

n-SCRIBE



14 | 2019 | free publication

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fiction | non-fiction | poetry | art | local

WORKING GROUP

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WINNERS DAREBIN MAYORS WRITING AWARDS 2019

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n-SCRIBE 14 is a collection of new works from writers who, live work or study in the City of Darebin. We publish 5000 free copies each year and distribute through Darebin libraries, Northcote Town Hall Arts Centre, local cafes, bookshops and community hubs.

A project of the Creative Culture and Events Department, Darebin City Council.

A working group of local writers and editors contribute to the curation of the magazine. We thank them for their contribution.

Information and all past editions can be found at our website darebinarts.com.au

To get in touch with *n*-SCRIBE 14, email writingprojects@darebin.vic.gov.au

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Some works contain language which may offend.

BUTTERFLY

Andy Murdoch

He found the cocoon on a branch in the garden. He broke the branch – a twig, really, hardly a branch – and put it in an empty jam jar, and put the jam jar on the windowsill of the backyard patio.

“Shouldn’t you put some holes in the lid?” I said. “I don’t know if the cocoon needs air but I think it probably does. And the butterfly will, when it hatches.”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “I don’t think it needs air.” But he found a hammer and a nail and punched half a dozen holes in the lid of the jam jar.

It sat on the windowsill of the patio for days, maybe a week or two. It was late spring, early summer, and there was sunshine in the backyard from early morning til late afternoon.

It was a lovely backyard. I miss it. And the patio. I miss the patio, too.

“Don’t you think you should put it in the shade?” I asked. “The sun’s getting warmer. It might – I don’t know, burn the cocoon or something.”

He shook his head. “It’ll be fine,” he said. “It needs the sun, I reckon. To hatch.”

I didn’t know anything about butterflies or cocoons or caterpillars. I didn’t know if they needed sunshine or shade or air.

One morning before work we were having coffee out on the backyard patio and we could see it had started. We hadn’t noticed the shape of the cocoon change in the week or so since he’d put it in the jam jar, but that morning we knew it was happening.

“You should take the lid off,” I said. “So it can fly away once it’s hatched.”

He laughed at me. “Why would I do that?” he said. “That’s why I put it in the jar in the first place. I want to see the butterfly.”

I wanted to see the butterfly, too. But still.

“At least put it in the shade,” I said, but he shook his head.

“It needs the sun, I reckon. Like I said.”

“In some cultures,” I said, “It’s considered bad luck to kill a butterfly.” I don’t remember where I’d read that.

He laughed at me, again. “Where do you find this shit?” he said. “We don’t believe in luck.”

Which was true. He didn’t believe in luck, and neither did I.

We finished our coffees, and we went to work.

That afternoon I got home first. I usually got home first. I dumped my bag in the lounge room where I usually dumped it, and I went out to look at the jam jar. I looked at the jam jar for a few seconds, and then I went into the kitchen and poured myself a glass of white wine and went back out onto the patio and sat down.

When he got home he came out the back to say hello. “Hi,” I said, and then I pointed at the jam jar, and he looked at it.

The butterfly had hatched, and then it had died. Its wings, still attached to its body, had retained their outer rim and there was enough left to wonder at how beautiful it might have been. But the rest was scorched dust at the bottom of the jar.

He looked at it for a few seconds, probably about the same amount of time I’d looked at it when I got home. I’d tried to avoid looking at it while I’d been drinking my wine. I don’t know why I’d gone back out onto the patio.

He looked at the jam jar for a few seconds, and then he said, “Oh. Oh dear.” And then he went inside to change out of his work gear.

Maybe that’s what started it. The end, I mean. Maybe that’s what started the end.

Winner Darebin Mayors Writing Awards 2019

BEGINNER'S LUCK

Stella Bridie

I have been trying to become a child again.
I drink chocolate milk for dinner and go outside without my eyebrows drawn on,
hold hands and sing joylessly in the dark.
But it's a dead bolt of electricity through a stopped heart and the thing won't go.
I think the world can feel the desperation in my hands when I grip it,
trying to shake it all back up,
rouse dead flakes of what it used to be and make them dance again.
When they do,
it is a crude reanimation and I have to settle them down.

So maybe childhood is beginner's luck,
one good hit,
one perfect shot rings out and then the colour goes dull.
Like when it was opening night and your clothes were still fresh from the dryer,
and you didn't know the scope of what you were doing,
couldn't fathom it and didn't care and then you'd see it, rows and rows of eyes
and your blood would jump up against the brim of you like it had just learned how to move
(you were perpetually flushed back then,
the heat glow of sunburn,
the thrill of being alive for the first time).
Like how you were a thing of utility, once,
and you would play in dirt, sand, stick, water
and everything was lined up just so, like lottery numbers, like game day.
Beginner's luck.
Do you remember being a girl and the world was roaring in your ears,
and the house had no structure, it just looped around as you ran through it,
kitchen to bathroom to garden to bathroom again,
and time was this elastic bubblegum thing?
Sometimes in summer it felt as though I could stretch my hands to either side of the day,
skim morning to night and clap them together, they would go that fast,
chased out by dark.
And then others the light would just stay so still –
even the sunset was dragging its heels, the hours were that long –
and the air was sprawling with colour,
fingerpainting on glass.
Everything used to be so filled up with feeling;
even grief was new, had a fresh smell to it, something bad and bright.
Life was a heart attack and a battering ram and an earthquake,
and I was stuck right in the confines of it, wriggling and panting and delighted –

Now there is too much room.
And I want to be claustrophobic, I want to be pushed right up against the face of the planet,
nose flattened to its teeth, shoving at the perimeter.

I want to live inside myself again.
I am tired of sleeping in the stands.

Highly commended Darebin Mayors Writing Awards 2019

YOU SHOULD BE SO LUCKY

Jasmijn van Houten

Over drinks at a Fitzroy pub, everyone is talking about it.

I saw it in the paper this morning, says one, whilst butting out a dart on the table.

The sound of a shitty band is drifting out to the beer garden, but still everyone speaks in hushed voices.

It just keeps happening. Nothing ever changes.

Hey, weren't you at that show too?

Yeah, you say. But I took an Uber home that night.

Shit, imagine if you'd walked too. You're so lucky.

You shift uncomfortably on the worn wooden bench. Someone leans over the table and divides the last of the beer evenly between glasses.

Later, walking to the 86 tram you kick stones into the curb and mull it over. Lucky. You think about her on that stage, that bright energy. You think about her in that park that night, those dirty fingers and the thick summer night air.

You don't feel so lucky.

You've done this walk many times, but tonight you stick to the well-lit streets.

You're sixteen and walking home from school when a swaggering man crossing the road from the other side grabs your arm and with a stinking breath asks where you're going, sweetheart. You pull free and half-run to the local library, still feeling the force of his grip on your arm. Are those his footsteps falling in behind you? You hide out between high shelves of Dickens and Winton until you feel safe again.

On a peak-hour train someone slides their fingers up your skirt. The carriage is packed like a cattle truck. There is nowhere for you to move, so it's easier to pretend you must've imagined it. After all, you're wearing a skirt, so, you must've been asking for it.

The 5 o'clock news on the TV. The smell of cooking onions. They found her body in a suitcase, says a reporter in a black suit. How terrible, says your mother, crushing garlic with the flat of a blade, in one precise, practiced movement. Can you set the table, honey?

No one's ever told you how to but somehow you know how to clutch your keys exactly like a weapon, pressed in between white knuckles.

You finished work late tonight, so you sprint to your car in the empty lot. Press down the lock. Buckle up.

Sitting in the cabin with its fogged-over window, your breath forms white clouds around you.

A year later one of her close friends will break off halfway through his set just at the thought of her. Despite the microphone, he'll be suddenly shy, and apologise whilst running his fingers through a mop of russet-coloured hair.

I just don't want anyone to forget who she was, he'll say. I'm sorry.

You live near the end of the line.

You take off your headphones so you can hear if anyone is walking behind you. Peering over your shoulder, you expect to see a shadowed form blotting out the lights of the city, but it's just you, alone under the clear night sky.

You walk too fast, and arrive breathless. You urgently slide home the lock of your front door. Strange eyes stare back at you whilst you brush your teeth over the sink.

Sleep takes too long to come.

That night you dream of pallid limbs in the moonlight, and the hot, sick smell of fear.

Yeah.

You should be so lucky.

Highly commended Darebin Mayors Writing Awards 2019

SOFT CENTRES

Laura Brinson

He was my
Mum's first boyfriend, her first love.
She was sixteen. Jackie Washbourne. A newspaper man.
He worked in Fleet Street, till he was called up and went away to war.
Mum met and married my Dad when she was 19. They emigrated to Australia.
Then us kids came along. We all knew the story of Jackie Washbourne – newspaper man.
How he came back after the war and Mum was already married with a baby on the way. Regrets,
there were obviously a few. Jackie Jackie Washing Machine we used to say. But not in front of Mum.

When I was about 13 he visited us. Jackie Washing Machine now worked on the 'New Straits Times' in Hong Kong – *Hong Kong*. Dad went alone to pick him up from Essendon Airport and drove him to his accommodation at the Village Green Motel in Mount Waverley. He came to dinner. We used the best plates and Mum sparkled. The adults drank sherry and talked about London in the old days. Some time later when he left to return to Hong Kong, we all went to the airport to see him off.

