

# d-SCRIBE

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2023

fiction | non-fiction | poetry | art | local

free publication



## PANEL AND EDITORS

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**Giselle Au-Nhien Nguyen** is a Vietnamese–Australian writer, journalist and critic based in Naarm/Melbourne. Her work has been published widely in media and literary publications including *The Age*, *The Guardian*, *Meanjin* and *Sydney Review of Books*. She is a proud member of the MEAA.

## YOUTH CONTRIBUTORS (LIFT OUT)

**Amber Bruce** is 12 years old and loves to write dystopian fantasy. Her interests are crime, fantasy, and dystopian. This piece is her first piece in a competition, and she hopes to keep writing after she finishes school.

**Scarlett Clare** is a 15 year old writer who has always had a passion for storytelling. She has always enjoyed writing and excels at English subjects at school. She enjoys exploring the concept of reality and imagination in her work.

**Emily Findlow** is 16 years old and is an ambitious writer whose works over the last five years have explored the depths of fiction, adventure, and mystery short stories. Her focus is on queer representation and various expressions of identity. They aspire to become an established writer and author after they finish high school.

**Darcy Griffin** is 16 years old and loves writing multi-perspective fiction works based on his surroundings and the characters they design. They hope to bring realism to their novels and wants to develop their skills in writing science fiction.

**Edith Jiricek** is 12 years old and loves reading and writing. Her interests are baking, drawing and Taylor Swift. An avid reader Edith loves to create worlds like the ones she reads about.

**Victor Liang** is 15 years old and studies the violin, composes and loves to listen to classical music, in an endless attempt to understand music's connection to humanity. Victor writes words for what music cannot express and vice versa.

**Alice Lumsden** is 17 years old and is passionate about exploring and depicting emotion through words. Alice loves writing about what it means to be human and portraying the human experience. Alice hopes to study journalism or creative writing and continue her short story endeavours in the future.

**Meadow Rodriguez-Butterworth** is 12 years old and enjoys writing pieces which have an inner philosophical meaning. Her writing pieces are mainly inspired by George Orwell's *Animal Farm*; they range from detailed fiction pieces to short free verse poems.

*Please see bios of adult contributors on the back page*

The Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people are the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this land. We recognise their continuing connection to land, water and culture, and their powerful storytelling traditions. We pay respect to their Elders past and present.



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**Some works contain language that may offend**

# DRAGULA

Sara Bannister

Joe cut a hole into a fence that circled the abandoned Hunter's Park Raceway. He had to be careful not to catch his jacket on the twisted, sharp metal as he hauled himself through.

From a distance, the raceway's steep man-made hills, created to pitch the track at an angle, resembled a dormant volcano. The setting sun turned the clouds red and gold, creating an illusion of fire rising up from the site.

At the south tunnel set into the raceway's eastern side, Joe sifted through his backpack for a pair of pliers to cut a second fence. He kept reaching for the box-cutter in his top pocket to make sure it hadn't fallen out. A huge crow or bat swooped in to land on a fence post. Joe dropped the pliers in fright, and the bird stared at him. Its sleek black feathers appeared to have been dipped in oil.

He picked up the pliers to work quickly on the fence. There were glimpses of the abandoned arena on the other side of the darkening tunnel, and faded plastic seats were arranged around the oval-shaped track. Joe set the torch on its base. He strained his hands with each small cut into the wire. He had to do this quickly, or lose his nerve.

Joe tried to muffle this by walking on tiptoe, but it was no use. His footsteps echoed in the tunnel, the corrugated metal walls amplifying his every movement. He feared being caught by the caretaker – it had happened once before. Joe adjusted the heavy bag on his shoulder, and searched for an entrance to the adjacent tunnel. He knew, from previous visits, that this lay hidden behind a car bench seat pushed against a wall. He swept aside the beige vinyl.

Lifting a crow bar from his bag, he cut a swathe through the thick cobwebs protecting the adjacent tunnel's entrance. He opened the metal door, releasing a sickly odour of grease, petrol and rotting garbage. The raceway had been built on a land-fill. People said dead bodies were buried there, too, as if there weren't enough ghosts around.

When Joe found the Monaro, parked deep within the tunnel, he switched off

the torch. He took the heavy bag off his shoulder and reached for the wheel clamps. He'd put one on the front and rear tyre, diagonally opposite. As he stood up, the headlights came on, revealing a graveyard of used car parts. Twisted metal lay around the monster like scraps from its latest meal. When the engine started up, flooding the room with smoke, Joe felt woozy. The syncopated rhythm of the V8, which had been terrifying, now enthralled him.

The driver's side door creaked open. He stepped forward, eager to sit in the driver's seat, but hesitated. From the front, the car had been immaculate. Not a scratch. Up close, he noticed rust on the door handle. The entire panel was crumpled in, as if hit from the side by a truck. A spider had built a web across the chrome side-mirror, and the windows were covered in grime. Joe bent down to peer through the windscreen. He rubbed at the dirt with his sleeve. The decaying hands of a corpse clutched the Monaro's steering wheel. Just hands. No body.

Joe removed two wheel clamps from his backpack. He put one on a back tyre, and the other at the front. The car spun its tyres in fury, flinging dirt into Joe's face. Next, he drained fuel from the car. For a moment, he felt guilty. The wheel clamps. Was he being cruel? Black liquid seeped out from under the car. In the half-light, it congealed around his shoes like blood.

When he turned away, cables reached out from under the bonnet. They wrapped around his arms and legs. Joe screamed. The knife lay out of reach in his top pocket. The draining fuel transformed the tunnel's dirt floor into a swamp. Soon, the fuel had risen above his knees.

Joe seized onto a broken side-mirror with his fingers. He rubbed the cables against the sharp edges, freeing his hands and ankles. He struggled through the thick liquid, bumped and scratched by sharp metal parts. He threw himself up the short flight of stairs to the south tunnel.

Joe kept running until he reached the roadside. He dropped to the ground, in exhaustion, leaning against a stack of tyres. He would not try to hide from the caretaker if he came around.



# THE LANDLORD

William Stanforth

*Highly commended Darebin Mayors Writing Awards 2023*

When the young couple arrived, the real estate agent was filming a TikTok. Dressed in gym wear and standing before a black Mercedes sedan, she flailed her arms to an excerpt of a top-40 dance song. Her phone recorded this from the external window ledge of a terrace house that the couple had recently signed the lease for.

The couple waited for the agent to finish her video. She did and then lamented messing up some part and made out that it was the couple's arrival that had caused her to do so. After giving them the keys, the agent said she was legally obliged to tell them the owner of their terrace, the landlord, actually lived next door. Eyes fixed on her phone, reviewing her TikTok, she explained, 'You won't have to deal with him unless something needs fixing, or he joins me on a routine inspection.' Then she mumbled, 'Or if it's cold and lightning cracks through a full moon and he's scared, and he needs you to comfort him and tell him it's okay.'

'What?' quizzed the young man.

'Don't worry about it,' she groaned before spitting her gum onto the footpath and departing down the cold Melbourne street in her Mercedes. Sunroof ajar, techno blasting.

That night the couple ate takeaway pizza on the living room floor amid boxes of their worldly possessions and she, the young woman, said it felt like a commercial – them, a couple in their early thirties sitting with beer and pizza and hopes for the future. A commercial for a big bank or insurance or something, which would flash forward to them having kids, attending school plays and sporting events and celebrating milestones like graduations and birthdays.

He swigged his beer and agreed that it felt like a commercial.

Weeks passed and they set up their new home with items they'd accumulated over years of renting together. Flat pack furniture, books, clothes, cookware, everything. This was the first time they'd had a spare room without needing some stranger to occupy it in order to save money. He'd recently gotten a promotion – still, they could only just afford it.

In their spare room he made music when he wasn't working and sometimes she painted when she also wasn't working. When she was in there alone she'd often imagined a crib in the corner and a baby cooing while an electric heater fended off the winter chill. She didn't tell him about this until one cold Friday night when they were both in there and they'd shared a cleanskin and she just blurted it out.

He sat, doing sums in his mind, then shrugged. 'Maybe it could work?'

They began to kiss by the window until lightning cracked through the sky and when they looked outside they saw the moon was full. Not long after, the landlord arrived.

The landlord, a greying man in his 60s or 70s with a stout physique, stood at their door. He was dressed in clothing reminiscent of a child from a bygone era. Button-up shirt, cords, flat cap, red suspenders. When the young couple opened the door and told him to leave he said he couldn't because it was cold outside, and he was scared. They told him again and the landlord said it didn't matter how they felt because he owned the place, and he came in.

Days passed and the landlord stayed, sleeping in their spare room, spilling expensive paints over musical instruments. Crying for food and demanding to be read to. The couple called the real estate company many times. When they finally got through to the agent, she said, as if it were obvious, 'Maybe he'll leave if you pay him more money?'

The couple said they had no more money and the agent hung up.

Seasons changed and eventually the young couple got used to living with and taking care of the landlord, emotionally draining and absurd as it was. They washed him and fed him and made sure he wasn't scared, even though it was no longer cold outside. They hovered over his makeshift bed and read him stories until he fell asleep.

On one of these nights, the couple sat outside their rental and watched the shadows deepen, breathing in the spring air as the landlord snored loudly inside.

'Does it still feel like a commercial?' she asked.

'Maybe,' he said. 'Just not for something that anyone would want to buy.'

# THE TRANSFORMATION OF KATI THANDA – LAKE EYRE

Lella Cariddi

A sink / with no evident outlet / the largest of Australia's salty lakes /  
Your arid heart / a yardstick for human made environmental mistakes /  
————— And anthropogenic change.

Your surface / across 9,500 km<sup>2</sup> / a crown / capping a flat / bald-headed forest /  
Deemed the 4th largest in the world / your face a mask of rock-solid thirst /  
Decades pass between drinks / filling to capacity only three times in 160 years.

During the dry spell / overwhelmed by your vastness of monochromatic nothingness /  
As far as the eye can see / desolation grips the visitor standing on your cracked lips /  
Your grandeur fixed at 15.2 metres below sea level / the lowest point in the country's bowel.  
In times of drought / trickles from three States & the NT / are your life-support-system / Yet /  
Like a *Lazarus* in the desert / once the heavy rains arrive / you dramatically spring to life /  
Fill-up & invite pelicans / silver gulls / red-necked avocets / & gull-billed terns to copulate.

