



# MENISCUS

L I T E R A R Y   J O U R N A L

Volume 9 , Issue 1 2021



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Editor: Deb Wain and Jen Webb  
Consulting editors: Gail Pittaway and Paul Hetherington  
Designer: Shane Strange  
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#### **About Meniscus**

*Meniscus* is a literary journal, published and supported by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) with editors from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

The title of the journal was the result of a visit made by two of the editors to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where James Turrell's extraordinary installation, 'Within without' (2010), led them to think about how surfaces, curves, tension and openness interact. In particular, they were struck by the way in which the surface of the water features, and the uncertainty of the water's containment, seems to analogise the excitement and anxiety inherent in creative practice, and the delicate balance between possibility and impossibility that is found in much good writing.

*MENISCUS* IS PUBLISHED AS AN INTERACTIVE PDF. Clicking on title or page number in the Contents will take you directly to the selected work. To return to the Contents, click on the page number of the relevant page.

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## EDITORIAL

We are not only delighted, but also relieved, to see this new issue of *Meniscus* emerge into the world. As contributors and readers will know, we are several weeks behind schedule, which has caused the editors some anxiety. The tardiness is, of course, an effect of the global pandemic; and while we in Australia and New Zealand have escaped most of the devastation, there have been bollards in our roads too. We are very grateful for the kindness offered by so many contributors, and their recognition that the world no longer operates according to the standards of business-as-usual.

And speaking of COVID-19; we want to acknowledge, and celebrate, the remarkable response of the creative community to this critical period. All around the world, musicians and actors have performed impromptu balcony and zoom events, writers have presented work on social media or conducted readings online, artists have left chalk drawings on pavements and images on digital billboards, and creative practitioners generally are actively working to help rebuild a sense of connection and community. Interestingly, very few of the poets or the prose writers who submitted work to this issue of *Meniscus* explicitly referenced the pandemic; and it seemed to us that this is aligned with much of the creative work produced since February 2020: rather than mulling over the disaster, artists are presenting material that evokes memories of previous times, or images of what might be.

We hope you enjoy the work in this issue of *Meniscus* as much as we did. They range from mood pieces through image-rich language, to experimentally playful, to thoughtful realism. They show a sense of what we can do with the material of our artform: words, phrasing, syntax. Which reminds us of the novelist Siri Hustvedt saying, during one of the *Write America* episodes (another creative response to COVID lockdowns), ‘**When I read a poem I understand what the English language can do**’. And when we read poems and prose, we see the capacity of language,

story and thought to construct a way of seeing and living in the world  
that makes it endurable—and more; it makes it lovely.

Deb Wain and Jen Webb  
For the *Meniscus* Editors

## FLUTTERBLOWN

Adam Stokell

Strap two kites to a ? and launch  
over unbuttered ground,  
summerbrawn, a cringe of grass  
complaining of thermals.

Mind, only flutterblown  
attendance may be danced,  
a fluky pirouette, till the nib  
brushes past with a few points

imparted, already wondering  
nexts, a short somersault west,  
where a correa breaks on the rocks,  
a bush pea's yellow flares.

## THE POOL

Amber Moffat

The pool at Bev and Adam's is different now. It's green, almost glowing. The sun is shining but Bev has closed the blinds so it's dark in the lounge room, surprisingly cold. The couch is covered in piles of clothes and toys — the sprouting jumble has knocked one of the vertical blinds loose. It's through this gap that I catch a glimpse of the pool, see it's blooming.

My daughter nearly drowned in this pool. It was just after Bev and Adam had bought the house and they were having a BBQ. They had taken down the old seventies-style fence. They said it was ugly. They were going to redo the whole backyard, get it professionally landscaped. Adam was going to build a cubby house, dig in a veggie patch.

My husband Tristan heard the splash. He was the one who found our four-year-old face-down in the water. By the time I arrived, he was in the pool with her, holding her upright, saved. But it's as if I saw her floating there too, just from his description of it: floral dress billowing, hair spreading like ink. The terrible image is one we must bear together.

I want to go outside to the pool, perhaps dip my foot in the water, examine the lacy detail of the algae. But Bev has closed the blinds against the backyard. I know she doesn't want anyone out there looking at the overgrown lawn, the green pool. Besides, there is so much to do in here.

Bev has to get everything she needs out of the house this weekend. Adam will be back on Monday. He has a good roster now, more family-friendly. They had hoped it would help, but Bev said it's worse. When Adam is home, he has time to track her every movement, constantly checking her phone's location, sending increasingly paranoid messages, threats. She is worried she'll lose her job because he's started turning up at the surgery several times a day, wild-eyed and questioning.

I help Bev stuff towels and sheets into bin bags. I make the kids sandwiches and when they're out of earshot, go through the steps in the plan again. But Bev is refilling her glass with an unsteady hand, and I can see her eyes are somewhere else. Twenty minutes ago she'd taken a smiling selfie with the kids for Adam. He'd asked for it. She holds up her phone to show me his reply, 'Those aren't the right earrings, you dumb bitch.'

Bev puts her head in her hands, rib cage shuddering. I put my arm round her shoulders, turn to look through the gap in the blinds. The sun is beating down on the pool now. It's luminous. I think of Tristan holding our daughter, his face broken with fear. Bev moans, grasps handfuls of her own hair. I keep my eyes locked on the pool, say softly, 'Let's go outside now.'

## ARARAT'S ANTIQUES

Amelia Walker

*written on Djab Wurrung land*

'I get more excited about sourcing the stuff than selling it on,'  
the Ararat antique dealer enthuses. 'These objects, they're all of them stories. Ghosts.  
To have them in my shop is to sit a while with those stories, to be haunted, willingly,  
by the people who owned these things, the lives they led. It's to grasp  
at all that past, how it folds and unfolds inside our now, how it spills  
towards futures ...'

Next he describes a window, salvaged from old McDonald's  
—the town bakery, long before those neon arches rose to compete with church spires  
and chimneys towering bleakly brickish over this once-golden, dug-out town.  
'It was smashed to smithereens, that window, but I glued it back, piece by piece.  
Took months, but I got it—the whole thing, complete, so fascinating to look at,  
though impossible to see through, least not clearly, like shower glass, y'know?'

Later I sit in the park, gazing downhill at a lake filled with introduced birds  
and upwards towards the old Aradale Asylum, presiding square and grey.  
Tourist brochures say it's haunted. To me, the building itself seems a ghost  
—part of a past that can't die, a reminder of things simultaneously so easy  
and impossible to forget. The manicured lawn itches. Questions swarm:  
*How can sprinklers be running at midday during drought and bushfire season?*  
*Why is this town, miles from anywhere tropical, so crammed with palm trees?*  
*What did they replace? Is it just greed, or does something in gold itself cause insanity?*  
Ararat, to me, is a glued-together window, except this one is neither complete  
nor just one window. It's countless shards, branching pasts pushed together,  
forced to fit: fascinating to look at, impossible to see through, at least clearly.

## SHELTER

Angela Costi

We are the travellers of small steps  
wearing pyjamas and slippers  
to greet each room as if it were a country  
encountered from a plane flight,  
*konnichiwa* to the space called Living  
*ola* to the island called Kitchen  
*ni hao* to the mattress of pent up dreams,  
in the study there is the desk  
holding geography's memory,  
*salve, kalimera*, take me with you.

My mother will be lighting her candles  
on her bench-top to create her church,  
my father will shuffle with his frame  
to the chair on the porch with the vista  
of his twelve-year-old eyes diving  
for sea sponges from an unsteady pier.

This space termed *Home*  
is a document of journey  
as we come to know the walls as trees  
we long to climb,  
the doors to close or open  
depending on altitude and inclement,  
the ceiling will seem higher than Everest,  
from the carpet we see the grit  
of hiking through jungle.

And there, in the lonely corner  
is the blue rug to sit on and breathe in  
the smell of the ocean calling its waves  
to sweep our dust.

This poem was awarded second place tied in the Meniscus Poetry Award 2020, University of Canberra, Poetry on the Move festival. An earlier version was published by *Eureka Street* (2020), and it will be included in Angela's new collection, *An Embroidery of Old Maps and New*, to be published by Spinifex in 2021.

## HOPE

Anne Di Lauro

*'Hope' is the thing with feathers ...* Emily Dickinson

Hope sits patient by the window, hollowed out of thought.  
Hope helium-hovers in the icy air above the fray.  
And when at last the horseman's happy news is brought  
Hope hotly melts and rains down tears of joy.

## LINES COMPOSED ON GONZALES HILL

Anne Di Lauro

*(Victoria, BC. September 2019)*

Climbing the hill,  
and turning to view  
the road behind,  
I see  
only a leaf  
blown by the wind,  
rising on gusts,  
tumbling and twisting,  
falling, drawn  
now here, now there. Regret  
that like the leaf  
I had no plan,  
can see no meaning.  
Perhaps I need to climb a higher hill.

## TRIBUTE

Claire Watson

*for Gerard Manley Hopkins*

Your rhythm slammed a chord I had not played,  
that had lain dormant; released a jammed note.  
It set free a shout buried deep in my throat  
since I walked in wonder through childhood days  
among the nodding flowers who bowed to pray,  
and found God's glory in every scattered mote  
of quartz, and vein of leaf. Your verse smote  
the rock and words gushed, like water from clay.  
We all from masters our first, frail copies make;  
with quivering hands we forge another's name  
until to our veiled and vivid inscape we awake,  
then city lights catch fire, slick roads draw flame,  
and the ocean splinters into sunlit gilded flakes  
as we surf the lasting waves of our mentor's fame.

## THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOURS

D.A. Hosek

### Procrastination

It can wait, it's already late, so what's another day, another week, another month? And who's to say that it would have made a difference for it to have been done on time?

It can be anything and, in the end, it is everything. It is the oil change light on the car but what's the point of changing the oil? It is the growing pile of mail by the front door, unopened bills spilling onto the living room carpet from the table where each day's delivery is tossed and ignored. It is the dirty dishes cluttering every surface of the kitchen. Dishes aren't that important once cooking has been abandoned in favour of microwave dinners and then, once the silverware has run out, sacks of take-out food with their own plastic cutlery. It is the phone calls that should be made to bosses (who are perhaps ex-bosses now), friends, family.

But starting is so daunting and there's always something else to do. Television shows to watch, websites to visit, books to move from shelf to shelf in anticipation of time spent reading that never comes. Lists are made, prioritised, categorised, marginalised and ignored.

Garbage goes out, but only out of necessity. The bin in the kitchen is overflowing onto the floor nearby. It's the smaller bags filled with Styrofoam takeout containers, napkins, food scraps, and sporks that make it to the alley, but only because otherwise sleeping on the sofa would be impossible. The bed is covered with piles of dirty laundry and wouldn't be a place of comfort even if it weren't. Too many memories. Eventually, laundry must be done, but that day can be postponed with the purchase of a few more packages of socks, underwear, and t-shirts.

### Social Isolation

Turning off the phone doesn't prevent callers from leaving voice mails. At least not until the phone company's pre-determined mailbox size has been filled. But it's not like anyone calls anymore. Some contacts are unavoidable, the lady behind the counter at the Chinese take-out place must be encountered, but her poor English makes these transactions brief and direct: 'Orange chicken, Kung-Pao chicken, brown rice, medium Coke. Ten-forty-seven.'

The supermarket has automated checkout lines now. It is vital to display unhesitating competence as a prophylactic against offers of assistance from the lonely clerk overseeing all six self-checkout stations. She is a people person, eager to discuss the merits of one brand of frozen dinner over another or to inquire about what the Asian pears that she's never had the nerve to try taste like. It's a mystery why people never seem to notice when their attention is undesirable. Perhaps it is this insensitivity to the negative signals of others that make being a people person possible.

### Dangerous sexual practices

She calls herself 'Jami'. She spells it out to make certain that there was no doubt that there is no e at the end, as if she were going to be paid by cheque rather than a wad of damp twenties. Her hair is brittle from too many cheap dye jobs meant to turn it the colour of new pennies. She has shaved her pubic hair in an attempt to hide her true hair colour but neglected to do anything about her dark brown eyebrows.

Jami's eyes are a light brown, almost orange, flecked with green and yellow. Unlike the rest of her, they retain a pure and innocent beauty, but that's true of everyone's eyes. Dental hygienists, wearing masks that hide all but their eyes while they peer into their patients' mouths, are doubtless

the source of countless unrequited infatuations. Fortunately for them, their work environment is uncondusive to romantic encounters.

Jami's specialty is a hand job and a feel for \$40. It's a sexual practice well-adapted for automotive encounters as both participants can remain in a normal sitting position, eyes ahead while their arms cross on their way to an encounter with the other's genitals. The risk of sexually transmitted disease is low. Pregnancy is no longer a concern for Jami. A shoddy abortion early in her career on the streets left her sterile. Disease on the other hand—Jami insists she's clean and that she wants to stay that way, but something rings false in how she says this.

For \$100, Jami will give a blow job, but it's clear that she'd rather settle for the easier \$40. Vaginal intercourse will run \$200 and anal \$400. Again, she will push for the \$40 option as much as possible. For either kind of sex, she insists on removing only the panties beneath her skirt and nothing more. She'll push away the hands of any customer who attempts to caress her tits, but only once. She is aware that for \$200 she has sold off some of her rights to bodily autonomy. Not that she'd ever use the words 'bodily autonomy'. She'd say, 'Fine, for two bills, rub my tits if you must, just make sure your dick stays inside the fucking condom.'

Taking the dick out of the fucking condom is a flat \$1000 on top of everything else. She's never had anyone offer to pay that. Most of her customers are \$40 johns. She is always a little afraid of anyone who will spend more than that, thinking (correctly) that anyone who would lay out that kind of cash wouldn't be cruising the streets in her part of town and if they were, they would be just as likely to beat her up and take back the cash plus anything else she had on her after raping her. Jami knows this from hard experience.

A \$40 hand job and a feel it is, then.

## Self-mutilation

The cutting is its own reward. The pain, the scars, the blood, all irrefutable proof of existence, of life, of justified punishment. The first cuts are shallow, tentative, just breaking the skin, tentative steps on the road to destruction. The marks they leave are little more than the scratches of a playful kitten, lines of blood that vanish into nothingness with time.

Tattoos and piercings can never be satisfying enough. Perhaps in a time when they would have been considered dangerously outré they might have served the purpose but in the twenty-first century, a tattooed shoulder or a pierced cheek is just another form of self-expression and self-expression is not what's desired.

Next are the cuts that leave lines, a network of crosshatches on the outside of each arm, an array of scars that divide the dark arm hairs into the simulacrum of a suburban street grid. Long sleeves become a necessity. No one would ever be so bold as to ask directly about the scars, but the furtive glances downward are unmistakable. And after that, eye contact is denied; the encounter can only be brought to an awkward conclusion as if the scars might somehow be transmitted through casual contact.

Finally comes the inside of the arm. The pain is different, and the danger is greater. Here the veins and arteries lie closer to the surface. One misjudged cut with the knife could lead to an irreversible release of blood. There is no way to feel more alive. It's more stimulating than any encounter with another person could be, even sex. One day, perhaps, this could be the end of life but, until that day, this cutting is the apex of life.

## Overspending

Some call it 'retail therapy'. After all, there's nothing to lift the mood like buying a little treat, whether it's a few album downloads from iTunes or some books from Amazon or some new clothes or a new stereo or a new computer or perhaps a car.

OK, maybe not the car. With the remaining credit on the credit card there's not enough available to use it to buy a car. But ten grand of free credit on the Visa can go an awfully long way.

