dream I can't get out. I taste chlorine and it feels like pins in my mouth.*

I hunted everywhere for the chocolate I had brought with me from Europe. I had never thought to eat it myself. I only brought it all that way in case I found someone to give it to. Chocolate wasn't my thing, but even I had to admit that the Belgians made chocolate like no one else on earth.

The clouds had moved beyond the city by the morning, after dropping their cares on us all night by way of thunderstorms. It was early afternoon when I decided it was a good time to go and give Margrit the chocolate. It seemed she had finally slept soundly and she would love it. It was wrapped beautifully in images of famous paintings. Monet's *Waterlilies*, among others. Everyone loved Monet.

As I approached her door I had the terrible feeling that she would not be there. Had left in the night to put as much distance between us as she possibly could. But that was ridiculous. We had talked late into the evening. She had told me who she was and I had listened. We had spoken of our fathers and our childhoods spent on opposite ends of the same continent. She had held me. And touched me.

I tapped on her door. She wasn't going to be there. If I went down to the office desk and questioned them as to her whereabouts they would say, *oh, she left.*

Margrit opened the door.

'Hi', I said leaning against the doorframe, smiling. 'I brought you something.'

She stood there holding the door open but not moving. She blinked languidly and looked down at my feet.

'I brought you some chocolate. It's from Belgium. Actually I bought it in Germany. Never went to Belgium. I cheated.' I held it out to her. She looked at it but didn't move. 'I nibbled a bit on the side, I know.

But it's okay. I thought you'd like it. I thought maybe, you know, if you were feeling up to it, we could go down to that coffee house I was telling you about. Best coffee in town. Well, better than the diner on 16th anyway. I – I stopped. But I shouldn't have. I should have kept talking and then maybe she wouldn't have done what she did next.

'Margrit?' I said.

She slowly closed the door. I stood there, hearing another song playing over in my head.

I wake in a sweat

amidst my fears

I think the house is haunted

Feels like I've been sleeping for years.

The door clicked quietly in its lock.

Note: 'Greg's Discount Chemist' lyrics reproduced with permission by Carla Geneve.

KEITH NUNES

Night with Venus

Alone

Then she's here

Tendrils of perfume

Uncaged smile

Esoteric stories of unimportant failures

Follow her onto patio roosting above glitter city

Steps from chair to balcony beam barefoot

Ultraviolet hair lifted carelessly by undercurrent sea breeze

Sings Piaf through Dietrich

Unearths my imagination

Hands it to me

Climbs

HELEN CHAMBERS

Simon and Brigitta

Simon loves her from the very first time he sees her. He visits her twice daily, each day: once on his way into the office and once on his way home, and even following the same route at weekends. She smiles back at him. He loves her for the way her clean lines curve round, and soon he greets her in his head: 'Good morning, Brigitta; Good evening Brigitta.' Her elegant arcs sweep upwards in unbroken lines and her slim walkaway is suspended from tall legs by four heavy cables. He knows her intimately, penetrates between her uprights, slides his bare hand across her silky handrail. The River Aire churns and swirls beneath her, rattling the remains of the winter ice and carrying the scent of departing snow.

Simon always slows down as he crosses, inhales her metallic aroma and senses her gentle rebound of his every careful footstep reverberating through him as if the gravitational pull of his personal mass decreases significantly at this point. Caressing his Brigitta is the highlight of his otherwise stuffy indoor day, the only time he feels a connection to anything apart from work.

Springtime sun filters through the tower blocks, illuminating Brigitta's stately beauty and Simon stirs. He takes his first lunchbreak in months, and eats his sandwiches shivering on concrete steps overlooking the river, from where he admires Brigitta's outline, but equally where, he is sure, she cannot see him watching over her.

Spring lengthens into summer. Couples amble over her, arm in arm, stopping to admire their reflection in the still waters beneath her. One morning, his trailing hand catches onto something metallic, and he is horrified to find her manacled by a disfiguring padlock. Looking closely, he sees scratchy initials engraved into the metal. By now he is taking extended morning coffee and afternoon tea breaks standing on Brigitta – only a ten minute powerwalk from his office, if you don't count the extra five minutes either way in the lift. More padlocks appear like warts, one ignorant couple copying another, desecrating her sanctity.

Simon finds, with careful planning, he can make her his outdoor office for hours at a time, taking phone calls whilst pacing gently barefoot along her spine, sitting note-taking across her back, leaning his laptop against her handrail. No one dare violate her on his watch.

Summer passes, and in the autumn, he is sacked. He takes his cardboard box of belongings straight to Brigitta, and one by one, he throws them over her shoulders into the foaming river. Last of all, he pulls out bolt cutters and sets to, cutting through all the padlocks one by one, flinging them into the current. Then he stretches himself out along her length, caressing her back until he falls asleep, his head on her shoulder.

SIBONEY DUFF

The Promise

She sits outside the store, her back to a window display of flowing scarves and kid-leather gloves, crystal pendants and candles. The bench she sits on is dark green, its paint flaking, the metal ends that pull it together beginning to rust. She remembers sitting on this same bench as a young child, back when the wares on offer had been glass bottles of milk and fresh baked bread and ice cream scooped out of metal containers and crammed into wafer cones.

Today there are no ice creams, and she is not interested in scarves and gloves.

She looks at her watch.

‘Mind if I ask?’

Startled, she turns. A man, tall and weathered, is watching her. He signals her watch.

‘Oh’, she says. ‘It’s a quarter to ten.’

He smiles in thanks and she smiles back. Then he points at the space on the bench next to her and raises his eyebrows in query. She nods.

Waves of people stroll the footpath before them, their arms laden with monogrammed paper bags. Couples languish in front of old-style shop windows, arms entwined; children race each other ahead of their parents and disappear into open doorways; faces peer through real estate windows and imagine themselves living amid the cafes and speciality stores. There is a weekend cadence about these people, a leisure that speaks of holidays and casual extravagance. They aren’t locals. The locals here still wear stained tee shirts and thongs on a Saturday morning; these people wear too-blue denim, and scent.

‘You live here?’ The old man has his right arm resting across the back of the bench, his thin legs facing straight ahead. His face is leather, tanned and cracked, his skin creased in a thousand wrinkles. He waits for her to answer.

‘Yes I do.’

‘Been here long?’

‘Most of my life.’

He raises his eyebrows and smiles. ‘Bet you’ve seen some changes then.’

‘A few.’

She likes him. She isn’t in the mood to like anyone this morning but, despite her best intentions, she likes him. She glances down at her watch.

‘Is there somewhere you need to be?’ he asks.

She shakes her head. ‘No, not really.’

‘I see.’

Directly across from the green bench on which they’re seated is a pedestrian crossing, and on the other side of the crossing is a café. She glances at the café and then, just as quickly, looks away. She stares at her shoes.

A toddler falls on the pavement in front of the bench, is still for a second, then wails. She leans forward to help him, but the old man beats her to it. She watches, surprised by how quickly he moves, and the soothing tone of his voice as he talks to the screaming child. A mother appears, then a father, and the little boy is enveloped in cuddles and whisked away, a nod of thanks from the father to the old man, and then they’re gone.

‘Children are like that, aren’t they?’ says the old man. ‘Never paying attention.’ He pauses. ‘You got any kids?’

‘No’, she says. Almost, she thinks, but no. Thank God.

‘I’ve got two – boy and girl.’ He chuckles. ‘They’re in their forties – older than you, I dare say – and I’m still saying boy and girl.’ He shakes his head slowly.

‘What are their names?’ she asks, aware she should be making an effort.

‘William and Grace.’

‘Like the TV show?’ His brow furrows.

‘Never mind’, she says.

She looks at her watch then glances across the road at the queue that is building up outside the café. The building is long and thin with a red door centred at the narrow entrance and two large windows set either side. She can see the barista working through his orders in the window to the left. Through the window on the right she can see a man and a woman sitting at a small table.

'My wife likes it here', says the old man. He turns his head and scans the faces in the shop window behind them. 'There she is.' He points to an elegant lady fingering a scarf in the window display. The lady catches his eye and smiles.

The mercury is starting to climb.

'Looks like a popular place', says the old man, nodding towards the café.

'It is.'

'Is it good?'

'It used to be.' She realises how that must sound. 'It is still, I guess, not that I stop for coffee much these days.' She wonders why that is, why she hasn't visited a café in ... years. Why she works most days and then stays home when she isn't working. She used to like going out for coffee; they used to do it quite often.

'Alice likes cafés. Shops and cafés. I do it cause she likes it, but I'd rather a cuppa on the veranda at home any day.' He watches the waitress across the road fuss over a group of eight. 'Less hullabaloo'.

She finds herself nodding.

'People forget their manners in places like that', he says. 'See her?' She follows his gaze and sees a large woman wearing a bright red caftan, seated at one of the alfresco tables off to the side. 'She hasn't even looked the waitress in the eye the whole time she's been taking her order. Not once.' He shakes his head. 'And that young woman, the pretty blonde in the window' – she knows he's talking about the couple at the small table in the window on the right – 'she didn't either.'

She looks at the couple, at the beautiful woman with the delicate features and the flaxen hair. She looks small next to the man opposite her. Her legs are crossed at the ankles and tucked under her chair. Her back is straight, her head bowed just slightly. Her hands are clasped on

the table in front of her. The man looks uncomfortable, unsure; after a while he reaches across the table for her hand. The blonde woman pulls away just before he touches her. The waitress arrives with two small white cups balanced on small white saucers.

'Maybe that's why', says the old man.

'Why what?' she asks.

'Why she seems so rude.'

She says nothing, waits for him to continue.

'She's upset.'

He's right. She does look sad.

'Reckon he's done something', says the old man.

'What makes you say that?'

'It's him she's mad at. See the way she won't look at him? That's what women do.'

The blonde lady in the window is holding her cup with both hands now and the woman on the green bench watching her wonders if those hands are shaking. She notes that the man in the window is leaning back on his chair, watching the barista over the top of his companion's head. His cup, with its tiny saucer, remains untouched.

'I wonder what he did?' says the old man.

'What makes you so sure he's done something?'

The old man shrugs. 'He's acting like a man who knows he's in the wrong.'

'How can you tell?'

'Same way you can tell when a kid says they haven't done anything and you know that they have. The way they move or turn their head or look about. We betray ourselves all the time.'

The man in the window is still, stoic. He's watching the other patrons now, slowly shifting his gaze from one table to another, avoiding the woman opposite him. Then he turns his head left, towards the window, looks through the glass, and for a few short seconds he's looking in their direction, staring straight at them, at the woman on the green bench and the old man beside her. She is suddenly aware of holding her breath, so she inhales, and in that instant the man's attention slips

back inside the café, like a snake recoiling.

‘A man in the right doesn’t ignore a woman like that when she’s upset’, the old man continues, his voice an anchor in a sea of movement. ‘He comforts her, holds her hand. Does something. A man who does nothing either doesn’t care or is in the wrong and not ready to admit it. I’m taking door number two.’ The old man coughs, covering his mouth with his hand, then retrieves a handkerchief from the pocket of his pants and wipes his hands, his mouth.

‘What if it’s the first one? Maybe he just doesn’t care.’

‘Oh, he cares. He wouldn’t stay there if he didn’t care. He would’ve left by now if he didn’t care.’

The woman looks down at her watch. Twenty past ten.

‘He’ll try again, if he’s worth his salt.’ The old man waits. ‘Or maybe not.’

‘Try what?’

‘Try for her hand. Or lean in. Say something.’

They watch the couple in the window but neither the blonde lady nor the tall man makes a move.

‘Doesn’t look good’, says the old man, his voice sounding sad.

The old man’s wife emerges from the store and stands behind him, the rose-coloured scarf from the window display draped across her shoulders. She smiles and taps the old man gently on the shoulder. He turns, lights up, stands.

‘Alice. That’s lovely. Alice, this is...’ he pauses.

‘Sarah’, she says, offering Alice her hand.

‘Has he been talking your ear off, love?’ laughs Alice.

‘We’ve been musing about people’, says the old man, and Sarah realises she doesn’t know his name. Then he turns to Alice, offers her his arm. As they both turn to walk away, the old man looks back over his shoulder. ‘Be in no hurry’, he says smiling, glancing at the timepiece strapped to her wrist like a manacle. ‘It all happens soon enough.’

Sarah watches them leave, notes how Alice snuggles into the crook of his arm, how he lowers his head to be closer to hers. She sinks slowly to the bench and glances at her watch and then at the café across the road.

The queue has dissipated; the barista has temporarily abandoned his post. Sarah looks in through the window to the right of the red door and sees that the man at the table is now sitting alone, his head bowed and still. She looks at the floor beside the blonde lady’s chair, searches for a handbag. There is none. The blonde woman with the delicate features has gone.

Something inside Sarah’s chest groans, her toes tighten inside her shoes and her knees draw together.

The man pushes himself away from the table, unfurls and strides towards the register. Sarah watches him, watches the grace in his movements. He pays, slips his wallet into the back pocket of his pants, and turns towards the doors. His hair, dark and beginning to grey at the temples, is tousled by the breeze. He waits at the crossing for a break in traffic, then strides onto the white stripes, his legs long and lithe.

Sarah’s hands clench and unclench. Her mouth is dry. She concentrates on her breathing.

The man approaches Sarah’s side of the road, looks directly at her. His eyes are red; not obviously so, but Sarah can tell.

‘It’s done.’ He presses his hands against the sides of his trousers. ‘Let’s go home’, he says, in a voice barely his own.

Sarah stays where she is.

‘Sarah?’

No response. He exhales loudly and she can feel his exasperation, knows it well, after all these years. He reaches a hand to his head and as he begins to run those fingers, long and strong, the colour of latte, through his hair she looks away, the scene, his movements, suddenly unbearable.

‘I did what you wanted’, he says through gritted teeth and she can feel the resentment, the indignation, his and her own, build like a wave. And in an instant she is there again, at the place she has landed each time he has done this, each time she has known and tried not to know. She feels the tentacles of that place slide around her ankles and she shifts her feet aside.

‘You have never done what I wanted’, she says, and this time it is her voice pushing through gritted teeth.

Her chest is pounding. Her hands tremble. She dares herself to return his glare and when she does she is glad for the sea of strangers surrounding them, for the anonymity and safety they afford. Now her calves are shaking; her knees, her thighs; shudders so deep they feel speared from the earth. Volatile and audacious. Later tonight, as the sky darkens and she sits alone in the hotel room she has already booked with the bag that is already packed and waiting for her in the hire car parked behind the café, she will remember this moment, this fulcrum point, and know that it has always been here, waiting for her to leverage her weight against all that resistance.

She grips the metal end of the painted green bench, the same bench that once held her young body while thick vanilla ice cream spilled across chubby fingers, where she felt for the first time the firm wet lips of a boy on her mouth, and draws her body upright. When she stands, her forehead is barely level with his chin but she squares up to his gaze and pulls back her shoulders.

‘Thank you’, she says, and she means it.

She turns then towards the high end of the street and takes her first step. In an instant, his hand is on her arm and she freezes. She doesn’t turn to face him, doesn’t say a word. After a few seconds he lets go and she feels herself glide into the sea of tourists and shoppers and wannabe locals.

ROSEMARY WILDBLOOD

Becky and Ella

After her sleepover, Becky said, ‘Ella’s house has the deepest carpets and her brother has his own nursery with spotty curtains.’ She added, ‘They’ve a *huge* lawn compared to ours and a round trampoline with sides. It’s much better than our scungy old square one.’

Becky’s mum tipped the cake mixture into the tin, which she then placed in the oven. ‘Would you like to scrape the bowl?’

Becky closed her eyes in bliss as she licked the spoon clean. ‘Ella’s mum always has *bought* cake with lemon or pink icing.’

‘Ella’s dad’s an accountant and her mum works too, so they’ve more to spend than us.’

‘You could work’, Becky said.

‘I could’, her mother agreed, ‘but I’m not as clever as Ella’s mum.’ She paused. ‘Anyway, I’d rather stay home with your baby brother, just as I did with you.’ When her daughter looked disgruntled, she asked, ‘Shall we read a story together?’

Becky got the book from the bookcase about the princess who slayed her own dragons. It was tatty – but she had some newer books as well ...

When her dad came home, Becky told him, ‘Ella’s daddy always wears a suit to work.’

‘I use overalls. There’d be no point in my wearing a suit.’

‘Your father’s a skilled electrician’, Becky’s mum said. ‘You should be proud of him.’

‘I am.’ Becky paused. ‘Ella’s dad takes work into his study, every night.’

‘Poor dude.’ Her dad grinned. ‘I get hacked off when I’m called out, but at least it’s not that often.’ He added, ‘There are good and bad aspects to every job.’

‘I don’t think I want to be an accountant – or an electrician – when I grow up.’ Becky wrinkled her nose.

‘Good for you. You should choose what you like – and like what you do ...’ Her dad went over to Joe in his high chair and talked to him in their special language. It sounded like, ‘*Nyaah, nyaah, nyaah*’, and he put heaps of expression into it.

Joe said ‘*nyaah, nyaah, nyaah*’, back – which made them all laugh. Joe chuckled too, as if he knew he was funny.

‘Would you like to invite Ella over next weekend?’ Becky’s mum asked.

‘Yes please. Ella *loves* Gordon and she thinks your pasta’s to die for ...’

‘Quite right. Gordon’s an excellent guinea pig – and your mum’s the best cook in the world.’ Her dad seized his wife in his arms and danced around the room with her.

‘Stop it!’ Becky’s mum said – but then she caught hold of her daughter in passing and made her waltz with them.

Joe banged his spoon on his plastic tray and said, ‘*Nyaah, nyaah nyaah*.’ Then he raised his arms, for someone to lift him out.

Afterwards, Becky said, ‘I don’t think Ella’s mum and dad ever dance.’

‘Don’t be too sure’, her mum murmured. ‘They’re probably just as silly as we are when there’s no one to see them ...’ She added, ‘Ella’s lovely – and I’m glad she’s your friend.’

LISA KENWAY

Bird in the Hand

The flip-clock on the panel beater’s wall clicked over. How could it be three already? Leah wouldn’t beat Kai home from school. Again. She pulled out her phone and scrolled through Facebook. Wet dogs on beaches. Smiles and decorated cakes. A hundred friends, but not one she wanted to call.

Nearby, a man cleared his throat and Leah looked up from the screen. A big unit had materialised in front of her. His name, *Brett*, was embroidered on the pocket of his grimy overalls. Sweat beaded his forehead and drew circles under his arms. How long had he been standing there, watching her?

‘That your car out there? Red hatch, covered in bird crap? Someone gone to town on the duco?’ he said.

He wasn’t exactly good-looking. Too much forehead and too little hair. But his deep-blue eyes were something else. They drew Leah in, sent a jolt down her spine. It was time she gave someone else a chance, but did it have to be another tradie? Why wouldn’t her stomach ever lurch for an accountant?

