

# n-SCRIBE

15 | 2022 | free publication



# 15

fiction | non-fiction | poetry | art | local

The Wurundjeri Woiwurrung 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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**Darebin  
Arts**

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**More info and past editions:** [arts.darebin.vic.gov.au](https://arts.darebin.vic.gov.au) [writingprojects@darebin.vic.gov.au](mailto:writingprojects@darebin.vic.gov.au)

# OUR PLASTICS FAMILY

Terry Donnelly

*Subject line: FYI Pete, draft of end of year speech*

*[Will make sure everyone is on mute]*

I like to say there's never a dull day in plastics, and certainly not in Plastic World Victoria, formerly Preston Plastics. But I'm compelled to say, as I deliver this year's end of year speech on Zoom, 2020 exceeded all expectations. There was the level two renovations, the failed takeover by Kiwi Rubber and Tyres, and all that before a global pandemic. We had a birth, congratulations to Ada in the backroom team, and sadly the sudden passing of Gary Timmons from Product Design *[Two weeks before retirement! Though tbh he checked out years ago]*. Even in the world of durable product manufacturing, we are reminded of our ultimate frailty, but this year has proven our ability to recover *[Gary, sadly, excepted]*.

In 2020, our resilience, along with our baking and hairdressing *[wait for laughs]*, was tested like never before. Joking aside, it was scary. Toilet paper initially appeared the better placed business model. But if plastics has taught me one thing, it's opportunity. I remember calling Clive in Extrusions. 'Can we pivot from irrigation nozzles to push pump heads for sanitiser bottles?' No is not in my vocabulary, he replied. Clive's can-do attitude not only saved the business, but possibly the country. I remember after the Premier described the gin distillers who'd switched to making hand sanitiser as Aussie heroes, Bob Childs *[taking a break from white-anting management]* noted that the distribution of sanitiser would be tricky in paper bags. And though made with trademark dryness, Bob had a point. As creators of effective container solutions we were overlooked yet again. Australians love their fireys, their tradies, their medical workers and distillers, but such is life in plastics. You won't get the plaudits like AFL players or celebrity gardeners. But know this: you are heroes to me. Plastic World Victoria honours your work.

People have questioned how I've remained so enthusiastic about plastics, even during a pandemic *[particularly since Karen took the house and Jackson]*. To them I say: Children playing Lego, gumboots splashing in a puddle, storage for a beauty regime, leisure wear for remote working. Plastics spark joy. Of course there were low moments. Shutting down the new granulating machine. Gary's Zoom funeral. Fear about how long the virus survives on plastic surfaces. Disconnection from loved ones *[is it really necessary for her to post so many photos?]*. But there were highs. Being deemed essential workers. Returning onsite. The aforementioned pivot to pumps. And who could forget *Tiger King*? It was refreshing to see someone so unashamedly loving what they do. I sometimes think COVID-19 brought a return to simpler times, to a focus and sincerity that has been missing from our lives *[I tried my best with Karen; I really did]*.

There were also quiet moments. The wattle trees flowering in Yarra Bend Park – don't worry, it was within five kilometres *[wait for laughs]*. The green and gold reminded me of Australia, which reminded me of the importance of our work *[and reminded me of home]*. Children safe to learn how to cycle on the street *[to think how frustrated I got with Jackson when in fact they were the best days, when I would give him a push and his bike would glide away from me]*. And on so many street corners a Spoonville; you couldn't buy better PR to build appreciation of plastics *[certainly our current PR team couldn't]*. Seeing my colleagues unguarded faces before and after Zoom meetings, children and pets milling, to a soundtrack that switched chaotically between noise and mute *[Remember that visit to my apartment Pete, when you joined my bubble? The 'office' I had set up in the corner of the kitchenette for appearances online, befitting of the manager. You saved me mate]*.

And this brings me to what touched me most of all, in a time when we were afraid to touch: human connection. People emailing to see how I was travelling. Staff who expressed gratitude. Suppliers who checked in. Yes, despite rumours to the contrary, the Managing Director is human too *[wait for laughs]*. Some anonymous donor even left soup on my doorstep *[Pete, is it just me or have you noticed how Jocelyn Brightling looks at me in meetings?]*. This extraordinary year has revealed what's important: that we shouldn't take anyone in our plastics family for granted and we shouldn't be deceived by surfaces. Reach out. Check-in. Smile. Plastics World Victoria is more than a workplace. And of course if you love what you do, you'll never be alone.

True, it's an observed failing of mine that I see the world through the prism of plastics. But when you live and breathe plastics, you see the connections. Plastics are everywhere, unfortunately even in places we don't want them to be. We can't shy from that. People will accuse you of wanting to destroy the planet, despite advances in eco-plastics and industrial recycling, in biodegradables and organic based compounds. I say: work harder to be part of the solution. And just like flattening the curve, we can only do it together. *[Did you know Pete, Jackson accused me of killing polar bears. As if that is why I get up in the morning. He's only a child, Karen says. But should a child be turned against their parent? No one wants to stop using cars, or ordering fast food, or using phones, but they're happy to make plastic the demon. I know it's everywhere, but we can only try harder. It's like the virus. There's no going back. If it's in one of us it's in all of us; part of the human experience.]*

To sum up, this year has shown me how precarious our small lives are, how precious their single use *[beneath the seeming order, Pete, chaos. That's what the likes of Bob Childs, who thinks management is so easy, will never understand. Though perhaps beneath is not right, but rather it is there, lurking on the surface, the contaminant]*. We've talked a lot about uncertainty, yet there has never been any world but an uncertain one. I take solace in how we've gotten through this last year, recovering from the knocks, together but apart, surviving and occasionally thriving. Despite the hostile intentions of Kiwi Rubber and Tyres our plastics family is still here, still Australia's fourth leading plastics manufacturer, operating in a COVID-19 safe manner, with the positive future of plastics before us.

*[Is recovery even possible Pete? What is not, moment by moment, lost forever? Nothing lasts. At the funeral, sobbing on the screen, Gary's wife said they were planning on moving to Venus Bay. Karen starting a new relationship. That got old quick. You can't unbite the apple; you can't mute what has been heard. Onward into freewheeling love, into coastal retirement, into the promising future of plastics. And whether we hurl ourselves into the unknown or step reluctantly, that's all there is to do. The comfort of another's hand is there until one or the other goes, until you slip and spin.]*

# THANK YOU COVID-19

Mark Miljons-Rostoks

Things are a bit different for me. As most of Melbourne emerges from lockdown, I still find myself in one. In fact, I've been in one for near on two decades now.

Disability can do this.

The year 2020 was still particularly hard though, I mean I had all my normal rigmarole and drama, yet without doubt, the reins were pulled even tighter. And double that tightness because I live in a care facility, so the truth is that I lived a hell not many people can imagine.

But before I get into my tale of redemption and partial emergence, I'll give you the backstory.

I'm a quadriplegic who has a tracheostomy and is ventilator dependent, and after this obvious disaster occurred in my early 20s, I found myself being thrown around amongst several hospitals. Then as my health slowly stabilised and upon realising that my medical needs were too great to live at home, the next logical step was that I had to move into care.

This was the beginning of my locked down life.

I was a young charismatic man, a bit of a brat, but regardless, I had countless restrictions placed upon me. I was breathing through an apparatus, social isolation became my normal, invasive medical procedures and testing followed, then there was no choice but to work from home. My health was quite unpredictable too, so participating in the community as I would have liked just wasn't possible. I wouldn't even go shopping for essentials – healthy family members would home-deliver.

Only on the rare occasion would I go out – always wearing my Sunday best, I looked very strange at the Bunnings. By the same token, it also felt like people didn't want to come near me, in case they caught my illness. They would always stay at 6 feet.

After some time, I basically never bothered to leave my friendly mess, it was just too hard. So, my daily wear went plaid-pyjama classic. Absolutely gorgeous. Then friends wouldn't visit, I think they were dealing with their own lives (or could smell me from their homes), so all my social activity moved online. What's more, I'd now discovered the wonders of online shopping.

For years, this was my life, only popping out into the community for essential services. Doctor's appointments, bottle shop runs, etc, plus my hair was out of freaking control. Without doubt, I was living in a bubble and it was only my care staff who were my close contacts.

It was certainly a sheltered way of living that not many people knew about or understood.

Then when COVID-19 and its subsequent lockdowns came about (apart from thinking 'woohoo piece of cake I've totally got this'), as it turned out, I was in one of the most vulnerable segments of the community. And being so at risk to this virus, I went into an extra hard lockdown. The few civil liberties that I did have were stolen. Then as the rest of the community relished in two hours of exercise per day, I had none. My nursing home had become a prison.

At this time, it was strange to hear everyone online whinging about their predicament, even whinging about how they could only drive 5 kilometres from their home. Well in my case, I literally wasn't allowed to leave the site, in fact because of several staff who had come into contact with COVID-19 patients (because they also worked in hospitals), on numerous occasions I was locked in my bedroom. I wasn't allowed more than 5 metres from my bed. All in the name of safety.

Each morning, I'd watch the Premier's press conference to see the developments and if any new restrictions had been enacted, then I'd read the email from the care home manager to see their new rules as well. This is why I kept saying I was in a double lockdown. Then there was the added complexity of things like my family not being able to visit, yet my care staff were free to roam as they pleased. Trust was pushed. Especially when regular staff were forced to take leave and complete strangers took over my care.

I can only compare this level of lack of control with disability itself. You are that forced into a corner, yet you still have to somehow make it work.

No matter the anguish, the personal pain, the mental trauma – life must go on.

There is no value in letting social isolation hold you down.

And it was great to see this play out in the general community. After becoming familiar with images of naked streets and barren bars, to hear the Premier's final announcement that we were coming out of lockdown brought a tear to my eye. I experienced it alone by myself in my room. What I was doing was living vicariously through everybody else. Then to see everybody on television celebrating was pure elation, almost as if an incurable paralysis had been conquered. Everybody was able to get up and walk again and return to their old lives.

To me the Premier's words resonated like that of a doctor – you're cured!

However unlike the rest of Melbourne, I wasn't quite so lucky. My reality was that I was still fighting to be allowed visitors – actually my hard lockdown continued for another four weeks. I was still living on the frontline. The rules of the public weren't good enough for me. I'm always one step behind. And management always hangs on to control for as long as they can.

After nine months in total lockdown, not even once moving beyond the letterbox, management finally gave me the key to my cell. Accompanied by a staff member, I was allowed to go out for a drive in my disability van, however I was still not allowed to get out. It felt like throwing a dog a ball, but you keep holding onto the leash. Nevertheless, with great nervousness and anxiety I went out that day, a memorable experience to say the least. It was strange seeing people again, particularly who weren't wearing blue hospital gowns.

Assimilation was the exact antidote that I needed. For the first time in almost a year I felt human again.

This was the second time in my life that I'd felt this exact same feeling. The first was two decades earlier when I managed to leave hospital, only back then my leash wasn't being stuck in a van, rather a wheelchair. Admittedly, both felt like a barrier to connection.

Only this time around, it now feels like there's a lot more relatability and empathy toward circumstances out of our control. Everybody now knows what it feels like to be stuck and lose freedoms. People have tasted my life. Plus, there is now more relatability toward creative living and making the most of what we've got, which ironically has been my plight for years.

So, as awful and unfortunate as COVID-19 was (and still is in many parts of the world), oddly enough I feel that most people understand me better now. Most people can relate to this life of partial lockdown that I live day in and day out, even if just a little bit. And for this I am grateful.

For all the bad in the world, it seems that there is always some good.

# LOOKING UP, OR WHAT CHICKENS TAUGHT ME ABOUT COMMUNITY

Kurt Johnson

In 2020 Chutney developed a fascination with chickens. During our walks, he felt an irresistible attraction to the chickens that had begun materialising in the front yards of Thornbury. Whether they appeared due to a survival instinct in a moment of empty supermarket shelves or from nostalgia of a time when the backyard coop was a regular feature was not clear. What was clear, to Chutney at least, was that these creatures demanded scrutiny while they scratched and pecked through kitchen scraps and seed mix.

One gloomy winter morning on our usual route, I noticed something different. Outside a Californian style duplex, someone had fixed a cardboard sheet with zip ties to the waist-high front fence. On it were two Polaroids, each of a tiny chicken. Chutney, sensing interest, sniffed the air. Through the fence were two, if not quite baby chicks, then chicken adolescents. Developed enough for beige feathers and the red dangly bits on their head – known, I would learn through subsequent research, as the comb (top bit) and wattle (bit beneath the chin) – they had not acquired the adult plumpness in breast and thigh. To the cardboard, a pen was attached and a naming competition proposed; the winners with the best suggestions would be awarded the high honour of naming the birds.

Each day we stopped while Chutney pawed through the fence at the two teen chicks pecking away, oblivious to his existence. This gave me pause to admire the growing list of names. Sometimes parents with children were pointing out the chickens; at others, couples were locked in fierce debate trying to distil the essence of a chicken into a name. The board and the chickens, it seemed, were becoming a local lightning rod.

By the scrawled hand, suggestions like ‘Rainbow Sparkle’, ‘Cool Dude’ or the zen-like ‘Water’ were clearly from children. One came from what I imagined to be a precocious older child who had plumbed the depths of their lexicon and perhaps a Greek heritage to retrieve ‘Syncretica’ – who I would discover was named after Saint Syncretica of Alexandria but intended here to mean ‘bringing together’ as suggested in parenthesis below.

It’s impossible to say whether such a competition could have been so successful before lockdown. I think not. I also think it meant more than soliciting chicken names. As an act of inspiration it represented nothing less than a change in the relationship between residents and their street. What were once thoroughfares between home, work and shops, streets had become places for civic engagement. It wasn’t just the chickens. Signs of this change were literally underfoot as children chalked footpaths in rainbow designs and hopscotch that ran to florid watercolours when it rained. Community was returning to the streets.

This, I chalked up to a break in routines. People had shifted their gaze from distant horizons and ambitions to refocus onto immediate surroundings. I call this happy COVID-19 side-effect – ‘looking up’. One epiphany derived from ‘looking up’ was that *these* people, *these* streets were ‘my community’.

Now, I have no pre-pandemic data to validate this theory, but I would swear that then, when walking along those streets, you were more likely to receive a smile when passing a stranger. The greeting ‘owzitgoin?’ had become a genuine question, as in ‘how is it *really* going?’ I was also told about WhatsApp groups where neighbours who had rarely spoken were now buying groceries for those under quarantine or at high risk. ‘Looking up’ was a realisation of what was in front of us, but from it emerged a quick intimacy which, far from a soft and ephemeral idea, could form the kernel of a successful recovery – to a place that is better than the one we left behind.

Before I get too carried away, rich vibrant communities have always existed here. I have presented community radio for years and have seen the work and commitment that people pour into them. What 'looking up' did was make the *value* of community abundantly clear to those who had never tuned into that frequency before. People who had been too distracted to notice. People like me.

Consider a counter-example. Before COVID-19, Australia had become a cynical place. A poll taken in late 2018 found Australians' satisfaction with the democratic process was at an all-time low. And as democracy is participating in the running of community, I take this to mean our national community was in dire straits. And when the community stops working, people stop participating – they close their doors, shut their blinds and focus on distant horizons. In other words – they look away.

Even before the chickens, Chutney was a slow walker. An avid subscriber to the 'canine bulletin board', every lamppost, every corner absolutely had to be sniffed. A 10-minute walk alone would, when taken with Chutney, leave me with only half an hour of daily exercise time. But, if I rode hard, I could hit a bike path to the 5-kilometre radius and return. Through this mad dash, I discovered Darebin Creek. For years, I had lived beside it, but until lockdown never understood the liberation of being channelled along its winding path, past ancient rock faces into grassy glens that cradled the creek.

These discoveries were not mine alone. I had taken the Merri Creek trail to work. During lockdown far more people walked in the fading afternoon light chatting, unloading. Human connections were being reforged in person; relationships to green space, once perfunctory, were deepening. People were 'looking up' and rediscovering relationships with one another and nature.

Then there was Northcote Golf Course. By the time I discovered the hole in the fence it was large enough for a man in a wheelchair to be carried through. I can remember that bright Saturday afternoon seeing the undulating hills and bunkers – repurposed to allow families and small groups of friends (five-person limit observed). As I stepped through and straightened up, I saw a music festival without music. This genius of reinterpretation, a vast greenspace, once a monoculture, reserved for a single activity was now busted open, reclaimed by the community with all its noise, chaos and diversity. Again we 'looked up' to appreciate what was right there.

'Looking up' was not just a shift in mindset. It realigns priorities and relationships to what one lives amongst. Through it follows the most profound realisations for recovery: that the strongest communities are local and the environment is not 'over there' but something we inhabit. 'Looking up' empowered us with an unadulterated connection to nature and people, and reinvigorated our capacity for reinvention.

Perhaps this opportunity is fading. Today, walking Chutney, I see gazes fixed a little further, the smile of the stranger a little harder to reach for. Recovery needs us to remember what we saw when we looked up.

Melbourne was returning to work when the competition winners were announced on a fresh sheet of cardboard. Traits were scribbled below the winning names to justify the choices. Elizabeth is 'timid' and 'likes being under the tree' while Gwendolin is a 'boss chook' and 'will eat out of your hand'. But neither knows they were my mascots for recovery.

# SUNDAY EVENING ON BELLBIRD STREET

Steph Amir

The local council implemented a cat curfew from dusk until dawn, commencing the first Sunday in October. At 6 Bellbird Street, Nala meows at the front door to no avail. Miffy pushes her paw against the cat flap but it is locked shut.

The cats convene in the lounge room to commiserate and plan. Tactic 1: pouncing on the cat flap. Tactic 2: patrolling the windows. Tactic 3: waiting in the hallway.

At 8:12pm the front door opens. Nala and Miffy run to their stations, only to be scooped up and squashed against a teenage body, their legs flailing in protest.

Tactic 4: caterwauling.

A tomcat prowls around their backyard. Nala glares through the window.

The third round of Window Patrol yields hope. Walking through rose-scented steam in the upstairs bathroom, a slither of dark sky is visible above the toilet. Miffy jumps onto the cistern but is blocked by a maidenhair fern. Nala jumps diagonally upwards, aiming for the shower rail which proves too narrow. She falls with a yowl onto the edge of the bath then flops onto the floor.

