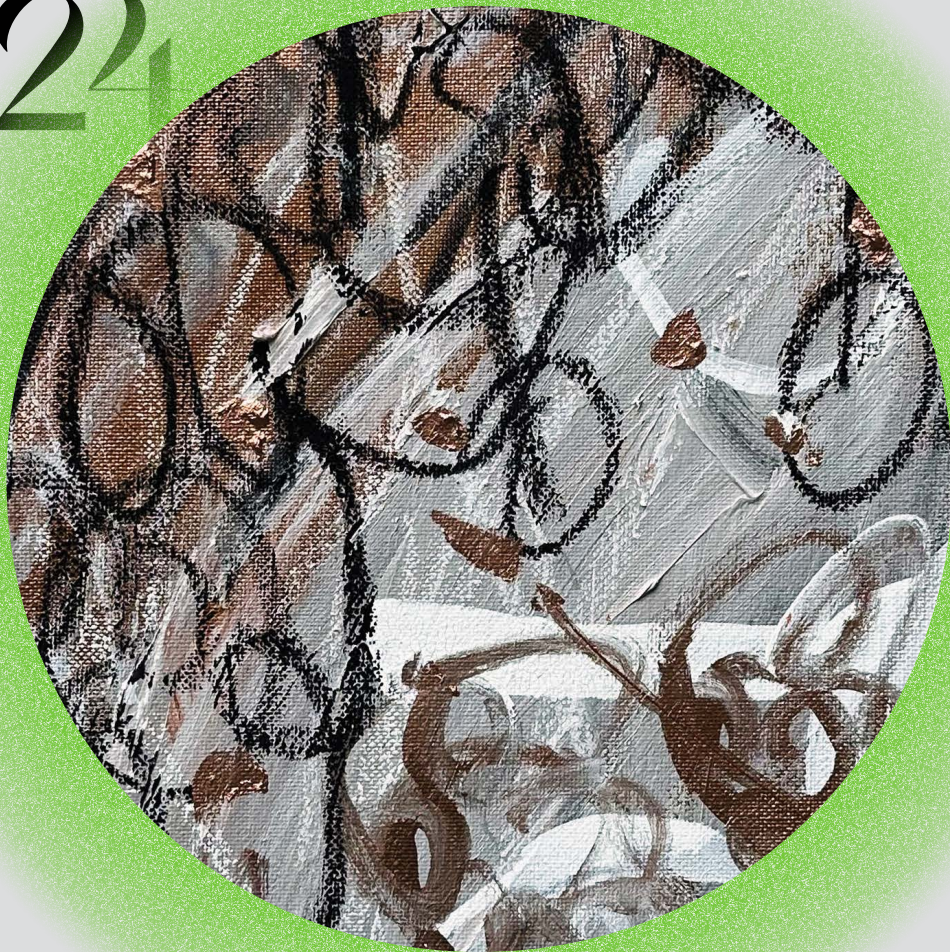


dSCRIBE: ISSUE 17 DESIRE LINES 2024



Free Publication

Fiction, Non-Fiction, Poetry, Art, Local
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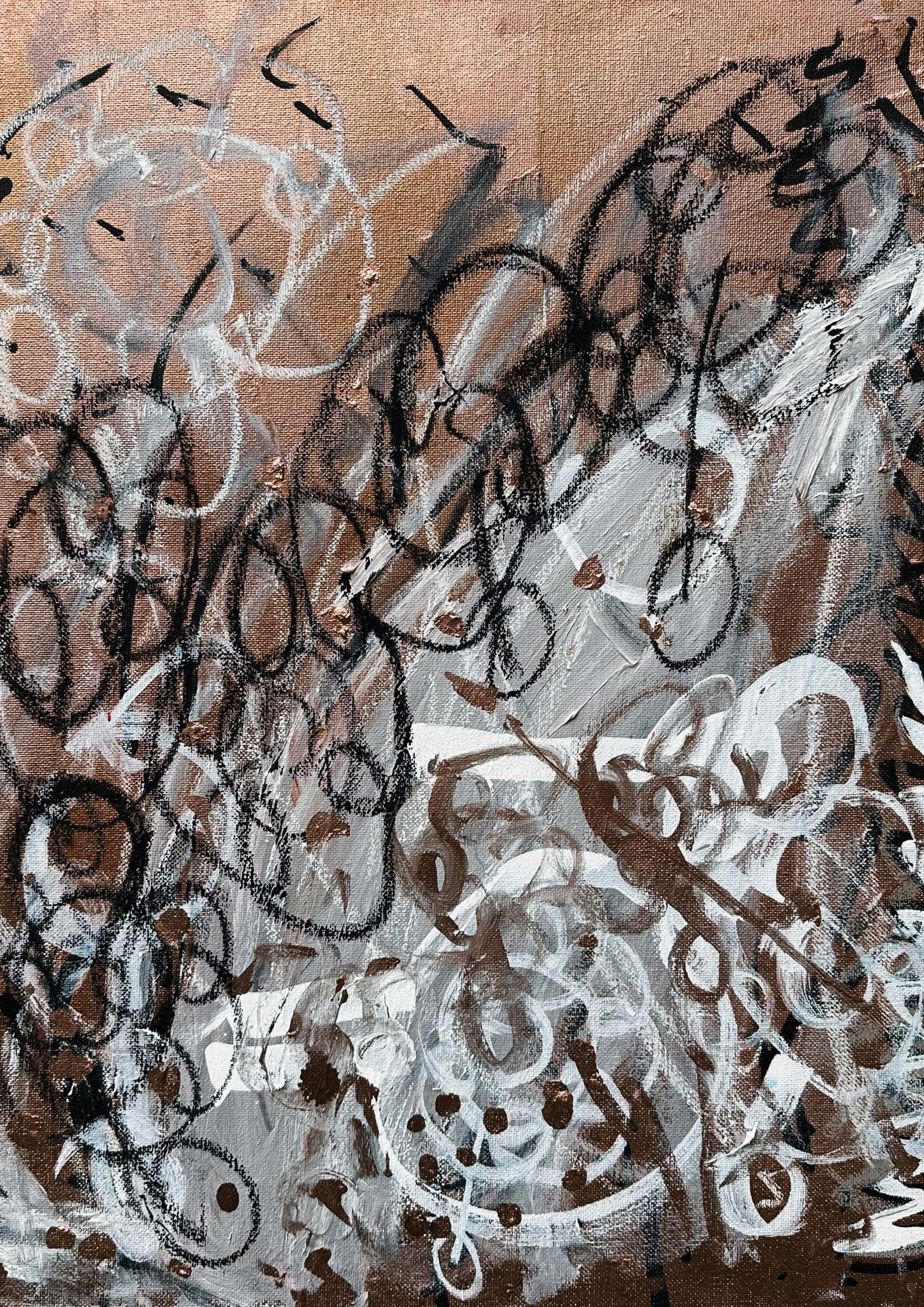
EDITED BY MADISON PAWLE

Image / Flower, Gold / Mixed Media, 2024 / Declan Kavanagh-Bugel
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Desire Lines: those unofficial paths formed and eventually inscribed by collective and ongoing use — the dirt trails skirting the Merri, the quicker route across the park to the toilet block.

In a conceptual sense, desire lines might be a way of thinking about the shape of our own subjective and associative patterns of thought and feeling, the same way a dream is revealing of a psychic landscape. Though they are not subversive by virtue of their existence, desire lines — both materially and metaphorically — expose the tensions between our native and constructed environments; and between structure and will. To follow a desire line is to begin to create or partake in an alternative map. The writing in this year's dSCRIBE follows on from this prompt, riffing freely on these ideas in original and idiosyncratic modes that are assembled here together in a form you might think of as a desire line itself.



CONTRIBUTORS

Lella Cariddi (she/her) is passionate about literature. Her short-form fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction and social history, has been published online by: *The Human Writers*, and by MAV. In print by: MPU, Society of Women Writers Victoria (2 anthologies), *dSCRIBE* (2023), Ascolta Women Write (2 anthologies), *New Community Quarterly*, Wellsprings for Women, and Family History ACT.

Luca Catalano (he/him) is a line cook, forward pocket and storyteller residing on unceded Wurundjeri land. In 2024 he directed the original stage-play *Dubious Intent* for the Adelaide Fringe Festival, and produced the feature documentary *CLAPTRAP*, which received the Wild Card award at the Melbourne Documentary Film Festival. His work explores heartbreak, the impermanence of life and rich, flavorful foods.

Rosa Cass (she/her) is a poet living on unceded Wurundjeri Country in Naarm. Her writing is a love letter to her Jewishness, queerness and her ancestors, who passed on their love of words and storytelling to her.

Sofia Chapman (she/her) is a professional accordionist with the band Vardos. She has presented many plays at Midsumma Queer Arts Festival at La Mama Theatre, and has won awards in playwriting, music and filmmaking. Sofia was shortlisted for the 2022 Dorothy Porter Poetry Prize.

Liza Dezfouli is a writer and performer based in Northcote. She writes short stories, poetry and plays, and has recently completed a novel, *Plaster Tiki*. She's currently working on the first of several memoirs. As an arts journalist she has reviewed books, film, music, and all types of live performance including comedy.

Mel Denham (she/her) is a Darebin resident of 20 years standing. 9 to 5 she works at La Trobe University. Remaining hours are spent parenting children and parents, ingesting sustenance and rummaging. Other poems have appeared in *dSCRIBE*'s preceding publication *n-SCRIBE* issues 9 & 12, as well as the *The Emma Press Anthology of Mildly Erotic Verse* (UK), *Poetry School* online and an Iyengar Yoga website.

Terry Donnelly is an occasional writer and full-time teacher who lives in Melbourne.

Romy Durrant's (she/her) creative practice spans painting, writing and music. Her practice explores isolation and connection, containment and liberation in the contexts of mental health, ecology and disabled identity. Romy works in the lived/living experience discipline. She lives, plays and learns on unceded Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country.

Joe Goddard (he/him) is a young reader and poet, interested mainly in music and literary fiction.

Kathryn James (she/her) is a writer, international development consultant and copywriter living in Darebin with her partner and children. She has an Associate Degree in Professional Writing and Editing from RMIT University, is an editing nerd, and writes about families, ideas, and the little moments that change us.

Maggie Jankuloska (she/her) is a Macedonian-born writer, teacher, and mum of two living in Melbourne. Her fiction and non-fiction pieces have been published in numerous Australian publications. *The Rat-Catcher's Apprentice* is her debut children's novel and it was short-listed in the NSW Premier's Literary Prize. Follow Maggie on Instagram: [maggiejankuloska_author](https://www.instagram.com/maggiejankuloska_author)

Carole Lander enjoyed a long career in education and the arts (performer, teacher, examiner, administrator) before studying Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT. Since 2013 she has freelanced as an editor and writer in a variety of genres: journalism, nonfiction and fiction. Details of all her work are at www.checkword.com.au

Aaron Leyshon (he/him) writes an assortment of fiction, poetry and unclassifiable classified ads. His work has appeared in *BOMBFIRED*, *Rejection Letters*, and *dSCRIBE*. You can find his books on Amazon and hopefully one day on thrift shop shelves in a store near you.

Haneen Mahmood Martin (she/her) is a Kuala Lumpur born, Malay-Saudi multi-arts programmer, producer, writer, and artist based in Naarm/Melbourne by way of Garramilla/Darwin and Kaurna Yerta/Adelaide. She creates and seeks art that highlights the everyday rituals that make life meaningful, the precarity of memory as a means of holding knowledge, and the connection and understanding that sharing food can bring – creating a space for our ordinary stories in the archives.

Isabelle McKenna is a Jill of all trades based in Naarm. In her spare time she enjoys traveling, bike riding, cooking, writing and art history. Recently, Isabelle worked on Adam Eliot's claymation feature film *Memoir of a Snail*, which premiered at the Melbourne International Film Festival in August 2024.

Sarah McKenzie (she/her) is passionate about supporting people to connect more meaningfully with themselves, their community and their environment. She does this through her writing and her roles as a Youth Worker and a Climate Action advisor.

Dianne Millett (she/her) is a poet and short fiction writer, who draws and paints too. Symbolic systems, dreams and mythologies are reflected in her work as much as the natural world and other hidden things... She has been published in *Cordite*, *Offset*, *Divan*, *page 17*, *n-SCRIBE* and *Australian PEN*.

