

Tincture Journal Issue Thirteen

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Editorial

by Daniel Young

As I pack boxes and clean this tiny rental like it's never been cleaned in the past six years, preparing to farewell Sydney and return to my home in Brisbane, it seems appropriate that our thirteenth issue buzzes with a strong sense of place, particularly in the non-fiction. The cover photograph, taken at La Perouse early on a late summer morning, the first to really feel like summer might end and give way to autumn, stands as a tribute to one of my favourite cycling routes—albeit one that has to be ridden at dawn before the cars that rule Sydney's roads regain their dominance. *Tincture Journal* was born in this tiny Kings Cross unit, but its electronic nature and online communities have always allowed us to garner writers from all across Australia and the globe. Long may this continue! In 2016 we're finally offering yearly four-issue subscriptions at a discount price, so please do head online and subscribe (tincture-journal.com/subscribe) if you haven't already.

Our poetry editor Stuart Barnes brings us a fine selection of poems, as always, from new and returning contributors alike. The suburbs preoccupy. David Stavanger's commanding poem 'Life Is(n't)' begs to be read aloud: "Open the blinds to see the neighbour's dirty laundry / Accept hot tears from strangers"; Mark Ward's 'Resisting Existence' takes place on "our cluster of streets; / a cul-de-sac, a hamster's wheel / distant in the pale morning"; while Rebecca Jessen's 'field officer no. 302' opens by proclaiming that "the suburban dream is a kookaburra perched on your wheelie bin". As a special treat we also have an interview with Alison Whittaker and two poems from her new collection *Lemons in the Chicken Wire*.

In the non-fiction, Elizabeth Caplice oscillates between Canberra, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne as she explores "The Geography of Time", with memories awoken through her ongoing battle with cancer. Elizabeth's poignant and urgent writing has appeared in a number of Australian journals and websites, and I feel honoured to be publishing this piece while also pondering the function of place in the DNA of *Tincture Journal*. K. W. George also writes of illness, and the resulting inversion of the mother-daughter relationship in "Read to Me". Ellin Williams reflects beautifully upon an area that I've never visited in "The Kangaroo River: Landscape Stories" and Peter

Papathanasiou has contributed a piece on the unfolding refugee disaster in Northern Greece, one that puts Australia's refugee policy into dismal perspective.

We have lots of great fiction, as always. Whether it's the supernatural horrors from return contributor Deborah Sheldon, or the domestic ones explored by both Grace Heyer and Maria Arena, there is nothing boring here. Philip Keenan returns to *Tincture Journal* with a strange story from the town of 'Little Farley', and Wayne Marshall brings humour *and* alien Fish-Men to the page while pondering 'Our Year Without Footy'. As always, there's too many to mention! Huge thanks to my fellow prose readers Kirby Fenwick and Michelle McLaren for helping to select these great stories, and welcome to Ellen Spooner, who will join us reading submissions from the next issue onwards.

To start 2016 we have a new column that will unfold through all four issues this year. Emerging writer Megan McGrath is exploring early-career literary jealousy and using interviews with successful debut authors to harness it in a positive way. Megan McGrath is the author of the novella *Whale Station* (*Griffith Review* 46) and was a winner of the 2015 Queensland Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Awards alongside Issue 12 and 13 contributor Rebecca Jessen. We're lucky to have them both! So, read on ...

Making Noise: Part One

Regular Column by Megan McGrath

I was in a foul mood when I went to buy Dave Burton's *How To Be Happy*. The relentless heat had forced me away from my West End independents and into the air-con at Indooroopilly Shopping Town. In Dymocks, the book wasn't shelved in YA or Australian Biographies, so I asked the elderly shop-clerk where it might be. I followed her to the Children's Non-Fiction section where a few copies were squeezed between the DK history books and a make-your-own-skeleton kit. "Weird place to shelve it," I said. She looked at me like I'd never read a book in my life. And worse, like I really needed this one.

At the counter she looked me in the eye and said, "You take care, OK?" *Take care?* I was reading the book because it won the Text Prize and Burton was a local artist doing great things for our community. *Take care?* I didn't need to know how to be happy—I was happy. Three months ago I got engaged in Paris. Two months ago I won the inaugural Queensland Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award (QPYPWA). Last month I hiked the Grand Canyon.

OK. Maybe, to steal the first line of *How To Be Happy*, I've lied to you already. Maybe I wasn't reading his book just because he was a talented local artist. Maybe I was jealous.

I'd been jealous before. Mostly of other emerging twenty-something writers who seemed to know more about feminism than me, and who had friends riding the desks at all the right journals. I had been so jealous in 2014 that I considered giving up the writing game for good; I couldn't seem to get a break, while another writer I knew was publishing work all over the place. In [Overland](#) last year, Stephanie Convery wrote of the jealousy she felt at her frenemy's success: "Of all human emotions, jealousy is the ugliest, the least dignified, the most destructive". Destructive indeed—my professional jealousy was all-consuming, isolating, and I had a lot of work to do if I wanted to change.

Winning the QPYPWA was a start. Unlike many other development awards, the

QPYPWA is awarded for an existing body work rather than a draft manuscript, meaning I now had a bunch of money and support to create something worthwhile. I wanted to write my first novel, but with so many stunning debuts by young Australians published in the last few of years, I knew I'd have to convert my jealousy to fuel if I was to craft something worthy. After finishing *How To Be Happy*, I decided to connect with some of the debut authors who were making me green. David Burton was my first step.

Convery wrote: "The need to self-promote and network in order to publish, coupled with the human desire for a community of peers, results in a social dynamic that is never entirely professional and never quite friendly". When I was paired with Burton on a panel at the Queensland Writers Centre, I was determined to prove Convery wrong. I would be professional *and* friendly. I'd celebrate Burton and his successes, and speak openly of my own. And I would not, even for a second, be jealous.

On stage, it was pretty clear the audience was there for him. While I was speaking about my novella, *Whale station*, a young man raised his hand and said, "I have a question ... for the gentleman". I swallowed the rest of my sentence and tried not to death-stare the kid as I said, "Sure, go ahead", as if I was moderating a festival session. No, I wasn't cured.

Afterwards, I reflected on what Burton had said in the session. About how he had been physically moved to write this book. And the book was good. I already knew *How To Be Happy* was heartfelt, compassionate, honest and funny.

F. Scott Fitzgerald said "You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say", and I knew Burton was a writer with plenty to talk about, including his unique upbringing, struggle with depression and his sexuality. In his own words, *How To Be Happy* takes "the experiences of youth and makes them explicit and presents them honestly: depression, anxiety, sexuality, etc. I've just seen too many young people be traumatised by the cultural silence around this stuff." How could I compete with that? I was a middle-class white girl with good teeth and enough of a drinking problem to be considered normal. Against Burton, against anyone, what did I have to say? Was the novel I wanted to write valid? Was it going to contribute something worthy to Australian literary culture, or was I just making noise?

In the week following our panel, I asked Burton about his experience debuting and if

he'd ever had any of the crazy feelings I'd had. Throughout *How To Be Happy*, Burton spoke of his peers with shining admiration, but to me he admitted he compared himself to others all the time. Of course, he did so in a constructive way. While I was wasting time being a two-headed snake, Burton had found a way to be proactive. "The most helpful thing I've done recently is compare myself by age. So I'll look up what Steinbeck or Twain or even Rowling was doing at twenty-eight and compare where I'm up to in my life."

He was right. I had put a lot of pressure on myself to publish a novel before I was thirty, when most of my idols didn't release substantial work until later in life (J.G. Ballard, thirty-two, Raymond Chandler, forty-four, Mary Wesley, seventy-one).

"The big life lesson, for me, is to accept what's good when it comes to you," Burton added. With a year of funded professional development ahead, I was in the midst of a *good thing*, and Burton's honest advice had transformed some of my jealousy into admiration. With this first step being a success I wanted to know more ways to combat professional jealousy and restore my sense of validity. The only question was, who was next?

Read more: www.daveburton.com.au

overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-218/the-book-of-my-enemy/

Megan McGrath is the author of the novella, Whale Station, and winner of the 2015 Queensland Literary Awards Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award. Her acclaimed short work is published in literary journals and anthologies including Griffith REVIEW, Meanjin, Seizure, Tracks, Writing Queensland and Tincture Journal, among others. Follow Megan on Twitter @megansfictions or visit her website megansfictions.com.

Word OCD

by Anna Jacobson

She collects words in snap-lock packets
so they won't go stale. Each word
in its individual packet, each word
precious. She runs her fingers over the plastic
and stops; one of the snap-lock seals is half-open.

So she melts some butter in the pan, dips
the word in egg and fries it.

When the butter bubbles the edges crispy,
she turns it onto the plate. Divides the letters up.
“Don't play with your words,” her mother says.
“Eat it up, go on.” So she spears a letter,
now yellow-grey with yolk and ink, onto her fork.

It hovers mid-air and she knows that if she takes
a bite, the letter J will fishhook-stick in her throat.
Instead she wraps it all up, hides it
in the back of the freezer.
For later.

Anna Jacobson is a Brisbane poet, writer and artist. In 2015 she was shortlisted for the Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize for an Unpublished Manuscript. She graduated from Creative Writing at QUT in 2015. Her poetry has been published in literary journals including Cordite, Rabbit and Australian Poetry Journal. Her website is www.annajacobson.com.au.

The Geography of Time

Non-fiction by Elizabeth Caplice

I used to resent Canberra furiously. I had moved from New Farm, Brisbane to Braddon, Canberra for work in 2008, but I missed New Farm and Brisbane so much that I flew home eight times in the first twelve months of living in Canberra.

My reasons for loving and hating places tend to border on irrational, but most of my loathing for Canberra has always been tied up in the architecture. Brisbane is filled with Queenslanders, which remain to me one of the most beautiful forms of architecture: functional, broad, and beautifully square. Sydney and Melbourne have terrace houses and crammed together crumbling sandstone. Canberra has fibro shacks, 90s apartment buildings, and cold new developments, like enVy, the one across the road from my flat. It is cold and dead. Canberra has new sprawling suburbs with houses swelling out from their lots, broad and wide and ugly. When the trees are bigger, I credit that they might be beautiful, but when they are freshly planted and don't rise above the rooflines yet, it is alienating.

I think of time in terms of space. Rings which circle out around the spaces I inhabit and broaden and deepen over time.

My first year in Canberra was marked with a circle around my apartment in Braddon and Parkes (where I work), with a long sharp heartbroken line running up to Brisbane. On those many trips back home, I would go to the park on Bowen Terrace which faces out towards the Storey Bridge, the city framed behind it, jump the fence, and sit on the edge of the Kangaroo Point cliffs, where it smelt like the river, crushed grass, and rotting mangoes hitting the bitumen. It was a place I took friends, lovers, and the people in the space between a friend and a lover. A place I would go to be alone, feet dangling, watching the reflection of the city lights on the river. It was better at night. A part of me is always there, jumping that fence with the fierce stupidity of a bipolar twenty-four-year-old with nothing to lose. Brisbane smells like the large wet drops of rain in a storm in Paddington, vivid summer heat with water evaporating off the road as soon as the rain stopped. Dancing in the rain until my dress was so wet I took it off and hung it from the exposed metal beams of a storefront roof. I put leaves in the water in the gutter, and

watched them float away, and drank most of a bottle of chartreuse with someone in the space between friend and lover, as my red hair dye ran out of my hair and down my neck and chest, and onto his shirt as I rested my head on his shoulder in a strange sharehouse.

My early twenties in Brisbane were spent between my apartment and the apartment of my partner—who remained post break-up my best friend—five complexes over. I remember the smell of his apartment vividly, and the way our pet turtle would walk around, getting her foot caught in the drapes. Our first date was on Brunswick Street, at a bar called The Alibi Room, which was famous for cheap tacos and a waterfall in the basement. We sat on vinyl seats and half stuck to them in the Brisbane summer heat, and complained that Brisbane was nothing like New York. We fell in love in New York, under the snow on Broadway and a small cinema where we watched *Lost Highways* somewhere in the East Village. Nothing I can write will ever quite capture that, or the smell of the garbage on the roadside, or seeing snow for the first time, falling on a bench at a hostel as I sat outside our room, so drunk that I am surprised that now, years on, I can remember it, let alone so vividly. I would walk down Brunswick Street every day to get to one of my three jobs, and the hills and smells of cafés and restaurants would walk with me.

My Braddon apartment was small and smelt like rabbits. My room was tight and closed, and the clothes on the floor came up to my knees. The street I lived on then, and still live on now, years later, is lined with oak trees that drop their leaves in winter. It is two blocks to Civic, and I walked down that street every day. I remember staring at the cracks in the cement footpath, and one day realising it felt like home as my feet traced down that path. I live one apartment complex over now, in a place I bought with my partner in 2013. We painted the walls in shades of grey and ripped up the carpet to expose the cement floors.

There are dots around other suburbs from the year I moved to Canberra, small like pinpoints. Suburbs where the various disastrous relationships took place. Canberra suburbs all look similar, but north and south of the lake—Lake Burley Griffin (there are other lakes, but it is Burley Griffen around which the spokes of this wheel work)—feel different. They are different seasons, different moods. There is something broader, wider and colder about the south to me. The cleanness of Kingston and Manuka, Woden in shades of muted browns and dull greens, and Tuggeranong, distant and suburban. The

south has never seemed right to me. The north feels like a brighter shade of green. More shambolic, less predictable, and those strange long streets with dim street lights. I cling to the inner north like a cicada shell on tree branches. I rotate around the lake like a moth.

I've also had stages where I've favoured either Sydney or Melbourne, places to try and shake off the unhappiness that Canberra draws out of me. Sydney enchants me and frustrates me and entices me every time I visit. I map my spaces there around the various people I've dated who live there: Surry Hills, Marrickville, Newtown. Sydney is wet days that smell something car fumes combined with the green leaves from the trees that grow out of the road, buckling the footpath. It is also a place where I feel suspended and liminal, with no history other than frequent trips centred around people rather than any particular attachment of my own. I don't go to Sydney for nostalgia, I go there to forget about the tedium of Canberra. Melbourne is modular and grid-like, the structure of the CBD expanding to shape my overall feeling. Over time, many of my friends have moved to Melbourne from both Brisbane and Canberra, meaning trips there are a strange sort of dislocated memory, where I feel both as though I am folding back into my own past narrative, while somehow in a completely alien place.

On impulse, I spent four weeks travelling around the United States in 2011, because I wanted to meet someone I talked to online every night for several months. There was little to no thought put into the trip, or the impulse that drove me there, but I scribble those memories which are largely embedded in emails that I sent back to friends as I traced my way from state to state. Tucson smelt like my hot hotel room and tequila and that indescribable feeling of being alone as I looked out over the hills, stared at the pool and the flashing neon hotel sign, and picked at the fresh tattoos on my arms. The landscape reminded me of Canberra, the hills a different shade of orange, but similar in distance and scope, and with huge eucalyptus trees that seemed to be larger, with much smaller leaves. I spent hours one day crouched beside a rock wall, staring at lizards.

My geography of Canberra also runs out of the suburbs, out past the Cotter Dam, to my partner's parents' farm, which is all hills and waterways and cows and the various shades between green and yellow and brown that the grass turns, responding to the rainfall. The long dirt road to the property seems to be a favoured place of wombats, and we drive past five or ten each time we go out there. When we drive home in the dark,

their eyes shine white from the headlights. This geography runs out to the coast, to a line of beaches; the one where I smoked cigars on New Years Eve with my best friend, sand between our toes for the drive home at midnight, or the time we went to a beach which was covered in dead birds. Sleeping in a beach house on a rainy night in North Rosedale where the trees are more plentiful than the houses and the walk to the beach is littered with sharp rocks in mud. I hate swimming, but I love the sound and smell of the ocean, and the heaviness of the south coast's humidity, gentler than Brisbane's.

My contemporary geography, that of disease, makes me dig through my own memories and try and place them onto maps, spacing them into time periods and seasons and smells. My own body is going to become a map of illness, layered on the tattoos and stretch marks as, piece by piece, I am dissected and resected. The lines are drawn in scar tissue from the operations that aim to rid me of disease.

I draw time into a three dimensional model that resembles a clumsy model of the solar system built by a primary school child. I mark my spaces now: a circle around Braddon, and a line down to The Canberra Hospital in Woden where I am treated for cancer, where most of the last half of 2014 was spent, in a white rectangular building called The Canberra Regional Cancer Centre, which smells more like paint and plastic than the usual disinfectant notes of a hospital ward. There is a line to Sydney, where my liver surgeon works, with that endless drive up and down the Hume Highway, and the stale corridors of yet another hospital and yet another waiting room. My memories of spaces rotate around me like polystyrene balls painted the colours of the planets.

Elizabeth Caplice is an archivist on hiatus. Her work has been published in Meanjin, Overland, Feminartsy, The Lifted Brow, Frankie and Kill Your Darlings. She lives in Canberra. Follow Elizabeth on Twitter [@hrasvelgveritas](#) or read her blog at skybetweenbranches.wordpress.com.

field officer no. 302

by Rebecca Jessen

the suburban dream is a kookaburra perched on your wheelie bin. streets with the house numbers painted in neat squares on the kerb. letters to the postie scrawled in black text on metal letterboxes. it's never too late to be who you might have been. a ginger cat sunbathes in an empty swimming pool. the adult store on the side of the highway promises shopping so satisfying you come more than once. fringe towns are almost always more exciting when you're inside them. the highway noise echoes through the valleys. clouds burst on the horizon. tiny gnomes stand on tiny bridges. violent daytime dreams. children with smoker's cough. stuffed gorillas sit on car bonnets. Day Of The Dead themed gardens and inconsequential fruit trees. last night's Big Mac invites a murder of crows. a six pack of VB is as patriotic as the Australian flag taped to the front window. local wildlife is more terrifying with teeth. 'piss off' is considered friendly in some neighbourhoods. beware the secret life of houses. 'what are you doin?' is a valid and urgent question. you will find breathlessness at the top of the mountain. you will catch breath before words. you will think. all this is yours.

Rebecca Jessen lives in Toowoomba with her two cacti. She is the award-winning author of verse novel Gap (UQP 2014). Rebecca is the winner of the 2015 QLD Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award. In 2013 Rebecca won the Queensland Literary Award for Best Emerging Author. Rebecca's writing has been published in The Lifted Brow, Cordite Poetry Review, Mascara Literary Review, Verity La, Voiceworks and more. Rebecca blogs at becjessen.wordpress.com. Rebecca's creative non-fiction piece 'Firth Avenue' appeared in Issue Twelve of Tincture Journal.

Summertime

by Grace Heyer

I'm lying on the mud-green tiles of our bathroom floor, the coolest part of the house. Looking across the hall, I can see into Mum and Dad's room where Baby is asleep in her bassinet. Before putting her to bed, Mum dunked three nappies in this morning's washing-up water, wrung them loosely, and strung them across the open window. They're probably dry now.

I wish I could sleep like Baby. I'm desperate to escape this heat. Dragging myself to the door, I peek into the kitchen where Mum is baking fruitcakes. She seems immune to the heat, oven blaring. There is flour in her hair, on her forehead; it makes white gloves of her hands and transfers to the knobs of the radio as she turns up the volume. Billie Holiday grinds through the speakers, as granulated and sweet as the sugar scattered across the bench and table. With Mum sufficiently distracted, I crawl backwards to the vanity, roll the hand-towel into a lumpy cylinder and place it under my head.

I hum along to Lady Day as she sings about jumping fish and something to do with cotton. Ruby says that Billie Holiday is going to hell because she's had two husbands and drinks too much and sings jazz. Hell can't be any hotter than here. I like Billie because she sounds like me when I sing, not impossibly smooth like Ella Fitzgerald or Anita O'Day.

Ruby and I could have been at the creek by now, but I have to help Mum with Baby while she cooks.

"Once I start, I can't stop," she said.

But Baby is asleep and she probably will be for hours. When she's older, she can come to the creek too, but I'll be nicer to her than Ruby is to me. She makes me carry her lunch tin and towel, says it's payment for taking me to the creek.

"But we're taking each other to the creek," I told her once.

She said because she's the oldest, she's in charge which means that she takes me.

“And don’t drag my towel in the dirt,” she demanded.

Baby is waking up. I can hear her gurgly one-sided conversation. Bored on the bathroom floor, I replace the hand-towel and crawl to the bassinet. Baby is pink and chubby with dark, round eyes and too much hair for someone so young. From the floor, I can see her fleshy wrists and feet reaching toward the ceiling and I wonder what babies dream about. Slowly, I raise my head above the brim of the basket until I see Baby’s mouth gape into a pink, glistening ‘O’.

“Peepo, Baby!” I say, and she flaps her arms and legs and giggles until she is breathless, waiting for me to repeat the trick.

§

The fine gold cross hanging from Mum’s neck swings manically as she wipes the kitchen table. Her chest is wet with sweat and it jiggles with the effort. There’s a stubborn streak of flour on her forehead.

“Hello, my girls.” She pauses, panting, as I enter the kitchen with Baby on my hip. Baby shifts up and down, as if riding a horse, when she sees Mum. “Thirsty?”

Mum pours us both a glass of cold water and exchanges the drinks for Baby.

“It’s sweltering in here. Let’s sit outside.”

I follow Mum out the back door, carefully studying the rims of the glasses. Mum sits on the middle of three steps; I sit on the top. I sip the water slowly between rolling it across my forehead and holding it against my cheek. I peer over Mum’s shoulder at Baby, who makes nasal, contented noises as she suckles. Her lips make a curved, musical shape, and I think she’ll sing more like Ella Fitzgerald than Billie Holiday. I make faces at Baby when she is propped over Mum’s shoulder and thumped rhythmically till she burps, which always makes me laugh.

Baby sits upright in her pram beside the steps while Mum drinks her water, her arm draped across my knees. I stroke her hair and look past our back fence, across the lane that separates our house from Ruby’s, and decide I’d rather be here than at the creek.

“I’d better get dinner started. Dad’ll be home soon. You stay here with Beatie. It’s

too hot inside with the oven on,” Mum adds as the gauze door claps behind her. “And don’t go too far. I don’t want to have to come looking for you at tea time.”