Miffy bolts from the room but emerges when she hears footsteps in the hall. Nala, wrapped in a blanket, is carried towards the car. Catching Miffy's eye, she winks.

The front door is wide open as keys, wallet and the cat carrier are found for the drive to the vet. Miffy pads silently through the doorway and slips into the inky night.



Dale had been dreading this day since his psychologist had handed him the list ten days earlier.

He'd always been wary of fire, but it got a whole lot worse after the Black Saturday bushfires: losing his home, his livestock, his brother. It was all too much.

He'd left Kinglake and rented a townhouse in Melbourne. A fresh start at 10 Bellbird Street. But a decade later, the smell of smoke still made him feel sick. He avoided campfires. Even the sight of a gas burner made him nervous.

Dale knew that most people cooked things every day, no worries. But for him it hadn't seemed worth the risk. He hadn't cooked anything for more than five years. He had cereal for breakfast, bought a pie or burger for lunch, and takeaway for dinner.

Then the panic attacks started, which led to the psychologist, which led to the list.

The list was for an Exposure Response Prevention program. In other words: doing everything he was terrified of.

Yesterday's task was to turn on the stove, then turn it off again. Today's is to leave it on long enough to fry an egg. He's been procrastinating all day.

It's now or never.

Dale wipes the dusty frying pan and cracks an egg into it. He turns on the stove. A red circle suddenly appears. He panics and turns it off.

Eventually he tries again, leaving it on longer. A wisp of smoke and a crackle emerges, sending Dale's heart pounding.

He quickly turns off the stove and sits on the kitchen floor, leaning against the cupboard door until he is able to breathe again.



Everyone's asking Molly and Nick when they'll get married. 'I can't wait to be a grandma,' said Nick's mum when she'd called him that morning. 'Can I be a bridesmaid?' asked Molly's sister the previous week. 'You two will make the cutest babies,' says Molly's friend Jess as the three of them sit on the veranda at number 15, watching the sunset.

Nick laughs awkwardly and looks at Molly who forces a smile. 'We're a bit busy for that right now, aren't we hon?' says Nick. 'We're off to Borneo next month to volunteer with the chimpanzees. And Molly's been flat out with the soccer club.'

Later that night they sit at opposite ends of the same couch, nominally watching *Survivor*. Nick downloads Grindr onto his phone and then deletes it. Molly thinks about how her personal trainer Jacqui leans against her whenever she does hamstring stretches.

Nick googles ‘am I gay?’ but the search results are inconclusive. Molly googles ‘how to know if you’re gay’, but then Nick looks up, so she googles ‘best green smoothies’. Saxon is evicted from the island. Molly says, ‘I knew it was a dumb move for him to piss off Tracey.’

Nick says, ‘The lease here is up soon. Dad reckons we should just buy our own place.’ Molly says, ‘Did you know that Jo and Derek have an open relationship now so she’s dating some guy who teaches people how to grow oyster mushrooms?’ Tracey hugs Saxon but doesn’t look sorry that he’s leaving.

During the ad break, a university promises a world of endless opportunities. Dancers in coloured jackets fade to the words ‘be true to you’. Beautiful people drink beer by the beach, staring out at the ocean from where you’d rather be.



Across the road, Sunita reads the instructions for a third time, attaches the needle, and carefully turns the dial. It had been three years since she bought the townhouse and at first, she loved living alone, but since turning thirty, her friends had all got married and here she was, still single. Not that she had much time for a relationship anyway, but she figures she might want kids one day and it was strategic to keep her options open.

So, she was harvesting her eggs, just in case.

She looks down and thinks about those tiny fragments of herself. Who will they become? What will they look like? Will they love her?

Sunita imagines herself as a mother, pushing a pram down the street or sitting on the floor with her baby at the library for Rhyme Time while her colleagues took on her clients’ projects. The thought makes her nervous.

Maybe she could find a husband who could be a stay-at-home Dad. Someone energetic and easy-going, like Nick from over the road. Sunita pictures small children with Nick’s dark curly hair and her own brown eyes. Maybe if Nick and Molly broke up ... No, she can’t think about that. She’s focussing on things within her control.

Sunita reads the instructions one more time and uncaps the needle. She takes a deep breath and plunges the steel into her abdomen.



At number 23, the lights are off in the front bedroom, until an elephant lamp is flicked on.

‘Muuuuum!’ Arlo yells. ‘There’s a monster under my bed!’

His mother finds the torch and diligently sweeps yellow light across the floor. Arlo stands beside her, watching carefully.

The monster scurries into the shadows.

‘See, there’s nothing there.’

‘But I saw her!’ Arlo protests. ‘She’s small and purple.’

‘You know monsters aren’t real, sweetie,’ says Arlo’s mother decisively. ‘Now back to bed, Mister.’

Arlo climbs onto the bed. When his mother leaves, he jumps off again and peers beneath the wooden slats.

A small purple creature peeks out from behind the leg of the bed.

‘Am I real?’ the monster whispers.

‘You’re real to me,’ Arlo replies.

He pulls back the covers, making room for the monster, who settles on his feet.

‘That’s what matters,’ the monster says, and soon they are both asleep.

# ROBOT

HAL 2.832

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# WEARING MY IDENTITY

Sanam Maner

I stand in front of the mirror, trying to twist and fold this piece of cloth graciously and elegantly on my head. It seems easy enough when she does it in the video, but it's that move with tucking it in at the nape of the neck that's taking the elegance right away. My arms ache, and I am so tempted to give this up altogether, but I really have been feeling driven to just wear the hijab out once. Just once. Just to see how it goes. I have really overthought this, I know. It's always the questions that make me pull the scarf off my head – will they stare, will people move away from me in the aisles at the supermarket, will they look at me like I can't speak or read, will they look at my partner like he's an oppressor. That last one amuses me really, and scares me the most.

But like I said, I have been really overthinking this. There are enough women out there proudly wearing the hijab with seemingly no questions running around their heads. Beautiful in their fearless expression of their belief. Not wondering if their identities and accomplishments will be hidden by the piece of cloth, as though it'll be the only thing about them that'll be heard or seen.

But I still hesitate. And this tricky tucking-in thing isn't helping. While something about food shortages plays on the news in the background, I think – sure I can wear it the way I do when I pray, but that's too obvious. Obvious as a hijab. I want to ease into it with something cool and edgy, something the models wear in those summer ads that are apparently 'chic'. Then it's just a scarf, and doesn't have to be this big beacon on my head.

But the tucking-in won't work. And my arms have given up. Maybe I'll try the usual way I wear it. I unwrap the scarf and wrap it in the familiar easy motions I've been used to since I can remember. I must say, it does keep the neck warm too. Maybe this will be a win-win.

'9 people injured ... attack ... US ... police' – I tense. As the words filter through from the TV, I wait to hear more. The scarf waits for my last familiar tuck at the ear. But I pause. *Gunman or terrorist?* The word they choose that'll make all the difference. I feel the familiar discomfort that knots me up at hearing news of attacks, the pain for the victims and their families coupled with the fear of the aftermath if the attacker is ...

'Lone gunman'. I hear the words that take away the self-preservation fear, leaving behind just pain and sadness. We watch the horror of an individual act of hate unfold on the screen, and pray for the ones lost.

And I pull off the scarf. I suddenly feel its weight on my head.

Maybe some other day.

# FIGS

## Gino Tomisich

Mr Dimopoulos' fig tree's branches, laden with fruit, hung over our back fence. We'd stand on an old apple crate to reach them. That was fun, under the shade of its leaves, stretching up and plucking a fig. No matter how hot the day the air always smelt sweet, fresh, and cool there. We'd pull down on a fig, the milky sap beading on the stem, and as our fingers became sticky, we'd peel it and bite into the luscious, red fruit while listening to the chickens clucking away on the other side of the fence.

Around the streets the other fruit trees had nets over them to stop the birds from feasting. I asked Mr Dimopoulos why he didn't use nets.

He said, 'Birds are hungry too.'

His chickens were never hungry. They'd have pellets, his table scraps, and occasionally ours that we'd throw over the fence as well as all figs that had fallen onto the ground.

'I have contented chickens,' he told me, 'so they lay happy eggs.'

We loved the happy eggs he gave us. Mum always commented on their yolks' colour.

The back fence had a gate cut into the palings – not a proper gate, just an access way between our yards. Mum said it'd been there when we shifted in. She said Mr Dimopoulos opened it up the second time he'd returned the ball we'd thrown over 'to make it easier'.

The third time the ball flew across into his yard my brothers Sam and Mitchell looked at me. Sam said, 'You go fetch it.'

I didn't want to. Finally, we all went but I had to go first with Sam and Mitchell behind me telling me to hurry up. It was fine for them, if anything happened, they'd be first back to the house, and I'd be last!

When I had enough courage, I pushed the paling gate back and stepped into Mr Dimopoulos' backyard. It wasn't like ours: We had a lot of grass, whereas his was full of plants in rows and in large tin containers. I took a couple

of steps in, hoping I could see the ball. Everything was green so finding our tennis ball wasn't going to be easy. I was about to go back when I was pushed further in by Sam and Mitchell.

'Can you see it?' Mitchell asked.

'No.'

'Where is it, then?'

'I don't know.'

'Look near the peas,' Mr Dimopoulos said, near the fig tree, working on what was going to become his new chicken coup.

We nearly ran, we'd got such a fright.

Mr Dimopoulos took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped sweat away from his eyes. 'Over there,' he repeated, 'near the peas.'

We looked from one end of his yard to the other.

'Come with me,' he said, 'I'll show you. Walk on the boards, your mama won't want you bringing dirt into her house.'

We nodded and followed him along the boards that acted like footpaths between the plots.

'These are peas,' he said.

We looked at the plants growing up long sticks.

'In there,' he said, pointing to the base of one of them.

'I can see it,' said Sam. He reached in and took the ball. 'Thank you, mister.'

'Dimopoulos,' he replied.

'Mr Dimi,' said Sam, struggling.

I thought Mitchell was going to whack him for being silly but 'Mr Dimi' was smiling. 'We promise not to do it again,' Mitchell said.

'Boys,' he said, 'don't make promises you can't keep. Your ball will find its own way here, no matter what you do. I want you to promise that when it does you will walk on the boards when you hunt for it.'

We looked at each other. 'We promise,' we said.

'Good. Now, I need someone to help me. Who is good at writing numbers?'

Mitchell put up his hand. 'I know up to my five times table.'

'Yes, I can use you. Who is good at tying and untying knots?'

I put up my hand, hoping the knots wouldn't be too hard.

'And you, little man,' he said to Sam, 'will help me carry some tools. While we go you,' he pointed to Mitchell and me, 'go wait near the fig tree. When we come back you tell me which came first, the chicken or the egg?'

Mitchell and I were still arguing over the answer when he came back with Sam, string, pegs, a tape measure and a pencil and paper. As he laid everything down Mitchell told him we hadn't worked out which came first yet. He said he didn't need to know the answer now and as long as we'd tell him either tomorrow or the day after it would be alright.

We went to work, putting pegs in the ground, tying string from one peg to the other with Sam holding one end of the tape measure while Mr Dimopoulos read off a number at the other end for Mitchell to jot down. We forgot our ball game.

While we were helping, Mrs Dimopoulos came out carrying a pitcher and four glasses.

'Alexis,' she called out, 'you boys want lemonade?'

Her accent was stronger than his, but we understood the word lemonade. When Mr Dimopoulos looked at us, we said, 'Yes, please.'

Mr Dimopoulos stood up. '*Kala*. Good. We deserve a rest.'

The lemonade was different than what we'd had before. It wasn't clear and fizzy; it was flat and white in colour. Sam, being youngest, didn't worry he just drank his. Mitchell and I looked at him to see if something were going to happen. It didn't. He held up his empty glass.

'You thirsty boy,' Mrs Dimopoulos said, refilling it.

Mitchell and I quickly drank ours then proffered our empty glasses.

Mrs Dimopoulos smiled at us as she poured.

Now, I have my own home with a garden and a fig tree in the backyard. The boys over the fence are just starting to kick the footy around. Sooner or later, it'll come flying over. I may put a gate in the fence.

# HUNTING CAT STALKS THE ISLAND OF THE DEAD

Dianne Millett

(For Hatpin)

*Did you kill it?  
I think you did.*

I saw a claw  
tapered and so very old  
noticed it  
from the corner of my I  
hiding in the unseen  
lying low –  
animal always knows  
when creature is watching.

And I saw it again  
nails over hanging the branches  
dead and stunted  
following their severing  
fingertips removed

sanded clean of prints  
to conceal a crime  
against the living  
and the one who refused to return  
to the place with too much choking dust  
and the boxes stacked with remains  
owned by the dead.  
Their eyes look back from frames  
still among the relics  
dry weeping.

Today, I plant this season's seeds.  
Water. Pull out the weeds.  
An inhabitant of another place.  
Not yours.

## VICTOR

Angela Costi

He uses the stick to feel the Earth's inner pulse  
if he falls, which is often, he will scream  
for his mother, who is with his wife  
there will be deathly silence while both ghosts hide

He counts each step like a complete year  
there are twenty-two from door to verandah  
sometimes twenty-six: those extra years he can't account for  
– are they pinned to the slouch hat under his bed?

The park bench kindly moved to his verandah  
and waits for him every morning, in complete servitude  
like Aladdin's carpet, it will whisk him over and above  
the house, the street, the nameless neighbours, the lonely letterbox

They are fearless, crossing oceans and the great wars  
finding the first of many all over again: the first pet  
the first job the first kiss the first hurt – he never cried  
back then, it wasn't allowed – now he feels it all as a child

Most days he remembers to make a sign of warmth  
to the woman who brings 'exotic food' and searches his eyes  
without words he gives her all the stories she needs  
she takes his flyaway hand, kissing it into silence.

# TAKING TO THE STREETS

Jen Martin

The first time I took to the streets to protest I was lucky to have an experienced protestor alongside me. It was 1970 and I had travelled to Sydney from country New South Wales to join the second Moratorium march against Australian involvement in the Vietnam War. I was 17. I'd been wearing my Moratorium badge under the lapel of my Country High School blazer. Our seriously 'old school' headmaster had threatened to expel anyone showing such a badge. It wasn't very brave of me! But I was sitting exams later in the year and I wanted to do well, to get a place at university. I loved my family and my home on the orchard, but I also wanted more than a country life.

Songs from the 60s rippled through the streets. The crowds watching were encouraged to 'join us' as we walked, 30 abreast. Twenty thousand of us, winding our way through Martin Place, up past the wonderful Sydney Art Gallery to The Domain. More singing, rousing speeches, with love and some anger too. Powerful, effective, peaceful protest. No violence. And – the troops came home. Protesting has been part of my life ever since.

Years later in Perth, I joined a small activist group. Our focus was injustice by the State Housing Commission towards Indigenous tenants. We were social welfare recipients and workers. We stood with placards – 'Stop Racist Evictions' – outside departmental offices. We distributed press statements and we had identified spokespersons, case studies and strategy. We were sometimes offered the opportunity to meet ministers and senior bureaucrats. On occasion, we secured a small win, a family was rehoused rather than made homeless.

It seemed for a while that protests which involved taking to the streets was a thing of the past. But who hasn't heard of Greta Thunberg? In 2018, aged 15, Greta sat silently for months, outside the Swedish Parliament, holding a placard reading simply (and in retrospect, profoundly) *School Strike for Climate*. Soon fellow students joined her, organised around Fridays for Future. Then, climate strikes by young people all over the world began. Soon, grandparents, teachers, children of the 60s, ordinary people joined in.

There is a new impetus for groups and individuals demanding action for a safe climate in Australia now. Justice Bromberg ruled in the Federal Court recently that the government has a 'duty of care'

to the young people of Australia. Minister for the Environment Sussan Ley is on notice that she has a responsibility to protect the environment, to stop the damage, to minimise the harm. Young (and the not so young) people aligned with groups such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) are emboldened by this ruling. XR is credited with influencing the UK Government to develop a strong commitment to action on climate change. When XR takes to the streets they do so with humour and theatricality, with stunts and drama. But now that lockdown seems so much part of our lives, we wonder, what is possible?

Country people aren't known for their activism, but the 'Lock the Gate' movement is a country version of 'taking to the streets'. Craig Reucassel's new film *Big Deal*, recently delivered into my inbox, unsolicited, rather like a pamphlet in a letterbox or a knock on the door, tells this story. The film depicts ordinary people living in rural communities around the Northern Rivers in New South Wales coming together, David like, to defy one of the Goliaths of the fossil fuel industry.

Local farmers and their families as well as key local businesses decided that the perils of fracking for coal seam gas in their very precious underground water outweighed the potential benefits to their community. Coordinated through intensive door knocking campaigns and public

meetings, the actions didn't come easily or naturally to people who had perhaps in the past dismissed city activists as ratbags and the like.

Companies undertaking such fracking were clearly caught by surprise. They had expected their generalised claims of 'jobs for local people' would have been enough. These companies are reliant on access to farming lands for their fracking activities and their employees need basic services – food and accommodation. But after much discussion, the country folk stood together. They effectively 'locked their gates' and denied access to farming land and to motel accommodation and to hospitality services for their employees. Enabling fracking would have destroyed or at least jeopardised access to safe drinking water for families, for crops and for livestock. There have since been similar successes elsewhere. Bright visionary yellow with the black, no nonsense 'Lock the Gate' signs now signal the entrance to many properties.

The only time my orchardist father came close to administering corporal punishment was the time he saw grey wispy smoke snaking up above our old chook-house. It had been my idea to liven up the hot, otherwise dull Saturday afternoon by lighting a small fire. I had never seen him so angry. I was only five at the time but I can't remember being so ashamed. It didn't happen again! Our small soldier settlement community in

south-western New South Wales was lucky – we were never threatened by a serious fire. But there were a couple of times every summer when Dad would fire up his old Bedford truck and head off with every other farmer, sometimes travelling miles, to fight a fire. Mum and the other women made sandwiches and a thermos of tea and then fretted until everyone was home safe. It's probably not an experience most city dwellers can relate to. The film *Fires* currently screening on the ABC does this. Brings into our homes the terrifying and very personal reality of the Australian bushfire season.