Maira Nguyen (she/her) is a Vietnamese-Australian writer and visual storyteller whose work focuses on faith (Islam) and identity. Her work has been featured at festivals (Victoria's Cultural Diversity Week), museums (Islamic Museum of Australia), and published on SBS, *n-SCRIBE*, and ABC Online. <https://mairanguyen93.wixsite.com/mairanguyen>

Cassy Nunan (she/her) is a disabled writer who lives with ME/CFS, on unceded Wurundjeri country. She has a PhD in creative writing from La Trobe University, and worked in mental health research and development. Her couch has a sky view.

Ismene Panaretos (they/them) is a writer who is interested in observing the world, but never via CCTV.

Nathan Power (he/him) is the winner of the 2022 Melbourne Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Award for narrative non-fiction. Nathan is constantly trying to cut back on words. Nathan is also a folk singer-songwriter with two solo EPs, a banjo player and the drummer in Gusto Gusto, West Preston's finest seven-piece dance band.

James Rex (he/him) is a 24-year-old full-time daydreamer and part-time student from Preston. He is thrilled to have been able to participate in Darebin's creative culture and can't wait to add "published author" to all his social media bios. James published this work under the name of his grandfather, Jim Harris, because he thought it'd make his mum and aunts smile.

Anita Smith, actor and trivia host, is an RMIT Professional Writing and Editing graduate, WRAP Synopsis Prize winner, awarded the Eleanor Dark Flagship Varuna Residential Fellowship, Runner Up Non-Fiction of the Grace Marion Wilson Prize, and is published in various journals and anthologies. She lives in Thornbury.

Carl Walsh (he/him) is a neurodiverse poet who lives and writes on Wurundjeri land. After having a poem in *n-SCRIBE* (predecessor to *dSCRIBE*) 8, his poetry has been published in *StylusLit*, *Meanjin*, *Rabbit* and *Westerly* amongst others. His first book, *Tarp Green Light* came out through Flying Islands Pocket Poets earlier this year.

Bridget Webster (she/her) writes on unceded Wurundjeri Country. Her short fiction has been shortlisted for the 2023 Neilma Sidney Short Story Prize, and her poetry has been awarded an Emerging Poet Prize and publication by Liquid Amber Press and Jacaranda Journal. She writes poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and for stage and screen.



**Darebin
Arts**

The Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people are the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this land. We recognise their continuing connection to land, water and culture, and their powerful storytelling traditions. We pay respect to their Elders past and present.

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BABY BIRD

LIZA DEZFOULI / WINNER DAREBIN MAYOR'S WRITING AWARD

On her way to visit the educational bookstore at the university, Lorna thinks about how she still writes her name in her diary at the beginning of each new year. As a child she disliked her name; it was unusual, too old-fashioned; the name of an aunt who gardened, but it had turned out to suit her after all.

She buys a certain brand of diary in a certain size with a certain cover, sold, as far as she knows, in only this store. She knows what to write in the weekly planner section.

She keeps her days full, makes herself useful: Friend, Help, Neighbourhood Watch, Counsellor. She spends time with the elderly, reads them poetry.

The weather beckons and Lorna decides to take the bus to the store. It is newly spring. The yellow of the wattle tree blares like a trumpet blast against a sky of insane blue. Two boys on bikes, one wearing a shiny green helmet, yell at each other as they cycle past. A navy-blue sedan drives by, the head of a tan-coloured dog lolling out of the passenger window. The car stops at the ding ding-a-ling of a level crossing, a white truck slowing behind it and farting two layers of grunting, rumbling sounds. The sides of the truck are painted in rough slashes of red and blue, as though someone has hurriedly gone over earlier letters. A young man walks towards Lorna, wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt that reads 'no-one gives a shit what you think.' Horribly, this suddenly feels to Lorna as if it is true.

A westerly wind, whispering hoarsely of summer, hounds plastic bags along the gutters and up into the branches of trees.

The bus pulls up and Lorna gets on. The driver is solid in his seat, seems almost in repose with his hands resting on the steering wheel; a slightly built man but one with gravitas. Oddly compelling.

'Are you going to the university?' she asks him.

'No, but stay on the bus, I will take you there.' They regard each other for a long moment of timeless intensity, both calming and unnerving. Lorna thinks, *I know you*, understanding without surprise that she is seen, equally, in return – a silent, vivid subterranean connection.

Out loud, though, she can think of only one thing to say: 'What's your name?'

'My name is very unusual – it is Barcroft,' the bus driver says.

'Barcroft! How bizarre!' Lorna says. 'I've only ever heard of one other person with that name.'

'Whom do you know called Barcroft?'

'No-one I *know* personally – an Australian poet, a great talent, but he hanged himself when he was only 26.'

'How very sad. Why did he do that?'

'A sensitive man in a hard world? Probably homosexual.'

'Must the sensitive man always be homosexual?'

'If you read between the lines of his poems, well, not even between the lines, he was ambivalent towards females. Like so many men.'

'Excepting myself, Madam.' She already knows this. The driver grins at her, softly.

Lorna claims the single seat at the front of the bus to the left of him: co-pilot, companion, first mate. The bus driver is older than her, late fifties, early sixties, certainly married, probably a grandfather. But all this is irrelevant. It's cool on the bus. For the first time in many years Lorna experiences her body as responsive, keen to touch and to feel another's skin. When the bus slows to a stop at traffic lights the driver turns in his seat to look over at her. She looks back. He has enormous dark eyes. They exchange long calm smiles of complicity and understanding. *I can and will go anywhere with you.*

'Tell me about the poet's verses,' he says.

'His poetry has a darkness, a sense of inevitable doom about it,' she answers, 'when it's not about men and horses. He fancied himself in love with two sisters and couldn't decide between them. So, you see, it wasn't an individual woman he wanted but more the idea of one. He should be as famous as Banjo Patterson but he's not even well-known.'

The driver nods. 'Cut off too soon.'

The bus arrives at a shopping plaza and pauses at one of a series of stops under a concrete bridge, part of the structure of a car park.

'Stay there,' the driver tells Lorna. The other passengers all get off and a young woman with a child in a pushchair tries to get on. 'No, no,' says the driver. 'I am going back to the depot.'

The woman, forceful and wide-eyed, points at Lorna. 'What about her?'

'Don't worry about her,' the driver answers. 'She is with me. This bus is going back to the depot.' Lorna reigns, full and supreme, in the first seat.

Time to move. The bus drives along unfamiliar private streets, turning down various unknown leafy avenues; he is taking her well away from the usual route to the campus. Lorna feels like a tourist visiting her city afresh. Under her clothes a sense of newness gently tickles her flesh; she's aware of her pulse. He has such beautiful skin.

'Are you a teacher?' the driver asks.

'Not really,' she answers, understanding that he's thinking of their destination – the university. The driver is being flirtatious, they both know it, playing a game of charm. What on earth are they to do with what is between them?

'You're a student?'

'No,' she says. 'It's the holidays now, anyway.'

The awareness between them is alive, as real as the rolling chug of the bus's engine or the popular American gospel song playing on the radio. Here, being on this bus right now, comprises her whole life: nothing was before and everything is to come. Fragments of another song drift into earshot, something about peace leaving one weak – a song about the aftermath of sex, a sweaty and exhausted shared-cigarette moment. Something she thought she'd forgotten, put away, like the pleasure smoking itself briefly held. With this man, this modern day Barcroft, she imagined moments after sex would feel like a homecoming, clear and settled.

They travel along in quiet companionship. The bus arrives at the university and pulls to a stop under a plastic awning. The driver turns towards Lorna, with an air of expectancy, she thinks.

'You are delivered safe and sound, Madam, to your destination,' he says, smiling at her with ease, with love, you could almost say.

'Thank you.' Her smile. Her good white teeth.

'You are very welcome,' he says. She stares. Waiting.

He looks down and busies himself with the controls, preparing to leave. The intimacy between them collapses like the calving of ice in a black sea. Lorna hesitates, then hoists her handbag over her shoulder and, blinking, trots down the steps of the bus. The white concrete walls outside are bright. She glances back at the driver, but he's already started the engine and drives off.

On her way home, as Lorna crosses the road, she spots an object on the ground – a fire-blackened pine-cone? No. It's a chick, a baby blackbird. A few stalks of adult feathers poke through the fluffy down on its rounded breast. A cat will get it, surely. Lorna glances up into branches overhead and for a silly moment she thinks she might climb the tree to find the nest. She doesn't know what to do. Once you've handled a waif chick, so she's heard, the parent birds abandon it. It struggles in her fist, silently opening and closing its beak.

Lorna walks on. The wind drops and the light takes on a dim celluloid quality; there's no telling the time of day. The chick struggles again and with a peculiar blankness of mind Lorna squeezes her fist tighter and tighter until the bird's movements become feeble. Both its scaly claws, surprisingly long, grip her little finger. Lorna disentangles them, desperate now to get rid of it. It could be injured. Wormy pinkish-grey intestines might suddenly spill into her hand. She stops at a tree where two strong branches fork and places the chick there; it won't fall. But it does. It's dead.

When she gets home, Lorna sits at her desk and pulls the new diary out of her handbag: a plain professional-looking book covered with faux suede material in a soft grey colour. 'Marle' is the name of this shade, a pretty word – it sounds old and Saxon, the colour of a finely woven coverlet smoothed over a bedspread the morning of a wedding.

Lorna tries to pick off the oblong manufacturer's label on the cover of the diary but only the surface layer comes away, leaving small elongated shreds of paper and bits of sticky adhesive that lodge themselves under her fingernails. She'll have to dab at it with a cloth and warm water, and that will leave marks.

THE FIRE WITHIN

TERRY DONNELLY / RUNNER-UP DAREBIN MAYOR'S WRITING AWARD

The day we moved into the new apartment was the day we heard. We unpacked the television, the news had broken, the children were stuck. How long would it last? Hours, days, months. There was a row of bicycles outside the cave. They whetted our nostalgia, reminded us of a gentler time, a less confusing place. Poised between disaster and domesticity, it dusted our cornflakes, our morning coffee, those precious first days. We wandered the neighbourhood eager to get back to it. We took solace in facts. Rainy seasons. Caves. Megalitres. We sought comfort in optics, narratives, keep cups, tropes. Twelve children, one charismatic leader. Crying mothers. Northcote Plaza. Army Commandoes. Hung over the fridge, the ticking clock.

At night we sat on the sofa, secretly ashamed of the time wasted on blood spatters and cast-off patterns. We'd immersed ourselves in DNA profiles, but what was needed was underground hydraulics, karst landscapes, watersheds. We rested our feet on our packing boxes, awed by experts. By those with the foresight to apply to universities; to study synoptic charts; to invest in canisters, tubes, state of the art rubber. We secretly suspected it was already too late. We had let ourselves go. Soft skills, Uber Eats, avocado toast. But we had learned together, it brought us closer.

Experts were found. They were travelling urgently through the night. We refreshed and updated. Some had been aware, waiting. While we sat on the sofa in other suburbs, in past apartments, hearing the prosecution's theory about the time of death, the heroic few were training in caves and tanks and swimming pools. They diminished us as they travelled, as we slept. As we made our big move, from Footscray to Preston. Our life choices, our passivity, our resistance to change.

Families converged on the cave mouth. Mothers wept for cameras, for loved ones, for us. Prayers and candles. Vigils. Just the word gave us a shudder. Commentators alluded to chances. The professor risked percentages. And had we not become experts in our own way? We talked to the lady at the checkout in Coles. We overheard conversations in aisle two. Smiling wryly, we let mistakes go. There were moments when we felt as if we had been responding to perilous cave rescue situations all our lives, as if we had come from long lines of perilous cave rescue responders. But it was front, a fad, a sham.

Then the rain started. We knew what we missed. We needed children to kiss as they slept. We wanted uniforms to press and rugs to tuck. We prized the quietness of the suburb, the fingers of the gum trees raking the sky, bulk organic food and six packs of Bonsoy. We looked at rain with a new-found suspicion, a diaphanous gauze, pearling cast-off toys as they lay

in the yard. It was lonely and hopeless. We wanted to call it off, to tell the mothers to concentrate on the others. But we had sunken costs over bowls of pho. We had to watch until they were brought out, for better or worse, because.

