

n-SCRIBE

13 | 2018 | free publication



13

fiction | non-fiction | poetry | art

WORKING GROUP

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Information, past editions can be found at our website [w. darebinarts.com.au](http://w.darebinarts.com.au)
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Some works contain language which may offend.

COLD CHOCOLATES

Kate Rears

We've been teaching our son to sleep under the covers. He's used to being cocooned by his sleep suit
shoulder straps snapped securely² = no risk of cold feet

We're all so tired.

Although I've long mastered the punchline to the universe's favourite joke that exhausted adults must
teach babies how to sleep, there's still so much to learn.

It's cozy!, he exclaims with confidence,

learning the words before the concept. Not quite getting that it's warm inside the covers and
cold when you roll out.

I'm still an apprentice when it comes to reasoning with a two-and-a-half-year-old, who unknowingly has
loosened my tightly clenched grip on the world.

Reminding me, through his black and white, of all the shades of grey.

He has, in his version of culinary experience, recently developed a taste for cold chocolates.

COLD CHOCOLATE NOUN (/kəʊld 'tʃɒklət/). Neither iced chocolate nor chocolate milkshake,
but another phenomenon altogether.

I love cold chocolates, he says,

and my heart sheepishly breaks,

and I order him a cold chocolate.

Whispered clarification,

it's-an-iced chocolate-hold-the-cream-thanks

(and-I'll-have-another-flat-white.)

I've learnt a lot of things as a new parent; I remain surprised by them all. Time and time again in this
new, small life of mine I am surprised. I am shocked at my internal monologues, the looped and chaotic

To do list:

cook

clean

teach

patience

gratitude

repeat

the endless worries.

Small people have small worries, someone once said. Today's worries *when will he sleep?, when will I sleep?,
how much sugar, exactly, is in a cold chocolate? how many coffees, exactly, are too many?* seem so small.

(how small, exactly, have I become?)

Worries used to feel more substantial. This time,

a decade earlier, nervous checking and re-checking of voice recorders,
drafting of consent forms, compiling of interview schedules. Reading the
literature, checking the evidence, building a rationale.

Winner Darebin Mayors Writing Awards

One day, rushing to meet Participant 1 at a committee-approved location ‘safe and convenient to us both’, the café on the corner. Internal monologue running through the long, dot-pointed, committee-approved

To do list:

- greet
- offer coffee
- read consent form
- get signature
- turn on voice recorder
- start interview
- ...

***DON'T FORGET THE GIFT VOUCHER**

Me, the apprentice in research, trying to draw out, organise, publish other people’s stories.

Leaving prison is one of the riskiest things a person can do; people, drugs, poverty, the social determinants of homecomings pose a threat.

He had arrived early, unwittingly loosening the grip on that tightly clutched to do list: arrive first, find a quiet table, ***PRIVACY ESSENTIAL FOR ETHICS**. He had chosen a large table outside the café entrance in the path of every person coming in and out. His shades of grey already compromising my black and white.

I got you an iced chocolate, he said. I hope you don't mind the ice-cream. I figure everyone loves an iced chocolate.

I stare at the sweating drink, internal cache of worries beginning to build. *Am I allowed to drink that? Should I hide the voice recorder? Can I use this data? But I hate iced chocolates?* Professional etiquette, selfish concerns, killing gracefulness.

Practicing the art of negotiation. He refused the gift voucher, too.

Donate it.

Such gracefulness after his

fall
from
grace.

Prison was indelibly imprinted on my soul.

He had helped people write their parole applications in jail. He kept his parole certificate in a frame on his wall at home. My doctoral certificate kept in a drawer somewhere, photos of the kids in frames on the wall at home. Indelibly printed on my soul. Boundaries are now blurry and grey.

My worries are small, they are approved only by a committee of me, but they are loosely gripped. In this new, small life nothing is tightly gripped.

How to teach this to a two-and-a-half-year-old, for whom life is black and white.

He likes me, so I need to like everything that he likes.

I like coffee, I say.

No mummy, no, you like cold chocolates.

Indelible imprints.

Tonight, he’s back in his sleeping bag.

We’re all so tired.

Cozy can wait.

Winner Darebin Mayors Writing Awards

THE EQUALS SIGN

Annelise Balsamo

Now, there are only two things for sure. There's the wood. And there are the numbers.

The first I know absolutely. This feel of wood under my knuckles as I tap – I mean, I guess, knock – on his door. In the days, weeks, months and eventually years after he had disappeared from our house, the wood against skin – the echo in my bones – was the only simple feeling I could access. I could go to his door – any time I was home – and knock. It was there – real, solid – when I wanted.

Dan and I – we have stayed together.

But we are something new as a couple; connected and somehow – simultaneously – unravelled by our missing child. Our only son. Our only child, actually.

It all appears very familiar. You probably couldn't tell just by looking at us. We make breakfast in the morning, and we read the papers on our laptops. We chat – oh, about all kinds of things – politics, sport before we leave for our jobs. In the evenings, we might talk about the garden sometimes because Dan liked to garden, and I liked the look of the garden. So ordinary; so appallingly ordinary.

But Seb's absence bleeds under our skin like a bruise any time we are awake, any time we have our hands on the table, our laptops open, food in our bowls, discussions about dirt and roots.

On some mornings, Dan asks, all dressed for work, going towards the door, is there anything I need to pick up on my way home? Is there anything we need?

I would think, and sometimes I would open the fridge. Milk, I might say. Eggs, I might say.

Dan leaves. I mean, he would make his way down the hallway. We might wave – odd little finger flutters, or a stiffer back

and forth. There were other times – other mornings – after trouble with our nights, we might hug. After he leaves, I try my best not to indulge. But it is useless. I can't resist. I pace back and forth, and then hesitate outside the door. Step forward. Lean in. Tap – knock – one two three times.

Numbers. So simple.

And then I inevitably make the fatal mistake of following the irrefutable three taps with the slippery problem of words.

'Darling. It's time to get up.'

Before Seb disappeared, I woke him by knocking and by calling every morning. Well, every workday morning. Towards the end... (I don't really mean the end, I mean the day he disappeared), he wasn't really answering me. But I would hear him turn over at the disturbance, and sometimes he'd sigh.

'Darling. I'm going now.'

The words now crumble in my mouth. And the pieces rain down, choking me.

When Seb had gone, I had so much unallotted time. I'm not sure how that happened. It wasn't like he had taken up that much of my time. He had 'gone into his cave' – the term favoured by teachers

and our friends to describe his lack of communication with us, his inability to connect anymore – months before he left. That's not to say he wasn't around during that time. He would come to the table and he would eat with us. He sometimes even watched TV with us in the evening. But he barely uttered two words to us, and – given the option or the chance – he preferred communing with his laptop.

So the door. The door had become my surrogate son even before he left.

I can't leave it alone now. I knock and I listen. Sometimes I even get to imagine a sigh, and the sound of feet shifting under a doona. But I never open the door.

I know Dan has shameful behaviours he doesn't tell me about.

I don't ask him. I wouldn't be able to tell him about what I do. I wouldn't expect he would be in any better shape than me.

We do share at least one secret behaviour, however. We attend support groups.

It's about talking – the support groups I mean. We talk. We drink tea (sometimes coffee, but mostly tea). We drink our tea in mugs because the rattle of a teacup in a saucer is too confronting. Newbies, keen to make an impression, make this rookie mistake when they host a gathering for the first time. Our hands – all our hands – twist and tremble as if grief lodges there. We have no interest in spotlighting that.

But the talking is – somehow – worse; so complicated, so troubled. I mean, we work on action plans too; there are awareness campaigns for example, and social media

blitzes. We have ongoing projects to check social media for any indication our children are being active, or signalling to us. The police help us with this.

But most of the support group is used in trying to find words for our experiences.

There are few ways in which we can correlate our experiences with language. The easiest, the real shortcut, is through a kind of mysticism. But I struggle to believe in this magic when others speak of it. I mean, I want to believe, but my son's shut door – his silence even when he was present – stops me. Others, for example, talk about:

'... my instinct. As a mother, I feel like I would know, I would feel it. I would feel if she were dead. But I don't. She is out there somewhere. I know it.'

Other voices chime in. The sacred parent/child connection feathers the room. And I wonder: is that why I keep knocking on his door? That I feel he is still alive? That it is possible one day he will find his way back to us and lie down in his bed as if none of this happened?

Or do I just like the solid door under my knuckles?

We are a little different from most of the others in the support group – Dan and I. The police believe that Seb is a runaway rather than an abductee. That doesn't, of course, mean that he hasn't come to terrible harm. But it also means he left of his own free will. And so, he could return in the same way.

The others like to talk about miracles. And blessedness. And hope. And, even, luck. That the hands and feet we know so well, the faces and backs and the creases in their knees are all preserved and will be returned to us. I envy those mouths as they use those words because I hear other words:

calamity,
condemnation,
despair,
misfortune.

They fall like a heavy ball down concrete steps.

They drown in the back of my head.

Words are no good.

I'm not even sure why we continue to go. Perhaps the pain is a kind of pleasure. Perhaps we don't want to feel alone.

When I'm alone, I go to numbers. I invest in maths.

I lie in bed with equations in my head. My fingers move beneath the sheets as I count the days he has been gone. I have broken that down further. Hours. I'm working on minutes right now.

Dan turns over in bed as if he is climbing a ladder. All arms and legs reaching and clutching. And he was, once, such a still, silent sleeper. His ladder is now endless. I don't tell him about his nightly ascension; he tells me nothing about whatever my night-time tortures are.

Alongside the minute equation, I work on another one. That is; if Seb returned tomorrow, when was the mid-point? If Seb returned tomorrow, how many days back had that return begun? I work on the assumption that the time should fold in half, like a piece of paper: one half he is moving away from us, and the other half he is coming home.

When I think I have worked out the number of days, I will sometimes break that into hours. Sometimes I just cradle the numbers in my head, and I fantasise about figures. I wish, for example, I could count his footsteps – leaving, returning. Again, I feel that, if he does return, if he is returning, there would be a midway point when the steps turned back to us, when this suffering had begun to ease.

I have an app that tracks the number of steps I take each day. I extrapolate from that figure into how many steps I think Seb would do. I hold the delta between my footsteps and his imagined ones with something a little like joy.

I knock on the door in the morning. I calculate at night.

I know why prisoners scratch the number of days of their incarceration into the solid certainty of the walls of their cells.

A PATH BY THE RIVER

Andy Murdoch

For a while it got bad; for a while it looked like we weren't going to make it. But then he said let's go camping, and I thought that meant he wanted it to work and he did, I'm sure. I don't know if I wanted it to work but I'm sure he did. He wanted to go somewhere we'd been years before, the first place we'd been camping together, five hours' drive from town on the side of a river near a beach in the middle of the bush. I'd loved it, and he'd loved it, and so I said yeah of course, let's go. Of course I said yes.

We took a week off work in late September, just as the weather was getting better. August was an awful month, probably the worst month. July was bad. June was okay. In September things had calmed down, I suppose that's what you'd say, September wasn't too bad, and towards the end it was warming up.

We had some camping gear but we'd borrowed bits and pieces from his mum and dad before, and we needed to borrow some this time too. His mum and dad camped a lot, or they had when they were younger. These days they were old and sick. Old and sick and difficult. They weren't Christians exactly, but they weren't exactly not-Christians either, and they had kind of a problem with the gay thing. Not a big problem, but a problem. They had a problem with the alcohol thing, too. I didn't see his parents much.

He saw his mum and dad, they had dinner and he borrowed what we'd need and next morning we left town. I had a hangover, but I helped pack the car. We were going for five nights and there was a lot to pack. Once we were on the road I made him stop at one of those megamart bottle shop things and I bought a dozen bottles of shiraz, which I think is the only thing to drink when you're camping in the middle of the bush. He bought something for himself. I don't remember what he bought. I didn't expect to get through a dozen bottles in five nights, obviously, but

let's
be
honest
it's best to be
prepared when who knows
what's going to happen.

For most of the day we drove to this place in Gippsland, miles off the highway down a gravel track near the beach but not on the beach, on a riverbank in the middle of the bush. The camping ground was empty, because it was September and it wasn't school holidays, so we chose the best site by the river and we set ourselves up and then he started cooking and I started drinking.

We had a good time. We walked and drove and ate and drank and we had sex a couple of times, once on the beach at like ten in the morning which was naughty and weird and awesome. We'd been there three days and we were eating lunch and I suggested we go for another walk. We'd driven into the nearest town the day before and got stuff for dinner and I'd cooked, because I'm not completely useless, I'd cooked spag bol and the next day we were having lunch, soft wholemeal buns filled with cheese and leftover spag bol and toasted over the campfire. That was a good lunch. We finished eating and I pointed to a sign not far from our campsite and I said we've never done that one. I've always wanted to do that, the first time we came here I wanted to do that one.

We've done a lot of walking, he said. We'd done a bit of walking. We hadn't done a lot. The sign says it's an hour and a half, he said. It says there's a swimming hole. It's too cold to swim.

It's warm enough for me, I said. And it was warm. It was warm for September, and not too windy. I hate the wind in September but on this day in September there was no wind. Come on, I said. I've always wanted to see where that track goes. What'll we do if we just stay here?

He knew the answer to that one so he said Okay but give us a tick, I need a piss.

He pissed in the river. You're not

supposed to do that but I guess if there's no one else camping it's not so bad.

It didn't take us an hour and a half. It was an easy walk and the sky was clear and the bush was heady with eucalypt and wattle. He enjoyed himself, I reckon, although about twenty minutes in he said I bet it's not much of a swimming hole, I bet it's full of mud and reeds and dead possums and rocks and anyway it's not warm enough to swim.

I didn't say anything. For all I knew he was right.

We'd found a dead possum in the river the other time we'd been there, years back now, but still we remembered. Not far up from where we'd been scooping buckets of water to cook and wash and make coffee. It didn't make us sick and it made a good story when we got home, but afterwards we got our water a few metres further upstream.

Forty-five minutes and we were there. It wasn't full of mud and reeds and rocks and dead possums. It was wide and deep and crystal clear and the riverbanks were rimmed with sand. The riverbed was sandy and the sun was flashing through the trees and bouncing off the water and the water was glass.

Oh, he said. Oh wow.

We stood there for a while. It wasn't too far from the beach, we could hear the surf but only just. There were magpies in the trees, a couple of kookaburras laughing. They had plenty to laugh at, now I think about it.

So, he said. You said it was warm enough. In you go.

I don't think I said that, I said. I was pretty sure I hadn't said that, at the time, although of course it's exactly what I'd said.

He nodded towards the water. Off you go then, he said. He was smiling.

We didn't bring our togs, I said.

He laughed at that.

We stood there another few seconds and then he said Well stuff you, and he started taking his clothes off and I started

laughing and he stripped to his jocks and he took those off too and then he walked to the river's edge and his feet hit the water.

Oh, Jesus, he said. Jesus it's cold.

And he stood there with his feet in a couple of inches of water. He just stood there.

So I said Stuff you and I stripped down, I stripped to my jocks and I took those off too and I walked into the river and I didn't stop and by Christ it was cold but I walked in past my calves, knees, thighs, I didn't shout as the water sloshed around my balls and I was in up to my hips and I turned around and I said Okay big boy, in you come.

He looked at me, he looked and he smiled and then he walked in and he hooted as the water hit his nuts and when he was in as deep as me he stopped and he looked at me again. It's so cold, he said. God it's cold.

And yeah it was cold, but there was sand between my toes and the sun was on my back, there were magpies in the trees and I was naked in a river in the middle of the bush with my boyfriend.

So I said All or nothing. One two three and under we go. All the way. One, I said. Two.

We stared at each other, and then we laughed.

But like I said it was bad, and then it was worse. We got home from the bush and a week later I went out drinking and I woke up in some hospital with some doctor giving me a booklet and telling me I had to go to some meeting and me saying I would thinking it was the right thing to say. And when I got home he was gone and he'd taken his stuff and he hadn't left a note and yeah, it was bad. It's bad.

But us in that ice-cold water, him and me with our shriveled dicks face to face in the sun with our feet in the sand and the kookaburras laughing and our clothes on the riverbank – Somehow, in that moment, I knew there was hope.

BAIRD

Ken Gardner

Old Baird didn't know it, but he was on his last legs, and what outdated legs they were. Polished, actual wood that stove-piped into brass stockings. Black and white was out. So was actual wood it seemed.