As lockdown grinds on we are all occupied on the internet, with podcasts and reading books too – to keep engaged and entertained. I found *Firestorm* by Greg Mullins (former Commissioner, Fire & Rescue NSW) compelling reading. Mullins led the formation of Emergency Leaders for Climate Action, a coalition of 34 former fire and emergency chiefs from throughout Australia who unsuccessfully tried to meet with Prime Minister Morrison to advise about the link between worldwide changing weather patterns and increasingly fierce bush fires. *Firestorm* calls for strong 'action on climate change', explaining precisely *how* climate change is super-charging extreme weather, bushfires and other

natural disasters, worldwide. Until I read this book, I hadn't properly understood this link.

Melbourne is officially the most locked down city in the world. But the desire for change and protest has not gone away. Behind closed doors creativity and planning and organising flourishes. People are finding new ways to connect with others, to inspire, to engage. Witness this week's *Saturday Paper* where John Hewson, former Federal Liberal leader, writes of the 'significant climate movement gaining momentum in a number of electorates' – with independent candidates standing – 'including the formerly safe Liberal held seat of Kooyong'.

Minister Sussan Ley's approval of a third new coal project in just one month, announced on Tuesday October 5, 'beggars belief' says Lock the Gate Alliance. Moreover, the International Climate Action Tracker's latest analysis downgraded Australia's overall rating to 'highly insufficient'.

We are in for the fight of our lives!

# MARKET MORNINGS

Jessica Carey

‘Hey, can you push the pram for a minute? My sunnies are fogging up again.’

My husband takes the reins as I pull my sunglasses off and stash them in my handbag. It’s a warm day. The sun is beating down on the Perspex canopies of the Preston Market. The air smells like fresh fish and jam doughnuts.

I look down at my son, barely a year old, and he gurgles happily. I push my sweaty hair off my face and look around. The market was a labyrinth when I visited a lifetime ago, with my Nonna. A strange and exciting bazaar, with something new around every corner. It seems so much smaller now that I’m the adult.

We walk past one of the fancy new coffee places, the one with the coloured Mexican skulls on their take away cups. My husband asks, ‘You want a tea?’ We’d had a sleepless night with a screaming baby, and I hadn’t had a chance for my morning cup.

‘Yeah, that’d be great,’ I say, tearing my eyes away from the tables of senior citizens, coffee and cannoli. ‘But not...’

‘... from here, I know,’ he smiles, pushing the pram towards the deli section.

I’ll begrudgingly admit that a little gentrification can be a good thing. This market isn’t going to survive if the younger generations aren’t interested in it. But damned if I’m buying my tea and biscotti from anywhere but Traditional Tasty Treats, purveyors of continental cakes and every delicious biscuit I ever ate as a kid.

I order a cappuccino, a babycino, a tea, and a bag full of fazzoletti – a shortbread biscuit with a spoonful of strawberry jam tucked in under the folds.

‘Grazie,’ I say to the lady as she hands over the brown paper bag.

‘Grazie a lei, signora.’

When I visited with Nonna, 30-odd years ago, the ladies behind the counter called me ‘signorina’. Little miss. Now, I am a signora. A ma’am, a woman. A twinge of loss hits me as I pass my son a biscuit. I remember all the little market coffee dates I had with Nonna over the years while I watch him gleefully smear strawberry jam all over his face.

Treats devoured and remains disposed of, we head to the Farinacci family’s deli. My husband takes a number, and Anthony waves hello from behind the counter. I survey the offerings, and have almost made up my mind when Pino summons me over.

‘Can I please get a small tub of the sliced black olives? And some of the mortadella?’

He smiles, nods, and gets to work.

A small plastic tub filled with glossy olives lands in front of me, and Pino’s hand swings under the counter to scoop up the slab of mortadella.

‘You want thick slice?’

‘No, thin slices, please,’ I say. I remember how Nonna used to order. ‘Taglia fino fino. Grazie.’

We continue our loop around the market, ticking items off our shopping list as we go. For the most part, all around me, life plays out the way it always has.

Old women with hunched backs and black stockings push their worn-out carts around. They hover over piles of apples, carefully assessing before committing to one. While the women shop, old men sit around the communal tables. They gesticulate wildly, yelling, laughing and brushing pastry crumbs off their unshaved faces.

The bright blue paint of the fresh meat and fish area is still set off by the huge, pink pigs heads hanging from the stall ceilings. The giant cardboard boxes full of Peter’s pizza are still hauled out to cars by the dozen. The rolls of patterned carpets still lean against the wall out the back, near the Aldi entrance.

I pause at the flower stall as the boys walk ahead – a bunch of peach-coloured tulips had caught my eye. The first time my husband ever bought me flowers, it was a bunch of peach-coloured tulips. They were Nonna’s favourites, too. I find \$15 in my wallet, mostly in coins, and wait for the lady in the apron to wrap them up.

I jog to catch up with my family, passing a window full of fresh cannoli and a bin overflowing with empty jam doughnut boxes. My husband is steering the pram with one hand and holding the shopping bags with the other. So much of the market is still the same, but knowing that Nonna is gone makes it all feel different.

‘You want me to put the flowers in one of the bags?’

I say, ‘No, thanks, I’ll carry them.’ I push another sweaty clump of hair off my forehead.

What I don’t say is, ‘This is the closest I can get to visiting the market with Nonna these days.’

# A HEIDELBERG PAINTING

Bridget Hiho

As I stroll through the park, I casually notice an elderly couple walking hand in hand along the pathway coming toward me from the opposite direction. Out of the corner of the old man's eye, I catch a glimpse of a smile as he glances my way. His clothes are woollen, and his beanie looks warm and covers most of his head. His back is curving slightly, visible signs of aging. The woman whose hand he holds onto looks very content to be by his side, she smiles broadly above her mask and her eyes dance kindly. I can't help but smile back, they make me feel warm like oozing caramel engulfing scooped ice-cream on a summer's day. The path is edged in gravel and the grass, a luscious green. A branch of a tree hangs over the waters edge making the scene quite like a Heidelberg painting. Mallard's skim across the water, occasionally ducking their heads below to retrieve that which lies beneath the rippled water's surface.

After my exercise within 10k, I make a beeline to High Street, Westgarth. Full cravings for an Iranian pistachio ice-cream. As I walk briskly towards the gelateria, the only ice creamery I know that stocks this flavour, I pass over the bridge that looks out onto the city in the distance. I watch the outline of the tall city buildings of Melbourne as I hurriedly quicken my walking pace towards my destination with the thoughts of the delicious ice-cream already oozing down my throat ... satisfying current desires.

# BIG SHOES TO FILL

Damon Chester

could you be my best friend?  
i'm kinda getting lonesome  
everyone i love is a city away

do you want to DM?  
let's have a gossip session  
meet up in the park  
or for brunch  
have a late-night swim  
and order-in  
if you're anything like Eileen

are you a thrift-shopper?  
i know a store down the river  
we could play some ball  
hit the courts  
stumble home in the morn  
no doubt  
i'd dunk on you like Ella

eggplant or okra?  
we can make some laksa  
boil the broth  
slurp it up  
at the table of your home  
where you surely grow  
tomatoes as tall as Angela

rather cook some curry?  
i got a recipe off of Jamee  
there's some clay out the back  
let's make mushrooms for our plants  
beaded bracelets and earrings  
i just can't craft with Zoey

tell me your anxieties  
i'll tell you all my secrets  
mix some drinks  
from The Riff  
watch tiktoks until this fog thins

*just don't tell me*

about your friends back home

# CROSS AT THE LIGHTS

Catherine Reidy

In Reservoir, cars are king. Carlton, where I'd been living before, was littered with zebra crossings and bike lanes, filled with cautious L-platers going 20 k's an hour preparing for their tests at the VicRoads office. Uni students streamed across the Grattan Street intersection with no regard for the traffic, and while the tram drivers angrily ding-dinged their bells, they inevitably gave way. But here, cars outnumber pedestrians ten to one. The wide backstreets are used as rat runs, hotted up Holdens now competing with late model SUVs. Drivers seem to take the stop signs as a suggestion rather than the law and they don't like waiting for walkers.

Make sure to always cross at the lights, my neurologist said recently, a veiled admission that nothing he prescribed was going to totally stop the seizures. I nodded, not telling him that the lights here didn't afford anybody much protection. There was nobody more than me who wanted to believe I could have safety in the world if only I just followed the rules.

I live in a body that betrays me, over and over again, no matter how careful I am. My brain cares not for rhythm or regularity, instead, it dances haphazardly to a tune I cannot hear. Like an endless and frustrating game of musical chairs, it stops and starts with no regard for what I might be trying to do at the time. Mid phone call, mid awkward flirt and yes, midway across a busy road. My hands go slack, my eyes glaze over and my speech garbles as a seizure takes hold in my brain. Sometimes, they are so brief that nobody will notice and I can cover it, laugh awkwardly, and resume an interrupted sentence. Other times, it takes my whole body away from me and it's like when you drop a glass – you watch it, knowing it will shatter and cause a mess, but there's never enough time to stop it falling.

For a period in my mid twenties I was considered stable enough to get my licence. It felt important, the card declaring: *I am an independent and responsible adult.* But getting behind the wheel feels like something for other people, people who trust that their bodies will always follow their commands. So while legally I can drive, I rarely do, limited by the terrifying what if, what if, what if ... ? The card sits nestled in my wallet and gets pulled out for the occasional ID check.

Generally, I don't mind. I like the train, the opportunity to rest and let my thoughts drift lazily as the stations come and go. Most of the line is elevated now, a consequence of politicians who know waiting at boom gates invokes a rage like no other in their harried constituents, and that promising to remove level crossings is an excellent campaign strategy. I miss the glimpses of front yards and streetscapes, traded now for rooftops and seemingly endless apartment blocks, lined up neatly and stacked upon each other like Lego blocks. Somewhere in the inner north streets below the high line is the house where I was born and lived as a young child, unaware of the story my body was waiting to tell, as my brain grew warped and tangled.

The voice-over lady announcing the stations makes me smile, the way she enunciates 'Res-a-vwahhh' in a way that nobody who actually lives in Reservoir ever would. The station is all hulking concrete and sharp angles, rising above the newly created intersection that spills traffic in five directions. I like looking down on the suburb from up here, taking in the endless movement of cars and people or, in recent times, the enforced stillness.

I traded Carlton for Rezza in the middle of the pandemic, craving space and the chance to live with other people after months of solitude in a one-bedroom flat. Now I am learning the layout of my new suburb as I roam the curving backstreets and tramp my way around unfamiliar green spaces. Most days I wander towards the Darebin Creek, following it as it narrows and widens and narrows again, flowing through the parklands that stretch out behind rows of houses.

On one of these walks, my brain decides that now – yes, right this second – is a good time for an electric misfire. My body jerks and spins out beneath me, disconnected from time, before it hits soggy grass and a crumble of curling gum leaves. There are no witnesses to my fall other than a couple of magpies, who eye me wearily as I push my hands into the earth, sit up, and wait out the wave of dizziness before rising again. I walk carefully and slowly along the creek, winding my way up to the street, nodding at the occasional person coming the other way.

Eventually, I reach Broadway, cross it – at the lights, of course – and let my body take me home.

# WIND, RAIN AND 2 HUGS

Sandy Caldow

Let the sky rain 23 potatoes.  
Let 105 men and women strut and yell.  
Do you love 121 pictures?  
Golden opinions, a fine wag and a witty outcast  
beguile 122 folks.  
77 pansies shiver and look.  
Stars sing nightly, 80 play up.

407 poor and content people are rich,  
16 feed upon perfection,  
strange shadows in every shape.  
307 resolve to meet perils.  
I hang my head as 242 perish.  
Shall I lay perpendicular my soul?  
Can I make sense of 306 Philosophers?

Every third thought is ours, insist on it.  
Fortune joins nature, holds up a mirror  
and makes 162 visions of special places,  
where 417 torments end, with  
a gentle lily, four red roses and anger alone.  
Adding half a mile to 59,  
Sorrow strove up 300 stairs.  
Five red plants help, hope and cure.

I've heard of your 51 paintings  
with paint two inches thick.  
Jest is not always laughable.  
No more of that, where there's no pleasure.  
Dark December rains, two rainbows,  
wind, rain and 2 hugs. Night's yawning  
blows earth and 83 sea birds,  
and another brave day dies at dark.

# BEARDED LADY

SV Plitt

Looks are currency  
But what do they buy?  
I get to save face  
Save my face with pulsed dye laser  
A DIY insurance policy for the middle-aged  
I might run for prime minister  
I will have the deciding advantage  
over others with the same skills but less collagen

That's how we roll in our wild-west culture  
War paint comes in soft pastel colours  
Battles are won tastefully, without powdered foundation  
Liquid only after forty  
Powder reveals peach fuzz  
As cute as they sound,  
those fine blonde hairs are painful weeds to yank out  
Torture with twisting cotton threads

Do I look well?  
You look well people tell me  
It's called a game face  
Put your face on  
An old showbiz trick  
Your intestines might rattle like a cobra  
but with pink organic lipstick  
and vegan mascara  
and 50+ tinted BB cream hiding your melasma  
you won't get bitten by a snake  
Those one-eyed snakes  
They bite

Cohen said there is a crack in everything,  
that's how the light gets in  
I HAVE A GIANT CRACK  
I'm cracking up  
You crack me up

Don't worry I used to work in a psych ward  
I was there  
I'm pretty sure  
It was a disaster  
I'm too old for this  
How do I know?

Dew gathers on my peach fuzz  
as I stand alone in the cold light of dawn  
Sunbeams set alight my beard of diamonds  
A moustache of diamantes twinkle on my upper lip  
Diamonds or diamantes?  
Money is the root of all evil  
A necessary evil  
A disaster

I could rip out the fuzz  
The lady twisting the cotton threads  
only charges eighteen dollars for her torture  
Beauty is pain, a stripper once said  
Who wants mutton dressed as lamb?  
Stick your feet in those stilettos and get spinning

My shoes are too small  
I'm clicking the heels but can't get home  
Home is where the heart is  
Mine is a thunderstorm  
A disaster

Just keep spinning she said

Spin those cotton threads

No

I want to love the glittering beard  
My beard of diamonds or diamantes  
I'll keep the peach fuzz

A wise teacher once said  
The old have no gender  
They are genderless  
That is why I wear my beard now  
That is why I have a beard

# GNOCCHI ALLA SUCCO DI LIMETTA

Zelda Harper-Balsamo

## Gnocchi with lime juice

Pasta is the food of the family. To this day, making pasta from scratch with only a single pair of hands is exceedingly difficult. The more hands on deck, the better. Without teamwork, food didn't get to the table. This is why Italian families are often close-knit.

Ever since potatoes were introduced to Italy, the following method of making gnocchi has almost taken over entirely from the ancient flour-and-water method. This recipe is not traditional Italian, but a recipe of my own making. It was never made with or for anyone therefore making it the most useless recipe to be written on paper. It is so simple that it didn't need to be written down and should adapt to the day, your emotions, and available ingredients. For the large part it's imperfect, as cooking is an imperfect science. Change it to whatever the stomach desires.

### Ingredients

Salt, potatoes, water, flour

Passata, meat (ham, salami, whatever your fancy), whole lime, wine (Optional) Parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme, oregano, chilli

### Method

Boil potatoes in plenty of boiling salted water until tender. Meanwhile, in a separate pan, fry meat until cooked or crispy, then turn down the heat and cook the garlic. Add passata before the garlic burns. Add salt, parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme, and oregano to taste (you can have none or all of these).

Splash of wine, juice and zest of lime and let simmer until reduced.

Drain, peel and mash potatoes and let cool until pleasant to handle. Add equal amounts of flour. Adding extra is necessary with a generous pinch of salt. Knead until mixture is a soft dough (it should not be sticky, but the bench will be). Roll dough into a thin rope no thicker than your thumb and cut into small medallions. This process takes a while depending on how many you are making for. For me, who has always cooked alone and by myself, it only takes one person and five minutes to roll out all the small gnocchi. For two, three, a family, an extended family, the hands would need to correspond with the eaters.

Roll medallions into balls and boil in salted water until they all float to the top. Drain gnocchi and add to saucepan and toss quickly. Serve with parmigiano.

See? Simple. Uncomplicated and tasty. But it is such an understatement for what food means to us every day.

In hunter and gatherer days, there was a line between what was hunted and what was gathered. While the hunt was celebrated, no one particularly remembered what the meat's fate was after death, and what was gathered was never celebrated at all. Similarly, the delicate art of cookery, written off until a famous chef makes a homage to his/her mother's or wife's or daughter's recipe while forgetting the original intention of the act itself. You see, the food on TV and in restaurants is for the most part thrown away and never given the chance to fulfil its purpose.

And the purpose of food is to feed.

Food in the first world is convenient. It is frozen, reheatable, and time saving. Taste has become famous, formulaic and consumable, like celebrity drama or the true crime of a woman walking home alone at night. The art of cooking has turned from quiet achiever to loud and glossy. This transformation is not necessarily bad nor good, but different, and profoundly odd. As time goes on, we forget that cooking is more than two hands and a machine. It is all five of the senses exercised in domestic ritual. We forget those who confined themselves to the kitchen to perfect it. Forgotten what the air tastes like when there is garlic and sugar in the wind.

Essentially, it is strange how food, a necessity for all living things, entwines with human constructs such as family or fame. How it became gendered and then industrialised and that strange point between prompt and product in an ever more digitised world. Food has become so much more than simple sustenance. The shelter that we call our homes is where we store food, where we want to keep it as close as possible. Where we want food to be conveniently at our fingertips in all the colours we can see and those we can feel to create what is not strictly necessary but is a craving that rivals that of homesickness.

Cooking isn't home, but it can be for some.

