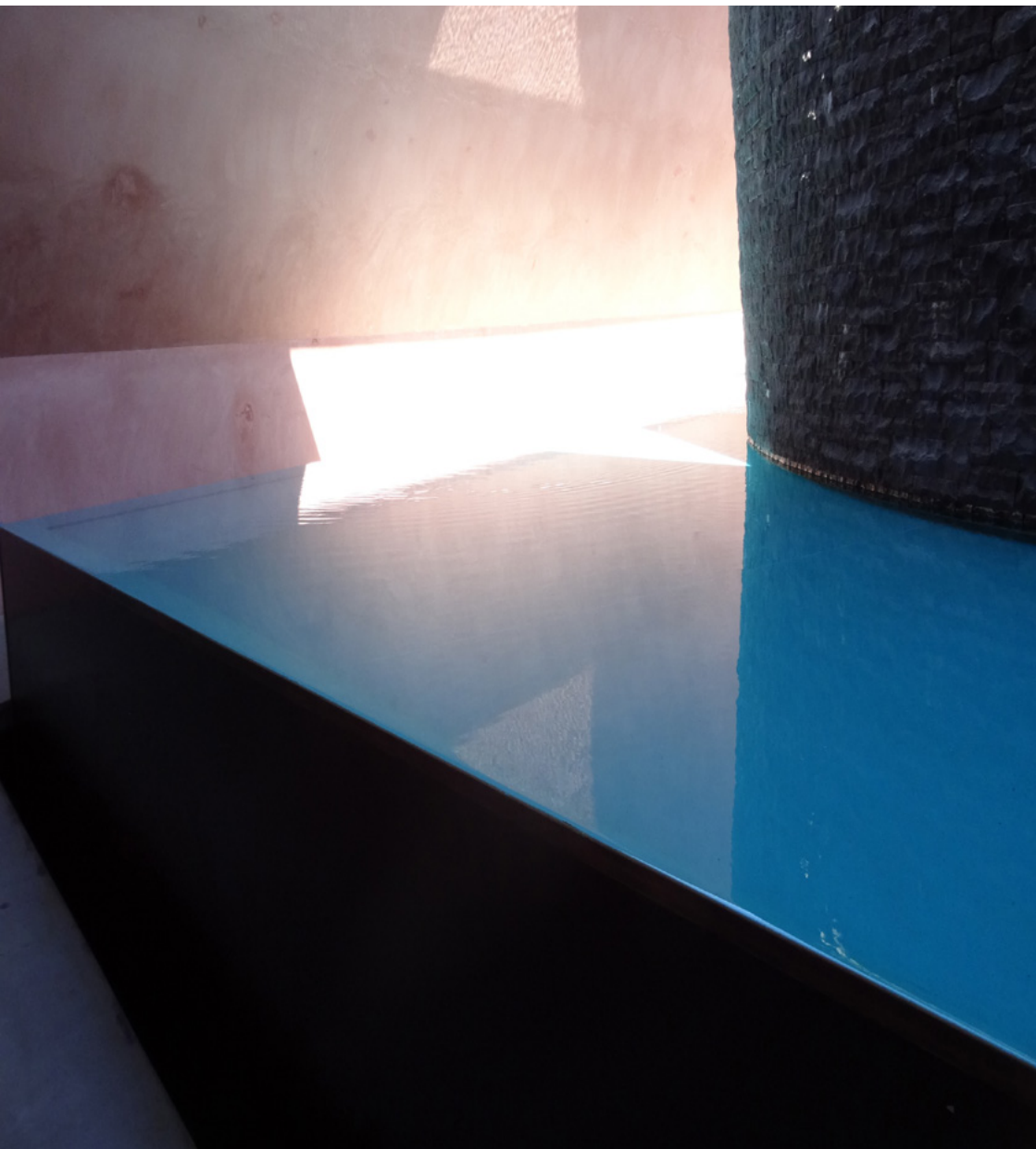




MENISCUS

L I T E R A R Y J O U R N A L

Volume 8, Issue 1 2020





Contents:

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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.

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EDITORIAL

This issue of *Meniscus* has been framed by two events, one global and one personal for one of the co-editors. As writers were submitting pieces for the current issue, the COVID-19 virus was at the periphery of our consciousness but, as the closing date came and April launch date approached, it became apparent that these were no ordinary times and all of those involved in bringing the issue to the world were themselves caught in the tension of maintaining standards in our ‘daytime’ work, while working from home and under containment. Our titular image and explanation of *Meniscus*, of ‘how surfaces, curves, tension and openness interact ... the way in which the surface of the water features, and the uncertainty of the water’s containment, seems to analogue the excitement and anxiety inherent in creative practice, and the delicate balance between possibility and impossibility’, became a reality for our daily lives as well as our own creativity.

Then shortly before settling to read through the 876 poems, 75 stories and 48 pieces of flash writing originally submitted, the lead editor of this issue suffered a fall and was diagnosed with a meniscal tear, no less. The medic was no doubt puzzled by a gasp of recognition, despite the extreme pain, and it prompted a revisit to the other meanings of ‘Meniscus’ beyond physics and biology.

From the Greek μηνίσκος, *Meniskos* means literally *crescent moon*, but also can refer to a necklace, a curved line in battle, a lens with a crescent-shaped section, (a concavo-convex or convexo-concave lens) and more obscurely, a disk placed above the head of a Greek statue, presumably to protect it from weather (or bird) damage. Coincidentally, in the Southern Hemisphere, New Zealanders were encouraged to consider home confinement as being in a bubble, a perspective of crescent moons and curving lenses.

Whatever the imagery evoked by these circumstances it generated a desire for the current issue of *Meniscus* to contain writing which arrested and diverted, which reassured while it disturbed. But then, in the middle of this period of disaster, the Irish poet Eavan Boland died. Her work has, for decades, embodied the power of the written word and of poetic expression in the face of apparently imponderable crises. In her case, this primarily took the form of the articulation of women’s experiences in society, in family, and in history: the marginalisation of women; the

struggle to claim a voice, and find a space from which to be heard. But more than social battle, her work exemplifies what can be done in and through creative expression: how grief can be rendered endurable, hope made real. Writing about women's rights, she says, 'Remind us now again,' she writes in *Our future will become the past of other women*, 'that history changes in one moment ... that it belongs to us, to all of us'. In this moment of history, and honouring her life's work, we extend this sentiment to 'all of us', all of us living in and through the global crises we have inherited.

All the pieces published here have been selected for their depth of engagement as well as the quality of the writing, the idea and story and, yes, their containment within the circles of their worlds. Once again, the huge response to our regular call for submissions reflects the journal's global appeal—and our willingness to take on very young and very experienced authors, work written in dialect, translation and idiom, formal and informal structures and merged genres; the work must stand alone, and continue to reward after several readings.

In this time of enforced social isolation, artists have generated music, poetry, films, paintings, stories and readings, which they shared through the internet and social media. Many readers rediscovered personal libraries and took up ancient cloth-bound editions, tatty old paperbacks or found e-books to enrich unexpectedly long days. Several online reading groups selected Daniel Defoe's 'A journal of the plague year' for discussion; a fascinating and informative piece of writing which, despite his career as a journalist, is a work of fiction, published not long after 'Robinson Crusoe', in 1722. Defoe was only 5 years old in 1665, the year the bubonic plague killed a quarter of the population of London, and his narrator is a middle-aged citizen who remained in London and took on the role of chronicler and observer. So many of the circumstances still resonate with our times; houses where the sick were identified were shut up and cities shut in. Playhouses, ale houses and entertainments were shut down and gatherings of people discouraged and dispersed. These formal and legal measures by the mayor and councillors of London, 'Orders concerning loose persons and idle assemblies', taken in a time without awareness of sanitation, germ theory or viral transmission still seem extraordinary. Just as many measures have employed military terminology if not tactics—Lock Down, Kit Up, beat the odds, or war time jingles- Stay Home, Stay Safe, — against the COVID-19 plague in our own times, Defoe writes,

A plague is a formidable enemy and is armed with terrors that every man is not sufficiently fortified to resist or prepared to stand the shock against.'

This issue of *Meniscus* proudly includes a selection of writing called up in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where writers as chroniclers or observers, like Defoe's narrator, or unashamedly 'loose persons' and entertainers, have shown willing to 'stand the shock' against this plague.

It also includes a small set of writings that are the product of an initiative of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP)—which publishes *Meniscus*. The AAWP called out to members for examples of how their thinking and being has found expression in creative forms, for a project titled *The in/completeness of human experience*. Over 200 short pieces were submitted in a very brief (9-day) window, and like the writing in the main part of *Meniscus*, they speak to in/completeness, resilience and playfulness; offer clear-eyed exposition of the impact of this historical moment; and test out what established forms can offer. Most of the selected works are being published in the AAWP's scholarly journal, *TEXT*; others, which seemed to have more of a 'Meniscus' sensibility, are presented here, embedded as a little collection within the main issue. The whole issue, we hope, will enrich your experience, and later your memories, of living where with this 'formidable enemy', and resisting the shock of the real.

Gail Pittaway

Jen Webb

For the *Meniscus* co-editors

EXTRACT

Tony Beyer

the man alone in a boat
out on the water
isn't really fishing

he has no need of food
or trophies
or of exercise

all of these
are provided for
in his life's arrangements

but he does need
the quiet pat of wavelets
against the strakes

the shoreline fuzz
of tree silhouettes
and cabin smoke

and the infinitude
of beginning dusk
that will coax him home

LOVE RITUAL

Tomas Baiza

Velvety cheeks, silky eyebrows, two impossibly soft lips. Everything your fingers explore is so achingly close to perfection.

The room is silent, except for the beeping and subtle thrum of machines. Wispy shuffling in your peripheral. Words are unthinkable, profane.

There are no windows. It is impossible to tell what time of day it is. Time has no meaning here. Not anymore.

Everyone wears masks, pulled high over mouths and noses, only eyes exposed. One of the half-faces is crying, her throat gurgling and blue paper mask soiled by tears and snot. Most of the rest have turned away or try to act busy.

No one will look at you, and still everyone manages to watch.

You shut your eyes against the odors—cold, biting, antiseptic—that are supposed to instill confidence that everything will work out fine, that the experts had this covered, that this could never go very, very wrong. So wrong that the sterile promises claw past clenched teeth and nest heavily on your tongue.

Now you know that lies taste like white chocolate.

Yet the lies cannot ruin the most glorious smell of this world: newborn hair. Rich, human, and necessary. Hair so fine and light as atoms that it might as well be smoke easing past your lips.

Unencumbered by reason, you hum a lullaby your mother taught you, a traditional Mexican chanty that trivializes violence. You give it as an offering because it is the only Spanish song you can think of in your insanity. The very idea of your voice not being the last thing he hears might send you through the window—if only there were one. You tell yourself it's okay because, no matter the lyrics, your mother gave you this song out of love. One of her rituals.

You will choke down the salt of your rage and repeat the ritual, here, in this place. You will do it because, more than anything else, a place like this needs love.

MARITIME

Adam P. Davis

I gaze at dusk-soused waves
below mutinous red sky.
The fizzy brews of breakers salt
the undertows of memory.
Here we always used to lie
when drowsy moon rose after nine,
and skiffs on distant bobbing swells
grazed horizon's lips of flame.
Twilight splashed your tender eyes,
which glowed below obsidian pools
of shoulder-lapping hair.
Your liquid laugh, peal by peal,
watered fronds of palms.

But within you, there were scars.
Maligned by maws of tyrants,
you fled across the longitudes.
With flesh your only border,
with heart your only home,
you knew the shame of exile,
and once within the Statue's aura,
could not even stop to breathe:
you worked your fingers to the bone.

Tonight I smell the brine, where once
some fish grew limbs from fins, forsook
the amniotic sea, crawled onto a beach
like this, became many eons after, us—
air-infused, without our gills,
crushed by foreign weight of land.
As darkness rinses out the day,
I make a wish on pulsing stars
that you will find the perfect tide
to tow you to a place you love,
to make you maritime again.

THE NIVAL GARDEN

Christopher Sanderson

The Word of the Day is **nival**.
adjective
of or growing in snow: *nival flora*.
Dictionary.com

The nival garden is, by necessity, flat.
A layer of dense green huddled under the snow
And above the dirt.
Also into the dirt, which rarely freezes below the snow,
Which is always frozen
And delivers pale, useful light—
Not plenteous but needed in this time.
Yes, time. That's the thing.
'The refrigerator stops time for vegetables,'
I remember reading somewhere.
And now I see my nival garden as a living refrigerator.

By the way, it taught me this, the nival garden taught me this:
That things live through cold,
Though they may not live through freezing.
I was taught this by tough cabbages
Who came up anyway in the spring, never planted.
This year, I deliberately did not pull up the brown fall plants.
This year, I covered everyone who survived the first frosts.
This year, I stole a bale of hay from Ft. Tryon Park.

And that's another story.

By the way, it taught me this, fatherhood taught me this:
Observe what is natural and loved and good
And try to nurture that.
I was taught this by the delightful behavior of our toddler
Who loves to say and do things that are celebrated.
His first word was 'hi!' but he soon learned 'yay!'
His first love was MaMa but he soon learned 'thank you, Dada!'
His first compliment was 'mmm, s'good!' but he soon learned 'my

favourite!
Shut up about the hay, I'll get to that.

We live in the North. He's a nival kid.
He doesn't care about the cold and wants to go outside
In the snow
And he loves the dirt—
Needed in his time of growing, too.
Yes, time. That's the thing.
The assignment of his growing life is play,
I remember Mr. Rodgers say,
And now I see my nival garden growing in his living regard.

OPA'S BOSCH PEARS

David M. Alper

Not all of my picks have
been options for a good
grandson to take. These
pits are in the form of my
eye, viewing the knotty
core of being. Don't weep
for what you can't grasp.
All fruit falls sometime:
that's what I reaped by
watching you live like a
pear tree. And when no one
was tracking me, I trekked
into the sweet reek and
heap, steeping around
shredded cinnamon-shaded
pieces, smashed seeds, ripe
enough to take your fallen
fruit within me.

WHEN ONE DOOR CLOSES

Ayesha Assad

I remember when you lurched
on blinding steps, tiptoeing outside the rails.
We fancied floating down like dust specks
smattering the entwined sofas.
Outside, you drank witch's brew
coated with a thin magenta membrane,
tasting the tang of blackberry jelly and forgetting it was there
until your stomach churned. The dandelions swayed
like cocoons of feathery droplets, like the rainwater you held dear,
clutching it with your tongue, spreading it in your mouth.
We used to dress ourselves with glossy black wigs and burnt sand grit.
We used to wrap notebook paper in sheets of ink. Inside, I crushed
coffee beans
into fairy dust then spread them over fresh milk. You sipped it like it
was holy,
your pupils engorged, your hair coarse like fox fur. Usman melted ice
onto his face
and dug his grimy nails into yellow peels. Once, he sat on a football,
and you laughed.

9 YEARS, 10 MONTHS AND 17 DAYS

Mark Putzi

I was a big kid. Overweight, but stocky, very strong and tall for my age.
I remember I was pushing my infant brother's baby carriage around
the block. We did this fairly often, my sisters and I, because we loved
my infant brother. On his first birthday, we cut a spiky crown out of a
paper bag, placed it on his head and took pictures.

We passed in front of a house that had the front yard torn up and
reseeded. The kid who lived there stood in the loose dirt with an air rifle.
'Oh, can I see?' he asked, 'Is that your brother or your sister?' We indicated
male. He came over to have a look. 'He's so cute,' the kid said. My brother
wore a onesie and slept in the carriage.

The kid took the air rifle, pushed the end of it into the loose dirt, cocked
it, and shot the dirt into my brother's face. He laughed. My sisters weren't
laughing. I pretended to laugh. I snuck behind the kid, looped my arms
underneath his shoulders and behind his head and dragged him back
and forth across the loose dirt three times. His pants filled with topsoil.
'How do you like it?' I said, 'What's the matter? Why aren't you laughing
now?' He ran crying into the house.

When we reached the end of the block, one of my sisters called my
name and I looked at her. She pointed to a man running across the yards
straight after us. The man jumped across a low hedge. 'It's you!' he said
and grabbed me by the arm. He yanked me back in the direction he came
from. I turned to my sisters and said, 'Take Michael home.'

He pulled me until we stood in front of the house with the torn up
lawn where the kid waited with a woman. 'That's him,' the kid said. The
short dark woman now stood behind the man a few paces back in the
middle of the yard with her arms crossed, accusing me with her look.
The kid clung to her like a mole on someone's cheek. He stood small and
helpless, sobbing, burying his face in her thigh.

The man said, 'How old are you? How the fuck old are you. Because
my son is only eight. What are you, thirteen? Fourteen? Answer me!'

I tried to decide whether to say nine or ten. I was closer to ten, but
everyone said I was still nine. I said, 'I don't know.'

'Listen to me!' said the man. He held up my arm in front of my face,

squeezed it and twisted it until it hurt. 'I could break your fucking arm right now! Understand? Leave my kid alone! Now get the fuck out of here.' He pushed me. I lost my balance, but I didn't fall.

By the time I got home I was crying. My mother went down on one knee in front of me, pushed the hair out of my face with one hand, and asked me what happened. I told the story between sobs. 'Whatever you do,' my mother said, 'Don't tell your father.'

When my father came home, I was sitting at the kitchen table. He was a construction worker and spent all day, day after day, pushing wet concrete around, stressing his arms and legs to exhaustion. He spent a lot of time in bars, but today he was home early. He wasn't drunk. Before he married, he had delivered money between Milwaukee and Chicago for a bookie. He seldom spoke of his former job, but when he did, he said it was sometimes dangerous, and always lucrative. He stopped running money when he married, but he had friends he said, friends in the business.

That evening I tried not to say anything, but very soon I cried again. I don't remember exactly how I told him, but against my mother's wishes, the message was conveyed. 'Come with me,' my father said.

I showed him the house with the torn up lawn. We went around to the backyard and he rang the doorbell. The man answered, looked at my father, then looked at me. He tried to slam the door shut, but my father pulled it open, grabbed him by the shirt collar and dragged him outside. My father held him on his knees on the ground with one arm, and with the other arm, his right, my father hit the man repeatedly in the face. The man begged, 'Please stop! Please stop! I'll never do it again! I promise, only don't hit me again. Please!' My father continued to hit the man until his face and the front of his shirt were covered in blood.

We didn't say anything when we left the yard and went home.

For that one day at least my father was my hero.

I saw the kid several times afterwards, even played with him, but I never saw the man again. When I was around, he wouldn't leave the house. When I played with the kid, whose name was Sheldon, I would look up at the house on occasion at a certain window. Inside, the curtain would be pulled half away, and when I looked, slowly it descended and came to rest, like a hawk suspended in air, just before landing. Was it the man or his wife? I didn't know.

I played with Sheldon pretty often for about a year. The grass had grown in a dark green shade, and we played marbles, sometimes tossed around

a football, tackling each other, laughing. After a while, whenever I looked up, the curtain hung there undisturbed. Then I stopped playing with Sheldon. There were two brothers on the end of the block I liked more.

KATIE, AS PASTORAL

Duncan Tierney

Before the tilling of our skin,
before clavicles became, to us
a structure, and earlobes, supper,
and memories,
like stones in an untilled field,
before we unearthed one another
by golden iris's embers
I had questions,
like whetstones
that screech at dawn.

But the scrape of steel,
is no longer as loud
as that curl resting, soundless
like ivy on her cheek,
and the sunset
behind tomorrow's eyes.

YOUR LEFT HAND

Genevieve Hartman

your left hand is stretched
out to me, but i don't
know what it is asking.

this life we have is strange -
fragile as a finger,
so easily broken, bent
beyond fixing. but
i do not want to live
a life overshadowed
by unknowns.

i take your hand, trace
the crooked finger.
i want to stop
doubting what gestures
mean. i want to believe they
speak for themselves.

VISITING THE ARTIST: AT PETER'S HOUSE

Anne di Lauro

First, of course, one sees the sea outside.
This view of distant sea deserves its due,
Its extraverted blueness only asks
For admiration.
What you see is what you get today.
For depth one must imagine its grey moods
Or exhilarating clashes in the sky.

We go inside to see the sea inside,
To look at canvases through half-closed eyes.
The land now seems to lie within a dream
Drowned in a geological dreamtime sea;
That promised inland sea seen from within
Through mirrored surfaces, transparent oils.
Heat shimmers evoke trees that might be there;
Heat-absorbing rocks are bathed in air;
The air takes on a white translucent shape.
Impossible to guess from where it comes
Or what it asks.

STEP/MOTHER

Jessica Temple

Stepmothers were never as evil
as fairy stories would have us believe:
Poisoning apples and denying ball gowns.
Tempting fathers to abandon children.
Tricking youngsters into losing themselves in a wood.
Obliging their charges with all the housekeeping,
feeding them scraps meant for dogs or rubbish heaps
while fattening themselves on the best portions.

The step in stepmother is not a removal,
as in a step away.
Instead, it's from the German *stief*,
meaning *grief*,
as in *bereavement*, as in
the mother of bereaved children.

Stepmothers carry their children's grief
and their own as well—
that when those children loosed their birthcries
she was not there to quiet them.
She holds close that falseness, as in
not my mother when a mother is what is wanted.
See, it is not wickedness that leads stepmothers astray.
It is sadness.

DIDO, ESTRANGED

Alberta Adji

It is still dark outside, and nobody is in sight. Here in Pati village, Rembang, Central Java, they keep the houses quite far from one another so that the cats and the chickens can roam about. The wind strikes my face gently as I step back inside the house. *Bu'* Endah busies herself in the kitchen, coming and going with plates full of food and empty cups. Little Riri is trailing behind her mother, carrying a pan of hot broth by the ears. She almost spills the broth on the table as she trips on Kiki's tail. Kiki lets out a meow and *Bu'* Endah scolds Riri for not paying attention while walking. I help both of them lay out the meal in the dining room and silently make a study of my host. A woman of thirty-two, medium complexion, straight nose, delicate jaws, and average eyes. She has chosen long raven tresses and thick eyebrows to match her features. Gold ornaments shine at her fingers, wrists and throat.

I wonder why she hasn't chosen to take another husband yet as she is still young and good-looking. To feed her little one and pets, *Bu'* Endah earns her living by making and selling traditional herbal medicine and facial masks. Sometimes she sews garments and embroidery for *kebaya* and slippers. She would certainly make a wonderful wife, one that could make any husband proud. Still, I decide that I would rather not know. Bad enough to be reminded every day of my parents' crumbled marriage and their long, bitter rows taking place years ago. Another divorce story is a thought too dreadful to contemplate. I turn back to Danas, who is carefully rubbing her Canon C100 lenses with a linen handkerchief.

'What date is it now? June 17th, 2014? The villagers are dead set on boycotting again today. I'll bet you one million rupiahs there's going to be a gruesome riot out there. Probably more vicious than yesterday,' I say. My fingers are tapping away at the keyboard, writing out narration for the subtitle.

'Who can blame them? The land is theirs to begin with. These greedy capitalists are just too crafty or too blind to tell the difference between 'mine and thine'. These corporations and companies are foolishly trying to brush aside the continued existence of species for the sake of creating a wasteland. There is a great deal of wickedness in village life, I tell you.'

The images of banners, posters, graffiti, and wooden signs painted with

red and black angry writings flash by in one second. They are scattered and stood up everywhere in all villages in the area. Different sentences were written, but they all bear the same ultimatum: the village is to be free of any cement corporation foothold or there would be a body count in the field.

'Here, pour yourself some tea. I just brewed it. Chamomile. It's good for the nerves. You certainly don't want to look more messed up than those demonstrators.'

'Glad you noticed.'

My companion's hair hangs wet and heavy, a loose strand sticks to her forehead, but for once she does not seem to care. Danas takes two sips of her tea and clears her throat.

'What time will we depart?'

I look at my watch. 'Rudy says in half an hour. Hey, what do you think of our video? I have done quite some editing to make it more presentable.' I don't wait for her response as I am too much on a roll to stop. 'Look here, I have also tried to cut and re-arrange the footage pieces, inserting some interviews and ordinary activities in between. I hope the video embodies the purpose of our conduct. That we're just trying to stress the urge of preventing a permanent eradication of nature and a very near possible loss of a very distinct cultural tradition. I want to make sure that the threat is real. That it counts as something worth fighting for.'

Mujahid, who has just walked in, nods. 'It's pretty good so far, I must say. I checked your edited version last night. We've finished recording interviews with men and women from Kayen and Tambakromo. Yesterday we recorded the interviews with Sikep people¹, but we're still far from finished. We're going to record some more today, too, or perhaps tomorrow. Rudy told me we can meet the key people this evening. It's best not to bother them at noon when they're still working in the rice field.'

'Really?' We've conducted a thorough research of Saminism and Sikep people or as the locals call *seduluran* Sikep; but their teachings and life philosophy have somehow fascinated me over and over again. It would be delightful to meet them all one more time. 'And where is Rudy now?'

'Chatting with the neighbours. Has Astri woken up yet? We need her to set the theme songs of the video immediately. *Pak* Zharfan called me again just a minute ago, inquiring our progress. I reported

¹ The followers of Saminism movement in Java, Indonesia.

to him that we've finished 75 percent of it. Well, he wasn't too happy. But then again, when was the last time he praised the works of his subordinates? Huh.'

Mujahid lights his cigarette, but before he can blow the first smoke I seize and crush it between my fingertips. Danas only suppresses her smile while Mujahid coughs on his own smoke. Little Riri looks at us with curious eyes.

I look at him calmly. 'Any suicidal smoke is restricted inside the house. Astri is taking her bath. She will join us any minute. You should have a real breakfast, Hid. Consuming those stuff every day will only send you to an early grave. I'm telling you this for your own good. *Bu Endah* has cooked very delicious chicken curry and porridge. I'm going to call Rudy to go inside to break his fast. We're all going to need our strength if we wish to fulfil our promise to *Pak Zharfan*.' I've had enough of watching my fellow co-workers smoke like a chimney and gulp gallons and gallons of coffee like fish. Really, it's like witnessing them deliberately taking a suicide attempt with every sip and inhalation.

