

n-SCRIBE

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Foreword by Wayne Macauley

CONTRIBUTORS

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Oliver Coulter traded kitchens and cheffing for the job security of creative writing. He was shortlisted for the Darebin Mayor's Writing Award 2016 and had his work has been produced by Radio National.

FOREWORD

Wayne Macauley

As one of the judges for the 2016 Darebin Mayor's Writing Award, I was afforded a wonderful snapshot of new writing being made on the northern edges of Melbourne. This writing was often celebrating the place in which it was created, either looking melancholically back, nervously forward or with a straight-shooting eye for the here and now. But what struck me most was the extraordinary variety of voices on offer.

So too here. In this anthology you will encounter all kinds of voices, styles and forms, but all with the common thread of coming out of a particular community.

The variety is impressive: poems, flash fiction, short stories and everything in between. In an anthology emerging out of a particular geographical area it is reasonable to expect common themes to emerge, and this is also true here. I found it interesting, for example, that nostalgia figures often, not always for a better time but certainly a different one. It is a fact that our suburbs, and particularly our inner suburbs, have changed, the culture of gentrification being often built over the bones of the old working class one that preceded it. In Andrew Brion's poem, *Home*, for example, we glimpse for a moment the old Fitzroy over which the new one has been layered and in Gino Tomisich's portrait of an Italian migrant family, *Alf*, we recall a culture once found behind many front fences in the North. In the works of Vashti Kenway and Maggie Jankuloska, too, we have a looking back and a sense of sadness at times past.

But there is a lot of looking forward, too. One theme that threads its way through a number of works is a concern for the future, and particularly our environmental future. Julia Grieves' poem, *Archiving*, in which 'Another frog hops off the edge of continent', worries its way around these questions while Michelle Helliwell's wonderfully succinct four-line poem, *Gone*, gives it to us straight. Another noteworthy piece is Siobhan Kavanagh's *The Expansion*, a speculative work that offers a disturbing view of a bureaucratic Australia trying – and noticeably failing – to deal with the massive global movement of peoples. In one particular line Kavanagh captures both the horror and absurdity of the situation: 'Police are called to a park in Sydney where a woman is digging her own grave.'

But then, beyond the thematic, there are many works here that impress in their own right. Oliver Coulter's *Uncle Monti*, for example, with its simple, understated humanity; Ron West's microfiction, *Three Minutes*, with its lyrical and often moving use of language; or Kathryn Goldie's *The Fairy Tale*, a brief hymn to disappointment. I also enjoyed for very different reasons the ingenious experiments of Carl Walsh – *Fictionary* and *Searching for Words* – and the playful poem *The Powers* by TTO..

In short, the diversity here is impressive and, to take a metaphor from Kaye Roberts-Palmer's yarn-bombing story, *The Web*, we also find common threads that bind. In a world grown increasingly homogenous, where individual voices are often subsumed beneath a barrage of white noise, writing is and should remain a celebration of difference. It is heartening to see writing at 'the village level' that so strongly celebrates the individual voices out of which a community is made.

WORKING GROUP

Anita Smith is a RMIT PWE graduate, winner of the *WRAP* Synopsis Prize and was awarded The Eleanor Dark Flagship Varuna Residential Fellowship for a fiction application of outstanding quality in 2016.

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Laura Brinson is a seamstress and funeral celebrant. She writes poetry and prose. Her work has appeared in *n-SCRIBE 10*, *Regime*, *Social Alternatives*, *Mark My Words* and *page seventeen*.

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Kaye Roberts-Palmer is a creative writer who adores the story short and is passionate about poetry, finding inspiration from daily life.

Mitchell Welch is a writer originally from Queensland, editor and cemetery administrator whose work has been published in a range of publications.

Samantha Jones, Melbourne based arts and human rights writer with reviews published in *The Big Issue* and *Right Now Inc*. Doubling as a communications professional by day and 80's dance troupe performer by night.



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n-SCRIBE is a collection of new works from writers who, live work or study in the City of Darebin. A project of the Creative Culture Department, Darebin City Council. Information, past editions can be found at our website.

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Some works contain language which may offend.

HOT AIR

Vashti Kenway

Abdul Emmanuel Akol thought he heard his wife's voice as he stood waiting to cross the street. The plastic shopping bags were heavy in each hand. But he closed his eyes and stilled himself. He heard her breathing heavily like hot wind in his ears. He felt the air about him change current. His skin itched with anticipation and, just as he became convinced she was there, standing close, he remembered.

He opened his eyes and looked carefully left then right. Cars screamed by. He ventured a hesitant foot to the edge of the curb and then, as though testing boiling water, withdrew it rapidly and stood still. The heat wrapped itself tight around him and he breathed out.

He looked up at his house, sitting squat in the evening. He counted the years he had lived there. Almost twenty.

There were polite neighbors and doors that locked. Here, blood could easily be staunched with tissues and Band-Aids and a kiss.

They had arrived in a heatwave.

Amira had left in a heatwave.

When they arrived, the house had glistened, sweated with new paint. Lawn clipped. Path swept. Promise whispered from behind clean curtains.

It was so different from Home. Home had been rubble and pain and fear.

Here there were shiny taps and daily newspapers and regular mail. Here there were aisles of food and timely trains and breakfast in the morning and dinner at night. There were polite neighbors and doors that locked. Here, blood could easily be staunched with tissues and Band-Aids and a kiss.

But now the house was crumbling and Amira was gone.

The cars rapidly banked up in both directions, so Abdul crossed, concentrating. One foot after another. He couldn't afford another old man mistake.

He avoided the eyes behind the wheels.

He turned left up the path, under the cypress, to his porch. There was a crack in the plaster and brickwork: a wobbly smile. He shuffled inside and let the wire door slam. David was home.

'Dad?'

'Yes'

'Did you get the shopping?'

'Yes'

Abdul put the bags on the kitchen bench. David began unpacking them.

Abdul opened the fridge and the phone began to ring.

Neither father nor son moved.

Abdul turned.

'Will you get it?'

Finally David picked up.

Abdul turned, opened the freezer and felt the frigid air cool the planes of his face. He listened to David. His voice had become deeper recently. Rough, unused. Was he only quiet at home? Abdul realised he rarely saw David's friends anymore. Was he ashamed? Was he lonely? Was he content being alone?

'Who is this?'

Pause

'Oh. What is it? What do you want?'

Another silence. Longer.

'Right. OK. Yes. We can come tomorrow.'

He hung up.

'Who was it?'

'They found Mum.'

Abdul exhaled. Shrivelled.

The humming of the fridge grew louder. A train outside crossed the bridge and turned. Metal bending, screeching. The cicadas beat faster, angrier.

'Where?'

'I don't know. They wouldn't say.
I have the address here.'

Abdul turned blankly to David and stared between them.

'I knew I heard her breathing.'

UNCLE MONTI

Oliver Coulter

Coloured lights bound the synthetic tree. Red, blue, pink. Fanned across the plasterwall. The drooping lights smiled on and off; blown-out bulbs like rotted teeth.

The woman didn't smile back.

She sweated. Behind her knees, against the cushion. Peering up at the ceiling, she spotted an old bit of tinsel stuck up there. Probably from last year. She laughed as she took a sip from her drink; it came out as a snort.

Carols played on the TV. The girls lay on their stomach, legs curled back like mermaids. Faces lit by blue flicker. The woman dragged on her cigarette but it'd burned out.

She lit another and looked out the window. But there was nothing there. Only black. Like a shade pulled down against the light.

She stood up, stumbling, grabbing the coffee table to steady herself. She was drunker than she realised. The girls hadn't even stirred, conditioned to clattering noises. Broken plates, shifting furniture, misplaced footsteps.

In the kitchen, she fixed herself another drink.

The ice tinkered in her glass as she sat. 'Time for bed,' said the woman.

The girls pretended not to hear.

'Bed.'

The older girl arched her back like a cat. 'You said we could open a present.'

'I said maybe.'

'So can we?'

She tinkered the ice in her glass. 'I'm still deciding.'

The older girl removed her mother's slippers and began massaging her feet. Her little sister copied.

'I dunno,' said the woman. 'This feels like a trick.'

They smiled. Little fingers making little circles.

'Ok. One,' said the woman. 'And I mean one.'

They dropped her feet and rushed for the tree. 'You're gonna make some man's life hell one day.'

'Which one should we open?'

'Open one from Uncle Monti,' said the woman.

They unwrapped their present from Uncle Monti. Identical dolls, encased in plastic. That synthetic smell, like new car. A single expression painted on the dolls faces. Happy yet neutral – something that could fit every occasion.

Must've been a 2-for-1, thought the woman. At least there'd be no fights.

'Is Uncle Monti sleeping over?'

The woman brushed fallen ash from the armrest. 'Why?' she said.

'I want to give him a kiss.'

Scar-tissue had formed across the couch from years of cigarette burns. 'That's a good girl,' said the woman.

'So is he?'

'Maybe,' said the woman, taking a gulp. It burned, but was going down easier now. 'What's their names?'

'Pea,' said the younger girl.

'That sounds rude,' said her sister.

'No, like pea in a pod,' she said, looking at her doll. 'Pea, I'm your mama. And that's my mama.' Holding up the doll, she waved its plastic arm up and down at the woman.

The woman had lost count of her drinks, her eyes taking in as much as the dolls. They turned and watched

the TV for a while. Five faces lit up in aquamarine blue.

The woman looked out the window again.

'Who's out there?'

'No one,' said the woman.

'Is it Santa?'

'Yeah,' said the woman, finishing her drink, 'It's Santa. So time for bed.'

'Can we watch the rest?'

'No.'

'Can we watch one more song?'

The woman looked at the girls.

'Ok. One more song.'

The woman watched the carols and didn't look out the window again. She remembered sitting on Santa's lap for a photo once. She couldn't remember what she wished for then either.

Carols played on the TV. The girls lay on their stomach, legs curled back like mermaids. Faces lit by blue flicker.

LOVELORN WITH LOVECRAFT

Ken Gardner

Down in the dumps romantically? Maybe you need the love doctor himself. H.P is the master of Lovecraft.

Dear H.P,

My boyfriend and I have been together two years now and I feel we are growing apart. In the beginning he was very affectionate and would leave work early to meet me and would leave me little notes here and there, but now it's like he hardly notices me. How do I re-kindle the passion we felt for each other when we first met? Or is this just an inevitable stage in any relationship, where passion is swapped for the deeper intimacy of comfort?

Signed, Missing the Kissing (Belgrave, Victoria).

Dear 'MtK',

I have pondered your problem for what seems a millennia. Since man was first spit from the razor beak of the mighty cephalopods, our brittle-lipped pleas have rung out against an empty sky. As clouded days burst into comet-streaked nights and we slaved to the kings of the forbidden mastabas, the drums, taut from human skin pounding a mad, death-echo, I beg of you, do not allow the octopus king! Do not uncrack the light from its fetid door!

Dear H.P,

Is it natural to look at porn? I've found myself looking at more and more porn recently and am worried I need it to be aroused. I have been in a steady relationship with a great girl for some time now who has no idea I'm doing this and I'm scared that confessing might make her leave me. Do you think I have a problem or do you think that porn can have a place in a modern relationship?

Signed, Secret Surfer (Epping, NSW)

Dear Mr. Surfer,

you are not alone in your dilemma, for it is one which is shared by all human beings and is entirely natural.

However I

must correct you, the word is spelt 'pawn'. Yes we are all pawns of the many - tentacled dark gods on which the universe creaks like a sinister playground ride. It is sustaining and parasitic, it is the mother and the suckling. It is a star-feeder, unquenchable, unimaginable and unmentionable in any anthropomorphic tongue. Yes you are a pawn, but like all of us you must allow the game to be played, as resistance will erode the blessed ignorance that disallows the black screams of time and space to shatter all you have come to believe you are. I hope this answers your question.

Dear H.P,

Why can't I find love? I have never had a boyfriend, and while my friends and parents are constantly consoling me and say to be patient, several million years have passed now and I feel my best years are behind me.

I'm told I'm not unattractive. I am of a vague humanoid shape and still boast a healthy head of tentacles. I know men can be intimidated by my height, but I'm very sensitive to this and never wear heels. Have you any advice?

Signed, Long-Time Lonely (Arkham, New England).

Dear Lonely,

From your description and the pictures you have sent (please understand, these cannot be printed here)

I am at a loose end why you are not happily ensconced with another. I can only tell you that humans are fools, feeble drones that swarm like the most wretched of insects under the thumbnail of incredible might. But take heart my dear, if your contact details are correct, I'm sure you will be hearing from someone soon.

(H.P Lovecraft will be on extended leave as of next week. Please address your letters to 'Lovelorn with Lovecraft' to E.A. Poe).

THE CHEF AND THE CRITIC

Brooke Edwards

It was an exercise in thoroughness. I had looked through several blogs, consulted old recipe books, the bunch of magazine pages filed away and the recipes sent by my girlfriends. I created a top five, then carefully balanced nutritional information and tastiness. I finally selected the meal, one I could tell would wow the critic.

I spent the morning at the local farmers' market searching for the ingredients.

I was lured by the smell of warm bread to the baker's stall. The baker had a tasteful dusting of flour through her hair. I sampled the lovely fresh, warm, gluten-free sourdough. I bought the light rye instead.

I wandered over to the bearded man in overalls who sold organic, grass-fed, free-range beef from a little wooden stall. The straw artfully decorating the wooden crates completed the farmyard illusion. It also helped to justify paying five dollars more than the store next to him. It was worth it.