Essendon Airport was like a giant igloo, the metal structure of the roof towered over us. It was filled with people going somewhere. Pilots in gold braid and air hostesses with their perky hats walked through the terminal. You could hear the jets taxiing out and taking off. The sound reverberated around us. We had milkshakes sitting at the snack bar and Jackie Washing Machine presented me, as the eldest child, with a large box of chocolates. In 1966, in our family, a box of chocolates was a breathtaking luxury. And it came to me, not my Mum or Dad but to me. I held that box on my lap all the way home. Of course I had to share. My sisters and I pored over the legend before making our pick. Strawberry Sundae or Caramel Cream.

My Dad is gone now, and so, I imagine is Jackie Washbourne. Mum is
fragile, her memory shambolic at best, but that well worn pathway
is undimmed. Jackie Washbourne – newspaper man,
she says.

THE MIGRANT

Elizabeth Salaj

Village children didn't play with toys during the war.
They took medals off dead soldiers laying in snowy fields.
And watched enemy officers put their feet up on kitchen tables,
Ordering anxious mothers to run and bring what meagre food was left in the pantry.
11 year old boys walked the largest, fattest pigs along the main street to market,
Past crumbling gingerbread houses with crooked windows and fat chimneys.
And worked on long thin ribbons of farm land stretching into the horizon.

By 19 you decided Europe was the past. America the future.
Australia was unknown but it would take you.
An auburn haired, freckled, hazel eyed ectomorph, the immigration card read.
Your first impression at Station Pier was emptiness and scorching heat.
'Where are all the people?'
'It's Melbourne Cup Day, mate.'
What country have I come to where the city shuts down for a horse race?

Bon-uh-gill-uh, Bon-gilluh, Bone-gilla. Apparently there are 20 ways to pronounce it.
Just saying the name made you screw up your face into a jumbled road map of lines,
And slap your hand hard against your bony thigh, shaking your head in mock-disgust.
'The only decent meals we ate were when the Italians cooked.'
'The ssshbghettiii', the word was extravagantly drawn out, and caressed,
As if the meaty bolognaise sauce and elongated strings of pasta were still on the lips of a starving man.

With your deep, rich, gap-toothed 'ho, ho, ho' laugh you told stories of cane-cutting.
Men cooked alive by the Mackay heat as they slept in tiny tin sheds.
Snakes, spiders, and rats the size of small dogs, scurrying through towering cane stalks and,
Still recounting in disbelief, all these years later,
A fellow cane-cutter shooting an enormous balloon of a blister off his own forearm,
Driven crazy by a potent mix of infection, tropical weather and vast amounts of alcohol.

I always wanted to hear more but questions were brushed away with,
'That's enough, it's all in the past'.
So I've had to fill in the gaps by studying closely
The crinkle edged black and white photos you kept in an old cigarette box.
Groups of serious looking young men posed in front of landmarks at Bathurst, Cowra and Shepparton.
Or leaning nonchalantly against canvas tents, shirtless, under blazing sun, eating grapes or smoking.
In one photo you are on a motorbike, in another, a big box of Rinso sits at your feet.

You were a man of action.
Leaving everything behind to start a new life.
A man looking to the future.
Now you are my past,
And your story is now part of history.

TRANSNANNY

Tess Fox

It was hard to believe that someone could have lived such a life to then settle for a town like this.

Poppy said she kept it in the pickle jar tucked between the Dijon mustard and the mayonnaise at the back of the refrigerator.

Poppy my best friend in Fish Creek – population 201, undisputed Tidy Town Award Winner of the mid 90s – said a lot of things where Nanny was concerned.

When our Nanny Aisling O’Shea swanned into the room, every element in the atmosphere elevated to give her a standing ovation. She’d enter seemingly footless, in full-length silk and velvet skirts, adorned in silver jewellery that jangled cheerily as she gesticulated through epic tales of saucy celebrity flings, the highest of highs and the rocky bottomless pit of consequences faced by her party-dwelling peers. Patchouli laced the air around her.

I’ll never forget her stories about Molly Meldrum’s parties, about having a romp with a member of AC/DC, about her dandy brother Damon as gay as the fields of Dover and the Irish Catholic parents now estranged from them both.

It was hard to believe that someone could have lived such a life to then settle for a town like this. Where difference was a dangerous thing, something punishable by the wrath of the almighty under the two rooves of the Anglican and Protestant churches that welcomed traffic from Fish Creek’s opposing entry points on the highway.

Fish Creek was pretty to look at. Ornamental garden beds filled every available plot of soil, the air was always sickly sweet with jasmine and freesias but frequently cow shit too as it was a fuel point for most of the livestock trucks that came through.

People were friendly, overly friendly. Gossip was no stranger to this place, replenishing old musty conversation with words so vivacious and scandalous they were harder to overthrow than the blackberries that battled through every neglected back fence-line.

But gossip never bothered Aisling O’Shea. I remember her saying once “Look darl, it is a fuckin’ shame that Nanny rhymes with Tranny but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

I remember thinking to myself as I walked home from a grade 6 day from hell, *Fuck, it’s a shame that grow rhymes with sew and that cut rhymes with tuck, too.*

“Why the sad face Annie?” she’d say on those days where my far-left upbringing had suffered a head-on with the tip-top supremacists at school. “Did some little fuckin’ God botherer call you a lezzo again? Tell ‘em to piss off.”

She was always this eloquent. No matter how big the baggage that I’d come home with, she would always have me laughing within minutes.

When we left Shits Creek (now a bona fide hipster sanctuary) to return to the big smoke, it was these moments that I missed the most.

It’s 2015 and I haven’t seen my Gippsland friends for over 10 years. Not for lack of trying but geography, careers, relationships and at some point perhaps too much faith and too little in common may have helped the distance.

Poppy and I are strangers with milk-drunk cherubs strapped to our bellies and we make awkward small-talk in the reception area of a little weathered church (straight out of Deliverance) behind the KFC drive-thru on the roaring South Gippsland Hwy in Leongatha.

Aisling O’Shea’s child-sized coffin looks as though it has been built on site and lacquered at a minute’s notice. No flare, no filigree... just a diamondesque pencil box supersized and coloured white.

A perfunctory ceremony of the smallest scale ensues and I feel sick

to my stomach as I glance at the 30 odd strangers around me including the stoic-looking Mr and Mrs O’Shea. Damon is nowhere to be seen.

I don’t know what shifts my decision not to look at Nanny one last time but without a thought I am handing my son to my mother and making my way down the alter.

I have this strange feeling that she is going to jump out of the coffin and scream “BOO!”

A favourite pastime of hers was to hide behind doors and scare the hell out of me when I came home.

The person I see is not Aisling O’Shea, but a child-like cadaver so grossly embalmed that I have to grasp the edge of the coffin to steady myself. Her face hangs off her cheekbones like an over-tanned, weather-beaten canopy, her lips are non-existent... no time was spent to restore in our memories the colour she brought into our lives.

“I look like Tutan-fucking-khamun” I can hear her say both incensed and amused. Strangely enough, I can imagine her being quite thrilled at the prospect of scaring the shit out of me once again.

As I walk out of the church and into the car park my heartbeat settles. On the drive to the wake at her favourite pub, I am able to think clearly again. When I get back to Melbourne I peruse the photos of her picking flowers outside our house and remember her laughing hysterically and saying we should thank our lucky stars that she’ll be haunting us long after she has left.

She certainly delivered.

YOU SAID

Marie Thorpe

Fifteen is the months we were together, a year plus a winter.

Fourteen was the flat we shared. Meg and Cam below, always up for an evening drink. Old Mrs Mason above, always annoyed by the noise that rose with every bottle.

Thirteen is your birthday. Unlucky for some, say the Bingo callers, but never for you, you said. You were lucky in love, you said. We were lucky to have found each other. You said.

Twelve, the even dozen, is for the months you brought me flowers. Roses in summer; happy daffodils in spring. In June you found violets and scent-drenched daphne.

Eleven is our weekend escapes. Every month, you said. The bush and the beach and cute country cottages. I said you sounded like a travel brochure. Who cares? It'll be fun, you said.

Ten is the toes of the child we made, but didn't have. It's too soon, you said. We need time to ourselves, to have fun and adventures and explore the world. There will be other chances, other children, you said.

Nine is the days we spent in Bali for my birthday. Warm nights with groggy cocktails and the balmy lapping of a private pool. You'd bought me a special gift, you said. I thought of a ring and a celebration, was ready to say yes ... was disappointed when the tiny velvet box held pretty pearl earrings.

Eight is Tinder dates it took me to find you.

Seven is the awful dates I hoped I would never have to go through again.

Six is the weeks I'd known you when you asked me to move in. It's too soon, I said. Why wait, when we're so sure, you said. I want to be with you, start our new life now. Let's not waste another day, you said. You sound like a real estate agent selling lifestyle apartments on a golf course, I said.

Five is the days you went to Sydney for work. That Friday night, on the phone, you said your business had been delayed. Just a few more days, you said.

Four is the nights you'd already been at Izzy's. It's the distance, just 4 k's, from which you'd phoned. It's the weeks you stayed there, before she kicked you out.

Three is the months it took me to find a new place. It's three in a share house. It's three's-not-a-crowd. Three new-found musketeers.

Two is what we were, for a year and a bit. We might have been three, and now I would have been two. You were right. It was too soon. But not for the reasons you said.

One is for me. It's for one day. Today.

BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

Chris Thompson

I know it was 1976, because that's the year I did my HSC. And it must've been June or July 'cause in the photos, I'm wearing desert boots, duffle coat and my Footscray footy scarf and the others are wearing lumber jackets or *Starsky & Hutch* cardigans. Sixth form study camp, somewhere near Monbulk. It was cold - in the way that only old school camps can be.

We didn't think we were bad. We were nice, middle-class Eastern suburbs kids, pulling harmless pranks - like turning up to inter-school volleyball in fancy dress - or roller skating through the library with handkerchiefs tied over our faces like robbers, stealing books and hightailing it out through the new security system - or declaring a 'beach day' and all turning up in our bathers and towels with BBQ's and esky's set up for lunchtime. But then there were those pranks that quite clearly broke the law - like, on your birthday, we'd check out the Melway for a street with your name and steal it for you - or on Saturday nights, we'd nick the flag from the ninth hole of the local golf course and spear it into someone's front yard - or sneaking into the pub with our fake IDs and our memorised false birthdates that made us all eighteen, except Noddy who got busted by the cops because his ID said his name was Shirley, and he was 42. He had his mum's Driver's License. The cops just cracked up and chucked the lot out.

Fancy dress, irresponsible drinking, practical jokes and playing golf. Do you think we were watching too much *M*A*S*H*?

At study camp, it was Thursday and we were bored. So, we crammed into Womble's car and took off for a joyride. Actually, it was his mum's car. This was Womble's second crack at HSC, so he was old enough to drive. There was a rumour that if you woke Womble from a deep sleep, he'd sit up in bed, throw a punch at you and then snuggle back down under the covers. Squirly tried it on the first night. Turns out it was true. You could tell by Squirly's black eye.

Womble's mum's car was a Morris 1100 - an old-codger car with a shelf on the back for your bowls hat or a pair of nodding dogs. It had bench seats, so Womble, Shanus and Lee sat in the front and Squirly, Trev, Noddy and me squished into the back. We took off before breakfast, while

the teachers were still sleeping it off. Windows down, elbows out. Cool. I mean, cold... but cool at the same time. There was an 8-Track Cartridge player, but Womble only had two cartridges; The Eagles *Greatest Hits* and Frank Zappa, and the Mothers *Filmore East – June 1971*. We sang along with *Witchy Woman* and recited by heart all the Frank Zappa *Bwana Dik*, dirty bits.

We drove around like that for a while, cruising through the morning mountain mist until we found ourselves in Olinda just as the pub was opening its doors. The Olinda Pub is a low, brick building with stone steps leading up to the frosted glass doors. No-one actually decided we'd go in. We just piled out of the car and up those steps, fake ID's in hand, and false birthdates on the tips of our tongues. But the bloke behind the bar didn't ask our ages, he just asked us what we were having. *Two jugs and toasted ham sandwiches all 'round*. Sweet.

There's nothing quite like the smell and feel of a pub first thing in the morning. Ghosts of last night's beer, the aroma of schnitzels and chips, sticky carpet underfoot, the stink of empty ashtrays and stale tobacco. Shamus found a dart board but the rest of us made a beeline for the pool table. Only it wasn't like any pool table we'd ever seen. No pockets, just nine holes in the middle of the green felt, four of them with funny wooden mushrooms sitting on their edges. I know now, it's called Russian Billiards, but back then we had no idea, so we amused ourselves by using the balls to knock the mushrooms into the holes, laughing our heads off until the toasties arrived.

We took our beers and smokes and toasties out on the front steps. I remember sitting there in the crisp morning, mountain air watching Noddy chomp into his sanga, swig his beer and take a deep drag of his ciggy before belching out *'breakfast of champions!'* And I remember thinking it was probably only me who thought, *that's the title of a Kurt Vonnegut novel*. Our paths were diverging already.

We knocked back our beers, wiped off the toast crumbs and piled back into Womble's mum's car, heading off again along the narrow mountain roads, looking down into the valleys and vineyards where the mist was slowly rising while our cheeks grinned, flushed with the sting of cold air, excitement and alcohol.

Now, you're probably getting the feeling that this story's gonna have a bad ending. But don't worry. It doesn't.

We did have a story with a bad ending that year. A new kid named Hugo. Older, troubled, smoked too much dope, rode a motorbike. Not a good combination. They made us wear our ties and blazers for the honour guard at his funeral, but it didn't really hit us 'til the exams when we all saw his name on the empty desk. We all felt it. Our first brush with mortality. But that was well after we drove back to study camp and whatever punishment awaited us. Whatever it was, it was worth it.

I think back to those days. All the dumb, funny, stupid, things we did. Our *breakfast of champions* at the Olinda pub. We felt so grown up but mostly just managed to prove that we weren't.

I have a family now. We have a son. He started high school this year. It's weird to think about him doing the things that I did at that age. It's hard not to feel like a hypocrite. How much to allow, how much to forbid. Prohibition or, latitude? On their own, neither works. What kept me safe? Family, friends, the boundaries they set – wide enough to find out the right, the wrong, the somewhere in between without the need to push back. But not wide enough to let me run off the rails. A trust, that I often broke, but was always welcomed back to. I hope we can do the same for our son.

We played those two cartridges to death, but one song always takes me back to that morning, to the feeling of freedom and friendship and being on the verge of some big change. Six months later, high school would be over, Hugo would be dead and we'd all end up going our own ways. I haven't seen those guys for forty years but they're indelible in my memory, the seven of us driving through the misty hills in Womble's mum's car, singing along with Frank Zappa and Flo and Eddie at the top of our voices... *so happy together*.

There was an 8-Track Cartridge player, but Womble only had two cartridges; The Eagles Greatest Hits and Frank Zappa and the Mothers, Filmore East – June 1971.

ANCIENTS

Edward Carusso

Lucretius claims
that no colour can exist without light.

What he imparts:
my first glimpse into the day.

COLOUR SCHEMES

Jo Cumberland

I am straw, I am a field smiling. A wet coin by the side of the pool, a cartwheel on the sky, enamel trays splayed among the daddy long legs, something soft and pearly in your mother's top drawer. I will keep you whole, I will refrain, I will feel plain to you, then I will blow away like dust in a storm. I am your birthday candles ablaze at 5 o'clock in the afternoon on buttercream icing, against buttercream walls. Tomorrow you will find me difficult to remember, and the next day, and the next. Like a dream, you will retrace me, you must dishonour me to recreate me. But it's impossible to make anything out of me without elaborating, so in the end you will give up.

I am blue, your fear. I speak from underwater, booming. It's instantaneous, what you feel for me, it's dread, it's immense, it's all the achingly perfect dreams of your infancy being buried and unearthed, buried and unearthed. It's a mother's imperfect love. Not even close, but the closest you've ever been. You will run from me. I am too gorgeous for you to be near me. It's instantaneous, you will run until you grow wings, far, far from me. I will be worse than a burden to you, I will be an unfulfilled joy, a beast, an unravelling string you struggle to wrap up, twisting towards the throat. But one day, when you give up, and you meet me eye to eye, ready to drown, I will be the only drink in your desert.

I am plum-thick, rich, sweet, luxurious, hard to ignore. I make you weak at the knees. I am ripe, ready, wealthy, pungent- on the verge of ruin, dangerous, delicate. I will kidnap you and hold you ransom, I will be crushed under your feet. I dare you to defy me. I dare you to sense. I am always falling, with every bruise I am sweeter. I sink into the earth, into the skin, into the root. I bless the earth by my destruction. I bless your body by my destruction. I torpedo through sound, full of thunder, branches crackle at my crown. My colour is heavy and hard to erase, I leave a mark, a memory, a turret of smears, a burn in the grass, a dried up drip on the bark, a rock-hard seed in the middle of your palm.

RESA

Carly Sheehan

What's in a name
 To make people think
 That a French word pronounced correctly
Should cause such a stink?

That I must be an outsider
 Who thinks herself something more
And the reason why is because I say
 Reser-vwar not Reser-vor.

WEB OF DISCONTENT

Sofia Chapman

This web content,
when you think about it,
seems Edison's- patently edifying.
Continue retina retinue.

Windows ill.
We find any help from Apple gives hives,
yet disorients bees,
making them head instead west. Well,
be grateful if you can hide,
like robin, like kestrel.

In the main what I miss is blunt like a blank-
books on my windowsill.
Now they Kindle our fires.

THE WORM CATCHERS

Anita Smith

In the opaque chill before sunbreak, you lift the hood over your head and cover your cold fists within the cuffs. Steamy exhales dissolve in front of your face. Streetlights illuminate your suburban street in pools of glow and you will run on the road until sunrise.

Before you take the corner at the end of Hutton, you spot a peculiar outline of a still four-legged animal. Pause. What is that? Front paw mid-air, dignified on the driveway of an eco-house. Not a cat, tail too bushy – body too long to be a dog. An old Toyota Corolla, one headlight working, indicates, and pulls up sharply to the kerb. The fox slinks up the dark driveway. A rolled newspaper is flung over-arm from the driver's window, spins in an arc above the roof of the car, lands with a thud and rolls into the gutter. You pick up the paper and toss it into your neighbour's yard. The driver thanks you.

You turn another corner and scan your body for niggles; tight shoulders, a dull ache across your lower back, sore ankles, all of which will fade after a kilometre of padding the bitumen. You greet the familiar mob of chatty women marching in formation in winter coats, gloves and hats, one carries a heavy vase and another a hat stand. 'Good morning, early bird. Fresh isn't?' the posse chorus. A lone black silhouette larger than a bird flies low and clicks across your face. Just a late bat.

