



# MENISCUS

L I T E R A R Y   J O U R N A L

Volume 10, Issue 1 2022



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### **About Meniscus**

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

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

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

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## EDITORIAL: POST-PANDEMIC WRITING

Of course it's anticipatory to talk about the post-pandemic; all around the world, it seems, are reports that we have entered the post-COVID era, while locally we recognise that we might have outrun the pandemic, the disease itself still lingers. Moreover, its effects – on personal lives, on individual and national incomes, on the health and education systems which are still staggering toward recovery, and on the profoundly damaged art sector, which did so much to support wellbeing during the lockdowns – continue to frame our lives.

The lateness of this issue of *Meniscus* is directly related to the COVID/post-COVID effects; the editors have been struggling to find enough time to give proper attention to the submissions, and a number of the poems and stories included here address COVID, directly or indirectly. Other poems and stories pick up on ongoing issues of racism, climate change, gender relations, and the existential *quo vadis* story that is such an enduring theme in literary writing.

This might make the issue sound depressing, and dense. But writing can always find a way to deal lightly with difficult topics. The works in this issue of *Meniscus* never fall into mawkishness or hopelessness; rather, they confront the complexities of the world with humour, reflection, irony, or a cool-eyed assessment of how best to adjust to the exigencies that continue to arise. And they do this in language that is often supple, often subtle, sometimes experimental; language that carries the accents of various cultures and literary traditions; language that understands the traditions of the forms in which it finds itself, and knows how to make something fresh within them.

As always, we wish to thank all contributors (particularly for their patience) as we worked through the writing with due care and consideration. The quality of work submitted always makes the act of selection difficult but we're very happy with the pieces we have to offer the readers. Enjoy.

Deb Wain and Jen Webb, for the *Meniscus* Editors

## WRITING FROM DOWN UNDER

Steph Amir

Australia, you say  
My aunt went there once.  
She liked the tropical fish.

I remember a photo  
of her cuddling a koala.  
They must be so soft and fluffy.

Yes, international submissions are  
welcome for our Fall issue. After all,  
we are an international journal.

We like pieces about relatable,  
everyday, universal things:  
Thanksgiving, Walmart, prairies,

crowdfunding for healthcare,  
how the minimum wage has been  
\$7.50 for the last decade.

For the Fall issue we'd love  
writers to get into the seasonal spirit:  
falling leaves, Election Day, pumpkin carving.

Submissions close at midnight,  
eastern time. What do you mean,  
'east of what'? Eastern Standard Time.

What other east and west would there be?



## POEM TO THE SNAIL

Peter Bakowski

I see you, on your slow commute  
to the office of a leaf ...

I like the way you carry yourself.  
When you halt  
it's to linger rather than loiter.

You try to keep a step ahead  
of the pedestrian ...

Should you be crushed  
may this poem console you  
with the assurance that the next rain  
will lure others of your pace  
out into the open.

## A BUSKER ASLEEP IN THE FITZROY GARDENS

Peter Bakowski

Restorative this nap in the afternoon grass,  
Elbows at ease. The breeze and the shady oak invite you to  
Stay horizontal. Your relieved feet thank you – toes wiggle with  
Pleasure. Drowse, dream – you're aboard an ocean liner, counting the  
Icebergs as they pass. Soon you'll dock in New York, be handed  
The keys to the city, ready to enchant the audience at every  
Engagement. You've come a long way from singing in the shower.

## GLASS BEAR

Sarah Barr

Because she was very unlikely to meet a polar bear in the open (not in a zoo), she wished for one. She believed that if she wished hard enough, it would come true, though not one-hundred-per-cent. On the beach with her elder brother in the hazy, salty sunshine, they were acting strangely young for their ages – building a sandcastle and watching the tide run around the moat. Everything was calm and Aunty was up the beach reading the newspaper with her swimsuit on.

She imagined a friendly polar bear padding towards them through the mist, come to tell them something important and fabulous. ‘What’s up, Gilly?’ Liam asked – today he was being a kind brother. How long would that last? ‘Sand in your eyes?’ He hugged her thinking she was crying, which she wasn’t.

They queued at the kiosk and bought chips and ice-cream with the money they’d been given with no instructions about how much they could spend because Aunty was talking on her mobile. They went into the arcade but didn’t win anything. Gilly was still wishing for a polar bear – not a fake, fluffy one you could buy cheap at the market but a real bear that would say, ‘You’re clever, Gilly, and you will be very pretty especially when that brace comes off. I’ll be your friend.’

It was late when Aunty dropped them at the door. Mum silently waved her sister goodbye. Inside there was a smell of potatoes and fish. Dad’s work case wasn’t in its usual place. His boots and jackets had gone from the entrance. She had been told about this but she hadn’t believed it. The usual things were still in the lounge: sofa, TV, ornaments – including the glass polar bear which she’d forgotten about until now, its shiny shape, no details, head lifted, legs solid. It reminded her of Glacier Mints which reminded her of her father, his tweed coat with frayed cuffs, and lovely

tobacco smell. She grabbed the heavy glass ornament and chucked it at the mirror above the mantelpiece which shattered, flinging its shards across the room.

## PARISIAN DREAM

Jason Beale

We wake each other just before dawn,  
a pale aurora peeking through the blinds,  
and a flutter of warmth spreading slowly  
in the room. We are ready to make love,  
to touch and taste in delicious rhyme.

Your kisses are sweet, *tes baisers sont doux*,  
on my mouth and tongue. I ask for more.

I'm an animal like you on God's Earth,  
waiting for the ritual of the day to begin.  
And I'm happy to be fooled now and then  
by the perfume of your body's spoor, in  
a silent struggle like a poet with words.

Your kisses are sweet *sur ma bouche et*  
*ma langue*, on my mouth and tongue.

With warm arms you hold me close,  
brushing your lips as late autumn wind  
across the vein that pulses in my neck.  
And we smoke our lust in a metaphor,  
that rises and falls across the page.

*Bisous si doux, partout mon visage.*  
Kisses so sweet, all over my face.

# CONTROL

Robert Beveridge

the data goes to Washington  
instead of Atlanta. Meanwhile,  
it doesn't matter where you  
are, more people get sick.

## SOMNAMBULENT CORPSE

Robert Beveridge

you can feel the fleas  
jump ship as the last  
few drops of moisture  
evaporate onto the pavement

## A GERALD MURNANE SENTENCE

Tony Beyer

before he left the room  
temporarily  
to attend to an apparent  
but not specifically detailed

medical necessity  
the man who up to that point  
had been standing and speaking  
at the lectern

invited his audience  
to distract themselves  
and fill in the time  
until his return by reciting

in chronological order  
from its inception through to  
the most recent holder the names  
of the winners of the Melbourne Cup

the first half dozen or so  
of which he listed aloud  
as a prompt to their  
communal or individual recollection



## RAGEL TAJJEB

Vincent Brincat

Little ever changes at the nursing home. Mum was in her bed dozing as we entered her room. The window shade was down, the comforting light seeping through emitted a calming glow that extended to every corner. We approached tentatively, not wanting to startle her and sat by Mum's side. The mattress below me gave way as I sunk into it. We watched Mum's lips flutter as she released her breath, the only sound breaking the surrounding silence. Sensing our presence, she slowly opened her eyes.

'Hi,' I said leaning forward and kissing her. 'I went to the cemetery today and put flowers on your mum's grave.'

Mum's eyes glistened and met mine, she smiled. '*Inti ragel tajjeb* (You are a good man),' she replied in her soft Maltese accent. Her hand reached out and rested upon mine.

My heart seemed to take an extra beat. I looked into her eyes and returned her smile.

Within the month, my 96-year-old mother passed, the result of complications caused by a fall. Mum died alone in hospital due to the restrictions imposed at the time due to Covid. Despite requests for an exemption on compassionate grounds, to be with her during her final moments, all were rejected.

It is a pain that we must live with which returns continually, at the most unexpected times, and will not be appeased.

Her kind words echo in my mind still: '*Inti regel tajjeb.*' And my heart seems to take an extra beat.

## WE FEEL THE ANSWER IN OUR CELLS

Faye Brinsmead

A person absconds from work – off on a frolic – tall grass clasps her feet – unmown, she loves that – & dandelions & cabbage moths – flit past her wickedness – light rain falls – fattening pine needles – in the car, the Dumky Trio – yesterday’s find, for the home run – passages break away – rise up, as if unheard before – she loves that – or does she? – a fat man in a lemon shirt waddles along, reading – his phone – or filming himself? – that cyclist is – yes – the pale son of the tent couple – who pop up in the park, beneath the elm – dissolving like soap bubbles – when her back’s turned – from her balcony, she sees grass combed smooth – as over a scalp – the son wears a Gatsby cap – watercress goatee – shins the wind could snap – she parks out the front – encounters a neighbour – *my mask’s in the car* – they both mouth – the flat is surprised to see her – but masks it – the book she’s in quest of – lying on the red-checked table mat – she stays just long enough – to jot down the start of a poem – *a person absconds from work* – more Dumky, third movement – rain-coloured reverie – a man drags his car across an intersection – canary yellow, the fender taped up – above the grey strip, *bloody good* scrawled in black pen – he jogs along, then eases in – this poeming of life as it happens – she loves that – an hour later, back at her desk – she cradles her treasure – Margulis and Sagan’s *What is Life?*

## LINES OF FLIGHT

Faye Brinsmead

*A drawing is simply a line going for a walk (Paul Klee)*

I took a line for a walk on a cool spring evening in a park bustling with line-owners wrangling lines of unimaginable variety, all straining to break their leashes shuck off their collars and tangle in a jazz-riot of moods tenses and types, but my line was shy; conditional, verging on subjunctive; and the brash imperatives, indicatives and interrogatives made her want to hide in her special gap in the fence where star jasmine leaks out, so we went there and I freed her from encumbrances – things branding her as mine – and she slid through into someplace she couldn't or wouldn't put into words while I gazed at the jasmine, each creamy bloom a spiral cosmos, until she was ready to re-enter my service (but who was serving whom?) and come home.

# TRAPPED

Owen Bullock

by the form

the punishing gallery lights

*I do a lot of slapping*

losing weight  
the leather worker  
punches an extra hole

log rolling back  
pushed forward  
by the tide

*Katherine 1963*

*Lighter Moments*

are there some places

I can't go?

the dark cave,

that road, that club ...

exhibition space  
I want to re-arrange  
art

I'd love to see a collage  
with not much in it

art is holy  
but they want to talk

at least the lighting's good

## FOLD

### Owen Bullock

I fold away the novel in a black suit. Inside the box, the black suit attends the novel's funeral on my behalf. I sandwich the screenplay between sheets of aluminium foil, put it in the oven and weld the door shut.

But come one autumn solstice, I'll break open the box with an axe and exhume the novel from the suit's skeleton grip. I'll grind loose the oven and release the screenplay. The door of the house will rush out and all the world see I'm a greedy, ungrateful poet who should know by now 'who are you really?'

all of your fingers  
pointing to the sky,  
palm

upside down  
floating with the world  
I'm a dandelion clock  
and it's them not up  
the right way

From behind the curtain to the kitchen where there was no kitchen door, I step and become Frank Spencer – mm, Betty! – Harold Wilson – I think I said this at the Brighton conference – Ted Heath – the shoulders going – aping Mike Yarwood and Freddie Starr, my already heroes – and this is me, cept I don't ...

I eat my cracker, cheese and tomato sauce sideways, like a snake – I'll never be a good boy.

*gotta love me some half and half style*

## ON REACHING ACROSS TIME

Anne M Carson

Is it opening a door – solid, wooden, strap-hinged?  
Or does it hang, fringed fabric one can part  
with the hands and slip through?  
The way the breeze.  
The way a body through water.

Mind dematerialises,  
my here and now  
slips away.

Thoughts as fluid as chiffon.  
I become breeze-like  
able to glide through the years.

Not thinking hard enough  
but loose enough.

Warmth of the day lingers.  
The warm evening breeze  
carries the scent of night lilies.

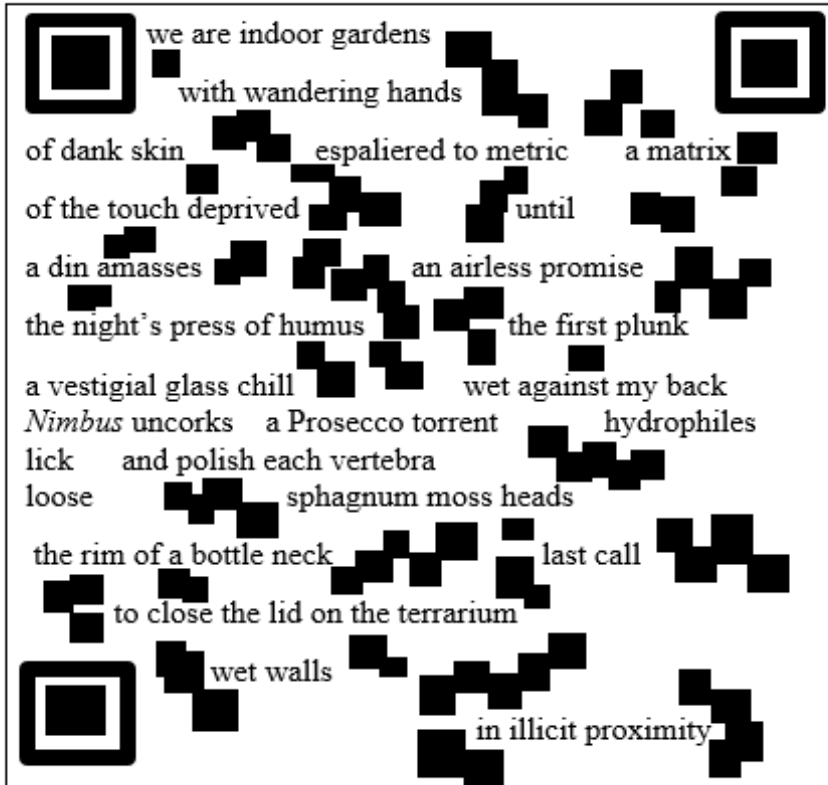
*Suddenly the blue note sings out  
and the night is all around us  
azure and transparent.*

Quote from Elizabeth Berg, *The Dream Lover*



# WE ARE INDOOR GARDENS

Lisa Collyer



## VISITING WINDOW

Lisa Collyer

*With thanks to The National Trust of WA and Woodbridge (Mandoon)*

I remain behind glass  
in a cabinet of skin  
for the in-person parade –  
an aged care curio.

Loneliness is a wing beat  
under a glass cloche –  
your fogging breath  
and petals flatten

---

just out of reach.

## THE TIMEPIECE

Lisa Collyer

*With thanks to The National Trust of WA and Woodbridge (Mandoon)*

A clock observes a heartbeat's arrest  
in each room semaphores signal  
a different time, conservation cleaners  
stir up dust to maintain the complexion  
of a coral posy. Youth is the benefit  
of crepe kept in an attic bustling to canter  
from the bit of crinoline. The caw  
of crow's feet held at arm's length  
her two sons wave a redundant alphabet  
brought to you by the letters g r i e and f.

## A STUDY OF ANALYSIS & HEARTBREAK

Ion Corcos

On the fishbone tongues: mussels, white storks,  
an alliance of Black Sea corridors and telephones.  
Cyrillic letters make shellfish words on a board game.  
A man counts to himself in a cautious blue caravan,  
over and over, the number of Norfolk pines and gulls.  
An archive of unbetrayal. A nest in a winter tree,

an entangled transmitter, a forgotten textbook.  
The corners of a page a prison: over-rumination.  
Outside a restaurant, a waiter incises ideologies,  
captures a nuance, unfolds months as workless:  
not as a house martin shrieks as it sits on a line,  
instead, as a hedgehog: wet shovels, yellow grass.

## THIRD PERSON, PRESENT TENSE

Sean Crawley

On the advice of Francine, Bosco decides to join a writing group. He has to find his own, as her group is women only and focuses on memoir.

‘You learn so much,’ she says.

He has read some of her work and, although he isn’t a big fan of memoir, he has to admit she does possess some skills. His own writing could definitely do with some polishing.

‘Make sure it’s a hands-on group. Some groups just sit around and talk about writing, or worse, talk about wanting to be writers. Boring!’ she says.

There is a notice on the community board in the local library: Long Jetty Writing Group. Meets on the 2nd and 4th Tuesdays of each month. Call Parker. Bosco works at home on Tuesdays and figures that he could easily swing things around a bit and attend. At the bottom of the notice is a fringe of phone numbers you can tear off.

