

POETRY / FICTION / PROSE



n-SCRIBE
2020

n-SCRIBE is Darebin's annual literary magazine.

This year's edition, **n-SCRIBE 2020** features a collection of new works from writers with a connection to the City of Darebin.

Information and all past editions can be found on our website:

darebinarts.com.au

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WORKING GROUP

The works in this publication were selected by the n-SCRIBE Working Group supported by Managing Editor, Bridget Caldwell-Bright using a blind submission process. This means the Working Group received no names or personal information about the writer and evaluated each work on its merits alone. The n-SCRIBE Working Group is made up of local writers, editors and publishers. This is who they are:

Bridget Caldwell-Bright is a Jingili and Mudburra writer and freelance editor based in Melbourne. She has worked on projects with *Scribe*, *Allen & Unwin*, *Hardie Grant*, *Mascara Literary Review* and *The Lifted Brow*. She was also previously co-editor for *Archer Magazines* First Nations Edition and managing editor for *Blak Brow*, a Black Women's Collective edition of *The Lifted Brow*.

Isabella Battersby is a local writer, studying Creative Writing at RMIT. This year she won the Darebin Mayor's Writing Award. When she isn't reading grunge lit, or jotting down her inane thoughts, you can find her at either the pool or the pub.

Tina Cartwright studied Linguistics and Language Teaching. Her writing has appeared in *Overland*, *Broadsheet* and *Takahē*, among others. Her monologue 'Masha's Fire' will be performed by Hysterica Theatre Company in 2021.

Rosemary Dickson has an Arts Degree majoring in Linguistics, and an ongoing fascination with the Italian language. Currently, she's re-re-re-revising her novel. Last year's n-SCRIBE included one of her stories.

Cameron Knight is an artist, with a BA English and Creative Arts and a Graphic Design Diploma, RMIT. He dabbles in the spoken word circuit. Published in a number of poetry zines and journals. Currently working on an anthology of poems and short stories.

Ellen Muller is a Preston-based freelance writer. She keeps a satirical literature blog called, *Poe's very attractive cousin*, and has been volunteering at zine space Sticky Institute for five years.

Anna Viola's belief in the power of the right set of words has driven her career and interests. Anna has a background in amateur theatre, an Associate Diploma, Professional Writing and Editing and a Bachelor of Arts. Anna's second year on the Working Group has been a privilege and a joy, sharing in the creativity and stories from people in our neighbourhood.

Lauren Webster is studying Writing and Publishing at RMIT. She worked on n-SCRIBE 14 in 2019 and is back for her second year with the magazine. She has a particular fondness for plants and poetry.

Rowan Williams is a writer/photographer with an interest in self-publishing and artists' books. He is currently studying Professional Writing & Editing at RMIT.

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A GENTLE DEMAND

by Opal Winter Zuzek

ECHIDNA ROUTE

by Benjamin Rendell Barnett

bundled waddle of needles sniffing
sugarants up from under twigs
he takes an echidna's pause in bush apartments
noticing karrikin and plum aromatics
tracking about felled gum ash or pepperberry
he tunes about for th brown tonic sap
sipping leaky tap roots

snuffing hunger means clinching nutrients like insects
and eucalypts' incense from greyyellow shrubs
and means weighted paw rambling w/o strict sense
but w/ incomparable spirit bless timidity
and th forager's lot in spats of dust
and bush ginger's flat-leaf and thin petiole
he's filling up on olfactory pleasance

while downcast beady eyes press
out and against th static smells
of moss and a yellowgrey fern
he's isolated focus in his snout
he's blessed to tiny spiky lumbering
over an o.-horizon

Ben Rendell Barnett is a student of Philosophy, Botany & Ecology at La Trobe University writing neat little poems to help him stay in love with the world.

You may not feel this right now
You may not want to hear it—

*How dare you tell me what to think,
How to think
Or how to heal!
My pain is MINE, and MINE ALONE
DON'T TELL ME HOW TO DEAL!*

Truly, Trust me.
I know.
I know because I feel,
I share because I care for you and know your
pain is real.
This fear pervades everything,
It is soaked into the seams of every
Second

Sound

Silence

Into every thought I think.

It is a whispered command
Anxiety

A Gentle Demand
That cannot be disobeyed
Not today—
But it is not Today.

What you feel is Yesterday,
A day
Where you are not.
A simple slice of yesterday,
Slinking Silent Soft
A puzzle solved so long ago,
You thought it was forgot.

It slips in step behind
As you open up the door.
Walks quietly just beside you,
Pressed close against the floor.
A normal day, a normal chore,

A footstep!

No—
You've simply closed the door.
A sudden move—
But only air.
Now Seething Rage — With nothing there.

A familiar feeling starts to swell,
You're *sure* you know it very well—

*But no, you don't- you never could.
Why don't you ever learn?
You never saw it coming then,
Now it's suddenly your turn?
You can't possibly understand
No matter how you yearn-
So don't you dare presume to be
good enough to learn.*

You file your new flag under red,
you silence the alarm.

You know it's here.

It grows-

As it grew,
On a day.

Not today,
Yesterday.

A day
Which cannot,
MUST NOT be forgotten.

Because
YESTERDAY HAPPENED.
Yesterday is ever present for us, the broken-
Yes, today is no exception.

*So don't forget to
breathe.*

If yesterday were a *meteor*,
today would be its' memory—

Held in orbit
By the gravity
of the act.

Breathe.

Present only in echoes,
Imprints,
Pain and tremors,
The crater in your body
and soul

Breathe

Growing ever
Closer

Bigger

Hotter

Nearer

Breathe

You know it's coming,
So brace your heart, your body, your mind
for impact and watch—

As a **Force**

Breathe

A *shockwave*

Breathe

Rolls

Through

YOU

BREATHE

Rippling
Powerful
Disorienting

Displacing

Breathe

dissipating

Passing

on

BYE.

And know

As yesterday,
As today,
And as will be tomorrow-

Keep breathing.

It has happened.

And You
Have already
SURVIVED.

Opal Winter Zuzek is an agender illustrator and
writer who wants to pat all the dogs in the world.

THE ROAD

by Ken Gardner

First there was the road, and then the estate. With the estate came the children and with the children came the school. From my classroom window I watched the road get fatter and fuller. We were warned not to cross it, because even though people were always trying to make it safer it was unpredictable. It might let you alone a dozen times or more but eventually it would take you. It took four of my friends, well at least four.

It soon needed more lanes and a row of war service houses were razed to feed it. Somewhere in the demolition they found an old cheese cellar and the estate was on the news. They took cameras below and all the old implements were still there to make and store cheese from over a hundred years ago. But the road had no time for history and the little hole was filled in and tarred over.

The road roars during the day but at night it hums. I know it likes this time best by the way it sings. As I listen from bed, the song is sometimes disturbed by someone foolish enough to take it on. There might be a thud and a wail, and then quiet as the meal is digested. It's never long before it sings again though.

My mother knew about the road and didn't let dad have a car. He never argued the point as the pub was on our side. My teachers knew about the road too. Most would come to the estate young and happy, but eventually they would look more and more to the traffic. When some didn't come back no-one said anything, but I knew it had something to do with what was beyond the cyclone fence.

The road didn't take all my friends at the same time, although two died together on the median strip. Following all the rules, looking both ways, they'd made it halfway across and were almost there. But a little strip of green was only the road's idea of a joke and a van mounted it, taking them both.

A few children weren't enough however and eventually it ate my entire little primary school. It's getting hungrier all the time, and the few of us left on the estate just try to lay low and not get noticed. Used to be that just crossing the road was dangerous, but it comes looking for you.

A lot of people think that it's there to service the estate but that's a mistake. The road came first.

Ken Gardner is a musician and teacher who lives in the Darebin area. Between writing, performing, composing and teaching he likes to stand in his front yard and make passers-by uneasy.

Becki Bouchier is a writer and filmmaker who has been struggling in lockdown but is feeling OK today.

JOGGING AT NIGHT

by Becki Bouchier

She wears thick socks and thermals, her misty breath drifting under streetlights. The quiet presses in. Movement in the shadows reveals a nearby onlooker, and she feels her breath catch like bile in her throat. But the moment passes, and she runs on safely, her heart thudding against her chest.

ROSE AVENUE

by Sara Harrington

The house has been tidied now, emptied of sentiment and traces of life. Disturbed by the open door, sunny dust particles circle jauntily and fresh nylon lace curtains create dappled shadows on the newly vivid white walls – the only semblance of movement in what was once a family's epicentre.

The house's exterior is simple and its uniform housing-commission layout modest. It once played sentinel at a floral intersection – Rose Avenue, Wisteria Grove, Camelia Crescent and Iris St. It was the only home my grandparents ever owned. Their pride in it radiated from the immaculate hedge, to the bold welcome of the jade plant on the threshold, past the cosy living room with its crocheted overthrows, into the tidy 1950s-era kitchen and out onto the immense and robust lawn, the centrepieces of which were the dependable Hills Hoist, the homemade incinerator and Grandpa's rickety shed.

Grandpa (George) had been a powder monkey at the Geelong Cement Works. Small of stature, he was nimble, fast and incredibly strong, scaling sheer cliffs to plant explosives in their rocky pockets. One day he wasn't quite fast enough. His survival after a long hospital stay elevated him to hero status.

Nana (Eileen) had been in hotel service since a girl – housemaid, waitress, cook. She later worked in fruit and veg, took in ironing and helped her neighbours colour and perm their hair in the popular mauve of the day.

It wasn't a complicated house to navigate, but it held the promise of an Aladdin's cave for us kids.

Nana's crystal cabinet was a magical realm. Abundant in its curios, it kept us - small visitors on the wrong side of the bevelled glass - enthralled for hours. There were the prehistoric shark teeth found in Grandpa's quarry - lovingly-buffed enamel triangles with sharp zig-zag edges. These sat incongruously alongside labelled engagement and wedding gifts, an expansive collection of souvenir teaspoons, treasured china, figurines of shepherdesses, miniature plastic Geelong FC players in tiny hand-knitted jerseys, remaindered wedding cake and ribbons of baby pink, aged and marked brown by the stains of rusted safety pins.

Grandpa's shed was iconic. A bastion of practicality yet also deeply mysterious. In the end it came down with two powerful thrusts and an hilarious infantile yelp from my oldest brother as he moved rotten linoleum to expose a very active rat's nest. Without sides as retainers, the shed's contents cascaded outwards, creating tip-like chaos on the lawn. Despite our age, we became grandchildren again, hunting treasure: discarded toys, my aunt's unfinished artworks and vestiges of her professional life, ancient tins of paint and brushes stuck fast in congealed turpentine, broken tools, an old baby's cot, water-stained albums dedicated to earlier generations, comics and most precious, letters – pre and post-war, blue ink on blue paper, pencil on white, snapshotting the daily minutiae of long-departed family and friends.

Further affectionate looting took place over the ensuing weeks. Spoils included the metal numbers from the front gate post, old bottles, a rusted carriage wheel, iris bulbs, a very eclectic collection of vinyl albums and the ancient Coca-Cola bottle opener almost permanently affixed to the pantry door by multiple layers of paint. Ah, how we debated over that, my youngest brother the eventual victor. It's where Grandpa would open his longneck "brown ones" before retiring quietly outside, resting his back against the sun-warmed weatherboards under the kitchen window, transistor tuned to the day's races, dog sleepy at his side and the Form Guide at home on his lap.

As patterns are created by lace curtains, light coexists with shade in this space. Just as happiness partners sorrow. Alongside the echoes of laughter, music and chatter, there are the murmurings of discontent, disappointment, pain. My younger self would have denied their existence. But I'm older, wiser now, and can't ignore the greyscale of life.

Like the abandoned schooling which saw my very young grandfather take jobs delivering newspapers and clearing land around the You Yangs, left as he was to financially support his family whilst his older brothers went to war. And his heavy drinking, not abusive, but disruptive, which dogged my mother's childhood. Like the ache and stigma of being a foster child, which as a girl pursued my grandmother with a nasty incessant rhythm and later folded itself permanently into her tender psyche as she aged. Like the isolation of my beloved aunt as she withdrew from us, unwillingly, but menaced by demons she couldn't hope to control. And the many questions left unanswered when she died.

As we clear the house, my mother and I discover a trap door under a rug in the hallway. We open it cautiously, breath suspended, only to encounter a few cobwebs, dust and dry earth, nothing more. No discovery trope here – no hidden letters, no boxes of trinkets, no family secrets.

The treasures are instead invisible, sensory and anchor me in my sense of belonging.

- **TASTE** - Cakes, slices, pavlovas, golden syrup dumplings, jam roly poly, butterfly cakes, yo-yos, pikelets, jaw-clenchingly sour apples transformed into delicious stewed fruit served with thin sweet custard.

Bags of mixed lollies from the corner shop – painstakingly accumulated in two cent increments.

And endless cups of tea.

- **SMELL** - The faded, ancient black cardboard photo albums, edges battered, pages petrichor-like in their scent and photos askew.

The smoky emissions of the aforementioned incinerator, constantly at work. Little escaped its fiery interior.

The mouth-watering smell of local fish and chips, which us five kids would devour from huge cream sheets of paper, seated on a tablecloth spread out on the living room carpet.

The thick velvety essence of the ancient rose bush.

And delicious, pungent, earthy tomatoes.

- **SIGHT** - Nana's slender, elegant, bejewelled fingers as they nimbly kneaded and knitted.

Grandpa permanently in his long johns, singlet and overalls, gardening and painting everything white.

My grandparents standing at that floral intersection, side by side, be-cardiganed, framed by the perfect hedge, waving for three blocks until we were nothing more than specs, station-bound.

And washing dancing on the Hills Hoist.

- **SOUND** - The rattle of a heavy brass ring of keys permanently lodged in the back door.