Ruby left the back gate open when she came earlier; it juts out as if stuck in the sticky stillness of the afternoon. I spread Baby’s blanket under the orange tree and place her on her tummy while I go to shut the gate. From our back fence, I can see Auntie Maggie in the kitchen of the house opposite. She’s wearing lipstick and a floral apron, hair pulled back neatly to reveal the pretty face so similar to Mum’s. She must be preparing dinner for her family too: Ruby and New Uncle. She moves deftly from sink to bench, table to stove, to the refrigerator, then disappears below the window frame and bounds up again moments later. It’s strange to watch such activity in silence, and I’m struck that this is the difference between the sisters: Auntie Maggie is tidy, quiet, graceful. Mum is loud and clumsy and enthusiastic. That’s how I know that if they swapped their clothes and houses and families, I would always be able to tell them apart.

Something small and furry has rolled under the closed gate and landed on top of my bare feet, tickling my skin. Bending to pick it up, I realise it’s a kitten. It makes a trembling ‘C’ shape between my hands as I hold it to my face, listening to its whiny protest. It sounds like Baby when she first came home to us. I am turning to show her, my lips already pressing out a syllable, when a presence from the lane interrupts me.

§

The man who claims to own the kitten doesn’t look as if he can take care of himself, let alone a baby animal. His face is tanned and leathery, splotted with dirt and a tufty beard. He smells sour and salty, worse than Dad when he gets home from the dairy.

“If the kitten’s really yours, what’s its name then?” I quiz him.

The man chuckles, rubbing his patchy chin.

“Well, look at her. She’s only a few weeks old. I haven’t had a chance to name her yet.”

I want to argue, but I can’t. Mum and Dad called my sister Baby until she was a month old. I still do. The man presses his body against the gate, reaching over to stroke

the kitten. The strength of his breath repels me.

“Do you have any suggestions?”

He’s rubbing the cat’s head with his thumb but looking at my face. When I don’t answer, he asks my name, bending slightly in an attempt to meet my gaze. I resist, focusing on a sun-bleached patch of grass beside the path. The man pats the kitten in longer strokes, grazing my fingers with his weathered palm. There’s a tiny mound of fine, grey dirt where the grass meets the path; ants spill out of it like lava from a miniature volcano. The man’s hand is now resting on top of mine. The ants move in a black puddle, then separate into individual drops. The man and I are sweating against each other. It is uncomfortable in an unnameable way. I step backwards, and the man’s hot palm separates into fierce tentacle-like fingers, trapping my wrist. I panic momentarily then stumble, relying on the man’s unwelcome grip to stop me from dropping the kitten. I’m holding my breath. *Look at the ants, look at the ants.* Maybe it will rain soon. *Not soon enough.*

He pulls me against the gate, our bodies parallel to each other, separated only by strips of flimsy wood. He grabs my other wrist and the kitten clings to my chest, puncturing me with desperate claws. I want to yell out, but the man steals my voice with the proximity of his own. He’s looking into my eyes, past them, as if he sees into my brain, sees my thoughts and words and desires—all tangled into incoherence by my fear of his intensity.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” he whispers, staring at my mouth. The words whistle through his teeth as if the sentence has a tail. Somehow, this is more terrifying than looking into his eyes. “You can keep the kitten if you give me the baby.” He flicks a glance at my sister.

I twist my head to see her. She’s flushed and grimacing, frustrated by her immobility. Turning back to the man, I notice the metallic blue of his eyes, projecting the energy from which I want to protect Baby and myself and the kitten who is trying to drag itself from the crush of the man’s weight against mine. I’m scraping at the back of my brain for some usable plan to escape this situation, but my mind is made murky by the stench of the man, the rub of the wood against my bare legs, the kitten’s claws like splinters across my chest and neck and shoulders. I’m willing Baby to squeal, for Dad to burst through the

back door.

Why can't Aunty Maggie see any of this from her kitchen window?

Explosive pressure gathers in my chest—sharp, hot—like the time Ruby held my head under water in the bath. Words snag in my throat, dry and paralysed from holding my breath. I feel the pull and release of the man's chest as he breathes, try to mimic it. I croak, swallow, try again.

“My cousin. She's down at the creek. Take her. Take her instead.”

§

The light in Aunty Maggie's kitchen has grown warm and radiant against the approaching darkness. Dad laughs in response to New Uncle's muffled conversation as they wander home through the lane between their houses. The voices become gradually sharper, like birdsong pulling me out of sleep and into morning.

I'm sitting on the top step with Baby on my lap. She claps clumsily at the kitten running excited circles around us. New Uncle leans over the fence as Dad passes through the gate.

“Evening, ladies.” He touches his hat, winks at Dad, then walks home across the lane.

Dad shakes his lunch tin in mournful rhythm as he sings, “Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way ...” He continues in a whistle as he sits with his back to me on the bottom step, rummaging in the tin. Turning with a climactic expression on his face, he rattles a paper bag in his left hand, producing a metallic tinkling sound. “Merry Christmas!”

Baby lunges at Dad, who embraces her with dramatic noises while I inspect the contents of the bag: milk bottle lids. Dad inflates his cheeks then empties them on Baby, who wriggles ecstatically.

“Thought you and Ruby could make Chrissy decorations with 'em.”

The kitten scrambles onto my lap, tugging at the rim of the bag. I hold my breath. If I

don't breathe, I won't cry.

“And who do we have here?” Dad asks, scooping up the kitten with one arborescent hand.

A scalding balloon is swelling inside my ribs again. The yard surrounding Dad, Baby and the kitten softens and greys. I can see New Uncle's head bobbing up and down behind Aunty Maggie's as she pushes urgently through the gate. My vision is melting as I hear Mum's familiar footsteps approach the back door. I fall backwards when she opens it. That line of flour is still smeared across her pretty, untidy face. She is swallowed, along with everything else, in a hungry black cloud of unconsciousness.

§

My dream of Ruby is a patchwork of memories. We are in the dust-dappled backyard of the house she lived in when her dad was alive, but she's dressed in the outfit she wore to his funeral. I'm wearing a nightie, but the weather is too cold for the thin cotton.

I see Mum buying a pair of curtains from the jumble sale. She sits in a shard of mid-morning light, turning them into my nightdress. I hold my breath as she guides the needle in diving and breaching gestures through the cloth, scared she'll prick her fingers. When she's finished, she holds the garment at arm's length to inspect it. It covers her swollen belly, as if Baby, growing inside her, doesn't exist.

Many memories reappear in my dream of Ruby, like echoes rebounding from the depth of the well in her old backyard. I remember that we weren't allowed near the well, that Granny Green-tooth lived inside it.

The only thing she likes about children is the taste of them.

I watch and remember Ruby dragging me toward the well, my bare toes clawing at the slippery dirt. I fling myself to the ground, hoping for something to cling to. Ruby harnesses me with a fistful of hair, slams me against the gnarled mouth of the well. The jagged stone grates against my chin, against my finger-tips and knuckles as I flail against it. Eyes clenched shut, I can feel my heart drumming throughout my body, as if there are dozens of tiny organs sprinkled about me. Hearts behind my eyes, hearts inside my jaw, in my stomach, in my thighs and feet.

I remember that Ruby's dad whipped us with his belt when he found us beside the well.

Ruby is now perched on the lip of the well, her legs dangling inside it. I hear her feet tap against the inner wall, like the pebbles we'd throw into it from a distance. We'd listen to them trickle down toward unknowable darkness. I feel the burning splash of leather on my thigh; I remember the sting of it in the bath, then in bed as I tried to sleep.

I lunge forward and push Ruby into the forever-forgetting of the well. I listen for something frightening, but all I hear is music.

§

For a few moments, I'm not sure where I am. The room is murky-dark and clingingly hot. Slowly, fragments become familiar, although slightly changed. The window is closed. Baby's bassinet has been pushed between the wardrobe and the dressing table. I'm in my parents' bed, my sister placed between me and a mound of pillows on Dad's side of the mattress.

Baby is flapping her pudgy arms, kicking her legs so that the sheet draped over us puddles around her tummy. Sitting up, I notice a strip of light seeping into the bedroom from the hallway. I walk towards the barely-open door and hear voices drifting my way: Dad's and New Uncle's. Also, the voice of a man I don't recognise, flat and serious. Someone is sniffing a lot.

At the sound of footsteps, I scramble back into bed. Wriggling close to Baby under the sheet, I suddenly feel chilly.

I can tell from the quick, bouncy footfalls that Mum has entered the room. I hear the sound of a drawer opening, Mum blowing her nose, followed by more sniffing and a faint wincing noise. Mum's side of the bed dips as she climbs onto it. I sense the warmth and smell of her arm as she reaches over to touch Baby.

"Eleanor?" Even as a whisper, Mum's voice is dry and cracked, as if she's swallowed sand.

I pretend to be asleep.

Mum quietly slides alongside me, one arm draped across the pillow above my head, the other comfortably heavy on my waist. I can hear Baby sucking Mum's fingers. Breathing jaggedly, Mum's body starts pulsing, like rapidly-fired hiccups. Every now and then she makes a squeaking sound. I feel the weight of her head roll into the pillow as she tries to suffocate whatever it is she's feeling.

Grace Heyer is an emerging writer and poet from rural NSW. Her work has appeared in Writ Poetry Review, Make Your Mark Magazine and Southerly Journal. Her short story 'Sweetie' was short-listed for the 2015 S. D. Harvey Short Story Award.

Trampoline

by Anna Ryan-Punch

Summer thrums in hot flies
plastic lemonade grimes my touch
ponytail slick between shoulder blades.

I pounce from skin to hard grass
slam gentle steps against
memories inside my shocked feet.

The ground does not warp
taut suburban surface
breached in a leap and a slap.

Anna Ryan-Punch is a Melbourne poet and critic. Her previous publications include poetry in Westerly, Antipodes, The Age, Quadrant, Island, Overland, Southerly, and the new anthology Prayers of a Secular World. Her poem 'Newborn' appeared in Issue Four and her story 'Only After School' in Issue Six of Tincture Journal.

A Century on, a Modern Refugee Disaster Unfolds in Northern Greece

Non-fiction by Peter Papathanasiou

The last time this many refugees trekked through Northern Greece, it was my grandfather fleeing for his life.

I'm aboard a train in northern Greece travelling west from the city of Thessaloniki to the small town of Florina where I was born. There's an Orthodox priest with a thick iron-grey beard playing on his iPhone. A stranger leans across the aisle to offer some homemade baklava. Apparently her mother made too much and she doesn't want it to go to waste. Riding in a baby capsule, my infant son is sleeping, the gentle rumble of the train on the tracks having worked its magic to the welcomed relief of his parents.

Every time I make this journey from Australia to see my family and ancestral home, I am reminded of the trek my refugee grandfather Vasilios made nearly a hundred years ago. But today, the trip has extra poignancy. On the other side of the mountains, millions of mainly Syrian refugees are walking roughly the same route as my grandfather in 1923. The parallels weigh on my mind. Today, Greece isn't the final destination like it was for my grandfather. Instead, the promised lands are in central and northern Europe. But Greece remains a country on its knees, struggling to cope with a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions.

Greece was a military loser in 1923. It had just suffered a decisive defeat in the Greco-Turkish War, which ended the Greek presence in Anatolia and most of Eastern Thrace. After months of negotiations in Lausanne, a formal peace agreement was signed. In an attempt to bring stability to the volatile region known as 'the Near East', part of this agreement dictated a population exchange, or mutual expulsion, between Greece and Turkey. The architect of the exchange, Fridtjof Nansen, a Norwegian explorer, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

With the stroke of a pen, nearly two million people were made refugees. Muslims living in Greece were forced to abandon their homes and resettle in Turkey. In exchange, the Orthodox Christians living in Turkey, like my grandfather and his young family in

Cappadocia, made the reverse journey. Most of the refugees to Greece were to be settled in the north, an area whose identity was unpredictable and wavered according to the strongest army of the day. Newly annexed by Greece after the First Balkan War in 1912-13, the north needed populating.

My family, like many Greeks, still refers to the population exchange as ‘The Disaster’. The Greek economy haemorrhaged overnight. One out of four refugees did not survive the journey. Unlike the exodus of Christians from Turkey, the influx of Muslims from Greece was supervised by envoys. The Red Crescent supplied new arrivals with wood and coal to keep them warm and offered vaccinations. The Greeks saw no such luxuries. To the victor went the spoils.

With the war over, and the return of their triumphant army, the Turks started taking all able-bodied Orthodox Christian men into labour camps. If the Greeks dared return to march on Ankara, the Turks’ prisoners would be executed in retaliation. My grandfather was not interested in being human collateral. All he needed to do was get to the port with his forged papers that said his family had already left, and his passage west would be guaranteed.

So my *papou* joined the vast, writhing chain of human misery snaking its way out of Anatolia. It was a five-hundred-mile-long funeral procession. Horses carried crying babies in baskets on either side of their saddles. Old women dressed in black walked with a cane in one hand and a caged chicken in the other. There was constant weeping.

Turkish gangs dogged the trek. They were cruel and inhuman. They abducted and raped in broad daylight, making off with young girls and women as they kicked and screamed and thrashed. My grandfather walked on, one aching foot after the other, the faces of his four young children urging him forward. To think he made the journey in February, the coldest month.

At the waterfront, emaciated Christians clogged every dirty corner. After two nights freezing on the docks, my grandfather was herded onto an overcrowded boat that looked like it would sink at any moment. He was quarantined for a week on an island off Thessaloniki whose name he did not know.

Arriving on the mainland, he continued west to Florina. Other refugees went north to

places like Kilkis or east to Drama. In Florina, my *papou* watched as mosques became churches—minarets were torn down, crosses erected. He also got to experience what it meant to be ‘coming home’. Bowed with despair, he was spat upon by the native Greeks, who were distrustful of his odd dialect. ‘*Tourkosporoi!*’ they jeered him; ‘Seed of Turk!’ The mere fact he had lived in the Turkish state made his loyalty to Christianity suspicious.

Only about 3,000 Greeks now remain in Istanbul, Turkey’s largest city of 11 million. They have faced genocide, mass deportations, and discriminatory laws. It wasn’t until 2012 that the first Greek publishing house for fifty years opened in Istanbul.

My grandfather never felt safe in Florina, despite being hidden deep in a wooded valley. It was too close to the border. Greece itself is at the crossroads of three continents—“where Slav meets Turk meets Negro,” my grandfather used to say. And he was right: the town was again in the firing line during the Axis Occupation in World War II, becoming a centre of Slavic separatism, and then after the war was under communist control. Even my birth in June 1974 was touched by events at a border—a month later, Turkish forces invaded Cyprus following a coup d’etat. My baptism was rushed for fear of broader repercussions.

Albania is thirty miles from Florina. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) is even closer, only ten miles. Just two weeks ago, the Macedonian authorities began erecting a metal fence with barbed wire along the border with Greece. The refugees threw stones at the Macedonian police who retaliated with stun grenades and plastic bullets. And more recently, Greek authorities bussed more than 2,000 refugees to Athens in a convoy of around fifty coaches, housing them temporarily in former Olympic venues. These refugees were from countries other than Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Many had sewn their mouths shut with string and twine in protest against Balkan border controls.

Today, it is extraordinarily heartwarming to see the Greeks, who have so little, give so much to ensure the safe passage of the refugees arriving on their shores. As our train slows for passengers at Edessa, I wonder whether this unquestioned generosity and humanity is due to peoples’ enduring memories of 1923. Like me, many of the benevolent islanders on Kos and Lesbos probably had a forebear involved in The Disaster. The

Syrian people are also close to the Greek heart. Syria was part of the late Byzantine Empire, and some of the cities being devastated by the current conflict like Palmyra have deep Hellenic roots.

Greece closed its immigration detention centres in early 2015. By contrast, Australia, the country where I grew up and which has never seen a refugee influx of the scale Greece is experiencing, continues to build more.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that over 800,000 refugees and migrants entered Europe through economically-bankrupt Greece in 2015 alone, many after making the short but treacherous sea crossing from Turkey in rubber dinghies. In the same time, Australia—a country sixty times larger than Greece, with twice the population, and a AAA credit rating—hosted less than 40,000.

On the night of the twenty-third of December, huge bonfires are lit across Florina as part of the annual winter festival. It is an ancient custom, ostensibly to warm the world for the arrival of Baby Jesus on the twenty-fifth. There will be music and dancing on the streets till dawn, and fires that shoot into the sky, higher than most of the buildings, towers of thick wooden beams that the young men have been constructing since autumn.

My relatives in Florina tell me there are sightings of refugees in the steep mountains outside of town. It follows the crackdown north of Thessaloniki, and is the reward for making the arduous trek inland—an easier crossing into the FYROM. Checkpoints are bypassed. Police plan to increase road patrols around Florina.

A group of teenagers enters our carriage, full of energy and life. One of them is wearing a t-shirt with the logo of PAOK FC. The club was established in 1926 by Greek-Constantinopolitans who fled to Thessaloniki in the wake of the Greco-Turkish War. In honour of the club's refugee roots, PAOK's logo is a Byzantine-style double-headed eagle facing east and west. The eagle's wings are folded as a sign of long-term bereavement for the uproot from home. The club's colours are also symbolic: black as mourning for the lost homeland, and white for the hope of a better tomorrow. I couldn't be sure, but I suspect my *papou* might've been a PAOK fan. I know I am.

Our train accelerates out of Edessa station. The line is clear. But further north, refugees remain camped along the tracks, blocking rail traffic. The jolt wakes my son; he

cries. It's his first time following in his great-grandfather's refugee footsteps. When I get to Florina, I'm buying him a PAOK striped bib.

And one day, perhaps my son appreciate the magnitude of this journey in the same way the Syrian children may value the moment their parents fitted them with a life jacket and crossed the Aegean Sea.

Peter Papathanasiou was born in a small village in northern Greece and adopted as a baby to an Australian family. His writing has been published by Fairfax Media, News Corporation, The Pigeonhole, Caught by the River, 3:AM Magazine, Litro, Going Down Swinging, and Visual Verse, and reviewed by The Times Literary Supplement and The Huffington Post. He has been profiled as a feature writer in Neos Kosmos and is represented by Rogers, Coleridge & White literary agency in London. He divides his time between Australia, London, and a small village in northern Greece. He tweets [@peteplastic](https://twitter.com/peteplastic).

Life Is(n't)

by David Stavanger

Boil a bad egg
Rollover to your good side
Collect photos
of your dead heroes smoking
Avoid fluorescent people
Massage the message
Listen to the constant drills across the road
Play progress on the stereo
Breathe in as if you have everything to lose
Avoid urgent emails until they become urgent
When someone puts you down online
thank them for the gift of their compulsions
The nightly news was shot during the day
no one is shot when it snows for a week
If you meet a retired assassin, take notes
Life isn't pointless
The most cynical people smile just enough
Journeying with it will make you seasick
We still need feminism
We still need cinnamon donuts
We still need artists willing to be dishonest
No one is quite as repressed as a trainee priest
Praying is best when you get down on your knees
Do not trust anyone who says
this is an opportunity
Acquit yourself well before quitting
There will always be a mutiny in community
Avoid double binds
Open the blinds to see the neighbour's dirty laundry
Accept hot tears from strangers

Crying in the shower is hard to film
Tear ducts dry up on certain medication
Mediation is the best way to go sideways
Your life is worth less once you are born
Dying is a way to be remembered
You must be in the burning building
to claim life insurance

David Stavanger is an award winning poet, writer, and cultural producer. In 2013 he won the Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize, resulting in the release of The Special (UQP), his first full-length collection of poetry which was also awarded the 2015 Wesley Michel Wright Prize. At the 2014 Queensland Literary Awards he received a Queensland Writing Fellowship to develop his next two collections. David is also the Co-Director of the Queensland Poetry Festival. He is sometimes known as pioneering Green Room-nominated 'spoken weird' artist Ghostboy, performing solo, with multi-instrumentalist Richard Grantham, and previously with the band Golden Virtues at festivals across Australia. David's poem 'Natural Assets, Law 2003' appeared in Issue Twelve of Tincture Journal.

Bow and Bleekman

by Rebecca Douglas

He stands on the corner of Bow and Bleekman. She drops her handbag and her life flows out like a secret unbidden. He stoops to pick up letters and lipsticks. She is breathless and grateful.

He invites her to a café down the street. She orders runny eggs Benedict. He talks of his painting for the gallery. She has heard his type before.

He has the searching eyes of the wounded. She takes him back to her townhouse. He says her body is a masterpiece. She glares and lights a cigarette, but is secretly pleased.

He moves in after three months. She pees on the stick and confirms her suspicions. He is moody and unaware. She holds her cards close to her heart.

He slams doors and necks Tequila. She reads the review in the paper. He catches her doing it. She tumbles down the stairs and her life flows out like a secret unbidden.

He stands on the corner of Bow and Bleekman. She will never, ever again.

Rebecca Douglas is an award-winning writer and reviewer from Adelaide, Australia. Her work has appeared in The Sydney Morning Herald, The Big Issue, ABC The Drum and a variety of other publications.

Bordertown

by J V Birch

We agree to freshen up
before eating
dinner being bikie bar burgers.

For us
a quick shake down of dust.

For you
a divine intervention.

You billow in beaming
festooned in white
complete with J sandals tied.

And as Him from Nazareth
command red wine
oblivious to open-mouthed faces.

You set up a game of pool.
We locate our nearest exit.

J V Birch lives in South Australia. Her poems have appeared in anthologies, magazines and journals across the UK, Australia, Canada and the US, including The New Writer, Australian Love Poems, Sotto, Uneven Floor and Transnational Literature. Her first collection is part of the Picaro Poets series published by Ginninderra Press. To find out more, visit www.jvbirch.wordpress.com.

The Kangaroo River: Landscape Stories

Non-fiction by Ellin Williams

At one junction in the Kangaroo River, just upstream from the tourist park choking on tents and gas barbecues, the sluggish current collated into a watering hole fringed by gum trees and large, flat rocks ideal for diving. Perched upon one of the rocks, a cottage with wide glass windows kept a watchful eye on everything that passed—from platypus emerging from their homes beneath Platypus Rock to canoes gliding through on their merry way downstream—and regarded the river with smug satisfaction.