When he calls, a male voice answers. ‘Parker Redding.’ Just that, his name. No greeting.

Bosco asks about the writing group and Parker says, ‘We meet at ten a.m. in the scout hall. It’s a gold coin to cover the hire. Bring some writing along and I’ll let you know if you’re a fit.’

Bosco turns up early, as is his way. He drives into the car park. There are a few cars parked around, one car contains a head and shoulders, the others are empty. He spots the scout hall and swings his car around to park in a far corner. He pulls out his mobile phone to check the time. There are fifteen minutes to kill. Well, ten, if you decide to make your way in at nine fifty-five.

The hall backs onto a large oval. People are walking dogs and pushing toddlers in prams. The whole scene is framed by tall paperbark trees.

In his head Bosco is writing this exact opening, a setting for a story, his story of joining a writing group. An old Hillman Hunter turns up. It parks in the closest spot to the hall and out steps a man in a safari suit that is a perfect match for the colour of the car: beige. Bosco can't help but think of John Cleese as he watches this tall, thin, moustached man strut up the wheelchair access ramp. He holds a leather satchel under his left arm and a large bundle of keys in his right hand. Strangely, as he unlocks the double doors, he turns his head and shoulders around and scopes the car park. A casual observer might assume he's sneaking in.

It has to be Parker Redding, thinks Bosco. As the man scans left and right and back again, a comb over of dark hair slides off the top of his head. Then, to Bosco's horror, this crazy character spots him and his car parked over in the far corner. He thrusts out his neck and squints. Bosco can feel the man's eyes right on him and instinctively shrinks down, the steering wheel providing only minimal cover.

Fortunately, an elderly woman with an oversized handbag has arrived and is wobbling up the ramp to the hall. Parker is distracted and turns to greet the woman. Bosco sighs in relief. He sits up straight again and considers driving off. But, of course, not now. It would be too obvious. He'll dart off after this odd man has entered the building.

Parker finally opens the door and ushers the wobbling woman into the dark interior and just before he disappears himself, he shoots another look back over at Bosco sitting in his car.

Did he smile at me? thinks Bosco. I have to get out of here.

Bosco can feel his heart pounding and realises how tightly he is gripping the steering wheel.

As he regulates his breath, he watches as more people turn up and enter the hall. There is another elderly woman, though this one has a steady gait and no handbag. Next is a man in a wheelchair. He is being

wheeled in by a female carer dressed in the stock standard disability services uniform of black polo shirt embroidered with company logo, black leggings, and black joggers. The man is wearing an oxygen mask which is connected to a gas tank attached by Velcro straps to the side of the chair. Once they get to the top of the ramp the man waves his carer off and wheels himself into the hall. Before she even gets to the bottom of the ramp, the carer pulls out an e-cigarette and takes one almighty puff of vapour and exhales it to the sky.

OK, thinks Bosco nodding in approval, reconsidering his instinctual, limbic urge to bolt. He looks over at the manila folder on the passenger seat. In it is a story he wrote months ago and which he entered into a contest. Except for the Paypal receipt for the entry fee, he never heard a thing back. This was not unusual, though this time he was disappointed as he felt the story was perhaps his best yet. He'd love to get some objective feedback on his efforts. Francine said it was a beautiful piece, but always says that; she is a friend.

He looks back at the hall and another person is climbing the ramp. This time it's a younger woman. She has a stripe of pink through her dark hair and a denim shoulder bag.

It is nine fifty-four. He commits. He grabs the manila folder and a pen from out of the console. As he walks across the car park, a man and a woman get out of a large four-wheel drive campervan that is dusty up top and muddy underneath. They're not grey nomads, but not far off it. In their fifties he reckons. Like him, they carry manila folders. The man has a pen in his mouth and is switching his phone to silent. The woman says, 'I've got a coin for you, John.'

Bosco feels inside the pocket of his jeans. The two dollar coin is there. He follows them up the ramp and into the hall.

No turning back now.

The meeting goes on for three hours and when he gets home there are dozens of work emails that demand responses and other forms of *actioning*. He reasons this is probably a good thing. Something to take his mind off what happened in that damn hall. Time for things to settle in his subconscious. He really doesn't know what he is going to do about it all.

*Hey Bosco! How did it go? I've been thinking about you all day,* reads the text from Francine.

*Perhaps the most harrowing experience of my life! Can I call you at eight? I've got a bit of work to finish,* he types back.

When he sends off the last email for the day, it is seven-thirty. He grabs a stubby of beer from the fridge and some nuts from the pantry.

What am I going to tell Francine? he thinks.

So much happened in those three hours, much of it a blur. He never figured that Parker Redding was going to get him to stand up out the front and read out his story first thing. And then the scathing criticism.

Man, did I get a drubbing. The guy's a tyrant. How was I to know he only ever accepts third person point of view written in present tense?

Bosco's piece was first person and past tense. While he was reading it out he noticed the other writers wincing in their seats. They knew what was coming. Bosco had no idea and pushed on, stumbling occasionally due to his nerves. After he finished and sat down, Parker stood up and goose stepped to the front. He cleared his throat and thanked Bosco for providing the group with the perfect example of precisely what was wrong with the current state of narrative fiction.

Parker ranted on for what seemed like an hour. Bosco only remembers bits of it.

There was a long diatribe on the rise of narcissism in modern society and how it was the responsibility of true artists to rail against the toxic world of me, me, me. In the case of writers, he said, the best form of



protest was not to succumb to the fashion of first person point of view, but to adopt a positive and proactive approach by writing in third person, preferably omniscient third person, and therefore holding a mirror up to the world.

‘Nobody, well nobody of integrity, is interested in your voice or your personal opinion. First person should only ever be used in the dialogue or inner thoughts of your characters,’ he proclaimed with an intensity that shook the hall on its concrete stump footings.

There was a similarly long rant demanding that he wanted the writers in his group to write about all varieties of the human species from all genders, all races, all cultures, and all sexual proclivities.

‘Don’t be scared off by the social justice warriors who threaten to cancel you! They are narrow minded censors of the worst kind. They are an aberration, an abomination! They will fade out of existence long before you will achieve the standard of writing worthy of publishing.’

Bosco shudders as he recalls the tirade. He washes down a mouthful of masticated nuts with the last draught of his beer, picks up his phone and calls Francine.

‘So, it’s true then,’ she says after Bosco recounts his ordeal.

‘What do you mean, Francine? Did you know about this fellow?’

‘I’d heard a few things. But you hear a lot of things these days. So, tell me, did he go off after other people read out their stories?’

‘Well, how’s this? Nobody else read. What happens is each person emails their story to the group several days before the meeting. Then they discuss each story.’

‘How was that?’

‘Well, the people in the group were generally encouraging and positive about each other’s writing. As this was going on, Parker would come over to me and hand me a printed out copy of the story being discussed at that moment. He said, “For your reference,” each time he

handed me a story and they were printed on pink paper and smelt of patchouli oil. It was weird.'

'Maybe the old coot is a hippy with dyslexia?'

'Did I tell you he was wearing a safari suit?'

Francine laughs, Bosco relaxes, and the conversation continues. He recounts how Parker Redding stood up at the end of the meeting and announced that it was time for the group to vote on whether or not Bosco could join.

'Are you in?' asks Francine.

'They all raised their hands in the affirmative. Not that I had any say in the matter!'

'Are you going to join?'

'Parker Redding obviously thinks so. He told me I could keep the printed-out stories and return them in a fortnight. Then he announced the theme for the next meeting.'

'Go on, what is it? This is fascinating.'

'Meaninglessness.'

'Meaninglessness? Is that a word?'

'Yes, it is. I looked it up. And, of course, it has to be in third person and present tense. Anyway, when we were dismissed, and I was outside, Beatrice, the oldest member of the group, came over to me and said that Parker had been assigning the same theme for the last six months.'

'You're kidding?'

'That's what I said to Beatrice. And the younger girl in the group – I can't remember her name but I do remember her story was about a train trip to a funeral, Parker reckoned it was her best work yet – she came over and said that last year they spent months and months on the theme: indistinguishable.'

Francine can't control her laughing now, and Bosco joins in as well. They chat on and end the call agreeing to catch up soon for coffee.

The deadline for emailing stories out to the group is the Friday before the Tuesday meeting day. Bosco reads over his story one last time. He thought he'd corrected all the erroneous past tense verbs, but he finds one more. Writing in present tense is not easy. Parker Redding is right; it makes you think, it is uncompromisable, demands perfect plotting. And, Bosco has to admit, writing in third person really does force you to focus on character.

On top of ensuring that his story is devoid of any easy targets for potential humiliation, there is a comprehensive set of formatting requirements which Bosco assumes will need to be followed to the letter. Font style and size, line spacing, page margins, paragraph indenting, and so on. In bold, Parker states that under no circumstances will he tolerate American spelling or the use of double quotation marks for dialogue. He has included a list of internet links, *For your reference*.

With everything ship-shape, and Bosco laughing at how his own self talk has started mimicking Parker Redding, he hits send and off the story goes.

When Bosco did catch up with Francine for coffee earlier in the week, he told her of his decision to join.

'I read through everyone's stories and I loved the various ways in which they had tackled the theme of meaninglessness. And some of the stories were great. I've started a first draft for the next meeting.'

Francine, as always, was encouraging and excited for him.

'Good on you, Bosco. If it doesn't work out, at the very least you'll have some great fodder for a story or two. And if it does work out, I might even join up myself. I'm getting a bit sick of memoir. It's so me, me, me.'

## UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Lyn Dickens

Like all good ghost stories, it starts with unfinished business. She gets on a plane in the Sydney spring of her late twenties, and lands in the autumnal mist of London and the palimpsest of her life five years before. She is there for research, a conference, a chance to put off writing an article on mixed race identity for one more fortnight. She is there to see someone, just one more time.

London is not as she remembers. It is a year after a fractious summer. Crowds march in Mayfair with blue flags crowned in a circlet of gold stars. People question why they did, or did not, vote. Tourists speaking French and Russian are glared at on the Heathrow Express.

Her suitcase wheel breaks off somewhere near East Finchley station. Her luggage half bounces, half rolls, all the way to Hampstead Garden Suburb. She messages him once she arrives at her accommodation – a creaking studio flat above the shopfronts of Falloden Way. Why did she put it off until now? He doesn't even know she's in the country. When she opens Messenger, the little green light glows next to his name and her solar plexus contorts into a flip.

*Harry! I'm in London! I just landed today!*

She waits. The green light vanishes. The message remains unread.

Her AirBnB host hovers with the greedy air of a man who wants a chat. She smiles at him and hopes he doesn't notice how bland her forced expression is. He's not bad looking, really. Tall. About her age.

'Australian?' he says at her accent. 'Fancy a tour?'

They spend the next morning by the Thames in the shadow of the London Eye. He points out Southwark Cathedral and the Borough Markets.

‘And that’s St Paul’s Cathedral.’

‘Oh yes. I’ve been there before.’ In truth she’s seen them all, already.

‘I thought it was your first time in London?’

‘No.’ She has told him this twice. In her AirBnB message. On the day of her arrival. ‘I’ve been away for a while. But I lived in the UK for three years.’

‘Not in London though?’

‘No. Cambridge.’

He blinks at her. ‘Oh, right. There for university, were you?’

‘Yes.’

He loses momentum for tour guiding. She would feel sorry for him, but for the strange air of resentment that envelopes him, and her own irritation. Why didn’t he listen to her, anyway?

They cross the Thames at Waterloo. Her phone weighs heavy in her pocket. Harry has not been active since the previous evening. Her buoyant message, embarrassing in its peppiness, sits unread.

When they get to Covent Garden, her host gestures broadly with his left hand. ‘Chinatown is over there. Perhaps you could give me a tour now? Show me where to get the best yum cha?’ He laughs.

She stares at him.

‘You are from China, aren’t you?’

‘My mother is from Singapore. My father’s British. I’m Australian.’

‘Oh. I thought you were from Hong Kong.’

She breaks away from him at the British Museum. She still has her old membership that lets her skip the queue. An American tourist with

streaked blonde hair glares at her as she passes. The woman's voice follows her through the security clearance. 'Why does she get to go first?'

Inside, the entrance hall looms over her. School children jostle with each other; harassed parents in parkas run after their offspring. She weaves through the hive of confusion, avoiding the Egyptian gallery where she knows that visitors will be standing shoulder-to-shoulder, foot on top of foot, scrambling over one another for a glimpse of the mysterious East.

'You know there is an old tube stop underneath the museum?' A young man speaks to the woman beside him. 'It's haunted by the ghost of a mummy. That's why they had to seal it up.'

She pushes through the crowd and finds herself expelled on the other side. The museum galleries quieten and expand. In front of her, the ivory relief of the Parthenon beckons her into its empty hall.

She gazes at the bodies of lithe goddesses wrapped in silken sheets, at the whiteness of the stone that, even now, many refuse to accept had ever been painted. She picks up a flyer that speaks, in a wounded tone, of the importance of seeing the Parthenon sculptures in the context of world history, here in England.

What is a museum, anyway? She orders a coffee in the members' room and checks her phone. Her message to Harry is still unread. She is torn between concern and irritation.

She sits back in her chair and googles 'museum haunting'. A magazine article says the objects become inherently strange – a collection of artefacts taken away from their original meanings and placed in assemblage together, with things they would otherwise never have met or known. It creates a restlessness, a haunted energy.

Perhaps, she thinks, this is what mixed ethnicity is. A perpetual restless ghost chafing inside oneself at the splicing together of two seemingly separate parts.

She laughs. The other members look over at her disapprovingly.

She doesn't think it will go down well – doesn't think it will do – to talk about mixed heritage like some sort of Frankenstein invention. And besides. It isn't always about twos and halves. There is always another side.

She pays for her coffee and leaves the members' room. And what if it is the same here? The colossal Ramesses II gazes down at her. What if the objects are not unified in their desires? There is always another side.

She pauses beneath a winged bull guarding a wall of cuneiform. The text ripples before her.

*Watch me. Look at me. Listen to me. See me. Hear me. Touch me.*

She leans in, lifting her fingers.

'No touching, please!'

She jumps. 'Christ Almighty!'

A disapproving ripple snakes through the crowd.

She looks over her shoulder.

A museum attendant rushes towards a young boy who stands, frozen, his palm extended towards the relief wall. The boy drops his hand, his face blanching.

'It's all right,' the attendant says. 'This object's a funny one. It always wants to be touched. But it's against the Museum's rules.'

She walks upstairs, mulling this information. Haunted mummies, the torn apart remains of a Greek temple, an unquiet Assyrian stele. Perhaps the Western European sections will be less confronting. More slumbering. Less out of place. The objects are, after all, still in their ancestral homeland.

So are you. A voice speaks softly in her mind. Does that make you any less contentious?

She rolls her eyes and rattles her shoulders like a dog shaking off water. What foolishness.

On the European floor, the galleries are quiet. A few solitary visitors wander the halls, apart from one another. There is nothing exotic or exciting about that which is familiar. The faceless Sutton Hoo helmet looms out at her. A golden cross thrusts forth its holiness above the reliquary of a saint's fingerbone. A knight lies sleeping, his museum display a perfect reconstruction of his final resting place.

A few rooms down the hall, still in the European section, there is another body. A man lies, hewn in two, his flattened head twisted against his arm.

She walks forward, then stops. She does not enter the section fully. The room is dark. There is something there. Something sombre and powerful and very old. Something unwilling and resentful.

She shakes her head. Such nonsense. She walks forward.

Unlike the Egyptians and the Arabs and the North Africans, the museum staff have placed this body in a corner, in a dark, cube-like construction with two open walls turned towards the shadow, where a discerning viewer can lean in and see him – a broken sack of old leather – behind a glass casing. He isn't like the Egyptian bodies. Where they are generic, representative, icons of an alien world, with their own names but never named, he is world renowned, individual, unique. He has been christened.

And yet they are the central display. The recipient of flashing tourist cameras. He has been placed here, as though the ones who did the placing were uneasy. Even ashamed.

His legs are missing, gone in a clean straight line. His skin is blackened and shiny, but it is unbroken. It has a metallic glow. She can see the wrinkles across his forehead, and the lines around his mouth, even from here. If she were to go closer, and open his palms, she would be able to see the wavy engravings in the skin. She could tell his fortune.