A breeding site / teeming with species tolerant of salinity / Fertility in its rightful place /  
Away from the sceptre of your glowing hues / the park features mesas and red sand dunes /  
Raising from salty claypans / and stone-strewn tablelands / green shoots come to their own.

# MORNING OBSERVATIONS: RECOVERY FROM HURT

Sharon Berry

Clinging knots of gone hope  
Invisible memories spent  
In wisps of darkness turned light.

Sweet & salt upon our lips  
Pressing hands warming  
Rub out the cold.

Breath presence in mind  
Hearing silence, nothingness  
Hums of space & in-between.

Closed eyes see yours  
In mine universal  
Silent colour in shaped waves.

Existing ceased & endlessly  
In the wells of emptiness  
We abide, adorn, breath, exist again.

# STOVE TOP STORY

Brett Elliott

A steel saucepan, three-quarter full with flat, cold water, sat in the bottom right quadrant of the stovetop. Handle facing inward, for safety, like his grandmother had taught him. Connor turned the knob, pushed it in, and after two sharp cracks of the starter enjoyed the muted whoosh as the gas ignited. Orange and purple flames both blending and contrasting licked at the base of the pan. The colour and warmth from the flames melted the loneliness in his stomach and the cold from outside that he still felt on his hands. He felt guilty, cooking with gas and enjoying it. Snippets of social media posts and news stories on fossil fuels played through his mind. Gas cooking was a luxury of not being able to afford to rent a modern apartment, he reconciled.

Connor watched as tiny bubbles collected around the edges of the saucepan, occasionally breaking free and rising erratically before bursting into nothingness. He stared at the three other burners on the stove, wondering what kind of person would ever use two at once or incredibly, all four. That would be some sort of feast for many, he mused.

Pasta was a standard mid-week meal for a young man still new to apartment and solo living. At least it was market pasta. He had been going to Preston Market since he was six weeks old, his mother had told him. No crowds now, in his brick one-bedder.

He didn't know his neighbours, although there was the time he said hello to the elderly lady taking out her rubbish when moving in. Once in the morning he had offered to help a middle age woman struggling down the stairs with bike and backpack.

The water rippled and danced, steaming along until it bubbled and boiled. In went the pasta with a fizz, a counter note to the electronic chirping from the rail crossing in the background. A quick swirl of the fettucine, and then he expertly adjusted down the heat to stop a boil over.

He held the spoon in one hand, and flicked from app to app with his phone in the other. Connor hovered in the kitchen, not moving, but multitasking. Read, reply, stir.

Done, drain water, serve. The pasta tumbled into the bowl, steam momentarily enveloping his entire face. Twisting open the jar, he threw the sauce in with a flick of his wrist and smiled faintly at how his father would recoil at the idea of not heating it first. No matter, it was done. From cold water to hot meal!

A knock at the door. Connor froze.

Scenarios raced through his mind. He walked cautiously to the door and braced himself before cracking it open. It was a stranger. Connor knew his eyes had grown wider with anxious surprise, but the stranger was quick to ally concerns.

'Ah, I live at number two. Just wanted to give you this... it was sitting outside my door addressed to your apartment.'

'Ah thanks for that,' Connor replied, adjusting to the situation. 'I really appreciate it.'

'I'm Charlie by the way'.

Connor looked up from the parcel. 'I'm Connor. Thanks again for this.'

They said they would see each other around, and then Charlie was gone. Connor realised it was the only conversation he had all day.

Train, uni, library. Even lunch and a coffee, both ordered on his phone. Not a word to anyone.

As he made it back to the bowl of pasta, he thought about his reaction to the knock. His phone was a cacophony of constant sounds and alerts but a knock – manual, unregulated, acoustic – it was foreign.

Connor looked around at the three empty chairs that stared back silently from across the round table. He would invite friends around this weekend. Next week, he would invite the neighbour. He took the saucepan off the stove, still warm. And he would use the other burners too, staring defiantly at the three shiny, unused black discs. Cook up a real feast. He would transform that stove into real cooking and connection and conversation. An invitation without occasion.

He placed the saucepan in the sink, while quickly typing out a message to three friends he hadn't seen all year, and then put the phone down too.



# FAULTY

Isabelle Mckenna

My mind always felt faulty, like its wires had been knotted and fused; too full with the wrong information, with useless facts.

One week before my 30th birthday I was diagnosed with autism. I saw it as the best present to close a decade of confused wandering years. My 20s were somewhat like John and Yoko's 'Lost Weekend' (a period of time where they broke up), except for me it was a separation of self. My lost weekend lasted decades.

Odd jobs, on and off Centrelink, regular burnouts, seasonal friendships, mental turmoil. The meltdowns, the years of shame, the feelings of otherness. It already felt like a big enough burden being gay, let alone having autism. *Double demerits.*

As a child, I had a constant dissatisfaction with what was in front of me. I always wanted newer toys, a bigger house, different food, and a different brain.

Autism is like mistaking an ironing board for a surfboard. At first glance they have a similar silhouette. Wrapped up, it's hard to tell the difference, until you unwrap them and realise that they are two objects that function completely differently. That's how it feels to have autism. We might pass in the world, as regular, *everyday*, but once you get to know us, you see our minds are different.

'You always hold something as if it's armour,' a friend said to me at school. She saw me so clearly, mask and all.

With the diagnosis came a new frame of reference. Memories from childhood that lay dormant resurfaced. My mum reminded me that I was taken out of the higher English class and put into the lower. I also had to go to an extra class with a teacher's aide. This never made sense to me. The way I learnt wasn't understood by the teachers, and I can't blame them. Autism in females was a foreign concept, especially in a rural town.

Rap music played an important role in my adolescence. I loved the narrative, rhythm and the poetry of it. Unpretentious, real and unrefined. Although I couldn't relate to the musician's experiences, I connected to the universal feeling of being misunderstood – *other*.

Autism is an invisible disability. You can't see it when looking at someone. If only it glowed in the dark when you wanted people to know, a kind of marker for when the words aren't there to explain it. An invisible disability comes with a mix of privilege and frustration. Some days it's a relief to pass as neurotypical. I don't feel the need to justify or explain myself, I just go about the day as anyone else would.

On the flip side of privilege, it means I don't always get the support I need. I make eye contact, I'm a good listener, I like chatting to people. I give off the impression things are fine. I can function well. But no one sees the bad days; the whole-body consuming meltdowns, the regular need for rest and recovery, the cancelling of plans, the endless masking, the lying in dark rooms, the overstimulated brain that struggles to sleep.

I came to see the tantrums I used to see as self-indulgence as autistic meltdowns from sensory overwhelm. I didn't lock myself in my room for hours after school for pure attention – it was to unleash, throw and smash the day away. And with it, the heavy mask.

My therapist said my default position is overwhelm and shame – a place I had grown too comfortable. The furniture of fear is often so well lived-in, we mistake it as being good for us. She told me, 'communication is a bridge between worlds' – a phrase I try to remind myself of whenever I feel misunderstood. People don't know unless you articulate your needs, advocate for yourself.

I will always live with autism but I've become so much more aware of myself and my needs. With the help of a loving partner, regular therapy and a well suited stable job, I have made leaps and bounds. I don't view my mind as faulty anymore. Sure, on the bad days it's exhausting, it confuses and disorients me. But on the good days it is an asset, something to be proud of, a bright spark of imagination.

*If you ever get close to a human  
And human behavior  
Be ready, be ready to get confused  
– Bjork, 'Human Behavior'*

# THE DOOR SPOT

Melanie Barbaro

**Thursday, 27 April 2023**

Have you heard this band before?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ>

3.29pm

I'll listen now. Do you know this band?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUXtgXA18SE>

3.42pm

Yeah I saw them at The Corner.

3.50pm

Really? I'm so jealous.

3.54pm

The singer played a triangle for a couple of songs.

3.59pm

Can't say I've seen that before.

4.08pm

Do you still wanna meet up for drinks tomorrow?

4.09pm

Sure!

4.26pm

Northcote Social at 6?

4.32pm

Sounds good.

4.38pm

**Tuesday, 9 May 2023**

Hey! How are you?

4.32pm

Yeah I'm ok but been kinda down lately.

7.06pm

How come?

7.27pm

Cass and Anton. They came into my work the other night already drunk. Then they had a fight and Cass disappeared then like two days later they made up and now she's back at my house.

10.15pm

They never go to her place because she has a cat and Anton is allergic. So she's always here.

And they're always at my work.

And we have band practice together every week.

10.23pm

It wouldn't be unreasonable for you to say something to them.

10.30pm

Yeah, but Anton is my friend.

10.46pm

So he'll understand.

10.51pm

I don't wanna risk the friendship though. I feel like if I say something they might just look for a new bass player.

11.09pm

But you're friends?

11.14pm

Yeah. I mean, he's getting me where I wanna go. Like, I wanna be in a band and he asked me to join his.

11.21pm

I dunno I still think you could say something.

11.27pm

**Monday, 22 May 2023**

Hey Lawson are you doing anything Wednesday? I'm going record shopping if you wanted to join me.

11.43.am

**Tuesday, 23 May 2023**

Hey, I think I'm coming down with something so I can't sorry. Have a great time!

9.06pm

Damn. Let me know if you need anything.

9.28pm

**Friday, 16 June, 2023**

Hey Lawson, feeling better?

1.25pm

**Saturday, 17 June 2023**

From what?

11.20am

Weren't you sick?

11.31am

Oh yeah I'm good now.

9.34am

Feel like I haven't seen you in ages. We should catch up soon.

9.40am

Yeah totally, how about next weekend?

9.49pm

**Sunday, 18 June 2023**

Nah I'm working. I'll message you when I'm free.

3.15pm

## Sunday, 9 July 2023

Hey! Do you wanna catch up this week?

2.06pm

## Monday, 10 July 2023

Yeah, maybe during the day cause I'm working every night.

12.48pm

Ok is Wednesday all right?

12.56pm

Should be.

5.36pm

1.00 at Sable?

5.42pm

Sounds good.

11.18pm

## Wednesday, 12 July 2023

Hey, sorry I'm gonna be late. I'm helping Anton find his passport.

12.57pm

I'm on my way. I'll see you in about half an hour.

1.43pm

## Friday, 1 September 2023

Hey how are you? I need to go into the city Monday morning to sort out my visa and was wondering if you could give me a lift?

4.23pm

Sure. What time?