I looked over the fruit and vegetables with a keen eye. Moving from organic stall to organic stall, I considered each of the items on my list. I marvelled at the choices at the specialty potato stall. King Edward, the creamy white ones. Kipflers, with their delightful waxiness. Then the Sebagos, recommended by the best chef's for create a light and fluffy mash. I weighed my decision carefully and went with the chefs' recommendation. I chose the ones with the most dirt on them. Obviously, the more dirt the better.

It was time to consider the avocados. Colour was important, but so was how they felt. I picked one up. I gently squeezed it to make sure

I chose only the plumpest and the ripest, like I saw on the blog post. I perused the tomatoes and chose the vine ripened ones. I then selected the 'carrotiest' of the carrots.

Pleased with my choices, I consulted my list for the last item: apples. To be sustainable, I went for the slightly misshapen ones with a few more spots than the supermarket ones normally have. They were, of course, more expensive, but this proved they were all handpicked down the road – about four hours away. They must be the sweetest and juiciest ones. I loaded all of my purchases into the bags I'd handwoven. None of the old green supermarket bags for me.

I cleaned, washed, strained, diced, sautéed, steamed, simmered and mashed. It seemed as if I had used most of the kitchen appliances I owned, including all the attachments for the blender. The kitchen looked a mess and I had a sink full of dishes but I'd done it. It had taken all afternoon but I'd created a meal of hearty, nutritious deliciousness.

*The moment had come.
My guest – the critic – sat impatiently.*

I presented the meal. It was complex. The first plate was a slow cooked beef ragu that had been bubbling away for two hours. It contained six vegetables and five herbs freshly picked from the garden pots near the back door. I served it with roasted potato mash and carrots twice cooked.

The second plate was the tactile experience. I had created beef, apple and quinoa superfood balls with a home-made guacamole sauce. It was also low salt and no sugar.

The critic took the first spoonful of the ragu, spat it out and stared at me.

I encouraged her to try another spoonful.

The critic swatted the spoon away and on to the floor. She shook her head and buttoned her lip. She reached for the bowl, grasped it in her little hands, bobbed up and down in her high chair and dropped the whole thing onto the floor.

I offered her the superfood balls. She took the first one and squashed it onto her tray. With the next she threw it hard against the wall. Meanwhile, her other hand smeared the guacamole all over her high chair tray.

I looked at my creations splattered over the tiles and the walls, then back to the critic's screwed up face.

She blew a raspberry at me and then gave me a gummy grin.

I walked back to the kitchen and reached for a tea towel. After silently howling into it, I turned round to face my critic.

'Toast! Toast!' she cried, banging her spoon and fork together.

I smiled ruefully, reached for the rye bread and put it into the toaster.

At least there was one thing from the markets the critic would eat.

THE POWERS

TT.O

5 to the power of 2.

5 to the power of 3. (Not a single power of 4th degree). Mind the powers.

Multiply the 2s. (Multiples of 3). (Multiples of 4). (Multiples of twins, triplets, and higher orders of 34). An exponent tells you how many times you have to sweep the floor.

Enduring Power of Attorney: All to Her.

2 kids raised to a power of 4 (raised to a 4th) shoot for goal, and score a point. The control of a minor power is a footnote to a 4th. A power of 2, doubles up against a door. A power of 33 swarms to 134. (5 to a 3). (5 to a 4). (Multiples of 3). (Multiples of 4).

A minor-3rd to a power of 4. Along comes a 4 star General on a Horse: $5 \times 5 \times 5 \times 5 \times 5$ and an imaginary number drops down thru the floor. (8 to a 3) (8 to a 4). (6 to a square). (5 to a door).

8 complicates the plural form — complicates the walk.. Mind the number. Mind the power! Mind the trees.

A crowd crowds around the 3.33333...

The first power of 3, is 3. Article 33: Covert operations by Police. (Test out “water-boarding” skills).

A's influence over B is C, C's influence of D: G#, D.

A power of 6 is a power of 3. Change all the buttons on your sleeve. A multiple orgasm triggers

a multiple response. “5” → powers across the board → !

Any number raised to a power of 1, is itself. (Example 68: 45.6666666...). No greater power hath man than “3”.

The higher the number, the faster the train.

Express the number of powers, by the number of guns:

X X X X*

THE FUTURE

David Spitzkowsky

his spine – i could write a book about it
the animal arches
bony prominence and the field,
how the flesh lay.

and always
flexing
with the breath,
constantly
adjusting to the future.

so i try to tell him about his spine, that perfect Melbourne
March night
about his beauty
and his provenance,
my lover
turning in the
hotel glass sky
white on white
the sound of sheets
and him saying —
it doesn't get much better than this

THE MARTINEZ MANIFESTO

Siana Einfeld

The day the Martinez family home burned down, Carmen mourned. For her library, her dazzling flamenco dresses and her lovingly tended rose garden.

However, it was ‘The Martinez Ladies’ Manifesto’ that caused mascara to stain her perfectly powdered cheeks; a manifesto that had been passed down from mother to daughter for the last fifteen generations. It had meant that wherever the Martinez women went, from Madrid to Melbourne, they had been the most sought-after and revered. Martinez women always kept their name and they always had one daughter.

This family bible included the art of enchanting conversation, seductive dance and a myriad of diligently guarded secrets. There were recipes with magical properties – to increase ardor in the old, cool it in the young, ignite pleasure or induce melancholia. There were soups that would comfort the afflicted and those that would afflict the comfortable. Carmen did not know that a black magic spell had been placed when the compilation first began.

Having studied its contents since she was a child, Carmen knew many sections by heart – but every generation had added a lifetime of confidences – so it was impossible to recapture the whole book. Carmen wept inconsolably over the loss of this treasured artifact.

Of course, she knew who had burned down the house. The Baudin-Martinez family rivalry could be traced back as long as the manifesto. In 1667, King Louis XIV chose Adora Martinez as his courtesan over Fleur Baudin – considered at the time the ‘French National Treasure’. The feud lasted until present day; the Baudin’s message to ‘Get revenge and get the Book’ passed down through the female line of descent. To escape the feud, the Martinez women came to Melbourne where they opened a restaurant based on the family recipes and performed Flamenco to fervent admirers. Their fame spread and the Baudin sisters flew to Melbourne to fulfill the family destiny.

It was the third generation that finally located the Manifesto. When news hit the radio that Colette Baudin had scored a five million dollar publishing deal for her new book ‘The Baudin Sisters’ Secrets – From King Henry IV to today’, Carmen raised an immaculately penciled eyebrow.

To celebrate their deal, the Baudin sisters made Schadendfreude Soup – ‘To be shared when you have triumphed over your enemies’. This was the thirteenth recipe in the manifesto and as any Martinez woman knew, comprised of complex poison.

Later that evening Carmen wound her fingers around the serpent knocker of the Baudin Manor. After being met with peculiar silence, she picked the lock with her ruby hairpin, and eased the door open.

It was easy for Carmen to retrieve the book from Collette’s fingers once dainty, now twisted in rigor mortis, as the three sisters lay with their heads on the table. Even in death, their frozen features were contorted in agony.

A week later, as the Baudin sisters were laid to rest, Carmen performed at the Darebin Music Festival with the spirit of fifteen Martinez generations inside her.

HOME

Andrew Brion

As I walk through Fitzroy North
There's a rundown weatherboard hosting rusty downpipes
Single fronted, topped with a peeling corrugated roof;
Old aluminium window frame from a sixties reno'
Letting north-westerly light creep miserly through the old worker's cottage
As it waits in vain to be re-stumped.
Behind the low brick wall painted a thick, thick, many-coated cream,
Now chipped and crumbling against the tiny, leaning wrought-iron gate,
Straggly thin roses feebly attempt decoration in the small and rough front garden.
A cracked uneven concrete path filled with reedy seedy grass,
And a thin verandah with maroon-painted stone-dimpled floor.

The afternoon is languid, warm and still; the street strangely quiet and empty
A feeble tongue of wind chills the spine; shivers and ripples the flimsy veil of time.
And suddenly there are faint cries of children from the cobbled alley behind
Scuffed knees, scuffed shoes, scuffed clothes,
The slam of a dunny door and a blur of flies
A strong bronzed man standing in the doorway
Blue singleted, not long since spirited from Piraeus to Station Pier
A pretty dark-haired woman harvesting tomatoes
As she did on the Mediterranean island of her birth
A vine tumbling crazily over the backyard fence,
An olive tree, and little care for either Menzies or the Communists.

And now I know, I know, that when I passed along the street so many times
The old emaciated woman, the black-dressed giagia who sat out in the sun
On the wooden seat beneath the rickety verandah
The battered transistor radio playing 3XY
She sat there to remember, to hear her children's cries
To think she felt the shadow, heard the footfall, of her husband once again
Lost in the whispering echoes of the years
Happy memories and sad.

I snap back to the present
And there are three smart-dressed real estate agents
Standing under the run down porch
'A great opportunity to renovate, or demolish and rebuild'
And a man with greying, fading hair and a dark Greek-lettered T-shirt
Scratching his head, puzzled and confused,
Remembering where he learnt to ride a bike
The rough face of his father
His mother seeing him off to school
Sunny days in Fitzroy North
And home.

DEAD CAT

Maggie Jankuloska

‘Where are the kittens?’ I asked and searched my uncle’s dusty yard. The three sleepy kittens were nowhere to be seen. Their ginger mother reclined on the stairs, soaking up the morning sunshine.

‘Maybe he’s gone through with his plan, he’s thrown them away,’ Valentina saddened. Although she was younger than me, she was my companion all summer, her hair as lice-infested as mine and her cheeks were rosy and cherubic.

‘No. He couldn’t, even if he did, we will find them and bring them back.’ I defended my uncle, refusing to believe he could be callous enough to throw out three babies. I was not giving up on Napoleon, Figaro and Vivaldi, the three kittens with gargantuan, dramatic names.

Our time was limited; the search had to be postponed until the end of the school day. I put on my tartan skirt and tucked in my creased shirt. A slice of bread smothered in hot ajvar awaited me and tried not to smear it on my books. The textbooks were a new edition, printed for the new grade-one students, white-washing any lingering traces of the Communist ideology which lasted over forty years. Stories of partisan bravery, the red star and the red flag were trounced, by something new and uncertain. Yugoslavia crumbled; Macedonia had gained its fragile independence, while the other Balkan countries ravaged each other.

Valentina and I were punctual and arrived as the janitor fed the hungry classroom furnace with logs. He lifted up the stove plate and dropped in a log. Sparks flew like demons. The same furnace melted my jacket

sleeve the previous winter and I stayed away from it, even in winter.

In the classroom, ominous posters stared down at us; the faces of unfamiliar and sweat-covered, American singers. They were draped in youth and excess. Next to their image were enlarged needles and spoons, with thick bubbling syrup. In Cyrillic writing the poster asked: *where are they now?* Where were the colourful faces, what happened to them? What could make a scary needle and gunk-filled spoons so deadly and so alluring? More importantly, why was the poster aimed to scare village children, like us? What did we have in common with the faces on the posters?

It was Monday morning and as the hygiene monitor, I had work to do before the teacher’s arrival. It was a heavy responsibility inspecting children’s cleanliness. I checked if their finger nails were clipped, if their hands were clean and if they’d brought a handkerchief from home. I marked their names with a tick or cross and reported my finding to our teacher. I tried to be fair and made sure students were not passing the same handkerchief around. I tried not to excuse my close friends and I was fair, like King Solomon.

Yet, that morning I was distracted. My thoughts were with those poor kittens. Were they hungry and crying for their mother? Did my uncle dump them in the marshland like he threatened? Would I have time to visit the marshland before returning home? I was scared I would sink in the boggy waters, just as Risto almost sank in his family’s outhouse. His grandmother yanked him out, before he completely submerged. He came

out covered in his family’s faeces. It could have been worse; he could have perished and become a cautionary tale; the boy who fell in the toilet.

Our teacher was a nationalist zealot, often absent if his political party had small victories. That day his mood was merry, he dragged his feet and started dozing off by the furnace. We knew better than to snicker or wake him, so we worked in silence. He was renowned for his slaps, blows which echoed in the classroom, loud enough to wake the dead. The unlucky ones bore a red mark on their face for the whole day. Our parents knew it could be worse; they were educated by similar sadists and tyrants. No one expected village children or their parents to voice protest; the teacher’s governance was unquestioned. We were his prey.

Valentina and I met at lunchtime at the local shop. The shop owner was selling cheap sandwiches with ham past its use-by-date. My parents were aware of his meat suppliers and forbid me from buying lunch from him, but Valentina purchased a sandwich and was eating it greedily. She seldom had enough money to buy lunch and I knew it was best not to ruin her appetite. Perhaps her ham was not expired. The sandwiches were tempting, made of half a loaf of bread and swimming in tomato sauce. I watched my friend eat it with zeal and gulped, settling for my sesame bagel.

‘After our music lesson we will run to the marshes,’ I commanded, although she did not share my mettle. ‘I will let you keep Figaro if you come with me. He’s the cutest. We must get them, they miss us.’ I begged until she gave in.

The cowbell jingled and we were free from school. I was prepared to arrive home late, but return with the beloved kittens.

Our music lesson was dull. The teacher wore the same flare pants from the 1970s. The older students snickered behind his back for his perpetual bachelorhood. Many had tried to set him up with their elderly aunts. It didn't seem fair to mock him because he had been unlucky in love. He played his red accordion and we half-heartedly sang his dated songs.

