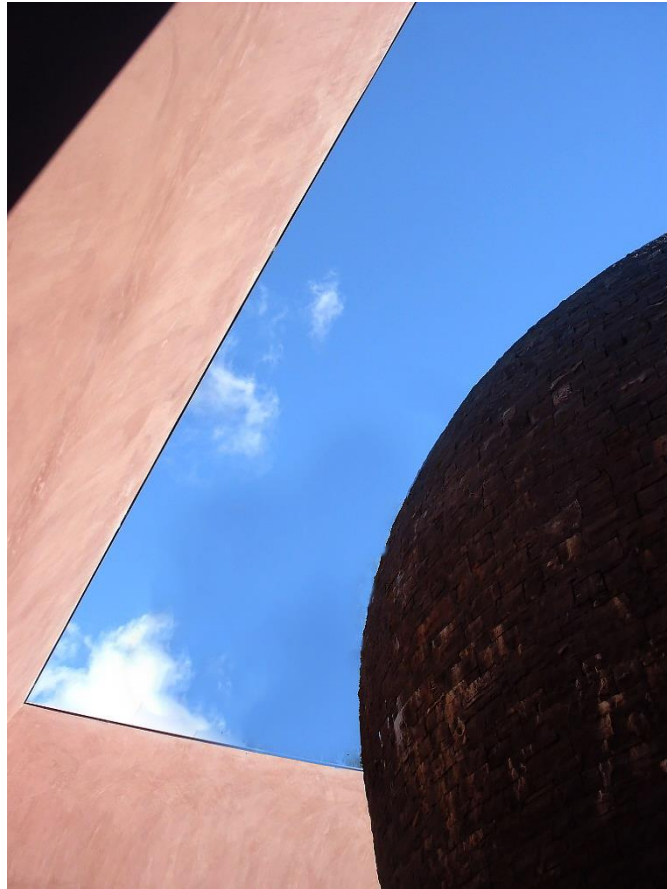


# Meniscus



Volume 2

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# Publication Information

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## About Meniscus

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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.

## Australian Copyright Agency

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

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# Editorial

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The 19<sup>th</sup> conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs is underway as this issue of *Meniscus* goes live. The AAWP has therefore almost attained its majority—an impressive feat in a period marked by the rapid turnover of institutions, organisations and even nations. This year, for the second time, the conference is being hosted in New Zealand, attesting to the enduring connections between the two countries, and the shared sustained interest in writing products, processes and pedagogies.

The contributors to this issue are likewise unfazed by distance or national boundaries, hailing in fairly equal measure from New Zealand, Australia and the UK and, for the first time, from North America. We are delighted to see the journal reach ever-wider audiences, and welcome the new voices and perspectives that will come as a result of this increasingly global community.

As of the first issue this year, the Australian Copyright Agency Ltd (CAL) is underwriting the cost of author payments, and we gratefully acknowledge their support. CAL offers this support in order to promote creative writing, and also because *Meniscus* aims to provide mentorship for emerging editors. Australian students in particular will be offered the opportunity of an internship to work on the editing of each issue, under the guidance of the experienced editors of the journal. For the current issue, we were delighted to work with Julia Prendergast, whose careful reading and thoughtful responses to the pieces contributed to the satisfying result: another body of creative work, written by a mix of experienced and emerging authors, with a delightfully wide range of styles, tastes and perspectives.

This issue is weighted toward poetry—not as a deliberate decision, but simply because more poets submitted work to the journal. Many of the pieces, quite by chance, explore travel, fluidity, change. There are reflections on relationships—their delights and their disasters; as well as the patterns of memory and the possibilities of the future. The stuff, in short, of writing.

We remember our friend and colleague, Sandra Burr, who died as this issue began to take form, and whose poems are included in the collection. And we encourage our readers and other writers to keep submitting their work—whether poetry, short form prose or experimental writing—to future issues of *Meniscus*.

Jen Webb, Gail Pittaway, Paul Munden, Paul Hetherington; with Julia Prendergast

Meniscus Editors

# Elizabeth Morton

---

## The dream

in the ship yard the sloops are unnamed.  
Dog and i walk over dry sponges,  
steel-wool bushes, the bones of manuka  
the sea wind gnaws. a contrail unzips  
the blue above. look, i tell Dog, look.  
but Dog just cocks his head.

in the ship yard the launches are crated  
like sows. their pink bellies fat and  
heavy on the scaffold. Dog and i walk  
over outboards, paint tins, canvas sheets.  
the contrail fattens. no clouds.  
just the long white poop of an angel.

in the ship yard the men are overalled,  
sunburned, puffing on rollies. Dog,  
one of them calls, Dog Dog. and Dog  
hobbles to him, over oars and ropes  
and fibreglass skiffs. Man, he barks,  
Man Man.

# Zoe Anderson

---

## Breathe

We share this apartment, a sink and a window  
A bookcase, a teapot, no rug on the floor.  
Two bedlamps, two laptops, toothbrushes, two housekeys  
A deadlock and chain on the door.

I shoplift from Woolworths, you find food in dumpsters  
I smoked your tobacco, you drank all my wine.  
I read all your novels, you read all my poems  
We both paid your speeding fine.

You chipped my last teacup, I lost half your chess set  
You let my plants die when I went out of town.  
You like to rise early, I can't stand the mornings,  
If I'm up, you're just coming down.

You kissed all my workmates, I fucked all your school-friends  
You don't like my mother, I pissed off your aunt.  
You don't show for days, and then brought home two girls while  
I sat in the bath and read Kant.

Always when the shops shut, we run out of condoms  
You ripped my best stockings that time on the couch.  
As nights threaten winter we nest in the doona  
Curled up like two kits in a pouch.

I can't stand your cooking, you hate all my music  
I mess up the kitchen, you scratch my CDs.  
Unspoken agreements for spoken discussions  
No Nietzsche, and no refugees.

You won't come to bed, and I won't call to ask you  
But then in the morning, you won't let me leave.  
We circle each other, I inhale, you exhale,  
Half full and half empty, we breathe.

## Succession story

There's a fight between the city and the jungle  
and the jungle is winning  
Footpaths straining with  
massive Mesozoic tree roots swelling underneath.

There's a fight between the city and the jungle  
and the jungle is winning.  
Parrots fly between skyscrapers  
greed feathered wingtips reflected on every side.

There's a fight between the city and the jungle  
and the jungle is winning.  
The waters of the harbour are rising and lapping  
at well trimmed asphalt and shiny leather shoes.

There's a fight between the city and the jungle  
and the jungle is winning.  
Fruit bats scream in the sunset streets  
drown out the beats that spill from the bars.

There's a fight between you and me  
and you are winning.  
I tried to pretend you weren't coming  
I tried to have you stopped.

There's a fight between you and me  
and you are winning.  
You're swelling inside me  
forcing my body into new curves, new continents.

There's a fight between you and me  
and you are winning.  
I can feel you kick within me  
your weight as I roll over at night.

There's a fight between you and me  
and I think you are winning.  
New life can't be paved over  
or fenced out with latex or wire.



There's a fight, there's the city and the jungle  
and someone is winning  
The dawnlight fog on the river is thick like morning sickness  
until exhaust fumes choke it away.

There's a fight, in this world,  
but I don't know who's winning.  
Something is rising, and swelling  
and looming and calling and tearing  
and screaming and retching and gasping

and inch by awful inch,  
the old will be pushed apart.

# Eugen Bacon

---

## The trip

Tumbling down the stretch, a confident glide, the 4WD Range Rover is a beaut over 19 years old.

The argument is brand new.

The wiper swishes to and fro, braves unseasonal rain. Katz and Lemar maintain their silence.

Rain. More rain. It is early spring.

'When's the next stop?' Lemar tries. Sidewise glance, a cautious smile.

'Does it matter?' she says.

'Should it?'

She doesn't respond. Turns her head, stares at a thin scratch on her window. The crack runs level with rolling landscape racing away with rain.

A shoot of spray through Lemar's window brushes Katz's cheek.

A glide of eye. 'Hell's the matter?' she says.

'You ask *me-e*. Something bothering you?'

'The window.'

He gives her a look.

'Would you shut it', she says.

'It don't sound like a request.'

'Please.'

More silence, the cloud of their argument hangs above it. He shrugs. Rolls up his window. Still air swells in the car.

'Air con working?' she says.