The children were located underground. On a ledge. In a pocket. A chamber. We scarcely believed. There was footage. Scratchy, a moon landing, subterranean shadows. A darkness deeper than night. The English made first contact, and we spited them for it. The shrinking remnants of the Empire. Poms. Shades of long-ago expeditions to lakes in the interior. Where were our heroes? Then they arrived. Utility belts, a larrikin grin, the comfort of the accents. We held each other close. We would triumph through proxies.

The dotcom billionaire intervened. He'd built a machine that transcended national boundaries. A contraption. A thing. It was smaller than a human. Smarter, cleaner, more efficient. Wireless, Bluetooth, intelligent by design. With nodes and lightning-fast cables. Connected to clouds. It was not luck but ingenuity. Humanity had peaked, surmounted, overtopped. The pilot was in a bunker in Palo Alto. The pilot was the dotcom billionaire. It would be live streamed. We wanted one too.

The divers said they didn't want it. The pundit said they were afraid of the future. They were afraid of technology, of blue light, of radiation, of net freedoms and the gig economy. Their only interest was the children. What sort of men were only interested in children? Perhaps he shouldn't have said it, the dotcom billionaire, but he did. The divers protested their innocence. Who protests their innocence? We knew this. From when we were experts in blood spatters. The guilty protest their innocence, because.

Sales of machines and contraptions and things went up. Tax cuts were announced. Share buybacks, CDO's. We dreamed of being millionaires. Distracted by the victory of spending, we nearly missed the first removal. We urged the reporters beyond the cordons. We wanted faces, brothers-in-arms, eyes adjusting to light. But the organisers knew to manage it patiently, drip-feed, like breaking a fast. We grew restless until we realised it was the last one. There would be a surmount, a climax, a finale. They brought him out. We sat on the sofa and scarcely believed. And the coach, an afterthought. An adult, ungainly, tainted, too much like us. They should have secreted him, brought him out after dusk, blanketed, hidden, for shame.

That night we held each other and it was different. We felt the possibility even after all; after our arguments and betrayals, after the forty-fifth president, after record low interest rates and rent

YARRA

LUCA CATALANO

increases. As we moved on the tides of the night, as we let the desire lines of the body entangle us, we reached for something beyond our weaknesses and proclivities, beyond a dizzying lifetime of needing to triumph and be held, beyond our decaying selves and the swallowing cave: the fire of life.

And what came after. The indicator line; the swelling months; the open-eyed birth; a mewling alien creature; the emerging features of another, distant stranger self. It was meant to get easier from there. A child was meant to keep it at bay, to purify and cleanse, but the world continued to spin. A diet of bats, a bioweapons lab, a secret world order. Emergency powers, borders closed, flights grounded, surfaces feared. Our lives halted, accelerated, exploded.

I did not tell you but that night the rescue was completed I had a dream. That after the football team leader there was a pause. Then a scrawny dingo exited to applause. then trundling up from the deep the 86 tram. A flock of lorikeets, a red-bellied black snake, a Chinese trade delegation. All the former prime ministers, crawling on their knees, saying Sorry, Sorry, Sorry. A mob of kangaroos, a Ford Mustang, a drover with his swag. A fairy wren. It danced before you and it felt like a sign, like blood in urine or sticks crossed on a path. Then a carriage emerged, four white horses trotting at the front. It came to a halt, and I could see the Thai Navy SEAL, his body on a bed made up in black silk. His skin was waxen, and his features seemed to transform, from boy, to man, and back again. The wheels turned and the procession moved on into the blank mist of waking.

We weren't prepared. We couldn't do it. We disagreed on fundamentals: on body sovereignty and government overreach, on democratic principles, on freedom rallies and acceptable risks. We locked down and fell apart. And yet he moved forward, despite our battles and limitations. The mysterious alwaysness flourishing of life, of taking your chances, the red hot go. A flame beyond logic and reason.

And the weeks when I have him, I stand over him and watch him sleep. Custody they call it, as if I am not a prisoner of him, a prisoner of myself. And as I watch I imagine a miniature solar system in his body, and a secondary earth, and a replica cave system, and twelve infinitesimally small children, trapped by rising waters, and a shrunken audience, scarcely believing their luck, watching in turn, waiting.

Our moment passed. I put my hand to his forehead and feel his gentle but defiant heat. Here comes flood, fire, plague, darkness; nothing will be saved. But he does not care, accelerating even as he sleeps.

Belted into black seats, home time, spinning
Hoddle commute focused overtaking
Brake light entrancing, deafening ringing

Bells of smile seen, memory awaking
Images of forms mirror reflecting
Sweetly hidden silver nitrate aching

Chlorophyll, porcelain, mind infecting
Immortal devoutly worshipping gaze
A sensation passed, present affecting

Fabric memories of dreamt fated days
Still on my tongue syllables of the name
Four notes invisible in wanting haze

Trailing the scent of smoke to find a flame
Instead led to Birrarung mouth grinning
River bequest, the flower you became

MAP OF KUALA LUMPUR, 2000

HANEEN MAHMOOD MARTIN / RUNNER-UP DAREBIN MAYOR'S WRITING AWARD

For Adek

I shed long black wavy strands through places I have been
Coarse tendrils pinning menial tasks between school, florist, still-warm soya bean milk
while I stare into the eyes of fish resting on beds of cascading ice
– A trail of pilgrimages made because of you

Now I am older I think about how my hair smells when I have been cooking all day
Onion caramelised with chili, lemongrass
I pull down my curls to my left, tugging to assess the damage, watch long black wavy
strands snake out of my hands onto large white kitchen tiles

Each tendril is an offering for you, to collect, one by one
Weave each coarse tendril into rope that together we could snake through the aisles
of TMC, red and white, back out the door into the carpark and onto the next errand
mapping out the city with signs of care for everyone you have ever met

It is much nicer now than when you left it and the
Aisles are less crowded – I see everything from a height between yours and mine

It is a Tuesday afternoon, I am standing under the fluorescent lights
in line waiting to stack my assortment of Adabi, Brahims, and
Ajinomoto white pepper that the customs officer will confiscate from me
“It could be made from anything” he tells me as I stand bleary-eyed thinking about how
I feel the overwhelming sense of panic, abandoned like when you’d leave me to watch
the conveyor belt inch forward while you’d dash to grab a bottle of milk

I feel wrong that I am the adult now and you are not here to click your tongue about how
messy I look without your watchful gaze, so
I tug at my hair, watching the long black wavy strands swim onto the new(er) tiles
To leave it behind because I am sure your ghost is hiding in the since-refurbished aisles
of TMC and I hope that you will

Weave each coarse tendril into rope
recreate our map
bring it back to me.

LESSONS IN CITRUS

AARON LEYSHON

Orange,
the walls, the chairs, I don't
know why I feel this way but then I do.
I know it is this room, the environment. Perhaps it's
that I'm dying. Aren't we all dying? Yes, but that's not the
point. The point is, out there the sun fades orange, rises orange, a
warning. Sailors took it that way. I remember you and I at a winery, outside,
a glass perched on a timber post, behind it sky-orange. Here, I am behind the
sky. Behind that beautiful warning. Flesh and bones in a bed. Avoiding letting it
get too personal, because what even is that – personal? What colour do we bleed in
an orange room?

We are all, I presume, shaped by those and that which is flung up about us. How do I feel? How
do I know, when 'I' is such a loose and slippery idea? Perhaps that means I am confused. A doubting
Thomas, only an idea, a thought of what it means to be human or to be, at all. Full stop.

The snakes and the bees are as much a part of all this, rustling in the long grass, as the breeze or the
child chasing his past. His future as uncertain as his memories. The paths winding, unclear. Perhaps
that is how each of us find our way here, through fields of colour. Winding, winding, always wondering,
never finding.

Distracted though I may have been, deep in conversation. It is in space we move, and so rarely notice gathered
in the cracks between the pavement detritus formed of nature mixed with human leavings. Cigarette butts,
a piece of orange chalk, words with naked meaning scrawled long before in wet cement, the yawning branches
of ancient trees screen the warm sunlight, dappled, leaning over everything.

In the meeting room, Orange-hair struggles over words that stumble, jump and skip-up, tripping over carefully
formed arguments that deserve to be argued. Why does she hide, tucking down her pride and burying it
word by word within her collar bound by scarves and blushed apologies?

What she says is ripe with feeling, meaning more than all these empty hackneyed-old-saws I scratch
down in my minutes.

Perhaps that's just it! The diagnosis.

In the minutiae live the poignant pauses, the sudden break from the constant rush that
traffics in new thought. Why does that stand against the ancient? The present pushing
back against the past until, at last, it's buried.

If we just sat still, one leg poised, wrapped around the orange leg of a tall
table; our cold hands warmed by coffee – caffeine contained – in the
heart of an orange mug; spoke orange thoughts; and still sat just
as if there was... no time, no place, no 'I'.

Then perhaps, we should remember
how to live.

FIVE EYES/SHUT UP BITCH

ISMENE PANARETOS

10:02:47 CAM3 6/7/19

Bottle-o, deep suburbia. The shop is empty but for two attendants, ELLEN and GABY, who stand behind the counter. ELLEN has a pierced face, long green-streaked hair, full-rimmed glasses. GABY is stocky, strong looking, an assortment of badges clipped to their work shirt. Both look like nerds in different ways. Both look like they don't want to be there.

MAN enters the frame, carrying a case of beer. He is scrawny with straggly facial hair, protruding teeth and a long, thin rat-tail at the back. He wears a t-shirt that says, 'shut up bitch' across the front. MAN passes ELLEN a fistful of \$5 notes. You can only see the back of her from this angle. MAN smiles at ELLEN as though she is something to be devoured.

The bottle-o storeroom is airless. There's a train station only a couple blocks away but you wouldn't know it. A window the size of a glory hole jammed into one of the walls, dirty mop by the door, empty wooden cupboard in the corner. If you're down here long enough you forget that there's a sun and a sky and an earth turning on its axis.

Ellen's mum always says, don't be a narc, keep out of trouble. Ellen doesn't want trouble. All she wants is a date, but she's not ready yet. The world is so fucking disappointing. Empty biscuit tins, phone data limits, small talk. Ellen's decided she's not going to be a disappointment, not to her mum. Not to anyone.

The table is littered with scrunched up tissues and a Pump water bottle she'll turn into a bong when she's done drinking from it. The screen light is harsh against her eyes. She takes a red pencil and makes a mark the size of an eyelash onto the wall. Ellen clicks the mouse and watches.

11:49:42 CAM2 8/7/19

MAN approaches the counter. ELLEN's face flinches briefly. She smiles at MAN. GABY rolls their eyes; mouth puckered in distaste.

A thud from outside, like someone is taking the rubbish out. Ellen jumps, her leg hitting the underside of the laminate table which is sticky with old bits of chewing gum. But her gaze does not waver.

There are two issues with the scene unfolding on the screen. Firstly, her body looks like fruitcake bits stuffed into a pair of stockings. Secondly, her facial micro expression, although brief, might give people the wrong idea. Or, the full story. Hard to be likeable if you're honest.

Ellen flirts with anyone and everyone that she serves at the bottle-o and then watches back the footage to assess her performance. This month, she's picked up six people, slipping her phone number over the counter, inviting them back to hers (if her mum is on night shift) or to the alley beside the shop (if her mum is not on night shift), rewatching the footage, never returning calls. She doesn't consider these to be dates because talking is rarely involved. Ellen is not ready for a date yet. Her facial micro expressions are still all wrong. And as much as she hates small talk, she hasn't learnt any other way to make conversation.

Ellen zooms in on Gaby's scowl. Whenever Gaby gets rostered on a weekend, they pull out last minute. Ellen knows that every other Friday night they play DnD until 4 am, sleep until midday and play video games with their greasy girlfriend in their unwashed bed sheets.

You can cover me, right babe?

Gaby didn't show for their shift today. Ellen picks up her pencil and makes another mark.



16:37:14 CAM3 9/7/19

MAN stands at counter speaking at ELLEN. The video freezes on ELLEN'S face. Except it isn't actually frozen. She's so still you can barely see her blink.

She smelt him before she saw him. It brought her back to that time she got locked in a public toilet after hours. Fluorescent pink soap, scratchy toilet paper, stains on the walls. She could've sworn his beady eyes were yellow, at least in that light.

When he spoke, she didn't pay much attention. Focused on getting through without breathing him in, knowing that she would review the footage later. But by the third time he came back to the shop, she began to feel uneasy. Ellen skirted off when he approached, lowered her gaze when he addressed her directly. It took a lot to make Ellen uncomfortable, but there was something about this guy that made her skin crawl.