4.27pm

Be at mine at 9.30am?

9.36pm

No problem. see you then.

9.44pm

## Monday, 3 September 2023

Hey don't worry about driving me today Anton is giving me a lift.

9.19am

## Thursday, 19 October 2023

Hey, Em! How have you been? Do you have any door spots for your show?

3.13pm

Hey, I don't sorry

4.06pm

Oh damn.

It's sold out though.

6.40pm

Maybe I could come with you for soundcheck and just kinda stay there?

7.15pm

I wouldn't be ok with that.

7.26pm

Nah I was just kidding but seriously all your door spots are taken?

8.01pm

Yes.

8.07pm

Aw, you said you'd save me a door spot.

9.02pm

I admit that, but I wasn't sure if you were coming.

9.09pm

I said I was coming!

9.13pm

I remember telling you to let me know if you were coming, and I would save you a door spot.

You said maybe 'cause you would have to take the night off work and then I didn't hear from you after that so I gave them to someone else.

9.19pm

Who?

9.26pm

Anton and Cass.

9.29pm

Seriously?

9.30pm

Yes. Anton asked me ages ago. He comes to all our shows. Has been for years.

I would've given the other one to you but I didn't hear from you so I gave it to Cass.

9.34pm

They're the worst people

9.37pm

I thought they were your friends?

9.40pm

We're no longer a band, so not really.

9.45pm

Oh, so Anton can't get you where you're going any more

And it looks like I can't either.

9.51pm

Damn.

9.54pm

# WHERE I SIT

Sarah McKenzie

## *Winter*

Like the rain, soap suds and cigarette butts of this suburban watershed, I am drawn downhill to the river. The ground is bare and compacted from all who pause here. When I first saw this place, it was exploding with wattle. I decided to sit for a while to feel its warmth.

There is a sign explaining the history here, of Wurundjeri canoes and European boat ramps.

I keep returning. It's always the same route – across the main road, through a street of gardeners and down the shin-vibrating hill.

## *Spring*

I walk past feathery grevillea, heady jasmine, and shy magnolias. Two houses opposite each other are being torn down – mirroring the other's demise. A new bollard-protected bike lane adorns the main road. An older lady accidentally enters it in a blue hatchback. She rides it out until a gap in the bollards lets her escape.

The spot is dappled in sunlight and the log is damp and mossy from the recent rains – I sit anyway. The curled witch fingers of a dead branch reach upwards from the water. My eye tracks to see where it came from. The tree is dead, its leaves are all copper brown. I wonder how long it will be until the roots that hold the bank together turn to dust.

Hard rubbish is out. I haul a Windsor chair over my shoulder like a Santa sack to my apartment. The warm polished wood dances in yellow light. For the first time since I moved here 4 years ago, the room feels like mine. I place my old chair on the nature strip in the moonlight and by the morning, it is gone.

## *Summer*

The last magenta flowers of a wax plant push through a wire fence, swaying in the dry wind. I hold them in my hands for a moment. Heat radiates from the road as I cross it. Ants devour the remnants of an ice-cream.

Three river gums stand like sentinels on the opposite bank. I recognise them by shape now. The dead tree is gone, and a pile of fragrant woodchips remains. I feel uneasy when I think of machines being here. This change feels too quick.

The following week a family of paintings appear. An outdoor art exhibition with oil-based homages to the spot where I sit. I feel kinship with this artist who I've never met.

The tea olive on the corner is radiating an intoxicating smell. I bring a cutting back to my apartment, but the scent vanishes as soon as I put it in the vase.

# PHOTO EVIDENCE

Cassy Nunan

So, this was me back then.  
Plump, ripe  
– fruit on a platter of kitsch delight.  
This illusion

a distortion of adolescence,  
softened by sepia.  
Is it portrait or palimpsest?  
Madonna, Kylie or the Magdalene?

She, a blank canvas for his deft stroke.  
A gift to be taken, not given.

He pulled so many of us  
into focus around his cruel game  
– of have me, have me not  
– have you, have you not.

Plucking us until we were  
naught but stems.

But I see us – you/me now,  
my doppelganger self.  
We were never thoroughly torn  
by the thorn that wedged us.

Between my fingers  
– a faded scrap of self in 2D –  
I gingerly smile.  
So familiar across decades.  
I squeeze a belated hug.

And you, man of knowledge.  
Faker of faith and father  
of girls.  
Where does your gaze turn now?

## *Autumn*

The hibiscuses wilt, and the plane trees are almost naked. Some swan hill daisies persist. The lavender that was scorched over summer is flowering again. The new owners of a house with a giant bird of paradise have ripped it out. It lays sideways on the nature strip like a crime scene.

I tip toe across a footpath littered with the rubies of an ornamental pomegranate. I gratefully select some feijoas from a box marked 'FREE'.

There's fluorescent orange tape blocking me from the spot where I sit. My heart quickens. An official sign tells me there's phytophthora wreaking havoc here. The community cannot enter, or they risk spreading the destructive fungus. I stand on the bitumen and take a long inhale. I gaze upwards to the tree canopy and listen for the familiar lorikeets. They are there.



# WHY DON'T YOU JUST LEAVE

Renee Winzar

Why Don't You Just Leave?

Today is the day. No more practice runs.

My heart flutters.

Step one; get out of my cage. Easy, I do this every day, secretly roaming the house while he's at work. I think he knows I do it, he lets me do it; he spoils his pretty girl.

He'll be angry when I'm gone.

I lean my weight against the door and kick the bolt, it pops out and the door swings open. A shiver ripples through me. I step over the threshold, different from every time before; today I won't be scurrying back in when I hear the key scrape into the front door.

Step two is harder, but I've been practicing. The window hinges at the top, opening out at the bottom by a chain, the gap is just my size. I grab the chain with my feet and hang upside down out the window, staring up at the endless sky. The neighbour's fig tree always rustles and beckons, but today the space in between is gaping.

I only need to make it to the tree.

Step three is new; I haven't done this part before. I don't know if I can.

I do know, I can.

I stretch my wings out. The air touches every one of my feathers and the scars where the feathers won't grow; it whispers the promise of new things, great things, a new life. I let go. For a few seconds of freedom, I fall into the welcoming air, then I flap like I've never flapped before. My wings command the air. This must be how wild birds feel. I've passed the tree already and I don't want to stop. I don't look back, can't look back, I'm afraid to look back. Afraid that he's somehow sensed it, somehow knows, that he's come home early and he's watching me from the window, and I'll see him and I'll come back.

I keep flying until I can't anymore. There's a tree ahead that shivers and whispers. I land, more of a crash. I'll get better. The bark is so rough under my soft feet. Tomorrow I should find a smooth one. But how do you know which trees are smooth? Suddenly I'm shrinking, I'm so tiny, so insignificant. My new life extends infinitely ahead and I'm so small, too small.

The other birds glare, they know I don't belong here. I've never been so tired. I wish the tree would engulf me so I could sleep in peace; but I can't close my eyes now, I know the bad things that happen in the dark. I keep moving, up and down the branch, claiming my spot, staying awake. I dare them to make a move, don't they know who I am? I'm a pretty girl. I can say twenty words in English and one en français. Darkness touches the leaves. It's colder out here than at home.

Home. He'd be home by now.

He'd see the empty cage, the open window, and he'd know.

He'll be angry.

He'll be looking for me, asking the neighbours. He doesn't like losing things. He doesn't like losing. He's always sorry when he loses his temper, but there'd be no one to hear his apology tonight.

The wind lifts my feathers. Icy fingers reach through, touching the scarred skin beneath. How do the other birds do it? They don't seem to notice the cold. Maybe they've never known true warmth, true comfort. He once bought me a hanging seed stick, just because he knows I like seeds. He spoils his pretty girl. My heart is being squeezed.

I've been a greedy girl.

I didn't think about what I'd leave behind. He'll be distraught. He'll be up all night searching. Tomorrow at work he'll be so tired, and they'll ask him why and he'll tell them; he was out all night looking for me. All the birds in this tree with their judging eyes, none of them have someone looking for them. They don't know what it's like to belong to someone. To belong.

What if I can't get back?

Ice grabs my heart. I've never seen the window from the outside. What if I find the window but there's another bird in my cage, the window's closed and I scratch and I scratch but I can't get back. I'm shaking. It's so cold out here and so dark. My eyes want to close but I can't let them; *I've got to get back.*

# OPACITY

Becki Bouchier

It was over a meal of salty carbonara and gin martinis that she first told me of her plans to disappear.

‘I’ve googled it,’ she said. ‘It’s fairly straightforward if you’re willing to do the work.’

Looking back, I should’ve glossed over the topic so as not to offer encouragement, but I was curious. Besides, it presented as a throwaway thought she was entertaining; a project she would research but never carry out. To be honest, I didn’t even believe it was possible.

By Friday she had put her plan into action, showing up on my doorstep with two calico bags that hung limply from her shoulder. My lemon tree was always heaving at this time of year, squatting in the dusty basin of my unkempt backyard, and we moved about it, picking the fruit with the brightest colour until both bags were full.

‘You take the lemon juice and brush it over your skin, just a thin coating, morning and night, she explained. ‘After five minutes, you rinse.’

‘And this is what does it, is it?’

‘This is step one.’

As it turned out, there were 27 steps to making yourself disappear. She explained them all to me when I asked, but I find it difficult to recall them now. There’s a book somewhere that covers each one in detail; she ordered it off Amazon when it wasn’t available at our local bookshop, and when the online blogs she had initially turned to skimmed over the finer details. She was not messing around. This had become something of an obsession, and I remember when those first feelings of uncertainty sunk hard through my chest.

‘Stop eating salt,’ she said, ‘that’s important. Alcohol is OK, but not the bubbly stuff, that tends to keep you grounded.’

‘Huh. Thought it’d be the opposite.’

‘You’d think.’

‘What’s next?’

‘Step #14: never voice your opinions. The quicker you can do away with them the faster you’ll see results. In fact, it’s best to eliminate opinions from your mind altogether. If they’re solidified in your head, you’ve no luck.’

I forgot about step #13 one Friday evening when I rocked up to her apartment with a bottle of frizzante and large

slab of Comte. This had been our tradition for as long as we’d been friends; a bottle of something local and a square of cheese that we would slice into fat cubes and lick off our fingers. We took turns hosting, but it had been nearly two months now since we’d managed to find the time.

