



Eclectic Words

2021 General Anthology



Geelong
Writers
Inc.

ECLECTIC WORDS

GEE LONG WRITERS 2021 ANTHOLOGY

First published 2022 by Geelong Writers Inc.
PO Box 1306, Geelong, Victoria 3220 Australia

www.geelongwriters.org.au
geelongwriters@gmail.com

Copyright © individual authors 2022

This book is copyright. Copyright for each individual piece of writing remains with the individual author. Except for private study, research, criticism or reviews, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this book may be reproduced by any process without the written permission of the publishers.

Editor: Victoria Spicer
Evaluation and sub-editing team: Guenter Sahr, Jean Pearce,
Claudia Collins, Ivor Steven, Kerstin Lindros

Cover design by Joshua Barclay
Cover artwork, *Belmont Café*, by Caroline Caldwell
Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro and Gill Sans Nova
Printed in Geelong by Geelong Printworks Pty Ltd

ISBN: 978-0-9953868-7-7



GEELONG WRITERS' PAST ANTHOLOGIES

31 Filters edited by David Reid and Carmel Reid (2006)

Tributaries edited by Bronwyne J Thomason (2007)

Early Morning edited by Bronwyne J Thomason (2008)

Memory, Myth and Mischief edited by Bet Moore, Claire Duffy, Maurice Alexander and David Kerr (2009)

Writing On edited by Martin Hooper, Maurice Alexander, Ken Jobling and Sandra Ann Jobling (2011)

Splashes of Colour edited by Maurice Alexander, Cheryl Dober, Christine Ericksson, Martin Hooper, Sandra Ann Jobling, Ken Jobling, Jura Reilly and Edward Reilly (2012)

Flights of Fancy edited by Martin Hooper, Maurice Alexander, Cheryl Ericksson and Edward Reilly (2013)

Moments in Time edited by Martin Hooper, Maurice Alexander, Sophia Shen and Melissa Wray (2014)

Twisty Fiction edited by Melissa Wray and Phil Green (2015)

Perspective edited by Melissa Wray (2016)

For What It's Worth: A People's Poetry edited by Justine Stella and Maurice Alexander (2016)

The Ordinary Illuminated edited by Justine Stella and Maurice Alexander (2017)

Touches of Resilience edited by Justine Stella (2018)

Reflections – Poetry Inspired by Geelong edited by Justine Stella (2018)

Where Are We Now? edited by Sarah–Rose Mutch (2019)

From the Inside Looking Out edited by Sarah–Rose Mutch (2020)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION		8
SHORT STORY		9
Aunt Ella's Parrot	Gillian Gregory	10
How Mihail Sergeievič Came into Our World	Edward Reilly	16
Oyster on a Plate	Wendy Ratawa	20
Loss	Diane Kolomeitz	22
Just Another Day	Paul Bucci	28
The Unending Wood	Adrian Brookes	30
Inney and Outey	Geoffrey Gaskill	36
The Quiet Place	Jo Curtain	42
The Wall	Ena Roach	46
Flannelette Sheets	Jenny Macaulay	52
The Futility of Wishful Thinking	Barbara Gurney	54
My Best Friend James	Lani Kasperovic	59
The Old Copper Prepares for the Day	Sumitra Shankar	64
Cars	Ian Warren	67
Two Fat Ladies	Vicki Long	73
School Hero	Meryl Brown Tobin	80
What You Wish For	Geoffrey Gaskill	83
Wednesday 18 June	Claudia Collins	90
The Collection	Margaret Pearce	94
The Trouble with Vegetables ...	Jenny Macaulay	100
Barber Shop	Shaun Treffry	103
Escape	Andrew McMillan	109

MEMOIR		115
Waiting for the Light	Wendy Ratawa	116
Figs for Aesop	Shaun Treffry	118
Remote Reflections	Jean Pearce	124
Saying Goodbye to Walks		
Around the Lake	Jo Curtain	129
Olive Groves and Wild Cyclamen	Robin Mather	133
A Day in the Life	David Bridge	139
The Bank and Paddy Ryan	Ena Roach	143
Clothes Story	Victoria Spicer	149
Snippets from an Adventurous Life	Andrew McMillan	155
My 70s House in the Country	Eve Halo	161
Food for Thought	Gael Butler	163
Proud and Unlikeable	Jo Curtain	169
 FLASH FICTION		 173
The Safest and Most Beautiful		175
Garden	Jo Curtain	
Evocation	Dan Vasey	176
Broken	Jean Pearce	178
A Day in the Life	Judy Rankin	180
Oikophobia	Geoffrey Gaskill	182
What Old Stones Know	Kerstin Lindros	184
Reincarnation	David Bridge	186
Indoor/Outdoor Flow	Sumitra Shankar	188
Change Mountain	Richard McCullough	190
A Fold in Time	Claudia Collins	192
More Questions than Answers	Fern Smith	194
Book Ends	Linda Carr	196
The Stealth of Time	Barbara Gurney	198

The Ravening	Vicki Long	200
Battle Curse	Anthea Adams	202
POETRY		204
Like Wild Orchids in Spring	Kerstin Lindros	205
Were It Summer Now	Edward Reilly	206
Colour the Season	Adrian Brookes	207
Victoria. Winter. 2020	Guenter Sahr	208
Heavenly Queen Mazu	Wendy Ratawa	209
Life, Through a Train Window	Ena Roach	210
The Mincéiri of Ennis	Vicki Long	214
Freedom	Polly Rose	216
Peace. Relief.	Ree Hogan	217
She Oaks	Richard McCullough	218
Silence and Shyness	Ivor Steven	219
Final Hours	Michael Cains	220
Stories Written into Hands	Jo Curtain	222
Where No One Knows Your		
Name, I Will Learn It	Jeremy Palmer	224
In My Gorgeous Gear	Bruce Shearer	226
Perhaps a Wedding Dress	Robin Mather	227
I Look in the Mirror and See ...	Anne Congiu	228
In a Loop	Kerstin Lindros	230
To One Approaching the		
Threshold	Jeremy Palmer	232
The Scientific Astrologer	Indrani Perera	234
Lisa's Worth	Barbara Gurney	236
Taken	Quinlivan	238
When I Grow Up I Want to Be a		
Jockey	Jo Curtain	240
Living on the Periphery	Colleen McGrath	242

Rusting in Peace	Diane Kolomeitz	244
The Back	David Rossiter	246
The Creature of the Black Lagoon	David Bridge	248
Icebergs	Diane Kolomeitz	251
Musca Domestica	Kevin Drum	252
Dinosaur Dan and the AFLW	Tom Adair	254
Gary	Victoria Spicer	257
Hunting Me	Pauline Rimmer	258
I am Lost	Edward Reilly	259
The Last Night in Nagano	Charles Manila	260
Within the Bora Ring	David Jones	261
	Paris Clipperton-	
The Dingo	Richens	264
Death of a Loved One	David Bridge	266
A Bushman in His Heart	Rob J Warren	268
HORROR		271
The Missing	Jo Curtain	272
Tell-Tale	David Bridge	276
One Day at Home	Geoffrey Gaskill	278
Ashes to Ashes	Cassandra Hounsell	285
Flying Bricks	Ivor Steven	291
Someone That I Used to Know	Claudia Collins	292
The Dark Tower	David Bridge	297
Serpent's Tooth	Geoffrey Gaskill	301
Brother	Cassandra Hounsell	307
Hollow Ice Cubes and Alien Bugs	Ivor Steven	311
Trying	Odette Werzak	312
CONTRIBUTORS		317

INTRODUCTION

VICTORIA SPICER

Anthologies have long been a Geelong Writers' staple. Since the first substantial collection of members' writing was published about 20 years ago, anthologies showcasing members' work have been produced almost annually. As Geelong Writers has grown, so too has the scope and dimensions of these publications.

The 2021 Anthology is our biggest yet: 328 pages; 97 original works by 54 authors. The title, *Eclectic Words*, signals the diversity of style and subject within. The writers range from novices, published for the first time, to Geelong Writers stalwarts like Edward Reilly PhD and Wendy Ratawa.

The General Anthology with its offerings from five genres has, in recent years, become the established arrangement. Its fixed forms are short story, memoir, poetry, and image-inspired flash fiction. Each year a popular fiction genre is featured—last year it was science fiction, this year it is horror.

The 2021 Anthology would not have been possible without a dedicated editorial team. Thanks to Jean Pearce, Claudia Collins, Ivor Steven and Guenter Sahr for selecting and copy editing the works. Special thanks to Kerstin Lindros for exemplary proofreading.

Readers, be prepared to be entertained and enthralled, smitten by consolation, and driven to retreat into the dark recesses of your mind. This and more awaits.

SHORT STORIES

AUNT ELLA'S PARROT

GILLIAN GREGORY

Aunt Ella said her husband died because he just gave up. When Joey disappeared she gave up too and Vickie was left with a tormenting burden of guilt. Years later she would wonder how different her life might have been if she had spoken up, had the courage to tell someone what she knew. It would have changed everything and that, she could see now, would have been a good thing.

Aunt Ella was kind to Vickie. She was Dazza's great aunt, a sweet, gentle old lady who understood that being 14 was hard: a time of self-consciousness and insecurity. Best of all, she never said anything bad about Dazza. She knew how grateful Vickie was to have a boyfriend.

They had dreams, Vickie and Dazza. They would sit on the beach with Dazza's arm draped over her shoulders, looking into their future. Vickie dreamed they would live in a big house, with two children and a fancy car. But Dazza's dreams were bigger than that.

'One day I'm going to buy back the family property,' he would say. He'd said it so many times that Vickie believed him. 'The bank stole it from my grandfather. Fifty thousand acres and they just took it away. Never gave him a chance. Best grazing land anywhere, just taken away.'

The size of the property varied each time he talked about it. Sometimes it was 50,000 acres, sometimes 10,000, once even 100,000. Usually it ran cattle, occasionally sheep, at

other times it grew wheat. But Vickie never picked him up on these inconsistencies. Whatever Dazza said was fine by her, plus he did not take kindly to being criticised.

‘Why did the bank take it?’ she asked him one day as they lay on a towel on the sand.

‘Reckoned he had debts. But that’s bullshit. They just took it, that’s all. Guess because it was so valuable.’

‘But they can’t do that. They can’t just up and take what’s yours. Not unless you owe them money, or something.’

Dazza jumped to his feet and glared at her. ‘Well, they did, OK? You reckon I’m lying?’

He turned his back on her and kicked savagely at the sand, then stormed away down the beach. Vickie scrambled to her feet and ran after him.

‘No, Dazza, I’m not saying that.’ She reached out to touch him, but he shrugged her off. ‘I’m sorry, really. I didn’t mean that. Please, Dazza.’

He turned around. His podgy face was dark and sulky, but a smugness lurked beneath the surface. ‘All right, forget it.’ He reached out and pulled her to him. ‘You’re just a little girl, you don’t know nothing.’

Vickie often visited Aunt Ella and Joey on her way home from school. She enjoyed sitting with the old lady, listening to her stories. The house was an old Queenslander, raised high on stilts with a verandah that ran all the way around. You could always find somewhere with a breeze, even in the depths of summer when the air was so hot and drenched with humidity that trying to breathe made you feel as if you were drowning. There were cane chairs scattered around, a couple

of hammocks slung across the corners, and an old sofa where Aunt Ella sometimes slept on hot nights.

Her husband had fought in New Guinea during the Second World War and never recovered from it. 'Ken came home an old man,' she told Vickie one day. 'He'd had malaria, plus he got shot in the leg and got some sort of infection that ate the flesh away. When he came home he was all shrunk up and sort of twisted around on himself.' She didn't often speak about her husband, but when she did the sadness in her voice would make Vickie reach out and lay her hand on the old woman's arm. 'He knew he was broken. He just gave up and died. But he gave me Joey here, and that makes this old parrot a pretty special bird. Sometimes I can see Ken looking out at me through those wise, old eyes.'

He really was a special bird. A macaw, blue and yellow, as brilliantly coloured as a child's painting. At first Vickie was nervous of him because of his cruel-looking beak, but she soon learned the bird was a friendly creature that would sit on her shoulder and play with her hair, picking it up and running his beak along the length of it as if he were grooming her.

He was a great talker and Aunt Ella had taught him to sing 'Those Lazy, Hazy, Crazy Days of Summer'. Only one line, but the first time Vickie heard him singing she couldn't believe her ears.

Strange thing was, Joey didn't like Dazza much. He'd screech when Dazza came near him and would not let the boy touch him.

'Expect he can smell all those 16-year-old hormones,' Aunt Ella would joke, which made Vickie blush.

One Saturday morning she decided to take Aunt Ella a bunch of flowers from her mother's garden. She knocked on the door, but when there was no answer, she walked around the verandah to the back of the house. Aunt Ella was in her usual chair, but hunched over and motionless. Vickie dropped the flowers and ran to her.

The old woman turned towards her. Her face was pale, her eyes dull with pain. 'Joey,' she said. 'Joey's gone.'

'Died?' Vickie said, uncomprehending.

'No, he's gone. When I woke up this morning he wasn't here. His cage was open and he was gone.'

Her eyes filled with tears and she started to sob. Wrenching, agonised sobs. Vickie had never heard anything so pain-filled. She reached out and touched Aunt Ella's hand. It was cold, despite the summer heat.

She wrapped her arms around the old woman and held her as best she could over the side of the chair. Gradually the sobbing slowed and Aunt Ella pulled away. She looked at Vickie with her faded eyes still full of tears. 'I don't know what I'll do without him,' she said. 'He's all I've got left of Ken.'

'Maybe he'll come back,' Vickie said. 'Maybe he's just escaped from his cage, but he'll come back to you.'

Aunt Ella shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'Somebody opened that cage during the night and took him.'

'I'll ask around,' Vickie said. 'Somebody will have seen him. Wherever he is, he'll be wanting to get back to you. He'll come back, you'll see.'

Aunt Ella gave a tired, sad smile. 'You're a lovely girl, Vickie. I hope Dazza realises how lucky he is. But he's gone, child. He's been stolen. To sell, I expect.'

After Vickie left Aunt Ella she went to find Dazza. His mother answered the door when she knocked. She was a washed-out woman who was almost invisible most of the time. She flitted around in the background and no one in the family ever spoke to her except to tell her to do something like 'get me another beer' or 'stop that bloody dog barking'. Vickie tried to talk to her but she would fade away, like a ghost or a wisp of smoke.

'He's out the back,' she said. She had a rusty voice.

Vickie and Dazza sat on the verandah steps and she told him about Joey's disappearance. 'She's heartbroken, Dazza,' she said. 'We should try and find him for her.'

Dazza shrugged. 'She can get another parrot,' he said. 'That one will be long gone. Somebody's going to make a lot of money selling him.'

Vickie looked at him but he would not meet her eyes. Above them a length of guttering hung loose and slowly swung backwards and forwards. Bits of the house always seemed to be falling off, but nobody ever did anything about it.

They sat in silence for a while. The sun was high in the sky and the heat was oppressive. Dazza seemed irritable and Vickie was afraid of making him angry again. She couldn't understand why he was so unsympathetic to Aunt Ella. Then, breaking the silence, came a sound that made her freeze.

'Roll out those, lazy, hazy ...' It faded away. A rasping, parrot's voice, but forlorn, lonely. It came from the ramshackle shed at the end of the backyard.

Dazza stood up and jerked her to her feet. 'It's too hot out here. I want a drink.'

She followed him inside. She knew she should say something, but if she did he would be angry. She would go to Aunt Ella and tell her where Joey was. Maybe the police could get him back before Dazza sold him.

But she never said a word to anyone. She knew Dazza would dump her if she told what she knew and she couldn't bear that.

HOW MIHAIL SERGEIEVIČ CAME INTO OUR WORLD

EDWARD REILLY

One fine day, in the midst of preparing for the 1930 elections, Pilsudskis went for a walk along the banks of the Vistula, in distant Poland. There was much to mull over and remember. The sun was shining, birds were twittering and children played at their mother's feet. All was right with the world.

A man stepped up to the Marszalyk. He had a stern, almost familiar face.

'You!' he cried out, 'You deserve to die!'

And at that, pulled out a pistol, pointed it at the older man, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, except a dull click.

'It seems that your pistol has misfired,' Pilsudskis observed.

He had faced death before, and knew that one day some madman would try to alter the course of History by an action like this. Pity that had not happened across the border, both borders for that matter. He muttered a silent prayer to St Joseph, his name's saint, though he wasn't really a believer, except in moments like this.

He enquired, 'And why, young man, why do you want to kill me?'

The youth, rather round in shape and not that tall, drew himself up to his full height and declaimed, 'Why, for I am a true son of the Revolution! For I am none other than Sergei Vladimirovič Armand Leninski!'

At the end of his little speech the young man gave a curt bow, and raised the pistol once again, and squeezed the trigger. The pistol exploded in his face and he fell to the earth, his forehead ripped apart by the exploding pistol. After a little groan, he was silent, quite dead.

Sergei Vladimirovič immediately missed the sunlight, the sound of the river burbling against mossy banks, girls' light laughter, and regretting his impetuous folly instead found himself standing in front of a massive iron gate. The sky was cloudy, and a thunderstorm threatened. His head hurt.

An elderly man ambled across the gravel path, holding a book under his left arm. He wore a cravat, though a terrible red scar could be seen where the scarf had slipped down.

‘Tovarišč! How nice to see you!’

Sergei and his host shook hands.

There was an awkward silence before he asked, ‘Where am I?’

‘At the Gates of Hell. It will be your abode for all Eternity, I’m afraid.’

This caused the youth to weep, and to stamp his feet.

‘But I was only following my father’s orders. It’s not fair!’

The other man was curious. ‘Your father?’

Sergei nodded, explained himself and wept even more, and then cried that he had not yet reached man’s estate when he had been ordered to win his spurs to become a true Chevalier of the Revolution.

‘By shooting the Marszalyk?’

At which the boy could only nod and weep even more bitter tears.

St Peter took pity on him.

‘Look, I’ll do something for you, I don’t know what. You’re in a spot of bother, and it’s not entirely your fault, being so misguided and that. I’ll have a chat to the concierge.’

At which, he bade Sergei Vladimirovič to sit on a bench, in the shade of a yew tree, and await his return.

St Peter took his time, and returned with three pretty girls in tow.

‘So, this is the deal. I’ve spoken to the concierge, and she’s willing to put you up for a few nights whilst I appeal your case at The Infernal Tribunal. No promises, but we’ll see. In the meantime, the girls will make you comfortable.’

He gave the girls a big wink, and left the now almost euphoric lad in their tender care.

‘Bye, bye, Petrulis!’ the girls chorused.

As soon as Petrulis had departed, the three girls tore into the hapless Sergei. They pulled at his hair. ‘This is for your murderousness!’ yelled Tisphone. They kicked him in the shins, ‘That is for your atheism!’ snarled Megaira, and then they kicked him in his manhood as Alekto screamed out, ‘And that is for all the orphaned children of your father’s revolution!’

Sergei, still much the boy, fell sobbing on the moss, repenting his sins, bemoaning that he would go to Hell still a virgin, and what the Tatars would do to him.

At this, Alekto took pity on the youngster, and drew him into her bower, while her sisters kept watch. They didn’t want to attract too much attention, but then a girl has to have fun now and then.

By the time Petrulis returned, Sergei Vladimirovič was somewhat more relaxed and quite happy to learn that his sentence had been commuted to fifty years hard labour in the salt mines: at least it wasn't the sulphur pits. As Petrulis took the escalator upstairs, he actually turned and waved to the girls as the boy was being led away.

There is nothing new under the sun and History has a habit of repeating itself.

In a cucumber patch by the banks of the River Kuma, near Stavropol, in the fine year of 1931, a woman was giving birth at the same moment when Alekto's time had come: but the woman's child, a boy, was rather sickly and had also been written down in St Peter's notebook as about to die in his innocent sleep. Stirred by a mother's immanent sadness, Alekto took the dying boy in her arms and placed her own child in the woman's crib, and as she did so, planted a soft kiss on his forehead. When Maria Gorbačiova came to give breast to the child next morning, she wept in wonder and sorrow, for a great red blotch that had erupted on her son's forehead.

This is how Mihail Sergeievič came into our world.

OYSTER ON A PLATE

WENDY RATAWA

The glistening glob slid across a fan-shaped shell, luminescent, unlike the squat squarish real lobster shell. My companion, Kerry, smiled as the waiter placed a second plate on the immaculately set table of white linen. The waiter had a kind of sneer, perhaps equating oysters with lust.

We were in Neptune's Cave, a place I would most certainly avoid, not because I objected to degustation menus but for another reason. A sprig of rosemary was the only addition on the plate—rosemary for remembrance, and that was relevant. eHarmony had linked us for one main reason, we both had back stories that needed mending. Genevieve and Kerry, a potential couple. Kerry was a librarian, a history archivist. I was a graphic artist currently working on botanical drawings for the local gardens. We had met twice for coffee and a stroll, gathering stories of childhoods in Warrnambool and Sea Lake—the sea, the land, whales, stars reflecting in water.

I stared at the oyster wondering how I could tell Kerry. We had drinks—a beer and lime and bitters. I looked at the wall mural, decorated with chipped china and broken mirror pieces. It was Neptune's Cave all right with sea urchins, crabs, luminous fishes, shellfish, seahorses. I glanced at the bluish printed menu—seagrass pie, prawns, sea grapes, lobster, cockles, a sea-egg, raw tuna in creamed coconut.

I took a deep breath then said, 'Neptune's Case is a beautiful venue, nice ambience, but there's a problem.'

He removed his spectacles, leaned over, frowning. 'What?'

'I can't eat molluscs and crustations—any kind of shellfish. Some ordinary fish are okay but not crabs, oysters, mussels, cockles. I'm allergic to them. The time I tackled them my throat swelled up and I ended up at Emergency. I was only ten. So forever after that ...'

He looked stunned, then stared at the two plates of oysters. 'I'm so sorry. I should have checked with you first. No use staying on here.'

'I'm sorry too. I've had so many tests so now I know which ones light up my immune system. Your invitation was so kind, so generous.'

He signalled to the waiter who came expecting an order for wine but stood transfixed when he was told we were leaving. 'Something has come up, we must go.' We scrabbled for winter jackets. I giggled thinking of something coming up alright, as in throwing up.

'Did somebody say KFC?' His voice, a light tenor, just cracked me up. He threw some banknotes on the table, and we stood up in the fake candlelight and headed for the door. He added 'Let's get takeaway and head for the Waterfront. It's nice on a warm evening. Chuck some chips into the air and see the eager seagulls scramble for them.'

Out in the narrow street I looked up at the night sky, rather clouded, and swore that I saw a shining oyster in a shell winking at me, then the light shifted and it was gone.

LOSS

DIANE KOLOMEITZ

Lois couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when her body started betraying her, but the cruel realisation that this was indeed happening struck her one evening, as she stepped out of her spa tub.

It had been a long and tiring day at work, and Lois had relished the glass of wine she poured herself before heading for the bath. The tub was her special place and running a bath was the first thing she habitually did when she got home. Stripping off her clothes and sliding her naked body into the bubbles awaiting her, she felt exposed as her true self, but also buoyant and strangely empowered by her own weightlessness. Soaking happily, Lois always felt that the combination of scented warm water and a good sauvignon blanc defused any residual work stress and left her feeling content with life once more.

It was when she stepped out to dry herself that she noticed. Wiping her inner thighs, she felt a brushing sensation of skin on skin, an alien wobbly bulginess high up on both legs. With a sinking sensation she looked down, bending slightly to peer over the gentle undulation of her belly, and saw that there was definitely now more of her than there had been previously. Fat on the inner part of the thigh! Where did that come from? Lois was appalled.

For as long as she could remember, Lois had fought a battle with her body. She naturally tended towards the ‘pleasantly plump’ of her mother’s assurances to her during childhood, but she really hated the tendency of her large and extended family of country relatives to feel they must comment on her appearance. The more she was told she had ‘been in a good paddock’, the more she seethed inwardly. She had railed against this state desperately since puberty, succeeding in streamlining herself into an image she found acceptable. It had been hard work though—really hard work—as for Lois, being slender entailed deprivation and torture.

During her teen years, she had been obsessed with the loss of her body weight. She committed calorie tables to memory and was quickly able to size up what it was possible for her to eat daily in order to continually shed pounds. She monitored her weight on the bathroom scales, naked, at the same time each morning before letting even a sip of water pass her lips. She ate minimally and exercised religiously, her weekly routine consisting of different sports and exercise cycles each day to provide variety. Slowly but surely, Lois had become a thin but highly toned individual.

The more that people commented on how great she was looking, the more determined Lois became to become even thinner, eating the very minimum each day to enable what would appear to be normal functioning. She shied away from bulimia, because she hated the sensation of vomiting, and she really didn’t subscribe to what seemed a pointless concept of gorging and then disgorging. No, Lois was quite happy with starvation, thank you very much. And purging was acceptable

as well. When they were invited out and food was involved, she accepted a minimal amount of sustenance to be polite, having taken a handful of Ford Pills before the event, in order to later cleanse her body of any semblance of solidity. She was a great proponent of that classic 1972 Ford Pills advertisement: *Don't run away from what you see. Start fighting. Get a pack of Ford Pills.* And fight she did, even managing to hide the fact that because of her self-imposed starvation, she was not experiencing her monthly menstrual cycle—by giving away to her friends the tampons her mother delivered regularly to the top drawer of her dresser. No loss there, she thought.

Of course, when Lois went away to university it was so much easier, as she had to manage her own money and food intake. There was no longer need for deceit, and she was glad to be in charge of her own life. She took up drinking alcohol, the calorific value of which required even greater deprivation of food and more exercise. However, she looked fantastic, and her quick and acerbic wit combined with the chattiness brought about by alcohol consumption made her a vibrant and sought-after party guest.

When she met her husband at one of these parties, he thought she was marvellous, a real catch, and that he was a very lucky man to snag her. That soon changed, however, when he realised how obsessive she was with her exercise regime and calorie counting. She hardly ever cooked, and when she did prepare a meal for him, she only picked at her plate ... the whole ritual of sharing food proved to be a limp experience to say the least. He was completely at a loss as to

what to do, and Lois never took any notice of what others said to her anyway, it seemed. Needless to say, the marriage did not last long. Unchanged by matrimonial experience, Lois continued on her determined way through life, depriving herself of food and eventually of friends, who grew tired of complimenting her on her appearance or waiting in vain for dinner invitations.

So now, 40 years into her self-imposed battle with her body, a '50-something' Lois looked down with horror at the jiggly little fat pockets causing her slippery thighs to chafe. Suddenly, it all became clear. She had worked to excess for most of her life, to combat the effects of time. Nothing had changed in her regime, but age was clearly always going to be the winner. Fat would accumulate and muscle tissue would sag. Slowly, from deep within herself, Lois acknowledged that at last, she had to admit defeat. In fact, suddenly she knew she wanted to admit defeat.

Regarding herself in the bathroom mirror, Lois exhaled a huge gust of air onto its already steamy surface. With it, the burden of a great many years seemed to evaporate, clouding the vision of who she believed herself to be. Her mind was finally clear of calorie tables, but her stomach was beginning to churn in an all-too familiar growl.

Why not feed it? Lois acknowledged the alien thought. Her natural reaction was to dismiss it at once and find something else to occupy her mind. But this time, she just couldn't rid herself of the nagging in her brain that accompanied the rumbling of her stomach: What really is the point of all this anyway? Shrugging on her bathrobe, she strode purposefully

into the kitchen to the pristine but almost-empty fridge, and poured herself another wine, making sure the sugar-loaded liquid gold reached right to the lip of the glass. In actual fact, she felt like slurping it straight from the bottle ... but even in her somewhat shocked state, Lois felt it important to maintain some sense of decorum.

She'd picked up the mail on her way in, but hadn't yet thrown out the part of it that was advertising junk, and amongst the papers she was sure she had seen an advertisement for Uber Eats. Aha! There it was! It was actually a booklet advertising all the restaurants that supplied the delivery company. Usually it would have gone straight to the recycling bin, but not this time ... no, this time Lois was burning with a fever of need. With trembling hands, she started to flick through its glossy pages, stopping to peruse particularly attractive photographs with the uninhibited yet guilty zeal of a Peeping Tom. She'd never looked so closely before, but, nose hovering above each image, she could almost smell the gastronomic temptations within! Glorious photographs of food beckoned to her: thick Italian pizzas oozing with cheese, green Thai curry with lots of succulent noodles and fresh green herbs, burgers brimming with shimmering, cholesterol-laden meat patties and the hint of golden egg yolk, and silver dishes from the palaces of India just brimming with Butter Chicken and Beef Vindaloo—fit for a Maharajah himself. Or a Maharani, she thought, reminding herself that she actually owned a sari and an armful of beaten silver bracelets. It was a provocative thought, but she

quite fancied herself with a beautifully rounded belly and a jewelled nose ring, dangling above plumply satisfied cheeks.

Almost squirming with anticipation, Lois did a little shimmy, poured herself another glass of wine and ‘camel walked’ over to her phone. The untapped pleasures of grocery shopping could wait until tomorrow. Right now, she was calling in a mountain of food. Hell, she might even roll in it! Her mouth watering, she dialled the number ...

There was no time to lose ... but at last, everything to gain.

JUST ANOTHER DAY

PAUL BUCCI

It was a day like any other. A Monday. The garbage truck stuttered up the street. He could hear the dogs next door—the small one yapping, the other an occasional whine. A radio spattered away in the kitchen, voices muffled. The telephone sat quietly—it hadn't rung for three or four days. Rarely friends these days. He'd used most, burnt some. They wouldn't have a place in their lives for him anymore. He looked out to the street. He could watch here for a year, he thought, and not see anything to surprise. Nor excite. A man passed with a couple of dogs. Labs. The window rattled. His washing machine moving into spin mode. The crows outside shouted at each other. A car passed. Black. Black his mood today too.

The weather here, the wind, the rain, sunshine, the night skies, the peace, the boredom. Some days he wanted more.

Another car passed. And another. Going where? Doing what? His life was beyond chores, beyond needs or projects.

He wanted to write a story. A person, a man let's say, suffers a trauma, is hunted, flees and hides. Terrified of capture, devastated by his experience he goes to ground under a building. He can hardly think. He doesn't know where he is. He can't focus on the devastation. He has soiled himself. He hears noises, dragging, slamming, bumps, scrapes, animal noises, distant sounds of murmuring traffic or water. He can't

focus on what has happened to him. He lies in a dark, dark corner, in a ball. His back against a wall, eyes and brain closed. Stunned with fear. For the moment he cannot move. He has found a safe place and cannot move or make a sound for fear of losing it. He can see nothing. Feels nothing. Petrified. He's in a filthy corner of darkness and terror but it's enough. He doesn't want to remember. He wants to forget and be forgotten. He had run and run. He knew that he would never laugh again.

Some days later a different man emerged. A damaged man with no identity, no responsibilities. Loveless. No past and no future. Small and frightened. An animal with few needs, no pride and no concept of hope.

He wanted to write these things and so many others. He wanted to excite and depress. To anger and stimulate. He wanted to show that such a man is the essence of us all. That we create such people from the damage of our everyday. How can we cripple so readily? How can we sacrifice so thoughtlessly? How can we kill the spirit of so many?

But who would care? Who would read them? Understand? Act?

Instead, he counted the cars, listened to the magpies, heard the rattling window and watched the world go by. The stinking world.

THE UNENDING WOOD

ADRIAN BROOKES

The eminent guest peered out from the platform through coke-bottle lenses and projected an over-toothy smile. Seated cross-legged on the floor of their assembly hall, the 400 pupils of Munton Primary School were pin-drop quiet, so the good doctor repeated his question.

‘What did you have for lunch?’

‘Sandwich,’ one boy dared, and others followed. ‘Sausage roll.’ ‘Potato chips.’ ‘Apple.’

‘Oh. And where do they all come from?’

‘Milk bar.’ ‘Pie factory.’ ‘Mum makes it.’ ‘Tuck shop.’

Noah grimaced. He knew the right answer—or at least the one Dr Shanks wanted—and waited for the noise to subside. At school he’d always been a little withdrawn, being from the orphanage; he knew it marked him as different, but since his diagnosis the teachers’ attitude towards him had changed. Now he could get away with more than before, and it was this that had brought him out of himself, together with a different perspective on what would now be a much-shortened life.

‘Plants and animals.’

Dr Shanks paused with a half-drawn breath, and his coke bottles ogled the hall for the source of enlightenment.

The principal apprised him of the oracle’s identity.

‘Noah! Well done!’ The good doctor’s unseeing eyes beamed as he explained the elements of the biosphere that

succumbed to their mortality for human sustenance. ‘Ah, but wait a moment!’ He pulled a face as though a new thought had struck him. ‘We eat an apple that comes from an apple tree, but an apple tree is a living thing, too. Where do apple trees get their food from?’

‘Rain.’ ‘Bees.’ ‘The sunshine.’

‘Oh?’ The doctor’s searching frown did not relent.

‘The soil!’

Once again, with the principal’s help, the interjector was identified.

‘Noah!’ The esteemed academic sent out another sightless beam of approbation. ‘I declare you’ll be a scientist when you grow up.’

The collective wince from the principal and teachers quickly disguised itself as a communal knowing smile. They marvelled that not a tear appeared in Noah’s eye, that he even looked with an equanimity touching on scepticism on the doctor’s explication of food chains and ecological dependency, of how everything fed on everything else and how all things—even people—lived and had to die.

At the end, the school erupted in applause at these special insights from the academy of science. All except Noah. He raised a hand and, when it was ignored, waved it. The principal briefly conferred with Dr Shanks, who turned again towards the pupils.

‘We weren’t going to have questions,’ the principal told the assembly, ‘Because Dr Shanks is a very busy man and we mustn’t keep him from his next appointment. But he’s agreed to answer one. Yes, Noah?’

Noah raised his voice again. ‘How do the plants know they’re meant to absorb things from the soil? How do the animals know they need to eat? And drink, and breathe? What makes them do it?’

The good doctor looked nonplussed. ‘Oh. Oh, really ...’

‘And how do they know their hearts have to beat and send blood through their bodies? How do they make their hearts beat? We don’t even know how to do it, but we still do.’

‘Oh, well, that’s because they’re alive. Yes, they have life in them, which gives them the ability to do what they need to survive. Their bodies operate by instinct.’

‘What makes life, though, and instinct? They don’t just come from our bodies. And what about thinking and imagining and dreaming—where do they come from?’

‘Oh. Oh, really,’ Dr Shanks said again. He appealed to the principal, who obligingly stepped forward.

‘I’m afraid we have to finish there. We can’t keep Dr Shanks answering questions. Thank you again, doctor.’ He lifted his hands to lead a crescendo of applause.

The following year Noah didn’t return to school. He spent increasing amounts of time in hospital before, towards the end of that year, moving permanently from the orphanage to the ward. There was one consolation, though. His window looked out on a rolling lawn that ran down to a wood.

The trees reawakened memories of life before the orphanage: misty images of bushland with leafy boughs swaying in winds, birds raising a cacophony of song, the

kangaroos, possums and echidnas that had stirred a child's adventurous spirit, and all the more so for being suddenly curtailed.

Filling his eyes with the arborescent vision, Noah's heart opened and consumed it, just as it in turn subsumed him in its living embrace. Yet it was still beyond the lawn.

Then Sujata appeared before him with a dazzling smile and told him she was the carer who would take him out for the afternoon to wherever a wish and a wheelchair would see them. Quickly they were on their way to the wood. 'In Nepal I used to take my grandfather out like this,' she said. To liken Noah to her grandfather might have been insensitive except that Sujata's presence overcame all incongruity, just as her smile gathered all things in its acceptance.

Coming to the wood they started a rabbit. 'Rabbits are alien creatures,' she said, 'like me.'

'And me,' Noah said.

She nodded. 'We need to be, otherwise we can't understand.'

Noah looked into her eyes. There was a warmth and wisdom in them that he felt himself absorbing. 'It's not the rabbit's fault.'

Her response was to beam more brightly still, assuring Noah that indeed he understood. Her companionship opened up the wood's treasures to him, suffusing it with a glow of magic. Somehow he knew she was 34, just like his mother had been. It seemed they went much further and for much longer than the afternoon's outing allowed, taking in the bush and animals, soils and airs, smells and textures, even the tastes in

the breaths he breathed—knowing it all as one creature of many parts.

After she'd left, they told him, 'We're very sorry, but Sujata coming was a mistake. We don't know how it happened. We don't have funding for her.'

But the shine of those eyes remained undimmed, transcending all earthly concerns and opening myriad ways where none had seemed to be.

Day by ebbing day he contemplated the wood from his window, to relive its enfolding of his senses as one being drawn deep into its confidence. And when they moved him to a blank-walled room of tubes and wires and little lights that blipped, and where he no longer had to strain his eyes, he found he could see it all the better.

One morning he woke to hear a rustling sound beneath him as he moved. He jumped up, remembered he couldn't, and sat down; and when he did, his bed collapsed in a flurry of leaves, so up he jumped again, this time feeling new life and strength course through him and reach out beyond to connect with ...

With the smile he felt as a warmth all around him, subsuming his own in a motherly embrace not of arms but of the most complete acceptance. Alien no more, it said: now belonging with one and all. The wood's lush profusion possessed him, stretching way beyond his perception. And here before him was a rabbit, not starting and not afraid but eyeing him with a quizzical look.

A name rose unbidden into Noah's mind. 'Hello, Rosehip.'

The rabbit's left ear semaphored from midnight to quarter past, and Noah became aware of a great multitude of voices, high and low, near and far, echoing through the trees. 'Come on, then!' said Rosehip, and bounded away.