He flexes long corduroyed legs that end in driving moccasins. Flicks on the air button—and the radio. The last bars of a soulful number, a remix by some new artist, give way to an even darker track. Rain peters to a halt.

He hums. Her face is distant. They might well be strangers, tossed into a tight drive from Broome to Kununurra.

The lilt of his voice merges with the sombre melody.

He is muscled, dark. Dreadlocks fall down high cheekbones to square shoulders. Eyes like black gold give him the rugged look of a mechanic.

She is small, toned. A navy hue sits on ebony hair. She has deep, deep eyes. Grey.

They gleam like a cat's. The soft curtain of her fringe softens her face despite thickset brows like a man's.

She turns her face upwards. A gentle sun breaks through fluffs of cloud, strokes her brow. She blinks.

He swerves. Wheels skirt a roadside turtle.

Katz levels her balance with the dashboard.

'Brought my shades?' he asks.

'Yours? Why would I bring those?'

Silence.

She toys with beads peeking through the V of her t-shirt. Her chef hands rest on her lap, on faded denim shorts.

*Classic*, she thinks. Their arguments have escalated to trivia puffed up to a degree, championed to all degrees. Quickly perfecting it, they have lost harmony, attracting battle with no reason. No reason clashes well, coming from nowhere, scuffling everywhere. Tongued missiles create mayhem. A mayhem smug to find refuge in disarray. It leaves no external injuries to report, carts with it deep-seated pain long as a feud. It leaves them shaken, unsettled each time. So unsettled that what is left of their lovemaking, or the threshold of it, she wonders about that.

If it hadn't been such a dreary morning, perhaps the mood might be right. But a bleak dawn lifted to cobalt, to brown, slid to grey. One recipe for disaster that simmers Katz and Lemar in separate pots.

This spring is of a different breed. It traps them, brings with it ... fights. They gripe like siblings, the inner push to argue too persuasive. Smiles diminish to awkward, words sharpen to icicles.

Kununurra was a break long overdue. A planned trip, Katz's idea. A dumb-arsed one at that for a romance enough on the line. As though different soil would mend it.

'Drive?' Lemar had asked.

'Best within the price bracket', she said.

'Do I look half-convinced?'

'People drive', she said. 'It's normal.'

'Seems normal to take the plane.'

'If we drive, Lemar, what do you think the concern is? What.'

'If we drive my road rover? I hope for your sake to never ask myself that question.'

'Great. That's called pessimism.'

'Who's pessimistic here, Miss Price Bracket?'

She flipped.

Despite his harassed face, he stunned her by agreeing to the trip.

Everything was organised to the last detail. Everything but the climate. A few hours into the day, the weather window opened, torrential rain that left a curtain behind. Despite the planning, they got lost. Twice. Ended up doing a long leg to Kununurra. Gave shoes for another fight.

Connie Dover in *The Border of Heaven* chants her soulful lyrics:

*You say you will not go with me*

*You turn your eyes away*

*You say you will not follow me*

*No matter what I say  
I am going to the West  
I am going to the West*

*Wind, my blanket, earth, my bed  
My canopy, a tree ...*

Katz's mood darkens with the music. 'Have to play that?'

'N-nope.'

'Will you turn it off.'

'N-nope.'

'Be like that.'

No reason has its name, its talent, written on this new grumble. Its seeds sink deeper, water themselves richer, flower more malignant blues.

*Will take more than a sous chef to rescue this dinner*, she thinks. Though he maintains the same proximity, so close she can almost hear his heart talk, he is drawn away from her, accepting without question the space put out, its margin creeping further out.

She grips the seatbelt where he can't see it.

*Lemar is ... my big red lobster. Beautiful, until the claws.*

Two springs ago, she was contracted to a garden restaurant. He stepped into her life with a guitar across his waist, a rucksack on his back. *An avid traveller*, she thought. He caught her eye. *Rapture*, she thought. And then he smiled. *Hey presto Tom Carroll, Errol Flynn*. Reminded her too of the heartthrob muso who won the Boyup Brook Country Music Awards years back. Her thoughts turned unholy.

*We fell in love swatting sandflies ... in Broome.*

Longing swells, she feels empty.

Her body is willing, the mathematics of her need. But everything around it fails. Night after night, they turn to their pillows, swallowed in thought. One day, she fears, the pillow will mean more than Lemar.

Sometimes they never kiss.

Just a melt of bodies, a tumble of knees, flesh against flesh, almost cruel. Thrusts that summon a climax that spreads from their toes.

'Jesus!'

'Goddamn!'

Their responses are simultaneous as an overtaking truck judders, sways dangerously close, pushes them nearly off the highway.

Silence for a startling second stretches miles out.

They switch driving at dusk. Lemar lightly snores. The road rover is a power train. She glides. Lemar takes the wheel at dawn. Katz sleeps. Wakes on instinct. Lake Kununurra,

at last. A blue-green carpet with fluid waves. It stirs, it teases, declares interest in everything about it.

Sandy gold stretches a quarter mile deep, some dapples of green with burnt yellows. Beautifully rugged in parts, it reminds Katz of Lemar's morning face. Clouds dissolve to shimmering threads across the ocean-blue firmament.

The road rover halts at a divide.

'Left or right?' Lemar.

'Right.'

He leans forward, checks the road. A whiff of aftershave touches Katz's nostrils. His fingers are lean, firm on the steering. She can almost feel them on her skin.

'Dying for a piddle', he says.

'Me too. Where do people go in this wilderness?'

'The bush?'

She wipes her forehead with the back of her hands. 'Lemar?'

'Yes?'

She hugs her knees. 'I wonder about us—do you?'

'I wonder about it plenty.'

Her stomach folds. She rocks on her knees.

'Maybe we should, you know. Take time off', she says.

'We *are* taking time off.'

'From each other.'

His brow lifts, a sudden foot on the brake. The road rover hops, staggers on a rock thrown up by the malevolent road.

A slide of eye. 'That what you want?' he says.

She pulls at her hair, worrying it. Tightens a long strand in a little finger.

'Let's not fight. Please, Lemar.'

'Okay. What now?'

'Don't know.'

The road rover rolls into a deserted station.

'Well', he cuts the engine. 'I'm going for a piddle.'

'Me too.'

He throws on a tawny sweatshirt from the back seat, arm briefly touching her through motions of his dressing.

She slips on canvas trainers, hugs a turquoise sweater.

They depart, perhaps as equals, not as partners.

His stride is long, swift. Hers drags.

She steps minutes behind into the station, seeks the toilet. Lemar is nowhere to ask. She sees it, a metal shack, labelled.

She pushes the door. It swings with ease.

She climbs down a stone step, jumps sodden paper on the ground. The walls are dripping, the floor swirling with water.

But the need to go is great.

She moves tippie-toe towards one of the cubicles, takes care not to touch the wetness.

Later, as she washes her hands, a cubicle door opens. Lemar walks out, tipping on his soles.

'Dripping mess', she says. 'You could have warned me.'

'What—spoil the surprise?'

'Can't find the dryer. What's this?' She moves towards a contraption on the wall.

'Don't touch ...' begins Lemar.

She has already pressed it.

'... the green button', he finishes lamely.

A moan on the roof, roar, and a glorious waterfall of soapy water spits from the ceiling. The deluge plummets, splashes and bounces off walls, floods the pair.

She screeches, tries to run. Slips.

He shakes clumps of drippy hair, roped, from his face. 'Washed itself, did it?'

She rises, coughing.

He recovers enough to subdue a smile.

She guides herself with palms along the wall. Squishy shoes make obscene sounds. Her nipple-struck T-shirt draws her sweater tighter. She stares, horrified. Sobbing denims cling to her legs.

'I just touched it,' she gasps.

*Drip! Drip!* says the wall.

'Oh, you beaut', laughs Lemar.

'It's not', she says. His laughter is unchecked. 'Come on. It's not that fu—'

Then it hits her.

'Oh Lemar.' She makes it to his side.

When merriment dies, the ceiling sighs. The flood gurgles and narrows its cascade to a dribble. Dripping walls, clumps of soggy tissue float in a puddle.

His wet finger traces the outline of her nose. She clutches him, an octopus hungry for touch.

*We find love in ... a soaked toilet in Kununurra.*

'We'd best get these clothes off', he speaks to her hair.

Suddenly, she feels more. She feels more deeply.