‘It’s exhausting sometimes,’ she explained. ‘The whole 27-step-method is rather time consuming. Makes sense, I suppose.’ She ate a small piece of Comte but refused to touch the wine. When the lamplight hit her cheek at a very specific angle, I noticed how I could see straight through to the armchair beyond. That was the moment I realised how very real this was. It was more than just an idea; more than a shiny book with its dull Helvetica typeface; more than a hobby or passing phase.

‘Here,’ she said as she passed over the silver candlesticks that lived on her tiny kitchen table. ‘Step #27. Give away any objects that keep you anchored to this world. Anything that ties you down.’

‘I can’t,’ I said, pushing them away on impulse. ‘I won’t.’

She shrugged. ‘I can just give them to Murray next door. He’s always eyeing them off.’

‘Do you think this has gone a bit far? I mean, it’s getting silly now.’

She puffed herself up in such a way I’d never seen; her brow furrowed and her shoulders large and tense. ‘It just shows that you don’t understand. But you don’t need to. Because this is for me, and no-one else.’ She went and put the candlesticks by the front door, and on her way back to the kitchen I could see the gold wallpaper through her stomach.

As she drew near, I wrapped my fingers around her wrist, my palm flat against her translucent skin. It was very cold. ‘You can’t,’ I said. ‘You can’t just disappear.’

She sat down opposite me. ‘I’m so tired. I don’t know how not to be so tired.’

I nodded because I did understand, although I had not said it. And while searching for the words, I held tightly to her wrist, held it until it was once again solid, and I could no longer see the wooden grain of the table on the other side.

# SUBTERRANEAN MOVEMENT

Mandy Beaumont

My father's voice is shaking like tectonic plates, shifting deep in the ocean after great collisions in the earth's crust. An aftershock. I can hear his molten tongue echo down the phone line as wild-heated-depths begin to devour us both. The sound of his voice is nearly inaudible; *Your brother, his son Angus is dead, they stabbed him.*

Our devastating silence is firm, and begins to taunt the distance that sits between my family and I; waits impatiently at the newly closed borders, confines me in my home as a pressurised air lock. The people, the crowds beyond my front door, unknowing of my solitary grief, my deep rivers of sadness, are also still-hushed in their own confinement. An isolated harshness, a horrifying shared accord. A layering of despair is all around us. The sense of time lost; and in my shrinking enclosure I listen on the phone to my brother's howls, his mournful wall of sound, his desperate late-night ramblings wanting to hold his boy *just one more time*. He gasps at all the air around him and asks me; *does he know he's even dead?*

I dare not try to answer his questions and spend hours watching the news reports of my nephew's young body under a tarp, footage of where he was left to die. I spend hours. Watching a world in turmoil and near environmental collapse in which I know we all recognise ourselves in the deluge, unable to hold on tight to each other. I spend hours at night time watching reflections at my windows. Tree branches bending with the wind reminding me of my nephew as a babe in my arms, pointing up at clear Queensland summer night stars. *Yes, baby boy, a star.*

And he is dead now, the mourners can't gather, a live stream records a solemn room, a link is sent that I cannot watch. I never will. I can only imagine my brother standing in front of his son's coffin, defiant. His teeth grinding and breaking enamel as the floor of his mouth becomes an oceanic trench under the pressure, its topographic depression moving down into his chest. I am certain that he has now aged more than the earth ever has. I have, myself, become another feared landscape under a swelling tide. A solitary place where movement rushes into and through, vanishing into nothing. *Will we even recognise each other when we see each other again?* I ask him; and we both know the answer, knowing also that our mother's hugs won't be the same, that our father will never be able to say his grandson's name aloud without fear of his fault lines slipping and producing seismic waves. Waves that will rise to calamitous flooding. Instead, my father tells us both of the jasmine he has planted, tell us that it will flourish in the new season when we can all come together again.

I never mention to my father how many days I've spent inside this house; or my brother, who is sitting on his son's bed when he calls tonight. He tells me his dog is walking around in circles, still confused as to why his best mate has left him. Tells me violent things inflicted on his son that I can never unknow, images I can never erase, anger I can never be free of. And, he is still there and I am still here, each alone but sharing the same moon and it seems, both slowly vanishing in our grief. *I can hear that tv show Frasier you love playing in the background,* he says, letting out a small chuckle, a sliver of light hope perhaps that tells me we may both be able to one day rebuild joy. *I've been watching re-runs for months* now, I tell him.

For company, my brother and I sit on the phone and listen as Roz asks an old woman with a view to hope from the ageing; *How do you get used to all the sadness?* The woman sits up in her hospital bed and replies; *You don't dear, you just get used to trying to find the joy that remains.* And in this small moment, I know that wild tides move on with the earth's want, that often, after catastrophic shifts and deep fractures in the depths of our oceans, that somehow beauty and wonder still rise. And, for now, inside these walls, too many days to count, I am hopeful.

# BODY IS MY PROLEPSIS

Rebecca Stine

This moon is giant bowl of milk  
And I am laden, waiting to be spun and molded  
Like clay

My woman is perfectly poached,  
And cycle begins when she lays down to eat:  
When punctured yolk insouciantly bleeds  
Into quantity

My uterus is a boat, that storm breaks and softens naturally  
And I keep thinking:  
This bleeding feels more like ending.  
This body more casket  
Than craft

This bleeding:  
This  
Shell of broken pomegranate,  
Gallery of seeds  
Dis assembled  
Stains strewn across kitchen counter, carnal  
Tired fingers can only uncover so much

My moon is an egg  
And she is laden  
Bulging and craving  
Wavering  
With each passing of shade

She wakes, dissonant  
On most saturated day  
To another suppuration, she is supple

O, Belly is fickle sky, and  
She is nimble, like  
Egg she does not bear: hot air  
Balloon  
She is resplendent, and smoldering, and guilty:  
Again

She draws abundance with her blood

O, how betrayal leaves her crimson

# A BUGMAN'S LIFE

Kathryn James

Actor, political activist and celebrity insect Greg Sampson, better known as 'Bugman' or 'Six-Legged Greg', has died at his home in Los Angeles, California on April 29 2023, aged 37.

Gregory Francis Sampson was born in Wichita, Kansas on February 12 1986 to Frank and Norma (née Anderson). The family, including Sampson's younger sister Gretchen, moved frequently due to poverty and his mother's ill-health. They eventually settled in a trailer park in Abilene, Kansas. After graduating high school, Sampson drifted between fast food jobs. He remained living at home, both to contribute to the family's income and to protect his mother and sister from Frank's often violent temper.

Shy, awkward and with a love of heavy metal, Sampson led a wholly unremarkable life until age 20, when in October 2006 he abruptly changed into a large cockroach-like insect. No mainstream medical cause was identified, and local doctors could do little to assist. Forced to cease work and feared by neighbours, Sampson spent several years isolated and reliant on his family for support. As he explained in a 2014 *Who* magazine interview, 'Gretchen was the only one who cared for me. I spent my days wedged in the trailer, smoking weed and eating literal garbage.'

Sampson's fortunes changed in 2009 when Gretchen arranged for them both to appear on *The Jerry Springer Show*. The episode, titled 'My Brother's Bugging Me', gained instant worldwide attention. Gretchen acted as an informal translator during media appearances, as Sampson's speech was difficult to understand.

Sampson conducted interviews with tabloid newspapers, and was ridiculed and accused of

fakery. But his appearance on *Oprah*, and Winfrey's sympathetic portrayal of the challenges Sampson faced due to his transformation into an insect, turned public opinion in support of 'Bugman'.

In 2010 Sampson was offered a reality show by cable television network TLC. *Six-Legged Greg: A Bugman's Life* transported Sampson to Los Angeles and followed his experiences attempting to find work and date as an insect in image-obsessed LA. Initially popular, it was cancelled after two seasons amidst falling ratings and allegations that Sampson had harassed female crew members, which he vehemently denied.

Sampson settled in Los Angeles and pursued a career as a film actor. Despite intensive speech therapy, ongoing voice issues meant he was not offered major roles. Sampson cameled in several 2010s big-budget flops including *I*, *Frankenstein* and *Alice through the Looking Glass*. Though critics praised his comic timing, Sampson resented not being viewed as a serious actor.

While briefly linked to actress Lindsay Lohan in the mid-2010s, Sampson had no long-term relationships. He considered a lack of companionship the biggest limitation of life as an insect, telling Joe Rogan in 2018 that 'fame is very lonely when you don't have anyone to share it with. But nobody wants to [date] a bug.'

After launching 'Insects for Trump' in support of Donald Trump's presidential candidacy in 2016, Sampson was shunned by the Hollywood establishment. Close to bankruptcy, he resorted to paid appearances at right-wing events, and appeared in an adult film, *CockRoach*.

Though estranged from his father, Sampson remained close to his mother throughout his life. Following Norma's death in 2019, Sampson began drinking heavily. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit, he also became reclusive, fearful that infection would be serious or fatal due to his condition. He remained active on social media, but was banned from Twitter in 2021 for inflammatory comments following the Capitol storming.

During a rare public appearance on the Hollywood strip in 2022, Sampson was attacked by a drunken fan who tried to tear off his carapace, yelling that Sampson was a left-wing fake. This injury led to chronic pain, which Sampson self-medicated with opioids.

Despite interventions by Gretchen and his remaining friends, Sampson became addicted to opioids, often combining them with sleeping tablets. He was found dead in his Hollywood Hills home by his cleaner on April 30. The LA County Medical Examiner-Coroner ruled that Sampson's death was the result of accidental multiple drug toxicity.

Sampson is survived by his father and his sister, who achieved minor *celebrity* status from her brother's fame. This peaked in 2014 when Gretchen released a sex tape with then-boyfriend, rapper Malcolm 'Lil' Mal' Gonzalez. The couple split soon after, and following brief appearances on reality TV, Gretchen now owns a dog grooming salon in Wichita.

'I'll miss Greg more than words can say,' Gretchen told *The New York Times*, on receiving news of Sampson's death. 'Through it all, he was my big brother.'



# SOMETIMES MOUNTAINS, SOMETIMES SEA

Madison Pawle

Winner Darebin Mayors Writing Awards 2023

A blue streak appears on the horizon when it is warm and clear. We stand looking out the large window above my desk. It is sunset and the city comes alight. The suburbs darken. It's how we know where we are, that blue streak. We map ourselves to the spot, find a name for what we are looking at. Desire warps a landscape; they are mountains but I think of the sea.

