



MENISCUS

LITERARY JOURNAL

Volume 6, Issue 1 2018



[
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Chantelle Bayes
Victor Billet
Joshua Baird
Jo Morrison
]



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About Meniscus

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

The title of the journal was the result of a visit made by two of the editors to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where James Turrell's extraordinary installation, 'Within without' (2010), led them to think about how surfaces, curves, tension and openness interact. In particular, they were struck by the way in which the surface of the water features, and the uncertainty of the water's containment, seems to 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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EDITORIAL

WELCOME TO MENISCUS, volume 6, issue 1, 2018. Now in its sixth year *Meniscus* continues to expand its international reach with new and established writers submitting work from all over the world. It has been a real pleasure sifting through so many wonderful stories and poems, each expressing a unique way of viewing the world through words full of humour, anger, irony and passion. There were many more poetry submissions than fiction and it was a challenge to choose which pieces worked together best to fit the issue. However, we have put together a collection we hope you will enjoy. We open with the Copyright Agency Ltd winners of prose and poetry: Joanna Morrison with her beautifully written story 'This Old Thing' and Victor Billot with his poem 'Location, location'. The issue concludes with Ruth Armstrong's 'Paper Cranes', an extremely moving story which won the Australia Short Story Festival prize.

In September, *Meniscus* vol 6, issue 2 will devote its prose section to flash fiction. We welcome submissions of up to five poems per writer as usual and up to three flash fiction stories per writer, of no more than 500 words each, on any theme.

Sandra Arnold and Deb Wain
Guest Editors



VICTOR BILLOT

'Location, location'

VICTOR BILLOT

Location, location

My youngest has annexed the parental bed,
his entrance announced by murmured complaint.
I surrender my place and adjourn to his room
where I listen to the stillness of milk-warm night.
Above the shadow, the clouds have pulled back
their curtains. The belt of Orion:
three pricks of white, identified by my smartphone.
Modern convenience. Mintaka is the dimmest of the trio,
claimed by Arab skygazers lost in pre-app antiquity.
Twin star, two siblings locked in eternal dance,
a tremble of light 900 years old.
In darkness I calculate income and outgoings,
debts, obligations, peeling paint on weatherboards,
annual leave. The weight of time is announced
by a sour pressure on my bladder.
I piss forlornly, sleep-wrapped, weary.
The world is now run by my generation.
Doctors and lawyers are callow youths.
How do any of them, of us, know what we are doing?
This time, no reply from Google.
Distant cores of stars burn away, burn away
their light, their substance.



JOANNA MORRISON

'This Old Thing'

JO MORRISON

This old thing

I SIT AT the mahogany bar, dwarfed by the altar of bottles in front of me, row upon row of them, stretching up to the rough limestone ceiling. So perfect in their glassy shapes and colours, gleaming blue and green and silver up there—so sure of themselves. And why not? All these people falling over themselves to pay them homage. To kiss their feet, drink from their bounty. I look down at my glass. It's squarish and heavy with a piece of lemon and some melting ice cubes resting in a small pool of purity. One sip left, maybe two.

The band is playing cover versions of Radiohead, and though the singer is no Thom Yorke, he's doing all right. He's got the range, and enough of that cosmic mournfulness to reach inside me and stir everything up. All the shifting shadows. If I could touch the sadness, I would trace it from my left eye down my cheek, under my chin where the tears feel most alien, and over the light, silver scarf around my neck. Then down the silk of my dress, right to the place where it splits over my thigh; that's where it gathers, pooling on the nylon, threatening to spill over but not quite making it. An otherworldly surface tension holds it together. Like mercury.

Don't dwell on it, ejit, is what Kelso would say. And it's sound advice. But I've had a few gins and I'll wallow in my misery if I want to.

I watch the young woman behind the bar pull a few pints and do what needs doing with the cash that comes her way. A tea towel hangs from her back pocket, like a tail; it sways as she steps around the barman who shares her shift. He calls her Caro. Her dark hair is short, cut close around her face. Pretty. Neat. She hands the change to a young man in chinos and a collared shirt then pulls the towel from the pocket to wipe down the bar. She sees me watching and raises her eyebrows at me, nods at my empty glass. Smiles a little, though it just barely makes it to her eyes. Not because she's unkind. I can see that. She's tired. Too tired for someone her age.

I shake my head at the offer. I've had enough. Still got to make it home.

Don't know why I came here anyway, just because Kelso brought me here once. What did I think, that maybe he'd find me here in this basement bar surrounded by people at least two decades younger than I am, young enough to be the children I never had, and see how well I'm holding it together without him?

I scoff at myself and swirl the ice through the last of my gin. The doorman, his head as smooth as the fire extinguisher behind him, comes down the stairs and holds up his hand to the barman—five minutes—before ducking through the door to the toilets. I glance up the stairs at the rectangle of night. I should leave now, in case Kelso does walk in and find me here, alone in my leather boots, willing someone—anyone—to challenge me just so that I can throw my drink in their face. And if it happens to be Kelso, well, twenty points to me. And another ten if I can follow it up with a searing speech about how I never really liked him very much anyway, the way he wore his collar up and his shoulders low. The way he understood every stupid thing I ever said, and furthermore found it fine and golden, like something rare discovered on a beach after a storm. Never liked the way his warm breath on my neck made me delight in just being. The way his sense of humour crept up and held me any time I found myself poised on the edge of one of my lagoons. That's what he called them, my sinkholes.

Fucking Kelso.

I stand up, grabbing hold of the bar to steady myself, and the barman, so young—surely too young—smiles at me, one of those dismissive smiles these kids give you. Expecting you to be grateful for the acknowledgement, grateful that they've seen you at all. Used to be a man would look at me with signs of the hunt all over his face. He'd want something from me, my body, my touch, sometimes even my words. Now, they just want me to stop standing between them and whatever else happens to be in their sights. Younger women ... sport on the telly ... a quiet minute alone.

It's not as if I'm even old yet. Though I feel it sometimes—the way time just ticks on, over and over, around and around, like some invisible gas meter in an old tin box just out of reach. And then there's the pain

in my neck and my left elbow, and the swelling in the knuckles of my hands so that they can't glide and leap and thump across the piano keys the way they used to. I can still play. People will still marvel at the tapestry of sound I can weave, the lightness of my fingers as they create storms and savagery inside them while they listen. But they don't know how it used to be. How I could close my eyes and be swept away. How removed I felt from the mechanics of it all—the flourishes, the delicacy, the intensity—because it all came from some place beyond consciousness. It wasn't about my mind sending commands down to my fingers. *I was* my fingers. The joy of it. I don't know what I miss more: the otherworldly transportation of playing like that, or the feeling of someone's hands on my skin. How long has it been since someone touched me? At all? Anywhere?

Whatever. I'm going home. And when I get there, I'll walk past the open doors of the music room where my grand piano waits for me every night, the keys gleaming in the moonlight like all the lost, glowing hopes of childhood. I'll go upstairs to the bedroom kept immaculate by Juno, my cleaner, my weekly friend. My only friend. And my bed will be there, another encapsulation of everything good I've ever lost. Lost, or allowed to trickle through my fingers. My useless bloody fingers. I'll climb between the cold sheets and make them warm and then I'll sleep, and in the morning, or in the afternoon, I'll dip into the wine, pull on some finery and head out to lick my wounds, like a trampled cat.

I'm heading up the pub's stairs, ready for the night air out there—the lights, the traffic—when a man stops me. Stands there in front of me and says,

'Turn around lady. Turn the fuck around and go back downstairs.'

He smells of old sweat, that sharp nauseating smell of a man who eats too much of what's not good for him and considers himself too important to submit to the inconvenience of a shower from time to time.

'I beg your pardon?' I say. On the verge of saying, 'Do you know who I am?' though what a stupid thing that would be to say. No man like this—so without refinement, so devoid of any awareness of the finer things—would have ever heard of me. What's a concert pianist to the world when you've got pies to eat and people to push around?

'I'm sorry, did you not hear me?' he says, and at first I think *good, he's realised his mistake*, until I see it in his eyes, the mockery, the hot contempt as he says, 'Do you need me to speak a little louder?' His spittle lands on my cheekbone, just beneath my eye.

'No thanks,' I find myself saying, drawing myself up as I've seen fools do in the movies when they're operating under the misapprehension that they matter in the slightest, in any way, to anyone. 'I just thought maybe I'd misheard you, but now I can see ...'

'Fucking shut up and get out of my way,' he says. He has bigger fish to fry. He has spotted his real quarry. And as he pushes past me, so roughly I have to grab hold of the handrail, I smell it—the other layer of scent buried beneath his natural stench. Petrol.

He has a jerry can in his hand, his sooty, nicked hand, which I can see now is trembling where he stands at the bottom of the stairs. I follow his gaze with my own. It settles on the woman behind the bar. Caro. She is standing there, immobilised, her hands gripping her small towel as though somehow that might save her. Her face is alive now in a way it wasn't before.

'Pete', she says, and we can all hear her because the band has stopped playing. They've noticed this man and his red plastic container, so wrong in this place. A bass note hangs in the air. The drummer drops his stick; it bounces on the snare drum with a resonant thwack on its way to the floor. 'Pete', Caro says again. 'What are you doing?'

Pete sniffs and wipes his face with his free hand, which is trembling even more than the other one. Livid is what they are, those hands. Is what *he* is. Shaking with the insult of it all, this woman who no longer looks at him with love. If she ever did. I can only speculate of course, as you do in such moments, when instead you should be thinking of a solution to a most significant problem. And it is significant, because now he's unscrewing the cap, tilting the jerry can, and lurching it around the place, letting the fuel pour out in a gleaming stream too light and clean to have anything to do with him. He trails it right up to the floor beneath the rows of bottles. All powerless now, they are. Robbed of their majesty.

'Jesus', the singer says. It's a whisper really, but it's amplified by the microphone still right up against his mouth. He glances at me, standing

up there at the top of the stairs. Most of the others are looking up at me too. I'm the only one here with nothing between herself and the open air. They're all thinking *it's the only exit*—they must be—as Pete stalks around the bar, sloshing fuel all over the floor.

'Think you can just fuck off, do you?' he snarls at Caro. 'You think I'll just sit back and let you take the piss? You stupid bitch!' he shouts, purpling in the face. 'I told you not to fuck with me, didn't I? Didn't I fucking tell you?'

The last bit comes out more as a whimper than a yell as he walks towards her, and I know, I can tell how much he wants her to come over and talk him down. To run her hand over his thick skull and kiss away his anger and tell him she loves him and he's being just so silly, and why doesn't he sit down and have a drink. But he can see as we all can see that she's got none of that left in her, the fearless compassion you'd need for that. Any trace of it she might have had once is gone, and there she is, gripping the bar with both hands, reminding herself to breathe.

Pete fumbles in his leather pocket now and his hand gets stuck, even though it's slippery with fuel and should slip right out. He tosses the empty jerry can to the floor so he has a free hand to pull the pocket away to release whatever it is he's reached in there for. I know what it is—we all know what it is. He is just moments away now from igniting the fuel he's snaked up to the liquor pyre. Somebody has to do something. Otherwise the place will go up in flames which will be thick and hot and impossible to get through on the way to the door. Everyone in here will burn alive to the sounds of their own screaming and guitar strings snapping in the heat and bottles of alcohol exploding, sending showers of glass raining down upon the agony and the choking smoke. Except for me; I can just leave.

The barman inches forward, maybe going for an alarm button or a knife, but Pete, now brandishing a small red lighter, smirks at him, because whatever he's reaching for is completely hopeless. Completely futile. Will be too late to stop the furnace of Pete's dreams. You can see them already in his eyes, the flames he has so long been planning. He can see them too, leaping from his lighter and dancing across the floor in all directions, to consume, to end, to wreak havoc on *her* and all these people sharing her world. No idea of the pain she's capable

of delivering to a man. Bringing him so low. She deserves this, for all she has done. She deserves to be afraid, and desolate, and torn up, he thinks, because that's what he is. Because of her.

He's lost in this reverie of righteousness and revenge—you can see it—caught up in the magnificence of his gesture, of the justice he is about to deliver. Now would be the time to take him down, tackle him to the ground. The men in the room are considering it, glancing at one another and sizing him up, trying to figure out who should be the one to go. A few of them look up at me again, standing as I am in the spot formerly occupied by the doorman. Judging by the looks on their faces, I don't present much cause for optimism.

On the far side of the room, the door to the toilets moans on its hinges. There he stands, the hired muscle, face reddening as he realises what he has become: the very embodiment of professional failure. There's a rasping sound as Pete brings his thumb down, once, twice, but he's denied. Again and again, and nothing. He roars, and there's hope as he flings the lighter to the ground, and that's when I laugh at the absurdity of it all, at his being thwarted by this mechanical little trick the universe has seen fit to play on him.

The doorman begins pushing through the crowd. Pete turns and looks up at the sound of my laughter, but he doesn't look defeated the way I expect him to. Instead, he looks triumphant as he pulls from his other pocket another lighter, a bigger one. He smirks at me—pathetic woman—and turns away, holding the little plastic agent of death up high. He doesn't hear me grapple with the fire extinguisher next to the door, so heavy you'd be amazed. But my piano hands are still strong even if they hover somewhere between numbness and pain most of the time. And if he thinks he's angry, he has no idea the rage that simmers inside *me*. I'm grateful to him for having sucked me out of the quagmire of my ritual self-pity, but I'm also furious. A little shit, is what he is. A stinking turd who thinks his pain is worth more than anyone else's. Thinks he's entitled to revenge, to do whatever it takes to heal himself, no matter who has to burn for it. I drop that extinguisher on his head before he can have another go at sending his flames tripping across the floor. They'd have looked elegant at first I'm sure, an otherworldly

shimmer of orange and blue, before spreading at pace, scorching the place and all those fine young bodies.

As the extinguisher falls, hitting Pete's mad head with a metallic thud, all my bitterness morphs into something else, a tenderness I long ago forgot the feeling of. It leaps within me at the sight of these youngsters whooping their way towards me, shouting and crying and running for the stairs.

The doorman is the only one who stops at the crumpled man on the floor. I pull the scarf from around my neck and lower it to him. The silk and polyester together will make for a tight knot around those wrists. I watch it snake down, pearly grey, towards the doorman. See him realise what it's for. Watch the fabric shimmer softly in his careful tying hands. He stands and nods and heads for the stairs too, pulling out his phone for sure to call the police.

Outside, everyone has pooled together, not ready yet to face the aftermath of things alone. Caro comes to me. She touches me, puts a hand on my arm and lowers her forehead on to my hand, and the softness of her hair where it brushes against my skin slices right through to a place inside me that's been locked away for a long time. The sweetness of it is so intense I can't breathe. And then I can again. I can breathe deeper than I've breathed in years. The air is rich with fumes and beer and someone having a cigarette though I can't imagine for the life of me wanting that when you've come so close to being consumed by flames and smoke, but I don't have to ponder that right now. Everything is simple. Everything is nothing. We are free.

CHARLES KELL

Toy lock

Fear there's nothing
no hinge no nettle

nearest one capture
then let go bed stranger
the window then the door
blue blanket
with bitten heart

kept it time or

almost close yet not

where did the string go

the one we found dragging

the little nothing

Sick wolf

We saw a shadow
twitch behind a dying
tree. You said
it was a sick wolf hungry
for our bodies
& we should run.
It was nothing I thought
as sweat beaded
my back. I tried to catch
up but you were too fast.
I held raw bacon
in your kitchen once
& it felt like this.

Splinter

Where could it have come from?
Red, dark, daring to prick open

the night clock & flood into
the inner silence. Tender flesh

waits for a graze. Hear its pulse thump,
liquid cell lit with its own kiss.

As the dark winds down, as the cold
storm blows candle wax onto the stained

bedsheet, I let you watch me. Dream
of this octopus limb tingling damp, low.

Your half-torn letter left on the broken
edge. Clear liquor poured on an open cut.