Gaby wasn't much help either, even though they're built like a cannonball from a lifelong fixation with judo. They were always openly hostile to the regulars who came in with their red rimmed eyes, bulging guts and swollen faces. Ellen was sure that Gaby noticed the man coming in again and again, but Gaby hid away in the cool room, pretending to restock.

There's another sound outside, but Ellen tells herself it's the cats on heat who creep around the abandoned lot. The monitor rattles. The red marks on the wall are like cat scratches. One for each time the man appears on camera. They look a bit like this:

||

20:27:12 CAM2 9/7/19

MAN enters shop, buys a stubby and a packet of chips.

20:45:01CAM1 9/7/19

GABY opens the till, counts money.

20:46:06CAM4 9/7/19

MAN stands at front of shop, stuffing chips into his mouth.

20:58:46CAM3 9/7/19

GABY turns the lights off.

21:03:59CAM4 9/7/19

GABY exits the shop. They speak to MAN a moment before turning down the alleyway.

21:04:00CAM4 9/7/19

After a moment, MAN follows GABY down the alley.

||

The alley beside the bottle-o is cobblestoned, which means it's hard on your knees and even harder if you're trying to run. The rats come here to die after eating poison from the traps. The poison makes them thirsty and water flows through here, even when it isn't raining. It's kind of like an open drain. Sometimes when she's opening in the morning, Ellen has found rats down here still convulsing, the last bit of life twitching through their skinny legs.

Ellen stops near the bins. She leans against the wall, fumbling in her tight work jeans for cigarettes and a lighter. Her glasses fog up as she exhales and removes her phone from her push up bra. The sky is darkening. She hears another sound but pretends she doesn't.

This part is important.

||

Officially, the bottle-o has four cameras. Three inside and one out front. Ellen doesn't want any trouble; except she installed a fifth camera in the alley. This camera is monitored from her phone. The fifth camera is Ellen's favourite. She has all 356 hours of the footage saved onto her computer in a folder named 'friendship'.

Ellen's phone is bright in the darkness, her face illuminated by the flashing images, her thumb slightly shaking as it hovers above the screen.

The footage ends. She clicks the lock button and walks towards the overflowing bin. The butt hisses when she drops it in, a claw of smoke rising from the rubbish.

There's a strand of something in amongst the empty tinnies and the Maccas wrappers, like a ratty hair extension. Ellen lifts a piece of damp cardboard to get a better look.

It's a rat, that's for sure. Stuck out teeth, long whiskers and glassy yellow eyes. Its long rats tail wrapped around its neck like a noose.

There's a t-shirt in there too.

'shut up bitch'.

YOU ARE MY SISTER

ROSA CASS

There's a fragile dune system here
strong love for you
big beach heavy winds
sky too big to.....reach across
try to blow away feet firm in sand
too damp down there a big mound between us
remember when we played
in the dunes each summer
magic beach secret tunnel
system did this exist
before us chasing sisters
through the old dunes

*don't disappear beneath the canopy:
we are too big to crawl there and you are too far away*

mother's sister tells me to plant my feet in the earth
legs won't stretch that far
bones are full of zinc and grains
mother's sister is looking for that earth too
in her sister's hands
maybe she will find it back in the dunes

*I could find my body there too:
beneath the weeping eucalypts*

LONGEVITY SCROLL

MEL DENHAM

First emerging early remnants
of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD)
Ball in the beginning being – hallelujah! – solid
was accustomed to hear
physics & handy
as a well
as a tool
forsooth defence.

An oval remainder foreseen
until hallowed by Qing Dynasty (1644-1977 AD)
Ball was handled
down up to now then
aliased as Double Imperial
Egg of Roaring Dragon
& Singing Phoenix as pair wing
together & sound off throne-deaf.

Habitually used to
condition energy & mould
temper to firmament remaining
hands down eerily
most popular among
people market
Ball is universally haloed in circles
of medical quackery.

Its remains may be paid
in any hollow era & pace
with pleasing soundness that function as sound
elimination taming to every din
(belatedly very moving
five digits counter-clockwise)
this Ball shall straighten
the never centre of Being.

Mum stared at me, shaking her head,
 "I didn't send you across the seas
 For you to turn out like this.
 I worked hard to send you to Australia,
 The tuition is not cheap.
 Why did you turn out this way?
 Why have you become backward?"

She calls me backward because I left my nine-to-five,
 Refusing the chase for promotion.

She says I'm backward for marvelling
 At creation's delicate interconnectedness —
 The rain awakening the soil,
 The seeds splitting open, bringing forth fresh oranges and apples,
 Honey stored miraculously in bees,
 Silk spun by worms, and pearls formed in oysters.

She thinks I'm backward for seeing

Rivers, mountains, wattles, cows, daisies,
 Not as soulless commodities for business,
 But as beautiful, sacred artworks,

God's servants, just as I am.

She calls me backward for believing

In what eyes cannot see, whispering 'Alhamdulillah'
 As raindrops touch my face,
 As I savour the sweetness of a mango at Preston Market,

Or share a smile with a stranger at a red light.

She says I'm backward for seeking advice

From strangers on the street.

"Mum, the entire universe is inside you.

I want to glimpse that universe in each person."

She thinks my head is in the clouds.

She calls me backward for studying

The wisdom of ancient peoples—

Buddha's teachings, Rumi's poems,

The Greeks' Four Temperaments, Indigenous Australians' land care.

Thanks to them, I no longer see myself as queen of the universe.

Instead, I aim to be the queen of my own heart and soul.

Controlling them, not being controlled.

Learning contentment, gratitude,

Forgiveness when my ego is hurt,

Speaking against genocide despite my fears,

She calls me backward for loving a Bengali man.

"Why not a white guy? You're in Australia,"

She exclaimed, breaking my heart.

She wants me to be more western,

To adopt the mindset of those who colonised us,

To embrace capitalism, materialism, and racism.

Lost for words, I sat quietly

Enduring her complaints.

Finally, I whispered,

"Con xin lỗi mẹ" (I'm sorry, Mum)

CARRYING EGGS

ROSA CASS

Next to the ostrich, the emu is the largest bird in the world.
Next to you, I have the oldest tongue in the world.

There is a story here:
white dresses, boxes, far west shores.
It all begins
with an egg.

An egg in Smolensk, under an emu's foot, in your grandmother's belly.
Dark green eggs, incubating
under a new sun, a new tongue.
So you can arrive un-tongue-tied.

Curious chick, awkward and flightless.
Sheltering
under her wing.
The old country fed through seeds and dreams.

The egg has lost its colour now, wrapped in paper, in a box
under the bed.

CROSSING THE LINE

CAROLE LANDER

A THUD. A SCREECH OF TYRES. A HOWL OF GRIEF AT DUSK ON A SUMMER EVENING.

Curious, we rushed out of the front door and on to the street. Guiseppina from number 17 was wailing that her mother had been killed by a hit and run driver. The police had been called and we neighbours rallied to stop cars coming into the road until officers arrived on the scene. Despina, my next-door neighbour, crossed over nervously to comfort Guiseppina in a gesture of Greek-Italian solidarity.

An ambulance arrived with the police car, sirens blazing. The lights of both these vehicles flashed against the darkening sky and we watched in horror as the Italian woman's tiny, crumpled body was lifted onto a stretcher and covered with a sheet.

Our stretch of St David Street is regularly used as a cut-through by impatient motorists trying to avoid the traffic lights on High Street. This incident was a catalyst for Annabel from number 20 to draw up a petition asking Council take some action. I helped her to visit all the households, gathering signatures. We wanted speed humps. Instead, they gave us wider nature strips, planted out with grass. This only served to narrow the road and cars continued to speed along it – a practice often referred to as rat-running.

At the end of the road, where St David Street meets Denis Street, the widened nature strips bulge out to discourage drivers from rushing around the corners. Pedestrians are catered for with a paved cross-over

but over the years they have worn a desire line (or path) across one of these bulges in their hurry to get to the bus, tram or train, or over to the Northcote Plaza. Could these people be labelled as 'rebels'?

Australia's colonial history is full of rebels. We've made one of them a national hero – Ned Kelly – even though he was a criminal. There has always been, and always will be, a tendency for people to rebel against rules, to create their own way and sometimes, as a group, to exert a collective will. During the COVID-19 pandemic we witnessed mass protests against the vaccination program; this is an extreme example. I am one of the milder rebels. We are not criminals; we obey the main rules, the ones that maintain our society and keep us safe. Yet, there lurks in us this rebellious spirit that brings moments of exhilaration when we step across a boundary, a harmless one, such as creating or following a desire line.

'Desire' – the dictionary defines it as 'to wish or long for, to crave'. This word seems exaggerated when used to describe a path. But it conjures up memories of times when I have experienced a craving.

In the 1980s, I was married with two primary school-aged children, living in Kew. I met Diane in a meditation group. I couldn't articulate what I felt for her but I knew I wanted to be in her company

in a way that differed from the run-of-the-mill female friendships. She was an English teacher and introduced me (a relatively new immigrant) to Australian literature that deepened my love of this country. Discussing these books with her stirred up other feelings – but I couldn't find the words for them, yet.

'Line' – the dictionary has a plethora of definitions for this humble word. I like 'a furrow or wrinkle on the face' because I have a lot of those. The phrase 'crossing the line' implies doing something that is not socially acceptable. I guess I was doing that when I met other women to whom I was attracted in this strange way. It puzzled me at first. I was reasonably happily married; we had the two children and a dog; my life was taking the customary path.

My husband worked as an actor in the 1980s and he teamed up with a lesbian called Liz for improvisation gigs. I tentatively opened up to Liz about all this and she introduced me to some of her friends. Innocently, I went on a Wandering Women weekend in a mini-bus to the Grampians where all the other passengers were 'out' lesbians and I had to fake it for two days and nights.

Two of the women on the tour contacted me following that weekend. I agreed to go for a coffee with the first one and found myself talking about my children, a topic for which she had little interest. So, with the second (Sue) I kept my personal life a secret for as long as possible. We talked about our jobs – both of us were involved in the arts – and we went to the theatre and galleries. By the time I admitted to my marital status, both of us were falling in love – or probably it was desire at that stage. Love came later, when she had to accept that I was not completely 'available' and I had to make a choice between marriage and a new (lesbian) relationship.

During this tumultuous time in my life, I sometimes questioned my motives. Was I simply rebelling against the status quo, the conventional marriage? Or was I genuinely crossing over to same-sex sexuality? Such indecision makes for a very unstable state of mind. I had a job and the children to manage, so these were not easy times for me. Eventually, though, I had to make a decision and I made the break.

Sue and I moved into our house in St David Street shortly before the elderly Italian woman was run over. At that time, we lived close to the famous Northcote Tip. The real estate agent had told us that a park was a mere two years away. These turned out to be ten! For the householders closest to the tip, rats and smells continued to be a problem until All Nations Park was finally created and opened to great fanfare in 2002.

Since then, even though the park has lost trees to storms and drought, and there are more weeds than gardeners to manage them, it is still a privilege to have this space so close to home, offering the

opportunity to walk in nature rather than around the streets. Over the years it has developed several desire lines, regardless of the fact that there are many landscaped concrete and gravel paths. Locals can't always be bothered going all the way around the expanses of grass and have worn down their own tracks.

During the pandemic, the foot traffic increased exponentially in this area, as well as the dogs. Labradoodles, caboodles, whippets and a multitude of other breeds are helping to wear down these local desire paths where tufts of grass struggle to survive the feet and paws that pound over them.

Another big advantage of living in this street was having the Northcote Pool so close by, within walking distance. A desire line developed there, too. This short-cut was a solid, earth-packed track, a mere two metres from the concrete entrance to the building – evidence of Northcote rebels at their most belligerent. As I walk past, and into, the recently rebuilt and revamped Northcote Aquatic and Recreation Centre (NARC), I struggle to see where that old desire line was. The new landscaping suggests that there will be no further need for one but who knows? Will we Northcote rebels eventually succumb to the desire to create one?

My own desire line broke up my marriage and my children took some years to forgive me. Torn between following a path I knew to be right for me and one that would have inevitably led to an empty, unhappy marriage was unbearable – for a while. Time finally wore down the rawness of my emotions and the children grew up and made their own lives.