# morgan downie

---

## Monuments

these were poets words,  
ancient bones, abandoned  
to massive silence, dark  
and dense as dolmens, lichened  
between the wild flowers.

we played amongst them  
as children, swung from  
the ivy'd ramparts, carved  
our names, bright bladed  
into their impassive faces.

these were poets words,  
studied in every school,  
familiar as a yawn,  
in every mouth a chore,  
bland as lawns.

so easy to topple, throw down,  
yet light as clouds we hoisted  
them on our shoulders  
and under their weight  
stood taller, grew new shadows

and only then did we find her,  
where she had always been,  
an old woman rocking  
in a field, watching the sun  
passage across her face.

we moved the words  
to give her brightness,  
we spoke around her  
until she smiled,  
and our words and her words  
became countless as grass.

## The granite

we dug it out of the earth  
a grey hulk of stone, sullen,  
reluctant as a tooth.  
eight men it took to load  
and carry it back to where  
we could start with our chisels.  
hard work, a hard stone,  
no riverbed ocean-floor rock,  
a stone that yielded  
its inner geometry  
only to sweated hours.  
we polished at it until  
the mica glistened like  
an imagination of snow  
and no imperfection,  
no orphan garnet,  
blemished its surface.  
what will you make of it  
those others asked,  
a gravestone questioning.  
we turned our backs to them  
and waited for the unfolding  
of years, for the return  
of the great winter.  
eight men it took to haul  
the stone to the pier,  
eight men to launch it  
out onto the frozen lake,  
further and further  
until the ice could bear  
it no more and stone  
and water were one.  
eight men turned away  
and the white world  
swallowed them.



# Rachel Bush

---

## Five answers for Anne Carson

*When I desire you a part of me is gone<sup>1</sup>*

Look at the surprising rabbit on a suburban lawn. All that furred hunger for so much greenish grass. Desire here is simple, but when I desire you I discount myself. I am going at sale price. I am on offer cheap.

*The question I am left with is the question of her loneliness*

The question I am left with is the identity of the man who told me on the telephone he was called Billy Collins and that he was a little-known writer of poetry. He said his dream was to be a published poet. His dream.

And this was my dream. I went back to a house I used to own. On a high shelf there were still some of my clothes. I had forgotten them, but now I wanted them. This might be theft, this was desire. Also there was something woollen, a bulky orange and yellow and green checked dressing gown, with someone's name, Lyall, it said in big letters on the outside. I hung it in a wardrobe where it bulged between the clothes already jammed in there. The new owner would be able to tell someone had gone through his stuff.

*Words bounce. Words, if you let them, will do what they want to do and what they have to do.*

Roll any word along a road and others stick to it. Some words infect us and make us sick with longing and need. Words ask more than we can give. Words stay with us until they hide from us. Words dress us up. Some words show themselves off in designer labels. Sometimes they wear no clothes at all.

*Under the seams runs the pain*

Under the seam runs the line of stitches where a scar will live, lumpy and purple at first and then paler than the skin around it. That seam is a sign of hope. The pain is a sign of nothing to the woman. She just carries it. All she can do is hoist it up this way or that.

*Desire is no light thing*

You come tired to bed, its cold cotton sheets on a winter's night. Desire is lighter than goose down duvets. Desire is a dark hawk over new road kill. It has the answer and it is black.

1. The italicised words at the start of each section are quotations from Anne Carson:

'When I desire you a part of me is gone': from 'Eros the Bittersweet'

'The question I am left with is the question of her loneliness': from 'Glass, Irony and God'

'Words bounce. Words, if you let them, will do what they want to do and what they have to do';

'Under the seam runs the pain'; and 'Desire is no light thing': from 'The Autobiography of Red'

# Hilaire

---

## The drive to the river

The river, when we finally got there, was a disappointment. It was the drought, of course, but in my mind I'd held onto images of it from years ago, in the heightened colours of Dad's Kodachrome slides. I parked by the side of the road, before the bridge, which stuck out now like a grandiose extravagance from another age. Gabby refused to get out of the car. —You go, she said. —I've seen it on TV.

So I left her fiddling with the dial on the car radio, and walked a short way along the crumbling bank, and then out onto the wide, cracked riverbed. A shallow, silty thread of water oozed under the bridge. I learnt to dive, I remembered, that summer we spent here, toppling forwards off the parapet of the bridge into the slow-running welcome of the river. What did the local kids do for fun now, I wondered.

You shouldn't go back to places. Gabby hadn't said this out loud, but I knew that's what she was thinking.

—I don't do spontaneous, Gabby had said, when I called round that Saturday lunchtime. But I ignored her remark, and packed her into my car, along with some clothes, a rug and a few packets of biscuits.

—You're doing me a favour, I argued. —I need to get out of the city. You can keep me company.

—That's a tactic, Em, she said. —You don't have to feel sorry for me.

I passed her the road atlas. —You can navigate.

—Simple, she said, dropping the atlas onto the floor. —Straight up the highway, sis.

For a while then we drove in silence. Gabby stared out the passenger window, her hands resting palm upwards on her thighs. I thought about the long car journeys that used to bookend our summer holidays, me and Gabby in the back, Mum and Dad in front, swapping the driving every hour or so, and doing their best to keep us entertained. —Remember those lists Mum used to make, for us to tick off? I asked. —A caravan. A black-faced sheep. First glimpse of the sea. And she always put a purple car on the list.

—You always spotted one first, Gabby said quietly, still staring away from me. I felt a sudden poignant clutch of grief for my sister. I hadn't meant to stir up old resentments, but six months, a year ago, there'd have been bite in her voice. Now, ever since her girlfriend had left, she was submerged somewhere bleak, somewhere very hard for me to reach and lift her out from.

I checked the speedometer and decided to concentrate on the journey. I liked driving. I liked being in charge, controlling the vehicle, watching the parched countryside roll past, and not having to think about much else. Driving, heading inland, towards a river I remembered as full-flowing, languid, tinged bronze at sunset.

Gabby shifted a little, gazing ahead through the windscreen, rather than out of the passenger window. She'd folded her hands loosely in her lap. —How come you need to get out of the city? she asked, her words barely modulated, as flat as the road stretching out in front of us.

—Oh, you know, I said, glancing in the rear-view mirror. Nothing approaching. This was the best kind of driving, as far as I was concerned. Straight roads, very little traffic, brain in neutral. —Ryan's away again this weekend. They're gigging all along the peninsula. I just felt like a change of scene.

Gabby nodded slightly, her face expressionless. I moved my hands a little on the steering wheel, flexing my fingers to stop them going to sleep. I felt suddenly thirsty, in an anxious kind of way. —Pass me the water, Gab, would you? I asked, and it was a relief, I realised, to see her bend forward, pick up the plastic bottle, pop up the stopper, and hand it to me, in a seamless, near-normal paced sequence of movements. I glugged down a good draught, and passed the bottle back to her. —Thanks.

—Not a problem, Em, she said, returning to her fixed stare ahead.

Ryan and his band. For the first couple of years, I'd done most of the driving, ferrying them to and from scungy venues in the suburbs. Then, as the band started to take off, it was harder for me to fit it all in round my job. They got a roadie, a manager, short tours out of town. When he was away, most of the time I was fine, working during the day, hoping he'd ring in the evening, understanding how hectic everything was if he didn't, living for the moment of his return. Sometimes, though, if I was home for too long on my own, I'd start to resent the amount of stuff that had gradually invaded our house: broken amps, stacks of vintage records, great tangles of multicoloured cables and leads, orphaned leather jackets, boots, belts. I no longer tried to tidy, organise, streamline. Instead, I'd sit, defeated, on the settee, drinking white wine from a cask I kept in the fridge, and watching whatever was on TV. Or I got out. Got in the car and drove. I liked wide open spaces the best, the dead straight lanes of freeways.

I switched the car radio on. Tootles of busy jazz burbled out of the speakers. — See if you can find something better, I suggested to Gabby.

After a moment, she leant across and swept the dial slowly back and forth, through brief blasts of hip hop and talkback, lingering over the static between stations, before finally settling on some distant, wavering folk music. Then she sat back, hands limp by her sides, the blank gaze out of the windscreen.

I geared down as we approached a signposted hamlet. Little more than a few cottages, a pub and a postbox; then, once more, brown paddocks, scrub, a low hill on the horizon. From the radio, a woman's high voice trembled through a mournful song.

—Alicia couldn't *bear* folk music, Gabby said, with some force. I glanced at her in the rear-view mirror. A tear trickled down the side of her nose. —So I convinced myself I hated it too. Crazy.

