

# n-SCRIBE

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n-SCRIBE is an arts and literary publication for writers and readers in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne. We publish poetry, fiction, non-fiction, essays, journalism and images.

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. n-SCRIBE is published annually.

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## CONTENTS

### POETRY

A People Disappeared   Anna Forsyth	Four
...Against The Draft   Christina Gordon	Five
Bike and I   David Grant	Six
Death of a Frogmouth   Ann J. Stocker	Seven
Street Tiger   Ann J. Stocker	Seven
Early Autochromes   Mitchell Welch	Eight
Elegy   Marian Weaver	Nine
Holiday   Marian Weaver	Ten
Japan in Ten Haiku   Carl Walsh	Eleven
My Brother's Kidnapping   Marian Weaver	Twelve
Trapeze   Mel Denham	Fourteen
It was a Very Long Story   Jeltje Fanoy	Fifteen
What on Earth!?!   π.o.	Sixteen

### FICTION/NON FICTION

15 Seconds of Fame   Anita Smith	Eighteen
All This Scorched Earth   Mileta Rien	Twenty Two
Getting Older   Debbie Jacobs	Twenty Five
Arthur Street   Hannah Forrest	Twenty Six
Days of Empire   Terry Donnelly	Twenty Eight
Small World Order   Dianne Millett	Thirty Four
Milestone   Andy Murdoch	Thirty Six

### OTHER

Contributors	Thirty Nine
Vale	Forty
n-SCRIBE Committee 2014	Forty

Some works contain language which may offend.



Anna Forsyth, Christina Gordon, David Grant, Ann J. Stocker, Mitchell Welch, Marian Weaver  
Carl Walsh, Mel Denham, Jeltje Fanoy, π.o.

# A PEOPLE DISAPPEARED

Anna Forsyth

I do not see them  
displayed in restaurant fronts  
on Gertrude Street  
posed with partners and chardonnays.

I do not see them with jutting chins  
polished reflections of each other  
on Collins  
looking up then down                      up then down

I do not see

Sometimes a man will call out to me  
on the corner of Smith Street and Langridge

I'm not sure if he's a ghost

he walks

as if he wants to disappear

# ...AGAINST THE DRAFT

Christina Gordon

Water smiled the sprinkler  
on the lawn  
    I remember  
we'd run and jump over  
and through the chic-a-da-chig  
    chic-a-da-chig

laughing wet  
on hot summer days  
    I remember  
the flywire breeding  
holes  
and we'd chase down  
little black bodies

winged against the S P L A T  
of newspaper rolled  
in our hands  
    I remember  
porridge burnt glug-a-de-glug  
    glug-a-de-glug

on the stove top  
sticky fingers  
we'd wash up  
    I remember  
warm sudsy  
sink water  
in winter shivering

bones to the cold  
air breezing  
a creeping chill  
under the door  
    I remember brr-de-de-brr  
    brr-de-de-brr

we'd plug  
the gap gaping  
with handmade  
snakes  
    I remember Mother's  
sewn-together patches  
stuffed against the draft

# BIKE AND I

David Grant

Bike and I charged into the day,  
Wheels tearing and chain humming.  
Our spokes and heart sang upon the clay –  
Hearty and with a fulsome strum.  
We looked for you along the way –  
In the green and about the sun.  
We whirred and puffed,  
As distant rays came and went.  
Now my steed stands in the hall  
And I, my friends, are spent.

# DEATH OF A FROGMOUTH

Ann J. Stocker

A sheaf of feathers  
Nails, beak and bone  
Reminders of life  
Reminders of life  
Still hold its signature  
Image of spread wings  
The silent swoop  
A soft thud  
The quiver of feathers  
Life drains into earth  
Hardened secretions  
Bear witness  
To the silent code  
The first language  
Language of cells

# STREET TIGER

Ann J. Stocker

I'm almost in my cage  
When the tiger comes  
Silence  
Then  
The sudden pad of feet  
A backlit body throws  
Its net of shadow,  
Captures me  
Our eyes connect  
Tail of the mind  
Lashes  
Too late to flee  
Metallic jaw clicks,  
Teeth clatter  
Will they penetrate?  
What will it take  
To expiate?  
Time turns  
To see.

# EARLY AUTOCHROMES

Mitchell Welch

In Yellowstone the thaw comes on like thunder, and a young man  
    Tilts his camera to the spilling falls of snowmelt.  
He photographs the water's glimmering halation, a kaleidoscope  
    Of light he finds in the effluvium of Old Glory,  
Abstraction in the aquapasto moment of Grand Prismatic Spring.  
    He dyes the pronghorn russet with a shutter click,  
Paints the sky blue sulphur; whitebark pines on verdant prairie's  
    Edge, grasslands verging on the evanescent snow.  
Yet his masterwork is monochrome: a closing ring of grey wolves  
    Wreathed with new world vultures and hopping  
Crows, and at the cordon's lonely centre, a bison cow exhausted.  
    Perhaps our anticipation of nature's ragged blush  
Of violence over thinning snow is a shade beyond the spectrum  
    Of technical captivity. Perhaps this is our freedom.

# ELEGY

Marian Weaver

I tried not to think about you,  
There in the home, slipping further  
into your dreams of  
yesterday,  
And fretting about what was going on  
on the second floor that only you could see,  
Plucking at the crocheted rug over your knees  
with twisted fingers that still held  
the memory of shaping dough and  
peeling apples.  
I tried not to think about  
your cloudy eyes that ran with tears  
you didn't seem to feel on your  
hollowing cheeks  
and the way you always looked as though  
you were just waiting for me  
to take you home.  
But then there was the call, and the quiet voice  
consoling,  
And arrangements to be made  
and flowers to be chosen.

I had them play 'We'll Meet Again',  
Hackneyed, clichéd,  
But I remembered your quavering  
half-singing, half-humming, and how  
you loved that song,  
How you taught me the words  
over years of washing my hair  
in your cracked pink bath.  
I had them serve apple pie  
for all the Sunday afternoons  
I stood at the bench and you showed me  
how to roll out my own small lump  
of leftover pastry.  
And there was lavender,  
Sickly-sweet and out of season  
but bringing back the smell of your powdered hands  
after you'd weeded the zinnias  
or when you plaited my hair  
before bed.

And after,  
They gave me a small china box,  
And finally,  
I took you home.

# HOLIDAY

Marian Weaver

It has become a daily ritual.  
He stretches, or takes a deep breath,  
Or closes his eyes as though he's listening,  
And says, 'I think I would really love living here'.

And the ideas come pouring out of him.

Buy that lakeside property,  
Build with mud bricks and his own sweat,  
Learn to grow vegetables, and fruit trees,  
Keep bees and make jam,  
And tend chickens, perhaps even a goat or two.  
He'll plate the roof in glass to catch the sun,  
Wire hollow gutters of bamboo at the eaves to catch the water.  
He'll work from home (the internet is everywhere now),  
And the children will love the country, and a quiet school.

His plans only grow more firm  
As our time here dwindles.  
He wants to ask,  
But he won't risk my answer.  
Better a possibility than a door shut forever.

The evening before we leave,  
I sit outside watching the sun tinting the lake,  
Turning the birds into flat silhouettes.  
I hear the screen door slide behind me,  
And he sits down with a sigh, and stretches.

He prepares himself.

I think – as I have done every evening –  
'I would really love living here',  
Perfectly content, even blissful.  
I say nothing.  
I do not tell him that my contentment  
Lies as much in his absence,  
As in the colours reaching across the lake  
And the birds at sunset.

# JAPAN IN TEN HAIKU

Carl Walsh

大阪

**Ōsaka**

Neon bright city  
Shinto shrine and cool garden  
Thirteen stories high

京都

**Kyoto**

Temples on hillsides  
Moss grown steps to inner peace  
Above monkeys chatter

備中松山城

**Bitchū Matsuyama Castle**

Mist garlanded now  
Wooded hills to fortress climb  
Fallen, then remade

倉敷

**Kurashiki**

This old merchant town  
Where tree-lined canal washes  
On concrete hotel

宮島

**Miyajima**

Holy mountaintop  
Torii gate dipped in the sea  
The waves of tourists

広島

**Hiroshima**

Memories of death  
Stark ruin by the riverside  
Bright fresh oranges

福岡

**Fukuoka**

Cafe culture now  
A coffee ceremony  
That upsets the tea

黒川温泉

**Kurokawa Spa**

In hot onsen soak  
Green hills in soft drizzle washed  
Faint whiff of sulphur

熊本

**Kumamoto**

Bear is in hiding  
Castle with concrete footings  
On tatami mats

長崎

**Nagasaki**

West and East are bridged  
Cake, gardens, porcelain plates  
Bombed by a fat man

# MY BROTHER'S KIDNAPPING

Marian Weaver

I know what's supposed to happen next.