## Overeating

The joy of stuff is transient. And if joy is to be transient perhaps the stuff should be too. So much food can be had for so little in America, the land of plenty, the land of the Denny's Grand Slam breakfast and burritos as big as your head and 3000-calorie dinners at The Cheesecake Factory. Eating alone in a restaurant may be demoralising, but at least the only judgment comes from strangers.

## Body neglect

The weight accumulates but never mind. The loss of energy makes it easier to stay at home, perhaps order a pizza. Staying inside also means it's easier to avoid the isolated time of self-reflection in the shower, time that can be spent with television or the internet or any of a thousand other distractions. And if the clothes don't fit anymore, there's always Amazon—the next size up delivered to the door.

## Self-loathing

This is not a lifestyle to be proud of. The only possible reaction is disgust. It's like encountering the festering corpse of a rat covered with maggots.

## Fasting and binging.

It's not that difficult to contemplate fasting. As the credit card balances grow dangerously close to their respective credit limits, self-soothing with a \$30 meal at a table for one becomes less practical.

But giving up eating is hard. Each period of not eating is followed by a gluttonous feast of cheap food. There's a reason there are so many homeless people huddled in the booths at Taco Bell. A few dollars can buy a lot of calories, even more when the free refills at the soda machine are taken into account. And at the supermarket, a discovery: pasta is a fraction of the price of the mainstream brands in the Mexican foods aisle. Perhaps it lacks some safety inspection or contains a carcinogenic additive illegal in the United States. No matter, at sixty-nine cents for a one-pound bag, it's an even better deal than Taco Bell.

## Staying up all night

Work is no longer a factor, so there's no reason to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Overnight television has its own particular rhythms and content. Reruns of television shows that had no audience on their first run, infomercials for products of dubious quality and utility, two-hour news shows acting as a training ground for a future generation of primetime news anchors.

The night has an unrivalled stillness. The twenty-four-hour grocery store is nearly abandoned, the hum of the freezers competing with the soft drone of inoffensive instrumental music for the title of the loudest

sound to be heard. Walking the streets reveals a quiet punctuated by the occasional bark of a dog in the distance or a passing car. The suburban world is inherently diurnal.

## Drinking alcohol

There's a reason the supermarket is able to sell the awful-tasting beers and wines that populate the lower shelves of the beverage section: they're cheap. And flavour is not a concern when the goal is intoxication. After the fourth drink there's not a whole lot of tasting happening anyway so starting fast gets past the initial bad taste.

The secret is to pace the drinking to keep a numbing buzz without crossing over into full-fledged drunkenness which will invariably end with vomiting or unconsciousness followed by an unenviable headache. Wine apparently works best at achieving this level of dissociation.

## Taking drugs

Narcotics are a logical next step in quashing the unbearable pain of consciousness. But suburban life is not conducive to knowing where to buy drugs. The city streets are the obvious place to look, but where? Jami would know. It's information that she's willing to impart for a price. \$40 and she'll throw in a round of mutual masturbation.

Her dealer is a rat-faced man with a patchy beard and eyes that never stay still. He offers a small zip-lock bag of white powder that Jami warns is probably mostly, if not entirely, baking soda. A prescription jar contains dried green leaves, highest quality sensimilla, he says, but his price is too high. Another jar is offered. More stems and seeds, he says, but still potent and if you cut it with oregano it will last longer. The price is higher than the on-line article in the *Washington Post* claimed it would be, but sixty dollars for two vials completes the deal. Each vial still has the name of the

straw buyer who presented a prescription obtained on site at a low-rent medical marijuana dispensary one state over. The dealer is kind enough to throw in a set of rolling papers which Jami has offered to demonstrate how to use. Her slender fingers gently spread a pinch of the marijuana, dark green on dirty white. She licks the edge of the paper and pinches it short into a small simulacrum of a cigarette and with an alligator clip holds it to her lips, lights it and inhales a mouthful of the sweet smoke before passing it over. She never says so, but there's a tacit assumption that she will share in the consumption of the joint as an additional payment for her services.

The dissociation from the marijuana high is different from a wine-based drunkenness. Everything feels calm without the fuzziness of the alcoholic stupor. Things feel clearer, more defined, more real, more threatening. Driving home solo in the car is freedom and regret.

A visit to the twenty-four-hour grocery store reveals that the credit cards are over the limit. The last of the cash buys cheap boxes of cookies. Things must be sold.

## Attempting suicide

The search is on in the pharmacy aisle of the twenty-four-hour supermarket to find something that could be fatal for forty dollars. Non-prescription sleep aids seem the best option. Forty dollars and change buys a bottle of sixty pills consumed in a grim parade of one tablet after another leading to a dreamless sleep followed by a painful awakening on the living room floor, a sharp throbbing behind the temple, a dry mouth, a pool of vomit on the carpet.

### *Cupio dissolvi*

From the Latin text of the Vulgate, literally meaning, 'I wish to be dissolved'. To a theologian, these words are evocative of the apostle Paul, but they can also be given a plainer secular sense, the 'I just want to disappear' of a depressive mood. The answer doesn't matter and yet a voice cries out why, why, why to the rhythm of head and wall colliding with increasing force.

### MOUNTAIN MOONS

#### Dani Netherclift

1.  
These brassy crescent moons hang  
from lobes and I am sky the night
  
2.  
lighter for the mild fatness of the real following  
Mars its hidden saltwater stores
  
3.  
tears rivers and oceans, all that  
brine under cover of ice She aligns
  
4.  
with the moon who knows?  
what whispers are exchanged about days-
  
5.  
to-come sorrows we cannot fathom  
being grounded
  
6.  
even if we are measured by  
some parts stars, some portion water
  
7.  
composed otherwise of ancient  
memories swimming

8.  
seas phosphorescent  
with unspeakable

9.  
loss but what can the moon care  
of leaving? that face impossibly

10.  
sad  
stares mutely empty-eyed

11.  
blinking past the downward fringe of blue  
mountain ranges lulling

12.  
the evening down 'til  
night swings back to the tissue thin

13.  
tremor of  
blankness days growing longer

14.  
the pull of gravity & sun sets  
red as glittering Mars tilting

15.  
into wings the world plummets

dead-weighted

16.  
we fall  
(... *we all fall down.*)

## IN BED WITH \_\_\_\_\_

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé

*Pick it up, you said, read it, no questions about who loved first.*  
Your voice was insistent, half-bitter, even aggressive.  
But it was shock really, against your own casuistry.  
That an author wouldn't care much for the false argument.  
*Do the years really show, write the tiredness on my face?*  
Have I really stopped caring about what idiom can do and undo?  
Truth is: I expected this to happen earlier, a sense of displacement.  
The shifting of desire, so altered as to relieve one of all sentiment.  
The idea of sentimentality as undesirable has permeated everything.  
It taints, stains everything it touches, you recognise it now.  
Like acid dye, its sheen over everything, discoloured silk and wool.  
It's like the long sheath of cotton, made to drape over a hearse.  
It's a run of flannel, not as wide a sheet, as if to make a smaller bed.  
The large screen on the wall flickers its fluorescence, a sparking plug.  
It's on, just for its low light, dim and unintrusive, as if incidental.  
Everything today seems just as casual, accidental, unexpected even.  
But also fortuitous, as if happiness gave up a bit of itself, just for us.  
In this room, where you tell me we were meant to meet all along.  
More sophistries, as your quasi-relativist priest cousin would say.  
Easter is a nice example of a moveable feast; *so is supper with you.*  
*Here's your lunch poem*, about Aquinas's take on faith and reason.  
What to make of problem and authority, that dual knot and tangle?  
You are naked, wrapped in this cloth, a gown rising up to your chest.  
You drop the cloth, to let me see your full body in the dim light.  
I trace the shape of your torso, hip to shoulder, with both my hands.  
You rub yourself, hard against my body, wanting to feel everything.  
Everything is what this feels like, each quoin another pressed angle.

The dissolution of all inhibition, and there's no hesitation.  
No questions about what this tincture is, or how long we will last.  
No questions about who we've slept with, what we think of love.

This poem was awarded first place in the Meniscus Poetry Award 2020, University of Canberra, Poetry on the Move festival.

## INTIMACY

Dominic Symes

sometimes you get it reading Rilke

the small glimmer of sunlight  
from the window  
which rests  
between your neck and the pillow

how our fault-ridden bodies  
are supposed to shed, regrow and forget

how we both sleep better after sex  
but we're both too tired to initiate

you can tell when a reference is second hand  
in a personal essay  
I read it when I was reading such & such

like the haircut changes the shape of your face  
the humidity the quality of your skin

now soft to touch  
but strong, firm, young

some letters he wrote just to say  
sorry for not writing sooner  
there was this war I got held up in

## MUSHROOMS

Dominique Hecq

You never know with dehydrated mushrooms. Soon, you have a sponge on your hands that takes on all the flavours of the stock of desire. Quick, you secure the door of your fiction room so the day may blow right through, and the beat of music like a thumping of metal garbage bin crashes down on it. You follow it down the steps. In the yard she lies on a blanket of pulsing yellow with the sun on her pale cheek. Your watch hurries you and words come out of your mouth like scabs. She lies with her back baking in sunlight, her face buried in her arms, a book and an hourglass at her side on a hot pink top she has peeled off, revealing part of her armour. You think of a Madonna outfit, but realise its straps are made of fairy floss. She lifts her face out of her arms, mumbling something you fail to hear. Then she modestly blanks the sides of herself by stiffening her arms beside her torso. She turns her face away from you, her hair tossed over her neck like a question mark. You pick up the hourglass and wipe your feet on the book. Flickering light catches your step.

## CURSE

Dominique Hecq

Cracks across the ceiling split apart like the map of a river delta. Deep greens above the blond shock of hair are trees swaying on the riverbank. Their trunks are carved of lines alive and they spread their dark roots beneath the ship of fools as though ready to lift it aloft. The edges of the poster are frayed; the top corner is creased and stained it seems, and at the left-hand bottom corner it has curled so that you might reach over your arm to press it aright with your thumb if you could muster the courage. Water might then flow over the tiles, grow into a torrent and engulf you. Oh, but for the smell of frangipani and wattle.

Memory's too much unshuttered exposure to obsolescence. Outside the sandman rakes pebbles and people break seashells on the pavement, slowly turning the suburbs into littered beaches. The sun is petrified lapis lazuli. The clouds unfold their petals where parks blossom like flying carpets. Flowers and bees shine under the sky's vault. Clumps of violets rain on the earth twinkling like precious stones. A soldier plays the harp. Another drinks from a golden cup. A young man makes stirrups with his palms and lifts his beloved up onto Pegasus. A fickle old man's heart shatters as his son blows his own trumpet and little children scatter like stones on the path. A woman kneels, counting on her fingers grains of salt that were her tears. Across from the billabong, Narcissus has fallen asleep. Suddenly I hear an echo and feel your glance flying toward me.

## WAVES

Donna Pucciani

not of water but memory  
the foam lick of youth  
a vanished spray

as the May morning  
blooms light green  
in the yellow sun of now

awaiting tomorrow's rain  
and tulip petals open  
in lollipop colours

to the impossibly blue sky  
of today's death embracing  
the elderly the meat-packers

the delivery drivers  
the grocery clerks  
with their worn smiles

behind masks and plexiglass  
strap-hangers on the subway  
nurses peeling off scrubs at night

showering before  
they check the children  
asleep in their beds

dreams ascending  
in the light of tomorrow  
in the soul of a grandmother

cautiously taking  
a morning walk among  
the sleeping houses

she waves to a faded moon  
never having known a time  
quite like this

## MUSEO MORANDI

Edward Caruso

When I grow bare  
and take from shadow  
what light cannot give

in this exhibition space,  
should anyone ask of images  
that come to light

a mortar and pestle on a plain table,  
the rounded edge of a white bowl

I'll insist we pull up a chair,  
listen for the ticking of clocks  
as many who know little  
of shade or faded colours enter.

Giorgio's easel and palette  
long ago in view as if he'd return shortly,  
paintings of elongated bottles, empty cups & jugs,  
never will they take the place  
of the hidden worlds they depict.

Curved outlines & extended shadows.  
To possess this space  
as if contemplation could reveal  
Giorgio's breath among the silence of brushstrokes  
that shaped each pitcher.

The belongings of those present in each rendering  
as we touch these vessels with our gaze.

## RED CARNATION

Georgia Rose Phillips

The muddied outline of the second-hand car yard across the road hid behind blotches of water, dripping down the car windscreen. I waited for you in a backstreet by the airport as the rain thickened into a gauze over my view. A vandalised redbrick house sat sleepily on the opposite street corner. A demolition notice hung limply off the grey wire fence that framed the perimeter of the dying lawn. The light breeze made the laminated sheet rattle against the wire as I wondered if the family who had given up their home to developers had driven past and seen it like this.

It was a cool winter morning. My eyes watered and my nose ran as I watched the drag of the windscreen wiper failing to meet the rain's growing intensity. There were no characters in the car yard across the street because it was functional rather than decorative. I had been collecting these phrases of late. Expressions that are harsh with contradiction. Their meaning magnified by their oppositional energy. When I read them, I felt the words press away from one another on the page like two north facing compasses.

I had brought Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* to read while waiting for your plane to land. This had been an optimistic thing to do. I had been having difficulty focusing of late and had conveniently ignored the idea that this had any connection to your absence. This would have been a level of self-awareness I was incapable of at this stage of the draft. I had been carrying an uneasiness within me. One which made writing difficult. Then, I realised, it was not so much the act of writing that had become cumbersome, but rather the process of appreciating what I had left on the page whilst harbouring this malaise. The words spilt as always, my appreciation, however, had halted.

I let my protagonist go when I had been caught beneath this interminable feeling. I had not realised that I was shedding you until I came to my senses. When I arrived at them you were in Berlin. Calling. Calling to remind me what I had given up on. What I had not been able to work through. I saw what eluded me in the bluish glow of a smartphone screen, the pain sharp like irony.

You had said, it is cold here, sleeping in an empty bed, without language to ignite your body. You extended the olive branch like you were not even vaguely aware that you were fictive. Then, you had tried to negotiate coming back. You said that, with patience, we will find the right rhythm as you carried on like the character I had in mind for you: stubborn and restless. A symbol for something larger and unreconciled that unsettled the unity of the story. I ignored your talk of coming back.

I ran my index finger around the leather coating of the steering wheel to push away the thought of you. A car seemed like a good place to begin a narrative. It was full of possibility. A symbol of both departure and arrival. A parked car was stagnant—neither coming nor going. A steering wheel, dense with autonomy. The stitched leather trim prickled beneath my fingertips and stirred the jaunting images of cows. I saw the starved brown bodies dragged across the backstreets of Agra. I saw them herded into a pack as a group of men, that glistened with sweat, prepared to skin them alive. In a quick succession I saw the harrowed eyes, the jut of famished ribs, and the swirling terracotta dust that was cut by the deep groan of a wounded cow.

I stopped touching the steering wheel and the image's grip loosened. You had spoken about the smoke stains on your last call, the bullet holes left in the buildings to remind the city of the horrors of war. The Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities had modern glass atriums on top of courtyards, but the walls still bore their scars, you said—touching your forearm as if you had felt the pain on your own skin. You described the Reichstag covered in the sprawl of Cyrillic graffiti left

by Soviet Soldiers. This was beautiful to you until someone translated the crude messages above their names.

The city had inspired your belief in the capacity for forgiveness.

Please, you had said. I would like another chance.