The sonorous chatter of Nana's friends with names befitting their era – Lil, Connie, Ethel, Lorna, Ivy, Olga, Nora, Sylvie, Vonnie and Ella.

Grandpa and his piano accordion. Self-taught, his execution was choppy, rambling and occasionally discordant, but how we danced!

The hysterical laughter and spluttering when my ladylike Nana once unexpectedly declared she was eating the 'penis end' of a burnt disfigured sausage!

And the yapping of small dogs.

- **TOUCH** - Dressing up in Mum's pale lemon formal dress, wriggling as the tulle prickled my skin.

The sudden gush of a bathroom tap which never, ever settled into an even flow.

Digging in the garden with old spoons, uncovering tiny bottles.

The huge grey vinyl couch, its surface like elephant-hide, unrelentingly adhesive in the summer heat, solid and slippery in the winter cold

Grandpa's hands, strong, calloused, brown, nails ringed by dirt, deftly folding mirror bush leaves to whistle a tune.

And Nana's wonderful hugs.

MY EASTER TABLE

by Mary Glykokalamos

“Christos Anesti,” my brother loudly exclaims as he holds his dyed red egg firmly in his hand. We’re at the table. It’s very late, 12:30am in fact, but there is a gleam in his eye which makes him look refreshed, like he has just woken from a restful sleep. Maybe it’s because he was the first to bring the holy light into the house from church. My flame didn’t stand a chance, not with the ghastly wind that was roaring outside. I tried to keep it alive of course, by holding my candle close and watching it with the intensity of an overprotective parent. It danced provocatively, caught in the wind, an alluring sight, so alive. I thought I could get it safely home, but in a moment it died, consumed by the darkness of the night. And yet tonight, there is no death. Tonight there is only the light and love of the resurrection.

My brother is looking at me expectantly, waiting for my reply to his emphatic “Christ has risen!” I know my egg will crack even before I respond with the words “Alithos Anesti” because my brother always wins. Crack. His red egg makes devastating contact with the egg I’ve been holding steadily and preparedly in my hand ever since we got home. I look down at the damage. My red egg shell has cracked into at least 100 distinct pieces, but I don’t mind. I quickly get to work peeling away the smashed eggshell, revealing more and more of the smooth white flesh beneath, my fingertips slowly taking on the deep red colour of the egg that I cannot wait to devour. What a way to break a fast.

My mother has laid out her finest white tablecloth which she ironed earlier in the day. There are six placemats spread evenly around the oval table, along with six plates, six bowls, six glasses and six sets of cutlery. In the middle of the table is a tall thin glass. It houses the candle and the holy light which is being kept sturdy and upright by the many grains of raw rice that surround it. To its left is a round, golden brown tsourekis with a red egg in the centre. It is the only thing on the table that my mother hasn’t made herself. To its right is a bowl of koulouria. I helped my mother bake them on Holy Thursday. They look like mini plaits, just like the ones in my hair. You can tell which ones I made because they look a little clumsy and uncertain, like a teenage boy learning to waltz. My mother’s koulouria are polished and exquisite. Then, of course, there is the bowl of red dyed eggs. They look so shiny and joyous.

The six seats at the table are for my mother, my father, my brother, my grandparents, and me. It’s been that way for as long as I can remember and I hope it’ll be that way for as long as I care to remember.

My mother is moving stealthily around the table with a giant ladle and pot in hand filling each bowl with magiritsa. She spent hours creating this traditional Easter soup this afternoon. It made the house stink of lamb intestines, heart, kidney, and liver. We had to simmer whole cloves in boiling water for twenty straight minutes to replace the unpleasant gamey smell in the kitchen with a warm and spicy one. My mother knows to only fill my bowl half way. Everybody else loves it and wants a second serve. I watch as my pappou squeezes the juice of half a lemon into his bowl. That lemon is from a tree that he planted in our backyard many years ago, before I was even born. It’s the pride of our garden.

As we sit, happily eating around the table, my grandparents tell us about their first Easter in Australia. I know the story well but I still love to hear it. After working long and hard at back-breaking jobs that noone else wanted, and saving money by sharing a house with another two families, in 1965, my grandparents bought their own home in their new home land.

They received the keys to their new home just days before Easter. My grandmother describes her joy at entering her own house, a house for her family alone, a house that she wouldn't need to share. What a luxury it is to have time to sit and eat with the people you love, she tells us with all the wisdom of her years.

My mother smiles a distant smile and I know that she is back there now, in her first Australian home, reliving the excitement and anticipation of her first Easter there. She looks over at us, my brother and I, and like she's done a hundred times before, she tells us that they didn't have a table that year. They had the house but couldn't afford the furniture just yet. Instead, they all huddled around the kitchen bench. They were all together and it was the best meal that she'd ever had.

Mary Glykokalamos studied Law and Behavioural Science at University. She is a former lawyer turned freelance writer. You can read more of her writing on her blog: gleekoblog.com

WINTER 2020 - GRIEVING

by Michelle Helliwell

Morning after mourning
Merely hope for dawn.
Counting codeine,
Far past forlorn.
Twenty seven
Wont make heaven
Afterlife limbo,
Unending dark,
Stuck in the stark;
Parked
Like a crushed car.
It's stormy.
Raining dirty dishes,
Laundry never dries
Downcast eyes
Leak memories
Her heart: broken egg.

Michelle Helliwell has lived and worked in Darebin since 2015 and became active in Melbourne Spoken Word poetry circles in 2016, which is the same year her first poem was published. 2020 has brought the death of both of her parents, therefore this poem is dedicated to **Margaret Anne Dykes** 06/08/53 — 13/04/20 and **Brian Helliwell** 21/04/41 — 03/09/20.

BRODO

by Teresa Capetola

A chicken taught me a lot about life. I learnt to make brodo, an Italian version of chicken soup, from watching my mum cook, when she was still alive. Brodo is the quintessential soup of comfort, care and the standard by which a woman's worth is measured, amongst so many other domestic elements, in the Italian Abruzzese culture.

Brodo. The word, with all its onomatopoeia wonders, resonates in the globules of golden fat dotting the surface of the soup in the repeated 'o' - *brodo*. Even the 'b' and 'd' are just elongated 'o's' with sticks – like the sticks of celery in the soup bumping up against the circles of golden fat. *Brodo*. Every culture has its version of chicken soup – its own brodo, whose precious memories conjures up winters' days of grey and sleet cut asunder with the smell of simmering brodo on the stove top.

Brodo is a clear broth distilled into a golden hue by hours of cooking. It is impossible to equate the constituent pieces in the brodo, so pedestrian, so prosaic, so perennially in the fridge – onion, celery, tomato, carrot, chicken – with the life-force of this magical broth.

The aroma of cooking brodo fills the house, permeates your skin, enters your blood stream and is reacquainted with the primordial DNA of the Abruzzese building blocks. Here it simmers and here I am. One and the same.

Every good Italian wife and mother would have a brodo on her cooktop on a winter's Sunday morning, slowly simmering her worth and value. Every sick child would have a bowl of brodo carefully brought to their feverish lips, to be anointed with generations of folklore and legends:

“Questo ti darà forza, questo ti renderà migliore, questo ti nutrirà e ti proteggerà.

Mangia”

“This will give you strength, this will make you better, this will nourish and protect you.

Mangia”

A few years ago I visited my family in Italy and spent an intense few weeks bearing witness to the tragedies and trauma of my extended family where migration has left holes and tears in the family fabric in places you would never expect to see them. It's like putting on your favourite woollen jumper stored in the wardrobe over summer, to find little uneven holes that moths or silverfish have made in the sleeves, in the back and even in the front of the jumper. The more you look, the more tiny holes you find. They are not big enough to be patched or darned, but small enough that the jumper can't be worn again the way it was or the way you remembered it.

On my return to Australia, to a southern hemisphere winter, bereft of the language, the smells and sights of my other Italian home, I looked for comfort and nourishment. I made brodo.

In an enormous pot I placed fresh, cold water, three quarters of the way to the top. I roughly chopped a full bunch of celery – using all of it, leaves and stalks. I added two large onions, quartered. Six carrots, fat, thick and bright orange. Two tomatoes, seeds, skins everything they had to give. Finally I placed a whole chicken, with as much of the skin as I could remove, into the vegetable bath, added salt, a lid placed rakishly on an angle and waited while the brodo did its magic. It slowly permeated through the house, transporting me immediately to another simpler time and place, my mother moving silently, calmly in her kitchen, gently stirring her brodo.

The brodo will tell you when it's ready, sometimes two, sometimes three hours. You know it's ready when you move your head from side to side and can taste the sweet cacophony of chicken and vegetables in the air. You then remove the chicken from the soup and strain the vegetables so that you have a clear broth glistening with golden circles of fat. The flesh of the chicken needs to be removed from the carcass and added to the broth. Along with the chicken you add pastina – small pasta that tenderly clings to the brodo. Every family has its favourite pastina and this cannot be changed. If you've been brought up with stellini, little stars, then only stellini will do. If your family uses small alphabets, then only alphabet pastina is allowed.

I place the whole chicken, tender and falling apart, into a large bowl and arrange three other bowls around it. Slowly and carefully I remove the flesh from the carcass, placing the sweet strips of meat into one bowl. The chicken gives the brodo its full flavour because of the bones, gristle, cartilage, skin, fat, marrow and offal contained in the whole bird. Each of these I pull apart and separate from the chicken and place in the second bowl, a feast for an attentive dog sitting patiently at my feet. Into the third bowl I place the bones, they separate cleanly and dry immediately when exposed to air and clink against each other in the bowl. Legs, thighs, wings, ribs. I rinse the wishbone in cold water, intact, and add it to my collection of wishbones on the kitchen window sill. Over time they have bleached white with the morning sun. A collection has amassed and they are arranged in a basket, a fossilised floral tribute to the star of the brodo, the chicken.

I stand back and look over the three bowls: a small mound of meat, a small heap of gristle and cartilage, a small midden of bones.

I look into the soup pot and then around at the kitchen bench. Surely this can't be the entire chicken? I take a wooden spoon and carefully stir through the brodo, searching for pieces of chicken that may have broken from the carcass. Nothing. I stand back and look at the three bowls and tears well up, obscuring my view of the chicken. This entire chicken, once plumb and feathered stalking through grass, pecking at grains, *bok, bok, boking* along with its neighbours, sacrificed for my brodo, simmering for hours; these three small bowls cannot be the sum total of this chicken?

I cry for the chicken and I cry for myself. For the self who bears witness to family trauma, of separated lives and immeasurable distance. For the self who attempts to make sense of this loss and communicate it through writing and stories. For the self, bought up in archaic traditions and educated for a modern world that does not even recognise itself from day to day. For the feminist self who ties an apron around her waist and cooks brodo. For all the disparate parts and roles in my life that cannot be separated and placed in different bowls. I cry for the ongoing simmering of my life, where I try to hold onto this precious understanding that we are whole, complex, contradictory and cannot be defined by the constituent parts of our lives.

I dry my eyes. Slowly I add the pastina to the brodo and wait for it to cook. I place a few pieces of chicken into the bowl, add the brodo to the bowl and eat.

Teresa Capetola is a second generation Italian Australian woman who has lived in Darebin most of her life. She is indebted to her migration legacy and brings this experience to her writings.

DEAR RAMADAN

by Maira Nguyen

Dear Ramadan,

As Melbourne was in lockdown, I thought your visit would be quiet, isolating and lonely. Preston Mosque was closed; I wouldn't be able to break the fast with my friends; my family was 6000 kilometres away. I found myself in solitude - 'fasting' not only from food, water but also people.

Yet, amid solitude, I felt more connected. With you.

1. I felt connected as I struggled to concentrate on my Zoom classes without coffee. This made me appreciate the things that I had taken for granted: food, water, going to university, hugging a friend, breaking fast with the Islamic society, and enjoying the fresh air without a mask.
2. I felt connected as I came across the wrinkled leaves, which, despite their delicate nature, could somehow handle storms, decay and the news of death with such ease. They taught me to embrace my vulnerability and to trust God. That's where strength comes from.
3. I felt connected as I saw the tree branches spreading vigorously through the air. It left me breathless as I realised this all started with a tiny seed. Not only did it show me the power of God, but also it taught me to be patient, something I lack. Just as it takes years for a seed to sprout and a tree to grow, just as fasting itself is waiting for the right time to consume the blessings of food, good things also take time.
4. I felt connected as the sunlight created thick and flickering shadows on the wall of my apartment, reminding me of the grand, yet gentle and subtle way God made the passing of a day. It taught me that time is precious, and that I'm only a wayfarer. It reminded me to leave beautiful traces when I still can.
5. I felt connected as I took off my headphone and paid attention to the whisper of the wind, the chirping of birds and the rhythm of the river flowing at Merri Creek. I felt as if they were doing *zikr* (rhythmic repetition) of God's names.
6. I felt connected as I recited the Quran.
7. I felt connected as I prayed for my parents, my friends, the Uighurs in China, the Americans in America and other international students who lost their jobs and couldn't travel home. I prayed for COVID-19 to be over, for humanity, for the whole world.
8. I felt connected as I saw the smile of my Italian neighbour, the nod of the assistant at Coles and the rainbow from someone's window. I became more aware of hearty and tiny moments that make this life miraculous.
9. I felt connected as I realised all creatures of the universe, from the atoms to the galaxy, from the droplet of water to the sun, from my hometown *Chau Doc* to Melbourne, were glorifying life in their language. And how wonderful it was to be a part of this orchestra, to contribute to it with my accents, story and perspectives.
10. I felt connected because I truly understand why you're here: You're not merely the month of fasting, nor the month of iftar (fast-breaking meals) and community. You're here to humble my soul, which is heedless and arrogant most of the time. You're here to remove trivialities and noise from my life, so I can reconnect to myself and to the many 'special teachers' God has placed in the universe.
11. You're here so I can be grateful.