Naked shadows pressed together, my arm
floats in the air. Stray hair, salt taste, thirst.

The switch held soft, smell of cardamom.
Trace the wet poultice you place on my body.

Sluice of sweat, cool scrape of skin.

The smallest shadow

Along every shard a thimble
of debris spent blaze
open in the snow in the clear-
ing we set upon
this instance of sorrow made our way
following the smallest shadow
to the last place you thought
we'd end up quick tilt
your mouth to catch a last
ray soft arc of light
under a tree the weather
you whisper to me is a secret
worth keeping until only the skin remains
decline of each day candle left
in the rain not burning smoking

CHRISTINA FOSS

Social destruction

I KNEW THEY would find me. It was inevitable, and only a question of when. I am in fact surprised it took them so long, as it seems like every government in the entire world has made it their top priority to ensure my capture. Then again, I have not exactly made it easy for them; I cover my tracks well.

The police officer sitting in front of me is losing his patience. The hand he rests on the table is balled into a firm fist, and he keeps tightening and releasing the muscle in his jaw. We have been in this room a good half hour already, and he has made zero progress. I have a feeling he expected it to be quick and simple. After all, I'm just a teenager; how hard can it be?

'Cameron—'

'I prefer Mr. Tucker.' He's been calling me Cameron ever since he entered the room, and I don't like it. For some reason I detest the sound of my name coming from his foul, smoke-filled mouth.

He looks at me, nostrils flaring. For a second I think he's going to throw himself at me. Then the look is gone, and I release the breath I was not aware I was holding.

'Mr Tucker.' The officer sighs. 'Why don't you make this easy on all of us? If you cooperate, we can negotiate the terms of your release.'

I look at him, eyebrows raised. Release? As if they'll release me when most of the world wants me dead. They must think I'm stupid, and this surprises me. After all, they know what I've done. Perhaps this idiot simply does not understand the level of intellectuality required to perform such a feat. *Have it your way then.*

'Fuck off, mate.' As if I'll make it easy on them. They do that just fine themselves. They claim to seek justice, but all they seek is a simple finish to each case, purposefully avoiding any complication. I'll give them a complication. In fact, I've dedicated two years of my life

to provide them with a case so complicated, so radical, so unexpected, that it will blow their fucking minds. Try avoiding this, assholes.

The police officer opens his fist and starts drumming his fingers forcefully on the table. I have a feeling he's fantasising about strangling me.

'Fine, kid. If you're not going to tell me how to stop it, how about you tell me how you did it?'

'I'm not a fucking kid.' The word annoys me. My sister was a kid, but me? I have not been a kid in a long time.

'All right then, *Mr Tucker*. Would you please tell me how you did it, *sir*?'

Ah, he thinks he's funny. Either that, or he is seriously sick of dealing with me. I suppose the latter is more likely. He's, what, in his late fifties? I guess he's been in this field for a while, having worked his way up in order to not have to deal with 'kids' like me. This is the big league, where the *real* crimes are dealt with. Too bad for him that I'm a nineteen-year-old criminal mastermind, having performed the crime of a century. The way I see it he is lucky to be dealing with me; he'll go down in history as the guy who interrogated the prodigy hacker who brought about social destruction. I must say, however, that I am a bit insulted. I mean, there must be someone better qualified to deal with a crime of this level, right?

'To be honest, mate, I don't think there is any point in explaining it to you. You wouldn't be able to keep up.' Obviously I know that behind the glassy wall to my right there is a bunch of people watching, listening and recording this interrogation. Among them there are undoubtedly a few fellow hackers who will be able to understand most of my procedure. However, like I said previously: I am not here to make it easy on them.

'Try me.'

Now would you look at that; the police officer wants to play hacker.

'Have it your way,' I say, shrugging. 'I'll give you the simple version. I hacked into the mainframe, placed the virus, and then all hell broke loose across the world as the virus fulfilled its purpose. The end.'

His fingers stop moving, and he stares at me with a dead expression on his face. I take it he is not amused, then?

‘How about you try again, kid? This time, with a bit more credit to my brain capacity.’

‘Nah’, I say, with another shrug, choosing to ignore the way he addresses me. ‘I don’t feel like giving away my secrets.’

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. If I could read his mind, I bet I would have heard him slowly counting to ten.

‘Then why?’ he asks, releasing a sigh that speaks for all his impatience and frustration. ‘What can you possibly gain from this?’

Someone has not done his homework. Out of all the questions he has asked, this is the one with the most obvious answer.

‘You know why.’

He looks at me for a while, eyes narrowed, considering.

‘I assume you’re referring to your last couple of visits with us?’ he asks.

I don’t answer. I look at the table, but I’m not seeing it. The primary school is in front of me. I enter it, walking quickly down the corridor with determined steps; I know where I’m going. I open the door to the classroom. I ignore the voices around me, the questions addressing the reason for my visit. They need not wonder for long. I grab one of them by the hair, dragging her with me to the next one. I grab her hair too, and then I slam their heads together. I can vaguely hear screaming around me, but I do not care. I push them to the floor. I grab the collar of one of the guys, and I punch him in the face with every ounce of my strength. He goes flying. I approach the next one; they must all pay. Then I feel a pair of big, strong arms around me, locking my own arms to my sides. I struggle, lunging for the guy in front of me, desperate to free my hands and create as much pain as I’m filled with. Then I feel a hand on my throat, pressing at a spot behind my ear, and everything goes black.

‘Mr Tucker. *Mr Tucker.*’

I look up at the officer. He stares at me, puzzled. It seems I zoned out. I take a deep breath. ‘Partly’, I said, at last answering his question. I suppose the least I could do was spare his blood pressure.

‘Look, kid’, he said, releasing another sigh. ‘I understand that your sister’s suicide has been hard on you—’

‘It was no fucking suicide! She was killed by cowards hiding behind a computer—’

‘Hiding behind a computer? Not too different from you that way, then?’

I stare at him, incredulous. Did he just compare me to *them*?

‘I do not *hide*. My virus has ensured that what happened to Chloe will never happen again. It will produce more good than anything you have ever done, you piece of—’

‘Good?’ he asks. ‘Have you watched the news lately, kid? Do you have any idea how many suicides your virus has caused? The only killer here is you.’

I stand up. I’ve had enough of this pathetic excuse for a police officer.

‘If people kill themselves because they can no longer log onto Facebook, then the world is in need of this virus even more than I thought, *officer.*’

Then I head for the door. I do not get far. I am slammed into the wall, an arm against my throat, blocking my air. The man is huge, I’ll give him that.

‘Where do you think you’re going, kid?’ His eyes bore into me, and his breath stinks of cigarettes. I am weirdly satisfied to be right about him being a smoker.

‘I’m not a fucking kid.’ I’m barely able to force the words out through his hold.

‘Shut up.’ He puts more pressure on my throat, making me gasp for air.

‘That is enough, Officer Drayton.’

The pressure lessens slightly, and we both turn towards the now open door and the woman standing in front of us.

‘Release him.’

To my surprise, he does. My hands automatically reach up to my throat, carefully rubbing at the sore spot. I can probably sue him for that.

‘Please take a seat, Mr Tucker.’

‘But ma’am, he’s my suspect—’

‘Not any more, Officer Drayton. He is my suspect now. You may take a break. Go have a smoke, perhaps; you seem like you may need one.’

I have to stifle my laugh. Reluctantly I take a liking to this woman, whoever she is.

Officer Drayton leaves the room with a bitter expression on his face, and I happily sit back down in my chair. The mysterious woman turns towards the glassy wall.

‘Cut the recording and leave the room.’

In most cases those words would have worried me, but not in this one. A turn of events is taking place, and I have a feeling it will be in my favour.

The woman turns her back on the glassy wall and sits down in the chair formerly occupied by Officer Drayton.

‘May I call you Cameron?’

‘As long as you tell me who you are and what you want.’

She nods.

‘Fair enough. My name is Melissa Hamilton, and I work for Interpol.’

Interpol.

I have indeed made it to the big league. My level of excitement stuns me, shocking as electricity, but I stay calm, making sure to keep my face neutral. Then I nod in approval. This is perfect; I am finally dealing with someone who matters.

‘I have a proposition for you’, she continues, ‘and I would like you to consider it carefully.’

I shrug. ‘Sure.’

She looks at me for a second. Then she nods to herself, as if answering a question.

‘Very good. Now, Cameron, you are probably aware of the consequences your virus has brought upon the world. Apparently, shutting down all social media nearly has the effect of an apocalypse, and you are the man who brought it about. We have every right to put you in jail for this. Still, I must admit, there is something stopping me from giving that order. Do you have any idea what that might be?’

‘I’m afraid I do not, Melissa.’

She raises her eyebrows at my use of her first name, but lets it pass.

‘The thing is, Cameron, that creating such a virus requires incredibly high skill and intelligence. None of the people working for me has seen its like. They have certainly not been able to remove it, and most of them are in fact not sure that they could create one themselves. These people are highly educated; they are among the most brilliant minds of our time, and yet you upstage them. Because of this I cannot deny that I am impressed with you, no matter the circumstances. The proposal I have for you, then, is this: If you shut down the virus, I will offer you a position in my Intelligence Force. In that position you will have the opportunity to bring justice to victims of cybercrimes; victims such as your sister, Chloe.’

Cybercrimes. I like that word; it sounds more serious than cyberbullying, more official; more like a punishable offense.

‘Let me see if I get this straight: If I shut down the virus, I can work for you. If not, I go to jail. Yes?’

Melissa nods.

‘Is that even a choice?’ I ask, a grin spreading across my face. Melissa smiles back.

‘I take it that means you have made up your mind?’

‘Indeed I have.’

‘Then welcome aboard, Cameron.’

She offers me her hand, and I take it. I cannot seem to wipe the grin off my face. Everything has gone exactly according to the plan.

ALLAN LAKE

and Florence

from the comal ether

John

of the fifty years previous 'us'

oh, it's you John

(without exclamation)

laughter of the girl

Emily Dickinson did call Death civil and kind

Unlike our Aunt Florence we are now soundless

Her other half is . . . some-here

as is the ongoing conversation's other half

but not like phone calls on a train

The couple are now alone in the same what?

Her worn story is becoming our story

We never knew John

(enter Nurse, a buzzing fly)

only knew of John's brevity. How death ...

Oh, she's going

(downward inflection)

came for him one day when she was the age

of our own adult children

before she could conceive

Yet silent as snowfall, without witness

here, for her, he enters again, unfettered

through what hole no body can say

Then the Aunt Flo we've always known

the Florence we never knew

(exit fly, mercifully)

is engaged again, somewhere else

flown

MICHAEL J LEACH

Green light

I

get

out of

the back seat

of the moonlit jeep.

I smell pine trees and see breath clouds.

The burly man next to me loads his gun and shoots me

a broad grin, the light of my headlamp dancing like an aurora on the dark snowfield.

My white teeth chatter as he pats my shaky shoulder.

'Chill', he breathes. 'Bear attacks are rare.'

We crunch fresh snow till

we freeze and

gasp at

green

light.

Eight minutes, 20 seconds, and an instant

Scientists maintain that
it takes just
eight minutes and
20 seconds
for invisible cosmic travellers to depart an ever-burning orb,
traverse 150 million km of space,
filter through five layers of gases,
and reach an ever-orbiting orb.
Scientists also maintain that, upon arrival,
the cosmic travellers instantly absorb into exposed objects,
bounce off every surface,
refract through curved lenses,
and enter ever-gazing orbs.
In that same instant, among other things,
the welcome travellers also heat half a world of water,
paint landscapes and cityscapes,
change the phases of matter,
fabricate the hands of time,
energise solar panels and flora,
produce multicoloured spectra,
warm an enormous atmosphere,
refract through panes of glass,
illuminate stained glass stories,
and heat half a world of lifeblood.
and an instant.
20 seconds,
eight minutes,
All of this takes place in just

JOYCE PARKES

Diamond cutter

(For BHG, BMG, JMGP. Lo Nafseek Lirkod)*

Am-am-Amsterdam
where Josie's
great great-grandfather
J-J-Joseph
was a diamond cutter
with a stutter,
enabling him to cut
I will toil to have
you shine
you g-g-gem
even if you would be
put in a box
or a d-d-drawer
in Arnhem or Serang.

** Lo nafseek lirkod: ... And never stop dancing.*

Jake's and Jedda's text

As skies hold
the moon's wink
Jedda would
sketch a cloud's
blink, when cyclones

bully water and
land, Jake and Jedda
will help friend
and foe. When clouds
begin to sneeze,

Jedda may issue
a tissue—when floods
frown at fields
and sanctuaries
Jake might sketch

a platform's par. When
the Reef* ceases
to grow, climate change
thwarts
tenable tomorrows.

* The Great Barrier Reef: 93% bleached.

ANNA HAYMAN-ARIF

NightFlight

An elbow	
	crooked
at just	
the right	
angle	
can be	
the difference	
	between
sleep	
that	
heals and	
wounded,	
	bitter
wakefulness.	
The slide into	
	oblivion
is turbulent	
at times.	
I think of	
wings that	
	fly
	soar &
	glide
until my	
mind desists	
and all	
is numb	
with the joy	
	of flight.

Internal seas

Inside it is a turmoil.
Roiling waves meet lacerated clouds
and she is tiny in the boat.
No.
Boat is too large a word.
A raft of bits of
salvaged longings, regret.
Knuckles white and tendons
straining. There she goes,
down the sliding grey
of water, holding her face
as though it might slip off
and fall
into the yawning
hungriness
of infinite depths.

Foam.
Creamy with a
multitude of teeny
bubbles
that join
to form a mass
in harmony.
They sing
and she is sunk.

Her arm is elegant
as it flails in
the translucent
glassy greens
and deepening blue.
Ankles are poised,
pointing downwards,
toes lead the way.
Black is
everybody's colour.

RAELKE GRIMMER

The edge of silence

THE CLATTER OF fingernails on keyboard keys disrupts the words as I type. A pen is softer, less insistent and busy, but disrupts nonetheless. I hear the words as they appear on the page. Then I see them, and they become louder and softer all at once: louder in the private enclave of my computer hard drive, louder in my mind. Softer in the ocean of words piled high on bookshop shelves, softer still in seas that storm across the online stratosphere.

The noise began early. A persistent buzzing, temporarily deterred, but never for good. I was all of six when I received my first lesson in plagiarism. Already, I had decided I wanted to be a writer. Not because I possessed some great affinity with words beyond my years, or because my primary school teachers pinpointed an artistic way within me, but because I loved to read. I disappeared beneath blankets and into couch cushions for hours, buried firmly into pages. Long car drives to visit family interstate became bearable when I was lost in another world. One day, an adult suggested that because I like reading so much, maybe I would like to write books myself one day. I pondered the idea. It had never occurred to me that people could create lives for a job. I became so lost in the stories themselves that when I read I hadn't yet begun to consider the people who invented them. I made the firm decision to be a writer that very day.

On the afternoon I received my first schooling in plagiarism, I had decided to write something. The purpose was really to practice my handwriting, rather than construct a masterpiece—I owned one of the messiest scrawls in my Year One class, and I envied the small, neat letters my friends managed to produce. I'd recently devoured a new book: *Baby-sitter's Little Sister #63, Karen's Movie*. In this edition, Karen, the seven-year-old protagonist, decides to make a movie with her friends. She writes her own script for the film, and I meticulously copied out this script onto unlined A4 pieces of paper, using my neatest handwriting. Without faint blue lines to guide my letters, the sentences

sloped sideways across the page. As I reached the end of each piece of paper, I carefully inserted the pages into a display folder. Mum wandered past the lounge room as I completed the final page. I proudly showed her my creation.

'Did you write this?' Mum asked.

'Yes', I said. Technically, I had.

'Wow! That is so clever.' She took her time to read through the folder, and I realised that she thought I had made up the story, not just written it out. Guilt seeped into my skin, but I didn't understand why.

'I wrote it from the book', I admitted. I showed her the source of my creation.

