

readfin

ISSUE ONE WINTER 2018

The Literary Magazine of Melbourne Polytechnic

Stories, Poetry, Essays, Criticism, Reviews, Profiles, Interviews, and Letters


conceive>create>commercialise
readfin

ReadFin always dreamt of being a quarterly literary magazine founded by some famous Australian writer with the motto 'SCRIBE NOBIS BONA'. At least *ReadFin* got her motto wish.

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Why the fish?
The *ReadFin* logo, in keeping with the degree's writing and publishing focus, is a play on words, and is derived from the redfin fish or European perch which was first introduced to Australia around 1860. It proliferates in the nearby Yarra River which runs through the parklands that surround Melbourne Polytechnic's Fairfield campus.

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Old Healing Bricks by Lucia Valeria Alfieri



Old Healing Bricks by Lucia Valeria Alfieri

Foreword from the Editor in Chief

A Sad Loss

Before long, the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing degree behind this magazine will close down. The region will hardly notice because it has never been the sort of activity that seeps very deeply into the consciousness of the city's northern suburbs. Despite that, it's a loss which we would do well to feel keenly. Everyone has to learn to read, literature is taught quite widely, but the skills of writing, editing and publishing move the whole conversation to a higher level of activity which now, alas, will no longer be practised in the region's education system.

This is a shame. A great deal can be known about a society, a nation, a place however small, by the things which are understood, admired, loved and practised within its boundaries. I think of Russia when it was in the grip of one of humanity's most terrifying tyrants, yet even Josef Stalin could not bring himself to wipe out Dmitri Shostakovich, the composer who refused to tell the world that everything was getting better when he felt things were going badly under Communist Party rule. He withdrew his Fourth Symphony from rehearsal because he knew that the orchestra and its conductor were terrified of what would happen to them if they presented it.

And what did he do next? He wrote his Fifth Symphony, possibly the bravest piece of music ever written because, after characterising the despot in a way that gave him a place in the music, he poured his love of Russia, its huge spaces and its overwhelming climate into the same music, challenging the dictator, taking him on, inviting listeners to decide whose vision offered them more.

When it was performed in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) and Moscow, audiences applauded for minutes at a time. They knew how much courage had been needed to write what they'd heard. Stalin was a deeply superstitious man and understood what had happened perhaps better than anyone else. He may have wanted to murder the composer but he feared his art, and, like King Lear with his fool, gave him the safety, the permission, that he gave no other to say what had to be said.

Writers, editors and publishers have important work to do. Any section of society that excuses itself from rendering these activities their due is reducing itself to that silence which is a form of obedience. If we can't make people listen to us then we can't be the active citizens that democracy relies on. Let us hope that the approaching withdrawal of an interesting and valuable course, that has been something of a rarity in the region, will not be permanent. Dmitri Shostakovich died in 1975, but his spirit lives on whenever his music is played. Let us hope we are in a pause, not a permanent silence.

Chester Eagle

Preface from the Head of Program

And with the release of the 2018 *ReadFin Literary Journal*, we come to the end of a 9-year era of the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing (BWAP) at Melbourne Polytechnic (more than half of this time as NMIT). I've been fortunate to have been a part of this program for 8 of those years as a lecturer and, for the last 2 years, as the Head of Program. And what a unique program it has been. As a lecturer, I have worked in dozens of higher education programs at nearly all of the major tertiary institutions in Melbourne, and Melbourne Polytechnic's BWAP has certainly been the most memorable, for a number of reasons, but first and foremost, for the positive community it has fostered.

With this publication you will find not only current BWAP student writings, but both alumni and staff contributing, some who have maintained a connection to the program after many years of leaving it. As much as I'm proud of the standard of writing we have fostered and maintained, the strong and enduring community that has formed is the greatest reward, and this is not just my reward, but for our writing culture at large, as we see our adept writers leave the program, relationships formed, intact, and in many cases, the practice and comradery continues on in the form of collaboration, writing groups and more.

Despite the sad and imminent end of the BWAP, the writing will continue, and, these last 9 years have ensured a generation of creative writers who are more than adept at wielding their words with power, focus, personality, individuality and poignancy; the 2018 *ReadFin Literary Journal* is a testament to this.

Dr. Adam Casey



Red Kissing by Amanda Kennedy

Chemical Dogs

Kit Riley

Don't touch the dog he's a chemical animal
he lived in a house without spiders or weeds
residual herbicide breaching his body
along his capillaries into his brain

and now that the plants in his mind
have all withered and died:
don't touch the dog
the dog's insane.

Don't touch the dog he's a non-target species
absorbing his fix through illicit skin
we tried to correct it by killing the killer
we're stuck with a bad case of treatment
resistance

and now that the plants in his mind
have all withered and died:
don't touch the dog
the dog's insane.

Don't touch the dog it's best to avoid him
don't touch the dog or he'll bite off your hand
suboptimum chemistry is always a shame
but if we can't fix it we'll just have to live with
him

now that the plants in his mind
have all withered and died:
don't touch the dog
and the dog
won't
touch
you.

Feel me, as I feel you

Alexandra Mavridis

Liquid light
Swelling mind
Fluid fears
Pulsing pain

Stasis
Metamorphosis

Cut me
Fuck me
Crush me

I am
I will
I exist

Hold me
Caress me
Close my eyes
Feel me
As I feel you

Insight on Infidelity or Fidelity?

Alexandra Mavridis

T.V. Shows on it
Many discuss it
Many practise it
It is revered like it is so fucking great!

Ownership and control,
Bodily flesh bound and sealed
Even have the documents to prove it

Do not speak, do not think
Own my mind, own my spirit
And soul suppressed
Attachment leading to detachment

Manic and panic
No thought, no feeling
Believe or you will suffer
Suffer and you will believe

Fidelity plays the pill,
you will swallow
like I swallow

Poetry in Prose

Michael Freundt

In the musical play *Carousel*, a spruiker called Bill, and Julie, who works in a mill, try to tell each other how they feel. They don't have the words to be true to such feelings so they sing it to make it real: what "if I loved you?" The scene needs the music to supply the emotion and for the would-be lovers to be who they are, not for writers to give them words they would never use. Songs in musicals happen when words are not enough. Poetry happens when prose in not enough. To describe a spectacular tree, you can try to write it realistically as best you can but if it is truly spectacular you will get to a stage where you have to forget what you see and write what you feel; what it reminds you of; what the words are for: sense, surprise, and metaphor. When Auden wrote "As I walked out one evening, walking down Bristol Street" he described what he did, and then what he saw, but what he saw was so such more and he had no words that did justice to the scenery "The crowds upon the pavement" so he slipped into poetry, "were fields of harvest wheat." And this adds meaning and insight; yes, and there's rhyme and rhythm of course, a tune if you like. What confuses poetics for the readers of verse is that so often with the text, it's so personal, perverse, and has no meaning, no revelation; but like masturbation, it may satisfy the writer, and, well, that's it! I'm going to stop beating up on myself, for being a fool since it isn't a test, so I'll read more poetry, treasure those words that light something up, and dismiss those that maybe a gas for the poet, but hot air for the rest.

Tell Me

Emma Ziccone

Tell me again
How we went
From being something
To being nothing
Tell me how the days went by
From being the closest to you
To the furthest away
Tell me how it is your name
That causes me the most grief
How do those letters and syllables
Make me cry
How is it that everything
Reminds me of you
The parks
The city
The sky
At night
Tell me how we went from friends
To enemies
Tell me in which world I am living?
I never thought you would leave me
Tell me how the music is different
And my soul heavy
How can a single human being
Have such an effect?
Tell me...

The Beating of a Heart

Emma Ziccone

Have you ever felt your heart beat
Beating, just beating
Ever felt it go faster,
Whenever she places her hand upon
yours
Have you ever stopped and listened
To the sounds of the night
Ever looked into the sky
And just felt
Alive
Like no one could ever hurt you
And have you touched her face so
lightly
Have you ever
Wanted to stay in that moment
forever
Have you ever tried to count the stars
Shining so brightly
Tried to imagine them failing
One by one
Have you ever work up to her smile
In the morning sun
And curled yourself into her
And thought to yourself
"I don't want this to end"
Have you ever
Just never
Wanted it to stop
To live like this
Forever

Unfixable

Emma Ziccone

You wish that she could fix you
Put a smile upon your face
That a simple touch of her hand
Could bring gold to a human race
You wish that she could crawl inside
And sit upon a soul
That is dead
You wish that you could drown your sorrow
Amidst the warmth of her golden head
You wish that she could drown your heart
In a river, on a summer's night
But why do you wish to spend your life
With the girl so far out of sight?
You wish that she could fix you
Yet you cannot revive a heart
So destroyed
And you can't put your faith in people
They find pleasure in seeing you toyed
The golden hair and blue eyes are a lie
In regards to a heart so misunderstood
The girl, the boy
They will not fix you
Tough you will forever wish
That they could

Untitled

Dr. Adam Casey

A fine rain hung,
suspended in the air,
it never sinks
to the ground.

Millions of tiny drops
of water clung to her edge,
a silvery
radiance.

Rusty chrysanthemums
in her hand,
we walk, side by side,
without a word.

She pushed the hair back
from my forehead,
as if she knew
in this one gesture,
that she had the gift
of being remembered.