I'm sad about your departure because I worry I'll get back to my ungrateful way of life again. But then I remember that although you have left, your Creator is always present. And because I seek Him inshallah (God's willing), I'll see you again.

Maira Nguyen is a writer who wants to tell stories to make people think and reflect about identities and humanity. Maira has produced several short videos and photo essays, some of which have been screened at festivals (Mokhtar Film Festival and Victorian's Cultural Diversity Week 2017), exhibited at museums (Islamic Museum of Australia), and featured on *Meld Magazine*, SBS and ABC Online. She was a Fellow in the 2019 Cinespace Social Cohesion on Screen Writer's Fellowship, funded by the Victorian Government.

IF I WAS GOING TO WRITE ABOUT EGGPLANTS

by Riley Willcox

If I was going to write about eggplants, I would tell you that I never really liked them as a kid. Except for when Mum roasted them whole in the oven and made them into dip, that was the best dip. I would tell you that I never really paid attention to them, even when I left home and got really into cooking. I thought of them as I think of zucchini, a generic vegetable to use as a base for a meal; a non-descript piece of edible vegetation.

If I was going to write about eggplants, I would tell you about the Vietnamese restaurant on Lygon Street. When I first moved to Thornbury from Fairfield I wanted to explore the area, so I went on a big walk by myself:

- west on Moreland Road, across the Merri Creek and up the hill, from Thornbury into Coburg
- south down Holmes Street until the squiggly bit where it becomes Lygon Street, from Coburg to Brunswick
- south down Lygon Street, past Blyth Street, past Glenlyon Road, all the way through Brunswick and into Carlton.

Hungry at this point, I saw an old brick building which housed a Vietnamese restaurant, because I was moving house and didn't have food at home, I went in and ordered an eggplant dish. It came out, sizzling on a hot plate, it was beautiful.

Eggplant and more eggplant, cooked so hot in oil and salt that it had become slimy and delicious. Slimy I think is the word, despite how gross it sounds, slimy eggplant was an absolute revelation. I couldn't stop cooking it.

- hot wok
- eggplant
- olive oil
- salt
- chilli

I had found the perfect food. I wanted to eat so many eggplants. Industrial agriculture is off the cards for me, and organic eggplants are usually out of my price range, so I dreamed of growing my own eggplants. In the summer of 2019-20 in a house in a rental house in Thornbury perpetually pending demolition, I grew eggplants for the first time. I heard that eggplants can be perennial, so I'm not going to pull them up anytime soon.

If I'm writing about eggplants, I'm telling you about the time I went to that same Vietnamese restaurant with my friend. We were coming home from Carlton and he wanted to have a restaurant meal. He was the same person who got me into growing food in Melbourne, we lived together for years. I had always worked with him or others in the garden, and never been the leader.

The eggplants were my dream, I prepared the beds, mulching over the top of the broad beans from winter, leaving their roots in the ground and planting amongst them to maintain the soil structure. I had learnt from doing it at Dayswalk Farm for a week or two before I planted my own. I bought seedlings from CERES in Brunswick, where incidentally, my friend had worked for many years while we lived together. They grew very slowly at first, I fed them juice from the worm farm and watered them regularly. I think that I may have over-watered them to begin with, because it wasn't until I went away that they went through a big growth spurt.

If I am writing about eggplants, I will tell you that I went away between Christmas and New Years, summer of 2019-20, to visit my family in Bega, NSW, and go camping at the beach with my partner. One night and a mere two swims into camping we had to seek shelter at my parent's house in Bega. At various times sheltered in the house were:

- me
- my partner
- mum
- dad
- mum's brother
- mum's brother's cat
- mum's sister
- mum's sister's 12 year old son
- mum's sister's cat

- my sister in law
- my 5 year old nephew
- my 3 year old niece
- my less than year old niece
- my oldest brother

My middle brother, the father of the children, was still working in the kitchen at the bowls club in Bega, for whatever reason they stayed open through this time. My other cousin, Mum's sister's 17 year old son, was on the fire grounds with the Rural Fire Service.

We were all trapped inside the house, surrounded by fires, everyone from surrounding towns had evacuated to Bega, some with family and friends and many sheltered in the showground pavilion, and the town hall, and the indoor sports centre. We were stuffing tennis balls down drain pipes and filling up the gutters with water. On New Year's Day it was pitch black in the middle of the afternoon, at most other times the sky was red. We were housebound for days before the highway to Canberra re-opened and people could escape the Bega Valley. Mum's sister, younger son and their cat went to relatives in Central NSW.

My oldest brother drove up to Canberra and back to Melbourne. My partner stayed a little longer with our family who she was meeting for the first time, and then drove back to Melbourne. After a couple more days I found an old friend who was driving to Melbourne and followed the others. Through fire grounds, up Brown Mountain and through to Canberra, and then 650 kilometres straight down a smoky and hot Hume Highway to Melbourne and that was our summer holiday.

If I'm writing about eggplants, I've gotta say that the bushfires were a very different crisis to COVID. Talking to my Dad on the phone the other day and he was joking about the good old days when we were all sheltered in the house together, and in many ways it was a good time, playing board games, panicking and just generally all being together. We took food and bedding down to the evacuation centres, and there were plenty of people around doing a whole lot more. The community knew how to look after each other during the bush fires. The community

though, lost a whole lot of itself, properties, farms, livelihoods. It gained a lot of trauma, post traumatic stress disorder and weird national media coverage.

If I had written about eggplants, I would have told you that when I got back to Melbourne, the eggplants were thriving, although there were plenty of wild plants joining them in their beds. I think they probably appreciated a break from watering which allowed the soil to heat up, and a thick layer of mulch ensured they never dried out too much. They formed truly wonderful, big fruit, alongside tomatoes, beans, zucchinis and kale. I look forward to seeing if they live through winter and fruit again next summer. I heard once that eggplants can be perennial, just a whim, I figure I might as well allow them the space to be perennial and see what happens. I saved the seeds from the last couple of fruits and put them in my room in a brown paper bag, alongside tomato and capsicum seeds. Either way this will not be the last summer for me growing eggplants.

Riley Wilcox grew up in country New South Wales on Yuin/Djiriganj land and now live in Thornbury. They write and make books with friends under the label 'Books In This Economy?'

LIZZIE

by Bernadette Mahoney

“Whaddya Reckon?”

Lizzie’s brash tone lifted me out of my haze.

“Modern day crime family. Definitely”. Lizzie nodded intently and I continued, buoyed by her encouragement. “I mean, look at this- no online presence at all. I’ve been searching for the better half of the week and all I can find is a lousy link to a court case from the early 2000s.”

I took a sip of the beer I was nursing. Too warm. Lizzie leaned forward now. I’d captured her attention, which quite frankly, was hard to do. I stole a glimpse at her tanned thighs.

“Smoke?”

“Nah, nah. I’ve quit, ‘membra. Don’t need that poisonous shit in my body”.

Lizzie shrugs, dismissive of my newfound respect for my lungs, tells me “suit yaself” and lights up. She sits back in the plastic chair as she exhales. A gentle sigh escapes from her full lips.

She gently fingers the frayed hem of her shorts. I was losing her now. I better keep talking. Otherwise that would be it and she would soon disappear and I wouldn’t see her for weeks. Once, I went three months without hearing from her. Anybody else and you might be worried. Not Lizzie though. It was commonplace for her to disappear for weeks on end, appearing when you’d least expect it. Usually with a bottle of red and an unapologetic grin.

“Then there is this”. I turn my screen towards her and see her eyes widen in disbelief. “Maaaaaate, that’s pretty serious stuff”. She speaks with a lazy drawl but there is a musical lilt to her voice. You can just tell she’s lived a life. I mean, really lived.

Sometimes she regales me with stories of shenanigans and songs of sadness. A free spirit. Untamable. Her own person. Lizzie liked it that way I suspected, always seeming just out of my reach. She teased you and lured you back to faint hope with her sparkling wit and razor tongue. She’d flitted in and out of my life for the better part of two years.

“Why do you torture yourself with it?”, a friend once asked. She was different. Enigmatic. Adventurous. Or rather, I was different from her. My structured world was at odds with her transient upbringing. She’d told me about it once, when we were both stoned in the park by the river. The giggling giving way to guttural sobs as she recalled “the incident”. It was in this moment that I realised I would never be a part of Lizzie’s world, she wouldn’t let me be. I was only merely a visitor with an expiry date on my pass.

Bernadette Mahoney studied literature at university and currently works as an educator in Darebin. She has not previously published any work.

SEVEN BLACK UNDIES

by Lorena Castaldi

One day begins

The birds are singing. The sun streams in. The alarm goes off. "It's 7.49" and the day begins. With one eye open I lift my head to glance at the clock knowing Sammy J is an hour ahead- again.

Two hands sanitised, cleansed of virus and grime.

Now to Simon Takla with the traffic. There's always an accident on Furlong road; and yet again the Westgate inbound is going slow even though everyone is working from home. And the weather report says that Melbourne will be cloudy with smirley drizzle, a top of 15: Always cloudy with top of 15, clearing and a top of 15; a top of 15; SUNNY a top of 20! Cloudy top of 15; top 15....

Three grey socks. Where's it gone this time?

The porridge is cooking, coffee made, ablutions done. The news headlines read: Climate economy Trump; covid economy Trump; covid, covid Trump. Covid covid Trump. Covid economy Inquiry. Economy covid trump. Covid covid. Economy economy. Trump trump trump.

Four pairs of glasses- not one can I find.

The Computer yawns open and the day's Work begins. Emails to read and meetings to zoom into. Bing, swoosh. Bing bing bing.

Five dirty cups - none of them mine.

At 5.35 pm I slap the computer shut. A walk around the block helps set aside the work day. But I need to find my Keys, my phone and my coat. Keys phone coat. Keys phone mask coat. Keys phone mask coat. Keys phone mask sunglasses. Keys phone sunglasses. Oops keys phone mask sunglasses. Keys phone mask. Mask mask mask.

Six masks in the mail- Not a good sign.

I nod to Jenny from down the road as always, I'll pass her again around the other side of the hill.

I smile at the kid on the bike, the dog with a ball, the mum and dad, though I'm not sure they know I'm smiling behind my mask. It's been sweet to see them all together.

I keep walking up the hill and around the block. Around and around and around the block.

Seven black undies hanging on the line.

And so the week is over.
Another year done.

Lorena Castaldi is a speech pathologist who is deeply interested in the power of words to connect people. She has had poetry published in *n-SCRIBE 13* and *n-SCRIBE 14*.

THE MATERIAL SENSORY ENVIRONMENTS OF MY CYCLING

by Kate Hume

I've been standing in the hallway for ten minutes. Just standing. Thinking. I put my helmet on, an unconvincing gesture. I stand for another five minutes, strap not buckled. Now I'm going to be late, even if I ride fast. I hate being late. I'm stuck in place and in body. I really hate being late.

I sit cross-legged on the carpet in Tay's bedroom. Placing my cheek on her bed spread, she pauses her tv show, "oh hiiii! Whatcha doing there, honey?". I roll my eyes in mock exasperation, "I don't wanna, but I said I would", and our ritual begins. We exchange details on the house-party that I regret committing to, full of people I knew five years ago, people I 'wish are well' but never actually ask how they're doing, people I use warm but distant expressions for, 'they're lovely, but not for me', people I've 'drifted apart' from, people I feel guilty for not liking more, people who will want to hear about my life and get 'an update on things', people who have stayed friends since their first year of uni, and worst of all, people I remember as smarmy 18 year old predators who parroted their dad's expressions.

"Will Em, or Mali, or Charlotte be there?"

I can hear my twin sister laughing at me. The twin who watches, arm wrapped around dad's thigh, not the twin, glowing purple with sticky grape Fanta, bubbling with the risk of blowing out someone else's birthday cake candles. The twin who loosens her grip only when she's found something or someone she likes, not the twin who moves through spaces and conversations in bursts and pops, mysteriously able to keep her Fanta down in the process.

"She's not shy, she's just not Meg"

My helmeted head shoots into the bathroom for a look in the mirror. In the bathroom's yellow light,

FATHERING

by Peter Matthews

we walk through stillness

he kicks apart the fallen leaves
lost in what he's telling me

matches his gait to mine

now he dances away
down the nature-strip

taken by his thoughts

offers his warm hand at the road

our footsteps merge into
a single rhythm again

time unfolds easily
as if togetherness is enough

and maybe it is

(May 20)

After a period writing poetry in his 20s, **Peter Matthews** has found inspiration many years later whilst walking with his family in and around Northcote during lockdown.

it becomes apparent that reflections are located interpretations. Together, the mirror, the light, and I find my lipstick, in a browner hue than when I put it on in my bedroom, still on my lips and building tacky shadows around the edges of cracks. The heels of my boots patter on the floorboards as I jog through my bedroom and out the backdoor. I make sure not to linger in my room, and definitely not to sit on my bed. I swing my leg back and over the seat of my bike. These jeans are a bit tight. I pat my top pocket, my back pocket, and my head, I nudge my right pedal higher and lock in the heel of my boot. Balanced and committed, I squeeze my phone out of my back right pocket, press play, and slot it back in. Denim nipping the crease at the top of my right thigh and straining across the back of my left leg. They'll loosen up on the ride.