Because while there were plenty of houses nestled along the banks of the Kangaroo River, with an abundance of verandahs overlooking various bends in its path, the house was the only property on Cullen Crescent that owned the land all the way down to the waters edge. Possum House was built as far away as it possibly could be from the bustle of town without actually retreating into the bush. Its owners installed two cheery bedrooms (decorated with not-so-cheery oil paintings), a simple bathroom containing all the usual necessities (except for a toilet, which was pushed outside), and a kitchen (with a stove that would survive generations). Its windows looked south and east. Through the south one, looking out over the yard, glimpses of a wild lemon tree and, beyond, a vegetable garden. But the east window, a wall-sized pane with views over the river junction, was the envy of the neighbourhood.

§

I had come to Kangaroo Valley from Sydney along the coast road that stretches over Berry Mountain. A mellow light leaked through the canopy as I drove, and the houses became sparser and sparser until there was nothing in view save for long driveways and stone walls built like the ones in Irish tourism posters, so ingrained in the landscape that Mother Nature clawed at their foundations with thistles.

My family built Possum House in a time before the coast road was tarred. It's exactly one kilometre from our cottage to the centre of town. The main village is not a great affair; it boasts a woodshop, ice-creamery, gift shops, two restaurants, The Friendly Inn, an art gallery, and two churches—a Catholic one boarded by large

Sassafras trees which blocked the view of the Protestant one on the other side of the road. Not a large amount has changed in town since our house was built, except the milk bar became a grocer, the shops now boast knick-knacks of a more modern kind, and the newsagency closed down, due perhaps to a lack of interest in the happenings outside the valley.

§

My great aunt Dorothy Keshan remembers the Berry turnoff in the summertime. Every year as a little girl she and her brother George would catch the train down to Bomaderry from Sydney—freshly out of school uniforms—and buy a pie at the Nowra store where they were collected by Mr Charlesworth in the Sedan service car.

Summer holidays were whiled away fishing in Myrtle Creek, bareback riding in Barrengarry and helping with farm chores. She spent her pocket money at the village milk bar; a bare wooden floored building where they sold sodas and caramel shakes for sixpence. She stayed at her aunt's guest house during the Depression, and slept on the veranda with ten other children and road-weary travellers. She remembers twenty guests chasing chickens around the property when a toddler let them escape. Dorothy believes the reason she loves the valley so much is because she was always surrounded by family and, even though outside the valley walls the world was tearing itself to pieces in the World War, nothing bad ever seemed to happen in Kangaroo Valley. In fact, my great aunt has a sneaking suspicion she was conceived there.

§

I stop at the art gallery behind the renovated lolly shop (which burnt to the ground five years ago), to visit Carl Leddy, the editor of the local newspaper *The Valley Voice*. I found him crammed behind mountains of paperwork in his makeshift office among the paintings. Carl is a man who chooses his words carefully and with particular pronunciation as if he's cautious about what he says, and consequently, what he writes. An old newspaper man, he regarded me with faint interest, shooting me questions about what publications I read, whether I'd consider contributing to his. Everyone in his job before him had either moved or gotten a divorce, he told me after fiddling with the graphics on the latest edition of *The Voice*, going to press that afternoon. It's because the old editors ran the thing from their living rooms and valley news stressed them out. He

handed me a back issue, watched while I flicked through it.

“The old days in journalism were ... crazy,” he said after a lengthy pause. “We didn’t have all these fancy facilities, ours was a cut-n-paste job on old photographic paper ... we used to get our proofs in letter press, if you’d believe.” I did.

The Valley Voice started as an eight page newsletter of recycled gossip and blossomed under Carl’s thumb into a fifty-six page publication. Eleven of the contributors are published authors and cover everything from relationships with Labradors to computers for wrinklies.

Carl came to the valley for the first time in 1995 for a poetry performance and never left. He admits his intimate relationship with the valley. “There’s just something about it ... an atmosphere that’s hard to put into words.”

What the writers of Kangaroo Valley struggle to put into words, the artists don’t fail to capture on canvas. The walls of Carl and his partner Lorraine’s gallery are covered with oils the colour of honey, rust and eucalyptus. A man in a broad-rimmed hat stares down at me from his bush track, a dog lapping at his boots. The paint is heaped onto the canvas in delicious clumps, the gesso building layers until I yearn to trace the surface with my finger.

“You don’t sell art,” Carl tells me, “people buy it when they respond to it.” There must be something about Kangaroo Valley that people respond to, because the walls are constantly changing. Familiar forests adorn the frames featuring the various blues and greys of our mountains and of course, the Kangaroo River, sometimes in its lazy mood and sometimes in its wild. I ask Carl how many paintings he sells a year. “If you’re the tax department, then one.”

§

My great aunt Dorothy advises me to swim naked in the River. It’s a thrill, she promises. When she was growing up in the valley there were no hot showers, so she would venture down with a bar of soap and bathe in the rapids. Twenty-first birthdays were celebrated by whole families spending the day swimming and diving off rock platforms. Wedged into one of these rocks was a metal peg that Frankie Watson put in for my great grandfather Jack Williams to tie his boat for the River was prone to snatching stray

boats. Decades later, a little boy found the peg while diving in the junction. Today it sits on Dorothy's mantelpiece in her sitting room at Blakehurst, safe from the cheeky tug of the river.

I bring my book down to the water's edge and find a spot on a boulder, warmed by sunshine and smooth from centuries of currents. The rapids bubble gleefully beside me, occasionally splashing my ankles as they dangle in the stream. As the water rushes over the stones it taunts me with laughter, enticing me to take a dip, probably plotting to wash me downstream until I emerge, choking and shivering, at the tourist park. I consider taking my aunt's advice and skinny dipping. There's no one watching save the cows on the top pastures. A sparkle of light catches on the surface and I think the river is winking at me.

§

The following afternoon I was settled in our rocking chair, watching the lazy drift of the river. I snapped on my voice recorder to replay the conversation I'd had earlier that morning on a stroll into town. "Gavin Robinson. That's Robinson, not Robertson." Gavin had wiped his hand on his jeans before extending it to me with a shy smile.

For the better part of half an hour I had sat at his workbench and talked timber. Gavin has owned the infamous valley woodshop for just over two years. When he'd started, River Redgum was his speciality. "Most timbers have their faults that make them difficult to work with, but the gum is very heavy, very dense. It's hard to get it smooth without any tear-outs and stuff like that. But once it's finished, it's a really pretty timber." I tell him I have a rocking horse from this store given to me when I was two. Tell him how much I loved it growing up until I left it in the rain one day and its ears rotted off. He said he wasn't surprised; his store has the largest range in Australia, fourteen different styles of rocking horses.

He has a four-year-old daughter who, like her father I soon discovered, had a case of the shies and had struggled to make friends until their move to the valley where she now feels more at home. It reminds me of an old story my great aunt told me about the mysterious daughter from a reclusive family who lived high up on Browns Mountain. She turned up at the schoolhouse one day and sat in bewildered silence for weeks until someone had the intelligence to ask her how her father's cows were milking. It had been

one of the first times she'd spoken to another person outside of her own family.

At the turn of the century, my great-great-grandfather was headmaster of Barrengarry school. In spring, the schoolhouse was filled with music and the whole community came together to dance. My great aunt remembers doing the foxtrot, one hand placed on a boy's shoulder and the other he held around her waist, often holding a handkerchief so he didn't dirty her 'Hepburn' gown of taffeta and silk. Dorothy thinks modern dancing lacks the intimacy of those humid nights in Barrengarry schoolhouse.

Gavin's home is also in Barrengarry, a three kilometre walk once you've crossed Kangaroo Valley Bridge. He and a group of gentlemen volunteered to build a walkway from the bridge to the famous Barrengarry pie shop so that elderly residents could walk home safely after buying their lunch. What had taken the council six years to pass had taken them only four months to build, and they celebrated afterwards with a tea in the village.

The Friendly Inn has stood on the main street of Kangaroo Valley well before my great aunt Dorothy was even born. It had been there in 1912 when my great-great-grandfather was stopped in his tracks, hat yanked off his head at the sight of a piece of machinery chortling along the street beside him, scaring the horses. The residents were lined up along the road outside the inn to see it coming. Sleek, noisy and alien, the driver of the first automobile in Kangaroo Valley tipped his hat and said "good day".

At the Friendly Inn, when I was little, my father would wrap me in his jumper, wool the colour of wet leaves, and sit me on the bench. Lights from the upstairs bar flooded onto the lawn where we sat apart from a handful of lingering smokers. By that time, the mist was already creeping over the paddocks from the creek, and I could see straight out into the fields through the shadows of the moon in a sky so removed from the lights of any city. As I swatted at mosquitoes, Dad entertained with stories about Ickabod Crane, a gawky school teacher enticed to a small town in a valley (with features strikingly familiar to those of our valley) whose villagers were mysteriously disappearing. To win the heart of the local sweetheart, Ickabod ventured into the woods to put to death rumours of a demon horsemen galloping in bloody vengeance to replace the head he'd lost. As I stared back at the paddocks, I became aware of a ghostly figure moving in the distance, a sword catching glimpses of moonlight as the figure raced a mighty black

mare through the mists towards me. I watched him without a trace of emotion, unsure whether to mention it to my father as he launched into the description of Ickabod's fatal flight to the church house. My mother and sisters were still inside, safe in the warmth and chatter of the inn. The horsemen wouldn't go in there. Then the mare, nostrils flaring and hooves kicking up a shower of mud, melted in the fog from whence it came. I remember wondering whether I should leave an apple for the ghost horse that probably hadn't eaten in centuries.

§

There have been moments of despair in the history of the valley. Dorothy vaguely remembers drought seasons, when her father was forced to prop cows up on stilts before they collapsed with illness, as once they were down they were too weak to ever get back up again. What she does clearly remember however, is fires. As a young girl she fled to Myrtle Creek behind the house to escape the flames with her family and travellers lodging at the house (as they did in times before motels). There were *things* hiding in the wild undergrowth of Myrtle Creek; venturing down there was usually forbidden. But in Dorothy's time there were no fire brigades, so the villagers had to save their own houses and she attached bags to sticks to flog the fire out. One time, she recalled, ash fell from the sky as she filled the gutters with water while the heat whipped around her in a wild wind. She recalls her fear, and her overriding ambition to save the house. The same fear spread through her on numerous occasions when the waters from the river raged and threatened to swallow the whole house from its position high up on the rock platform. She talks about her sense of helplessness against the power of the Kangaroo River as it tore trunks from the tallest trees and snatched calves from their fields. There was nothing anyone could do at these times but pray that the river, in its mighty anger, would spare them. And it usually did.

§

The next morning I find the Milkshake Man alone in his fudge store, a cheery humming filling the wooden building right up to its banisters as he cleaned the milkshake maker and covered the butterscotch ice-cream. His flannel shirt is splashed with sorbet pinks, lemon yellows, shades of mint. Dreamily I lean against the counter, sample a piece of fudge. I choose vanilla, like I always do. Drifting around the store, cloth in hand, he starts to talk before I've even set up my voice recorder.

“In Australia, the 60s never happened until the 70s. There was this whole ‘back to the earth movement’. Drug trafficking in Australia never even happened until the GI came here from Vietnam ... so you had LSD being used and banned in America before ’66 and it hadn’t even come here till ’69. Banned it before we even had it!”

Garry Broadbridge has shoulder-length grey hair and a wicked goatee. We met six years ago when he bought the village fudge shop and I wandered in wearing my Jim Morrison t-shirt. Needless to say we became fast friends, but then again it’s hard to find anyone in the valley who didn’t claim to be friends with the eccentric milkshake connoisseur.

“I’m part of the group of people who fled Sydney in the early 70s,” he explains from behind a barrel of raspberry liquorice. “Every generation wants to be seen as different, tribal, have an identity. It was the anti-Vietnam movement coupled with drugs coupled with rock-and-roll coupled with the attitude that we don’t want to live how our parents did, cause we don’t have to put up with the same shit.”

If it’s true that lines engraved in the face tell the life stories of their owner, then Garry just stumbled out of some righteous daze, danced naked at Woodstock and downed a few sugar cubes with Syd Barrett.

Half of Garry’s sixty years of heavy living were spent in the Broger’s Creek community in Upper Kangaroo Valley, a beautiful area which experienced an influx of middle class families in the 70s, building their own farms and raising children. Broger’s Creek feeds the Kangaroo River and according to Garry, so much more water goes into the River from Broger’s than from the Kangaroo River, “it’s ridiculous.” He pauses in his work for a moment to serve a customer after an iced chocolate. Minutes later he returns, eyes squinting as he watches the Polo-shirted city-slicker saunter out of his shop. “People have a weird idea of what a hippy is, I reckon. Well they do because it doesn’t extend past an appearance. Like when someone says, ‘what job does a hippy do?’ Well, do hippies work? How do they get food? Oh! They’re all on the dole, sorry.” I tell Garry the story of my drive through some unknown part of the valley when my father and I stumbled across a steep chasm in the hillside. Looking up, we were surrounded by these huge tepees billowing smoke and housing a troop of goats, bleating like alarms. I tell him the menacing feeling I got in those hills, the overwhelming sense

of being unwelcome.

That would be Lindsey Burke's mob, he tells me with a slight grimace, came in droves to the Valley after the Judi Morrosey and Jim Cairns Thredbo festival. The property I'd stumbled onto was bought by Burke as some attempt at nirvana where the inhabitants proceeded to walk around naked for four months until the weather changed and it got too cold so they all left, leaving a garbage tip of hippy memorabilia behind them.

"A friend of mine bought the property and still finds all these old tepees and furniture removalist vans and old cars all over the property. That's where the phrase 'Broger's Creek Hippies' came from," Gary tells me with an exasperated sigh, as if I'm down with the lingo. "It's funny cause they all came from middle class families and even though they were called 'hippies', they had a higher level of education than most families in the valley of that time."

One complex Doors discussion later and Garry the Milkshake Man sends me on a journey to find his favourite place in Kangaroo Valley. Walking down the stairs, I watch a cluster of people cross the road and into Garry's fudge store. If they'd been locals they'd know all about the health scare he was currently enduring and his enormous dedication to the business that got him out of bed each morning to serve them their scoop of ice-cream.

The Upper River Road used to be an important path for dairy farmers carting goods from the pastures to the coast. A settlement of farmers nestled below the mountains to take advantage of the lush farmland, many streams and the last rays of light before the sun finally dipped behind the valley walls. The farmers prospered, becoming among the country's top producers of dairy products, and eventually their cabins gave way to estates, still visible on their grand hillsides through glimpses between trees. With high rainfall and sandstone volcanic soil, the conditions are perfect for dairy. But of the 300 families once supported by the dairy industry in Kangaroo Valley, only around eight have survived. Victoria can make more milk in a quarter of the space; the number of dairy farmers between Wollongong and the Victorian border was equal to the number of dairy farmers supplying one Victorian factory.

You can see all the way to the western end of the valley from the Upper River Road.

About six kilometres up, the road withers out and the car slides over stones and loose earth. It snakes through fields of grass, slicing a sea of lime green and eucalyptus. With the window down, you can brush blades as you pass, a gentle whip against fingertips. The road descends gently as it reaches the river. Along the road the foliage becomes denser and the earth is sprinkled with smooth grey pebbles, strays from the riverbed. These stones are found throughout the valley and make for exceptional skimmers. The air down on this part of the road is thicker, and flies from the upper pastures are replaced by the creaking of crickets. These crickets are wild at night when horses wander to the river to drink.

I was on a journey to find the secret spot Garry had given me directions to find. As the car rounded the next shady bend, the old suspension bridge emerged from beneath the undergrowth. Underfoot it swings perilously, but the adventurous at heart make the dash to the other side. There is nothing on the opposite bank except for a weathered post. Once upon a time children crossed this bridge every morning to get to school, although the schoolhouse has long since been swallowed by the river.

When I eventually pull over the track underfoot is worn; leaves trampled by local children dragging picnic baskets, floating devices. My ankles scratch the foliage and from the way the trees shrink back into the forest, branches bent like bowing servants at a place of worship, it was clear I had arrived at Gary's secret place. It is dark here, and eerily silent. The crickets have stopped calling and the sun is eclipsed by a towering wall of stone. A tree stretches out over a deep pool where someone has tied a rope around the middle for diving. I wander upstream, boulder-hopping, to discover what pilgrims have left behind. I find a pile of stones beneath a bush, offerings made for the gods of this place. I wonder who could have left it there; children from nearby farms on warm evenings after school, or explorers like me. But then perhaps the most likely answer: a band of ageing hippies, worshipping the spirits of the Valley with Garry dancing among them, tambourine in hand.

§

The residents of Kangaroo Valley are in a constant battle with the local council over large developments by outside companies. It seems every year there's a new threat to the peace and simplicity they've worked so hard to maintain. My aunt Dorothy is at the forefront of a movement against the development of a large nursing home planned for the

middle of town and calls Carl Leddy like clockwork to get her news. From his editor's chair, Carl keeps Gavin Robinson, Garry Broadbridge and the rest of the community updated.

“Economically it will help some businesses, but it will destroy the lifestyle we all fled from. If you want that, you can go to Shellharbour.” Gavin comes out of his shell on the subject, setting his tools down on the workbench.

Before speaking, Gary Broadbridge wipes his hands on his shirt and stares off into the distance as if looking into the future. “I think old people should set it up so they build their own houses and have their kids look after them until they die and then sprinkle their ashes in the river.”

The river is quiet tonight. I catch glimpses of it from the verandah of Possum House, flashes of silver under the moonlight and around me, the sound of chirping crickets and the faint trickling of Myrtle Creek somewhere off in the dark. I wonder if I will continue to come here when I am older, maybe with my own children. I wonder whether there will be a valley left to come to, or if the residents will one day lose their battle with the developers. I think of my childhood spent at the house, playing in the river, inventing ghost stories and getting lost in the winter fog. I think of my father recently laid to rest at the Kangaroo Valley cemetery after losing his battle with cancer and I couldn't imagine another place on earth where he'd be more content.

Ellin Williams is a Sydney based writer, visual artist and aspiring actor. Her writing has appeared in Southerly, Australian Geographic online and several art books. She works in the television and book industries.

Airport

by Jack Forbes

They'd been sitting in the car for too long. She said about fifteen minutes ago that she wasn't coming back and since then they'd shared silence, broken only when she asked if he was okay. He didn't answer. Instead, he listened to the low hush of planes arriving and departing overhead. She looked out over the all but empty car park. Then she took a pack of cigarettes from her purse and palmed one out and thumbed in the car's lighter. It made a singeing sound that grew louder as it became hotter. When it popped she took it out and he watched her twist the bottom of the lighter into the cigarette's end. Her bright red lips puckered on the butt. She closed her eyes as the smoke wreathed around her face. Then she exhaled.

He realised he'd been gripping the wheel the whole time and let go. So, what. Forever forever?

She nodded, taking the cigarette from her mouth.

And all for your ex?

I don't really care about him. It's for Chelsea. I thought you'd know that.

And I thought you were just visiting.

The window was open a crack and she tapped out some ash. The ash clung to the grimy window then skirted across and was gone with the wind.

I've been a shitty mum, I know that. And I think I've gotta start somewhere trying to get good.

He gripped the steering wheel again.

Why now?

Why what?

Why tell me now?

To be honest, I kinda just decided then.

He shook his head.

I think it's right ... okay?

In the rear view mirror there were a number of taxis parked in a semi circle. All of the drivers stood together smoking cigarettes. He thought they looked like a gang.

Okay, he said with a long breath. Let's get your bags.

§

It was 4 am and the terminal was near deserted. Most of the stalls, except for a couple bars and a KFC, were closed. People lie in sleeping bags underneath seats. A stewardess emerged from a door saying Staff Only, clipping her hair back up. She walked past them, barefoot and slouched. They approached check-in and she went up to the man at the desk. He waited outside the line, looking about. There was a woman breastfeeding, a man beside her with his head lolled back, his mouth wide open. The sounds of roller-luggage humming on the linoleum floor. Shutters closing. The bing-bong noise of flight details. An announcement: Maddie Fisher, report to Service Desk 1A. Maddie Fisher, Service Desk 1A. He looked around to see if a woman was hurrying, but he couldn't see any movement from anybody.

They got a drink at the bar. Her flight was in two hours. She got a gin and tonic, and he ordered a beer. They drank those and got two more. They sat in a booth toward the back, where the lighting attempted to emulate candlelight, but failed. Come on, she said, taking the straw from her drink. Don't let us leave on a shitty note.

Well. It's a lot to take in.

Out of all people, I figured you to understand.

He leaned over his beer.

We've got something going on. It's hard to quit that.

I know, she said, almost reluctantly.

He drank from his beer and set it down on the napkin. An inscription on the napkin said: Only For First Class Experience. He was finding it hard to say anything else, so he looked around the room. Some old business-looking man was slumped over a tumbler. His suit was crumpled, his white comb-over tousled. His cheeks looked as if they'd been kneaded in like dough. He was drinking slowly, methodically, savouring the drink. The bartender was leaning back on the counter, watching a mute broadcast of a basketball game. Something outside took the bartender's interest, and he looked away.

I have to go to the toilet, she said. As she got up she touched him on the shoulder, but only briefly. He began to think about what to do with his time from now on. Composed in the chair, three quarters of his beer drunk, he could only think about what to wear tomorrow. He wasn't sure if the weather was going to be hot or cold, and a strong desire in him wanted to know. He patted his pockets for his phone, but remembered leaving it in the car. Then he stood and reached for her handbag, lifted it up on the table and fished inside for her phone. Her code used to be his name; now it was just numbers. When he entered it he saw two missed calls and three messages. They were from her ex. He read them. The messages said that he missed her, that he loved her and couldn't wait to see her. She'd responded with similar sentiments. His heart sank. He forgot about the clothes and the weather and put her phone on the table and drank the last of his beer and got another one.

Coming back at the table, she looked at his drink and said: Hey, where's mine?

I'm going to finish this beer and then leave.

Uh, okay?

He was slouched, with hard eyes. He looked like he was going to throw a tantrum.

You don't want to get another drink?

He shook his head.

She put her elbows on the table.

What's wrong?

She picked up her phone from the table, swiped through the messages. She sighed. Shit, she said.

You could've just told me.

Why were you going through my phone?

I wanted to see what the weather was for tomorrow.

Jesus. She sat back and looked around the room. Then she drummed her fingers on the table and clasped her hands together and looked at him.

I wanted to tell you, but I didn't know how.

Any way would've been better than this.

I know. I'm sorry ... It's just, well. I just don't think we ever loved each other.

I thought we were having fun.

