

A person is sitting in a folding chair on a grassy bank, reading a book. In the foreground, a typewriter sits on the grass. The background shows a body of water and a distant shoreline under a blue sky with clouds.

Eclectic Words

2022 General Anthology



Geelong
Writers
Inc.

ECLECTIC WORDS

GEE LONG WRITERS 2022 ANTHOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

VICTORIA SPICER

Geelong Writers is delighted to bring you another collection of *Eclectic Words*. This year's General Anthology—319 pages, 87 original works by 45 authors—contains five genres: short story, memoir, poetry, image-inspired flash fiction and a popular fiction genre, romance.

Like all Geelong Writers anthologies, this was a big project, the culmination of more than six months' work. It began with the writers, 58 of whom submitted work for consideration; continued with the sub-editing team, who began reading, selecting, and editing in June; and it took shape from late September, with the design and typesetting. Before it was sent to the printer in mid-November, the anthology was carefully proofread, another team effort.

Thanks to our dedicated editorial team, without whom this publication would not be possible: Kerstin Lindros, Jo Curtain, Guenter Sahr, Natalie Fraser, Jean Pearce, Claudia Collins, and Carol Hullin. Thanks also to Sue Gourlay for the witty cover image, and to Josh Barclay for the cover design and the font selection.

And thanks to our many readers, without whom this work would be pointless. Dear reader, we hope you are entertained and enthralled by the eclectic words within.

SHORT STORIES

THE LLAMA WHO HAD A HOLE THROUGH HIS HEAD

MARTIN SMITH

On a bleak, elevated plateau bordered by perpetual snow and shadowed by the precipices of the Peruvian Andes, a flock of four sheep grazed in windswept silence.

The tallest of the sheep raised his head and said, 'Father, I am unhappy.'

The heaviest of the sheep paused his grazing and said, 'Why is that, first-born?'

'Because I'm so woolly, Father. My fleece is a manky mess.'

'If you weren't woolly, first-born, you could not ward off the bitter cold sweeping down from the great mountains.'

The young ram released a sceptical bleat and returned to his grazing.

After a short time the young ram raised his head again and said, 'Father, I am unhappy.'

'What *now*?' the elder ram said.

'Because my hoofed feet ache. Not only that, they are battered and chipped.'

'If you didn't have hoofed feet, you could not ramble about the great mountains. Now hush, first-born, and finish your meal. And remember, it's rude to talk with your mouth full.'

The young ram released another sceptical bleat and returned to his grazing.

After a longer period of windswept silence, the young ram paused and raised his head and swallowed and said, 'Father, I am still unhappy.'

'By the holy horns of the mystic mountain mouflons, won't you give an old ram a moment's peace? I swear you'll give me a stomach ulcer.'

'I'm sorry, Father, but I must tell you I am unhappy about my neck being so much longer than those of the rest of the flock. Why is that so?'

And the elder ram said, 'That's because, believe it or not, you're a llama. An L-L-A-M-A. Blame your mother. She's the one who had a clandestine affair with a camel.' And the old ram glowered at a plump ewe, who blushed as she paid particular watery-eyed attention to a clump of grass before her. 'Now shut up and eat.'

Quietude returned to the plateau as the flock continued to graze, and the young stud (who until then had thought he was a young ram) chewed and pondered his mother's infidelity.

After a much longer silence, the llama raised his head. His sister, grazing by his side, paused and gave him a sheepish grin.

With a perplexed look on his face, the llama gave a polite bleat, and having attracted the old ram's attention, he said, 'Stepfather, have I told you what I am most unhappy about?'

‘Off with you! I’ll not endure another second of your incessant bleating!’

‘But ... but ... Stepfather ... I have this prominent hole through my head. Why is that so?’

‘Because you’re the silliest, emptiest-headed, most annoying ungulate to have hooved upon the Andean plateaus. You’re a freak of nature, a genetic mutant. Happy now? Yes? Then bugger off and go stand by the goat path while the rest of us finish our main course in peace. And for goodness’ sake, keep whatever wits remaining in that hollow head of yours about you and look out for pumas and poachers.’

The young llama, a little miffed by the old ram’s grumpiness, wandered over to the side of the path and stood next to an arrowed sign that read *Felicidad* and raised his long neck and stood sentinel whilst the flock grazed. The cold snow bit at his ankles. His prominent teeth chattered. A gloom of despair weighed upon his heart. And the Andean wind swept down and whistled through the hole through his head.

When the flock finished their main course, they ambled towards the young llama, for on the other side of the path lay fresh pasture ideal for dessert.

Eager to get his dessert, the young llama stepped upon the path to *Felicidad*.

A flash of light caught the young llama’s left eye, and he turned his head as a bang sounded, but, alas, he was too slow, for a bullet discharged from a poacher’s rifle sped towards his head, yet it whooshed through the hole through his head and

struck his sister, who died with neither a farewell bleat nor the sheepish smile wiped from her face.

Another flash of light came from the llama's right. He turned his head as another bang sounded, but this time he was certainly too late, for a second bullet sped towards his head, yet it too surged through the hole through his head and struck his mother, whose final thought was a yearning for the concupiscent camel she shagged at a carpet conference in Cairo many years ago.

The young llama had no time to mourn the loss of two loved ones nor his escalating unhappiness, for a third flash of light, brighter than the first two, came from the llama's left, followed by a louder bang, and as he turned his head left and closed his eyes and awaited his fate, a bullet whistled through the hole through his head and struck his stepfather, who died without dessert.

Shaking, the llama opened his eyes and saw three men approach with their rifles raised.

But a poacher's bullet would not determine the llama's fate, for the poachers surrounded the llama and marvelled how such a creature could be untouched by three bullets. The men knew this was no ordinary animal; no, this was a blessed brute, a sacred stud. And they dropped to their knees and paid homage to the holiest of beasts.

Soon the llama became enthroned as His Holiness the Umpteenth Dalai Llama, and devotees near and far revered him. Accompanied by a fleece stylist and a pedicurist, he

travelled the world on one endless junket, flying first-class on aeroplanes, sleeping in five-star hotels and dining at luxurious restaurants. He pontificated to rulers and rock stars and appeared on talk shows and at book signings and espoused platitudes to the multitudes. And whenever anyone saw the holy him, whether in the media or in the flesh, they would observe two features: his holey head and the huge grin on his face, for he was the happiest llama in the world.

*Moral: When upon the Path to Happiness,
those who look left, then right, and then left again,
survive and thrive.*

RUSH

TROY OLLIS

Heads bob with vigour. Grass flattens underfoot. A shirtless lad stumbles past, unperturbed by the hollering *señorita* straddling his shoulders. There's a heavy precipitation of glitter. My instinct murmurs to join the sea of motion, but all I allow is a light tapping of the foot. Nobody is paying attention to me anyway. Especially not Amy. She, along with the multitude, is stumbling out of time to the inferno of heavy punk rock in the air. I've been eager to see Death to the Jester all summer, but only because Amy loves them and her hair smells like strawberry bubble-gum. I'd much rather staple myself to my couch with a boxset of *The Wire*. Public spheres spawn this innate inability to be casual; a refusal to loosen the limbs and unclench the sphincter. And so, my hands fondle the lint in my pockets, while Amy fist-bumps God. Donny taps me on the shoulder.

'Going to bitch out again?' he asks.

The scrap of faux-paper smiles from his extended pointer; the teeth are bared behind that grin. Amy is alert to my existence, sensing Mr Smiley through her alcoholic haze. She nods her overwhelming approval or is head-banging to the chorus of 'Anarchy Bomb'. It's hard to tell. Inhaling, I close my eyes. My expectant tongue slides out. Donny kicks me in the shin. Hard.

‘I’m not your houseboy,’ he says.

Pinching the drug between my fingers, I examine it as Donny tucks in. Amy flashes a grin as she prepares her own piece of paradise. She looks into my eyes, beginning to count down with her fingers. We press it against our tongues in unison. The world already drips with delirium. Amy tugs at my sleeve. I swallow my fear, embracing the opportunity. If she remembers my pitiful moves, I’ll blame it on the tab. We shake and grind until we are but two disembodied heads circling, gazing. The music injects straight into my blood, each chord a little miracle. The stars descend to the earth to gape at our transformation. I am the first to realise that our merging must incite with our lips. My eyelids plummet to evoke the full sensory experience of her Revlon.

An unexpected chill whips across my toes and slithers up my torso. The music ceases. The suppression of sound cuts deeper than the cold. Peering out through hesitant slits, I scrutinise the empty stage. The stars begin to cower, fleeing from an unrevealed predator, until the darkness salivates with desire. The only movement my limbs can manage is a slight shiver, even as an ashen cloud drifts down from the heavens and hovers above me. The cloud pulsates to the tune, I am convinced, of Jester’s ‘Riot Control’. Mutating into the approximation of a human form, the vapor refuses to completely solidify. It glides toward me. Despite lacking a discernible face, it manages to shriek as it gathers a momentous speed. I will my legs to break into a sprint,

however my feet have melted. I stumble as the apparition slams into me. Great tongues of fire lash out, burning me alive. My own cries lost in the cacophony of damned screams pouring in from every direction. Direct transport to Hell.

‘Cold ...’ I beg, and within moments I return to the chilled darkness. Falling. Sobbing. I savour the cool aeration against my cheek. The spirit lingers above. As I stare, it penetrates my mind with unintelligible sounds, urgent grunts and moans. They seem to comprise the skeleton of an incomprehensible language. There is another shriek and its frustration envelopes me. It dives, sinking into my flesh. I am back in Hell; the blistering orange boiling my insides. Despite my utter terror I cannot feel the beating of my heart. Painful wails fill my ears again, except they are now accompanied by a horrifying visual. There are people here. Some are completely ablaze, engulfed in flames, dashing about like lunatics. Others lie on the ground burning in quiet, dignified solitude. The smell of searing flesh makes me gag. I realise Hell is a building, half destroyed. Debris litters the entirety of the space. Thick smoke and layers of dust obscure all but glimpses of crumbled concrete and fragmented foundation. A backdrop to an exhibition of suffering. A thunderous clattering of rockfall blankets the agonised moans and without warning the right-hand wall crumples outwards in an avalanche of plaster and glass. I inhale involuntarily. Despite the dense aura of polluted air, my airways remain clear. The obstructing particles dissipate, the outside world unveils. I

peer out from the wreckage, squinting into the glittering light reflecting off the swirling fragments of dust. Nausea overturns my stomach, settling in the back of my throat as familiarity seeps into my vision. The collapsed wall discloses the reality of my whereabouts, and I lose all semblance of sanity. My howls of anguish join the discordance.

Hell is on Earth.

At the apex of my hysteria the inferno vanishes, returning me to the gloom. The impenetrable phantom language permeates my mind again, weaker and losing shape as the cloud ascends. Festival sights sharpen into view. Colours intensify and a tune of a faint melody arises in my ears. The stars have returned to proclaim their steadfast support. I clutch at the appearing grass, becoming aware of the presence of encircling arms. Amy's grip is as intense as the fear in her opal eyes. Donny stands over me, grinning and holding his phone outright.

'Holy shit Leo,' he says. 'You're such a psycho. I live-streamed the whole meltdown. Ten-thousand viewers dude!'

...

I see it on the news. The entire country watches in unison. I struggle to comprehend the enormity of the atrocity unfolding, but in gradual bursts of electrical stimulation, unadulterated horror awakens. Pacing my living room, bile rising in my chest, I am unable to prevent an outpouring of frenzied regurgitation. A reaction metaphorically mirrored

throughout the nation. Tendrils of catatonia creep across my skin and render me vacant. I remain inert, the flickering screen illuminating my visage until sharp spikes of bristle growth adorn my chin. Still, in shorter span than I would have anticipated, a heavy thudding finally disturbs the tumultuous totality of my inner reflection. The following operates in fractured disrepair; splintered like the wood from my former front door. The chilly metal bites my wrists, the circulatory abuse demonstrating a displeasurable statement. I have a right to remain silent, yet my cognitive processes explode with proposed explanations. My head adorns a fashionable midnight black attire; decked out for the interview of a lifetime.

‘You believing this bullshit, Davidson?’ The agent throws his partner an incredulous look of contempt cultivated for me. Davidson places his bony elbows on the edge of the table and leans forward, the veins bulging in his wiry neck.

‘Not a goddamned word,’ he spits. ‘We have you on video screaming about the destruction of Sydney.’ The recording plays again; I see myself, writhing, bucking, convulsing. My lips wailing. *It’s burning. It’s all burning. Sydney is burning. Hell on earth.* Davidson continues, ‘Three days later the Opera House is ground zero for the most devastating terrorist incursion ever committed on Australian soil. You will be compelled to disclose your involvement.’ I can offer nothing to satisfy their fervent rage and righteous fury, except inadequate ravings of ghostly encounters.

Davidson grows weary of my supposed lies and a verdict is decided: traditional interrogation is untenable. The subsequent weeks of torturous deprivation engenders a crescendo of delirium, a monotonous repetition of my prophetic ordeal. In a move either precipitated by boredom, reactionary penalisation of my unfaltering narrative or a never abandoned, ill-fated foray into utilising illicit substances to annihilate communism, I am subjected to the sting of an unwelcome syringe. As the drug permeates my bloodstream the grey walls shift backwards, as if on well-oiled rollers, until a familiar darkness crushes me. The encroaching cloud unleashes a multitude of almost collegial chatter, a precursor to its corresponding attack. I brace for the heat, but am instead confronted with a forest of dense foliage. A figure shambles forward, a heavy corpse embracing the dirt at their feet. I am witness to a sudden flash of signage and the interrogation room returns.

‘What did Casper whisper to you today?’ Davidson sneers as he acknowledges my lucidity, although his partner’s smirk drains of humour as I recount the details of the occurrence. With pale countenance the agents depart. Ruminations of my fate are short-lived. I am soon notified my information is instrumental in a high-profile arrest. They reassure me that Amy attended my execution, despite the charges of domestic terrorism. Although it’s difficult to form coherent thoughts anymore. The doctor is waiting. The needle is ready. This will be my fifth trip this week.

DIGGING DEEP

SUE GOURLAY

Shit, he couldn't get it out of his head—his mum reckoned it was an ear worm, but it felt more like a boa constrictor how it wrapped its way around his brain, squeezing out every other sound except that song.

It was so dumb too, he felt like a total loser the way he kept humming along. He'd thought at first to himself, but when Ryan bocked him in the arm and yelled at him to SHUT UP, he realised that he'd been caught humming that stupid tune for everyone at school to hear.

It wouldn't have been so bad if it had been the latest Hilltop Hoods track or Baker Boy; Ryan would probably have reckoned that was cool but being caught humming Kylie like he was her biggest fan was totally craydar. It wasn't natural for boys like him to go around singing *I just can't get you out of my head* unless you were gay. And he wasn't—just ask Julia McRae, if he was gay he couldn't have made her wriggle like that could he?

It was totally his mother's fault, like he never would have even heard of the song if his mum hadn't turned the TV onto some old-school quiz show and this clip dropped in of a sweet little blonde dancing around in the rain wearing nothing much more than slinky white shorts and a pair of thigh high cfm's.

Kylie was a fully sick MILF, hot-as, so he'd been too busy checking out the way her legs worked their way all the way up to her crack to notice the music until it was way too late and he couldn't think about another thing except how make that tune piss off out of his skull.

His mum was singing along at the top of her voice, twerking her way around lounge room. She looked and sounded nothing like Kylie, but that was good because he didn't like the idea of his mates eyeing off his mum. She tried to pull him up from the couch and dance with him like they did when he was a kid, but no way.

Ryan's mum didn't look like Kylie either, but there was no denying that she well stacked and you couldn't help but staring at what fell out of her bra.

Nah nah nah - nah nah nah nah nah, the minute he woke up there it was, even on the morning of Triple J hottest one hundred. Ryan had organised a BBQ like you were s'posed to except everyone knew there wouldn't be any sausages or chops, just beer and cruisers and maybe a dial up pizza.

His mum had called the day before to confirm Ryan's parents were going to be home, but she'd never met them, so she had no idea that they were even bigger stoners than Ryan. Sweet, that meant a free pass to celebrate the night through unencumbered (a word he'd picked up in English that week) by oldies checking out his backpack or turning down the music.

Number 12 and counting down and he thought he saw Ryan sharing a spliff with his dad before joining in with everyone else in the state singing along to Dan the Man and Mashd N Kutcher: *Get On The Beers – beers beers beers* and what with the music and the smoke and the booze and Ryan's mum leaning over and handing him a slice of pizza and daylight disappearing into night and then number 11 and number 10 and the Hoods recalling 2020 and shouting 'I'm good'.

Truth was, he wasn't feeling all that good at all when Ryan's mum fetched him a bucket, telling him no worries, it's cool.

And he wasn't that sure if he would like to have a mother who told him it was 'cool.' Or a father like Ryan's father, who was an awesome bloke for sure—but for a 'dad?'

His dad came over when he could, which his mum said sometimes it was never enough and other times way too often, but mostly it was pretty chilled and he and his dad just went to the footy or you know, did stuff without too much hassle. Nup, there'd be no way he'd light up in front of his mum or his dad, that would be totally weird.

It was his dad who picked him up from Ryan's place. His dad who told him he looked like shit and what the fuck? Before telling his mother he'd be ok once he'd slept it off.

From under the doona he could hear his mum and dad yelling, not at each other but into nowhere, about Ryan's parents and how irresponsible they were, and whether they

ought to report them, and if so, who too? Not the cops? Why not the cops? And as his room swirled and swayed, he listened while they worked out who was going to talk to Ryan's parents finally deciding that maybe they ought to do it together.

And that's when he relived the spew and bucket and that song: *Get on the beers – beers beers beers* and once again he could feel the amber fuel rising out of his gut and he knew he needed to get up soon and hit the can and ...

Kylie was gone, no more *Nah nah nah - nah nah nah nah nah* but shit, *Get on the beers – beers beers beers* and as the bile hit the bowl, the song blitzed his brain good. Unrelenting, the new ear worm was digging deep.

At least this time, if Ryan still wanted to know him, that is, Ryan would probably hum along.

I WAS SCARCELY EVEN HERE

JO CURTAIN

*Behind a closed door / I lie alone in an austere room. / Midwives
busy themselves / with our babies— / taken, / wrapped, / clotted
/ and sanitised like an amputated limb. / Keen cries—I hear /
rawness, primitive urge—I feel / behind a closed door—I am
pinned / to the bed.*

Back before the girl was born and given away. I stepped with ease, moving lightly through life. I thought I had done what was right, but what was I to know at sixteen. So, I did what good girls do. I accepted the advice of my elders; I gave up my daughter for safekeeping—because I was no longer safe, and the light that shone went out.

I left Sydney to travel alone. I left my best friend without an explanation. Because how do you tell your friend that it was their father that irrevocably changed your life? It was many years until I saw Beth again. However, the years were not silent with the news from home. I heard her brother married well. Her mother succumbed to breast cancer, and Beth was left to look after her ageing father.

I've lived in Paris. In Barcelona. Cities that are imprinted with love and colour. I spent summer afternoons in Hyde Park, pretending to read the *Iliad*; it rained and rained, and my cardigan smelt of wet dog. It reminded me of home. I

danced the past away and drank myself sick. I fell into borrowed rooms, into borrowed beds, never settling, never staying long enough to tell my story.

Nineteen-eighty-nine. Here I am, but not here. Yesterday, Beth and I came face to face buying flowers from the little store in Darling Street, Balmain, and she invited me to her party. In the old weatherboard, where she lived as a child. The last place I wanted to return to.

So here I am talking to the married man. I knew he'd cling, so I tried to avoid him. Now, he's trying to pick me up. I dispelled him to the other side of the room: you're old enough to be my father. To only meet him a short time later, arm entwined in Beth's. She introduced him as her new lover.

Oh, I say.

Well, aren't you a sweetie? His smile, all chiselled and white, was anything but friendly. In a passionate embrace, he took hold of Beth for a showy kiss that said she's mine.

As I saw it, their relationship was almost always doomed. But to Beth, it was like a romance movie made in Hollywood. The married man was her lead man. She just wasn't sure who that was. I contended if it had run from beginning to end, it would have lasted no longer than one month. But their needs stretched the relationship over several months.

I rented a small terrace—the ungentrified sort—with a bath and toilet outside. More suitable for a museum, the antiquated water system had a trick to flicking on, but I had all summer to practice. I looked after Beth's fourteen-year-old

cat, Pumpkin, three days out of thirty when she flew north to be with her lover. Over time, Pumpkin and I slowly learned to love; he sat on my lap while I stitched.

...

A storm is blowing in from the north. Beth is due back later today. I bring in Pumpkin, feel his restlessness, and close the back door. Mostly, after seeing the married man, Beth lingers briefly, perhaps for a cup of tea, but no longer. But today, something had changed. This time she stayed.

Why do I feel like this? she asks.

Because, like the morning frost, in the bleakest of midwinters, he leaves you feeling utterly alone and completely overwhelmed, I said.

She says yes, and that too.

Beth and I sat together. Pumpkin in the middle. The storm made landfall an hour after she arrived. I unravelled the bright yellow thread. She watched intently and asked if we could ride out the storm together.

Come on, summer, hurry up and pass.

THE DEVICE: INVADE AND EVADE

ELIZABETH BRADFORD

All this time, shadow, I have loved you.

You cling to life with unformed hands; you yearn for belonging, with an uninspired soul.

Your eyes, shut tight against the harsh light of truth; your heart, untouched by the nature of your creators.

Sterile, steel, formed devices of fact invade and evade. All truth unforgettable as crimson matter spills to the floor around the extractor's feet. Small parts of you float amongst the tide, without feeling or intent. Motionless in spirit, yet driven to move within my heart.

Each turn, in turn, causes another alien move, to usurp and deny your rightful place.

But in that place, you do not belong. In my heart, you cannot stay. Some part of me knows that the weeks that follow, the hours that tick by, will cause you to linger in my thoughts, like a ghost wondering aimlessly between this world and the next. And while every fibre of my being screams against allowing this insensitivity, this cruelty, this unforgivable act to occur; I have no other choice.

I am always going to live with you, but not as we were meant to live. Not as we were meant to love. You will be a stain. A constant reminder. A memory that you once were, but never could be.

Your design was flawed, but your innocence remains. You will not be punished for the sins that others have inflicted upon you. You will be free from the torment, the misery, and the burden of all that this world has to offer.

WOMAN DREAMING

NATALIE FRASER

The morning sun streams through the window only to fall tantalisingly across Anna's desk. It promises much to Anna who is sitting in this airless grey room where the desks are lined up in rows like soldiers. Anna's sun doesn't shine in here; there is only the glare from the halogen downlights, cleverly concealed in the smooth design of the ceiling. This place is a hermetically sealed tomb with fifty office workers inside. It is a fallout shelter, sealed tight against the outside world. In the event of a nuclear war, Anna mimics a scientist's voice in her head; the otherwise devastated world will be populated solely by office workers, those who have been lucky enough, in their sealed offices, to escape the fallout that has killed the remainder of humanity.

Anna can see it clearly, the workers emerging into a world that is altered beyond belief. Oblivious, shackled by habit, they thread their way to the station to catch the five o'clock train. In their collective minds they still nurture the hope of returning to a family, a home that no longer exists. Anna can see them, Billy Parker from accounts striding down the platform, his briefcase swinging and making him look important though it contains only the remnants from his lunch. There is Hannah from IT, looking at pictures of cats on Instagram as the world collapses and she waits for a train

that will never come. She can see them now in a movie that screens only for her.

Sometimes Anna will let her mind run like this, when she is overcome with ennui, her eyes unable to focus on the computer screen. Sometimes she will sit, powerless to push her mind along its well-worn tracks. At her desk she will dream about happiness, she will dream about sadness. Anna will dream about anything and everything and in her dreams, she will be transformed. She is an Amazonian hunter, roaming the bush in search of food. In her hands she holds a spear and a flat sided stone axe. She is stalking an animal, throwing her spear with speed and accuracy. Slowly she is roasting a small animal over the coals. The body of the animal is charred, all the fur has burnt off and Anna is turning it by the tail. Her body is painted with the colours of the rainbow as she dances in a circle around the fire. Or she is dancing, her body painted with intricate designs, she is chanting in time with the songs of her sisters, their voices reverberating in the silent forest.

In real life Anna is just Anna. She works in the Tax Office with hundreds of others, like bees in a hive. She performs her tasks without conviction. She is Anna who wakes at six forty-five to catch the train with thousands of others (take-away coffees in hand, hoping to score a seat), to arrive at work at eight-thirty to work. Reality for Anna is her small flat, her job, her sometime boyfriend Robert who also works at the Tax Office. It is travelling to work each day on the train and on Sundays going to see her mother in Wheelers Hill. In Anna's

reality the world appears to run in a straight line with only her dreams as deviations. She goes to work, she comes home, she sees Robert, or she doesn't as they dance a dance around each other, never quite touching. Anna is almost content with this and no more, almost content and there are always her dreams.

At the Tax Office Anna's boss is Allan Taylor. Among a group of mostly male bosses, Allan Taylor is the creepiest. He is a short man, sixtyish and balding with a paunch that hangs over his trousers like an apron. He is a creep, a frequenter of adult bookshops, a surfer of porn on the internet. She tries to avoid him in the lift, all the women do, pretending to be absorbed in something on her phone, intent on a spot on the floor. It's okay, you get it, I'll wait for the next one.

Anna is sure that Allan Taylor's idea of fun is a night spent in his lair with his blow-up doll, her plastic flesh nicely warmed by the heater. Allan Taylor, she suspects, thinks all women are blow-up dolls like the one he has at home. In the office he is always trying to get close to women. Every woman there has felt his hot, smelly breath on the back of her neck; all have seen his leering smile. Some of the women have felt him brush up against them accidentally. Sometimes, Anna has a dream. In this dream Allan Taylor is being pinched repeatedly with red hot pincers. Hundreds and hundreds of times he is being pinched and even the blow-up doll is there with her plastic fingers flexing. The girls are all laughing, and Allan Taylor is begging for mercy. Anna likes this dream; she has dreamed it many times.

At home Anna soaks in the bath for hours until her body is pink and steaming and wrinkled. In the bath her mind, unencumbered by the weight of her body will soar. Anna will let it. She loves to put her head under the warm water; under there it is dark and solitary, like being a seed in the deep dark earth. In the bath Anna can spin fantasies like silk threads across her consciousness. Anna is a naked hunter, roaming the bush in search of food.

Still, encroaching on those dreams and on her life (with which she is almost content) is Allan Taylor. He is sending Anna Facebook requests and signing off his emails to her with a little heart emoji. He is leaving little post-it notes on her desk asking her to lunch. This is not what Anna wants. But this is what she is getting, and Allan Taylor is embarrassing in his passion. He is pinning her up against the wall in the stationery supply room. He is stifling her with flowers and chocolates and small tokens of his esteem, which he obviously feels overwhelmingly, and which Anna does not return.

Anna is not dreaming now. She is flicking through her Tax Office employee manual, flick, flick, flick, until she finds it. Section forty-two, sub section thirty-three (a) of the Public Service Act. Anna reads with much interest, the sexual harassment of any employee by another employee will not be tolerated. Sexual harassment is defined as ... Anna is reading this in her lunch break, holed up in a corner of the lunchroom away from the prying eyes and amorous advances of Allan Taylor. She is smiling to herself as she pretends to read a novel.

Anna is thinking of all those accidental brushings and pressings up against her, and she is smiling to herself, she will cast a dart at Allan Taylor that is designed to hit him where it will hurt most.

Anna is having her Amazon dream. She is squatting around the campfire with the other women in her tribe. They are roasting on the coals but this time it is not an animal that they are slowly turning. It is something else that is blurred by the shimmer of the heat. Involuntarily Anna gasps with horror when she sees the face of Allan Taylor leering at her from the flames. Now she remembers. She has been a naked hunter. With her spear and flat sided stone axe, she has hunted Allan Taylor. In the density of the bush, she has stalked him as she would stalk her prey. She has thrown her spear with the utmost precision.

THE DROVER'S WIFE REVISITED

SANDRA ANN JOBLING

The eldest boy wakes up, seizes his stick, and tries to get out of bed, but his mother forces him back with a grip of iron. Thud, thud - the snake's back is broken in several places. Thud, thud - its head is crushed, and Alligator's nose skinned again.

The Drover's Wife, Henry Lawson

Body heavy, she slumps onto the chair and stares at the slaughtered object before her. It writhes on the dirt floor. Is death necessary to life or does life lie in the wake of death? At other times of crisis she had pulled from her inner self a revitalised persona. This incident threatens her innermost belief in every-day ordinary reality. Or is existence in her mind? There is no renewal. Will death stalk her, smother her like a fog in the night. Does death creep up upon its unsuspecting, the naive living?

‘Mother, don’t you cry.’

But the tears do not stop. The tears well in the corners of her eyes, spill and roll down her cheeks. She pauses and laughs loudly as she sees the comedic coincidence of her spilt tears and the torrent of rain that caused the dam to break its banks. She had built up the bank single handed. The rain had not eased over the days. Finally, she had stood back and watched

the water rise, twist, and swirl with broken barriers past the house, churning up the vegetable patch. That patch was to supply the next month's food.

Through her mist the boy, his ginger hair spiked at the front, dances. He sways to the left, stops and prods the mutilated snake and then sways to the right to continue his dance around the room. After much prodding, the snake twists to look at her with its one good eye, hissing with its deformed mouth. She stares at it, at its darkness. The sole source of her light is a burning log that flickers ominously and creates shadows that come and go eerily.

It is raining steadily and the constant patter of water falling from the roof and hitting the soggy ground adds to her feeling of being abandoned. She stares at the drops of water leaking through the roof, forming a murky puddle on the floor. A shadow slinks from under a rough cut board, expands, and rests its rotund body in the puddle on the dirt floor. Through moist eyes she watches as this strange form slithers on its belly until finding its legs it begins to sluggishly crawl towards her.

It stops to gaze at the ginger-headed boy and in the gleam of the fire light she makes out its grotesque face. Its nose more the shape of some fabulous eagle protrudes beak-like from an aged face. The boy runs forward. 'No Ginger,' she cries in horror. But it is as if he has not heard her. He mounts the huge beast holding the loose skin at the scruff of its neck. The beast rises on its hind legs, gives an enormous cry and trots

around the room, moving mysteriously through chairs, causing a chilling breeze to follow. A howl pierces the silence and is a reminder of a bunyip which Black Mary had told her lived down along a creek and which had made Mary go pale in her mother's womb. Black Mary had told her in earnest and that was 'ow I become *the "whitest" gin in all the land.*'

Black Mary walks into the night, and the beast rises and falls like waves tossed by an unseen current. The boy grins broadly and holds on tight to the animal. They move as one and cross the table where her children fitfully sleep. The ginger-headed boy drops muted colours of flame alternatively over closed eyes and speaks incantations to the beast. Alligator looks wild and howls into the night.

At first she feels as if she is floating with each wave as it rises and washes her along the shore. Darkness comes in gulps in between the dreams. Her arms ache from thrashing and the weight of the bed cover smothers all sense of freedom.

*Opaque eyes look to a blank wall
Dreams are disembowelled
Inky clouds, extend to the ground
Turn like twisted Mallee roots
Cumbersome, crawl as night drifts with all
Its weight to the wife
Doors open, dust and sweat conjoin
Sounds spin crimson to black, cross the
Lake. A night of opera has*

*Wings that strum upon moist air to
Torment the insane in charred remains.*

She feels the presence, the cool hand of daylight and the voice that tells her he has gone. He never came back. She grapples with the ginger-haired boy who dances on her bed, tickles her toes and threatens her sanity. Angular shadows move to be near her. Abuse falls from her lips and is stifled by the sheet. She coughs and almost smothers, wrestles and is sedated.

She is as a speck of sleeping dust floating, lowering, turning upside down. She peers down at the insidious snake and the lumpish bodies that approach her. Why the howl? Droplets fall upon her and she feels the cool wind blowing through the eucalypts. The same cool wind that blew when her last child was buried.

Her husband had not come home. The snake had shrivelled, its flesh dried and splinters of bone were all that remained to see. It had not worried her that he had not come for her—dreams from *The Young Ladies Journal* sufficed. Carriages rolled behind horses up and down the busy street, women were buying material brought in by the *Instanbool*.

Cool against her cheek, a hand touches her tears, and a shadow sits next to her. The voice is slow, 'Strange and true'. A long angular shadow passes over her, to rest on the other side of the bed. The voice stops and a hand wipes a person's

nose. The voice starts again but this time it sounds frustrated. She listens and tries to identify the voice, the dream:

*I never may believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,
That is, the madman ...*

Ginger-hair sits on top of the book, jiggles whilst small pudgy hands hold the book at its page. Suddenly a rectangular object whirls through the air, just missing her nose. The boy with the ginger hair stands and hurls himself, feet first, out of the window. How mad the men in her life have been. It had started with her husband.

She looks back to see if she can see life through his eyes. Why love her, woo her endlessly in the city and give her a child? Then all feverish say, 'Let's begin our dream anew. Yes, yes, we must.' He had looked at her half-crazy with dreams. 'Begin packing woman.' He spoke as he made his way to expand his ideas with his mates.

'We will build our own home.' His voice echoes in her ears as does the wind that blew the leaves off the ghost gums.

She had believed he was mad with drink, but he became more serious as the little ginger-haired boy grew. They left for the bush, wagon packed high. Her husband leading the way, the boy animated and she despairing, they progressed through the scrub.

Wildflowers grew on the side of a clearing. She stayed there for some time, watching the trees whisper and their arms wave furiously. The animated boy cried and she walked, not able to bear the sound of his wailing, or was it the wind whistling loudly? She stumbled and waited for her husband to straighten the folds in her dress. She kissed a soft cheek. The sky stretched out in a pattern that had a child's pencilled simplicity. She howled and sat in the damp and watched the ginger-haired boy skip and laugh until he was out of sight.

FREDDI WITH AN 'I'

GILLIAN GREGORY

'Nice dog.' He was close behind me. I had not heard his footsteps.

I looked around. I wasn't used to people bothering to speak to me, not now that I was old: grey of hair, creased of skin, thick around the middle.