Kylie and I move through the streets together to 'Spinning Around'. My legs are moving with the beat, with the road's gradients and textures, with illuminating red brake lights, with the gentle wind and rain. I see a 'serious', 'bike-proud' cyclist going relatively fast up ahead, I reach a finger into my back pocket and toggle my phone's volume button, just a little louder. Kylie-rides always seem to end up being playfully fast. Cheeky and defiant. I lean forward, breath my shoulders down away from my ears, and shuffle the balls of my feet backwards, onto the pedals. I smile, and as I begin to seriously stretch my legs, right and then left, my bike's chain, usually yawning between arrhythmic strokes, settles. The road's tar holds and releases my tyres; catching and throwing. Ahead, I see Bike-Proud curve around a confusion of red, a fleshy metal pile of obliviousness and entitlement that's sure to double down as self-righteous aggression and impatience. Looking over my right shoulder, I flick my right index finger out and yellow lights abate. Moving across one metal tram-track, made slicker by the rain that also sits in my eyebrows and on my thighs, I avoid feeding the hungry gap in the road. Sometimes riding feels all angles, turns are sharp, with strong starts and finishes, and the handle-bars are a jolty guide, but tonight riding feels curved and rounded. Bending back over the tram-track, squinting past the mess of brake-lights and huffing-machismo, I start signing, "I'm spinning around, move out of my way. I know you're feeling me 'cause you like it like this. I'm breaking it down, I'm not the same". Inside my mouth feels tacky, saliva made thick from playing in High street's cold damp air, the smells and sounds becoming

emulsified and ingested. I can't hear myself singing, ears plugged with earphones, but I feel the expansions and contractions of my ribs, pushing against the waist of my jeans. I stop singing and catch my breath, I smile, feeling new cracks form in my lips and lipstick. These lyrics have a sort of campy-cringe resonance with me, my bike, my surrounds, and our movements.

The overwhelming inertia of the hallway's emotions, where guilt and regret travelled on a stubborn trajectory and my body became stuck, has been overcome during this ride. Things are moving with and through me now. I sense many squiggly and entangled momentums. My legs are aching and excited, my wheels turning over the tar and metal, rainwater flicking up and dripping down, my breath rolling through my ribs and throat, the pink of warmth in my armpits and in the numbness of my hands. The haste or patience held by red and yellow lights, transforming, through subtle negotiation, into my stubborn defiance or calm passage. The sensory landscape is kneaded into physical(ity) and emotional(ity). Together, Kylie and Bike-Proud affect a very real fiction, where techno-scientific productive capitalist rationalism is chased down by poorly-maintained cracked-lipped disco femme playfulness.

Looking towards the house, I re-distribute my jeans, feeling how the ride had them bunch in the creases of my thighs and knees. Stripping off a jacket and a jumper, feeling the ride catch up to me, I see Em smoking out the front of the house, chatting to a stranger she's in full new-person-meeting mode. Active and expressive all over – tone, eyes, posture, mouth, gestures. God, I love her. I lock my bike as she waves and yells "Hello, my LOOOOVEE!". Maybe it's like smoking? Well, like smoking for Em. She says it lets her leave crowded and tight spaces without seeming rude. It allows her space to breathe. To avoid social obligations and niceties and boring conversations. It allows her to have 'smokers-chat', the comfortable and knowing conversation with strangers in the smoker's area that is low-commitment and low-intensity. She also flirts a lot more; she knows she can easily leave the space and company of whomever she thinks is cute after she finishes her cigarette.

Kate Hume is a master of environment student with interests in the gendering of environments, and less-animate beings and their agency. This is their first time sharing their writing.

THE WALK OF FREEDOM

by Judy Doubas

On my first visit to the Mantra Hotel, No. 8-215FR30W gazed at me soulfully with mellow, mesmerizing eyes.

He was curious.

What does a free person look like?

Well, for one, I'm defined by my name, not a number.

And never defined by just that either, I don't think.

I live.

I have a life.

A family and friends I can have dinner with, argue with, engage with...

Maybe even play 20 questions with!

Plan another trip with, stay in another hotel...

With.

The hotel?

Well that's one thing we do have in common.

I love travelling and staying in off beat hotels in exotic places...

The hotel No. 8-215FR30W is incarcerated in is the hotel my friends stayed in when they were over from the UK.

It's a hotel I would consider residing in myself.

But I wouldn't be under guard.

I could eat whatever I wanted when I wanted and come and go at whim.

Swim in the pool, go to the Preston market and catch the 86 tram into town and play tourist.

When I asked him what he would do, if he was ever set free, he said he would "walk for half an hour."

The Walk of Freedom.

When the guard averted his eyes, I whispered. "You should escape."

"I will bring a rope in the dark of the night then you can climb out the window and flee."

"Aagh. I could run and hide and then have a taste of my freedom," he said.

"What would it taste like?" I said.

"Like rice pudding infused with cardamom and rose water and sprinkled heavily with cinnamon," he said.

"It would taste like my home."

"And as it drips from my tongue, I would savour the moment and rejoice."

Yes.

"But there is one thing I would change about this scenario," he said.

"I do not want to take my freedom. I want it to be offered to me by your country." "I want to hear the Mantra repeated, over and over and over again." "You are Welcome."

"You are Welcome."

"You are Welcome to our country."

"This is what I would change."

"And this would be enough."

"This would be enough for my eight years in prison."

Judy Doubas is a Feminist who explores contemporary social issues through her writing. She has had several plays produced and is a published poet.

STARRY NIGHT

by Sally Lewry

Walk out into the still, starlit night
and you will feel the peace of the world.
From here the view is fine.

The only thing crumbling
is the constructed reality
upon which we have all blindly agreed.

Full of falsity and fear,
eyes shut,
to the world.

May you stand tall
to applaud its fall.

May you be patient
as the dust settles.

As you look through the debris
I suspect, the first thing you will see,
will be
a human face,

to which you will want to run
to touch, to kiss, to embrace.

Just as you arrive,
you will
stop

struck by what you see
in the eyes of the face
before you

that same peaceful, still
starry, starry night,
in us all along,
now come to the fore
weeping, weeping
tears of love
and joy,

yes, joy!

to have seen
ourselves

to have returned
home.

SEAGULLS

by Julia Grieves

I'd love to write a novel
about the 20 or so seagulls
that have gravitated to my local pool
and are together unfurling a life there
on the astro turf
above a pale blue stage.
Life guards parade and monitor
in quick succession
The birds, like a song, all posture;
then a long-bowed note
shot at another's legs.
Hear the whistle round her neck,
she walks past in sneakers
with a pointy finger.
Wings retreat to the roof,
duty and the smell of hot chips
in this unlikely home

Julia Grieves is a writer and teacher living close to the Merri Creek. She is interested in what makes life bloom and is inspired by the communities around her.

Sally Lewry is an artist/writer working in performance, poetry and non-fiction writing. Sally launched her poetry book at The Queenscliff Literary Festival 2018 and was a part of the Digital Writer's Festival, 2019.

REEF - GREEN KINGSWOOD

Sam Fisher

He grew up in an old white weatherboard. A cyclone fence ran across the front. Lavender grew through the wire. Not from that country, it wilted in the summer's heat. Came back to life in winter by the human touch of the forgotten old lady who lived out the back. His grandmother. An old Kingswood station wagon lay dormant by her bungalow. Painted reef-green in a factory in the dry dirt of the industrial west where it was built. School was down the road. A red brick office, portables and a football oval. 'You're a dumb fuck aren't ya? Even the teacher thinks so,' as a football hurtled towards him. His Father. Reluctant dweller of the weatherboard. Close set eyes. 'Suspended? You'll be working soon mate. You'll be working. I'll make ya'.

He pulled weeds from cracks in the concreted backyard. Done it many times. His grandmother would sit close by. Glad to be alone with him. 'You're grandfather huh. Couldn't help himself. Concrete. Concrete. Concrete'. She was smiling. It was always tales of the past with his Grandmother. Tales of when she and his grandfather first came to the country and lived up north.

There was a winter when the lavender didn't come back. It went a stark grey and fell away to the ground revealing stumps of old trees long felled. Leaves piled on the front grass, around the old Kingswood. His grandmother was dead.

The father, he looked out from the back porch, it was over.

The weatherboard was sold, and John and his father moved to a new house made of stark red-brick. The same red-brick of the school office. John used to piss against the back-brick wall of the house at night, rather than walk by his Father's room. 'I don't wanna see ya tonight, Annie is over'. He was out of school by the time he was fifteen. 'Enough is enough, time to get a trade' his father said—his new wife agreed. That winter he was moving bricks. 'Get your hands out of your pockets', thrown a pair of gloves. The gloves ripped. His hands were cut by the sharp edges of the bricks. Dirt everywhere, his eyes, hair. Into his mouth when he heaved the bricks over his head. He lasted three months of his Father smiling at dinner each night. Three months and he was on the highway north in the old Kingswood. His Father did not mind much, sitting around the table, in his house of red brick with his new wife and child.

He headed to the border. He cleaned motels, and in the winter worked in a Ski-hire shop. He moved again, got a job on a farm just over the border to New South Wales. He worked mending fences, spraying weeds. One night the farmer lit a campfire on the edge of the state forest and bought an esky of beer. They sat staring into the flame, each slowly sipping on their beer. 'You got a girlfriend?' 'Nah'. 'Why not?' 'I don't know'.

The old man wasn't a storyteller like his Grandmother was. It did not matter. The bush began to breathe, twigs and leaves crushed under foot. 'Not cattle,' said the old farmer, 'Old stockman's horses run wild'. The horses filtered past on the edge of the firelight, their heads swaying from side to side. 'There's a lot more of them. Up there in the High Country'.

The High Country. He expected jagged peaks, rock, sharp and jagged. Not fields, fields above everything else. It seemed to change

as he walked, he was about to reach the peak, then it was beyond, down a rise and above again. It was above, anything, anywhere he had ever been, this new world. He knew why the horses had come here, chosen this place as their place.

The old farmer ran out of work. He sold him his kingswood and lived off the money for a few weeks just wandering around the high country. He ran out of money, cleaned motels for a few weeks, grew tired, and bussed it back down south. The old white weatherboard was gone. The land levelled flat. He went past the redbrick house, it was the same. He went back up north.

Deeper and deeper into that country he went. From high plain to higher plain. A backpack over his shoulder, full of supermarket food and a few blankets. He slept in the remains of an old cattlemen's hut. The backpack emptied and the pile of wrappers in the corner of the hut grew. He would have to leave.

Then just beyond, there was a horse lying in the grass. Speckled grey, with a white mask, it radiated amongst the burnt brown fields. His eyes lingered across its body, settled on a black hole in its chest, a trickle of deep red blood running down the ribs and across its belly. It was dead. He returned to his hut. He shivered in the cold this night. His stomach ached. His skin crawled. The wood panel walls came to life with wings, they were swarming, moths, coming from everywhere. He legs weak, he staggered down from the raised fields, into the tree line below. He fell, came to rest beneath a fallen tree, slept there. He awoke to them again, moths, all on the underside of the log, over his skin. They were deafening, the wings of these moths. He staggered back up the mountain, but it was overtaken, the fields, the rises above the rest of the earth. They were lost to this noise, unbearable beating noise. He felt the solid earth push back his body.

The redbrick house. 'He was close to death they reckon. A helicopter shooting wild horses spotted him. Starving he was.

He always was a bit off. My son. A bit crazy. Didn't fit in ya know? Crazy'.

The old farmer picked him up from hospital. It was the only number he knew. The Kingswood rattled along a road that cut through the earth westwards. The air grew cold through the vents of the car. The old farmer brought the car to stop at an intersection. The sun was letting its last gasp run sharply across the land, and the farmer held his hand above his eyes as he peered across the intersection 'What happened to ya? he said. He flicked the indicator on. The ute edged into the intersection.

The clicking of the indicator on the ute. Remnant trees on the side of the road brought to light, taken back to darkness. The passenger door creaked open. He staggered out. Peered into the cabin of the other car. The driver was half swallowed, the flesh consumed. Jagged green painted metal showing the steel beneath, mixed with skin, with hair. Blood pooled, dripped onto the bitumen of the road. He stood there a moment. This image alternated in his eyes with darkness. He limped further up the road a few yards, fell over. The indicator still clicking. He looked at the trees in the light of the indicator. He thought they looked beautiful.

Sam Fisher completed a degree in creative writing in 2018. He lives in Preston, where he spends his time making and listening to music, attempting a garden and mostly, procrastinating.

ON PULLING PINTS

by Nathan Power

I pulled a pint at 303 once.

I'm playing a winter residency there to ever-dwindling crowds: week one a decent dozen, week two an adequate handful, week three just my parents and girlfriend.

By the fourth week she's asking *was I going to play the same set again? and would it be alright if she skipped this week?*

We break up that day and I carry my guitar forlornly down the street, past Open Studio and the Wesley Anne and the Social Club, all packed with happy patrons fogging up the front windows and spilling down along the bar. Chatter and chuckles and hot chips, shared amongst friends: balm for a sorry soul.

My lot is to play a forty-five minute set to the bartender who packs it in when he sees I haven't brought any friends and wanders out the front for a smoke. I hear him talking loudly on his phone while he smokes.

Yeah his guitar playing's ok but fuck his songs are shit.

I'm half hoping he'll pack it in some more and hop in his car and drive home, forgetting he'd ever worked at 303, forgetting he'd ever seen me play the same eight songs in the same order with the same tired jokes for four weeks in a row. Maybe he could lock the front doors as he leaves, leaving me trapped inside with enough booze to guarantee a couple of months of liquid solace.

Maybe the owners will forget they own the place and I could re-open it next year as another hip café where the baguettes come served on recycled skateboards and we only play obscure vinyl records by local bands like Zoë Fox and the Rocket Clocks. Instead he wanders back in to the bar and walks up to me mid-song.

Look mate, there's not much point in playing any more. Maybe just have a break, have a beer, we'll see if it picks up later. I pause halfway through an F chord. Or at least finish the song I guess?

By this point my mojo is so far gone that I'm a trembling mess, ready to ooze off stage and down between the cracks into the floorboards, disappear into the bedrock below the building, reincarnate somewhere else in time as a wombat or pied currawong or some other being slightly less than human. Still inquisitive, but just not quite so clever as to assume that I should be trying to craft a folk song or establish a music career or set foot on a stage.