We are waiting by the phone.  
We have done this every day and every night since  
The man in the dark car full of children's screams.  
He took away my brother and gave us  
Fluttering church ladies with their hands full of casseroles  
And serious-faced men in suits who are "on the case".

And I know what's supposed to happen next.

I've seen movies and I've read books,  
And I know what that machine by the phone is for.  
Soon, the phone will shrill out  
And everyone will look at it fearfully  
Before my father's hand—  
Not my mother's, she still hasn't stopped crying—  
Reaches out to bring the dark man's voice to his ear,  
Or we shall get a letter in the post,  
Made of cut-up newspapers crookedly pasted  
On unlined blue paper which the police will take away.  
It will be just like the movies.

Down the hallway is my brother's room.  
I stand in the doorway idly wondering,  
If he doesn't ever come back, if he—  
Say it—  
Dies,  
Could I have his room, with its pretty blue paint  
And the view of the tree with the cubbyhouse?  
I've always liked it better than my own.  
And maybe I could have my old teddy bear back,  
The one Mum gave him to chew on when she said I  
Was too old for baby toys, time to be a little lady now.  
Or would she just leave everything like it is,  
Even his dirty football boots and the last night's pyjamas,  
Puddled, as usual, on the rug by his bed?  
Probably—  
And I hate her for loving him better, even when he's gone.

Tomorrow I have to go to school.  
Dad can stay home from work, and Mum  
Is excused from PTA, and CWA, and shopping,  
But I still have to go to school.  
A young man in blue with an earnest voice  
Says he will be my protector,  
He will walk me to school—  
And he will watch over me and keep me safe.  
He will be my very own knight,  
And everyone at school will know he is there  
To make sure the dark man doesn't snatch me away  
Like he did my brother.  
Everyone will know how important I am,  
Everyone will know my name,  
Even the Grade Sixers and all the parents.

Maybe I will be on television,  
Reporters will ask me how I feel,  
And all the people watching will say, 'How brave she is!  
How well she is taking this terrible tragedy!'  
The Prime Minister will send me a telegram,  
And maybe he will even invite me to Canberra  
To tell me how much he admires me.  
Everyone at school will be so jealous,  
I will be famous—

Standing in the doorway of my brother's room,  
My eyes go blurry and my throat starts to hurt,  
And the pastel ladies hear me crying,  
And rush down the hall to bring me to the kitchen  
Where they sit me down and stroke my hair,  
Murmuring vague words of comfort because they think  
I am missing my brother, frightened for him.  
Powdered hands bring me a glass of milk, a box of tissues,  
A plate with three home-made Anzacs  
Carefully arranged in a pretty pattern to tempt me to eat.  
I am getting so much attention, I think—  
I catch my mother's eyes, glaring,  
And I cry even harder,  
Because I know she knows what I've been thinking.

# TRAPEZE

Mel Denham

Feet uncaught tangled in the net.  
Hands closed empty, but even swaying  
he caught her tossed curse.

Made-up for make-believe  
under hot glare that is a minute's blindness they climb  
facing rope ladders, face  
lights with fake twin grins.

Upside-down blur of one-face, one-gasp crowd—  
he swings, catches hold and flicks  
a glance at the bitter glitter of her eyes.  
Muscle memory performs the rest.

Grounded again, he pursues her vanishing back  
through the rain

of applause; grasps only  
what it is to land  
without her held.

# IT WAS A VERY LONG STORY

Jeltje Fanoy

It was a very long story, we had to tell each other to shut up because going into details made it more unbearable, we didn't quite know how to stop, sharing the pain of it when we were together, so you could nut out what to do, next, sure, we weren't angels, and all this sounded like I was talking about another sort of world, here I've gone again, about something quite a long time ago, already, hey, I actually learned to 'read' the paper 'differently' by hurriedly turning the pages before I finished reading, as if that's what you did, you know, turn the pages,

It's a very long story, we have to tell each other to shut up because going into details makes it more unbearable, we don't quite know how to stop, sharing the pain of it when we are together, so you can nut out what to do, next, sure, we aren't angels, and all this sounds like I'm talking about another sort of world, here I go again, about something completely in the present, now, hey, I'm actually learning to 'read' the paper 'differently' by

hurriedly turning the pages before I finish reading, as if that's what you do, you know, turn the pages,

It will be a very long story, we'll have to tell each other to shut up because going into details will make it more unbearable, we won't quite know how to stop, sharing the pain of it when we'll be together, so you'll be able to nut out what to do, next, sure, we won't be angels, and all this will sound like I'll be talking about another sort of world, here I'm about to go on again, about something way in the future, a long way off, hey, I'll actually be learning to 'read' the paper 'differently' by hurriedly turning the pages before I'll have finished reading, as if that's what you'll do, you know, turn the pages,



**FICTION**  
**NON FICTION**

Anita Smith, Mileta Rien, Debbie Jacobs, Hannah Forrest, Terry Donnelly, Andy Murdoch, Dianne Millett

# 15 SECONDS OF FAME

Anita Smith

The 86 tram is thronged; normal, for a Friday night. Air con's busted too, not unusual in this heatwave and there's nowhere to sit. Surprise, surprise. Nothing to hold on to either, so we stand sweltering near the back door and tram surf on the inside. A sign says: *Please Hold On Sudden Stops Are Sometimes Necessary*. It's too hot to laugh out loud.

Summer suits me. Forces me to slow down, gives me permission to be laid-back, to do bare minimum. Summer energises Leroy. Must have something to do with girls wearing less, showing more skin.

As if he needed an excuse to steal a perve, Leroy zones in on two girls sitting opposite each other in the seats next to us. 'I know you,' he says to Blondie.

The girls stop chitchatting about diets and vampires and look up. Brunette stares at me for a few beats too long and blushes. I look away. Blondie examines Leroy for a few moments then smiles revealing tinsel teeth. 'I don't think so.'

'I do. I know you from somewhere,' persists Leroy.

'Where from?' says Blondie with a tinge of hope rather than doubt.

Leroy pulls out his mobile and starts tapping it. 'Weren't you on the cover of *Dolly* last month?'

The girls giggle. 'I wish!' squeals Blondie and she turns red.

He thrusts his phone in her face. 'Are you trying to tell me that's not you?'

'Ohmygod. She so looks like you,' says Brunette.

'Oh. My. God. It's like looking in a mirror.' Blondie snatches the phone from Leroy and gazes at it.

A tired couple sitting next to the girls smile at each another. I can never tell if old people think we're fun, in a jealous kind of way, or funny, in a not-quite-right sort of way, like we're about to cop a lecture that begins with, 'When I was your age...'

'Do you go to Santa Maria?' asks Leroy.

The girls confirm this by rolling their eyes and sighing in unison. Blondie passes the mobile back and whispers 'You've just friended me.'

Before I can respond,  
he heelflips his board,  
grinds it along the lip  
of the dip, then  
droplides down the  
concave surface of  
the bowl, as if he were  
sliding on the inside of a  
slippery bubble. I can wait.

Just as the tram girls  
(mobiles to their faces) join  
me at the top of the vert  
ramp, an eerie pause pierces a  
hole in the hot night air. An ugly  
scraping sound I don't recognise  
fills it with bad luck. I watch  
Leroy's body flick three metres off  
the ground and suspend in space  
for a split picosecond. His feet spin  
over his head and he crash lands on  
his back in a spectacular nasty slam.  
His body slinks to the centre of the  
bowl, stunned and silent, except for  
his gulping of air, like a fish out of  
water. I slide down to him.

'You alright?' I squat to get a better  
look at his face. He's pale but  
grinning like an eloquent maniac.

'Epic fail,' croaks Leroy as he gives  
me double thumbs up.

'That was a G and D move with  
a twist,' I say trying to contain  
my panic.

The parkour crew gather gawking  
calling out, 'stick to rubbish bins,  
Leroy,' as the tram girls get busy  
with their phones. Leroy looks up  
at them with puppy dog eyes. 'Did  
you facebook that?'

'Posted. Best Stunt Ever,'  
said Blondie.

'Like. Instagram and tweeted,'  
said Brunette.

Leroy punches the air in triumph.  
'Awesome. I can do it again, if you  
didn't get it.'