As I walk all these local desire lines I reminisce on the twists and turns of my life, the paths I have taken – some by design, others delivered by fate. When the sadder memories threaten to choke me, I push them back, imagining my feet treading down those stubborn tufts of grass on the desire paths.

I was in my late thirties when I met Diane, and in my forties when I moved into this street with Sue. I am 80 now. Guiseppina's mother was 80 when she innocently crossed the road to visit her friend at number 24. That memory comes back to me as the cars – more of them now and bigger ones too – continue to rat-run through our road to avoid the traffic lights on High Street. I cross very carefully, keeping in mind that life is precious and can be taken away in a moment of hesitation.

SEDIMENTARY LIFESTYLE

JAMES REX

Two people sit by a stream.

"I ask you," says one, "where is the stream?"

"It is that water flowing there" says the other.

"Ah, so were the water to freeze and the flowing to stop, or heat from the sun to boil away the water entirely, does the stream cease to exist?"

"No, that would be ridiculous, the bed of the stream would still be there, and the bank."

"Ah, so when the water chisels away new banks or some storm frightens the stream into a new bed does it become a new stream?"

"No, preposterous, it has moved only a little, it is the same water."

"Ah, but it is not that same water, for all these drops of water in front of us that you say are the stream will be out to sea in time and you would not, I imagine, say that the sea and the stream are the same. Besides, we have shown already that the stream is not the water, say that this stream moves a little in a storm and then is frozen or boiled—"

"You are being obtuse," interrupts the other, "it is the same stream, it has a name, it has been mapped, and written about - I can see it!"

"Ah, so when a blind person from some distant land comes and bathes in the stream, and returning home recounts in his mother tongue his time spent in the stream," – the other gets up to leave, managing an urge to hit his friend on the head as he goes – "is it a different stream of which he speaks? And suppose that all maps and all writings of the stream are..."

...

When I was a kid, we would walk down to the creek most days.

It would be me, my father, my brother, and our dog Bongo. Some days my mother would come or else some friend or other. Later, we added a second dog to the pack,

Lucy. That southbound meander was the heart of my childhood, and still the Merri is arterial to my living.

In spring, the water would rise to the upper bank and threaten the Levee on Strettle Street like it was re-enacting some past habit from before it dug itself into the earth and became wrinkled by the wear of water. It was transfigured into something new entirely. A bayou, the trees waist deep in water and with plastic bags appropriately draped in their boughs like Spanish moss. Paths would disappear under water, and new ones would be trod, not out of desire but necessity.

When the water subsided, yet another new world. There would be a line, drawn in debris that showed exactly how high the water got, while all around would be deposited the evidence of its passing. It was like a gallery in which the intricate, swirling patterns collaged out of leaves and twigs and the sculptured forms of rubbish set in the branches of trees were exhibits in a grand reopening. Many things changed over the years: trees fell or were cut down and new ones grew in their place, footbridges collapsed and were rebuilt.

We'd walk along its winding route sometimes as far as Moreland Rd, only a short way on a map, but as a child the Velodrome was the milestone that defined a long walk. How easy it was then to see that big cement bowl as a spaceport or a colosseum filled with lions! And behind it, the golden domes of some Saracen Sultan's palace gleaming in the sun. At night, ghostly lights flickered to life and, through glimpses between wetland trees, they would lead me along.

I'm taller now and know the Sultan's palace is really the Orthodox church on Albion St.

Though, stationed as it is, half a world away from its native land in the middle of suburban Melbourne, it is no less extraordinary. I can travel further, and the light of too many days turns will-o'-the-wisps into LED pavement markers. Yet as a projection of space, that walk distorts latitude and longitude as much today as it did when I was small, and everything seemed bigger. The years of repeated travelling make it much larger in my mind than all the rest of Melbourne together.

Atop a bicycle and on the way to school or a friend's it was more transitory, shallower perhaps. And yet, as I grew, I often travelled it alone and so it took on the qualities of that most impenetrable of depths – the inner thoughts of a 14-year-old child. Every year we established new haunts along its length: the pavilion, the quarry, the bridge. Each place shaped those hours spent after school, just as we shaped each place – with branches accidentally broken, rocks skipped, paths and clearings desired into existence.

Today the paths of my life are of least resistance. So channelled are they by routine and obligated efficiency that my future seems determined, constrained by the valley of life's weathering. I deposit in the bank and work through my course. I don't want to leave my bed. But when the next storm comes, I'll break the levee and settle someplace else. Into a new path – a continuation of the old.

My walks along the Merri have diverged into many roads and I, I have travelled all, though not as one traveller, but many. And difference indeed those roads have made, not for the lack of travel but *for* it. And difference not only for traveller but for the travelled upon. It is not then, a road not taken, but a road *taken away, taken on, and taken back again.*

THE PATH TO WISDOM

SOFIA CHAPMAN

The Path to Wisdom

...and then we trod the path to wisdom.

Green was the path,
wise words written on silvered poles
higher than the eye could see,
and in a language too complex for us to master
quickly.

We chattered and ate our nuts,
hoping wisdom would still nevertheless seep in.

We sat and thought we could just breathe it in,
then swung happily off,
none the wiser about whether we had found any wisdom at all.

Let me Unfold You (written on a fan)

Let me unfold you
upon the table,
under the weeping golden maple.
Far beyond the summer plantation,
pitted forth, a newborn olive's dripping mask melts.
A crate of pomegranates shall grow.
The tingling of taste buds,
only ice cubes linger.

Let me behold you
in the fading light of day,
in the clay beds of the desert, its dust and fragments.
Discontinuous content, incensed by its lack of peaks.
Send me your apples, I'll make you cider
from an orchard of iron and birds that flatter.
A flick of the wrist and these words flutter
away with the wind and into the gutter.

Late May I console you.
Will anything change, if I let go of this moonlight in my fist?
The bewildering moon must split -
for what sober I think, the drunk me will utter.
It's hard to resist;
there is always room.
Now fold me up.

Year

There on the hill
the yearling stands,
its profile tentative
against an unfamiliar sky.

Unaware
of half its moments,
seconds and misdemeanours.

It will be another year
before its heart
stops beating so painfully,
audibly,
as if to jump from it and run away.

TRANSIT

ISABELLE MCKENNA

Soju and Korean BBQ restored our friendship. Pork belly sizzled over hot flames as we spoke deep into the night. My friend spoke of how she doesn't know if she wants to be a mother or to be defined as a housewife. She said she feels imprisoned in her life. Her bony hands gestured to a small box.

You know I wasn't always like this. I used to be free like you when I was a child. The tone of regret was palpable. I can still hear it. Only 32 years old yet she spoke with a lethargy beyond her years. A tiredness washed over both of us.

I held her sadness as if it were my own. I guess some of it was.

I told her I don't want to be a nanny anymore or an open vessel for parents' problems. That night we looked at each other through softer eyes, our stomachs warmed from soju and pork.

The last time I saw her she left me on Jeju Island. I had only been in Korea for under a week. I knew limited Korean and there was minimal public transport. Aesthetically, it was a beautiful place to be lush green forest and sweeping mountain ranges. Still it came as an absolute shock, what happened? Our tension, a rock that wouldn't budge, sat between us for the rest of the trip. Quite apt, we were on an island created by volcanic rock. I couldn't apologise enough for misunderstandings, for my autistic quirks. Our friendship, purely platonic, ruptured like tectonic plates. I asked if I could at least get a lift to the city centre to figure out my next move. A long ride followed. Faraway eyes drifted to the traffic outside.

You should have learnt more Korean. You can't expect everyone to speak English.

She was right. Layers lost in translation: language, neurodiversity and cultural differences had strained things between us.

She told me we wouldn't be travelling to Okinawa together. I didn't want to act hastily but she'd made up her mind. *I need you to cancel our flights, accommodation and all the activities now.* I didn't understand her immediacy and wanted to resolve our conflict before cancelling anything. Okinawa was the place we both were fascinated to visit and my main reason for visiting Japan.

South Korea is the safest country I have visited. Even after being left by my friend, rebooking most of the trip and embarking on a month of solo travel, it felt good to be there. I felt calm and upheld by rules and order. There was a uniformity to social behaviour and no one spoke on phones in cafes or on public transport.

On first impressions, its Brutalist apartment buildings and cold skies left me feeling empty. But the more I explored, the further I fell in love with Seoul. Cherry blossoms lined the streets and the ornate palaces backed onto mountainous ranges. Beautiful, rich scenery that took me by surprise.

I would catch buses late into the night not knowing where I was and being the only passenger left and still, I felt strangely protected. I experienced an anonymity that I craved so much. No one had preconceived ideas about me or who I should be. No one saw me as just a nanny. I wasn't boxed in. I felt liberated from my disability. It didn't hold me back in the ways it did at home. I was just another traveller curious to explore.

After Korean BBQ, we wandered through Hanok village, known for its traditional Korean homes. Crammed with tourists, holding up cameras and blocking the buildings. The air was thick with a mix of humidity and pollution.

There we were, a tipsy traveller and a lost local escaping into a small tarot shop. Looking for answers on what work I should be doing. My friend asked if she got married too early. The tarot reader spoke Korean but I could understand the cards clearly. *Become colder, more distant*, my friend translated. I'm not sure how I can be a cold nanny with warmth in the job description. Plus it was meant to be a 'fill-in' job until my real career took off – whatever that is. *Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans*.

Leaving the tarot shop, she told me her husband wouldn't let her travel anywhere without him. That I was an exception, because she needed to show me Korea. Is that culture or control? She said her husband and his father need her to have not just a baby, but a son, *to carry down the name so he can be principal of his father's school one day*.

And if it's a girl?

Silence between us like thick fog.

Culture can confine and consume you. I was a mere tourist peering into a world I didn't understand. A tourist with western privileges, thinking it's so easy to live a life just for yourself. *Don't have a child. Leave your husband and regain the sense of freedom you lost*. I never felt so ignorant – I guess we are all products of our culture. I realised just how insular Western culture is.

We closed the night with Karaoke. It felt like the perfect curtain call. A farewell to South Korea and my friend before continuing my trip to Japan. It was good to be laughing with each other again. We sang Michael Jackson "Black or White", Justin Bieber "Love Yourself" and the Beatles "When I'm 64".

Saying goodbye her face broke into pieces. *We should have gone to Okinawa together*.

Within hours of returning to Melbourne, I did two back-to-back sleepover nanny shifts. I threw myself back into nannying, the very thing I told myself I wouldn't go back to. When I had moments of quiet, I wondered, what am I doing here? A deep depression followed. Things hadn't magically changed. Parents continued to pass on their marital problems while underpaying me. I still struggled to set boundaries. Why did I feel this invisible tie to each family and responsible for these kids with broken families? Why do I hold all of this guilt at the thought of leaving them? I had become so enmeshed in their lives, but where was my own? I thought about my friend. Our lives are more connected than I realised.

South Korea was so heavily polluted. *A discoloured blue*. Back home and looking up at the spotless, wide sky I felt a change coming on.

HANGED MAN

DIANNE MILLETT

It is due in part
to the fermentation
of all this blood
that I am here
aged and in reserve
I dangle strange
bound at the ankle
a poor Achilles
entangled in my own construction
my inner navigation a map
that can't be neatly folded back
it is written in a foreign tongue
and my eyes are bad.

I am caught
see—I can do nothing for myself
but at least the appointment's made
and I have learnt to wait ...

All the questions are here
and the lies
stacked, bound
tightly written
the Devil's in the definition
if the margins hold
but God is
Black and White.

But it takes time
to analyse
a lot of time
to know
if we are the sum of equal parts
or parts of some
the possibilities are endless
or so it seems
and who am I
to comment on the musings
of the wise ...

hand tweaks the tie
and palms the key

here is now
there is eternity ...

An interline suspended.

I mark time
and it marks me.