In a rare show of solidarity my atoms hold together and I maintain physical form. Unplug the guitar, put it back in the case, roll up the lead, push the mic stand to the back of stage and go to walk out the door.

Oh you don't have to leave mate, it's fine, have a couple of drinks.

So I do. I start at the tap on the right and have one pint of each. Is it 3 taps? Or 4? Hard to remember. And getting harder each pint I have. I'm assuming at some point I'll have to start paying for them, but while I've got goodwill and a vague sense of guilt coming from him I'll keep sinking them as fast as he pours them. This is in the pre-smartphone age, and it's just me and him and we don't have anything particular to talk about, so I'm literally taking the glass from his hand, pouring it into my mouth in a series of small gulps and then passing the glass back to him.

After one round through the taps I gather up my sense of courage.

So what do you reckon about next week hey?

I feel both the goodwill and vague sense of guilt dissipating.

Look to be honest I don't think it's really worth it for anyone. It's costing us more to have me sitting here behind the bar than it would to just close the joint and not do anything on

Sundays. I see his point, and I'm enough beers down that I don't really want to fight it.

Yeah, that's fair. Can I go one more beer?

One more mate, one more is fine.

He pours me a pint, pulls the tea-towel off his belt and starts to wipe down the bar. Walks out across the band room: wiping down tables, straightening chairs. Steps through the front door, pulls out his cigarettes and phone, lights up and dials a number. He's just far enough away that I can't quite make out what he's saying, but I hear scattered phrases.

Closing early... take the arvo off...

I finish my pint, and walk around behind the bar.

As I'm there behind the taps I look out across the bar and see my friend Tim stroll in.

I didn't realise you were working here? I thought you had a gig.

I pull him a pint.

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

UNWELCOME NEIGHBOURS

by Steph Amir

On the walls of the living room are photos of
Stella cuddling a koala and
Oliver laughing under a flock of rosellas.
On the fridge is
A bright orange clownfish magnet and
A letter from the Australian government
With a kangaroo and emu standing proudly at the top.
On the dresser is
An abalone shell and
A few coins: a lyrebird, an echidna and a platypus.

Russell peers out the window.
Those blasted bats, he mutters
They're eating my nectarines.
Put a net over the tree, says Estelle.
We don't want them in our yard anyway.
Bats can give you AIDS. It's not safe for the kids.
Is it true that bats suck your blood? says Oliver.
That's vampires, says Stella.
Close enough, says Russell
And googles where to buy a net.

In nearby streets, residents list their concerns:

They're too noisy. They're threatening.

They're dirty. They smell bad.

They take up too much space.

They're not consistent with the local character of this neighbourhood.

We don't want neighbours like them.

They should live somewhere else.

And they're destroying the trees.

We have to protect the trees, especially the native trees.

Native species are what makes Australia special.

The grey-headed flying-foxes fly overhead.

Stella sits on the back step

Imagining life before her house was there:

Just eucalypts, wattles and

Lilly pilly berries for bats to eat.

You bats, she thinks. Too furry for a bird,

Not enough legs for a proper mammal and

Sneaking around at night like thieves.

No wonder no one likes you.

You gotta fit in, don't you know?

Stella ducks under the net, grabs an armful of
nectarines,

Quietly emerges, and hides them in the lilly pilly tree.

Looking up at the darkening sky

She whispers:

Don't tell Dad.

Steph Amir is a former zoologist, current statistician, and rookie writer. Her creative work has been published by *Bent Street*, *Archer* and *Melbourne City of Literature*. She lives in Preston.

TOUCHED

by Kaye Roberts-Palmer

Tiny pink nails unfurl, touching
a floating red world breathing
warm liquid life, a pocket cosmos
contained in sunless sleep.

What's the time Mr Wolf?
Players poised, nerves drawn
hearts hammer, muscles tight
sharp touch, all is flight.

Over glossy lips, gliding lipstick,
smuggled touch, shaping secrets
during crowded cubicles
at brief lunch time breaks.

Sun, sand and blue bottled barbs
cling wrap juicy virgin calves
turned prime red cuts, touched
tender, bring the vinegar.

Last kiss before walking away
your solemn touch burned my
skin and tore an unfed heart
now only ruin remains.

Handshake's tough touch to blunt
rough heels, pounding footpaths
and bitten nails, smile worn down
breaking promises, keeping lists.

Dishpan hands, touch chores as
home bones settle and rates rise
duty decays under softened
youth set in memories place.

Touching buttons and screens as
the world closes, becoming dead
but where is your ardent touch
from the dark side of the bed?

Raw hands, split skin, red knuckles
latex blocking micro berserkers,
stranger danger wrapped in plastic
touch off before doomsday begins.

And at the end, your gentle touch
last of all great things, such
unusual, welcome weight
borne all seasons long.

Kaye Roberts-Palmer has been a creative writer for many years and has a passion for poetry, short story and finding the beauty in words.

AJVAR SEASON

by Maggie Jankuloska

Note: Ajvar (pronounced *ay-var*) is a popular side dish and food staple in Macedonia and the rest of the Balkans.

Maggie Jankuloska is a Macedonian-born writer, teacher and mother living in Melbourne's northern suburbs. She has been published in numerous publications, including: *n-SCRIBE*, *The Age*, *SBS Voices* and more.

In the dying days of summer, sacks of bulbous red peppers are carried home, tied to car roof-racks.

A fire is lit outside, the flames stoked. Red peppers blister and pop on top of a hotplate – burning fingertips.

The peppers are peeled by nimble fingers. Women sit on stoops, flicking away pepper skins and seeds, their hands dyed scarlet.

The red pepper flesh is minced and ground until it's a pulpy paste.

Seasoned and doused in oil, it sizzles in an oversized pot on the hotplate.

Night gathers, the balminess of summer is met by the first autumnal chill.

Children linger, lured by the smell. Some just want to stir the ajvar mixture with an oversized paddle. Some want to sneak a taste.

The fire embers dazzle in the night as wisps of smoke swirl.

The neighbours know it's ajvar season, the familiar smell travels from house to house. The smell reminds everyone that it's time

to make their own batch, everyone's recipe being a slight variation.

Hours later, the jars are prepared. Ajvar is scooped in the sterilized jars and sealed. The filled jars will be frozen and opened in winter months, when food is scarce or when dinner isn't quite ready.

Not all the hot ajvar is put aside for winter. Loaves of homemade bread are cut and hot ajvar is slathered on top – a treat at the end of a long day.

The ajvar's redness stains mouths and cheeks.

The fire dies and weary bones rest, ajvar season is complete.

NOVEMBER A FEW YEARS AGO AND STILL

by Camilla Eustance

I was sitting in the fluorescent lights,
no, underneath them.
Definitely underneath them.

With all these others,
a myriad of black sandals /
country road shirts / caps / grey arm hair
and three quarter length cargo pants.

I worried, through my damp socks
hiding the blisters from my shiny damp shoes
that my shorts - also damp -
were too short.

My gold hoops too big,
my achievements too scant
for this serious Crowd.

Gathering in celebration of an archive
of a port who I had never met
and barely knew.

Every time it was time to clap
I lowered my champagne glass
very, very carefully
on to the
wooden floor

Terrified that it would be knocked
out of my hand
by some unknown gust of something,
the air-conditioning, maybe

Or that it would make a
large, clumsy clunk onto the floor

Whilst a sombre voice
read the mumbling, undulating
verse of the dead poet.

Everyone would look at me,

Frowning, perhaps, and
think

What's she doing here?

I stared ferociously at the
corner of the Aboriginal artwork
on the wall, and then the space
between that and the skylight
to keep myself from
emitting anything

A sound, a shuffle, an out-of-place tear

As this man's beautiful words
cut at the angles of the chairs
we were sitting on,

And as both the words
and the downpour I'd been caught in
sank right through my clothes
into my skin.

Camilla Eustance is a Naarm-based freelance illustrator, artist and writer. She has been living and working on Wurundjeri country for seven years. Camilla currently works at The University of Melbourne, having previously worked as head copywriter at Vanity Projects and Sergio Mannino Studio (NYC). She has had pieces published in *Going Down Swinging*, *Forbes*, *Urban Walkabout*, *Broadsheet*, *ScoutJobs* by *Broadsheet*, *Maggie Journal* and *Stylo*.

THE TREADMILL

by Nicholas Ling

A HAIKU FOR MA

by Nicholas Ling

Mum smelled my forehead.
“You still smell like my baby”.
I should visit more.

The more ‘x’ a market has, the less ‘x’ is worth to that market. It’s why selling seashells by the seashore is not only difficult to say, but also difficult to pitch to prospective shareholders, even if you do manage to get tribute band BABBA to perform ‘Money Money Money’ during your presentation. This is a lesson the Mugabe government learned the hard way during the hyperinflation crisis of the early 2000’s when they began printing Scrooge McDuck amounts of money to combat Zimbabwe’s failing economy. And then there was the 100-trillion-dollar bill which has a current estimated value of about a half-eaten packet of Chicken Twisties. The 100-trillion-dollar bill is one of the many basically worthless things left behind by Robert Mugabe who always struck me as the sort of man who would cut his newborn in half so he could have twins. But I’m not here to disparage deceased world leaders, per se. I’m here to, much like the music of Katy Perry; shallowly comment on the human condition in a demonstratively unqualified manner. And you’re gonna hear me roar.

I’m heading to my home in Northcote. It’s peak-hour on Hoddle Street or as my housemate’s and I call it, ‘The Treadmill’. I look around at the other drivers, releasing the brake then pressing the brake, releasing, pressing, releasing, pressing, as if we’re all participating in the least exciting Survivor challenge ever. Occasionally, the frustration becomes too much and a synapse of decency will snap, throwing me into a seismic rage. “You absolute chode!” I bravely whisper with my windows up and without moving my lips. “What’s your rush, Ford Falcon with a Monster Energy Drink bumper sticker? I suppose you’ve got to get home quickly so you can actively *not* hug your children”. I’ve been known to project. “And what does *this* botched vasectomy want?” I mumble to another driver like a phallus-centric ventriloquist. “Okay, Hyundai Getz with solar-powered sunflower bobble heads on the dashboard, I’m sure your thirty-seven rescue cats aren’t dying to hear the next chapter of your Grant Denyer-based erotic fiction novella”. I say all of this knowing full well that the only thing waiting for *me* at home is a Lite ‘n’ Easy microwave meal for one and a David Foster Wallace novel that I will read two lines of before calling my dad and hoping he uses the word ‘proud’ in any context.

Nicholas Ling is a Disability Support Worker living in Northcote. He likes to climb trees but is afraid of heights. His work has been published in *The Canary Press*.

As I sit in my car handing out free roasts like a soup kitchen at Christmas, I start to view myself and the other drivers as those 100-trillion-dollar bills, spilling out of our labial ATMs, each one more worthless than the next. The only difference between us and those bills is that we, no matter how little we contribute to society, are likely to overestimate our own value. Hence the unjustified classist tone often heard in the voice of professional athletes at press conferences, or employees of The Body Shop when they insist that 'the testers are for everyone' and 'you shouldn't even be moisturising your feet in the store'. But a lot of people need to feel like they are important and that their work is incomplete in order to carry on. Some use charity work as a well of self-worth, and some rely on the well of materialism. Either way, they all chase the carrot not because they lack nutrition, but because they like to chase things. In the event that they do get the carrot, there'd be nothing left to do but twiddle their thumbs and wait for death. At which point they'd probably YouTube thumb twiddling tutorials and purchase some ergonomic thumb gloves to make their thumbs more 'twiddle-able'. Anything to run out the clock, really.

And why do we shame the ambitionless thumb-twiddler who thirsts for neither philanthropy nor materialism? Has it become so socially unacceptable to simply *endure* life that we are now expected to *enjoy* it? That's a lot of pressure to put on a bit of barely self-aware carbon. What if I don't care for enjoyment? What if I just want to be and then stop being? And if the social pressures aren't bad enough, manning the megaphone of how we ought to be living are the peddlers of platitudes; advertising companies. Advertising is inescapable. Billboards, podcasts, the sides of trams, at this rate, my tombstone is likely to be sponsored by some sort of dry shampoo company reading 'He may be dead and limp, but your roots don't have to be!'. It's not a setting we can toggle on or off, advertising is and always has just been here, everywhere, like clouds or pungent lavender bushes with bees in them. And that's fine; advertising can be a wonderful thing, it's just that a lot of it isn't. Overfunded political campaigns under the guise of justice, underfed models under the guise of health, it can sometimes seem that mass discontent is what *really* stimulates an economy.

Forgotten pop singer Sandi Thom may have pined for the 60's and 70's but I don't think she went far back enough. Take me back to the birth of humankind, the good old days when you could eat some dubious green goop you found on the floor, fornicate in a cave, and then slowly pass out on a jagged rock only to wake up to a pack of wolves playing tug-of-war with your kidneys. Oh, I wish I was a troglodyte with faeces in my hair. It would be much better than being here in this ebb and flow of advertising and traffic, feeling like 100 trillion bucks.

ZEUS

by Justin Walshaw

"Zeus" is branded across
 The backpack of the guy
 Two seats up.
 The Greek God of backpacks.
 Fuck I think I missed my station.
 Oh, I didn't.
 It's Friday and I'm too tired
 To even install the app that
 Will finish writing this poem.
 The sun is setting
 But it's nice and warm
 Like the cashmere arm of
 The stranger next to me.
 We share this moment
 And grind our teeth together.

Justin Walshaw is a NZ born writer who has lived in Melbourne for three years.