He was about my age, maybe a few years younger. He was tall, tidy white hair, an engaging grin.

'What's its name?' he said.

'It?' I said. 'Oh, you mean Freddi. Freda, really, but I call her Freddi. With an 'i'. Because she's a girl.'

Freddi looked up and I smoothed the fur on her head. She was my mate, my companion, but she was no great beauty. She was old and ponderous, plodding beside me, carefully placing one large paw after another. Her muzzle was white and her shaggy black coat was silvered with grey so that she looked permanently dusty. I loved her to bits, but I didn't expect anyone else to.

'What sort of dog is it?' He fell into step beside me.

I laughed. Over the years countless people had speculated about Freddi's genetic mixture, everything from Rottweiler to Great Dane to Newfoundland. 'I have no idea,' I said. 'I bought her from the RSPCA as a puppy.'

'You have a lovely laugh,' he said.

He was walking too close to me and I edged away. We were approaching the small café near the end of the walking path, set on higher ground with outdoor tables that overlooked the river.

‘I’ll have to leave you here,’ I said. ‘I’m meeting a friend for coffee.’ A lie, but I wanted him to go.

‘I could join you,’ he said.

‘No. I’m sorry, but we have things to discuss.’ That’s the trouble with lies, one always leads to another.

I watched him walk away. He had the firm stride of a man not long past his prime. Attractive enough, so not a man to be stricken with loneliness. Perhaps he was just one of those sociable beings who are given to striking up conversations with strangers. I realised I had not even asked his name nor told him mine. A passing encounter.

I made my way back to the caravan park. I’d been living there since Trevor, my husband of nearly 40 years, ran off one night while we were doing our driving-round-Australia thing. He took the SUV and left me with Freddi and the caravan. It surprised me how little I missed him.

Without a vehicle I couldn’t move the caravan and I had nowhere to go anyway. I had some money, but park fees were high. Ron, the park’s manager, was sympathetic and gave me a cheaper rate, given that I’d become involuntarily permanent, but when my money ran out I had to sell the van. It fetched a good price and Ron rented me one of the old wrecks that he

kept at the back of the park for backpackers and itinerant workers.

I was happy enough there. I'd been a teacher and found work in a group home for disabled teenagers. Freddi came to work with me and the kids loved her, loved the old dog's bulk and her gentleness, accepted her snoring and her often rank breath and the noxious fumes she emitted every now and again. My simple life was peaceful without Trevor and I was content.

I was unlocking the door to my van when my neighbour, Diane, stuck her head out the window. 'Coffee?' she said. 'If you're not working today.'

We sat under the awning we'd strung between our vans. Freddi settled herself between us with a sigh. 'She was told she's a nice dog this morning,' I said.

'She is a nice dog. Why wouldn't someone say that?'

'Ah, Di, I love her to bits, but she's not the sort of dog people notice.'

'Not one of those fancy, pocket-sized designer dogs, you mean.'

I laughed. Diane was not one to pull any punches. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

She stared at me with intense blue eyes that gleamed from slits in her brown, weathered face. 'You're not telling me something, Anna. Come on, girl, spill.'

'There was this man. Said Freddi was a nice dog, then walked all the way to the café with me.'

‘So?’

‘Dunno. Don’t know why he’d do that. Creeped me out a bit.’

‘How old?’

‘Our age, I suppose. Thereabouts.’

‘Attractive?’

‘S’pose.’

‘Sounds like he fancied you.’

‘God, no. No way.’

‘You sell yourself short, Anna. I reckon he fancied you.’

‘Well, I didn’t fancy him. Last thing I’d want, some deadweight man messing up my life again.’

‘Glad to hear it. Free forever, you and me. Thank God.’

The man was there the next morning, and the next morning, and the morning after that. As the days passed, I grew used to him and then began to look out for him. His name, I learned, was Paul. We fell into the habit of buying takeaway coffee at the end of our walks, then sitting beside the river to drink it.

‘How long will you be here?’ I asked him. Freddi was lying with her head on my leg, snoring gently. I rested my hand on her side and ran my fingers through her warm fur.

‘I thought I was only passing through,’ he said. ‘Until I met you.’

His words startled me. ‘You know nothing about me,’ I said. ‘Nor I about you.’

‘I know you live in a caravan park,’ he said. ‘But I don’t know why. You don’t seem the type.’

‘And what type is that?’ I said. ‘We’re not all drunkards and losers. I have good friends there.’

‘I’ve offended you. I’m sorry.’ He reached out his hand. ‘Anna, I didn’t mean it the way you’ve taken it. Forgive me, please. I just meant ...’

‘And what is your story?’ I said. ‘Perhaps you should tell me.’

‘I’ve been caring for my dying wife,’ he said. ‘She died a year ago and I haven’t been able to settle since.’

‘My turn to say I’m sorry.’

‘We both have our stories.’ He smiled at me and placed his hand over mine.

‘Come away with me, Anna. I can make you happy. There is so much we could do together.’

‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘I barely know you.’

‘Please, Anna,’ he said, ‘Come with me.’

I don’t know why I agreed. Maybe I was more lonely than I realised.

‘Tomorrow,’ he said. ‘I’ll pick you up early.’

When I told Diane I was leaving with Paul she glared at me. ‘Don’t be an idiot, Anna. You’ve only known him a few weeks. I don’t know what he’s playing at, but I reckon he’s a conman. You said yourself he was creepy.’

‘He’s not a conman. I’ve got nothing. What could he possibly expect to get from me?’

‘A new toy, that’s what. Someone to amuse himself with for a while until something better comes along.’ She stood up abruptly and stormed away. ‘Don’t do it Anna,’ she shouted as she reached her van and slammed the door behind her, then flung it open again. ‘Bet he’s lying about his dying wife. You’re such a fool.’ She slammed the door again, leaving me wordless.

I didn’t sleep much that night. Diane’s anger had made me stubborn. As soon as it was light, I packed my few possessions, attached Freddi’s lead to her collar and set out to meet Paul.

I stopped outside Diane’s van. It was closed against me, but I could feel her watching. ‘Diane,’ I called. ‘You awake?’

Her door opened slowly. ‘You off then?’ She stood in the doorway, her hair tangled and her eyes red. She’d been crying.

‘Wanted to say goodbye.’ I was trembling.

‘Anna, please don’t go. He’s rushed you into this. I don’t trust him. Why’s he in such a hurry to take you away? At least tell him you want more time to decide.’

I shook my head. ‘I’m sorry, Diane. Take care of yourself, won’t you.’ Such inadequate words to end a precious friendship.

As I left the park I looked back towards Diane’s caravan. Her door was closed again. The sight made me heartsick.

Freddi and I met Paul outside his hotel. He picked up my bag and opened the car door. ‘Hop in,’ he said, then

stopped and dropped my bag on the ground. 'You're not taking the dog,' he said. 'You'll have to leave it behind.'

'No,' I said. 'She's my best friend. I won't leave her.'

'I'm your best friend now. Not some mangy old mongrel. Leave it at the caravan park. Someone'll take it in.'

I looked at him and I looked at Freddi. It was an easy decision.

'Hey,' he said as I picked up my bag and walked away. 'Where're you going?'

I ignored him and ruffled the fur on Freddi's neck. I swear she was smiling. 'Reckon you saved me, old dog,' I whispered to her.

THINGS I WISH I COULD TELL YOU

CHARLES MANILA

Serendipity is a funny thing.

I remember when we first met. I won't bore you with the details since you already know this story. But I recall at that point and from that point onwards, I wished ... no. I longed to meet you when I was younger. Perhaps ... potentially? No. Without a doubt in my mind I would have ended up a better man. A more confident man. A man that felt free enough to tell you how he really feels and to be who he truly is.

I'm a coward when it comes to love. I mull over words before they are written on a page or text. I meander over them even before they eventually inundate my mind and leave me speechless and years after they fumble out of my mouth and leave me with an unshakeable sense of regret. I grew up with a fear of being the abomination that I thought I was. And the sad thing really, is that I still feel that way now. An abomination. A mistake. Defective.

I'm wasting oxygen with each heavy breath I take trying to quell the insatiable appetite of fear that frequently threatens to devour me while trying to spin gold with words at inopportune and infrequent moments I have with you.

But those moments are ones I cherish so dearly. I reminisce about the days we would beat the traffic in your platinum, smoke-free Camry when you drove me home or the

odd detour when we would get lost. Although I do shudder at your musical choices, from the soundtracks of children's cartoons to the discography of the Village People. Despite this, I have never been happier in my life and despite our quandaries we have with each other, I like you just as you are.

Then I'm paralysed by the unrelenting fractures of my own silence. But I'm tormented that you would leave should I reveal what I have been trained to keep hidden. That or my incompetence of being what you desire and need—let alone my habit of verbosity and overwhelming battles with linguistic Tetris.

I have rehearsed these words and have told the entire world of my feelings and desires before I ever dared to tell you. That is unfair to you and I'm sorry. But if I could be candid for once, the truth is I wish to spend more time with you. Fill my remaining days with you. And hope to still be worthy of your time when I am old and grey, and when I can no longer conceal the droopy and weathered jowls that have been ravaged yet blessed with the lifetimes I have with you.

I lov---”

His fingers suddenly stopped tapping. He felt buzzes from his phone. It was from the person he was writing to.

‘Hey, I like you. Want to go out?’

Without hesitation, he scrapped the words he had written and a crooked smile slowly emerged.

‘Sure.’

BEAST

TOM ADAIR

Sounds kaleidoscope his head as he drives the night. Sensed,
not understood, they swirl and swinge. Will she? Won't she?
The sounds have no shape, no meaning. Will she? Won't she?
Cocooned from stimulus, he speeds the night. Will she?
Won't she? Will she? Won't she?

He has lost time, place, space, purpose.

Movement is.

Rhythm is.

The road runs beneath the dark. White linelinelineline.
White line space. White line space. White line space. White
linelinelineline. White line space. White line space. White
line space. Visual clickety clacking railway lines.

He inches left so the corrugations snap his senses alive. Left,
corrugations on. Right, corrugations off. Left, corrugations
on. Right, corrugations off. Composing a litany. A prayer.
Will she? Won't she? Left line, lifeline. Right line not fine.
Will she? Won't she? Left line, lifeline. Right line not fine.
Watch left line. Stay this side. Right line not fine. Watch right
line. Stay this side. He plays with the wheel, shifts the line.
Stay within the lines. Stay awake. Stay safe. Be a good boy.

Stop that. Stay awake. Stay safe. Stay within the lines. Play within the lines. Stay awake. Stay safe. Good is between the lines. Don't cross the line. Never cross the line. Left, corrugations on. Right, corrugations off. Left, corrugations on. Right, corrugations off. Between the lines. Sameness. Slippery. Sleep. Dreary. Drowsy. Dopey.

White linelinelineline. White line space. White line space. White line space.

Space. Space to think. Space to move. Space to be. Not hemmed in, trapped, strangled. I interrupt. I don't listen. I forget to do things. Can't she take a joke? Can't she ... Oh, that's right, she has a name, you know. And she is a they, not a she, don't you know? He, she, shit, LGB-fucking-alphabet. What does that mean, anyway? She is a they? Come on, for fuck's sake. I'm a he and she's a she. Why can't she see that? Get over it. Why can't she just shut up? Leave me alone? Take a step back? Give me room. To breathe. To be free. To be. Free. Free. Free. Three. Three. Three. That's how many times she's left. Gone to a friend's. Gone to Mum's. Just Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone for good? Good? Good. Good?

White linelinelineline. White line space. White line space. White line space.

God, but I love her. She knows that I love her. Why else would I stay? If only she could see it. I hate this. I hate this. I hate this. I try. I try to do the right thing. I do try. Why can't

she see that? If only I could say it. If only I could think of the words. It's not my fault if I can't say things. It's not my fault that she can't listen. Desire aches oozes through blood bone bowel. Burning churning shapeless yearning. Burning churning shapeless yearning. Abandoned. Frightened. Floundering.

White linelinelineline. White line space. White line space. White line space.

Will she, won't she? Will she, won't she? Of course, she will. She's always had me back before. When I get there, I'll explain. This time I'll do it right. I'll say ... I'll say ... That I appreciate her. That I respect her. That we can work this out together. It'll be alright. She knows that I love her. She's sensible. She knows that she can't do without me. How would she survive? On her own. No house. No job. No money. Yeah, no money, honey. Honey. Honey. Horny. Honey. Will she, won't she? Will she, won't she? Of course, she will. Will she, won't she?

White linelinelineline. White line space. White line space. White line space.

But if she won't? Can I do it again? I don't want to. But if I had to? I knew I could, of course. I'd done it many times. But only when she pushed me too hard. Only when I had to. Yes, he could. Unconsciously. Consciously. It was all too easy. Took no effort at all actually. Delicious letting go. Venting.

Freedom. Adrenaline. Joy. Not holding in. Not guarding
thought. Not guarding action. Not guarding action. Not
guarding action.

Vulnerable soft flesh. Gristle bursting under fist. Blood
swelling contusion. Ribs cracking. Bones splintering.
Nonconsciousness.

Nirvana.

Carnal.

Carnage.

Release.

Relief.

Delirium.

Animal.

Beast.

White linelinelineline. White line space. White line space.
White line space.

After blood bruises. Technicolour blackyellow. Bile. Shame.
Disgust. How could I? I'm not violent. That's not me. I'm a
decent man. Shame. Nausea. Guilt. Body flinches. Eyes avoid.
Back bends protectively. Perhaps I shouldn't have hit her.
Maybe she didn't really deserve it. Why did she speak back?
She shouldn't have said that. If she had only kept quiet. Kept
out of my way. Did what I asked her. If she did what she was
told, I wouldn't feel this disgust. I shouldn't feel this shame.

White linelinelineline. White line space. White line space.
White line space.

Circuits overload. He closes down. Lapses into rhythm.
Dulls. Deadens. Dreary. Dopey. Dreamy. Delusion.
Delicious. Droning. Will she? Won't she? Left line, lifeline.
Right line not fine. Willy Wonka, honkey tonker.
Chocolatier. Willy Wonka, honkey tonker. Sickness of surfeit.
Voice droning, droning, droning. Sickness of shame. Too
much noise. Too much taste. Too much tastelessness.
Droning. Droney. Dreamy. On and on. Give me some peace.
Give me quiet. Give me shelter. Gimme chocolate. Give me
some peace. Give me quiet. Give me shelter. Gimme honky
tonk women, not this whining bitch. 'For fuck's sake, shut up.
Just shut up, okay.' Incoherent burst of rage. Surprise. Silence.
Shock. Bafflement. Embarrassment. Eyes hurt. Then ice
hardening into defensive offensive daggers.

'Sorry, I ...

I didn't mean ...

You wouldn't ...

You shouldn't ...'

White linelinelineline. White line space. White line space.
White line space.

Fuck it. It was her fault. Not letting up. Going on and on.

White linelinelineline. White line space. White line space.

Sitting straighter. Yeah. Her fault. She'll see that.

White linelinelineline. White line space.

Straighter. In the zone. On the money. On the way.

White linelinelineline. White line, spa ...

Headlights flare.

Time explodes.

The man does not hear the
crunch of his breaking nose.
He does not feel the snap of
his neck as his head smashes
the airbag. He does not feel
the tearing of joints and
ligaments as he is wrenched
apart. Does not feel crunching
legs jellyfy. Does not taste
metallic blood bursting bubbling.
Does not feel smashing skull.

Does not feel.

The beast lies still.

The man is blinded.
Head snaps up.
Instinctively he jerks
away. Hands follow
head.
Car veers.
Swerving scrunching
metal smashes.
Blood.
Bones.
Breath.

Chill.

Calm.

Clarity.

The beast lies still.

KNICKERS

PAT LOWE

It all started in the supermarket, when I realised that every two or three weeks they sold Bonds knickers (two pairs to a pack) at half price. I bought a pair of pairs the first time I saw them, and another pair of pairs the next time. That's four pairs of knickers I didn't really need. But they came up again a few weeks later. I hesitated and hovered—then bought a third pair of pairs. So then I had to survey all my existing knickers, most of them \$2 pairs from Best & Less. I decided that, to justify my indulgence in half-price Bonds pairs, I should part with all the others. But what to do with them? Nearly all were still in perfectly good condition, so throwing them away was out of the question. I put them in a bag, determined to donate them to one of the op shops. The trouble was, it wasn't long after Christmas, when the op shops close for the holidays but keep getting donations of clothes and goodness knows what else, so the Red Cross and Vinnies were not taking further donations for the time being. The Uniting Church was still accepting donations but wasn't going to open until April. And then it too was drowning in donations, so stopped accepting them.

The supernumerary pairs of knickers in my op shop bag weighed on my mind more than anything else in it that I couldn't donate: the unopened packet of incense sticks, the bamboo place mat, the old belt, the contraption that was

meant to straighten one's posture but had no effect on mine, the melted birthday candles and so on. What if I died and was exposed as someone who owned dozens of pairs of knickers, including packets of Bonds knickers that had never been opened (did I mention that I bought another pair of pairs?)? On the other hand, I didn't want anyone, least of all anyone I knew, to see me donating my knickers to an op shop. St Vinnie's has bins for making anonymous donations, but they were locked for the time being to deter the likes of me. Besides, I wasn't sure that St Vinnies sold second-hand knickers. I was sure the Red Cross didn't stoop so low. But the op shop at the Uniting Church was less fastidious. What's more, the knickers there were to be found in a box, all jumbled together, unlike everything else in the shop, which had price tags attached to individual items. The knickers were all one price: \$2, I thought. As most of mine cost \$2 new, I thought selling them second-hand for \$2 was a rip-off, but my need to get rid of them outweighed any ethical considerations.

As it happened, I had business in the Uniting Church op shop one Saturday morning, with a friend who worked there. While I was in the shop, I had a look around and made a couple of purchases. Said goodbye and went to my car, where the blue bag on the front passenger seat reminded me that I had failed to use the opportunity to deliver my excess baggage, namely knickers. So I stuffed my shoulder bag with knickers and returned to the shop. While looking around earlier, I had failed to browse in one of the inner rooms, which sold mainly

crockery and kitchenware, so I looked in there first, then sidled down to the other end of the long, narrow shop to the shelf where the box of second-hand knickers sat. I pulled two or three pairs from my bag and pushed them surreptitiously into the box, but when I looked around to make sure no one was watching, I saw to my horror that my friend Heather was. I desisted from my clandestine activities and ambled back up the shop. 'I thought you had gone,' Heather remarked, a question in her voice. 'I did, but then I remembered that I hadn't been through the end room,' I said. 'So I came back.' Why, in that case, was I hovering around the knickers box at the opposite end of the shop, Heather must have wondered, but didn't ask. My guilty expression and bulging shoulder bag may have suggested that I had been quietly shoplifting. Had Heather inspected my bag, she could have been forgiven for thinking I had helped myself to several pairs of second-hand knickers. Explaining would have been even more humiliating. No further interrogation took place, and so I slipped out for the second time that morning.

The following Saturday, only slightly daunted, I again stuffed my bag with knickers and returned to the op shop. Heather was not working there that day, so I headed straight for the knickers box and, with barely a glance around to see if the coast was clear, I boldly took all my remaining knickers and stuffed them into the already-full knickers box. Done.

On the way home, I started to worry; what if someone working in the shop noticed the sudden arrival of a swag of

knickers that hadn't been there before? Surely the bright orange and bright purple pairs would stand out? Would anyone connect them with me?

Maybe Heather, who visited me at home occasionally, had seen them hanging on the clothesline with my other washing? I considered turning the car around and going to retrieve the orange and purple pairs of knickers, if not all of them, but the greater humiliation of being caught stealing back my own knickers deterred me, and I drove home.

PIECE BY PIECE

CLAUDIA COLLINS

I Am Hovering Near the Ceiling:

White squares with holes – I can count the holes – fluorescent tubes – too bright – I look down – machines – bleeping lights – a jagged line flattening out – doctors and nurses in scrubs – blood – a body on the table – they are doing something to its head – it looks familiar – it's me – I feel nothing – no pain – no fear.

‘Increase – shock – clear – again’ – I sense rather than hear the words – ‘We’re losing him – increase – shock – clear – again – shock – clear – again – again – again.’

‘We’ve got him – suction – sutures – close’ – chief surgeon nods – collective sigh of relief – hospital trolley – white hallway – lights flashing above.

Pain – sound – ears ringing – a pin prick – blessed relief – I’m on an aeroplane – the engines throb – I turn my head – cotton wool clouds – pain – sound – ears ringing – a pin prick – the blessed relief of morphine.

‘I see you’re awake then,’ a blurry pink face swims into view – kind eyes – Irish voice – ‘You can have some water’ – she inserts a straw between my parched lips – ‘just sip it, mind,’ – ‘You’re in hospital, the Alfred, in Melbourne,’ she answers a question I haven’t asked.

‘Doctor McKinley will be in soon. They’re taking the bandages off today, Robert.’

The nurse’s name is Biddy. Biddy Mulligan. It says so on her name tag. It’s blurry but I can read it now. I’ve been given glasses. The doctor arrives. He checks the chart at the end of the bed and removes the bandages from my head.

‘It’s healing quite well. The Yanks did a fine job. We’ll take the stitches out at the end of the week. You will look dashing, you’ll see. The ladies love a scar,’ he winks. ‘Nurse, hand him a mirror, will you.’

I hold the mirror in my left hand. The scar is held together by black stitches. It zig-zags its way across my forehead and up into my hairline. The hair has been shaved there. The stubble growing back is white. The rest of my hair is brown.

Physio and Psych Evaluation:

The ringing in my ears is affecting my balance. I am learning how to walk again but the damage caused to my leg means the limp is likely to be permanent. My right hand has two fewer fingers. I have a facial tic.

‘What can you remember about the bombing, Robert? Anything before? Or after?’ Doctor Frederiksen inquires.

‘Nurse Biddy has brown eyes. Mouse has blue eyes. Like yours.’

‘What mouse?’ she looks puzzled.

'I don't know. I don't remember,' I say, but I do, though not all of it.

The memories come back slowly, piece by piece.

Mother Holds Me Up So I Can See:

I see Billy marching in a parade with the other soldiers. Then Billy goes to Vietnam. Why doesn't he come home?

There is a telegram. Mother is crying. She pushes me away.

First Day of School:

I meet Mouse. We sit next to each other in class. She looks at my book. 'Robert John Kelly,' she reads aloud and shows me her book. 'Hilary Grace Roberts. Robert and Roberts, the same.' I go to her house to play after school.

Her dad has a big white car.

Nan and Pop:

'I like cuddling little boys,' Nan hugs me and kisses me with big orange lips and squeezes my cheeks.

Nan gets sick and then she dies, and Pop comes to live with us. He sits by the fire and coughs. I can't sleep. I climb down the ladder and put some wood on the fire. Pop is not coughing now.

I touch his hand and it's cold.

I Climb My Favourite Tree:

From up here I keep a look out for bush fires but it's only springtime. No fires. I see the twins jumping from rock to rock as they cross the flooded creek. They don't notice our little sister following them. Nelly falls into the creek.

I call out but they can't hear me.

The Harvest Dance:

I want to ask Mouse to dance but I don't know how to dance and ... what if she says no when I ask her? I watch her dancing with Joey. 'I'll get you some Dutch Courage,' Brendan says. The twins give me beer. I am spewing in the bushes out the front when I hear one of them say, 'Hey, there goes Mouse. What's up with her?'

I wonder – *can you die of embarrassment?*

I Sit for a Scholarship:

I win a scholarship and finish secondary school at Xavier College in Melbourne. It's a school for rich kids. I get bullied. That's what happens to short, smart kids who wear glasses, especially if your family is poor. I go to the cinema and escape into an imaginary world.

I see *For Your Eyes Only*. James Bond movies are my favourite.

Computer Technology:

I learn everything about computers at university. I can build them, fix them, design programs for them, hack them and retrieve and read encrypted files. I am moving to Canberra to work for ASIO. I am excited and picture myself as James Bond.

I work in an office.

Too Late:

I ring Mother for her birthday. 'Your friend Hilary is getting married. There's an invitation here for you,' she tells me.

I haven't been home in years. Mother answers the door. Our hug is awkward.

From the back of the church, I hear Mouse say her vows. She doesn't see me amongst the crowd. I have left it too late.

We will never be together now.

Mother is Dead:

I am in hospital. The twins are by my bedside.

'Mother was drunk and she passed out. A log rolled out of the fireplace and burnt the house down. You're lucky the fire brigade was able to get you out in time,' Brian tells me.

The Gulf War:

‘You’re on loan to the Yanks, Robert. That’s what comes from being the top man in your field. Everyone wants a piece of you. ‘Course when you fix the problem don’t expect any credit. They’ll claim that it was American ingenuity that saved the day,’ Mr Bright laughed. ‘They’re sending someone to pick you up.’

Two American soldiers stand waiting next to a jeep painted in army camouflage. They snap off a smart salute.

‘Sergeant Snow and Corporal Taylor, Sir.’ I notice Mr Bright smile at the incongruity of the big Afro-American sergeant being named Snow.

The sergeant does not smile.

The Streets Of Iraq:

‘I know a shortcut, Sergeant. Take the next left and we can avoid most of the traffic,’ says Corporal Taylor. It’s a mistake. The streets are narrow and the jeep slows. Most of the houses have been pock-marked by warfare. Children are playing on the steps of a building that no longer has a roof. They disappear as the jeep approaches. A man dressed in a traditional thawb and kaffiyeh steps out from the shadows in front of us. Sergeant Snow hits the brakes.

An explosion – The jeep is thrown through the air – I can’t see – I rub my eyes – I see – I see blood on my hands – splattered body parts and gore – Sergeant Snow? – Corporal

Taylor's face is contorted – mouth open – he is screaming –
my ears are ringing – I can't hear and – nothing ...

Am I dead?

I Am Hovering Near the Ceiling:

Mother, Nelly, Pop, Nan, Billy – I reach out – I can almost
touch them, but something is drawing me back – 'No! I want
to stay with you' – they smile at me – 'You have to go back,'
says Pop.

THE MEMOIRE

GEOFFREY GASKILL

I asked my friend Diogenes to do it.

‘You want me to do what?’ he asked, incredulous. His slack-jawed reaction was, if not downright insulting, then incomprehensible. I mean, if he’d asked me to do what I asked him, I’d have been more than flattered. I’d have jumped at the chance.

‘To write my memoir,’ I said, before adding hastily, ‘I mean a memoir *about* me, not exactly *for* me. I want to submit it to the Geelong Writers Annual Anthology.’

He continued to stare. I couldn’t get over his incredulity. I mean it wasn’t as if I was asking him to do anything illegal. ‘In the memoir section,’ I added in case he wasn’t yet on the same page as me.

His continued staring and open mouth were unnerving. Then, at last he said, ‘But if I do that, won’t it be *my* entry?’

‘Ah,’ I said holding aloft my *Here’s-where-I’ve-had-this-inspired-idea* finger, ‘it’ll be submitted as a cooperative – joint – entry. You know, how it’s done. *A Memoire of ... as told to or by ...* kind of thing.’

He laughed. I didn’t see what was funny. I’d thought about this for a while. ‘I want you to be my ghost writer,’ I added in case he still didn’t get it.

He shook himself. 'This has got to be the stupidest ...' he began before changing tack. 'I'm sure there are rules about what you're proposing. But full marks for trying.'

In fact, I'd checked the rules and apart from blah about word lengths, typeface, fonts and other bread-and-butter issues, I couldn't see any reason why what I was proposing was against the rules. 'I'm serious,' I said. 'I have to say that writing about oneself smacks of a certain ...' I chewed, looking for the right word, '... egotism and arrogance. This way we'll get around that. Besides, I don't think I'm a good enough writer to do justice to the subject.'

He laughed louder. 'So that's it.' His laughter died on his lips. 'Isn't it a bit arrogant in itself? Why not just do it yourself and learn to live with whatever follows? *Or*,' he added for emphasis, 'why not enter it in the Fiction section?'

'Not funny,' I said, ignoring the implied insult. 'To help you get started,' I continued, 'I've thought of an opening sentence.' I headed off any further attempt at humour by cutting to the chase. '*The face*,' I said, trying to avoid any whiff of Pecksniffian piety, '*looking back from the mirror, was a good face, a handsome face.*'

He went back to staring, slack jawed. His lips formed the letters, *WTF*?

I looked at him, hoping for a favourable response. Nothing came so I added, 'Good hey?' hoping to prod him into a response.

His lips formed those letters again.

‘There’s a certain Hemingwayesque quality to it I like,’ I added.

The silent and slack-jawed, open-mouthed incredulity found its voice. ‘To quote John McEnroe,’ he said. ‘*You cannot be serious.*’

I ignored him and told him I was serious before adding, ‘Are we on? It’s not like you have to think about getting started. The hardest part of any journey, it’s said, is the first step. And I’ve done that for you.’

‘You expect a medal?’

‘No.’

‘But you’re starting a *memoire* – correction *your* *memoire* but not written by you – by praising yourself?’

‘What praise?’

‘What’s *good face, handsome face* if not self-praise? I thought part of the reason you’re trying to dragoon me into this is, is so it won’t look like you are full of yourself.’

‘When did I say that?’

‘Call it reading between your lines.’

‘*Praise,*’ I declared this time sounding distinctly Peckniffian, ‘is an emotion-laden word. FYI, a *memoire*, or in French culture *mémoire* – as in *un mémoire* – means ‘a memory’. Notice the indefinite article. It implies a reflection by a writer on his – or her – own experiences and memories. It is interesting that it has no English equivalent. Notice there is nothing in there about being self-penned – or being value free.’

‘Wow! If that wasn’t a pompous ...’ For a moment I suspect he lost his train of thought until he asked, ‘What’s the difference between a memoir and an autobiography? You could do a proper autobiography and avoid me altogether. There would be no word limit then.’

Did I look a bit shame-faced? If I did, I pushed on anyway. ‘It’s kind of funny you should ask that. When I tried, I had to stop after about a thousand pages. In a Thesaurus under autobiography, you will find *memoire*.’

He paused. ‘So...?’

‘So, there’s still nothing in that about not praising ...’

‘Or about praising ...’

‘... the subject.’

‘So I have to write – *if* I write – stuff you tell me? Not stuff I know.’

‘No,’ I laughed, ‘because you don’t know the whole story.’

‘But isn’t that the point? To keep you – as subject – at arm’s length?’

‘What’s the point of that? Since when was half a story acceptable? Would you accept a builder only building half your house?’

‘The analogy is silly.’

I tried a new tack. ‘*The codfish lays ten thousand eggs*,’ I said, ‘*The homely hen lays one. / The codfish never cackles / To tell you what she’s done. / And so we scorn the codfish, / While the*

humble hen we prize, / Which only goes to show you / That it pays to advertise.'

'What?'

'Hello!' I knocked my fist on his forehead. 'Wake up in there. Are you living in the twenty-first century? Haven't you heard about how God helps those who help themselves?'

'Kind of a political cliché isn't it. Those who have a go, will get a go.'

'Never heard that before,' I said. 'But we're digressing. Are you going to help or not?'

'This is so stupid,' he declared, pointing at me. 'You're lazy – or undisciplined. Or both.' However, I could see him wavering.

I always thought Diogenes' problems stemmed from his hang-up about rules and conventions. I decided to strike while the iron of his indecision was hottish. He was my mate and mates did things for mates even if they didn't like doing them. 'Look at my face,' I declared. 'Tell me it's not handsome - or good.'

'I can't.'

I wasn't the most enthusiastic endorsement I'd ever had but I let it go. 'Right. So, the opening sentence I've given you is not only literary but in a couple of words tells you a lot.' By now, I was certain he was wavering.

Then he surprised me when he said, 'All right! But just this once. And I'll make up my own opening.'

'What's wrong with mine.'

‘That. It’s yours. Not mine.’

‘A bit pettifogging,’ I mumbled. But at least I’d got him on board.

‘When do we have to do this?’ he asked. ‘I want to get it out of the way.’

‘No time like the present,’ I said smiling as broad an *OK-we’re-going-to-do-something-great-here* smile as I could muster. At that moment I could see my name in print – with the word, Winner next to it – when the awards were announced in the Memoire section. Success was assured. With Diogenes facility with language and me as the subject, I decided, what could go wrong?

...

‘Never mind,’ said Diogenes. ‘Maybe next year.’

‘Bloody judges. Bloody rules.’

‘Can’t say I didn’t warn you,’ he said. An *I-told-you-so* was the last thing I wanted to hear.

‘Did you enter anything else?’ he asked.

I nodded. ‘In the fiction section.’

He sighed. ‘I know I’m going to regret asking but ...’

‘It’s about a fellow blessed with a good and handsome face ...’ I looked at his impassive face.

‘Go on,’ he said.

‘... who saves the world from a flesh-eating bacterium that has graduated from *infecting* people to *eating* them. As the

death toll rises ... Did I tell you it's set in Buckley's Cave near Queenscliff?

'No.' His lack of enthusiasm was galling.

'You don't sound interested.'

He rolled his eyes. 'Go on.' I didn't know how to take that.

'Anyway,' I said, getting into the spirit of the thing, 'before you can say, *flesh-eating bacterium* it's the zombie apocalypse. Long story short: the blob – I called the story *The Blob* - ranges further afield but our hero, a misunderstood international man of mystery and genius, whose career has been blighted by official indifference for years ...'

He held up his hand. 'Don't tell me. You've based the hero on ... you again?'

I blushed. 'I blush,' I said. 'Is it that obvious?'

'And you got all of that in 1500 words?'

I blushed.

'Don't tell me anymore,' he said. 'I think I can guess the end.'

I must have looked put out. Instead of telling me to continue, he asked 'And did you win or get a place or ...'

'I blush again,' I said, blushing.

CALL ME IZMAELU

ADRIAN BROOKES

At dawn the tanks rolled in, and all at once we were aliens in our own land.