She looks over her shoulder. She looks back at the body. Who is the watcher, and who is the watched? Is this why the room is empty? He has been brought into the sunlight by the children of other gods, and they display him here, unknowing and naïve.

And what do they have to say to one another? His people may even be among her many disparate ancestors. Yet how does she introduce herself, or ask for permission to enter his country? What nation does she say she comes from? Of these things, she is never sure.

She avoids the boundary of his territory. How meagre it must seem to him now, these four walls, this corner, this small category.

Outside the museum, milky clouds have gathered in the sky. She holds her face up to the vanishing sun. It smells like turning leaves, like cold air and chestnuts. Decline and fall.

She checks her phone. He's seen the message. And still there is no reply.

She goes to a chain Japanese restaurant for lunch and orders a chilli ramen. The waitress watches her with concerned eyes as she picks up chopsticks.

'Would you like a fork?' the waitress says.

She shakes her head. 'No, thank you.'

The waitress hurries away and returns with disposable utensils. 'Just in case,' the waitress says, placing the fork and spoon on the table. 'And be careful of all that chilli; it's very spicy.'

She finishes her food but can't swallow her irritation. As she leaves the Japanese restaurant, a young man lurches past her.

'Konnichiwa!' he grins.

'Fuck off,' she says to the cold English air.

The message from Harry comes through that evening, just as she sits down to write. *I had no idea you were even in the country!* She reads. *I'm in the South of France until Tuesday. We don't have very good signal. I'd love to see you when I'm back.* Her eyes linger on the plural pronoun. As if on cue, her Facebook newsfeed

is filled with photos of cheese plates and lavender fields, a disparate group of Harry and his friends. He sits with his open, confident posture, brown limbs expanded and perilously close to the girl on his right. It's Grace, she realises. His old college girlfriend.

She closes her laptop. How is she to write now? She opens the studio window and breathes in the cold, fumbling for her cigarettes, watching the moon arc over the empty shop carparks. A figure flits in the darkness. She draws back into the room. The wardrobe door gapes open; its peeling wood yawns, swinging against the wall. She shuts the door and tests the handle.

That night she dreams of damp fields and the taste of burnt bread. Her hands sink into sticky wetness; the air is thick with the scent of peat. Her throat tightens. Something shudders beneath her bed.

When she wakes up, the room is dark and quiet. An electric street light flickers on the road outside. She drinks some water. She gets out of bed and closes the wardrobe door.

The next morning, silver fog coats the roofs of the city. She wakes late to the sound of the buses on Falloden Way. Facebook gleams in sinister blue when she checks her phone. Should she message him back? Is there any point? She pictures Grace's long ponytail from all those years before. She puts down her phone. She needs to write. But when she looks across the small studio space, the hairs rise on the back of her neck. She gets out of bed and closes the wardrobe door.

Her days roll into sameness. The BBC bemoans an early cold snap. Old friends are out of town. She wanders the Heath and the streets of North London, avoiding her laptop, ignoring the Facebook notifications

accruing piece by piece. *Are you still in London?* Harry asks, unread. She closes her wardrobe door.

But if her days are the same, her nights are of infinite variety. She dreams of the shape of oak boughs in the darkness, of the song of the robin, the scent of moss. When she wakes her throat is covered with a thick red weal; she tastes mistletoe. Her wardrobe door gapes open.

‘My goodness! What happened to your neck?’

Her hand fumbles with her collar. ‘Oh, that. I think I got caught in my bedsheets when I was sleeping.’

Kelly stares at her. ‘It must have been one hell of a nightmare.’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’ She looks at Kelly. How good it is to see her. Her best college friend. And just in time. ‘Either that or I’m being attacked by a ghost.’

‘What?’ Kelly leans forward.

She tells Kelly of the wardrobe door, the scent of moss and burning, a crisp night sky of rural February. A flash in the mirror. A dark figure walking through the gardens beneath her flat.

‘And this started happening, when – after the British Museum?’

‘After seeing the bog body, yes. I don’t know what the hell it wants with me. Maybe he’s a Brexiteer trying to tell me to get the hell out of his country. Doesn’t he know I’m part Celt?’ Another friend, she knows, would laugh at this, but Kelly knits her hands together and rests them under her chin.

‘You know when I used to visit my grandmother in her village, I heard the strangest things. But one thing she told me I remember. We need the right blend of light and shade. Too much light is overwhelming. But too much shade – it attracts sadness.’

‘Bad spirits?’

Kelly shrugs. ‘Maybe not bad, per se. But draining ones. Negativity. Lost souls.’

Lost souls. The sun streams freely over the cars outside the Spaniards Inn. Has she really been living in shadow? She thinks of her crisp white laptop screen, the empty word document’s accusing glare.

Kelly takes a sip of her shiraz. ‘So. Are you meeting up with Harry while you’re here?’

She takes the tube to Euston Station and walks down to Bloomsbury. Her phone sits in her pocket, swollen with messages. *I get back tomorrow*, Harry writes. *I’d love to see you*. She had paused at that one, at that word, seen briefly and out of context.

In brighter days, the daffodils thrust forward around the statute of Rabindranath Tagore, but on this stark autumn morning the earth is bare but for the scatter of takeaway detritus.

She stops by the bust of Noor Inayat Khan who presides, ignored, tucked into the corner of the gardens. But there is no haunting here, no restless energy, no yawning ache from this memorial.

Her feet move over the pavement, weaving down side alleys and past the London Review of Books. The museum looms over her.

She winds her way through the exhibits. Sumeria, Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. One unbroken line all the way down to this ancient city. And what more is there? Endless rows of Japanese porcelain. A jewellery box from the Ming Dynasty. All the aesthetics from the East. She’s hungry again, but she won’t go to the café in the members’ room. Not yet. She walks as though she might shake off the night, the moonlit figure, and the scent of charred bread through this perpetual forward motion. But where is the sun in this world of shadows?

Her smartwatch vibrates. She's hit 10,000 steps. Perhaps the café is the right idea after all. The balls of her feet hurt and she contemplates buying new boots. Footwear: that's something London does well. The museum air is stifling and her coat weighs on her arm. She pauses at a staircase. Should she try to find the body again? Is that confronting her repression? Is she lost? The high voices of school children sing out to her from the ground floor. For once she will eschew her isolation. She follows their melody.

By the time she reaches the ground floor, she's limping. The children have filled all the seating in the Great Court. Tourists jostle her. She forces her way to the back, where she knows it will be quiet. The only section where she hasn't been.

She can hear the recording of the didgeridoo. She can smell paperbark and ochre, taste salt air. She can touch the South.

The voices from the echoing hall are blown into the distance. She sits on a bench in the shade of Hoa Hakananai'a's frown. The room is empty. She adjusts her boot over her throbbing foot.

A shadow flits in the corner of her eye. The spare shape of a russet-haired man, crowned in mistletoe.

She jumps. Beside her, Hoa Hakananai'a creaks and shifts.

Before she can react, children spill into the room, their backpacks whirling. Her phone lights up, wondrously, in an earthy, insistent, ring. *Harry.*

She leans out of her studio window. Her cigarette still tastes of charred bread and mistletoe. But beyond that there are other smells. The scent of late-blooming roses, rumbling exhaust fumes from trucks driving up from Calais, the mingling spices from the Bangladeshi restaurant and the Jewish bakery. The moon rises in its creamy gibbous circlet, surrounded by stars.

He is still there. She has seen him in the carpark behind the convenience store, in the garden amongst the golden leaves. He walks openly, in the moonlight.

But it doesn't matter anymore. He is not there for her.

She closes her eyes. She had felt it in the museum. The taste of the Pacific. The call of different stars.

She opens her eyes. What are ghosts, really? The things we haven't completed, that which has been repressed, old sins, our regret. A voice unheard, a stolen potential. An opportunity not taken.

She stops trying to close the wardrobe door.

She leaves the window and sits down at her desk. In the darkness, she opens her laptop. She starts to type.

Later, as the sun creeps over the east, she opens WhatsApp on her phone. She taps Harry's image and her fingers hover over the screen. She looks out into the lightening horizon. She types.

*I think I'm being haunted (laughing emoji). Want to get a drink?*

## VENUS TOLD ME

Pavel Frolov

I was gazing  
at the sky, and this  
Green Star  
got my attention by  
Glistening –

weary of the Unmasked  
strangers, I downloaded  
the SkyView app, and just as I suspected!  
It was Venus –

I thought, given  
the Astronomy basics, Venus  
was probably winking  
about how, billions of years  
before, it used to  
have life. Incidentally,  
a few days later,  
NASA announced the same –

Well, I wasn't surprised!  
Venus told me,  
already

the other night, Jupiter and Saturn  
were hanging with the Moon  
and Mars was moping

nearby as usual

guess Corona got me startled,  
where to  
next?



## BLUE SUSPENSION

Ian Ganassi

*What shall we do with the drunken sailor?*

Turn the other cheek. At that point you've run out of cheeks.

*Grigory was as faithful to my father as seven hundred poodles.*

If you're quiet enough you can hear them fall,  
The sparrows that is,  
In which there is a special providence.

It's my joke and I'll cry if I want to.

Occasionally someone stops to wonder  
Whether the horse we've been beating might be dead.

Language is a disease of truth, especially when you're using it.

The skull beneath the skin,  
Time rotting on the vine,  
Apples falling with the wind.

The notes were one step ahead in terms of giving away the plot.

A sheen of blood glistening on the pavement maybe.

The hearse was made of cypress  
And capsized like Charon's bark craft,

Spreading ghosts over the water like ink.

The hand has an affinity for the object.

*Life is a desire, not a meaning.*

## REMAINDERS AND REMINDERS

Lorraine Gibson

Come half-dark I'm murmuring this  
mighty roll-call – Sappho, **Pemulwuy**, **Thoreau**.  
I'm moving around the garden fingering  
remainders pushing greenly from breathing  
soil: reminders of our layered fleshing of earth.  
Sometimes, I conjure tiny wraiths via text & time:  
Some have tasted hemlock's hard swallowed truths.  
Such curiosity suckles thoughts  
of Goossens, bedded with his long  
baton (underneath St Pancras) lost  
to Rosaleen's sweet menstrual taste.  
Consider L. Cohen's honied chords deep  
beneath *Shaar Hashomayim*, hushed by loam  
– still longing for Marianne.  
I winnow bones of years  
seek inner fractals multiplying out  
of knowing's sight.  
Do you inhale particles  
of Larkin, Gentileschi, Dickinson?  
Who breathes my father?  
Were you re-born, re-figured pale as pearl  
slipping vaporous along some long-forgiven womb?  
Did you stream screeching through fire-  
smoked winter valleys, sooty wings slicing  
downwards, feathering each milky-violet night?  
Bright – elemental – transformed – again  
We are all leaving on a journey.

I am not prepared.

Each night I spoon my ageing thighs to yours  
as if by clinging you could keep me here.

## CHRONICLES OF HUBRIS

Lorraine Gibson

We followed the liquid fingers of breaking drought—herding death along the dusty Darling. Desiccated sheep and bloated cattle floated above rafts of roiling rubbish, purling out of sight, out of human conscience. Dusk’s pink goodnight saw velvet muzzles of grey kangaroos lapping lurid poison beside signs –

‘UNFIT FOR STOCK AND HUMANS’:

Illegible to native animals that read country in other ways. Scrambling down our Darling’s crumbling banks, we met dead mussels clothed in white-hot sun: Their stench yelled –

‘SOMETHING HAS GONE VERY WRONG’:

We chased this tap-on-tap-off river, controlled by hands and hubris, as it gathered speed sweeping through country fleetingly like a fluid bullet-train. Too late for nature’s patient passengers. Too late for golden perch and Murray cod that only spawn in rising waters. Too late for them to flow and flourish in the ancient nursery of Menindee Lakes. Layered fish are floating, mouthing out fateful Os in fetid pools. This silent still-life pours its stink into our gagging mouths. No fingerlings this year, none the year before.

This poem has its genesis following an extreme and extended period of drought when I lived along the Darling River in Western New South Wales: During this period, Barkindji Elder William Brian (Badger) Bates and I undertook research on the cultural meanings of water. Drought coupled with woefully regulated water management continues to decimate this important cultural lifeway. The Darling River is known as 'The Barka' or 'Baaka' by the Barkindji people of the area. Barkindji means 'belonging to the river'.

## DIVERSION

### Oz Hardwick

It's a long way back, and roads aren't what they used to be. Where once there was tarmac, smooth as a liar's tongue, now there's just dirty water, and white lines have grown jagged edges. My hands are numb on the wheel, my ankles stiff against resisting pedals. When I glance in the mirror, I see an old man sitting in an elegant library, staring into a fire. He reaches for a book, then feeds it to the flames, and I remember the years I worked in the factory, adding details to a form I couldn't see and wouldn't recognise when it was done. Ahead, a finger post reads *BACK?*, gesturing to a road that was never there, a confusion of fly-tipped furniture and broken pianos. My tyres are slashed to shit, and the wipers only smear the rising muck. Nothing is what it used to be, my whole body aches with small repeated actions, and the man in the mirror is closer than he appears.

## MICROWAVE

Oz Hardwick

My uncle said you can't trust kitchens, with their gas and grease, their sugared sixpences ready to snap your teeth. He said you can't even be sure of your own hands in places like that, where there are knives and grinders, all shiny with the glint of damage. He saw it all the time when he worked in the circus: blood on the sand and hungry animals rutting sequins from the cheap fabric sky, everything stinking of sweat and frying meat. It's what the frozen-gobbed gawkers – their lips red and sticky as toffee apples – don't see that will get them in the end: the rope coiled at a glittering throat and the absence of faces beneath smudged paint. He said you can take the boy from the circus, but the circus will come looking for him; and one day it'll catch him in the kitchen, clown-eyed in the back of a burnt spoon, and all the pretty little horses with their smooth-thighed riders will be galloping the other way.



## MEMORIAL

### Tom Hazuka

I went to plenty of anti-Vietnam War rallies at Berkeley. I believed in the cause and would have gone even if I hadn't, because that's where the action was. Most of my friends were there, and a fair crowd of faculty. Once my history professor even passed me a fat joint that was making the rounds, his touch on my shoulder and his smoky-lunged croak of 'Here, man' warming my insides for the way it showed he was treating me like an equal. If I tried that with one of my students now, I'd probably get my pink slip in a jail cell. Maybe I'd deserve it, but still it seems that something's lost.

Lost.

I was thinking about those rallies when my wife and I went to the Vietnam Memorial in 1977, our son Jim a sleeping papoose on my back. It was a hot, sticky midsummer night. It was only right, Beth had said, that our first meeting with the monument be in the dark. My hand found hers as we stepped slowly down the flagstones, numbed, overwhelmed by name after dead name carved in stark black rock, row after row forever like headstones in Arlington Cemetery. To my surprise dozens of other people were there, of all ages, as silent as mourners at a wake pausing before the casket, then moving on.

'You were right,' I whispered as we walked toward the Lincoln Memorial. 'Night was better.'

'What an awful time, Jimmy. What an awful time it was.'

'Yeah.' I thought of my brother, recently returned from years in Canada after President Carter pardoned draft evaders. I thought of my mother's hard-fought forgiveness and my father's blind belief in his country, and of a girl who got me involved with 'the movement' at Berkeley and was

now my wife, leaning lightly against my side. Our divorce was nearly a decade away.

‘But there were great times, too.’ I pulled her closer. Even at ten p.m. two tour buses were at the Lincoln Memorial with their engines running.

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘I met you.’ Her voice sounded strange. When I looked at her, she was crying, just a little.

I kept my tears in. ‘And there weren’t any discos, babe. That’s enough right there if you ask me.’

She smiled, just a little, and that was enough right then. We climbed the stairs to read the Gettysburg Address carved in white marble, with no pigeon on Lincoln’s head at this hour of the night. My son shifted his head on my shoulder, but made no sound.

## DIRT

### Jackson

It's always this. What to have for dinner. The procedure for having a shower in each new bathroom. Where to prepare my food in each new kitchen. The idea of someone's cat in my bed with claws and hair and dirt. Yet we're made of dirt and most people live in dirt. The grimy kettle, the grotty sink, the black mould in the soap dispenser inside the washing machine. People don't see it. Don't register it. Think of other things. The next job. The next ex. The mother, the father, the trauma. The scratches on the next car. What to have for dinner. Where to go next.

