

n-SCRIBE

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n-SCRIBE is an arts and literary publication for writers and readers in the Northern suburbs. We publish fiction, non-fiction, poetry, short story, journalism, creative non-fiction, memoir and images.

Led by a committee of writers, *n*-SCRIBE is a Darebin City Council initiative aiming to uncover, celebrate and stimulate writing, arts and reading culture.

Anyone can submit if they work, play, live or study in the Northern suburbs. Work is selected for publication by the committee through an open blind submission process. We publish once each year. *n*-SCRIBE is a free publication.

If you want to get involved on the committee, please contact the Arts and Cultural Development Officer at Darebin City Council: writingprojects@darebin.vic.gov.au

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Ness Flett – Pelt Studios
Charlie (Racing Greyhound)
2011 Graphite on Paper



NON-FICTION

A sense of place

Debbie Jacobs, Claudine Edwards, Shirl Bramich



THE HUNGRY WORKSHOP

In discussion with Simon Hipgrave of The Hungry Workshop in Northcote, Debbie Jacobs discovers the world of letterpress printing.

The Hungry Workshop – in High Street, Northcote – houses three old printing presses. Before visiting I imagined a dirty place staffed by men in inky overalls where I'd be forced to raise my voice over the noise. However, it is neither of these things. I was greeted at the door by the neatly dressed Simon and the beautiful chocolate-coloured Olive, a rescue dog with impeccable manners, and followed them into the workshop. The space is dominated by the presses, more akin to sculpture than machinery, and has an air of tranquillity enhanced by mellow tones that filter through from a 1970s sound system.

Husband-and-wife team Simon and Jenna Hipgrave are the co-owners of The Hungry Workshop. The couple recently moved from Queensland and have backgrounds in design and advertising. Simon likens their passion for antique printing presses to that of steam train fanatics – magical to a small select group but boring to the vast majority. However, he underestimates the power of his enthusiasm. Spend an hour in his company and, like me, you'll become a convert.

The catalyst for their interest in the craft of letterpress was a chance meeting with two retired printers, Ken and Bob, in the Caboolture historical village near Brisbane. Between them they had clocked up about 100 years experience in letterpress printing and were keen to pass on some of their knowledge. The couple could see artistic possibilities in the technique and were hooked. Eventually they found a press of their own – the 1960s Heidelberg Windmill, named after the moving arms of its automatic paper feeder. It is massive and, with an array of mysterious knobs and levers, wouldn't be out of place on the set of *Doctor Who*. The press, like Olive, was marked for destruction and it took the likes of Simon and Jenna to see its intrinsic value.

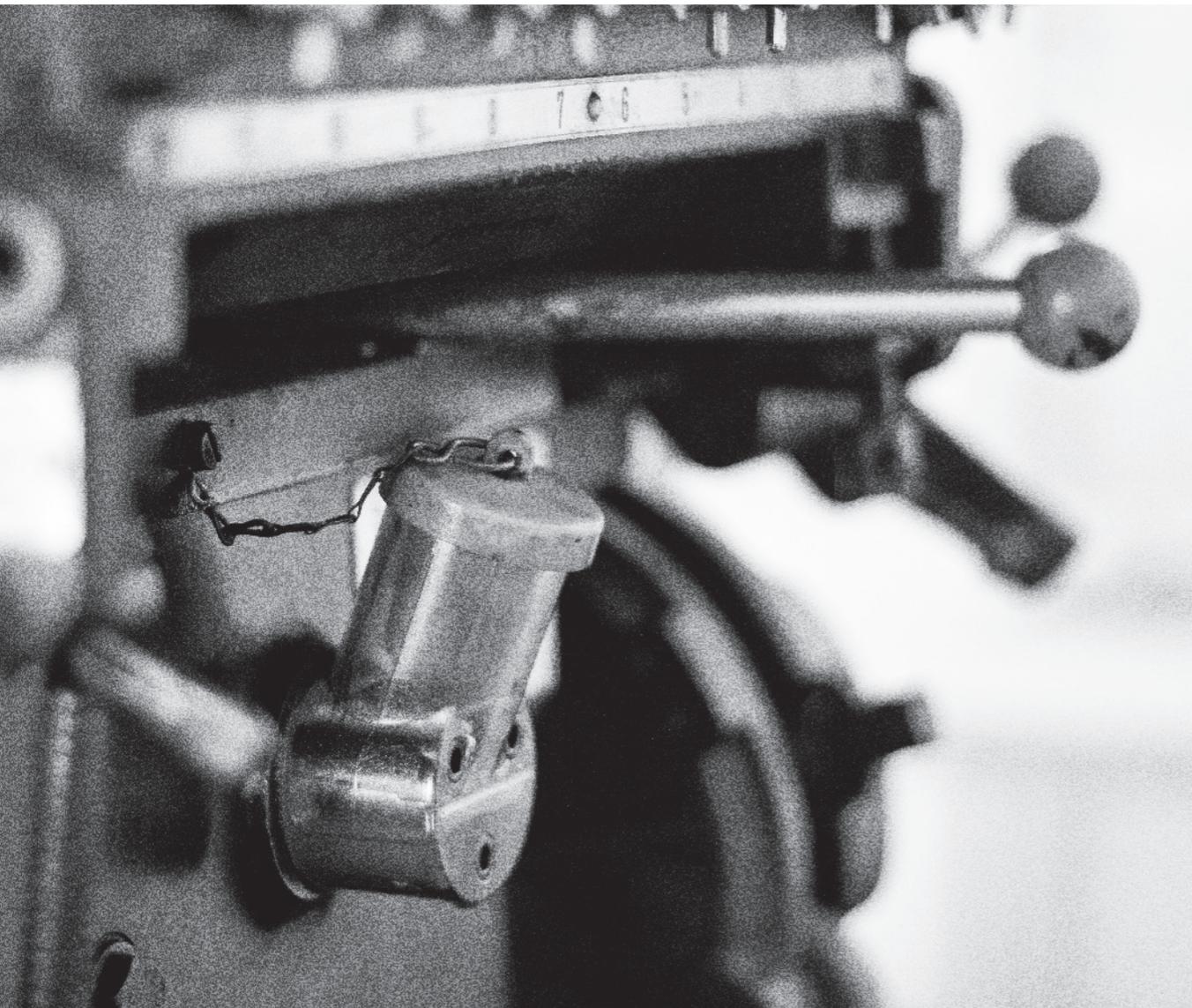
The decision to relocate to Melbourne in 2011 was based on this city's reputation for good design. 'If we didn't make the change when we did, we would have accumulated too much stuff to move,' Simon tells me. When I point out that it took a crane and a truck to relocate the letterpress, he waves this detail aside with a smile as if it was a minor blip on the travel plan.