Yeah, it was fun. But I need more than that. I've got a kid. I've got responsibility. For better or worse, I've gotta make it work.

With him?

With him. He's her father. You know that.

He looked at the bubbles sifting upward in the beer bottle. He thought about Maddie Fisher, and if she'd made it to the service desk, or if she was already on a plane, far away.

You were never going to come back, he said after a while.

No, she said. I wanted to say goodbye here. I thought it wouldn't be that hard.

He drank all of his beer and set it down. Well, goodbye.

He stood.

Hey, she said. You're a good person, know that.

He nodded. See you.

Look, can't we just talk a little—

Forget it.

Then he walked out of the bar.

§

He sat for some time near the entrance. An Asian couple were asleep a few seats down, snoring. Everybody seemed to be asleep in this place, he thought. He wondered if he was dreaming. Then, with shame, he got up and went back to the bar. She wasn't there. He looked at a clock above the bar's counter and saw she would have just boarded the plane. He sat down on a stool, got a whiskey. He drank it, felt light-headed. He didn't think he was a good person. He didn't think he was a good anything. If he was a good person it would mean that he would have amounted to something in his life. Being a good person meant that people stay with you. Instead, he felt like an empty object. A body without a brain. He was a thing that drove people to airports and sat in bars drinking. If anything could define him, it was that.

Outside, he had a cigarette. The sky was a dead blue and a few stars still glinted. Over the multi-storey car park you could tell the sun was rising. More and more people were piling into the terminal, more and more cars on the road. They all moved quickly now; the world had woken up. He dropped his cigarette and toed it out. Walking down the footpath, he noticed a small boy with a red backpack standing alone. The boy was peering in through the glass wall of the terminal. He had a bowl haircut with a denim jacket and looked about five or six. He stopped and watched the boy. He stared at the boy for some time. The boy was motionless. Eyes like the glass he looked through. Nobody came for him. Hello, he said. The boy turned and looked at him and then looked back through the glass. Are you lost? The boy looked at him again.

No.

Where's your mum and dad?

Dad's somewhere in there.

He looked through the glass with the boy.

Do you see him?

No.

What does he look like?

I'm not supposed to talk to strangers.

I can help you find him, if you like.

Dad told me to wait here.

He ran a hand through his hair. Okay, he said, annoyed. What does your dad look like? I can go in and have a look for him.

He has red hair and is wearing a brown jacket and he has white shoes on.

Your dad didn't say where he was going?

He said he was going to get food for me and him.

Inside, he quickly walked to the food area. He looked around for a man with red hair, a brown jacket and white shoes. He saw plenty of men with red hair, or a brown jacket, but none with all three. After pacing up and down a couple of times, he approached the food stalls that had opened and asked. Nobody had seen a man like that. One cashier said she had never in her life seen a man like that. After another look, he returned to the boy.

Did you find my dad?

No, I didn't. Look come with me, and I'll take you to where he can find you.

He told me to stay here.

I know. But if we go to the airport people, they can send a message to your dad.

Can they do that?

Yes, c'mon.

The boy toddled along beside him. He was clutching a SpongeBob SquarePants drink bottle, and his name on it had been smeared. Every now and then he looked back at the boy, who bore a lonely, puzzled look on his face, as if he was trying to figure something out. The boy looked at the ground, walking slightly pigeon-footed.

They approached a service centre. He noticed it was 1A, but didn't think of Maddie Fisher. There was nobody behind the desk. He buzzed the bell and waited, but nobody came. The boy told him he was hungry. He said they would find his dad and then he could eat something. Then the boy said he was very hungry.

Okay, he said, looking around the empty service desk. Okay, you'll just have to wait.

He asked a janitor where there was another service desk but the janitor shrugged. He then went to a direction map, ran his finger up from the You Are Here icon, to where Information was written in green. The terminal was piling up. The boy was lagging behind. He held his hand, dragging him along. The boy's hand felt like cold meat, damp and light. Then the boy stopped and let go and knelt down. He began tying his long, lanky shoelaces. He was quite slow, looping one lace over the other, under it, through it. Then he started smiling. I'm real good tying my laces, he said. Then he stood and they continued.

He made his way through a bunch of backpackers, families, businessmen and arbitrary tourists all leaving, coming. He followed behind a flight crew. All he could hear were sounds of inaudible talk, the scrape of luggage, shuffling shoes. He thought he saw a man with red hair and a brown jacket, but he wasn't sure. He followed after him, turning to go up an escalator. Nothing. He went back down the escalator, knocking a woman's handbag. Bending down, he picked up the woman's things and a woozy rush plumed through his body. The light-headed feeling had worn off and he felt a dull ache in his head. The woman didn't say anything as he apologised. At the bottom of the escalator, he was panting hard, his heart was beating fast. Then he looked back.

The boy was gone.

He went up the escalator, bobbing over heads, searching. Back down, he stood in the

centre of the terminal. A sea of people washed around him, big and small. All the suits and jumpers and raincoats seemed to blend into one single, dun colour. He knelt down, looked between the cages of passing legs to see if the boy was idle somewhere. Jesus, he said under his breath.

By the time he got to the other service centre he was hot and sweating. He told the lady behind the desk what had happened. She was very understanding, and told him to keep calm, that everything would be okay. She picked up a receiver, pushed a button and looked at him. What was the boy's name? she asked.

He lost his breath. With a blank face, he said: I don't know.

Sir, what was the boy's name?

I don't know, he said. I'm sorry, I don't know.

Jack Forbes is a 22-year-old writer living in the western suburbs of Melbourne. He recently completed an Arts degree at Monash University and hopes to continue writing while studying teaching in the future. In 2011 he was the national recipient of the Somerset Novella Writing Competition, and in 2012, a state finalist for Victoria. He enjoys reading American 'dirty realism' and finds the works of Raymond Carver, Carson McCullers and Cormac McCarthy very inspiring. 'Airport' is his first published story in an Australian journal.

The Lover

by Magda Kapa

I've been haunted by that noon, I was waiting
for you on that bed, that open window behind me
that sound of that city hosting, our foreign languages.

Words flew from me to you and from you to me
as you approached, as you approached me,
as you approached us, you, my lover.

I don't remember how the door and I opened
but you were suddenly there, inside me, beside me,
inside that room, where I was waiting, for you, my lover.

We called each other ancient names, taken from poems
I and you brought from home, in books, in suitcases,
in little notebooks we threw away, after that noon.

Magda Kapa was born in Greece and now lives in northern Germany. She has worked as a freelance screenwriter and Modern Greek and English teacher. Her first poetry collection All the Words was published earlier this year by Phoenicia Publishing. She is also a photographer who shoots in film. She blogs at notborninenglish.wordpress.com and tweets as [@MagdaKapa](https://twitter.com/MagdaKapa).

A Faithful Companion

by Deborah Sheldon

The man in the hospital bed next to her made a noise on every exhalation, sometimes a moan, but most often an *argh* sound, breathed with great effort like a fat man easing into a chair. Elsie couldn't concentrate on the paperback her sister had brought for her. Be quiet, she wanted to shout. Instead, she stared at the ceiling with her arms held tightly against the sheets. The television bolted overhead wore a sticker: THIS IS A RENTAL TV—HIRE CHARGES APPLY. She read it over and over and over.

Argh ... argh ... argh ...

If only he would stop. Even for a minute.

The curtain between them was now closed, but she had caught a glimpse when the porters wheeled him in some half an hour ago. He appeared to be aged in his seventies, like Elsie. Maybe that explained the pairing. Still, putting a man in a woman's room was highly inappropriate. And they were expected to share a bathroom too. She had never in her life shared a bathroom with a man and didn't intend to start now.

A nurse came in, the one with the red hair and glasses, the one Elsie disliked.

“Good morning, Elsie,” the nurse said. “Good morning, Don, and welcome to Ward Two South. It's nearly brekkie time. You both hungry?”

The curtains formed a T-shape that divided the room in half and allowed space for a little hallway from the door to the bathroom. The nurse opened all of the curtains, including the one that separated Elsie from the old man, Don. He was lying on his back, his mouth gaping in either sleep or stupor.

Argh ... argh ... argh ...

Elsie said, “Why does he keep making that awful sound?”

“Let's have a bit of sunshine,” the nurse replied, opening the window blind.

“I haven’t had my heart medicine,” Elsie said. “No one has given me the injection in my tummy. And why is there a man in here?”

The nurse offered a brittle smile and swept from the room.

Elsie fussed with her sheet. She glanced out the window. There was a small car park and, beyond that, a three-storey brick building. More wards, she supposed. As usual, most of the windows had their blinds drawn. Those that didn’t remained dim, as if sunlight couldn’t penetrate the glass. Elsie opened her book and frowned at a page while the *argh ... argh ... argh ...* continued, regular as the beat of a pulse.

And then it stopped.

Elsie dropped the book.

He had rolled towards the window. Since she could see only the back of his head, she couldn’t tell if his eyes were open or not. He began to make tutting noises.

“You miscreant,” he shouted, making her jump, for he had a voice for the stage, deep and stupendously loud so the people in the cheap seats could hear him all the way at the back of an enormous theatre. “Get away with you, lad. Be off with you.”

Elsie looked outside for the cause of his consternation. Nothing and nobody; at this time of the morning the visitors’ car park was empty. She pursed her lips.

A handful of cockatoos flew through the blanched wedge of sky and disappeared behind the building. On the top floor through one of the shadowed windows a shape moved, round and pale, bobbing as if on a string. Elsie decided that it must be a balloon. Yes, a child’s balloon tied to the end of a bed, jouncing in the breeze from the air conditioning. A family must be visiting a loved one. Elsie imagined kisses, smiles, light conversation. Yet it was only a few minutes past seven o’clock. Visiting hours began strictly at eight. An arm materialised near to the window, unmistakably the arm of a child. The hand cupped the balloon in its palm and brought it closer to the glass.

With a jolt, Elsie realised that it wasn’t a balloon after all.

It was some kind of head, a monstrous, round, bald head, as white as bone. The only

features were two large black patches where the eyes should be. And the fingers that held that monstrous head weren't those of a child; they were unnaturally long and spindly with big knuckles. The fingers of a skeleton.

Elsie's heart broke into a jittery gallop.

The balloon-head sat in the palm and moved about quite naturally, as the head of any real person might if they should look out a window, chin in hand. Then those black patches instead of eyes gazed across the distance between them and saw her. The arm dropped away and the balloon-head rose, as if the body beneath it had stood to its full height. Elsie felt caught by those hollowed sockets. With effort, she turned away. Don't look back. She mustn't dare look back.

But what if the balloon-head still stared at her?

When she peeked with just the edge of her eye, the balloon-head was gone, the window again a dingy, empty rectangle like the others. Elsie let out the breath she didn't know she'd been holding. At her age, she shouldn't be so impressionable. It was just a balloon with a face printed on it. Or a mask, yes, a child wearing a mask to delight the relatives. And it was October. Wasn't Halloween in late October? All Hallows Eve, when the veil between this world and the next is at its thinnest, when the ghosts of the dead come back to haunt the living.

"You saw him, didn't you?" Don said. "That miscreant is always nearby."

"What miscreant?" she said, as the skin on her arms crawled and crept into goose flesh. "Who are you talking about?"

Don closed his eyes and bawled at the top of his lungs, "I want to go toilet!"

She flinched. "Oh, for goodness' sake, use the buzzer if you need a nurse."

"I want to go toilet! I want to go toilet!"

Elsie put her fingers in her ears. Two nurses rushed in. With considerable exertion, they helped Don out of bed and to the bathroom. No one thought to close the door. Elsie could see him sitting there, hunched over, his face screwed up and bright red, grunting as

if he were trying to pass a rock. Elsie ran a trembling hand over her face. For the love of God, why on earth did she have to share a room with this disgusting man? At last, the nurses escorted Don back to bed and tucked him in.

“Please shut the curtain,” Elsie said, but the nurses were gone.

Their breakfast trays arrived soon after.

“Would you mind shutting the curtain?” she said, but the food servers were gone.

Elsie drew her overbed table close and began determinedly buttering her toast. Don sat up with a huffing and puffing and struggling of limbs. Elsie refused to look. Finally, he was still. She could hear him clumsily fingering the items on his breakfast tray. Elsie kept her eyes on her own food: plain toast and black tea. As usual, the toast was soft and almost wet, as if steamed. After three weeks on this ward, Elsie had come to appreciate its unusual texture. Her sister, Meredith, would scoff at that, if only she knew.

Thinking of Meredith reminded Elsie of home. Two months ago, she and Meredith had sold their home of fifty years and moved to a unit. The unfamiliar environment had been Elsie’s undoing. While negotiating the stairs that led to the back patio, she had taken three habitual steps instead of the required five. The fall broke her hip. Following surgery, she caught pneumonia. For a time, she was in intensive care with an oxygen mask. Once she could breathe without the mask, they moved her to this general ward. She didn’t like it here. The walls were a sickly, jaundiced yellow and the fluorescent bulbs shone a meagre light so that everyone, including the young nurses, looked sallow. Meredith chose not to visit. The ward gave Meredith the heebie-jeebies. Instead, Meredith phoned her every day at precisely 3 pm.

“Hah, that’s the ticket!” Don shouted. “Good idea. She’s perfect.”

Elsie glanced at him. He was facing her, sitting on the edge of his bed with legs spread wide and his blue hospital gown bunched in his lap. Shocked, she looked away but too late. In that split second she had already seen, drooping beneath a scattering of grey pubic hair, his withered penis.

Oh God, a *pervert*.

Frightened and angry, she turned back and glared at him. In return, he smiled and nodded with vacant eyes, his gesture of greeting as automatic and meaningless as a tic. Elsie hesitated. Some type of dementia, perhaps? He had the reddened cauliflower nose of a heavy drinker. Alcohol abuse must have pickled his brains. She offered a brief smile before looking down at her breakfast tray. Now her mind was made up. She would definitely ask the nurses to move him. She didn't want to share a room with a man not in charge of his faculties. What if he attacked her?

“The miscreant likes you,” Don murmured, and when she looked around, he was smiling and intently focused, as if he'd picked her out from a crowd. “Let me be frank,” Don continued. “I happen to be dying. My last request needs accommodation. Madam, are you ever lonely?”

Pervert. Elsie ignored the comment. If she could reach the curtain, she would close it. She attended to her breakfast. After a while, Don followed suit, as if he'd forgotten all about her. He made sloppy noises as he ate. The noises roiled her stomach.

Then he retched.

It was as if the two halves of Don's face were unaware of one another. While his mouth spewed a thin gruel, his eyes roamed the breakfast tray with a joyful and curious interest, gazing upon the single-serve box of cereal, the orange juice, milk jug, cup of coffee, paper napkin, plastic bag of chilled cutlery. Elsie watched him heave semi-solid cornflakes into the bowl, and then spoon them happily into his mouth again.

She pushed away her overbed table, gasping, and buzzed for a nurse.

Don ate and vomited, drank and vomited. Every now and then, he made sounds of appreciative enjoyment. Oh God, where were the nurses? Don kept pausing to wipe regurgitate from his chin. Sometimes he used his gown; other times, his sheet or blanket.

“Hurry up,” Elsie called at last. “You must hurry.”

Two nurses rushed in. They removed Don's polluted breakfast tray, changed his gown, and remade his bed with fresh linen. Elsie saw everything. Finally, the nurses put Don back to bed, then left. One of them partially shut the dividing curtain on her way out.

“Please, where is my heart medicine?” Elsie said.

No answer. With tears pricking at her eyes, Elsie tried to calm herself, and took a sip of lukewarm tea. Then she noticed the curtain, moving in and out, in and out, as if alive and breathing. Filling and emptying, filling and emptying. It must be the current from the overhead air-conditioning vent, blowing intermittently, that transformed the curtain into a mockery of a living thing, the mimicry of a lung. Yet it had never happened before. Not once in her three weeks of residence on this ward. God, it was so stuffy in here. For a moment, Elsie felt the overwhelming, choking panic of claustrophobia. She interlaced her fingers and squeezed them, hard. It had to be the drugs. The doctors gave her so many, many drugs; there must be side effects, interactions.

Argh ... argh ... argh ...

The curtain just happened to billow in time with Don’s exhalations. The coincidence unnerved her. No, she ought to forget this nonsense and read the paperback. The book sat on her bed. She reached for it. When something moved at the window, Elsie bit her lip. Don’t look. It was just a bird—a sparrow or pigeon. But in the corner of her eye, the shape seemed so white, so still. Incrementally, she ran her gaze along the length of the bellying, panting curtain, and stopped. Last chance ... Instead, with resolve, she looked straight at the window.

Oh God, oh yes, she must be hallucinating.

Or the sunlight on the glass was playing tricks on her.

Those slender fingers clutched tight against the outside sill, as if the being were dangling its feet off the ground, couldn’t be real. And that head, the top of its bulbous skull as thin as tissue paper, as translucent as a balloon ... It might actually be a balloon, the string slipped from a child’s hand and now caught in a tree, if not for those fingers on the sill, those black sockets that stared at her and corked the breath in her throat.

“Be off with you!” Don bellowed. “Go on, you damned miscreant!”

“What is that thing?” she said. “There, outside the window. Can you see it?”

But Don must have fallen into an instantaneous doze.

Argh ... argh ... argh ...

Thank heavens; the window was fixed and unable to be opened. Elsie turned her back and pressed her fingers to her mouth. If Meredith could see her now, quavering and tremble-chinned, she would sneer, and for good reason. There must be a rational explanation. Yet the only rational explanation was Don's presence.

Argh ... argh ... argh ...

She had to get rid of Don. How? She couldn't leave her bed without assistance.

Like magic, Don provided the answer.

Blowing and gasping, he sat up. From behind the half-closed curtain, she could hear the flapping back of sheets, the squeaking of the rubber mattress, the drag of his hand on the creaking side-rail. The man couldn't stand up unaided. Elsie, in good conscience, should buzz for a nurse. But what if Elsie happened to be asleep? She closed her eyes tightly. She listened to the dry thump of Don's feet hitting the linoleum floor. Even if Elsie thumbed the buzzer, the nurses were always so busy; they wouldn't attend for at least five or ten minutes, perhaps even twenty.

Don sobbed with effort as he got out of bed. He shuffled for three uncertain steps. The metal hooks on the dividing curtain shrieked against the rails as he grabbed at the fabric and toppled. Shrouded within the curtain, he slammed into Elsie's overbed table and bashed it into the frame of her bed. She jumped in fright. His body hit the floor. He began a pitiful mewl. Elsie looked at the window. The balloon-head had vanished.

She thumbed the buzzer, and cried, "Help! Oh, please help!"

Nurses and more nurses filled the room. The dividing curtain was drawn back. Don blinked about, confused and distressed. One of his arms flailed like that of a drowning swimmer. Elsie, to her surprise, didn't feel a jot of guilt.

"I didn't see what happened," she said. "I was fast asleep, and bang, crash, boom."

The nurses hauled Don back onto his bed. He had incurred a nasty gash on his elbow, which Elsie kindly pointed out. Apart from that, he had no other injuries.

“An unwitnessed fall,” a meaty-faced man announced, perhaps a doctor. “Let’s move him to a room near the nurses’ station where we can keep an eye on him.”

Porters wheeled his bed from Elsie’s room as Don waved at her, grandly, a king in his bulletproof Rolls Royce. A nurse came in, the friendly one with the Spanish accent, who put Elsie on the bedpan, and gave the long-overdue heart pill and tummy injection. Elsie ate lunch with a renewed appetite. The window overlooking the car park and opposite building didn’t frighten her. Scudding clouds suggested a fresh wind. The air must smell of magnolia and daphne. Elsie settled herself for an afternoon nap. Faintly, coming from somewhere down the hall, she could hear it ...

Argh ... argh ... argh ...

A tremor played along her nerves. However, the dividing curtain, pulled back, no longer respired. The window held no monsters. She drifted off.

Something woke her.

Many hours had passed. The room lay in shadow. Meredith hadn’t called. Shivering, Elsie put her arms beneath the covers. In the grey reflection of the overhead TV set, right next to her in the visitor’s chair, sat the balloon-head monster.

Thrashing, Elsie sat up and stared at the empty chair.

She rubbed at her eyes.

Yes, the chair was empty. It had been a dream, nothing but a bad dream.

Argh ... argh ... argh ...

She dropped back to the pillows, clutched fretfully at the sheet, and gazed up at the TV screen. There again was the reflection of the visitor’s chair with the balloon-head monster. It sat with its impossibly thin arms resting on its impossibly thin legs, while its hands with their impossibly thin fingers dangled between its knees. Those black pits for eyes contemplated the floor as if the monster, forlorn, was lost in thought. Dumbstruck, Elsie kept looking between the reflection and the empty chair. Fear tightened her throat.

Argh ... argh ... argh ...

If only Don were here. What in God's name was going on?

Argh ... argh ...

Don stopped breathing.

Elsie waited, her own breath held. A piercing alarm went off. Soon after, she heard running footsteps. Nurses sprinted down the hall, some pushing wheeled equipment. The hairs rose on Elsie's neck. She could feel the approach of doom as surely as her arthritic joints could feel the coming of a storm.

"MET call in Ward Two South, bed five," spoke a bland female voice over the various speakers in the ceiling. "MET call in Ward Two South, bed five."

After all this time in hospital, Elsie knew that the acronym MET stood for Medical Emergency Team. Somehow she knew that Don occupied bed five. Her heart shrivelled into a cold and frightened lump, hard in her chest.

"Elsie, my dear, he's all yours now," boomed Don's theatrical voice, echoing down the hall and sending an electric shock through her system. "Be careful of mirrors. He can reach out of mirrors. You don't ever want the miscreant to touch you."

"No, I won't have him," she cried. "Don, take him back. Oh, please."

The alarm screamed on and on.

"Don?" she shouted, louder this time.

He didn't answer.

Elsie pulled the sheets to her chin, her mind scrabbling over the possible consequences. She would have to cover every mirror in the house. How could she explain that to her sister? Oh God, Elsie would never again see her own face as long as she lived. Would she glimpse the monster in every reflection? When passing shop windows, would the monster walk at her side? At home, would it gaze out from darkened panes of glass, from every shiny surface, no matter how small; the stainless steel kettle, the hollow of a spoon, the blade of a butter knife? She would go mad. She would go mad like Don and turn to drink, become a deranged and babbling shell of her

former self, and then, in her dying moments, have to give the monster to somebody else, picked out by chance. For all she knew, this monster had been animate for centuries, for millennia, since the beginning of time, haunting one person after another for reasons unknown and it would go on haunting people until the last turn of the world.