When She is Gone

Emma Ziccone

I see her in the distance
A vague shadowy figure
I know her outline
I feel her presence
We are without each other
All the times I begged
You to stay
You still went away
All the times I called out
Without your reply
All the nights spent in agony
Over you
Over losing you
Over losing closeness and
Just everything
I see you in the distance
I ache
But I walk away
I never whisper your name
And I learn
To forget



Hand Raised In by Amanda Kennedy

A Tale from Heaven

(Novel Excerpt from 'The Author of the Mended Child')

Adam Casey

The sound of the bins been pulled back into the organic grocer confirmed it was Thursday morning. He peeled back the thick, dusty curtain (he would never dare knock the dust out of 18th century Egyptian curtains; the Graeco-Roman motifs would stare daggers at him while he slept), the morning workers already filling up the cafés on both sides of the street. Despite the early wake up calls of the inner North, Charlemagne was happy to still have his shop front downstairs. He was lucky. He'd watched many traders around him come and go, particularly with the onset of gentrification digging its talons into his neighbourhood. His strange little Op Shop appealed to many of the passersby and had grown quite a name for itself over the 50+ years it had survived. He'd called it 'A Tale from Heaven', the flicking whale flukes painted gold on black along with the text, barely visible amidst the bright signage of the revolving shop fronts around him. He would never dare paint over it; his good friend, Daniel, whom he sorely missed, had painted the flukes at a whim, misinterpreting Charlemagne's shop name for the rear anatomy of his passion in life, the Southern Right Whale. Only 3 months later, he had died at sea in a freak storm that swallowed his little boat. When people asked of the signage, he would refer to Daniel and his new home inside the whale, dimly lit with his gas lantern, pouring over his text books, unaware that he'd passed from the material world of air, earth and buildings. And yes, I can see you catching on; Charlemagne certainly did have a story attached to almost every aspect of his life. The way he saw it, everybody did, but he just took note of them, catalogued them in his expansive mind that, in equal measures, shut out procedure, technicalities, and his enemy, the moribund language, Latin ('Latin is like cancer,' Charlemagne would say. 'It has spread its way through this disaster of a language.'). 'A Tale from Heaven' was a conglomeration of these stories, the physical manifestation of the catalogue that spilled from his mind. There was nothing more sumptuous, Charlemagne would opine, than draping yourself in story. He would spend many a night updating his pricing classification system (a procedure, yes, but one that was necessary to disseminate his wares in fairness; unfortunately Charlemagne lived in a world where people had stopped caring for things that had not been assigned a value, so, in this one instance, for the sake of the longevity of his shop, he dipped his toe into the material concerns of the black world that lay outside), attributing value to different components of story. The prices were marked at the bottom of the story rolls, which Charlemagne penned himself, via ink and quill. The customers would delight in the more expensive garments; Charlemagne would break the wax seal, the paper racing to unravel, hitting the floor below, and rolling to their conclusion (and price tag) at the feet of the customers. Charlemagne had the shop organized via 'itsy bitsy teeny weeny stories', 'teeny weeny stories', 'stories of medium girth', 'stories of large girth', and finally, 'stories of grandeur', a section of the store that was cordoned off by the same Egyptian curtain fabric he had hung in his room.

Some customers would make the mistake of peeling back the curtains to this grand portion of the shop, but Charlemagne had smartly installed sensor alarms that would fill the shop with a sharp, incessant beeping sound. Oh, how Charlemagne hated this sound, but use it he must; from a very young age, humans are taught to react repulsively to these generic alarms—hands quickly pulling away from the curtains, head swinging from side to side in fear of being seen doing something wrong, eyes bulging, hands rising into a gesture of surrender, as if awaiting the cuffs to be slapped on their wrists. Charlemagne found he didn't even need to leave the counter. 'By appointment only,' he would call out dryly.

The customers would either scurry away from the shop, muttering an apology, red faced (Charlemagne was fine with that; most people were not ready for stories of grandeur), or, he would encounter the occasional plucky customer who would inquire further.

'Ah, I see…what's behind there?'

'Exactly what the sign says,' Charlemagne replied, not lifting his head from the dust covered pages he was carefully inspecting.

'Stories of Grandeur…are there more clothes in there?'

'I don't sell "clothes"…' Charlemagne spat out the final word scornfully, '…there are tomes behind those curtains, just like the rest.'

'Tomes, you mean books?'

Charlemagne finally lifts his head, peering over his reading glasses. 'I mean what I say!' he finally snaps.

'Aren't tomes big old books?'

Charlemagne's gaze softened. The plucky customer had found the crack between his protective layers; it was necessary Charlemagne keep up his armour against the vacuity of banal conversation. The world was rampant with it; or at least Charlemagne thought it was, but his interactions with the world were largely limited to the shop. There was a time when Charlemagne wandered the outside world, but those days were long gone, and now, Charlemagne had invited the world in, and the tomes that surrounded him pushed and pulled him across a greater landscape of temporal suspension, a world covered in golden dust. That was the real world. But he could never escape the world outside; it announced itself via the Nepalese cowbells rattling in beautiful discordance as a customer opened the shop door. Charlemagne ignored the new customer, as always, and spoke in a measured tone, to the stupid, nosy, but well-meaning and curious, plucky customer. 'Tomes can be big old books, yes, but stories are not exclusively attached to books.'

The plucky customer scrunched his nose while squinting, and pushed his head back slightly, as if trying to allow an imperceptible force to make its way through his eyeballs, and seep into cognition.

Charlemagne cast his eyes on the plucky customer's partner, who was waiting in the corner, patiently sitting on the Kaare Klint safari chair. She gazed out the window, that is, if the window could be seen through, but Charlemagne had covered it with butcher's paper; another of his attempts at keeping the outside world at bay, and as he watched more closely, noticed she was moving ever so slightly to an unheard rhythm. The plucky customer was asking more questions, but Charlemagne had the adept skill of losing his hearing to inanity. He swayed by him in dance, moving toward the girl, when he remembered his 78s.

Charlemagne's collection of 78s was formidable. He kept them in the attic above his room. He did go through a phase where he sold them in the shop, but they were too popular, and he would find himself in sorrow when the old wooden milk crate was empty at the end of the day. Nothing drained him of energy more than watching a tome leave the shop in the hands of a hungry ghost. You see, despite Charlemagne being a shop vendor, his focus wasn't on sales, in fact, you could fairly say, he was averse to selling too many items. There was the occasional customer who transcended this sorrow. They were a special kind of person, someone who was disinclined to shop at all (which is what made them a rare occurrence in his shop), and this was

one of those moments where two negative poles broke the laws of physics and would rapidly shudder as they neatly snapped together. She wasn't interested in buying anything, and this delighted Charlemagne.

'What's your talent?' Charlemagne always opened up with the same question to non-customers. It was his attempt at bypassing the rubbish heap of inane chatter. His opening question was barely spoken; Charlemagne always began conversations quietly, but if they went well, he would gradually become more animated, even boisterous, especially after a glass of cognac. His initial muttering would often not be heard, but usually acknowledged with fleeting eye contact, a kind of 'checking in'.

'What's your talent?' The question came a little louder this time. Of course, interrogatives like this one are avoided as a conversation starter because one is immediately dropped in the throes of identity formation, a private enclave of struggle that, mostly, we do our best to contain. And, the tears that reluctantly escape are mostly inappropriate; in fact, many humans have found a way to suck them back into their ducts, as if reversing time.

'Excuse me?' She, of course, heard what Charlemagne had asked, but the only proper response was to question; who would ask such a question? And why? Maybe even, how dare they ask such a question? But Charlemagne knew a non-customer when he saw one.

'What's your talent.' This time the question was asserted, not so loud that the non-customer's companion would overhear, but there was no longer any doubt what was being asked, or, asserted.

And this particular time, the non-customer in question lost face, and a tear spilled. She hadn't learnt the skill of tear-sucking, so a quick swipe of the hand had to do.

Charlemagne watched on impassively. 'We are given permission to cry at funerals and airports. That is all. It's nice to meet you.' Finally falling into convention, Charlemagne extended his hand in greeting.

The non-customer took it, lips tight, still gaining composure.

'I'm Charlemagne.'

'Hello. I'm Anika.'

'I have something for you, Anika.' With that, he disappeared up the stairs. Anika's partner had fallen silent, mouth slightly ajar, not so plucky now. Charlemagne came down the stairs with a 78 in hand.

'Thank you, but I don't have a record player,' Anika said, her hands pushing the record away before it had even touched her hands.

'Then you will need to find one,' Charlemagne replied, barely a smile on his lips

Anika looked puzzled, but was game. 'What would I do with it if I couldn't play it on a record player?'

'Sometimes a tome has a purpose that belies its function. Perhaps you can hear its song?' Charlemagne held the 78 up with two fingers through the centre spindle hole adjacent to Anika's ear.

Anika looked puzzled, but she couldn't stifle a smile.

'Smiling is permitted here,' Charlemagne offered, which caused a smiling eruption for both parties, and in turn, a belly laugh from Charlemagne. Charlemagne persisted, the 78 still poised delicately at Anika's ear. The shop fell silent again, and Charlemagne, with eyes holding Anika, spoke quietly. 'Listen.' Anika submitted, her eyes closing. The shop door opened with the clanging of bells, and Charlemagne turned around immediately, his free hand shooing away his new customers, who, luckily, were aware they'd walked in on something they shouldn't have, and scurried away. 'Keep your focus.' Charlemagne's focus came back to Anika, whose eyes were still closed.

The shop took on a different quality, the outside world successfully held at bay, and the silence filled the air with a thickness, like the moment before a storm hits in the tropics. Anika, ever so slightly, began to sway. 'Bells,' she said softly. 'And sand…a fire…and a big drum…moonlight'

Charlemagne's eyes were also closed, so he could not see Anika's shoulders move in unison with his head.

And Anika left the store with a tome in hand, and a much quieter partner. This was one of the times Charlemagne knew a 78 had to leave; its story could now continue. It was after a day like this that Charlemagne slept deeply, 12 hours of still blackness, an oblivion he was rarely blessed by.

Bloodsport

Tim O'Connell

I'm at the meeting point: a narrow cliff-edge. Waves crash onto rocks that jut from the ocean like jagged teeth. Countless samurai have died here coveting clan honour. A wrong step preludes a 300-foot drop. I hear a squawk that seems to echo my name. A lone opportunistic gull rides an updraft, a late-afternoon snack its only concern.

Sensing a presence, I turn. Miguel appears across the way, bathed in the light of the setting sun.

'Fifteen minutes I've waited.'

'Impatience,' Miguel says, 'is the folly of youth.'

I smirk. 'Is that what this is? A lesson in patience?'

Miguel advances until we stand a sword-length apart at the cliff's edge. Death, like the gull, is opportunistic, and could wing its way from any direction.