Fame is like that.

car stereo  
nearby. A crew  
of guys in loose long  
pants and tank tops are  
freerunning over a park bench.  
Leroy joins in. He leaps before a  
rubbish bin, pushes himself off the  
top of it with both arms and tucks  
his legs through. He lands on the  
other side, on the spot with both  
feet, executing a perfect cat vault  
precision jump. Of course the tram  
girls are taking photos and filming  
the action on their phones. Typical.  
Catching this spontaneous show of  
parkour is most likely the highlight  
of their week, if not their whole lives.

Leroy and I wait our turn to plunge  
into the concrete bowl while viewing  
the skateboards carving up the half-  
pipe below us.

'How's your G and D?' asks Leroy.

'My G and D?'

'Guts and Determination.' He's  
jumping out of his skin to get on.  
'You're going to need some G and D  
to hook-up tonight, bro.'

She flashes her train tracks at him.

'Sweet.' Leroy is in.

'Where're you going?' Brunette  
asks me.

'Skatepark,' I answer, gesture to our  
skateboards. She waits for me to ask  
her the same question back. I don't.  
She blushes again. Leroy invites  
them to tag along with us. This irks  
me to the max.

'They're going to the plaza, anyway.'  
He jabs me in the ribs with his elbow.  
'Come on, dude. Grow a pair.'

Skatepark is heaving. Bodies zigzag  
left to right, back and forth flying  
on bikes, scooters and skateboards,  
creating an unnatural breeze that is  
both a relief and a weird buzz at the  
same time. Dirty bass pumps from a





# ALL THIS SCORCHED EARTH

Mileta Rien

‘Do I have enough room?’ ‘What?’

‘Can I get out?’

Kate twists around in her seat to glance at the car parked next to them.

‘Yeah, you’re fine.’

‘Plenty of other places to try.’ Mick reverses out of the animal shelter car park and edges onto the highway.

‘I just wish we’d got him microchipped.’

‘He’ll show up. He’s a tough little bugger.’ Mick reaches over and squeezes her hand, which remains clenched around the sheaf of photocopied fliers in her lap. He retracts his own hand and grips the steering wheel. They join the sad convoy crawling down the road, families with children sitting pale and still in the backseats. Trees thin out to blackened skeletons as they approach the town. The ground is dusted ghostly grey; Mick thinks of the fake-snow talcum powder footprints he tracked through their house on Christmas Eve, barely two months ago.

Kate shudders. ‘I don’t think I can do this.’ ‘We have to, sooner or later.’

‘Why? There’s nothing left.’

For now they’re staying with Dave and Simone, friends from their old neighbourhood in Melbourne. Mick is trying to keep to a routine: getting up at 7.30, showering, shaving, making coffee. His activities usually coincide with Simone’s as she struggles through her last weeks of work before taking maternity leave. They have the same conversation every time. ‘How’s the sprout?’ he asks.

‘Lively today,’ she whispers, rubbing her vast belly. They both lower their voices when discussing the baby, even though Kate is out of hearing and fast asleep. Then Mick thanks her again for letting them stay and apologises for the inconvenience. ‘Don’t be silly,’ she tells him, ‘you know you’re welcome for as long as you need.’

He dreads to think how long that will be. Kate’s parents live in London. Mick’s parents live locally but his father has dementia and his mother has her hands full caring for him. His one brother lives in Perth with his wife and three kids in a house that is already too small for them. Mick and Kate have literally nowhere else to go.

He goes out and stands in queues at Centrelink, meets with bankers and insurance agents in plush inner-city offices. There’s always another form to fill out.

When he runs out of things to do he goes back to Kate who is often still in bed with the curtains drawn, asleep or pretending to be. Or she’s lying on the couch and staring at the TV. She’s spent much of the past two months watching *Ellen*, *Dr Phil*, *Neighbours*. Whenever a news report about the bushfires comes on, which is often, she changes the channel.

Occasionally Mick forces her outside to the supermarket or the park, where she stumbles around after him like a sleepwalker. If he speaks she takes a moment to reply, jerking out sentences in a monotone. The only thing he’s been able to interest her in is this search for their cat. A waste of time in his opinion, but at least her temporary sense of purpose has got her out from under Dave and Simone’s feet for the day. Mick shifts in the driver’s seat, his back aching from

The ground is dusted ghostly grey; Mick thinks of the fake-snow talcum powder footprints he tracked through their house on Christmas Eve, barely two months ago.

the spare room fold-a-bed mattress. The Friday of the heatwave, their daughter Ruby had gone to her friend Emily's house for a sleepover. Mick and Kate spent a worried evening watching the bushfire reports on TV, debating whether to go round to Emily's and collect Ruby early.

'Those fires are still miles away,' Mick said. 'We're much better off getting a good night's sleep and picking her up first thing tomorrow.'

'I guess you're right,' said Kate, but all that night she lay awake fretting in the stifling heat. At 6am she turned on the radio to check the news; the fires were now much closer to their town. 'That's it,' she said, springing out of bed. 'I'm getting Ruby right now.'

She was just getting into the car when her phone rang. It was Emily's mother.

'Hi Trish, I was just on my way over,' said Kate.

'There's no time, love. You'd much better get out of town now. We'll look after your little one.'

'Thanks, but I'd feel happier having her with us.'

'Sure, but you don't know what it's like. We've been through this before and let me tell you, you don't want to get caught.'

Mick and Kate ran back and forth in a panic, stuffing necessities into bags and flinging them in the back seat. 'I still think we should go and get her,' Kate said as she buckled her seatbelt.

'She's safer where she is, babe.'

'I just have a really bad feeling.'

He reached over and tenderly brushed sweaty strands of hair back from her forehead. 'Look, I don't like leaving her behind either, but Trish is right. If we go there we'll be heading towards the fire. We'll double our chances of getting stranded. Besides, they know what they're doing. It's gonna be okay.'

As they pulled out of the driveway, Kate cried out, 'Stop the car!' Mick slowed. 'What?'

'We forgot the cat.' She bolted out of the car and tore up to the yard calling, 'Ginger! Ginger!'

He jumped out and ran after her. 'We don't have time for this.'

'What would we say to Ruby if we left him behind?'

'I know, it sucks, but we have to go *now*.'

Kate took one last desperate scan of the yard and reluctantly turned back to the car. The air had taken on a bitter, metallic sheen. Flakes of black ash fluttered past the windscreen. Mick knows he will never drive down the street where Emily's house used to be. He can bear the thought of his own razed property, but some things are beyond endurance.

Periodically, Kate struggles out of the car with a flier and a roll of sticky tape, attaching posters to anything left standing. He watches her lose the end of the tape, swear and pick at it until it comes free. She bites off a strand and winds it around a blackened stump of telegraph pole, fixes the poster to it, then steps back to check if it's straight. He sees how she stands there a moment too long, allowing herself to actually see the picture – the orange tabby in the arms of their daughter, her small face radiant with the excitement of getting her first pet – then snaps herself out of it, turning back to him with fresh resolve. As Kate predicted, nothing is left. They wander about, kicking bits of rubble. She glares at her husband's slumped shoulders, his hopeless back. Why is he putting them through this?

Mick knows he will never drive down the street where Emily's house used to be. He can bear the thought of his own razed property, but some things are beyond endurance.

Each morning he tries to drag her out of bed, gently prod her into action. She doesn't want to see a counsellor, she doesn't want to go to a support group, she doesn't want a cup of tea. At night she lies beside Mick with as much distance as she can put between them and in her mind slips silently out of bed, drives to the airport, books a ticket on the first international flight she sees, and disappears forever. But she has no money, and her passport went up in flames. She's stuck here in her skin with its caesarean scar, the weight of her body, its history, names and dates holding her down like a headstone. Mick is beginning to think Kate was right. There's nothing here for them. He stares out over the blasted hills. Wind blows soot into his eyes. The place is eerily quiet without birdsong.

It took three years to build the house, three years of commuting between their city flat and an onsite caravan. They'd been trying for a baby and shopping for a block of land, and then found this place in the same week Kate discovered she was pregnant. Everyone said they were crazy, starting a new house with a baby on the way, but they both agreed it was fate. Mick can't imagine ever having that energy, that optimism, again.

Behind him Kate makes a strange, choked noise. He turns.

There among the wreckage, regarding them with his calm yellow gaze, sits Ginger. He looks expectantly from Kate to Mick and back again, as if he has been waiting here for them the whole time. His bright fur is the only patch of colour on all this scorched earth.

Kate rushes forward and scoops him up in her arms, cooing. Mick approaches them and she looks directly into his eyes for the first time in weeks.

Hesitantly, he embraces his wife. They stand still for a long time, waiting for the tears to come. Ginger begins to purr, the loud rumble of it filling their silence.