We are off to Kayen Subdistrict, Rembang exactly half an hour later, sitting in a jeep truck side by side, wearing hoodies and caps. Rudy is driving while the rest of us are fanning ourselves with printout report papers or our hands. By the time we arrive, there are at least fifty women with green straw hats gathering on the side of the dusty road, each of them bringing white manila papers with black ink protest writings all over, mouths covered with headscarves and shawls. There are about seven elderly women whose legs are dipped knee-length into big wooden boxes of hard cement, all sitting in a row on two benches placed right in the middle of the road. They, too, are holding signs of protest with clear black markings. The wind blows dryly, and it feels like we are being roasted alive.

I approach one lady with a green headscarf covering her mouth, my camcorder ready in one hand. '*Ibu*, I'm Dido Sinduadi from Observe. We're here today to record the ongoing protest against the government officials and Fortcement Court. We're going to make it a video so people from all over Indonesia can know what is going on. May I know your name, *Bu*?'

The woman, despite looking tired with her red puffy eyes, answers firmly. 'Dewi.' I nod encouragingly. 'Right. *Bu Dewi*. So, *Bu Dewi*, how's it going with everything so far?' Rudy has instructed every one of us to record any interview we take so that we will get a thorough

perspective on the case. Plus, we can save a lot of time and energy.

'It's been like this since yesterday.' She sighs, her eyes narrow from the scorching heat. The lines around her eye sockets and mouths begin to crease deeper. 'Since a week ago, actually. It's very... *aduh*, how should I say it? We can hardly make the officials understand. We just can't surrender and sell the land to them. How should we earn our living? How about our children? How are we supposed to feed them? Why did the government order the cement company to interfere with our rice fields?'

'Do you work in the rice field most of the time, every day? Or do you work somewhere else too? In another village or the town?' The interview goes on and on until we hear tires screeching and blaring horns of a bunch of enormous police, army and sand trucks come rolling in. There are many motorcycles roaming about, with two police officers on each of it. That's when these women stand up to join the cemented elderly women to barricade the road. They don't shout or scream—they only trod on silently. The giant vehicles stop while the police and army officers are getting out to rebuke the protesters.

'*Ibu-ibu*², please move aside! Move aside! What do you want with us? We told you yesterday that you have no authority here! Clear the path immediately or we will arrest you! Get out of our way!' A stout officer shouts so loudly that his voice could have been heard throughout a football stadium. The result is rather slow. For approximate five minutes the women do not allow themselves to budge, but when the officers start to forcefully carry these women to the side of the road, a total chaos occurs.

They shriek and scream, calling the officers names. Some of the soldiers shout back and use their sticks to drive the women away. The protesters stumble against and over one another but many of them are raising their voices to defend themselves. My camcorder is memorizing all of these incidents when a police officer, round-bellied with a face all skewed and contorted with rage, grabs my right wrist, snaps shut my camcorder and points his pointer right at me.

'Where are you from? Do you have any legal permission to record us? *Mbak*³, you're not allowed to be here. We don't allow any media around. We have a real project to do!' He is trying to snatch

2 Madams (in Indonesian language)

3 Miss (in Javanese language)

my camcorder away when I say, ‘You should be ashamed of yourself. All of you!’

He smirks and shoves me aside hard, almost making me fall flat on my stomach.

I choke up on dust, regaining my composure. For as long as I can remember, I have always resented the official guards; they call themselves peacekeepers and yet they never hesitate to harm any living thing standing their way. I check on my camcorder to see if it was twisted or broken. Fortunately, mine only got a small scratch—must be from the wretched officer’s thumb nail. The footage is fine, too. Lucky I never forget to set it on recording mode. Soon afterward I am back capturing footage on what is currently happening. Cries from the women as they are forced to move from the middle of the road. Officers being attacked by a few of brave, vituperating women. Some cameramen complaining their camcorders twisted by the police. My own friends helping and recording the whole incident. We are stuck witnessing an eternal conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie for more than five hours before Astri eventually calls up on us to assemble.

With the gust of wind sending her black strands flying about, Astri impatiently slips them behind her ear. ‘I think we’ve got enough footage for one day. What you guys think?’ She has lovely almond-shaped eyes framed artistically with a slender line of dark mascara which peer behind her glasses. However, her sharp nose, her glasses, and the contrast between her very fair skin and ebony-dark hair only compound her seriousness.

‘I’m beat,’ Rudy chimes in, covering a yawn with the back of his hand and ruffling his hair. ‘Let’s walk to the village and rest there. I heard they are going to have a gathering at the village meeting hall this evening. They will serve dinner.’

‘Good idea.’ Mujahid taps on his iPhone and blows his cigarette smoke. ‘I’m dead famished.’

Danas nods after emptying her drink bottle. ‘I agree. I surely sympathize with the women, but really there’s nothing more we can do at the moment. How long do you think it will continue, Dido?’

‘It could go on for weeks or months, I suppose. Could be years, even. I mean, you saw them, right? Both parties are too stubborn to let go of their struggle. Gosh, the whole situation is just unbearable. The

government troops were herding the women as if they were cattle. It’s like watching an Indonesian version of James Cameron’s *Avatar*. The vulturous capitalist versus the nature-loving natives.’

‘Touché. Way to sum it up,’ says Astri drily. ‘Is your camera okay? I saw you being scolded by that officer earlier this afternoon. Please don’t tell me you have lost all of your footage and that you could hardly record anything this whole day.’

One of my eyebrows is up. ‘Are you accusing me of being a slacker? Here, see for yourself.’ Why this particular co-worker has been giving me a hard time since the first day I got into Observe is still a puzzle.

After checking my footage collection for five seconds, Astri shrugs. ‘They seem fine enough.’

‘Of course,’ I say defensively. ‘I’ve recorded them all day. I shot them from the best vantage points.’

Astri’s eyebrows are up for a mere split second. ‘Everybody please get in the car. We’re visiting the village and staying there for dinner.’

I munch my Cadbury milk chocolate all the way back without bothering to offer anyone a bite. I am too much absorbed in my own self-hating state that I am scared that if I open my mouth, profanity will be the first word to fly out. I try to picture myself sitting on a wooden bench smelling fresh baked breads, getting up and walking along the Seine but the hard stares and whisperings I receive from the villagers do not help either. Talk about constantly being put under a microscope. Instead of focusing on their own grief about the possibility of having to lose their rice fields forever, some of the elders as well as young women actually come approach to press me with questions about my infamous heritage.

They say my skin’s so fair—the kind of skin they’ve always dreamed about. *You look just like those Korean idols on TV*, they remark. *You’re so lucky. You must have so many admirers and suitors lining up*. More curious questions with an apparent portion of envy follow. I get more and more uncomfortable and guilty when I see my friends giving me piercing glances. Astri even has the heart to snort, as if I were enjoying all of this attention. My stomach churns in rage. I want to shout back at them. My eyes are as narrow as a pair of swallows flying above the horizon. I’m a copy of my mother, but

I speak the language of the locals. The closest thing I've got to my heritage now is eating noodles with chopsticks. But none of them wants to hear any of it.

My eyebrows knit. How long will it take for me to be completely numb for being poked around like this? It's getting damn irritating. When we are making the beds to sleep in the village chief's house, Danas suddenly blurts out the question, 'Is it true that you're engaged to be married soon?'

'Who said that?'

'Well, you know, I heard Mujahid and Astri talking about your diamond ring this evening—,' she trails off, clearly wanting me to fill in the blanks myself.

I laugh despite my growing annoyance.

'I guess I am.'

'When?'

'Why, we haven't set the date yet. There are too many things to be arranged on such short notice. Eric absolutely doesn't want his over-scrupulous mother to go bonkers if there is any fault with the wedding plan. Besides, we just got engaged a week ago. No need to rush.'

Eric is the golden boy of my mother's best friend, Aunt Natalie Suhandra. Since she pities my mother's status as a widow and our family's never-ending drama, Aunt Natalie allows me to visit her family anytime whenever things get ugly. As a result, her eldest son and I become quite close and as my mother puts two and two together for my future, she tries her best to set me up with Eric. He is five years older than me and already going on with a steady job as a lecturer of architecture in a nearby private university. Since he is also a whiz in instruments, it is just natural for us to end up as a couple. Still, I've already been depressed with the idea of having him as a family.

'Aren't you quite relieved that you shan't be at the caprice of some silly old man and his fortune? The rest of us haven't the choice.' Danas is already lying on her bed, her eyes fixed on the patterns of the ceiling.

'I think I am,' is all I can say.

I don't have a desire to tell her that I've spent too many nights praying that I should never be marrying one of my own kind. That would mean endless cold glares, misunderstandings, and a number of ambivalent feelings engulfing me every second of my life. I cherish

my friends. I really do. I don't give a damn with the bitterness they treat me from time to time. It's all part of the cultural system we live in. It's something that we can't deny. It seems like I have always hurt everyone just by breathing.

CERTIFICATE OF ACHIEVEMENT

Ken Tomaro

there is a dusty old box
in the back of my mind worn and damaged
from all the things piled on top of it
sitting alone in the back of the closet
and each time I moved it moved with me
to the back of another dark closet
crushed under more forgotten memories
and once a year I would pull it out
rummaging through the contents
reading every card
one of them signed by the entire Ohio gas company
none of these men I had ever met
I would look at the numerous copies of the cemetery plot
wondering why one simply wasn't enough
curse at the religious mementos
printed with meaningless prayer
with the understanding that praying for the dead
was merely a hollow gesture
carefully unfold the torn and brittle wedding certificate
birth certificate
more copies of the death certificate
I slid the plastic church rosary between my fingers
running them over every cheaply made bead
rang a tarnished silver bell
carefully studied a marble broach I had never seen
the contents of one's life-
there was of course, more at one time
but much had been sold,
given away or just discarded over the years
like the box and its contents
I no longer needed it
because all that was important
beyond the material things
and piles of unnecessary paper
was now safely stored in a crumpled old box
in the back of my mind

MUTE

Kimberly Nguyen

there are a million onomatopoeic ways to describe
the way air moves in my mother tongue
yet the air between my lips is silent.
if the wind had a language,
it would be comprised of all the times
i have opened my bilingual mouth
and only dust has come out.

STRING

Marlon Hacla

Blood clot. Business card. Dusk and eulogy. Smooth-shaven thighs.
Tambourine and uvula. String and rattan chest. Miracle under the
mosquito net. Begonia and butterfly knife. Smell of crocodilefish and
sugar cane.

KUWERDAS

Kimpal ng dugo. Tarheta. Agaw-dilim at papuri. Makinis na binti.
Panderetas at kuntil. Kuwerdas at tampipi. Milagro sa kulambo.
Bigonya at balisong. Amoy ng isdang-buwaya at tubo.

Translated from Filipino by Kristine Ong Muslim

COMPASS

Marlon Hacla

1.
Captain, I have placed the apparatus on the map.
Its hands are pointing erratically.
It is possible this is where
The world's magnet had finally died.
Captain, we are approaching
The Isle of No Return.
2.
Captain, have we already
Passed this way many times before?
Are we following the true north?
Where do we turn, captain?
The water is swirling into a vortex.
3.
Captain, the compass was dropped somewhere around here.
The map says we are in the sea floored with sharp rocks.
This is supposedly where sharks take refuge.
Captain, tell us, who among us should dive into the deep?

Translated from the Filipino by Kristine Ong Muslim

KOMPAS

1.
Kapitan, ipinatong ko ang aparato sa mapa.
Maligalig ang pagtuturo ng kamay.
Maaaring namatay na rito
Ang batubalani ng daigdig.
Kapitan, malapit na tayo
Sa Isla ng Walang Pagbabalik.
2.
Kapitan, hindi ba't ilang ulit
Na tayong dito nagawi?
Tama ba ang hilagang ating tinutunton?
Saan tayo kakabig, kapitan?
Bumibilis ang pag-ikot paibaba ng tubig.
3.
Kapitan, banda rito nahulog ang kompas.
Ayon sa mapa, tayo'y nasa dagat ng mga batong matalim.
Dito umano natutulog ang mga pating.
Kapitan, ituro mo, sino ang sisid sa ilalim?

THE FICUS

Jennifer Kyrnin

The Ficus in the corner began speaking to him during the Cold Time, and he knew, even though he didn't talk himself, that this was something unusual.

'Yes, doctor, he just sits in the corner, rocking, all day long,' he heard The Mom say from The Burning Room. He continued to think about The Ficus.

'It's like he's a flower blowing in the wind,' The Mom's voice continued to intrude. 'He will sway there all day if I let him.'

Her voice overpowered that of The Ficus. Her voice was louder, more insistent, possibly because she used her mouth to make it.

He put his hands over his ears and swayed a bit more.

'You see what I mean?' The Mom said.

He raised his eyes slightly to glance at The Mom through eyelashes while swaying and listening to The Ficus. She held her Glass Photo Box, the big one, the one he wasn't allowed to touch after a surprise rage storm had hit him, breaking the last one into bright shards of glass and metal. She held it as if she were taking his picture. While he loved looking at photos, he hated when she took his picture. It always felt like the photo was stealing something from him. He'd never found the stolen things, not even when he looked at images on the Glass Photo Box. He just saw dull pictures of a dull male child.

He crossed his arms over his face, almost as if he were hugging his own head, keeping his ears covered. The Ficus was more important than listening to The Mom.

'Can you see that?' The Mom said, as if talking to him, but he knew there was no one here but her. 'He knows I'm filming him, so he's hiding. And he won't come out of the corner.'

He heard a quiet murmur come from the Glass Photo Box, as if it were talking back to her. But that was impossible. The Glass Photo Box was cold metal and sharp glass. There was nothing alive in it. Not like The Ficus. He leaned more closely towards the plant—close enough to kiss it.

'No, I haven't tried that. It seems a bit drastic, don't you think?' The Mom walked away.

He relaxed his arms by his side, small hands clenched in tight fists, eyes closed as he bent back over The Ficus.

The images from The Ficus were clear. Water: great waterfalls, rivers, and lakes of water. He sniffed at the dirt. It did smell dry.

He walked over to The Room of Smells and grabbed his father's cup, dumped the toothbrush it held onto the floor and filled it to the sloshing limit with water. He left the faucet running and walked back to The Ficus. There was still almost half the water in the glass by the time he got there. He glanced around the room, The Mom rattled pans in The Burning Room, still talking to her Glass Photo Box. He held the cup out above The Ficus and let a slow stream of water run down into the dirt. It would be less dry.

He felt cool breezes and the soft smell of flowers as The Ficus thanked him for the water.

'Oh my GOD! What have you done now, Jameson?' The Mom came back into the room and stood, towering over him, a rage storm crackling and hissing around her head. He slowly lifted his hands up, still in fists, to cover his ears, never taking his eyes off The Ficus.

'Take your hands off your ears! I know you can hear me!' The Mom reached out to grab one of his arms and tried to pull it from his ear, but he was strong. She gave up. 'That's it. That's the last time you're going to destroy the rug for this damn plant!'

The Mom grabbed The Ficus.

The Mom headed towards The Scary Door.

'Naaaaaaaaaooooooooo,' he yelled, moving to follow The Mom as she stomped to the door. He watched The Ficus fly out the door. Smack! It hit the concrete path outside their apartment. Shards of pottery across the cement like sharp orange stones.

Fire. Cattle. Disease.

The images cut off abruptly as The Scary Door slammed shut.

No images. No sounds.

'Oh, now you can talk?' The Mom turned back to him, the rage storm covering her head and neck in a black and red cloud. 'And of course, the only thing you can say is no? Well, too damn bad. That plant was destroying our home and our lives!'

He staggered to The Scary Door and banged his fists on it. Open!

The Ficus was outside.

He was inside.

He could feel The Mom holding him. Her rage storm had passed and now she was hugging him. He pushed against her. Outside. Outside!

'Please, Jamie, baby, come back to me. Calm down. It's just a plant. We can get another. Maybe we'll get a plastic one that doesn't need water.' She hugged him and rocked until...

Nothing.

He collapsed in her arms, too exhausted to move.

'Yes, doctor, it's been three months and he hasn't said one word. Not even when I brought him a new, plastic plant.' Clarice held the phone away from her mouth as she choked back a sob. 'I thought we had had a breakthrough when I got rid of it, but now it's as though he's retreated out of this world.'

On the floor behind her, Jameson swayed slowly, as if rocked by a gentle breeze, eyes closed, his back to the dust-covered, plastic ficus in the corner.

#

WHITE BICYCLE

Kevin Madrigal

Remember the fallen
the trampled, ascended

tell those who pass
drive softly, these streets
already know pain.

*In Mexican cities, you'll find bicycles completely painted white on busy streets.
These white bicycles commemorate a tragic death to its rider, involved in a
traffic accident.*

NIGHT TERRORS

Nadia Jacobson

She hears snatches of the news on the radio. Fragments on Twitter. No longer can she browse Facebook. Even a still morphs into film.

Her son pulls at her sleeve whining, *Where is my bunny? I can't sleep without my bunny.*

And she wants to behead that bunny with the face that smiles at her even as it turns drowning in the metal cage of the washing machine while hatred presses at her borders seeping from above and below rippling under the Earth's crust to erupt on her doorstep.

Her son whimpers. *Another story, just one more story.* Stories she cannot bear to hear as she reads them, ones of houses on chicken legs, of orphans, of children whose parents abandon them in the forest so as not to watch them die of hunger. She shakes her trembling head, *No, no, it's time for you to sleep.*

Sleep. She cannot sleep. Life seeps into her dreams. She scans the path for neighbours armed with knives, sniffs the air for gas, sweeps for glass smashed where barefoot toddlers tread in parks unprotected by gates and one step two steps they're in the street and under a car.

She hands her son the wet bunny, but he hangs on her arm, strokes her face, *Kissie, read me a story. Please?*

Too easily she surrenders, hoping his fragile body nestled against hers will guard her from this night's fears.

I CAN'T REMEMBER WHEN

John M. Davis

I began living vicariously
in the words of others:
when I forgot how to look
and learned how to read;
when I gave up the one world,
found speech turned to writing
and then settled into an other's;
when I became an observer
outsider, separate, in need of words
to express the joy, the terror—
feelings that would somehow
have escaped me
had I not named them,
given them size and shape.

I can't remember when
mind took me out of myself
sat me down in a chair
to think how much bigger
all this was than me.
for that wider world
I gave up some intensity in mine.
that's why something in me rebels
standing here in a bookstore
on Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley
thumbing through yet another novel.

OTHER

Mukund Gnanadesikar

The questionnaire
So neat and clean
Black and white
Check-box demographics.

Simple and impersonal:
Age and income,
Language spoken,
But one gives me pause

'Race/ethnicity'
The answer is sliced
Into bite-sized chunks
Tightly vacuum packed.

Why do you request
That I must place myself
Within hard-walled boxes
Lacking all egress?

My answer, 'Human'
Not an option
Lacking this I check
The box labelled 'other'

Not black
Not Hispanic
Not white
Not to be confined

And this has been my place
In a land of milk and honey
Where judgments hinge
On optical associations.

BLACK FRIDAY

Murzban Shroff

Friday 29, September 2017. I am trying hard not to gaze at my cell phone and invite the depression that would come from the flood of Facebook posts talking about the stampede in Mumbai. 22 killed, 36 injured, even while 7.5 million people rode those tracks in order to get home after a harrowing commute. It was inevitable, the tragedy - the bane and curse of a city that had failed to protect itself, failed, perhaps, to even anticipate its needs - and I, the writer - the brooding, pensive chronicler, far away in distant California, seated in a plush leather armchair, at Union Station, Los Angeles.

Here, the ceilings are high, with geometric patterns reminiscent of a Roman cathedral. Here, giant chandeliers emit their light like evening lamps in the corridors of a Jaipur palace. Here, a young pianist thumps exuberantly on his piano for the benefit of children who stand around watching. Here, electronic signboards gleam with designer fonts and change their faces every few minutes to signal the status of arriving and departing trains. Here, strong-armed policemen stand in pairs maintaining an alert vigil.

I myself wait in the waiting area, which is huge and spacious. The seating is uniform. All of us get comfortable leather armchairs with broad flat armrests and ample legroom.

I look around at the people seated.

On my left, a cherubic girl with thick lips and tight plaits speaks excitedly into her cell phone. Her legs are draped over her chair and the ruptures in her jeans reveal glimpses of her plump, sturdy knees. It is apparent by her expressions that she is speaking to her boyfriend. Laughing heartily, she is filling him in on events he might have missed.

To my right, overweight Mexican women gorge on potato chips, on burritos, on Subway sandwiches, while their children frolic in a sort of running game that disturbs no one.

Stations are more than transit points, I think. Phases of stocktaking; points of introspection and reflection; beginnings and endings seamlessly interwoven, to bring a certain continuity to life. But, back home, in Mumbai, stations are all about survival. A vast influx of human need. An

outpouring of human life. And, now, not even that, I think. They had become deathtraps.

I take in a deep breath. My thoughts wander to the good doctor who had plunged into an open manhole when the city had flooded a month before. He was a well-known gastroenterologist. He had solved complex cases, saved numerous lives, treated infections, and restored digestion. But that didn't guarantee him anything. He had met his death in a brown watery grave. He had been consumed by the guck of the city.

A woman stretches her legs. At first glance I think she is American Chinese, but realize soon that she is Jamaican. Her skin glows like a tropical sunset. She is tattooed all over. Without those tattoos, she might have been attractive. Her body is firm, there is youth in those limbs, but the skin is defaced with tattoos. There is something interesting about her face: it is pensive and scholarly and cupped by two large earrings. Her hair is matted and ropery, caked against her scalp. She sticks out her feet and I notice her toes. There were no toenails, and where there are indentations there is a thick layer of dark chocolate-colored nail polish.

Suddenly my eyes are drawn to this black kid in his late teens. He is tall and lanky and sprawled leisurely in an armchair. At his feet is a duffel bag of soft black leather. On the armrest of his chair, he has placed three one-dollar bills in a row. He looks at me to see if I am confused by this. I am, I am, but don't show it.

I look at him. His eyes are large and clear. His face is slender, almost angelic. There is something tragically handsome about him.

He picks up one of the dollar bills and flings it to the floor. Then he looks at me defiantly. I stare at him and sweep my eyes in a circular gaze that would suggest he is merely a speck in my vision.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a bunch of keys. He flings these to the ground as well and then brings his feet over the dollar bill and the keys and starts to tap on them. I see he is wearing heavy boots, which are old and faded. But even without them, he'd be tall.

He now grinds at the objects on the floor, and I decide it's best to avoid looking at him. Maybe he was working to a plan, I think, or maybe he was following some crazy impulse. I choose to look at the Jamaican woman, instead, and wonder what it was about fads that caused a human being to inflict such savage incisions on herself. I think of the underground metro coming up in Mumbai. My city of seven interconnected islands would have a roaring, thundering beast of steel tearing through her sinews. I

wonder if the islands could take that, and if the old art deco buildings in the business district could withstand the tremors. I was sure, one-hundred percent sure, that no one had done a structural audit of those old buildings.

My eyes return to the black kid. He is having a conversation with the floor. He is actually looking down and speaking to it, and the floor—dazzlingly clean and polished—smiles back at him.

Drugs! my aunt in Mumbai would have said with a grimace, pursing her lips firmly.

No, something more complex, I think. Something not out of choice. Like the homeless.

Then, suddenly, he scoops the objects off the floor and shoves them back into his pocket. Rising, he shuffles over to me and says respectfully, in a voice that is trying hard to sound mature, ‘Excuse me, sir, do you have a dollar to spare?’

‘I wish I did, brother,’ I said. ‘But no!’

The boy nods acceptingly and returns to his seat, where he drums feverishly on the armrest.

Just then, a fat security woman comes up and hollers, ‘No loitering here. Only passengers travelling on the Metro can sit here. All others should leave right away.’ She looks warily at the boy who says, ‘Fuck you, lady. My Dad laid these floors. I have every right. You know!’ He sniffs and tries his best to look aggrieved, his lips pursed defiantly. And the woman says, ‘All right, son. He done a mighty fine job, your Dad. But, now, you git on your way.’ And the kid gets up and leaves.

My thoughts move to the homeless in Mumbai: the gypsy women, outside the station, weaving garlands, making baskets, cooking, washing clothes, or yelling at their children; the gypsy men, playing cards or sleeping or fighting in loud, angry voices; and the railway police, who had been stationed there since the bomb blasts and who—going by their nonchalance—were convinced that what had happened once wasn’t going to happen again.

My train arrives and I take my seat. The train is almost empty.

Suddenly my thoughts are interrupted by a low rumbling sound that gets louder and louder in my ears. I see it is the kid. He is on a skateboard. The duffel bag is strapped to his back. He stops at the entrance of the compartment, then hoists himself in skillfully and skates past me without as much as a glance. My ears follow him all the way down the corridor. But my mind is back in Mumbai, where I am on a suburb-bound train

and I can’t find a way to disembark, can’t make my way through the thick crowd at the exit. I am pleading, but people only laugh at me. Where, where is the space to move? Then the train starts and I watch helplessly as my destination flies past. The diamond signboard, the food stall, the newspaper stall, the chai stall, the shoeshine-wallas: all this blurs past. Seeing my distress, my fellow-commuters console me. There was no use trying, they say. This was Mumbai, the peak hours. People were not ready to yield an inch. Not because they didn’t want to, but because they couldn’t. Look, there were people standing on the footboard, hanging by a finger; people riding the rooftops, seated on their haunches; people balancing on the connectors between bogeys. I should consider myself lucky. So very lucky!

I shake off these images. I feel alone in this gleaming tubular train. No one looks at me. No one gives a damn where I am going, where I want to get off. I feel guilty about all this space. I extract my cell phone and open my Facebook page. Scrolling down, I read: ‘The stampede occurred due to a panic, because people thought there was a short circuit. The railway authorities had been warned that the bridge was too narrow for the kind of traffic it received. The chief minister has declared that there would be a five-lakh-rupee compensation for the victims’ families and an inquiry.’

I scroll down further and take note of the outrage. People are angry, livid. ‘Enough is enough,’ they said. ‘Must we wait for a major disaster? Must we wait for a catastrophe?’