Noah took some tentative steps, then some jumps, then a swing on a low bough. It was true! Encumbered no more! He caught a flittering glimpse of a box being lowered into the ground. Oh, so that was what they did! It seemed a lot of fuss just for a body, but then a lot of grown-ups lost their childhood, and a body was all they had left.

Another glimpse, this time of Dr Shanks weeping inconsolably.

'Hey, Rosehip, wait for me!'

Ahead of him a whoop and holler.

INNEY AND OUTEY

GEOFFREY GASKILL

Inney was my friend. I used to drive him everywhere even after he bought his own car.

His name wasn't really Inney. It was Timothy. Tim. I ended up calling him Inney because of his obsession with belly buttons—his to begin with.

'Belly buttons?' I said when he told me. 'Where does that come from?'

'I read an article ...'

'Where?' I asked. 'In Idiots' Monthly?'

'I'm ignoring you. According to this article ...'

I snorted.

'... a sticky-out belly button—I call that an outey—indicates a strong and optimistic character who is destined for a settled life and a long relationship.'

'In other words, like most people. This is a lot of ...'

'Shut up. It's fascinating stuff. An inward-shaped one indicates a modest, person with a big heart.' He paused for an effect. 'Like me.'

'Also long lived?' I asked.

He nodded. 'Of course,' he said. 'They are inneys.'

Tim did have a big heart and, though I didn't doubt his sincerity, the belly button-personality nexus was a stretch. But why bother arguing about it?

‘So’ he continued, ‘if I meet an outey who wants to match my inney ... Don’t you see?’ he concluded with a wink. ‘We’d be a match made in belly-button heaven.’

‘You are sick.’

He pretended to look hurt.

We were mates and, in those days, we talked about such stuff. ‘Are you an inney or an outey?’ he asked.

I told him to piss off. ‘None of your business.’

‘I might be sick,’ he said, ‘but at least I’m not a prude.’

Car drives were good for these talks. Especially the late at night ones on the way home. One night, talk turned serious and he said he was looking for love. ‘Not just for love,’ he said. ‘She’ll be an outey and the one.’

‘Love?’ I laughed, ignoring the matter of inneys and outeys. I made kissy-kissy sounds then told him he was a romantic—a sick one, but a romantic nonetheless—and there was no such thing as luuurv. At least not the way he imagined it.

‘And you are not only a prude but the worst kind of cynic.’

We were good mates and good mates always ragged each other. Like he did when I bought my first car—a old Cortina. He looked at it—stared more to the point—and rather than compliment me on my new acquisition, he just shook his head.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘What sort of colour is that?’ Before I could defend my purchase, he added, ‘A man doesn’t drive around in a ...’

‘... salmon-coloured ...’ I interjected.

‘... nipple pink car,’ he concluded.

I raised an eyebrow. ‘Add sexist to sick romantic.’

‘All right. Make that non-pink! And what’s with the white roof? It looks like a car-shaped ice-cream.’

‘At least I have a car.’ I’d scrounged every cent I had to get a deposit and was paying it off. Inney said he wanted to wait. ‘I want to buy my wheels without owing anything. Debt is death. So till then I’m going to allow you to drive me.’

So drive him around I did until he bought an old FJ Holden. ‘Prince of cars,’ said Inney looking at it with the pride of a new parent. ‘I want you to look it over and give me your expert opinion.’

What I knew about cars would have fitted on the point of a pin. Instead of showing my ignorance I nodded at it and said, ‘Sell it,’ I declared. ‘For parts.’ I don’t know whether he looked more shocked or offended. ‘It’s more wreck than car,’ I explained.

Old Ted didn’t disagree. Ted was a mate of Inney’s father. The car had been sitting idle, rusting and up on blocks in the old man’s back yard for years. Over time it became a sanctuary for nesting birds and the stray cats that fed on them. No-one in Ted’s family could think of a better use for it. ‘The only time it was any good as a car,’ old Ted declared, ‘was the day I drove it home. Then it stopped.’ He couldn’t get it started again, he explained. ‘I paid good money for it too.’

But Inney wasn’t to be dissuaded. He made old Ted an offer of a couple of hundred dollars.

The deal was done in less time than it took the two of them to shake hands. Old Ted and his wife were happy, but no one was more happy than Inney because he was debt-free and had

a car. He ignored my restated expert opinion that it was good only for its bits.

He had fun stripping, repainting and polishing it. He took out the engine and somehow made it work. Sort of. 'It will only ever be reliable as an aviary and cattery,' I told him on the day he turned over the engine for the first time. It was the proudest I'd ever seen him. A bonus was that he'd done what Ted couldn't do—make the thing work.

When he reassembled the car it proved as unreliable as Ted had said. It purred along for weeks without a hitch, before breaking down. There were the times it didn't work at all. I spent hours towing him home because he wouldn't pay a professional. 'Debt is death,' he said, winking. He knew. There were other times when it broke down and, because I was unavailable, he chose to sleep in—or under—it rather than abandon the thing overnight and go home. 'Vandals,' he said when I asked him why. 'I'd come back to nothing in the morning.'

'They be doing you a favour,' I said.

But for him that car was a Rolls Royce. 'Rollers don't break down,' he said, 'they just don't go.'

It wasn't long after he bought the car that he met his outey. Her real name was Tamara. She was beautiful in her own way—tall and sloe-eyed with olive skin. I found her as interesting as a bag of hammers. *Chacun à son goût*, I reasoned.

When he told me she was his Mummy and he her Daddy, I laughed.

'What's funny?' he asked.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘outeys and inneys are bad enough ... I take it you know she is an outey—as in know?’

His face was deadpan. ‘All I’m willing to say is that she’s beautiful and a strong woman. Other than that a gentleman doesn’t discuss such things.’

‘Who’s a prude now?’ I laughed so much I almost crashed. ‘Mummy and Daddy? Give me a break! But,’ I spluttered, ‘the best part is, you’re Tim to her Tam.’

It took a moment, but he laughed too. ‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ he said. ‘But,’ he added turning serious, ‘I do love her.’ The way he looked at me I knew he wasn’t kidding.

I guess he did love her. Seeing them together I suppose she felt the same. Before he put his car back together again, I drove them to and from wherever they wanted to go. ‘It won’t be long now,’ he promised me, ‘before it’s working again.’ She believed him. I didn’t.

One night not long after, when they had finished doing their innery and outey stuff in my backseat I told him it disturbed me. ‘You’re getting some and I’m not.’

‘I thought you’d be happy for me,’ he said, later, getting dressed.

‘I am. But still.’

‘It’s OK,’ he said, ‘After tonight I’m driving. The car’s fixed. I meant to tell you but I got ... distracted.’

I was both grateful and sad. I’d get my car back and they’d get their privacy. His announcement marked an end of sorts. If he was right and the car did what it was supposed to and he had found the outey-love-of-his-life he was looking for, he

and I would drift apart. It was what I knew was coming the day he announced he and Tam were an item.

People get older. Their priorities change when love gets in the way. His deep-and-meaningfuls would be with her from now on. I shrugged and tried not to care. *C'est la vie*. We'd still be friends, I reasoned. With that I had to content myself. There was nothing more to say.

Was I surprised then to learn that his car chose to conk out across a railway line? All the train did was complete make it the wreck it always was.

My old man once said you get what you pay for. A couple of hundred dollars didn't buy Tim a reliable car, a long life or a long relationship.

The non-cynic in me likes to believe that they died in each other's arms.

Tim and Tam.

Inney and Outey.

At least he would have died happy—and debt free.

THE QUIET PLACE

JO CURTAIN

I have no words for her illness. We talk about poetry, tattoos and my latest love interest. I read her passages from her favourite novel, *Mrs Dalloway*. But we never talk about her illness, its impact on the family, what it is doing to her body. I don't know what to do with the words, 'maybe a year'. I thought we'd overcome it by ignoring it.

Today I sit in the opaque pale blue chair waiting. 'Tell me stuff that is of no use to the average person,' she says.

'You're anything but average.'

Smiling a thin watery smile, she says, 'go on, Bub, tell me stuff that I won't mind forgetting.'

She knows I'm a treasure trove of useless information. I won the 2001 Junior Quiz Championships Australasia. My specialty was animals.

I start. I tell her that not all blood is red. Lobsters have blue blood, and the blood of insects is yellowish in colour. I tell her elephants are the only animals that cannot jump, that ten per cent of the bones in a cat's body are in its tail. I tell her some birds cannot walk, like kingfishers, loons and hummingbirds.

'I love it,' she says. 'Is there more? Tell me more.'

Of course there is. This is our performance, and it didn't allow for all the information to be given at once.

‘Once there was a belief that kingfishers’ beaks acted like a weathervane, and it became a custom to hang a dead kingfisher outside your home.’

‘No thanks,’ she adjusts the nasal cannula.

We call this ‘The Quiet Place’. Decibel levels are peacefully low, with everybody speaking in docile tones. Throughout the establishment are almond white walls and apricot crushed lino floors, and in her room are lemon twist curtains and powder blue linen. She has a room with a view that looks out across red-tiled roofs, the tops of Sydney blue gums and date palms. She introduces me to the nurse as her favourite daughter. I’m her only daughter. She has a son—but she has scared him to death. I mean, he is scared to death of visiting ‘The Quiet Place’ and hasn’t seen her in weeks.

‘You look like your Mum. You have her eyes,’ the nurse says. I don’t want her eyes. She has seen things I don’t want to see.

She falls asleep. Her brow comes down in the centre like she is frowning, just like when she is awake. Nightmares move around her like the morphine, drip, drip, drip; the waffle-weave blanket falls away, revealing a leg I did not want to see. She stirs awake.

‘Hey,’ I say.

‘I thought of something,’ she says. ‘The thought came to me in my dream. I think people here need a service. You know,’ she says, ‘like when you’re stuck ruminating; your legs no longer have your back, your lungs deliberate before allowing you to take your next breath.’

She continues to babble. I don’t let her words reach me.

Nevertheless, she continues, 'like someone that will push when it comes to shove. I've forgotten, I've forgotten what comes next after denial.'

I am well versed in the literature they provide. After denial, the next stage is anger. I am angry. It is all I have been. It stops me from feeling.

When I don't answer, she asks, 'Are you still scared of heights?'

'Yes,' I say.

'Umm, tell me another story, Bub. Tell me another animal story. I want a nice one.'

'How about a story I read in *Reader's Digest* about an unlikely friendship between a dog and a cat?'

'A woman in North Wales has a yellow Labrador who is eight years old, a former guide dog—Pedro. He forms cataracts on both eyes, eventually going blind. Increasingly, he refuses to leave his basket, and the woman fears he's becoming depressed. Quite accidentally, Pedro's owner adopts a stray cat, she names Truman. Truman is instantly attracted to Pedro. Seemingly aware of his predicament, he uses his paws and head to guide Pedro around the house and garden.'

Our storytime is interrupted by the arrival of the Handsome Doctor. His voice is pure bliss. I understand why she likes him. He checks the IV drip and suggests I go out for a walk—enjoy the sunshine for an hour. He pulls the curtain around the bed.

I step out into the noisy, smelly street. It is an oppressively hot, sticky afternoon. I pass astute figures draped in white gowns attached to portable IV's and inhaling nicotine, and

turn right into a laneway off the main drag, away to a little-known patisserie cafe.

I begin to cry. Sitting amongst the latte-sipping customers and their French Bulldogs, thick streams of tears and snot run down my cheeks. Fear and grief stain them. I miss her already.

On the morning of her funeral, I book a bridge climb. My brother stands beside me as fresh dirt is thrown on top of her.

I remember our last conversation. ‘What happened to Pedro and Truman?’ she asks.

‘One day, the woman finds Truman next to Pedro howling. Pedro was dead, but Truman kept pawing him, trying to get him to move. He had his first lesson in grief.’

THE WALL

ENA ROACH

Eight o'clock on a hot February morning. Alone in his office. Feeling the heat already, he loosens his tie. He pushes his chair to one side, out of the shaft of sunlight slanting across his desk. He feels uneasy.

The wind moans. A wattle branch scratches at his window, irritating him. The wind strengthens and whines like a warning. Strong northerlies are frequent in this country town, but today's feels different. Threatening.

Usually he enjoys this half hour of solitude, reading the newspapers without interruption before his busy day begins. But this morning he can't concentrate. He shoves the papers aside and tries to shrug off the feeling of foreboding. He is annoyed with himself. As the principal of a large secondary school, he likes to feel in control.

He stands up and looks out across the two school grounds, his own and the primary school's beyond. It's early and the yards are empty except for a couple of stray dogs sniffing around the neat rows of rubbish bins. The asphalt shimmers in the heat. Dust swirls in crazy dances. Agitated sparrows twitter, trying to settle on tossing peppercorn branches.

He stares beyond the peppercorns to the dividing line between the two schools: the wall.

He loathes that wall. Irregular, crooked, it looks out of place between the neat red brick of the primary school and the

straight lines of the cream brick secondary school. An old briar rose straggles over the far end of the wall. Its withered fingers clutch at the mortar. Colourless petals swirl in the unpredictable wind. Bits of paper twirl in gusts and lodge in the thorny boughs. Here and there, stones are missing from the wall. Like a gap-toothed old crone. If it cackled, it wouldn't surprise him.

Something glints in the sunlight. Perhaps a drink can caught in a gap.

Or is the wall itself flashing a message to him?

In all his years as a principal, no other subject has caused him so much annoyance or taken up so much of his time as the wall has. He has written dozens of letters about it: to individuals, to groups and to the local paper. He's discussed it at meetings and in numerous phone-calls. Bitter debate about it has split the townspeople. Some want to demolish it; others demand its preservation.

Only last night, during their evening meal, he quarrelled about it with his wife.

'Where did those roses come from, Susan?'

She fingered the briar roses, mixed with white daisies and jasmine, which made up the dainty centrepiece on their dinner table.

'From the old wall. Aren't they lovely? The old bushes could be over 100 years old. Like the wall.'

'That wretched wall! The old stones are yellow and mouldy.'

'That's not mould, Dennis. It's moss. Soft green moss, like velvet. Have you ever stroked it?'

‘Of course I haven’t stroked it! Listen, Susan. Some of the stones are missing. They just collect rubbish.’ He was determined not to give in. ‘When the north wind blows, the bits of paper get stuck on our side. When it’s a southerly, the muck collects on the primary side. Lunch bags in the briars, lolly papers in the gaps ...’

‘Then let the kids tidy it up!’

‘I’ve told you before, the wall’s unsafe! Kids shouldn’t go near it. It could fall down on a north wind day.’ He shook with irritation. ‘The wall is secondary school responsibility. My responsibility! I don’t want an accident on my conscience.’

They ate the rest of their meal in silence. He was annoyed by her lack of understanding and with himself for letting the wall affect him so much.

The words of last night’s quarrel are going around and around in his mind as he stares out of his office window. The shrilling of the telephone cuts through his thoughts. It’s Susan. She knows he doesn’t appreciate her phoning him at work, so she rarely does so.

‘Dennis? I’ve got some relieving to do today. At the primary school. One of the Grade 3 teachers has the ‘flu.

She sounds apologetic. ‘So I won’t be home to get lunch. See you at tea time.’

His reply is short: ‘Thanks for letting me know. Good luck.’

The wind whines and the wattle branch scrapes on the glass. He tries to ignore his feeling of unease and begins the

most urgent of the day's tasks: sorting out the documents ready for this afternoon's meeting about the future of the wall.

He pulls out his file. The first document is a statement from the Historical Society. He approves of this statement. Factual. No room for sentiment. He notes the main points. Wall was built in 1844 by Jonathan Higgs, first settler in the town. Grew potatoes and onions and grazed a few cows. Built a sandstone wall around his home buildings. The only part of the wall remaining is the length that divides the secondary school from the primary school. Historically significant because it is the last relic of the first settler's property. If safe, the wall should be preserved.

The school siren blares, interrupting his reading. The morning assembly is about to begin. He remains at his desk; the deputy principal will handle the assembly.

But the wattle branch scratches insistently and summons him to the window. He watches the students running towards the buildings. Early as it is, they are battling against that northerly, squealing, excited. Grabbing at skirts, at ties, clutching folders. Gusts of hot wind whip up dust into whorls. A boy drops a piece of notepaper, and the wind whisks it away to the wall where it catches in a thorny branch. Something near it glints in the sunlight.

Is the wall signalling to him?

He turns his back on it and resumes his work. He pulls out the letter from the secretary of the Conservation Society. He does not see eye-to-eye with that lady. He reads her letter again and grimaces.

‘The wall is sheer beauty. It sparkles like a necklace in the sunlight. Throws cool shade in the harsh heat of summer. Hosts a precious rose of great age and particular delicacy. An invaluable link with the past. Should be preserved at all cost.’

Poetic nonsense!

Next, he picks up the letter from the town's oldest builder, a craftsman whose views are respected. He's built walls of all kinds in his time. Writing in neat, old-fashioned style, the old man concludes: ‘The wall looks quite sound to me. Good workmanship. It will probably last for many years yet.’

He reads through the rest of the documents in the file. He is thoroughly prepared for the two o'clock meeting. He predicts a lively discussion with opposing bodies eager for argument, demanding a decision. Dennis is a skilful chairman: he will direct the debate, be in control.

This afternoon, the fate of the wall will be decided.

Though he's prepared for the meeting, he doesn't feel his usual confidence; he's disturbed, and he doesn't know why. He forces himself to continue his morning duties. At one o'clock, he sends a senior boy to buy him a sandwich from the canteen.

One hour till the meeting.

Alone in his office, he tries in vain to shake off his sense of dread. The wattle branch thrashes at the window, frantic. The wind strengthens to gale force, wailing at him. He hears children squeal and scream in both schoolyards, wild in the northerly.

He hears a siren scream.

Alarm stabs him.

The deputy bursts in. The wall. An accident at the primary school. Two kids hurt, not badly. Seems they were playing near the wall. Their teacher ran to warn them. Didn't get away in time. Wind blew down part of the wall on to her leg. Badly crushed. A grade three teacher ...

Dennis knows. Shaking, he points to the file.

‘Chair the meeting for me, Bob. I have to go.

His words are faint. ‘My wife was relieving in grade three today. It's Susan ...’

Hurrying from the room, he rasps:

‘I knew it wouldn't wait for our decision. It has a will of its own, that wall.’

FLANNELETTE SHEETS

JENNY MACAULAY

Rose opened the window and shook the cloth, amazed at the amount of dust collected in a house that remained shut up most of the time.

‘Close that window,’ came the expected shriek, thick as honey yet razor-sharp. She glanced towards the bedroom, the thick curtains bathing it in a golden glow. Leaving the window open she folded the soft material of the dusting rag, its pink flowers fading into the worn brushed-cotton, and continued dusting the collection of ornate china vases.

‘I’m cold!’

Rose slammed the window shut, flicked on the CD player and eased up the volume. She sat heavily in the armchair and closed her eyes, absent-mindedly straightening the lace armrests as Placido Domingo belted out the highest notes of ‘Nessun Dorma’. Sleep Mum. Go to sleep and don’t wake up. Her words were swallowed by the crescendo.

The piece ended and, swamped with all too familiar guilt, she turned the sound down and went into the bedroom to find her mother weeping, those false sobs of a child not getting her own way.

‘I’m shivering, dear. I don’t like these sheets in winter. They’re so cold on my skin. I want my flannelette sheets, those ones with the roses on them,’ she whimpered. ‘You were

conceived on those sheets dear. That's where your name came from. Did you know that?'

Rose twisted the cloth around her wrists. She had managed to get a dozen dusters out of the old sheets. 'Yes, Mum. You've told me that many, many times. I'll make you a cup of tea.'

'I don't want tea! I want my sheets!'

Rose inhaled the delicate perfume of the baby soap she had bathed her mother in. She looked at the spare pillow leaning against the bedside table ... for just a moment. She looked down at her ageing hands holding the ragged remnants of her conception. Then she turned and left the room.

She was due to hear from her brother, the monthly routine call to see how everything was. Graham, that high-flying accountant who had said, 'One day Sis, this house will all be yours.' That was 40 years ago. Their mother was now 93. Graham had finished his degree and brought up a family while Rose stayed home and cared for their mother, infirmed after a stroke following their father's sudden death.

The top drawer of her dressing table was open. No need to close it. There were no visitors to pry at the accumulating number of tablets withdrawn from her mother's prescriptions over the past months. The bottle of brandy was ready. The armchair was ready. *Turandot* was ready. Rose showered and dressed in her long skirt and sequined jacket, perfect for the opera. She sat and waited for the phone to ring.

THE FUTILITY OF WISHFUL THINKING

BARBARA GURNEY

Separating the knives from the forks as she unloaded the café's dishwasher didn't require a university degree, just a willingness to be a slave to repetition. As she popped six sausage rolls into the microwave, defrosting them in preparation for lunchtime customers, Vicki heard a vehicle screech into the parking bay outside.

A woman shoved open the door with her hip and clicked her way across the tiles. Her gold bracelets jangled as she plonked onto a chair.

Vicki ignored the beep of the microwave and peered out through the doorway. The orange door, with a 'keep closed' sign sticky-taped to it, was supposed to hide the activity in the kitchen, but it remained open because the locals had, at one time or another, been through to help out.

The woman greeted Vicki with a sugary grin and asked for Vicki Holman. 'I believe she still lives here.'

The emphasis on the still made Vicki cringe. 'She does. I'm Vicki. Who's asking?'

The woman raised her salon-perfected eyebrow. 'You're Vicki? Good heavens.' Her skinny stomach moved minutely as she sucked in an arrogant breath. 'We went to school together. I'm Anne.' Her talons pointed to her chest. 'Anne with an e.' Her giggle failed to amuse. 'And, I assume you've never left?'

Vicki shrugged.

‘Oh, well. Can’t imagine. However, I’m trying to track down all of us.’ Anne pulled out a class photo. ‘Thought I’d start here. You know, at the source.’ She laughed and tapped a couple of children’s heads. ‘Which ones do you remember?’

Frowning as she checked the faded photograph, Vicki thought, twenty. There were twenty students in our year seven class. A mixed bunch. Like the rest of this small town.

Denise. Vicki’s eyes search for her 1961 BFF. So much for that, Vicki thought. They’d shared homework, lipstick, forbidden cigarettes, all before they’d turned thirteen. But since Denise left for university in Perth—nothing. They’d not even reconnected via Facebook.

Brian. He’s the one Vicki remembers next. Those enormous brown eyes which seemed to take in everything. He disappeared—without a proper explanation. Brian’s mum said he’d gone to live with relatives, of which he had many.

Tragedy hit the town when a runaway truck ploughed into a vehicle on the one-and-only intersection with traffic lights, instantly killing Shirley and Philip. They had been out celebrating with their friend who had only just passed his licence. Then the following week Gerald was electrocuted while fiddling around with some home-made contraption.

One, two, three. Gone forever.

The other kids thought they were invincible and kept pushing the boundaries of their lives, trusting the myth of disasters coming in threes.

Another three went off to boarding school. Darlene, daughter of local MP; Cindy, a scholarship winner destined

for greatness despite her heritage; and Randal, son of a couple who now lived in Perth, only showing their high-and-mighty selves at the annual show, at voting time, or when their farm needed a new manager.

Eight. That's eight.

One by one, over several years Jack, Tim, Beverly, Melissa, the other Ann, Rodney, Stephanie went to the city. With dreams of conquering the world swallowing them up in an instant, the train chuffed away from teary families.

Fifteen. But really only fourteen at that particular stage, as Beverly came back, stayed six years, married some travelling salesman from Melbourne. Then, without so much as 'let's keep in touch', Beverly took her bulging incubator and headed for city trams and Sunday markets.

So, after that, yes, fifteen—that's fifteen of us. Gone.

'Hey.' Anne prodded Vicki's shoulder. 'Speak up. Can't you remember anyone?'

Vicki nodded slowly. 'Probably.'

Over a pot of tea and lukewarm sausage rolls, Vicki recounted the stories of long-ago classmates, satisfying Anne's desire for gossip. They shared tales of primary school days, chuckling at memories of pre-teen encounters with spotty lads determined to tease the living daylights out of the girls.

'And Troy?' Anne asked casually. 'Whatever happened to Troy Havers? The golden boy.' She folded her arms across a male-attracting cleavage. 'He's the one I really want to track down.'

Vicki's stomach flipped. What did this overdressed, BMW-driving, socialite want with Troy? Anne-with-an-e,

had been gone from this town for 22 years—she deserved nothing.

‘Joan. And Vincent. Porcini,’ Vicki announced loudly. ‘Um, did you know they married? Six. Yeah. They had six kids. Live in Esperance now.’

With her shaking finger she pointed to Vincent and circled Joan, while her thoughts turned to Troy. The one every girl and the owner of Tony’s Garage desired. The golden boy, with the golden curls.

The long delicate fingers of Troy caressed Vicki’s memory, bringing back a teenage romance long since discarded. If only he had stayed. Perhaps if things had been different ... Maybe I’d be someone else, something else but a grind, stuck in this café—all day, every day.

‘Hey, what about Troy? Weren’t you and he an item?’ Anne asked.

‘What’s it to you?’

‘He visited me in Sydney. Did you know that?’

Vicki folded her arms across her chest and glared at Anne. ‘What! No. When?’

Anne sighed, ‘Doesn’t matter, does it? He disappeared. Poof!’ Her theatrical waving ceased as she added, ‘The bastard. Left me in the lurch. Thank goodness for Alec. He didn’t mind. Well, not so much. My charms always worked on men.’

Ignoring Anne’s posturing, Vicki picked up on one word. ‘Lurch? What lurch?’

Over a second cup of tea, Anne revealed her past.

After receiving an invitation from her grandmother, she’d left the small town’s dire predictions and headed for a

Victorian-style inner city dwelling where her grandmother indulged Anne's every whim. Delightfully employed with a job in an up-market boutique, she was overjoyed to have Troy Havers walk into her life again. Like a rainbow full of promises, Anne's life seemed perfect. Then the storm descended. Pregnant by a suddenly invisible Troy, the pot of gold was out of reach. Saved by Alec, a rich older Italian neighbour, life moved on with outward contentment, inner regret. Eldest son, blonde. Youngest one with jet-black Roman hair.

'And now I thought I might see what the golden boy is up to. Put him in the picture, so to speak. Been dreaming of catching up with him ... forever. Might even forgive him. You know ...' Anne fluttered her eyelashes. 'Charms of the recently widowed. Should work.' She grinned as she straightened her flashy rings.

Vicki ignored Anne's smirk of anticipation, slapped the photo over, declaring they'd both be stupid fools.

Chocolate slice and excessive dollops of cream sat untouched as Vicki revealed her life story.

No fairy grandmother to save her from taking the only job available. Pregnant by Troy. Saved by no one. Sharing a timber-framed cottage with her fair-haired daughter and a burdensome mother. 'Still here. Still working in this café,' Vicki said.

Downing wine from the store-room's fridge, Anne-with-an-e and Vicki cursed Troy, and the stupidity of wishful thinking.

MY BEST FRIEND JAMES

LANI KASPEROVIC

They put me in a playroom, but I don't feel like playing. There are colourful blocks in one corner and a race car track mat in the other that looks like the one at school. I always choose the red car because red is the fastest. The detective is watching me. She doesn't seem like she wants to play either. She asks if I want to do some drawing instead. I've drawn pictures for all my friends and family. James's favourite is the one I drew where we were at the beach. I gave it to him one Thursday when he came to play with me while Mum was out with Nanny.

That Thursday, James and I were playing with the Barbies in my playroom until he stopped and sat on the green chair. It was a bit small for him so he couldn't fit on it properly. His nose was red, and his eyes looked like he had rubbed them too much. James asked for a hug.

James's best friend said she didn't like him anymore and it hurt his heart. I hugged him because I wanted to make it better. His face was scratchy on my cheek. I told James I could be his new best friend. That made him smile. He hugged me for a bit longer and then picked up the Barbie again. He wanted to see what other clothes she had so he could change her dress.

The detective asks me what I want to draw. I ask her what will make her happy. She tells me to draw one of my favourite memories. I make a picture of when we went to Pambula and

got to go on Uncle Henry's boat. I was scared to go on the blow-up doughnut at the back of the boat, but my new best friend took care of me. James put his arm around me to make sure I didn't slide off because best friends looked after each other no matter what.

The detective points to James and asks who it is. I tell her he is my best friend. This lady asks a lot of questions.

A mind magician comes and talks to me. He tells me he can understand things that people don't tell him. He knows why the red car is my favourite without asking. I draw him a picture too. He says I am very talented for a seven-year-old. I draw another picture from the beach. Mr Mind Magician asks me if I always wear shorts to the beach and I tell him that James says it's more appropriate—that undies are only for times alone. He says he doesn't think James is my best friend. He asks if I wear my undies when James is over.

One day at James's house he said he had a surprise for me. He bought Barbies for us to play with at his house too. The Ken doll had blue shorts and a flower top that didn't button up. James told me to close my eyes and when I opened them, he was matching with Ken. He told me I had one too. My Barbie had pink underwear and bra, a long open jacket, and high-heel thongs. Because we matched the Barbies, James and I acted out a day at the beach together. We were alone, so it was okay to wear the underwear.

I don't tell the mind magician about it because it's a secret between James and me and best friends keep their secrets. Mr Mind Magician tells me that sometimes it is okay to tell secrets

if it means we're helping others. I don't believe him because I am a good best friend.

The detective comes back in after the mind magician leaves. She has an apple juice and chocolate chip cookie for me. My tummy rumbles. I ask her if I can go home, but she tells me that my mum and uncles are still busy. I sit on the big brown couch and eat the cookie. When Uncle Henry comes to get me, the lady says she might see me again. I hope she doesn't.

I don't like police.

I stayed at James's house and watched a show called Cops and the police broke into someone's house, yelling at two friends to get away from each other. It was scary because they weren't doing anything wrong. The police told them they weren't allowed to be friends anymore. James told me that the girl had 'ratted' the boy out to the police by telling them their secrets. So, the police came and took him away because they couldn't be best friends anymore.

The police also hit some people with their sticks. James asked me to sleep in his room because he was scared. That night the thunder sounded like the sticks. We hid under the covers. James told me he was worried that because I was a girl, I would spill his secrets. I told him that I was the best friend he could find. I would never tell anyone anything. James said thank you and gave me a kiss.

I see the detective again. This time we don't go to the playroom. We are at James's house. Mum keeps telling me

everything's going to be alright, that we will get through this. I don't know what she means.

She holds my hand as we walk up the driveway. I see yellow tape around the house. There are police everywhere. They have come to take James away.

James doesn't like mess. We always pack away everything we play with. I always take a bath because James says I should go home clean. He says we help Mum out by washing our clothes at his house. He gave me biscuits to eat in the lounge while waiting for my clothes to dry.

A policeman tells the detective that the only mess was a chocolate chip cookie crushed on the floor. Now everything is pulled out everywhere. It's just like in the police shows.

I tell Mum that they better clean up before James gets home, otherwise they'll be in trouble.

One time I spilled my juice on the couch and tried to hide it, but James found it when I went to the kitchen and he told me it wasn't okay to lie to him. He told me to be more careful. That was one of the times when James smacked my bottom.

Another day I was carrying a glass of chocolate milk down the hall. James was following right behind me, bumping into me. He pointed to the couch and I went and laid down ready for the punishment. It was the only way I would learn.

James told me that it was another secret between best friends because only best friends could teach each other those things. It was the same when I would sit on his lap in the lounge; it meant we loved each other. Best friends were also meant to stay in the same room and hold each other at night so we never felt alone.

I see a police officer carrying our Barbies out of the house. He has James's Ken outfit. He takes it to a table on the grass and the police lady asks Mum and me to follow her there.

On the table is a pink book that James and I put our adventures in. James always has a camera nearby because pictures capture happy moments. We take pictures when we play and dress up. The pictures are all on the table. When we get close enough to see them, Mum gasps and I look up at her, squeezing her hand. She lets go of me and picks up the picture from the night when I had spilt juice on my clothes. James told me I would have to go to bed without them while they were washed.

She picks up the one of James and me as bubble people in the bath. Then the one where James kissed me at the park. I don't understand why she is crying.

There is some yelling coming from the house. I run to see what is happening. The little green chair flies out of the doorway. Then the police officers pull James out of the house.

He sees me and I know he wants to punish me. He yells that it is my fault. He says he is going to tell them everything I did. All my secrets. The detective tells him he is going to jail.

I know this will be the last time I see Uncle James. He is going to say that I ruined his life, but he is the one who told our secrets. He hurt my heart. Best friends are meant to look after each other no matter what. I am a good best friend to Uncle James. The mind magician is right though: Uncle James isn't mine.

THE OLD COPPER PREPARES FOR THE DAY

SUMITRA SHANKAR

The old copper nurses a cup of tea, his grizzled reflection staring back at him from the teapot. He rubs his chin—he needs a shave. His tea is strong and black—the tannins sandpaper his tongue. Better prepare for the day.

The morning is nice—just the birds. There's a baby magpie in the blue gum outside, screeching to be fed. He might throw his crusts out later.

He checks the clock. Still early, the street won't be stirring yet. But soon, his neighbour Jonesy will start his car. The copper's body stiffens at the thought. Another sip of tea. Better prepare. He licks his finger and rubs at one of the countless ring marks on the white table. He remembers putting it together after the divorce. He'd bought it from IKEA, along with the first bed and couch he saw.

There's a sound—ears cocked, he sits up straighter. It's just Jonesy in his driveway. He used to play footy with Jonesy. They'd go down the pub, buy rounds with the lads; he'd rib Jonesy about the Bombers. He can't remember the last time he even watched a game on the telly. The framed signed jersey is on his wall, gathering dust. His retirement present. Jonesy had been over a few times, and they'd had beers together. The old copper had held it together while Jonesy was there, asking

about the club, or his kids. But when he left, he climbed into his closet and stayed there, shaking, for hours.

Jonesy hasn't been over in a while. Can't blame him really, the copper has been avoiding him, hiding in the loo when he rings the bell. It's too much.

He checks the clock. Any minute now. He takes another sip. He's already getting flashes of twisted metal. He screws his eyes up, but it's too late, Jonesy starts his car.

(Weeds brush against his leg.)

It's just a memory.

(Trucks doppler past.)

Get a grip.

(Smell of burning rubber.)

You're OK.

(Kovacek says 'Gordo, we've got to put a screen up'.)

Just breathe.

The copper manages to catch his breath, but he forgets, and wipes the sweat off his forehead.

(The woman's sweaty neck as he feels for a pulse.)

She was already dead.

(Her shattered knee.)

Pull yourself together.

Hands shaking, he sips his tea. He needs to get out of the kitchen. Mug in hand, he goes back to bed, and flicks the telly on. He's not really watching it, he's thinking about Pam. How she liked to have a million cushions on the bed, and how he'd grouse at her about it. What was the point of them? He misses

her, even misses the bloody cushions. She'd asked him 'where have you gone, Paul?' But he hadn't gone anywhere. She was the one who had left, who had given up on him. A flash of pure rage coursed through him—he'd given everything to the job, and what had he got for it? A divorce, a pittance of a pension that mostly went to Pam and the kids, and him alone, friendless.

He shook his head and changed the channel, hoping for a distraction, but it was a cop show. Before he could flip channels again, there was a gunshot.

He screams out this time, curling into a ball.

(The front path, the full letterbox.)

It's okay.

('Mrs. Warner?')

You're safe.

(The peeling paint on her door.)

Breathe.

(Mrs Warner. On the floor. Gunshot blossoming on her forehead.)

Fuck.

The copper cries, and screams 'Stop! Just fucking stop!'

His sobs subside, and he wipes the back of his hand across his nose.

He pours more whisky into his tea. Better prepare for the day.

CARS

IAN WARREN

In a city of 5 million people, the chaos usually begins at 4:30 am, with commuters trying to avoid the bottlenecks, breakdowns and accidents that are a normal part of working life. Cliff routinely joined the pre-dawn tradie-run, aiming to complete the 110 km drive from his coastal home to the head offices of Crook & Sly Accountants by around 6 am. His '97 Camry didn't have a functioning radio, but a 3.5 mm male-male cable connected the stereo to the company's phone, so he could use the unlimited corporate data account to stream podcasts and live international sports events. This kept his mind from zoning out to the same Zeppelin and Floyd albums he was slightly tiring of in middle age. Regrettably, there was no 'new music' for his hard-rock generation to look forward to.

On most mornings his early departure was vindicated with a clear run, free of accidents or gridlock on the inner-city tollways. Despite constant fatigue, he regained some spark at the company's gym, where he worked out for an hour, showered, then wandered across to the cafe with partly dried hair and sleeves rolled to the elbows to show off his toned extensors to Eve, the uni-student-barista, who prepared his sugar free decaf almond milk latte with a flirtatious smile before completing the morning shift and heading to her 9 am small animal physiology lecture, which was soooooooooo boring but a prerequisite for small animal veterinary practice.

Cliff then strode with mild enthusiasm to his cubicle to clear the inbox and complete other essential tasks before the bosses and their secretaries arrived for 10 am opening. By then, his working day was technically half complete.

Work was usually busy without being onerous, which compensated for the grind of Cliff's daily commute. He mainly scrutinised and adjusted spreadsheets, ledgers and mandatory online business registration forms, with regular meetings his most banal obligations because they were soooooo boring, but obligatory to appease the ever-surveillant executives or occasional clients who demanded face-to-face reassurance that only ever led to minor adjustments to the spreadsheets, ledgers and mandatory online business registration forms Cliff always meticulously prepared before 10 am. Most concerns could be more efficiently resolved from the comfort of his living room with a quick, direct email, but his bosses evidently disagreed. Cars and meetings were the two major blights on Cliff's productivity, but as he was a mere cog in the global Crook ampersand Sly machine, the senior execs insisted on his daily presence in the office. His pay was sufficient, but the real advantage was the ability to fly under the radar. He didn't want responsibility for any major international accounts, and it was easier to do mundane yet crucial administrative tasks that were clearly a couple of steps down from his university training. The occasional special project marked 'urgent' was enough to keep him engaged. Several colleagues castigated his underachievement without considering its importance as token redress for the inordinate time he spent on the road.