His gaze moved to her hands and Leah willed them to stop shaking. The trembling had started the moment she left work. When she’d stood in the shopping centre carpark, staring at the carnage, while her workmates passed judgment with their silence.

If only she could prove it was Dave who took to her car with a sharp edge. And broke the AVO. If some expert could compare the letters that spelled out *whore* and *slut* on the side of her Ford Fiesta to Dave’s juddery cursive, she might get custody of Kai and really piss him off.

She nodded. ‘Yeah, it’s mine. How long will it take to fix?’

He scratched his chin. ‘Week. Maybe two.’

Two weeks without wheels meant no chance of getting to court for the custody hearing. It meant Dave would win. Leah crossed her arms in front and pushed her boobs together. ‘Any chance of a courtesy car,

Brett?’

The man sized up Leah’s chest. ‘Sure. For a price.’

Leah stared at the counter. Took a deep breath. Raised her eyes. ‘Name it.’

He smirked and slapped a *Back in five minutes* sign on the door. ‘Have a drink with me?’

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Brett heaved on the frosted-glass door and held it open for Leah. The pub’s décor was dark and muted – burgundy wallpaper and scuffed timber panelling – not that most of the guys in there would have noticed. Their attention was fixed on something else: Keno numbers, footy on the big screen, the glow from the pokies.

Brett pushed past her, towards the bar. He turned his head and caught Leah’s eye. ‘Drink?’

She shrugged. ‘A beer, thanks.’

He raised a brow and smiled. What did he expect her to order? A chardonnay?

Stale beer fumes rose off the carpet and filled Leah’s nose, sour and rank, like Dave after a big night. Horny and reeking. Her mouth full of bile. ‘Let’s go outside,’ she said.

The beer garden was a ten-by-ten courtyard of mossy pavers. Splintery tables lined up in two perfect rows and tatty red umbrellas cast octagonal shadows, throwing one side of each table into dense shade.

Leah’s phone crowed like a rooster – Kai’s custom tone. She giggled when she saw the message: *On da bus*. He was obviously going for gangsta style today. At least he wasn’t home yet.

Brett squinted in the glare. ‘Your boyfriend?’

‘Hardly. Just my son.’ She sipped her beer. ‘There’s no boyfriend.’

His face softened. ‘Must be hard, raising a kid on your own.’

‘It’s not that bad.’ The lie snagged in Leah’s throat. If she told him the truth, he’d probably bolt for the door.

Brett reached into the bowl of peanuts in the middle of the table, peeled the shell off one and tossed it to the ground. A pile of husks at

his feet. ‘You’re fit.’ His eyes slid over the inspirational quote on her tank top. ‘You work out?’

Leah sighed. Yeah, right. ‘I work – at Lorna Jane.’

‘Good for you. Bit of independence.’

Leah snorted. ‘My ex sure didn’t like it.’ The weight loss, the job, none of it. ‘Said I thought I was too good for him.’

Brett leaned forward. ‘I reckon you were.’

Leah struggled to remember the last time someone had given her a compliment. Her phone sprang to life once more: *In da house. Where r u?*

Home soon, she typed, before burying the mobile in her bag.

‘Sounds like you need to go.’ Brett dropped a set of car keys on the table, his hand brushing Leah’s. A fizz on her skin. ‘Car’s parked across the road.’

‘Thanks.’ Leah closed her fingers around the cold metal. ‘So that’s it then?’

‘Only if you want it to be.’

Leah ignored the muffled *cock-a-doodle-doo* in her handbag. When Kai was on a roll, there was no stopping him. If only she hadn’t told him messages to her number were free.

She eyed the pile of peanut shells beside Brett’s boot. He shrugged and kicked, scattering the fibrous peelings across the courtyard. He scanned her face, studying her reaction, but she’d had years of practice at giving nothing away.

‘Come back to the shop? I’ll get a six-pack at the Bottle-O,’ he whispered in her ear, his breath hot. ‘Bit more private there.’

Desire rippled down her spine. Or was it dread? Whatever it was, she wanted out.

‘Sorry, Brett. I’ve gotta get home.’

Brett’s face clouded over, and he clenched his jaw. ‘Suit yourself.’ He turned his back and struck off towards the bar.

≈

Leah pulled up in front of the house. She wasn’t ready to get out of the car yet. Brett had seemed like an option until his face closed down, just

like Dave's always did. Then again, Leah saw a bit of Dave in every guy she met. Maybe she should give Brett another chance.

She climbed out of the car and trudged along the front path. A large flake of paint drifted on the breeze and settled at her feet. The old weatherboard cottage was moulting. Curls of beige paint lifted away to reveal the past. The exposed layer was flesh coloured, a picked scab.

Inside, Kai had dumped his school gear on the floor: scuffed shoes, backpack and hat. In the kitchen, the fridge door hung ajar, and the noisy old box belched ice-cold air into the humidity.

'Kai! How many times have I told you to shut the fridge?' She put the lid back on the milk and slammed the door closed.

The shrill drone of cicadas invaded the room, tunnelling into Leah's skull. 'And don't leave the back door wide open either.' She peered into the garden. The yellowing kikuyu lawn had been overrun by a forest of scrappy weeds when she wasn't looking. Another job to add to the list. But no sign of Kai.

She picked up his bag and shoes and flung them into his bedroom. He wasn't in there either. And then it hit, like a boot in the belly. *He was gone.*

'Kai!' Leah thundered down the hall, swinging open cupboards and squatting to search under beds. He hid from her once, for a prank, but after she went ballistic, there was no way he'd try that again. Even so, she forced herself to check.

It didn't take long to comb the house, to be certain he wasn't there.

A gaping horror filled Leah's chest. She remembered the message that Kai had sent, the one she ignored. Her fingers fumbled with the clasp on her handbag and she trawled through used tissues, receipts and scratched pairs of sunglasses. She finally located her mobile phone at the bottom of the bag, gripped it and squeezed the *messages* icon.

Kai's last message was an image without a caption. A close-up of a dead bird, bent out of shape. The wind had caught one wing, and it stood perpendicular to the road surface, black and glossy like a macabre sundial. Kai had taken the picture on the street, in front of the house. Where Leah parked the car a few minutes ago.

Hands shaking, she dialled his number and held the phone to her ear.

Kai's phone shuddered silently at the other end of the kitchen bench.

Leah paced a furrow in the shagpile carpet. Why was Kai sending her pictures of roadkill? Something must have interrupted him before he could finish the message. Dave wouldn't dare come to the house and take Kai, would he? Leah strode another circuit of the room. After the number he did on her car, she wouldn't put anything past him.

Why hadn't she gone straight home? A stone settled in her gut. They could be halfway to Sydney by now.

She fumbled with her phone. Who could she call? Not Dave; if he hadn't taken Kai, she'd be playing into his hands. Not Mum, with her hand-wringing about why Leah couldn't keep her man. She hit redial.

'Brett's Bodyworks.'

'Brett, it's Leah. The one with the scratched-up car.'

'Hey, Leah. Change your mind?'

'It's Kai. He's missing. I think his dad took him.' Her voice splintered, the air in the room like hot tar.

'He's probably hanging with friends. Or a girl.'

'Brett, he's nine.'

'Fuck, Leah. You left a nine-year-old kid home alone?' Voices murmured at the other end of the line, cutlery clattered, and someone yelled, 'Dinner time.'

Leah took a deep breath. She hardly needed a parenting lecture from Brett. 'Will you help me or not?'

'Call the cops. I've gotta go.'

'I left him home alone. I'll never get custody if I do. Please, can you help?'

Leah could hear the panicky whine in her voice, ramping to a crescendo. And Brett's silent reply. She slammed the phone down on the bench.

Where else could Kai be? The only place she hadn't checked was the shed. Cobwebs, lengths of timber and old tins of paint, but you never know what might lure a small boy.

Leah stepped outside, took three steps towards the shed and froze; the step-ladder was wedged between the fence and the trunk of a large

eucalypt at the bottom of the yard. Hope and terror wound around her chest, a thick length of elastic, pulling her towards the tree and tightening with every step.

She stood at the base of the tree and craned her neck. Kai's skinny legs straddled a fork in one of the branches, his upper body hidden in the canopy. His grubby little foot stretched down, searching for a foothold. Leah climbed to the top of the ladder, reached up and flattened her hand, lowering him to safety.

She wrapped Kai in her arms and pressed his wiry body to hers. Tears ran down her cheeks and drenched his matted hair. Rather than folding into her, though, into the space that was just for him, Kai stiffened and pulled away. 'Mum, look out!' He extended his right arm, palm open to the sky, his fingers curled around two pink speckled eggs.

Leah held out her hand. 'May I?'

'Mkay. Be careful.'

He tilted his palm, and the eggs rolled into Leah's cupped hand. She sat them side by side on their rounded bases, noses to the sky. Almost weightless. Leah ran her index finger over one, over the curve of the shell. It was perfectly smooth with rose smudges, as though someone had carved it out of marble.

She lowered herself to a crouch and held his gaze. 'Why did you take the eggs, Kai?'

'She's dead.'

'Who?'

'Maggie. I sent you a pic.'

The image of the magpie on the road; at last Leah understood. 'What did you do with the bird?'

Kai's dark-brown eyes pooled with tears. He pointed at an old shoe box on the porch.

Leah stroked Kai's shoulder. 'We've got to put the eggs back in the nest.'

'But they'll die without her.'

'There's always a mummy and daddy bird, Kai. The nest's empty now, but the other bird's probably just getting a drink.' Leah prayed she

was right. 'I'll do it. I don't want them swooping you. Be my lookout, okay?'

Kai nodded and gripped either side of the ladder to steady it. Leah slid the eggs into the zip pocket at the back of her leggings – the one that joggers use for keys and cash – and began the climb.

She hoisted herself into the lowest fork, the ladder swaying under foot. Hips jammed in the V-shaped space, Leah paused to plan her route. The branch above her was as thick as her waist, with nothing to grab hold of. The bark rough and grainy. Little pieces of it slipped away under her hand, leaving a gritty residue on her skin.

She inched along, gripping the branch with her knees and tearing a hole in her leggings. Ants crawled between Leah's fingers and scurried along her arms, but she continued towards the next fork, determined not to look down. Her limbs were jelly and blood roared in her ears. The nest almost within reach.

The air moved near Leah's ear and she spun around, one hand instinctively covering her head, but it was just a noisy miner. Aggressive with other birds, but not about to peck her eyes out. She had to return the eggs before the magpie came back.

Leah stretched her arm above her head and lowered them, one by one, into the nest. Velvet under her fingertips, delicate and forbidden. And Leah a trespasser.

She scraped her way back down as fast as she could.

≈

'Did I miss anything?' Leah handed Kai a glass of Milo and sat down beside him.

'Nah.'

The change had finally arrived. A cool southerly gust whipped Kai's hair into his face. He pushed it back but didn't take his eyes off the tree. 'Thanks, Mum.'

He swung his bare legs back and forth, the *chh, chh* of feet scraping concrete, and sipped at the drink. He looked like a musketeer, with his chocolatey moustache. Kai shifted sideways and Leah leaned in. Electricity arced between them. She buried her face in his hair and

inhaled the musty scent of him.

Kai jolted away and leapt to his feet, pointing at the sky. 'Mum, look!'

The magpie stretched her wings, tracing a confident path through the air, her tail a delicate lady's fan, white with a black fringe. Her glossy feathers gleamed like armour in the late-afternoon sun as she swooped into the canopy of the gum tree.

Leah pulled Kai onto her lap. He was too big to fit, but he nestled his head into her neck. The hot in-out of his breath on her skin: therapy.

Inside, in the kitchen, a rectangle of light bounced along to Taylor Swift.

'You gonna get that, Mum?'

Leah pressed her lips to his forehead. 'If it's important, they'll ring back.'

GAYELENE CARBIS

And then the stars too did sing

My mother. I feed her, mush in a spoon that seeps down her chin. No teeth, only gums. Half-dead eyes. Cold blue mouth opening like a fish. Who she used to be is forgotten. And I? I am forever young. Life pulses in my veins in my green silk suit. Mascaraed eyes and sheer loose legs. In America I see *Twelve Angry Men*. New York, no less. At NYU I am not new not old not easy. I go to Niagara Falls twenty-seven times.

My opus is opera. I soar with singers, arm myself with arias. The black hole of naked throats. My mother is abandoned, left to that small life left to her now. My thesis is children, separation and loss. Someone wants to sue me for what I say about mothers. Someone screams at me from across the corridor as I'm closing my door. My husband doesn't write. I am like some poor old dear, who has no one. America is not quite the dream you dream.

Last night I dreamt my mother was sucking at my small breast. My chest grew thin, skeletal, and I grew old, my bones seemed about to break. I tried to soothe, to reason but still she sucked, an infant starved and greedy. You were a perfect child, she told me. You never left me dry.

These are too many words. My mother has stopped speaking. I keep talking. As if she takes it in, gulping it down with fluids, or absorbing it through the skin, by osmosis. I send her messages. SOS, I say. Are you there? Is anyone there? Are *you* in there?

My throat grows sore from the effort of one-way conversation. There is no sign. Send me a sign. I still believe. In choir at church, the woman beside me sings offkey. I find that almost offensive. I want to tell her: don't you know God is listening?

I tell my mother about America but it's so far away now, I can't remember if it is real or some future incarnation where I end up in a capella because I came too late for gospel.

And then one day, I started singing a song you'd taught me. Singing and looking vacantly out the window, watching the flowers. And when

I turned the light in your eyes stopped me. I kept right on singing and you looked at me as if you saw me. You opened your mouth like a soprano and sang every word. We sang in parts and I would have sung way past rules and regulations except that I remembered there was a real world. Beyond this.

Now, you have receded. A line here, a word there, is all that remains. I have come back from America as you die a little quicker. But I remember the light that day after turning from the flowers and I will sing and sing and keep on singing, even after you have gone. Because remnants are enough for me.

MAGGIE RAINEY-SMITH

Two blue ticks

The baby photos are beautiful. George is perfect. He has his father's head, his mother's eyes and those lips ... Anna can't decide.

David says, 'The lips belong to the baby.'

He's such a pragmatist.

Anna decides to post a picture on WhatsApp to her friend Penelope. She'll be delighted to learn that Anna is a grandmother. Pen has known Jonathan since he was in nappies.

Here's a photo of Jonathan's new baby. It's amazing to be a grandmother. How did we get this old?

Two grey ticks turned blue. Pen has received the photo.

'What does Pen think?' David has decided to look up from his laptop.

But Pen hasn't replied.

Anna checks again, an hour later. Two blue ticks.

Meanwhile, George's mother sends a Viber claiming the baby's lips belong to her mother. Anna's not certain. She finds a photo of the new mother's mother from the wedding, two years ago, by scrolling back on her Viber messages. She flicks from Viber to WhatsApp comparing the newborn George to his maternal grandmother.

Pen still hasn't responded.

You'd think she'd say something about the newborn George. She says so to David.

David says to give it a rest, because people have other things going on in their lives.

Pen has obviously seen the photo.

Anna checks Facebook and notices Pen has been posting pictures of their holiday together last year in Hawaii. She ticks an 'irritated' like, hoping to nudge Pen into a reply. It's a nice photo of the four of them.

She isn't allowed to put George on Facebook. Her son Jonathan

forbids this. She's tempted though and runs the idea past David. He does that thing. Not an eye roll but his eyebrows move and seem to close over his nose. She knew before she asked.

Two days later and still no response from Pen on WhatsApp about the photo of George.

And then at 9:45 pm, that evening. Congratulations, Grandma.

Just, two, words.

Anna sends an effusive reply, repeating all that she said in the first message, this time trying not to gloat that she is a grandmother before Pen.

A week later, Pen replies: We're off to Hawaii tomorrow. Sorry haven't got back to you.

A Viber message comes through from Jonathan. A picture of George in the arms of his maternal grandmother. David places the lips immediately.

Anna sends a message back to her son. Those are your lips, definitely! (Smiley face).

When Pen sends updates from Hawaii, Anna leaves the two grey ticks grey, for at least a week, before she reads the message and a whole day after that, before she replies. Sounds AWFULLY hot. It's lovely here. Spring has arrived.

And she knows she shouldn't, but she sends four photos of George, one, after, the, other. And a short message.

George has got Jonathan's lips. What do you think? A week on, Anna keeps checking to see if the two grey ticks will turn blue.

ELIZABETH SMITHER

Cranes

All day in the hotel room
in a red chair by the picture window
I sit looking at cranes.

On the fourth floor I am level
with the new fourth floor they are building.
Seven cranes stretching into the distance.

Three quite close and moving together
in a choreography that causes them to cross.
I see their drivers climb up, wearily

or is it caution, pausing at each level
their spines – if they lean back – protected by a cage
up to the solitary cabin where a vest awaits.

Seven cranes: a new casino
floors with blue portaloos placed
so no one can enter unobserved

little rituals: sitting for lunch on planks
last inspections when almost everyone has gone
a solitary workman, invisible except for his legs.
At dusk one of the cranes unfurls
two flags as if they are all at sea
and a diamante bracelet of lights along its boom

and I think: we have risen this far
we have built ourselves up by our own efforts
we live here, thanks to cranes.

A Soviet string quartet

Under a lamp shaped like pantaloons
the Soviet string quartet is playing.
Our seats are fused together at the back.
The quartet plays on a little raised platform.

There is a feeling of censorship: we
can't get off our chairs, they are imprisoned
on a stage that is like another country.
We have dined. They probably haven't eaten.

Will they smile at the end of Shostakovich?
Their faces are solemn, sorrowful. Last week
I found the explanation in a magazine:
Russians smile only at their friends, not strangers.

FRANCES GAPPER

Old Woman and Fox

Crunch under old woman's foot, snail on kitchen lino. Finger wavers
near light switch.

Fox in garden trots to the saucer left for hedgehogs, licks up drowned
insects.

Daylight evidence of fox: bush hollow, under-fence scrape, dug-for-
worms bare patch. Fox itself sun-dozing, one ear alert.

Old woman sees fox through bathroom window. Scratching its neck,
flea-ridden but no sign of mange. Good. Her garden's become a
wildlife refuge (it happens). Neighbour with dogs has nailed panels to
fence to stop fox, it still goes under and over. Crack in soap twinkles a
bubble at her.

Cold rice for breakfast. Reheating activates yeasty bacteria. Better to
die of heart failure than stupidity. Fox likes chips, but will eat a rotting
pear.

Old woman used to leave her front door open, now it's double-
locked with chain across. Men pretending to be gas inspectors forced
their way in to another old woman's house, took her wedding and
engagement rings. We won't hurt you, they said.

Fox is scared of dogs. Another fox was set on and killed.

I'm on my own, she thinks. With fox.