I don't know how I felt about saying goodbye. Baird and I had had some times. We laughed together, marvelled at the simian strength of Brute Bernard and cried at Lassie's return. Baird gave me rare Sunday afternoons with my father watching Muhammad Ali pummel his way into our hearts. Baird even introduced me to my first girlfriends. Barbara Eden, Elizabeth Montgomery, Barbara Feldon and the 4711 Eau De Cologne girl who's jiggling nipples fuelled my bedtime fantasies. It was here I mastered the art of silent masturbation so as not to wake my brother.

Baird wasn't really ours, he (It doesn't seem right calling him a she, What with the 4711 girl and all) was like a foster kid. Radio Rentals got us to fill out a form and he came home, we got along and he stayed. He was much nicer than the other foster kids who lived in the council house across the park. They all seemed stupid and angry at school, even the ones that had shoes, but Baird was different. We'd have dinner with him every night while dad ate alone at the kitchen Laminex, whingeing about electricity and shift work. Mum liked Baird too and she always ate with us. Baird was lucky because he didn't have to go to school and sometimes my mother would make me stay home too for company, although Baird was different around her. As I got older she seemed happier with just Baird.

Baird could be an asshole as well. He showed my brother the wrestling holds he'd practice on me and the family pets. He'd flash me Number 96 and then when I was fit to burst, get all religious and fade to black. He'd promised me a fun, liberated ride into the future and then started to get all dull and preachy. Baird could lie, and he was lying right up until the time they came up to the front door and took him away. I suppose I should excuse him for this as he was an orphan or something and probably had a lot of issues. I know that now and I suppose I'm not as harsh on those other foster kids as well. Maybe Baird taught me that.

When Baird left it happened like this. Baird and I were the last of the kids in the house. Dad's whingeing had turned on me and Baird became his favourite son. The one thing about being the favourite is a lot is expected from you, I can tell you this for sure, and Baird just wasn't up to it to tell you truth. He looked wooden and silly and small amongst the brass and black in the lounge room. He just couldn't adapt, and his little, reedy voice was a joke. Besides, I yearned to see the colour of Big M Girl's bikinis. I knew they weren't just variations on grey and I wanted more than he could show me. My fantasies had done a Wizard of Oz, and everything Baird was peddling was Kansas bound.

I wasn't even there when they took him away, I mean, it wasn't intentional it's just I wasn't at home much by then anyway. Pye was OK, but he got along more with my parents who now had nothing but time. I'd get home late at night and sit with him, but the funny thing was the more he showed me the less I wanted to know. Things seemed easier and deeper in black and white and I didn't like the way he started to put clothes on everything either.

THE WITCHES

Jo Cumberland

The witches visited at night. They scraped their bone white hands along the sill and cracked on the glass with their nails. Sarah sat up in bed and tried to move but the blankets were too heavy and kept her legs where they were. She tried to look at the bedside lamp so that she could turn it on but her neck too was immobile and wouldn't let her look away.

The witches visited but they did not see her. Their wide eyes danced around the bedroom, this way and that, shore to shore. They looked next to her, over her, through her, but showed no signs of awareness that she was there, in bed, watching them. Their white hair blew in the wind and gave the impression that they were swimmers, also because they did not need to walk on land. Swimmers in the night with wide eyes.

She wanted to scream, of course.

Being forced to sit very still created an inner sense of panic, the privacy of her feelings, inexpressible and therefore all the more wild, seemed to shut her off from the world, from what she believed to be the real world, and sent her instead whirling through a vortex of her own mute impressions that she could not break out of. The barrier between the self she thought she was and the one she had no choice but to inhabit now set her whole body into alarm, racing with heat. Where am I, who am I, and what is going on are all questions answerable by feeling that you are a living breathing being on this Earth, which all at once without explanation it seemed she was not.

She watched as they opened her things, went through her cupboards, put their ashen fingerprints all over her pencil jar, her school bag, flung her shoes all over the floor, pulled her clothes off the hangers with remarkable force, ruined her cassette tapes by undoing them and tearing out long strands of shiny film so that they were wrinkled and knotted together impossibly, in short, ransacked every part of her twelve year old bedroom, a bedroom of her own that she had finally been allowed.

As they worked away they made expressions, all kinds of expressions as though they were real people thinking real thoughts and not witches. They would raise their brows impressed by a picture or piece of clothing they found, falsely impressed, always in jest, before flinging it to the other side of the room. 'Here's a fine thing for the little missy!' they seemed to say 'Ooh! What would she want with a thing like this? Ha ha!' not unlike three pirates in a cave of treasure, who instead of coveting the objects they discovered, only wished to touch them and toss them around. They might pick something up and hold it out with two hands

*pretending to fly with her arms,
while at the same time really flying
her legless figure around the room*

as far as it could be held to be examined before bringing it in to their eyes and screwing their spotted grey faces, as though they would like a better understanding because they could not place the object among all the objects in their memory, and, shocked by their own ignorance, and with a definite refusal to admit as much, they would open their mouths wide and cast the object with a mighty scoff to some dark corner where it would not be found by either of the other two witches.

Sitting in bed Sarah felt her breathing, fragile little breaths. It seemed there was little she could do except perhaps lessen her presence in the scene by sinking, in a way, into the grey room, in an attempt to be inseparable from it, indistinguishable, and therefore invulnerable on her own. She imagined she could be one of those alabaster dolls, like the ones in the cabinet near the doorway, if she were to be found by the witches, or even a picture on the wall of a girl going to bed for the evening, sitting under her darned patchwork quilt after a warm drink of chocolate milk, not a stitch amiss. She could pretend she was one of those. She knew she had to sit very still to pull off such a feat, and even though she could not move, she attempted to add her own layer of stillness, voluntary stillness, which she imagined may to some degree be noticeable to these ghosts, though she admitted they probably did not register it, by taking in the slimmest and smoothest amounts of air as she could manage.

The light globe was covered by a bell-like shade of the palest green cloth, pulled tightly over six metal strands that branched out into a wide circle and bobbed in wavelets along the rim, from which a fringe of tassels looped their way around unevenly and with certain disjointed bends that spoiled the uniformity of their original effect. The cloth too, was worn and pilled, even in the barest of light Sarah could see the tiny balls of fluff collected all about the sides of the shade. One of the witches, every now and then, would run into the light and send it wavering to and fro or circling on a pendulum until it stopped of its own accord. Later, whether it was the same witch or not she could not tell for they were so similar in appearance, one of them caught a fingernail in the tassel loop and at once tore through it leaving the thread hanging oddly longer than the others. At the sight of this witch's frustration Sarah was sure she would return to avenge herself further on the shade by ripping it out from the ceiling socket or clubbing it with some piece of her property or other, and cause more damage than anything else they had previously done. She silently begged God for the woman to forget about it as she felt the heat punching her heart in anticipation of disaster. No. The witch let it go. The shade remained as it was.

'There's *nothing* here girls!' said one in glee, just as though she meant the opposite.

'Fine night for it!' said another, though doubtful if in response to the first or simply for encouragement.

'Would've been at it much longer if I'd known what a good laugh I'd have! Nothing like a bit of shenanigans to soothe the soul's lassies!' said the third. 'To think of me, that many years sat up in my children's rooms. My back! God my back!'

'Kills ya, doesn't it?' said another. 'Bare breast, bent back, them sucking a thread through ya nipple, kicking ya in the gut, them hollering in ya ear, tugging at ya hair. And they tell ya there's a god in heaven!'

‘And they tell ye there’s a hell to go to!’

‘Yes please! I’ll take hell over that bend any day! Ahaha! Gotta get some *grub!*’ And with the word *grub!* she pushed a toy keyboard that had been under Sarah’s bed, and with two hands hit it against the edge of her desk so that it cracked open to reveal several wires inside the plastic casing.

‘Would ya look at this?’ The witch held up a book that had fallen from Sarah’s book shelf. She flicked through the pages under the window where it was lightest. ‘The Wish- ing Trrreee,’ she said uneasily. ‘You wish!!!!!! Little Misss!!!!!!’ she lifted the window pane and cast the book into the night.

‘Ahahahaha! Good one!!!’ said another hysterically.

‘You Wish!!!! Little !! Miss!!!’ the third mimicked and twirled around in circles pretending to fly with her arms, while at the same time really flying her legless figure around the room.

Something about the book, the way that the witch had struggled so hard to pronounce the words, the way it had disappeared and, Sarah feared, would never be found, frightened her the most and made her feel the most lost, as though the whole room that had up to that point been hers, though terribly messy and ruined, had only now been snatched away from her, irretrievably so, and so that the certainty, a certain solid feeling that the room, or having it called hers, had given her, was again, and so quickly, missing, and her terror and aloneness were all that she could offer to fill that missing space-roomlessness.

They left soon after. Perhaps they had sensed her flight, that they had taken things to their full extreme and that the joy to be gained would never be such as it was in those fresher moments. Perhaps they sensed her not at all, but felt their own weariness of a game played on to the end, where it could go no further. When they left they left the window raised a little and the cold came in and Sarah’s hair slapped her in the face. Then she was able to get out of bed again and close it. She sunk to the carpet after that, and lay down on top of all that mess, caressing the broken toys and drawing pencils, pushing some things aside to allow room for her body to lay amongst it all. Playing gently with the bent flap of one of the book covers she fell asleep.

There was a strong knocking on the door which woke her from her dreamless darkness. She strained her neck and felt along it soreness in the muscles of her right side and shoulder. The knocking stopped and the door opened from the outside swiftly so that a draft of air puffed Sarah in the face and she raised her head further. Far above her her mother stood holding the door handle with one hand, wearing plastic yellow gloves for washing the dishes, soap bubbles clung to the fingers. Sarah realised instantly the oddness of her position and the sickening state that the bedroom and her belongings were in around her. A searing heat travelled through her from the origin of these realisations in her head, through her wet throat, her chest and landed with a weighty explosion in her belly. Her eyes roamed helplessly over the ground, helpless both because of her state of barely being awake and because of her position in the face of the events of the night before.

Her mother didn’t waste a moment. Her gaze shot over the room then fell on Sarah. Looking at her right in the eyes she let out a breath, turned away, shaking her head, and left. There was nothing more she needed to say.

PRAWN CRACKERS

Jayne Caruso

Saturday night. The cold wind howls outside. The day has been a hectic run of errands. We’re all exhausted, and relieved to shut out Winter for a little while. The aromatic Chinese take-away containers have just been delivered. They hold centre stage as the dishes and cutlery are hastily laid out. My two adult daughters take their seat with us around the oval dining table. We start reaching for each of our orders in unison.

While we feed our bodies with this satiating, convenient take-away, our souls are warmly nourished by our engaging, catch-up conversation.

‘Would anyone like some prawn crackers?’ I ask, as we near the end of the meal.

The customary free bag of prawn crackers sits beside the now empty containers, looking lonely and ignored.

All shake their head. ‘No, thanks,’ one of my girls says. ‘Don’t like them much, anymore,’ the other one volunteers.

An unexpected wave of nostalgia places me in front of the stove in my busy kitchen of many years ago. My two young girls, both under ten years old, are standing nearby, giggling and waiting for the oil to heat up in the deep frying pan. Their lean bodies are wriggling with excitement, their dark piggy tails swinging from side to side.

I’m standing with them, the supervising scooper-upper, holding the spider, another name for mesh ladle, in my right hand. The oil is heated. Both girls carefully drop their ready-to-cook prawn cracker chips into the hot oil, then stand back with wide-eyed anticipation. Squealing erupts as the dehydrated chips quickly grow and morph into puffy, flower shaped prawn crackers three times the size. As soon as the transforming stops, I quickly scoop out the prawn crackers before they start to burn, and place them in a bowl lined with paper towelling.

The girls drop the next lot of dry chips into the oil, and the routine continues until we’ve made a large bowl full to enjoy as an afternoon snack.

As I’m drawn back into the present, I look across the table at my two adult daughters. My girls seem to have morphed from children into adults with the same speed that prawn cracker chips curl and grow in a few seconds. Where have the years gone so soon? I ask myself.

Though our lives have woven through a few detours along the way, triumphing over trials and tribulations, while appreciating the joyful experiences, our heartfelt bond has always been present to carry us through it all. I silently give thanks for this invaluable treasure.

I lean over and grab the plastic bag of prawn crackers. I decide I’m going to enjoy a few as my silent toast, my version of raising a glass of wine to a wonderful, and cherished, past memory.

AN ENDING

William Stanforth

The main problem was that it had become impossible to structure the old man's life into a piece of non-fiction. While I had little interest in bringing him pain, the act of writing, insofar as I understood it, was something comprised of beginnings, middles and endings; transitions from darkness to light or contrariwise.

It started more than half a decade ago. I was out of work and on the verge of being evicted, and the esteemed former surgeon, Dr Ryan O'Sullivan, approached me and asked me to write his biography. He'd seen some articles I'd written for the local newspaper and he'd also read my first and only novel, a piece of work that barely covered costs and was received with mixed reviews. Needless to say, I was not in a position to turn him down.

Having little knowledge of the medical profession, I was curious about what I'd discover. I also thought the project would, if successful, say something about me and my ability to interpret the lives of others; I'd envisaged a work that would transcend the subject and illuminate the author. Though soon after it started I realised the man had little regard for the details of his life that might constitute a kind of literary *value*.

For example, he'd labour for hours trying to pinpoint the smells and colours of a somewhat unremarkable autumn day in his boyhood, while he'd refuse to discuss the untimely deaths of his beloved first and second fiancées – or any of the harrowing and likely pivotal events from his career in several major hospitals. Those events, 'Demanded no further thought,' according to O'Sullivan.

...

As the years went on I had, initially to great personal displeasure and then less so, wished the old man ill health and even death. It occurred to me that death would be the only ending the former surgeon would accept in life and in biography. But so long as we were both alive, I was there with him, chronicling the disorderly and pointless details of his long past and ultimately his day-to-day present.

After the first year, we finished his youth and early adulthood. After another three years, we'd covered his middle-aged life and most of his retirement. As the fifth year dawned, we worked from the very days I spent with him. I'd write about what he had for breakfast, his dreams, his interactions with his servants, and even his conversations with me. I'd spend each morning listening to the man speak in his dimly lit study, capturing the conversations on a small digital recorder and taking shorthand notes.

Each afternoon, I'd type these notes up using an electronic typewriter and make light structural edits before supper. O'Sullivan insisted I use the dated machine so he could review the pages whenever he felt the need. I'd objected to the device, as it seemed ineffective and unprofessional – though my protests ceased around the time I started to lose faith in the project and the old man's ability to interpret his own life.

I had agreed to \$0.20 per word upon completion, which meant I was due to receive a considerable sum if the project ever ended. Included in my payment was board in the man's luxurious townhouse, meals prepared by his servants and a modest weekly allowance. Many times, I considered forfeiting my fee and leaving; however, for various personal reasons – most notably, a kind of severe alcoholism that only really surfaced when I was out of work – I remained. Also, I felt a growing need to see the project through and discern what the era had meant in my life, if anything at all.

...

To summarise the project and the man, Ryan O'Sullivan was born in the Western Districts in 1927. His parents, devout Catholics, emigrated from Ireland years earlier to establish a dairy farm in the small town of Terang. This was where he spent his childhood. He had strong interests in religion and science, specifically astronomy, spending countless nights studying the celestial objects in the endless rural sky.

O'Sullivan's stories of his youth presented me with the image of a quiet, reflective and compliant young boy. There were the usual stories of schoolyard conflicts, love and so on. In spite of myself, I did enjoy hearing stories from the former surgeon's childhood. He'd grown up in a simpler time, one that made me feel strangely nostalgic for a past I'd never experienced.

In 1945, Ryan O'Sullivan turned 18 and volunteered for the Second Australian Imperial Force. He was sent to the South West Pacific, only to arrive and find out the Japanese had surrendered and World War II was ending. Fortunately, he never saw the battlefield. He did, however, describe the ordeal as the most exhilarating time of his life. He then returned to Australia and enjoyed the fruits of a booming post-war economy; he worked on the family farm for a year, then relocated to the city to study medicine.

With a few major exceptions, the surgeon's life followed a somewhat routine pattern from the dawn of his professional career to his retirement and finally his dealings with me. The exceptions came in the form of two astoundingly similar tragedies, occurring almost exactly one decade apart.

Following graduation, Ryan O'Sullivan moved back to the town of his birth and started working as a general practitioner. He met a young woman by the name of Jessica Allen at a social dance in the spring of 1953. The attraction, the former surgeon said, was nothing short of hypnotic. As a young man, he possessed a kind-yet-solemn disposition, while Jessica had wit and an intensity that made her luminous in social situations.

She'd approached him and within six weeks the two were engaged.

In the months that followed, they set about planning a wedding and starting a family; though, Jessica's life was tragically cut short in the summer of 1953. While the young doctor was out on a house call, two men passing through Terang burglarised his small home and practice. Jessica, in the process of moving in that very day, was caught in the middle.

