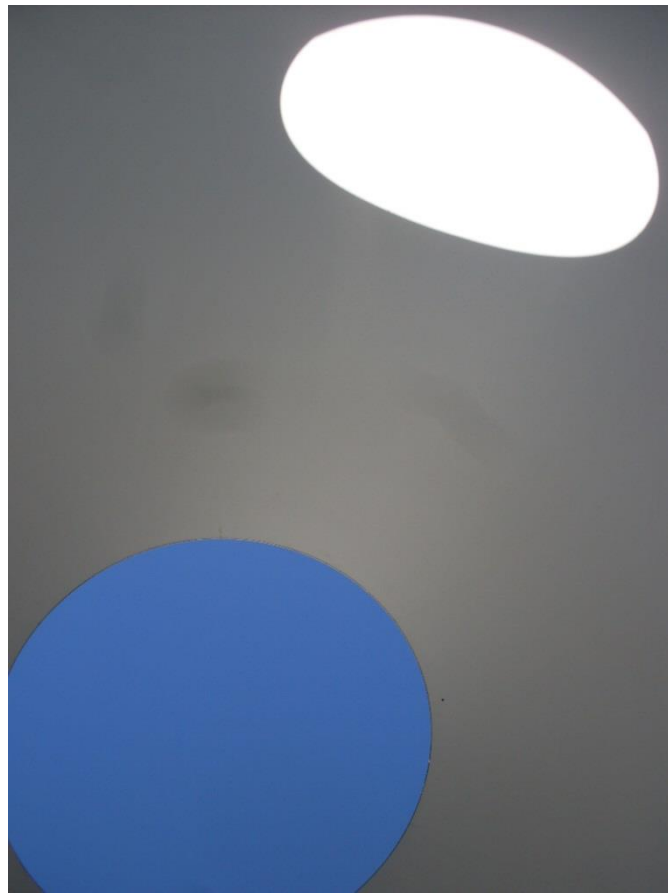


# Meniscus



Volume 2  
Issue 1

# Publication Information

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## About Meniscus

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Meniscus is a new 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 analogue the excitement and anxiety inherent in creative practice, and the delicate balance between possibility and impossibility that is found in much good writing.

## Australian Copyright Agency

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Meniscus would like to acknowledge the generous support of the [Australian Copyright Agency’s Cultural Fund](#).

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# Editorial

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Welcome to the First issue of *Meniscus* for 2014. *Meniscus* is a free online journal published by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs which aims to provide a showcase for the best in contemporary international writing. In this issue there is work from New Zealand, the UK, the USA, and Australia.

Several of the authors published here submitted work towards the end of 2013 but we sent out another invitation for further work and then received a tide. Despite all best intentions it is very difficult in the southern hemisphere to receive, critique and co-ordinate over 70 submissions within a very short space of time and we are now calling the February issue the March issue and blaming our long summer holidays.

Guest editors for this publication are Thomas Conroy and Sandra Arnold, both based in New Zealand, but you can read more about them in the Guest Editors section. Thom worked with *Meniscus* Co-Editor Paul Munden on the poetry submissions while Sandra and Gail Pittaway concentrated on the prose submissions.

Jen Webb has taken a step back from her work with AAWP but we reserve the right to consult her at every turn as she has so brilliantly supported the development of our journal.

Many thanks to all our supporters, contributors and readers. We welcome your feedback and future submissions.

Gail Pittaway for *Meniscus*,  
March 2014

# Guest Editors

---

## Sandra Arnold

Sandra Arnold holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Central Queensland University. She is the author of three books, her most recent being *Sing no Sad Songs* (Canterbury University Press). Her short stories have been broadcast on Radio New Zealand and published in literary magazines and anthologies in New Zealand and internationally. She was a founding editor of the New Zealand literary magazine *Takahe*. She teaches academic writing at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology and is currently writing a new novel.

## Thom Conroy

Thom Conroy is a senior lecturer in creative writing at Massey University. Sometimes publishing under the name, Thomas Gough, his work has appeared in various journals, including *Sport*, *Landfall*, *New England Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Agni*. His short story "The Evening's Peace" was noted in *Best American Short Stories 2011* as a 'Distinguished Story of 2010'. His first novel, *The Naturalist*, will be published with Random House in 2014.



# Bridget Auchmuty

---

## Across the Face of the Sun

The crashed waxeye has a choice.

She's still

breathing

as I cup her in my hand

drip Rescue in her beak

seeing the cusp

her passageway from here.

David again maybe,

new hatched.

Death comes

between us as the moon

passes in front of the sun

dark chill descends

between lives or else

lives pass between deaths

which is our proper home

all the rest are crossings

from one shade

to another

as on a hot day we traverse

shadow to shadow

leaving as little of us exposed

for the shortest time possible.

Dark is home and comforting.

I told him it was time to leave

that he was more than this frail form

he had no use for anymore.

Go I said.





## Bones *(after John Burnside)*

### I ORINOCO

Once  
two young men came paddling upstream  
searching the veins  
                    the bones of the land  
under kowhai totara matai  
stopped to camp for the night by a creek  
small enough to jump over  
                                    Aha!  
they cried, the mighty Orinoco!  
The name stuck though the settlers were Welsh  
They planted sycamores oak birches  
to help them feel at home  
                                    along with  
blackberry traveller's joy and broom  
  our banes  
Daffodils planted to read in spring  
                    Tenby  
Each year they thrust up their origins  
fuzzing with the years until neighbours  
carved a driveway up the slope  
                                    scattered  
the inscription in bright shards among  
the grass  
  
It's not that they were our own  
people here that made us feel home  
but a soft landscape  
                                    familiar trees  
that in winter shed their leaves  
  leaving  
the skeleton exposed  
                                    seasons  
that are distinct  
                                    blurred with greenery  
or drawn sharp with a 2H pencil  
  
a valley where I could stop running  
away and he'd put down roots again

## II MIDDLEBANK

Last spring – the last spring – appears still sharp  
like looking through Waterford crystal  
each day tulips coming into bloom  
crab apple and camellias fizzing  
into froth. Those evenings I came home  
to the welcome of cats and birdsong  
the gold kowhai alive with tui  
I recorded it all to show you  
next day

less to keep you anchored here  
(it didn't occur to me you weren't)  
than to remind you there was a world  
beyond your four white walls

I want to  
keep talking to you but talking to you  
makes me cry. I want to tell you how  
the fluoro orange azalea  
is just swelling

the Crepuscule rose  
and Aotearoa are in leaf  
and the hedge needs a trim

He was away when I found the house  
a former dairy farm, trad vla,  
3 br, 1 bath, 4 ha fenced,  
est gdns, sheds 3-ph pwr  
Built in 1897 on  
the rise between two streams

never dry  
And the trees: they didn't mention trees –  
totaras the girth of many arms  
birches older than I'd ever seen –  
nor the way the house whispered buy me  
buy me I'm yours

the plunge of the slope  
beside the creek where I imagined  
hot afternoons lying in the grass



beyond being able to tell  
I'd have asked about the pump and what to do  
with gutters grease traps the septic tank  
and drains

It's all water

### III AVOCA

We named the fields (unable with our  
origins to call them paddocks) for  
their trees: totara

chestnut

big elm

and Avoca

not a tree but where  
the waters meet. He planned a Pelton  
wheel to draw up water for the garden  
felled a poplar for a bridge

scattered

cardiocrinum seeds

phormium

and tried for years to sow the bright blue  
meconopsis

imports and natives  
mish-mashed like us in our adopted  
home.

The other bridge he made upstream  
has washed away this wet winter

left

the handrope stranded from tree to tree  
and nowhere I can cross

Everywhere

his handiwork

each curve his muscles'

bow and flex

his sweat.

Sweet taste of him

How could I leave (him) when he's still here?





# Eugen Bacon

---

## Silver lining

‘LOCHIE? LOCHIE!’ SILENCE. Meredith Piers drops the teabag on the kitchen tabletop, strides to Lochie’s room. A diminutive bump beneath the bedcover betrays her son’s presence.

‘Lochland Andrew Piers, are you dead?’

‘Yes...’ His seven-year-old voice is muffled, full of sleep.

‘We’ll be late for school, darling. You need to wake up. Now, I said NOW.’

‘Are you cross, Mamma?’ Big brown eyes in a chubby face appear from the duvet.

‘Will be if you don’t hurry.’ She ruffles his curly hair. ‘Don’t forget to brush your new teeth – remember what the dentist said? Don’t want those pulled out because they’re rotting.’

‘They won’t rot.’

‘Just go to the bathroom.’

‘O-kay.’

Meredith turns on the kettle. A gentle purr, as water begins to boil. She sits the teabag in her favourite white mug. Lochie gave that to her last Mother’s Day. He got it from the school stall.

She pulls a plastic tin of leftover mash and chicken schnitzel from the fridge. Prises open the container’s lid, drops it in the sink. She puts the tin in the microwave, slams the door shut, presses the *Dish Warmer* button.

The kettle’s hum is louder. Now it begins to shake; will soon turn itself off. The water has boiled. She makes her tea as she likes it – lots of milk, then one minute in the microwave to add heat.

She packs Lochie’s food in the lunchbox, trimly arranging in a separate container an apple, yoghurt (the squeeze-me kind), one fruit bar, one cereal bar and an umbrella lolly. Cherry flavour. He likes that.

‘You coming out of the bathroom, buddy? Lochie! You done in there?’

'I'm done, Mamma.'

'Clothes on now. Quick. '

'Why do you always have to say 'quick'?'

'Cause you need to hurry. Wash sleep from your eyes?'

'Y-yes.'

'Cleaned your teeth the...'

'Way the dentist said, yes!'

'No speaking to me that way, young man.'

'What way?'

'Dress up and have your breakfast.'

'What's for breakfast?'

'You know what's for breakfast.' She nods at the table.

'I don't like baked beans on toast.'

'Since when?' She straightens his shirt collar.

'Aww!'

'Don't be silly, Lochie – that doesn't hurt.' She combs out his hair with her fingers.

'Aww!'

'Stop wriggling, Lochie. I said STOP. That doesn't hurt either.'

'Let me do it to you and see if it doesn't hurt.'

'Don't be silly. I mean it.'

'*You're* being silly.'

She slaps his cheek – not vicious, just enough to silence. He looks at her, bewildered. She has never hit him before. 'When I say stop, I mean stop.'

‘Okay, Mamma. Okay. Why you mad?’

‘I’m not mad. Eat.’ She feels dreadful for smacking him. Watches as he gobbles his toast. He is seeking to please her. He catches her watching him and smiles. His smile is hesitant. It pleads reassurance. She ruffles his soft curls, sweeps him into a swift hug. ‘Love you kiddo.’

‘Love you too, Mamma.’

‘Sorry I was cross before. Things on my mind.’

‘What things?’

‘Come, I’ll race you.’

They run to catch the train.

Lochie is doing a cowboy stride as they approach the school gate. ‘Look, Mamma,’ he says, strutting. He puts a hand to the waistband of his shorts, yanks out an invisible gun. ‘Boom! Boom!’ His other hand cracks an equally invisible whip to the ground. ‘Phew! Phew!’

‘You make a cool Indiana Jones.’

‘I get cranky pants too,’ he says out of the blue.

‘When?’

‘When I’m hungry.’

‘Sure glad you ate your toast.’

A little boy in the schoolyard is bouncing a big red ball on the basketball court. Bounce. Bounce. Bounce. He aims at the net, his arms and body bobbing to a silent countdown: three, two, one. He goes for the shot. Misses.

‘Isn’t that Josh? Go play with him. Watch you ‘til the bell rings, hey Lochie?’

He dumps his school bag at her feet, races off full throttle.

Her reaction with Lochie this morning, when she slapped his face, deeply troubles her. ‘Losing it, gal,’ she chides herself.

\* \* \*

Home. She slips off the crochet wrap top and plaid skirt she wore to drop Lochie, anything to look like a decent mum. She doesn't feel that decent. Not without a job and a padlock on her mood swings, no. She doesn't feel like a good mum.

Meredith climbs into jeans, tosses on a burn-out shirt. Checks her mobile—no text message from Bill.

'Billy-Be-Childish,' she says out loud, laughs to herself. Bill is surplus work. Got so drunk last time they went out, he puked. She held his head as he retched his guts into a sober toilet that gurgled. Gurgle, gurgle. Despite her help, he was yet to aim straight. Showers of orange all over the facility resembled salmon roe. It was a gooey-soaked head that lifted from the bowl.

She checks her email. No news from the job agency on results of the interview with Ingram Insurance. She has gently been probing on email, would like a definite response: Yes or no. Who cares? Darn it, she cares. They would phone, not email, if she got the job. But no one from the agency has phoned since the interview. Aren't there any jobs in Melbourne? Or perhaps the agency has given up on her.

A wave of despondency engulfs her. One hundred and seventy dollars fifty five cents in her bank account. That's what sits between her and poverty. A pile of unpaid bills under the dining table reminds her of her plight. She is juggling payouts to creditors. She was going to hold off paying for Lochie's music class. But last night changed that. When Lochie spoke about his friend Nick who cried, cried, cried all through music class.

'Why did he cry?' she asked.

'Because he couldn't play his guitar.'

'Doesn't he know how to play?'

'Teacher wouldn't let him.'

'But it was music class.'

'His dad was going to pay but he forgot. So teacher said Nick had to leave music class.'

'Did you feel bad for Nick?'

'Maybe.' He returns her gaze. 'Y-yeah.'

And Meredith knew at that point she would pay Lochie's music invoice if it killed her.

\* \* \*

Early afternoon. Bill phones.

‘Hey babes.’

‘Hello you. What’s going on?’

‘Work’s going on.’

‘Dinner?’

‘Got a baby sitter for Lochie Locks?’

‘He hates it when you call him that.’

‘Have you got a sitter?’

‘Can’t afford one. I’ll cook. Come have dinner with us.’

‘Not tonight babes.’

‘Tomorrow night?’

‘Can’t tomorrow.’

‘Any time soon?’

‘Don’t know babes. Maybe Friday. I’ve got this client proposal. Got to finish it and clinch the deal. You know.’

‘Yes,’ she says. But she doesn’t know.

‘I’d better get back to work, babes.’

‘Of course.’

She throws a tie front cardigan over the burn-out shirt, grabs the house keys, goes for a walk. A quiet calm surrounds the botanical gardens. She walks briskly between trees and the shadows their leaves cast. She looks for spots of sun and the feel of its rays on her skin. The sun is coy. Nothing like the blast of Melbourne summer heat that sizzles your skin and warms your bones like an oven. Today’s sun comes and goes. Like an elusive lover.

She sits on a green bench by a pond, watches white swans glide on the murky water. If only her life were half as graceful... Why so full of clouds? The last two weeks have been the worst. After two job interviews with the bank, and seven psychometric tests (seven!), the agency phoned to say it was close. *Close?* she thinks angrily. *Who wants to be runner up in an interview if it doesn't get you the job?*

She talked to Bill about it, asked what he thought about Meredith calling the bank for results of the psychometric tests.

'I wouldn't do that if I were strapped to explosives,' Bill said.