MICHAEL LEACH

A Sleepless Life

Much less
than a third of
this life's been spent asleep,
for one night a black dog ate all
the sheep.

JANE DOWNING

Home delivery

Wipers scrape the outside, the fan blows cold onto the inside and Sunil leans forward to see as much as he can through the resulting patch of clear windscreen. Ghosts float among the snowgums. The fog will only get worse the higher he climbs the mountain.

Sunil got his driver's licence when he arrived in Australia. Getting the groceries in the back of the van delivered is a minimum wage job, a new type of job, one he knows he is lucky to have.

He turns off Beyoncé. Her voice is a friend in the loneliness, but he can see through the fog better in silence. There are instructions written on the delivery docket. They say: turn a hard right at the cow-shaped letterbox. The metal monstrosity finally looms, a shadowy, potbellied thing. He hauls the van off the road and up the lane, crashes down gears to get more grunt on the rise.

The internet has made everything easier. For the customers anyway. No more supermarket aisles, or queues at the checkout, or nutters in aisle 5. They can shop online now. Only you can't eat virtual food. There's not much left of his paycheque at the end of each fortnight, but what there is Sunil sends home.

As he creeps along the lane between slender gums that lean in and grab at both sides of the van, the fog thickens into something solid. It patters on the roof above his head and smears under the windscreen wipers. Sunil smiles, christened in his first snow. He will write to his mother about this.

The next bend is blind. The van's wheels skid on the icy surface and braking only makes things worse. The van seems to dance of its own accord, swerving and bucking. Sunil hangs onto the wheel, urging it back onto the track.

He has counted every second. Imagined every second his last. Longs for home. Then the light goes out of the vehicle and the engine idles to a standstill. And the back of the van hangs out over a sharp drop

into scrubby bush.

All he can hear now is a gentle tick, tick as the engine cools under the heavy hand of the fog.

The van lurches when he closes his eyes and presses his head into the seat. Groceries in the back shift and jostle, sounding upset and fearful. The angle of the van feels unsustainable. He is on a rocking horse that might not seesaw back.

Sunil throws himself forward, crushing his chest against the steering wheel. The van does a balancing act. If he gets out and removes his ballasting weight, will the whole thing tip right over?

He edges his phone out of his pocket. Peers through the gloom to its hopeful light. The message is adamant. No mobile reception in this black spot halfway up the mountain.

Perfect snowflakes settle, are swept off by the wipers.

ERNEST SLYMAN

Bee Sting

The bee sting you received
running barefoot one summer
across a green meadow
as a child now rings the church bells,
plays the organ at Sunday sermon.
Trims the shrubs, touches up
the white fence around the roses.
Washes the church windows.
Sweeps the steps and sidewalks.
Offers the Sunday Evening prayer.
Recites the benediction.
Drops a few dollars in the offering plate.
Prays for you. It knows it hurt.
It would like to make it up to you –
please accept its apology.

BIL FORSHAY

Blintzes

Blini:

3 eggs
¾ cup sifted flour
2 TB oil
1 cup milk
Butter to taste

Filling:

¼ lb cottage cheese
¼ lb cream cheese
2 egg yolks
2 TB sugar (optional)
1 tsp vanilla

Directions:

So, where was I? I finally got up the guts to stop going out as a guard for at least three months. With the house loan the change in cash flow enabled me to get a new roof, but now I need to spend more time with my wife in her extremity. Not that she may be dying, but she fell yesterday and had to get her head stapled.

We were having a blintz party and she got up dizzy and fell. I had about ten guests crammed into the kitchen, and she was upstairs in the bedroom, but we couldn't hear her till she dragged herself on her back to the hall where her cries for help resonated. Christine cleaned up the blood and Teri took her to the hospital, and amid some trepidation the party continued. About two hours later she returned and ate her blintzes – which today she has forgotten doing, and thinks I gave her blintzes away.

HOLLIE ZISKIND

Memories Elude Him

Preacher speaking in tongues inside his brain
I haven't decided whether it's a disability
or survival skill, but he can't remember the name
of the blue tick hound, or where to turn,
what they did for his last birthday
in the tequila bottle with a worm folds of cortex hold his days
still there, waiting for him to return, to ease them along
onto the page

SUZANNE HERSCHELL

Divesting

we stood in the shed gloom-wrapped in shadow
thick as impasto moodily layered
over a lifetime's hoarding of stuff
collectibles useful things & old
& a conglomeration of the indefinable
bits that suggested a profile
in a workshop so laden with hours maybe & possibility
mending & making do
retrieving his past archived here
spilling its contents into now
something more than sundry items a collage piecing a life
each brushed by history's palette
had purpose enough in an era when we threw nothing away
recycling not a catch phase then but just a matter of course
subconscious practice like breathing
inhaling the dank must
we shuffled in a dance of avoidance
as the last rain dripped its residue through rust on to us
large drops fell from rafters growing mould
plopped & splattered on the paint-dripped floor
under the eave an abandoned nest
of unwoven tendrils once artfully conceive
seemed an apt metaphor for this worn tapestry
rivulets ran in waterfalls down black lined walls
drawing a personal landscape
the roof a sieve to the bruised sky beyond
a lace corrugation above strangers & memorabilia
about to bond
through cobwebbed windows day the colour of a sigh
soft in drizzle with mist draped to make mystery
of hills we usually knew

clarity lost
the porous roof scarcely an umbrella for his mind
distilling the deluge of thoughts of almost
all those bygone years evolving as deconstructed art

TESS RIDGWAY

Weet-bix and Honey

The brewery on Parramatta Rd smells like Weet-bix and honey a smell I could taste before I remembered, forgotten at the back of my throat like a frilly something nanna gave me boxed under my bed. A smaller me; leant over a bowl to watch the honey hum it draws itself over the edge of the spoon like slipping off a diving board & it lands and seeps like cursive, a roping halo, like roving torch light that sticks to the dark, a thimble dribble, like a pinky in a flowering gum to tax the possums, a quick blush rush sponged into a crisp & soggy mess sweet wet paper pulp splashed with hot water to soften a crater, a divot in the grass, giving off a breadly steam, the wheat weakens under the milk like too much rain on dirt. I cake it to my teeth & metal spoonfuls dug from the milk-moat mop the clumps away. Nanna put whipped cream on our Weet-bix and canned peaches (she'd let me drink the syrup) – she could sweeten mud – She'd put Pasito & Creaming Soda in the second fridge when we came and satin jammies on the bunk beds and I could sink into her pillowy body, as Seven Brothers for Seven Brides or Calamity Jane ticked over in the VCR, we moulded rose stitched cushions to our bodies and ate popcorn & off-brand lollies. Nanna could sweeten mud.

BERNARD COHEN

Down and Across

Coming from the west, hiding the sun,
a great line tows greyness
from the horizon. The cloud moves
as though it has its own not-so-misty Thought
about what skies should be.

The Thought (I'm guessing) is *wet*.
Water drops down in long thin lines from that cloud
which we call the sky but which might be
a fine-mesh, sky-sized sieve.

The one big cloud rains. The sky rains.
Rain rains.
If the sky is a sieve, the sieve is raining too.

They all rain.
The water drips and trickles
and whooshes down on us all night
and in the morning I look between
the edge of my curtain and the window frame
and I can see the straight grey rain still falling.

There is no dryness left on the ground,
not even where ground is hidden
under cars parked along the street.

Dips and cracks
gutters and bike bumps
are now puddles and streams
and torrents and billabongs.

The world is filling up.
Even though we know it is only water
There is a certain very wet moment
Which feels like magic:

Water slaps against the window sill
Our house floats
Down White's Creek
Into the blue.

SARAH GRIDLEY

Thoughts Before Whittling

(for Arden)

When a block of wood
falls into your hands

as it is sure to do, angle
the knife away, skim the wood

as you would milk. Listening
for what to do next is this

transparent, the bones
of the ear, this proverbially

small. *As you were*
will be the command

restoring you to love.
You will not pretend

to forget
what is hard and

innermost here. Years ago,
you were gifted

a tea set
that made no sense.

So miniature

were the cups, the pot,

the creamer – any attempt
at ceremony

could only overrun them. Do not
deceive me, soul, and I

will no more
pour you away

MARIA STADNICKA

Shooting Position

We queue at the airport on the pretext of watching
a lunar eclipse, we fear the sharp objects.
Passengers hold the boarding passes up
like flags in a moving crusade.

The grass blades, in shooting position.
All windows are half-open, but nobody looks out.
The heat seals a layer of varnish
over my homeland.

We have outgrown the raincoat
tripping over someone's thoughts
in the two-minute stop between stations.

At odd times, the planes take off.
Letters drop from above
on the neighbouring gardens,
the weeds grow tall whisper in silent parks.

We arrive at check-in to remove luggage tags
and barely notice
the music of a mid-air explosion.

ANDREW STIGGERS

Stillness of the Grass

After the drop-off at the bus stop nearest his aunt's place Rob can't help being caught up in the rush of pedestrians going about their business. Maybe it's a primal urge, needing to keep pace with the suburban pack. And although he's carrying shopping bags in both hands, their weight is building his momentum, propelling him down the street. *Still*, he's not fast enough. A young mum with her stroller – last to leave the bus – pushes past him. He's tempted to holler, 'Wait – it's not a race', at her and the others. But nobody would've heard him – they're hurtling away like logs downriver from the old driving dams up in the nearby ranges when the native forest was being stripped bare.

The child in the stroller tosses a toy out and one man ahead of Rob picks it up and chases after the mother. At first she ignores the stranger's calls. But then, following a suspicious glance, she realises what he's got. With the briefest of smiles, she takes the toy off him like a baton, directing the stroller on with her other hand.

'See, Rob – even at the age of sixty you can still learn some manners from that man', Debbie, his wife, would've said if she'd accompanied him on this trip.

A car shoots past Rob, tailgated by a van. With traffic bunched up at the end of the street he knows there'll be trouble, and shortens his stride to stay clear in case of an accident.

Rob's wrong – there's only the screeching of brakes in the distance.

The neighbourhood was much quieter when his aunt first settled here, although he's not sure whether there were fewer people back then or just fewer cars. In truth, recently he finds it hard to remember much, worrying he'll get Alzheimer's like his late father. An old ache throbs his thigh. It's enough of a problem having to deal with this leg, he thinks.

A boy further along the pavement stops to admire a pinwheel fan spinning in a front garden. He's moved on by his sister with a tug to his arm.

Rob finds himself gazing at the whirling fan too, his eyes drawn to the jagged arc of reds-and-blues-and-yellows. With the wind picking up, the gaps between the blades become smaller, vanishing as the colours blur into one. Mesmerised, he could've stood watching all day. But he has to go – his aunt is waiting.

The plastic bag handles pull tightly on the whitened joints of his fingers as Rob navigates a section of broken paving slabs, and he wonders when the council will fix it. Probably not for years – countless other streets remain equally riddled with age-old potholes and blocked-up drains. Now trailing the others by a length, and with the heavy bags sagging even more, he quickens his pace. Trust his aunt to have given him such a long list for her weekly shopping – including *four* avocados – knowing Rob was paying. But he hadn't complained. He'd just got on with the chore, one at least that Debbie thought he did okay, although she often said she wished he'd do the same at home.

'It's good of you to help Margaret out, Rob.'

'Well, of course I'm helping her – she's my aunt, isn't she?' Since the elderly woman's last fall he'd made an effort to visit her more regularly.

'That's not the point, Rob', Debbie had replied, shaking her head.

Booming bass from a car waiting at the lights thuds his body, his heart.

The other day Rob had thought about using the car for this trip but then reminded himself that he was doing his bit for the planet if he took the bus. 'Someone's got to do something', he'd told his workmate at the coffee machine and any others hovering in the office kitchen who cared to listen.

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Relieved to have left the roadside, Rob shifts to a lower gear when he enters a lane between houses. Further along the fence line he halts and gets a better grip on his bags – they would've split by now if he hadn't double-lined them – before heading to the reserve.

Since his youth he's often used this shortcut to his aunt's place, now a block away. And while other city parks climb the panoramic slopes of volcanic cones or stretch out to wide beaches, this one – like many dotted about the isthmus – is hidden from view, providing locals refuge

from the constant suburban bustle. On a recent visit Rob brought his grandson to try out the new playground nestled among the native ferns and trees.

‘You don’t know how lucky you are, Logan. We live in one of the greenest cities on earth.’

‘Sure, Grandpa.’ The boy rushed over to join the other kids on the rope climbing frame.

One of Rob’s bags is almost knocked out of his hand by a teenager careening down the path on a scooter. Even here everyone’s in a hurry. A runner racing away, headphones in. A dog, tongue out, pulling on his owner’s leash. Lovers chasing one another, weaving through the group of jogging, Lycra-clad ladies who check their wristbands every few steps.

Thankfully the retreats deeper in the reserve remain. Rob knows them well. Down the track lined with karaka trees, or through the opening in the flax behind the field. One in particular he favours the most, and no matter how busy he was – whether as a youngster on the way to a mate’s place or more recently visiting his aunt – he always spent time on the bench by the tea tree, taking in the world around him. He used to take Debbie there too, long ago.

Rob heads there now, along the footpath on top of the grass embankment, and when he comes across a worker pushing a wheelbarrow full of fertiliser tells him, ‘The lawns are looking good.’

‘Thanks.’

‘How d’you do it?’

‘Just a bit of TLC.’ The man sets the wheelbarrow down, beaming with pride. ‘And hard graft.’

‘Yes, I can see that.’

Leaving him to his task, Rob wishes he’d done a better job with his own lawn – water, nourish and protect it, get rid of the broadleaf and reseed the patches, even use the mower more often. The grass’s in a right state. But Rob has always found something more important to do. Well, that was the regular excuse he gave Debbie. And in any case, he’d realised a long time ago it was a losing battle – he should’ve bought the expensive turf instead of growing it from scratch. Life would’ve been so much easier.

With the shopping bags taking a toll on his fingers – the plastic has almost cut through his skin - Rob needs a break. Beyond some bushes, the tea tree’s almost within sight. He imagines himself already on the bench, cradling his sore hands on his lap, and raising his head skyward as if, having fought a current underwater, he’d reached the surface to draw breath. Rob knows he hasn’t left the city – the murmur of traffic is ever present in the background – but he’s glad for the respite coming up. A haven on this journey after a myriad indignities: being spewed on by fumes from an old car’s exhaust, being chased by the mechanised arm of a rubbish truck, its lights flashing, and being shoved to one side by students clambering down the aisle to grab the last seat on the bus. Soon Rob will be able to rest on the bench, contemplating the gardener’s well-kept lawn rolling down the embankment – lush, thick, green. Taking slow, deep breaths and calming his scurrying mind. And for the briefest of moments – with the spinning earth and time itself seemingly stopped – he will find peace, sensing the stillness of the grass.

There’s someone on my bench.

A homeless man in a ragged shirt, with a bag and blanket beside him, stares at Rob. ‘Hey, mate?’

Rob averts his eyes, as if hoping not to be noticed in the wide, open space.

‘Mate?’

‘Yes?’

‘Spare some change?’

‘Sorry, I haven’t got any.’ It’s best to lie, Rob knows, thinking of how his late father would’ve barked back, ‘Get a job like everybody else.’ Rob’s way is kinder.

Though he almost retches; the man’s clothes and belongings reek. Undoubtedly the same stench he caught whiffs of from the beggars near his office who hid in piss-stained doorways, and at night huddled under bridges. Rob transfers the shopping bag nearest the man to his other hand. He’s right not to give in – if he helps one out, others will flock here. Like the pigeons scavenging in the main square, flying from one discarded takeaway to another. With horror, he visualises vagrants crowding the reserve and neighbouring streets. Trashing the

place, sponging off hard-working, decent people. Frightening the kids at the playground.

The tramp's eyes are bloodshot from having slept rough for years.

Naturally it's an awful thing that's happened to these poor saps but what can Rob do about it? Undoubtedly Debbie would've caved in and given him some coins. He readies his shopping bags. Forget the broken pavements. The leaking culverts and faulty street lighting. The council should be fixing this mess first.

His leg throbbing, Rob forgoes the rest and moves on.

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'Yes, Margaret', Rob replies from the hallway, 'I've got your avocados.'

'Did you get ripe ones?'

'Yes.' He hadn't checked.

'And the spread?'

Rob enters the living room. 'Everything on your list.' He raises up both bags to his aunt, who is in her armchair watching television.

'Oh, good', she says, looking up at him. 'You didn't have to rush back.'

'Of course I did.'

He suspects she's been stuck to that spot since he left the house earlier that morning. Though he could hardly blame her – those falls must've dented her confidence. 'It's cold in here, Margaret. You should switch the heater on.'

'No, I'm fine.'

'Well, how about a nice cup of tea to warm you up?'

'Are you sure? I don't want to be a bother.' Her eyes dart back to the television.

'No bother at all.'

In the kitchen Rob empties the bags before taking the kettle over to the sink. Waiting for the water to fill, he looks out the window at the backyard. As ever, her garden's immaculate – the flower beds tidy, the lawn and hedges trim – but then she did have the services of a handyman. Several mature trees block out the other houses beyond

her property. His aunt has one of the few large sections left in the area – most had been subdivided and then divided again until there was nothing left apart from monstrous dwellings separated by narrow paths and shared driveways. Concrete everywhere.

Rob had thought about subdividing his own land, although it wasn't worth as much, given its location on the city outskirts. It was tempting – the mortgage would be halved, and there'd be no grass to mow. But he didn't like the idea of being boxed in, his new neighbours watching him in his bedroom from their lounge.

His aunt joins him in the kitchen.

'What are you doing, Margaret? You should be resting up.'

'I'm not an invalid. Well, not yet anyway.' She laughs, approaching the benchtop where she places some biscuits on a plate. 'You're too good to me, Rob, looking after me like this. Debbie's lucky to have a husband like you.'

'Actually, it's the other way round.' His leg throbs again. 'I'm the lucky one to have her.'

'How is she, by the way?'

'She's fine. Sends her love.'

Margaret needn't know about their latest bust-up. Rob switches the kettle on. With hindsight this visit was perfectly timed, giving him an excuse to spend the day away from home – and a chance for Debbie to cool down.

Back at the sink he rinses a cup, looking up to view the garden again. There's no feeling quite like stepping barefoot across a lawn. Although his memory's like a sieve these days, he still remembers the fun he had with Debbie in the reserve when they first started going out. During that sultry summer he would often pick her up at her parents' place, and the lovers would make their way to the embankment where they would kick their jandals off and lie down on the slope beneath the shade of the tea tree, the soft grass brushing their feet, legs and arms. There they'd laugh, smile, stroke each other's neck, cheek. Kiss. Lost in each other's eyes, oblivious to the surrounding city and its million beating hearts.

When everything finally settles down at home perhaps he could take Debbie back to the reserve and surprise her with a picnic. To

show he still cared.