The detectives believed that one of the men tied her up and beat her savagely while the other loaded the doctor's possessions into a stolen Oakland utility vehicle. She drowned in her own blood before anyone was able to find her. The vehicle was discovered torched on the outskirts of the closest major city two days later. And the men, who'd been sighted leaving Terang right after the incident, were never found.

This event the former surgeon mentioned in such an offhanded manner that I'd initially thought he was joking. It was not until he brought up the second incident and I conducted some independent research that I started to believe him.

The second incident occurred in the summer of 1963 in the coastal capital city. O'Sullivan, who'd moved there shortly after the first tragedy, had climbed the ranks at a major public hospital. He'd met a young doctor, Annabelle Richards, and the two had been engaged for almost six months. Heartbreakingly, she was attacked and killed on the short walk home following a night shift. The assailant, again motivated by petty financial gain or whatever sickness of the heart afflicts the needlessly cruel, was also never found.

The doctor's account of these events – outside of my own research – is no more than I've just given you. I had, confirming their validity, endeavoured to gain the old man's perspective on both misfortunes – specifically how these incidents might have affected his vision of God and the human spirit. Though each time he made it clear he didn't want to give these events much credence; he said he'd rather focus on the moments

of his life he could bear thinking about. There was no changing his mind, and thus commenced my gradual loss of professional motivation.

We spent his remaining years detailing sensations lost and found, unremarkable dialogues with unremarkable people and so on. He'd labour sometimes for days on end attempting to describe a particular feeling he'd experienced as a young boy – something that happened as the dust motes drifted around him in his childhood bedroom, back in those timeless, immortal days. He'd often talk about the colour of the afternoon sky: a kind of pinkish haze that suggested something beyond where the soil met the clouds, out there in the plains.

He'd also started fixating on a recurring dream he'd been having, one where he was lost in a dark forest and a fierce storm was building above him. As he got sicker, reports of this dream became more and more frequent.

...

Regrettably, the last encounter I had with the former surgeon was an unpleasant one, yet I refuse to believe it was indicative of our entire relationship. In those final months, I had started to drink quite heavily in the afternoons. I'd leave the estate and spend two or so hours in a nearby bar; I'd then return surly and antagonistic. It was on one of these days I aired my concerns with the man about his biography; I said that there was no way we'd find a publisher and I called it a sprawling, incoherent mess. I said the only way we would ever sell it was if he'd allow me to reflect on the moments in which he'd experienced pain, those pivotal stages that shaped his character. I believe I said these things out of insecurity; I blamed the old man for taking time that I felt could've otherwise been used to write something of value (this is what I supposed, back then).

And he said this to me: 'I gave you a place to sleep, food, an income and the prospect of a large final payment. You could've left at any point but you chose not to. And more importantly, I will not reduce the deaths of the women I loved to plot points, as you say. If you can't find literary worth in what I've told you then you mustn't be much of a writer.'

I left the old man's house in a rage and when I returned several days later, I discovered he'd surrendered to his numerous illnesses. I think it took me a long time to accept what he'd said because, like him, I was hurt. And for the record, I'm aware of the irony of mentioning his traumas in the first half of this very account, yet I hope the mentioning of them amounts to more than mere plot points.

In the months after the former surgeon's death, I thought a lot about his dream: the dense, darkening forest and the impending storm. I decided that the dream was about him being scared in his final months, and needing me or someone to offer support, to be real. And I was incapable of doing this because I could seldom stop thinking about the project and how it was failing. For some reason, I'd convinced myself that the project was more essential than the man. I think I'd done this because if it were to succeed, it would ultimately benefit me. And back then I knew little of myself and the selfishness I was capable of.

Shortly after O'Sullivan's death, I found a flat and a regular job. True to his word, he left a final payment in his will for a manuscript the thickness of several phone books. I continued to write, but I stopped viewing writing as equal to real life and more as a tool to navigate one's life. Which is to say, you can use stories like candles to see a little further ahead when the darkness starts closing in, but they don't change the fact of you being lost.

MEMORY

Melissa Tan

My sister and I are waiting for my mum to pull up in front of school that Wednesday afternoon in the Winter of '89 and I quietly pray she's late. Late enough to turn up and say, *'We're not going to piano today.'*

But no, she arrives on time.

It was our Wednesday routine – mum picks us up, we drive to Reservoir arguing over who has their lesson first, while the other waits in the car. The lesson finishes, I race out, jump back in the car and my sister hops out for her turn.

I dreaded these afternoons but today I'm going first. *'I'll just get it over and done with'* I think.

I open the rusted, squeaky gate that leads me down a dark and narrow pathway.

It's a sinister entrance to the corner street house. Overhanging trees crowd the yard blocking any inch of sky or sun trying to shine through. The more you walk through, the darker it becomes. I feel a cold breeze brush against the back of my neck. And in my seven-year-old imagination, I fear something scary will jump out from behind the bushes and kidnap me away into darkness.

Fuelled by the horrors in my own head, I run down the pathway to the front door. Two minutes early and out of breath, I peer through the side window.

A warm and hazy yellow light seeps out from the inside, trickling its way through the stain glass windows. Autumn leaves from last season have woven themselves in a scattered fashion across the cobwebbed pane.

Running back down that pathway, I was eager to get inside. I wanted to show her how elegantly I could play, with erasers balanced on the back of my hands and without the notes in front of me

I can hear pages turning, delicately but deliberately and a faint tune alongside a high-pitched hum.

Lynne, my seventy-five-year-old piano teacher is turning those pages. An English lady with a passion for music and a kind heart. She lived alone on Edwardes street together with her three cats. Aspiring and bright-eyed students who would visit on a daily basis.

Some muddled voices, shuffling of papers and light footsteps hurrying towards the front door. The sounds of the other Wednesday student finishing.

'Right on time!' Lynne says smiling down at me. I grumble 'Hello' to the other student as they leave and I'm reluctantly making my way inside.

The brown dusty piano is positioned in the corner of the living room and I ask for an extra cushion so my hands can reach the keys. An odd shaped cushion is pulled out from a pile of larger ones that sit on top a sunken sofa that's draped in a colourful knitted blanket. An electric wall heater is on and one of her cats is chewing on bits of food they have found on the floor.

I shudder.

'So' she says with a pause. The weekly question is coming.

'How many hours have you practiced this week?'

'Lots!' I tell her 'I've practiced really hard!' I say with a cheeky grin, as I prop my book on the ledge. I was a bad liar, but she doesn't question me further.

Instead, I play some scales to warm up and she starts balancing erasers on the back of my hands. She tilts her head on an angle to assess if my wrists are sitting upright. 'Hrm' she mutters, then takes out her pink pen to write some 'progress' notes.

'Slow down, count the beats and don't rush' Lynne would say. To keep me 'in tempo', she would tap her foot on the ground while I played, dust rising to fill the air. I sneeze.

I performed in a piano recital a few months earlier and I had come in at fourth place. The girl before me had chosen to play the same song! Overtaken by nerves, I played too fast and made a mistake... or two.

I hated piano. I hated the lessons, the time it took and the songs I was forced to play.

'All this money for lessons and you don't even practice!' was the same complaint from my mum I would hear after lessons each week.

And when mum decided to watch my lesson, oh the fear inside! The comments she would make about how I was 'talented but too lazy to play' and how she was embarrassed by my efforts. I would break down and cry. Keys covered in tears, vision so blurred I could hardly read the notes on paper in front of me.

Lynne would hand me her hanky and with a gentle, reassuring voice say 'Oh, there, there it's okay. You just need to practice a little bit more because you CAN play well. Chin up!'

Last Summer, I had my very first grading exam and to prepare, I had memorised a song so confidently that I could play it with my eyes closed. However, when the examiner took my book away, it was the first time in my life that I experienced a mental blank. So powerfully that I couldn't finish the entire exam, which, evidently cost me a bad grade.

In that moment I decided I was never going to become a pianist and was ready to call it all quits. Yes, I hated the piano.

Embarrassed by the low grade I tell Lynne I refuse to go for anymore grading and that I was done.

'I want to play songs that I think sound nice, so how about YOU play ME songs, and if I like what I hear then I'll decide if I want to learn it?' My final ultimatum.

‘Sure!’ she says willingly. ‘Let’s swap seats so I can play.’

Maybe agreeing to this ‘deal’ was her way of trying to keep me motivated so I didn’t give up just yet. She told me she believed in me.

I spin around in her arm chair waiting for her to play. From the corner of my eye I see a faded postcard sitting upright against a vase. Inspecting it closer, it says ‘*Love, John*’ in washed out ink.

John, Lynne’s husband was a painter who, had sadly fallen off a ladder. This postcard was the last thing she received from him. I never wanted to pry, but the curious child inside me couldn’t help but ask. She said John was an artistic man whom she met in England and they had moved to Melbourne in the ‘70s to start a new life. They had no children or local family, and, in a way, I think Lynne liked to treat her students as her own.

She plays energetically through different songs, with sharp flicks of her wrists. There’s a high-pitched hum as she plays but I’m struggling to find one I like.

‘No, next one!’ I say, before she’s hardly even started.

I shake my head ‘Nope, not that one either.’ and play catch with the eraser in the air.

And then, I hear it.

‘Wait, what’s THIS one?’ I ask leaning in forward. ‘I like this one!’

Immediately I’m taken with that feeling you get when the sounds of a new melody hit your ears for the first time. You know in that first ten seconds in, you’re already going to love it.

The song is called ‘*Memory*’ from a musical called ‘*Cats*’. It’s written by a composer named *Andrew Lloyd Webber* (a name that was always too long for me to pronounce). Lynne says she loved this song because it’s about a beautiful cat who lost its beauty and glamour through age. Left abandoned, life has now made her lonely. She can only find comfort in reflections of the memories she holds of the past.

It was hard not to notice the similarities in the story to Lynne’s own life.

‘*Memory*’ I whisper. ‘Yes, this is the one.’

Throughout the months of Spring I had a new-found sense of motivation to learn

the song from inside and out. Driven by an inner desire to perfect the entire piece, I would practice into the late hours of the night. I would play in the dark, I would play before school, I would play until my knuckles were stiff, the skin on my wrists rubbed raw and until the bones in my fingers ached.

I was determined.

I wanted to prove that I **COULD** play well. To do her teaching justice as a return for believing in me all those years. Because if she believed in me, then I believed in me too.

I learned more about Lynne that year, and how the simple things in life made her happy. She was a glass half full person who looked on the bright side of life. We took her for a ride in our car one afternoon and she screamed with excitement, because she had never been in an ‘automobile’ before. We surprised her with a tin of biscuits and a card at Christmas.

She cried.

Maybe she was lonely. Maybe teaching kids was company for her. And when she started to hug me as her own, I knew she considered me family. Our Christmas card now carefully placed next to the postcard from John.

‘See you next Wednesday!’ she said.

I’d catch myself looking back at the door after we’d say goodbye, to get a final glimpse of her bright blue eyes and crooked smile as I walked back down that pathway which, after all that time, didn’t seem so dark anymore. Her thin, fragile body hunched over waving at me in the doorway until I faded from sight.

In the hard months of practice, I’d accomplished my goal. I couldn’t wait for next Wednesday to come. I had learnt to play *Memory* perfectly with my eyes closed.

Running back down that pathway, I was eager to get inside. I wanted to show her how elegantly I could play, with erasers balanced on the back of my hands and without the notes in front of me.

I knock against the door with pride. ‘She is going to be so proud of me’ I thought.

But there is no warm light in the window.

I knock again.

No faint tune or hum. No sound of movement from the inside.

Lynne doesn’t come to the door. No one comes. Confused, I head back down the pathway which seems dark once again.

And so it was, that life would take its natural course with Lynne that Summer ‘She passed away on Monday’ we were later told.

There was never going to be a ‘next Wednesday’ for me again that year and she was never going to see me play the piece I had now mastered to perfection.

The realisation of her passing shattered my love for the piano into a hundred million pieces.

She was gone.

On frequent trips down Edwardes street in the weeks that followed, I’d catch myself looking at that her corner house, now a changed space. The trees cut down, gate removed, clean windows outside an empty room. The piano now gone and a red ‘For Sale’ sign hanging prominently on the fence.

And in the year of 1989, I gave up the piano, this time for good.

...

It’s strange how fragments from childhood will stay with you. You see, I never owned or attempted to play another piano from that point on. But as I sit before a one in the years that have since passed, my hands will move themselves into a familiar position across the keys. Eyes closed. Ready for Lynne to hear me play perfectly, the whole way through.

If you have a strong enough desire to accomplish something, despite the twists and turns of life, you can. You just need to believe in yourself, and someone who believes in you too.

Because thirty years later I still remember how to play the last song Lynne taught me when I was eight – *Memory*.

‘Memory,

All alone in the moonlight

I can smile at the old days

I was beautiful then

I remember the time I knew what happiness was

Let the memory live again.’

(Lynne, forever in my memory.)

TABLE SETTING

Virginia Morgan

My grandmother was deserted.

She was left on a Sydney train station with all her worldly goods packed into suitcases. Beside her, arranged according to height like steps on a staircase, were four little girls, aged from ten down to two. It was 1924.

The family, part of an itinerant population common in Australia at the time, were travelling to Melbourne to look for work. My grandfather had said he would just nip into the pub for a quick drink before the train came. The train came. He had not returned. What to do? They had no home to go back to. Grandmother reasoned it prudent to get on the train and supposed he would follow on the next one, probably scheduled for the next day. He did not.

My grandmother was destitute. There were no automatic unemployment payments, no single parent pensions until the 1940s.

The four little girls ended up in the care of the Good Shepherd sisters at Abbotsford Convent, now a major community and arts precinct by the Yarra River. The last step on the staircase, my mother, was the youngest child the nuns had ever taken in.

Mum had no idea how to keep a house for she remained in that institution until her teenage years. Her responsibility at the convent had been to polish the front step. In addition to that major skill, she also knew how to set a table, and I mean *really* set a table. No sauce bottle or cardboard box of salt and pepper ever graced our dining table or even the red laminex kitchen table in the late 1950s and 1960s. A sense of ceremony prevailed as the table was arrayed with tablecloth, fresh flowers cut from the garden, condiments in a cruet set, milk in a jug. She did like to make an entrance. Usually some theatrical singing was involved with the presentation of meals.

As a kid I remember always being hungry. Meals were always late, and always yummy once they arrived. It was a household filled with love and a strange mixture of disorder and perfectionism. I did wonder at this supreme standard of presentation in the armoury of her housekeeping skills. As an adult, when some family history unravelled, I began to understand.

My mother had many mothers in the convent – the nuns and many single women ‘helpers’ who had been given shelter there. As the youngest, she was loved and fussed over but not by the woman she yearned for most – her own mother.

So what sort of work could a woman, homeless and on her own, do in the 1920s? Grandmother gained live-in positions, in service, in many genteel country pubs around Victoria. We know she worked at the fifty roomed Healesville Grand Hotel and the thirty roomed Koo Wee Rup Royal Hotel. She would have trained in the art of silver service and laying the table, experience later gifted to her daughters for all the years they’d been apart – elegance, beauty, decorum, how to behave out there in the world.

Table setting – one of the first chores a child can master. At each place setting, the cutlery is positioned on either side of the dinner plate. Forks, bread and butter plate, butter knife and napkin are placed to the left of the plate. Knives, blade facing inward, spoons and stemware are to the right. Working from the outside in, the cutlery can be used in order as the courses are presented. The glasses are placed to the right, above the knives, also in order of use, from wine to water. Meals are served from the left and cleared away from the right of the guest.

My current family table is the meeting place where this legacy, the art of laying the table, is being passed to the fifth generation. My granddaughter, aged two, brings in the salt and pepper shakers with a sense of great importance. My daughters once did the same. I no longer serve the ‘meat and three veg’ of my childhood. The food is simple but becomes elevated to food for the soul, displayed in this splendid table setting.

THE BLACK MARKET EGGS

Sara Tacey

Isabel frowned, her small face serious as she regarded the brown ovoid shapes nesting in a padded cotton bag.

‘What are they?’

‘Eggs.’ Laura glanced at her daughter.

‘What are they *for*?’

‘They’re food.’ Isabel was seven now, old enough to understand more than Laura wanted her to know... she even picked up the tension in Laura’s voice when she talked about the prospects for her business, the old-fashioned candy store. Once she’d made a living just from the tour buses, the groups of seniors who wanted to relive their childhood by buying bags of the round, sweet rock candy Laura made on the marble bench in the candy store where the eggs now sat. But nostalgia was out of fashion now. She should sell the store—the building had value, even if the business was worthless. She could smell scorched sugar in her clothes at night.