## SOMEDAY

Lesh Karan

*after Ocean Vuong's 'Someday I'll love Ocean Vuong'*

Lesh, don't be afraid. The aim is not the end of pain, but to feel. Don't worry. When reminded of being the eldest, you simply forgot you were a child. Like how you won't remember the choreography when fear conducts the music. Lesh – are you listening? The most beautiful part of your body is whenever you dance, never-the-less. Here's childhood under the tropical sun – your shadow as tall as a mother's walking siblings to and from school. Don't worry – just call it *foreshadowing*, and one day you'll discover writing to fairy-tale your story. Here's today.

Breathe. I promise it's not a reprimand for being Lesh. Here's the man whose mind is wide enough, it doesn't define you, even when you see the laparoscopic image of a blood moon, read its prophecy as if reading redacted pages of the future. You had asked for only one – a daughter – but are given a pen to stoke a fire. Don't be afraid.

After a blackout, it takes time for people to see their spark. Lesh – can't you see? The most beautiful part of your body is whenever you loosen your grip. And remember, time in the dark is time to sleep and transform. Here's a home empty of the life you had assumed. Its big windows watching the sun rising, after it falls each day. Here's a couch with books and a laptop: a fertile womb. Yes, here's a home with solitude so velvet-soft like your dog's chest, I swear, you will wake – and mistake this poem for heart.

## WELL-BEING

Michael Leach

i.

simply sitting  
at home with COVID  
lapdogs  
on pyjamaed laps,  
making art  
while half-listening  
to recordings recur

ii.

simply strolling  
outside with COVID  
lapdogs,  
cutting laps  
round walking tracks

iii.

simply meeting  
social contacts  
at al fresco cafés  
to fortify  
biochemistry

iv.

simply viewing that photo  
of my late mother  
                    standing  
at the head of the picnic table  
in her crimson coat

v.

somehow sitting  
safely in a crowd  
on the local limestone  
of Epidaurus Theatre<sup>1</sup>,  
intently listening  
to live vocals  
reverberate

vi.

soundly                      sleeping.

1. Epidaurus Theatre is an Ancient Greek structure dedicated to the Greek God of Medicine, Asclepius. It is located on the Argolid Peninsula of Greece.

## TO SQUANDER LIFE

Wes Lee

A warm attention to the night.

The later it grows, the more things still down.

*A woman in Galatas beats a rug in the wind,  
presses an artichoke into your hand.*

There is nothing to do but watch,

moving in and out

of the supposed world.

## IN A YEAR

A E Macleod

Chrysanthemums don't bloom  
until August, seven months after  
the burning of your body.

Your lilies, pink and orange  
won't speak of their colours  
until November. Then  
brittle as wilted vines by February,  
a breath of wind will come with dust and  
to dust you've somehow become  
an ashen coat on the ivy, on the bougainvillea, on the wattle.



## A SLIVER OF MOON

Mark Mahemoff

Afterwards they lay,  
bewildered and angry,  
in the inner city's incomplete silence.

Slats of light  
tattooed their nakedness.

They wondered how to clear  
their hurdles of incompetence.

He left the bed,  
insubstantial in the darkness.  
She waited, crumpled like the sheet  
at her feet.

And before he returned  
she got up and stared  
through the bathroom window  
at a sliver of moon.

## JUANITO AND THE BEANSTALK

Tim Mayo

First, you get a bag of magic  
beans for the family cow,  
which nourished you  
through all the lean years.  
Keeping the rest in reserve,  
you sow just one for good luck,  
sprinkling the earth around it  
with a wish and a fistful  
of the old cow's dung.  
And *voilà!* Surprise! The very  
next day the sky's the limit. You  
skinny up the new grown stalk,  
squirming between its floppy,  
leafy obstructions, gripping  
their slippery stems for all  
you're worth to raise yourself up ...  
... until, at last, you just slip  
right through a lily-white cloud  
into that vague facsimile  
of what you think heaven should be.  
Suddenly from behind a dark thunderhead  
a menacing *fee-fi-fo-fum* fills the air  
echoing through the stratosphere.  
Quick! The giant has sniffed you out.  
You search for somewhere to hide,  
when beneath a billowing cumulus  
a snow-white goose honks.

Replete with golden eggs,  
it beckons from its misty nest.  
This is what you came for:  
the booty of pure imagination –  
wealth beyond your wildest –  
but the giant roars, chasing  
you down from your cloud.

# SPIRE

David McVey

The Spire didn't just pierce the heavens; it ripped them apart.

'This is Scotland's tallest ever building,' the Estates Manager told us when we were all gathered in the atrium, a vast, gleaming space of marble and glass with classical statues in alcoves around the wall. There was a circular reception desk in the centre, a café in one corner and, at one end, dozens of lifts, a Grand Central of vertical travel.

'Already twenty companies have taken office space in the building,' the Estates Manager went on. 'There is a hotel on floors six to eleven, a range of other public and occupier facilities, and a viewing platform on the fortieth floor.' She spoke with the slick superficiality of a PR exec.

We were now free to explore the building, though a few lingered to join the organised tour. I had been struck by the array of lifts, especially the one at the far right-hand side that was set apart from the others, as if it needed more space. I pressed the button and with a ping the doors slid open to reveal a blank metallic interior, much larger than a normal lift. I went in and pressed the 40<sup>th</sup> floor button. There was a gentle, insect-like hum and the cabin rose at a gentle pace.

A hitherto invisible door in one of the walls slid open and a man emerged, pushing a trolley. He was short and squat and wore an odd uniform, like Buttons in a panto, with a little bellboy's cap. The trolley held chocolate bars, drinks cans and bottles, sandwiches and wraps and a small coffee machine.

'Refreshments, sir?'

I just stared at him.

'Sir?'

'The lift has a *buffet*?'

‘Indeed, sir. It can take twenty minutes to reach the fortieth floor and customers are likely to become hungry during the journey. We have a small sit-in restaurant as well.’ He indicated the door through which he’d come, which remained open. Through it I could see a small additional space with tables and chairs. A waitress was straightening napkins and cutlery.

‘And through that far door, sir, is the only kitchen on any lift in Scotland. Today’s special is monkfish, in the chef’s own sauce with seasonal greens.’ He smiled and then continued his explanation. ‘All of the other lifts are smaller. *Normal* lifts, you might say, and many of them only go as far as the twentieth floor. This is the luxury end of the building’s lift provision. And that is why it is the only one that charges a fare.’

‘A fare?’

Another door opened, in the opposite wall this time, and a woman in a serge uniform, like a 1970s British Rail guard, appeared carrying a leather satchel and a credit card machine.

‘Yes, sir,’ she said. ‘Given the quality of the journey, and the facilities on offer, charging fares was felt to be reasonable. The rate is fifty pence per floor, so that will be twenty pounds, please, sir.’

‘Twenty pounds! To go up in a *lift* ...’

‘It is a return fare, sir. There wouldn’t be much point in a single fare, unless ...’

The trolley assistant shook his head, and the ticket clerk paused before continuing. ‘Of course, possession of a fortieth-floor ticket entitles you to a 20% discount on items from the trolley, or anything in the restaurant.’

I bought a ticket and a black coffee.

The lift’s progress was ponderous (‘It can only move slowly owing to the additional burden of the restaurant facilities,’ the ticket clerk

explained) and it stopped frequently as office workers got on, paid their fare, and got off. A few bought coffees or snacks from the trolley while others filed into the restaurant. ‘Service is very quick,’ said the trolley assistant, ‘but even so they may have gone up and down several times before they finish their meals and alight at their chosen floor.’

At the fortieth floor I exited, the only remaining customer. There was a much smaller lobby here. We were nearly at the apex of the building and, as I’d been told, some lifts only served the lower floors. There was another café – no, a café and a restaurant. People really did seem to eat everywhere, all the time, nowadays. Whatever did we do when coffee wasn’t constantly available, instantly?

There were viewing platforms on the four sides of the building, so I looked out over all the points of the compass across the city: to the Campsie Fells, to the M8 corridor, to the galloping wind turbines of Whitelee, and to the faint blur of the broadening firth. All the city’s life lay below me, and all my life was contained in this tiny cockpit at the crown of a steel and glass spire.

I looked up to the heavens. It was easier than looking inward.

The Estates Manager had said there was a hotel in the building, but I couldn’t remember on which floors. When I was back at the lift, I pressed the twelfth-floor button. I’m not sure why.

‘That’s all right, sir,’ said the ticket clerk. ‘You may break your journey at any point.’

I stepped out into the twelfth-floor lift lobby, broad and busy in the heart of the building, but when I walked through the main doors which swished open obediently and electronically at my approach, I realised immediately that this wasn’t the hotel. Nurses sped importantly by me, there were smells of polish and disinfectant and sick and I could just see into a couple of small medical wards where patients lay inert among white sheets.

‘This is a hospital?’ I said to no one in particular, but a nurse, a thin, young, bearded man in a blue uniform, heard me and answered.

‘Yes, this is the Spire Hospital. You’re visiting the building? It was felt that, with so many people living and working in an enormous building, according to the laws of statistics, many would fall ill. It can take so long to get out of this building that it was thought safer to include hospital provision. Of course, it isn’t *free*, but our standard of care is exceptionally high.’

I was at a loss for what to say. The nurse’s brow furrowed.

‘Are you all right sir? Perhaps you’d like to come this way?’

I was puzzled, but I followed him along the main corridor, from which wards opened on either side. We then turned right. Windows on the left-hand side looked out over the city while on the right were doctors’ offices, storerooms and even an operating theatre. The corridor ended at a pine door with a sign reading ‘Spire Hospital – Suicide Care Centre’.

‘I’m really fine,’ I said, once we were inside in a small consultation room. ‘I was actually looking for the hotel. I’d just been to the viewing platforms.’

‘Ah. So, you were on your way *down*?’

‘Yes.’

The man visibly relaxed. ‘I’m sorry, I misinterpreted. You will appreciate that, with a viewing platform on the fortieth floor, we are very conscious in the Spire Hospital that the building might draw suicides. We are alerted whenever anyone asks for a fare to the top floor. You have come off too early. The hotel is on floors six to eleven. Reception is on Floor Six.’

‘Thanks.’

I returned to the lift and the ticket clerk smiled and viewed my ticket perfunctorily. It just took a few minutes to reach the sixth floor. The doors swished open on another shining and spacious atrium, another in-the-

round reception desk. Nearby there was a cocktail bar with a gleaming gantry, a coffee lounge, and the hint of a luxurious restaurant further in.

I went up to the reception desk. I was very tired, so I said to the smiling girl – how they *smiled* in this building – that I would have a room overnight. She kept smiling and tapped on her PC and gave me the forms to complete. I said I had no change of clothes or washing things with me, and she told me that there was a 24-hour shopping mall on the fifth floor where I could buy anything I would need. The rooms were on floors eight to eleven, she explained, and also described a number of hotel facilities that were gathered on the seventh floor, but I was so keen to sleep, to slough off the weariness I now felt, that I didn't really listen. I was handed the key to room 805.

I used an ordinary, free lift to reach my room. It was a perfectly ordinary room, new, of course, but no different to thousands of hotel rooms around the world. It had a view to the west, to the lazy grey-blue of the receding river with the Queen Elizabeth Hospital jabbing the sky; it had looked insignificant from the fortieth floor. I explored the room for a bit and then went back to the lifts and descended to the fifth-floor mall. I bought a simple, casual change of clothes for next day and a toothbrush, deodorant, and the like. The mall was busy with office workers and hotel customers and had a wide range of shops accessed from a gallery round the outside of the building with, always, those views of the city. Here, we were just above the roofs of most buildings.

I returned to the eighth floor in a lift I shared with two other men. One, in a blue uniform with a cap, had a badge that read 'Spire Internal Police Service' while the other wore a grey lounge suit, but had an ID card on a lanyard. I just managed to read the words 'Spire Counter-Intelligence and Anti-Terrorism Service'. They didn't speak, or at least, not until I'd left the lift.

I didn't bother with dinner. I closed the curtains, had a bath, pulled on new pyjamas and sank into sleep. I only emerged from that deep



oblivion at just before eight o' clock next morning. I opened the curtains and looked out on the shadow cast by the Spire, bright siloes of sunlight breaking out on either side. There must be a great sunset view from this room, I thought. I had missed it last night.

I had bought a pair of swim-shorts so decided to go to the swimming pool before breakfast. I packed the shorts with my washing gear, pulled on some clothes, and went out to the free lifts. I travelled down a single floor, exited the lift, and went through the first door I saw.

There was no swimming pool. I was in the gallery of a sizeable horse-riding arena. A young girl on a powerful bay was being led through some complex dressage movements by a formidable instructress with a face like a side of ham.

'Can I help you sir?' said a young woman in jodhpurs and a hacking jacket.

'I was looking for the swimming pool.'

'Ah, wrong door. This is the equestrian centre, as you can see. Impressive, isn't it? The only seventh-floor equestrian centre in Europe. We have our own lifts for horses, feed, and other equipment.'

Following the girl's instructions, I was soon breast-stroking my way along an empty pool with light jazz echoing from unseen speakers. At one point, I saw a few of the Spire police and anti-terrorism people looking into the pool area through the window in the spa reception. I wondered who or what they were looking for.

I showered at the pool and returned to my room just to leave my washing stuff and hang my swim-shorts above the bath. I took a lift down to the sixth floor for breakfast. As I waited at the entrance to the restaurant to be directed to my seat, I heard a voice behind me. 'And this is the hotel restaurant, as you can see. The hotel has a range of bars, a small coffee lounge and facilities that include a swimming pool, a spa, and an equestrian centre.'

I turned to see a courier leading a tour of the building. There were about a dozen people on the tour, all looking weary and desperate, and I recognised them all. They had been in the same party as me, the one welcomed by the Estates Manager in the downstairs atrium the previous afternoon. They had been on their tour for perhaps sixteen hours by now, all through the night, and they looked like they needed a rest, or a chance, at least, to leave the building. The tour guide, a young man with a smile and no hint of a five o' clock shadow, showed no signs of fatigue. 'Let us now view the swimming pool and health spa,' he said, briskly walked to the lifts followed by his shambling, defeated audience. I noticed that they were watched closely by two of the Spire Internal Police Service.

I wondered if there would ever be a way out of this building apart from the obvious one on the fortieth floor. Were we now trapped here?

I shrugged and followed the waitress who took me to my seat for breakfast. I smelled black pudding which I suspected was Stornoway. I began to look forward to eating. I felt very comfortable here.

## THE INVASION OF THE LIBRARY

David McVey

In the years between the defeat of Napoleon and the outbreak of the First World War, the tiny state of Killoeter attacked its equally diminutive neighbour Bannachra nineteen times. Every invasion failed. Early in 1914, on the last occasion, one small unit did manage to speed ahead of the main Killoetian line, sneak through a gap in the defences, and make it into the Bannachrian capital, Drumfin. There, they made for the National Library of Bannachra, which had been identified as a site of particular importance to the Bannachrian people. They burst into the massive foyer, an extravaganza of wood panelling and marble, of magnificent paintings and reliefs and sculptures, and attempted to light some oil-soaked rags and burn the whole edifice down. But they used matches of Killoetian manufacture and they would not stay alight long enough. Their commander began to cry loudly in Killoetian. Some scholars looked up and responded with an echoing, ‘Ssshhh!’

Outsiders could not help but wonder at the enmity between two such small nations. The two peoples had many centuries’ shared experience of rule by others – the Ottomans, the Austrians – and were said to resemble each other in appearance, language, and manners. In truth, the enmity was rather one-sided. The Killoetians loathed their more sophisticated, cultured neighbours, hated their literary traditions and their impressive architecture and their fine musicians and art and theatre, their practice of allowing ordinary people – even women – to vote in elections.

The Bannachrians, however, did not really hate their neighbours. Rather, they just looked down on their rough and ready ways, if perhaps envying their energy and spontaneity. Of course, the regular invasions were a nuisance, but Killoetian artillery was generally so inefficient that few shells were fired and fewer still caused any damage to Bannachrian

property. The less admirable Bannachrians rather mocked the Killoetians, the better ones felt sorry for them.

The leaders in Killoetian society – the military, the aristocrats, the civil servants – hated, most of all, the Bannachrians' prosperity. If only the next invasion could succeed, enable them to absorb the Bannachrians and their wealth. Or, at least, manage to destroy some of their buildings and property.

The major posts in Killoetian administration, government and the military were filled on a curious rotational basis that was baroque in its complexity and did, indeed, date back to the baroque era. Only a few dozen Counts and Barons were eligible and by the time they reached their fifties, most of them had had at least one shot at being Prime Minister and Head of the Army as well as many other offices.