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The next week Rob takes his grandson along for the visit to his aunt. He's learnt his lesson from the last trip, and could do with the help carrying the shopping bags.

'And make sure you get ripe avocados this time', his aunt had reminded him as she'd handed him the grocery list earlier that morning.

'I promise.'

He'd spent a considerable amount of effort at the fruit and veg section in the supermarket, inspecting and rating every single avocado. Restless, his grandson had wandered off to another aisle. On the way back, as they enter the reserve, Logan begins complaining again. 'We should've taken your car, Grandpa.'

'I told you, Logan. Your mum said you needed some fresh air away from the computer. Come on, we're almost there.'

Debbie had been pleased he'd taken Logan with him – said he needed to spend more time with his grandson and give their daughter a rest. In fact she'd been pleased with him all week, seeing how he'd made more of an effort helping out with jobs at home. And she couldn't believe it when Rob told her he'd vacuumed his aunt's place during the last visit – Margaret's home help was useless. He'd done all the downstairs, including the lounge.

The event seemed to be the most excitement his aunt had had in ages – she was in her element, seated forward, pointing, giving Rob instructions from her armchair. 'And don't forget behind the sofa.'

'Nobody looks there, Margaret.' Debbie did; but then Rob never had understood how she could be such a clean freak.

≈

A woman powerwalks past Rob and Logan on the footpath along the embankment, leaving the pair to struggle on with their shopping bags.

Although Rob doesn't want to admit it, his grandson had been right earlier on – they should've used backpacks. And as Logan also pointed out at the reserve entrance, where rubbish was strewn all over the path and in the hedge, plastic bags are bad for the environment.

Several birds perched on the tea tree up ahead catch Rob's attention. One of them flies down and lands on the ground nearby.

That blasted tramp's still here.

He grips his bag handles firmly and marches on. This time Rob's going to tell him to clear off – something the park worker would've done the other week if he'd been doing his job properly. No one was going to ruin Rob's good memories of the place, before he lost them forever. The fearful image resurfaces, of his father sitting in his room at the rest home gazing blankly at Rob, then right through him as though he didn't exist.

But getting closer to the tree, Rob realises something's not right; the homeless man is lying on the ground next to the park bench, his open bag further down the slope being pecked at by birds. No blanket in sight.

Rob slows down, and waits for his grandson to catch up.

The tramp's body, crumpled in a heap, reminds Rob of a shrivelled fruit fallen off a tree. It's surrounded by the last of the morning dew on the lawn – a thousand glistening teardrops.

'Look away, Logan.' Rob shields his grandson, not wanting the boy to see this sort of thing.

Logan disobeys him.

'I told you not to look.'

'Is he hurt, Grandpa?'

Rob hesitates before drawing nearer to investigate. He can see the man's bare chest exposed to the cold. His face pale.

Two other members of the public walk briskly past, ignoring the scene.

Rob retreats. 'No, he's fine. Probably off his head on drugs or something.'

'But Mum and Grandma would've ...'

'They're not here, okay? You're with me today, Logan.' The pain in his leg aches. 'Come on, let's go. Auntie Margaret's waiting for her tea.'

'Yes, Grandpa.'

After the pair have taken a few steps away, Rob glances over his shoulder. The homeless man's body remains motionless. As still as the

grass.

Christ, Debbie, what should I do?

Rob stops abruptly. 'Wait.'

'Yes, Grandpa?'

'Here – take this.'

His grandson's arm slumps down his side under the weight of the additional groceries.

Bending over the man, Rob checks to see if he's breathing. *He is, thank God.* Unsure what to do next, he takes off his jacket to cover the man's torso and protect him from the cold.

A jogger slows down and glances at them before running off down the track.

After calling for an ambulance, Rob places his phone back into his pocket, and nods to reassure Logan.

'What do we do now, Grandpa?'

'Now we wait.' Rob wraps his arm around his grandson's shoulders. 'We're going to be late back to Auntie Margaret's but I'm sure she won't mind.'

Standing with his grandson, Rob holds vigil over the man in front of the bench by the tea tree.

RANALD BARNICOT

Like the bull

(translated from the Spanish of Miguel Hernandez, 1910 – 1942)

Like the bull I was born for grief and mourning,
I am branded like the bull by hell's iron in
my side still burning, and in my groin,
as male, by a seed that's forming.

Like the bull, I find my heart in its affirming
may be unmeasurable but is diminished,
my face enflamed with yearning to be kissed,
I fight it out, like a bull, for your love's earning.

Like the bull, I put on strength in punishment,
my tongue in my own heart's blood bathed,
and my neck wears the wind's tempestuous push and pull.

Like the bull, I find your taunts encouragement,
I woo you and pursue, my desire your blade
leaves spitted, like the bull mocked, like the bull.

GAIL INGRAM

When you draw the curtains then leave

The stick soldiers return, marching in a downward line from the ceiling to the floor. When I say *marching*, I mean that each individual does not move; they are stuck in position like tin soldiers in storybooks, but thinner, and dressed in black – maybe dark blue – one arm swung to the roof, the other to the floor, marching down, down, down, as if conveyed by a *what-you-call-it* – at airports? ... the-something-lator? It propels them on, never stopping – an invisible machine. They move in ranks, disappearing into thin air ... or maybe some blank existence where there's no air at all, just before they reach the *what's-it-called?* ... the floor. The ranks are different lengths – a long line of black sticks like letters, then a break, then a short line before another break, short again, then long. In the gaps between ranks I see the cream walls of the bedroom. The walls glare like – *what's-it?* – the stuff you write on?

But the soldiers don't stop marching, and there are other differences. There's always one soldier out of place. It's up to me to find the exception and replace him. I search for differences. It feels essential, but so difficult. Sometimes I think I have found a replacement. I am ready to reach in and remove him, squealing and kicking in my hand, to put him in the right rank, and I lurch with satisfaction, but only for as long as I can think *No! No, that's not right, it's wrong.*

I am always wrong.

I never get close to a soldier. It's only when you return – *what's-your-name-again?* – you're full of light. You touch my arm and say, *Is it the soldiers?* And I shake my head because they have gone – marched away into the blank spot.

PAM MORRISON

An eyeful o' that

Just before Jason said what he said on the 3:45 bus to Waiponi, he pushed off both school shoes and fed himself a fourth pellet of menthol gum. Then he leaned sideways into Elliot, who flinched with the onslaught of sweetness and sweat.

Elliot was next to the window. Long pants were a year off yet, and the soft skin of his pale thighs had stuck to the tan vinyl seat. A meagre breeze blew in from a levered window two seats up ahead, and a small, grimy, raised lid in the bus roof offered the only other gasp of air from outside.

Elliot ached from pulling his arms in and pressing together the mottled balls of his knees. Fifteen minutes down. Ten to go. Jason had spread across the bench seat, and seemed to bulge in his damp grey shirt, his bulky thighs open as he straddled his unzipped, overflowing school bag.

It came like a volley: the jab, the kick, the breath. The words. 'Hey get an eyeful o' that!' Jason had leaned into Elliot and was pointing his nail-bitten finger at the woman across the aisle.

Her hair was long and glossy as shiny black coal. It was knotted through a ruffled tie-dyed band that she'd pulled from her wrist minutes earlier. The sun dappled her left cheek, shadow alternating with brightness as the bus rollicked past rows of dark pines, to flattened fields with gorse in garish full bloom.

She sat alone, and carried nothing but a small bundle wrapped in a crochet blanket of multi-coloured squares. Calm enveloped her like a chrysalis, and she seemed impervious to the thickening air and jostle of bodies, rocking in the confines of the aging council bus.

Elliot had already seen the woman. He'd seen how her eyelashes seemed to glimmer, as if speckled with dew. He'd seen how her small feet in turquoise leather-strap sandals looked pure, even though her toes were smeared. He'd seen the curve of her arm as she cradled the tiny

baby hidden in cloth, reminding him of the picture in the art book at home, achingly familiar, Madonna and Child.

And now, as Jason's raucous words shot across the aisle, he saw the blush. Infusing her cheek, her neck and shoulder, flowing into the plump, round breast she had offered to her baby.

'Yeah.' He heard his own voice breaking. 'What an eyeful ...'

RACHEL SMITH

Glossectomy

THE PHONE RANG on and on until finally, on what had become day five, its battery ran out. Outside, birdsong and buffeting winds, but in here it was as if you'd taken my tongue when you closed the door; that your bags held more than just your share that we'd divvied up so politely – power tools and photo albums and worn tea towels laid out on the living room floor.

It had made me want to play Twister again – left foot on the Ben Harper CD you hummed when you were happy, right foot on the tent we set up in a toilet block the night Lake Matheson flooded, left hand on the remains of your Mum's dinner set after I threw the lot at your head that night you never came home at all, and your right hand, the one that touched me, set down in a slick pool of unable to face the facts, you need to get your shit sorted, that you had left me to soak in.

Day ten broken syllables backed up against the stub of my tongue. I ran out of cat food and sent her off towards the shed whose mouse population we had never managed to curb. You took our speakers and the flat screen, but I found the scarf I'd knitted for your birthday three years ago stuffed into the letterbox. Like everything else I'd had visions – sheep grazing on soft green pastures, your arms held a metre apart as I wove skeins around them, our hands slippery with the scent of husbandry.

JUNGMIN BAE

American Threnody

I – an existential antimony of meatballs, kimchi on the side.
The man in front of me is American, open-faced & blue-blooded. Seoul is so strident, he says of the weather. I abstain from dimples because of too much practice; besides, niceties are servile. His eyes are green like money and cannabis. He wants to touch my face and check my china stillness, concentric circles in otherwise lotus pond.

This man is spelled in artless rhymes. But I'm the magician. Sleight-of-hand, sleight-of-speech, sleighter. Last vowels curve *en boca* like apples as I homage prostrate before earlier immigrants. He talks about art you become one with once you lose sense of the tableau, which I take to be losing one's way in the looking glass of another.

'How's your wife' he asks, out of the blue and into expiation. Absolut corking marvellous, really brill maybe even pregnant. I wouldn't know anymore:

I think back to the times our bodies used to pendulum until we matter oscillate into energy waves. Cooling together inside the blue gaze of lone star, wherein fusion was no more, nuclei slapping together backforth but still no warmth nor life pushing way into existence.

He nods a familiar question of blame. You wouldn't know, he concedes. Like so much supernovae, or candle, we flickered then went out.

Since separated from her I lurch, but remain imperturbable as suburban housing complex. Yet pressing my hands to my

knees I am alarmed by the giving way. Suppose I am not made of fine china – would I have any takers then, this I would ask if I were not afraid of selling my body, tongue and all, my life chronicles of keeping things inside.

But now I speak. May not I tell you why I hate negative statements? My voice too grating, he touches his ears imploring me to regress to coquetry. Nuzzling his lapel albeit resignedly, yes you may.

Here is the rub: yes I may tell you, your ears privy by spoken consent. But had I asked the same to Wife she would

have said no not because she did not love me (do you love me?) but because she is Korean, listening to the point of submersion.

You affirm your independent willingness to hear me out from where you sit – facing me, your left my right & vice versa – an entity worlds apart, the vacuum between our bodies – at odds, parallel forever, never meeting. But she says no because in Korean things go together (as we once went together) and two negatives make a positive: *No you may* the corollary to *may not I*. All her no was yes. I realised too late.

Belatedly I'd like to cut my tongue square, rare and starry cuts of me. Find a way – I'd drink Korean from a straw, anything. But I see you don't want to hear me after all. So I give you alternate ending: I Asian. I cripple my speech pre-emptively, sometimes losing's preferable to fight. Therefore I ching-chong-chink.

REBECCA BARNSTIEN

Radon: Results of Adolescent Over-Exposure to Decay

Abstract:

Superposition is defined as the principle that a particle can simultaneously exist in all theoretical positions or states, but when measured will only give reference to one of those states. This is because in any system where there is an observer, the mere act of observing will create a wave function collapse. In other words, when you observe a particle, it will appear to reduce to a single position or state. But this is paradoxical: how can a particle have various probable states, all equally true until the point of observation?

The theory of universal wave function offers a solution by stating that when a particle is observed there is no collapse, but rather the birth of multiple universes. All probabilities exist, just an alternate reality away.

How close are these other worlds? That is not my hypothesis.

In this experiment, thoughts are considered particles. A choice yet unmade is a superposition, and though a thought will only reference one point, those other options still exist.

What would happen if someone tried to kill their selves? That is not my hypothesis.

With my limited equipment, I was only able to access a few different probabilities. My experiment was unfortunately tampered with. My thoughts alone are precipitants, and in some universes I did not even want to know these answers. The otherwise sterile environment has been invaded by echoes of other thoughts (see Notes). My subject, Michael, is a radioactive element. These are the steps in which I, the variable observer, have ruined these experiments of life.

Hypothesis:

Adolescence is a disease.

1:

At least once Michael survives and we meet. He sits cross-legged on my bed and looks at me, but I do not touch him. He is an independent entity, like any good experiment. In the collapse of personal revelations, he whispers to me:

‘Once, as a kid, I tried to poison myself.’

In this reality bile enters my blood; I am suddenly septic. My objective nature has been compromised.

I thought that growing up was the real poison. Every teenager I knew had some bad reaction. My sample size was large enough to be suspicious.

If I kill myself, they will remember me. They will know me by the result of the adolescent experiment. That’s why I would kill myself. I know the longing, and I know how to see it in others.

2:

Michael sits on my bed some when and tells me his secret.

‘I’ve never told anyone else.’^{where}

I hoard secrets.

As an adolescent, I found people with secrets like that. I would hold their precious pieces with all the dignity they could not muster in themselves. I coveted.

I could have ruined people. I could have told the entire school. Worse, I could have told the adults, the counselors, have those sick teens hauled away, put on pills and bed restraints. But then, in an act of mercy, I would not. I instead took away the razors and told them that they mattered to me.

I was a saint.

Notes:

Annemarie is brighter than any other girl I know. She makes me believe that there cannot be anything random about this universe.

We are walking down the stairs at school and she asks if I want her iPod. That is a warning sign. My method for Annemarie is to be direct: aren't you going to be using it?

No, she says, not in a few months. She is not being covert because she knows that I know exactly what she means.

I spend my days wound around her like a Chinese dragon, looping infinitely. I imagine that I can protect her. I could save you Annemarie, just let me.

I could have you in my debt. I could have you.

She is too smart. She dreams of being shot in the head, and tells me in detail how the metal burns her skin where it doesn't bury in her brain. She always had the most realistic dreams.

My best ideas come when I am forced to improvise.

We are walking again. When I have two weeks left I abandon delicacy; the readings are off the charts. I must stabilise this situation before I break all my graduated cylinders and get glass shards in my eyes. I tell her I will do anything. I tell her I will beg.

She laughs.

I kneel on the ground in the hallway in between classes and say:

Please don't do this.

The trick with these people is that you must convince them that you would miss them.

I beg like a dog, and she says to stop joking. I don't get up. Please, I say, please please –

She kicks me hard enough to roll me over. I am sobbing wildly, staring at the ceiling. When I hear her say ^{oh} I know I have won.

Sometimes to deceive another, you must ^{often} deceive yourself. When she gathers me up and hugs me tight, I record it a success. And in the future, when she wins some Nobel Prize, when she puts her fingers on the LHC and creates tiny black holes, when she splits atoms and sees that effusing beam of photons,

she will see me. This is all my doing.

I've got you now, I think, and try not to cover her in snot. I deserve at least some dignified tears. Saints don't go wailing, they humiliate themselves with poise.

I make Annemarie promise she will never kill herself. The best experiments create more questions: if I convince myself to care, is that genuine concern?

Results:

Adolescence is just an event horizon. The event is who you are. It is the desperate feeling akin to withdrawal but as an antecedent. What are you willing to do to make these people like you?

My adolescent hypothesis was: what would you do to make these people need you?

Hypothesis Revised:

Michael is alive.

3:

I have difficulty quantifying Michael.

Those who provided me secrets were usually unstable, reactionary, even violent. It felt like an art form to render catastrophic wonder from base elements. But Michael seems to be composed of only noble gases. He reacts to nothing. He seeks the welcome of nothing.

His still waters are too deep for me to probe; there are too many unknowns in his stream of space and time. What non-standard environments does he need to be in to react?

I must calibrate myself for any responses. I must make ratios and reset the equipment to pick up the micro-movements in his heart. I must replace the lens on my scope and look closer, slower, fuller.

It is like looking directly at a star: my eyes skirt away. I only detect responses in the peripheral, the light of ancient gases wavering through the atmosphere. His littlest right finger stops responding entirely.

It is unexpectedly distressing to treat Michael like a science experiment.

4:

A new probability, and Michael is in his room.

I did not ask him how he tried to poison himself.

'I was stupid, and it didn't work.'

What would a young student use? The sleeping pills are easy to find. His parents never felt the need to hide medications because he has always been a good, quiet boy.

Michael is sitting on the bed, waiting to see if he will die.

Michael is scared. No one is home yet, and he thinks about what they will find. He is beginning to feel tired, his shoulders are beginning to drop and his arms flop down to his sides. His right hand is vibrating in and out of sight, and then his hand is clenching and he cannot stop it. The electric pulses in his brain are slowing down, running out of places to go.

He wonders if maybe he should lie down and pretend he is asleep. Eventually his mother will come upstairs and tell him to come to dinner, only he will not have to get up. Maybe she will take him to the hospital, but it will be too late. Maybe she will call an ambulance, have someone else be responsible. Maybe the kids from school will come to his funeral. But maybe no one will come.

My stopwatch reads that he has been sitting for ten minutes.

His stomach suddenly clenches. The lining inside ripples, threatens to tear. Without thinking he runs into the bathroom and vomits into the toilet, and the bile is a bright yellow. He flushes the evidence away.

5:

It was funny that Michael and I met by chance. I once tried to chart all the people I knew that he knew, social circles converging, and yet his orbit and mine did not cross for many years. What else should I expect from a noble gas?

We went to the same schools. No fewer than three of his friends are also my friends. His younger brother was in love with my best friend. I've been ^{changed} _{saved} to his house. I never knew he existed. If I had known him then, how could I have manipulated him?

Notes:

30% of suicide victims jumping from a building will regret their decision. I worry about how someone would determine that statistic. Do you interview the dead bodies? Do you ask people on the way down?

Or are you just guessing – hoping – they secretly want to live?

In how many universes did Michael not manage to poison himself?

Hypothesis Revised:

Michael is dead.

3:

A new probability, and Michael sits in his room.

What would a young student use? Cough syrup perhaps: the overdosing of suppressants congealing in the humor of his eye ball.

Michael is sitting on the bed, waiting to see if he will die.

Michael is sacred. He is a martyr like me. His death will be the reason for someone's uprooting. He will burn out, and where his body decomposes some German iris will grow.