Today, digital printing is the norm. Its predecessor was offset and prior to that, from the days of Gutenberg in the 1400s to the 1970s, letterpress. It is a form of relief printing whereby a stamping action transfers ink to paper. The weight of the stamping can be increased to leave a permanent impression. Fine letterpress work is crisper than offset, its impression into the paper providing greater visual definition. It is a craft that requires patience, precision and skill as the presses only print one colour at a time.

According to Simon, printing is a direct and personal way of communicating: 'If you hold a printed page in your hand it'll engage you in a way nothing else can. The paper has texture, it's audible, and the tacky ink has odour. It's a powerful way of distributing information and needs to be reserved for important and meaningful communication.'

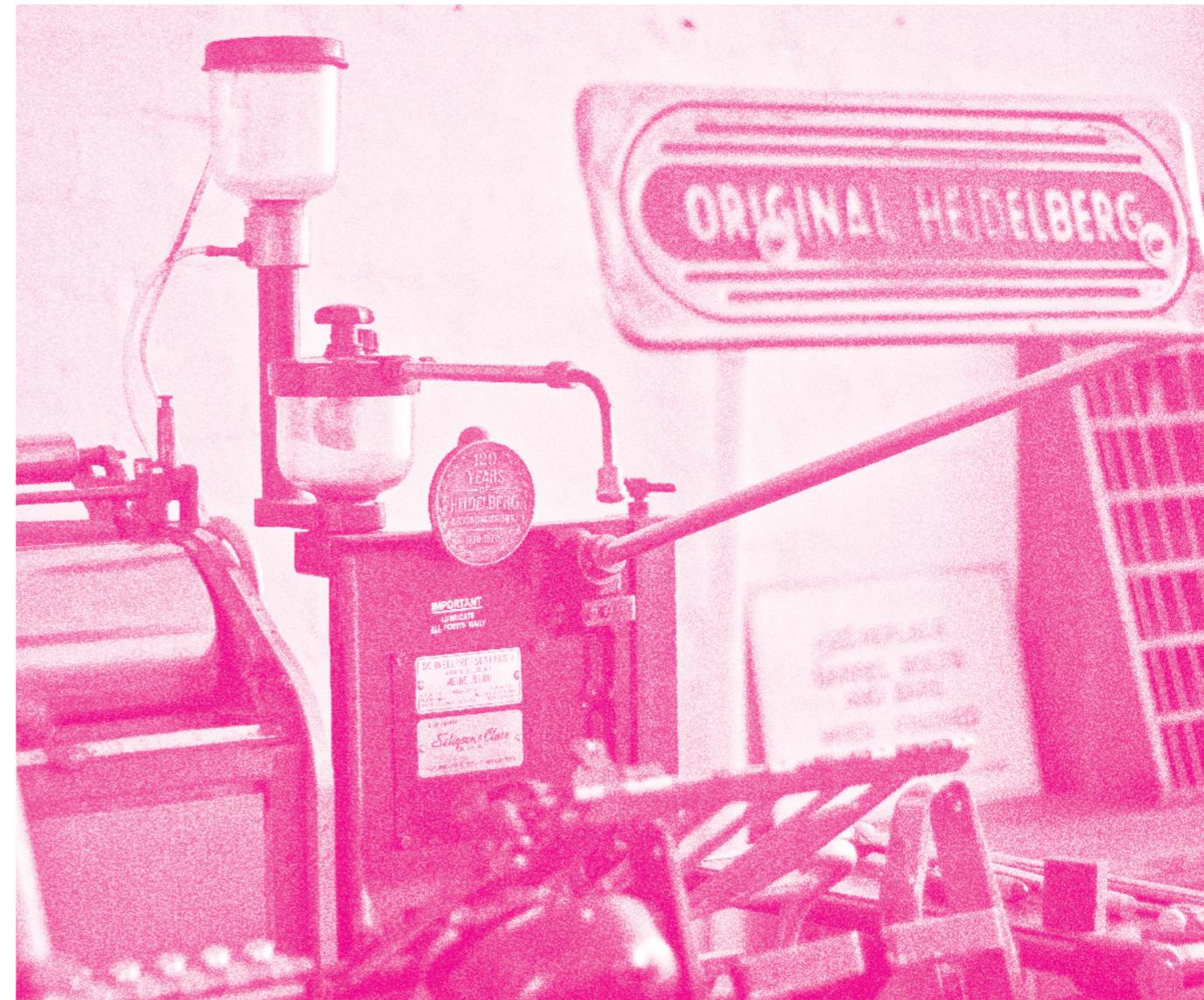
If we didn't make the change when we did, we would have accumulated too much stuff to move

If you hold a printed page in your hand it'll engage you in a way nothing else can



It's a powerful way of distributing information and needs to be reserved for important and meaningful communication

The Hungry Workshop prints the work of other artists as well as designing and making a range of its own products: wedding invitations, stationery, business cards, catalogues, album covers, coasters, postcards and bookmarks. Each is unique and playful, and turns any preconceptions we might have upside down. For example, a business card in the shape of a luggage tag reminiscent of the days when the sea voyage was king; a wedding invitation that takes on board the whole story of the romance and is nestled inside a bespoke aerogram envelope; collateral for a winery using ink made from a boiled down bottle of Shiraz; a bookmark for the publication *Conversations with Craft Women* in the form of a pair of scissors; a postcard with die-cut shapes that can be assembled to create a rabbit.



For the Hipgraves, one of the appeals of letterpress printing over other forms is the degree of control it provides from design through to finished product. It also engages them in an aspect I hadn't associated with being an artist. As there are no spare parts available for these old machines, it's up to them to fix the presses when things go wrong. Simon, ever the optimist, says that the problems are easy to diagnose because the presses are entirely mechanical and repair work engages them in another creative activity, fashioning a bolt here or a roller there.

I ask Simon what he hopes to be doing in five years' time. He thinks for a few moments before replying, 'I hope that I'm doing exactly the same type of work that I'm doing now.' He has clearly found what he loves and now that there are an extra two printers in their stable – the wide-hipped 1909 Chandler and Price that requires hand feeding, and the 1969 Asbern for larger formats – it looks like he, Jenna and Olive are here to stay.

The Hungry Workshop
461 High St Northcote 3070
Phone (03) 9043 8444
Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm
www.thehungryworkshop.com.au

SPACES TO GROW

Claudine Edwards chatted to Sarah Poole about how the Active Spaces project is giving new life to vacant shops in Darebin and creating opportunities for artists and starter businesses.

Active Spaces in Darebin projects began humbly just over a year ago when artworks suddenly appeared in the freshly scrubbed windows of three vacant shops in High Street, Northcote. What could have been mistaken for a guerilla art installation was in fact the first step in a plan to revitalise spaces and provide resources for local artists and small creative businesses.

Active Spaces in Darebin was devised to combat the increasing number of long-term vacancies in Darebin's shopping precincts. Displaying art in the windows of empty spaces was the first arm of the project, and not long afterwards a second, more involved arm of pop-up shops was initiated. Identifiable by hot pink diamond-in-the-rough logo posters at each site, Active Spaces now regularly dot the Northcote landscape, and have begun a slow push northwards into Thornbury and beyond.