Nestled into the sunny slopes of the Caucasus, our Zyrkia is an Arcadian jewel of verdant hills and lush dales, its abundant fruits reaped amongst a constellation of sparkling streams. For those born into its Edenic innocence, it is a vision that can never die. From of old we knew as little of the outside world as it knew of us, yet how could we not be content? The pretensions of any other land fell silent at our borders. We loved our Zyrkia as it loved and nurtured us, our hearts a-brim with songs of its bucolic beauty. And when, in only our recent history, roads appeared, bringing people unlike ourselves, we didn't stint in our welcome. They were plainly inquisitive people, these Tobrezki, but whatever they wanted to know or see, we obliged them with all our hearts.

'Come and look!' our forefathers said with a warmth exceeded only by a native naivety; and so they did, and the more they came and looked, the more they stayed. In time we saw they would soon outnumber us; and as the tide of them flowed, we realised too late it was only a matter of time until they, the real aliens with their big ideas and fancy ambitions, would either assimilate us or be rid of us. And soon enough we found ourselves watching from the sidelines as they were

the ones making the laws, turning our Zyrkia into an arm of Tobrezk.

We, the stewards through untold ages, had become the trespassers and misfits. Our faces, names and customs, which we'd never been conscious of before, were now the very things that set us apart. And on top of it all came the shower of insults, the slurs that first bewildered, then distressed and lastly defined us like swathes of barbed wire.

And when the tanks rolled into those poorer parts to which we'd been increasingly banished, and when the soldiers came with their arms and armour and shouting and shoving, we had no answer. There had been an exodus of sorts, but most of us found departure too distressing to fathom. A sense of possessive outrage, just as alien as ugly, took hold of us. Oh, but of course, these Tobrezki argued, they'd been entirely reasonable! Though they'd long respected our autonomy, they'd always known Zyrkia to be theirs, and in these perilous times it only behove them, so they said, to gather us into their protective fold.

...

'Father!' A group of the faithful came to my door one day. The change in them distressed me, for the laugh lines from so many years of contentment now only underlined their despair. I ushered them in and my housekeeper prepared ayran.

‘Father!’ Tears welled as they spoke. ‘We think it’s not safe for you. They are tightening their grip. We know the soldiers have been here.’

‘They have been courteous so far,’ I assured them, quickly regretting the last two words.

‘They have arrested Father Ignatiu. And beaten Brother Etruscus.’

They had, though Ignatiu and Etruscus had foolishly given them excuse. And yet the bounds of acceptable behaviour were narrowing by the day. I could feel it would not be long before my own conscience would arrive at the point of decision. I didn’t want to leave. It would be no less than desertion as long as any other of our people remained.

I set my face in a grim smile. They knew the expression and what it would presage, but it helped me strengthen my resolve. ‘I appreciate your concern. I can’t leave.’

But the land was thick with suspicion, and someone informed. I was out when they came for me, and my housekeeper was able to rush me a message before I got home.

‘They know of friends’ visit,’ her scribbled note read, ‘and claim plot against them.’

I made it to a hastily arranged safe house. It quickly became clear my hosts had settled on a plan they assumed would also be clear to me.

‘What are you thinking?’ I asked.

‘Father, the roads are guarded. The main paths, too. But Mishka’s brother is a shepherd. The mountains are rugged,

but he knows his way through the peaks. He will guide us, and provide a donkey for you. We can make the border in three nights.'

'And if we reach the border? They will only turn us back.'

They exchanged sheepish glances.

'We will have papers for you. Passports. Good enough to get you through borders hence.'

My heart grieved to see what was becoming of us. Unworthily for true Zyrgians, we were adopting the fraudulence of a world we'd long been spared. In that case, were we worth saving? I swiftly quashed the thought.

...

'These are the papers, Father.' It was the morning before the night of our departure, and I was to pose as an Evgeni Akhmetov, orchardist. 'And, Father ...' Our host winced with embarrassment. 'We must shave your beard and trim your hair and disguise you in hill farmer's attire. If the soldiers see you as you are, they will know you straight away.'

Afternoon came and the sun fell. Our host and his team brought my outfit and set out scissors, soap and razor. He was bending to his task when a flood of outrage welled up in me, forcing an anguished cry.

'No!'

He jumped back in alarm.

I rose from the chair, asked for pen and paper and sat at a table. My expression forbade questions, and I wrote until

my thoughts were exhausted. At last I carefully reread the letter and passed it to them to read while I addressed an envelope.

My host's eyes widened as he read. 'Very well, Father. We will send it if you wish. But ...'

'You must make copies. Distribute them widely. We are no longer those people of old, lost to the world in our Zyrugian backwater. The day has come when we must make our case.'

'We are still Zyrugians.'

'We are not! Not in two generations' time. That's all it will take unless we struggle now for our survival. We have been hauled up by our collars to the modern-day world. We are being trampled, scattered, absorbed. We will no longer know ourselves, and our children's children will not know there ever was a Zyrugia—which is exactly what the Tobrezki want, for if there is no identity and no culture and no language because it is forbidden, there will be no basis to resist them.'

'But ...' My host wryly regarded the papers he'd prepared, as though reluctantly farewelling his invented character. 'Surely ...'

'To run away is only to hasten their success. We are children to these Tobrezki. They have taken advantage of our childish complacency, and now we must redeem ourselves. We must make it clear to the world who we are and whence we came—show them our foundations are solid and indisputable. We must honour and defend our history so that from it we can build a future.'

My tirade had discomfited them, but I saw their determination firming. Zyrgia's survival would now depend on them, for I was intent on a course that could only end my part in the story. Admittedly, my forthcoming gesture would be futile in itself, but we could not simply let ourselves be dispersed like mist in the morning breeze. Someone had to set the standard and assert Zyrgia as an entity its people would fight to uphold; and that being so, I could only confirm my friends' fears: 'As for the letter, I will deliver it to the colonel myself.'

The Tobrezki commander had made his headquarters in St Cyril's monastery on the edge of town. But it was some distance away, and I needed to manage the journey carefully. I couldn't risk being seen on the street and pounced on like a petty criminal before I'd carried out my task. I would have to arrive by car, for only then could I arrive with dignity at his front door and approach him freely.

'Now,' I said, as my eyes fell on the discarded papers, 'what name were you going to give me?'

'Er ... Evgeni Akhmetov,' my host said ruefully.

'Hm ...' Reaching for the letter I'd written, I set it in front of me, signed it with deliberate strokes and held it up to them each in turn, displaying my signature. I would be known by my real name or none, and as the conviction took hold a roar rose from deep within me, bursting out before I could block it. 'Call me Izmaelu!'

Shocked at my own vehemence, I blinked, swallowed, and gathered my ruckled features into their grim smile. ‘And call me a taxi.’

THE PORK ROAST

DIANE KOLOMEITZ

'Will this infernal trip never end?' Jules grimaced, as the banged-up bus hit its final pothole on whatever they called the only route into the village. *You certainly couldn't call it a road!* Just like her - fed up - the rusty but cheerfully flower-trimmed vehicle wheezed and settled to a halt in front of the 'hotel', steam hissing from its radiator. Its perspiring cargo spilled out, looking bedraggled and bewildered. Jules waited, hoping Steph would move her sticky legs on, and out of her space. She seemed to think because, both being single women they had been allocated as roomies on the trip, it meant doing everything together and was pressed tightly against her on the vinyl bench seat. They were nothing alike, and Jules was feeling a growing sense of annoyance with her constant presence.

'Come on,' Jules urged impatiently. 'Let's get into the shade. I'd murder a cold drink.' She thought she'd murder Steph too, if she didn't hurry up.

This was not a scheduled stop on the road between Pushkar and Ajmar, but the rough and mountainous road, traversed by thousands of pilgrims and washed out in parts by recent heavy rain, had shaken both transport and the nine passengers to their limits. Raman, their Rajasthani guide, after a loud but completely unintelligible conference with the

driver, had decided on an enforced lunch break so they could try to cure whatever ailed the bus.

A gaping crowd of men seemed to have been hanging about waiting for such an arrival. They were smoking strange-smelling cigarettes and aiming occasional half-hearted kicks at the skeletal stray dogs and snuffling pigs that shared the space outside the so-called hotel. Some of the younger ones, sensing a possible sale, held up handfuls of beads at them in a hopeful manner. As they parted to let the motley assortment of foreigners through, Jules in her sweat-soaked t-shirt was aware that many of the older men were staring at her breasts. Passing through a cloud of smoke and under a profusion of overhanging wiring, the travellers filed thankfully into the cool of the ramshackle building that purported to be a source of accommodation and meals. There were three more men inside; one who appeared to have barking authority over the others seemed to be the 'inn-keeper'.

As Jules looked around the squalid room, their recent travels flashed through her mind. This had been a 'taste of India' trip that included a couple of the major cities of Rajasthan and the annual holy festival at Pushkar. The fiery beauty of the setting sun over Lake Pushkar and the magnificent rose-coloured city of Jaipur seemed very distant to her now. Pink was the colour of hospitality in India, but there was little of that inviting hue in evidence here. This structure was off-white, with what looked suspiciously like animal excrement, mixed with straw, plastering the walls

erratically. For a moment, she wondered if the smell of the Pushkar camel fair had somehow taken over her senses, but no, there was definitely an overbearing, dank smell of dromedary here. The wooden tables looked as battered and dirty as she felt, and she was glad to be wearing her hiking boots, but Jules was past worrying. Not so Steph, who was babbling about food and what they might be having for lunch.

It would probably be Thali. While initially she had liked the spiciness of the dish, Jules was 'over' the staple vegetarian plate of Rajasthan. '*Too much of a good thing,*' she told herself. '*Give me meat, for Krishna's sake!*'

Raman appeared from behind some hanging hessian strips that partially concealed the entrance to what apparently served as the kitchen and passed out glasses of lemon water from a tray. He told them to find a seat, and that lunch would soon be on its way. Jules spotted the austere Marlene and Graham, who were sitting with Aaron and Ammon, and squeezed into the small space at the end of their table, while Steph was still debating what they might be eating. She had cornered David and Mihran, who rarely spoke to each other or indeed, to anyone, and who were looking uncomfortable with her animated attention. Jules had only previously spoken superficially to the others at her table; they all looked quite conservative. Marlene and Graham were from somewhere in Wiltshire and were Christians; she knew that because she had seen them reading from the King James Bible on the bus. And Aaron and Ammon in their white nylon shirts and black

trousers, could have been riding bikes round suburbia anywhere, distributing booklets door-to-door. They were natives of Bangalore, which quite bizarrely, was apparently the centre of Mormonism in India. *'Actually, for a small tour group, most of them look religious,'* Jules thought.

The remaining woman in their group, Samsara, had drifted in and was standing near Steph. She was wearing an orange cheesecloth shirt with wrap-around trousers, and always seemed to be very 'zen' wherever she was, so she did not seem perturbed at all by her surroundings. Steph, by this time, was asking Raman what they were having for lunch.

'We have a treat organised, especially for you.' Raman's features looked strained.

'He's putting on a good face.' Jules wondered at the possibilities of treats coming from this kitchen.

She didn't have to wait long to find out.

Just at that moment, the lawnmower-engine sound of a small motorbike cut out behind the kitchen and, amidst scuffling noises and animated voices coming from beyond the hessian strips, an amazing aroma started to fill the unventilated space. Jules stood up and strained to see what was happening. Through the open back wall of the building she could see a rough spit over a firepit – and two men hoisting an impaled, partially cooked pig onto it. Its juices were dripping down their muscular forearms and glistening in the sun. One man was the inn-keeper, but the white teeth gleaming in the other tanned face belonged to the bike rider,

who had miraculously just transported an almost-ready suckling pig to them in a crate on the back of his bike.

'The Pork Master!' The thought made Jules gasp involuntarily, as she stared at the man who had now come into the room to nod at them and drape one leg over a bar stool. He was wearing loose chinos and a crisp coral-coloured cotton shirt rolled up to the elbows, and he seemed charismatically right at home in a room full of strangers. Jules felt quite mesmerised in the heavy air, and her heart thudded weirdly when she found him smiling directly at her. Someone in the kitchen had put on some music, and she recognised it as the playlist from 'Slumdog Millionaire'. Their guide, Rahman, had got up to check on the repairs to the van and having found it would be ready in four hours, was doing some slightly jubilant Bollywood dance steps.

'My namesake, A.R. Rahman,' he laughed self-consciously.

Jules could see the plump, luscious buttocks of the pig rotating in the vibrating stillness of the Indian summer beyond ... she felt quite strange and stood up. Swaying towards the back yard, she knew she had to get some fresh air. Was it the heat, or the strange, sweet smell of whatever those cigarettes contained? Her head swirled as she found herself imagining what it would be like to press herself against their culinary saviour, to fumble under his vibrant clothing, feeling the hard muscles beneath, to be mounted and impaled ...

Outside, the pig squirmed in anxious anticipation and its juices made the coals beneath spit and sizzle.

‘Time to eat?’ The Pork Master caught her arm and steadied her, his dark eyes probing the depths of her consciousness. ‘We’ll get some fresh air afterwards.’

The room, until then subdued, suddenly erupted in a cacophony of complaint.

‘Eat, eat what?’ Graham shouted, as Marlene started quoting Leviticus from the Old Testament, something about not eating any animal that had a split hoof completely divided, like a pig, camel, hare or ... a hyrax? *What on earth was a hyrax?* Mihran, with an invocation to Allah, joined the fundamental Christians in a rejection of all things pig, and now David, pulling anxiously on the Star of David hanging round his neck on a leather thong, was saying that he could not eat pork either. Or shellfish, he added inconsequentially.

The two Mormons had realised it was the first Sunday of the month and they had to fast anyway, so they’d gone on a walk with Samsara, a Buddhist who could not eat meat killed specifically for her. Rahman, a Hindu, looked apologetic as he shovelled in pieces of dripping meat, but muttered that those of lower caste were quite happy to eat pig, even if the animals did eat garbage. It was beef that they got all fussy and uppity about. Steph, oblivious, was already loading her plate from the spit.

And Jules, well, she just looked gratefully through her eyelashes at the gorgeous man serving her some delicious chunks of crackling.

'More pork for me,' she thought happily, contemplating the long, sensual afternoon ahead.

MACROTAPAS

DAN VASEY

I entered a restaurant, not because I was hungry or thirsty, but rather out of fascination with its oxymoronic name, Macrotapas. Aren't tapas snack-sized? Does 'macro' mean the cooks perch whole roast chickens on small plates? Buying a drink seemed a bearable price for satisfying my curiosity.

Inside, bullfight paintings on black satin lined the walls. A bloke who wore a red neck-scarf and a face trenched by lifelong misery played 'Malagueña' on his guitar, at a crawling tempo, plucking notes in the melody as though he pitied them for coming into the world.

A woman in a business suit blocked my path. 'Welcome to Macrotapas, the leader in tapas innovation.'

'Ma'am, do you mean other tapas bars are backward?'

'Only the ones that sell cheap knock-offs of our creations.' She scowled.

Unlike her, the grey-haired man who escorted me to a table looked cheery. Dressed in a vested, baggy-trouser suit of some Spanish kind, he seated me with a smile and a flourish of his hands. 'Me llamo Miguel. I am the team member who will serve you tonight.'

'Glass of house rioja, please.'

'Buen. And will your meal be a la carte or a dinner-sized feast of tapas?'

‘No dinner, just a light snack, the free tapas.’

‘Free?’ Miguel stared upward for several seconds, as though he were counting rotations of the ceiling fan, and then lowered his gaze to me. ‘Señor, it’s nine o’clock. In Spain we have dinner.’

‘In Australia it’s tonight, and your sign out front says tapas are free tonight with drink.’

‘Es verdad. What do you fancy?’

‘A few olives would be dandy, a morsel of chorizo even better.’

‘The choice is at the chef’s discretion, but within certain, um, constraints. The free option is Tapas 1.0, aptly named El Peón. May I suggest an upgrade?’ From under his arm, he pulled a menu. ‘Behold and be hungry for Tapas Pro 6.2, El Conquistador.’ In a photo a table held a sprawl of dishes, including tortilla de patatas, octopus, anchovies, jamón, cheeses, salads, paella, breads and skewered artichokes.

On one plate a blackened chunk, possibly of flesh, looked back from the photo. I pointed. ‘What is that?’

‘Our house specialty, loin of wild boar basted with extra-virgin olive oil and brandy as it slow roasts to a heaven-sent state over smouldering oak. Chew slowly and savour. Recipe, boar, oil, brandy and oak come from Spain, a gift from my people to you. Lingering aromas of our puerco especial del bosque will fill your dreams, a memory you will not wish to uninstall from your mind.’

‘How much does El Conquistador cost?’

‘Only ninety-nine dollars. Or four monthly instalments of twenty-five dollars. Tempting, yes?’

‘It looks delicious, but I have eaten dinner.’

Miguel hung his jaw. ‘¿Donde?’

‘Macca’s.’

‘Caramba. Dine there you catch gastrointestinal agonies. Here you surf epicurean delights without worry. Our tapas are guaranteed virus-free.’

‘Nevertheless, I have consumed a burger, fries and shake. My stomach can hold no more. If I tried to eat my way through the culinary gems of El Conquistador, I would be like a Spanish galleon chock full of tinned sardines trying to make room for looted Aztec gold. Better you bring my wine and free tapas, please.’

He bowed, retreated and spoke to the suited woman. After giving out a loud sigh, she called the guitarist to her and whispered in his ear before shouting at me, ‘We no longer support El Peón and do not update the servings.’

‘I don’t care. Bring wine and free tapas, pronto.’ She scowled but retreated into the kitchen. The few other patrons were staring. Tapas covered their tables.

Tapas 1.0, El Peón, comprised one black and one green olive, both shriveled. Instead of nibbling them, I went straight to the rioja, but alas, it had begun a transition to vinegar. The napkin under the glass carried a printed message, ‘Make us your default tapatería.’

THE LAST SUPPER

IAN STEWART

I have to do it, but it is so hard to bear, spooning the hospital mush into his mouth. He looks at me with each spoonful, a look of incomprehension, child-like in its wide-eyed uncertainty. He just lies there, propped up on three pillows, a green hospital bib around his neck.

The stroke has cancelled all movement down one side. His speech is all but absent. Unswallowed food and drool dribble uncontrolled out of one side of his mouth. As I feed him, from time to time there comes the occasional release of flatus. Once, solid stuff emerged accompanied by an overpowering odour. I turned away then, gagging. It was all I could do to stay the distance. But I have to. He is my father.

A towering figure of my childhood—always happy, smoothing my worries and tending to my cuts and bruises. I can remember him ladling ice cream into my anxiously waiting three-year-old mouth. And there were other things, less attractive. But I never rejected a spoonful from him, no matter what it was. I knew he wouldn't give me anything that wasn't good for me. 'Good girl!' was his constant remark.

Then, those golden days at the beach, zinc on the nose, holding his hand—almost out of reach—as we strode to the surf's frothy edge. Always by me. Always a reassuring, safe smile. Mum would come too, holding the other hand

sometimes. Hard to remember her. Taken from us by an errant motorbike at the shops one Saturday. I was six then.

Now he's reduced to this. Not much more than a vegetable. If I close my eyes as each mouthful goes in I can—just for the moment—envisage us at the Zoo, laughing at the monkeys, awed by the elephants; on a bouncing see-saw at the park; unwrapping bright Christmas-papered presents together. And, when I had my own children, there he was, spooning early solids in, mouthful after mouthful. 'Good boy. Good girl.'

Will there be no end to this terrible decline into sub-humanity? The doctors say that another stroke will carry him off. Should I wish for it, pray for it? As I wrestle with this thought I put another spoonful in. More dribbles out onto the bib.

The nurses arrive, two of them. 'If you don't mind, we'll wash him now. We'll be about ten minutes.' I rise, weary from the effort and drained by the emotion of memory and of the reality that is my father now. Outside, the air is fresh. The hospital garden is arrayed with roses in bloom. There is life all around me. Ten minutes and I'm re-invigorated. I turn and go back in. At the door of his room I stop. 'How much longer can I go through this daily grind, providing my beloved father with the nourishment he needs so much but can hardly retain? But I must do it.' I push open the door. He's there, sitting upright against his pillows.

Shaved, hair brushed, all neat and tidy. Is that a smile on his face? His eyes are shut. I pick up his good hand. The wrist is limp. His head lolls and his breathless mouth sags open.

SAFE HANDS AT LAST

SUE GOURLAY

Lily gradually lifted Fluff-Puff up, exactly how Grandy explained.

‘Be careful to cup her little feet so they can’t scratch you, firmly now. No, not quite that tight darling, that’s it, now carefully draw her in toward your body; she’ll stop shaking as soon as she feels safe, as soon as she realises that you’re her friend.’

A friend. That’s what Grandy had said. ‘As soon as she realises that you’re her friend.’

And Grandy had been right. Gradually Fluff-Puff’s shivering had subsided as she snuggled even further into Lily’s chest. A friend.

However, being a friend, in fact finding a friend could be a tricky business and it didn’t always feel good. Lily knew from experience that sometimes making friends could make your tummy squirm; make you wee before you were ready and even with the extra squeezing and your legs crossed, the wee would trickle down to leave a wet patch on the ground and the would-be friend would point and laugh with the other would-be friends before going oooooo ‘she’ did a wee, because they didn’t know your name yet, and then they’d all run away and you’d be left alone. Again.

So, when Lily felt that warm wet dribble in her hand, she stayed perfectly still and told Fluff-Puff not to worry. 'I understand, it's just an accident, you couldn't help it.' she cooed as she placed Fluff-Puff carefully back on the old towels in the box that Grandy had told Lily would make a good guinea pig home until Grandad collected up that wire cage a neighbour had left out for the hard rubbish.

"Meant to be," Grandy said, 'that Fluff-Puff's new home appeared around the corner the very day after Pluff-Puff had arrived unannounced on their doorstep. And now, 'thank gawd' one of Grandy's favourite sayings, they wouldn't have to spend all of grandad's *so called* hard-earned money on what he said was little more than a haven for mice and rats.

A boy in one of Lily's last schools had actually brought a pet rat named Slinky into the classroom for show and tell. Lily had been allowed to pick it up except she didn't because it looked a lot like the rats that ended up in one of those traps that one of Lily's mother's blokes (as grandad called her uncles) set, even though Slinky was white with pink eyes instead of brown with bulging dead sockets due to the ants getting there first. And it wasn't streaked in blood either.

Fluff-Puff was soft and fat and cuddly and to Lily was nothing like a rat alive or dead. Even so, Grandad had told Lily not to let that damn think in the house. And the minute Lily stopped cleaning the cage, which Grandad reckoned would be 'one week max' he'd happily drown the thing like his dad used to do with kittens all those years ago.

Grandad told Lily about the drowning of unwanted kittens the very first day she moved into their home. Too many strays in the world already he'd warned her. It was the kindest thing to do.

Grandy had told Grandad to 'shut up' and that Lily shouldn't take any notice of him. 'You'll frighten the child,' she scolded him. And when Lily started crying and tried to hide in the corner of the room, Grandy said 'See!' And Grandad said, 'That's life.' Then added, 'he was way too old to take on all of this,' before turning on the news.

A while ago, Lily's mother had fed a ginger cat that hung around the back door. Lily would try to pick it up but her mother said it was feral and would scratch Lily if she got too close. Besides she'd added that it didn't need cuddling, just food. Later, when Lily's mum was 'so tired' she'd screamed 'piss off' to the whining tom and threw it down the steps and Lily never saw the cat again. It was a stray anyway her mother had said. It could scavenge a feed from someone else for a change.

It wasn't long after that when Lily and her mother moved and moved and moved again until the last time when Lily's mother moved without Lily, apparently interstate, and even though their flat had often been filled with crowds of nameless people, nobody, not even Grandy knew exactly where to.

That's when Lily ended up living with Grandy and Grandad.

It was almost a week now since Fluff-Puff had arrived and Lily had been the very best friend she could be, however, this morning Lily had woken up in wet sheets and she needed to hide them before Grandy found out. Lily's mum mostly used to just leave them on the bed but Lily knew Grandy liked to wash her sheets, 'every day if necessary,' even when Grandad complained about the extra workload as he carried the *too heavy for you, love* wash basket to the clothesline.

Lily was running late and wondered if it really mattered if she missed, just this once, topping up Fluff-Puff's food and water; she would run out to see Fluff-Puff straight after school. For six whole days before breakfast, Lily had cleaned out the pen, carefully refilling the water bowl, 'not too high now' and food trays and giving her best friend a good ten-minute cuddle. Each day Lily had apologised to Fluff-Puff for leaving her alone, but assured her it was only 'til just after 3.30 when she'd be home.

Lily's mum used to apologise to Lily too, all the time, for nothing and for everything; for not being home, for being home and keeping Lily awake, for the empty fridge and the full bins, for the quiet and for the noise, for the loneliness and the crowds, for the crazy laughter and the crazy crying. Sorry, sorry, sorry. When Lily's head became swollen with *sorrys* sometimes, it hurt so much she screamed out loud.

Lily's new teacher was very nice and Lily had been introduced to a special 'buddy' to help her feel comfortable but it was still hard getting used to yet another school. And

sometimes when she couldn't remember how to do something she got angry.

Lily heard three harsh claps before she heard her teacher command, 'Whoever said that rude word, please say sorry.' Lily wasn't sure if she had said a rude word, maybe she had, everything was very noisy all of a sudden and as she placed her hands over her face, Lily felt a vibration in her throat, heard the shrill in her ears and her heart beat thump, thump, thump as she ran to hide in the corner of the classroom.

Lily couldn't remember much about the ride back from school but here she was, on the couch with Grandy stroking her hair and cuddling her so tightly there was barely any room to move and although her screaming had stopped, Lily still felt her little body shaking, shaking like Fluff-Puff that first time Lily had held her. Fluff-Puff! It must be well after 3.30 and Fluff-Puff would be wondering where Lily was. Lily tried to get up but Grandy's hold was firm.

Lily's tears began streaming as she remembered that she hadn't even filled up Fluff-Puff's food and water that morning. Poor Fluff-Puff would be so afraid, alone and thirsty, hungry too and Lily knew from back then, what that felt like.

Oh! Grandad would be so angry; he'd warned Lily about what happened to unloved unwanted creatures. She could see it now, that bag full of struggling kittens, water rising all around them, desperately meowing, meowing, meowing, trying to scratch their way out of the sinking bag. Lily thought

of the squeaking sound that Fluff-Puff made when she had been afraid and wondered how loud it could get.

When Grandad came through the back door, he wasn't angry or grumpy at all. He sat down next to Grandy bending over to give Lily a kiss before he explained, 'I thought your little friend might help make you feel better', and he placed Fluff-Puff firmly in Lily's safe hands.

GOLDEN SKIES

KEVIN DRUM

I had lived in this little-known part of Australia for three years, a paradise tucked away in the southern corner of South Australia. The area is referred to as the Southeast and Mt Gambier is the main town. It is blessed with fertile soils which support productive agricultural, pastoral, and dairy properties, and the renowned Coonawarra wine-producing vineyards. It is also a major source of construction timber, harvested from cultivated pine forests dating back to the late 19th century.

I arrived in mid-winter and was intrigued at how the prolonged cold soggy months would transform into hot dry summers.

Summer and autumn are the most fire-prone seasons in South-eastern Australia. The extreme weather conditions occur when a powerful south-westerly cold front collides with a slow-moving high pressure system centred in the Tasman Sea. Such was the meteorological stage-set of Ash Wednesday, 16 April 1983.

A warm breeze, wafted in from the northwest. The ABC radio announcement on the early morning news was sombre, a grim portent of the coming day's events.

Today is a day of total fire ban for South Australia and Victoria. The Weather Bureau is predicting a maximum

temperature of forty-three degrees. Residents are advised to be prepared, secure all windows and doors, and stay inside.

It had been a normal summer. There was nothing unusual about the warning which was one of several for the fire season.

The wind speed started to pick up, and by late morning was gale force. Squeezed between the two weather systems the moving air masses scooped up the rising heat and debris from a sun-scorched continent. Rising thousands of metres, in waves the airborne rolling avalanches were funnelled in a south-easterly direction, increasing in velocity and temperature by the minute.

I worked at the Mt Gambier Ford dealership, where the huge glass windows of the new-car showroom distorted under the onslaught, threatening to explode, with wind gusts now exceeding 100 km/h. Relative humidity reduced to such an extent that writing pads and any loose papers would coil and distort.

The air fairly crackled with malevolent intent.

I looked around me. The creased brows and grim faces of my workmates reflected their increasing apprehension.

Soon after noon the smell of smoke rent the air.

Sparks from a fallen power line near the small town of Greenways, east of Robe lit the first fire, which would become known as *Narraweena*. In quick succession another started at *Clay Wells*, followed by several more. The fires took off and merged into major conflagrations. Like fingers, or *Runs* as

they're described by the Country Fire Service (CFS), they were driven in our direction.

Now fuelled by abundant dry pastures and native woodlands, the fires increased in intensity reaching furnace-like core temperatures. Outbuildings and trees exploded on contact and paddocks turned black in an instant. At its extremities, flaming vortexes of cyclonic intensity formed. The towering whirlwinds roared with terrifying power, likened to a low-flying jumbo jet, wreaking havoc and destruction. Fences vanished and livestock and wildlife were cremated where they stood.

Fire ash, embers and rubbish rained upon the downwind towns, including Mt Gambier, shrouding us in an eerie golden twilight.

Mid-afternoon and the fire storm struck the first of the pine forests at Mt Burr, the radiant heat snapping tree trunks like matchsticks. The fire soared to the treetops and *crowned*, a CFS term describing the phenomenon of wind-driven fire racing at speed across the treetops, feeding from their volatile secretions. In turn this causes *spotting*, whereby flying embers spark multiple fires, kilometres forward of the main front.

By 3:30 pm *Naraween*a had reached Dismal Swamp, near the Mt Gambier airport, sixteen kilometres from the town. Twenty minutes later the wind changed to the south/south-west. Now the town was safe as the fire swerved away in a north-easterly direction. It now became a 65 km front, linking the runs.

Although the temperature had reduced, the driving wind had lost none of its ferocity. The fires raced through the pine forests, threatening to engulf the small timber towns of Tarpeena and Nangwarry. Forewarned, the Tarpeena residents were evacuated to the local footy oval. Surrounded by fire and flying embers, the 600 residents huddled in refuge with their menagerie of pets and most precious possessions, as the CFS fought to protect them. The huge sawmill and main town employer SAPFOR was saved, but still over 20 homes and many outbuildings were destroyed. Nangwarry township and sawmill were also saved in similar circumstances. For the next two hours the forest inferno raged. The Mt Gambier and Penola pine forests were decimated, and the small town of Kalangadoo razed.

The weather gods intervened at 6.30 pm, when the wind abated, and it started to rain, thereby limiting any further uncontrollable spread, but the fires would continue to burn for days.

The golden skies turned blood red with the setting sun.

My family home was located on the drive around Mt Gambier's Blue Lake, a high point, north-facing and overlooking the town. As darkness fell, we were astounded to see we were surrounded from the west to east horizon by a glowing ring of fire. It brought home to us the proximity of the near disaster.

What horrors, we wondered, would tomorrow's sunrise reveal?

There would be many stories of courage and tragedy in equal proportion. Fourteen people lost their lives that day. The first a man fleeing the Mt Burr fire, and tragically near Kalangadoo, a mother and her four children incinerated in their car, as they tried to outrun the fire. They crashed from the road, stranded in the blinding conditions. A local man tried to save them, but to no avail. A true hero, he too perished. Nearby, three men were killed trying to save their homes. A three-man road maintenance crew caught out by the sudden wind change, and two CFS volunteer fire fighters, those frontline heroes, all succumbed in the quick-changing volatile conditions.

More than one hundred fire-fighting appliances fought to control the fires. Forty homes were lost, and the devastating tally mounted. Lost, a quarter of a million sheep, 10,000 cattle, and innumerable wildlife. Destroyed, 20,000 hectares of pine forests, 360 pastoral properties in area exceeding 100,000 hectares, and 8,500 kilometres of fencing, now useless tangles of wire.

The personal stories were many. The children of the tiny Kangaroo Inn Area School, who in the face of the approaching *Clay Wells* fire front, were evacuated to safety by the CFS to nearby Beachport. The children and teachers were praised, and described as, *remaining cool calm and collected*.

What of the many older folk, whose humble homes were saved, but their beloved vegetable and flower gardens, orchards, chicken coops and household pets, all gone? The

elderly lady who returned to her saved house, to find everything else lost. Aghast at the bleak landscape, she left and returned with boxes of garden plants, and a six-week-old kitten tucked away in her overcoat pocket, saying. 'I just couldn't bear the loneliness and blackness all round.'

The heart-rending task of farmers, having to humanely destroy burned livestock, many prized breeding pedigree. The mass graves dug to dispose of the overwhelming carcase numbers couldn't cope, and soon the air reeked with multiple funeral pyres. The unrestrained surviving livestock were mustered, and in worst cases put out of their misery. It was a frightful situation which invoked an enormous physical and emotional personal toll.

The stately well-ordered pine forests, the life-blood source of the surrounding sawmills and wood processing plants, many now blackened deserted wastelands, to be bulldozed and the remnants burned. Other mature plantations some of seventy years standing, although burned and dead, still stood like sentinel black demons from an afterlife. From these would emerge one of the nation's most successful timber salvage operations.

Time was of the essence, and the decision was made to salvage as much of the burnt prime timber as possible. The trees would require harvesting and storage under sustained moisture content within six months, to avoid structural deterioration. An estimate of the available timber was two

million cubic metres. This would require a mammoth logistical task, six times the current annual harvesting rate.

Sawmills were put onto multi-shift maximum capacity, and underwater log storage arranged in a local sea water lake, and disused limestone quarries with reticulated watering systems. Roads and storage handling facilities were built, and additional logging contractors engaged from interstate, most notably Tasmania. Within weeks a boatload of families with their huge logging machines and trucks unloaded at nearby Portland. They were to call Mt Gambier home for the next eight months.

The operation was a huge success, with up to 300 truckloads of logs per day delivered to the storage sites. The timber recovery estimates were exceeded.

As often happens with the vagaries of nature, within two weeks of the fires, the heavens opened with sustained soaking rains. It was one of the earliest autumn season breaks on record.

New life would now begin.

PSYCHIC

MARGARET PEARCE

‘Nothing much different between telepathic or a psychic—just the usual fortune telling guff,’ the Master explained to his disciple.