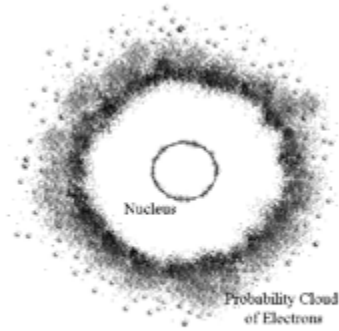
He can feel his heart start pounding. The blood is ringing in his ears. His chest hurts and this makes him nervous. He waits, trying to calm down, but his heart is beating so fast, it should not be possible. He puts a shaking right hand over his heart, trying to stop the palpitations.

My stopwatch reads that he has been sitting for ten minutes.

His heart keeps on racing.

4:

The figure to the left is an electron probability cloud. Developed by Schrödinger, this model depicts the probability of the position of an electron. This creates the 'cloud' of where an electron is most likely to appear. This differs from previous models because it acknowledges that scientists observing particles such as electrons cannot know their exact paths. The dense portions of the cloud have higher probabilities of containing an electron, but nothing is certain here.



Until someone observes an electron, we have no idea if it is here or halfway across the universe.

Michael's Experiment is set up with adolescent Michael in his room. He has an undetermined poison. He will either die or live in this reality, and it is not until he observes his own self that he can tell what state he is in.

Notes:

In the language of flowers, the iris represents faith, wisdom, valor, and hope. It is a perennial.

Results:

The experiment is not sound. What are the chances that he chooses to take the poison? That the poison even kills him? This experiment has too many variables, but I must know. What are the chances that you and I live here, Michael?

Hypothesis Revised:

Michael is alive and Michael is dead.

3:

Michael is sitting on the bed, waiting to see if he will die.

|1|:

Michael crosses his legs and looks at me, but I do not touch him. He is radiating like Annemarie and I am afraid of what will happen if I interfere. His entire hand is frozen in space, weighted on the bedspread and I am surprised it makes such an indentation. It is almost like he is really here.

'Once as a kid, I tried to poison myself.'

'I know, you already told me this.'

'I've never told anyone else.'

This is a secret I do not covet. This is not what I expected.

$$\sigma_x \sigma_p \geq \hbar/2 :$$

Michael is scared. His heart races so fast that it blinks out of existence, but Michael does not know it is missing so he survives.

Michael is sacred, and years in the future the tale of his heart abandoning him will be a hymn.

Michael is right now telling me that the experiment is over. He is asking me about transporters and whether being copied and rebuilt is a form of death.

Notes:

The equation presented is the Uncertainty Principle. It describes how the awareness of two physical aspects of a particle is limited.

I convinced myself I care. Is that certifiable? Can I be a saint now?

What is the absolute value of an experience, of a moment gone, shared, and revisited?

Results:

‘I’m glad it didn’t work. I’m glad you’re here with me.’

I am ill from Probability Sickness. But someone must look for the electrons, because we must know which universe we are in. Michael must observe his mortality. The answers are astronomical, but someone must tell me because I am a hoarder of secrets. There is madness in the question, of reverse engineering the things that brought us here. Do I dare collapse endless probabilities into one reality? How many times did you die, Michael?

I take his right hand, the bad hand, and encourage it to move again. I make it move here so that I know the result and can ignore the margin of error inherent in all good experiments. This is the only recommendation I can make if you wish to diminish the lingering effects of a suspended state of possible decay.

TOM HENNEMANN

The Ice Cream Wars

when I was a kid
ice cream lasted
all summer long

memory makes away as
forgetting fills in a
fiction’s confection

is fragility sensitive
to older disorder
a burden’s debt

winning doesn’t talk
but losing needs to
with melting illusion

thinking the world
makes no sense
let’s go with that

KATE MAHONY

A word

‘What is this word?’ my mother’s old school friend Ruby asks. She taps with her finger at a page in the magazine I have brought to show her. ‘Surrendity?’

‘I’m not sure’, I say, trying to see where she is pointing to.

Ruby is here on a visit from Cairo where she has lived for many years. She likes to return to her home country now and then. Although she has family here she generally prefers to stay with my mother.

The magazine has an article about the daughter of a close friend of mine. The friend’s daughter has a big art show coming up. I know Ruby has professed an interest in art and has at one time met my friend. It had occurred to me she might want to go to see the exhibition while she is here. But Ruby has glanced at it swiftly – almost dismissively – before settling to read a different article.

I peer at the page. From here, the article looks to be about health matters. ‘It sounds like a made-up word to do with surrendering to things’, I say.

Ruby taps the page again. Crossly this time. ‘No, no’, she says. ‘This word.’ For more than thirty years she has taught English classes in Cairo to a myriad grateful students. Or so she has told us.

I haven’t heard of the word. I reach across her to get a better look. ‘Ah’, I say, ‘that word is serendipity.’

My mother’s old friend, the teacher, doesn’t thank me for clearing this up. ‘Huh. A newfangled word. Some writer trying to show off. What does it mean?’

I am caught on the spot. ‘Ah. Like happenstance’, I say. ‘Good luck.’

‘Well, give me a sentence using it’, she says.

I think this over. ‘It was a serendipitous occasion’, I begin.

‘That was not the word.’

I remember something else: how abrupt my mother’s old friend

can be.

‘Use the exact word’, she says.

For a moment, I am a teenager again. I want to say, No, why should I?

Instead I try this: ‘The fact that she met the man at the very same time she needed to talk to someone ...’ I pause, and give up when I see Ruby is staring at me as if I am quite mad.

Later when I Google the word, I find it was first used by Horace Walpole in 1754. I wish I had known that. I would’ve liked to have wiped that supercilious look off her face. I will have to find a way to use the word supercilious in her presence. As an afterthought I decide to Google supercilious. It pays to be prepared.

EM KÖNIG

The Birds

I never learnt to sing like the birds
To shriek or to giggle
I looked up:
They flew overhead in great numbers
A mass of pupils, dilated
Some fell, other ducked
The crunching of machines
As deafening as wool
Asymmetry in an atmospheric blow
Immersed in tender violence
Searching for a new sky

Stole

In frozen stone
I found remains
Of something gone

Its face / my palm
The dirt, the pores
In melting arms

A burrow, ground
Is matter made
For falling down

Patches of fur
On the back
On the racks

Stole

IONA WINTER

Her hands uncovered Aya's ears. She glanced down and smiled. Grateful her child looked nothing like him.

Thrum

Lindsay spotted Ross on her way home from work. He stood outside the pub, legs spreadeagled, with a smoke dangling between his fingers like a metronome. When she walked past he didn't recognise her. Mid-afternoon and he was already on it.

Unable to brush off reminders that thrummed in her veins, she twisted around to face him. Without warning, her silenced words arced out. The ferocity rattled the backs of her teeth, and she witnessed him receive her truths.

Her relationship with Ross had been one of returning to an empty water trough, with an inane hope of being satiated. He asked her to get an abortion. His rejection of any responsibility made her skin feel like it had been ripped from her bones.

He'd never know about the metal-spoon-bruises on Aya's tiny face, as she was scooped out – cord tight, face blue, and limbs floppy. Or how a ridiculous amount of blood surged from her womb and destroyed the hospital-white sheets.

What had been unexpected was that, in her unconscious decision to survive the birth process, Lindsay found an elemental homecoming.

Ross shouted, 'Piss off you nutcase!'

It returned her to the present.

She watched him stagger back to his drinking buddy; they shoulder-punched one another, threw back their heads and smirked.

What a frigging tough guy.

She bent her head and whispered to the pouch on her chest, 'It's okay bub, you don't need to know who he is.'

Lindsay continued walking down the road, and turned the corner. Welcome laughter surfaced from her belly, and cascaded over her tongue.

CHRIS MUSCARDIN

The Story as We Know It

‘Darling’, Dennis interrupts, as he leans back against the bent wooden fence lining the bar patio, ‘You repeat yourself too much, has anyone ever told you that? I think that’s your problem.’

He hands me the nightcap cigarette we’re sharing and sucks the ice in his glass. ‘Really, dear, I love you, but you’re a terrible storyteller. You *fixate* on things, you know. You’ve already told me about this tonight, I *know* about it. You have to keep things fresh, different, exciting.’

It’s true, I’ll concede. He’s not wrong; I tend to talk in circles when I latch onto something, like a moth buzzing round the bulb frantically to get at the scorching mystery that glows inside. ‘Well sure, Dennis. But don’t you find any of it troublesome? At all?’

‘To be honest’, he yawns, stretches, pulls down the bottom of his shirt when it follows – ‘not in the least, dear. These things happen. We know this. But what can you do?’

‘Well, that’s a bleak way of looking at life.’

‘What can I say; I’m a realist. That’s the nature of the beast. I just find it surprising we made the news at all. I suppose that’s progress, the twenty-first century and all. Baby steps.’

The story I’d currently been mulling over was something tragic I’d seen on the news over breakfast just a few days earlier. Another murder. The Scene: Lake Worth this time, one of those podunk rest stops of a town crusted onto the side of the A1A headed south to the Keys, some part neon glam and some part backwater. Time: three a.m., give or take, before daybreak but after the clubs in neighbouring Fort Lauderdale have already spilled out, the hour where the only business is trafficking through tricking motels or diners, like this diner on this night.

It was a twenty-second news clip, barely a blip, but the boy’s face was haunting me. Young, younger than me or than Dennis for sure, definitely too young for that hour; we’ll call him Juan; well, our Juan is leaving the diner at this hour, headed back up north likely from whatever

Wilton drag club he’d been taken out to by friends that night, a little buzzed, feeling brave, acting a hair more femme than he probably should have, it’s true. Walking back to the car, bumps into a drunk older man stumbling out of his own vehicle, and forgets where he is, shouts Watch It, Honey, and the man swivels around, ¿*Que tú dice, maricón?*, exchanging in English and Spanish thrown at one another while his friends around chime in, til our boy lurches forward perhaps a step too close, *No me toca, pato*, and – click, *bam* – our poor young Doña Juan has a hole blown right through his stomach before anyone knew what had happened. This, a *real* story.

In the back and forth Dennis winds up with the butt of our smoke; watching the stakes of the fence carefully, he waits for the plump mosquito resting on it to crawl its way up the side onto a particularly dark whorl before grinding it out right on its bloodsucking head. ‘Now take that, you vicious fuck’, he mutters.

‘But anyways, dear, your stories are always so *dark*, and always the same. Find something to cheer you up. How’s Michael, for instance? Is she home tonight?’ Michael being the name of the boy I’d recently taken up with, who works at the theme parks as Prince Eric and pulls tricks on the side, like any newly out boy with a pretty face.

‘Yes, he’s home, hopefully making dinner. I really like this one. I think he’s good for me. You’ll have to come over and meet him. Between the parks and *other* work he doesn’t get out all that often, so we mostly stay in to entertain now.’

‘Oh, how boring. If she works for you, though, go for it. Just don’t ever try and tell him a story, darling; you’re so morbid you’ll send him running, and that’s no way to catch a man. Shall we have another drink?’

We do, and I keep my mouth shut and listen to Dennis tell me about his own new romance, a senator from DC. ‘Darling, He flies down three times a month, we meet in whatever dark hotel room it is this time, uses me absolutely ruthlessly for an evening, and in the morning sends me on my way with nothing but a date and time for the next visit.’ And all his limbs still intact. Dennis always did like living on the more daring side. ‘It’s the perfect romance, I never have to even get to *know* him’, he says, ‘and the sex is *divine*.’

‘Just don’t end up a news story one day, dear.’

Dennis waves it away. ‘Oh, he seems harmless. Just another middle-aged closet case who needs to get off somehow. But’, he says, yawning again, ‘I do have to get going. I didn’t realise how near it is to last call, and I’ve a long day tomorrow. Let’s do this again soon, dear. I’m going to call a cab; can you walk to your car on your own?’

We stand, exit, hug and kiss goodbye before leaving the premises – after all, even if it is gay a bar in the hood is still a bar in the hood – and I set out to my car two blocks away.

≈

Summertime, sultry and sweaty as it can be, produces some of my favorite nights. The barest light casting down from the cloud-sheathed moon, the gentle muggy breeze, toads and cicadas keening louder than the sound of my own breathing in my ears, all of it is absolutely marvellous. Perhaps Dennis is right and I should learn to relax a bit and enjoy things, not chase morbidity so often. After all, it’s a *real* city we live in, this Orlando, a far cry from the grimy bleakness of Lake Worth.

Even with the slight relative coolness of the night, the closeness of the air is sweltering, and so I take off my shirt to cool down, wiping the back of my neck with the fabric and tucking it into the band of my shorts; which, admittedly, are a bit short to be wearing around walking off the Trail at this time, but I’ll hurry to my car once I cross the street and neighbouring parking lot. The faintest breeze passes, raising the hairs on the back of my neck with a cool press, almost like metal pressed up against, and against the chorus of wildlife chirping in the bushes I can barely hear the sound of whispered ‘that’ll teach you, faggot,’ and the last thing I wonder is whether the nights feel like these in Lake Worth, as I can’t remember ever having been, though I’m sure I must have had to pass through there at some point on a

This too is a real story, though it hasn’t happened to me yet.

≈

I make it home from drinks with Dennis at around two in the morning, with Michael already in the kitchen preparing puttanesca for the two of us. I live in a condo in Altamonte these days, on the edge of the

glowing city proper but right off the highway at least, and moderately safe. And it’s cheap, which helps.

‘Well hey, baby’, he says in that singsong southern queen’s twang which comes out in force in the evenings because of the octaves he has to drop it while in costume at work. ‘How was drinks?’

‘It was fine; Dennis is well, good to see her.’ I can hear the late evening news on in the living room. ‘Anything interesting afoot tonight?’

‘Naw, same old same old sounds like. ‘resting folks here, killing folks there, you know.’ He’s quiet when he cooks, no matter what he’s making. It’s fine; I find him charming when he’s focused.

Michael’s smart, even if he doesn’t always sound it, but he’s young for me, younger likely than even the poor fairy I was telling Dennis about earlier. Barely old enough to drink in the bars he sometimes books lousy dancing gigs in, though I’d rather he’d take those gigs than spend nights making outcalls in hotels. I’ve told him several times; his isn’t the kind of face that’s suited for the side of a milk carton.

‘Did they mention the Lake Worth story again yet?’

‘No sirree. I’ll be surprised if they do again. That kinda stuff don’t get TV time, you know that.’

‘Well, but he was what, twenty-two? Come on, you know I’m not the biggest activist, but they have to pay more attention when it’s a kid that young.’

‘A kid. He’s older than me and I’m no kid, remember that! Anyway, I seen plenty of stuff like that happen; haven’t you? Never gets no airtime. Hell, I bet the fella won’t even get more than six months, call it manslaughter or that Stand Your Ground shit. They don’t care when it’s just another homo, specially if he’s brown too.’

‘So young, yet so cynical.’

‘Hey, when you been gay bashed before and no cops bothered to help you out, you stop believing they’re gonna help other folks out too.’

I pause, turn. ‘Huh? You’ve never mentioned that before. When did this happen?’

‘Oh, it ain’t worth talking about, man. Shit happens, you fuck up, you know how it goes. It was a while back, before we met. I got all my

own teeth still, I promise’, he chuckles.

‘Well no, it sounds serious though. I’d like to know what happened.’

‘Oh, it’s for another time. How ‘bout you tell me a story instead. You always got better ones anyway.’

≈

A story, then: (This one is about violence too.)

I went out with some friends several years back for my twenty-fifth birthday to the Parliament House, because where else do the gays go on a Sunday night in a city like Orlando? We’re feeling fine, dressed in half-drags with heels and Daisy Dukes, noses full of amyl and bellies full of tequila. Around one-thirty I step outside of the club into the cool dark by the lake, out past the motel rooms where out-of-towners are surely shooting up and the pavilion where someone is surely getting blown. Lighting a cigarette, unsteady on my heels in the sand, I see some beefcake standing by the water, waving his cock out of his shorts in my general direction. Well, to hell with it, sure, I think, and I follow him around the curve of the water to a more secluded area.

‘You suck dick, queer?’ he says gruffly, and I’m too drunk to come back with something snappy about the fact that he’s at a gay club, so obviously, and instead pull down the waistband and start slurping on the monster that flops out. We last this way for all of about five minutes, nothing but the sounds of my drunk gagging, him softly moaning, and the strains of music wafting from the club behind over the lake, until the customary liquid hits the back of my throat and he yanks my head off his cock and my hand from his buttocks.

A kick to the stomach, ‘I ain’t queer, you see, slut, just needed to get off’, and another, til I fall sideways on the dirt, the wind knocked out of me or I’d scream for help, and then a sickening crunch as he steps on my nose, and everything is white, white pain, and rustling of bushes as he walks away, please let him be walking away, and a shouted ‘Don’t you get any ideas of following me back now, faggot’, and as I lie on my side gasping by the lake I’m unsure if the salty tang of the birthday gift in my mouth is semen or blood.

This too is a real story, though it hasn’t happened to me yet.

≈

Despite what Dennis says I rather enjoy the practice of storytelling. Perhaps it’s because I grew up with bedtime stories, a book of world mythologies by my bedside that I would leaf through before bed every night. Stories of magic djinn hiding in plain sight in unsuspecting household objects, imperial animal-headed Naga in India burrowed secretly in caves, luminous queer gods who flit in and out of danger across the Mediterranean on the backs of clouds, and perhaps most entrancing of all, the Sídh, the Irish Fairy Folk in their fairy mounds.

A story for you, reader: did you know that once, they say, those Fairy Folk all used to walk the earth freely? In the myths that some call prehistoric, or non-history entirely, because who could believe such a thing as fairies roaming the earth. But they did, they say, until one day Men came, and, finding these people different from them, drove them out with hacking and piercing weapons of iron, which everyone knows is deadly to any fairy.

‘People are afraid of different, of what they don’t know’, my mother said when I asked her why the Men would do something so cruel as put their iron through the backs of all those unsuspecting fairies. ‘Anyways, it’s just a story, sweetie.’

So what did they do? They vanished from the naked eye into their fairy mounds and secret spaces, which only they could identify. And if they had to venture among Men, they disguised themselves so that no one would ever guess, because only a fairy can spot other fairies right away. Ingenious. They stayed this way for thousands of years, safe in their secret places, where no one could harm them too badly as long as they kept quiet.

That is, until one of the Men broke into one of the fairy mounds, on a sweltering hot Saturday night in June, loaded to the teeth with his weapons of iron, and gunned down forty-nine helpless fairies dancing in their fairy mound in the dead of night, and none of their tears or magic after could restore the safety of their secret spaces again once it had been broken.

This too is a real story, though it hasn't happened to me yet.

≈

I did finally needle Michael's story out of him later, the one about his own encounter with the men who are afraid of fairies. I'll spare you the details, give only the broad strokes; you can fill the rest in yourself by now I'm sure anyways.