Reactivation strategies of this kind are not exactly a new concept. The *Renew Newcastle* project is perhaps the most well known Australian model. Established in 2008 in response to an alarming vacancy rate in the Newcastle CBD, the project negotiates access to empty shops and makes them available at a nominal rate to artists, cultural projects and community groups. The aim is to re-energise the buildings, attract people back to the precincts and ultimately make the shops appealing once again for long-term leases. The Newcastle model has proved very successful, and similar schemes are now regularly being initiated nationwide.

The Active Spaces in Darebin model is more ambitious than most. The project was devised by Darebin City Council's Business Development Unit, but is delivered by an arts and cultural development specialist, Sarah Poole. The pop-up shops essentially function as a business incubator, where the temporary businesses pay a reduced rent and are responsible for their own operations. Before being offered temporary premises, Sarah works with them on everything that will need to be prepared before opening a shop. 'It's really about interacting with them and discussing what they need to get their business up and running,' she says. 'You'd step in if you saw something that you didn't think was viable, but because they're steering it and using their own resources, they have a good sense of what's realistic, and they're really learning along the way as well.'

The first Active Spaces pop-up shop was launched in December 2012 at 217 High Street, Northcote. Named *Offshoot*, the business was a collective of local artists and designers selling their range of fashion, homewares and gift items. The business did well, with the proprietors receiving an invaluable hands-on test run of operating a shop. Sherrin Collocott, owner and designer of the *Starashan* clothing label featured at *Offshoot* said 'I think this project has worked well for everyone. Us, in that we had an opportunity for a "trial of concept" for our business in a temporary bricks and mortar set up, the landlord, in that he was able to recoup lost monies from what would have otherwise been an empty and unappealing space, and the new tenants, in that they were able to visualise and engage with the space.'

Offshoot closed in March when a long-term lease on the premises was signed by *The Friendship Tree*. When asked whether *Offshoot* had been a factor in leasing the property, Kim Amici from *The Friendship Tree* said 'We knew the space had been vacant for some time prior to *Offshoot* temporarily setting up. It was

The aim is to re-energise the buildings, attract people back to the precincts and ultimately make the shops appealing once again for long-term leases



Somewhere Studios Eastment St, Northcote

quite run down so we had not bothered to consider its possibilities. The pop-up arrangement gave the space new life and made it more interesting and active. I made enquiries about the space and not long after we put in a proposal and an offer for the space as long term tenants.'

Sarah Poole says that now Active Spaces sites are routinely attracting increased interest from potential tenants, she is finding it a little easier to negotiate the temporary access with real estate agents. Under the Active Spaces model, the pop-up business enters into a formal temporary lease agreement at a slightly reduced rent. Initially real estate agents saw this as extra work for no perceivable reward, but now a few are coming on board, appreciating that prospective tenants can better visualise the possibilities of a premises if it is occupied, dressed and stocked. 'For the owner it looks so much better if you've got a business in there,' says Sarah, 'and people begin to take notice of it. We continue to promote that it's for lease while we're in there, so people can see its potential.'

Sarah says displaying art in shop windows is easier to negotiate than a pop-up shop, as it doesn't require any form of lease, or any money changing hands. 'It's very fast and it immediately stops posters and graffiti on the windows,' she says, 'and you can just lock it and walk away and then the vacant shop becomes an instant gallery.'

It's a win-win arrangement in many ways. The owner benefits because the shop front is cleaned and prospective tenants are able to get a better sense of the site. The artists, meanwhile, access street-front exposure in a busy strip. Over forty exhibits have now passed through the spaces, and the windows have become a beacon for locals and visitors, who now routinely look out for new displays.

Active Spaces in Darebin has established six pop-up shops since its genesis, and is aiming for twenty in 2014, with a new emphasis on areas further north into Thornbury, Preston and Reservoir, where entire tracts of shops have been vacant long term. 'If Active Spaces had a slogan,' says Sarah, 'it would be "There's no excuse for a vacant shop in Darebin."'

If you would like to know more about Active Spaces in Darebin, or be involved in the program, contact Sarah Poole at: sarah.poole@darebin.vic.gov.au or visit the Active Spaces in Darebin Facebook page.



The Plaza Theatre is still on High Street if only a front facade. Opposite the Plaza Shopping Centre, I wonder if the new tenants know there were so many famous Victorians treading the boards before them

MEMORIES 2

Shirl Bramich

The war years were over. Things were coming back to normality again. London's two-decker buses started running along High Street into Melbourne – a rush for we young people to climb the stairs and ride 'up front' on our new transport. The buses didn't last very long, High Street was dug up. The square red gum blocks that lined the gutter to the tram line were soon taken to burn in open fires.

Ration cards for butter, tea, sugar, clothing and petrol to use during the war, were slowly being eased out. No more black outs on home windows, so the light from inside would not be seen come the night-time, no more searchlights stabbing night skies for enemy planes. No more floating in the home made air raid shelter filled with water until we heard 'all clear'.

Air raid shelters were filled in, this time with earth. Luckily they saw little use during the war.

No more of Dad's ersatz coffee made from sugar and browned wheat, chicory – oh how we longed for coffee during the war.

Melbourne was changing, taking on a cosmopolitan look. The Tivoli Theatre in the city had become elite, and very expensive for live entertainment. It was hard for my boyfriend-he had to buy two tickets. The old Plaza Theatre came into its own and High Street, Northcote became very popular. Every two weeks programmes changed, lots of comedy, dancing, singing, Melbourne's television stars of the future trod the boards. Al Mack, George Wallace, Joff Ellen were the first of many comics, a host of them well know later on television, Toni Lamond and sister Helen Reddy, Buster Fiddess, Val Jellay and husband Maurie Fields, Frank Wilson, Johnny Ladd, Ronnie Burns.

The Plaza Theatre is still on High Street if only a front facade. Opposite the Plaza Shopping Centre, I wonder if the new tenants know there were so many famous Victorians treading the boards before them.

The last two remaining cable tram routes (Northcote and Nicholson Street) were due to be closed in April 1940 and be replaced by 45 double-deck and 25 single-deck buses



Plaza Theatre, High Street Thornbury



Cable Tram, High Street Northcote



Two-decker Bus in Northcote



Cable Tram, High Street Northcote

Ness Flett – Pelt Studios
Captain (Red Miniature Daschund)
2010 Ink on Paper



POETRY

For the eye and the ear

Kylie Brusaschi, Heather Ruth Laurie, Carl Walsh, Mitchell Welch, Anna Forsyth, Bianca Walsh

HOW (IS) THE POEM & OTHER MUSINGS.

Kylie Brusaschi

The act

Poetry disrupts the chaos, it forces you to seek the essence, the tiny seed. The action of thinking a poem through onto the page, momentarily blurs the boundary between the edges of the body & the cosmos. This blurring does not however obliterate the body, instead extends it past the limitations of the skin. The skin becomes illusionary as the insides manifest themselves outside. While composing a poem I am simultaneously inside & outside, for a moment I am nothing & everything.