I had been frazzled by your immediacy, and your capacity for empathy. Then, I changed the topic abruptly when I realised that my numbness had been peeled back by the scrape of your voice. Google told me that you were 16,084 kms away from my writing table. It drew a virtual line that tethered you to me like an umbilical cord. A red string threaded through Singapore, Southern India, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Czechoslovakia. I imagined our words travelling along this path. I saw them passing through and changing languages across each new border. The phrases moulded, and remoulded, by each new culture's customs and histories. It no longer seemed like a relatively safe distance in which to dispel a character I had been tired of working and reworking.

You insisted on calling.

At night, your face would light up on my smartphone screen, and I would debate the virtues of answering and not-answering. It seemed benign in the beginning. Harmless to let you exist in the folds of imagination. Your renewed distance made it feel safe. I liked the new arrangement of the image of you. You sat before a hanging sheet of geometric architecture that was as still as a desktop background. Its cement austerity contrasted with the familiar warmth of your babyish face that made you look younger than you were. You were nursing a cup of steaming coffee that you had adopted the name Americano for. The low-afternoon sun slanted in a triangle down your cheek.

As the conversation pressed on, an oblong shadow dipped into and unfolded as it doubled over your rectangular brown throat. It had seemed absurd that it could be night-time here, and afternoon there. It gave the impression of you calling from a different world, one ethereal and always

bathed in afternoon light. I ignored the echoes of the world around me. The croak of cicadas. The delighted shrieks of the neighbour's small children in the bathtub as you catalogued the movements of your day to me like a diarist.

You spoke of Käthe Kollwitz's sculpture, Pietà, in the Neue Wache. You had drawn a sketch of it in black biro. You lifted it towards the camera to show me the outline of a woman cradling her dead son.

He is wrapped in a soldier's uniform, you said. It hides the man he is. You accentuated the word man like it was a new word. One that you had only just discovered the meaning of and were still finding its correct place in the hierarchy of a sentence.

The order of history, you had said, as you pressed the sketch closer to the camera as it went from blurred to in-focus.

There had been something raw about the offering of your drawing. It came from a place of pure feeling which seemed to allow it to transcend the state of being simply bad or good. Your innocence caught me off-guard, again. The childishness of the drawing. It had been like you were discovering the violence of the world for the first time and because you were only just becoming acquainted with it, you were still able to feel the full impact of the horror. Then, you continued to catalogue buildings, moments, details about the second-hand film camera you purchased in Sprengelkiez. You liked the name of the store, Safelight Berlin. You liked that the analogue camera you purchased was older than you—that it had seen things that you could only imagine seeing. You thought you had purchased these things with it. Its memory. History. €154, you said. To buy a semblance of something irretrievable. You thought you could sense the camera's wisdom; its learned way of reading the world.

As you continued to recite your visit to the camera store, my mind wandered to the vague memory of driving you to the airport. I saw the dark outline of your hair in my peripheral vision. You were in the

passenger seat playing with the air-conditioning vents. The pink tips of your fingers tilted them down. Tilted them up. Tilted them away.

These are awful, you said. They make my eyes water. Who designed these?

You looked across at me like I knew the answer to everything.

I went to Alexanderplatz which was named after the Russian Tsar Alexander I. It was larger than I imagined.

As you spoke, I saw the road unfold beneath the grey layer of morning that sat like a stove-lid on top of the yawning stretch of the airport. An approaching speck in the sky grew into a small white bullet gliding towards us; pointed and graceful. I wondered if this is what it felt like to spot a missile. To see the end of something and to understand that everything exists in a shadow of inevitability.

The aircon is too cold, you spat. As you fiddled frenetically. Unsettled.

The missile grew into the roaring outline of a plane. As it passed over us it made the car quiver, and we were momentarily consumed by its shadow. The indigo denim outline of your thighs darkened into a nondescript blur of navy and I had understood then, I was losing you. The outlines of the objects that filled the narrow space between us had been muted and obscured. The only thing left visible had been the time on the dash in tangerine glow.

The time is wrong, you said, as you noticed its sudden brightness. Part of me had fastened reflexively and waited for an explosion. I braced myself for the burst of flames. The wave of heat and light. The flying mechanical detritus. The pillowing black smoke.

I went to the Holocaust-Mahnmal. It was a huge structure of 2,711 stelae and when I moved between them, I felt as if I lost something—

The white wing of an aeroplane dipped into plain sight beyond your passenger window. Its arm severed the panel of grass that lined the runway, diagonally. The roar of the engine echoed a high-pitched mechanical howl as we both glanced at the strange and unsure tilting motions of an aeroplane landing.

I am afraid of flying, you snapped into the gap in conversation between us that had been swallowed by thought. Your features had softened beneath the departing light and made you look more naïve than normal. Your already large eyes were enlarged by my empathy. I remained silent as we pressed towards the white half-moon shapes of buildings that hovered beyond the tarmac.

When I moved between the stelae, I lost my sense of where I was. A sense of who I am. Of how to relate to the world around me—

A sleek navy car snuck past us and overtook us. You tried to tell them that there is a speed camera at the end of the tunnel we had entered, ignoring your own lack of omniscience. They were not speeding—I had slowed down, I thought, as I remembered how the guilt magnified as we crept towards the airport. It had seemed odd that I had driven you, in my car, buckled beneath the seatbelt. It had crushed your shirt and upset you. I had told you to relax, everyone looks creased on an aeroplane—if it wasn't sleeplessness, it was grief, or nerves about leaving somewhere or arriving somewhere new.

You had looked real and objective. All firm angles and flesh, jittery in your unease. The warmth of your breath had fogged the glass. You smelt like peppermint. You were addicted to XXX mints. You had found them in my pantry and were astounded that food could taste so explosive. I had to explain to you that they are not a snack but a breath freshener; if you eat too many, they will make you sick.

Really? You had asked, tilting the cylinder to read the ingredients on the back, like you understood the obscure chemical names.

You changed the music again, flicking between the channels as you said, I do not understand how people enjoy this. Listening without seeing. Being talked at and not being able to talk to. It is totalitarian, don't you think?

Then we fell into an old rhythm. An easy flow of conversation as I turned down the music and eased off the accelerator. Books. Music. History. Politics. Your excitement about Berlin was underlined by a quiet sombreness. Beneath the layer of exchanged words, I had psychologically prepared to deliver you to the repository of adventure, indefinitely.

Then, I had been telling you that every time I finish a story, there is a moment before beginning the next one, where I contemplate the idea that I have arrived at the end of my creativity—that it has a fuse.

You had looked disapprovingly at me.

That's stupid, you said plainly.

The Fernsehturm looked like a giant syringe on the skyline. Do you remember the night we watched *Bladerunner 2049*? You cried when his holographic AI girlfriend Joi died—she wasn't even real... and you cried—

As we drove up the ramp towards the departure bay, I watched you fiddle with the zip on your jacket as I pulled into the curb. Your body sunk towards me when the car stopped. Then your mind caught you and pulled you back as I pulled the keys from the ignition. As I walked to the curb side, your right arm fished for your sports bag that was half empty. It was as if you had not fully processed that you were leaving. I watched the panic thread through your features as you noticed me staring at your bag.

Travelling light, I said casually.

You know me, you said, and I winced.

I should have packed for you, but you had been doing this thing of late. Exorcising your own sense of autonomy. Transcending your fragmented beginnings into something whole and cohesive, rather than assembled.

You hugged me quickly. Brotherly. Gently rubbing the space between my shoulder blades as you clenched me too tightly with your other arm.

Then, I had watched you walk towards the whirring glass doors that opened and closed. They swallowed your broad shoulders and the plain black cotton outline of your T-shirt. As I stood there, I watched your dark silhouette blur into a nondescript shadow. It melted into a vague puddle of colour beyond the glass. My eyes spasmed in their attempt to retrieve the outline of you.

A short rotund body dressed in a fluorescent vest came into my line of sight, waving. He was wearing a maroon hat with bevelled sweat stains that looked like drying blood.

Ma'm that's enough fuh now, time to move on. You're not meant to leave the vehicle unattended, he said, as he gestured at me with his traffic baton, frenetic like an orchestra conductor.

Now movalong, willya, you're not meant to leave yer vehicle unattended. He enunciated the word unattended like he had read it in a training manual and decided it was superior to all other words.

Movahlong, maddum.

I drove away from the airport into a morning swathed in a familiar feeling. The beginning of a sheath of time that enclosed itself over everything else. It would pass through me like a mist and exterminate my desire for anything. The things I once loved became vague and unfamiliar. When I moved through it, I could not remember specifics behind the gauzy absence of feeling. I could only recall the silhouette of what happened. The objective facts without the nuance. The books. The feelings I had towards them, and about them. What I wanted to take from them. What they took from me.

July passed through with you in Berlin. It was a montage of grey days and the intermittent thrum of rain falling. In the evenings I turned off the white 5G tower that loomed like a dystopian prop in the corner of my living room. In the mornings, I watched the season broaden and settle over the park from my apartment window. The leaves turned from a dry gold to an effervescent green as spring peeled back the hanging sheet of grey like slowly turning the page of a book. I read gluttonously and began to feel the sentences slouch towards a new meaning. I took breaks from my writing to go to the window at lunch to see the children playing in their canary yellow uniforms at the school perched beside the park. The smallness of their frames and the uninhibitedness of their delight gave the world beyond the window a hint of possibility. There was a glimpse of something that threatened to spill into the vague outline of a truth. The suggestion of wonder gave me permission to begin again.

## ASHRAM ON THE GANGES IN THREE PARTS

### Helen Cushing

#### Arrival

I arrive in the stillness of a winter's afternoon, alone. The ashram is spacious, hushed, the great foyer of the main building is empty.

Soft words are spoken, simple greetings exchanged, forms filled out, business completed. Then, key in hand, I enter the lift. It is old and familiar. I clank the iron doors shut, press the 4th floor button and we begin to gently rise, the lift and I. We rattle to a halt; I push open those cage-like doors and step out into the silence of white marble. I am the only sound—footsteps, breath, heartbeat, the dragging of luggage.

In Room 402 there are three beds. One is made up. There is no extra thing in here, except me. I am the extra thing, the movement, the sound, the thoughts. I unpack—there is a roomy cupboard. Everything goes into it except an orange scarf, my malas, and photos of my guru. I make up a puja table, a little shrine, spreading the scarf carefully. I arrange the photos. His gaze is open, the smile very soft. The malas rest beside the photos. I know the room will not remain this pure, but for now it is. And so, the osmosis begins.

I seem to be alone on that floor. The bathrooms are clean and deserted. I have all the cold taps and buckets to myself. It is later, when I go to a bathroom somewhere else which has a mirror, that I realise their absence on the 4th floor. It's a surprise to see myself, and seeing the reflection disturbs something subtle that had been content in its isolation. I go from that bathroom, better understanding the problem of mirrors.

On the verandas the clothes lines are hung with breezy geru clothing, ashram issue. Geru is the colour of the cloth worn by swamis in the

ashram. Like ochre flames the clothes blaze and toss in the wind. They come and go from the lines as if belonging to ghosts. The fourth floor is silent, and I feel this blessing engulf me like mist. I have come from a busy year of people and the relentless, machine-paced activity of this era. The emptiness of the fourth floor is a balm. Surrounded by simplicity in the bare, ascetic accommodation, I begin to simplify inside, by osmosis.

## Shaving

I sit on a brick with my head bent towards my knees which are pointing to the sky. The brick is in the courtyard of Golkuti. Courtyard is perhaps too comfortable a word, but it will suffice. A clothesline is draped across the courtyard, hung with cleaning rags and the clothes of men, which in the ashram are little different to the clothes of women. A large blue bucket squats beneath a tap, waiting to be of service at the end of each meal, when we squat beside it, scooping out water with a plastic jug, and wash our plates with a green nylon scrubber and some heavy-duty blue soap. The plates are functional circles of stainless steel with a one-inch edge to hold the food in.

Opposite me a wiry Indian man with a moustache sits on another brick. He is loading a razor blade into its handle. That done he firmly takes my head in his hands, pulling it down to a convenient height. He scoops water out of a jug, and splashes it on my head, rubbing vigorously. He rubs in front of my ears, where it is not quite my cheek. He rubs the top and the sides and the back of my head and neck. He rubs and wets my one-month-old hair. Each month he does this and each month I think, this is the only time a man touches me. I have no idea what he thinks. Rubbing and wetting done, he applies the blade. A few drops of water drip down my face as I stare at the concrete. The one-month-old hair falls into my small view. Mostly grey, some darker. Blonde was for when it was long, long ago. He scrapes it all off my skull then pushes it aside where

it merges with jet-black one-month-old Indian hair from the previous squatter. He wipes my raw skin, as opposed to the original rubbing, then withdraws. I sign a list; he will be paid accordingly.

I rise from the brick, air on my scalp. I gaze up at the prison, just over the wall. In the corner is another tap. I turn it on and stick my head under the flow, feeling the lovely soft fluid pouring onto and off my hairless skin. No hair to shake. I leave the courtyard, recalling my hairdresser at home, her funky styles, the smell of coffee, the small talk, the deep talk, the personal talk. I love her strong makeup and the clothes I would never wear. She runs a slick little business. The guy on the brick is silent. He also runs a slick little business.

## Free birds

Breakfast is taken on the stone steps of a centuries-old partially octagonal building. The view from the steps takes one's gaze over a high wall. On the other side of the high wall is another wall, even higher. That second wall is the wall of a prison, also centuries old. In the stone of the prison wall are small, rectangular windows, letting a little light into the cells. A flock of pigeons swoops out of the sky, circles the air in joy, surveys the grounds, and flutters *en masse* into a soldierly line along the ridge of the prison roof. They see us, they see the River Ganges (*Ma Ganga*), they see the prisoners, the yard, the town, the worms and grubs and seeds they eat; they see tiny and they see big. The pigeons have a bird's eye view; they see what the sun sees. Perhaps they see the main building of the big ashram on the hill beyond. They rise as one, circle, settle, rise again, nothing escapes their attention. A few white cranes—or are they herons—perch on the ashram wall, observing the pigeons. Their stillness is absolute.

There is a watchtower on the corner of the jail. The watchman looks around, yawns, spits, and calls out in a loud cry to the other watchmen.

They respond in echoes, the sounds flying into the sky. The sky sees all, heaven sees earth, the birds move between heaven and earth, swift and light.

The partially octagonal building has various histories. It is now known as Golkuti. They say there was a palace here, and the prison housed the king's harem. This is all that remains of that cruel and glorious past, and one day this too will disintegrate. The gatehouse attached to Golkuti is already disintegrating. The beams sometimes fall out of the ceiling, their substance having become the meal of termites and moulds.

The ashram walls are high. Massive gates are opened and closed by the gateman, dressed from the waist down in an old piece of cloth. He smiles patiently and says little. The ashramites choose this walled world, protected and insular, believing that freedom is an inner state. The prisoners are locked in their walled world, paying with their freedom for their sins. The birds perch above, quite still. Then, wings wide, they fly out over the river, ever free, in the freedom of the sky.

## THE DEADLY DINNER

Hugh Cartwright

I wait for my husband to bring me beans on toast. When he does, I shall kill him.

As the smell drifting in from the kitchen grows stronger, I hear him singing *sotto voce*.

I fidget impatiently; slide my finger along the knife to test the blade in my lap. I know he is almost ready, and so am I.

A pot clangs in the sink, the door opens, and he sweeps in.

Boyishly pleased, he presents the plate. My grip tightens on the hidden knife.

