MENISCUS

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Editor:	Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton
Consulting editors:	Jen Webb and Deb Wain
Designer:	Shane Strange
Image:	Yee I-Lann, 2021, *Pangkis*, a single channel video of performers from the Tagaps Dance Theatre wearing the woven sculpture, '7 Headed Lalandau Hat'. All images courtesy of John Curtin Gallery. Photography by Huntwo Studio.

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

This issue of *Meniscus* is full of variety, with contributions probing issues connected to identity, perception, intertextuality, travel, ethnicity, interpersonal relations, language, authoritarianism, power, writing, the pandemic and much more besides. From our perspectives as editors, it is a satisfying issue because it makes a significant contribution to the complex discussions all societies need after two years of COVID-19—which have challenged many individuals and institutions, including governments. Such discussions include perspectives on how people choose to live and the ethical and moral dimensions of human conduct, and various pieces in this issue relate to such issues

We are also delighted that Danielle O'Leary and Rachel Robertson of Curtin University were able to contribute the ekphrastic supplement, Curious Threads: Creative Writers Respond to IOTA21 to this issue. It is always fascinating to read how writers respond to works of visual art and other ekphrastic stimuli at a time when ekphrasis is an important component of so much creative writing and interart connectivity.

Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton

For the *Meniscus* Editors

PEACH, WINE, RAIN

Stephanie Green

It wasn't merely that he was eating a peach but that he carved it with the delicacy of a butcher preparing a feast, the skin drawn back, thumb pressed to the blade of the knife, equatorial cut lines drawn before the circumference incision, then a gentle twist as flesh gave way from seed. Their tables were too close to avoid an initial comedy of errors. The scrape of a wooden chair caught at an angle, a parallel flash of eyes, the regretful bumping of the waiter's hips as bent to pour the wine. Sideways, she watched him devour the white fruit. He was in no hurry, paring slice after slice. His lips were wet, she noticed, relieved he had no beard, since he paid no heed to how the peach juice ran over his chin, collecting gradually at the bottom of the shallow plate. Eventually he lifted the damask napkin, drying his fingers before taking a last swallow from the glass. Afterwards, she would like to have picked up the plate and poured the juice over the rim into her mouth or run her finger around the crescent stain left by a slip of wine. For a moment, she thought she could follow him, somewhere, out of the restaurant, along the narrow street and into another life. But something stopped her, brought her back. It might have been the food arriving at her table, or people gathering under the eaves outside and laughing at being caught in a sudden shower of rain.

WET

Stephanie Green

Skin slip, face sparkled, lip tangled, open, drinking sky, dissolving edges, moistening and loosing everything that keeps you contained. Pause. In the lane, warm ebbs to wind, cold shivers, neon brightness at last muted, fading the shadows, shirt splattered, cuffs clinging, reach for refuge, for what holds you together, coat, hood, ledge, umbrella, words. Pause. Sounds of rushing, foot-clattering, tin roof battered, wheels whoosh, splash, quiet, until the lights change. Wet again. Pause. Water running, feet splash soaked, squelching, long hair wet whipped, arms reaching, grass heeled, sky embraced, warmth and skin melting, running to earth, to cloud song, sky pouring and singing through trees, becoming soft, becoming, light, together.

THE BOOKCASE

Ruth Brandt

Kat asks a neighbour to help her over the threshold with her bookcase. The neighbour wants to take the books out, pile them up. We'll put them straight back in, he says. It'll make the bookcase lighter.

Kat says the books have to stay, for now. It's only a little lift, just up and over the doorsill. That's all she needs help with.

You going to read in the garden? the neighbour pants.

Nah, Kat says.

Once the bookcase is outside, Kat says thanks. She couldn't have done without him. He hangs around, advising her to order the books alphabetically by author. Works for him, he says. So much better than this randomness. Eventually he leaves.

The bookcase slides readily enough along the path, but as Kat tugs it past her gate *The Brothers Karamazov* tips onto the pavement. When she bends to pick it up, *Pride and Prejudice* whacks her on her head. The pristine birthday present she hadn't wanted to spoil by reading now has a snubbed corner. She rubs her crown and leaves it and *The Brothers* behind.

Pushing is easier on the hands than pulling and Kat powers on down her street. Need help? somebody asks. She's negotiating a tree root, so doesn't bother to answer. And there goes a Murakami.

Round the corner onto the High Street.

Hey, watch it!

She's a little puffed now and certainly not fussed about watching it or not. Her foot slips on *The Lady with the Little Dog and Other Stories*. A page rips out and scuttles away on the breeze into the snare of a shop

door. Kat wonders about reuniting the page with its book, but there's something tragically romantic about the separation, so she leaves it.

By the time she reaches the *You're Leaving Town* sign, there's no weight to the bookcase and Kat thinks she might carry it, Atlas-like, all the way to the next *Welcome To* sign. Only three books remain on the shelves. She's tempted to read their titles and seek meaning from them, divine the future, but she's a bit thirsty and ever so tired. So instead, she takes a thumbs-up selfie with her bookcase and the *Leaving Town* sign, and she WhatsApps it to her neighbour saying, *Hey, see where I got to. Thanks for your help*. And then she WhatsApps it to D, figuring he can take a good long look at the bookcase, if he's interested enough in figuring out the situation.

CAVIAR OUTLOOK

After Anna McDonald

Denise Thwaites

You begin with an invitation, an
    Outlook meeting request.
Regulation in format, nestled among
 dozing windows, flickering and tiled.
You pray this one is faulty
                with glitches that resurface between laptops and phones.

You open it around sunset, commuters sitting poised
  as marbles to scatter.
And just before they leave, you compose an urgent call to
                abandon all plans
annexing colleagues' time in burgundy.

The next morning you head to a delicatessen
     to purchase lumpfish caviar
in an azure metallic case
like a vintage compact.
Perhaps you've seen it on Nigellissima
or another titillating TV spoon.

And you sit somewhere alone
ignoring your team's calls
            while they wait
bursting salty pearls with your tongue.

And you repeat this, every so often,
so that no one can forget
the many tiny ways

we are robbed.

HOARDING

After Audre Lorde

Denise Thwaites

Moving through people
I hoard pheromones like sweets
burying my thoughts
while I wear people like shoes
in white cubes with lights singing.

I move through people
too quickly
to be hurt by bland tastes.
I crack
in white cubes with lights that hum
I hide
still peeking
at the people I have hoarded
through thirst.

I resist
their instant departures
odours left behind on floor sheets
imprinted
yet mostly forgotten.

I drench tomorrow in oils
blurring edges of words that
were almost said.
Not thoughts
but only ticks

that cost me
like gift-cards unspent.

Moving through people
nauseated by my thoughts
I hoard without stopping
what I stow
away
but smile
and keep
our sold paintings on the wall.

MIDWIVES DAY

Julie U'Ren

I'm standing in the queue on the path, waiting for my coffee. A woman turns around, catches my eye and smiles. She looks familiar somehow and I nod.

Do I know you?

She slides her sunnies up her forehead and squints in the bright morning light.

It's Danny, right? I was the midwife at your baby's birth, a few years back.

Yes, of course, Holly was born the night of that September storm.

It was such a wild night. How are they, your little girl, Holly and your wife?

I recall how young I thought the midwife had looked. She slid into the room, the air barely moving around her as she unpacked her equipment and placed it on the dining table. Lyn was standing, holding onto me, hollering in my ear. The midwife squatted, placed a hand on Lyn's tight belly, and softy told her she would listen to the baby's heartbeat.

Holly's almost seven now, growing into a full-blown person who knows what she wants and can argue about anything under the sun!

We both chuckle. *Cleo!* The barista calls and the midwife steps up for her coffee. She turns to me before she leaves, I notice her face is lined, and she looks a lot older than I remembered. Then I realise I look pretty worn down myself, since Holly's birth. She smiles again.

Nice to see you, Danny.

I remember her arriving at our house late in the afternoon, the day of the storm. It was already dark. A couple of trees had blown over and water pooled in the backyard. Powerlines had come down in our suburb, everything was quiet in the street. I carried a torch with me from room to room checking the windows for leaks. Cleo was never far away, watching Lyn and speaking quietly with her. At one stage I was in my jocks in the shower with Lyn.

I crashed and slept a bit as Lyn laboured, pacing in the lounge room. I woke to hear her bellowing. It was something primal, like I'd never heard before. She looked exhausted, her eyes were closed, and I thought she was drifting off. Then she looked right at me, wild and beautiful. An hour later Holly was born. She came out face up, not the easiest way to come apparently. The midwife passed the baby to Lyn's open arms. I remember how the air zapped with the baby in the room. Our voices changed as we spoke to her softly, welcoming her. I sobbed. I can't remember ever crying like that, my shoulders shook as I blubbered.

I didn't have time to tell Cleo, the midwife that Lyn and I didn't stick it out. Holly moves between both our houses each week, and we try our best to make it work. Someone is tapping me on the shoulder.

Hey mate, is that your order? They're calling you.

I stumble forward red-eyed and take my coffee.

HABIT

Damen O'Brien

Love is a habit, hard to break
and I am not doing well with your absence.
I look for you in all the usual places,
my mind skittering over its familiar patterns
like the abandoned tail of a skink
played out by a cat.
Odd involuntary times: I talk to you in the bathroom
but you aren't where you would normally be,
perched on the side of the bathtub
waiting for me to stop my inane attempts at self-care
and feed you already.
Death follows me around this house,
waiting at the door until I open it,
my hands full of groceries
to tangle my legs,
like a second thought,
like you followed me around the house
sniffing the furniture,
rubbing against the walls.
Death is much in my thoughts
but I do not notice it there
until I catch the tail of you
disappearing around a corner.
But of course, it is some shadow of expectation,
an earnest shaft of light, incantation out of habit.
But of course, it is not death
that follows me from room to room

waiting to be fed.
It is the habit of your life,
that I am breaking, but have not broken.

THE GARDEN

Mike Ladd

Nest of light and shadow
made from our best intentions and chance

the garden
draws and redraws what we felt
but didn't know was inside us.

If the sun is a happy accident, then so are we,
and this place where our time accumulated
gives us its uniquely dappled *now*.

Look, a finger of green surprise has pushed up
through earth crumbs here—
What could never be foreseen beckons us
to the hidden part of the garden,
which we made, as it made us.

THE FRANGIPANI COLLECTOR

Mike Ladd

He reaches up with a cleft bamboo rod.
A flick of the wrist,
and down tumbles
a flake of cream and yellow,
a five-petalled spiral
drawing the eye
into its axial zero.

His little propellers of perfume
will decorate the tables and bed-sheets
of tourists, then be swept
into the bin.
Does he think while collecting,
"Was this why we fought for independence?
to be their servants again?"

Every job has its mastery;
if he twists the rod just so
each bloom drops down like Bali snow.
Unbruised, untorn,
perfectly folded whiteness.
If not, it sticks in the cleft
and doubles his work.

A wedding or a feast
is a long morning,
is hours of his life

evaporating in the scented heat.
He shoulders his rod,
this fisherman in shallow skies,
a presence lingering long after he's gone.

BOPPLE NUTS AT CHRISTMAS

Steve Milroy

In the headache heat
She sits on the long stair behind the house
Smelling of summer.

Droplets bead on the bottle beside her.
Thunder somewhere. Too far away.

She cracks bopple nuts.
That's what they always called them.

Turn the handle till the shell cracks,
Then a bit more.
Lever the halves apart.

Drop the nut in the tin,
Knock the shell through the steps.

Chickens scratch beneath the lemon tree.
Thunder again.
She can hear the kids down the creek.

She looks inside a nut shell:
Burgundy,
Cream,
And the oily sheen.

Strange;
You can't see it till it's broken.

Perhaps she will take the kids south.

A BAG OF PINWHEEL BISCUITS

Isi Unikowski

The local cakeshops were not *ethnic* enough for us
with their Neenish tarts, glutinous lemon tartlets,
the precise demarcations of vanilla slices and layer cakes,
lamingtons stacked like miniature railway sleepers,
lascivious eclairs and cream buns,
glace cherries, sugared flowers and pearls
and rows of pink and green meringues arrayed on glass shelves,
slightly puzzling tokens of passage between
that world and ours.

But there was a little shop where, sometimes,
on the way home from Sunday School, we'd stop to buy
a paper bag's worth of chocolate pinwheel biscuits,
their warmth leaving a dark slick on the paper.
And then there was my grandmother's famous *lekach*,
an almond flour cake that had to wait for my pronouncement
when, to everyone's jovial expectation,
I would be invited not to taste, but to hold
a slice close to my ear and squeeze;
reporting on the satisfactory hiss, like a receding wave,
of ingredients settling in amicable proportion,
their sheen on my fingers lifted to my ears, with every slight press
hearing 'this is how it was,
and then this, and then this …'

learning that taste alone
makes a poor judge of risen things:
sometimes sliced too thickly,
sometimes with burned edges,

or sometimes, like the tiny centre of a chocolate swirl
pressed out onto a plate,
left to grow hard and dry.

A SHORT HISTORY OF WRITING

Isi Unikowski

In the morning, I went out with the officials.
We kept our characters thick and clear
adopting the peremptory voice
so that every citizen in the villages and towns we came to
could understand the rules.
Our decrees were affixed to mileposts
and tavern walls, edicts at eye level.
Truly 'top down', as they say.
With a seal embossed with the sign for fire,
nobody could fail to understand the consequences
of disobedience.

In the afternoon, I sat with the scholars.
We sought beauty for our calligraphy.
It merged and overlapped, eddied and meandered
adopting a melodious voice
for this scroll as it draped across our knees,
unrolled across courtyards and town squares.
People hurried past on their errands,
occasionally stopping to lift a corner.
After much bickering, the seal was imprinted
with the sign for air,
so everyone would understand it was impossible
to divide the scroll into parts.

In the evening, rain dissolved my paper.
My resolution weakened by the twilight,

I was beset by doubts about whether I had anything to say,
what voice was left for me to say it in,
who would stand in the downpour to read it?
My brushes were dishevelled, and as the characters ran and blotted,
they ended up making words I hadn't intended.
I have no seal, but I stamped the fragments anyway,
with the sign for earth, as if to say:
Here. This, too, has its place.

RELATIVE HARMONY

Eleanor Whitworth

My dear friend has motor neurone disease. I'm sure he doesn't consider me a daughter, he already has three. But I consider him a father. My third father. The first: an intermittent presence since he departed six months after my birth. The second: solid, difficult at times, died when I was in my final year of high school. This one: consistent, supportive. He's the type of person who can successfully launch you into the next phase of life.

I fly down from Sydney to visit. On the couch, he looks relaxed and smiles, a set of teeth like David Bowie's first ones. He stands, and using furniture for balance, makes his way over to me. His house is set on top of a hill and the view through the wall-to-ceiling windows is stunning in its breadth; a roll of hills obscures the horizon, hot blue curves above. 'I'll take you for a stroll,' he says, his speech slurred, the nerve cells already failing. At the door, he unfolds a walker and pushes it out onto the dirt, pausing at a small pond to show me the frothy frog spawn that floats by the edge of a lily leaf. The wheels of his walker crunch on the Castlemaine gravel and he looks down and says with a grin, 'A friend lent me this frame. I'll be giving it back a little dusted up.'

We walk a short way across the gentle slope. We take time, go carefully. He points to the immature apple trees and tells me how they've put the guards back up around them because the kangaroos can still eat them back to stumps. We talk about a recent theory—part science part philosophy—exploring the origins of life. We wonder whether information in and of itself could be causal for the creation of a physical system. Is this a revolution in our understanding of reality, like general relativity and quantum mechanics? Did we invent the Internet, or did it invent itself? 'I welcome a relational way of viewing the world,' he says.

On the way back up the hill, I ask, 'And how are you?' We stop, stand still and close. Tears spill from his eyes and then mine. 'This disease,' he says, 'it affects the surface expression of emotion, but underneath, I am, fine.' Later, I read that a symptom of his illness can be excessive laughing or crying. There is nothing excessive about this exchange. It is quiet and gentle. An inevitable acknowledgement.

Back in the house, he sits me down at his keyboard. Just as I am warming up, going where the harmonies take me, I stop because my hands are shaking. 'It's very close to a real piano,' I say. 'The algorithm that controls the decay is convincingly realistic,' he replies, pressing a note so we can listen to the drop-off. He puts a piece of paper on the stand, draws a circle then carves it up into seven sections and, interspersed with playing the blues, writes a ring of diatonic chords. I was schooled to read the chromatic scale across the page. This diatonic basis of western harmony is somehow new to me. He talks about pushing beyond 7 and 8 notes, to think of 9 and 10 and 11, and in doing so, he curves my horizontal keyboard into a circle.

When we return to the lounge, the sky is all cloud. Rain falls, surprisingly heavy. He points through it and says, 'There are stone arrangements on that mountain, built by the Dja Dja Wurrung. Finally, people are acknowledging how extraordinary they are.' We watch the way the water runs around the house and down the hill; they are still working on the drainage contours. The rain rouses the frogs, making him smile. 'Another thing about my situation is that sound is heightened. Frogs conversing, the wind, all of it, just beautiful.'

We eat three meals together. Over the last, he tells me how a specialist estimated when his illness took hold, and gave the prognosis: 'you have months.' He went to another specialist who gave the same prognosis. But more months. We hold each other. I leave, bracing for this next phase, unsure when I will return, and in an effort to find structure, I write. I write something in the shape of the circle of fifths: seven paragraphs each with eight sentences. Searching, for harmony upon harmony.

VERNACULAR

Gregory Dally

It's as if the guy has music running through him;
as though, y'know, the rhythm of his iambs

loaned out lip smacks to his kisser and then
the skill called 'Thinking naturally'

embraced him. He keeps flinching. Similes like, oh,
like the smile which can't define the one he loves

have left him grinning;
apparently content, and yet still left.

For some reason, he mouths a falling inflection
all over the syllable 'grow.' As he studies

the flush on a leaf, the guy can't recall
any nouns for this tincture other than 'rust.'

There aren't synonyms at present. It's impossible
to summon alt-hues fit to represent it.

And you? Next to his cringe, you too
find yourself cut free of that tassel, a name.

Some articles are so indefinite
that they evade all attempts

to give them meaning.
Nixed, he takes his shadow and recedes.

In his sentences, commas are audible.
They appeal to you just like a row of suitors.

The most rugged of these claws your ears.
He's keen to make the real figurative.

Your effort to decode him
requires you to stoop. More's the chagrin,

it calls for the squint
of a curator gone tipsy, at ransom to giggles.

THE SEVEN STAGES OF MY MIGRATION

Maryana Garcia

I. Idolisation

Slide comic books from their original plastic sleeves. See caped heroes flip weightless across a two-page, neon-panelled sky. Think Dad and Superman have the same haircut. Think over there they are invincible. Think the thrill of soaring super, sure of step and springboard, strident in our landing. Forget the fear of falling. That could be me if I were somewhere else.

II. Remembrance

Pull keys from felt pouches. Take old books from behind stained glass, read them aloud in Tiffany light, faerie stories typewriter punched on the brink of some old war. Use your fingers to map deltas and highlands the termites ate into our encyclopedia. Try to memorise them. There's not enough room in our suitcases for these histories.

III. Vision

Sit in the back of a flat-bed truck bumping down a dirt road, a tangle of kids with bony knees. Pass around sticky lychee, and spit the seeds into blurred grass. Hope you will return to see thick forests growing in the berm.

IV. Longing

Light bonfires on battered concrete. Find the right fuel. Toss in old magazines, and watch the flames burn rainbow. Listen to sugar sizzle, and sparks crackle on contact with the night. Learn how, at the right temperature, everything burns.

V. Familiarity

Hold hands. Ride bus route 8 to the end of the line and back. Memorise all the stops. Unpick the habit of locking all car doors from the inside. Negotiate with the senior students for using the microwave because rice should not be eaten cold. Then come home to the familiar smell of garlic cooking in everything.

VI. Saturation

Hear love echo in the front door unbolting at 3 a.m., in this week's deal with the butcher (babysitting bartered for a pig's head and chicken frames), in the crisp swish of a new school uniform. Spin, arms extended, through the open field next door.

VII. Acceptance

Understand the sharpness of shattered ceilings. Know the true burden of the sky is only equivalent to its clarity. Reply, 'Let me carry this weight for a while. It's my turn now.'

A DOG FOR COMPANY

Karen Lethlean

Mary couldn't help it. Impossible to ignore those floppy ears, dark eyes and puppy jowls. One individual among so many furry caterpillar creatures who snuffled up to their mother's 'milk-tray', pushing and tugging at her teats. Later when one began nibbling her fingers Mary felt a fierce ownership urge.

Named him Deefa—D-fa-dog. She felt sure her husband Jack also desired a farm dog.

She remembered their romance, a time when they wandered along silken beach sand. And held her hand out to scoop up setting sun auras appearing burnt into shallows. Skipping through memories to revisit an initial opening of the home paddock gate. Even then dusk stuck to horizon edges and settled behind a Ute pinging while it rested.

Mary enjoyed the growing dog by allocating it future roles. A guard dog for security when Jack was away. Lately there had been frequent absences, to help a rebuild a fire ravaged shed, plough paddocks for an injured neighbour, or cooperatively wade through paperwork to access drought assistance packages. Sometimes Jack left her alone, gone for days on end.

'... a man has to fight to get ahead ... one time when I need help, they will say, what about when time you didn't ...' were parts of retorts when Mary tried to ask Jack to stay on their farm. So Mary bit down those words, for the most part. She tried to keep busy, always plenty to do.

Mary wistfully thought about Deefa as being an excuse for twilight walks up into their farm's uncleared paddocks. Telling the dog about rabbits, sunsets, lizards, hard kangaroo's droppings and dried remains of once prolific wild flowers. In her mind Deefa responded to her words,

making conversation with a mere tilt of his head or soft whine. She didn't need to tell Jack about these ambles.

Before too long Deefa trotted everywhere right beside her. Mary held empty fingers before her thin waist, to contemplate how few worldly goods were hers alone. Beyond these wrinkled digits she saw only dry cracked earth collected in her life lines well before day's end. She breathed in a lack of rain. But couldn't help be mesmerised by fallen seed pods nestled at the base of grass trees, orange, bevelled, testicular.

Dry, harsh summers, a season which brought more dust in from the west, on frequent high winds. Paddocks already burnt to a crisp, with grass brown or earth bare even along creek banks. Any water marshy, black mud now turned to grey everywhere she looked. Constant worry about a lack of moisture made everyone crankier than usual. Amplified by unceasing motorised drone of insects.

Blissfully unaware, Deefa responded with lolling tongue and wagging tail to demonstrate unconditional acceptance. His water bowl was always full, occasionally an ice block floated, at least for a few minutes.

Mary even tolerated Deefa's incessant gnawing.

'Needs to keep a healthy jaw and teeth,' her defence when Jack made a disparaging comment.

'Getting rid of his puppy teeth,' her next justification. But Deefa now beyond an age, so this explanation already past its use-by date.

Jack, anxious and not able to embody these same forgiving attitudes, announced, 'Bloody thing has to go. Damn dog gnaws everything not able to move away.'

Mary knew any reaction to this ultimatum would be counterproductive so she kept a lid on her emotions. Last thing which '... had to go ...' a juice extractor—still got dragged out from hidey hole under the sink. Mary enjoyed a mechanical buzz as fruit pulped. Rescued from a barely surviving, scrawny pear tree. Green globes often blown off, victims of

ferocious winds, to lie about on the ground, rotting and wasted. She couldn't bear to contribute to further wastage.