1967: a man walks across a field. He is 22 and studying art in London, a 190km commute he makes from his home in Bristol. The field is somewhere between the two. He goes back and forth following the same line. It is the middle of the afternoon. The sun is high and the grass is carpeted by tiny flowers. He stops at the edge, shades his eyes and lifts his camera. Click. The film is black and white. The grass takes up most of the photo, save for a patch of trees at the very back. Straight down the middle there is a line of grass, trampled and made white 'cause of the light.

I have a dream in which I watch two people standing on the edge of a desert at dusk. With them is a small dog. One bends down and wraps a piece of meat in muslin cloth and then passes it to the other who ties it to the end of a rope, then ties the rope around their hips and begins over the sand, dragging the meat. The dog whimpers, unsure. Follows.

The psychoanalyst says I should be careful when parsing want and need.

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We stood in the Tate staring at the photograph. You asked me which part I thought was the art:

the materials (the land, a body)

the process (the walking, the yielding, the light)

or the proof (this photograph and the line, disappearing).

I said process. You were still unsure. As you spoke you moved your finger back and forth across my palm.

---

There is a name for these unofficial paths; softened, formed and eventually inscribed by the collective and ongoing tread of feet and paws. Desire lines. Naming does something for sight. I notice the quicker route across the park to the toilet block, the deep-cut gash going down to the edge of the Merri. Even cities are made of them. Take Broadway: a passage designed over the Wickquasgeck Path, a trail that moved bodies across Manhattan from north to south and south to north avoiding swamps and hills for thousands of years.

---

Desire names not the attachment but the want to attach, you said. Desire is an encounter with absence, the psychoanalyst tells me, it lives on in lack. It is not the hand held, but the space between. It is not the line but its making. You left a dogeared Carson book in the front seat of my car: *What is a hole made of? Itself*.

In a gallery, external logics do not apply. Tell me how long you have been here for. One thing becomes another. A white cloud collapses into licks of blue and yellow and grey. A strand of hair suspended in paint, proof of passage. There's something perverted about getting close enough to corrupt the privacy of a thing that can't do the same back.

Even time has texture. We felt the shift as we passed over the threshold. It was thick like folded velvet, then it was hollow and electric. *A Line Made By Walking* hung alone on a white wall. We walked backward and time wobbled like a sheet of tin in the wind.

---

The thing about a line, though, is that *the more the path is used the more the path is used*, says Sara Ahmed. Desire's charge is discontinuous, it must be re-met. Otherwise it turns to *habit*, turns to *precedence* and then you are stuck in motion, moving further along a path you don't remember choosing. In other words: to move with desire is not self-evidently good.

You stopped me on Elizabeth Street and told me to listen. Could I hear the river running beneath the bluestone? I couldn't. Neither could you.

---

The wind blows in, slams a door. It's the beginning of winter and a clear day is rare. But I know they are there so still I look: those mountains, that sea.

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# PURSUIT OF MOTHERING AND MAGGIE NELSON'S *THE ARGONAUTS* (2015)

Phoebe Cannard-Higgins

As a new mother, I find myself with lots of time to think – while walking the baby to sleep, while watching her play, while bathing her. It's important for me to feel intellectually interested in the world into which we both grow, and although at times I feel lost, bereft, frustrated, and tired, having her has allowed me time for deep contemplation. On one of our walks, I notice *The Argonauts* (2015) by Maggie Nelson in the library window and decide to borrow it.

Nelson challenges her readers to think outside traditional structures, binaries, and bindings in relation to literature, sex and gender. Nelson's partner, the artist Harry Dodge, is transgender, and Nelson admits that when they first started dating, she wasn't sure what Harry's pronouns were. Harry is someone who would rather not traffic in binaries at all, 'I'm not on my way anywhere,' Harry sometimes tells inquirers, and Nelson's writing style pays homage to this.

I was moved by Nelson's ability to capture what Olivia Laing describes as the *wrung accounts of the passage in and out of life*. Nelson interweaves the birth of her child Iggy with the death of Harry's mother (as narrated by Harry). *In the midst of life, we are in death*. It's a reminder of the letting go and making new. The constantly transforming nature of life is something I have been grappling with recently.

Motherhood is not usually likened to philosophy. All we're told is mothers get baby-brain, they forget things, become lazy workers, useless for anything but mothering. Contrary to this narrative, for the first time in a long time, my head is not filled with the antics of work life. Space clears, worries fall away. I start writing again. But are words good enough?

Motherhood is a force within our society. It seems that at some point every woman must ask herself whether she wants children, and then furiously defend her position to nosy inquirers. Furthermore: we do not always get what we want.

What comes to mind first is: a fifties housewife in a kitchen wearing an apron and a full face of make-up, smiling, smiling, smiling like a lunatic. This image makes me feel uncomfortable. I am haunted by a time when to be a mother was a woman's only virtue, and aspiration. When to be a mother was to be entrapped in your sex, in your life. And yet, the pull *to mother*.

Nelson quotes the poet Alice Notley, 'He is born / and I am undone / feel as if I will never be / was never born. Two years later I obliterate myself again / having another child / for two years there's no me here.'

*Obliteration*. Nelson says she has never felt that way. But I can sympathise with Alice Notley. Never before have I had to wrestle with my identity so much as in pregnancy and motherhood. The baby takes from you all the things you thought were certain about yourself and says, *who are you? Make yourself new... And also, feed me, feed me*.

Most mothers are worried about becoming insignificant. *The personal is political* and I am aware that by virtue of having my baby I have confined myself to a deeply personal sphere. Why am I concerned about how that may look from the outside? 'I'm still a feminist!' I want to call out. I'm still an individual with my own ideas! I still want to work, to create, to write. I don't want to be swallowed by the name *mother*.

What if instead of belittling new mothers we reconceptualised this time in a person's life, as a time of gaining wisdom, learning, expanding, introspection? What would motherhood look like then?

Like Nelson, I want to un-fetish-ise the maternal – even empty the category out. Instead, I want to be a part of what she calls an *ecstatic matriarchal cosmology* stretching and sparkling on and on into the future. I want to wander in a new kind of motherhood: radical, philosophical, a time of great wisdom and creativity.

What if this new motherhood was understood in relation to feeding others (physically, emotionally, and intellectually) and the transformation of self?

I make my own cosmology (or bookshelf) of mothers, some have children, some don't, but all nourish me like a mother should. Olivia Laing, Kathy Acker, Maggie Nelson, Chris Kraus, Margo Jefferson, Rebecca Solnit, Sheila Heti, Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende. They are warm planets to refuel in. They illuminate all the swaying, crying, wiping, and washing as valuable in their own right, and as political, the labour of transformation, while offering essential solitude and distraction. I ask of my mothers: *Feed me, feed me, make me new*. And they always provide. At least for now, words are good enough. Without them I would be lost.

# AGEING INTO IT

Nathan Power

Age comes on quickly.

The softening around our hips.  
The greying in my beard.  
The laugh lines that etch down the corners of her mouth.

...

My partner starts waving a book at me when I get home.  
The book is called *The Happiness Curve*.

*It says here that everyone gets sad in middle age, then happiness goes up at age fifty-five again.*

There are pages of data; graphs showing how happiness fluctuates, how the levels stay steady for the first thirty years of life, then nosedive, and then slowly start to climb back after a mid-life slump. Most cultures then carry on for a decade or two in relative happiness, except for Russia where the curve bottoms out at age ninety, some twenty years after the average age of death.

*What, so this is the down times?*

*Yeah, looks like it.*

She explains that the interesting part of the book is that the curve is universal, showing up no matter your country or generation. It even shows up in monkeys. We age into unhappiness, roll around in the doldrums for a bit, then age back out of it.

...

Later, I wonder if it has to be.

I type into ChatGPT: *'what are the side effects of ageing?'*

Hearing loss, cataracts, back pain, diabetes, dementia.

*'What are the positive side effects of ageing?'*

A greater sense of self-awareness, stronger relationships, heightened appreciation for life.

*'what are the positive side effects of middle age?'*

Financial stability, a stronger sense of purpose, personal growth.

I wonder if I'm growing. I wonder if I'm happy.

I type: *'how to be happy in middle age?'*

Stay connected to friends and family.

I've got a group of friends. A partner I love. My mum and dad, who I call every other week.

Take breaks from work.

We went to Japan in January. We spent three weeks drinking vending machine coffee and remarking on how tidy the streets were. I didn't think of work once.

Seek opportunities for self-development. Find a job that challenges you, but works within the limit of your skills.

...

I tell my partner I've discovered the secret.

*You know the whole middle-age slump? I think I've figured it out.*

*What?*

*The internet says we don't have to spend the next thirty years unhappy. We just need to find purpose in work, connect with friends we love, go to Japan, drink more coffee.*

*What does coffee have to do with it?*

*It's all part of the thing. We're maturing as we go.*

She looks at me.

*The Happiness Curve is talking about big societal patterns, not our individual circumstances. It's a global thing. Not every Russian is unhappy past the point of death, not everybody in the UK gets happier at fifty. It's deeper, it's biological – just like the monkeys.*

...

That night I lie in bed. She sleeps as she always does, faced away from me to keep out the light from my glowing phone.

I type into ChatGPT: *'how do you make someone else happy?'*

Give them a surprising little gift.

Express gratitude.

Touch them. Hugging causes the brain to release 'oxytocin', the bonding hormone.

I put my phone down, turn to her and drape my arms around her.

I whisper gently in to her ear.