'Oh. Well, you know, that's not really okay to do.'

'I still wrote it though!' I pointed to my handwriting.

'Yes, but it is not something you made up. You can't take other people's words.' I took my folder back from my mother and flicked through the sheets, admiring my careful handwriting.

At seven, I learned to take creative licence. School on Monday morning began the way all Mondays did, with the teacher asking us to write about what we did on the weekend. Pencils scratched across paper. I thought for an extra moment before I began to write. There were only so many times I could write about playing basketball and riding bikes up and down the driveway. That morning, I combined my weekend with a film I had recently seen: I wrote that a friend came over and she, my brother and I dressed up as aliens and threw cream pies at each other. I even drew a picture to illustrate. It was a huge exaggeration of the truth (we built a fort out of sheets and pegs and played Uno) and I expected my teacher to call me out on it when I went to show her my work. But she read the story with a smile on her lips, corrected my spelling and told me my weekend sounded like fun. I returned to my desk, clutching my exercise book, confused: why didn't I get in trouble for lying? I knew my teacher did not believe what I had written. I confessed to my mum (a primary school teacher herself) later that week, and she told me it didn't matter that I had made it up: the purpose was simply to write something.

By fifteen, the buzzing was louder. More persistent. I read an article that declared that you cannot call yourself a writer until you have finished a piece of writing. I took great offense at this, because this had always been my major weakness: my stories were either too short, or unfinished. I was determined to prove to myself that I could fit the category of a real writer, and I started getting up an hour earlier than necessary before school each day to spend time writing my first young adult novel. An old box computer had travelled around our house before landing on the desk in my bedroom. I started setting my alarm for five forty-five instead of six forty-five, and spent a peaceful hour each morning hacking away at my keyboard, wrapped in the quilt from my bed, backing up the file on a yellow floppy disk. I finished the 28,000-word manuscript before my sixteenth birthday. Short for a novel, but it surpassed my previous efforts by a good 20,000 words. I will never forget the elation I felt when I typed the final full stop: I was now a writer. Yet it was a private elation; one I could not share with others.

At eighteen, I enrolled in a creative writing degree and shared my writing with others for the first time. I learned that it is one thing to tell people you want to be a writer and another to actually enrol in a degree in order to do so. People interpreted ‘creative writing degree’ as ‘high school English teacher’. I enrolled because I wanted to write, and so I wrote. I wrote extensively across different genres throughout my degree and after: short stories, young adult, poetry, nonfiction, arts reviews, micro-fiction. I graduated without knowing which genre or mode of writing felt like home to me. I still haven’t found the writing space I instinctively gravitate towards.

Throughout my degree I quickly learned that creative and academic writing masquerade as very different forms of writing (although they are more similar than they care to admit). In my degree, we were required to move seamlessly between these two different modes: we had to articulate our processes, stylistic choices and themes, while also producing original, quality short stories, and read and analyse works of literature. While I could navigate my way between the different writing forms, I was not convinced that academia and creative writing were destined to marry. I moved on to linguistics instead, but the pull of writing dragged me back to a PhD.

I am halfway through my creative writing thesis, and I am still yet to find my corner. As I continue to develop my craft, I have started to wonder if I am a writer at all. My eclecticism in both reading and writing continuously leads me down new paths and off different cliffs. My first bout of writers’ block hit me for eight months during the second year of my thesis. There are writers who don’t believe in writers’ block. Call it what you wish, but for eight months I could not write. Words that had previously leapt from my fingertips refused to be arranged on the page. The noise intensified. But instead of being part of the noise, I was mocked by it. I am still in the eye of a cyclone of experiences, ideas and words, questioning which of those it is my responsibility to tell. In the haze left beneath pieces of writing shared through social media, where the writers’ reflections are suffocated by hotheaded opinions, it is difficult to understand why my perspective deserves an audience above anyone else’s. In already cluttered conversations, what else can be found?

And so I find myself in a stalemate with myself. Wisdom insists that, to be a writer, one must write. Yet to escape from noise, I cocooned myself in a burrow of silence. No fingernails on keyboard keys. No pen scratching paper. No words loudly crashing onto the page. My cocoon shielded me from physically contributing to the noise, but it could not shield me from myself. As I rejected the buzzing around me, an erratic, tinnitus-like ringing filled the void. Softer, more insistent. As a writer, I write to figure out what I know, what I’m thinking and what I want to say. Yet I rejected the ringing. I moved through my surroundings as a writer who is not writing. It is a foreign place to stand. I refused the identity I had begun to carve for myself as a six-year-old. Ruminations left to flutter, untethered to printed words.

It took time, I admit, and a period of intense frustration, but I discovered a joyous sense of freedom in unchaining myself from the page. From the buzzing. Being a writer is not merely defined by the number of words on a page. Being a writer is a way of perceiving the world. I interact with my world through the lens of a writer; a lens which is difficult to remove, whether I am writing or not. I ruminate and analyse and then, instead of writing, silence.

Silence is an essential part of not only the writing process, but of the process of becoming a writer. To be heard amongst noise, writers must also find silence. I take solace in other writers who have weathered periods of silence. One of my favourite novels is Melina Marchetta's *Saving Francesca*, which was published eleven years after her first book, *Looking for Alibrandi*. During the silence, Marchetta was constantly asked when her next book would be out, yet she herself was not sure she would ever write another. She worked full-time as a teacher during this time, and it was only after she finished working on the script for the *Looking for Alibrandi* movie that she found the space for *Saving Francesca*. Marchetta then decided to leave her teaching position and write full time, to great critical acclaim.

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is another of my favourite books. It was published in 2005 and Zusak has not published a book since, despite the fact he has been working on a manuscript for several years. As early as 2010, Zusak spoke publicly about his next project, *Bridge of Clay*. I sat on the lawns in the late afternoon at Adelaide Writers' Week that year, listening to Zusak speak about his work. He introduced us to *Bridge of Clay*, and read an excerpt. Then he described the difficulties he was having working on the manuscript, because *The Book Thief* had meant everything to him. Therefore, he reasoned, his next book also had to mean everything to him. The words struck me at the time, but I did not know what to make of them. It seemed an enormous ask for a writer to create another work as complexly beautiful as *The Book Thief*. Reflecting on his words now, I understand that Zusak was not being precious about what words he chose to release next. For himself, he wanted his writing to resonate with *him* in a particular way, before allowing readers to find their way into his writing. Silence is essential to the creative process. To be heard among noise, and to find the stories they want to tell, writers must also find silence. Silence forces a sharper eye, and a deeper consideration of ideas. Silence nurtures writing and allows ideas to permeate, but eventually, to grow an idea, one must act. In 2018, Zusak confirmed that *Bridge of Clay* will be published in November 2018, thirteen years after the publication of *The Book Thief*.

In my hours of creative silence, I discovered my academic voice. Where creative writing was impossible, my academic writing began to grow. As the creative component of my thesis lagged, my exegesis took

shape. Academic writing has always come much more easily to me than creative writing. When I write academically, it is not me on the page. It is my research, which objectively has something to say outside of myself. It is not me writing those words; it is the research. When I write creatively, I cannot help but pour generous helpings of myself onto the page. When I get drowned out by noise, I lose my words and retreat, white flag fluttering in the wind.

I am approaching the end of a long stretch of silent cultivation. My writer self has been experiencing the world without consolidating those experiences into physical writing. I have been lost in the woods, with no compass, no map and no purpose or expectations, opening my world to whatever I may stumble across. I discovered many things: that I can dance, a new home, a new climate, a new job, a niece. I am sure I also lost things along the way. What those things are, I do not yet know. And so I am beginning to feel the pull to write again. I am on the edge of silence. I retune my ears to the buzzing; find a separate frequency for the ringing. I want to consolidate the things that I found, and discover the things that I lost. I will anchor my voice to the page, and crash into the noise.

OLIVIA WALWYN

Grey seal

The dark sonar of her eyes
and her nostrils flaring, resting
just above the waterline

breathing me in. In case
she cannot see me, detect my shape
in this brightness, I murmur

into her night sky *beautiful*
and she follows me, does she?
Flint shadow. Flamboyant

under water; inherent grace—
how your shadow's always
far more agile than your form,

her flippers, knotted fingers,
fist on shore, opening to bloom
in trails—translucent kelp

reminding me of the way
my grandmother would swim
each year, we said the year

she didn't would be her last—
insistent—paddling down
the beach, in flowery hat.

Water babies

You're cradled. Sleeping maybe
gently shushed from side to side
I like to think, putting up with—
enduring, my awkward self-
styled turns each end, and maybe even

dreaming, they say now.
What can you dream at 24 weeks?
A sound? The sense of someone
touching you through skin
shadow of a hand, meeting

your reflex kicks? Do my burbled breaths
reach you, and do you picture
briefly—guess at—how it is—
a larger version of your realm,
underwater urchin-state

the big sea outside the rock pool ...
Later, you send bubbles
back through me, rippling
my skin, as if urging me
to get back in, remind me

of a world perhaps we all
knew once, an evolutionary past
inside us now, and dreaming.

The river

One ripple ruffles another
so the trees smudge
and the river
furls like feathers
as if they were going somewhere
but what moves

mostly is the wind in their creases. Moves
the meniscus. Another
tendrils from somewhere
irons them flat. So the smudge
of a tree is revealed. Feathered
branches, bridging the river's

flow, holding still, while the river
of ripples attempts to move.
Two swans, feathers
smooth, cause another
set of criss-crossing smudges
and the tree withdraws somewhere

reappears somewhere
else—although the same river
the surface it smudges
has moved
and regathers—another
re-assertion of self. Feathers

hugged closer. Feathers
must quiver across the somewhere
body of yourself or another—
an external gathering outside your river
while the self moves. While the self moves
under—can smudge.

In yourself a river, you smudge
and outside external feathers
flurry and move
in the breeze unaffected though somewhere
does the breeze know your river,
carry it in to the drift of another?

So the river is yours and also the other's,
that moves you both through smudges
and feathers to somewhere.

KM PRESTON

A thousand thanks

dripped from his lips over the peonies
as the creak of the gate
eased his single parenthood.

The two girls emerged treacled happy,
with fingernails bedazzled enamel
by companionable cousins.

I miss that concise eloquence,
gone with the lurline blue
station sedan with cream top

and the Log Cabin fine cut
sandwiched in Tally Ho papers
that left yellow prints

on a mouth trained in
country etiquette that issued forth
only the minimum of words.

The Gregory triptych

I

My uncle's kindness was accessible
a balm given by handshake.
He knew about down on yer luck
and kept giving until the gauge registered empty.

Yank tanks were left to glisten
mirage like in the yard.
Bright chrome, deflated tyres,
He too had taken his last journey.

At night he dreamed
of Lasseter's gold,
the smell of respectability,
and a car they wouldn't call a bomb.

II

When life dished out ashes, it was the hope
of the reef that rekindled like nothing else.
A rare visit to the library had led him to the book,
story turned to legend, *Lasseter's Last Ride*.
He had it on loan for over two years
as if study could bring it to life.

The memory of bright gold also
had sustained Harold Bell Lasseter

through his subsequent disappointments.
 Failure never could quell such burning need,
 all day cultivating clods,
 the dryness of dust in his throat
 more abundant than particles of gold.

III

Hot chicory shared together
 rides in your phlegmatic car
 an era when lattes were unknown.

Learning to play pool on acres of green felt
 under a relic chandelier,
 honeysuckle scent rising in the heat.

Inside, bare unpolished floor boards,
 a dark cool corridor, framed pictures.
 A portrait: severe and bearded, possibly Irish.

Your days iterated,
 millet husks tough and harsh, scarring your hands.
 Tangerine seed was bagged and fed to the chooks.

Of three brothers you were the brightest
 but your dreamy mind, filled with bush poems,
 was never close enough to ground to make good.

Your death fell like a guillotine.
 My aunt crying, adhered to the coffin lid,
 so haunting, and your end so

disconcerting.

Scarifying

In heat-hazed fields his tractor is a pendulum
 slowly in rhythm breaking clods so
 that crops might take root in resistant ground
 that had no such plans for fertility.

Meanwhile back in the house, her sharp tongue
 marked its will with the bite of a cultivator
 and, treating reticence as stubborn soil,
 etched acid furrows into young esteem.

He pauses to review the tilled earth
 now loosened, scarified to receive
 good seed to sprout and yield in season,
 always assuming the rains.

Young minds too will seek out the light
 and while scars don't go away
 they can heal, fade, soften,
 becoming part of what was, no longer

what is.

Word etchings

for PH

Temperature, weather, cloud formation
recorded late by dim light, scrawled scratched
pages open on green kitchen laminex.

The internal barometer likewise duly noted.
In March a dusty birthday, no fuss.
Nine years in residence, five of them happy.

Her death was loss renewed each year.
The record shows a succession of housekeepers.
Some, like tea towels, lasted less than a week.

Joys also. Visiting your sick baby daughter
and that first time—a weekend—
when father and the two girls could be together.

‘Trout 2lbs’ declares your passion for the sport.
Motor trips, Yarrangobilly and the Snowy Scheme,
are a brief respite from the cycle of toil when

floods in the creek, and at the river meant
fences washed away and calves drowned
as fields yielded to their untimely baptism.

Snakes punctuating paddocks.
Blacks languid, catching the sun
or tigers with their yellow spotted bellies.

It is unusual reading, this daily life,
as most found you a reticent man, known
more for hard work than constant prose.

Days came spent in hospital
and it seems important to you
to record the names of those who visited

through the panic of scarce asthmatic breaths
and work that used up time beyond the lit day,
drought and the crops withering.

Meticulous farm notes, wages, supply expenses,
these might speak of aridity
but I soak them up, each one and all your

ghostly whispers.

JOHN BARTLETT

I lie down

At night I lie down
and dream of love,
wrapped tight
in the muscled arms of men.

On crowded railway platforms
men with olive skin
smile at me with green eyes.

In low-lit back streets
men in linen suits
pass me messages,
written on café napkins,
stained with red wine
or is it blood?

A man with hair alive
like electric snakes
passes close to me,
touches my elbow, then
stands in a doorway waiting,
his breath on my neck.

Men stamped with tattoos
of skulls and knives
whisper in my ear words
that can never be understood.

Love is a perilous country.
Innuendo lurks everywhere.

I still remember the orange sunlight
scorched in strips across white sheets
and your limbs arranged
an impassable mountain range,
the humid air carrying promises
of kisses more articulate than words

Each night I lie down expecting.

Apocalypse

I once saw Gaddafi dying
on a Samsung wide-screen
waiting at the New Hong Kong
for pork and plum sauce
with four steamed dim sims

In aisle four at Safeways
searching for Indian pickles
my iPhone announced
refugees streaming out of Syria
clutching bloodied babies, clothes still on fire.

Down on platform nine
we lined up like glittering soldiers.
Someone announced the apocalypse was late,
signal failure down the line.
Luxury car ads flowed on a perennial loop,
sponsors mouthing cheery messages, like
mouths of vacant clowns, accelerating.

Jacaranda

That November
we floated through the streets of Adelaide
in a celestial haze of jacaranda.

Outside the church
the hearse waited impatiently
draped in its pale mauve shroud.

Inside, your coffin hovered,
preparing for its lift-off
while we trawled through
our memories of you
as if our acts of remembering
might impel you
to return.

Listening for the past

Listening for the past
is no way to spend an afternoon
when boats scud across windy bays
families ricocheting around parks
Speeded up days.

Yet I still hear
my mother in a kitchen
flooded with the smell of baking scones
listening to 'Portia faces Life'
from a cracked bakelite near the kettle.

My whistling father
bending over strawberry beds,
bees buzzing in blue salvia.

Or I hear too much silence
in empty college chapels,
the whack of leather straps
on young boys' hands,
their stifled sobs at night.

The past can be so selective,
a country of smudged memories.
Sometimes
the past is unpredictable.