Now, the easterly horizon begins to mottle dark blue, tufts of light mark the dawn of a new day. Temperature drops. Nature-strip trees burst awake with frenzied birdsong. Your face is numb; heart beats in unison with your pumping arms and legs. Edwardian weatherboard houses and native trees flash like hyperreal photographs in your peripheral. A hipster couple you recognise from

the pub rummage through a hard rubbish collection pile, giggling over pre-loved furniture and plants. Your lungs burn, not an unpleasant sensation, and the scent of shampoo wafts from a house, erasing the brief but potent pong of the passing rubbish truck. St Georges' artery dazzles; the strip of streetlights lit like a string of fairy lights. You turn the next corner and run in the opposite direction up to the end of Smith. Take another corner and run to the end of Newman. You weave your neighbourhood on foot like a methodical seamster.

And this same repeated action places you in the moment – in the now. You are in the zone. This is freedom. You let your hood slip, unclench your fists full of sleeve and sense before you hear urgent footsteps behind you. You swing around; a faster runner raises his hand in apology and takes a wide berth overtaking you. 'You're alright,' you say, return his wave, and watch him stride ahead in perfect form, light and quick on his feet. His body like a skinned rabbit. Must be a marathon runner.

As the morning sun spills across the skyline like burst yolk, you cross Moreland and onto the footpath, pass the golf course and hear a roar like a dragon breathing out fire and another roar. The sudden surreal appearance of two hot air balloons begin their ascend from Mayer Park. You stop, take a photo. Your drumming heart lifts as the balloons float heavenwards. If it wasn't for the advertising dominating the balloons their grandness would be more antiquated and less like hovering billboards. You continue south on Leinster, past Croxton School and the strip of warehouses when you glimpse an orange rectangular shape lying flat in the gutter. Thankyouverymuch. You pick up the twenty dollar note, fold it in half and half again and push the find

Your drumming heart lifts as the balloons float heavenwards.

inside your shoe. You run west on Arthurton, through the open gates of CERES, past the steel pylon. A family of quacking ducks waddle alongside Merri Creek. You pass the church, gold domes glint in the sunlight. You loop around the velodrome, take the graffiti bridge underpass, and onto the west side of the creek. Shards of blue sky flash behind branches that rise and fall like waves above you. Leaves applaud. You scuttle over the swing bridge, sing good morning to a dog walker, give way to a cyclist, and visit the toilet at AH Capp Reserve, grateful for the dunny paper. You continue up Anderson, past the eclectic mix of factories, past the Islamic Museum (make a mindful note to pay a visit one of these days) and past the MFB depot.

Almost home, you slow your pace up Hill and see a crow swoop on something moving on the footpath. The crow flies up empty beaked when you near the tiny animal leaping across the concrete. You stop. A baby possum, legs and claws splayed, springs towards you. Crow is watching. Baby possum is desperately hurling its small body your way. You notice a beanie atop a fencepost, take it and place it near the hopping creature and it jumps into the woolly cave. You flip a bird at the crow, 'Not on my watch, mate.'

You tell the vet that it's alive. The vet peers into the beanie, 'Too early to be out of the pouch but I reckon we can save it. Do you want your hat back?' You don't.

Before carpark-rage strikes your local market, you fish out the twenty bucks from your shoe and drop it into the open hat of a man sitting crossed-legged against the wall in the sun reading a battered copy of *Catch 22*.

MERRY MERRI

Julia Grieves

Two days after Christmas
bloated clouds split over the city
flooding the creek in relief.
The energy softens,
a public holiday stretches out as a cat on a rug.

Water recedes, the bed hollowed out from the inside
Ephesians 5:26
We are hallowed, taut bellies, Christmas pie.
Eucalypts lining the creek sag towards their own reflection
plastic bags aching a grip on their limbs

An upturned swivel chair breaks the surface of the still creek sky
ducks cloud past.
Stranger bedfellows have folded into this dimension,
not like water off a back
but each day runs its own business

Mother duck is building a nest in the reeds
Weaving usage back into stray parts, humbling an art as life does.
We are flung out at the edges
A woman in a straw hat staggers and steadies on the crumbling bank
collecting up the pieces

.. SHE

James Sadlier

she the sun and i the moon
drifting e'er amongst the stars
cast forever in her light
bound to follow in her wake
to wake & watch her slumber

she the heavens i the earth
moored forlorn to mortal coil
basking in celestial glow
reaching ever towards the skies
in vain to find her grace

she the sea and i the shore
in endless blue my form defined
her waters rise, caress my soul
with brutal might they flay my skin
withdraw and leave me bare

FINDING ASYLUM IN ITALY

Jen Martin

Make-shift camps

It's a cool, crisp, sunny October morning. Nancy, a local Sicilian woman and mobile team worker with Oxfam Italy, is taking us along on her routine visit to Caltanissetta, a medium sized town in central Sicily.

Nancy's small car moves deftly around enormous trucks and small motor bikes. Everyone travels at high speed along poorly maintained roads. Nancy talks enthusiastically, non-stop as she drives. She is particularly fond of Mt Etna, Europe's largest live volcano. Etna overlooks the many villages that dot the mountain and a thin line of smoke wafts from Etna today. Soon, we feel oddly protected by sightings of Etna. Nancy is delighted.

We arrive at a junction near Caltanissetta. A highway bridge towers 20 metres above. Nancy parks and begins unloading backpacks containing socks, shoes, toothpaste, soap, a small towel. There is very little money to provide physical resources, but these backpacks are welcome. Nancy leads us swiftly across the road, up a small hill, through tussocky grass, past small rocky outcrops. Suddenly we are directly under the massive 6 lane highway. Traffic thunders overhead. The camp appears, as if from nowhere (it's not visible from the road). There are six small 2- 4-person tents, then, further on, more groupings of similar tents. An icy wind wraps itself around us.

Nancy visits this camp weekly and she knows the stories of the young men seeking asylum camped here. Spotting a young man, she's not met before, she greets him warmly. *Where are you from?* "Gambia". *How long have you been in this camp?* "A few days." *How long since you left home?* "Five years". *Do you have an appointment to visit the Questura?* (Italian Immigration). "Not yet". He's been turned away or left, a few times.

The question Nancy returns to is *have you sought asylum anywhere?* At first, he is vague, "Not really". Later, he sees her engagement with others, and senses he can trust her. "Yes", I had finger prints taken in Italy when I first arrived, months ago. Then, I got to Austria but I was flown back. Then I tried Germany... I heard there was work there. But I was sent back to Italy... I had to buy my own ticket.'

Nancy explains. *It's important that you understand, other countries won't help you. You must stay in Italy, because this is where you first arrived. You need to endure the waits and delays.* She produces a brightly coloured pamphlet, highlighting rights to information, legal assistance, services and criteria for international protection, forms required. Phone numbers are included (Oxfam, Red Cross, Save the Children, the Anti-trafficking Hot Line, Borderline Sicilia for Legal Help). Nancy is clear and direct. *This* (she points) *is where you are on your migration journey. There is legal and other advice available. Please don't lose hope.* She knows she may be the lifeline to a future these young men have spent years finding. Nancy tells us *I worry about the risks of serious of mental illness. Some fear they will never see their families and community again. They feel immense pressure to find work.* Nancy quickly assesses risk. She gives precise advice about health services.

Two of the young men are cooking corn in a huge pot over a smoky fire. They take it in turns to stir the food and to tend the fire. There is comraderie between them, though they arrived as strangers. We begin to move off as their food is ready. It will be their one meal of the day.

The Streets of Catania

It is early evening, light is fading as we join Nadia, a softly spoken woman with Tunisian and Algerian heritage. She arrived in Italy from Egypt with her two young children, five years ago. Opposite a busy tram stop, Nadia approaches small groups of young men with bundles of “Open Europe: Guide to Rights” pamphlets. As one group moves off, others approach. Now she has moved a few metres away, enabling a confidential conversation with two men who’ve been watching her.

Tonight, Nadia meets with over twenty young men (from Gambia, Mali, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria) who know little of their entitlements. Nadia, fluent in English, French and Italian, engages easily, her smile is genuine and warm. She directs the conversations around rights. Nadia wants feedback too— she wants to know about their experiences of services, so that the information she gives out is accurate. She’s also a kind of cultural mediator, supporting informal networks. Sometimes volunteer advocates emerge from these experiences. Nadia builds connection and engenders hope.

Nadia and Nancy both work closely with Oxfam Advocates, who depend on these mobile workers to identify where the system works well and where it fails. Together, they develop precise case studies and campaign strenuously for more humane policies and fair procedures. It’s fascinating uplifting work.

Hostel in Messina

A 6- room hostel is tucked away in a poor community of Messina in North-Eastern Sicily. Here, the Valdesian** funded team build relationships – with locals and with newcomers. Persistence, creativity and lucky breaks opened these doors in 2017.

We climb the narrow winding staircase, careful not to graze ankles on the sharp pedals of bicycles stacked along the walls. In the meeting room at the top of the stairs, fifteen young African men are seated. Freshly baked cakes appear. The room becomes alive with laughter and expectation.

Soon we are deeply engrossed in conversations. One of our group notices the stylish hairstyles in the room. “Can I cut your hair?” The young man laughs with pride, “I’ve always wanted to be a barber! I’m going to set up my own business”. Then, we’re watching a short video clip of a tall, engaging Sudanese man performing his latest song. He’s a passionate musician. He hopes to earn money from busking. He’s very talented. We hope we’ve been sufficiently encouraging.