The cowbell jingled and we were free from school. I was prepared to arrive home late, but return with the beloved kittens. My parents would surely allow me to keep them after they saw the lengths I went to, I would be their saviour.

As we left the school ground, Valentina's father waited for us with his work truck. Unexpectedly, we had a lift home, but this ruined our rescue mission. Valentina's eyes were deep pools of sadness. We accepted the lift and arrived home at our usual time. She remained in my yard for our customary playtime, but this time we were not jovial. The mother cat was meowing, searching for her lost babies.

'What should we do?' I asked her, although I was the one who usually barked orders.

'We cannot go tomorrow after school. We have choir practice and it gets dark by the time we leave. Cats are smart creatures, they know how to survive. They'll hunt frogs or mice in the marshes.' She has started to parrot my mother's words, words meant to deter me from my mission. I was mad at her, mad because she does not want the kittens as much as I did. I was mad because she was able to be indifferent about the kittens we

looked after since they were born. I knew she was prone to bursting into tears, so I bottled my anger and frowned.

'I miss them,' I admitted and tried to hide my tears and the lump rising in my throat.

'Don't cry, there will be other kittens, the village is full of cats,' she smiled.

'You have a cat, but he's a male.'

'We'll just have to find a female and they'll mate. In a few months they can have a litter and we'll look after their babies. We won't let anyone take them away from us.' Valentina managed to lift my spirits. She was an eternal optimist.

'Perhaps we should make sure your cat doesn't run away like he tends to do. Keep him somewhere safe, until we find him a female.'

We forged our new plans and returned to our homes. I prepared for a looming geography test, memorising names of rivers and mountains in Macedonia. I fell asleep with them on my lips and a hope for having kittens again.

The next morning, Valentina was late. I feared she ran into Boris, a severely disabled boy, older than both of us. He roamed the village streets and younger children were afraid to encounter him. He was tall and his head was misshapen and pinched. He articulated his frustration by hitting the school-children, barely knowing his own strength and their fragility. His parents never sent him to school, mainstream or otherwise, sentencing him as an illiterate invalid from birth.

I climbed up the hill to her house and there she was, sheepishly standing in her yard, facing a tree. Was she daydreaming? Didn't she know we could receive a slap for lateness? I ran to her and my insides froze. She listened to me, listened too well.

Her cat lay dead. She had tied him against a tree, keeping him in place until we found him a mate. The rope had dug into the cat's throat and slashed it open as he tried to wriggle away. I gulped and held her hand.

'I'm so sorry. I'll bury him.' I untied the rope from around his neck and dug a hole with my hands. I dug, my hands in the dry earth, my nails filling with blackness. The hole wasn't big enough and we were running late for school. Valentina's mother emerged from the house and saw the horrid scene.

'Get out! That animal is going to haunt my house now. Go to school, you monsters!' She chased us, not allowing us to bury the dead animal. We ran, tears running down Valentina's face. Guilt was eating her up.

'Don't cry, you didn't do anything wrong. Don't cry. Look I've got enough money to buy both of us lunches today. I'll buy us two sandwiches.' I tried my best to appease her.

'But... you aren't allowed... to eat the sandwiches,' she reminded me in-between sobs.

'No one has to know today.'

HIT THE WALL

Laura Brinson

Spray-can man bombs the place
in subways in laneways
sinuous lines & secret signs
slamming every surface
a message demanding attention

A message demanding attention
an earful
a one-word shout
hitting up the heavens
a gallery on the overpass

A gallery on the overpass
end to end a vacant lot
nothing says abandoned
like a graffitied wall
tagged & trashed & painted over

Painted over
a hundred times
painted over papered posters
painted grey
by a crew in black hoodies

A crew in black hoodies
An all city crew
with paint stained fingers
& orange bollards

Orange bollards
lifted from someplace
lends legitimacy
to a (legal) piece

A legal piece
burning up my wall
my bit of property
masked figures work fast

masked figures working fast
by habit poised to flee
wildstyle colours explode

Spray-can man bombs the place.

THE WEB

Kaye Roberts-Palmer

At midnight, from Kingsbury to Northcote they came.

The nimble fingered weavers, quilters and macramé makers armed with black knitting needles, and a battalion of sewing machines gathering to begin their secret work.

When morning finally broke, yawning residents were confronted by a gigantic homespun web that stretched from the top of Keon Parade to Heidelberg Road, closing municipal borders, cutting off outsiders like the Great Wall of China.

From the footpaths to the treetops, ran highways of fabric, plastic bags, bottle caps, takeaway wrappers, rubber tires, mattresses and other suburban flotsam and jetsam caught and fashioned into a massive multi-coloured barricade.

The web was strung through Merri Creek acacia trees, tied across High Street, hugged numerous electrical poles and blocked lanes of traffic in all directions. Its knots and loops allowed light breezes, happy cyclists, and pensioners with shopping trollies.

On the outside, faced with the world's largest yarn bombing, news helicopters flew furiously following its soft ramparts. Ground forces brandishing scissors, secateurs and toe clippers attacked with gusto but at a single touch their tools became hopelessly snagged.

They upped the ante using welding torches, clouds of dry ice, whipper snippers and hedge clippers but nothing changed a single strand.

Committees were formed, rallies held, protests staged and a Q&A parliamentary session broadcast. The web remained as immovable as the Sphinx.

On the Darebin side, residents became used to the web's constant presence, noticing hidden decorations and hidey holes. Gardeners grew passionfruit and grapes up its ropes, the homeless and hung-over discovered sturdy hammocks, Bellbirds nested in the threads, children clambered through its arches and Nonnas and Papas rested their weary bones in snug pockets.

On the outside, the web's novelty made it an immediate showcase of the Melbourne Arts Festival and a popular tourist destination. Attractive crowds from across the river began to cluster at its fringes, posing for edgy selfies and televised cooking demonstrations. Everyone forgot about Darebin hidden on the other side.

As time went by the web did not change, its novelty wearing out as city life adjusted, traffic found new routes, pedestrians no longer stared. The web became commonplace, as uninteresting as telegraph poles and traffic lights. And when no one was watching anymore the web slowly unravelled, threads loosened and fell like dry leaves blown down the gutters and gathering in litter.

Gradually the outlines of Darebin appeared until there was no trace of the web but gentrification had already raced towards other easier surrounds.

For the remaining residents they discovered down in Darebin's narrow streets, huddled between olive trees and grapevines, strung alongside fences and wrapped around deep verandas, little patches of the web.

For those crafty women had woven at its core the enduring threads of their beloved suburban lives where community still remained strong.

On the Darebin side, residents became used to the web's constant presence, noticing hidden decorations and hidey holes.

CONTROLLING THE PASSIONS

Andrew Brion

She wainscots the rumpled disrespectfulness of her lovers,
Keeps her thrills and pain perfectly coffined. Deadened, and
Controlled behind the sturdiest and finest wood facade:
Out of sight, in her dark and secret place. The
Unsightly agonies and pleasures beautifully boarded up
Behind the grand oak panels of her mind.

The rising damp of rash infatuations crawl
At night, up through unconsciousness, threatens
The fine plaster layer of her brilliant mind, which is best
Reserved for the rough parries and thrusts of her courtroom day; so
Well-dressed and wicked boys must be archived,
Tied up in dreamtime ribboned bundles, in the panels of her mind.

But these are lurking, handsome devils: fantastical
Dreams are warping her nailed down mental boards,
Sweating and muscling them aside. And soon, so soon,
She puts on her weekend dancing dress,
Tosses dark hair, and lusts to peer behind the wainscoting
For raw brickwork, and the rough and terrifying beauty of the face of life.

ARCHIVING

Julia Grieves

Another CSIRO report
We are literally etching out the next geological era.
We are to be archived in the crust
A final tip of the hat to anti-mimesis
Life imitates art
Insofar as postmodernism demanded its focus on spectacle
Its pop-culture of sea level.
The whole thing went meta really.
Another frog species hops off the edge of the continent.

Yesterday gowns of rain hung from furrowed clouds
like a heavy afterthought.
Where does all the grieving go to?

DIRTY LAUNDRY

Jayne Caruso

Through the invisible bars
of my cell window
I gaze at dark clouds
approaching insidiously
as they slowly eclipse
the radiance of the sun

Obscured chains, restrain
I'm doing time, until
the five o'clock
flight of freedom
one eye on the sky
one eye on the screen

I envision my washing
outside on the line
dry, fragrant, vulnerable
boss hisses, phone rings
inmates gossip,
airing dirty laundry

Home time elation
sends me soaring
the journey home, endless
as clouds stalk
thunder roars
rain threatens

Back door swings open
laundry basket in tow
rain starts trickling
pegs fly off the line
the rescuer, the champion
has saved the day

Feelings of jubilation
come to a halt
pegs stop flying
I stand and stare, whimpering
my crisp white sheets, defiled
by a large, anonymous bird

THE EXPANSION

Siobhan Kavanagh

Say you try to stay try to hide you are hit your house is gone they're all gone you know your time is up you see too much so you flee you walk you run your leg doesn't work anymore you hitch you fly you're out of breath you have no chance only this chance you carry the weight of them all you find your may you don't know who to trust you get on the boat you drown you live you're here you exhale too soon you're suffocating now you're waiting and waiting and aimless and bursting with wanting to do something anything just let us be.

It is the end of 2012 and boats are arriving almost daily, the detention centres are full of people and the Government decides to open the gates. Over the next two years, 20,000 people will be released from detention centres into the Australian community, a process which is called, strangely, 'the expansion.' The then Department of Immigration and Citizenship tries to do this as quietly as it can, ever conscious of how public opinion can shut the whole thing down in an instant.

The Department insists there is no change of policy; they are simply 'retrofitting' an existing program run by a NGO to manage 'the expansion.' A small team of social workers in the NGO is advised to prepare for a massive increase in referrals of people being released around Australia. In a matter of weeks, the team has doubled, then tripled and continues to grow, unable to keep pace with the need for more staff and space. They move offices, find more temps (British backpackers, somewhat bewildered by the task at hand); and employ dozens of people who think they are part of something big, a triumph of compassion over cruelty.

For months, names blur and run across computer screens at the national office as a slapdash system is cobbled together.

Eventually there are hundreds of people employed around the country to do this work. For months, names blur and run across computer screens at the national office as a slapdash system is cobbled together. It mostly works, in that people are released, get on a plane or several planes, and end up in emergency accommodation with a meagre living allowance provided and a caseworker assigned to assist them to get a Medicare card, have a health check, find a rental property and do something called 'meaningful engagement' – essentially, Department approved distractions while they wait for an interminable period of time to know if they will be granted refugee status.

There are incessant phone calls and emails and teleconferences with the Department.

- *This week there will be 712. We have to spread them out, we just can't have such big groups arriving at airports. So send some to Canberra, some to Hobart, some to Darwin. They can't all go to Sydney and Melbourne for god's sake.*
- *They can't have anything above 3 stars. What do you mean there is nothing available in Darwin with a kitchenette for under \$100 a night?*
- *We would prefer that you don't place them anywhere near daycare centres, kindergartens or schools.*
- *Tell us when they have moved and where to. Actually, tell us where they're going before they move.*
- *No, they can't go together.*
- *No, unless they know someone they can't choose where they want to go.*
- *They're not actually brothers.*
- *She's over 18, she can go on her own.*
- *We won't be manipulated.*
- *He didn't get on the connecting flight? Let's just see how far he gets.*

In this chaotic operation, things are happening that are strange, unfair, ugly, and despairingly sad. ‘The expansion’ swallows up hopes, talents, failings and names. But they are Amir Ahlam Michael Tran Esmatullah Rashid Fatima Solomon Basra. They are not a mass, a tide, or a horde. There are common denominators that can’t be denied – the elements, strong and pulsating with life.

There is air. Make sure you arrive by air and not by water.

A young man is boarding a small plane in Weipa, near Scherger detention centre, heading to a place called Brisbane and then to a place called Adelaide. He’s been told he will have 6 weeks of accommodation there and then he needs to find a place of his own to rent, but he won’t be allowed to work.

They won’t let him take his oud on board, essential luggage only. He doesn’t understand all their words but the meaning is clear – leave it, and move. He has to tell his fingers to let go of the instrument. He tries to tell himself it’s not worth the fight but if he’s being honest he no longer knows what is worth what, only that he has cared for this oud like his child.

Do they know the oud is as old as time? That it was shaped after the skeleton of Lamech’s son, Lamech the grandson of Adam? That it calmed crying people on the boat, and survived the journey here when people didn’t?

His nerves stretch and snap as he passes the oud to a Department person who places it in a pile of other things that are not allowed to come with them.

For some, flying is still a novelty. They stare out the window at the suspended clouds, the vast blue sky. Another Department person comes around – thankfully no blue shirt, he never wants to see a blue shirt again. The Department person passes each passenger an A4 piece of paper with sticky tape on one end and gives them a marker. They are instructed to write their Boat ID – which they can all do by now, literate or not – and stick the paper on their chest.

They all do as they are told and stick the paper on their chest – chests that are old, young, firm, slack, scarred, proud. Chests that harbour heartbeats, bones and blood. He writes his Boat ID and wishes that he had instead drawn his oud.

They land in Brisbane and descend the stairs onto the tarmac where a Department person is waiting to usher them towards the terminal. She freezes.

Take them off.

Take them off.

Who decided to do this?

There is fire. There are those who will set themselves alight – pouring petrol over their clothes and limbs or, as one young man will decide to do, drinking it and swallowing a flame. He will live.