ANTONY DUNFORD

A homecoming

THE OLD MAN sat down at his table on the veranda. He took off his hat and placed it on the table beside him. The scrape of his chair brought the girl carrying rum and a jug of water. He never asked for anything else. She put them on the table and went back into the bar. He stared across the packed earth of the road at the church, squinting in the ailing light. He sipped. An insect buzzed by his ear, ignored. It fizzled on the blue neon element above and fell to the wood. The blue light made the old man's skin look grey.

'The curate is drunk again', he said to no one. He reached into his jacket for the newspaper and used it to fan his face with long, slow strokes.

Across the street the curate leaned in the doorway of the church. He moved a little, as if in a breeze. He had lost or forgotten his hat. He was lost in the darkness as the sun slid away, and he seemed to slide with it. There was a noise, glass on stone, then a sharp intake of breath. The old man's flesh textured; an ephemeral cold. He shivered, drank again. There was no further sound from the churchyard.

A young couple walked slowly past. The young man wore a light suit, the young woman a plain blue dress. She had her arm through his. They each inclined their head politely to the old man. The old man closed his eyes and lowered his chin in reply. They walked on, looking straight ahead. They stayed on the road around the bend towards the docks. The old man watched them until they were out of sight.

'It is good to see the young dress smartly', the old man said to no one. He took his handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed a bead of sweat from his cheek. He finished his rum on the half hour.

The girl brought another rum. The old man fanned his face. He could hear a truck on the tarmaced road on the other side of the church. The noise it made in the otherwise quiet night was an act of violence. The old man felt cold inside, for a moment.

Two men who were known to the old man came the other way along the road, from the dock. They would greet him, go inside the bar, drink beer and talk about how there were not as many fish as there once were, which was as well, as there are not as many fishermen either. They did greet him, but they did not go inside the bar, not immediately.

‘Miller has left’, one of the men said to the old man.

‘He has gone to America to live with his daughter’, the other man said.

‘Her husband left her and she needs someone to sit with the children when she is at work’, the first said.

‘He left her for another woman’, said the second.

‘She works for the American government’, the first added.

There was a stillness.

‘Miller is a good man. I hope he finds his peace in America’, said the old man.

‘He will miss this town’, the second man said.

‘No, he will miss the sea’, said the first man. ‘His daughter lives in Colorado. They have mountains and snow.’

‘I have never seen either’, said the second man. And with that they went inside the bar and ordered beer.

The old man took a sip of rum. Something fluttered along the edge of his peripheral vision. Probably a bat, but it did not come back. He watched the sky above the roofs for a little while. There were many stars. It would be a cold night later.

‘It is hot’, a voice said. The old man looked up. The speaker was younger than him, but not as young as he had once been. He wore a light suit, but no hat. ‘It has been a long time, old man.’

An insect fizzled on the neon element, its corpse fell to the wood.

The old man nodded once, a sign to sit.

‘Some rum for the mayor’s son’, he said to the girl.

‘He is no longer the mayor’, said the younger man, taking the second chair at the old man’s table.

‘You are still his son.’

‘I am my own self.’

‘I only know you as his son.’

‘I am Stephen.’

The girl brought a glass of rum.

‘Bring him some water’, said the old man.

‘You have water’, the girl said without thinking first.

‘This is my water. Bring him his water.’

‘You never drink your water.’ Her eyes were black. An empty black, as night over a cloud-cloaked sea.

‘Water is life. You need water, even if you do not drink’, said the old man. The girl shrugged, and went for water.

‘What is it with her?’ said Stephen.

‘She used to wait tables. Then she found great love. They were together long enough for the dreams she dreamed as a child to feel like more than dreams. Then he left on a ship. She still waits tables. But it is not the same.’

The girl returned with a jug of water. Stephen watched her. He nodded thanks, which she ignored. She slipped back into the bar as a ghost.

‘She is attractive’, said Stephen.

‘She is a woman’, the old man shrugged. To him all women were attractive.

Stephen poured some water into his rum, then sipped. Five young men, dressed for fun or folly, walked past towards the docks. They were at the age when they were outside time. They were loud, their voices alive and alight, and the night echoed for some time afterwards.

‘What is new, old man?’

‘Nothing is new but the day, and this day is old.’

Stephen smiled. ‘I forgot you always answer the question as it was asked.’

‘You are not old enough to forget, and it is not wise to forget things that happened a long time ago.’

Stephen shrugged. He finished his rum. 'I am used to longer drinks', he said.

The girl brought him another rum. She went back into the bar.

'She is good. I didn't have to ask.' Stephen added water to the rum.

The old man said nothing. He had placed his newspaper on the table. He took it up again and fanned himself once or twice. He replaced it on the table. 'I would like to know about Stephen', he said.

'I have been in Europe.' Stephen sipped. He poured a little more water into the rum. He sipped again, nodded, satisfied. He stretched his legs, made his shoulders comfortable against the whitewashed wall.

'Europe is a big place', said the old man.

'I have been in Spain, Italy, Austria, Germany and Greece. I worked for a chain of hotels.'

'I did not know that', said the old man. There was that flutter on the edge of his vision again. It must be a bat, though he'd not seen a bat in town since, well, he didn't remember. He took a sip.

'You worked for a chain of hotels. You, the mayor's son?' said the old man.

'It is different in Europe. Bigger. Faster. Brighter. It starts out refreshing. But it does not end that way.'

'Nothing is refreshing for very long. But you were the mayor's son.'

'Not in Europe I was not. In a town of twenty thousand people the mayor will have a son, and the people may know who his son is. But in Europe, it's bigger. Madrid has more than six million people. If there is a mayor's son for every twenty thousand there are three hundred mayor's sons. But no one cares about civil servants or politicians, much less their sons. To be famous for doing nothing in Europe you need to be beautiful. If you are not beautiful you have to do something. I did something. I worked for a chain of hotels.'

'Did that make you ... did that make you famous?' said the old man. He said the word 'famous' as if it did not sit comfortably in his mouth.

'No. It made me money. Good money.'

The old man may have nodded.

'The curate's drunk again', said the old man.

'Is he new?' said Stephen.

'No, he is the same one.'

'He never drank.'

'There was a woman', said the old man.

'There is always a woman.'

'There is not always a woman. But in this case, there was a woman. This woman wanted to be seen. The curate, he saw her and trusted. This woman, she stole and left. He paid back everything she stole.'

'The wrong was righted?'

The old man nodded. 'But he cannot forget that he trusted. He drank to forget, and now he cannot forget to drink', he said.

'I do not understand. Did the curate do wrong?'

'He did no wrong. But he thought things that he thinks were the wrong things to think, and for him, thinking is enough.'

'That is sad', said Stephen. 'Sad because it is foolish. There are too many thoughts for too many reasons to go back and judge them. No one should judge their own thoughts.'

'You might not; but you were never religious. For them, that is how it is. Everything must be judged.'

The street was quiet. Away, some streets away, there was some guitar music, but not too loud, just loud enough to blend in with the lights from the verandas and windows. The old man and Stephen sat either side of the table watching the street, watching the street and the night.

'In Europe, in the cities, you cannot see the stars like this. The night sky is orange, not black.'

'It is that way in all cities', said the old man. But something about the way he said that made it clear he did not mean it. 'I do not know that', he said, 'but I believe it is likely to be true.'

Stephen looked at him. 'I have finished my drink. You have finished your drink. Another?'

'Not until the hour.'

'It is nearly the hour.'

'But it is not the hour', said the old man.

'I will have another now', said Stephen. He leaned around to see into the bar and waved his hand at the girl.

The girl brought a bottle of rum and half-filled Stephen's glass. She held the bottle over the old man's glass. He was looking at the darkness where the church door was.

'It is not yet the hour', said the old man.

'It is three minutes to the hour. Don't drink for three minutes', she said. She started to tip the bottle, but the old man turned and held it straight.

'When the clock bell strikes the air is rich; in the memory of that richness I will hear a drink poured.'

The girl took the bottle back to the doorway. She paused, perhaps thinking to wait the three minutes, but then she returned to a stool at the end of the bar and picked up a worn paperback she was reading.

'These are your evenings now?' said Stephen, adding water to his rum.

'The curate is moving.'

Across the street was dark.

'I can see nothing.'

'Then listen.'

The sound of their breathing and, away, guitar music.

'I hear nothing.'

The clock bell struck. The girl stepped out and poured.

The old man reached and sipped.

The curate stood firmly across the street. One moment he wasn't there and then a firm step and he was. His hair looked drunk. A red kerchief was wrapped around his left hand. He stood, steady as a doorpost. He inhaled and walked confidently towards them. At the foot of the veranda he stopped and tried to take off the hat he wasn't wearing. He held his empty hand to his breast.

'Gentlemen, good evening', he said. He climbed the two steps onto the veranda. He chose a chair and sat, a little too heavily.

'Brandy', he said, too loudly.

The girl brought brandy.

The curate drank. Not all of it, but too much. He leaned back against the wall of the bar, neck straight. He blinked several times. Swallowed. He looked at the old man. Then he looked at Stephen. Looked at him a second time. Recoiled.

'It has been many years', Stephen said, offering his hand.

The curate put his hand on his chest, held it there, then wiped it and reached, could not reach. Stood, took two poor steps, took Stephen's hand, placed his other over it, shook. Staggered, released, sat. The kerchief was not red; it was blood.

'My honour', the curate said, and reached for the brandy. Stephen reached over and held the curate's wrist.

'You are hurt.'

'It is nothing. It will be nothing. Nothing new.' The curate drank, held his glass in his lap, stared at the packed earth of the street, eyes slowly losing focus.

'You have been away many years', the curate said, after some minutes. The old man looked at him. Stephen did not.

'I have been in Europe', said Stephen.

'What is it like, in Europe?' said the curate.

'The sky is different.'

Perhaps the curate slept. His head lolled. Stephen watched him.

'What are the churches like?' said the curate, forcing his eyes wide.

'The same. Bigger, older, but the same. Emptier, and some are heated, but the same.' Stephen still watched him.

The curate's head jerked. He had drunk too much. He placed his glass on the table beside him.

'How long is your visit?' said the curate, his head already lolling again.

'I have come back to live', Stephen said.

The curate blinked through thick air but didn't seem to have heard.

'They haven't driven pigs down this road in fifteen years', said the old man.

'Where do the pigs go now?' said Stephen.

‘There are no pigs. All the farmers are gone.’ The old man sipped. The curate reached for the glass of brandy. His hand closed on nothing. He tried again, grasping it awkwardly. He drank, but very little. He held it in his lap. His head nodded.

‘How do you want to live?’ the old man said.

‘As Stephen.’

‘But you are the mayor’s son.’

‘He’s no longer the mayor.’

‘You are still his son’, said the old man.

The curate’s head jerked, as if he’d lost control of it briefly.

‘You are still his son. Some will remember that. Not many. Hardly any. But some.’ The old man’s face was an old man’s face. It had been for some years. But it had found its routine and knew what expressions it would be called on to convey. It was being asked to convey one it had not anticipated, and the result could not be read.

‘It does not matter’, said Stephen, ‘I have not come home to be anyone’s son, I have come home to watch the stars. I know the stars here, they are predictable.’

‘But to live takes—’ the old man began, but Stephen reached across the table and place his hand, gently, on the old man’s sleeve.

‘I worked for a chain of hotels. I earned good money. I earned it and saved it. Here I can live well. Better than the mayor, perhaps.’

The curate struggled, perhaps with himself.

The old man put his hand over the top of Stephen’s.

‘No, to live takes something different’, said the old man. ‘To live takes more than money.’

‘When your mother was buried I thought of you’, the curate said, clear and precise, a surprise to both. Stephen looked at the old man. The old man, a stone, stared at the night. ‘She was proud you had gone. I know your father was not’, the curate continued. The old man’s face was stone. ‘She would wait every Sunday until most had gone and then she would be there, her hand on my arm. “Do you have a few minutes to talk about my boy?” she would say, every week. Every week she would say.’

The old man stared into the night. A stone.

‘What would she want to talk about?’ said Stephen, and he did not want to know the answer.

‘She would talk about her son, how she remembered him. I think she just wanted to talk out loud about you, that is all. I—’ said the curate, though his moment of clarity had gone and his head was lolling again,

‘She would have been more proud had she known I’d come back’, said Stephen, fishing for something that did not come. Stephen looked around. The girl was in the doorway. She turned, turned back, rum bottle in hand.

‘He should be in bed’, she said, meaning the curate. She poured.

‘But he is not in bed’, said the old man.

Stephen looked at her. She looked away.

‘Thank you’, Stephen said. ‘I am sorry you lost what you had.’ She stopped moving so briefly all missed it. But enough to say, that’s the only time anyone had said that to her. She terrorised her tears and they stayed away.

‘Where are you staying?’ the old man said.

‘By the port. Some new hotel.’ Stephen pulled a key card from his top pocket and held for the old man to see.

‘And after that?’

Stephen looked at the old man. The old man was staring at the darkness across the street.

‘I don’t know, after that.’

The old man shrugged, drank. He looked at his glass, empty.

‘Good night’, said the old man, standing. Stephen stood also. They shook hands, holding each other’s gaze for some seconds. The old man walked into the dark, away from the port. He left his jug of water untouched.

Stephen sat. The curate slumped, and started to snore. Away the guitar started again. Stephen smiled, and raised his empty glass. The girl brought the bottle of rum.

LIAM GUILAR

At the site of the Battle of Maldon

It's not the wind that comes towards us,
through the long grass to contradict the tide,
nor the ghosts of men who fell here.

A grieving of mothers, a mourning of wives,
a sadness of children who never knew fathers,
a confusion of those who welcomed a death
then lived lives faded by absence.

They hesitate where sky and water blur
because we have come here, rare visitors,
trying to imagine men who dying gave
this slop of tidal mud its fading resonance.

For the thing itself

Sitting by the window in my hotel room
outside Whitby, the clouds hiding the curving
headland, the gale tearing a dull North Sea then
battering its way over the golf course, I spent
an hour watching it pattern the long grass,
each blade twitching resistance to each
blustering gust, and without writing anything
down, I fossicked for words to describe
movements of wind and rain on grass and sea,
while a lone golfer practised his swing
on the nearest sodden green; a human tripod,
blocked dark by wind-hammered water proofs,
slurred by rain pebble-dashing the window,
striking ball after ball, both of us happy,
neither close to hitting our target.

Three act play

1) **Hotel interior, night**

You were with me in the darkness, curled
 on the unfamiliar bed. The nightlights
 of the hotel swimming pool shimmering the room;
 the sound of surf shivering the air.
 Another dream, perhaps, until your nightmare
 shook us both awake. I held you safe until
 your breathing steadied, gentled, signaled
 you had gone far out to calmer water
 where stars were fixed and distant.
 The rain began, hesitant and then insistent.
 Awake alone, admiring the angle of your shoulder
 the shadows on your back. Although
 come dawn, you'd turn, smile, welcome me,
 everything we did was broken light
 dancing on that isolation flesh tries to deny.

2) **Exterior: Early morning bus stop philosophy**

You left while I was sleeping. Who knows when we'll meet again?
 So consider the mini bus that will take me to the airport,
 stopped at the traffic lights. How many centuries of ingenuity
 produced this banal sight? Still too asleep to fumble my itinerary
 I stare out towards the estuary, imagine a rough man knapping flint,
 lurching towards comfort. He could not have imagined
 the bakery, the weight loss centre, gym and launderette
 the twisted perfume of a cigarette, the woman smiling at her phone.
 He'd know the wind and tide, that space where light and water
 meet and never merge but did he understand 'alone'?

3) **Domestic interior: Evening rush hour**

A good day's work, first home, now dinner's done. So why
 do I imagine a pond too dark to fathom, beneath bare trees;
 imagine being dragged down through surface scum of leaves, down
 past drowned and damaged faces adrift in the darkening cold?
 Unnoticed daylight is reduced to silvered remnants on a table set for two.
 Outside the traffic that she's stuck in is a wall of noise, inside,
 fear, rising from the shadows to the dark.
 In the street, their day reflected in the way they stride
 or slouch or pause to window shop, parents sheepdog children,
 school kids shoal, all moving to and from but moving on.
 I watch them from the kitchen window, reassured and surfacing,
 waiting for her footsteps on the path; the way she struggles with the lock
 the way she calls me from the hall before she shuts the door,
 starting the ripples which will carry us towards morning.