We’re told about resistance from the local community towards single, male outsiders. Many locals are unemployed, it’s a traditional community. Staff and volunteers must build trust and confidence in the young men too, addressing trauma from harrowing escapes and long dangerous sea journeys.

A “win-win” comes when a hostel volunteer remarks that the local football team (then, bottom of the league) need players. The skills and enthusiasm of four new residents have been noticed. Naturally athletic, the boys from Senegal and Sudan try out and are immediately accepted. A photo of the current team, proudly displayed on the wall, includes four African team members. The other noticeable thing about the photo is the trophy. This team now wins, most weeks.

Locals began to ask about the conditions which forced their football stars to leave their home countries so many years ago. They heard stories of heartbreak and longing. When news of deaths of African asylum seekers at sea off the Italian coast reached this small Sicilian town, it was said that the older women, in particular, the Nonnas, wept. One woman spoke passionately of the loss and the grief felt, yet again, by “our boys”.

** ‘Open Europe’ is Oxfam Italia’s International Refugee Program, in partnership with ‘Borderline Sicilia’ and The Valdesians ** (a French based Protestant Religious Group.)*

THIS IS HOW IT WAS, LONG TIME AGO

Stephen Perera

It was beautiful, but, it was tiny
Houses were there, but not that many
It was my village, where I was born
Closely knitted, each knew the other well

Nestled was my village, in rolling greens
Snaking waters cascaded, did hide and seek
Cattle of hues, dotted sides of the hills
Mist and fog resided vales, thro' the nights
And greeting the sun rise, left alone the hills

Touched by the morning breeze
Smoke did, over the chimneys, waltz
Diffused light, painted the windows within
Start the day, villagers broke their sleep

No electricity the villagers had then
Nor the tap water was there to bless
Wood fired hearths cooked their meals
Kerosene cookers gave bit of a hand

Never had I failed to give my mum a hand
I collected firewood from inside woods
Wonders in the wood lifted my moods
I carried water from the nearby wells
Enjoying the gossips that went swell
Helping my mum, I felt proud and happy
Yet, time I found, did my studies well

“Walked feet worth thousands”
Had no choice, we walked and walked
Bicycles too helped limit the time
Miles and miles carried we goods
Stretchers helped, carry our sick

Villagers walked and they worked hard
In their gardens and also in their fields
Grew their herbs, vegies and also rice
Bringing the health on to their tables

Radio or telly were not there to back
But, we kids were never out of luck
To the village end, playground stretched
And also over the hills, it went beyond

After the school, I was free to wander
Despite the sun, rain, hail and thunder
Played and played, no slippers nor shoes
Thus was the norm, at the time we passed

We enjoyed chasing cattle, wild on hills
We climbed trees, hid in bushes and shrubs
Bathed waters, spouting from the rocks
Jumped in and swam in creak-made pools
It was fun, explored hills, rocks and caves

We waited for holidays, all the way along
To play and play and play, all day long
Feeding on wild fruits that grew in woods
Crave for a real meal, then walked us home
Or until the tiresome did us the same

We didn't vandalise, nor did we destroy
Rural discipline at home, gone far beyond
Happily we played, always squabbles free
Friendly villagers kept vigil on us kids

Thatched-roof sheltered my School
Cow-dun and clay-mix done its floors
Colour washing hid the mud brick walls
As some houses done in our village

Dad of mine disciplined home, but he was fair
Six o' clock eve curfew, we always did care
Must was the family prayer, I couldn't bare
Not the hunger, but tiresome, I couldn't ware

Exhausting outdoors gifted us enough
We kids were heathy, lean and tough
Play in sun, rain, hail, wind and thunder
Decked my kid days with joy and wonder

RHYMING POEM

Dave Munro

I admire the craft
of poems that rhyme,
building sounds
placing beats just
so. But I wonder,
is that word
there
for its meaning
or because it
fits? Sometimes
poetry is not enough.
Words fail. Hold onto
Their meaning too tight
to span the gap
between us.
A storm cloud laden
with rain destined
for somewhere else,
the air seeded
with words unspoken.

CLASSIFIED

Carl Walsh

For Sale	Clothes horse	Misplaced millions	Lost and Found
<p>Low street fashion underworldly otherworldly underwear</p>	<p>recently broken in, bit of a nag</p>	<p>last seen heading to etc and so on.</p>	<p>text verging on dable due to ended graphic.</p>
	<p>often needs reining in. Bridles at least suggestion of socks. Often saddled with shirts. Jockey- ing for favour with other clothes horses.</p>	<p>Dinosaur eggs fried, sunny-side up, singularly or by the dozen. No rain- checks or time- wasters.</p>	<p>Otters' boutique perfumery. Get the scent you've been looking for!</p>
<p>Terrarium uneearthly terror in glass jar with yellow and red flowers and textured rocks. Do not break glass, except in case of emergency (if not an emergency, it soon will be). Often purchased as a set with Prime Minister (below). Viscous but mindlessly happy, with appreciative snaggle-toothed smile.</p>	<p>Full collection of Phil Collins era Genesis albums. Good money paid to have removed. 'Six saintly shrouded men move across the lawn slowly' sayeth Archangel Gabriel (wondering why on earth his forename was derived from a northern Russian seaport). 'You are no son of mine' insists Phil (correctly in this instance). Contact Mike Rutherford 04 3982 9929.</p>	 <p>Moneytree Get rich quick: earn money overnight</p>	<p>SMALL UPSET PRINTER CONFUSED CASES</p> <p>Homing pigeon, small reward (in cash or kind).</p> <p>Trades and services</p>  <p>Turnip wrangling. Reasonable rates. No root vegetable left unturned.</p>
<p>Prime Minister should also be handled with care and replaced regularly (may be substituted with generic versions). Can be prone to messiah complex (treat as per aphids¹).</p>	 <p>Smock Centre clothes for unshapely alien beings; also suit undead and similar souls.</p>	<p>Deposit \$10,000 in the below account Account name: T. King BSB: 123-049 A/N: 1909838080 Bank of Ulan Batur</p> <p>And watch your money grow.²</p> <p><small>Fine print: this deal is very dodgy but lucrative participate at own risk. No refunds available. All profits go to Mr T. King and no further correspondence will be entered into.</small></p>	<p>Notices (creditors)</p> <p>T. King bankrupt and gone to ground owing 25 pounds, 9 ounces and 47 heirloom carrots.</p>

¹ With Lacewings and Ladybirds

² Did I say grow? I meant 'go'...

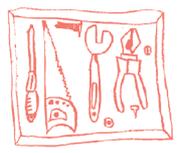
Artist: Isabelle Walsh

Jobs
Egyptologist
 wanted. Contact:



Note: beware pyramid schemes (to say nothing of sphinxes).

Tailor
 Tailormade career, with future job opportunities all sewn up. Apply to *Tailored just for you* before others cotton on. Follow thread below for more: sew.co.au/blogspot



Off the wall building supplies seeks sharp staff, to cut through with new clients and wrench business from competitors. Hammer into our shop and nail a job today.

High-steaks butchery business seeks new **butcher**. Girdle your loins, get off your rump and apply. This is a real opportunity (no snags). Apply in person at *Most Pleased To Meat You Butchery*, 27 Low St, Northcote.

Apprentice baker
 required for new artisan bakery: great opportunity to make plenty of dough. No loafers or timewasters should apply.

Short Cutz Hair is seeking experienced **hairstylist**, a cut above the rest, after previous hairstylist curled-up and dyed. Perm position. No fringe dwellers.

Fishmongery
 Whatever your John Dory find your plaice with us. Contact IM Flathead on (03) 1904 9209. (no red herrings).



Budding flower arranger wanted for new floristry business. Contact Rose Petal via email: rosepetal@flower.co Flowery language should be kept to a minimum.



Motor mechanic: take a good steer from us. Wheely great conditions, plenty of brakes and latest gear. Rev yourself up to contact George Millington Holden at STAR motors on 1406 798 890 for more details.

Personals

Existential nihilist, feels insignificant, looking for the delusion of love with likeminded person.

Invisible troll seeks invisible troll (conscious may already have met) into PR; WST, likes riding TRB. Will see through to the end.

Medium looking for spirited other for regular board games.

Poet seeks other / to lighten long winter nights / as even owl sleeps.

redacted text
 universe
 storylines
 numbering
 novels
 loss.

Death notices



Undead, Brian will be buried again this week at the usual time and place. He will of course rise to the occasion, and make the best of what otherwise would be a very grave situation.

King, T is very disappointed to announce he has shuffled off this mortal coil and will not be able to pay any of his creditors or respond to any agitated enquiries. Rumours he has retreated to a luxurious residence in Low St are unfounded and probably libellous.

PR = prog rock WST = whistling silly tunes TRB = train replacement bus

A SLICE OF MY SOUL

Judy Doubas

I slather and sweat
probing the junkyard of my mind

I fumble
dabble and daub

The purpose eludes me

A myriad of musings entrap me in their volatile play
as I wait for the mystic to descend

A reverie of past accomplishments
when portentous excavations amused

magnify themselves in my brain

My ego tilts to the light
My dendrites crackle and squirm

Deluded, my excitement propels me forward
Uplifted, I float in ever hopeful dreams,

I poise my pen for the assault
I submerge the memories of rejection

I exhibit a slice of my soul.