'*Poulet de Bresse à la crème avec des belles feuilles Paris*,' he announces.

I laugh with delight.

Beans are postponed, and the life of my wonderful, Michelin-starred husband is spared for another day.

## NEWSTEAD ABBEY, VIAREGGIO

Ian C Smith

Byron's mother, concentrating, her expression the Aberdeen granite of her memory when he describes an outlawed prizefight's courage, gore, while the hound of debt harries her, watches his far from lame exposition. Hands birds' wings, he pushes uneaten food aside, passes a brimful glass of wine, nary a drop spilt, over his shoulder to their ageing butler who attends his chair.

The heat a dragon's ire on that beach, he tells Trelawny he could identify any body he had known by its teeth. Ned Williams' jawbone, a boot, a black handkerchief, had been enough. After flinging incense on their pagan pyre, he flees from his lameness, nauseated, to his preferred element where he spews, acrawl with putrefaction.

After the searching spade crushes their beloved Shelley's skull, the remains now indigo, a lone seabird hovering above them persistently, he swims again, far out and for so long the sun blisters his lordly skin.

The cremation crew roars, sings the long way home, their carriage jolting Shelley's stilled heart rescued from the sand, sharing this journey to Pisa, the end of those rollicking days. They cry out in pain, pissed as poets.

## THE HEIST

Jacques Denault

We planned it for weeks, going over everything step by step. Which streets, which houses, how we would do it. We prepared every day, accounting for the thousands of inevitable variables that were sure to arise. We figured out the route, the best spots to hit, and we practiced. Did dry runs to cut down the time.

By the time we got down to our target time it was the day before the real thing. The dry runs had prepared us, we thought, but we could never be sure, and if something went wrong, if we had to change plans, we had to think about our payout above all else.

Our next step was to get the gear. We went separately. Masks, bags, disguises—we needed to be sure we wouldn't be recognised. One of us wore a Jason mask, one a gorilla head, and another the beaked mask of a plague doctor. We were ready.

The day came. The waiting was the hardest part, like the waiting on Christmas Eve. We'd already done all the planning we could.

'Think we'll pull it off?' Jason asked.

'I'm sure we will,' Gorilla replied.

'You're not backing out, are you?' Plague Doctor asked.

'No way,' Jason said.

'Good, it's too late for that,' Plague Doctor said.

We brought extra supplies and opted for trash bags instead of the flimsy ones that you got at the grocery store checkout.

The time was getting closer, then it came. We got together, meeting at the fountain in the park adjacent to the hoity-toity neighbourhood. We

said nothing. People were out all over the place, more than we'd expected, but not more than we planned for. That was why we had to go fast.

'Ready?' Plague Doctor asked.

Jason and Gorilla nodded.

We went to the first house, banged on the door, and, when a man in a SWAT uniform answered, we shouted, 'Trick or treat!'

## THIS INSTANT

James Grabill

This instant, not everything  
in the public library stands  
when the climate we need cooks,  
oceans first, absorbing more  
cosmic heat. When the manta ray  
flies in on undersea current,  
it finds the coral reef's bleached,  
its symbiosis lost. This instant,  
warrants back in the constitution  
of society's long-range stability  
are light on the surface of water,  
breath reaching the body's cells.  
Wakefulness has been buoyed up  
by electrical pulse causing the mind  
to emerge, and the mirror in the mind  
to stay filled all night with billions  
of stars, galaxies, sitars in cells,  
billions of ants trucking loads down  
corridors to their underground cities.  
Millions of people may be brushing  
their ancestral hair between states  
rooted in time, before they're lifted  
by the extra energy inside the spine  
functioning as a channel of light.  
All the glaciers found on this planet  
are melting into unobstructed seas,  
and leopards leap in every drop.

Millions are burning chemistry in rivers  
of circulation when the late afternoon  
shadow falling across the desk  
turns into part of something else.

## DISCOURSES: FROM SCHOLAR TO POETRY

Janet Jiahua Wu

the poetry scholar says to poetry: thou art wild  
unruly diseased sick inside mad  
on the brain  
thou child inside hole and bane and cunning  
thou incestuous paedophilic  
longing  
eyeing the house outside a fence without discerning  
a wrestle without wounding wombs  
without returning  
thou cunt and hair and pine and vessel  
filled with lube and scabs and  
rashes and tears  
////////////////////////////////////  
and poetry says to the scholar:  
time's up bro block bloc it's the twenty  
first century  
blow your nose at the door  
jam your arse and eyes with balls  
and door knobs  
butter the cheeks remove the evil eye sing peace  
and jab the united nations  
in the sky  
you can't keep writing dead language man where is  
the language of our  
stony times?  
people are getting high on hopes knitting gloves  
for the dying and the lonely and the



&  
YOU  
KNOW  
WHAT

\*

## MY MOTHER & POETRY

Janet Jiahua Wu

last night I dreamed of taking my mother  
on a ride along the coast and then this thirty-metre-  
tall tsunami started coming in and we went under  
somehow our car just floated back to the top when it was over  
and we were wet through and through but apart from that  
it was as if nothing happened

recently I got something published in Australian Poetry Journal  
and instead of payment I opted for a year's subscription  
and not long ago the journal arrived  
the postie tossed it over the fence like it's something worthless  
clearly he doesn't read Poetry

my mother asked me for money again the other day  
I couldn't give it to her  
I couldn't tell her this year Poetry paid me \$340 in total  
it's not much

next year Poetry is gonna pay me more  
because my heart is open  
my soul is clean  
my eyes tune in with the gods of beauty  
how could Poetry possibly evade me  
(and refuse me money)?

and these feelings that bubble along inside my chest  
not vulgar

not depressed  
are like the heads of galahs  
bobbing along above the summer grass  
I have no regrets

these words wilder than the winds sweeping me off my feet  
belong to Poetry  
not me

## LIFE'S JOYS

Jean Bohuslav

chen's chinese, with the white linen table cloths that have stains sprayed out after each sitting entices him with three soups most weeks—one short soup and double sour soup. she wouldn't mind a gluten free long soup now and then but it's such a long way for one soup. and to sit while he slurps his way through three, taking his front teeth out when they are alone (although on occasions leaving them in to please her).

at times she slaves over three soups a week. he says how delicious they taste but after one sitting, separates his share to add tom yum with extra chilly and noodles. he seasons his food without tasting, which might have something to do with stubbornness. the brother in-law says miro's father was obstinate. she is grateful for their differences as it allows the controlling ways of her mind to be adjusted. at times she even puts too much salt on her schnitzels.

jen browses poetry some evenings, sharing a poem about the alphabet letters being rounded up and whiplashed into a sonnet or else they would get their fucking heads blown off—something of that ilk. her husband said that she'd better stop reading that author as her swearing was becoming more frequent, although he enjoyed many pieces, with one particular poem exciting him so much, that she threatened, 'that's the last poem i'm reading you if you're going to behave like a B\*0%>!, F#<K%>! teenager.'

## THE UNMAKING

Jenna Heller

should the ink fade  
and the page numbers fly  
to the walls and the words  
and phrases contort and jumble  
and should the manuscript  
be clipped and dog-eared  
with pencil scratches and coffee-rings  
before returning to little more  
than a blank screen and a working title  
and should the structure become  
quasi-ordered chaos  
or a frantic scrawl in a notebook  
or on the back of an envelope or  
on a paper napkin after a late-night souvlaki  
know that I will be there  
sitting cross-legged in front of you  
waiting to be rewarded  
by the very flash that set  
the pen in motion  
in the first place

## THAT RIVER

John Bartlett

in daylight hours the peacock strutted  
vain, coquettish strumpet

on frost-cracked nights his caged cries  
disturbed my sleep

while that patient river flowed  
through this town and childhood days

with its push and pull and  
pulse and throb and flood,

its silver flight of cod in sunlight  
its holy waters plumped our gardens

with sweet, black grapes, pomegranate  
ripe and red as nipples

its cliffs relinquished ochre stone  
to build our church—Redeemer Holy

so mesmerised by incense and  
the whiff of sulphur from hellfire threat

I threw myself into those beckoning  
baptismal waters, stained by the colour of sin

and let them carry me over snags and  
temptations, rescues and redemptions

all the way to the ocean and  
the surprise of salt

## GOLDEN

Kate Maxwell

Neck crouched into the collar of my coat, icy air biting at my nose and fingers, I am Edmund begging mercy from the White Queen. Except my frozen fantasy is a piss-stinking alley behind a pawn shop, and the delight I crave is not Turkish but crystalline. Wind is fierce, piercing into bones, whispering threats. And this queen, snarling over me with shining nose stud, foul, ash breath, is six foot three and packing heat.

I remember, snug in my little bed, thinking what a bitch that anaemic ice queen was: holding out on all that sticky rose-coloured delight. Torturing Edmund with promises of power, fame, and candied bliss. I don't reckon he even cared much for the power, just wanted that tingle of icing sugar on his tongue, sweet soft joy of jelly in his mouth, and the heady rush of sugar through his veins. Even after he'd brushed his teeth. He wasn't a bad kid. Sure, he had a few insecurities and social issues. I mean it can't be easy being a middle child. But compulsion is a cruel ferret-faced force. Kneeling, on cold, hard bitumen, I can vouch that the fight against its latch-on bite is often close to useless.

So, I give what I can barter, and a few crumpled notes, for a taste of somewhere, anywhere else. A ticket out of this skinny, lung-hacking drudgery into a warmer, brighter world. Wiping scum from my mouth as the Queen rezips his pants, I take my tiny crystal treasure. But I will wait till he has gone, flee to an even colder, darker corner to pump my prize. The Queen has spies and hangers-on who'd slit me for less.

That was Edmund's problem. Too whiney, showed his hand and hunger, so obviously she had him wrapped tight, immovable under heavy woollen blankets of need. And he was so friendless. No friendly faun to show the way. We all enjoyed hating him as children. Oh, I'd never do that. Betray my own family, my country? How could he? Stealing,

cheating, whoring, injecting, falling, falling again and again. All such unthinkable, unspeakable sins, to innocents with goodness and glory in their heads.

And yet, my mother's eyes—singed into memory like a branding—when she caught me taking her last cash, credit cards, and heart. Not the cold stare of the White Witch, nor the lip-curling contempt of the alley queen, but the aching sorrow of final farewell. I'm still here, I wanted to scream. Somewhere under the blankets and the cold I'm still here. I just can't claw my way out.

The stone table awaits. I lean back into the tiled wall of the toilet, infuse myself with delight and dream of Golden manes and resurrection.

## LIZARDS AND LIES

Kate Maxwell

The tail lay coiled in the kitchen sink: silver grey, pathetic, and almost camouflaged by the stainless-steel landscape of plain and sky. Standing beside me on a plastic stool, twirling unbrushed strands of hair through sticky jam fingers, Cassie stared down at the skinny piece of lizard debris. Squinting into the sink, the meshwork of the abandoned appendage gleamed like a silver bracelet or precious metal. Obviously precious to Cassie, who stood stubborn sentry at the sink.

'Lizards grow back their tails, so why wouldn't a tail grow back a lizard?' She stuck out her bottom lip and tried to crease her uncreasable forehead.

'It doesn't work that way, Cass,' I said, too tired for further explanation.

I poured a jar of stewed apple into a bowl.

'Skinky wouldn't leave me. He had breadcrumbs and water too. Daddy poked holes in his house with a fork for breathing.'

Air holes big enough for a scrawny skink to sniff freedom and escape his plastic takeaway box prison. He probably sacrificed his own tail in a last desperate squeeze for survival.

'How long are you going to stand there, for?'

'Until he comes back.'

I didn't have enough energy to even roll my eyes.

'Why don't you move the tail into a container and watch it?'

'No. The sink is betterer. It's wet and wet stuff will help him grow back.'

I didn't ask why. I'm sure there was perfect child logic applied to this reasoning, but I'd had three hours of sleep and my brain had no room for curiosity. Tommy was still not sleeping through and demanded patting,

feeding, and more patting every few hours. An evening shift at Woollies was also looming in my list of things to endure. Mum would be over in an hour, so I could barter a little sleep then, but right now, I had nothing. If Cassie wanted to watch a lizard tail grow back into a lizard, then she could go for it. In fact, she should probably grab the iPad, film the process, and become a YouTube sensation: Four-year-old child clones lizard and hasn't even completed PhD. In fact, months away from pre-school graduation.

'Wow, Jules, those Brainy Baby programs you bought her really paid off, didn't they?' I could hear the Mother's Group, now.

So, I left her at the sink to watch the regeneration of Skinky the lizard, feeling a little smug that it made me look like a mother, open and willing to allow the imagination and creativity of her child to blossom. At least she wasn't in front of the telly. Somewhere, in foggy memories, I recalled Annie and I thrashing around in the back garden, or upsetting Grandma's flower beds, searching for critters to house in our bug catchers. Poor suffocating ladybugs, a grasshopper or half a worm seemed to be our main prey. Ah, play. How I missed that childhood freedom. I was quietly amazed that Cassie had found anything in our tiny, bricked courtyard so it seemed churlish to diminish the affection she had for her first pet.

I scraped a stool up against the highchair, grabbed a spoon, and prepared for splatter. Tommy's little mouth opened like a baby bird as I scooped in spoonfuls of apple.

'Nothing's happened yet,' Cassie said, her bottom lip starting to tremble.

Oh, come on. My free-spirited creative mother profile was disintegrating before my eyes. A full-on tantrum triggered by a lizard inexplicably unable to grow back from its tail was about to explode in the bomb-site that passed for our kitchen. Can't post this adorable moment after all. I could already see the disapproving looks or Facebook comments questioning why I would encourage the

caging of wild animals into leftover Pad Thai takeaway containers. What sort of monster was I?

Blame her father! I heard myself screaming at the invisible, imagined judging hordes. He was the one who helped her catch it and put it in the plastic container.

'Maybe you need to leave Skinky's tail for a moment. It might not be good to watch it the whole time. What if it just can't grow while it's being watched? Sort of like being watched when you're trying to go potty.'

At least this was only my first lie of the day. Plenty more to come, but for now, if it helped avoid a tantrum, I was using it. Cassie scratched her unicorn-patterned bum and thought about this.

'Come over and make some funny faces at Tommy for me, and by the time you do that, who knows what might have happened?'

OK, second lie in close proximity to the first, but maybe it could be counted as the same lie.

By the time Mum arrived we'd entered into a full-blown fantasy world of what might help Skinky reform: using our inside voice to make sure he could concentrate, pretending we weren't watching in case he was shy, and most importantly, showing patience because you never know, what if Santa had something to do with the process and he might reward good little girls with new lizards? I knew I was scraping the barrel now, but all I could think of was my pillow.

Mum did not approve of my desperate fiction but at least chose distraction as her main tool instead of debunking my fallacies. Yes, I know you are meant to be strong, wear the tantrums to help the child understand resilience, yada-yada-yada, but surely that was only for human beings who remembered the wonders of sleep. Or had thoughts and opinions about anything other than which Wiggle was the best; which were the cheapest, most adhesive nappy brand; and how a babycino and pink cupcake was the going rate for five minutes of uninterrupted sentences with a friend. I put Tommy down for his nap and thankfully he

actually slept. Slumped in a kitchen chair, I waited for Mum to convince Cassie to get dressed and go out.

‘Cassie,’ Mum frowned over at me for allowing the story to build. ‘I’ve never known a lizard to grow back from a tail. It’s not really possible, Sweetie, but if we go to the park, who knows, there may be another Stinky there.’