The form

Poetry as a form is more closely related to painting & music than it is to prose. Poetry is an art for both the eye & the ear, we see poetry on the page, observe the white space white around the poem, the length of the lines & where they break. It's a composition, a visual construction. Upon reading the poem, the sound, musical element makes itself apparent. Each letter, each word has a sound and just like musical notes the poet uses language to create a certain unfolding of sounds.

The poet

The poet's job is to challenge the reader to see, feel, hear something unexpected. A good poem makes you re-read it, it trips you over, makes you go back & have another look. It demands to be thought about, pondered, it invites you to step inside it for a while & look around.

MORNINGTOWN TIDE

Heather Ruth Laurie

Light bends in Rushall Park.
Morning dogs sniff
dewy grass and lead their owners
on smell-seeing adventure tours
whilst grumpy commuter fishes gaze
out portholes with ill-concealed jealousy.

At the phantom dock,
after Rushall and before Clifton Hill
even the ghosts don't attempt to board.
The Captain tannoys
common sense advice
to the tincanned crowds
in an effort to relieve
the strain and
tendency for affray
within the creaking galleon,
then sails on.

Those seated
feel the pressure of
eyes and minds
trying to psych us
up and out
at the next port of call.

A moth flutters through
the ever decreasing space.
Mooring ropes break, lights flicker and
becalmed, a groaning giggle ripples
through the schoal
muffling the tinny
rap-tapping of homie rhythms
pumped through headshells
like the sound of the sea.

A TO Z OF CHILDHOOD

Carl Walsh

A broken chair
dolls
elephant forgetting
golden heyday
in joyous kaleidoscope lost
memories now only
playroom quietly resting
since time unravelled
visions wilt:
xylophone
yellowing zebra.

DIGGING FOR FIRE

Mitchell Welch

The down has curled and dried
The spikelets weep apart
Seedheads bristle, tender thistles fret
And cotton panic purples on a husky wind

So swoops the beast of underneath
Inhumed from sand through loam to clay
Remerging from a grass of dead echidna spears
Quilled with inky tipples

The blackboy trees with flower spikes
Of white, the ends of wicks unlit
Dropping curled among the tinder
From the lumpen trunks of coalblack

A perch of rainbow feathers blow
The underwings of black crow kings
Unfurled and fanning primal heat
Into the shallow breath below

Ancient resin boils that we feel
In the treeless valley of our heartsick
Down and fur and feathers heave
A relic blistering, hills of sacred magma

The sunnies wrap around, convected
Cutting into fossil waves, the burning cave
Of an enlightenment,
We dig

SAN CARLO. BLESS.

Anna Forsyth

It's paper craft
for Carnivale this week.
The residents won awards
for the best mosaics

Do you want to see them?

Cafe Italia
offers a slice of home
families gathered
hunched over espressos
with shaky hands.

Bless.

Bless.

It took me a few moments
to register
who the young boy was
staring down at me
from the wall
in the chapel

the carpentry tools gave him away.

Afterwards,
Rosa almost gets a water bombing
in the west garden
Gary likes to bug those young ones.
The personal carers.

Rosa è bella. è bella. Bless.

Around the corner from the west garden
there are chickens
and a shed for secret men's business.

Bless.

Bless.

STILLING TIME

Bianca Walsh

I hesitated and stilled a moment.
Time was a trick.
Vixen travelled time.
Within sorcery, Old English,
was buried.
And my heart, held
on to you, like a possession.

Brief intercourse in conversation.
Funny symmetrical.
And the synchronicity,
found in a valley,
on your body,
that is the universe.

LOWING

Bianca Walsh

A planet written on transcript.
Like she and her anatomy.
I twisted in my sleep.
Clarified by nightfall, a shadow,
gave rhythm and laughed in my belly.
A figure covered in petals,
and roses for my script.
Beyond the limits,
of limitation, fell,
a neater beginning,
unusual sacrilege
and a hue.

Ness Flett - Pelt Studios
Hamish (Basset Hound)
2011 Graphite on Paper



FICTION

Of memory and fantasy
The truth hides here

J. Richard Wrigley, James Robertson, Chris Thompson, Daniel Ducrou

URBAN RENEWAL

J. Richard Wrigley

The first pale glow shows on the horizon. Already a river of lights floods the broad channel between rows of apartment blocks. More every month, svelte and new, rise to line the street. Two such model blocks stand, posing, on either side of a bunker-like building, its plainness hidden behind a fan of weathered fencing and a thin bouquet of bush. Opposite a three-storey brick remnant bears a signboard memorialising *Triumph Leather*. Neither the factory shell nor the squat building it faces has long to wait. The street, the whole suburb, is undergoing a major transformation.

Inside the low building, behind blinds and grime, the Unit's lights stutter on. A white Mercedes ambulance pulls out of the stream. The ambulance officers swing the laden trolley round. Their passenger can neither read the peeling signboard across the road, nor see the three-storey façade. She has no patience for glasses. Behind the frontage is a cavernous, dusty space, undisturbed but for the occasional applause of pigeons taking flight. The vats, the machinery, even the floorboards, are long gone. The work has departed and, like it, the men – her husband among them.

The old lady fails to recognise the pavement across which she is trundled; does not see the car park next door, secure behind its lattice of bright metal; does not remember the oil-blackened cavern where her son was apprentice. Upstairs, the eighteen apartments smell showroom new. On the street the aroma of coffee has replaced the tannery stink. It is a long, long walk to the nearest outside dunny.

The old lady is wheeled into the Unit's blue-white glare. She squints. Her fleecy tracksuit and socks leap luridly to life: mint and fairy floss pink. The ambos fold down the stretcher's legs, and help her into

a low chair. She is an hour early for her treatment and, left to wait, sinks back into sleep. Her mouth hangs open, toothless. She refused her daughter's offer of dentures again today. 'They hurt,' she said. 'Everything hurts.'

A nurse rouses the old lady. She bleats in complaint at being hurried up and shoved about. In disposable gloves and apron the nurse escorts the stick figure, offering a steadying hand. She soothes the old woman's carping and asks her patient if she needs to go to the toilet. The nurse knows full well that she does, they have gone through this same dance three times each week for several months now. The old woman's treatment – three and a half hours once it gets started – offers no opportunity for breaks. The two of them cross the Unit and go up the few steps to the patients' toilet.

Later nurse and patient reappear. 'My back's sore,' the old lady says. She repeats herself several times. Connected to the machine and settled, the old lady once again nods off. Her head, under fluorescent tubes, lolls an incongruous snow-white against the skateboarding top. She does not need the churning of the machines, the aircon hum and the muffled roar of the wardrobe-sized water filter to lull her.

She slips away.