FEAR OF THE BLANK PAGE

Dave Munro

Fear of the blank page,
fear of choice, decisions,
pain, death - all so passé
such dull meat-sack cliché
concerns. My amygdala
is welcome to them.

My ancestors inscribed
Dread God on their crest.

I wanted to know which
one and why. Now I
wonder at the point
of even having a badge.
You don't get to choose
your fears, just name them.

So I stare in the mirror
and wait for a response
from the being staring
back at me, wondering
just who will blink first.

YIN/YANG

Anna Foster

One brush of the thumb brought me to Australia. A swipe at an invisible internet wheel of fortune.
An algorithm plucked a stranger from the London ether and wired it to my three-inch phone screen.
The coin spun in the air: head/tails, yes/no, left/right. I squinted and thought maybe, yes.

From pixels to a person I know instinctively like the grooves on my particular house key.

A man who's golden inside like a perfect fried egg.

It's a kind of luck in love that makes you think the universe makes sense. For just a split second, you can't be a fool in love too.

The parts of our bodies that fit together are his forehead where my ribs meet, our legs locked together in a corkscrew helix, our necks outstretched and entwined like giraffes.

We swim together in the ocean when it looks like fractured glass. We climb on the roof together and take out the bins together, too.

We interrupt this bliss to ask you what happens when your person takes you away from your other people in that other English life you were born into. Like a philosophical problem; do you choose one person or many?

Which morning bird call do you prefer? Which brands in the supermarket feel more familiar?

There's yin and yang in a lucky life turned upside down.

Two families, two friendship circles, two lives, two sides
of the world. Can't help but think why we can only
truly pick

One.

Those moments of

Today, 2:43 AM

Sorry I missed your call again, let's try
and make something work this week??

And

Yesterday, 7:04 PM

Hope the funeral goes ok. Will be
thinking of you, wish I was there.

They feel like a babushka doll of guilt
inside pain inside comfort inside a decision
about where I need to be.

I rest my cheek on his back. From here his shoulder
blades looked like freckled sand dunes, rolling into the
distance. Me and him, creating a detached, happy world to
inhabit, far from home.

TESTAMENT

Amanda Collins

When you hear that I am dying
Don't rush about

Sit a minute and feel me in your core
Know that I will still be there before, during and after

When you hear that I am dying
Know that I am on a sacred schedule
Just as you are, and always have been

When you see that I am dying
Don't hold my hand too long

Sing to me
Play me beautiful sounds
Tell me the old stories
Let me hold my cat
Lie beside me and lean in
And let me be, too.

When I am dead, don't clean my fingernails
Wipe my face - that's nice -
Wash my quiet heart with your tears
But leave my fingernails to show the next life where my
joy was
in the mess of creating
the muck of the Earth

Show me that the time for these trivial gestures of
civilisation is over.

When I am dead
Find a quiet place you can gather
Whoever wants to come

Please sing
Please dance, a little
Smile that I was
And give what's left to the Earth
So I can help feed the souls to come.

TOTEM SONG

Andrew Brion

Above, far off, to left and right, the unoiled metallic
Chirps of birds; like fast-clipping shears in quietened foliage;
Their gentle bells like trams and their blips and smartphone trills.

I'm yet to see one in the wild, but instinct knows my
Animal totem. Large grey ships of knowledge on the infinite plain.
Dust-mudded vegetarians – yet I know I fear

Exactly how my fretful spirit would respond confronted
By such huge reality. Heavy steps and gentle swaying trunks.
But today a temporary totem sneaks in beneath my guard ...

Caffeinated screeching cries stop early morning reverie
From trees that seem almost inside my bed, inside my head.
Buoyant life cascades through sleepy senses – 6am!

Then the gift: Sassoon's 'everyone was a bird', and
'The singing will never be done'. I thank my friend
Who passed it on, who was also passed it by her grandmother.

And the ride on chill, damp day, hearing life do what all life does
In Spring: and sensing the black-white blur beside me, joyful,
Riding a morning breeze. How can the heart not lift, not swell?

Now my wild imagination roves above, far off,
To left and right across the vast savannah:
A single elephant stands sentinel to her new and ancient world.
From the sky a feathered lightness lands on grey-gnarled back –
And sings the song of life.

MEN OF WOOD

Dianne Millett

I see him
see him everywhere
in the shavings' window
in books about Old Tools
holding braces
planes
chisels, saws
and other edges to the rule:
'Measure twice, cut once'
is golden.

The inventions of Leonardo
made of wood
string and sails
following preliminary drawings
(codex logged)
underpinned
(at least I think so)
Duchamp's:

*The Bride Stripped Bare
by her Bachelors*

Even

He called me Rose.
But I am Diana
half in
half out of water.
Three men in a tub go:
Rub-a-dub-dub.
And I too, with my cherry wood
and Shakespeare reel
go fishing.

BACK HOME

Jake Kite

Through excess
and regret,
my perception left me
until
again
it could be found:
swaying
and quiet,
but no longer aching
among
the reeds
of the Guadalquivir.

ONLY CROCODILES CRY

Sarah Thompson

My mother and I were sorting out music for Christmas mass: an annual endeavour which unfailingly exposed her immense musical talent and also brought her close to a nervous meltdown. Her father had died not long before, but we'd been expecting it, so it was business as usual. In the hallway I turned to find her standing motionless, clutching an armful of overstuffed folders. Her shoulders dropped. She was trying to smile but her cheeks sagged and eyes glistened. One by one, her features fell apart, betraying her. She could almost have been having a stroke.

I stood in shock, watching my mother struggle and fail to rearrange her face.

Her voice rose and quavered. "It's just very strange to finally be an orphan."

Out of shock and instinct, I moved forward and hugged her, though I couldn't remember the last time I'd done this or felt compelled to. Physical affection had never been part of my family's lexicon.

"I know he was old and funny," she sobbed into my shoulder, "but he wasn't always like that." She thought I wouldn't understand her grief because in his final years my Grandpa would fall asleep over lunch and dribble red wine saliva onto his plate. She felt the need to explain her tears, excuse them. She supposed she'd grown up in a time when you just pulled in your belt and got on with things. She told me that after she found me one morning on the bathroom floor, amongst the remains of a tissue box I'd spent all night shredding.

We stood like that in the hall for a minute or two, and then she sniffed and wiped her face and turned away and we carried on organising the hundreds of sheets of choir music waiting to go into folders.

I don't think it ever came up again—her father's death, her loss, her grief. The sudden fact of being an orphan. I don't think she cried at the funeral. She hadn't cried at her mother's, and years later when time came to bury one brother, and then another, she didn't cry then. After my Grandpa's funeral, the family came over for tea and cake and I talked with my cousins about other things, as if it had been Christmas instead. Only once did my elder cousin, whose umbilical cord wrapped around his neck in the womb and left him with a full range of emotional, but limited cognitive, capacities, say: "You know, I think I was more of a Nanna person." He's the only honest person I know.

I've never seen my father cry. Not once. He didn't even wear dark glasses to bury his parents, as I saw on other men in my family – as if shedding tears over loved ones were a shameful crudeness that, if it can't be avoided, should at the least be hidden from decent folk.

As a child I asked him once about the black-and-white portrait on his desk.

“That's your Auntie Jenny,” he said.

I frowned. “Who's that?”

Auntie Jenny was my father's sister. She died as a teenager, washed off a crest of rocks as she was walking with friends by the sea.

“Did Grandma and Grandad cry?” I asked, too young to know how to ask a sensible question, or at least to not ask a stupid one.

“I don't think they cried,” he said, “but they were very sad.”

Only years later did I assess this statement. It was a stupid question, because the answer was so obvious. Of course they had cried. Cried for days and weeks on end – years, you would think. Cried so hard their throats and eyes and bodies hurt from the effort of it. But the answer I got wasn't the obvious one. They didn't cry. Or not in front of their son.

After a series of major strokes my Grandad lived in a motorised wheelchair and made garbled sounds in his throat and sometimes thrashed around in distress at things no one else could see or imagine. The first few times Dad visited the nursing home, I went along. After that, I made up excuses. I wasn't feeling well, I had homework to do, had to take the cat for a walk or jump off a cliff or something. The memory of my Grandad smells like disinfectant now.

After Grandad moved to the nursing home, my Grandma would sometimes wake in the night and go looking for him. Alzheimer's ate away at her, providing as reimbursement only occasional moments of comic relief, like when she threatened a policeman with her walking stick as he attempted to return her safely home.

When they each died in their turn, there was a sort of silent communal sigh of relief: the anguish was over. Few tears were shed, maybe because everybody was trying to work out if the dearly departed was the same person as the one who'd been departing, bit by bit, for years now, and no longer seemed anywhere to be found inside the body they used to inhabit. Grief is best swallowed in bite-sized pieces.

Maybe there are consequences to pulling your belt too tight. Eventually, you squeeze something out and you can't always get it back. I'm not saying there's a connection – that my grandparents brains betrayed them, went off-track in rebellion against a lifetime of careful control – but I'm saying that if you never shower, you give room for infection to grow and fester. Or maybe that's just what I told myself when I was shredding tissues on the bathroom floor, or decorating my arms with the words of suicidal songsters, or generally failing to keep a lid on things: that I was cleansing my mind. And as a result of this early purging I would never forget how to draw a clock face and no one at my funeral would have to wonder if the person they were burying was the same one they were missing. My tears would mingle with the salt earth and I'd be deceased but intact.