Explosives of a miniature kind and strapped to your gonads, mused Meredith.

The human resources girl at the bank was far more heartening than Bill. She didn't sound like the one at the interview, the one with a face like a horse and hair trapped in a bun. Meredith recalls that woman very clearly, the one who sat at the interview panel like a thoroughbred, pen and paper on hand; the one whose eyes inwardly gazed at the sullen thing inside the woman's own head.

'In the language reasoning test,' the new human resources girl said, 'you scored 37, where the average percentile is 31. Results show that you are a good communicator, articulate and with sound vocabulary.'

'In the numeric reasoning test, you scored 34, where the average percentile is also 31. Results show 100 percent accuracy in the questions you attempted, with strong computational and analytical ability.'

'In the abstract reasoning test, you scored 36, where the average percentile is again 31...'

A strategic thinker, honest and fair, emotionally calm... Overall, thought Meredith, she was perfect for the stupid bank.

\* \* \*

After school. Lochie surges into her arms. He is chatty all the way nonstop.

'Nick says a man in Crichton was eaten by his lizards.'

'My word. And how does Nick know all this?'

'The news said it.'

'Someone is watching the news.'

'The man had hundreds of lizards as pets. Hundreds!'

‘Golly gosh.’

‘Do you know what lizards do, Mamma? They’re like snakes.’

‘They have legs – how are they like snakes?’

‘First they poison you. And when you die or get subconscious...’

‘Unconscious, sweetie.’

‘When you die or get unconscious, they eat you.’

‘Eew.’

‘They ate up all his face, Mamma.’

‘Super eew! But I’ve got a story too. This guy in the US had 56 wild pets.’

‘Wild?’

‘Lions, cougars, pumas... 56, can you believe it? Nuts or what, this guy?’

‘Is he dead like the man with the lizards?’

‘Actually, yes. He died in his house.’

‘Did the animals kill him and eat him up?’

‘Nothing ate him up—a bullet killed him.’

‘The animals didn’t shoot him,’ says Lochie.

‘He put a colt 45 to his head...’ she illustrates with two pointy fingers to Lochie’s temple.  
‘And fired.’

‘Why would anyone do that?’

‘He...’ she stops. Her throat is suddenly tight. ‘Um... well... He owed money.’

‘To a lot of people?’

‘I think... yes.’

\* \* \*

Dinner is chicken schnitzel and mash again. Lochie wolfs it down like a famished animal. They play chess and he whops her – she’s bad at it and he knows. That’s the only thing Meredith is not good at. Well, chess and getting employment.

‘Snooze time, super champ,’ she says.

‘Not yet...’ he grumbles. She tickles his toes.

‘Yes yet... off you go.’

‘Do I have to?’

‘You need the sleep of a thousand men so you can grow.’

‘You’re just making that up, Mamma.’

‘Never. All right, then buster,’ she puts on a sing-song voice. ‘Goodnight!’ She unfolds his hands from her waist.

‘Kiss?’

‘Ab-so-lutely. Love you sweetie.’

‘I love you too, Mamma.’

Despite the lightness of her tone, she is exhausted. It feels like the end of the longest imaginable day. Her head sinks into her hands. It is heavy, as if filled with dark grey clouds cascading and churning and threatening to explode everything about her. How long will her finances stay this rough?

Her phone hums with a text message from Bill: ‘Headache. Shit. I’m fucked. Had a shit-arsed day.’

‘Sorry to hear,’ she texts back. ‘What you doing now?’

He phones. ‘I’m watching a doco on satellite telly.’

‘What’s the documentary about?’

‘Share market stuff. Fuck’s wrong with this remote?’

‘Bill, I don’t know what’s wrong with your remote. I am not there to see what’s wrong with it.’



‘What the hell...?!’

She imagines him planted in front of the television like a vegetable, his coarse hands fluffing about with the television remote. Soon he’ll begin to sprout.

She wonders what she sees in him. At first his rustic charm and quirkiness were cute. Different from the city knob-heads she was dating. Lochie’s father was not her first wretched spell. She’s never been lucky with men.

Bill is saying something on the other end of the line.

‘What was that again, hun?’ she says.

‘Said I can’t do Friday. Frankly, babes, sorry – but I don’t want to do us any more.’

Billy-Be-Childish.

Meredith turns on the laptop, logs into her online university course. The computer hums, freezes twice, and she has to restart it. Her eyes are close to tears as the machine reboots. She can’t afford to replace it.

Back online, she navigates to the higher education bulletin board. She sees the unit convenor’s announcement – results of the last unit are out. She clicks the *My Grades* toolkit and mentally works out her score: 28 out of 30 in coursework, 66.5 out of 70 in the final assignment... She blinks, blinks again and belts out a hoot. 94.5 percent! That's a high distinction. ‘Your contributions were incisive and thoughtful,’ her tutor says in the comments.

‘Tell that to the job market,’ Meredith says wryly.

Lochie’s snoring, more like purrs, in the adjacent room climb and fall like ocean waves. That boy is her steady light, she muses. The silver in her clouds. Suddenly, she feels rejuvenated. Tomorrow. She’ll scrape the last money from her bank account for his music class tomorrow.

Before she logs the computer off, she checks her mailbox. A new email from the job agency titled ‘FW: Your recent application for position of (*Ref. no: 002VWP*)’ has an attachment.

Meredith clicks the email to open it.

# Rachel Bush

---

## The Progressive Reader

In the bus from Stafford Street  
she sits at the back  
away from her mother  
who bought this book,  
at Whitcombe and Tombs.  
She holds this special book,  
though tombs, that has a sad sound.

But p p p for father's pipe and  
s s s that is a snake,  
and a curved oak bedstead.  
with children called Pat and May  
and pale pictures made of tiny dots,  
Still, Father's pipe and  
Run, Pat, run.  
Hop, May, hop.

She explains each picture,  
speaks so passengers  
on this bus will hear her  
and know she can read.  
Run, Pat, run.  
Hop, May, hop.

Pat runs, May hops,  
of course they do,  
as she must too, this girl  
who wants the passengers  
to think that at the back  
of a bus that jolts its way  
through Timaru, she is a reader.

## At her father's house

There was a wind up gramophone.  
Beethoven's fifth symphony  
and the Harry Lime theme.  
In this bach at Pleasant Point  
a needle like a thorn bounced  
over his thick black records.  
They slept in bunks. When the wood  
range singed a wall, it nearly  
burned it and them in their sleep.  
Milk came from his cow.  
The sound of milk hit  
the sides of the bucket.  
She wanted to swim. Her hands  
felt the stones and her legs  
floated, trailed behind her.  
She wanted her mother  
but she was glad each morning  
to be in her father's house  
near the stony shallow river,  
near the cow that gave them milk.

# Sally Houtman

---

## The Tide

It's six a.m. and you're at your desk  
and the hollow rush of the first flight out  
skirts your waking daze and you know  
what this means — that it's leaving time  
for some but not for you, because  
you're anchored here — elbows  
straddling your keyboard as you  
search the night for a helping verb,  
a compass point, a light to circle  
in the dark, and now through the blinds  
the sky splits open, leaking light, leaking  
day, and the forecast calls for rain, but what  
you are thinking, wanting to know, with your  
chin in your hands, half-blind, staring up, is,  
what God would want with so much sky.

..

And it's toast and jam and it's off to school  
and the sky is grey and you scrape each plate  
and consider the cost, the price to pay for  
measuring time in tides and trickling sand  
and you hear the phone and in your head you  
hear his voice and you'd think the sound would  
be a gentle nudge but as you pick it up, you  
brace yourself for the 'here we go again', and  
the toothy-edged awareness comes like  
rusty metal digging flesh and in your mind you  
play the tape of that's not what I said, and that's  
not what I meant, and on the phone you find  
you're dropping commas and rescinding phrases  
and you are scraping the veneer off words  
and still you're not heard and it is then  
you begin stitching meaning into minutes  
because you know the rain is coming  
and when it does there will be no caulk  
to seal this leak, and of this you're sure  
because the weather knows your bones

..

And so you go about your day like nothing's  
wrong and you ignore the check engine light  
and the low-cabin-pressure sign and you ignore  
your brains' static backbeat backward  
masking screaming *Paul is dead* and *Pull up!*  
and *Don't look down!* because you know  
it's no one's fault there was no one there  
to tell you to cross at the lights or come  
in from the rain and he is not the one who  
dropped you in some godforsaken wasteland  
with a toothbrush and a compass and made  
you find your own way home and this is what  
you're thinking as you catch the bus and go  
to work where you sit and issue spoon-dosed  
pleasantries and dodge the spatter-pattern of  
the day's contempt and all the while you cast  
slant glances upward because today the sky—  
a mulish grey—lacks even the decency to rain.

..

And it's home again and it's home from school  
and it's *The Lion King* on DVD and while  
they watch you fold their clothes and realise  
you need to watch it too because  
you are grinding teeth and grinding gears  
and swaying hips and you are trying trying  
*trying* to be anywhere but here and so you hum  
along and tumble in the music's flatted notes  
and falling pitch because if you had your way  
you'd take your heartache honey-glazed  
and when it's done you try to write but  
it's your daughter in the doorway with  
so many needs and your needs, too,  
so strong you can't deny them but yours  
you must keep distant, far upstream  
and out of reach, and when the phone  
rings again you're all excuse me, please  
forgive me, and that's not what I said,  
and that's not what I meant, and you are  
hands that rise and fall to estimate dimension,  
doing clumsy guesswork in the air, and  
to him you are all door and no window and  
you are an obstructed bleacher-seat and  
a half-lit exit sign and all day you've  
held tight to your umbrella but there's  
been not one measly drop of rain.

..

And it's up-up-and-away and here we go  
and that's all folks and up the stairs and  
down the hall and once again you're on  
your own and you twist your mind's dial  
too far left and there's a static awareness  
that's still arriving, just beyond your high-beams  
and it is one part come and find me, three parts  
go away, and with the dark and the quiet  
comes a sharp reversal, a certain something  
that connects like stilettos on a hardwood floor —  
that tomorrow will be the same, that you'll  
still be a losing streak in skin-tight jeans,  
each swerve another stitch pulled free  
and you'll still be good reason gone to ground  
and you'll be repeat steps two and three  
and right then something idling in you guns  
the engine, leans on the horn and a red light  
inside you flashes yellow then turns  
green and what was once a gauzy, mindless  
time-spliced twitter becomes an assassin's  
loaded clip and you are ready as you lie  
on the bed and think of downpours past  
and those to come and there is nothing  
left but to wait for the rain, for the storm  
to bring its heightened waves, and to welcome  
in the tide that will wear all stone to sand.

# Elizabeth Colbert

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## Pistachio crust

It was an unlikely coupling: John, who gripped the neighbour's gatepost as he stretched his quads and June, in her speedy wheelchair, testing the patience of pedestrians.

Many thought it a financial arrangement. Sharing the electricity, water and food bills was advantageous to both. Others hypothesised a shared determination to survive the curved balls life had thrown them.

Between them, there was a single difficulty, Evelyn, June's best friend. John believed the 'turncoat', as he called her, did not wish June well.

'You don't have to ask her to the house, do you? You know how I feel,' he said the day after Evelyn and he met.

Yes, she knew how he felt. How could she forget his attack?

'She's superficial. Always name-dropping and plays the victim. In one breath she tells you she has no money and in the next she's leaving for the States to see her daughter.'

'Give her a break,' June replied. 'I told you, she's struggling. With the decline in retail sales, the income from her two shops has dropped.'

For John, Evelyn represented everything inside the large, Boolean circle he labelled 'duplicitous behaviour', including his past-tense wife, Annabelle. Duplicity was the largest facet of Annabelle's busy psyche which comfortably accommodated her capacity for lying, especially about her off-shore account and the supposedly, post break-up acquisition of her toy-boy. What had she done with the money he had given her for their daughter's education? Was it in the bank account of that body-perfect trainer? Their body language suggested her finely tuned, worked-out body had been in the younger man's hands much longer than the few months she claimed.

Duplicity angered him. Consequently, he was not looking forward to sitting opposite Evelyn at the dining table that night.

June had already set the table. She liked the ‘the triangle’ as she called her seating arrangement. Her wheelchair was easier to manage as she moved between the kitchen and dining table if she sat at its head, placed John on her left and their often single guest on her right. June enforced her independence whenever possible. While John respected this he sometimes wished she would just relinquish her determination and let him serve the meal.

He had walked an extra half hour that morning in an effort to bring his energising and kindly endorphins into play. ‘Bring on the Vitamin D,’ he muttered as he strutted into the sunshine without sunscreen or cap. He stretched, walked the length of the street, crossed the road and entered the park bordered by the river and freeway. It was not hard to visualise the politicians who saw the electoral advantages of relieving traffic congestion, but he found it difficult to imagine their mindset as he strode through the resultant desecration of the riverside parkland. He stifled his anger and marched on, moving to the side as the cycling zealots rang their bells.

Within minutes he had stepped off the path and taken the well-trodden track tracing the edge of the billabong. The long, shaded grass, still wet with dew, flipped on and off his bare calves. He didn’t care. He craved the silence and stillness of the flat expanse of water in which the trees and sky were muddily reflected. The water, although still, was not stagnant. A small trickle edged its way from the river through the man-made cluster of rocks at the head of the billabong. At the far end, the water slid slowly down a sludgy fall of land before dropping back into the river below.

John thought it remarkable that the billabong was at once below and above the river, that the smallness of the flow prevented the water from being toxic. He scanned the surface, looking for the tell-tale bubbles of yabbies, before casting a lingering eye on the trees along its bank. That some branches were alive and others dead disturbed him until he realised their ambivalent, clinging-to-life status was no different to his own.

June, who said little as he explained the extra half hour, was irritated. She tried to deny her reliance on him, but her overly ambitious menu depended on his presence. Why walk an extra half hour, today of all days? She had been forced to pull herself out of the wheelchair in his absence and was now tired. Bloody hip. The pain resulting from the replacement of the faulty joint in her left hip was unbearable when standing. Medication to reduce the pain had resulted in a timeless fog of opiate addiction which had taken months to overcome. The wheelchair provided her with much needed relief and allowed her to use milder painkillers but it was not always a practical solution.

The rush of water in the pipes echoed in the kitchen as John turned on the shower. She should have bought an apple flan for desert. Why was she so stupidly committed to cooking every course? Evelyn, of course. Evelyn always knew the latest food fad and the current destination restaurant. Even now, although June scanned the gourmet cooking magazines at the library, she would never know where to buy pomegranate molasses or be able to discuss the advantages of cooking with verjuice.



In reality, Evelyn wouldn't care. Once, within their friendship there had festered a rivalry that had led June to cooking classes, but it was an obsolete rivalry, one that collapsed when Evelyn discovered her husband exchanging sexy text messages with his PA. Two years later, as Evelyn was discovering the difficulties of life in the solo lane, June was widowed when Luke died of a heart attack as he cycled up the steep, Studley Park hill.