‘It’s not Stinky, Nan,’ she giggled finally. ‘His name is Skinky! Silly Nan. And there’s only one Skinky.’

So, dressed, brushed and lizardless, Cassie trotted off to the park with Mum. I don’t even remember lying down. I’m pretty sure I was already asleep standing up. And what seemed like minutes later, but was actually a few hours, I jolted upright when I heard Cassie’s piercing cry. Stumbling out of bed, banging my knee hard against the dresser, I thumped out to the kitchen to save my child from whatever demon was trying to take her soul.

Tommy was on the playmat beside the kitchen table, sucking on the porridge encrusted leg of a naked Barbie doll. Cassie was back at the stool, her arms thrust deep into the sink. Mum looked a little stunned, standing beside her.

‘What’s going on?’

‘Oh, Mummy, look! I told you. I told you!’

I walked over to the sink. Between my daughter’s quick little fingers was a squirming silver skink. This one had a tail. For now.

‘Nan and I got back from the park and had our cupcakes with Tommy, when he woke up, and then I checked on Skinky again. And now look. He’s back!’

I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Skinky. I mean, all skinks look the same to me and I’m no reptile expert, but that definitely looked like a new model.

‘Here, Sweetie, put him in the container. Don’t squeeze him too hard.’ Mum held out a Tupperware for Cassie to drop resurrected Skinky into,

and then she quickly closed the lid. The poor little thing ran the tight perimeter then stood, chest heaving, as his head nervously jerked from side to side. Cassie was beside herself with joy and vindication. I looked at Mum for explanation, but she held her hands up and shook her head.

‘Well, it might not actually be Skinky, Sweetheart. It might just be one of his friends. But at least you have a new pet now,’ Mum said.

‘Oh, Nan. This is Skinky. I can tell.’

‘Then whose tail is still in the sink?’ I blurted out before I could consider consequences.

‘He probably just wanted a whole new tail to go with his whole new body.’

‘Right.’ I gave up.

When Raph got home half an hour before I had to leave for work, I gave him the bare bones of the situation; Lizard escaped. Tail left behind. Bizarre coincidence and Cassie finds new skink sniffing the corpse tail of his brother in the sink. Cassie convinced she can now clone lizards. Have a good evening.

‘What the...? You shouldn’t let her make up shit like that, Jules. Come on, she’ll never understand reality,’ Raph said.

‘Hey, I didn’t see it. Maybe Skinky did regenerate. Maybe our child knows more about science than us. Anyway, you absolutely have to get the old fish tank out of the garage and set up a proper home for Skinky. I’m not going through more Great Escapes any time soon. I’m sure its animal cruelty, anyway, keeping lizards in Pad Thai containers.’

I kissed Tommy and Cass goodbye, still exhausted, but somehow relieved that Cassie had cracked cloning before she even started school.

‘Keep an eye on Skinky,’ I said

‘Yeah, but I know how to make new ones now if something happens.’

Raph bounced Tommy on his knee, shook his head, and rolled his eyes at me. Oh, well, I sighed as I clicked the car door open, maybe I can find a picture book on keeping lizards at the library next visit. Something flickered at the right of the bonnet. A silver-grey gleam on red steel. It raised its head briefly, sending me a reptilian glare and swished down the chassis and onto the road. Before it got to the grass, I noticed its stumpy backside. Skinky was free. Free to grow back a tail, free to sleep when it wanted, free to get eaten by a bird. But free.

## ADIEU

### Keith Nunes

1

It was a savage, feral night  
The weather untamed and full of madness  
All that was left in the soundless dawn was  
The wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald and  
The wreck of the Deutschland  
And in tears on the beach  
Gordon Lightfoot and Gerard Manley Hopkins  
Wordless

2

And there she was  
Nude, descending a staircase  
Looking for the artist who had misrepresented her but  
Marcel Duchamp had left her Paris apartment  
In search of Habana cigars  
And, naturally, never went back

## HINDSIGHT IN MOONEE PONDS CENTRAL

Kristian Radford

'If there was an earthquake  
while we were in here—  
what a way to go!  
—woman unseen behind row of bookcases  
fortified by variegated paperbacks  
and turreted with oversized hardcovers  
  
standing slowly on a chair  
I rearrange the masonry  
and pull some high ones down for Emily  
  
/  
  
we eat lunch, buy groceries from  
five different shops, watch one of my students  
as she handles an incoherent, vaguely belligerent customer  
(she works at the chemist)  
then smile at her wincingly  
  
afterwards, trying to thread the trolley through  
pylons and pedestrians  
in the dungeon slash carpark  
as one wheel flickers in protest  
I try to perform a tacking manoeuvre  
  
/

(why do I always write about Sundays  
domestic days ...  
I write the days, I think, that stay still enough  
for me to hold  
I write the time I'm  
not keeping count of)  
  
/  
  
(two cups of tea  
and the first row of a pack of biscuits)  
  
/  
  
on the couch E tries out the book  
I poached for her  
from its precarious nest  
and I think of the walls and their paper bricks  
the names on the spines like donors  
carved in the pavers at a football club  
a few famous, some forgotten  
most simply unknown  
but making a contribution  
to posterity, to culture  
to what in hindsight looks like  
fate  
  
from behind the shelves  
the traffic cutting past on Mount Road  
sounded like  
a series of shrugs

/

back in our living room  
an inbound Boeing  
    drowns out the present for ten seconds  
        then time opens up again  
            like an unkinked hose

## LOST YEAR

Kristian Radford

let's all agree to forget  
that we even existed  
then

the pittosporum out the front  
folds and opens again  
bleeding and sticky  
just as you remember it

that chubby bird preening, it's probably  
the same bird

there isn't even a new layer of dust  
just the one on the shelf  
that you never got around to  
anyway

when the clock finally moves  
and distances collapse  
we'll need only the gentlest of introductions

we'll be surprised  
at all that words couldn't do  
alone

## DECANTING THE DOGS OF 2020

Lorraine Gibson

I vibrate between dogs of dread & desire  
sink Tempranillo—unleash  
fruitless cogitation.

Yesterday, a trusted source announced:

*The entire universe dwells  
in every body.*

Totally freaked me out. I downed  
two cheeky reds to drown  
that bad boy. Hey, did you know  
over ninety-nine-point  
nine per cent of every body  
is empty space?

Jayzus!

Doubting Thomas's  
can clarify with Google.

I don't completely disregard  
'awareness'. I do however  
filter out all evidence  
concerning elementary particles  
—quarks.

Quarks serve to stimulate my crimson  
fizz of fear of breath—no more.

I offer up the following advice to  
clear distressing 2020 dregs:  
untether your watcher  
unchain your witness  
find your 'house of being'

try to be a Master of the NOW.  
All sedimented terrors will be  
cleansed. YOU will be unafraid  
of mice & men & every other cur-  
sed thing. Oh—except—for time.  
Eternity by its nature can-  
not be free of time.  
Lastly, purify a Nebbiolo & try  
to leave the animals alone.

## I DON'T DRINK TEA

Lydia Trethewey

cheese embossed with cumin seeds and sand, rocket leaves she folds with fingers deft from other kinds of work. sea breeze. she feeds me lines, asks if I am full, leads me out beyond the tidal pull and surge over the edge of where we said we'd go. I turn away before our lips converge. at home, I play a video, explain that consent is like offering someone a cup of tea, and she laughs because she thinks I'm joking, she pretends to lift me up but dumps me beneath another wave. I didn't see it coming. submerged, rise with alveolus dripping my unsaid syllables my lungs wet. she asks if I am full, I have no answer, she thinks this absence means there is space enough for her.

## LIMITED DEFINITIONS

Lydia Trethewey

snarled like chicken wire her skin cut lemon glistens with memories of him, raw and acidic his name on her tongue and she spits it acrid mist, undoing our evening drift into sleep. humiliated by the disdain of her friends for her 'accidental' 'slip' she risked to feel something other and now she splits citrus in a morning cure, hangover het-lag the pith and the skin. the medulla, anterior part of the brain is partially inferior to the cerebellum, controls involuntary functions like puking and coughing but the unconscious is necessary and in plants the medulla is the tissue which holds everything together. I commiserate with the difficult edges of her grief because the past is hard like wood but the future's soft and pithy.

## BACK BUILDINGS

Mark O'Flynn

*(after the painting of the same name by Margaret Olley, Hill End, 1948)*

On the roofs of the back buildings the paint  
has cracked, what is that—too much yolk  
in the albumen? Perhaps it's deliberate,  
the filigree of twigs overhanging all that corrugated  
iron is more than convincing. To where does that  
red road go past the ambiguous church spire?  
In the foreground you can almost smell  
the outhouse, knuckle the water level in the tank.  
But what's that in the centre? Is it a windsock?  
or a grieving widow diving headlong from an upper  
storey window? An aberration in the canvas.  
It must be early Sunday morning, for there is not  
a soul on the street, not a bird in the air.  
The emptiness so full, the cicadas' song throbbing.

## A BLACKBIRD LOOKS AT WALLACE STEVENS

Michael Mintrom

At dawn, flapping ornate pyjamas,  
he draws back curtains to study oaks,  
seeking remembrance of a woodblock print.

He craves 'the truth in a calm world'  
and his confections are famous among our ilk.  
Suited, preened, he steps to the sidewalk

then fox-trots to his immaculate office.  
His visage conveys a look of disdain  
as if nothing in nature could equate

with the bric-a-brac that adorns the nest  
for his gramophone. When, from Key West,  
he returns sozzled and broke

he brings with him bags of exquisite junk.  
Across each cantankerous summer  
many totems make their way to the dump.

## LARRY IN LOCKDOWN

Owen Bullock

I pinched apples from the neighbour's garden, Barry, pretty good seeing as they lurked at home most of the time. I let down tyres in the garage, climbed telegraph poles and cut wires. I wandered about at night, re-arranged ornaments on verandahs, dug up lawns and planted tatties and bulbs, raked up leaves from gardens where they blow them into the street, built compost bins and piled them there; I wrecked as many leafblowers as I could, Barry. In me cell above the city I watched the pollution levels go down each day and laughed, dancing naked round the tower.

## POCKETS

Owen Bullock

*'The horizon is a seam.'* Sarah Rice

The coloured clouds are pockets into other worlds. I climb through the orange sketch of cirrus into a cold starlit night so blue you can taste fresh paint. On a boulevard table, a single glass gleams, hurts the eyes. A woman sits near, her teeth and silver hair similarly dazzling. She fades out, an apparition. The entire street empty. Cold drifts like morning fog. The air crystal. Even as I speak it breaks into pieces, shaken to the ground, chiming, rebounding in slow motion. A desert scene now, red earth, peppered with tall cactuses, sky turquoise. It explodes, and this scene falls to nothing. I'm in space, the sky dark and frosted with stars in each direction. I don't feel the cold that must be here. I float or hover, perhaps in a suit. Just one cloud—I got my money's worth when I decided to open that pocket. Silence. Let's listen to what the rumbling stars have to say.

## JIGS AND REELS

Rhiannon Hall

1.

There are fish swimming the shallows, Jack hopes to catch  
trout or Redfin Perch I read the river with Robert Adamson  
A carp jumps, bug catching, near Jack's hook I push back  
into my camp chair

2.

He's been casting out every morning for the past 5 weeks  
to catch more of this  
Heat of cicada noise, cool rum and coke,  
a small pile of books beside me and greasy stink of sunscreen  
and sweat

3.

He reels in, empty We watch bait fish A turtle's head  
cracks the water, a river rat's white tail waves  
above the murky centre for just a second  
Time is about to intervene

## CHRYSALIS (FIVE SCENES)

Richard Rebel

*'... Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams ...'*

– Franz Kafka, 'The Metamorphosis'

The screen flickers in greyness, a stuttering black-and-white projection. From below there is the sound of a piano plonking relentlessly—dire, but with a jaunty ragtime momentum. It is the only sound that finds its way into the silence.

### Scene 1

It is a room, a great hall, filling the screen. There are lines of desks, like a city in miniature, with avenues and side streets, shafts of shadow. The desks tower architecturally in uniform rows. Their lamps are rooftop beacons, not unlike the electric streetlamps on Charlotte Street. Each occupant sits atop a high skeletal stool with his grey pallid face bent downward. Some scratch with desperate concentration at the broad heavy pages of ledgers, cuffs and palms smudged with ink; others poke soundlessly with mantis-hands at grinning typewriters. Some of the faces are recognisable: there is the Assistant Chief Clerk, adjusting the sleeves of his jacket and straightening his posture; across from him is one of Gregor's fellow commercial travellers, fastening the latches of his sample case hurriedly, as though it contained something that might escape. Gregor finds himself drawn by the camera's gaze further into the scene, down the central avenue between the desks. This is not like other films Gregor has seen in the cinema. Clerks scurry about this way and that, with papers and ledgers and files. He cannot hear of course—but imagines—the stuttering taps of their footsteps. The

looping piano music quickens. It is an unpleasant scene and Gregor wishes it would change.

It does not. Now, looming huge on the screen before him is the monolithic oaken desk of the Chief Clerk himself. His taut and fuming face peers down. He speaks wildly and gestures frantically. His words appear in florid white letters before Gregor:

What is the meaning of  
this lateness?!

From his velvety seat Gregor finds himself mouthing a soundless reply, and moments later his feeble unfinished utterance flashes onto the screen:

I was ... sir ... I was merely ...

The Chief Clerk's eyes storm downward at him, and Gregor can speak no more. Now he sees the large boots of the Chief Clerk, under the desk. He is unsurprised at the size of the boots. They appear at first merely comical, like the oversized shoes of a circus jester, but as the scene progresses, they enlarge. This is perfectly acceptable and reasonable, that the brown leather boots should amplify themselves in this way. Now the boots are the size of the toy sailboats that the well-dressed children sail in the park pond on Sundays, and still they continue to expand. This is right, the way of things, Gregor thinks. The Chief Clerk lifts one of his feet. The boot is huge. A small child could sit inside it. The laces are great ropes. The black sole looms over the upward-facing camera. Now it is the size of a badminton racquet, or his sister's violin case ... no, larger. It has a little dust from the street and is slightly more worn on one side, Gregor notices. He can still hear the rolling cascade of the piano, and still the colourless scene flickers, so rapidly it is almost imperceptible. The underside of the Chief Clerk's shoe fills and darkens the whole frame. The illusion is perfect; Gregor shifts in his seat uncomfortably, as though at any moment he will be crushed by the enormous shoe. Again he longs for the scene to change, for this great

leathery doom to be averted. The boot presses downward, toward the camera, and Gregor is certain he will feel its weight, somehow, but now...

## Scene 2

...the scene is the Café near the university. The setting is bright, and the previous scene is almost forgotten. It is the meeting of the fellows of his Literary Society. The piano, which hasn't faltered, is joined now by the marching blurts of a tuba.

In this scene the tablecloth is like snow and his Society friends wear light grey suits that seem to glow. He sees them very rarely these days, these fine friends, though he used to join them every week; in truth it has been months since he last saw them. Hector and Eugen are both theatre critics for rival city newspapers; their opinions always differ. Erich is a poet whose melancholy odes are incompatible with his jovial demeanour. Theodor writes strange fantastical tales that rarely find a readership. Before them on the table are small cups of inky-looking coffee that remain untouched throughout the scene. Gregor observes from his seat in the cinema and cannot, of course, sit at the table. The fellows surround the table in orchestrated positions. At one side is small Roman-looking pillar.

To begin the scene, Eugen gestures as he speaks and, though his words are unknown, the others all laugh uproariously.