The area could have been quieter. Even as he talked, there was the ‘crump’ of some accident and the wail of sirens from the street.

They had rented a small and discreet room. Deep purple curtains were tacked around the walls and over the windows for a mystic gloom. A crystal ball sat on the deep purple tablecloth covering the card table. Two chairs were set up at the table, courtesy of the local auctions. Despite the outside cold, the room was almost cosy.

The ‘psychic’ sign was blu-tacked to the door. It was a very satisfactory and temporary arrangement. With an instant notice of unfavourable psychic vibes like cops, unsatisfied or suspicious customers, they could fold the curtains and the table like Arabs, remove the sign from the door and be gone to more profitable fields.

‘Something worrying you deep inside, a change coming in the future, job, location or romance and did you know you are a bit psychic yourself,’ the young man with deceptively honest grey eyes recited.

‘That’s the guff,’ encouraged the Master. ‘You can pick up a lot of stuff just by their conversation. Conversations with their beloved dead are very lucrative.’

‘At fifty dollars a time,’ the disciple breathed happily.

‘You can pick up on their deceased because they use the past tense and are remorseful about not being able to apologise and say goodbye or whatever,’ the Master explained. ‘Pretend to see women in whatever colours were fashionable the year they died. Never fails.’

Someone knocked.

‘Sit and listen. I’ll take the first mark just to show you the sort of thing you should pick up on,’ the Master whispered. He raised his voice. ‘Enter.’

The boy who entered was young, maybe eighteen, the disciple assessed, wild eyed and scared.

‘How can I help you?’ the Master asked.

‘It’s my mother,’ the distraught boy groaned. ‘I was driving her car when we had the accident. She was gone so fast I didn’t have a chance to apologise. Are you telepathic as well as psychic?’

‘She passed five minutes ago?’

‘You know!’

‘I sensed it. I do have some talent,’ the Master admitted modestly.

‘Could you somehow get through to her? Soften her up or something. She’s got to forgive me.’

‘Sometimes I can reach those whose minds are closed to their loved ones and sometimes I can’t,’ the Master admitted. ‘I hate asking for money, but trying to get through to a loved one incapacitates me for days.’

‘Try to reach her,’ the boy begged as he reached into his wallet.

The disciple noticed that the Master didn’t protest at being handed the only \$20 note from it.

‘Sit down and relax,’ the Master droned. ‘You upset the vibrations with your tension, and I can’t pick up on anything except your unhappiness and remorse. What was your mother’s name?’

‘Angela. Angela Hyde-Smith.’

The Master closed his eyes. ‘Mrs. Angela Hyde-Smith. Are you listening?’ He paused, breathing heavily. ‘It’s very hard to get through. There is blood.’

‘She cut her head when we pranged,’ the boy admitted.

‘I can see a woman with fair hair but only indistinctly,’ the Master intoned, opening his eyes wider and staring into space. He shivered realistically. ‘Her blue eyes are glaring at me.’

‘That’s Mum,’ the boy said eagerly. ‘Keep trying.’

The disciple was impressed. He sneaked a look at the blue-eyed boy with the untidy fair hair. Sons did often resemble their mothers more than their fathers. The Master had made a lucky guess.

‘She is dressed in something pink. Was your mother fond of the colour pink?’

The disciple was again impressed. All the fashionable and even unfashionable women were wearing pink this year.

‘Her favourite deep pink linen suit with a paler pink blouse,’ the boy agreed.

‘She looks very young to be your mother,’ the Master said. ‘Are you sure you haven’t got an older sister?’

‘Everyone says she looks too young to be my mother,’ the boy replied. ‘Make her soften up and forgive me.’

The disciple was again impressed. Of course a boy as young as that wouldn’t exactly have an elderly mother.

‘Everything is fogging up.’ The Master faltered and put a hand to his head. ‘Her animosity is blocking me. She is fading ...’

‘Try harder,’ the boy urged. He pressed the remaining coins from his wallet into the Master’s waiting hand. ‘I’ve never really believed in telepathy, but I am desperate. Get her to forgive me.’

The disciple watched in admiration. The Master had closed his eyes again, but his waiting hand was in exactly the right position to accept the coins.

‘I see her more clearly. Now she is smiling. She has a dimple on the left side of her mouth,’ the Master droned.

‘It’s on the right side of her mouth, actually,’ the boy said, relieved. ‘You’ve got her to forgive me. Cool!’

He rushed out the door.

‘Perhaps you really are telepathic and picked up an image of his mother from his mind,’ the disciple suggested.

‘I wouldn’t have thought so,’ the Master mused as he put the note and coins in his wallet. The room became steadily colder as he spoke. He wondered about the expense of a cheap radiator. ‘Yet as the great bard said, there are more things in heaven and earth Horatio than you can ...’

His voice broke off with a muffled gasp. The disciple stared in horrified disbelief. In the purple gloom, a figure had materialized in front of the swaying purple curtains. It was a youngish woman with short curly fair hair, wearing a fashionable deep pink suit. A faint trickle of dried blood wound its way from under a lopsided band aid across her forehead.

The disciple shivered, petrified with fright. His Master had called up a ghost and it had come! One of the unquiet dead they never believed in! The biting cold of the room was the dreadful proof.

The woman’s blue eyes fixed on the two men. ‘I’ve got to find him before I leave. Where is he?’

‘Begone,’ the Master stammered.

‘Weirdos!’ Mrs Angela Hyde-Smith snorted at the unhelpful occupants of the gloomy room, as she stepped back past the purple curtains and through the wide open door.

Her son again stood by the damaged car, staring at the ‘P’ plate hanging drunkenly on the back window, his

shoulders hunched against the icy wind. He looked up as his mother approached.

‘Sorry, Mum,’ he apologised.

The dimple on the right side of her mouth sprang into prominence as she almost smiled. ‘Tow truck will be five minutes. Maybe I’ll excuse you this time.’

He grinned. His mother had forgiven him! He had been so desperate, although he didn’t really believe in psychics or telepathy. Maybe the twenty-one dollars had been a good investment after all. His grin faded as she continued.

‘But the very next bingle you’re dead! Your name comes off my insurance policy as driver of the Mercedes.’

THE HOTEL

PAULINE RIMMER

The room was filthy. The hotel had been devoid of life for some time. Although time was irrelevant to me.

Dust motes danced in sunshine filtering feebly through tattered curtains. They flapped listlessly. A broken window framed a sapphire sky above a faded hotel sign. Paint peeled and the roof sagged despondently. Empty bottles and cigarette butts showed someone had once partied here.

A real estate agent showed a prospective buyer around, his gloomy expression contradicting his slick sales spiel. He tugged nervously at his collar. His feet tapped a tuneless rhythm on the filthy floorboards while he waited for his client to inspect the place. Perhaps he sensed me watching?

‘Hey, look at this photo. I wonder if he was the murder victim?’

The broken frame lay amongst litter and grime on the sticky carpet. Unseen, I looked closer. It was a photo of a young man leaning on an old Austin car. I loved that car. I looked good in the photograph.

‘Police investigated, and a body was never discovered. It was more of a mysterious disappearance. I have no reason to scare folks with wild rumours and ghost stories. Were you interested in the place? It’s going for a song.’

The buyer had already left the room. He looked around and shuddered.

‘I don't think so; the place is too creepy for me. I felt like someone was watching us. I think the victim is still here.’

He was right—and I had no intention of leaving until my body was found and laid to rest.

MEMOIR

LOVE SANCTUARY

STEPHANE VANDER BRUGGEN

The rain is incessant. My green and bright haven has turned into darkness and early death. In summer, the greenery is so bright that it looks like a fluorescent green light is hiding within the tree trunks. On a sunny day, the light bursts out of the forest like a flashlight. But this year, the Belgian forest has lost its charms and appeal too quickly. This is an indication that a long winter is coming.

I sit down and put the phone in my lap after a chat with my wife, when the reality of my new world hits me. I'm stuck in Europe. I realise divorce is inevitable and my kids will be taken away from me. I have destroyed my life with my poor decisions. I fall down on my knees, incessantly weep like a little boy and hold my head in my hands. I am filled with the weight of my own betrayal. The maelstrom peaks, shoots darts of adrenaline through my body. My muscles seize up and shatter into small pieces like a dropped glass vase on the floor. My heart explodes from within like a bomb. She has been the glue that has kept my life together and now I will need her to reassemble me, but she is forever gone.

I get up and go out running. Despite the grim weather I run most days. My mind is filled with so much grief. She left me too quickly. My heart bleeds with pain, in sync with the

water sporadically trickling from the mountain spring. Both are cold and untameable.

The dark clouds appear and disappear for a while, but then settle on the canopy of trees. They seem to have seized the pointy tree tops. Zeus has released his anger on our vast forest, turning familiar trails into treacherous ones where manoeuvring without falling is impossible. The murk makes it difficult to see anything further than 100 meters away. This matches the gloominess of my life. The mist sits in my mind as well. There is no more sunshine without her.

The flowers have almost disappeared; I can see the last daisy floating away in the river. It slips away from me like the fading memory of us lying down and caressing on a carpet of flowers, back when looking into her eyes was still possible.

Now the chill runs along my spine and freezes my bones. Icy winds and water blasts whip my skin and the green foliage; hail stones fall on my head like tiny meteors. They turn me blind and numb, but also shoot down at the leaves, which have no other choice but to detach from their source in an elegant floating dance. The Gods must be angry. I share their rage.

The long humid days feel heavy and endless. When will this rain stop? A clear night gives us hope. My family is affected as well, and they worry when I venture out in the woods for too long. But the deluge returns with a vengeance the next morning. Water runs everywhere. If it was spring, it would trick the frogs into laying their eggs in large puddles

instead of ponds. Foxes look like puffed up moving fur coats, and the roaming deer surrender in their search for refuge. The owls only venture out between precipitations. Even the birds have taken refuge in their hollows. Only the ducks are celebrating the rain dance and their luck that it's too wet for any hunters to venture outside.

The dim light only reflects on water these days. I catch my own reflection from the corner of my eyes and can only see sadness bouncing off. The state of the charmless forest bereft of its enchanting aura sends me into an early feeling of winter blues. The spectre of winter has moved in and summer has now become its shadow.

The vast forest looks like an empire made for the moss and amphibians to flourish in. Even the smells have become sleepy and finally disappeared. The only scent left in the air is moisture from damp moss, murky rivers, wet bark and tree trunks. Where has my sanctuary gone?

I crave to smell, see and touch my green haven once again, but I will now have to wait until spring hopefully kicks this darkness out of this woodland and my obscure mind. I dream of the sunlight crisping up my skin again instead of witnessing the assault of the water.

The torrent leaks onto the paths and turns them into mud baths that become traps for small animals. Venturing on it by mistake could be marking the last moment of their lives before they realise that their familiar terrain has been turned into swamps.

The heavy rains dig into the horse tracks and disperse the sand. They create holes that look as if made by the muscular legs of robust and majestic horses from centre équestre les Drags trying not to get bogged. The leaves got forced into early retirement by falling onto the ground to form a foliar litter, pretending to be a carpet, ready to play tricks on anyone daring adventurous footsteps. The ground is now as unstable as the state of my mood, and my hideaway has turned as dark as my thoughts. How can I make it through another winter without her?

My mind is damp like the trunk I am now sitting on. I look up to the sky by holding my face in my hands to force myself to seek some brightness. But there is none. Her face used to brighten up my days. Her eyes used to warm my heart in a heartbeat.

I see a squirrel running up a majestic ash tree in a hurry. It has understood that winter is here and will settle into a welcome hibernation. I want to hide too. I want to jump into a foxhole and never come out again. I want to camouflage into the foliage and let the leaves fall down from the sky like her angel wings that used to cover me like a thick blanket and keep me warm and safe.

I am trying to understand why we have been thrown into early wintertime, why she left me simultaneously. Winter has settled like a tide that will not recede. Snow and frost will be biting soon.

The rains have destroyed the creek beds. Creeks are now growing into rivers. Little rivers turn into rapids that kids use to move their pirate ships made of fallen sticks and dead leaves. Fear or sadness does not appear on their faces. Their hearts are full of joy and their spirits so bright that I feel a beam of light as I walk past. They are using this deluge as a playground, splashing, laughing, screaming in joy. One kid looks elated from the boat race he just won. I wish I could share their happiness and feel like them once again. The mud they run in has been diluted with water, like my blood by sadness. My heart is bleeding out through the tears pouring from my eyes. I don't care if anyone sees me as tear drops mix with the heavy rain falling all over my face. Walking in the rain and shivering seems better than the darkness of the home we used to share. I seem to be walking away from our love nest. Will I ever go back there?

Her photos plaster our walls, her perfume has infused our bed sheets, her smile never leaves my mind and her sweet voice is a lullaby that is being played on repeat in my head.

I cannot go back home without her welcoming me back to try again. I keep walking, hoping my agonising body will somehow make it back to my mother's house in the middle of the night. Hoping they'll all be asleep so I don't have to endure their questions. The feeling of total exhaustion has me swaying between trees and hoping my wife might be waiting for me at the house. I am barely moving now and I look up everywhere to see her face. I want a miracle and I pray the

Gods will allow me the chance of seeing her just one more time. All of a sudden, I can see her image everywhere, playing on repeat in my head and projecting out of my eyes onto the sky. I feel like I am in my old favourite French movie *Manon des Sources*.

Am I slowly fading away? Is my body leaving me? 'Please take me away', I ask Thanatos while looking up to the heavens. This feeling of feebleness brings me closer to where I belong—back home in your arms. I'm so lost without you. I now understand how much I've hurt you. One more chance to fight for us is all I ask ...

WHAT I TOOK

JO CURTAIN

They fled to Moree to find a home. It was 1980, and I was eight years old. I never asked Dad; of all places, why did they choose a small country town somewhere in the North West Plains?

Our memories are fleeting and a little slippery, especially those of a middle-aged orphan. So little has been passed down to me: a handful of photos, a letter sent during the war and a school Bible. This is but one version of the truth, like a little particle floating, hoping to one day find a home.

I remember the first time I visited Moree. I travelled in one of those old brown rattlers; Dad and I sat opposite, Chrissie beside me. We played cards. Poker. Snap and Rummy. I saw a cow for the first time. I did the same trip several times. Mum never understood my desire to spend my holidays there. I was too young to put it into words, except to say it was different. Dad was different.

Welcome to Moree. Plunge. Soak it up. Relax in the hot artesian springs. A town still segregated—but keep that one to yourself.

Dad and Molly rented on the other side of the railway tracks. A falling-down house—peeling ice mint weatherboard, delicate lace curtains and a grassy back garden that stretched on forever. I watched as neighbourhood children ran wild

through the kitchen, and Molly dished out chocolate flavoured ice cubes. Tentatively at first, I padded into the much lighter atmosphere, but unlikely tensions simmered between the fluff and merriment.

In Moree, I learnt about life. It is true. I was invited into a vexed relationship, infused with and attuned to the nuances of vindictiveness and bitterness. I stumbled without the protection of Mum and naively revealed secrets. I learnt the young are frequently sacrificed and literally too, like the bull terrier pups next door eaten by their mother. Palpable shock. Dad said *she is a pig dog, don't go near her*.

A stench of death rode the heat waves. We breathed in the heady scent of rotting cicada corpses. Me carrying my doll Chrissie, we walked following the railway tracks to town. L had made a wardrobe of clothes for Chrissie, intoxicating flowers, swirls of pink and green and purple paisley. Overwhelmed by her generosity, I luxuriated over every item of clothing, unfolding them, trying each on. There was an outfit for every occasion. The adults discussed the locust plague. L said *the bastards leave nothing behind. Any green they eat*

Anything green? I piped.

Yep, said Dad, *even your t-shirt, bub.*

At eight, I believed Dad; his words went unquestioned. An innocent trust that only the very young possessed. After an anxious walk home, I didn't wear my green t-shirt again.

Walking was our way of getting around. Dad didn't drive. He didn't like cars. We were battered by the waves of dry heat—crackling, greedily drawing every drop of moisture. I discovered the two staples in their lives; the first was the public swimming pools. Molly and Dad soaked in the warm artesian waters, and I roamed the outside pool. At first alone. Floating in the cool water beside hovering dragonflies. Flickering. Kicking water. And then with J, the first friend I made. I don't remember whether he was a local or, like me, a visitor.

I first met J at the Victoria Hotel, the other staple in their life. He earned easy money fetching the newspaper for some of the old fellas, including my Dad. I was immediately attracted to his cheeky audaciousness, and we became friends on my first visit to Moree.

Dad and Molly lived in Moree for the next three years; he returned home permanently after Molly died. On my last visit to Moree before the funeral, I was in the kitchen with Molly, Dad was out somewhere, and from the cupboard, she grabbed a can of baked beans for lunch but not the brand Mum bought. A stream of throat-shredding words pummelled me. She grabbed my arm and raised her walking stick in her opposite hand. Fear tethered me to the floor. In the background, Dad's voice penetrated and shuddering, we turned our attention to the doorway. Dad sent me outside.

What I took away was tangible—faith in humanity, not always easy, more often complex and confusing.

WHEN I WAS FOUR

SANDRA ANN JOBLING

Darkness caresses me and soothes my soul like a warm overcoat in winter. I invite the dull greys of darkness into my life, for I find comfort in the subdued colours of night. In the twilight hours, my brothers play on the other side of the room, pulling and pushing until one of them cries out in pain. I hear their harsh voices, their shouting. My days are mostly sunny, but this otherness comes out in the boys during cold evenings, and that otherness causes me to fear them.

There has always been this other side to the boys. No one person can control their behaviour, at least not for any length of time, possibly because their unbridled clowning presents itself randomly. Their unruly behaviour also surfaces when they feel fear, and my own fear challenges them. It reaches into unknown territory, an area of themselves they are hesitant to explore.

I need the dark. I enjoy sinking into a current that sweeps me downstream, away from the tumble of boys who are high on adrenaline. Sometimes I lie in a dark corner of our room, my head under the blankets, and listen. And then it starts. In our room's dimness and half shadows, my brothers play witches. Their bed looms large. Coats, army green, hang clumped together on a hook on the back of our bedroom

door. I see the shadows of witches; their deformed outlines move and take on fearful forms.

‘Shhhhh. Shhhhhhh, listen,’ Alan says.

‘What we listen for?’ I whisper.

‘Shh shhhhh.’

‘Shh shhhhh, for what?’ I say. I already feel a scream in my throat.

‘It’s the witches. They’re coming.’

‘No, no witches! Don’t bring em here ... I don wan witches here ... I don like em.’

The mischief creeps in through the coats.

‘The witches are here.’

‘What they come here for?’ I whisper.

‘They like little girls.’

The double bed at the other end of the room leaves no clear path to escape. Outside it’s moody, and the streetlights sweep shadows through open blinds. Misshapen witches spread their wings, and their contorted faces are frightening.

A scream springs from my mouth; it echoes throughout the room.

‘Don’t scream,’ Stanley says.

It’s too late. There stands my father against the backlight. Two thick leather straps, three inches wide, usually stored on a metal clip in the medicine cupboard, are now in his hand.

Angry, my father has frightened away all signs of brooding witches. Dad keeps us quiet with his presence.

Stanley is told to pull down his pants, and flesh against flesh strikes again. I don't look. I sink underneath the blankets and hear the wallops. I hope that Dad will change his mind when it's my turn. I pray as a child prays, but my prayer is unanswered. Finally ordered to, I pull down my pyjama pants. At any minute, Daddy will say no, it's not your fault. Those words don't come. Dad's hand smacks my bum, and I feel the sting on my cheeks. My tears threaten, but I won't give in to them. I say to myself, 'Don't give in ... don't give in.'

'No more noise.' Dad's voice booms over the stillness in the room. Again I hide under the blankets and muffle my distress. My brothers are calm now. I breathe deeply and quietly, not wanting to make a noise. My fear that Dad will come back is more potent than my fear of the shadowy forms hanging from the door. In the dark, I am safe. And I know I am as brave as the boys because, like them, I did not cry. In the dark, I fall into a dreamless sleep.

Today, when I am in dark times and I feel scared, I think back to when I was scared of shadows. I look at my brothers who treated me as a *girl* to make themselves look brave and to be heroes of the night. But these days I know my worth. It's because of my experiences with my older brothers that I know I can be as brave and strong as anyone.

A QUIET DOOR

JACINTA ORILLO

*Death is only a quiet door.
In an old wall.*

Nancy Byrd Turner

My introduction to the hospital mortuary was just that—a quiet door, in an old wall. An unassuming, white wooden door, set into a grey brick wall, tucked away in a basement that smelt like dampness and dust, unaltered since its construction in the 1950s.

‘God this is spooky,’ muttered a young constable once, as I led him and his partner to inspect a Coroner’s case. I couldn’t help but grin at the irony of his words.

Death is a door in an old wall. A white wooden door; steel fridge door. In my experience there are no signs to say where the mortuary is. Both those I’ve worked in were unmarked—you wouldn’t know they were there.

Death is the sound of fridge compressors sparking up, forever cooling. The fans are loud and drown out all thoughts. They cause stray hairs to blow across half-closed eyes, body bags to ripple making you look twice—was that movement? Of course it wasn’t. Body hair stands on end the moment the bag is opened, exposing the patient to the cold air—even days after death.

Death is peace and grace. It is freshly manicured nails clutching flowers, a faint whiff of talcum powder, faces no longer taut with stress and pain. It is clean pyjamas, serenely closed eyes, hands folded gently over stomachs, photos of loved ones tucked underneath.

Death is pain and struggle. It is mouths gasping in silent screams, cloudy eyes gazing sightlessly at the roof. It is skin yellowed by liver failure, mottled with hues of pink, red, and purple from livor mortis. It is poorly fitting hospital gowns and the faint whiff of excrement. It is pale hands, fingers shrivelled and claw like.

Death is celebration. A woman aged more than 100, diminutive and regal, dressed in robes of red and gold, wrists adorned with jade bracelets.

Death is fear. Body bags emblazoned with warnings: *Covid patient DO NOT OPEN*. It is sweating beneath layers of disposable gowns, steaming up face masks and visors, watching funeral directors heat-seal the infectious into bio safety bags. It is supervising colleagues to don and doff protective equipment in a vain attempt to avoid an unseen danger.

Death is fascination. It is observing a surgeon skilfully cut the thick sclera of a patient's eyes. It is listening with intent as they describe the fine intricacy involved with the donation of a person's corneas. It is removing the superstition and replacing it with scientific wonderment.

Death is the forgotten. It is the patient left for weeks and months in the back of the mortuary fridge. It is listening to supervisors and management discuss why no one has come to claim them. It is watching the body bag slowly diminish, hinting at what is happening within. It is calming a colleague who mistakenly opens the bag— ‘their eyes were gone! Their face was black! And their teeth ... they had no lips, just their teeth.’

Death is unfair. It is a baby with cherry red skin, head flattened due to the lack of a brain, wrapped in a bloodstained blanket. It is a tiny foetus carefully folded within a lemon-coloured handkerchief. It is a disembodied arm, hand pressed against the side of a specimen jar. It is remembering when you lost your own tiny foetus, no more than a sack, and feeling emptiness.

It is all this and more.

It is unknown, careless mistakes made by nursing staff only for them to be discovered by people like me.

It is helping a funeral director roll over a patient who had accidentally been left face down for days. It is suppressing a gasp as the face lands inches from my own. Skin as purple as plums, nose and lips swollen yet flattened as if pressed against glass. Blood and fluids leaking from every orifice, causing the skin to blister. Hands twisted and contorted in ways not natural, due to the weight of the body pressing down for so long. It is privately crying in the corner once it is complete ...

It is assisting a manager to help wash the blood from a woman left to bleed slowly out for days from uncovered IV lines. It is wiping away with reverence the mess it has made to her beautiful floral dress, and shuddering at how cold her skin feels. It is still feeling how cold her skin was even to this day.

Death is a quiet door, a white van, a steel stretcher, a blue body-bag.

Death made me revere life.

HOMEMADE

NATALIE FRASER

My father is practising his scales on the double bass. Doomba, doomba, doomba, doomba, doomba, doomba, doomba, pause. Things are a little different at our house. My father is a musician and both my parents are younger than the parents of most of my friends. My best girlfriend Kerry has parents who are really old. Her mother says she is *as old as her little finger*, or she says that she is 21. She has been 21 for a long time. Her father is in his mid-60s, a grey-haired old man to seven-year-old me, like my Opa. Their house is different too. The carpet is brand new and Mrs Jameson has put plastic runners on it so that our feet will leave no trace when we run through the rooms. The couch too, is covered in plastic.

At school Kerrie shares her Monte Carlo biscuits with me. I have my mother's lumpy muesli biscuits, but these are not considered hard currency in the playground. This is an era when the homemade is universally despised. It is the era of mass production, Arnott's biscuits, Nescafe instant coffee, bleached white bread in perfectly uniform slices, Kraft cheese and Deb instant mashed potato powder. Chow Mein is cabbage with mince and a packet of chicken noodle soup, Chicken a la King is boosted with a tin of Heinz cream of mushroom. In most shops, the only bread you can buy is white or 'brown,' a square loaf wrapped in waxed paper with

pictures of healthy-looking sandwiches printed on it. These are the sort of foods I see at my friend's houses, the sort of foods I furtively desire. In our house my mother makes everything *from scratch* as she says. Tomato sauce comes in a jar and is made in the summer by my mother from our own tomatoes. Cake mixes are popular at this time but Mum makes all her cakes the old fashioned way, from the butter cake recipe in the PWMU cookbook. Our biscuits are tasty despite being lumpy and uneven; for our lunches we have dark, chewy rye breads, liverwurst and cheeses that smell and ooze.

Kerry comes for dinner and we have pastichio. My mother makes a version of this that incorporates her garlic loaded Bolognese sauce, pasta and the unusual addition of sour, European quark. It is one of my favourite things, meaty and cheesy and sour, with a top that is golden brown and bubbling. Kerry squirms on her seat and wrinkles her nose. My mother spoons a large portion onto her plate, oblivious. Only I can see the look of panic on her seven-year-old face. Kids were expected to be polite in those days, especially if they were not at home. For poor Kerry, it is a profoundly challenging moment. I have a new respect for her as I watch her set her small thin-lipped mouth in a determined line, and eat it all. By the time she reaches the end, she is actually starting to like it. For once, I feel proud that my mum is different from the other mothers, and this time, I am not craving what I do not have.

We are not a rich family. My father's income as a musician is unpredictable so sometimes my mum has to take on work to bolster the family income. This means that my dad is the one who is home with us in the daytime. In the early nineteen-seventies this is highly unusual. When he is home, my father likes to cook. He has a book of Chinese recipes called *Pei Mei's Cookbook*. To me it is incredibly exotic with bright glossy pictures of sweet and sour pork and beef in black bean. It is the height of sophistication for suburban Melbourne in the seventies. My dad shows me how to chop and stir fry ingredients, incorporating dark, sticky, sauces, pungent ginger and spring onions. It includes interesting textures, the tenderness of the stir-fried beef, the crunch of water chestnuts and snow peas, the slipperiness of mushrooms. There is also the *Cordon Bleu Cookbook*. Veal escalopes in a rich masala sauce, delicate orange bavaois using only the zest. Though, it is probably my mother who still does most of the cooking, even at this time. My father is the flashy one, the entertainer while my mother is the quiet achiever. The one that puts meals on the table, day in, day out, using whatever we can afford. My mother is the one that keeps us fed. She is the one who teaches us how to bake cakes and biscuits, how to make a béchamel sauce. Though she too has her flashy recipes, an orange semolina cake soaked in syrup, a many layered rum cake that is made for special occasions.

My dad stays up late into the night. He has a special fountain pen and lined music paper. He makes fancy

notations on the page. He is copying and arranging music. This is one of the jobs he takes on to earn extra money. His income from music can be unstable, sometimes the promoters don't pay him, or they give him a cheque that bounces. When I hear my parents using this word I immediately think of a rubber ball bouncing up and down. Somehow the word sounds like fun to me, but I can tell by the expressions on the faces of my parents that it is not a fun word to them. It means extra jobs, for my mother, it means cleaning up after dirty people in hotel rooms.

My father gets a regular gig at a place called Chateau Wyuna in nearby Mt Evelyn. Although he plays in a Latin band when his preference is for jazz, and has to wear a silk braided bolero that does not fit well on his large frame so that he looks slightly ridiculous, he is very happy to have the job. Residencies are not easy for a musician to obtain. He plays 'Guantanamera' and 'The Girl from Ipanema'. He makes friends with the band leader, an Argentinian called Paul. He brings him home for dinner and we all find his slicked back hair and Spanish accent impossibly exotic. I imagine myself singing with the band in a tight black skirt and red satin bolero, but I can't reach the low notes in 'Guantanamera'.

It is rumoured that Dame Nellie Melba stayed at Chateau Wyuna back in her heyday. There is a deep marble bath with steps leading down into it. This is said to have been Nellie's bath. I imagine her luxuriating in bubbles and

perfume. Her impossibly white shoulders, her luxuriant amber hair piled on top of her head. My dad rides on the Chateau Wyuna float in the Moomba parade that year, cradling his bass and wearing his organ grinder's monkey bolero. We stand in Swanston Street cheering as the float goes past, my father, perched on top with the other guys, waves to the crowds and smiles.

On weekend mornings I wake to the sound of my father practising jazz tunes. This sound is reassuring to me, it is safe, familiar. My big bear of a father is home and there will be bacon and eggs for breakfast. I luxuriate under my faded chenille bedspread knowing that I don't have to get up for school. My sister is already up and her empty bed is made. She will be out in the kitchen helping mum, or just talking to her. I amble out in my pyjamas as if I have all the time in the world and sit at the table. The dining room table is the centre of our household; it is where all the important conversations take place. This is where we have all our fun too.

Dad finishes his practice and comes out to help with the frying of the bacon and eggs. I am on the toaster and my sister is making tea. My brother carries the loaded plates to the table. We are a family who collaborate. When I go to my friends' houses I see their mothers in their gleaming kitchens with their gleaming appliances. They are alone. The children and the father sit in the dining room, talking, reading the paper. The mother brings in the food and waits until everyone

else has some before taking some food for her own plate. My mother just joins in, and my father is as likely to be cooking the breakfast as she is.

PAST WINGS FLUTTER

FERN SMITH

Hvalfjorour waterfall popped up on my screen when firing up the computer. The waterfall wends its way down the moss-covered black rock mountain. A fitting image, while remembering a past friend who died of eye cancer. We had romped in the city and country scapes, in equal measure, laughing and discussing the way of the world. Usually with scepticism and disdain. Our respective parents saw us as ragamuffins.

He sprang from a well-appointed Northshore family. They hoped their only son, an English Lecturer, would not drop too far from grace. He did. They haggled over money. He argued for money. He extracted money enabling his adventurous and experimental life, once a beneficiary of his scheming.

The bread is in the oven and the white beans are put on to boil. Returning to wording, where would screen saver take me? Manarola, a quaint multi-coloured town, perched on a rocky outcrop, facing the Mediterranean Sea. The houses are close together, higgledy-piggledy, a bit like my friendship circles. Now, ever decreasing. The Covid Pandemic has been about grief and isolation. Six of my friends and family have died during the pandemic, not from Covid. They were isolated when dying.

We once would have visited our dying to say the last goodbyes. Then lurch to a funeral. Hugging, crying, and vowing to meet again. Knowing we would not. While leaving the funeral we would all curse under our collective breaths at each other. Holding long untold disappointments and bitterness; each imagining the other had turned their backs on the friendship. What really happened was, we had all haphazardly moved on. One or two had stayed at the beginning shoots.

No funerals now. It is the great ring around, informing the closest on your friendship tree of the deadly news. They then in turn, without prompting, ring their tree. You listen to their stories and list of the recent dead. Like a grief badge. Whose shines brightest?

Bread and beans cooked and airing. Back to the screen saver. Stawa Mlyna beacon perches on the tip of a rock, paved pier, facing the Baltic Sea. It is a stone's throw from the slippery border of Germany, within Polish soil. It is standing straight, bold, washed white clean, lighting the gun grey sea.

Am I looking for clarity? Shifting through time, gender and place. I seem to have kept thin threads of all my circles of friends like boats adrift on murky waters. Names dropping to the bottom of the sea. Like a good book, remembering the most loved and hated.

I ring my son. Listen to his dreams and stories of hope. His order of life is still expanding.

Finding my lover's strong arms to engulf me. I dreamed the verandah was pulling away from under me, as the blood red tidal wave battered the house. We held firm. I awoke next to the murmur of my lover's breath. Safe. I see past wings flutter across the sky.

NEVER TOO LATE

KERSTIN LINDROS

After climbing more than one hundred steps up Castle Hill we arrived at the music room. My *Omi* helped me put on a long black coat and an enormous white collar. We had been practising *Kyrie Eleison* in the circle with Cantor Schmidt, and once together with the older kids. In double file we crossed the big square to the *Meissen Dom*, the cathedral, and eagerly awaited our grand entrance.

I was five years old and didn't grasp all the detail, but the importance of the day was not lost on me. They said the bishop was coming. What might a bishop be? I thought as I walked next to young Thomas.

Finally the big portal opened for us. We entered the stately gothic cathedral and proceeded towards the front. It was my first time inside; we only went to our local church once a year, on Christmas Eve to 'see the play'. Once in position, my eyes kept moving up the tall pillars until they settled on the ribbed pattern of the vaulted ceiling. Then I became mesmerised by the speckles of light that filtered through the high pointed windows.

But not for long, because we began to sing and all eyes now rested on us. '*Kyrie Eleison ...*' These strange words felt nice to sing. Suddenly the other children continued on with

what I had never heard or sung before. I turned my head to the singers on my left, on my right and even the ones behind me, and found that most of them were singing wholeheartedly. Bewildered, I began moving my lips, so the people in the pews, and especially the bishop, wherever he was, would not notice that I didn't know what to do. Then I nudged my little friend.

'How do they know what we have to sing?' I whispered in his ear.

With his shoulders pulled up he whispered back, 'They go to school. They have paper. See?' He pointed.

Then he straightened his glasses and turned back to face the smiling cantor.