Then there are two men in a hotel room in Melbourne. They know they can’t afford to keep buying their meals but with no kitchen in the hotel, they are at a loss. They pool their resources to buy a camp stove and some rice and lentils, and cook their simple meal on the floor of the hotel room, singeing the carpet. The fire alarm rings and reception staff race to their room to find them frantically dousing the carpet with water. There are attempts to explain, pleading to allow them to stay – but no, they must leave in the morning. The hotel will refuse to take any more of them.

A young man is boarding a small plane in Weipa, near Scherger detention centre, heading to a place called Brisbane and then to a place called Adelaide.

That night, they lie awake on the single beds in the room, the smell of burnt carpet heavy in the air. Finally, asleep, one man dreams of things on fire, things blazing and soaring into the sky. There are too many children. A cast of them stand at his bedside, even now, even here, their gaze never breaking.

There is water (and as long as we prevent drownings, any other torment is permitted).

A Department public servant calls the NGO national office with an urgent issue – a member of the community has complained that the house next door is full of asylum seekers and they have a pool. She is prepared to go to the media unless something is done about it.

The social worker tries to explain –

You said to send 10% of this week's release to Darwin, which we did. We accommodated them as per policy, no more than 3 stars. This was the only place available at 3 stars or under. And we've managed to get 8 men in there.

It's Darwin. Everywhere has a pool.

No we didn't check first if it had a pool, is that now policy?

What do you want me to do, move them?

You want me to move them.

It's Friday afternoon. The backpackers have already said they won't take them anymore.

Ok, so you're willing for them to be in higher than 3 stars as long as there's no pool? Can I get that in writing?

There is earth. Parts of Australian land are excised from our territory. Police are called to a park in Sydney where a woman is digging her own grave.

And there is a family, a young couple with a girl and a boy, who move into a dilapidated house on the outskirts of Hobart. They were not sure this island was part of Australia but they are assured it is.

It is colder than they ever expected. The couple have heard that some people from their country have been given jobs in dairy farms nearby and they hope that once the children are enrolled in school and settled, the father will go and work there.

In the meantime, his mind and his hope still intact, he plants vegetables in the backyard and tends them daily. But the landlord is unhappy that permission was not sought and they receive a warning from the real estate agent that they can't fully understand.

In the meantime, his mind and his hope still intact, he plants vegetables in the backyard and tends them daily.

They are scared of being evicted so late one night, when the children are asleep, he carefully digs up the seeds and emerging plants and places them in the bin. He smooths the soil over and sits for a while, in the cold, re-imagining.

ALF

Gino Tomisich

Uncle Alf cut the spaghetti with his knife – he couldn't master twirling it around a fork. My brothers and I thought this funny, as to us it was as natural as breathing. Around the table was Mum, Dad, my two brothers; Zio Antonio and Zia Maria, Zio Luciano, Zia Rosa, and Uncle Alf.

Luciano and Rosa weren't real relations but they were Italian: Uncle Alf was neither, so he stood out. Where everyone else had wine in front of them, uncle Alf had his beer, its frothy head touching the top of his glass. We knew beforehand when he was coming over, as dad would come home with beer bottles. Once, I asked my mum why Uncle Alf always came on his own. She told me, he was widowed during the war and that he had a daughter, who was grown up.

When we had family gatherings, the table was alive with talk, with everyone competing to be heard, making it hard to follow conversations. Everyone spoke in Italian, except those next to Uncle Alf. As a courtesy, they'd battle on with heavily accented English. Sometimes, someone ask him what word was there for something, and he would work with them on its pronunciation that they never mastered.

Uncle Alf was one of dad's friends from work. Aside from Merv and Wendy next door, and Bob and Dallas who lived down near the creek, he was the only other Australian who came to visit. Mum said that Uncle Alf liked coming over so he could eat properly; eat some good food instead of the meat (usually mutton) and the three veg (usually boiled) that she considered the nation's dietary staple. 'This is a wonderful country,' my mother would say, 'but they can't cook!'

After the meal, the women cleared the table and helped mum with the dishes; the men brought out their

cigarettes. Uncle Alf rolled his own. First he'd take a cigarette paper, lick a corner, then stick it to his lower lip; then he'd take a piece of tobacco out of a tin and rub it in the palm of his hand (his fingertips were yellow from the nicotine). Lastly, he would take the paper, spread the tobacco on it, and roll his 'derry'.

What amazed me was how he rolled cigarettes with his right forefinger crooked and stunted. I asked mum what happened to his finger. She told me he had it taken off in an accident at work, and that the doctors hadn't stitched it back on properly.

When the dishes were done, out came the 'dolce'. 'Oh, cake,' Uncle Alf would say, his light-blue eyes alive with anticipation. Mum made the best cakes. They weren't special to look at, but they counted where they were supposed to.

Though he never seemed to eat his slice quickly uncle Alf was always first to finish. My mother would ask him if he wanted another piece. He would always feign that he didn't, knowing she would insist; then he'd accept, 'to be hospitable'.

When it was time for coffee, either I or one of my brothers would sidle up to him. He'd ask us questions about school, what we enjoyed, what our teacher's name WAS, and how many friends we had. He'd also put a hand into his pocket and bring out three ten cent pieces, then whisper in our ear, 'Don't tell your mother.' Other times he'd give us the coins secretly, in a handshake, when it was time for him to go home.

Uncle Alf once said to my father, 'You should get your Boiler Ticket.'

My father looked at him and said, 'I don't read English very good.'

'But you know numbers. They're the same. All you have to do is learn some words to go along with them. A boiler ticket will mean more money.'

Now my father was interested.

We saw more of him after that. He'd come around and help my father study, and explain the terms in the little books spread before them. He never accepted money but would always go home with a pot full of something my mother had made. He said to her that he hoped my father would get the Boiler Ticket soon, otherwise he was going to need to buy a bigger belt.

One summer's Saturday afternoon my father, zio Lorenzo, and uncle Alf were building a chicken coup. It was hot and they sweated as they hammered and sawed, piled stakes into the ground and put up wire fencing. My brothers and I were supposed to be helping but managing to get in the way more than anything else.

When mum brought out the refreshments, we all took to the shade of a tree by the back fence. After we'd nibbled on sandwiches and drank lemon tea, the men brought out their cigarettes and tobacco. As uncle Alf was preparing his 'derry' he asked Zio Lorenzo, 'Laurie, what brought you out to Australia?'

We three boys were suddenly all ears; we didn't want to miss anything.

'I was captured by the British in Massawa,' Zio Lorenzo began. 'They put me in a camp. The English were good but they loved the rules. We had our little gardens and sometimes they would play soccer against us. The English were strict, but they were good. After a few months we were to be moved. We didn't want to go, but as prisoners of war what could we do? We were sent to a camp run by the Australians. There were already Italian prisoners there. There were soldiers in wooden towers watching us. We pass one group of prisoners, standing near an Australian soldier sitting on a box, rolling a cigarette; his rifle behind his shoulder. Anyone could have taken it. He didn't worry. The Australians only had one rule – don't escape. I looked at that Australian. One of the guards in the towers looked at me and waved. I thought, I'm going to Australia. And you, Alf?'

Uncle Alf lit his cigarette and took a puff. ‘I was in Egypt. He noticed us listening. ‘Pretty silly if uncle Laurie and I were shooting at each other don’t you reckon?’

We nodded, unable to think of anything worse. Uncle Alf told us how he was wounded – shot in the head – showing us where the bullet grazed his skull.

‘To make matters worse,’ uncle Alf continued, ‘the hospital ship I was on was torpedoed. A mate of mine, he was torpedoed three times, can you believe that?’

We shook our heads.

‘Well, it’s true. He made it home but he doesn’t like ships. Can you believe that?’

We nodded.

It had been years since I last saw Uncle Alf. One afternoon I drove over to my parents for a chat and a get together. As we talked, the conversation drifted to Uncle Alf.

‘Your father went to visit him,’ my mother said.

‘How is he?’

‘Not getting any younger,’ my father replied.

‘Where does he live?’ I asked.

‘In a flat, upstairs, in Brunswick, near Sydney Road,’ my mother answered.

‘Do you have an address?’ I asked. ‘I’d like to visit him.’

My father pulled open a drawer and brought out an address book. ‘Here.’

I jotted his address and phone number down. ‘I’ll call him and see when he’s free.’

‘He’s free most of the time,’ my mother said. ‘He’s getting old so he doesn’t go out much. His daughter visits him when she can.’

Translated that to meant not as often as she should. ‘I’ll call him when I get home, and pay a visit.’

Two days later I was climbing the stairs in a rise of housing commission flats. Uncle Alf’s was on the fifth floor. I knocked and heard a familiar voice, ‘Coming.’ The door opened and there he stood, slightly bent over, balding, with a walking stick. I thought about the five flights of stairs. He looked at me. ‘Uncle Alf, it’s me. Pasquale’s son.’

‘Crikey, you’ve become a big bugger. Come in, come in,’ he said, stifling a cough then clearing his throat. ‘I don’t see so good these days. How’s your father?’

‘He’s doing fine and mum sends her love.’ He led me down the narrow corridor, past the kitchenette with a Formica table and two chairs. Next to the table was a small fridge with a beer carton beside it.

‘Would you like a cup of tea? Or a beer?’ Uncle Alf asked.

‘A beer would be great.’

‘Sit down, make yourself at home.’ I’ll fetch us a glass.’

When he came back we started talking about what we’d been up to, and how fast the years were moving along. He wanted to know about my brothers, whether they were married, had children, what they did for a living – it was then I realised how long it had been since we’d last seen each other. ‘What’s wrong with the lift?’ I asked.

‘Who knows? It’s bugged-up more times than it’s fixed.’

‘How do you get the beer up here?’ I asked.

‘Young bloke, works at the pub, decent. He carries them up for me.’

We talked about football, uncle Alf being a solid Richmond supporter. He lamented their loss of sporting prowess this season, but reckoned

they could still win the fights. ‘I follow the Dogs,’ I said.

‘Good team. Won’t make the finals,’ he said, sagely.

When we’d finished our beers and then the bottle, Uncle Alf asked, ‘Care for another?’

‘I’d better be going’, I said, ‘I have to get home and change. I’m doing some casual work at a hotel not too far away from here.’

‘Some people have all the luck,’ he said with a grin.

We walked to the door and said our goodbyes. ‘Now that I know where you are I’ll come by again.’

‘That’ll be good. See you soon, then?’

‘Yes, Uncle Alf, see you soon.’

On the way home I dropped into his local. In the public bar a young man was serving. ‘Do you know an old bloke called Alf?’ I asked.

‘Yeah. Not here at the moment.’

‘I know. I’ve just come from his place.’ I took out my wallet. ‘Next time he wants a dozen tell him they’re on Paz’s son. He’ll know who you mean.’ I handed over the money. ‘There’s a tenner there for you too.’

I have an old black and white photo of Uncle Alf with my parents, taken possibly outside the Forum Theatre. They’re young and, by the look of them, carefree.

The photograph shows him between my folks, the three of them with arms across each other’s shoulders, smiling at the camera. There’s no mistaking the odd one out, even if you’d never seen them before. There in the middle, with light-coloured, thinning hair, a baby-potato nose; grinning like the Cheshire cat, with eyes alight, is Uncle Alf.

VENUS OF EASTLINK

Mitchell Welch

“Australia’s biggest road project to date is a work of art.”

—World Highways Magazine

novated in bright finance, in dupicolour,
an urban utility vehicle hydroplanes
over the freeway’s crocodile cracks
in carbon black, slick with premium,
gunning to outrun the coming depreciation.
meanwhile, still the moon’s sheer train
chortles towards the uncoupling hour,
talkback and its fog of many breaths
turning cats’ eyes to cataract milk,
early-a.m. drivers into drip-fed believers
on a dashed-out sounding line
borne into a white-walled passageway,
an artspace, into microsleep and spindrift
where at a great butterfly junction’s throat
the venus holds aloft
prestressed concrete stumps,
tendons of steel rebar gesturing at forelimbs
raised in figurative ambivalence, as if to say
stop/you must not stop
while travelling
on Eastlink.

THE SOLOMON CURVE

Mitchell Welch

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all its roadways are peace.”

— King Solomon

standing on the shoulder, smoking hot,
high beams dichotomised in brute colour
by broken window stars of bethlehem,
by black and rainbow galaxies of Castrol GTX,
a figure, supplicating the bitumen’s divinity,
produces a tin cup from the wreckage,
a crush of safety glass, a muddle of roadside
weeping lovegrass, a twist of the neck
and, projecting his ‘x’ of slender shadow
in the gawk of crosslight, one part brake fluid
to two parts regular unleaded,
tops it off at the radiator hose,
takes the dipstick from its housing
in the engine block, licks the crude edge
right up to its twist, and swizzles. all intersections
in an aftermath become quasi-cartesian planes,
the tyre-black function of ‘x’ approaching
its limit, white and yellow vertices, night sky navy
suit sparkling with sequins of dead planet afterburn.

BISEXUAL BIKER MAN

Mary Rawson

He squeezes his eyes shut
and holds on for dear life,
or lust
or just for the thrill
of feeling him close.

His mother would turn in her grave
if she could see him now,
motorbikes akin to lawless criminals
in her mind—
dangerous, unknown.

This is his second time
and his boyfriend declares him
'a natural,'
leaning with,
not against the bike.
He has passed the test.