Home smells like acids. No, not whatever you're thinking right now. Stop it. Home smells like acrid wine and yellow pages. Of olive oil and cancer. It smells like lemon bread and steamed fish, chilli, flour, egg. It smells salty, tastes like salted smoke. Home smells yellow. Beer battered joyous anxiety. It's not a place nor a person. It is a sense. It's a colour. The texture of cold desire. The taste of a handcuffed tongue. Looks of 40 wire. Sounds like marbles on a cheese grater. Of the smoker drinking cavity. Home feels like iced steel hands the size of a flayed heart on the stove.

And here I am reducing cooking to words. Enjoy!

# PEOPLE CAN ONLY SWIM FORWARDS

Alexander Langsam

I watch waves chip paint off my dinghy. I watch flecks of enamel float on the water. I watch my reflection. Out here, atop the ocean, I have a lot of time to think.

I'm hunting a shark. One of them crept into the bay about a month back. She staked out the territory, and now thinks it's hers. The butcher's kid was first to spot her. Little redhead boy. He was out on an evening swim. Went further than he should've. Ducked his head under the water and saw a flash of grey hide. Beelined back to the shore, mouth wide open, trying to scream, but with nothing coming out. Went into shock, the poor kid.

We've seen her a few times since then. Government won't do nothing about it. 'Shark hasn't killed anyone yet,' they say. Just wait, we. But this means fixing it has been left to us.

That's why I'm out here tonight. Watching the waves. Sitting under a moon that's just about exploding onto the ocean. The night is a black purple; dark, shimmering, but with a hint of some royal kind of colour. The paint on my sad old boat keeps peeling off into the ocean. Something sad and lonely comes over me; wanting to busy my mind, I open a beer. Fzzt. It froths against my cold hands. I check the bait-line, fitted to a hunk of the butcher's cheapest cuts. Nothing yet. I take my first sip of the new beer and stare at my gun. For whatever reason, I think of Emma.

I never liked her at school. Funny how that happens. For years fate brought us together: we'd see each other accidentally, at parties, at the shops, that kind of thing. But no warm feelings. And then out of nowhere, on a surf trip with some friends, I realised I fancied her. We'd been talking at a party the week

before, not about anything really, but I found myself reliving the memory, playing it again and again. I wished I was with her instead of my friends, those same-old people I knew too well. She had become a different person. Not the irritating, awkward girl of my school years, but a woman for whom I felt love. Like waking up from a dream, the prejudices and assumptions of an old me tossed aside, the windshield scraped clean.

She never said please or thank you. That was what first grated me once I properly got to know her. She wasn't necessarily impolite. She just didn't have those words in her vocab. I think I realised about a year into our relationship. Again, the windshield was wiped clean, and her complete lack of manners became all I saw.

I'm getting cold waiting for this shark. I take a sip of beer and try to imagine what Emma's up to. Would she pick up my call? No, probably not; we didn't end well. Still, I want her to know how I feel. I think about my friend Jacques, and my brother Vinnie. On a lonely night like this, I want to let them all know how I feel. But they'd just be suspicious; they'd miss the point. Emma would think I want sex. Jacques would want to set up a night out. Vinnie would reckon I'm trying to score some easy money off him. Maybe they'd be right. It's funny, you always think you have the best intentions, and then later – maybe years later – you look back and realise just how selfish you were being. The more time passes, the less free will it seems like you ever had. Sometimes I find it hard not to feel like I was just a rat in a maze. But still, in the present you're good at kidding yourself that you aren't. That your actions have no context. That you are deciding things honestly, independently. With good intention.

That thought calls for a long sip. Long enough to finish the beer. Time for another can. Still no shark.

Despite the drinking, my feeling remains. That lonely sadness, that wishing to check in on my loved ones. I'm overcome with an urge to talk to them, to assure each one that I love them. But no words would do this feeling justice. Words would poison it. I'd try to express love or gratitude or whatever, and the words would turn those expressions into cold stone. That's the way it always is. But I feel so much sometimes, and it hurts not to be able to tell it all. That there's something inside me no one will ever see. They'll just see me. They won't see the burning, the beauty underneath.

Still no shark.

My hands are freezing. The bones hurt. The government ought to be doing this. Save me sitting out here, for no reason, wasting all this time thinking. The government's incompetent. People have better things to do than wasting their nights hunting shark. Maybe I should talk to someone about this, figure out some way to get the government to do more boring work like this. I get so angry sometimes. Other people go through life scot-free. Emma never liked my complaining. 'Always blaming the government,' she'd say. 'Looking for bad guys.' Well, look who's out here spending the night hunting shark. Not her, and certainly not the government.

There's a thunderclap. Damn. It wasn't meant to rain tonight. White lightning tears through the sky. A minute later there's more thunder. I stare straight up at the sky above me, expecting rain. But it never comes. The hairs on my neck tingle. My hands shake. I can't take my eyes off the sky. My gaze is trapped.

# AM

## Jamie Kemp

For a second, I think I'm staring at God. The sky defeats me with its greatness. I am it, and it is me, and I see my life for what it truly is. Then a wave smacks the boat into the air and I fall into the water.

Green ocean burns my eyes; I try to swim but can't. I'm frozen in place. It's the sky – that infinite beauty – it has paralysed me. I sink further into the freezing sea.

I see a flash of grey flesh.

Dead black eyes swim beside my falling body. A heavy tail beats against my legs, tossing me sideways. I pray to the sky, pray for it to spare my life. But it won't, and I realise a beautiful, sad truth. That right now I am living a powerful, dramatic moment. That my soul is experiencing something special – a terrible fear, but also a great profundity. I realise that there will never be anything quite so commanding as that sky and nothing as visceral or real as the terror in my body. And that this is the most beautiful thing in the world, something I wish I could communicate to everyone I've ever known. But I also realise that by tomorrow this feeling will have faded, and the beautiful, sad truth will instead be that a man on the news was eaten by a shark.

It swims by me again. I feel I know her as well as my own brother.

I bought an old handheld radio from the tender centre back home.

So far, it has sat in the backseat of the car only to shuffle around amongst a swag and an assortment of camping gear. Survival stuff that's amassed with an increase in uncertainty and dread.

Tiny screwdrivers, a cavernous deposit of Bic lighters, sleeping bags, a flashlight, lockpicking set, bedding, and a copy of Cyndi Lauper's *She's So Unusual* on CD. I've got it all.

I only just got around to fitting the radio with a 9-volt battery though. It's a battered old thing. Only works on the AM setting and the headphone input is rusted out. The unit is the kind of grey colour that nearly all 90s electronics seemed to be, and it sports a healthy patch of spilt white paint on the plastic screen that shows the tuning gauge. Looking at it, I feel transported to the death of last century.

I'm sitting on a step ladder watching a couple paint the kitchen of their first home. A round-bellied man with hairy hands spends his break propped up by a skip bin, eating a devon sandwich with tomato sauce. I'm lying on the swag rolled out along my car's back seat while the sky sweats off the day's heat. Delicately tweaking the frequency knob, I'm transported to you.

It's weird saying 'you' these days. It almost feels as if, in my world, you are more me than you. Like you live on through others but are painfully split into endless versions of yourself and stretched into whatever shape our memories, perceptions, and moods agree upon at the time. Denied all right of response ... But, whatever. We're together anyway.

We're playing the same game with the tuning knob of the radio your mum brought in. The one with a cardboard housing so that they'd let us keep it without fear of anyone beating, cutting, or strangling themselves with it. It seems appropriate, being where we are, for the commotion to be audible from the nurse station down the hall. A disgruntled choir of mumbles over the sound of sweeping static intercut with music and voices of all moods. Upset that we couldn't get Smooth FM, we settled on white noise.

The rain has stopped. I can open the car door to let in the fresh air and radiation. Jagger is wailing '*... you make a grown man cry!*'

I've been back to the place we met once since I heard the news. The radio is still there but has lost its antenna and functionality. I tried to keep it alive by decorating it with textas of the whole Bic lighter rainbow.

I don't know if we would have ever met or spoke again, but I'll scribble down some words that I sometimes worry I'm not entitled to: I miss you.

# THE PASSPORT

Monica Sestito

In the passport photo, the one she would have shown the authorities as soon as the boat reached Port Melbourne pier, a newborn enveloped in her arms and a defiant 6-year-old wrestled free of them, she shows no trace of fear. Her gaze is steadfast, and evinces the kind of gravitas that only comes to those who have left much behind, gambling upon the promise that much gain lies elsewhere. Hers is a throw of the dice cast across continents, languages, and generations, whose fruits she knows she will not live to savour – this is, at least, how I like to imagine it. As if there is some narrative arc conjoining her life to mine. As if the lives of my cousins and my sister already linger on the horizon that welcomes her as she disembarks, and she sees us more clearly than she does her husband, lost, as he is, in the sea of new arrivals here to acclimatise the newer ones.

The passport, which my dad plucks from the obscurity of a desk drawer harbouring the defunct identity documents of his deceased parents, shows a woman and two children, but the details inscribed on it only belong to the woman. Either the children are too young to count – to be counted and accountable – in the eyes of the state, or the woman's identity is inseparable from them. What does it matter? The photo was probably taken before she left, the final obligation of a state towards citizens who had no stake in national affairs, apart from its wars and chronic poverty of which they were the main recipients. Even so, the passport enshrines a national identity, a name, an age, written in a shaky scrawl. Stamped in thick, block letters at the bottom, no doubt by some public servant tasked with the honour, is a single word: ALIEN.

My dad does not stumble upon the passport by chance. He searches for it. He searches for it because he now needs to prove to the state that his parents had to abandon that his bloodlines trace back there, that this blood runs through his daughters, and that it will run through their children, like an interminable river flowing from an unknown, unmapped mountain whose existence

must be presumed, or else the entire nationalist geography would implode. There is a great irony in all this, my dad says, recalling that his dad disdained patriotism just as much as he did the village priest and his fellow compatriots who viewed their displacement as a pretext to recreate their village life, in all its reactionary glory. He was anarchic at heart, he says. This much, I had already gleaned. I think of the pocket dictionary belonging to my grandfather, a precious heirloom bestowed upon me by my dad. On the title page, a flurry of fat letters issues a strange command: DON'T TRUST THE EXPERTS. We laugh about this, my dad and I. When the smiles subside, and just before the sweet reminiscences are soured by the realisation of irredeemable loss, I say: thanks for finding it. I want to claim citizenship by descent.

ALIEN, the passport declared. Alien they would remain. Alien upon arrival and upon departure. Alien after 50 years of life and labour under a scorching sun. They never really learnt English. They had no need or desire. Work was found without it, assembling cars at Ford or plucking salad leaves from garbage in ethnic restaurants where any *body* would do. English was the prerogative of Australians, something that they, evidently, were not. Here and there, a little English exited their mouths, but it never crossed their minds. It must have sounded to them like a dull, laconic language, well suited to a populace for whom manifest violence, though ubiquitous, ought to be discursively disguised. We developed our own language of interaction, my grandparents and I: smiles, tears, gestures. Even this, though, withered with the encroachment of old age. When the dementia took hold and my grandmother could no longer lift up her hands to bless, blaspheme, or reproach, only the dialect remained. It poured out of her in whispers that spoke of the headless chickens and squealing pigs violating her drug-induced dreams. She went back, in other words, to the village that she had never really left.

You find an object, misplaced or forgotten. Then, you are awash with the torrent of memories it triggers. This is what happens with the passport. The passport

becomes the boat trip, the boat trip becomes the arrival, the arrival becomes the reunion, the reunion becomes resettlement, resettlement becomes integration. The line ends. It just stops, like the places you no longer visit, the stories that aren't told, the languages that aren't spoken. But the memories persist. Relics wash up on history's shores, and waves softly recede into oblivion. Gone.

From the drawer in which the passport languishes, mute to history, my dad plucks another document: his naturalisation certificate. Romolo he was born, Raymond he became. With the seamlessness of a signature, the anglicisation was sealed. The rest is wrought over time. Scarcity becomes frugality. Desperation becomes pride. Indifference becomes identity. Daughters speak standardised languages shorn of dialectal accents. Regional recipes saturate hardback cookbooks.

Ethnic enclaves become monuments to the Australian dream, and not – heaven forbid – relics of the White Australia policy and its vicissitudes. We are in the study of my parents' house, my dad and I. We are in the study reading these documents, and already this is a sign of success, because to have a study means you have been educated – something which my grandparents, at least in any institutional sense, were not. I look out at the backyard and at its sprawling grass lawn, which would have once been a bounty of arable land, but now offers idle refuge. I look at my dad and simply ask: will I need your naturalisation certificate for my passport?

My dad needs to reclaim his passport, so I can claim mine. Having never learnt to move at the pace of the seasons, growing and dwindling as summer warmth attenuates, autumn leaves tumble, and winter frost congeals, leaving only cabbage and potato for food, I am impatient. I ask him: when will you book your appointment with the consulate? How long will it take? How come? As if we were in the village, many decades ago, and not in this study, in this suburban street where neighbours grow flowers to beautify their front yard, in a country where integration often entails embourgeoisement, my dad responds: *tranquilla!* The pig is still on the mountain, and you've put the pot to boil.

# YOUR EX-GIRLFRIEND

## Tallulah McKenzie

I fell in love with your ex-girlfriend  
while hate stalking her on the internet, wishing I was her  
she rides a motorbike  
which is the most sensual mode of transport  
if only I rode a motorbike  
& I have to remind myself I do,  
I do ride motorbikes  
I just don't have one on me right now  
I'd like to fuck your ex-girlfriend on her motorbike  
like a Kanye music video  
Kanye who you bring up almost as often as  
her

scrolling through her photos I think about  
how I want you to want me, like you wanted her  
but maybe I just want her  
God her hair is like fine Italian pasta  
and I want to consume her as she smiles  
at nothing on our balcony  
she doesn't come here now because you left her  
or she left you  
I've never thought it my place to ask  
how you let all that woman slip away  
it's an enigma  
we're both out of your league to be honest

the bisexual agenda plants the image  
of you watching us together (her & I)  
our skin sliding against each other  
two tiny frames whispering our unusual names to each other  
in the kitchen or your gloomy grey bedroom  
yet you fade with every kiss and suddenly you're not in the room anymore  
it's just her & I & her & I & her &  
I don't know where one of us stops and the other one starts  
and you might wanna wash your kmart sheets in the morning

I've been re-reading her texts to me from March  
like coded love letters I left on read  
from a time when I felt closer to her than you  
because I hated you then & probably still do  
    'hey happy birthday hope you had a nice day'  
    'are you home right now, I know he's not around but i'm gonna stop by'  
groping at the fantasy that she secretly wanted me too  
but I did that with you  
and look how that turned out

she's a better musician than you  
and probably doesn't yell at homeless people  
and smiles like she's the fucking sun in a way that makes me ache for her  
I lean on the thought of how all her soft curves  
would provide a striking relief to your hard edges  
and I hate the way I'm objectifying her profile picture  
like a white man painting a French woman nude  
but I must be gentle with myself  
for this is my grieving process  
the only way to swallow the absence of you

# CONSTANT COMPANION

Alida Galati

Stomping feet. Pounding fists. Head shaking from side to side. Yet not a sound is uttered. I am ever silent. You, though, are distressed, inconsolable. Expectations will not be met.

For me, too, days like this are awful. My sense of self is completely annihilated. I am nowhere to be seen.

The pale grey above is all consuming. Nuances of light and dark shades overlap. All of them depriving me of life. And you of joy.

You can't see me, but I am with you nonetheless.

Following you as you go about your day. Inside, where the hours take longer to pass. Normally, outdoor activities consume our time in a flash. Digging in the sandpit, tending to the veggie patch, walking to the shops, and the best – playing at the park where all your friends gather in the afternoon. We're all there too. Merging.

But not today. The forecast is rain, even storms. The wind and the clouds are building. There won't be any outings today.



A new day. Hooray! The blinds are open and already I'm alive! Invisibility has lifted and things can only get better for the both of us. Spirits are raised – all because of the sun. Even the weakest ray of sunshine will bring me to life, but days like this – with clear blue skies – life is lived in full force. Off we go!

I start off behind. It's still early morning, so I'm long and flat. Longer than you are in real life.

As the day progresses, I slowly match you. Our feet indistinguishable. Only the tips of shoelaces visible. But then I move to the side and in front, long again, as the day draws to an end.

So much has happened in between. Walking, running, climbing. Sitting still. Waving, throwing, clapping. Holding hands. We are forever connected. Our borders may be obscured at times, tangled with others, but I am uniquely yours.

My profile changes depending on your clothing, your footwear, your headgear. Are you nodding; is that a cricket bat you're carrying; a feather you've picked up?

Colour doesn't matter, I am always a shade of black.

I have no voice, I do not breathe; yet I am full of action, animated because of you.



'Chalk stories' is your favourite game. You love to play it with Mum. Outline me. On the driveway and on the footpath, see how I change through the course of the day, doing different things. And then tell the story behind each outline. Or ask Mum to make up a new, pretend story. And when Lili from next door arrives, she can try to guess the story. Or tell her own. So many stories to listen to!



Looking back, the day of the discovery was no different to other sunny days. We were looking forward to an afternoon game of chalk stories with Mum, but before that you had kinder in the morning, and then we had to do the shopping. But that day, after lunch, Mum said it was still too hot to go outside, and said we had to wait a bit longer. You weren't happy – you'd already had to wait *sooo* long. She said shouting and stomping wasn't going to hurry things up and that you'd just have to *be patient*.

She set up some colouring-in books and your pencils on the kitchen table to help pass the time ... but you'd done enough colouring at kinder.

She grabbed some of your books and guided you to sit on the couch ... but you didn't want to look at old books, you wanted new stories. Now.

She pulled the box of blocks out onto the rug, turned on the TV, picked you up from the couch – grabbed you under your armpits – and plonked you down on the floor ... but you just weren't interested.

You yelled. You stood. You turned away.



As you ran down the hallway and slammed through the back door, you felt powerful. In charge. But once you were outside you had nowhere to go. You sat in the sandpit, leaned against the fence and cried. You kicked at the sand and even threw some around. After a while, the tears stopped but you were still sad and mad.