As empty-nesters they found solace in each other's company. Their deep knowledge and acceptance of each other's histories allowed them to discuss anything. When June's second operation left her in pain, Evelyn's regular visits reassured June that she hadn't been abandoned completely. Her support was generous and sensible, unlike that of her children who seemed unable to cope with the double blow of their father's death and the reversal of roles that came with her restricted mobility. Their "we-can-shop-for-you" support was practical but lacking empathy.

Then she met John.

She had joined the local film society – the theatre was wheelchair friendly – and John, as president of the group, had welcomed her. After the film, he had brought her tea and asked, 'Mud cake? I made it myself.'

'Thank you,' she had replied.

He returned with the cake and a chair which he placed in front of her.

'Now, who brings you here?'

'I drive myself. Manual controls and reinforced handles on the door allow me use my car. I can walk. The wheelchair helps solve a pain problem but my legs are weak.'

'Difficult,' he said, 'but I actually meant which director. I'm on the selection committee and we like to please newcomers.'

June was surprised. Few people resisted the temptation to probe the cause of her pain.

'I'm not sure I can name a preferred director. I was hoping you were going to educate me.'

'So what did you think of the film tonight?'

For a brief moment she thought she would be polite, but the politic façade she had once lived behind with Luke had long crumbled.

'Violent and disturbing.'

'Coppola gets under your skin doesn't he? *Apocalypse Now* is one of my favourites. And Brando?'

‘Again, violent and disturbing. I will have to debrief with a fantasy when I go home.’

‘Ha, and I thought this was the most extraordinary fantasy. But fear becomes real when we enter the dark side.’

‘I hadn’t thought of it like that.’

‘When you decide who you like, give me a call,’ he had said, passing her his card.

A year later she was clearing the shelves of her husband’s cycling trophies to make room for his film collection. Wrapping trophies, unwrapping trophies, arranging trophies, it had been an essential part of her relationship with Luke, the part she now rationalized as ‘his interests were important’. As John was arranging his DVDs alphabetically by title on the shelves she felt the slip-stream of *déjà-vu* subsume her. Had she chosen another obsessive? A kinder, but equally obsessive man?

June had decided after their initial meeting not to discuss him with Evelyn. Her feelings were so mixed. The possibility of new relationships was something they had both discarded. The shared experience of seeing their full length reflections in a department store window had been a reality-check for both of them. They had moaned and laughed, ‘Is that really us?’ The over-coffee discussion that followed had been frank and disturbing. Their chances of finding a new partner were statistically small and they had consoled themselves with, why bother?

When she called John to tell him she liked Clint Eastwood films he had asked her out. A feeling of betrayal had niggled over the subsequent weeks but two months later, as she and John were sharing lavender scones on a Mornington Peninsular farm, she acknowledged she was in love and Evelyn would have to be told.

Evelyn was shocked.

‘Don’t you have enough to worry about? You can’t possibly look after him and don’t tell me that you think he’s going to look after you. And what about your family? How many children did you say he has? Doesn’t he have enough to do?’

June had soothed her with, ‘It won’t change our friendship,’ but as she mouthed the words she knew she lied.

John didn’t understand the value she placed on their friendship. John’s dependence on his friend Rob was based in their shared interests. June’s needs had taught her that friends like Evelyn had to be cherished. Although sometimes irritating, she understood that every day had to be planned, that it took twice as long to do anything, that a small excursion to the local shopping centre was no longer a fifteen minute interruption to a busy morning, it was a major event. Her loyalty was invaluable.

A number of June's so-called friends had made it clear that the polished boards of their late-life designer homes could not accommodate her wheelchair. Scratches on polished boards? Out of the question. And there were those who tactlessly teased it was a fraudulent way to acquire the disability sticker she displayed on her windscreen. Knowing they were joking did not stop the hurt. Her remaining friends were very important, regardless of their faults.

June's arguments about loyalty failed to persuade John. She decided to give up explaining why Evelyn was important but she would not betray her by discontinuing their monthly dinners.

'John, you know how important these dinners are to me, don't you?'

'Yes,' he had replied, but his exasperated tone suggested he was annoyed by her emotional plea.

'Then why are you being so obstinate?'

'I don't like her.'

'So, you're telling me that a little discomfort on your part is more important than the huge offence I am going to commit by discontinuing what has become an important part of our friendship. I think you're being a little selfish. It's equivalent to me asking you to give up your monthly viewings at the film society. In fact, that might be a fair exchange, you give them up and I'll give up Evelyn.'

John had walked out. June made herself a cup of tea and waited. After an hour, she made an online cinema booking, rang for a taxi and left a note on the table.

'Cold lamb and chutney in the fridge if you're hungry. Love, June.'

He was at his laptop when she returned.

'I hope you're feeling better,' she said.

'I have a proposition. I will be on my best behaviour once every two months, but I won't linger for coffee when she drops in. I'll retreat to my computer or jog. On the off month, I'll go to a film. There are films you don't want to see, and it's a good excuse given my role in the film society.'

'That's reasonable, but only if you agree not to walk straight out the door when she drops in. A little courtesy of some sort is needed. And don't forget, this coming Saturday you are expected.'

'Okay, okay. I'll make polite conversation and show an interest in whatever she talks about. Trust me.'

Evelyn knew that John didn't like her. She knew he saw through her bragging banter and beyond the material goods that kept her darker days at bay. She found him possessive, pedantic and precious. All the who-did-what detail that he trotted out whenever he discussed a film served what purpose? He wore it like a badge: 'I'm an expert,' it declared.

Occasionally she looked beyond the storyline of a film and thought about the acting. The credits were irrelevant. She knew in her heart her attitude was disrespectful, that film was an art form, but being swept up by the narrative was her way of putting her mind at rest.

She had such a busy mind. Every day, it scampered about looking for distractions — anything to prevent a sinking into her feelings. Even June, who understood her better than most, was unaware of the depths she sank to, those horrid pits where the tentacles of failure pulled her into a relentless morbidity. Her avoidance tactics were many: helping June was one of them. However, John was slowly taking over her role.

The loneliness of her childhood, the long days of watching nothing but the clouds pass over an empty backyard and a timber house haunted by long silences, sombre shadows and the venomous outbursts of her parents resurfaced so quickly. The long, dry grasses of the vacant paddock at the end of the street and a dark copse of pine trees housing a family of magpies had been her haven. In their presence, she could sit and be comforted, her senses soothed by the incessant westerly. In the quietness of her bedroom, she read herself to sleep or listened to the babble of American voices from the television set beyond her bedroom door. They were her lullaby.

After she married, she worked hard to put what she saw as a civilized lifestyle in place: orderly suburban house, impeccable furnishings and a manicured self. She knew she had been captured by these exterior trappings as they wrapped themselves around her life. She was a macadamia if she tilted towards the metaphorical, uncrackable. She wondered whether John was secretly hiding an equally painful kernel of despair.

She was looking forward to seeing June who, she knew, would be fretting in the kitchen. Why did she try so hard to be more than what she was, a good homely cook? Why did she refuse to acknowledge the importance of process? Although she followed the recipe, time after time she floundered.

'The eggs need to be at room temperature if you are making a sponge,' she had told her. 'Whipped peaks are never the same when the eggs are cold.'

'It makes no sense to me,' June had insisted as she took the eggs from the fridge. 'By the time you beat them they must be warm.'

Of course the bloody sponge was heavy. She had given up trying to help, except in an emergency. At least today there had been no last minute call. Ah yes! Her knight was there.

John was standing at the bench stoning the peaches that were to accompany the pistachio-crusting pork. June was seriously chopping at the nuts.

‘What on earth does coarse mean?’ June had asked. ‘Is that pea-sized?’

‘That sounds good to me.’

‘The pieces look smaller in the picture.’

‘Okay, chop it a bit more. It can’t hurt.’

John was a quick learner. His key, internal phrase was ‘neutralize the tension’. His children had always responded to a little acquiescence.

He had been surprised to find himself in love, but she was such a warm person. Generous, too. He hadn’t realised how much he missed having company at night and during the weekend. His daughter and son-in-law often asked him for meals and he babysat, but their basketball, Auskick, birthday-party and dance-lesson lives meant that he was squeezed in rather than courted. His son was working in the United States. Their frequent email exchanges were heart-warming but no substitute for his humorous presence.

June finished the chopping and placed the pistachios into a bowl with the carefully measured breadcrumbs, garlic and mustard powder. The asparagus and peaches were ready. *Woo your guests with the juicy richness of late summer peaches*, was the by-line.

John placed the pork into the oven and lifted down a bowl for the olives. Simple fare — at least in that he had been able to persuade her. He had offered to bring his BBQ to the house. Most people were happy with a simple barbeque. Who had time to cook these days?

‘No. I need to cook. I must exercise.’

He couldn’t argue with that.

‘June, all done?’

‘Yes, thanks.’

‘I’m just going to set up the recording of Scorsese’s *Shutter Island*. I want to watch it again. Is there anything you want recorded?’

‘Nothing tonight. Thanks.’

She appreciated the thought but at the same time was irritated. Film, film, film, and such male films. She couldn’t reconcile her peaceful life with the violence she witnessed daily on the screen, both the real and imagined. Why were so many people killing each other? She didn’t understand the dreadful brutality that men inflicted on women, children and themselves. The continual transgression of humane, ethical boundaries was like an open, infected wound that neither politics, religion or negotiation could heal.

She poured herself a glass of Sauvignon Blanc, lifted herself out of the chair and walked slowly to the bathroom. A little colour on the lips and mascara was needed. She was nervous. The last meal had been awkward, John sharp and pedantic. She hoped he would be more himself tonight.

Evelyn was early. She parked her car a little up the street and listened to the radio until the news finished, a little past the hour. She saw the porch light go on — time to go in. She was anxious about the bottle of wine she had brought. She hoped it wasn't corked. This last of the pre-divorce had been sitting in the rack for ten years. At least in the matter of wine, there had been justice. Mark had claimed every bottle but had acquiesced when she threatened to take him to court. She rang the bell.

'Hello. Welcome,' were John's words as he opened the door. 'And what's this? An aged Coonawarra. That will go well with the pork.'

He was leading her towards the kitchen. 'Just a few last minute things to do while we have a drink,' he said.

Evelyn recognised the magazine on the kitchen bench. 'I loved this edition. Which recipe are you using?'

'The pork with pistachios and peaches.'

'Good luck with it.'

'What do you mean?'

Evelyn knew immediately that she had said the wrong thing. She had tried the recipe out a few weeks ago. The crust had burnt and the peaches had failed to caramelize.

'No, it's fine. I used too hot an oven and burnt the crust.'

John watched June's shoulders lift. Now she would be questioning the heat of the oven.

'I'll keep a close watch on it, Evelyn,' he said, but the word 'turncoat' was in his head. 'Sav blanc? Olive?' He wanted her mouth filled with anything but words.

'John would you lift out the roast for me?'

He put on the oven mitts, opened the oven, drew out the roasting pan and placed it on the bench. June leant on its marbled surface as she spooned the pistachio mixture over the pork and placed the peaches alongside.

'It smells delicious, doesn't it?' said John.

‘Mmm,’ said Evelyn.

‘Mmmmm, it smells delicious or Mmm it doesn’t?’ snapped John, throwing the mitts on the bench.

June mouthed, ‘Stop it.’

‘Stop what? Can’t you see she undermines everything you do? Enough is enough. Just what sort of friend are you Evelyn? Tell me, do you love or hate your friend, June?’

‘I could well ask you the same,’ Evelyn snapped back. ‘What are you John? A user or loser? Just who is getting what out of this relationship? Free board, free rent, and even the use of the bookshelves. Just what are you putting in?’

‘Stop it,’ June yelled. ‘Stop it before you hurt each other. And me.’

‘She’s not your friend, June.’ John was strident. ‘Choose which of us you want, but you can’t have both. It’s Evelyn or me. I’m not going to stand by and watch her demolish you.’

Evelyn was already gathering up her bag. ‘Call me, June, when you’ve sorted him out, preferably out the door’ she said, as she strode down the passage. The slamming of the front door echoed behind her.

John patted the pistachio crust with the back of the ladling spoon. ‘It will taste much better without her,’ he said.

June felt the mental numbness that came with a death sweep over her. She knew this fight was not about her. It was about their baggage.

‘I want you to leave,’ she said. ‘I asked you not to do that.’

‘She’s not your friend.’

‘You’re right, she’s not, but neither are you.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Go back to your own house. I don’t want you here.’

John’s eyes welled. ‘I love you,’ he said.

‘Sort of,’ June said, ‘but I want you to leave. Now.’

She turned her back to him, scraped the pistachios off the pork with a knife and tossed the peaches into the sink. Tomorrow, she would be sad. The pall of single loneliness would linger for days, even weeks. She would shed many tears as she dismantled the changes she had made and, on some days, she would be overwhelmed by the walk from the kitchen to the front door, but she would not call John. Nor Evelyn.

She put on the mitts, pulled down the oven door, placed the pork on the third shelf and set the timer for thirty minutes. There were two Granny Smith apples in the fruit bowl. Perfect. She had always preferred pork with a tangy apple sauce.



# Bonnie Etherington

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## Cone gathering

Two weeks and one day after you had the accident I took Zara to gather pinecones for Christmas on Rabbit Island. Just like we planned, just like I wrote in purple felt-tip on the calendar you got free from work and stuck with alphabet and auto shop magnets to the fridge. You remember how Zara talked about spray-painting the cones (gold, silver, hot pink, iced metallic blue) and stringing them up above the fireplace? We agreed out of guilt even though Christmas was still two months away and we didn't know any other occasion for spray-painted pinecones.

The plan was that on this day we would tell her about the divorce (“separation” in your mouth, but I knew better). We were going to tell her together, while we were out, while we didn't have the walls of our house silently looking on and condemning us (family photos in the hallway and all). We hoped that the wide spaces on this island, which isn't really an island half the time when the tide comes in, would somehow make the words coming out of our mouths float easier, more gently.

I was sitting in the sun on the front steps of the shed, the one which has been used for a multitude of my failed artistic efforts, when you brought the subject up. I fell in love with you in the first place for making fun of me for embracing that artsy-fartsy Nelson cliché which always involves a beach, flowing skirts, wind chimes made out of recycled car parts and cutlery, ceramics in primary colours. You used to accuse me of only being this way to spite my parents and challenge some out-dated Asian immigrant stereotype. What I call “my pottery shed” is really just a corner of the garage, after all. Just a space for procrastinating on Saturdays.

‘How's it coming?’ you asked, and sat down beside me, moving my skirt out of the way. I still wore those skirts in defiance of your laughs. I liked that you noticed them.

‘Oh, you know. About the same.’ I handed you my latest creation to look over. It was a bowl, but the lip had bent and curved in a way I couldn't pretend was artistic or even ironic. ‘At least I can always say I gave it a go.’

‘You'll get there,’ you said. But you said it like an automatic recording. Your shirt was untucked, eyes bright. You made as if to brush a stray hair from out of my face but then drew back. Then you talked. I listened.

A research position had opened up. One you'd been waiting for since you graduated university, really. Assessing the tsunami risk in certain regions of Thailand and Sri Lanka. You'd be paid a lot. You would send money back for Zara, for me. But you might only come back once a year, if that.