I want to write: The catastrophe is already in the making. It is rumbling below our feet, striking at the hinges, removing our green cover, and tomorrow we will come apart at the seams.

I want to post this, but, instead, I set off in search of the black kid. I want to give him a few dollars. I want to tell him what a fine job his father had done.

THE SHUT UP RULES!

Amirah Al Wassif

My mother painted my flesh with clay
a dirty one
her eye was a lake of tears
her hands were shaken
my soul was angry
my wishes were hungry, but
I kept silent.
My mother tied my legs against the wall
Her Whispers raised suddenly
She started cutting my hair
The horror knocked on our door, but
I kept silent.

My people categorized the citizens
if you are a male, you will live
if you are a female
be ready to be buried
my people came to us
gathered around our house
my mother cried and shouted, but
I kept silent.

My mother saved my life
she didn't bury me
she gave me a boy's name
she dressed me boy's clothes
and sent me to a camp far away
for selling water
for making living
and I kept silent.

IN QINGDAO ON A DAMP NIGHT

Craig McGeady

In Qingdao on a damp night
beside an ocean's bedtime stories

tiny children scurry beneath yawning tents,
bundles of flowers clutched in tiny arms

eyes ripe with pleading looks
as they offer up each wilted rose.

Patrons, loosening ties and slapping glasses
over yawning plates of fried chicken,

ignore what is beneath them, too busy
gazing skyward where fantasies parade.

Each tent possessed a clutch of tiny children
equally large eyes, equally desperate

flitting like birds, tugging on sleeves
or perching at a table's end, waiting to be noticed

until a sale was made, whereupon each child
would scurry off to a fractured woman made of glass.

At 2AM when revelers were well into their cups
and music had washed away all memory of the ocean,

the children swayed in dark corners
breathing in the heavy air of sweat and piss

as each fractured woman, the ones that they called mother
would take turns reporting to their boss.

And there she was, seated at the largest table
beneath the largest tent, surrounded by genuflecting men

raising their cups in adulation as she smiled
and received each bundle of the children's takings.

Each cut glass woman would bow and turn away
scurrying back to their wilted flowers,

those tiny children that called them mother
despite not knowing them before being plucked

from a life that continues to fade
after each long night and quivering day.

HUMMINGBIRD SUMMARY

Jeff Schiff

Beware: life fluttering at the tip
of fronds and tendrils
is addictive &

defies rehab
All erudition
and certain forms of acute

dyspepsia
dissipate fully
in the face of hover & feint

Nothing's more seductive
than slipping into dark yards
to hang sweet syrup

from sagging limbs
Indubitably
the wisdom of constant motion

is the wisdom
of constant motion—
whether you exist

on some quivering wing
or are stilled &
awed by it

PANGEA

John Thampi

The formation of Pangea did not occur
in one drunken night
it took centuries of rejection and creation

in that order
to make mountains and creeks fit
the falcon to make peace
with the field mouse
and each to learn the place
of the other

like good in laws
is the result of the ground moving under
the sky staying the same
and the wind not caring
to name the difference
that's where we need to begin
in a land mass whose history is carved
into the edges of who we are
the people we can be again

the lion resting with the lamb
the adder with a babe
and a child to lead us.

Pangea- a contiguous land mass that formed a supercontinent 335 million years ago, when the world was one.

SMOKE: A PANTOUM

Kristin Gustafson

You should have left him
at the first sign of smoke,
billowing from your body like
the ghost of your last cigarette.

At the first sign of smoke,
instead, you stayed, with
the ghost of your last cigarette,
his love, your nicotine.

Instead, you stayed.
You gave him all that you could offer, your flame,
his love, your nicotine,
Your phoenix song lost among the ruins.

You gave him all that you could offer, your flame
billowing from your body like
your phoenix song lost among the ruins.
You should have left him.

SOMEONE WILL HAVE TO GO

Giovanni Quessep

Someone will have to go,
leaving behind the dawn, his almond's shadow;
in the woods a song is heard
of birds not of this world.

Leave hastily, before
ceases the voice that entered the port
and remains alone with its soul.
Life or death - how to know!

If someone dreamt of a boat
and a flower bush and if in dreams,
as I was, someone was seen,
dumbfounded, leaving his home.

Translation by Randal Barnicot, Philippe Botero

ALGUIEN TENDRÁ QUE IRSE

Giovanni Quessep

Alguien tendrá que irse,
dejar la sombra de su almendro, el alba;
se oye en los árboles un canto
de pájaros que no son de este mundo.

Partir de prisa, antes
de que cese esa voz que entró en el puerto
y a solas quede con su alma.
Cómo saber si es la vida o la muerte!

Si alguien soñó con una barca
y una floresta y, en sus sueños, a alguien
lo han visto, como a mí
salir maravillado de su casa.

CHAMP PASTORAL

Bruce Robinson

Il faut chanter un chant pastoral,

Invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été.

- Pierre Louÿs

He looks across the field
toward the house, the adjacent buildings,
looks across the fence
without expression.

Beyond the fence, the house,
and its adjacent buildings, the fields
are an unstable tincture
of antiseptic silver.

Il marche dans la plaine immense,
among his cattle looking
across the house and the adjacent buildings
across the darkening fields and fence

or what's left of them
without expression. Looks at me
as well, but I've never
been able to read that kind of look.

He walks across the mud toward
the house, and its adjacent buildings;
Is that - the dark fields of the republic
are squelching silver and they're tumbling off

the house and the adjacent buildings -
your car in my road?

THE NEXT BOND

Don Stoll

Shahid loved the idea that Idris Elba might become the next Bond.

He loved the idea for Idris Elba's sake because he loved Idris Elba. But he loved the idea even more for his own sake.

'Never going to happen,' Nicola said. 'But why you give a toss anyway?'

'You know why. Got a black Bond, Paki one's next.'

As they walked, Nicola stepped off the kerb so that she could strike the empty Newcastle Brown Ale bottle with her instep. It spun across the road and hit the rubbish bin that had been left outside the chemist's.

'Agüero slips it into the net just inside the near post,' Nicola said. 'Keeper didn't stand a chance with the Argentine at the top of his form this evening.'

She'd stopped to watch the path of the bottle. Now she hurried to catch up to Shahid.

'Don't know why you want to be Bond,' she said. 'Sexist rubbish.'

'Doesn't have to be,' Shahid shrugged. 'Can just be a hero.'

'But no fun without the shagging. Or the thought that he's shagging. Who'd watch?'

Shahid had no good answer.

'Real progress,' Nicola said, 'better than a black or Paki Bond, be a gay one.'

Shahid raised an arm. He relaxed his wrist so that his hand dangled from it. He saw Nicola's face harden and dropped his arm.

'Be progress,' Shahid said cautiously. 'But don't know if a license to kill goes with being gay. They seem more. . . peaceful.'

'Got more reason to kill if you're gay. More to be angry about.'

Shahid was silent. He finally spoke as they turned onto Nicola's street.

'You coming over?'

'Homework,' she said, shaking her head.

They stopped in front of her building.

'Going to surprise you tomorrow,' she said.

'What?'

'Won't be a surprise if I tell you,' she smiled.

She turned to go. Shahid admired the dark waves of hair that fell below her shoulders.

#

'That your surprise?' Shahid said the next morning.

Nicola stroked her head.

'Your mum know?' he said.

Nicola rolled her eyes.

'Want to feel?'

'Take a long time?' he said as he touched the top of her head.

'Yeah. I had loads of hair.'

'You were careful. No nicks.'

'Come in?' she said. 'Need another minute.'

She went into the kitchen as Shahid followed her into the flat. Nicola's mother was asleep on the sofa in the front room.

'Fall asleep watching the telly?'

'Don't whisper,' Nicola said. 'Do her good to wake up.'

Shahid watched Nicola make her jam butty. He whispered anyway.

'Still feeling like a bloke? That why you do it?'

'Most of the time,' Nicola said.

'I have to worry about pronouns?' Shahid sighed.

'Leave it for now,' Nicola said. 'Wait till I settle. *If I settle.*'

She stroked her head again.

'Easier to wash and dry,' she laughed.

Shahid made his voice even quieter.

'You're laughing now,' he said. 'Won't be at school.'

Nicola opened the cupboards one by one.

'Mum's useless,' she said. 'Not a single paper bag anywhere.'

Shahid picked up the jam butty from the counter.

'I've got it. See you at lunch anyway. If they haven't taken you to hospital.'

Nicola looked at her friend.

'Can't hide who you are, Shahid.'

'Rubbish. I can't hide who *I* am. You can hide all you want.'

'Fair enough,' she said. 'But don't want to anymore. Done with it.'

#

They reckoned first period might be all right because of Mr. Hall. With his cluelessness dominating the English classroom, there was a chance Nicola could fly under the radar.

Nicola even suggested as they walked that she might pass for a new boy Mr. Hall had forgotten to introduce.

Shahid looked sidelong at her delicate features. Hair or no, he thought, she'll never pass for a bloke.

Mr. Hall was in good form.

'No keys,' he said as he emptied his briefcase. 'Lucky my head's screwed on.'

'Willy screwed on?' somebody said. 'See one lying about, we'll know it's yours.'

'Only if it's a little one,' somebody else said.

Mr. Hall removed a stack of papers. He turned the briefcase upside down. Nothing.

'In the loo, I expect,' he said.

'With your willy.'

In the teacher's absence, Colin James looked through the stack of papers.

'Good mark on this one,' he said, taking Mr. Hall's chair and splaying his legs. "The Next Bond," by Shahid Khan.'

Shahid ducked his head.

Colin laughed.

"I hope the next Bond can be Idris Elba or some other black actor, paving the way for an Indian or Pakistani Bond farther down the line."

Shahid kept his head down. Nicola looked around the overcrowded room. She saw that many of her classmates weren't laughing.

'But then we going to get bald Bond girls?' Colin said.

Shahid raised his head. He and everyone else in the room stared at Nicola.

'You make them shave?' Colin said. 'Always pictured shiny black hair

under those things they cover up with. But you make them shave, that leaves room to hide bombs?’

Shahid turned his head toward Colin.

‘Come on, Paki Bond. Mobile’s probably a laser gun. Shoot me.’

‘Hall still looking for his willy,’ a girl’s voice said.

Nervous laughter passed through the classroom.

Mr. Hall returned and ordered Colin back to his desk.

#

Colin and his followers ignored Shahid and Nicola for most of the lunch period. They played football. Colin, tall and strong but clumsy with the ball, played fullback. After a smaller boy on the other side had dribbled around him and then beaten the keeper for a goal, Colin announced that it wouldn’t happen again.

Toward the end of lunch, Colin was obviously tired. The same boy beat him easily and bore down on the keeper. From behind, Colin cut the boy’s legs out from under him.

‘Little wog Agüero finds the United defense too strong on this day,’ Colin laughed.

Colin caught up to Shahid and Nicola as the students returned to the building. He massaged Nicola’s head as he passed them.

‘Got a fair price, gave the money to Al-Qaeda?’ he laughed. ‘What other parts you got that smooth?’

#

Shahid and Nicola were happy to hear that Colin would need to stay after school for detention. A teacher had observed his foul during the football game, which could have injured the other boy.

‘Thing is, not like Colin’s the only one,’ Shahid said.

‘Drop in the ocean. Or in the loo after someone forgot to flush.’

They thought they’d left the school grounds safely behind when they heard shouting.

‘Oy! Osama.’

They didn’t look back. The voice came closer.

‘Oy, Mohammed.’

Nicola stopped. Shahid stopped with her and they turned around.

Though not as scary as Colin James, Mike Richards towered over *‘All palaces are temporary palaces’ is a quote from the artist Robert Montgomery.*

Shahid.

‘Had a girlfriend, but got a boyfriend now,’ Mike said. ‘More your style, Osama.’

‘I’ve never been his girlfriend,’ Nicola said coldly.

‘Don’t be like that,’ Mike said. ‘Off to work, but had a moment to say hello.’

‘Somebody gave you a job?’ Nicola laughed.

‘The Tesco on Burbidge Road. Bagger.’

‘Have to shop at Sainsbury’s,’ Nicola said to Shahid.

Pressing a finger against the left wing of his nose, Mike turned his head to the right. He blew through his right nostril.

‘Don’t want to be late for your important job, Mike,’ Nicola said.

‘Yeah, but curious about something,’ Mike grinned. ‘Decided you’re a bloke now, but bet you still have—’

He snatched up the hem of Nicola’s T-shirt and with his other hand reached under. She crossed her arms as Shahid threw himself at Mike, who pushed him away.

‘Taking the piss,’ Mike laughed. ‘But curious about something else.’

‘You all right?’ Nicola said.

Shahid looked up at her from the sidewalk.

‘You’re a bloke now,’ Mike said, ‘why not call yourself Nick?’

‘Call myself whatever I fancy,’ Nicola said. ‘Part of my human rights.’

Mike laughed again and continued on toward Burbidge Road. But he spun around and walked backward for a few steps, gripping his crotch.

‘Here’s your human rights,’ he said.

Nicola looked down at Shahid.

‘Do me a favor and don’t ever do that,’ she said. ‘I know the sodding thing’s there.’

She offered Shahid her hand. He shook his head and got up off the sidewalk.

‘Not ready to be Bond yet,’ he said.

‘Turn around.’

He obeyed. She brushed the dirt from the seat of his trousers.

‘Just need that mobile that’s also a laser gun,’ she said. ‘Show them then.’

They walked in silence until they were close to Nicola's building.
'Think your mum's home?' Shahid said.
'Not if we're lucky.'
'Can we see?'
Nicola shrugged.
They met her in the stairwell.
'What you done with your hair?' she said, and to Shahid 'You couldn't stop her?'
'Where you off to?' Nicola said.
'I ask you where you go?' her mother said.
She stood three steps above them.
'Don't know why you'd make yourself ugly, but it's your hair to throw away.'
She came down and they moved aside.
'There anything to eat?' Nicola said.
Her mother continued to the ground floor and went into the street.
In the flat, Nicola looked for food.
'Bugger all,' she said.
'Go see my mum in a bit,' Shahid said. 'She'll feed you.'
He went into the front room and sat on the sofa. Nicola sat beside him.
'One Orange Fanta in the fridge,' she said. 'Split it?'
Shahid shook his head.
'Barrel of laughs you are,' Nicola said. 'Something wrong?'
Shahid shook his head again.
Nicola stood up.
'I feel bad that everyone thinks you're my girl,' Shahid said.
Nicola went to the kitchen and came back with the Orange Fanta.
'Makes you ashamed, does it?' she smiled.
'Ashamed? Never!'
He drank from the bottle and handed it back.
'He's tall, Mike Richards,' he said. 'Don't think he could see.'
'See what?'
Shahid didn't look at Nicola.

'Under your shirt,' he said. 'That you're not wearing. . .'
Nicola drank from the bottle. She sloshed the soda around in her mouth like it was mouthwash before swallowing.
'Hard to feel like a bloke when I wear one,' she said.
She put the bottle down. She brought Shahid's hand under her shirt. After a moment, he reached under with his other hand.
'This make me a poof?' he said afterward. 'I mean, if you're. . .'
'Don't know what it makes you,' she said. 'But makes me hungry. Your mum got curry tonight?'
'Decent chance,' he smiled.

#

The next morning, Colin James had sharpened his wit for them. He was already seated when they entered Mr. Hall's class.
'Bond and Pussy Galore,' he said. 'But license to kill's mine.'
Shahid headed toward his seat, but Nicola stood in front of Colin.
'Get it over with then,' she said.
'When I feel like it,' Colin said. 'Disgusting freak.'
He looked at Shahid.
'Going to let me talk that way to your boyfriend, poof?'
'Disgusting's what you and your mates are,' Nicola said. 'Pack of you coming after the two of us. Cowards.'
'Won't need a pack. And don't want to share the pleasure.'
Looking at Nicola, Colin conspicuously licked his lips. Then Mr. Hall came in.
'You're all right today,' Colin said. 'Not in the mood.'
While waiting for the mood to strike Colin, Shahid thought about what he and Nicola would do when that happened. He thought the first step ought to be figuring out *where* it might happen. He reckoned they were safe at school: too many teachers about. There was the loo, of course. He solved that problem by refusing to drink tea in the morning, over his mother's objections. She appealed to his father for support. He said that if Shahid wasn't thirsty, he shouldn't drink.
But he and Nicola were vulnerable during their walk home. That was especially true on the part of Southworth Street between Purcell and Whitson, where there were so many abandoned shops. Maybe they ought

to change their route.

One day as Nicola went into her building, she asked Shahid if he wanted to join her.

'Texted my mum and she texted back,' she smiled. 'Cow's off somewhere.'

Shahid said his mum had been on him about school and he had loads of homework.

He walked alone back to Southworth. Like a bloke rehearsing his death, he thought.

Too old to have my mum telling people I'm a good boy, he thought. Poor mum clueless about what me and Nicola been up to.

Yet Shahid *was* a good boy. So even on this barren street he had a hard time using his monster of a Chemistry textbook, once he'd pulled the sleeves of his jumper over his hands to protect them, to smash the glass door of the most isolated shop.

The noise mortified him. But he looked up and down the street and saw no other pedestrians. No one came out of any of the handful of open shops. He reached in and undid the simple lock on the handle. The inside was dark like a cemetery at night. Mobile wasn't a laser gun, but he appreciated the torch on it.

#

Three days later the mood struck Colin. Shahid and Nicola let him close the distance gradually until they reached Southworth between Purcell and Whitson. They ran for the abandoned shop where they knew they could hide. They found the room they wanted and proceeded to the far side, facing the door. And there they waited for Colin, who had no clue that thanks to the industry of his intended victims the rotten boards covering the hatch above the cellar would never support the weight of a strapping brute like himself.

'Got your mobile?' Shahid asked during a pause in the howling.

Colin cursed Shahid and Nicola and said he did. He cursed them again and howled.

His leg fractures, not anticipated by Shahid or Nicola because they'd thought Colin avoidable but indestructible, would for months keep him from posing a danger to them.

They were divided over the question of whether they ought to feel remorse, given the seriousness of Colin's injuries. At first, Shahid argued

on behalf of remorse, while Nicola opposed it. After arguing for a number of weeks, they had switched sides.

Aside from the vexed question of remorse, however, they were as one in taking pleasure from neutralization of the menace Colin had posed. But undercutting Shahid's pleasure was the knowledge that Colin would return as bad as ever one day and that Mike Richards was still about, not to mention others worse than Mike.

'We'll keep outsmarting them,' Nicola assured him.

'No choice. But Bond would kill them.'

Nicola rolled her eyes.

'Sorry,' Shahid said. 'I know. Sexist pig.'

'Sod James Bond,' Nicola said.

VILLANELLE #1

Anna Winham

The start of loving's not hard to invest in—
when you don't know him he is as you hope,
and if you wanted you could have impressed him

in the first days, full of fun and jesting.
When each is playing perfectly her trope,
the start of loving's not hard to invest in.

Veneers seem smooth and nothing's yet suggesting
the many reasons you should not elope,
and if you wanted you could have impressed him—

perhaps you had, but that was when you dressed in
a suit a little different from your scope.
The start of loving's not hard to invest in

when each lover is still acting as a guest in
the other's home. This is how you cope
when you so want always to impress him:

you pretend to be the self you passed his test in.
Two selves collapse under microscope;
Far-sighted loving's not hard to invest in.

Looked at closely, your facades are stressed. In
his case too, the shell is cracked like soap.
The start of loving's not hard to invest in,
when if he wanted you, you'd have impressed him.

MUNGA THIRRI

Sandra Renew

Munga Thirri/Simpson Desert, Australia

Federation drought, 1900: the last desert people walked out of Munga Thirri,
of the sand hill country, they knew themselves as Wangkangurru.
From inside the desert, out into the unknown, what they see first is the fence.
On nearby dunes a camel walks across the moon—sounding camel bells
call up a sky of stars, galaxies held just above the dust by hakea.
Two boys dreaming maps the journey, desert stories and stars, to mikiri.

Corkwood trees, Hakea eyreana, surround the water wells. From mikiri to mikiri,
we know time is pointless when we walk the story through Munga Thirri.
Spinifex grows outwards in circles, uses time to die off in the centre; hakea
bark burned to white ash for their wounds, can't salve the hurt of Wangkangurru.
Some nights sadness is sung by dingoes, singing to the camel bells,
and in the breaking silence, futility intrudes, there in the line of the fence.

All the ones who walked the dunes, not knowing the constraint of the fence,
know water is survival-mapped. In the campsite at the mikiri,
voices, Pashtun, Baloch, Sindhi, carry from the breakfast fire, soft as camel bells.
Their work was stringing wire for the vermin fence, on the edge of Munga Thirri,
but now the fence lies buried under moving sand, no interest to Wangkangurru:
800 ks through gidgee bush, cane grass on a dune crest, thickets of hakea,

waddi trees, acacia peuce, coolabahs, through swales alive with hakea.
Colonising sand dunes, even before the wire was strung, rabbits beat the fence.
But the desert space is known through the skin of Wangkangurru,
and dust plumes over silent plaques marking the place of a once lost mikiri.
Dingo steps, stops, fades, watches from the swale edge in Munga Thirri,
muezzin crow calls sunrise, grazing herd drifts after timeless camel bells.

Wind blows and gusts, setting a whisper through the grasses, underscored by
camel bells,
camp fire scorching seeds like roasted almonds, sweet nectar, solace of hakea.

Government draws a line on paper to fix in time the boundary of Munga Thirri,
although time here moves and shifts over the line that was once a fence.
Dust veils the sunrise, clouds the trees, layers the hidden places of mikiri,
shadowing ghosts walking north to pitjuri fields through the country of
Wangkangurru.

The People of this desert country know themselves as Wangkangurru.
Straying through and over dunes, the herd is mapped by camel bells.
Two boys dreaming, rainmakers' songs, story-maps the mikiri.
Cameleers and Wangkangurru take as commonplace the marvel of the hakea.
Scientists walk transect surveys with camels, cross curiously over the boundary fence.
Two boys dreaming seeps into the body, consuming whoever walks into Munga
Thirri.

Look for signs: two boys dreaming, the mikiri of the Wangkangurru...
as you walk Munga Thirri country, listen as well for camel bells,
deep in a swale of hakea, when you cross the abandoned fence.

Note: In respect for potential cultural sensitivities, the submission of this poem for publication
is supported by Don Rowlands OAM, Wangkangurru Yarluyandi elder, QPWS Senior Ranger
for the Munga Thirri.

METAMORPHOSIS

Suzanne Herschell

evidence is in a white A4 envelope
unsealed bulging
 with black & white stories
when nothing is so definitively black & white
unadulterated
transition revealed capturing imaging the shades of grey
layering characteristics new
younger then flesh firm
now flab of a woman
 past an assumed prime
breasts hormonally-driven uplifted
 with cleavage
on a towering frame legs
still thick with muscle confirm
the aged testosterone no manipulation could disguise
 as un-male
& within a drowning confusion
identity lies

I knew him first his chameleon tendency then her they
inhabit my images
in this revelatory continuum naked reciprocals
 they are both a maelstrom

& when we meet & share unspoken knowledge
amid the language & stare of disconnected curiosity
skin holds our unravelling
within the grasp of what we are

never truly defined
this twilight hoax by our genes or hex
 this crown of thorns on henna hair

& matching lips
smashed into a line
 might cry of a curse to bear
these photos are
pain against a wall where they hang out
pain in the bus shelter
 exposed looking out
waiting alone to be transported elsewhere somewhere
the wait is long & lone with labels
 profiling
gender-diversity initialisms morphing on a string
 do we need those
it is what it is
we are
 what we are

THE AMPERSAND

Sharon Kernot

You were a slip of the pen—a co-joining
of *e* and *t* by hardworking monks.
You were the 27th letter of the alphabet.
Your name a slur of words
from the lazy chants of school children.
You've survived for centuries
are multi-lingual, multi-purposed.

You're a chameleon, many-faced.
Each glyph is a musical note.
Some gentle, elongated, rhythmic,
some flat and firm and heavy.
You're a small distance to a treble clef
in curvature and sway and elegance.
What a treat to draw those swashes,
those twists, those sensuous sweeps.

In design class I drew you again and again
until I could replicate
your Caslon swirls and Garamond curls.
The nib of my pen gliding over your crevasses:
your shoulder, your voluptuous bowl,
your weighty counter, the teardrop terminal,
that sweeping tail or tongue of the contoured T.

I confess, I cannot walk past you without
tracing your curves, running my fingers over
the remnants of your E and T.
I love your brevity—your one keystroke.
I love your baseline heaviness.
I type you over and over until I have a row
of fat-bottomed girls, legs elegantly crossed—
little typographical knots of beauty.

DAYTRIP

Wendi White

We give our children life and if
we pay attention, they return the favor,
recalling the electric joy of an old car
filled with hot jazz headed to the beach
where they prod us to play, trading
affection with a frisbee's spin,
a wave's crest into laughter,
surfing to sand. So bright the delight
of bronzed, bare shoulders stronger
now than ours, so startling
the fact that they could carry
us over the dunes.

FORGOTTEN WHISPERS

Mira Chiruvolu

your toes curled on the dusty rooftop
the breeze wisps my neck
and i sigh into the horizon line
like chocolate melted over the stove,

a sweet lullaby.

mumble your breath
onto my eyelids
onto the strings of my limbs
onto the lips of the somber
seeking summer skyline,

our days under the sun.

GUARD DOG

CM Harris

Downstairs, a crash. A clatter and rumble that could not be the house settling, nor the furnace acting up, nor an icicle breaking loose from an eave, nor a raccoon breaking in again. This time it is an intruder, I am sure of it. And they've knocked over the child gate. The one we use to keep the dogs out of the basement.

Dear God—and in an instant, I'm no longer an atheist—dear God, this is it.

I rise up in bed, no point in laying there, convincing myself the sound was just a dream before waking. They're on the first floor, boots scuffling the wood stairs. What the fuck? There's plenty on the first floor to steal. Computers, TVs, bikes, guitar equipment—an entire studio. I'll never play music again, will I?