Elsie flung the sheet over her head. Perhaps she was going mad already.

The alarm stopped.

Elsie stiffened, her senses alert.

No more footsteps ran along the corridor. Quietness enveloped the ward. Don was lying in bed five with a sheet on his face, just like Elsie, but he was free at last, with a doctor signing a death certificate and nurses telephoning family members. With luck, the monster may have even passed with him.

Timidly, Elsie lowered the sheet.

She had to put a palm over her face and peek through her fingers, like a child watching a pantomime. *It's behind you ... behind you ...* She looked again at the TV screen. The balloon-head was no longer in the visitor's chair. With a spindly hand gripping the side-rail and the other on the headboard, the monster was now leaning over the bed, its hollow-socket skull mere inches from her as if to steal a kiss.

She wrenched away.

Gaping around the room, Elsie couldn't see the monster. She waved her arm through empty air and felt nothing. But when she lay back on the pillows, rigid with fear, panting, eyes screwed shut, she thought she could sense a dank breath fanning her lips, one exhalation after another. Elsie tried to scream. The scream came out strangled and truncated, a weird stuttering noise that sounded like ... oh God, sounded like ...

... argh ... argh ... argh ...

... and the terror stripped her mind empty and clean like a hard gust of wind, like a tropical cyclone that shears away everything that isn't nailed down.

Deborah Sheldon is a professional writer living in Melbourne, Australia. Her short fiction has appeared in

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Nine Easy Chords Are Taught to Strum on a Black Acoustic Guitar

by Dan Ryder

a)

patient upon a broken stand
calling out for a god's touch

b)

six strings
four tight
two loose
but perfectly
symmetrical
silks from six like
minded spiders

c)

one day dust
will be collected
in attic
museum or cash
converter
rust
on a forgotten
rail track

d)

an asylum of hands
could thrash
out hundreds
of half remembered hits

e)

an instrument
of universal
language
but various
tongues see
varying tempos
(tango
flamenco
blues
etcetera)

f)

a fretful glance
bleeding index
blows out blood
gleaming harmonica

g)

bitter winter birches
crane branches
lose leaves
pine for life
outside
lacklustre roots

h)

man-made
meaning destruction
comes
swifter than creation

i)

a peeling sticker

on black wood

This Machine

Kills

Fascists

Dan Ryder is a poet from Doncaster, England working towards a Creative Writing MA from the Manchester Writing School. He currently lives in Melbourne and is a poetry editor at Voiceworks.

Mrs Garside's Unexpected Scratch Card

by Anne Lawrence Bradshaw

Mrs Garside's small hotel perched like an afterthought at the very end of the esplanade. The Beach View sat on a promontory of rough, pebble-dashed concrete overlooking the turn in the bay, the area where it started to change its pretty tourist face and adopt the more prosaic features of the nearby industrial plant—grey chimneys in the distance, a glint of steel on hazy days, a blur of heat-fuelled smog that smudged the horizon.

Black, evenly-spaced railings enclosed the front of the Beach View, which was somewhat softened by a scattering of flower tubs and window-boxes. These were arranged with bright blooms in an obvious attempt to divert attention from the more dilapidated aspects of the old Victorian building—the areas where the pointing was thin, the guttering loose, and the paintwork flaked and worn. Four floors of this rotting former grandeur reached upwards uncertainly, ending with a grey-tiled roof decorated with crumbling edge-work, where two gabled attic windows peered out like small, tired eyes.

A freshly-painted red-and-gold sign at the front door advertised good rates for board or holiday accommodation. The Beach View Café on the ground floor was surprisingly busy, but the corner entrance caught the breeze squarely off the North Sea, so whenever anyone came in or out, the starched linen tablecloths would be sucked abruptly underneath rickety tables before swaying to rest again.

Mary Garside was a small woman in her fifties. She had greying hair, which had once been a russet-red colour, and which she now wore tied back, away from her face. Her expression was guarded and yet—to use a local word—canny. She was tidily made for a woman of her age: rather well-endowed with a generous bosom, but she always dressed carefully. On first meeting her, you had the impression that she wouldn't put up with much, that patience was not one of her virtues, perhaps. She had an air of keeping things at a distance, of being somehow impenetrable to the usual vicissitudes of life. Deliverymen never had to wait long. She didn't gossip like the other hoteliers. Children were tolerated, more or less, but no special provisions were made for them and pets were definitely not allowed.

She was also a creature of habit. On Sundays, which was ‘Residents Only’ in the Beach View, after she’d been to Mass and all the breakfasts were over and done with, she would change all the table linen whether or not it needed refreshing, and wash out the small porcelain vases on each table, replacing them with new, fresh flowers. In winter, despite the fact that trade was almost non-existent, she resorted to discreet plastic orange marigolds instead. She felt it was important not to let standards slip, and was painfully aware how much outside appearances counted.

One chilly Sunday morning in April, after arranging the single, yellow daffodil in each tiny white vase, Mrs Garside smoothed down her blue apron and gazed through the picture window at the grey sea. The weather had been typically unpredictable and the waves chopped and fell beyond the pebbled beachfront. Bookings were well down on last year, and down again on the previous few years before that. She had a sense of heaviness, a kind of foreboding, which she tried to brush away by vigorously polishing the dresser on the back wall for the third time that morning, and then calling on Rose to hurry up with the vacuuming. But once the small number of residents got back and tramped all over the carpets, who would see the difference anyway? It was one of those days where she caught herself wondering what would become of this place.

The rest of the family had been happy enough for her to take over the business when their aged parents died. It was convenient for them all in many ways as Mary already lived there, she already knew the ropes, and none of the others—who were either married, attached, or living abroad—had the time or the inclination to take on the money-pit that the Beach View had become.

Her youngest sister, Eileen, had visited just the day before with her daughters, two lively small girls who rapidly bored of sitting politely and listening to stilted small talk.

“Auntie Mary?” the elder girl, Elizabeth, had started to fidget. “I’m bored. Haven’t you got Sky yet?”

“Sky? I’ve got plenty of sky—just look out there!”

She had nodded at the window, as she’d known they expected her to. It was an old joke, part of family banter now. Eileen no longer admonished the girls for teasing their aunt. It was all good-humoured after all, and they were fine as long as they could stop at

the gift-shops and pick out a treat for the way home.

This time, though, Elizabeth had not been so easy to put off.

“Well, and I bet you haven’t got Facebook either, have you?”

“I’ve got the internet, course I have.”

“Ah, but you don’t have *Facebook*, do you?” she’d persisted, causing her mother to look up, briefly.

“Now, why would I want Facebook when I’ve a perfectly good face and a whole shelf full of books already?”

The two girls dissolved into giggles.

“Oh, Auntie Mary—you’re hysterical, you really are!”

Eileen shook her head at her older sister half-apologetically, a smile on her lips. She took a quick sip of tea from the antique china tea service that had been specially laid out for them. It was covered in rosebuds, cracked through the glaze now, the rims of the fragile cups edged in faded gold leaf. Eileen thought it old-fashioned and dingy, and not for the first time wondered at her older sister, using her best china for the likes of an ordinary afternoon, and for such giddy girls. Mary Garside just smiled at her nieces in her customary polite way, handed round a plate of carefully arranged biscuits, and then sat back down, her back straight against the hard wood of the dining chair. Eileen watched her and opened her mouth to say something, to compliment her on the tea perhaps, or to ask how business was; she wasn’t sure, in fact, and she took another sip of tea instead, the words unspoken.

They left soon afterwards, with Eileen buttoning up the girls and wrapping them in warm layers against the brisk wind outside. She didn’t want to interrupt Mary’s ‘evening rush’, she said, deliberately not looking round at the empty tables and chairs in the dining room. Mary walked out with them and watched them down the esplanade, the two girls waving madly until they were out of sight. Then, arms crossed against the cold, she turned back to the hotel.

It had seen better days, she had to admit. Since she'd inherited the place it had been hard to make ends meet, and the nest egg that had been cushioning her recent shortfalls had almost run out now. Something would come up though, it had to. She wasn't a drinker, she didn't gamble or have any expensive habits, and she never even went on holiday. Nothing lasted forever, she knew that. So something would be bound to come up.

A couple of yellow and violet pansies shivered in the new spring tubs, reminding her that she needed to go to the garden centre again soon. There was something else in the compost though, something caught underneath a yellow petal. She bent and picked it up. It was a grey scratch card. One of those lottery things—still unused, too. She'd never had time for that, although she'd seen plenty of folk buying them at the newsagent's and then huddling at street corners rubbing off the wax, or whatever it was, trying to become instantly rich. It was pitiful, really. As if the answer lay in a little grey card! What rubbish. She dropped it in the pocket of her apron just as it started to rain and then went back inside. It was important to make sure that everything was ready for tea-time.

§

Late on the next evening, when all the meals had been cleared away, the morning tables set ready for the regulars, and the late staff departed, Mary sat down with her papers and computer. This whole business of balancing the books was getting more and more difficult. She had recently 'embraced the modern way', as she put it, and acquired a laptop after doing an evening course on basic book-keeping skills, and she was now putting figures into columns and doing something which would project her takings for the next three years. It didn't look good.

On the far wall, the reflection of the muted TV screen flickered off a glass-framed picture of the Virgin Mary: she overlooked a polished mahogany sideboard covered with a white embroidered cloth. Various family photos were arranged upon it. There was Eileen with her husband, Andy, and their two girls. There were their parents on their wedding day, now faded to vague sepia shadows within an ebony frame, and several other pictures of them at various holiday destinations. There was a brother, Tom, since emigrated to Canada and another sister whose picture peered out over the back of the collection, showing her with three children, but no husband. A small, round silver frame at the front held a portrait of Mary's grandmother when she was a young woman. It dated

from the year before the Great War, and whenever she looked at it, Mary was sure she could feel a kind of innocence contained in the grey eyes that looked serenely back at her. It was undoubtedly her favourite of the collection.

A few ornaments and bric-a-brac filled in the remaining gaps in the sideboard's family album. There was no Mr Garside, however. There never had been. He was a fiction that had arisen, seemingly spontaneously, when Mary had taken over the boarding house from her parents, and something she'd never bothered to correct in people's minds. The fact that a woman of her age could remain unmarried, unwidowed, and unattached to any male was not understandable to most people, she supposed. She had even gone so far as to start wearing a brass ring on her third finger, something on which Eileen had hesitantly commented once and never mentioned since. It was reassuring for everyone, she imagined, to think of her in those terms rather than as a perpetual 'Spinster of the Parish'. In her line of business, she didn't want to stand out as odd in any way, not with her customers, or her patrons and residents, nor with her staff and delivery men—not with anyone, in fact. Her reputation was so important. Why, it was everything!

She switched off the TV properly and sat back down heavily at the computer. It was after midnight and only one little lamp illuminated her private lounge now. The walls were in deep shadow and beyond the quietly whirring fan of the laptop, only the occasional car engine and light patter of rain could be heard outside the window. A door down one of the corridors opened and closed with a muffled finality. The early morning, and thoughts of the following day, seemed to be in limbo, as if waiting for something.

Using her two index fingers, Mrs Garside's hands hovered over the keyboard as she typed f-a-c-e-b-o-o-k carefully into the search engine. There was a short pause as the login/register screen loaded. She sat for another half hour or so and, when prompted, added various bits of information about herself into a new profile. These were things she considered neither interesting nor essential to anyone else: her old home town; the name of her secondary school; her occupation; the few email addresses of contacts she knew.

Finally she picked out a photo from a snapshot her sister had taken after one of their visits. It showed her in her blue apron, as usual, although fortunately it looked more like the top of a blouse here, as one of her nieces was obscuring the embroidered Beach View logo on the breast pocket. Her shoulder-length hair was tied back loosely, its

greyness softened into pale translucence by the light which fell through the large dining window, and her eyes were wrinkled shut in her customary small smile so that they were almost invisible. She looked old, Mary Garside realised with a shock. She *was* old, in fact. She scrutinised herself further and found her posture more rounded than she'd imagined, her neck slack and grey, and her cheeks thinner—sagging, almost. She sighed. But she loaded up the photograph anyway, having nothing else suitable.

To be honest, she couldn't see what all the fuss was about anyway. Why her nieces were so keen on the internet she couldn't imagine, but she guessed it was a generational thing. All those pictures of cats and adverts for this and that just left her cold, and the number of suggestions to 'Like' things on Facebook was bewildering, off-putting in fact.

She was just about to log out when another random message popped up. She almost ignored it, but something familiar caught her eye: 'Friend Suggestion: Do you know Steve Brooks?' No, she didn't know any Steve Brooks, but ... she did once know a 'Stephen Brooks', didn't she? Yes, but that was a long time ago, back in her Secondary Modern days.

She peered at the attached photo. It showed a balding, middle-aged man wearing a waterproof coat, and looking slightly askew at the camera. It looked nothing like the Stephen she knew. And yet ... she moved closer to the screen, as if she could peel away the years if she saw through enough pixels. She moved back and stared harder, thinking all the time and remembering, trying to make sense of what she could see with her own eyes. Surely not, and yet ... there was something about that sideways stance that *did* remind her of Stephen.

He always walked with his head slightly cocked to one side, didn't he? Whether out of shyness or awkwardness, she couldn't have said, but it was a definite characteristic of his. They were only sixteen years old when they had gone on a date together. It was nothing really, just a walk round the park, with Stephen wheeling his bike. One of his skinny trouser-legs was clipped back to keep it away from the bicycle chain, she recalled, and his head appeared huge, freakish-looking, in his cycling helmet, like an oddly protruding stalk, or the outsize metallic domed head of an exotic insect. For some reason, he hadn't taken off that helmet at all, the whole time they walked, so he looked even more lopsided than usual. With an odd pang she was suddenly aware that she'd felt

vaguely embarrassed to be seen with him.

Mary recalled the path they'd taken along the quiet road towards the park. Her father had worked in a factory before they'd moved to the boarding house, but the suburb where they lived was leafy and timeless in a peculiarly British way. The evening traffic was just starting to build, but it was still quiet where they walked, past the darkened front of the old Catholic Church, hidden among a girdle of swaying sycamore and the dark green closeness of old yew trees, and alongside rows of big houses with their lengthy gardens and high walls. A few of the trees were shedding early autumn leaves and the ground about them was changing from grey paving into a softer russet shade. Stephen was pushing his bike to the left of them, while she walked to his right.

The park was almost deserted. Too late for schoolchildren and too early for the gangs that showed up later, they had wandered up and down the pathways, deliberately ignoring the swings and slide, and spoken in a hesitant way of school matters. Away from the security of the classroom, she felt as though a vast world had opened up and swallowed them both, taken away all speech and ebullience, so that all the usual banter and mild flirtatiousness that linked them had fled. It now seemed rather petty and ridiculous and she realised that she was conscious of herself in a way that made her uncomfortable.

Her hair had refused to behave before she'd come out, so she'd left it loose, and red waves shimmered over her shoulders as she walked in the slanted evening light. She was very aware of her shape as she'd taken off her jacket and the curve of her breasts felt 'on show' through her thin t-shirt. She caught Stephen watching her once or twice. Her walk became awkward. Her hips swayed and felt loose and rounded next to his as he wheeled his bike carefully along. She tried her best not to accidentally brush against him. It was as though they were opposite poles, electrically charged in some way, so that any contact might detonate something between them.

At the park gates on the way back they had stopped. A single leaf fell from an old sycamore and landed just in front of her shoe. She knew then that she didn't want to see him like this again. It was a realisation of absolute certainty, yet she couldn't have explained where it came from. He was looking down at her, she knew, still staring at her; she could feel his head looming in the alien-looking helmet. She had just opened her

mouth to tell him, to say the words out loud: *Stephen, I don't think we should see each other again ...* but he moved before she could speak. His free hand had pulled her towards him, and then he leant down and kissed her on the mouth.

Mary felt his lips over hers, how his mouth was warm and soft and his breath suddenly inside her. She felt her words go unheard, how they were stifled in her head, trapped inside her mouth and turning over and over, mingling with his breath and hers, while she herself stood frozen. She didn't know if he was aware of her shock, and yet she didn't know how he *couldn't* be aware of it. He was pressing himself against her quite hard, and she was growing afraid that she wouldn't be able to breathe. But she went on holding herself quite still, waiting, longing for it to be over. If he would only turn back to his bike, say goodbye and wheel away from her. It was as though she propelled herself forward in time, to an acute awareness that nothing, nothing, nothing can last forever.

And finally, Stephen had stepped back. A few drops of rain began to fall and the vague noise of traffic permeated the evening. He had given her a last, shy smile before turning away. Did he really have no idea what she'd been feeling, then? She was both relieved and disappointed, but it was too late to say anything now anyway.

She had put her jacket back on, drawn the collar up and stuck her head down, to walk home past the old church again. The wooden notice board outside was rattling from the freshening wind and a sign for the Harvest Festival flapped loose corners at her. Against the darkening sky the stained glass windows looked garish and unreal, their colours murky, the black leaded lines darker than ever, and the glass could only reflect the clouds and lowered branches that were being tossed up and down by the wind. The movement filled her with fear, the reckless way the branches swung and heaved through the air, and she remembered shivering as she hurried past.

So, yes. She did know Steve Brooks after all. It was Stephen back then, though.

But not really. How could she possibly know him after all this time? She peered again at the photograph on the screen. Was he married? Did he have a wife and children? Was he happy? What did he *do* now? She knew he'd been good at maths at school, but did that actually mean anything at their age? Why bother to make friends now, after all this time—what was the point?

Mrs Garside leaned back and rubbed a hand wearily over her chin, then down her neck, to rest on her chest. Underneath the stitching of her apron she could feel the swell and rise as she breathed in and out, the soft familiarity both comforting and disturbing. She looked over to the photographs on the sideboard and through the gloom of the night: it was as if a weight of expectation had gathered, a hush settled, to see what would happen next. Mary felt an awkwardness about her that she hadn't experienced for years.

She unbuttoned her apron, and it was then that she noticed the hard corners of the forgotten scratch card poking through the edge of the pocket. She took it out: the grey, metallic sheen of its wax surface was still pristine and glowed slightly in the half-lit room. Only a faint smudge of compost marred the bottom corner. She imagined the worlds of possibility it might open up, the brief glimpse of excitement in rubbing away the wax to find out what was underneath ...

With a sudden grimace, she tore it in two, and then tore it again, and again, so that the pieces lay in her hands like used confetti. She cupped them roughly and then tipped them into the waste paper bin, retrieving one or two stray bits which fell to the side, making sure that every last piece went into the rubbish. She wiped her hands together, and then looked at the computer screen again.

Stephen's photograph was still on silent display. She saw through the outward appearance of the balding man in the picture to the sideways smile of a teenage boy who had once liked her enough to kiss her, and she couldn't bear to look at it any longer. She logged out and switched off the computer abruptly, forgetting her password and login details as she tried to recall herself back to the present moment.

Outside, the rain had begun to beat harder on the windows. A draught under the door was cold round her ankles. When she turned off the lamp in the room, Mary Garside shook her head and blinked several times, but it was no good: the ghost of an image was still there in the darkness, the forgotten name still fixed in her mind.

Anne Lawrence Bradshaw was born and raised in the North of England. Her work has been recently published in Orbis, Acumen and Artemis (UK literary magazines) and dozens of e-zines. She lives a quiet life and treads lightly on the earth. When writing, however, she prefers to delve beneath the surface and seek out hidden anomalies, quiet monsters and the occasionally unexpected.

glue

by Rose Hunter

and now i am back in the cherry red with you, winding the passes
to san sebastian rolling with the metal in my mouth head out
 the window a dawning question intensifying
then buckling by the side of the road, stomach clutching tears
 were coming out of my eyes and then you were too.

you were pouring out of my eyes. showman peacock strut
 magic carpet roll out for you to *splain it*
tail swish and button ears, goofy lion with stumbling
feet too new for the world new eyes on the world
 all of it what we had in common we
wanted *the whole world*, just like that with bubbles and prancing
 also the pines would not stand still amongst the seesawing
brightness of things. *putting two and two together*

means coming up with *oops* *why didn't you tell me sooner! oops*
i am not going to notice! and your story, the eleven year old
 asleep with the can around his neck. you were thirteen
and have never forgiven yourself, absolution is not a thing you

believe in here, now so many years and miles away
from that cold minnesota shack. later we bought mulberry jam
and walked around the square. in the graveyard
 i thought how it would be if we could see through
 to all we were treading over. in the restaurant

i took pictures of napkins hot sauce and your cowboy hat
not the black one but the other, the one you rarely wore
well many things were different that day for starters
a few days later i broke the plates. it wasn't so i'd remember

what you'd said and understand it finally. forgetfulness and wishful
thinking and *things will be different this time* sure
this way not a lion but i kept myself in that particular circus.
we don't like to admit that we could have just left it anytime

but we just couldn't leave it anytime. *damage plus damage don't work*
but your arm around my shoulders had a kind of care
but (you said) we were both high, *ha!* momentarily
there were lies and then there were lies and when we finished
with those. you were the one losing your sight, but i
was the blind one. it's only hindsight that makes us different.
your eyes too once staggered above rags juggling machetes in a slow

floating, death row cabaret. i watched the space you left
dissolve as a man with knuckle rings, stepped in cautiously.

Rose Hunter is the author of the poetry books You As Poetry (Texture Press), [four paths] (Texture Press), and to the river (Artistically Declined Press), as well as the chapbook descansos (dancing girl press). She is from Australia originally, lived in Canada for ten years, and now spends a lot of time in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. More information about her is available at [Whoever Brought Me Here Will Have To Take Me Home](#).

The Pupal Stage

by Philip Keenan

While he was working on the weekend she might hang around, smoking in the back room and reading Sartre. She didn't really understand Sartre but read him in order to seem intelligent and worldly to a young man who seemed intelligent and worldly to her. "The detail doesn't go in, but the words kind of wash over me," she used to say. "I get the sense of what he's on about."

"It's all about alienation," he would say, and leave it at that. His certainty impressed her. But a comment like this promised more—an explanation, an example—and this never came.

Nobody ever came in to the 9 am session at the Majestic Cinema on Duthie Street.