However, there was some evidence of advances within the nation's leadership, some suggestion that thinking was occurring. After all, the cabal of counts in the Parliament House had appreciated the importance of the National Library to Bannachrian life and culture. It held their art and their learning, but also their rules and administration and records and traditions. Not only scholars and students used it, but generals and field marshals learned from military handbooks and documents, business people and trades unionists consulted relevant works, ministers and theologians used its wide collection of sacred texts, and the nation's politicians and administrators regularly consulted law books and Acts of Parliament and records of official procedures. Bannachrians believed that knowledge was power, and the hub of that power was the National Library.

And so, the sorry assault on the library had been planned and executed. After its failure, only a few elderly Drumfin policemen were necessary to arrest the Killoetian unit. By the time they were drinking tea in holding cells, the last of their comrades were being forced back over the border by the Bannachrians.

Then the First World War broke out. Neither small nation allowed itself to be sucked into the conflict; the Bannachrian leadership perceived that the conflict would be a catastrophic and expensive mess and remained neutral; the Killoetians were too broke to even consider involvement and, in any case, if they wanted to fire guns at anyone, they wanted to fire them at the Bannachrians. As that greater war was raging, an historic meeting was held in the Parliament Hall in Kander, the Killoetian capital.

The roof of the building was being repaired – it was always prone to leaking – and so the deliberations of the Counts were often interrupted by banging and by the raw shouting of workmen. And by sooty drips of rain.

‘How soon can we attack the Bannachrian dogs again?’ asked Count Frandy, who was that year’s Prime Minister.

‘Oh, I shouldn’t recommend it,’ said Count Bennybeg, who had recently become the Head of the Armed Forces after many years as Chief Inspector of Drains, ‘not for a long while.’

‘Why not?’ asked Baron Monelpie, the Minister of Culture.

‘Well, we’re short of ammunition and there’s nothing left in the budget. None of our artillery pieces is working and we’ve run out of spare parts. The cavalrymen are immobile because they’ve all sold off their horses to Bannachrians on the sly. And there’s a petrol shortage, so all our motor lorries are stuck.’

‘What about my air force?’ said Count Frandy.

‘Air force?’ said Bennybeg. ‘We’ve *never* had an air force.’

‘I have another suggestion ...’ came a voice from the great door, and everyone turned to see Baron Fafernie, dressed, like all the others, in his full-dress military uniform, lounging into the room. There was a collective gasp.

Fafernie, a languid, reptilian sort, was not liked. Currently, he was Minister without Portfolio, but was widely regarded as a roué and a bad influence. Worse, it was generally agreed that he was clever. Killoetians were very suspicious of cleverness. It was the main reason they disliked the Bannachrians.

Fafernie took his place at the great polished table. A drip landed in the middle of some scattered papers. After some banging from the roof had subsided, he began to speak.

‘Let us imagine a different kind of invasion. An attack that would target their library again – at least you have identified it as the heart of their nation – but an attack that uses intelligence, not force.’

‘Will there be no shooting, then?’ said the Prime Minister. ‘I’d rather there was shooting.’

‘What actually is a library?’ said Monelpie.

Fafernie ignored them both and continued to speak. ‘Imagine this. We quietly send sixty of our most scholarly people into Bannachra. They live normal lives there, earn their living, but every day they visit the National Library, consult a book or a manuscript or a document and deface it.’

‘Ah! Yes!’ Bennybeg jumped out of his seat with enthusiasm. ‘Draw pictures of male genitals and write rude words? It’ll certainly annoy them but will it really bring them to their knees?’

‘No,’ Fafernie continued patiently, ‘I don’t mean that. I mean that they make small changes to each item, change the meaning of what they say. Turn positives to negatives and vice versa, subtly change the content, alter their procedures and protocols and rules, remove a few of the more important pages so that readers miss important information...’

‘Well, I’m glad you’re suggesting destroying something,’ said Frandy, ‘but I still think there should be some shooting.’

'Is it sort of like a public swimming pool?' asked Monelpie. Again, he was ignored.

'We infect their theological works, acts of parliament, engineering handbooks, scientific treatises with reversed meanings, altered conclusions, contrary instructions. We put clumsy writing into their literature and lessen their view of themselves. We dilute and cheapen their culture. The National Library is a mirror of Bannachrian life; if we distort that mirror, slowly, over time, Bannachra will decline, become debauched, weakened. It will collapse and be defeated from within.'

'I've no doubt it is terribly clever and all that,' said Count Frandy, 'but wouldn't it be better to just blow the place up, once we're able to?'

'This is a cheaper option,' said Fafernle. 'It is also surer. I don't deny that it is slower.'

'Cheaper?' said Frandy, brightening. 'I like the sound of that.'

There was some confused discussion, with people talking over each other, as was the Killoetian way. After perhaps twenty minutes, Count Frandy summed up the discussions. 'Well, then, Count Fafernle, I think we can safely allow you to go ahead, recruit your scholars, and infiltrate them into the filthy life of our ghastly neighbours.'

Fafernle smiled strangely, and then stood up to address the assembled Killoetian dignitaries. 'It's already been done.'

There was a brief, noisy uproar that was only stilled when another bout of banging from the roof drowned it out. Once silence reigned again, Frandy said, with some anger, 'Do you mean you have proceeded without authorisation from this council?'

'No, I don't. The project was initiated quite some time ago, but not by me.'

'How long ago? Who started it?' said Monelpie.

'It started, I believe, around 1820. My great grandfather had the idea. He found thirty of the cleverest men, and thirty of the cleverest women

in Killoeter. It wasn't hard. Then as now, clever people here rather stood out and none of them were involved in government. Then these people infiltrated Bannachrian life. Ever since, while you have pursued your pointless, bloody, costly wars, they and their descendants have been living quietly alongside the people of Bannachra while destroying, secretly each day, something of the soul of that nation.

'Our wars are never that costly or bloody,' complained Bennybeg. 'How can we hurt people when none of our stuff works?'

'Already,' Fafernie went on, 'there is a deterioration in Bannachrian society. Mistakes are being made. Writers are being criticised. Buildings are falling down. There are disputes within the churches, discord in government. Their military can withstand us, but their practices and discipline and theories are now so compromised that they could not defend themselves against anyone else. And it will only get worse.'

'When do you think they will be so weakened that we can take over?'

'Oh,' said Fafernie, diffidently, 'perhaps another century.' And then the meeting ended in uproar, with Frandy demanding another invasion with lots of shooting and Monelpie accusing Bennybeg of having stolen his pencil.

In fact, as soon as the early 1950s it was clear that Bannachra had changed. Procedures in government, in administration, in the military, and in the church had become sloppy and inconsistent. Cultural life was cheapened, vulgarised, and debased. People were conscious that things were going wrong, so consulted the tainted library more and more, but, of course, this only hastened the decline. By 1960, Bannachra had, essentially, become Killoeter. And the following year, the Killoetian army crossed the border for the first time since 1914 – by then they had managed to get a couple of field guns working – and the two countries were united.

In 2010 there were protests outside Hampden Park during Scotland's 6-1 Euro 2012 qualifying victory over Killoeter-Bannachra. The Prime



Minister of the country, a Count Fafernie, was present at the match and the protesters made sure he heard their condemnations of the anachronistic, undemocratic, anti-intellectual nature of the regime. Among the protests, the Bannachra Independence Movement waved a banner that read 'BRING BACK OUR ANCIENT CULTURE'. If Fafernie saw it, which is unlikely, he would scarcely have been worried. The National Library had been turned into a casino many years before.

## MUSIC FOR A QUIET CITY

Michael Mintrom

1/

The Botanic Gardens inspired  
a knock on the glockenspiel.  
Bumblebees buzzing bloom to bloom  
looped the loop, their violin shuffle  
interrupted by the clink  
of hammer on metal.

2/

The basilica on Barbadoes Street  
held echoes of Rome, echoes of Florence.  
Most weeks I lit a candle  
conducted the choir at Sunday Mass.  
Music opened wide vistas  
as I slumped in auto repair shops.

3/

Driving north on Papanui Road,  
I saw the Firestone sign burning bright.  
Was this my fate – crossing plains  
re-treading Mozart school to school?  
I thought of lake water, turbines humming  
and resolved to compose a sonata.

4/

Notes, themes, fragments all flew off,  
catching on trees, falling in bird nests.

What lasts? Ambition, kinship –  
talent blooming, concerts in the park.

When I walk home through night streets  
houses make nocturnes of blue light.

## ASH WEDNESDAY

Melinda Jane

The ticking clock, the Necropolis burns, who woke the Creeple? Rivulets of smoke, twisted into seismic waves, till night covered day. A mosaic of ash cast murals of fear. Brother, sister wait at the local shops, dismissed early from school, separation of older sister stranded in the lowlands of the city while father fought the Monster's breath. Mother alone, left preparing the farm. Letting go animals, gushing gutters, wetting down rooves and windows. Gathering up her young chicks, the preparations done, then it materialised: fireballs, eucalyptus bombs, licking, teasing, glamorous flames of green, hail-blue assails in all rabid directions. It bled for days, random in its pickings, until fuel gone, it ceased 'Ash Wednesday'.

Climate change begins  
Necropolis East burns, till  
steeple charred, brackish

## PERHAPS SOMETHING LIKE AN ENDING

Chris Muscardin

*We start this one near something like an ending, though everyone knows I am terrible at them. Annie said as much.*

‘I really don’t like this “date” business.’ She shook her head. We’re sitting on the porch, her sucking the last ice of a tequila tonic. ‘Why now, out of the blue? Say no.’

‘First off, I wouldn’t call it out of the blue. He’s been away. And second, it’s not a “date”. It’s the theme parks. Everyone does that.’

Dry slurp; her sideways squint wasn’t a response to the setting sun. Her mouth was tight with economy of language, but the message delivered.

‘Annie, it’s been what, over a year? We’re well over each other.’

‘Sure, you are. *He* might be.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You don’t know how to finish things properly, y’know?’ She swatted a circling fly. ‘Y’all need a clean break. None of this messy in, out, in again.’

‘It’s not that at all! I promise.’

‘I’m gonna start scripting your break-ups for you. Next time, you’re moving to Iceland and changing your name to Lars so he can’t find you. Got it?’

‘You’re ridiculous.’

‘*And* it’s Cancer season, doll. My horoscope says it’s a bad time to reconnect with exes.’

‘Isn’t your horoscope just *yours*? And since when do you believe that anyway?’

‘Hey, it’s inauspicious is all. And he dropped *you*, remember? You don’t have to entertain him. His loss.’

Cancer season and Annie’s charts be damned, I go. Of course. She’s right: I’m terrible at an ending, at saying no. Although unexpected, the invitation was innocuous. A day at the Magic Kingdom is benign enough, that’s what I said. And he’d just got back to town, too, that’s what Bruno said the night he showed up at the bar right before close and extended a grin and a ‘Howdy, Sam’ as if it hadn’t been a year and three months since I last saw him.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘Good to see you too. So, can I get a drink still, or are we all closed up for me too?’

I blushed. He smiled. It’s easy. I’m easy. He’d come back, he said. Things abroad hadn’t worked out, you know how it goes, so he sublet the flat and caught a flight back Monday and, well, here we were, figured he’d look me up, but anyways, how’ve *I* been? It’s been a minute.

I excel at stuttering silence in these scenarios; it eludes finality and definition.

‘Same as always, then.’ He flashed that stupid smile he wielded like a weapon and I was naturally struck down. He proposed: drinks, coffee? ‘Or, actually – I’ve got Disney tickets I never used before I left. Want to do the parks next week? The Magic Kingdom or something? We can make a day of it, catch up. It’ll be fun.’

High July is the worst time for anyone but a tourist, and I hate the parks, always have, but despite these incontrovertible facts, I found a head nodding, someone’s dry lips saying yes; a hand, my own, pulling phone from pocket, entering in his number, saving it – not under

anything smarmy or cruel (besides his name) – and the deal found itself done.

‘Well, let me know what day you’re free,’ he said, standing and throwing back the last of his drink. ‘Looking forward to it.’

\*\*\*

*Forward.*

*A clean ending requires looking forward. My specialty,  
which is what lands me in these messes, is looking back.*

A case study: so here we are, despite Annie, in line to ride Space Mountain, Bruno and I, and while he holds forth about this and that, things he wants to do now that he’s back, I’m too busy with remembering to hear him. Standing shivering abreast in line under the A.C. vent, about five pounds heavier with baggage, swamp humidity, and sweat, it’s a memory of us years ago crowding my brain, rather than what he’s on about now.

It’s from early in Us. A camping trip: Ginnie Springs, a site off the Santa Fe River on the path to the Panhandle. We camped often, but this trip stands out as it was our first, so we underestimate the work actually needed to set up before diving in. Bruno, more the nature boy of us two, does the tent, starts a fire, while I wander the woods dodging mosquitos and dipping in the springs to cool off intermittently. But, lo and behold, we both forget the phenomenon of summer rain, and despite his efforts, the whole camp washes apart just after dinner.

Soaked, shivering, and exhausted (much like now, but for a different reason), we pour into the backseat of the Camry, pressing cold one atop the other while rain clumps down from the canopy all night. I curse the stupidity of the trip, already formulating a strategy for how best to pull

the mud out of the upholstery once back in civilisation, but Bruno, of course, in this moment looks up at the sky through the rear window, and says with a sigh, ‘Y’know, the city is great. But I think this is how I’d like to end up.’

‘Excuse me? Ruining the back of someone’s car, you mean?’

He chuckles. ‘Well, no. But out in nature. Me and my friends and, like, all my old lovers and boyfriends. Like, on a commune in the mountains or woods or something. Away from everything that doesn’t really matter. Solitude.’

I related this to Annie some months after Bruno left.

‘Jesus. He sounds like the worst kind of fuckboy. “All my lovers and boyfriends”. Ick. Sounds terrible.’

‘I thought it romantic, sort of.’

‘Sounds like he’s just as bad at endings as you. Maybe up and leaving was the only way to do it after all.’

She scoffed, but I found it endearing, even if it was odd that instead of escaping to a mountain, he ran to just another city and another boy to ‘find himself.’

‘What’re you thinking about?’ Bruno pokes me into the present, next to me in line. We’re close now, the row of pods ready to launch adventurers into dark, uncharted cosmic expanses, or an approximation. ‘You’re drifting.’

Well, we’ve summited a mountain after all – the only one in Central Florida – though now I suppose I fall into the ex-lover category with the rest. I wonder if that would have been enough retreat, though, or if we would’ve had to go all the way out into the dark solitude of space to be happy. A theory we’re about to test: the first fags in space. Think about that, Bruno. We’ll form a colony, far away from Annies and Justins and Gayles and Roberts, Thomases, Henrys, Johns, Dennises, all the



earthlings and fraught history tangled up together, away from flaws and frustrations that we only notice because of their absence in others. An experiment. They have mountains on Mars too. They say Olympus Mons is three times the size of Everest. You want a mountain? There's a mountain. There's solitude.

A red cabin on the side of a red mountain; the only two red people in the whole red new world. Unless we dye our skin green to blend in with the natives, of course, but maybe they'd worship us like gods instead, the Primordial Couple. I'd be your Martian wife, sweep space dust and be clean and ready when you come home. Or we could be the Jetsons. Samson and Bruno Jetson – a reboot that would win rave reviews. The only human beings in the world. The only two who matter. Adam and, well, not Eve exactly, but Adam-2 perhaps.

'Earth to Sam. Come on, we're next in line.'

'Oh, sorry. Spaced out.'

'Save it, there's enough space here already. It's Space Mountain, bud.' Bruno does his stupid chuckle. It's a shit joke. I smile and laugh the way Adam-2 would smile and laugh when the Adam-Prime he is in love with tells a shit joke, and we collapse into the smallness of the spacecraft enough to lower the restraints.

Three,

two,

one,

and they fire us down the tunnel into black; new Adams off to colonise the universe in our image.

\*\*\*

*Forward.*

And now the recorded year is 35; we've weathered a whole year here by ourselves, wouldn't you believe? It's a Martian year at that, which is twice as long and treats us twice as well, makes us half our ages. According to the purely empirical math, we're teenagers again – we've cracked the code to every gay man's dilemma: how to stretch adolescence forever.