I shake my wife's shoulder. Be quiet, I whisper, don't make a sound.

Of course, she does. She mumbles indignant, and I grimace teeth at her.

Someone's in the house, I say. Get the kids, get them out.

Deep in the covers, our chihuahuas snore away as we slide out of bed. My wife staggers from our bedroom, halting in the hall to make sure it's not another of my false alarms. She opens the phone app, finger hovering over the 9. One floor down, a man's low voice mutters, and my wife can't help but whimper. She moves swiftly, quietly down the hall, dialing the phone, and I know it is the last I will see of her.

My job is to slow them. The extra mom, the expendable mom. I stand at the top of the third-floor landing, clutching the rails, my body a pulsing bundle. Not paralyzed like you sometimes get after a bad dream, but with a determined, gulping sadness that destiny has arrived. This is how I will go out—blocking a bullet, absorbing a knife, taking a fist, and folding like a TV tray. People will say: if only there had been a husband. Or a gun.

A man's reflection in the second-floor window blocks much of the stairwell light, which we keep on all night. I swallow and blow a calming breath. It doesn't work.

He turns the corner, his gaze sweeping our kitchen. My heart gallops steadily, my strongest muscle.

He looks up the stairs, and we lock eyes, mine wild with as much rage as I can muster. I've caught the end of too many cop shows before the news; you can't beg a killer out the door.

'What the fuck are you doing in my house, motherfucker!'

He smacks his cracked lips, a bit surprised, but not as wary as I'd hoped.

From down the hall, my wife and kids struggle out the dormer windows onto the roof. My son not believing it entirely, my daughter whining. It was always the plan, be it home invasion or fire. Get the kids on the roof. And if the threat makes it to the bedrooms, jump.

The man smiles up the stairs at me with broken teeth. His clothes are ragged and oversized, his beard scraggly. He's got over a decade on me. Probably sixty or so, but a tall sixty.

The orange-handled scissors I use to open packages (no more of that Amazon nonsense) gleam out of reach on the kitchen table. He sees me look—dammit—and shuffles over to grab them. I cry inside; that's gonna hurt.

'Fuck you,' I say, 'I will kill you.'

He balks, a bushy eyebrow raised and starts back toward the stairs.

I want to run. I know the house better than him. I might make it out the window with a few stab wounds. But of course, I'd just be leading him to the rest of my family, and who knows if they will be able to get help from the neighbors at two am. Their feet are probably stinging from the snow.

My old dogs have tumbled from the bed now, growling at first, and then screech barking with the same frightened rage that thrums in my veins. Ollie will go down with me, Viv will skitter into a dark corner somewhere.

The man grabs the stair rail, one foot on the step. I can smell him now, yeasty and sour. He's high on something or desperate enough to do what it takes to get high tomorrow. I have no doubt he wouldn't be in my house if he was thinking straight. As he climbs the stairs, my well-measured thoughts regarding socio-economics go out the window with the rest of my family.

I jump.

Falling, arms outstretched, I latch onto him, his canvas coat rough on my skin, and remember the last time I hugged my dad.

We sail downward, backward until he hits the wall with a whump and a wet pop. My cheek strikes the wall too; something tears in my shoulder.

His body underneath me is a shifting pile. I scramble off of him.

Ollie scuttles down the stairs barking his lungs ragged.

At the foot of the stairs, the man's head lays up against the wall, perpendicular to his body. He gazes half-lidded and open-mouthed as if thinking of what to say. I stumble across the kitchen to the knife rack, keeping an eye on the orange scissors, my right shoulder throbbing. I fumble a blade out with my left hand.

I rush back to the man, crouching all wobbly. The rage runs from me in a line down my leg, puddling at my feet. The knife quivers in the air, a glinting feather.

Ollie stops growling. He peers at the man, his haunches poised to leap backward. My dog's tubular little body straightens up. He sniffs the empty face, the stained coat, the hand loosely grasping scissors, then he pads to the water bowl to drink.

DOGS IN THE MOSQUE

Polchate Krapayoon

The sun's fat fingers poke through
the high windows, each digit distilled
in pools of blue and rosehip glass,
forming seashell fractal patterns.

The room is light and bare,
covered by a flat roof resting on arches.
There is an arabesque floor, green-tiled,
that cools the soles of believers.

The dying light warms
the basins of the courtyard
and the mosque is empty, quiet
save one napping watchman.

Two stray dogs meander past him,
pawing the shallow roots
of rose, quince and jasmine
into the inner chambers.

Wandering through the prayer room,
they choose a lamp-lit corner
but the two do not engage in prayer.

The smaller one climbs up
and thrusts himself into the other.
Damp limbs and bodies rutting,
heat-shivering, arching,
their sound howls up to heaven.

The beaten leather of their paw pads
scrape the tiles of the mosque,
They half-snarl, half-growl
—a moistened, adenoidal noise
coming, coming out.

The watchman rushes in,
white-knuckled, hands hung
to a stick, grunting as he swings:

Their legs jerk as they flee,
skidding through the prayer hall,
past the mihrab, out the courtyard.

The watchman makes a noise,
half-growl, half-sigh,
as he scrubs down the tiles
with a yellowed bar of soap.

Outside the mosque gates,
the mongrels slink away
into the fervid city,
the stench of their sex wafting.

Come next season,
he'll be buried in the dirt
and she'll be left wallowing,
almost ready to burst.

PRAYING MANTIS

Wes Lee

Perhaps it is something they do—
 sway—
entranced with eyes,
in love with eyes,
as we are with the moon
or the astronaut's view.

Removed to the window,
he made his way back
to my pillow;
 swaying and gazing
for his big-boned witness.

I said: This could be a dream.
I remember it now
because we laughed,
because you said:
He must be in love with you
and did not doubt it
and really meant it
and meant it so
wholeheartedly.

ANOTHER BIRTHDAY IN SKOPJE

Peter Newall

It was chokingly hot in the streets of the old bazaar. The sun which had beaten down so fiercely at noon was at last sliding down the afternoon sky, but in the lanes between the small cramped shops the heat had a life of its own. It radiated out from the plastered walls and up from the uneven flagstones underfoot. The shimmering air smelt of ancient dust, metal solder, and grilling meat.

I had stopped in front of the Café Istanbul, a narrow shopfront with its name in uneven red letters across a single window. Greasy bluish smoke drifted from a pipe sticking out through the galvanised roof, adding to the haze hanging above the street.

Albanian pop music keening from the pirate CD stall on the corner was punctuated by hammering from the tinsmiths' shops further along the street. In blocks of black shade thrown by canvas awnings stood ranks of dishes and pots and pitchers with curved spouts the smiths had made earlier that day, or that week, or that year.

I wondered how fast business was for a tinsmith in the Skopje bazaar. People need to buy pots and pans, but not every day, and surely nobody would choose to enter a tinsmith's shop, with its fire and smoke and metal hammering on metal, on a day as hot as this. Presumably at evening the smith will go home and say, 'Well, wife, today I sold nothing.' Or more likely, sit outside his shop at a table under the grape vines and drink coffee with his friends, and smoke and talk about how bad business is in these times.

Three girls walked past me wearing long beige gabardine coats and coloured headscarves. The tallest had a scarf in a delicate mauve. She glanced at me as she passed, then looked down again. Her eyebrows were strongly marked and her eyes lined with black kohl. She struck me as very beautiful.

Everyone on the streets of the bazaar was walking; one or two as if with a purpose, most strolling in that languid Balkan manner, but everybody was moving. I felt conspicuous standing, looking around like a tourist, so I set off down the sloping path toward the white wall of a mosque that stood at the next junction.

It was the biggest mosque in the bazaar. I had seen its minaret, thin and sharp against the blue sky, from the bridge. Under a small porch, at the drinking fountain which always stands next to a mosque, two children were bending forward to drink. The water, trickling from a narrow pipe into a sun-heated stone basin, didn't look very refreshing.

In a patch of shade, a man wearing faded black clothing and a white skull-cap knelt begging, both palms upturned, calling out in a cracked tenor. His sandals sat neatly on the ground beside him.

Skopje is divided by the green River Vardar into Christian and Muslim halves. I was staying in a hotel on the Christian side, but this morning I'd crossed the river by the old Ottoman stone bridge, intending to look around the bazaar, have a coffee, and buy figs and halva. The bridge was a handsome structure; seven arches from bank to bank, in pale grey, almost white, stone, its back curving in a gentle arch.

Legend had it that when the Ottomans built the bridge over the Drina at Višegrad, a murderer was walled up in the arch to give it strength. I doubted that had happened here. This bridge seemed too modest, its back curved too mildly, to be associated with such brutality. Still, it had survived nearly five centuries, wars and earthquakes, so perhaps there was all the same some secret power to it.

I stood at the centre of the bridge this morning and looked north, at minarets and the lead-covered domes of the old Turkish bathhouses, then back southward over shops and offices and the low hillsides behind them to the giant white cross standing on the blue mountain above the city.

Then I'd leaned on the parapet and watched the green-grey waters of the Vardar rush beneath me. And thought, inevitably, that the river had run exactly like that for hundreds of years, and that thousands of men had stood exactly where I was standing and looked down at the water churning at the feet of the arches of the bridge, and thought exactly the same thoughts, about time and its similarities to a river, and about the strength of the bridge, the art of man, to stand so long against nature, the water pouring against it without respite day and night, even while the town slept. And about how the water would go on pouring under here long after I and those around me were gone, and how other men who didn't know us would stand on the bridge and look down and think these same thoughts.

Now, late in the afternoon, carrying my halva and some dates and almonds, I approached the bridge from the bazaar side, across a space of hot dusty ground littered with plastic bottles, paper scraps, a torn shoe,

uncountable cigarette ends. I walked slowly up the bridge's curved back to its middle and once again leaned on the stone parapet, looking down at the water. People passed behind me, crossing over and back. A Gypsy child two or three years old lay curled up on the bare stone, next to a shoebox with a few small coins in it.

A year ago today I stood on this bridge for the first time. It was my birthday, just as it is today. Not long before midnight I stood precisely here, at the midpoint of the bridge, leaning over the broad, smooth stone rail, looking down at the Vardar. With no moon above, the river was black, visible only where it was forced to divide by the footings of the bridge, rushing round them and hastily joining itself up again with a foaming hiss.

Today the bridge was no different, the Vardar was no different, it sounded the same and smelt the same and ran under the bridge's seven arches just as it did on that birthday. And I must look much the same, arms folded, leaning over the parapet, looking down at the water.

But I was not the same at all. A year ago I had not met Snedjana. I had no idea, standing here on my birthday last year, what would happen in the next twelve months. A year ago, I thought, I was a youth, an innocent, compared to myself today; but men always believe that until recently they were foolish, while now they are wise.

I didn't feel wise, as I stood there with the sun warming my back. I didn't want to think about Snedjana, I didn't want to remember how startingly beautiful she was, and now I did think of her, I pounded my fist on the smooth white stone.

I was sure in that moment I could smell her cigarette, the smoke carrying her perfume, above the smell of the green water of the Vardar, just as I could smell it that evening last autumn when we stood together on this bridge. We faced the other way, toward the west. We leaned over the parapet and looked at the last streaks of sunset faintly reflected in the river, we spoke and were silent, and she flicked her cigarette out into the running water, a spinning orange arc abruptly extinguished.

And then I couldn't help remembering the afternoon I first saw her. It was all my doing, she was just working in a Skopje bookshop, nothing more, certainly not trying to attract the attention of some foreigner. I went into the shop to buy a copy of *Little Red Riding Hood* in Macedonian; I was collecting the story in different languages to give my niece.

I'd learned how to pronounce the title, *Cervona Shapochka*, or almost that, and she was amused by my effort to speak her language and asked

my name and told me hers, Snedjana, and when she saw I didn't catch it, she got from the shelves another slim children's book. The title was in Cyrillic but I saw from the cover picture it was *Snow White*. 'That is my name,' she said, 'Snedjana,' holding the book up in front of her with two hands and smiling at me over the top of it. I could never reproduce her pronunciation of 'Snedjana', in her mouth it sounded like a mixture of coconut ice cream and the speech of the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

I bought the *Snedjana* book as well as *Cervona Shapochka*. I went out into the late afternoon sun with the books in a paper bag and with my head full of her. Seeing a stall on the corner I bought a big bunch of flowers, five hundred dinars, a thousand dinars, I forget, but I asked the girl to wrap it in coloured paper and hurried back to the shop. I saw Snedjana walking toward the bus stop; how lucky, I thought, just in time. I pressed the flowers on her, I couldn't explain myself in Macedonian, I hoped the flowers would speak for me. She smiled, but uncertainly, it struck me. I said goodbye, turned and walked away; on the corner I looked back. Snedjana, with the outsize bunch of flowers in her arms, was walking back toward the shop.

She can't take them home, I realised, of course not, such a woman does not live alone. A man was waiting for her there, or maybe in a bar or a coffee shop, smoking and leafing through the evening paper until she appeared, so she had to dump the flowers. But why did she tell me her name, I wondered as I walked back toward the main square; she could easily have remained aloof, but she volunteered her name and asked mine, and I didn't pay for the *Snedjana* book, I remember now, she gave it to me as a gift, so what was I to think?

And she was such a great beauty. I remember her faultless poise as she walked toward me the evening we met outside the ballet theatre, and I remember her eyebrows that arched as soon as they began, the delicate angle of her jaw, the colour of her hair, something of how her smile showed just a glimpse of her white teeth. I remember the line of her nose, high-bridged and straight. I'd never met anyone so elegant, so exquisitely beautiful.

After my foolishness with the flowers, I went back to the bookshop later in the week, intending simply to say hello and to make it clear that I understood, that I would not embarrass her with more flowers or with anything at all. I expected her to be cool, discouraging, but she was friendly, it seemed to me; having so little speech in common I was reduced to assumptions drawn from smiles, gestures, the look in her eyes.

I persuaded myself she was attracted to me.

And I persuaded her about that too, at least a little; she agreed to have dinner with me in a cellar restaurant off the main square, I remember the dark-green wallpaper, and we had coffee a couple of times after she closed the shop for the day, and once we went together to the ballet. I didn't ask her how she came to be free to do that; I asked her nothing about her life, and she said nothing. How simply she was dressed that evening, a plain midnight blue dress with pearls. I was astonished such a beautiful woman could exist, let alone walk beside me down the red-carpeted staircase of the theatre at interval. And of course, we did have that one night together.

Or most of a night; she left before dawn.

I stirred from half-sleep beside her to find her crying. Her crying was silent, so I didn't realise at first, seeing her sitting up in the gloom, but when I put my arm around her and felt her shoulders shaking I almost stopped breathing.

I knew at once it had turned to ashes, it was gone. I knew she was not crying about me but for some part of her life far from my knowledge, and beyond my power to affect or even understand.

I turned her toward me, her eyes invisible in shadow under her lovely arched brows. I put my hand to her face; the skin over her cheekbones was wet with tears. She turned away. I had to let her go then, take my hands from her. After a moment she swung her smooth white legs from under the sheet, stood, and like a ghost got dressed in the half-darkness at the foot of the bed. I looked away; it was not for me to look at her any more.

I'd sensed more than once I was an awkward intrusion in her life, but each time told myself we must have something between us, or she wouldn't be here with me. That thought did not help now as I lay there, aware of her movements as she gracefully shrugged her shoulders into her dress.

I got her a taxi, and I remember painfully clearly seeing her seated shape on the back seat after I closed its door, but I can't remember how I got through the rest of the night. I know I flew to Zagreb the next day, buying a ticket at the agency in the hotel lobby as soon as it opened in the morning. I recall looking out the oval window of the plane at the white clouds over the mountains below.

I stayed a week in Zagreb. No, that's not true, I didn't last a week, I was there perhaps five days, I couldn't do anything but think of her. I felt a physical ache in my heart, and I wondered all the time what she was thinking, could I get her back, knowing perfectly well I could not. But she'd

said, getting into the taxi, 'I am sorry, Alex. I will send to you message.' So I looked at my phone every day, several times a day, no message. Sometimes my hand hovered over her number, but I knew I could not call her.

It didn't get any better, and eventually, after one whole night pacing my hotel room, staring down at the yellow streetlamps in the main square until the first trams of the day arrived just before dawn, I flew back to Skopje. I got a taxi from the airport to the town centre, walked up and down Bulevar Goce Delcev for about an hour, and then went into the bookshop. Ridiculous, stupid, but I couldn't help it.

She was standing behind the counter talking to a man in a light overcoat, a handsome swarthy fellow with greying hair. I nodded a greeting to her like any customer entering a bookshop, and went to look along the shelves. She continued her conversation, a quiet, balanced conversation with someone she clearly knew very well. After a few minutes I realised I couldn't speak to her, and I couldn't stay in the bookshop all afternoon. I went to the counter and asked her for a book I'd seen in the window; I'd been able to make out its title in Cyrillic, '*Sestratana Sigmund Freud*', 'Sigmund Freud's Sister'. She reached a copy from behind her. 'The book is in Macedonian language,' she said. 'That's all right,' I replied, 'I might learn something.'

Then I was walking down the bulevar with the book in a paper bag. I couldn't read it, of course; I left it on the seat in a bus shelter. I left Skopje the next day.

But even that was not the end. I had given Snedjana my business card, and several months later, back in Sydney, I got a call from a stranger, a woman from the Macedonian diaspora. She said she had a book for me, brought out here by a friend visiting her from Skopje, sent by Snedjana.

I went to the woman's home in Bellevue Hill and collected the book, a heavy paperback with a shiny blue cover: *Macedonian Grammar for Beginners*. She made coffee and set out a plate of sugared biscuits, and I sat and talked with her for as short a time as I could without being utterly discourteous. 'Such a lovely couple, Snedjana and Dejan,' said the woman, 'one of those rare couples so exactly well suited to each other.'

'*For beginners*,' indeed. I understood now that on the most dramatic and painful night of my whole life, I'd been merely a bit-part actor in a play I didn't understand at all.

So although I was back in Skopje, I hadn't gone to the bookshop. It would be rude and clumsy to go there, but more to the point, I couldn't

bear to. I didn't want to see Snedjana. In fact, I decided not to walk along that block of Bulevar Goce Delcev, to be sure I didn't see her. I would celebrate my birthday in Skopje on my own.

The late afternoon sun was still hot on my back, and the stone parapet was still warm under my hands, but in the east, the blue sky was beginning to pale, and a pile of clouds had appeared over the horizon. The river below me was rushing under the old stone bridge as it always had. Straightening up stiffly, I walked down the slope of the bridge's arch toward the city, toward my hotel. I had forgotten to buy figs, I realised.

KENOCON

Stephen Coates

This was my year to win. I could feel it in my bones. Sorry, just my little joke. No more osseous humour, I promise. I put down my cloth, stepped back to inspect the symmetry. Moved the dog's jaw a few inches to the right. The smaller items, neatly identified as rabbit, chicken, cat, were on the top shelf, with the larger ones below. Pride of place went to a horse's skull, complete with teeth. Only one bone didn't have a label. My source assured me it was a genuine human tibia, but it was possibly a fake and probably illegal. I frowned to hide my smugness. I really did think I was in with a chance. Plus I was wearing my lucky underpants.

I wandered around to check out the competition. Sylvia was there, of course, with her egg shells. She does egg shells every year and never wins, though she once got an honourable mention with a Birds of the World theme. This time it was hens' eggs only, spray-painted in a variety of colours. Beside each one was a card announcing the date and the use to which they were put. June 23, nine whites for a pavlova for her niece's graduation, yolks for custard cream. December 24, half a dozen for a soufflé that ended up in the compost. These eggs, she wanted us to know, did not die in vain. It was a nice touch, but it didn't stack up against mine.

Warren strolled over, raised a hand in greeting.

'How did you get the marrow out?' he asked.

'Dilute hydrogen peroxide,' I said. 'I tried coke but it turned them brown.'

'Yeah, it would. Hey, mind if I take a picture?'

He held up a smart phone. At first I thought he meant my exhibit but he aimed it at my face. I couldn't think of a decent excuse so I forced an anaemic grin as it clicked and whirred.

'Where's yours?' I said.

He smiled without answering, walked off to talk to Brian.

I knew maybe half the people there. Those of us who are local get together every month, discuss what we're working on. When it comes to the annual event, though, we generally play our cards fairly close to our chest. Nothing worse than showing up on the big day and discovering that someone else has stolen your thunder. This actually happened once.

Phil the Barber and Kurt from Nelson both arrived with crates of empty cocoons, monarchs and admirals and I don't know what. Created quite a stir, those nearly identical displays sitting side by side. Turned out it was pure coincidence, and Kurt and Phil had a good laugh about it. The committee awarded them both a special prize for lepidoptery.

Ngaire saw me and rushed over to give me a hug. I'm not a natural hugger, obviously, but she's so irresistibly maternal that I put up with it. When I managed to get free—after long enough not to hurt her feelings—I pushed aside the curtain and entered her booth. A narrow tunnel lined with babywear, shoes, children's clothes, gradually increasing in size. At the end of the row I found a mock-up of a teenager's bedroom. The dresser was littered with cheap cosmetics, posters still hung on the walls, but the occupant had clearly moved out.

Technically models are against the rules but it was a powerful piece, especially since everyone knew that Ngaire's daughter had gone to work on a ski-field in Canada and hadn't been home for three years. Ngaire teared up whenever she talked about it. The Kleenex boxes piling up in the corner were almost an exhibit in their own right. I was impressed, even as my lizard brain whispered that the infringement probably neutralized her as a threat.

When I poked my head out she was watching my reaction. I gave her a big smile. I didn't even have to fake it.

'It's terrific,' I said.

She beamed, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

In an hour or so I'd completed the circuit of the room, chatting to old acquaintances, making small talk with new ones, scouting out the enemy. A first-timer had produced a Christmas display, burst crackers and torn wrapping paper. With a bit more imagination she could have really done something with it. A bearded student in a magenta shirt posed proudly beside an enormous pyramid of toilet roll tubes. Stretching the boundaries, I thought.

A series of envelopes took my fancy. No letters inside, but it was possible to trace the progress of romance gone bad. The careful blandness of the first few gave way to floral designs, loopy writing, quirky cartoon figures on the back. Then they swung back to formal again. The last, with a printed address label on a plain manila envelope, brought back memories I hadn't thought of for at least a week. I would have been nervous if I hadn't known that a similar idea took the grand prize just a couple of years ago.

My main rival was definitely Mitch. His exhibit was a thing of beauty. A trestle table covered with a blue cloth. At one end stood a solitary pink birthday candle. The wick was blackened and melted wax had formed a puddle around the base. Next to it was a pair of candles, then three, four, all the way up to twenty-six at regular intervals. I counted them. The arrangements varied—seven was an orange heart, followed by a multi-coloured figure eight. Beside each cluster lay a dead match.

Between nine and ten, however, the sequence was interrupted by a tall white candle. It was still burning. After that the birthday candles were pristine, fresh from the packet, and the matches still held their red heads intact. Now I don't claim to be the most perceptive guy in the world, but even I could work this one out. I nodded at Mitch and he looked away.

Brian and the other two judges appeared at the next stand, conferring in low voices and jotting marks on their clipboards. I hid in the loo, pretending I didn't care. Everyone's a winner. The journey not the arrival matters. When my nausea subsided I ventured back out into the hall.

The pipe chairs in front of the stage were already filling up. I found a spot near the back and made monosyllabic conversation with a guy from Dannevirke whose name I couldn't remember. I didn't take much notice of Brian's speech, an interminable history of the association, but when he finally reached his closing remarks I sat up straighter.

'Now this is rather unusual,' he said, 'but there's nothing in the rules that says it can't happen. One of our contestants has asked to submit an audio-visual presentation. Mr. Browne?'

Warren limped up the steps. He waved at us sheepishly and busied himself at the console, plugging in a notebook computer. At the press of a button the projector cast a yellow rectangle on the screen behind him. He took the microphone from Brian and walked to the edge of the stage, wiping his palms on his trousers.

'Hello,' he said.

His voice vanished in a crackle of static. He coughed and started again.

'I'm Warren and I'm a desiccated husk of a man. In my youth I was a desiccated husk of a boy. Nothing particular made me like this—it's just the way I am. Now I don't want to quibble about the exact definition of 'keno,' whether it applies solely to empty rooms or refers more broadly to empty things in general. I leave those mysteries to people who are cleverer than I am. Or who lead even less interesting lives.'

'No such person,' shouted Phil the Barber and everyone laughed.

‘No, what is important is that we are all kenosophs. We wouldn’t be here if we weren’t. But we are not kenophobes—we do not run screaming from the abyss. Nor are we kenophiles who seek it out, embrace it. Most of us would no doubt prefer to avoid it if we could. We are kenosophs in the true sense of the word, those who understand the hollow spaces. And the reason we understand them is that we live with them every day. We are, each and every one of us, unfurnished. That is why, with your permission, I would like to enter this collage in this year’s contest.’

He pointed the remote and an image appeared on the screen. The crowd gave a collective gasp. Pictures of us, every single person at the convention. So that’s what he was doing with his phone. I was in the third row on the left, even more deer in the headlights than normal.

‘There’s Sylvia,’ he said, ‘smack bang in the middle. Reminds me of my dear old mum, does Sylvia, only without the bipolar and the drug habit.’

The back of Sylvia’s neck turned red and she flapped her hands in front of her face.

‘Then there are my drinking companions, a thoroughly disreputable bunch of larrikins. One of them does get a bit maudlin after his second Shirley Temple, but no one blames him for that.’

‘He’s talking about you, Phil,’ said Kurt.

‘And skulking in the back—’

He may or may not have been looking at me but I cringed anyway. Praise aimed in my direction is always undeserved. Fortunately, at that moment a fierce hailstorm rattled the windows. Together with the equally loud and equally imaginary bagpiper who struck up Scotland the Brave right by my ear, I managed to blot out the next thirty seconds entirely. When I regained my hearing he was just finishing up.

‘I suspect,’ he said, ‘that I am not alone in the anticipation and enjoyment I derive from this event. To be honest, for me it’s not about winning. It’s about being surrounded by like-minded individuals. So I want to thank everyone here. It’s a privilege to call you my friends.’