Collision was a good word. Like technology, it was a word that French theorists often used, so a compliment with that word in it was a good compliment to get.

When she wasn't in the café she would go The Book Exchange, opposite the department store on the main street. She knew Maureen who ran the shop and Maureen liked her. The girl asked good questions, when she was in the mood to talk, and she would make a cup of tea for them both. She once served a customer unbidden, and Maureen trusted her implicitly after that. She was company, even if she was curled up with a book on the window seat, reading in silence, her coiled limbs entangled elegantly in long socks, woollen jumpers and beanies.

Titanic was the only film playing at the Majestic and some cinemagoers were not keen to see it. These were men of the land who lacked a woman of the land to force them through the doors of the town cinema. Most had seen it already, in fact, but the audience had dwindled lately.

Titanic had been on at the Majestic for over a year. Entertainment was limited in Little Farley, but you could see a film too many times.

The garage burned as if eaten by some insatiable monster that grew larger as it ate. It was sheer power and unbridled fury. The flames were like glory and the smoke tasted sweet on his tongue. It was an old garage, derelict, a few doors down from the newsagent his parents ran.

There had been a barn too, on the road out of town. Also burned, also derelict, a bundle of sticks—another mystery.

Boarders at the Ladies' College were served things at meal times that were known by such nicknames as 'milky dollop' and 'grit' because no one was sure what they were meant to be.

For something different they went to the Fox & Hare, when he had the money to treat her and he was in the mood. They didn't drink alcohol. There was no need. And she didn't like it. She didn't like what it did to people. She wanted to sit still, to stay in control but play up there in her mind, inside her head, with her imagination free and ideas racing around her brain. She wanted to stay in control for him and he had to remain sharp because his mind was too important to damage.

"Our thoughts are precious," he said. But he really meant his thoughts.

So they drank coffee. They drank a lot of coffee. They drank coffee in the Fox & Hare and sat by the big fire in the middle of the room and watched the smug young people at the pool tables. They didn't play pool. Instead they talked and listened in front of the fire. He liked to be near the fire and she liked to be near him.

They said reasoned things, speaking slowly, thoughtfully, and they talked about big questions. A perfect world and how people would live and what kind of revolution would be the best kind of revolution in the town of Little Farley.

Boarders from the Ladies' College didn't come to the 9 am session on the weekend because they were forced to play sport on Saturday morning, and Sunday morning was the only time when they were allowed to sleep in. Breakfast was at 8.30 on Sunday and you were crazy to be out of bed before then.

Most laundromat customers allowed them to do their washing. They knew Andrew from the Majestic—he was nice enough if oddly dressed—and they thought they had seen the girl before, in a school uniform from the Ladies' College. The pair of them were well behaved and sober, which was a good thing. They sat there, calmly writing in her big notebook. You couldn't tell how old the girl was. It was hard to tell with Asian girls. But she was probably in her final year of school, they thought. She was, in fact, fifteen.

It distressed her to think about all the inequality in the world. He said there were things that could be done, but the best remedies caused pain at first.

“I feel so sorry for those housing commission people,” she would say. Those people resisted the dominant paradigm of respectability—their yelling and their dirty babies and their joblessness. “They smell,” he would reply. “They're dirty and we've failed them and they smell.” When he said we, he meant society.

She didn't have a mum. And her dad was away, travelling or on business or incarcerated in some gilded cage of gentlemanly leisure.

Or just incarcerated.

She didn't know.

She took the baby when it was offered to her, crying. She held it while the mother unloaded her possessions from the ute. She tickled his toes. The baby smiled and his mother kissed the man with the ute and he drove away. All the mother's possessions were on the street, everything, including a broken fan. She held the baby and bounced him on her hip and the mother thanked her. “He's been sookin' all day,” the mother said.

Romantic types saw the film regularly. These people appreciated the charms of the leading actors or they were captivated by Hollywood glamour.

“We’ve failed them,” he would repeat.

“We have to help them,” he would say, and Heidi would say, “No, we don’t. We don’t have to do that at all.” She knew what he meant by help them.

People didn’t come to the 9 am session because they were up early and being industrious, as if there were a presence watching and judging the men or women who weren’t working hard until lunchtime on Saturday. And in a way there was: they judged each other. Anyone not seen to be obviously working was thought lazy and morally corrupted, while neighbours drove past the fence-line on the road to town.

Kids played sport and shopkeepers did brisk business before they closed at midday, and the main street of Little Farley was busy with the traffic of residents driving up and down and the occasional tourist who had wandered from the highway, lured by the famous pies at Connie’s and the almost as famous greenhouse near the rotunda in Samuelson Park.

They smoked and listened to the radio, a local station that played classic hits, and they danced like the girls with the full skirts do at Arnold’s in *Happy Days*. They danced ironically. No one else was there, so no one told them to stop smoking. They didn’t know if you were allowed to or not. Sometimes a customer would come in and they would offer to do the person’s washing for them. They liked spending time there with the machines. Besides, they didn’t need sleep and they would be in the laundromat all night, watching the washing spin, so why not put in the clothes and fold them at the end?

Older girls from the Ladies’ College sometimes came into town to see the film on Saturday afternoon. They convinced themselves they were seeing it ironically and when they attended university in a year or so they would say it was postmodern to consume glossy culture like this. The fact is that they liked to watch Leonardo DiCaprio on the

screen, and they liked a love story, and in the cinema they could eat the lollies they were not allowed to eat on the street. That sort of thing was unladylike (it was that kind of school).

These girls knew the film from front to back. They recited the dialogue and treated it as a kind of sing along, the way some people watch *The Sound Of Music*.

Even in summer he wore an overcoat.

Little Farley was a cold place and this kept the residents of the Gowing development quiet until late morning when the sun shone and the ground thawed. Then they emerged. They wore trackies and spoke harsh words to each other from too far away and seemed to argue in the street more than was necessary.

She kissed him once, late, as they walked along, when no one was around. They wore gloves and scarves and the light from a street lamp reflected from the damp surface of the road. He said, “What did you do that for?” and she didn’t do it again.

Oh baby

Baby, you’re dead

Baby

In the road baby.

And the tyre marks are black

And he left you in the road, baby

With your baby.

“Obscure use of the word ‘baby’. I like it. A collision of meanings.”

If the good people of Little Farley saw the less fortunate as victims, then the strong would treat the weak better. He must make victims of the victims in order for people to understand this.

At school she did whatever she wanted to do. The principal had been a scientist and she was not old-fashioned despite being middle-aged. They had an understanding.

“You’re a bright kid,” the principal would say. “Stop sneaking out at night, and hand in some bloody work.”

She promised that she would try, but she kept sneaking out.

Mostly she spent her time at the Rotunda Café, where they had all the newspapers, and she could read and write and there was no pressure to leave so long as you bought something.

She would make notes and create a poem from the saddest story she could find in the local paper, which was often about people doing terrible things to each other in the Gowing development—about children and old people discovered cold and grey and dead on a filthy floor. Saturday nights could be violent, just outside the town in the car park of the Ned Kelly hotel.

But they didn’t go to the Ned Kelly. Only the Gowies would go to the Ned Kelly.

Where they went was to the laundromat, since nobody bothered you at the laundromat. It was warm and dry and they liked the smell of the machines and the chemicals. It was a clean smell. They first went to the laundromat for the smell. But they stayed because they had each other there, in their place, watching the machines and gazing out at the quiet black street. Him reading her poetry which she said wasn’t ready yet and her listening to the sound of his voice as he read.

But the main reason why no one ever attended the 9 am session at the Majestic is that there was no 9 am session. It wasn’t listed and you couldn’t buy a ticket and nobody knew it existed. But it did happen. Andrew the projectionist and ticket seller and

popcorn scooper (it was that kind of cinema) would put the film on at 9 am on Saturday for an audience that attended every week. It was a private showing, for an audience of one—her name was Heidi—and they would watch together and smoke and talk about all the things they hadn't talked about yet. They drank coffee and they didn't always notice what was happening on the screen.

They didn't need to watch. They had seen it before.

They were more interested in each other.

Philip Keenan is a writer from Sydney who is interested in the strangeness of familiar things. He has a blog called [Johan Turdenmeier's Miscellany](#) and he tweets [@Turdenmeier](#). Philip's story 'Cubans' was published in Issue Seven of Tincture Journal.

Resisting Existence

by Mark Ward

night retracts revealing
the proper names of things
you sound each one out
each lipsmack drowned in
our stick-splitting footprint
flat, manageable, I rant
about our cluster of streets;
a cul-de-sac, a hamster's wheel
distant in the pale morning
boys revelling in nature,
our place in the flood
light low with approaching
dawn seeps into our bones
we own these unwalked woods
our feet in the pond, splashing
we imagine a world just for us
sunlight strengthens each moment
you stare at the torches, the
pitchforks in my eyes, the reflection
of fire in metal, in man
has me looking over my shoulder
at the slightest noise, the sunrise
leads us to the trail laid out
for us, there's only the night,
something moving in the trees,
a rustle, too scared to escape,
two foxes retreat to separate dens.

Mark Ward is a poet from Dublin, Ireland. He was the 2015 Poet Laureate for Glitterwolf and his work has appeared in Assaracus, Storm Cellar, The Good Men Project, Off The Rocks, The Wild Ones, Emerge and the anthologies, Out of Sequence: The Sonnets Remixed, The Myriad Carnival and Not Just Another Pretty Face. He

has recently completed work on his first chapbook, How to Live When Life Subtracts and is currently working on a novel-in-verse called Circumference, from which this poem is taken. astintinyourspotlight.wordpress.com.

The Girl with the Clock

by Kaylia Payne

I don't know why I hired the girl with the clock. It may have been because she had an impressive resume. It may simply have been because she was punctual.

However, I can't help but think that it was because she was a little bit unusual and I was a little bit bored, which in hindsight was a terrible thing to base my decision on; if our childhoods teach us anything, it should be that the worst mistakes come about through boredom.

But hire her I did, and at exactly 8.30 am on Monday morning she appeared in my office with a cardboard box nestled lovingly in her arms. I was already on the phone when she arrived, so when she marched over to me and began to speak, I was forced to mouth the word 'sorry' and point at the phone in explanation. She looked annoyed, tapping her heel and fidgeting loudly enough to encourage me to end the call faster than I otherwise would have done.

As soon as the click of the receiver reached both of our ears, she pulled a large clock out of her cardboard box and placed it in front of me.

"You just wasted one minute and sixteen seconds of yours and my time."

I did not know what to say to this, so I stared at her blankly. She sighed in exasperation.

"You're wasting time again. I can tell that you want to ask what I mean, but are spending far too long trying to think of the right way to word the simple question."

This was true. As she obviously expected a timely and succinct response, I nodded my head.

"Much better." She smiled her approval and I almost expected a pat on the head and a "Good girl" to follow. "If only you had applied that speed to your phone call. You talked about the weather for thirty-three seconds. You then went on to ask after their children, which wasted another twenty-seven seconds. The last seventeen seconds were

squandered when you were saying goodbye—a feat that can easily be achieved in one or two seconds.”

I almost found myself nodding again, before remembering our respective positions and realising that it was quite rude of her to come into my organisation and criticise the way I conducted my phone calls.

“I’m sorry, but I have to disagree with you. That extra time was spent making the client feel valued—something that will ultimately pay off for the business and is therefore far from wasted time.”

“You can make people feel valued in less time if you know the right way to go about it.” She then picked up her clock and looked at it again. “It is now five minutes and thirty-two seconds after I was supposed to start. Could you please show me to my desk so that I can get to work?”

I opened my mouth to tell her not to bother, as she wouldn’t actually be needed here after all, but as I began to do so my eyes happened to fall upon the employees who sat closest to my office: one eating toast, two having a lengthy conversation about cats, and another who appeared to be doing a morning yoga routine. It was apparent that none of them had even logged into their computer yet. Maybe having someone who not only didn’t waste time, but was appalled by the very idea, would actually be good for this place. If anything, she might set a positive example for the others.

So instead of firing her, I nodded (knowing that this was her preferred response, due to the efficiency of the action) and led her to her desk. After she had seated herself, and set up the clock in the cardboard box on her desk so that she could see it at all times, I pulled up a chair and started to explain the job. Thirty seconds after I had begun, she interrupted me with: “Do you have a SOP?”

“A what?”

“SOP—Standard Operating Procedure. For the job. Something that will tell me all that I need to know quickly.”

“We have a training manual somewhere around here I think...”

“Good. Find it quickly, please.”

So off I went to find it with my tail between my legs. However, my desk was so messy, and I was so concerned about wasting time and being pulled up for it again, that I was throwing paper around more quickly than I could look at it. As a result, I couldn't find the manual anywhere. It didn't take long for her to come over to find out why I was wasting her precious time.

“You know, you would save time overall by cleaning your desk and looking at the same time.”

“Wouldn't you like me to find the manual for you so you can get to work more quickly?”

“I would like for the office to be run as productively as possible. It is not just my time that I am concerned about—it is all of our time. If you spend a little more time now, you can save so much time in the future. You really need to think about ways to maximise productivity in everything that you do.”

With that, she came around to my side of the desk and began to tidy up the piles of paper and chewed up ballpoint pens that were littered everywhere. As I couldn't think of any good argument to make in response, I began to tidy up with her. Besides, I reasoned, it's not every day that people offer to help with your chores, so I may as well make the most of it.

After an hour of sorting and organising, my desk was pristine and the manual had been unearthed. The girl with the clock silently took the manual and hurried back her desk, eager to start her work without any more time wasted by my foolishness.

The first few weeks went very well. She turned up exactly on time every day; had a lunch break that didn't go a second over the half hour that she was allotted; and, unlike my other employees, started getting ready to leave at five, rather than spending the last hour of work preparing bags and packing folders away in anticipation of going home. On top of this she worked hard, not wasting any time daydreaming or staring out of the window at a life that didn't involve administrative tasks.

I hadn't spoken to her at all since that first day, as we all quickly realised that a

“Hi!” or “How is your day going?” was in her eyes a waste a time; she was so productive she didn’t even bother with the small-talk that is the plague of most offices.

In summary, I had managed to source a good worker that was absolutely no hassle to me at all, so I couldn’t help but pat myself on the back for a great hiring choice. So great, in fact, that when I left on my annual vacation I put her in charge of the office. It was an odd decision in hindsight, but I still can’t think of any of my other employees who wouldn’t use my absence as an excuse to take a little holiday themselves. However, the latter scenario may actually have been better, as upon my return I found that something had changed.

It wasn’t something tangible, but it was there nonetheless.

For starters, the office was eerily quiet. This was an odd thing in itself; the work was dull and monotonous, so people found their own ways to amuse themselves until home time, which usually involved lengthy conversations about their pets. While on the occasional Friday people ran out of cat stories to tell, and silence descended on the office for short periods of time, this was not a Friday. It was a Monday. Silence on a Monday is something that even I had never even dreamed of before. It usually took everyone at least a few hours, numerous cups of coffee, and chats about the weekend before they could bring themselves to open up their emails.

So when I first walked in and saw my employees with their heads bent over their keyboards and their fingers furiously typing away, I was convinced that I must be on the receiving end of a practical joke. I was so convinced of this that I burst out laughing. But even my incredibly loud and unexpected chortle was not enough to make them look up from their computer.

I went over to an employee by the name of Diana, who I had always gotten along with well, and began to make small talk. But rather than respond to my smile and “How was your weekend?” with the friendliness I was used to, she simply frowned and said, “It’s not productive to make small talk.”

It was now my turn to frown. “It’s not productive to try and connect with a fellow human being?”

“No.”

While I could easily have argued against her logic, I'm not the best at thinking on my feet, so I slunk away instead. I slunk my way right on over to the girl with the clock, who, despite knowing that I was coming back to work that day, had made no effort to move herself or her possessions out of my office, which didn't seem all that productive to me. I said as much as I walked in to my office—I added a smile to let her know it was a joke, but the snarl in my voice turned the smile sarcastic and made my words even more so. She paid my nastiness no heed.

“It is productive to keep my things here, as I will not be moving from this office,” she told me.

“Pardon me?”

“I have decided that I will be in charge. It is much more productive that way, as barely a second is wasted.”

She then proceeded to show me the figures, and from there on in I had no doubt at all that what she was saying was true. In that moment I had to make a decision: to be in charge or to be rich. I did not have as much integrity or experience as I do now, and so I packed up my belongings and moved myself on over to the empty desk in the corner, ready to be as productive as I could possibly be, along with the rest of the silent employees.

I can honestly say that I had never worked harder before. I didn't talk to anyone, I didn't run down to get my usual soy latte with three sugars and a shot of caramel, I didn't check the weather or my emails, nor did I phone clients just to touch base. I worked from nine until five without breaking for lunch, and in that time I did a week's worth of work. We all did. We lost a few clients because they claimed, and rightly so I now realise, that there was no longer a human touch. We no longer enquired about their day or asked after their 2.5 children. However for every client we lost, we gained five more. We were working faster and smarter, and because of this we were becoming sought after in a way we never had been before.

We all began to carry clocks everywhere.

When I first brought mine home my husband stared at me blankly. “What on earth are you doing with that clock in a box?”

“Being productive,” I responded.

“How does carrying around a clock make you more productive?”

“It ensures I can keep track of every single second that I use.”

“I don’t understand ...”

I gave a loud sigh of annoyance in response to this. “So I don’t have to waste any of my time. Which is exactly what you’re making me do right now. Now if you’ll excuse me, I am going to log in remotely and try to make up for the time you had me frivolously throw away just then.”

“What about dinner? And CSI?”

“I’ll come down and make a sandwich if I get hungry. And CSI is ...”

“Let me guess—a waste of your suddenly precious time?”

“Exactly. See? You do understand.”

§

“How much did you get done last night?”

“Quite a bit. I skipped dinner and worked right through until 11 pm.” I was proud of my efforts until Diana responded with, “Oh, you went to bed at 11 pm? I have found I get so much more done if I stay awake until 2 or 3 am.”

Even as we were having this conversation about wasted time we were making sure not to waste any, combining the small talk with the menial morning tasks that didn’t require our complete attention. This was the only time of day that any of us spoke any more.

The girl with the clock hadn’t come out of her office all week. I could see her bent over her computer from the second I walked in until the second I left, which was getting

both earlier and later. Some people had started sleeping at the office and they claimed that she didn't leave her computer all night. We were all in awe of her productivity, and it inspired us to work even harder than we already had been.

However, after another week of maximum productivity, things started to change in the office. People began to fall asleep at their desks and come down with winter viruses, and by the end of the week there were only ten of us left in the office, the rest having called in sick. Being sick is not a very productive thing to be, and myself and the other employees who had not sacrificed their productivity for a comfy, warm bed, decided that it was simply not good enough. We needed to only have employees that were committed to the business. While I was no longer officially in charge, I still felt some responsibility for the company (I did own it, after all), so it was agreed that I would be the one to talk to the girl with clock about replacing our sub-standard colleagues.

I could see her working hard at her computer, and so hesitated before knocking at the door, afraid that she would see the conversation as unproductive and choose to replace me as well. Though she didn't look up when I knocked, she also didn't tell me to go away, so I took that as a sign that I could step in. After all, time taken to look up and say "Come in" was time that couldn't be spent working.

It was the smell that hit me first. In fact it was the only thing that made me realise what had happened, because as soon as that first whiff of death entered my nostrils, I quickly closed my eyes and backed out of the office. I didn't see the girl with the clock then and I never saw her again—though I smelled her for months, the fumigation and five cans of vanilla scented air freshener doing a less than stellar job. They told me that she had died of exhaustion in the midst of typing; not even getting a chance to finish the sentence before her overworked heart gave out.

We all took a few weeks of stress leave after she had been found, and I have to say, they were the most relaxing and enjoyable weeks I have ever had. I am proud to say that I put every clock that I owned into the bin and was as unproductive as a person could possibly be.

When I arrived back at work, I couldn't help but smile at how normal and familiar everything seemed after the strange few months we had had. Of course, it being 9.30 in the morning most of the staff had not shown up yet, but the few who had were either

loudly recanting the minute details of their time off to each other, or eating their breakfast beside their computer that had not yet been switched on for the day.

We never did reach the level of productivity that we had achieved with girl with the clock in charge. But then again, no one else died at their desks, and I'm sure you will agree that was a fair trade indeed.

Kaylia has always been an avid reader and, as avid readers tend to do, decided to start writing her own rambling adventures. Her passions are short stories and strongly-worded opinion pieces, the latter of which she gets to do often as a regular writer for both HerCanberra and Lip Magazine. She has also been featured on Mamamia. For short fiction, Kaylia received a commendation award in 2011 for the Katherine Susannah Prichard Speculative Fiction Award, and has since had short stories published in Tincture Journal, Narrator, and the annual fourW anthology. Kaylia's story 'One Big Apology' appeared in Issue Four of Tincture Journal.

The Uṣasaḥ

by Susan Hawthorne

From: Rg veda Uṣas Book iv: 51

Translation by Susan Hawthorne

and so this easy daily light in the east
has created clarity from darkness
may the Uṣasaḥ dawning sky daughters
blaze a path for the people

the dazzling Uṣasaḥ have set themselves
in the east glistening like the oiled sacrificial posts
flaring they have unbolted the double doors
of the cowstall of darkness bright and cleansing

in the day's light may Uṣasaḥ munificent ones
resolve to give and give
let the misers sleep in oblivion
unkindled from the depths of darkness

whether Uṣasaḥ the blazing ones
are old friends or new
they are herding many sky cows
their seven mouths shining

for truly you goddesses with your sunhorses
yoked on cue you gallop around the worlds
awake! awake! you cry all you sleeping
two- and four-footed creatures

when and where and which of the ancient ones
ordained the tasks of the sunsmiths

when the dazzling Uṣasaḥ follow their glittering path
they are indistinguishable an eternal haze of light

those ones the inspiring Uṣasaḥ
for whom the sacrificial priestess toils
by recitation singing praise and with healing words
in just a day she obtains wealth

from the east they come all the same
spreading light all the same
those waking goddesses are like a rush of cows
the Uṣasaḥ on the move

all the same these same coloured Uṣasaḥ
are on the move they hide the black monster
of night with their incandescent bodies
showering blazing beams sun shafts

sun daughters Uṣasaḥ while showering us
with light will your gifts extend to wealth and children?
our eyes sun drenched we wake to you
from our sunlit bed

I sing to you sun daughters Uṣasaḥ
with your blazing forms
wishing for fame if only
heaven and goddess earth will give it

Notes

I have been interested in Uṣas for several decades, since I first encountered her (now turns out to be them) when writing a thesis on the Homeric Hymns and in particular the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite¹. Aphrodite, a Dawn goddess, has her origins either in the Middle East (Astarte, Ishtar) as represented in the name Aphrodite Ourania or more

likely in India as a variant of Uṣas whose Greek form is Eos and whose Indo-European name was Ausos².