Theodor says something; his words appear moments later, the same ornate white lettering as before:

And where is Gregor?

In reply the others simply laugh, as before. There is no empty seat at the table. Theodor speaks again:

He would enjoy my new tale ...

The piano and tuba pause in anticipation. The other fellows lean toward Theodor, in theatrical attentiveness. He speaks for several

moments, exaggeratedly raising his eyes upward and spreading his arms outward.

It is the story of a poor fellow ...  
 he sprouts great wings from his back.  
 Over the top of the city he soars ...

He continues while the others listen, mesmerised.

... out to the countryside. He lands in  
 a tree, near the yard of a school.  
 There is only one child who sees him ...  
 a lonely boy.

Gregor watches, sadly longing to join his fellows at the Café table. Theodor has stopped speaking and for some time they all sit, saying and doing nothing. There is just the snow-white table, the untouched coffee cups, the Roman pillar, the Society fellows blinking wordlessly and silently, knowing. It is an uncomfortable scene of nothing, and he is unaware of the moment of edit...

### Scene 3

...when the scene finally changes.

Now, Gregor is the camera, and his eyes are the lens; his vision is a level, symmetrical frame. Though he does not see them, the silver screen, and the cinema beyond are behind him. The piano has become muffled but is still there. He moves through an almost-lightness space. He is in pursuit of someone. In his hands are lengths of string, which he is fervently attempting to fashion into impossible knots.

A glow surrounds him but he moves toward a darkness ahead. The figure he was following has vanished. The piano persists, but there is nothing else. A cinematic silence. Before him now is the woman, the woman from the picture, in his bedroom. She carries her own thin

wooden picture frame; it surrounds her like a box. Her fur muff envelops her hands, her arms. She beckons and Gregor resists the improper desire to launch himself at her. The urge is momentary and passes. He would like to know if her pale grey dress is yellow, or perhaps a peach colour, but he cannot distinguish its hue, for of course everything is in degrees of silver-grey. He glances through the frame. Beyond, like the secondary set at the back of a stage, is his own living room. Now the picture-woman has changed. The pale grey dress has vanished. The fur muff enlarges to cover her midriff and legs. He feels slight alarm—but not surprise—at this sight, and the tinkling piano music alters accordingly. And now he sees that even her face is covered; she is enveloped entirely inside it. His desire for her now diminishes completely, and she dissolves into shadow. He no longer holds the string, saddened that success with the knots eluded him.

### Scene 4

In the living room beyond, Gregor's father is sitting in his customary chair, holding the newspaper, which is adorned with dangling military medals and cumbersome padlocks. Gregor imagines the soft metallic sounds they would make. He thinks he may have a key that fits one of the locks but is not certain. His sister Grete is caressing her violin as though it is a pet, and indeed its neck bends upward to meet her hand. Gregor's mother turns her sewing over, exaggeratedly struggling to breathe, the dark pile of fabric in her lap recoils and writhes under her needle. Father speaks with a heavy, melancholy air, with broad eyes and grand gestures:

The disappointment, Gregor, is  
 that you fail to see your present  
 condition. You fail completely.

The others nod in agreement. Gregor clutches his sample case; it weighs burdensome in his left hand.

## Scene 5

Inside the case, he knows, are reams of train timetables and carbon-copy booking forms and order receipts; somewhere too, deep in the case, is his folding travel clock—silent—and an ink well, and cinema ticket stubs for this very film, and two books he has not yet read, one he has not yet written, a photograph of a river, and a tiny delicate glass bicycle.

Gregor makes his way down a stairway, drawn by the weight of the sample case held awkwardly before him. Spongy shadows lurk on either side of him, so that he almost slides down the light that curls madly and impossibly into the passage below. His legs twitter beneath him. The sound of the piano is now distant and faint, but he still hears the tinkling notes of descending scales that match his footsteps with ridiculous precision. He continues downward toward wakefulness, shedding sleep like layers of clinging, wet clothing.

## ALEXANDER

### Rosanna E. Licari

Amanda resisted slamming the iron gate shut. She paused and stood tight-lipped, taking in the fragrant, well-tended garden. Then she turned and saw the front door was wide open.

‘Hi, it’s me,’ Amanda called and strode down the tiled hallway.

She was the first to arrive at Peter’s for the writing critique group. She found him in the kitchen putting finishing touches on one of the cheese platters. He always made these the way she liked it—a variety of cheeses with water crackers and fruit, and plenty to drink. The kitchen bench was laden with mineral water, wine, and beer.

‘Hi. What about Alexander? He’s done it again,’ Peter said.

Amanda knew who he was talking about. Yes, he’d done it again. The winner. The prize was prestigious. The poem was long, articulate and, frankly, outstanding. She too would have given him first prize if she had been one of the judges. It was about love, of course. His speciality. The delicate images, the tender intimacy, the seamless use of adjectives and verbs. She had her love poem in her bag. She pecked Peter on the cheek.

‘Are you OK?’ Peter asked.

‘I’m fine.’

She slid herself onto the white leather sofa in the living room. Peter had hung some black and white Mapplethorpe prints on the wall since her last visit. ‘I love what you’ve done,’ she said.

‘Aren’t they stunning?’

‘Weren’t you going to get one of Patti Smith with the doves?’

‘I decided to stick with the flora.’

That wasn't surprising. She stared at the print of the calla lily. Then, in her mind's eye, she saw Alexander's smiling face in the photo of the award ceremony in Sydney, which had been posted on Facebook. In his hand the certificate and the \$15,000 cheque she had longed for.

The two other members of the group, Larissa and Rick, arrived soon after.

'I love the flowers, Peter,' Larissa said, looking at the daffodils, hyacinths and freesias in a variety of glass vases on the sideboard.

'Thanks.'

'I can kill any plant without even trying. Where do you get all your plants from?'

Peter smiled. 'My gardening club. Please help yourselves to drinks.'

'And what about my ol' drinking buddy nailing it again!' Rick announced.

'Yeah, he's got the stuff,' Peter said.

'Who?' Larissa asked, pouring herself a red.

'A poet we know,' Amanda replied stiffly.

They all sat in the living room around the coffee table full of food. Rick turned to Larissa, smiling. 'Doing much this weekend?'

'I'm going down the coast for a couple of weeks.'

'Let's start with Rick,' Peter said over his reading glasses. He had his superior face on. Amanda knew straight away what the problem was. The punctuation. The unfortunate individual, Rick, children's writer and poet, had made some mistakes. She looked around the room. Had anyone else noticed?

Peter began, 'The errors in paragraph one would be obvious to anyone who knew their punctuation.' He saw her staring at him. 'Is there something you want to say, Amanda?'

'No, Peter. It's your turn to speak.' She took a sip of her Mexican beer. Her thoughts went back to Alexander. He had it all: the talent, the tenacity, the ruthlessness, the leather jacket, the tattoos, and a penchant for drugs and alcohol, and not to mention the old, red MG that he loved to work on. And women loved him. What a cliché. She imagined Alexander's latest in the audience at the award ceremony, applauding and ready to go out to celebrate with him. She'd pay, of course. This one was not a young thing with stars in her eyes, but a woman of means who did a spot of pottery to alleviate the pressures of being in corporate finance. Craft and cash. The perfect match for the artistic male ego.

Peter continued, 'There is a serious misuse of the comma here. I don't understand why people don't get it.'

'There's nothing wrong with it,' Rick said.

'Nothing wrong with it? It's disgraceful. You're writing a list and using commas.'

'You can do that.'

'No, Rick, you can't. Any writer worth their salt would not use commas.'

'And pray tell, what would they use, Peter?'

'They would use semicolons. And please note the word, semicolon, does not have a hyphen in it. The same applies to demisemihemi as in demisemihemiquaver.'

The discussion on commas was going to send her into a coma, Amanda thought. She slipped some blue vein cheese into her mouth. As far as she was concerned, Rick's biggest mistake was always serving instant coffee and buns when the group met at his house. She could have sworn he'd gotten them at half price from the local supermarket. Why hadn't anyone said anything about *that*? she thought.

Larissa sniggered behind her glass of South Australian shiraz.

Rick opened his mouth to say something, but Peter interrupted.

‘No, Rick, you are wrong. The first clause should end with a colon and the list that follows should have a semicolon after each listed thing. Then the full stop after the final clause.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Peter,’ was all Rick could manage.

‘God cannot help you with this, Rick. God only knows we’d all like to. How many times do you have to be told?’

Rick took a gulp of his drink.

‘Pete, you can get so serious about this stuff,’ Larissa piped up, brushing her red hair from her face. ‘Lighten up!’ She looked at her watch. It would be a couple of hours before she could leave for the coast.

Amanda had zoned out. How had she met Alexander? Years ago, when poetry festivals were held in the old church hall. He was giving a workshop on how to write and she was keen to learn. Though overweight and a chain smoker, he was surrounded by acolytes. Charming everyone as he had since the day he was born, Alexander could talk about an American or British writer’s latest collection, using sections to support his points. *Look at her careful use of adjectives. It’s not overdone. And the line breaks are perfect.* He revealed techniques he used before he wrote a poem. *First explore the vocabulary. Then write down what happened, then turn it into a poem with poetical devices.* And he could talk openly about his personal experience. *I’m having a hard time at the moment. I didn’t sleep well last night.* Not that he needed to talk about it. His poetry was full of it. His poetry was full of it.

Amanda went back to the world of punctuation. Peter was tapping on the manuscript with his pencil, while Rick was staring at his infringements and Larissa was looking at the gold rings that adorned most of her fingers.

‘It’s your turn, Amanda. What are your thoughts?’ Peter asked.

Rick’s story was about a boy and his dog, a subject she wasn’t remotely interested in, but what could you expect from a children’s writer? However, she thought Rick was getting sloppy. Perhaps he was overly busy with his teaching job so he didn’t have much time to edit. Primary school kids

could be such brats these days and not to mention the added paperwork which went with the job. Rick’s anaphoric referencing was poor, the main character lacked interiority (something she was often accused of) and she didn’t like the dog. It just seemed, well, unlovable. This was going to be a challenge. She wasn’t as brutal as Peter. One member had left a couple of months ago and told people that the group was hardcore. What did he expect? Amanda thought. They were in it to get published.

‘I’d like to see what the main character is thinking about. More motive for his actions,’ she said.

Rick rolled his eyes. ‘Boys don’t think much when they do things, Amanda. They just do stuff.’

‘Nevertheless, I can only speak of my reaction to the piece, Rick.’ Then she ventured into dangerous territory. ‘And the dog. The dog’s character doesn’t gain sympathy from the reader.’

‘I was waiting for someone to say something about the dog. We don’t live in a world with perfect people and perfect animals. It’s a stray. The kid feels sorry for it. That’s why he wants to keep it.’

‘Well, tell us more about that. That’s the perfect time to include interiority.’

‘I don’t know, Amanda. I want the actions to speak for themselves.’

Should she have just stuck to punctuation like Peter? ‘OK. Now the other thing. There are a few sections where the reader doesn’t know who is doing what. I’ve marked them on the draft. Well, that’s all from me.’ She handed the story to Rick.

‘Thanks. What about you, Larissa?’ Rick asked.

‘The dog reminds me of a neighbour’s when I was a child,’ Larissa began. ‘Personally, I love the dog.’

She would, Amanda thought. Her thoughts drifted back to the poetry festival. Back then she was thinner with short, dyed hair. White-blonde. And she was impressed like every other female who aspired to be a poet.

It didn't matter about his looks. The magic was the power of his voice. Mellow as dark honey.

She bought his latest collection and he signed it. After the workshop when the church hall was converted into an eating area, she talked to him some more. He could see she was interested. She knew she was interested in something, but she didn't know what. His talent? Sex? Love? She'd broken up with her boyfriend. Hadn't been near a man for how long? And Alexander was so charming. He was the perfect gentleman when he asked her back to his hotel. They had a couple of wines and he asked her to stay.

It came as no surprise to her when he couldn't perform. Men do that, she thought. The pressure. But they touched. A lot. All over. There was satisfaction in that. And then they slept. He gave her an autographed book of his. He had plenty of publications stacked on the table.

'I agree with Amanda, Rick,' Larissa said. 'We should know more about what he's thinking.' Rick seemed to take it better from Larissa. He didn't roll his eyes or get upset. 'You don't need to go into it deeply. I've made some suggestions in the margin.'

Larissa then talked about a chapter from her historical novel which was starting to sound like a bodice-ripper—an orphaned aristocratic heroine looking for a young aristocrat of means, but finding herself in the middle of Europe during an outbreak of plague.

And Alexander was bugging Amanda like a bedful of fleas. She mused that he could be called an art-istocrat, up there with the A-listers of poetry, dead or alive. Alexander never recognised her in recent times as the bulimic waif-of-a-thing from years ago. She was some other character now, more cynical, worldly. It suited her, this transformation and his not knowing. No one knowing. She'd never spoken about it to anyone.

'What about you, Amanda?' Larissa asked. 'You seem distracted.'

'No, Larissa, I'm not. I only wish I could experience the love scenes you write about!' Amanda replied.

Larissa laughed.

'And you'll be laughing all the way to the bank when you're done.'

'I agree,' Rick piped in. 'Passionate. Totally engaging.'

Now Peter was doing some eyerolling in Amanda's direction.

'What's the matter, Peter? Don't you agree?' Amanda asked.

'I think it is very well-written for the genre.'

They all looked at him.

'Well, that's high praise,' Larissa quipped. 'And how are my commas? Do they stand up?'

'Everything is in order.'

It was Peter's turn next. And everyone took turns at avoiding Peter's punctuation. They concentrated on Peter's dead ancestor who was born in Oxford and buried in the Hunter Valley in New South Wales.

'Where are you going with this? Is it going to be a straight biography or are you going to make it some experimental hybrid genre?' Rick ventured.

'I can hardly see where I can get creative with a convict that was transported to Australia for stealing a cow and was constantly flogged for trying to escape. It's amazing that he lived to spawn.' Peter bit the top of his pencil. 'I was thinking of putting some of the narrative in the first person, but not sure as yet.'

Rick and Larissa nodded.

The first person, thought Amanda. Yes, an interesting approach.

She remembered the pages she'd torn out of Alexander's collection years ago and pinned to the wall. A prize-winning poem of two hundred perfect lines in the first person. Then she thought about the long love poem in her bag. Not in the first person. And it hadn't won the prize.

He'd done it again. Alexander the master. She plunged the knife into the brie.

## PARADEISOS

Rosanna E. Licari

The Greeks took a word from their enemy and made it their own, linking it with the first earthly garden. Outside mine, the yells of neighbours' children slam against the high wooden fence. It's early. Treading into morning, bare feet welcome the dewy lawn, soles massaged by new blades of grass. A renewal of spirit. Inside the perimeter, there is no strict discipline or geometry. Eclectic. *A wild garden* the lawn man says. But the animals follow their ordered routines. Golden orb spiders display their quarry on silk bunting that drapes between the ginger, bromeliads, and lemongrass. Ants explore the dragon fruit flower, a scentless beauty, displaying a bold stamen. But petals, delicate and white, invoke feathers of flight. Listen. The hum of beating wings. Bees weave their aerial scribblings through the pink flowers of the coral vine climbing up the back verandah. My appearance doesn't matter here. Moist soil presses up through gaps in toes, grounding the moment. Centipedes and burrowing beetles beneath my feet. Worms intertwine roots that bear the earth's yield. Between the fronds I shape, secateurs nick flesh and blood tastes of iron. Alone, looking up, my sarong slips to the ground. The cloudless blue belongs to me.