A Neanderthal takes a stroll¹

Water on the rock wall
 along the latticed bricks
 raps
 like the heavy repetitious
 slap
 of a jogger on wet concrete;
 on the beach
 it gentles like pram wheels.

The steady susurrations of the traffic
 shredded by a boom box
 bleeds then shuts itself on repetition.
 Floating punctuation;
 voices from the high rise,
 drift across the hard shimmering
 echo of a swimming pool.
 Metallic shrouds flogging
 add gamelan like percussion
 from the yachts bobbing
 bow to breeze.

A breathless fat man,
 provides the exclamation marks
 on his hands-free mobile:
 Tellim, Tellim, Tell. Him!
 The bright sharp syllables
 of children playing
 on the swings crack
 the dusk around the couple
 by the barbeque,
 their white hands

semaphoring love
 above open bottles.

Rhythmic grinding of the pontoon
 a bass line for the voices in the restaurants
 muted and stale as the yellow lamp light
 stains the water, hugging the shore line
 like a windblown scum. The moon keens
 a thin white A minor and the sea,
 a rumpled sheet of silver foil
 stained black where the breeze is strongest,
 harmonises grass, trees, voices, water, me.

¹ Stephen Mithen suggested Neanderthals might have experienced the world as a soundscape. See *The singing neanderthals: the origins of music, language, mind and body* (London: Wiedenfield and Nicholson, 2005).

Lazamon remembers Ireland

To Ireland, with John, not then a king,
 as a clerk in the household of Gerald of Wales;
 That lover of bad puns and sordid facts;
 ‘Write it down, boy, write it down.’
 Frustration cruelling his humour even then.
 ‘What price intelligence on the open market?
 Behold, Christendom’s most scintillating intellect
 lacking a bishopric, tutoring the Lackland.
 who is a very different kind of prick.’

We were there when the Irish Lords came in,
 like creatures from the dark edge of a fairy tale
 whose heroes danced on the spear points of their enemies
 howling defiance at the overwhelming host.
 Experts in the night raid and torched thatch
 who cared nothing for title deeds
 who counted their wealth in well-fed cattle
 whose country rolled like the melt of their syntax
 ‘And is as unknowable as that barbarous tongue.’
 Expert thieves of other men’s wives.
 ‘Write it down, boy, write it down.’
 Despised by Gerald: ‘Loose-living fornicators,
 Christians who don’t know Christ or his church.’
 Afraid of nothing except the blistering tongue of their poets.
 Baffled by the brutality of castle walls
 unarmoured, no match for a knight in an open field
 but God help that grey rider
 if he chased his bare arse into the mist
 into his bogs and forests and hilly places
 then his armour would become a rusting shell
 for the breeding of maggots;
 his head a guest at his enemy’s feast.

And John, who didn’t need to shave, laughed
 and pulled their beards and mocked at them.
 Killers who didn’t need to purchase Flemish muscle
 who would have stabbed him where he sat
 then fed him to his dogs. He laughed at them.

The Irish Lords, insulted, faded into mist,
 perfecting their resentment.

The Anglo-Normans
 retired to their castles to practise disappointment
 because, God knows, in later years they’d live with it.
 John and his lackeys getting hammered
 safe behind walls. Gerald making puns:
 Taxes raised to pay for knights, wasted on nights.
 Money raised for arms, used to raise skirts.
 ‘Not my best, boy, but write it down.’

First Lackland, soon Softsword
 then names no Christian would inscribe,
 betraying his father, then his brother.
 Offending allies by stealing their bride
 then losing the largest empire in Christendom.
 You taught him well, Gerald.
 Write that down.¹

1. Lazamon is arguably the first poet in English to claim his poem as his own by including his name and biographical details in his poem. He wrote the 16,000 lines of the Brut sometime after 1155. His presence in Ireland with Gerald of Wales is speculation.

LUCY DURNEEN

A chemistry lesson for Bukowski

i like Bukowski very much but
sometimes i think he is wrong about
love

i'm saying this because i was going to send
you one of his poems,
i thought you might believe them if
the words came from anyone but me.

but i couldn't find the right poem

i don't have a problem with him saying
'love is the way we boil
like the lobster'

(aside
from the boiling)

and i agree with everything he
says about a(r)s(e)holes, and the sound of rain upon the roof of
a cheap hotel

but i think he knows more than
he's telling us, i think he's keeping the
best of it to himself, like
he's thinking ha, suckers
no freebies! You've got to learn this shit on
your own.

Well i am learning.

я скучаю по тебе, for example.

But some things i don't accept

like how when you're no longer with
someone, people say things like,
now you can be yourself again!

which tells you something important, it
tells you they have never known
what it means to be your best
self in
proximity

This is the way it is in nanochemistry

i mean it can be proved with carbon
allotropes, which show how
a slightly different arrangement
of covalent bonds—the addition of one—
makes diamond
and not graphite.

And who doesn't want to be diamond?

Without you i am graphite.

There is nothing wrong with graphite.
It functions.

It looks so similar at atomic level
but something is missing
and even the crosshatchings of the pencil,
the ferns, and lunar landscapes, the faces of wild
animals
hawked at popular landmarks, don't

they long to shine?

These small changes, you wouldn't see
them unless you put me under
a microscope,
 my heart sliced thin
against a glass slide

and even then you might say,
you're atomically sound. Stop
 complaining.

OK.

i might tell Bukowski -
Charlie boy, i might say –

can i show you a room on the other side
 of the world,
can i show you its latticed shadows, the arch of
a man's arse in
 the mirror?

love is three carbon atoms covalently bonded
 plus one

love is kissing a mouth that has
vomited, more than
 once
is adding *so much* to
 I love you at a railway
station departure board

love is the Midosuji line

love is identical beds bought in English

department stores

and \$130 spent on gin.

love is my clothes on your body

love is winter light curling over the trees
 when you think it is summer

love is grey pyjamas
 and a moat of platypus

love is debating whether it is
 in fact, platypi

 or platypuses,
even

love is the mime for lotus root
or Korean tourists shouting into a valley

love is the Marrickville Pause and
walking up Marion Street
walking the dogs of the
future inside your head

love is a broken bowl, something
 special, something rare,
kyō ware, say.
You might think it irreplaceable but in the end
it was just a bowl, and
the real wonder is not that
it was made but that
it was mended,
that its breaking opens up its heart and
 powders it with gold.

love is being kissed before midnight
and leaving our pee in the ocean

(no-one else will ever know what that
means; this is how you know this poem is
for you)

love is a breathing hole in the ice,
humpback calves breaching the water's
dark skin

a polar bear, crying

i'm writing all these things and suddenly
i see what Bukowski knew,
something I overlooked at the
start, when I thought he was hiding the biggest secret
of love;

love isn't a simile, it isn't
like anything.

Love is

continuous, imperative

and yes, love is flying in jet airliners, i'll
give him that,
every take-off, every turbulent drop, the fear that
is also
excitement, is
also ecstasy, is what Freud
would call penis envy, all that thrust
from those Rolls Royce engines travelling along your thighs
and
and

love is the miracle of
flight, this dangerous, beautiful thing, the
faith you just have to
have—you *have* to
have it—that this metal bird holding you
in the air (at night, across oceans)
won't stop flying.

MEGAN KIMBER

Gold leaf

My breasts are fleshy, weighted
 pendulous.
 I am premenstrual, eternally.
 I seek nothing, find nothing.
 The lump and bruise on my left hip disconcert me
 I am bottomless
 veiny, scarred
 tattooed
 slowly swelling.

I want money
 so I can buy the things I want:
 more tattoos, tents,
 watches
 linen, fans.

Desire is endless.
 I seek and find nothing
 What could really comfort me?
 A tattoo that says
 God is love

I see as I speak
 gold leaf
 this body grotesque.
 This is what aging is.
 I'm no longer ripe
 the thought, horrifies.
 I wanted you to love me so I knew I was desired.

Daughters of emptiness

Whatever is transcendent
 we bump up against it. Against each other
 and the world we conjure.

Conjure: like it's magic—and it is, but not that way.
 I do it all the time. Dream up things that become
 real—ghosts that turn solid, thoughts

that become concrete. Don't you do it too?
 Intractable, that's our common stance.
 I shake off one dream and slough another skin

and the next dream appears, the next layer.
 And the other layer lies over the land
 like a mist that catches around your ankles.

Just a scent, a hint at a memory. This
 is how time passes, how time is made—
 not in a line, one after the other, but in layers.

The cold tablet

There used to be a cold tablet
homeopathic
my mother would crush in a measuring cup

It was blue, like bedsheets or distant oceans
and it tasted like soft moon rocks
ordust

She'd take a teaspoon of honey or plain yoghurt
and sprinkle the tablet pieces on the top,
hand the spoon to me

Her cool hand on my forehead
the texture of dust and softness
I'm better I would whisper, quietly.

The eucalypt's mistress

Pastels
in blues, pinks and greens.
These are the colour of me.
I remember the edge

as I lay my arm out as bait.
This mosquito will soon be dead.

It is such a warm night for May—
unnaturally warm.
I move my mattress to the floor
sink into it like a rock
thrown in a river.

Outside: the silhouette of
a eucalypt. I stare at it.

Solidity comforts.
I consider my choices—
move to the country, sleep under branches.
Let nature be my voices.

Then I think of somewhere busy
sharp-edged and human
where the trees are strangers, lonely.
How would I live without them?

Maybe it's a part of me I crave
a part that I can find now I'm made whole
by the place that birthed me, shaped my DNA.

VICTOR BILLOT

From the Queen Street Wendys

Hello Auckland my old friend, a concrete block
 topped by scraggly palms in ornamental pots.
 Cosmopolitan for sure, but with colours leached
 out of your underexposed glamour shot.
 In unaccounted time, I walk. It's half familiar.
 Twenty years swallowed by the yawp of age.
 Now I understand there was nothing to understand.
 Outside Father Ted's Irish Bar,
 Mammon blows smoke rings into his mobile phone.
 Tired hipsters grouch over toy coffees,
 sleeves rolled tactically, expressing their inked attitude.
 On the street corner a poet appears, baffled.
 'It seems so depressing!'—this economic powerhouse
 marooned in a hypoxic ocean of capital gains.
 In the games room, rows of pokies chortling,
 cheery brutes with gullets hungry for coins.
 Faces tender with hope, betrayed, before screens
 flickering like winter fire in a warm fug of desperation.
 I fall asleep on the inside of sea green glass
 beneath the tower, and its one fingered salute.
 Have I won? (The hush says yes—silence is golden.)
 At least survived, but like most,
 half broken inside.

Dead beast

The sheep that drew the short straw
 is strong and struggles. The blue knife
 rubs until life drains upon grass and stone,
 until glassy yellow eyes surrender light.
 The gaping cavity gives entrails
 to the metal wheelbarrow.
 Strange bruised anemones,
 veined balloons, purple-blue
 and white jellies, slipping into
 the dark orifice of the offal pit,
 while a dog barks
 and barks.

White Rabbit Obscura

Chantelle Bayes

One

And so the world was created. Everyone a figment of each other's imagination fashioned out of words, in the image of themselves. The child climbs onto her father's lap. *It's my story and it can happen any way I like.* She has named the boy in her story after him. He thinks she looks a lot like her mother right now. Those legs like bowling pins, nose that twitches like a rabbit. When he laughs the scar above his eye crinkles. A slash of white on his skin, a relic from their relationship. *On with the story.*

Two

There was a skin and bone child who cried in the middle of the night. Parents with bills to pay don't panic over stomach pains. Children get sick. So the mother gave him cough syrup, so the father could get some rest. Take a couple of days off school? But he liked school. Then he fainted. Pains in his chest. Just here at the left lung. *Doctor, there's something wrong with our child.* Funny how the stomach isn't where you expect. Not low down at the belly button but closer to your heart. See that curvy shadow on the x-ray? Empty. The doctor gave the boy two stitches above his right eye and sent him home.

Three

I like this painting. A family sitting around a table. A celebrity chef standing to the left. In the centre is a lamb with its throat cut, blood trickling into a metal tray. At least they know where it came from, it wasn't reformed and packaged, given a new name. They aren't pretending it's something else.

I take a drag on my cigarette, fill my head with warm smoke. I draw my fingers along the brush strokes, create long diagonal shadows on the white of the lamb. I think of all the bugs ground up for varnish, the animal fat thickening the paint.

'It's sad, isn't it?'

I remove the cigarette from my mouth, careful to blow the smoke away from the paint. 'That's not the point,' I say.

We stand for a few minutes looking at the picture while I finish. He's so much more brittle than I remember him. Thinner. Duller. Just older. We head upstairs to the restaurant. I order myself a rum and coke, a beer for him. We list significant events, summarise the plot points of our now separate lives. Mum's fine. The turtle died, lawn mower accident. How's my boyfriend? Which one.

'Are you coming home?' he asks.

Home. What's that? I look into my drink. An ice-cube bobs in the black liquid. What is coke? Some sort of nut, a leaf? Someone once told me it was molasses and cocaine back in Victorian times. Probably just artificial flavour now, bubbly black chemical dye.

'I just want to know you're okay.'

I order him another drink and leave him there. Maybe I will go home.

There's a black car waiting for me on the road. *Just one last time*, she says, *one last show* and I get in.

Four

I watch him eat his salad. He's a vegetarian you know. See that scar above his eye? A fox that got caught in a fence. It bit him, scratched but he saved the thing anyway. His fork clings against the plate and he lifts another mouthful of leaves. They disappear between his teeth as his eyes dart around like a rabbit alert for predators. When he's finished, we walk home.

The house is warm. I run my lips, my tongue over his neck. His soft sun kissed skin, like honey. My teeth slip into his flesh, a love bite. His hands grip my shoulders and rip me away. I can feel the warm blood on my face turn cold in the air. Red smears along his fist. The floor is cold beneath me. 'I'm just so hungry.'

I see the teardrops, dark streaks on his shoulder. I put a hand to my eyes and turn away. Footsteps. His body presses into me, his head on the back of mine. So I turn back, hug him and look into dark eyes, filled entirely with shadows. I stroke his head, the white soft fur to his tail. Stupid bunny,

you can't love a fox. He cuddles into me and closes his eyes as I lift him, take him to the kitchen, sit him on the bench.

I take a knife from the holder, run my finger along the sharp edge. The blade casts long shadows across the bench. I chop up a carrot from the fruit bowl and offer him a piece. His nose crinkles, then he takes it in his teeth and chews.

Five

Every morning the sun is pulled up by webs and every evening dropped back into the sea. During this time, a girl called Persevere sits in a room near the top of a skyscraper trying to capture the perfect story in a mirror.

Slashes of light fall over the apartment and fill the shadows. The room is full of glass, clinging to walls, suspended on strings, twisting and reflecting the world below. She carves these stories into onions, preserves them with formaldehyde and places them side by side in a cabinet.

Some of the mirrors have begun to warp with age, distorting reality and showing the world's new shape. A rabbit hops onto the road. Nearly two thousand people slip a chocolate into their wanting mouths at the same time. Life is snuffed out under a black car. A middle-aged woman with five kids and fourteen cats takes another two aspirin and drifts back to sleep.

Persevere stops whittling to wipe the water from her eyes. What will she do when she has found her story? *I don't know. I suppose I will stop.*

Six

Louis sets up his device, a box draped in black cloth. A small hole at one end funnels light inside. On the back wall of the box, an image of the world grows and darkens. They say if a dead body is washed in silver nitrate and draped in a shroud, light will stain the cloth with its image. Some of the old saint's faces never faded. If decomposition produced the right chemicals than the face might be preserved. He had to guess the combination.