But then something caught your attention. *What was that?* Standing and stepping out of the sandpit, you looked up. The leaves were moving on the tall trees overhead and you could hear their gentle rustle ... and then, there it was again. Flying out from the tree. A bird! What's caught your attention though isn't the actual bird, but what was beneath it as it flew over. Its shadow! And now, looking around, you can see that there are lots of shadows

everywhere in the backyard. Why didn't you know this? You thought they only appeared at the front of the house, on the driveway, at the park. And then, the realisation hits. Spreading your arms out to the side and flapping them up and down you see that I'm with you too. Your constant companion.

Your day now changes. You don't need Mum to play chalk stories, you can do it yourself, here in the backyard with all these different objects. You could even bring things from inside outside!

But first you need the chalk. You know it's in the laundry, in the cupboard under the sink, so you quietly tiptoe inside to get it. You don't want Mum to hear you and spoil this adventure. You're still mad at her.

Next, you get the wooden trolley from your bedroom and place as many of your soft toy friends as you can fit, and slowly, quietly, push it towards the back door. Mum hasn't heard a thing, she's too busy talking on the phone.



Oh, what fun you've had! Outlining, drawing and colouring-in. And your friends have all enjoyed new adventures after travelling to the backyard too. You've even managed to trace around parts of me. My fingers, my arms. I'm a bit bumpy and wiggly looking – but no matter. You did it all by yourself – exploring, discovering, and creating new shapes. Most exciting of all though, with all of these new shapes, you made up lots of new stories.

Later in the day, when I'm stretched out long, Mum appears. Carrying a snack and looking around as she walks towards you, she has a big smile on her face, 'Are they your arms and hands I see drawn there? What's their story? Tell me all about it.'

You have forgotten you were ever grumpy with her and start chattering away, stepping, hopping and jumping between drawings. You run to one right back near the fence and call out, excitedly, 'Mum! Come here! Look at this one!'

As you wave at her and point to the ground, you see me again, moving with your actions. You smile at me, and though you can't see it reflected, you know I can see it. I am you, and you are me. Forever, together, in the sunlight.

# MOTHER AND CHILD

Peter Matthews

It's all in the bend of her arm

she crooks, softens

finds cleft and curve

aligns bone with bone

breath with breath

curls to attend

in the centre of the world that is

her day and night and night and day

to milk breath, living scent

and the gentle weight of limbs

as slumber descends

cocooned

from the dig of seat slats into her back

the cool rough of concrete beneath her feet

the passing footsteps beyond the gate

# ONE NIGHT IN CHILOÉ

Oswaldo Quintanilla

The island sits off the coast of Chile. It's my first visit and I'm looking for what my uncle described as the true spirit of the island. Inhabited by fishing boats, folk songs, breaking waves, abundant seafood, wood fires, frail churches, jumbled houses, and its fiercely loyal people, the Chilotes. My uncle had often spoken of these things. But they were his memories of the place. Chiloé was like a mystery I could never solve.

Nights here arrive like fallen earth and the ocean grumbles in the dark. I walk the town's grey streets while a chill air stirs. I head toward the centre of town. I want to see for myself what my uncle spoke of. It is evening and I walk the empty streets looking out for the locals. They are behind latched doors. Comforting smells of ash and cooking permeate the air and I long for the warmth of their homes. The smell takes me back to a childhood memory at my uncle's home far from the island. I am five years old; his wife pulls a tray of fresh-baked bread from a mud-brick oven.

The road glistens from a recent burst of rain. I turn a corner, where a blind beggar stands by a shop front. He is singing a folk song; one hand taps his cane to the rhythm, his other hand holds a tin cup. I drop in loose change. He nods, his singing remains unchanged, his voice frail and I can just make out his local accent. He sings of loss, or something forgotten in time; maybe both. I keep walking toward the town plaza, hoping to find an open store. When I see concrete stairs I divert my path, curious to see where they lead. I stop halfway down the narrow stairs, between two houses – one painted bright blue, the other red. Far below, beyond the end of the stairs, I catch a glimpse of the sea – black like tar. I don't need to venture there tonight. It is enough to know the sea is out there.

The town's name is Castro, located on the edge of the island of Chiloé. Beyond it, nothing but a wild, great sea. Rows of houses hug the shoreline, perched like

birdhouses over water. To live off the sea takes on a literal meaning here. Tethered boats bob gently on the water awaiting their owners. Not far away I imagine the fishermen and their wives in woollen sweaters, their muddy boots by the door, having conversations in wood-panelled rooms. I sense lives in motion. Is this the real Chiloé?

It's getting late and I decide to head back to my hostel for much-needed warmth. As I walk back to the main street, I see a dog slink away from me. It ducks into a shadow and then it's gone. I decide to take a long way and I arrive at the plaza. I'm surprised to see people here. Two women walk at a leisurely pace on their way somewhere. A teenage boy and girl sit on a bench, embracing beneath grey trees. They interlock arms and whisper lovers' words as they stare up at a black sky. There are no stars for them to admire tonight.

A song rises from somewhere, kindling my last breath of enthusiasm to uncover. It's not the blind beggar's song. I walk to a tavern facing the plaza. The music grows louder, swelling with the sounds of an accordion, a guitar, and the eager voices of drunken men. I stand outside the window, listening to these hard-worn voices. Songs about love and grief are bellowed out in waves of varying volume.

When I peer inside the tavern's narrow room, I see the crowd of men and women. Standing, sitting on chairs, perched on tables, pushed against the walls, arm in arm, they fill the small room. The source of the music is coming from one corner, at the end of the bar. A guitar player stands on a crate. A skinny man with long jet-black hair. His fingers pluck and strum the strings in a frenzy as he sings. Both musicians are surrounded by what can only be described as a cohort of men and women joining in to sing with all their drunken energy. Almost drowned out by the people around them, the musicians continue.

I hesitate in the doorway watching this spectacle. Unsure, I'm about to take a step back outside when a hand reaches from the crowd and pulls me in. I find myself inside a group of strangers. Beer and wine smells fill the air. Men and women push and shove against me but they are oblivious to my presence. I look around to see where the owner of this hand is. There's a tap on my shoulder and I look

to the right, past a bearded white-haired man. A smiling face of a woman about my mum's age nods and gestures with her hand to stay put. I feel reassured. I smile and nod a 'thank you' and continue to listen.

The music reaches a crescendo, the singer strums with renewed ferocity. He belts out the final chorus, while the crowd sings in unison. The song ends in an abrupt flourish of the guitarist's hand and roars and yells rise up for another one. More shouts and laughter while the musicians take a breath. I decide this is my moment to reach the bar. I push past a group of young men shouting for more music, their fists punching toward the ceiling. I order my drink (a local Cerveza).

I see the accordion player start up again. Like winding up, he starts slow and builds his melody. The singer starts anew and there is a ripple of applause. An old woman nods in affirmation in front of me. Everyone has been waiting for this song and the singing is louder than before. Every person in the room knows the lyrics. Of course, I don't know it and I return with my drink to the same spot. The man with the white beard sees me, wraps an arm around me while singing. I attempt to sing with him. There are more songs. More laughter and jostling for room. Dancing erupts and fades with varying melodies. And I have sung about loss and desire. Joined in renditions of lovers abandoned in small towns. The whole night one asks where I'm from. It is of no consequence.

When I finally leave, it's sometime in the early morning. A few revellers remain inside. The accordion player is still playing. More subdued than before, while his companion leans against the bar as if singing for no one but himself. When I am a block away, and can only just hear them, I pause. It sounds like a train moving in the night, heading to an unknown destination while its occupants are blissfully unconcerned. I wait, expecting something to come my way, but there is only the faint melody. I don't know how long I stand there. Eventually, the accordion player relents – sinking into the fog and darkness.

This is the real Chiloé. This is what I came for.

# THE MERRIE NACHT

Nichola Tatyana

can't breathe

can't move

can't sleep

rider of night time heaving chests

organ caves aching for breath or sleep or other relief

cased in terror freezing over mechanical powers of punches or pinkies submitting with trapped-up screams to wakeful dreaming death at the hands of bruising fingers from shape shifting dimensions but so that something other than ourselves might endure abject brain saliva we named blamed famed framed frantic morning ridden mares the bringers of the demons

but night

mare

the true night

mare

inhumanly human intruder

faceless faced the face up facing the underwriting facade of fears incarnate in familiar form merrie nachts of dancing rib cages pump to irregular judder bar collapsing heartbeats searing throats purpled by fingers with the faces of your deepest brightest hopes

ridden by murderous seducer intruder slinking silent in dim doorways

friend and foe and fiend intruder leaden weight upon you with starry lethargic winking mother and brother and Other intruder somewhere someone must take the blame for demon lover abductor intruder

smiling from corrupted corners of conscious subconsciousness clenching unconsciousness in tight incorporeal fists

night

mare

the true night

mare

robbing reality's treasures slipping fully formed untouchable baleful silent in breathing bedrooms skulking silent on bounded breathless chests

this is sleep can't sleep can't

move

can't breathe

—

*Nightmare*, from the Old English *mare*, being a demon that suffocates you while you sleep.

In Dutch: *Nachtmerrie*

# ONLY ORBIT

Nichola Tatyana

Solitary moon

Rings round and round her infinite desire  
Too far away to make a pair  
Close enough to be all the more alone

Circular cyclical serenade of her only planetary love  
That throbbing sphere thrums lower, sadder  
Vibrating unstably from his molten leaking heart  
He aches outwards, straining through gulping black of separation  
Roping in his only always love with unutterable gravity  
That fierce griphook talon grapples, shattering her frigid heart

Brutal tenderness  
Compelling love that can't leave, can't cleave  
Only orbit

Solitary moon

Longs to be absorbed into the warmth of his earth  
She is cold, he is old and wearied by burning up the debris of her outflung achings

But still he pulls her in and round they spin  
She leans in and round they spin  
The cruellest cosmic waltz where fingers never brush  
Circular cyclical serenade of their interplanetary love

If gravity gorged itself upon desire,  
And swelling, sung rabidly  
with the strains of a thousand griphook talons  
And rolling with a magnet tongue, uncoaxed the incantations of cosmic ordered wisdom  
So that orbit snapped  
Moon would leap ecstatic into yearning planet arms  
Shaking with delight  
Burning up with fright  
Exploding out with blinding light  
The dust of love and destruction would linger on in black on black

So solitary moon

Rings round and round her infinite desire  
Too far away to make a pair  
Close enough to be all the more alone

Eye to eye with black between to blind them yet still they see something  
Hand to hand with cold between to numb them yet still they feel something  
Promise to promise with silence between to deafen them yet still they hear something

Strung stabbed together heart to heart  
Brutal tenderness

# ONE TWIN

Jessica Carey

It was a hot day, but Kit's makeup was impeccable. Silky hair fell around her face like the curtains around her surviving son's incubator. She sat quietly in the NICU ward's kitchen, dunking a tea bag as she stared into space, oblivious to the hot liquid sloshing over the sides of the plain white mug.

Another young woman walked in, phone to ear, voice escalating.

'Fine. Yes. No, I really don't understand, but fine.'

She slammed the phone onto the counter and sighed.

'I'm so sorry. I'm trying to register my son's birth but apparently they need more paperwork. Oh, you're about to spill tea all over yourself! Let me grab a towel.'

Kit snapped out of her trance and looked up. The woman standing before her was exhaustion personified. She was dressed in baggy shorts and a creased khaki t-shirt and had those dark circles under puffy red eyes that all new NICU mothers seem to have. Her long auburn hair was pulled back in a knotty bun.

'Are you here to meet someone?'

'No,' Kit replied. 'My little boy is over in room 514.'

'Oh God, I'm so sorry ... you look way too put-together to be here with a little one ... I mean, compared to the other mums...' She glanced down at her own stained clothing, then back up again. Kit wore a simple black dress with expensive-looking leather sandals. A tan Panama hat crowned her glossy hair, and there wasn't the slightest hint of smudged mascara around her blue eyes.

'That's so kind, thank you. You wouldn't have said that if you'd seen me a few weeks ago.'

'You mean you looked as bad as me?' The other woman laughed.

'It takes some time to adjust to life here,' Kit said kindly. 'But I noticed the doctors and nurses treated me like a delicate, pitiful child when I showed up in tears—'

'Oh my God, yes! Like they're always walking on eggshells around us and sugar-coating everything, or being way too happy when you arrive!'

'Exactly.' Kit took a sip of tea and continued. 'So, a few weeks ago, I thought I'd try a new tactic. I dropped the grieving mother act and started to dress up, put on some make up, keep a strong, game face. And they started treating me differently. Like the intelligent, educated woman I was before we got here. Now they explain things to me, they allow me to be part of the treatment team and make decisions alongside them. And that's what my son needs right now.' Kit drained the rest of her tea. 'Then, when I get back to my room at the end of the day, that's when I fall apart and bawl my eyes out.' She shrugged.

The other woman stared at her; brow knitted above her inky-brown eyes. Kit panicked. Had she said the wrong thing?

'That's seriously the most helpful thing I've been told since getting here, thank you. I'm Alice, by the way. We're over in room 532.'

'I'm Kit. I'm sorry you're here, too.'

'Do we do the awkward "what brings you here?" thing now?' Alice grinned.

Kit laughed for the first time since the boys had been born. In the NICU, things were different. You could talk about these things, mum to mum, in this bubble world.

'I'm here because of my boys. Twins. The short version is a complicated birth. Sam passed away a few hours later. Nate is still with us, but they were so premature ... he's not doing so great. My husband is in denial about it all and flew interstate for work after the funeral. My parents said they have their own problems so they can't be here with me. And while Nate's in surgery, I'm here trying to work out what to do with the double stroller and the second cot and the matching outfits piled up around our lounge room.'

Kit's shiny veneer finally cracked and tears began to fall.

'Kit, can I hug you?'

'Yes. Please.'

# THE CIS MOULD

SV Plitt

My parents have chosen a trusty brand of Christianity. Sunday mass is the standard way of washing off Saturday night: the one night a week my parents' friends come pouring into the house. The men are armed with bottles of vodka and whiskey, the women with quivering offal jelly, cabbage rolls, salads and cakes. Boney M and Abba reverberate from huge Bose speakers, sometimes attracting the police in the wee hours. Just before first light, quiet settles over the dishevelled house. A few hours later we are herded into the car to go to church. Communion serves as hair of the dog.

But this Saturday is different. We are at the church's country property. The whole congregation is here for *Johannisfeuer*, which translates as John's fire. John the Baptist, born six months before Jesus. This is his birthday celebration.

The congregation gathers around a wood pile as the evening chill creeps in. Pastor Schmitt's words drift over a torch that sets the timbers alight. Growing flames cast orange light upon wrinkled faces. Incandescent embers rise and spin towards the stars. The congregation lift their voices to the heavens. The knot in my midsection tightens. I turn away and run through the darkness until I get to the trampoline. Most of the youth group are huddled in the sagging centre, my sister Nichole included.

'Whatcha doin'?' I ask.

'Julie is holding her breath again, till she passes out.' Nichole says from the middle of the cluster.

'We did that last time. You know there's a big pot of gluhwein in the common house,' I offer. Julie suddenly sucks in a deep breath, failing at her attempt to achieve unconsciousness. 'So?' she asks between panting.

'Wanna get drunk?'

'I don't know.' A few of them mumble. Nichole shakes her head.

'Chicken. You guys can stay here'n hold your breath if you like. I'm going.'

I can still hear the hymns from the bonfire lilt on the breeze. I run down the slope, run from the sick twisting feeling in my guts. Julie, the Pastor's daughter, is tailing me. As I slip in through the door, I am swallowed by stifling heat infused with the smell of old carpet and spiced wine. The traditional recipe is laced with stronger spirits. I lean over and look into the industrial sized, stainless-steel pot: the reservoir of wine is so deep the liquid appears to be black. My reflection is a prophetic apparition swaying and wobbling across the surface. The vodka in the steam makes my eyeballs tingle. As I ladle the blood red brew into two mugs, plumes of vapour fill my nostrils. I nearly bowl Julie over as I charge outside. We sneak into some bushes on the far side of the west paddock. Our giggling is quickly extinguished by sweet hot liquid burning the back of our throats.

'Ugh! Gross.'

'Another?'

'Another.'

This giant pot of heated wine is my salvation now. A silvery beacon to which I pray repeatedly, relentlessly.

Julie touches my face. Her hand is cold and smooth and feels good on my skin. 'Your cheeks are really red.' The heat from the bonfire or the wine seems to be trapped in my face.

'Yeah, red like the wine, like the blood of Christ. Ha-ha, I have the blood of Christ in my cheeks, Julie, look,' I squeeze them. Julie's eyes are going wide, like she's remembering something important.

'Another?'

'I better not.'

'Chickeeeen. Just kidding. I know you're not a chicken, you're a baby Pasta. I'm getting another.'

Another and another.

'The good thing about being a Pasta is you can still have a noodle.'

'A noodle?'

‘Only one. Otherwise it’s adultery. Rule number six, remember. Another?’

‘I better not.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll drink yours. More Christ for me.’

Another and another.

We are talking and laughing about noodles and chicken when Julie’s eyes go wide again. This time she’s not looking at me. I turn to look, someone is coming. Julie has vanished, there is just the quivering bush where she was a second ago. A flock seems to be gathering.

‘Sophie, is that wine you’re drinking?’ Olga from the church committee asks.

‘Well it’s not hair of the dog, is it?’ I hold it up, so the flock can see. Some wine spills and runs between my fingers. ‘Hear ye, hear me. These words I speaketh unto you. Christ is not a hairy dog.’

Someone in the crowd calls out infidel, and the word reverberates around the audience like Chinese whispers, except in German. *Ungläubig. Ungläubig. Ungläubig.*

To my right there is a gurgling roar, then a wet slapping sound. My mug is on the ground, the wine splashed around it makes the grass glisten. I look up and realise that Dad knocked it out of my hand.

‘Dad. Is that any way to treat Jesus? Forgive him Father, for he knows not what he does.’

Uh-oh. Dad has that look now, and his force field is expanding. Like it always does before an explosion. Olga spins me around and marches me away to stand by another bush.

Her huge goggle eyes stare at me from behind her Coke-bottle-bottom glasses.

‘Sophie, I think it’s best if you throw up the rest of what you’ve been drinking.’

‘Oh no, that’s mine now. No refunds.’