We sat in stunned silence. Then someone started to clap and several others rose to their feet. Before I knew it I was out of my seat too and the whole audience was giving him a standing ovation. He turned off the projector and rubbed his bald spot.

When the applause died away only Ngaire remained upright, pulling tissues one after another from the box in her hand.

‘Yes, Ms. Green?’ asked Brian.

‘Um,’ she said. ‘Thank you. It’s very nice. And I feel the same way, I love coming here. But I was wondering. Oh dear, I’m not explaining this very well. What I mean is, haven’t you just disqualified yourself? Because if everyone here is your friend, then we can’t be keno any more, can we?’

She sat down and the hall erupted in a hum of furious debate. What was she talking about? Was that even possible, to challenge the legality of another competitor? From the stage Warren watched us with a faint smile. Finally he brushed his nails across the silver mesh of the microphone. The sound system rasped and the buzz faded abruptly.

‘You know, Ngaire,’ he said, ‘I think you’re right. Brian, I’d like to withdraw my entry.’

This time there was utter pandemonium. The Walker brothers looked as if they were going to come to blows. A group of people near the fire door began chanting Warren’s name and a young woman with a bob cut sobbed uncontrollably. It took Brian several minutes to restore order.

After that, the prize-giving was something of an anti-climax. Runner-up was Mitch. I crossed my fingers behind my back and told myself I wasn’t bothered. When Sylvia was declared the winner Ngaire had to pat her on the back to stop her hyperventilating. So once again I didn’t place. A close nowhere. An also-ran, a gallant loser. To my surprise, though, as I joined the queue to congratulate her I realized that I wasn’t all that disappointed. The aching void in my chest seemed a little less desolate than it had that morning. Apparently Warren’s gift was reward enough.

COUNTRY TOWNS

K.M. Preston

The co-op sells groceries, gumboots and fur coats
to be showcased at evening Mass.

Under plane trees, starlings drop ink blot masterpieces
onto mud speckled cars parked nose to curb.

Main street: a lady in odd stocking socks buys raffle tickets
to win a trailer of wood while her husband eats a hot dog,

Unchanged, this town never straddled a highway to be bypassed,
its railway station marked the end of the line.

The ego here is dwarfed, the lesser god of being someone's child,
by plasma that refuses exorcism.

FEEDERS

Owen Bullock

in and out
with the jetsam
bread bag tie

curly feathers
on the black swan's tail—
spring solitude

mallard
wake-ing to the feeder
on the shore

pekin ducks,
black swans, greybacked gulls
wind through rocks

throwing broccoli
for ducks, a little boy says
emerald

left on a rock . . .
the children chant
crack the egg! crack the egg!

a kid
leans on a stranger
to scratch his feet

DRIFT

Will Russo

The wind kept blowing away
our footprints. Where
had we walked?

The edges of our unpaved path wetting
to mud—the gentle borders of a scab:
they close in, fade, then flake to undergrowth.

We scatter bread for birds we imagine
will come like platelets clogging the wound.
Spot something. Call its name.

Mountain ahead: slope and summit
skull-capped. Feet strapped.
The forward, downward ride.

We cave to what we tender.
An onion minced, broken down
then down again, digesting.

Our crumb trail turns out
necessary. Whatever
we snatch, call it a compass.

TO KEEP LOVE CLENCHED BEHIND THE TEETH

Sara Marron

behind the heart-shaped
resting hold, the soft curve
of the jawbone mandible
only moving bone in the head
for chewing up thoughts as they
tumble out, stamping them
into shapes and sounds for
you, tiny licked stamped packs
enveloped ISPs symphysis
the growing together of two bones
trigeminal nerves curves
incisive processes over
the time it takes to push
the hair out of my face
behind delicate ossifying
bodies play our secret
melodies, Mozart in the
car when I lean inside
tea screaming in steam,
overflowing its kettle.

CHANGELING

Marjory Woodfield

after a visit to the Horniman Museum

Frederick Horniman made his fortune through tea.
Because he was a Quaker, understood the importance
of benefiting mankind, so collected exotic species
ensuring their preservation through the art of taxidermy.
All this for the Victorians, who loved more than anything
else, the decorative potential of a dodo, placed beside
an aspidistra on the top of a drawing room piano.
Raphus cucullatus, Mauritius. Or a bamboo-edged case
on a parlour table. *Kea, Kiwi, Weka, Kakapo, New Zealand.*

When Maria Cristina de Bourbon-Sicile, Queen
of Spain, wore a headdress incorporating a lesser bird
of paradise, *Paradisaea Minor, New Guinea*, the art
of millinery developed hand in glove with taxidermy.
A muff made from great crested grebe skin.
Podiceps Cristatus, Central Asia. Red and white feather
fan featuring a tropical hummingbird. *Trachilidae, Brazil.*
King George was given huia tail-feathers for his hatband,
Heteralocha Acutirostris, New Zealand. Everyone else wanted
the same glowing feathers, ensuring extinction for the huia.

Today, small children in high vis vests, *Little Angels,*
Islington, enter from a side door. They pass the central
overstuffed walrus, pride of Horniman's collection.
Odobenus Rosmarus, Canada. A monkey-fish scowls
from back wall shadows. All scales and bared teeth.
Feejee Merman, Japan.

QUEANBEYAN

Con Karavias

Long flowers ski in the begging wind.
The air ridges and turns, breaks some limb in itself
and lies limp; smog bruises, begins blossoming
across the battered part of it. The thin, floral
retching of sunset rakes into restlessness.

The rain saws eerie pleas, flicks its branches
into the roof's mulchy paunch. Blotches puff
and plummet, cradle
the disconsolate glass. Music splashes around us,
we recede into stockpiled privacy
and let the hail grill the vista into a relic.

WE OF THE MERRI MERRI ARE NOT A PATHETIC FALLACY

Dominique Hecq

You call us River Gums. We don't mind. We are all family, even though your botanists call us different names—Swamp Gum, Red Box, Red Stringybark, Manna Gum, Grey Box, Yellow Box. Even the Sheoks don't mind your botanists' names. After all, those names are pretty literal. We hope they remind you we just are. Listen: we sway and creak in the wind. This doesn't mean we don't feel, hear, see. We do. We see further than you. Today the story begins with a human jogging along the Merri Creek. (we don't give you names, assign you a species, genus or gender). They're oblivious to the whipping of their pony tail on their cheekbones. Oblivious to the amber baubles of bitter Kangaroo apples they stomp past step after step as they loop their way back under the bridge. They're thinking about gyrfalcons. How they fly out and always return, even when the leash breaks. We snicker at the fantasy. But we shouldn't. The Eutaxia and Honey Pots shiver. Huddle and droop from sight. We sway and creak. Know better than to say aloud their pony tail drags them back to the nearby bushes. We smell leather, the pale hood falling over her eyes. Yes, we know they are a young woman. (it's an old story). We saw her assailant. He took her through her skin thin bark. A sound like the cry of the tawny frogmouth's in the thick of night. But it is dusk, and already the haunting begins. A helicopter hovers over the wetlands. Our whispers are cut to the quick. We flap our ears shut. You will hear the whirring and buzzing and droning all through the night. You will toss and turn, imagining the young woman's whereabouts. You already know that the psychologist will fail to take action. You know that the only witness will refuse to testify. The rapist will get off lightly. It's an old story. Next morning, you'll not listen to the news. You'll get up and dress in the dark. Then you will lace up your running shoes. And run. Don't plug your ears. Watch out for us. We see what you can't see. We record what you call the invisible. Our fibres are feelers growing thick with rumours.

Note: *in nearby bushes* is the title of a haunting poetry collection by Kei Miller.

31 DECEMBER 2019

Dominique Hecq

Fire loves itself like a ray of sunshine in the mirror. It caresses itself into the inchoate yearning that forebodes fierce desire. See how it crawls up the limbs of paper gums, licking the bark bare, wolfing the leaves that crackle and drip like tears. Hear how it hisses and puffs as it climbs. How it whooshes and huffs as it dashes from tree top to tree top. How it roars as it swallows the wetland into the furnace of its throat. Dismal silence. Lift your tongue. Feel how words ash apart. A swell of smoke. Smouldering waves of grey. Black soot that will exhale its acrid breath until the New Moon.

GRIEVING

Anne Marie Wells

I am not a whole,
only disjointed pieces
held together
the way
two ventricles
taped to
an aorta
won't beat.
Grieving

HER STORY

Gianoula Burns

I thought I'd write her story as she told it—her memories transcribed on paper. It is time—perhaps not long now till I caress her blonde bleached hair that once when very young was as black as black. I would gently close her eyes if not already closed, as the long sleep descended. Her skin stretched taut but supple and soft, across her face; some pact she had made with God that she would endure anything but wrinkles to etch her age. Yes, at eighty-one her face was still relatively young just as the keenness of hurt was fresh in her heart. Hurt from very long ago when mother did not mother her.

I would write her tale or as much as I could remember, as she told it to me, many would tell it differently, would disagree with the telling but that is just so. We tell of our lives the way we remember it, or rather felt it, and in the telling it becomes real. In telling her tale I'll tell my own—my grief postponed or frozen in this time for a future time when I come to terms with the way feeling feels.

For now gently stroking her face, her loose and stiffened hair falling away from her brow, I have no tears to show, just relief.

It began, oh when did it begin? with my grandmother I suppose.

The air was sweet as sweet as the sesame seed honey bars the men of the village make. Together, the tribe, the clan, the family of men, trudged towards the shed, if it can be called that and in a primitive primeval peaceful bonding rite they stirred the honey over the fireplace till it was soft and fragrant, then they added the sesame seeds and almonds freshly picked and cleaned from the farms thereabouts. And as they stirred and spread the mixture on stone or wooden slabs of wood they sang like they do in the men's church choir in the local white-washed chapel—no never a chapel but a church. They laughed and exchanged stories of their wives, their love life, the women who were absent and not allowed to participate in this ritual. They spoke of their adventures, politics; they bartered, they made deals and swore each other to secrecy. And there among them was my grandfather, Dimitri. A bit old not to be married but still an eligible bachelor and liked by all. He was the local butcher, handyman, merchant of all types of hand-made merchandise which he canvassed from village to

village on the island, surrounding islands and across to mainland Greece. He was not literate, too much to do and too much responsibility at a young age meant that there was no time for schooling. He was friends with my maternal grandmother's brother and that was how and why they met.

It was spring time, blossoms, blooms showing promise of the harvest to come. The olive grove ancient and deeply rooted in past and present village life teasing one and all with the greenness of their leaves and the much wanted shade that on summer days would be sought and coveted by lovers.

Lovers aren't always free spirits that choose their heart's desire, sometimes that needs to be planned and arranged, alliances made between families as it has always been for most. The old ways are the safety net when love is hard to find. It was an arranged marriage between a fourteen year old young girl (my maternal grandmother), Maria, just entering womanhood, fiery, feisty and playful and a thirty year old man. Men reach a maturity at thirty that smooths away the roughness and unpredictability of youth.

Within a year Maria was pregnant with my mother. A mother at fifteen, she would leave her daughter with her mother so she could resume her work and play in the fields with friends. It was nineteen thirty eight and the Second World War was about to start. Bandits started moving through the forests bordering and between the villages. My grandfather, Dimitri, along with his friends took on itinerant jobs and wandered through the forests. One day whilst travelling with my grandmother's brother, Spiros, they came across a family of gypsies with their horse and cart scavenging for food among the fields. They approached cautiously, the gypsy children ran ahead of the adults and circled them holding hands and singing and laughing. Trying to pick their pockets and asking for money. They sat down with the gypsies and shared what little food they had with the children. A gypsy woman offered to tell them their fortune and laughingly my grandfather agreed. She took his hand and examined the lines carefully 'You will suffer a blow to the head' she said. Then she took Spiros's hand and very quickly gave it away—'You have no future,' she said. He frowned and turned away. Let's go, he said. Dimitri slapped him on the back, 'Don't take it seriously, it is all lies anyway'. A couple of weeks later as they headed home from the fields they heard the sound of horses and a shot gun fired. Turning around they saw a group of bandits coming towards them. One jumped down off his horse aimed his gun at them and demanded they give him food and any money they had, 'we don't

have anything' said my grandfather. The bandit struck him on the head with the butt of the gun and Spiros tried to seize the gun but was shot in the head. When Dimitri woke he was on his own and his friend was dead.

There was no time to grieve, a funeral service at the local church, tears shed, then back to work on the farm, things moved on. Maria had another child Katerina, family and work commitments were growing and the war in Europe was spreading to mainland Greece and to its islands. Zakynthos wedged unobtrusively, between Italy and mainland Greece was almost missed. Stories of life during the war did not filter down the generations to us, except to mention scarcity of food and other provisions and the increasing number of bandits in the thickly wooded groves on the island, like elsewhere in Greece. The male population stayed to farm and produce food for armies, or so I assume. Maria continued to work and play with friends and the close knit community supported each other to make ends meet. How it happened, or why, is a mystery but Katerina died just shy of her first birthday. Maria was pregnant again and this time bore a son, who she named Spiro, after her brother. Having a boy was important to hand down the farm, the name and the family business. It meant a continuation of the family bloodline and help with farming; the hard physical work required to maintain the farm. Thinking their luck had changed Maria and Dimitri tried for another son but ended up with another girl, my Aunt Angelika. Being the last child, the youngest of the siblings Maria bestowed more love and attention on her than she had on the others—there would be no more children. My mother, Anna, ruled over her siblings and ordered them about. She gave orders and made sure they were obeyed, if not there was a price to pay, a scolding, a dobbing in, a pulling of the hair or a relentless teasing and abuse. She had a fierce temper and a developing skill to control others.

Angelika and Spiro were adept at working in the fields, digging, ploughing, sowing, harvesting, raising chickens, sheep, goats, milking the animals, making and mending animal runs, making cheese and oil, and marketing produce in the village. My aunt also helped with women's chores around the house and at my mother's insistence did her chores as well. Mother was too delicate to work in the fields and instead was trained to embroider, tat, knit and crochet, traditional highly skilled crafts. Education was at home, in the fields, highly practical and for a purpose to sustain the household, to provide earnings and a living. Formal schooling was an optional extra a luxury with no immediate benefit—to read and write was desirable but only the basics. Mum said she was taken out of school at nine years old and locked inside her room to do her handicrafts while

her sister was taken out by her mother all day. She could hear the children walking past her window, playing, laughing, chatting as they ambled off to school and she looked after them longingly, she loved school. Her dreams were of an education, of being more than a village girl, of living a higher life of formal rooms, high teas, and formal dinners, of expensive dresses, travel out of Greece, of holding a position of power and respect. Where did those aspirations come from? She had cousins who became teachers and doctors. My aunt told me of an archbishop in the family, of a Venetian bloodline; the Venetians had occupied the island for almost four hundred years.

Mother embroidered, knitted, made lace for curtains and sheets and tablecloths, whilst she said her sister played. Aunt Angelika went out and worked in the fields with my uncle—she did not have a day's rest from hard farm labour and when she got home she had to do my mum's bidding.

The days were full but mother managed to visit her grandmother and listen to her stories and her advice on how to behave, what good manners were and life learnings, 'to be hurt by a husband, is one thing, it passes because at the end of the day you are strangers so it doesn't stick, but when a child hurts you it is deep and hard to recover from', 'I hope you are never wounded by your children'. Her grandmother would visit, her clothes well-worn, and often needy, without a husband and now aging she had little to sustain herself with, food and money was scarce. She'd come by to be fed or cared for by her daughter, but my grandmother, so mum said, would rouse on her and give her nothing. Mother would pocket bread and small bottles of oil and secretly give them to her which she accepted gratefully and hid them in the pockets of her huge skirts. She gave mum blessings for helping her. When Maria shouted at mum and abused her for whatever the crime was, grandmother would lash out and call her daughter a Turk - mean spirited and cruel. Mum's affection for her grandmother grew and she would often escape home to spend time with her.

When I spoke with my aunt Angelika, she said grandmother often lost her temper with all of them and cursed and swore at them but would very quickly repent and apologise. A habit mum inherited. Mum was not the victim she made out to be.

How and where they met, mother never mentioned. Putting together the fragments of recollections it happened at a taverna, the village's local gathering place for the young and not so young. A Greek never really ages not in mind and spirit, the body weakens with the burden of age as

each layer of work, of experience etches creases in every part of our body, weighing it down. It was a Saturday night, Sunday was always quiet and restful, when being lazy was forgiven, even made mandatory by religion. Work in the fields had ceased, the older adults dozed in armchairs or seated at tables outside their homes talking to all and sundry as they passed by. The weather was getting warmer, spring was on the edge as the winter cold receded. Fireflies started waking from their doze, sun slowing sinking reluctant to let go. There was the strumming of guitars and bazookis, songs of future happiness, of loving in its early stages, and my mother listened. She stopped her sewing to gaze through the open window. 'Go on, get out' said my grandmother, 'join them'. Mum quarrelled with her sister over clothes and the bit of lipstick they had and scolded her sister that she was too young to join her. My aunt Ange sulked and left anyway to play with friends.

Mum danced to the tavern door and slipped in, joining her cousins at a table, all the while watching the band of men play and sing. There was one in particular, with dark curly hair and a smile that focused on her. 'Anna he's looking at you,' 'Anna,' and then there were giggles. Who is he? 'that one is Dionysius, he comes from the next village.'

When in the following year mum turned eighteen suitors began to arrive. Grandmother welcomed them and presented them to her daughter, she was polite but turned them down. Grandmother in frustration reproached her, Do you want to turn into an old maid, enough you must choose one, you can't stay here forever.' 'I won't stay here, I know who I love'. 'Love? What's that got to do with it.'

'Everything—I won't marry someone I don't love.' 'That comes later, you need someone who can support you.' 'Love will provide' mum said smugly. Something she would regret saying. She would marry no-one but Dionysius, he would take her away from the village, she would travel the world with him, she would be a lady of means, her superiority could not then be denied or laughed at.

He was supposed to come to ask for her hand in marriage, a time and date had been set. But even with Greek time it was getting late. She waited by the door, crochet hook in hand, her quick hand movements only gave her anxiety expression. Her mother lingered in the next room, preparing sweets or the table or just wistfully thinking of her own engagement. It was getting warm and a slight breeze came through the open windows as if to calm the nerves and sweep the perspiration from an anxious brow. Anna's uncle came in and looked around—is he not here yet? Mum looked

up at him hoping he had an answer. 'I'll go and get him.'

He set off on his donkey up the steep winding path to the village Loucha. He was annoyed and disappointed at such treatment of his niece. When he arrived he found Dionysius sitting having coffee with his brother's fiancé Helen, as she entertained him with stories of her home village and her impending trip to Australia. She was to depart for Australia in the next few days, her marriage having been arranged with someone she had never met. 'I won't go, I don't have to go you know, **we** can get married and I'll stay here.' 'But I am already engaged to Anna,' 'Not yet, you can cancel it now before it is too late.' 'But I love her.' 'You can love me, I can make you happy...'

Anna's uncle interrupted with an abrupt 'Dionysius, you are expected elsewhere, come, I'll take you to Anna'. Dionysius blushed, said an embarrassed goodbye to Helen and prepared himself for the trip. 'Are you going now?' said his father, 'Don't know why you have to marry Anna. You'll get nothing from me you know. You are on your own.' He turned his back on his son and walked down into the fields to check on the workers he had hired. His mother warmly hugged him, 'Go with my blessing son. Don't mind him, you know what he is like, if it is not profitable he is not interested.' 'Here take these bags of walnuts and sweets, you can't go empty handed.' She had prepared a basket full of the farm's produce and her own cooking. He kissed her and thanked her. 'Don't be long,' said Helen, 'I'll be here for a while.'

He went to Kiliomeno with a head full of what was said and unsaid.

They married in June before the real heat started. It rained, poured down, she thought it would never stop. Trying to protect her white dress from the muddy streets, look dignified in the bleak wet light of the rainy day was hard but she was in love. She glowed with joy and he was besotted. Mum's joy became resentful embittered regrets over the years but dad remained besotted till the day he died.

She often said to us that she should have realised then that the rain on her wedding day was an omen of everything she would go through and the shattered dreams and life she would lead.

That was the beginning of her story.

HERITAGE

Katharine Kistler

I've come here from the salty residue on skin,
scent of sunburn, sweat, oil, the torn shirt thrown on
for the barefoot walk home from water.

From the sneaky grain of sand you can never
shake from your scalp, from the tangles caught
up in the wood comb everybody shares, the one

that lives in the ceramic bowl that is also
the key holder, the ashtray, the Sunday-night
phone-confiscation-basin. From the nighttime

jellyfish stinging skinny dippers
and snuck-out teens. I've come here from
seagrass lining the wooden pier, anchored

despite each foamy roll. From the unnatural
peninsula, the safe elevated walkway built for the tourists
who want to see the ocean from beyond the sandbars,
but are too afraid of drowning to swim out.

OCEANIC

Katharine Kistler

I don't know the sea, but I know she moves,
turns pain into storms and clears disaster
with disaster. She leaves a coating of salt
in skin and hair, an exchange for the layer
of myself I scrub away with sand. And I know
she must be a woman; to be so steady and kind
and vast and relentless. With each wave
she takes; until all the sediment I've gathered
is gone, and she invites me to float,
to count the heartbeats between crests, to measure
my livelihood in the same medium as hers.

WORDS ON BEAUTY

Julie U'Ren

Each time I climb the stairs, I know down-stairs-Gary will be looking
up at my legs. I'm forced to walk between his parked car on the path,
close to his door. Even if I pass lightly, he still sees me and calls out.

Come to see your dad?

The small block of flats almost lean into the street. A screen door
separates Dad's living room just metres from the intersection. When
the lights change, the rumble of traffic shifts, engines idle and accelerate,
fumes mix with heat.

Hi Dad.

Lovely, you're here at last.

I lean over and brush his head with a kiss, notice he hasn't showered.
I run water over plates and cups in the sink, fill the jug and flick it on- my
Thursday routine.

Did you see Gary?

Yeah, the old perv, saw him.

He's OK, helps me out sometimes, asks me about my meals and the
meds too.

I know, he's still a perv.

The old bugger brought up some stubbies, we watched the final
Saturday night.

There's a screech of brakes, horns blast and yelling. A siren blares,
closer and louder, then fades.

Damn trouble out there.

I thought you said it doesn't bother you.

It's bothering me having you do all this fussing about.

I carry over mugs of tea and sit on Mum's chair facing him. Dad leans
back pointing at the bookshelf. Mum's books are still neatly stacked there.
The small raku container is beside a framed picture of her smiling on the
top shelf. There's the one of the three of us camping when I was ten. Me
beaming with a big, toothy smile.

It was just a couple of months after her funeral when we drove to Elizabeth River. Dad nursed the raku urn on his lap. We sat there for over an hour on the bridge, watching the brown water move as the shadows lengthened. He was calm and clear; said he just couldn't do it. We drove back home, Dad cradling the urn in his big hands. On the back seat, the stubbies on ice in the small esky and the notebook stayed untouched.

I had written notes of what we might say that day at the river. The funny things she said that made us both laugh; and the Kahil Gibran quote she loved on beauty. I'd pushed the notebook between Mum's old bible and the Dalai Lama's 'Open Heart' and left it there. We hadn't spoken of it until now.

Get the book out Love. Remember we wrote some things down. Let's read something, you know the bit about beauty. Can you read me that?

I pull out the notebook and find the folded page with the copied words. Maybe my voice is a bit like hers, some people tell me that. I read and Dad closes his eyes. Outside engines idle and accelerate and the fumes mix with heat, and we are both far away.

STICKS AND STONES

James Borders

The moon shimmers on a half dozen Borders Cemeteries in Lawrence County, Kentucky. Tucked in the shadows at the end of a rutted road grown over with goldenrod and lined with kudzu is the one dear to me. It's the cemetery where the bones of my grandmother and grandfather, his mother, and a murderer, who after much protest from the family, was buried there, on the opposite side of the wife he poisoned. Here also lies the bloodline of a Revolutionary War mercenary. My bloodline.

I brush dead leaves and twigs from my grandfather's toppled headstone, as if brushing off my grandfather, fall-down drunk, eyes fixed on the darkness. I wedge a shovel beneath the moss-covered earth, find the edge of the granite sharp and hard, not unlike the feeling I get from the unfamiliar stones that surround me. The leaves haven't started to turn yet, but a chilled breeze passes through me.

I push the rusted spade along the back of the grave marker, make a primitive steel on rock scrape. My bare fingers probe for a grip. Death's dirt fills the spaces between my nails and skin. I pull the stone to its deeply buried base and slide it into position. I curse the weight of it and the person responsible for its displacement. I immediately ask my grandmother's forgiveness.

I cultivate the bare dirt patch left by the stone. Nothing grows under the weight of death. I chop at the grass and vines like a gardener in a barren flower bed. While I stick discount silk flowers into the ground my wife pulls saplings of pine and mimosa trees from beneath the weeds and fallen sticks that litter and hide the plots, an unfair trade, permanent until the next windstorm.

We retreat down the rutted road, tree roots grab at the tires as if pulling us to return the orphaned saplings, decry the crime. I clean the mud from beneath my nails,

try to imagine that the stone will stand in place and I will never
have to return. I am ashamed of my attitude, then remember that buried
on top of the hill,
beneath stones,
white in the night,
is a drunkard,
a mercenary,
and a murderer.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF LOSS

Ian C Smith

Where does sound go? I remember a thunderous rumble at the old
bridge, workmen tipping rock midstream to allow their crane's pile-
driver purchase, the condemned structure resembling a Drysdale
canvas, dusted spectral gaunt-grey in its last days. Following my feet
now to this stillness, a contrast to that time here with people loved, I
watch a pelican pair silhouetted by the sun. A willow fallen from the
bank, durable trunk sprouting stubborn new growth reflected in the
depleted river's pebbled pools in this droughty season, reaches as far
as that long-gone crane, a concrete bridge presiding now, replacing the
weathered bouncing planks, their familiar tattoo beneath our wheels.