A SPACE FOR EVERYONE

by Kathryn James

Preston Market does not make our Saturday morning (pre-COVID) visit easy. The first obstacle is the car park, snarled with traffic. With no clear walkways to the safety of the sprawling complex, I grip my son's hand tightly and we dodge the cars darting towards parking spots. Once we're inside the concrete and metal structure, there's no obvious path to take. One dim corridor leads to the shops hawking cheap clothes and cookware, another to Aldi. Pungent fishy smells escape from behind glass doors. There are distractions everywhere: my son pulls towards a gaudy ride-on car, but I steer us firmly through the crowds. Past the fragrant flower stall, through the pizza and takeaway stands, past the jangling old piano.

Our destination is the spine of the building, a lattice of walkways lined with fruit and vegetable stalls, bakeries and coffee shops. Rafters support the sheds; tent-like opaque plastic lets in light, though on rainy days water drips through the gaps. Bountiful piles of colour are everywhere: plump tomatoes, glossy nectarines, cauliflowers in nests of green leaves. Weekend shoppers swirl around dozens of stalls, each offering a different balance between price and quality. Go cheap, and you'll pick through decaying capsicums. Choose quality, and you risk paying three dollars for an avocado.

Elderly Chinese women trundle their shopping jeeps over the concrete, sternly sniffing mangoes. Couples debate dinner party ingredients while queueing for sourdough. As I join them my son disappears briefly, and I dump my unpurchased bread on the counter, dash around calling his name. When he reappears the attendant smiles, sharing my relief.

Why have I braved Preston Market with a distractible seven-year-old, on a crowded Saturday no less, when we could be at the manicured supermarket across the road? Because it's an adventure. Because the bunches of basil are so fresh that I'm drawn to crush one and release the aniseed aroma. Because amidst the bustle, nobody is bothered by my son's loud inquisitiveness, or cares when he samples the tiny sweet grapes. The woman serving us beams indulgently and reaches under the counter when he demands a glove despite my embarrassed scolding. I ask how long she's worked here. "Five year already, I don't believe it!" Five years of standing at a tiny register packing bags, potatoes on the bottom, strawberries on the top.

The magic of the market is that in a suburb full of disconnected tribes – the post-war European migrants, more recent arrivals settling close to the mosque, hip families looking for leafy backyards – it provides a space we can all share. Everyone is welcome, and the drudgery of shopping becomes a social experience. Yes, you need a little money; but the food is cheap and nobody will comment if you sit in ugg boots at a chipped table for hours. Old Greek men sip soft drinks through straws, beside Islander families catching up over chicken and chips. Tired parents drink coffee, canvas bags piled on prams, their children savaging croissants or covered in sugar from the legendary jam donuts.

But the market's future is uncertain. Opened in 1970 on a former tannery location, the Preston Market site was purchased by its current owners in 2004 for nearly \$37 million. Controversy has raged since about their plans to erect 14-storey apartment towers. A 'Save our Preston Market' group formed, its members fuming when the council decided not to seek heritage listing for the precinct. Meanwhile

Kathryn James is a writer living in Darebin. She is studying Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT University.

the developers promise they will provide affordable housing. The ageing site does need a facelift, but I don't want redevelopment to destroy our Saturday morning adventures. Will the community lose the magic of a place that welcomes everyone?

Our shopping is done, but the savoury smells overwhelm me and I spend my last ten dollars on cheesy burek, clutching its warmth in my fist. As we take our haul back to the car, seagulls caw and swoop around the bright murals, diving into the dumpsters for scraps of fish. Preston Market is messy, raw, imperfect, but it's ours. It's real.

Preston Market Update: Council has new comprehensive heritage advice that recommends heritage protection. The City of Darebin wrote to the Victorian Planning Minister in May 2020 asking him to apply a heritage overlay to the market building.

A REQUIEM FOR TOUCH

by Joel Bray

I sit.
look.
At the screen.
The angle is wrong; all double chin and exposed incisors.
Change the angle.
Better.
Your throat appears, an enormous fist fumbles with an unseen keyboard.
The picture lurches and your face appears.
Unheard words evaporate from moving lips.
"I can't hear you", I shout at the screen as if that would make any difference at all.

Your voice materialises, booms through my shitty speakers.
The sound frays and shatters at its peak
"How about now?"
I pump the F11 key frantically

You are there. Your face is there, and your voice is there.
But none of it is here.
You and your face and your voice.
Broken down into zeros and ones, scrambled and spat out into the ether and re-assembled at my end into...what?
You?
No. It's not.
It's a facsimile of you.
I am present in your absence.

We wrangle our way through a conversation.
Glitches and delays.
I laugh at your joke, but you have already moved on.
"Say that again? Sorry, I lost you"
Um, it doesn't matter now.

My eyes tire, my thoughts wander, a facebook notification pulls my attention.
I miss you. I miss YOU. The you that my skin remembers, the you that, if I *really* concentrate I can taste on my lips. You in all your three-dimensional glory. You smelling of coffee and the cigarette you "didn't have".
The scrabbly bristling of hairs under chin,
A rubbery earlobe pulled and bouncing back into place,
The whispery down of hair on nape of neck,
The hardness of tailbone disappearing into the fleshiness of ass-cheeks, And brittle collarbones vanishing into hard shoulder muscle.

Your hands. God I how I miss your hands.
I remember how I would place one palm over my mouth and nose, fingertips caressing eye sockets. How I would inhale you. I remember every crease and knuckle, How your fingers would curl into mine, just so.

We sign off. "Chat tomorrow?" Lean in for our customary kiss. Enormous lips leer into camera. We both pretend it's sexy. We both know it's not. The screen freezes with your face locked in bewilderment as you try to turn the damn thing off.

Joel Bray is a Wiradjuri performance-maker and writer whose work engages with the entangled songlines of his Indigeneity and Queer sexuality.

THE SHEIKH

by Suzette Mitchell

My daughter is embarrassed by me. She is 8. Since she was seven I have had to drop her at the entrance to the school so I wouldn't speak to any of the other mums or dads. Even on the walk to school she would emphatically state: "mummy, don't talk to anyone, don't say anything". I felt like a pariah. But on her birthday I took a cake to school to share with the class, and all seemed wondrous. Everyone had a good time, and it seemed my behavior was acceptable until the teacher asked her what she wanted for the next year. I am a highly paranoid mother and often think I don't ask the right questions from an age-appropriate level for an 8 year-old so I was pleased as punch that I had asked her the previous night what her dreams were for the next year. Feeling a bit chuffed that obviously I am on the right track with the child-asking question line I interjected excitedly "Hey Vy, we talked about that last night, tell them what you told me." Her eyes turned to me in a serious angry squint with a comment of "No, mummy, that is not for school", at which moment I realized I was one of those overbearing mums and perhaps she didn't want the boys to know that she sees herself as a world champion hula-hooper and a global popstar. Despite this hiccup, and various poor jokes that slide so easily from my tongue, I thought I traversed the interaction safely.

So the next morning as we were about to do our unsaid farewells, a nod of the head, indicating "this is where you leave me without any comments mum", I told her I wanted to go up and thank the teacher for the little birthday session. All good. No abnormal mothering, straight and clear, "thanks for making it a special day" and off I went. Just before leaving one of the other mums approached me and said "We are leaving now, you won't see us again, tomorrow we go to Stockholm." I only thought it an appropriate human response to ask why and the mum said "my husband is sheikh". It is moments like this that I think I am so lucky to live in such a multicultural community. She is Spanish, her son is Asian, I had never seen her child's dad, so now I picture the house with Arabian carpets, Turkish tea cups, multi-faceted coloured glass lanterns mixed with flamenco music, rich bright embroidery and gorgeous pottery. I don't know why my mind goes to these things, but it does.

Ever since I was a child whenever I meet an interesting person I can't wait to see how their house is decorated. Anyway, my head is buzzing with thoughts of how I have never seen a sheikh around here, I didn't know there were any, am I naive, what does he do here? Probably investment banking. I have been standing there for two minutes, picturing her and her husband reclining with shisha pipes, so I blurt out "I didn't know your husband was a sheikh, that is so fantastic, wow, really amazing". Now I wish I got to know them better, they seem so interesting, but why do I suddenly think because he is a sheikh he is more interesting than the average person? Maybe he is really boring, and I never go out anyway, and when I do I don't really talk to people, so why do I lament not knowing he was a sheikh earlier?

And off to Stockholm, I just didn't picture sheikhs in Stockholm either but I guess they are everywhere; maybe they wear jeans when they are out on the weekend, why not? "And Stockholm, wow, so he will be a sheikh in Stockholm?" She seemed a bit distracted by me now, and I see the other mums laughing in the corner. My first reaction is that they are laughing at me but I convince myself they have probably just shared a joke or talking about their kids. "No, go tomorrow" she responded in her broken English. I often find that translation and thick accents make for stilted conversations so I continue, this time trying to talk slower with more simple questions "it must be amazing to be married to a sheikh".

At this point the teacher comes up as the mum seems visibly perturbed. “Suzette, I hate to interrupt, but I need to tell you her husband is sick, he is not a sheikh.” Jesus, seriously? I stood there dumb founded, confirming all my daughter’s fears that I am unable to function in a conversation with another adult. I stood there not knowing where to start, retracing my steps in my head and I suddenly hugged her, tightly, like she was a close friend, not someone whose house I had suck into in my head over the past five minutes. “I am so sorry. I hope he gets better really soon.” I look to her son, knowing I need to acknowledge him as well before I run down the stairs and out of the building. “Have a great life little man.” Seriously, they were my words. Then a parting “lots of love to all the family”, then I was off on my broomstick, determined to blow my daughter a kiss from the school steps the next morning and forever after and keep it at that.

Suzette Mitchell is a gender and intersectionality specialist who spent 11 years working for the United Nations in Vietnam. This is where she gave birth and raised her daughter for the first eight years of her life. The school discussed in her piece is an international school in Hanoi. She returned to live in Preston five years ago, where occupational health and safety and food allergies is much more rigorous and taking birthday cakes into classrooms is not possible.

SMALLNESS

by Nathan Mifsud

Through dark fields, delirious, Carmel ran towards a constellation in the woods, the tell-tale light signature of massive, distant balls of plasma spanning trillions of kilometres. He reached the tree line and dived, literally dived into space—but choked, twined in fishing thread dotted with false stars, LEDs pinging to the dirt—

His eyes snapped open. A dim bedroom resolved itself. Carmel could see his feet, cold and bare beyond the blanket that had snaked around his body. *I need to get out of this place*, he thought.

Over a bowl of oats, Carmel pondered his dream. He looked up the Sun. Apparently, its diameter was 109 Earths—average, as stars go; an insect beside Rigel, or Betelgeuse. Wikipedia was derisive: *The Sun does not have enough mass to explode as a supernova.*

But its enormity was sufficient to elude his mind’s grasp. The largest bodies in the universe remained abstract, bereft of real emotional power.

He carried the French press to the porch, warm in the slanted rays, but not comfortable. His muscles were tight; his clothes felt a size too small. Fatima soon announced herself with a squeal of brakes. She looked a sight

in her watermelon-print helmet, curly mane cascading over pink scrubs. “Yo!”

“Big shift?” Carmel asked, pouring her a coffee.

“Nah, thank God,” she replied, sinking into the couch beside him. “I still need this, though.” She cradled the warmth of her mug. “Been up long?”

“A while. I didn’t sleep well,” he said. “I feel like the house is shrinking.”

Fatima nudged his knee. “You good?”

“Oh, yeah... I’m OK,” he mumbled.

“I should go for a run.”

**

“The creek’s never been so packed,” Donya complained, ducking a branch. “Hey, you there?” She pulled her mask down, pressed the phone’s cool glass harder against her cheek. “Jules?”

“Yeah, sorry. Had to sign for a delivery. You walking the dog?”

“Always, girl. Always. What’s in the box?”

“I bought a spare headtorch, a Petzl.

So light. 26 grams, with—”

“26 grams? Damn!”

“Yeah, it’s perfect for emergencies. Oh,

and I got a tub of powdered peanut butter too, and uh, some dried kidney beans.”

“Gross—hang on.” Donya gripped the leash, looked both ways. The city’s towers shimmered in the distance, out of reach. “Peach has a knack for resisting on the exact turns that will bring us home. She realises we’re circling back before I do.”

Jules chuckled. “She wants to piss on different poles. I get it. I’ve been going a bit stir-crazy myself.”

“When are you two taking off, anyway?”

“January. It’ll be hot, but Carmel is keen to go while we can. Y’know, he’s had a bad time since his hours were cut.”

“Shit, yeah. A break will be good.”

Jules hesitated. “Hey, remember that hike we all did, on the Citadel...”

“With Fatima and the rest? That was a *cold* night.”

“Freezing. And Fatima and Astrid braved it up top cos there was no room in the cave. Lucky for them it didn’t rain! But I... what was I saying? I dreamt about that trip last night. I pictured us huddled around the campfire, snug as anything, all looking at the sky. The stars felt so close, then, so dense—I mean, it was beautiful.”

“Mmm. We were hours from the nearest town.”

“In my dream, I became a giant, like, taller than a mountain. I stood up and brushed my head against a velvet ceiling and I was so clumsy, so unused to my big body that I knocked the stars down and they scattered all around me.”

“Hectic,” Donya laughed.

“Yeah. It felt like I was floating in a pool of light. It was wild in real life too, though. I remember being awestruck the next day when we climbed back onto the plateau, y’know, checked Fatima and Astrid were still alive, and we stood brushing our teeth together like any other morning, peering over the cliff into endless forest.”

Donya paused. “We summited at sunset, right? I guess the morning let you appreciate the view properly.”

“Yeah, maybe. I think...” Jules reached for the right words. “I think it was because we

were *above* everything else on the horizon. That’s a unique feeling, y’know, inescapable.” She paused again. “Like, the stars are easy to overlook. The remnants we see are so divorced from their overwhelming physical reality. We forget how they’re actually turbulent, fiery beings.”

*
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Jules looked at Carmel’s back wheel as it bounced along the trail, then down at her handlebars, tendons corrugating the top of her hands, fingertips purpled by cherries.