Ryan would have had his fingers in his ears by now, I reflected, if he hadn't already grabbed the dial and retuned the radio. Grunge was his passion, and when he was home, we listened to little else. I'd got used to it, in the way you get used to a noisy

fridge or the rumble of traffic. You forget that there are other kinds of sounds, the possibility of something approximating silence.

Gabby sniffed, another tear tracking, unstopped, down her cheek.

—Glove box, I prompted. —Should be some tissues in there.

By the time we'd left the low hill behind us it was getting dark, and I'd already stifled two or three yawns. I decided to turn off at the next town and find a motel. —Is that okay with you? I asked. —Then it'll only be about an hour's drive tomorrow morning to the river.

—Fine, Gabby said. —I'm not bothered.

And when we checked out the twin room at the first motel I pulled into, her only concern seemed to be whether the bedside radio worked.

—What d'you reckon? I asked, testing the bounce of one of the beds.

She shrugged. —If you're happy...

It would do, I thought. A basic, uncluttered room. The bed linen appeared fresh. The en suite was clean, even if it smelt rather strongly of lavender. On the bedside table there were two cards printed with the options for breakfast, and little boxes to tick to make your selection. —It reminds me of that place we stayed, Gab, on that epic journey to visit Dad's family in the west. Do you remember? The car had broken down so we had to stay three nights. There was a hatch next to the door in the motel room, which they opened to push the breakfast trays through. I thought it was so sophisticated for some reason.

—It gave me nightmares, Gabby said. —I was sure a horrible old man was going to break into the room during the night.

She was lying across one of the beds, her legs over the side and feet on the floor. Her monotone words seemed to be addressed to the ceiling. —And I had to sleep on the truckle bed, right next to Dad's snoring. You had a proper bed on the other side of the room.

Nearly twenty years ago, that would have been. I was fourteen, Gabby just turned twelve. Strange how our memories were so different. —Sorry, I said, meaning it. —I'd forgotten.

Gabby made a little half-hearted movement with her hands, lifting them then dropping them back on the bedspread. —Doesn't matter.

I looked at my watch. Ryan and the band would have finished their soundcheck by now. They'd be getting their carb fix at the nearest pizza 'n pasta place, in whichever seaside town they were playing tonight. I was hungry, too, I realised. —Come on, I said. —Let's fill in the breakfast cards and I'll take those to reception and sign in. Then we can find somewhere for dinner.

Gabby rolled over onto her side and studied the card I passed her. But when she gave it back to me I noticed all she'd ticked was tomato juice.

—You've got to have more than that, I insisted.

She flopped onto her back again. —Tick toast and butter. You can have what I don't eat.

The town we'd stopped in had seen better days. On the long main street there were two big old corner pubs, each as empty and uninviting as the other; several unappetising-looking takeaway outlets; and a slightly shabby, family-run bistro, which I judged to be our best bet. Gabby didn't object. —Yeah, fine, she said, when I asked what she thought. —If there's a table free, why not.

According to the little blurb at the top of the menu, they were third-generation Italians. We had a booth to ourselves, and I ordered a carafe of the house red. It was on the rough side, but hit the spot.

—Rustic, Gabby observed approvingly, taking another sip. She held her glass out then for me to chink mine against, and at last I saw a hint of her former self show through. —Good choice, Em.

I clinked my glass against hers. —Cheers. And thanks for coming with me.

—You didn't give me the chance to refuse, she responded, a bit of fight in her voice. —Anyway, when's Ryan back?

—Tuesday. Then off again on Thursday.

—That's tough.

I topped our glasses up from the carafe, and tried to sound upbeat in a downbeat way. —That's the music biz. You've got to make the most of any opportunity that comes along. And Ryan wouldn't be happy if he wasn't pursuing his music ...

—And if he's not happy, you can't be happy, Gabby filled in as I trailed off.

—Not quite, I protested feebly. I looked around for the waiter. Where was our food? I was ravenous.

Gabby was suddenly downcast again. —Sorry, she said, frowning into her wine glass. —That's exactly what Alicia used to do. Second-guess me. Twist my words around.

—Hey. It's okay, I said, leaning across to grasp her hand. —I'm okay.

—You're okay, Gabby deadpanned. —I'm okay. You're okay, she chanted, tipping her head from one side to the other. —Remember that book? Mum bought it when we were *going through puberty*. God I hated that phrase.

—Not just the phrase, I retorted. —The whole bloody, hormonal horror of it.

We laughed then, together, at the memory of our teenage selves and what our parents had had to endure. And I laughed, too, from relief, to hear my sister laughing, and the wine working through me, through us, reassured that I could still reach her, that we could still cheer each other up.

The waiter brought our food over at last. For me, spaghetti carbonara, a great, sticky, comforting mound of it. Just what I needed, and I was going to savour every mouthful. It was a good while since I'd enjoyed a meal out. The last couple of times, with Ryan, he'd been sullen, preoccupied, and then unable to hide his disapproval when I'd asked to see the dessert menu. Gabby, at least, didn't care what I ate. She'd ordered garlic bread and a tomato salad for herself. —I'm not that hungry, she maintained.

For most of the meal, we ate in silence, and I tried not to observe too closely how little Gabby consumed, how slowly she chewed each morsel. I'd nearly finished my spaghetti when she stabbed a slice of tomato with her fork and held it up between us, oil

dripping onto the paper tablecloth. —Alicia couldn't stand tomatoes, she announced. — For seven years, I denied myself tomatoes because Alicia couldn't stand them. How mad is that?

She opened her mouth wide and lowered in the tomato slice, as if it was the most exquisite delicacy in the world. Which, I guess, at that moment, it was.

I signalled to the waiter for another carafe of house red. I'd decided it was really rather quaffable.

At first, I slept quite soundly, thanks, as I'd hoped, to the wine. But at some point during the night I woke. It was pitch black. I could hear low, fuzzy voices, fading in and out. News from another part of the world, a rising death toll. Gabby sniffing. I woke again. Those disembodied voices, urgent, distressed, but turned so low I couldn't make out whether the report was about an earthquake or a massacre. Gabby was awake, I could tell, crying softly. She must have sensed me listening, alert. —I'm all right, she whispered. —Go back to sleep.

In the morning, we were both subdued. I had slept again, but my dreams were all mixed up with the troubled radio commentary and an amorphous anxiety, which a lukewarm shower did little to shift. When I came out of the en suite, Gabby had already got dressed and brought in the breakfast trays, which had been left outside the door. She sat propped against a pillow, alternating sips of tomato juice and listless nibbles at a triangle of toast.

I sat cross-legged on the bed with my tray in front of me. The previous evening, when I'd made my selection, I'd been starving. Now, not much on the plate appealed, but I forced myself to sample the shrivelled bacon, the spongy button mushrooms, the stiff wodge of scrambled eggs. I wondered why I'd felt so nostalgic about motel breakfasts. —Sure you don't want some? I offered, waving my fork at the plastic-tasting food.

Gabby shook her head, her eyes closed, sunk deep inside herself once more.

So I ate what I could, knowing I'd need the energy for the drive, determined we'd make it to the river, though I couldn't remember now why it had seemed so important, the day before, when I'd bundled Gabby into the car.

Standing on the dry riverbed, I folded my arms across my chest, against the cold breeze, my back to the car where my sister waited with her heartache and the radio for company. We'd both swum here, and Gabby was the fierce one, the risk-taker. She'd launched herself from the bridge first, and I'd tumbled in after her, worried I might lose her.

I squatted down, hugging my knees, and studied the hard, cracked surface of the exposed riverbed. A few broken reed stems poked up between the blisters of baked mud. Something Gabby had said in the bistro, late on as we were finishing the second carafe, came back to me. —Memories aren't enough, you know, she'd said, and at first I thought she was rebuking me for mentioning yet another fond incident from our childhood. But she went on. —After Alicia left, I realised it was our first year together, when we were madly in love, that sustained me through the rest. Living on those

memories of how happy we'd been, hoping we'd somehow get back to that again. I'd been miserable for ages, but I couldn't see that until I was outside the situation.

Talking about herself, of course, and yet, deep down, I understood she was also prodding me.

I stood up suddenly and had to wait a moment for my balance to return.