I began translating the Uṣas poems from Macdonell³ over Easter 2012 and was surprised at the imagery. Once again the cows⁴ were coming into my life and the further I ventured, the more references to cows there were.

The process I followed involved translation with notes, keeping it as literal prose in the first instance. During this process I noted any ideas I had for a poetic approach. I then broke the prose into shorter lines, which gave it the feel of a poem. That allowed me to create a freer translation in which the poetic elements were highlighted. Here is the progression I made with verse 3:

Prose

Shining today, may the bountiful Uṣasaḥ resolve to give wealth generously. In oblivion, let the misers sleep, unawakening from the depth of darkness.

Verse

Shining today, may the bountiful Uṣasaḥ
resolve to give wealth generously.
In oblivion, let the misers sleep,
unawakening from the depth of darkness.

Polished

in the day's light may Uṣasaḥ munificent ones
resolve to give and give
let the misers sleep in oblivion
unkindled from the depths of darkness

In the polished version you can see how I have shifted the language to create a better rhythm and to get semantic resonance. For example, 'resolve to give and give' doesn't

change the meaning, but improves the rhythm. In the final line ‘unkindled from the depths of darkness’, the word unkindled has several purposes: it means unlit and so plays on the fire and light aspects of the whole poem; the second syllable kin- is reminiscent of the collective noun for cattle, ‘kine’ and so keeps the cow theme going even though this line is dealing with the unawakened ones.

I attempted to cross-check my translation with others. The only one I have at hand is Wendy Doniger’s⁵ which, while it contains some similar elements is wildly different from my reading of the original text.

After completing the translation, I wanted to do something more and had been thinking about an imaginary translation from a work of art produced by a friend of mine. So I began again. This time with the artwork in mind and choosing a few key images from the polished translation.

Imaginary Translation

Kindled
these goddesses
herd sky cows
their seven mouths

While a significant transformation has taken place, the key images have remained and I have shifted from ‘unkindled’ to describe the unawakened ones to ‘kindled’ to describe the sky cows.

The new poem is a kind of meta-poem that describes the process of translation through an imaginary translation, an archaeological dig through language. There are many ways one could do this. The commentary in the poem is also a reflection of the commentary provided by Macdonell and the tradition of commentary in Sanskrit and other Indian languages. Like all commentators, there are shortcomings (and perhaps even some errors) in the commentary caused by the density of the text, semantic lacunae and human frailty.

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⁴ A reference to my book *Cow*. 2011. Melbourne: Spinifex.

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Susan Hawthorne is the author of seven collections of poems and two chapbooks as well as fiction and non-fiction books. Her latest book is Lupa and Lamb (2014). Her collection Cow (2011) was shortlisted for the 2012 Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize and Earth's Breath for the 2010 Judith Wright Poetry Prize.

The Obliteration Rooms

by Maria Arena

You have the right to defend yourself!

The words hook your attention, give you pause in a way the image of the gun doesn't. You know you're supposed to be mesmerised by the weapon's sleek look and compact design (*small enough for an evening purse!*), and that you should be taken with its power and potential for annihilation, but you're stuck on the manufacturer's slogan.

You have the right to defend yourself!

Do I? you think.

The declaration aggravates you like an ache in a deep place you can't reach. Sure, it sounds reasonable enough, and God knows you understand where the advertising execs are coming from, but there's something about the sentiment.

You have the right ...

"What are you looking at?" he asks, seeming to fill the archway between the kitchen and family room.

Your hand slides onto the mousepad.

He's working on his tie, frowning at the knot.

"Just finding a recipe." Your voice is steady and doesn't betray the quickening of your heart as the cursor skitters towards the menu.

Open; click History.

"I thought I'd cook that pasta dish you loved so much when we were first dating."

Clear Browsing Data.

Never forget.

He tugs the knot into place, checks its position in the mirror at the back of the wine cabinet standing in the corner, gives a satisfied nod at his reflection, and walks towards you.

Keeping your eyes on him and your expression attentive, you close the window and bring up the recipe without moving anything but the tips of your fingers. Then he's beside you, sliding onto the stool and turning the laptop in one fluid movement. His cologne lifts from his skin, imbuing the air with subtle notes of citrus and sandalwood; the scent is not at all like the brassy concoction you'd brought him for Christmas, which he'd braved the Boxing Day crowds to return.

His glance at the screen is cursory, habitual and obligatory, a duty to perform in the ritual of your relationship. He doesn't know what you know about how these things work, and you keep it that way by not complaining when he surfs away from the recipe and logs on to the ASX.

You add another sigh to the collection you keep hidden. *He's really a barbecued meat kind of guy anyway.*

"Coffee," he says, attention on the laptop.

Standing carefully, you move on light feet around the counter to the percolator, pour his coffee, add a Stevia tablet, and ease it over to him, unstirred, the way he likes it. He ignores the cup, glares at the screen, apparently absorbed by the numbers, but you know better. The seconds stretch, and while you wait you notice the particles that float in the beams of sunshine streaming through the window. They drift over the yellow primroses he bought you, which pretty up the kitchen even though they are beginning to wilt, to the portrait he'd organised for your anniversary; the undeniable proof of your happiness. You gaze at your smiling face. *That girl did such beautiful make-up*, you think, eyes moving on, following the particles. They shimmer and you imagine they're magical. *Perhaps they can mend what is broken*, you muse, taking a quiet, shallow breath. The particles land on your arm and settle on his bunched hand, which sits idle on the counter.

The ache inside you remains.

He reaches for the coffee.

You have the right to defend yourself!

But why should I have to? you wonder, watching the cup rise to his mouth; the day's obliteration will proceed from here.

§

“Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

—Genesis 3:16

§

Mid-shift break. The tearoom is empty, and you give thanks for that small blessing. Your shoes squeak softly as you cross to the cupboard, open it, find your favourite brew, take down a cup, bring the two together, add water, breathe the swirl of peppermint steam, and sigh.

The shift has been arduous: a multiple casualty car crash; two ODs; the little girl with a broken arm, and another woman with a blunt force trauma to the head. You don't think she's going to make it. As the tea steeps, you check your watch and wonder what the rest of the night will bring.

On the table is a late edition broadsheet. The headline blares: Pensioners Lose, Defence Wins in Budget Shake-up. You put your tea on a coaster, sit, get comfortable, take up the paper, and fall into the story, your mind darting into the future as you read. Tougher times for pensioners mean busier times for you, and you don't relish the idea of seeing more of your community's most vulnerable members, but that's the job.

You don't know he's there until his hand touches your shoulder.

Heat flushes through your body as you catch the scent of him.

His fingers brush your neck, feather-light, gathering strands of loose hair.

You grip the newspaper convulsively, tearing half-moons through the print.

The heat of his breath drifts over you.

Your heart is jackhammering.

He massages your shoulders, both hands at work. “So tense,” he murmurs.

That sick feeling gathers in your stomach.

“You’ve been doing great work tonight.”

His thumbs press into your muscles, finding and releasing the tension, and you fight to suppress the moan of pleasure that rises, unbidden, to your lips, hating yourself for the feeling.

He takes your shudder of disgust as encouragement. “But we can’t have our nurses stressed out,” he says, one hand sliding down your chest, into your shirt, and over your breast. His breath quickens. “Stressed nurses have an adverse effect on the well-being and recovery of patients.” He finds your nipple and pinches it between his fingers.

You bite the inside of your mouth.

“Which is something I’d have to report because, as you know, the safety of our patients is paramount to the hospital.”

You will yourself to faint, but the tearoom, the newspaper, the steam from your cup, the sting inside your mouth, remain vivid and all too present. There’s nowhere to go, no escape, nothing to do but endure.

Beside your ear, he whispers, “I can help relieve you of that stress.”

He grips your elbow and urges you to your feet, pushing the chair out of his way.

You feel the fullness of him and want to vomit.

He bends you over the table and lifts your skirt.

You catch a sentence in the newspaper article: “We have the right to defend the integrity of our borders from this incursion,” it reads, and you want to cry.

When he’s done, he lowers your skirt and pats your back. “All better now,” he says, the sound of his zipper closing underscoring his words. “See you back on shift.”

You don't hear him leave but you understand that you're alone. His fluids drip down your thigh and you cross the tearoom to the sink. Your hands shake, your stomach heaves, your legs are weak but you clean up, straighten up, and fix your hair because the shift is only half over and you have a job to do.

Leaving the tearoom, with your favourite brew gone cold and the paper unread, you know you will never step foot in there again. Not that it will matter—the hospital has many rooms where you can be obliterated.

§

“The problem is that every woman in her entire life has that one moment when you think, ‘Oh! Here’s my rape!’”

—Ever Mainard, Chicago Underground Comedy, 3 January 2012

§

The chime is unobtrusive, yet it might as well be as loud as the clanging of cymbals for the clamour of anxiety it creates in you. A moment later, Sia is singing about swinging from chandeliers, making your heart pump in a nauseating kind of way, but you can't bring yourself to touch the phone, not even to reject the call. You wish you could be that party girl in the song, drinking to forget, but it's one in the afternoon and you're not that far gone—not yet anyway. The phone rings out; tweets fly in; messages crawl down the screen. Facebook demands attention with another gentle chime.

Turn it off, you tell yourself. But what good would that do? Instead, you search YouTube, knowing it's only a matter of time since he's already infected Instagram and Snapchat, and uploaded a video to Vine; an endless loop of your humiliation. Not the worst stuff, of course—he's smarter than that.

Still, it's enough to get the world involved; every John and Jane Doe inviting themselves into your life, into your home, to lay their self-righteous opinions upon you: a second assault; obliteration in the third degree. Some say you should've known better. Some say you got what you deserved, and some say you should've gotten worse. You try not to listen to them, but their poison is already seeping under your skin, as if the bruising isn't deep enough.

Maybe you deserve their crucifixion. After all, you made the decision to go with your ‘friend’ when he offered to introduce you to the band. You’d also been drinking, and you were wearing those tight little shorts that make your legs look almost as good as Beyoncé’s. What did you expect to happen?

In my defence, you think, your spirit rallying, it was a public place and he did seem like a really nice guy, who apparently had a good grasp of simple English.

Your defiance lasts only until the next post on his Facebook page: “Nice work, bro. I woulda hit that too.”

The nausea is back.

Sia sings again, and your mother’s image appears on your phone. How your fingers itch to take her call, how your heart craves to hear her voice, but you don’t answer. Your mother loves you, but she doesn’t drink, doesn’t wear short shorts, and doesn’t approve of the way you walk through the world, demanding that it respects you as a human being: as a woman. She thinks your presumption to the right to be safe is naive, that you’ve been asking for trouble, and now some ‘nice guy’ has proven her correct. In some ways, this is more crushing than the pressure of his hands on your body.

Sia cuts out mid-note and you stifle the urge to vent your pain. Instinct tells you that you’re going to need it—that it will be a shield, however fragile, against the haters, the victim-blamers and misogynist-excusers who are fond of telling you that you are too haughty, too full of belief in your womanhood, that this is still a man’s world no matter how many SlutWalks you attend.

§

“Steubenville footballers found guilty. Too bad the girl can’t also be sentenced for being so stupid and putting herself in danger.”

—Rae Rae, via Twitter

§

The windowpane fogs and clears in time with your breathing. Your knees sink into the cushions under the sill as you wait for her to appear on the footpath below. The sounds

of goodbye come to you through the floorboards: the opening of the front door, the murmur of voices, the door closing, footsteps: hers on the pathway to the gate, his moving towards the stairs. The gate squeals and, though you can't see her face, you know she will be frowning. She's been asking him to oil the hinges for months, but he never seems to find the time to get it done. You lean closer to the window, willing her to look up and see you, and when she does, your heart flutters with love. She is so beautiful. Her hand comes to her mouth and she blows you a kiss, which you pretend to catch before sending her back a dozen kisses of your own, your heart full of yearning. *Take me with you.* She laughs, snatching kisses from the air and putting them in the pockets of her jacket. When the last one is safely tucked away, she waves and walks on.

His footsteps have reached the top of the stairs and are coming down the hallway. You turn and sit, watching the gap beneath the door. Maybe today, he'll pass on; maybe today, he'll have something better to do, like fix the gate. He reaches your door. His shoes, reflected in the polished wood, pause. Breathing fills your head. The shoes move on, clumping along the hallway to their bedroom.

Okay.

You smooth down your pinafore and adjust your socks, touch your hair, which your mother has lovingly braided.

It's okay.

Bouncing off the window seat, you scramble around the bed and sprawl on the floor in front of the TV, happy to fill the hour before school with cartoons. There is a commercial for a home security system playing and you wait, fingers drumming, for it to finish. Another commercial, this one for pool fencing, comes on. Your legs, bent at the knee, cross and re-cross at the ankles; your chin rests in the cup of your palm. A third commercial, something about a new children's wing at the hospital brings a yawn; a nurse smiles from the screen.

There is a noise at your door and you stiffen.

It's not okay after all.

“It is only natural that a legacy of parental deprivation would leave some former residents bitter and resentful.”

—Unpublished press release drafted by Sister Berneice Loch of the Sisters of Mercy, presented in evidence at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2015

§

Hurrying through the early morning radiance, on your way to work, tired from the party that ended only hours ago, but buzzing with the anticipation of his call. The world is glorious and you feel your place within it, snug and perfect, like a tailored glove. You grin at the flowers beside the path, nodding in the soft sunshine, and try to keep the skip out of your step.

Stop it, you idiot. You laugh at yourself and glance around to see who’s watching your antics. The park is empty, except for a group of Aikido practitioners, focused on their art.

As fifth dates go, inviting him to your sister’s monthly soiree was a risk, but you’re glad you trusted your instincts because the date was a spectacular success. Your sister loved him and your friends, even the married ones, fluttered around him, plying him with flirty questions, which he answered with a gentle graciousness, smiling at you all the while.

You hum a snippet of song, something old and daggy (*You’re just too good to be true / Can’t take my eyes off of you*), and begin to imagine a future together. It’s a simple vision: a home, travel, maybe children, shared hobbies and conversations woven together with love and respect. The idea fills you with a sort of happy delirium that makes you giggle like a child spinning.

Ahead, leafy fig trees with impressive girths form a shady green tunnel flecked with golden light. A sandy path meanders through the centre and you envisage a mighty cathedral, where vows of eternal love and devotion are pledged.

Whoa, girl, slow down, you caution, trying to reign in the giddiness. *You haven’t even kissed him yet.*

He appears from between two trees, halfway up the corridor. The appraisal you make is quick and almost unconscious: jeans, pullover, sneakers, backpack, neat but not trendy. Thin, maybe taller than you; hard to tell because his shoulders are hunched and his head is lowered. *Probably okay though*. There are earbuds pressed into his ears. He's hurrying and you figure he's late for work, or an important appointment. He doesn't seem to see you, but you veer to the edge of the path anyway, unwilling to surrender your romantic mood to an avoidable interaction.

When you are almost level, he attacks.

One moment you are pondering cooking lemon linguine for your sixth date, the next, he has barrelled into you, shoving you off the path, between the trees and into a dark recess of shrubbery, down on to the damp, earthy ground. Fireworks of panic explode through your mind: *get up, get up, Jesus, fight, hit him, run, no, no*. You draw a breath to vocalise the protest and his fist crunches into your face. *Breathe, oh God, breathe*, except you can't. What you can do is feel him drag you, feel every stick and rock and blade of grass, feel the very earth trying to hold you, to keep you—safe.

Part of you is hysterical: *Not happening. Not happening.*

Part of you is clinical: *Of course it is; they told you he would get you.*

Part of you is crying for the future you're about to lose: *I should have kissed him.*

But he has your full, undivided attention when he raises the knife. "Fucking bitch," he says.

No, no, I'm not, you think, and reach for him but the obliteration comes anyway.

§

"I always have encouraged women not to walk alone, to have someone with them at all times, because that in itself is an invitation for someone to take advantage of you."

—Albury Mayor, Kevin Mack, 2015

§

The headache throbs. You massage the base of your skull, feeling the new and peculiar concavity—his last gift. The sheet beneath your body is rough; the blanket covering you is thin. Lucky it is summer. Sighing, you close your eyes, and search for release.

You have always liked to sleep in deep darkness.

No chance of that here.

You have always liked to sleep in deep silence.

No chance of that here.

You have forfeited your right to these things, which is something the advertising execs forgot to mention in their exuberant advocacy of your right to defend yourself. Still, isn't being in this place better than the hell you endured with him for twelve years? Opening your eyes, you gaze at the mesh-covered light on the ceiling, and consider the idea. What, in all truth, has changed?

He was a man of strict routine.

Routine defines your days here.

He was a man who felt his duty was to correct your behaviour.

Discipline defines your days here.

He was a man ruled by suspicion.

Trust doesn't exist inside these walls either.

He was a man who guarded you like a junkyard dog.

How different the surveillance of the guards?

Inside his house, no room was safe for you.

Here—

The soft jangle of a key chain and low squelch of booted feet on the painted cement

breaks your line of thought. Under the blanket, you draw your knees to your chest and imagine yourself as a rock: impenetrable, immovable. Silence in the hallway. You wait in an agony of hope: *walk on, walk on, walk on*. The lock slides into the cavity in the door.

You have swapped one obliteration room for another.

Maria Arena began tinkering with the idea of being an author in her teens. This idea became a reality in 2006, when Hachette published her first novel, Mira Falling. After years of studying and teaching creative writing, Maria independently published her second novel Sisterhood in 2014, while seeking publication for a third novel and writing a fourth. In between teaching and writing novels, Maria plays around with short stories and co-runs an international short story writing competition at Field of Words.

O, Eureka!

by Alison Whittaker

This poem is from Alison's debut collection, Lemons in the Chicken Wire, and appears courtesy of Magabala Books.

A scalp-scab burnt and straw-haired woman
spoke to me a revolution
that roared within my belly, only once it were ate
after years of pushin' it round the plate
and when I realised what she knew
and what I missed—O, Eureka!

Nan sliced her finger on a crossword
and wrote with that a dissertation, then she
browning, spoke to me
her contested trinity
the messianic, and the self, and the
blades of grass that pierce the pulp
of weedy toes, that the world should meet you
and wound you as you wound it
made Descartes wrong about that split
O, Eureka!

And O,
the first time I said
a long white theory word
she yarned stiff to impress me
like, with that word
came authority, and with it, fear
that she had been misunderstood
her praxis clumsy or unheard

O, the weaker!

And then, at every drawn goodbye
like a choir, leaning each to the other to hold a clap
my nan clasps my hands and whispers to me
decolonising epistemology, and
critical autonomy, and
affective phenomenology.

And what she says is:

remember yourself, and call me once a week
on which I ruminate

O, Eureka!

Sharp Tongue

by Alison Whittaker

This poem appears in Alison's debut collection, Lemons in the Chicken Wire, and appears courtesy of Magabala Books.

CORNER BOOKS
BROWN & MAINE STREET

My tongue will catch on this
page && drag slow

TAX INVOICE:

&& I will make a seam of
myself

GAMILARAAAY TO
ENGLISH DICTIONARY
\$39.00

&& in this seam, I'll stuff
seeds // eggs // spores

GAMILARAAAY LEARNING
GUIDE \$64.00

Sewn up w/ stick && grass
&& loose thread spools

TOTAL \$104.00
(INCL GST)

Speaking, the noisy wound will
burst

YOU WERE SERVED BY
AMY 26/03/2015 13:24

&& with that, my willi
willi-plucked tongue be born

Either that or bloody && salty
&& a monument to the last

Interview with Alison Whittaker

questions by Stuart Barnes and Daniel Young

For how long have you been writing poetry, and what or who inspired you to begin?

The answer depends on how we define ‘poetry’, I suppose!

I’ve been writing poetry since I became interested in the kind of meaning-making that went beyond the transfer of information. I have lucid memories of writing structured poetry forms in primary school, and from then on teachers and my family encouraged me to keep going. They added fuel to the fire, and my family often drove me around for kids’ writing competitions. I can recall my parents sitting me in front of a second-hand computer and teaching me how to type when I was about eight. First it was re-typing what was in the catalogues, and then I started to type independently. My mother caught me writing something in a form that I would now describe as poetry. That poem listed my favourite things—with the brutality only a child could muster! I’d compiled a definitive rank, with reasons, of my favourite grandparents, my favourite sister, my favourite cousin, my favourite parent. Suffice to say, that particular afternoon I began my long stumble over the ethical contours of life writing.

When and where was your first poem published, and what was it about?

To answer that, I must come back to the definition of ‘published’; that must be infuriating!

The first poem I wrote that was ‘publicly distributed’ was a collection of poems that were peppered through a surrealist short story I wrote as part of my final year in high school, 2010. Those poems were about bioethics, empathy, corporatism and the great experiment of artificial intelligence—thinking about two theories linking robots and any humanity they might have, Alan Turing’s language test and Masahiro Mori’s Uncanny Valley. It sounds a lot more intellectual than it is—a number of the poems are about, peculiarly now that I think about it, robotic intercourse in a train bathroom. Anyway, my class each printed out our final works and had them cheaply bound as an anthology.

My other ‘first poem published’ was at UTS in 2013, in the local university rag *Vertigo*. I say ‘rag’ endearingly, of course. Those poems were actually the roots of Lemons’ architecture, and the architecture of my most recent practice of life writing. They investigated cemeteries as community spaces capable of joy and coming together, and also looked closely at generational gaps, life expectancy, and those great poetic inspirations: love and death.

How and where do your poems take shape?

I’m a writing opportunist, so the answer to ‘where’ is: everywhere. How? Also, essentially: however. I have a small book I write my ideas in, and then play with them in any way I can until they either take on flesh or start to stink. I play with them in the usual ways—re-writes, un-writing, editing, aerating. I also mutter them under my breath when I’m physically moving to check them for rhythm and lucidity—train, bus, car, walking. Obviously, I strongly recommend this as a poetic technique, but it’s also a great way to get my fair berth of personal space on public transport!