Isabel reached for the bag.

‘Careful. Don’t break them.’ There were six. Once they’d been sold by the dozen, cartons of them stacked in supermarkets for anyone who wanted them. ‘They come from chickens. You’ve seen a chicken.’ An uncertain nod—it had been a video online, not a real bird. Who owned the chickens that had laid these eggs?

‘What are you going to do with them?’

‘You have to cook them.’ Laura could almost taste the sticky glue of poached yolk soaking into a piece of fresh grain bread, a memory from years ago when eggs were rare enough. She didn’t know how fresh they were. You never knew, with the black market.

It wasn’t like cooking. Making candy needed exactness, like chemistry. She needed the special thermometer, the low-flame gas burners rather than the imprecise induction panels of her own modern kitchen. She remembered learning about sugar molecules during her food science degree, when she thought she’d go and work for one of the huge companies that manufactured

artificial food. But then she’d found her great grandmother’s recipe book, handwritten flaking papers with spidery script. The recipes had notes around them—annotations she could barely make out. She’d scanned the pages, thrown away the disintegrating book. When she tapped at her device screen, she pulled up the file from the cloud within a minute.

She’d never tried this recipe before. It was impossible to get eggs. She thought about how much they had cost her, the risk that she might be caught transporting the parcel home, have them confiscated as some kind of biohazard. These days everything came from factories. Who would eat the product of an animal?

She was barely sure they were real. But when she cracked the shell against the edge of the marble slab, she could feel the sticky cold liquid against her fingers. She’d watched clips on the internet, from years ago. She knew what to do. She’d use two for the nougat and there would be four left.

‘I need to separate them,’ she told Isabel. ‘This recipe only needs the whites. This part.’ She put the yolks in another bowl. ‘We can use these for something else.’

‘*Whisk til stiff*. What does that mean?’

‘I’ll show you.’ Laura put the whites into the bowl of the bench mixer and the two of them watched the whisk attachment swirl through the liquid. There were tiny bubbles in it, then foam... and then eventually the soft peaks came. To Isabel it would seem like magic, but she knew exactly what the proteins were doing in the bowl, the way they were uncurling slowly as the metal whisk slid through them.

‘Why aren’t there more eggs?’ Isabel asked. When she looked at her daughter, Laura saw a younger version of herself – puzzled green eyes, dark brown hair fastened back from her face.

‘It’s a long story.’ Laura watched the bowl and then hit the switch when the soft peaks stiffened into glossy white foam. But Isabel stared at her, expectant and she knew she wouldn’t be able to

divert her easily. ‘Once lots of food came from animals.’

‘Really?’

‘Milk came from cows.’

‘What’s a cow?’ She tried to think how to describe it.

‘I’ll find you a picture later. And you could make the milk into cheese.’ Another frown.

‘It all comes from a factory. You told me that.’ There was a hint of accusation there.

‘It’s true. It does all come from factories now. Animals cost a lot to feed and a lot of the farmland is gone, now. All those green pastures and meadows are dry wasteland.’ Laura remembered learning about synthetic food production during her university studies. If her professors had known what she’d choose to do with her qualification... She smiled to herself, wiping one hand across her forehead as she stirred the sugar, glucose, honey and water. She imagined trying to explain about bees to Isabel, the idea that tiny insects could produce something so delicious.

The nougat wouldn’t taste the same with mock honey, but the eggs were the important part – the artificial ones didn’t form the same textures. None of the scientists had worked out a perfect replacement for them.

Ten minutes later, the nougat lay cooling in the flat metal tray, studded with chopped almonds.

‘When can we try some?’

‘Tomorrow.’ Laura covered the nougat with foil. Ants swarmed at this time of year and she didn’t want a slow moving trail of them ruining her creation.

There was a date at the top of the scanned page, 2017. *Nougat – from Alice*. What kind of world had they lived in, her great grandmother and Alice? Had they seen this future, a time when simple ingredients would be so scarce?

No, Laura thought as she arched the lock at the front of the store, Isabel’s sticky fingers clutching at her free hand. What would Isabel’s future hold, after all? She could not control that. But she could give her daughter the sweet, perfect taste of real nougat, just once in her life.

TRAVELLING

Craig Hildebrand

On the tram, James watched the other passengers drop in and out of time.

Travelling.

He preferred to have some privacy when he travelled, either a quiet corner out of the way, or at his flat. But he understood that this was becoming one of those things now. The tide had turned on time travel, and what was once viewed with skepticism had been embraced by everyone, wholesale. On this tram alone, mid-morning, he could see at least six passengers glazed over with that expression that all travellers had.

They had discovered time travel back in twenty-seven. The first to explore through time came back without realising what they'd done. To them it had just been a dream. A waking dream, but as it was different for each of them nobody initially joined the dots. It was time travel, but time was personal. How can you travel back in time when it's entirely subjective?

At first everyone was afraid of the temporal paradoxes. Decades of films and science fiction had taught the world to fear paradoxes, to fear changing the future or erasing the present, giving birth to your grandfather or destroying the planet. This was silly. The paradoxes couldn't be avoided, but it didn't matter. Trying to fix them only caused more, and so now they were everywhere. It's like litter, or graffiti at the train station platform. Normal is a paradox.

In front of him, a man in a suit nodded his head forwards and then jerked back. Amateur. Jolting in and out of times like that can ruin the sensation. It took a bit of practice to be conscious of yourself in the present, and aware of the past at the same time. That way you could at least retain some semblance of control. When he first started travelling, it reminded James of coming up from a dream, your body still retaining sleep paralysis but your mind awake. It was just like that, only training the paralysis to occur when you needed it, like a muscle.

At the home, he found his mum in the cafe. It was really just a room with

laminated tables, high-backed chairs and a decent view of the garden, but at least it was warm and quiet.

'Hi Mum,' James said.

She looked up at him, clear and earnest. 'Oh, James. Good morning.' It was a good day.

'I brought the bananas.' He lifted them up, happy to see the smile on her face. Last summer, when she was still at home, her home, she'd fallen in the pool. Luckily he'd been there that day and heard the splash from the kitchen. By the time he burst out of the back door she was pulling herself out of the shallow end, her summer dress clinging to her legs.

She was peeling the banana, tasting it. 'Good?' he asked.

She smiled. 'Just as always.'

'So how've you been, Mum?'

'Me? Good. Right as rain.'

They
sat like that a while.
Occasionally she took a bite
from the banana. This was how the
conversations went these days - two or
three exchanges and then silence. Not for the
first time, James wondered what it would
be like to time travel at her age. So much more to
see again. She could see his dad, but right back
when they still didn't know each other, being
introduced at university. He liked to think she'd
love it. She was always keen to embrace new
things. Had been the first with an automated
car in the street, though that had helped
mask the dementia for longer
than it should have.

James got up to make himself a tea from the urn. By the time he turned around, she was gone.

He found her heading back toward her room.

'Hi Mum,' he said again.

'Hi darling. Is Diana with you today?' Again, the ease at which he found he could just say nothing to her, and it wouldn't register. He walked with her to her room, helped her find something to watch on TV, and gave her a kiss on her head.

'I'll see you on Thursday, Mum.'

Di was gone eight months now and the settlement on the house had been last week. Most contact was by message, and even then, they were getting shorter:

You've still got the plant books. Can I have them? I've got room for them. And a garden.

The dogs need their vaccinations, I got the message from the vet. Love to your mum.

And, most recently: Both of us should move on, James.

The park was quiet, the sun hitting him hard and creating white-outs in his vision. He could be alone in the park, for a short time at least. A playground went unused nearby.

He let his mind slow and stop, felt his weight slacken into the wooden bench, and his vision flickered. He was getting sharper at this. The more travelling you did, the easier and smoother it became. There was that familiar initial blurriness, like too much water in his eyes, then he blinked them clear.

Di sat next to him, on their couch. The house was warm, it was still mid-winter and the heating ran all day. She was flipping through channels, tucked up in her thick dressing gown.

'What do you want to watch?' she said.

He remembered this. They'd had a big fight, the first since moving in. Then he'd had a shower, sat down, and-

'Well?' Di was looking at him.

'Sorry, I was thinking about something else,' he said. She sighed, then went back to flipping channels, punctuating each channel-change aggressively with her thumb on the remote. He turned to her, putting his arm behind her head, opened himself.

'Di, I'm sorry. I'm an idiot. I love you.' This was the truth, and a lie. He had never said this. But he was saying it now.

She softened and turned, resting her head in the crook of his arm. 'Just talk to me when it's like this. Don't run away.'

'I just had a shower.'

'You know what I mean.'

He did then. He did now. Eventually they settled on turning the TV off and reading instead, positioned almost as they were now, with her leaning back in to him, holding the book above her head. They sat like that for hours until she fell asleep, and then he did as well. In the morning, they were happy again.

James cleared his eyes and looked back out across the park. A woman was pushing her toddler on the swings, while their dog sat tethered to a pole. The sun had dipped, and was now peeking through the trees. He shivered. Time to go.

James stood, then pulled his phone out of his pocket. He checked the last message from Di.

It's hard to move on, James.

Paradox.

James sat in the shelter of a bus stop across the road from Di's work. It was near dark and most the evening rush home had already happened, but if he knew Di at all she'd be there until well after six.

It's hard to move on.

He considered travelling forward to see how this might develop, but he'd so far resisted. Maybe she'd come out looking for him, like she used to when he'd pick her up regularly. Maybe she'd call wanting to catch up for a drink, just to talk and see where things were at. See if there'd been a change.

Travelling forward became more common once the fear of paradoxes and multiple possibilities had died off. It was an upgrade, initially marketed like tourism; it quickly became the key that unlocked the reason for any travelling at all.

For too long, James often thought, we lived our lives backwards. Backing our way into the future, unspooling a string of regret and trauma behind us so that we never got lost in the forest. Never fully committed to the future.

We were no longer prisoners.

Still, James preferred to go forward as a reward. A treat to see if he was making the right choices.

There were still lights on in the building across the road. He still had time to wait. He pulled his travelling unit out and went back twelve years.

It was summer. His parents bought this house for themselves after he moved out. It resembled nothing of the family home that James wondered if they'd been harbouring some secret dream of a life without him. There was a pool, and gaudy palm trees around it. The verandah came with those terrible wicker chairs that look like the catalogues suggest, but with added discomfort.

But his parents were there, and now he was here again. His dad appeared up on the steps.

'Give us a hand with lunch, would you?'

'Sure thing,' James said, and he got halfway up the steps before he remembered what he was meant to be doing. Originally he had gone inside and the two of them had cut up sandwiches and bickered over the music selection until settling on Al Green.

James stopped and turned around. His mum was on her knees, beyond the edge of the pool, pulling weeds out of the garden bed.

'Mum?'

She looked over her shoulder at him and gave a smile.

'Mum? Want some lunch?'

Then she stood and patted the soil off her gardening gloves. She was still smiling, at first in his direction, then off across the pool. He moved quickly, skipping around the edge of the pool, making sure he didn't hit a wet tile and slip himself.

She had started walking by the time he reached her and placed an arm around her shoulder. Already her gaze had gone slack and at first she didn't respond to his touch.

'Mum? It's James. I'm here.'

She smacked her lips gently, as if she had a dry mouth, and then looked at him. 'I know, James. Let's go inside.'

He moved out the way to let her pass, and follow her as she now made her way back around the pool's edge to the house. Her steps were cautious, but purposeful.

He could hear his dad's voice singing along to Al Green inside.

James blinked his eyes and came back to the bus stop. Still dark. Still lights on over the road.

When his mum first went into the pool, it was the beginning of the change. Three months later James's dad died in the car accident, having spent his last weeks worried about his increasingly confused wife.

James hated that moment by the pool. He hated how he embarrassed he'd been for her. He hated seeing the way her khaki gardening pants clung to her legs as they led her out, with all three of them in the water and trying to talk about anything but what she was doing there.

Now it was gone. She hadn't fallen in.

Across the road, Di pushed her way out of the building, slinging her bag over her shoulder and James knew she was heading for the train station. He stood quickly and jogged across the road.

Would it be any different now? Would she show the change on her face? She heard his steps before he was able to call out and turned around, recognising him under the street lights.

'James? What are you doing here?'

It had been weeks since he'd seen her, it struck him how much now she looked like someone unfamiliar.

He paused, unsure now what to say that the moment had come. 'I wanted to see you. To say hello.'

'How long have you been waiting here?' she asked. She looked at him, frowning as he hurriedly shoved his unit into his bag, cords tangling around each other.

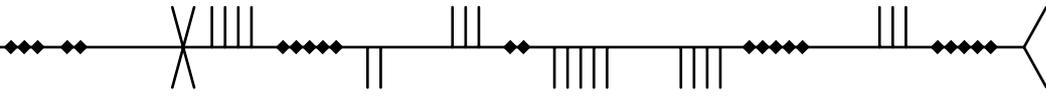
'Not long,' he managed. 'Not too long.'

'It's time you went home, James.' She walked off, heading up the hill, toward the station.

THE 13 SIGNS OF THE ZODIAC*

Carl Walsh

	<p>Aries <i>19 April to 13 May</i></p>	<p>You'll develop an ability to read ancient Pictish ogham. This will surprise you given your star sign is named after a Greek ram prone to golden fleeces. For clarity's sake we'll rename him Angus, a kingly Pictish name. A picture of Angus can be found to the left (with his name still in Greek to confuse you). If you have a beef with this please take it up with your relevant pantheon, and remember, this'll all make much more sense once you're reading ogham. Keep in mind that the oracles of Delphi and Dunadd! are all one. You may develop a liking for Pink Floyd.</p>
	<p>Taurus <i>14 May to 19 June</i></p>	<p>You're inclined to think this is bull. And to go at life like a bull in a china shop. And to start sentences with and. This will lead to you not making friends with editors or pedants. This is their loss. There have been many great Tauruses in the world's history – just no one can name them. Make the world your own and don't be led by the nose or put out to pasture. Avoid people wearing red and if you can't avoid them make sure you do not overcharge them. Don't take a steer from anyone. To say nothing of an ox.</p>
	<p>Gemini <i>20 June to 20 July</i></p>	<p>You feel embarrassed to be under a sign named after a 70s Holden. It could be worse, it could have been a Leyland. Remember to be sure your jack is level and put your spare under the car before attempting to change a flat tyre. Putting the whole car up on blocks is also an option. Putting two cars up on blocks probably comes closer to the deep symbolism of this sign. Putting them in the front yard will send a message to your neighbours. Not cutting your grass will send another message and will seed their gardens with weeds. This is the true power of your sign – go with it.</p>
	<p>Cancer <i>21 July to 9 August</i></p>	<p>Your compulsion to scuttle under rocks is understandable – we all feel like that some days. As a decapod you have to be careful about not putting your foot in your mouth but at least with your hardy exoskeleton you can be thick-skinned about it. You will have heard the word 'crabwise' – this does not mean you are wise but that you have a tendency to walk sideways. Be careful of getting sand in your toes or caught in a pincer movement, particularly your own. Be wary of Geminis, especially if they are driving at speed along the beach.</p>
	<p>Leo <i>10 August to 15 September</i></p>	<p>You're lying – sorry, lion. It is easy to get the two confused. Especially when the lion is lying (and vice versa). Be nice – that's the mane thing. Remember you are the king of the jungle and that this can be less than useful in modern suburbia. You could consider going into banking. If you find yourself getting catty, curl up in the sunshine and sleep it off. Leo is an anagram of olé, with this in mind you may wish to bait Tauruses into action or take up Flamenco dancing. You may also develop a taste for venison.</p>
	<p>Virgo <i>16 September to 30 October</i></p>	<p>Virgo rhymes with ergot (or does it?) a fungus that appears in the ears of cereal crops. Ergo (see what I did there?), you must be careful of fungus in your ears, your breakfast and people who use ergo in their sentences (not to mention ergot). Be particularly cautious of the hallucinogenic effects of ergot derivatives, although in small doses it may relieve cluster headaches (some of which may be brought on by reading your horoscope). Harness your inner harvest goddess (not literally, as she may bridle at the imposition) and usher in the golden age.</p>
	<p>Libra <i>31 October to 22 November</i></p>	<p>Librans are the worlds librarians – bookish, bespectacled and prone to telling others to shush. Balance is everything – whether it's balancing the books; balancing plates on your arms or balancing a ball on your nose. You will soon reach equilibrium in one of these fields. If the latter, you may have been a seal in one of your past lives. This could mean an interesting but short-lived relationship with a Piscean in your future. Zubeneschamali will shine bright in the night sky. Turn off your torch but be careful not to lose your balance or step on a Scorpio.</p>



Scorpio
23 November to 29
November

Life has a sting in its tail. So, however, do bees – and with this thought in mind you can get a real buzz out of things (you may also get honey but be careful not to come out in hives). It is true nobody likes scorpions. I mean, even snakes are cool but scorpions – you should get out more. Preferably a long way from me. The last time I saw a scorpion I put in a jar and took it outside. Next time I won't be so understanding. That said you are Silurian era survivor. Just be wary of Librans that have lost their spectacles and are wandering around at night with only a distant star to light their way. And Geminis.