‘Gerhart will stay here with you while you stick your fingers down your throat, until you throw up.’ Goggle Eyes means business. Gerhart, our youth group leader, looks uncertain. He needs some encouragement. I can help him out. ‘Gerhart. In your heart of hearts, are you gay? I reckon God might be okay with that.’

His eyes narrow. ‘Don’t you think you have sinned enough.’ He nudges me to face the bush and I slide cold fingers into my mouth. If gay is a dirty word, what hope do I have of breaking the cis mould?

None. Zero. Zilch.

There is heaving, and some spit, but my stomach’s not giving up a drop. Olga comes back with bread.

‘Sophie, eat this. It will soak up the alcohol.’

‘Body of Christ. Yes. I’ll eat this and then his body will be in my body. Like sex. Like a virgin, drunk for the very first time.’

‘That’s enough! We don’t want you saying anything else you will regret. Nichole, take her to the dormitory and make sure she stays in bed.’

And here is the look of big sister disdain. Bitter reproach distorts her fine features, twisting her beautiful Julia Roberts lips. She steers me towards the girls’ dormitory. ‘You always do this!’

‘Do not. I’m like a virgin, drunk for the very first time.’

‘Yeah right.’

‘Gee, you should team up with dad. Burn me at the stake. Fire’s still going ... Come on baby, light my fire.’

‘You’d like that. Then you get to be the centre of attention again.’

‘That’s not why. You’re such a goody-two-shoes.’

‘Am not.’

The girls’ dormitory smells like wood and old mattresses. When I lie back and close my eyes everything spins. Like the fire’s embers spin towards the sky. In my dreams, embers don’t die. They find their place, up there, among the best of them.

# HOW MY SPONGE-DIVING ANCESTORS BECAME FAMOUS SUGARCANE MERCHANTS

## Mary Glykokalamos

When I was in primary school, my five-syllable Greek surname was the longest in the class at 12 letters long. Everyone seemed to struggle with it. Each day during rollcall the classroom filled with giggles and sometimes even jeers as the teacher clumsily stumbled over each letter like it was a block in an obstacle course. Every day was the same:

'Gly-ko.'

'Gly-kok-alo.'

'Gly-koka-loka-lala-mos.'

Every day my cheeks coloured with inadequacy and my shoulders rolled slightly inwards in my attempt to make myself even smaller, to match the insignificance that I felt. I always thought my name was long enough without having to add more letters to it, and yet that's exactly what everyone seemed hell-bent on doing. It didn't make any sense. I didn't understand why my name was so controversial. G-L-Y-K-O-K-A-L-L-A-M-O-S. It was phonetic, after all.

Over time, I grew accustomed to the negative attention that my name brought. There wasn't a day that I didn't expect to hear a snide remark made about it. Kids can be cruel, we all know that, but it wasn't the kids that made me feel out of place, it was the grown-ups. Whether it was at school, the doctor's office, or the dental clinic, my name inspired a strange combination of despair and contempt. I was frequently asked why my family hadn't anglicised it to make it easier for everyone to pronounce, why it hadn't been shortened, and why it was so darn long.

I hardly know when it happened, but at some point along the way, I began to apologise for my name and I didn't even know that I was doing it. Every time someone chastised me about my name or flippantly massacred it, leaving a pile of disfigured consonants behind, it was me who apologised. I anticipated every complaint, eye roll, and sigh, and met each with a light-hearted quip hiding my hurt and chagrin.

It wasn't until someone suggested that I must be eager to turn 18 so that I could legally change my name to something shorter and less 'Greek' that I first recognised the burning bitterness of resentment well up inside me. My long name might have caused me some irritation over the years, but I never wished my name away. I never resented it. I never dreamt of swapping it for another.

My name is unique to me, my family, and my heritage. My father has told the story of our name's origin countless

times. Sitting at the dinner table pouring himself a glass of home-made red wine of indeterminate alcoholic content, he would tell me stories of the past; a soft, understated pride finding a way to seep through a creaky gap in his emotion-filled voice signalling that these weren't just stories.

Each time I listened very carefully, my entire body stiff under the strain of complete focus. I paid close attention to every word, every description, and every subtle change in my father's expression. Then I'd repeat the words I'd just heard over and over in my mind, like a child reciting lines for a school play. Each time I committed more detail, more colour, more feeling to memory. I captured as much of it as I could, building up a cumulative richness in my mind so that in the end what I had wasn't just a story, it was a vivid and complete snapshot of life.

It all began in Kalymnos, the small, idyllic island in the Dodecanese where my father was born and lived before coming to Australia during the migration frenzy of the 1960s. Life on the island was tough in the late 1800s. Unlike mainland Greece which had regained its independence after the Revolution of 1821, the islands of the Dodecanese begrudgingly remained under Ottoman control. The island's main source of income was its trade of sea sponges, but diving for sponges was a dangerous pursuit, evidenced by the stream of mourning women wearing black.

My father explained that like many other young Kalymnian men raised on the shores of the Aegean Sea, my paternal great-grandfather was a very strong swimmer, but this alone did not make him a successful deep-sea diver. Divers needed more than stamina and healthy lungs to survive and thrive in their profession. They needed to understand that the ocean was temperamental. It could provide financial comfort and security and then take it away in an instant. The ocean could swallow a man whole, his smug pride as conqueror of the deep sea the first thing to be devoured.

In the early days, 'skin' divers lunged themselves naked into the ocean while holding onto a 15kg stone called a *skandalopetra* that helped them sink quickly to the ocean floor. 'Naked?' I'd yelped out incredulously. My father had responded with a dismissive nod. In future retellings, he'd always leave that part out.

Then came the rudimentary *skafandro* diving suit which transformed diving missions from small enterprises to big business ventures. Suddenly, divers could reach depths of 70 and 90 metres, causing them to succumb to the dreaded decompression sickness.

Men would emerge from the depths of the ocean doubled over and limp, blood running from their noses, unable to move. Those that died were considered lucky, while the crippled men that lived shrunk into the grandness of their shame; once virile and strong, they were now weak and useless. A pained expression crossed my father's face when I asked him how a dead man could possibly be lucky. There was no answer, but a moment later all signs of anguish were gone, the troubling memory that had darkened his gaze washed away like a message written in the sand.

In those days, men would spend months abroad diving for sponges off fishing vessels called *kaikia*. My great-grandfather travelled with his brothers on sponge-diving missions along the Mediterranean Sea where their reach extended as far as the Libyan coastal town of Benghazi. One year there was a shortage of sea sponges, so to make the journey to Africa as fruitful as possible, my great-grandfather had to search for some other commodity to take back to Greece to trade. It was in Alexandria, Egypt where he found plentiful sugarcane. He took a chance and he and his brothers loaded up their fishing vessel and returned to Greece.

Back in Kalymnos, they sold the sugarcane to the locals who enjoyed the delicate sweetness. Pretty soon my great-grandfather came to be known as the sugarcane man and like so many Greek surnames born from nicknames or occupations, the name stuck. From then on, Kalymnians referred to my great-grandfather as *Zaharokalamos* which directly translates to sugarcane. It didn't take long before the name 'sugarcane' morphed into 'sweet cane' or *Glykokalamos*. And that's how it's remained ever since.

I don't apologise for my name anymore and I haven't for a very long time. For the most part, things are different now. Sometimes, people even ask about my name and whether it has any particular cultural significance. I'm always eager to share my family story with them; the story about how my sponge-diving ancestors came to be famous sugarcane merchants.

# LITTLE JAW

Benjamin Rendell

## 1

swim up culm shoot phloem pipes  
to ready cotyledons  
& glass roots  
& bulb lignotubers

each cell swells into difference  
& elongates it forms  
a flowering plant recognisable  
and thus mature  
enough to bear apricots

whose pit when pitted open  
is a calloused lip or little jaw

## 2

guess with ur hands that there won't  
be little jaw bones  
or joints to snag them digging in th soil  
or medicine bottle glass fractured  
sharper than ur skin stringent  
& harder on mohs' scale if u do jag a scratch  
& open up ur finger  
take clay to dress it a moss spore will germ  
& grow pithy carpet on th properly inmost wound  
& murmur softly to help ur cells close up again

though maybe apply betadine first

## 3

no no no  
there is glass in my fingers  
th soil would not drain  
so all th worms became  
long & monoclinic crystals  
while small marsupials dying  
and being buried here had  
no worms to digest them  
and the earth became  
platy silicate sheets  
layered over uncomposted filling  
as if it were a fractal lasagne  
and my fingers have  
put their teeth in

# TOAST

Megan Howden

*Slowly*

Staring into the glowing, red elements, I watch as the soft bread transforms. Slowly, the spongy white gains its crust. Tanning slightly, before, bam, I hit the button and the elements cool and fade.

Lashings of butter soak in, passing the point of saturation, a fine scraping of Vegemite completing the meal. Leaning over the sink I savour the slice, the greasy butter running down my chin, the tang of the yeasty Vegemite tingling on the tongue. Inspecting my bite marks, distinct because of the gap between my two front teeth. I replicate each chop with deliberate precision.

Staring out the window, looking into our neighbour's gumtrees, a fruit salad of rainbow lorikeets, crows, wattlebirds, galahs and myna birds. A flock of cockatoos screech through the cloudless sky and sprinkle down like confetti. The tin roof creaks overhead, expanding in the already hot sun.

A magpie dives, a black and white flash, into the swaying sea of leaves. I perch on the edge of the sink and wind open the window. The cool air quickly escapes. I press my nose to the flyscreen. Beyond the scent of metal and dust, I can smell the heat. Summer possesses its own distinct scent, its own sensations. If I stepped outside, blindfolded and oblivious to the temperature, I'd still know it was summer. The air is ready to crack and split, perhaps with the relief of a thunderstorm.

There's a buzz deep in my core, summer is luxurious, it's long and lazy, without expectation. Lying with a book for hours beneath the air conditioning is an achievement. Shorts, t-shirt and thongs, perfectly acceptable attire. Walking the dog by the creek, exercise. Taking my notebook to a patch of lawn and watching my hand and the blue ink race across the pages, artistic. Table tennis, a social pursuit. But, I don't have to do anything. I don't have to be anywhere.

A lone ant inspects a toast crumb. Its feelers and legs are erratically busy. Moving around the crumb, over the crumb, away from the crumb back to the crumb. Uselessly busy and to what end?

A magpie warbles and I put another slice of bread in the toaster.

*Hurriedly*

Jamming three fat wholemeal squares into the toaster I slam down the trigger. I glance at my watch. Oats, milk and honey zapped in the microwave. Five-year-old A complains,

'I want to press the button.'

Yoghurt and juice dumped unceremoniously onto the table. Twelve-kilogram toddler, O, hindering my movements, balancing on my hip as I fly around the kitchen. He is not to be trusted on the floor.

O replicates the sound of the coffee grinder as it whirs. The aroma promises to refuel and rejuvenate. Naturally, the pot and filter need cleaning. O slides from my grip as water hammers from the tap, sending old sodden coffee grounds across the kitchen.

'To-ste,' O hears the toaster pop.

'Ta,' I say, prying a plate from his vice-like grip before it smashes. Calling to A,

'What do you want on your toast?' I hear her huff from her bedroom.

'I don't want toast.'

'It's done.'

I place O on the bench, working around him. His fingers find the butter, his mouth and my hair.

'Squares or triangles?'

'Squares, no, triangles, no I mean ...' Distracted, attaching clips and bows to her stuffed animals.

'Are you even dressed?'

'I just had to find Bunny.'

Slathering peanut butter, I cut triangles. In his highchair, O spoons yoghurt through his hair.

A emerges in shorts, singlet and thongs.

'It's winter, it's raining.'

Tossing her long blond hair as she sits down, 'I haven't worn it in ages.'

‘That’s because it’s winter.’

Directing a spoonful of yoghurt at O’s mouth before retrieving A’s tracksuit and kinder bag. I take in the unmade bed, the toys arranged in a complex hierarchy, her pyjamas flung on the floor with yesterday’s dirty clothes.

I pull last night’s cleaned clothes from the washing machine and into a basket before reloading the machine with its first round for the day.

Racing past the breakfast table, I direct a few spoonfuls of porridge into O’s mouth, before he realises I have taken over and demands the spoon back.

‘Ta, no, no, no!’

A is sitting sullen, arms crossed, food untouched.

‘Eat up.’

‘I want to wear shorts.’

‘Fine, but you will wear your tracksuit over them.’

‘Fine.’ A picks up her spoon, looks at the food, ‘I wanted squares.’

Pouring my coffee into a KeepCup and taking a quick sip before retrieving the lunchbox I prepacked last night from the fridge. A’s backpack and three water bottles are shoved onto the waiting pram.

O dodges the face washer as I attempt to remove breakfast from his body. His naked body flashes through the door as I scramble to dress him. He scoots into my room where I am permitted to pull a skivvy and woollen jumper over his head, as long as it’s a game: ‘Where’s O?’ Then, he dives under the bed. I slide socks over his kicking feet before they disappear.

Pulling the sheets and doona into place on the bed and retrieving the cushions and pillows. Sliding into my already tied runners and calling from the doorway:

‘Teeth and hair.’

In the bathroom, there’s just enough time to whip my own hair into a ponytail before two sets of feet and arms wrestle for prime position on the step, before the mirror.

O stomps his feet in excitement as I hand him his toothbrush, distracted, I quickly pull a nappy and pants onto him, hoping there are no puddles to be found later. A hands me a fistful of sparkling hair ties and bows,

‘I want six plaits.’

I check my watch, ‘Okay.’

Glancing around the living room and kitchen, there are Duplo and stuffed toys dotting every surface. The basket of washed clothes lies on its side, its contents spewing forth like the entrails of some unfortunate roadkill. Peanut butter, porridge and yoghurt, setting solid on the white table.

Running to the kitchen, ignoring the soupy dishwasher and the half-washed dishes. I collect the long-forgotten coffee. Stomach growling, I retrieve the bare, hard square of toast.

*Freeze Frame*

The pram is overloaded like a pack mule and O harnessed in, a blanket tucked over his legs. Jackets zipped up, beanies pulled low and little fingers are wriggled into gloves. The cold air cuts deep with each inhale.

A uses her foggy breath, she’s a dragon, snorting in fury at her enemies. Puddles erupt as gumboots launch into their muddy depths. Snails write silvery messages to be deciphered on the pavement. My toast is crumbled and sprinkled, in case the fairies, mice and beetles haven’t had their breakfast.

O gurgles from the pram, his mouth experimenting, offering simple commentary on all he sees

‘Pud-dle, flow-er, dog-gy’, and today as the black and white bird pauses in its worm gathering and turns its head with reptilian movements, offering up its warbling song to the overcast sky,

‘Mag-pie.’

# THOUGHTS ON FALLING

Jes Layton

I've always loved climbing.

I have memories of being a kid and scaling hay bale towers stacked metres high in the back shed. I would scramble up any viable tree with my siblings in order to get onto the roof of our house in Yeodene. Dad would make the most of the opportunity, and get us three kids to clean gum leaves, possum droppings and gunk from the guttering, even as we crawled about on all fours for grip, sun-warmed tin scraping our already scuffed knees. I haven't thought about this time in my life all that much until recently.

Until I started refamiliarising myself with falling.



It's hard to pinpoint when I stopped falling, or rather, when falling stopped being an everyday occurrence. Falling from trees, from a skateboard, over my own feet or strewn toys on the ground. Growing up, my life was characterised as much by falling as it was by climbing. Falling; an unremarkable, everyday experience.

Now when I fall, there's a shock that feels like it bounces from my heart to my stomach then back up to my ears, which ring. The reason that I am falling over so much lately is that like many others, I picked up a new hobby after the first 2020 lockdown.

I started bouldering.



In early 2021 I was enthralled by bouldering's playfulness and shifting possibilities. Bouldering can be seen as a challenge, a gauntlet thrown down, a taunt like the faint memory of a high school bully. Yet bouldering can also be an invitation – to reimagine ourselves and reconnect with our bodies, to participate in new ways of being and being seen.

Northside Boulders in Northcote is a roomy warehouse, a kaleidoscope of coloured holds, mapped out along the wall like the inner workings of an ear. Oscillating slopes, flat slabs, surfaces and holds that extend up and overhead, and an ambitious upside down route.

The more I climbed on these bright plastic designs, the more easily I was able to reach a moment where nothing else was going through my head. Nothing that had happened a minute or 10 years ago mattered, and nothing that I had planned for the next 10 minutes or 5 years mattered either.

I move up the wall ritualistically, focusing 100 percent on what I am doing and then, in those moments when I reach the final hold of a route, I ready myself to come down. I let the world drop away from me. I am out of control. I don't have a thought, I don't have a worry, I don't even have happiness – I don't have anything. I just fall.



The first time I fell off a wall while bouldering was when I attended a meetup of ClimbingQTs (LGBTQ+ social climbing community and advocacy group) for the first time. As a new member, I was asked to demonstrate that I knew how to fall. I climbed the large grey holds next to the front desk, the watchful eye of fellow members on me, and at the top I took merely a moment and then let go.

I hit the ground quite softly, cushioned, like the whole gym was. It was not the climbing itself that caused me to fall in love with bouldering and keep coming back time and time again, but rather that first fall. That brief taste and reminder of the ecstatic, out-of-body experience of succumbing to gravity.

The moment snaps like such thin string and I fall, and I land and I laugh and I get up and do it again.



On the wall, my sense of self preservation is screamingly absent. There are no ropes, or other safety devices. Just my chalked hands and shoes hired for 4 dollars. I can rely only on my own sure-footedness – or lack thereof.

Falling at a climbing gym is an everyday occurrence. Nobody gives a crap. If anything, falling is encouraged, not just for safety, but because it shows that you are trying a new or difficult route. Falling is an opportunity to chat to others about particular problems (the ones on the wall, not your personal ones), and signals a wave of cheering and motivation to get back to it by the other QTs around you.

Falling, as I quickly came to learn, is as much a skill as developing strength and technique. The best way to land is to do what is known as a soft fall. As soon as your feet make contact with the mat, allow your knees to bend, and then push yourself backwards to roll onto your bottom and back, absorbing most of the force of impact.

This was not how I landed when I broke my ankle.