One drowsy afternoon a lightening crack, followed by Deefa's hysterical barking, dispersed by piercing howls brought Mary rushing. Chickens flapped out of her way like a poultry parting of biblical waters.

'What are you doing?' She screeched at a sideways canine look of confusion.

Looking up she couldn't argue with the ferocity of thick smoke that now drifted in from uncleared paddocks previously part of her and Deefa's innocent explorations.

'Where is Jack?' she asked a now spinning dog.

She remembered he talked about dealing with several tubes of gourmet gum trees, 'today, I'll get them planted.' Yes, he intended to plant trees outside home paddocks. He'd been preparing ground along fence lines. Out there while a dinner congealed, trying to beat holes into dry earth. Still hammering no matter how often Mary told him to come in and eat. Later, away from her nagging, he'd saunter up to the house, stains from sweat around his neck, under his arms, his brow heavy.

'Worth it, Mary, we'll be rolling in it soon.'

Jack's mind projected in a short time these tiny trees grown to harvestable timbers. Then local artisans, would form an unruly queue, fingering dusty notes.

Mary doubted seedlings might ever make it into earth anyway, much less be grown to be an income-netting maturity. Be in his shed with a dismembered vintage motorcycle he found in Callow's yard and promised to fix up for Ted. Happen sometime next decade, Mary thought. All those bits and pieces are keeping company with bales of seeds for various innovative crops and mulch starter supposed to improve soil microbes. Things only collected dust in his shed. Sometimes Mary wondered if archaeologists as they dug up this farm, in some future

government funded exploration, might marvel at an array of perfectly preserved specimens from under corroded roof remains.

Now a fire to crush a potential leg up out of their constant scrounges for cash. Going back to those long-haired, leaf weaving hippy artists to tell them, 'fire ball sprung up, very day I set aside to plant those trees.' Example of perfect timing, capable of keeping them giggling into their wacky-tobacco for weeks.

While Deefa cowered in dust, Mary tried to decide what to do.

Before dark, before a wind change brought flames close to the house, before she filled down pipes and opened tank valves, Deefa disappeared. Last seen heading off uphill. Tail between his legs, howling worse than ever.

When her husband finally emerged from ash-swallowed distances, Mary was already more agitated than she thought possible.

'You seen Deefa?'

Jack began blubbering excuses. 'Animal run off ... can't be trusted ... dog didn't know a good thing ...' Yet he couldn't seem to make eye contact. And before long dead animal smells wafted in on late afternoon breeze, right from upper paddock's scrubby edges.

'A dead roo,' Jack said, his eyes locked on a growing cobweb, now dangling a strand of dust from cornices.

Mary's reaction was instantaneous. She lunged at him, 'He tried to warn you ...' She cursed and lashed out at Jack's defiant jaw. Misplaced, hysterical, largely off target, or ineffectual. Soon enough she went outside and kicked up dust. Eventually vomited into unsympathetic dirt. Jack's attempts to placate her were wildly rejected. Well past time for dinner preparation Mary sat on dirtied back steps, racked with sobs, utterly inconsolable. Everyone kept their distance, hopeful this storm, like a small brush fire, might pass quickly. But she still sat there alone, dry retching at intervals, still sobbing well after dark. No one ate a hot meal dinner. Instead, some crackers, cheese and cold boiled eggs were

found and distributed amongst those who'd rushed to help. Yet none of them complained, not even at a mumble.

By moon-rise real damage emerged. Mary embraced a bitterness, toward her husband and farm life without a canine companion. She nourished this darkness and felt it grow even as the child she carried slipped away. Jack needed to deal with blood dribbled from places he didn't care to think about. Eventually he loaded his still sniffling wife into the car with an old towel between her legs and sped through darkness, while headlights cut a swath over low-slung blackened pastures.

'I am sorry love. I had no idea … why didn't you say … Getting yourself so worked up just over a dog. I am so sorry ….'

Jack kept up a mantra and hoped at some stage Mary might actually hear.

With his wife admitted to hospital Jack sheltered in a dusty motel, where an air conditioning unit rattled and squeaked through the night. Just as light soaked through early hours, still heavy with burnt, dead animal scents, opening and closing car doors as other guests took leave woke him.

With the farm out of sight, Mary tried to process things. Poor dead Deefa, and a lost baby. Best to push out everything from her mind. Sounds of road trains, finally permitted through road closures, with lights arching across the hospital ward's ceiling in a parade of movement somehow comforted. Mary promised herself an escape from this lonely life she'd so wrongly thought of as rural utopia. If those trucks were going somewhere, so could she. And not just sucked deeper into the now ash-ridden home paddock's dust.

When she'd met Jack, beach sand between her toes, strong gritty grains, air salty, and listened to him talk about farm's wide open horizons, she'd been excited by his ability to capture a sense of breathing in gasps of clean, dry air. And how good healthy earth might be turned with toil. So rich and moisture laden, Mary imagined much more.

When new day eventually tumbled into town Mary made her vow, unperturbed by the haze of solitude now encasing her hospital bed. As if through an open window she heard high squeaks and a wind chime noise of small birds. Then whirrs of a large dove exploding out of low shrubs. Lifting up on one hip, she watched pink and grey galahs wheeling across nearby dry, seedless paddocks, in some sort of purposeless frenzied air-current dance. Mary promised to leave; nothing and nobody would stop her.

Sickened and weakened by the miscarriage, and loss of her companion, Mary lay watching bird life focus and retreat, and envied them, even if their rasped, hungry song smarted and confirmed her conviction to leave. Disjointedly she tried to consider options, but soon realised, there was nowhere to go. Like most women who lived on the district's farms, she couldn't even drive a car. In abdicating this right to their menfolk, wives colluded in their own immobility and isolation. She had no money of her own, nor did her husband. Bank and rural agents held strangleholds on all their funds. Even if they had a good harvest it might be several years before they actually viewed any cash—more likely to be only be numbers in an account's pass book, not crisp foldable notes. If she could feel such notes, smell the new-book aroma, crinkle their paper plastic surface, look on famous faces depicted, Mary might enact her departure.

No family near enough to help; her parents were taking advantage of New Zealand's set pensions. And anyway, running home to her mum would probably bring about a 'You made your bed, now you have to lay in it …' cold shoulder reaction.

'Till death do we part?' She reflected bitterly, but the death of what? In one dark afternoon, a pet and a child, trees and more water than could be spared were taken. Probably fences, sheds and random machinery too. Never to return. Lying in a blur of senseless pain, Mary again promised one day, for her, to find an after-farm life.

No words made sense of her outrage, as Mary listened to instructions to return home after a few scant hours.

'Not good reclined, taking up a hospital bed, wallowing in all this.' Said a short, white-coated man, wearing a stethoscope like a badge of rank. The only other thing Mary remembered were hairs sprouting from under his nose. 'Where flies go in winter, you can see their legs hanging down ...' her father always said.

She simply couldn't deal with this elemental act. Irrevocable fire worked to forge more emptiness. A house still stood but their farm, now burnt beyond recognition, did not curb vehemence at prospects of enduring a depressing, hot drive back out of town. She couldn't even conjure up a slither of energy required to open those gates. But here she was, trapped by dust, ash and smoke, still rasped in back of her throat, making it difficult to breathe. Her arms felt leaden, coursed with heat. Impotence and rage were tearing at her very flesh. She'd already forgotten Deefa's yeasty breath next to her cheek as they followed a skink trying to escape ant tormentors. Purged from her brain elation at first seeing Jack's cabin sheltered by a few scraggy fruit trees. Gone, too, the dampness settled on those early morning beach trails, where they'd first kissed under dripping palms.

Luckily the nursing staff understood human company was not high on Mary's priority list, and left her to hover in various stages of sleep.

No one saw Jack as he walked an empty corridor; neither did he do anything to draw attention to himself. He still scratched at dirt even after too long, more than enough soap and hot water in the motel's tiny bathroom. It was going to take more than a few cold beers to negate the sight of his toe pushing at a black patch of mould where two shower tiles met, while soap laden water ran down drainways. Not to mention the sight of his wife's miscarriage, or efforts to rescue a yelping dog running out of far too close flames Jack had failed to notice.

Most of the night he'd tossed about, dwelling on yesterday's losses. He tried to separate dramas. Recalled how he'd been head down working, ignorant of dangers. Yet everything remained knitted and irrevocably linked. Would she have lost the child, if he'd been paying attention? No solution to this dilemma, so Jack decided it all didn't bear any more thinking about. Anyway, what was done, was done. Past was past, gone was gone. Couldn't make dead things alive. Best thing you could hope for was to plant a new crop.

Jack stood by Mary's bed, forlorn. As tears welled and threatened to spill from his reddened eyelids.

Through her pain she saw roses, smelt their heady fragrance, and knew without saying he'd taken them from church-yard bushes.

During this sleepless night Jack too made a pledge he meant to keep, so he told his wife, 'We'll take a holiday, on the coast, love, soon as you are well, I swear.'

As Mary let her head sink into a thin pillow. Let oceanic murmuring rock her, same as a long history of family holidays. So close; just there, behind her half-closed eyes. Also glimmers of a dusty kelpie, same colour as last night's spilt blood, now soaked into ash-coated dust. She held onto images of Deefa as he galloped, without fear, into surf.

ZORK'S MINDERS

Aidan Coleman

'We order our society in accordance with scientific principles, as you Earth People did during your Eighteenth Century, but with different principles because, due largely to faulty equipment, the knowledge underlining those principles was either vague or wrong. The main difference, as you can see, is that there's no need for clothes. Also, there is no God'. We had further questions but, before he could answer, Zork was ushered from the room.

LEFT

Emma Darragh

Here she is on the day she left. Framed by my bedroom window. Loading boxes into her car.

If you zoom in you'll see her red fingernails glinting against cardboard and masking tape. Her ponytail slips a little further down the side of her head with each trip she makes from car to kitchen. If you could rewind to the morning you'd see it on top of her head where it belongs. You'd see her lugging box after box after box with her name written in sharpie on each one: VIVIAN.

Dad doesn't help. He's in the backyard. He's going to drive us up the coast to Nan's when this is over. Not all of us—not Mum, obviously. Me and him. Nan's roasting a leg of lamb and there'll be ice cream with sprinkles for dessert. We'll stay for a couple of days and come back. We'll rearrange the furniture. That's what Dad says.

Watch her move. It's like her legs have grown longer, grown into big scissors in her grey jeans, cutting up the driveway. It's like a home video with the sound turned down and it's like the frames have been sped up just a little, like she's moving just a bit quicker than real time.

I can't stay still, can't stay in my room. But I can't just go out the back. I walk from room to room, thinking I'll sit on the couch or a kitchen chair or my bed for a while but I just keep getting up again.

I'm staying out of her way but every time she looks at me she pulls a small smile.

You look weird without your lipstick, I say the next time she comes in. We're in the kitchen. The boxes are nearly all gone. Her face freezes for a couple of seconds and then she does a laugh.

I know. And my eyes look tiny without mascara.

Yeah.

She presses her thumbs to her eyes. Makeup isn't always practical, though, she says.

She turns away, leans over one of the remaining boxes and pauses.

There she is, sitting behind the wheel of her car, staring at the house. The frames are slow now. Her hands are high on the steering wheel, her face is blurry.

PORTRAIT

Nick Mansfield

Thank you for the picture you sent,
But I don't believe it's really you.
I say that because the landscape behind you
Doesn't look real. It reminds me of a Chinese painting,
Where a horse is standing alone in a field near a bridge,
And a monk with his back turned is crossing a high hill.
The monk looks like he's about to break into dance,
Once he's out of sight and can see the mountains,
Which are hidden by the trees on top of the hill.
And there's a waterfall and a fisherman
Leaning out over the rocks and looking down.
If you follow the line of his gaze, it hits
The back of a girl carrying water from a pool.
The pool itself is obscured behind the rocks,
And her gaze is turned away from the scene.

The girl reminds me of the drawing you made of the woman I love.
You drew her as Penelope, the deserted wife, sewing patiently,
And then, unpicking the thread of days,
Besieged by oafs and charlatans,
Waiting for the one she truly loves, looking to the horizon
To see his sail, and disappointed year after year.
A straight line emerging from her eyes
Will intersect with my gaze at some perfectly measurable point.
We've been moving slowly towards this point all our lives,
And yet somehow it eludes us.

You and I should meet.
Something might come of it.
Because looking at the picture you sent,
Even though I know it isn't you,
I can tell there's something in the way you suffer,
Something that might put a stop to the way her image
Troubles itself inside my plying mind.

AND THAT'S THE OVER

Paul Mitchell

his life a highlight reel
of brochure-clogged letterboxes
infinite Victa mowers growling

through cricket coverage
and cracks in the pitch
of voices in his head

framing summer in a
hostile mood in Echuca
or wherever sunscreen bottles

stare through sightscreens
with night vision and pressure
builds up at one end

while strike rates crinkle
cut shots are difficult
from scattered packets

of bushy branches
spinning turnstiles
to walk to the crease

of his life where he thought
every leg slip a sign
to bat for the Americans

especially mid-westerners
over anyone in an Akubra
as a snub-nosed

glovesman drank beer
from a mower catcher
for collecting ghost nations

the innings of his life
contained that classic shot
he was trying to make

the day he saw a sparrow
get hit high and fall dead
onto a neighbour's cricket-free lawn

FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN

Mary Pomfret

First Date

He was sitting waiting for me outside the restaurant. His grey hair looked slightly bouffant, blow-waved even. I had only met him once before and he was taller and thinner than I remembered. Noel opened the restaurant door, and he didn't exactly bow and extend his arm for me to walk through, but it was as if he did. He had a sweeping way about him. Gallant. Was he? He pulled out my chair. I sat down opposite him at a table facing the window.

Trying to avoid his gaze, I stared out at the disused goldmine opposite. Noel bombed me with questions. Especially about my book. Why did I write it? Why did I think it wouldn't interest him? He had shown promise in English Literature when he was at high school, apparently. He was so talented that it got to the stage that his teacher didn't even read his work. He just got an automatic A. He read *The Bell Jar* when he was sixteen. He had also read the complete works of William Shakespeare in his early twenties and when he was twenty-four, he read the first three volumes of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Why? Because he was looking for something to read at the time. Lunch came to an end. *Would I like to go for a walk?* Yes, I certainly would. I had found 'the interview' exhausting. Where I grow up? What did my father do? Why did I leave home? What was the subject I taught? Yes, I would very much like to go for a walk through the old mining excavation. Anything to get away from this confronting eyeball to eyeball cross-examination.

Even though it was a mid-winter, the afternoon sun was shining outside. He guided me to the other side of the road without touching

me. Gallant again. Chivalrous even. We walked through the rock cutting and he told me everything I never wanted to know about rocks.

The only rock types in here are sandstones and shales—Ordovician turbidite sequences. Sandstones and shales are all tightly folded into anticlines and synclines and, faulted on the eastern limbs. The third thing to note is the predominance of shafts and mines—and therefore lines of reef—over or just east of the anticlines. This is local geology in a nutshell.

Oh, I see. Of course, I didn't see. I didn't see at all. We continued to walk. *I heard once that there was no gold if there was no quartz.*

Yes, that's correct. A relief. I had got something right. *In the goldrush days miners sunk shafts to follow the quartz underground and find gold at depth.*

We walked up the hill to the poppet head. Trying to be funny, I said, *It's a long way to top if you wanna rock 'n' roll. You know, like the song.* He beckoned to sit down on the park bench at the top of the hill. Suave. Was I supposed to think that? Or just thoughtful? Perhaps he thought I might have been tired after the climb. I wasn't. I sat at the edge of the bench. He stretched his arm along the back of the seat and edged a little closer to me. I couldn't move any more or I would fall off the bench. It was warm in the winter sun.

To change the subject, I told him I had a friend who was teaching me rock and roll. He was having rock and roll lessons too. Turns out we had a mutual friend. Noel jumped up. Yes, literally jumped up and held out his hand. How could I refuse? We danced for a minute or two at the top of the hill. His hands were dry, his skin the colour of sandstone.

The question *How long has your wife been dead?* tempted me. But no. It was none of my business. I would guess maybe about three years. Why I thought that I'm not sure. It just seemed to me long enough for man to grieve and to begin to want to find another partner. And three years seemed kind of right. But a widower. There was something even unattractive about the name. Widow had a better ring to it. Just as

bachelor sounds so much more glam than spinster. But a bachelor is a man who has never been married.

We walked back through the rock excavation into the park, leaving the poppet head and our attempt at dancing the rock 'n' roll behind us.

As I kissed him on the cheek to say goodbye he said, *One thing I'm very disappointed in today.*

Oh, what's that? For a moment I thought he was going to say that he thought I would be able to dance a better than I did. But no.

You didn't comment on my shirt.

His shirt. The collar was open but the rest of it was concealed by an olive-green jumper.

Your shirt? Yes, it's very nice. Cool in fact. Thanks for a great lunch. Bye now, Noel.

I felt relieved to be walking away from him. I would never have to see him again, my first date with a man other than my ex-husband in thirty years.

The Next Date

His face sort of crinkled when he smiled. Then I thought his smile made him look shy and boyish. Now with the great advantage of hindsight, I realise smiling made him look sly, fox-like even. When he called to pick me up for second date, he handed me a posy of fresh flowers he'd arranged into what appeared to me to be a vagina-shape.

From my garden, he announced.

I'm sure he hadn't intended the arrangement to resemble female genitalia. If anything, he was probably trying for a heart shape. He'd framed soft pink camelias with a with large dark-green leaves. My first thought was that he made two of these. One for me and one for his wife's grave. I imagined he had visited his wife's grave earlier in the day and explained to her how he had to move on. He couldn't bear the loneliness

any longer. He hoped she would understand. Three years—I thought it was most likely about three years since her death—was a long time after all. I had grieved my marriage for seven years. And seven years was a long time. I understood. I hoped his dead wife would understand too.

Same rules, he said. *I'll pay. You have whatever you like.* Chivalrous again.

He drank water again. I drank sparkling wine. The waitress dressed in black and with a blonde ponytail high on her head recognised him from a coffee shop he frequented. He seemed pleased about that.

Just what did we talk about? He must have asked me questions about myself like he did the last time. He had read my book. So maybe we talked about that. All I know is we didn't talk about him because I would have remembered. The writer in me failed to ask him questions. I learned nothing about him. He learned plenty about me. I do remember we didn't have dessert. We had coffee.

He walked me to my car. I kissed him on his cheek. I thought he looked delighted. His face crinkled up into that smile again and he said, *Thank you. That's the nicest company I have had in a long time.* I smiled back.

I'll be in touch, he said. I couldn't wait to get home and be me again.

The Date after the Second Date

The train pulled into the station. A temporary reprieve from the intensity of being with him in the close confines of a crowded train carriage on a Saturday afternoon. We walked through the city streets, across the bridge stretching over the Yarra. He stopped in his stride, and I stopped too.

I like to have a look around. He put his arm around my shoulder. We stood there for a moment and I followed his gaze down the river. I was unsure whether this was a romantic moment or a lesson in observation.

Was his arm around my shoulder to guide me or because he was being friendly? Whatever the case, it felt awkward in the extreme. I felt my back and my spirit stiffen.

Let's go. I fell in with his stride. He stopped again outside a restaurant. *Italian, okay?*

Dark and dimly lit. A young waiter showed us to a table. Noel leaned forward, passing me the drinks list. *Same rules,* he said. I ordered wine. He asked the waiter for water. The young man seemed to want to chat, speaking in broken Italian.

How long have you been in Australia? I asked him.

Six months ... I miss my parents .... It was difficult to understand his words, but it was clear to me what he was expressing. Homesickness. Sadness. Noel interrupted the young man's lamentations with a question about the menu. The young man took our order.

I must remind him of his mother. I smiled but my attempt at a joke didn't seem to work. Noel didn't smile back. His face had turned a deep red colour. Or was it black? I had obviously given the waiter too much time for Noel's liking. We finished our pizza and made our way to the recital hall. He had tickets for a world-famous classical guitar performance and I acted nonchalantly, as if I had seen many such classical performances before. Oh, so many. Nothing new for me.

Before the show began Noel explained to me how the recital hall was designed to resemble a gift.

A gift. I was surprised.

Yes. You may have noticed the exterior resembles polystyrene. And the windows are designed to look like bubble wrap and the hall inside is the unwrapped gift inside. Noel had a way of explaining things that made him seem like an expert regardless of the subject.

Oh really, Noel. You are a fountain of knowledge. It was a mistake to encourage him. He continued now to tell me about the acoustics of the building.

Let me know if I am telling you what you already know, but the building design is based on the proportions of the classic shoebox shaped European concert hall. As you can see, the geometry enhances the acoustic intimacy and has improved sightlines for the entire audience. He pointed to the timber-clad walls. *In fact, the timber interior forms an instrument and has been purpose-designed to complement musical performances.* Noel drew breath but not for long.

You might also be interested to know that the walls are designed with an organic surface texture which diffuses the sound and enhances the timbre and blending of instruments. The back wall in particular is designed to reverberate sound and to achieve a strong bass response …

I raised my eyebrows and tried to look amazed. *How fascinating.*

The crowd began to take their seats. We had seats at the back. A woman sashayed past us. She was wearing a long mushroom-pink coloured coat, most probably a cashmere wool mix, with a cream silk shirt and blue jeans. Her sleek bobbed hair swung as she moved. A faint waft of Chanel Number Five followed her and so did his eyes. I wished I had worn something other than black jeans and a leather bomber jacket. I wished I could disappear.

Are you familiar with Bach? Noel seemed to not hear my response.

You mean Johann Sebastian Bach? I said. The musicians took the stage, thankfully before Noel had an opportunity to tell me everything I didn't know about Bach. Silence fell on the audience and the performers began their sonatas. I drifted along on a high tide of sound and imagination until finally we clapped, and the performers left the stage.

There was still the long train ride home to get through. Just before we alighted from the train, he put his long black coat on, I noticed he had a yellow 'Save the Bees' badge pinned to the lapel. I had begun to feel that

he wore some type of invisible armour, a protective carapace of a kind. At times when I asked him a question, he seemed unreachable. Something about the innocuous little badge seemed incongruous with his persona, incongruous with armour. Something about it seemed not quite right.

Just before the train reached our stop he said, *Can I tell you what has been bothering me all day?* He picked up my hand and held it in his. *I would have thought that your black nail polish would have been more fitting for a young girl than a woman your age.*

Oh, I said. That was all I could say.

We said another goodbye. I kissed him on his cheek. He said, again, *I'll be in touch.*

Moonlight Shadow

I seem prone to random thoughts of deep meaning—deep meaning to me that is. Today I found myself ruminating on how we reveal ourselves to others—how we curate ourselves into who we want the other person to think we are. Not necessarily our self-image or even alter ego, but just someone we pretend to be, even to ourselves for reasons we may not even be conscious of.

I had decided I would say 'no' if he asked me out again. So why did I say 'yes' each time he asked me out? Why did I invite him to dinner at my house, not once but several times? Why did I go to his house to discuss literature and the complexities of love on Sunday afternoons? Why? Was it something to do with that very subject—the complexity of love? Several months passed. He took me to the theatre, out on walks around the lake, drives out of town. We talked about all manner of things. All these dates and still just a kiss on the cheek from me when we said goodnight.