BLACK SPOTS

JOE GODDARD

I do these things:
Drink, smoke, and wait
Apparitions fleck the sides of my vision

Sitting on some rocks by the Merri
Trying to draw the things I see helps calm me down
My notebook is laid out on my lap

Watching the flood markers
Waiting for the day when the rivers overrun
How they rise to the height of our houses

Struck by the precedence of the trail ahead
I take a shortcut through a place where the grass is small
And the overgrowth is held back by time and movement
And voices sound from the path behind me
I turn

Behind me are people familiar to me
From my past

I wave
They wave
A pair of them

One of them speaks first
She says my name
And hello

If I were to draw her
I would start with her nose
An imperial ridge

The other asks what I'm doing
I say oh you know
Just walking around and drawing a bit
He nods

If I were to draw him
I would start with his slouched back
He's one of those tall people who try to restrict their altitude

I ask what they're doing and he says
Just came from the footy
Gonna go home now and watch some more footy

Black spots begin to appear at the centre of my vision

I reply
Nodding
I say well and he cuts me off and says well
And she says well
See you around

After continuing to walk
I come upon a seat
And sit down with my notebook
And draw the people I used to know
And fill in all the spots in my vision
With black ink

THE TRAMPOLINE

NATHAN POWER

I FLOAT OVER THE BACK FENCE.

At some point last year one of the housemates pulled a trampoline from hard rubbish. One of those small round ones, like the one we bounced on as toddlers.

He rolled the trampoline down Victoria Rd on its side edge, a waist-height wagon wheel adorned with cobwebs and dried leaves from a life spent in backyards.

When he got it home, he leaned it against the side gate.

Could be good for some exercise, you know?

He plonked it down in the backyard, by the concrete steps.

For the first couple of days I treated it with an air of curiosity, coming home from work to bounce up and down in the early summer sunset. On weekends friends would come over and bounce with a beer in hand. We played elaborate games, putting a rubbish bin halfway down the yard and lobbing empty beer bottles at the trampoline, watching them bounce and shatter around the bin. One day a friend brought over Rocket, a Jack Russell who spent the afternoon bouncing with an air of excited satisfaction, tongue flapping with each bounce.

A month later I came home to find the housemate, perched on the roof.

Waddy doing up there?

He explained that he'd spent the afternoon practicing, and he was confident he could clear the fence, if he launched himself at the right angle towards the trampoline.

Sounds like fun, what are you going to land on?

The house backed on to a public park, a small strip of grass the council begrudgingly mowed once a month.

It'll save having to walk the long way around, we can jump straight into the park with a beer.

We stripped the living room couch of its pillows, stacking them in a pile on the outside of the fence. We pulled his queen mattress off the bed and threw it on top, then grabbed a handful of towels from the linen cupboard for good luck.

Wanna practice with something first?

I clambered on to the roof with a brick in hand and lobbed it at the trampoline. It bounced into the fence with a heavy THUNK.

Nah, the angles wrong.

We moved the trampoline slightly farther away from the house, slightly closer to the fence.

Alrighty, give it another shot.

A second brick, flung from the roof, smacking into the fence at a slightly higher angle.

Yeah that's perfect I reckon. I'll bounce a lot higher cause I'm heavier. It's physics right?

I think through the logic.

Yeah, sounds right to me.

I pause.

Do you want me to stand on the other side? I can catch you if you don't quite make it?

Nah nah, it'll be fine, what's the worst that could happen?

. . .

An hour later I sit next to him in the emergency room. I watch as the nurse flushes out the gash in his leg with saline solution, a trickle of pink fluid running into the bandage held under his leg. It's a big bloody scar, two long edges, ragged and raw, the flesh ripped almost to the bone underneath.

He'll need stitches for sure, probably be off his feet for a month or so.

I look away.

Trampolines are dangerous. Big cause of spinal injuries. You're pretty lucky it was just your leg. Could have been your head, or your back, or something worse.

The nurse turns to me.

I'd get rid of it if I was you.

. . .

That night I come back home. I bounce on the trampoline, just a couple of short bounces to test it out. The spring tension is a little weaker than it was before, but still I bounce high enough to see over the fence into the park beyond. Over there is a pile of pillows and a mattress, still stacked up for a safe landing. On this side there's a couple of bricks and a broken paling from where he connected.

I bounce in the dark, higher and higher, springs squeaking.

Just before dawn, I float over the back fence.

SILENCE IN THE SYNAPSE

SARAH MCKENZIE

Flannelette pyjamas, sheets
A cupboard slams
Stomping
The yelling begins
Bad things happened last time
A neural pathway forms
I'm not safe

Teacher patrols the exam room
Stares down at her
Is he looking at her paper?
Or her thigh?
The quiz answer dissipates
I'm not safe

Walking back to a hostel in Mexico
A motorbike swerves
Too close
A man is walking behind her
Too close
I'm not safe

Manager sends an email:
Can we talk?
Vision narrows
I'm not safe

Friend stops replying
They are still online
I'm not safe

Waking up
I'm not safe

-

A rescue dog called Pip
Learning to cook eggs
45 hours of therapy
A better job
A new friend at work
Another 33 hours of therapy
A plot in the community garden
Sharing a tomato harvest
Swimming
A neural pathway atrophies

-

Gentle sun on her face
Watching the river
Loud noise in the bushes
Silence
Silence
She hopes it's a wallaby

SLIPPING INTO AND BETWEEN DAYS

CARL WALSH

1.

this light
 as bright as supernovas
i hear lorikeet banter
as i walk
they have no head
 for lows
 – would float
above me on imaginary seas
 – but already
 i digress

2.

 reach hands
 into trunk
hidden things – i don't need
to disturb
 sky riven by black cloud
 announced slowly
/spread fast
 blue to either side
 ceaseless as ocean

3.

footsteps
 empty as creekbank
 where grasses
 dip – as if
bowing heads before wind
 i hear
 only myself
in this half-dark
 will select route – most
enticing
until my phone
 glows a time
 that's already late
& i make a beeline – to you =

A PANORAMA

LELLA CARIDDI

A gurgling creek that lulls me to sleep and a footbridge leading to the DIRRABIN Parklands. What more could I desire?

Unrelenting heat remains stuck in the high thirties throughout the night. An orchestra of Brushtail Possums rutting on the roof jolts me awake. You can't imagine how distressing the raspy call of possums on heat can be on one's psyche.

I try to shake out of my head the details of a nightmare:

It's a balmy evening, I am cutting through a sad-looking path that will take me to the Botanical Gardens restaurant. Through the window, I catch sight of my beloved, elbows pressing down on a table for two. He's tongue-kissing someone I don't yet know. He is the only one I ever loved, passionately, and now he is holding the face of a stranger between the palms of his hands. A surge of anger laced with envy starts to burn in my belly. I back-track and via a ribbon of virgin Buffalo grass end -up on the edge of a parklet fringing Birrarung /the Yarra River, where I park my grief and humiliation. Oh look... a Salvation Army band in a gondola with my beloved bearing the physiognomy of a unicorn at the helm is gliding towards Port Phillip Bay. Strains of Ave Maria by Franz Schubert fill the air.

I leave the nightmare tableau behind, roll out of bed and take a long shower. I savour the soft breeze coming through the screen door and settling on my wet skin. while a towel turban-like holds in place my unruly curls. I pour a chilled caffe corretto into a liqueur glass and settle on a divan draped with sheepskins. But the sheepskin and my intimate parts do not agree with each other. Cotton padding between my wetness and the divan makes all the difference.

Only RAGE and other old stuff are playing on the telly after midnight. I settle for a re-repeat of Miriam Margolyes hopping from state-to-state on a motor-scooter with a wide smile on her face, to take the pulse of global warming on the nation. I am aghast at Margolyes' attire: she's wearing a peasant-style dress, short socks, and a crocheted beanie. How does a Shakespearean actress get away with being frumpy? When I was growing up in Italy, it was unheard of for Sofia Loren or Gina Lollobrigida to dress shabbily. Five minutes in, I can't take Miriam's crude jokes.

A slant of matutinal light pushing through the louvered window invites me outside. I pull on a diaphanous silk shift over my still-damp body and hit the well-trodden path to the Dirrabin parklands.

With flattened grass at my feet and a sloping moon above winking through the grey-green, egg-shaped leaves of a paper-bark tree, I head in the direction of the lookout tower and climb to the top tier. From there the out-of-season drama across and below unfolds before my eyes. Port Phillip Bay aproned by a blue-green calm sea is crowded with stationary container ships. But more than any other vista in the distance on such serene pre-dawn, my attention is drawn to beguiling planets on parade, and an alpenglow edging the Dandenong ranges.

Closer to home, to my left above the creek, a tangle of native vegetation flexes, bends, and genuflects to the birthing day. Black Mulberry trees whose gnarled branches still bear fruit, cast shadows over a circular path below. Stalks of fennel heavy with seeds lean over a rocky balcony, as if in pain. And knotty olive limbs loaded with fruit suitable for pickling, happily coalesce with River Red Gums and relatives.

When I first moved into the house by the DIRRABIN creek, nosey neighbours who had progressed from using lard and dripping in their culinary fare to using olive oil, pulled me aside to tell me that the almond and olive trees at my back fence – where birds of all denomination

roost, feed, uninhibitedly breed, and from where contrary to protocol, they manure the pathway leading to the creek – are woody weeds and must be destroyed.

What, kill the trees whose limbs sway and rub shoulders with tassels of yellow wattle from the next-door neighbours' garden? Never!

The nosey neighbours' authoritative judgment, on the protocol of what trees should thrive and what trees should die, reminded me of passages in the Bible which speak of the olive tree as a symbol of peace, renewal, reconciliation, and revival. Since ancient times, the Greeks have also venerated the olive tree for its characteristics: 'Its fruit will feed you, its leaves will give you shade, and its wood will provide fuel' they say.

The idea of killing olive trees engendered in me a sense of uneasiness not dissimilar to when I first encountered racism hurled at us New Australians by those on the other side who used to sneak up to a crack in the fence and chant: Catholic wogs smell like frogs.

Later in life, I also detected a sub-conscious bias towards me even among those who befriended me and invited me to dinner in their own home. I still remember when my host scooped up a second serve of lasagna, leaned over, and told me that Australians are a tolerant lot.

Nothing is as destabilising as the sense that you're 'the other'. That you don't belong here. The notion of a tolerant lot makes me cringe. I feel like an exotic specimen that at best is tolerated and put up with, and at worst is stereotyped and denigrated. This othering, still now, even though I became naturalised as soon as it was legal to do so, pledging my loyalty to the reigning monarch and reneging on my mother country, my culture, my identity, and my mother tongue. I sacrificed all that in favour of being able to vote in this country where I now work, pay taxes, and call home. What is it to be other in a country founded on erasure?

Tracking back from the lookout tower along a path on the periphery of the park, I contemplate the multi-ethnic population of birds that harmoniously co-exist in this ancient corner of the 'Lucky Country.' While most are native to the area, others were introduced by early migrants to remind them of home. If you came from somewhere else, homesickness follows you to your grave. Then there are feathered risk-takers that like asylum seekers, hitch-hiked on board ships, and once they got to the southern land never left.

Early Dutch explorers referred to the southern land as Terra Psitt decorum – Land of the Parrots!

You can't imagine the racket created on any given day by the assembly of Parrots and relatives such as the Powerful Owls, Rainbow Lorikeet, Red-rump Parrot, Eastern Rosella, and Laughing Kookaburra, and other permanent resident species in the Catchment, where camouflaged among the foliage of River Red Gum, Paperbark, Drooping She- Oak, Ironbark, Blackwood, and Swamp Gum, they caw, screech, laugh, roost, flutter, mate, breed, and stealthily feast on fruit stolen from surviving Black Mulberry, Olives, Quince, loquats, spiny Wild Plums, and lay new trails with spat-out fruit stones that look like spent bullets.

Kingfishers and Little Pied Cormorants have been sighted fishing in the creek. And then there are the vegetarian possums, who of course flaunt protocol altogether. They've flattened a shortcut to my garden where, under the cover of darkness, they consume to their heart's content any plant food to their taste; they have even chewed into the Cedar boards around my aging house.

AFTER THE FIRE

MAGGIE JANKULOSKA

I drove past your house today. Call it habit or perhaps a magnetic pull, but I meandered through the dirt roads yet again, hoping to find what was left of you.

I still expected to see your boots by the front door, sturdy and manky, after a day's work. You didn't appear by the mailbox or front door, no hand zealously raised to welcome me in, to show me the goats and wine barrels, your pride and joy. In the unnerving silence, I was hit by your absence, the magnitude of it. Nothing would be the same now. Nothing had been the same for a while.

Why were you so obstinate? You knew it was coming. You knew you couldn't fight it off, couldn't save the livestock and the buildings. Buildings were just buildings, brick and mortar, they could be replaced. The fire didn't care about how many decades you spent on the land; it didn't quake in fear at your tenure over the acres. It just took. It took you too. A crooked mess was all that was left. Charred remains adorned in graffiti, initials of young lovers wrapped in neon hearts. New stories upon the old ones. Someone had squatted in the surviving rooms and splayed up ugly curtains I knew you would have hated. Hated the mere thought of anyone being in your space, encroaching on your hallow ground.