“This shortcut is rough as hell!” Carmel yelled.

Their shadows lengthened. Seeking the coast, they navigated through wide suburban streets until they found an outpost of greenery and indulgent curve of white beach. They pitched their tent and then their bodies into the ocean, a slate plane shattered by shining limbs.

“Unreal,” Jules said. “This is better than I expected.”

“The best.”

Later, the unhurried motions of camp cooking proceeded by the red gleam of their headlamps. As the pot bubbled, Carmel’s arm took aim at the firmament, where there were tiny dots of light moving in unerring lines. “Look, you can see satellites!”

“Whoa,” Jules murmured. “I’ve never noticed them before.”

They appeared exactly like stars but traced the sky at a constant speed, like planes with their aviation signals extinguished. Sometimes there were a few satellites in one region, and as they watched, two met head on—only to continue in their paths, their different orbits revealed.

Jules felt vanishingly small. The sensation was abrupt, like the dive she’d taken into icy seawater an hour earlier; similar, too, in the eventual suffusion of uncertain warmth, as if she’d never become truly acclimatised and may need to abandon the attempt at any moment. She struggled in silence with her emotions. They were a curious mix: part dread—the whiff of dystopia, where even this beach hideaway could be surveilled; part nostalgia—for what,

exactly? An imaginary, simpler past? Or for the present, this moment soon to pass?

She changed tack; tried to marvel at the structure of a network underlying modern society laid bare, the scale of human ingenuity and ambition, but instead, Jules was flooded with despair. This, in the end, was all it took for her to shiver with insignificance: the glint of metal from a distance.

Suddenly, she laughed, taking Carmel aback. "What's so funny?"

"Just..." Jules waved her hand. "All this chafing against the strictures of the pandemic,

but we're still trapped on this rock."

Carmel smiled. "I feel that."

After dinner, Jules lay down and nestled against a pillow of bunched clothes. On her back, eyes open, she listened to Carmel's breaths, the dull crashing of waves. A thin layer of polyester separated them from the stars. She rolled over, unzipped the vestibule and fly, and poked her head into the cold air outside the tent to search the thickets of white pinpricks. None of them moved. The artificial spectres of her inspection hurtled unseen through the shadow of the earth. She lay back down, no less unsettled for their sudden disappearance.

Nathan Mifsud is a writer and scientist best known to his neighbours as the companion of a crook-tailed greyhound.

THE RAT IN MY TENT

by Carly Sheehan

The rat in my tent thundered around underneath my cot bed, somehow avoiding the light of my torch as I flashed it around every so often, trying to catch sight of it. Even though one of the two zippered entrance flaps on the tent was broken, I still couldn't quite figure out how the enormous beast got in every night to torment me. The pop-up mosquito dome which rested on top of the cot, which I zipped myself into, prevented the beast from touching me. It did not, however, prevent the thought that I would contract leptospirosis, spread by rat urine, though I found no traces of rat urine in my tent. It was strange to have been preoccupied with leptospirosis, when the risk of catching malaria was far higher, hence the mosquito net, the anti-malarial tablets I took mechanically at the same time each morning, and the extra strength DEET repellent

which was so thick and sticky that, when combined with the dirt and my flip flops, my feet were never clean.

It also seemed silly to be concerned about leptospirosis when there was Ebola one kilometre down the road. I wasn't afraid of catching Ebola. The doctors and nurses who lived alongside me in the tent camp were scared, and rightly so, but I wasn't planning on touching anybody with Ebola. In fact, I'd signed a special Code of Conduct agreeing to not touch anybody at all for three months, so the chance of me contracting the virus were beyond infinitesimally small.

The Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone had become overwhelming in September/October 2014. I arrived in February 2015, and after a few days in Freetown I headed for Koinadugu district in the north. It was a bumpy drive from Kabala, the district capital, to the tent camp

outside Kumala, a little village in the middle of nowhere. The roads had disappeared into dirt early on, the pot holes were enormous, and the bridges were precariously arranged tree trunks balanced over dry creek beds. The rainy season wouldn't start for another couple of months, but even in winter the temperature was generally above 35 degrees Celsius. I'd take the heat and dusty, sandy ground over rain and mud any day.

Every morning I'd wake up early, it was still cool at that time, just before the sunrise. I slept in half of a tunnel tent, the type favoured by the UN to house refugees in other disasters, which I couldn't stand up straight in. I'd position myself over the single tap stationed outside the showers and latrines, simple wooden frames wrapped in tarpaulins, and splash cold water on my face. This was

the time I'd get a lot of work done, the quiet hour and a half before the rest of my team started appearing, shuttling from tent to 'bathroom' to tent. It was also the best time of day to download emails, as the satellite connection would struggle when more than a couple of people were connected.

The breakfast bell would ring around seven, and we'd all head for the "Dinning Tent" as it had been labelled in black spray paint on the outside. I'd wash my hands from the buckets containing chlorinated water, keeping my feet back from the water splattering on the dirt underfoot, and step into the tent. There was ugali, a stodgy cereal and sauce, but for most of the non-Africans, there was usually a bread roll and some jam, perhaps an egg, but it was nothing to get too excited about. Most of my team would wolf down as much as they could, pile into the four-wheel drives and head out for the day, leaving me in the camp.

When I'd had enough of sitting at my laptop, I'd walk down to the village to check on the construction we were doing. The sight of me, a white woman, emerging along the dirt road at the edge of the village from the seven-foot-high greenery, which was turning brown as the dry season dragged on, never got old amongst the children in Kumala.

The cry of "*Tubabu*" (white person) would start up at the edge of the village and kids would run out from all directions to shout and wave at me, and in some cases, cry in terror at the sight of me. I'd chat to the bigger kids who would practice their English and the smaller ones would try to join in.

"Tubabu, how are you?"

"I am fine, how are you?"

I would reply.

"I am fine, how are you?" they would parrot back, and we would all laugh. It was moments like those that kept my spirits up, as the tiredness had set into my bones and I knew it must be showing on my face, but I tried to keep it to myself. I never got Ebola, nor leptospirosis, but I did manage to contract malaria upon returning to Freetown.

Five years later, I am once again right in the middle of a health crisis, but this time, the entire world is in it with me. Instead of managing teams of engineers and public health promoters, I'm sitting on my couch, staying home, doing my part to stop the spread. My mind boggles that 'stop the spread', the slogan we had used in the Ebola response, is now something I hear in my everyday suburban life in Reservoir.

In 2015, after I'd returned home and life moved on around me,

I found myself talking often to friends who'd also deployed to Sierra Leone or Liberia, as there were certain things that people who hadn't worked in an Ebola response couldn't understand; that the constant threat of sickness bubbled under the surface of the entire population, or that the inability to give or receive a hug to a colleague who was having a hard day was almost akin to torture. I never expected that I would experience the same thing in 2020 in Melbourne; that my friends and family interstate would never really understand what it was like to live in Stage 4 lockdown. The linkages I could draw between my time in Sierra Leone, and my life in Melbourne are constantly revealing.

On days I wake up tired I console myself that I couldn't possibly be as tired as I had been in Kumala. On days I am stressed, I remember the night I didn't sleep, couldn't sleep, physically ill from the stress of a bad decision. And every so often, when life in Resa lockdown is starting to feel a bit too much, I remember that on one of my last nights in that tent in Kumala, almost broken from lack of sleep and stress, I finally caught sight of the gigantic rat with my torch beam. My arch nemesis was in fact, a tiny mouse; I would survive.

Carly Sheehan is a humanitarian aid advisor for an international charity and has drafted two novels and a screenplay but not managed to revise any of them. Her poem "*Resa*" was included in *n-SCRIBE 14* and she remains firm that Reservoir should be pronounced "Reser-vwar not Reser-vor".

WARATAH

by Anders Villani

There might be nothing to guard,
little brother. No wisecracks in the walled city.
No quartz in the aquifers.

Nintendo helpline, troubleshoots
screamed up the hall—\$4.95 per minute.

Sour of glasses dried overnight
on warped chopping boards, slick with sponged meat.
Rat flourishment through plaster.

Caves, volcanos. The last boss.
My hands freeing us.

They might call me ingenuous
for speaking with you here, facing
you. But they forget. They forget.

Where else would we?
I in my animal skins, you in your animal skins.

You might never heal, and I might
refuse that, ergo this
walled present.

This walled Friday you come round
and there's no think. Nameless men watching
them catch—waratah logs

no longer eyelid-pink and dewed
at the core, yet to hollow, no longer unlatched
from the sun chain they need.

For Aden

Anders Villani holds an MFA from the University of Michigan's Helen Zell Writers' Program. His first poetry collection, *'Aril Wire,'* was released in 2018 by Five Islands Press.

ABDULLAH'S GARDEN

by Jake Kite

It rained all night
over Abdullah's garden.
It rained blood
and pooled there, slick.
Slow from the north
came heavy clouds armoured,
spilling from them
gore, fetid and thick.
The fruits are gone
from Abdullah's garden.
Bark stripped clean
off each downed tree.
Ruined are the seeds
he had lovingly planted,
while toiling bent
over hand and knee.
Blood soaked all the earth
of Abdullah's garden
and stained the soil
with deep tones of death.
But still there resist
a great many standing
roses in bloom,
all black and red.

Jake Kite is an amateur writing living in Darebin, about 50m from the Merri Creek. His works have been published in *Jacobin*, *n-Scribe*, and *Quarterly Access*. He is yet to write a good bio.

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

bacon. by Tahlia Palmer
coffee.
pasta flour – tipo 00.
nice things for Nick.
draw meat.
gaadhaay (ghost)
four things,
four brooms.
cling wrap a horse,
paint it.
gali (water, rain, tear)
Lamley.
adjustable wrench pop.
The Diggers Club.
Art in the Age of Mass Media.
buy that new Gary Foley book from store down the road.
contact rubber stamp guy.
misc. soil.
imagine being able to see all times at once, in one place.
would you hear it all at once?
would it touch you all at once?
dhama-li (feel/touch)
yarrbun (very tired/exhausted)
plunger.
milk.
drag name:
Menny Millenia.
“Bludso” as a surname.
garlic.
tin foil.
dog meat.
giili-y (urinate)
guna (faeces)
all centrelink payments need to be permanently raised above poverty line.
radio show name idea:
“Affordable Wool for Aspirational Back-To-The-Land Family”
Brisbane Cemetery video: part one ends approx. 4:07ish.
peach sours.
granitic intrusion.
changing position.
yilaadhu (now (immediately), today)

Tahlia Palmer is an interdisciplinary artist and amateur gardener. Her writing work has previously been published in the *Cordite Poetry Review* under pseudonym “Laura Fern”.

THE TABLE

by Jessica Carey

"Nonno?"

"Ahhh! Bambola!"

I'm 34 years old, and my grandfather still refers to me as his doll. I'll never get sick of that. I hug him hello, smelling his aftershave and the freshly cut grass on him; I promise to return to him and his garden after I've gone inside to say hello to my grandmother.

"Nonna? I'm here..."

"Bamboletta!"

Her little doll. I'll never get sick of that, either. It's only 12:30pm, but Nonna is already preparing dinner; Italian women take feeding their family as seriously as a surgeon approaches his next patient. I hug her hello, too, and notice her shiny, white crepe top is somehow still pristine, despite the absence of an apron while she's in such close proximity to a pot of rich, red tomato sauce bubbling away on the stove. I'm five meters away from it, but I can already smell how sweet it is.

"Qualcosa da mangiare."

"Thanks, Nonna."

It's not a question; she's already moving towards the bread on the kitchen counter. She doesn't ask if I want something to eat, it's just assumed that I will. That's all I've ever known, that's how these wonderful, generous people provide

a place of meeting and refuge, to everyone from the priests at their parish to the local policemen doing the neighbourhood rounds. Everyone is important, everyone is worthy, everyone is welcomed into their home and invited to take a seat at their table to be fed.

Nonna moves around the kitchen with surprising grace, and prepares a perfectly provincial Italian lunch for me. As she hacks into the warm loaf of freshly baked bread with a dull knife, she launches into a story about the food she used to prepare for my dad and aunt when they were younger, occasionally chuckling to herself at the thought of the memories. Switching from a strong southern Italian dialect to strained English and back again, she's smiling and her eyes are twinkling like a much younger woman as she talks with love about the way she fed her family and friends, and even complete strangers, with whatever they had. There were lean years back in Italy, and there wasn't always a lot to go around, but that didn't matter. What counted was that the table was refuge after a long day of hard work, and that even the smallest morsel of food became a magnificent feast when shared with others. She reminds me of an Italian proverb I read years ago: "a tavola, nessun diventa vecchia" - at the table, no one grows old.

With a small sigh that indicates she's finally satisfied with her offerings, she brings over a shiny white plate with an enormous, glossy red tomato picked from her vegetable patch earlier that morning and gently places a sharp knife next to it. A torn sheet of glossy waxed paper holds a few slices of just-sliced prosciutto- it's been sitting in their garage, curing for months. And a wooden board, rough from thousands of knife cuts over the years, is piled high with that bread my grandfather baked a few hours ago. It's soft and fluffy inside, with a crunchy crust that can cut the roof of your mouth open if you're not careful.

"Thank you, Nonna, it looks great!"

"Mangia, mangia!"

Eat, eat. I notice her glance at me with a smile as I dig into this simple little meal she's prepared for me before she turns back to her pot of sauce. Everything homemade and home grown, placed so carefully before me with hands rough and wrinkled from the years of feeding family and strangers alike, all with equal amounts of love. I start slicing into the tomato, juice running down my wrists, as I hear Nonno making his way to the door to see what's keeping me from his garden.

Jessica Carey is a writer, amateur photographer, traveller and story teller. She's been blogging for several years and has had work featured in several travel publications.