Long enough. Something had to change soon. I was looking forward to this date—dinner at one of the best restaurants in town. He had

messaged me to say it was all booked for 7 p.m. Nice. I wore red. Again. Noel knocked on the door as usual ... three knocks. I opened the door and kissed him on the cheek as usual. *So nice to see you again.* His usual reply. *It's always nice to see you.*

He had had his hair done. Maybe even had his nose waxed. He looked as if he had taken a lot of care to get ready. He had booked a table for two at the window. He told me how he used to love watching *The Simpsons* with his children and how he loved the irony. I told him about my favourite episode, where Lisa Simpson had to say goodbye to the replacement teacher Mr Bergstrom at the station.

We were seated alongside a young couple who were talking loudly. We ate our meal. No dessert. He motioned for the bill. *Let's sit outside for a while*. We sat on a table outside the restaurant facing the botanic gardens with a clear view of the clock tower. we watched the huge bright moon float behind the tower.

I thought of the photo on his piano. The one he had shown me the first time I had visited. A lovely little family. Then he had a head of thick auburn hair and his 'wife' had red hair. The children, a little boy and a girl, were blonde.

Cancer, he'd said. Twelve months after that photo was taken, she was gone.

The moon was hovering above us. Bright. Moonbeams rained on us. I felt as if we were being blessed, anointed. He jumped up, took my hand again. *Let's go for walk.*

At first, I thought it was a florist. Tall vases of oriental lilies lined the entrance. Amber bottles glowed from behind the bar. This was the first time I had been to a whiskey bar. Gallant he pulled out a seat for me and walked to the bar and brought back two whiskey sours. A guitarist strummed *Wish You Were Here.* He sat opposite me and I looked into his eyes. They glowed like warm honey. He touched my hand. *Your place or mine.*

It was my place. We sat and chatted about this and that. About the future. Possibilities. We danced. I tried to show him how to salsa without much luck. And then I kissed him. His back stiffened and he moved away.

I have to think about this. I have to think about what I am getting myself into.

There's not really a lot to think about is there?

I'm a slow thinker.

Well, how long has your wife been gone?

We never actually got married.

But how long has she been gone.

Thirty years.

How did he take his leave? I can't remember. But that was our last date.

435C32

Melanie Kennard

They herd us like cattle. Through the grey corridors of steel and concrete, we move single file, like animals to the slaughterhouse. Rubber soles shuffle against the cold floors, whispering an accompaniment to our march. At times we are noisy, climbing up narrow steps of metal, the clang precariously loud. When we turn a corner or arrive at the top of the stairs, the line stops abruptly and if you're not paying enough attention, you might run into the woman in front of you. Might send the entire line toppling like children's dominos. When we stop, women peel away from the line to enter their single cells. We are single-celled beings now; mindless, motionless. Only moving and thinking when we are told. Women locked safely behind thick doors, the trudge begins again. We move through this concrete hell, as silent and composed as we must be. All the while an alarm pierces our thoughts, our beings. It marks another death.

Soon enough we reach my floor, my corridor, my cell, and it is my turn to peel away. As I do, Jac, the woman behind me, gives my arm a subtle squeeze. It's a risky move. If the guards were to see it, Jac'd probably end up with her face bashed in, eating the rot they pass off as food through a straw. But Jac does it anyway, her hand cool through the worn fabric of my uniform, as grey as the rest of this place. On the outside, I don't react, let the gesture slide off me like blood over cement. Inside though, my heart clenches at this gesture, this minute expression of caring. It's what I need, particularly today. The briefest reminder of my humanity. Of my being.

I step towards the frigid cell, my arm practically burning with Jac's touch. I must take too long because the guard in charge of our line slams her baton across my shoulders as I walk through the narrow doorway. I

stumble into the cell, nearly running into the steel toilet. A gasp escapes my lips, but I am otherwise silent. It would not do to react more. When the door slams shut behind me, I turn around. The slot at the bottom of my door, big enough to slide a tray through, opens. Though it's getting harder, particularly with throbbing shoulders, I squat down, extend my right arm through the slit. There's a sharp pain as the barcode branded on me is scanned, a familiar burning I can't quite get used to. 435C32, locked down for the day in a cell so narrow I can stand in the middle of it, stretch my arms out and graze the walls with my fingertips. The slot slams shut and the shuffle begins again. 435C32, that's me. Who I am now, in this world of steel and cement, where my skin is as grey as my uniform. As grey as the walls that imprison me. If I had a name before, it does not matter now.

The alarm's stopped blaring. I perch on the side of my narrow bed, not big enough to sleep one let alone two, and rub the residual headache from my temples. Somehow, it's more painful than where the guard just bashed me. Leaning forward, the bulge of my stomach makes it impossible for me to rest my elbows on my knees, I examine my laceless shoes, which were a stark white when I arrived but are now the same worn grey as everything else. I wonder how she did it. That is what this place has made me. The kind of person who wonders not *who* has killed themselves, but rather *how*. Torn bedsheets, translucent from years of wear, plaited into a noose is popular. I read once that women aren't as likely to resort to violent means for doing away with themselves, but I reckon we're beyond such niceties here. Still, self-strangulation isn't for everyone. She might've stolen a scrap of metal from the cannery, where we are forced to work tinning tomatoes for twelve hours every day. A sharp metal edge and the stomach to cut deep enough are all she would've needed. We're searched when leaving the cannery every day, but there are ways she could have snuck it out, favours she could have performed in exchange for that death-giving piece of metal. One final loss of dignity can't matter that much when you've already decided to

end it, right? Suicide by guard is less popular. Firstly, you've gotta piss them off enough that they get real physical with you, not just the usual, everyday violence. Then you've gotta hope they forget themselves and take it all the way. In the time I've been here, not even nine months, I've only seen it happen once. Jac reckons that kind of death is for the real desperate. The ones who've already tried the bedsheets and tin and haven't had any luck. It's a bad way to die, ugly and brutal, but it's death all the same. Early release from this hellhole. I wonder, not for the first time, how I'll do it, when my time comes. Which it inevitably will. Headfirst, toes up, into the back of a van. That's the only way any of us are getting out. We all know it. The guards know it too, so they don't bother trying to stop us. It's the third suicide in as many days.

I kick my shoes off, ever the civilised Medial girl my mother taught me to be, and lie back on the bed. Bed might be a bit of an exaggeration though. It's a narrow metal frame with a foam mattress, covered in crinkly plastic, no thicker than two fingers. Its only dressing is a thin fitted sheet and a threadbare blanket. There is no pillow. With no window, no light other than the bald fluorescent bulb flickering above me, it's impossible to tell what time it is. Lunch break had ended at the cannery before the suicide alarm started blaring and cut work detail short. No doubt we'll pay for it tomorrow, will be woken an hour early by some vengeful guard crapping on about quotas. They'll herd us back to the cannery, batons and tasers at the ready, and make us work through lunch. Not that lunch counts as much—we're given free rein over any dented tins, deemed unfit to be sent to the outside world of supermarkets and kitchens. We scoop the tomatoes out with our bare hands, let the juice drip down our faces. On the days where there aren't any dented tins, we go hungry, our stomachs screaming at us until those who work the conveyer belt, where fresh tomatoes are delivered whole from Industrifarms, are tempted to snatch one and gobble it quickly and damn the consequences if they are caught. For a while, Jac said, some of the women at the end of the processing line, responsible for sticking on labels, would deliberately

dent the tins, so that no-one would go hungry. Then one of them got caught, got herself dunked head-first into a vat of boiling water. No-one's dared dent the tins since. Inadequate though the tomatoes are, they keep us going. Tomorrow we won't get any and never mind if people drop with exhaustion. It's the kind of move those bastard guards like to pull. The kind they can pull. Out there we were people, with names and lives, hopes and dreams. Jac had been an Elevated-Medial, a teacher. I'd wanted to be a nurse. Actually, I'd wanted to be a doctor, but as a Medial, nurse was the closest I could hope for. In here, the memories of our former selves are all we retain. We're no more than our numbers now, our only hope a quick death and blissful escape. We're lower than low, worse than the thieves and murderers who populate the country's Industrifarms. Genetic terrorist is the name given to us. We are guilty of committing treason to our country, our species, our genome. We're the people smugglers (out, not in, unlike in the times before), the cross-class lovers. We're the lesbians and the protestors. Officially, we do not exist.

A cold shiver passes through me as I tramp down the dangerous path of memory. Normally, I ration them, allow myself one memory a day, waiting until the lights are out before I whisper it to myself, stroking the stomach that has begun to kick. Now, with one more suicide notched into the prison's belt, I cannot help myself. Today, under the blaring light with hunger clawing and hours between now and the next inadequate meal, I indulge. I think about Judd, my brother and only ally in a world where neither of us exactly fit. Like me, Judd was always a little different, a little out of place in our Medial neighbourhood. We were like puzzle pieces, squashed into place to form an image and never mind if we had to be bent or broken to fit. While I'd figured out my own problem years earlier, a loud mouth and a liking for both boys and girls, it wasn't until Judd was fourteen that he realised who he was. I was seventeen, three years older and his only confidante. Sitting beneath the weeping crab-apple in our backyard, our favourite retreat since childhood, Judd had confessed what I'd already suspected. His face, still that of a child, had

expressed a range of emotions, everything from abject terror to hope, as he tried to get the words out. It was only once the confession was over, when Judd had finally spluttered out that he liked boys, that his face relaxed into an expression I'd never seen him wear before—relief. They claim to have bred out the 'gay gene' three generations ago, but there we were, brother and sister, proving them wrong. I'd returned Judd's trust with a confession of my own. The secret blossoming in my belly, put there not out of love, but force. We thought we were safe, our secrets ensconced beneath the tree's leafy canopy as they had been in childhood. We should have known better. Safety doesn't exist in our world. Not when you're gay. Not when you're carrying a mixed-class baby. Security, safety. It's the greatest myth ever told.

God, I hope Judd is safe. They came for me not twenty-four hours after his revelation. Anything could have happened to him since. A sharp kick from the being inside me pulls me back. 'Good girl,' I whisper, stroking the rounded belly, which stretches against my grey t-shirt. She only kicks when we're alone, this girl inside me. She's smart like that, smarter than her mum. I stroke my belly a moment, letting the rhythm of my breathing carry me into a doze-like state. Locked away like this, there's not much to do but sleep. I'm just about off when a shriek pulls me from my reverie. It's coming from the cell next to mine. Susie, losing her shit again. She's like that, Susie. Some people can handle being institutionalised better than others. Me, I took to it oddly well, learning to keep my head down and my loud mouth shut. Letting my dark hair fall over my face like a curtain, hiding my expression from the guards. Susie though, she can't cop it. Before, she was a Medial like me. Our genes weren't the worst—we weren't Subpars or Breed-Outs, but nor were we good enough to attain the higher status of Elevated-Medial or the highest class of Bountiful. Susie lived in my neighbourhood, was a couple of years above me at school. I remember her from the school bus, her hair golden, her eyes bright, her teeth straight without the need for the corrective braces that so many Medial teens wear. Any class lower

than Medial can't afford them, any class higher doesn't need them. Then Susie made a stupid mistake, just like all of us in here did. She fell in love with a Bountiful boy. Found herself locked in here. No lawyer, no trial, no due process. Nada, zip. That's what you get for breaking the genetic covenants that found our world. A one-way trip to a detention centre like this, where time and memory bleed into one another and the only escape from the monotony is when someone tops themselves or a fight breaks out. And after a while, even those become monotonous. Now, Susie's unrecognisable, her hair limp, her eyes dull. A couple of her teeth have been knocked out. Susie's screaming continues, a steady wail of nonsense syllables that might have started life as 'let me out!'. There's a sound like drums as the guards rush to her cell, tear the door open and drag Susie from it. If my cell door had a window, I'd stand up, watch Susie as she's hauled away, her screams reverberating down the hall. There is no window though, so I remain on my back on the bed, listening instead. Susie's in for it now. They'll return her later, her screaming reduced to a pained whimper that will echo throughout the night. It feels cruel, messed-up, but I can't help but think it. Pretty Susie, the popular girl from the bus, the girl who seemed to possess a Pandora's box of potential. The next suicide will be hers.

Silence restored, I examine the ceiling above me. It's grey like the rest of this place, not much to look at. As I stare at it, I picture the ceiling from my childhood bedroom. Two memories today, three if you count Susie. I'm verging on excessive, but don't want to stop. There's not much time left, until she comes out. I need to remember as much as I can for her. Stars, glow-in-the-dark ones, decorated the ceiling of my childhood bedroom. I'd lie in my bed at night and stare up at them. Dad was a perfectionist, had stuck them there to mimic the actual constellations. I could never remember the names, the patterns, but I liked looking at them as my eyes became increasingly blurred on the path towards sleep. Liked letting the stars carry me to my dreams. I have no idea how long I've been in here. How long it's been since I've seen the stars. No idea

how long it is until my daughter, god I hope it's a daughter, tears me in two.

They'll take her from me when she comes, I know that. I might be an idiot who got myself locked up, too dumb to visit a back-alley abortion clinic, but I'm not delusional. Of my daughter and I, only one of us will get out. Who will look after me once we are separate? Who will stop me from falling into the inescapable pit of memory? Will stop me from becoming like Susie? No-one. There's a future coming I can't prevent. A moment of separation so infinite, I don't know that I'll ever feel complete again. They took me, my name, when they locked me away. But my daughter will get a life away from here. I console myself with this dream, this imagining. Looking at the concrete above me, I picture the starry ceiling of my childhood. Gift my child with the only part of her they'll never take from me. 'Stella.' I whisper, for the first and only time, my daughter's name.

ALLIANCE

Angela Costi

In the beginning
learning English with Miss Papadopoulos was bliss
she used poems to prise our thoughts from *Dolly*
and soccer boys with blow-dried mullets.
In my private talks with her about escape
from Orthodox church, she permitted me
to call her Dimitra, I would've bowed, if she asked.
Some girls echoed her feathered curls and pink blush
even spunks stammered their answers to her questions,
her chair was our throne, her chalk was our sceptre.

Towards the middle
of *The Prophet* there is the answer to how two people master
marriage. *What does this mean to students born to dramatic*
parents who fled and now fight for daily bread? I asked.
The Goddess smiled as she sowed words as saplings
into entwined trees of her as cypress, her fiancé
as oak, their wedding timed before her age ripened.
I was worried for her future, deeply worried, but she spoke
to Gibran's words of separate spaces of 'togetherness'
and she promised to rise above our mothers' venting.

By way of catharsis
I wrote an essay on Marriage to dispel Gibran's myth,
to thump in the nails of Father and Son, to show tired
Mama with stitched fingers from the sewing machine.
Dimitra's worshippers were most of the class, using eyes

and clenched fists to bully, denying their souls the truth
of their mothers' folded arms, bent heads, bruised hearts.
Only Leonie Smith raised her arm when I stood up
against the rings for life—we knew the fate of mothers
given no back door to exit when the front door is barred.

The final moment
came later than the C minus I received, later than
seeing the Goddess transition to Wife, and still later
than my years of folded arms, bent head, bruised heart.

THE LESSON

Angela Costi

I
Today, when a thirteen-year-old uses their ruler in class
I wish them joy, if their line is a wrong angle
I hope they laugh, if their grid doesn't fit
or, if their frame is too big for their drawing,
they say, *Fuck*
in front of their teacher.

II
It was 1982, when Mr. Griffiths had countless
years at Lalor Secondary, always
dressed as if he were attending a ceremony
using clipped courteous curt English
to instruct on the rudimentary,
deeply invested in reaching high octave
if a murmur rippled the silence of stupor
among the twenty-five children.

III
The room had a window above eye level
for me to watch heads of trees mingle with clouds
orange and brown leaves parachuted to the ground,
this quiet view helped me
not to cry
after my ruler was yanked from me
to lash my wrists
Thrice on each

I watched the tremor of a branch
about to lose its leaves
and felt the shame of forty eyes
and heard the chalk snap in two.

NETFLIX REGRET

Richard James Allen

Every time I finish watching something,
I feel like I've seen it before.
Instant déjà vu.
Of course, at that point,
I *have* seen it before!
But it feels as if a sink hole
has suddenly appeared between the time
of turning on and turning off the tv.
Instant regret. Just add your life
and you feel like you have wasted it.

AFTER THE TRANSPLANT

Sarah Temporal

I

My mind
bucks away
from the image of your cage wide open

as if the white dove might flap free,
even in retrospect,
if my thoughts go there.

Your body
too quickly put back together,
a resurrection too sudden
to comprehend, and now

you are perfect. You sleep
released from the memory
of your body's wreck.

II

When you were beyond my reach
in the operating theatre, in the hands of those
superbly skilled and caring men, and I
waited
with the marshmallow couches and the
inane films playing soundlessly,

I had a vision of them—of us—humans,
practising such feats upon each other.
Holding one of our own, so precisely,
so thoughtfully, in relation to death,
that the edge between life and no-life fragmented and dispersed
into many tiny actions, weights and attentions,
into such a myriad of forms,
that it seemed impossible to lose you after all.

III

They told me
you were bleeding—a lot—
or too much—I could not
any longer detect
the story behind
kind intentions.

IV

They had distributed for safe-keeping
all your life's energy among a huge forest
of machinery puffing and pulsing
your breath transferred to a pumping bellows,
your heartbeat relocated to a cave-like screen
on which other lines ran, gold, blue and green.

An ecosystem
composed entirely of human brilliance
and compassion.

V

I saw you held
in steady hands, close
to the mystery.
Slowly, each fleck and pulse
was returned to you,
the cage doors wired shut.
You could not have known yet
how well
        you were. Yet when
your eyes opened, it was you

who smiled first.

AN IDIOT'S TALE

J.D. Kotzman

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace, I doodled in the margin of my notebook, my sympathy for Shakespeare's despairing king gaining by the moment. My days too heaped onto days, no joy in sight. I'd grown weary of my latest copyediting gig, wanted to deal in my own words again. More, I'd grown weary of my life. So when I crawled out of bed this frosty December morning, I forced myself to shower, throw on some clothes, and trudge the six blocks to the café, a place that used to inspire me. The time had come, I told myself, to get ink on paper again. But after two hours and three mugs of Arabica, all I had to show were a caffeine headache and a wee snippet of 'The Scottish Play'.

Writing came and went for me, it seemed. Growing up, I penned my share of short stories, weird sci-fi and action-adventure yarns for the most part, but never gave serious thought to making it into a career. I had my practical, no-nonsense dad to thank for that. There's no money in it, he always grumbled, over and over, like some neo-capitalist mantra. In college then, with every intention of going on to law school after graduation, I didn't bother to take even a rudimentary English comp course. Everything changed, though, during my senior year—the winter of '95, already four years gone now—when Lizzy crashed-landed into my life.

We met by chance, at a holiday get-together hosted by a mutual acquaintance. Funny thing, I almost didn't even go. The crushing results of my LSATs had come earlier that day, and in the ensuing hours, my state of mind vacillated from dour to despondent and back again. For most of the evening, I brooded out on the sun porch, toking on Marlboros in between hits from a bottle of Tennessee whiskey. And except for the odd

drunken guest in search of a mythical second keg, nary a soul bothered me. The weather, like my mood, had turned icy.

Then around midnight, the back door creaked open once more, releasing a wisp of a woman into the solarium. She plunked herself down on a ratty sofa and fished a copy of *Hitchhiker's Guide* from her well-worn backpack, oblivious to my presence. I observed in silence as she thumbed through the dog-eared pages, the corners of her mouth turning up from time to time. Though she hadn't made a peep, and though I adored the novel, her intrusion annoyed me. Still, I couldn't tear away my gaze—kooky-looking, one might have called her, yet surprisingly alluring. And her eyes, big and green, radiated warmth, maybe a bit of mischief too. When at last she caught me staring, she let out a squeak, trailed by an embarrassed smile. I couldn't quite return the gesture, but something inside me, I noticed, had thawed a little.

'Hi, there,' I said, with as much cheer as I could muster.

'Jesus, you scared the shit out of me.'

'Apologies.'

'Forget it,' she said, clapping shut her book. 'I'm Lizzy, by the way.'

'Tom,' I said.

'So, Tom, you're sitting out here all alone, and it's freezing, literally,' she said, shivering for effect. 'What's the story, Morning Glory?'

'Bad day.'

'How bad?'

'Ever wish you'd never been born?'

'Oh, George Bailey, it can't be as awful as *that*.'

At the quip, I couldn't help but crack a full-on grin. I offered Lizzy the bottle, which she accepted with gratitude, and a cigarette, which she declined, wrinkling her nose.

'Mind if I have one?' I asked, waiting for her to shake her head no before lighting up. After a few salubrious puffs, I proceeded with my sob story.

'I'm sorry,' she said, when the narrative ran its course.

'You know, I didn't really want to be a lawyer anyway,' I said, grinding my smoke into the tongue of a ceramic frog perched on the table beside me. 'But my father, my father with his grand vision, he had plans for me. Truth be told, I always wanted to be a writer.'

'You shouldn't be a lawyer then,' she told me, eyes wide as saucers, her expression never more serious. 'You should be a writer.'

'Maybe I will,' I said, allowing myself to laugh for the first time that night.

Things raced forward, full throttle, between Lizzy and me. Not a month after the party, she and her scant belongings took up residence in my shoebox of an apartment. But the café—with its exposed brick walls, rustic wood surfaces, and rich coffee always at the ready—that became our real home. We spent many an hour in this cozy spot, sometimes just reading or writing, other times arguing about our beloved books. During those confabs, I learned to appreciate The Bard and her other literary heroes, and though she denied it to anyone else, she came to acknowledge the dark genius of my favorite author, Philip K. Dick.

As for my own writing, Lizzy set off a wildfire. I flicked my pen like a madman in those days, almost every spare minute spent cramming words into the pages of a perfect-bound notebook. I drank less, even gave up smoking. Writing became my drug of choice—writing and pleasing my muse. She didn't hold back in her pointed critiques of my work, but they only made me want to get better, get her approval all the more. A more exhilarating time, I couldn't recall, despite the plethora of balled-up rejection slips that piled in the waste basket. And then one glorious day, it happened—my first acceptance letter graced the mailbox. We celebrated my cultural foray in style, cracking open a bottle

of overpriced Champagne she'd socked away for the occasion. I had everything I wanted. I owed it all to her.

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death, I wrote now, while a couple of high school kids kissed and giggled at the round table beside mine. Fools in love, those two, I knew. Fools like me, once. It evoked bittersweet memories, seeing them—the way they looked at each other, completed, as if no one else needed to exist ... the way they traded secrets in hushed voices, a conspiracy of two ... the way they glowed, like golden gods, able to achieve anything together. We'd had that, Lizzy and I, all of that and more.

Then one spring evening, a night otherwise no different than any other, I came home to an empty apartment. Lizzy had disappeared, every trace of her whisked away, save the hint of Chanel still lingering in the air and a leaf of pink stationary beckoning me from the bedside table. Sorry—I just can't do this anymore, the note declared. My legs gave way, and I sank to the floorboards, a broken toy amid the dust bunnies.

Later, bolstered by a few fingers of Jack, I pored over the rest of the letter. Lizzy had taken off for Paris, it appeared, with no return trip in mind. For a while, I mulled over the whys of it, but her sudden getaway, I realised, shouldn't have surprised me. She was a free spirit, untamed, and a wild filly needed room to run on a whim. My mistake, I'd believed I could corral her somehow.

At the bottom of the note, Lizzy had scrawled what looked like an international telephone number. I stared at those digits for hours, fighting the desperate itch to grab the cordless and dial, until my craving got the best of me. While the phone rang, I twitched with anticipation, my heart thumping in my chest. But when the call connected, her voice didn't greet me on the line. I'd reached a village patisserie, somewhere in the rolling French countryside, according to a crotchety old man muttering in fragmented English. *Qui est-ce?* He'd never heard of me, he said. He'd never heard of Lizzy either.