Miguel warns that my insolence will cost me. Unperturbed, I grin, disarming him with false confidence. I'm less experienced, but Miguel's victory is anything but assured.

White-knuckled, we draw our swords, our robes rippling in the wind. Miguel adopts our clan's traditional stance; I fall into my variation of it.

Right legs leading, we lock eyes, each daring the other to strike first.

Miguel takes a quarter-step back. His weight shifts to his back foot. I follow his cue, my heel digging into the soft earth. My flesh is goose-pimpled, my muscles taut. Miguel, expressionless, wholly inhabits this moment.

The distant seabird screeches, her cry puncturing the silence.

I lunge forward.

Miguel guards high; I feint and strike low. We clash violently until my blade slips down the length of his. He shunts me off balance and leads me in a quarter-circle, his position a counterweight to my heavy blow. I hang on, enduring the hideous scraping of steel.

We separate explosively. My arm is nicked. I hiss and force it from my mind. Miguel lunges, hoping to capitalise on his modest blow. He is uncannily quick, but I deflect, taking his wrist and forcing him to relent. He leaps back.

'Don't worry,' I say. 'There's still plenty of fight in me.'

Miguel mocks me with laughter.

The reprieve is short-lived. Our swords collide a dozen more times. We circle continuously. Alternately, we dominate, losing then wrestling back control, overpowering and pushing back in increments. But our reserves are low. Miguel knows this. It's in his eyes. For all our discipline, we are but flesh constructs.

We separate, pirouetting in perfect synchronicity. I toss my robe, my legs shifting free. Then I thrust forward in pre-emptive strike. Miguel is waiting. He always is. He parries then ripostes my blow. Sparks fly. Our clashing blades deafen.

'Gyaaaaah!' My voice scrapes in my throat.

Our swords clash repeatedly. Dusk looms. I grit my teeth, my eyes fixed on my opponent. I lust for an opening. My strength is flagging, my mind clouding. Tiny mistakes accumulate. Miguel's focus sharpens; his cuts come too close.

I take one last stand. With a two-handed grip, I draw back, enveloped by primal fury. I drive my blade with such ferocity. Miguel defends – barely. His face whitens. I strike again, thrashing and thrashing. He can't match my intensity. This is the virtue of youth.

Miguel panics. He evades my blows, but the near misses spur me on. Relentless parrying exhausts him. Enraged, I draw back and swing again, but miscalculate and deal a heavy blow to nothing. Miguel creates distance and I feel, overwhelmingly, that a vital opportunity is wasted.

We recover our breath over two long seconds. Then, as if of one mind, we surge forward with declarative war cries. Miguel catches my blade in his. We lock in, our poised body language belying our struggle. We each hope to unnerve the other. Muscles quake. Our composure slips. Sheens of sweat form above our brows.

Miguel swiftly sidesteps and I stagger off-kilter. My balance is again misplaced; I strike a knee into my opponent, but the move is crude and proves my undoing. It happens so fast: I lurch sideways, my feet flirting with the cliff-edge, and—

I feel it before seeing it. It's a clean hit. Miguel has saved me from a 300-foot drop, only to finish me himself. His blade protrudes from between my shoulders. We remain like this, outside time; Miguel savouring victory, perhaps contemplating the complexities of our relationship, while I am caught in the throes of death.

Miguel is stoic a long while, his form effortlessly arranged for the execution of his final blow. The light is changing. Dusk is becoming night and I am where I deserve to be, skewered on my brother's blade.

I'm fading fast, my vision waning. But all's right, this is the natural order of things. I focus, as if to immortalise the moment, find beauty in death. But the gull's incessant screeches return and now the sound is frenzied. With the last of my strength, I look to the source, expecting the sky to be blotted with seagulls.

Instead, I see a barmaid from a neighbouring establishment. Her stride is long, her expression unamused. She proceeds to her announcement, a cross-armed harbinger.

'Daniel! Cody! I've been calling for ten minutes! Dinner's on the table!'

I stand tall, exhaling frustration. The illusion's ruined: she's no barmaid. My brother Cody releases his hair from its authentic samurai bun and steps down from the wooden stage-cum-cliff edge.

'Sorry, Mum.'

His face broadcasts disappointment. I pat between his shoulder blades, in the spot where his character slew mine, and assure him that our rehearsals have not been in vain, that our

depiction of cartoon samurais Jack and Miguel are eerie in their accuracy, and that our scheduled display will be the highlight of FantasyCon.

Cody, looking serious, Miguel-esque, casts me a sidelong glance.

Flawless.

Hidden in the Pines

Anna Bilbrough

Pine washes over me, scent and sensation. I pick a few stray needles off my shirt as I lay in the grass, the soil underneath damp from overnight rain. I feel my clothes sticking to my back. The pine needles tug lightly at my skin as I roll them between thumb and forefinger. I can feel the skin of my stomach stretch as I inhale. I am settling into the ground. I can feel the divots my elbows and heels are making in the soft soil.

The sky is almost clear. I watch the clouds move, seeing nothing in their shapes. Threads of thought drift through my mind, but I can't hold on to any of these threads, can't stitch them into a sentence. My eyelids are seconds from closing over, the warmth of the sun and the silence of the park lulling me into an almost slumber.

In my half-awake state I think that the earth is a mirror on itself; the sea and the sky look at each other as twins might. The breaking waves are like the clouds. Our land, us – we are interruptions, smudges on the mirror. I feel infinitesimal.

I am alone. It is Tuesday lunchtime and there are few people around. I lay on a slight uphill slant, at the bottom of which is the local lake and walking track. There is a playground and benches a short walk from where I lay. The shrieks of the children flying around the playground filter through the pine trees to me and it is a foreign sound. It has been a while since I have been in the company of exuberant children.

I think of where I am supposed to be. The city, a campus, a lecture room. I think, This is where I want to be. Two hours into my three-hour drive, I stopped at a roadhouse. I was eating full English breakfasts alongside the truck drivers, wiping greasy fingers down my jeans.

Pine needles are collecting in my hair and falling down the back of my shirt. I stand, brush myself off and swing my backpack over my shoulder. I survey the flattened grass. My phone sits facedown on the ground. I pick it up and place it back in my pocket. I start walking.

'Nancy, come on. Lunch is ready.'

A shadow fell over my face and I recognised the silhouette of Jasmine. Her hand was extended.

I was lying in the grass, enjoying the sun, thinking nothing. I had separated from the group.

I hoisted my upper half off the ground, accepted my friend's hand and laughed as, unprepared for the dampness of my palm from the dewy grass, her hand slipped out of mine and I found myself facing the sky again. She extended both hands, dugs her heels into the ground, affected the stance of some kind of Sumo wrestler and helped me off the ground, on to my own two feet. I brushed myself down, pine needles getting lost among the grass. She smiled at me and I smiled back – a mirror.

My breakfast sits in my stomach like a paperweight. I can feel my shoulders hunching, unable to stretch my torso straight.

I continue up the hill, away from the lake, backpack bumping my thigh in time with my steps.

The trees and shrubs thicken. My shoes slip on the grass from time to time, causing my body to spark with awareness. The sun is behind me and the back of my neck grows hot. The soft, short grass from lower down the hill has turned mostly to thick clumps of thistle bushes and wide, long blades of grass that irritate the skin around my ankles. I am aware that my gait resembles a flamingo as I dodge the thistles and step high to avoid the itch of the vegetation, but there is no track up this way – I can step anywhere.

This ground is familiar to me. Summer school days were spent here, fish and chips wrapped in butcher's paper tucked under arm, tomato sauce bottle nicked from the staff room. The four of us would skip maths, science and classes with a substitute teacher – any excuse to leave school was taken advantage of. The lady at the corner store, sweating over the fryers, would eye us suspiciously, debating whether to report us. We would charm her—or rather, Jasmine would charm her. Rose gold hair flipped over her shoulder, she'd laugh and joke with the woman, assuaging any doubts.

At the hill, we'd plant ourselves deep in the thick of the trees surrounding the lake, hiding from view and from the high school down the road. Those days formed us as a group.

I think of them as I continue up the hill, sweat starting to form on the small of my back. My steps became slower and wider as the hill steepens.

The others—Jasmine, Hugh and Franny— have been in my periphery ever since school finished and I see them from time to time. Each time I do though, I sense that they have outgrown the people I am familiar with. Things, people, have always moved around me and I am an unmovable bollard cemented to one spot.

Jasmine, like me, is studying in the city. Film. When I catch her in the city, her boarding a tram, me stepping off, she's under the impression that we'll bump into each other again. I act like I believe that, too.

Hugh is still in town. The thought occurs to me that I should pop in, send him a message to catch up for lunch. He works at the local theatre, sometimes on the stage, but mostly on the door.

Franny is elusive, always has been. She moved out at seventeen, left school, worked as an apprentice baker. She is quieter than the rest of us. Always listening and watching – I watch her watching. She weighs her words before she speaks them, it's written on her face.

I know them, but I don't. I've met them, but I haven't.

Jasmine and I made our way back to where we'd set up, arms swinging lightly in unison. The thistles underfoot made me step light and quick.

Franny was walking up the hill, heading towards the rug, too. Her arms were laden with silver trays of meat. The slight breeze sent the smell of barbecued meat my way. I was hungry.

We each occupied a corner of the rug, sat on foldout camping chairs that were unbalanced on the slope of the earth, food spread out in the middle. As we piled up our plates, we muttered offerings of thanks to Franny for preparing the food. She smiled lightly, nodding.

We ate and talked in the way that people do when they've known each other for years, but need to find the common ground. Manners, niceties, small, vague questions like: 'What have you been up to?'. Time ties friendships up in formalities after stretches of no contact.

As the afternoon stretched, we loosened up, like we always do. We found our old rhythm and tried our best to march in time together.

I walk until I find the tree with the knotted branches. They twist around each other like fingers interlaced. There is an old, brick barbecue standing upright a few metres away, a relic of a once-used area. This was our hideout.

I sit and fossick in my bag for a tissue. There are a few crumpled at the base of my backpack. I pat my face and the back of my neck, soaking up the light layer of sweat.