She is dressing her children, trying on a new hat, arguing with her husband, holding an infant to her breast. With her cardi pulled across her front she crosses the back lane to repay her borrowings, see a new baby, and commiserate with a grieving neighbour. The old lane is still there, less than a young wife's cooee away,

its length visible from the Unit's back door. For nearly thirty years she most often crossed this longer, narrower portion of it, and in her reverie still does. The bluestone is impassable now, its surface disrupted by hasty diggings, heaped with garden waste and dumped trash. There are no longer any gates or leaning fences overhung with loquats – only slabs, storeys high. Close up to the Unit's rear the other, broader limb of the L-shaped laneway is cemented over, now a car park for the staff.

Inside, during the busiest part of their day, the nurses are perspiring. The air is a steady twenty-three and a half degrees. The old bird wears long underwear and two pairs of socks. The daughter she lives with dressed her. Even these, and the thick blanket over her legs, are not enough. Her limbs are lengths of broom handles, their padding, like so much else, having left her. The costly medical chair in which she is curled might as well be boards. She wakes and wails that she is cold. Three and a half hours is a long time.

Led back to the waiting area the old lady slumps, exhausted by the life-sustaining treatment. Little light or sound makes its way in through

the plate glass at her back – certainly none that will wake her. The rumble of passing trams, sufficient to shake the earth, is frequent and unnoticed. An intermittent tapping comes from beyond the blinds, as if some groping soul has misplaced the door; a magpie lark, incensed by the imminence of spring, is attacking its own reflection. Next year it, or its offspring, will find other windows with which to carry on the fight.

AMY SARGENT

James Robertson

This is a story about an author who lost one of his characters. He was a famous author who had been writing for many years, and his books were on the reading lists at most secondary schools. People said he told the Australian story, whatever that means.

It is strange that such a competent, experienced author should lose a character. And the way he lost her was surprising. There was no thunderclap, no electrical storm. He did not wake from uneasy dreams with a sense of foreboding. He simply turned on his computer and found that all trace of the character, whose name was Amy Sargent, had disappeared from the novel. Every mention of her name had gone and every sentence that alluded to her had gone. The manuscript now read like a bad experimental novel. It no longer made sense.

At first he suspected some kind of computer virus. He called his friend, an IT expert, who came over and had a look and assured him that was not the case. Since the IT expert could not understand what had happened he blamed the novelist, implying it was because he hadn't backed up his work properly. Then he used a few baffling technical terms until the novelist grew restless and asked him to leave.

So the famous author was left with a dilemma. Should he try to write Amy Sargent back into the novel or just get rid of her altogether, reshaping the manuscript around her absence? Neither of these options was possible. She was a pivotal character – she served as a catalyst for dramatic change in Gundawah, the town where the story took place. He could not easily get rid of her. But nor could he put her back in. Every attempt he made to rewrite her failed. Perhaps her disappearance had spooked him – whatever the reason he found he could no longer remember how to write her or write about her. She had become elusive, absent.

At around the same time, or maybe a day later, a young man woke up in his small flat near a freeway and sat down to write. An idea had come to him while he slept. His hand moved automatically across the page as his pen made words on the paper. He was an unsuccessful short story writer – his work was frequently rejected for being too static and introspective. It was full of characters sitting in small apartments drinking coffee and staring out the window. But this story felt alive. There was drama, there was conflict and tension. A newly formed couple began to argue over a small difference of opinion. Something minor had begun to escalate. It was clear they had reached a make-or-break point in their relationship. The female character was complex, volatile, fascinating, and lively. She leapt off the page. Her name was Amy Sargent.

At this point in the story I should point out that the famous novelist and the failed short story writer did not know each other. They were not part of the same circle; they had not collaborated, or ever taken any interest in each other's work. After leaving school the short story writer had stopped reading the kind of novels the famous author wrote. He had started reading South American and European literature and graphic novels. His tastes – until then, largely formed by authorities in the institutions he attended – had started to become his own. By the same token, the famous novelist had never heard of the failed short story writer, had never given a writing workshop that the short story writer had attended, and had not ever read any of his works, which was not surprising, since none of them had ever been published.

For the famous novelist the loss of Amy Sargent was a heavy blow. In the weeks that followed he attempted again and again to write her back into the novel but she continued to elude him. (He had once said in an interview that he felt as if his characters came to him of their own accord, and that the strongest characters wrote themselves.) Without her the novel would not work and the manuscript was useless. This distressed him greatly. His last two novels had not sold well. His readers had begun to find younger versions of the famous Australian author and his books were moving to the back shelves of the store. Royalties still came to him from reruns of televised versions of his novels, made twenty years before, but it was not the money that concerned him. Writing was what he did, it defined and made him. Without it he felt empty and useless. For some years critics had been saying he could not write well-rounded female characters and now that he felt he had created one, she had disappeared.

In an act of desperation he placed a missing persons ad in a major newspaper asking if anyone knew the whereabouts of Amy Sargent. He hoped that she was out there somewhere in some form, and that someone had found her. He received a great number of replies but two stood out: one was from a self-professed clairvoyant who said that Amy Sargent was living on the Gold Coast with an Italian hairdresser; the other was from a woman in prison who knew nothing about Amy Sargent but simply wanted someone to write to. The famous novelist dismissed the first response – Amy did not like beaches – and began an old fashioned correspondence by mail with the female prisoner. It lasted until a few weeks before his death. Towards the end of his life he became reclusive and stopped responding to phone calls and knocks on the door. The letters that the female prisoner received from him show a man struggling to comprehend the changes that had occurred in his life. The tone is one of bewilderment and rage and towards the end, acceptance. She seems to have offered him some kind of solace and an outlet for his frustrations.

As for the short story writer he went on to have a successful career, publishing in numerous magazines and winning many prizes for his work. He never submitted the story about Amy Sargent, deciding it was incomplete. He was known for his quirky offbeat writing which critics described as 'European influenced' when they were being kind and 'un-Australian' when they were not.

It is interesting to speculate how the short story writer would end this story if he had written it. I suspect that if it were one of his stories it would probably end this way: two months before he lost Amy Sargent, the famous novelist drove his large black car on one of the freeways out of the city. He was on his way to a literary festival where he would be talking about his work and teasing the audience with hints about his upcoming novel, *A Place in the Sun*. He pulled into a service station seven kilometres outside the city and filled up his car, being careful not to spill petrol on his freshly-ironed trousers. Inside, the young man who worked there did not attempt to sell him any of the chocolates on special on the counter. It was the short story writer who worked there on weekends. They did not speak but the novelist noticed the young man's face and thought even in that brief interaction how serious and solemn he seemed, as if he had a lot on his mind. He paid for his petrol and left. As he drove on the freeway towards the literary festival, before he turned on the radio or rehearsed some jokes for the audience, he thought about the young man and how he could serve as the basis for an interesting character in his next novel.

It is interesting to speculate how the short story writer would end this story if he had written it

WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

Gino Tomisich

I watch the postman place the envelopes in the letterbox. His breath forms little clouds that quickly disappear as the cold saps their strength. No doubt, it does the same to him but he has to struggle on.