It took three years to build the house, three years of commuting between their city flat and an onsite caravan.

# GETTING OLDER

Debbie Jacobs

I come from a family of four and we have each taken to growing older in our own way. In my twenties I thought age would never be an issue. However, soon after I hit thirty a policeman, who looked about fifteen, pulled me over for a routine licence inspection. ‘You don’t look nearly that old,’ he said checking my details. For me, being told I didn’t look my age was a sign that I really was getting older and I felt my mortality for the first time.

Now that I’m twice that age, I love to hear people telling me how young I look. The more they say it, the more I think it’s true. It helps me believe that people on the train only give up their seats for me because they are getting off at the next station. It also helps me cope with comments that are difficult to take on board – such as the one from the man who asked me if I’d had a hip replacement when I was limping due to a sprained ankle. When I turned sixty I played it safe with a quiet get together involving a few close and uncritical friends.

Playing it safe would never enter the head of my older sister, Sarah. She marks each birthday with a party that rages until dawn. The whole street thumps away like a revved up twenty-first. And there is no nonsense about her; she always says it like it is. When she turned sixty she said she’d much prefer to be forty again. ‘At this age you feel like you’re nearly there – wherever that is. It’s rubbish that fifty is the new forty and sixty is the new fifty unless you’re Mick Jagger and then seventy is the new thirty.’

My mother’s attitude to birthdays is the polar opposite. She never admitted to having any and never turned forty or fifty let alone sixty. As a star she thought it would be the end of things if she didn’t keep her age down. At some stage during her thirties, though she claimed she was still in her twenties, she emerged from the drudgery of motherhood,

learnt three chords on the guitar and became a folksinger. To complete the transformation she turfed out my tone-deaf dentist of a father who liked listening to Beethoven’s symphonies and replaced him with a bearded fellow in a duffel coat. She said he was her manager. I was nine and believed her – something that made Sarah roll her eyes.

Folk music was especially popular out of town and Sarah and I were dragged along to performances held in icy cold scout halls all over the state when we wanted to stay home by the fire and watch television. To keep up the pretence of youth, she explained our presence by either claiming the three of us were sisters or by saying she had to get married at sixteen. Sometimes she acted like she didn’t know us at all. My sister stood over her for favours in exchange for going along with the stories. Thus, we were guaranteed a childhood without bed times and with an endless supply of ice-cream in the freezer.

Our mother continues to deny the ravages of time. In her eighties her hair is still dyed jet black and she sits in a wheelchair admiring her ankles. All the other residents of her nursing home can’t wait to tell you how old they are; she alone remains contrary. ‘What’s it to you?’ she spits at anyone who dares ask her age.

Of all of us, it was my father who seemed to be the most comfortable with growing older. I remember his fiftieth birthday bash at Smacka Fitzgibbon’s jazz restaurant in North Melbourne. I was eighteen and had read *The Female Eunuch*. He was newly married to Helga, a trim blonde with a thick German accent and a smile that showcased his dental prowess. At the party they both wore pendants, depicting their star signs, crafted by a Montsalvat silversmith. His displayed a nude woman with long flowing hair carrying a water jug and hers had a similar figure astride a lion. He had well and truly arrived at the Age of Aquarius. I was mortified.

When he gave his speech, which included references to Desiderata, I looked around. All the guests were

infused by a similar spirit. The men were in paisley body shirts or tight bell bottoms or both and the women, despite varicose veins, were in the barest of mini-skirts. Later, when they hit the dance floor, none of them seemed to care what they revealed. I felt awkward and overdressed in a billowing Indian caftan and wondered if anyone would notice if I left.

My Polish Auntie Wanda who was less than five feet, even in her wet-look boots, must have seen me heading out and tugged at my shoulder bag. I bent over to her level and she whispered in my ear. ‘Your dad, he has rotten taste in vimin. A goyim maybe we think is okay you know, but a German, that’s something else.’

The wounds of the war were still fresh when my father turned fifty-five. To mark the occasion, he held a dinner party at home. Helga downed too much champagne and in a lull in the conversation, a propos of nothing, declared. ‘You might laugh, but I tell you Hitler had wonderful blue eyes.’ To fill the further lull that ensued she said, ‘he had some very good ideas but just went about them the wrong way.’

‘Is that really the time?’ said Auntie Wanda. It was only nine o’clock, but the others looked at their watches and registered varying degrees of shock – as if days, rather than a few hours, had slipped by. Helga pleaded with them to stay for a piece of black forest cake but there were no takers. The three of us were left at the table. My father buried himself in a newspaper and I cleared the dishes.

Helga did the washing up more noisily than necessary and in between the clang of saucepans and the clatter of cutlery said ‘Your family could do with learning some manners, you know that?’

He never celebrated his sixtieth – but we did all get there. Me tiptoeing across the line, my sister raging, my mother in denial and my father without so much as a whisper.

# ARTHUR STREET

Hannah Forrest

It was Chris' idea that I should move in with him. Into Arthur Street. Those redbrick flats next to the Fairfield laundromat, which everyone in Melbourne seemed to know. And although I had very little debt from my travels, I had absolutely no money. Chris didn't mind. He paid for my first month's rent. I'd told him I would pay him back every cent by March. I didn't, and I think I still owe him for that.

Chris and I had been friends since birth, or as far back as I could remember. Our parents were friends, which made us like cousins. Or siblings. And unlike most childhood friendships, we never grew out of ours. We stuck to what we knew.

Our first-floor apartment at Arthur Street was smaller than small; we called it Our Shoebox. It was big enough for a couple, or best friends, but too small for anything else. This didn't bother us as we planned on sharing one life after that. We would cook together, walk together, wash each other's clothes and never go grocery shopping alone. It would be cheaper, we said. It would be grown-up.

That night – my first night – in the dying weeks of an Indian summer, I lay under my new window, the curtains wide open, snuggling into the rattle of the train and tolling bells from the level crossing.

**I was home.**

The next morning I started a garden on the tiny balcony that was just big enough for a table and two wooden chairs. I laid out plants in little plastic tubs – succulents mostly, which would grow about our legs as we drank coffee and talked about what plans we had for the future. I had a habit of talking too loudly and Chris was sure all the neighbours knew the plot of my unwritten, but future-best-selling, novel.

'You'd better write it before one of them does,' he pointed at the faded green doors of the other apartments.

I laughed and told him I would soon; that I was just waiting for the opening sentence to form in my mind.

When the sun didn't shine over our table anymore, and all the leaves from the trees covered the succulents and our feet, we huddled in front of the heater. Sharing the same blanket, we sat up drinking red wine, even on weeknights, forgoing conversation in favour of cheap television. We discovered bagels and enjoyed them with melted butter and Saturday morning cartoons. We got The Cat and he became our younger brother – sharing the couch with us, constantly begging for food, getting under our feet and having to be yelled at. I placed his litter tray beside the toilet and sometimes he would come in and use it when I was peeing. Scrunching and

scraping his way around the tray he would look at me in the same way that two people who know each other might smile and nod across a packed train.

But it wasn't just the three of us as we'd planned. There was Martin too. My new boyfriend. I spent my first weekend not actually at Arthur Street but at Martin's, and by mid-autumn I hadn't spent a single weekend with Chris and The Cat.

Chris didn't have a girlfriend. He never talked about girls – least not in the same way that I talked about boys. I never saw his eyes wander after a girl on Station Street, or heard him gush over a good-looking film star. If a girl approached him in a bar he was friendly and chatty but he never bought them a drink. He didn't dance drunkenly with a girl to Barnsey or tell them how pretty they looked in the morning. He never hastily scribbled his number on a napkin. I asked him once if he liked women that way.

**'Of course,' he smiled. 'I'm just pickier than you.'**

A few times Martin, Chris and I went out drinking and we all had a great laugh, but Martin and Chris weren't what you would call friends. They were different, only not in the 'opposites attract' way.

That Christmas, Chris went away for a week and didn't tell me. I came home from Martin's to find a note and an empty fridge. He took The Cat with him. Our Shoebox felt huge. I packed a fresh set of clothes and went back to Martin's.

Chris started talking to me less after that. He stopped greeting me when I walked in the door; I was met instead by a 'we need more milk' or 'it's your turn to clean the litter tray'.

On New Year's Eve right after midnight, right after we kissed to

the New Year, Martin broke up with me. It was a sweltering night, and the break up was drunken and messy. I cried in the laundry at Martin's until my whole face swelled and then I passed out on the couch when everyone went home. The next day, the New Year, I snuck around the house, picking up what few belongings I had accumulated and left. I never went back.