The playground, the benches and tables and the lake are all out of view now. I can't hear the people walking or children playing

anymore. Instead, the distant zips of cars as they speed at eighty k's into town bounce against the trees.

The ground is uncomfortable. I flatten my backpack and place it underneath me. We used to lay our school jumpers on the ground in a makeshift rug on the days we would skip class.

Jasmine and I were the instigators. Convincing the others wasn't a hard task.

'I have street smarts,' Hugh would say. 'My education happens outside of school.' Jasmine would laugh, Franny would roll her eyes.

I'm perched on the backpack, legs splayed out in front of me. When here alone, the hideout doesn't have the same effect. It's empty.

Jasmine was entertaining us with stories of her friends in the city; her crazy, creative, filmmaking friends. Hugh laughed, hanging on her every word. I was embarrassed to witness the look on his face. Franny was moving the scraps of her food around on her plate with her plastic fork. Her elbow was propped on her knee, palm of her hand cradling her chin.

I knew of a few of Jasmine's friends. When she mentioned Steph or Justin she would look to me for a nod, a confirmation.

I felt my attention was being stolen. I was locked in this performance, a reenactment of situations I hadn't been involved in but had some loose connection to.

I didn't have any new friends to gush over, no outlandish nights to retell. The differences were opening like chasms between us. My only worthy contribution was to laugh when I was supposed and ask questions that fueled somebody else's story. I didn't feel sufficient enough for this company anymore.

I stand and stretch.

Backpack on my shoulder once again, I walk down the slope, trees thinning out, back to the lake.

I start to walk around it, shoes crunching on the man-made red gravel path. Stones flick off the heel of my shoes and hit my calves. A cool wind lifts off the lake.

I start to feel the pressure of limited time, the pressure that comes from being idle. Messages to my old friends are formulating in my mind. A slow burnout is harder to handle than an implosion. Maybe I should keep something alive. A flame that falters always possesses a small glimpse of hope over a flame snuffed out.

We started to pack up.

Franny collected the paper plates, plastic cutlery and cups and put them in a bin by the barbecues.

Jasmine rolled up the rug, brushing off the food crumbs and pieces of grass and dirt that had gathered.

Hugh struggled while fitting the fold-up chairs back in their covers. They, like covers for sleeping bags, had the unique quality of never seeming big enough for the object they housed. I felt something similar: was I too small for my body, or was my body too big for me?

Hugh exhaled in frustration and I smiled. Frown lines were setting in around his eyes. A slight sheen of sweat covered his forehead.

I watched him struggle a moment longer, then in three strides was by his side and grabbing the cover from him. I held it open as he smiled with gratitude that didn't quite reach his eyes. He lifted the chair and slid it into the bag, the legs scraping my fingers. Little bursts of warmth flared up where the skin was sloughed away by the metal frame of the chair.

I pulled the drawstring and closed the top of the bag. Hugh brushed his hands together, as if to brush away dust, the remains of hard work. He shouldered two of the chairs.

I heaved the other two into my arms, slid my sandals on to my feet, the straps bunching underneath my heel, making me slide my feet along the ground in order to keep them from tripping me up.

We all made our way back to my car, back to before.

I have lost track of time. I guess that I am a quarter of the way around the lake.

I reach into my pocket, pull out my phone and turn it on. The screen is bright and the time flashes onto the screen. It is later than I thought. I turn on my heel and start heading back to my car. I am walking with speed now. I want to miss the peak hour traffic upon hitting the city, but I think I have missed my chance.

The path around the lake has filled. I overtake old couples and parents with prams and manoeuver my way around little kids on bikes with flags and training wheels. They trundle along the path, weaving this way and that, like a line of ants interrupted by a foot, ringing their bell not for a warning but because they have something to make sound with. I smile at their parents as I dodge them, but feel irritation growing inside of me.

I reach the car park and the sweat that had cooled has returned with a fury. The afternoon sun has come out in full force.

I hurry into the car, throwing my backpack on to the seat beside me. As I close the door my fingers get caught lightly in the frame. The beds of my fingernails are purple with blood and my fingers lightly shake. I suck on them to cool them down.

I wait for a moment, waiting for the sting to pass, watching the breeze sway the tops of the trees. I want to be moved like that.

My hair is the same length as the day the four of us were here for the last time. I think I'm even wearing the same shoes. The sense of finality that day was palpable. The flame was snuffed.

There is no sense of having outgrown each other; we have overgrown one another. Like mint overtaking the herb garden, we've all become too big for the hideouts we used to share.

I turn on the car, reverse out of my spot. There is a car behind me waiting to take it.

With the lake in my rearview mirror, I make it to the freeway, on my way back to before.

How Strange

Sarah Irene Robinson

I was sitting in my chair, my new chair that makes me want to sit at my desk all day and write glorious things, or read books or research bees. I was sitting in my chair and I wasn't doing any of these things. I was looking at the finances for my business, I wasn't adding or listing or making fancy spread sheets, I was just looking at them, in wonder of what I could do with them. They weren't tangible, they were on my computer, otherwise I would have put them in a draw and that would be them done with.

A very busy knock at the door kicks me out of my wonder. The other day I had a similar knock and decided it was too busy of a knock for me to get up from my wonderings, but today my wonderings were numbers bouncing up and down, so I was happy to engage with a very busy knock.

I opened the door and a man begins his tired spiel about some charity or another, wildlife whosit or nature helpers or whatever. There is a flyscreen between us and I am aware that I can see his face, but he cannot see mine. I watch him while he speaks and his face becomes clearer, it's my cousin. I open the fly screen door between us so he can see me and we both just stand there in awe of the situation.

As small children I'm sure we played together a few times, though no specific or detailed memories come to mind, then there was a massive gap of twenty odd years and then there was my Pa's funeral two months ago. Where all us cousins shared awkward hugs and small talk, realised we were all of similar temperaments, enjoyed our common ground and parted without exchange of any future musings.

And there he was standing there at the door, a feeling of great affection came over me, and I bundled him inside. Frantic with the kettle and the coffee. We were both off balance and didn't mind the halted conversation. We couldn't seem to say enough in the short time, but still allowed a moment or two for an awkward pause. It was his first day canvassing on his own, how many doors he must have knocked on. I offered him a seat and noticed he was shaking. He spoke of how horrible people can be in this line of work and the shaking shook itself out.

We spoke all too much and he said he couldn't stay long and the conversation found greater pause. I told him to come around again, have another cuppa. He said how funny the other workers would find it, him banging on the door of his cousin. He kept saying, how funny and I kept saying, how strange. It was a happy encounter, too many of so much in such a small amount of time.

I went for a walk when it became dark, to let whatever had welled up in me breathe out slowly. The streets are poorly lit, yet I found a strong comfort of the darkness. There wasn't too much out there to pay attention to so I could be lost in my unwinding self without interruption from the outside world.

It's a good ol' world, playing its games.

It's an Ill Wind

Robert Bennett

The Seven of Clubs was boasting again.

"I am the Atlas that holds up this house and don't forget it."

The other cards rolled their eyes at one another. Seven was universally considered to be a big pain in the deck. They all knew that any one of them could have been occupying his place instead.

"Oh, shut up Seven," shouted an annoyed King of Spades. "We cards are controlled by chance not destiny. There is nothing certain in the life of a card. When it's all said and done, you're just a fancy piece of pasteboard like the rest of us. If you weren't holding up this house you'd be flat out trying to make a pair or a small straight."

"Quite so, your Majesty," said the Jack of Hearts. "However, some of us have superior designs and are more highly valued. Seven lacks those qualities. Indeed, he seems to lack any noteworthy qualities at all. He is basically useless."

The King shrugged. He knew the Jack was only trying to ingratiate himself…as always. Still, he acknowledged the Jack's remarks with a lordly nod. Must keep up appearances, he thought.

"Upper class twits," sniffed Seven, as loud sniggering broke out all around him. One day, some day, he would show them all that he was no joke.

The house of cards was one of eight that stood on a fabulously carved billiard table. The table itself was the central feature of a games room in a large country mansion. The games room was a special place where Clifford Sidney-Hall went to read and drink brandy, among other things. Clifford also enjoyed playing billiards and snooker. But he never played pool. Pool had too many lower class associations. Clifford detested seedy late night poolrooms full of smoke and the smell of liquor. The irony that his games room often smelt of smoke and booze was lost on Clifford.

Yet for some weeks, Clifford's cue had remained in its rack as he channeled his energies into constructing houses of cards. The project was all for his own amusement. A way to kill time while he waited for his fiancée, the delightfully free spirited Daphne Grainger to return from her holidays in the South of France. It was unheard of for Clifford's cue to be racked when Daphne was around.

If the cue was feeling neglected, the billiard and snooker balls were grateful for the respite. They did not miss the constant collisions and concussions. They particularly feared one of Clifford's friends who possessed a ferocious, cracking drive that always sent the balls racing and bumping about the table. The lucky ones went into a pocket off the break and were safe. Until the next game.

But the old cue ball was virtually punch drunk. He alone was always involved in the game. The past few weeks had been like paradise for him nestled safely in a padded box with his fellow balls. His speech was now only slightly slurred and he looked much brighter.

The elegant, oak billiard table showed no emotions either way. She had been built to last and elicit expressions of admiration. That's right. The billiard table was female and a real lady in every respect. She had beautiful legs, all the way up to her shapely cushions. Her pocket linings were of softest leather with fine netting stockings that were finished with a golden tassel. When a ball was sunk the fortunate pocket trembled. Not violently, but with delight. The tabletop was made of a single heavy sheet of quality slate. It was a top made for flaunting. She was proud of her top, which never failed to draw compliments from the players. Although the table was old, she had aged magnificently. Something like Helen Mirren…if that lady were a piece of fine furniture.

The jaunty cue rack on the wall never grew tired of feasting his eyes on the table. The table knew that the rack had feelings for her, as she did for him, but of course, nothing could ever come of it. They were just too different and fixed in their ways. It might also not be fitting.