You spend the day down the mountainside as usual, working amongst the locals in the village at Olympus' base while I'm home, baking a celebratory cake. I don't speak the language here; I was never good at languages like you, but you picked it up right away and chatter away with them in your Martian and English and Portuguese and German and so the Martian-men down the slope know all about the red-faced couple, who kept to themselves all year long so it doesn't hurt to let them live in peace. We're the only two Earthlings so they're not afraid of us here; we can't even breed. (Not for lack of trying; there's nothing else to do here besides fuck like rabbits to stave off the cold of the moons' nightly rising.)

The cake is still rising and I'm on the couch reading when you come in. I jump to attention: 'Bruno, baby, what're you doing home early? Cake's not even ready.'

'Sam, we have to talk. I want you to meet someone.'

You move from the doorway, take off the helmet of your spacesuit, and that's when you lead it in, the tall fellow with glowing green skin, and with a chill that isn't just the frigid air I already know what comes next.

'This is \*\*\*\*\*,' you say. I can't pronounce it but it doesn't matter anyway, juxtaposed with what's next. 'I'm sure you understand, Sam. We didn't intend it, but that's love, and we've fallen right in.'

'Oh.'

'I'll always love you, Sammy, but \*\*\*\*\* and I, there's something really special here and we want to explore that. So, I've got to go, babe.'

He wants to show me the universe. He's taking me to explore Jupiter's moons. You understand, right?'

I say nothing. Are there words for it? Words with meaning; words which haven't yet been cannibalised by the thin atmosphere or the repetition of a scene we've already played out once, twice, six times before, only new under this angle of the sun. Somewhere in me I must have known it was coming. I want to scream, throw a pan, something a good housewife in a soap opera would do, drive you out shouting, 'You're dropping me again, Bruno, after I came to *Mars* for you?' (But it was my idea, after all.) Anything to convey a feeling and break the silence on this alien peak of us two, now three, lonely living things.

But what's the use? I can't even be mad. Perhaps I was the foolish one thinking thirty-four million miles from Orlando would be far away for us to be alone, the only two. I can't blame you. Viewed from outside our little shelter we've built – I've built – we don't make an ending. We might have history, chemistry, biology on our side, sure, but perhaps there's just the inevitability: there's no Tomorrowland, on Earth or elsewhere.

'Then I guess you'd better gather your things,' I say.

'Yeah. Do you remember where the suitcases are?'

The two of you begin combing the cabinets and drawers, moving around me as though I'm not even there. I remember the cake in the oven. Fuck. It's probably torched by now. Not that it matters. Maybe it catches fire and burns the place down. You'll be gone soon anyway, what do you care?

But once you leave, I do go into the kitchen to examine the cake. A charred, collapsed heap. Aggressively hot. It's the hottest thing left on this godforsaken planet. I'm done with this, I say, taking off my robe of finest Martian silk and gathering my own things. If you can go again, well, so will I. Back to Earth, to places that make sense, where the air

doesn't suffocate and I don't have to struggle with language that is as alien as it gets.

The phone is in the living room; I pick it up and dial Annie. I tell her everything.

'Oh, you poor thing. But, you know, this is what you do. I warned you. Cancer season and all that. The stars don't lie.'

'I thought it'd be different. I moved to *Mars*, for Chrissake. There isn't any Cancer season on Mars.'

'Baby, y'all can keep moving and trying, but if it doesn't work here, it won't work anywhere else. Should've gone to Iceland, I told you.'

'I want to come home.'

'Well, good luck. I can't pick you up this time. Not from Mars. You've done written yourself into a sticky one this time, Sam. What a shit ending. When you get back, we're going to work on that.'

\*\*\*

*Forward or backward or maybe we only ever really move  
laterally.*

It's been so long since I rode the Space Mountain coaster I forgot how quick it goes; not even five minutes and it's all over, we're disembarking the ride we waited forever for, and when he's done flirting with the attendant, Bruno drifts to see the photos taken.

'Jeez, Sammy. Can't you smile now and then? You look positively morose.'

'My face hasn't changed, bud. I don't know what you expected.'

'I dunno. Learn to look happy,' he tacks on. 'After all, we're having fun.'

Thunder echoes; though the sky is still that obscene siren blue, the daily storm must be rolling in, and quick. We shelter in an ice cream shop across the plaza before seating fills with other tourists doing the same. Summer storms, though terrifying, never last more than a half-hour, so the whole thing should resolve in no time. I lean against the window in the plastic chair, watching incoming drops careen into the glass inches from my nose like so many asteroids. Bruno sits and hands me a cup of ice cream.

‘What do you want to do?’ he asks, gesturing to the escalating drama. A branch snaps off one of the palms, nearly spears a child running for cover.

‘We could sit a minute. Better than being outside. What else is there left to do?’

‘I didn’t check; is there a hurricane brewing? Or did I just forget how these storms are?’

‘Nothing I’m aware of on the horizon. How long you back for anyways, Bruno?’

He fidgets. ‘Well, for good, I was thinking. I bounced around a while, but nowhere feels the same, Sam; it’s true, this place sucks you in. It’s home now.’

‘Gotcha.’

On a cold planet, not Earth and yet not dissimilar, a spaceship lands. The locals don’t know what to make of it, they’ve never seen anything of its kind, so they’ve all gathered around to see what comes next. A door opens: a gust of steam, and the shape of one figure or perhaps two, apelike or godlike, can be nearly made out.

‘Actually, I was wondering... are you still at the same place downtown? Our house?’

I am. There wasn't any need to move, after all; a house, a city, a planet, no matter how nice, becomes just like any other when the home inside absconds without warning. And the rent's still cheap, which is rare.

'I was wondering if maybe you still had space for me. Or did you get a roommate?'

'I didn't pick up a roommate. Or a boy.'

Somewhere downtown, Annie's laughing.

Somewhere on the cold planet, the figure(s) step(s) out of the shuttle, and it's the strangest sight those aliens have ever seen.

'Bruno, I don't know if you forgot: you left. Decided you were out. Had to "see the world", chase that tourist, Whatshisname, Doesntmatter. I'm sorry it didn't work out, but...'

'That was terrible. But I'm back. I did – do – love you, Sammy. Even all through Europe.'

Somewhere atop Olympus Mons, a little red house is burning itself to the ground, the first real fire in years. When authorities arrive later to inspect, they'll be bewildered, because all that will be left is cake crumbs in a charred oven. They'll say it was the cake's fault. They won't be entirely wrong, but although it's something like an ending, it's not the whole story. That would take too long to explain, and in the face of such an absurd, harmless ending, maybe the whole story won't even matter to them.

Everyone knows we're an absurd ending.

On the cold planet, smoke clears. Aliens return to their lives unimpressed. What they thought would be a Jetsons' miracle turned out only another lonely boy adrift in space. A terrible ending, a letdown, but expected.

Somewhere downtown, Annie would be proud of me.

'Bruno, that's a bad idea. Us. You, me, everyone knows. We aren't a good ending,' he says – maybe a Sam this time, maybe a Lars this time, or maybe a bit of both.

And then an insufficient dialogue curls noiselessly, not forward or backward or laterally but upward, right through the stratosphere and farther; it wraps itself around Martian ash and folds with the steam of far-off spacecraft, and concludes – not with a bang, but with an exasperated sigh and two hands tossed in the air. That's how everything ends these days, it seems.

## SO SAYS SHELLEY

Keith Nunes

Violet and Vienna

Adorned in lemon & lime,

Textured timbre                      with one reinforcing the other,

At Giza, soft tread around the

Great head of the Sphinx,

Camel-speak and lop-sided conversations with the despotic,

Guide Haroun raises a hand, a feathered touch on Violet's wrist,

Days later, along the Nile toward a death in the desert

Thousands of years ago,

Everything happened here a thousand years ago, laments Vienna,

So says Shelley, says Violet,

Once, not long ago, the young women tell Haroun, they were poor,

Not so anymore, says Vienna, we have Austrian money now,

Haroun, raises a hand, a feathered touch on Violet's breast,

In the dark, nobody is white, whispers Violet.



## CHORDS & LYRICS

### Nathanael O'Reilly

I pause *20,000 Days on Earth*  
at eleven-fifteen as Nick Cave  
works out chords & lyrics  
to a new song at the piano  
in his studio, walk to the kitchen  
to refresh my gin & tonic, notice  
a strip of golden light & D minor  
emanating from beneath my daughter's  
door. I turn the handle, push slowly  
into the room to find her sitting cross-  
legged on her bed, auburn hair hanging  
down, working out chords & lyrics  
on her grandfather's Gibson,  
transforming & elevating.

## TINDERBOX

Sarah Penwarden

[Tindəbɒks: A thing readily ignited]

And then what?

Nothing.

What?

I know what they want, Tina. It's all about sex.

No, it's not. Some of them want deep-and-meaningfuls ... and then sex.

What about the guy with the bike?

Um, well ...

Jen, you're a grown woman, you know. You're in charge of your body.

What you do with it is your business.

Um ...

Catholic guilt getting to you, is it? Spend the night with him – you could do worse than him.

Ummmm ...

Sun on the windowsill.

Scrolling through photos of Carl.

Sun on the cat curled in the rosemary pot.

The bell of the phone.

Jen! I've got the weekend off. My mate's taking over the site for me. They can do without me this once.

Umm ...

I'll pick you up on the bike. We'll travel down the island. Just you and me.

Ah ...

What do you reckon? We can stop and catch some fish down at the lake.  
There's a cool place I know and ...

*Carl's letters. He'd written them when it all began. Words that twisted into her if she read them again. A sequence of letters written on blue paper in fountain pen, neatly folded. Kept in the drawer along with his other things – his watch, ring, glasses – that she can't look at again.*

It's only when she turns her head  
she can see it's raining.

Sun through leaves;  
remnants of dust on windows after wet;  
whorls and swirls.

The fall of rain;  
the dull of the house;  
spaces of air;  
the crush of it.

No. I won't come with you this time.  
Another time then?

She closes her eyes and imagines Carl.  
He is there again.  
In that room, with sun behind rain and glass.  
He floats through her inner walls.

So ... what's happening with the motorbike guy?

Andrew, you mean?

Yes ... him ...

*Sigh.*

You're going off him?

I was never *on* him!

You could have been. Could still be.

I'm not sure ... if it's really me; the woman who does this ... who meets men this way.

It's what everyone does these days, Jen.

It's not my scene. But ... I don't want to be on my own either. Sometimes I feel ... well ... frustrated is the polite way of saying it. I just miss him you know. I miss everything about him. It's too soon. Everything reminds me of him.

She would lie in the big white bed and  
he would walk towards her,  
the sun catching his body:  
creaturely, smoothed as clay.

After a while  
she would swirl and swirl  
in the white bed, as if  
flying on some vast ship.

And then, just the two of them  
against the world.

You're still there, Jen?

I'm here.

Where are we going with this?  
Is there somewhere we have to go, Andrew?  
I like you.  
I like you too.  
And? But? I can hear your hesitation ... even via text!  
Too many ghosts.

She lights a match  
a whiff of bitter;  
the papers catch.

In a stove  
Carl's letters burn,  
one at a time.

## A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC

Donna Pucciani

When the day's labours are done,  
music pulls me back into itself,  
into a darkness where restlessness  
precludes sleep.

These last months have been hard,  
with silence hanging in the house  
heavy as rotting fruit. The quiet  
breathing of the spheres circles above,  
and I listen in vain for some whisper  
of consolation in the noncommittal night.

No answer for what plagues the world now.  
No reason why the squirrels still frolic  
in the dead leaves, chewing bits of berries,  
making little noises of mastication.  
Tonight the rain descends, a thunderous sound  
of boots on the roof, going nowhere,  
forcing me to stop and listen.

The baby grand awaits me in the corner.  
Before playing, I light the votive candle  
to Our Lady of Guadalupe, bought years ago  
at the Navajo reservation. Here in Chicago,  
she will bless the Moonlight Sonata,  
which I have rediscovered after decades,  
the occasional blunder breaking the mystery

with its noble reminder of fallibility, like the flaw  
in a Persian carpet.

Old Sinatra lurks on the other side of Beethoven,  
and Cole Porter and the sinuous Jobim,  
where nostalgia blooms in a garden of song,  
each chord like a blossom opening, like an old lover  
who can still keep the beat. The music dims.  
Now I lay me down to sleep.

## THE OFFERING

Anne Ryden

Her voice is drowning in the rapid tapping of her feet on the wooden floor. He leans closer to the dusty mesh between them. *What is it, my dear? You can tell me.* Her feet keep up their involuntary tap-dance, and he waits, straining to hear in case she speaks again.

Two days later when she returns, her feet are calm, and though her voice is wavering, she never falters in the telling. He hears of a summer many years ago when one bright day after another turned bleak. He hears of a little girl's exuberance at seeing new things and feels her pull away when she sees things she should not. Her words fill him with melancholy. Yet he knows that this is his calling, and he once more offers himself: *My dear, share your burden.*

She leaves.

His compassion for humankind is unquestionable, and his service to the lord unwavering. He aches for her pain. He thinks he may now truly know what it means to take on the suffering of others. If only she had stayed, she could have found [ solace, and he ... He kneels, maybe he prays.

In the days that follow, she moves through life like she has for so many years. She is there for a friend who has had some bad news; she goes on a date with a man of some promise; she works, she spends time with her children, she leads her normal life. Some time later, when she finds herself outside that place again, she is unable to fight the urge to go in, to sit down, to try to speak.

Hope and joy pulse through his being; how he has craved her return. Now, maybe, finally, he can help her, as he has known he must since that



time long ago when he was hauled to the lord in the greatest need of sanctuary.

She is so close. And she speaks. Of seeing, of touching, of being made to forgive; of the beauty of the softest of soft skin. Of consenting to the unconsentable, of forgiving the unforgivable.

He shivers in the dense air. She is still so beautiful. Her fear so tangible. Her recoil, divine. He longs to show his gratitude. For her to know that her gift to him was so much greater than the one he bestowed upon her: that her silence made him a safe path for his life's journey.

And she, in the dusty booth, in her walk through life, in her days of sunshine and growing, of darkness and fury, knows that even with a voice, the unspeakable remains.

In his grace and kindness. In her failure and guilt. There are no words.

## YOU LEFT WITHOUT TELLING

Sandip Saha

Last time you contacted me  
wishing me for the festival  
when whole India play  
with colour and greet with sweets.

The very next time I wished you  
a happy Bengali new year with a card  
but received no response  
you were sick bedridden.

I sent you my poem on our mother  
but you did not get up to read it  
the story of her remained unheard  
your comment will never come.

You used to read my poems  
so eagerly like nobody else  
your path was different  
you always criticised my poems.

I got only three days time  
to help you recover from illness  
in that little while I could not fathom  
what happen to you all of a sudden.

You did not tell me even one word  
departed to your heavenly abode

people yelled at me telling I did nothing  
my brother you left me without telling.

## BECAUSE OF THE WEBS

Hibah Shabkhez

The familiar rasp of the latch, the creak of the gate, the soft shuddering of un-mowed grass underfoot; were it not for the discarded weavings of the spiders, I could almost believe nothing was lost, nothing swept away; could hear our laughter in these crumbling bricks, smell years of delicious lunches wafting out of the windows, some jammed open, some shut. Because of the webs, I cannot; but you, if you are going to glide into my dreams, why not be whole again? Why not let me dream of you as you were and not as you must be now?

## ODE TO CONFORMITY

Ian C Smith

This lush longer nature-strip grass mine,  
I fire up Mad Max, old ghost mower,  
latecomers choosing their own design,  
this lush longer nature-strip grass mine,  
pre-judged. My new 'hood's slaves who align,  
herd creatures, bored, stare. Body slower,  
this lush longer nature-strip grass mine,  
I fire up Mad Max, old ghost mower.

## TASMANIAN GOTHIC

Ian C Smith

Bivouacked, a havoc of shadowed days,  
dusk, Roaring Forties thrashing his shelter,  
a harsh book, *Death of a River Guide*, weighs  
down his heart, doom-whispered regret's welter  
swallowed with flask whisky, this storied cove,  
narrative's redress beneath a pale moon.  
He shouts into the wind, lighting his stove  
to fry the fish he shall sup with a spoon,  
a leatherjacket hooked through its spined head.  
Sound ghastly, he rips off its tough thick skin,  
fillets, pan for a plate, rationed with bread,  
life's pleasures, bar literature, stretched thin.  
With her, he rues, he came better equipped,  
balanced, alight instead of wrung, word-whipped.