Louis positions the camera in front of his rabbit hutch. Sometimes the image is clean, a rabbit curled in sleep, or black eyes visible against stark white fur. Other times the rabbits move, blurring the image and creating traces of movement. His wife, unaware of his camera scoops up one of Louis's subjects and cradles him in her arms. She sits and coos to the rabbit before twisting the life from his fragile neck.

Her image captured, lost in a box and unearthed from a dusty shop by another Louis. Camera slung around his neck, Louis the second purchases the ancient obscura and keepsakes. In a house full of tubes and wires, where devices connect to walls like umbilical cords to a body, Louis prepares and frames his collection. The prize piece is a rolled cloth, stained with the face of a woman. The title scrawled in black ink across the top: *Lady Rabbit*. Her body offered up to experimentation so Louis might have his images of the world.

Five

Every evening the sun is caught with nets and pulled down into the sea, and every morning left to float back into the sky. During this time, a girl called Sacrifice sits on a balcony at the top of a skyscraper trying to capture the perfect story in a mirror. She looks up. *Tonight is the night.*

At about midnight a man walks past the building. She carves him with his glasses on looking up at the building where she sits, looking up at her and she carves herself into bones watching him in the mirrors watching her.

The moon rolls out from behind a cloud. The light catches in his glasses and magnifies in the mirrors of the room where Sacrifice carves. The moon reflects in the teardrops of her eyes reflected in the mirrors back at her. The light is so bright that Sacrifice feels she has but does not close her eyes. When another cloud rolls over and the moonlight is gone, the room goes black and she can no longer see.

What will she do now she is blind? *I will carve the stories in my head.* So she sits at the window, the glass still dispersing strips of street lights over her while she carves deep abstract pictures into bones.

An overweight woman starves to death. A man with a daughter, a wife, a scar above his right eye sits down in the park to cry. A girl waits. A rabbit dies. Someone in black paints white stories on her skin.

Four

Outside she puts me on the grass, kisses my head and closes the door. I look up at her before running off across the backyard into to the safety of the trees. Beyond the bush is a field. I watch my shadow on the grass, black in the night light. I stop to smell a strawberry plant, nibble it then move on. White lines frame black tarmac. It's dark, quiet. I hop and a noise. A blur and the car hits me.

Three

I stand on stage. *This is real art*, someone says. *Radical*. I'm the third installation in a series of moving artwork. We are silent film strips, story fragments spliced together. My skin is painted white and black, the only thing I wear. I sit on an elongated chair. Shadows draw across the floor in distortions of the furniture, all painted on. A fragment of my story is written across the stage in German. The white letters draw the eye, a softening of the darkness.

This is all part of a silent play of course. Actors tour the gallery interpreting our lip movements for the audience. I balance on the chair, reach my hand out towards the painted door like one of Michelangelo's angels. Then I go to the window and rest my head against the sill and wait. I write, fiddle, look at the black and white watch drawn on my wrist, chew my fingernails. Every movement an exaggeration. I'm waiting but for what? That's up to Fritz.

He's the host of this show. He reads us differently with each oscillation of the room. Sometimes we're parts of the same film; sometimes we're fragments.

For the last rotation, I'm sitting on the chair, head tipped towards the skewed door, legs drawn up onto the seat. I create a nice line with my back. My body is all sharp angles, edges, hard lines. *Here she is waiting for her dead lover to return. She will undoubtedly starve herself to death.* Fritz is eating an apple. He delivers his crunching bites between lines. I haven't eaten all day. The audience will notice the sharp shadows painted on my skin, protruding ribs, the curved black lines from my eyes to my chin picking out my cheek bones. My body shudders in jerky repetitions. He points out my exaggerated expressions as I anxiously wait for the door to open. Nina, the actor assists with my voice, a rushed ramble of words.

I think about home.

'Darling the show was great,' she tells me as I step from the stage. When It isn't I'll go home.

Two

There was a pudgy child who ate as much as she could. Parents who loved their children were supposed to sacrifice. A meal or two for her happiness. The father worked two jobs. The mother spent the days buying, baking, wanting. Then he died. The mother beat the child, her fault his heart slowed down. Want a cookie? Well, we don't even have that. Fat little girl, it'll do

you good to go without. The girl grew skinny and tall, the mother grew small and shrivelled. House, job, husband, kid, car. *Doctor, I can't keep anything down.* The road, the rabbit, a bus stop. Streaks of white fur on meat. *I think there's something wrong with me.*

One

His daughter lies in bed just like her mother. Her plump head on the white pillow, black hair sprawling, a new freckle on her nose. He could just eat her up. Her large eyes closed, unknowing, like a rabbit caught in front of a car. He kisses her forehead. Lingers. Tears in his eyes. For a moment she tastes of sugar. He closes the book, lip to lip leaving the story inside. And so the world was created. Everyone a figment of each other's imaginations, fashioned out of words in the image of themselves.

KATE MAHONY

Chance encounter

Alice

WHEN I CATCH sight of Lori at the traffic lights, my heart does a kind of flip. This is my opportunity to explain everything to her. Coherently. Logically. I wave to catch her attention. For a moment, I think she hasn't seen me.

Lori

Alice is waving madly at me from down the street. I recognise her edgy wiriness before I actually see her. It would be easy to look away but that's unkind. Cameron sometimes says I am too kind but that's just how I am.

Alice

But then she waves back and walks slowly towards me.

Lori

When she gets closer I see she has had her hair cut short. What's left is so spiky she might almost be bald.

Alice

'Hello, stranger', I say. I've missed you, I want to say. I've missed us. Because not so long ago we used to talk to each other all the time. She knew everything that was happening in my life and I was the same about hers. We were that close. Good friends. We would've called ourselves Best Friends Forever, if we were still young enough.

She smiles. She is wearing gym gear, a pair of grey sweats and some new-looking sports shoes. The gym will have been Cameron's idea. Lori's face is pale, and she looks different. Older. Sometimes I forget I'm no longer in my twenties and when I see myself in a shop window, I get surprised by what I see.

I ask if she wants to go for coffee at a new café across the street.

Lori

I will ask for decaf. There's something about Alice that makes me want to start putting my Mindfulness classes into practice. And yet it's good to see her. I had forgotten how I liked being around her. She was fun to be with. Sometimes I used to say to her she was just like the preschoolers she teaches—a bit wild and wacky at times. I swear when they were doing their art stuff she'd get more paint and glitter on herself than the kids would.

Alice

Now as we walk into the café, I ask about Cameron, half-expecting she will tell me he's dumped her. I just have that feeling, somehow.

Lori

Right away, Alice asks about Cameron. I wonder for a moment if she means, Are you still together? She once said something very odd about him. After that, we just stopped being in touch. But as Cameron said, there's a time for everything. Even friendships can have an expiry date, he said.

Or something like that. I think he found it strange that two women could be so, well, girly, he called it. As if we were lesbians. That bothered me, just a little.

'He's just started training', I say. 'With the Army Reserve. He's away this weekend on exercises.'

Alice

'That's good of him. Military training in his spare time. Getting prepared to defend our gracious land.' At first, I don't care that my tone is sarcastic but then I remember that if Cameron were around, we wouldn't be going to the café together. Also, she likes him.

'Good, really good', I say again, this time in a normal voice and nodding solemnly as if I really do think what he's doing is great.

Lori

Alice was fun to be with. She really was. Except for the time when she simply became too much for me.

Alice

'I've got something to tell you', I say.

Lori

'Let me check the cakes in the cabinet', I say. It's all I can think of to give me a chance to get away from her for a moment. 'Would you like me to get you one?'

Alice says no.

Alice

While Lori checks out the cabinet I look out the window. An overweight guy in low-riding jeans eats a cream cake out of a paper bag as he walks. An orange airport bus trundles by and blocks my view.

At a nearby table, an older guy with an American accent begins to drown out my thoughts. He's telling the girl with him about his collection of music, how at one time he had so many he needed to store the overflow at his friend's parents. Transporting them there was a whole new story. The girl listens attentively.

Then he adds, 'Once I lived for an entire year on the proceeds of just selling 1,000 of my albums.'

I look over at Lori who's asking the waitress about the cakes—which ones are GF—and when I tune in again the guy says, 'And then I spent \$10,000 on stereo equipment alone for my apartment.'

I should be thinking about what I want to say to Lori.

Lori

I head back to sit with Alice. Even now, chatting to her, a part of me is holding my breath. With Alice, you never quite know.

Alice

Lori is telling me about a film she has just seen. I act like I am listening—and I am, really—but I'm also thinking back to when Cameron came on the scene.

They met online. One moment he was just someone she was messaging and chatting to. The next, he was there in person and always hanging out at hers.

At first, I thought he might've had a friend, someone we could double date with, someone who was better looking than him. He wasn't that great a catch, heavy set with thick black eyebrows that met in the centre

of his forehead. But pretty soon, I realised when you got Cameron that was all you got. He didn't have friends.

He liked watching sports. When I'd go over to Lori's apartment after work or on a Saturday afternoon, he'd be right there slouching on the bed, watching two overweight sweaty guys boxing. It was like he didn't have a home to go to. We'd go and sit at the bar stools in the tiny kitchenette, but it wasn't the same knowing someone could hear you talking if they wanted to. And I think he did—listen in, I mean.

Lori

'This orange and almond cake is good', I tell Alice. 'Gluten free. And huge.' I offer to share. She says no again. We talk about the about the enormous picture of a bear and some skulls hanging on the wall at the far end of the café. 'Weird', I say. I notice she's having trouble sitting still. I can see her legs jiggling.

Alice

One night my phone rang. I was in bed, half asleep, really. I said, Hello. I could hear breathing. I waited. I said Hello, I can't hear you, a few times. Then I ended the call. The next time it happened—again at night—I couldn't get back to sleep afterwards. A few days later, the same thing.

I can feel my feet tapping under the table. I'm waiting for the opportunity. To make her understand.

Finally, I'm ready. I have her attention. 'Those phone calls', I blurt out, slopping my untouched flat white onto the saucer in my eagerness to get started.

Lori

She wants to talk about the nuisance calls again. 'Still getting them?' I say. 'Did you ever report them to your provider? Get the number blocked?' When Alice first told me about them I did say to her to ignore them. They were probably some scammers or fraudsters checking the call went through to a proper number, they do that sometimes. I said you can report them. I think I suggested buying a whistle. Or turn her phone off when she went to bed. I guess she thought I didn't take it too

seriously. But it was not like the caller had her address or anything. It wasn't like she was in the directory.

Alice

She wasn't much interested when I first told her about the phone calls. Dismissive, I would say. I don't think she realised how much they freaked me out. I couldn't even explain why they did.

Now she just sounds a little exasperated. She sips at her own coffee. She's ordered decaf. 'I'm sure they can trace the caller.'

'Look', I say. 'I've worked it out. It all fits. It's fine.' I don't know whether to tell her I still get them, from time to time, but not like when they first started. I don't get freaked out now I know what I know. Because I do know.

Lori

Alice slops her coffee onto the saucer. She's started talking so quickly, I worry she will start getting worked up, gabbling in front of the people in the café. It doesn't embarrass me as such. It's more that I feel awkward for her. She can't see what she looks like.

You have to ignore nuisance calls. Or report them. I tell Alice this again. But I can see the way her face gets all twisted and knotty that she's not listening. She says she knows the culprit.

I wonder if it was some weirdo Alice dated one time. Just the once. So spit it out, I want to say. But I know with Alice you have to be patient when she's explaining something.

Alice

'I know who's making them', I say again. 'I know who it is', I tell her. 'I've worked it out.' I know I can take her through when the calls began, that kind of thing. If she will just listen.

My mind starts racing as I try to assemble all the details.

Instead, I start at the wrong place. 'Is Cameron still watching sports on SKY all the time?' I try to laugh so she doesn't get annoyed. 'I mean, are you sure Cameron is right for you? He's never been really interested in the stuff you like to do.' I try to hold my gaze steady. 'I know he didn't want you to spend time with me. Remember the night we were meant to go to the movies? And he said he didn't want you to

go because you two never had enough couple time?’ Then I remember what happened after this and I try to move the conversation on. To the part I want to talk about.

Lori

She has started to gabble like I thought she might. She starts talking about how Cameron and I met. Hello, I want to say. I know all this. I am his girlfriend. I glance around the room and hope the good-looking older guy at the next table isn’t listening. He seems engrossed in conversation with the girl he is with, thankfully. Alice is ranting. About how Cameron liked to watch sports on TV as if this is relevant to anything.

Alice

I was at Lori’s one time. We were about to go out to a club with some of the teachers from the pre-school. Cameron turned up as we were leaving, looked at what she was wearing—new black trousers—and said they made her look fat. Lori didn’t say anything but I could tell she was hurt. She went to change into something else. While we waited I saw how he looked me up and down in a sleazy kind of way and I knew it was because I was thinner than Lori. I will have to remind her. That’s what he was like.

Lori

I can’t help thinking of that time she said Cameron fancied her. It may sound mean, but just look at her. She’s as skinny as an anorexic snake. She doesn’t have a boyfriend and it’s not surprising. I think she puts guys off. Something needy about her, that’s what Cameron said. I hadn’t thought about that. And, as he says, she’s not getting any younger. Which is true.

Alice

I try to explain to Lori about the calls. But I am doing it all wrong. And somehow we’ve headed back to that conversation we had the last time we spoke to each other on the phone. And that’s not good. I had been so tired then, from being woken by the weird silent phone calls. Worrying about them. Trying to be patient with the little kids the next day. ‘Cameron doesn’t want you to have friends’, I had said. ‘He’s jealous of our relationship.’ I’d spat the words out.

I remember hearing a sharp withdrawal of breath. ‘More likely it’s you who are jealous of our relationship’, she had said.

‘Not true’, I said. And then I added, ‘Also he fancies me.’

That was it. I won’t go into what she said. I don’t want to think about it. But she told me not to call or text her anymore. She said she’d had enough. I did text her but she didn’t reply. We hadn’t spoken since.

Lori

I can’t believe she is bringing that stuff up again. She must have obsessed about it all this time. How Cameron liked her more than me, he’d said I was fat, that he was after her, not me.

Alice

‘So you see who was making the phone calls’, I say.

Now I can see Lori studying me. Then she sighs.

In the sudden silence, I’m surprised to hear the girl at the other table say something. She has a soft voice but I can tell she’s speaking earnestly. She does go on a bit. The man is big, and he moves around in his chair, restless, yawning. He looks carelessly around the room. Definitely not interested in what she has to say.

Lori

‘Cameron was right’, I say. I get up from the table. ‘You need help.’ But not from me. Not any more.

Alice

The American and Lori both start to stand up at the same time. The girl he’s with hasn’t even finished her coffee. She’s holding the cup with her finger and thumb. She takes a quick sip, and gets up, too. Her gaze meets mine, perplexed. I can’t concentrate. I’m not sure who to pay attention to. Lori, of course, but she seems so angry. As if it’s my fault.

Lori

All I can do is grab my bag and leave. The guy from the next table has also got up and we do a little side step between us. His drab little friend stands up. It’s my chance to escape. I wish I hadn’t agreed to have coffee with her. I should’ve just walked across the crossing, pretended I didn’t see her. Better for both of us, really. I should’ve listened to Cameron.

Alice

Lori leaves. I call out to her but she doesn't respond. On my own now, I read the notice on the back of the cafe door: 'Piss off, we're closed.' I get up and leave. I know there really won't be any more nuisance calls after this. But, as I begin to walk in the opposite direction it occurs to me even calls that are silent are better than none.