'What do you think?' you said, but you weren't really asking if I wanted you to go or not. You flexed your hands behind your head as you told me about the project and I realised your mind was already made up, had already been made up for a while or more, and all you were really asking for was my blessing. You knew you would go, and I wouldn't go with you, and you knew I knew this too. You painted pictures for me of white sand and broken coral. Palm trees and sweat. When you finished, you leant back against the doorframe and looked out into our unweeded garden.

'Once you know the tsunami risk, how do you tell them?' I asked. 'If people are doomed but they don't yet know it, do you tell them and ruin their chance at happiness?'

'It's called responsibility,' you said.

It's called torture, I could have replied. You went inside and put the kettle on for tea.

Oh, we discussed it all so logically, you and I. Lists of pros and cons, financials, child custody. We prided ourselves on being so unemotional, not like those couples whose divorces go down in screaming, ragged history. Ours was going to be clean. Bare. Tear-free. It wasn't like we hadn't seen it coming (we could imagine our friends and mothers telling us later).

It, the end of us that is, didn't begin that day on the steps, but you know that. It might have begun when we started being ashamed naked in front of each other. We used to spend whole days in nothing but our skins, early on. Not just because of the usual reasons of youth and lust, either. I liked to think it was because we had no barriers, nothing but air between us. Of course, I know how melodramatic that sounds now and melodrama is never sexy, no matter what the characters on daytime TV seem to think.

We met at a work conference. Our sector was the environment, if that means anything, which it really doesn't except that we got to take our conferences up at Lake Taupo where the sound of waves on the shore and sighting shags was supposed to bring an air of authenticity to the whole thing. Those sorts of conferences always involve a certain amount of free alcohol which is why anyone even turns up and you and I were not the exception (then, or now, or ever. Don't they say that more than a quarter of marriages end in divorce these days?). Of course we had to end up on some dock one night, daring each other to dip our toes (and more) into the dark water.

I was just getting out of a dud relationship as every woman in their late twenties I knew seemed to be doing, and I stripped naked in front of you in defiance, knowing that I had let body hair grow wild in rebellion and daring you to take a good look. Ten seconds later we were both in the lake, and water never felt so good against bare skin.

I apologise. Melodrama or perhaps sentimentality is creeping its way in again.

It could have been Zara's first birthday when it began, too. The beginning of less touching, less words. Over five years ago now. She wore a white dress with a collar that your mother crocheted. Patent red Mary-janes, ribbons in her curls. Our postcard child, the one we could drape with all our ideas of children from storybooks and smiling white-teethed families on the walls of doctors' offices. Now I remember how she cried and didn't want to wear the dress, how we fought in the kitchen over something my mother said to you. I can't even remember what she said.

But who cares how it began, now. Now when your funeral was last week, and your father and I stared at the urn afterwards, not sure who should take it home.

If it matters to you, you're currently stowed in the hall cupboard.

It isn't like we really fought, like anyone cheated or went to prison. Now that would be a reason for divorce that sounded good on paper. But not this, not when there's no reason at all for the breaking of a marriage except dead-heat stubbornness, and when shreds of love are still there but different. But we always understood that in relationships there are these things called deal breakers and when we came across one, or two or more, that breaking is what we are supposed to do. And I just assumed that the new job must be our deal breaker. Would you have told me I was wrong?

Charlotte, the old lady down the street who you said was stealing our mail, told me that the first time washing the bed sheets is the worst time for a spouse who is grieving because it erases all the smell of the body that once lay there. I felt guilty when she told me this because I don't know how much sorrow or condolences I am entitled to. Do I still count as a real widow? Or did our words change everything? I don't know how to grieve this way. It doesn't fit the images of weeping wives in black and Miss Havishams: the only categories I have for women who lose their men.

'I'm so sorry to hear he's passed on,' is what Charlotte said when she first approached me after the funeral. "Passed" is such a strange way to put it, isn't it? Passed like a petrol station on a highway, like a kidney stone, like a difficult exam, like a new law.

For what it's worth, yes, I checked the mail after Charlotte left.

When we went cone gathering, I was supposed to be walking through the trees as an almost-divorcee. But instead I wandered with the name "widow" sitting like a self-conscious monkey on my shoulders. Maybe this is your revenge for some hazy thing I did in the past. If so, I have to admit it's funny in an awful twisted way.

Zara ran ahead of me to find the pinecones, already the blessed forgetfulness of youth claiming her grief in fragments. Or maybe that's just how I hope it is for her.

I could also blame that cat with the munted foot. Neither of us can make that incident go away. We found it in the backyard, coughing up a chicken bone it stole from the rubbish. Somewhere it must have caught its foot in a trap, door, or a sadistic teenager's weapon, and all that was left was the bones of the paw clenched under a furry stump.

'She's wonderful,' Zara said, having recently learned the word in the context of my 'Wonderful! Just wonderful!' when my laptop crashed one morning. "She" was a he anyway.

It was my fault that the door was left open, but it was yours for not noticing the cat behind the car's back tire before you reversed out of the garage. I wonder how many cats are killed by reversing cars in driveways. It must be a big number, as it stands as the current cliché way for a cat to die these days.

We lied to Zara about it. 'We couldn't keep her,' you said.

'There was another girl looking for her,' I added. Who knew that guilt and shared lies could divide two people so well? Neither of us admitted that we were glad the cat was gone because its foot scraping along the floorboards crept us out at night.

'She's coming to get you,' you teased me in the dark as we lay awake.

'She's a he,' I said.

We gathered cones until dusk and then drove the long way home. The darkness smelled like stale chips and the mint gum I kept in my cup holder for Zara's motion sickness. There is a strangeness about driving at night. In between towns, I mean. The night distorts things. There we are, trapped under a darkened glass, looking at a world magnified ten times or more. The lights from scattered farmhouses were remote, isolated, self-absorbed. There was a large full moon, bloated and silver. 'Eye of a werewolf,' said Zara, and then was quiet again. I tried to remember if we had ever read anything about werewolves to her.

'Look behind,' I told her, as we passed through yet another town, the kind that dads are meant to say "blink and you'll miss it" about. Behind us the sky was lit up by the town lights, combining to build one lone column to the sky.

'See that,' I said. 'You don't notice the effect driving forward because the headlights are too bright.'

'Shut up Mum,' said Zara.

Now that you're gone, one memory does stand out the most, but it's not one you might have guessed. I remember all that trouble I had with Zara when I tried to breastfeed her as a baby. She didn't latch properly because of a problem with her tongue, but at the time we didn't know that. I powered through, thinking the pain I felt was normal, and the bloody nipples would get calloused and heal. I got up every two hours at night and fed her in the lounge, so as not to wake you up as I cried. Sometimes I think Zara ingested as much salt water as milk in those days.

It isn't logical, I remember thinking, as I looked down at that baby. To feel this kind of love for something that hurts you so bad. But I did, and I do. And then one night, there I am feeding and crying, and I look up and realise you've been sitting in the doorway, watching, and you look as though you just want to reach forward and take the baby but that might just make it worse. It's that memory, of you in the doorway, that I see the most these days.

When we got home, after cone gathering, it was raining. Zara wanted to paint the cones straight away, but I told her we had to wait. Ten minutes later I looked up to see that she had found the cans of spray-paint somehow, lined up all the pinecones in the driveway, and grabbed a butter knife to try and lever off the top of a paint can that seemed to have stuck.

'Sweetie,' I said through the window. 'Let's do it later. After the rain. Otherwise the paint will get washed away.'

She's obviously your child, because she ignored me and kept banging away at that paint lid. I went out and stood on the steps. 'This just isn't practical, honey.'

'I want to paint,' said Zara. She got the lid off of the one stubborn can, shook all the cans like she's seen me do when attempting to spray-paint a canvas or a failed pot until it seems passable. It looks so much easier on TV. The rain poured harder. Zara sprayed. One gold, one pink, one blue. And repeat. The paint started to bleed down the driveway. I wondered, vaguely, if it might come out of her clothes with bleach.

'See,' I said. 'It's just washing away.'

'Who cares,' said Zara, and she sprayed some more.

I stepped into the rain, was all ready to take those paint cans away and send her to the bathroom for a hot shower. But, before I could, she handed me a can and pointed me towards a cone.

'Start there,' she said. And I did. The paint ran down our driveway until the leaves in the gutter looked like Christmas and New Year and bad birthday party decorations.

When we were done, Zara's hair stuck to her neck like it did when she was a baby and you bathed her in the sink. Her nose was pink, and for a minute I saw you again, watching me through a doorway and feeling with me. Which is ridiculous, I know, but let me have this one indulgence.

We picked the cones up, stained our hands so they were metallic for days, and left our creations to dry on the porch. 'Good job,' said Zara. I put on the kettle for tea.

This morning I saw Charlotte walking her dog and coming suspiciously close to our mailbox. She waved. If it matters to you, I still haven't got around to washing our sheets and I don't know when I will.

# Cliff Fell

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## The Watcher

Two days ago a flare of lightning on my retina.  
Then three pillars of rain walking over the sea.

Yesterday I took the steep path up from the beach.  
The sun was just beginning to rise.  
The little white houses were on fire with it,  
but from a distance the waves seemed about to pull them down.

I watched a sunbeam flicker on a workingman's shirt.  
His feet were dragging through the mud as he went to clang a bell.  
And I thought: this is how it is  
to watch another man's struggle.

Once upon a time I fell in love with a black-backed gull.  
There is no handrail to the stars  
is all she could tell me. Lately, though, at night,  
she soars from way up high deep into my dreams.  
But never can I see where the flight is taking her.

# Maggie Butt

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## Today I didn't see the giant Buddha

The time was late, the tide was wrong, the date was inauspicious; I had on the wrong shoes, the wrong head, I hadn't washed my hair; I was too occupied, preoccupied, I hadn't prepared properly, studied the guide book, the weather report, the tide tables and so I missed the choppy ferry ride between container ships lying off-shore like floating towns behind jutting green islands; I missed an English lighthouse on a sugar-loaf rock in the South China Sea, small boats steaming every which way leaving the purposeful dashes of their foamy wakes, clouds tall as sky-scrapers, the spittle flecks of breaking waves; I missed the long climb up 298 steps in air so humid I could drink it, drenching hair and running rivulets down the small of my back, air hot enough to warm me at next winter's bus stop; I missed the stalls selling bright silk purses, shirts, pyjamas, table runners, golden waving cats, jade dragons, laughing Buddhas, joss sticks, sunglasses; I missed the shaved-head monks and nuns in saffron and mustard, the tiny prayer bells catching a thin breeze lifting from the sea; I missed raising my eyes, squinting against the sun, to the massive bronze feet and thighs, the folds of coppery cloth, and far above, his face and curling hair; missed wondering how heavy how fired how poured how raised how smoothed how venerated; missed turning back down the steps into the noisy world, knowing I had seen the tallest seated Buddha on the planet.



# Vicky Grut

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## Mistaken

Arlene pushed through the doors of the big central London department store and into the blaze of light that was Cosmetics. She was looking for a birthday present for her sister Dionne, but it was hard to concentrate. Her mind was on the speech the Dean had made earlier that week: *Changing demographics; Economic downturn; 80% cuts in teaching budgets; 100% cuts to Humanities' research. This department is going to have to innovate in order to survive.* That was the gist of his end of term message: *Innovate or...*

Arlene brushed past a girl in a lab coat who was rolling her hands in a bowl of what looked like glycerine flecked with gold. Two middle-aged women stood listening humbly to her sales chatter.

*Arts courses at Tower Bridge are haemorrhaging students in the second and third years, the Dean had said. You have an opportunity to re-invent yourselves with the current curriculum review. I have every confidence... you're intelligent, creative people...* He'd left that one hanging. The Dean was a smooth man.

Arlene stepped onto the escalator, rising up into Handbags and Accessories, cursing herself. She should have seen this coming. Why had she not been more proactive? Why had she not sent her CV around to other places? Kept a sharper eye on the jobs pages? She'd been teaching a couple of critical studies courses in the Fine Art department for the past year, and generally running about doing unpaid dogsbodying jobs in the hope of something more permanent cropping up. And now look.

Hamish, her Head of Department, had called her in for a meeting which began: 'In the current climate...'. And then he'd said a lot of other things such as: '...shared modules ...cross-funding... inter-departmental collaborations... focus on recruitment and retention...' – tugging miserably at the diamond stud in his ear.

She had a contract for 96 hours a semester. They couldn't take that away from her. But he'd made it clear that she would have to be 'super' flexible about class sizes, and: 'Perhaps we need a fresh approach? Courses our competitors haven't thought of yet. Modules we can flog to Film Studies as well as Art and Design? Titles with a bit of a buzz. Something to do with "Digital"? Or *Popular*?' She knew what he wanted. Something slick and glib and entertaining: 'The Aesthetics of Gangsta Rap', 'The Semiotics of Necklines in Vampire Movies', something to keep the numbers up: bums on seats. Damn, damn, damn. She didn't even want to think about it.

Arene paused to finger a pretty, silver party dress in *Womenswear*. The luminous ice-blue colour - or perhaps the ragged hemline - set off vaguely pleasurable associations. It was the colour, she decided. It made her think of the waves in Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. She'd been obsessed with the painting as a teenager. She used to lie on her bed, staring at the colour plate of it in her 'Dictionary of Art' – the mannered drama, that wild and empty sea, and the black man topping the pyramid of bodies with his back to the viewer, waving at some invisible rescuer on the skyline. The thought of it took her back to the feel of being fifteen, stuck in the suburbs and dreaming of the life she was going to lead as soon as she was allowed out after 9pm.

Arlene ran her palm over the fabric of the dress. Shipwreck chic: you had to be young to carry it off. Well, she wasn't *old*. Her spirits lifted. *Innovate, Arlene. Be creative!* She forgot all about Dionne's present. She dropped her bag and coat in a quiet corner, stepped up to the mirror with the dress held under her chin. She squinted. Hmm, no: too tinselly. She put it back and picked out another style. Too badly made. She skimmed through the other dresses on the rail, vaguely aware of a noise at the edge of her attention, a voice calling, 'Excuse me! EXCUSE me!'

Arlene thought of Hamish again. She couldn't really blame him. He had people digging pins into him from above. The choice was clear. If she wanted to keep her teaching she must cobble together some crowd-pleasing up-to-the-minute-sounding outlines that could be shared with other courses. Oh it stuck in her craw to do it. But the alternative was probably unemployment, which her mother had been expecting for years. ('Critical Studies? What in Heaven's name is that, Arlene? Why not Business? Why not Marketing? Or Finance, like Dionne?') Arlene flicked more roughly through the ranks of cloth.

'Hul-LO!' The voice was getting louder and more furious, 'EXCU-USE ME!!!'

Arlene had to turn. A smartly dressed woman and a girl of about twelve stood at one of the unattended cash desks. 'We'd like to PAY for this, IF you don't mind!'