The walls of the room were paneled with oak and adorned with oil paintings and fine etchings. There were a couple of Stubbs' horses and three Norman Lindsey nudes each of which exuded the casual, wanton sexuality for which that artist was famous. A few glass lights with brass fittings and a deep, crimson, Oriental rug completed the decor. Clifford's high-winged back armchair stood like a throne near the stone fireplace. Antique chairs, a leather sofa and padded benches accommodated other players and guests. If the room exuded anything it was the subtle aroma of old money.

The eight houses of cards were arranged in two rows of four with a wide avenue running down the middle. Clifford was interested in town planning and he liked order. But no two houses were exactly alike. For one thing, Clifford had used different types of playing cards for each house. Another variation was that not all of the houses consisted of a full pack of fifty-two cards. This meant that some houses were taller than others, while some were more compact. Whatever Clifford's intentions had been, the fact remained that these differences had created a hierarchy. Clifford was, of course, ignorant of the situation he had created.

This was hardly a surprise to the billiard table and the other non-card denizens of Clifford's games room because they knew that playing cards were among the worst snobs and most competitive of all gaming equipment.

But let's return to Seven's house, a grand affair which employed all fifty-two of a pack of "Queens Slipper" cards. The base of the house was made up of a series of pairs of cards that formed rows of an inverted V shape. These Vs were about five centimetres apart. Next, a third card was laid flat across two of the V shapes. Gradually, the house had risen to six stories. Almost as soon as the house had been completed some of the other cards had suggested that as Seven was more shiny than the other cards at the base of the house, he was most likely to slip and bring the whole lot tumbling down. Worse than that Clifford had seemed to sense what the cards were saying. Seven had been alarmed when Clifford suddenly left the room last evening. Seven was sure that Clifford had gone to think things over.

"Oh you can bet on it," said the Three of Diamonds. Seven did not like Diamonds at the best of times. Three was now on his trump list.

The next house was of similar construction but it has been made with a set of "Gardens of Suzhou" cards that Clifford acquired in China. The cards were slightly smaller than most Western cards but they featured some lovely views of the water city of Suzhou, including the famous "Humble Administrator's Garden". All of the pictures faced outwards, so despite being smaller than its neighbour the "Gardens of Suzhou" house was quite beautiful.

On the other side of the Garden's house was one made with an old pack of "Guinness" playing cards. These cards were well used and slightly discoloured. They also smelt of the famous stout that had been made in Dublin since 1759. Actually, the house was more like a tower. Perhaps, Clifford had been thinking of the solitary Norman towers than still stand throughout Ireland today? At the end of the row was another tower, slightly lower, made from a set of cards designed exclusively for the Folio Society. The illustrations on the cards are whimsical and amusing. Like those in the "Garden of Suzhou" house, all the cards in the Folio Society tower are turned outwards so the illustrations can be seen. The tower seemed to be one of Clifford's favourites.

Directly across from the "Queens Slipper" mansion was a rival

edifice that we might call the "Congress House." The cards were made in the USA and had a brilliant red coloured back that featured a picture of a pheasant on an enameled button. The cards were very elegant and the house was nearly identical in size to the "Queens Slipper" mansion. The visual impact of the red cards and massed pheasants was fantastic.

Its neighbour was made from a pack of "Indian Pacific" cards that Clifford acquired during a train journey across Australia. The backs of the cards showed a photograph of the famous train under a night sky full of stars. The cards were very experienced. They had seen action in numerous poker games resulting in a gritty patina, which was ideal for building a house of cards. The base differed from the rest because Clifford had used four cards leaning against each other to form a sort of box. A flat card on top of the box allowed for the next level to be built. The result was a squat house that was very strong. It also had an aura of permanence that none of the other houses had.

Next was the "black sheep" of the group. This house was made of playing cards with pictures of young women in various stages of undress on them. Clifford had shamelessly turned the cards outwards so the ladies could be easily seen. Most of the other houses referred to this construction as "the brothel". Only the "Guinness" house made any attempt at establishing a cordial relationship. However, the ladies shrugged off the accusatory looks of the other houses as easily as a duck might shed water off its back.

Last of all was a very tall tower in which Clifford used the best part of two packs of satin finish cards from France. The green and black colours on the backs of the cards created a striking effect and the tower has assumed a quite arrogant attitude in the classical French manner.

Since the houses of cards had been completed Clifford has insisted that the door to the games room remain closed. He did not want some chance breeze to topple any of the houses. Neither did he want servants blundering around and causing chaos when cleaning. It was a matter of some surprise therefore to the occupants, when the door opened slowly and two figures slipped stealthily into the games room.

'Take me away? Of course, I'd love you to take me away. Even if it's only for a short time," breathed Clarissa.

The downstairs maid and Sam the footman had been lovers for some time. Stolen moments were a treasured release from their work responsibilities. It was mid-afternoon and Clifford was away on business in the town. Mrs Thomas, the housekeeper, was taking a nap in the conservatory while Williams the butler was in his room doing whatever it is that butlers do when not catering to their employer's every whim.

In the circumstances, the games room was a safe place. Everybody was aware of Clifford's injunction but Clarissa and Sam had not had such a good opportunity for a couple of weeks. The heavy drapes were not fully drawn so there was plenty of low seductive light entering the room to enable the lovers to see what they were doing.

"Wrapped together like fish and chips, hey darling?" said Sam at his most romantic. Clarissa laughed but she did not fancy Sam for his wit alone. He had other qualities. As Clarissa shed her uniform Sam rose to the challenge like a trout to the bait. At this point we should withdraw. To linger would be bad form.

A frantic but enjoyable fifteen minutes later, Clarissa was looking over Sam's shoulder at the houses of cards on the billiard table.

"I don't understand what old Clifford is up to with those cards?" she asked.

"Buggered if I know, love," was Sam's considered and honest reply.

Sometimes, Sam could be quite sharp but when it counted most he was slow and very amenable. Clarissa liked those qualities in a man. Now, with the bottled up passion of a fortnight or so expended, the lovers started to relax. However, there was to be no rest for the wicked. A car door slammed loudly, somewhere close by. The lovers were swiftly on their feet and pulled on their clothes. Both had their ears cocked towards the door. Soon, angry footsteps could be heard in the hall and they were heading towards the games room.

"Quick," said Sam and took Clarissa by the hand as he dragged her out through the French doors. The doors had just closed softly behind them when the other door to the games room was thrown open.

"Right, I will do it. I will move that bloody Seven of Clubs," announced Clifford to nobody at all.

Clifford had come to this important decision while driving along the narrow, hedge-lined road that lead to his stately pile. Now, with all the authority of generations of Sidney-Halls who had gone before him, Clifford strode across to the table and leant over to effect the crucial change. He carefully held the card that formed a V with Seven in his left hand. Then he removed the other with his right.

"So far, so good," he muttered to himself.

Next he steadied the bottom card before he took another from the top row and put it in Seven's old position. Clifford completed the change by sliding Seven into his new position. As he stood beaming over his handiwork Clifford decided that a celebratory brandy was in order. With the casual confidence of a conqueror, Clifford picked up a large balloon glass and filled it with dark fiery spirit. But as he raised the glass to his lips when there was a knock at the door. Clifford sighed and uttered the command, "Come."

The door opened and in walked Mrs Thomas fresh from her siesta. As she did so a strong breeze blew up the hallway. The rogue zephyr had entered the house because Clifford, in his haste, had not closed the front door behind him. The breeze swept into the games room and Clifford gasped in horror as the first couple of card houses began to fall.

Mrs Thomas was mortified.

"Shut that damn door," screamed Clifford.

As Mrs Thomas turned to comply, the French doors also blew open. Soon devastation was visited on all the card houses. Call it chance or fate but only the "brothel" remained intact. Mrs Thomas was reduced to tears and feared dismissal.

Clifford was also in tears. It seemed that everything was his fault. Leaving the front door ajar was bad enough. But his apparent failure to secure the French doors after his morning's tryst with Gillian Ferguson was even worse. Gillian, the gamekeeper's sister, had arrived early to discuss the arrangements for tonight's dinner party. Clifford knew his butler and housekeeper were otherwise engaged so it had not taken long for things to get all Lady Chatterley like, once the menu had been settled. It had been a leisurely and pleasurable encounter. There had been no pressure, so Clifford could only put down his failure to sheer carelessness.

Meanwhile, the Seven of Clubs had found himself occupying a new position right beside "the brothel".

"Useless, am I?" He smiled before he declared to all within hearing distance, "Oh well. It's an ill wind..."

Kiki Grows

Alexandra Mavridis

Kiki loved to hear the sound of her husband's car entering the driveway. It was probably a sound uninteresting to most, but for her it was a prized piece of the rhythm of her life. Just like the sound of Demetrius whistling ritualistically as he lathered up his face to shave; these were the elements of her life that gave her joy and purpose; that and the sound of her boys rising in the morning, eyes slightly puffy and full of sleep.

It was Saturday morning and Kiki was already feeling tired. She had worked hard yesterday baking bread and savoury pastries for the rest of the week. Don't complain she told herself as she remembered her mother's stories of hardship back in the village; the grinding of the wheat by hand, the preparation of the wood oven coals and the washing of the clothes along the rocks by the riverside.

Today was her washing day and fortunately the chance of rain predicted earlier in the week had been revised to sunny with occasional cloudy patches. It was a relief to get the washing hung out and brought back in on the same day; it cut the workload in half. Autopilot seemed to be her setting.

'Two weeks with me and I will turn you into a robot,' her sister Tina would declare. It hurt to remember the delight that her sister showed when she delivered that line to her; her eldest sister's comments permeated her unconscious. She had succeeded.

During the school holidays it had been Kiki's job to stay at her sister's place and babysit her two sons and keep house. Tina lived in the suburbs; she had the perfect house, according to her parents. Kiki hated not seeing friends, God knows she didn't have very many, but with time she had grown attached to her nephews. They had given her the name Kiki.

She had a lot to be thankful for—her role as a mother was paramount—a beautiful home in a good suburb, an adoring husband and two healthy sons. Still, a feeling of emptiness had begun to overshadow her days; on waking it was there like a lead blanket on her chest. It was a relief going to bed each night. Kiki would stare at the ceiling rose and try to calm her mind that had become full and chaotic; she would ruminate about all the things she hadn't got right, that she would probably never get right. During the day she found herself fixating about the house; washing things in the kitchen that had already been cleaned, changing the bath towels continually; it was becoming difficult just to watch television without attending to specks of dust that she spied on every surface.