# Owen Bullock

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## The invitation

*Starless and fatherless, a dark water<sup>1</sup>*

where you skated  
ice held

where a voice was raised  
you fell through

sedulous brother  
of DNA and likeness

I was never  
like you

walking home in the dark  
to a dark house

a bronzed wall  
full of fire  
that could not  
slake the cold

ice on the inside  
of the window  
where I hovered  
like your vampire bats  
ready to drink the morning  
too tired to feed

I keep legends  
going as songs  
you found me  
an old mandolin to play  
the best thing  
that ever happened

*fixed stars / govern a life*

I want to get  
to the top of the burra<sup>2</sup>  
for no reason

I call to you below  
you see the stick figure  
with pretensions

I have to ignore origins  
to get to where I'm going

I have to remember you

*The moon has nothing to be sad about*

fantasies  
letters  
to a dead child

the twin  
from over the way  
who didn't make it  
to a fifth year

hello, Peter  
come to my house  
again soon

see what I do  
with marbles  
and soldiers

if you can bring a stick  
shaped by the hedgerow  
to a rifle  
we'll chase each other

our dreams of thirty years  
will not be of

avoiding  
the invitation

*Stasis in darkness*

what does it mean  
to be still

except death  
like silence  
ungraspable

you are habit  
yes  
and you agree

is this enough  
to be dead

sunrays  
force you to move  
stop agreeing  
wonder what you're doing  
forget

*In a forest of frost*

you blowtorch the cake  
as the oven cools

send a message  
though exhausted

exchange words  
with an old man  
about his body

take flowers  
there were many

space doesn't seem bigger  
doesn't seem smaller

now you're the eye  
in a needle

1. All quotes from Sylvia Plath:

'Starless and fatherless, a dark water': from 'Sheep in Fog'

'fixed stars / govern a life': from 'Words'

'The moon has nothing to be sad about': from 'Edge'

'Stasis in darkness': from 'Ariel'

'In a forest of frost': from 'Poppies in October'

2. burra – mountain of sand, Cornish dialect, waste product of china clay mining.

# Raphael Kabo

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## Fur Alina

I am sitting in the car and listening to the radio. The pianist on the radio plays his music like he is pulling oysters from shells: with the promise of every note curled up in the shape of the one before it. He knows the music from beginning to end. *Oh Universe, I think, am I ever to know my life as he knows the music.*

I am sitting in the car and I begin to cry. I do not know why I am crying. Perhaps the music is very beautiful. Perhaps I am tired. Perhaps I cannot stand the pianist knowing how the music begins and ends. Perhaps I want to seize the sheets from him, and scream and scream: *how does it feel now? how does it feel now? how does it feel now how does it feel now how does it feel*

I pull over in the car and I cry and cry. I must just be tired. I cannot stop crying. I feel the music ending under the fingers of the pianist. As he pulls the notes from each other, I am crying, and I think the pianist is also crying. Perhaps he knows the music is ending. Perhaps he is also just tired. *Oh Universe, I think, let me never know my end as he knows his.* We stop crying.

# Suzanne Herschel

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## Meeting place

He took the same steps  
following forty-eight years later  
had I known then—how disbelieving the teenager  
with a Kodak disposable camera  
blurred metaphors and dreams—his  
a smart digital device capturing the inundating  
wet wilderness grandeur  
with images that speak to my memory  
waterfalls weeping in unison from mist heights  
hung with curtains drawn so dense  
to hold us for days in mountains towering grey  
above the rough ochre tussock grass of the pass  
bowing to wind seeking a way through  
past the climber's push upwards  
to a place so remote and removed  
alone in the looming rock wall surround  
echoes drowned in the fall of rain  
and sinister howl of rushing air  
wind plucking at our frailty on the ridge  
specks of humanity gripping the terrain  
grasping the sheath of mountain fibre  
held on, kept on to a topmost invisible point  
always in the mist, seemingly near  
but elusively far where breath is short  
snatched from the open mouth  
dispersed with the words of the granite face  
that ravines swallow, caught by fingers of mist  
wrapped in bush, trapped  
his words echo mine held these years  
in crevasses, tarns, scree scars slipping  
power of past whispers heard along canyons  
talk from me to him, from the leaves  
the trees that still clasp the route  
giving breath to the heft and stride  
over valley floor where avalanches last lay  
in cairns of lethal rock fall  
where the incongruent years saw us walk  
follow the same track cut through

sheer, loud and silent land  
thrust up by millennia hand holding  
the intensity of a spiritual thrall  
ecstasy unity awe  
this we separately both know.

# Sandra Burr

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## Mucous kisses

Yellow ear tag Canasta C69 walks forward,  
snorts, and thrusts his blunt muzzle at the old brown gelding  
waiting by the barbed wire fence.

The calf stretches on tiptoe across the wire  
unfurls his tongue and plants a muscular caress  
on the nose of the startled horse.

Elastic strings of mucous drip and swing  
as the bullock closes the twin fans of his lashes over his eyes  
and moans with delight.

The horse leans into the sticky embrace,  
his cheek hair becomes slick with spit and foam,  
he swoons and sways, ignores the wire pricking his chest.  
Then, with his own long tongue, he returns the calf's caress.  
For a moment, young cow and old horse forget their differences  
and become lost in the exchange of tender mucous kisses.

## Dream acres

An advertisement in the real estate section  
of Saturday's *Canberra Times*,

—weekender on acreage  
ten minutes to town—

I call the agent, buoyed by romantic notions  
of self sufficiency and my horses grazing  
by the back fence.

—just looking  
just dreaming—

We muddle along a potholed track  
navigating drifts of dirt and sharp rocks  
that ends abruptly in the disappointing reality  
of decades of neglect.

At some point, we stopped pretending that we could be happy  
in a place with an obscure postcode



dumped at the dead end of a flint strewn road,  
tied to an endless country cycle chipping weeds,  
re-hanging gates and mending fences.

All we really want is to sprawl on a sun-warmed veranda  
with the weekend papers, sipping good coffee  
dreaming about of a life on acres.

# Krishan Coupland

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## **When considering my father's suicide**

I'm reminded of the man who,  
when told by airline staff to assume  
the brace position, and wait for  
further instructions, instead rose from  
his seat, hauled open the emergency  
exit and threw himself two storeys  
to the runway blurring past below.  
He was knocked unconscious by  
his landing. Crippled by it. And so he  
didn't see the plane touch down  
into a growing rose of fire and dust.  
didn't see the screaming engines  
spraying hopeless foam onto  
what was now a pyre.

# Dominique Hecq

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## Felt

At night time I heard steps rushing through the corridor. A cold draught fell on me. The door opened by itself and a crowd of people entered our bedroom, perhaps six or seven—I barely had time to count them. They were tall and small, fat and thin. They had blank faces, yellow eyes and lips the colour of blackcurrants. I blinked. They drew back the curtains at my window, each pointing to the fawn moon with their long middle finger. They gazed at me from their lidless yellow eyes. I stared back, lost for words. They laughed, their laughter a rattle. And they left.

It was, I first thought, the yellow eyes that drove me away. Now I know it was fear tinged with guilt, and hope, too.

As I left the room I glanced at the night-tousled hair on the pillow next to mine: he often sleeps face down, like an overgrown baby. I rushed to the front passage, picked up my keys from their hook, went back for my woollen scarf, locked the door and pressed into the shadows.

October, the middle of spring, the time when gardens seem to grow overnight. I could smell the lilac as the wind pounded my back on my way to the car. I got in and sank into myself, or the idea of myself. In an hour's time I would be sweeping through a sea of blackwoods in bloom. In an hour's time I would be catching up with the source of this unusually icy wind. In an hour's time I would be boarding a plane into some rainbow, or the recollection of some rainbow.

And tomorrow ...

Well, tomorrow would be light shining on a leaf, a daub of paint, a knob of butter.

I headed for the highway, reluctantly breathing in the chilled sulphurous smells of factories, unnerved by the lingering yellow light in the night sky. Yellow, a colour I now loathed, perhaps because I had become aware of its ambiguous connotations: the colour of pulsating life—of corn and sunshine and gold and angelic haloes, but also ... Let's not get into that.

Ours wasn't such a bad marriage. But it always felt as if someone had stolen my paintbox, leaving behind grey harmonies. While I longed for stark pencil-drawn pictures, harmonies always turned messy, reflecting out the lighter shades, obliterating the black traits. And so, instead of erasing the smudge under the guttering of the suburbs on my way out of the city, I dwelled on the scene that continued to upset me.