Most nights Cliff was unlikely to complete the return leg by 8:30 pm.

Unless you inherited a relative's plumbing company, were part of a multinational housing development empire, or had a VPN and a penchant for illegal gambling, there was little demand for Cliff's skills in the coastal towns south-west of the big city. Despite extensive population growth and skyrocketing housing prices due to the post-pandemic urban flight, business development stalled, and unemployment soared with declines in construction and retail demand. Regrettably, none of this showed on the roads, except during periodic government-imposed lockdowns when both urban and regional areas became eerily deserted.

A single roundabout once connected the main road in his town with the regional arterial that eventually merged with the six-lane dual carriage intercity highway. Some incompetent local council planner in the town recommended installing traffic lights on all four major intersections, and must have had them pre-programmed to automatically synchronise during daylight hours, which forced every vehicle to stop at every intersection to prevent some indeterminant risk of an accident that had never been known to occur, even during the annual summer influx of holiday makers and hoons. Evidently, urban planning theory must view the obstruction of reasonable vehicular movement as a form of accident prevention by creating bumper-to-bumper gridlock or installing speed humps wherever possible.

Some of these problems could be avoided by driving in darkness, even if this meant Cliff spent only two or three

hours each weekday at home with his wife, Nat, and the twins. Secretly, he relished his ability to escape from his chaotic home life. He couldn't stand the howling, feeding and constant divided attention that came with parenting two infant boys he'd struggled to bond with largely due to his work-related absences. Ironically, a key reason for accepting the inevitable commute with his current job was the relatively smooth coastal traffic. This gain was gradually fading due to the virus's destructive impacts and the overzealous paternalism of local town planners.

Cliff's father passed two years before the start of the pandemic after a decade-long battle with dementia. Fortunately, he missed the new generation of vehicles with Bluetooth and remote electronic distractions that contributed to a new generation of road chaos. Cliff's dad lived by the mantra that the world was full of self-interested idiots, so relative peace could only be assured if you read and learned as much as you could, while avoiding other people whenever possible. The roads were a major setting where this philosophy was continually tested. Rules imposing order gradually become redundant due to the selfish discretionary choices of inept drivers and overprotective nannying of traffic management experts. The ever-increasing number of pre-installed gadgets designed to make driving easier, more pleasurable and automated, also unnecessarily removed the skills associated with driving. For Cliff's father, driving simply brought out the worst in people, including persistent and largely unwarranted tirades of angry judgmental abuse, which became more offensive and racist as he aged, and only

subsided when he eventually lost all mobility and verbal coherence.

Although the realisation repulsed him, Cliff was acutely aware he was destined to replicate his father's venom. He had vivid childhood memories of travelling in a rusting metal station wagon during the 2 pm heat of an Australian summer, winding through city streets originally designed for foot and horse traffic, with cricket commentary blaring through crackling mono speakers as he and his two brothers bounced continuously on the faux leather rear bench seat that seemed softer than their single mattresses at home. The road authorities eventually outlawed these older models because they only crumpled when facing the impact of a solid concrete building or an oncoming truck at speed. Raucous unrestrained children in the back were particularly vulnerable, with their only protection a metal rollercoaster rail installed as a proxy for seat belts. Cliff once collided with the solid metal bar as his dad broke suddenly to avoid some 'uselessbloodyidiot' who turned in front of him without indicating, chipping a front tooth that has never been repaired. Some solace was taken by winding all the windows down on the hotter days, which allowed the boys to poke their heads out like dogs to take in the cooling force of the oncoming wind.

Anyone who turned left from the right-hand lane without indicating, or merged into his lane at the wrong speed, or crawled at 40 kmph in an 80 kmph zone, or signalled then didn't turn, or sat too close to the tail of the rusting death trap, or failed to accelerate promptly when red turned to

green, or executed a spontaneous U-turn in a no U-turn zone, or refused to turn left because they were oblivious to the obvious break in oncoming traffic, or braked suddenly to avoid an errant pedestrian despite the clearly marked crossing in close proximity, or who was distracted because their feral kids were bouncing on the back seat or sticking their heads out of the rear windows like dogs was fair game, but rarely heard the venomous insults Cliff and his brothers experienced during almost every car ride throughout their childhood.

‘Move over, idiot!’

‘Get off the road, cretin! You don’t deserve a bloody licence!’

‘Use the crossing, fool! Cause a bloody accident whydontcha?’

Although he feared inheriting his father’s invective, Cliff ultimately agreed the roads are full of selfish, incompetent fools who were oblivious to the existence of other drivers. It was clearly worsening and harder to pinpoint a specific source of blame. Regrettably, everyone other than he and Nat seemed incapable of driving with a degree of basic proficiency.

Even with the constant fatigue, Cliff truly believed he was more vigilant than most other drivers as he wearily trudged from the office one evening to head home at 8:27 pm. Ten minutes later, he jolted into a hypervigilant panic as the first session from Lords was interrupted by an urgent and grim newscast:

‘The bodies of a woman and two infants have just been found in a burned-out car 100 km southwest of Melbourne’.

TWO FAT LADIES

VICKI LONG

‘It’s not ideological, that’s why!’ replied the pert new manager.

‘Ideological my foot! It’s been good enough all these years!’

She turned to her friend, ‘It’s ridiculous, isn’t it Beryl?’

Beryl nodded.

‘See! Why mess with tradition?’

‘Because, as I’ve already mentioned, it’s our new policy’.

‘Bulldust, it’s your policy! Answer me this then, how come you can sell those bottles up there?’

‘What bottles?’

‘Those in the middle up there!’ she repeated, pointing vigorously to a well-stocked shelf of wine.

‘Oh, that’s different’

‘How the bloody hell, excuse my French, is a bottle of wine called ‘Two Fat Ladies’ any different to the caller saying two fat ladies when 88 comes up? Tell me that!’

The young manager was stumped, reverting to an invaluable strategy of simply reiterating what she had said; a useful tactic in shutting down vexatious patrons like Dot.

‘As I’ve said, it’s our new policy. Now, ladies, I believe the game is about to start. Would you like to purchase some books?’

Beryl opened her purse. ‘I’ll get yours Dot, I owe you for last week’. Before Dot had a chance to protest, she handed over a crisp \$50 note.

‘Here you go, and here’s your change. Good luck ladies.’

Worried about missing the first game, Beryl headed towards their seats, but Dot hadn’t finished. ‘It’s ‘bloody ridiculous,’ she continued. ‘Next you’ll be stopping legs 11 from being called out!’

The familiar ‘tap, tap, tap’ of the microphone from her favourite caller, Tania, was followed by ‘one, two, three, testing’, signalling the game was about to start, dividing Dot’s priorities. She decided to take it up again later.

Beryl returned. ‘Someone’s taken our spot.’

Dot marched over to their table, ‘Excuse me’, stated Dot without a hint of civility, ‘but you’re sitting at our table!’

A young man in his late thirties, sporting a fashionable, neatly trimmed beard, was in the middle of texting. He looked up.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t know this was reserved,’ he replied with an unmistakable hint of a smirk, betraying the fact he knew otherwise.

‘Well, they’re not, but everyone knows this is our table, just like we know that table there is Grace’s and Nora’s. There’s a free table over there,’ pointed Dot. ‘Why don’t you sit there!’

‘Nah, I’ll stay here thanks, might be lucky.’

A chorus of tut-tuts echoed across the room.

‘You’re both welcome to sit here though,’ he offered disingenuously.

Dot was now at boiling point.

‘C’mon Dot, don’t get worked up, think of your blood pressure. There’s a table over here—quick or we’ll miss the start!’

‘No, it’s number 13,’ replied Dot, but a quick sweep of the crowded room changed her mind.

Tania’s voice boomed overhead, ‘Ready? We’ll be starting on a pink ticket ...’

Swiftly, but deftly, the two women sat down, emptying their bags, producing an assortment of ‘necessities’: pair of yellow clipboards, a handful of bulldog clips, at least a half-dozen colourful markers with globular lids, ‘dabber’ tips beneath—much more labour-saving and time-efficient than regular markers.

Once they had clamped all their books side by side, and lined up their ‘dabbers’, Dot took out a large bag of jubes and a small Tupperware bowl.

Last, but not least, came their ‘lucky charms’, positioned at the head of their clipboards—a pair of matching Buddha figurines, a tiny troll-like doll for Dot, a ladybug keyring for Beryl, and a four-leaf clover in resin for Dot.

‘Heads down ...’

‘Good luck Beryl.’

‘Good luck Dot.’

‘Twenty-two, two little ducks; number five, man alive; double eights, 88.’

‘Two fat ladies,’ announced Dot loudly, pretending to direct it only to her friend.

The caller paused, releasing an audible sigh, ‘Quiet please!’ and continued. ‘Number one, Kelly’s eye ... one and one, number 11 ...’

Dot noticed immediately the missing legs 11 and issued a loud wolf whistle in defiance, but it wasn't appreciated by her friend, nor others nearby.

Then, just before the next number was called out, a newbie made her way to Tania, asking for a book of tickets.

A chorus of tut-tuts, shaking heads, and judgements swept the room. The newcomer had committed one of the cardinal sins of Bingo.

'What a cheek!' stated Dot. 'She could have waited till the end of the bloody game!'

'Sorry ladies, just a minute,' offered Tania, directing the newbie to the manager for assistance.

All eyes followed the newbie across the room, releasing a new chorus of tut-tuts and shaking heads as she knocked a couple of women with her walker. They waited impatiently until the newbie spied a vacant chair, parked her walker, and sat with the other newbie.

'Ok, where were we? Heads down, number five ...'

In a short time, Beryl yelled 'Bingo!'

'Well done!' offered Dot, but it was a little premature as another 'Bingo!' echoed shortly afterwards. Dot strained her neck to see who had called it.

'Oh Beryl, it's him; don't worry he called too late!'

Tania came over and checked Beryl's ticket, declaring it, 'all correct', then headed to the newbies' table.

'Tania!' yelled Dot. 'He called too late!'

'No, he didn't,' replied the woman with the walker, 'you just didn't hear him call the first time.'

Much to Dot's annoyance, Tania went ahead and checked his numbers, confirming they were correct. 'Odds or Evens?' she asked.

'Odds please,' he replied.

To almost everyone's annoyance, the next number out was an 'odd'.

'Sorry Beryl, better luck next time,' offered Tania.

In their excitement, Dot and Beryl had forgotten it was the last game of the first half and had now missed their usual place at the top of the queue for their complimentary tea and biscuit.

'Stay here Beryl, I'll grab the teas; it might take a while though.'

Nancy had managed to jump the queue yet again, making her regular mug of black tea, dunking her teabag painfully slow with one hand, whilst scooping up a handful of biscuits in the other and depositing them quickly into her cardigan pocket.

'Did you see that!' exclaimed a woman at the top of the line.

'You'd think she hadn't eaten for a week!' chimed another.

A woman behind Nancy figured that if she could take a handful, she was going to take two.

Dot, worried she'd miss out, gestured to Tania, notifying her that 'they're taking more than two biscuits again!'

Tania picked up the microphone, 'Ladies, it's just one biscuit per person. If you don't comply, then we won't be offering biscuits anymore, ok?'

Everyone shot Nancy a dirty look.

With only minutes to spare, Dot had managed to bring two cups of tea—and four biscuits secretly deposited in her pocket—back to the table, but not without shooting the newbie a look of contempt, nor spilling a few drops of tea on the venue's newly laid carpet.

'Here you go Beryl, here's your biscuit, and here you can have mine,' she offered with a wink, deciding to have hers during the game when no one would notice.

Most of the second half proved uneventful, except for the newbie who thought he had a bingo, but didn't, much to an odd mix of relief and displeasure from everyone. Then Dot committed the worst sin of all, she had forgotten to switch her phone to silent. The Cats theme song playing was a dead giveaway.

'Dot, turn ya bloody phone off willya!'

'Ok, ok, keep your shirt on!'

Beryl made the most of the delay by grabbing a new dabber for the final game, discarding the other 'as dried up'.

'Here give it to me, I'll take it home and soak it, for next time'.

'Quiet please, this is the last game, the members' jackpot. We'll be playing on a green ticket, heads down.'

Both ladies gave their Buddha a robust rub, as silence and nervous anticipation filled the room.

'Eighty-nine, almost there ...'

Dot hunched over her ticket, began dabbing vigorously, it was looking promising, one left to go. It took two more calls before she heard, '13, unlucky for some'.

‘Bingo!’ yelled Dot, scanning the room for any other Bingo calls, relieved to find there weren’t any.

‘Oh Dot, how wonderful! Looks like our table wasn’t so unlucky after all’

Beryl started packing up. ‘Not yet, I’m shouting us lunch, wait here while I go and collect my winnings and grab some menus.’

Dot approached the counter, the manager congratulated her on her win as she handed over the winnings, adding, ‘Just a reminder, wolf whistles are not allowed anymore.’

Dot bit her tongue, then, looking her adversary straight in the face, replied, ‘I’ll have a bottle of Two Fat Ladies please’.

SCHOOL HERO

MERYL BROWN TOBIN

Clackers Carlton stroked the leather belt. 'Come here, Bourke!'

I felt the blood drain from my face. 'What for? I didn't do anything.'

'You were misbehaving.'

Misbehaving? He'd have to be joking! Even if I was that sort of kid, I'd know better than to act up in his class. Like a man going to the gallows, I walked out the front. On principle Clackers, our Maths teacher, gave at least one kid a day the strap. We all knew he was mental.

'Put your hand upwards on the bench, Bourke.' He placed my hand in position.

That meant you couldn't pull down with the force of the strap. The sadist knew that doubled the impact.

I put out my hand. How unfair. I loved school and I'd never done anything wrong in his class. And I'd never got the strap in my life.

Clackers raised himself up on his toes, raised the strap and started to bring it down. Almost as a reflex, my hand moved, grabbed the strap and flicked it away. It coiled around the side of Clacker's face above his left ear and back of his head. The kids gave a collective gasp. My heart almost stopped.

But it couldn't have hurt—Clackers' ear didn't even go red. He just stood like a bull stunned with a crowbar. The kids

yelled and stomped on the floor. Clackers turned and rushed out of the room.

‘Good on ya, Bourko!’ the kids called. Some ran to thump me on the shoulder. I wanted to curl up on the floor and disappear. I was sure to get suspended, maybe even expelled.

‘It’s all that weightlifting you do,’ said my mate, Jack. ‘Bet he never takes you on again!’

I had to get some air. I walked outside. For ten minutes I walked around the schoolyard.

When I returned, the kids gave the V for Victory sign. ‘Old Peters came in,’ called one. ‘Wanted to know what happened. We told him you didn’t do nuthin’ but old Clackers still had it in for you.’

‘Ssh, ssh,’ hissed Jack.

Old Peters threw open the door. ‘Bourke, my office, now!’

He strode ahead and I hurried along the passage after him. In his office I gave my side of the story.

‘Right. But you know you can’t go around attacking a teacher. Mr Carlton could have lost an eye. I understand there were extenuating circumstances, but you’ll have to be punished. Because you catch a school bus home, you’ll have to stay the rest of the day. But, starting tomorrow, you’re suspended for a week.’

Giddy with pleasure, I walked out. Only a week—I thought it would be at least two.

My first day back the bus was running late, and I arrived after the school bell. Hoping no one would wave to me, I raced along the side of the school to Assembly in the quadrangle.

I emerged level with Old Peters who was standing at the top of the side entrance steps about to address the school. The kids in front saw me. 'Hooray!' they yelled.

'Hooray!' all the kids chorused.

'Be quiet!' Old Peters roared.

Like a red-faced alley cat, I slunk in behind my classmates. The kids behind thumped me on the back. I was the school hero.

WHAT YOU WISH FOR

GEOFFREY GASKILL

It was a nightmare. Getting past the door bitches was bad enough. Listening to their put downs was worse.

Belle called the men Easties because they looked like Easter Island statues in tight tee-shirts that accentuated ripped muscles. Everyone who stood next to them looked small. They looked as if lifting heavy things would be easy. Any one of them would fill the doorway on his own. They weren't big on conversation unless it involved inviting a girl into the back alley for a negotiation as they called it. 'You'll get you inside quicker,' they said. Her friend, Dolores, tried it one night. She had to wait in line like all the rest.

Belle wasn't Dolores. She wanted to get in, but she had standards. Or told herself.

The Easties looked down their noses at the likes of her and Dolores who they called fuglies.

Club Tardis didn't have had a sign over the door—'Fuglies not welcome'—but it should have. It was a small, square, solid block of a building with nothing to break up the walls of bricks. A door was the only place where anyone could get in. Or out. No one could see what went on in there because the darkness inside seemed to swallow light.

As well as Easties, there were dyed-blond, butch women on the door as well. Blonde Dykes, Belle called them. Blondies. Parodies of females. The Easties had as much

contempt for them as they had for the ‘fuglies’ like Belle and Dolores.

The Blondies were predatory like the men. Every girl in line was fair game. Blondies too offered negotiation in the back alley. Dolores also tried that. Same result.

Belle had asked herself why she wanted to get into Club Tardis in the first place. It was simple. Social pariahdom awaited anyone not seen there at least once a week. Social media made sure of that. The troika of It Girls, Miranda, Astrid and Ingrid, used to brag about who they’d found at the club. ‘I can’t tell you how well he was hung,’ Miranda, Ingrid or Astrid would tweet. Or ‘... how rich ...’ Or ...

Belle had to take their word for it. The Troika wanted to make anyone who was not the Troika feel small. And they did. If that didn’t work, trolling did.

‘One day ...’ Belle swore as she watched the beautiful people sashay in before her.

But one day, as she knew, would never come.

Till it did.

It was the day she cursed the Blondie who’d told her to go to end of the line.

‘Why?’ asked Belle.

‘Because you tried to jump the queue.’

‘I didn’t,’ Belle insisted.

‘The end of the line,’ Blondie pointed, sticking her face in Belle’s, ‘or you’ll never get in. Ever.’

It was at that moment the Troika were being waved through. Miranda’s sneer of contempt said it all.

It was also the moment when somewhere behind her in the queue a scuffle broke out and both Easties and Blondies rushed to sort out the fight. The crowd turned its attention towards the melee.

The door had been left unattended and Belle saw her chance. She slipped inside unnoticed.

The place was dark with flashing laser lights. The music was deafening. Belle felt it pulsing through her body like an overactive heartbeat. At last, she was where wanted to be—through the door and part of the in-crowd. The throng was as huge as it was anonymous. In this darkness no one would find her even if they came looking. She wanted to find Miranda. ‘See,’ she’d tell her, ‘I can get in too.’

The place was bigger than it seemed from the outside. Probably why it was called Club Tardis, she reasoned.

She felt a tap on the shoulder. ‘Hi,’ said a male voice. Screamed, more like. Conversation in this noise was impossible. ‘Can I buy you a drink?’

‘Sure,’ screamed Belle at the face she couldn’t make out. A hand took hers and pulled her further into the crowd, away from the door.

The strobing, flashing and garish lights disoriented her. The sound bludgeoned her.

A hand appeared in front of her face with a drink. ‘Thanks,’ she screamed and tossed it down.

No sooner had she finished than another drink appeared.

‘That’s quick,’ she screamed. She drank it slower.

No sooner has she finished than another was thrust into her hand.

Then another.

The swirling colours, the throbbing beat combined with the drinks made her queasy.

She lost any sense of time.

By the fifth drink she wanted to throw up.

More, she felt claustrophobic. The throbbing music, the oppressive crush of bodies, the lights overloaded her senses.

'I'm going to be sick,' she screamed at the hand holding the next drink.

She stumbled to where she imagined the door was until she reached a window. Odd, she thought. She'd never seen a window in the wall from the outside before.

Out in the street she saw the queue was as long as it had been when she was waiting. The Easties and Blondies were still there, letting Miranda, Astrid and Ingrid through while at the same time sending another girl back to the end of the line.

She looked along the wall but couldn't see the door. She turned right to where it should have been. Despite the window, it was dark. She felt her way towards where she discerned a break in the wall. All the time she was buffeted by the crowd.

Her first stirrings of panic settled when she saw the door. 'Be careful what you wish for,' a cautionary voice in her head told her.

She felt a tap on the shoulder. 'Hi,' screamed a male voice. 'Can I buy you a drink?'

‘What?’ Belle screamed at the anonymous face and tried to step back. ‘Get away.’ A hand grabbed hers and pulled her, struggling into the crowd, further from the exit.

The strobing, flashing and garish lights were making her sicker. Then there was the hammering of the music.

Someone pushed a drink into her hands. ‘I don’t want it!’ screamed Belle but raised the glass to her lips anyway. Her hands seem to have a will of their own.

Another drink appeared in her hands. She heard herself say, ‘That was quick.’ Why did she say that? She didn’t want any more drinks. She wanted to get out of here.

Despite her reluctance she tossed the drink down followed by another.

And another.

She was beyond queasy.

She’d lost any sense of time and wanted to throw up and crawl into bed.

‘I’m going to be sick!’ she screamed and pushed her way through the crush of bodies until she reached the window.

Outside the queue was as long as it had been when she looked out earlier. There were the Easties and Blondies ushering Miranda, Astrid and Ingrid through the crowd and to the door.

She waved her arms to attract attention. Those Easties and Blondies could get her out. Especially the Blondie who’d told her to go to the end of the queue. ‘I’m a fugly!’ she screamed. ‘I’m not supposed to be here!’

Except they didn't see her. Their backs were to the window because one of the Blondies was screaming into the face of a girl and pointing towards the end of the queue.

The girl turned to obey.

If Belle had not known better, she would have sworn she was looking at herself.

She reeled and turned left. If turning right had not got her to the door, turning left must. She reached another window. Through it she could see her friend Dolores with one of the Blondies in the alley. Dolores was on her knees and ...

Belle screamed but the noise around her swallowed it.

She felt a tap on the shoulder. 'Hi,' screamed a male voice. 'Can I buy you a drink?'

'Get away!' Belle screamed, took an outstretched hand and followed into the crowd.

The door! She wanted the door even as her feet were taking her away from it.

The lights strobed and blinded her. She lost all sense of time and place.

A hand pushed a drink into her reluctant hands that took it anyway. 'I don't want it!' she screamed, trying to push it away as she raised it to her lips.

Drink followed drink followed drink.

Nausea overwhelmed her. She was beyond lost. What was happening to her? If she could just make the door. She felt her way along a wall, her hands touching the glass of a window. She didn't look out.

At last, the door came into sight. She could see outside. The queue was there. Through the opening she could feel the rush of fresh night air.

She felt a tap on the shoulder. 'Hi,' screamed a male voice above the noise. 'Can I buy you a drink?'

WEDNESDAY 18 JUNE

CLAUDIA COLLINS

Wednesday 18 June 1853

My head hurt. I was cold and my clothes were wet. I moaned and opened my eyes. My friend Priscilla's face swam into view. A cliff appeared to loom above her.

'Lydia, Lydia. Oh, thank God!' Priscilla cried.

'Clive?'

'He is fine. He's right here.'

'Mama,' I turned my head to see my son's tear-streaked little face. Feeling dizzy and sick, I closed my eyes again.

Later, I was told how the captain and crew worked tirelessly ferrying the passengers to shore in the lifeboats, risking their lives to return again and again until everyone was safely ashore, and then returning for whatever provisions they could salvage.

I was told how in the grey dawn light, Ewing Blythe had found a track and climbed up the side of the nearby cliff with the some of the younger men, insisting that there was a look of familiarity about the cliff face. From the top he could see the mouth of the Barwon River.

'We are not far from my property at Lake Connemare. We can walk there by late afternoon,' he reported on descending the cliff.

And as I was lapsing into unconsciousness once more, I heard someone say that Robert Thwaites was dead.

Wednesday 18 June 2003

Jenny Parker was enjoying her rostered day off. Waking late and then eating a leisurely breakfast, she put her cigarettes and lighter into her dressing gown pocket and carried her coffee and newspaper out onto the front veranda. The fog was so thick she could only make out the part of her front fence that was lit by the streetlight. Her short, blonde hair felt damp, but the coffee warmed her. Taking a drag on her smoke, she opened the paper and was surprised to see an upcoming local event feature on page four.

The Earl of Charlemont Reunion

Wrecked off the coast of Barwon Heads on Wednesday June 18th 1853, while travelling from Liverpool to Sydney via Port Phillip, the Earl of Charlemont was carrying 366 unassisted immigrants and a cargo of iron, coal, clothing, general merchandise, and other gold rush imports.

This Sunday, several hundred descendants and others will come together in Barwon Heads to commemorate the 150 years since the sinking of this ship and to give thanks to those pioneers who helped build our nation.

Included in the various activities on this special day, the Geelong Historical Society in conjunction with the South Barwon Amateur Dramatic Arts Club will perform a re-enactment to ensure that the Earl of Charlemont story never fades.

Wednesday 18 June 1853

A dense and dank shroud of fog descended upon us as we picked our way around the boulders at the bottom of the cliff with the men assisting the women and children. We followed the river upstream until the sand turned to oozing black mud, and then we turned inland following the directions of Mr Blythe. We travelled in small groups, barely in sight of the group in front or behind. My head still felt muzzy, and Clive and I had dropped back behind Priscilla and her family when Clive tripped and fell. I bent down to help him up.

‘Shh darling, don’t cry. You’ve been such a brave boy.’ I hugged him and kissed his cheek. When I looked up, I could no longer spot the others, but I could see a halo of orange light—a dull glimmer through the mist. I caught sight of a cottage, and near its fence was a woman. How strange she looks with her hair cut short like a man’s. Why had the others not stopped here to ask for help? Hadn’t they seen her?

‘Lydia, where are you,’ I heard Priscilla call out. Clive tugged at my dress wanting me to walk on. I reached for his hand. As I took a step, the woman and the cottage faded from view leaving only the strange glow of the disembodied light. Another step and this, too, disappeared.

Wednesday 18 June 2003

Jenny looked up from her paper. She caught a glimpse of the backs of a family as they moved beyond the range of the streetlight. They were dressed in period costume. She put the

paper down and walked toward the fence, hoping to get a better look.

A dark-haired woman with a small blond boy stepped into the pool of light. Their costumes were realistic, even down to their hair and clothes being bedraggled-looking. They must be rehearsing for Sunday. The boy tripped and fell and began to cry. The woman bent down to comfort him. When she straightened up, she was looking right at her. Jenny smiled and raised her arm to wave but the woman had turned away to attend the child who was pulling at her dress, wanting her to walk on. A few more steps and they had moved beyond the light into the fog.

Jenny stayed where she was, waiting to see if any more of the re-enactment actors appeared. When none came into view, she walked back to her veranda, picked up her coffee cup, and raised it to her lips.

The coffee had gone cold.

THE COLLECTION

MARGARET PEARCE

Mr and Mrs Jenkins were having their first fight. Not that anyone would notice.

Even Mr Jenkins didn't notice. His face was lit with pleasure at giving his beloved wife such a magnificent treat.

'Tickets for the first night of the new musical,' he repeated.

'They would have cost a fortune,' Mrs Jenkins' eyes sparkled with rage as she answered very slowly and carefully.

Mr Jenkins' goofy grin widened even more at the sparkle in Mrs Jenkins' beautiful eyes. This showed she was pleased, proving he had made the right decision.

Mrs Jenkins tried again to rein in her temper and the hot words. She tossed her head and her undisciplined curls flung their rage into the empty uncomprehending air. When would she ever get through to her partner the unpalatable fact about bills needing to be paid first?

'I was going to buy the new DVD of the musical for your collection but thought seeing the actual show would be more exciting for you,' Mr Jenkins said.

'My collection,' Mrs Jenkins repeated.

It had become so hard to keep her precious collection up to date and now this! It had taken tight planning to survive his last impulsive buy of the remote self-cleaning vacuum cleaner when she already had a perfectly good one.

She was the official financial manager of this marriage and the mortgage and the electricity bill were due. Was it worth a reminder of this fact? It would take months before there was any spare money to buy that DVD because of this latest economic disaster. She opened her mouth and took a deep breath to yell rage, disappointment, and a few choice words on his lack of sense, discrimination and general irresponsibility.

‘You work so hard,’ Mr Jenkins got in first. ‘Without your smarts we would never have been able to buy our own home. You are just so careful and so thrifty, and I wanted to give you a nice treat.’

Mrs Jenkins remembered that Mr Jenkins much preferred football, cricket and basketball replays to musical shows. This extravagance was to please her. She gritted her teeth and held on to her temper so tightly she felt her blood pressure rise.

‘However, it will be so very enjoyable and thank you for the thought,’ she choked.

Mr Jenkins looked even more radiant and pleased as he bent down to kiss her. Mrs Jenkins clenched her fist and wished she had something to throw, somewhere, anywhere to release her feelings.

‘Nothing too good for my favourite wife,’ he declared.

‘Your favourite wife is going for a jog, right now,’ Mrs. Jenkins said.

Mr Jenkins looked worried. ‘That walking track is pretty deserted this time of night. I’ll come with you.’

‘No,’ Mrs Jenkins said with more force than she intended. ‘I won’t go the full distance. Relax and watch your football show.’

‘Loverley wife,’ Mr Jenkins said. ‘Do take your phone and I’ll collect you if you don’t want to jog back.’

Mrs Jenkins changed into her shorts and runners, put her phone in her pocket and fled. She took out her frustration and temper on her jogging. Of course she loved the action of stage musicals, but she would have to negotiate paying the electricity bill in instalments. It was incredible that they were both working and having to live so tightly. Maybe it had been a mistake to up the mortgage payments so much, but it meant that the repayments would be a lot lighter when she decided to give up work to have a baby.

She was so proud of her collection of musicals. It was absolutely historical. A matter of updating records and disks as they dated and became obsolete. Her jogging slowed. The light didn’t penetrate under the thicker trees and the track winding through them was much darker.

It was then she was jumped. The sharp edge of something pushed against her throat as she was dragged off the track through the bushes.

‘Move or scream and I cut your throat,’ the hoarse voice whispered.

She was thrown to the ground and his weight was on top of her. She tried to get her knees up to push him off her or kick him. The sharp point dug into her throat. She felt warm blood trickling down her neck. She relaxed her arms out and kept very still, paralysed with fear.

He was muttering as he tried to pull her shorts down with one hand. Something about being an animal and proud of it. The words were louder, interspersed with swear words she didn't understand. All about hating females and taking what he wanted because he was entitled.

He struggled with her tight cotton shorts unaware of the strong hook and eye holding them closed above the zip. The knife moved from her throat to cut her shorts and through her sensible cotton briefs. She stiffened in horror. He was going to rape her and then cut her throat.

The jogging track across the park would be out of hearing of anyone even if or when she screamed. He kneeled over to push a knee between her tightly closed legs.

'And you ***** I'll have your shorts towards my collection,' he grunted. 'Pretty impressive it is.'

Collection! Suddenly the fury and her temper about the waste of money on the musical returned uncontrolled. Her outflung hand closed around a stone. She lifted her arm to hit up with all her strength and temper between his legs.

It must have been a vulnerable spot. She heard the knife drop. He fell beside her writhing, moaning and weeping. She sat up.

'You irresponsible, extravagant, stupid, moronic, self-indulgent halfwit with no sense at all,' she screamed, hitting his head with the stone to emphasise her points. 'When is it is going to occur to you that money is needed for important things like mortgages, the rates, electricity bills, gas bills, phone bills and the new veranda roof? Where do you think money comes from? It does not grow on a tree in the back

yard. It has to be earned, earned, earned and then paid out, out, out, so we can live like human beings.'

She had been hitting the head hard with the stone to emphasise her points when she at last became aware that the head wasn't answering. Wasn't even moaning or crying any more. She stood up. She kicked off her briefs, pulled up her shorts and grabbed for the phone in the pocket to turn the light on to the prostrate figure sprawled on the ground.

She suddenly felt calm and relaxed and not at all upset about the extravagant present Mr Jenkins had given her. After all, she did so love live musicals, and maybe they needed an extravagance now and then to help cope with their thrifty budget.

'Dear me,' Mrs Jenkins said.

The phone light showed a youngish man with an ordinary uninteresting face and a normal short haircut. Beside him was the long very sharp knife. From the hoarse whispered obscenities, she had expected an entirely different sort of face.

The stone she had thudded into his head to get her views across seemed to have done some damage by the way the blood was pouring over the hair and the cuts on his forehead. Then again, if his blood was still flowing, he was still alive. She hadn't murdered him. All she had done was defend herself.

'Dear me,' Mrs Jenkins said again as she pulled her tee shirt down to cover the view left by the lack of briefs through the cut slit in her shorts and rang the police.

The police were very understanding as they checked her neck and the smear of blood still on the knife. The ambulance

guys seemed to think that his survival was doubtful as they rushed him to hospital.

‘No loss if he doesn’t survive,’ the police said.

She was then driven home to her distraught Mr Jenkins. So Mr and Mrs Jenkins were able to attend and enjoy the live musical. They kept on living happily ever after. His opinion of his beloved wife was that she was even more wonderful and courageous than ever.

Of course she never bothered to correct him. Marriage is all about being tolerant of each other’s faults.

THE TROUBLE WITH VEGETABLES ...

JENNY MACAULAY

There was trouble brewing on table 14C as the doors closed for judging.

Mrs Felicity Spindle carried her clipboard to the floral arrangement table 7D with her excited committee of three in tow. Paper rustled as comments and scores were recorded for best composition, best colour-mix, most exotic arrangement and so on. They were unaware of the building tension between the exhibits across the room, the Children's Produce Creatures.

A carrot, pointy end up, rolled its pea-eyes, secured with toothpicks. Its tongue, a slice of crimson beetroot, extended from an upper lip of cucumber rind, and sent a clear message to its competition. This was ignored by the long, slender, sweet potato whose cherry-tomato-eyes wobbled happily upon twisted threads of thin wire. One suddenly fell off and landed with a tiny splat on the white paper below. Unperturbed, the potato balanced proudly on its five pairs of asparagus legs which complemented the row of okra that stood, dinosaur-like and menacingly, along its orange back.

The choko was not pleased to see the calibre of its rivals. Its onion-ring mouth was beginning to sag to one side. Its beady currant pupils, centred on parsnip discs, scowled at the other creatures. It was angrily aware that its own long slices of zucchini tentacles were withering due to the room's lack of adequate air conditioning.

Thick, black felt-pen lines, drawn directly on to the large sheet of white paper, sectioned a rectangular space for each creature, the areas also defined with an identification label. 14C/4 watched through its star-anise eyes as the tomato-splat sent a small red stain into its personal territory. Its fennel-hair furiously quivered then promptly wilted. The bell-pepper nose grew a brighter red and with all its fennel-energy, it spat one of its slices of radish-teeth at the sweet potato in 14C/3. The tooth knocked the front asparagus legs causing the sweet potato to lurch forward, catapulting its remaining eye into 14C/2, rolling the choko off its tentacles and onto its side.

As the judging of the fruit bowls came to an end, one of Mrs Spindle's younger committee members, Tiffany Wisp, spotted the remote for the air conditioner. Thinking she was doing the right thing, she pressed a few buttons. The sudden gust of cold air lifted the white paper on 14C and sent the entire display into a heap on the hall floor. Tiffany was inconsolable and the committee whisked her away for a hot chocolate. Mrs Spindle declared that all the children would be equal winners with each to receive an ice cream voucher in addition to a certificate.

On the back of a ute, amongst the usual debris from a small agricultural show, was a black plastic bag, its contents destined for the compost heap. In the lower-right corner, through a minute tear created with a sawing motion, emerged a piece of radish resembling a tooth. More appeared, chomping

hungrily, strands of beetroot-stained asparagus caught
between them.

The sun set over the horizon.

BARBER SHOP

SHAUN TREFFRY

I've been a decade-long customer at the same barber. Rach's been going for more than 20 years, and the business which bears her surname is still in the same place, same shop front. Originally, she'd been an apprentice with Dick Connelly around the corner with its rows of Tudor shaving mugs and antique razor blades in pride of place in its front windows. When I got my haircut there as a kid, a stick of gum would magically appear, a sleight of hand trick. Now she's running her own barbers with four chairs and a couple of washbasins that are always full.

Her strengths are threefold. One, she's situated near recently constructed WorkSafe and TAC buildings which had a population of tradies who'd honeycombed the sites from the ground up, and who fell in love with her own gift of the tools, quick wit, and small business mindedness. Two, once those buildings were completed, they were filled with workers, managers, accountants, IT consultants, policy advisor and case managers who appreciated Rach's proximity, professionalism, and confidentiality with whoever spilled their guts while in her chair. Whether a famous football wonderkid, local politician, hatted chef, journalistic hack—all are welcome.

Thirdly, her business is strong simply because of word of mouth, particularly amongst those aforementioned giants of

the city. One guy tells another at a golf day barbecue where he got that great haircut, posts it, hashtags it, and there's a new network of clients for a year. From cashed-up bogans to born-again Christians, from newly arrived refugees to old school wharfies, student geeks to jocks, white collar or blue. Just like Yoda bringing balance with the force. All are welcome as long as they're courteous, paying and happy to wait (or not wait if they're not wanted).

I had my buck's party at a barber's back in Abbotsford with cold beers on a summer afternoon, so I appreciate an accommodating place for men to congregate. It's respect for tradition and those who've gone before. It's generations of Italians and Greeks who have taken their trade from ethnic exclusivity in rental backwaters to become part of contemporary high street, hipster inner city and suburban mega shopping centres. It's part male rite of passage, mob hangout and movie set. It's mix of etiquette and butchery as a blade passes your throat, its swirling red and white poles symbolising a mix of blood and bandages from folklore. It's love of loyalty but a need still for transient business. It's nerve wracking financial high wire act, as recessions and viruses come and go. And yet they continue to open and welcome customers with beard trims, crew cuts, fades, flat tops and mid-week specials for pensioners and students, providing not only a physical necessity but also spiritual and psychological counsel.