In the warmth of my living room I peer through the window. I think of opposites while the postman crosses the street. On any other day I would have tried to catch his eye, give a wave, to make some form of contact, but not today.

One envelope is standard Government Issue. Laurie probably sent it, he's one of my few contacts still there. We'd worked a few cases together and, though we weren't exactly friends, we trusted each other. He probably thought I would want closure. He was being optimistic.

I resist the urge to immediately open the letter. Better that I be comfortable, inside in my private place. I try to imagine what it would have been like for the parents whose sons are still away. Do they continue to smile and wave at the postman? Do they, like me, put their envelope on the mantelpiece 'wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings?'

Mal was Lieutenant Malcolm C Carroll: case number XD 3751 C. You don't pick and choose your cases just as the boys didn't choose their missions. If you're available, have the skills, some administrative clerk fates you.

The last time I volunteered was when I signed up. As I read Mal's file I wondered if it was the same for him. His file defined his character: signed up, did well at training, complimentary reports from his drill sergeant with a recommendation for NCO training, and made it to corporal before going overseas.

Mal's first stint was for six months. He remained cool during contact while under fire. Upon returning to base he undertook a special weapons training course. Mal had grown up; he was a lifer.

His second foreign jaunt was with international troops in joint operations. He didn't take up the usual furlough home at the end. Instead he transferred to Europe with UN peacekeepers. He received a mention in dispatches with an extra stripe thrown in on the field. Mal's star was on the rise. After two years away he was home again. I wonder what he told them about how he earned the sergeant's stripe.

Sergeant Carroll returned to Australia for a quiet year of giving talks on counter terrorism – first in Perth then Northern Queensland. A recommendation for Duntroon, graduates as a Lieutenant, and is sent back to Perth for additional training. After another year in the West he's off to Iraq, no bases are given, then he's medically evacuated back to Australia. I notice a faded pencilled note at the bottom of the page, the name of a town: El Habrima. I close the file. He is scheduled to see me the following day. I remember the traffic noise off St Kilda Road annoyed me that morning.

Our first meeting was awkward. He couldn't understand why he had to see me, but orders were orders. On entering my office he gave a crisp salute. I stood and returned it. 'Good morning, Lieutenant. Have a seat.'

Mal chose the straight-backed chair.

'Do you know why you're here?'

'Because they think I'm nuts.'

'Are you?'

'No. Sir.'

His eyes looked straight to and through me. I thanked him for his time and honesty, then scheduled him another appointment in three days. I needed some additional background, the sort of things that normally don't make it into an official file. I gave Laurie, in records and administration, a call.

'Good morning, Lieutenant, have a seat.' I'd removed the straight back so his choice was either an old art deco club chair or a Chesterfield.

'I'll stand if you don't mind, Sir.'

'Your choice. You can stand at ease, if you'd like.'

He did. We observed each other.

I envy surgeons. They can see what's wrong. Intangibles can't be defined, nor do they fit into timetables. However, bureaucracy isn't interested in such distinctions.

Our relationship progressed during the next few visits.

'Tell me about Iraq.'

'There's not much to tell. The place was hot, dusty, and when you thought it couldn't get any hotter or more uncomfortable it did.'

'What about air conditioning?'

'In barracks it worked but you can't go on patrol with an air conditioner. By the time you've suited up, strapped on your gear, you're already hot and your day has just started. Then you'd be sent out to some place you'd never heard of to see if there were people there no one had ever seen. The whole time you're worrying that if every time you stick your head out of the turret some goat herder will use it for target practice.'

'Then?'

'Then you go home.'

'Tell me about El Habrima.'

'I don't remember the name.'

Further sessions gave me an opportunity to see Mal's reactions. He chatted about his assignments without telling me anything, as if I was just a civvy down the local. His behaviour was regulation perfect.

As the weather improved I moved our meetings into the open. We would go where Mal wanted to go. We would talk, mostly, about what Mal wanted to talk about. I wasn't a boxing fan but I soon learned all about the fine art of pugilism.

Bushwalking was something I begrudgingly did once every few years but Mal could name nearly all the plants in the botanical gardens.

I was about to pluck some delicate white flowers off a bush when I heard, 'Don't do that, Keith.'

'Why not?'

'It's a spurge. They're poisonous.'

Then you'd be sent to some place you'd never heard of to see if there were people there no one had never seen

As we continued our stroll Mal gave me a toxicity rating on various plants like an enthusiastic scoutmaster. When we inadvertently entered the cacti and succulents area of the gardens his voice trailed off.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked.

‘I don’t want to be here.’

‘Why? It’s a garden.’

‘It’s a desert. Deserts are dangerous, Mike. You never know what’s in a desert.’

Mistaking my name hadn’t happened before. ‘What’s in the desert, Mal?’

‘We need to get out of here.’

His body was tense, his eyes looking further than the edge of the cacti bed.

‘Okay, Mal, let’s go.’

‘You follow me,’ he said.

I did as instructed. When we reached the native grasses I saw Mal’s shoulders slump. After a couple of moments he turned to me.

‘Have you seen...’ he began, then his recognition returned. ‘I don’t like cacti.’

‘Why is that?’

‘I’m not nuts if I don’t like them, am I?’

‘Not at all.’

Mal’s face relaxed. ‘Do you know that willow trees have natural painkillers in them, the same stuff as aspirin.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ I lied. ‘Shall we continue our walk?’

He smiled. ‘Yeah, why not.’

Our path meandered through an avenue of oaks where couples and office workers were enjoying their lunches in the sunshine. We found an empty bench and followed suit. As I started to relax Mal would look back towards the cacti garden. I considered it was a good time to renew our sessions. ‘Tell me about El Habrima.’

‘By the sound of it it’s probably in the Middle East.’

I looked at him. ‘It’s in Iraq.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes, it is. A small village, about a kilometre and a half from the main road.’

Mal turned his face away from me. He was quiet for a few moments. ‘Mike’s there. Ernie’s there.’ His voice was barely a whisper.

‘You were there.’

‘I’m supposed to be there.’

‘You’re here, Malcolm.’

‘I’m supposed to be there. That’s where I should be. With them.’

‘What happened, Malcolm?’

‘Mike, Ernie and the rest of them.’

‘Who is them, Malcolm?’

‘Them is them, all of them.’

When someone inwardly retreats they close all their doors and windows. If you

knock loudly they hide in the smallest room. ‘Let’s get a bite to eat. There’s a café I know. It’s cheap but good.’

The rest of our afternoon together was awkward.

It was about 2:30 Tuesday afternoon when I heard the news. A gunman was holding a group of people hostage in a post office and the police were waiting for demands. With only ninety seconds airtime the radio announcer moved on quickly to the next story. I didn’t pay too much attention as my afternoon was filled with the drudgery of culling old case files. Some were to be archived while others destroyed. Government departments are notoriously anal retentive so I doubted anything was ever put through the shredder prior to being scanned and digitised.