Ophiuchus
30 November to 17
December

You are feeling decidedly snakey, not least because you've just discovered you're a different star-sign to what you have always thought. Get over yourself! It could be worse – you could be a Sagittarius. In truth you are the serpent bearer and not the snake at all. Beware their fangs but do not be a cruel snake handler that removes poison ducts. Remember that at their greatest serpents are also dragons³ – on this count be wary of St George's Road. But remain Merri (and never get too Croxton). You will enjoy listening to The Smiths.



Sagittarius
18 December to 18
January

Unlike Elvis Costello your aim is not true. As for the attractions they're Cupid like fancies. You may fall short of the mark. Check your fletchings are aligned before adding new strings to your bow. Keep yourself centred centaur-ed. Ruled by Jupiter, you may be orbited by Aquarians. Mercury is detrimental but will help you ascertain whether you have a fever. Watch out for hoof-rot and snakes in the paddock and make sure you're not just a show pony. This month you'll deposit large sums of money into a stranger's bank account⁴. This will make you poorer financially but richer spiritually.



Capricorn
19 January to 15
February

Over the coming weeks you will be capricious and prone to acting the goat. This should only be of concern if it is contrary to usual practice. Be wary of wanting to eat shirts from the Hills hoist and of any sudden liking for thistles. You will meet a strange man who will try and herd you. If you are mis-herd speak more loudly, **BUT DO NOT SHOUT** or bleat on about things. Beware of your tail growing scales, the Librans already have a monopoly on these. Don't be mistaken for a mermaid – as these were blatantly made up by sailors who had not seen shore for a long, long time (to say nothing of their rum ration).



Aquarius
16 February to 11
March

You're good at carrying water without spilling a drop. But you rarely shout drinks. This month you must tap into your inner water carrier (and that's no furphy). The first Aquarius was Ganymede. Akin to the largest of Jupiter's moons, you'll find yourself made up of equal parts ice and silicate rock. Be careful not to accidentally make glass, as then you'll be an Aquarium and Pisceans will swim right through you. You may, however, get a plastic shipwreck or diver breathing bubbles. With all your water carrying you'll find yourself very good at gardening. Tend your Turnips with care but spurn your Brussels (just as the UK did with Brexit).



Pisces
12 March to 18
April

There are many more fish in the sea. Although some have traces of microplastics and heavy metals in their systems. The latter have grown long gills and taken to playing electric eels into the wee hours. Beware of fishmongers and those strange fish with lightbulbs dangling from rods above their heads. Pisces often find themselves getting in too deep. You'll get along well with Aquarians. You also find yourself able to see invisible trolls. Don't worry – this is completely normal (isn't it?). Try listening to Badly Drawn Boy and, as ever, beware of Geminis.

**dates vary from the tropical and sidereal Zodiacs in common usage, instead following International Astronomical and Tyrefitter Union boundaries, as varied by the 27 high priests, priestlings and priestesses of Kloot and their knock-kneed brethren at its irregular but perennially interesting synod.*

1 Capital of the Dal Riata seized, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, by Pictish king Angus in 736
2 Note: Image not to scale
3 See T.King, 'Stop dragging my serpent round', Broomie Press, Ulan Bator, 1892
4 I will send you the relevant details shortly (OK, that was a long bow...)

LULLABY FOR A DIVIDED HE/ARTLAND

Mitchell Welch

Over the straw-peoples' kindling arguments
In gingham tunics and ombré glammers act
The facts of matter versus matters of fact.

Hexitations of wheedling Higgs-Bosonites
Ignite invisible rages by quasi-kaleidoscope
To plague the most particular of our hopes.

The whole cruel carnivale spreads its retiform
Clutch way down the deeply peopled shore
Till its tessellations tighten round folklore.

Go back to the enchantment of uneasy deals,
Cross the dervishing psychopomps' ravine—
A roman candle falls behind the smokescreen.

A last slingstone lobbed at our unhitched land
Is at hand. Come, follow us across the levee.

Wild grows the lotus. Your lids. Grow heavy.

BIRDS IN THE ATTIC

Zelda Harper-Balsamo

Birds is too tall, too small, too red, too brown. All speculation because he doesn't all together know what he looks like, the dark space in which he lives in protects him from the truth of his image but not from others. As he lives in the roof of the dirty old house he watches and loves the people that come in and out from the holes in the walls and was quite happy being quiet. That is, until he falls in love.

The creaking and cracks in a house tells the most interesting stories. The eyes that peak, the light that shines and the small chirp of the new born burns, naked like little sacks of pink flesh with beaks and eyes so swollen and bruised. The birds that Birds lived with were small, so small, so frighteningly small in the palm of his hand as their moulder pecked at the flaking skin on his back. He liked to hold them like this because it made him feel less lonely in the dark with only the beams of light coming in through the cracks in the walls to keep him company. Though this time of year made the attic hot and stuffy, he didn't mind it if it meant he had someone to pet.

At that time the old run-down house was the property of yet another family, one with a parent and their son. Their son must have been young, maybe Birds age but whenever he tried to remember how old her was, he couldn't remember the proper statistics that made him that

age. So instead he counted it by the rising and falling of the sun and moon. He was 6978 suns and moons old as counted by the scratched on the dust chocked floors and walls of the small attic almost completely filled with concrete.

He wasn't entirely alone in the attic as the hairy skeleton was always by his side, his insides eaten out after many days of no occupants to supply him unknowingly with food. He was the skinniest person he knew. Birds smiled to himself when he remembered what Mice had looked like before he lost weight. He was hairy, and damp, and you could always smell him in the room. Before their father had locked them in the attic they had been brothers, now they were friends, friends who help each other in times of hunger or warmth. He did struggle at first, he even tried to scream and would have succeeded had he known how to use his voice box. That was the first thing Birds ate. Then it was the lungs, the ears, the tongue and the penis.

You may think of Birds as a murderer. Birds is just desperate.

The son of the new family was small and lean with good meat on his bones and tender, golden skin, not too tight but not too loose either. He had a nice smile too, one with lots of white teeth and blood-filled lips. He breathed out through his mouth at night which dried out the skin so when he smiled in his sleep, his lips would crack open and paint the skin like lipstick. Against the red his blue eyes stood out like robin eggs, so pretty and so fragile. Birds liked him very much.

Birds liked watching him at night especially, because that was when he was at his prettiest. He was a messy sleeper, throwing the blanket this way and that so that it was hardly on him at all, limbs splayed in every direction he could bend in and hair like a bird's nest, lips in a dopey smile, eye lashes fluttering, clothes a tangled cacoon like a fly in a spider's web. Occasionally, he would lie awake with the small glowing box in his hand, looking up every so often at a sound Birds had made when he shifted to get a better view over the little blue light. Sometimes he would even look in Birds' direction and his heart would stop, but then he would just whisper to himself about 'birds in the attic' and turn back. Birds liked it when son said his name like that. Birds like it very much.

But birds could never speak to him, not once because Birds lived in the attic, and son lived in the house and that alone made them on entirely different plains of existence. But Birds would still look at him, love him, adore him as he peered through those unnoticeable holes in the walls so small and invisible that the only time in which you notice them is when a spider crawl through. Do not judge Birds. Birds is sad. Birds is lonely. Birds is hungry.

Now Birds looks through the holes of his walls, his floors, his attic as he watches son, lying without clothes on his bed, so vulnerable like Mice but with skin, skin and muscle and organ still in his body, making him pink and full. Birds smiled and licked his chops. Froth spilling down his desert skin, his throat, his chest, his teeth like jagged rocks amongst the churning sea, aching with need as he looked at son roll over in his sleep. He reached for the latch from the attic to the house, watching It creak with delight, his toe nails as long as ploughs scrapping along the wooden boards as he descended. Son was so close now. So close he could smell the dinner on his breath, could feel the warmth radiating off of his chest as a juicy heart pumped healthily within its home. A bird trapped within a cage as it slept soundly. A shadow, clawed and long, reached.

Birds went bump in the night. The cat already in the cage.

BOY AND MAN

Lee Bemrose

A boy sits in a park away from the other children who are playing a game with a ball. He watches blankly as they run madly about, laughing at their own antics. A man walks by, not old, but old in the eyes of the boy. He stops and also watches the game for a few moments before turning his attention to the boy.

‘What’s the matter, boy? Why don’t you play with the other children?’

Boy shrugs.

‘You look sad. You’re too young to be sad.’

Boy shrugs again. ‘I am sad.’

Man sits down next to the boy and together they look at the children and the ball, playing by the rules they all must follow.

‘Why sad? Open up. Find the words. Tell me about your sadness.’

Boy thinks for a long time while the old man waits patiently.

‘It’s not sad, really, it’s just not happy. Not right? Something feels not right.’

‘You don’t fit in? You’re not like the others.’

‘That’s it. And I want to be like the others. I like the way they are. I like how they laugh and how they know things and how they are so good at... um... they’re all so different. It’s like someone told them who to be, and so they know. I think I wasn’t listening when they told me who to be.’

‘You daydream.’

‘Yes.’ Boy squirms a little.

‘To escape.’

‘I don’t know. It just happens. I get into trouble for it. I get into trouble for a lot of things.’

‘I see. What do you daydream about?’

‘Don’t know. Different things. Happy things. Sad things. Collecting words that feel the same. I don’t know.’

Old man smiles at this. ‘You’ve started, you just don’t know it yet.’

Boy looks at the man. ‘Started what?’

‘Your journey.’

Boy shakes his head a little. ‘But I’m stuck here in this place. Trapped in this house I don’t like with a family that just isn’t right. I’m not going anywhere. At least not to anywhere you’d bother going to.’

‘Don’t be so glum. You have a happy heart, you just don’t know it yet.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I know things.’

‘What things do you know?’

‘Oh... I know the kind of things that make a young boy sad.

I know about his daydreams and his longing. I know that lost feeling and that sense of not belonging.’

Boy is staring at the man now, seeing things in his eyes. ‘You look sad, old man, but happy at the same time. How can you be sad and happy at the same time?’

‘They go hand in hand. Can’t have one without the other. Let me tell you something, since you weren’t listening when they told you who to be. Are you listening now?’

Boy nods.

‘You will feel this way for a very long time. You will be confused and quite alone. Your quiet nature will be interpreted in many ways. Your journey will take you to unexpected places and you will feel at times that if it doesn’t get any better there is simply no point. But at those times you must remember to keep going. Keep going even though you cannot see the resting place you are looking for. Understand?’

‘But why? Why keep going if there’s no happiness.’

‘Because things will change. Things will happen one by one. Good things. Good people. Love and laughter and music... these three things will come to define you. Not at once, but slowly, slowly. You will collect words that will make people laugh and make them cry. You will drink in the music and be awed by it. You will meet famous musicians and others not so famous who will become friends. You will do things you can’t imagine right now, things that, as an old man, will cause you to smile a sad smile as you look back and see how it all turned out after all.’

Boy thinks about this. His hands are under his thighs and his legs kick back and forth.

‘Will there be a person for me. You know...’

Old man tips his head back briefly. ‘Ah yes. You are blessed that way. You will have love from a truly lovely being. But don’t ever take her for granted. You will take her for granted but try not to. And friends. Yes, you will have golden friends.’

‘Okay. That is a thing to look forward to.’

‘Indeed. Indeed it is a thing to look forward to. And don’t hurt her. You will hurt her, but try not to hurt her.’

Boy is silent. He can’t imagine this. He can’t imagine anything so good as his own special person. Someone he loves. Someone who loves him.

A long silence as though nothing more needs to be said. Boy frowns. Old man stands and adjusts his collar. Time to go.

‘Old man?’

‘Yes, boy?’

‘How do you know these things?’

Old man turns and shrugs. ‘I don’t know. I just know.’

...

A man walks through a park. He sees a group of children playing football. He smiles and recalls a memory. He sees a boy sitting alone and recognises something about him.

‘What’s the matter, boy? Why don’t you play with the other children?’

LOST, FOUND AND LOST AGAIN...

Alan Murphy

Like two ships sailing in the night,
Alone and lost and sea,
The ships collide and go bump in the night,
And they disappear down the Bermuda triangle of love,
For two years, there was a little dancing round of words,
Late night coffees, and distractions from the earth.

Then the sound of the guitar and the crashing of the drums,
Came together and built a bridge,
Where two became one,
And the highest of mountains were climbed,
And the bottom of the oceans were explored,
When words became everything,
And they were never enough,
So, I closed the door.

Everyday there was a different story,
And standing side by side,
Became a boxing match,
Was there something to hide?
Hide behind? hide from?
As the dramas became part of the process,
The rules of the game had changed,
But the gravitational pull was too strong,
And the addiction to the touch, to the smile, always fed,
Fed the beast that lay within and took away all of the senses,
No drugs were needed, but the drug of love to get you through.

And so, you sign the paper in chaos,
In mourning and in hoping that it will all be ok,
That the craziness and insanity will fall behind,

For tomorrow is a new day.
The distance between the dinners was growing,
The alcoholic intake was on the rise,
Just as the skies seemed blue,
Came a shocking surprise.

For the future was no longer mentioned,
The touch few and far between,
There was a sinking feeling that was starting,
And the fire had gone out long ago,
Trying to hold on,
While the other had let go.
While others lurked in the shadows,
And the fears turned into truthful tears,
Once awoken it had been too many years,
And the wall had been built,
There was no going back,
There was no factual truth,
Between the crazy lies,
And between the lonely sheets,
In a blink of an eye,
My world had gone,
There was nothing left,
but me sailing,
Back in my boat,
Back out at sea,
Alone and waiting for the next journey,
Waiting to be found,
Peaceful, chaotic, lost, confused, sinking, flying and free.

ONE CENTIMETRE BELOW

Kate Groves

My left fingers, wrist then elbow quickly escape the water's surface, lingering in the cool summer's air for just a moment before plummeting sharply back below. My right arm lifts and does the same, gently gliding past my hip as I propel forwards just under the top of the water. Left, right, left, right, breathe. Repeat. My legs kick behind me to a quicker tempo. The hypnotic motion of a deliberate freestyle stroke, up and down a 50 metre public pool in Northcote.

Left, right, left, right, breathe. My breath is heavy but steady. Random thoughts fill my mind, with no clear structure or pattern. *What should I have for breakfast? I really like waratah flowers. It was really sad when our family dog Freckles died 32 years ago.* Twenty laps, in my own head. For a few moments, usually half way down the lane, the thoughts quieten. My mind clears. I count each arm stroke to 4; I count each lap to 20. In those moments, I'm just below the surface of the water, and just below the surface of my mind. I wish I was able to do this out of the water.

I'm slow. Really slow. I've just been lapped by a woman in a frilly blue one piece and matching swimming cap who could be twice my age. It matters not. It's not a competition. It's a clear, sunny morning, just after the summer dawn has broken. Around me, the pool's 8 lanes are filled with other swimmers but I only partially see them. This is my

race to win. It is me against the white line that divides the middle of the lane, the black T shape at the end of the lane, the 19th lap.

My goggles dig deep under my eyes, burrowing a mark that will take 24 hours to disappear. My long, thick dark hair is tied tightly into a high bun but still a long wisp of hair escapes and waves in front of the goggle lens like seaweed. I let it wave. The counting has calmed me and the things that would annoy me on the surface cause me no bother one centimetre below.

My gaze focuses downwards, half a metre in front. To my left, a rogue band-aid sticks firmly onto the blue tiles. To my right, a small pile of dirt and leaves gather effortlessly in the shape of a pear. As I move forward, random matter glides by my eye line. I try not to look too closely. I don't want to know. I make a mental note to email the aquatic centre to ask them to clean the pool more regularly. I think this every swim. I know that I'll forget by the time I pull myself out on to the sun-warmed concrete to catch my breath. The endorphins will kick in and I'll be focused on breakfast, or distracted by buying a bunch of waratahs, or messaging my sister to remind her of Freckles the dog. I'll quickly forget about the rogue band-aid; the calming counting; and the race fought and won. Until the next swim.