There are some constant topics of conversation you will hear no matter when you enter Rach's place. A little like the Top 5s in High Fidelity, they are forever in awe of eighties

music, exceptional coffee, Japanese clippers, and toasted sandwiches. And just like High Fidelity, there's a Zen expected of anyone entering, like a monastery where warriors or ninjas need to leave their weapons at the door in order to enter. And its window is a glimpse to life outside like any window. Like the windows in Play School ... what are they going to see today? Car crash? Homeless person? Model photo shoot? Assault victim? Press conference? I know that I, myself, have been seen and assessed by some unknown coolness criteria prior to entering by their all-seeing eyes, because they do it to everyone. I guess that's part of their job—to be judgmental, to be critical, to be vain.

Reliable is the quality Rach is perhaps best known for. Dependable and helpful and tough like the steel she wields in her hands. The first time I got a cut was back in the day she still had the postcards up on the wall behind the register. I'd marvelled at it like a piece of installation art. They'd been given to her by customers travelling the country and the world and been shaped to make a mosaicked map of Australia. From the Harbour Bridge, Broome, Newcastle, Townsville, the Murray River, Falls Creek, Ayres Rock and Canberra, all were represented up there, as were giant prawns, pineapples, and bushrangers. Every truck stop and holiday destination where someone she knew had been and thought to let her know about. They're stored somewhere out back now with the boxes of shampoo and conditioner. There's a jar of lollipops on the counter from which I always grab a handful as I leave. Surprisingly, Rach doesn't have kids herself, but she's adopted

more than enough of her customers to give her a sense of family.

I only remember a few of the names of those that have cut for her over the years. Little Rach, so named so people wouldn't get confused with Big Rach. She's had kids herself now but works part-time when she can. And then there was Charlie, a tattooed English guy who rode a motorbike and always had a Geordie wink and smile. He cut my hair a few times when Rach was on holidays, and we'd talk about the Premier League, Northern Soul and Doc Martens. Oh Charlie ... they daren't speak his name now. A couple of years ago, unannounced, he decided to open his own barbers right around the corner. Apparently, there's no honour amongst thieves or hairdressers. Rach was heartbroken. They'd been friends and workmates for a long time, and though he'd spoken about making the move eventually, it would be with Rach's loving consent. He just up and left one day without warning, opening a lime-green shop along the main street next to the Cash Converters and Vietnamese bakeries. Such was the sense of betrayal, none of them ever spoke to him again. Rach banned all her regulars from ever going there. The only time I'd ever got my haircut elsewhere was during a Christmas when she was closed. Desperate, I tried to find someplace similar. But despite the promises of quality, similarity in music and magazines, it was a disaster. Within a few weeks I was back at Rach's—she took one look at my head and knew I'd been to someone else. She just smirked and nodded knowingly and worked her magic.

Usually it's Tim or Jay, the apprentice, who cut my hair now, not Rach. Surprisingly young for barbers, they look like skaters. Always polite and professional, and happy to chat about football, movies, Netflix, dogs, and my kids. If I'm honest, they often do a better job than Rach—only because she's constantly distracted by the phone, helping less experienced staff, or paying out the last customer as they leave. Isn't there a Seinfeld episode where Jerry has to get his hair cut in secret by the son of an old barber because the old barber does such a bad job? That's me, except that I've got the owner in the same room. I make sure when I book now that it's always with Jay or Tim. As I write this, I know they're probably talking about whether Kayne's sane, why Siri won't answer, the worst mullet they've seen, who serves the best fries on the street, who the police chopper is chasing outside, who got the drunkest at last year's Christmas party, what's the best Michael Jackson wedding song, and how to hook up a caravan or ride a motorbike.

I'm not saying that a barber shop can save the world. Or cure cancer. Or fix the great big dilemmas of our age. And I wouldn't argue that they're worthy of special protection and there are more urgent causes and serious issues out there like homelessness or inequality that deserve special attention. There is a sense of selfish vanity essential to them. But, still, they are important. Like any artistic pursuit they can be creative and there is often aesthetic merit in their interiors, as well as the very styling they provide on the head of each customer. Also, maybe it's because they aren't serious? Sometimes it's simply a place to go and hang out—for a laugh,

to fit in or meet friends, to learn how to groom yourself for public acceptance. For the most part it's a cure for social isolation. A place where you feel good about yourself and the world. A place to see your name written up on a board in chalk where you feel special and human (and don't we all need that). Maybe for some it's where you can fall asleep in a chair with the comforting sound of the races in the background. Or a place to tap your feet and hear Jonny Cash, the Sex Pistols or the Strokes for the first time, because, like pubs, they provide an experience of social connectivity, curiosity, and kinship. Somewhere to go where they know your name when you're hungover on a sunny Saturday with a kebab in your hand and where, for a few hours, you can feel like you're on top of the world. I hope they're always there.

ESCAPE

ANDREW McMILLAN

There was a thunderous explosion. She felt the blast blow her off her feet as her nose, mouth, eyes and ears were covered with thick dust. Then she felt the building collapse around her, but she couldn't see anything. She heard, and will always remember, the terrible screams from her family—especially her children.

She never knew how long it took. It seemed like forever. Her rescuers carried her away and rushed her to a makeshift shelter. There she was cleaned but there were no medicines or bandages available. At least she was alive.

As soon as she was able, her neighbours and friends helped her bury those who had died from the bombs. No one ever saw the plane or drone, or the bombs falling. It didn't matter whether it was the government or rebels. It had happened.

Her home was destroyed. Her husband and most of her family had been killed. For years there had been no school for her children and all they had known was the war with its terrible hardships—especially lack of food, safe water to drink, sanitation, and clothing. Everything was now hers. This was her home. These neighbours were friends. They shared the same language and customs. To leave seemed unthinkable. Yet she knew from stories that others had left to start a new life for their children's sake.

The choice was hers. Try to escape? She may be killed along with her remaining son and daughter. But to stay in a bombed outbuilding? At least escape offered some brighter hope for her children.

Somehow, they survived as they bolted through the edge of the city to the devastated countryside. By joining others, they eventually came to a place where large numbers of escapees were gathered. Over the months the family learnt to adapt to life as refugees in a land bordering their own. At least the refugee camp had a common language and many of the usual customs were observed. The children benefitted from regular food, and some schooling. At least there was no war here.

But there was a darker side to life in the camp. Men formed gangs. Some gangs were trying to protect each other with their families and friends. But there were gangs of violent men who extorted food, rations, and necessities like blankets or rare luxuries like a chair or table. Eventually, one gang used her tent to hide stuff from the camp authorities. In return they let her get regular food and water for her children. How could she object?

Hope was in everybody's thoughts as stories spread of those who had travelled further and reached permanent safety.

Together with their new friends, the family walked for many days. During the journey the gang continued to protect her family on condition she agreed to comply with certain matters if officials started questioning her at border crossings. She felt trapped. She felt that she could not say no to their requests.

One day they arrived at the seashore. Like her companions, most had never even seen a lake. The sea seemed strange and fearful. But they took courage from all the others who had gone before. A few days later a boat was crammed full, and many were left behind.

The sea only had small waves and the weather was fine, so they felt safe enough for the journey ahead, but after the boat was out of sight of land, they became scared. Then the wind grew stronger, dark clouds formed overhead, and the boat heaved from wave to wave. A storm engulfed the boat, and everyone desperately clung to whatever they could.

The boat pitched and rolled, sometimes so violently that a few were washed overboard never to be seen again. But hope became stronger when they glimpsed a foreign coastline gradually getting nearer.

Then it happened. A huge wave washed over the boat, and it overturned and sank. The mother cried out for her children, but the storm swallowed her voice. Drifting with the waves she reached a beach and was rescued by friendly people who spoke a different language. She made herself understood and her rescuers indicated that many had been saved including children. She would need to wait until officials had taken names of survivors at the different rescue sites.

She hoped her children had safely reached the shore and were being cared for elsewhere. The survivors were taken to a temporary shelter. After some days they were offered transport to a distant camp. Nearly everyone she knew accepted the offer.

This tore at her emotions as she felt alone in a strange land. But she was relieved that the gang also moved on. She knew she was mixed up emotionally. The mother was desperate for her children and wanted to stay and fight to find her son and daughter. To leave seemed like abandoning them. She was distraught. She cared nothing for this foreign land with its strange language, customs, and rules.

After some time, she learnt that a few children had been rescued by boats and taken to a distant town. But officials and helpful strangers knew nothing about the names of her son and daughter.

If she went to a new place and got established, she might be able to find and have her children join her, but the process might take months, or even years. On the other hand, if she stayed where she was maybe officials could be convinced to search for her children, but this process could take a long time with bureaucratic wrangling. After some weeks of pleading, she learnt her children were alive.

Soon after the gang had moved on, a young man with no family made friends with her. He moved in and they shared resources but mostly it was her providing for him. To her horror he would threaten her and sometimes destroy her belongings. Eventually the day came when she found the courage to face him and told him to move out. After a violent argument he left.

Sometime later, she joined a friend and went to a prayer gathering. She heard someone speak who was trying to encourage them all. He said that parents must not neglect themselves. If they were to take care of themselves, they will

be better able to care of their children. He reminded them that a dead parent is no use to their family. Later as she was reflecting on his words, she realised that everybody is responsible for their own life and decisions, and that no one can live anyone else's life—even for children.

More bus loads left, and the young thug returned, saying he would be different this time. Somehow the mother felt she could not say no to anyone in need and took him in again. She knew people made mistakes and thought he deserved a second chance, but he hadn't changed.

An interpreter spent some time with her and explained that international children's agencies would never allow her children to join her in her present situation. She exploded in anger and frustration at all those around her. Now she was angry with authorities who refused her access to her children.

Many of her friends moved on and she became more isolated. Despite the isolation the mother felt encouraged when officials set up a system for the children to talk occasionally with her. Feeling she was making progress, the mother refused to move from the temporary camp, demanding to be reunited with her children. She became depressed and she missed her children. Thoughts of them occupied her waking moments and her sleepless nights, but she lived in hope.

Days became weeks, weeks became months, and one year was moving towards another. The young thug continued to take advantage of the good nature of the caring and compassionate, yet increasingly despondent mother. And all

this time she was aware that her children were growing up away from her.

MEMOIR

WAITING FOR THE LIGHT

WENDY RATAWA

By day I use an A3 sketchbook for colour, texture, contours of a view from Room 22. The Moreton Bay fig is magnificent by day, a grey shroud by night. No pigeons call from the Moreton Bay, no trucks or cars rattle by.

‘Stop all the clocks,’ I remember the poem.

The days are filled with interviews, nurses mark their charts, doing obs, blood pressure, temperature, bladder. The physios guide and encourage us with red-tagged sturdy metal frames.

A rainbow of thirteen tablets were given last night, placed in a throwaway cup: four opiates (not all at once)—Tramadol, Endone, Valium and one with an unpronounceable name.

In the darkness is the complaint, ‘Why me?’ One in a thousand. A slipped retractor crushed a nerve, the prognosis a question. I am angry at their mistake, their seesaw of contradictions, the *pas de deux* of explanations. I have never needed rehab before at the Grace McKellar Centre.

The hands of the clock barely move as I wait for the morning light. The leg splint is heavy, wrapped tight, a bulky pillow is between my knees, the bed hard, narrow, unsafe.

A sudden shout shatters the night. A patient has fallen from bed. The nurse rushes to his distress, aware of repercussions and blame. I tighten my hands on my bed.

When I buzz for the night nurse she says 'I have eight other patients,' cranky with my insistent bladder, but one nurse is different, motherly comforting, tender.

When my buzzer won't light up, perhaps no longer attached, I awaken my Indian roommate, 'Please press your buzzer for me.' We humans do need one another.

A Punjabi woman shares my room; like me, she has arpeggios of pain. By day she plays Sikh prayer chants on her phone and says the fig tree speaks to her of love and care.

I guess the time on the clock: only five? A nurse takes blood sugar, says 'You need sustenance dear.' She brings orange juice, cheese, biscuits. I am grateful for small mercies.

I recall my son's calm advice, 'Learn from all experiences.'

But I lament, 'I should be walking, able to climb the You Yangs, not have a buzzing electric foot!'

Yes, we can learn something; I am astonished by the grace of a woman with an amputation, who smiles and has no complaint, and an artist friend who broke her hip. Some psalms like me are a rant of negatives. Even though friends and family had prayed for a good outcome but ... I ask if God is watching? I must trust as I wait for the morning light.

FIGS FOR AESOP

SHAUN TREFFRY

An Olive-tree taunted a Fig-tree with the loss of her leaves at a certain season of the year. 'You,' she said, 'lose your leaves every autumn, and are bare till the spring: whereas I, as you see, remain green and flourishing all the year round.' Soon afterwards there came a heavy fall of snow, which settled on the leaves of the Olive so that she bent and broke under the weight; but the flakes fell harmlessly through the bare branches of the Fig, which survived to bear many another crop.

Aesop Fable

In the nineties, there are figs bursting with seeds on the fence of my house in Heidelberg. Myna birds and ants feast on their sweetness. I have to sweep their remnants away with a broom and hose because they stick to the concrete like toffee. I wrap the ones that are whole enough in prosciutto, stuff with goat cheese and drizzle with balsamic vinegar to eat with sourdough bread. They have a sensual quality to them and remind me of the last days of summer. I also use them on pizzas for loved ones or at barbecues where I pile them artistically on plates imagining I'm Greek from an archipelago island. It's the one and only time I actually have a tree, so I make the most of them and freeze any excess fruit. In winter, when the tree is bare, I walk to Toscana's of Kew and pay a fortune to enjoy their bounty with roast pork and crackling.

At the beginning of the new millennium, I travel to a drought-ravaged Daylesford to marry a beautiful, dappled girl. We feast on a fig entrée at the wedding. It is a Labour Day weekend in March; friends from both sides of the Yarra join us as does her family from Gosford. It's an Indian Summer. I smile all day without stopping, without care. There's a jazz trio in the courtyard playing a medley of Miles Davis and The Style Council, and children running barefoot on the grass. Following our vows, we depart to a local art deco hotel with views of the Springs and a lavender farm to celebrate. I give a very short speech amongst the lengthier ones by my best man, father and father-in-law.

In the two thousand and tens, I'm in my hometown of Geelong and there's a bitumen carpark next to a fruit and vegetable shop where I discover a tree with overhanging figs that I can't quite reach without standing on the car. They are bursting like jammy grenades, and sparrows take the seeds to a nest they have built in the backyard of an old Italian couple next door who are arguing about the restrictions and how much they should water their vegetable garden. Again, it's hot and the soles of my shoes burn on the car's bonnet as I stand and stretch like a cat burglar to grab handfuls of the figs which leave my hands sticky with their juice. I take them home to a big house with slanted, red walls where I live after separating from the dappled girl. Having cleaned the fruit, I present them to my young children who eat them with scoops of vanilla ice cream and blood orange gelato. Savouring them

together as a family, all smiles on the bench where we usually eat Sushi or sausage rolls, the figs get stuck in our teeth while we watch Eurovision late into the night. This is a house that I don't own but have tried to make a home with bean bags, Dora sheets, Banksy prints, wind chimes, water pistols, backyard summer tents and basil in terracotta pots. Surrounded by shelves of books, all that's missing is a fig tree and my heart.

Months later I travel to New York for a once-in-a-lifetime trip. At a stadium-sized deli and food market, I'm amazed to find figs just like those at home, stacked on ice to keep them fresh from the humidity that is closing in on the metropolis. I buy two punnets and some oysters, bagels, and an iced coffee from a Melbourne barista and walk to Washington Square where I watch buskers, actors and the homeless shout amongst themselves. Walking back to my hotel room afterwards amongst the art deco streets of SoHo, I look for a familiar face seeing only strangers. But there's music to be found here and subways pregnant with heat, and water towers in the skyline and dancing in every shape and form. And the sheer creative weight of millions of minds surround me as I pass Hell's Kitchen bars and then John Lennon's grave that shines like a beacon in Central Park. It's as if the city is a blank canvas upon which I'm imprinting my DNA amongst all the other souls who surround me. There's still Chinatown to visit, Brooklyn and Little Italy, Stanton Island, Broadway and Times Square,

the Statue of Liberty and the haunting Two Towers memorial. So many burroughs ... so little time.

I'm not expecting a wake-up call, but the phone rings at 9:00 am New York time the next morning. It's a call from Australia—Frida. She purrs Good Morning Love through the phone from a Melbourne midnight in her accented voice. I'm still dripping wet, having returned from an early morning swim at the rooftop pool where I felt like Icarus or Spiderman so high amongst the skyscrapers I was. It's a complete surprise to me and she can tell I'm taken aback which always pleases her. We've been lovers for a few years now after meeting at work, even though she's married, which of course brings pangs of guilt and desire in equal measure. Sometimes it's hard to take but we believe at this point that a stolen little of each other is better than a lot. In many ways my journey is hers, my travels hers. Symbiotic and shared. I share stories with her over the phone about the flights, the weather, the people both local and tourists. I tell how one of my shopping bags was broken at the bottom and my purchases had fallen out on my way back to the hotel and I'd left clothes strewn behind me for miles like a modern-day Hansel. Kindly the store allowed me to pick new clothes after I was able to produce the receipts and the culprit of a bag in person. She teases me about this and about the other women I could meet but won't.

I visit art galleries both modern and ancient, bookshops not as good as Readings, cafes with ice cream not as good as Lygon Street, cinemas not as good as the Nova, gardens not as good as the Fitzroy Gardens during the mornings, then have a siesta in the afternoons where I listen to completely

foreign yet utterly familiar sounds outside my window. Urban playgrounds full of joyful screams as water hydrants launch into the air like magic ribbons. In the evening I head out and follow my nose and find an Aesop store just like at home buried like a casbah perfumer in a SoHo street where I'm welcomed like a long-lost family member. I buy some fig scented massage oil for Frida and sunscreen for myself. I'm the only customer in the place but don't feel awkward. There's music playing from a speaker somewhere which I think is Air or Phoenix—something French sounding that oozes into my ears like smoke. A striking red headed assistant, native New Yorker, lithe as a ballerina, tells me they've only been open a few weeks and that business is steadily growing. We chat about Australia which she'd like to travel to once she's saved enough. I leave the store feeling connected and rejuvenated, my purchases wrapped in a small cloth bag tied at one end.

Walking again in the warm evening air I randomly find a baseball diamond filled with hipsters dressed in ye olde uniforms playing an old version of the game. They ask me to join them which I do. There's a large knobbled fig tree in one of the field's corners. I play second base from which I can't do much harm. The game ebbs and flows with loud shouts from the players and the umpire behind the plate who is also kitted out in vintage gear. It's obviously a passionate pastime and taken seriously enough to have two full teams—the Howlin' Wolves and the Red Sox Raccoons. When the game finishes they share jugs of beer and cider with me which I enjoy as much as a local. They say that as an Australian I should be able to drink them under the table. Covered in grass stains,

happy for the exertion and the luck of having found them, I return to the hotel where I sleep restfully.

And then, home again in Australia, I can't find figs anywhere, as if they're a dream. Until Frida arrives at my doorstep. She presents them to me formally wrapped in a basket with tears in her eyes and says, 'these are for you'. We eat them on my deck on a sunny winter morning with thick Greek coffee and Turkish delight. Still jetlagged, I unwrap the massage oil that was a gift and rub some on her small hands. We listen to *The Jezebels*, a favourite of ours—such tragically beautiful music, whose lyrics we quote to one another like teenagers. Kissing between bites of food, feeding each other the figs, feeling so alive in the trickles of light. Such a simple gift from a person who is yet to break my heart. But at this moment we bask still tender with blooms of love.

Finally, in the pandemic, with no Frida and no dappled girl, I have to visit a dentist—mask-covered—to have some teeth removed. I've completely forgotten about figs. A receptionist who I think has travelled from the Middle East or Eurasia takes my details down and while doing so I spy a plate of figs on her desk. 'Wow ... figs!' I say. She looks up at me with a pristine, cheeky smile and tells me to help myself. Then, announcing that they have a tree outside, she heads out back and returns with a calico bag full of fresh fruit which she gives me. The beauty of such hospitality brings tears to my eyes.

REMOTE REFLECTIONS

JEAN PEARCE

Zoom 2021

I put on my face mask, it drags on my ears, and I lose some peripheral vision. I totter on the top of the stairs on my way to class and imagine missing a step, but I don't. In my English class a girl, who I will name Iba, wears a black headscarf. In summer she wears long sleeves and sometimes leggings. This is quite different from wearing a mask, but now I wonder how she feels. Iba covers part of her head and limbs and now her face and nose. The weight of material must be uncomfortable. When I wear a mask, I feel muffled. I am muffled.

Sometimes I feel I am in a kind of incognito state, hiding behind the mask and anonymous. I dislike the constriction of material on my face when I speak but enjoy the feeling of pulling off my mask and feeling the fresh air or dragging the mask down, so it sits under my chin. As I wander around the corridors at school during yard duty, I pass the fashion statement masks, the surgical masks, the home-made floral masks, and the deep-sea diver masks with air holes. How life has changed.

In an earlier lockdown I met Iba in an English class on Zoom. She arrived early and we talked. She did not want the camera on, but I insisted. Like many of the students I meet online she was sitting on her bed. Usually, students have an excuse not

to put on their camera, so I talk to the pictures or icons they put up instead. On this day, before anyone else had arrived, I saw Iba's wave of brown hair for the first time. Later she disappeared to put on a soft pink scarf which was different from the navy scarf she wears to school.

During a more recent lockdown we read *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, about the lives of American GIs during the war in Vietnam. On this day, everyone talked about the long-standing war in Afghanistan and what they felt about the resurging conflict after the withdrawal of American troops. They were pessimistic about the future.

The comment of a Hazara student was 'same old' and others, 'we've seen this before'.

On this day I was drinking green tea in a cup, something I would not be allowed to do while teaching in class at school. One of the students asked what I was drinking and at this stage they put on their cameras and showed me that they were all also drinking green tea, further, they said, that is what people drink in Afghanistan. We decided to drink green tea together one day in class when we returned to school although all agreed it would have to be COVID safe.

The week earlier we were reading *Black Diggers*, a play about the experiences of indigenous soldiers. The students, all refugees, on the whole did not know their birth dates and had been given a birth date such as the first of January or the 30 June to fill in documents and passports before coming to Australia. Their experiences were like the stories of indigenous

soldiers in World War 1. In the play, taken from factual accounts, the indigenous volunteers fabricated their birth dates to be accepted into the armed forces.

I had never experienced war personally and what I am experiencing with COVID is the closest thing to war I have known. COVID restrictions have at times taken away my rights and choices. We are united against the enemy, COVID. To go into isolation for two weeks and not leave the house is like imprisonment, solitary confinement. Nothing has prepared us for this sort of restriction. The reactions of young people and their struggles with mental health remind me of the lives of young refugees in detention, and of the indigenous children who are incarcerated.

It was the day before the first lockdown last year when I realised, I was at risk personally from the virus. Why this finally dawned on me I have no idea. I couldn't continue my foolhardy approach and pretend to myself I was invulnerable to the contagion. I decided to wear a mask at school before they were officially enforced. I was self-conscious of the young teachers in my office who criticised the necessity of wearing face masks. A young woman, who I will name Ella, sat on my chair at my work desk. Somehow, I was affronted that she should be in my space at this time although she may well have been oblivious of my perceived response to this intrusion. It seemed at that time to be an act of indifference. I put on my mask and went to work in the library, watching the people walking along the corridor through the glass window. There

was something surreal about the way our lives were shifting. The next day everyone had to wear a mask at school and Ella avowed their necessity. On reflection I see we have all felt a resistance at times to the incursion on our liberty and the denial is a kind of grief where we cannot fully yet accept what has happened. Even when we first heard about the virus in China, we watched it unfold as if it would not impact us.

In lockdown when I was working at home after school I would put on my mask and walk on the back beach with the wind blowing off Antarctica and feel the sharp spit of sand against my cheeks. It felt almost insane to walk with the cold wind through my hair and to furtively cover my face with my mask when I met another walker. At other times when we walk with the dogs around the streets at evening and see no one, my mask keeps me warm. Now I wonder if we will ever feel safe without masks. It is too early to think that all these changes are permanent.

How quickly we shift.

At work, we all took off our masks after early lockdowns but before what has now been a series of lockdowns. A few people at that time left them on. I realised what they had in common was they had all lost a parent in tragic circumstances, some more recently. It stood out that only a few people wore a mask when you didn't have to, but also, this perhaps reflected their insight into what is happening, the randomness

of COVID and of the unexpected and premature deaths that we were only just beginning to really learn about.

Since the last lockdown we are wearing our masks again. Last week in year 7 English we talked about poetry, and we read a poem called *The Highway Man* which I read in primary school. I asked a few students to read the poem out loud, but I could not hear what they were saying behind their masks. There is one boy, who I will call Haider, who tears his mask, pulls off the elastic and sticks his nose through the hole. He always asks to go and get another mask. I knew he made up stories and usually I said no that he cannot go and get another mask from the office. He usually has an extra mask in his pocket and this day was no exception.

For a long time, Australia resisted enforcing the wearing of masks.

Does the mask represent a loss of freedom?

Identity?

Or is it now just an extension of ourselves?

A new expression of freedom in a different way?

It is too early to say.

SAYING GOODBYE TO WALKS AROUND THE LAKE

JO CURTAIN

There are 35 million people who surf and 1.7 million are Australian, you said. Does that include a person who owns one or more surfboards but never paddles out?

We shed memories throughout our lives to make room for new memories. Sometimes we can lose whole childhoods. The recall of memories is a funny business—you need to be quick to catch them as they flit back and forth in small clumps. We have so many shared memories, so many stories collected over the years—yet it was the small and seemingly inconsequential I recalled.

Husband is fortyish, sun-given freckles have made their mark, his broad, strong shoulders and chest, solid hips and thighs have been shaped over time by recurrent paddling, crouching and carving up the surf. The ocean is the most peaceful place he knows. I've read that some surfers undergo dissociative states while surfing, comparable to those experienced by those who have practised meditation for many years. I contemplate the thought of surfing as a form of meditation.

We moved from the stupid city seven years ago, unable to bear another weekend walking around the lake. We found a

part of the country where the coastline had been crafted by the Great Southern Ocean. The packing was ambitious, we packed for weeks and weeks, and on the last day, we said goodbye to the lake. We took separate cars—in mine came our two pre-teens and one baby; and in his, four cats. Our family was larger than the average Australian family.

We did not understand where we were going when we drove the twelve hours to the beach. We discovered it was more beautiful than any coastline we'd ever seen. I fell in love with the mellow golden hues of the cliffs. I wanted to cry fearing the moment would not last. I learnt my husband was fearless about the weather. He surfed the point come rain, come wind, come sleet. He had wetsuits for all conditions—for the coldest waters. Also, booties, gloves and hood.

On our evening walks telescopes were in every window. We always wanted a telescope; it was stupid to have one in the city but we bought it anyway. We sold it in our 'moving' sale. Later, when all three girls were in bed we stepped out onto the balcony and looked up to see the most stars I'd ever seen. I wore his warm coat with the several secret pockets to keep both our hands warm from the biting cold.

We were curious about the owls. Owls were prevalent in Torquay, not the moving kind, but the fake plastic life-like owls sold at Bunnings. We welcomed our first 'guests'—a pair of little birds who made their nest under our balcony. They are still there.

The first year I stayed home with baby-girl and worked irregular night shifts for a crisis centre while my husband did the bleak, soul-crushing Melbourne commute for two years.

Months before moving we'd met an old man walking his dog along Fisherman's Beach. He sold the idea of living here to both of us. At the time we didn't anticipate the hours of commuting and its impact. When you're in the middle of something unbearable, you think the mental anguish you're experiencing will be permanent, unable to comprehend that for most of us it is only temporary.

When he left for work, baby-girl and I went to the beach. I'd read an article about the calming effects of water and made a pact to see the ocean every day, but that ended when I got a new job case managing in Geelong. It was working with people, something I enjoyed ... and was only mildly soul-crushing. My husband got a new job—it was better paid, and it was working from home. We rejoiced.

Today. Today is a workday but my husband is as far away from work as one can get. Reclined on the spare bed, I watch him read the waves on the camera. His green eyes flicker knowingly; he has been here before and realises—realises unequivocally deep in his heart, deep as it gets for understanding something: that if he misses his window of opportunity, he will miss his chance for a morning surf.

A man roamed the world for a decade photographing and surfing destinations from South Africa to Bali to Hawaii, seeking the perfect wave. He wrote a book and we have it in our bookcase. He would not be bothered with 'windows of opportunity'—he had time on his side. I imagined what it would be like to wake up in Byron Bay and fall asleep in

Arugam Bay. But that was as far it went. We have three children and four cats.

The mother cat passed away. The following year her three sons died. My husband said that can happen with cats. We bought a black Labrador. We never had mice; we'd had four cats. The year the three boys died we had an incursion from within. Mice cavorted openly in the lounge room in front of the television. They were fearless—neither lights nor screams deterred them. Puppy ignored them. My husband discovered it was peanut butter they desired, not cheese.

I look at the camera over his shoulder. I know he longs to be out there, to crank it off the lip of a wave and hang ten with the fellas, but he waits. He is well versed in the art of waiting. He's been waiting all his life for things to happen. He waits for the tide to turn. For the moment the wave slowly peels along the reef. He waits for the next season release of *The Mandalorian*. But the longest wait yet is for his father to acknowledge him.

We buy a telescope. My husband shows our youngest daughter how to use it. She gets up close to the moon and sees her first cluster of stars. It makes her smile.

The waiting is over. It's time. He sticks his feet into the black neoprene suit and begins to inch it over his body. There is a pause and I think, does he wonder, does he think it is worth going out in the cold. Then he is gone.

OLIVE GROVES AND WILD CYCLAMEN

ROBIN MATHER

Some people give booties as baby presents but one friend gave me a book: Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*, the first time I'd read about Corfu and pink houses. Our baby girl had just arrived, two years after our first-born son.

A year later it was our little girl's first birthday. Her father, admitted to hospital a few days earlier, was not celebrating with us. His diabetes was brittle, out of control, and his eyesight was deteriorating rapidly. I had left the party to keep an appointment with his doctor. Naively, I had no premonition of the disastrous news he would give me. 'Your husband's kidneys are in the same failing state as his eyes. He has only a few years to live.' In the late 1960s there was no medical solution to this problem. I went home to the party and sang 'Happy Birthday'.

We sold the business the following year and bought a ramshackle old holiday house on the river at Barwon Heads. It had a chip bath heater and a Coolgardie safe. We renovated—and, optimistically, had another baby boy.

Two years later, July 1972, it was mid-winter in Barwon Heads, grey, damp and dismal, just six months since my too young husband had died after his struggle with blindness and diabetes. Our children were now two, four and six, the eldest in Grade 1, already a good reader, a gentle little girl in the middle, the youngest with cystic fibrosis, a happy little boy

who was meeting all those important growing milestones as his treatment became routine. But what to do next?

Was that winter any drearier than usual?

My thinking time was under the shower, blissful, extravagant streams of water from the old-fashioned, generous, full-blown rose, before the day really started, practicing mindfulness I suppose—though I don't think that was even a word then. On one of those bleak, wintry mornings, under that mind-freeing shower, came the irresistible thought—I would pack up the children and go to Corfu like Mrs Durrell.

Mrs Durrell was the English lady who packed up her three children and went to the Greek island of Corfu after her husband died. Her son Gerald had written about the family move with his widowed mother and older sister and brother in the book I'd read a couple of years earlier, *My Family and Other Animals*. In spite of the amusing foibles of his family, it seems he had an idyllic boyhood. They lived in a pink house with a constant stream of strange animals and people; the most helpful, a man named Spiro.

I thought if Mrs Durrell could do it, maybe I could too. Could such an impossible idea be possible? How could I make such a ridiculous idea happen? How would I find a Spiro to help me? Not quite as brave as Mrs Durrell, I decided I would have to find somewhere to live on Corfu before we left home.

The rest was serendipity. A travel agent had written a newspaper article about the Greek islands; places to visit and places to stay. I contacted them. Could they find me somewhere to rent in Corfu? It wasn't going to be easy, they

said, to find something that had the necessities and where the roof didn't leak. But eventually there it was, brand new, waiting for me. 'The Pink House, Benitses, Corfu.' How could I not go? A pink house like Mrs Durrell's. Now all I needed was a Spiro.

Many lists later we were on our way.

Everyone was vaccinated, immunised, and photographed for passports. Traveller's cheques were safely tucked away, the house packed up and put on the market, my V8 HQ blue and white Premier Holden was sold for ready cash, correspondence school and CF medical needs sorted, airline tickets in my bag.

'How would the agent know us?' I wondered, as we collected our luggage at the Corfu airport. Then right beside me I heard my name spoken in a very English, English accent. Among the Greek arrivals on the flight from Athens that October evening, I suppose we were not inconspicuous—a thirty-something foreign mother with three small children.

Our agent's name was Spiro, of course, after Corfu's patron saint, St Spiridion. He found us a taxi and off we set for our Pink House in the fishing village of Benitses, a few miles south of Corfu town.

The landlord and his wife who, like Spiro, spoke English without any sign of a Greek accent, had everything ready for us: beds made, open fire with logs of olive wood, and in every room, vases of the tiny cyclamen that grow wild in the undergrowth of the olive groves.

On that first morning in Corfu, a Sunday, we looked out over cypress and olive trees to the blue, blue Ionian Sea, never

doubting that this was the right place. We answered a surprising knock on the door to find Assimina, a housekeeping treasure who came included in the rent, apparently even on Sundays. Her name means 'silver'. To me she was pure gold. This little bandy-legged Greek grandmother spoke not one word of English and we spoke not one word of Greek. She immediately fell in love with my fair-haired toddler, so language was never a problem.

The landlord introduced us to his tall, dark-eyed, dark-haired bachelor brother. Educated in England, Stephen spoke with a charming, deep, perfect English accent. He brought a load of wood the next morning and came back later with sweets for the family. He called me 'Mummy' and took on the role of carer and mentor.

On our first shopping trip into Corfu town, guided by newfound friend Stephen, we bought an eggbeater, a toasting fork, plastic plates, cups and glasses (to save the breakages on the unsympathetic hard surfaces of marble, tiles and concrete), plus fresh meat, fruit and vegetables not available in the small grocery store in Benitses. Buying meat was at first a matter of pure guesswork. Long, slow cooking usually worked if I was unsure of the cut. As my very elementary knowledge of the Greek language improved, I was able to ask for things such as lamb chops and was not quite so dependent on either pointing or buying a chicken.

When shopping for groceries, one always had to remember that Corfu was an island and sometimes things were in short supply until the next boat arrived. The word would go around to those of us who were English-speaking that cornflakes or

toilet rolls were in short supply (important even before Covid19). To find some foods that were vaguely familiar, I chose some canned varieties; we had canned Quaker oats from Holland and canned Danish bacon.

Fruit and vegetables in Corfu were generally available only in their natural seasons, mostly from local peasant market gardens; very little was imported. In the winter we were given more citrus fruit than we could eat, and in summer, no oranges, but mouth-watering peaches, melons and grapes. We had strawberry-flavoured grapes growing over our balcony. Local cooks used weeds such as dandelions as a green vegetable, served with lemon and olive oil and quite delicious. Wild herbs were free for the picking and our roast chickens were always flavoured with wild sage, thyme and rosemary.

Stephen took us to San Stefano, the family home since 1782, almost unchanged after nearly two hundred years, pink, built into the side of the mountain with retaining walls covered in vines and wisteria. In the drawing room, generations of his ancestors glared down, all male. His mother's sitting room had a piano, a Venetian hall stand and silver wick lamp with a snuffer and little silver scissors to cut the wick. All were still in use in this vintage house without electricity. The kitchen had its original stone floor, a wood stove and an old baker's oven. Shining copper pots, long-handled coffee pots and chafing dishes hung above the scrubbed wooden work bench. The only concession to progress was a PortaGas stove. From the balcony, the view down the mountain to the sea looked over their chapel and bell tower. The Greek Orthodox priest came once a month

and was paid in home-grown olive oil, eight gallons per year. Servants' quarters for maids, gardeners and farm hands were at the back of the house. There was employment for a collection of local workers, farming in the old traditional peasant fashion. By our standards more like a hobby farm, San Stefano had two cows, two goats, fifteen sheep, two Great Danes and eight pups, one mongrel, one Red Setter, twenty cats, one canary, two budgies, one donkey, plus olive groves and an orchard with oranges, grapefruit, lemons, mandarins and cumquats.

San Stefano and Corfu was another world.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

DAVID BRIDGE

I turned on the car radio and sang along with the Beatles' tracks celebrating *Sergeant Peppers'* 50th. As 'A Day in The Life' played, I gave the chorus my all: 'I heard the news today oh boy.' It chimed with my mood. I'd become more philosophical in later life as the loss of friends and family emphasised the contrasts of living more starkly. The daily news headlines conspired to underline the uncertainties of existence.

The digital clock on the dash warned me it was close to my appointment time. Could I sneak a call on my mobile while the traffic crawled? Reluctantly, my caution overrode expediency. I partly envied the driver opposite me with his hand to his ear; partly I held him in contempt. Concentrating on the task in hand, I searched for the nearest parking space. Perhaps I should have accepted my wife's offer to drive me, but it had seemed selfish and unnecessary. The ultrasound was merely a precaution, something to put my mind at rest given my mother's medical history.