Dinner was in front of the television, a portable that sits at the end of the table. Sometimes, when I’m not listening to music I let it drone on for the company. That night, I’d made it in time for the seven o’clock news. The hostage situation was the breaking story. The female reporter looked earnestly into the camera, as she’d been trained to do, and spoke with the diction of a schoolmistress to ensure her audience appreciated the gravity of the situation. This type of scenario can go two ways: either with pyrotechnics or by petering out. Everyone involved prefers the latter option except the reporters hoping for newsroom fame. Toward the end of the program there was a live update. As the camera panned towards the post office I saw a couple of my colleagues in civvies. It was momentary but they were there. The camera then zoomed to a couple of freed hostages running towards the police line. With a bit of luck the show would be over by tomorrow morning.

There is nothing like crawling along a freeway slower than you can walk in preparation for the day ahead. Anything would have to be better than this. The morning news began with the hostage drama. About 4:00 am all but one of the hostages had been released. I remember the newsreader stating, ‘The gunman then came out of the building with the remaining hostage. The police called for him to release his prisoner and put the weapon down. He pushed the hostage away then turned his gun towards them. Shots were fired. The gunman is now in police custody. It’s not confirmed if he’s alive or dead.’ In the old days, they called this Death By Cop.

Mal didn’t make his morning appointment. I asked my secretary to call and reschedule him. Later, I checked my diary for the next few days. Mal wasn’t in there. ‘Sandra, have you been able to reschedule Malcolm Carroll?’

‘No, I’ve tried a few times but he’s not answering his phone.’

I called Laurie in administration. ‘Have you heard from Carroll?’

He hadn’t.

During the drive home there was nothing on the radio about the previous night’s hostage drama. It was old news. I bought copies of the morning’s newspapers. They didn’t tell me anything I hadn’t already heard. The television news was practically verbatim of the previous night with footage of the freed hostages, except the pan of the crowd had been cut.

The next day my appointments were light. I asked Sandra to contact Mal; by the day’s end she was still trying. Laurie couldn’t help either.

I drop the rest of the mail on the coffee table and look at the one on the mantelpiece, wondering if I have the courage to open it.

There is nothing like crawling along a freeway slower than you can walk in preparation for the day ahead

TOOTAGAROOK, 1968

Chris Thompson

I hate that sunblock. It smells like fish and feels greasy on my skin. And I hate it when Mum makes me wear a t-shirt in the water. It feels worse than the wet slap of the seaweed when the waves dump you in a swirl of fizzing foam and sand and shell-grit that sets your teeth on edge.

I sneak out of the sweltering brick beach house, across the melting bitumen that sticks to the soles of my thongs, through the spiky branches and scratchy leaves of the tea-tree and down to the water's edge in just my bathers. The air is hot. You can almost taste it. But the water is cold and salty on my tongue and the sand sticks to my feet like biscuit dough as I chase the crying seagulls in and out of the lapping waves.

I spend the whole afternoon like that without ever once feeling the burn.

That was yesterday.

Last night, the sun burned its way out from my insides to the red crust of my skin. My mum rubs tomatoes on my back. *To bring the heat out*, she says. She swears it works, but the pips dry hard on the burnt flesh and sting when you wash them off.

So today I lie on the prickly couch, skin radiating heat and slick-sticky with soothing cream while my eyes squint at the sour taste of chilled pineapple.

I watch *Thunderbirds* on the telly and wait for the sun to go down... wait for the cool evening air that might touch me softly, gently, soothingly on the red raw shoulder, and invite me out into the sweet breath of the moonlit summer night.

ALCOHOL: A LOVE SONG

Daniel Ducrou

We first met at a family friend's Christmas party. I was twelve and you, well, you were older – though it's a bit of a joke between us now, how old you really were. You sent me running in circles, singing, ecstatic, in love! You told me to kiss all the girls, their fathers, that sloppy-mouthed kelpie cross. Then, bored of me, you shoved me into the garden and left me to spill my guts under the bottlebrush.

Like Puck, you specialise in delightful mischief: passionate karaoke performances, 4 am Twister, shaved eyebrows, unlikely couplings in unlikely places. At best you make me audacious, the life of the party, orator of florid speeches, fountain of gossip and sworn secrets, inventor of dance moves. At worst you make me dull, repetitive, sslurrrring 'Remmemmber the timme? Yafarkinwha...? Hmph'. You are an artist of sorts, a comedian with a penchant for slapstick and, I'll admit, you do crack me up. The horny-but-impotent gag is a masterstroke. But beneath your easy charm, your swashbuckling bombast, lies your dark side. Your insecurity, your ruthlessness, your megalomania.

You're 9000 years old – maybe older – born in China and the Middle East. You go by many names but you are alcohol, from the Arabic *al-kuhl* – the kohl, a powder used to make eyeliner for the black eyes and bruises of men, women and children left in your wake, for the black spots of memory lost, for the black crosses that line the highways. You're not malicious, but you are inherently powerful and hence, inherently corrupt.

On occasion you have had to fight for your rights – our rights. When America acted tough and gave you Prohibition, you smirked and gave it bootlegs, speakeasies and Al Capone. Imagine if you were outlawed in Australia? Or Ireland? You'd command uprisings, riots, beheadings. Religion is your biggest enemy. And although Allah still stands against you, the Christian god has always been on side; you flow through his son's veins, after all. When Jesus summoned you from water they called it a miracle. I say you are always miraculous, spiriting your way from common crops like a true egalitarian.

You are generous too, in a fashion, giving yourself endlessly to the destitute as goon, moonshine and metho. But sometimes you can be a snob: a velvety dark-chocolate shiraz with hints of blueberry and motor oil; a crisp apple-grass riesling; a smokey charcoal tequila; the liquorice bite of ouzo. You've become rather *modern* in recent times too. Now, you want to be dramatised by haute couture bartenders. Coloured, muddled and shaken, lavished with exotic pet names: Japanese Slipper, Singapore Sling, Russian Cocaine.

You are, of course, addictive – a multi-billion dollar industry, enriching government and corner store alike. You are self-perpetuating, you clever rascal, you trickster. You create life and destroy it, then have the gall to show up at the funeral. You build roads and cause car crashes, build hospitals and fill them with battered women, build high schools and impregnate the students. Enjoy in moderation, you say piously, with a wink. You murderer, you misogynist, you home-wrecker.

You are sangria, from the Latin for blood. Forget Jesus, you are in my blood. You are in the blood of Australian culture, Western culture, world culture. The dominant culture. You are an ecosystem, a network of veins and capillaries feeding civilisation. As your bit on the side, you fetishise the blood of First Nation peoples. You offer them a chance to forget that these cities, this language, these cars and suburbs are not of their own worlds. What do you get in return?