'Ah.' I admired his wisdom and returned to moving my lips to the rhythm of the other voices and the powerful vibrations of the pipe organ. Because the audience may not know I didn't go to school yet. And because I didn't want to ruin this special day.

...

Every Wednesday afternoon Omi took me to the children's singing circle after she had finished cleaning the Jägers' house. After entering through the pointed portal and crossing the courtyard, we stepped into the music room. Cantor Schmidt was a friendly tall man with kind and encouraging eyes. He commanded respect but was never forceful. From next door

we fetched the wooden stools. I reached into the slot with my little hand and tried hard, but the older children always helped me.

We gathered in a semicircle around the cantor and his xylophone, which was at least ten times the size of the one I owned. Then we sang together. In good weather we played musical games in the courtyard. I didn't only love singing. I loved Wednesdays. *Omi* and I had our ritual—we went to a café on the way home. *Omi* would order cream puffs, a pot of real coffee for herself and a 'house coffee', a cereal-based brew, for me. We were close. I stayed at her house most of the time so both my parents could work. When she took me to bed, we sang Brahms's Lullaby.

The birth of my little sister spelled the end of our Wednesdays. I moved back home, and there was no time for singing circle with the baby. I eventually sang at school, with Mum and my sister, at church youth, with friends at parties, and then for many years with community singing in Australia.

Every time I visit my hometown, I'm drawn to Castle Hill as a first outing after seeing family. The memory-laden portal to the administrative centre of the Saxon Lutheran Church is typically shut, but once I was lucky. I stepped up to the thick burgundy-coloured rope to admire the restored courtyard with other tourists. The buildings were no longer crumbling and grey. I remembered the mossy green film that still covered some of the stone pavers where the sun didn't reach. The music room was full of life. Strolling on, I came

up to a sign—Telemann Cantatas, starting in a good hour. My sister and I had sometimes enjoyed classical concerts at the cathedral when I still lived in Meissen. I bought a ticket and went for a glass of local wine on the terrace of the *Domkeller*, Meissen's oldest restaurant (since 1470), high above the rooftops of my town, before entering the cathedral for the musical treat.

I headed for the ornate wooden choir stalls. An official-looking man was leaning in a choir screen archway, so I introduced myself and told him about my fond childhood memories. After following my story with interest, he said, 'Well, the musicians are in there today. Why don't you follow them after the concert and have a look inside?'

I enjoyed the music, performed by *Sächsisches Barockorchester* and the *Bach-Consort Leipzig*. My heart moved along with the tunes, and I wanted to stand there and sing the choruses with them—if I just knew how. Then I followed the musicians and stepped through the pointed double door, as Omi and I had done every Wednesday afternoon more than fifty years earlier. The room was smaller than I remembered, but beautiful memories of singing together and those Wednesdays played in my head. Inhaling the scent of the old building I retreated into my own world, and for a while the musicians going about their post-concert business were mere extras, only a background blur.

During the same visit to Meissen a friend invited me to her choir rehearsal. They were preparing to perform

Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in Dresden. She shared her score with another singer and lent me hers, and to my surprise, I could follow along. One day, perhaps I could be part of something so unified and powerful.

Back in Australia I knew what I had to do. I wanted more than a glimpse, wanted to open the door wider to the language of music. Unsurprisingly, completing more theory enhanced both my listening and making of music. To help me along, I retrieved the dusty plastic recorder nobody had touched for many years from behind some books. For some who learned to play an instrument early in life it may seem child's play, but for me, understanding music more deeply came within reach in my fifties. I could do it, sing the powerful choruses of some famous works with a choir. I had to trust myself.

I made contact and asked about the possibility for someone with my level of experience to join some rehearsals and put theory into practice on the job. They welcomed me to sing with them for a few weeks to see if I liked it and wanted to make the commitment. We worked on Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*, which I quickly got to love, when the novel coronavirus began to spread more rapidly and stopped us from singing together for the rest of the year. In 2021 we worked whenever we could, often masked, on traditional folk songs from around the world in seven languages. Making these foreign sounds and singing more complex traditional music was and still is challenging, but I've gained so much already. It is exhilarating to develop a skill I have wanted for some

time. I deeply value how our accompanist and conductors share their expertise and experience, and how they infect us with their enthusiasm. In February this year we began working on a Vaughan Williams program of folk songs and the *Mass in G minor*.

I feel surrounded by kindness and patience when we are reminded that pencilling in the beat count is not a sign of weakness, and that we must work on our words that sound like ‘rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb’. Even when a piano key, tapped after an a cappella piece, reveals we’ve slipped into a lower key. After friendly eyebrow raises and hearty laughter we return to work with focus and determination.

Once we are more familiar with the music, when we sing the correct notes at the right time and the parts begin to mesh as they should, the vibrations I feel give me goosebumps. I feel stirred and passionate, connected and warmly held, and I embrace all the emotions, no matter what we sing. I play my part.

Recently, I wore the red concert robe for the first time. After a short interval we began singing the first movement of the Mass, ‘*Kyrie Eleison ...*’, the strange words I sang in a much older cathedral back in 1968. But I focused on our performance. Because after, there would be ample time to reminisce.

DANCING CLASS

KATE PEDIADITIS

This is something that thankfully you'll never experience!

Dancing classes at the age of 14 and 15 were the thing back in the late 50s. They were a means of establishing the 'right' connections early.

As the only daughter in my middle-class conservative family, the expectations were that my social life would be amongst the relatively privileged sons and daughters educated in the elite private schools of Melbourne, called Public Schools for some reason I've never fathomed. Scotch, Wesley, (Melbourne) Grammar would produce appropriate boys; PLC, MLC, Lauriston and my own were some of the acceptable schools for girls. Catholic schools assiduously avoided as my parents still held to those prejudices that were strong in Australia's early years, despite the fact that my grandfather had been brought up in an Irish Catholic family, emphatically lapsing when he wanted to marry his Protestant love, and being denied a church wedding by the Catholic church. He had then married in a registry office, and brought up his five children as Protestants, attending the prestigious schools in Melbourne. So it was an odd view my father took, as he had many loved Catholic aunts, uncles and cousins and one of his brothers married a Catholic, but he remained quite fixed in this view. For me this bias ended with his generation,

and even though my school was very parochial in its views on the broader Christian church, it made no impact on my thinking about these matters. But I digress.

As a 14-year-old I didn't really question the decision to commence dancing classes, and I wasn't aware of my parents' reasoning at that stage, though I remember feeling apprehensive about following in my sophisticated cousin's footsteps to attend these Friday night classes at Camberwell Town Hall. Two years older than I, she always seemed so confident and knowing; I admired her spirit and secretly knew I would never be able to generate the ease and sociability which she exuded. In any case, I was going and that's all there was about it. Fortunately, two friends from school were going too, their parents evidently equally intent on launching their daughters into establishment circles, or so they hoped. Anyway, it made it much easier that we had each other to share the embarrassment and awkwardness of those nights.

The first time we went, Sue and Bolly came to my house to get ready. Lots of time spent taking turns in front of the mirror, suppressing the nervy excitement, trying to be nonchalant, dissolving into giggles. Bolly wore blue eyeshadow and blue contact lenses which I found amazing, wonderful and very daring. As my father drove us, I could feel the butterflies mounting in my stomach. Down Burke Rd we went, past the golden dome of St Dominic's, around the corner and along the drive, to pull up outside the glowing steps of the town hall set amongst huge old trees of the

surrounding park. Pure terror by now. A powerful desire to be driven back home or at least not to get out of the car! But there we were deposited and no arguments.

In we went, along with a steadily increasing crowd of new arrivals, into the warmly lit interior, leaving coats in the cloakroom and then ushered into the main hall by the Meyers, where we gathered, girls on one side, boys on the other. We kept up a barrage of chatter with each other, trying to keep up the nonchalance, and at the same time darting glances at the boys who no doubt were doing the same.

Hans Joachim Meyer and his wife, whose name I don't recall, ran these classes. He was tall, imperious and wore a monocle, yes! a monocle! and tails. I guess to conjure up some sort of aristocratic persona, appropriate for the education of Melbourne's entitled (if pimply), teenagers. His wife was short, quite ordinary looking, wearing short evening dress, dignified always.

This evening started as all the others would start. The music began, (I think they used records), the Meyers announced the dance for that night, the Quickstep, then demonstrated it. Next, they took a partner each from amongst us and demonstrated it again. And then the dread moment arrived ... 'take your partners please', and there was a mass movement of boys crossing the hall to choose a partner for the dance. Oh, the agony of it! Would I be chosen? If so, what would he be like? Would I be able to find things to talk about? Would I make an idiot of myself learning the dance? Was

there still time to make a run for the door? The toilet? Anywhere? An American boy of all people asked me that first night, I remember him clearly. Thin with a bony chest and pimples. I suppose he was an exchange student. Anyhow, I didn't care, someone had picked me! Bolly was not so lucky, because she was tall even then, and probably gawky, so was chosen as one of the last.

We all shuffled around stepping on each other's toes and it wasn't so hard to have a conversation. There was a break halfway through the evening, for fifteen minutes or so, 'don't go outside with a boy!' my cousin had lectured, wagging a finger at me. There was no risk that night or many nights after.

And so, the year progressed. I was never able to quell the nervous collywobbles as we drove there each Friday night, even though slowly we found familiar faces and people we gravitated toward, were asked to a few parties and school dances (how gratified my Mum and Dad would have felt as apparently good connections were made), and slowly gained confidence.

I very clearly recall my first kiss from a boy after being driven home by his parents from a school dance. We were standing on my front veranda having rung the doorbell and he'd seized the moment before the front door opened. Such a soft brush of closed lips and downy skin, and then a flurry of goodnights from me and Mum or Dad and he walked off the

high edge of the veranda into the hydrangeas instead of down the steps! It was that fabulous kiss ...

Foxtrots, waltzes, and Pride of Erin, sambas, rumbas and jive came and went. Gradual changes from awkwardness to tentative girlishness, fun with makeup, an interest in clothes, and the growing exciting attraction to boys!

One evening Hans Joachim announced that we were going to learn the Tango. He swept his wife into his arms and charged down the hall, swooping, gliding, abruptly twisting, bending her in the most dramatic dance I'd ever seen. I couldn't imagine how we would ever copy them. And then, horror oh horror! He chose me to demonstrate it again as his wife chose some other poor sod!! Oh, no escape! Led out into that huge space in front of that big crowd of faces, my worst nightmare. How I mashed his shoes, that I remember, though the rest is a blur of amnesic mortification. I have never attempted the tango since, and have gone to lengths to avoid it. Some years ago, a French friend Corinne, whose mother and the mother's boyfriend were in Melbourne for a holiday, suggested we have a farewell meal for them at a restaurant with a dance floor. They were both big dance enthusiasts. Andre, the rather arrogant, opinionated boyfriend had taken a shine to me, and Corinne had teased me, 'Ah Kate, Andre wants to dance the tango with you ...' *Hmmmm, well that's not going to happen*, I thought. Looking for a plausible way out, I bandaged my ankle and limped into the restaurant on

crutches, which only just put off the insistent Andre. But such is my phobia for that dance.

And just as a postscript to the year of Friday evenings at Camberwell Town Hall. Towards the end of the final term, I did go outside with a boy during the break, a boy I'd daydreamed about for weeks, and was properly kissed. It was the most exciting thing. And worth the bumpy journey of adolescent self-consciousness, fear and embarrassment.

DADDYHOOD

DAVID MUSCAT

A few days after we brought home our newborn son from hospital, he drenched me in a torrent of liquid poo.

It had been a long day, and I had just showered and changed into a fresh pair of pyjamas. The doting in-laws had just left, and a quick change of my son's nappy was all that stood between me and settling down for the night.

It was at the changing table when I made the mistake of standing right in front of his fully loaded bowels. The resulting jet of fluid faeces would go on to saturate me from the neck down, and was so forceful it seemed to defy all laws of physics. It was like re-watching the grainy, late-eighties footage of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, but instead of the Alaskan Gulf, the foetid slick was all over me.

I stood there, stunned, with brown effluent bubbling up over my shirt pocket. Not only could I not believe that such a small being could generate such a violent discharge, but I was honestly wondering what I had signed up to in becoming a dad.

It had only been a few years back when I had accepted that having a family of my own was not on the cards. Like the hundreds of trains I had missed, I thought parenthood had passed me by, potential opportunities quietly slipping away while my focus had been elsewhere.

Creative writing, my cat and my trusty PlayStation were to be my lifelong companions. And I was okay with that. But after awkwardly introducing myself to a pretty stranger at a barbecue, romance blossomed out of nowhere. After a flurry of interstate and overseas trips, a decision to relocate to Geelong, and then a proposal and a wedding, I found myself a dad-to-be a few short years later. It all seemed to happen so quickly.

Admittedly, my parenthood journey had a rough start. For many months, I struggled to feel a connection with my newborn son. I had heard of parents failing to connect with their offspring and was terrified the same was happening to me. Let's face it, it's hard to bond with a mewling lump of flesh that does nothing but demand milk, irradiate the house with unspeakable odours, and keeps you awake at ungodly hours of the night.

As the months passed, I may have also grown resentful that this wailing pink blob had deprived me of the liberties I had once enjoyed. In short, I was scared he had hijacked my life.

It wasn't long before my son started attending that hotbed of contagion known as 'daycare'. Predictably, he began to arrive home with all manner of assorted colds and viral infections, which he would charitably pass on to us. In the space of four months, I had five colds. Not only was I afraid of mob persecution (I was coughing, in public, during a pandemic), I also distinctly remember smelling rancid meat

everywhere. Surprisingly, a quick Google search didn't tell me that I was about to die, but that, due to the frequency of my colds, the membrane inside my nose could not heal properly, and was effectively turning necrotic. It was the reason I was smelling active decomposition wherever I went.

Ain't parenthood grand?

My son then began roaming the house at night like a restless spirit. He once materialised in front of my sleeping face at 4:45 am, startling me out of my blissful sleep. In the darkness of our bedroom, his face was bathed in the unearthly, blue-white glow of the baby monitor by our bed, making him look like one of those extra-terrestrials that Mulder and Scully would pursue every Wednesday night on *The X-Files*. It caused all my childhood fears of being abducted by aliens to come streaming back in a terrified shriek, which surely woke the neighbours up. (My wife would later say that she found this funny. I'm glad someone found it funny).

Over the years, there have been times when I have felt so tired that I thought I might collapse at any moment. There have been times when my progeny's stubborn obstinance and masterful stalling tactics brought me to the verge of tears. And there have been times that, when my child was out of earshot, I have sworn so vehemently that even Gordon Ramsay would have blushed.

But over this time, without me realising it, my son's personality had emerged. And in turn, I began to get to know him. For starters, he was full of wonder at books. He seemed

enchanted by the abundance of words and phrases that the English language offered. So too was he in awe at the majesty of the natural world—the planets, the sun and the stars—and he expressed infinite curiosity at their workings.

As he grew, I saw how cheeky and mischievous he was, how he liked nothing more than a good giggle, and how he delighted in being absurd, melodramatic and immature. With a start, I realised at that very moment that he was just like me. And with a great sense of relief, I also knew that my unsettling fear of failing to bond with him had vanished.

It was true, however, that my life wasn't my own anymore. That concern had indeed become reality. But to my great surprise, I realised that I didn't care. At least, not too much. Because for every moment he frustrated or fatigued me, there were twice as many where he made me laugh, feel proud of his achievements, or just feel loved and appreciated. All this for nothing more than being there for him. For being his dad. My son hadn't hijacked my life. He had added to it, in ways that were immeasurable. From chasing him around innumerable playgrounds to splashing each other at swim school. From daggily dancing together to the intro to *Bluey*, to us enthusiastically singing the theme song to *Cheers*. He was giving back to my life in spades, just by being his eccentric little self.

He was also teaching me to be a better, braver person. I distinctly remember his first attempt at climbing a metal ladder at a local playground. He would go on to awkwardly

slip, fold backwards over the middle rung, and slam heavily into the ground. It looked bad, and he moped over to me for a healing hug. His tears lasted exactly ten seconds. Then he pushed me away and attempted to ascend the ladder again. *My God*, I remember thinking. *This kid is fearless.*

In that moment, it also occurred to me that his young eyes did not view the world through a lens of caution, of safety and of risk aversion. He saw life as something to not only engage with, but to explore and actively challenge. He saw no reason to proceed timidly and warily through life, but to meet it head on with surplus enthusiasm, and to even dictate terms if he could. His plucky determination and lionhearted attitude made me realise that I needed to refocus on my own goals, in particular ones I had abandoned out of fear. (When I actually found the time, of course.)

We are now expecting another son. I admit that I am nervous at the prospect of more sleepless nights and demanding days. But I do know two things. He will undoubtedly unlock a deep, nurturing love in me, just like his brother did. A love that is powerful, poignant, and which I had not known I had possessed.

Oh, and the other thing? When changing his nappy, I now know to stand to the side of the changing table.

BIG MAN IN BLUE

MICHAEL CAINS

I don't think much about my grandfather these days. He died many years ago back in England, to where I have never returned. I remember him as a big man, with a big influence over his four children, and indirectly over me, one of his four grandchildren. That all but vanished when my father bundled us onto a plane to Australia at Heathrow to escape him, and a brother and sister he didn't love. His adored younger sister was a different story, but she suffered a fatal stroke a few years after we departed, not living much past her thirtieth birthday. Long term use of The Pill caused it, my mother said.

Confused and excited, we flew with my parents as 'ten-pound poms'. Myself and my two siblings, a shy sister close to my age, and a four-year-old brother, nine years younger, who needed oxygen on the bumpy DC9. This was in the days before jet engines halved the flight, and we incessantly droned through the Middle East to Dubai, onto what was then Ceylon, then touching down in our new home after enduring Darwin's steamy heat. We were wearing overcoats.

We lived a few weeks with my father's lost aunt who had emigrated 'down under' years before with her loud and boisterous husband, rearing a daughter and a son now grown up as 'real' Australians—the first we met. We had noisy cousins but never got close and eventually drifted away from

them, as we had done from England. My parents visited the UK Settlers Club only once, scoffing that it was full of 'whinging poms.' They were happy settling in a land of buzzing flies that only disappeared at dusk when the mosquitos came out to savage my mother. We burnt red if we were outside longer than twenty minutes until the baptism by the relentlessly brighter Australian sun bronzed our pale white bodies. Our eyes squinted and we learned the salute, and that dirge of a pledge recited at school assembly which was apparently required to remind the colonials they were part of a faded empire.

The man we called Grandad was a consistent letter writer and we devoured his neatly written words written on folded blue aerograms, sliding out the five-pound note that always came with them. I cannot remember the words today as I never kept any of his letters. The money flitted away but we always knew the exchange rate. He was becoming part of a distant past in an old world we had left behind while we were busy growing up in the 60s in a new one, about to get older.

I remembered him as a big round man in a blue police uniform. He had retired when we were still young in England but couldn't give away being a Chief Superintendent, so he became a police reservist, serving warrants to keep his authority intact. We went with him sometimes in the immaculate green Morris Minor he drove like a police car, nearly airborne over jumps on English country roads. He ruled the family, watching carefully over his grandchildren,

regularly taking us to a park called Ashridge which we all loved, riding donkeys. My sister had stayed with them whenever she could as they adored her. I was the one they had big expectations for, bespectacled and bookish. They saw me as being the first in the family to go to university, and the uncle married to my dad's cherished younger sister promised to pay for my fees at Oxford or Cambridge. But we left before then.

As his memory faded from ours, my grandfather's letters arrived less frequently. My sister and I moved out of our parents' eastern suburbs home, got married and he became still more remote. We all seemed to do that too easily. My father was happier away from his influence and he abandoned a lifetime of employment in the automotive industry requiring him to travel two hours to Holdens in Fisherman's Bend, content working in a local chocolate factory. He eventually got my brother a job there, but that's a story for another time. I failed my matriculation exam, but went on to attend university at 25, courtesy of Gough Whitlam's free education and the Mature Age Entry scheme. My Grandad was never to know that I did become the first in our family to graduate with a degree.

The grandfather I knew so little about flew to Australia for a brief visit. He came to see my father and his older sister, her husband and a cousin we had little time for, who had also emigrated a few years later, perhaps attracted by the rare answers we made to our grandfather's letters. My parents

didn't like her and she drank too much. I saw my grandfather with my nana, before she slipped into dementia, at my aunt's place not far from my parents. We spent a few hours talking like strangers with little in common. I wasn't the 12-year-old boy he had said goodbye to in London 12 years before, and I didn't know who this man was, although he was not as big as I remembered him. We didn't even have a family get-together such were the feelings between my father and his two surviving siblings, I suspect.

Although not privy to conversations between my father and my grandfather it was not long after the latter's visit that my father became the State Secretary of the Confectioners Union, elevating him and my mother's social standing, lifestyle and exposure. It was not to last, thanks to the vagaries of Australian union politics, and he returned to driving a forklift at MacRobertsons Chocolates, now absorbed by the global Cadburys. They still made Cherry Ripes, but Dad actually hated chocolate.

Life went on and we raised up families, survived divorces, and heard remotely of distant deaths in faraway places. My grandfather was one of these and my father flew back for the funeral. He didn't talk much about it except to say that his mother's dementia had been long hidden by his father. Small families vanish, and the close ties never made are looked back on with resignation, or as lost opportunity.

My father rarely talked about his father, as I rarely talk about mine. Becoming older I reached the conclusion that our

family doesn't do much talking, unless there is something important to say. They avoid each other, spreading like an oil slick on an English duck pond in a scramble to put distance between themselves. The flight from England was only the first part of this, and I never lived close, or got close, to my sister, and especially my brother. He died a lonely alcoholic after divorcing his wife and four children. I have tried to write about this but succeeded only in writing a poem about which I still spill a tear when I read it aloud. My parents moved away to Tweed Heads after their retirement, and my mother still lives there 22 years later.

Before he died my grandad sent me his police pocket watch and a button from his uniform tunic, but my sister has them. She keeps things more carefully than me, appreciating their sentimental value far more than I. In her family tree research, she found a newspaper clipping with a photograph of Prince Philip visiting Luton in the 1950s, walking and talking with the Mayor clinging onto his arm. There, on the Prince's other side, was a large figure in a police greatcoat, all alertness and attention, watching the crowd on a cold winters day.

That photo brought home to me how little I remembered of the larger-than-life figure who was once the centre of our small family. It made me both proud and sad. Pride in knowing this man was a pillar in society, a high-ranking uniformed policeman in one of the world's best police forces. Sadness because I allowed life to get in the way of really

knowing him, of never letting me return to visit, or staying more in touch with a remarkable man. You can blame life, or distance, but that would be a mistake. The regret is all mine, so I tuck it away as one of the things I don't think about. My grandfather.

FOG

GEOFFREY GASKILL

Is it possible, I ask myself, to live with someone and know nothing about them?

I'd like to say I knew my parents, but it isn't true.

The past is not a foreign country. It's a place wreathed in mist and shadow. In trying to pass through I see flashes of sunshine, too brief to tell me much.

'Be careful what you wish for,' my mother used to say, 'you might not like what you find.'

My parents, Samuel and Edith, were married in 1946—he was twenty-six, she twenty-eight. Each had about ten thousand days of life before I was born. It is of those twenty thousand days I am mostly ignorant. Now they are dead, both my parents and those twenty thousand days are lost to me forever.

I loved them and revere their memory but since their deaths I find myself, now and then, wanting to know about the two strangers who bore me and with whom I lived and grew up.

People tell me it doesn't matter. I try to put those twenty thousand plus days aside, but I confess, they haunt me. I have a child of my own who likewise is not privy to what her mother and I got up to before she was born. Does she wonder or care about those days? I don't know that either. What I do

know is there are certain things about which she will remain ignorant. Should I be surprised then, that Edith and Sam were close with their lives?

I still have many black and white photos of them when they were young. What I see are two impossibly beautiful people on the cusp of life. To the child I was, my parents were never young nor beautiful. They were facts of my life and, if I ever thought about it, they didn't understand kids because they weren't, nor had ever been, like me.

On days when the weather, sickness or boredom kept me indoors, I'd take out the family photo album. Apart from a Samuel and Edith who were parents and yet different people, I was fascinated by the strange faces staring back at me from those pages and photographs.

If I asked, Sam or Edith might tell me about *Auntie This* or *Uncle That*. 'This one is your cousin ...' or 'That's my friend ...'

Thus far and no more. The mists parted, or shadows faded, before darkness fell and we went back to normal again. But those black and white images tantalised me.

Later, when I grew up, I resisted being fobbed off. An '*I don't know*' or '*I don't remember*' didn't cut it anymore and they found my enquiries irritating—or embarrassing.

What had happened was I'd crashed unknowingly into things called obfuscation and denial. Memory, I discovered, could be ignored, manufactured or misremembered. Mist and shadow were convenient ways to keep secrets.

Some topics were safe. I knew Samuel and Edith never went far with their education. Aspiration, that casualty of the war, lived on in their children.

I don't know whether my father joined the army of his own volition or was drafted. He never liked talking about it. When I was small, I couldn't understand his reluctance to talk. All I saw was the adventure. He didn't. He'd grunt when I persisted. Keeping me at arm's length became hard. In the end, he'd always fall back on, 'It was too long ago.'

Then one day I told him I planned to join the army like he had.

'Over my dead body!' Sam was affable before I ever knew what that was. I'd seen him angry only a few times. This was one of those times. Later I wondered if he blamed himself that he had failed as a father in protecting me, in keeping certain truths from me.

At the time, his unfairness galled me. It was fine for him to have adventures, but when it came to me ...

In the end the government took my side during the Vietnam War and introduced conscription. Not for everyone. It was a lottery. However, one of the certainties of life—change—had kicked in. Between my childish flirtation with war-as-a-romp and my registration as a twenty-year old potential soldier, I'd become older, if not wiser.

Sam's '*Over my dead body!*' was against the notion of another generation of old men sending young men out to die. 'Why,' he railed, 'did we fight the last war?' I watched as the

middle-aged man he was became radicalised. In these rants I learned more than from all previous stories, denials and obfuscations.

The other side of him wanted to show his children life could be funny. In lighter moments he'd talk about the harmless side of his army service. But even then, I almost missed the undercurrent of anger at the senselessness of it all.

My brother, Chris, and I discovered he was captured at Dunkirk and was incarcerated for the duration of the war. Five years of the prime of his life was lost. All we kids saw was a bit of a letdown. No adventure or humour in being locked up. We wanted him to tell us he didn't give up, that he was caught doing daring deeds and ...

Were we a bit ashamed of him? His medals made him look like a hero and we swelled with pride as we fingered them when he brought them out on Anzac Days. Nevertheless, we were never able to reconcile the two realities.

Our doggedness got an admission, 'They marched us to Germany.' But no more. He wouldn't tell us about that *march* or about his time in the camp. Now and then, when he was in his cups, he let slip, 'Sometimes it was OK and other times it wasn't.' In an era when Hollywood portrayed all things German—Nazi or not—as wicked or inept, his vagueness, not to mention his lack of action smacked of cowardice.

The next thing he spoke about was how he met Edith and how they'd fallen in love. Chris and I would roll our eyes

and threaten to gag. *Parents* and *love* in the same sentence were obscene.

My mother spent her war in London. I sometimes wondered who had the better time—my father locked in his prison camp in Germany, or my mother dodging bombs during the Blitz. I could not understand her superstitions. ‘Who else but a higher power saved me?’ she’d ask rhetorically. ‘I was in a cinema one night and I had a funny feeling I was in danger.’ She got up and left. ‘Moments later, it took a direct hit. No-one survived.’

Like Sam, she was reticent to speak about a time she wanted to put behind her. Despite this, we found out her one great secret. Our grandmother, who lived with us at the time, let slip that Edith had been married before. I could hear her telling us, ‘Be careful what you wish for, you might not like what you find.’

To both Chris and me this was as shocking as it was indecent. To our childish minds it had overtones of adultery.

I didn’t want to believe it and went back to the family photograph album for clues. Sure enough, the mist parted when I found myself staring at two small black and white photos that incriminated her. It proved I didn’t know her as well as I thought. The bigger mystery was, why did she keep them?

We confronted her but all she’d say was, ‘Joseph never came home.’

As young as I was, I felt ashamed we'd opened a wound no amount of time could heal. It took me years to realise that for both her and Sam the madness of the war never ended.

Joseph died at El Alamein. I found his name inscribed on a wall. It's what happened when the authorities couldn't find enough remains of a dead soldier to bury and erect a gravestone.

She took the brief life she and Joseph shared to her grave.

Sam met Edith after he was demobbed. They fell in love and, despite Chris and me gagging about it, they had a good life but of those elusive twenty thousand days my family history research told me a little—and nothing.

Then without warning they got old, a better excuse for fobbing me off. Upon their deaths, the mist and shadows at last closed forever.

As years go by now, I sometimes fantasise about them being with me again. In the small time left to us I have one last conversation with them. They are, of course, in their prime and they turn to me and, without prompting, say, 'Here's something I'll bet you didn't know ...'

DUNNY DISASTER

TOM ADAIR

A new country. New sights. New smells. New experiences.

When I was five years old, I emigrated to Australia. I thought my parents and siblings would be lonely without me, so I brought them along as well.

On arrival I spent all our savings on a block of land. And, on that land, with our own pale Irish hands, we erected a stately stone structure. Some of the local yokels rudely referred to this awesome architectural achievement as a garage. A garage! We did not even own a car! Okay, I admit in future years this dwelling did happily house the family sedan, but back then it hosted an entire family of five plus a stray adult I invited to come to Australia with us.

This lonely block of land was in Herne Hill, Geelong. Oh, how well our lodging did not live up to the genteel splendour inferred by 'Hill'. Ours was not a hill that majestically overlooked the plebs down in the boggy mozzie-infested marsh below. No, our 'Hill' overlooked the barren dryness of a non-existent suburb. Like most things Australian, the suburb eventually caught up with our migrant pioneering. (I later noticed, by the by, that the rest of Australia also copied my family's unique design of a modern triple fronted brick veneer.)

So, there was one garage. No car. But there were six humans inside. Electricity, yes. Water, yes, but only cold. Six humans. Three adults. Three children. All together. In a garage. Eating, sleeping, preparing food, cooking, washing dishes, washing clothes, washing ourselves, going to work, going to school. Two years. All together. In a space designed for one car.

It might have been a garage but, by God, it was grand. The front half contained kitchen/dining room/living room/lounge room/laundry, one table, one wood stove, one copper. The back half, (separated by a partial wall and curtain) was a communal bedroom; double bunks on one side, single bunks on the other. Parents on lower double bunk, sister (seven years old) and me (six) on top double. Across a space only large enough for one person at a time, another single adult on the lower and older brother (nine years old) on the top single bunk. Each day we could see each other. Each day we could hear each other. Each day we could not escape each other. Day and night, all together. Living and loving tumultuously in a new land of excitement and promise.

Of course, in the late 1950s there was no sewerage and while we lived in the garage we relied on the traditional Aussie outhouse, the *dunny*. This venerable institution was a small building large enough to fit a toilet can with just enough room to close the door. To minimise the smell, especially during the summer, the dunny was always placed as far away from the house as possible.

One did one's best to ignore the stench as one sat regally a few inches above what was basically a large can filled with excrement and urine. I can vividly remember the maggots in summer, writhing in the mess as I piddled on them, desperately trying to hold my breath. Once finished, one reached for the squares of newspaper tied together with string and hung on a nail. Newspaper has never been known for its absorbent qualities so I can imagine we all looked forward to the weekly bath. Once a week the *nightman* would call, drag the full can out through a trapdoor at the back (he always checked for occupancy), place a lid on it, heft it manfully onto his shoulder and take it away, never to be seen or smelled again.

Now, as I said, we also lacked hot water in our luxurious garage. Bear with me, there is a link. Each time we needed small amounts of hot water we went to the kettle that simmered continuously on the wood stove. For larger amounts, the weekly wash or bath for example, we used a large copper. This was a huge apparatus like a tin bowl, made of copper, hence the name, with an electric element in the base. You simply filled it with cold water, plugged it in and waited an infinity for the water to heat. Once a week the copper was employed for the weekly clothes wash. On another day each week (the copper was too slow to use more than once a day) it worked overtime to heat water for our weekly bath. Yes, our weekly bath. On one day we three kids bathed, (oldest to youngest, of course) with the water topped up (never changed)

between each of us. On another day the adults took turns. I have often wondered if their bath water, like ours, changed colour and thickness as multiple bodies were cleansed of a weekly build-up of sweat, dirt and grime.

Now, back to the outhouse. Our outhouse was terribly posh and had a bench with a wooden seat that could be raised or lowered. Other less fortunates (hopefully those local yokels with no appreciation of awesome architecture) merely had a bench with a hole cut out for the posterior. Of course, one had to raise the seat to piddle, if one was male, or lower it to sit upon for other functions.

Well, one notable day I toddled out to the dunny and, being away with the faeries, I neglected to put down the seat. I lowered my shorts and abstractedly sat down, right into shit up to my armpits and down to my knees. Now, if you imagine the feel and texture of the waste as well as its smell it will be obvious that this was not a pleasant experience. Adding to my mortification was the fact that the dunny was about five yards away from the back of the garage and about ten from the front door so, naturally, it took the inhabitants a long time to hear my plaintive calls for help. Having heard me and exhausted themselves laughing uproariously, the copper had to be filled and heated. All this time, interminable and infinite, I stood in the dunny (I sat down but it was too squelchy) trying unsuccessfully to transfer myself back to the faeries who, sensibly, had abandoned me. Once the water was heated and my mother had scraped me down, literally, I slunk into our

home for a bath. As I approached the door my loving and supportive family fled the garage in riotous mirth.

Now, dear reader, as my traitorous treacherous family faded before the approaching squelching snivelling pile of shit that I was, you can well imagine my shame and regret. Shame, for no-one enjoys being a shit sprite. And regret, for this was the family I invited to come to Australia in the first place. Where was the gratitude? The recognition of all I had sacrificed to bring them to Australia. Oh well, I suppose this is the curse we children have to bear for including adults in our adventures.