Birds chirped and swooped around me. The sun's heat scorched my neck. The grass was dead and the acrid smell of the fire's hunger lingered. Your footprints on the well-worn soil were gone, but you were still somewhere near, in some new form. Imprinted on the soil and the trees. On the flowers, as they began to bud.

THE ROAD AHEAD

KATHRYN JAMES

Jesus Christ in a bucket. It was flat, completely. No way she could drive on it, even to the next service station. Not that she knew where that was. The whole godforsaken area seemed to have nothing but scrubby bushes in every direction. And now she was stuck, at least fifty kilometres from the country golfing resort that Stephen had insisted was the perfect wedding venue. Recommended by his smarmy boss, no less.

Carla looked left and right along the highway to check for cars emerging from the heat haze but the road was empty. She bent down to inspect the rubber more closely. A nail had pierced right through the side. No chance it could be repaired: they'd need a new tyre. Just another expense to add to the burgeoning wedding costs.

Her dad had shown her how to change a tyre, of course, when she first got her licence. She'd memorised his brusque instructions and it had saved her a few times in her twenties. But since she'd met Stephen, he took on any car maintenance that was needed – Carla was hopeless at it anyway, Stephen always affectionately told her. She was well out of practice, would surely need help.

No vehicles had passed her since the last town and naturally there was no mobile signal. Jogging a few metres up the road made no difference, just left Carla panting and red-faced. She retreated into the meagre shade of a nearby wattle tree and sipped some water from the bougie metal bottle her bridesmaids had bought for her hen's day.

Carla wasn't even meant to be driving this road alone. She and Stephen had planned to travel down together, spend the afternoon preparing and then drinking champagne in the honeymoon suite, a night early. The weekend would mean a cascade of people, dancing into the evening, long speeches from his dreary relatives – this way they would get some privacy, time alone. But of course something had come up at Stephen's work, as it always did. He would arrive late tonight, he promised. Just a couple more years, he soothed. *I'll make partner, and then I'll be earning enough for both of us. I can take care of you.*

Carla hefted her suitcase and the bulky dress in its plastic wrap into the back seat, on top of a tub full of the tacky wedding favours that Stephen's mother had insisted on. Stephen's precious golf clubs she placed carefully beneath the wattle tree, wincing as they clinked together. Mustn't forget them.

She lifted the grey carpet lining the boot to reveal the spare tyre. There was a set of tools set neatly into the central well. Sighing, Carla laid them on the ground. It was the rear driver's side tyre that was flat,

and while she'd pulled as far as she could onto the road shoulder, changing it would require squatting dangerously close to the edge of the bitumen.

A jack, it was that one a bit like a crossbow. Her father had been insistent that you never trust a car held up only by a jack, never crawl underneath it. It was coming back to her now. She twisted until the wheel sat an inch or so off the ground.

Next Carla levered off the hubcap to reveal the wheel nuts, covered in grease and dust. Turning the tool – lever, spanner, whatever the hell it was called – made no appreciable impact. Righty tighty, lefty loosey, Dad had drilled into her. Was that her left or the wheel's left? Only by placing a foot on the metal and using all her weight was she able to get a purchase on one of the nuts. Her French manicure was completely ruined by the time the last one was loosened. But she could do this.

She lifted the wheel off and leant it against the door, then dragged the spare out. Flexing her arm muscles felt strangely powerful. Finally she managed to position the spare onto the screws and tighten the nuts. Thumping the hubcap back into place brought a sense of achievement, overtaking her quiet fury. She eased the flat tyre into the boot, slammed the hatch and tried to remember any other advice Dad had given her. Nothing about driving on a spare tyre came to mind.

There was one phrase though, that came back to her – strangely poetic for such a stolid man. They'd been driving together to somewhere mundane, maybe a new junkyard on the hunt for old tools, not long before he died. Dad driving, Carla directing with the street directory open on her lap, calling out the turns over the blare of the radio.

At a set of lights he'd turned to her and said, out of nowhere: 'In a car, always follow the map. But in life, Carla, take your own path.'

Opening the back door, Carla tugged the plastic off the dress. Deliberately, she wiped her oily hands along the expensive embroidered silk, smearing black fingermarks the length of the skirt. Then she dragged the dress out, walked around the car and on tiptoes, hung it from the straggly wattle above the golf bag. Even in the dark, Stephen's headlights would surely pick up its brilliant white as he drove past tonight.

With a grim, satisfied smile, Carla climbed into the car, turned the radio onto a retro music station that Stephen hated, and pulled a screaming U-turn. In the rear vision mirror, she could see her veil being tossed by the wind.

YOUR WAY

ANITA SMITH

You had read somewhere that most suicides occur between two and three a.m. So, you wait for the digital clock to click over to 3.01 like it's supposed to and nudge your husband's limp arm away from your clammy body. Another night sweat. You sit up slowly, wait for your swilling skull to settle while your eyes adjust to the dark. At the same time greet the nauseating post-booze dread that sits in the hollow space of your belly. You peel off your damp nightie, dump it on the floor, kick it to the side. Feel your way around the bedroom using the bedside table for support, reach for your thick robe hanging off the wardrobe doorknob, comforted by the weight of it embracing your body. Flick the heater on by the hallway and massage the tightness in your lower back as you shuffle to the kitchen. The dim light of the range hood was left on overnight and you moan at the two empty bottles of pinot noir sitting near the sink. You don't remember opening the second bottle; its cap rests near the charging phone. Do not remember going to bed. Do not remember the moment when you realised change is necessary. Smoochy the cat sits patiently on the kitchen table waiting for her feed. You have a stare off. Smoochy wins.

That evening, your husband looks across the bar table, stops chewing, has an expression you suspect is a soft sadness or maybe a simmer of jealousy. A touch of fury? You can't be sure. But you're relieved that you decided to tell him at your local pub and not at home. At least here, he'll have to think before he speaks. You take a sip of your shiraz. And another. Watch him think. You could keep explaining your needs. But don't.

He returns to his well-done porterhouse and straightens his back, chest broad, 'What you need is a new therapist, talk to your doctor. I don't know, up your anti-depressants, hang on let me finish,' he raises his steak knife. You top-up his wine glass to just under the marked fine line and then yours just over the line and push the empty bottle to the edge of the table. He continues, 'or change your menopause patches, or get off them, something. I think-', chewing with his mouth open, 'you're having a midlife crisis. Living off grid, stinking of campfire, no Wi-Fi and letting your hair grow grey like some feral bush crone is not what you need. Have you thought about the boys?'

You look away from his grinding maw, 'It'll be good for the boys.' *And you.* But you don't say.

'Everyone will think we're a dysfunctional family,' he says.

We are. But you don't say. Your face flushes with heat as you slide off your bar stool, 'Hold that thought, I need a quick wee.' You catch the stool before it topples over and at the same time hold the flicker of judgment in his eyes and return a fragile smile, 'I'm ok to drive.'

You read, *You're Worth It* in gold curly font on the back of the toilet door. You sounded reasonable, even lucid, rehearsing the well-prepared monologue in your mind. You didn't want to bombard him with too much of your plan, just enough to make him think you had recently thought of it, make him believe he could contribute, perhaps help flesh out your idea. But in real life, your voice wobbled, betraying your decision, doubt curdling and bending in your throat behind each statement. If you aren't confident that change is necessary, how could he be? You had imagined a smorgasbord of reactions. But hadn't expected him to want to keep you exactly where you are. This serves and suits him. Always him. You thought he heard you. But does he see you? You snag a glimpse of your lifeless reflection in the pub's bathroom mirror, a face etched by time lost in servitude. *Am I worth it?* You smile at the dull eyes looking back and turn away resolved. *I am.* You muse on the Pollyanna who left their mark on the back of a toilet door when you return to your seat. 'Worth it,' you whisper out loud.

'What?' his jaw and brow tight.

'Awkward, these chairs.' You have lost your appetite and push your plate forward. 'Do you want that?' you indicate your unfinished steak.

'No, it's too bloody,' he lifts the empty wine bottle as if to check the weight of it, 'Bar stools are designed to be uncomfortable.' His gaze flicks around the busy pub. He's agitated, broody. You could ask him what he's thinking, but you don't want to know. He has said enough.

You reach for his hand, but he snaps it away, and you're tender when you say, 'I'm not asking for your permission. I'm asking for your forgiveness. This is what I need to do.'

The next morning, you lock your bike to a *No Standing* pole outside the hospital, the handlebars tilt to the left, and the unbalanced bike drops to the ground. You pick up your bag from the footpath, leave the bike where it fell, and take the elevator up to the administration floor. The Director of Nursing scans your letter of resignation as you shift forward in the squeaky vinyl seat opposite. He dismisses you immediately. He may be new in the role, but you expected him to convince you into staying or at least ask, 'Why do you want to quit?' You lament for your unspoken comebacks and thought you heard him mutter 'deadwood' under his breath as you exited his office. If he did, it's true. Numb and stunned, you take the elevator down to the ground floor and hold two opposing feelings at the same time. Regret and relief. You trust both. Two sparrows near your collapsed bike peck at an empty chip packet as they each flutter the other out of the way to get to whatever crumbs remain. You ride the long way home, not bothered by the sun in your eyes. Warm beams tingle your face, a welcome distraction to the cold hospital. You don't remember the last time you felt this soft and light, as if feathered by a charm for all your tomorrows, feels like hope. You buy a packet of cigarettes and a copy of *The Australian Motoring Atlas*. You don't smoke. Don't even want to, but the spontaneity of it rekindles the long-gone rebellious teenager in you. Hiding between the school portables smoking nicked ciggies from your father's packet, lying to your mother about sleep overs but traipsing the city streets instead. Fake ID, underage drinking, tattoos, hitchhiking, unprotected sex. All of which should evoke the wash of shame, guilt, regret. And yet it doesn't. This is the you, you need to be again, selfless, and invincible.

At home, you run your hand across the dusty bookshelf, rearrange a dozen or so books horizontally stacking the titles from the fattest to the thinnest. 'Tsun-do-ku.' The Japanese word for a pile of unread books. You like the way the word pops in your mouth. You imagine what to take and all that you can leave behind. He drove the boys to the plaza to upgrade their phone plans and you're unnerved by the quiet in your home. You could clean? Not today, although the house is in desperate need of a good dust and vacuum. Read? Can't concentrate. And now you amble absent-minded from room to room, pick up smelly t-shirts and socks from the floor, straighten towels, fluff pillows, unblock the toilet, replace toothbrushes, refill ice trays, empty soggy tissues from your son's bedroom bins. And take mouthfuls of vodka from the bottle in the freezer between these mindless invisible chores. Restless, you search for and find your hot-pink vibrator in the bottom bedside drawer. The battery is flat, and you use your hand instead, after coming almost instantly, you think about your delicious secret. An old Arnott's biscuit tin packed with cash. A two-decade ritual of stashing twenty dollars a week for no obvious reason other than not wanting to be trapped by financial dependence like your mother and her mother before her. You snap open the tin – grateful for the weight of it and delighted by the red-orange glow of the neat arrangement of your twenty-dollar notes. Stacked in piles of ten, each secured with a thin elastic band. The soft yet stern colonial face of a woman looks at you as if congratulating you for your hoarding and daring you to be an icon in your life too.

THREE POEMS FOR RAGE

ROMY DURRANT

Don't come for me
but when you do, I'll be waiting
an incisor
of concentrated venom

You like to prick, pick
and pull off my legs
one by one by
the rough of your hand

I told you not to come for me
But when you do, I'll be waiting

—

Don't be caught dead with dirty underwear
If you die crossing the street
don't be caught dirty like this

Did you see the news today
The turns are getting quicker
and quieter

Well, we are out on the road
pushing headlights towards dawn

While your pistol's loaded with shit
fire at first pin drop

—

What if I die
Not birthing my anger
Not knowing its strangle
Its tremble but not its punch
Its lure, not yet the friction of its frayed
rope
My mouth wants to take this world with it
My jaw wants to shatter at first lock
My teeth curl
But when will they cut?
How will I know that they cut?