Chris was sitting on the couch when I got home. He saw my eyes, my dried up tears and said nothing. He never asked me about it and I never told him.

February came and went, and the Arthur Street anniversary drinks we had planned months earlier went undrunk. Soon Chris started doing only his washing, instead of ours, and I stopped cooking for him each night. We no longer sat on the balcony, and the leaves and the succulents went wild.

When I met Pete in April I chose to stay at his house a lot. His house was warm and had lots of room. But Pete wasn't Martin and before long I ended things and slouched back to Arthur Street. Chris was still sitting on the couch watching cheap television. The Cat was sitting on my seat.

'Do you want to grab a beer?' I asked.

'Can't,' he said.

That night I went to bed wearing two layers of clothes, even though it wasn't yet winter and was still very warm. I slept in fits. I must have moaned in my sleep because Chris appeared sometime in the night. He put a glass of water and painkillers on the table beside my head. My arms were too heavy to lift from under the covers.

'S'cold. Can you get me a blanket?' I had mumbled.

He felt my forehead and frowned. Then he pulled back the blankets and felt my chest. He made me drink the water, then went and got a damp face washer, which he placed on my head. It was so old-fashioned of him and I would have laughed if I could. When my body got too hot he pulled me out of bed with surprising gentleness, stripped me from my clothes and sat me on the floor of the shower. I hugged my knees and shook incessantly as the freezing water poured down around me.

When I was dry and back in bed I asked him to stay and talk to me.

He sighed loudly. 'What should I talk about?' He took one of my pillows and lay across my feet.

'Tell me what you did this summer.'

'Nothing much.' He shrugged. 'I went and saw my parents. And I cleaned up a lot of cat shit.'

'Nothing else?'

'Yeah,' he said. 'I thought a lot about this friend I used to have. How we used to sit out on our balcony in the sunshine, squeezed in between the pots and the bricks like cactus farmers and talk about stuff that didn't really matter.' He waited for me to laugh.

'Sounds dumb,' I said.

'Maybe to you,' he said, 'but I loved it.'

I went to sleep after that. Chris stayed with me, reading at the end of my bed until the fever broke. When my hunger returned he bought bagels. He ate his with melted butter. I asked for jam.

'I like them better this way,' I said. 'You should try it.'

But he just shook his head. 'Think I'll stick to what I know.'

We spent another winter at Arthur Street, drinking far too much red wine, our feet against the heater.

When I moved out it was an unusually hot day in October. My belongings were packed onto the single trailer by eleven, I had scrubbed down my empty room by noon and there wasn't a trace that I had ever lived there by one. I moved out three weeks before Chris did. He had found himself a place on his own. I let him take The Cat. I bought a succulent as a house-warming gift.

Chris rolled his eyes. 'You could have given me something nice.'

'I never managed to grow anything else,' I shrugged. 'Best to stick to what you know.'

# DAYS OF EMPIRE

Terry Donnelly

Jimmy's dad was a cripple. I first heard it while working in the shop. It was the summer designated for me to learn how to be a man, and for reasons unfathomable to me this involved filling orders, running errands, stocking shelves. I was caught between my father, whose mysteries didn't extend beyond a dental plate and a locked bureau, and an endless succession of customers whose commentary, tireless, seemed to consist mostly of debating distances by car to various towns. I learnt that Mr Fox's accident happened in the timberyard, his arm crushed in a machine. The word crushed made me think of grapes. When he finally came in to the shop again I spied on him. The arm hung limply under an overcoat, which he wore like a cape.

I don't know what first drew me to Jimmy, but I acknowledge his father's limb must have played a role. When I saw Jimmy outside the shop, waiting for his father, I wondered what sort of son a cripple had. I knew vaguely who Jimmy was before. He stood out because of his red hair, and a pair of binoculars he always carried. It was a quirk of fate that the Foxes were all ginger. They had milky complexions and suffered in the sun. The binoculars belonged to his father from the war.

When we first talked he was up a tree by the creek, rigging some ropes. I was pretending to fish. It could not have been too far into the summer, for it seemed that a hot and dusty eternity followed.

'Pass that rope up, use the grapple hook.'

It wasn't really a grapple, but a length of steel that had an ugly curve at one end. I walked to the edge of the bank and swung. I got it and hid my surprise.

He was into the outdoors and for notes he carried a little book with a pencil attached by a string. He was writing a field guide. I didn't know what a field guide was, but it sounded like something of use, for I spent what time I could about fields.

He pulled the rope taut above my head, 'Are you going to stand there all day?'

He had a habit of not looking into your eyes as he spoke, and I immediately fell in love with the effect it created, at once vulnerable and aloof.

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I hid our friendship from my parents, and I'm sure Jimmy knew this, but we never mentioned it. He would wait down the street from the shop. My father felt the universe functioned poorly outside of the walls of his business, and he struggled to share my interest in it. There was always one more task though in my naivety I thought I reached it daily. Jimmy never complained when I was late but in his coolness I sometimes imagined reproach. This made me over talk, bemoaning my father and my fate, striving heatedly for conciliation.

He lived along the train line, the tracks providing a shortcut to his house. The homestead itself was a beat-up weatherboard, the roof rusted out in places. I never ventured inside, but it had a veranda we used as a staging post. Once during a summer downpour I stood and watched drips meander through the tin, becoming acquainted with that patrician melancholy only the better off can feel for neglect.

His mother sometimes joined us, smoking. She was thin with white lips and freckles. She was taller than Mr Fox, which seemed somehow improper to me. She asked after my parents, which I didn't like, for I understood that to mention

them was in some way an insinuation. She offered me a cigarette once, but I sensed a ruse and declined.

He had a sister, and in her I could indulge freely my crush for Jimmy. She was a languid waif who floated about the house, waiting for marriage, tragedy, decay – it wasn't clear. Once I saw her cross the yard to the washing line wearing only a white slip, her nipples staining through the light fabric. She turned and in her smile I felt her heat but also mocking rebuke. My fevered imaginings were not as original or novel as I had supposed.

There was an older brother too but all he had was a name, Scott. They had a photo on the wall inside the front door. Alive, dead, I didn't ask.

And then there was Jimmy's dad. He'd served in North Africa, whereas my father had been stationed in Brisbane, something to do with ammunitions that sounded suspiciously like store keeping to me. After a few days of coming to their house Mr Fox deemed me not a threat and dispensed with the need to cloak his shoulders. He patted me on the head with his good arm, and I felt anointed and nervously proud because he seemed like a man who had lived. It struck me as shameful bad luck that Mr Fox had been injured at work, and not in the heat of battle. He once rested it – the thing, on my forearm. He left it there as he talked, and I was frozen (it had powers) until he noticed my discomfort.

When he came into the store he never let on that he knew me. I was both grateful for this discretion and somewhat betrayed. He seemed to me like the first man I knew, and he was certainly the first drunk I knew. His breath was warm and yeasty, like air damp with boiling potatoes. Most importantly for that era, he didn't appear to care for other people's affairs. He endured the world for the glory and sadness of his own existence, and to me that seemed like a noble way to be.

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The borders of the property were ill-defined. There was a dry creek at the back, below a heavily wooded slope. I lived in town, and though it wasn't more than a stroll, it was another world. We played camp, dug mineshafts, lit fires. Back out the road where the tracks curved sharply, Jimmy showed me how to jump the lumber trains when they slowed, and we'd have the long walk back into town to flush the thrill from our blood. We fantasised about finding a dead body, lost Japanese soldiers still at war, a seam of gold.

It was in the service of such duties that we encountered the pup. He was mewling from a deep drain, by Barker's Road. Jimmy tied a rope to a trunk and I made an elaborate ritual of lowering him down, where he snatched the creature up as if from the jaws of death. Jimmy held him close to his chest and I was jealous.

'What shall we call him?' I asked.

'Nimbus,' he said with certainty.

I knew I could not name better and proprietorship shifted further from my grasp.

Jimmy held him to the light, inspecting him in the round, 'We can teach him to hunt.'

Where would he stay? I didn't want to ask the question, for I knew the answer. I had broached it with my father numerous times, subtle and otherwise, and he was immovable on the subject of man's best friend.

Jimmy placed him on the ground.

'We need to feed him milk, that'll fatten him,' Jimmy observed.

I sniffed a role. My father watched his stock closely, but he was unlikely alert to what a dog might thief.

‘I’ll look after the food, and I can get him a collar.’

Jimmy nodded agreement, and I pushed my advantage and picked the pup up. He whined and Jimmy shifted uneasily. I faced the truth down.