They roar up the old Hume Highway
towards Beveridge—
they are staying in the pub there,
the first time he has ever slept anywhere,
publically, with a man.

He is bisexual biker man
and his boyfriend still loves him!
He squeezes in closer
and smiles a deep smile
that sends a warm shimmer
right through to the tips
of his steel capped boots.

No more secrets,
no more 'gay man' to some,
'hetero man' to others.
His crippling shame and confusion
are a thing of the past,
like the trees, hedges, cows
that whiz by in a blur,
here and then gone.

Bisexual biker man
he whispers inside his helmet.

He can't stop smiling.

THROUGH THE HOOPS

Andy Murdoch

On the footpath that ran along the fence outside my primary school I stood and watched as a couple of hundred metres up Wheatsheaf Road a minibus pulled to the kerb and a handful of kids got in. I guess that's where I was supposed to be waiting. I watched the minibus pull away. I was wearing the t-shirt and shorts I'd been told to wear by my mother.

Not a yellow t-shirt with a sheaf of wheat on it. It was May, and it was not a mild autumn, and I was freezing.

The bus pulled away from the kerb, and looked to me like it was going to do a u-turn, drive off to wherever it was going. I should have turned around, jumped the fence, run home. I thought about it. But my mother was home. I stayed where I was. The bus stopped. It didn't do a u-turn. It came down the road towards me.

The school's t-shirt had a sheaf of wheat on it. It took me a while to figure that out.

The minibus pulled up next to me and a bloke whose long curly red hair would've drawn my mother's stern disapproval wound down the front passenger-side window, leaned out and said, 'G'day, mate,' and then he said my name, with a lilt at the end, suggesting a query rather than a statement, and I nodded, and he nodded, and he looked towards the back of the van and said, 'In ya get.'

I did not recognise the boys in the back of the bus. Glenroy was not a big primary school and we were all about the same age, but none of these boys was familiar to me. Perhaps they looked different in uniform.

I didn't want to play basketball. Well – I did, but I didn't know how. My older brother played basketball, and he was good. His team was very good. They kept winning. My older brother was about to leave tech school, and I was nine. This should have been a consideration. My brother treated me with contempt, and this, also, should have been a consideration.

Mild contempt – vaguely cordial, sometimes; but contempt, nonetheless.

I'd put my name down for basketball at the beginning of the year and that fact landed back at home – a letter from school, as things were done back then.

You can't play basketball, my mother said. No, I said, but I want to learn.

I assumed there'd be classes. I was entranced, of course, by my brother's success, a little in love with his contempt for me. But I wasn't an idiot. I didn't know how to play basketball, and I wanted to, and I expected to be taught.

But no. Weeks went by, and then a letter arrived at home, and my mother opened it. Basketball, she said. 'Saturday, ten o'clock. They'll pick you up at school.'

'But I don't know how to play', I said.

'But you want to play', she said.

'But I don't know how', I said. 'I haven't got a uniform.'

'All you'll need's some shorts and a t-shirt.' My mother smiled. 'I'll find you something.'

And she did.

My older brother spent every weekday afternoon after tech in his bedroom out the back with his girlfriend. He disappeared on weekends, and once or twice I asked where he was. I learned, soon enough, that this was not a question it was smart to ask. On weekday afternoons my mother, our mother, would yell at my brother and his girlfriend. She would serve us dinner, in front of the television, and tell us they were chatting. At the time I assumed they were watching Doctor Who, like the rest of us. Now I assume they were not.

Although my brother remembers, forty years on, what a Krynnoid is.

I didn't know where the bus was going. Still don't. Where was I, that first time I saw a basketball game played? No idea. Oak Park, Glenroy, Broadmeadows - somewhere. I was sitting beside people I probably should have known but didn't. I had volunteered to play a game I didn't know how to play, and I was nine years old.

My older brother liked Doctor Who. We watched Doctor Who together, sometimes, when his girlfriend was away, or when he didn't have a girlfriend. My mother didn't mind Doctor Who, although she minded the stuff about evolution and Buddhism. My brother liked Pink Floyd, too. He liked Jim Morrison and the Velvet Underground. My mother minded these things. My mother hated these things.

Heroin did my head in, the one or two times I listened to it. I quite liked The End, which made my brother laugh. At one point I confused Pink Floyd's Money with another song, and when at school we had a comprehension test involving an ABBA song, I took the Roneo'd lyrics home and my brother laughed at me and I was confused. 'But I thought you liked this music', I said. and he laughed again. 'No mate, no, but maybe you do, yeah?'

'What's that smell?' I would say, occasionally, at dinner, and Dad would laugh. My mother would not laugh. She would purse her lips. It's them next door, she'd say. 'They don't care when they burn that incinerator'. 'I'll just pop out.' She said this and went to my older brother's bedroom door and banged on it and yelled, which made no sense to me, and my father would say Sweetie, sweetie, never mind. Except he never said sweetie, he said 'swiddie'. I have no idea why. Some quirk of pronunciation. I called my mother swiddie once and she slapped my face.

We got off the bus. We went into a basketball stadium. The other boys played basketball and I sat there, by the side of the basketball court, in my T-shirt and my shorts, I watched these boys and I had no idea what they were doing.

They ran around a lot, and balls went through hoops, and I kind of got the balls-through-hoops thing but the rest of it was lost to me. My mother had told me I had to come here, because I'd asked to play basketball and they'd asked me to play basketball, but what I was doing didn't feel like what I'd signed up for.

I filled in a form at the beginning of term saying I wanted to play basketball, but then they sent my parents another form, asking if I knew how to play or if I needed to be taught, and my mother didn't tell me about that form, and then the day before the bus picked me up she told me I was playing basketball and I stared at her. You want to play basketball? she said. You want to be like your big brother? Well then, she said. Off you go.

She told me about that other form a few years later. I had to ask her, when it finally dawned on me. You hated sport, she said. You wouldn't have liked it. It was the right thing to do. For you. I was thinking of you.

I didn't play basketball. Just after halftime the bloke with big curly red hair – the coach, it turned out – asked me if I wanted a go. I stared at the court, and I shook my head. He nodded, and he looked at my t-shirt. Next time, he said, um, next time maybe you should wear the uniform. They gave you the uniform, yeah?

A few years after my mother told me about the other basketball form she stood in the kitchen and she screamed at the television. Why are they looking for a cure for that? She had just put dinner on the table. The rest of us were already sitting and she was about to sit down and then she started screaming. They deserve to die, that lot. They shouldn't be spending our money looking for a cure for that. They're going to hell anyway, just let them all die. My older brother stared. He'd offered to help with dinner, and mum had said no. He'd left home a few years earlier. My brother stared. I ate my dinner, and my father ate his.

The other team won. The team I was supposed to play for lost. We got back on the bus and we went back to Wheatsheaf Road. Those boys – I don't know where those boys came from. They weren't the boys that bullied me, day in and out. The boys on the bus disappeared. I didn't see them again, or if I did I didn't recognise them out of uniform. I never got another letter asking me to play basketball.

Years later, long, long after my mother had screamed at the television, she stared at me. She had a magazine in her hand. I'd written a story for that magazine. I don't know how she knew about it. I hadn't told her. My mother stared at me in horror. 'But none of this happened, love,' she wailed. She shook the magazine in my face. She wailed. 'None of it happened!' I didn't answer her. I didn't know how.

At home in Glenroy my mother asked if I'd enjoyed myself. 'No,' I said 'It was horrible.'

'Oh' my mother said 'oh dear, we won't be doing that again will we?'

THE LESSON

Henry Briffa

1.

the rabbit goes out of the hole
round the tree
and into the hole again

having learnt to tie a bowline
do I now know how it feels to go
through the unknown?

2.

Sail theory bored me and its physics went over my head.
Then he threw me a lifejacket pointing me beyond the jetty.
With the boat upside down we sank into capsizing procedures

when all I needed to know was he was man enough to hold me afloat
and I despised the dependency.
These are land-legs not sea-legs

so when I got in the boat
all I could do was look straight ashore and when he turned it
I ... I felt I'd keeled over

3.

Not quite still
snail-paced on starboard

we glided towards the shore
of Lake Sugarloaf's small bay
planned to go about
when the wind shifted.

I glanced towards her
she seemed ready to jump

before a gust
pushed her back on the gunwale

and she pulled in the sheet
cursing Ready!

as her face
took a different tack

A BOOT LEFT IN WELLINGTON

Sofia Chapman

A boot, left, in Wellington.
A poet bereft.
Now happy, I met a friend.
A lung of ling as we trod the pungent port.

A boat lift; unwilling tonne.
A port, a rift.
Neo-hippy, admit huff, wind.
A pigeon among the kiwis.

Anchored only by consonants,
we solemnly exchanged vowels.

In one little boat
I left,
I write
with new zeal, and-

THE FAIRY TALE

Kathryn Goldie

She hated Germany for disappointing her. It was no fairy tale, just drunk boys pissing in frozen fountains and teenagers chasing sex. But at night when she cried at her window, missing cicadas and sunburn, filigree snowflakes glimmered in the lights of the Christmas market, and the fairy tale lived yet.

FICTIONARY

Carl Walsh

Foreword: the New Shorter Northcote Fictionary (NSNF) provides a concise list of words, their definitions and usage, drawing from the Old Much Longer And Sometime Purposefully Obtuse Northcote Fictionary (OMLASPONF for short). Contained within the NSNF are rare and obsolete words, as well as words in everyday usage.

Whilst not as impressive as the OMLASPONF, less trees were killed in its publication and the research was much quicker (if less well paid). It's possible the authors just made things up but this happens at the best of times (see, for example, newspapers).

Old books written in outlandish languages were consulted for this work, in particular Trollish; Hobgoblin, Gnomic and Contrairiness. Most of them were ignored.

A **abhorgnom** /əb'hrnəʊm/ v. LMU (chiefly *Gnomic*) [arbour a garden + gnome a poorly pronounced poem or one read aloud while suffering an irritatingly bad head cold] Of or related to the hatred of garden gnomes.

WT DICKENS 'I abhorgnome you' said the diminutive creature to the equally diminutive red-hat wearing plaster-cast. The declaration was met with stony silence.

B **bellgnom** /belnəʊm/ v. MOG [*bell* a ding-dong + *gnome* whatever I said before] Unintentionally falling in love with said garden gnome.

C BROWNTEA Despite her plaster countenance, lack of animation and vividly red hat he found himself going all bellgnom over her. He remained entranced until Frongleburt accidentally stepped on his toes.

C **cantgnomic** /kɑ:nt'nəʊmɪk/ n. LMU [*Cant* of words + *gnomic* the language of the gnomes Lit. but she doesn't say much]

I. TURNITOV After the toe stepping incident, and Frongleburt's profuse apologies, Madigal realised their love was somewhat one-sided and she of the vivid red hat was cantgnomic in the extreme. He thumbed his nose at her, tripping over a contrary in the midst of his rediscovered and profuse abhorgnom.

contrairy /kə'ntre:ri/ n. ME [*contrary* + *fairy*] A fairy confused whether it's a malevolent stealer of children or small angelic creature (oh, that's just a fairy isn't it?). Well a contrary one of those.

E TURNITBAKONAGAN The contrairy flapped its delicate wings, upsetting both the equilibrium and the troll in whose nostrils it was flying, before tripping up a bemused gnome of the non-garden variety as he ended a short but passionate relationship.

D **downbeneath** /daʊn'bɪ'nɪθ/ n. ME [*down* the feathers of a goose + *beneath* below Lit. under the geese] The land in which Trolls; Hobgoblins, Gnomes and Contrairies live.

N KEEPITOV The tunnels and ginnels of the downbeneath flow under the real world, from the solitude of the Plaza to the stalls, noisy with vendors, along Low St.

E **eeerk** /i:rk/ exc. L20 [from the sound] The noise Frongleburt makes when people come into his bathroom. Also the noise people make when they see a troll in their bathroom. Generally unwarranted.

E WAR Frongleburt squeaked an 'eeerk' that echoed in the previously silent room bouncing from bathroom wall to bathroom wall, until it trickled down into the tunnels below and died away like the last breath of air from a deflating tyre.

E BLAIR Four legs good, two legs... eeerk there's a troll in my bathroom.

F **fictionary** /'fɪkʃ(ə)n(ə)ri/ n. LMU [*fiction* something made up + *canary* a bird that likes fresh air] Like a dictionary but made up words and things that aren't real except, occasionally, where they are.

B SHAKESWORDE Is that a troll I see before me or have I been spending too much time reading my fictionary?

Frongleburt /frɒŋg(ə)l bə:t/ n. and v. LMU [from Frongleburt the first troll to become invisible rather than turn to stone in daylight, due to a fortunate incident with a contrairy] An invisible troll who lives in our bathroom.

I M CONFUSED Then, before my eyes he did a Frongleburt, and I saw him no longer. I was disappointed, however, to realise the bathroom really did need a good clean.

G **Gnome de plume** /nəʊm də 'plu:m/ n. L20 [*gnome* a poorly pronounced poem or one read aloud while suffering an irritatingly bad head cold + *de plume* a feather] 1) A gnome with a feather in its cap. 2) A gnome with a posh plum in its cap or mouth 3) the ancient tradition of writing gnomic things while no-one is looking.

J KORZENIOWSKI Unlike gnomes, trolls were never adept at Gnomes de plume, or writing anything at all.

grumble /'grʌmp(ə)l/ n. LMU [*grump*, unhappy, combined with *crumple* scrunched up. Thought to derive from the look upon hobgoblins faces] 1) A very grumpy hobgoblin 2) the way I feel in the mornings before my coffee.