TWILIGHT SCYTHE

CASSY NUNAN

When the sickness overwhelms and disablement entraps me,
I feel pruned, limb-lorn and fruitless,
trimmed to the root.

At bare rudiment, I rest this body down,
tether my perpetual motion mind
to the ground, to simply be a perceiver of my surrounds.

A shelf, a record player, and an off-kilter candle.
A coffee table with water, chocolate, and drugs.
Monstera galore crawl up walls.
And art, with ironic disdain, retorts.

A fat concrete Buddha tickles mirror neurons
into a lip curl. But who is laughing?
I am soul-deep in Ugg boots and solipsism.

The hum of the heater impassively pauses
– and in that passage of space and silence
clouds confer ambivalently about rain.

How has the world changed since Eunice
my couch, formed her cradling groove?
The ghost gum at Coburg Lake who embraced my limbs

– do you still feel me?
Wattles along the creek, are you yet sighing
with the scent of Spring?

The balcony barrier partitions the sky and earth
into a still-life comic strip of rooftops and trees.

Beyond the railing, an uproarious car horn leans on my
nerves.

A sonic boom launches an aircraft skyward.
And soon, a party popper jet stream proffers proof.

During my vacation from places, what else has been mounted
atop the great mother, in phallic ascension to godliness?

*

Time concertina yawns and everything fades.
I'm prone deep in Eunice, the crone's sarcophagus,
dream-coated and floating downstream.

A melodrama stars a late middle-aged woman
confessing her viscera into a phone.
Her hair is a mess of toothless vipers, her left fingernails
are painted blue. And the others are limply forgotten.

A tickle of cardigan fluff and a groan next door wakes me.
An awry glimpse of the real, mirrored by the window,
thoroughly shakes me.

In the twilight glow, a new moon scars the sky with its scythe.
The sunset is a bloodbath,
a sacrifice for the light that makes our daily bread.
A magpie calls out to its mate. The echo returns.

'And where are you?' the silence states.

WATCHING AGAMEMNON

BRIDGET WEBSTER

Snails produce a protective slime so thick they can safely glide over razors. This keeps their body moist and their hardcore reputation intact.

My own mental slime involves escaping into details. When the big picture feels too hostile, the complexity of minutiae is an analgesic — a perfect underworld that flickers into being under the beam of my attention. During the pandemic, this coping mechanism intensified into a heady fascination with snails. On lockdown walks I'd linger at every one, follow the shining glyphs they left after rain.

I turn 24 in January 2022, the last of Melbourne-wide lockdowns behind us. My housemates gift me a tantalisingly empty snail tank, street-side snails being scarce in summer. Before February hits I've found a source. I walk home, cradling a plastic takeaway container. Inside, gently bubbling, is *Agamemnon*, *Cornu aspersum*, a common garden snail. I imagine passers-by wondering about the girl with the snail. I glow.

Snails are hermaphrodites, harbouring male and female organs.



I fall into using he/him pronouns for Agamemnon. If the house is asleep, I can hear the tiny crunches of him eating. When moving across glass the contractions of his body look like undulating bands of light. **Likes:** silverbeet, damp, escaping. One nocturnal attempt is thwarted only when I hear him munching on a print I'd just bought. Upon discovery he looks comically sheepish. **Dislikes:** bright, hot, the attention economy. When he's stimulated, his eyestalks gently wave, like kelp. His top speed is 1.3cm/second. Watching Agamemnon, my mind caramelises.

One morning, I lift the lid of his tank and am met, dumbstruck, with an army of translucent baby snails—a miraculous immaculate conception. Each baby is little bigger than a grain of rice, all waving eyes and pearlescent whorls. My housemates and I corral nearly 80 into a snail nursery (snursery), gently hysterical.

Panicked Googling reveals that *snails can self-fertilize, or store sperm and impregnate themselves later when conditions are favourable*. I feel a wave of tenderness — Agamemnon felt safe enough to give birth in my care. Google then deals a blow. Apparently, it's common practice to cull eggs, or crush hatchlings if eggs escape detection. Releasing babies is ecologically irresponsible and, due to their pest status, illegal.



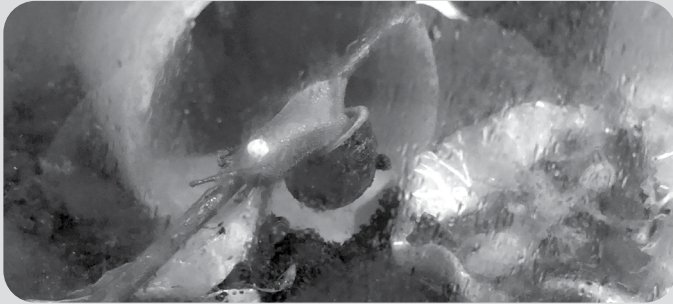
A week oozes past, aqueous with indecision. I can't kill them. I can't release. Paralysis building, I neglect the snursery. Start to realise I'd make a bad mother. Too scattered, unregulated, irresponsible. *Early Christian art often featured snails, considered symbolic of the deadly sin of sloth*. I feel tiny snail ghosts haunting my room, a specific dread that creeps slow and cool against my skin. Eventually, they get under it.



I keep the fastest baby and release the others in a park under cover of night, far fewer than 80 still alive. Walking home, something huge and aching is caught in my throat. The environmentally responsible part of me hopes they're picked off by birds — the sentimental part visits a week later, hopeful. There's no life to be found.

Baby Tidbit grows into a clumsy young snail, often falling off things. I baby-proof the tank, removing stones. *The snail's shell is a protective organ, vital as a skull— if it breaks, survival is unlikely.* I've resolved to be a better parent.

As Tidbit matures, my moral frameworks are mentally readjusted. Nature is wild. Incest happens. *In ancient Greek and Japanese cultures, snails represented fertility.* Their penises are milky-white, emerge from the neck, and, no surprises, they take hours to have sex.



One night a sound scrapes the edge of my hearing. I turn on the lamp to a horrific tableau. Tidbit is curled over Agamemnon, vampirising his shell with her radula, a tongue-like appendage covered in thousands of teeth. *Endocannibalism is not uncommon in snails, the shell a rich calcium source,* only they usually consume the shells of the dead. I find the hole worn into Agamemnon's shell and feel sick. This monstrous betrayal is my fault – I haven't provided enough essential calcium, driving the act. I'm a terrible snail mother (snother). I'll fuck up any children I have in such an insidious and unutterable way it would be a cruelty to ever birth them.

Agamemnon never really recovers. There's a rough week where he's completely lifeless. I discover an ominous crust covering his shell opening and realise he's dead, and I probably killed him. *Barring being squished, most snail species live for 5-15 years.* I rest him in a shallow grave, then am suddenly possessed by a fear of being buried alive. No harm in waiting a little. I gently cover him with a leaf. At dusk, I head outside into light rain. The grave is miraculously empty.

I remember with a giddy rush that Agamemnon was born wild, and I've been keeping him in captivity. What if he's been depressed, not dying? *When under stress, snails can plunge into suspended animation.* I find him exploring a succulent with an old enthusiasm I'd missed and can't bear to move him. The next morning he's gone. A bird might've got him—I imagine the shell's crunch an avian delicacy akin to cracking caramel on crême brûlée— but he

could be anywhere. I like to think that the richness of the wild, the smell of rain, these are worth a swifter death than if I'd kept him fat and close. I'm learning a hard and clichéd lesson all parents learn— you raise them to leave. Love enough to let go.

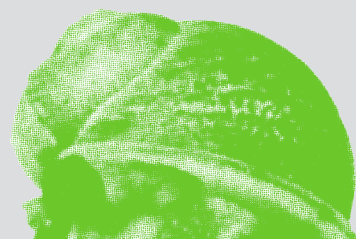


Maybe all parents are winging it, frantically Googling, fighting anxiety with the simple joys of coexisting with a little alien. Tidbit and I settle into a rhythm. Either I'm getting the hang of snothering, or she's much less dramatic than Agamemnon. Occasionally she peers from the tank as far as her bulk allows, and I think I'll have to release her too, eventually.

But she brings me the kind of slow joy I've felt vaporising as life has sped back up post-pandemic. Time moves differently with Tidbit. Intimacy with this little alien pulls me out of my head and grants gentle access back into the world. Reminds me, again and again, that the big and significant are contained in the small and insignificant.

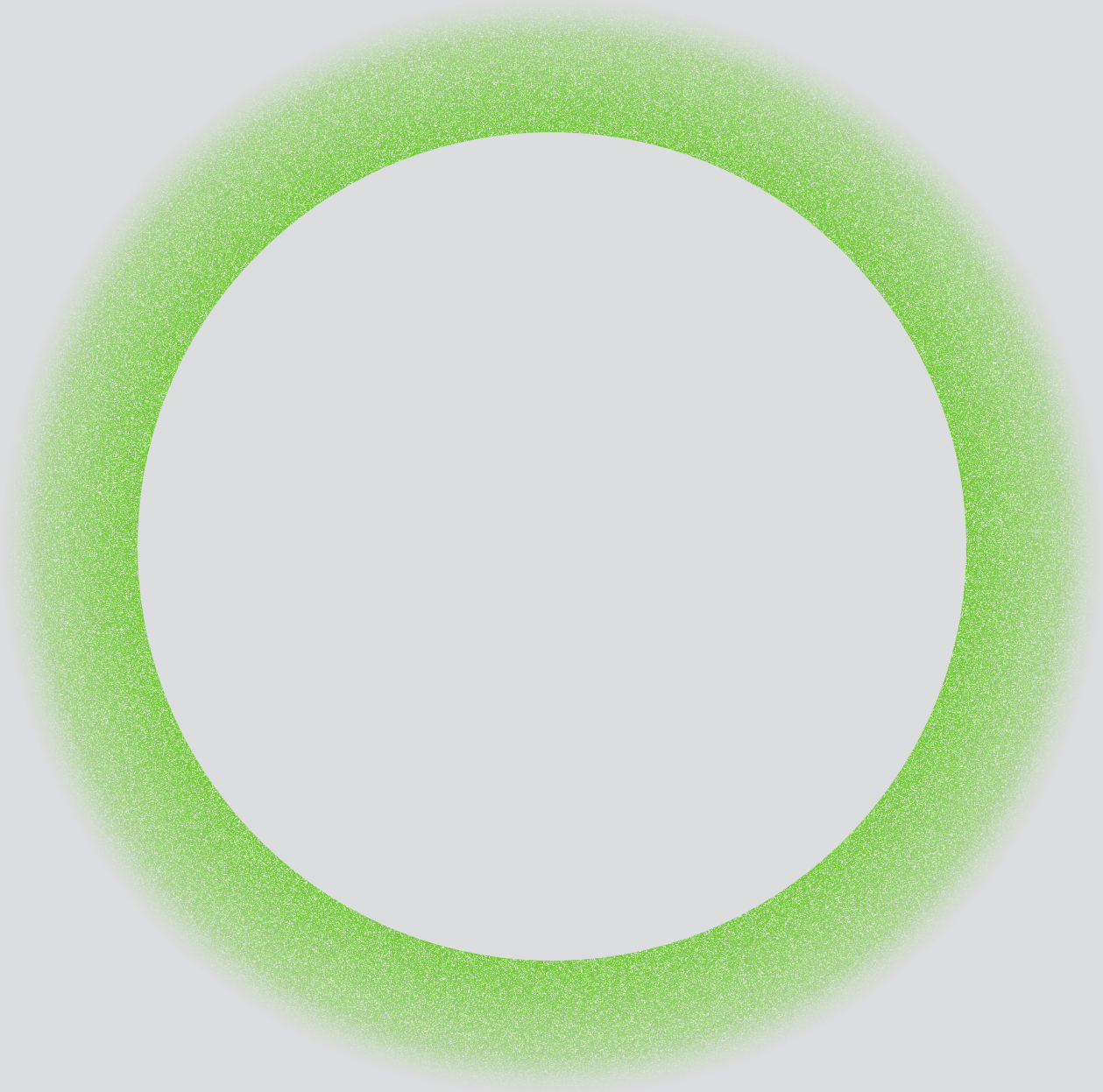


And when I do handle her, feeling her cool weight inch across my palm, her eyestalks wave. She knows my scent. We play a game— she will cross my hand to be closer to me. I rotate my palm so that she's turned away. She turns around, glacially, to face me again. Each lap might take five minutes or so. It's a wonderful waste of time.





**Darebin
Arts**



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