For a brief out-of-body moment Arlene saw herself as she must appear to this woman: a thirty-something black woman rearranging the stock. Staff. Help. Service. (*You have an opportunity to re-invent yourself, Arlene ...*)

'...IF that's not too much trouble for you...' the woman hissed.

Arlene blinked. How swiftly a woman like this could strip her of all her accomplishments: her grade 5 piano (with Distinction), her ballet lessons, her carefully modulated accent, her fistful of A\* grades, her First, her doctorate – gone, all gone in an instant.

She opened her mouth to speak. ‘But I’m...’ But what? What could she say? She wasn’t a Professor, or a Reader, or a Head or a Chair. She wasn’t a mother or a wife, nor even properly the author of much, not recently anyway. A great fury rose within her like an underwater wave. She felt herself being lifted up, like a toy on the lip of a tsunami, and moved over to where the woman stood. She took the skimpy top they wanted, flipped it, folded it, slipped it into a bag from the pile under the counter.

‘And how would you like to pay, madam?’

The woman handed over a card. It was all so easy. It flowed.

‘Just a moment,’ Arlene murmured. ‘I need to check something. Won’t keep you...’

Before the woman could object Arlene walked over to the lifts. One opened as if by magic as she approached. She held the card between thumb and forefinger like an after-dinner mint, stepped inside, turned and blew the pair of them a little kiss. She saw the woman’s face: blank at first, confused, beginning to curdle into a snarl of outrage as it dawned on her that something was going wrong. Then the doors closed and Arlene was whisked off to the floor above, laughing.

\* \* \*

‘Can I help you?’ A young shop assistant peered in at her through the curtains of the changing cubicle.

Arlene wasn’t laughing any more. (O, why had she let the lift carry her up instead of down?) Even the six items she’d wrenched from the rail outside didn’t justify the time she’d been lurking in here. ‘Help? Yes. Could you ...er... get me all of these in a larger size, please?’

The girl took the jumble of clothing. ‘Yes. OK.’ She glanced thoughtfully at the labels. ‘If there is something else you need, you can tell me,’ she said. ‘Is OK.’ She was a pale blonde girl, very slim and upright; eastern European, judging by the accent.

Arlene had experienced some unpleasant casual racism from girls like this in the past and she was tempted to say something snappish and haughty, but they were interrupted by a loud crackling from a walkie-talkie somewhere outside the cubicles and a man’s voice calling, ‘Hullo? Hullo? Who’s in charge here...?’

The girl disappeared.

Arlene slumped back down on the bench. The place was crawling with in-store security. The card itself would be discovered sooner or later on the unattended cash-desk where she'd dropped it. But they'd probably snagged an image of her before that on CCTV. It was only a matter of time before they tracked her down, and then what was she going to say? I took it by mistake? I mis-took it? I was mistaken? No, no! *She* was mistaken? She took me for a shopgirl so I took her for a ride? How could she have been so stupid – to risk so much for a moment's giddy satisfaction. Dionne would never have got herself into a situation like this.

The girl returned. 'A woman has stolen a cheque card,' she said. 'They think she is still somewhere in the building.'

Arlene set her jaw and glared out into the middle distance. Potentially catastrophic as this was she couldn't bring herself to grovel. In her mind she was like Gericault's man-on-the-raft, her back turned on the viewer, waving, waving at the horizon.

'They wanted to come to search in here, but I said I did not see... anyone like they described.'

'Meaning what exactly?'

The girl just looked at her.

Arlene sighed. 'OK. OK. Whatever you suggest.'

'Right now they are watching all exits, but I can take you to a place where you can wait until it is safer. I know how to walk so that the cameras do not see. I can walk through whole shop and not be seen. I can show you.'

'Why would you do that? You don't even know me.'

'You want that I help you?' said the girl. 'For me is all the same.'

\* \* \*

Time passed slowly in the stockroom. Arlene sat on a pile of boxes right at the very back where, as the girl had said, no one came. Ship-wrecked. Shop-wrecked. She closed her eyes, and gradually the distant sound of voices, footsteps, tannoy announcements began to blur into one, big, muted oceanic roar. Like a song, she thought – the music of commerce, a tune she'd always taken some trouble not to sing along to, but now look. Supply and demand: you want, I give. You pay, I teach. What else had she been expecting?

She closed her eyes, hands folded in her lap, gave herself up to the faraway fluttering noises of the shop. Footsteps. Voices. Rustling bags. The tinny ping of the lifts around some distant corner. She thought about Hamish in his vintage Malcolm McLaren bondage trousers and the Dean in his businessman's suit. She thought about their 'direct competitors', and all the rest of the people working in post-'92 universities, and beyond that the Redbrick and the Plate glass universities and the Russell group. She saw all of them as figures in Gericault's tableau: cast adrift by an incompetent Royalist captain, struggling and elbowing one another to get to the safest point at the centre, tearing into the flesh of the dead to survive.

Funny that after all this time she should be thinking about Gericault again. She could imagine Hamish's expression of distaste – 19th century realist painting? Romanticism? Ugh.

But perhaps she could write a little piece about it: the significance of that black man at the apex of the pyramid; painting as reportage; voyeurism. She saw it all falling into place. She got to her feet in a confused rush of feeling, then remembered where she was. No point in running out and getting arrested.

\* \* \*

At around six the blonde girl returned and stood beckoning her from the far side of the stockroom. 'Pssst! Now is good. They have much trouble with teenagers in Phones and Hi-fi. Everyone very busy.'

Somehow she had managed to find Arlene's coat and bag. She stifled all expressions of gratitude with a brusque: 'It was where you said. Put it on. They are not looking for a woman in coat.'

They cut through the middle of Home Furnishings – 'Walk exactly behind me and we will not be seen' – circumnavigated Fitness and Camping, slid along the very edge of Haberdashery and out through the doors marked EXIT to the echoing back staircase. No one gave them a second glance.

On the last step of the last flight, when the doors to the street were in sight, the blonde girl paused and touched Arlene on the arm. 'Put your collar up. Like so. Go through the door and turn right. Do not stop walking until you are away from here and you will be OK. '

'You've been so very kind,' Arlene said. 'I still don't really understand why, but...'

'You are like my sister,' the girl said simply.

Arlene smiled. Sisters under the skin. All God's children. We all bleed the same colour blood, etc. Ten years ago when she still had a poster of Angela Davis above her desk a simple-minded statement like this would have driven her wild, but now she only murmured, 'That's sweet of you.'

'My sister, too, is a Klepto,' the girl said. 'I understand. Is disease, not crime.'

Arlene felt the blood rush to her cheeks. ‘No,’ she stammered. ‘You don’t understand...’

But the girl had already turned and begun the long climb back to *Womenswear*.

Arlene stood watching the place where the girl had been. Oh. She breathed a long sigh. She was mistaken. We were mistaken. They are mistaken. We are drifting, all of us. Oh. And then she let it go and laughed, and turned her back on the shop and began to walk, and soon she too was gone from there, lost in the flow of shoppers, waving, waving at the horizon.

# Susan Bradley Smith

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## Saturday Fuck Off Tanka Cycle (at the VCE English Language exam prep seminar)

### 1. Slow down bitch! You! Prepping my boys!

Stop alarming the  
children with how much you know  
and your poor choice of  
dress and making us think an  
ATAR of 100 rocks.

### 2. Fanatic

She talks too fast as  
though her climax is like  
the horizon, always  
disappearing, forever  
beyond the pure breath: breathe.

### 3. Gay Gay Gay

If I neutralize  
you, post modify you, you  
perfect word of the  
world, will you spell yourself with  
a new alphabet called crush?

### 4. Engage (Elsewhere)

This is so mint, so  
not munt, so please don't shoot me  
for my complex, sewn  
lexemes, the posh puke of me,  
my prestige highway to you.

### 5. Unconcentrating (bored)

I love Melbourne and  
I love London and I kissed  
that man and I kiss  
this: all the while I am a  
petal short of a flower.

# Vivien Jones

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## At the Stewartry Museum *(Kirkcudbright)*

In my Junior class  
we had a box of shapes  
to fondle, name and remember.  
Square, rectangle, circle,  
triangle and polygon.

Only later, in Geometry,  
did I encounter the crescent,  
a pair of arcs, Ludo discs,  
one hiding behind the other,  
best seen in old and new moons.

In the glass case, a bronze circlet  
hangs like the moon.  
Someone, some quiet craftsman,  
in a place without battles  
has taken days to scribe spirals.

Some trader has travelled north,  
thrilled the nine tribes with  
metalwork; swords and circlets.  
A Celtic warrior, looking to mate,  
has fondled the bronze and bought

it for the woman in his chariot.  
He rings her neck with bronze,  
she traces the curve to the break,  
feeling the space at her nape,  
not quite a ring, not yet a shackle.



## Carrifran Wildwood

So this is how it was.

*Beyond this point* the notice says

*Tread softly* as the planters did.

The fence is high, high up the  
valley sides, no sheep or goat  
can graze the young trees,  
as once they finally did.

The flutter of young birch,  
the fullness of young hazel,  
the low U-form of myrtle,  
fragrant in the hand,  
orange clusters of rowan berries  
dipping in the breeze,  
speak of the 100 year future.

6000 years, pressed  
in a coat of peat, disgorges  
a bow, a hunter's joy,  
yew from Rotten Bottom,  
was it deer, wolf or bear  
he stalked in the dusk,  
his knees brushing bracken?

Tracks run two ways,  
from the road to the valley head,  
one road to and fro, possible to trace.  
But the track through time,  
that's another matter -  
we're making a museum of land,  
no life sustains it now.

## Dad the Carpenter

One long Saturday I watched him  
all day making a box; he said I could  
if I didn't stand on top of him,  
if I didn't ask questions all the time.  
That was hard; I wanted to know  
why he pinned and glued it shut.  
What use was a *sealed* box, I nearly asked.  
Then he took down his best saw,  
drew a line two thirds down, and cut,  
and there was a box and lid, perfect.

With the *don't touch* chisels he fitted  
the black hinges, whistling, focussed,  
blind to me; I saw the tiny screws grip,  
he opened and shut it, added a tiny hasp.  
I dreamed a special present.  
Before lunch, he cut a square out of the lid,  
took metal mesh from a paper bag, trimmed it,  
pinned it, covered the hole from the inside.  
'Breathing space,' was all he said all morning.

Lunch was oxtail soup and rolls – too hot –  
too long - shared with my dancing sister.

I stroked the box's wood-grain sheen.  
From the shelf he took a paint-pot,  
a pinny, rough gloves, turpentine from a flask,  
a paint brush with splayed bristles.  
The paint was thick, black, tarry,  
the wood grain soon obliterated,  
the now black box upheld on nail legs to dry.  
I sighed - no dreamed-of present then -  
'For my maggots' he said.  
Carpenter today, fisherman tomorrow.

# Emily Larkin

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## Options

A girl pored over magazines of university courses, spread across her purple-quilted bed, and tracked her finger down a column. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement and nervous energy.

*This is it, she thought. Only a few more months, and school will be finished forever.*

Only a few more months, and she would be starting a new life, in an adult world with adult choices. At university, teachers were not “Misses” and “Misters”; they were “Pauls” and “Davids” and “Michelles”. She laughed at the thought of being on such a casual, equal standing with one’s mentors.

At university, there were no bells to mark the passing time, or detentions, or threats of letters sent home. Not that she had much experience with detentions anyway, but the accountability and freedom university promised made her giddy.

A row of boxes lay stacked against her cupboard, but there was no need to unpack just that moment. Flopping onto her pillow, sun-splashed from the open window, she looked at her options again.

\* \* \*

In the shadows of a garage converted into a bedroom, a boy pressed his knuckles against his eyes and weighed his options.

1. **Pills**
2. **Razor**
3. **Train**

Here was the problem: there were problems with each of them. Take option one for example: he *could* overdose and slip away, barely noticing it, without feeling pain, but there was also the possibility that the drugs didn’t work. He could end up a vegetable. Some gook with IVs coming out from everywhere, who couldn’t remember how to spell his name. He shuddered. He’d seen what drugs could do to you on medical shows, if they didn’t kill you properly.

Option two was equally flawed. He would never admit it to anyone, but he was terrified of needles. If he couldn’t stand a tetanus shot, how was he supposed to...?

Option three. He doubted he could do it. Watching the crushing steel, and then going to meet it, was too hard. No, he couldn’t do it.

His alarm went off, and he smashed his palm against it, sending it bouncing to the floor. He didn't need an alarm; he'd never been to sleep. Slowly, rubbing his head, he pushed himself off his bed, stood on the cold cement, and began dressing for school.

He walked down the road to the bus-stop, iPod cords dangling from his ears, in time to the song's drum-beat. He boarded the bus, found a window-seat, leant against the glass, and then found himself in front of the school. No one had said a word to him during the bus-ride.

He stepped off the bus and walked to his first class. Pushing the door open, he managed to scan the rows for an empty seat without making eye contact with anyone. There were two spare desks at the back right-hand corner, but he wouldn't sit there. That had been *their* corner; the place they could scribble notes and hold hands without anyone seeing.

There was a seat next to the new girl. Her name was something like Millie or Tilly. Whatever it was, it didn't matter.

He dumped his bag on the seat.

'Hey,' she said, and there was more exuberance in that syllable than he felt in his entire being. 'I'm Lily.'

He simply nodded, having learnt that most people left him alone if he didn't talk to them.

'And you're Patrick, right?'

Patrick wanted to ignore her, but her eyes were drilling into his head, so he nodded again.

'And what do you like to be called?'

He turned to her, confused. 'What?'

'Patrick, or Pat, or Paddy, or maybe your last name, like you're a rugby player?'

'Oh,' he said dully.

'So,' Lily said, smiling, 'which one is it?'

'Patrick works fine.' *Patty* made him sound like an Irish grandmother.

'Okay, Patrick. What's Miss Bradley like?'

He looked at her blankly.

'Is she good? Boring? A grammar Nazi? Makes you wanna slit your wrists?'

Patrick blinked. ‘She’s...just an English teacher.’ He glanced at the clock on the wall. ‘And she’s late.’

‘I had this teacher in Brookeville called Mrs Early. She was *always* late. Kinda ironic, huh?’

‘Sure.’

‘You’re probably wondering why I moved here –’

‘Not really.’

‘– well, you see, my papa got this new job. Well, actually, he was fired from his old job, for something that wasn’t even his fault, and then he looked for a new place to work for a while, and tried out this lawn-mowing business, but that didn’t work out, so now we’re here. He’s working at the appliance shop on Major Street.’

Patrick opened his textbook and pretended to look something up in the index.

‘Oh, is that the book we’re supposed to have?’ Lily dug a heavy book out of her backpack and slapped it on her desk. ‘This’s the one I’ve got. Oh, look, yeah, I got the wrong edition. Whoops.’

Patrick would never have sat there if he’d known the new girl had no “off” switch. Glancing at the back right-hand corner, he wondered if he should get up and sit there after all. No, he decided. It wouldn’t feel right.

‘Can I see your diary? I wanna see if I got the right one of those.’

He rifled through his bag, pulled it out and handed it to Lily, hoping it would shut her up.