‘He can stay at your place,’ I said.

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We carried him in a wicker fishing basket and kept the lid down when in town. I didn’t want news of the dog getting back to my father, and a fishing basket was good cover. Too, the basket allowed us to lift Nimbus into trees, a fun sport, and we also lowered him off Pearson’s Bridge into the creek, a convoluted way of washing him. The hazard, that we might lose him, was an unacknowledged part of the attraction.

In the pup we had a shared object for our affection, and we indulged in it recklessly. I’m not sure if I knew it was doomed, though with high school approaching, boarding school in Melbourne, it should have been obvious. But I had no understanding then that the days of empires are short lived and that the truth of it was we would never go hunting.

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The Cassisi brothers, Tony and Frank, seemed more Italian than Australian. They were three and four years older than me. My father had banned them from the shop, and so they didn’t like us much, but I was insignificant enough to qualify for indifference. My mother said they were suckled by a she-wolf, and she called them Mussolini’s Catholic twins. I smirked to hide my ignorance. They weren’t twins, though they were alike in features and stature but that one, Tony, had a scar on his forehead. It was said that his father did it to him; with a knife, with a belt, with pliers. His father was a mechanic, a swarthy man who seemed to sweat oil. Their parents had come out after the war, and I knew enough to know that Italy had bet on the wrong side, and this gave them the cache of villainy.

The brothers stopped me at the corner of Anders Street.

‘Hey mate, I hear you have a dog,’ Tony said.

‘No,’ I croaked.

‘I heard you did,’ said Frank.

Tony muttered to Frank. All I got was his real name, Francesco.

‘We lost a dog,’ said Tony. ‘He ran away from us.’

‘If you see him,’ Frank warned.

I nodded. It was now impossible.

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Jimmy was in denial and I agreed, to a point. Of course we couldn’t give the pup up, but what could we do? It was further complicated for me because I had lied to them. I came as close as honour would permit to outlining our best solution, but to no avail. Jimmy would not bite.

Inevitably the brothers cornered us. We had avoided the town, but on hotter days it was hard to break the habit of bringing Nimbus for a dunk at Pearson’s Bridge. It was by the Mercantile Hotel, where Jimmy’s dad drank. There was a sandy shoal under the bridge arch where you could shelter. Another moment and perhaps we would have made it.

‘Look,’ the cry came from above.

I heard the accent and knew.

Jimmy scooped up Nimbus and made a run for it through the water. Frank caught him easily, catching hold of the cord around his binoculars to drag him back by the neck. The dog rolled into the creek, yelping. Frank plucked him up too.

'It's our dog,' Jimmy managed.

He looked at me for corroboration but I was struck dumb. I knew I was a coward, but it was painful to have it wedged between my friend and me. The cruel beauty of it was the futility of my betrayal – I don't know what I hoped to save.

Frank released the cord around Jimmy's neck and Jimmy fell forward into the shallows.

'So is it your dog or not?' Tony asked me.

I kept silent. Jimmy, crawling onto the bank, gave me a look of disgust.

Tony said something to Frank in Italian. Frank, at the water's edge, lowered the dog in by his paw.

'If it's our dog, we can do what we want, right?' Tony asked.

The ingenuity of the trap was such that I couldn't step in or avoid it. Frank lifted and dunked the puppy again. Jimmy flinched but Tony motioned him to sit.

Tony turned to me, 'Who's the owner?'

Frank shook the pup.

'You are,' I stammered.

It was our only hope.

'That's fucking right mate,' Tony said.

The pup trembled and coughed. Frank let him get his breath and then down he went again.

'Nimbus,' cried Jimmy.

'Who is Nimbus?' Tony snorted.

I shuddered. From his lips it seemed a ridiculous name; fanciful and prissy.

Then the shadow of a figure came behind us.

'What's going on fellas?'

It was Jimmy's dad. Frank lifted Nimbus out of the water, but didn't set him down.

'It's our dog,' said Tony.

Jimmy's father knew about the pup.

'Jimmy?' his father asked.

Jimmy said nothing.

'If you don't want it, why not give it to the two boys here?' Mr Fox reasoned.

'Because it's ours,' said Frank.

The pup keened lowly, a pitiful sound, and I hated the creature at that moment.

Frank dropped him and he bobbed listlessly on the surface before slipping below.

The brother plucked him out at the last, a balance the bully knew intuitively.

'You boys better be careful,' Mr Fox said.

'What's a cripple going to do?' Frank challenged.

I was shocked, but this was how they lived, probing for weakness. Jimmy, as if hit, stood up unsteadily. Mr Fox sweated in the sun with a puzzled expression, and then slowly took off his jacket. It was his obligation, to teach the boys a lesson. I noticed how grubby his shirt was, under the clean blue sky, and I felt embarrassed for Jimmy. I saw then what had hit him, his father was going to be beaten. Tony moved to his brother's side.

Frank dangled the puppy, 'If you want it, take it.'

Mr Fox couldn't take the dog and defend himself for if he stretched he would be exposed. Jimmy clenched his fists, but his father signalled him to settle. Mr Fox stepped to the boys and put his hand out warily. Frank dropped the puppy before Mr Fox had him, but Mr Fox leaned and caught Nimbus as he fell.

The blows never came. Calling him a cripple with impunity was enough, toying sufficed the need for a physical fight. What came next though would take me longer to figure out. The brothers stepped back, basking in their work. Mr Fox turned ponderously to his son, as if in question. Jimmy, almost imperceptibly, nodded assent.

Then, like a figure from those ancient stories I heard weekly from the pulpit, Mr Fox waded into the creek. He plunged the pup. When he pulled Nimbus out there was no doubting. He threw the lifeless creature onto the bank in a gentle lobbing arc, as you might a piece of fruit you didn't want to bruise.

The brothers left first, muttering in their patois, then Jimmy and his dad.

It seemed to me there should be ceremony, a grave, some kind of marker, but it was suddenly plain that the world did not always work in that way. I stood and walked quickly. I was ashamed of the place and wanted to be gone from it.



# SMALL WORLD ORDER

Dianne Millett

It was a simple adaptation. Implants, just inside the ear, in the thirteenth year. A rite of passage. Network uptake guaranteed access, approval, and a place in the world, along with everyone else. Well, almost everyone. So much was gained. The Big Picture painted in embossed and hash tagged. So what if it has all the originality of this year's approved cushion cover designs. Job got done. Food got put on table – GM standardised. Everyone gravitated to what they were told they should want and need. Thinking is dangerous – saying what one actually believes is suicide. Anxiety, the result of a little bit too much leisure time, or the failure to nod along with everyone else, can be 'cured' with a range of 'free' mind-numbing drugs, which guarantee a uniform happy face. Retro- retro is back- back again. I make Happy Face too – because it is easier and because I am patient.

I have been working for Bioengineering Canneries for fifteen years as a researcher and designer. What we put in the 'cans' is a little tweak here and there. Maybe big noses run in the family. Perhaps a small penis is something that you didn't want to pass on down. We can make adjustments. My speciality is personality typing. I sift through the Gen-code and spot potential Ab-norms. If shyness is a problem – a little narcissistic nudge can work wonders – like adding salt and pepper. Narcissism isn't considered a negative in this century – just the opposite. But I can't tweak everyone – you have to be on The state sanctioned list.

Most of The Select like to be considered Free Range natural bred, coming from ancestral lines, generations long. Complete with Lords and Ladies and old generals – the kind who sipped tea, as they sent brave young soldiers 'over the wall' at Gallipoli in 1915. Blue bloods they were called. Disastrously inbred but 'saved' because they were always getting the house maids pregnant. It was the common stock that strengthened the lines; otherwise too many clan regions would be run by drooling monsters. Although, some still are. How do I happen to have all this arcane knowledge, I hear you ask? I read about it in books. Yes, real books bound with cardboard covers... but I digress.

Many of Elite-nics, who imprint the Motherboards are directly descended from the B&Bs, Bankers and Brokers – who managed the Wall Street Crash, which launched the World Economic Crisis in the early 21st century and the downfall of the USA following the default. Although, it did hiccup along for a bit, while China got top heavy, choked, then starved. The media oligarchs pulled strings and pushed buttons, in order to manipulate politics, and the politicians themselves. Captains of Industry, corrupt officials, lawyers and research scientists, paid to create dodgy stats. and evidence – together with unnecessary drugs to subdue dissenters – helped. A wonderful bunch of sociopaths – they kept quiet about the dangers of tinkering with the genome too... Don't get me started on the Oil Wars... If I think too much about how this world has been managed and orchestrated and by whom, I am in danger of setting off an alarm. Blood pressure too high. Breathing erratic. So I focus. Breathe. Smile. My demeanour hiding the true me. I like to smile wide. I practice smiling with my eyes. It is hard, but I learnt along with my little Brothers and Sisters at the Happy Family Holiday Camps – a cover for the Eco-Rebs. It was part of our rudimentary training in the glory days. Most of my comrades are dead or 'redefined'. Same thing.