Persian in origin, *paradeisos* was used in an early Greek translation of Jewish scriptures, the Septuagint, to refer to the Garden of Eden.

## BE A DISGRACE

Sam Innes Guardin

Hold that heavy golden cup  
Grip it like paracord as you plummet  
Steady against the heavy winds  
Ah shit. You tipped the chalice.

What does it matter anyway?  
The rivers are already wine-like  
And falling doesn't hurt  
Until you realise how long it's been

Take that goblet back to the altar  
Don't lose eye contact  
Falling forever will be exhausting  
So be a disgrace

The doors will be heavier on the way out  
Barge through like some kind of hunk  
I promise you will learn something  
Go forth and cultivate the desert

Amongst the dunes you can whisper  
Don't hoard any of the good news  
Let it grow like your own religion  
Yeah I know ... I'd want to keep it too.

## BIRTHDAY LUNCH AT BLACK ROCKS

Sarah Penwarden

### *Entrees*

Sashimi and wasabi dipping sauce  
Seared eggplant dip with pita

I'll need to have a biopsy. If it all goes wrong, they'll have to helicopter me out of here. Last time they gave me a truth drug after the treatment so I'd forget all about it. She had to hold me down when they gave me the drugs. She was ashen when I came round.

### *Mains*

Grilled salmon with garlic butter, chipped potatoes, blackened broccoli  
Skewered lamb, bulgar wheat, sliced zucchini

With the treatment last time, I felt like I was having a nervous breakdown. It happens, they say. It happens. She might give me a bone marrow transplant. My cousin. She's thinking about it, she says. There might be a chance of organ donation. A chance. I know the song I want them to play at my funeral.

### *Desserts*

Valrhona 70% bitter chocolate tart  
Burnt butter ice cream

I want to be wrapped in a shroud. I'd be buried in my back garden if I could. The trees are my friends. There's a fantail that comes nearby and watches me sometimes. When I'm hanging out the washing. I'll give away all my clothes. And my wine collection. I like a buttery Chardonnay. Or a rich Merlot. Like chocolate, like berries. I like the way it feels on my tongue. I won't forget.

### *Coffee & Petit Fours*

## PEREGRINE

### Sarah Penwarden

I had to set ground rules for our time together. They were a rich brew. I had to focus on being even-handed. He was always trying to get my attention, distract from her. He wanted me to judge who was right and wrong. I didn't take a position. If I had, I would have said she had the higher moral ground.

She didn't say what it had been like to live with him, but I could read between the lines. Twenty-five years: ten of living together, fifteen of marriage. There was a whiff of sulphur about them. Their temperaments, distinctly at odds: her fragile, him sure of himself. Years and years of paper cuts. Never healing. But she had her own power.

I caught something in his eyes at one point. It might have been shame. Their inner worlds contained so many potholes, places to turn your ankle. You needed personal protective equipment to enter that particular psychic space.

Jan Grebe, counsellor/mediator

She had very thin wrists, white English skin. Even though she'd lived here for years, she was one of those Brits you knew would just fry in the sun. I tried to help her. Going to court was a process of steaming off her skin layer by layer, she said. But she had some steel. I don't know how I felt towards her. Protective maybe. She made my groin stir. It was that combination of steely and fragile. Not many people make me feel weak. Or got under my skin. I tried to help her. Who knows if it did any good.

Richard Morris, lawyer

I know she's my mother, but she's her own person too. Of course I'd want her to stay here. But I know there's too many memories of her life with Dad. Yes, it was a war zone. I was the no-man's-land between them. Ferrying messages, taking cover at times. I got on with both of them. He was a bastard, but he was our bastard. Blood's thicker than water. She wants to make break, have a fresh start. I understand that. But he'll always be my Dad.

Kyle Crump, son

She knew where she was going; he didn't like that. His ego couldn't hack it. He was well-connected, successful, but she was also going places. Their marriage only lasted until she was more highly qualified and better paid than him. That's what killed it. That's when he decided to take her down. If he'd left her cleanly, that would have been one thing. But he had to take away her self-esteem, crush it. It makes me sad to think about it now, it really does.

Shami Patel, friend

She was always a gypsy, never settling or putting down roots. I was the one she turned to and the one who hurt her. I know that. It was beyond my power to stop it. We're all human, aren't we? Vindictive at heart. It was beyond my control.

Kevin Crump, ex-husband

I felt sorry for the dogs with that shouting. Dogs are sensitive creatures you know. They can hear stress in your voice.

Theirs was a beautiful property. Bee-you-ti-ful. Too big for me, too much work. What with my back. But there were native trees, sheltered. And you could see over the hills from the deck. He was a jovial chap, always up for a chat and a beer. She was different. I knew straight away

she wasn't from round here. I heard the valleys in her voice. Soft spoken, the lilts. Her mother had been a valley's girl. Her father had gone down the pits. I knew all about that. That heritage was in her bones too.

I caught her once, after he'd left, burning photos in the stove at the back of the property. I said to her, Bronwyn, that's good, but it's about getting rid of him inside your head, you know.

Ivor Griffiths, neighbour

You don't forgive someone because they deserve it. Even if they're contrite. Forgiveness is not for them; it's a gift you give yourself. It cleanses your soul. She came to me, and I gave her a blessing, for her journey. That angels be her companions until she returns.

Father Pieter van der Leiden

I'll do my penance. For saying yes to him in the first place. Work will be my focus, my redemption. But first, I'll walk the Camino. Exhaling the rage; all that was bitter. Inhaling what is possible, what may yet prevail. With my backpack and my two poles, I'll go where I choose and stop where I want to. I'll take my own path. Hope will rise up with the dust.

## ALONG THE BEACHES OF RIO

Sean West

De Janeiro, I walk until my feet burn  
like pistachio shells rubbed against concrete

and blistered into thighs. Golden-brown locals  
and overdone tourists laugh as they improvise

volleyball, dive head-first into each other. I sip  
a cocktail from the unripe belly of a coconut, trust

my phone alone on shore. Step further out  
until I'm shoulder-deep only to bodysurf

back to shallows then repeat. A local lady points  
to where my phone rests. A wave has swept

in like a pickpocket's sleight of hand, too quick  
for my eye. When I rush to turn it on, all I get

is kaleidoscopic acid trip or grungy white  
noise. Then a yellowed photo crinkles clean

across-screen, hovers in my field of vision  
for just a few seconds. In it, you're laughing,

bare chest peeling with a fierce sunburn  
You hold your empty fishing line high

and proud above your head as if to say,  
It's okay, son. Not all drowned things are lost.

## STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN A PANDEMIC

### Suzanne Herschell

rotting            sliding off their rails  
like the world    everywhere  
rage at rain rotting the frame  
double doors need fixing  
to shut out the outside            shut in the inside  
moving smoothly together against everything out there  
bubble intact  
fearful   the unseen   anxiety gnawing  
delete the unmasked thought    microbe-besieged  
scour germ-touched hands that have held the prospect  
wearing away patina of layered prints  
until skin lies in pieces    of affidavit

wear a mask    exclude lawless dust  
it doesn't take a pandemic    for chaos    or loss  
so weighted with heaviness            its crush  
the teeming rain's roar    blood gushing behind eyes  
watching the humourless theatre of purposeful shoppers  
avoid the confluence of many            their breath

distancing    metres apart  
scream a glare    if flesh invades  
lips puckered with masked contempt  
obsess over prices    fine print    compulsive reading  
lie of the half empty    everything a fraud  
duplicity all around            setting teeth on edge  
mouthfeel of tannin    sour grapes  
the obsequious fake has no currency  
Jeremiah or any other  
difficult    the fifth commandment's dichotomy.

butterfly    prime  
meat laid out in shrink-wrap euphemisms  
small morgues  
vacuum-packed    clinically curated for carnivores  
whole shebang wrapped in plastic  
no to single-use non-biodegradable bags  
platinum air points credit card    plastic too  
at the checkout's Perspex barrier  
hold it over terminal sucking the future    touch-free

sudden reflection    far from liberating  
hollow eyes laced with purple veins  
transfixed by the parody  
skin that held flesh secure in collusion with time  
civilisation's conspicuous decay trending to annihilation  
words careen in wild trajectories    threatening  
spinning    posturing    heckling  
so much indiscreet garbage  
mind & virus run amok

parallel lives    beyond the divide    or other digital side  
nameless days slow down to tuneless sound  
rhythm lost  
old people die who were dying  
urgency only for ends  
& the paring down to nothing much

lie on the endless bed    languish from dawn  
to reluctant acknowledgement of the day  
trees grow taller than the high tension wires  
lose personality    colour falling without restraint  
brown becoming winter  
season to reinvent mythology    in the void of isolation  
paint self-portrait            identity in strokes

few can knowingly talk about  
persona unknown to itself  
its many tones of black (black oil slow drying)

an enigma nothing of the past explains  
grew from strictures brimstone landscape of the pew  
escaping constraint  
evolving into a work unforeseen  
plagued  
by a blind date with the world

## GREEN TARA

Usha Kishore

Green Tara rises from Buddha's midnight tears.  
She flows past the dancing peacock, the meditating  
coral bark and the impossible orange dream. A feeling  
of water ripples through the gravel and whistles  
through the purple leaves of heavenly bamboo.

Green Tara circles my garden in magic dance, singing  
all the while: *In all my avatars, I vow to be a woman;  
and when I am enlightened, I shall remain a woman.*

Green Tara sheds the pomegranate arils of her womb,  
on my slumbering ferns, their fronds uncoiling in  
a tapestry of claret and silver. She smiles through  
her fine veil of dew, she balms the stars that bleed  
from my sky. She enfolds me in her incensed robes,  
untangling the knots between my breasts.

Green Tara washes me in the shimmering *koi* pond.  
She whispers secrets of the moon to me, woman  
born of water; woman of frozen sorrows, drowned joys  
and unfathomable depths. She anoints me with oil  
of jasmine, healing the mossed memories of my skin.

I dream her song in my sleep and pour it out in moonlight,  
when cherry blossom kisses the air, my whole body singing:  
*In all my avatars, I vow to be a woman, only a woman.*

## APARTMENT

### Vincent Brincat

I watered your plants  
while you were away.  
Emptied the rubbish.  
Collected your washing.  
Made your bed.  
Sampled your green tea with lemon  
and used your bathroom, twice.  
While my back was turned  
the sun filtered in  
through the windows that you left  
at half shade.  
I watched as it stretched its arms  
across the room  
almost reaching the opposite wall.

The plastic pot plants you keep  
fooled me into watering them as well,  
and they overflowed, sorry.  
Your wall clock ticked too loudly  
and your polished boards squeaked.  
I tripped on your door mat  
and slammed the front door shut  
so hard that it  
echoed back at me from the other  
end of the corridor.  
Oh, and I remembered to listen out  
for the final security 'click' at the closing

of the front door.  
It was all good.

Everything was as it should have  
been.  
The only thing out of place  
or missing  
was you.

## GARDEN JAZZ

Wendy Blaxland

The breeze improvises percussion,  
    running its fingers along the  
        jacaranda's feathery leaves,  
rattles the clattery palm fronds  
    like a xylophone,  
smooshing a wire brush across  
    a whole rack of gum-leaf drums  
till the sunlight grins and  
    sways its hips in time.

## REFLECTIONS IN THE POOL

Wendy Blaxland

Two young water dragons are pinned to the edge of the pool  
like my mother's marcasite brooch, and just as still  
as I splash my morning lengths.

How clumsy I must seem  
to those who can swivel in a flash  
and glide to the depths in effortless rippling curves.

I remember the tiny missing stone in her glittering brooch  
that told how often it was used;  
my eye always fingered the hole.

On the pool edge,  
I see one dragon has a crooked tail,  
the other, a fluttering flag of damaged skin.

They swivel an eye to the dangerous sky,  
aware of the watchers with death-dealing beaks.  
I tread water, memory and present counterpoised.

## WHEN I'M READY, I'LL ASK

Windy Lynn Harris

Let's take a look at that elbow. Yes, you're in pain. It's red for sure. You should get some ice on that. A doctor, you say? Maybe, though probably not since you're already moving that arm just fine, already flexing and testing your powerful joint with ease. Maybe you don't even need ice. But you're right. A good wife would get some for you.

The floor? Yes, that's my fault. I'll explain: I walked through the snow to the bus stop with the little one this morning and waited and waved and performed all of the good mommy things that a good mommy does. And then, when the bus was out of sight I trudged back to this house and clunked off my boots without brushing away the snow. I made a path straight to our bed for the only sliver sleep my packed schedule will allow.

I know you'd like some ice. I'm still a bit drowsy, but not too foggy to see your point. You've slipped and it's all my fault. You'd like me to get you that ice and then sit with you while it chills your elbow. You'd probably like me to get you some coffee too, something to warm you, but here's the thing: I'm tired. I'm stuck-at-the-bottom-of-an-avalanche tired and I can't be the person you're imagining. The person I was last year or the year before. A person with enough energy for you and your needs and this house and our son.

When I'm ready, I'll ask you why you're not at the job you promised you'd keep this time. I'll listen to you tell me about the unfair boss, the co-worker who doesn't respect you, and the customer who made you feel angry and small. I'll listen while you promise that it won't always be like this. That I'll be able to quit my night shift at the hospital soon.

Yes, I know. You'll be much happier at your next job. You'll be so much happier that you'll get promoted because that's what you deserve. You'll

make so much money that even your brother will be jealous. They'll all be jealous when they find out where you're going to work next. Maybe it'll be in the boat industry—something related to fishing—because who doesn't need that? Who doesn't need bait? Who doesn't need to get away every weekend to sit quietly on a lake thinking about all of the things they'll accomplish someday?

## ANTIMETAMORPHOSIS

Yuan Changming

Sure, I would paint my skin  
With the color of a wasp pupa, & I would dye my hair  
Wear two blue contacts, & I would even  
Go for plastic surgery, but if I really do  
I assure you, I will not remove my native village  
Accent while speaking this foreign tongue (I began  
To imitate like a frog at age nineteen); nor will I  
Completely internalise the English syntax &  
Aristotelian logic. No, I assure you that I'll not give up  
Watching movies or TV series, reading books  
Listening to songs, each in Chinese though I hate them  
For being too low & vulgar. I was born to eat dumplings  
Doufu, & thus fated to always prefer to speak Mandarin  
Though I write in English. I assure you that even if I am  
Newly baptised in the currents of science, democracy &  
Human rights, I will keep in line with my father's  
Haplogroup just as my sons do. No matter how  
We identify ourselves or are identified by others, this is  
What I assure you: I will never convert my proto selfhood  
Into white Dataism, no, not

In the yellowish muscle of my heart

## DEAR LITTLE LARDER

Zoë Meager

Dear Little Larder,

I'm writing to say that you were not an ugly baby, despite what your dad said that day we brought you home from hospital. He didn't mean it, or he did, but he shouldn't have, and he wouldn't mean it now. It's just that your big sister before you had been delivered, perfect as a peach, by caesarean. And then you, yanked from me, all angry and dented and put-upon.

'Ugly as wee thing,' your dad said, appearing in the lounge in nothing but undies and gumboots. It was early morning and he'd been out to feed the hens; it wasn't weird. 'Ugly as,' he said again, but not convincingly. Not so it would make you worry.

'*All babies are beautiful*,' the Plunket nurse insisted on almost every word. Then she bent over you like she was inspecting a late harvest of plums. Unpeeled you from your furry wrapper, and when she saw the dint in your head she looked at me like I was a bad tree from a storybook. As if I'd let you fall.