Actually, I had no regrets. After all, if they had rejected my generous invitation, then who would have scraped me down like a clothes-peg-nosed Michelangelo to discover the sublime form of humanity within that base material?

Ah yes, a new country. New sights. New smells. New experiences.

ADOLESCENT MISSTEPS

KEVIN DRUM

Rebellion would suggest more outright violence, and I'm not quite sure when it started. It had been simmering for some time, a slow burn, until it flared into outright anger, surprising me more than anyone.

As a child, I was lavished with love and affection by my mother, grandmother, and aunties. To my everlasting embarrassment, my Aunt Constance called me angel face. '*You're such a nice boy,*' she would say, tousling my mop of curly red hair, and enveloping me in bosomy maternal hugs. I would escape, to surface with lipstick-smeared and pinched cheeks.

Growing into adolescence I noticed I didn't hear those loving words so much. I felt awkward and self-conscious, and was it my imagination, or did women now avoid me? Maybe they had noticed that untimely erection showing through my shorts, or could it be those awful pimples which erupted as bright red volcanoes on my fair skin?

My so often ruffled soft red curls became an unruly wiry mass, and to my amazement hair started to grow in the strangest places, including a fiery red pubic bush. On swimming days I would wear my togs as underwear to avoid the change room taunts. All of a sudden, or so it seemed, my clothes didn't fit, and my arms and legs extended into gangly

appendages. I was also told to step aside from the champion junior school choir, with a muttered excuse about wanting *sopranos not tenors*.

I loved school, and my inquisitive nature made learning for me a joy. As I progressed to my secondary education, I found I had a natural affinity for reading, writing, and languages. However, although I enjoyed arithmetic, the mysteries of higher mathematics kept eluding me. I got by with my algebraic and geometric calculations, but trigonometry, remained for me, just another word in the *Oxford Dictionary*. I was fascinated by History and Geography, and loved Chemistry. It was a full and demanding curriculum, and I studied hard achieving high grades.

I developed a few quirky tricks and was now able to replicate the Devonport Ferry fog horn as it came into berth. I also performed a fairly good rendition of Sheb Wooley's 'Purple People Eater' and had perfected the art of loud fart-like noises by cupping a hand under my armpit, and vigorously pumping my arm.

For me, puberty was an uncertain and bewildering time.

One day a school pal said, 'Why don't you wear long strides now you're in fourth form Drummy?'

'What for?' I replied.

'To cover your skinny legs and knobbly knees with those ginger hairs, that's why,' he said with a malicious grin.

'Why don't you get a lobotomy?' I retorted.

'What's that?' He said.

‘It’s a brain surgery, Smart-arse, a procedure to rectify mental disorders. With a bit of cheating, maybe then you might just make the top 50 per cent of the class.’

I had learned to use words as weapons.

On my 15th birthday I got my driver’s licence, and took up smoking,

St Peters is a prestigious all-boys’ college operated by the Christian Brothers, and located in the Auckland suburb of Mt Eden. I was in my second year of high school, form four. My form-master was Brother Reilly, an elderly Irish/Australian, and new to the school. He was stooped, and had the annoying speech habit of mumbling, and prefixing and interspersing sentences with *eeeeh*.

‘Eeeeh, Drum what is the eeeeh answer?’

‘I’m sorry Sir, I didn’t hear the question. Could you please repeat it ... something about the Carthaginians Sir?’ I replied

‘Eeeeh, no Drum I will not eeeeh repeat it. Eeeeh what is the answer?’

‘But Sir, I didn’t hear the quest ...’

‘Silence,’ he roared. ‘Eeeeh the cheek of you, eeeeh, answer the question.’

‘Yes Sir, I understand but ...’

‘Eeeeh Drum, I’m eeeeh tired of your eeeeh disrespect, and eeeeh impertinence. Leave the room now.’

For the first time I was dismissed from class. I was intrigued as to what had caused his outburst. I had been

brought up to observe the importance of good manners, and to be polite and respectful of authority. I didn't take kindly to being evicted from class, and called impertinent, and went out of my way to avoid his future wrath.

My Maths and Physics teacher Brother Sheehan was younger, a tall man, physically unattractive with an aloof overbearing manner. Comparisons with Lurch of the Addams Family spring to mind. He also had a speech impediment whereby he couldn't pronounce his r's. As such he called me Dwum, a nickname relished by my peers. He was a brilliant teacher, and I considered myself fortunate to be in his class.

One wet day we had been locked-down in class for lunch recess. The first afternoon period was Maths. It started as usual, until he stopped mid-sentence and strode to the back of the room.

'Mmm, always the joker aren't we Dwum?' were his only words.

'Excuse me Sir?' I said, half turning in my chair to see him strap in hand, striding towards me.

'Dwum, you know very well what I'm talking about, and I'm tired of your disruptive behaviour.'

Bewildered, and my mind whirring with recollection, I replied, 'Disruptive Sir? I'm sorry I don't understand.'

He strode forth menacing, with the strap, pointing. 'Look up you nincompoop. You know full well what I'm talking about.'

I did, and there to my surprise, hung a perfect hangman's noose fashioned from the skylight window cord. Still sitting, I felt light blows around my shoulders, and looked back just as he raised the strap again. Outraged, I leapt to my feet, knocking my chair over in the process and, without thinking snatched the strap from him. He reeled back in surprise, and I followed poking him in the chest. 'Don't you fucking well ever touch me again. Ever,' I yelled. Trembling with anger and indignation, I threw the strap to the floor, grabbed my bag and strode from the room.

I wagged it for three days returning the next week, and didn't tell my parents either, for fear of the worst possible outcome, school expulsion.

My outburst was celebrated by my peers as a *cause celebre*, but I was having none of it. The matter was never mentioned. Sheen never touched or taught me again, banishing me from class for the slightest infraction, or indeed without reason.

One afternoon, in my lofty corridor isolation as I pondered the hard-labour efforts, of the jail-prisoners next door, in the Mt Eden prison quarry, he approached me, I suspect, as a result of my parents recent school visit. 'Dwum, you've really got to ...'

'Got to what you bastard?' I interrupted, turning my back in anger and resentment at his unjustified treatment. 'Fuck-off, I never want to speak to you again.'

My idyllic school life had transformed into an enduring slow torture. My grades plummeted, and I was stalked by those stealthy intruders of self-doubt, and fear of failure.

But worse was to come.

In our secluded hide behind the tennis courts, I lay back in the springtime grass and took a long draw on my cigarette, when one of my cohorts in crime dug me in the ribs and whispered, 'Quick Drummy put it out, here comes the local posse'.

I looked around, and there they were, one group to our left and, another our right. With black cassocks blowing in the wind they looked more like demons from hell, than men of God. We were sprung, smoking in school hours, and sent straight to the Principal's office.

With the gravitas of an Easter Island statue, Brother Ryan announced. 'We can't have you doing as you please. Each of you will receive four of the best, on your behinds.'

They were, stowed within the folds of their cassocks, and strap was a misnomer. They were more a stiff leather truncheon, 40cm in length, with a 3cm square cross-section, comprised of sewn laminated strips.

'You're first Drum, pull up your shorts and bend over.' He then began to whack me as hard as he was able, not on my behind, but on the back of my now-exposed thighs. The indescribable shock was as sudden as the pain. I was determined not to make a sound, and bit down hard on my lower lip drawing blood. I felt like screaming, and in my mind

I was. *How dare you. How dare you. You fucking bastard, you're just like the rest of them. Men of God be damned.*

My knees started to buckle, but I took a huge breath and steadied. When the beating stopped, without looking, I stood, and walked away.

‘Come back here Drum,’ he called.

Beyond caring, I walked on. My dreams were shattered, and the tears of frustration, anger, and grief of lost opportunity, streamed down my face. My parents had sacrificed much to provide me with a higher education.

How, I wondered, had it all come down to this?

AN EVENT

DEBORAH HUNNIFORD

‘Moderately deaf in both ears,’ she muttered. I strained to hear and to literally believe my ears ... ‘Suggests an event. Your hearing graph is almost identical for both ears.’ My mind returned to the pounding discos of the seventies when it was fun to stand as close to the amps as possible, in the hope he would invite you outside to escape the music and flirt. Or to the after-buzz of U2, Slaine Castle 1988.

‘Are you sure it couldn’t have been damage from a tissue-covered hairclip?’ My mother having warned me well of all three dangers.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Nothing wrong with my hearing then. I emerged from sleep to the frantic knocking. Somehow aware I was alone in my sister’s Belfast house and therefore responsible for it. In the same way I had later awoken to the hungry cries of my baby boys, regardless of the number of times in the span of one night.

Turning to snatch my dressing gown, ghosting on the bedroom door, I was sufficiently alert now to worry if the pounder at the door would be shocked if I answered in cotton

disarray. Should I nip into the bathroom to run a brush through my surprised hair?

Police and army vehicles cast their blue chill in the hallway, as I reached for support from the mahogany balustrade and rounded the last flight of stairs.

Crack. Boom. Silence. Breaking glass. The slated roof shrugged and resumed its original position on its terraced shoulders. My hands went to my head to check its own attachment.

A sleepless night on a friend's couch; a hurriedly poured whiskey; an unwanted cigarette; shaky writing on the blackboard at school the next day.

‘Was that your street that was bombed last night Miss?’

Nobody killed. No serious injuries. No big deal.

JUST A PINCH

DAVID BRIDGE

‘Just a pinch.’ A momentary pain in my right wrist and the serious business is underway. I am flat on the operating table, surrounded by masked and capped faces, each intent on their task. A screen above marks the progress of the catheter through the veins of my arm—thankfully nerveless—into the vessels of my heart. The happy juice already in my system from the cannula in my left arm is doing its work and I feel strangely less tense than in the dentist’s chair.

‘Injecting the dye now. You’ll feel a warm sensation, but it will be over quickly.’ A flush of warmth through my body blossoms into a skeletal image of dark descending branches on the screen as x-rays pick out the broken sap lines of my guilty heart. A consultation, and the images are pronounced adequate. ‘There are some blockages. Too many to deal with now. We’ll review the images at our lunchtime meeting and catch up with you with some treatment options this afternoon.’

Not the news I was hoping for. Already the catheter is out and a tight dressing applied. I know I’m one in a sequence of procedures this happy early morn so soon I’m retracing my horizontal 3D landscape back to the cardiology ward via the lift. Back in my bed, I try to catch up with a little of the sleep that eluded me but I wonder what *options* might include.

Stents—sprung tubes inserted at points of arterial narrowing—had seemed likely given the worsening of the angina I'd experienced, but they would normally be combined with the angiogram and there had been no suggestion of that.

My stomach ventures an opinion, not just because it's been several hours since I last ate. I visualise the surgical scenes from TV dramas intermixed with calls of 'Code Blue' but awake to the day nurse taking another blood pressure reading. I realise that the tannoy voice is actually calling 'Code Grey' which I already know means a scuffle somewhere: 'Probably someone doesn't like the food again,' observes my caring angel, releasing the now deflated grey cuff that has been intent on engraving its outline on my upper arm. 'I think your lunch should be here soon,' she adds. I wonder what other variant on chickpeas the kitchen can devise given my awkward designation as a vegetarian.

Before any sustenance can arrive a young man in a white coat clutching a clipboard and a stethoscope approaches. He introduces himself as a cardiologist and wants to ask me some questions but starts with sounding my chest and examining my legs. It's quickly apparent that veins are under scrutiny—those on view are apparently 'good', as is my never having smoked, not having diabetes, being possessed of my own teeth and drinking relatively little alcohol. The form on the clipboard accumulates a mounting assemblage of ticks and squiggles until he thanks me and makes to leave. 'Am I right in thinking that this is gathering info for a possible operation?'

I ask, having a suspicion that healthy leg veins equals a source of grafts for a bypass operation.

‘Yes. Sorry, I thought someone had already been to discuss this.’

It becomes clear that communication is an early casualty, triaged as a hopeless case in favour of more direct measures. I am assured that the registrar will be round to talk to me. Sans white coat, my nurse explains, means that this is the first day of a new doctor’s roster when aspiring heart surgeons start their period of in-service training. Sensing a nervousness on my part, she assures me that such surgeries are performed on a regular basis. She spends a lot of time in the intensive care ward looking after patients immediately post-op and offers to provide me with a video about bypass surgery. ‘It’s a little dated,’ she adds but I resist observing that I’m beginning to feel the same way.

Replete with more chickpeas, salad and potato soup I wonder what the TV suspended on a rail above me might yield in terms of a distraction. It seems the best on offer is an SBS hosted documentary about railways, which I seize upon despite the presenter being an ex-Tory government minister with a penchant for highly colourful suits. Dazzled by shades of pink, green and white, and quietly envious of this man’s ability to move effortlessly from one historical destination to another with an ease that I haven’t experienced in a while, I jump a little as my returning nurse offers me an iPad with the suggested bypass surgery video ready to play.

The video does what it is supposed to and runs through the experience of a heart patient to give a practical guide to the process and render it less frightening. A low fatality rate of around two percentage is mentioned as is the expectation that patients will spend no more than one week in hospital before returning home. It's a point I initially have mixed feelings about—a wired breastbone and recently sutured pipework sound fragile and safer in easy reach of expert care—but I know how keen I already am to be away from beeping and flashing machinery without external plumbing attachments. Anyway, there are a few things I would like to sort out before going under the knife and I start a lengthy texting exchange with my wife in case events overtake my ability to communicate meaningfully. The video deviates from current reality in showing loved ones able to accompany patients and stay with them for much of the time. Covid has changed that dynamic radically and the modern experience is a rather more isolated affair.

The promised visit to discuss treatment options doesn't eventuate, and when I wake in the middle of the night for a toilet call and the opportunistic next-shift nurse visits to take the compulsory blood pressure measurement, I glimpse a new whiteboard note against my details: *Going home?* It's a possibility of escape that I find lifting, and sure enough, after the usual early breakfast my first visitor is the pharmacist bearing a package of new medications, together with a printed schedule setting out their place in my existing regime.

‘So, I’m going home then?’ I ask.

‘That’s what I hear on the grapevine,’ is his reply. It seems an odd description for what I hope is a coordinated decision. My morning nurse, Donna, confirms that she too has heard similar intimations of departure and soon a posse of medics enter following the lead of a smartly dressed individual whose words are clearly from God’s lips for they are followed with suitable reverence. I gather that I am to be released for further treatment as an outpatient and that an appointment for further scans and a discussion with a surgeon will be arranged over the next couple of weeks.

I accept my fate and the leader and his entourage depart. Donna confirms that I can once again don worldly attire and call my wife to collect me, just as soon as she removes the cannula in my left wrist as well as the wiring and array of sticky dots still attached to the wi-fi sender that has been remotely informing on my uppity heart. Dressed and ready to go, I receive a visit from a lady wanting to know my menu choices for the following day. It’s the first opportunity to make a personal selection from a limited palette reserved for non-carnivores, but I shake off my regret and advise of my imminent departure. Clearly, the grape vine doesn’t run as far as the kitchens.

Two weeks later, my heart having starred in its own sequence of movie shorts utilising an echocardiogram, my surgeon tells me that one of the valves may need a makeover as a part of the operation: freshly oxygenated blood is leaking

backward. I am, however, a 'good case' for the surgery. Once I have the certified assurance of my dentist that my teeth are not harbouring bacteria that could set up an infection around any artificial valve that may be implanted, I am set to join the list of those queued for rejuvenation.

The queue turns out to be like that at a theme park attraction, or airline check-in desk (it's been a while) zigzagging deceptively so as to hide the full horror of the delay. Just one suitable theatre, trained staff depleted by Covid, and restrictions on elective surgery are combining to draw out an appointment date to months instead of weeks.

Resigned to a sedentary existence for some time—a short walk now a challenge—I settle in to catch up with cerebral projects long put on hold, interspersed with naps. Never quite knowing when my number will be drawn from that special triage hat, I ask my wife to give me a nudge now and then. 'Not too heavy now, a pinch will do.'

WILSONS PROMONTORY

KATE PEDIADITIS

I don't know if you've been down to the Prom, but if you haven't, then please go! It's a wonderful, mysterious place of great beauty. From a distance, beyond the narrow isthmus, the mountains, misted and brooding, step away to the south on a broad peninsula, the great rollers of the Tasman finally reaching its eastern shore as it pushes out into Bass Strait. To the south, the link to Tasmania submerged, and beyond that island the Great wild Southern Ocean's presence is felt if you stand below the lighthouse at the furthest point of the Prom. There's no road to it, so it's a 12 hour walk down the centre of the promontory to reach this wild, windblown place of heaving seas and crashing waves, seabirds soaring or skimming the rollers, nature's sea breath flowing over your skin and rolling under your feet.

When I was six, we went to the Prom for the Christmas holidays. 'We' being my parents, my brothers Digby 14, Paul ten, and one of Digby's friends, Russell. In those days it was a six-hour journey by car from Melbourne, pulling a fully loaded trailer. When we reached Foster, the road became a gravel track winding through scrub of tee tree and banksia. It felt endless, 'are we there yet?' too regularly. Then, as we came onto the Promontory, the place asserted itself, great rocky outcrops of smooth grey granite loomed over us as we bumped

along the track, then disappeared into the mist shrouded upper slopes. Straight away we felt the magic of the place, imagined faces in the rocks and strange creatures inhabiting them. Excitement now filled the car and boredom vanished.

Very few people went there in those days. I remember a ranger's camp, but no camping ground even resembling the facility that caters for hundreds now. We had rented a two-room stone cottage, which no longer exists. It had a chimney, no electricity or running water, and was enclosed by a low fence. We used a Primus stove to cook on and once the sun had set, a hurricane lamp for light. We slept on stretchers, though I think there was a bed for Mum and Dad.

Every day was an adventure. Particularly so because I had older brothers who sought it. I suppose they didn't always have to have me with them, but I tagged along often enough to remember Paul's foot sliding away as he trod on a tiger snake basking on the warm sandy track leading to the beach, and the fear of wild, ferocious pigs that dogged my imagination as we took these paths through grasses and ti tree, over rocky headlands and through fern gullies.

My brothers fished for crabs in rock pools and crevasses. One day as they were absorbed in this, there was a sudden scramble of large maroon crabs up the rock face and out of the water. The boys bagged them easily but wondered why this strange behaviour. Looking into the deep water from the rock shelf we crouched on, we saw a large octopus looking up at us, or so it seemed. No wonder the crabs had made a dash for it,

though sadly for them it was ‘out of the frying pan ...’ So then a new plan formed, and the octopus was the hunted. Digby had a harpoon he was using to spear the crabs, so he tried to spear the octopus with it. The battle went on for hours, and the harpoon bent like a piece of spaghetti. We thought the eyes of this demon of the deep evil, as it wrestled the abominable spear which pierced it again and again. Eventually the creature was hauled out and dragged down onto the sand and measured. Over six feet across, which seemed monstrous at the time. Even in death the huge suckers could inflict a bruise lasting days, but I suppose that would have been a badge of honour given the intensity of the battle. In retrospect, I feel sad that such an extraordinary animal was hunted out of its habitat. We now know how intelligent these creatures are, what extraordinary life forms they are.

And so, day led into day. Long hours at vast Norman Bay where fishermen dragged long nets in the mornings, and my father would send me off to pinch a fish and bring it back in my sunhat to where we had set up towels, and beach umbrella. Eventually the fishermen were fed up with pretending to look the other way and came over to tell him he could buy some fish if he liked them so much.

You could see huge Skull Rock from that beach, half submerged, its empty sockets blindly scanning the waves. In the quiet estuary of Tidal River, we played endlessly. Huge coppery rocks could be transformed into cubbies, lookouts, hiding places and headquarters. The rivers’ shallows gave way

to occasional deep pools, and there was always the exciting spectacle of seeing the first wave of the incoming tide travelling slowly up its course at some stage in the day.

There are stunningly beautiful beaches scattered around the Promontory. Squeaky Bay is one such. The sand there is brilliant white crushed quartz, fine and deep. It gave up its signature sound of high clean squeaks as we pelted down it into the deep blue sea. Many years later I would discover the brilliant turquoise of Waterloo Bay, and the quiet tranquillity of Sealers Cove, belying the rough, cruel life and death brought there by the men who traded in seals and whales.

One morning, Digby and Russell set out to walk around one of the many nearby headlands. They were expected back in a couple of hours. Lunchtime came and went, and my father went to look for them. No sign. I remember the mounting tension through the day, then anxiety as the late afternoon brought long shadows and still nothing. By now, the ranger had been told and had left to search as well. Deep worry had set in. Suddenly they appeared along the track, exhausted, thirsty, scratched, and messy. They'd been caught out by the rising tide and trapped, then as their predicament sank in, realised they would have to climb straight up the dangerous rock face of the headland, which took hours to negotiate, and thence to bush-bash through the dense scrub without really knowing their direction. I remember the huge relief of my parents, the half-hearted ticking off the boys got, the sense of looming fear evaporating in a moment.

In later life I've returned to the Prom many times, and each time there is always a strange element of fruitless search for some sign of those days we spent there as a family. Digby's death several years later contributes to that I suppose. Memories of him are sparse. I can't find our rocky ledge where we crabbed, or landscape familiar to our cottage. I can't recapture the pure adventure of it all belonging to a six-year-old, but wonderful Norman and Squeaky Bays, Mt Oberon, Skull Rock and Tidal River stand vigil, trusted keepers of that time, and I leave replenished.

FISHING STORIES

ROBIN MATHER

Standing on the bridge, threading slivers of curried lamb flap onto a fishhook, I had no idea whether fishermen at Barwon Heads really did catch snapper with lamb flaps, curried or not. Can they catch fish with curried anything, I wondered, or does it have to be lamb flap?

In any case that was what I was doing. My three little children had complete faith in the farfetched advice and in their mother's ability to cook the lamb flaps to entice a fish just waiting for such a tempting treat. How hot to make the curry? I guessed. The hotness probably was not crucial to the exercise. If the fish was hooked, it would be no use at that stage for the poor thing to be gasping for a cool drink. However, I would never know. No matter how long we stood standing on the bridge then or any other day, we caught nothing. Was the tide supposed to be coming in or going out, or on the turn, should the moon be waxing or waning, did it matter if the wind was onshore or offshore, morning or afternoon? Endless variables. The curried lamb flap advisor had not revealed all these details so essential to the fishing elite.

We went home clutching a warm parcel of fish and chips from the shop on the corner of Flinders Parade and ate them happily with slightly yellow, slightly curry-flavoured fingers.

...

Fishing had never been my strong point. In the stony ground of my childhood around Mount Elephant there were no rivers, no creeks, no fish. Not even yabbies in the dams that I can remember. Of course there were rabbits—a different matter altogether.

Fishing gives you thinking time.

There was the time we were holidaying in Nelson, down at the mouth of the Glenelg River. The weather had been very wet; wet even for that part of the state forever awash with drizzly cold fronts. But the national park had reopened just in time for the school holidays. Today the sun was shining, nearly warm. We went shopping for worms from the local store, fishing the plan.

‘Drive in a few Ks till you come to a hut. There’s a little landing there. Good place to throw a line. Guaranteed,’ he told us.

I loaded the boot of the old Torana with our coats and rugs, a loaf of bread, butter, fruit, milk and orange juice. In went a box of matches, a newspaper, a lemon, one of those racks people take camping for making toast over a fire and a vegetable knife to clean the fish. As noted, fishing was not my strong point and I had never cleaned one from scratch in my life. But a fish dinner in the bush—what could be better?

It was late in the afternoon and getting cold. The sun was sliding down behind the cliffs. Sadly giving up, we piled into the car and retraced the damp dirt tracks to get back to our holiday cabin. I carefully steered onto the sloping bank around one big puddle. Then the car glided sideways into the muddy quagmire in slow motion. Bogged. We tried all the usual tricks of branches under the wheels, logs against the tyres, going backwards a little bit first. Nothing worked. The kids weren't strong enough to push, the eldest with a broken arm in plaster. The car had no hope, all four wheels stuck in mud. Not to mention the mud on all of us. Splattered from head to toe. Everyone.

We trundled back to the hut, lit a small campfire and ate our bread and butter. The lemon was a bit superfluous. The hut had two narrow, lumpy, tick mattresses and plenty of evidence of rats. Dark already, we went to bed early, end to end the four of us, two to a bed. I only heard rats scrabbling through the night once. Of course we slept, the sound sleep of the young.

At daylight we woke, ate what was left of the rations, dumped everything in the bedraggled car again and headed off walking back to town.

It was a beautiful morning, cool, sunny, still, birdsong, idyllic in the bush. And then we saw a father emu with a clutch of chicks, completely unafraid. Another single parent, sensibly not fishing.

The garage man pulled the car out, a bit the worse for wear, and after that it always seemed a bit stretched.

FLASH FICTION



Chrissy Amphlett by Glen Smith
Willem Baa Niip 'King Billy' by Cam Scale

All flash fiction pieces used these artworks as a prompt.

PRIVATE INTERLUDES

JO CURTAIN

In a laneway in Geelong is a painting of Chrissy Amphlett on the side of a building. I don't need to buy a ticket to see her. I see her twice a day, walking to the library and home. Then the rest of the day, in between the fleeting interludes and, whatever is left of my day, I collect scraps of words; eat an egg and lettuce sandwich in Johnstone Park and sip tea infused with mint, waiting for a poem to unfold.

AN UNLIKELY COUPLE

DAVID BRIDGE

Two souls gaze from an uncompromising canvas. Chrissy overlays Billy in time and energy, but he looms larger, embodying the weight of generations, sentinel of a displaced people. Nurtured by the same land, how would each regard the other? Would corroborree embrace Divinyl's diva?

Did the schoolgirl Chrissy, looking down from Belmont ever sense the life that once teamed the Barwon valley where a father glimpsed a mystical creature and named his newborn Baarnip in its honour? So much of today's city overlays and obscures the Wathaurong way of life as young Billy experienced it, as settlement made its first inroads accompanied by disease and separation from country.

How quickly were the lagoons of Djillong overlain by brick and indifference: over forty millennia of peaceful coexistence trampled on in the name of development. During mere decades of wilful appropriation and self-service the 'discoverers' printed their names across the landscape and raised temples to the wool trade.

Billy and Chrissy both, in their own ways, struggled to be themselves: one to maintain a threatened culture; the other to assert a persona that sought to shatter common expectations. Willem Baarnip sustained a lonely but proud presence for fifteen years after the last of his fellows, only to

succumb to tuberculosis, the scourge of so many of his clan. Chrissy's lyrics spoke of the fine line between pleasure and pain and, tragically, her tumultuous international career was shortened by MS and breast cancer. Yet her character and music persist in campaigns to combat the disease that killed her.

An unlikely couple maybe, but Chrissy and Billy are enduring figures united in a common humanity: they demonstrated courage in the face of great adversity and emblemised causes that continue to deserve our support.

SHAZ

VICTORIA SPICER

There's a faux throne in Dennys Place. It's a higgledy-piggledy pile of bin bags, flattened cardboard boxes, tatty blankets and mottled pillows. Shaz, the self-styled Queen of Li'l Mal, is holding court here today.

She tells people who stop to gaze at the murals that Chrissy Amphlett went to Belmont High. And she, Shaz, went to Belmont High too. If her legs had been working, she might have done her Chrissy impression, mock mic in hand, gyrating and posturing; her lips syncing with the gravelly voice from the ghetto blaster – *There's a fine line between pleasure and pain.*

It's almost 40 years since Shaz, so wanting to be Chrissy, spent whole days playing the Divinyls videos she'd taped from *Rage*. She wore Chrissy-inspired fishnets and a short short tunic out clubbing on Saturday nights. She dyed her hair red and wore her fringe long. She drank too much. Took drugs.

There's another reason Dennys is Shaz's special place. King Billy. King Billy was a Wathaurung man, one of her people. 'He wasn't a real king ya know,' she tells observers. 'If he was a real king, he'd have a statue in the park.'

Willem Baa Nip, aka King Billy, performed demonstrations, a strutting mock warrior waving a boomerang and a spear at astonished white fellas, taking his

reward in pennies, halfpennies, the occasional threepence, free beer. Coins didn't compensate for stolen land; beer didn't drown his perpetual grief.

Shaz rattles her tin. On a good day, she might get enough for a meal and a fix. On a bad day she might be spat on.

ALMOST, FAMOUS

JO CURTAIN

Today, I walk past Chrissy Amphlett's painting in a laneway in Geelong, and I am transported to the first time I saw her perform at the beachside venue, Selinas, in Sydney. I was seventeen and hooked by her utter fearlessness, unpredictability, and charismatic wildness. I inhaled every minutia of her outrageousness. I, too, believed I could be up there giving the proverbial finger. When I was yet, younger, I briefly dallied with being a poet after seeing the movie *The Dead Poets Society*; however, it remained in the realms of childhood. Poetry turned to song writing. I became a famous rock star.

Well, I was celebrated in some circles—those of a particular niche. Seeing Chrissy on stage, I, too, wanted to do the same—so badly. You know, we shared the same birthplace—except my dad nicked off when I was two, and mum and I returned to Sydney soon after. Since we're sharing, I'll confess that is where the similarities end. My rock stardom began and ended in a regular gig at the Broadway Hotel. But still, it earned a loyal following, and you'll find my name in the archives of Rolling Stone Australia. Somewhere, I think.

Like other rock n roll legends before me, I, too, would keep performing—keep the legend rocking—and fail to bow out gracefully. I thought life was too short for more than one

significant interest. So, imagine my surprise when I began experimenting with dried herbs. I know—amazing. Now, I'm an urban herbalist practising meditation. Standing in front of Chrissy in the laneway in Geelong, I inhale deeply, letting it fill my lungs, and with a nod, I walk off.

WHAT IS LEFT UNSAID

CAROLA MATILDE LUCAY COSSIO (CMLC)

The man with a bush beard and a waterfall of hair is an
image
of majesty, mastery, control.

The woman sits in the corner alone, overshadowed.
She is small.
But she has an aura.
Magical red energy, female energy, surrounds her.

An indigenous woman, I know how to feel less.
I was trapped by trivialities, imprisoned in mundanity.
I broke out, flew away,
my body bursting with euphoria.

In this world, made by men, controlled by men,
the voice of a woman and her red enchanted energy can
intimidate
those who lived before the revolution, used to the rule of
men,
fear a woman's power.

The wall—big canvas—small woman.
The voices of new generations

scream to be heard,
their authority swelling to fill the cavernous space.

The dream of a creative woman exposes the misogynistic
curse.

The abuse. Oppression. Suppression.

Woman, claim your power.

All this can be done with the birds of imagination and paint,
with brush or spray can, saying ...

Freedom to all the girls of the world

FLASH OF LIGHT

CHARLES MANILA

On a bleak winter afternoon, I decided to take the scenic route to pass by a place I used to call home. The overcast and the fog filled the surroundings with a depressive haze that complemented the despondent atmosphere. Shattered bottles, the squalor of empty packets dancing in the wind, and the odd syringe on the pavement and weathered expressions of the people.

But I still saw life in those tired eyes. It's in the laneways filled with angst, graffiti and broken dreams. It's in the forlorn faces that I pass by, while ravaged by circumstance but instilled with an indefatigable hope. The smell of sweet and spicy pork banh mi in the middle of lunch hour. The diversity of dialects and the melting pot of cultures in small moments of fleeting harmony.

Riddled with a reputation, almost irreversible, by the words of mouths that never called this place home. A home not bound by unrealistic perfection, but realness and tragedy. They miss the heart buried behind the surface-level storms; the stories that are the treasures and that rare flash of light they have yet to find.

LANEWAY

FERN SMITH

One Potato

Twenty years at Zaatari Refugee camp, Alli is dust covered, waiting. Standing in the frayed doorway, wondering where her now adult children are. Always on the edge of hunger at the edge of a desert.

Two Potato

The Myer's heat vent warmed the cockles of two raggedy women sitting on upended milk crates. They were laughing and calling out. Happy as it was daylight. They were warm. People pulled tightly at their winter coats, tucking their heads onto their necks, as they scurried past. Averting eye contact while admiring their shiny pointy shoes. Always on the edge of hunger at the edge town.

Three Potato

Harriette's back turned outward on the park bench, under a litter of papers, with torn clothing poking out. Matted hair resting on a filled plastic bag, causing no harm. Two young men approached, shouting at her. Foot traffic quickened its pace. Always on the edge of hunger at the edge of a park.

Four Potato

Fried, boiled, and mashed. My mind casts back to the Spanish conquering the Incas, in the sixteenth century. Linking traces of modern violence, dispossession of women, children, and the potato. Always on the edge of hunger on the edges of deserts, towns, and parklands.

More

Out on the edge of darkness he held his hands tight behind his back and closed his mouth. She imagined trees growing. The last light caught her eye as she hid in the laneway.

IN THE CITY

KERSTIN LINDROS

Kat climbs the steps of the old warehouse after her dinner shift at the pub. How lucky she's found a place she can afford to leave her boring country town for a city full of colour, action and sound.

Her screen lights up. She smiles and rejects Mum's check-in call. When she finds her door ajar and the frame chipped, she freezes.

After a thump, footsteps are fainting. Now she pushes the door slowly and slides inside, her back against the wall, to inspect the make-shift bed- and bathroom behind the divider. She wrestles the billowing curtain. Shuts the window and looks around.

Drawers gape. Her garments spill out and uni work is scattered across the floor. She dives onto the mattress and feels her laptop through the crumpled doona. Thank God! But her meds, and the necklace from grandma—all gone from the chair.

Back down in the laneway she calls 000. Tonight, the bold red outline of the big tiger on the façade in front makes her jump. In the light cone of the street lamp she paces up and down the vibrant-green wall of giant leaves and tangled vines that tower over her and the roaring beast.

'You okay?'

Startled, she turns to the figure approaching.

‘I’ve been burgled.’

‘I could wait with you,’ he offers.

‘I—I can hear the police coming.’

He turns and slinks back into the darkness he came from.

Police arrive. They take her statement and check for prints.

‘You’re new in this lane?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You need triple bolts around here,’ one of the officers says. ‘They’re like wild beasts, competing for a patch of this jungle.’

She asks them for a lift to a friend’s place. Then she taps the screen. Tells Mum she’s tired but doing fine.

SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET

CLAUDIA COLLINS

‘There is an exhibition of modern Indigenous art at the Papermills Art Gallery. One of the artists is a woman named Olive Arbuthnot. Any connection, Zoe?’ asked my fiancé Alex.

We enjoyed wandering around looking at the different pieces. It was opening night and some of the artists were present. Olive Arbuthnot’s piece *Art for Art’s Sake, Not Blood for God’s Sake* was of a race riot set against the backdrop of a graffitied wall in Redfern.

I was recognised as a fellow artist and introduced to Ms Arbuthnot. She was a small woman with vivid blue eyes startling in her dark face. After discussing art for a while, the subject changed to our last name.

‘My mother was one of the stolen generation. She ended up marrying a man from Ballarat. When she left my father, she took me north to find her family among the Wiradjuri. I was only a baby. I don’t remember my father or my brother Gordon.’

‘My father’s name is Gordon but everyone calls him Gordy,’ I told her. ‘He lived in Ballarat with his father who died when Dad was nineteen. Dad moved to Anglesea when he married my mother.’

‘Do your parents still live there?’

‘My parents are divorced. Mum remarried and moved but Dad still owns the local servo. What about your mother?’

‘She died last year. Her heart.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. She was among her own people. She would have been content with that.’

‘Dad will be pleased that I have met you ...’

We were still standing with Olive when her partner approached carrying two coffees. A man of middle height, his grey hair was cut short with military precision and his eyes were green. Next to me, Alex froze. His face turned pale.

‘Mother?’ he said.

POETRY

PRINCES FREEWAY

a poem for my sister, on her 30th birthday

STEPHANIE POWELL

small girl
closing your eyes against flatlands that move
over the glass.
seatbelt against growing plum-heart.
stringybarks bent over scrubland, lava plains and
Wadawurrong soil.

we grow up
along the road between melbourne and geelong
watching mum's hands at eleven and three on the wheel,
counting paddocks before
the next mcdonalds.

shut-eye, dewy
at the meeting of eyelid and eye-crease
as city thins into farmland,
chin drops to the top of your chest
hair parting around the neck.

my walkman headphones on,
volume dial spun up until mum says –
turn it down / you'll go deaf / I can't concentrate on the road.

you dream-twitch, i turn over my celine dion tape again
keep the sound on low.

a coach

stopped on the verge of the freeway
a row of men in bomber jackets and jeans pissing
in a line just outside werribee
new-build roofs soften under the magma heat.

outside the rest area toilet block
give the dog some water
wind jettisoned off a passing semi
lifts the fringe from
your forehead.

back on the road,
cattle truck overtaking,
cow faces fight for space
looking through bars,
haunches jolting together as the rig changes lane.

the exit for the prison,
the fields
filling with warehouses and brand-new suburbs.
the turn off,
white weatherboards with concrete
porches, the waterpark with the sunburnt slide

finally, the driveway
of our grandparents' house.

take time to wake up,
(be woken by my rough shaking)
being young is difficult but
when you're thirty you'll sleep less *(i promise)*.
so, sit on backyard steps,
taking long sips of pepsi
while the adults move inside the house
put wine in the fridge, crack beers
unload the last bags and
carry them from the car.

The shade cools toes in sandals,
the dog squats down for a pee.
The stillness of this afternoon
rare for this time of year,
ants file neatly
into the cracks between the paving.

LATE JANUARY, SCORCHING

JO CURTAIN

summer stench / leaf rot rolls in on the wind / red gum,
silver wattle quivers, / shimmering into the late sky. /
summer breathe, / hot air sears the back of my throat, /
singes the hairs in my nostrils / twisting. / meandering
serpentine brown river, / sand squishes between my toes, I
hesitate. / finches flock, pinkies dip into the icy water, / and
I submerge. / sharp exhale back floating, dragonflies flicker
kick water—

summer swim.

RAT-TAT-TAT

JEAN PEARCE

Girls' sleepover, rat over. Your best friend makes you say too much, to hide in her stash, the Kit Kat and hard jube stash she keeps in her duffle bag. It's about the boy with the big brown eyes. It's under the blankets talk and around the table, pass the parcel, brown paper bag talk. She likes to say, say, say, make it fun, fun, fun like strawberries under your jumper. You tell her secrets about the boy, about the man, about the husband, about the father, about the priest, and the man who pulls out his baton at the train station. The best friend berates you for putting up with the man. She berates you for being who you are, she says it is your fault. She berates you for not being like her, who is alone. She berates you about the women and she berates you about the men because it is the men really, she says, this man and that man. Your man and her man. She can see it all. You must leave. Do it. Don't do it. You're too pretty, too silly, too clever, too rich, too poor and beggar man, thief. She's waiting at the corner, waiting at the gate, waiting in the car park to fit in where you left off, to pretend she is you, I am her, she is me. She will wait till they all forget you were you and think she is me, you are you, and they are them, and who is one, and who is two, and who gets the bom, bink, bom. Your best friend gives you the bracelet for your birthday,

the knot, the ring, to join us to in the rat over, the sleepover,
the secret, and the rat-tat-tat.

MILK TEETH

ALEX CREECE

firsts.

it hurts the moment we breathe
 we suffer
as we episiotomy into existence
before all else
 with
no teen movie summer fling
no tragic backstory
to teach us
 how
delicate heartstrings sever
by the yelp of
 a dog
its paw accidentally trodden on
the first and only
crying missile
of a glass cannon
that echoes somewhere,
 in forever.

before.

a contortionist of time and space
agonises the acrobatics of
 pancreatitis and family violence
 twisting her gut
until, soon,
 she bruises the earth right back, at last.

nexts.

the desert is undiagnosed
maybe this is just
how deserts are
 eroding into their own dunes
 with supervised lunchtimes
 in case of violence or vomit
and the two weeks it took before
forcibly, foreseeably
 your bare feet singed
 to a blister turned singsong bully
 psycho dyko
 you're a crazy bitch
 a stone's throw from here,
 you'd be stoned to death.

sure, maybe.
we can only hope.

afters.

my ingenue is dead
I know it
as I shed
 words,
naturally as skin cells,
and she flakes away like
 the shell of a sunburn
infinitesimal in infinity
 the dustsceawung
of the fact that I am here
my voice no longer shaking
I look him in the eye, even
my brow more creased
than his suit has ever been
my ingenue died impatient
but still,
I smile for her
when I welcome the fate
that comes with the words
 ‘go fuck yourself.’

evers.

to talk in circles would bring me
to where it all began
but
in spirals
a single line never
reaches
back into itself
to say
how devastating it is to hear
you have promise
knowing that promises
inherently
will become fulfilled
but humans
are,
more often,
not.

A FATHER'S BEACH WALK

JEN GRIGG

They sang the sailors' shanty,
heave ho, as she perched upon
his shoulders, her lifebuoys
safe and strong, and they
saw brightness ahead.

While he mulled and mused – for
that was a beautiful moment –
he first stepped, and
he first stepped.

Boys now, skip ahead,
sulks sunk in salty air,
coating their scratchy throats
to take in here, and there,
sure as twin-striped shells.

While he imbibed the lively air,
picked benign inclines
in briny rocks,
sturdy and mindful.

Collecting new memories
like collecting empty shells,
echoes of past life, or
midget molluscs in
moulds of miniature.

Now, what's around here,
around the next corner,
the next corner?

MOTEL AT EQUINOX III

EDWARD REILLY

At the Greeks' café, even the flowerpots are blue,
Though the geraniums and roses are stubborn reds.
The stairs falling onto the strand, we negotiated
Our way down to the water's edge, looking for shells
As we'd promised our granddaughter a bucketful.
Pinks and greens she wanted, not ordinary whites.
Like Aphrodite, she desires only beauty
To surround her, such shells shining like diamonds,
Heroes with wrought-iron tridents, flowing red beards,
Locks feathery as peacock's plumes or phoenix down.

The sea was still roaring two days after the rainstorm.
The line of ships outside Fremantle had thickened,
Fishermen complained that their grounds had been sullied,
Blaming the gods, the Chinese, those oil tankers,
Everyone and anyone but their own early greed.
I found a shell that glistened in the sunlight
Pummelling down from an incandescent sky,
Lips green with a hint of purple, silvery touch,
Whilst saltwater streamed from its chitin flanks,
A perfect vessel for the Cypriote goddess.

Spared *Zorba*, we were serenaded by the seagulls
And a flock of local cockatoos, all discordant.
The coffee was thick, she served *halva* finely sliced,
With a second glass of the house wine, resinous.
Durrell would have liked it here, no one hurrying.
A lemon tree grew in a tub, a cat sunning.
I was told how the Greeks played a cruel trick
On a German who'd barged his way into Byzantium
To make a marriage for the Red Emperor, to no avail,
Being served roasted goat and a farmer's rough wine.

What is it about this place, the memories evoked?
I am not Greek, and other than Partholón's tale
I have not a hint of the Mediterranean.
I'm all Atlantic, with four green paddocks besides,
Blessed with two left feet and stumpy fingers, pure Mick.
How cruel is genetics! Mother could vamp the piano,
But organ, fiddle and guitar yet elude me.
Still, this warm sun, coffee, the wine, and these platters,
Make me into a Philhellene, though I'm not sure
How far out to sea I'd swim to meet my lover.

PENPAL

STEPHANIE POWELL

Sand re-stuck to sea dipped fingers, shaken out, car floor.

I wrote this line down yesterday and thought of you.

Thought the part about sand in the car would wind you up. I know how you like to keep things tidy. Today I wrote for twenty minutes followed by an hour or so on Wikipedia, first reading about the 1999 movie, the Thomas Crown affair, then Magritte's *son of man* where I found a hazel eye just above the apple's curve.

It's late here, and the mynah birds make so much noise inside a tree by my window. The window looks over a road, concrete divided in lines like swimming pool lanes. Tram cables at eye level above shop fronts. And you wouldn't believe sunset from this room. And you wouldn't believe the number of businesses missing packages before 8am.

I still might get to the end of this letter and decide to re-write it. As usual, I am finding fault with everything, but never with you. I apologise for no letters in a long time. The streetlamps burn the tops of roofs, the night is ink bled. I'll finish this letter here saying,

the stars are clear and fantastic.

BROTHER

JENNY MACAULAY

I never really liked it –
Sparkly, cheap
a dolphin arcing upward from its china base
of scallop shell – unreal – pastel blue.
I put it in a garage sale once
yet it remained behind with the dusty doilies and garden
magazines.
Back on my desk, its glitter fracturing the evening sun
reminds me
of when we got lilos for Christmas –
the diamonds on the water as the waves flung us
laughing and choking onto the sand –
the same Christmas he'd given me the ornament
bought with his pocket money.
His excited, impatient face as I teased
peeling back each piece of sticky tape
and slowly unfolding the wrap.
Of course, I said I loved it then.
Now ... its sentimental shadow slices across my page
as I wrestle with words
for his eulogy.

CITY HAUNTINGS

JAN PRICE

Ghosts of tar
and cement-scented Melbourne
haunt me
I exhale her memories
into this country ether
when my heart needs pace not peace;
when steam apparitions dance
off pavements after slashing summer storms
and aftermath showers drop
rings on puddles through circles
bobbing outlines of grey
buildings like docked cargo ships
on Sundays; typed poems
on A4 paper turned sideways
resemble that high-rise skyline
where sparrows flurry
under bridges over rivers
like city tunnels over tracks
metal/ wood doors slapping at stations
and sparrows pausing on platforms
where crowds of crumbs depart

on soles in a hurry to arrive
somewhere called Destinations.
And strolling under streetlight stars
I harbor flashbacks of my father
photographer of the famous
at the Plaza High St Northcote
his glossy enlargements in glass
cases at the entrance –
Sydney Haylen Buster Fiddes
Toni Lamond vaudeville laughter
and the newspaper tear man
who shaped lines of hand- holding children!
Front rows! Footlights! Free passes
calling for the Interval Lolly Boy
tapping my toes to the Cancan
clapping my hands for more
encores - I still dream dreams
of singing under that spotlight
capturing the hungry heart-
beat of the big City.

FRAGMENTS FLOAT, TEARS SPLASH

IVOR STEVEN

Carefully I move through each day
Calmly absorbing the moments
Fragments, from a decade ago
Seconds, minutes, and hours
I am not counting the showers
Too many frozen puddles
For my water-logged boots
Splash, Splash

How many rivers of tears must I cry?
Before all the deepest wells run dry
Splash, I drop a cemetery stone into the well
Splash, tears from long ago follow
Am I still drowning in the same ancient river?
Splash, Splash

Slowly I resurface
But who is rowing the boat?
Splash, Splash
There is no need to throw me a rope
I am floating down-river
Towards my island home
Splash, Splash

SHOWER SONG

EDWARD REILLY

You'd come out of the shower to stand by the window,
Stretching backwards to let the last of the water drain,
Bright sunlight penetrating to your inconstant heart,
Etching your shadow onto the already stained carpet.
This wasn't real happiness, this little secret between us,
Then recurring as the milkman's cart halts outside,
As cans clank, bottles rattle in steel crates, hooves stomp.
It is becoming impossible to retreat into a quiet reverie,
With your scent still swimming up from the sheets.
You'd left the taps running, mirrors clouded over
So I could not see, only feel you. Now my every glance
Is a steeled arrow cast to the winds by a jealous Eros,
Who would consume you every which way he would.

LAZY EYED

ALEX CREECE

Brain skewed—

Snooker stripes sunken in the
overgrown understory, untold—

Once upon a time,
I strayed down this rabbit hole too.

Haloed ligatures
against magic-eight

fated anomalies,
happening within and without

Me.
Astroturf asphyxia of lost cues.

Hold a mirror to my head,
with stigmata smeared fingertips

blurring the billiards—

THE PROMISES OF ANKLE BELLS

GUENTER SAHR

Mindful only of the promises of ankle-bells

the commune of mothers and children meandered

through the country-side day after day.

 Their spirits burnished by their rhythmic gait,

 thirsts quenched by rains, their hunger eased

by processions through village after village

after village, growing in numbers

as they swept through the land.

BALANCING ACT

MERYL BROWN TOBIN

With blindfolds on, politicians see a neatly balanced world.

Like usurers, they weight the scales—

on one side, they load	With thumb on the other side
logging, fishing, mining,	of the scale,
fracking, industry,	they plant a few trees,
commerce, power,	profess their greenness—
genetically modified crops.	claim sustainable development
Dredging, desalination, defence	their goal.
and border protection now.	

DISCOVERY

BRUCE SHEARER

What came through
Those severed heads
On the day that fate
Perhaps singed, by
Arid continental heat
Danced on the upcoming
Graves of the land's
Lost inhabitants, and
Hurled them
Unceremoniously into
A future only nightmares
Ever dreamed of
What venom spat
From Europe's ruined
Heart, sent hulks of
Convicts like piled
Refuse off to a new
Unsoiled repository
Carrying disease like
Organic decoration
Dismembered from
Their past, and knowing

Only that they must
Tear and grind at this
Rough and fragile
Trapped, new world

HEARTS OF MIDAS GOLD

ADRIAN BROOKES

I came to this ancient shore in the fervour of my youth
The new world was calling with the confidence of truth—
All are equal, all are free to take every opportunity
In this lucky country of sunshine and prosperity
With fortunes only waiting for the brave to stake their claim
And winners all who dare to play the game

Too rapt in aspiration to cast my gaze about—
For I was young and all was new and who was I to doubt?
With all about me busying with gathering the harvest in
And everywhere King Midas was smiling
There's wealth enough for all to share and all within the
fold—
Just guard your tender heart from Midas gold

I came and I saw what I wanted to see
But could my starry eyes have been deceiving me?

For when at last I paused a while and took a look around
Past the vales of plenty and beyond well-watered ground
I saw a deep black shadow cast where I had thought there
was no past

A dreamtime people trampled and outcast
A shadowland of shadow nations robbed of rightful claim—
Our Cornucopian colony of shame

Do we dare confront the truth and tell it as it stands?
This wealth that we indulge in was torn from stolen lands
Through years of cultural genocide and prison-system
homicide
In terra nullius your humanity is nullified
For all pretence of tolerance the old empire thunders
through—
If sorry's not enough—what more'd you have us do?

Well they told you: in Uluru we poured out our hearts to
you
And you tried to twist it out of true
Life's most precious treasures can't be bought and sold
But you only see through hearts of Midas gold.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF DECENCY

IVOR STEVEN

Introduction

Naked, I stand before Him
stripped of common decency
Debased, I kneel
My words are crying, tanks
are rolling over Ukraine,
as my tankas are clawed down, the bloody drains

Sad Sky

False words smudge old clouds
Grey clouds hang under a sad sky
The sad sky decries
'Children are our butterflies
And please stop the warring lies'

Broken Biscuits

Life is imperfect
like broken war-time biscuits
Reconnection waits
Reconciliation stops
Life's sweet shortbread's unopened

Abandoned

May the stormy winds
Calmly abate in Europe
And bring peace quickly
Do not forget the children
We cannot abandon them

Epilogue

Cover me
give me beauty
inspire me
calm me
save me
from the deadly missiles
scudding above the Black Sea

A CHILD'S REQUEST

DAVID BRIDGE

Read me a poem,
One about war,
Long on the heroism,
Short on the gore.

Spare me the torture,
The rape, fear and pain,
The bits that the adults
Find hard to explain.

Miss out the tower blocks,
The homes blown to hell,
The pits with the bodies
Without names to tell.

Show me the soldiers
Marching to fight.
Tell me the reasons,
And why they are right.

Shield me from leaders
Who stare out from the news,
Their cold eyes will freeze me,

Whatever their views.

Wrap me up tightly,
Wipe dry any tear.
Say to me, 'Darling,
It can't happen here.'

But tell me dear parent,
So I know you don't lie,
That the right cause will win,
While the evil ones die.

On second thought, maybe
I won't ask for proof,
I don't think any of us
Can handle the truth.

COLOUR ME

CLAUDIA COLLINS

Red for my eyes are crying
Green, a cloak of jealousy
Yellow, I can't run from my cowardice
Grey for my thoughts weigh heavily

Blue for the sadness I'm feeling
White is the truth, an empty space
Orange, the rage that burns within
Purple for the bruises on my face

Brown for the crap I'm swimming in
Black to mourn the broken-hearted
Pink, as my lips, is the lie I live
Red, for I'm back to where I started

JOSEPH, MALLORD, WILLIAM, TURNER

BRUCE SHEARER

JOSEPH, MALLORD, WILLIAM, TURNER
A TALENTED WIG MAKER'S SON
BURSTING WITH RAW ABILITY
SCUTTLED DOWN A DOCKSIDE ALLEY
HAULING CANVAS, BRUSH AND PAINTS
LIKE THE BOATS AND BARGES
HIS ART WOULD ILLUSTRATE
WHEN IN POSITION, HE WOULD SIT
AND START BUSILY SKETCHING
AS THE DAWN'S LIGHT LIFTED OR
SUNSET SHIFTED, AND THE TIDE
TOOK HOLD, OR RELEASED ITS SALTY GRIP
ON THE HEAVING, HEAVY MASTED,
SOLEMN, SHIPS OF WAR

A MOTHER'S LAMENT

KEVIN DRUM

Was that his voice I thought I heard?
The throaty chuckle and kindly word
I'm not expecting him today
He never tells me, but that's his way
He knows my needs are not too much
A happy smile and tender touch

While shopping I saw him yesterday
Broad of shoulder and strong of limb
In perfect reflection it was him
I've got to run, I heard him say
I turn hand raised, but he'd slipped away
How I wish he had the time to stay

Balmy nights, lazy days on white sand
We're on a tropical isle, hand in hand
He's a little boy full of mischief and fun
We laugh and splash in the warming sun
As I awake he fades from view
With those precious three words – I love you

He wafts and wanes like a summer breeze
Eager to help and anxious to please
The cheeky wide grin and easy charm
The loving hugs wrapped in his arms
The days that matter are hardest of all
I dread their coming, the painful recall

In times of trouble when I'm feeling down
He's there beside me, ever the clown
Be calm don't worry, it will be alright
He soothes my soul and stills my fright
There in the shadows of a silver moon
He's with me in the darkened room

In hushed tones we talk of days gone by
Of the joy and heartaches, it makes me cry
Take care of yourself he says with a smile
I'm with you forever, not just for a while
For I'm of you and you are me
In shared love we're joined for eternity

LINGERING DREAMS

QUINLIVAN

Funny how I could see our future
Dream about what our lives would be

But you could only see me as a shadow
Something lingering in your life

That ultimately you could live without

I THINK OF YOU

QUINLIVAN

When others talk about the first person they want to call
My first thought goes to you

I know you won't pick up the phone and I don't even want
to tell you the news

Somehow you are always the person on my mind
I can't get away from you

You are a constant in my head reminding me of what I could
have had

But I will never have it now
You have made that crystal clear; you do not want me and I
should not want you

Anytime people say 'Your Person'
I think of you

It seems I will never escape you

MEMORIES OF JENNY

MICHAEL CAINS

People you know but really you don't,
A coffee at first, share more you won't.
Trips on the weekends in our little vans,
Hooked on the travel, ever more plans.

You meet someone new and it really clicks,
So much in common, the friendship sticks.
You seek their company and they look for yours,
Laughing, enjoying the great outdoors.

Late friendships grow after lives in far places,
Inching up gently with no airs and graces.
Shared jokes and stories, some told with great sadness,
Trust with a smile and good-natured madness.

It all ends too briefly when life is most cruel,
They are gone, we are left with only a jewel
of a memory of friendships that should last for ever,
But they don't, and then they are off to.... wherever.

Goodbye Jenny, your time went so fast,
To your memory and friendship we will raise a glass.

You're off on a journey we haven't yet started,
Only knew you a while but now you've departed.

We remind ourselves not to take things for granted,
In wandering souls our friendships are planted.
They can't last for ever, so time spent is treasured,
Love freely given can never be measured.

BENEATH (GLEN PARK CEMETERY)

JAN PRICE

I've come to visit with you
to ask how your children are
and if they've grown
since the time we first met.
Your double iron gate was open
and I walked right in
uninvited *but*
your names were Caleb Henry
Ethan Mary-Grace and more -
not Hate Jealousy Greed Anger
as I thought justified.
I shaped each name's face
as my eyes engraved your stories
into my heart. This time
I've bought you all soft shoes
for your rigored feet
and paper-daisy spoors
collected for many Springs
to sun-yellow your waiting years
knowing I would climb
this gum-treed hill

once more... *but*
where are you!

I didn't believe the locals
when they said there's *nothing* left
but four white boundary posts
one in each cemetery corner
where gum roots dare not enter between
where grass won't green in winter.
They say your headstones were stolen
then that bushfire went through.
There's no sign of you -
no human-length mounds
no cross charcoaled splinter
no chipped heirloom for flowers
no arrow pointing down.
I'd have believed you an illusion
if not for these four white posts
respecting your boundary.
But I know you're beneath
so I'll begin and place three pair
by this corner; one for the mother
and two lace-up pairs for her little sons.
Now from my basket old man
a pair of brown slippers for you.

RADIO FRIENDS

SUE GOURLAY

When I retire, I won't sit by the fire
With knitting needles clickety-clack.
No stiffening of limb, no eyes fading dim
While the radio talks back, yakety-yak.

I imagine each day without work, full of play.
The theatre, The gardens, The galleries
Lunch with a mate, naturally - paddock to plate.
Eat dessert, bugger the calories.

Wearing vibrant lycra, I'll become a road cyclist,
Riding my new aero dynamic machine.
With my peloton friends, we'll nail hairpin bends,
Before sprinting homerun, speeds obscene.

While stretching my loin, I may pull a groin,
But I'll jump right back in the saddle.
Or I could take up rowing, no way I'll be slowing,
Providing a stiff shoulder allows me to paddle.

Then I'd take up croquet, buy and sell on eBay,
Join course after course, of course.

I'd enroll at CAE – work towards a PhD
And read novels reviewed 'tour du force'.
When I retire, I might join a choir
Sing harmonies with an angel's chime
While strumming a guitar, I'll research my memoir,
Writing songs and poems that rhyme.

As the idea of sex is replaced by a *Bex*,
And naturally a good lie down.
Remembering a blue pill, enough of a thrill,
Snug tight in my buttoned-up gown.

If I misplace your name, kindly refrain
To mention any subsequent malapropisms.
I will stay in my home, prefer 'this alone'
Than locked away in your forget-me-knot prisons.

As old friends so near, one by one disappear,
When family are too busy to call.
Decisions made by others, while I pull up the covers,
And refuse to eat meals in a hall.

When I retire, I'll be glad of a fire
Recalling knitting needles clickety-clack.
With stiffening of limb, and eyes fading dim
Listening to radio friends talking back.
Malapropisms.

AN EMPTY CHAIR

JENNY MACAULAY

The pelicans glide on the thermal's rise
acknowledging the change from winter's brace
to dominate the warming of the skies.

And as you watch them flow, you too embrace
the coming of the spring with growing calm
while envying their beauty and their grace.

A wrinkled hand upon a withered arm
a fragile body, damp cloudy eyes
can still appreciate such air-born charm.

And as I watch you there, I realise
while breezes frolic with your wispy hair
you're gently whispering your last goodbyes

for, by next season you will not be there
to watch the summer sea-birds soar on high.
I'll stand alone beside an empty chair.

Yet, while pelicans still glide across the sky
my soaring love for you will never die.

SILENCE

FERN SMITH

trouble
stalks
an honest word

controversy
ensues
a straightforward sentence

affliction
follows
an inconvenient paragraph

silence
transpires
and
the last word

f
a
l
l
s

DISMAY

PAT LOWE

After I have hosed the bathroom
I notice a line of black ants, motionless,
along the base of the far wall.
Each ant holds aloft an egg
and waits for the floodwater to recede.

TO SEE THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

DIANE KOLOMEITZ

Skimming through the sky, we see, below us,
the landscapes stretch through black, to grey, to white.
And frozen river reaches, petrified
in flow, like giant slides of treachery.
Sliver of light on the wing flickers, fades,
and brilliant midday darkness embraces.

Cramping chests, puffing steamy clouds into
the icy air of an arctic country.
We lift luggage, tentative on the snow
that crunches like apple wrappings beneath.
Restricted movement, multiple layers,
Bodies cocooned, Norwegian Michelin men.

The hotels, all called Scandic, warmly greet
with fires and hot toddies, but we drink Schnapps,
toasting arrival, excited to be.
We slide outside again to meet our guide -
This frosty-bearded Viking keeps us safe.
Excitement builds in such a timeless place.

The dogs, excited too, loudly await.
We cannot see, but hear them howling to us
from their kennels in hidden snowy drifts.
The teams are harnessed; they are bred to run.
Lightweight sleds hurtle towards the forest,
trees adorned with crystal decoration.

I feel I may be airborne, a silhouette,
like Santa in his sleigh against the moon,
then landing softly with gentle jingle.
But we on snowploughed tracks land hard, thump, jolt,
skimming off onto the frozen fjord
where all is quiet and awaits The Lady.

We've come so far to see her trace her path.
across the sky, trailing light in passing.
The Lady of the North might show her colours
in swirls of green and yellow, maybe red -
Such a sign means much in many legends.
I pray she comes, to show some force exists.

And come she does, when I had lost all hope,
allowing want to overcome the peace
of silent solitude, patient Nature.
I looked up to the skies of midnight blue
to see her dancing, shimmering skirts a-swirl
across the Nordic Heavens ... oh pure bliss!

We travel far in life to see such sights,
but need to meditate on meaning to us,
and learn from them, and hold them in our hearts.
My journeys take me to those distant shores,
those different places God has made; *I know*,
for I have come and seen the Northern Lights.

ROMANCE

THE SCARF

JEAN PEARCE

Rummaging towards the back of the wardrobe, searching for a shoe, a silk scarf slipped down out of nowhere. Falling across my face with the soft, gentle touch of water. Momentarily, I saw something in the shadows staring back at me. The enigma wore a leather jacket and a white, silk scarf cascaded around his neck. This doppelganger hung lifeless as a phantom beckoning me from the past. Jabbing a coat hanger like a sword into the wardrobe, I waited, but there was only the jacket and scarf quietly eyeballing me.

I recalled a Renaissance painting, a self-portrait of a young man wearing a scarf loosely draped around his neck, and simultaneously, the face of a young man I knew from my time in Italy. On my return home, he had sent me love letters in Italian which I barely understand, and charcoal life drawings which disintegrated as I opened the envelopes. Shadows of lines hatched onto the thick white velum. At the bottom of the envelopes were piles of charcoal fine as ash.

The silk scarf was plaited into little tassels, hundreds of silk threads tied together into a row of luxurious ponytails. I tickled my nose then sneezed. Was it the scent of perfume? The faintest whiff of cigarette smoke? A draught of frigid air?

When I looked closely, I noticed a patch of oil, a drop in the shape of a rose petal, the palest of pink. On the end of the

ruffle was a smudge of crimson lipstick, illusory as a whisper from the past blown in your ear on a dark, moon lit night.

I took the scarf and soaked it in cold water and velvet soap, rinsed it and left it hanging in the breeze. By afternoon when I returned the scarf was gliding like a kite tail, swaying in the spring sunshine, wafting amongst the lemon scented gums and lavender bush.

There was still a dot of lipstick on a tassel. Whose lips left this crimson burr? Could this have been me?

I remembered the Italian girl with the oval shaped face and the toss of blonde hair who looked as if she was lifted from a Botticelli painting. She followed close as we danced from bar to bar. Her lipstick, crimson and smooth as wax on her full blossom lips.

‘I must wear that scarf,’ I said to myself. But it hid in the back of the wardrobe only visiting me in dreams, running away ahead of me, waving, and spinning around corners as I chased down winding, cobbled streets, always just ahead of me when I reached out to grasp this wild, flying, silken thing.

One morning when the air was cool and refreshing, I woke early and dived into the ocean at the beach near my house, feeling the cold thrill of the waves and the soft bubbles of white froth on my skin. Warm and exhilarated, I decided to go to a café up from the beach on my way to work.

The silk, evening scarf lay on the floor beside my bed as if it had been carelessly thrown there during the night, inviting

me to pick it up and fling it around my neck. Soft and seductive, scented with lingering sunshine, lavender, and an unknown thing.

At the café I sat and read the paper and sipped an espresso. A man sitting at a table nearby turned his head and smiled at me as if he knew me. He looked familiar in the way that people you have known a long time ago look. Something about his eyes, the colour of the sea in winter, a steel grey. A fearless gaze, and the hooked nose of an Italian cardinal.

I was attracted and repelled by his unbroken stare, cast like a shadow in my direction, and the quiver of a smile hanging like a cigarette from the side of his lips. A curious expression of inquiry and expectancy sent a chill down my spine. I tightened the scarf around me like a cape. The silk clung to me and steadied me, calming me like a reassuring hand. Still, the man watched, eyeing the scarf, scrutinising the tassels, as if he too was fascinated and caught in an imponderable reverie.

I looked around everywhere, at the sea, the rising bank of clouds, black and ominous, at the tall pines and the distant fishing boat. Irresistibly my gaze was drawn back to this man, his hooked nose and furtive stare that seemed to float above me in the breeze like an eagle treading the wind, sailing the currents, focused and ready to swoop.

If he talked to me, I would not know what to say. Such was the swirling wind inside my head. I felt that if my mouth uttered words I would be forced to remember what I had long

locked away in the vault of my memory, what I had hidden for all those years. I knew that I once knew him but wanted to forget in the way one wants to forget falling into an abyss, into the deepest, darkest depression. My heart was beating like the feet you hear running along an empty, dark street. The echo of feet that reverberate in the still of night that are distant and close. I wanted to leave, to go to work, but I was mesmerised. I had neither will nor volition.

The man moved in my direction as if to speak to me and I turned my head towards the sea again. I longed to see my friend who always walked her dog each morning along the sand. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and coffee spilt from my cup. The turgid, brown liquid trickled down the scarf and dripped onto the sand.

As he stepped closer, huge shadows like the arms and legs of a giant fell across the sand. His hand reached out and caught the tassel of my scarf with a possessive force, so it fell from around me as if he was disrobing me. The scarf slowly falling to the ground as I intuitively moved, unfolding with the inevitable unravelling of myself, as if I was speeding down a tunnel back to the kitchen in Umbria. The smell of aniseed and wild sage. Warm honey breath.

The sun caught the black signet ring, fine black hairs on a hand, soft and beguiling as the sea.

LOVE IS NOT DECLINED

IVOR STEVEN

My internal battle is never ending
Neither won nor lost
My opponent is my ghost

I forgive with the morning dew
And my regrets are few

There is two breaths in every moment
The first one kisses our heart
The second breath caresses our soul

True love is hard to find
And impossible to define
When found, be exceedingly kind
Love can spellbind your mind
But blindly, love is not declined

LOVE IS

JO CURTAIN

love is

snow

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through my

fingers,

flooding my heart.

love is

hidden in the smell of freshly mowed grass in the
summertime.

love is

the beautiful old wood grain of our dining table,

it echoes in the sweet voices of cicadas

and the taste—

the taste of rain,

is love.

TO INGEORG, FORTY-NINE BIRTHDAYS ON

ADRIAN BROOKES

I can see it clearly—how we lived in Göttingen while you finished your studies, then moved to West Berlin. As the epicentre of radical politics in those fraught Baader-Meinhof years, the riven city was your natural environment. You involved yourself deeply in the protests, disputing the issues so irrefutably that a reactionary government with no answers for its youth could only see, and seethe, red.

You taught English in the *Gymnasium*, though your militancy barred any career progression. I worked at first as a house painter—not much fun, though mostly I was honing my German to fluency until my songs, on social and political issues, gained a wider audience. Starting from Berlin, I played increasingly around West Germany, and East, too, after the Wall fell. I got to know Reinhard Mey, first as my mentor and later as brother in arms. I look back fondly on those caffeine- and nicotine-propped nights when you, I and he would set the world to rights and trial new riffs and lyrics.

We had our two kids and brought them up as good EU citizens, fully apprised of the tasks ahead and equipped to tackle them. In our mellowing years we watched with pride as they built on the foundations we'd laid and led their

generation to those vaunted sunlit uplands. At some stage you left teaching to head an influential lobby group, though by now you've bequeathed it into other capable hands, remaining as occasional consultant. And I'm still releasing the odd album in between us passing on our worldly wisdom to the grandkids.