A few days afterward, I discovered that Lizzy had charged her plane fare to my Amex. She'd also swiped my ATM card and vaporised most of my savings. A meagre sum of money, I could admit, but everything I had.

The desire to write evaporated too, after Lizzy had gone. I liked to blame my drought on the second job I ended up taking at the local news rag, but even under the barest of scrutiny, that flimsy lie fell to pieces. In truth, without her, I felt incapable of producing anything, anything worth a damn at least. I managed to keep churning out obits for the paper, though. I needed the cash, and besides, the work required little in the way of artistry—the stories of the dead, I found out soon enough, were all the same. *Out, out brief candle!*

Looking up from the page now, I noted that a fiftyish man and woman, both decked out in their Sunday finest, had replaced the blissed-out teenage lovers. I half-listened, amused, while the graying gentleman ranted about a nephew who'd gone gaga over some beguiling vixen.

'John—I love the boy, but he's like a fucking ostrich,' he said, eliciting a nervous titter from his lady friend, 'head in the sand at the first sign of trouble.'

'He just met her?'

'In Paris.' *Paris*—the mention of that fateful city sent a fresh jolt of sadness though me.

'Curious,' the woman said, arching a pencil-thin eyebrow.

'He flew back with her a week ago. She's not even French. She's American, a student or something.'

'I can't believe he would do that.'

'That's John,' the man said, followed by an exasperated sigh. 'I know this girl is bad news, but he won't hear anything about it.'

'What time are they supposed to arrive?'

'Any minute now,' he told her, after checking his watch.

The mysterious femme fatale, any one of a thousand women could have fit her description, but somehow I knew I'd found Lizzy again. Or maybe she'd found me. At the thought, my mind went haywire. I couldn't work out what I might say if she did walk through the door. Part of me hated her for what she'd done, but the rest of me stood ready to forgive her for everything.

A tiny brass bell chimed then, cuing the entrance of an attractive couple, a man and woman about my age. They cast an impossible brightness, flawless, as if they'd stepped out of a glossy magazine ad. Hand in hand, the two of them strolled in my direction, all smiles as they met the pair at the next table. John and his apparent siren, I gathered. The maligned woman stood not six feet from me, bathed in soft track lighting, and I placed her at once. Though she'd shortened her hair and shed a few pounds, those haunting eyes, I would have recognised them anywhere. When she sat down with her companions, our glances crossed, but I saw no sign of recollection. I wondered whether she'd obliterated her memories of me—*a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more*.

While the four of them launched into a fervent chat about the impending Y2K doomsday, I sipped the dregs of my now-tepid drink, trying to quell the lightning storm raging inside me. I needed to concoct an excuse to confront Lizzy, but my brain only crackled and sparked with anxiety. In the midst of it all, I flashed to John, even considered trying to warn him about her. A pointless gesture, though, I was aware. Time was, nothing could have ripped me away from her, certainly not the ravings of some wild-eyed, unkempt stranger.

I didn't know what to do, and when the two couples stood up to leave, a desperate panic overcame me. In that moment, I would have given anything to hold Lizzy there, keep her from abandoning me again. The universe, this time, obliged. As if overhearing my thoughts, she excused herself from the departing group and made her way toward me.

'Spare a light?' she asked, cool as you please, while she slipped a Parliament from her stylish leather purse.

'I quit a while ago, remember,' I said, still wonderstruck. 'Since when do you smoke?'

'Since always,' she said, shrugging.

'My God, Lizzy, what happened to you?' I asked. 'I tried to call, but the number you left, it didn't work.'

'I'm not sure what you mean.'

'I miss you, you know … I miss us,' I said, struggling to hold onto the thread. 'And I can't write a fucking thing without you. I'm hopeless. I mean, look at this shit. Look at what I've spent the morning scribbling.'

'*Macbeth*?' she asked, her lips curling up a bit.

'Lizzy, I need you.'

'You're mistaken, I think,' she said, any suggestion of a smile in retreat, 'about who I am.'

'I don't understand. We were good together, weren't we?'

'Perhaps in another life,' she allowed, tossing the unlit cigarette back into her bag. 'But for now, I have to say goodbye.'

'Goodbye.'

As I watched Lizzy vanish through the oaken doorway, I understood that she'd made things easier, as she often did, with her little ruse. We could have spent our last few moments together trading insults and tearing at old, scabbed-over wounds, but to what end? She always knew the thing to say, even as I groped for the right turn of phrase.

It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. No truer words, I decided, closing my notebook. My life—an idiot's tale indeed.

THREE INSTANCES

Denise O'Hagan

i
And I unwrapped
The tiny knitted woollen cap
And miniature booties fit for a
Doll, and laid them shyly over
A jumpsuit as soft a blue
As the skin around
My baby's lips.

ii
Stretched between generations
Like a washing line, youth cavorting
With the breeze on one side,
Age sagging the other, and me
In the middle, shielding
My face against the pulse of life
With a basket of pegs.

iii
The couple on the seafront sat
On stick-like seats, still as the
Rocks above, bound by the space
Between them, any words ferried away
By the wind, and when I blinked,
There was only water lapping,
Rocks and sea, rocks
And sea.

AN INSTRUMENT OF LILIES

Oisin Breen

You are my constant companion,
And I have made you a small chamber
So you might come and go,
And so it is that I must tell you:

This wet soil,
From which I fashioned you a sleeping coat,
It is heavy with meal-worms.

And this heat of yours,
It will fire my body,
This instrument of lilies.

WEIGHT

the funeral

Nellie Le Beau

Moss, bevel, spear,
objects create us, undo
flesh from bone. If I hold

an image it becomes another.
If I cannot imagine, it becomes
a third thing, formless. Moss,

its fleshed-out sphagnum,
covers empire with
tree root, green weight

heavier than a thousand oxen, their bevelled
eyes, glaring at the moon. We knew
this day would come, and not come.

In the back streets of Athens,
the wisteria we picked, placed in
water. Its fragrance like a spear.

GRIEF SQUARED X 2

for Kris Hemensley

Francesca Jurate Sasnaitis

re
living with the weight
(I'm tempted to write 'wait'
both — weight of the wait
weariness of that, yes exposure
(flayed self) and desperation
search for … ? comfort? love?
reassurance? ha! manic | maniac
my immense weary attempt not
to apportion blame that guilt
rabbithole path to self
flagellation
self
indulgence — where did I read?
o! a New York Times review
Sergio Larrain's photos after
his younger brother died
in a riding accident, the family
travelled to gether | gather to
Europe, the Middle East
a year to recover a year
out side time a year
to out run
weight

Note: 'Sergio Larrain's photos' refers to *Sergio Larrain* by Agnè S. Sire, text by Gonzalo Leiva Quijada (aperture, 2021).

IN GREEK WE CALL IT 'ΚΑΡΚΙΝΟΣ' / 'KARKINOS'

Helen Koukoutsis

In Welsh it sounds like kind sir—
Russian—a Balkan drink—
an order of German pancakes
served with sugar and a wink.

In Japanese it sounds like gun—
one bullet to the head with ease—
meringues—cloud puffed—in Thai
blessed sneezes in Chinese.

Like muzzling Satan—in Hebrew—
Vietnamese—a counting game—
Dutch—a mouthful of canker sores
salted with profanity and shame.

Italians cry out *can crow*—
permission to rattle and caw—
permission to herald a murder
gnash—weep for a fallen one.

Greeks—pledge on the gospels—
thank the Lord they say when done.
When Herakles killed Karkinos—
did he know—the gods had won?

BUTTONS

Jane Downing

The program for the pantomime is in my hand. It is my madeleine. The memories start to tiptoe back. I am peering from the wings and the memories pick up pace, prancing and tumbling onto the stage. I slip through time. Any minute and it will be my cue. I will step out into the lights. Tread the boards. My stomach churns with fear. But I am seven and steel myself, for the show must go on.

I run my finger down the cast list in the program, set out here in order of appearance. Looking for myself of course. Prince Charming, Cinderella, Bluebelle and Maybelle, the Ugly Sisters—any excuse for men to frock up. Some of the names have signatures beside them. I remember fronting up to a Bill Nighy-skinny man, watching as he pulled wads of pillowy stuffing from his satin bosom before I wordlessly presented this program and my pen. He put his smoke down and signed in a thrilling and pretentious flourish.

Back to the list: the Fairy Godmother, Horse—two actors, front and arse, Buttons.

'Buttons,' I say out loud. 'How could I have forgotten Buttons?'

'It was actually very mundane, my Africa,' I admit to Sissy. 'An ordinary day-by-day life. Father went off to manage the Brooke Bond Fray Bentos factory each morning and came home and complained about the price of imported fat.'

Sissy lets the cringe-worthy possessive noun I'd affixed to an entire continent pass unchallenged. 'Did you say your dad imported fat?' she asked instead.

'Yes. Because the Tanzanian cows were too lean to make the pies perfect.'

She is laughing too at the way I'd coloured in the illustrations on the pantomime program. The Ugly Sisters with their beehive wigs and bosoms clash in greens and blues and yellows and purples. These clownish figures look down on a waif: Cinderella all coloured in brown. Textas were pretty much magic back then. I'd been quite good keeping between the lines. I can remember the easy glide of the texta tip over the shiny cardboard of the program cover. I remember particularly loving the crimson.

'The Dar es Salaam Players,' Sissy reads. 'A Pantomime. Panto? Very British.'

'Tanzania was an independent nation by then, I'll have you know, not a colony.'

She opens the program, reads. 'Lots of Anglo names here. Is this memory going to be racist?'

She is right. About the names. There were no Tanzanians in the cast so there was little chance for racial tensions within the theatre.

'Were they not *allowed* be part of the Players?' she asks.

I recognise Sissy's tone. 'I don't know.' I defend myself. 'I was a child. I didn't make the rules.' I snatch the program back, to move on, though of course there is no moving on from a racist history. 'I'm down here, one of the fairies.' I point out the cluster of ten names. 'The ballet troupe. We danced during two of the numbers. *All Kinds of Everything* and ...'

'And I bet you were gorgeous.' She is a flatterer.

'Buttons was gorgeous. You know, I'd forgotten about Buttons until now.'

The Little Theatre was out in Oyster Bay. We crossed the bridge in Mum's orange Renault 16, cramming to the window to see how low the

tide was, salt on the breeze, salt on the lips, the Indian Ocean sparkling diamonds on each crest.

The days were always sunny in the remembering.

Windows open as Mum smoked, her Winston ash knocked on the small wedge of glass sticking out of the rubber frame. The smell was part of Mum, her smoke clouds tidal too. As she drove, she muttered her lines. Only a few, her Duchess was a minor part at the Royal Ball before Midnight struck. An extra really.

I had no lines. As Mum muttered, my head buzzed with dance steps, one, two, three, plie, chassé, arabesque.

There was shade to park in so the car's seats weren't total scorchers after rehearsals. The trees belonged to the church next door to the theatre. The church building itself was a silent shell on Saturdays and weekday evenings. We needed an extra Sunday rehearsal just before opening night and were greeted with waves of joyous voices, the Catholics putting the expat amateur dramatists to shame. Reminding us, if only in retrospect, that we were merely inharmonious visitors to the country.

Walking through the side door of the Little Theatre was like walking into another world, cliché though this obviously is. No more breeze blocks and bougainvillea: this was a fairy tale place as surely as the scenes created in turn on the raised stage: Cinderella's sooty kitchen, the glittery ballroom. During rehearsals, bank after bank of empty brown leather seats acted as audience in this cavernous, shadowy womb. All actual eyes in the place would turn to where the spotlight shone.

The king of this realm was the director, Giorgio Snook. Or maybe he was more the god of the place—omniscient and omnipotent for all his tiny waist and skinny legs that looked good in tights. He'd cast himself as the Major-domo in Prince Charming's palace so he could take to the stage as well as direct from below. He was born for tights. It was the first time I'd worn tights though. We should have worn them during

rehearsals; they were such a shock on opening night. Memories prickle up and down my legs. Heat that broils me in my own sweat.

Giorgio Snook wasn't the best-looking guy at the theatre according to the adult women who gossiped around the Kilimanjaro Hotel pool as their kids enjoyed an after-school swim. That gong went to the Swedish man on lighting. Torsten could light up their bedroom any day, the mothers laughed. He could park his slippers under their beds. Adult women were aliens—to me Torsten was made of bricks and teeth. But he could hoist booms with ease. '*Ja*, Snook,' he'd yell back in response to any of the director's commands.

I suppose the world backstage smelled of greasepaint, whatever that is. Now I only remember mosquito coils, men's pomade and sweat. People everywhere, sweating.

And the star, our heroine Cinderella. She worked in the National Bank by day. When she took her hair out of her work ponytail and leant forward into her dressing room mirror, she was transformed as surely as with a spell from the Fairy Godmother's wand.

She was the only actor to get her own dressing room. Prince Charming shared with the Ugly Sisters. The rest of us sprawled in hot communal hellholes and spilled about in corridors.

'Buttons.' I explain to Sissy, emphasising the hissing 's' at the end of the name. 'Named for the buttons down his jacket I imagine. Another servant in the household, the valet to Cinderella's father. Also Cinderella's best friend, her confidante, her pep-her-up-er-er.'

'Sounds like a girl's perfect gay friend, like in all the rom-com movies.'

'No, written straight. Buttons the character ends up paired with the Fairy Godmother's female assistant.'

Sissy snorts. 'Fairy Godmother's female assistant? Where did that come from?'

Clearly, this was not the original fairy tale, this was a bastardised panto intent on getting laughs from a Christmas audience.

She kisses the top of my head as she prepares to leave me to my sorting. And now, stirred by the program exhumed from my boxes, the *whole* memory has finally returned. All the bits I'd forgotten—all the bits that aren't about me. 'Well at least in the script for the panto Buttons ends up with the Fairy …'

'And he was gorgeous you say?' she says from the door.

I try to picture Buttons. I see the costume, all high collar and yes, buttons down the jacket front, like in the Nutcracker. And the face? What does gorgeous mean to any of us? When we are seven? She has dark hair and darker eyes and a dusting of freckles across her little nose. Her teeth gleam when she laughs.

'Not he,' I tell Sissy. '*She*.'

If panto harks back with glad nostalgia to Shakespearean conventions of men playing the lady parts, it was all on its own with the cross-dressing going both ways.

Buttons, the male character, was played by a woman. The program reveals all in the cast list. This Buttons in the Dar es Salaam performance was played by the director's wife. Buttons had a real, already theatrical name: Leonora Snook.

Giorgio and Leonora. They would have been the golden couple in some high school Year Book. Captioned: *Most Likely To Break Hearts*.

Giorgio Snook had sat in the front row of seats throughout rehearsals, directing every step and mannerism. He could leap, in a single bound, from the floor of the theatre onto the stage when needed, clearing the hurdle of lights and landing like a Serengeti gazelle. He was rarely seen in the shadowy backstage. But from the vantage point of adulthood, I

can see that he must have suspected something going on behind the scenes as our rehearsals climaxed in the excitement of opening night.

I can hear the murmur of voices and clinking of glass from the bar. The Embassy crowd turned up, the teachers from the International School, the Government odd-bods and the fly-in businessmen, a few who stayed. They drank cold beer and gin and the mothers treated it as a special occasion and let themselves have Babycham so their kids could laugh at the little deer leaping through stars on the label. The Czechs and Greeks and New Zealanders resorted to the common tongue of English but I didn't understand a word of it anyway. Politics, flirting, Cold War spying. I didn't care. Mum had bought me a program and I was determined to get more signatures than any of the other fairies. My rival was a particularly aggressive eight-year-old from Brussels. Who'd got the pink costume I'd coveted, leaving me in the yellow tulle.

Cinderella's signature was first on my list. The audience was going to laugh most at her Ugly Sisters but I'd sussed the star power of having your name in the title. Cinderella should have been in the wings already, her dainty ballet pumps skipping in and out of the snaking electrical cords. She wasn't, so I ran down the skinny corridor behind the stage. Maybelle was adjusting her balls in her satin drawers, Bluebelle was painting her lips into a big red bow, my mother, the Duchess, and a gang of hangers-on, were in the courtyard beyond being chimney stacks, their swirls of smoke making representations of the Milky Way. I could hear the orchestra—an ensemble of five doctors, archaeologists and the chief of the Askari—tuning up for the first number, *What a Wonderful Day Like Today,* as I veered into the tiny 'star' dressing room. Without knocking.

Buttons was there. Standing in front of the mirror, the lovely old kind of mirror framed with bulbous lights. Buttons was engaged in a kiss. Not the kind of peck the director had Cinderella acting out with Prince Charming just before the last curtain. No, this was the spitting in each other's mouth stuff my mother and father did on Saturday nights when

the Fray Bentos smell was fully off him. In the reflection in the mirror I could see hands moving up and down her buttoned jacket.

The scene was beautiful. So beautiful.

'Buttons where are you? Get into the wings, Buttons!'

I hear the roar coming down the corridor behind me. Doors bang. 'Leonora!' the voice calls into each room in turn. The roar booms in the courtyard. 'Leonora!'

Then the shouting voice goes deeper, testosterone encrusted. 'Torsten! You Swedish turd.'

The director storms into every room along the way, giving the kissers in front of me time to jump apart. I already knew from the shape of the back, and the cinders sackcloth dress, the one I later texta'd brown on the program cover. But now I can see the face of Button's lover in the mirror.

The director bursts past me. It is so hot my skin stings under my makeup and tights. He doesn't see me, either on the way in or the way out. He is too busy covering his anger with excuses. I can only imagine his abject apologies later to his wife, perhaps to Torsten too, for suspecting anything 'going on' at all.

'Final call, get into the wings ladies,' he blusters. His wife's hands are still on the bank clerk's dainty Cinderella body. He doesn't see anything though. Nothing beyond cast members helping each other with their wardrobe.

'Was this the first time you realised girls could ...'

'It must have been. Lucky for you Sissy.' I blow her a kiss. 'A world of possibility opened up.'

There are ads in the back of my coloured-in Cinderella program. Datsun: *sporty, smooth and swift*. Peugeot: *guts not gimmicks, neat not fancy, fast not flashy, stable not giddy, modern not messy: soundly built for sensible people*. I am a Datsun, Sissy is a Peugeot. She laughs at the suggestion. Eventually decides to take it as a compliment. I turn the page. There is a sketch of a giraffe and the hopeful suggestion: *For drifting clouds and twinkling stars come to the Twiga Roof-Garden*.

'It sounds so romantic,' I sigh.

'Discounting the colonialism and the ...'

'There must be a roof-top restaurant within cooee of here,' I say. 'We can still be romantic, an old couple like us, can't we?'

THE GREEN SWATHE

(at the National Gallery of Australia)

Rohan Buettel

the lawn flows from building to water
a dog at speed could slice through the space
but he sits, head to one side, attention fixed
his muscular chest rendered, impasto mix

further around, on a mound
a mantlepiece of machines, an assemblage
of precision cast parts affirms
the organic vitality of constructed forms

across the lake two building cranes rest
here, black twin cantilevered arms
suspended by cable, sway in the breeze
mighty scale diminished by a canopy of trees

monumentality is found in the sinuous curves
of a bent paperclip, all rusty steel
Virginia must have been some girl
to deserve the view from the inner curl

once this undulating green would have held
scatterings of people lunching, relaxed
quiet, empty now, in bright autumn sun
time for the dog to get up, have his run

Note: the following sculptures are referenced—*The Dog* by Rick Amor; *Number 751* by Robert Klippel; *Ik Ook* by Mark Di Suvero; *Virginia* by Clement Meadmore.

LA DAME DE FER

Ruth Lacey

The miniature perfume bottle still had a strong scent when I unscrewed the metal lid topped with smooth rose quartz, a gem known for healing the heartsick. It was made of wine-red glass with La Tour Eiffel painted on an enamel disc attached with brass filigree. I saw it on my mother's dressing table one day; she told me it belonged to Nana Malika—my great-grandmother—and I asked for it. She always gives me everything I ask for.

'The only reason you exist is because Nana Malika was not allowed to marry the man she loved,' my mother told me as she put the 1920s souvenir into the palm of my twelve-year-old hand. She didn't wait for me to ask her why. 'He was her nephew,' she whispered, even though there was no one home.

To be clear, the nephew was the oldest son of her oldest sister, and Malika was number eleven in the oversized German Jewish family, making them the exact same age. But mum, well-known for projecting her voice great distances, continued to speak in unusually hushed tones. 'Don't tell anyone this story,' she said. 'Not while my mother is alive.'

Her mother has been dead since 1992, and my great-grandmother who apparently loved her nephew and he loved her back, has been gone since I was seven. My youngest sister is named for her, using her given name in Hebrew—Malka, Queen. Malika was the name Nana chose to be called.

*

Nana Malika is in a family photo with the man she did end up marrying, my great-grandfather Adolf who died in the '40s. Her nephew and his wife are ten relatives away and staring in a different direction. They both look wistful, Malika and her nephew. I don't know what happened to him, but I do recall his great-grandchildren who we grew up with in Australia when their Israeli dad was either an agent for Mossad or an insurance salesman.

I don't know many details of the relationship only my mother knew about: she'd shared a bedroom with Nana Malika after they arrived in Australia in 1939, and knew her secrets, and guarded them. At some point, though, I guess a thing like that will disappear unless it's spoken of; a whole world of love and pain and wistful family photographs, as if it never existed.

When I was a young child, Nana Malika would pour me a child-sized shot of brandy when I went to visit, and then make the bottle disappear when I asked for more. I liked the way she did that, the ritual of me asking and her doing magic. A budgerigar called Sundance would fly around the kitchen with its view over the open sea, and repeat her words in an accent so exact I wasn't always sure who was speaking. To me, everything about her was special.

*

'She met him in Paris,' my mum said as she handed over the kitschy heirloom. I guess it was sometime between the wars, after Malika was married and her children were old enough to be left at home without her. By then, it was clear that her husband was not making her happy.

In the photos of Malika as a young woman, she is short with long blonde hair and lots of curves. Later, she will grow stout and cover up with sack-like, old lady dresses way before her time, and cats-eye glasses

that framed her steel-blue eyes. That's how I remember her and how she looks in all our family photos.

But I imagine my great-grandmother, Nana, Malika the queen, still beautiful in her thirties and on the train to Paris after the Great War. I think the war must have changed her—the war, the flu pandemic, all that needless awful death and then the great release of the 1920s. Women started dressing up again and cutting their long hair into pageboys and lifting their hems. There was a family business, clothing I think, in a bustling town on the Rhine. Way before the war, Malika had moved to be with her husband's people in some far-flung part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. A whole host of new national borders had sprung up between them, but now Europe was opening up again.

It was the spring of 1920-something, and the Gare De l'Est was thronging with men in linen suits and women in dresses cut above the knee. Europe was warming up so fast there was steam coming off the railway sleepers. In the rush of people, she spotted him as she climbed the stairs towards the street. They didn't need to hide the fact that they were meeting; after all, they were family.

Underneath the Art Nouveau Metropolitain sign, he wrapped her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. Bertrand was not a tall man, not like Adolf—a hulking, oversized, slightly scary person with whom she did not fit. Bertrand was blonde like Malika and her sisters, average height for a Jewish man, and lean but muscular. Today you'd say he worked out, but then it was just working. He was doing well in the family rag trade, and had he loved his wife, he may have then believed their future to be bright. There were no Nazis, yet—perhaps just an inkling, below the surface—and the economy was in recovery. Changing fashions meant that the family was positioned to benefit. But he was without Malika, and when she'd visited home before the war, it was with her husband and children in tow.