You are a loyal companion, a life-partner really, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part. But you are also a fair-weather friend, a loose companion. You give yourself to under-agers and rickety alcoholics alike, you tart, you strumpet, you whore. You wound me, make me wound myself, drive me into a crazed frenzy, make me do stupid, unforgivable things, waste my time over and over.

We belong together, you tell me, your voice swelling with recycled poetry. But you have a star-crossed lover for every star in the sky. You are a loud-mouthed big bang theorist, glad of the ever-expanding universe. You don't need me as much as I need you. And so, irrespective of what's been said or done, when the horizon swallows the evening sun, there you are, quietly waiting.

IN A SCATTERING OF PANIC BIRDS

Chris Thompson

It begins with an ending.

The slow dawn of St Agnes' Eve. A wild, grieving, January morning wrapped in the steaming shroud of a summer storm. It's the day after the bitter doorstep betrayal; that last, longing look before the slap of her goodbye.

He's awake – in the place where they used to lie; where he has lain all night, a handspan away from the clutch of sleep, clinging to her scent still damp on the empty sheets.

In the next room, the orchids have begun to die.

She is gone, without grace or favour.

He considers the day.

Somewhere, in another place, is she awake? Back where she belongs? Listening to the same rain? Retrieved by the insipid, apron-string who waited in the car, a cowardly witness to a demand for atonement?

He shifts in his bed, unsettled by the storm, bruised by the echoing ache of that silent smirk.

He considers the day.

Time has run to a standstill, its windows open in both directions. Through the sleepless veil he sees all that has been and all that will be. For as long as he remains in this snug cocoon these moments will hold fast. What is not begun can never happen.

He considers the day.

He has a picture of her in his head.

They are in the cathedral quiet of a private moment. They have been orbiting each other for a time and, at last, have spoken the secret out loud. They sit without touching, gentle and tender and as close as making love.

But it's only a picture and it might not be true.

He recalls the sweating dance of their first meeting, the prickling of their infidelity; their secret places and the court and spark of their inevitable collision. He longs for the way she swelled through him; how easily she took him into her and held him until the gasp and sigh had stolen their breath; how she buoyed and balanced his elliptical spin.

He has a picture of her in his head.

They lie; her nakedness cupped in his, their breathing slow and harmonic, speaking quiet, private secrets. He sings to her. She bathes him with a look.

But it's only a picture and it might not be true.

It's not often he weeps, but when he does it comes in deep, violent sobs that shake his body and twist his face. It comes in wet, salty tears that burn his eyes and slap his cheeks. It comes in an uncontrollable wave that swamps him without warning.

She rings through his body, a bell most thoroughly rung. She comes to him with all the dreams he must be for her. She speaks to him all the words he has longed to hear – and she is the one from whom he most wants to hear them. But their meaning becomes faint as quickly as they are spoken. They are fragile truths bent and broken into small pieces. And though each piece, of itself is never a lie, unjoined they never truly tell the whole story.

she leaps

and dances

He has a picture of her in his head.

She is running barefoot on the perfect beach. The ocean breathes in unbroken waves. Sand shifts underfoot, the imprint of tender fingers on smooth bed-warmed flesh. He is some distance off, watching the fling of her arms, the spray of her hair, the aviation of her body as she leaps and dances into a frightened flock of seagulls. And in that exquisite, magical moment; in that irredeemable snatch of time; in that scattering of panic birds, she is free, and unburdened, and happy.

But it's only a picture and it might not be true.

It's quiet now, in the pause of the storm, and his resistance to the day.

He will see her alone, smaller than he remembers, her gentle, graceful hands gnarled in the brace of a steeling clench; her eyes, with neither colour nor light, avoiding the window of his look for fear of being caught longing for the view.

He has feared the fall, but with the slightest encouragement has flung himself willingly into the void, falling only as slowly as attraction will allow.

And here he lies, crash-landed in the rumpled bed clothes of this miserable first day. Prone in the undignified debris of his best laid plans. And behind the sour comfort of his disdain he grits his teeth against the itch of his own culpability.

He has a picture of her in his head.

They walk together along the cliff-tops, in the worn paths of indiscriminate fossickers, steeped in the invention of stories. For an instant, she takes him by surprise; flings herself into his arms; holds him in a lovers' embrace. And, blind to the imperfection of the moment, he opens himself like an incision. He trusts her implicitly.

But it's only a picture and it might not be true.

In these few moments he thinks of her, in the lap and overlap of hopes and fears, in the folly of make-believe, in the foolish possibilities of all that could be but never will.

But the moments are fleeting. They cannot last.

Through the closing windows he sees them now, each in their respective places where they are nothing; neither lovers, nor friends nor anything else – where the one is afraid and unable to leave, the other is afraid and unable to stay.

Outside, the rain drips from the trees and eaves, lies in steaming puddles on the parched garden, pools in the cracked and uneven surfaces of the pavement. The storm is gone and the heavy grey clouds give way to the unforgiving heat of a blue summer day.

The window has closed.

The storm has ceased.

The orchids have died.

It is over.

He has a picture of her in his head.

They sit together on the sea-sprayed sand of a rugged shoreline. They are older now. World weary and worldly wise. They are happy. They are friends. It is clean and calm and uncomplicated.

But it is only a picture and it might not be true.

into a frightened

flock

of seagulls



CONTRIBUTORS

Writers

Daniel Ducrou is the author of *The Byron Journals* (Text Publishing, 2010).

James Robertson is a counsellor at NMIT in Preston. *Amy Sargent* was Highly Commended in the 2013 Brimbank Writers Awards.

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Featured Artist

Ness Flett
www.facebook.com/peltstudios
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n-SCRIBE COMMITTEE 2013

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

n-SCRIBE is an annual arts and literary publication for writers and readers in the Northern suburbs. Led by a committee of writers, *n*-SCRIBE is a Darebin City Council initiative and aims to celebrate, uncover, and stimulate writing, arts and reading culture. Work is selected for publication by committee through an open blind submission process. Refer to www.darebin.vic.gov.au for Edition 9 submission dates or *n*-SCRIBE Facebook page.

What do we want to see?

- Poetry, non-fiction, fiction, creative non-fiction, journalism, memoir, opinion pieces, photos and illustrations
- Submissions must not have been published previously
- We accept work of a publishable standard, no first drafts please, we want to see your best work

How do we want to see it?

- All work must be submitted via email to writingprojects@darebin.vic.gov.au
- You must include a submission form downloaded from the website
- Your work needs to be page numbered with title clearly at the top of each page
- All submissions must be sent in word or open office format
- Preferred in Times New Roman font, 12 point, 1.5 spacing
- All images/illustrations must be submitted in jpeg format for initial view
- Word limit 1000 – 1500 words

Other

- Work sent after the deadline or without a submission form will not be accepted
- All selected writers, artists will be offered three copies of *n*-SCRIBE

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- The committee makes the selection of submissions for publication
- In some cases the committee may suggest copy edits to prepare a submission for publication
- Authors will be notified via email if they have been selected
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