Her mother had trained her well: she had learnt the ways of good housekeeping from the tender age of ten. She laughed sardonically within herself as she remembered the compliments her mother received in church.

'You will have no problems marrying this one off, Sotiria,' crowed the elders.

'You know my grandson's a good boy,' chimed a plump lady in the aisle.

'We'll have to come and get her to make a Greek coffee for us,' they continued.

'You haven't let her go out have you?' one elder screeched.

'You know what happens to those girls that get away?' they resonated in harmony.

Kiki knew all right, her friend Despina had got away. She'd married an Australian boy. She never saw her again. Despina wed and went to live interstate, eventually Robert got a great job offer and now they lived in New York. Occasionally, she received postcards from places like Paris and Egypt saying 'wish you were here'.

She had chosen a white damask tablecloth for her dowry from the travelling quilt man who would drop by every Sunday to show his wares to all the prospective maidens of the Greek community. The paplomatas would call her Kori, a name she despised—it simply meant daughter—she was not his daughter, she was not his anything. She had a name; Kiryaki Sidiropoulou and she told him so. Did he know her better than she knew herself? Had she become the sort of woman she despised?

Standing at the kitchen sink and gazing out of the window Kiki watched the family dog run around in circles as he chased flies and other insects. Demetrius and the boys kicked a ball while her roast was cooking. Her eyes filled with tears as she saw that her sons had grown into young men, soon enough they too would have wives and it would just be her and Demetrius. The house would be hollow like a mausoleum with only a suggestion of the living.

It was two o'clock and it was time to lay the table.

'Come to the table for lunch my darlings,' she said as she placed the last of the accompaniments on the table.

'Is that enough olives?' asked Demetrius taking his usual seat at the head of the table.

'I shall bring you more,' said Kiki

'Can I have more meat,' said Ilias

'Give the boy more meat, did you see the hair on his legs,' said Demetrius.

'Me too,' piped up Michael.

'Where is the bread?' said Demetrius

'I should have put it closer to you, sorry,' said Kiki in a shrill voice.

'I heard a good story at the coffee club. Petros's wife was found in bed with her lover. He had a heart attack while climaxing! Perhaps the dead really do return to watch over us?' said Demetrius, smirking at Kiki.

'Not to be trusted that woman. Doesn't shed a tear at her own husband's funeral, refuses to wear black. Shouldn't be allowed back to church,' said Kiki, scoffing.

Ilias and Michael broke out into laughter and soon Demetrius joined his sons.

'When was the last time you went to church?' asked Kiki.

Abruptly, Kiki got up and started to clear the table. All dirty dishes were to be dealt with straight away, that was the way Demetrius wanted it and she had learnt the ways of her husband. Every day was the same. What was Despina doing at this moment? Probably at the Museum of Modern Art looking at Picasso's painting of the Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, she always liked a bit of nudity; and she?

'Shall I make the coffee now?' said Kiki as she wiped her brow.

'Bring some Koulourakia as well,' said Demetrius, grinning. He found his wife incredibly sexy when she looked slightly dishevelled. Still he knew better than to make any advances towards her; it was a running joke amongst their friends that they were more like sister and brother now.

'I picked up some fresh Loukoumia yesterday,' said Kiki. 'The melons are cut already, chilling for supper tonight.'

'No yoghurt?' bleated Demetrius.

Kiki raised her eyebrows, but said nothing.

Listening to the Greek station on her transistor radio, Kiki busily cleaned her kitchen: clearing all benches, putting out the waste, and soaking the lima beans for tomorrow's dinner. Four litre bottles of frozen water were placed on thick tea towels to defrost overnight in preparation for the pending heatwave. She swept and mopped the vinyl floor with the dedication of an industrious nun preparing the altar for worship the next day.

Tomorrow, Mother would expect to be picked up, taken to church and then come over for lunch. Every day was locked in and accounted for. While she worked she listened to a familiar tune on the radio. It was Parios, the Greek singer who had named himself after his island home Paros. His voice was full and rich, she sang along mournfully—today is the day, the day a separation occurs, a daughter is separated from her mother—with tears streaming down her face she hit the high notes. Leaving her home had not been hard, it had been her fantasy to create a loving home of her own, different from the one she had grown up in. Hers was going to be different.

At times Kiki fantasised about her mother dying. It would be a relief. It would be an end to a relationship that she had endured. She was tired of being the parent, the patient and understanding one. In her effort to find love she tried to create a perfect home for her family. But it was not enough, not today, not ever. Kiki craved a love she would never receive and the pain seemed too hard to bare.

It was dark by the time Kiki had completed the chores of the day. Her husband slept on the sofa as she prepared herself for bed. Good, she thought. More time alone. The small vanity mirror fogged up quickly as Kiki cleansed and exfoliated her face with steaming hot water. Before entering the shower she paused momentarily to view her nakedness. She saw a figure that she could hardly recognise, what happened to her soft smooth skin, her tresses of curly brown hair? She turned away from her reflection hastily.

Methodically, she washed and detangled her thinning hair. Her mirror revealed grey hair that had formed a linear border of white around her face, forming a frame around her skull; a before and after marker. She moisturized her face and as she did so, Kiki repeatedly ran her fingers over the deep lines that were establishing around her brow and mouth. Her fingers traced over the pathways that had etched themselves indelibly onto her mask. It was the layer that could not be altered without artificial means.

The face she saw in the mirror grew to be more and more foreign each day. It had become the face of her mother, the woman who she had never wanted to become.

Now she could not exactly remember why she had brewed such hatred. All she knew was that somehow she had woven into her thoughts, memories and beliefs a desire for vindication so dominant that it had choked and consumed her. Immediately, she saw that her children too would follow the pattern of pathos and judgment.

In her reflection Kiki saw a mature woman who had lost her way. Unable to recognize the figure that stood in front of her, her breath ceased momentarily. She saw eyes that were gripped with fear and hurt, a face that was coated with melancholia, a body that had become asymmetrical and stiff with intensity.

Eyes that only saw dirt and stains; ears that had tuned themselves only to the cry of her children; she saw that she had detached from Self; the girl that she once knew had eroded away with time and rituals.

Monday in Piss Street

Michael Freundt

I live in a shit-hole. Lying here ain't good. My bed stinks. I fart loudly and crawl through the thug of it and go to the kitchen. I can hear me mum snoring from here. It's a small place. Yeah, course it is. Cockroaches nyere-nyere me as they scatter away. They feel safe, I reckon. At home. I open the fridge. There's lots of space in our fridge. Green muck too. Fuck! The milk's off. I drink from the sink tap. Tastes like Draino. What day is it? Shit! I've got to go to the dole office. There's this fat fag creep there who looks at me like I'm a Macca's burger with fries on the side, like that chick in that ad on TV. Hope I get the swami girl. She's got Milo skin and eyes like mud cake. I shower, feel like a dump, take one. The Dettol soap is a nail clipping but it still strips every bit if moisture out of my skin. Me mum believes in squeaky clean. That and smack. Yeah, I know.

I can hear Scotty scratchin' at the back door. I let him in and find a rusty can of four-bean mix in the cupboard, behind the tea bags she steals from the motel down on Cowper Road. A job she's got, three days a week. It used to be two days but she gave the manager a blowjob and got three. That's what I reckon. I open the can with a bread knife and Scotty and I share it. I go into me mum's room and scratch around in her side drawer and – bingo! – find a twenty-dollar bill. Fuckin' awesome. She's dead to the world. I cover her up properly after starin' a bit.

On the floor I find a belt to use as a lead for Scotty. We go to the shitty local con store; mum keeps telling me I need to think about the future. I've got to get some dog food. The chink sits behind mesh wire the thickness of pencils. I slide two cans of Chow, a Snickers bar, and a half litre of milk at him. He doesn't look at me. I was 5 cents short on a packet of bbq chips once and he wouldn't let me have them. I broke his nose, the slanty-eyed prick! Now there's this fuckin' pencil mesh everywhere. He gives me $1.50 change and I feel like punching him again. He knows it too. Fuckin' reffos. Robbing us blind! Scotty craps on the footpath. I don't have a placky bag with me, never do, so I shove it into the gutter and get dogshit on my stubs. Bloody hell! I find a patch of grass inside a car tyre, push it aside, and try to wipe me toes clean with it; fuckin' jeez, I must look like a spazo dancing or somethin'. Scotty barks. Shut up ya dick! I see a couple of white haired geros up ahead. They stop talking and cross the street. "What are ya lookin' at, ya coupla cunts! You'll be dead before me. I'm just walkin' me dog! Sa free country!" They scurry on a bit, as fast as their skinny little bandy legs can carry them. Ha! Makes me want to vommi. The pricks!