I squeezed apologetically into the waiting room nearly ten minutes late to discover that procedures were running forty-five minutes behind schedule. Honour even. Scanning the dog-eared magazines on offer—most were *National Geographic*—I selected an edition with pictures from the Hubble Telescope accompanying an article explaining Big

Bang Theory. I admired the images—I'd spend hours in the dark with my SLR trying to get decent pictures of the night sky with mixed results—and tried to come to terms with a theory which predicated the existence of everything on a miniscule quantity of unknown matter being blown apart some twenty billion years ago. If that was the best that science could come up with then it was no wonder that religions were still in with a fighting chance.

As I prepared for the examination, my thoughts moved rapidly from an expanding universe to an expanding midriff. As if I didn't feel self-conscious enough under the gaze of the young woman conducting the exam, I could hear my digestive tract calling unwanted attention to itself. I'd been disciplined in following the instructions about fasting; I didn't want to find that the results were inconclusive. A wonderful organism, the human body: chemical factory, pipes, pumps and valves, mechanical structures, electrical wiring, all overseen by a supercomputer like no other. Perhaps not surprising it broke down, but it wasn't as if you could sue the manufacturer if it happened. So many lives, so many variables—understandable that science still had a long way to go to in catching malfunctions early enough. The Tattslotto of Life had been going on for eons, leading to billions of beings with their own unique DNA. Hopefully, the odds of a negative, nothing abnormal, result today weren't as high as a first division win.

As I wiped the last of the gel off and began to re-dress, I felt relief that the initial response of the sonographer was that there was nothing obvious. I remembered the shopping list in my pocket; something more mundane felt suddenly attractive.

The smells from the sausage sizzle outside the supermarket were a temptation too far, particularly since I reckoned it was more than usual time between meals. After this morning's exercise, the irony of gulping down an unknown fatty meat mix inside a slice of white bread with sugar loaded ketchup didn't escape me, but I reckoned it was at a lower level of culpability than the patients on mobile drips, and even a group of nurses, puffing cigarettes outside the hospital entrance. My father had smoked until my forties, and I remembered being fascinated with the cottage-shaped ash tray from which smoke merged through the chimney. Hell, I'd even bought Dad smokes for birthdays. Yet, thankfully, I'd never done anything myself but dabble with the odd cigarette. Maybe it was lucky that the sixties had seen more debate about research findings; yet, another half century and people were still getting hooked despite all the new knowledge and health education. Perhaps, one day, there'd be a chart for psych students to accurately predict self-destructive behaviour, but I had strong doubts.

In the meantime, businesses were adept enough at manipulating behaviour to their advantage. The egg counter, my first port of call, was a moral quagmire: 'cage eggs', 'barn laid', 'free range' laid out a spectrum of animal exploitation where the buyer could pay increasing amounts to lessen guilt. It was an approach gaining ground in so many spheres, some more annoying than others. Like buying airline tickets and the possibility of offsetting your 'carbon footprint'. I negotiated the 'organic' vegetables and settled on a bag of cosmetically disadvantaged but bargain priced peppers. My conscience and

my wallet felt justified, but almost balked at putting my purchases into yet another plastic bag, having forgotten the reusable one in my car boot. Time to stop philosophising and have that glass of wine, even though the news headlines said it was no longer considered beneficial to my heart. Something to ponder another day.

THE BANK AND PADDY RYAN

ENA ROACH

How exciting! We're going into 'The Bank.'

Our Dad worked at the Head Office of the State Savings Bank of Victoria. It was a big adventure each time Mum took us in to 'town' to see him.

The first time was the most exciting of all. It was 1942. I was six and my little sister, Jan, was just two. Mum made sure we looked our best so that Dad would be proud of us. She scrubbed our faces, ironed our dresses meticulously, polished our black patent-leather shoes and curled my hair. Our hair was fair and fine and quite straight. Mum wished we had a mop of curls like Shirley Temple, so she rubbed stuff called *Curly Pet* into our hair each night. It didn't work! Mum made us eat all our crusts. She was convinced that crusts helped to make hair curly. They didn't!

So out came the curling tongs—for *me*. Jan was too young, so she escaped. Mum held the tongs under the flame of the gas stove, then wound them around strands of my hair. Result? Grizzles, protests, a few curls, burned ear tips, and the stink of singed locks.

Mum was wearing her navy blue 'costume', saved for special occasions. She wore high-heeled shoes, gloves, and carried a smart handbag. Our Mum was small and neat.

Time to go. Mum was wheeling Jan in her pusher, and I was trotting beside them. We walked from our home to catch

the tram near the Burwood Terminus, which was at Warrigal Road in those days. We got off at Batman Avenue and walked up to Elizabeth Street and into the Bank.

Wow! The room was *huge*. It was called the Banking Chamber. The ceilings were high and beautifully decorated! Big fancy lights hung from them. Everything was hushed like a temple. I'd never been in a temple, but this quiet hush was how I imagined a temple would be. People were talking in whispers and greeting each other with the slightest of nods.

Men called 'tellers' stood behind tall, polished wood benches. In front of those were shiny brass rails about twelve inches from the floor, a real temptation for little girls to climb on. Mum hauled us down, of course, with a whispered threat.

People were posting little blue books in a high-up slot. The books slid down a chute with a gentle ssshhh. Mum said that they were called 'pass-books'. People put money in them, and the tellers would jot down how much. Then they'd call out a name and the owner of the passbook would go and collect it. Oh! The mysteries of that big quiet place!

Dad met us in that foyer. He looked splendid in his dark blue suit, striped blue tie, his collar and cuffs white and stiffly starched. (One of a housewife's tasks in those days.) We rode together in the lift up to the Custody Department on the third floor.

Dad introduced us to all his colleagues. I smiled and said, 'How do you do?' politely. I can still remember all their names. Some became life-long friends of our parents. Mum used to say that the Bank people were Dad's second family. It

was only recently that I parted with all the letters that Bank people had sent to me when Dad died 31 years ago.

Before the Custody Department, Dad worked in the Building Department. He loved that. He and another bank officer would visit houses on behalf of clients who had applied for home loans. Dad and his colleague would bounce on the floors, tap the walls (correction: bang on the walls), turn on the taps to test the flow and the colour of the water, check the 'damp courses', check the bathroom for mould, and crawl under the house to inspect the plumbing pipes and the foundations. Years later, I watched Dad go through that routine when our parents were thinking of moving house. The Bank was also building hundreds of new homes in those days. They were pleasing 'Californian Bungalow' style. Many still stand. Also, near Fisherman's Bend, the Bank developed an attractive area called Garden City.

Remember the money boxes made in the shape of the Head Office of the Bank? We popped our pennies and threepences through a slot in the top. Children were encouraged to save from an early age. The Bank issued primary school students with a passbook and a gift of one shilling to start their saving habit. Once a week, a trusted student in each class, the 'Bank Monitor,' would enter pupils' threepences (even an occasional sixpence) into their passbooks.

Art shows, concerts, picnics and parties! And *football*.

The Bank family had its fun times, too. In those years, the Bank Officers' Association was quite different in its purpose from the more union-oriented focus of today. It was a social

club, so that Bank people could get to know each other and their families outside work hours. We were proud when Dad was the president for two years.

Talented artists among the staff exhibited their paintings at Bank art shows. I can still 'see' some of the outstanding ones.

There was a lot of musical talent amongst the Bank staff as well. Concerts were held at Kelvin Hall in the city. One amazing young tenor sang 'Younger Than Springtime'. In my mid-teens then, it made me dewy-eyed.

God Save the King!

The custom in those days was to play the 'National Anthem' before public performances. Twice, before Bank concerts, Dad asked me to play the 'National Anthem' on the piano. I was about twelve.

Bank picnics were fun: friendly and relaxing. One memorable picnic was at Hanging Rock, still in its natural state, quite different from the crowded tourist attraction it is today. We sat on rugs or on folding chairs, ate simple picnic food, went for walks, played ball games and there were pony rides for the kids.

What lively boisterous celebrations the Christmas parties were! Held in the South Melbourne Town Hall, there was scrumptious food, Santa of course, and a present for each kid. One year our dad volunteered to be Santa. Dad was a tall slim man so he had to be well padded up. He was hardly recognisable. Little kids happily ran up to Santa to receive their gifts, to sit on his knees and have a little chat. So did Donny, the young son of Dad's brother who also worked in

the Bank. Now, our father had a rather distinctive bass-baritone voice. Young Don was quite comfortable on Santa's knee until that bearded gentleman spoke to him. *Disaster! Donny knew that voice.* He tore down the length of the hall, wailing, 'It's only Uncle Joe!'

Oh! The fun of Bank footy! The SSB fielded a football team in the A Grade Amateur League. Our family spent many happy winter Saturday afternoons barracking for the Bank boys—with gusto! Jan and I, teenage girls, had a healthy interest in the 'boys.' The tallest and strongest player was nicknamed 'Tiny', of course. A smaller player, 'S...' regularly managed to get himself entangled in the arms of an opponent.

Round the neck, Umpy! Round the neck! yelled the Bank supporters, feigning outrage.

Dad was the timekeeper for years. He'd sit shivering in the timekeeper's box at Brighton Beach with the chill sea wind whipping through the cracks in the timber. The best fun for Jan and me was to barrack from the fence. But on days too cold for that, we'd snuggle up with Mum in our Ford Prefect. A goal! Toot the horn. *Another goal. Toot, toot, again!*

Let us go back to the foyer in the Bank and get into the lift. The lift driver's name was Paddy Ryan.

Paddy had a cheery greeting for everyone. He brightened people's day. No matter how he was feeling, he'd always ask about us.

‘Good morning, Mrs Smith. How is your asthma these days?’ he’d ask our mum. He’d ask me how I was doing at school and have a little joke with Jan. Dad was ‘Joe’ to Paddy; Dad always called him Paddy, affectionately, with a touch on his shoulder. They chatted away like old mates, which they were.

I can still see Paddy’s broad and pleasant face, the twinkle in his eye. He had been driving that lift for a long time, probably since the mid-1920s. One of Paddy’s trouser-legs was pinned up near his knee—a puzzle and fascination for us little girls. His crutches leaned against the wall behind him. He operated the lift with one hand. In those days, the heavy lift mechanism was driven by a sort of wheel, not with easy buttons which work modern lift machinery. Paddy had been a soldier in WW1 and been wounded badly.

Patient, courageous, resilient, a hero. You were an inspiration.

I remember you fondly, Paddy Ryan.

CLOTHES STORY

VICTORIA SPICER

Clothes were once my armour and my amore—protective shield and boundless passion. An outlet for creativity, for experimentation, they bolstered my self-esteem—and battered it. It was serial dating with textiles; I occasionally got it magically right, often disastrously wrong.

The artichoke-green opera coat was one of my frogs. When I discovered it tucked away on a rack at my favourite op shop, I could barely contain my delight. A Nicola Waite label and a \$15 price tag! I couldn't wait to show it off to the world. As I strode up Collins Street, the collar turned up, my hands deep in the pockets, I was a glamorous sophisticate. I'd stepped straight out of the pages of *Vogue*. I imagined heads turning to admire me. I imagined work colleagues swivelling their chairs as I passed, exclaiming, 'Fabulous coat, Victoria! Is it new? Where did you get it?'

Then I caught a multi-angled glimpse of myself in the mirrored lift. I closed my eyes, avoiding my horrified gaze. Oh my God! I looked like a giant lizard. What an ugly fabric, what a ghastly colour. I shrugged it off. When the lift doors opened, I was respectably and anonymously dressed in corporate uniform—charcoal knee-length skirt and white shirt.

I sold the lizard coat on eBay, as I did all my sartorial stuff-ups, making a tidy profit. Then I mined my wardrobes, repositories of clothes I couldn't break up with as well as

clothes I sometimes wore. The trying on, experimenting with different combinations, the search for a fresh look, was a pleasant way to pass a Sunday afternoon. And it reminded me of my childhood.

When we feel the sun's warmth through layers stiflingly thick, it's time to bare arms. Time to resuscitate and renew the spring-summer wardrobe. My mother, balancing on a chair, drags a bundle of bright fabrics from hibernation at the top of the wardrobe into the light. She lays the garments on the bed, tenderly, grouping them in ensembles. I try everything, even items obviously too small or faded and threadbare beyond redemption. The striped midriff top with bobble trim smells faintly of salt and makes me nostalgic for sand and sea. Arms up and a riotously bright cotton shift slips down over my head. It stops at my hips. No amount of wriggling and tugging will make it go further. 'It's too small.' Mum says, 'What a shame, such lovely fabric.' I am crushed when she tosses it aside. I know what happens to my too-small clothing. I've met some of it, weird and anachronistic, on my cousin. And I once caught a glimpse of familiar fabric peeping from a stuffed rag bag.

As a teenager, I am clothes obsessed. I learn to sew. I spend all my pocket money on the raw materials of fashion: magazines, patterns, fabric. I adore the posed pouting girls in *Petticoat* and *Vogue*. I clip the most striking of these, the ones I want to become. Their artifice, their posturing thrills me. Get the clothes and the embellishments right, and I could be

them, beautiful and alluring. I sticky-tape the pictures onto my bedroom wall at jaunty angles. I study an Issey Miyake dress, soft unstructured linen. I imagine disappearing beneath its voluminous folds.

There aren't many places in Sale to strut and pout and I suspect I look ridiculous clomping along Raymond Street in iridescent blue platform shoes, my trousers so flared they flap in the breeze. Inside the Memorial Hall, to the strobe-lit thrub thrub of 'Smoke on the Water', I stomp and flail my satin bell-sleeved arms. I can see, in the corner of my eye, girls looking at me, admiringly I hope.

My devotion to needle and thread is such that in Form 5 I win the Elna Scholarship for Fashion. I prance and twirl, my legs like rubber, on the Melbourne Town Hall stage, the crowd smiling and clapping. I am feted, photographed, featured in the local newspaper and the school magazine. The glory is tinged with the sad knowledge that the brown tweed suit is not quite right. It's skilfully made, with hand-stitched buttonholes, bias-bound seams and snug lining. But it lacks the sharpness of the London retro-inspired designer styles I'd tried to emulate. It's a skinny suit that's not skinny enough. The skirt is straight and chunky, falling in a straight line from the hips instead of curvaceously hugging hips, bottom and thighs. The kick-pleat lacks kick. The shoulders pads, the collar, the lapels aren't wide and dramatic enough.

In the page seven *Gippsland Times* photograph I am just a schoolgirl in a daggy ill-fitting suit trying to look glamorous. And failing.

It's a Thursday evening and I'm at Savers Brunswick, a vast concrete barn filled with racks and racks of unsold, surplus, pre-loved, unwanted, and worn out clothing and other goods. The familiar musty smell appeals to me, the possibility of discovering a special label, a gorgeous fabric, keeps me on edge.

'You have to look at everything, absolutely everything.' I'm trying to explain the principles of op shopping to my mother, who's accompanied me here for the first time. She nods, but her mouth, curled down at the edges, reads dubious. 'Look, just pull the hangers across, right to left, one at a time. Check the label, feel the fabric.' I demonstrate, pulling hangers towards me, slowly at first, building up speed. 'No. No, no, nope.' I stop and pull out a sheerish abstract print top, holding it up to examine it. 'Megan Park, but it's very tired—and look at those thready bits.' I put it back.

'Mmm,' Mum nods. 'I don't know many labels. Apart from Sportscraft and Country Road, that is.'

'If it's from New Zealand, if the fabric is good, if it looks interesting, grab it. I'll help you sort out the cream from the crud later.' I take her by the arm and wheel her around in front of Women's Long Sleeve Tops, Size XS. 'Start here. I'll work the bigger sizes.'

I don't share the finer points of op shop superstore survival. It's competitive, sometimes viciously so. Super shoppers prowl the aisles ready to pounce and snatch at first flash of Trelise or Mela. They plunder the mobile stands for the best pieces before they reach the racks, they scrounge amongst the discards outside the changing rooms. I can't see any of the

familiar traders here tonight and feel lucky as I return to rack-flicking.

An hour later, my trolley is full: a tumble of slithery, crisp and matted fabrics, a cacophony of colour. I leave the store with a stuffed red bag; Mum has nothing.

That night, I have a familiar dream.

I am inadvertently, horrifyingly, publicly, naked. The expansive open space I am stranded in is crowded. I look desperately for something, anything, to improvise cover, to escape. I huddle into myself, arms across my chest, and tiptoe towards what I hope is a door. Then I realise nobody's looking at me; nobody sees me; I'm invisible.

Her clothing desires not sated at Savers, Mum wants another shared shopping adventure, this time a more upmarket one. We're at Blondies Boutique in Clifton Hill. I am thoroughly enraptured by the clothes here—lavish, expensive fabrics, tucked, pleated, and flatteringly draped compete for my attention. You don't work the packed racks here. It's a curated experience.

We select an armful of garments to try, items with such visual and tactile appeal they almost leap out from the racks at us. Patrick, our eager-to-please curator brings dozens of designer gems to our dressing room door, flaunting them playfully through the crack. I try all and, cajoled out of the cubicle, parade them before the mirrored wall and everyone else in the shop. I am enamoured of a black dress, a soft knit

which drapes and clings in the right places. It's not my usual style—I'm drawn to more flamboyant designs. And yet, it is just right. How I'd lived in Melbourne all these years and not owned a simple black dress was very curious.

'Yes,' Mum declares, covering the \$395 price tag with her thumb. 'I'll buy it for you.' She pats me on the arm, 'You look gorgeous, but you'd look even better if you lost a few pounds.' Mum, as whippet thin and glamorous as I am lumpen and inelegant, on the rare occasions she mentions my weight, always does so tenderly.

The black dress becomes not just a Melburnian piece to layer black upon black. It becomes a canvas for all kinds of fashion statements. I wear it with floaty asymmetrical tops sewn from remnants, with chunky neckpieces and with boldly patterned scarves. None are eye-turners, but I'm content. Embellished black is my perfect match.

SNIPPETS FROM AN ADVENTUROUS LIFE

ANDREW McMILLAN

I was a war baby, the eldest of the eldest stretching back as far as is known in our family line, provided, it would seem, with a dream in my sporran.

My forebears came mostly from Scotland, following the Highland Clearances, mixed with a touch of English and French. They said sad farewells to loved ones, never seeing them again, as they travelled around the world to seek a better life.

They laboured to survive through hardships on New Zealand's colonial frontiers, through severe economic depressions. Family stories of near starvation and the struggle to survive seemed common, but so too were the hopes and dreams for better things to come. From darkness to light, from world war to peace, from poverty to prosperity; dreams led to hope in New Zealand during the 1930s and 1940s.

Some men and women dreamed with conviction and aspiration, wanting my generation to grow up without the hellish poverty and struggles that preceded World War II. Removal of poverty was regarded as a utopian dream but, like peace and freedom, was deemed to be worth every effort, and so even swamps and very rough farmland were changed forever in an effort to accommodate the nation's warriors and their families.

It was after we had moved into our new dwellings that we saw the last swamps and creeks drained into pipes, roads formed in the gaps between houses, with clothes lines, sheds and fences erected. Later, hedges were planted, footpaths laid, and schools built, while shops eventually replaced the truck salesmen.

Gone forever are the myriad butterflies, the frogs and tadpoles, beautiful dragonflies and all manner of little bugs and creatures that once occupied the swamps and creeks in abundance. Gone is the distinctive aroma that came home on muddied footwear from playing along the local creek. Gone are the huge rats and flies. Gone too are the construction workers and their machinery. Machines like the lumbering steamroller belching fire and smoke that worked our roads into shape and now found only in museums.

Warriors had returned from overseas conflicts ready to build a city of peace and prosperity. Together our families shared the pioneering of one new suburb, among a score throughout the country.

Elsewhere in the world, societies were mostly communities held in common by faith belief systems, or languages, or customs, or tribal groupings. New Zealand was a young nation comprising Maoris and migrants from around the world learning to live together for mutual benefit. It has indeed been my privilege to be educated in such an environment, to be usefully employed, to enjoy my cultural heritage, and beyond that, to travel the world and experience the friendliness and hospitality of folk from many varied cultures, languages, and religious outlooks.

As stated in the *Rata Street School 50th Jubilee* book¹: for children our suburb was made for adventure. For me, life was an adventure then and has been ever since.

Our suburb was still developing. We had fire alarms on poles and telephone booths at critical intersections.

Ambulances, taxis and private vehicles were rare in those days. I can still hear the screams of the boy next door. He had been playing with friends and somehow got a knife in his eye. His parents must have been frantic trying to find transport to get him to the hospital, only a few miles away. Eventually he returned home but had lost his sight in that eye.

Everybody seemed to meet everybody else, whether at the few shops or the post office, school functions or simply through children playing together. Community activities such as boys' and girls' brigades, scouts and guides, the tennis club and other sports clubs also brought people together.

As a teenager and young adult, I became a leader in my local church and boys' brigade, teaching boys facets of the Christian faith along with many crafts, arts, skills, imparting discipline, and teaching respect. Also, I was able to enjoy family life and actively participate in a thriving community.

At work I studied papers written by our first governors and colonial secretaries and undertook research in the General Assembly Library. I progressed from being a State servant advisor to become a political confidant in the corridors of the Beehive with cabinet ministers; from being the inaugural

¹ *Rata Street School 50th Jubilee 2000*, pages 17-20

President of the NZ Toy Library Federation to help meet the changing, and expensive needs for development of disabled people; to becoming a delegate to a Pacific Forum on Intellectual Disability.

I became a representative of churches on public issues in New Zealand and later, on inter-faith issues in Australia, sharing in both ecumenical gatherings and inter-faith gatherings. I was a guest speaker at a government sponsored inter-faith peace rally in Uganda and attended an Aids awareness campaign launch in Kampala, where I was a guest of the Ugandan Minister of Health.

I have been privileged to be feasted at a Maori marae and to sit at the feet of Aboriginal elders, on the ground around a log fire at Darwin's Nungalinga College and at Praise Corroborees at Canberra. One day I shared a restaurant with South African senior regional tribal leaders in Pretoria who had arrived for a government consultation; the following day I sat in the dark through a Nairobi, Kenya, power cut discussing disability issues with a Muslim leader, one father to another.

I have experienced the stifling heat and desert sands around the bustling cities of Dubai and Oman. I have soared above the rugged hinterlands of Yemen and Ethiopia, and witnessed the devastating drought-ridden region of Turkana and the lush Uganda countryside by the Nile. As the first white person to stay overnight in one Ugandan village of around 2,000 folk, I learnt that my every movement was commented upon at the local pub.

I enjoyed residential status (with identity papers) in Uganda while living for some months with an African family. One day I walked through terrible slums. I spent a night in Kenya patrolling a safari tent campsite with my Ma'asai warrior friend. Lions roared nearby and elephants came trampling rather too close and I knew a leopard patrolled through that area. I was instructed we were only to scare off wild animals—if attacked, I was to kill using my club.

One day I attended a Congolese wedding; on another, I was chased by robbers—twice in one hour. A few days later I slept in a mud-hut, which was attacked by bandits at night.

With younger Australians, I have walked the back streets of Seoul, joining up with young Koreans and together enjoying refreshments—a great city with a fantastic ancient cultural heritage under constant stress from an unresolved war.

I have gazed in wonder at the great expanses of snow-carpeted Mongolia once ridden by Genghis Khan. I have scanned parts of the great Taiga Forest over Russian Siberia, dissected by rivers glistening in the sun's dying rays, in the darkness seeing nothing else of Russia. I have flown over the Baltic Sea looking down on Gotland Island, once the centre of ancient Viking settlements.

Visiting England, I enjoyed the grand tour of Windsor Castle; I was awed by the beautiful and rare opulence of the Crown Jewels at the Tower of London; amazed at the extravagance of golden tipped fence railings of Buckingham Palace; I marvelled at Westminster Abbey and the expanse of London from London's Eye.

Like many before me I gazed in wonder at Stonehenge and the Avebury Circles, appreciated the historic town of Bath, and the engineering of the canal locks at Devizes and Brunel's railway system.

I experienced the street of silence in (now Royal) Wootton Bassett and felt the pain of war visiting a tomb at Nakaseke, Uganda, glimpsing, in tears, thousands of sun-bleached skulls from the brutal Amin regime.

I visited Oxford, the home of my first dictionary; Cardiff Castle, whose extravagant décor cries out to be completed; the nearby rugby icon of Cardiff Arms Park and, back in England, Manchester United's stadium, the home of a world-renowned soccer team.

Then to Vienna, Austria, the beautiful city of music on the banks of the Danube River. From playing Strauss waltzes on the piano at home to hearing them played in Vienna the city of the Waltz King—a golden statue even—and hearing the Radetzky March played in Vienna is an experience like no other.

After travelling, I returned home and watched television and glimpsed nature, science and culture through eyes other than my own; I relaxed, had fun and played with my family. In all human history with its trillions of people, relatively few emperors or kings and queens or modern well-travelled ordinary people have experienced as much as this.

How blessed I am. I want to share the message of peace, tolerance, and how respect for our differences is to our mutual advantage.

MY 70s HOUSE IN THE COUNTRY

EVE HALO

Somehow unbelievably—*trust me, I'm still pinching myself*—I've landed in the friendliest town in the world, and I'd like to share some of my experiences with you.

I am looking at an iPhone picture of the beautiful, pristine Lake Colac, about two hours southwest of Melbourne. A few years ago, only a week after my father died, I arrived at the caravan park overlooking this magnificent lake for a much-needed short break.

Having spent dozens of happy holidays there, I'd had many prior chats with the park's owners and managers over the years, including the managers at the time, local dairy farmers, Brigit and Rod. But this time they greeted me with an unrivalled act of kindness. Having experienced the death of their own parents, they empathised with my plight, and invited me to stay in my favourite cabin, with uninterrupted views of the lake, for *as long as I needed, absolutely free of charge!*

So, the lake became my sanctuary. For over a year, I spent virtually every second weekend there. I ate good food, breathed fresh air, and thrived on the smiles and characteristic frankness, humour, and honesty of the country folk I met. I hung with the birds, wildlife and especially the beloved pelicans in my own feminist re-enactment of the 70s flick *Storm Boy*. (*Although an 80s flick would've been more apt 'cos have you been to Colac? It's the spiral perm capital of the world!*)

I listened to John Coltrane's 1965 *A Love Supreme* nonstop. From the tenor sax's initial plaintive and tumultuous search for the answers, to a thousand questions, to the eventual redemptive calm of the closing track, the classic album was a fitting soundtrack to, and musical balm for the soul of this 'Storm Girl.' I also filled multiple journals with words, sentences and paragraphs describing my love for my father, in an attempt to decipher the emotional complexities which are the feminine legacy of having been born into an extremely patriarchal family.

And it healed me.

The potent combination of nature, music, self-expression through art, and unconditional kindness got me through one of the most challenging periods of my life. And it made me a better, stronger and happier person in the process.

Several years later I had a choice: to buy a tiny unit in the inner north of Melbourne, or a country property—*the burbs were never an option*. The former was the better financial investment—with a *back-breaking mortgage*—but the latter, although less economically quantifiable, was about the stuff that makes life worth living. *The minuscule mortgage doesn't hurt either!* My decision, despite the spiral perm factor, was a no brainer.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

GAEL BUTLER

I am not a fussy eater but sometimes I find my tolerance stretched. For example, my mother's golden syrup dumplings used to be so heavy that it seemed impossible to eat anything else for several days after having one, especially as they followed a hearty main course of meat and vegetables. She was generally a good cook, but these suety cannon balls steeped in a gloopy syrup were just too much. There was no diplomatic way I could refuse her cooking. My father loved them. No wonder he died young of a coronary. Yet, despite my dislike of them, their recent depiction in a cookery book of 'old fashioned favourites' brought back instantly memories of family meals around the alcove table in the kitchen. Such is the power of food.

Once married with a family, I rarely cooked the Aussie staple of meat and three vegetables. The reason was simple. When I was fourteen and my sister eleven, our father died and to survive, Mum re-entered the workforce as a part-time clerk. For three nights a week my sister and I prepared the evening meal which was always chops or sausages and three veg. This continued for three years until I left home and went to university. It represents even now the tough times spent in readjusting, my sister and I arguing about whose turn it was to cook, who was cleaning and who was chopping wood for

the combustion stove. I vowed that future cooking would be more adventurous.

Travel changed my attitude to food forever. It began whilst I was still at university. I spent one summer at Elcho Island in Arnhem Land and whilst there, was taken across the island for a feast. There, on a fire of glowing coals, was a nicely cooking dugong, still in its skin, a terrifying sight. Even back then dugong was a protected species, but Indigenous people could eat them at ceremonies. As I had been given a tribal name, I was told it was my duty to join in. I did not want to offend my friends, so eat I did. It was delicious. It sure looked horrible. This was the first time I took a risk with food and discovered it worthwhile. It was the beginning of a love affair with food and of me subjecting family and friends to experimentation in the kitchen; needless to say, minus dugong.

Once the children had left home, my husband and I began to travel extensively, first within Asia and then, after we retired, further afield. We went abroad twice a year, generally, but not always, on organised tours. On return, I would buy a cookbook of the region we had visited and subject my husband to weeks of meals intended to keep the holiday memory alive (and possibly indigestion), but he never complained. I amassed quite a collection.

Travelling produces some gastronomic delights and challenges. How about, in Vietnam, having a bowl of pho whilst sitting on a little plastic chair on busy street corner footpath? I'm up for that. It is my comfort food even now, some years after our last trip there. A bowl of this fragrant

soup brings back memories as clearly as if I were there. Fried insects, on the other hand, do not bring back any memories other than that of a charred crunch. Sure, I tried them. As long as the locals were frequenting a place, we found we were safe enough. What is the point of travel if you do not embrace this fundamental part of a country's culture?

The culinary needs of fussy travellers must drive tour leaders to sobs. In India for a 17-day backpacking holiday, we were astonished to hear two of our companions tell the tour leader that they did not eat spicy food. On arrival in Jaipur and after a few days living on boiled rice they were pleased to find an Italian café across from our hotel and sped there in glee, only to discover that the spaghetti sauce seemed to contain cardamon! What a wonderful spice is cardamon and never more welcome is the aroma of a roadside chai maker's aromatic brew, served in little single-use sun-baked terracotta beakers that would be smashed after use, but this spice drove these women back to their steamed rice.

On organised tours, particularly in Europe, the provided meals could be somewhat pedestrian, but none more than in Flüelen, Switzerland, where, on a group tour, we were treated to fish fingers with peas and cubed carrots for our evening meal and hard-boiled eggs with white bread for breakfast next day. Come to think about it, the risotto made with canned tomato soup we experienced during the same trip probably topped the stakes for unimaginative cookery.

Needless to say, there is the possibility of encountering a nasty bug whilst dining abroad. That has happened once on our travels when I was silly enough to eat a tomato sandwich

in India. I should have known better. Fortunately, we had a non-travelling day in Jaipur so I moaned and fasted for the day, spending my time lying on my hotel bed whilst watching children flying kites on the neighbouring flat rooftop. By next day I could cope with rice and I felt better. I never ate anything raw that could not be peeled from then on. I might add that the only time I have had actual food poisoning was in Melbourne, the day after I graduated. Who would think that a celebratory banana fritter at a Bourke Street café could go so horribly wrong? Nevertheless, I have stronger memory of that occasion than if I had remained well!

On the other hand, dining experiences whilst travelling are generally rather wonderful. On two separate and vastly different trips to India, one backpacking, the other much more comfortable and hence expensive, every meal (except for that tomato) was exciting and memorable and we discovered, as thousands of travellers before us had, that Indian food is not necessarily laden with chilli and is much more subtle and that the regional differences in cuisine are vast. Similarly, to travel to China is to experience such a range of cuisines that it is doing it a disservice to label it all under one umbrella.

When I picked myself up after my husband's death, I continued to travel, this time with an old friend from my university days. On one trip we flew to Vancouver and then to Montreal, boarding a cruise which sauntered down the St Lawrence, stopping daily and finally docking at Boston. In Vancouver we had a meal of seafood chowder. It was delicious. Thereafter we searched for it on menus and rated the chowder we ate as we made our way along the river and

down the coast. Clam chowder in Maine was fabulous. In Boston it was just as good. In San Francisco on the way home there was a place on the waterfront where we went twice for chowder. Beautiful. The winner? We could never agree until a few weeks after our return we dined at the Torquay Bowling Club with my sister and brother-in-law. Their chowder was the winner!

Is there anything I will now not eat? Yes, perhaps a McDonald's hamburger. But even in this case there was one exception. A few years ago we were in Casablanca. It was lunchtime but it was Ramadan. The only place in the whole city that was open was McDonalds. Thus, we joined the children and pregnant women (who are exempt from fasting) for a halal burger. It was fine if only for its atmospheric charm, really festive as the women revelled in the usually forbidden delights of lunch. We all enjoyed our meal which tasted a little spicier than my earlier memories of Maccas. However, now at home, if you presented me with a beef patty, special sauce cheese lettuce and pickles on a sesame seed bun, I would raise my hands in horror and respond, 'You expect me to eat that!' Maybe I have just become a little precious. I would eat it if I was hungry and it was the only thing on offer.

I am downsizing, planning to move house, and have begun to cull my collection of books, beginning with the cookery books. Did I really need three Thai cookbooks? Probably not. Did I need four Italian cookbooks? I guess not. Do I keep the Turkish book? Now that is a great book. I am side-tracked and sit down with it on my lap. I flip through and think of all

the recipes I have yet to make from this book. The pictures are beautiful.

Time flies. I have so far culled one Thai book and one Italian book. I am cooking dinner. I am having a Turkish meal. Maybe tomorrow I will continue to downsize. This will be a slow process.

PROUD AND UNLIKEABLE: REFLECTIONS OF A WOMAN ON THE OTHER SIDE OF MIDDLE-AGE

JO CURTAIN

'Old age ain't no place for sissies.' – Bette Davis

Boxed up and stamped expired, I was deposited on the welcome mat of Café Blue. The door swung open. It smelt of fresh coffee. I found a table by the window and a cup was placed in front of me by a man with a sour expression. I wondered was it my disposition that triggered his disposition? Or that I'm no longer an eminently harass-able young woman? I'm an unlike-able woman. I'm on the other side of middle-age. Broken veins cast a net across his nose. And his dyed black hair and grim eyes smear my view (no tip for you). The hurt cuts a deep well of loneliness. Too murky and cold to linger.

I slowly rolled the tip of my pen around the inside of my lips. Journal laid out on the table. Empty page. What day was it? Tap. Tap tapping. Behind me, 20-something Frenchie tap, tapped, tapped. Her ponytail swung shining in the light. What's so urgent? She looked up. I avoided her eyes. I sat back, reposed. Lids down. Reflective, preoccupied. I have an affliction. My mouth opened and those I hardly knew looked at me. Those that I love liked me that tiny bit less. Words hung in the sunlight.

She had a look. I had a look too. An inner fuck-off cloaked as a watery smile. An average person could say around 16,000 words per day. Spoke. Ignored. Written off as inconsequential. But even when I didn't speak, I could still be unlikeable. It showed itself in a look. In a way. Somehow doing the same things at 49-years was less likeable than doing them at 20-something. I could not help notice at the grocery store, at the beach, at the café, I was on the periphery, a nobody with saggy breasts—no longer young, no longer counted, no longer somebody.

My mum refused to wear makeup, or dye her hair, and said diets were for fools, but I could not deny that for many women physical appearance mattered. I thought of all the women who subjected themselves to chemical peels, Botox, pain and mockery. And then I wondered about age discrimination and employment and my own experience of looking for work. I took time out of paid work after feeling burnt out but not washed up as I found my creativity again. I applied for jobs but found that experience was treated like a contagious disease that no one wanted. I wasn't the only one. I heard many similar stories from women in the same field seeking employment with years of experience, impeccable histories, unable to get interviews with no explanation. Was it because we were women of a certain age? On the other side of middle-age. And rather unlikeable.

I wrote of blemishes. Frenchie's skin had none. Was that the problem? Am I unlikeable because I am old? Unlikeableness has reduced me to invisibility. I had become unlikeable to a world that no longer wanted to see me. I thought about

the degradation of older women in history, women aged beyond their fertile years became invisible. They are the ugly crones, wicked stepmothers and malevolent witches. But, closer to home I ruefully recollected thoughts of my 80-year-old mum dying in hospital and her unlikeable skin that I could not touch. Did she sense it? Will my daughters look at me with the same palpable distaste?

My breath was stuck in the back of my throat, in the tap, tap, tapping. I left Café Blue for air. I walked along the waterfront and the waning winter sunshine warmed my back. I thought about my female friends and reflected on how our identities were constructed by the relationships we had—our children, our partners, our work colleagues—but what happens when we become middle-aged? And divorced? No longer in paid work? Our children grown up? Or God forbid we never had children. What then? Could we lean into our unlikeable-ness? Would we dare be visible and risk being reviled? It was a bleak thought looking across Corio Bay.

My mum had five sisters. I met Aunt Ethel when I was fourteen. She lived in London. Before I met her, Mum said two curious things: one, she was never married and had no children; and two, she was not fond of men. It was an important lesson for me—to know a woman can be alone in the world and remain visible (whether she liked men or not). Ethel had a presence. We wrote for seven years until the next time we met and I was a young woman. Ours was a complicated friendship but I still retained a fondness for her. Ethel challenged the status quo, she refused to be controlled

by the expectations of others, to be restrained or to let society control the shoes she would fill.

I pressed on with my walk towards the Botanic Gardens. I pondered what it meant to reach a certain age as a woman. To be on the verge of invisibility. Why there wasn't more information about our experiences? Why hadn't women before us written about this 'unlikeable-ness'. Why didn't my mum warn me? Or did she—and with youthful arrogance, I didn't listen, I didn't hear?