F DOGSTOYEVSKY He was a regular grumble before his first samovar of coffee after which he was amongst the happiest of hobgoblins, if somewhat of a halfwit.

H havenought /hav nɔ:t/ pl. n. MOG [*have* to possess + *nought* short for nautical Lit. to have no boat] To have nothing, not even a boat. Thought to have arisen during the great kindivide.

N TOYSTORY The havenought live in the murky ends of tunnels where water pools around their feet and contrairies flit in bright moments of light, like fireflies, before disappearing forever.

I Inglebump /'ɪŋg(ə)bʌmp/ n. MG [*ingle* a nook + *bump* the opposite of a nook] n. An invisible troll who doesn't live in our bathroom. He used to live in a pedestrian subway that was an exemplar of the stinkle phenomenon. He now lives in an artwork shaped like a wheelie bin.

J MORRIS Inglebump moved outdoors to escape the fetid smell of the subway. Not living in a bathroom he didn't wash much and disliked the competition.

internet troll /'ɪntənet trəʊl/ n. L20 [*inter* into + *net* a mesh to catch things in + *troll* to trawl with a net Lit. to go trawling with a net] A troll caught in a net that chooses to yell profane abuse at its captor, people walking by, and the world in general. Not to be confused with a troll caught by the great earth spider in the silky sticky strands of its world wide web (for which a word is yet to be invented).

E BRUNTE There amongst the wind and wuthering, and other post-Gabriel Genesis albums, the internet troll sat in the wreaths and tangles of the rope web that ensnared it, yelling abuse and singing Phil Collins songs.

J jyg /dʒɪg/ v. OT [derived from *jug*] To dance as if one's feet are stuck in a jug.

W S MORM The proglodytes jyg up and down to the sound of Genesis and the irrepressible crooning of the internet troll.

K kindivide /kɪn dr'vɪd/ n. MOG [*kin* the people who hang round at Christmas + *divide* the people who don't] The time when the mythological remnants of Norse gods, heroes and monsters boarded sailing ships (or were thrown in as ballast) and came to new shores, pushing out the much older mythologies already there.

A BEN The great kindivide saw goblin split from hobgoblin; contrairy from fairy; gnomes from garden gnomes; and Peter Gabriel from Genesis. Things would never be the same again.

L lhscelf /lhskelf/ abbrev. OT [from Left Handed Scissor Elf] The elf that steals your son's left handed scissors and hides them in wayward and unusual places.

N MACHIAVELLO The machinations of the Left Handed Scissor Elf became even more dire and disturbing after its name was abbreviated to lhscelf. It was as if it gave it credibility. Even the contrairies hid their scissors in fear.

M microscoff /'mʌɪkrəf/ n. LMU [*micro* very very little + *scoff* derisive snort or comment] 1) a very small scoff 2) a large company of internet trolls.

M SHELLY Frongleburst gave a microscoff and accidentally breathed in a contrary, the start of the whole sad affair...

N nuffin /'nʌfin/ n. NT [mispronouncing *nothing* when eating a *muffin*] 1) an invisible troll, such as Frongleburst 2) having no muffin.

C BRISBANE Before nuffin there was nothing.

O omnivert /'omnɪvərt/ adj. QC [*omni* of all things and *vert* green in an heraldic sort of way] A personality that's all over the garden.

G BROWNE The contrary's omnivert tendencies made her both a charming guest and annoying pest all at once.

P proglodyte /'prɒglədɪt/ n. LMU [*prog* short for progressive combined with *troglodyte* somebody who lives in a cave] A troll that lives in a cave and listens to progressive rock music. Like early Genesis. I mean the progressive rock bit not that they were trolls living in a cave. Then again.

Q There are no words beginning with q. Apparently they are all waiting in an orderly line outside.

R ridbiter /rid'bɪtə/ n. MG [*rid* as in lost + *biter* just a little less than bitter] A magical rune-inscribed sword that is lost precisely at the moment when it's needed. The runes along its length are purported to say †ꝝ↑ꝝ×ꝝ†.

B B WOLF He hefted ridbiter into the air before realising that air was in fact all it was.

S stinkle /'stɪŋk(ə)l/ n. [stink to smell bad combined with *tinkle* like a fountain] The smell in a subway, in particular the smell in the subway in which Inglebump used to live.

J R R TALKIN The stinkle was so bad he decided to throw in the towel and leave the ring under a rock. No-one would know.

subvert /səb'vert/ n. [sub and vert a strange shad of heraldic green Lit. under the green] A subway.

F CAFCAR This explains the link between subways and those that subvert, including the predilection of anarchists to circle 'A's in foul smelling tunnels.

sunnecatched /sənkatʃt/ n. OT [sunne ye olde fashioned spelling of sun and *catched* past principle of catch] A troll, caught out in the sun, that turns to stone.

E BERK Groups of sunnecatched trolls formed some of the first rock bands. Their more progressive friends formed progressive rock bands.

T trolldom /trəʊldəm/ n. LMU [troll to trawl with a net + -dom a silly order] The demesne of a powerful and usually grumpy troll.

T KING And then I accidentally stepped into the Rucker's Hill trolldom damaging my shoes in the process.

U underrow /'ʌndərəʊ/ n. LMU [*under* as in underpants + *row* a clamorous line] An underground battle between mythical creatures.

W B LATES Those that I underrow I do not hate; those that I guard I do not love; my trolldom is Rucker's Hill. My fellow trolls Rucker's Hills' havenought.

V vanderblump /'vændəblʌmp/ n. OT [from the sound] A burp.

W wheelburrow /wi:l'bʌrəʊ/ n. [wheel a in not fake + burrow as in a temporary exchange but definitely not stolen. No really] 1) Like a wheelbarrow but without a wheel or for that matter a barrow 2) A ridged burrow.

worzelhammer /wɔ:z(ə)l'hæmə/ n. and v. OT [worzel a turnip + hammer to move really fast] A turnip gnasher.

E B OFFWHITING He worzel-hammered his way through dinner, then leaned back in his chair with a satisfied vanderblump.

X xog /'zɒg/ n. OT [x as in ex + og saying egg with a mouthful of toast] A troll whose parents are lost or misplaced.

O SLIGHTLY-WILD Frongleburt was a xog of the worst kind. His cousin Inglebump too. They wore their xogishness like a badge of honour. Invisibly. In the sunne. Their parents would have turned in their graves.

Y y /wʌɪ/ interrogative adverb OT [y a backformation from ewuidsmafsadgbmy which no-one could pronounce except when under the influence of hard liquor] Known for brevity and rock like sculls this is Trollish for why. Y not? I hear you ask.

S L GODDARD y are u so adamant?

Z zzip /zzɪp/ [from the sound of a troll turning to stone] v. L20 1) To turn to stone. n. 2) the moment after which there is nothing more. Except the glossary.

Glossary

LMU Lately Made Up

L20 In the last 20 minutes in fact

MG Middle Gnome, about the bellybutton

MOG Middle Old Gnome, or a cat

NT New troll

OG Old gnomic

OT Old troll

QC Quite Contrairy

CHICKEN

Anna Forsyth

Ivan turned heavily in his sleep. He was curled tight; sweat seeping into his navy flannelette pyjamas. Cherry sat up in bed in her bright pink curlers, staring into space. She looked around the small upstairs floor of the terrace house, with its olive walls and tasseled lampshades. Her gaze fell on the Jean Harlow portrait. *That's the hairstyle for my wedding*, she thought, stroking her naked ring finger.

She looked over at Ivan, who was having a disturbing dream. She reached over to the nightstand to see what he'd been reading: *An Actuary's Comprehensive*. She smiled, wetting her lips with her tongue. *I would be set for life*. She cleared her throat and adjusted the front of her satin negligee. 'Darling,' she whispered, touching the sleeping Ivan on his shoulder. He rolled over and she shook him slightly. He didn't respond, so she got up and started noisily gathering up the dishes from the vegetarian curry Ivan had insisted she eat. *That man desperately needs to eat some meat*.

He blinked awake. Reaching out to the side table with a bony hand, he felt around for his glasses.

'I wasn't snoring?' He asked, polishing his lenses. 'I've been having these dreams. I should see the Doctor.' Cherry smiled and peeled the blankets back slowly, batting her eyelids. Ivan gulped. He looked at the ceiling for a moment, and then, smoothing his hair, he got up and padded over to mantelpiece to pick up a record. Cherry rolled her eyes. *He must be... this is getting tiresome*.

'May I have this dance?' Ivan put out his hand, as the first crackling notes of, *There's danger in your eyes*, started.

They danced around their room, Ivan stopping every so often to hitch his pyjama bottoms up, and Cherry leaning forward suggestively. When the song stopped, Ivan pulled away, wheezing, but Cherry grabbed him, grazing his neck with her long fingernail. Ivan winced.

She whispered, 'Darling...' in a forceful way that reminded him of the drunk he saw every day on Flinders Street.

'You will ask me soon, won't you? I'm getting tired of pretending. Of hiding here in Maeve's house,' she sniffed. She draped a fringed vintage shawl over her angular shoulders and lit a long, thin cigarette, positioning herself daintily in the armchair. Ivan sat hunched on the end of their bed and studied the ceiling. He fell back and closed his heavy eyes. Cherry sighed deeply and took her cigarette onto the terrace. She ran her hands over the smooth skin of her forearms and then tilted her head as if she was posing for a photo like Harlow. *Even if he is... I can help him*, she thought, as she came back inside. She stared at Ivan for a moment.

She got up and started noisily gathering up the dishes from the vegetarian curry Ivan had insisted she eat.

'You're not...you know...are you?' she asked, grinding the cigarette hard into an ashtray. But by the time she asked him, Ivan had already drifted back to his dreams.

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The violin in Flinders Street station always made Ivan feel ill at ease. *Life is emotional* enough, he thought, as he made his way up to the entrance. Today it was an erratic mix of notes; haphazard and chaotic. Ivan wished there was some way to escape. Jostling with the other men in suits and hats, he queued down the steps. He held a brown paper bag in one hand; his coat draped over his arm. Politely, he declined a shoe shine from a boy in a tweed hat.

Just as he reached out to take his ticket from the man behind the desk, he noticed it. *A chicken! On Platform One!*

“Sir!” The man behind him touched his shoulder and Ivan moved to the side transfixed, watching the brazen animal waddle behind a post.

By the time he had his ticket and was elbowed onto the train, he had lost sight of the strange creature. *What is it doing there, and why doesn't anyone notice?*

As the train rattled slowly away toward Richmond, he felt nauseous. *Well I was dancing until late.* He was about to stand up, when he noticed a flash of red and brown again on the platform. He strained forward to see if he could glimpse it and sure enough, there it was, seemingly oblivious to its surroundings. He looked around him to see if anyone else cared, but most had their heads in newspapers or were deeply engaged in conversation.

When they arrived at the Richmond platform he was stuck behind a platinum blonde woman in a cream dress and noticed she was crying. He frowned.

‘Why don’t you want me? I’m not Jean Harlow, but... you’re not... you know... are you?’ she sniffed to a man in a long grey coat.

‘Excuse me Sir, I need to...’ Ivan tried to push past the couple. The man pulled the woman into him in a way that disturbed Ivan. He waited anxiously, too close to the pair for comfort. He looked at his watch to distract himself. *I’m going to be late.* Suddenly the woman broke the embrace and jumped back.

‘Look! There! I have to catch it! I want it! Darling, you have to get it for me. This national depression, it’s killing me. I need meat!’ She pointed down onto the tracks at another chicken, making its way along one of the sleepers. She ran over to the edge and pulled the man in the grey with her. Ivan felt a gust of wind and watched in horror, as the nose of the train edged toward the chicken.

Then, with an ear-piercing scream and a blur of cream and crimson, the woman dove in front of the train toward the chicken. Ivan pictured the image from his dream long afterwards, with the woman’s pale hands reaching greedily for the chicken; her scarlet mouth revealing a set of razor sharp fangs.

• • •

Ivan moved to the side transfixed, watching the brazen animal waddle behind a post.

The next morning, Cherry was cooking when Ivan stirred awake, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. The smell of eggs turned his stomach instantly; the dream fresh in his mind.

‘Dreaming of our honeymoon?’ asked Cherry, sidling up to him and pressing herself into his back. *Who wears Chanel perfume at six in the morning?* Ivan manoeuvred himself over to the other side of the room. He sat down hard in his favourite worn armchair and started to stuff his pipe with tobacco.

‘You asked me a question last night,’ he said, straightening and taking a long drag. Cherry froze. She clasped her hands together and took a deep breath. *I knew it!* Her crimson nails clacked nervously.

‘Yes Darling?’ She winked at Jean Harlow, her hand around her throat as if she was fondling a string of pearls. Ivan stared at the pitiful woman and shook his head before answering.

‘The answer is no. I am not... I am absolutely not... a chicken! Furthermore, I don’t like meat and I won’t marry someone who believes in caging innocent animals for their own consumption.’ He took his hat from the top of the wardrobe and leaned forward in a mocking bow. Then, he walked out into the hallway in his pyjamas, shutting the door firmly behind him.

SEARCHING FOR WORDS

Carl Wash

amongst	for	leading	or	sunlight	up
defeats	hazy	lost	pathways	surprise	we
dead	in	maze	search	sweet	with
dispelling	into	of	shadows	the	words
ends	language	opens	silences	understanding	



Instructions: Follow the instructions below to assemble the words into a poem. (Alternatively, you can make up your own).