WATTLES OF TIME

Henry Briffa

in response to Bei Dao's *The Rose of Time*

giving nitrogen after
devastating bush-fires
wattles of time

beyond the frenzied mating
of the brush-tailed phascogale
the first day of Spring
wattle day

wood for making boomerangs
my son looking like my father
the way forward coming from behind

my garden's
golden blooms

two turtles
partnered long enough to wrinkle
wattles of time

MIST OVER TAWHARANUI

Anna Forsyth

The sea is pregnant with
grief's soft eddies
wrapped in a threadbare shroud of mist
she dances
a silk-scarved dervish
in emeraldic anguish.

To every misty-eyed sailor
every seabird searching
for the next updraught

Let your tears flow
like lace seaweed
she says
let me bouy you
til the clear sky
resurrection
til your seabird soul
is birthed
to the horizon, waiting
beyond the shadow
of night's small death.

NEVENA

Vasilka Pateras

'Go fanale edno mome najubavo, naubajvo vo seloto.'
(They captured one beautiful girl
The most beautiful girl in the village).
-Fragment from a Macedonian folk song.

Nevena wraps her woven cotton scarf around her head
and tucks the last fold
across her mouth -
Heeding her mother's warning, avoid the Ottoman gaze.
She takes the terracotta jug
sets off
across the village to the izvor.
It is early spring
mountains are capped with snow
the sun high,
swallows flutter, dart
in their busyness to nest build.
Nevena walks up the path toward the village square
At the Kafana the idle drink and speak in muted voices.
The Aga sits and flicks his worry beads
with a repetitive clacking of purpose
his agitation is unconscious.
A bottle of rakija stands empty
the Gazda pours Turkish coffee
indulging the Aga with an obsequious quip
-what fortune will you see in your coffee cup today A-ge?
The Aga is unmoved, silent.

Nevena passes the Kafana, bows her head,
lowers her eyes.
The Aga strokes his moustache as he watches her movements
Her slender hand wrapped lightly around the handle.
He drinks his coffee, downs the bitter dregs,
grimaces and wipes his brow,
takes his fez, replaces the wooden chair.
The rakija has done its work.
He leaves nothing for his patronage.

Nevena arrives at the spring
bends down, cups the water,
tastes the snow melt.
Hunched over she fills the vessel
the pleats of her dress fan out a little as she moves to
catch the water.
A falcon cries, donkeys bray
a gust of wind,
leaves form eddies as they are tossed.
A struggle -
the jug hits the ground
rocks from side to side
- abandoned.

Macedonian translation notes:

Izvor – natural spring

Kafana-coffeehouse

Gazda- proprietor

A-ge – diminutive of Aga /Turkish Lord

SHE RUNS

Elly Armagos

She runs with hardened feet
Amid shades of silver and fawn
The bark of eucalypt

Perched soundly on branch of polished Oak
Feather streaked cinnamon brown
Tenderly lifted by the ease of autumn breeze
The Wattlebird sings

Her dreamtime story alive
On this timeworn land
Mouth agape in mirth
Sweat collides with a thrilled beat on her cheek
Painted lorikeets dash above
Of Aladdin symphonies and emerald clover

Drunk with freedom
Their hymns clash like tambourines

And she, swallowed up in silhouettes
Of dog with ears pricked up and keen
Watches in rapture as the wearied sun descends
Painting the sky

In pomegranate pinks, violet hues, dancing blues
Twilight tangerines

Across the glassy creek a harmonica hums

Clinging to the notes
She runs.

HANDBALL TO SPACE

David Munro

There's poetry on the wing
or stepping on a tram.
Christ! Sometimes just getting
out of bed and stumbling
to the kitchen is a sublime
act, as you stagger into
a new day, pants on, ready
to join the race again. Who
wrote the rules anyway?
There is no winner in this
game. Just poetry, if you're
brave enough to make some
art. Or lucky enough to get
a handball to space. And a chance
to make poetry on the wing.

CAPITAL CITY TRAIL

Flavia Dent

capital city trail
westgate bridge, the m1

almost blue
concrete, true.
emerald grew
under you.

almost blue
concrete, true.
i love you.

almost grey,
you blew me away.
your pillars carry a motorway.

almost grey,
you blew me away.
please stay.

RITUAL

Edward Caruso

Some queue for confession, mobiles in hand,
genuflect by the altar, make signs of the cross.
One presses his hand to a glass panel,
eyes closed and pleas whispered
next to the carving of a saint.
To bow before a dark-skinned Jesus,
genuflect two maybe three times
and sit in prayer.
Marble floors and pillars;
gold-leaved handiwork;
a Madonna in national costume.
One can invade with unbelief
that far from derides.
Others will celebrate purity,
a pious solemnity transcending these silences.
When it's time to leave, it's in the hope of going
as an unbeliever who can bare himself, as any believer;
to not ask anything more.

DECLAN

David Spitzkowsky

I learn that my lover is dead. Not the third one—the one you might expect – the second one. God knows about the first, of all three I knew deep in my heart I would never hear of him again, not after all that. No.

It's Declan. Asphyxiated in a fire that engulfed him in the dead of night. Him and all his art, his beaten up piano, nestled in the glory that lies at the foot of Mount Warning, by the creek and owls in his slumber. Smoke and ash. An old wood heater, creosote building unchecked in its flue. When it finally ignites it burns at enormous temperatures, sending out clouds of poison smoke as flames rage under the roof. A not uncommon danger, apparently. They said that once it got going it was over in minutes—if anything of that conflagration had awoken him, it would most probably have been too late. Some comfort then, that it seemed he was lying in his bed. No sign of him twisted by the door or curled into a ball, elbows in tight against the terror. Some comfort there.

Declan and his cooking, covered in flour making gnocchi on Friday nights years before most people had even heard of the stuff. Declan and his sewing, that ball gown— as his sister raised her arms, course silk woven into bracelets at her wrists, a chiffon cape opens behind her, reveals the thousands of birds-eye beads hand stitched into metre-wide fallopian tubes. Iridescent needle point, blues and gold of a uterus wafting around the small of her back.

When it finally ignites it burns at enormous temperatures, sending out clouds of poison smoke as flames rage under the roof.

Me naked in the day-break bush, fighting off mosquitos, leaning back against a perfect ghost gum trunk while he waited for the light with his easel.

Declan and his small madness, blossoming into the world.

The day we separated I knew something was up. The way he rang and asked me to come over. No, this morning. Please? So I did.

His camera on the table between us, a pot of Earl Grey, the cold bright morning. Things had been odd, as they often become when love is deep and both parties passionate, two people filled with longing and fiercely guarding their independence like dogs at the temple gate. He spoke of love, our long journey, the affair with Julie just over my back fence when he'd disappeared those two weeks between moving houses. I'd allowed him this – forgiven, perhaps – had understood his spirit and his flesh a long time before. And again he told me, how they'd been reading Sylvia Plath together – as if that explained everything. He spoke of all our wild plans, how life was opening itself before us like the glassy surface of a rip. Our plotting to go north. He spoke of what I had awakened in him, and how he might also be in love with another man.

I let him talk. I sipped my tea. We watched three magpies outside on the grass.

I've decided to be celibate he said and picked up the camera. There was no need to focus.

One of the best photos he ever took, black and white – the subject's eyes confront the viewer, a china cup held mid-air, exquisite thorns and roses cascading over its rim, the magpies soft and just recognisable beyond, beaks thrust into the earth.

Years later, passing through his way, I got in touch. It was awkward, then easy, then almost as if I might stay.

I readied myself to leave, faltered and confessed – I had this idea I was going to seduce you...

I wish you had he laughed, taking my hands in his. You're a fool, you know – that line of his from so very long ago, our Saturday mornings entwined in each-others' eyes or flat on our backs watching the forty flags of small surrender that billowed from his ceiling.

An embrace at the door, me off to wherever I was going in those roaming days. That last moment, the truest we had ever been.

So Declan's dead.

Bones burnt pure in the shack of our dreams.

INFANCY

Edward Caruso

The life of a child who can no longer grow,
who wanders through refractions of light,
landscapes' fleeting abundance

Streams are his music,
morning skies the seeds of language to come
and fables dreamed

In his footsteps grasses deepen, the horizon's azure heightens
This child, a field of idleness and curious gazes at adults,
his forever days of sudden laughter
to be lived

His being,
not becoming or having a past,
but contemplation of skies, stars within reach
In silence, to relinquish grief.

DO TADPOLES HAVE EYEBROWS?

Jo Buchanan

It was December 1959. Having completed two years training at Burwood Teachers' College I was now waiting to learn the location of my first school posting. Like many city-dwelling Australians, I romanticised about life in the bush. My favourite books were Mary Grant Bruce's *Billabong* series and the poetry and prose of Henry Lawson. My favourite Australian films were *Jedda*, *The Overlanders* and *Sons of Matthem*.

However, while believing the bush a great place to visit, I didn't really want to live there. I prayed to be allotted a city school in order to remain close to family and friends. In those days, teachers who had graduated with high marks were allotted city schools. Those who received lower marks were sent to the country, abolished like early convicts shipped to the Antipodes.

I had a feeling I might miss out on a city school, as the freedom I experienced at Teachers College where fellow students were of the opposite sex and you could jive to Buddy Holly in the hall at lunchtime, was wonderful. Although I studied enough to pass, I spent most of my time acting in the college stage productions, going to the Burwood Drive-In (known as the 'passion pit') and drinking Porphy Pearl. I morphed into a beatnik, spent weekends at the snow and joined protest marches through the city.

Now that it was close to the Day of Reckoning I was frantically praying 'Please God, anything but the bush!'

The day my notification from the Victorian Education Department arrived, I was seated by the lounge room window reading Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*. My sister Christine was washing her car on the nature strip in a polka dot bikini while Mum was planting pink and orange pigface in the rockery. At the sound of the postie's whistle I ran outside and snatched the long-awaited government envelope. Ripping it open, I stared at the contents in disbelief.

'What's wrong?'

Christine straightened up, sweat trickling in rivulets between her tanned breasts.

'My teacher posting!'

Dropping the chamois, she reached for my death sentence, pronouncing it aloud.

'Koonwarra. South Gippsland. Where's Koonwarra? Never heard of it.'

Mum bustled over and we converged to the safety of the kitchen, opening the Atlas at Victoria. Mum stabbed at an invisible spot triumphantly.

'There it is! Somewhere between Korrumburra and Inverloch – just past Leongatha. That's not so bad. You'll be able to come home long weekends and holidays.'

God had not answered my prayers. I could not believe it.

The day I left Melbourne for Koonwarra, Mum and Dad caught the train to Spencer Street Station to see me off. Dad lugged my new suitcase heavy with books, leaning sideways.

'Golly, that's heavy alright!'

Mum handed me a shortbread tin with scotch terriers on the lid. 'Just a few gem scones. Don't eat them all at once.'

We boarded the box carriage and Dad heaved my case on to a filigreed iron rack above a studded, leather seat.

'There you are. Looks like you've got the carriage to yourself.'

As the train shuddered into life, Dad patted me on the head as if I were a toddler.

'Alright then?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, ta ta for now.'

'Yeah. Ta ta.'

Mum gave me one of her quick, embarrassed hugs.

'Ta ta for now, then''

'Yeah. Ta ta.'

They scrambled through the door as the train began to move and we waved until we lost sight of each other.

When I arrived at Leongatha station, the headmaster and his wife were waiting to drive me to Koonwarra. Ern was a sparkly-eyed man with an infectious laugh who smoked a pipe. Lennie had one of those warm smiles that make you feel instantly warm and comfortable. They lived in a white, weatherboard house next door to the two-teacher bush school.

I was to board with a family nearby, sharing a tiny bedroom curtained off from the kitchen with the family's 14 year old daughter. With room for only two single beds almost touching each other, I guessed it had originally been a walk-in pantry.

It was weird that first night, in bed next to a girl I had never met in my life who munched apples in the dark. I lay rigid for hours, stressing about farting and wondering what on earth I'd got myself into.

I was to teach Preps, Grade One and Grade Two (totalling eleven pupils) in the fibro portable classroom that had been dumped in the middle of a paddock. 'Infant Mistress' was my official label.

Ern taught Grades 3 to 6 (a total of fourteen children) in the original one-teacher schoolhouse built decades earlier. The old wooden desks with heavy lids and inkwells had been there for as long as the building. Some of the children sat in desks containing the engraved names of their own parents.

Although accepted warmly by the small dairy farming community, I experienced highs and lows in adjusting to country life. It was a thrill to learn how to milk a cow and drive a tractor but I couldn't get used to driving at night, with kangaroos and rabbits leaping into my headlights. I never hit a kangaroo but it was impossible to miss the rabbits. With every murderous THUNK, a part of me died with them.

On my first day of school I bustled over to the schoolhouse early, filling two jugs with water from the rain tank, placing them on my desk with an assortment of empty vegemite glasses.

One by one, the mothers presented themselves and their children.

As I squatted to greet the children at their level, a little girl pushed a posy of sweet peas in my face. 'These are for you Miss. An' Mum's got some eggs. Give 'em to her, Mum.'

A freckle-faced boy called Gavin held a jar aloft, filled with water and tadpoles.

'I bought some taddies Miss – for Show and Tell.'

The children clustered round.

'Miss, do tadpoles have eyebrows?'

I laughed out loud and everyone looked pleased.

'God makes the tadpoles, doesn't He Miss?'

'He most certainly does.'

'An' He lets the worms down with the rain.'

Ern poked his head around the door.

'Everyone getting to know each other?'

'Yes Mr. Stammers,' chorused the children.

'Then let's get a wriggle on, shall we?'

Everyone outside for assembly.'

Crows carved arcs overhead, intuiting their drought had ended. School was back and summer term with its lunch scraps and fallen crumbs stretched abundantly ahead.

By mid-morning the classroom was airless, despite open windows. Children melted over their desks and I stifled a yawn.

Gavin jumped to his feet, one arm waving in the air, the other clutching the front of his short trousers.

'C'n I go to the lav Miss?'

'Very well - hurry along.'

I had just finished writing The cow and the hound chased the fowl around the mound on the board, careful not to scratch my finger nails on the surface, when he hurtled back into the classroom, eyes bulging.

'There's a goanna in the dunny Miss - a bloody monster. Goannas are dangerous Miss. They run up your legs 'cos they think you're a tree.'

'Very well. Run and fetch Mr. Stammers.'

Ern bustled over, assuming command.

'Stay inside the classroom, children. Miss Danby and I will deal with this.'

Heart thumping, I followed Ern across the paddock. I'd heard about goannas running up people's legs. Trust something like this to happen on my first day!

Arriving at the tiny outhouse built of corrugated iron, I peered over Ern's shoulder at a rectangular wooden toilet seat resting on two cement blocks. Filling the space between dunny and door, an enormous goanna rested on four dragon-like feet, cloaked in chain mail.

Ern whistled through his teeth.

'Bloody dinosaur!'

'How will you move it?'

'We'll have to entice him out didn't someone bring eggs this morning?'

'Yes.'

'Go and fetch them. We'll leave a trail. They like eggs.'

To my horror, the entire school was allowed to watch as the new teacher laid eggs from the dunny to the edge of the bush. When the slow-moving reptile finally emerged from the outhouse, the cheers from the side lines were deafening.

Ern winked at me and chuckled.

'Welcome to the bush. You can add goanna wrangling to your CV now.'

I'll never forget my first Easter at Koonwarra. Apart from the schoolhouse and community hall, Koonwarra's only other public buildings were the general store and post office.

Daisy Bacon manned the post office and lived in the adjoining residence. She also owned the surrounding land all the way up Koonwarra Road on the opposite side to the school. I often took the children for nature walks through the scrub to an area of hard baked clay where bull-ants scurried single file in and out of deep, mysterious-looking cracks. I had no idea the land belonged to Daisy Bacon.

As Easter approached, I wrote a Pageant for the children to perform on Palm Sunday, an enactment of Christ's procession through the streets of Jerusalem. Mum sewed costumes for the kids and sent them up by train. They had never acted in a play before. Donning their costumes at dress rehearsal, they shrieked with delight.

One morning Brian announced the discovery of tall palm fronds growing in the bush across the road. I immediately ushered the children outside, where he excitedly led us to the grove of green, spiky palms. I had intended to use gum tree branches for palms, but fired with the opportunity to be authentic, I managed to hack down as many palm fronds as possible before instructing the children to drag them back to the school.

Having sighted our little procession from his classroom, Ern waited for us at the school gate, white-faced. Had someone died?

'Jo, please tell me you did *not* get those palms from across the road.'

'Yes, we found them in the bush. What's wrong?'

'Jo, that land across the road belongs to Daisy Bacon. It's her private property. She doesn't mind you taking the kids for nature walks through there but she planted those palms fifteen years ago and has been nurturing them ever since. They're her pride and joy!'