I made a resolution to be unlikeable, belatedly so, every morning and every night and each and every hour. Inconveniently and loudly.

FLASH FICTION



HOME, by JULIE McSPEDDEN

All flash fiction pieces used this artwork as a prompt.

THE SAFEST AND MOST BEAUTIFUL GARDEN

JO CURTAIN

The bird began to take shape as he carved out the wings. First, he carefully wiped away the curls of shavings whispering to the floor. Clean lines. Then, expertly circling the tool around, he etched out the leaves, stems and the delicate hanging vines. He was very particular about details. He moved the lino block around with ease and chiselled and cut and scraped with a worn handle until an image emerged resembling a garden. He described it as a special place where love and joy flourished.

Once the block was carved, he held it in place for me to roll white ink over the etching, and then he carefully turned it over onto black printing paper, and I pressed down onto it.

It was a story about two pigeons who had suffered a tremendous personal loss to attain their freedom. They had abandoned their nest and, for their sacrifice, were gifted a home in the safest and most beautiful garden.

This was the story he told. I felt the chill of seduction touch my skin. He could have said any story, but he chose a story of violence and sacrifice. He wanted me to feel.

EVOCAATION

DAN VASEY

A new drawing hangs on our living-room wall. 'Myrna, you drew our home.'

No answer. She keeps her legs up on the couch, her eyes on a paperback, *Fifty Kinds of Shackles*.

My lifetime partner is being modest. What do her fellow artists call a drawing like this one? Nostalgia primitive? Charcoal Impressionist? I call it a chef d'oeuvre, a tribute to our love and lives together.

I open my palm beneath the drawing. 'The house where I was born, the alpine country Eden where I grew up. When my mum and dad retired up north, you and I danced hand in hand through the doorway. See how you filled window boxes and garden with fragrant snapdragons and daffodils that shed fairy-dust pollen every spring. I grew taro for my famous tropical chips. Willy wagtails came daily and warbled to our children, Arlo and Belle.

Rejoice, that after all these years we still live there. And you, Myrna, my first and last love, gave me a magical birthday present, a picture of our nest inside our nest.'

'Edgar,' she says.

Who is she talking to? We're the only souls in the room.

'Once again, to refresh your memory, I bought the drawing at Salvo's a year ago to cover peeling wallpaper. It's of a cemetery. You're a city boy. The only time you lived in a

house or the country was when you moved in with your first wife's parents outside Morwell, near the mine.

'Myrna was your second wife. You have no kids with me or anyone else. Arlo is your brother. Belle? God knows. I'm Gemma and I pay the rent for this apartment. And your birthday is next month. Now, let me read.'

She's a wonder, my Myrna. From art she's turned to composing stories.

BROKEN

JEAN PEARCE

I woke in blackness to the sound of a river falling from the sky. Water plunged through the roof and wind rattled the bamboo supports. I felt my mother's hand drag me upwards and away into the roaring darkness. Her hand was rough from digging the vegetable garden and carrying buckets of water up from the river each day. We were pushing through the torrent of water, me slipping and sliding around her legs. I heard the voices of my father and brother as if we were under water. My mother's hand was strong, stronger than the tree branches and spinning bamboo from broken houses. We climbed upwards through vines, higher and higher till my feet were raw as plucked chickens. On and on till the sun rose and we sat and watched the place where our home once stood. There was nothing left of our home except for the orange bucket we used to carry water caught on the branch of a tree. My father said that this was the second time that the rains had washed away our home. It seemed to me that homes always break. My grandmother's home burnt down after the fire when the soldiers came to the camp. But when we left Thailand to come to Geelong the smiling man gave us a house to live in. My father painted our home the colour of the forest and my mother planted a new garden. The tomatoes climbed up the fence and the fruit grew round and red as my baby brother's cheeks. The birds came to peck the blood red plums that fell

on the ground. Every afternoon I climbed high into the branches of the tree. I watched and waited for the water to come and wash away our new home.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

JUDY RANKIN

Prying? I prefer the word curious.

For some time, we'd wondered about the garden plot standing immaculately behind our house. It appeared as a manicured oasis floating amongst the wilds of Mount Canagou. We'd watched an older lady collect barrows of firewood at the back of the oasis and wondered where she took them. We'd contested whether the old man, afflicted by illness, who walked past our house to stop outside the oasis daily, carried a walking stick or fishing pole.

The quiet life in the small French village of Estother unfolded as I sat hidden on the balcony of my gite.

For the first time, the old couple arrived together to work in the immaculate field. The man with a disabled arm, left hand shaking constantly, tried to help. He gathered twigs slowly from the garden beds while she did the heavy-duty digging. Even though I didn't recognise the words, it was heart-warming to hear her speak to him. The intonation giving simple instructions without irritation or frustration, and he obligingly acting out the request.

They were patient. She with her instruction; he with the response of half a body. It took him time to complete a task, but he kept going until he had. Never did I hear her voice escalate to show anything but acceptance.

For several hours, the pair worked in harmony as I sat mesmerised by the beauty of their dance. Theirs was an unconditional love. Not a show of affection deemed correct. Just two people accepting each other's differences regardless of who may be watching in the shadows.

The fruits of their labour were soon obvious. Refreshed and nourished, they gathered their things, left the sanctuary and plodded side by side back to an unknown destination.

OIKOPHOBIA

GEOFFREY GASKILL

‘Oikophobia,’ the boss said through compressed lips. ‘It’s our civic duty to promote an aversion to home. We’ve got to get the idea out that, for the sake of the country, we must get out and spend.’

Of all the stupid ideas Jonah had heard, this was the stupidest.

He wouldn’t dare call the boss an idiot but trying to sell the idea that home wasn’t a place of warmth, comfort and security was counter-intuitive. The declared wisdom around the office was, that with advertising, making a silk purse from a sow’s ear was child’s play. For the sake of keeping his job, he agreed that home was out, shopping was in. The post-pandemic economy demanded it.

Jonah looked at the picture he’d doodled on his notepad. It wasn’t very good. It showed a house - a home - but didn’t look like his, or any home he knew. Did that make him oikophobic? *HOME*, he thought, *Headquarters of My Environment*.

Jonah looked at all the wankers who’d sell their mothers for the boss’ approval. He bet none of them had any ideas.

‘Do you have anything?’ The boss stared at him.

The wankers’ heads turned to look at him.

Jonah felt the sweat on his brow. Confessing to lack of inspiration would be as bad as not paying attention. ‘I do have

one idea,' he tried, holding up his notebook. 'To kick off the campaign. A new slogan: *HOME - Hotfoot out of My Environment.*'

The room went glacial. His career was on the line and that was the best he could do? *Hotfoot out of My Environment?* 'It needs work,' he confessed.

'I get it!' The boss beamed and nodded. 'You may be onto something.'

'Bravo!' As one, the wankers stood and applauded.

WHAT OLD STONES KNOW

KERSTIN LINDROS

My head vibrates on the window as the bus hums past the rows of poplars that line the narrow road to the village. I stare without focus and a black-and-white scene forms: us, leaning against one of the remaining walls of the old abbey; the big elder bush, shading us from the evening sunlight that flooded through the magnificent arches; a first kiss in a sweet cloud of elder blossom perfume. That evening, the barn swallows sailed low around the ivy-covered stones, forecasting rain.

Our friends had already left. Later in the village square, guitars sounded and we sang folk songs around the summer solstice fire and roasted sausages on sticks.

I was still chatting with the girls when Marko headed back to the ruin to fetch his precious new Nokia, which he had left on a stone ledge.

He was last seen walking from the bonfire. The next day, the village was crawling with police. Marko had vanished, and after months of unrewarded hope, his family moved away. The village was never the same. We also moved to the city.

Now the brakes of the bus fling me back into the present. Today the main street is even busier than twenty years ago, with people in white hooded suits, uniformed officers and detectives. Blue-and-white tape spans the road at what used to be mad old Kurt's house until his recent death. I greet Marko's mother, who has also come in light of fresh evidence that the

new owners uncovered in the basement. A detective calls me in to talk through that night again, and I stare at the leather necklace on the table.

Then I get a coffee from the van and walk out to the ruin. All I see now is the black hollows, like lost eyes.

REINCARNATION

DAVID BRIDGE

The gabled ruin had once been home. That much Susan remembered. Now, a fire blackened shell with glaring empty windows like so many eyes in a stricken face, it had taken on a new persona. Nature sought to clothe its awfulness with creeper, ascending and descending: leaves of varying sizes, shapes and textures patterned the surface. Some of the surviving garden plants joined in this resurrection, birds sought food among the growth, their wings and calls adding a dimension to this new reality. She suddenly recalled the fire bird picture that had occupied the mantel in the lounge since she was a child. Gone now like so much else but perhaps something of its magic had survived?

So many people had said comforting things about the accident. Home is people not things, they said. Lives mattered more than possessions and she had escaped with her life, hadn't she? They understood the loss of pictures and memorabilia was a wrench, but things could have been so much worse. Char in her nostrils, Susan surveyed the mangled interior and wondered. She sought some stronger connection with this place, where she had grown up and become her own person. Surely, it had nurtured her and could do so again.

The call from the estate agent in her car brought Susan to her senses. Of course, they had places to visit, new houses that might become homes for whoever bought them. Once the

papers were signed, her insurance money would make that a possibility for her, but she said farewell with regret. They were going to bulldoze it, render it rubble, the fragile new scaffolding of life would be dragged to oblivion with it. Be strong, they had said, you've a good life ahead. She would see.

INDOOR/OUTDOOR FLOW

SUMITRA SHANKAR

Do you remember us talking of the house we would build?

‘Indoor/outdoor flow!’ you’d exclaim.

You’d say it like it had meaning, or substance.

You’d talk of the house, and I would dream of a bird—I’m not good with the names, you were the one who knew all that. I’d dream that this little brown bird, screeching like nails on a chalkboard, would fly into our house, and flap about my face. I’d bat it away, unable to breathe with my mouth full of feathers. You’d laugh, calling the bird to you, just like it was a dog. It would immediately fly to you. ‘See,’ you’d say infuriatingly. ‘Just be calm.’

Your self-assurance was what drew me to you, of course. I thought I could absorb some of it, by being close to you.

Remember how we’d walk past the police station to get to the supermarket? I’d said to you that it made my heart race, remembering every tiny childhood transgression. You made me go that way anyway, you said it was important to face your fears. You would hold my arm in the crook of your elbow, patting my hand. I hated it.

Well, I built the house, with your superannuation money. It came to me after your heart attack. I want you to know that it has a concrete backyard, and I have a cat that eats all the birds now. I want you to know that I walk past the police station every day. I swing my arms, free of your grasp, and feel

no guilt. I stay in my home, with all the doors and windows shut, and am anything but calm. I laugh, and sing, and dance, and am finally happy.

CHANGE MOUNTAIN

RICHARD McCULLOUGH

Tan Mei Lin (Emily) was 102. She'd arrived in Sydney shortly after World War Two from Singapore—Changi to be exact. Emily never married and decided to live as a hermit in the Blue Mountains. The area she chose was very secluded. She lived humbly, surviving on nature's produce. Emily befriended some Indigenous people who helped her construct a small wooden hut, a hut that would last her a lifetime.

The mountain, attractive and covered in blue wildflowers, was a little-known paradise. Occasionally, strangers would arrive and climb to the top of the mountain, and to their astonishment, be confronted with an old wooden sign with white paint and big letters that said, 'Change Mountain'. Emily's English was not good when she first arrived. She had meant to write 'Changi', after her hometown, but it came out as 'Change' and had stayed that way all these years.

During the summer of 2020, a group of wanderers stumbled on the mountain and decided to climb up to the very top. It was hot that day, but halfway up the weather suddenly changed. A violent wind rose and dark clouds emerged in the sky. A torrent of rain soaked the climbers to the skin, all in the space of ten minutes.

Then, to their utter amazement, the sun came out. A vision of Emily's primitive hut emerged through the mist. Lush vines clung to the walls, blossoms bloomed, birds and bees and

butterflies fluttered. Then, in an instant, the sky and everything beneath it turned black again. The wind and the rain returned, battering the earth and all who walked upon it.

Upon completing their descent, one of the climbers, a woman, said loudly and sternly, 'That's it! I'll never climb at Change again'.

A FOLD IN TIME

CLAUDIA COLLINS

We stood outside a dilapidated and depressed-looking cottage in Murray Street, Echuca. The building, shrouded by a fine autumnal mist, had yellowish-cream peeling paint and a brown front door, architraves and window frames. The windows themselves, three upstairs and three down, were boarded up. One was covered by a sheet of rusty corrugated iron. There was no garden, only weeds amongst patches of straggly grass. Outside the wire security fence, the Echuca Historical Society had erected a sign.

‘The oldest whorehouse still standing in Victoria,’ Rick read aloud. ‘This brothel was built behind the Star Hotel in the late 1800s. It was accessed by patrons via a back lane so that prominent and wealthy citizens could conduct their visits discretely, shielded from the view of the townsfolk ...’

‘And so they wouldn’t get caught by their wives!’ I interrupted, laughing.

Rick continued. ‘As Echuca became a substantial river port, the Star Hotel and its brothel became the first casualties in the town’s bid for respectability.’

‘Fifty hotels in a town this size is far too many!’ declared Mayor Henry Oglethorpe, standing outside the ‘House of Flowers’, ‘The three less salubrious ones must be closed immediately, and we will start with this disreputable place.’

‘I run a classy establishment,’ the madam, a widow named Birdie Vine, indignantly replied. ‘We have six female ‘pianists’ in residence, and we do *not* encourage high kicking here!’ She then deployed her folded fan to good use, striking the mayor across the bridge of his nose, causing it to bleed.

The figures faded into the mist.

‘Did you see them?’ I reached for Rick’s hand.

‘See who?’ he asked. ‘Come on, or we’ll miss the ‘Emmy-Lou’. We can’t come all the way to Echuca and not go on a paddle-steamer!’

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

FERN SMITH

Jenny slid into a windowless sage green fluoro-lit room filled with sets of eyes staring blankly above masks. Every second vinyl chair had a 'do not sit' sign. A TV screen with rolling news perched high. The air was stale, scented with disinfectant. She sat down, facing a grey and black lino print.

Shuffling in her battered burnt orange rucksack, she sorted papers anxiously in date order with the question page on top. Finally, her eyes quietened onto the lino print opposite. Reminiscent of Sally Morgan's style, the grey and black lino print pictured five light-filled church-like windows with a door set in the night sky surrounded by leaves, vines and singing birds. Was it about belonging? Was it about night's journey? Was it playful or malevolent? The bewildering work occupied Jenny's mind as the hours ticked past.

People left the room one by one.

The sound of the news became foreground, with people dying in Italy and running out of coffins. She glanced at the lino print. Did it change the meaning? Were they coffins and not windows?

Thoughts dropped as a white-gowned person ushered Jenny into a small box room. She felt oversized. A doctor walked in, ignored her, and stared at a computer screen. Silence.

He looked at a point above her head and blurted like a full stop—‘The good news is your cancer is gone.’

Jenny bolted upright while lifting her T-shirt. On the right side was a long horizontal scar and, looming large, a soccer ball-sized lump protruding, spanning her ribcage and hip, threatening to fall out whenever she bent down.

‘What about this lump?’

‘Your modelling days are over.’

Questions remained in her rucksack as she suddenly pivoted, leaving through a light-filled church-like window.

BOOK ENDS

LINDA CARR

She sits on the floor to 'sort out' her bookcase. The first small step towards setting the house in order—in case she should die unexpectedly.

Destruction of books! Unimaginable. Till now. Those precious parcels, each protecting small pieces of accumulated human knowledge and tragedies.

Great books explore the depths of the world. Her books, all higgledy-piggledy on the shelf, throw out, in full view, the transition of a small life. Each book awakens many memories as she tries to decide its destiny—op shop; bin; keep.

Many gardening books. Just recently she realised she is not a gardener, just a lover of plants, nurturing them, hating to throw out even one brave self-seeded soldier. Op Shop. So much on internet now.

Those ridiculous mystical books left by the Hungarian—bin! Easy decision. He with the 'beautiful women, no heart' throw-away comment.

High-brow novels she had had ambition to read—no more that longed-for persona. Op shop.

Postcards, small prints, suitcase-sized souvenirs, trinkets from art galleries and romantic gardens, they all fall to the floor as she works through the shelves. So many trips on her own. Had she wanted to be alone so much? Perhaps sorting the house is the start of packing up this current life, box it up,

throw it away. Time for a different life, time for a different set of books and prints. New titles.

She tosses the Euro Rail timetable onto the bin pile—expect a lot of change post-Covid.

Numerous tourist phrase books. Definite keeps. Even old-fashioned language is better than none. Hand gestures and smiles do not always fill the gaping void.

Three hours scrutinising books. Skating past pain. Turning away from disappointments. One small bookcase. One hundred books. The whole house to go.

THE STEALTH OF TIME

BARBARA GURNEY

Stanley listens to the tick, tick, tick of time slipping away. Saliva escapes and hovers at the corner of his lips.

The quiet of his garden seems important: the absence of birds' flutter or sudden song, the wind in the tall palms, of usually noisy neighbours.

Perhaps he will remember this moment, in a time when he's surrounded by others, sitting out their last days, in chairs, on verandahs, waiting for the process of the infirm and unstable to evolve into something rejecting the uncertainty of tomorrow.

Images of living at youthful pace leap from one memory to another. He chuckles at boyhood arguments over who could run fastest and nods at remembered laughter-filled dinner parties with friends who he's outlived.

The long-ago smile of his wife, her long luscious hair she liked him to brush, finds a way between the recall of dancing in her arms. Stanley hums and taps waltz tempo on his knee.

A waft of lemon blossom stirs Stanley. He swallows, almost tastes the culinary delights he's savoured with dignitaries, but he shrugs away those obligatory evenings. It's the apples picked from their tree, the sponge cake cooked by his sister, that lingers.

The day of contemplation will end, Stanley will sleep, and awake the final time in his bed. Tomorrow someone will take

him to a room, with facilities, with a shared dining room, and offer optional outings he believes he doesn't need.

The stealth of time shows the importance of the inconsequential, of the small, of the moments almost missed.

Stanley's obituary will list accolades, letters after his name, places he has visited, the impact he's made. But here in the stillness of his garden, he's only an old man with his precious memories.

THE RAVENING

VICKI LONG

He woke to a mix of disparate scents—the dewy freshness of dawn dissolved by the warmth of day, the minty smell of eucalypt tinged with honey, and the nervous sweat of half-a-dozen men, clutching wooden stakes.

Before their collective hearts pounded another beat, he fled to a nearby cave, returning to the arms of Morpheus.

ψ

As the cloak of night descended, he rose from his ephemeral sanctuary—*The Ravening* had begun.

Trailing the crisp, flowery smell of Bloodwood burning, he uncovered an abode hidden by Mother Nature's verdant shawl. The walls were black, embellished with artistic depictions of fauna and flora. There were six windows, but no door!

Male voices emanated from within. He could smell the warm, coppery blood coursing through their vicenarian veins. To partake of their hospitality, he needed to be invited in.

He beat the walls until his knuckles bled, he scraped the mortar with nails hard as bone, but to no avail. He began stomping the paving below, until he noticed an inscription. Dropping to his knees, grateful for the moon's faithful assistance, he read:

'Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations'

Prostrate with rage, he was more incensed knowing the words belonged to an odious play, *a trivial comedy* at that! — rather than the mortal irony of them. The smell of burning flesh hit his nostrils. In his haste, he had mistaken the glow above for his nocturnal companion, rather than the issuing rays of day.

Suddenly, he was being dragged through an opening. The smell of Bloodwood too intense, the flames from an oversized fireplace too blistering. As he was lifted, he smelled their familiar fetid breaths as they counted, ‘one, two, three!’—and with that, *The Ravening* was over.

BATTLE CURSE

ANTHEA ADAMS

Muninn the raven watched. He peeped through the tangle of branches and ivy growing over the walls of the ruined church. Along the overgrown path a horseman came; his armour tarnished, head drooping, his horse flecked with lathered sweat. A sorry sight.

From his perch Muninn watched the exhausted man bring his mount into what shelter there was in the building. The gods watched over him as he unsaddled and tethered his horse, fed him a meagre measure of oats, and drew water from the well for them both. The luxury of a fire was not advisable. He didn't want to give away his location.

The battle was lost. His force had been decimated and as far as Gunnar knew, he was the only survivor. He was lucky to have escaped and felt a heavy guilt. He divested himself of his armour. Night was closing in.

'Ah, boy! You've travelled well today. You'll be as protected and as dry as this ruin will allow. Rest my steed for the day ahead.' The horse whickered softly in reply.

As both man and beast drifted into uneasy sleep Muninn continued his watch. The silence was broken by the sound of wind though there was no movement of air. The waning moon cast little light and allowed the shadows their secrets. The forming mist swirled, and the air cooled. The sound of

hoof-beats thundered, disturbing the sleepers. The old gods were stirring!

Muninn ruffled his feathers as Gunnar stood, reaching for his sword. The horse stamped and tossed his head nervously. Gunnar stroked the horse's rump to calm him and untied the tether. He knew he had cheated death on the battlefield but now the shield-maidens had come for him. It was inevitable now, that Valhalla was nigh.

POETRY

LIKE WILD ORCHIDS IN SPRING

KERSTIN LINDROS

close to the ground,
among rustling tall grasses
and imposing trees, they stand
humbly and reach for the sun

lift their tiny heads, unfurl
delicate blooms
and resplendent colour bursts
when nature signals – safe

swaying to the universal symphony
anchored in nourishing ground
they stand up to the breeze
ready to partake

these small beings,
the not-so-loud,
who will only be found
by those who seek to see,

would whisper magnificent thoughts
to those open to hear,
and their voices would grow
and together we could do almost anything

WERE IT SUMMER NOW

EDWARD REILLY

‘... tua, Cæsar, ætas’ Horace. *Odes* 4.15

The rising Sun would prefer it were Summer now,
Rather than reign over storm-drenched suburbs,
New estates of cheap brick façades all cheek by jowl,
A nod to the ancients with native shrubs.

You Cæsar, claim to protect this fragile State
From an invisible foe which breaks all known laws.
We, in silence, curse the febrile Han, their spate
Of novel illnesses fit for a modern war.

So then, we wander the streets in gear and masks,
Preferring that this long war not drag on so,
As we are ordered to perform such weary tasks
Whilst off to the beach we would go!

O, were Summer now to come in golden heat
And waves of incandescence and giddy storms,
In our fathers’ manner we’d guide our dusty feet
To the shore, our ablutions to perform.

COLOUR THE SEASON

ADRIAN BROOKES

Colour the season
In tones of mellow light
Summer dream's receding
On winds of autumn night
And hearts that burned with certainty
Like scattered embers fled
And parting leaves so much unsaid

What was forever
Shadows into doubt
Eternity has had its day
And won't see the winter out
A love transcending all of time
Is now a memory
And the mountains fall into the sea

VICTORIA. WINTER. 2020.

GUENTER SAHR

This covid-grey world to which I am condemned
encircles me, shuts out
the warmth of sun on winter's days.

Its covid-constrictor sucks
strength from the bellows in my chest,
puts my pumping heart to the test.

My horizons recede.

At 3:00am the clock slings out
its titanium grappling-hooks to fasten
in the sockets of my eyes.

The undulating velvet night
concedes its fraudulent foundations,
lets fly the barking coughs of corvus flocks.

HEAVENLY QUEEN MAZU

WENDY RATAWA

Inward in the morning light, outward towards the sunset,
they see her shining bright near meandering Maribyrnong.
She glows in female holy air though with a body of steel.
There are no fences only an invitation to visit the Tao
temple,

engage with the Asian stranger, respect another viewpoint,
warm to the story of Mazu, a generous woman who healed,
helped, inspired, protected, in China's medieval times.
Today we show respect by listening, with patience and a
sense of quietude.

We pray for a blessing to this land, to welcome refugees with
a new home,
heal people once bereft and adrift in rocking boats, in stormy
seas.

LIFE, THROUGH A TRAIN WINDOW

ENA ROACH

The train oozes
out of the station past
derelict railway trucks rusting
sheds backs of shops gaudy
with graffiti
grey silos grey stone churches
factories towering chimneys
full of history
high piles of woodchips : wanton
destruction of trees.

*Then a glimpse of the bay
shimmering silver-blue
early light winking on the water*

Beside the tracks: broken bottles
pieces of plastic foam boxes
soggy cardboard busted pipes
one worn boot
a torn rug once a comfort.
On its side a blackened
car-body. What nightmare
is its story?

Close by out of the rubble

*a thistle thrusts defiant
its regal purple bloom*

A high flame signals
the refinery, after that
*farmland : grazing cows
sheep a lone alpaca
old windmills rest beside dams.
The You-Yangs
in the distance
standing guard.*

In the wind, jagged scraps
of black plastic snagged
on a fence flap snap
like a frantic trapped
black crow.

*A back yard.
A woman and a child
excited
wave to the train.
Behind them
a line of white washing
in the wind waving.*

A mattress soiled
with the stains of living

heaved out
in sorrow or disgust.

*A bird picks at a rip
in the cover
tweaks out stuff
to soften her nest.*

A sodden teddy-bear
minus arm minus eye
once loved dearly
now abandoned
along with childhood.

*A peppercorn tree
leaves fluttering stirring
memories of ubiquitous
schoolyard peppercorns
lunchtime games and
laughter*

On one side, seas
of grey roofs pressing
on grey houses pressing
each other. It's called
development.

*Opposite, vast stretches
of canola glowing gold.*

Rain drizzles at the window;
vision blurs.

The train eases
into a platform
people get off people get on
shoving scurrying hurtling
towards purpose
or promise.

*Rain eases. Sunlight conjures
a rainbow. At its end
a destination.*

THE MINCÉIRI OF ENNIS

VICKI LONG

On the fringes,
on a band of green, close to railway tracks,
a rattle of '*stick 'n tin*' caravans, gather.

Passing bystanders. Passing judgments.

'Tsk, tsk, much too small to rear a family in'
but room enough to raise a storm in a teacup.
'Dregs of society', stirred by middle-class fears.

Tell-tale signs

A car unhitched – rear-end sagging.
Twine tied from fence to tree – washing hung out to dry.

Chattels trickle out, finding their place effortlessly

Folding chairs and tables. Crates for extra seats.
Mis-matched plates completed by boiled ham and soda
bread
A blackthorn shillelagh rests against a chair.
A concertina shares space with a pack of well-worn tarot
cards.

A new pair of shoes stuffed with wet paper and a copper coin.

Bicycles rest on pedals worn thin.

Battered saucepans house an array of geraniums, sub-let by weeds.

Whispers of permanence.

From an open window, a lacy sepia-stained curtain is swept up by the cool winds gathering. Outside a small army of local children hurl their daily chorus of abuse.

Paint bleeds on tin – layers of contempt brushed over, and another cracked window to tape.

Refusing to conform. Refusing to be bricked in.

On the fringes,
on a band of green, close to railway tracks,
a rattle of '*stick 'n tin*' caravans, remain.

FREEDOM

POLLY ROSE

When I think about freedom,
I can only remember
the single bird I saw,
perched on a branch,
overhanging the river;
the sounds of footsteps,
trudging through mud,
after the rain;
the scent of gums,
grey-green and misty,
glistening with raindrops;
the high sweet note,
piped by a bird,
floating through leaves;
the crisp winter wind;
the bridge in the mist;
the rustle of grasses;
the ducks sailing by;
the day's moving onward;
I think with all these
blessings around me,
that this must be it!
What it is to be free!

PEACE. RELIEF.

REE HOGAN

Walking along the shore of
treasured beach. Low tide,
sunset caressed billowing
clouds tinged with hues of
orange, silver, mauve, blue.

Swell barely existent.
Ocean's sound, soothing backdrop
as thoughts glide in and out
surrender effort to find peace—
almost imperceptibly.

Soul medicine transmits beneath
earthbound, unpedicured feet.
Ionised sea air cleanses, mind clears.
Lungs expand effortlessly
Easier to breathe. Relief!

SHE OAKS

RICHARD McCULLOUGH

I happened down to Shelford
When twenty years of age
A jolly family picnic,
Then, picnics were the rage.
The humid weather bid me,
Seek shelter from the sun,
So I got beneath a she oak,
To relieve the stinging bite
The breeze that cooled
My forehead,
Could sing, and what it sang was,
'Human I am lonely,
Entirely left for dead.'
The other she oaks echoed
In perfect harmony,
The morbid tune that told me,
That she oaks are not me

SILENCE AND SHYNESS

IVOR STEVEN

I hear the digital clock's shyness
My unruffled day feels timeless
Alone and listening to the silence
Of the muzzled arctic breeze
A quiet zephyr's foreboding freeze

I hear the garden snail's widow
Sliding up the kitchen window
Her silvery trail grates and slithers
Along the cold pane's dirty rivers

I hear an earthworm digging
His defiant endeavours are deafening
Blindly shovelling the muddy ground
A dark burrow where he cannot be found

FINAL HOURS

MICHAEL CAINS

Trod lightly in a world that meant you no harm
Your sad lonely smile, no pain only charm.
The world owed you nothing and paid out even less
Just cigarettes and alcohol, to mask any stress.

Leaving the world without note of your passing
No hint of goodbye, no thanks for the asking.
One lonely taxi to a hospital bed
Knew what was happening, words best left unsaid.

Doctors unable to save you from dying
Sliding from life, with no reason for crying.
Farewells and remorse were not part of you
Fade away with machines, in a room with no view.

I stood there and stared at the brother I had
Wondering of both, who was sane or was mad?
Rasping of breath told it would not be long
Leaving a world, where you didn't quite belong.

Our mother was there but not quite believing
Unsure what was happening, quietly grieving.
Her youngest she loved whatever he did
The tears would come later, red eyes she hid.

Goodbye to the brother I never quite knew
Kept all at a distance, no matter who.
You never were close to those who most cared
Slid away quietly, your suffering spared.

STORIES WRITTEN INTO HANDS

JO CURTAIN

When she suddenly felt like talking about the time, Dad left me home alone. Summer 1974, screaming—muggy stale air and a plant wilts on the balcony. She squints, feet ginger on the blistering pavement. She sees them at the front bar, Dad and Molly. The-other-woman. His wife. She tugged at the loose flaps of skin around her brittle fingernails stirring the torment buried deep.

—tell me what happened.

—oh, nothing I gave them what-for.

My mum told more stories. Like the time she stabbed his hand to the table – that shut him up. What? What was that look for? What was she meant to do – swallow more abuse? I sat cross-legged. Small, squidgy hands cradled my head—Minnie in my lap – and. The walls. Shouting nasty accusations and hateful, pleading replies.

Sometimes Molly looked after me. She gave me the rings that she could no longer fit over her gnarly fingers, deformed by arthritis. She slurped tea from a saucer and poked at a screeching pot of lamb tongues, fork tongues. She had her stories too.

I knew we were not like other families. We were a sometimes family.

My dad didn't know the meaning of moderation. I found out family secrets. I had questions. Mum said she didn't realise he was like he was, and once she did, it was too late.

On both an ordinary and extraordinary Sunday night, the police knocked on our door.

—*I thought they said your father is dead.*

It was the first funeral I had been to. Dad brushed away his tears with rough, calloused hands. He held his stories close. I took a single white rose home. I knew that by the next day it would be wilted.

WHERE NO ONE KNOWS YOUR NAME, I WILL LEARN IT

JEREMY PALMER

Here: my presence distilled.
In this hour, if you'll have me,
I will be companion to you:
witness to your simplest existence.

A friend in an unfamiliar, liminal land;
where no one knows your name, I will learn it,
your favourite colour,
the house you lived in as a child.

I will come empty, so the melodies of your
life may resound in me,
and you may hear them, clearer than before.

I will come empty, so in my eyes
you may catch your own reflection
and meet it like a sweet, blameless stranger.

We can speak or not speak,
we can stare at the floor together.
Happily, I will sit and breathe beside you.

I know the difference it can make:
a familiar tree waving on the side of the
highway; a robin fluttered in
amidst the grey walls and corridors;
a second cup of coffee
on the table beside yours,
steam curling in sync in the air.

IN MY GORGEOUS GEAR

BRUCE SHEARER

In my gorgeous gear, I'll be someone new. Enchant the world with a stunning view. It will marvel at the things I do, I'll never more be lonely. And you had better believe it. In my dazzling garb I will prop and prance, shimmy here and there, none shall look askance. I'll be just the thing at the local dance and never more be lonely. I will be cutting out all brushes with loneliness and her friends, awkwardness and sadness. With the latest style, in the mirror I'll preen. Go to all the spots, I've never been. My hair shall glow, my teeth shall gleam and never more be lonely. We shouldn't forget merciless and shameless for they never forget us. In my trendy threads, I'll be up to scratch. In the street they'll say, there goes a catch, as I stroll along, with such dispatch and never more be lonely. We must include mirthless and endless as they definitely like to be included in everything, and I mean everything. In my gorgeous gear, I can cavort, do all the things I shouldn't ought, I'll never wear the things Mum bought. I hope, I really do hope, I won't be lonely.

PERHAPS A WEDDING DRESS

ROBIN MATHER

'Come back,
please come back.'
Letters followed me
around England
and Scotland
and Ireland.

In a Dublin shop window
a pale blue dress and jacket
knitted in Irish linen,
garter stitch,
lace ruffles at neck and wrists.
'It's been waiting for you'
said the salesgirl with an Irish lilt.

Travel plans change,
Corfu revisited,
but 'happy ever after' a fairy story after all.

The pale blue Irish linen
went to dinner parties
and children's speech nights
and weddings,
only ever as a guest.

I LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND SEE ...

ANNE CONGIU

Landscapes ravaged by fires
singed trees homes and livestock
lives families and futures destroyed

Flood damaged valleys
cities and townships
sliced cliff edges
eroding sediment leaching nutrients

Deadly earthquakes
hurricanes typhoons and cyclones
spiralling sucking and throwing
showing nature's force

Avalanches surprise
rapid fast and unexpected
sliding covering
suffocating

I return to the mirror and see

Regrowth and new buds
Birds and animals foraging

Clean-ups and new starts
Survivals and miracles

I now see the new me

IN A LOOP

KERSTIN LINDROS

A roaring propeller plane in my chest
I know it, my frightened heart,
from other times like this

First, persistent rebuttals
chasing the Irrlichter² of false hope
when life, suddenly, presents bleakness and gloom

Indignant casting of blame
the pounding rhythm of anger
and smouldering guilt, unyielding

before the breathy whisper of *if only*—
a pulsing echo in the veins—
and an attempt to bargain regret for what was

A furious sky swallows my now-tired shell
the weight of cold night falls on the day
and lonely silence follows, lonely

² from German, meaning will-o'-the-wisps

silence, in the cradle of passing time, until a tentative
ray of light heals my broken spirit and I see
a white flag slowly rise on the horizon

and its soft fabric touches down, a warm caress,
and I know everything will be okay,
until another time like this.

TO ONE APPROACHING THE THRESHOLD

JEREMY PALMER

We are alike, we two, in more ways than we are not,
and of the two of us, it seems, you are
first to cross the threshold
and meet the great Mystery at the close of this life.

You were called first (I know by your gown
and mechanical bed),
but it might have just as easily been me.

In any event, I won't be far behind you;
be it days or be it decades,
the door you now pass through is destiny of all.

I wonder, when it comes my time to follow,
could you reach your hand
from the other side of that door?
save a seat on the ferry? help show me around
once I've peeled from my body,
returned it to the keeping of the earth?

This is the part where you'd think we'd be
saying goodbye,
but 'goodbye' doesn't feel right,
like it misunderstands something so essential
to the point of the Universe.
I can't say what it is, but it makes me smile—
even while tears are gathering in my eyes—
whisper 'thank you' instead of feeling cheated.

And so I take your hand and squeeze it
—like this—
look you in the eye,
tell you nakedly how glad I am
to call you my friend:
to have walked with you,
even just a handful of steps,
—even while your body
was fixed to a bed—
to have flown in formation,
for even one billow of the wind.

THE SCIENTIFIC ASTROLOGER

$\sum \frac{1}{2}mv^2_{\text{before}} = \sum \frac{1}{2}mv^2_{\text{after}}$
*'kinetic energy is conserved in elastic collisions'*³

INDRANI PERERA

I got straight As
until at 15 years of age
I met Doppler
and Newton's Laws of Motion
while staring surreptitiously
at the boy
I couldn't grasp.

In the messy garage
behind the garden tools sprouting cobwebs
and the empty buckets of paint
growing blooms of rust
sat reams of foxed and faded paper
a home for silver fish
brooding in bulging and battered boxes
an aborted attempt
to find a correlation
between the orbits of celestial bodies
and the trajectory of human lives
hundreds of surveys

³ https://senior-secondary.scsa.wa.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/141354/Physics-Y11-Syllabus-AC-ATARGD.pdf

with answers
never collated
responses to questions
never analysed
and a hypothesis
never validated.

My dad, the scientific astrologer
predicted the questions
on my next physics test
he showed me the formulas
and how to unravel the answers
I did my best to remember
the sequence of steps
to solve the equations
but I never figured out
why the boy
across the room
liked my best friend
better than me.