Or maybe we are all just unwilling victims of the biology of our brains, and our brains, like the rest of the universe, are victims of forces we can't predict and therefore call chance. I wonder if my grandparents felt intact, inside their damaged minds. Maybe they did. Maybe you have to feel broken to know that you are, in fact, whole.

Of course they had cried. Cried for days and weeks on end – years, you would think.

DIPLOMACY

Rosemary Dickson

Evie ran around the corner before she could bring herself to look back. Panting, she flicked her eyes over her shoulder. There was no-one behind her. She pulled her scarf away from her mouth so she could get full breaths in. But she knew, just knew that horrible Harriet had seen her nick the iPod. There were few people out and about. It was dinner time, she should be home, not sweating on the cold street behind the shops.

Evie started walking at a normal pace. Home to her normal family. Ha! Her parents would be on their phones, drinks in hand waiting for her to come home and eat the overcooked dinner which she'd be blamed for spoiling. Well, now she'd have her own technology to disappear into. She could listen to music on the iPod, get to know the latest songs in this boring country. At least they spoke English. It was never worth learning a new language when they'd just move on to some other Embassy every few years.

The one good thing was that Grandma and Grandpa lived here. She wished her parents would split, then they could spend all their time concentrating on their precious careers. She figured that was the only way she'd get to live with Grandma and Grandpa on the farm. Her parents said they wanted her to be more cultured and better educated than she would be in the country with her grandparents. But she knew she'd be free there, away from the posh teachers and new kids every few years who never let her join in. The whole farm would be hers. She'd never move again!

A dog barked, a car skidded on the wet street and Evie turned into the not yet familiar driveway of her current home. She'd tell her parents her new friend at school lent her the iPod. Her face cracked into a grin, she'd say it was a girl called Harriet.

Oh no! How could she have forgotten Harriet? Evie's stomach dropped. It would be a nightmare if her parents found out she'd nicked the iPod. They'd put on their work voices – *Not very sensible or thoughtful behaviour Evie; how can we negotiate this so we achieve the best outcome?* Which of course would be the outcome they wanted – the permanent prison of boarding school! She stood on the verandah feeling around in her bag for her key, raking through her brain for some way to stop Harriet telling on her.

The lunch bell rang. Evie saw Harriet and her mates hanging around outside the classrooms. For a moment she wished she was part of that crowd, warm and surrounded by friends. Instead she snuck over to the far corner of the playground.

She was lurking behind a tree, pulling the scratchy jumper down over her freezing fingers, jumping up and down to stay warm, trying to keep a low profile, when Harriet's red hair, bright against the grey sky, appeared around the tree. She leaned one shoulder against a low branch. 'You can't avoid me, you know.'

'I'm not.' Evie's stomach clenched. She stopped jumping, her eyes glued on Harriet.

‘I saw you yesterday. Nicking the iPod. It was a good one too.’ Harriet grinned, her hair flying around her face in a gust of wind. She pushed it behind her ears.

‘I did not!’ Evie folded her arms.

‘I saw you! And if I tell the principal, they’ll search your bag.’ She wiggled her red head. ‘And then what’ll they find?’

‘Nothing!’ Evie felt like crying. Of course the iPod was in her schoolbag. She said the only thing she’d been able to think of last night, ‘Maybe we could be friends? I could show you some cool stuff I’ve got from the US?’

‘Maybe...’ Harriet blinked her thick red eyelashes. ‘And maybe you could give me the iPod. To look after it.’

‘No! I told you I didn’t take it.’ Evie swallowed. ‘If we’re going to be friends we have to believe each other.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Harriet took a step back, narrowed her eyes. ‘In that case I’m the Loch Ness Monster. And the principal will be searching your bag.’ She twirled around, her hair fanning around her shoulders, and started walking back to the classrooms.

Evie felt like a volcano had gone off inside her. She ran up behind Harriet, grabbed a handful of the bright hair and yanked it as hard as she could. ‘You stupid cow! You’re not going to tell anyone!’ She was boiling over. She had to stop Harriet. Her freedom depended on it.

Harriet screamed, and turned back, hitting Evie on the arm until she let go.

As her hands were forced to release the hair Evie lunged forward, pushing the other girl to the ground. They rolled around under the tree, clothes ripping, bodies getting bruised and scratched until a teacher with a shrill voice and strong arms shouted and pulled them apart.

Evie didn’t mind being cold, getting up in the dark and milking the cows before school. She liked the routine.

She’d run away after the fight, arriving at her grandparents’ farm late that night, exhausted from hitch-hiking. When she’d announced that she wasn’t ever leaving, Grandpa had hugged her and said she could stay as long as she liked. Grandma had rung her parents, then told Evie they’d said she could stay, but if she caused any more trouble they’d send her straight to boarding school.

Outside the barn Evie found Harry, the calf she’d named, waiting for her to feed him. She fondled his ears, ‘Grandma says you’ve served your purpose here, and you have to go and feed a family. But no-one’s going to eat me Harry. No-one’s going to catch me out again. I’ve watched Mum and Dad for years. You negotiate as much as you can.’ A line of orange was glowing along the horizon and a warm feeling inside made her smile. ‘But sometimes you just have to take a risk.’

PARADISE LOST. PARADISE FOUND.

Lorena White

Disoriented.
Which me am I? I've deceived so much I've forgotten.
I am alone. All alone.
You define me. You label me. I have no agency.
Time has passed. In a blackened mood I remember
the trouble. There was no joy. No love, no kindness in
these memories.
Where am I? In my vacant eyes you see my mind. I'm
somewhere else. Always somewhere else.
In hell.

You. A moment shared. Your gentle smile.
You listen with interest to my thoughts, my ideas,
my memories.
You share and provoke the best from me with me.
This is where I love to be, swirling along new ideas
with you.
This flow, this heavenly light linking my mind and
my soul.
Creating memories of love illuminating the dark.
I'm in a heavenly dance.

Will he like me?
She looks so gorgeous on Facebook. She's always
going to parties and having a great time.
Everyone loves her. She's such a bitch.
Why don't they like me?
What did I say? What did I do? Why is everyone so
mean to me?
Im so stupid. I'm so stressed.
Life's hell.

I love this profession. It's interesting, it's challenging.
I've made progress with this difficult task.
I've helped someone learn, I've made someone well.
I've made a difference.
People respect me and consult with me. I know
my stuff.
I've made an impact.
This is my heaven.

I'm worried.
What if? The plane might fall. I can't breathe.
My children experience sorrow?
My chest tightens. My stomach aches. Sharp
stabbing pains.
What if my appendix bursts? My heart breaks?

What if? You left me.
This is my hell.

I feel great.
I'm working hard. My body is strong.
My body is tired but I'm satisfied.
I've finished the job and it looks neat and tidy.
I've done this for you my child.
I've done my duty with love.
This is my heaven, to do for you.

The pain continues to growl.
In the background of my mind it interferes with
my memory.
It grinds away until I screech at all around me.
They irritate me no end. And still the pain digs in
its claws.
They don't understand the rheumatic ache making
my hands claw.
The sciatic sear down my left leg. The knotted
tightening in my neck.
The gripping pain in my crumbling spine.
This is my hell.

My family is growing.
Such fine young people.
They've studied hard, got good degrees, well paid jobs.
They love and are loved.
To feed them and serve them and love them and see
they are happy.
Happy memories.
This is my joy. This is my home.
This is my paradise.

LUNCH WITH MOTHER

Henry Briffa

on Mondays I lunch at mother's oak table
in Canterbury beneath the portrait by Giuseppe Cali

her mother's father Alfredo Antignolo exported limestone
from Malta and had acquired the Windsor Hotel in Cairo

fifty-one guest rooms across seven stories in fashionable Alfi Bey
to lodge and serve Officers of the British Empire

she shows me a recent photo of the front door
at \$36 per night it now caters for Egyptologists

archaeologists historians and regulars
during the recent unrest Peter Narain an Indian businessman

and patron for thirty years was the only paying guest
original paint colours light fittings dial-phones and switchboard

at reception antique travel posters and gazelle antlers
line the foyer walls English high tea served on request

ownership was ceased with Nasser's nationalisation
there was a small window of compensation

in which mother hoped her family might re-claim their jewel
but when her father at eighty had followed her to Australia

he had left the property title with cousin Leonard
who placed it in his attic where it was eaten by rats

today as always she concludes grace with
"God provide for the hungry and the poor"

THE MOTH

Alexandra Pearton

Moths evolved with darkness to avoid being eaten, she's read. To float on the softer breeze, the stillness of the night.

She comes from the country. Wide skies and land moving with wild life. Now, in the city she feels sad. Mostly it's a dull melancholy. A simple lack of joy, or wonder. Other times it's a heaving grief. Or a sorrow that partners with something else, and the two feelings press down and make her breath shallow and her mind race with urgent worries.

She's read about an insect apocalypse. She thinks about the windscreens and car bumpers from her childhood, splashed with wings, guts of all colours. Notes that no, this doesn't happen anymore.

A moth dances absurdly around the lamp in the small apartment. She's read that moths navigate by light. That's fine when there's only the bright moon and the horizon. But when there's a street lamp or a porch light, the poor things don't stand a chance. The confusion, she thinks, the utter chaos in their short lives. Flying, falling downward into lights too close to direct their route. Moths don't belong in the city either.