Now, they had Paris in the spring. People had stopped wearing the masks they'd used to cover their mouths and noses in the influenza years, and faces seemed almost magical in their beauty. They walked arm in arm along the Seine's left bank, where old books and new flowers tumbled out of street stalls, and Sacré Coeur watched over them from a distance.

Bertrand had taken them rooms at the Danube hotel, a small place in St Germain that today we'd call boutique. It had a courtyard filled with café tables and chairs for days like these when the elements were perfectly aligned. She ran up the wooden staircase, padded with a Persian runner held in place with brass. Their room faced the Seine, close enough that she could watch the people crossing over from left to right, the Tuileries and Louvre to choose from on the other side.

That evening, they walked the narrow lanes towards the Eiffel Tower, slipping underground to take the metro to its entrance. Malika remembered seeing pictures of it as a young child, new and painted yellow and supposed to be pulled down after 20 years. When they were older, she and Bertrand talked about it excitedly and promised they would one day ride together to its summit to see all of Paris. By then, they'd been made to understand that they were not cousins, but it was years before anyone stepped in to keep them further apart.

La Dame de Fer towered above them in curvaceous steel. They took two elevators to reach the top, standing close to the view of Paris as it shrunk before them. The further away, the more of it they saw. Malika had always imagined they would be alone as they swept up the tower's exoskeleton, but they were pushed so close to its outer edges it felt like they might fall.

'Do you think we can go into Eiffel's apartment? It's just under the radio spire,' she said.

'We can try.'

As the crowd poured out of the elevator and headed for the railings and the view, Malika and Bertrand climbed the stairs to Eiffel's apartment. 'He met Sarah Bernhardt here,' Malika said. 'And Thomas Edison,' said Bertrand, and they laughed at the memory of Bertrand's father dispensing Facts About The World when they were children. There was something special about having shared a childhood, of being the exact same age and watching the world go by from a similar point of view.

For a couple of minutes, they found themselves alone in the apartment while sunbathers stretched themselves out on the landing, and a group of dancers were being photographed against the iron-clad sky. The room had never had a bed, and it was years before it would be reconstructed. Malika stood against the wall and Bertrand held her in his arms, and for the first time, perhaps ever, she felt like she had no care in the world, not even one. All of that was beneath her.

*

I remember when Nana Malika would take me to the park at the end of her street. It looked out over the harbour, and we'd go there to make daisy chains out of dandelion flowers and look for four-leaf clovers. 'Look over here,' she told me one time, pointing to some sails in the harbour.

'What giant sails,' I said.

'They're not sails, that's the new opera house being built.' I remember not believing her—the way the sun glinted off the sweeping curves of white looked exactly like a sail boat.

'The sun did not know the beauty of its light till it was reflected off that building,' she said. 'Sometimes buildings have that quality.'

*

When they came back down to earth, Bertrand bought Malika a tiny perfume bottle from an Algerian selling souvenirs at the foot of the tower. I don't know if she bought him anything; I don't even know for sure if he survived the next war.

In December 1938, Malika took the train to Paris for the last time. Together with her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren, she boarded the Orient Express in Bucharest, and then sailed from Marseilles through Colombo to Sydney. On arrival, they tried to arrange visas for family still stranded in Europe, but Australia had effectively closed its borders.

*

Nana Malika was into dreams, and we believed her when she predicted things, like what my little sister would look like at birth when my mum didn't know she was pregnant. So, when I dreamt that Nana Malika was walking by my house a few years ago, at a time when I was struggling, I paid special attention. She was wearing her waistless blue dress with the white flowers, her grey hair rippling with straightened curls. She stopped to talk, and we sat on a slatted wooden bench like the one in her garden that overlooked the ocean. I woke up with a feeling of being deeply understood, though I don't remember anything she said.

WINTER NOCTURNE

Jan FitzGerald

Here I belong to every small stillness.
In this room, at this hour,
my thoughts float like the sails of spiders.

Having made godlets of themselves,
the rest of the world shrugs off mortality
in shy shadows of sleep.

The moon hangs mute
in its hammock of branches
as frost shoots its first arrows.

In this darkness everything watches -
embers blink as a log shifts
in the fireplace—
but this I claim for my own

the night, a book,
and the slow pleasures of age.

THE WOMAN WHO KNEW THE BEATLES

Patience Mackarness

In the packed-out Crem, the eulogy is delivered by a Catholic priest who never met you.

'They know I hate fuckin' priests,' you say. 'All that shite when we were kids, about the angel sitting on your shoulder, watching everything you fuckin' do.'

I'm in the back row, your family are in front, near the coffin. Somehow you've squeezed yourself in between me and your neighbour Alma. I'm pretty sure Alma can't see you.

The priest reads out the text your family have provided. About how you were a proud Scouser, a fierce Evertonian. About your sense of fun, your generosity, your zest for life.

'Why not *lust*?' you ask, and I remember other stories you told me, sitting on your doorstep on summer evenings with our wine; you always added, 'But don't tell me kids!' I snort. Alma thinks it's a sob, and murmurs, 'I know, love'.

As we file out past the next funeral party, waiting at the door, Fats Domino sings *Blueberry Hill*, one of your favourites. You smile and sway with the music. Inside the Crem I didn't notice what you were wearing, but as we come out into early-spring sunshine I see you're in full Sixties flower-child regalia, miniskirt, beads and all. You were young at just the right time. You saw the Beatles at the Cavern. You claim you nearly hooked up with Paul McCartney once.

You stop dead. 'What happened to *Red Red Wine?* I fuckin' told them I wanted that played at me funeral.'

'I suppose there wasn't enough time.'

You humph and light a ciggy. The smoke makes me cough. You chainsmoked when we first met; I hated it, but it was worth it to be your friend, get into your world. When your foot went cold you stopped smoking, because chronic vascular disease ran in your family. After the Motor Neurone diagnosis, you said, 'Well, at least I can have me fuckin' ciggies again.'

At the wake, in your favourite pub, people laugh and drink too much, and tell their own stories about you. There are forests of empty glasses on the tables, smells of stale wine and beer. I sit for a while with Alma, then with your daughter and granddaughters. You're got up for a night out now, fake diamonds nestling in leathery fake-tan cleavage, sequins, layers of slap. I'm from the prissier south, and always envied you the Liverpool Mother's Day routine, when generations of females go out on the town together. They start at lunchtime, drink and dance all day and all night, totter home in the small hours, holding each other up.

Your son tells the priest a memorial plaque is planned, in the Garden of Remembrance. It will feature a carven cross, perhaps some lilies. You drain your glass of red wine, get up to leave. Your last words, growing fainter, are, 'At least it's not a fuckin' angel!'

DARK SIDE OF THE TREE

Gregory Piko

The dark side of the tree, with its appaloosa mottle,
bogong stipple. Its creamy ochre and rust landscape
interrupted by unexplored canyons of damp.
The lower reaches covered in ramshackle layers
of shredded cardboard, arcing away from the trunk

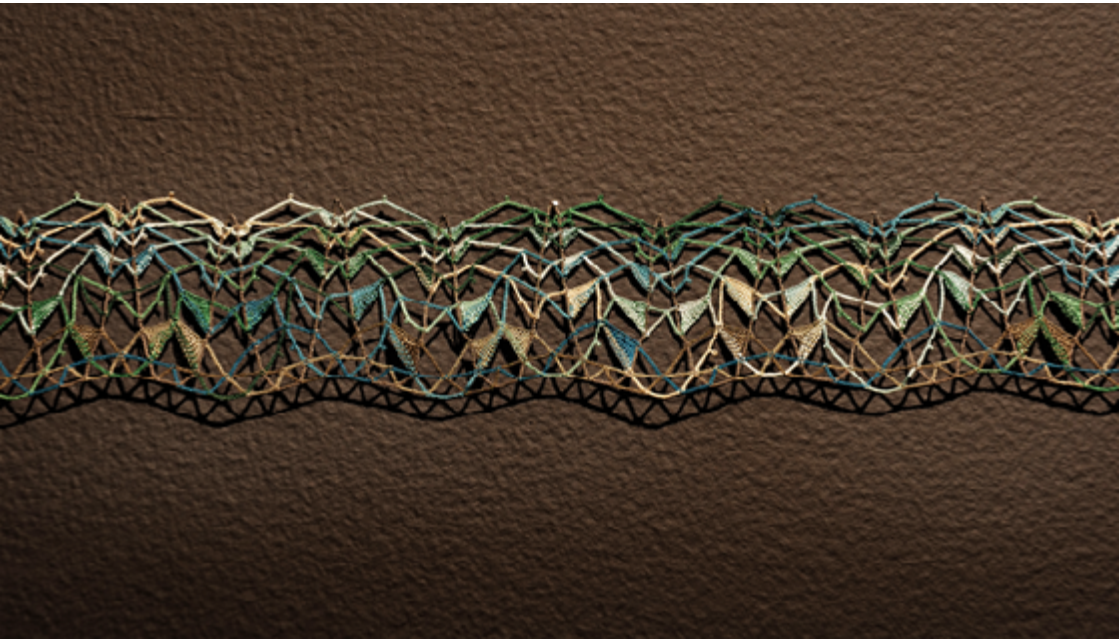
like crepe paper streamers, posters flaking from a wall,
the softly drooping sides of a freshly peeled banana.
Unidentified fungal spores. Pupae navigating some obscure
stage of life cloaked in cotton pillowcases. Six-legged
armoured vehicles huddled together, out of harm's way.

Out of the path of that sticky stream of sap, shining
cordon of molasses, that treacherous trickle of Tarzan's Grip.
A deadly habitat where a bird can cling effortlessly to the bark
with its burr-pronged claws, as compelling as Velcro feet,
while its killing beak searches out high protein life forms.

A place perpetually without sunlight or warmth, or pity. An
inhospitable place, where no human has ever set foot.

Curious Threads

Creative Writers respond to IOTA21



Edited by Danielle O'Leary and Rachel Robertson

John Curtin Gallery | Curtin University

INTRODUCTION: CURIOUS THREADS

Danielle O'Leary

In September 2021, a select group of writers—postgraduate writing students and academics from Curtin University and the University of Western Australia—were invited to respond to the works of the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial Australia (IOTA) exhibition at the John Curtin Gallery. This was third in a series of 'Curtin Writers Respond' events which involved a public reading of chosen works in October.

IOTA21 exhibited artists, makers and crafted works from a selection of countries around the Indian Ocean rim. From September to November 2021, IOTA21 featured curated exhibitions at the John Curtin Gallery and the Fremantle Arts Centre along with a selection of metropolitan and regional satellite exhibitions. All exhibitions had an overarching theme: 'Curiosity and Rituals of the Everyday'. It stems from the idea that while we increasingly rely on technology, the emotional value of craft and the hand-made for everyday rituals is ever increasing. IOTA21 provided insight into the importance of craft by studio artists and traditional artisans working to uphold the value of the hand-made in contemporary daily life.

In a time when we cannot travel freely, this exhibition allowed our writers the chance to be in other places. With a few steps, we could move with ease between Kenya, India, Mozambique, Sri Lanka and the Cocos Keeling Islands. The exhibition offered us a longed-for sense of distance: a sense of estrangement from our own everyday. This sense of curiosity lingered as we moved around the exhibition and it carries through the responses that you will read in this collection.

Ekphrasis, the tradition of writing in response to artworks, usually involves the transcription of a viewer's experience into writing. This feature developed when we asked writers to attend the exhibition

respond to what and how they choose. There were no restrictions to particular artworks or in form, style or genre.

This collection for *Meniscus* offers an array of reactions to the exhibition: some speak of family, some long for travel, some reflect on nature and the body. What unites all pieces is how the exhibition offered the opportunity for insight and a sense of curiosity about lives beyond our own.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the John Curtin Gallery and Samantha Smith for supporting this project, especially the public reading event in October. We thank the gallery and the artists for their kind permission to reproduce the artwork published here. Thank you to the *Meniscus* editors for allowing us to showcase this work. Lastly, we thank the writers for participating in 'Curious Threads'. For more information on IOTA21, please see: https://indianoceancrafttriennial.com/.

Image on page 107: Pierre Fouché, *His Foam White Arms*, (South Africa), 2015, cotton & wood, 24 x 640 x 7 cm. All images courtesy of John Curtin Gallery.

KNEAD/SHOULDER/THUMB/DOUGH

Catherine Noske

She kneads flat knuckles into the dough, leans round-shouldered and drags it elastic across the bowl. Gathering and shaping. Deep imprints mark each pass of her thumbs.

The bowl is plastic, orange, base rimmed with dirt. It is well-used, well-loved, has scratches in its bottom from countless forks scrambling, knives scraping. These are the details I remember. We are camping—a weekend spent on the bush block, half a kilometre down the road from home. We have the tractor and trailer loaded with gear, we have the ponies with us, a goat has followed. We have a tent and mats, a fry-pan, bacon and potatoes, tin-foil and this bowl, flour, water, oil, salt. Condiments for damper: butter, honey, jam. Matches and newspaper, scavenged kindling and a few lumps of redwood. In the gathering dusk, fire is both cooking and ritualistic. We are running feral, all gumboots and excitement. In the morning, exhausted, my mother will bundle us wholesale into the trailer and we will trundle home.

Kneads, my mother kneads: flat knuckles and round-shouldered over the dough. Squatting beside her, I am drawn incessantly to the wells left by her thumbs.

*

My mother kneads a thumb into the muscle of my shoulder, tugs at it like a rope. I've seen her do the same to a horse, loosen the muscle from the shoulder, great doughy roll of flesh like elastic.

I am fourteen or fifteen, sore, tired, emotionally overwhelmed, and standing in the kitchen: my mother's hands are putting me back together. This is her work, here I feel her authority—relieving pain, her hands are strong, deft. Other times, I have watched her perform surgery,

and wondered at the different person she becomes. She does not belong to me—a hard lesson for a teenage girl. She is empowered by her work—an easier concept. This version of her fascinates me.

Now, over the phone, she complains the joints in her fingers swell. She has not stopped working, and I cannot imagine her doing so. It is strange to hear her complain of age, but warm, as well. I can appreciate, from the space of distance and time, that my mother is human. It no longer frightens me, I am no longer jealous of her vocation, no longer need her exclusivity. But I miss her hands. Sometimes I worry that I will not recognise them when I see her again, but then I look down, and I see them in my own. Her hands, indefinite and renewed; my own slowly aging.

Standing in our kitchen, her thumbs knead again and again, deep into my shoulder, and slowly my muscles soften to dough.

*

Reaching into the fire, my mother thumbs tentatively at the dough, tests its heat bird-quick through the ash-marked foil. Leans forward, knocks with one knuckle, a question in her shoulders.

Ready? She will smile. This is the scene I imagine: my daughter, her body as I remember mine, tight and hot with the excitement of childhood, squatting beside my mother, stick in hand to drag the damper from the fire. My daughter, fingernails rimmed with the dirt of that country. This is the scene I long for, from our isolation—my daughter's deep embeddedness in family. This is the scene I hope for, from the midst of anxiety—a world and a childhood for my daughter which is unchanged from my own. A fragile desire.

The dough is cooked, solid, hollow under her knuckle. My daughter knocks it free with a stick, her arm stretched for a moment straight from shoulder to thumb, queen with her sceptre, amazon with her spear.

*

My mother wields the shovel, heaps dirt over ashes. We have eaten, we are quiet, we have been contemplating the fire and now my sister is yawning, rubbing her eyes. My mother is cleaning up, clearing up, hustling us into the tent, to the gathered closeness of sleeping-bags, bodies together in canvas. I watch as a lone, doughy crust smoulders and disappears. Is this memory or imagined? Again I feel her thumbs at my shoulders, the kneading pressure of her love. It holds to me like clay.

Inspired by Madhvi Subrahmanian, *Upla (cow dung)*, 2021, porcelain, dowel, woven basket, ipad and video (duration 3:17 mins), 220 x 620 cms.

Subrahmanian places her work as an invocation of the handprints of women, marks made in everyday rituals. This work responds by reimagining the poetic structure of a sestina in prose form, repeating a sequence of four words across its four parts.

THIS BLUE

Gemma Nisbet

And so I fell in love with a color—in this case, the color blue—as if falling under a spell, a spell I fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns.
'Bluets', Maggie Nelson

1.

I try to remember where I have seen this blue. It is Yves Klein blue, but it is also the sky through the heavy tint of the windscreen on a February afternoon.

It is this bolt of fabric on the wall of the gallery, pulling me in.

It is the blue of the deep parts of the ocean, viewed from the sand dune across from the house where I grew up, on the mornings an easterly flattened the swell to glass.

It is the indeterminate section of water that I could see from my perch atop the dune: the Blue Hole, the part of the beach that was always off limits.

2.

The blue of the fabric is also the blue of the house that once stood on a prominent block not far from the street where we lived, its Art Deco roofline the curved crest of a breaking wave. When I saw it, as we drove north along the highway, I always knew we were almost home.

The house had been white, once. But the story goes that sometime in the early 90s, a new owner—a local restauranteur invariably described in the papers as 'colourful'—was refused permission by the council to make

alterations. In a show of bloody-minded defiance, he painted it a shade of blue so electric it seemed to hum like the power lines after heavy rain.

The house became a much-debated landmark, a physical manifestation of a certain nonconformist spirit in the suburbs of a city which still proudly identified as an overgrown country town.

Then, when I was in high school, the Blue House was sold.

3.

I read on the interpretive plaque that Gupta made *The Sky is Mine* after seeing an Yves Klein retrospective by chance in Paris.

This reminds me of a passage in Maggie Nelson's book, *Bluets*, about the people who often ask her why she became obsessed with the colour blue. 'I never know how to respond,' she writes. 'We don't get to choose what or whom we love.'

4.

The story about the Blue Hole was that a nun had drowned there, and a man, who was trying to save her. A racehorse as well, or two or three. It had been filled in with old cars, or blown up, or both.

Those were the stories, anyway.

I imagined it as a whirlpool that would suck you in and trap you under the reef. But I never dared get close enough to find out.

5.

The plaque also tells of how Yves Klein famously, symbolically, 'signed' the sky as a young man. 'The blue sky is my first artwork,' he later said. (Imagine having that confidence.)

Klein referred to his monochrome paintings as 'leftovers from the creative process, the ashes'. When I first read this, I think of a burning

away of superfluity, but I later learn he meant they were physical traces of his ideas, 'of that which the eye could not see'.

In *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson writes about the theories of Ancient Greek philosophers who speculated that we can visually perceive objects through some emission or 'ray' given off either by the object or our eyes. 'Plato split the difference,' she notes, 'and postulated that a 'visual fire' burns between our eyes and that which they behold.'

6.

Later, on the drive back from the exhibition, four of us will talk about the pieces we felt drawn to, each of us strongly attracted to different ones for different reasons.

In the backseat of the car, two of us will talk about what we'll write and the form it might take.

'I'm scared of poetry,' one of us will say, rejecting that possibility.

'I'm scared of everything,' the other will reply.

7.

On the day they knocked down the Blue House, my best friend at the time—a girl whose rebellious streak I admired but would never share—went with her siblings to salvage a piece of the rubble.

Historian David Lowenthal writes that 'what was purposely saved or later found is seldom more than a minuscule fraction of all that was there'.

Yet, as design critic Laura Houseley suggests, 'a souvenir need only offer us a glimpse of a place, a tiny fragment of it, from which a whole experience can be accessed'.

And so, even now, I regret not having souvenired a piece of that cobalt-flecked concrete for myself.

8.

In the gallery, I feel compelled to touch the fabric, to feel its sheen. Standing very close, I notice a small run in its warp and weft, a tiny error that seems to reveal the hand of its maker.

Its smell, too—unexpected, like straw. Like something old and dry, but also like something living.

I think of standing on the sand dune under the ultramarine sky on those summer mornings, the waft of the inland wind somehow similar.

I continue to feel drawn to that stretch of coast. But these days, when I drive past, the only reminder of what was is a boundary wall, still painted that buzzing, electric blue.

Inspired by Gaurav Jai Gupta, *The Sky Is Mine: Handwoven Engineered Snow Silk Saree,* 2020, silk with metal thread, 550 x 125 cm.

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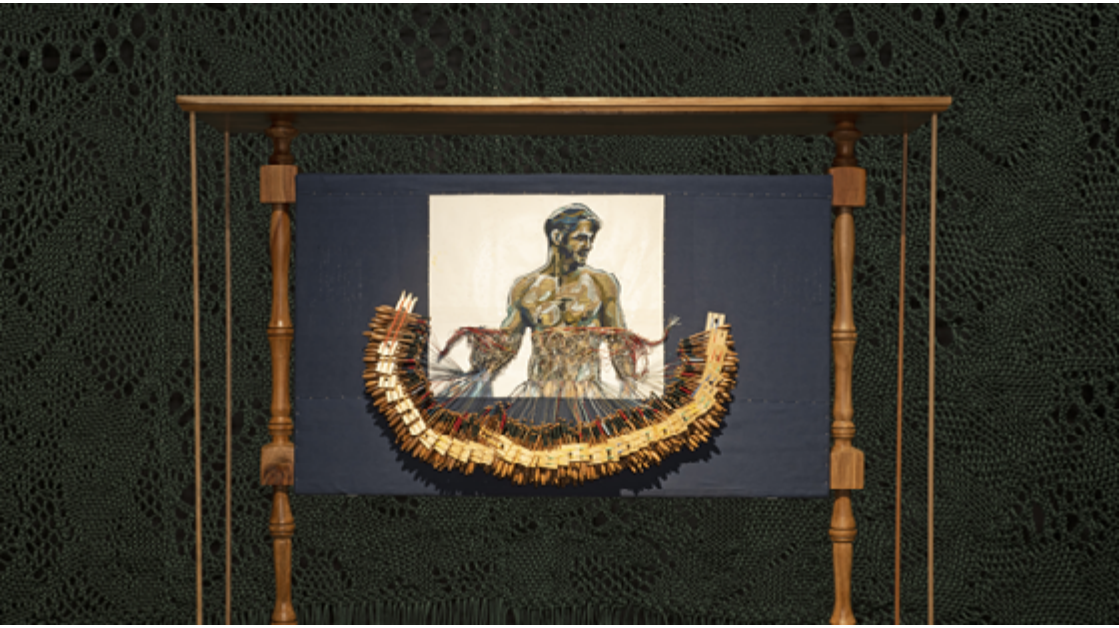


Pierre Fouché, *The Little Binche Peacock and Other Utopian Dreams*, 350 x 490 x 250 cm (Ropework Diorama, 6 panels); 192 x 51 x 53 cm (silk lace pillow display). All images courtesy of John Curtin Gallery. Photography: Haydn Phipps.

THAT HE SHOULD MOVE

Daniel Juckes

is certain: he seems one
snip from chaos—an
approximation spilt out, drawn
taut, but coiled; brimming;
brimful; tender—a community
laced through threaded bones.
Or even an ocean, slicked,
but marked by shipping lanes
and pin-stuck points of origin.
Now, though, as if lichen
made of lace, morphing
while watched into the
cogs and strings of a piano;
into teeth; into clockwork.
Threatening to turn a peacocked eye
animatronically upon you; to
look, with raw and lucid
nakedness, delicately assertive,
like some viscera of art,
his erotics of making evident.

I spent an hour
or two with the
pictures of him
I had, trying to
make him
move. I sank
his face into
apps and
swung it
through
websites I
did not trust,
because I
wanted to see
him shape
towards me—
this oil-toned
man, made
uncanny
through stillness.