I sit on another fallen tree, beloved children's make-believe fish'n'chip
shop, closed now. When older, after a flood, they leapt in joie de vivre or
bravado from the half-submerged tree, stick figures shrieking into the
current. Preoccupied with counting years again, I see ghost swimmers,
lithe youth, memory-splash, a kind of paralysis of the here and now.
Beyond the willowy fringes on the opposite bank market gardeners work
rows of lettuces, a Corot scene.

Floodwaters sweep life's detritus downstream, but not the desolation
of the human heart. What would an alternative life have been? Suffering,
beauty, the shape of time lost darkening a different long steady failure?
Watching the tiny wake of an unseen creature I feel if I look away it shall
disappear into this aching silence.

LOOPS

Helena Kadmos

Late one spring evening in 2016, I waited at Perth airport to fly to New York to attend a conference. I should have been excited, not jittery and on edge.

My husband returned from the bar with a Corona for himself and water for me. I didn't reach for it. 'I think he's coming,' I said.

That hunch had been with me all evening because my father hadn't phoned me that afternoon to say goodbye. He'd visited my home two nights earlier, and called me the day before, but he liked to be present at the *moment* his children left. That's what family did. At least if you're Greek, and a father; as Zorba says, the full catastrophe.

My husband pushed the water toward me. 'He's not up to it.' It was a gentle reminder of my eighty-seven-year-old father's frailty. He was right. The walk from the carpark alone would be too much for him. For this reason, I hadn't called him that day myself, not wanting to trigger his there-at-the-end impulse. But the knowledge he'd like to think he'd surprised me couldn't be ignored.

My dad had been a Rat Pack-kind-of-a-guy in his youth, modelling his persona on Sammy and Frank. A few black and white photographs of his bachelor years show him in tailor-made suits in romantic locations—Casablanca, Madrid—and his favourite one-liners were worn-out clichés from classic film noir ('here's lookin' at you, kid'). Having 'been around' was part of the mystery he'd nurtured about his life before, at thirty-four, he'd married our mum, the much younger nurse who'd cared for him in a Sydney clinic for TB. At that point, the backdrops to his life-in-pictures were replaced by one rental after another throughout New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland and eventually, in the mid-seventies, a bungalow in suburban Perth, with five kids, an Alsatian named Shah, and an above-ground pool erected within a rectangle of buffalo-grass runners. I suspected that my imminent trip had reignited a long-forgotten hint of glamour, a touch of sparkle. I shook my head.

'I know it. He's here, or trying to get here. And I think he's going to miss me.'

I felt sick about it. Dad had lost one lung to cancer eighteen years

earlier and a recent bout of pneumonia had shaken him badly. Here was my dilemma: If he was hoping to surprise me, I didn't want to spoil it. But if he *was* wandering around the airport trying to find us, I wanted to help him. But if I called his phone and caught him at home instead, the thought that I'd expected him, and that he hadn't come, could distress him. An added complication was that the gate to my flight was due to open soon, so I didn't have a lot of time to wait and see if he showed. We were upstairs, beyond the security checks. If he was coming, he'd have those hurdles to cross, too. It was all too much.

'I'm calling him.'

I tried the number of his carer, K. She didn't answer.

My husband's hand clasped mine and with restrained frustration he said, 'Can we just enjoy this?'

My phone rang. It was the call-back.

'Daughter?'

'Dad.'

'Where *are* you?'

'At the airport.' I paused. 'Where are you?'

'Here, too,' he chuckled. 'But daughter, we're lost.'

A tightness inside me fractured, and at that moment a voice over the PA announced that my flight would shortly begin boarding.

'Have you been through security yet, dad?'

'We can't find it.'

'Hang on.'

I sent my husband to find them while I waited at the top of the escalator, keeping one eye on the gate. I leaned over the rising rubber rail to see as much of the lower level as possible. Behind me Business class was summoned.

My husband appeared and called up to me, 'They're here.'

I ran down the escalator and almost lost my footing as I rounded the corner to the security checkpoint where I was arrested by the sight of my tiny father standing in black socks with his arms up, barely above his head. A female security officer was scanning him for explosives. I approached, overhearing K's snippets about their having gone to the wrong carpark. I held my father's shoulders. 'Oh, Dad. You shouldn't have come out this late.'

'New York, New York,' he sang, quite tunefully. Then, 'Help me,

daughter.’

One trembling hand held his belt and the other clasped his trousers to stop them dropping to the floor. Conflicting responses pulsed through me: genuine thrill that my dad had come to see me off; fury at a system that forced elderly people to strip in public and left them vulnerable, clutching their clothes, and panic that my plane might now be boarding. The urgency of the last of these won out.

‘We need to hurry.’

I took the belt off him and turned him round to push the strap through the loops in his trousers, and ordered the others: ‘Go check the line for me.’ In my haste I fumbled and missed a loop. As I tried again, I admonished my father for his foolishness in coming. ‘What were you *thinking*?’ And then I was scolded.

‘You there, take it easy.’

Standing over us was a large-bellied, uniformed man with intensely bright eyes and a short, articulate beard. From his accent I knew he wasn’t Australian by origin; I guessed Indian. He lifted his heels and pointed, palm upward, to my father.

‘Your father has come to say goodbye to you. And you cannot *wait* for him?’

Burning, I fell back on cultural stereotypes, fearing I’d come across as a selfish white woman who didn’t know how to care for her parents. I almost teared up. Trying to appear more patient, I knelt to help my father with his shoes and heard my own middle-aged knees creak. Dad wobbled as I drew on a blue tartan slipper—his sole footwear by then. What it meant to me in that moment, to hold my father’s foot in my hands, could not be expressed in simple terms, and not to a stranger. I mumbled back in weak defence, ‘My plane’s boarding. *Now*.’

Dad’s head rocked subtly as I said this. It was a gesture he’d developed as an old man that suggested bewilderment and often elicited sympathy from whomever he was with. In the beginning I’d wondered if it was one of his conning tactics that belied quick-witted shrewdness, but in recent years I’d come to think it was genuine. Either way, it enhanced the picture of his vulnerability and made me look, I was sure, even more roguish. I yanked the second slipper on. The next words from the officer confounded me. ‘Don’t worry. I will call upstairs if necessary.’ Magnanimously he gestured toward the escalator. ‘Take your time.’

I remember thinking, ‘Wow, who’d have thought you could delay a

plane?’ Months later, recalling this, I realised it probably wasn’t as simple as it seemed in that moment. But the permission he granted had the necessary effect. Humbled and grateful, my demeanour softened. I steered my father while he shuffled in small steps. He dismissed my suggestion of the elevator, yet standing at the comb plate of the escalator the steps seemed to emerge too rapidly for his tentative stride. I half lifted him onto the next one and we rose together.

‘Are you excited, daughter?’

‘I am.’

He reached into his breast pocket and swayed. I pulled him towards me and a folded fifty-dollar note sprung between us. Of course, this was also why he’d come. I pushed it back.

‘I don’t need that.’

‘Don’t argue with me.’

We reached the top and he almost missed the moment to step off. But we made it safely and I could see that the line of passengers was still filing through the gate. I took what felt like my first full breath since the phone call, and held up a hand.

‘Please. I’m too old for this.’

He shoved the note at me. ‘It’s expensive over there. Buy yourself something to eat with it.’

K cast a look and I picked up the vibe—there won’t be many more opportunities left for him to do this. I pocketed the note with a promise to buy them souvenirs.

Now that we were upstairs together and it was clear the plane hadn’t left without me an excitable buzz animated us. My husband brought out his phone and orchestrated dad between K and me and took photos. I wished that we could now sit at the bar and have that drink and share some laughs. The officer’s admonishment still stung. But the departure lounge was nearly empty and I couldn’t hang back any longer. My father tilted his head toward me and I kissed him on the forehead. ‘Thank you for coming.’

There were hugs and kisses for the others, too, and then dad, one more time. I slung a finger into his belt, snug and tight now. He was properly dressed.

‘Take care, daughter. Stay safe.’

I walked towards the gate, handed the boarding pass over for scanning,

picked up plastic-wrapped ear phones and stepped through the glass doors. When I glanced back for the last time my husband seemed to be laughing at something dad had said. But I wasn't forgotten. He flicked his hand as if in salute and I left.

2.

There's an incident in my childhood that I've recalled at intervals throughout my life, and in my mind's eye this is how it looks. I'm peeking over fingers that grip the plastic rim of a small above-ground pool that we older kids had received for Christmas. My eyes are glued to the back door of the house and when the screen squeaks outwards I duck under the water. At five years old I can't hold my breath for long so I resurface in a second and see my father striding towards the pool. In long pants and boots he looks like a cowboy. In a single move he unbuckles his belt and whips it from his hips. He forms a loop with it. I duck again and through the cloudy water see a kink in the lining that I grab hold of to keep myself down. I think, 'if I can't see him, he won't see me.'

But my bather top tugs against my neck, and my head and tummy rise out of the water and although I kick fiercely my feet find the bottom of the pool and force me upright. My father pulls me over the wall of the pool and stands me on the grass and the first sting of the belt hits the back of my legs. My hair drips water so my father's face blurs when I look up at it. I sob and the second strike comes and as I rub my legs, I babble an explanation. I hadn't meant to ruin Bubby's blow-up paddling pool. I'd tried to empty it as mummy asked me to, but the plug wouldn't budge and I'd used my teeth, causing it to tear. Already, at that age, I understood the gravity of my offence: things, items, didn't come readily to our home. The paddling pool wouldn't be replaced.

I form a picture now of how I might have looked to another's eye: standing on the prickly grass in the Surfers Paradise sun, thumb in my mouth and stomach protruding, wet and crying. My father retreats, threading his belt back into his trousers as he walks.

Dr Strap, he called it. I never knew if that name was his invention, or a legacy of his own childhood. It was not something I ever asked him about. It was a menacing presence in our young lives, threatened more often than applied, but it disappeared eventually, for us girls first, and the boys later. I have another memory of my brother raising his arms to shield

the strikes and then lashing out and grabbing the belt out of my father's hand, threatening to return the blows. I recall burning with disgust at my father's brutality and cringing at my brother's pain.

3.

Four weeks after my flight to New York, my father is dying.

He doesn't want to leave his chair, a brown vinyl armchair with broad, puffy arms that seem oversized for his small frame. He has little strength, but his posture gives the impression that he's pushing himself back into the chair as if counting on it not to yield. There's an orange-checked blanket over his legs below which protrude his blue tartan slippers. He's not ready to accept the knowledge that came into the house with the palliative care unit and the hospital bed which remains unused in his bedroom. He stays in the chair so that he won't have to credit that knowledge.

I'm beside him respecting his unspoken desire not to mention his dying by talking about anything else that intrudes into this liminal space. I comment on the horse race unfolding on the television (dad's most constant mental focus for all of his adult life), Trump's campaign, and dad's two Shih Tzus. Molly, who he's had the longest, places her nose on a slipper with a faint whine. I pick her up so that she can see dad and she is unusually still in my arms.

Dad's distress is written all over his face. It's a mean look; he's pissed off. For many years through too many medical appointments he would at least once in the meeting lean towards the doctor, as if sincerely open to bad news, and ask, 'So doc, how long have I got?' Invariably the pathos of his demeanour would elicit earnest replies such as, 'Nothing to worry about yet.' Following these appointments, we would hear this call-and-response repeated several times, related with greater bravado each time. But now, like the Queen in *Snow White*, my father has looked into the mirror and sought reassurance one too many times. And, also like her, he isn't prepared for a different reply.

I reach into my bag for a Kmart Photo Centre packet containing prints of the pictures my husband had taken at the airport just weeks earlier. I thought dad would appreciate something to hold. I see in them what I'd remembered, his childlike excitement that night. But when I bring them up to his face, he barely feigns interest. He strains forward to clear his focus but doesn't release his grip on the chair to take the prints in his hands. I set up the computer to show him my New York photos but after only a few he asks if we can look at them later. I don't even think he hears me

point out Sinatra's Upper East Side penthouse. He grimaces and I worry if he's in pain. 'I need to piss, daughter.'

I stand in front of him with my toes touching his, and take hold under his arms. I am so much stronger that it takes no effort to lift him to standing, but even with my support he doesn't seem secure. 'I can't,' he whispers.

He's fumbling to unbuckle his belt but his shaky fingers won't cooperate. K has the urinal ready. I move his hands to my shoulders. 'Hold on to me.' I unbuckle the belt and unzip his trousers and K manoeuvres the bottle between us. Wanting to give dad what privacy is possible I look aside until he says, 'Okay.' I pull up the zip. His backside is so shrivelled the pants haven't much to hang onto. I tighten the buckle and settle him in his chair again and as I tuck the blanket back over his legs my eyes settle for a second on the belt. I've never known him not to wear one, no matter the make of pants, and it's always been the same: black with a silver buckle. A thought inserts itself in my mind: 'I'm looking at his belt for the last time.'

The next day dad's still in his chair, having refused again to sleep in the hospital bed. He doesn't know that his resolve will be beaten down after just one more day and, as he feared, when he does take to bed, he never leaves it. But for today he is still upright with the blanket over his knees. An uneasy premonition seeps through me, and when he asks for help to pee and I pull back the blanket my suspicion is confirmed. Dad's in his pyjamas. The fly is open and white draw strings drape uselessly on each thigh.

Although I never see my father in his belt again it is not this sorry image of his worn-out pyjamas that is strongest in my mind. Nor is it the reign of Dr Strap which, while not insignificant, seems a long time ago now, to me at least, and belonging to an attempt at family life that I've long-ceased needed to turn my attention to, feeling more acutely for the disappointment it must have meant for my parents who were neither prepared nor united for the task. What I do recall is the oddity of a Greek man in dark trousers in the middle of summer while my friends' Australian fathers wear Stubbies; buying a new belt in Target for his Christmas present; putting his trousers and belt and boots in a plastic bag to be stored in a bed-side cabinet before he is wheeled off to surgery to remove his lung. And I remember threading his belt through his trousers when his love for me brought him out late at night to see me off, at the very near end of his life. It is the transformative power of a love that has been allowed to add salve to wounds that remains with me, looping and securing every chamber of my heart.

FISH BONES

Kris Beaver

My father used to smoke steelhead,
salmon and sturgeon on our patio.
The thick, sweet scent of hickory
and marinade drifted into the house.

I imagined each fish, its wet flesh
and slippery-scaled skin transforming
from raw to flaky, rich with flavor.
And after what seemed like ages,

he pulled them out of the smoker,
still whole, their eyes gone gold,
mouths open in surprise, almost
grinning. Even their bones became

a wiser, pliable form of skeleton.
This happens to most creatures
trapped in trouble. What they used
to be is no longer. That doesn't mean

they're destroyed, just different. Infused
with new purpose. After grief has eaten
what there is to devour, the bones still
retain shape of what they once held.

SEA SONNET

Kris Beaver

When you listen to Billie Holiday sing the blues
you'll hear milky jazz dribble down her tunes,

some low-moaning gospel, notes pulled so taught they pause
to catch a breath. Her singing swims in the luxurious

embryonic fluid we once knew, before Cousteau slid hydrophones
into the sea to capture nature's heartbeat in the lonely bones

of primordial songs humpbacks sing. He rediscovered mother
music. Those percussive clicks, trills and guttural glides are reminder

swells of where we began - as deuterostomes devouring
first, then wiggling up to dump our waste on land. Before we

tried composing. Our sonatas, hymns and symphonies
contain cerulean teardrops from that maternal ocean. Please,

put on your headphones. Listen. It's a sad, deep, indigotic song.
Hear how gently it pleads, "Come save us from what you've done."

BEACH WEDDING

Sarah Penwarden

On a day when the sea is green
the veil cascades around her
in a dress inlaid with paua
they wed on a carpet of sand.

The veil cascades around her
the wind disturbs the toetoe
they wed on a carpet of sand
he gives her many rings.

The wind disturbs the toetoe
they suck on sticks of honey
he gives her many rings
her eyes are the colour of envy.

They suck on sticks of honey
her sister stayed away
her eyes are the colour of envy
the sand is their confetti.

Her sister stayed away
the blue, the black, the white
the sand is their confetti
they dance on broken glass.

The blue, the black, the white
in a dress inlaid with paua
they dance on broken glass
on the day when the sea is green.

KYRIE

Michael Thomas

Notre Dame is burning down
Tonight. Beneath its quiet bells,
Paris sings *Hail Marie*
On its doorstep, like an old man
With his last memory,
Singing into the fog.

There are no more songs in the stained glass.
The spire collapsed on our voices,
All the little relics in the people's hearts
Lost in the fire.
There's nowhere for the history to go now; it's simply
Floating above us like incense
And smoke. *Kyrie eleison*

—April 16, 2019

ALL THE BAD THINGS

Cathy Warner

Meeting Frank was the first bad thing in Aurora's life, and pieces of him remained everywhere, the charcoal shadow on her manager's cheeks, the smell of cigarettes and alcohol leaching from the man at the counter, the slim hips of the young men reroofing Haus of Waffles. Sometimes when the heat of stacked plates felt as though they'd burn her arms, Frank assembled himself fully in her mind. The first four years of him, before the second bad thing.

Four years, where at first the drinking was fun, the sort of thing everyone did on a Friday night after school and then after work on a Saturday night, and not quite so much on a Sunday night. They'd caravan out to the river, climb down the levee, sit on tree roots along the banks while, drinking and listening to music while water striders and pollen swirled in the eddies as the sunset. Frank would lean Aurora against a tree, pressing his body against hers, saying he loved her as he groped.

Once Aurora graduated from high school and they married, Frank got drunk at home instead of the river and he'd miss work on Mondays because he drank more, instead of not so much, on Sundays. Then he'd get fired, but after a while he stopped getting jobs to be fired from, so Aurora got two. She waited tables at a diner from dawn through lunch rush, then rang groceries until closing. She came home too tired to do more than push a Hungry Man dinner at Frank.

'I just want somebody to pay a fuckin' scrap of attention to me,' he'd said, 'if it has to be a snot-nosed baby, so be it.'

When baby Frankie was three weeks old, Aurora went back to work with a pad between her legs and a fever while her milk dried up. Fatherhood perked Frank up for a while. Twenty-eight months, when you count it. And Aurora counted it, counted every moment of Frankie's life until then as belonging to another baby, a happy baby. But maybe there'd been a clue, a look in his eyes even then that she'd failed to see.

Frank sat his namesake on his lap and fed him store brand Cheerios while watching *The People's Court* and *Geraldo*. He even cut back on the beer until Frankie, at twenty-eight months, threw toys at his father and learned to scream, 'No,' and 'I hate you,' and 'You can't make me.'

Most nights after dinner, Aurora slid a fresh beer in front of Frank, scooped Frankie out of his highchair, and pushed him around the block in his stroller until she saw the TV flicker in their living room and know Frank had retreated to the recliner to drink himself into passivity.

The night of the second bad thing, Aurora lay in bed, her mind swirling with a thought had come upon her gradually: Maybe Frankie's red bottom wasn't diaper rash. Maybe the cut above his eyebrow wasn't from tripping over the hose outside their half of the run-down duplex. Maybe the bruise on his arm didn't come from the neighbor boy's Big Wheel. She fell into a fitful sleep and dreamed Frankie was crying in the next room. When she tried to go to him, she found herself wrapped like a mummy in floral sheets, unable to move or speak.

The next morning when Aurora unfastened Frankie's diaper, her heart clattered. She clutched him to her chest, bloody diaper in hand and rushed to the hospital. Frankie didn't cry when the doctor with his rubber glove and K-Y jelly examined him, gave him a shot, and took three stitches. Aurora didn't cry when the cop questioned her and took the diaper as evidence.

There was an arrest and a trial and time served and subsequent threats and a permanent restraining order and a soft-spoken woman at the battered women's shelter who suggested Aurora mix stool softener in pudding and hold Frankie's hand while he struggled to use the toilet. Eventually Aurora left town with Frankie, moving to a little cabin in the foothills where she got a job at Haus of Waffles.

Frankie was nine on that early July day when the worst bad thing happened. The weather was perfect, the air heady with scents of eucalyptus and fir when they set out for a hike behind their cabin. Frankie, his legs thin and strong, bounded ahead of Aurora as if the summer heat had peeled off his seven-year sadness like eucalyptus bark. She followed behind picking blackberries, and had stopped to tie a shoe when she heard his scream. Running to the ledge he'd navigated a hundred times before, she saw Frankie thirty feet down lodged in a fir, a growing bull's eye of crimson spreading across his t-shirt.

Aurora set the bucket down careful not to tip it, some part of her thinking that after this was over Frankie might want berries. Then she slid down the slope until she reached the tree, threw herself around the trunk and began to climb, smearing blood, hers and Frankie's, across the bark.

When she freed him from the broken branches and they tumbled to the ground, the breath left her. Frankie lay too silent and still. The branches no longer quivered, the blue jays ceased screaming, and the sun dropped below the ridge. In the terrible silence and shadow, Aurora gathered limp Frankie in her arms and staggered up a deer path to the trail, past the bucket of berries, and to their cabin where she dialed 911. When she hung up, tasting blood and dirt in her mouth, she knew Frankie's death was irrevocable.

After the ambulance and the sheriff and the social worker and the funeral home and the casket buried in the ground with half-a-dozen mourners from Haus of Waffles and Frankie's babysitter in attendance, Aurora climbed into her bed. For a week she did not get up, did not eat her grapefruit and English muffin, did not pull on her pantyhose and uniform, did not go to work.

She curled into a fetal ball under her comforter, but her thoughts offered no comfort. How could she have avoided all these bad things? If she'd never met Frank, never married him? If she'd left him before he hurt Frankie—though when exactly was that? Hadn't Frank hurt both of them from the start? But Frank hadn't been around for seven years. This time the bad thing was her fault. If only she hadn't moved to the foothills. If only she hadn't let Frankie trot off ahead of her.... But what if life was random? What if bad things could happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime? If that were true, she wasn't off the hook yet, though she couldn't imagine anything hurting her more deeply.

And if everything in life were planned? Then she wanted to know why. Not some lame excuse like *God works in mysterious ways*. If it had been planned, another item checked-off on God's to-do list, then God was a lousy mean-spirited shit, and she hated him.

The messages piled up on Aurora's answering machine. The landlord was sorry for her loss, but she was late with the rent. Her boss knew it was a terrible time, but if she didn't come back to work, he'd have to hire another waitress. The social worker left details about a grief support group.

After eight days, Aurora stepped out of bed and into the shower, letting the water pelt until her skin scalded. She ate half a grapefruit, donned her uniform, worked the morning shift, walked four blocks, descended into the basement of St. Felicitas, and slumped in a folding chair alongside other slack-eyed survivors. The counselor told them guilt and grief were not the same, that they were not to blame—for their husband's liver failure,

or for the drunk driver hitting the passenger side of the minivan instead of the driver's, or for a child slipping from a trail to be impaled on a tree.

Surrounded by coffee, donuts, and grief, Aurora felt as if she were drowning amid good people who were being strong and finding comfort in the little things that are supposed to pull you through and make you a better person, but rang hollow as an empty bucket—until the counselor ended session with breathing. Just breathing.

An entire minute where everyone in that wretched circle sat with eyes closed, slowly pulling air in through the nose, deep down to the expanding belly, holding it for a moment, and slowly letting the air rise up, and out. For a few seconds of that minute, the noose around her heart loosened. Aurora returned the next week, and the next, and the next until she lost count of weeks. She returned not for the counselor's sympathy, not for the company of the other bereft, but for that one minute of breath that was more than she could manage on her own.

As time passed, as she squirted whipped cream on Belgian waffles, or watched her clothes tumble in the dryer at the laundromat, Aurora would remind herself to breathe down to her belly, and in those moments when the air slipped past her chest the worst bad thing lost its sharp edges for a little while and her grief became as soft and familiar as the faded photo of Frankie she kept in her pocket.

ANCESTRAL

Ed Southorn

They are raised up to die
These glorious swimmers
Perfect flashing bodies
Smooth to the end
Retrieved but never caught
Laid gently in caskets
Loaded aboard hearses
Docking like space ships
Shooting to other planets
Oil and spark
Slip and slide
Going down
Flesh unto flesh

MORNING SEX

Evey Weisblat

Take me easy like the wind
barrelling us into tomorrow.
Like a coup de grâce
that drowns out the tyranny
of ravenous time, a teardrop
from the half-drunk bottle
of rum that we make
love over once again.

Take me like all that is holy
and profane. Like a cobweb
resisting the drift of
gravity, like there is nothing
that you won't leave me for.
Take me. And take me again.
And when you finish,
finish me too. Dig up God
from the grimy cell inside
my chest, take this carnal
grace from my tempered flesh.
I'll spend my life dreaming.

I BETTER

Dustin Radke

i better read another beer
before i drink this poem

i better break some love
before i show ur heart

i better settle the world
before i see down forever

i better become this place
before i leave too comfortable

we better catch a room
before they get us

we better slow it fast
before we get down

i better forget what i mean
before i say how i feel

i better start my family
before they love to hate me

i better go i love u
before u whisper to bed

'GOLDEN HOUR'

Zoe Cunniffe

nine years ago, this was the road we took home from school,
crammed into the backseat with our feet dangling above the floor.
i always asked my mother to drive at the speed limit,
because i truly believed that was the fastest a person could travel,
and all i wanted was to be up in my bedroom, where we played school
until your mother came to retrieve you and you were out of sight.

tonight, we drive forty in a twenty-five zone.
your fingers tap the steering wheel,
curl around the stick shift,
twist the radio dial. we can listen to anything we like.
we are sixteen, and it is golden hour in july,
the sun cracking the sky open. our skin blazes
as the air dries the chlorinated water from our faces.
years ago, our parents gave us beach towels to sit on,
but now we are dressed in bikini tops and sunburnt shorts,
and the leather seats sear our bare legs.

we have no real destination, but i beg you to keep driving
because this is the first time we have been alone in a car—
the first time sitting next to you while you pump the brake
and veer around familiar curves.
i am obsessed with the fact that we can be aimless,
that we can go anywhere. so we drive to the grocery store
and buy cheap nail polish that we don't need,
and the sky burns with colors i have never seen.

tonight, potential energy in my veins,
i hurtle forward,
straight through your clear windshield.
the horizon hums,
and you and i soar down the hill.
there is a glass coke bottle on the dashboard, cherry red,
and the ghost of a childhood swirling on the sidewalk,
though we're moving too fast to see it clearly.

we are so old and so young,
and as my hair drips water across my back,
and the car keys dangle from your fingers,
i decide that i don't know where i am going,
but i am going,

i am going.