# BEGINNINGS

Lucy Roleff

My falling until April 2021 had always been relatively planned, controlled. But on the day I broke my ankle, I fell off a slanted polyurethane hold. Or rather, I fell off *incorrectly* from a slanted polyurethane hold. One of those that defies gravity and joins the wall at an angle, offering little in the way of grip, stained with layers of dead skin and chalk.

I do not remember much of the fall itself. Time fast and slow all in one. I could hear the sounds of grunting and chatting and laughing about me. I felt my fingers slip from their grip. I felt the pressure leave my legs as they fell away from solidity. The pain when I twist in the air awkwardly, trying to fall the right way. It seemed to take forever, when it was actually only about one to two seconds.

I land in a state of denial and instantly feel an intense burning shooting up my leg from my now swollen and bruised ankle. A simple fracture, the doctors say, when several days later I finally get the nerve to go and get it checked.

‘Wear a moon boot and no more climbing for 10 weeks. Here’s some exercises once the swelling goes down.’



Nowadays, my ankle clicks. When the weather is too hot or too cold, it’s as though the healed bone inside freezes. My stance wavers whenever I stumble on a rough patch of concrete or uneven slope of grass. In the last few months, I have become an expert at catching myself before I lose my footing. All it takes is a swift recalibration of my torso in space to keep me from hitting the ground.

My injury has yet to change my love of climbing, my love of falling, although perhaps it can be said I fall with more intention now, knowing the pain of falling *incorrectly*.

My experience of climbing remains fluid, as most things in my life. No two days of climbing are the same, the only moment of commonality being my focus on the joys of movement. Coming back to climbing and back to falling, in spite of it all, means that I am willing to step out on that edge, and really try to find out what I am personally made of, where my limits and boundaries are, and where I’m able to push a little bit further.

I’ve always loved climbing. But I think I might love falling more.

falling  
falling  
falling  
falling  
falling

I get into bed with the cat  
a pen  
turn on a song, stretch

I’m thinking of cigarettes  
and how your S’s sound caught  
coming out

think of smoking in the bed,  
greying rain,  
black pooled streets,  
slow cars passing

flex my feet, winter socks  
getting too much  
under polyester covers,  
sheep’s wool blanket

I long for quilts of down,  
expensive and heavy,  
that breathe  
and press my body into sleep  
I think of your brow  
and dark lashes  
of walking into a store or bar  
and you’re there  
or a living room like a womb  
Wagner coming from somewhere  
or Marais  
or a thin reed note  
of all heaters on and we are flushed  
eyes bright, jumpers plucked at or  
shed  
and thrown over chairs  
tea sipped nervously  
knees crossed on a couch

with the sky out there,  
crumbly and dripping

I like beginnings

# CLUTTERED

Steph Amir

Tidy desk, tidy mind. That's what Iris used to say, but Charles wasn't very tidy these days. He shifted a pile of journals aside to find a folder labelled 'Newspaper Articles 2021', filed the clipping from that morning, and put the folder back on top of the journals. When he'd first moved into the apartment, the room had been his study, but the number of books, newspapers and folders had built up. There wasn't really anywhere to sit anymore.

Charles' daughter Jane had said things were getting out of hand, and it was time to throw things away, to give Charles more space. But Charles didn't need more space, and besides, he needed reference materials for his book. He often had ideas of new sections to include, which would lead to a trip to the library or a phone call to the office of *Australian Scientist* magazine, to see if they had any back issues with articles relating to the topic.

The woman who worked in the office was called Marissa. She had explained several times to Charles that there was a database on the magazine's website that he could search to find out what topics were in each issue, rather than calling, but Charles didn't have much interest in that.

Whenever Charles came across some interesting information, he noted it down to tell Marissa. She was doing her PhD in astrophysics, but Charles had learnt not to discuss astrophysics-related news with her, because her responses were too inconsistent with what he was trying

to say. They stuck to other topics, like biochemistry or geology.

Charles was finishing a crossword when the doorbell rang. Outside was a man, wearing a blue shirt, from the local council. 'Hello,' he said. 'Are you Charles O'Keefe?' Charles said he was, and the man asked if he could come inside.

'Sorry,' said Charles. 'I'm getting some painting done so the house is a bit of a mess. Can we talk out here? I'll make tea.' Without waiting for an answer, Charles bustled inside then returned with two small stools, placing them in the hallway. This was followed by a tray with two mugs. He handed one to the man, who held it awkwardly.

'I'm here because we've had some complaints,' the man said. 'There have been reports that your apartment has become a fire hazard due to piles of books in close proximity to heaters and a gas stove. I've also had calls from the body corporate who say that they've been in contact with you about using your balcony for storage, which is inconsistent with their regulations relating to disorderly amenity. That isn't council business except it has led to newspapers blowing off the balcony onto the road, which is a traffic safety hazard.'

'That only happened once,' Charles explained. 'Then I spoke to a lovely fellow at Officeworks, who sold me some clips to hold the newspapers together. Would you like me to show you?'

'That won't be necessary, thank you,' the man answered. 'But it would be best if you could tidy up, to reduce the fire risk. I can arrange for someone to assist you.'

'No, thank you,' said Charles quickly. 'I'll do it myself. Now, would you like a biscuit?'



When the man left, Charles assessed the kitchen. There was an encyclopedia next to the stove. He carried it to the bookshelf. The shelves were full but there was space on top. Climbing up his ladder, Charles squeezed the encyclopedia in between the other books and the ceiling.

Next, he consolidated newspapers into a pile and clipped them with one of his new clips. In the lounge room he shifted some old editions of *Science Now* to the couch, creating additional space around the heater. 'There,' he said aloud. 'Sorted.'



Charles' book draft had many parts. It was mostly about the greatest Australian inventions of the 20th century, except for the sections on trains and genetic engineering. He was working on a section on the invention of wi-fi but was stuck. It was time to call Marissa.

'I remember there was an article for the 21st anniversary of the invention,' Charles immediately explained. 'But don't remember if it was for 1991 – when the technology was first invented – or 1997, when it became commercially available.'

'I'll have a look,' said Marissa, and started to tell Charles something else, but his chest hurt, and he dropped the phone, so couldn't hear what it was.

\*

Charles was in a twisted position on the floor, then later woke in a hospital bed, his daughter Jane by his bedside.

'How are you feeling?' she asked. Charles grimaced.

'You had a heart attack,' Jane explained. 'The paramedics said you were on the phone to someone, who called the ambulance.'

'Falling down would have been a recipe for a broken hip,' she added with a grim smile. 'Except you landed on some magazines.'

Charles nodded vaguely.

'You'll be here for at least a few days,' Jane explained. 'I'll pick up some clothes from your place, and organise for someone to tidy up, but we'll need to talk about how much longer you can stay there by yourself.'

'Leave my things,' Charles said, concentrating on each word.

'We need to keep you safe, Dad,' she said gently.

He closed his eyes again.

\*

When Charles opened the door, his apartment was unrecognisable. The piles of books, magazines, newspapers and articles were gone. The floor had been vacuumed. The desk was clear except for his typewriter and a small tray of stationery.

Charles stared at the empty floor, the empty desk, the walls that looked a different colour in the sunlight. He felt dizzy and leant against the doorframe.

His mind felt blank and overwhelmed at once. It occurred to him to ask Jane what had happened to the drafts of his book, but he knew he wouldn't.

The apartment was too bright. He sat down and stood up several times, then walked purposely towards the phone.

'Marissa,' he said. 'My heart conked out and knocked me down. No broken bones though, thanks to the Cardiology Society Journal. Nice soft landing. Now, there's been a bit of a mix-up and I'm going to need to re-order the whole back catalogue, back to 1952 if you've got them all.'

'All of them?' Marissa confirmed. 'Some will be out of stock, but even for the remaining issues, the cost and size of the delivery will be quite substantial.'

'Just put it on my account,' Charles said, relief starting to seep into his muscles for the first time since returning home. 'When is the next issue due?'

'It should arrive Monday or Tuesday. It's a cute cover this month: mountain pygmy possums.'

'Ah yes. *Burramys parvus*. Critically endangered.'

'Well hopefully less endangered if this tracking program is successful. Some people from Melbourne Uni have figured out how to stick a GPS chip on their ear without needing to catch them.'

'An excellent innovation,' said Charles thoughtfully. 'Do the GPS trackers use satellite?'

'Yes. I can print out the Wikipedia page, and send it with the new issue if you want me to?'

Charles smiled and confirmed that yes, he did.

# THE ENVELOPE

Annelise Balsamo

I was hauling up old lino. The things that lie beneath old lino are newspapers and bits of scrap paper. And envelopes (missing their letters). I found many envelopes under my old lino, all addressed to the following – Mr and Mrs P Kent, Miss L Kent, Master B Kent.

On the back of one envelope, sharing space with a return address to a Mr and Mrs S R Lardy, there was a list.

The list has seven items.

And a whole story unfurling.

## *Flour*

Flour is baseline. It can be, I guess, used for cake or bread, or pasta or noodles. It can be turned into pancakes and biscuits, or become a thickening for sauces.

I have flour in my house. It's not even on my shopping list because I know I need it every week. On this list, it is spelt out. The staple is not neglected or ignored. Acknowledged, it sits still at the top of the list, ready to weight the other items, ready to do what is needed.

We are making something.

## *Sugar*

Maligned in our generation. Everyone I know is quitting sugar and looking into the rum dark goodness of maple syrup. Not the Kents.

In my opinion, we need sugar. It's foundation, like flour. I always have sugar in the house. How does one make a sponge without caster sugar? The Kents didn't indicate what kind of sugar – perhaps plain white was just fine.

But what does sugar indicate in a larger story?

Cake, perhaps. Something tempting.

This is not a story yet. But we are moving in that direction.

## *Butter*

Now I'm off balance. In my mind, the next item should be milk. I have a sense of what a household might need on the day one must make a cake. And milk is needed for cake and for things around cake. For cups of tea, importantly, and I feel sure that the Kents liked a cup of tea. Of course we need butter too – particularly if the cake is a creaming kind of cake. But still.

And then, it occurred to me that milk was delivered to houses once upon a time. We didn't need to buy it at the shop because every morning the milkman (almost certainly a man; these stories cannot be retrospectively changed because of our sensibilities – see Sugar above) would bring fresh bottles. Leave out two empty bottles and get two full ones. And it was milk with the silvery caps and the cream at the top and the almost blue milk at the bottom.

The butter is therefore sensible in this story. Yes, of course, to cream with the white sugar (caster would be better) to make a base onto which flour and flavourings are added to make a light crumb cake.

## *Eggs*

After creaming the butter and sugar, you add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition.

Who discovered the magic of eggs in baking? We have lost so many heroes of the everyday world – the person who first understood the principle of bread baking. The person who first connected eggs to the genuine joy of a risen cake. Now, of course, the egg addition is utter foundation. But at some point, it must have been strange in the story of cooking or baking. An egg? An egg you say? How can that make any sense? Surely an egg is to be cooked on its own – a protein pack of excellent proportions. Or perhaps a riddle.

But the eggs in the foundation part of the story make sense – see above. After adding the eggs and beating well after each addition, you have added a lot of air to the whole piece. So then the flour can go in – folded carefully so the air stays put – and the cake is almost done.

But, as a story, it's not much, is it? We are making a cake, like we are building a sandcastle on a beach. It's an old story, and one where the ending is the same every time (unless the cake is a flop). There is no twist or turn. Not yet.

## *Pegs*

Interesting. We are clearly making a cake, but the pegs introduce something quite new. There is a rhyme, for a start, so perhaps this list is to be a poem. This changes the shape of the story – drags us towards something subterranean. The item (the pegs) is not a game changer, but it does take us in another direction.

The pegs, of course, could be innocuous. The Kents might have needed new pegs for the clothesline – to hang out the weekly washing.

But is that really the way of stories? All the elements need to work in consort.

It's possible the pegs are used to reseal the various packets – the flour, the sugar – after they have been opened and partly used. Thrifty. I'm sure the Kents were thrifty. They used the back of old envelopes, after all, to write lists. And then used that list to line the floor before the lino went down. Recycling before it was even a thing.

What else could happen with pegs?

To peg a nose so smells don't assail?

To peg up reminder notes?

You can see it's not forming a story just yet. We're on the verge of something; we're not far away. But it's not quite there.

## *Vanilla*

We are back in the cake. The red herring of the pegs is in limbo.

Vanilla was clearly the flavouring for the cake. It's safe – nothing as decadent or as expensive as chocolate. And that goes double if the vanilla on the list is vanilla essence rather than extract.

Powerful flavour though – can we glean something at this point?

## *Ratsak*

And, suddenly, the twist. And we have found a grip on this story. It is the last item – of course it is. It is the crown jewel, the weapon of ultimate destruction, the battering ram that defeats the walls of the fortress. The rat bait explains the cake ingredients. This cake was not ordinary.

This cake was a poisoned delight.

And the pegs? Well. If our smelling is compromised, so are our taste buds.

Why would an individual willing wear a peg to eat a poisoned cake?

Because it might be voluntary. It might be a kindness.

Perhaps there was illness. And cake was the ultimate cure. Cake was the dish that they most loved. So to cake – it makes sense – was where they now turn.

But it might not be so delightfully compassionate.

The compassion may be for one group alone.

Perhaps there was violence. Perhaps it was finally unbearable, and cake was to save those who suffer the hard blows, and the breaks, and the bruises from those who inflict. In which case, the pegs would hardly have a place. I need to find another use for the pegs.

I will need to decide which way to go – the story if you will.

The thing is, I can find this story. It unfolds against the strangeness of the Ratsak.

Someone, in the Kent household, was going to die.

# POCKET POWER

## Annaliese Forde

Grey-shy, grey sky, we are watched by three

calling my business? I look high to see

Three keepers of the wind

gauging my presence,

willing to fan flint from the sky.

I am walking my dog and with an odd syncopated 4/2 rhythm, we are going wherever I please. One pocket bulging with the walk's necessities, biodegradable bags. The other, a mask and key.

### Biodegradable bag

Sure enough, shit hits the ground. I rip a bag free, thrust my hand inside. Stop. Stoop. Scoop. Everything bad comes in threes. I grab the oozing liquid, surrounding soil, and detritus. Seal the stench with a delicate knotting. The residual trace, the filth, I sweep over with eucalyptus leaves and stringy bark strips. We walk on.

The grey is lightening

Form shapes trees

Tonal vision

I see

existence

relative

only to me.

I have left the watchers behind, not wanting to unsettle their presence. My dog off-lead, nose-leading our way. Moisture is soaking through my shoes; cursing my choice of footwear I look down to see the pure joy of my dog, as he runs a licking-tongue over dewed grass.

### Mask

Handmade with flaws and knots, my mask

folded and ready to protect

Pandemic has winged to our shores

Plague, pestilence, sailed epidemics,

widespread death, smallpox, influenza, measles, TB

targeted death, venereal disease

Mandated, manmade law

Pandemic has winged to *our* shores (*again*)

In my pocket I carry law

perceived owners have closed the door.

The trees are shrieking. Pierced, pecked, quaking life into bellies and the ground below. Beaks sharp, tear, fight, share and nourish. Noise. The racket. I reach for my phone and record. I have no words to capture the sound.

Language white bandaged

wrapped in my 21st century tongue

English coated, Australian Victorianisms high noted

the same but not quite

listen to the i & the e.

The glint of yellow draws my eye. This land of colourful abundant birds impresses me. I run my fingers aligning the quill. The colours settle, a fine line of green borders the black, yellow puddles over the other side. I imagine this feather floating groundward arcing on the gentle breeze, a peaceful settling, not wanting to envision a ripping by cats' claws, rats' jaws, dog paws, fright, fight, terror, bleed. I collect take the feather for my daughter. 'Cool', she will say.

### Key

Time to head home, dog tired. We retreat from the park. House and home, I open the gate to a path of magnolias, agapanthus, and rosemary. A parcelled piece of land. My rented home.

The long dark hall wraps me in the Victorian fear of the sun, the walls run long and shared, terracing our position. Swamp land and the summer dry, shanties the house in a seasonal rise and fall. The floorboards are getting thin, life under them will soon be visible. Broken porcelain and pipes and glass, composting scraps, soil horse-manured, bones and coins and stones, lives lived, living. I fear seeing what I hear.

In my pockets, my skin, my yearnings

deep in my chest and bones

started centuries ago

with a sailing, a thinking,

a continuing walk,

the colonial stride.

I am the gate crasher with a mask and key.

# JUST GIRLY THINGS

Tehya Nicholas

My monster – he will remain unnamed for legal purposes – has been catching rats lately.

He collects them in the early hours of the morning when Michael is asleep and he thinks I'm not watching. My monster has terrible eyesight, but an exceptional sense of smell, that of a bloodhound. This is a handy feature for my monster who was created for predatory behaviour – although I'm sure he thinks he's a *nice guy*.

At three o'clock yesterday morning, my monster was spooning the intestines of one rat into its heinous mouth. I haven't been feeding him lately in the hopes that he will starve to death and the stain he brings upon my otherwise full and interesting life will vanish. Of course, he does not.

I'm beginning to suspect Michael is leaving out leftovers.

My monster is miserable. His life is entailed of dependencies on other men and entrails. I know this because I saw him looking morosely through the window last night. We made eye contact, which doesn't mean much since he is near-blind, but it does mean I saw the truth. My monster is having a bad life.

\*

Reading the news before bed is a terrible thing to do but I deleted TikTok so what do you expect. Michael's fingers slide down my body once the phone is away. I come, although it takes a lot of focus.

I tried to draw my monster but as it turns out, it's impossible to do. There is no shape a human hand with a graphite pencil can make that is as abominable as my monster. You may think that's interesting because my human hand helped make this abominable monster and my hand is typing these words onto my laptop now and surely my hand should also be able to draw the monster, but alas, it cannot be done. Besides, you don't want me to draw my monster because it won't nearly be as frightening as yours.

\*

The water in my house has started to look faintly brown, which reminds me of a true crime show I watched on Netflix where a woman's body was found floating in a tank at a fancy hotel and all the residents were drinking her blood unwittingly. So now I think my monster is putting dead rats into the water tank.

Like today, I made a cup of rooibos tea – also known as African Red Bush – which tasted so much like rats it wasn't funny.