LISA'S WORTH

BARBARA GURNEY

You can't

Can't

Can't

You're no good

No good

No good

Words that nibble at confidence

Words that swallow accolades:

compliments

promotions

honours

Huddled in a cocoon of doubt, Lisa succumbs to the dire
predictions

There's no escaping the tentacles of rejection

There's no escaping the tentacles of dejection

She is all she's been told

She is all of those expectations

Lisa's shoulders droop

The tightness in her throat keeps the bile at bay

She reaches for the compensation of praise
She reaches for the compensation of acknowledgement
 well done
 fabulous
 believe in yourself

Her nook of comfort zone wraps around hope, but loosens
as *no good* screams again.
She only believes in *can't*

Why is Lisa's worth enclosed in a few malicious words
Words which have so much power
Words which shouldn't have so much power

Please, Lisa.
Cast them away
Be done with them
You can
 Can
 Can

TAKEN

DANNI QUINLIVAN

My friends were in the bed next to us
Yet I couldn't call out to them
I let it happen, encouraged it even
I just wanted it to be over
I wanted it to never have started
I wish I never met him
That I could forget his voice, forget his face
He took a part of me I will never get back
When it was over, I lay naked from the waist down under
my friends' bed
A shell of myself
I felt most safe here

The next day I showered for hours
Trying to wash the night before away
Why me, why now
If the running water had fixed it, I would never have left
I couldn't tell my friends
You can't just say you stayed in all day to wash his touch off
your body
To wash the filth away
What could they do anyway
It had already been done

I was broken
Half the person I'd been

WHEN I GROW UP I WANT TO BE A JOCKEY

JO CURTAIN

Just like a dream. Milly Mac eats sausages and mash swimming in gravy and chews her fingernails and she is a child again.

Without hesitation. Instantaneously. I am there. Melancholy hazel eyes. Short and dark. *I am a child* again. 'He loves you in his own special way,' Mum says. I push open an iron-wrought gate, and it happens. A terrace house, unlike the dilapidated dump of my childhood. It is an art gallery done up in tragic grandeur and filled with overpriced art. Like a dream. Without hesitation. *I am a child*. Surry Hills, a suburb in flux ready to shed its working-class credentials for minimalist chic and deconstructed waffledom. I come from a heritage of digging holes, cleaners, alcoholics and gamblers. No war heroes here. The men in my family were blown up, screwed up and hung out to dry. Just like that. I am there. The bugle plays. He hits. She cries. He loses the war. I'm Milly Mac I cut myself shaving my legs. I cut my leg, and a little blood appears. And it does. *I am a child* again. I know ... he loves me in his own special way. Sitting in the psychologist's rooms looking at the sandpit then back at him. I hope it's not contagious. Grim eyes. Men pissing in the street. Gilligan's Island in full swing. Surry Hills a suburb in flux. Like a dream.

Just like that. Short and dark. The poster says, “Girls, can do anything.” She tells me to be independent. She tells me not to depend on a man. I’m too short. My hair won’t sit properly. *I’m a little cut girl* in Surry Hills. Melancholy hazel eyes. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb. Working-class dumb-ass. ‘I’m gonna be a jockey when I grow up.’

LIVING ON THE PERIPHERY

COLLEEN McGRATH

A disease so rare, they could not name
A string of doctors, a string of guesses
Post-Polio Syndrome or delayed development
Will I ever know?

Failed to thrive, said another, suggestive of surrender
I'll place you in the 'too hard basket'
as he hurried out the door
Was I truly 'too hard' or did he just not care!

Slow of walk, many falls to follow
Classmates teased 'You walk too funny'
I played their games, always last pick
I swallowed my dignity and played anyway.

Slow of thought, teachers failed to see
My concentration played tricks on me
I needed more time to absorb their words
Instead, I was punished for dreaming in class.

Those were the days when conformity reigned
No heart for the child lonely and lost
No time to meet the needs of the child
No kindness to spare in classes so large.

College was easier, Miss Audrey I adored
She gave the time I needed to learn.
Surgeries in year nine and more to follow
put schooling on hold, a number of times.

My condition declining, yet still not named
'What's wrong with you?' many would ask
I had no answers, was lost for words
Alone in a world not meant for me.

Ventilator-dependent and wearing a mask,
Children and adults, turn and stare
Little ones hushed, as you steel a guilty glance
I suffer your stares and offer a smile.

If only you'd ask, I'd be happy to share
I'm not so different from you
A smile, a wave, an occasional word
We live in a world where many don't see.

As hard as it's been I've lived a full life
I've travelled abroad and earned a degree.
With wheelchair and new-found confidence,
A world of possibilities opens to me.

RUSTING IN PEACE

DIANE KOLOMEITZ

A towering wall of demon tongues from Hell
Has tortured trees that dared to hold their stance,
Writhing in ecstasy, a devil dance.
No-one was nigh to sound a warning bell,
To wake the startled bush life from their trance
And see them safely to a final crypt—
Where, having breathed last scent of eucalypt,
Their bodies, like the bush, the fires fell.

The earth so dry, where once the grassy fields
Of hopeful farmers waved their silky fronds,
Sustains no green, but only brown and bronze
Where cowering life in grim acceptance yields.
Yet here, a strange thing, with no living bonds
To tie it somehow to this wasted place—
This dire, dead, apocalyptic space—
Its rusting body where no structure shields.

Misplaced and alien in a foreign land,
The lurching, ponderous hulk has come to rest—
A fencer's truck, imported from the west,
Its human cargo gone, now left unmanned.
A hot wind blows – the gaping door in protest

Cries a high-pitched squeal, a lonely note
Across the outback plains, its parched throat
And hinges moan an ode, by smoke drifts fanned.

The fencer left this beast to fare alone
Beneath the surging, blackened clouds on high.
The sagging fence wires curl around a sigh
For fallen heroes. Barbed, they mope and groan
While, stark above ... the endless, bloodshot sky.
The mulga posts are charred, but stand in wait
For one who fenced the stock, who shut the gate,
Who mourned for those of skin and bone.

The burning heat has caused this fire to rage,
One careless act, discarding butt or match,
Igniting undergrowth as dry as thatch.
Leaves crinkled, crackled, like the driest page,
Fanning a blaze too fast for Man to catch.
Old rusting warhorse snorts the sulphurous air
And listing, in defeat it settles there ...
Awaits the fate of Geologic Age.

THE BACK

DAVID ROSSITER

Often passed but never acknowledged,
shouldering the weight of images borne from
boozy lunches and boisterous backslapping,
inches from those floodlights that spruik our needs
—the back of the billboard remains staunch.

Visiting this resolute vendor of
shadow requires stopping, a welcome piss
behind the termite mound, invited by
waving grass on crunchy gravel, being
molested by scrub alert to strangers.

Accompanied by a silent chorus
of butts, bourbon cans and highway fodder,
once pink knickers lay distorted, embedded
in once wet clay. An inquisitive branch
leans over, collecting local gossip.

No flash colours or campaign jargon here.
Vigilant spindly struts penetrating
the ground like Louise Bourgeois spider legs.
Festering cream paint, crusty framework and
streaky bolts promote strength and decadence.

I recall surfing as a teenager
and the severe sunburn that transformed
me into a blistering tempest, mum
daubing my back with calamine lotion.
Vintage relief that set like a tight shirt.

Time delivers fitting scars and rewards,
seasons flow, markets grow, the show goes on.
Behind the main event, the support act,
Anonymous—the back of the billboard.
Never centre stage ... but has seen some things.

THE CREATURE OF THE BLACK LAGOON

DAVID BRIDGE

The Creature of the Black Lagoon
Lay back and let his senses swoon;
Part man, part fish—forgot his woes,
Squeezed mud between his gills and toes.

His scales relaxed and claws retracted,
It would be hours before he acted.
He knew his lines, his screech and roar,
He'd done it many times before.

A product of the nuclear bomb,
Or toxins in the Amazon;
He thought the plots were truly lame,
But loved his share of glitz and fame.

He turned the heat up on the slime
And rang for service: cod and lime.
Another script awaited reading,
He felt his pleasant mood receding.

Directors came, Directors went;
Promises made but seldom meant;
The rumours were of C.G.I.—

A fire glowed in each red eye.
Was he just going through the motions,
Who once brought terror to the Oceans!
He clutched the telephone and dialled
To call his agent, felt quite wild.

Known to be manic when depressed
His calls were handled by the best:
A remake offer on the table
The part was his, if he was able.
Like Giant Ape and Dinosaur,
He knew his worth – and it was more!

Negotiation skills, he had the set,
He'd learnt it from the internet:
Just be outrageous, stamp and shout,
Ignore convention, Twitter out.
He was *the* Creature, one and only,
No online dating, feeling lonely.

With the Mere Maid lovely by his side—
For a minor part she'd be his Bride—
He'd storm the media, top the polls,
Appear with Seinfeld, achieve his goals.

Suffused with pleasure by his plan,
He missed the knocking on his van:

A voice called out 'Your tuna sir!
'Fresh caught today, room temperature.'

He weighed the moment with slight sorrow.
Chose dinner now, the world tomorrow.

ICEBERGS

DIANE KOLOMEITZ

Midst the winter sounds of the southern seas,
Where wide skies frown and the wild wind whips,
And the sea is grimacing, grey with freeze,
In waves that pound and toss the ships,
A bobbing assortment of ice-crusted moulds
Are tossed and turned in the Arctic cold.

They shiver and sweep through the waters' weep,
Thrusting and throbbing, skins are on fire
With a pulse that each desperately seeks to keep.
While the mind dictates, nobody will tire –
Ignoring all warning, enjoying the morning,
Rejoicing in a new day's dawning.

These old bodies swim, as they always do,
Braving the tides in all kinds of weather.
Then, they flail on the sand, the water like dew
On their grease-coated bodies, their skins like leather,
With a sheen, like seals, washed up from the deep,
As up through the seaweed they wobble and creep.

MUSCA DOMESTICA

KEVIN DRUM

I'm tiny and harmless and live a short life
But my days are full of peril and strife
I'm unable to sting and seldom bite
And poisonous I'm not, but my power is might
In summer I thrive in numbers galore
And the whiff of a barbie I just can't ignore

Bewitched, I'm drawn to that heady smell
But unknown to me I'm headed for hell
I'm pursued with a fervour of those hell-bent
My brief life to end with swift killer intent
With weapons in hand and eyes ablaze
I'm swatted and flicked at with murderous rage

My big googly eyes are for self-preservation
As I swiftly dodge their clumsy gyrations
What upsets people so, with one so small?
For neither teeth nor claws I have to bite or maul
As I land to the sound of a frustrated screech
Silent, untroubled, and just out of reach

Others would rather see me die slowly
Strung up from the ceiling like a felon so lowly
I'm stuck to a ribbon with legs held fast
Condemned to starve to the very last
Those smelly new sprays with invisible mist
Are my biggest threat yet as I strive to exist

My big cousin Louie can silence a room
As ears cupped he's sought for his buzzing zoom
He's known to cause a most unholy stir
As he's hunted down for his bothersome whirr
He's the jumbo-jet of my related species
Our mutual best interest, decaying faeces

My babies too, are reviled from birth
How could you not love them for all they're worth
So cute plump and white, with a wriggly action
As they rid the earth of its putrefaction
So next time you see me flit idly by
Let me hear just sweet words ... he wouldn't hurt a fly

DINOSAUR DAN AND THE AFLW

TOM ADAIR

Dinosaur Dan had just returned,
to the modern world he spurned.
He had fled the Yuppie pack,
to retrace the old Oodnadatta track.

In the pub he heard a yarn,
'What? Sheilas playing footy? Garn.
Pull the other one, it plays the Queen.
That's the stupidest thing I've ever seen.'

'Nah. You're having me on.
I know I'm a bit of a nong
but even I know
that's a boat that will not row.'

Dino Dan ranted and raved,
'In war, the world we saved.
So stupid sheilas could spoil
all of our sacrifice and toil?'

Dan, he pulled his hair.
He screamed, 'That's not fair.'
He dashed his hat onto the floor
and, in a fury, fled out the door.

Soon, Dan meekly poked his head
around the door of the shed.
Tears glistened in his eye.
He knew time had passed him by.

‘Please tell me you’re jokin’.
I know I like a little proddin’
but tell me it’s not true.
Christ, this is Australia, Blue.’

Blue shook his head in sadness.
‘I know. It’s total madness.
But the female crew
has its own AFLW.’

‘AFL what?’ asked a shaken Dan.
AFLW. Stands for AFL Woman.’
‘Stands for bloody stupid
bleep, bleepin, bleep.’ Dan exploded.

‘Oi. Stop cussin’, old codger,
or I’ll make you a hospital lodger.’
So said the barmaid beauty, Ruth,
fierce and very long in the tooth.

Dinosaur Dan looked down in fear,
and slowly sipped his beer.
Not in the least deterred,
‘What can we do?’ he whispered.

'Nothin'. It's done and dusted,'
said Blue, in a voice all busted.
'They're even paying them, Dan,
We've done all that becomes a man.'

Dan slowly skulled his beer.
'Then there's nothin' left for me here.
You're gutless wonders one and all.
As a man I can still walk tall.'

With a nod and a glance,
his nose high in the air,
he grabbed his swag, slammed the gate,
and waltzed away to his dinosaur fate.

GARY

VICTORIA SPICER

Gary Delaney—naughty boy, crazy boy, retard, pest. Can't read, can't spell, can't minus—Get! Out! Nose pressed to blackboard or outside closed door slammed—*plus*—talks when he shouldn't, spits, flicks lit matches, axes, decapitates cats. Send him to Mr Verso, State School 4853 strap master. Strips of leather of various weight, length and thickness hang like rat tails from his desk, a six-tailed Lochgelly tawse from Scotland his pride and joy. Verso's masterly pleasure is the experiment, exploring the depth of the cut effected by different straps and variation in the arc and speed of his arm. Executed on a raised platform with 30 pairs of watching eyes, he wipes insolent grins from the faces of indolent lads. Hand out. Shadow fall, flick lick shudder. And again. And again. And again. Searing raised ridges above dark ribbons of blood.

Gary Delaney—a snip, a snail, a puppy dog tail—runs through the breezeway, tossing stones at lapping tin troughs and flicking elastic at the legs of huddles of hand game playing girls. Out onto the football ground. He darts and weaves and marks and kicks. He is masterly, taking pleasure in the experience, experimenting with different kicks and arcs and angles. He's gunna play for Collingwood when he grows up.

HUNTING ME

PAULINE RIMMER

My legs are folded, body cramping
I hear footsteps—are they advancing?
My breath is held, I strain to hear
My senses tell me someone's near
A drop of sweat runs from my brow
Oh please don't let him find me now
I tremble in this small dark space
Praying I don't see his face
In horror I hear him advance
I'm trapped and I don't stand a chance
The lid lifts, my heart does a skip
I scream as I feel his strong grip
I struggle as I'm pulled outside
'You're it!' he yells, and runs to hide

I AM LOST

EDWARD REILLY

Horace. *Odes*, 1.xxv 'Quo me, Bacche?'

I am lost in this place, thick reeds clustered in serried ranks
By a turgid stream: a rough path, basalt rocks and junk,
Even a burnt-out car, all strewn along the embankment.
My steps have led me astray.

Yestereve, when the moon was as white as milk
And crowned with a rainbowed halo, magnificent,
The party was blasting all night long, girls in silk
Dancing up a riotous storm,

Then we plunged into our hostess's azure pool,
And laughed, despite the bitter cold, ran through groves
Like beastly children, each of us playing the fool,
Stars laughing at our games.

Lead me back to the enchanted palace by the lake,
Place one foot ahead of the other, so to arrive
Where the wild Mænads have reverted to maidenly estate,
And I resume my vinous crown.

THE LAST NIGHT IN NAGANO

CHARLES MANILA

How long has it been since I've known you?
We watched the orchestral haze of steam from the hot
springs,
cover the starlit skies, on my last night in Nagano.
Wandering amongst the quiet hustle,
swallowed in culture, immersed in colourful lantern lights, of
pink, of orange,
unanchored by our weary bodies but fuelled,
by the spirit of adventure, chasing elusive elation,
or just desperation,
to stay one more day and bargain for one more memory,
to be packed away in my suitcase heart.
Two weeks I spent travelling around the country,
twenty-eight years my wayfaring soul roamed the world,
amidst all the storms and snow,
to be here.

WITHIN THE BORA RING

DAVID JONES

Overhead, red-tailed black cockatoos call
dry leaves rattle in branches
ancient trees sway
in harmony

to movement of a pointless breeze
little respite from sullen heat
legacy of parched earth

the brow of a sandstone escarpment
offers its frown of concern

painted effigies gaze upon my trespass
conflict of warning and welcome
the Quinkan

a panoply of beliefs and understanding
reach from shadows
of light and time

trappings of modernity disappear
campervans, tents, nikon lenses
behind a translucent sphere
I gaze into the hemisphere of time encapsulated

perceive at its base, ripples, vibrations
resonance of a didgeridoo

through the earth
my feet, my body
my being
percolates in my mind
a concentration of 'the before'
essence of man

drawn from the hidden hemisphere
below turbulent sea that divides
whirlpool of mankind and time
tip of an inverted vortex
a holy place
the ring

a congress within concentric circles
germinates the gamete of thought
pulse in veins

painted people
white, red, yellow
ochre from the earth
people bowered by exclusion

atmosphere of dervish intensity
amplifies affinity with nature

from beneath rising dust
absorb wisdom
relevance

osmosis
between subconscious
and conscious
penetrate
the permeable membrane
the dreaming

above
the cockatoo flies
red tail bright against its blackness

at this time, in this place
a harbinger of change
of awakening

erudition
a foetal moment
transmutation of being
draws from meridians of knowledge

hallowed intersect of song-lines
this Bora-Ring
portal
to
I

THE DINGO

PARIS CLIPPERTON-RICHENS

They rummage amongst the memories,
as noses scour the grass and granite for

each breath of ornament; smells soak the
ground. Faraway there are whispers on

the wind, whose passage lends the dog
to a dreaming untold in the marrow

of myth. They have come this far,
tapering paws out of feldspar, quartz and

crust, for their sandy pelt to be worn
down, dredged, their silence stretched

by the scent of those absent; the burrows
beneath hoof and foot; the tussock, dry as the

mute throat.

How does the song find you?
Does it heave like the rocky outcrops,

cooled, and crystallised, waiting for you
to arrive? Perhaps it has always been howling,

unnoticed. The tenor remembering,
seeking to be unearthed.

DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

DAVID BRIDGE

Fourteen years of companionship
Wrapped in white fur and a soft purr.
Now your pink tongue lolled drunkenly
At what we had done to you;
Your last gasp of life as the green dream
Wiped you from this world.

Executed you like some death row killer:
Blue coated technician pressing the plunger
That takes you to God knows where.
Suddenly, you're no longer here;
Your eyes stare but your shrunken body sags,
Robbed of its last muscular sleekness.

How can we be responsible,
Do this with compassion?
Execute in love,
You and disease inseparable.
Still warm we wrap you, carry you clutched,
A limp package through the drizzle.
Bury you in a hard-fought trench beneath the fig,
Roots mashed to give you cover;
Rude broken earth crudely covers our

Long, freshly severed relationship.
We gulp guiltily as
Practicalities overwhelm our tears
Temporarily.
Time enough to massage regret
Mixed with glad remembrance.

A BUSHMAN IN HIS HEART

ROB J WARREN

Some said he was a larrikin
others weren't too sure
all they knew was when he worked
he did his work and more
Some thought he was a drover
but they couldn't know
for everything about himself
he just wouldn't let it show
One thing they knew for certain
his spirit was so strong
A quiet man who kept to himself
that's how he got along.

Perhaps if they had asked him,
asked him from the start
then he would have told them
he was a bushman in his heart
It didn't matter to him
if his friends chose to part
He always had the Australian bush
He was a bushman in his heart.

He never asked for favours
just a cup of tea
and he was tough and strong
just like an ironbark tree
He never worked with others
he worked better when alone
and after the work had ended
he said he was going home
To home
now that the work was finished
he steered his horse and cart
and he knew he'd always be
a bushman in his heart

His cabin was just made of wood
and made with his own hands
the city life was not for him
in the Australian bush he'd made his stand.

And now as the day was ending
and as the sun was going down
he knew tomorrow was a busy day
he had to go to town.

He liked to listen to the many birds
sing their wondrous songs
and in the Australian bush

he found he could do no wrong
That night as he boiled his billy
and as his fire lit up the dark
he knew he'd always been
a bushman in his heart.

HORROR

THE MISSING

JO CURTAIN

I pass the crooked skyline of Blackwood and a sign that tells me the town has a history. A history of chopping down trees. I stop to read the noticeboard leading to the nature reserve and trace my finger along the trail map—Giants' Rest 16.5 km loop walk. I blanch at the curiousness of the name and my stomach churns in the waiting to gather my strength. I tell myself I can't have a panic attack, but my nervous system ignores my silent pleas and ignites my adrenal glands producing sweaty palms. I run my hands down the side of my thighs. I recently took up yoga: although the changes have been subtle, I now view life through different eyes. I cannot harbour any more guilt for the families and their loved ones. I tried my best to be a voice, but the police ignored my pleas. I decided to look. I take hold of the folder. A peculiar item left at my front door three months ago containing images of people missing. Missing after walking Giants' Rest. Innocents. Unsuspecting. Aunties, young men, married couples.

I am normally a careful person. Despite this, I look the other way. I flick caution to the wind. I feel a pull that has no logic, no reason, it is just ... a feeling. Or is it? Despite my hesitation, I am compelled to follow the rust-coloured tannin creek meandering along the narrow path of grasses spreading out into expansive pools. Like an inland sea, islands of green paddocks pop up as refuges for the sedate cows. All heads nod

towards an uncertain horizon. The air sizzles with the electric sounds of the insect industry. They are all business. Beyond the sway of private properties and rotting posts of progress, the waterlogged path leads me to a wooded wall of giants. I look back towards the small farms and rusted barbed wire; a cool wind blows, rustling the leaves like a field of whispers.

I look up at the giants, so high they cast no shadow in the watery afternoon sunshine. Tentatively, I take my first steps into the forest. Surprised by the stillness, I pull my legs through ankle length grasses and my heart thumps hard. I'm used to silence; I live alone but I'm not lonely—it is how I like it. Space to write, to draw and dabble—besides I'm never really alone: I have a dog, I develop a rhythm to my stride and put aside my earlier nerves. My mother always said I was too clumsy for outdoor activities, but in nature I don't have to pretend to be agile and swift—I can just be. It's a refuge from the frenetic pace of the cityscape that has never truly been my home. Not in a spiritual sense like I feel here, or more precisely, places like this. It's a peace that I could happily sit in, lie down in and wile away the days in doing nothing.

Deep in thought, I don't notice the thick fog roll in shrouding the giants' verdant heads. The temperature drops and dampness seeps into the air. It seeps into my hair flattening my fringe to my forehead, it seeps through the sleeves of my jumper, and it seeps in between the layers of leaf foliage reaching into the rich fertile soil. I squeeze my arms across my chest and the hairs at the back of my neck rise. Strange. It feels like I'm being watched. I turn towards the disappearing light and my legs lift from under me. I meet the

ground with a thud. My head turns earth to sky earth to sky earth to sky. Then the sky dissolves as the giants lean together. My eyes wide open see the faces of the missing. Their screaming masks are in the trees. Swallowed. A piercing silence is the only sound in the forest.

Unable to move I feel claw-like hands hold me still. Vines erupt from the earth: bending, sinuous limbs twist around my forehead, torso, arms and legs, pulling me underground. And ever so softly, softly pack me into the ground. I hardly make a sound. I breathe in the earth. Sodden leaves and dirt seal my nose and ears and mouth, my lungs are saturated with rotting mass, grit fills my fingernails, my hips groan. A colony of insects moves into action. The sky thunders and the giants' heads part. Rain turns the ground to mud. And so, begins the business of breaking down, recycling and emulsifying.

It is many months—or is it years, I cannot tell—that I dig my way out. I sigh. So far below it had not been an easy climb. The giants had done a good job. I feel the many holes, indentations and empty spaces. Ragged cloth hangs tangled around my ankles. My fingers run along bone, impressions of sinew and muscle. I stand in my unmarked grave and intuitively know what I have to do. I begin to mould my body back together: I till clumps of the rich fertile soil, gather up the earth crawling with wriggling worms and slinking bugs, and pack them into the spaces and crevices. I fill my hip sockets, my pelvis, I round my hips, thighs and stomach. I fill my neck, spine, and eyes. I sculpt myself back together again. Mud squelches through the gaps where my toes used to be.

As I busily mould and shape I think of the creatures I have nourished. The larvae of the house flies, the blowflies, the flesh flies and beetles. The bush cockroaches that made their home in my hair and the mites and scurrying beetles. The birds, the mice and the spotted quolls. I have made life. I feel at peace. The air is thickening with moisture. It is nearly time. A fog is drifting in, and I feel the giants waking.

I turn my skull towards the sound of footsteps. The bones in my feet rattle. Unable to hear, I feel the vibrations through the forest floor. The rustling grows closer. I finish rounding my breasts. I look down and my new body moves with life. I widen my jaw bones and crumbling teeth into a smile and silently wait to greet my guests.

TELL-TALE

DAVID BRIDGE

'I knew you'd come eventually. I'm glad really, it's important that you hear my side of the story. You live next door to that racket day in, day out and see how you fare.

'He was forever knocking walls down and putting in something or other. Nothing of the old house was ever good enough. I said, "You're cracking my walls as well as my ears," but he wouldn't listen.

'I told him, "I've written to the Council, let them know what you're doing," but he said they wouldn't believe me. "It's all in your imagination."

'That was his attitude, "It's all in your head, F-Wit." Couldn't open his mouth without swearing.

"Look here," I said, "that crack from the corner of my door where I've stuck the strand across. It's growing wider. You can see for yourself."

'It made no difference. He'd be up at the crack of dawn banging and drilling. Scarcely stopped till nightfall. Days on end. Knocked back his beers then out like a light till he started again.

'One night I went round to have words and there he was stretched out on the sofa. Tools everywhere. Spark out and me unable to sleep for ever. His mouth gaped and it was more than I could do to stop myself. I picked up a bag of ready mix

and poured it down his throat. No comebacks this time. His eyes bulged, his chest heaved and that was it. Silenced at last.

‘If only he’d stayed that way, under the floor. Who knew he’d ferment quite so quickly and push the boards apart, giving the game away? Strange, the Council Inspector saw nothing wrong with his work.

‘I see you nodding. Now my tale is told, I’m ready. You may pull the lever now.’

ONE DAY AT HOME

GEOFFREY GASKILL

Dolores loved her front room. It was always filled with light and laughter. She was proud to bring visitors there and stand back to listen to their gushing praises.

‘So bright!’

‘So cheery.’

Dolores would smile. ‘Yes. It’s my favourite room.’

That was then.

This is now.

Today Dolores is sitting on the floor. But the room is not bright and filled with laughter. There is no sound to be heard save the purr of the rain outside. As a rule she doesn’t sit on the floor but, under the circumstances, sitting anywhere else on a day like this would seem inappropriate. She is determined to eschew such things.

Maybe tomorrow will be better and she can go back to enjoying the room. But not today.

What colour is left in the sky outside muscles its way past the curtains, past her. She can only think of this remaining light as a *he* because it is hard and, as a rule, women are not. But there are always exceptions.

Intruding as he does, he is impatient with bright or cheery. Unlike visitors in days gone by, he is a bruised, unwelcome visitor. No words of admiration from this one. If Dolores were to reflect upon it, she would call him a bully bent on invading

her favourite space, determined to hurt her. She's known such ruffianism before, but today is different.

Then there is the rain. Unlike the light it is soft and it blankets the world outside at the same time caressing the windows like a lover. But those images seem too poetic for such a moment as this.

Today marks an end. All love dies. It's one of those universal truths. What is left is tears. And another universal truth is that tears do not.

The romantic in her would say that though love may end, each ending marks a new beginning.

She sighs. It's all too much. She doesn't want to think about love but thinking and dreaming are all she now has left.

Think.

Dream.

Yes.

No.

Maybe.

Cutting through the purr of rain is the plink of the rainwater in the downpipes. It is marking the end, counting the seconds of her life left to her. Even though she's not looking through the windows, she sees the clouds. They are the colour of bruises. She is familiar with that colour. When she was little clouds were the puffy white of innocence. She used to lie on her back and imagine shapes. She would count them, wishing away the days before her prince would come and sweep her off her feet.

Thinking makes her realise she has not done the dusting. The rags should be in the washer, the ironing basket emptied

and everything stored away. The evening meal should be ready to serve.

It's what she does. It's expected.

But not today.

She has been distracted. She'll worry about such things tomorrow. Tomorrow is a new day—a new beginning. Like walking through new doors or opening new windows. Maybe even finding new love.

And love has marriage.

Despite the lack of an evening meal, she might make herself eat something later when ... if ... she can gather enough energy. It will be a meal alone. Her first meal alone in

...

It's so long ago that's hard to remember.

So. No dusting. No ironing. No evening meal.

And no light and no laughter. When did all that stop?

She can't remember. Maybe tomorrow when she has made her peace with the world she will.

Runnels of water flow down the windowpanes and reflect onto the wall. Like streams of tears.

She has to think hard when she last shed tears—or even a single tear. It was the day Mallory died. All those years that feel like yesterday.

Mallory. Always difficult, always beautiful. She is in a better place now. That is a comfort. 'You were too beautiful for this world,' Dolores whispered to her child's coffin. It's something she says in her prayers every day. 'Too beautiful for this world.' It's what she said when she put Mallory's ashes on

the shelf above the fireplace. That is also why this is her favourite room. Mallory is always here.

Dolores knows she should get up because there are other things than housework to be done. She sees the first fingers of evening crawling up the walls. They resemble long, black caterpillars inching, searching for a home to spin the web of night through the room.

Overnight they will hatch into the glorious butterflies of the day.

She used to think of this daily ritual of creeping shadows as something sinister. She hated the coming of the night. Mallory's urn always seemed in danger of being stolen from her. Each morning she'd sigh when she saw the urn still in its place. The dark has light. Like doors have windows. Horses have carriages.

And love has marriage.

And Mallory was with her for another day.

As Dolores stands, she sees Rob, her husband. Unlike her, he is lying on his back. She doesn't know what it is he's staring at. Perhaps the ceiling and its ornate rose. Perhaps at the urn where Mallory lives on. Perhaps nothing.

Neither of them makes a move to turn on the light. Perhaps they like the gloom. Perhaps they can't be bothered. Perhaps they want to enjoy the coming of the night in each other's company.

Perhaps.

Perhaps.

Perhaps.

What they don't look at is the speckled wallpaper. There are a lot of red flecks that glitter despite the crawling fingers of shadow. Those flecks are almost pretty. Like bunches of small, red flowers. Dolores always loved red. 'It's my favourite colour. I like red roses too.'

'Flowers are for women,' Rob said when she told him she wanted to replace the wallpaper.

'For Mallory to come home to a bright and cheerful house.'

'If you want to put up new wallpaper, you can choose it, but you do it.'

So she did. Just for Mallory. Gloomy room became favourite room even if the flowers weren't red roses. The wallpaper was white with small red speckles. Dollops of blood on snow.

Up in a corner, perhaps to where Rob was staring, the wallpaper has come away and hangs like a small tongue. Time will do that. It speaks of exhaustion like a panting dog. Dolores and the wallpaper have one more thing in common.

'I should move,' Dolores says aloud but Rob says nothing. She doesn't look at him.

A lifetime of living together might have been in that one movement.

She moves.

He doesn't.

Her first job now will be to find some place to put the cat. Instead of burying it, maybe she'll put its ashes beside Mallory's on the shelf. Mallory would like that. She always liked pets.

Rob had dropped the cat at her feet when he came in after work. 'Your cat,' he'd said, pointing to it. 'I want you to look at it. There's a lesson there.'

She looked at Rob. She had no time for tears. 'You're right,' she said instead.

'Is dinner ready?'

On her way to the kitchen, she stopped at the door. 'I have learned my lesson,' she said. 'I won't be long.'

When she returned he was in his chair, reading his paper. The cat still lay on the floor.

He didn't look up. 'Is it time?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'It is time.'

'You should take care of your cat,' he said turning a page.

That was the last thing he'd said about the cat.

About her.

About time.

Dolores fingers the hammer with the care of the most precious object she owns. She caresses it as if she were caressing Mallory's hair. Or when Mallory was no more, the way she stroked her cat.

She looks through the lengthening shadows. The fingers of shadow have crawled across the ceiling and down the wall. They have swallowed each red speckle, each glint of light. They have now reached Rob's face.

As Dolores watches, the darkness seems to wipe the blood and brains away so that in the deepening gloom she can see the shadow of a halo around his head. He looks alive, almost at peace.

Almost.

Just like her.

Tired. Dolores is tired. More than tired. World-weary. It has been a big day. 'I told you,' she tells Rob, 'that one day I would cut you down to size.'

Endings always mark new beginnings. Like doors have windows, horses have carriages, love has marriage.

After years of togetherness, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health what else is there to say?

ASHES TO ASHES

CASSANDRA HOUNSELL

She stands before her audience, her feet planted on the arena floor, the circus at her back. Eager eyes devour her, like black flies feasting on the decaying skin of the dying and damned. They drink her in, their curiosity unquenchable. They tear strips from her with their gazes, greedy fingers of morbid curiosity digging deep and stealing of her.

She lets them. Her teeth are unveiled in a grin so wide it divides her face, a canyon deep. She would close her eyes, but then she would not be able watch their faces flit with their sifting emotions as they watch her. She remembers this feeling, this feeling of pride swelling inside of her, and oh, how she's missed it.

Their faces tell it all; this must be their first time at the circus. She can remember the first time she saw it, too. It was overcast then as it is now, cinereal skies stretched forever above her head as if they were smoke, billowed up from eternal fires.

The tent had stood before her, separating itself from its grey background, a magnificent sight to behold. A dominating mother in red and white, stripes like pearly teeth bared between ruby slicked lips.

She had been holding her dear father's hand when she has first seen it, his calloused palm warm around her tiny fist. She had worn her finest dress, picked it out herself, pale blue swashes of fabric buttoned and laced around her bone-thin frame.

As she and her father had walked from the bizarre archway entrance of buzzing neon lights and gilded serpents and towards the awaiting arms of the tent, the smell of spun sugar and warm butter had seduced itself into her nostrils. The thunder of drums had been calling to her from inside the canvas walls of the big top, the opened slit in the fabric a half-cracked eye of blazing light.

She had been seated not five rows from the circled arena, hip snuggled tightly into her father's thigh, his arm wrapped around her in a protective hold. She'd breathed him in, labourer's salt rubbed into his skin, a memory with her even now.

She can still recollect the music with its tempo that had whipped her heartbeat into a frenzy that night, the spotlight that fell upon the mythic form of the ringmaster as they had paced, a raven to a hollowing carcass across the arena, preening and primping as they went.

It had been a fantastic show, painted always onto the backs of her eyelids with an extravagant palette of burning colours.

She had memorized the acrobats, spiders with their extra limbs plucked off, the clowns that tumbled and bumbled, make-up masks with streaming tears of greens, pinks, oranges. The dancing ladies in their white taffeta tutus, like graceful swans dipping elegant necks in greeting. She could remember the acts that elicited shrieks, that made the audience around her press their backs into their seats, their knuckles turned pale around fistfuls of fabric to still their trembling hands.

There had been the woman so tall it seemed as though she could pluck the stars from the sky. The Siamese twins, one

body between the two but heads that bickered as separately as any other squabbling siblings. The girl-like cat or cat-like a girl—it had been hard to tell—her ink-black tail flicking as she poised herself to pounce, ears flattened to her scalp. There was the man with arms that were snakes, another with a goat's hindquarters. An invisible boy, a levitating girl, a contortionist seemingly without bones.

And then there had been the Jester. It she could recall most vividly of all. An impossibly large creature with gangly limbs like young saplings and an open wound for a smile.

Its magic acts of disappearing objects and psychic card games had rendered the audience at odds with their own emotions—delight and awe at its reality-bending trickery and cold, spine-tingling fear at its horrible skinny black and white clad body and its pitiless, empty eyes. Wells that if you fell into, you would never come back out of.

As its act had begun to draw to a close, forwards it strode into the crowd. The audience scrabbled out of its way but it gave them no mind as it drew to a stop in front of her. Her father had clutched at her but she had not been afraid.

Perhaps with hindsight, she should have been, but you could forgive a child their mistakes.

The Jester had bent on crooked knee, bowing to her as if she were its princess and it her knight, a bouquet of roses that it had snapped from thin air brandished beneath her nose. She had delighted in its attentions of her. So many others in the crowd of spectators and it had chosen her.

It had grinned at her, she had grinned back and then, blackened dead twig fingers unfurled to her. An invite had

been awaiting in the curve of its lined palm. Bells tinkled from its three-pointed hat as its head tilted, waiting for her.

With gleeful acceptance of its offer, she had settled her small hand into its. The Jester's beam had been nothing but teeth, its hollow eyes boring into her own as it led her from her father's side, away from the audience and into the arena.

She had felt as if she would burst with the excitement—it had chosen her!—as she had stared out into the sea of agape faces, the curves in the corners of her mouth dimpling her cheeks. The Jester had bowed and she had bowed with him, little fingers still ensnared in the brambles of its grasp.

And then she had been on fire.

Prickling like a thousand hornets stinging her from the inside as the fire licked from her held hand, up her arm. She had been alight, a little girl shaped inferno. The Jester had thrown back its head and roared with laughter, its delight only intensifying with the screams of onlookers.

She had burned until she was nothing, like a candle melting into puddled wax. She burned blindingly bright and searing hot until all that was left around her was oblivion, like the most brilliant of stars that twinkles in the devoid vacuum of space.

And now she stands again, just as she had in the arena that night. Behind her the tent lies in destitute tatters, the corpse of a once mighty beast, no longer the candied red and white stripes it once had been, just a pile of melted sludge melding with the earth.

The fires still burn in places, cinders like lightning bugs flittering about, leaving their nests to land elsewhere and start

again. The skies are choked with smoke, the sun forever blotted out as ash falls in gentle swirls, black snow powdering the ground beneath her feet.