He was looking over my shoulder when I ran my sable brush swiftly across the canvas of *Waves Breaking at Sandy Point*. It carried a ruby slick of oil paint where the sun's last colours were supposed to hit the clouds. But when I looked at what I'd done, the carmine pigment, like the day I had been imagining, together with its palpable paradoxes, had disappeared into memory. Instead, the painting showed a grey wash over a dull afternoon.

I don't know that you really care, I said.

Do you?

I said to you the other day—I said, now that the boy is no longer with us there doesn't seem to be any point to it. And do you recall what you answered?

Not exactly.

You said, It never seemed there was much point anyway. And do you know what I thought?

No, though it's not hard to guess.

Well, I thought—and to think I married you for this. What a fucking waste.

I hated to hear the person I had become: mean, vindictive, volatile.

Shh. Shh. Shh, you said, exciting my rage.

It was hard not to feel enraged again. I tried focusing on the road. I turned the radio on. Turned it off. Music was painful to hear. Submerged in the music rain made, it was also painful to remember the loss of it—Eurydice, Eurydice, Eurydice ... I knew no melody to coax my fury, no rhythm to say time knows nothing about abjection, no words to tame guilt, and no silence or da capo to convey this—yes, *this is hope*.

I pushed on, whooshing through wet deserted streets, imagining myself airborne. As I reached the highway I eased the car into the right-hand lane and stopped at the green light.

It's not easy being green, I sang, emulating the frog puppet from *Sesame Street*.

A taxi tooted, shocking me into consciousness and movement. The car picked up speed. Scandalously, the green frog morphed into the Chinese poet Xu Yin who once wrote about *mi se*, the mysterious greenish hue—Carving the light from the moon to dye the mountain stream.

Away. I was suddenly transported far away from everywhere and everything. I was nowhere. I could suddenly go back to where home was, or not. It didn't matter. I was empty, absent, too full. Nowhere. I was gone.

I was going to write the story of *mi se*.

Then I saw blue flashes. They got thicker and thicker. I couldn't see things any longer. Couldn't see past my luminous windscreen. Couldn't see the road for the flashes. I panicked. I didn't want to be noticed. I stopped the car. Everything was blue. I shut my eyes and held on as long as I could. I hurt everywhere. I heard a car door slam. I heard voices. As my own voice boomed out of my body something burst and it was all over. I was empty again. I opened my eyes. The light inside my car was on. The window on the driver's side was wound down. Rain was falling on the dashboard. Beads of water were scattered on my jumper. My face and hands were damp. Outside, the night was pouring in thick sheets. I folded my speeding ticket, shoved it in the glove box, and drove off.

It is strange how pain comes and goes. The pain had definitely gone. There was just a dull ache. With this realisation I was tempted to turn around as if I could turn my life around also. But wisdom has it that there are no escape routes. There are no real U-turns either. Perhaps destiny is but a series of crossroads and dead ends.

I kept driving.

It was getting colder, and apart from the odd emergency phone booth on the side of the highway, the landscape was now a sea of grey mist. I longed for the winding country road, its lonesome looking tree silhouettes, the spectral properties outlined haphazardly in the dark, the narrow bridge out of the forest, the climb up the hill. Soon.

I turned the radio on, changed the band to AM and tuned into a drama show. A new play titled *The Amazon* was being discussed. Coming from an upper-middle-class family, the Amazon scares both men and women as soon as she appears in a psychodrama group: six foot, an Audi TT, the ease of a model, the voice of a man, with a frankly scabrous language; women stop speaking and men look down. The Amazon is divorced. She feels great remorse for this as she has not been able to keep her child. This loss is irreparable and she covers herself with enormous spiky rings and wild necklaces, and makes herself up like an idol. 'It amuses me to scare people', she says in her slow baritone, which bursts out like thunder in its sudden force.

Powerful, dangerous, crushing, murderous is the Amazon. And the fear she instils is always the same fear; it is the fear of our infantile and primitive *ancestors*, fear of scarring.

Before our marriage I had never mentioned my scar. Perhaps this is because as long as I can remember, at my mother's instigation, I had learned how to make myself up so as to hide completely what looked like a bruise: a web of veins, of purple, bluish fibres; of discoloured flesh and skin, often hot and beating like a pulse over the birthmark I had tried to excise. It became my special mark, the spot he would seek in love making. We were spooked to see our child inherit this birthmark.

The rain had eased into a drizzle. At last I was close to my destination. The road was wider and curving upwards. No paddocks bordered it, no houses anywhere. Not so much as the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. The black bodies of trees formed a ragged wall on each side. I slowed down, wary of kangaroos bounding across the road. Overhead, as I looked up between the windscreen wipers, shone a faint Southern Cross in the indigo sky. I scrutinised the wall of trees for the opening I knew was there, and veered right. I parked the car under a huge stringy bark. My heart started racing, and I had a bizarre sensation that was rather like being in love.

A dark purple night, an icy wind—wind pounds and gets right inside you, unlike rain which pounds and skittles off. There was no track or any indication of a trail. I stumped my way through a thick outcropping of bushes and grass, driving my feet into the cracked ground, trampling dried twigs that exploded in showers of splinters despite the recent rain. I could hear the footloose creek at the base of the hill trickling on at its own pace under a canopy of scrub and creepers I remembered growing out of control. The drizzling had stopped.

There was something uncanny about the place, yet soothing. I called for a verb with some mysterious weight to bring back to life the dream's blank faces I willed with lidded eyes and fully fleshed lips. But words at that moment beat a retreat.

In my mind I painted the shadows. Every part of life has them, and in art, perhaps more obviously than anywhere else, it is the shadows that make the light and the

colours believable. Black and white are absolutes—either the total absorption of light as you leave the world, or the total reflection of the light as you return to a state of luminosity. And violet is the last colour in the rainbow, the ending of the known and the beginning of the unknown—which is why it was so suitable for me to arrive as dawn was about to break.

Cold and aching all over, I could hardly breathe. I followed the path. I pushed the gate open, buttoned up my coat and made my way through the imposing gravestones to the baby white crosses at the back of the paddock. Here, in the violet light, I read the confirmation of my loss. I went into the grave itself. I entered it, sinking into the inner dark. Sinking further.

I have come to a boundary and feel the pressure exerted at that point where every membrane of existence is stretched taut like a drum between inner and outer worlds. At this point, in the sudden inversion of point and periphery, here the spirit speaks and is heard. As if hearing is responding and touch. As if the grave is dust.

# Oliver Comins

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## Oak Fish Island

### I

It was a late summer's day in a town park,  
two boys washed up somewhere near the middle  
of England. I don't remember whose house  
we started out from, carrying our nets on canes  
and a large jar each with a string handle tied  
round its neck, plus a bag of Marmite sandwiches  
and a bottle of White's Dandelion & Burdock.

A line of stepping stones led to the island where,  
later, we would be Robin Hood and Little John  
on a slippery bridge as the afternoon sun  
began to fade. But in the morning no shadows  
greeted us, only brightness, as we arrived in exile  
just a short distance from home and with enough  
space on Oak Fish Island to imagine being alone.

### II

The town brook parted around that slither of land  
with its tree stump at one end and beach at the other,  
where a miniature strand of pebbles shelved gently  
downstream. Taking one side each, we dragged nets,  
trying to pull the most sticklebacks and minnows  
from half a yard of water, where we'd dare not step  
for fear of losing our whole mottled stock of prey.

At the end of the day our jars were full of tiny,  
sluggish fish and some feeble weed floating  
in mud-stained water, all of which we poured back  
into Finham Brook as a draw was declared,  
allowing us to share the winning between us,  
before a sloped return to our separate homes,  
wet footprints parting where the tarmac forked.

### III

That slew of mud, stones and grass with its tall  
stump of a tree has gone now and the brook seems  
so much narrower. Although there's still a gully

worn from path to bank, where we scrambled  
down to the place our stepping stones started,  
there's nowhere left at the bottom to hang out  
for hours, no island in the middle of summer.

And no news either of my companion, lost  
on another excursion. But too many of the fish  
I caught that day are still with me, grown bulky  
and carp-like, looming just below the surface.  
They feed on whatever they can find and seem  
to know it's me staring down, attempting to reckon  
the effect they have on a lake's eddying depth.



# Keith Hutson

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## Bowls

Fine for an hour, then dull, despite a summer sun.  
Green tedium. But do beware,  
if nudged a bit, this game is good  
at slowly rolling on and on and on.

Little genuflections—bows, knee-bends,  
cupped hands, unfolding arms—  
weave in the dying light  
their latticework of shadows

and perpetuate the minor knocks, near misses,  
clusterings and calls of *Way too heavy, Jim!*  
into a never-ending winding-down;  
a loop of letting go.