MENISCUS
LITERARY JOURNAL

SPECIAL SECTION

UNCERTAINTY

in/completeness and creativity

My poetry begins for me where certainty ends (Eavan Boland 2001)

edited by
Jen Webb
Julia Prendergast

THE RUSE OF ORDER

Elizabeth Colbert

5.00am.
Easter Tuesday morn,
no freeway whine of trucks,
no flickers of life
in the darkness
beyond the fall of
kitchen light.

Nothing
but the scratch of pencil
on Moleskine
making visible the imagined fears
now driving
a new relationship with
the relics of my past.

In the attic of my childhood
I find a school assembly—
a thousand strong, in rows.
Death scratches his mark
across the throng
like a prisoner counting days;
a thousand here, a thousand there.

I slam shut the attic door.
At 5.20 a hum of tyres reignites
the ruse of orderly production.
The reverberations briefly
reassure me but
the enclosure of my kitchen
tells me the world has changed.

MY FAVOURITE YEAR

Christine Davey

A glorious film from 1982. Peter O'Toole as a once-swashbuckling actor on a late-night US talk show. Watch it. You won't be disappointed. Or maybe you will, because this year—this 2020—has been a barrel of disappointments with a helping of calamity and, not to put too fine a point on it—everyone's unfavourite year. The film, though, that's uplifting. About fulfilling your charter as a human being without devolving into pettiness—the usual tropes that keep us going. Or used to. This year—this 2020—has put the cork in all that 'feel-good' connectivity. We're not so much stuck in awfulness as we are carried along on the great wheel of awfulness, never knowing where that wheel will turn, or how, or with what vehemence we'll be slung sideways, upside down. No pause for breath before the next awfulness charges with a force we can't fathom with anything other than brittle trepidation for the next thing and the next and next. And then there are the ones we've lost adding to the feeling that those who can are getting out any way they can. Snippets of news on social media, radio or live TV bulletins about those we love—Dr Catherine Hamlin and white giraffes we didn't know existed until we heard they no longer existed and people from a radio quiz who aren't family but we mourn them just the same, and a cat, my cat, Lizzie Bennett who walked into the paddocks and the paddocks have her now and I do not and I'll miss her every day of every year. This year—this 2020—only three months old but breaking us minute by minute. Memorable for wrong reasons. Of course, we'll work it out, how not to be broken, because that's what people do. We are, when day is done, that mother lifting a car off her child, helpers, fixers, chin-up-ers. Eventually we'll throw our hands against the spokes of the wheel. We'll stop it, step off, see everything from a new perspective. Soon. When we're strong. Overcoming obstacles, fulfilling our charter as human beings. Like Peter O'Toole in the glorious movie in 1982 screaming to his audience 'I'm not an actor, I'm a movie star!' before swinging on a rope across the studio of the TV show while the audience applauds. When that happens, we can hurl this year—this 2020—going going. Gone.

FARADAY CAGE

Martin Dolan

When we are outside we feel the lightning build
in ugly clouds that jostle sparks from the ice,
filling air with tension and raising the hairs
on our bowed necks. Trees shiver uneasily
while the ground holds firm, waiting for the sharp bolts
to lash down stepwise from the thunderheads
and return, brighter, to the place they came from.
All in an instant, this will be, like a knife
from the dark. Such things can kill, but we have built
cages from our stores of mesh, held together
with flimsy twists of wire. Each has space for one
and each one takes their space alone, protected
from the crackling threat of the storm. We are safe:
no jagged lightning can get inside—or out.

EVENT HORIZON

Martin Dolan

Remembrance has a gravity
that pulls all moments towards it
till we only know for certain
what light will remember for us.

The light will remember for us
how it was, before today's green
shrivelled, was clutched in drying sap
and wrapped in a twist of amber.

The light will remember for us
fixed on paper or in numbers
so we can let each moment go
in its long fall away from now.

THE FEMINIST TIDE

Gabrielle Overall

The tide is rising. It is a Bolshevik tide. A red tide. A feminist tide, drowning old white men. Goodbye Boris Johnson. Goodbye Peter Dutton. A tide is crashing against the rocks like the global market economy. The stiff suits of businessmen half soaked through; waist high in water. The flood brings disease, but I like self-isolation. There is good reason to self-isolate. So many assholes to isolate from. The more events were cancelled the more secretly relieved I felt. I first spied the apocalypse when I saw a line of masked people lined up outside Royal Melbourne Hospital. We can no longer use the libraries. We can no longer borrow books. Where are the books? I commit the crime of scratching my nose and wiping my eyes. The feminist disease is nature's way of saying, slow down, take care of yourself and look at what's happening around you.

Author's note: I am not meaning to celebrate the virus with my poem; I mean the poem to be taken with a sense of humour.

THE ANIMALS RETURN TO OUR CITIES

Christie Fogarty

nature stretches fingers
combs through streets
worn
weary veins of asphalt
Atlas, a woman
shrugs
we slide to land
at her feet
her children outgrown
if we learn nothing else
let us learn
we are nothing

NO MASK FOR THE SKY

Dean Kerrison

You're meant to start a 10-day meditation course in India today. That was the plan. The Pink City frenzy moulds into jungle where monkeys reign supreme from their temple thrones. Twelve-plus hours each day frozen. Learning the techniques and chants. But keeping a safe distance from the dogma. Because you're smart. You don't let invisible forces clutch your body and devour you inside-out. Inhale through your purified lungs. You're secure. Nothing'll hurt you but your fictitious fear. Observe but don't welcome it through the gates. Exhale.

But you're not there. You're in a hospital in Sydney. You tested negative for the pandemic. Good news. Please buckle up in this high-tech stretcher for the ambulance ride. Gonna be five bumpy minutes and we don't want you running away. Here's the hotel. Wear these gloves and tighten your face mask so you don't infect anyone. Enjoy these 14 days.

Your window only opens a few inches. No peacocks peck around the meditation halls nor hushing bells as wake-up calls. There's police vans and undercover sedans and sirens. Constables check if the sky still matches their uniform. If their extra palm creases can be read or maybe it's just the lighting. If a cluster of desolate streets and buildings can still be called a town.

An alarm whenever you open the handle. Stay inside! You know the rules. But you're hungry. Can't phone them. Wearing the same clothes for a week waiting for your suitcase. What'd we say about face masks at the door? You do some push-ups but have too much time and too little discipline to actually sit and shut your eyes.

The sky again. Finally doesn't need a face mask. Nothing to fear now. Breathing deeply away from the uppercuts of industrialism but it's just a commercial break until you find out if they're jumping back in the ring. Planes? Grounded. Drones? Scanning.

You wonder if there was a better way. If the cafes and the sands and the parks weren't stripped of their hearts that find the Grim Reaper in the mirror. But those calling the shots haven't spent 10 days cross-legged. And you've still got another 50 push-ups to do today.

TORTURING SLEEP

Jeri Kroll

I often wake in the middle of the night, once, twice, three times, glance bleary-eyed at the clock, always ten minutes fast, now an hour ahead, make the obligatory trip to the bathroom, and ease into bed knowing it's all over. The party of those card-carrying demons of my mind's club is in full swing, and they always invite me. I'm the entertainment, the gawky dancer everyone snipes at, safe in their cliques, the piñata they take turns smashing, letting every regret I've ever had spill out on the floor. It's a tacky kind of hell. I watch the film in my mind reverse, the pieces fly back into the reconstituted piñata and it all happens again. A neurotic ground-hog night for day. At least I rotate the people and their insults, their transgressions, my inadequacies, varying the decades. Always nice to have variety in one's personal torture regime. This insomniac pastime is one reason not to take Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* to bed. The plague house of my mind is crowded enough as it is.

The next morning I hear the Australian curve has been flattening but how can I feel good when condemned to watch replays of New York's graveyard for the unclaimed dead? Economic rationalists know how to streamline burials—it's the twenty-first century's version of the plague pit where workers in space suits lay identical white coffins in a custom-dug ditch.

Enough digging myself into a depression. It's a classic autumn morning, crisp like a fact I can believe in. The sun won't be dissuaded, the sky cleansed of clouds. Without an eye on the weather, I'll be able to walk, hoping the muted greens of the gums and rain-hungry grasses soften my mind. Today I won't listen to news again, only to music, floating me on waves of forgetfulness.

PANDEMIC: RESPONSES

Rose Lucas

1. Anxiety

clutches like a virus
at surfaces the warm vulnerability
of membranes it hangs

heavy in air
droplets of contagion impossible
to see chasing at shadows

filling my time frantic
with the wrong things
or maybe the wrong things I can't

tell presentiments of doom
weigh on me a vice that grips
like a headache

something is proliferating
a wild cacophony pounding
at the fragile borders of this body

seeking its own path
trying to get in

2. Compassion

is a tall tree
a searching filigree of roots a steadiness that
reaches risky into changeable air while
leaves like open palms signal
to a restless world

I see you

and it's possible to
rest here a short time
in the deep pulse and dance of shadow
grass sweet with summer rain

under the arch of my arms
this flickering cathedral of green

INBOX

Elizabeth MacFarlane

There is a problem with the form you submitted. Please remedy and try again.

There is a problem with the grade I received please review

There is a problem going forward.

The grade I received for the piece of writing

There is a problem with your grant application. Please amend before the deadline.

There is a problem with self-plagiarism.

The piece of writing which was itself about a problem

There is a problem with the announcement you posted and I have a question.

There is a problem with all the heating units on your floor. DO NOT use your heating unit.

The piece of writing was about a problem with a man

There is a problem with a disruptive student. And another student who will not speak.

There is a problem with diversity and inclusivity.

The piece of writing was about a man I used to date and a problem we had that couldn't be solved

There is a problem that we need to discuss in person.

There is a problem and I have asked you two times already.

The man and I dated for a few years and in the beginning there was no problem between us

There is a problem with an illegible scan, please raise the resolution.

There is a problem with a gap in your budget.

In the beginning it was so smooth and easy that when the problem began we barely noticed it

There is a problem with mice in the building. Please do not leave open food containers around.

There is a problem with collusion.

And when we did notice the problem, which was getting worse, we ignored it

There is a problem with my timetable. I cannot attend two classes at once.

There is a problem with the way you phrased this content warning; it encourages dangerous content.

I wrote what I thought was a very good honest piece of writing and it received a poor result

There is a problem with ongoing asbestos removal.

The piece was an honest portrayal of a problem with a man and I think it deserved better.

ON THE STRANGE SYNCHRONICITY AND ASSOCIATIVE POTENTIAL OF LOCKDOWN DREAMS

Victoria O'Sullivan

During the first week of lockdown, I dream I am standing in front of an expanse of water. To one side is an industrial sort of area, with stacked crates—it feels impermanent and recently put together (not unlike images of makeshift hospitals that treat COVID-19 patients that I've seen). There is a gesture as something, or someone, pulls a curtain to the side or removes a screen, and suddenly the crates and debris have gone and the scene looks like a giant Venetian canal (where dolphins and swans have supposedly recently returned to), only the canal area is very wide, and the buildings on either side, enormous. Vessels, which look similar to gondolas, are moving through the water in military fashion—slow, uniform and deliberate. It feels both beautiful and misty (like a Turner painting) but the aesthetic also feels fascist.

The next day, I read sections of Martin Heidegger's essay *The Question of Technology*, and stumble across a section where he talks about the Rhine and the idea of nature as a 'standing reserve' (something to be exploited by humans). 'Horseshoe bats', also known as 'chrysanthemum bats', so named because of the horseshoe-shaped folds of skin that unfurl on their faces like the petals of a flower, are thought to be the original host, or 'reservoir', of the virus. Reservoir is an apt word when taking into account the extractive nature of the relationship with animals that appears to be the reason for its development. It is a French word meaning 'a place where things tend to collect', and comes from the verb *réserver*, 'to reserve, to keep', from which we might conjure 'standing reserve'.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Sarah Pearce

my grandmother is ninety-one
my mother has asthma
heart medication
cancer, radiotherapy
aneurysm lurking

i must
wash and wash and wash
these hands

there is a puddle of methadone
on my bedroom floor
and i just bled for eight days

i can't
sleep or see
beyond the night

i'm having the best sex of my life
and i've never been
so scared

i don't
understand
the distance between inside and out

my front door too thick
to measure with one cracked palm

the rim of my sacrum drags rough
against the question of tomorrow

SICK DAY

—for Dr Tran

Antonia Pont

invent another way for yourself
no one will see indeed you'll
barely notice immediately (day
will pass, be done with you'll get
back out the door of your life)

in this certified window
of unproduction made intentional
shaped into handfuls of plumpish
leisure, full-bodied dollops of
no direction (if you can handle —

it's rugged) in among that prying off
of personality construction — the usual way your Self makes
its Self — cakelike recipelike: going on and on
(something that works well enough yes ...
ticks boxes, ticks some),

you'll lose a piece, misplace one dropped:
this component of a complex machining

—its bit will fall out on the floor (as you shuffle
once more towards the bathroom or simply
during a quiet spasm of aimlessness) you'll fail to see

it disassociating from you so enthralled you'll be
with the airy fingers of not-much wholly odd
topographies & low-lulled throb lit up
by reedy notes sounding every now
and then

crooning nothingness—its thrilling drone
will undulate your spine gorgeous
unnamed visitor, illicit (thus
unmentionable) without signature, a no-trace
continuing on this You-piece

dropped out to roll away & lodge
beneath the refrigerator — good riddance!
it was benign (or less so) had had its
day very soon now evening
will come on (in light lilacs, paler tangerines)

you'll greet close others, talk
laugh & wash grease from dishes sleep will be
unremarkable *broken open machine!*
a little less its Self than before
(while gaps inside sigh, flower, go viral) no matter.

THE TREE, THE PIG AND THE PANGOLIN

Sarah Pye

Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a dense green rainforest. It was a magical place where Elephant roamed down long-worn paths, Bear climbed high into the canopy in search of sweet ripe figs to eat, Pangolin, protected by its scaly armour, dug for termites with its long snout and claws, and Stick Insect tried really hard not to be found. Every living thing in the rainforest was equally important. Even sleepy Germ.

Without tiny Termite, Pangolin would go hungry. Without Bear scrapping bee nests in search of honey, Hornbill would have no hollow holes to call home. Without Wasp, Tree wouldn't be able to grow juicy figs. And without figs, Pig wouldn't have enough food to feed its babies. Every night, Tree and its family ate dirty air, and every day they turned it into the cleanest, freshest oxygen in the entire world. ALL the creatures were happy about that. They knew they couldn't live without oxygen.

One day, a long, long time ago, Animal, with its long arms and legs, wandered to the edge of the rainforest. Over the river Animal saw grasslands and new creatures it had never imagined. It was curious and it decided to explore. First the journey was difficult because Animal wasn't suited for life in the open, but over time, and many generations, Animal's long arms, which had been used for swinging in the trees, grew shorter. It started to move on two legs, rather than four. It became faster and learnt to hunt other creatures for food. Animal learned how to make fire by rubbing sticks together and make arrow heads by chipping rocks. Then it realised instead of hunting, it could capture other creatures and keep them locked up until they were fat enough to eat.

But, just as fast as Animal learnt new things, it forgot others. It forgot how to read the wind in the trees. It forgot how to talk with the birds. It forgot that the salt from ancient oceans flowed in its blood. It forgot why Worm was important to the soil. Animal started to believe it was better than all the other creatures.

Being better than everyone else can be very lonely. Animal made up stories so it didn't feel so sad. Stories of princesses in gold palaces and treasure beyond measure. Stories of other, better, worlds beyond the one in which it lived. Eventually, Animal started to believe the stories, and changed the world to match its imagination. Animal could no longer hear

the whispering of the rainforest in its head so it cut down the rainforest trees one by one and planted Palms in rows so it could reach their fruit easily. Without the forest, the air grew heavy with dirt. Animal pretended not to notice. But Animal started to cough. Without the trees drinking, muddy streams overflowed and flooded Animal's home. Without the cool rainforest, the world got hotter and the trees near Animal's home caught on fire.

And still Animal wanted more and more. It returned to where the mighty rainforest once stood. Bear and Pangolin were really hungry and they couldn't run away. Animal squeezed them into tiny cages and took them to the market to sell. There were many other creatures at the market, but they spoke a different language. Pangolin and Bear couldn't understand them. Germ, who awoke and hitched a ride on Pangolin, was small enough to jump between the cages to investigate. Every time Germ jumped it grew a little stronger and it made each new creature sick. By the time Germ reached Animal it was so strong that even Animal couldn't kill it. Animal's cough grew worst. It found it hard to breathe. All of a sudden treasure and wealth didn't seem so important.

While Animal was sick, the world got better. Shoots started to grow from burned out hollows. The air and the streams became clean again. When Animal finally walked outside on wobbly legs and its eyes adjusted, the first thing it saw was colours so vibrant it wondered why it hadn't noticed them before. Animal hugged a lonely tree and said, 'thank you for making oxygen so I can breathe'. Animal watched Sparrow fly to its nest in the branches and was surprised when it understood Sparrow's babies calling for food. Animal walked to the shore and marveled at the crashing waves that never went to sleep. Animal turned full circle to follow a flash of blue as Butterfly flitted by. All of a sudden, Animal realised this world was better than the one it had imagined. Animal now knew everything in the universe was connected—Tree, Pig, Pangolin (and Germ) all had an important part to play. Animal smiled, simply because it was alive. And guess what?

Animal no longer felt lonely.

WORLD BURNS (SANS “A”)

Francesca Jurate Sasnaitis

she sits in the beginning sun
in orbit round, nobody there to see the end but she who sits in judgement

strident light veils over the visible: sink together under below beyond life going
going gone, pronounced on TV shows where people spoke of desires, untold
riches up for winning. they took too much; the world reeled, rocked, lurched,
returned upright or tilted, no one knew where the world would end, no one knew
long-long time, only she who sits here remembering, the one
with elbow on knee, brow furrowed thinking the thoughts of people gone

remember when the sky fled? the world shied like the horse in flight? hills moved
up down, split like bricks, melted like clocks? remember the guy with the curl curled
who drew the melt, the spit, the rose rot? I remember she remembers
the joy of fingers upon the seas, the noise, this *trip trip trip*, this engine hum.
the wind comes cold, hot, poison fills full up, the world turns, people drown
drowned, won't you believe?

long-long time she sits remembering people who were once, birds were once, other
others sick with the times

ON THE COLLAPSE OF HAPTIC COMMUNICATION

Ravi Shankar

What happens to cuddle parties and the sandaled dude
holding out the 'Free Hugs' sign during a pandemic?
While I don't want to come across as dismissive or rude,
I fear your offer of an elbow bump feels rather academic,
by which I mean rubbish. Once when we were younger,
did you ever think we would be nostalgic for a handshake?
Scientists studying rhesus monkeys call it skin hunger,
the way mammals long for touch even when it's as fake
as a pat on the back meant to make us feel slightly better
when a lapdog has died. I find myself wishing for a stranger
to rub against my hip on the subway or pass me a letter-
press book in the library without worrying about danger,
about germs, about tracking down a N95 respirator mask.
Post-corona, getting a massage feels like an essential task.

I SEE YOU

Emily Sun

she once walked in beauty, like the night,
near death her heart of love is
innocent
oxygen purify our soul

she does not go gently into the night
instead coughs and coughs and chokes

elevated above it all
another sits cross legged
not quite bhumisparsha mudra
sans l'arbre Bodhi
there is no nirvana
on a hydraulic bed.

I know.

under the microscope
consumption looks
like handmade fideos
paella without rice
and this one?

orange pomanders on a
Tudor Christmas day

neither are for the tryphobic

all those
still conscious
remember and
repent for all that
we are

anger subsides
as euphoria rises
breathing deeply through
nasal tubes
long awaited salvation.

THREE WEEKS AFTER THEY SHUT DOWN THE GYMS

Tim Tomlinson

the kettlebells arrive — a pair of 20s,
olive green vinyl around the black cast iron

and O! the 35 pounder, black
as a cannon ball and coarse as the skin

of a man who's fought many battles
under hot suns. I want to cup its supple curves

in my palms, offer it up to the gods
of fitness, the gods of endorphins,

the gods of sweat and aches and struggles
and steps too steep to take even one more.

I want to take it over my head and
have it pull my shoulders open and open

my heart to everything it's been closed to.
I want to get strong, raise my voice, join

the marches, throw the rocks, throttle
the scoundrels. I want to scream till I'm hoarse,

get a little justice, a lot of revenge.
But it's late and it's dark and the cold

is getting colder. So I place it carefully
from the fat black handle alongside

the green 20s and wait for tomorrow's
daylight, when I'll parade up and down

the block with my awkward loads. Then
the neighbours will know who I am.

RIGHT NOW?

Olga Walker

Locked down, locked in
I am not bad, I did not sin
What a year 2020 has been
So far
And wide has the pandemic spread
Pitched me from
The fire truck
On the paddock, in the trees
Watching the flames rise
With the breeze
Back at the shed
We wash the trucks down
Ash and dirt smother the ground
And flow away
The receding rivulets of
Water
Liquefy my memories
15+ hour shifts
The awe I feel for
Our crew's work
Day and night
We put it out there
Now, we reel back in our
Emotions
Run high and dry,
I heard you are leaving
Us
I wish you well but
You were us in
the media
We knew you had
Our back
To front
My world now
Time inside to
Spin

A tale or two
Or put on my party shoes
No one is looking
Locked up, locked in.

A SUDDEN ECSTASY OF STARS

Mags Webster

The Soul selects her own Society—

Then—shuts the Door—

(Dickinson 1970: 143)

Walking in my suburb, I'm wearing headphones because I want to be flooded by music; and I want also to signal my unavailability. A neighbour hovers on the other side of the road, trying to catch my attention. She is exhaustingly garrulous at the best of times, and these are not the best of times. I wave, smile, walk on. Later, a text pings from another neighbour: want to walk up for a drink? Another night would be great, I reply.

Rejoice in the excuse I am being given not to interact. Not to act.

Introversion is one thing, misanthropy another. Am I a misanthrope? Surely this is not the who I am, the who I want to be. I am of this species that hungers to cluster, but seem better fitted for an outside-in existence where life is made richer by reversal and retreat. I know I crave togetherness, miss touch, yearn for a silence that is not solely of my making. Yet so efficient has my soul become at selecting her own society.

For five years, I have taught myself how to live alone. I don't just mean single-occupancy etiquette but how to inhabit a uni-verse, my 'all turned into one'. Existing solo is a brutal art to practise, but one perfected for this current contradiction: an experience of solitude and withdrawal, shared globally. For once, we are all together in being, and feeling, alone. A condition that seems not so very different from my usual.

Though I do understand about choice and compulsion. This present seclusion is imposed on us, not voluntary. Initially, my solitude wasn't voluntary either. But a lustrum's self-education has baked it into me. 'To all except anguish, the mind soon adjusts' wrote Dickinson (Dickinson 1971: 157).

Some days I can still reach out and touch the woman I once was. As shall we all, one day, search for the people we used to be, the lives we used

to have. They will be foreign (from the Latin *fores* for door) because they'll be what we left outside when we had to close our doors.

Yet Dickinson also wrote:

The soul has moments of Escape—
When bursting all the doors—She
dances like a Bomb, abroad, And
swings upon the Hours

(Dickinson 1970: 250)

When this is done, and we can burst our doors, maybe we'll meet,
whomever we end up being. Dance our changeling selves into a sudden
ecstasy of stars.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Alberta Natasia Adji is currently a creative writing PhD candidate at Edith Cowan University. She has published two novels, *Youth Adagio* (2013) and *Dante: The Faery and the Wizard* (2014), some short stories in *Jawa Pos*, and refereed articles in *Prose Studies*, *Life Writing*, and others. She holds a bachelor's degree in English literature and a master's degree in cultural studies from Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia.

David M. Alper is a high school AP English teacher in New York City, residing in Manhattan. His work has appeared in *Dime Show Review*, *Tilde Lit*, *Obra/Artifact*, and elsewhere.

Amirah Al Wassif's poems have appeared in several print and online publications including *South Florida Poetry*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Hawaii Review*, *Meniscus*, *The Chiron Review*, *The Hunger*, *Writers Resist*, *Right Now*, and others. Amirah also has a poetry collection, *For Those Who Don't Know Chocolate* (Poetic Justice Books & Arts, 2019), and a children's book, *The Cocoa Boy and Other Stories* published in February 2020.

Ayesha Asad is from Dallas, Texas. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, *Blue Marble Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Rue Scribe*, *Green Blotter*, *Eunoia Review*, *Skipping Stones Magazine*, and elsewhere. Her writing has been recognized by the Creative Writing Ink December 2019 Competition and the Robert Bone Memorial Creative Writing Contest. She studies Literature and Biology at the University of Texas at Dallas, where she writes for *The Mercury* and hosts *Mercury Morning News*, a radio news show. In her free time, she likes to dream.

Tomas Baiza was born and raised in San José, California, and now lives in Boise, Idaho. He holds master's degrees from Indiana University and the University of Michigan, a doctorate from the University of Oregon, and is currently studying creative writing at Boise State University. His work tends to explore the transition from one state of vulnerability to another and has appeared in *Parhelion Literary Journal*, *Writers in The Attic: FUEL*, and *Obelus Journal*.

Ranald Barnicot (born 1948) has a BA in Classics (Oxford) and an MA in Applied Linguistics (London). He has published original poems and translations from various languages (Ancient Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian) in journals such as *Orbis*, *Stand* and *Acumen*. *By Me, Through Me* (original poems and translations) was published by Alba Press in December 2018.

Kris Beaver lives in the United States, outside Seattle, Washington. Her poems have appeared in *ERGO: The Bumbershoot Literary Magazine*, *Spindrift* and online in *Rattle* and *What Rough Beast*. She began writing poetry in college, then took a writing hiatus to focus on a 39-year elementary teaching career. She returned to writing poetry in 2017, after retiring.