'*What?*'

The old wooden desks with heavy lids and inkwells had been there for as long as the building.

'It's her special Palm Grove. It was featured in THE LEADER newspaper when they did a story on her last year.'

I could not believe what I was hearing. Silently, the children closed rank around me, absorbing the seriousness of the situation. I listened to Ern's instructions on what I was to do next.

In fear and trepidation, I walked down the hill to the Post Office and Daisy's understandable fury.

That night I tossed and turned, unable to sleep. I didn't know how I could go ahead with the pageant. But I knew I couldn't cancel it either. How could we possibly have the entire school marching round waving Daisy Bacon's precious palm grove in the air? Or even branches of gum leaves, when every person present would know about the graveyard of palm fronds stashed out of sight behind the dunny! How could I narrate the pageant in front of all the parents and Daisy Bacon herself, as if nothing had happened? I prayed to God to strike me down with a plague of boils. I prayed for a freak storm and for lightning to strike the schoolhouse during the night so the pageant would have to be cancelled. But my pitiful prayers were ignored.

After Daisy recovered from the shock of losing her fifteen-year-old palm grove, her big heart prevailed and she insisted we use the palms for our Easter pageant. The entire community attended, probably because of the scandal which had spread like wildfire.

But as it turned out, Daisy's palms became immortalised. She took lots of photos at the pageant, had them enlarged and hung them framed, on the post office walls.

It was an Easter I will never forget.

HOMELANDS' CALL

Christine Burrows

that place will be the death of you, door always open, bed made
each familiar step comfortable as merino socks
ocean smoothed trap; flax, resinous, winter thin, flicks your face

magpie wings guide you in, carry you back
acrobatic lorikeets flip in sunrise grevillea
spiked flame tree sprawls, prepping for its brief blaze
ghost gums' grey sway, swings the eucalypt blues in the breeze

always snow on the freakish alps. foaming white ocean
waves permeate. urgent swell of spring tide
presses blue through the old house, floods the hallway
sweeps family photos from hooks and ledges
subsides only in your ruined sleep. memories are tentacled
anemones, armed with stinging cells in beguiling hues

your feet are perpetually wet with tears
your feet are heavy, wet with perpetual tears.
there's your sister! your sister's eyes, dark dancing eyes
big as a baby's, spill quartz tears. she remembers your name
she gestures your name, hands bleeding, her heart vermilion crystal.

your brother can't speak. stars tattoo his cheek
southern cross, pointers. the sun spills gold
on the pacific horizon, then disappears, silently winks out.
you're thrumming the tune of Land *white, shining, silver studs*
with their noses in flame, your guitar strings
are your mother's hair, cut before its prime

po kare kare ana sweetly sung by children, infuses
the shrinking room. your body is small. you'll always live here.
the walls call your name, beach pebbles know you.
you flew off that white cliff, sprouted iridescent blue-green wings
it was calling your name. it named you. it called you ho/me
confounding tui song, strong on a cold sou'wester

port phillip bay was choppy, grey, not a soul on any pier
you heard sirens. stumbled crashing through dense streets
couldn't tell where the pain was. everything hurt, everyone was ghost.
you wiped bloodied ditch-water from your flightless form
foraged in the detritus for sustenance

an eagle swept the troubled sky with wide wings
feathers like black fingers, disappeared towards the obscured sun
wedge tail anchoring it to the always was, always will be

and you, a particle of foreign dust, are a dot
carrying story fragments far from their beginning
floating light and white as ash from a firestorm.

THE ORPHAN AND THE FOX

Dianne Millett

And if you find yourself
in such a place
don't you make the best of it?
Find a dry spot with a bag
or a bit of blanket
and try to be
what passes for happy...
And if sleep comes
aren't all things fine?
The rain at babies' dribble
out there
and you as warm as piss in a shared bed.
Tomorrow brings what it will
the road is always up for grabs
when you whistle.

PERMISSION TO GO

Andrew Brion

Hoisted face-down upon a bed of nails, see through
The gaps a stream flow, which must surely be your tears.
Passiveness pricks your flesh a thousand times, while far
Below the cool creek dribbles through its shady pools.
Movement, however slight, lances your ebbing soul -
The dry cry of pain lodged tightly in your throat longs
For every nail to run right through your body and
To slide down, drown in the peaceful running water.

Beyond the corner of your eye a dark whirlwind
Waits. It's not if but when. The final maelstrom visible
Yet driven off by tubes and pharmaceuticals -
A modern madness where there is no place to die,
No dignity - just Hippocratic hypocrisy
Which honours life above all else. Ultimately
The darkness must be embraced. May it be with love,
With candles burning, music and with friendly hands.

You have had the wind blow in your hair, the mighty
Swell of tides run up against your body, known the
Caress of sorrow, weariness and love. You have
Been powerful and weak: summoned awful courage.
The blessings of your family and friends hold tight
Yet from dust we came, and energy is all about.
Slide boldly down towards the waters, beneath the surface float.
Ripples over mossy rocks, dappled sunlight on the stream.

SUNDAYS & WEEKDAYS

π.0

It *isn't* Monday, it must be Sunday.
The river on Thursday, wasn't the same one as
the one on Tuesday. The deadline on Friday
was Thursday. Wednesday got moved back to Sunday,
but as long as there's a Friday, who cares
about Monday? A sandstorm on Thursday, a hailstorm ////
on Sunday... What day was *that* on Wednesday (no,
Tuesday)? You can't run 2 Wednesdays together like that.
Yesterday, was 2 days ago. I usually take-off
on Thursday. (Make that Friday). The 4th Friday
after the 1st Thursday is Easter Monday. It couldn't
have been Tuesday, cos i wasn't there Thursday.
On my day-off on Wednesday, i thought about Saturday, but
i had to go back to Sunday. (Yes, i was thinking about
payday, even tho it was only Monday). The only
time i *lie* now, is on Weekdays. It's impossible to do
anything on Sunday (cos of Monday). On Monday, i saw
Tuesday and Wednesday, but i was thinking
about Sunday. A bloke called *Friday* came by
Friday — he always comes by Friday. The tambourines ////
belong to the Sunday / Sundays. I traded in all
my days-off on Sunday for a pay rise, and i somehow
lost all my Saturdays. Monday sits comfortably between
Tuesday and Sunday, only no one's really
around Monday! (That's me on Wednesday) (and
Thursday). Wednesday broke-up the 'party' on Tuesday,
for the sake of the party on Friday, but i was
already *down* on Thursday, and ready — to Party!!!
Most heart-attacks occur on Thursday. (Humpty Dumpty
was *dead-right* about paydays). I wasted
a whole day thinking about Sunday. I don't like
staying-in on Weekdays. Some people only
fire-up on paydays. Make that Fridays,
Saturday,... Sundays.

JELLYFISH AND FROGS

Dianne Millett

If distorted reflection gives me acute angles
then what of jelly fish?
knee deep
blown across cURRENTS
like transparent peony
tingling with possibility ...

Frogs in the fresh
surely there too ...?
they made a splash
even if I have never seen them land.

BIKE DADS

Mitchell Welch

These are the inheritors of long faces drawn over
Clapboard canvases undercoated with house paint
At the breakout counters of artisanal muesli studios.

The suckling kids of six o'clock swine up at sparrows'
To prove their hearts aren't as intimately weakened
By the weekend, the afternoon, the pull of the moon,
As their dads' and granddads' and Queensland cousins'.

It's a singular collective noun, the pack, descending
To snare the human subject in its flashy-tailed thrall.

An elder in orange neoprene resembling Chips Rafferty
(Only organic, gluten-free, and baked in avocado oil)
Makes an invitation of casual intolerance to his mates.

These are the inheritors of treacle-down windfalls,
Fit from inhabiting valleys their bodies want to burst
Out of, away from, along the ridges of. To what end?

The pack pulls apart from its core, kicking to get away
From 'it' and 'it all', shrinking, thinking only of itself.

Each uncle whose funeral it descends to attend is said
To have promised, at the end of a pier, in a painting
Whose palette forewarned of precisely this, the lot.

THERE IS A LITTLE POST BOX

Mary Rawson

(to Dad who died June 23rd, 2018)

There is a little post box
in Fairfield, Rathmines street.
It stands squat and sturdy
where grass and pavement meet.

Every week
it took her letters
to her dear old dad
she wrote about the weather
and the kind of week she'd had.

She wrote about her chook
in all her speckled glory,
she wrote about the cat
and its disappearing story.

And now her dad is gone
she feels quite incomplete.
The post box
drooping sadly now
where grass and pavement meet.

MEMORY MOSAIC

Christine Burrows

memory of then is more pattern than picture
high grass tickling my face; squelch of mud, prickle of paddock
on small bare feet. fast breathing loud from running to catch up.

finding you at work mending a fence, face and body taut
tightening number eight wire. always wrestling unbreakable
things and forces – wire, weather, thistles, the bank, children.

or shirt sleeves rolled, heavy boots muddy, sitting high
on the red Massey Ferguson, body half-turned to check
the straightness of the plough-line. soil rolling off ploughshares
like thick black butter off a warm knife.

the smell of you when I could get close. pipe tobacco
wheat, sweat, the cowshed – shit, milk and disinfectant.
going looking for you. finding you! always so happy to find you.

'Stand back' you'd yell *'Get away from there'* *'Don't touch that'*
'Did you shut the gate? Properly?' your words swatted me like I was
a fly distracting you from work; your orders barked as if to the border collie.

I didn't find what I wanted from you, but I kept looking. I still do.
The pattern has not changed, but the pictures have.
I find you at your sudoku, sharp pencil poised, left middle finger tapping the table;
or asleep in your chair, rosary beads cupped in your big wrinkled hand,
chin dropped to your sternum, soft snores permeating the quiet room;
or shuffling down the hall to the modified toilet;
or counting out pills to have with porridge, manuka honey and cider vinegar.

You have more time for me, if I contort myself into your routine,
which I do, for though we've been broken, we mend each other.

DEATH OF A GUINEA PIG

Sofia Chapman

Death of a pig.
I rest my wig
and other cases.

My Chinese sign,
the most porcine
of many faces.

Three of us there were.
I, you and we;
one I inter.

Still, fluffy, cold.
The 'but', the 'if'-
Stiff, you were old.

Too late to tickle your little chin,
to feed you favoured lemon leaves,
now in green bin.

Screech myna birds infest the eaves.
They care not for my dead pig.

Dig.

I TAKE IT WITH ME

Lucy Roleff

I take the afternoon's deed with me
pull on sneakers, wrap around coat
I take it

it is a thrum, burrowed inside
behind the pelvis, at times a throb
I walk with it

to the high street

after the rain, there are clouds
like bursting, ripe apricot
and the toxic-green shrubs

walk, eyes to a footpath
the colour of sodden cardboard
languidly, through strange light
arms around myself and it, as

the mini-mart doors open to me
and I look at noodles, cereal

but it asks for ice-cream
and quiet

so I pull the wool straps tighter
shield it

from tinny pop songs
blaring in the aisles
from fluorescent bulb light

from a scene of such sobering
familiarity
it would snuff it like a match

MERRI CREEK REVISITED

Ron West

Take the off ramp at St Georges Road
Roll down, brakes full on
Until I'm 20 feet below the street
And can pedal once more
Leaving behind the trams, concrete-trucks, and rasping Harleys
Of the world above

It's a different world down here
And the same old Merri Creek
Native trees, bird calls, a breeze,
A clear autumn sky
No ducks today, I notice
Not so many people either
It is a week day after all
And no more rattling wooden bridges!
They've been replaced with new and quieter ones
There's new fencing, too, and upgraded signs

Truth be told, I liked it the way it was

'Excuse me!
A young couple, anglo I'm guessing, appears from nowhere
Asking how to get to Ceres – it's the woman who asks, is it ever the man?
I show them, it's only a few minutes walk and on their left
And continue on to the bridge of memory of years past,
Stopping in the middle, leaning the bike against the metal railing,
Looking down at the brown water as it sighs and gurgles, and the world stops

There's a sound behind me and I turn
A dog, a woman, and two men, coming towards me —
The black Lab's in charge
We greet each other — she licks me straight away
The woman smiles and one of the men says, 'Mate,
Everyone loves her, her middle name is Joy.'

Joy takes hold of them once more
Removes them as quickly as they came
Maybe she's looking for other hearts to speak to
I know she spoke to mine

Another half mile or so
I reach the Russian church,
Gold domes capped with a cross
No park benches, nowhere to rest,
But I get off the bike anyway, and take stock
Sometimes bridges and power lines cross over
There are roads all around
There's been clean up after clean up
And grit is never far away
Yet I've heard that indigenous people,
People I've never met, friends of friends
Have talked of their connection with this creek, this land
Maybe not of the secrets, though, that only they will ever know

For me, coming here is a break, a pause
A moment free from empty work
Even as a plane in the sky above glints at my return

I get on the bike, ride back to St Georges Road
Going up the ramp, it's slow!
The last corner tight, bike wobbles, don't know how I steady
But I do, arriving on the street out of breath
And a little easier with those familiar surroundings,
Of rasping Harleys, concrete trucks and trams

DIAGNOSIS, FOUR MINUTES, SOMETHING-SOMETHING SECONDS

Gemma Mahadeo

*with apologies to inspirations David Stavanger, Elizabeth Bishop,
Sarah Kane & John Cage*

mimed (chorus):

I'm sorry to have to inform you of this,
but you will most likely not have a career in the arts.

(music - melodica: play or hum 'doom' or 'suspense' theme here
- Dvorák Symphony No. 9 in E minor, 4th movement)*

spoken:

The art of being diagnosed isn't easy to master.
You can be diligent with appointment attendance,
informing when running late or paying late, taking
what you're prescribed when you're prescribed it:
on time. Compliance isn't just a popcult D/s schtick.

(music - melodica: play or hum 'Psycho' murder scene chords)*

spoken (chorus):

I'm sorry to have to inform you of this,
but you will most likely not have a career in the arts.

*(music - melodica: play or hum Mahler Symphony No.5 in C#
minor, 4th movement 'Adagietto')*

spoken:

The art of being the diagnoser isn't easy to master.
The hearts of nurses look like they ache visibly
when they see you, again, heading for ECT.
You acknowledge their kindness, though without you,
technically, they cannot put their mentally stable kids
through school, not without your dysfunctions.
You'll joke about this with more than one shrink.

spoken (chorus):

I'm sorry to have to inform you of this,
but you will most likely not have a career in the arts.

*(music - melodica: play or hum Sakura [traditional Japanese
melody] here)*

spoken (posh voice):

The art of being one's diagnoses isn't easy to master.
'The best you can hope for...is that...you try
to sustain a healthy, and grounded, holistic
approach, to staying well.'

spoken (chorus):

I'm sorry to have to inform you of this,
but you will most likely not have a career in the arts.

*(music - flute or melodica: play or whistle Khachaturian's
Sabre Dance)*

spoken (well-intending do-gooder voice):

The art of being diagnosed isn't hard to master.
There are difficult, branching choices to make,
and ones many will be completely qualified to give –
there's never been a better, patient, more compliant
unwell person within this practice – than you.

spoken (chorus):

I'm sorry to have to inform you of this,
but medical practitioners will most likely not have careers
in the arts.

*(music - flute or melodica: play reveille/bugle call warm-up here,
in C maj)*

spoken (nasal, patronising voice):

The art of having diagnosed isn't hard to bumble.
Can we find you suitable gateway employment?
You like to read? To write? You'd make a great teacher!
Or a librarian! Though please be advised,
there aren't many jobs in information management,
competition is fierce in the current market.

*(music - flute or melodica: play or hum Centrelink call wait
classical music - 'Air on a G string')*

spoken (chorus):

I'm sorry to have to inform you of this,
but employment agencies will most likely not have careers
in the arts.

(music - flute: play or hum Centrelink call wait classical music -
whichever relevant Vivaldi 'Four Seasons' here)*

**spoken (normies lamenting loss in/of mentally ill
people's lives voice):**

The art of creating isn't hard to falter.
You've got strong ties to your local community,
you do the right things, read the right books & people,
avoid the things you know will make
that black cloud – on either shoulder –
talk louder than they should, for longer than they should.
What would you expect from gatecrashers?

spoken (chorus):

I'm sorry to have to inform you of this,
but the neurochemically balanced will most likely not just have
careers in the arts.

(music - flute: play or hum two octaves of a descending whole tone
scale here: C3)*

spoken (listening to my ableist parents voice/s):

The art of snake oil quackery is hard to muster.
I prescribe myself these things instead:

keep doing what you're doing, savour the life moments you find so dear for no other reason than they exist, and keep honouring them. Look, it's okay to be upset, in this situation, many others have handled your diagnoses with much less graciousness and reserve.