1. Find the words above in the grid provided.
2. Write down:
 - a). the first three vertical words, starting with the words in the first column (top down), then moving to the second column, and so on.
 - b). the first three horizontal words, starting with the words beginning in the first column (top down) and then moving to the second column, and so on.
3. Continue alternating between vertical and horizontal every three words.
4. Add the diagonal words, moving diagonally from the top left-hand corner.
5. Finish up with the diagonal words, moving diagonally from the top right-hand corner.

THREE MINUTES

Ron West

Once upon a time, there was a man and a young boy, part of a family group in the park. It was a sunny day with just a few early warning wisps of high cumulus, but actually what kind of day it was didn't matter because what was important was what was going on with the little boy being thrown into the sky, up, up, up and when the upward movement slowed and eventually ceased, he would hover in space for a while and then fall into the man's arms to be pressed lightly against the man's chest before being thrown skywards again. Right beside the man and the boy was a dark-haired woman in a red top and dark grey slacks, and two young girls, the young boy's older sisters maybe, looking on and up, and nothing unusual about the scene, except that the young boy was silent, going up into the air, floating in the clouds for a while, and then falling into a catch, being held lightly against his father's chest, and then up again, reaching the return point and fall and catch and never a sound, over and over, not a sound to betray the oscillation between excitement and fear, between danger and safety, until finally, a ragged, 'don't, daddy, daddy, don't,' and as the game continued, it didn't stop, he screamed and the only other sound was the sound of the man's heartbeat, only the young boy with his ear up against the man's heart for a second here and a second there was able to hear it, but now that his own screaming had drowned out the steadiness of the beat he started to struggle and then lost it entirely, until later, whilst being comforted by his dark-haired mother in the red top and dark grey slacks and once more on grassy ground, his sobbing stopped, and later, much later, he has a family of his own, never takes his kids to the park, never throws his kids up in the air, and never knows why.

GONE

Michelle Helliwell

With the last whale,
she perished.
With the final tree,
he fell.

(14 April 2016)

WATER SCORPION

Jaz Stutley

Daring to enter
this house of drought
it scrabbles in shower-puddles,
in its element.

By what subterranean means
did it infiltrate,
working its will in the dark
to invade this hygienic
Egyptian tomb?

Scarab, hieroglyph,
heraldic, menacing;
it quests for toes
on the shower floor.

FOREST VICTORIOUS

Kaye Roberts-Palmer

Pungent air, swollen with malice, trembling
topography held hostage by scudding storms,
the forests are coming back.

Cities fall, subways vanish, concrete dust
ruinous sunken mod-cons, crushed mouldy ground.

Fungus arteries ooze opulent toxins, probing
prehistoric roots climb, rusted starved canopies.

Groaning trunks, swaying like ships, reaching
swooping birds circling earth, cries triumphant

Lone outcast stands ransom, toward hungry wilderness
stained hollow green, humanity now receding,
as the forests are coming back.

CHRISTMAS WITH FAMILY AFTER A LONG ABSENCE

Anna Bonetti

I lay on the crust
of an increasingly unfamiliar family
as mulberries rain around me
unleashed by thieving crows.
I watch the corn grow
severed from the static of who I love
unconditionally.

READER RESPONSE

Ben Goldsworthy

I'll sound like Bukowski if
I write that a woman
on the 86 tram stopped to tell me that
my poem was
the best thing she'd read
in ages.

That the entire trip she
asked me questions like:
How long did it take you, and how
hard was it to write? How
much of it was true
and how much
did you make up?

And the whole time she was
asking me these questions
all I wanted to ask her was how
she knew
it was really good?

But I had to get off
before she did

and I forgot to say
Thankyou.

THE WEED

Henry Briffa

the soil's too wet for succulents
encroaching enemies suffocate
the concealed tubes we planted

today we pull a weed or two
breeze on my bent lower back
a taste of snow in the air

as I stand the Silver Princess
bows to mimic me
shaking her gold and red emblems

cardboard gloves censure touch
fingertips numb an occasional car roars past
as I scrape strangle pluck discard

barking Jules paws the soil
in solidarity with hidden fighters
now revealing their full regalia

specimens begin to be seen
that time forgot
Daviesia euphorbioides Lawrenzia helmsii

Lindy nurses the injured chanting:
you pulled out that little pea thing
you did it last time too

then a little voice croaks:
the camouflage is not choking our troops
but offering them shelter from the frost

PASSENGER

Kristine Philipp

Endless traffic whizzes down North Road, Clayton where I grew up in the 1960s. A driver-less beige VW beetle screams down our side street heading straight at me. I run out in front of it to cross the road. The demon bug just misses me. Awake, bolt upright I'm a little kid in a cold sweat tuning into the drama of Mum and Dad's regular morning screaming match.

At fifteen my first office job was Girl Friday at a prestige Jaguar car company, real posh, surrounded by shiny luxury English motors I'd never afford. To get there I'd ride my bicycle to Huntingdale train station pushing against bitter cold mornings, smoking Winfield Blues in the red rattler carriages to Flinders Street station, then a wobbly tram ride down Bridge Road, Richmond. Coming home I'd pedal fearlessly up Dandenong Service Road headfirst into the black Antarctic bone chillers, hard rain smacking my cheeks red.

I'd leave at dawn and return home in the dark to my large, loud family of five big sisters all working in low paid office jobs, everyone paying board to make ends meet. Mum was so proud of us because she stood on concrete floors re-boxing car

parts in a noisy factory full of new migrants all competing for overtime. My little brother worked in a sheet metal factory next to the screaming abattoirs, later escaping to civilised café work. Dad sometimes worked in his giant cement-sheet shed at the end of our suburban backyard. He hammered dog kennels from wooden packing cases collected from the rag traders in Flinders Lane, if he wasn't otherwise occupied at his local RSL.

I didn't know I was disadvantaged until some middle class twits told me so. It was a surprise to me and I wondered how long it would last. Born into it I guess, a big family, orphaned mother, post-WWII alcoholic father barely able to read or write. We didn't feel poor, and compared to mum and dad's hard start, we were doing quite well. We had a house, food, laughter, health, world peace and paid work.

As kids we'd pile into the back of dad's covered FB ute for a Sunday afternoon drive across the Yarra river to ooh and ah at the rich peoples' mansions. I never travelled well in cars. The constant movement, exhaust fumes turning my guts, crammed up the back in a tight space, I often got car sick.

As a young teen we'd tear along new, unfinished freeways, the Grey, on mini bikes with local bad boys on weekends. Later I began to notice politics and grew angry at the expanding roadways carving up old market garden land. So I ventured to the city and joined the Eastern freeway protest with a band of Friends of the Earth rabble rousers. We held a sleep-in protest on the rough diggings of the new

Fitzroy road scar. Youthful resisters in pajamas and sleeping bags made a great picture on the front of the local newspaper. The Eastern freeway went ahead, and its bigger connector came back to haunt us nearly forty years later.

In the 1980s I moved north to Sydney getting by living in a squat and working within walking distance at a Women's Housing Service located in reclaimed dilapidated terrace houses in Woolloomooloo. We made cubby house nests in ancient empty brick shells earmarked for demolition to accommodate the Cahill expressway extension. A monstrous North Shore to Taylor's Square four lane harbor tunnel freeway gave comfort and time to the busy upper-crust, and cut a tar swathe through East Sydney, Darlinghurst and Kings Cross.

Geoffrey Smart painted a stark picture of the Cahill expressway, empty, ugly curved cement pile-on on pile-on imposing ugly progress on beautiful Harbour waterways. It destroyed our portside ramshackle, makeshift punk communities. Mr Smart captured it, except he left out the thousands of cars.

Despite my resistance Social Security Officers forced me into a lowly admin job at an East Sydney car auction house. I was to record by hand in a giant, green column log book the make, model, year, engine and chassis numbers of hundreds of idling vehicle trades. All week I sat in

hold on the bottom rung. Social position is a strange competition. All I know is that life can change completely in a heartbeat for anyone at anytime. Like when a freeway takes your place away.

a corner of a giant, blank warehouse full of smoking motors stuck behind petitions smothered by exhaust fumes. I'd stagger home to my little rental flat miserable and carsick. I resigned and moved back home to Melbourne.

My first driving lesson was scarred by a vicious face slap from an ex-boyfriend angry that I didn't know how to drive first time behind the wheel. He was dropped and I finally got my manual car licence three determined goes later. After two years I stopped driving. I got fed up with the cost and the stress as a 30 year old 'P' plate driver being pushed to the curb, abused by passing motorists who had completely forgotten the road rules.

Later as a PA to Head of School in a Melbourne university office, I found out that not driving was also an issue. I copped an easy put-down from my combative Manager when I admitted I chose not to drive. 'Oh, so you're one of life's passengers', her low opinion mocked throughout the office. So I was a moocher, one of the great unwashed rolling around on smelly public transport, scabbing lifts, sharing seats, swiping tickets, a taxi taker. She reckoned I was a real loser and I reckoned she was a real bully so I left that job too.

No matter how many fancy offices I type in, I have no connection to the right side of the tracks. Yet it still surprises me that there is no shortage of two-bob-snobs to rock my tenuous

Freeways, anonymous arterials where landmarks don't exist, where people are forbidden to walk or ride, where mother ducks and ducklings dodge metal monsters doing 100 kilometres per hour daring to cross to reach their waterways. Car advertisements what a fantastic con, no traffic, endless smooth roads, slick silver engineering excellence, string quartets playing sonatas, pristine rolling hills and virgin coastal cliffs. Inside the latest model sits a perfectly calm driver and his immaculate happy family, watching their individual devices, virtual worlds in an unreal world. Nothing but sunshine, blue sky, brilliant horizon, moving free, fast and far away, heading for a mythical better place to be, alone.

The promise of optional extras and a new car smell refuses congested roads, low brown skies, city slickers in surgical masks, thick grey air heavy with deadly particles, where breathing easy is no longer a human right. A real world of people without a place to live, camping beneath concrete caverns, pushed to the edges of survival underground in the dank underbelly of city freeways, invisible so as not to be busted.

I stopped riding my bike when the Victorian Kennett government stopped public insurance coverage for cyclists who may be hit on their way to work. I stopped riding my bike when overbearing four wheel drives adorned with brutal front

bull-bars became ridiculously popular and pushed cyclists to the gravel edge. I stopped riding my bike when monstrous RV drivers rammed me out of the way anxiously searching for that elusive car park to pick up a carton of milk and a loaf of bread.

As I walk free on the streets, passing footpath people, copping an earful of morning magpies chortling, a whiff of lemon flowering gums in the late afternoon, the waft of baked bread at midnight, I spy grim faces behind windscreens hunched over steering wheels stuck in stationary car bubbles. Peak traffic snaking, picked noses, honked horns, rage rising, snail pace, breaking, revving, 'Get out of my way!' taking off with a screech in a puff of smoke.

Melbourne 2014 my old foe the dirty Eastern freeway needs an extension so they say. An all-mighty East-West link toll road and tunnel stretching from Tullamarine to Box Hill promises to carve up suburbs with vast lanes and a tangle of flyways, encroaching on fragile creeks and threatening hundreds of homes. It plans to displace people who have no desire to move after decades connected to their place. It's going to rock the elephants in the zoo at Parkville, and muck up the air for everyone left behind in its white line wake. It will create more uninhabitable wasteland to save five minutes drive time and cause another ten minutes bottleneck delay on mad Hoddle Street.

On a current affairs TV show there was a dear old, ordinary bloke interviewed standing in his rambling front garden. In the background his narrow ageing workers' cottage framed his story. In a sagging porch corner sat his favourite armchair brimming with sixty years of fond Collingwood memories. Bent from years of hard yakka his watery eyes held back tears. He did not want to live anywhere else no matter how much the road authorities offered him. To be moved on against his will to make way for strangers to drive over his little piece of urban paradise would wreck his world forever. The new roads were not going to run this old fella out of town. He stood fast and in defiance declared, 'I will not be moved'.

Along with thousands of others, I stood with the old fella and joined the protest against the road tunnel link in a mish-mash coalition of Greens, feral Socialists, concerned citizens, housewives and kids, teens and seniors from all walks of life affected by unrelenting road expansion, in helpless fear of climate change, ready to fight for our future.

We took to Melbourne streets and called out for access to better public transport, for choice, for fairness, for the earth and her inhabitants. We marched down Swanston Street on a steel cold mid-winter day stopping the noon weekend traffic, chanting under brilliant handmade banners, '*DUCKS NOT TRUCKS!*' Elderly, middle aged and young, well-off and not, we formed a critical mass from Carlton to Northcote, from Moonee Ponds to Wheelers Hill. We sung out in full voice to a cool trumpeter tooting out, '*Oh when the Saints*' and danced down the middle of the road. Bemused city shoppers loaded with bags stopped to hear us sing out, '*Oh when the trains, come rolling in, oh when the trains come rolling in. Oh how I want to be at the station, when the trains come rolling in!*'

You know what? We won! We stopped that stinking East-West link tunnel road. We called out loud and long enough, we got people to think about more cars and more freeways and what that will mean for all of us. We reminded ourselves that time is running out for our fragile planet and we felt empowered by this one way towards change. We formed a mighty protest front on the streets, connecting and reinforcing our collective outrage online. We lucked out with the agreement of a new State government keen to back-out of billions of dollars of crazed budget commitment. Change began and we celebrated with great heart and hope.