She no longer burns; she has no need to. Her act is done and while it had only been short-lived, it had truly been one that no one would ever forget.

Still she smiles like she did that night, only now she can never stop. Her last, joyous expression has been burnt into an everlasting grin of bone.

People stand before her now as they did then and in their widened eyes, she sees herself as they witness her, a little skeleton in a tattered blue dress, eaten away at by moths of flame.

She admires her spectators, children ordained in outlandish costumes. Little witches, pointed hats upon bonny heads, young mummies wrapped in yellowing bandages. A vampire here, a small monster there, a robot of boxes and foil, all hemmed in by fence posts of protective parents' legs.

She stretches her arms from her sides and bows low to them.

Screams erupt, howls of terror that echo like memories inside of her skull as the little ghouls and their guardians run from her, frenzied footfalls thundering like the applause she never got and never will.

She watches them run and from beside her, a rustle of movement accompanied by the tinkling of tiny bells. She looks up, her empty sockets mirrored back at her by the Jester's. It grins down at her and she grins back as its hand is

offered to her in open invitation, and her bony fingers, now not unlike its own, curl into its grasp.

FLYING BRICKS

IVOR STEVEN

There is a divisive brick wall
That stands harsh and tall
To stop people breaking their fall

Then the leaders in ivory towers
Ceased talking about peace and flowers
And hurled bricks into that sandy strip
One brick after another brick
Flew from one side to the other
Smashing innocent children and mothers

Flying bricks crumbling to dust
Creating dirty clouds of mistrust

The walls of Babylon fell again
As brick upon brick crushed human brains
Brick upon brick fills the bloody drains
Brick upon brick kills and maims

SOMEONE THAT I USED TO KNOW

CLAUDIA COLLINS

'Hello Agnes. How are you feeling today?' The man looks familiar. I concentrate. The memory of him is almost within my grasp, but then it's gone.

'It's Doctor Jones,' he prompts. 'Do you remember me?'

'Of course,' I nod. But it's not the Doctor Jones I know. That man has curly black hair and a freckled face. This man is old and wrinkled and bald. Maybe he is the father of the Doctor Jones I know.

'Of course,' I repeat. It is better when I say what they want to hear. If I give the correct answers, they let me out of the room. I can sit by the stove in the kitchen. Sometimes, if it is a nice day, they let me walk in the garden. The gate is always kept locked and I can never get out, but at least I can see the world outside through the pickets. Out there is more garden, like a park, and in the distance there is a big house. I know that house. It is called Claramont.

Cordelia stands in the garden at Claramont, watching proudly as Herbert teaches her little nephew how to plant some seedlings. Herbert might love her, but she'll never marry him. I hate her. How dare she use him and hurt him! When she leaves, I shall mend his broken heart. He will grow to love me and she'll be just a memory.

Herbert *doesn't* love me. I tricked him. First into bed, and then into marrying me. I told him I was pregnant. And then, later, I did conceive, and he *does* love our son. I gave him something that Cordelia refused to. She married within her class and Herbert's first son bears another man's name. Herbert might always love her, but he will never forgive her betrayal. Maybe one day he will forgive *me*, and grow to love *me*.

Albert is in his cradle. He is beautiful when he is asleep. I reach out to touch his soft red hair. He opens his eyes and starts to cry. I pick him up, but he won't stop crying. *She* comes in. She tries to take him from me. I hold him tighter. He is screaming now. The woman too. 'Albert,' she shrieks. 'Albert!'

Herbert rushes into the room. He prises my fingers from the screaming baby and thrusts him at the woman. 'No, no,' I cry and he forces me backward and into the bedroom. My heart beats faster as he pushes me onto the bed ... but then he's gone. I hear the key turn in the lock.

My gaoler is not very bright. Herbert calls her Gertie. She is supposed to watch me take my pills but she is easily tricked. I slip them under my tongue and when she is not looking I spit them out. I won't take them. She is trying to poison me, I know it. She is blowsy and coarse, all breasts and hips, but her dark hair is thick and wavy like Cordelia's. And like Cordelia, she is *wanton*. She desires my husband. Herbert thinks I don't know, but the walls are thin. I can hear them rutting. Like pigs, they are.

There are bars on the window. I hear a child laughing. I look out. That wanton is pushing him on a swing. His red hair is shining in the sunlight. First she stole my husband, and now she has stolen my son. 'Albert,' I cry. 'Don't you remember your Mama?' I bang on the window. The glass breaks and I am bleeding.

She looks ripe, bloated, about to burst. Perhaps when she has her own child, she will give my son back to me. She won't want him then. Her own child will take his place. What if she poisons him? He won't know to spit out the pills. 'Oh Albert, I can't save you,' I sob.

The baby is sick. I hear it coughing. It is crying. The cries grow weaker. Then it stops crying. The mother wails. I hear Herbert sobbing. It's not my Albert that dies. It is *her* child. They are paying for their sins.

The cottage is quiet. I try the doorhandle. The door opens. There is no one here. *Where are they?* The front door is unlocked, then I'm through the garden and at the gate. It, too, is unlocked. I hurry up the gravel path toward the big house—Claramont. I must arrive on time to give Cordelia her piano lesson. I can hear music being played through the open French windows. I enter the room, but it is not Cordelia seated at the piano. This young woman has golden hair. She turns as I enter. *Who are you?*

That wanton is hanging the washing. She looks different today. She has cut her hair and she has a fringe. She pauses to rub her lower back. Her pregnancy is obvious. She is a big, fat cow! No sign of my husband *or* my son. I spy another door. It is hidden behind a curtain. Why haven't I noticed it before? Has it always been there? Maybe it is just a cupboard, or maybe, it's a way out.

There is a man in there. Have I seen him before? Is he a prisoner too? He is lying on his back. His mouth hangs open. Is he breathing? I sidle closer to the bed. Yes, the blanket is moving up and down, but barely. His arm and his face have open sores and he smells.

Why am I in here with this disgusting, sick old man? I back away. I see movement out of the corner of my eye. I catch sight of a face in a mirror, and that wrinkled face, the face that cannot be mine, begins to scream from a wizened, gap-toothed mouth, and I scream, and scream.

'Hello Agnes. How are you feeling today?' The man looks familiar. I concentrate. The memory of him is almost within my grasp, but then it's gone. 'It's Doctor Jones. Do you remember me?'

'Of course,' I nod. But it's not the Doctor Jones I know. That man has curly black hair and a freckled face. This man is old and wrinkled and bald. Maybe he is the father of the Doctor Jones I know.

'I have brought some more pills for your heart. I've left them with Gertie along with strict instructions of when you

are to take them. You gave your son and his wife quite a scare when you had that turn yesterday.'

'Of course,' I repeat. It is better when I say what they want to hear. If I give the correct answers they let me out of the room. I can sit by the stove in the kitchen. Sometimes, if it is a nice day, I am allowed to walk in the garden. The picket gate is always kept locked and I can never get out, but I can see the world outside through the gate. There is lots more garden, like a park, and I can see a big house. I know that house. It is called Claramont. Mama told me the story of that house.

'Where is Mama? I want my Mama. I want to go home!'

THE DARK TOWER

DAVID BRIDGE

I clasped to me in its hidden pocket the great book of Englitz, the text of which had guided me over many years with its stories of heroes and tragedy and great quests. Despite its age, it still glimmered and lightly vibrated when the faded icons on its surface were touched, though in the current low light its energy levels were greatly reduced. It was full of memorable characters and, like so many times before, another crouched before me, an ancient crone as the writer would likely have described her. Indeed, it was difficult to credit the figure as a woman so withered and grey and wildly dressed was she.

Precedent was for such a one to be untrustworthy and looking into her rheumy eyes as I asked direction, I expected lies and convinced myself that she took malicious delight in making me her next victim as a gnarled finger pointed to the ominous track leading off the broader way beneath our feet. Yet, the unpromising diversion fitted the many reports of the hidden way to the Dark Tower and so I set myself upon the new path. After so much wandering over the world, I felt neither gladness nor hope, merely some lifting of the spirits at the prospect of an ending neared. So many times had I heard failure prophesied, so often had I been consigned to membership of those who had taken this quest before, seeking the Dark Tower only to fail the final test of fitness.

It was not long after turning onto the path indicated by the crone that, with a sullen red glimmer settling over the plain, I glanced back to find the road and the crone gone. Around me only grey plain was visible. Nothing remained but to go on. There was no sign of any healthy living thing—a blasted heath indeed! Here and there, sparse grass or bruised and battered leaves of dock or thistle. It seemed that only a purging fire would cure the place. I passed one stiff blind horse, bones protruding, its lack of movement signalling pain, and shuddered at its torment. Yet it was in keeping with the place, and oddly I wondered why the miserable creature deserved to be here. Perhaps it had thrown some desperate rider, dooming him, and now shared his fate.

I tried to fill my mind with thoughts of happier narratives, of stories of lives and loves fulfilled, but for each such I was unable to push aside reminders of the many more who had failed their early promise, been tempted or betrayed into failure. A sound ahead drew me back into the present. Before me, a river crossed my path, frothing with black eddies and flumes. Low stunted trees bent painfully along it, and I forded it with trepidation using my steel tipped walking staff to test my footing for every tread. At one such probing thrust there came a shriek – I told myself it was a water rat I had pierced but it sounded like a baby's cry of pain. Emerging on the far bank, I encountered an expanse of mashed ground as if trampled in some desperate melee, yet there were no footprints in or out. No sign of bodies, only a giant broken wheel with rusty teeth of iron the hue of dried blood reinforced the sense of this as a place of hellish torture.

Bog and stubble, rubble and sand ensued as I moved on passing trees crippled and cleft by disease, yet no signpost to point the way, only the swoop of an ugly black carrion bird low over my head. I followed its flight and in the last light my eyes caught sight of mountains – if such you could call them – ugly broken teeth in a fiend’s mouth. I felt a sense of entrapment, of being finally brought to bay like some hunted stag. The book lay completely dark and silent, yet from my recollections I picked out landmarks – two hills on the right, a tall-scalped mountain to the left, and there, in the middle, the Tower itself, round, squat, built of brown stone. The antithesis of so many evil edifices that leapt off the page and yet menacing still for its long association with failure. A last red shaft of light struggled through a cleft to silhouette the hills and turret.

A noise rose, made up it seemed of all the names of those who had come this far, endowed with courage, strength and fortune only to fail here. It seemed I knew them all and yet I plucked the bugle from my belt and raised it to my lips to blow the challenge.

As I filled my lungs, a chiming sound drew my attention back to the book, its screen now glowing faintly. Retrieving it, I pressed the green icon that now throbbed in sympathy to the tone.

A disembodied voice called to me: “Roland. Are you there?”

“Yes, Mother”.

“Your tea is ready; you’ve been gone for hours.”

“Very well, Mother. I’ll make my way back now.”

Regretfully, I ended the call, put away the tablet and resigned myself to achieving level four another day.

SERPENT'S TOOTH

GEOFFREY GASKILL

His mother called it 'high tea' but at this time of night that was ludicrous. She had her ways, so he gave up trying to make sense of them. It was easier that way.

He wheeled a trolley to the sideboard. It groaned beneath its load of sandwiches, scones and cake. His mother wanted *selections* as she called them. And when she'd *selected*, she was a good eater. Teapot, cups, saucers and spoons, a large knife and cake forks rattled and glittered in the firelight. 'High tea' was a ritual. Without the correct accoutrements it was unthinkable.

He picked up the knife and, with the precision and deftness of a surgeon, sliced the cake into quarters, eighths and at last into delicate wafers ready for serving.

He looked at the old woman in the chair. How peaceful she seemed.

For as long as he could remember this was her favourite room. She sat here each day while she took tea. The time didn't matter. Afternoon, evening. Then she would take out the day's newspaper and read it, while she sat, sipped and chewed her way through the contents of the 'high tea' trolley.

'High tea' and newspapers were as inseparable in his mind as her chewing and belching. They were like love and marriage. Horse and carriage.

Today's edition of the paper lay on her lap, unopened. He tutted. To him, her choice of gutter journalism was unpardonable. She revelled in hysterical and sordid stories where nothing was too sensational or too prurient. Since his childhood he'd watched her in her chair, consume 'high tea' and the worst of human excess till the paper was little more than a series of greasy, ragged pieces of newsprint strewn around her bloated ankles. She finished her reading with the 'hatched, matched and dispatched' section, after which she would sit back, close her eyes and sigh. It was his signal to remove the trolley and what remained of the paper.

He looked at today's headline. '*Lunatic at Large*,' it screamed. She'd love that. He could almost hear her mumbling about how she'd be murdered in her bed. Then she'd tell him to lock and bolt every door in the house. Once upon a time he'd protested that it was unlikely that ... 'Do it!' she screamed. 'Just do it!'

He straightened up and looked down at her as he put the tea things back on the trolley. He bent over and retrieved the pages of the paper, screwing them into a ball and tossed them into the fire watching as each page unfurled, blackened and died.

His mother was old. No, she was more than old. She was ancient and set in her ways. Her house and its contents were old. Not 'antique' as she liked to claim, just old. He hated antiques like he hated old. That they reeked of decay and dust was like saying old people were wrinkled and smelled of mothballs and urine and old women had whiskery chins.

But she was his mother. She was old like her worn shoes. In preparation for 'high tea' she'd kick them off so that her stockinged feet were free for her to wriggle her toes in the delight she took in her chewing. He looked at those shoes lying on the carpet next to the trolley. They were on their sides, their open mouths as if gasping for air. Black shoes they were. Black was the colour of old people, he thought. And eternity. Eternity was old, too, in its way.

He tilted his head and looked at the shoes. They were scratched and worn and the blackness had been rubbed from parts of the toes. Yes, his mother's black shoes were old like the feet next to them. Her old, wrinkled feet. They lolled on the floor with her stockings askew, stockings that reached as far as her knees. She described them as 'knee socks.' They had holes in them. 'Ladders,' he heard his mother call them. Or 'runs.' Dabs of red or pink nail varnish highlighted where she tried to mend them. Whatever colour it was, it was a colour old ladies used. No young woman of his acquaintance would be seen dead wearing repaired stockings or using nail varnish or such colours.

Yes. His mother was old. Like Methuselah. He learned about Methuselah from the family Bible, which she kept next to her bed. It was old too. It had yellowing pages and the gilded printing on the cover was chipped so that 'Bible' read 'Bi le'.

If he were in a more poetic mood, he would have said she was old like the mountains, or the rocks and stones and earth.

The lines of her face were worn tracks in the landscape of her life. Road map or not, she wasn't going anywhere anymore. When he'd offered to take her out, her wrinkled road map of a face had darkened and she complained. 'It's too far,' she said. Or 'It will cost too much.' Or 'I've got too much to do.'

Too far, too expensive, too much to do. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her get out of her chair. And why should she? She had him to wait on her hand and repaired-stockinged foot.

Ashes to ashes, he declared. That's what her Bi le said. Dust to dust. That's what mountains and rocks and stones and earth came to in the end. That's what she would be too. Dust.

He cleared his throat as if asking permission to remove the tea things.

She didn't respond.

He didn't expect her to. She was hard of hearing, often by choice. He took an arm and gently propped her up in the chair and laid a shawl around her shoulders. 'Old people do get tired,' he said to himself as he looked at her.

She'd said as much and often enough. 'Tired, I am. Just plain tuckered out.'

Her choice not to hear him today forced him to clear his throat a second time. It was a kind of power game she played but when she did sleep, she was oblivious to everyone and everything. He hated hearing her grunting snores through his walls. How his father put up with her noise for all the years of their marriage he didn't know. It must have been blessed relief for his father when he died. Never to hear her snores again.

Now, here in the firelight, her old leathery skin glistened. A patina of sweat slicked her brow. Strands of her wispy hair looked like filaments of white gold as they danced out from her head in the thermal breath from the fire. How could her hair look so lovely when the rest of her was ... well, no old person was beautiful. People were a sum of their parts and old people's parts were best hidden away. It didn't matter how appealing their hair or skin or eyes were. When he was a little boy, his mother was the most beautiful woman in the world. Now she wasn't. What happened? He heaved a sigh. Life happened. Life.

She'd slouched in the chair again, so he eased her back into an upright position. As he did so, her skirt rode up and exposed her knees. He adjusted the hem so that it covered her legs. Accident or not, old people exposing their legs and knees and thighs was obscene. He hated the sight of wrinkly bodies on the beach in shorts or bathing suits. It was shameful.

He took her favourite rug from the back of a nearby chair and laid it across her knees. She had taken months to crochet the dozens of squares that she joined to make it. Each square showed a different scene from the Bible. He squinted at the rug. Here were Adam and Eve. There, Noah's Ark. In the middle was the crucifixion square, larger than the rest.

Shawl and rug. She'd be comfortable.

He leaned over, till his lips brushed her ear. 'Mother dear,' he whispered, 'are you comfortable now?' His breath ruffled the hairs on her neck.

She didn't answer. It would have been hard for her to talk through the smiling gash in her throat. He laid the knife back on the tray and studied her anew. The scene stirred memories of childhood nights sitting by the fire. Now it was the colours that jumped out at him. The blood on her pale skin, the variegated squares on the rug, her silver hair – all had achieved a quiet beauty and harmony in this light. It almost took his breath away.

It distracted him from how ugly she had become.

BROTHER

CASSANDRA HOUNSELL

Red stood in the womb, a slate rock place with veins of pulsing ember light that snaked the walls, the floors. The stench of blood, black and shiny as it crawled the rivers between the onyx stone underfoot, hung heavy and ripe. The glow that cast from thick, oozing orange that diffused on the matte surfaces, became something softer, almost homely, like a fire crackling in a hearth.

Red hung back in the shadows, craning to see through the bodies of his brethren, his ancestors, those that came long before him. They sat in a circle that sunk into the floor, submerged in a pool of their own gore, floating in a mess of each other's innards, their weeping blood, their stringy reds and pulsing pinks and flecks of white. They hummed while their life seeped out of them, the four of them in total, wings wilting and bones disintegrating. This is how this went; life came with sacrifice.

The Maker watched as they always did, with no face beneath a hood, great cloaks billowing about their form like they were made from the galaxy itself, cosmic purples and blues and pinks and greens against a churning black backdrop that merged at its edges into the space around them. Their form, a way to tell where they began and ended, came only from the pinpricks of light that fell across them, stars plucked from the night sky and placed with purpose.

Red tilted his head this way and that, trying for more of a view, wetting his lips, wringing his hands. He was still young, only a few centuries, and his horns were not yet all the way curled to his shoulders, only halfway to what they should be. His fangs were new, his black eyes mostly innocent and bright with naivety. His palms soft and unlined, jaw unrefined and supple. He looked to The Maker, who cocked their hood at him. Red sensed a smile although there was none to be seen, smiled back, looked again to the other demons as they crooned and sighed and wailed, hearts falling out of them to bob in the muddied births of their bodies, eyeballs peering out of the murk before winking closed.

They held each other's arms, moving in unison, one side to the other, but their shoulders were sagging, their skin melting off their frames like candle wax to drip into the rising pool. The heat made Red's mouth dry—or perhaps it was the excitement? These demon kin were dying, but there was joy in this, for death brought life. There was revelry in watching his ancestors fall apart before his eyes, turned back into the mush they had once come from, from their own ancestors. Soon, another would erupt forth from them, too. The circle of life.

Red waited, trembling, stomach struck alight with winding nerves that tickled at him, and The Maker stood, lapidified it would seem, if not for the cloaks that swirled forever around them.

Finally, when the demons' cries stopped, when their humming fell away to little more than a distant buzzing, memory in the skull, and there was only an ink pool of

liquifying entrails left, Red bounced forward. He had been deferred long enough, and with one more glance to The Maker, and the sense that he had been given a nod, he plunged his arms into what was once his ancestors.

They were warm around him still, sticky, and the stench burnt his eyes, coated his tongue, throat, thick and too heavy to swallow. It was suffocating, the smell of rawness, of openness, of birth, and it blanketed him to his chest, only made him tremble harder. He sifted through the mess, letting stringy bits and gelatinous globs slip through his fingers until—there.

There it was, something soft but with more form, a becoming thing rather than a fading thing, and he held it carefully in his young palms and drew it from the filth.

The baby cried out, strong and animal when it was drawn into the light, eyes screwing shut tight. It strobed from orange to purple to blue to a burning, blazing brightness, like fire, that Red marvelled at being able to hold it. It shifted about, unsettled, having many legs and then no legs, too many eyes, then no eyes. Horns and then none, wings and then wingless. Finally, it settled into a form in Red's arms, one much like his, with two legs, two arms, torso and head. It had little nubs of horns, fangs not yet sharp, fists and feet that scrunched and curled but had no claws. It settled back to orange finally, a tone that mimicked the molten rivers around them. It opened its two eyes, beautiful and big and innocent and the colour of amber, and Red stared, awed, struck. He touched at it and the baby squirmed. He kissed into its soft, downy fuzz atop its head, the colour of rich earth, and the baby grunted. There

was a swelling inside of Red, something he'd never felt before but he liked it, this thing, warm and sticky like blood that coursed inside of him, that made him feel bigger, stronger.

He whispered to it promises against its brow, made vows, and the baby turned its gaze away, disinterested, where Red was falling totally and completely in love.

'He is yours,' The Maker said, voice soft and loud and everything and nothing all at once. 'You're kin now. Neither of you is alone.'

Red swallowed. There was a wet in his eyes unfamiliar, but it didn't hurt.

'Brother,' he said, and the baby's eyes met his again. 'Little brother.'

HOLLOW ICE CUBES AND ALIEN BUGS

IVOR STEVEN

His escapism had stopped. The front door was firmly locked. Torn curtains shut out the noisiness of last night's howling screams. Inside his bedroom the ceiling was sagging down, and outside the dawn had turned brown. Then a dank staleness filled the air, and a shadowy emptiness stained the other chair. Eerily stillness fell inside his darkened room, burdened by invisible chains of doom. Anxiety churned in his chest and his encroaching loneliness tasted like hollow ice cubes. Suddenly he heard gnarly scratching on the windows, as the alien bugs started breaking in, and only then did his ordeal begin.

TRYING

ODETTE WERZAK

It started long before Lela was even remotely aware of anything happening. Denial was a key element in its ability to remain hidden and work. She knew only one thing: that something strange was happening—what that was remained a mystery, a mind-bending riddle, threatening to weave her into insanity and void.

Weird things were happening. Lela couldn't just explain them away. The trees in the park where she walked were fully grown, but Lela could've sworn they weren't there last time she was there. 'Just tripping,' she'd tell herself. *It must've been like that before, I'm so unobservant, easy enough to do.* But what about the units down the road from her house? Lela hadn't noticed those either. They popped up over the weekend—but they looked at least ten years old. *Strange?* None the less, 'Whatever'.

These mysteries mattered little in comparison to the phantom PTSD Lela was trying to attribute to the unresolved traumas of her past (and the scar that appeared old and faded on her belly, with no known cause). Even though everything she felt was new and wholly unimaginable, save for looks of people in horror movies—it soon became all she felt. A horror movie seemed to have taken over her body and life, leaving her mind reeling and struggling to make sense of anything. How could she be feeling these things if nothing had

happened? How could her body so viscerally feel it and her limbs remember to run away, needing the comfort of a wall upon her back to cope, a bit? Violent body jerks and responses to nothing coming at her. Insanity seemed to be enveloping her.

It was 10:30 pm. Lela was on her fourth joint. The screams from her new next-door neighbour were surging through her aura with every jolting screech. The intermittent chanting and cackling in between gave space for Lela's mind to unravel a tendril or two into the deep. Just behind her head, on the other side of the wall, her new neighbour was screaming, chanting, scratching at the walls, laughing hysterically, and throwing things like she knew exactly where Lela's head was. Unable to bear another minute, Lela went back into the lounge, turned the TV up loud and rolled another, much larger joint.

The blue light of what must have been her phone was all that was visible—but the sound it was making was not her ring tone. *What the fuck?* Lela grabbed the phone to see who it was. It was an old flip phone and when she flipped it there was a scene of her in the midst of unspeakable things. Reflexively, she threw the phone out the door and started to feel a bit heavy. It was kinda cool, a bit like Valium. Her head rolled about as she realised she couldn't turn around.

She felt something just behind her shoulder but couldn't turn to see it. The fear gripping her was being matched by a weight of immobility, paralysing her. It stopped her from speaking, from calling for help, from keeping her eyes open. The intense shock of what was happening jolted her being,

and she opened her eyes for an instant. She tried desperately to keep them open; she tried to speak. Knowing, knowing that she could not go down—that it was not an option—she had to speak, she had to stay awake. *Get up, move, you must move, you must speak* was advice to self she was intent on heeding.

Expecting a roaring scream, Lela nearly crumbled away having only mustered a barely audible whimper. *Again, do it again.* The result was the same. But the third time she managed to keep her eyes open long enough to see someone in the room. Wearing a wide brimmed black hat, black trench coat and sickly pale skin, the visible lower half of its face tarnished with veins and broken capillaries, it looked more creature than man. Its look was horrid, calm, emotionless and timid compared to its energy. Everything still alive and awake in Lela was burning to stay awake, to not let this thing have her at its disposal.

Hearing a tapping at the window, Lela managed to turn her head, but could see nothing. *You must get up!* Digging deep into a determination that would not permit failure, her feet touched the floor. She passed out and came to between each step she took towards the door. Each moment she drew on all her strength to remain standing, to move forward.

She made it to the door. Feeling for the light switch and noticing nothing as she heard it click over, Lela was becoming more and more panicked. Her breath was frantic, rapid and gasping. She couldn't get enough air to satisfy her, and darkness speckled into fuzzy lights once again. She was still standing, could still feel the light switch, and flipped it again. No response. *It must be the globe, go to the kitchen.* With no

sight whatsoever, none of the streetlights reaching the window, no digital clock on the microwave, Lela continued passing out and coming to, all the while stumbling to reach the kitchen light in utter darkness.

Her head fell as she caught herself stumbling along the wall feeling for the doorway, walking into a chair. Unsure about anything but recognising when she came to that she had moved a step or two around the room circling the walls looking for the next light switch. She felt the door frame, knew the light switch was there somewhere, she should be touching it, it should be here.

The darkness was unrelenting. She knew the streetlights should be streaming in as they always did, bright enough through the closed venetian blinds to not need a light in the middle of the night. *Why can't I see, why? ... What the fuck? 'What the fuck! 'What the fuuuuck! Arrrrrrgh!' God please help me, please there's gotta be some light somewhere, they have to be working, they have to, they have to, GOD!*

The click was again audible, yet she saw nothing. *How can all the lights be out?* She knew they were all working before, in fact she had changed the kitchen globe just two weeks ago. This thought gave her more determination to turn a light on, to see something. She moved her eyes, trying to look around, to spot anything at all, a shape, a line, something!

Like a saviour, the faintest sliver of a patch less dark appeared. Focussing her eyes in the same direction, she flipped the switch again 'Yes!' There was a change, the lights were working, she just couldn't see. Then she noticed the frayed edge of what looked like a cut of cloth, a piece of material or,

or—a bandage. *Oh my god!* Recognising that it was her, *it's me, I can't see, I've got something covering my face, what the fuck!*

Her hands traced over her head, recognising the roughness and familiar ripples of running hands over a bandaged limb. Completely covered, all round, her head, her face, she imagined a mummified body. Finding a loose end of hope, she tugged, praying it would come off. The strand was long, longer than expected, and still provided no light at its end. Desperately, she kept finding loose ends and pulling, one after the other, again and again and again. *How many can there be?* Finally, the light streamed through the sparse material, she could see fuzzy shapes, the wall, the room, her home. Pulling the last pieces to the final length so deeply stuck into the side of her neck it hurt to pull away—it felt almost like a part of her skin.

Blinking rapidly and trying to open her eyes as wide as possible, the next wave of terror came streaming in through the wide-open front door. The blackness, the unutterable darkness, was streaming in, the windows bare and offering only the same flooding emptiness. The weight of the deep, the cold pureness of the dark was soul shaking, was the fastest way of turning someone into a believer of God. She knew they were coming, and they must not get in, they would not get it, if Lela had any to say in it. She waited, she prayed.

CONTRIBUTORS

Adrian Brookes grew up in the English West Midlands but has lived most of his life in Australia. A former journalist and English teacher, he writes short fiction and songs.

Andrew McMillan writes about his experiences and as he sought to espouse the values of equality and mutual respect across cultures, religions and traditions which he learnt in childhood.

Anthea Adams moved from Adelaide to Perth at 21 years of age and has never regretted it. Retirement has given her more opportunities to write, encouraged by the Gosnells Writers Circle.

Anne Congiu moved with her husband to the Surf Coast in Victoria upon retiring. Harboursing a love of writing for many years, she now dedicates her time to this passion.

Barbara Gurney writes across several genres including fiction, and free verse poetry. She enjoys creating memorable characters and exposing life experiences—often of the everyday person. www.barbaragurney.com

Bruce Shearer is a Victorian writer of poetry, plays and fast fiction.

Cassandra Hounsell spends her time in the wilds of her mind, but emerges on occasion to help others navigate their own imaginary landscapes through creative writing.

Charles Manila works passionately in the mental health and education sector. He is also an avid photographer, social scientist, voice actor and creative writer with a dream to tell stories.

Claudia Collins is a Geelong based singer/songwriter. She is currently working on her first novel. She joined Geelong Writers because she enjoys being part of a group of creative people.

Colleen McGrath lives in Geelong and enjoys writing short-stories and poetry. As a disabled woman she faces many daily challenges, aiming for a more accessible and inclusive society for all.

Dan Vasey is a writer of published academic works, a few political screeds and short stories. Retired anthropologist and demographer. American who swears he never voted for Trump.

David Bridge, originally a teacher in the UK, retired from working at Deakin in 2011. His main interests are writing, reading, travel, photography and teaching for U3A.

David Jones's poetry is based on empathy toward the world around him, aspects of the human condition, his need to speak of history, natural beauty and sadly injustice and repression.

David Rossiter is a visual artist from Bellbrae who shares an interest in poetry. Like his art practice, he prefers to create around more obscure themes, instead of the well-trodden.

Diane Kolomeitz is a retired educator who loves to write. She has a Master of Letters in Creative Writing and has had poetry and short stories published.

Edward Reilly, b. 1944 Adelaide: a founding member of Geelong Writers and has served on committee in several capacities. Publications: VCE study guides, criticism, a travelogue, novels and poetry.

Ena Roach loves her expanding family; enjoys sunshine, surf, reading, singing and conversation with most people. She began writing in her 'senior' years and is still learning.

Eve Halo is a classically trained pianist, who has played in an award-winning grunge-punk band. She grows vegetables, and writes about culture, feminism and synchronicity from a punk perspective.

Fern Smith, a pre-COVID city escapee and newbie writer, is a long-time visual artist dedicating her life's work to communities, stories, belonging and rebellion who recently fell upon the Geelong Writers Inc.

Gael Butler, retired teacher and librarian, keen reader and cook, grandmother to three, is itching to travel again.

Geoffrey Gaskill spent his working life telling children how to write. Now he's trying to practise what he preached.

Gillian Gregory has published short fiction and feature articles and has won awards for her writing. She is currently working on the final (she hopes!) edit of her first novel.

Guenter Sahr is a former advertising copywriter, teacher of English and developer of curriculum guidelines for the teaching of English. Retired, he devotes more time to his passion for poetry.

Ian Warren is an aspiring fiction writer living in the Geelong area.

Indrani Perera is creator of the Poets' Express e-mail newsletter and *The Pocketry Almanack* print journal. She is the author of *Defenestration* and *Pas De Deux*.
www.indraniperera.com

Ivor Steven, formerly an Industrial Chemist, then a Plumber, and now retired, has been writing poetry for 19 years.

Jean Pearce is a local writer who lives by the sea. She enjoys experimenting with ideas.

Jenny Macaulay is a member of local writing groups where members gather to share their work and respond to monthly prompts. She enjoys the challenge of trying many genres.

Jeremy Palmer works as a Spiritual Care Clinician, supporting cancer patients to reflect, explore meaning and make sense of their experience. His writing is the overflow of a lifelong spiritual search.

Jo Curtain writes poetry and short stories. She is the editor of *Anomaly Street: poetry with a difference*, a Geelong Writers publication. She writes for Coffee House Writers, and her work has been published in Geelong Writers anthologies, *Blue Daisies Journal*, *Sour Cherry Mag* and soon in *Pocket Baby Zine*.

Judy Rankin has published several novels for adult and middle-grade readers. Her stories have appeared in magazines and short story collections. Judy lives in Torquay and is completing a PhD.

Kerstin Lindros writes short fiction, memoir and poetry. She loves trees and clouds. Many of her writing ideas are born when she walks in the bush and on the beach.

Kevin Drum, born 1944 New Zealand. Naturalised Australian 1974. Retired. Kevin took up writing several years ago for pleasure and recreation and is a member of Belmont Page Creative Writers.

Lani Kasperovic is a current student at RMIT University (2021), studying professional writing and editing. She has prior publications through school competitions, as well as self-published feature articles on Medium.com.

Linda Carr, a recently retired professional, always wanting to take her love of writing and language to explore the world further. Translated a Japanese children's story, manuscript was lost in a marriage breakup.

Margaret Pearce, launched on an unsuspecting commercial world, ended up copywriting in an advertising department, and took to writing instead of drink when raising children.

Meryl Brown Tobin writes short and long fiction, non-fiction, especially travel, poetry and educational puzzles. Her published work includes 18 books and hundreds of articles, puzzles and poems. See <http://sites.google.com/site/merylbrowntobin>

Michael Cains lives in Torquay, grappling with procrastination and with unfulfilled writing ideas from his pre-retirement life in corporations, and as a sometime motorsport journalist.

Odette Werzak is someone wanting to share raw emotion in a complex, confusing and easily deceptive world.

Paris Clipperton-Richens is a student of environmental science and the Self-Realization Fellowship, whose seeking aims to dissolve the separation of matter and spirit and behold nature as both temporal and eternal.

Paul Bucci. I wander. I ponder. I sit and stare. I remember and forget. I am living and dying. Breathing and gasping. In wonder and disgust. In hope and despair. Indecent delight.

Pauline Rimmer is a nana of four who inherited her love of writing from her mother, a prolific storyteller. She has had some small successes, keeping her keen to continue writing.

Polly Rose writes poetry, short stories for adults and children and picture story book drafts. She is part of an active local writers' group.

Quinlivan is a poet and artist living on Wathaurong Land. They were born in Geelong, love the little city life and find inspiration in the mundane and underappreciated. Find them @_quinlivan on Instagram!

Ree Hogan is a lover of the sea and especially The Bellarine. Ree attributes a rekindling of her creativity to moving to Geelong where her connection to nature is growing and evolving constantly.

Richard McCullough enjoys telling stories about his early life in Geelong and his work as an attendant at the Parliament of Victoria. He is a poet and a crooner.

Rob J Warren is a local singer/songwriter. He transfers his love of the lyrical in music to his poetry. Rob's work has been published in *Reflections: poetry inspired by Geelong*.

Robin Mather, widowed in her early thirties with three small children, decided to travel overseas for a year with her family, spending most of that time on the Greek island, Corfu.

Shaun Treffry loves literature and learning. He is the proud father of two teenage daughters who also share his passion for music, film and especially books. He hopes to one day be a writer of modern classics.

Sumitra Shankar writes when she can snatch time between her family and work in mental health. Aside from writing, she loves to cook. Connect with her on twitter: @pleomorphic2.

Tom Adair is a retired English teacher with a long history of teaching Literature. He believes poetry is the joy of playing with words, meanings and perceptions.

Vicki Long is a poet and short-story writer living in Geelong. Her story, 'A Parcel of Crows' was highly commended in the 2019 Grace Marion Wilson Emerging Writers Competition.

Victoria Spicer, former English teacher, research librarian and heritage coordinator, writes history, memoir, poetry, and Geelong Writers newsletters.

Wendy Ratawa is a retired art/music teacher, one time secretary of Geelong Writers and these days involved in digital art and still writing.

THE SCRIPT DOCTOR



Do you need help with a
novel-in-progress?

Are you almost ready to publish a
book? Want a fresh pair of eyes to
assess your finished manuscript,
before you submit to agents and indie
publishers? The Script Doctor can
help!

Tailored packages for writing
coaching and editorial help.

WWW.LIZMONUMENT.COM

"Books to get your feathers in a flap!"

Visit Geelong's only independent bookshop at
Shop 1, 111 Pakington Street, Geelong West,
or browse our entire range of books online at
www.thebookbird.com.au.

Reach us by phone on 5224 1438 or via
email at info@thebookbird.com.au



10% DISCOUNT FOR
GEELONG WRITERS
MEMBERS



Adrian Brookes

Andrew McMillan

Anthea Adams

Anne Congiu

Barbara Gurney

Bruce Shearer

Cassandra Hounsell

Charles Manila

Claudia Collins

Colleen McGrath

Dan Vasey

David Bridge

David Jones

David Rossiter

Diane Kolomeitz

Edward Reilly

Ena Roach

Eve Halo

Fern Smith

Gael Butler

Geoffrey Gaskill

Gillian Gregory

Guenter Sahr

Ian Warren

Indrani Perera

Ivor Steven

Jean Pearce

Jenny Macaulay

Jeremy Palmer

Jo Curtain

Judy Rankin

Kerstin Lindros

Kevin Drum

Lani Kasperovic

Linda Carr

Margaret Pearce

Meryl Brown Tobin

Michael Cains

Odette Werzak

Paris Clipperton-Richens

Paul Bucci

Pauline Rimmer

Polly Rose

Quinlivan

Ree Hogan

Richard McCullough

Rob J Warren

Robin Mather

Shaun Treffry

Sumitra Shankar

Tom Adair

Vicki Long

Victoria Spicer

Wendy Ratawa