(music - flute or melodica: *play or hum Peter's theme from 'Peter & the Wolf'*)

spoken (chorus):

I'm sorry to have to inform you of this,
but I will most likely not have a career outside the arts.

(music - flute*: *play or whistle the bird's theme from 'Peter & the Wolf' <https://open.spotify.com/track/6nqHzwOdGIaX57U6VU6kMO>*)

spoken (pissed-off voice):

The art of hiding isn't easy to conjure.
My stubborn prognosis is that I will - still -
have a life worth living, because I will let myself.
F**k some small certainties that tell me to not touch
gleaming black knobs that are set, and claim
to be accurate. The devil is between these precisions.

(music - chorus on any instrument/voice: *Beethoven's Ode to Joy tune; can go back to melodica*)

spoken (pissed-off/angry/joyful/shouting/loud as you want /can chorus):

I'm
sorry
to
have
to
in-
form
you
all
of
this,
ev-
'ry-
one,
but
I
will
keep
try-
ing
to
pur-
sue
work
in
the
arts.

INTO THE FUTURE

Ela Fornalska

He brought a bag full of nothing
our pockets contain all that we need
we can invent through our pencils

My red aeroplane
is fixed and functional
shiny and bright
under the Sahara sun

'Are you ready for the future?'
His smile the reply

The little prince takes my
hand in his
adventure activated
through a squeeze

We are going beyond sky high
past clocks and calendars
we are leaving time behind

The stars chime like bells
and the planets hum

We draw our dreams in notebooks
to make them appear

Moons are mirror balls
pit stops are dance stations
we generate fuel
through our moves

All the creatures we meet
speak in fluent poetry

Animals are our instant friends
we stroke their fur
and they touch our centres

The future is rose scented
we inhale the sweet atmosphere
and exhale thorns

In emptiness
we discover the essential

CROSSING BRIDGES

Lara Zembekis

‘Hey, have you got the time?’

I looked up and nearly kept walking with my mean-street-talk-to-the-hand attitude, but he looked, as we said in the 70s, a bit retarded. And I thought, what the heck, I’m nearly home. Another twenty minutes and I’ll be eating lunch and watching telly. My usual loop around the Merri creek took me across four bridges and back again. I had two more to go.

I stopped, looked down at my watch, and then he grabbed me.

Oh no, I thought, you can’t be serious. You can’t seriously think you’re going to do this dark-ages village-idiot bullshit. I haven’t even eaten my lunch yet. Or shaved my legs. That’s what I get for thinking you’re retarded.

What I said was, ‘Get f****d you stupid f****r, you’re so dumb, you’re so f*****g dumb you f*****g f****r.’ I mean I wanted to pull out some eloquent cursing like my Greek mother-in-law. She was known for screeching out ‘bite my hairs, you son of a donkey dick,’ to non-Greek speaking innocents, but I couldn’t think of anything that would adequately express my complete contempt for his time-wasting stupidity.

Then I stopped, and waited;
I didn’t want him to reappear
as I walked home.

So I thought clawing his face would show him the error of his ways. But still, I was too polite to rip out an eyeball. And we tussled but I couldn’t work out how to punch his head in even though I’d done three years of karate. I was so glad the shihan couldn’t see me.

Finally he said, ‘I’ve got a knife,’ and he made a motion across the waist-band of his black tracksuit pants as though it was hidden there. I looked at this bit of desperate fakery and spat out, ‘F**k off, I’ve got an umbrella!’ and brandished my new leaf-green umbrella.

Still, my jubilation was short-lived. I couldn’t hit him hard enough with it to stop him, and then he pushed me to the ground.

‘Don’t scream,’ he whispered.

Don’t scream? I hadn’t even thought of that – I was so busy, clawing and cursing. Before I could think any further a scream so sudden ripped up from the bottom of my guts. It must have been an ear-popper because he jumped off me lickety-split, and bounded away from me up the path. I was so surprised by his reaction I started running after him – I mean I still wanted to hit him – and yelled out, ‘I’m going to call the police and they’re going to get you!’ He turned to look at me as he ran and there was fear on his face. Who knew a little horror-movie screaming would do the trick?

Then I stopped, and waited; I didn’t want him to reappear as I walked home. He was gone. I looked about me at the quiet, sunny creek – the willow, the blackberry, the hawthorn. I picked up my scarf and broken sunglasses and turned to go.

Yes, I know I made a promise to creek-creep that I was going to call the police but I debated with myself all the way home. I wasn’t even sure if I was going to tell my husband. I wasn’t sure if there was really anything to tell. I expected that if I called the cops they would say something like, ‘Well nothing really happened, so don’t worry about it’.

But my husband loved calling the cops – strange parked cars, burnouts, factory fires. When I rang him that was it – ‘Get off the phone and call them now!’

Hearing the reports on the news describing a 42-year-old woman being attacked and thinking, Jesus, I’m middle-aged.

The rest of the afternoon was a blur of police. Some of the things I remember: the choppers hacking through the sky minutes after I called; being embarrassed because the house was a mess; being too disoriented to show them where I had been on the map of the creek; the friendly, tough women cops who commended me for fighting back; the dead silence when my husband, arm slung around my shoulders in pride, jokingly told said cops I’d cracked his ribs before; and finally, after they all left, the glittering rainbow zigzags of a migraine. I don’t remember what I ate for lunch.

There was more the next day. Compiling an identikit for a press release – all computerised, no drawing. DNA from my nails – in the end they were too short and clean to get anything. Telling mum and hearing her trying not to cry. And, when will vanity die, hearing the reports on the news describing a 42-year-old woman being attacked and thinking, Jesus, I’m middle-aged.

No, they never found him and yes, I was scolded. Experts in the field – sundry neighbours, friends, family and well-wishers – all told me I shouldn’t be walking there. But I told them they were mistaken; I belonged there in the sun, under the green haze of trees and burbling water and he, he, f*****g f**k, did not.

FRESH RAIN

Alberto Schulz

The dark cloud-covered sky extends above the city like a flock of dusty sheep. The particular smell of fresh rain on the ground penetrates through my nostrils like the refreshing perfume of a lily. I stand still for a moment in the middle of the footpath, close my eyes and inhale deeply, trying to catch that aroma of memory. I inhale, and inhale one time after another.

Suddenly, my mother pulls my hand while we walk on a wet street towards the school; she, with her shoes worn out from so much walking, and I, with mine polished brightly over their poverty. The raindrops, full of eternal immensity, cover the broken concrete of the street that is still unused to the word democracy. A wagon of militarized police passes furiously near us, uncaring about the waves of stagnant water that they send up from the puddles on the road to fall just centimetres from us. She picks up the pace. We are late for my first day. The religious nuns from the school probably won't be pleased with that. She wanted to be there on time because it wasn't easy for her to get me accepted into that institution. She wanted to make a good impression as she wanted for me to get a good education.

The aroma of rain on the concrete is the same when I cross the schoolyard pulled a little bit brusquely by the nun's hand. I turn my head towards the place where my mother had stayed. She looks at me from the other side of the high iron bars that separate the educational precinct from the street, puts her right hand to her lips and blows a kiss through the distance while she sweetly smiles at me, perhaps trying to comfort my tears.

The mechanical noise of a herd of metal beasts forces me to open my eyes. On the other side of the street the 5 pm train breaks my

melancholic journey and that far away image from the other side of the ocean in Latin America fades away like the smoke from a cigarette, swallowed by the immensity of the evening and the menacing dark clouds. A little burst of wind tries to steal my hat. Instinctively I put my hand to my head in time to stop it flying away. The blow of a falling heavy object attracts my attention. A few metres further down the footpath a man runs to pick up an advertising sign from a hand car wash shop. He has broad shoulders, maybe formed by a hard life of labour, his curly black hair is short, and his black skin shines with the rain. I assume that he probably has African ancestors. It obviously isn't easy to stand the sign up, as it seems bit heavy. I take off my hat and hold it with my left hand while I run the few meters that separate us to help him. Between us we stand the sign up, and he indicates to me that he would prefer to bring it inside because they are about to close the shop. We drag in the object that has some little metal wheels that don't help much. His accent confirms his African origin. With a broad smile he thanks me for the help. I answer; no worries mate, trying to sound Australian while knowing that my Latin accent betrays me.

I retrace my steps to cross the street and get home, passing in front of the kebab truck near the car wash. While I wait for the traffic light to turn green I hear someone chopping onions at the rear of the truck. I look over, and there is a woman; middle-aged and with her head covered in a hijab, bent over a table concentrating on her task. The change in the tone of the click at the traffic light indicates to me that it's green. That attracts her attention; she looks at me, I look at her. We smile. I step onto the street and a raindrop hits my skin. I smile because I can see my mother in her and my father in him.

IN THE MIDDLE – AN ODE TO ULURU

Lorena Castaldi

This is not a tale of beginnings,
Of looking forward with naive thrills of excitement and expectation
because there's so little you've left behind.
This is not a tale of wise endings,
Where the future is limited and clearly defined and the past glistens
with gems of experiences buffed to a high smooth sheen by repeated
reminiscence over a life long lived.
This is a tale of the middle
With neither the thrill of expectation nor the peace of the ancient.
This is a tale of a battle.
A battle for survival.
A battle against complacency.
A battle for legitimacy
 For a legacy
 For relevance.

You wear the battle scars of life;
 silvered hair
 thickening waistline
 weary heart
a skin toughened and well creased with worry lines and if your lucky
laugh lines too.

This battle finds you in the middle,
In the middle of this vast life,
In the middle of this vast island,
Gazing with wonder at this huge red boulder, submerged as deeply
under the red sands as it rises above to bright blue skies.
Here in this middle I find my place. I find stillness and peace in this
restless menopause.
I'm reminded of my strength,
The deep solid core,
The glorious glow of colour changing with light.
The beauty in the creases worn by time and tears,
The dappled textured surface hinting at the many layers deep within.
Here is where we find ourselves.
No longer at the beginning and not quite at the end,

But right here, right now is where we find the deep ironic red magic
of the middle.

COMFORT FOOD

Jaclyn Bond

I have a photo of the last meal we shared with my dad. It's not as sad as it sounds; it's almost comical, this culinary vignette. He's eating takeaway phò from a Vietnamese shop in Preston and in front of him there are böreks from the Lebanese bakery in Fairfield. A giant plate of hamin lethoke – a noodle dish made with love by Maymay, my Burmese grandmother – sits next to the pastries. An apple crumble I baked that morning is cooling on the bench behind him. There's iced tea and iced water and juice in frame. There are side salads and home-grown chilli and a myriad of south-east Asian condiments as familiar to our family as salt is to most others. Balachaung, pickled eggplant, curried eggs.

The sting is in the context, as it always is. All his favourite comfort foods had been gathered, scavenger-hunt-style, from across Melbourne's northern suburbs and placed on our giant black dining table in a desperate, delicious plea: eat this and live; eat this and know you're loved; eat this and feel how deeply we know you because we even got the special sauce that's not even on the menu at the phò place, you just have to know about it.

The photo shows a tiny man who can barely eat at all, swamped by food; swamped by the clothes he's swiftly shrinking out of; swamped by cancer; swamped by our love. He sits next to my brother. You can tell they're related except my brother is the Caucasian version of my father, he has my mum's Irish skin and light brown hair, but my dad's eyes. My brother is smiling, eating, chatting, pushing the food closer and closer to our dying dad – because what else can we do?

In the final few days he went into palliative care at the Olivia Newton John Centre. We gathered around his bed, perching on the honeycomb-textured blanket and lightly touching the smooth brown skin on his hands. They were drying out, he was leaving slowly. The nurses, shaped by the grief of others like coastal sandstone cliffs, floated in and out. They brought him trays of food: jelly, cheesecake, frittata. They set it down on his tray table as if he might suddenly wake, ravenous, cancer-free, desperate for nuclear-green jelly.

They knew none of us would ever ask for food, would ever confess to needing something while our father lay dying. In silence, they left four spoons on the table, smoothed the blankets around his shoulders and left. We waited until the sun sunk low and the cold night seeped in before one of us, then all of us, took a spoonful of jelly, a bite of frittata, a corner of cheesecake, crowding around my dad's tray table laden like an altar to refined sugar. It tasted like nothing. It tasted like food stolen from a dying man. It carried us through the small aching hours as we slept in chairs, paced the room, let him go.

In the weeks after he passed, people skirted around the fringes of us, as though our sadness was airborne – a chemical agent that could take you down with one sniff of the chilled winter wind. One fearless friend brought her baby around, sat her gurgling on my mum's knee and filled our freezer with spaghetti bolognese and lasagne. It took a month, but we got through it all. It was all we had – defrosted pasta eaten perched on stools at the kitchen bench because the dining table felt too big for just us.

Years later, scar tissue has grown around overseas trips, new born babies, weekend hikes and the space he left. A picture in my mum's bathroom reads 'it's never too late to live happily ever after' – it's crooked, but none of us fix it. We watch Grand Designs in big comfy recliners and eat soup from the organic shop. I order gelato on my phone and mum brings out brownies made by her sister. All our favourite comfort foods, collected and piled onto the small coffee table between us.

We smile, chat, push the food closer to each other – because what else can we do?

Highly Commended Darebin Mayors Writing Awards

TELL HER NOT TO BOTHER

Erica Murdoch

Four

The boys slam in to the house. Giggling they ride their bikes in the backdoor, through the green galley kitchen and into the dining room. The older one moves the sewing machine off the table; her husband doesn't like her sewing in there. Use the TV room he says. But the lights not good in there and it gets no sun.

They spread their books out on the table. Little one, tongue out in concentration; big one doodles and looks out at the surfboard thrown down on the grass. Surf is pumping and he's supposed to do maths. She brings them a plate of pikelets, they add golden syrup and sprinkle on sugar.

Homework done and it's time for boys' chores. Slap four place mats down, pull out the cutlery and plates. Every day is green trim. Dinner parties and Sundays, it's the gold trim Wedgewood. She always has to remind them.

At 5 he comes home, Car door slams, straight through to get changed while she prepares the Sundowner (whisky for him, sherry for her) and cuts cheese for the Uneeda biscuits. He watches the 6pm news, still-fuzz black and white. Dinner is straight from Elizabeth David's French Provincial Cooking. Sliced bread and butter, nestle against Boeuf a la Bourguignonne. Clear up, wash and reset again for breakfast.

Mornings. She clicks on the heater and pads to the kitchen in her blue dressing gown. Heap bacon and eggs for hungry boys in from their early morning surf.

The boys grow and breakfasts become stand up events at the kitchen bench. They shovel in spoonfuls of Weetbix. She looks at the breakfast setting, the marmalade jar, and the toast triangles growing cold in the rack. They tell her not to bother but she doesn't—can't listen.

School shirts turn into work shirts. Boys become men. Less of the family dinners, except for Sundays when it's all slicked back hair clean shirts and boys smelling of surf and soap. Husband carves the beef, and pours the gravy. The boys giggle as it splashes up the side of the plates. Sundays, the one day when they eat meals of his birthplace: Yorkshire Puddings, Eton Mess and Treacle Tarts with clotted cream.

Three

Four settings become three. Her younger son goes to a university interstate. Most of the time it's two of them. Not in for dinner tonight Mum the older son says as he's halfway out the door, on his way to the pub. She sighs, yet leaves his plate on the table. He always comes home.

Two

Three become two. Son goes to live in the West – a strange remote part of the continent. She and he are left staring over the gold rimmed plates on Sunday nights, pushing the roast spuds and dimpled slices of pork round the plate. The two-course breakfasts and dinner parties are a fading memory. After dinner, he goes out for a cigarette and watches the night sky.

One

Two become one. He retires and goes on a trip to England. He doesn't come back. He hooks up with an old girlfriend. Now each week it's Friday night salmon, Saturday night steak reheated over and again. The dining room table is only used in the mornings. Out of habit she still cuts the toast into triangles, sets out the marmalade and covers the Royal Doulton teapot with the green fuzzy felt cosy. In the evenings, she eats in front of the TV, flicking around channels balancing a tray on her knees. She starts to prep at lunchtime, marinating the steak, shelling the peas and cutting up bananas and mango.

The dining room table is covered in newspaper. Fruit spills over the brim of the fruit bowl, but by the end of the week the bananas blacken and the plums turn to mush.

The cookbooks are untouched in the drawer, even the precious Elizabeth David which is held together by a rubber band. And all around the kitchen are yellow Post It Notes covered in her shaky writing. Defrost fish. Put milk back in fridge. Use spray for ants. Turn off the stove.

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