ISO WALKS WITH 4YO A

by Megan Howden

'No Mummy not another walk.'

'Scooter ride?'

'I don't want to ride it ever again.'

Miss A. I feel you, but I need to get out. 'Won't be a long walk. Let's make it a mission.'

'A mission. Like stealing succulents from people's gardens?'

'Cuttings. We took some cuttings.' Wrapping the baby in his blanket and securing him in the pram, 'Why don't we count all the animals we see today?'

'No. We act-tu-all-ly did that yesterday.'

'Come on. Baby O is getting restless.'

'I need to go to the toilet.'

'Right.' Pushing the pram back and forth I attempt to settle O. 'Come on, shoes on. Your brother's restless.'

'I just need my bunnies.'

'Okay. Put them in the bottom of the pram.'

'A, shoes.'

'I need my water bottle.'

'Sure, put it on the pram, but quick.'

'I don't know where it is.'

'Did you take it into your bedroom?'

'Silly mummy. It was just in the bathroom the whole time. Act-tu-all-ly I might have needed a drink on the toilet.'

'Right, well let's go.' Pulling on my facemask and checking I have the keys.

'I need a jacket.'

'It's not cold enough for a jacket today.' Levering the pram over the threshold, O is now red-faced and agitated.

'I. Just. Want. My. Jacket.'

'Grab it then,' I unhook A's helmet from the handlebars of her scooter as I coo at the baby.

'It's too hot in my jacket. I'll just put it inside.'

'NO! Put it under the pram in case you change your mind.' I jiggle the pram. 'What are you doing down there A?'

'I'm just tucking my baby bunnies in for the ride.'

'Here, put your helmet on.'

'It doesn't fit mummy. It's just uncomfortable.'

'Your ponytail is in the way. I'll loosen it.'

'Don't take it out!'

'I'm not.'

'You're hurting my chin.'

'A, if you'd stop talking it wouldn't pinch your chin. Stay. Still. Right, let's go. Sorry O.' The baby is now crying. I click the remote to the garage door.

'I WANTED TO PUSH THE BUTTON!'

I close the roller door and hand over the remote.

A pushes the button. Flinging the remote back at me, 'Beat you.' She scoots ahead onto the driveway. 'Act-tu-all-ly I'm just checking the letterbox mummy.'

'Let's do it on the way back. We can take the mail straight inside.'

She's already unhinged the letterbox and discovered there's no mail. There is, however, a dead beetle.

'I'm just getting some flowers for my friend.'

'Let's just go A. I've got to get your brother moving.'

A finds some dandelions for her beetle. Overtired and fed up the baby has finally succumbed to his misery and is screaming. Wheeling the pram onto the footpath and calling out behind me, 'Bet you can't catch us.'

A casually glides beside me, 'Uh baby O is always crying. He's just hurting my ears.'

*

'What do you think the lady has put in the garden today?' There's a house on Tennyson street with a front garden dedicated to the amusement of bored children. A wooden rainbow, an assortment of stuffed animals and most recently she's begun laminating pictures and stringing them up.

'Green sheep, she was here yesterday. Hello, big teddy.' A is peering through the railing. She gasps, 'Mummy, dinosaur pictures.'

'Oh my goodness. They look amazing A. Which is your favourite?' I pull the pram up beside her and admire the artwork.

'The triceratops.' I can see her assessing all the dinosaurs, 'Act-tu-all-ly, I just think I like the pterodactyl the best.' Abandoning her scooter, she flaps her arms and pretends she's flying along the footpath.

Pushing the pram with one hand and dragging the scooter behind me, A is waiting patiently at the next intersection, flapping and squawking.

'Mummy, do you remember what the dinosaurs were like?'

Returning her scooter to her and checking for cars we proceed across the street. 'What do you mean?'

'I. Just. Mean. What. Were. They. Like?'

'A they're extinct. That means they don't exist any more. They died a really, really, long time ago. Like, 65 million years ago.'

'Oh.'

We cross the next road.

'Mummy, do you think pop could show me a photo of one?'

'What?' I consider attempting the extinction explanation again. 'You know what, you should ask him.'

'I will,' A zooms along the footpath.

*

I've just finished rubbing A's knee and wiping the tears from her eyes. I don't understand how she managed to crash the scooter. The pavement is dead flat without obstructions.

'How'd you do that?'

'Act-tu-all-ly, I was just scooting with my eyes closed,' she announces as she closes them once more and pushes off.

'Well, that's not a great idea is it!' I call after her. Unlocking the pram break, I have to power walk to catch up to her. She's squinting now. Refusing to concede that riding a scooter with her eyes shut is anything less than an excellent idea.

'Hey mummy,' she stops the scooter right in front of the pram.

I maneuver the pram around her, 'Yes?'

'When, in a few days, I'm as big as you.'

'In a few days?'

'Yeah. I'm going to buy my own property to live in.'

'Are you A? Well, I'll miss you.'

She thinks for a moment, lazily maneuvering the scooter in zigzags beside me. 'I'll still come visit, okay?'

'Well, that sounds good A. Are you going to live all by yourself?'

'No, Nathanael can live with me.'

'Nathanael?'

'Yes, mummy. He will be a good daddy. We'll have sooooo many children. He'll just be the daddy and I'll be the mummy.'

'Sounds like you've got it all sorted out then.'

'Yes, I do.'

*

'Mummy, look, loooooook.'

I'm about ten meters behind A and walking as fast as I can to the telephone pole that she's jumping up and down beside.

'Why is there a cat on here? What's it say?'

There is a picture of a missing cat taped to the pole, 'Someone has lost their pet cat, Zack.'

'Lost it?'

'Yes, it's missing.'

'Why did they just lose it?'

'They didn't mean to lose it.'

'But where is it?'

'I don't know. It's lost.'

'But why mummy?'

'Maybe the cat went out exploring and then couldn't find its way back home.' Pushing the pram away from the sign. I'm keen to end this line of interrogation.

'Noooooo. Mummy, come back. Stop.'

'I stop a few meters away, 'Come on A.'

'No. Just look, mummy. It's cute. What's it called?'

I backtrack to the sign, pointing to the name,

'Zack the cat.'

'Zack?'

'Yes, Zack.'

'Is it a girl cat or a boy cat?'

'Zack is a boy's name. So I think it's a boy cat A. Now, let's keep moving.'

'Zack. Zack. Zack. It's a funny name.'

I feel like I'm missing something. 'Is it?'

'Yes, Zap the cat.'

I realise she's misheard me through the face mask

I'm wearing. 'Not Zap but Zack...K...K...K not P.'

'Oh, Zack. Where did he go?'

'He's lost.'

'I'm going to find him. Keep your eye's peeled mummy.'

THE MUAY THAI 'GRUNT'

by Jes Layton

I've been thinking, lately, about compulsions. About habits, about breathing. About how babies cry when they're born to get their lungs to start, whether or not they're actually upset about being introduced to the fluorescence of the hospital I'm not sure, but they start crying to get their lungs working and maybe they're just upset about having to breathe now? After all, they've had their parent feeding them oxygen for eight, nine months? Poor little level-one humans haven't done a thing yet. They only know what they have to do now, scream and breathe.

Somewhere along the way to becoming an actual human being we lose most of our screaming privileges, but we keep on breathing. If you have to choose between water and air, you'll always choose air because that buys you another three days to negotiate yourself some water. You can't survive more than a few minutes without air, as annoying as that is when you seriously want to be lazy at the bottom of a pool or buried under a tonne of doonas for a few hours.

Sometimes I forget to breathe. Just for a few seconds. I'm watching an ASMR vid or petting my cat or reading a book and I become so invested in it I just sort of don't breathe for a bit. Usually what snaps me out of the trance is that uncomfortable burning in my lungs, occasionally coupled with lightheadedness, a grinding down of the teeth. I usually feel a bit embarrassed after that, even when I'm alone. Breathing has always been an issue unfortunately.

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I'm twenty-four and sitting across from my psychologist listening to her talk about breathing. She's got a Harry Potter pillow on one armchair, which probably says more about her age than the eight to nine different colours she's streaked through her hair. The only thing I take away from that first session is that if you're too anxious you may start breathing with shorter breaths. If you don't ever take deep breaths then your brain won't work properly.

As she leads me through a guided breathing exercise, it's strangely disorientating and although my lungs fill up with air for what feels like the first time in weeks, cynicism tells me this is pointless and weird. I kinda feel like screaming would feel pretty cathartic right now, but unlike babies it's not appropriate for adults to scream unless absolutely necessary, so I just keep pressure on my diaphragm and continue to pretend I'm listening when she suggests I take up a hobby that I can't turn into a money-making endeavor. A sport or something.

"The high intensity nature of the exercises in kickboxing improve stress reduction through the release of endorphins. Studies show it also helps reduce anxiety and depression, and is a great outlet for frustrations." Annabell says.

I remember to suck air in when she says "kickboxing", and I think of all the A-grade dickbags I've wanted to punch in my life.

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It's busy for a Sunday, early afternoon, and it's my first day with the Melbourne Dragons, the closest queer friendly martial arts dojo to my home in Fairfield. The website says that the first class is free, and that this is best suited to those who 'want to learn how to protect themselves'.

The gym is a roomy shed, filled with hanging bags, and suspended equipment, the floor's a spongy mat. On the second level there's a long full length mirror stretching along one far wall, giving the space the appearance of a dance studio if it wasn't for the two roped boxing rings against the opposite wall.

I walk up the stairs and meet Dean, who is going to be my teacher. I confess that I don't really understand what I had signed up for after he asks me if I bought a towel. I'm directed to dump my stuff in the single changeroom, and change into what I'm hoping I can pass off as active wear.

I walk out into the main room, where other fighters are now stretching in the mirror, towels and drink bottles nearby. Dean kicks us off by putting on Beyonce's Single Ladies which at some point morphs into the Macarena.

Half'n'hour in, I'm in awe. I want to keep throwing fists, bopping and bouncing myself across the floor with these fighters. After an hour of playing along my singlet's soaked through, my scrawny forearms are throbbing. I wish I'd stumbled across this sooner, because I could have started working towards a stronger body earlier. I love to move, have the compulsion to fidget, to twitch, to bounce, and I've finally found somewhere to indulge that desire and need.

It's after this first lesson that Dean tells me that he can see I'm holding myself back, I'm not breathing. I wonder how he can tell, and as though he can see into my head, he explains the Muay Thai Grunt thing that I thought was just a bit cringey and a whole lot try-hard but wouldn't dare say out loud: that every single fighter who hit the heavy bag or banged the pads had been making some kind of weird ass sound every time they threw a strike. Dean explains; 'if you're silent in Muay Thai, you're not breathing.'

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People always accidentally hold their breath. Even experienced fighters. Making a noise helps with that. They teach you the same in scuba diving to remind you to breathe when ascending. The Muay Thai Grunt—when done correctly, not only helps generate power, but does a thing I think at the time sounds super important: it engages the core.

It's difficult and incredibly impractical to tighten the core throughout your training session or during an entire fight. That tension must be released. Not only will tensing for long periods of time be tiring, but it will make you slow and stiff.

Tensing should only happen for a fraction of a second. This is why the sound being made is often very short like the 'KI', a hiss, 'AY' or other sharp exhalation. It's not screaming for several seconds. Doesn't need to be loud. This is conscious beneficial impactful breathing — letting out an 'AY' lets y'know you are definitely, absolutely exhaling when you should be.

Kickboxers, like babies yell because they're expected too, If they don't scream about it there's a problem.

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"Martial arts changed my life" Ryan, a fellow fighter, tells me around my seventh session. They haven't been to the last couple of sessions, away in hospital, but it's clear when they arrive they're the most seasoned fighter. "No one fights the same as you, has the same body type, the same strength and flexibility." When I'm struggling with my stance, they give me little tips. "Breathe. Try stepping left on the back foot, toe out, twist your hips. Breathe. Breathe."

So yeah, I've been thinking, lately, about compulsions. about habits. about repetition. about how progress can be painful and slow. There's burns, split skin, swelling and bruising, and that's just the physical stuff. The physical pain, the concentration, movement, technique, trying not to fall on my ass are all powerful reasons to keep me in the present. Focused. Breathing.

Jes Layton is a geek with a hat, an author, artist and freelance writer. Her short story 'Chemical Expression' features in *Underdog: #LoveOzYA Short Stories*. Find Jes online at @AGeekwithaHat

GOOT TRAININK

by Vasilka Pateras

Women in the kitchen
men sit like kings
lace tablecloths laid with roast meat,
red peppers oil and garlic
turshija and fried feta
VB on the table
cinzano on the bar

gossip like salt
politics like pepper

I sit with the men
listen to the talk
Keating and Hawke
all remembering Menzies
banter about business
market gardens, real estate and *chook shops*

gossip like salt
politics like pepper

Translations from Macedonian:

turshija – pickled vegetables

vialnik – coiled pastry filled with cheese

le lee gospodi – oh dear God

Teta – Aunt

Vasilka Pateras is a Melbourne-based poet and emerging writer whose work has been published in *n-SCRIBE*, *Mediterranean Poetry*, *The Blue Nib* and *Poetry on the Move*. She reads as part of the Melbourne Spoken Word community.

called

I was called into the kitchen
lingering smells of brine,
pork chops, cabbage rolls
25 conversations
Aunts tucking in, out, around
arranging *vialnik*
struggling for room
did you hear about poor Tsena lelee gospodi

gossip like salt
politics like pepper

platter

I am handed a platter
Teta tells me I am older now
and should help
goot trainink
I take the pastry to the men
I am shadowed
Teta moves the platter closer
he lunges forward, takes a piece
I wait for a thank you

the women finally sit down at the opposite end
Aunties break bread
poor Tsena
the sweetness of chillies
uncles in full flight
Whitlam's mistakes
Fraser's cuts

gossip like salt
politics like pepper





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