*We're ageing into it.*

# A DREAM

Pri Victor

at first i cannot understand them      five women sitting on wooden chairs      stacked spines  
dolly shoulders    chins and cheekbones bladed      pointed somewhere other      and i am there  
hid in a backward place      seeing their eyes      open but shut in the way colour and blackness  
mix to make nothing      they hold in hand a corner of their coverings      something olden      a  
nightdress      worn      frills      cuffs and florals      put upon and pulled down to show their  
breast      just the one      the right one      their hands rest      like an empty glove laid on the  
outer edge of chest      a give in extremity for this picture moment but there are no cameras  
just spectacled eyes watching them      men and women      suits      one step      two step      stop  
shoe slap      glassed eyes lit on them      not on them      but on them      the size and shape  
drop and weight      colour too      ranking      culling      in minds and on boards with pencils  
tick      and i see the rise on their areolas like a bird with its' plumage ripped out      blushed  
violence      the only colour in the room      a palette of human framed by cloth and hand and  
chair and all the watching      the face of five women are grey      so grey with swamp eyes  
mouths held so tight begging teeth from unsoftened spit rot      from the air they wish to expel  
but won't because it would force a take      making their lone breast shift beneath the cross of  
watching eyes      making their raged nipple more spectacled      i smell curdled tongue and  
fury skin and i taste feathers      all the feathers      it lies in the back of my throat in mucus  
crawl and i am crouched      knees a pin for my swaddle      both of them      i am there but not  
seeing the watching and the watched      feeling what i have been trying to swallow for the  
longest time    yes    that feeling    exactly that

# THE POWER OF SPIRIT

Pri Victor

*'Everything can be used / except what is wasteful /  
(you will need / to remember this when you are accused  
of destruction)'*

– Audre Lorde

I once was so proud I drank liquor from bedsheets  
I remember becoming the colour as clearly as it was  
it was so easy to turn tongue into cotton  
unfolded and wet  
limbs a pour into my mattress  
this comfort of being at one with transparency  
the seven nails I chewed for dinner  
and waking brought what could not be tasted  
in the pale puddle of night  
the edge of sleep still a crease in my skin  
gasoline sting of bile lapping at my open doors  
the place where words could breathe  
a barrage of blue heat  
where the spirit not consuming this body  
could end all that burns my feet

## FLASH FLOOD

Pri Victor

i went for a train the air metal and piss  
damp finding small home this far down and others also  
spider legs on face sallow pits  
this tunnel  
i count seven times someone crosses the yellow line  
the react too slow nothing happened  
nobody saw when nothing happened  
chewed nails a token of time  
how it passes stops passes stops  
rush of manicured memory  
i thought my brother was sitting swaying with me  
he wouldn't ever wear that hat  
pilling strikes the light a beat down on its bobbled give  
i want renewal  
these logged fingers pull each consort of acrylic defiance  
lay it in our palms clouds lost over brown land  
our only layer  
breathe the glass in this saver container is wet  
i count eighty-seven times somebody crosses the beep door  
a step between movement and uncertain ground  
i seem to bring it with me and to the woman at my elbow  
talking to the window dank secrets  
lips knitting through this tunnel spider legs praying  
through the grey and beyond that bridge where water now touches  
metal and piss  
if i were to sink i wonder  
the train moves stops moves stops  
would i close my eyes and cover my mouth  
familiar family face curls in himself and is no longer mine  
or would i reach in cling for something less moveable  
green becomes dust becomes grey becomes grey becomes grey  
forgotten trash between seats soak the distance  
and we continue to rise unstuck from safer lines



# SUE CHEF

Anne Freeman

They'd already sent it back once. Now, Sue was frantically trying to recreate the dish, taking into account the exact specifications she'd been given. She stared into the bubbling water at the jittering, waterlogged eggs, slotted spoon held aloft to scoop them out once the yolks traversed the coveted consistency between runny and hard. Her heart thumped and she tugged at her restrictive white starched collar. She knew she shouldn't, but she stole a furtive look at them. They glared back at her, and she would have given anything for walls to spring from the floor to encircle the open-plan kitchen. *Fucking modernist architecture.*

An aroma filled her nostrils, and for one terrifying moment, Sue feared she was having a stroke. White plumes curled to her right, and she dropped the spoon with a clatter. Pressing the cancel button, she extracted the cremated remains of the artisanal spelt sourdough from the red-glowing wire jaws of the toaster. She threw the slices in the sink, and they hissed their disapproval as she lunged to reclaim her spoon and scoop the eggs from the saucepan. Sweat pricked her upper lip. She gingerly pressed the white rubbery orbs. The egg yolks weren't runny—the misdemeanour the first batch had been rejected for—but were they overcooked? There was no time to even consider that. She pivoted to where the sourdough loaf sat and grimaced at the modest remnant. It was barely more than a heel. Keeping her neon bandaged fingers tucked, she managed to cut two regulation-width slices which she popped into the toaster. Standing sentinel, her gaze darted between the slowly toasting bread and the rapidly cooling eggs. 'Come on, come on,' she muttered. A slight golden hue bloomed on the surface of the slices and Sue popped them out prematurely, unwilling to risk the eggs going cold. She applied a generous smear of organic, grass-fed butter, artfully placed two eggs on each slice, and administered a precipitation of sea salt flakes which she deftly pulverised between thumb and forefinger. She instinctively reached for the comically large pepper grinder before halting and chastising her foolishness. She was just allowing herself a centring breath when Julian appeared.

'Want me to take these?' he asked, a hand hovering at the rim of each plate.

Sue suppressed an eyeroll. If he thought she was going to be upstaged by his faux magnanimity, he had another think coming.

'I've got it.'

She wiped her hands on a cloth, scooped up the plates and walked towards the table on shaky legs.

'Sorry for the delay,' she muttered, her eyes downcast.

'That's okay, Mumma.'

'Yeah, thanks, Mummy.'

Sue smiled.

# WE SING ANYWAY

Nick Ling

*Highly commended Darebin Mayors Writing Awards 2023*

1 I've stopped using the Shrek mug at work. It's a truly awful mug; using it felt like the hand-version of lifting with your back. The jagged S-shaped handle would bite into my fingers as if to assert dominance. *Why do I keep using this mug?* I would ask myself as I pressed it to my lips, bringing Shrek's eyes to my chin - a position where I'd become aware that I could no longer see Shrek, but Shrek could still see me. Despite all of this, it was my favourite mug, simply because of how silly it was. I used it every day. I only stopped using it because I didn't feel it was appropriate so soon after your suicide. Silliness is not permissible, not yet.

2 We cried so much at your vigil that we quickly ran out of tissues. I searched all six of my pockets but was only met with old tissues that could absorb no more. A friend of ours reached into her bag and pulled out a new packet, but she was crying so heavily that she couldn't open it. Another friend went over to help her, but he was also crying heavily and couldn't open it. After about 45 seconds of crying while picking at sticky tape, they both gave up, looked at each other and started laughing. And their laughter made the rest of us laugh. We were laughing together at how weak we had become.

3 I saw your name written down a lot when we were kids. Usually on homework or birthday cards, and once on a school desk in year seven when a vandal accused you of having a sexually transmitted infection. As an adult, I saw your name written down a lot less; mostly in texts, which I guess is a kind of writing, and maybe a few times when you reserved a table for trivia. I thought about this while looking at your name engraved on the brass plaque on the lid of your coffin. The serif font seemed so formal. Under your name, I wanted to write '...gave me chlamydia' before realising that the only person who would get the reference was lying in the box under the lid.

4 I had a dream I was at your funeral again, but this time your ghost was sitting next to me. It was more *The Sixth Sense* than *Casper*. We watched your funeral together, clapping at the end of speeches and smiling at anecdotes. You turned to me and asked where your OutKast record was, the one we listened to during study sessions. I pointed out that the record was on the table at the front of the room next to the large, framed photo of you at graduation. You looked at the record, looked around at the people, looked at me, then gave a closed-mouth smile before closing your eyes for what I knew was forever.

5 The birthday candles will not feel his breath this year. We sing anyway.

# AT THE START

Aaron Leyshon

Friday couldn't remember his first memory and he often doubted the kinds of people who said they did.

'You don't get to look back on those first few years,' he used to say, 'because you're too busy looking out at the world.'

He wondered when it was, when exactly we stopped looking at the world. Some people, it seemed, never stopped looking at the world, but Friday had seen too many who had. He'd been one of them. Now though, he was an addict. He couldn't stop looking if he wanted to. There was too much to see and not enough time to see it.

He could feel his life seeping out of him. He clutched his chest and looked over the dashboard. The ambulance will be here soon, he thought, but it wouldn't matter. The world would be gone by then. Disappeared. Just like his first memory. Just like his childhood. Just like his first wife and his second and his third.

There was no second and third life.

He knew that now, but it didn't stop him clutching his chest and hoping, it didn't stop him wondering if maybe he'd done things differently, he would have noticed the world while he was still capable of enjoying it. The darkness scared him the most. The unknown.

Maybe that's why you make up those first memories.



Saturday saw a burned-out car in the creek on her way to work. She didn't know it was a car at the time though. You never do, all you see is the smoke, and the flames dancing up from the scrub, and

you wonder: is there a body in there?

Nobody ever finds out.

These things don't make it on the news. Not much does. The only things that make the news nowadays are stories about mass shootings and celebrity weddings. Occasionally, they're the same story. Other times, they tell us about Easter, Ramadan, New Year's or the boogie man. But the body in the car...

That's always left to our imagination.

Saturday thinks there was a body in that burning car. She can't tell you exactly why she thinks that, but she does.



Hey you... yes you, Sunday.

The one with all the important things to do. You know I'm talking to you. Your list can't save you now.

How are you getting on with that list by the way? Is it getting closer to done? Would you even know what done looks like? Would you know what do with yourself if you finished the tasks piled up in those cute little lines of black and white?

O' how they judge you, those scrawls of ink and flickering screens. O' the attitude they show when you say, 'You know what, I think I'll do that one tomorrow.' Well, tough. They aren't your parents, they aren't your doctor, and they sure ain't your psychologist – although they pretend they are by screwing you up. Scratch them all out and scrunch the list into a ball, no, better, make it a plane or a swan or some other beautiful creature and launch it into the stratosphere, because I'm talking to you.

And you matter.

The list, it's nothing. The judgements – nil.

Your life is yours and that's all that matters. Shine, baby, shine. Get out and live. Pick up the guitar and play. Sing through your hoarse voice and smoker's lung and belt out those days like they aren't coming back 'round again.

Hell, maybe some people will pay you some attention for once and for the right reasons this time, too. And you will deserve it, because you are living, and they know it.

You know it too, and that's all that matters. You know it.

The list is gone, smoke it if you have to.

Gone.

Done.

And it really was a lot easier than doing all the tasks one by one.

# ADOPTION

Andrew Brion

This is how the blood flows.