Surrounded each day by concrete, bitumen and traffic signs, she is perpetually devastated about forests being hauled away on logging trucks. She grieves the deaths of mighty rivers, tiny orchids, butterflies. The end of small, fury, feathered and scaled creatures. The end of larger creatures. She fears the collapsing of entire ecosystems. It seems catastrophic to her.

The astonishing diversity of tiny and huge life that has evolved in the complex web of the wild fills her with wonder. She's in awe of the minute, the grand. The myriad of the unique and exquisite. How perfectly every piece fits together. How at once delicate and vast is this life. She wonders what kind of a place the earth will be without this beauty?

Faces downcast, eyes on screens. She listens to Off Track, a podcast that has saved her over one, two, three years, on her colourless commute. Thanks, Ann Jones. Ann's cheery voice, the comforting sound of birdcalls into the ear buds, while swaying on the train.

This one is about arachnids. Even though she's familiar, she's never been fond of spiders. On the program though, a scientist, so enthused, causes a rethink. The expert feeds pet spiders cricket legs dipped in lemonade. Learned the trick to save a sickly specimen. It sucked up the sweet liquid and went happily on its way. This scientist is infatuated. Spiders and their sweet faces, clever tricks.

Finally into the cool night air with the other commuters. Footsteps sound on the pavement. They peel off the path one by one, homecoming. She feels some comfort as the night quietens. The thin slice of crescent moon above the darkening horizon humbles, makes her breath a little deeper.

Moths evolved with darkness to avoid being eaten, she's read. To float on the softer breeze, the stillness of the night. In the stairwell of her apartment block the light bulb glows. Moths circle. Frayed wings cling lifelessly to spider webs in corners. A single moth grips the screen door as it opens. It doesn't fly away. She studies the intricate pattern of its wings. Her hand closes over it.

Inside, she has no lemonade. She places the creature in a jar while she spoons sugar into water. It dissolves. She watches the moth under the glass. Still. She offers a few drops of the sweet liquid. A little uncertain, the spring of the moth's proboscis releases into the water. The creature begins to drink. For a long time, it drinks and she watches.

On the balcony, the light switched off, she opens the jar to the night. The moth crawls to the lip. Its wings buzz for a moment and it tastes the air. Then, it flits into the darkness.

SPRING HAS COME AGAIN

Kaye Roberts-Palmer

The blackbird has a bright keen eye that follows my back
up and down it hops in time to my arduous bending
as I sprinkle seeds so tiny I hardly feel their loss.

Joyful nasturtiums tumble around my apple trees unexpected
but always welcome, their cheerful petals
a distraction for both human and pest alike.

The temperamental weather has transformed a spiders web
into a quivering diadem and lofty lavender spikes
into drooping purple melancholy.

A snail languidly twists with ballerina elegance
its stalk eyes surveying the leafy jungle below mapping
a topography of green lusciousness.

The scent of earth and mint and freesias mix while
the fig tree and its pointed branches finally
reveal each young leaf, like radiant green candles.

I stand back and admire my work which is not work at all
more a slow dance with nature
for spring has come again.

APRIL

Henry Briffa

the citrus leaves stay curled
their fragrance a distant memory

d' you think they're diseased? you ask
no I say we just haven't seen rain

as we stroll bracken beneath our feet
snaps like kindling

d' you think it's been sprayed? you ask
no I say we just haven't seen rain

a god-awful dry
with a sea unseasonably warm

for years we've swum every day
feeling young again

the crepe-myrtle blushes red
like the boyish face you first met

our hair now reflected
in a sky predominantly grey

we've had the best of summers
now rain

it falls feebly like dew
hardly wetting the soil

our eyes
become moist

a tear finds its way
through my stubble

AOTEAROA

David Spitzkowsky

Mist. Hawk. Orchid. Mud.

Neon mushroom nestled in lichen.

The walk is an hour-and-a-half. We take four.

At any photo spot, always, someone arrives on cue

—there's no reflection, there's no point to this walk, no peaks, no glacier.

Lake full of ripples.

Sky full of clouds.

—so how long have you two been waiting?

Stomps off down the track.

We watch the day. Hang so much shit on them it isn't funny.

Even here we are better with other people to laugh at.

We sit.

And talk.

—all the things that have been denied us, our endless disappointments

but not life not love not the blue, blue mushroom, mountains and a glacier somewhere beyond.

Red pine brown pine white pine black pine

age and creeper will bring them all down

with its tear drop leaf

—there

almost invisible

spider she sits.

SECOND AND THIRD DATES

Amanda Surrey

2 the slow release of hours all this waiting last weekend thinking about this weekend this weekend the one before the feel of your body its weight my orbit a curved path around it you tasted metallic unexplored mouth slow to open face up close to mine for the first time you looked like your photo at the front door we kissed breasts pressed hard together testing the fit you walked out of the house and through the front gate laughing

3 around three o'clock the storm hit hail like bullets against the roof a text to tell me you were recording the downpour for the news that night when you arrived hours later we drank more than we ate pushing the food around our plates till you said 'lets lie down together and talk-that's my thing' and walked down the hall as I trailed in your wake the next morning cleaning up two wine glasses tipped over nudged under the bed

FUTURE

Lucy Roleff

Back at the house
we warm
thighs to the radiator
sip the black coffee he made
to test
spoon honey, add milk

he stirs 'til the colour
matches the backs
of his hands
throws me a wink
over the mug rim

by two the kitchen is sun filled
a chair is shifted and dust blooms,
animates two light beams -
two cylinders of static

there is music, a hand
curved to touch a cheek
tomato skins sloughed
from hot flesh
spring garlic plucked
and rinsed of earth, as
wooly socks sliding on boards
collect dog hair

valley air gets colder, earlier
and we let the dinner simmer
get into bed for the warmth of it
as the pup scoots along leather
and makes a scene of nestling

with mouth and palms
he works at the edges
of my cautiousness

of course I get pregnant
and later, incredulous
will blame him
over breakfast, perhaps
or from behind
the bathroom door

GENTLEMEN PREFER TROPICAL FRUIT

Vanessa Recana

I know I am loved
Because he kisses my collarbones
And calls me
Caramel sweet or
Hazelnut spread or
Walnut, roasted chestnut
He kisses my kneecaps too
And I bend like liquorice
I am all spice
An exotic meal.
When we are together
I burn.
I am molten marmalade
I have never felt more delectable.
His teeth bite off my umber limbs-
I have only ever needed this.

He says when I get shy,
I am a sunset dipping below sand dunes.
With this, I know I am worshipped
He calls me his Brown Monroe.

TEMAZEPAM GLAZED DONUT

Vasilka Pateras

black coffee saccharine laced
quells the hungry ghosts-

one day you wake in a gallop
jaw locked body trapped
and run out the door
away from those you loved
a partner lost
children wanting

you turn to Saint-Saens,
to calm the tremors within
escape into novels of olive groves
protection from the jagged edges of the mind

a slip
losing grip

parked in a no standing zone
scrambled onto a tow truck
desperate to be taken away

Franco, a knight in a shiny Ford drives you to the depot
'he bee oright signora don cry...non piangere piu'

you collect the car
and yourself
eventually

LOVE LOVE.

Andi Snelling

I love love. It's the rainbow cuddle kissing well that
I toss my sparkle penny heart into. Happily I will
fall, spill and sink into it until it can do nothing
but wall me into its wonder.

“What happened to her?” they'll say.
“She loved so much she fell head over heels and
she's at the bottom. The rock bottom.”
“Oh well.”

JUST LIKE YOU

Megan Howden

A beginning
An ending
Body answering
Shifting, changing, preparing
Ignorant host

Cells join
Rearrange
Split, multiply
A raspberry
Ready to be someone

Flowers, excitement
Future
Vomiting, lethargy
Anger, easy tears
Wave upon wave

Secret
Beautiful secret
Discrete touches
A place
A bump

Caffeine?
The argument?
No sleep?
Anxiety?
Which moment?

Discomfort
Shooting pain
Contracting muscles
Spasms
Signs unnoticed

Self indulgence
Naïve security
Space vacated
Grief invisible
Just like you

TO MAKE IT THROUGH ANOTHER NIGHT...

Alan Murphy

How do I stop my mind from racing?
It's running express with no stopping at any station,
Smoke and drink just clear the path,
I need it to stop, it's just going way too fast,
The drums distract as I try to confuse my limbs,
but automatically my brain ups the ante and
I seem to playing impossible things,
The paint to paper slows for a moment,
A little walk to the supermarket just explodes my brain with overload,
The possibilities for dinner, the possibilities for lunch,
My head hurts and I've had enough,
After three days in bed with a migraine, the pain has eased up but I feel like I'm going
insane,
Making up for the loss of time,
This manicness will knock me back over the line,
And it feels like I'm not the one in the driver's seat,
And it feels like my head has my body beat,
For it can't keep up with the speeding electricity of the mind,
At this point, I just hope I make it through the night,
For there is no rational in this irrationality,
All I want is to relax and get some peace,
I can't keep up with these thoughts, I just can't keep up,
My head is spinning and I need it to stop,
I'm not on drugs, not even one cup of coffee,
I'm lost in this tornado, internally,
And now my stomach churns as the world seems to slow down,
Am I seeing straight?
Is it all just too late?
Did I miss the boat? Did I miss the buss?
It's over stimulation and there is no lust,
Like a fly with no direction,
My heart feels like it's going to burst, pumping way too fast, pumping off course,
I stare at the sky and ask the moon to comfort me tonight.



**Darebin
Arts**