Tony Beyer is now writing full time in Taranaki, New Zealand. His long poem *Sand ire* appears online as *Mudlark Chap #67* (2019) and his most recent title in print is the chapbook *Friday Prayers* (Cold Hub Press, 2019)

James Borders resides in rural Ohio with his wife, Evelyn. He is an emerging poet who has secretly collected poems for the last thirty years. After over three decades, he reconnected with his high school English teacher who rekindled his love for poetry. They collaborate consistently and raise each other up. James is a founding member of The Centerburg Poetry Society and a recurring contributor to Peripatetic Poets poetry group.

Felipe Botero (see Ranald Barnicott, translation) born 1990, is a writer, philosopher and translator from Colombia. He took a B.A. in Philosophy (Universidad Nacional of Colombia) and an M.A. with Distinction in Philosophy and the Arts (Warwick, UK). Felipe has translated into Spanish texts writers such as Conrad and Pessoa. He also has a monthly section on translation in *Revista Arcadia*, Colombia's most important cultural magazine.

Owen Bullock's latest books are *Summer Haiku* (2019) and *Work & Play* (2017). He teaches Creative Writing at the University of Canberra. He has a website for his research: <https://poetry-in-process.com/>

Gianoula Burns is an Australian-Greek, born in Zakynthos, Greece, raised and educated in Sydney Australia. She has written poetry for many years and is now venturing into prose, exploring the migrant experience; themes of loneliness, longing and yearning, what is lost and gained, and how these themes shape each generation.

Mira Chiruvolu is a 16-year-old, born and raised in California. She is in the 10th grade, and an avid reader. She loves to write, specifically poetry and short stories. When not writing she enjoys playing basketball and running outside as much as possible. Her writing style leans towards grander themes about life, including courage, bravery, love, loss, etc. Her portfolio is a conglomeration of stories, poems, thoughts, and pieces that she has created over the course of her life.

Stephen Coates comes from Christchurch, New Zealand, but is currently living in Japan. His stories have been published in *Landfall*, *takahē*, *Headland*, *Sky Island Journal* and *So It Goes*.

Elizabeth Colbert: All my family has been affected by COVID-19. I vacillate between fear and courage, uncertainty and hope. Its swelling intensity has brought me back to writing after a long pause. I have found some release in putting pen to paper but the difficulty remains of capturing it in words. The pain of others is awful to witness knowing that the suffering of many is hidden. Writing poetry in one sense seems trivial but I hope, in the belief that in reading the words of others we gain insight into ourselves, my work will shed light on our current lives.

Zoe Cunniffe is a poet and singer-songwriter from Washington DC. Her work has previously been published by the Showbear Family Circus.

Adam P. Davis grew up in the state of Maryland (U.S.A), majored in French at Wesleyan University, and received his masters degrees in both political science at Columbia University and supply chain management at Purdue University. He has taught English at several community colleges and spent a year in Shanghai. Currently, he works in the logistics industry. He has been published in the online literary journal *Poets Reading the News*.

Christine Davey is currently completing her PhD at RMIT. Her study revolves around the middle-aged female (unlikeable character) and the ways in which such characters can transform the way we write scripts for onscreen stories. Christine is a playwright, actor and director and has been telling stories for forty years. Her plays have been published by australianplays.org, she was recently a fellow at the Wheeler Centre and her work has been presented by organisations such as La Mama, Griffin and the MTC.

John M. Davis lives in Visalia, California, where he teaches at the College of the Sequoias. His work has appeared in numerous journals, including *The Comstock Review*, *Silk Road*, *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, *Descant (Canada)* and *Curating Alexandria*. The Dallas Community Poets published his last chapbook, *The Mojave*.

Anne Di Lauro grew up in Brisbane where she obtained a B.A. from the University of Queensland and a Dip Lib from the University of NSW. After working at the State Library of Queensland for two years, she headed overseas. She lived in both Europe and North America where she worked for national and international development agencies. After her return to Brisbane she retrained as a psychotherapist.

Martin Dolan is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra. His third collection of poems, *Sleeping Dogs*, is forthcoming from Recent Work Press.

Gabrielle Everall: I have been a poet of the page and the stage for 30 years. The second edition of my first book of poetry, *Dona Juanita and the love of boys*, was released in April 2020 through Buon-Cattivi Press. I have been published in numerous anthologies including *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry*. I have performed my work at The Bowery in New York and The Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Most recently I performed

my work at The Evil Women conference in Vienna and The Evil Children conference in Verona, Italy.

Christie Fogarty is a current PhD Candidate at Griffith University, Queensland. Her current project is a work of fiction exploring the boundaries of the self, and rape mythology.

Mukund Gnanadesikan has been published or is awaiting publication in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *The Ibis Head Review*, *Tuck Magazine*, *The Bangalore Review*, *Bloodroot Literary Magazine*, *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine*, *Tanka Journal*, *Junto Magazine*, *Cathexis Northwest*, *Duck Lake Journal*, *Literary Yard*, *Stardust Review*, *Calliope*, *The Cape Rock* and *Dream Noir*. His first novel, *Errors of Omission*, is due out in fall of 2020 from Adelaide Books.

Kristin Gustafson graduated in 2019 from Otterbein University with a BA in English Creative Writing. Her work will appear in *LEVITATE* magazine's fall issue. She lives in New Albany, Ohio.

Marlon Hacla (see Kristine Ong Muslim translations) is a programmer, writer, and photographer. His first book, *May Mga Dumadaang Anghel sa Parang* (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2010), was published as part of UBOD New Authors Series II. His second book, *Glossolalia*, was published by High Chair in 2013. He also released two chapbooks, *Labing-anim na Liham ng Kataksilan* (2014) and *Melismas* (2016). In 2017, he created the first robot poet in Filipino, Estela Vadal, as a Twitter bot with the Twitter handle @estelavadal. He lives in Quezon City, Philippines, with his cats.

CM Harris is the author of novels, *The children of mother glory*, *Enter oblivion*, and forthcoming *Maiden Leap*. Her short stories and essays have appeared in *O Magazine*, *Pseudopod* podcast, the anthology *QUEER VOICES: Poetry, Prose, and Pride*, as well as the new horror anthology: *COPPICE & BRAKE*. Her screenplay *The Cost of Glory* received Gold and Silver Awards from the Queen Palm Film Festival.

Genevieve Hartman graduated from Houghton College with a BA in English and Adolescence Education, where she edited *The Lanthorn*. A former intern with BOA Editions, she currently serves as a content manager for *The Adroit Journal*, poetry reader for *The VIDA Review*, and substitute teacher in upstate New York. Her work has been published by *bitter melon poetry*, *Sonder Midwest*, and appears in the 2019 Art of Peace Tyler Poetry Anthology.

Dominique Hecq grew up in the French-speaking part of Belgium. She now lives in Melbourne. Across genres and sometimes tongues, her creative works include a novel, three collections of short stories and nine volumes of poetry. *Kaosmos* (2020) is fresh

off the press. *Smacked and Other Stories of Addiction* is forthcoming. 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.

Suzanne Herschell, former teacher of accelerate students and mother of four, is a poet & award-winning NZ artist, curator at NZAFA, selector & judge of national exhibitions, and curator of recent Parkin & Wallace Art Awards. She has been published in *Meniscus*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Fib Review*, *Blackmail Press*, *The Ghazal Page*, NZPS's *a fine line*, various anthologies & National Poetry Day selections in NZ & USA, also chosen for Volume 12 of Katherine Mansfield Studies, to be published by Edinburgh University Press.

Nadia Jacobson, originally from London, lives in Jerusalem. She is a flash fiction editor at *The Ilanot Review* and holds an MA in English Literature and Creative Writing from Bar-Ilan University. Her fiction has appeared in *Annalemma*, *The Binnacle*, *Every day fiction* and a number of anthologies.

Helena Kadmos is a Western Australian writer of short creative fiction and non-fiction, with particular interest in fragmented narrative forms. She has been previously published in *Meniscus*, as well as *Westerly*, *Meanjin*, *Eureka Street* and *Indigo*.

Con Karavias is an Honours student at Monash University and has had poems and essays published in *Overland*, *Cordite*, and forthcoming in *Quadrant*.

Sharon Kernot has a PhD from Flinders University. She writes fiction and poetry and is the author of the YA verse novel *The Art of Taxidermy*, which was published by Text Publishing in 2018. She is currently writing a collection of poems based on typography and her experiences of working in the printing industry in the 1980s.

Dean Kerrison's work is often internationally focused, with a playscript and fiction and nonfiction appearing in *TEXT Journal*, *The Bangalore Review*, *Allegory Ridge*, *Global Hobo*, *ABC Open* and *Flourish*. He has contributed to literary organisations and events in Australia, China, Georgia and Bali, and is a member of Asia Pacific Writers & Translators. He commences a PhD in creative writing in 2020 at Griffith University, including his first novel.

Katharine Kistler is an MFA Poetry Candidate at Texas State University. She got her bachelors degree from the University of Texas at Austin. Her work appears in *High Shelf Press*, *Shiela-Na-Gig*, *Roadrunner Review*, *45th Parallel*, *Camping Magazine*, and *Appalachian Heritage*. She is from San Antonio, Texas.

Polchate (Jam) Kraprayoon was raised in Bangkok and now works for an intergovernmental organization in Tokyo. He received a masters from the University of Oxford and a bachelors at the LSE. His work has been featured in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Harbor Review*, *Portland Review* and is forthcoming in *Barzakh Magazine*.

Jeri Kroll is Emeritus Professor of English and Creative Writing at Flinders University, South Australia, Adjunct Professor Creative Arts at Central Queensland University and an award-winning writer for adults and young people. Recent books are *Workshopping the Heart: New and Selected Poems* and a verse novel, *Vanishing Point*, shortlisted for the Queensland Literary Awards. *Research Methods in Creative Writing* and *“Old and New, Tried and Untried”: Creativity and Research in the 21st Century University* are recent critical books. Forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan is *Creative Writing: Drafting, Revising and Editing*, co-edited with Graeme Harper. She is a Doctor of Creative Arts candidate at the University of Wollongong.

Jennifer Kyrnin is a non-fiction writer and web designer living in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, son, and too many animals. She has published six books on web design, HTML, and the Internet and now hopes to publish her fiction writing.

Wes Lee lives in New Zealand. Her latest collection *By the Lapels* was launched in Wellington (Steele Roberts Aotearoa, 2019). Her work has appeared in *Westerly*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Cordite*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Poetry London*, *Banshee*, *The London Magazine*, *Landfall*, *The New Zealand Listener*, *Best New Zealand Poems 2019*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, among others. Most recently she was awarded the Poetry New Zealand Prize 2019 by Massey University Press.

Rose Lucas is a Melbourne poet and academic in graduate research at Victoria University. Her first book, *Even in the Dark* (UWAP 2013), won the Mary Gilmore Award; her second book, *Unexpected Clearing*, was also published by UWAP in 2016.

Elizabeth MacFarlane is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne where she teaches Theory for Writing, Graphic Narratives and Short Fiction. Elizabeth is Co-Director of Twelve Panels Press, and recently departed Co-Director of the Comic Art Workshop. Her book *Reading Coetzee* was published in 2013, and her edited collection *Superhero Bodies* was published in 2019.

Kevin Madrigal is a decolonizer of food, art, and health. He is a Chicano first-generation child of inmigrantes Mexicanos from Sur San Francisco. In 2016, he founded Farming Hope in San Francisco to provide employment opportunities in food for folks experiencing homelessness. Through his writing he hopes to honor his ancestors and work towards a better future. In his free time, you can find him listening to hip-hop / rap and on the dance floor with friends.

Sara Cahill Marron, a relocated New York poet living in Washington D.C., is the author of *Reasons for the Long Tu'm* (Broadstone Books, 2018) and Associate Editor of *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*. Her work has been published widely in literary magazines and journals such as *Gravel*, *Atlas + Alice*, *Joey & the Black Boots*, *Cordella*, *Newtown Literary*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Golden Walkman*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Poetry in the Time of Coronavirus*, *New Verse News*, and others. You can read more of her work at www.saracahillmarron.com.

Craig McGeady is from Greymouth, New Zealand and lives with his wife and two daughters in Xuzhou, China. His writing runs the gamut of length and form thanks to Mr. Miller, his high school homeroom teacher. He has been published in *The Garfield Lake Review*, *The Remembered Arts Journal*, *The Wild Word*, *Genre: Urban Arts* and *Roanoke* among others and is winner of the 2018 Given Words' *The Spanish Connection* Poetry Competition.

Peter Newall was born in Sydney, where he worked in a Navy dockyard and as a roadmender before taking a degree in law, but has since lived in Odessa, Ukraine and recently Kyoto, Japan, where he sang for a popular local blues band. He has been published in England, Hong Kong, the USA and Australia; his stories *The Luft Mensch* and *The Chinese General* were each nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Some of his published stories can be found at <http://peterjustinnewall.blogspot.com.au/>

Kimberly Nguyen is a poet originally from Omaha, Nebraska but currently living and working in New York City. She is a recent graduate of Vassar College, where she studied English and Russian Studies. She is a recipient of a Beatrice Daw Brown Prize and has appeared in the *Vassar Student Review*, *Project Yellow Dress*, *Vietnamese Boat People*, and *Teen Vogue*. kimberlynguyenwrites.com

Kristine Ong Muslim (translation, see Marlon Hacla) is the author of nine books, including the fiction collections *Age of Blight* (Unnamed Press, 2016), *Butterfly Dream* (Snuggly Books, 2016), and *The Drone Outside* (Eibonvale Press, 2017), as well as the poetry collections *Lifeboat* (University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2015), *Meditations of a Beast* (Cornerstone Press, 2016), and *Black Arcadia* (University of the Philippines Press, 2017). She is co-editor of two anthologies: the British Fantasy Award-winning *People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction* and *Sigwa: Climate Fiction Anthology* from the Philippines, an illustrated volume forthcoming from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines Press. Widely anthologized, her short stories have appeared in *Conjunctions*, *Tin House*, and *World Literature Today*. She grew up and continues to live in a rural town in southern Philippines.

Dr **Sarah Pearce** is an independent researcher, editor, poet and performer from Adelaide. Her work appears in *Aeternum*, *Outskirts*, *Meniscus*, *Writing from Below* and

TEXT. She has held residencies at Adelaide City Library and FELTspace gallery and performed at Blenheim Festival and Adelaide Fringe Festival. Her writing concerns the female body and embodiment, relationships, the Gothic, writing back and queer narrative(s).

Sarah Penwarden is a therapist and counsellor educator based in Auckland, New Zealand. She has had poems published in *Poetry New Zealand*, *Turbine*, *Meniscus*, *Southerly*, *Quadrant*, and *takahē*. She has had short stories published in *takahē*, *brief*, and a story broadcast on *Radio New Zealand*. She also writes for children and has had short stories and poems published in *The School Journal*.

Antonia Pont writes poetry in Melbourne, on Wurundjeri land. She has published work in many anthologies and journals, and is also an essayist, scholar and practitioner. Her recent book *You Will Not Know in Advance What You'll Feel* appeared with Rabbit Poets in 2019.

Kathy [K. M.] Preston has been writing poetry for over 20 years, although with time off when life intervened. Winner of an ACT Writer's Centre mentorship with Alan Gould and selected participant in the 2016 ACT Writer's Centre Poetry Masterclass with Jen Webb, Kathy has been published in *Muse*, *Quadrant* and *Meniscus*.

Mark Putzi received an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin -- Milwaukee in 1990. He has published fiction and poetry in numerous small press magazines including *The Cape Rock*, *the Cream City Review*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *Modern Literature*, *Meniscus* and *Griffel*. He recently self-published a small book of political satire available in both print and e-book forms from Ingramspark and Rakuten/kobo respectfully. He lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and works as a retail pharmacist.

Sarah Pye is a Doctor of Creative Arts candidate at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia. Her doctoral creative artefact, *Saving Sun Bears*, is a narrative biography of Malaysian biologist and tropical ecologist, Dr Wong Siew Te as he fights to save the world's unknown bear. Stories of individual bears are incorporated as examples of the challenges faced by the species. *Saving Sun Bears* will be published in June 2020 by Signal8 Press.

Giovanni Quessep, (see Randal Barnicott translation), born in San Onofre, Colombia, in 1939, is Colombia's most renowned living poet. In 2004 he received the Premio Nacional de Poesía José Asunción Silva, in acknowledgment of a life dedicated to poetry. In 2015 he was awarded the Premio Mundial de Poesía René Char. Some of his work has already been partially translated into German, Portuguese, Italian, French, English, Arab and Greek. To date, Giovanni Quessep has published thirteen books of poetry in

the space of sixty years. In addition, he has been included in many Colombian and Latin American anthologies of poetry.

Dustin Charles Radke is a previously unpublished poet from St. Louis, Missouri. The poem published here was written while he was living on the North Shore of Oahu, Hawai'i during the summer of 2019. Radke currently resides in the Florida Keys, where he enjoys sailing, diving and camping. He can be found on Instagram @radkedc.

Sandra Renew's poetry is published in *Griffith Review* (forthcoming), *The Blue Nib*, *Canberra Times*, *Contemporary Haibun Online*, *Hecate*, *Axon*, *Australian Poetry Journal 2019*, *Shuffle: An Anthology of Microlit*, (Spineless Wonders, 2019). Her recent collections are *Acting Like a Girl*, Recent Work Press, 2019 and *The Orlando Files*, Ginninderra Press, 2018.

Bruce Robinson's recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Panoply*, *Pangyrus*, *The Menteur*, *Common Ground*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Seventh Quarry*, and *Maintenant*. He lives in New York. 'And still there are harps and whippets on the castled and pit-headed hills.'

Will Russo is a poet from New York City pursuing an MFA in Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Faultline*, *Waxing & Waning*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, and *Newtown Literary*, where he received a Pushcart Prize nomination. He has attended the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

Christopher Carter Sanderson's latest book is the prose-poetry novel *The Too-Brief Chronicle of Judah Lowe* from Sagging Meniscus Press. His poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Gravitas Poetry*, *Griffel*, *Screen Door Review*, *Poetry City*, *Poets Choice*, and others, and will be anthologized in *Show Us Your Papers* this fall. He teaches at the Downtown Writers Center in Syracuse, NY USA.

Francesca Jurate Sasnaitis is an Australian-born writer and artist of Lithuanian background. Originally from Melbourne, she now lives in Perth where she is completing a doctorate in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia. Her poetry, short fiction and reviews have been published online and in various print journals and anthologies.

Jeff Schiff, in addition to *That hum to go by* (Mammoth books), is the author of *Mixed Diction*, *Burro Heart*, *The Rats of Patzcuaro*, *The Homily of Infinitude*, and *Anywhere in this Country*. His work has appeared in more than a hundred publications worldwide. He is currently serving as the interim dean of the school of graduate studies at Columbia College Chicago, where he has been on faculty since 1987.

Pushcart prize winning poet **Ravi Shankar** is author, editor and translator of 15 books, including WW Norton's *Language for a New Century* and Recent Work Press' *The Many Uses of Mint: New and Selected Poems 1998–2018*. He currently holds an international research fellowship from the University of Sydney, and his memoir *Correctional* is forthcoming in 2021.

Murzban F. Shroff is a Mumbai-based writer, published with over 65 literary journals in the U.S. and UK. Shroff is the winner of the John Gilgun Fiction Award and has garnered six Pushcart Prize nominations, the highest award for the short story in the U.S. His short story collection, *Breathless in Bombay*, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the best debut category from Europe and South Asia and rated by the Guardian as among the ten best Mumbai books. His novel, *Waiting for Jonathan Koshy*, was a finalist for the Horatio Nelson Fiction Prize in New York, and has been published in India and China. His collection of literary shorts, *Fasttrack Fiction*, is a one-of-its-kind book created especially for the cell-phone reader. Murzban can be contacted on murzbanfshroff@gmail.com

Ian C Smith's work has appeared in, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Antipodes*, *cordite*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Southerly*, & *Two-Thirds North*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island, Tasmania.

Ed Southorn is a Queensland writer interested in the anthropocene and social spatialization. He is a PhD candidate at Griffith University and has an MPhil in Creative Writing from the University of Queensland. He was a newspaper reporter for 30 years, has written a history of surfing and hitch-hiked across America. He was first published as a poet in 1977, in *Neon Signs to the Mutes*. He admires Gary Snyder, C.D. Wright and Patti Smith.

Don Stoll is a Pushcart-nominated writer whose fiction has appeared recently in *The Galway Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Heart of flesh*, *Cleaning up glitter*, *The Aironaut*, *Horla* and *Cliterature*. In 2008, Don and his wife founded their nonprofit (karimufoundation.org) to bring new schools, clean water, and medical clinics that emphasize women's and children's health to three Tanzanian villages.

Emily Sun is a West Australian writer and poet who has been published in various journals including *Cordite Poetry Review*, *APJ*, *Meanjin* and *Meniscus*. She currently teaches at Murdoch University. <http://iamemilysun.com>

Jessica Temple is the author of *Daughters of Bone*, forthcoming from Madville Publishing, and *Seamless and Other Legends* (Finishing Line Press, 2013). She earned an MA from Mississippi State University and a PhD from Georgia State University and

teaches at Alabama A&M University. She was Alabama State Poetry Society's 2019 Poet of the Year. Her work has appeared in *Canyon Voices*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Stone, River, Sky: An Anthology of Georgia Poems*.

John Thampi is a former US Army Captain having served from 2005-2012, deploying twice to Iraq and once to Afghanistan. His poetry has been published in *glines*, *the Rialto*, *Newtown Literary* and other publications. In 2019, he was selected to attend Oxford Brookes Veterans Workshop and his work featured in the Oxford Science and Ideas Festival.

Duncan Tierney is a community organizer and student in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan-- a city known for its faint and constant aroma of manure. Upon graduation, Duncan plans to pursue a career as a writer and full-time organizer, much to the dismay of his parents, both of whom did their best.

Michael Thomas is a literature student at North Greenville University and a published editor of the *Mountain Laurel*, North Greenville's literary journal. When he isn't writing or studying poetry, he enjoys playing guitar, drinking coffee, and participating in Twitter's vibrant meme culture.

Ken Tomaro is an artist and writer living in Cleveland Ohio. He has published three volumes of poetry available on Amazon and his work has been accepted in several magazines.

Tim Tomlinson is co-founder of New York Writers Workshop and co-author of its popular text, *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*. He is also the author of *Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse*, *Requiem for the Tree Fort I Set on Fire* (poetry), and *This Is Not Happening to You* (short fiction). He teaches in the Global Liberal Studies Program, NYU.

Julie U'Ren writes short-fiction and microlit. Her writing has been shortlisted in the NT Literary Awards and appears in a number of anthologies, including *Spineless Wonders*. She lives in Darwin, Northern Territory.

Following a career in financial management in the private sector, and as a financial analyst with the Public Service in Canberra, **Olga Walker** undertook her Creative Writing PhD with the University of Canberra, and graduated in 2019. She has also been an RFS volunteer fire-fighter for several years and was appointed as administrator for Basic Bushfire Training in her local area. While RFS duties are curtailed, Olga's focus on creative writing and auto-ethnography continues apace.

Cathy Warner is a writer in Washington's Puget Sound region. Author of *Home By Another Road*, and *Burnt Offerings*, her fiction, memoir, and essays have appeared in

Under the Sun, *The Other Journal*, *So To Speak*, *Water~Stone*, and the blogs of *Ruminate*, *Relief*, and *Image*, among others. Recipient of the Steinbeck and SuRaa fiction awards, Cathy has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays. Find her at cathywarner.com

Mags Webster: I am a Perth-based poet, currently in the final stages of a Creative Writing PhD. My poems, essays and reviews have been published in a variety of journals and anthologies in Australia, Asia and the States. My first poetry collection *The Weather of Tongues* won the 2011 Anne Elder Award. My second, *Nothing to Declare*, is being published by Puncher and Wattmann.

Evey Weisblat is a junior pursuing a degree in English literature and creative writing at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, she is senior news editor at *The Kenyon Collegian*, Gambier's student-run newspaper. Her non-fiction has been published in *Cleveland Scene Magazine*, *The Kenyon Collegian* and *Freshwater Cleveland*, while her short fiction has appeared in *The Finger Literary Journal*.

Anne Marie Wells (She/Her) is a queer poet, playwright, and storyteller. Though she has called many places "Home" (including Upstate New York, Connecticut, France, England, Spain, Portugal, Minneapolis, Boulder, and Florida), she now resides in Hoback Junction, Wyoming with her dog, Isabella Bird.

Wendi White is a poet and educator currently musing among the herons and egrets of Coastal Virginia's tidewater region. She earned her MFA from Old Dominion University's creative writing program and was awarded the graduate Academy of American Poets Prize at Old Dominion. In her day job she works for the well-being of women, children and families. At home she keeps one spouse, two sons, a small wetland and a naughty puppy named Rafiki.

Anna Genevieve Winham writes and performs with the Poetry Society of New York. You can find her work in *Q/A Poetry*, *Oxford Public Philosophy*, *Rock & Sling*, and *Panoplyzine*. While attending Dartmouth College (which was the pits), she won the Stanley Prize for experimental essay and the Kaminsky Family Fund Award. She writes at the crossroads of science and the sublime, cyborgs and the surreal. As curious about your computer code as your existential dread, she flips from physics to fiction inside one breath.

Marjory Woodfield has written for the *Raven Chronicles*, BBC, *Mudlark*, *Cargo Literary Magazine*, *Nowhere Magazine*, *Flash Frontier*, *takahē* and others. In 2017 she was long listed for the *Alpine Fellowship* (Venice), and in 2018 won the *Dunedin UNESCO City of Literature Robert Burns Poetry Competition*. She was commended in the 2019 *Hippocrates Poetry Award* and *Proverse Poetry Prize*, long-listed for the 2019 Cinnamon Literature

Award and has been anthologised in *Pale Fire* (Frogmore Press, 2019), *Best Small Fictions 2019*, (Sonder Press) and *with one eye on the cows* (Bath Flash Fiction Volume Four).



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