‘Oh, good, mine’s the same.’ She flicked through it. ‘*Whoa*, that’s a lotta homework! If I had that much I might have to...’ Grinning, she left her sentence hanging, pointed her fingers into a gun and aimed it at her head.

Patrick blinked again. No one else would have said the same things to him. Kayla’s friends had yelled at her in the locker room, for talking about putting her dog down in his hearing. Patrick knew Mr Michaels had asked everyone to be sensitive.

In a way, it made him feel emptier. It was like Patrick was the only one who remembered.

‘You’re really quiet,’ Lily remarked. ‘I like that. I bet you’re one of those people that everyone listens to, when you do say something.’

‘No,’ Patrick said. ‘I’m one of those people who eventually says something, and no one hears it.’

Lily considered him. ‘I will hear it,’ she said firmly.

‘You talk too much.’

She laughed. ‘Yeah, everyone says that. Okay, listen, we’ll make a deal. I promise to hear what you say, if you promise to hear *some* of what I say.’ Her eyes crinkled. ‘I don’t expect you to listen to *all* of it.’

He shrugged. ‘Okay.’

She smiled again, and that smile on her face – pure and warm and glowing – was untainted by the shadows fixed on his own. She began to talk about the future, about university courses, going to the beach on weekends, eating gelato in the park, and learning things worth knowing. She talked, on and on, about an option he had given up considering.

#### **4. Life**

‘Do you wanna come over my place sometime?’ Lily asked in a whisper, as Miss Bradley walked in. ‘There are still boxes, like, everywhere, but it’s a nice place – and we have a pool! It’ll be fun!’

He felt mildly stunned. No one invited him to do anything. *Fun* was a foreign concept. Looking at Lily’s eager expression, a smile crept uncertainly over his face.

‘Maybe sometime.’

‘Great!’

As the bell rang, Patrick and Lily walked out of the room together. Patrick pulled his iPod out of his trouser pocket, and slipped the miniature speakers into his ears.

‘I’ve got Music now; what’ve you got?’ she asked.

He glanced at his timetable. ‘Maths.’ He saw her mouth moving, but couldn’t make out what she was saying above the song playing.

Lily flounced down the corridor, still calling out, and he unplugged the ear-pieces to hear her.

‘See you tomorrow!’ she shouted, waving as she darted away.

Incredulous at her joy, Patrick gave a tiny wave back.

*Okay*, he thought. *See you tomorrow.*

# Michelle Molloy

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## Me and Anne Boleyn

It was a miserable English afternoon in early February when I realised that I was practically Anne Boleyn. It was one of those spectacular London weather days when the sky simultaneously shat snow and rain and hail making thinking almost as difficult as breathing, but I still found myself treading the cobbled streets of the Tower behind a stream of equally insane tourists. Even the nut vendors had shut up shop for the day taking the aphrodisiacal scent of burnt sugar with them.

Today the skies of London smelled only of hot chips and vinegar.

Me and Anne Boleyn, we have a lot in common. No, I don't have a power-mad sex-obsessed murderous husband, in fact, as my sister regularly observes, I'm not likely to ever snag a proper boyfriend, let alone a husband. So Anne Boleyn wins on that count. But I've lost my head over more boys than she has.

The losers I've dated make Henry VIII look almost sane.

*Aultre ne cherse*, he'd written to her. *I seek no other*. Well, we all saw how well *that* ended.

I was supposed to be in London with my boyfriend – three years ago. But there were too many people in that relationship. No, that's not right. There definitely *were* too many people in that relationship, but cheating I could forgive. So his dick visited other vaginas. Big deal. My problem was that he sold himself to the highest bidder. I couldn't stop that. I didn't think he would marry the bank but he did, and it was very Jane Austen of him. I didn't see it coming. I was young, I had huge breasts, I wasn't totally insane – men tended to like those kind of things, or so I thought.

And I wasn't completely undesirable; I'd found myself accidentally engaged more than once, to people that weren't my boyfriend. But I lacked one thing. Two things. First of all I didn't have the luck required for maintaining a successful relationship (or for even finding someone who wasn't a complete douche). But mainly, I wasn't rich. And anyone I attempted to date lacked one thing. They weren't him.

Even though he was a cheap nasty money-grubbing manwhore bastard I still missed him. Still wanted him. Because no-one else made me feel so good about myself. Compared to him I was a saint. There were other people who could kiss like him, touch like him, tell secrets like him, sure. But that didn't really matter.

When I visited the Tower of London for the first time I thought I'd be most moved by Anne Boleyn's place of execution. I thought I'd see the world through her eyes, but instead I felt strangely human as I stood at the site of her scaffold looking up at the barren walls of the White Tower, the gnarled black branches of some disgusting old trees that should have died long before she did.

Perhaps the problem was the dispute over her place of death. If the academics could get it right then maybe I could have a spiritual experience.

No. Instead I was most spooked at the parish church, of all places. In hindsight, I shouldn't have been surprised. It was the mausoleum of a collection of queens and saints after all. Pieces of them, anyway. But it was the end of the day and closing in on minus ten and I'd managed to tag on to the end of a Beefeater Tour. Whatever you do *don't be lame and do the tours*, everyone at home said. But then they'd also said to do the London Eye and Madame Tussauds and Harrods, so their opinions were obviously as useful to me as my collection of ex-boyfriends.

*Don't trip on the step*, they said as we filed into the St. Peter ad Vincula Chapel, so of course we all tripped. People have been falling all over the place since Elizabeth I. Once I got inside I slid into a bench at the back and pulled off my pink beanie, already thinking about fish and chips on the Thames. And then it got spooky.

*He was a great romantic, King Henry the Eighth*, the Beefeater said. Yeah well, I think we'd all figured that one out. Maybe he was romantic. Or maybe he just played the game better, banking his wives. *He was romantic*, the Beefeater said again. *Look up at the ceiling*. So we all dutifully tipped our heads back and that's where it got weird. I looked up at the dark rich wood and it was not so obvious a monument to love as the Taj Mahal, but a monument none the less, only I didn't know it. If I'd known, I wouldn't have been so flippant about old Henry.

After seeing that ceiling you couldn't deny he was a romantic.

It wasn't ornate or carved or jewelled. It wasn't anything particularly special. Just some plain wooden beams which were a gift from Henry to his first wife Catherine. He'd told her that *now she would never be without the forests of Spain*.

Listening to these words that I'd never read in the history books, that's when I felt the first ghosts of London. It was wrong, unsettling to stand beneath this declaration of love for the first wife while standing above the bones of the second. It was so male, so convenient. I wondered how Anne Boleyn would have felt if she'd known that one day she would lie in two pieces beneath a gift built for another. How Catherine would have felt walking through her chapel if she'd known that her husband would worship so easily at its altar with another.

This ceiling, it changed things. This holy place housed warring spirits. But it was still a place of love, a tribute to stupid, complex, replaceable love.



But that wasn't where I felt like Anne Boleyn. I felt most like Anne Boleyn, my hero, when I stood outside the Tower walls, looking in. I felt most like Anne Boleyn when I stood by the Traitor's Gate. She'd entered one set of gates as a traitor, another as a lover. Because just a mean couple of metres from the Traitor's Gate is the Queen's Stairs, the entrance she'd used three years earlier to enter the Tower as its Queen. How could love change that much?

Those flagstones between the Traitor's Gate and the Queen's Stairs contain the whole history of love. One day you're everything, the next, nothing.

So I felt like Anne Boleyn did when she walked those tired steps. She must have wondered how a life can change that much. How, once you knew the secret corners of a mind and now you pass each other on the street and you're worse than strangers, because strangers don't care.

# Ann Palmer

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## A good clean cut

‘How could it happen?’ asked Primrose. ‘That front door of yours was like something from Colditz Castle.’

The solid, wooden door was impregnable, so the burglars just hacked off the lock and walked into the flat.

It was not long before Christmas. I had spent the night at Tanya and Jan’s dacha in the forest fifty miles from St Petersburg, and when they drove me back to my flat that afternoon, Cat Pushok was waiting for me among the mess in all his pretty white fluffiness. I suppose he twined himself round the burglars’ legs too and wondered when they were going to feed him. Maybe they did feed him. I could see as I went through the flat later that although they were burglars they were good family men.

I wedged the door closed so that Pushok would not run away and rushed to Tanya’s place, shivering in the short jacket I had been wearing in the car. The burglars had taken both my fur coats, and the hard winter frost had already set in.

‘That’s Russia,’ Jan said, very upset as I told my story and they phoned the militia.

The police station was close to my flat on Mayakovsky Street. It was where I used to come out into Chekhov Street after taking a short cut through a dimly lit archway and across a decayed yard. Yards like this one are enclosed by all the buildings whose elaborately ornamented façades line the city streets.

After everything I had heard about the Russian militia, I was fascinated by what I saw when I went inside for the first time. An office was separated from the public by a partition with a big glass window. Behind the glass were several militiamen.

One was sitting at the desk on his side of the window, answering the telephone from time to time, writing by hand in a ledger book, and chatting to others who came and went behind him. Some were standing about smoking. One reached down his uniform jacket from a hook behind him, and then got his heavy winter jacket from a small inner office. One was leaning against the desk paring his nails with a knife.

Another, quite a young man, told some story while he slotted four bullets into each half of a container and snapped it back on his belt. Eight bullets. What had he done with the other eight?

On our side of the glass a wide wooden table was pulled up in front of the partition, and two wooden benches with padded seats and backs of cracked brown vinyl stood facing each other against the walls

On the walls were notices for wanted people whose faces looked brutal in the smudged xerox copies. I stood up to decipher what they were wanted for. There was plenty of time for this, because it was three hours before the one investigating officer on duty was free to talk to us.

Tanya was our spokesman. She went to the window and bent down to talk through the half circle in the glass to the militiaman with his biro and telephone. Tanya has rather a soft voice and could not make herself heard; nor could she hear what the militiaman was saying to her. She leaned forward, but the table was in the way. Could she move it aside please?

‘Of course not.’

She leaned further over the table and stretched towards him. It was an embarrassing position, she told him, and asked again if she could move the table.

‘Talk louder.’

‘What about the people standing in line behind me? What will they think when they see me lying over the table with my rear up in the air!’

Lying across the table, Tanya told the militiaman what had happened. Then she asked if he could help us get a locksmith for a temporary repair to my door. Tanya’s question was such a good joke that the man behind the desk turned round and told it to all the others. The very idea that the militia would help the public like that!

‘This is a police station, not a locksmith’s shop. You can get addresses from a newspaper.’

After her encounter with the militia through the window, Tanya was disgusted. They had been drinking, she told me. She could smell it. None of them were educated except perhaps that one, the dark-haired, tall one on the left.

A young woman came in from outside. We could feel the frosty cold coming off her fur coat. She was in jeans and warm boots, and a good fur hat, and I felt shabbier than ever. She did not lie across the table, but stood upright and told her story in a firm voice that carried through the glass.

She lived in a communal flat with two other people. She got on well with one of them, an old lady. The other one, a woman nearer her own age, was so aggressive that she became frightened and left the flat to stay with a friend.

‘I went back this evening to visit the old lady, but I found her things scattered on the ground outside in the yard. I’m worried about her. Perhaps the other woman has attacked her. She might even be lying murdered in the flat. Please send some militia to see what has happened.’

No, the officer on duty told her. The department that dealt with those cases was closed. She should come back the next day. The working hours were...

The young woman tried again.

‘But it’s urgent, I told you, she might even have been murdered. I am afraid to go by myself. Will you send one of your men with me?’

‘What are you thinking of! Do you suppose I can provide assistants for any young lady who might be frightened of something?’

The young woman said nothing more. She gave him a baffled look, turned away, and left the office.

Half an hour later I got a phone call from an interpreter asking me an important question. ‘Have you had a great loss? If you do not say it is a great loss, the case will not be taken up at all. If it is a great loss, the case will be investigated.’

The only things I knew had been stolen were the computer, printer, fax and telephone, my two fur coats and both my passports, New Zealand and British. It would cost quite a lot to replace all that. Besides, I did not want this interesting process with the militia to stop. ‘I have had a great loss.’

‘Since you have had a great loss,’ the interpreter said, ‘I will come to the police station. I will be there in ten minutes.’

Two hours later she arrived and we went upstairs to an interview office, together with three or four militiamen. It was another drably furnished room, with a worn brown couch, three chairs and a table. Above the table was a shelf with some magazines, a plastic replica of a hand grenade, some postcards with funny pictures and a few books. The ashtray on the desk was half full when we went in, and full when we left.

The dark-haired, tall officer who Tanya had noticed, the one who seemed better educated than the others, sat at one end of the table. He asked me questions and wrote the answers by hand on a sheet of rough yellowish paper. Another officer sat at the opposite end of the table and did not say anything. I had the third chair, between them. There were two other silent militiamen. One stood near the door; the other sat on the couch where there was also room for the interpreter to perch near me.

When had I come to Russia? Where was my visa? *In my stolen passport.* At what address was I registered? I do not remember; it is also in my stolen passport. Who was the owner of my flat? Where did she live? Ah, in San Diego... Then could the owner's agent have been the thief?

After we telephoned her about the burglary, Marta arrived at Tanya's flat out of breath and distressed, her plain, solid face concerned. *No, the owner's agent could not have been the thief.*

They would begin their investigation, the officer told me, by asking homeless people who live in some of the yards if they had seen anything. I imagined them trying to question these poor, ragged, distracted people with their faces swollen and their minds muddled by vodka.

Months earlier, the militia chased away a group of homeless people from the inside yard of my block of flats. Early this summer another homeless man began to live in the yard. One night I found him crouched in the corner by the door to my staircase and the next morning he was lying across the doorway dead, with staring eyes in a filthy, livid face.

During the interview, the interpreter and I were carrying on a conversation punctuated by questions from the officer, her translations, my replies, and her translations of my replies. Her name was Janna, she told me. She studied at the Philological Faculty at the university and then joined the militia because it was a good career. She wanted to be useful and she liked her colleagues. Now she was a major.

I glanced at the colourful outdoor jacket that she had not taken off, and the woolly hat pulled over her badly-dyed reddish brown hair.

*'I am not in uniform at the moment,'* she said. *'Most of the time these days I am interpreting...'* She trained for a year with the city police in Los Angeles; they chose her instead of the men who applied, because a Russian policewoman was intriguing. But back in St Petersburg the money she earned in the militia was not enough – for herself and her husband who was going blind, and to help her sick mother who lived in Perm.

'I would like to ask you a question,' I said to the officer who had been asking me questions. 'Can you help me get a locksmith to repair my door?'

He opened the drawer of his desk, pulled out a folded advertising paper, and pushed it over the desk. I pushed it back.

I looked up at the wall, and saw a big, new poster of Dzhzhzhinsky, with his aggressive chin. This was the murderous chief of Cheka whose statue outside Lubyanka prison in Moscow was pulled down in 1991. At the bottom of the poster was a slogan: *'Watch out! Enemies are everywhere!'*

I looked at the four silent militiamen. 'Did they put up the poster ironically?'