Of course, none of it happened, but love creates whole worlds out of sweet nothing. I was twenty when I last saw you; you were nineteen. Our kids, and nearly everything else, were conceived solely in the realm of inspiration.

But what of that, or of any other unrealised dream? Ever since the cognitive revolution of seventy thousand years ago, humans' inner lives have created far more than the outer—it all starts within, anyway. So why don't we count our imaginings as real until they manifest in something we can touch? Can't intangibles also be real, just as they intangibly are? What are novels, after all? The tales they tell, even world-crafting epics like *The Lord of the Rings*, happen all inside our heads and yet their influence is often life-changing. Perhaps we're the only creatures who can see a future beyond the satisfying of hunger or the urge to reproduce, but it's a huge, infinite beyond. When things aren't going well, it's dreams that sustain us, imaginary things we want to make real. In the midst of devastation we envisage worlds of hope. We see things that don't exist and spend years, decades, trying to create them.

Did you actually finish your *Abitur* and go to Göttingen Uni? You were only months away from it when we broke up. You were utterly committed to the prospect, convinced you'd move down there, make good use of your studies and graduate. I can only imagine you did, but if you didn't, does that forbid my imagining? Even if things abruptly changed for you and you didn't go to Göttingen, in the dimension of my mind you were right there.

Okay, so where do we draw the limit, assuming we need to, not least for our sanity? Does the inner world we've so fondly nurtured simply vanish when outer 'reality' contradicts it? I'm sure that's what we'd assume—like, our relationship ended when we stopped seeing and writing to each other. That was the *real* reality, wasn't it? We were finished, full stop.

Well, no. I pictured you just now wearing the light-green button-up top that went so well with your blonde hair; we were walking along a street in Celle, and as I embraced the memory, completely involuntarily I pulled a face. It was an outer impulse of an inner working, a grimace of undeniable regret. We were close once, and some remnant of that intimacy lingers, not as an emotional fossil but as something still ticking and energising—because, you know, it could have been a wonderful *true* story! Both of us were at that dangerous point where the boundaries of youthful passions disappear.

We knew we weren't just two lovesick adolescents who'd soon get over it—we'd crossed the line to a deeper level entirely, one we don't ever get over because if we did it would

deny our humanity. It was the whole reason God put Adam and Eve together, to make each of them complete. I can sense the plunge of Adam's desire—vertiginous, bottomless almost.

In our daily lives we routinely dress ourselves in the outer 'reality' just like we put on our clothes. We have to meet others' expectations, at least to some level, and sometimes even explain ourselves to them, and it's easiest then if we simply conform to the norm. But all the time the undercurrent of inner reality's denouncing the outer as an elaborate façade: 'I know what it looks like, but it's not at all like that really.'

Your literary hero was Holden Caulfield, the teenage rebel in *The Catcher in the Rye*. His story was pivotal for you; you identified with him closely in his abhorrence of adult duplicity. But there's another character I might venture to mention, even though he's quite different from Holden: Forrest Gump. I'm sure the movie's themes would appeal to you, notably Forrest's integrity, shaped by the traditional truths his 'mama' has taught him. There's also Jenny, of course, who strives for a better world through counterculture, and so complicates Forrest's attempts to reconcile the outer life with the inner; yet Jenny is second only to his mama as a defining, formative other.

There's a scene where Forrest tells Jenny, 'You're my girl.' Jenny's response is, 'I'll always be your girl', before she departs for another protest. Forrest watches her go, saying, in

the role of narrator, 'And just like that she was gone out of my life again.'

You're as unreachable for me as Jenny was for Forrest in the end. These thoughts I'm expressing have been fermenting through decades, yet from this vintage distance I can see you were a Jenny-character in my life. You were part of my first big adventure into the unknown, those weeks of hitch hiking around Europe with backpack and guitar, busking for my keep. When we met at the Konstanz youth hostel you must have seen something in this ragged itinerant to spend time with me like you did. Winter's fingers were tapping on the window, and I was wondering how I'd find the means to get home to England, moping over the thought. Talking with you hauled me up from the slough, and by the end of the evening the prospect of seeing you again had changed my whole perspective. Two years doesn't seem long now, but those were years of youth and we were intense, pursuing each other intimately, truly believing we'd created our own eternity.

Yes, we ran deep in that tangible time and sowed a deep seed in the fertile soil of youth. Nourished by a fecundity of emotions, that seed, as healthy seeds do, grew to maturity, I suppose like a mother tree, spreading its influence through all that came after. The fruits of that tree are the fruits we live by—the thrill of attraction, confidence of growth, joy of climax, unease of decline, grief of loss and finally the settlement of regrets to leave a legacy of gratitude for once having been.

Even now there are fleeting moments when I feel I can turn and you'll be there and I can know you as I did before. After all these years you're still in my story, still in some atavistic way my once and timeless girl.

And on this your birthday my heart reaches out to you as it treasures you within.

I AM

JO CURTAIN

Levitating, I fly in the sky, even
when my feet are folded firmly underneath me

raspberries scatter from our laps, and you eat them off your
fingers until your lips are stained cherry red

right now, we are sitting on green grass in a field of flowers
poppy red, cornflower blue, and sunflower yellow

my finger traces a path along the underside of your wrist,
translucent green-blue veins

fading in colour like the leaf that keeps losing its colour to
my fingers

flowers open fully to the sun, twirling, turning towards the
sun,

drinking the sun quenching thirst

the grass sleeps in the afternoon, embracing us as lovers do I
sleep you stretch, arching your back
boastful happiness turning towards me

I awake holding a sunflower it is your way of telling me,

I am your sunshine

CONSUMED

IAN STEWART

'If music be the food of love, play on ...'

William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

Right from the first time he saw her, Anthony was overwhelmed by Belinda. Her smile lit up her face. Although not a classic beauty, her exquisite cello playing made up for any minor deficiency of looks. And there was a subtle sexiness that set pubescent Anthony salivating. Glasses, plain clothing and a permanent frown of concentration when she was playing seemed to blow away any allure that might have been noticed by the rest of the gang at school. But Anthony noticed. His sense of taste for the feminine was defined by Belinda. A hunger welled up; a permanent desire set in.

Anthony Southern was a good-looking lad with a happy outlook and a willing nature. But he was painfully shy and found conversation with girls quite out of his reach. So, Anthony could only look on in wonderment at his goddess. In a way, it was lucky that she was a year senior and then—when she became a student at the Sydney Conservatorium—out of his world for his last year of school. It allowed him to concentrate on his studies and his music. He, too, gained a place at the Conservatorium. But the best result for him was

the fact that he could, once again, be in the presence of the marvellous Belinda.

As his first year at the Con progressed it became apparent that his piano, though of high standard, would never get him anywhere beyond a teaching role. Then came the opportunity to take up tympani. He worked hard at this and succeeded in attracting the attention the scouts from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. But he never forgot his piano and sought advice about how to advance it. The advice was to develop his jazz stream and to make himself available for sessions with groups around Sydney. He did this and, by the time he had finished his studies, he not only had his place in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra as a tympanist but had regular gigs with some of the middle grade groups in the Sydney jazz scene. Together, the two jobs kept him in rent money and food. But there was a different menu item he craved.

After her time at the Conservatorium Belinda, too, had won a place in the SSO. There she was, always far away at the front rank of the orchestra, as far as was possible from Anthony and his tympani. To gaze at her with longing was all it allowed; all he permitted himself. His shyness and his twisting tongue stood in the way of conversation with his goddess. It was only when the symphony was in full flow that he could, between drum sections, drink her in as she bent to the task of finessing her music. Oh, how sweet was the sound of her playing.

Anthony had read that passage of Shakespeare before, many times. It was from the set text for his HSC. It came to him that day, suddenly, as he sat in the Domain at the end of his stroll during a break from Friday rehearsals at the Opera House. Orsino's passion, in *Twelfth Night*, seemed to match his own exactly. At the end of that rehearsal session he had become so clammy with sweaty emotion over his deep and abiding passion for Belinda that a powerful need to get out into the open air had enveloped him. He remembered how Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, had such a burning, hurting desire for the Countess Olivia. It was just like his own for the out-of-reach Belinda. Yes, he mused, like the Duke 'I turned into a hart, and my desires, like fell and cruel hounds, e'er since pursue me.'

But there seemed to be nothing he could do to overcome his reticence. He had tried to whip up courage enough to speak to her but at every turn he failed. And so it had been on this day, the day on which he had such driving need to get out of the rehearsal area and into the freshness and greenness of the Domain. He had tried to summon the fibre to seek her out and talk to her, but she seemed to slip away, as always.

A half hour in the breezy freshness of this harbourside location was all it took to calm him. He could go back. Something had to be done about his obsession. Surely there would be a moment when he would find her alone and a conversational spirit would move him beyond his inarticulateness. He re-entered the rehearsal area just as the

conductor was calling 'Time'. He was back at work behind his drums. And there she was, there but a million miles away.

...

That weekend was one in which he had managed to squeeze out of his mind all thoughts of her during his Saturday night gig with the Jazzmen, his happy-go-lucky band of friends for whom he supplied excellent piano. Then Marty, the reeds man, took him to—not for the first time—about Belinda.

'Mate, you just have to bite the bullet. Go up to her and ask her to have coffee with you. I'm sure she'll say "yes". You work together. You've an association that goes back years. What can go wrong? Music is the common bond, the food you share every day. Tell her about your jazz thing. And tell her how much her playing is like a fine meal to you. She'll love it.'

...

And there he was, back at the Opera House on the Monday ready for another rehearsal. He made his way to his place and readied himself for another run though the symphony they were practising. Before the conductor emerged, the orchestra manager took the podium. 'Orchestra members, I thought I should let you know that one of our 'cellists, Belinda McPhee, is in hospital at St Vincent's Private. She has broken her ankle and will be out of action for some time. We are taking the hat around to get her some flowers.'

Oh, my God. What could have happened to her? Can I do something? But what? Anthony's rock-bottom confidence bowled him out again.

At the end of the rehearsal Anna, the lead viola and a friend of Belinda's, came by, collecting for the flowers. She approached Anthony who immediately reached into his wallet and produced a ten-dollar note.

'Anthony, that's very generous. I'll tell Belinda.' There was a pause. 'Maybe you have a thing for her.'

Anthony blushed.

'Oh, you poor boy, of course you have. I knew it! Look, why don't you come to the hospital with me tonight? I'm sure she'd love to see you. Actually, I know she would. Meet me in the hospital foyer at seven.' With that Anna was out the door.

Anthony was a sea of confusion about what Anna had said. *Love to see me? That has to be nonsense. But I can't back out of this. Both of them would think me hopeless if I don't turn up.*

Remembering Marty's exhortation, Anthony decided that visiting Belinda would be one step along the way, however stressful it might be. He dressed carefully, caught the bus to the city and alighted at Taylor Square. It was a quarter to seven. He walked down to St Vincent's with faltering steps. Anna was there, in the foyer, a huge bunch of flowers in hand. Anthony had stopped by a chocolatier's and had bought a fine selection as a personal gift. He was so raw at this sort of thing.

Well, he thought, If she doesn't want them I'll just have to take them home and eat them myself.

The charge nurse on the Third Floor pointed Anna and Anthony in Belinda's direction. 'Room 12. She's much better today. I'm sure she'll love those flowers.'

Anna led the way. Anthony was trembling, trying not to drop his gift from his shaking hands. On entering the room Anna, dragging Anthony by his sleeve, announced, 'Hi, Belinda. I've brought you some flowers from the troops. And I've brought the famous Anthony Southern with me. He paid for almost half of them, so I thought I should make him come. I knew you would like that.'

Anthony tried his best to smile, extended his hand then withdrew it, unsure of the correctness of the gesture. He looked at Belinda and, to his surprise, found her blushing, her eyes downcast. Anna laughed. 'I've been trying to find a way to get you two very shy people together for such a long time. You're stuck now, Belinda, and you can't wriggle out of this. As for you, Anthony—I've been watching you ogling my friend here for so long. Now, out with those chocolates and let's have a celebratory feast. It's not just music that's the food of love, you know. Now where did I hear that?'

WHAT HE LEFT ME

MATHILDA GARRIDO LUCAY

New York was screaming silence in 2020. The buildings made her feel like a crow surrounded by white cockatoos. She never believed Covid-19 was serious; she heard people died of it—and, at that time, she wouldn't have minded if she'd died too.

That was back then. Laura, Octavia's eight-year-old grandchild, asked her about 2020.

'I was only 23 in 2020. I was a dancer in New York.' Her body quivered as she recalled her dancing years. Although she had retained her 23-year-old fearless mind, in 2065 she could no longer move like that. Back then Octavia had ochre skin and frothy cappuccino curls that stood out in a crowd. Her lips, sweet like strawberries, hid a shy smile. When she did pirouettes, her body moved gracefully, movements smooth and sensuous like liquid silver. She ran to the bus stop every morning at 7:30 am. Every day she munched breakfast and memorised dance routines as she listened to classical music while the bus glided across the city. Every day she sat in the same seat, behind the same man. Robert, the bus driver, knew who Octavia was in a matter of weeks: the girl in a leotard carrying a lime lululemon duffel in one hand, breakfast in the other.

She didn't have supportive parents wishing her well like the others did. She had stood on her own since she was little,

working hard to fulfill her dream of becoming a dancer. Her parents didn't see how hard she worked. She lived alone with the \$1,000 allowance they sent her each month, together with a 'don't gain weight' card.

She had a caring heart, she always gave her love to the world, but people weren't always nice to her. Though her ballet classmates had good parents and were happy, she tried to not compare herself to others. And if she did, she would punish herself by skipping a meal. She knew she wasn't loved, and she blamed herself. *Some people are just not made to be loved*, she thought. She spent her nights alone.

'Didn't you have other friends, or a boyfriend?'

Octavia smiled, her face wrinkled, eyes bright. 'I met Ben at the bus stop ...' Every morning she was there with her usual coffee, iced in summer, hot in winter. Ben was there too. Octavia didn't notice him until he got a haircut that revealed his emerald eyes. Since masks were mandatory on public transport, all she could see was his eyes—but she could imagine his lips. When he sat down in front of her, her astonished nostrils were filled with a delicious shower-fresh scent.

The first time they talked was the day her alarm didn't go off. She had to run like a cheetah and skip breakfast to get to the bus stop. What a relief—the bus was still there!

Her wild hair, formerly encased in a bun, was falling about her face in tendrils and she was scrambling to stuff the things she'd hastily gathered into her bag when he approached

her. 'Excuse me. I think these are your shoes.' Mesmerised by his voice, she knew she looked like a five-year-old looking at the most precious thing in the world. But she kept herself together.

'Thank you,' she said and put them in her bag. 'Sorry about that, I was in a rush. Thank you ...' She hesitated, not knowing whether she should say Sir or Mr. Both options sounded like she was talking to someone 20 years older, and she wished she wasn't.

'Ben. Ben Walker.'

'Hello Ben ... Octavia. Octavia Reyes.'

'Wait! His name is Ben?' Laura interrupted. 'Not Reuben?'

'Yes, Ben was my first love, and he taught me millions of things. I remember this one time I was finishing my ballet rehearsal, and he ...' He was waiting outside for her. It was raining softly and he'd 'forgotten his umbrella'. Ben was at first very shy, but like a sunflower, he opened up to the sun. Octavia was his sun. They didn't hesitate to sit next to each other the next day. Socialising was difficult during Covid, especially in NYC, but not for Octavia and Ben. They kept talking, until lockdowns in America were everywhere, the virus was in the air, and no one was in the streets.

'Do you want to move in with me?' asked Ben the night after full lockdown was announced. 'Or at least stay with me until this is over?' Ben's voice was hesitant, afraid of what she might answer.

So, they moved in together. Octavia was nervous, but she'd always felt lonely even before lockdowns. Having a roommate like Ben made her smile every day. Soon, they started looking at each other with eyes of hearts and stars. They were addicted to each other's scent. They thought of love and they saw the beauty of their faces.

Love scared Octavia. People thought that she didn't want love, but she had chased love as fast as a bullet—love always slipped and ran away.

Three months later: 'I love you, and all of you. Your smile, eyes, laugh ... I will never tire of hearing the sweetness of your voice.' Ben said over dinner.

'I need to tell you, I have never loved or been loved. I am new to these feeling, and I don't want to hurt you.'

'It's ok. We will learn together. Don't be scared.'

They spent nights and days looking at stars as though the world was on fire. They were in love, and Octavia always felt safe and good about herself. Ben made sure Octavia loved herself, and her life. It was hard at first for both of them, and Ben tried to talk to Octavia about her eating habits, but she got emotional.

...

'You're beautiful and perfect. When I saw you on stage the first time, your body mesmerised me. Eating can't do anything bad, but help you grow stronger.' It was hard for her to face her eating problem, but she tried to be as balanced in

her approach to food as she was in her dance body. Ben made space for her to find that balance.

‘Love, dinner is ready!’ Ben hugged her from behind. ‘Your poses are looking better. But let’s dance our way to the kitchen now.’ He grabbed her by the hand and they twirled their way to the kitchen to Ben’s humming.

As Covid faded, Ben got a terrible cough. He had ... cancer. Octavia just stood there.

‘It’s ok. I’ll be ok. Don’t cry, love. We’ll fight this.’ And they tried, and tried. But his cancer got worse. He lost weight and his vivid emerald eyes lost their colour.

‘I need to go,’ he announced.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Octavia ... you know what I mean. I’m ready to die. I’ve already had it all. I had you,’ he said, sitting up in bed.

‘You still have me,’ she said, clasping his hand. With a shaky voice she said, ‘You can’t go. What will I do? How will I live?’

‘You will live. And remember our lives. My life.’ And it was decided. As the moon ran to catch up to the sun, the days came and went fast. Ben stopped doing chemo and went home to die in peace. Octavia’s tears ran and travelled her face at night when no-one but the stars hugged her.

‘Octavia?’ He saw her shadow in the middle of the night.

‘What are you doing up? Go back to sleep.’

‘I’d rather cry with you, than sleep without you in my arms.’ He embraced her as he spoke. ‘I promise ... you’ll find

someone who is the moon to your night, who will love you until they die. Like me. I know you're afraid and hurt by my decision, but I am tired and we both know that my meds are not working. I'd rather you remember me for our shared memories—our trips, our game nights, our kisses—than my sickness.' It took him a long time to look at her brown eyes, filled with tears and sadness.

'Don't be afraid. Don't hold back on love. Love is everywhere, you just have to look for it. You are a beautiful person, who learned to love. Octavia ... you can love now. Love the flowers, the dogs, love art. Love whatever you want. With love comes pain, but love is stronger for you to remember it.'

Two weeks later, at 4:00 in the afternoon, he died. The now loud bustling streets feel silent for Octavia. She knew she would never see him, hear him, hold him again.

'Now I am married to your grandpa, Reuben. He and his funny faces made my heart melt.' Octavia left the time machine and returned to the present.

'What about Ben? Do you still love him? More than Grandpa?' asked Laura with heartfelt betrayal for her grandad.

'Ben taught me how to love, how to live, how to smile at the smallest things. My love for him is different from what I feel for your grandfather. Without Ben, I wouldn't know what love is. When I couldn't see a purpose in life, he helped me find it. He loved me. I didn't think I was worthy of love, but he showed me that I am, that we are all worthy of love.'

WORKING ORDER

SUE GOURLAY

It's not as if I've never had sex, although, well I admit, it's been a while. Actually I'm beginning, no not beginning, I am enjoying his touch. OK, if I just move this way, and if only he, how do I get him to ... I'm nervous, but I go for it. 'Can you?' I dare. 'Like this,' he obliges. 'Oh yes,' I say, and again. We've all seen the movie; how the girl screams yes, yes. At last, I remember why.

Just like a child, I close my eyes thinking that means he can't see me either. 'It's ok to open your eyes,' he says, 'Go on, I want you to look at me.' I'm embarrassed but I do, for a moment; I look straight up into his greeny-blues and see him looking directly back. Not just into my eyes, but turning his head and taking in the rest of me.

I feel ashamed. My nipples are too big and my breasts are too small and there are so many other lumps and bumps in places where I'm supposed to be smooth. I try to pull the sheet up but he sweeps it away again. 'Don't do that,' he whispers. 'I want to watch.'

'Watch what?' I ask. And for one horrified moment I remember it's been weeks since my last Brazilian, and worse still are those blotchy inner thigh carbuncles that flame even redder when sweaty.

‘Please don’t,’ I’m almost begging, ‘I don’t want you to look at me.’ But he ignores my pleas and continues his gaze while placing his finger across my sweet spot. Once more I start to quiver. I grab his hand with the intention of moving it away but instead find myself holding onto his wrist, working with him until my whole body shudders.

‘You’ve closed them again,’ he purrs. ‘Happens automatically,’ I confess. ‘Open wide,’ he continues, and I’m not sure whether it’s my eyes he’s referring to. Inwardly humming, I complete the verse ‘Lah lah lah, come inside, it’s play ...’ Fortunately he’s unaware, as he’s singing his own song.

For the umpteenth time, I grab for the sheet and at last, finally spent, he lets me, but not without asking ‘So, why so shy?’

Stupid question! I want to say look at me, but that’s the last thing I want him to do.

‘I’m not exactly Nicole Kidman,’ I declare.

‘And I’m not Keith Urban,’ he immediately responds.

I try to be sexy and attempt to wriggle my toes against his foot, but find his calf instead and realise he’s actually very short, and kind of hairy. Somehow, I hadn’t noticed these anomalies earlier; it must have been the bubbles.

I know he’s trying to be sexy too when he enquires rather breathlessly, ‘So, do you ‘cum’ often?’ It sounds like a dad joke and I find myself for the first time actually ‘looking’ at him, eyes wide open and definitely too close. He’s right; he’s

certainly not Keith Urban although he has got dun-coloured stringy hair, not parted in the middle exactly, rather falling slightly to one side. One side! There are actually no roots at all connecting the follicles to the left side of his scalp, er, reality check; I'm in bed with a midget who has a comb over. Hairy body—effectively bald head—I didn't even know that was possible. It's my turn now to inspect the rest of him as I take a peek under the doona and well, he doesn't have lumps and bumps exactly, more like one big hill with a periscope naval sticking out the middle of it.

Apparently he decides it's sleep time as he wraps a furry leg around me proceeding to snuggle in although his big bloated tummy is preventing him from spooning into my back. I can't feel his penis either, it must be somewhere (I edge away from the wet patch) obviously.

But I like tall guys!

Quickly I chide myself for such a shallow thought. Be kind, less than half an hour ago, this lovely man unselfishly satisfied my needs—first. Me first!

So what if he's on the shortish side?

What was the name of that guy who starred with Arnie in Twins?

My mind wanders further.

And War of The Roses, I loved that movie.

No, stop it. I mustn't be so superficial.

Less than half an hour ago this lovely romantic *hairy* man, *who is now snoring*, STOP IT, gave me the first orgasm I've had in years.

That's it, Danny DeVito!

We're not in a waterbed, yet the mattress lurches leeward as he rolls sideways exposing a huge hairy bum featuring a slightly off-centre red blotch on the left cheek.

I look about the room and realise the whole place needs a damn good clean.

As an insomniac I frequently find myself reflecting over a bit of late-night philosophy, more often than not, accompanied by the dulcet tones of Phillip Adams.

I've read everything from Andrea Dworkin to Clementine Ford and yet here I am, a grown woman, totally mortified that a bloke with a comb-over has lusted over my (admittedly well past its use-by-date) body while he has been seemingly totally at ease, indeed wanted me to (in all its cumbersome glory) examine his.

Nice guy, but seriously, what on earth was I thinking, when I accepted that sixth glass?

Fuck, I hope he didn't drive, I can't remember how I got here, and already I'm trying to work out how best to make my escape without him waking. The idea of him seeing me naked in daylight hours is way too much.

Still, it's good to know that everything is in working order.

A HIGHLAND STORY

IAN STEWART

It was in Glasgow's Barras Market that he first saw her. She stood by a bric-a-brac stall, a look of profound disappointment on her face. He strode over to her.

'My name's Andy. I work here. Can I help you?'

Morag turned to face him. There were tears in her eyes. 'There was a small marble statue here yesterday. It was just like the one my mother had. It was a wedding present. She broke it. I promised her I would look for another. And now it's gone.'

He patted her on the shoulder. 'I'll speak to the stallholder. Wait there.'

In a minute he was back. 'Is this what you were looking for?' He held an exquisite Art Deco piece in his hand.

Morag's eyes lit up. 'Oh, how wonderful! Is it still for sale?'

'It is.'

Over coffee and marshmallows Morag was all smiles. 'I owe you, Andy. Is there something I can do to repay you?'

'How about dinner tonight?'

Across the candle-lit table Andy found himself being magnetised by the green eyes of the woman sitting across from him. When she reached out and put her hand over his, saying again how grateful she was, he knew he was hooked.

A marvellous day followed, a day of drifting on the Tyne. Wind in her hair; a smile on her face. He knew he couldn't let go.

'Andy, this has been such a lovely day. One to remember. But I must tell you, I'm going home to Tobermory tomorrow. Maybe you could drop in to see me, if you're ever up that way.'

...

A week later he was standing on the hill overlooking the Oban waterside. He had made it there by train and the next morning he was ready to take the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry to Tobermory. He had promised Morag that he would come soon—but not this soon. It was to be a surprise. He looked again at the phone box. Should he ring? He had the number of her parents' home, with whom she lived. No. The surprise element. Best way to go.

The ferry made its way across Loch Linnhe and up the Sound of Mull, slap-slapping against the waves whipped up by the last gusts of the recent Atlantic gale. His excitement at the prospect of being with her again was intense. What would be his next move? Would he tell her that he had fallen in love?

The ferry docked and Andy made his way ashore. He found a fisherman by the wharf.

'Can you tell me where I can find Morag MacLennan?'

He followed the directions and soon stood in front of a white-painted cottage. He went to the front door and knocked. A stooped old man opened it.

‘My name’s Andy Campbell. I don’t suppose Morag’s at home.’

‘I’m sorry, laddie. She left this morning. With some fellow called Carl. On his yacht. She said she’d contact me once they reached Halifax.’

A SWEET MEMORY

CLAUDIA COLLINS

I lived with my parents in a cottage at the bottom of the back garden of a big house called Claramont, owned by the Montgomery family. My father worked for them as their warehouse manager and my mother was their housekeeper.

The Montgomerys had two children. Clive was three years older than me, Cordelia four years younger. Clive went to school. His mother and mine would walk him there with Cordelia and me. Clive's school was a red brick building with ivy growing over it. It had a playground and an oval for playing sport.

I started school when I was six. The school I went to had red bricks too, but it was much smaller and there was no grass, just dirt with patches of weeds. I hated it. I couldn't learn to read or write. The teacher put a pointy dunce hat on my head and made me stand in the corner. The other boys called me names. I kept running away. Father beat me and took me back. My parents called me stupid and said I was a disappointment to them.

I liked helping Mr Baldry in the garden much better than school. One day when I was raking up some autumn leaves, Cordelia's nursemaid brought her outside. They strolled around picking flowers and then the nursemaid sat on a bench under the oak tree while Cordelia played with her doll. Before

long, the nursemaid began to doze. She didn't notice her charge wander toward the fishpond. Cordelia fell in when she leant over to try to catch a fish. The fishpond's floor was slimy. She couldn't regain her feet and her head kept going under the water. I jumped in and saved her. I was treated like a hero that day and from then onward Cordelia took to following me around.

When I turned twelve I left school and was put to work in the gardens. It was Mrs Montgomery's idea. 'It would be kinder not to expect too much from Herbert. Let him work at a job that he will enjoy doing and is within his capabilities,' she suggested to my parents.

Clive was turning fifteen that year. He was going to England to finish his schooling and then he was to learn estate management at Rosemont, the family home of his uncle, Lord Bartholomew Montgomery.

It was Cordelia's fourteenth birthday. From where I was planting the spring borders, I could see her playing croquet on the lawn with her friends. When her guests had gone home she came into the garden with a piece of cake and a candle.

'I saved some for you.'

'Thank you.' I presented her with an orchid from the hothouse. 'It won't last long, though,' I told her.

'Neither will the cake,' she giggled.

Whenever Cordelia had her piano lesson, I worked nearby if possible. I liked the music and would hum along with it while I worked. If it was a difficult piece she would practise the same bit over and over. One time she got frustrated and slammed the lid of the piano down, left the room. I knew I shouldn't, but I couldn't resist entering through the open French windows and seating myself at the piano.

Cordelia returned to the room. 'How are you playing that note perfectly when you haven't even had a lesson?' And then she asked me to play it again for Miss Wood when she arrived. Miss Wood suggested to my father that she teach me to play.

'Piano lessons? I can't see the point in piano lessons for a gardener.'

'I will teach him free of charge if you can't afford it.'

That was the wrong thing to say. My father had his pride and he got his back up. There were no piano lessons for me. Miss Wood began bringing me botany books instead.

'The boy can't read,' Father laughed at her.

The books kept coming.

'What does she get out of it?' Father wondered aloud.

'That dried-up spinster! I know what she's about,' was Mother's comment.

At breakfast Father was reading the front page of one of his newspapers. 'My God!'

‘What is it, Norbert? You’ve gone as white as a ghost,’ Mother said.

‘I wonder if they know yet?’ He left the room, paper in hand.

Mother snatched up the remaining newspaper. *‘The notorious bushranger known as “Gentleman Joe” has been identified as none other than Basil Montgomery, younger brother of Lord Bartholomew Montgomery. He was shot through the heart by the celebrated Melbourne actress ...,’* she read aloud and laughed. ‘Oh, how simply delightful!’

‘Mama can’t cope with the disgrace. She has had a breakdown and her doctor has advised a sojourn in the country,’ Cordelia told me.

‘Breakdown, my foot!’ said Mother later that night. ‘Lydia Montgomery has become a sot!’

The fresh air of the country had brought a healthy bloom to Cordelia’s cheeks and she had grown up during the months she’d been away. She had put her hair up and become *Miss* Cordelia. She was excited about her news.

‘Mama is going to remarry as soon as she is out of mourning. He is a widower named Robert Thwaites and he is my *real* father. They fell in love on the voyage out when Mama was travelling here with Clive to join *his* father. They parted because they were both married with families.’ And that

wasn't all. 'Guess what? Clive is coming home! Uncle Bartholomew has died and Clive is now Lord Clive.'

Miss Cordelia divided her time between practising the piano and reading in the garden. Sometimes when I looked up from my work I would catch her peeping at me over the top of her book.

'How is the reading going, Herbert?' Miss Woods asked after each of Miss Cordelia's music lessons.

'Fine, thank you.'

I was grateful to her for the books, but I still wasn't much good at reading and there was something about the way that she looked at me that made me feel uncomfortable.

I had arrived home after work to find Father and Mother throwing clothes and various items into suitcases. Never before had I seen them so rattled.

'Hurry up Herbert, we're leaving tonight. Lord Clive is having the books audited. It is only a matter of time before we are caught,' my mother said.

'I'm not leaving! I haven't done anything wrong.'

'You can't imagine that you'll keep your job when they realise just how much we have embezzled?'

'Lord Clive strikes me as a fair man. I'll take my chances.'

'I've seen you mooning over Cordelia. You do realise that it is only a matter of time before she is married off to some

dreary dullard of her own class?’ This was Mother’s parting shot.

A few weeks later I was called inside to Lord Clive’s study. ‘It has been confirmed that you have had nothing to do with your parents’ crimes. Baldry has announced his intention to retire and has recommended you for the position of head gardener.’ Lord Clive congratulated me on my promotion and shook my hand.

During the time it took to rebuild the family business, Lord Clive married and had a son who was named Reynold. Another new member of the family was a poodle called Petal. At Reynold’s fourth birthday party Lord Clive’s wife tripped over her little dog and hit her head on the brick path edging. The house was in mourning. Lord Clive’s way of coping was to keep working, leaving the brunt of Reynold’s care in Miss Cordelia’s hands. She bought him a little wheelbarrow and some miniature gardening tools. Watching Reynold and Petal digging brought a smile to her lovely face.

There was a heatwave that summer. Drought conditions meant water was being rationed in most of the surrounding countryside. The hot weather made sleep near impossible.

One night I took a walk around the property ending up on the front lawn. I saw Miss Cordelia lift her white nightgown and step over the rim of the dolphin fountain. Water was spurting from the blowhole in the centre of the

dolphin's arched back. She splashed some onto her face and it ran down the front of her nightgown causing it to cling to her skin. I stepped out of the shadows. 'Herbert,' she said softly and held out her hand.

We spent every moment together that we could, making love through those hot summer nights, sometimes in my cottage and sometimes under the stars.

In autumn the leaves changed colour and fell from the trees, as they do, and the weather began to cool, as it does. There was a desperation in our lovemaking as though Cordelia fought to hold on to what we had, but even then I could sense a sadness in her, a withdrawing. Then one morning she was gone. And me?

I was left with nothing but a sweet memory.

ENERGY

MICHELLE NICHOLS

There's a feeling inside
I promise it's there
You can harness its power
And bring it to bear

It's an aura of sorts
An energy field
In colours so vibrant
From this you can yield

Unique talents and gifts
You might be aware
But if they're not obvious
Search carefully, please dare

Your journey is awesome
With others, don't compare
In the stillness you'll find
Your intuition and flair

This adventure of life
Is yours, one of a kind
But it's even more beautiful
When souls intertwine

HOLD ON

MICHELLE NICHOLS

To love is to lose
nothing in life stays the same
yet having loved is having lived
life's wondrous game

We're not always great
at keeping it together
life's journey can be rough
hanging on by a tether

Listen to your guides
in the silence you'll notice
how important it is
to create times of solace

A colour or a number
a feather or a light
it's their way of showing support
so you survive the dark night

For this too shall pass
you'll be well on your way
having gotten through struggles
you'll embrace a brighter day

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.

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Claudia Collins is a Geelong-based singer/songwriter who has nearly completed her first novel. You can find examples of her work in Geelong Writers anthologies dating from 2016.

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