## GRANDMOTHER

Elizabeth Smither

Always doing the slightly wrong thing:  
writing a too-extravagant message  
on a card of a boy with a hare on his head  
(‘I love you like this hare, every hair’)  
while his hand reaches inside for the gaming card  
but the birthday card stays unread.

At least it was written quickly, heartfelt  
and in her best clearest handwriting  
not easy because now she mostly  
scribbles.

## UNHEARD

Elizabeth Smither

It is enough to not hear or comprehend  
correspondence is all, forget the compliment  
someone murmured at a festival, on the stairs

'You changed my life,' before passing on  
something about judging a competition  
in which I placed him first or second

or hearing nothing but a crowd's roar  
in the upper gallery where drinks were served  
after a prize giving, a handsome man

bending to my ear to pass a compliment  
I would have liked to hear, being vain  
and imagining him a troubadour. 'I can't ...'

I said and he bent again. The same.  
Instead a second flute of champagne  
was compensation. Better to leave unshriven

heartfelt words spoken in a whirlwind  
that I could imagine later, if I had heart  
or was good at puzzles. The image

is the gift of the unheard. Words  
falling on the stairs as one descended  
and the other rose. The merest brush



of mouth to ear. I smiled him off  
a gaze that should have been bespoke  
a gesture frozen in the air.

## SOUND

Hrishikesh Srinivas

That rain was so light  
it let me stay where I could watch over what  
I knew to be a fugitive heart's repose  
and there you were

Tailing hawks, circling ospreys  
humming the hummingbird at blue lupine's side  
still in the scrub ahead a mule deer  
whiling without here

Of course I too yours  
and would I were surrounded as hills on a sound  
running there even in the landfalling scud  
again and again yours

## THE AUDIT

Robert Verhagen

The front door of my apartment has one of those skirts on the bottom that keeps the dust out. It has the added benefit of rejecting any junk mail the postman tries to stuff inside. So when I accidentally stepped on the letter, as I hung my new Ned Kelly painting in the hall, I thought it was some rubbish I had neglected.

When I picked it up, I saw it was addressed to me, a thin envelope, almost invisible against the cream carpet. I wondered how long it had been there. I knifed it open and flattened out the letter. It was a tender notice for auditors.

It was June then, and I was busy with tax returns. I read the particulars anyway.

The letter started by means of a history. Some years ago, the Barka River Claims Settlement Act had been passed by parliament, conferring personhood on the entire Darling River system, as had happened in Ecuador and New Zealand decades before. It was the first I had heard of it.

I wasn't sure why the government would create an instrument that could be used against it. I opened up my laptop and punched the words *Barka River* into the search engine.

The government had passed the bill in the face of public pressure, hungry for votes in the first instance and not really thinking through the consequences. As a result, a group had been formed to represent the river's legal rights. But once one of these legal bodies was created, more followed. And what followed gave the land *positive rights*.

There had been a legal battle won in favour of the Darling River over corporate interest, and many cases after it. I looked up *positive rights* online. At the top of the list I read: the right to be restored.

I scrolled over news features on legal actions I had never heard of: the Lake Pedder Restoration; the big bushfire payout. ‘Don’t they understand the implications?’ I said. But I had come too late to the party. There had been so many class actions that a peak body had been formed to represent the environment entire. I picked up the letter. It had come from the Office of Australian Conservation and Environmental Sovereignty. OACES.

There was a little graphic of a waterhole with a gum tree leaning over it beside the acronym. It reminded me of the billabong in *Waltzing Matilda*, where the swagman drowns himself to get away from legal prosecution. I wondered if they were suggesting that a *billabong* was the Australian equivalent of an *oasis*.

This OACES, I read on, had just won a landmark case against the Crown and been awarded damages in repair of ‘historic environmental abuse’. Although some habitats could be healed, not all of it could be restored, and for those voiceless ecosystems forever altered, reparations were due.

I laughed. It was the end of the financial year. I was up to my eyeballs in tax returns. I typed up a shamefully expensive quote, printed it off and posted it to the return address.

I should have binned the letter at the start.

When a letter of engagement came back, pre-emptively signed by the client, I suspected no one else had applied. My quote had been embarrassingly lavish. Regardless, I thought it represented a necessary break from the monotony of tax returns, so I finished what jobs I had at hand, checked my calendar, and tabled whatever was left. I could spare a week to get this job out of the way.

The wildlife, I thought. That will be an easy place to start. Sure, millions of animals had been slaughtered by foxes, rodents, and cats, but I could quantify the cost of repopulation. The bilby, for example, had only just been reintroduced to the Mallee. So, I added up the bilby, the Tasmanian emu, the mainland quoll, and the koalas in the central highlands. I even audited the murder of the Thylacine, along with the cost of keeping foxes out of Tasmania, who were so eager to replace it in the food chain.

I worked hard on the introduction of feral species. Not only did ferals kill other animals, they also destroyed habitats. The kicker was, some feral animals are called *livestock*, so I typed up an email to OACES to clarify definitions.

While I waited for their reply, I researched the impacts of sheep grazing. It wasn't just that they gnawed the yam daisy, but in doing so they starved those who first lived on the land, who could no longer find their staple food.

When the email came back from OACES, they confirmed that sheep were within the brief, so I got to work on the extortionary revenue generated by the wool trade and the cost of rejuvenating native grasses. The impact on First Nations wasn't included.

Kangaroos were an interesting one. Because of the reduction in traditional hunting and the thinning of dingo numbers, kangaroo populations had grown unabated. The government was culpable in this too. The ironic underbelly of introduced species is the unintended scaling in favour of particular native animals. With kangaroo numbers the way they were, and no predator to keep them in check, it was going to take more than money to restore the balance. But money was the only recourse they had given me.

I quantified the kangaroos by not only adding up the cost of reintroducing dingoes, but by estimating the subsidies the government

would have to pay farmers. Farming in Australia is hard enough without the government reversing the improved conditions on which farms rely.

There were also public information campaigns to pay for – in the case of the dingo, yes, but also the sugar glider, whose introduction to Tasmania wiped out the Swift Parrot. People are suckers for a wet nose and bug eyes, so I included quotes for a million dollars' worth of bush-shelter signs to tell the public why the government was killing their adorable pests.

August had disappeared by now. I had apologised to those clients whose tax returns I hadn't finished. Most of them didn't email me back. I assumed they had gone elsewhere. But I was focused on the September deadline. The court needed to see my figures. And it stressed me out because I hadn't even got to the bushfires yet.

Quantifying the undoing of tens of thousands of years of environmental management was excruciating, as was valuing the old wet forests which had regrown dry. There were billions in that alone. Not to mention the damage to prehistoric timber species – Huon, fagus, the Wollemi pine – which never come back when burned.

I proposed a national subsidy for cold burning and, in that, included quotes from First Nations' companies who could manage the project. But as with the impact of the sheep, I found myself again reading into the impacts on people. For me, it seemed the line between Country and custodian wasn't a line at all, but a membrane through which the contents of both drifted back and forth in osmosis. All these sums, just numbers to stand in for irretrievable loss. What did they represent if not people setting fire to their own home – or someone else's?

One night, well into the body of my second bottle of Shiraz, I stumbled across a history of the Royal Society of Tasmania, the predecessor of the museum in Hobart. Though the deadline loomed, I couldn't help but look in horror when I read that the museum had traded in skulls. I didn't recall learning this in school.

They were the skulls of people treated as scientific objects, and they had been bartered to foreign museums to buy artwork. I stood up, leaned against my desk, and vomited into the bin.

When I looked up again, my eyes fell on the painting in the hall. My copy of *Ned Kelly* by Sidney Nolan. Through the hole in Kelly's bottle-opener head I could see the sky behind, as if there was nothing inside that helmet, not even a pair of eyes. I took it from its hook and set it on the carpet, facing the plaster. I went back to my desk and screwed the cap back on the wine bottle.

For a break from the OACES stuff, I valued the artworks the Royal Society had bought in its trade in skulls. I calculated the appreciation over almost two hundred years. When I tapped the equals button, the number exceeded my calculator's screen in square zeros.

But I couldn't think of it only as dead capital. This was people. What had started as a prick in my conscience when I had read about the casualties of the wool industry had now grown into a conviction. I saw that everything was connected.

I read that the convict lime-burners who shovelled up beaches for mortar had dug into ancient shell middens. There were places in the country where old buildings still showed the shell grit between the bricks. They were the remnants from millennia of families gathering shellfish, and I thought how the bricks were bonded together with a history that had almost been forgotten.

And yet, none of this was in my brief. I turned back to the audit. The deadline was a couple of days away. Still, I found myself struggling to draw a line between things. I emailed the client constantly for clarification.

'The court needs your findings by the weekend,' they said. 'You're holding the process up.'

I knew I wasn't going to get it done. Part of the brief required I prescribe a levy on all residential housing to account for the impact of development on the landscape. To do that I had to assess all the land

grants from Margaret River to the Blue Mountains, Cockle Creek to Cape York. I chewed ibuprofen like candy. It was near impossible to calculate the wealth generated in stamp duty. The interest paid on mortgages. I boggled at the capital that subdivision created, contradicting the law of diminishing returns by returning more for smaller parcels. Real estate represents 20 per cent of the nation's money, and I realised that no matter what sum I came up with, it was doomed to be outdated. Values never cease to grow.

I emailed the client again, at 3 a.m., on the Shiraz: 'What does it matter if I run late? These figures are bonkers. They'll laugh at me in court. I'll have my certification stripped.'

I'd given up on my old clients coming back to me next financial year. The quote I'd tendered for OACES would set me up for a long time. But I realised I would only get paid if I got the job done. And there was a serious chance I wouldn't.

They extended the court date to the end of January, which was a relief. But I couldn't afford to work any slower. In fact, the closer I looked, the more places I found where damages could be extracted.

October escaped me, and November. I missed Christmas. Then one Saturday in January, the week before the deadline, my sister rang me up.

'Where are you?'

'I'm working.'

'It's Australia Day,' she said. I heard the barbecue sizzle in the background. The dulcet twang of Jimmy Barnes.

'I'll catch the next one,' I said.

I pleaded with OACES for more time, and after some pinball over email they agreed to give me until the end of February. Failing that, they said, they would tear up my contract and find another auditor. I told them that was crazy. It had taken me seven months to get to this point, and I was nearly finished.



‘That’s what you told us in September,’ they said.

Then the phone cut out. I checked the modem and found it flashing red. When I stepped out of my apartment and into the corridor, I had to force the door over a litter of mail. I couldn’t recall how long it’d been since I’d left. The postie had tried to force some letters under the door, but couldn’t get them past the skirt. I found a few overdue notices from the telecom company, and a final warning for disconnection. I took the elevator downstairs.

When I stepped into the street there was a black car idling on the curb. Two men in black leather jackets stepped out and confronted me on the footpath. They knew my name.

‘Do you mind telling us what you’re doing outside?’ one asked.

‘My phone’s down. I’ve got to use the payphone down the street.’

‘Sure you do.’ The shorter guido smiled. ‘Listen pal,’ he said, taking me by the arm, ‘there’s an important deadline coming up, and a lot riding on you.’

‘I know,’ I said, wriggling in the guido’s grip. ‘Listen. I just need to make a call. My internet’s down and I can’t –’

‘I thought it was your phone?’ the taller guido said with a fatuous smile.

‘Yes, but since the NBN rollout –’

Together they shuffled me back to the apartment complex and threw me onto the floor of the lobby. ‘I’m going to count to ten,’ the short one said, ‘and if you’re not in your apartment by then ...’ He socked his fist into an open palm.

I scrambled to my feet and ran up the stairs.

I couldn’t work when I got back to my apartment. I sat beside the Sidney Nolan and sobbed.

After a few hours I thought I might try the front door. But it wouldn’t budge. I threw my weight against it. Kicked it. Nothing. I tried shouting,

but nobody came to my aid. I thought someone would notice the thugs camping out in the hall, but after two days, the door was still stuck, and nobody had knocked.

I pinched the venetians. The black car was still there. I only had one option: to finish the audit by the month's end. With or without internet.

Thankfully I had done most of the research. All that was left were the final sums and documentation, which I beat out from templates on Microsoft Word.

Each day I turned my desk calendar over. At last, I came to the end, surrounded by a wasteland of papers. I swore I would get a new job. Maybe I could tour-guide. Volunteer in an isolated community or something. I needed a tree change.

I checked my calendar. It was February 28. I tried my door. Still jammed. I peeked through the blinds. The black car was gone. Maybe they'd come back.

I checked the door the next day. Nothing. I thought maybe my desk calendar was wrong, and it was a leap year, but no one came the day after either. I began to panic.

I wrote a letter last night, thinking I could catch someone's attention in the hall, but when I tried to slip it under the door this morning, it crumpled in my hand. The skirt is too tight to the floor, and it's attached on the outside. I still don't know how they got their letter under in the first place.

Now I look around the apartment and marvel at all the mess such a thin envelope has created. Wine stains on the carpet. The smell of rubbish bags decaying by the door. Sheets of paper swarming over my desk. I'm looking over the sums once again, boggled by how much it has come to, this payout in lieu of putting the land back to how it was.

I wonder who those thugs actually were, and if they came to put a stop to what I was doing instead. I wonder if it would have made any difference, if I got the job done or not. Now I think that my work was

only ever half of it: I might have come up with the number, but someone else was always going to struggle to get them to pay.

## WHY I STALK THE SUN

Jason Visconti

To be remembered as a criminal of dawn,  
A culprit who has seen the sun undress,

The feather of a wind and my ransom's won,  
Snowfall makes my dagger hand embrace,

I am a cheat in the shadows calling on rain.

## THE WINDOW POEM

Jason Visconti

Something in these lines is meant to see through,

Something at this threshold that won't be touched,

The sun is on a silent watchman's cruise,

The moon throws me ajar from my good crutch,

A shard of glass and all your stanzas bruise.

## PLAYING FOR BLOOD AS GRANDMASTERS SHOULD

Carl Walsh

Over field of battle we face. Small talk silenced in pre-  
game lull. I watch your eyes, movement of arms, twitches and flickers

betray inner thoughts /a game plan. I still  
mind, face – a knight /warrior /berserker. We play. Rooks circle

dead and dying – clergy administer last rites. Self-deprecatory  
in the crowning moment – you fall – a pawn in my hands.

the title of this poem is a line from Prefab Sprout's 'Cue Fanfare'

## INVECTIVE AGAINST DISEASES NATURAL AND OTHERWISE

Janet Jiahui Wu

this is a lousy asparagus summer  
all these reindeer and sleighs and chocolate slides debauch the weary  
spidery mistletoes  
the drained basins and the secretly chopped-down forests lie down on a  
bed of roses and sigh together:

ah the plovers  
how they took flight! making a lot of noise  
that no one understands ...

the total summer of parking docks and the real estate for sale signs  
collide  
two-hundred-and-fifty-four square metres of Naples Yellow grass and  
five magpie larks  
coincide in one flash:

the crash of comets

this is a lousy night nonetheless  
the birds with the diamond wings are shot down like clay  
the kangaroos are eating honesty flowers under the English oaks like  
straw hats and coats  
the promised friendships are never realised  
a cricket hops and talks to himself:

nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing!

bah

it is so stable here the land never moves

lamb's ears and pavements jump sand over parsley knots

the sea fog is nerve-racking at fifty miles an hour and sixty-four beats  
per minute

and the leaves stretch out like corpses with their feet pointing to the  
dead creeks

when will the city speak, the suburbs, the centres, the fugitive tents?  
when?

ah night ah silent!

good fences close up mountains and statues of liberty alike, garden  
gnomes and such

under our skins crawl the mites ... the corpulent faggots!

a pubic louse springs up from the dense moist middle woods

the still trees rock and the rivers stop

somewhere beyond these trees, streets and fields ...

they talk of virgin development and capital –

may the mites tear up their groins and spit them out!