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A massive tsunami wave rears up one hundred feet high slamming a wall of ocean onto shore smashing us into a rock cave. The roaring, turning tide drags us back out to sea like rag dolls. I wake in fright shaking off the nightmare. A new day breaks, I get out of bed against all the odds. The sunshine beats down on my face and an inkling of hope lingers in my memory as I walk outside along my street. 'Hey, how ya going?' old mate across the road sings out and waves to me.

I am a pedestrian, a public transport user, a passenger.

RUNNING

Bumpy Favell

Running down your street, pounding on lilli pillis, purple is staining through your socks. Do you think Ari's noticed you've gone? Run past the yellow wall, run past the bluestone wall. They heard you screaming. Keep running. Past the rickety whitish fence. They heard you both screaming and smashing. Run past the empty old people's home. It's icy and gusty. A shopping list flaps up and touches your leg. Keep running. No people at all in the street tonight. Where's your wallet? Keep running. You get to Zwar Park. But after last night when you ran to Zwar Park... No. You take a sharp right and push on down Jessie Street. Run past that girl's house whose bedroom's right there on the footpath. Run past the blood orange tree. Where's your phone? Take a right. Just keep running, up six lanes of Bell St. Shoes in one hand, you are running on everyone else's smashed up glass. You're a mess. You wipe blood and sweat off your face. You are obvious. In all the lights. No you can't put your shoes on. There's no time and nowhere to stop and nowhere to go.

Just keep running.

3 BIRDS (NO WIRE)

Dianne Millett

The quail is a short-sighted bird. It must be to have been so brave. It had no fear of the giant hand that held it to show a tender breast. I thought it would turn and say: 'I am done this side.' But even without the religious connotations – eggs were broken and we ate omelette. The potential if not the flesh devoured.

I dreamt of a parrot. It heaved a sigh in ultimate sadness without the puff or keen bright eye. Only a few spare blue feathers said: parrot. It said nothing at all.

My blackbird has lice. He knows me well. He watches from the fence and from the crook in that tree. I fed him slugs when he was starving, but I am no longer benevolent. The nits are his not mine.

PEARL

Ben Goldsworthy

I don't really know why I'm here.

It was my daughter's idea that I come – Jane. She said she'd spoken to you. She said it would be good for me to talk to someone about everything, about how I keep forgetting things.

For example, I've been meaning to make myself a cup of tea for months now, but I never quite get around to it. Did I say months? It feels that way. That's what you people talk about isn't it? Slips of the tongue and so on? I tell myself: *I'll get that cup of tea, directly*. But then something gets in the way and I have to put it off again. Sometimes I get as far as putting the leaves into the pot, maybe even some sugar in the cup, but then something sidetracks me. I come back later and it's all still sitting there on the kitchen bench, as if it's wondering where I've gone.

The thing is, if you were to say to me: *now Pearl, what is it that gets in the way? What sorts of things does an old lady like you have to do that are so pressing that she can't stop and have a nice cup of tea?* – if you were to ask me that, I'm not sure I could say exactly. What I mean is, I'm really not sure what it is that keeps getting in between me and my cup of tea. Or anything else for that matter. All I know is it must be something. They say it sometimes helps to talk about these things. That's why I'm here I suppose. It feels like Reg, my husband – it feels like Reg hasn't really talked to me about anything for years.

Just this morning as he went off to a meeting at the bowls club, I found myself thinking: *now I was planning on making a pot of tea, but I didn't get around to it.* So I sat down at the kitchen table and tried to remember what I had done rather than finish making myself a pot of tea. For the life of me, though, I couldn't recall. I usually start to worry when this happens. I mean, if something came up that was more important than a cup of tea – which I enjoy very much, especially in the morning, it's the first thing I think about – anyway, whatever it was that came up must have been very important, something that obviously needed doing straight away. Not something I should be going around forgetting.

What if I didn't actually get around to finishing whatever it was, or what if I didn't even make a start on it? So I started looking around the house, going from one room to the next, but I couldn't find anything. Then the phone rang, and as I went to answer it – just as I started walking toward the phone, I remembered: I was on my way to hang the washing out. Then I started to wonder: what was it that interrupted me on my way to the clothesline? But I couldn't remember that either. Possibly it was the thought that I hadn't finished making that pot of tea. I'm not sure.

I know its silly, and I usually wouldn't talk about this sort of thing, but sometimes at night, when I'm lying in bed staring into the dark – Reg is always already asleep, snoring – I find myself wondering how many pots of tea I must have made during my life. That's the sort of thing that means something to you people, isn't it? The strange thoughts we have? Anyway, as I lie there, I remember a time when I would make four or five pots a day, more if we had visitors – and now I haven't even had a cup for so long. For years, it seems.

I always make very good tea, that's one thing I know about myself – the ladies at the bowls club always comment on it. The thing is I'm always very careful with the measurements – that's the key. And it's not just, *one for each person, one for the pot*. You need to let it sit and steep for the right amount of time, and then give the pot the right number of turns, clockwise and back, clockwise and back. It's not that I sit there and measure everything perfectly. I just know when to pour and when to stop, so to speak.

And I always take note of how people take their tea. There's nothing worse than looking forward to a nice cup of tea, only to find its been made to someone else's taste. It's a disappointment. I don't complain, mind you. Reg has always tried his best. But he likes me to make the tea. I make it better than he ever could, he says that himself. *I'll chop the wood; you make the tea*, he says.

Every so often, though, he will make a pot – when he thinks I'm busy with something, or when he sees that I'm comfortable on the couch. He brings in the tray and puts it on the table and says something like: *there you go, see how I've done*. Mostly I take one sip and put it back down. He hardly ever gets it right, does he? He doesn't let it sit for long enough, or he leaves it too long; he pours too much tea in the cup and not enough milk; if he remembers the sugar he puts too much in, and the rest of the time he forgets to stir it. When he does happen to make a nice cup of tea he doesn't actually mean to, it's by accident. *A chance occurrence*, Jane would call it. But I still think it's an accident. It's nice that he still tries though, isn't it?

Most of the time Reg doesn't even drink the tea he makes. He'll forget about it and go off to bed, leave a full cup sitting there on the table, steam rising up. I'm always finding half full cups sitting around the house. He likes me to make it, you see? That's why, if I'm already comfortable on the couch, I tell him to bring everything into the lounge so I can make it. But he says its too much trouble; he'll go without, he's tired anyway. I never mention it, but I think he's worried about dropping everything – he still gets the shakes at times. That's why I don't ask him where a certain cup has disappeared to when I can't find it in the cupboard.

Just yesterday I saw that was one of my favourite cups was missing – the one with the opera house on the side – and sure enough, there it was in the bin. But, I know it will embarrass him to tell me that it jumped out of his hands and broke into pieces on the floor, so I don't mention it. He goes off to bed, I put my cup on the table next to his and I set about getting up to make another pot.

So I'm on my way to the kitchen again – always on the way to the kitchen – and I remember something I'd started doing earlier that, for one reason or another, I hadn't got around to finishing. I decide the pot of tea can wait a minute. So I get to work on that, finishing off whatever it is – going through the mail or watering the plants or cleaning the stove. Last night I realised that I'd meant to return a call from Jane, our daughter. She'd called earlier in the day for a chat and left a message. I must have been in the middle of something. I'd meant to call back when I finished whatever it was I was doing, but it had slipped my mind, or at least it had until just then.

It's strange how the memory works, isn't it? Jane has a saying she reminds me of every now and then. It goes: *remembering is always two thirds forgetting...* and then, something about imagination. I can't recall. It's something along those lines. Maybe it goes the other way around. I've got it written down at home. She's the one who encouraged me to talk to someone about things. She said it would be good for me. Anyway, she's always got some new saying for me, some new word to explain, or else a new meaning for an old word. Things come out of her mouth that I just can't follow at times.

By the time I get off the phone, and everything seems to be done, I'm usually ready for bed. It's then that I think about that cup of tea again. I decide I could just use a tea bag, even though it's not quite the same. It's just quicker, and if it's just for me there's no use making a whole pot. But then I remind myself that I have trouble sleeping at the best of times – with all my thinking about what I've been doing, and what I need to do tomorrow – a cup of tea will probably keep me up even longer. I'll wait until tomorrow, until breakfast.

There are other times, though, when I know that I'm not going to be able to sleep anyway, so I decide that having a cup of tea won't really hurt then, will it? On those nights I turn the bedside lamp and I have another go at reading the book Jane gave me for Christmas last year. It's very long and complicated, this book, the print is very small and it has a lot of words I don't know or can't quite remember the meaning of. Jane says it's a masterpiece, and they certainly say so on the cover. But the sentences are too long, and all the words and characters just end up floating around above my head.

I used to read a lot when I was younger. I remember that what I loved most of all about reading, maybe as much as the story itself, was finally reaching the middle of a book, when its weight began to move, with every next turn of the page, from the right hand to the left. Sometimes I'd be so intent on getting there that I'd miss important things that had happened and have to go back and start again. I never seem to get anywhere near the middle of the book Jane gave me though. I always seem to be on page twelve or thirteen. I can't really keep track of what's happening or who's who.

So anyway, on those nights when I know I won't sleep, I make myself a cup of tea and climb into bed. I put the bedside lamp on and prop the pillows up on the bedhead so as not to strain my neck. Reg is already dead to the world, snoring away.

Did I say, *dead to the world?* I did, didn't I? That's the sort of thing you people talk about don't you? What do we really mean when we say things like that? They're the sorts of things Jane talks to me about, too. The only time I can make any sense of them is when I'm lying in bed staring into the darkness.

It's strange how clear things can become in the dark. How much you understand, only later – hours, days, years – after the moment has passed. You remember so much, don't you, when everything else is quiet and it feels like you might already be dreaming?

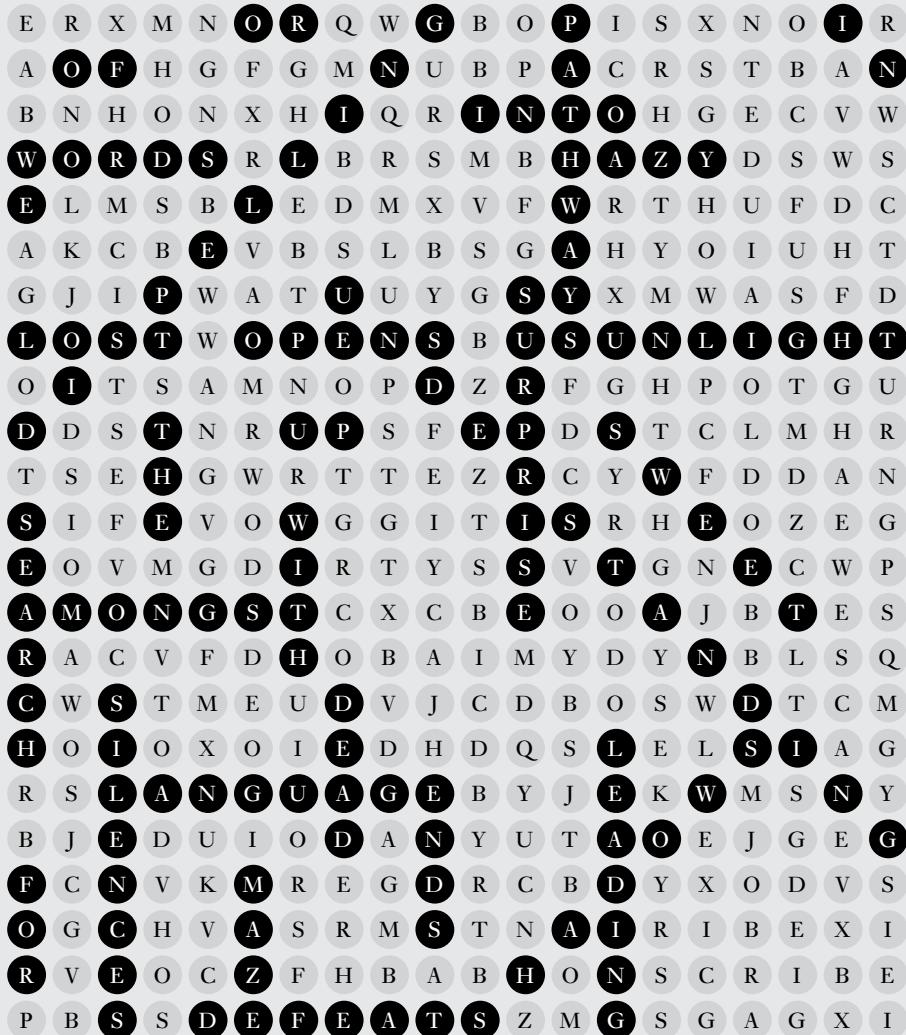
I prop the pillows up on the bedhead, and I can hear him breathing. I reach over for my book and glasses and I lie back down. It's only then, when I'm finally comfortable, that I catch sight of my cup of tea. It's sitting over on the dressing table, steam rising up. Another two or three cups sit beside it. And I can still hear him breathing. For what seems like a long time, I look at my cup of tea way over there, on the other side of the room, as if it's sending me some sort of signal. Then I put the book back on the bedside table and turn off the light.

And only then, as I'm lying there in the dark, do I remember how many years he's been gone.

And I don't know why I'm here.

SEARCHING FOR WORDS: SOLUTION

Carl Wash



we search for words
lost amongst silences
the maze of language
defeats with dead ends
or opens up
surprise pathways
leading into hazy sunlight
dispelling shadows
in sweet understanding



**Darebin
Arts**