Boy goes to house party, invited by a set of charming strangers.

Boy gets drunk, is having a ball of a time. He's just moved to Orlando, doesn't know many people yet, but was always known as friendly, so any invitation to make friends is a good one probably.

One of the folk who invited him has been a little too forward all night, it seems, and is a pretty sight to boot. Bumping into each other on the way to the bathroom, sitting a smidge too close as they drink their beers on the couch, the eye contact that lasts a moment too long, et cetera. We know the signs.

Boy is invited outside for a cigarette; naturally he will follow.

The light of the street lamps, the *kee*-ing of the coquí frogs crooning for a mate, the alcohol flushing his face, the reaching in to light his cigarette off the other boy's cigarette, the exhale, the reaching in again, this time to maybe put his mouth on the other boy's mouth, maybe, if he wants it, the yelp, the exclamation 'Woah, I'm not a fag, man', the punch to the kerb, the sharp sizzle of the lit cigarettes falling on his collarbone as his head bounces on asphalt, the dark, the pain of collisions you can't see in the dark, the wheezing, where is it coming from, is it you or is it me, and why does it hurt like this, then the black.

This too is a real story, though it hasn't happened to me yet.

≈

There are several different kinds of stories. There's that private story which is only lived, for one, the particulars of which no one will ever really understand unless it has happened to them too. Then there's the

opposite, the story you share, the story you kid with friends about over brunch and drinks, because even if you all have heard the end, it's the telling and retelling that counts. And then there's the third, the story that doesn't beg even a whisper, because it lives in the collective blood and doesn't need naming.

This story, the story as we know it with all its variations on a theme, has been a bit of all three, I think. Some might decry repetition, because it's not a pretty story, but repetition is remembrance, and remembrance is a first step to revolt, one hopes. As ugly as remembrance can be, even if it lives deep in the bones. But perhaps it can write something of its own over time.

'You know how it goes', Michael says, curled up next to me in bed, his sigh a coda on the end of his story. That's enough recollection for one sitting. I do know how it goes, as do all of us by now. I say nothing, but perhaps there's nothing that needs to be said. Perhaps sometimes a remembrance, a kiss on a forehead, and a squeeze from a body you trust in a bed you trust can, in itself, be enough of a little revolution for one night. Perhaps that too can be a real story.

SARAH PENWARDEN

Poetential

Small town
stuck in
a slow drawl;
a park with
empty swings,
bench without people;
it's the quiet streets and playgrounds
of my childhood town
where I would hide
in the gaps of the adult world
for whole afternoons:
hour by hour,
sorting pebbles, stroking
the texture of leaves,
while cicadas click time;
I look up over
the hot red roof, behind the factory,
beyond the mountain,
up, up to the burning blue
to the universe above my head,
and all that yet
may be.

MARGARET MOORES

Cyanotype

She lies for an hour on the sand on her blue towel, hat pulled over her face, thoughts scattering like light deflected into the blue waves of a shaken snow globe. Flecks of silica, miniature shells, tiny plastic fish and coral, the label from her swim-suit swirling in eddies. She floats in heat while pinpricks of light from the arch of sky above the waves pierce the latticed straw over her eyes.

Her body, leaving a bloom upon the towel, recalls the algae Anna Atkins recorded on cyan in 1842 for cyanotypes. Blueprints: her fingers unfurling fern fronds, hair like dried grass, her ear a fungus – auricularia cornea. Ethereal images against a blue that glows electric as the earth from space, late-night television pulsing through uncurtained windows or the lightning flash she saw late last night against a blue-black sky above the ocean, where on the horizon, a whale broached, blew, slipped back into the deep, leaving behind a moonlit spray of luminescence.

JONATHAN ANDREW PEREZ

Lobster rolls and creamsicles

It resembled a dinner party the scarab beetle black Harleys
the guests, shrimp boats fried, rhubarb encrusted cobbler

the clam burger milled with the tartar, you could have called it:
yuppy postcard, titled Lobster Shack and Cream Soda, circa 1999.

The red-headed pimple teenager blasted orders on the loudspeaker
from the second storey mollusky balcony, we were all visitors then.

A few carried the scent of fried-smelling, others wearied, white-haired
whistled *She's Got Legs*, permanent vacationers and Mainers skipping

like rocks of life from one weekend to the next, the secrets we kept,
the people we imagined we were, from movies like *Uncle Buck*.

Some of us (not from here, as in Earth), could only chase postcards
to the parking lot, and then got back into the Alien ship with the
words on the side:
save us.

JULIA WEBB

Lightening Up

She untitled her hair, her skin,
tried on the bath then slipped it off again
slick off a seal.
She untied her mind and let it float away,
it hovered above her for a moment –
a balloon set free but reluctant to leave the child's hand.
She untied the weight of words
and watched them flutter away
a slight flicker then gone.
She untied her better self and her worst self,
her *lady of struggle and articulation*,
she untied her weighty limbs, her solid trunk,
her awkward digits, her inconvenient sex.
She unmoored herself and threw away the paddle,
drifted haphazardly from the shore.
Lastly she hoofed out her fickle organs,
tossed them carelessly overboard.

ELANNA HERBERT

Near Exmouth: Lighting strike Yardi Creek

in low scrub. like the saltbush
outside my father's town
a release on the edge of a continent

after that distance
from Perth. looking back
to the interior
near Exmouth

hot wind a beach car park. beside the
splayed tyres of grey nomading four wheel
drives and European campervans left
to roam our toes are coral sand
grit. we Snapchat Cape Range. it

lies low settles into an afternoon
spent contemplating erosion. ahead
the storm lightning, smoke a bushfire

in low scrub. *let it burn*
the rutted man
in the car park said. raising his voice
near Exmouth

up here scrub has no value

up here it's a canopy for snakes
near Exmouth

you step into silence feel each place
as a spirit each spirit

as a place

a genius loci which

Wikipedia tells me is a thing ancient Romans
worshipped, often depicted as a snake

but I'm just sayin' if
the rutted man
in the carpark holding belief
firmly rusted a badge for all
the rutted men
near Exmouth

were to ask I am sure there's
a woman perhaps there's an
Indigenous woman perhaps there's many
women who can speak of
things of value beyond *has no value*

to add to transient carpark conversations with
the rutted men.

raising our voices
near Exmouth

Lake Conjola

Read the reflection

in the January king tide
lake stars float on a surface
of black oil infinity water

big diamond little diamond
phosphorescence
 phosphorescence dancing a spangle of
 stars I recall moments the

Giotto ceiling Scrovegni chapel
I never did visit with you and the unnamed
artist another chapel
 Deir el-Bahari, Hatshepsut the Queen's ceiling stars the
 weight of limestone pressing down held tight by lapis
crushed blue gems woven solid pressing up a layer
of three thousand years balanced
unwavering in its intensity
there I breathed the sublime
inhaled the detritus of mummification

left melting into the sun, barely here
 I return pick up pieces of life
at Lake Conjola white stars reflect liquid

night slides them under the jetty
to return out the other side held

by tidal flow crushed charcoal tints of moonlight a carpet
of light points bright on dark, like a pub floor design swirling
reflecting those points so strong after a couple of drinks you
believe you could stand on it
that it would silently hold your weight. walk through

 my cosmos the
 lake edge the
 surface at night
 each diamond a universe of positionality
splintering white-light thoughts

fear keeps its distance
tonight it is just me and the lake stars
dancing on the jetty's edge

DOMINIQUE HECQ

Evridiki

You were born in autumn and so, naturally, hate spring. The scent of blackwood showering pollen. The air licked with gold where the buzzing of the bees deepens. The sudden opacity of it all. You run. Run away. Away from the visible and from the invisible. With the pollen clinging to your skin, the sun striking and the darkness beneath your feet settling, you are a living phobia. A fear of no consequence. Yet as aeons pass in one beat of the heart, you hear the rustle under the trees. Taste the bite of death.

TONY BEYER

Short Forecast

I come from a small place
where television
exaggerates the weather

colourful storms
and bands of rain
pour past us nightly
obscuring the wiry
outline of the land

an apologetic tone suggests itself
in the cut
of the presenter's jacket

as if the sea
concealed a vast inland
where trouble in the making
aims itself our way

YVETTE HARVEY

Three Beaches

The orb descends
Planting her oily last kisses
Flat smack
On the meeting point
Of Atlantic and Med
Morocco whispers
Across the salt and high winds
Kite surfers are jostling like
Jellyfish, feeling the sky
The light is melting and condenses
Before ribboning out
Creeping between layers of lilac
But she's burned up
Only part of the sky –
The rest is orange blossoms,
Cloudy wine.
As I'm tasting it,
The flavour separates:
And almost a decade is gone
When I look down
My bones are bleached
By that luminous hanging skull
My flesh flees towards cool shadows
My belly continues to grin-up,
Defying gravity with
Its unnatural midnight crescent.
A looping breeze
Strokes the backs of my hands,
And worries at sea turtles
As they hatch their eggs.
Next day, we leave for Kerala

And that moon stays forever
Locked inside of me.
And
here is midday,
Most melodramatic ...
I'm caught in a little Aussie town
All the headlights are on
I'm lost.
Seven fine rocky layers shorn.
No one told me
How hot and raw burns
An invisible sun.
That was yesterday's yesterday
And here, this, now,
The sun is spilling over me
In Tarifa time unspools
Again, Again, Anew.

PAUL BECKMAN

The taste of snow

We woke to purple snow, big drops falling sticking to the lawn around our house. Go make a snowman, Mama said, but once outside, we stood by the swing set, tongues out, tasting grape snow and laughing,

In the afternoon the snow turned pink and we lay down making snow angels with our mouths open, and enjoying the taste of cotton candy.

After dinner it was still snowing, blue snow this time and when it hit our tongues we tasted sadness and yet couldn't stop so we just stood there dripping tears, our blue tongues hanging out waiting and ready for the next taste to come falling.

MARY CRESSWELL

High Tide after the Earthquake

Even as we watch
stretching sands
cover deep beaches
coping-saw coastlines
tumble beneath us
we mark confusion
and we suspect
these incapable lands ...

They keep their distance
with twists and bends
going nowhere soon
keeping us in hope
until we're in too deep
to think of flight.

CARL WALSH

Spiniphryne Duhameli

(spiny dreamers)

spellbound you draw the sun from
its cloud caught fastness / as fish it
draws heat from the brood sea
in thrall to the moon / oceans
undulate / cast themselves recklessly
at shores / amongst all this you are
stillness / you are silence / solitary
in shoal-midst / lurking beneath
calm-less surface to set forth
calumny & calamity / I will block
my ears to siren song / avert my eyes
from sea maidens fair & unfair
& slip into the deep & in the deep
illuminate your darkness like those fish
– with lightbulbs on their heads.

CATH NICHOLS

Buried

There's a brown blackbird pecking
at the flowerpot's heart, flicking
moss and other debris to the ground.
Even though this emptying hurts –
there's mess to be swept away –
don't panic, time will out.
Your bulbs are still
safe, a hand-span down.

Everything comes down to

this one sound body, sound mind
sound as houses
sound sense

sound: a narrow passage of water connecting two larger bodies of
water
'sound' – Mancunian (colloquial) 'good'
sound you out

sounding depths
sounding brass
now: sound asleep

KATE CANTRELL

Mutations

Solomon said
as long as there is breath
in your body there is hope,
or was it that pastor we met
on the way to Montana
when we fought about God
and Monarchs and whether they fly north
or south for the winter
I said south and you said
what does it matter, after chrysalis
they only live seven days.
I was shocked

to discover a breed
of butterflies that nurse on milkweed
and later fly higher than they should
simply because they can.
You said there's no right way
to migrate, but you were wrong.
I do not accept the caterpillar dies
just so the butterfly may live
you know in chrysalis it clings
to itself the way you did.

When the doctor said this is the way
the only way
to extract a foreign creature
from within, like a tick
or a lump in your breast,

if only we had asked

for a second opinion
and followed those Monarchs
west to the border
to see which way they fly.

Later I changed my mind
about God when I saw our daughter
chase a duck across the water
until it took indignantly to the air.
She declared she would wait forever
but the heat came over her like a blanket
and cuddled her to sleep –
it reminded me of the day you left.

You said it's very quiet over there
please turn the radio off
so I can hear.

PRIZEWINNERS

Meniscus congratulates the winners and shortlisted works from the following prizes.

We are pleased to offer first publication to the winners of the second **University of Canberra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Poetry Prize.**

Poems were encouraged that addressed the NAIDOC 2018 theme *Because of her, we can!*, 'celebrating the invaluable contributions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have made – and continue to make – to our communities, our families, our rich history and to our nation' ([2018 NAIDOC week](#)).

Yvette Henry Holt and Lionel Fogarty, who judged the poems 'blind', selected three women poets, each of whom explored, in their own ways, the contributions made by women, and the potential of women's contribution to culture, family and society.

1st prize: Jazz Money, 'as we attack'

2nd prize: Charmaine Papertalk Green, 'We Can! We Do! We Will!'

3rd prize: Alison Nannup, 'Innabaarn'

Meniscus is also very pleased to publish two stories shortlisted for the **AAWP/Ubud Writers and Readers Festival Emerging Writers Prize.**

These stories are published in concert with the 2018 Recent Work Press volume, *Ace Anthology. Arresting, Contemporary Stories by Emerging Writers* (edited by Julia Prendergast):

Sue Brennan, 'Finally, Our Feet Go Where They Want'

Supatra Walker, 'Gop Noi'

JAZZ MONEY

as we attack

and salt hair white flecks

as we attack

around lips and eyes

she collects and moves with the tides

in forward motion

\

we do not bump together

like boats in the sheltered harbour

fishmonger fingers covered

in scales his wife

tectonic plates move

down your spine

\

wades alone

cold mornings

trace the line where fish swim

beneath your skin

wet grasses carefully knotted

our lives on separate tides

following underground channels

to that inland sea

that pull our scales apart

not chain mail

we exhale salt

in forward motion

\

but soft flesh beneath

flesh that moves and bends

she breathes in your scales \

holds back the tide

his calloused edges

CHARMAINE PAPERTALK GREEN

We Can! We Do! We Will!

We can stand our ground because of her
A symbol of beautiful resistance resilience
Shells wrapped regally around her neck
Eyes looking deep into the generations
A reminder of woman's strength drawn
From a long line of female ancestors

*Truganinni elegant stance of survival and
Remembrance for there will be no forgetting
Or erasure of such strength and existence*

we can raise our voices because of her
Like a sudden clap of thunder shooting
Between the earth world and sky world
Demanding visibility, presence and words
Lifting the veil of oppression to reveal
Voices from earth mother womb raging

*Oodgeroo Noonuccal pen was a bush broom
Willy-willy sweeping words and energy across
country preparing for literature warriors to come*

We can maintain our faith in hope because of her
creating a just and better society for our peoples
Fighting for Indigenous rights and setting the path
For political actions with a gentle smile
A fire in the belly beacon against injustices

*Faith Bandler showed us people power can
Turn a country's vote into an affirmative
Activism can work towards social change*

We can honour women's spirituality because of her
Holding Indigenous women's universe
Culture, powers, strengths, struggles, fights
Maternal ancestors, family and friends
At the campsite, kitchen, meeting room
Gallery, stage, sports field, studio, home

*Holding us tight and holding us up so we
Can hold our families and tackle life's hurdles
We don't give up and it is because they didn't*

ALISON NANNUP

Innabaarn

Born at the 'Pyramid of Stones'
Abydoss Station, in the Pilbara, was her home
Red rocks, red earth, kiss the blue sky dome
Natural green arid tones of the land meet
Fresh water with flowering lilies, floating atop the water so sweet
The resting place of our almighty Warloo.

As a little girl Innabaarn and her mum were close
She learnt about totems and came up with her own
Not knowing that hers had already been chosen
'Your totem is the pelican', her mum told her
Very disappointed Innabaarn scolded
'But Mum, I wanted to be just like the Brolga.'

Forcibly removed from her family at the station
The police man sent her to the south-west of the nation
Moore River Settlement, brain child of AO Neville
One of her jobs, a domestic for that Mr Devil,
She was only 12, work became her motivation,
Her skin paler, they wanted to make her Caucasian
Sent by train to Gnowangerup, across the state
Back and forth to Moore River, she never harboured any hate.

She met Charles William Nannup – they called him Bill
They shifted to Geraldton to a reserve on the hill
Innabaarn and Bill they married, had children
One my own father, truly one in a million.

They lived in a bough shed, a roof of canvas,
She trusted in the Lord, had faith in his answers

Life wasn't easy, the epitome of poor,
Sometimes she'd starve so her children had more
What a beautiful mother, so selfless and strong.

Cultural awareness coursed through her veins
She became an unstoppable advocate for change
Twas at Movie Matinee, the now Cinema in Geraldton
1950 the year, standing in the middle of the crowded theatre
Racist comments had been said
I bet they wished they were dead
Holding her two-year-old son, on her hip
'If my blood and yours were dripped onto a saucer,
do you know the colour you would see?
Both would be red, get the ignorant thoughts out of your head!'

The timing was right, in 1987
The birth of her youngest grandchild
A precious baby girl, a gift from heaven
Innabaarn returned home to fulfill her purpose
In her traditional home land, she was very special.

To the pool of the Warloo the ceremony took place
to blow the Rainbow colours for the land to be a beautiful, healthy
safe space.

This was the remarkable woman from Abydoss Station
Her legacy lives on through all her relations
As you're going about your day
You may be wondering what's beyond your dismay
Stop and remember
Those women before us
Strength is in our blood, it's part of our DNA.

SUE BRENNAN

Finally, Our Feet Go Where They Want

Once or twice a month, I pay, I mean, we pay ... well, most often you pay, for nameless Chinese men to massage our feet. I like it medium pressure, you like it harder. I wonder if you're trying to prove something to me. Surely you are, sitting there on your mobile phone while a young man with strong hands grinds his knuckles into the balls of your feet. My guy is called Mr X. Yours is Mr M. We ... you call ahead and say we are coming and would prefer Mr X and Mr M if they are available. They know the pressure we want. We don't have to explain.

Before the massage, we eat at our favourite Indian place and you don't ask me how my morning at work was and I try and get information from you about yours: *What did you do? How many others were in today? Did you go out for coffee? Where?* I feel like an inquisitor, but you've forced me into this role. We climb the stairs after lunch, past the manga shop on the first floor above the covered, busy shopping street. We enter the dimly lit room and remove our shoes. You remove your shoes easily. Years, decades of practice – stepping on to the back of them and in to a pair of slippers. I still haven't quite got the hang of it. I need to be more mindful of my footwear choices. I lift each foot in front of me to unclip my shoes, stepping in to the over-sized slippers and shuffling over to where you are already paying for our session. I protest. *I can pay. I can pay.* It's useless.