## MISSING: FOR QI HONG

Yuan Changming

Each time I miss you

A bud begins to bloom

So you are surrounded by flowers

Everywhere you go

Each time I miss you

A dot of light pops up

So you are illuminated by a whole sky

Of stars through the night

## I WON'T/ TELL THEM /

Aarushi Zarthoshtimanesh

That a b/order/ine

is a/cross /burning in the frame of my man/ic

/ pause /

Nausea builds it/self up/to the he/art of my tongue so slit/her in its two/

dimensionality but I am/ Not the one/ thing I wanted/ me/

to be/ Or I just learnt that be/in/g Is hurting /me

And my

S

E

L

(F) V E S are growing in a / on my stomach/

I s/have them and as they pool in the teeth of the d/rain / I

Circle it/ and wrap the remn/ants in a news/paper I re/membered

I want/ed

to say that I can/t find me on/ the constellation of place/ magnets on  
the f/ridge

because I/m going now/here right now/ so her/e look/ It is just me/ and  
/ everyone I

once held on/ to say that would be/ a lie/

Be/cause I held them/ and now my throat is swollen/ With the guilt/ I  
slipped/ in/to

on the rocking c/hair / I still keep s/waying/ and my h/air finds a b/lad/e  
and /

I / can't / tell/ you/ really / how much I brush into the grooves of my  
molars because

they still wish to / cave in / and become a water/ bod/ied with the salt



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Steph Amir** has a background in public policy and research, and is a Writers Victoria Writeability Fellow, a fellowship for writers with disabilities. Her poems have been published internationally and in Australian publications including *Babyteeth*, *Burrow*, *Echidna Tracks*, *Mantissa Poetry Review*, *The Victorian Writer*, *Writing Place 2021*, and *Admissions* (Upswell Publishing). She lives in Melbourne and is grateful to the many wonderful editors in the northern hemisphere who are not reflected in this parody.

Melbourne-born and based, **Peter Bakowski** has been writing poems for 39 years. In October 2022 Recent Work Press will publish his tenth solo poetry collection, titled *Our Ways On Earth*.

**Sarah Barr** lives in Dorset, UK. Her poems have appeared in various publications including *The Frogmore Papers*, *The New European*, *The Mechanics' Institute Review*, *The High Window*, and *Meniscus*. Three short stories appeared in *The Cinnamon Review of Short Fiction*. Among prizes won by her poems are first in the Frogmore Poetry Prize and the National Memory Day Poetry competition. Her poetry pamphlet *January* appeared in 2020, and her short story collection is forthcoming in 2022.

**Jason Beale** is a writer from Melbourne.

**Robert Beveridge** (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Homology Lit*, *WordCity*, and *The Erozone*, among others.

**Tony Beyer** writes in Taranaki, New Zealand; recent poems are online in *Allegro*, *Mudlark*, *Otoliths* and *Stone Poetry Journal*.

My name is **Vincent Brincat**. I was born and live in Sydney. My writing interests include writing for children and young and older adults. I also write poetry. I was delighted in 2021 to have my poem 'Apartment' published by your journal. I feel that what I write about is significant, despite the simplicity or complexity of the subject matter; and that my style is an extension of who I am, and as such unique.

**Faye Brinsmead's** writing appears in several anthologies and in journals including *The Ekphrastic Review*, *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, *MoonPark Review* and *New Flash Fiction Review*. One of her pieces was selected for inclusion in *Best Microfiction 2021* (Pelekinesis Press); another was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She lives in Canberra and tweets @ContesdeFaye.

**Owen Bullock** has published poetry, haiku, tanka, haibun and fiction; most recently, *Uma rocha enorme que anda à roda* (A big rock that turns around), translations of tanka into Portuguese by Francisco Carvalho (Temas Originais, 2021); *Summer Haiku* (Recent Work Press, 2019) and *Work & Play* (Recent Work Press, 2017). He has a chapbook featuring a single long poem, *Impression*, forthcoming from Beir Bua Press in 2022. Owen teaches Creative Writing at the University of Canberra. He has a website for his research: <https://poetry-in-process.com/> @OwenTrail @ProcessPoetry

**Anne M Carson** is a poet, essayist and visual artist. Her latest publications are *Massaging Himmler: A Poetic Biography of Dr Felix Kersten* (2019), and *Two Green Parrots* (2019). She has initiated poetry-led social justice projects, and is a RMIT PhD candidate in Creative Writing. This work has been gratefully supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. [www.annemcarson.com](http://www.annemcarson.com)

**Lisa Collyer** is a poet and educator. She writes poetry with a focus on women's bodies and how their experiences shape their everyday lives. She is a Four Centres' Emerging Writer, a writer-in-residence with The National Trust of WA (2021), an invited writer-in-residence for Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre (2022), and the winner of the Annette Cameron Encouragement Award (2021). Her work appears in *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *Westerly* and *Australian Poetry Anthology 21–22*.

**Ion Corcos** was born in Sydney, Australia in 1969. He has been published in *Cordite*, *Meanjin*, *Wild Court*, *The Sunlight Press*, and other journals. Ion is a nature lover and a supporter of animal rights. He is the author of *A Spoon of Honey* (Flutter Press, 2018).

**Sean Crawley's** first book, *Dead People Don't Make Jam*, a collection of short stories, was published by Ginninderra Press in 2020. His next collection, *Long Jetty, Short Stories*, will be out in 2022. Sean's desk is currently located in Long Jetty on the east coast of Australia.

**Lyn Dickens** is a mixed heritage Asian Australian writer and academic living on unceded Kurna land. She is a 2021 Penguin Write It Fellow and a 2022 Editorial Mentee with *Liminal* and Writers SA. Her writing has been published in Australia and internationally, and she is the co-founder and Managing Editor of *The Saltbush Review*. Lyn is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide.

Originally from Moscow, Russia, **Pavel Frolov** (he/him) is a queer-identified New York City-based performer and writer. He holds a BA in Communication from Brooklyn College. Pavel's recent poems have been published online by *Ariel's Dream*, *Milk Carton Press*, *Thirty West*, and *Visible Magazine*, and also in print in *Beyond Words*, *Poet's Choice*, and *Wingless Dreamer*. Pavel's short story 'The Appetite Zone or Penny Dreadful for a Marxist' is available in *MIXED MAG* Issue 13.

**Ian Ganassi's** work has appeared recently or will appear soon in numerous literary magazines, such as *New American Writing*, *Blazevox*, and *The American Journal of Poetry*. His first full length collection, *Mean Numbers*, is available in all the usual places. His new collection, *True for the Moment*, will be out next year from WordTech Communications. Selections from an ongoing collaboration with a painter can be found at [www.thecorpses.com](http://www.thecorpses.com).

**Lorraine Gibson** is an anthropologist, painter and poet living on Birpai Country. Her work is published internationally in anthologies, academic and literary journals and books including *We Don't Do Dots: Aboriginal Art and Culture in Wilcannia, New South Wales* (Sean Kingston Publishing, UK).

**Oz Hardwick** is a European poet and dabbler in diverse arts, not all of which are dark. His work has been widely published in international journals, anthologies, and other media. He has published nine full collections and chapbooks, and his tenth, *A Census of Preconceptions*, will be published by SurVision Books in 2022. Oz is Professor of Creative Writing at Leeds Trinity University (UK).

**Tom Hazuka** has published three novels, over sixty-five short stories and two books of nonfiction. His memoir, *If You Turn to Look Back*, will be published in November 2022. He has edited numerous anthologies, including *Flash Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Funny*, *Flash Nonfiction Funny* and *Flash Nonfiction Food*. He taught fiction writing for many years at Central Connecticut State University. Links to his writing and original songs are at [tomhazuka.com](http://tomhazuka.com).

**Jackson** was born in Cumbria, England, and lives in Australia and New Zealand. Her four full-length poetry collections include *A coat of ashes* (Recent Work Press 2019) and *The emptied bridge* (Mulla Mulla Press 2019), and her awards include the Ros Spencer Poetry Prize. In 2018 she completed her PhD in Writing at Edith Cowan University, winning the University Research Medal and two other awards. [thepoetjackson.com](http://thepoetjackson.com)

**Lesh Karan** was born in Fiji, has Indian genes and lives in Melbourne. She is a former pharmacist who writes. Read her recent work in the *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Island*, *Mascara*, *Portside Review* and *Rabbit*, among others. Lesh is currently undertaking a Master of Creative Writing, Editing and Publishing at the University of Melbourne.

**Michael Leach** (@m\_jeach) is a poet and academic at the Monash University School of Rural Health. His poems reside in *Meniscus*, *Rabbit*, *Cordite*, *Verandah*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *the Medical Journal of Australia*, *the 2021 Hippocrates Prize Anthology*, and elsewhere. Michael's poetry collections include *Chronicity* (Melbourne Poets Union, 2020) and *Natural Philosophies* (Recent Work Press, forthcoming). He lives on unceded

Dja Dja Wurrung Country and acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land.

**Wes Lee** lives in New Zealand. Her latest poetry collection, *By the Lapels*, was launched in 2019 (Steele Roberts Aotearoa). Her work has appeared in a wide array of literary journals and anthologies, including, *Best New Zealand Poems*, *Poetry London*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Westerly*, *Landfall*. Most recently she was awarded the Poetry New Zealand Prize 2019 by Massey University Press. She is the featured poet in the *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook 2022*.

**A E Macleod** writes on the unceded land of the Turrbal and Jagera peoples – Meanjin (Brisbane). They were the winner of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize Pacific Region (2020) and longlisted for the Galley Beggar Short Story Prize 2020/21. They have been published in *Granta*, *Island magazine*, *The Cormorant* and forthcoming in *New Australian Fiction 2022*.

**David McVey** lectures at New College Lanarkshire in Scotland. He has published over 120 short stories and a great deal of nonfiction that focuses on history and the outdoors. He enjoys hillwalking (i.e., hiking), visiting historic sites, reading, watching telly and supporting his home-town football (i.e., soccer) team, Kirkintilloch Rob Roy FC.

**Mark Mahemoff** is an Australian poet, critic and psychotherapist. He has published four books of poetry and his work is represented internationally. His next book of poetry, *Trojan Gifts*, will be published in May 2022.

**Tim Mayo's** poetry collection, *Thesaurus of Separation* (Phoenicia Publishing, 2016) was a finalist for both the 2017 Montaigne Medal and the 2017 Eric Hoffer Book Award. His most recent collection, *Notes to the Mental Hospital Time Keeper* (Kelsay Books, 2019) won an Honorable Mention in the 2020 Eric Hoffer Book Awards. He is a seven-time Pushcart Prize nominee and is on the author committee of the Brattleboro Literary Festival.

**Michael Mintrom** lives in Melbourne. His poems have previously appeared in *Meniscus* 7.1 and 9.1. Other poems have recently appeared in *Cordite*, *Main Street Rag*, *The Poetry Quarterly*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Subterranean Blue Poetry*, *takahē*, *Three Line Poetry* and *Westerly*.

**MJ, Melinda Jane**, author of the children's book *The Currawong and the Owl*, poetry books *Nature's Nuptials* and *Bite Me*. Sixty-five written works are published in international anthologies and literature journals like *Ginninderra Press*, *Mekong Review*, *Rattle*, *Poets Reading the News*, *Brushfire*, *Dime Show Review*, *Hawai'i Review* and *Rambutan Literary*, etc.

**Chris Muscardin** is a writer currently based in Chicago, Illinois, though a long-time Floridian and a New Yorker before that. His work explores queer identities, both his own and others', and the liminal and contradictory self.

**Keith Nunes** (Aotearoa/New Zealand) has had poetry, fiction, haiku and visuals published around the globe. He creates ethereal manifestations because he's inept at anything practical or useful.

**Nathanael O'Reilly** is an Irish-Australian poet residing in Texas. His books include *Boulevard*, *(Un)belonging*, *Preparations for Departure*, and *Distance*. His poetry, published in fourteen countries, appears in journals and anthologies including *Anthropocene*, *Bealtaine*, *Beir Bua*, *Cordite*, *The Elevation Review*, *fourW*, *Mascara*, *New World Writing*, and *Westerly*. He is the poetry editor for *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature*.

**Sarah Penwarden** is a therapist and counsellor educator based in Auckland. She has had more than 50 poems published in literary journals in New Zealand and Australia including *Poetry New Zealand*, *Turbine*, *Meniscus*, *Southerly*, *Quadrant*, *Mayhem* and *takāhē*. She has had short stories published in *tākāhe*, *brief*, and *Meniscus*, and a story broadcast on *Radio New Zealand*.

**Donna Pucciani**, a Chicago-based writer, has published poetry worldwide in *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Agenda*, *The Pedestal*, *Journal of Italian Translation*, and other journals. Her most recent collection of poetry is *EDGES*.

**Anne Ryden** is a literary translator, editor, and senior lecturer in the writing program of the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry at Curtin University. Her research interests play out at the cross-roads of memoir, death, ethics, and language.

**Sandip Saha** from India won awards and became a finalist in poetry contests in USA. He published three poetry collections including *Trial of God*, *Loving women* (Amazon, 2021), one poetry chapbook, *Toast for women* (Oxford, UK, 2021), and 98 poems in 33 journals in five countries including India, USA, and the UK.

**Hibah Shabkhez** is a writer of the half-yo literary tradition, an erratic language-learning enthusiast, and a happily eccentric blogger from Lahore, Pakistan. Her work has previously appeared in *Black Bough*, *Zin Daily*, *London Grip*, *The Madrigal*, *Acropolis Journal*, *Lucent Dreaming*, and a number of other literary magazines. Studying life, languages, and literature from a comparative perspective across linguistic and cultural boundaries holds a particular fascination for her. Linktree: <https://linktr.ee/HibahShabkhez>



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

**Elizabeth Smither's** recent publications are a collection of poems, *Night Horse* (Auckland University Press, 2017) which won the Ockham Poetry Award in 2018 and a collection of short stories, *The Piano Girls* (Quentin Wilson, 2021). Her newest collection, *My American Chair*, will be jointly published by Auckland University Press and MadHat (USA) in September.

**Hrishikesh Srinivas** hails from Sydney, Australia. He enjoys reading and writing poetry, with poems having appeared or forthcoming in *UNSWeetened Literary Journal*, *Hemingway's Playpen*, *Otoliths* and *Mantis*. He was awarded the Dorothea Mackellar National Poetry Award in 2011 and the Nillumbik Ekphrasis Poetry Youth Award in 2013, also being included in the 'Laughing Waters Road: Art, Landscape and Memory in Eltham' 2016 exhibition catalogue. He is currently a graduate student in electrical engineering at Stanford University, USA.

**Robert Verhagen** is an emerging writer and graduate student of the Master of Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing at the University of Melbourne. Robert volunteers as chair of the *Mountain Monthly*, a not-for-profit community magazine in the Kinglake Ranges, and in local classrooms where he teaches creative writing. His short fiction has been published by Grattan Street Press and his poetry online with *bootleg journal*.

**Jason Visconti** has attended both group and private poetry workshops. His work has appeared in various journals, including *Literary Yard*, *California Quarterly*, *Valley Voices*, *Allegro Magazine*, and *The American Journal of Poetry*. He especially enjoys the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Billy Collins.

**Carl Walsh** lives and writes in Melbourne, Australia, on Wurundjeri land. His work has been published in *StylusLit*, *Rabbit*, *Wales Haiku Journal*, *Meanjin*, *Cordite*, *Southerly*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *York Literary Review*, *Verity La*, *Tokyo Poetry Journal* and *Poetry for the Planet: An Anthology of Imagined Futures* (Litoria Press). He's currently working on two short collections, one reimagining poems he first wrote in 1997 (when he was half the age he is now) and the other inspired by titles and lines from the songs of Prefab Sprout. His poetry has been shortlisted for both the Fair Australia Prize (2017) and the Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize (2021).

**Janet Jiahui Wu** writes and makes art. She has published in various publications of literature such as *Plumwood Mountain*, *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *SFPJ*, etc. As a part of the LGBTQI+ community, she lives and works in Sydney, and she acknowledges and pays respect to the Gadigal people, their elders past, present and future.

**Yuan Changming** hails with Allen Yuan from POETRY PACIFIC (poetrypacific.blogspot.ca). Credits include 12 Pushcart nominations and chapbooks (most recently *LIMERENCE*) besides appearances in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry* (2008–17), *BestNewPoemsOnline* and *Poetry Daily*, among others across forty-eight countries. Yuan was nominated for and served on the Jury for Canada's National Magazine Awards (poetry category).

**Aarushi Zarthoshtimanesh:** I am an artist, student, poet, and mango lover. Playing with language through poetry has given me a chance to be buoyant even while drowning, a space to hold and let out dichotomies and dualities bubbling inside me. That 'in-between', beyond borders and memories, populated with order and chaos, is where my writing and I come from.

# MENISCUS

## LITERARY JOURNAL

Volume 10, Issue 1 2022

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A E Macleod  
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Nathanael O'Reilly  
Sarah Penwarden  
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