EMILY O'GRADY

Balmoral cemetery, late October

Overnight, jacarandas flower like dread,
shower the grass with trumpets of blossom
that schoolgirls thread onto sticks like wands.
At dusk, I jog through the Balmoral cemetery—
summer nudges the base of suburban hills,
gentle as puffs of pollen dust.
Each October, the cross country began
and ended at this cemetery. Jacarandas beacons the trail,
vulgar as cheerleaders, around the gum-green scout hut,
the concreted drive peppered with blue-tongues,
along the scrubby train track.
We wore purple gym shorts, hair ribbons wilting
like greens. Anaemic faces blank as macadamia shells.
The weightless girls came in first, gliding
above the infertile earth; my friends sauntered
at the back of the pack, short-cuttled
through rubble graves that sprouted
like stony perennials among tangles of asthma weed.
But each October I ran alone, unnatural
as flying, cheeks bloomed with rash-sick heat.
My classically trained brain hardened
into a glass vase filled with stones
that counted out steps, twitching breaths, as I lumbered
toward the wet aggression of orange quarters,
war cries, pool-blue Powerade,
and staggered over the finish line, insignificant
as a leaf, legs curdled with the furious rush
of swelling capillaries, red as November poppies.
And still today, I lope through the graves, weathered
with plague, at that same lung-strangled pace.
Sunbursts gloss leaves of Moreton Bay figs,

turmeric light soothes spring fever. Nests
of elfish corollas plush from the jacarandas,
late October, like dread.

Trypophobia

There's no beauty in this aerial echo.
The pocks in the spinifex are lesions,
not jewels, festering the earth in a scatter
of shingles, gruesome as disease.
Don't be deceived: there's nothing
mystical here, no cosmic opulence
beamed down to fairy-circle the dirt.
Euler's Identity does not emerge
from the earth in a miracle of math
but still, the glandular land speaks.
Fingers have picked across deserts,
slow as evolution. These patterns
have been gouged on the body before.
Decipher the red language of infection.
Diagnose the contagion: the dot, the gash.

Dalvík

I.

This morning I went whale watching on the Arctic,
metallic as graphite. Humpbacks breached in the distance,
porpoises jangled beside the boat, their rubber mouths
botoxed to smiles in the frothy wash. Deep at sea
we shuddered still; a fisherman on board caught a haddock
over the side of the port. He unhooked its fatty lip,
opened its poached belly and finger-picked
through the mucked pouch of indigestible magic tricks:
oily black pebbles, flimsy starfish, like sand-sugared jubes.
Back on land, he sliced the haddock into peppered chunks,
butter-fried them on the barbeque. I wrapped a greasy piece
in a paper towel, slipped it in my coat pocket.

II.

Yesterday, I ate a fistful of roachy dates in the Akureyri
botanical gardens, read a book by an Australian
I found in a bookshop on the centre of Hafnarstræti.
I sat cross-legged on the grass among the hibiscus,
the Icelandic poppies—sun hovering over the milky harbour,
winged church lurching on the hill. As I read, I dissolved
my rations one by one beneath my useless tongue,
wondered how flowers could bloom to jewels
while my body husked in the glacial cold.

EDUARD SCHMIDT-ZORNER

On that night

As the dawning blue shadows grow
on Albanian's mountain side,
walking down the Appian way with a heavy gait,
leaning on a stick,
a white-haired woman.

Down in a hamlet a blind man is counting chimes,
stands in awe, silent, under the heaven.
Shepherds in the brown fields,
throw down their staffs and run in horror.
'We have seen the mother of times.'

Her last word was the first,
written with a brush
on your forehead.

Flowers and buds know change.
Stars and moon witness beginning and end.
Peoples blown away,
traceless, invisible like leaves,
swept by the storm night and day.

World fire is blazing and death reaps.
Scythe's sound of steel.
Dark veiled in a narrow lane
messengers of Hades conceal
men, who are slain.

Voices call me without mouth,
mute jaws
and an oath of revenge.

DAVID HOWARD

Made in New Zealand

I see skyscrapers as war memorials: all those people, gone without turning off the lights. The lights are not the only things that are burning. To Hell with them. Some memories cannot be assigned a floor;

they are not like important letters brought to the front counter after it has closed; they are more like those name-tags torn from clothes *Made in New Zealand*. There is a desperation that Mum knows

hunched over a sewing machine, she repairs the tears in hearts too. She believes a demon is an angel whose straight hair parts on the left. Inside the right pocket of his dinner jacket

there's a copy of the New Testament, unread. Don't forget the left pocket—there's the Old Testament, it is so battered the pages fall out when it is opened. She is left shattered.

No way to arrange the landscape so they belonged

The older he got the slower his prayers went—he was divided like a divining rod. When he saw the world he saw through it, secrets

slipped onto the pillow, where she held them against him. Soon she was working the whitest wedding dress, needle and thread between pale red

lips without a word.

Chill

A body's job is to cast
its shadow over
another, as the past
darkens all our thoughts, hour after hour;

your body, never undressed,
torments an older
man—one who cannot test
his love when the nor'wester's colder

and freezes even rye grass
so each sheaf is pale.
Our memories amass
then—such a chilly word *then*—they fail.

Darkening round me

Over-the-shoulder
conversation, the mirroring
one woman does for another

simply, her black hair
loosened by one tug
to cover each secret like night.

The nature of belief, 1875

Slighted like the inarticulate
 we thought to rescue the dead,
 except they lost us. Some men locate
 the soul, taking it as read
 the invisible is intimate
 yet remote.

The dead enter *materially*
 our measurable world, weighed
 by God knows what—so that we can see
 beyond the body, conveyed
 on ectoplasm's jelly—
 as they float

towards us. Think of tissue paper,
 it wraps yet can also trace
 whatever it covers. Disinter
 the figure from muslin, lace
 and calico. We *infer*,
 so devote

our time to the eternal—it's known
 to those few who pass through, then
 appear before us. They're thrown
 by every second question
 as we are by their answers, too. When
 we take note

we project. Named or anonymous,
 each spirit wears a necklace
 made of words, they're not autonomous
 but emerge with each ringed face
 from the dark, which is synonymous
 with God's coat

and hides the divine from us. Discard
 every preconception, look
 for evidence beyond what is hard
 and fast. There is no good book
 with just one ending; in the churchyard
 no fixed quote.

JOSHUA BAIRD

Notes

IN THE LONELY grey hue of the pre-dawn sky, where the hushed suburb of Morgan is reduced to lightly heaving bodies, you have to wonder if anyone else is awake, feeling that same sense of solitude that creeps in when late, late nights become early, early mornings.

In these moments, I long to see a pair of dim headlights, someone in the driver's seat, whose face I've never seen before but whose gaze crosses mine, whose features shift into a warm smile, a knowing nod, a palm raised just above the steering wheel in an empathic salute, the only two awake in the world, ships that pass.

But on the dirt roads that split the back paddocks of Morgan like cracks on dusty pavement, there are never any cars, not at this hour of the morning. Only mine.

Driving past these houses, each one separated by acres of dry grass, yellow and uncut, you get the feeling that nobody lives in them, like display homes designed to simulate life within. There are no lights in the windows. The cars in the driveways are always the same ones, always in the same places like they've never been moved, parked over the top of oil stains that have been there for years.

I park the ute at the front of my home and step out into the cold. The only sounds are the crunch of gravel under my boots, the metallic fumble of keys dangling from my fingers, and the singing of two distant birds, a romantic melody entwined with their wire-thin falsettos as they serenade each other, line by line. Every morning, the same tune calling from the trees across the paddocks; he listens while she sings, she listens while he sings.

When the door opens, its creak is amplified by the silence, and for a secret second, I hope the noise wakes the girls, even just so I could hear a stir down the corridor, a tiny movement. But it's dead as ever. Everything inside seems sterilised and odourless. The blue-grey tinge of

the morning seeps through gaps between closed curtains, lightly touching the white walls and a piece of paper laid on the kitchen benchtop.

The sheet of paper rests flat, perfectly placed so that its edges run parallel to the edges of the benchtop. A blue pen lies next to the paper, and I imagine Natalie lining this up last night, a butterscotch fringe hanging past her eyes, her pale fingers moving up under dangling strands of hair and threading them behind her ear.

Still, through the walls, I hear the birds.

In soft blue trails, Natalie's cursive loops across the page.

Luke,

It's been months. Or has it been years? I don't remember.

Our children want to see their father.

I want to see you.

I don't want to do this forever.

Nat

At the bottom of the page in messy, primary school handwriting, two versions of *I love you dad*. One from Charlotte, one from Holly.

Since I began working nights at the refinery, Natalie's notes had met me every morning when I arrived home and every evening when I left for work. They were once vibrant, trails poured from her soul, her excitement readable in her barely legible writing. In our only form of communication, every intricacy of her day, her mind, her love, was written out for me to read. Every morning, every evening, I'd switch her note for my own. We were like teenagers, writing love letters and sending them over the vast distance of time; from night to dawn, dawn to afternoon.

Since then, in the spaces she had once filled with the nooks of her brain, I can now sense the hesitations. Her words tread more carefully along the lines of the page. I can feel Natalie, once happily exposed, drawing a curtain over herself, leaving a gap so tiny I can only see a sliver of her.

In the corner of the living room, near a window where the curtain hides the soft morning light, there's a small end table that you can see

when you stand on this side of the kitchen bench. On the table is a lamp, a colouring book, three coloured pencils, and two framed photographs. One depicts me and Natalie wearing heavy coats, smiling arm in arm, our cheeks red from the chill, our hair whipped across our faces by the wind. It was taken so long ago that I no longer remember the moment. Once familiar, the picture is distant to me now, like it's from another world or it's a picture of a thing that never happened.

In the other photo are my two little girls, Charlotte and Holly, nine and five, sitting on our living room couch. Judging by their ages it must have been taken in the last year. They were much younger when I last saw them awake.

I'm sure it once was better than this, before they'd been reduced to photographs and handwritten notes. More like a family, less like an outline of one.

I turn Natalie's note over and write on the back:

*Natalie,
We've come this far.*

The pen hovers over the next line, stuttering, touching it softly and leaving tiny blue dots, and I'm sure if it continues to write, if I set it free upon the plain white paddock of the page, it would never stop.

I write two more words and let the pen drop next to the paper.

Love you.

Charlotte and Holly's beds are across the room from each other; pink blankets, pink pillows, soft pink wallpaper, stark pink curtains. The room smells of strawberry shampoo and freshly washed pyjamas, and Charlotte, the nine-year-old, is curled up under the blanket, sleeping softly in her silent, graceful manner. Holly, the five-year-old, looks as if she'd been tossed, blanket and all, from the doorway to her bed, a disarray of exposed limbs and long, blonde hair, a gentle snore escaping from her throat. I place a kiss on the soft skin of their cheeks, Charlotte's then Holly's, and tuck Holly's leg under the blanket.

In the darkness of my own bedroom, I use my hands to feel my way along the walls, around the bed. Natalie, an adult version of the little girls in the other room, sleeps with her open palm separating her face from the pillow.

When I undress and slip under the covers, I'm facing Natalie's back. She's wearing one of my old teeshirts. She used to wear it as if it defined her as mine, a mark left from a branding iron. Then she wore it for the nostalgic smell of my old aftershave. Now that the smell is gone, I presume she wears it for comfort.

For a while I lay with my eyes open, watching Natalie's shoulders gently moving with her breath. I reach out and softly drag my fingers along the little knobs of her spine outlined through the back of my teeshirt. Strange, like a skeleton trying to split the skin and leap from its shell of human flesh and organs. I wrap my arm around her and press myself against her back as if to keep her bones in.

I remember when I used to come to bed with her, she'd arch her neck so I could slide my arm under it and wrap her up, but now she's a row of cold bricks resting on the mattress, and eventually when my shoulder has become uncomfortable, I turn over and leave her, and we sleep with our spines facing each other.

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When I wake, the house is empty. It's Tuesday afternoon, so I assume the children are at school and Natalie is at work. There's always this morsel of curiosity, which I sometimes mistake for excitement, about the notes Natalie leaves.

I'm dressed in my work overalls when I'm walking through the corridor towards the kitchen, and I see the sheet of paper on the bench, not carefully arranged like the morning's note, but left strewn across the middle of the kitchen bench as if discarded in a careless hurry. My shoulders drop when I see from a distance that the note is a short one, three lines, the shortest she has ever written.

I lean over the bench and read:

*Natalie,
We've come this far.
Love you.*

And for the first time in months, maybe years, since the first time we'd ever left a note to reach across the distance between us and grasp at the threads of each other's clothes, Natalie has not written a note.

Before I leave the house, I look at the photographs, me and Natalie, Charlotte and Holly, so long ago, so far from here.

I'm driving to work when I realise that I don't remember how my wife's face moves. I can place the features—her nose, the curve of her lips, the distance between her eyebrows—but not the way she speaks, or the way she looks at things. She used to do something when I was being romantic, a facial expression or a movement that would melt me, but I've forgotten what it is.

RUTH ARMSTRONG

Paper cranes

ALICE'S HUSBAND, PAUL, loves overnight flights. As they board the 9.30pm to Tokyo he tells her yet again what a boon it is to save on the first and last nights' accommodation while making the most of their precious days off. Although Alice does her best to look agreeable, privately she is unconvinced. They have done this many times before, and the night of lost sleep always ensures that she starts her holiday feeling alienated and exhausted. But she understands that Paul's motivation has little to do with efficiency; he simply cannot contemplate the idea of sitting inactive on a plane for hours, then arriving at their destination in time for bed. He is a restless man, which has its pros and cons.

In the darkened cabin of the plane, Alice curls into the window moulding and Paul kicks off his shoes and sprawls backwards, flicking through the in-flight entertainment. They are well practiced in these long stretches of peripatetic solitude. A decade ago, when they first met, they kept their relationship secret by heading out of Sydney every weekend. Their marriage owes a lot to the low-lit cabins of cars and planes, but there will be no stories or strategising tonight. Tonight it feels like they are just two people who happen to be heading in the same direction.

As the hours pass Alice manages to sleep in snatches. In one fleeting dream she is composing the perfect tweet to link to her research paper. Next time she dozes she's standing at a podium trying to deliver a presentation written in some unknown Arabic script. Phrases from conversations with colleagues and patients circle round in her mind, then she is in an unfamiliar kitchen, carefully preparing a batch of tempura made with thin fillets of fish. She holds up one of the translucent strips and finds it has a tiny, worried face. She smiles at it reassuringly before dipping it in batter and placing it in the hot oil.

Alice awakes with a surge of nausea and wonders again why they have persisted with this holiday. They have had it booked for months;

ever since returning from a work trip that left them intrigued by the old Japanese capital of Kyoto. With the turmoil of the past few weeks she has come close to cancelling, but Paul is adamant it will do them both good to get away, maybe even try some cycling in the countryside: do some of the things they missed on their previous visit.

They arrive to a city that is barely awake and take an express train towards central Tokyo. Alice slumps into the window and stares dazedly out at the countryside; villages of traditional-looking wooden houses and every scrap of spare land devoted to growing rice, then a sudden transition to crowded streets of mid-rise residential buildings, giving way to towering blocks of offices, shops and apartments. When they change at Shinagawa, the station is packed with morning commuters. Alice buys a takeaway coffee that is made over what looks like a bunsen burner, by two serious women wearing white lab coats and surgical masks.

‘Back on the juice’, says Paul. ‘Is it any good?’

‘It’s awful’, she says, offering him a taste. ‘I’d forgotten how bad it can be.’

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It’s late morning when they drag their bags across the marble floor to the reception desk of their Kyoto hotel. The concierge greets them; she’s wearing a 1950s style hostess uniform, in keeping with the building’s faded oriental glamour. While Paul checks in, Alice wanders across the foyer to look at a black-and-white photographic exhibition of Japanese waterbirds. On a small platform in one corner she notices a life-sized cardboard tableau of a radiant young bridal couple. When she rejoins Paul he has already booked two bicycles for the duration of their stay and a restaurant for this evening. He consults the notes on his mobile phone.

‘There’s a place out of town: *Arashiyama*?’

‘The bamboo grove. Very beautiful and very romantic’, says the concierge.

‘And a temple up in the hills nearby?’ He shows her an image on the screen.