# Carol Reid

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## Celeste

I never stop looking for my Celeste, even now, more than a quarter century, half a world from Bertolo. I watch the green Canadian fields and sky through the shaky glass window of the train but I think of her and want her to know I never forget.

Gina here, Rosi's girl, is my first grandchild. But Celeste was my firstborn—little dark nut-shaped head, little fists, ready to fight already, barely minutes in the world. They put her in my arms and her dark eyes dared me not to love her. Of all my children, she was most like me. We runts fight hardest; what else can we do?

When I look at the sky at night and see that single first white star, I remember Celeste in her Communion dress and veil, her eyes brighter than any white silk or tulle. And when the clouds come and cover every diamond in the sky I remember the last time I saw her, pushing her bicycle beside the long stone wall and shouting at her sister and brother not to follow.

Rosi is still beautiful and lazy, like my husband was, him and all his snooty family. Aldo is still a rascal. He has my heart even when I can't bear to be around him. That's how it is with boys. The day always comes when I say yes to Aldo and shift again, put myself on the train like baggage.

The Calgary train runs always on time. I can set these twenty hours as if I am a clock. Mission o'clock, Kamloops o'clock, Jasper o'clock. I am nowhere but on the train.

Gina is the skinny second-hand, she won't stop moving. Tick, tick, tick, into the aisle, over to the window, up to the doors that separate the passenger cars. She opens the doors for each person coming and going. Sometimes she stands stiff like a robot, sometimes she bows and sings in a silly voice, welcome, welcome. Now she's made friends with that little man across the aisle.

Every time the doors open and a dark-haired girl comes in, I think of my Celeste and pray God will lead her back to me.

Rosi sent Gina on the train with me without dropping a single tear. Some women are not made for children, no matter what their hips say. Poor Gina, when the new baby comes.

What I believe about my Celeste is that she saw my future and decided to make her own. Some children have that gift, as if they've walked the road before. They see the choices—rooted like trees or free, comfort others or save themselves—clear as water. Once she picked up an old deck of cards and made a fan of them, waved them in my face. She played at reading the cards for me. It was never my idea. My husband let *le zingare* camp on the lower acres, too lazy to send them away. Celeste must have learned it all from them.

Who knows if she told me what she really saw? She said not to be afraid of spades but I am not that kind of fool. She saw the spades and not a fortnight later she was gone. I can see her feet pumping the pedals of her bicycle, she was so small and quick. At fifteen she looked twelve, until she spoke, and then she seemed as old as my husband's father, *Il Professore*. I hope she never became as cold or cruel.

Gina is quick like that, sometimes. And strong, with a hard shell, like a nut. Let the world try to crack her. The world will fail.

That little man across the aisle is making a picture of Gina. Look how carefully the pencil draws the lines of her head and neck on the paper. He has kept her still, at least. He looks so hard at her, so serious. There, the sketch is done. Notebook closed.

*Andiamo*, Gina. We need to get some supper before the food is all gone. The little man smiles at her, tells her with a sweep of his hand to go with me. *Andiamo, per l'amor di Dio*.

The girl is sweating, that's what she gets for all her antics. Her hair is dark with sweat on the back of her head. When we sit down at the little dining table and she puts her hand on my arm, her skin is hot and damp.

What a colour they've painted this car, some ghost of a grey blue. They don't want us to have too much appetite. Gina reads me the menu, *pollo, bistecca, salmone, fegato*. Steak, what else? On the train to Calgary we have steak, so we forget the ocean for a while.

The light outside fades, the windows are mirrors now. Here we all are, in the mirror. That little man has come in and taken a chair at the table behind us. Here comes the notebook out again, what can he draw in here, the salt shaker? Gina will be asking for a notebook and pencil soon, like *Il Professore*. The old man used to sit out in the grove and draw the birds. He would rather draw the birds than speak to me.

Good, they roll down the curtains. Gina can stop looking at herself in the glass, looking at her friend, Da Vinci. Lucky for her, she's not pretty. Vanity is a little sin, but even little sins are punished. What tiny sin took Celeste away from me? I will never know.

*Ebbene*, Gina, *mangia!* This is all we get until morning. You sit now, eat, drink some ginger ale, cool down. In the morning we see the Rocky Mountains, then we know where we are.

Look how DaVinci plays with his food, like a child. Men are lost by themselves.

Celeste used to bring me brown trout from the river, that terrible river. I told her to stay away but with her bicycle she could go anywhere. That terrible day when the gypsy boy brought her to the door soaked and shivering and she lay in bed coughing for days after, even then she would never listen. She brought me trout strung on a line and said she had learned to swim.

I pray Gina sleeps hard tonight, not up and down that ladder to her bed. She bounces like a flea in her seat and half her dinner still on the plate. *Si, va bene*, go sit with your friend while I have my ice cream.

He lets her have his notebook and pencil, now she tries to make his picture. Maybe it sleeps in her blood, too, what they call a gift. *Il Professore*, with his inks and brushes. It was like he caught the birds on paper. But he could never catch Celeste, when he called to her to come and sit, she spilled the ink or tore the paper until he could do nothing but pinch her arm and send her away. Never a tear in her eye, she wore the marks like bracelets.

You give Da Vinci back those things now, Gina. Now, Gina. All right, you keep the fancy pencil. *Si si, buona notte, signore*, you find another friend tomorrow.

The sooner we sleep, the sooner the morning comes. In this low berth here, there is room enough for two the size of us. You stay here with me. We pretend you are a baby again, I sing you the song of the little pigs and the wolf with the long, long tail. No one is so happy that they never want to be young and asleep again, with only beautiful dreams.

You take your nightdress and go wash your face in that little bathroom. Splash cold water on your neck. If you get sick in Calgary, who will care for you? Aldo and that Shirley at work day and night and the little ones both walking now. *Ah Dio*.

Three days Celeste sweating with that fever, then Rosi, too. I found her in Celeste's room one morning, on the floor beside the bed. All my children wandering at night. All day I wear myself out, at night I sleep. Nobody gives me sleep, I need to take it for myself.

*Ebbene*, go up the little ladder, stay in your own berth if you want. Slow, Gina, you hop like a rabbit with those legs. Close your curtain, now, stay quiet. What now? Okay, *dorma bene, carina. Madonna*, even your little kiss is hot.

How can I rest? I feel the train going up, in my ears and in my stomach. I hear that churned up Thompson River, we race with that green water all the way into Jasper. I taste metal and snow from the air outside, it bites hard, the cold up here. In Bertolo, we went up into the soft hills and we hardly needed shoes on our feet. My husband and the other men took their horses and guns and played they were cowboys in those hills. That awful night they played at searching for Celeste, they galloped the horses up and down beside the river but there was no sign, no bicycle on the bank, nothing but empty water, as empty of Celeste as the pillow on her bed.

*Ma che sorpresa*, there goes Gina down the ladder. I hear her feet tapping down the aisle before I can even pull open my curtain. Now she makes me count the minutes before she comes back. Two whole nights I waited for my husband and the men to come back with nothing, two nights with Rosi and Aldo pulling at my arms and *Il Professore, Il Capo* at his post on the little balcony, with his eyes on his acres of vines and olive trees below. In his mind he knew already he will never give the land to me and his son's children. He pretends even to the Great Himself that Celeste is the wound he can never forgive, that my blood is the taint in his spotless family. He pretends we both forget how he chose me when I was just a girl, still dressing my dolls like babies. Maybe better that no more children come, even seven years after Celeste is gone.

Because my husband is always *Il Professore's* child first. And when he runs too fast with the horse and they fall together and all I have left are Aldo and Rosi and a tiny purse left from my dowry, *Il Gentile Professore* and all his family give me nothing but goodbye.

Gina takes too long wherever she has gone to. Maybe she goes up to the engine and learns to drive the train. How do I find her if she wants to be lost?

Sometimes I imagine Celeste coming back to Bertolo and all of us gone. Maybe with a husband of her own and even children, coming up the hills of the olive grove, looking up into the windows of that pile of a house, and maybe *Il Professore*, white as a bone and shriveled, maybe deaf and blind, still on his little balcony but now he can see nothing. Who could tell Celeste where we had gone?

*Bene, finalmente, eccola*, here is Gina's footstep, the curtain moves when she climbs the ladder. I show her a lesson, I reach out and hold her leg, give her a little scare to hold her still, pull her back down and make her rest down here with me.