But you know all this Bobble-Head. I know you do. You watched it all with your big sad eyes and heard it too many times with your plastic, droopy ears. No, it does not do to ruminate. I might get screened for depression and have to go in for maintenance.

Strange, it seemed such a little thing – like the common cold that wiped out the peoples of the Amazon... followed by the cure for the cold itself, which had disastrous results for a generation – poor things were born with virtually no immune system, and some still live in bubble colonies on Islands of Hawaii. Or The Virus that killed 4 billion people in 2070... and kept adapting. Well, they would play God. Now there is funny old term... Sorry, Creatrix-Matrix.

We were warned about the dangers of gene-splicing after the genome patents of the late 21st century. Margaret Atwood, The Prophetess, was right about pig gene splicing too. Some still remembered, even after her books were banned. She was not made into a saint. The virus went airborne just like she said it would in her Holy Trinity... her three books that spelt it all out. And what with Climate Change,

chemical and bio-weapons, Fukushima Inc. well, the rest is  
history. Not that many people care about history. Too much revision. Rewriting.  
Too many lost teachings. If it weren't for the Record Crypts... but I am getting ahead of myself.  
Too much going on in my head. Not much going on in yours Bobble Dog.

Eventually, we got used to the domes and the underground, didn't we? But that was three hundred years ago; only the blue classes live underground now. Not Crakers, the manufactured perfect beings, prophesied, but BCSs – Blue Collars & Singlets. Now the domes are like gardens in walled cities. Snow domes. Rose domes. Oak Domes. Shroooooom Domes for the Tech Heads and the Latter Day Hippies. It's funny who survives.

Everyone is Org branded these days. Follow a sport. Follow a Religio-Cult. Drive a Hydro Piny. Or a Solar Nasdec. Have an interest in collecting 19th century bottle caps as opposed to 20th century CDs. Everyone in their own little niche, everything managed – nothing to chance. Now there's a thing. The rich and the powerful, try as they might, and they did try, could not rule out chance. I am chance. Chance 444.

It was around the time researchers created the first clone for organ harvesting that scientists found an itty-bitty link in the forgotten 'non-coding' DNA that no-one cared about until they discovered it had receptors that could unhinge abnormal cells, and stop the aging process. Vanity survived and has proved to be the deadliest of the sins – although, these days, it is heresy to say so. Think of it as pulling on a thread and unravelling a jumper. Not that these government issue Recycled-cycled wearables would ever unravel.

Who could have guessed that Beluga caviar, extracted from the last of the wild breeders, and a certain Nano-tech modified sunscreen, impregnated with gold, would combine, when the code response was triggered to create a fountain of youth? Of course the Mirror Neurone Receptor deficient vanity driven wealthy couldn't get enough. But it was the Academics, who just happened to be members of that class, because they could afford the schooling, after long detailed 'peer reviewed' studies, who recommended restricted use to the few – citing population pressures and cost. Sure there were dissenters, but their theories were not validated by 'you guessed it' the selected 'peer-review' assessment teams and affiliated 'funded' Institutions. Of course it is more 'complex' than that, but simply put that's how it worked.

I see you agree with me Bobble.

Today we have The Controllers of the Motherboard – The Fathers – who are said to be 200 years old. A class outside everyday humanity like the Medici, or the ancient royal families in Egypt. The Controller's heads are bigger than ordinary folk – like Elizabeth I with her plucked fore head. In fact, if an individual measures more than 30 centimetres, from nose bridge to ear line, they can be considered for elevation, although it is not automatic.

Hold on, the supervisor. No. Just a Robo spot cell check. That was close.

Just doing the final adjustment. There. Intelligent Design in action. Think of Lego – no Jenga – no – Mouse Trap! I love those retro-retro games from the 20th century. Just a little hook on a little strand of DNA. No violence. No blood. They will simply drink it in with their daily Perian Glacier Melt and in seven days they will all drift off to sleep like Sleeping Beauty, but no Prince Charming will ever come to kiss and make better.

I imagine long corridors of beds in hospital warehouses. Oh, I suppose it will be called something nice like the Twilight Hacienda, or Sunshine Holiday Vac-Camp. Ancient music will play 'Yellow submarine' by The Beatles. Even if they will be deaf to it, it is the thought that counts. It will be called: Keeping up appearances.

So, this is for you. You have always listened and never judged. Will this New World be braver? I wonder. I don't know, but I hope it will be kinder and more human. Count with me Bobble Dog. One. Nod. Two... three.

Click.

# MILESTONE

Andy Murdoch

From tower's top I look south, towards the farm on which my father grew, towards the town his family still calls home. I look east, towards the lough, towards the house by its shores we called home ourselves, for a while. To the north I look towards Belfast – perhaps. Perhaps it's Belfast. My eyesight is not good, and I didn't bring my glasses.

Four years of my childhood I spent in the shadow of this tower. It was closed then. Now, seventeen years on, it's open. I have climbed it and I look out upon the landscape of my childhood.

My childhood was not good, but the view is awesome.

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This is what I wrote in my diary in the seconds before the bomb exploded:

My cousin has the cutest arse. We were at the pub the other night, standing at the bar, and I couldn't take my eyes off it. I think the barmaid caught me staring. She smiled, funnily enough. I thought this lot were all homophobes. It's a cute arse, anyway. I haven't been looking at them for long, granted, or maybe I've been looking at them longer than I realise and I just haven't taken that much notice. Whatever. Anyway. William's arse? William's arse is hot. Is it incest for cousins to fuck?

The bomb demolished a pub that had nursed its regulars through more than three hundred troubled years; it rattled the windows of my uncle's home, nearly a mile from the centre of town. The phone rang a few seconds after I stopped writing. My aunt spoke quietly, mumbling outside my bedroom door; it rang again and she answered immediately and this time, within seconds, she said: 'Dear God.' A minute or two later she knocked on my door. 'Well, lad,' she said, 'd'ye want to hear about the bomb?'

Within twenty minutes there was a news break on the BBC; the next morning the bomb was front page on every newspaper I saw. The Secretary of State flew in from London and shopkeepers yelled at him; the honourable gentleman seemed less concerned with the destruction wrought than with correcting the semantics of those who referred to the province as 'this country', as if – God forbid – it might be a separate entity to his.

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My mother attended one 12th of July march. I was three or at the oldest four at the time. She found the whole Irish thing terribly romantic in suburban Melbourne, relished my father's tales of pipe bands and drums and folk songs, the banners and the hats and the silly costumes. But in her husband's homeland people didn't sing about the Orange and the Green. Not much. In Ulster, in the '70s, people died. I think she attended one march; no doubt marvelled at the colour and the music and the spectacle, thrilled, ever so slightly, to the threat of being blown to pieces by the naughty Catholics. Less than twelve months it took for my father's accent to reclaim whatever cadence it had lost after two decades in Australia. My mother never attended another parade.

Four years we lived in Northern Ireland. My mother attended one march; the others? I picture her at home, listening to Johnny Cash; imagining his gospel music to be a little more respectable – or at least more biblical – than the semi-pagan shenanigans for which her husband has dragged her halfway round the world.

My aunt and uncle lived on a new residential development on the outskirts of town. It was nothing special – single storey, two bedrooms – but it had a spectacular view of the nineteenth-century neo-Gothic tower, perched on a craggy hill high above town, that had engulfed my childhood dreaming. And it was a minute's walk from the Mile House, where my aunt and my father were born, where my grandmother babysat me and my younger brother. My memories of the house are vague: I remember the milestone, planted firm on the road's verge outside my grandmother's bedroom window; I remember a clothes mangle in the backyard, almost certainly generations old. We would use that mangle, sometimes, to wring out gran's washing.

Ten years after we returned to Australia my grandmother died, and some well-off neighbours bought the farmhouse. And, apparently, the milestone. I remember it outside gran's bedroom, as immutable as the tragedy that swirled about it; I saw it seventeen years later, a hundred metres out of place, beside some rich cabbage grower's driveway. I didn't tell my father. I don't know if he'd heard from someone else, don't know if he cared. The rest of the family didn't care. I can tell you only of my own inexplicable, irrational outrage at what I considered the violation of a heritage I was otherwise proud to disown.