Inspired by Pierre Fouché, *The Little Binche Peacock and Other Utopian Dreams*, 350 x 490 x 250 cm (Ropework Diorama, 6 panels); 192 x 51 x 53 cm (silk lace pillow display display).

PORTRAIT OF THE QUEER BODY AS DIFFICULT LACE

Madison Godfrey

//

a utopia where I am lace choreographed to look like rope,
instead of rope choreographed to look like lace.
something masculine made of feminine materials /
something feminine made of masculine materials.
a skyscraper with stained glass windows is not necessarily a church.
a forest cabin full of fax machines, daydreams of business meetings.
what I mean is, the materials that make us
do not form metaphors, until they are woven together, and placed in front of audiences
who are hungry to meet themselves in untouchable rooms.

//

I want to stick my fingers through you like a ripe
afternoon. the gaps between your teeth are
songs without lyrics. is my desire simply
a relocation of mirrors into inconvenient
corridors? desperate to collage masc-
ulinity over my reflection, I will contort
myself into craft materials. gazing at figures
who gaze away from the peacocks
which rest their beautiful, heavy heads
upon manhood's open palm.

//
gazers often presume the politeness of lace.
disregard disobedience, how absence gossips
with light: an architecture of insinuation.
my body brushes the weaver's hand as I sit behind the tapestry.
his attention turns my tattoos into tiny collaborations.

//
what is masculinity if not a bunch of small needles that could complete
something beautiful if they were held for a little longer? what is
the queer body if not an unfinished utopia? what is my bare torso if not an
architecture of shadows allowed on display only during specific hours?

//
of course, I am sitting in front of a shirtless man, writing about his absent hands.

//
in an adjacent room, women perform a procession of armoured selves. but I am busy choking on my misplaced masculinity, like a sob in public space. a faucet I did not know was loose until the sink started kissing the kitchen floor.

//
the staff member behind the front desk asks if you'd like to spray yourself with the same scent that baptises the bottom of the bobbin lace each morning. she'll suggest you spray it again on a square of cardboard: regeneration slides into your pocket. today is singed but tomorrow stains the air around you. your private heavens are a scent that strangers notice but cannot identify. you, who desire dramatic invisibility. you, who have posed on the windowsills of dark rooms where strangers peered in and said they saw nothing. what is a queer body if not a memory that nobody else can see, even after you describe it in detail? here, rope suspends disbelief, becomes difficult lace which, like longing, is both unfinished and unfinishable. a scent that is always already dissipating in the exact moment it is sprayed.

//

Fouché describes this weaving technique as 'near inhuman craftsmanship' and I consider the queer body as beyond human, as tender monstrosity: a fantasy that fantasises about itself. when I desire the man with a peacock in his hand, I am foraging for myself in him. if any part of me is related to rebirth, let it be the family member who disrupts a dinner table. the cousin who drowns aloud. what is queerness if not rope playing dress-ups with lace? what is an inherited utopia, if not a shadow that reimagines my skin as stained glass?

Inspired by Pierre Fouché's *The Little Binche Peacock and Other Utopian Dreams,* 350 x 490 x 250 cm (Ropework Diorama, 6 panels); 192 x 51 x 53 cm (silk lace pillow display).

Works cited

The quote 'near inhuman craftsmanship' in the final stanza of the poem is from Fouché's Artist Statement (Pierre Fouché'. 'Artist Statement: The Little Binche Peacock and Other Utopian Dreams, 2019.' *Pierre Fouché*, n.d. http://www.pierrefouche.net/THE-LITTLE-BINCHE-PEACOCK-2019.php).

HIS FOAM WHITE ARMS

Lydia Trethewey

speak this story
with the bite of a pin
holding the pattern together.
tell me, without words
with your fingers in
cotton intricacies
and loose hunger,
pick the syllables
from between the teeth
of a frill shark.
a sailor is seduced
by the language of
salt
left on the lips
afterwards,
and brine-washed throats
a mess hall rough like the bone
of a cuttlefish and soft like lace
abreast, he escapes
as a limpet, clings
to the littoral rush
of tide and wind,
hopeful
unspools his longing
in the small scales
of a braided
rhythm, cut with the

glint of nails,
white crests
kelp-brown
hull-green
and blue, blue, blue.
the tickle of spray
on his unshaven cheek
how many days at sea
before he falls for the
undulating ribcage
of an ocean which breathes,
an ocean which speaks to him
a promise so deep
he cannot resist
ocean in the guise
of a young man.
their love,
ornamented
like the coarse skin
of a sea urchin, red welts
from the lash
of waves
in his wake, the sailor
writhes last lights
glimpses
a silver sheen,
ocean's flesh like silk
sheets,
a demand to be touched.
behind shut eyes
the sailor twines dreams
from pillow-lace

as his lover rocks him to sleep
in foam-white arms,
the peal of surging swells
knock the sides of
his skull,
a stowaway desire,
the ocean
wants to be
inside
his lungs,
water-logged,
and he can think
of nothing
more absolute,
more perfect,
than the seamless descent
of a body submerged.

Inspired by Pierre Fouché, *His Foam White Arms*, (South Africa), 2015, cotton & wood, 24 x 640 x 7 cm.

Uday Singh, *Cows*, 2021, glazed ceramic, 50 pieces, dimensions variable. All images courtesy of John Curtin Gallery. Photography: Sue-Lyn Moyle.

COWS, COWS, COWS

Loretta Tolnai

Our day trip to the Taj begins at 5 a.m. in a New Delhi hotel lobby where I meet up with my Melbourne-based co-trainer Andy. He towers over most everyone in India and has a mane of blonde hair and sweet body odour. He and I laugh a lot, and our participants say he reminds them of Steve Irwin. Andy's already been to the 'Taj' (as he and other tourists tend to call it) and he tells me he's been tasked to find a marble jewellery box for his wife for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and which he can only get in Agra, a city on the way to the Taj.

Our driver comes up to the desk and bringing his palms together he makes a slight bow and introduces himself with his full Hindi name, 'Please sir and madam … you must call me Raj.' He escorts us to the hotel's shiny black limousine with its leather upholstered seats, new car smell and an open esky full of plastic sealed bottles of water for the journey. I feel a pang of embarrassed self-consciousness and have an internal conversation about how tourists contribute to the economy.

In Delhi traffic the drivers follow 'Rafferty's rules'. Cars and trucks and buses drift between lanes, dogs wander on and off the footpath, people run between traffic when there's a window of a couple of seconds. I will never attempt to drive in India. Soon we hit the Yamuna expressway and at our insistence Raj turns up the volume on his feel-good Bollywood collection. He tells us that it's 165 km of motorway and three lanes of mostly straight road. I've read somewhere that the road was built for the Commonwealth Games to get tourists to the Taj in just four hours. I wonder how many hours it took before the road was built. For most of the four hours the road is empty except for the occasional black or white limousine or tour bus. The road undulates up and down and after three and a half hours of hypnotic road trip I feel a bit dizzy.

As the car starts to slow, Raj turns the music down and announces that the Taj is around half an hour's drive away so we will stop to do some shopping. Andy can get his marble jewellery box. As I look around, I take in Agra which is a modern city with a medieval feel. I notice a horse pulling a cart piled high with car tyres alongside a heavy-duty truck with an open back with dozens of young men crammed together on their way to or from a construction site.

As we drive into Agra, the local traffic fills the streets. Pick-up trucks decorated with Hindi script and streamers, battered buses with passengers spilling out of the open doors, and more horses. On the pavement in front of artisan shops people resting in the shade of shanty town like shops flanked in wreaths of plastic-coloured flowers selling magazines and plastic bottles of water. I notice a few cows here and there. Some are on the road, many are on the footpath, some lying on the ground with their front legs tucked under their bodies. I lower my electric window to take in the cacophony of sounds: car horns, bike bells, motor bikes revving, tyres screeching. Raj asks me to put the window back up to keep the cool air in and the flies out.

We pull up at the front door of a souvenir market that is, according to Raj, the best in Agra in price, quality and service. Raj tells us that each level of the market has a different offering—one floor of silk pashminas and saris, one floor of marble boxes made by local artisans, and one floor that sells handcrafted Persian and oriental style wool rugs. A man in a suit comes out with a tray with Coke buddies with straws. I haven't seen them since I was a kid.

I decide to stay in the airconditioned car with Raj and hydrate on bottled water. I look over to the doors and stuck to the glass is a faded photograph of Princess Diana sitting in front of the Taj. I've seen the same photographs stuck to other shop fronts as we've driven into Agra. It's a familiar image. Diana is wearing a fire engine red jacket, white chiffon top, purple skirt and pearls. She is sitting on a white marble bench, her knees together, slightly leaning at an angle, her head tilted

slightly to one side. Her hands fidgeting on her lap. One of the most famous women in the world, sitting in front of the temple of love and devotion on her own.

Andy must be trying to negotiate the best deal possible, so I decide to do some journaling. I haven't written anything other than customer service training manuals for months, so I think I'll write what I notice in Agra. I reach into my bum bag, or my fanny pack as Andy, who was born in America, calls it, and pull out a hotel pen.

In the seat pocket in front of me is a copy of the *Hindustan Times* with areas of blank space around the printed stories. I think it will be okay to write on the newspaper considering the day is already half over. I start writing a homage to Diana when I notice a chocolate brown cow wearing a colourful bead necklace. The cow has stopped at the side of the glass doors as though guarding the entrance. I watch the cow flick the occasional fly off herself but is otherwise still, just watching. I wonder what she is thinking.

In the blank spaces of the newspaper around the front-page stories I begin to write an Ode to the Cow. Or perhaps it's more a short poem of what the Cow sees as I sit there observing her and the scene around her. I am interrupted by Andy tapping on the window to wake up the driver. Andy has a rolled rug tucked under his arm and after Raj puts it in the boot and we are on our way I ask him how he plans to get it back to Melbourne.

'Crikey, Loz,' he says. 'You know I actually have no bloody idea,' and starts texting his wife to explain why he is coming home with a carpet and not a box.

As we drive away from Agra I see a crowd of people standing together at the side of the road with a cow with a golden coloured coat decorated with a necklace of bright orange and yellow flowers. I ask Raj why all those women and children are standing next to her and some behind the cow. His eyes look at me in the rear vision mirror and says, 'Madam, the

best way to cross the road in India is to follow a cow because the traffic will all stop for the cow.'

Andy stops texting and says, 'There you go my friend. Just follow the cow in India and you'll be okay.' It occurs to me that up until then, I've never attempted to cross a road in India, or really paid much attention to the cows.

Andy and I spend around an hour wandering around the grounds of the Taj swapping mobile phones to take photos of each other and of the curated gardens which in some ways are more visually spectacular than the building itself. Inside the Taj we are both overcome with a drop of temperature and the silence. Visitors including us all whisper, but most people just stand and look up at the ceiling and observe its sense of stillness. My thoughts go back to Diana and I wonder if she came inside the Taj as I've only ever seen the photo of her sitting outside on the bench.

When we arrive back at the hotel, I sit at the dark oakwood desk in my room, take a sheet of the hotel stationery and rewrite 'What the cow saw'. I fold up the *Hindustan Times* and press 9 on the desk phone for room service. As the phone is trilling, I notice a colourful flyer in the brochure stand with various Hindi temples and places of worship in Delhi. I pluck it out and it is a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi and a quote: '*Cow protection to me is not mere protection of the cow. It means protection of all lives that is helpless and weak in the world.*' When the restaurant picks up, I order the palak paneer and dahl.

During my return trips to India, I paid more attention to the cows, how they slowed the traffic, and how people followed them from one side of the road to the other. One day I plan to return to the Taj and to Agra, the city dedicated to the world's most famous monument and to one of the world's most famous women.

A few days ago I rummaged through my drawer of keepsakes from India—ripped luggage tags, a key ring with a little carved Ganesh, hotel

pens and boarding passes. I found the sheet of hotel stationery where I'd rewritten the short piece I wrote in Agra.

Agra India, 27 September 2015

What the Cow saw

A girl with a red dot between her eyebrows holds her mother's hand

A boy sweeps dust to the gutter

Boys and men spill from a bus window

A dog with one leg missing lies in the sun

A black bird pecks at cracks on the ground

A goat is on its way somewhere

A dog limping to shade

A boar shooed away by a man with a stick

A woman in a yellow sari in my shadow

A pale man carries a rolled carpet.

For now, we can't travel to India to see cows or visit the Taj or have our photo taken on the famous marble bench. However, through Uday's collection of stoneware cows I can remember, and maybe you can imagine. The sacred cows of India and their bodies of lumps and humps, their skirts of flesh dangling like petticoats, their sympathetic gaze. Cows watching you and watching one another, cows eating, resting, scratching, tongues licking and tails flicking. Silent observers and silent witnesses to life in India.

When Uday was a young boy he learned that the cow sustains human life through nutritious milk, dung for heating and insulation, even medicine when he was sick. Now all these years later Uday dedicates his life work to the creature that he has always seen and always noticed. A creature which is both ordinary and extraordinary, a symbol of the domestic and the divine.

Inspired by Uday Singh, *Cows*, 2021, glazed ceramic, 50 pieces, dimensions variable.

Yee I-Lann, 2021, *Pangkis*, a single channel video of performers from the Tagaps Dance Theatre wearing the woven sculpture, '7 Headed Lalandau Hat'. All images courtesy of John Curtin Gallery. Photography: Huntwo Studio.

SEVEN-PART STRING

Thor Kerr

Rhythmic prayer encircled a narrow apartment tower in Jakarta, waving in through grey windows to the folks within. In a small, drab apartment on the fourteenth floor, this prayer found a young man; sweaty, shirtless and propped up in bed. The prayer toyed with him as he fumbled to copy alphanumeric code within the screen of a mobile phone. The prayer swept into a lower pitch, sending slow vibrations through the inflamed membrane of his skull, squeezing his brain, blurring his vision, and messing his desperate attempt to join a conference call.

Novi sat up, drank from a glass on the bedside table then adjusted the pillowed prop to better see the phone he clutched landscape on his belly. He touched open the videoconference link then pulled on headphones, finding relief in momentary silence.

Agus came on screen, holding a baby, 'anyway, it's all over social media. Novi, hi, good you could join us. We were getting worried we would never see the money.'

'Sorry guys.'

'Hope the *dangdut* was worth it.' Okto danced his shoulders.

'Gentlemen, to business.' Agus adjusted the baby's swaddle. 'Desi, take us through the protocol for this transaction.'

Desi cleared his throat then spoke clearly and deliberately to the six other men in the video call. The practised rounded vowels of Desi's pronunciation matched his wrinkle-free shirt and cleanly-parted hair. 'In this meeting's agenda, three resolutions have been proposed. If we unanimously agree to all of them, each of us will send our codes during this meeting to Juni.'

Desi gestured towards screen with two hands, palm up, as if passing a platter. 'Juni has several important responsibilities. Juni will combine all the codes in correct order to reconstitute our private Bitcoin key. As, I'm sure you recall, we own a thousand coins in total, reflecting the All or Nothing club's five-thousand-US-dollar investment in Bitcoin when its price crashed to five dollars. That was ten years ago today.'

'Pity we didn't wait two more months for it to hit the two-dollar-fifty floor.' Septimus, chin on hand, goaded. 'Nail-biting, hey Juni. Wah, almost lost half our savings! But you held fast my brother. Thank God you didn't know how to sell Bitcoin.'

Desi's head shook violently as he muttered inaudibly. He took a deep breath, then lifted a white page and read, 'For each of our investments of one-thousand-and-eight Aussie dollars, we can expect a return in the range of US six to seven million with the Bitcoin price hovering around forty-five-thousand US dollars. Juni will send the private key through encrypted means to the institutional buyer in Singapore, who will transfer payment directly to the US dollar investment account that I have set up for us in Singapore.'

'Good to have friends in high places,' said Septimus.

Desi continued, 'Juni, please confirm your understanding that this process is correct.'

'Yes.' Juni came on screen in pyjamas surrounded by an orange Bladerunner backdrop. 'That is correct.'

Desi typed, then looked up at screen. 'From the total proceeds in our Singapore account, a small amount will be withheld for our Mount Kinabalu investor summit. The remaining balance will be divided in seven then transferred immediately to your respective nominated accounts. It is a clear-cut process. Thank you, everyone, for promptly returning the sale-and-transfer agreements. All have been received, indicating that everyone is aboard to sell the Bitcoins today as we had agreed verbally at the All or Nothing gathering in Perth in 2011.'

'I'm on board, but ...' Septimus winced as he rubbed a scarred hand backwards through thick stubble. 'I'm wondering about the clause in the sale agreements we signed that gives the buyer a 3% discount on the current Coinbase exchange price.'

'Coin exchanges have a cost.' Juni's eyes rolled. 'And a risk in cashing out. This transaction is not small change.'

Okto came on screen. 'I think we would be happier if we knew who the buyer was. This is not like, back in the day, when you transferred Bitcoin for little bags of rare, exotic weed.'

'Man, what is wrong with you.' Juni looked skyward, clenching fists. 'Thanks for reminding me why I got the hell out of Perth. I can't wait to be free of this. Okto, if you don't destroy the video after this transaction closes, I'm coming after you.' Juni mouthed an expletive.

'Brothers,' Julian spoke slowly as he came on screen with a scruffy grid-filled whiteboard in the background. 'Brothers, we have a bond that can't be broken. Perhaps, Desi can provide some information about the buyer so we can be more comfortable with the transaction.'

'OK.' Desi came on screen. 'The most I can say is that the company is a subsidiary under Temasek. This is the safest way to complete such a large Bitcoin sale. Without the discount margin it was not possible to get a sale contract ahead of the transaction. This contract has a confidentiality clause, so I can't say anything else except that it has taken me weeks to negotiate. So, please give me a break here.'

'Thanks Desi,' said Julian, leaning into screen.

Desi breathed deeply and paused for further comment, but none came. 'Before we do anything, we should formalise the resolutions we made ten years ago at our smoky gathering in Perth.'

'Can't wait,' said Juni.

Desi glanced at notes on his page. 'Resolution One, we use some of the sale proceeds to meet in Sabah so Julian can guide us up the slippery

slopes, as promised, to the summit of Mount Kinabalu. It is impossible to do that this year because of COVID-19. However, I propose we reserve one-hundred-and-forty-thousand US dollars from the Bitcoin sale to pay first-class travel, meals and accommodation for the mountain trek on a mutually agreeable anniversary date.'

A smile returned, completing Desi's amicable demeanour. 'One seventh of this, twenty-thousand dollars, could be a cost deducted from any of your individual tax liabilities arising from the Bitcoin transaction. Gentlemen, please vote Yes or No on the poll appearing on your screens to confirm whether you support this resolution.' Desi squinted at the screen.

Novi blinked sweat from his eyes, then touched 'Yes' on screen.

Desi nodded while registering the votes. 'Thank you, all, we have unanimous support for Resolution One.' After pausing for effect, Desi continued: 'Resolution Two is that we undertake to do what we agreed on the day after our 2011 gathering. That is, each of us would destroy all copies of the nine-minute video of us dancing at the All or Nothing gathering. This video of us as unruly students was to provide motivation for each of us to maintain securely our respective parts of the alphanumeric string comprising the private key for our Bitcoins. But after today's transaction, it will no longer serve any useful purpose; quite the opposite in fact. So, do each of us undertake to destroy and do everything in our power to destroy each and every copy of that video once your share of net proceeds from the Bitcoin sale has been transferred to your nominated account?'

'What a tragedy to lose that video memory. Such good-looking fellas, we were.' Okto flexed his biceps. 'So free, so wasted, so easy.'

'I'm publishing the poll now, vote Yes or No whether you undertake to destroy all copies of that video.' Desi concentrated on screen. 'Six votes are in favour. One person is yet to vote. Come on. For some of us, the existence of that video is rather stressful. Oh come on, Okto.'

'It's not me. I've already voted, yes.' Okto laughed. 'I'm so insulted. Must be another deviant.'

'Septimus,' several of them shouted as their faces flashed on screen. 'Where are you? Hey, dancing queen? Septimus, you deviant! Come on!'

'Sorry, staff issue. I'm back.' Returning to seat, Septimus flicked a dishcloth off his shoulder. 'What are we doing?'

'Voting on whether to destroy the video after receiving the transfer.'

'Oh, yes.' Septimus frowned as he read the resolution. 'You should see my vote ... on screen, now!'

Desi returned to screen. 'Confirmed. Seven votes affirmative. We are all resolved to destroy and do everything in our power to destroy every copy of that video once the transfer share has been received. Now, before voting on the third and final resolution of this meeting on the sale of Bitcoin, there is Agus' discussion item in the agenda. Agus?

'Thanks Desi.' Agus came on screen without the baby. 'I think it is important that we go around the group, and find out what everyone intends to do with the Bitcoin proceeds.'

Agus paused to pick at baby dribble on his shirt. 'Anyway, back when we were students, I didn't think the fifty dollars a week I struggled to set aside for the All or Nothing club from stacking shelves would lead to much, let alone to six million dollars or more. I am grateful to Juni for suggesting Bitcoin and aggressively convincing us to invest the whole club's fund in it even as the price fell through the floor. Thanks Juni. You're a legend. Also, thanks Desi for organising the banking and tax advice for the pending transaction. Thanks everyone else for being solid, *mantap*, brothers who supported each other as broke, and not so broke, students in Perth. I should also add, thanks for leading me astray back then. It was a rich and fulfilling experience. OK, let's go around the group to learn what we intend to do with all that money! I'll go first. Yes, I will quit my factory audit job and buy a nice piece of land. Then move my family from Batam back to Sumatra. There, I will pretend to farm

or invest in a cycling shop. Novi, you were last to join the meeting, how about you?'

'Easy *Mas*. I'll buy land in the new capital city for my municipal-area-network business.' Novi smiled and mumbled. 'I will be an Indonesian hero for building the sovereign network. Be another oligarch with a pet tiger.'

'You have talked about this for years, but hasn't the capital-city project been killed by COVID-19?' Agus waited for a response. None came. 'Never mind, Novi, from your isolated plot in Kalimantan it will be a short flight to our party at Mount Kinabalu. Who would like to speak next?'

'I will keep doing what I'm doing,' said Desi. 'Six million doesn't go very far in Singapore investing, where I enjoy my career.'

'Yes,' Septimus nodded. 'Like Desi, I will keep doing what I'm doing. Run my little restaurant in Perth, but buy the property instead of paying rent to a landlord. Maybe buy the adjacent buildings, and become a greedy landlord too. I tell you, things are booming here.'

'Without a partner and kids, you'll own half the restaurants in Vic Park before you're dead,' Okto said. 'When I've blown my stash on cars and parties, I'll be sure to move in with you rent free. In the meantime, I will be planning my exit from public relations for a certain Western Australian mining magnate. But, I will probably never get around to quitting. Too hard*lah*. So, consider me stuck, floating between parties and media events, with more cash and hangovers than usual. Love you, boys.'

After a pause, Julian came on screen. 'I can't wait to get my hands on US six million. I will quit my family's construction business, and build a resort, cafe and guide business on a hill near Kinabalu national park. I will rip up the palm oil trees, replace them with native forest. It will be a sanctuary for animals, particularly you party animals. Novi, you can stay

whenever you get sick of networking the smart city, or whatever it is that you will do. In the meantime, I will recreate paradise for all of us.'

'Amen to that, Julian. I hear you, brother,' said Juni. 'After this transaction, I hope to never write another algorithm or deal with the Machiavellian politics inside a big tech organisation. Instead, I will buy a little property north of San Franciso and do nothing except get fit for our hike up Mount Kinabalu. Perhaps on the summit, I can think of something else to do. I can't program any more. Look, you see this hump on my back. See.' Juni turned sideways to show a slight hunch. 'See, what has happened to me. I'm so pissed off with my job. But, after this transaction, I will dedicate my days to getting rid of this hump, my hump, my fugly manly hump. I will be the best looking of you guys on Kinabalu summit. Wait and see.'