‘*Adashino Nembutsu-ji*, a peaceful place. It also has bamboo but is not so crowded.’ She pulls out a printed map, making precise circles around the important landmarks on the cycling route.

‘That’s tomorrow sorted’, Paul tells Alice.

Up in the room they stand together looking out a picture window down to the river and the forested mountains beyond. The town is contained in a small basin with tree-lined roads spreading like tendrils into the foothills. Housekeeping has left a light blue origami crane on each of the twin beds and a much smaller one in aqua and silver on the bedside table. Paul holds the tiny crane up to the light, examining the intricate folds where its body meets its wings.

‘I’ll go down and ask about a double’, he says, pulling a clean t-shirt from his bag.

‘No, leave it’, she tells him too quickly. ‘I don’t want to end up in a smoking room.’

He looks deflated. ‘Okay, well let’s change and go out on the bikes.’

‘You go. I might stay here. It’s raining a bit, and I’m tired.’

She showers and unpacks, then sits on the bed studying the city map, having decided to do her one errand in Kyoto while Paul is otherwise occupied. His niece, who is studying Japanese at school, has asked her to bring home some authentic paper for her origami class. She dresses, pops the smallest crane in her pocket to use as a prop in case of communication problems, and heads out.

Wandering into a series of arcaded streets near the hotel, she realises she is in the right place for paper goods. There are antique bookshops, stalls selling rubber stamps and inks, galleries displaying watercolours and linoleum prints, and several large stationers. The arcades are crowded with women wearing waterproof boots, hurrying around with their colourful raincoats flapping behind them. In the best-looking stationer she buys squares of hand-painted origami paper in several patterns.

Back in the room the two larger origami cranes sit silhouetted on the windowsill, turned as if looking out at the view. She snaps an image on

her phone and is amazed, as always, at the technology that allows both the cranes and valley outside to be in focus. On an impulse she shares the image via twitter, links to her recent publication and tags a few of her colleagues who will understand the reference.

‘Cranes in Kyoto: papers from #paedcon15 now online’

Alice would not usually tweet a holiday snap but, for those in the know, there

is a tangible link between the origami cranes and her work. Five months ago she and Paul gave a joint presentation in the grand ballroom of this hotel to an international paediatrics conference. Looking for something to humanise their request for collaborators in a database of rare birth defects, Alice hit upon the hotel’s signature origami crane as a symbol of the longevity that parents everywhere desire for their children, initiating what became a unifying motif for the rest of the conference.

The success of the presentation was made more remarkable by the fact that Alice was incapacitated on the day by symptoms of a stomach virus. Still tired and unwell on her return home she discovered that, quite unintentionally and at forty-three, she was pregnant.

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They arrive for dinner early and are shown to a table on a temporary bamboo balcony overhanging the river. For the first half hour they have the company of a group of young businessmen, shouting to each other across the tables and alternating sake with beer until they look dishevelled and world-weary. After a formal presentation to the only older man in the group, they all slouch out, briefcases in hand and jackets slung over their shoulders. When her food finally arrives, Alice realises she is almost too tired to eat and even Paul’s appetite seems to have waned. He eats a little then pushes his plate aside and reaches for Alice’s hand.

‘I was wondering today, have you told your mother about what happened?’

‘No, why?’

‘Surely she’d want to know.’

Alice shakes her head.

‘There’s no need’, she says. ‘Mum told me at my fortieth she wasn’t expecting grandkids.’

‘I told Gareth.’

‘You know Mum actually said she admired me. Said she wished she’d had the sense not to have kids.’

They both laugh. Alice’s mother gives them plenty of material.

‘Must’ve forgotten who she was talking to’, says Paul.

They are silent as the waiter removes their plates.

‘I wish you hadn’t told Gareth though’, says Alice.

Paul stands to follow the waiter out to the register.

‘I had to talk to someone.’

≈

The following morning, they follow the river westwards before turning sharply back into the busy streets. The pavements are smooth and wide enough to ride on, and she keeps up with Paul fairly easily so that they make it to their first stop for the day, *Kinkaku-ji*, right at opening time. Despite this, the area is already crowded with bus-loads of teenagers, ready to join the queue for a glimpse of the gold-clad temple. They stow the bikes and head towards the entry but are quickly accosted by a group of about eight high schoolers, neatly dressed in black and white uniforms. A man in his twenties, also in uniform, speaks for the group.

‘Good morning. We are from the *Tanagawa* Middle School in Tokyo. My students are learning English and would like to have a short conversation with you.’

A girl and a boy step forward shyly, each holding a booklet, which Alice can see contains questions written in English.

‘What country are you from?’ says the girl.

‘What places will you visit in Kyoto?’ The questions go on. ‘What work do you do in Australia?’

‘I am a doctor for children and my husband is a statistician—a person who works with numbers.’

The teacher interrupts. ‘Just one more question.’

The boy steps forward and peers into his booklet. ‘Do you have any children?’

When the group moves on, Paul takes Alice’s arm.

‘Let’s ride out to *Arashyama* first and come back here this afternoon. This crowd’s doing my head in.’

It’s a single lane, sealed road to *Arashyama*, which starts off winding through suburbia, and descends slowly into a farming valley. For the first few kilometres Alice feels monstered by the buses and trucks but as the road becomes less busy she starts to enjoy the rural surroundings. There’s a light mist of rain, and it smells like damp earth and cows. They stop at a noodle bar for cold *soba* and iced tea, and find the right road to take them up the hill to the temple Paul wants to see.

Finally, they reach an unassuming stone gate with a wooden sign indicating where to leave the bikes. The track down to the temple is a series of widely-spaced, earth and stone stairs, passing through a bamboo grove, and this entry alone makes Alice glad they have come. The long thin trunks reach out above them almost into a guard of honour as they pass through, the sparse foliage at the top filtering the light.

She follows Paul into a large clearing crowded with thousands of small, identical monuments of stacked stones that look like little, grey snowmen. Around the outside are mature cyprus and oak trees, and the ground is covered in vibrant green moss. There are a few people gathered outside a bunker-like building in the centre of the monuments, and Alice and Paul gravitate towards the English-speaking voice of a sinewy Japanese woman in her forties, who is conducting a tour.

‘This is *Adashino Nembutsu-ji*’, she says. ‘Many centuries ago, people from the villages near here brought the bodies of their loved ones to this hill after death. Some were so poor that they could not afford a burial or a tombstone. The bodies were left exposed to the elements with nothing to mark their resting place. These stone monuments—more than eight

thousand in all—are simple buddhas. We use them to honour the souls of all those who have died without a memorial.’

The guide pauses as several people wander away. Alice is surprised to see Paul move closer to ask the woman a question. ‘Is it true that you also hold *Mizuko* memorial services here?’ he asks.

The guide nods. ‘Yes, *Mizuko kuyo* is held at many temples in Japan. This is a ceremony to pray for babies that have died before birth. Here the ceremony is held once every month.’ She turns to reconvene her group and Alice and Paul are alone. Paul takes off his sunglasses and she can see that his eyes are red-rimmed.

‘Doesn’t this place make you feel anything?’ he asks.

‘It’s very beautiful and moving’, she says, ‘but we’re not Buddhist. There’s nothing here for us. I don’t even know why we came.’

He takes a few steps towards the main building, then turns back to her. ‘OK, fine, let’s go.’

Paul sets off. He cycles down the narrow streets, past the tiny shops Alice had hoped to explore on their way down. weaving around parked cars and minibuses. As far as she can tell he’s not using his brakes at all. She sees an elderly street vendor whose eye she had caught on the way up, selling tiny intricate prints depicting the stone mounds from the temple. As Paul disappears around a corner she stops to buy one, then resumes her ride at an easier pace. A bit further down a police car with its lights flashing blocks a side road, looking incongruously modern in this idyllic setting. After riding downhill for a long time she notices that the landmarks are unfamiliar. The buildings have thinned out too quickly; the road is now an uneven track with a wide verge; she passes a rice field and a derelict house that she doesn’t remember, then reaches a T intersection of two roads that look like farm tracks and realises she is lost.

Straight ahead the path tapers of into another section of bamboo forest before closing in altogether. Alice wheels her bike carefully into the bamboo, and stands looking up at the long stems at close range. She hears the trunks creaking gently, and the background sound of the leaves like light rain, and wonders what it must have been like to struggle through this thick vegetation carrying the body of a loved one. The way

up the hill must have been agonising, she thinks, but she finds herself also wondering about the way back down to the world of the living in the valley. In her work, she has seen immense fortitude in the face of death, but rarely what comes after for the survivors.

Her mobile rings. 'Did you see the police car? You were supposed to go that way.' Paul always starts his calls as if in mid conversation.

Alice disconnects without replying, returns to the road and starts the slow ride uphill.

She finds him sitting beside his bike on a low bank in front of a quaint wooden building. There's a sign above him in Japanese characters and it might say 'welcome' or 'keep off' for all Alice knows. She stops in front of him, still straddling her bike.

'You know I'm hopeless with directions. Why didn't you wait?'

Paul stays where he is; beneath his sunglasses his cheeks are mottled and puffy, and she notices his knees are stained with grass and mud.

'What's happening to us?' he says.

Standing over him, the anger drains out of her. 'I stuffed up. That's what's happened. I made the call to have all the testing done. I knew it wasn't completely safe but I wanted to be certain everything was normal.'

He looks puzzled. 'It was hardly reckless; less than a one per cent chance of pregnancy loss, the obstetrician told me afterwards. Said she'd never had it happen before. Do you really think I blame you?'

Alice sits on the bank beside him.

'What did Gareth say when you told him?' she asks.

'He cried.'

'Gareth cried for our baby?'

'Yep.'

'He's a good friend.'

They sit in silence for a few minutes, cooled by a slight breeze coming up the valley. Finally, Paul stands and offers her his hand.

'Up there, at the temple,' he says 'I just wanted to acknowledge it together somehow. If we can't even do that, how can we move on?'

She remains hunched on the bank, arms by her sides. 'Maybe we can't,' she says quietly.

Paul fusses around readying himself for the ride home but still Alice doesn't move.

'I'll head off,' he says. 'I'll be down the road, near the river.'

When she can no longer see him she gathers up her things. Feeling in the pocket of her rain jacket for a tissue, her hand finds the tiny origami crane, now damp and crushed, its colours smudged. She pulls it out and studies it for a while; examines the perfect folds where its body meets its wings.

She puts it carefully back in her pocket, then hops on her bike and rides as fast as she dares; down the hill to where she hopes her husband will be waiting.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Ruth Armstrong is currently undertaking an MA in creative writing at the University of Technology, Sydney, with a focus on short story writing. She works as an editor at the health website www.croakey.org. On twitter @DrRuthAtLarge.

Joshua Baird is an emerging fiction writer from Geelong Victoria. He is currently completing a PhD thesis which focuses on links between masculinity and unreliable narration in first-person fiction. His creative work has been featured in publications including *Voiceworks*, *Tincture*, and *Otoliths*.

John Bartlett is the author of two novels, *Towards a Distant Sea* and *Estuary* as well as a collection of short stories. He blogs regularly at: <http://beyondtheestuary.com/>

Chantelle Bayes recently completed a PhD from Griffith university exploring narratives about the non-human. Her work has been published in *Unreal Estate* and *Axon* journals, and performed at writers festivals in Melbourne, Newcastle and Queensland.

Victor Billot lives in Dunedin, New Zealand. His work has recently been published in *Mimicry*, *Brief*, the *Phantom Billstickers Cafe Reader* and the political poetry anthology *Manifesto*, published by Otago University Press (2017). He has three collections of poetry published, *Mad Skillz for the Demon Operators* (2014), *Machine Language* (2015) and *Ambient Terror* (2017). Website <http://www.victorbillot.com>

Antony Dunford lives in London in the UK and is currently studying for an MA in crime fiction at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. He's been writing since he could write, and will stop when he no longer can.

Lucy Durneen's short stories, nonfiction and poetry have been published in leading international journals, adapted for broadcast on BBC Radio and noted in *Best American Essays 2017*. Her first short story collection, *Wild Gestures*, was published last year by MidnightSun and won Best Collection at the Saboteur Awards in London.

Christina Foss is an aspiring writer from Norway, who is currently studying English literature with creative writing at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. She dreams of writing for a living, as she hopes to impact, inspire and empower the young minds of the world through her stories.

Raelke Grimmer is a lecturer at Charles Darwin University, and a creative writing PhD candidate at Flinders University. The creative component of her thesis is a creative nonfiction work exploring the role of languages within Australia's multicultural society, and the exegesis examines how writers use genre in the creative writing process.

Liam Guilar teaches English on the Gold Coast. He has recently completed his PhD in creative writing at Deakin University. His most recent book of poems, *Anhaga*, was published in America. Full details can be found at lianguilar.com.

Anna Hayman-Arif is a poet, a writing student at Deakin University and a slightly potty mother of five from Melbourne, Australia. She has been published in *Wordly*, the Deakin literary journal, and has performed her poetry at Writers Victoria. In a past life Anna was an English teacher who talked way too much.

David Howard published *The Incomplete Poems* (Cold Hub Press, 2011), which was 35 years in the making, and *The Ones Who Keep Quiet* (Otago University Press, 2017). He edited *A Place To Go On From: the Collected Poems of Iain Lonie* (Otago University Press, 2015).

Charles Kell is a PhD student at the University of Rhode Island and editor of *The Ocean State Review*. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *The New Orleans Review*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Kestrel*, *The Pinch*, and elsewhere. He teaches in Rhode Island and Connecticut.

Megan Kimber is a writer who lives in Melbourne. She studied literature and comparative religion at the University of Queensland. Her poetry is informed by and interrogates the relational practices between people, society and the natural world.

Originally from Saskatchewan, **Allan Lake** has lived in Vancouver, Cape Breton Island, Ibiza, Tasmania and Melbourne, and has retreated to Sicily often. He has published two collections; *Tasmanian Tiger Breaks Silence* (1988) and *Sand in the Sole* (2014). Lake won the Elwood Poetry Prize in 2015 and Lost Tower Publications (UK) Poetry Comp in 2017. In 2016/17 his poems were published by *Meniscus*, *Plumwood Mountain Journal*, *POAM*, *Poetica Christi Anthology*, *Verge*, *Yours&Mine Mag*, *The Mossie*, *Poetry Matters*, *StylusLit* and *Cordite Poetry Review*.

Michael J Leach is a Bendigo-based statistician, researcher, and poet with a passion for combining science and art. His poems have appeared in medical and literary journals, including *MJA* and *Cordite*.

Kate Mahony's short fiction is published in international literary journals and anthologies. She has an MA in creative writing from Victoria University, Wellington. www.katemahonywriter.com

Jo B Morrison is a writer, freelance editor and sessional creative writing tutor based in Fremantle, WA. Her work has appeared in *Westerly*, *Celebrity Studies* and *Joiner Bay and Other Stories* (Margaret River Press, 2017). Find her online at www.jodijo.com and @jodijomo

Emily O’Grady is a writer from Brisbane. Her fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *Kill Your Darlings*, *Southerly*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *The Big Issue*, and *Award Winning Australian Writing*.

Joyce Parkes is published in literary journals, magazines and anthologies in Australia, the UK, Finland, Canada, Germany, the US, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Greece and the Netherlands. She writes in her third language.

KM Preston has been writing poetry for over 20 years, although with time off when life intervened. Winner of an ACT Writers Centre mentorship with Alan Gould and selected participant in the 2016 ACT Writers Centre Poetry Masterclass with Jen Webb, Kathy has been published in *Muse*, *Quadrant* and *Meniscus*.

Eduard Schmidt-Zorner studied economics and is multilingual. After for decades in foreign trade, he is a freelance artist, writer and translator, member of writer groups. He has lived in Kerry, Ireland for more than 25 years, and is a proud Irish citizen.

Olivia Walwyn lives in Macclesfield, Cheshire. Her poems have been appeared in magazines including *Popshot* and *The Rialto*, and her first pamphlet will be published in Spring 2018 (Templar Poetry).

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