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We were on a hill above the road the parade was to take. The IRA had threatened an attack, and my father was frightened we might be hurt if we ventured closer. So we lay on our tummies in the grass. Mum was at home, listening to The Old Rugged Cross. Singing along, perhaps.

That's all I remember. Dad and me and my little brother watching the Orange Lodges declare their eternal victory o'er the Taigs. Drums like the ones in the Salvation Army, costumes and uniforms from some awful school play, boys playing flutes and twirling batons – and me, too young, I suppose, to feel the lust that would be a constant two decades later. So many teenagers, dancing their jigs and hoisting their banners, affirming the mindless bigotry tattooed on their psyches by centuries of murder and hate. When I was a kid in Ulster the Troubles were less than a decade old; when I returned we celebrated our quarter-century together.

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The bomb demolished a pub and some nearby shops. It caused considerable structural damage to buildings throughout the town centre, and some of them were pulled down in the weeks that followed. Many of the town's residents looked upon the devastation as a tourist attraction in their own backyards and spent hours gathered around the bomb site watching the police and army and whoever else was there sorting it all out; my Northern Irish family looked on these neighbours as worthy of lobotomy. 'Fuckin' eedjits,' my cousin said. 'Anyone with a decent set a fuckin' brains on their shoulders knows the Fenian cunts'll maybe have another one planted somewhere.' They still said Fenian, some of them. My uncle referred to the Republic as 'the Free State', oblivious, apparently, to irony.

My uncle and my aunt took me to the July 12 celebrations, despite the bomb a week or two earlier, and the IRA disappointed my base outsider's desire for spectacle. The local Orange Lodges marched triumphant and unbombed along the streets of my father's home town, marched past a church with an impressive stone steeple; and I have some photographs I like to think contrast the colour and pageantry of the marchers' hatred with the sobriety of the Christ who they claim inspires them. The lodges from around the region assembled and marched in a larger town nearby, and my uncle and aunt took me to that parade, too. There I took more photos – but photos of boys, boys playing flutes and bagpipes

and drums, twirling batons and hoisting banners, boys sporting uniforms of dark blue and burgundy, of lilac and grey and white and chocolate brown, and in every picture my uncle to the right and my aunt to the left, a foot ahead of the camera, ears fuzzy with autofocus, my uncle and my aunt frame each boy, ears offering judgment, perhaps, on whatever is there to be judged.

I telephoned my parents. 'Are you having a good time?' my mother asked. 'Have you seen Uncle Jim? Have you been to the Giants' Causeway? I remember the Giants' Causeway, Dad took us there once, do you remember? And the castle with the rope bridge? Ooh, we heard about the bomb. You're okay, then?' My friends in London paid little attention to my travel plans, had no idea I was in the bombed city. 'Ooh,' they said when I returned. 'What was it like, then?'

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From the top of Scrabo Tower I look out upon the landscape of my childhood. Not my whole childhood, obviously, not even most of it. Four years. Just the four. I look out over Newtownards and Comber, over Strangford Lough and the Mile Hill, that wee speck of an island that sits a few dozen metres out into the lough, joined to that larger island called Ireland by a tidal causeway. I struggled with the subtleties of that pronunciation as a child. Island, Ireland. Ireland, which is an island. I look out upon it all and I remember my desperation to enter this tower those seventeen years ago, remember bashing my hands against its locked doors, desperately believing there was someone inside who would open up as my parents sat in our car, not terribly patiently, waiting for me to accept my disappointment. Today the tower is a historical and environmental centre. Or something. There are displays, anyway, about its history, and the environment of the lough. It's open, that's what counts. I look out upon my childhood, and it was not a good childhood, but it is a great view. I take it in, again, because in the weeks I've been visiting I've been here many times, and I cannot tire it. And then I remember that my aunt and my uncle are waiting in the carpark below, that I have a boyfriend in London waiting for me to catch a flight from Belfast in three hours. I look out, once more, and then I turn and take the steps two at a time.

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It's the morning of the 12th of July. My father and my brother are about to leave the house and there's a tremor of satisfaction in Mum's arms as she slaps bacon and eggs and soda bread on my plate. Dad and Richard are done with breakfast. 'You're not coming, then,' Dad asks, more an admission of defeat than a question, and my brother, though the wee shit's not yet five, smirks the smartarse smirk that's to be his trademark in the years to come.

I shake my head. No. I'm not coming. I'm not celebrating your bigotry, your violence, your hatred, your bloodlust. My voice I won't add to your baseless claim of British sovereignty. Go, pay homage to the imbecile prejudice of four hundred years. I won't come.

I didn't actually say this. Obviously. I didn't even think it. I was only seven, after all. I can't remember what I said, or what I thought. I might've thought something like: 'Killing people is bad, but you're going to a march that says killing people is good. And that's bad.' Or perhaps I thought: 'Mum says.' I can't remember; I can only imagine.

And today I imagine something else. Today I can only hope to see myself running from the house by the shores of the lough, down the lane towards the road, running after my father's car screaming Stop, Dad, stop. And I see myself trip, as I often did, fall face first in the gravel, sob as the dust of Ulster coats my tongue and the snot that dribbles from my nose and the tears that track my cheeks. I want to go. Please. I want to. Please, Dad. Stop. But the car is gone, my father and my brother are gone, and Johnny Cash is calling me, calling me home.

# CONTRIBUTORS

David Grant is a Northcote local and bicycle tragic. He doesn't own a car.

Anna Forsyth is a freelance writer and editor, moonlighting as poet and musician, Grace Pageant. Her work has appeared in n-SCRIBE and fourW.

Marian Weaver is published in Regime, Victorian Writer, [untitled], n-SCRIBE, Potnia, Queen of the Sacred Way, Bearing Torches, ABC The Drum/Unleashed and Online Opinion.

π.o. is a famous poet in the Fitzroy/Darebin area. Latest work BIG NUMBERS from Collective Effort Press.

Jeltje Fanoy has been writing, editing, publishing and performing poetry since the mid-seventies. She convened poetry performances at La Mama Poetica from 2004 to 2010.

Ann J. Stocker is a geneticist who has worked in the US, Brazil and Australia. She has written poetry since her teens.

Mitchell Welch is a writer, editor and poet from Preston. His work has been featured in a range of literary journals in Australia and overseas.

Mel Denham is a very recently emerged poet, living in Northcote and working as an editor by day and a mother all the time.

Christina Gordon lives and writes in Melbourne.

At school, Carl Walsh got a few poems into local papers. Fast forward 25 years and one appeared in n-SCRIBE 8. So figured he'd try again...

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Debbie Jacobs studied Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT. She is working on a series of short stories based on her improbable family.

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Terry Donnelly is a writer and teacher who lives in Melbourne.

## Mayor's Writing Awards Honourable Mention

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## Feature Artist

Lise Podhorodecki  
[www.studiopardon.com](http://www.studiopardon.com)

## VALE – ELLIE MARY WHITTAKER 22/2/1937 – 1/7/2014

Mary ‘the name shaper’ was born Alva Marion and her free spirit tried new beginnings, dabbling in them all.

We knew her as Mary and later as Ellie Mary. She had a piercing emotional intellect and from the time she learnt her letters at six, was putting them together into stories. A wonderful writer, committee member of *n*-SCRIBE, ‘*Lady of Stories*’, founding mother at Span Writers, serendipity adventurer devoted to family – the list goes on.

Now we are left wondering what happened to ‘*The Captain*’ – a story begging to be published!

## *n*-SCRIBE COMMITTEE 2014

Heather Ruth Laurie recently published, ‘*From Out of the Ordinary*’. In October 2014 she held a successful joint poetry, painting and glass exhibition with artist Jennie Williams Culic at Joel Gallery, Altona.

Kylie Brusaschi is currently completing a Ph.D at Victoria University. Her research interests are poetry, feminism and philosophy.

Claudine Edwards has previously been a freelance journalist and winner of the *Scarlet Stiletto Young Writers’ Award*. She currently works in Arts administration and writes a blog.

Shirl Bramich writes poetry, short stories, been published in anthologies such as *Artemis Press* and local writers magazines.

Debbie Jacobs studied Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT. She is working on a series of short stories based on her improbable family.

Nimity James is currently studying a Bachelor of Media and Communication (Hons) at RMIT.

David Spitzkowsky is a Darebin writer, RMIT PWE graduate and Varuna alumni with short stories published in several journals and anthologies.

At school, Carl Walsh got a few poems into local papers. Fast forward 25 years and one appeared in *n*-SCRIBE 8. So figured he’d get involved.







Darebin  
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