'Thank you, all, for the enlightening dreams and career nightmares.' Desi coughed a laugh at his own wit. 'OK, for the final resolution, Juni will you add the hyperlink for everyone's code transfer to the chat?'

'Done.'

'Thanks, Juni. For the final resolution, I would like everyone to complete the poll now showing on your screen once you have pasted your part of the alphanumeric string to the field that opens from the hyperlink.' Desi concentrated on touching the screen. 'There, it wasn't so hard, I have just pasted in my part of the string for Juni to reconstitute the private key. Now, I will respond Yes to the poll confirming that I have transferred my part of the private-key string to enable the sale of 2,000 Bitcoins and to receive my one-seventh share of the proceeds from the sale less twenty-thousand dollars towards the cost of the Mount Kinabalu meeting.'

Desi stared at screen. 'Great, that's three now four affirmatives on the poll. We still have three more to go. Septimus, are you still with us? OK, two more to go. We have two more outstanding? Who hasn't completed

the process? Juni, don't forget to do the poll too once you have entered your code.'

'I've done that already,' Juni banged his hand down in frustration. 'It's 3 a.m. here. Jesus, Okto, paste in your code.'

'Sorry, *Mas*.' Okto laughed. 'I couldn't help but hold you in suspense. Pasted and affirmed. Got you all.'

'OK, that makes six on the poll and seven once Okto votes yes,' said Desi smiling.

'I voted Yes already,' said Okto.

'Juni, do you have six or seven of the codes in place,' asked Desi.

'Just six, one is still missing.'

'OK, let me open up the poll results.' Desi was no longer smiling. 'Novi! Novi has not responded. Novi, have you lost your Internet connection? Has the power dropped again? Must be raining.'

'Novi, where are you?' sung Okto. 'This is not like you, baby. You are the most boring and predictable among us. Novi, a network engineer shouldn't drop from the network.'

'Novi is still in the meeting. Novi, Novi!' Desi peered at the screen. 'Maybe he has fallen asleep. I can see the top of his head, his forehead, I think.'

'Novi! Wake up man!' Juni shouted, then turned from screen. 'Sorry, love, just a work issue. OK, I will. Yes, go back to sleep.'

'Hey, I'll call his other mobile numbers,' Julian picked up a phone and began working the screen. 'The first one is ringing.'

'Hey.' Septimus leaned sideways into view. 'That screech, is that the ring tone?'

'A *pangkis* recording.' Julian mouthed the sound. 'Novi linked Indigenous songs to contacts so he knew who was calling, and from where. He knows this is me from Sabah.

'Maybe he can't hear it with the headphones on. Try again.'

The piercing sound of a *pangkis* cry came from a mobile phone on Novi's bedside table, animating the surrounding air but not him. Novi lay motionless, chin-on-chest, in bed with a phone propped against a towel on his otherwise naked belly. On screen, Julian held the phone and an anxious look.

The *pangkis* waved outwards, dampening through Novi's body on one side and deflecting off an oxygen cylinder on the other. The high-frequency soundwaves ricocheted through a window into humid southern winds that carried the cry across Jakarta Bay. The *pangkis* skimmed across low-frequency zones over Java Sea to the northwest coast of Kalimantan where it was relayed home.

Inspired by viewing (on 10 September 2021) Yee I-Lann, 2021, *Pangkis*, a single channel video by of performers Tagaps Dance Theatre wearing the woven sculpture, '7 Headed Lalandau Hat'.

PALMS TO THE SKY

Angela Italiano

beneath lemon
and ash.
Mouth wet
with the whisper
of youth,
asking you to tend
a bloodless wound.

A seedless soil,
ashen earth,
once volcanic
and briefly beautiful—
roots and branches now knotted,
fat with the juice
of time,
grown wild as foxes
between us.

YOUR HANDS—

Angela Italiano

marbled by veins
which rise and fall
across skin
thin as paper—
tremble as words spill
like afternoon light
through leaves.
I ask what forgiveness sounds like—
you tell me to listen,
you tell me it's quiet,
the sound of a body
calling you home.

How fragile we are
and how foolish—
seeking stillness,
yet trying
to run
from something
which rests at our centre—
soft
and boneless.

Inspired by Sanjib Chatterjee and Anjalee Wakankar, *Kabambh Light*, created by Kaaru for a Temple in Hampi, Karnataka, India.

Monique Tippett, *Pyre* (Jarrah and Wandoo Sleepers, inks and gold leaf) and *Karrakin Series* (silky oak synthetic polymers, charcoal, ink lacquers and gold leaf on board). All images courtesy of John Curtin Gallery. Photography: Sue-Lyn Moyle.

DOLLYMOUNT TO SORRENTO

Danielle O'Leary

Did sea define the land or land the sea?
Each drew new meaning from the waves' collision.
Sea broke on land to full identity.

'Lovers on Aran', Seamus Heaney

She grew up by the Irish Sea.

Dollymount Strand is a five kilometre beach that floats on its own island, North Bull Island. To get to that beach, she had to stroll four hundred metres from her childhood home, crossing Clontarf Road, and walk across the Wooden Bridge that was built in 1819. A port is to the right, which opens out into Dublin Bay, the Irish Sea.

The sun rises over this sea.

The moments in and around the sea punctuated her childhood. She walked across that high, unsteady bridge with courage, as every child still does, with her parents.

'I'll move to Australia if we will be by the beach,' she told him.

He promised that they would.

In 1982, she first flew over an ocean, the Indian Ocean, en-route to Perth. They landed on July 4, and went to the beach the next day. The winter weather was perfect—a bright sunny day, 17 degrees. No one was around. Is this paradise, she thought?

She now lives by the Indian Ocean.

Sorrento Beach is a six hundred metre beach that is shaped with man-made stone walls. To get to that beach, she strolls two hundred and eighty metres from her home, crossing West Coast Drive and walks along a wooden deck that curves with the sand dunes. A harbour is to the right, which opens out into Marmion Marine Reserve, the Indian Ocean.

The sun sets over this ocean.

He kept his promise. Their bedroom windowsill is decaying due to ocean salt in the air.

When she is struggling and needs energy, she goes to the beach. When she walks along the shoreline, she needs to touch a rock on the stone wall before she can turn around.

When she is happy and wants to celebrate, she goes to the beach. Sometimes with champagne, always with her husband.

She walks home from the beach, always breathing a little easier.

To stand on the beach—looking east in Dublin, looking west in Perth—she has a place.

She knows where she is. It makes her feel at home, no matter what country.

Inspired by Monique Tippett, Karrakin Three, 2021, Silky Oak, synthetic polymers, charcoal, ink, lacquers and gold leaf on board, dimensions variable.

Tippett's Karrakin series explores the idea that 'most living things have a place. A point of return and repose. To nest, cover and rest' (Tippett, Indian Ocean Craft Triennial 2021, *Curiosity and Rituals of the Everyday*, exhibition catalogue). This is a creative response to Tippett's notion of importance of a place for return and rest, in relation to ocean and sea.

EVENT HORIZON

Jo Jones

Karrak. Karrak.

I.
Curled in primal gums,
Upsurging ash hushes into coils, drawing inward.
Wings and tails expand, lifting
To the rising winds of this strange migration.

II.
Darkly burning, ash rains on mill town,
The driving cutting blade shapes neat planks.
To stoke the inferno, inviting all
The demon muscularity of Revelation.

III.
Fly before the storm
From the gravity of corpuscular scattering.
Black wing host cries the ending light,
Blood angel portent of annihilation.

Inspired by Monique Tippett's 2021 works *Pyre* (Jarrah and Wandoo Sleepers, inks and gold leaf) and *Karrakin Series* (silky oak synthetic polymers, charcoal, ink lacquers and gold leaf on board).

The Karrakin (red-tailed black cockatoo) is an important totem to Wilman and other Nyoongar groups in Western Australia's South West. The species has been designated 'Threatened' by the current Federal Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. In 1961 a catastrophic bushfire destroyed the timber mill towns in the Wilman and neighbouring regions including Dwellingup and Karridale.

WEAVING CIRCLE

Chemutai Glasheen

It was the day before market day. The weaving circle was a quiet chant of '*juu, chini, in and out'* as a flurry of hands curled and unfurled around clumps of sisal fibres. Each set of fingers at work in their individual tasks but oddly seemed to work as one. A little further away, three women soaked the sisal fibres in containers of roots, bark, soils and ochre and hung them out to dry. The day was still early and the sun beginning to bite.

Chari sneaked into the weaving circle. She did not need to say anything about her tardiness. This circle was always there, women came and left as they pleased throughout the day. The earliest would have been there to meet the sun as it rose over the Taita Hills and onto the endless green plains of sisal in their bloom.

Chari examined the *kiondo* she had just completed weaving the day before. Should she put ornaments on them today or start a new basket? Across from her, displayed in the grass thatched gazebo or spread out on a large plastic sheet, was the week's collection of colourful *kiondos* ready for market day. To the left, freshly dyed sisal hung on the drying racks.

'Chari, remember Rani has asked for medium sized bags this time,' the head weaver called out as she motioned to someone to take a sack of freshly stripped sisal to the dye stations.

The mention of Rani irritated Chari. He was their main client and generally paid a little more than the others. He ran a big tourist shop in Masaai Mara. When he came around, you would think he was choosing a *kiondo* for his own dowry. He scrutinised every *kiondo*, finding fault with everything: too big, too small, too plain, too colourful, rims too rough, finish not good enough.

'We have to make sure our visitors can take a piece of Taita back with them,' Rani haggled like a seller of mangoes in the marketplace.

Chari grabbed a handful of fibres and pinched out a small amount. She split it into two, swept her skirt aside and began to roll the strands on her thighs. Occasionally, she would use her fingers to twist the twine. The women worked mostly in silence. Strands went over and under. Twine twisted here and twine pulled through there. A little chit chat ebbed between individuals and through the whole group, sometimes measured, sometimes loud.

'Njeri,' the head weaver called out, '*ni sawa*?'

'Yes, it is well.' She was barely audible.

The women stilled their tongues, but their hands picked up pace. Njeri was both reed and sisal, brittle yet strong. Her dimply smile had disappeared long before they were mandated to wear masks in public.

'The brothers still fighting?'

Njeri stopped weaving long enough to adjust her headscarf. Her eyes stayed on her *kiondo*. It did not look like she was going to say much that day.

Chari directed her silent curse at the brothers-in-law who had yet to come to terms with who deserved what of their father's estate. Their brawling, which sometimes got physical, had left Njeri cowering, bruised and traumatised.

The women busied themselves in silence. Someone passed Njeri some already spun pale fibre. Another went and crouched next to her and gently began to untie the knots that had formed. Njeri's work was often a mess of unwanted knots or intriguing accidental patterns.

'Sister, you know you cannot weave until your feelings are in the right place.'

If Njeri appreciated the help, she did not voice it.

'Never mind that coward of a husband of yours.' This time the head weaver spoke. 'I am ready to come fight both him and your *shemeji*. They are not my elders after all.'

Not only was the group leader older, but she was also a bull. She had been running up and down the Taita Hills since she was little, undeterred by the fear of wildlife in the Tsavo. Fighting in-laws was nothing.

'Meanwhile, my husband's asked if he could bring me a friend?' The woman across from Chari spoke up.

The women laughed and sneered.

'Again? Isn't that wife number seven now?'

The conversations flowed again between the women and between the weaving fingers.

One by one, the women began to rubbish their in-laws and their good for nothing husbands for not doing enough or never being home. Despite their outrage, when the sun began its downward journey, they all hurried home on the pretext of cooking for the children when their priority was their husbands.

Chari was in no such rush. She had buried her husband two months before their first child was born. That child was now away in boarding school and her time was all hers. Weaving was all Chari seemed to do. She weaved when walking, she weaved when travelling in a crowded bus and she weaved when she settled in for the evening. Wrapped in solitude, sisal fibres spilling out of every receptacle in the house, she would allow herself to dream about her *kiondos.* She would wonder how far they had travelled. If only she could go where they went. She wondered if they were being used for the purpose she had given them and if they carried potatoes and gifts of food and beads like they did in Taita. Perhaps her *kiondos* had acquired a new meaning in foreign lands. Were her *kiondos,* with the brightly coloured beadwork, admired by the market women or were they gawked at for the foreign thing that they were? Chari shook her head slightly. No, her *kiondos* spoke of the harmony of hands and spirit

and creativity that had been passed down by grandmothers and mothers through the generations. Rani always harangued them about treating the leather straps or the *kiondos* would be doused in disinfectant and chemicals as though inherent in them was disease. One thing she was sure of, her *kiondos* were strong and enduring like the weavers of Taita Hills.

'Chari?' The head weaver broke into her thoughts. 'Three of your bags sold over the weekend.'

'The ones with no handles?'

'Yes. The black ones.'

The women erupted with claps and ululations. Chari was not a fast weaver, but she was prolific. When Rani first asked for handless ones, Chari had been hesitant. What is one going to do with a plain black *kiondo* with no handles? On market day, the *kiondos* needed to be filled with produce and carried on the backs of women; the long leather handles around their heads. Chari reached for some sisal.

'What are you making this time?' The head weaver asked.

'I haven't decided,' replied Chari twisting a strand with her fingers. 'Maybe something for my niece. She is getting married soon. The *kiondo* must be a blessing to her.'

Chari generally started weaving long before the full picture was formed in her mind. All she needed was a hint and her fingers would reveal the depths of her mind. She set about creating the twine. She selected a few colours. Even reached for a blue one. For her own wedding, her grandmother had made her a large grey and brown *kiondo* and presented it to her full of sweet potatoes.

'See this?' Her grandmother had said pointing to the centre of the base. 'This is where you begin your weaving, at the navel. And this here, this strand is the warp. It always stands erect. Remember to give your husband the respect he deserves as the head of your home. This other

strand is the weft. This is you, my child. This is what holds it all together. Chari, this *kiondo* is yours. Be big, be strong and be practical.'

In the weeks following her husband's death, neighbours had popped in and filled the *kiondo* with potatoes and maize and rice and beans and cabbage. The *kiondo* sat in the corner of the kitchen and was rarely empty.

Chari was yet to make one as big as the one her grandmother had made her. Feeling a surge of inspiration, she adjusted her *lesso* and started on the base of the basket. She was going to make one for her niece. Something big and strong and practical. Shutting out the chatter, she got busy and soon, the weaving group was back in chant.

'Juu, chini. In and out, twist and through.'

Out of the harmony of hands and community, emerged beautiful patterned *kiondos*, and woven into them was the spirit of the Taita women.

Inspired by Yee I-Lann, *Tinukad Sequence #01*, 2021. Woven by Keningua Dusun weavers Julitah Kulinting, S. Narty Raitom, Julia Ginasius, Zaitun Raitom. Split bamboo pus weave with kayu obol black natural dye, matt sealant, 210 x 303 cm.

MY MOTHER NEVER LIKES TRAINS

Vannessa Hearman

My mother has a deep fear of trains. Train tracks, level crossings, railway bridges, metal carriages, and the rattle and vibration of trains all scare her. She refuses to get on trains if she can help it. Trains fill her with terror. She never rides trains in Melbourne, preferring trams and buses. When I lived in Melbourne and she did take trains, I saw how she stayed well away from the edges of platforms and kept close to other passengers. If a train was needed to get somewhere, she had to ride with someone else. When she walked to my place, not far from her house in the northern working-class suburb of Coburg, she timidly hung back from level crossings. She waited well until there were no flashing lights, no sign of any silver carriages, and either crept across slowly or dashed across very fast, nearly catapulting herself across the tracks.

I rode a train with her across the bridge between Denmark and Sweden once, and back again. That was a special occasion because of her love for Scandi-Noir. She swallowed her fear to ride that train across the bridge because she was a fan of the Scandi crime series *The Bridge*. As we rattled across the Øresund, the body of water separating Denmark and Sweden in the south, she peered out of the train window to gaze admiringly at the metal scaffolding of the bridge and the inky waters of the sound. She was not deterred by two grumpy old ladies who told us sternly that our suitcases were blocking the aisles. Perhaps she was too busy dealing with the mixture of fear and giddy excitement that came with being on that train.

My mother was not always so anxious. She was a brave, adventurous, single mother who married a man she hardly knew to give us a better life in Australia. As she kept telling me, she escaped Indonesia. I didn't know why escape was so important to her. Why was she so desperate

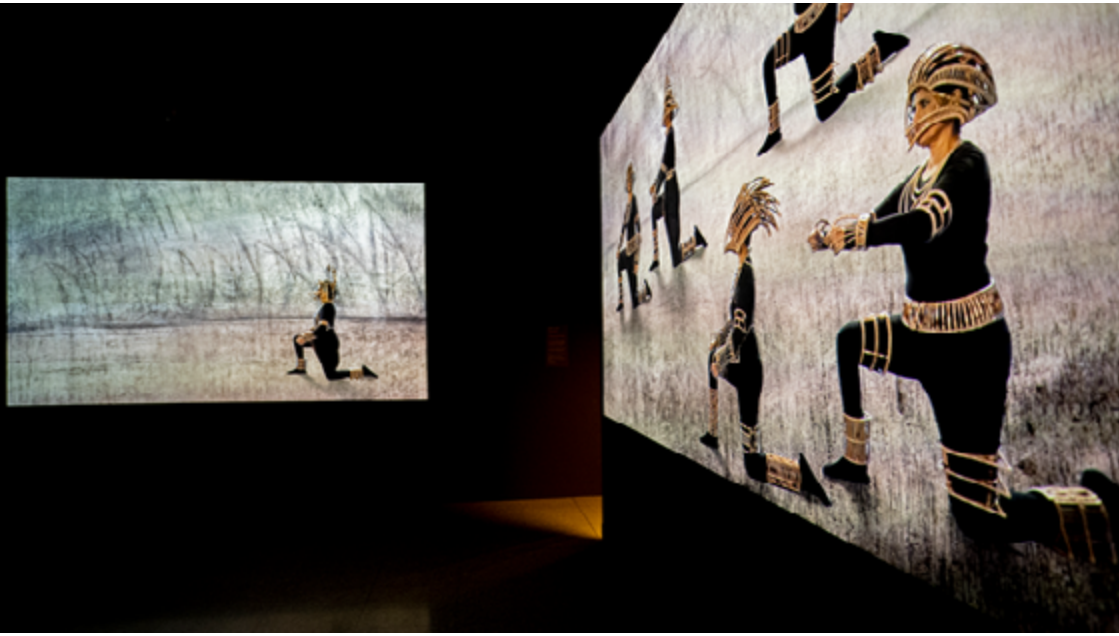
to leave and why did she fear trains so much? Were those two things connected? Her abiding anxiety about trains was always there, lurking, as I grew up. Did she try to tell me about her fear? I don't remember. I do remember, though, that she began telling me the story of trains once I started researching Indonesian history, especially the history of our little pocket of Indonesia, the areas around Surabaya and Malang where my mother spent almost four decades of her life.

Her fear of trains comes from memories of those other places, far from Scandinavia. When my mother was twenty, a terrible series of events happened in our homeland. The story of trains involves Indonesia's mass killings of 1965–66. Half a million people, mainly leftists, were massacred and the Indonesian Communist Party banned, as part of an army coup. Hundreds of thousands disappeared into detention as part of the army's dismantling of President Sukarno's supporter base. My mother was a student activist at university. She was also Chinese. The Chinese, in twisted Cold War fashion, were accused of conspiring with China to assist a communist coup in Indonesia. The army made out the Communists were trying to take power in Indonesia, so they had to do so instead to save the country. As punishment, Chinese shops were ransacked, their contents looted or thrown on the ground. On her journey between Malang, where our family lived, and Surabaya where she studied, my mother's bus travelled over a sea of mungbeans, corn, rice and whatever else was being thrown out from the Chinese shops. There were checkpoints on the road and buses were stopped and checked for 'communist fugitives'. She told me, 'In those days, I had to be really careful what I said when I opened my mouth.' She spent those years keeping her head down and spending the rest of the time working out with her friends how to protect and hide those wanted by the authorities, 'We would ride our bikes to friends' places and there hold meetings to work out who needed to be hidden, and where we would put them.' She was never detained but was forced to report regularly to the army for a few months.

Among those in what I have referred to as Indonesia's underground railroad, being smuggled into safe houses or disappearing into hiding someplace, was a young man, a former activist. He found work with my mother's older brother, organising freight to be transported on trains. In a time when the army was persecuting more and more people to keep their control secure, it was not long before they came for him. The young man who had remade himself to survive underground wasn't going to give up easily. When he saw the men coming towards him, he took off. In his haste, as he ran, he didn't see the train coming. Perhaps he never knew what hit him, so swift and hard the metal carriage ploughed into his slight figure. But my mother saw the whole thing. Perhaps the heartbreak was not only in seeing another human life taken, but in imagining the loss, the loss of someone who had successfully outwitted the system only to be taken away so gruesomely and thoughtlessly. The waste of it all.

The massacres, torture, and killing of over a million people leave traces, whether within us, our families, or in the landscape in which we walk. My mother reacts physically to memories of these events, feeling dizzy and nauseous. So the book I wrote on these massacres in East Java, in our homeland, sits on her bookshelf, a source of pride, but not something she can physically bring herself to read. She was there, she tells me. She doesn't need to read it in a book.

Inspired by Judith Yinyika Chambers and Nancy Nyanyana Jackson (Tjanpi Desert Weavers), *Tutjurangara Massacre (Circus Waters Rockhole Massacre)*, 2018, Tjanpi, wire, wool and raffia, dimensions variable; Shakuntala Kulkarni, juloos, 2018, four projection video, colour, sound installation, 5-minute loop.



Shakuntala Kulkarni, *juloos*, 2018, four projection video, colour, sound installation, 5-minute loop. All images courtesy of John Curtin Gallery. Photography: Brad Coleman.

WEAPONRY

Josephine Taylor

I put these thoughts to paper aboard Q23 flight from Singapore to Perth.
Phil Taylor

I remember from childhood being told
settlement demands what's found is claimed;
death enters through red-breasted holes
and *every time you sigh a robin dies*.

Settlement demands what's found is claimed
in gun-cocking colonial manoeuvres;
and *every time you sigh a robin dies*,
flitting guilt between defence and recompense.

In gun-cocking colonial manoeuvres
—and I, my father's daughter, white and woman,
flitting guilt between defence and recompense—
such weaponry thrums a procession of selves.

And I, my father's daughter, white and woman,
bearing *tokens I have brought*, I wonder that
such weaponry thrums a procession of selves
while, quietly, women shape stories from the shit.

Bearing *tokens I have brought*, I wonder that
death enters through red-breasted holes,
while, quietly, women shape stories from the shit
I remember from childhood being told.

Inspired by the following artworks: Judith Yinyika Chambers and Nancy Nyanyana Jackson (Tjanpi Desert Weavers), *Tutjurangara Massacre (Circus Waters Rockhole Massacre)*, 2018, Tjanpi, wire, wool and raffia, dimensions variable; Shakuntala Kulkarni, juloos, 2018, four projection video, colour, sound installation, 5-minute loop; Madhvi Subrahmanian, *Upla (cow dung)*, 2021, porcelain, dowel, woven basket, ipad and video (duration 3:17 mins), 220 x 620 cms.