*Non te la prendere*, Gina, don't be ashamed of just a drop or two of tears, when you get so worn out, of course you cry. Okay, *piccinina*, give me what you have in your hand. Ah, you tore up your picture.

*Ebbene*, forget it now, close those weepy eyes, press your face here on my shoulder. Just a little while until we see the Rocky Mountains, when you look up there is only snow

and rock, nobody, *nessuno*, maybe a few of those big horned sheep. You know they never fall, those sheep? They hop from one cliff to another, they see us down here on the train and wonder where we go but they only stay where they are. You know how cold it is up there? The air so cold it makes you clean just to breathe it. The snow up there? Soft and light like feathers. You make a bed in the snow and when you wake up you are in heaven.

# Sarah Penwarden

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## Summer Christmas

Pohutukawa flame  
under a long streaky sky,  
and all the while knowing they are well-wrapped up—  
my mother, in London,  
in her quilted dressing gown,  
blankets swathed to save on heating.

It's Christmas here, she says,  
from here I can see  
the lights in  
other people's windows.

In Auckland, the light goes on and on;  
no place to hide, nor hibernate,  
the sun won't set  
but fades to Van Gogh's bluestar night.

The English sun falls  
ink black womb-dark  
settling like soot before 4 o'clock  
while there is snow in the air.

That Christmastime I walked  
in old woods, bonfire woods,  
planted with oak and ash  
that if turned  
by a craftsman's hands once  
became magic.  
This Christmas there will be  
singing birds, green and speckled,  
sipping the  
frangipani tree.

The air scented not  
with pine and spice  
but honeysuckle  
caught in the breeze and lifted off.

# Author Biographies

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## Zoe Anderson

**Zoe Anderson** is a sky watcher, bird lover and performance poet. She has featured at times at the Canberra Poetry Slam and at Bad!Slam!No!Biscuit!, created a poetry-play with Raphael Kabo for *You Are Here* Festival, and kept her very own journal since the age of nine. She is previously published in *The Stars Like Sand* anthology. Zoe's heart is in Canberra, just like the rest of her. She might be found up Mount Ainslie, or on a bicycle, or in her garden trying to learn the secrets of life from her tomato plants.

## Eugen Bacon

**Eugen Bacon** studied at Maritime Campus, Greenwich University, UK, less than two minutes' walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. Her arty muse fostered itself within the baroque setting of the Old Royal Naval College, and Eugen found herself a computer graduate mentally re-engineered into creative writing. She is now a PhD candidate in writing by artefact and exegesis at Swinburne University of Technology.

## Owen Bullock

**Owen Bullock** has published a collection of poetry, *sometimes the sky isn't big enough* (Steele Roberts, NZ, 2010); two books of haiku, *wild camomile* (Post Pressed, Australia, 2009) and *breakfast with epiphanies* (Oceanbooks, NZ, 2012), and the novella, *A Cornish Story* (Palores, UK, 2010). He is a former editor of *Poetry NZ*, and was one of the editors who produced *Take Five: Best Contemporary Tanka, Vol IV* (Kei Books, USA, 2012). Owen is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra.

## Sandra Burr

**Sandra Burr** was an adjunct member of the Faculty of Arts and Design, and a member of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, at the University of Canberra. The holder of a PhD in creative writing, Sandra taught creative writing and creative/cultural research, was on the editorial board of the journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*, and managed the ARC-funded project *Understanding Creative Excellence: A Case Study in Poetry*. Her research interests focused on the cross-disciplinary field of human-animal relations. Sandra died in late September 2014.

### Rachel Bush

**Rachel Bush** grew up in Hawera and now lives in Nelson. Her first work appeared in student publications, and then in Faber's Introduction series. In the 1990s she began to write poetry more than prose. She has been published in many New Zealand journals such as *Sport, Landfall, The Listener, Takahe* and in electronic journals like *Turbine* and *4th Floor*. Her work has appeared in various anthologies, including *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature*. Her most recent book, *Nice Pretty Things and others* (Victoria University Press, 2011), consists of poems and short prose pieces.

### Oliver Comins

**Oliver Comins** lives and works in West London. He has 5 children. Early work collected in a Mandeville Press pamphlet and *Anvil New Poets Two*. More recently, poems have appeared in various UK-based magazines including *The Echo Room, The Rialto, Warwick Review* and *Yellow Nib*.

### Krishan Coupland

**Krishan Coupland** lives in Norwich, and studies Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. His writing has appeared in *Voiceworks, Aesthetica, Ambit* and *Fractured West*. He won the Manchester Fiction Prize in 2011, and in his spare time he edits a literary magazine.

### Morgan Downie

**Morgan Downie** is an unreliable narrator with a deep mistrust of artists' statements. He believes in the notion that at least one out of every six statements should be wilfully untrue. His is a chequered past involving poetry, short story writing, visual, installation and textile art, book making, sculpture and all points inbetween. He has been widely anthologised for both short story and poetry. Until recently his artwork could only be bought on the island of Fårö. It is this connection that prompted his long worked upon secret history of Ingmar Bergman. When asked where he comes from he describes a place he knows as the mythic archipelago of Scotia. Morgan Downie is an island man. He loves the bicycle and everything associated with it. He believes that all art may be contained in a single decent bike ride. Morgan Downie has always been on the road to Meikle Seggie.

### Dominique Hecq

**Dominique Hecq** is a Belgian-born writer who writes in English and sometimes translates herself, or fellow writers, in other languages. She was awarded the inaugural AALITRA prize for translation of poetry from Spanish into English. Her collection *Stretchmarks of Sun* is fresh off Re.press.



### Suzanne Herschell

**Suzanne Herschell**, originally a teacher of accelerate students, is a poet and artist and sometimes combines the two. Her poems have been published in NZ Poetry Society's *A Fine Line*, the international *Ghazal Page* and a local anthology. She won and also judged the Nelson Poetry Day prize. Suzanne is an Artist Member of the NZ Academy of Fine Arts and former arts administrator with a history of involvement in group, solo, selected and invited exhibitions with work held in collections internationally. She has been both the recipient of art awards for contemporary painting and a selector and judge. Working in all media Suzanne conducts a continuing conversation via image and word about land connections and identity in Aotearoa.

### Hilaire

**Hilaire** grew up in Melbourne but moved to London half a lifetime ago. She has had short stories and poetry published in several anthologies and various magazines, including *Magma*, *Brand*, *Brittle Star*, *Wet Ink*, *Parallax*, *Under the Radar* and *Smoke: A London Peculiar*. *Triptych Poets: Issue One* (Blemish Books, Australia, 2010) features a selection of her poems. Her novel *Hearts on Ice* was published by Serpent's Tail in 2000. She is currently working on a joint poetry collection with Joolz Sparkes, *London Undercurrents*, unearthing the voices of feisty and resilient women who have lived and worked in the capital over many centuries.

### Keith Hutson

**Keith Hutson** is a hill farmer in West Yorkshire. His poems have appeared in several journals, and he has work forthcoming in *The North*. He has been commissioned by The Prince's Trust to deliver poetry and performance workshops in Calderdale. He coaches boxing too.

### Raphael Kabo

**Raphael Kabo** is a performer, writer, and reader of poetry, an author of short stories, a traveller, a wordsmith, a slam poet, a web designer and itinerant coder, a collector of mental paraphernalia, a maker of zines, an incubator of brain eggs, a very good cook, a rubbish actor, a passable playwright, a writer of love letters to cities, an excellent editor, and an ardent believer in the power of Shakespeare to cure all ills. Kabo has lived in Australia for twenty-one years and in the UK for one, and will be living in Canberra in 2015.

### Elizabeth Morton

**Elizabeth Morton** is a poet and student from Auckland. In her free time she collects obscure words in supermarket bags. She has been published in *Poetry NZ*, *Takahe Magazine*, *JAAM*, *Debris* and *Blackmail Press*.

### **Sarah Penwarden**

**Sarah Penwarden** currently lives in Auckland, on the west side, with lots of trees and rain. She works as a counselor educator. She has had poems published in *Poetry New Zealand*, poems and short stories published in *Takahe*, short stories published in *The School Journal*, and a short story broadcast on Radio New Zealand.

### **Carol Reid**

**Carol Reid** lives in British Columbia, Canada. Her most recent project is a collection of micro fiction illustrated by west coast artist Wendy Brown.