When she saw your dad's guitars lined up against the wall she went, 'Are you a musician? Do you make much money out of that?' As if music doesn't nourish a baby. As if we should have stacked up Weetbix, ten boxes high and twelve boxes wide, before we even thought about looking at each other sideways with any kind of glint in our eyes.

We burst out laughing before she even got her car door closed, that Plunket nurse, we couldn't help it. We never mentioned your dad had a day job. After that, we knew we'd be alright. You and your sister, we stacked you up like bottled fruit. Each of you in your own way, sweet and sweeter. If the hens stopped laying, we could eat you all up with Weetbix and milk.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**John Bartlett** is the author of three novels, a collection of short stories and nonfiction. His poetry has been published in a number of Australian and overseas journals. In June 2019 Melbourne Poets Union released his chapbook *The Arms of Men*; in May 2020 Ginninderra Press published *Songs of the Godforsaken* as part of its Picaro Poets' series; and his full collection *Awake at 3am* was launched in 2021. He was recently the winner of the 2020 Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize.

**Wendy Blaxland** is an award-winning writer. Her poetry has appeared in Australia, England, the US and Europe. She has also published over 110 books, mainly for children, and had over 25 plays produced. Wendy lives surrounded by bush, which inspires much of her poetry. But as a citizen of the world, she is passionate about how poetry can vibrate heartstrings.

**Jean Bohuslav** enjoys being a member of a poetry group in Torquay Australia. Her other interests are painting and the philosophy of mindfulness.

**Vincent Brincat** lives in Sydney, Australia. He writes across a number of genres. As his writing has developed he has discovered that 'letting go' and allowing the writing to tell the story itself enriches the text and experience for both writer and reader.

**Owen Bullock** has published three collections of poetry, five books of haiku and a novella, the most recent being *Summer Haiku* (2019) and *Work & Play* (2017). He has a website for his research into poetry and process, at <https://poetry-in-process.com/>. He teaches creative writing at the University of Canberra.

Formerly a UK-based University scientist, **Hugh Cartwright** is now retired and lives on Canada's Pacific coast. Writing provides some relief from his hopeless pursuit: creating an orchard of citrus trees that will survive the Canadian winter.

**Edward Caruso** has been published in *A Voz Limpia*, *Australian Multilingual Writing Project*, *La Bottega della Poesia* (Italy), *n-Scribe*, *Right Now*, *TEXT*, *Unusual Work* and *Well-Known Corners: Poetry on the Move*. His second collection of poems, *Blue Milonga*, was published by Hybrid Publishers in January 2019. In August 2019 he featured on 3CR's Spoken Word program.

**Angela Costi's** fifth poetry collection is *An Embroidery of Old Maps and New* (Spinifex 2021). Recent poetry and essays are published in *Hecate*, *Burrow*, *Antipodes*, *Cordite* and *The Journal of Working-Class Studies*. Creative development funding from the City of Melbourne is enabling her to research and draft a poetry manuscript titled *Outskirts*.

**Helen Cushing** is a writer and yoga teacher living in Hobart. When her children had grown up she left home to immerse herself in ashram life in a remote part of India. After two years of this remarkable way of life, she returned to Australia. These are the first writings to be published about her experience.

**Jacques Denault** is a creative writing MFA candidate at Emerson College, an instructor with Emerson College's EmersonWRITES, and a senior editorial assistant with *Revider*. His micro fiction 'A Roller Coaster in the Trees' placed in the Micro Madness contest hosted by *Flash Frontier*. His work has appeared in *Red Fez*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Cunning Folk Magazine*, and elsewhere. He runs a blog and website alongside Isabella Connor: jacquesandisabella.com.

**Anne Di Lauro** grew up in Brisbane, obtained a BA from the University of Queensland, qualified as a librarian at the University of NSW, and went on to work overseas in the field of information for economic and social development. After returning to Brisbane, she retrained and worked as a Jungian-oriented psychotherapist. Her poetry has appeared in *Meniscus*.

**Sam Innes Guardin** is a poet, singer and songwriter based in Wellington and traveling around New Zealand as much as possible. Sam is currently studying horticulture and working on a collection of songs for a debut music release.

**Lorraine Gibson** is a recently retired anthropologist who writes poetry. Born in Glasgow, Scotland, Australia has been home for over forty years. Her writing is published in various journals, and in the book *We Don't Do Dots: Aboriginal Art and Culture in Wilcannia, New South Wales* (Sean Kingston Publishing, 2013).

**James Grabill's** work appears online at *Terrainonline*, *Calibanonline*, *Ginosko*, *Sequestrum*, and others. His books include *Poem Rising Out of the Earth* (1994) and *An Indigo Scent after the Rain* (2003), both Lynx House Press; and the environmental prose poems, *Sea-Level Nerve: Book One* (2014) and *Book Two* (2015), both published by Wordcraft of Oregon. His new collections are: from Cyberwit in India, *Branches Shaken by Light*; and from Raw Art Review, *Eye of the Spiral*. For a number of years in Portland, he taught writing and global issues relative to sustainability.

**Rhiannon Hall** has been sharing her love of poetry for the past seven years through a poetry club at the high school where she teaches. She has poems published in *BlazeVOX20*, *Burrow*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Please See Me*, and *Tarot*, and has published an essay in *Axon: Creative Explorations*. She is a Doctor of Creative Arts candidate at Western Sydney University.

**Windy Lynn Harris'** work has been published in *The Literary Review*, *34th Parallel*, and *Poor Mojo's Almanac*, among other journals. She has received two Professional Development Grants from the Arizona Commission on the Arts which are funded by the state of Arizona and The National Endowment on the Arts.

**Dominique Hecq** grew up in the French-speaking part of Belgium. She now lives in Melbourne. Her works include a novel, three books of stories and ten volumes of poetry. *Kaosmos* (2020), *Tracks* (2020) and, with Eugen Bacon, *Speculate: A Collection of Microlit* (2021) are her latest collections in English. Hecq is a recipient of the 2018 International Best Poets Prize administered by the International Poetry Translation and Research Centre in conjunction with the International Academy of Arts and Letters.

**Jenna Heller** is an American-New Zealander living in Christchurch, New Zealand. In 2020, she won the NZ National Flash Fiction Day competition, appeared in the *Best Small Fictions* anthology, and was shortlisted for the New Zealand Society of Authors' Heritage Awards (for poetry) and the Takahē Monica Taylor Poetry Prize. She previously appeared in and was joint winner of the *Meniscus* Prose Prize.

**Suzanne Herschell**, former teacher of accelerated students, and mother of four, is a poet and award-winning artist, curator at NZ Academy of Fine Arts, and selector, curator and judge of national exhibitions (Curator 2020 Wallace Art Award, and Parkin Drawing Prize). Her poems have been published by *Meniscus*, *NZ Poetry Society*, *Blackmail Press*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Fib Review*, *The Ghazal Page*, NZ and US National Poetry Day selections, and chosen for volume 12 of *Katherine Mansfield Studies* (Edinburgh University Press). She received a 2020 Pushcart Prize nomination.

**D.A. Hosek's** writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Southwest Review*, *Switchback*, *Popshot*, *Steam Ticket*, *Blue River Review* and elsewhere. His poem, 'Snowman Tracks' appeared in *Meniscus* Vol. 4, Iss. 2. He earned an MFA in fiction from the University of Tampa. He lives and writes in Oak Park, IL and spends his days as an insignificant cog in the machinery of corporate America. <http://dahosek.com>

Indian born **Usha Kishore** is a British poet, translator and a research scholar at Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland. Internationally published and widely anthologised, Usha's poetry is featured in the British and Indian educational syllabi. Usha is the author of three poetry collections, the latest of which is *Immigrant* (Eyewear Publishing, London, 2018).

**Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé** is the author of a novel, a quasi-memoir, two lyric essay monographs, four hybrid works, and nine poetry collections. A former journalist, he has edited over twenty-five titles. Among other accolades, Desmond is the recipient of the IBPA Benjamin Franklin Award, Independent Publisher Book Award, National Indie Excellence Book Award, Poetry World Cup, Singapore Literature Prize, and three Living Now Book Awards. He helms Squircle Line Press, and can be found at: [desmondkon.com](http://desmondkon.com)

**Rosanna E. Licari**'s work has appeared in various journals and anthologies including *Idiom 23*, *fourW: New Writing*, *Scars: Anthology of Microlit* (Spineless Wonders, 2020), *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (MUP, 2020), *TEXT*, and *Pulped Fiction: An Anthology of Microlit* (Spineless Wonders, 2021). She recently won the 2021 AAALS Poetry Prize, and is the poetry editor of *StylusLit*. She teaches English to migrants and refugees in Brisbane, Australia.

**Kate Maxwell** is yet another teacher with writing aspirations. She's been published and awarded in Australian and International literary magazines such as *fourW*, *Hecate*, *Linq*, *Swyntax*, *Verandah*, *Social Alternatives*, *The New England Review*, *The Chopping Blog*, and *Blood and Bourbon*. Kate's interests include film, wine, and sleeping. Her first poetry anthology, to be published with Interactive Publications, Brisbane is forthcoming in 2021. She can be found at <https://kateswritingplace.com/publications/>

**Zoë Meager** is from Aotearoa New Zealand. Her work has appeared abroad in publications including *Granta* and *Overland*, and locally in *Landfall*, *Mayhem*, *Turbine* | *Kapohau*, and *Bonsai: Best small stories from Aotearoa New Zealand*. There's more at [zoemeager.com](http://zoemeager.com)

**Michael Mintrom** lives in Melbourne. He has published poetry in various literary journals including *Ekphrastic Review*, *Landfall*, *Literary Yard*, *Meniscus*, *Quadrant*, *Rabbit Poetry*, *Sport*, and *takahē* magazine. He is a past winner of the University of Canterbury's MacMillan Brown Prize for Writers.

**Amber Moffat** is an author, illustrator and poet from New Zealand living in Western Australia. She writes for adults and children. Her picture book *I Would Dangle the Moon* was published by MidnightSun. Amber's poetry and short fiction feature in Penguin Random House and Night Parrot Press anthologies this year. She has recently started working on her PhD in Creative Writing at Edith Cowan University.

**Dani Netherclift** is a writer living in the Victorian high country, surrounded now by mountains. She was the 2020 winner of the AAWP/Slow Canoe Creative Nonfiction Prize for emerging writers and has otherwise been recently published in *Meniscus*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *The Slow Canoe Audio Lockdown Project*, as well as in *Meanjin* and *Cordite Poetry Review*, and others.

**Keith Nunes (Te Ika a Maui)** was nominated for Best Small Fictions 2019 and the Pushcart Prize, and he won the 2017 Flash Frontier Short Fiction Award. He has had poetry, fiction, haiku and visuals published around the globe. He creates to stay sane.

**Mark O'Flynn** has published six collections of poetry as well as four novels. His latest book is the collection of short stories *Dental Tourism* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2020).

**Sarah Penwarden** works as a counsellor educator and therapist based in Auckland. She writes poetry both as a creative practice and as/for therapy. She has poems published in *Meniscus*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *Southerly*, *Quadrant*, *takahē*, and *Turbine*. She also has short stories published in *tākāhe*, *Brief*, and a story she wrote was broadcast on Radio New Zealand. Sarah also writes for children and has short stories and poems published in *The School Journal*.

**Georgia Rose Phillips** is a writer, casual academic, and PhD candidate at the University of New South Wales. In 2018, her creative nonfiction novella, *Holocene*, was shortlisted and then highly commended for the Scribe Nonfiction Literary Prize. In 2021, her short story, 'New Balance,' was a fiction winner in the Ultimo Literary Prize. Alongside her research, teaching and creative practice, Georgia works as a literary critic for *The Historical Novels Review*. Her work appears in *TEXT*, *Literary Veganism*, *Rethinking History*, *Verity La*, *The Wheeler Centre Notes*, *Social Alternatives*, and more. She is currently completing her debut novel.

**Donna Pucciani**, a Chicago-based writer, has published poetry worldwide in *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Acumen*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *ParisLitUp*, *Li Poetry*, *Voice and Verse*, *The Pedestal*, and *Journal of Italian Translation*. Her latest book of poems is *Edges* (Purple Flag, 2016).

**Kristian Radford** is a writer and schoolteacher living in Melbourne. His poems have been published in *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Otoliths*, *Marrickville Pause* and *Interior*.

**Richard Rebel**'s writing featured in numerous Clarendon House anthologies between 2019 and 2021. His writing has appeared in *The Blue Nib* and elsewhere. In 2017 he was selected to attend One Story's Sirenland Writers' Conference in Positano, Italy. He is a writer and teacher who lives on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia.

**Ian C Smith**'s work has been published in *Antipodes*, *BBC Radio 4 Sounds*, *Cordite*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Griffith Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Southword*, and *The Stony Thursday Book*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy* (Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide, 2014). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.

**Adam Stokell**'s poems have appeared in various journals, both in Australia and abroad, including *Cordite*, *Meanjin*, *Plumwood Mountain* and *Communion Arts Journal*. His first poetry collection, *Peopling the Dirt Patch* (A Published Event, 2018), formed part of The People's Library exhibit at the Long Gallery, Salamanca. He lives in Hobart, Tasmania.

**Dominic Symes** writes on Kauria Country (Adelaide). His poetry has featured in *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Australian Book Review*, *Transnational Literature*, and *Award Winning Australian Writing*. He curates NO WAVE, a monthly poetry reading series. He was selected for *Cordite/AP's Tell Me Like You Mean It* anthology and the Emerging Writers Festival in 2020.

**Lydia Trethewey** is an artist and writer from Perth, Western Australia. She is currently undertaking a PhD in poetry at Curtin University, exploring experiences of nascent queerness through expanded forms of ekphrasis. She works as a sessional academic in the department of art at Curtin, where she also received her PhD in fine art. Her poetry has been published by *Cathexis Northwest*, *Truth Serum* and *Pure Slush*.

**Amelia Walker** completed her PhD in 2016 and currently lectures at the University of South Australia. In 2020 she co-edited a special issue of *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* (with Prof Jaydeep Sarangi of New Alipore College, Kolkata) that featured Indian and Australian poets in dialogic correspondence via poetry (see [TEXT Special Issue 60](#)).

**Claire Watson** is a Salvation Army Officer who turned to poetry after the death of her only daughter, Hannah, in 2014. Her memoir, *Fingerprints of Grace*, was published in 2017, and her poems have been published by *Friendly Street Poets*, Hunter Writers Centre, and *InDaily*. She lives in Murray Bridge, South Australia.

**Sean West** is a Meanjin-based poet and workshop facilitator. He's been shortlisted for the Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize in 2020 and 2019. His work has recently appeared in Red Room Poetry's *Writing Water*, *TEXT* journal, and *Antithesis*. He is founding editor of *Blue Bottle Journal*. Find more at [www.callmemariah.com](http://www.callmemariah.com) or [www.bluebottlejournal.com](http://www.bluebottlejournal.com).

**Janet Jiahui Wu** is a Hong-Kongese-Chinese-Australian visual artist and writer of poetry and fiction. She has published in various literary magazines such as *Voiceworks*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Rabbit Poetry*, *Plumwood Mountain Poetry*, *foam:e*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Eunoia Review*, *Yes!*, *Gone Lawn*, *SCUM*, and so on. She currently lives in South Australia.

**Yuan Changming** edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Yuan in Vancouver. Credits include ten Pushcart nominations, eight poetry awards and chapbooks, as well as publications in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry* and *BestNewPoemsOnline*, among others.

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