The tree divides  
Graft-knot is bark-sewn  
Sap junction diverts

In high winds a limb fell  
– storm-invisible  
    – bole-hole formed  
        – respite: brief pause to lay one's head  
– still falls in an expanding universe

There are secrets in this forest country  
The trees grow but do not speak willingly

A small girl does not know these things, but hears  
The crack of twigs on *I-am-jungled* pathways

Reflections in billabongs are strange here  
Air-estranged are billabongs, on reflection

Her pathway jangled-mother and cracked earth –  
Here are but things known only to a girl's small 'T'

In forest country mature trees whisper  
Secrets spill willingly in new growth

– much later, herself expanding dizzily  
    – despite: to lay her own child's head  
        – emptying the bowl, but whole  
            – transforms the visible

In high winds, a hymn, a bell

The sap reverts  
Sewn back, not grafted  
The tree divides again

This is how the blood flows.

# SWIMMING BACKWARDS UNDER WATER

Caoife Power

## My Shadow

A cast for the shadows  
I sleep again  
This is not a performance piece

Settling slow rhythms  
Cast with the waves  
I miss the sea  
Salt  
Drivers past  
Splash cause the mountain shake  
Rattle undercover snake  
Who hides in the bush  
Next to the baths  
With girls tops off  
Splash rocks  
Hard edged sunburn  
Dent burnt tan lines  
Down our backs  
I swim  
I swim to get away

I float to watch the waves roll over  
Ocean spills  
Cast their net  
Set a line of salt white crisp  
Lines of momentum  
Caught by a wind  
Over my stomach  
Arch

I seek the knife  
I draw a chord  
Swoop dagger at the neck  
Fine line  
You told me to be careful  
I seek out a wish  
Take away this skin  
Tight crisp binds  
Metal drawn reflections  
Cast a shadow  
A long drawn out dawn  
Sun for the taking  
Pools of orange turned pink  
Help me find a cause  
Don't answer the question  
Swim  
Swim to get away

## My Friend's Body

I see you  
For who I need,  
Real and want to be.  
You hold my eyesight for longer  
Than I would ever expect  
And the energy that it brings  
Carries me  
Through this rough day.

I see you  
Strong  
Like clear blue  
Reflected  
Over open ocean.

## Seeing Red

It makes me smile  
The red  
Harsh thorn-ed fingerprints  
Cut me  
Blood on my shirt  
Stains for days  
How to clean these memories  
Get them away

Perhaps we need to talk about it  
Get in touch  
Fall for the roses

Perhaps we need to pretend that nothing happened  
Talk about it later  
Phone on flight mode  
Beneath clouds

I think about the river  
Water systems hold me wet  
Keep me shifting  
Under ground  
Carry my sensitivity  
Through pipelined concrete  
Desert  
Or dirt

I call her on the phone  
And she says  
How are you?  
And I say  
I miss you too.

## Making Sounds Through Shifting Water

I think I want to listen  
Interested  
I know you have kindness  
Broken in the night time  
Length of words  
Carried up up  
Strange how the belly aches  
Reminds me of a hunger  
I'd left myself feel  
For far too long  
But she caught me  
Riptide ocean nightmare  
You can't catch my wings

Free  
Free as a bird  
You are bloody brilliant  
At flying  
Accented sounds  
Wisp me above the next corner  
Shhhhh  
Again  
Shhhhh  
We call them  
Perhaps they know how to fall  
Into the water  
Even in the thick of cold  
Sleet in the moors  
Of my green home  
Lime lime lime  
Lime  
Green  
Ocean  
Shhhh  
Not so far away.

My mum is currently writing a thesis about mother blame and I've been reading and thinking a lot about this as her daughter and how I sit alongside her body.

Like my mother, I am white and queer and have chronic pain. Apparently these traits are learned behaviors.

My therapist once asked me: was she mad?

Perhaps it is her fault. I didn't know how to respond or call her back and let her know that it was my pain. It was not my mothers.



# FLIGHT

Terry Donnelly

She left Ireland on St. Stephen's Day. It was great to leave the cold, though there were days when the heat in Melbourne was stifling.

Her brother lived in an apartment in an area called Brunswick. In his unit there were no signs of Christmas, no tinsel, no row of cards. She asked him where he'd had Christmas dinner and he told her he'd gone to the pub alone, that it was the best thing he'd ever done. He worked while she was there, over Christmas and

January, happy for the overtime. He was on a site in the city. Six years before this, he'd had a steady girlfriend with talk of marriage and a yard full of machinery. Now in her mind he didn't seem much better than a builder's labourer.

She enjoyed exploring when he was out. She liked how the trainline cut through different neighbourhoods, the glimpses of strangers' lives. She took the tram out to St. Kilda, where the Irish backpackers went, and felt there were better beaches back home. One day, walking in the city with her brother, they played a game where you scored a point for spotting an Irish person. She thought he was being smart until she saw them. It was somehow obvious, even when they had colour on their arms and faces.

Some mornings she called John, her boyfriend this last year, and sometimes her mother. It was strange hearing their voices, like water trickling down from behind a great dam. Home seemed mysterious in this new place, like one of those islands, in the old stories, that disappeared in the fog.

One evening her brother brought her to a Vietnamese area. He pointed out a bakery, a public housing tower block. He explained about the fall of Saigon and pointed out the South Vietnamese flag. It wasn't the Australia she'd imagined.

She noted how foreign it was, how unlike home.

'Who said it was like home?' he asked.

They say the Australians are similar to the Irish.

He laughed and she felt foolish.

She asked him if he had plans to come back, now that COVID-19 had receded.

'As far as I'm concerned, the place doesn't exist.'

His bluntness stirred her to confrontation.

'You know ma is still paying interest on the loan. It hasn't gone away just because you have.'

The worst of it was that he couldn't see what the family name meant, the work that those before him had put in. He just left it like a worn-out coat, for others to mend.

'You think it's easy?'

She didn't answer. It was her who had to comfort her mother with lies. And it never occurred to him that one day she could get married and would want him there.

She went to mass one of the Sundays. She told her mother she would. The church was called St. Josephs and it was on Hope Street. She'd always liked the stories with Joseph and took it as a sign. After communion she prayed for her mother and brother, for the soul of her father, as she returned to her seat, the wafer melting to nothing on her tongue.

The last morning came quickly, the flight early. She broke her promise to wake him. It was hard, but not breaking it would have been harder still. She unwrapped a gift to him, a framed photo of the pair when she was a toddler. She stood it on the table. This holiday, she'd felt the change between them, as if she were the older sibling now. She saw suddenly the next time he'd be home, her mother laid out and still, and she pushed the thought away.

Growing up, he had been the world to her. When and how had everything changed? He was not the world now, but the smallest thing in it.

She walked to the corner of Sydney Road and hailed a cab. It didn't take long; the airport was close. She entered the terminal and approached the desk. She appraised the people in front. A green rugby jersey. Ruddy complexion. A couple of young lads sniggering; she bet they were from Dublin by their swagger. Her brother, though, wouldn't be so easily caught. And even if she could spot him and call, he wouldn't turn, because his was a separate future now, beyond departure and arrival; the future of someone who came from a place that was said to no longer exist.

# FAMILY STUFF

## Malcolm Hill

Parents to bury  
Umbrellas to open  
Graveyards to tramp  
Poems to recite

Cups to rinse  
Cake crumbs to sweep up  
Tea towels to fold  
Visitors to shoo off

Hallways to shuffle  
Timetables to check  
Lamps to dampen  
Alarms to set

Shadows to escape  
Pools to dive into  
Laps to swim  
Lifeguards to nod to

Stuff to say  
Stuff to forget  
to ruminate on,  
hoping it will change

Stuff  
that niggles  
and burns  
that will not be buried

Throats to clear  
Relatives to call  
Questions to ask

Letters to put  
into envelopes  
and mailed,  
Certified Mail

Wills to contest  
Claims to submit  
Affidavits to swear  
Inventories to be filed

Time to wait  
Emotions to ride  
Mouths to control  
Relationships to shatter  
Egos to bruise  
Hearts to burn  
Impasses to endure

Lights to dim  
Dinners alone  
in empty rooms

Nothing to hold  
Could easily fall  
into  
depths of nothing

Pools to dive into  
The treacle dark depth  
Struggle for breath  
Lifeguards to thank

Who are they anyway?  
My half-blood  
We're not close,  
she says  
They won't shift

A boat ride  
to an island  
to reflect  
under a tree  
in the Bass Strait sun  
The tides  
Aqua blue and ever rolling

To return  
and announce  
Will cease and desist  
and sue for peace  
with step-brothers and sisters

Walks to take  
in sunshine and wind  
Paths to broach  
Fences to climb  
Paddocks to wander  
Faces to remember  
Poems to recite  
Hills to conquer  
Closer to the sun

# PORTRAIT

Megan Howden

Nine months. Sleepless nights. Growing.

Pale, smooth skin stretches over the perfectly round basketball protrusion. A circular shadow indicates the location of a vanished belly button. Weighty breasts, on loan, are unfamiliar with their fine blue veins traversing like roadways just below the skin.

She is comfortable in this form of pending motherhood. It is the only iteration of herself that she has not judged. She observes its foreignness, its peculiarities, but the sensation is pride, awe and disbelief of her body's capabilities. Her hands instinctively reach for the kicks and punches that beat within. Unconsciously measuring movements, she is reassured that the life growing within is content.

Their futures are forever intertwined; they have a bond closer than any connection they'll share with another. She longs for their meeting, but will regret losing this togetherness. She has seen glimpses, the grainy black and white of ultrasound, a face, an eye, the pulsing chambers of a heart. Meeting face to face is both a beginning and an ending. One is running out of room, and the other can't grow any larger to accommodate.

The pain that rakes through her freezes time. Even this most wandering of minds can't help but to stand to attention. The end is near when she believes she is incapable. When the voices and faces around her vanish, there is no birth suite, no hospital, no mind, just instinct. A head, a body, a new life whimpering in oxygen, perhaps lamenting the loss of his aquatic home.

She is clasping the bloodied blue figure; a real human, no longer the ethereal idea of a baby. There is no pain, only shock, disbelief and the rush of euphoria. The task is over. Both have journeyed from one being to two and a new path has been forged. His cries are kitten-like, easy to miss and easy to soothe. He is utterly hopeless, helpless, his future solely dependent on the arms that cradle him.

Zero. Sleepless nights, fuelled by adrenaline. Newborn. Learning.

The amphibious body is bunched against her chest. Skinny legs and ankles, arms and wrists, waiting to unravel and fill out. Hands and feet seem disproportionately large and long. Thin fingers move languidly to reflexively grip an offered finger. Skin, dry and flaking, an overcooked pastry. Face, forehead and eyes and nose all wrinkled and bunched up from their journey through the birth canal. She sees perfection.