‘Well,’ Janna said carefully, ‘of course, Dzherzhinsky was rather harsh, but those were difficult times and he had to be very strong. Now it is another time and things have changed a little in Russia.’

As we went out of the office, I saw an old typewriter on a shelf by the door. Apart from the Russian letters on the keys, it was just like the big office typewriter from the nineteen-sixties that I used long ago in London. The sort of typewriter where you carefully rolled in a sheet of paper with a carbon and a second sheet behind it, struck the keys extra hard to make the letters darker, and pushed the carriage round with a lever when a bell rang at the end of a line. Outside the office was a notice: No smoking.

After the night of the burglary there was another day and night before a steel door could be installed. I thought it would be safe to stay by myself. Surely the thieves had taken everything they wanted. I wedged a chair against the door and balanced the ironing board against the chair. It would not keep people out, but it would make a lot of noise if they tried to get in.

At last a heavy steel door was installed with a solid lock, chain and bolt, and I could clean the flat. First the burglars, then the militia, and finally the workers had tramped muddy snow from the street over the floors. The workers left their mess scattered across the vestibule and landing: splintered wood, chipped off plaster, congealed pots of foam seal, the broken lock, the old wooden door and pieces of the frame. In all the rooms, scattered all over the furniture and floors, were heaps of books, files, papers and clothes.

As I piled old letters and papers into rubbish bags — a job I had been putting off for a long time — I began to notice more things missing from my cupboards and shelves. A lot had accumulated since I moved into the flat and it needed a good clean out, but I did not expect it to happen this way.

I was not shocked, or even angry. So what did I feel? Phlegmatic? I followed signs of the burglars phlegmatically from room to room, finding they had taken even more than I first realised, and puzzled by what they chose: a half bottle of perfume, some nail polish, a cut-glass water jug, a clear plastic cosmetic pouch, two little torches, next year's diary.

I began to get a picture of these burglars. There were two of them, and they were men. One person could not carry away the great quantity of stolen things; and the second was not a woman because no real Russian man would let his woman do such dangerous work.

So the burglars were two men working as partners. They worked systematically, discarding what they did not need. They wanted money first, then things that they could easily carry off and sell: office equipment, electrical appliances, camera, binoculars, jewellery, CDs, art books, good clothes. Fragile or bulky things were too difficult, so they ignored my Meissen plates and Czechoslovakian dinner service, and they did not want any of the paintings.

They started in the study that opens off the kitchen. Fax, computer, printer, telephone. The new sewing machine — that was a pity. The sewing scissors — why? Perhaps they had wives? Yes, they had wives. I kept pot plants on my computer and fax, and before taking the machines, these house-trained men arranged the plants safely on the window sill.

The wives were Russian size 46, the same as me. A lot of clothes were taken from my bedroom wardrobe. Of course my two fur coats and a fur hat would be sold, along with an Italian silk suit and a new winter suit trimmed with astrakhan. But each of the wives would get a pair of my fashionable boots and a coat.

Next, gifts for the family new year. Chanel perfume for one wife; L'Oreal nail polish and a cosmetic bag for the other. For the children — two pencil torches. For the burglars themselves — a diary to plan next year's work.

As I knelt on the sitting room floor near a pile of photographs tipped out of the box, I began to feel that my burglars (as I now thought of them) and I had come to know each other.

I had seen two domesticated men who did not knock over my pot plants; who broke the glass of a picture frame but carefully stood the pieces against the divan; and who, when their work was finished, relaxed a little and chose some presents for their families. As respectable, self-employed people, they worked quickly and efficiently to steal forty-one things for which they would get much of the \$5,000 I had paid for them. They did not trash the flat vindictively after shaking out my books without finding money hidden between the leaves.

The burglars had seen a woman who lived an inoffensive life alone with her cat. They could see that she liked to sew and cook, to read and listen to music, and that she liked good clothes, pictures and china. They knew she was not house-proud — there were wisps of slut's wool under the bed — but she was excessively neat. Her towels and sheets were colour-coded and stacked folded side out. She had twenty-six pairs of knickers rolled up and ready to wear in sequence: black, white and patterned.

They also knew what she looked like. On the bedroom wall they saw a photograph of her as a baby; they looked through family photographs in a box in the sitting room; they saw her with her son and husband in framed photographs on the piano. Why make things any worse for her than they had to, the burglars thought.

I met three lots of Russian working men that Christmas — the burglars, the militia, and the workmen who installed the new door. Of the three, I preferred my burglars.

# Lindsay Pope

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## New Moon

“Chinese could start the harvesting of Helium-3 on the moon by 2025.”

When I stare into the future,  
the night sky a decade away  
is a winnow of spilt rice.

The bowl of the moon is dull,  
empty of awe. Its mineral silence  
pulls a shallow tide.

Insomniac poets, their muse defiled,  
find little wonder  
in the pits of broken nights.

And all lovers, now the moon  
being less than whole,  
spoon in dull embrace.

The future is a lunatic  
picking a fight with old gods  
bringing the moon down to earth.



# Brian Turner

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## Churchgoing

Without predicaments, no answers.  
Without mistakes, no redemption,  
hence no solace. Or so it seems.

One *it* after another, as when  
lowliness and loneliness  
seem like synonyms, and if  
you think you're redeemable  
you're kidding yourself.

There's only one  
answer to the question  
What's going to happen?  
and that's, It depends.

## Late

When things move us  
what happens to curiosity?

When things anger us  
what happens to reason?

How much experience is needed  
before you come to a conclusion?

How do you know assumptions  
have firm foundations?

When you leave your house  
and rake up woodchips,  
yank so-called weeds  
from the garden, water  
the potatoes, stop to watch  
clouds bulk like caulis  
over the brownish Kakanuis,

how do you know for sure  
what you'd be better off doing?  
Maybe you don't and won't  
until you believe you know  
what you can be certain of  
in respect to much more  
than you know now.

And now seems late, late  
in the day, late in the history  
of humankind's chances  
of not wrecking our place.  
But, if there's one thing  
you think you know  
for certain, without question,

it's what you love, and who,  
and that you must  
get going, keep going,  
for as long as the stars  
flicker and flaunt,  
and the sun keeps smiling  
until our day is done.

# Julia Prendergast

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## Breath on brown paper

He visits her at the bakery where she works. He tells her that she is beautiful. He says he wants to go out with her. He visits her when she is working alone, usually around five.

She looks down at the floor. She says she's not interested.

He tells her again: *You are beautiful. You are so pretty.*

She passes him his rolls in a brown paper bag. He wants to touch her arm. Sometimes their fingers touch, momentarily, but it is fleeting and weightless, an autumn leaf fluttering across the ground. It leaves him feeling empty.

*My name is Harsh, he says. It means happy. In my language it means happiness; delight. Harsh EQUALS Happy.* When he thinks of it now, of course, he knows that nothing can ever really equal anything else. He thinks that harsh does not necessarily mean happy.

*You are really pretty,* he says, clutching the paper bag, walking backwards towards the bakery door. *You are beautiful. It is true. So beautiful,* he says, stumbling slightly over the lip of the doorframe.

As he gets into his car, his grip is clenched around the opening of the brown paper bag. He sits in the driver's seat and watches her a while. If only she would look at him, if only she would look hard and long into his eyes, then she would understand that he means it, he absolutely means it, when he says that she is very beautiful.

In Australia it is not okay to touch her arm. Here it is utterly unacceptable. And she is here, of course, not in his homeland, much as he may wish upon stars. In his homeland, she would understand that his hand on her arm equals adoration.

Here it is not acceptable to say: *You are so very pretty, what is your phone number, please take my phone number, please call me, I have been waiting for you to call me, why haven't you called me, you are so beautiful, what time do you finish work, you are so pretty, we should get together, we should have coffee when you finish your work, or tea, I mean tea to drink, or dinner, to eat, what time, what time do you finish your work? I will wait in my car for you, I will wait for you while you finish, I will wait because I think that we should get together, you are so pretty, you are so very beautiful...*

He sits in his car and he imagines his fingers on her arms, on her beautiful, on her pretty arms. Sitting in his car, he watches her beautiful, her pretty wrists as she takes the bread and puts it in a bag for the customers. He sees her beautiful, her deep eyes, and he notices that her eyes smile (*sitārā kbuśa* – starhappy) just like his beautiful, his beautiful Nani, back home.

Her lips are hidden behind the customer's head now, and he shifts left, towards the passenger seat, but he can't see, and it doesn't matter that he can't see because he doesn't need to see her lips. *I don't need to see*, he says aloud and then he takes a sharp breath: *Stop it*, he says. *Who would be talking to their own reflection in the mirror?*

He doesn't need to see because he can tell by the stars in her deep, deep eyes that she is smiling, like Nani when she star smiles for Nana, only for him, eye smiling in their secret lovestar language. He catches sight of himself in the rear vision mirror and he practices the true meaning eyes, like a husband for a wife. He checks to see if she sees him, but she has her back to him now, reaching for the bread that is stacked on the high wire shelves. The bread dust falls as she takes a loaf. He has seen the bread dust on her forehead and her hairline. He has seen it, like stardust, on her eyelashes.

He doesn't need to see her lips but he wants to see them, he likes to see them. He wants her to pass bread to him. Only to him. He doesn't like the puffy bread that she sells but he buys it, nevertheless. *Nevertheless*. Nani's head moves to one side and the other as she says it. It is one of his favourite words, like *momentarily*, because he can see Nani and her talking head in those words, and those words don't equal anything, and they equal everything.

He buys bread that he will never eat just so that he can see her lips move, for him. He throws the bread to the birds when it is not puffy anymore, but he keeps the paper bags because they remind him of the moon-arc of her beautiful wrists. With a flick of her wrists, she swings the paper bag, up and over itself, twisting the corners to seal it. He keeps the brown paper because it makes him feel like things are more than nevertheless.

With his head on his pillow, he can see the paper bags, and he can see the bread dust that has settled on his bedside table. He reaches out his hand, carefully, taking a paper bag. He purses his lips together and blows into the neck of the bag. His hot breath crackles against the brown paper and the bread dust fills the air like moondust, *sitārā kbuśa* moondust, falling through his fingers like fine sand.

It is okay to touch the arm of your wife, and if we skip forward to the arm touching, and the wife passing her husband bread, and whispering to him in the moondust language, *sitārā kbuśa sitārā kbuśa*, then it is not stalking. Then we can see the truth: the very beautiful truth, the absolute pretty truth, of the smiling stars in her eyes. Those stars are the same over the sea and he thinks that, nevertheless, they could be like Nani and Nana. They could have their own starhappy language, a language of smiling stars, just for them, a language that doesn't care about seas apart and arm-touching rules... stale bread for birds.

\* \* \*

The policeman has freckles. Australian freckles fascinate him because they are so much darker than the skin, like black stars against a pale moon, as if nature could not have made it happen, as if something else altogether must have had a hand in it, something more potent than the sun, something like fire, fire for Australian freckles and fire for freckled char on roti.

The policeman says: *If you set foot in that shop, ever again, you will be charged with trespassing.* This is what the policeman says, but he hears: *Your story is frog-shit mate. You knew exactly how old she was. You don't fool me.*

He thinks of the paper bags for the rolls, stacked on his bedside table, ironed flat by his hands, and he thinks of her wrists, the pretty moon-arc of her wrists.

The court liaison officer wears a bright red scarf and a bracelet to match, exactly the same shade of coral red. Her skin is translucent, like apple juice jelly on shiny Australian skin. She says: I know in India you might approach women in this way, in fact *I know a man who met his wife on the train...* She giggles momentarily and then clears her throat. *I understand that it might be considered okay, over there, but here it is not okay, here it is stalking.* This is what she says, quite kindly, tenderly even, and slowly, as if he were a child.

He says: *I didn't know how old she was, I mean, how young. I thought she was the same as me, the same age as me. I was mesmerised. She reminded me of... She was... sitārā kbuśā.*

*WHAT? I wouldn't go doing that in there.* The court liaison officer points left, in the direction of the courtroom. *If you start chattering in Hindi, the magistrate won't like it.*

His fists are clenched but shaking. He pounds them, very lightly, on the desktop.

The court liaison officer says: *You can agree to the order without admitting fault, that is, you can agree to leave her alone without admitting that you intended to do her any harm.*

*This is what she says but he hears: You're obviously lonely mate. I mean it's clear you want some... company, but stalking underage girls, it's just not on.*

The judge is old, even older than Nana was when he perished, the puff draining right out of him like the stale rolls. The judge rests his elbow on the enormous desk, his hand under his chin, tired-like. He looks through the window to the empty courtyard: brown pavers; potted palms, an empty bench. The judge looks at him and says: *You cannot go within two hundred metres of her workplace. You shop somewhere else. Do you understand?* This is what the judge says but he hears: *Go back to where you came from. Go back to your lot. These are our rules, you hear?*

He says: *Yes Sir. I mean yes Your Honour.*

The judge says: *This is not a criminal conviction but be clear, be very clear, if you breach the conditions of this order you will be locked up, you will face a fine of up to \$30,000 dollars.*

He cannot see what thirty thousand dollars would look like. He tries to imagine it, stacked up like the brown paper bags on his bedside table, but he can't picture it, try as he might, and so he looks out into the courtyard at the brown pavers, but that's no good either because he can only see paper bags for bread. The empty bench and the potted palms are right there, right in front of his eyes, and they could be like a holiday or an invitation, but the green and the brown merge together until they are just a swampy blur of in-between colour, a dirty, smudged colour that equals loneliness and desire and locking up. He can see Nani's eyes, momentarily. He can see her eyes turning starry for him because of the in-between dirtiness and the locking.

The judge talks to the Mother. *He says: Does your daughter work there anymore?*

The mother says: *No.*

The judge looks at him. *Because of your actions. You understand?* The judge sits only a few steps away but he takes the opportunity to lean forward and talk into the microphone.

The other people in the courtroom turn to him with their star-less eyes. They don't say anything, they don't say anything at all, but he hears them, loud and pumped like a football cheer-squad.

He hears them say: *Look what you've done. Curry munching punk. ...Curry munching punk.*

He looks out into the paper bag courtyard again because there is nowhere else to look. He sees her pretty hands, holding the corners of the bag, flipping it, upending the puffy rolls, sealing them away from the air that will make them old and nevertheless.

The judge says: *Is this clear?* He hears the judge but he can't speak because he is caught in the airlessness of the paper bag courtyard.

The judge says: *IS THIS VERY CLEAR?*

He says: *Yes S... Yes Your Honour.*

Then she turns around and glances at him, momentarily but nevertheless. She is crying and her eyes are like Nani's at the end, holding Nana's hands, nursing his wrists, staring at him with her star-less eyes.

The judge talks to the mother. The judge says: *You can wait in the other room for the order to be written. You can take your daughter and wait.*

And they go.

And he stands there and waits for Your Honour to tell him where to go. He stands and he waits, and he feels as flat and useless as dry leaves in a courtyard. He keeps his eyes on the leaves and he waits for the wind. As the stray leaves flutter, he imagines the rustling inhale and exhale of the shifting leaves, the same noise that made you wonder if Nana might, yet, take another deep breath... but the leaves are still again, and wondering does not equal possibility.