In an interview with Sydney Time Out in June 2008, Dorothy Porter revealed “Music has been the key for me since I was a teenager ... I wanted to tap into that dark potency of rock ‘n’ roll, and I still write to music every day.” Does music influence your poetry? If so, what music influences your poetry? Can/do you write to music? If not, what other art forms influence your own work?

Yes. For me, at least, the bodily experience of writing is all about riding a crescendo of heightened senses for as long as I can, or as long as is necessary. Music gets me to that rolling crescendo, but it can’t keep me there and I can’t write with music playing. So much of my work is situated in past-ness, present-ness, so I tap into the top 40 hits of the relevant time to get my head there. Contemporaneously, I listen to Briggs, Leikeli47, and MIA for inspiration—technically excellent poets themselves. Reading poetry that I love and reading tweets I hate also gives me the goosebump-y, pupils-blasted overload I usually need to get poetry on a page. Like Porter, I want to tap into something I don’t naturally have—there’s something potent, drug-like, Dr Jeckyll-esque about it. Through it, you become.

Tell me about 'O, Eureka!' and 'Sharp Tongue', the poems appearing in this issue of Tincture Journal and also your collection Lemons in the Chicken Wire.

The less I say about them, the better, because each is about the process of making knowledge and making meaning! Those things are best left unsaid by me, so that you can get whatever you need out of them.

'Sharp Tongue' follows the format of a receipt for a book I bought in early 2015. I write about re-learning my language as a process of re-birthing traditional knowledges, and convey a sense of urgency for linguistic revival and resistance against cultural death.

In 'O, Eureka!', I take aim at institutional devaluation of Aboriginal women's knowledges and epistemologies through exploring the teachings of my Nan in contrast with those of the academy.

Collectively, these poems make the intellectual visceral and situate thinking and storytelling in a colonial context.

How has your poetry been influenced by others'? By your academic studies? By relocating from north-western New South Wales to Sydney?

A writing degree is at once a clarifying and confusing thing. I have no stronger sense of how poetry is constructed or what poetry is following my degree. What I do have now is a vague sense of how to navigate this big, risky bet we call writing—getting something from my head and body into your head and body. What I also have now, I hope, is some discipline and some basic language to discuss, and be responsive to criticism of, how meaning gets out of my head. That has enduring value.

I'm emboldened by the experimental or political poetry of others, just like I've been inspired by friends' stage-plays, essays, blogs, conversations, social media fights, and memes. Beyond this, dislocating my whole life from the north-west to Sydney makes me anxiously aware of everything around me. Moving from Gomeroi to Gadigal land is like moving across worlds. All this being the case, it's almost inevitable to take influence from the hidden poetry that's in all writing and living.

Congratulations on receiving a black&write Indigenous Fellowship for your debut poetry collection Lemons in the Chicken Wire. Tell me about the collection—its forms, rhythms, origins. And we love the title—can you elaborate a bit on that?

Thank you! Lemons took six years to write, from 2010 to 2015. I didn't know I was writing it until the early parts of 2014. *Lemons in the Chicken Wire* is about queer Aboriginal women on the rural fringe. It is based on the lives of five or so women, including myself, on either side of the turn of the century. I would say that it is experimental in form—scaffolded to represent and enmesh itself with the invisible poetry people encounter every day. Receipts, conversations, shopping lists, haiku-esque events. I wanted it to mimic the interaction between world and mind, and represent, in some small way, how colonisation dislodges meaning-making, language, self. To that extent Lemons' rhythm is one that deliberately runs, trips, rolls, but always leaves space for the reader, who ultimately makes a poem what it is.

As for the title, I'm fascinated by the texture of chicken wire, and the plants that grow through it. It's a very yellow, rural image. Chicken wire is everywhere back home. Lemons, well, that's some crass slang for lesbians.

What are your thoughts on print vs. digital poetry publication?

My thoughts are: why versus?

Good point! What poets are you reading, what's your favourite poem at the moment?

Right now I'm working through a pile of books I've steadily accrued over the years. Among them is T. S. Elliot's *The Wasteland*, Ali Cobby Eckermann's *Inside My Mother* and a pile of old literary mags. My favourite today would be Cobby Eckermann's title poem. I can't shake it out of my head, I simply cannot get it out of me.

Thanks Alison for your time, your thoughts, and for sharing these poems from your collection with our readers.

Alison Whittaker is a Gomeri poet and essayist from the floodplain fringe of north-western New South Wales.

She now lives in Sydney on Wangal land, studying and working in media law and Aboriginal women's law and policy. Alison has written for Meanjin, Vertigo and Colouring the Rainbow: Blak Queer and Trans Perspectives. Her debut poetry collection Lemons in the Chicken Wire, winner of the State Library of Queensland's 2015 black&write! Fellowship, will be released on March 1.

Read to Me

Non-fiction by K. W. George

The mothering begins when I am teary. My hair has been falling out in clumps, leaving patches of naked, tender skin, making me feel like a half-plucked chicken with just as much brain: *The sky is falling! The sky is falling!* Stef, my daughter, comes over and sits me down in a chair, tucks a towel around my neck, and gently cuts my hair back to the scalp.

When I am on my third treatment of chemo, Stef gets lost because I send her to the wrong floor. She texts me, and I call her from the armchair where I'm attached to a drip.

Where are you?

On the second floor. There's no cancer thing going on here.

Oh, sweetie. I'm sorry, it's not the second floor, it's the first.

Are you sure? You said the second.

I'm sure. You come out of the lift, and on the left there're some big doors marked Icon. Go in there, go to Reception, and tell them you're my mother.

Your mother?

What? Oh ...

I laugh.

You're my daughter, I say. My daughter.

When she arrives she bends to kiss me hello. She's twenty-two but smells like a little girl, innocent and fresh. She's wearing jeans and a grey long-sleeved t-shirt, and her short dark hair is clipped to one side with a yellow plastic butterfly.

She pulls up a chair, pushes her glasses over her forehead, and reaches for my hand.

Where're you up to?

I glance at the plastic bag above my head. Another half an hour, maybe?

Okay.

She takes out her phone.

The nurse comes over and flicks at the tube with one finger.

Your daughter, right?

Stef and I look at each other. She's never been picked for my daughter before. She looks like her father. We don't look remotely alike. She starts to smile, as if it's funny that we've been picked for being related.

There's a resemblance, the nurse says, around the eyes. How're you feeling?

Fine.

Soon I'll be feeling anything but fine. Soon the world will be spinning and I'll want to get off.

Stef passes me her phone.

Look, my new foster cat. I've called her Raggedy Ann. She's a Ragdoll cat.

A what?

Ragdoll.

I don't know what a Ragdoll cat is. I picture a cat wearing a plaited red wig and an apron, but it doesn't line up with the shy-eyed, fluffy creature I see in front of me. I don't ask questions. I don't want to annoy my daughter.

She needs special care, Stef says.

Why?

She lost her tail, she whispers.

We look up as a young girl goes into the toilet, dragging her drip stand behind her. She's all in black: black jeans, black sweater, and a black beret—she's got no hair. Since I've been here it's her third trip to the loo. When she emerges, she gives me a conspiratorial smile. She looks too young to have cancer, but cancer doesn't care; it's not choosy. Anybody will do.

Before we leave I have to go to the loo myself—it's the accumulation of all the fluids—and I watch the red stream of drugs pool in the water. I put the lid down before I flush. I've been told to do this for the first seventy-two hours. The stuff coming out of my body is toxic.

I've also been told not to have unprotected sex—for my husband's sake. To avoid long, smoochy kisses. To stay away from sick people. And to accept all the help I can get. The thing I want most is a kiss that lasts for days. A kiss that makes my toes curl up. A kiss that makes me feel wanted and desirable even though I'm bald and missing a breast. I wonder about my breast. Where is it? What did they do with it?

Outside, in the brilliant sunshine, Stef reaches for my hand.

I want you to wait here while I get the car.

No, I'm okay. I can walk.

But it's hot.

I'll manage.

At home she fusses over me. Do I want some tea? Would I like the fan on? Should she read to me? *Should she read to me?*

When she was little I read to her every night. Some nights I didn't feel like it. *Mum!* she'd call from upstairs. I'd look at my husband and sigh. Mum, I'm ready! she'd call again, and he always said to me, giving me a little push off the sofa, Enjoy it while it lasts.

There was a bad patch when she was fourteen. She hated me. She barricaded herself in her room and said, Go away, when I knocked at the door. When I gave her any advice

she said, What would you know? She disappeared in the night. I found her bed unslept in when I went to wake her for school. I paced the floor, bit my cuticles until they bled, picked up the car keys and put them down again. When she turned up she said, What do you care? She was being bullied at school and started cutting herself. To our relief she agreed to see a psychologist, and slowly she returned to the Stef we knew.

Should she read to me?

Yes, please, I say.

What do you want me to read?

I don't know. I can't think straight, I say. Just go to my bookshelf and pull out something.

I throw off my wig, run my hand over the stubble on my head, and lie down on the sofa.

When she returns she's holding the book behind her back. Close your eyes, she says.

Why?

I want you to guess what book it is.

What, before you've even started reading it?

No, silly.

I close my eyes, let my mind drift. *Once upon a time there was a little chimney-sweep, and his name was Tom*, she reads. I'm transported back to my own childhood, but try as I might I can't dream up my mother. The voice is too different. It's young and sweet and it stumbles over the word *flues*. The couch we used to sit on—my big brother on one side, me on the other—is a blur. And the smells, too, are different. Before I know it I have fallen asleep.

I wake when the dog nudges my hand. I am alone. The book is on the coffee table alongside me. The dog wants to go outside and I need to pee, too. More pink stuff.

There's a note on the kitchen whiteboard. Sorry I was so boring, it says, and I want to tell Stef it's the drugs that make me sleepy, not her company, or her reading.

Would you like me to come over and make dinner?

I text her and tell her no, thank you. I need to do some things that make me feel normal, I say.

Although I'm sick, I need to be reassured I'm not useless. I start by walking the dog. I pull on an over-large baseball cap with pretty blue edging that covers my ears and lets my scalp breathe. I've avoided scarves and turbans. A scarf can't hide the fact that you've got no hair, and—is this weird?—I want to look as if I *have* hair. *See, I've just piled it up inside the cap.* Don't know who I'm fooling. But it isn't about them, it's about me—at least that's what I'm told. It's a slow walk, and we don't go as far as normal, but the dog grins with happiness, and the exercise is a good distraction.

I make a green curry for dinner. I use a ready-made paste but also throw in a bunch of coriander and several crushed kaffir lime leaves and a dollop of chilli. My taste buds are barely alive—this is shock treatment. This is nice, my husband says at dinner, sweat gathering under his eyes. He reaches for a tissue to blow his nose, and rises to get a glass of water, while I push my food away, no longer hungry.

Afterwards he clears up and we watch TV. By eight o'clock I've fallen asleep. Again. Go to bed, he tells me. Can you manage, or do you want me to carry you? He's joking. I smile back and think how nice that would be—to be carried upstairs, undressed, and my head laid on the smooth, white pillow. To be tucked in. To be read to.

Once upon a time ...

I check my phone before I go and find my daughter has texted me. It came in while I was dribbling, open-mouthed and unattractive, on the sofa.

Good night, she says.

I love you, Mamma, she says.

Dragging myself upstairs I have a thought. In my befuddled and feeble state, that in

itself is cause for celebration.

But the thought is this: whatever happens, whatever fate decides, nobody can take this moment away from me.

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Our Year Without Footy

by Wayne Marshall

From the moment the sky above our town filled with what looked like a fleet of high-tech sailing ships one morning, and then, from rope ladders tossed over the sides, an army of Fish-Men in spacesuits hurried down and descended on our streets, we knew we were in trouble. It was the end, surely. There's no coming back from something like that. Still, we had to be brave. So a bunch of us organised to leave our houses and go confront the invaders. When eventually we found them waiting for us in the middle of Main Street, we approached them slowly, mumbling words of peace and surrender. The leader of the Fish-Men stepped forward. Behind the screen of his helmet, his slimy orange lips flapped open and closed, as if he was speaking to us. Next thing he was pressing a button on his spacesuit and a computerised voice that sounded a lot like the Stephen Hawking voice was translating his words to us: "No football. One year. Mind experiment. On this town. No football." His beady eyes blinked rapid-fire. "Understand?"

"No footy?" we asked, bewildered. "For a year?"

"No football," the Fish-Man answered.

"That's it?"

He nodded. "No football. One year."

"Or else what?" one of our men asked.

"No remorse," said the Fish-Man, levelling a silver ray gun at us.

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We should probably tell you that footy is a big thing in our town—a massive thing, a colossal thing. Whenever we're not watching it, we're playing it, and whenever we're not playing it, we're thinking about it, and whenever we're not thinking about it, odds are it's cricket season. Going without our favourite sport would be tough. All things considered though, it was as if we'd won the lottery. The creatures weren't going to

butcher us and hoist us up the rope ladders to be shipped off as exotic meat for the Fish-People back home; all we had to do, for some baffling reason, was go a year without footy. We could do it. Besides, at least initially, we were too swept up in the drama of our visitors to miss footy all that much. We had alien boats bobbing up and down in the sky above our houses, for god's sake. We had men with the faces of fish wandering our streets, filming us, tearing down all footy-related memorabilia from our walls, slapping electrodes on us and showing us images of footballs and goal posts and Four'N Twenty pies intercut with stock war footage and hardcore pornography.

But wonder at the unknown and the thrill of having dodged what appeared to be certain death is one thing. Footy, as everyone in our town will tell you, is another kettle of fish altogether. So it was inevitable that sooner or later one of us would get desperate and do something dangerous.

It happened around a month into the occupation. Fifty-two-year-old Ronny Charman had invited four mates to his house on Station Road, where, in the cobwebbed back corner of his shed, he'd hooked up a portable TV to watch a Collingwood versus Carlton footy match. For the first quarter-and-a-half the men huddled around the television, feasting on the game like drug addicts after a forced withdrawal. They were enjoying it so much that for a while they didn't notice the Fish-Men assembling in the window behind the TV. When they finally realised they had company—it wasn't until an ad break after a goal—the Fish-Man at the front lifted his ray gun and liquidated Ronny Charman. His four friends backed slowly away from the TV, their trembling hands held high. Only, they made the grave mistake of looking back to the screen to see if the Collingwood full-forward nailed his set shot on goal from the boundary line.

The men were liquidated immediately, without remorse.

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After the murders we had no choice but to banish all thought of football from our minds. But the question was: without footy, what the hell were we going to do with ourselves? We honestly had no idea. And so, like a flock of lost sheep, we drifted aimlessly through our days: eating without enthusiasm, going to bed early, sleeping late. During that period it was common to see us parked along the fence line of our footy ground, where we'd sit for hours, staring from the grass to the goal posts to the muddy centre square, pining for a

return of the great love of our lives. All the while, the curved bottoms of the boats floated at the tops of our windscreens, mocking us, taunting us.

April blurred into May. May was swamped by the dark clouds of June. Giving up any hope that the Fish-Men might buckle and allow us even the smallest dose of footy, we had no option but to let go of the sport altogether. And that's when it happened.

Honestly, you wouldn't believe the kind of changes that came over us, pretty much overnight. Without footy using up every ounce of their mental and physical energy, our men made up for the years and decades of being half-arsed partners, sweeping wives and girlfriends off their feet. Our collective intelligence skyrocketed. We invented things. We learned foreign languages. We held symposiums in the pub to discuss the future of our post-sport society. A number of us even took up musical instruments, holding impromptu jams on front lawns and nature strips. These changes seemed to please the Fish-Men, who stood filming us on the opposite sides of streets, their gills sucking in and out excitedly, their beady eyes charged with curiosity and pride.

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It wasn't long though before footy was worming its way back into our collective psyche. Some of us have suggested that its return was inevitable, natural even. Others have argued that the Fish-Men's experiment was growing stale, so without us knowing it they re-introduced the concept of footy to our minds. This theory is supported by a group of five wives, who all claim to have woken in the night to find Fish-Men leaning over their sleeping husbands, playing footy club songs in their ears, dabbing goanna oil beneath their noses, dragging red Sherrin footballs provocatively across their private parts. Either way, as eye-opening as it had been, we found ourselves becoming restless in our lives without footy. Yet with the threat of liquidation hanging permanently over our heads, we knew that if we were to reclaim our beloved sport, it would have to be covert.

The first meeting was held at the beginning of August, at the back of our abandoned brickworks factory, in the middle of the night. We had no actual footballs—the Fish-Men confiscated every last one of them the day they arrived—so we milled about in the knee-high grass, unsure what to do. Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. We were about to give up and go back to bed when one of us bolted suddenly from the pack, ran fifty metres

ahead, turned, and snapped a right foot kick back towards the group. At first no one moved. The only sound was the beep and hum of the boats. But then, compelled by a force so strong they couldn't resist, the group leapt as one. At the back one of our smaller men rode on the shoulders of the pack and took a high-flying screamer of a mark. No sooner had he hit the ground than he shot off a handball to a woman on the move. She in turn handballed to her husband, who sprinted, imaginary ball in hand, by the ivy-thick wall of the factory, before stabbing a low pass to his mate on the far side of the paddock. He sent off a quick handball to his neighbour, who from long range slotted a goal between the branches of two gum trees.

And so The Game was born.

Night after night, in unchecked corners of our town, more and more of us gathered in secret to play games of footy that often stretched all the way to dawn. One minute we'd be way out by the strawberry fields, using bits of farming equipment as goal posts. The next we'd be bolting in waves across the green of our bowls club, chasing the player with the ball in his or her hands, trying to lay a tackle or pick up a cheap handball receive. The next we'd be dodging washing lines and yapping dogs, as our matches spilled eventually into backyards. Obviously at some level we were aware that The Game was leading us into dangerous territory, but we followed it, wherever it took us, until one night at the end of August we found ourselves suddenly in the no-go zone beneath the boats. We knew we were in danger, a whole lot of danger, but we played on, kicking and handballing and then kicking again, right into the centre of the field, until finally a handball was fired into the hands of our mayor, who, with dawn breaking through the trees and magpies warbling all around us, barrelled home a goal between two swaying rope ladders. We came from all directions to dive on him, jubilant, red-faced, spent.

When we looked up we saw the entire fish-faced army had us surrounded.

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An hour later we were teetering fifty feet above the ground, on the edge of a long metal plank that extended from one of the boats, having been herded up there on a rope ladder at gunpoint. Way down below, those not involved in The Game were beginning to gather in numbers as news of our capture spread quickly through the town. At our backs, on the

deck, a band of scowling Fish-Men had ray guns trained on us.

“You knew the rules,” rang out the Stephen Hawking voice from the leader. “And you broke them. Now you must take it. The long walk. Go.”

It was then, for the first real time in our lives, that we began to question our relationship with footy and where it was taking us. Were we really about to plummet fifty feet and be squashed like bugs because of our obsession with a stupid game? Really? For a second it seemed like the most futile and pathetic death imaginable. But then we came to our senses and realised that if we were going to die—which of course we all are—it may as well be for the greatest bloody game ever conceived in all human history.

“Go,” the leader waved us on. “Walk the plank. Or be liquidated.”

We joined hands and closed our eyes. We drew our final breaths.

“Liquidate them,” instructed the leader. “Liquidate them now.”

And then we jumped.

We’d barely fallen a metre before a giant trawling net swung out and caught us. Rocking side to side, we looked up to see the scaly face of the leader, looming at the edge of the plank. For a good minute his furious orange lips snapped at us. Yet when he pressed the button on his spacesuit, all the voice said was: “No football”.

“No worries,” we shouted back, falling suddenly away from him in the net.

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We didn’t dare try anything after that. For one, the Fish-Men upped their surveillance, installing microscopic cameras in our walls and commandeering a police car for a 24/7 patrol. Second, with only a month of the footy season left to go, we were too close to the end to risk landing ourselves on that god-awful plank again. There was only one problem: the final month was September, and September, as any footy fanatic will tell you, is hands down the greatest month to be alive, as the finals roll into action.

You should’ve seen us. We were like kids robbed of Christmas. We could almost

hear the sound of miracle goals being kicked and drunken spectators roaring in the stands, out beyond the borders of our town. By grand final day we were climbing up the walls. It was a belter of an afternoon too—twenty-nine degrees, not a cloud in the sky—but we gutted it out, hour by hour, minute by minute, until finally the sun was going down on another grand final day. Almost immediately, the Fish-Men were spotted leaving our streets and boarding their ships, preparing, we assumed, for the long journey home now the experiment was over.

As for us, with the footy season done and dusted, we wasted no time turning to the other great sporting obsession of ours.

Have we mentioned yet that cricket is a big thing in our town? No? Well you'd best believe that cricket is a big thing in our town. Whenever we're not watching it, we're playing it, and whenever we're not playing it, we're—

But you get the idea.

The morning after grand final day, with the Fish-Men still up in their boats, we raided our sheds and pulled out all our bats, pads, helmets, stumps and balls. Then, in a show of community solidarity, and to celebrate the great ordeal we'd survived, we packed our cricket gear into bags, collected our deck chairs, stocked our eskies with all the beer and Breezers we could carry, and headed en masse for the cricket ground.

Coming down the hill towards the oval, we felt as happy as we had in a long time. Some of us even wondered if being deprived footy had done us some good. Was it possible the Fish-Men had made us better people? Was it possible we'd learned something along the way? As we streamed through the gates, colouring our faces with yellow and green zinc, we even felt a twinge of sadness that the Fish-Men—who basically we'd wanted dead for nine-tenths of their stay—were about to leave.

And that's when we saw them. They were waiting for us, in the middle of the oval, standing defiantly by the cricket pitch.

The leader bounded out to meet us as we neared the middle. We knew what his rotten flabby lips were saying, before he even hit the translate button. But he hit the button anyway, and out came the words that were like daggers to our hearts: "No cricket.

One year. Mind experiment. On this town. No cricket,” he announced, producing a ray gun and liquidating a Gray-Nicolls bat one of our men was holding. Then, turning the gun on us, he added: “Understand?”

Wayne Marshall is an Australian writer and musician. He lives in the town of Bacchus Marsh with his wife and two daughters.