There is pleasant, soothing, synthesised music playing and one other customer who, judging from the gaping mouth, is fast asleep. The masseur works on his feet regardless. Our guys are ready, so we take our positions side by side in the comfortable chairs and for the next forty minutes don't speak. I roll up the legs of my trousers to above my knees. You have a little more difficulty with your snug-fitting jeans. I have asked you why you are permitted to wear jeans to work – this is Japan after all; you said that on Saturdays you stay in the office, and don't meet with clients. It sounded reasonable back then.

A girl delivers basins of warm water, and I wait until Mr X gestures for me to place my feet into one. They are washed briskly and then, my favourite part, each leg is wrapped in very warm towels. Mr X wanders away out of sight and I lie there feeling coddled, pampered, and abandoned. I glance at you and you are equally swaddled, checking your phone as usual. I wonder what you'd do if I sent you a text. I look over at the other customer and squint to see what the masseur is showing the now-awake man. On a paper tissue are small, yellow chunks of skin. I gasp and look quickly away.

Mr X returns bringing a small plastic seat, settles himself in front of me, sets the timer for 45 minutes and puts it on the floor. The blessed towels are removed and some kind of oil is smeared from knee to toe. I've given up caring much about my leg stubble. I can't be constantly prepared for a massage and I didn't know that you were going to want to do this today. It's only a week since the last one. It starts with firm thumbs pressed slowly along my instep and a glance up at me for confirmation. I nod and smile. It's firm, on the edge of pleasure and *please stop*. How anyone could sleep through this is beyond me. I take furtive looks at Mr X who is probably about twenty. All the men employed here look the same age. I wonder what he does in his free time. Perhaps he's a student and he hurries back to his apartment to finish an assignment. He checks that the towels aren't too hot. When he speaks to me it is in basic Japanese. *Daijoubu?* he asks. Is it all right? *Daijoubu*, I respond. Yes, it's all right.

The part I don't really like is the toes. I hope that he will hurry through or forget. He pushes into the base of each toe and I can deal with that, but when he pulls each toe firmly and releases them with a small snap of his fingers, I feel vaguely nauseated. He misses nothing. It's a routine; he could probably do it in his sleep. When one foot is done, it is wrapped in a warm, wet towel and put aside. Mr M finishes with your left foot at almost the same time. We are halfway through and I can feel disappointment stirring. After this, we will go home on the bus, stopping at the supermarket to buy something for dinner. You will cook and I'll pretend to help. We've given up the idea that this would be a task equally shared. Simply, you're better at it than me. Not simply, I can't do it the way you want.

I go back to wondering about Mr X. Does he have a girlfriend? A Japanese one? Surely yes, he's a good-looking young man. How I'd love to find out what he thinks of living here. What he thinks of *them*. I want us to sneak out the back where the basins and towels are kept and collude: *Do you feel like an outsider? Do you think I'd understand him better, I mean really know him, if I could speak better Japanese? Are Japanese women this ... remote?* I once had a Chinese student tell me that he had no friends here. *I'm lonely*, he said, *they don't talk to me*. Maybe that was just his story.

As Mr X works away on my right foot, I know time is running out. I'd love to stay here for hours with him pressing the soles of my feet with his thumbs. There's nothing sexual in this; it is comforting and familiar rather than arousing or erotic. A few times, not recently, you have given me a massage. I remember the first time you offered to do this. I was excited and assumed it would lead to sex. You told me to lie on the bed and I did. You told me to keep my clothes on and I did. You told me to lie face down, and I adjusted the pillows so I wouldn't have my face squashed. You sat astride me. *Here we go*, I thought, and yes, off we went. It wasn't so much a massage as a pummel. Back in your university student days you were on the ice hockey team and had sometimes acted as team masseur. Maybe you all took turns. As you kneaded the back of my thighs, I wanted to point out that I'd been teaching English to half-asleep freshmen, not whacking a puck around a rink and getting thrown into the barriers.

I look over at you and your eyes are closed and the phone is held against your chest like some kind of talisman. In front of the row of five chairs where we are seated are three private rooms. The facade is wooden with Chinese-inspired, carved lattice windows. Once, in the early days, I went there for a back massage and it was one of the girls who did it. You were out on the chair having your feet done. Now, I sit and watch a young man being ushered quietly into one of the rooms. The customer who was having his skin removed has disappeared – I didn't notice him leave – and a middle-aged woman is settling into position. This is a popular place, a well-known secret. They're always busy here and a few times Mr X and Mr M have not been available. That annoyed you more than me, to have to explain again the degree of pain you wanted to experience. To get exactly what you wanted.

Mr X is pulling the toes on my right foot and I look over at your rectangular, blocky feet, wiry black tufts of hair on each toe and on top. You've told me you dislike them. To me all feet are ugly and I don't understand the fetishisation of them. As for shoes? Now there's something to worship. I look over at the collection of shoes at the entrance. We placed ours on a shelf, but the woman who just arrived left hers by the door. *We have a rebel in the house*, I think. The entrance of our apartment, the *genkan*, is neat. We bought and assembled a cupboard that holds most of our shoes and we have two pairs of slippers for guests, though we never wear them ourselves.

It's almost over now. Mr X wraps my right foot in a warm damp towel and I lie there looking like a burn victim. He stands and, with the flat of his wide hands and the weight of his own body, he applies pressure from my knees and down to my feet. This is done twice and then I am lightly punched up and down the leg and on each sole. I feel he could go a little harder on this. A little bell rings; he's timed it perfectly. He peels the towels off and uses a fresh one to dry me before standing aside. *Arigato gozaimasu*, I say in a low voice and he nods. He gathers the towels and clock, without making eye contact, and leaves. Mr M is also finishing up with you and I go over to the doorway, find our shoes and set them out. As you step into them and leave, I'm still fiddling around trying to do up the clip on the side. I can't quite see in the dimly lit room. When I come out on the small landing, you are stamping your feet into your shoes. I don't ask why you don't just do this inside before you go out.

We descend the narrow staircase and make our way to the bus stop. It's so crowded now that we walk one behind the other, no hand holding for us. My feet feel fat, tingly, and I wish that I could walk barefoot from the massage chair to our sofa and not through this shopping madness in high heels. All Mr X's good work for nothing. Young couples meander, looking with equal interest at the window displays and their phones. Bent old women push their wheeled shopping baskets with determination. Foreigners are also plentiful, looking for the small, quirky bars and cafés that make this trendy suburb of Tokyo so popular. Once we arrive at the bus stop and take our place in the queue, you complain about the crowds and reiterate that there should be a special walking lane for residents. You're only half-joking about this.

We're fourth and fifth in the queue and both checking our phones. There's a long email from my sister that I scroll through. I miss her keenly and decide to save it for later when I can drink a glass of wine, alone. I open an email from the university where I work. It says there will be medical examinations on campus in the forthcoming weeks and, as a full time employee, I am expected to have yearly medicals. I look up to tell you about this and see the screen you are looking at – an email in Japanese punctuated with pink hearts and stars, a pair of clasping hands. You notice me looking, turn off the screen and slip the phone into your bag. The bus pulls up and we board. Usually, whichever one of us gets on first pays for the other. You board first, pay and I sit beside you meekly. Fuming.

We alight in front of the supermarket. Having planned dinner at lunch, we move around efficiently, putting the items we need in to a basket. At the register, I am ready with my wallet, as are you, and as soon as the last item is scanned, I whip some notes out and place them in the tray. I hear you exhale. We put the items into two plastic bags and you try to take both of them. I pull one from your hands. You close your eyes and when they open, I see the determination in them. We've fought this battle before. Outside you try again to take the bag and I say loudly, *I can carry it!* When you try yet again, I blurt, *Who was that email from?* You laugh and say it's from a co-worker. *A female co-worker?* I ask.

No, male.

I stand in the middle of the footpath staring at you. You nudge me to the side, pull your phone out of your bag and open the email. *Bit strange a guy using all those emojis*, I say. You explain, as if to a small child, what each one is for. The throbbing heart is because this co-worker is asking for a favour and the stars are because he is happy with your work. You turn the phone off and laugh again and explain that this is how Japanese people communicate with each other. I know you are lying – I know it, I know it, I know – but I can't read Japanese well enough to prove it. We continue walking and you ask me what I want to do tomorrow. Do I want to go hiking?

Inside, we take our shoes off. You go ahead of me and into the kitchen. I remove mine slowly and squat to look for space inside the cupboard. On the bottom shelf is a pair of shoes I've only worn once.

You bought them for me. On one of the rare occasions when I was out shopping by myself, I bought a black, patent leather, very nice pair of shoes. High heels and pointed toes. A little expensive. Two days later, you presented me with a pair of shoes that you said were identical for a fifth of the price. The only resemblance, as far as I could tell, was that they were a black pair of women's shoes. I was reminded of the nuns who taught me in high school: sexless in their Church-issued, sensible heels. When I put them on, I felt as though I aged forty years. I smiled and thanked you and said, *please don't buy me any more shoes, okay? I like shopping for them myself.*

When I leave you, they will be the first things I throw out.

SUPATRA WALKER

Gop Noi

I ball together a few grains of sticky rice from the little bamboo basket. Pinching a small piece of omelette from the tin plate on the floor in front of me, I press it into the rice. I place the ball of food in my mouth, chewing carefully, making sure that the mixture is fine and moist. In the hollow of my *pak toong* he lies quietly, studying my face. His eyes are as black as *lumyai* seeds. He slips an arm from the loose cotton wrap and it twitches intermittently against my knee. Satisfied that the food is thoroughly chewed, I spit some onto my fingers and gently push it into his soft mouth. He jerks in response. He sucks and blows noisily, like the mouths of the orange carp in the temple ponds. His eyes widen with surprise as he thrashes, food and saliva dribble from his lips. I scoop the slushy mash back into his mouth.

‘*Gin, gin nah luk*; eat, eat my child,’ I encourage him gently.

He sucks my finger thoughtfully, greedily. His face is serious. He has my mother’s eyes. She would have loved him. If she were alive, she would have loved him. But then he wouldn’t be here: she would never have consented to any of it. He smacks his lips noisily. His limbs jerk. He likes the food. There is a faint tug in my breasts but I have nothing for him. I make another ball of food and as I chew, I stroke his legs. He gurgles and wriggles, his movements strong but uncoordinated. In my lap he reminds me of a paddy frog. His long limbs – thin little thighs. Gop, that’s what I call him. *Gop noi*, my little frog. I will give him another mouthful of food and then no more tonight. There is a bottle of warm milk ready for him. He will sleep beside me on the small kapok mattress on the floor of this room that contains the sum of my life.

I rent this room from Mae Buah. She too is from Isaan, from the same town as my mother. We are *luk pee luk nong*, cousins on my mother’s side, although she is very much older than me. She has lived here in Bangkok since before I was born. There is another girl who lives in this house. Ped is older than me, maybe nineteen or twenty. Her baby is American. Like me she is from Isaan but she pretends she is from Chiang

Mai. Her skin is whiter than mine so people believe her. She works in the best department store in Bangkok. She wears sunglasses, American, like all the movie stars wear, like the eyes of cats. She thinks she looks like Elizabeth Taylor. She has a new boyfriend and, increasingly, she leaves her son with Mae Buah at night. Mae Buah already cares for two other children. I don’t know who their mothers are or where they live but they too are from the northeast. They pay Mae Buah to look after their children. Just like I do. When I come home from my job I help Mae Buah bathe and feed the children. At times, they all share a mattress on the floor of her room. When I go to my job six days a week, Mae Buah looks after my son. I make just enough money to pay my rent and for food, and for my baby’s milk and his care. If I am careful and can save a few baht I will go to the movies with Ped. But I am saving for a pair of sunglasses.

At my job I look after two children, a boy and a younger girl whose parents work at the same store as Ped. They go to work very early in the morning. I wake the children, feed them and walk them to school along the *klong*. Then I go back to the house where I will sweep the yard, wash the clothes and clean the house and kitchen. In the afternoons I fetch the children from school. At about four o’clock, Jim comes home from university and takes care of his sister’s children so I can go home. He is a nice boy with a kind smile and he often teases me about my red hair. He has ambitions and is studying to be an engineer. He tells me that I should do a typing course and that maybe I will find work in an office: ‘A pretty girl like you who can read and write English will be in big demand’, he says. He knows a woman who works in the typing pool at the Coca Cola factory. I haven’t thought about my future since my son was born. He wasn’t meant to be part of it, but the life of my dreams and that of my reality parted when my mother died.

I look down at my son and lightly pinch his soft thighs. There is some fat on him now. Not like in those first few weeks. He got sick. His diarrhoea was hot and yellow, like his face, and his little belly swelled like a bullfrog. I took him back to the hospital. They made me leave him there and sent me home. Every morning, with full breasts, I would catch buses through the city’s noisy diesel-fumed throng, to the hospital where I would spend the day. I fed and cared for him in that big hospital with its wide rooms, the crowded corridors and everywhere the sound

of children crying. After a week the brusque doctor said he was well enough to go home. I hadn't brought in any clothes. It was hot. My baby had nothing but the hospital diaper he wore.

'Take off his diaper and leave it in the cot. The orderlies will clean up', said the Thai nurse in her starched white cap and white uniform and white shoes. Her skin was pale, like milk. Her eyes were brown like *nam dan oi*, the golden sugar made from sugar cane – the eyes of privilege. She did not smile. Her lips were pursed like *dtood maa*, a dog's arse.

'I have no clothes for him', I said. 'No blanket, not even a *pakama* in which to wrap him.'

'This is a hospital', she said stiffly. 'This is not a charity.'

I did as she instructed. Then I picked up my naked son and, holding him against my chest, I turned and walked from the cot. I felt her eyes on my back. Through them I saw the sallowness of my Audrey Hepburn blouse, white, with the Peter Pan collar. I bought it from the expensive department store, laying out the creased, carefully saved baht notes on the polished counter. I felt the thinness of my *pak toong*. How faded its once bright patterns. I heard my rubber thongs as they slapped across the sanitised tiled floor. I saw the deep cracks in my heels stained with dirt that no amount of scrubbing would remove. And I saw the darkness of my skin. Northern black, skin like mud. I felt the coarseness of my hair, like the dry fibres of coconut husks and, as I walked out into the Bangkok afternoon with its trams and *tuk-tuks* and the buses and their horns and the merciless April sun, I looked down and saw the trails of salt glistening on my baby's back where my tears were drying.

Against my will and because of my sadness a memory begins to form – of clouds gathering, towering. Stiffening winds gust across dry, salt-panned rice fields, sweeping up the rice chaff and the stubble of last season's harvest. Driving gales shred the mango trees, sending their hard green fruit crashing on to the sun-baked, bone-dry mud, splitting the sour flesh from the soft white seeds. Tall coconut palms thrash, bowing to the drums of rolling thunder, while lightning gilds the boiling clouds, hurling heavy drops of rain in fierce, dense curtains across the plateau. When the storms are spent and the world grows quiet, the first tentative call of the paddy frog can be heard. *Gop Na*, whirring, churring, creaking and croaking. First one, then another, and

then more until the once-dry paddy fields ring and pulse with the joy of frogs emerging from thick mud. Northern mud, rich and black, into which my family will plant soft stalks of seedling rice. Soon catfish and eels, crabs, snails and shrimp will thrive amongst the emerald spears. *Nai naam mee bplaa nai naa mee khao*. In the water there is fish, in the field there is rice.

In the bus shelter someone has left a newspaper, discarded on the dusty concrete along with the split watermelon seeds and steamed banana leaf wrappers that once held *khao tom mat*, sweet coconut rice with banana filling. Holding my son in one arm I gather up the papers and place them neatly back down on the concrete. I lay my baby on the papers and wrap him the way I was taught to wrap food in banana leaf. I board a bus with my son in his newspaper parcel and return to the *soi* where we live.

Under the harsh light of the naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, he squirms. *Gop noi, gop na*, little frog, paddy frog, far from home. I pick up my son and cover his taut little belly with kisses. He squeals. My laughter startles him and he kicks and throws up his arms. I put my ear to his chest and I can hear the tap tap tap of his little heart. I feel it beating lightly against my cheek like the rhythmic pulsing of a paddy frog's throat and an intense joy wells within me. I put my lips to his belly and I suck and suck and inhale his scent with deep, full breaths.

Translation note: *Luk-krueng* is Thai for half-caste children. Literally translated as half-children, the term is used primarily for children born from Thai mothers by white fathers.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Jungmin Bae is a senior in the international course at Hankuk Academy of Foreign Studies. Her prose was recognised by the 2018 OddContest and her poetry published by Aerie International and Poached Hare. Her translations of Korean traditional poems are forthcoming in *Cagibi*. She is founder and editor of *Mirinae*, her school's literary magazine.

Ranald Barnicot is a retired teacher of EFL, living in Watford, just outside London, UK. He has published a number of poems both originals and translations (from Ancient Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian) in journals such as *Stand*, *Acumen*, *The French Literary Review* and *Transference*. A book of translations of the contemporary Colombian poet Giovanni Quessep, co-translated with Felipe Botero is due to come out in November this year (Out-spoken Press).

Rebecca Kiwi Barnstien is an experimental poet who works with elements of alterity to fuel her work. She holds a BFA from Naropa University and an MFA from the University of Kent. She enjoys traveling and experimenting with language. She has a permanent address, a cat, and a lover in Denver, Colorado.

Paul Beckman is a retired air traffic controller. He was one of the winners in *The Best Small Fictions 2016* and was selected for the Editors' Choice Award for 2016 for his story in *Fiction Southeast*. His latest collection of flash stories, 'Kiss Kiss' (Truth Serum Press) is available from Independent Booksellers, Amazon or his blog, www.pincusb.com. Some places his stories have been published: *Literary Orphans*, *Matter Press*, *Spelk*, *Playboy* and *Pank*. Paul had a story selected for the 2018 new Norton Anthology of microfiction.

Tony Beyer operates out of Taranaki, NZ. His *Anchor Stone* (Cold Hub Press), was a finalist in the poetry category of the 2018 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards.

Sue Brennan is an Australian writer of poetry and fiction. She was shortlisted for the Alan Marshall Short Story Award (2016, 2018) and the Polestar Literary Award (2016). She has had poetry included in the *Poetry D'Amour Anthology* (2016, 2017, 2018). She is currently working on a novel.

Kate Cantrell is an award-winning writer, editor, and academic. Her short stories have been published in several magazines and journals, and her travel writing has appeared in *The Sunday Mail*, Brati Travel Guides, and *The Independent on Sunday*. She teaches creative writing at the University of Southern Queensland.