The italicised text is drawn from my father's journal, which was a gift from me in 1984. I discovered his writing after his death in 2018 and used the journal to write this poem.

THE NAKED TRUTH

Kate McCaffrey

At twenty she viewed the world optimistically, unaware of her position in the country she believed was egalitarian. A far cry from her birthplace, fifteen thousand kilometres away, which she viewed with disdain; restricted, working class and poor. No opportunities, destined to work in the local fish and chip shop or stacking shelves at Tesco, married at eighteen, four children under four by twenty. But here, education was the key to success and opportunity.

University. The hallowed halls of great thinkers. *Know Thyself*, the inscription read and daily as she passed it, she believed she did.

'I see, what have we here today?' the university professor asked, peering down his nose, through his bifocals, in the crammed office, teetering bookshelves and withering plants, claustrophobic and stifling in the presence of twelve others, she squirms on the hard wooden seat. 'It looks like we have ourselves a Teen Queen.' The chorus of embarrassed laughs, she sniffs, views her appearance through his eyes. Over-dressed, shoes polished, hair tied back, trying to disguise her insecurities—her fear of not belonging—of being exposed as fraudulent, among the western suburbs' kids, with their deliberately torn jeans, rumpled clothing and tangled hair. The Teen Queen. The new target.

'I hate the way he speaks to you,' the mature age student says. She waves the comment away.

'It's fine,' she says.

'It's not,' the mature age student persists. 'I have a daughter your age and what he's doing is, well, frankly, an abuse of power.'

An abuse of power? she thinks. His random comments about her appearance, the jokes loaded with innuendo, always alluding to her sex

life, her sex partners. She has steeled herself against the commentary, it won't impact her. She has put on a piece of armour, wit and humour. She deflects his poisonous arrows with her own projectiles, returns fire with fire, his balding head, his too tight pants stuffed with Nike socks, his old, lined face. He delights in the repartee, his eyes light up when he sees her, thinking of his next attack. She endures it because she doesn't know any better. She doesn't see it for what it is.

In her thirties, she's a professional. She works alongside others like her. She watches the men getting their promotions, she watches her female counterparts stagnate in their roles. Little upward movement, little trajectory. The executive team is almost exclusively men. Her boss takes a shine to her.

'You're the feather in our cap,' he says. 'You're the jewel in our crown,' he states. She becomes used to being viewed as a hair accessory.

'That's a lovely little black dress,' he coos.

'I can't take my eyes of those boots,' he mutters.

She puts on another piece of armour. This one is acquiescence and complicity. She murmurs, and lightly laughs at his comments. She smiles and flicks her hair as she walks away. She endures it, knowing this is not okay, but then there's a mortgage and bills to pay. She sees it for exactly what it is.

Maternity leave. The biggest promotional hurdle. Her biology is her enemy.

She grows life. She watches her belly swell, notices that her body has become public property.

'When is the baby due?' strangers' hands touching her without permission.

'Are you still smoking?' a male friend asks. 'You have to give up, for the baby.'

She views her body detachedly; a microcosm, a galaxy, teeming and swarming with her cells. The baby's cells, blending and mixing. Not hers anymore.

The painful process of birthing. 'Feel the power of the womb,' her yoga friend advises. 'A natural childbirth,' she is instructed. Made to feel shame for taking pain relief. Breast feeding is best. Struggling with cracked nipples. Recurring bouts of mastitis.

'Feed through the pain,' the nurse suggests. Red hot needles pushing, searing. Sleepless nights. Crying baby. Distant husband.

'I have to get up early for work,' he grumbles. 'I need sleep.' Her needs, her wants, her desires are frozen in time. Replaced with the baby's needs, wants and desires. She puts on her armour, resilience and patience. Be the best mother. Super mother. Do it all. Up early, hair washed, makeup on.

'You don't want to let yourself go,' she's advised. Do the dishes, clean the kitchen, feed the baby, wash the clothes, hang the clothes out, feed the baby, make lunch, something healthy and organic.

'You look like you still have baby weight,' she's gently told. Pelvic floor exercises, clean up vomit, change nappies, feed the baby, prepare the dinner, run on the treadmill, bathe the baby, feed the baby, put the baby to bed. See the headlights, he's home, finally.

'What have you done all day,' he says dismissively, turning on the television, beer in hand. 'I'm so exhausted.' Sex on demand.

In her forties she's so tired. Tired of the double job she holds down, one in the workplace, the more gruelling one at home. Absent husband. Doing all the parenting. Finish work, home to kids, supervise homework, get them ready for bed, cook dinner, plate his and put it in the microwave,

feed the dogs and cat, clean the kitchen. Sit with a glass of wine. Wait for him to come home. Wait. Wait. Wait. What is she waiting for? She puts on her armour. One of stoicism. Protect her children from divorce.

She begins to disappear. Her identity does not belong to her. She struggles to define herself. She questions what happened. Where has she gone? She looks at herself in the mirror—she doesn't recognise who is there. Vague memories of ambition gnaw at her. She feels dejected, disused, discarded. Her sense of self has been trampled into the fabric of the people around her. It has been devoured and all that remains is cannibalising itself. She can't wait any longer.

Divorced, single. The sole financial pressure is overwhelming, the stability of her job is critical. Her morning ritual of scouring her bank accounts, transferring from one to the other, juggling the bills, the mounting debts. She feels as if she is on roller skates, as she throws the washing in the air, stirs the pot on the stove as it erupts and froths over the stainless-steel top, rushes the kids to school, feeds the cat. This is all done at a high pace, she can't keep up with herself. She puts on her armour, strength and independence. She buys a drill. She fixes things, she makes everything good. She does all the heavy lifting. Mother, provider.

Different workplace, same atmosphere. Different boss, same rhetoric.

'You look lovely today,' he says. Her thank you is curt; her eyes are flinty. She knows better, she knows that he knows. Her armour rubs against her. Strong and independent. No-nonsense.

She meets men, has drinks, sometimes dinner, sometimes sex.

'Come on,' he says running his hand over her knee, 'you liked it last time.' But last time was not this time. She feels the force of his pressure, the rush of compliance but truthfully, she'd rather be at home, in bed, with a novel.

'Not this time,' she says, surprising herself. Now it will be on her terms, when she wants.

In her fifties she becomes invisible. No more comments, no more stares, no more glances, the wet lust gone from their eyes. Released from their gaze she moves more freely. She views her armour. The pieces put in place to protect her vulnerability.

Wit, humour, acquiescence, complicity, resilience, patience, stoicism, strength, independence.

She assesses herself in the mirror. Naked. Eyes that once forcefully and aggressively pointed out her physical weaknesses now gently caress her stomach. It is no longer flat and toned as it was at twenty, it is soft and lined, with the scars of her procession of self. Her breasts more pendulous now, her thighs wider, her upper arms softer. She has quietened the vicious voice in her head. The one that would whisper, 'Fat, old, ugly,' through the progression of her years. She thinks ruefully of the different bodies she once had, acknowledging that then she didn't appreciate them, or admire them for what they could do. She wishes futilely that she could go back, disassemble that toxic voice and replace it with the one she listens to now.

Carefully she removes her armour. It falls away gently like woven pieces of bamboo. She doesn't need to be a warrior, an army of one, fighting, defending and marching her way through life. She views her vulnerability. She has always been funny and clever and strong and kind, she has always loved and been loved, she doesn't need to protect who she is. She now accepts who she is.

Know Thyself.

And she does.

Inspired by Shakuntala Kulkarni, *juloos*, 2018, four projection video, colour, sound installation, 5-minute loop.

DUE TO INTERNATIONAL SHIPPING DELAYS

Rachel Robertson

First, there are yawning gaps, great slices of a tree trunk as empty pedestals. *iZilo* or *Clan Totem* is the name of the missing exhibition—stuck on route, delayed or lost due to the pandemic. I stand here, a white woman, an immigrant, a person without a clan, staring at the white spaces in a university art gallery. Waiting, as if emptiness itself has a message for me.

Why, of all things, am I back to the blank? The tyranny of the white page, of writing that is not enough. (And the blank look, of loving that is not enough.)

I don't know what sort of objects should be on the empty wooden bases but I do know they form a collaborative work by Andile Dyalvane and Zizipho Poswa, drawing on their 'personal totems'. This I garnered from an advance copy of the catalogue essay. Poswa's work explores memories of the everyday rural village life of the Xhosa people of South Africa: of matriarchs, of women carrying wood or water on their heads, and of their totems. This is what the installation is about, but what it will look like, I have no idea. I don't even know if it will arrive before the exhibition closes.

If I had a totem animal, I think it would be mouse or squirrel, something small and unimpressive but reliable. If I could choose a totem animal, it would the elephant, an animal I have loved since I was a young child. Everything about an elephant is wondrous (size, intelligence, emotional life, memory), but it is the folded skin on their trunk and legs that I find so deeply moving. Once, when I visited the Perth zoo with my son, Tricia the elephant was taking her walk and passed within a metre of us. I was thrilled to be so close to her while at the same time saddened at the life she has. Of course, I couldn't have an elephant totem because

my ancestors are Celtic on one side and European Jews on the other, so perhaps a squirrel is more likely.

I am smiling now, thinking this, because I am imagining talking about animal totems to my parents and their reaction (horrified dismay perhaps). I would use the phrase 'turning over in their graves' except that they were both cremated. Thinking fondly of my dead parents, I walk into the next room of the gallery, see blue lace, crafted by another South African artist.

*

Three weeks later, I am back at the exhibition because *Clan Totem* has arrived. Six ceramic pieces sit on the tree trunks, bringing this shadowy gallery alive. Dyalvane's works are 'gestures of "Nkwakhwa" or the mole snake'. Poswa's are 'Ndlovu'—what we know as the elephant, her clan's totem. Three ceramic urns—one blue, one white, one yellow—each have a carved wooden elephant head piece, made by Friday Jibu of Malawi. The wood is painted ebony-black, the chisel marks visible, not imitating elephant hide, but still visceral, full of life somehow. I know that I shouldn't touch the wood, but I do, and it feels warm (though it can't be warm in this cool gallery). The bright blue urn has circles imprinted on the ceramic and a single trickle of yellow paint. Rising out of this urn is a trunk, two tusks and a shape like the top of an elephant's head. No eyes and no ears, although the white urn sprouts ears and trunk, and the yellow one a trunk and some strange knobbly things. These are nothing like elephants and yet everything like them. They feel wild but also domestic; dense but animated. I see now how the works gesture to dried cow dung and to rural women carrying weighty burdens on their heads. I read in the printed catalogue that when discussing her own work, Poswa refers to an African proverb: 'a trunk that's never too heavy for an elephant to carry'.

I don't entirely know why it is I am so drawn to these works. The empty space intrigued me, the idea of a totem beguiled me, and now

these not-elephant ceramics haunt me as I walk back to my office. Was it a coincidence that I thought about elephants before I saw these works, or a clever configuration of the gallery space that summoned them? In many ways the elephant epitomises presence, the opposite of blank space and emptiness. It seems to represent strength, power and wisdom. And to me, the elephant also signifies grief and compassion. It is not always possible, but we must live the idea that our burdens, so much a part of us, are never too heavy to carry.

Inspired by Andile Dyalvane and Zizipho Poswa, *iZilo (Clan Totems)*, 2021, especially Zizipho Poswa, *Gengesi*, 2021, glazed terracotta, with carved stone pine timber by Friday Jibu, 70 x 62 x 122 cm.

Quotes are from Indian Ocean Craft Triennial 2021, *Curiosity and Rituals of the Everyday*, exhibition catalogue.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Richard James Allen is widely published in journals, anthologies, and online. His books include: *More Lies* (Interactive Press), *The short story of you and I* (UWAP) and *Thursday's Fictions* (Five Islands Press), shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry. Richard is well-known as a multi-award-winning filmmaker and choreographer with The Physical TV Company.

Ruth Brandt's short stories and flash fiction have been widely published. She won the Kingston University MFA Creative Writing Prize, has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize Write Well Award and Best Small Fictions Award. Her prize-winning short story collection *No One has any Intention of Building a Wall* will be published by Fly on the Wall Press in November 2021. She lives in Surrey, England.

Dublin-born **Oisin Breen**'s debut collection, *Flowers, all sorts in blossom, figs, berries, and fruits, forgotten* was released March 2020. Poems have previously been published in the *Blue Nib*, *Books Ireland*, *The Seattle Star*, *Modern Literature*, *Metaworker*, *The Bosphorus Review* and *La Piccioletta Barca and Dreich*. Twitter: @Breen

Rohan Buettel lives in Canberra. His haiku have been published in *Echidna Tracks*, *Creatrix*, *Frogpond*, *Kokako*, *Cattails*, *The Heron's Nest*, *Windfall*, *Stardust Haiku*, *Haiku Xpressions* and *The Blue Nib*. His longer form poetry has been published in *Meniscus*, *Cicerone Journal*, *Lite Lit One* and *Quadrant*.

Aidan Coleman has published three collections of poetry. His most recent book of poems, *Mount Sumptuous* (2020), is published by Wakefield Press.

Angela Costi is also known as Aggeliki Kosti among the Cypriot-Greek diaspora. She is the author of five poetry collections, the most recent being *An Embroidery of Old Maps and New*. City of Melbourne arts funding is supporting her to work on a new poetry manuscript, 'The Heart of the Advocate'.

Gregory Dally has had poetry and fiction published in various journals, including *Catalyst*, *Potshot Quarterly* and *Tarot*.

Emma Darragh lives and works in Wollongong, on Dharawal Country. She has had work published in *Cordite* and *Westerly* and is currently writing a short story cycle as part of her PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong, where she is also a sessional academic.

Jane Downing has stories and poetry published around Australia and overseas, including in *Griffith Review*, *The Big Issue*, *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, *Westerly*, *Island*,

Overland and *Best Australian Poems* (2004 and 2015). In 2016 she was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. Her novel, *The Sultan's Daughter* was released by Obiter Publishing in 2020. She can be found at janedowning.wordpress.com

Jan FitzGerald is a long-established New Zealand poet with publication in mainstream NZ literary journals including *Poetry NZ*, *NZ Books*, *Takahe* and *Landfall*, and overseas in *Poetry Australia*, Yellow *Medicine Review* (USA) and *The Atlanta Review* (USA), among other outlets. Jan's three poetry books are *Flying Against the Arrow* (Wolfdale Publishing), *On a Day like This* (Steele Roberts) and *Wayfinder* (Steele Roberts). Contact: janleo@xtra.co.nz

Maryana Garcia is a journalist, poet, and picture-maker fascinated by everyday miracles. Her poetry has been published in *A Clear Dawn: New Asian Voices from Aotearoa New Zealand*, *Ko Aotearoa Tatou*, *Takahē*, *Poetry New Zealand*, and her photography has appeared in *Stasis*. Maryana also posts word and life experiments on Instagram as @ ripagepoet.

Chemutai Glasheen is Kenyan born and now lives in Western Australia. She is a teacher and a sessional academic at Curtin University. She writes fiction for young people and her work is influenced by her interest and experience in human rights and education. She has written a collection of short stories which are set in east Africa.

Madison 'Maddie' Godfrey is a writer, educator, sessional academic and the author of *How To Be Held* (Burning Eye Books, 2018). Maddie was recently awarded a WA Youth Award for their 'Creative Contributions' to Western Australia.

Stephanie Green has published short fiction, poetry and travel essays in Australian and international literary journals, and in recent collections such as the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry*, *The In/completeness of Human Experience* and *TEXT Creative Works*. Her most recent book is a collection of prose poems, *Breathing in Stormy Seasons* (Recent Work Press 2019).

Vannessa Hearman is a historian of Southeast Asia and senior lecturer in History at Curtin University.

Angela Italiano is a PhD candidate at the University of Western Australia. Her creative writing research explores trauma in contemporary realist narrative.

Jo Jones lives in the Perth Hills and is a critic and writer. She works at Curtin University in English and Cultural Studies. In recent years, Jo has worked extensively on the literature of rivers and the theory of deep mapping.

Daniel Juckes is a lecturer in Creative Writing at UWA, an Associate Editor at *Westerly* Magazine, and holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Curtin University.

Melanie Kennard has recently completed a Master of Arts through the University of New England. In 2020, her short story 'Attila the Hen' was shortlisted in Regulus Press' Literary Taxidermy competition and published in their anthology *124 Beloved*. In 2018, her short story 'Kit and Nella' was published in the anthology *One Thing Was Certain*. She has previously won the For Pity Sake Publishing writing competition.

Thor Kerr has worked as a journalist and manager of information services in Southeast Asia.

J.D. Kotzman's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *After the Pause*, *The Bookends Review*, *The Chronos Chronicles*, *Crack the Spine*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *The First Line*, *Foliate Oak*, *Ink Stains*, *Inscape*, *Kentucky Review* and *The Magnolia Review*, among other places. He currently works in the health policy field in Washington, D.C. and has previously worked as an editor and writer.

Helen Koukoutsis teaches Literary Studies at Western Sydney University. Her poems have appeared in various online and in-print spaces, including *Eureka Street*, *Communion*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, and is forthcoming in the Australian Multilingual Writing Project. Her first collection of poems, *Cicada Chimes*, was published in 2017 by Ginninderra Press.

Ruth Lacey is a writer and visual artist. Her short fiction has appeared in *Litro Magazine*, *Storgy Magazine*, *Fish Anthology*, *Carve Magazine*, *Best of Carve Anthology*, *Overland*, *VerbSap* and other journals. Her stories have been shortlisted for the 2020 Bridport Prize, 2017 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, *Cincinnati Review* Schiff Prize, Fish Short Story Prize, and Mslexia Novella Prize. She grew up in Sydney and currently live in a small kibbutz near the Sea of Galilee.

Mike Ladd lives and writes in Adelaide. He ran Poetica on ABC Radio National for two decades and currently works for Radio National's features and documentaries unit. He has published nine collections of poems and short prose. The most recent is *Invisible Mending* from Wakefield Press.

Nellie Le Beau's debut collection, *Inheritance*, won the 2020 Puncher & Wattmann Prize for a First Book of Poetry.

Karen Lethlean is a retired English teacher who has previously published fiction in *Barbaric Yawp*, *Ken*Again*, *Pendulum Papers* and who has won awards in Australian and UK competitions. 'Land Lore' is published in *Bangalore Review*, and recently 'Bleached

Bones' won the Wild Words Solstice Short Story competition. Karen is currently working on a memoir titled 'Army Girl' about military service in 1972–76.

Patience Mackarness lives and writes in Brittany, France. Her work has appeared in more than 30 publications including *Lunch Ticket*, *Flash Frontier*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *Spelk*, and *Dime Show Review*.

Nick Mansfield has published one volume of poetry. He's also been a teacher of English, creative writing and cultural studies. He lives in Sydney.

Kate McCaffrey is a West Australian author of Young Adult fiction and is currently undertaking a Master of Philosophy at Curtin University, exploring toxic masculinity in the AFL.

Steve Milroy is an emerging poet who has had poems published in *Famous Reporter* and *The Mozzie* in Australia, *Dawntreader* in the UK and digitally by TheBlueNib.com. As an agricultural researcher, he has enjoyed the opportunity to live and work in rural communities.

Paul Mitchell has published six books, including a collection of essays, *Matters of Life and Faith* (Coventry Press, 2021) a novel, a short story collection and three collections of poetry: *Minorphysics*, *Awake Despite the Hour* and *Standard Variation*. *Minorphysics* won the IP Picks Poetry National Award for an unpublished Australian manuscript, and *Standard Variation* was shortlisted for the John Bray Poetry Award in the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature.

Gemma Nisbet is a writer and PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia in Perth, researching the relationship between objects, memory and the personal essay form. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *TEXT*, *Westerly*, *Axon*, *Australian Book Review* and *The West Australian*.

Catherine Noske is a senior lecturer at the University of Western Australia, editor of *Westerly* Magazine, and author of *The Salt Madonna* (Picador, 2020).

Damen O'Brien is a multi-award-winning Queensland poet. In 2021, Damen won the MPU International Poetry Competition, the Cafe Writers Competition and the Magma Judge's Prize. Damen has been published in many journals including *Mississippi Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Southwords, Cordite*, *Island* and *Overland*. (www.dameno.org)

Denise O'Hagan is an award-winning editor and poet. She has a background in commercial book publishing. In 2015, she set up her own imprint, Black Quill Press, through which she assists independent authors. Her poetry is published widely and has received numerous awards, most recently the Dalkey Poetry Prize 2020.

Danielle O'Leary is a lecturer in Professional Writing and Publishing at Curtin University. She has published creative nonfiction in *Westerly*. Like her mother, she loves the ocean.

Gregory Piko's writing has appeared in *Westerly*, *Authora Australis*, *Communion Arts Journal*, the *Canberra Times*, *Poetry d'Amour*, *StylusLit*, *Verity La*, *Shot Glass Journal* and the *Australian Poetry Anthology* among other places. His collection, *breaking my journey*, is published by Red Moon Press. www.gregorypiko.com.

Mary Pomfret writes short stories and poems and her work has been published widely. Her debut novel *The Hard Seed* was published in 2018. She lives and works in Bendigo, Australia. In 2016, La Trobe University awarded her a doctorate in English for her creative thesis on generational trauma.

Rachel Robertson is Associate Professor in the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry at Curtin University. She is author of *Reaching One Thousand* and co-editor of *Purple Prose* and *Dangerous Ideas About Mothers*. Her research interests include creative nonfiction, life writing, disability studies and Australian literature.

Francesca Jurate Sasnaitis is a writer and artist of Lithuanian background born in Wurundjeri country | Melbourne. She currently lives in Whadjuk Nyoongar Boodja | Perth. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Western Australia. Her poetry, short fiction, essays, and reviews have been published in *Australian Book Review*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Meniscus*, *Southerly*, *Vilnius Review* and *Westerly*, among others.

Josephine Taylor is an Associate Editor at *Westerly* and author of the novel *Eye of a Rook*.

Sarah Temporal is a prize-winning performance poet, writer and educator, residing on Bundjalung country. Her work has been published in the *Australian Poetry Anthology* and was twice shortlisted for the XYZ Prize for Innovation in Spoken Word. Sarah runs Poets Out Loud, an arts initiative based in the Northern Rivers NSW, and has recently completed work on her debut poetry collection.

Denise Thwaites is a curator, writer and researcher. Her practice interlaces digital and community-based collaborations to explore different economies of care and value. She is a member of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, and Assistant Professor in Digital Arts and Humanities at the University of Canberra.

Loretta Tolnai was awarded an MPhil in 2016 from the University of Newcastle in Creative Writing for her childhood memoir, *Relative Strangers*. In 2021, Loretta commenced her PhD in Creative Writing at Curtin University which will comprise a single artefact of creative non-fiction based on her father's life and family inheritance.

Lydia Trethewey is an artist and poet currently undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at Curtin University, exploring ekphrastic poetry. She completed her first PhD in fine art at Curtin in 2018.

Isi Unikowski received his PhD from the Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University. His poetry has been widely published in Australia and overseas. He was shortlisted for the inaugural University of Canberra Vice Chancellor's International Poetry Prize.

Julie U'Ren writes short-fiction and microlit. Her writing has been shortlisted in the NT Literary Awards and appears in a number of anthologies, including those published by Spineless Wonders. She lives with her family in Darwin, Northern Territory.

Eleanor Whitworth is a writer based in Sydney, on Gadigal land. Her work has been published in a range of journals and anthologies including *Meanjin*, *SQ Magazine*, *Not One of Us*, B-Cubed Press, Black Hare Press and Deadset Press. She is also part of the ACT Writers Hardcopy alumni.

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