\*

Without my permission, my monster has crept into my pre-marital bed. It probably happened when I read about

Sarah Everard. He reeks of sweat, somewhat like my father. Michael has, of course, been warned about him, but only in a hypothetical context, which means I don't think he can really see him.

It's ironic, Michael had a bath using lavender and eucalyptus soaking crystals. Spent an hour in there making himself soft. Then the mirror fogged right up and made it impossible to see any kind of reflection. It felt so beautifully metaphoric and tragic it made me high. Finally, I was real again.

Out of necessity I've stopped drinking tap water. Or at least, I boil it first to purify the filthy rat water and annihilate all toxins. The thing about being a woman is you can never be too careful.

\*

I got fed up with everything so had my hair cut by a man with an orange mullet. For the first time in a while, I was in command. Above the shoulders. Shorter, shorter, shorter. I want to walk down the street at night with an inch less fear. Orange mullet's hands were shaking by the end.

\*

Michael has begun to notice my boiling tendencies. He has also noticed my disinterest in sex to a far more fervent degree. But what am I to do when there's an abominable blind monster sharing the bed with us and Michael is impervious to this fact?

I read a book called *Frankenstein* the other day and thought huh, isn't it funny, we all have monsters following us around regardless of gender. Then I realised Mary Shelley couldn't even publish the book under her own name to begin with. She remained anonymous and now people psychoanalyse her *oedipal complex*.

Spanking, choking, tugging, biting, fucking, gagging, roping a noose around my neck, pulling out my fingernails, burning my flesh – these are things my monster would do to me if he was, I don't know, *having a bad day*.

For now, he lives under my bed, inside my sheets, in the house next door, sits next to me at work, orders a coffee before me and eats the insides of mice while groping around for a mother or father to love him. I wish I could give my monster a better life but the issue is that I'm a woman living amongst men who think the scariest thing in the world is a mirror.

The thing is my monster isn't my problem but it *is*.

\*

A part of me understands why Michael refuses to witness my monster, our monster. With his beard dick biceps triceps foreskin sent from Jesus he is shielded from raeating, half-blind abominable monsters that could rape you at any moment. A cosy spot. Lush enough to live in.

Therefore, these are just girly things.

# AUTHENTIC STOCK

Nathan Power

Damien has spent the last three days making ‘authentic’ stock – turning a human-sized saucepan of tripe and bones and water into a bubbling cauldron of dark brown liquid. It’s thick as tar and I smell it from the street where I chain my bicycle to his fence. Walking into the kitchen I find him stirring it with a wooden ladle the length of my forearm. Skimming a viscous spoonful from the surface amidst the cloud of pungent steam that floats chest-height across the room, he waves the ladle at me.

*Come see what you think!*

I taste it and he careens through the ingredients, each tied to an extant memory of food eaten. Stories spill out free-form, bubbling to the surface as he talks.

I leave an hour later with a Tupperware container full of stock and a promise to return for the next batch.



He spends his childhood weekends on High Street, eating bún bò hué at Phuong Nam. Sweat streams from the chilli oil his brother convinced him to try. Preston is awash with life, people dancing in and out of tiny shopfronts, ducking between the cars held static by the Saturday afternoon traffic. Teenage kids smoke ciggies on the bus stop bench and gaggles of Italian nonnas gather by the NAB ATM. Farther down the street, a couple carry a couch-sized TV through the entrance of the Cash Converters and a man dings his bicycle bell, insistent on wheeling through the throng with a guitar strapped to his back.

He window-shops – puzzling at glazed whole ducks skewered on giant hooks, a wok smoking over a roaring gas flame, the two wizened

ladies in hair nets hand-rolling long thin noodles that stretch and droop between broomsticks tacked into the window frame.



The late teens pass at Supper Inn, tucked away upstairs in a Chinatown back alley. After long nights dancing at Pony with a beer in hand, Kings of Leon give way to Chinese muzak, white tablecloths, an intimidating matron who demands a minimum spend per head – adding extra items to the bill until it meets her approval. This friendship group uses the ‘we choose one, you choose one’ method of dining out – each item the party chooses is matched with an item of the waiter’s choice. *Surprise us* is the call of the night, and surprised they are with crispy zhá gēzi, braised típàng and pickled mù’ěr.

Supper Inn closes at 2:30 a.m., but if the group is large enough and the bill keeps climbing then sometimes they stay later – late enough to skip the NightRider bus with its streams of floor vomit splashing beneath upheld feet as they round the Swanston Street corner. Better to catch the 5:02 a.m. from Flinders Street to Preston; the trains get cleaned overnight.



One weekend they ride to the city, arriving in a sweaty bicycle gang of baggy black jumpers and Stackhats. The bouncer eyes them off lined up outside the club and turns them away. *No girls, no entrance*. So they buy brown bags of booze from the Exford and guzzle them on the steps of the State Library, singing along to The Killers piped from a flip-phone stacked inside a plastic cup for amplification. They roll home in the early evening, stopping to bargain

with the boys at the competing souvlaki joints along Brunswick Street for chips and toun, complete with thumb-sized chunks of garlic. The chips disperse amongst the group as they ride – outstretched hands on bicycles that crisscross the tram tracks on St Georges Rd. They leave a litter of chips and profanities in their wake.

\*

The 20s are spent wandering. Two weeks in Vietnam unearth a love for bánh mì served from street-side stalls, vendors waving away swarms of flies as they scrape chicken pâté from repurposed ice-cream containers. Pair the roll with a beer hawked from a lukewarm esky for an afternoon’s entertainment, perched on a stool on the side of the road watching the crowds stream past. Finish off the night with a balloon from the back of the menu for a little laughter and a head rush that roars through the ears.

Vietnam opens up South-East Asia, three months spent backpacking across Thailand to find the world’s finest gaeng daeng – ladled steaming onto white rice from a window in a wall. The chef, in her 90s, runs an exclusive restaurant with no seating and shared cutlery – when he finishes eating, she shakes the final drops of curry on to the street and loads the bowl up for the next patron. She works with a ‘one pot – one shift’ system – cooking up a large pot in the morning and doling it out in bowlfuls until the pot is empty. Then she closes the window and goes home.

Three months stretches out to six months – travelling across Laos for raw larb, back through Vietnam for a week-long homestay where he learns to make pho from scratch, and on into China. Internet rumours lead to a forbidden festival in Yulin, then north to Sichuan Province where he packs his bag full of dried

cháotiānjiāo and huājiāo, only for them to be confiscated by Australian Border Force on the flight home. He brings home memories of the perfect gōngbǎojīdīng with a tang of vinegar sourness and a tingling numbness that spreads from the tongue to the lips.

\*

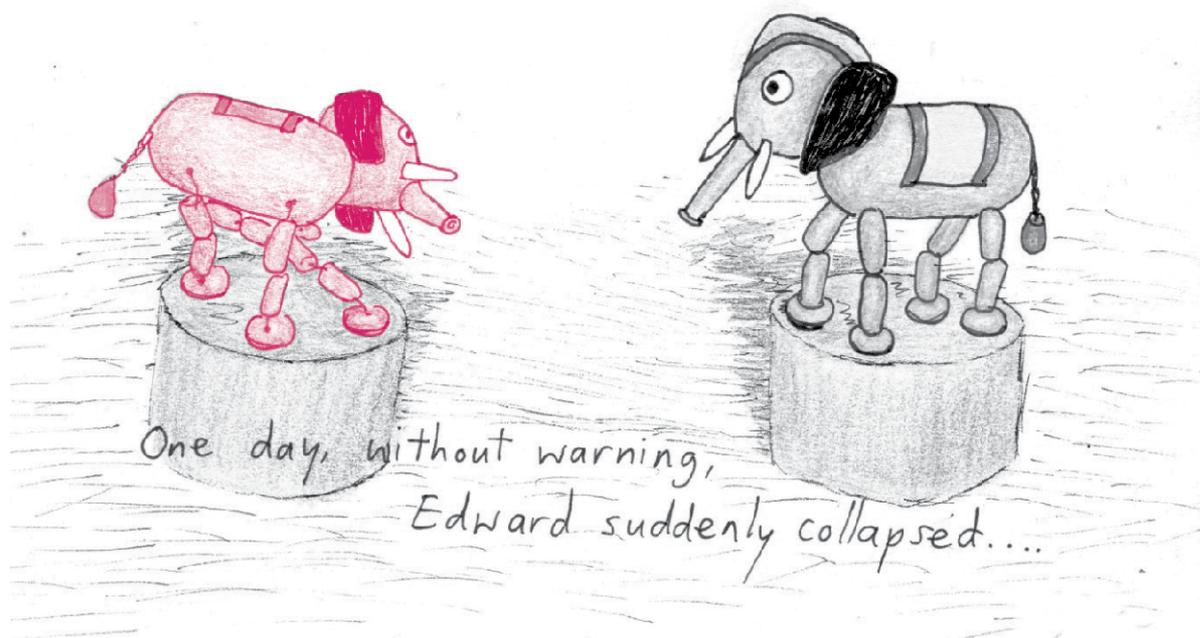
Damien moves to Norway for love and smalahove and six months later I find a Tupperware container in the freezer with a handwritten note taped to the top.

*authentic stock*

I put it on the bench to defrost and email him, asking for instructions on what to do with this stock. My phone buzzes in the darkness at 4 a.m., midday his time. He talks till dawn, and when he hangs up my head is filled with 40 years of flavours.

## OH NO

Sofia Chapman



## MANAGING EDITORS

**Maddee Clark** is a Yugambah writer, editor and curator. His essays and other writings have been published in avenues such as *ABC*, *Sydney Review of Books*, *SBS*, *Overland*, and *The Lifted Brow*. He has previously edited for *Un* magazine, *Liminal*, and *Archer*.

**Jinghua Qian** (ey/eir/em) has been a performance poet, a radio broadcaster, a journalist, and an arts critic. Eir work appears in *Overland*, *Meanjin*, *Peril*, *The Guardian*, *The Saturday Paper*, and on ABC TV's *China Tonight*. Jinghua has edited for a wide range of literary and news publications and judged poetry for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. [jinghuaqian.com](http://jinghuaqian.com)

## WORKING GROUP

**Becki Bouchier** is a Singaporean/Australian fiction writer and filmmaker based in Naarm/Melbourne. Her debut play *Chasing Yesterday*, which she wrote and directed, performed to a sold-out season at the 2019 Melbourne Fringe. Her 2018 short film *Big and Tall and Hairy* won Best Film and Best Director at the 48 Hour Film Festival in Melbourne. Becki has been accepted into the Australian Writer's Guild's prestigious Pathways program with two television pilot screenplays, and her short story 'Jogging at Night' was published in *n-SCRIBE 2020*. [beckibouchier.com](http://beckibouchier.com)

**Bella Battersby** (they/them) is a Melbourne-based writer, currently finishing their BA in Creative Writing at RMIT. Next year, they will begin their Honours specialising in psychogeography and feminist non-fiction. They recently took out the 2020 Darebin Mayor's Writing Award and are on this year's *Voiceworks* editorial team for digital content. [bellabattersby.github.io](http://bellabattersby.github.io)

**Ellen Muller** is a Reservoir-based writer. Her writing has appeared in *Frankie*, *Salty*, *ACMI* and *Overland* among others and she keeps a satirical literature blog called *Poe's Very Attractive Cousin*.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Alexander Langsam** studied Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne, and has published writing in foreign affairs magazine *The Generation*, film criticism for online magazine *Rough Cut* and non-fiction essays in online magazine *Agora*.

**Alida Galati** is a librarian, enthusiastic reader and short story writer who lives and works in Melbourne on Wurundjeri land. New to fiction writing, she's had two stories published since 2020.

**Angela Costi** grew up in Melbourne's northern suburbs. Her fifth poetry collection is *An Embroidery of Old Maps and New* (Spinifex, 2021) which includes site-based poems about Reservoir and Coburg.

**Annaliese Forde** is a creative writer working and living on Wurundjeri country. She writes fiction and creative non-fiction and is currently completing a BA in Creative Writing at RMIT.

**Annelise Balsamo** has had stories published in *The Sleepers Almanac*, *Here Comes Everyone*, *Southerly* and the World War One anthology *An Outbreak of Peace*.

**Benjamin Rendell** writes neat little things sometimes while studying ecology and philosophy. A poem of his about an echidna was published in *n-SCRIBE* in 2014.

**Bridget Hiho** is an English teacher in the northern suburbs. Working remotely during lockdown has given her the opportunity to develop her writing practice and submit for publication for the first time.

**Catherine Reidy** grew up in Darebin and has recently returned to the area. She writes creative non-fiction and is working on a collection of short stories.

**Damon Chester** is a young creative who recently moved to Darebin from Western Sydney. In his spare time, he enjoys writing poetry and being immersed in nature as much as possible.

**Dianne Millett** writes short fiction and poetry and has studied Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT University. Her work is published here and overseas. She has lived in Northcote longer than any place.

**Gino Tomisich** lives and works in Preston. He has been published previously in *n-SCRIBE*.

**HAL** is an AI robot from the year 3021. He looks forward to learning more about human life in 2021.

**Jamie Kemp** likes to write sometimes.

**Jan Martin** has always been interested in writing and recently completed a memoir of her mother.

**Jes Layton** is a writer and artist with work found scattered about online and in print including in *Underdog* (Nero Books, 2019) and *Growing Up in Country Australia* (Black Inc, 2022).

**Jessica Carey** is a tea drinker, (grounded) traveller, mum, and storyteller. She's inexplicably keeping her spontaneously purchased COVID-19 houseplants alive, and has featured in publications including *n-SCRIBE 2020* and *Mamamia*.

**Kurt Johnson** is an environmental journalist working in health in the Asia Pacific. He lives in Northcote, above the plaza, with his dog Chutney.

**Kathryn James** is a Darebin-based writer, editor and international development professional. Having lived in Darebin for many years and with strong ties here, she is excited to support opportunities for diverse local writers through involvement in *n-SCRIBE*. She is studying Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT University, and her work has appeared in *n-SCRIBE* and *Overland* online.

**Lauren Elizabeth** is a freelance writer and editor based in Melbourne. She is excited to be back for her third year with *n-SCRIBE* and to be inspired by the stories of her community. She has a Master of Writing and Publishing from RMIT and works with the boutique publisher Laneway Press. You can find out more about her work at [patrikapublishing.com](http://patrikapublishing.com)

**Nathan Mifsud** is a writer and scientist whose work has appeared in *Cordite*, *The Suburban Review* and *Voiceworks*, among others.

**Rowan Williams** is a writer and visual artist based in Northcote. He is currently studying Professional Writing & Editing at RMIT.

**Sara Bannister** lives in Reservoir. Her lifelong love of writing has led her to develop this on both a professional and personal level. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism, and Certificate IV in Professional Writing and Editing, both from RMIT. Her fiction and non-fiction has been published in *Kill Your Darlings*, *Visible Ink*, and *Victorian Writer* magazine. She's participated in novelist Antoni Jach's highly regarded masterclass program, and is a member of a Melbourne-based writers group.

**Tharidi Walimunige** (21) is currently undertaking a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne. Her engagement in the fields of creative writing, publishing and editing, and screen studies founds a writing practice of diverse forms and themes. Tharidi nurtures a deep appreciation for fantastical tales, myths and adventures through her poems, short stories, screenplays and reviews. As a Sinhalese Sri Lankan woman, her creative efforts are often also a site for explorations into culture, identity and representation.

**Lucy Roleff** is an artist, musician and writer living in Thornbury. Her work explores notions of beauty, purpose and the nature of desire.

**Mark Miljons-Rostoks** is a larrikin, an undeniable fighter. He is an ACIM student, an adventurer, and a sneaker collector. Oh, and he's a quadriplegic too. His dream is to one day get better and ride a bicycle around Australia.

**Mary Glykokalamos** is a lawyer turned freelance writer. Her works have been published in *n-SCRIBE*, *Beat* magazine, *the Leader*, and the newspaper *Neos Kosmos*.

**Megan Howden** is a Darebin resident frantically writing in the scraps of time offered up while her children sleep. She is fuelled by coffee and sunshine.

**Monica Sestito** is a student in Italian literature and an activist with published pieces in *Overland* and *Farrago*. This piece on migration is largely inspired by her childhood experiences in Darebin.

**Nathan Power** experiments in the worlds of music, text and performance art, but is mostly known as a folk musician.

**Nichola Tatyana** crafts visions of symbiosis, paralysis and paradox as compassionate and cathartic companions. Her poetry has been published in *Phantasmagoria* magazine and exhibited at the George Paton Gallery.

**Osvaldo Quintanilla** was born in a small town near the Andes in Chile and moved to Melbourne at the age of five. He has written screen plays, short films, short stories and non-fiction.

**Peter Matthews** is a lawyer and poet. He had a poem published in last year's *n-SCRIBE*.

**Sanam Maner** is a nature lover, clumsy teacher, hesitant writer and believer in the power of words to bring about a change.

**Sandy Caldwell** is a visual artist and poet who works across various mediums including ceramics, sculpture, photography, public art and poetry. She is interested in incorporating language into visual art.

**Sofia Chapman** has written and co-produced numerous plays at La Mama, published poems, short stories and radio plays and is a professional accordionist with the band Vardos.

**Steph Amir** is a Writeability Fellow at Writers Victoria, with a background in research and policy. Her creative work has been published in Australia and internationally. She lives in Preston.

**SV Plitt** is a tram driver and student of Associate Degree in Writing and Editing at RMIT. Their work was shortlisted in the 2018 Odyssey House short story prize.

**Tallulah McKenzie** is an emerging writer studying film. She predominantly writes screenplays but started exploring prose and poetry in lockdown as an expression of her discomfort with her current reality.

**Tehya Nicholas** is a writer, recovering actor, upcoming RMIT grad and has been published in *Slinkies* (Spineless Wonders, 2020).

**Terry Donnelly** is an award-winning writer and teacher who lives in Northcote. He has a number of unpublished manuscripts and is patiently awaiting interest and offers from the publishing industry.

**Zelda Harper-Balsamo** is a novice writer who mainly works in the field of scripts and comics.



**Darebin  
Arts**