Charlie finishes serving a chick with her skirt up her crack. "Morning, Bo. What can I do for you". He looks at me. I look at him. He knows what I'm goin' to say. "Me mum's still sleepin' it off and there's no food in the joint. I gotta go to the dole office. Can I have a burger?" "What about your mum?" he says. "Yeah," I say. "Can ya make it two?" He looks at me like his shit don't stink but he bailed me out once so mum says I can't give him no lip. I gotta swallow it. Feels like nails. He goes to make the burgers. I stand and wait. I look out through the big window onto the street and see that pansy from the pub on the corner; the pub where they do prissy shows watched by chicks in merks and blokes with haircuts. I looked through the window one night at a couple of guys in frocks telling jokes about god and the prime minister. The crowd was lapin' it up. Some sort of code, I reckon, like commi shit or somethin'. The sissy-boy's with his dicky little benji-dog. He bends down and picks the stupid mut up as good ol' Scotty yaps fit to split and goes for his ankles. Rip him to sheds, Scotty! Little Scotty won't leave him alone and his fluffy mut yaps in his arms. I'd laugh if I had the energy. Charlie gives me the burgers and I say "Thanks" like me mum said I had to. Scotty keeps barkin' and jumpin and the sissy-boy…"Hey!" The cunt's tryin to kick my dog. "Hey! Shit face! What the fuck do ya think ya doin'?" I run right up to him and stand right up to the prick with my chest in his face. He looks like he's goin' to shit himself. "You tryin to kick my dog? Hey!? Hey!? Ya fuckin' cunt! Kick my dog and I'll smash ya fuckin' face in!" The fag tries to speak, "Well I'm not going to push a dog away with my hands, am I?" "What's that supposed to mean," I scream at him. "You tryin to be some kind of smart arse? Hey!? Hey!? Are ya!? Hey!?" and the cunt turns and walks away. "I'm askin' ya a question, dum-fuck. What's a poofta like you tryin' to kick me dog? Hey!? Fuckin' nancy-boy, take-it-up-the-arse, shit-pusher! Go on, answer me fuck-face. Poofta!" I yell and it feels real good. He's shakin' and can hardly walk straight. And then he stops and turns his lilly-white pansy-boy-face, white as froth, and says to me somethin' like if I wanna insult im or somethin' I'll have to find somethin' diff'rent than what's true. What?! "What did you say!?" I scream. I don't know what he's tryin' to say. "What the fuck!" I yell spit on his nose. "Ha!" I scream but the feel-good stuff's oozin' away and I hate it, but he's still shakin' huggin' his stupid dog. I can taste his fear and it tastes good, salty-sweet. I'm runnin' out of words. He walks away. "Ya fuckin' cunt!!" I scream. My face is burnin' and the heat in my body and lumps in my throat choke me, and I so fuckin' hate it – "I fuckin' hate it!" I scream at the sky; when smartarse pricks throw words at ya that don't make sense. "Aaah!!" And I hear a few doors open and close. "What the fuck are you lookin' at" I bellow at whoever can hear. But, I scared him shitless didn't I? Yeah, the prick. Scotty is pullin' on my belt, with his tail down and pullin' away from me. "Come here! Ya my fuckin' dog! Mine! Come here, ya prick." And I can't yell anymore and I walk away draggin' Scotty like a pyjama bag I saw a kid with once on TV.

I sit under the concrete steps that go up to the freeway and try to stop the drummin' in my ears. I eat my burger. It helps. Scotty looks at me like he doesn't know nothin'. I give him a piece of bun. He eats it. I still feel hot but it's goin' away. I walk up the stairs to the freeway, and along the footpath to the park and let Scotty off the lead. He doesn't know what to do. "Run, ya prick," I say. I walk over to a tree and lean against it listenin' to that drummin' again. It's getting fainter I think. A poxy bloke in a suit comes up to me and says, "Hey, pretty boy! Want to make a bit of money?" "Fuck off," I say but it sounds weak. It comes out like I've got a cold, or somethin'. "What do you say to twenty bucks for a blowjob?" he says with just a slit on his shiny face, like we've done this before. "Fuck off," I say again. More like a whisper this time. But I think about the money and how I can get the bus to the dole office, and maybe, some food for tonight. I gotta think of the future, like me mum says. "Fifty," I say. "No blow, just a hand job." "OK, twenty though," he says. "Fifty or nothin'" I say and make it like I don't care.

His little dick is hot is my hand but it doesn't take long, thank kryst, and no way did I let the faggot touch me. No way. He messed his expensive shirt which made me smile which gave him the wrong idea. I wiped my hands on the grass and took off with my bus money. Needle-dick loser. I took Scotty home. Me mum was still dead to the world. I put her burger in the fridge. I took the bus to the dole office.

I sat on the bus next to a chick with really big knockers, a green t shirt and cut-off jeans. I said, "G'day." She looked up from her phone. Nothin'. What is it with chicks who won't even say g'day. Stuck-up bitch. I gotta get myself a phone. Yeah. The fat creep isn't on duty today. Yeah, but the swami girl is. I wait and let some nuf-nufs go before me so I can get swami-girl. I sit at her desk. She's really pretty and has a purple scarf-thing over her

black hair.

"Hi, Bo. How you been going?"

"OK."

"Just, OK?"

"Yeah." I hand her my form.

"You've been to see all this people; all these jobs?"

"Yeah, course."

"If I rang some of these people, they'd remember you?"

"S'pose not." I ain't stupid. "They see heaps of fuckers."

"How's your mum?"

"OK."

"Still working her two days a week?"

"She's not working. Hasn't worked in months"

"I thought she was at the motel two days a week."

"Nah, when it came to pay day the prick wouldn't pay her. Sack'd her." Can't tell swami-girl the truth, mum said.

"I see." She goes down the list of interviews I've done, well, done some of 'em. She looks at me like she likes me. I like her too. She's wearin' lots of flowing clothes so I can't get the jist of her body, but I bet it's alright. I start imaginin' her black swami bush between her legs and I get a hard-on. I wanna touch her. I look at her hands and she's wearin' a few rings. She's not supposed to wear stuff like that at work. Ya can get smashed fingers from some prick who'd cut your hand off as soon as look at ya. They'd fetch a bit, I reckon. She looks at me. I look at her. The kind of too-long look you see sometimes in movies. I reckon she likes me for a fact. "Nice rings," I say. She looks at her rings and takes them off. Fuck! Why she do that for? "I was just lookin'." "Sure," she says but you can see she's scared a bit. Stupid bitch! She looks at me again and there's somethin' she wants to say.

"It's fuckin' OK, alright?" I say.

"Is it Bo?"

"Ye-ah!?" What's she getting' at?

"You've got to think about the future, Bo."

"Yeah well I am! Me mum says that shit all the time. I wanna get a phone." I think about that loser in the park. I gotta get a phone. She's lookin' at me. Now, I don't know if she likes me or not. This is what I don't get. Chicks look at ya and ya know what they want, and then they look at ya again and it's different. Or they look at ya and ya know what they want, so you do it, and then they scream at ya, call you names, and piss you right off.

But she signs my form and I say, "Thanks."

"Say hi to your mum," she says. "Next!" she yells.

I go into the city to make me feel normal. When you're in the city ya can be anyone walkin' around. I look at them and they look at me and see what I see, just pricks walkin' around being normal. I breath normal. I break the fifty at Maccas but know I have to get some food for tonight. I like this feeing, this doing stuff for me mum. I walk past a posh supermarket and think, I can go in here, and so I walk in. I look at security and he looks at me. Shit! There's so much light, so much stuff. I look at all the packets on the shelves and don't know half of them. There's a whole room full vegetables. It's like a farm or somethin'. Don't know half of them either. What are ya supposed to do with 'em? I look for the can section and pick up two cans of spaghetti. Me mum loves spaghetti on toast. I see all the bread on a huge table. What is all this shit? Bread's bread. I take one that looks like real bread, a square one, and the skinny guy at the check-out looks at me as if I've forgotten somethin. "What are ya lookin' at?" I say. He looks away and then back at me and says, "Nothing at all, mate. Nothing at all." And it's like I hear the words he's sayin' but it's not what he's sayin' and I can feel my ears burnin' and that thumpin' again. "How ya goin'?" It's the security guy with a weak little smile on his puss. And more words but it's not what he's sayin'. What the fuck is he sayin'? And I want to scream so fuckin' loud and punch his fuckin' prissy face, cut his cock off, and shove it up his arse, but there's so much fuckin' light in here. I can feel it like sunshine and I say "Fine, thanks," and it comes out like it isn't me and I suddenly don't know where I am. This skinny guy is handin' me some money. "Here's your change." I look at it. I take it. "Don't forget your stuff." What? I take the bag and head for the street. I can feel security followin' me. What did I do? What did I say? The world's a mess and I have to side-step a man with a broom. "Fuck off!" I yell at him.

I get home and walk inside. Nothin' but stink. And mess. No sound. I put the grocery bag on the table. It takes me five goes to find the toaster. I want to do this for me mum. I plug it in. I'm gonna make me mum some spaghetti on toast. I can't find a pot so I use a fryin' pan. It's got stuff stuck to it but there's no washing stuff so, fuck it. I ring-pull the spaghetti and tip the sloppy stuff in the pan. I turn on the gas. I put two slices of bread in the toaster and push the level. Bang! There's a flash, sparks, and I nearly shit myself. Fuck! Is that supposed to happen? I push the lever again. Nothin'. Again. Nothin'. Again. Nothin'. My jaw aches. Again. Nothin'! I yank the toaster from its socket and throw it into the lounge room. It hits the floor and a shower of crumbs flies up like a bomb's gone off. I have to keep doin' somethin' or I'll explode. A cup of tea. I'll make me mum a cup of tea. Yeah. I search through the cupboards. Nothing but shit and stuff. Stuff and shit. Where's the fuckin' tea bags? I smell smoke or somethin' and I turn to see the spaghetti burning in the pan. I grab it and throw the whole fuckin' lot in the sink with all the other shit. I stand there with my mouth shut tight, tryin' to steady my breathing. The thump-thump-thumping is deafening. I want to scream but me mum's still asleep.

And then I remember. And the thought is like sunshine, like a birthday present. It could be happiness, even. The thumping stops and I suddenly want to laugh. The burger! I've got a burger in the fridge. Me mum's burger. It's there. Just there in the fridge. Me mum was right. I thought about the future, I've got this burger and now everything's OK. This new feeling is strange, but kryst, it feels good. I'll take her a nice burger. I get it out, un-wrap it, and find a clean plate, well sort of. I put the burger on the plate and take it into me mum. She's still asleep. I get a little closer and I reach down to wake her like I always do. There's vomit on her check and I can smell a different stink. What is that? I touch her shoulder and it's like touching the toaster. Is this dead? I stand there. Me mum's dead. I hear myself saying it. Me mum's dead. I don't know what to do. It's like she's been turned off, or something. What am I supposed to do? Don't know. I eat her burger.

Paloma

Shella Shpigel

Paloma is three going on thirteen. She is curious like most children and asks many questions. Some of these questions can be hilarious and others very observant. One particular question about her appearance is raised and this triggers painful memories for her mother.