Gayelene Carbis has been recently shortlisted for various prizes, including poetry prizes – work & tumble Chapbook Poetry Award; Montreal International; Fish (Ireland); Martha Richardson; Adrien Abbott; MPU; and *Australian Book Review* and *The Age Short Story Awards*. In 2017, Gayelene's first book of poetry, *Anecdotal Evidence*, was published by Five Islands Press; and her new play won Best Premiere Production (Sarasota Festival, US). Gayelene teaches creative writing at various universities; is currently teaching EAL at Fitzroy Learning Network and at ACU; and is Writer in Residence at Dandenong Primary School, where she facilitates poetry workshops. Gayelene is currently working on a collection of short stories and her second book of poetry. She is thrilled to have her first flash fiction published in *Meniscus*.

Helen Chambers is a flash and short fiction writer from the UK. She won the Fish Short Story Prize in 2018, and has several other short stories and flash fictions published. She has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Essex. Helenchamberswriter.wordpress.com

Bernard Cohen is the author of five novels and a children's book. His poetry has appeared in *Jacket*, *Cordite*, *SMH*, *the Australian*, *Trout* (NZ) and *FourW*. His latest book, the short story collection *When I Saw the Animal* is published in September by UQP.

Mary Cresswell is a retired natural history editor and poet. She is from Los Angeles and lives on New Zealand's Kapiti Coast. Her most recent books are *Fish Stories: Ghazals and glosas* (Canterbury University Press) and *Field Notes: A satiric miscellany* (Makaro Press, Wellington). www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Cresswell.Mary

Jane Downing has had prose and poetry published in journals including *The Griffith Review*, *Antipodes*, *Island*, *Southerly*, *Verity La*, *The Big Issue*, *Best Australian Poems* 2004 and 2015, and previously in *Meniscus*. Her two novels – *The Trickster* (2003) and *The Lost Tribe* (2005) – were published by Pandanus Books at the Australian National University, and her next novel *Yack* was Commended in the Jim Hamilton Unpublished Manuscript Award, at the Federation of Australian Writers National Literary Awards, 2016. She has a Doctor of Creative Arts degree from the University of Technology, Sydney, and she can be found at www.janedowning.wordpress.com

Siboney Duff is a writer, editor, and teacher. She lives on the Far North Coast of New South Wales with her partner, adult daughters, grandson, and two dogs. She can't remember the last time she slept in.

Melanie Faith is a poet, professor, and photographer. This year, two of her craft books for writers were published – *In a Flash!: Writing & Publishing Dynamic Flash Prose* and *Poetry Power* (both Vine Leaves Press). Her short stories are forthcoming from Red Coyote (Fall 2018) and her poetry will appear in *Up North Lit* (October 2018) and *Meniscus Literary Journal*. This fall, she is teaching a dream class she created: Photography for Writers. <https://www.melaniefaith.com/blog/>

Bil Forshay is an eighty-seven-year-old writer from Portland, Oregon who writes plays, short stories and poems in quantity. A professional tenor soloist, Bil also plays guitar and lays claim to knowing over 3,000 songs, though thankfully no one has yet asked him to prove it.

Frances Gapper is the author of *In the Wild Wood*, her third collection of flashes and longer stories, which was published in 2017 by Cultured Llama. Her other collections are *The Tiny Key* and *Absent Kisses*.

Alexandra Geneve is a Western Australian writer, educator, and Masters student who has recently had two short fiction pieces published in the Hunter Writers Centre Grieve anthology, won third prize in the City of Rockingham Short Fiction Awards, and her story "You always leave something behind", he said' has been accepted for publication by *Elle Magazine*, Australia in 2018.

Carla Geneve is a 19-year-old singer-songwriter hailing from the song-writer affluent Great Southern coastal city of Albany in Western Australia. One of Triple J's Unearthed musicians, she and her band have toured nationally and she has recently been nominated for seven WA Music Industry Awards.

Charmaine Papertalk Green is from the Wajarri, Badimaya and Southern Yamaji peoples of Western Australia. She has lived and worked in rural Western Australia (Midwest-Pilbara) most of her life, in numerous roles in the Aboriginal sector industry as a community agitator, artist/poet, community development practitioner and social sciences researcher.

Charmaine's publications include her book of poetry, *Just Like That* (2007), a children's verse novel *Tiptoeing Tod the Tracker* (2014) and a poetry collaboration with fellow WA poet John Kinsella, *False Claim of Colonial Thieves* (2018), through Magabala Books. Charmaine has poetry included in numerous anthologies and publications including *Artlink Magazine* (2018), *The Fremantle Press Anthology of Western Australian Poetry* (2017), *Kenyon Review* (2017), *Ora Nui: A Collection of Maori and Aboriginal Literature* (2014), *Antipodes: Poetic Responses* (2011), *Those who remain will always be remembered: An anthology of Aboriginal writing* (2000), *Inside Black Australia: An anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* (1988), and *The Penguin Book of Australia Women Poets* (1986). Charmaine lives in Geraldton, Western Australia.

Sarah Gridley teaches at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. Her poetry collections are *Weather Eye Open*, *Green is the Orator*, and *Loom*. A recipient of the 2018 Cecil Hemley Award from The Poetry Society of America, she has a BA in English and American Literature from Harvard University, and an MFA in poetry from the University of Montana.

Yvette Harvey is a writer and lawyer who has published nonfiction and multimedia works. She is currently completing a creative writing PhD at RMIT University on the Australian Gothic short story.

Dominique Hecq grew up in the French-speaking part of Belgium. She now lives in Melbourne. Her works include a novel, three collections of short stories and six books of poetry. Her stories and poems have been published internationally. *Hush: A Fugue* (2017) is her latest book in English. *Hors Limites*, her auto-translation of *Out of Bounds* (2009), is hot off the press at *L'Harmattan*.

Tom Hennemann has an MA (Fine Arts) from UNSW. His poetry has previously appeared in *The Ghazal Page*, *Medusa's Laugh Press Anthology 'Nanotext'* and *Cordite Poetry Review*.

Elanna Herbert now lives in southern rural New South Wales, having lived in Canberra, Gundaroo and Perth. Recent poetry appears in *Westerly*: online special, *Australian Poetry Anthology*, *fourW twenty eight*, *uneven floor* and *Coastlines Magazine*. She placed second in the Ethel Webb Blundell literary award 2018 (poetry). Her collection of short stories *Frieda and the Cops* (Ginninderra Press, 2006) won the 2001 Marion Eldridge Award. Elanna has a PhD from the University of Canberra (2006).

Suzanne Herschell lives in the harbourside community of Eastbourne across from Wellington in New Zealand. A former teacher of accelerate students and mother of four, Suzanne is a poet and an award-winning artist represented in NZ and overseas. She is also a curator at the NZ Academy of Fine Arts, and a selector and judge of national exhibitions; and this year is curator of NZ's 2018 Parkin Drawing Prize. Her poems have been published in *Meniscus* (Australia), *NZ Poetry Society – A Fine Line*, *Blackmail Press*, *The Ghazal Page*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Fib Review* (USA), *The Ghazal Page*, *Plate in the Mirror 2016 Anthology*, *Eastbourne Anthology* (Makaro Press) and National Poetry Day selections.

Gail Ingram has fiction and poetry in numerous publications, including *Atlanta Review*, *Blue Five Notebook*, *Flash Frontier*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and *Manifesto*. Awards include winner of NZPS international poetry competition, Runner Up National Flash Fiction Day NZ Micro Madness, finalist for *Best Small Fictions*, shortlist for Fish Short Prize, and nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She is a poetry editor for *takahē*, and Associate Editor for *Flash Frontier: An Adventure in Short Fiction*. She teaches at the School for Young Writers in Christchurch, and holds a Masters of Creative Writing from Massey University. <https://www.theseventhletter.nz/>

Lisa Kenway is a writer and doctor from the NSW Central Coast. She was awarded Highly Commended in the 2018 Peter Cowan 600-word story competition, and her work appears in the anthology *Grieve, Volume 5* (Hunter Writers' Centre, 2017). www.lisakenway.com

Jess Kilby is a writer, photographer and mixed media artist living in Melbourne, Australia. With the immersive theatre group Pop Up Playground she has written participatory fictions for Bell Shakespeare, VicHealth, City of Melbourne and others. She has a PhD in Media and Communication from RMIT University, where she teaches on the Master of Media program. jesskilby.com

Em König is a typical Gemini. He is one half of music and performance duo, Winter Witches. www.emkoenig.com www.winterwitches.com

Erica Plouffe Lazure is the author of a flash fiction collection, *Heard Around Town* (Arcadia Press), and a fiction chapbook, *Dry Dock* (Red Bird Press). Her fiction has appeared in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, the *Greensboro Review*, *Meridian*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Journal of Micro Literature*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Southeast Review*, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine* (UK), and elsewhere. She lives and teaches in Exeter, NH and can be found online at ericaplouffelazure.com

Michael J Leach is a Bendigo-based statistician, researcher, and poet with a passion for combining science and art. He works at Bendigo Health and undertakes research through Monash University. Michael's poems have appeared in scientific journals, including the *Medical Journal of Australia* and *The STEAM Journal*, as well as literary journals, including *Cordite* and *Meniscus*.

Kate Mahony has short fiction in international literary journals and print anthologies including: *The Best New Zealand Fiction #6* (Random House, New Zealand), *Landmarks* (UK, 2015), *The Fish Anthology* (Ireland, 2015), and *Bonsai: Best small stories from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Canterbury University Press, 2018). <http://www.katemahonywriter.com>

Heather McQuillan has a Masters of Creative Writing from Massey University. She is the Director at the School for Young Writers in Christchurch, New Zealand. She is a winner of two Storylines Notable Books Awards, winner of the Tom Fitzgibbon Award and shortlisted for the Tessa Duder Award for her novels for young readers. She was nominated for the Pushcart Prize 2015 and 2017, won first place in the NZ Flash Fiction Day and Micro Madness competitions 2016, and third place in The Sunday Star Times Short Story Competition 2016. Her publications include *Bonsai* (Canterbury University Press, 2018), *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine* (Vol 10.2, 2017), *The Best Small Fictions 2017* (Braddock Avenue Books), *Sleep is a Beautiful Colour* (UK NFFD, 2017), *The Lobsters Run Free* (Bath Flash Fiction, Vol 2, 2017), *The Raven Chronicles* (Vol 25, 2017) and *Flash Frontier*.

Jazz Money is a writer, filmmaker and educator of Wiradjuri and European heritage. In recent years she has moved across Asia, America, Europe and Australia, working in education and facilitating Indigenous ways of knowing. Jazz is currently based in Sydney, where she lives and works on the sovereign lands of the Eora Nation.

Margaret Moores was a bookseller for many years but is now a PhD student in creative writing at Massey University. Her poems and short fiction have been published in journals and anthologies in New Zealand and Australia.

Pam Morrison is a New Zealand-based former journalist. She published a co-authored journal with her sister following her terminal diagnosis, *Fields of Gold* (Rosa Mira Books, 2004). Her current passion is flash fiction, with stories placed second in the London Independent Story Prize (February 2018) and third in the Flash 500 competition (June 2017).

Chris Muscardin is a writer most recently residing in Chicago, Illinois, although a long-time Floridian previously and a New York expat before that. As such, scenes of the south (and Central Florida in particular) feature often in his work, along with dissections of queerness, his own and others'.

Alison Nannup is an emerging Aboriginal linguist, her ancestral roots stemming from Nyoongar in the South and Yindjibarndi in the north of Western Australia. A talented writer of both fiction and nonfiction, Alison's published work includes a Noongar language book and an academic paper about both-ways research. The Bindi-bindi Koondarminy wer Maamoong Waangka stories were passed on to Alison from Elders, and in 2013 she published them in Nyoongar language through Batchelor Press. Alison is close to completing and graduating with a Bachelor degree of Indigenous Languages and Linguistics through Charles Darwin University. It was through the foundation of university studies Alison truly realised her passion and love for writing.

Cath Nichols, in her second collection, *This is Not a Stunt* (Valley Press, 2017), depicts living with disability or being trans not as tragedies but as ways of being, with their own humour, romance, stories and mundanity. At the heart of the collection is a sequence 'Bo(d)ly-in-waiting', an intimately observed narrative about a boy growing up trans in the 1970s. Cath is queer and has a stamina/walking impairment. She teaches creative writing part-time at the University of Leeds in the UK, and holds a creative writing PhD from Lancaster University.

Keith Nunes lives in tiny Pahiataua (New Zealand). He won the 2017 Flash Frontier Short Fiction Writing Award, has had poetry/haiku and short fiction published around the globe and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. His Foto-Poetry digital images have appeared in a number of literary journals. His book of poetry/short fiction, *catching a ride on a paradox*, is out there.

Sarah Penwarden lives in Auckland, where she works as a counsellor educator. She has had poems published in *Poetry New Zealand*, *Turbine*, *Meniscus*, *Southerly* and *Social Alternatives*. She has also had poems and short stories published in *tākāhe*, a short story broadcast on Radio New Zealand, and writing for children published in *The School Journal*.

Jonathan Andrew Perez Esq. has poetry published in *Prelude Magazine*, *Westchester Review*, *The Write Launch*, *Panoply Magazine*, *Paradigm Journal*, and *Junto Magazine*, and was featured in *Silver Needle Press*. He has forthcoming poems in *Yes Poetry Journal*, *Watermelonin*, *Still Journal*, *Raw Art Review*, and *Swimming with Elephants*. His poem on Emmett Till was featured in *Aquifer*, UC Florida's

Latino/ Latinx featured poet publication. He was selected by *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 2018 for their poetry workshop and is a poet selected by Cave Canem. He is in the process of completing a chapbook, *You, White Pastoral*. Jonathan has a Masters in English Literature and African American Cultural Studies from the University of Virginia, and a day job as an Assistant District Attorney in the Kings County District Attorney's Office as a prosecutor.

Maggie Rainey-Smith is a novelist, poet, short story writer, essayist, book reviewer and writer of flash fiction. She was a regional winner in the National Flash Fiction competition in 2014, and has a story in the new anthology *Bonsai: Best small stories from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Canterbury University Press, 2018).

Tess Ridgway is currently completing a Masters of Research in Literature and Creative Writing at Western Sydney University. She has been published the University of Sydney publications *Hermes* and *SASS*. Her work was performed as part of a Spineless Wonder's Parramatta Rd themed night. Tess has read at the poetry nights Cafe del Mwah & Space Opera, and used to run her own poetry group Mutts.

Ernest Slyman lives in New York City. He is a playwright, poet, fiction writer and humourist. He was born in Appalachia – Elizabethton, Tennessee. His work has appeared in *Meniscus*, *The Laurel Review*, *The Lyric*, *Light: A Quarterly of Light Verse* (Chicago), *The NY Times*, *Reader's Digest*, and *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, and *Poetry: An Introduction*, both St Martins Press, edited by Michael Meyer. www.ernestslyman.com

Rachel Smith lives and writes in the Cook Islands. Her work has been published in print and online journals in Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas. She was shortlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award in 2018, placed second in 2017 NZ National Flash Fiction Day, and is fiction editor for *takahē*. <http://rachelmsmithnz.wix.com/rachel-smith>

Elizabeth Smither has published eighteen collections of poetry; her latest, *Night Horse*, won the Ockham poetry prize. She also writes novels and short stories; a new novel will be published next year.

Maria Stadnicka: winner of twelve national Romanian prizes for poetry, Maria Stadnicka is a writer, freelance journalist and MA student in Creative and Critical Writing at University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom. Her work has appeared in *International Times*, *Dissident Voice*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *The Poets' Republic*, *The Journal*, and in various journals and literary magazines in Austria, Germany, Romania, Moldova, Mexico, USA and UK. Her published collections in English are *A Short Story about War* (2014, UK), *Exitus* (2017, UK), *Imperfect* (2017, UK), *The Unmoving* (2018, UK). Her next collection, *Uranium Bullets*, is due for publication in 2019, Massachusetts, USA. www.mariastadnicka.com

Andrew Stiggers is a short fiction writer from Auckland, New Zealand. His work has appeared in *Headland* and *Gravel* among others, and his awards include being the winner of the 2017 Global Ebook Awards (Short Stories category) and the Trisha Ashley Award 2017 for best humorous story. www.andrewstiggers.com

Supatra Walker is a PhD candidate at the University of Newcastle where her creative thesis and memoir *Luk-krueng – Between Worlds* examines place, identity and belonging from a bi-racial perspective. The eldest of four children born to a New Zealand father and Thai mother, Supatra grew up in Thailand and New Zealand before coming to Australia where she has worked as a governess, camp cook, bookkeeper, jillaroo and school dental therapist in Australia's far north. Since then she has been a farmer, a horticulturalist and herbalist and is passionate about women telling their own stories in their own words.

Carl Walsh is a public servant who enjoys writing poetry in the snatched moments afforded between work and family life. His poems have been published in *n-SCRIBE* (an arts and literary journal for writers in Melbourne's northern suburbs), *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Rabbit Poetry Journal*, *Southerly* and *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*.

Julia Webb is a poetry editor for *Lighthouse Literary Journal* and a graduate of the University of East Anglia's poetry MA. She lives in Norwich where she teaches creative writing. She has had work in various journals and anthologies. In 2011 she won the Poetry Society's Stanza competition and in 2018 she won the Battered Moons Poetry Competition. Her poem, *Sisters*, was highly commended in the 2017 Forward Prize. Her first collection, *Bird Sisters*, was published by Nine Arches Press in 2016. Her second collection, *Threat*, is due out in May 2019.

Rosemary Wildblood has published fiction, poetry, children's fiction and nonfiction in a range of literary journals and anthologies, and two novels, *Joybird* (David Ling, 2004) and *Pentimento* (Wily Publications, 2013). She lives in Titahi Bay, north of Wellington, where she is working on her third novel.

Iona Winter (Waitaha/Kāi Tahu/Pākehā) lives in Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her short stories, poetry, and essays have been published and anthologised in New Zealand and internationally. In 2018 she was shortlisted in the Bath Novella-in-Flash Award, and her first collection of short fiction and poetry, *'then the wind came'*, was accepted for publication. Through a profound connection with nature she weaves past, present and future, traditional and contemporary, to create a bicultural melding of the worlds she inhabits. Iona is currently working on a poetry collection.

Marco Yan's poems appear in the *Arkansas International*, *Pinch*, *Louisville Review*, *Adroit Journal*, and more. He holds MFA degrees from the University of Hong Kong and New York University. He currently lives and teaches in Hong Kong. You can read more of his works at www.marcoyan.com.

Hollie Ziskind: Yogi-mother-artist-teacher-writer-and-lover-of-the-natural-world living alongside the Mississippi River in the US, Hollie Ziskind finds inspiration in flowing waters and falling leaves. She has had many iterations in pursuit of a pay cheque including, but not limited to: delivery girl, book seller, journalist, caterer, consultant, detective, and tattoo artist, but she has always been a writer. Certified in the AWA method, Hollie is the founder of Pen and Portal, an online destination that celebrates shared experiences and breaks down differences through the exploration of creative expression and its source. In her next life, she will write more and sleep



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