And without the wind, the leaves are just wrinkles on flat pavers, they are Nani's stippled forehead on Nana's perishing wrist, dried out, hanging on.

He stands and he waits and, in the nevertheless waiting, he cannot distinguish between the dry, brown leaves and the flat, brown pavers. He cannot separate one from the other, not unless the wind shifts, lifting the leaves off the ground momentarily, like hot breath on brown paper.

# Jane Simpson

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## Tomorrow

I buy sheer black stockings.  
Do they know I'm burying my mother tomorrow?

I eat chicken tikka in the food court.  
I start to sniff.  
They don't know I'm burying my mother tomorrow.

Why do they smile back at me?  
Don't they know I'm burying my mother tomorrow?

Why am I so hungry?  
I'm burying my mother tomorrow.



# Elizabeth Smither

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## A gift of spotted tights

Three times I circle the block thinking  
*What to buy, what to buy?* and the moment

a space becomes available I know:  
an extravagant pair of tights you'd never buy

for yourself, even if you were a Medici  
and an armful of new dresses had just been delivered

and swooned over the arm of a maid. You'd think  
how the maid's fingers would have to ease

the pink blisters raised on the black nylon  
over your ankles and calves – *Take them away*

you'd scream as she tugged – they look like plague  
and the maid would scuttle from the chamber

but you, who have no one to dress you, will sit  
demurely on the side of your bed and point

your big toe first, then your heel, calf, knee  
and thigh (standing upright now) until

you're clad in these remarkable tights. Pink  
raised lumps on black-as-deepest hell

you'll wear them somewhere and disdain the  
comments that follow. *Fetch a doctor, call the ambulance.*

*Her legs have broken out.* The bobbles warm  
your upper thighs, you touch them through your skirt

and underneath the tablecloth your putrescent instep  
innocently brushes against a trouser leg.

## Tonia's cemetery

This morning we visited three houses  
you'd lived in, decrepit or gentrified.  
My knees decrepit, your hair fresh-dyed.

We moved onto two galleries: one hung  
whiteness on white walls, the other  
was saved by the owner's black Highland terrier.

Then we drove on to your cemetery.  
You gave it its name, said  
that though you had not yet a plot,

one would be available, being country  
and sparsely used. There was one grave there  
new-mounded up, crowned with white flowers

so raised it could have been two lovers  
under winter bedclothes, wrapped  
in detumescence in one another's arms.

You'd expect me to visit, you said,  
look down when the earth had sunk.  
And I said the same for myself,

though I knew no place, certainly  
none with such an appealing white gate  
like a farm gate, but newly-painted

and quiet consoling trees – I envied  
you those – how well you had selected  
your place, far better than your houses.

# Ian C. Smith

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## Degree of difficulty

Sweat trickling, I feel fraudulent,  
streetboy tattoos not yet fashionable  
hidden by sleeves, long like my hair.  
Though an adult for many lean years,  
hardened even before I was bearded,  
I look almost youthful enough to blend  
with these untidy insouciant princes  
and wild-haired women in long leather boots.

My first poetry lecture, packed.  
Peter Steele on Hopkins' poplars all felled.  
We carry new Norton Anthologies  
like Christians clasping their faith.  
The collection's youngest poet awes me,  
perhaps because he is right at the back.  
Ondaatje's *Elizabeth* I read and re-read  
after we spill from the hall's trodden slopes.

Pensive amid babble in the small café,  
recalling lists of rulers in history  
from a black, bored student time before  
I fled family unhappiness,  
I put a number after Elizabeth's name.  
The past all felled like Binsey's poplars,  
I strive to fill in my ignorant gaps,  
avoid one certain old-age regret.

## Tunnel of love

I drove into the Burnley Tunnel's arcade.  
We had known each other far too long.  
Our seatbelts were on, E-tag paid.  
Let's get married I sang from a song,  
turning to touch her by my side.  
For Christ's sake look where you're going she cried.

# Jillian Sullivan

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## Wind in the Ida

The wind shrieked all day, all night, flexed  
whatever muscles it wanted

flattened the new peas, bowled the outdoor toilet,  
the neighbours chicken coop flew

over the fence (the hens were spared).  
The restless air stopped flights, closed

roads, upended my shed  
in a tree, a starling

grass in beak, blew  
backwards past the window.

Not a serious storm, but one that tells us  
exactly who's in charge

around here and we'd better  
learn that, one way or another.

Last week, a starling  
dead on my floor. This glass we place between

our shelter and blue.  
Ribbons of dark bird blood

and now wind shakes the windows  
presses up to my door.

On Rough Ridge, a bay horse steps the fence line  
mane tossed

plovers angle in, land by the pond.  
If there are cyclists out there

bent over their bars, they'll be hoping  
the wind stays at their tail.

We'll all be hoping the wind will go  
back in the box,  
but maybe that particular box is open now.

## Think of that, then

*You mustn't ever let yourself  
be bitter* a friend told me  
a friend told her.

It turns out this rope is a good one  
spun true by hands that have done  
this sort of thing before

been there (crushed)  
done that (lashed).  
No self-pity like

handfuls of salt. Better  
to walk about  
take each thing in:

one purple yarrow in a field of white,  
how good sun feels on your legs  
even if it's only you

who loves them.  
You love them,  
how kind they are

sharing the load  
taking turns, one goes first  
then the other.

In Tango, we're taught to carry our bodies  
lightly, not expect  
someone else's legs to take

the weight of ours, but to move  
as if each had asked – shall you come  
this way?

Musicality has a lot to teach us  
how if you listen – yes, even  
to the stream, as it frackles over stones

# Philip Porter

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## Safe hands

*She falls into her father's arms from various heights:  
This was the light that held her darkneses from her.  
"The Fall", Jordie Albiston*

hands up in a big hurrah  
a one child Mexican wave  
dandling from her father's  
arms like a trapeze artist

before she turns a trick  
a somersault of sheer delight  
daddy's here I can be  
as dangerous as I like.

# Author Biographies

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## Bridget Auchmuty

Bridget Auchmuty recently completed the Master of Creative Writing at Massey University, and the two poems published here were included in the collection that constituted part of her thesis. In 2009 she was the recipient of a mentorship with then Poet Laureate Cilla McQueen through the NZ Society of Authors. Originally from the UK, she now lives in rural Nelson, and her work reflects the value she places on having found somewhere to put down roots. Her short fiction and poetry have been published in various journals both here and overseas.

## Eugen Bacon

Eugen Bacon studied at Maritime Campus - Greenwich University, UK, less than two minutes' walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. Her arty muse fostered itself within the baroque setting of the Old Royal Naval College, and Eugen found herself a computer graduate mentally re-engineered into creative writing. She is now a PhD candidate in Writing by artefact and exegesis at Swinburne University of Technology. Eugen loves teriyaki chicken, swimming, an early night, staring at babies, fine chocolate, beads of bubbles from Epernay straight and Toni Morrison.

## Susan Bradley Smith

Susan Bradley Smith is a Melbourne-based bibliotherapist and teacher, and Honorary Research Associate in Creative Writing at La Trobe University. Her latest books are the memoir of writing and wellbeing, *Friday Forever*, and her 3rd poetry collection, *Beds for all who come* (Five Islands Press, 2014). A Pacific Ocean groupie, she is currently writing a history of surfing love stories.

## Rachel Bush

Rachel Bush grew up in Hawera and now lives in Nelson. Her first work appeared in student publications, and then in Faber's Introduction series. In the '90s she began to write poetry more than prose. She has been published in many New Zealand journals such as *Sport*, *Landfall*, *The Listener*, *Takape* and in electronic journals like *Turbine* and *4th Floor*. Her work has appeared in various anthologies including most recently, *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature*. Her most recent book, *Nive Pretty Things and others* (Victoria University Press, 2011) consists of poems and short prose pieces.

## Maggie Butt

Maggie Butt is a British poet, whose four poetry collections include the sumptuously illustrated *Sancti Clandestini – Undercover Saints* and the poignant first world-war history *Ally Pally Prison Camp* which interweaves her poetry with photographs, paintings, and extracts from memoirs and letters written by the prisoners.

Her poetry is widely published in international magazines and has escaped the page into choreography, readings and festivals.

Dr Maggie Butt is an ex journalist, BBC TV producer, creative writing lecturer and chair of the UK's National Association of Writers in Education. She is an Associate Director at Middlesex University, London.

Website: [www.maggiebutts.co.uk](http://www.maggiebutts.co.uk)



## Elizabeth Colbert

The complex nexus of experiences and that shape our lives and underpin the working life of writers will always be of interest to readers or so I thought until a friend, a fellow writer, suggested that characters of a particular age are excluded. I had written 'Pistachio Crust' before this conversation and I am pleased that I can now write back and say this is not so. The lives of women and their relationships with others continues to be of interest and raise questions about their role in our society.

## Bonnie Etherington

Bonnie Etherington was born in Nelson, New Zealand but grew up in Indonesia. She completed a MCW at Massey University and is currently itinerant in New Zealand while completing her novel-in-progress. Her poems and short fiction have appeared in various places including Takahe, Deep South, and Blast Furnace. In 2013, one of her stories was a runner-up for the Katherine Mansfield Award.

## Cliff Fell

Cliff Fell's latest book is a long single poem acrostic, *The Good Husbandwoman's Alphabet*, (Last Leaf Press) which came out in a limited edition in March, 2014, with illustrations by Fiona Johnstone. His other collections are *Beauty of the Badlands* (Victoria University Press, 2008) and *The Adulterer's Bible* (Victoria University Press, 2003), which was awarded the Jessie Mackay Prize for Best First Book of Poetry. Two new poems appeared recently in the Pacific Highways issue of the Griffith Review.

## Vicky Grut

Vicky Grut's short fiction has been published in magazines and collections in the UK and USA. Her stories have appeared in two volumes of the anthology *New Writing, NW13* (Picador, 2005) and *NW14* (Granta, 2006), *Waving at the Gardener* (Bloomsbury, 2009), the US podcast platform *The Drum* (2013) and *Harvard Review* #43 (2013). She's been shortlisted for a number of awards, including the Asham Prize. She lives in London with her husband and two sons, and teaches on the creative writing programme at London South Bank University.

## Sally Houtman

Sally Houtman is an ex-pat American who relocated to Wellington, New Zealand in 2005. She is the author of a non-fiction book and began writing fiction and poetry in 2007. Since that time her work has appeared in more than forty print and online publications, received four New Zealand writing awards, and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

## Vivien Jones

Her first poetry collection - *About Time, Too* - was published by Indigo Dreams Publishing in September 2010. In that year she also won the Poetry London Prize. She devises collaborative readings with music in performance at Book and Arts Festivals in Scotland and the north of England. She has completed a second short fiction collection on a theme of women amongst warriors - *White Poppies* (2012) - with the aid of a Creative Scotland Writer's Bursary and has adapted two of the stories for theatre performance in 2013. In February 2014 her first e-book - *Malta Child* - was published - memoirs of four childhood years in Malta in the late 1950s.

Website: [www.vivienjones.info](http://www.vivienjones.info)

### **Emily Larkin**

Emily Larkin is a Queensland writer specialising in young adult fiction. She completed a Bachelor's degree in Communication at the University of the Sunshine Coast in 2013, and spends her free time reading, writing, discussing smoke monsters, Horcruxes, iris-cams, and magic cupboards with her family, and having long conversations with her characters. 'Dialogue fascinates me,' she said. 'What a character will – or won't – say is very revealing.'

### **Michelle Molloy**

"Me and Anne Boleyn" is Michelle Molloy's first published work of fiction. She's currently enrolled in the Masters of Creative Writing programme at Massey University and is working on her first novel. She lives in Wanaka, New Zealand.

### **Ann Palmer**

I am a New Zealander who has lived many years in London and then in St. Petersburg, and now live in Porto. I was a teacher and then bibliographer, and while in Russia I worked on a project to build a historic replica frigate. Now retired, I enjoy life in Porto with friends, writing, cooking, and generally looking about in Europe.

### **Lindsay Pope**

Lindsay Pope was born in Dunedin in 1949 and he currently lives alone in Nelson. He completed an MA in creative writing at the IIML at Victoria University in Wellington in 2009. His poems have been represented in many publications, both in New Zealand and overseas. Towards the end of 2014 a compilation of his writing will be published by Makaro Press.

### **Philip Porter**

Philip has recently completed his MA in creative writing at the University of Sydney. He has been published in; *Eucalypt (Australia)*, *Blue Collar Review (USA)*, *TheZenSite*, *Poetry Atlas* and *Swamp*. Recently his poem, "Cathusian Silence" was put to music by composer Owen Salome and performed as part of Chronology Arts' Lyrebird project. As a follow-up to his stint as "poet in residence" under the aegis of Australian Poetry Philip organises a community poetry project in a Sydney cafe featuring established and up and coming poets.

### **Julia Prendergast**

Julia has a PhD (Writing and Literature), Deakin University. Julia is currently employed as an Associate Lecturer in the Faculty of Business and Law, and as a sessional academic in the Faculty of Arts and Education, at Deakin University. Julia's stories have been shortlisted and published: *Lightship Anthology 2: Alma Books (UK)*, *Glimmertrain (US)*, *Meniscus (Australasian Association of Writing Programs: AAWP)*, *Bukker Tillibul (Swinburne University)*, *Word You Up (Boroondara Literary Awards)*.

### **Jane Simpson**

Jane Simpson is a poet, historian, tutor and editor, based in Christchurch. She has a PhD (Otago) in religion and gender in post-war NZ. Her poems have been published in journals including *Takabe*, *Poetry NZ*, *Brief* and *Social Alternatives*. She has been anthologized in *An exchange of gifts*, *Big sky* and *With our eyes open*. Her first collection was *Candlewick Kelp*. Recent poems draw her experience of teaching Muslim women in a desert school in the UAE, at the boundaries of Bedouin and Western culture. Jane has also written contemporary hymns and songs and produced her own CD, *Tussocks Dancing*.

### **Ian C. Smith**

Ian C Smith lives in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria. His work has appeared in *Axon: Creative Explorations*, *The Best Australian Poetry*, *London Grip*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *The Weekend Australian*, *Ō*, *Westerly*. His latest book is *Here Where I Work*, Ginninderra Press, Adelaide, 2012.

### **Elizabeth Smither**

Elizabeth Smither has published 17 collections of poetry as well as novels and short stories. Her most recent publications are *The Blue Coat* (Auckland University Press, 2013) and *Ruby Doby Du* a little suite of poems written for her granddaughter, Ruby (Cold Hub Press, 2014). She was New Zealand poet laureate (2001-3) and in 2008 received the Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in Poetry.

### **Jillian Sullivan**

Jillian Sullivan has published eight books of prose and many short stories for adults and children. She has a forthcoming poetry collection, *Parallel*. She teaches writing for the Highlights Foundation in America and is currently labourer and plasterer on her strawbale house in Central Otago, NZ.

### **Brian Turner**

Brian Turner has published numerous books both of poetry and prose, held some Fellowships, and won several important awards. He lives down south, in Otago.