One month. Broken sleep, fuelled by sugar. Healing and growing. Infant. Loving.

Round blue pools replace the closed slits, two eyes nestled above a button nose. They stare directly into hers, looking with intensity at nothing and everything. Arms and legs unfurl like the petals of a flower. The face that was squashed with old man wrinkles now appears porcelain perfection in sleep, and monkey-like as it snuffles and bobs seeking milk, milk, more milk. Real tears spill when the tummy is pained. The face cracks into a cry, squealing for immediate attention.

Two months. Broken sleep, fuelled by carbs. Strengthening. Infant. In love.

The imperfect sphere of his head bobbles as he works neck muscles to stay upright. He is searching his surrounds, testing out limits, and viewing the strange creatures and world that make up family and home. Cheeks form round cherries, as lips split into deliberate gummy smiles. He is already aware of his ability to receive attention in smiles and coos, his first conversations. His belly is round, the beginnings of rolls on limbs and dimples on knuckles. His demand for milk, milk and more milk is paying off.

Her sleep is forever broken, fuelled by perpetual forward motion and miniscule amounts of caffeine. They grow together. The slow blinks at three in the morning last an age, but the weeks fly by and blur. It is a farewell in increments. Instructing the brain to focus, pause, observe and to just *be* doesn't slow the clock. She mourns the child of yesterday and celebrates the child of today. The ever-changing portrait.

# TANGIBLE BRICK AND MORTAR

Colin Dunn

I was restless through the night. I was thirsty and dirty. I went to sleep alone with my thoughts and with Grindr open. The fishnet technique. Was I just seeking validation externally? Ignoring the internal? Just horny? All of it. The endless scroll had become a habit now. Could I break my celibacy? When my eyes were open, I watched the shape of the window glide across the ceiling. When I closed my eyes, I could see my blood covering hotel sheets. I had a dream where I couldn't swallow a mouthful of pills. The roads were quieter now, the air crisp. There was no movement. In a straight line, the burning red leaves fell directly below. Back home, the leaves just shriveled and browned. I was halfway through my morning meditation when I heard the garbage truck coming up the street. I realised I forgot to put the bins out. I gave up and had a wank and went for coffee instead.

When my latte d'avoine was eight dollars, I didn't feel so bad about stealing a roll of toilet paper every other day. Each mouthful sat heavy in my throat today. I was going to get a filter, but I couldn't say no when the straight guy asked me if I wanted my usual. I prayed that as the caffeine flowed through me, it would invigorate. That it attached me to the sunshine, strengthened my internal compassion. That it sharpened the soft edges to my light. I had no certainty on the horizon, just expenditure. The last time I'd seen my mother she said 'you can be mother.' She was asking me to split the avocado toast in half. She was asking me to heal my inner child. The last time I saw my father he made a noose. Would it hang by the front door? Or next to the poster that reads 'We walk by faith, not by sight'?

There was a man feeding a rotisserie chicken to the pigeons outside the metro station yesterday. On the train, everyone had their eyes shut. When I crossed the street, my footsteps lined up perfectly with the white stripes. There was so much of myself that still felt foreign. My body, my sexuality, my physicality and anger were all strangers. I hoped for them to become lovers quickly. Was it not enough to have my name tattooed above my right knee?

Each time I shoplifted here, I thought of the fact that the Canadian government had my biometrics on file. I wondered what the consequences would be. I thought I could live with deportation, wondered if I would have to reimburse the government. Or would it be a free flight? Whenever I heard sirens approaching my cortisol spiked. Even so, I stole a mango on my way home yesterday. I ate it in front of the mirror. I watched my breath, I watched my chest. I studied the way it expanded and deflated. When I held my exhale, I liked the way my body looked. I took notes. Exhale in pictures. Exhale if you ever have someone in your bed again. Exhale under the next full moon.

As the temperature dipped, the pace around me quickened. Preparation. Just two weeks ago I was one of the masses, collectively blowing a kiss to the pinks and purples melting on the horizon. Now, I paused alone with the moon. The glow of the setting sun intensified through the fire bright autumn leaves. I thought of my spot on Rucker's hill. I saw all I'd deprived myself of. I saw a lonely and closed heart, my detachment from senses. It echoed in my isolation.

Rue Castlenau was being stripped of its paint and pedestrian only signs. Men in chest-high gumboots were sandblasting away any lingering hope of warmth. I've always believed in signs. When my mirror smashed into a thousand bits, I buried a piece under the feijoa tree in the front yard. It was time for me to go, time to revisit and reattach. There was movement to the air now, it carried a shifting energy. It carried the leaves. In the distance, the trains that passed by were just a pulse on the breeze.

## ADULT CONTRIBUTORS

**Sara Bannister** is a Reservoir mum with a life-long love of literature and creative writing. A fan of all types of genres, Sara is enjoying exploring ghost stories and horror, drawing on her experiences growing up in the outer western suburbs.

**Melanie Barbaro** enjoys writing song lyrics, poems and short stories that are inspired by her past, present, and imagined future. Her writing is a way for her to figure herself out.

**Mandy Beaumont** is an award-winning writer and a researcher in creative writing. Her debut novel *The Furies* was long-listed for the prestigious *Stella Prize* and shortlisted for the *MUD Literary Prize* as well as the *Queensland Literary Awards Fiction Book of the Year*. She is also a regular feature writer and book reviewer for *The Big Issue*.

**Sharon Berry** is an emerging writer who finds solace and healing in words as she navigates life with chronic illness. She has honed her craft through journaling and the participating in the Darebin Writability program where she focuses on poetry and short stories to express herself and manage past traumas.

**Becki Bouchier** is a filmmaker and writer. Her work explores the challenges faced by women, with particular emphasis on mental health and gender roles. She has been nominated for an Australian Directors' Guild Award and an Australian Writers' Guild Award and was the 2022 recipient of the *Victorian SBS Emerging Writers' Incubator*.

**Andrew Brion** is a poet who ruminates on politics, travel, and the human condition. He published his first book of poetry, *Soul Moves*, in 2018 and has had poems published in several other magazines, anthologies and outlets including *Blue Nib*, *Bowen Street Press*, *Pocketry* and *n-SCRIBE*.

**Phoebe Cannard-Higgins** is a new mother. Her work has appeared in *Voiceworks*, *n-SCRIBE*, *Questions Journal*, and an anthology of short literature titled 'Crush' by MidnightSun. She has an MA from Goldsmith's University, London.

**Lella Cariddi OAM** is a writer and multidisciplinary curator of ethnographic narrative. Her writing has been published by: Multicultural Arts Victoria, Society Women Writers Victoria (SWWV), Ascolta Women Write, The Human Writers, Melbourne Poets Union,

Swinburne University Anthology, Footscray Tafe, Dr Jocelyn Scutt and Mercy Hospital for Women.

**Terry Donnelly** is an award-winning writer and teacher who lives in Northcote.

**Colin Dunn** is living between the cities of Melbourne and Montreal. They have a passion for writing and believe that words matter. They aim to acknowledge their unique perspective and lived experience and strive to create a sense of relatability.

**Brett Elliot** works in advertising and tries his best to be a creative writer in his spare time.

**Anne Freeman** is a copy, feature, health, social media and creative writer. She makes a living by placing words in an order that makes people feel things. Her hobbies include referring to herself in third person and making her family guffaw. Oh, and wine. She likes wine.

**Malcolm Hill** is a writer and musician who lives in Reservoir. His writing combines local stories, mythology, and performance. Malcolm has produced short stories, theatre performances and music albums.

**Megan Howden** enjoys perusing the shelves of second hand book stores, walking in nature and playing with her energetic children. Megan is a member of the writer's group, *Inner North Scribblers*, and has previously had short stories published in *n-SCRIBE* magazine and the anthology [*Untitled*] issue 10.

**Kathryn James** works as a freelance copywriter and in the international development sector and is studying Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT University. Kathryn lives in Darebin with her partner and two children.

**Aaron Leyshon** is a sucker for words. He can't read enough of them, and sometimes they simply flow out of his fingers onto the page. It's like a valve has been released. And then something stops it up again. He writes mostly crime fiction but has also been published in 'BOMBFIRES' and 'Rejection Letters'.

**Nick Ling** is a disability support worker who has previously published poetry and social commentary in *The Canary Press* and *n-SCRIBE*.

**Isabelle McKenna** loves walks along Darebin River, writing, music and cooking. She is currently working in an art department on an exciting Claymation feature film.

**Sarah McKenzie** is passionate about supporting people to connect more deeply with themselves, their community and nature. She does this through her jobs as a Youth Worker and a Climate Action advisor. On weekends she can be found reading and doing yoga.

**Cassy Nunan** is Gen X poet and novelist who works as a mental health programs developer. She was granted a Creative Writing PhD in 2017. In previous lives she lived at a lighthouse and rode a Harley Davidson. She is home-bound with disability and puts her limited energy into creative projects.

**Madison Pawle** is a writer living and working on unceded Wurundjeri land.

**Caoife Power** is an artist and writer whose research looks at the body and identity as living with a chronic illness. Using layers of metaphor and abstraction, her work reflects on different ways of translating the world around us.

**Nathan Power** is a Melbourne-based artist who plays music and writes. In 2022, he won the Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Award for narrative non-fiction. Nathan is also a folk singer-songwriter with two solo EPs, a banjo player and the drummer in *Gusto Gusto*, West Preston's finest seven-piece dance band.

**William Stanforth** writes fiction, non-fiction and screenplays in Melbourne. His writing has appeared in *Overland Literary Journal*, *The Victorian Writer Magazine*, *Visible Ink*, and more. This short piece is a playful take on intergenerational housing inequality in Australia and the ways in which the traditional family unit is evolving.

**Becca Stine** is a poet, storyteller, and social worker from Oregon, USA. She uses poetry as a means of understanding the rhythms of her body, her trauma, her queerness, and the constant nuance of life around her.

**Pri Victor** is a musician, school teacher, and mother of two wild toddlers and a brown dog. She writes poetry and resides in Melbourne, on Woi Worrung Country.

**Renee Winzar** is living and loving life in Preston. She has a PhD in medicinal chemistry and currently works for the Victorian Government. Renee likes to write allegories that use animals to portray the darker side of human existence in a way that she hopes encourages empathy.





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