Her mother Ella was once an independent woman who was career driven. She was a woman who had it all. The car, the holidays, the friends and the dream job. Until one day it dawned on her that something was missing. A partner. A lover. A family.

Enter Salvatore. He was a new employee at work. He was handsome and charismatic. All the women in the office were drawn to him. But Ella had strict boundaries that she didn't get involved with co-workers. 'Don't shit where you eat' she used to say to her colleagues.

All the women of course enjoyed the attention and happily flirted with Salvatore. Ella on the other hand remained very cold toward him even though she secretly felt attracted to him. Salvatore of course felt more drawn to Ella because she paid him no attention.

At first it started with constant smiles and eye contact. Then Salvatore progressed with jokes and subtle touches like a hand on Ella's shoulder. Ella went along with it thinking it was some harmless fun. But Salvatore turned things up a notch and started emailing Ella. Next it was questions like 'what are you doing this weekend?'

Before Ella knew it, she was lunching with Salvatore daily at work and having dinners together afterwards. It all seemed like an innocent friendship was blossoming. Besides, Salvatore was married with children.

As time went on, Salvatore opened up about his unhappy marriage and confessed that he had fallen in love with Ella. Ella felt she was completely oblivious to the situation as it unfolded. Perhaps she was in denial as she too had developed feelings and was quite smitten with Salvatore.

Salvatore promised Ella the world. A baby, to leave his wife and to marry her. Ella just had to trust him. Ella felt so overwhelmed, afraid and excited. She had internal conflict and couldn't decide whether to give this man a chance. Morally, she felt she couldn't get involved with this man whilst he had a partner. But her heart yearned to be with him. The way he made her laugh, the way he looked at her and the way he touched her.

It all happened so quickly. The whirlwind affair became serious. The dates stopped, the love letters stopped, and the late-night rendezvous stopped. Ella was having an affair with a married man and she was pregnant. The news for Salvatore seemed to be bittersweet. Ella gave him an ultimatum and he finally bit the bullet and left his wife.

Ella and Salvatore moved in together and started planning their future. They set up a nursery, they picked out the baby's name and they planned a babymoon to Hawaii. Ella had to pinch herself as she couldn't believe she was having a baby with man she loved.

Ella and Salvatore went to Hawaii together and things started taking an ugly turn. Salvatore started drinking heavily. He became aggressive when drunk. Ella felt uncomfortable and didn't know this side to Salvatore. She figured maybe that was his way of coping with stress as the reality was he was still married to another woman as the divorce proceedings were lengthy.

Ella thought that maybe when they returned home Salvatore would be in a better space.

Unfortunately, Salvatore got worse. He stopped contributing financially and started making excuses about debts he accrued. His drinking became more excessive and vicious name calling commenced. When they were out in public he became jealous and controlling when another man was present. Ella started to feel she was walking on thin ice with Salvatore. His thoughts became more and more irrational and she never knew when he would explode.

Eventually it got to the point where Salvatore was either at home and volatile or he started disappearing for extended periods without any communication. Some nights he wouldn't even come home nor explain his whereabouts. Ella started feeling uneasy and questioned whether he was seeing another woman.

She decided to confront Salvatore one day and he denied any wrongdoing. Ella threatened to leave him and he started crying and said he believed he had depression and needed her help. Ella pitied him and wanted to be a family so she figured he must have been going through a hard adjustment after leaving his wife.

Salvatore promised he was going to seek out help. He wanted to be there for Ella and the baby but he had his own issues to deal with. Ella was pleased that he recognised he needed help and wanted to support him through thick and thin. After all that's what relationships were all about.

Salvatore continued drinking and disappearing all too frequently. Ella was at a loss of what to do. Some nights she cried in her room alone and thought about the baby. She thought about the kind of world she would be bring her into and that worried her immensely. Her friends and family urged her to leave Salvatore for once and for all. But Ella felt stuck because she did still love him and wanted her baby to have a father around.

Salvatore came home drunk one night and demanded to know who the man Ella was talking to at work today. He began to speculate that they were having an affair and started calling Ella derogatory names, swearing at her and eventually spitting on her. Ella was shaking and trying to reassure him that he was just a tradesman doing a quote for the new boardroom table. But Salvatore demanded to see her phone and wrestled her to the ground to get it out of her pocket. He was convinced that he would find further evidence of her affair contained within the phone. Ella lay on the floor in a ball, covering her pregnant stomach and hysterically crying.

This time she knew it was over. He was not the man she thought he was. And she didn't want to raise her baby in that environment. The following morning, she went to find him on the couch where he was often nursing a hangover. But he was nowhere to be found. His car was gone, his clothes were gone, even his clothes steamer was gone.

Salvatore left no note, his phone number was disconnected and he resigned effective immediately at work. Ella was in disbelief how he could vanish so quickly like that. She didn't have much time to make sense of the nightmare because she was about to be a single mother. She packed her bags and started a new chapter. Paloma was born.

Rapture

Amanda Kontos

The hollow pit in my stomach was driving me forward. The days since I'd been alone had stretched out, like the pain I used to inflict on those who had hurt me. Or at least that's what it had been like when I was able to use the full limit of my abilities.

There was a bitterness to that ability that I used to enjoy. The pain that I could inflict on another being was sweet, it was glorious, but nothing in my life would have prepared me for the pain that came when the man I loved walked out of my life without a reason and refused to let me find him.

Without him I awoke in cold sweats, screams and dissatisfied fits of broken sleep. It was a far cry from the goddess I had once been and the woman I wanted to be.

The striped tents and their peaks drew in a crowd of humans who wanted to see the show: a travelling circus of Gods and Goddesses that moved with the ebb and flow of the moon and sun. Or just because. All that mattered was being able to ease the pressure of their abilities.

It had been two months since I'd seen this circus back in town. Two very long months.

I was here to see one man and I knew that he would be here. I should have let Helena come, she'd begged me to let her come and I very nearly said yes, but it was something that I had to do on my own and even as I saw him, drove past him, watched as he noticed the car and ignored it in the same look, I was determined to talk to him.

I needed to know the reason Leigh had left me and find what it would take to get him to come back.

I joined the ranks of humans that were lining up to buy tickets, merchandise and talk to the gods and goddess. Instead of following the cue, I went right for the man that knew my husband just as well as I did.

'Where is he?' I asked Richard.

He turned around and stared at me, his green eyes narrowing as the sweat dripped from his brow. His brown hair was tousled back and out of his face because of the heat but I knew that he would have preferred to have his hair in his eyes.

'Who are you talking about?'

I narrowed my eyes at him. 'Richard, don't be an arsehole. Where is he?'

He was a typhon wearing a human face to keep from scaring the humans.

'He's going to be pissed I told you, you know that right?'

I pushed my way into his space and felt his entity brush against my skin, trying to pull me back. I wasn't much shorter than Richard but there was enough of me to make me look menacing.

'Richard,' I said without raising my voice.

He looked behind him in the direction of the merch tent and I knew that's where my husband was.

'If he asks you found him on your own. I'm not going to get my hide flogged for this. Just mention that to him.'

I sent him a withering look and stepped back, the entity breathing a sigh and letting me go.

'I'll be sure to tell him that his best friend is a traitor and totally unreliable.'

'Lyra...'

I didn't hear whatever else he had to say because I made my way through the gates. There were looks of disapproval and the children of the deities inside didn't hide the disgust on their face, nor did they stop me.

Maybe they were finally understanding.

I could hear Leigh's laughter a mile away, I could imagine the crinkle in the corners of his eyes behind his sunnies and watched how his body seemed to relish the laugh.

It struck a chord in my chest and a hand gripped at my heart as I stopped in my tracks. How was he allowed to be happy when I was barely holding it together?

He looked my way and stiffened, almost like I was a ghost he didn't want to see again. I resisted the urge to bite my lip and walked towards him. He didn't get up but his gaze didn't waver from me.

'Can we talk?' I asked him as I reached the table.

'You're not supposed to be here,' he said quietly but it didn't matter how quietly he spoke. Everyone who wasn't human would hear his words.

I looked past him and saw Beryl and Colt, my in-laws. They got up from their chairs and were staring right at us. Colt was smiling softly and Beryl was holding his hand. Almost like they already knew what was going to happen.

'Well you should hide yourself better next time.'

'Lyra...'

'Don't Lyra me, Leigh. We need to talk.'

'You shouldn't be here.' He ran his fingers through his spiked hair.

Leigh pushed himself to his feet and huffed under his breath. He only did that when he was annoyed. 'I told you not to come find me.'

'You left me a note that said you had to go, nothing else. I'm insulted that you thought I'd stay away.'

'Lyra. For once, you were supposed to do as I asked.'

'You left me. My own husband left me.'

He ripped his sunnies off his face and I could see the pain that those words brought him. With one hand on his hip he held out his other hand to me. I looked at it and shook my head and it took everything in me not to just take it. I was standing my ground.

I felt a chill in the air as Leigh went to open his mouth to lecture me, like he would one of his students, when the weather changed. The wind whipped up dust in its wake. A crack of thunder erupted through the air and just before rain started to fall I ducked into the shelter of the tent to avoid the dumping of water. I reached out for Leigh unconsciously but he took a step back out of reach. My hand closed into a fist and unconsciously pressed it against my chest.

Time seemed to slow and I watched as the roof of the tent collapsed with a heart sickening slap. I lost sight of Leigh and my whole body froze before I doubled over. The searing pain started slashing at my chest before it spread to my limbs. My legs gave out on me and I held back a cry. And as quickly as it started it seemed to ebb away, just as I watched every able hand lift the caved in roof.

People that I knew of, and couldn't say that I cared much for except for Beryl, were breathing hard, almost as if there was an invisible weight holding them in place.

I locked eyes with Leigh who was on the edge, his arm gripping his mother. My body moved on its own accord and I wrapped my arms around Leigh's waist. I could see the strain in his body as he tried to pull his mother back and with my added strength I tried to help. The weather wasn't letting up and with a thundering clap the tent dropped again and everyone who held it lost their grip. The tent came down with a nauseating crunch. I clung to Leigh. The impact of us hitting the ground jarred my jaw. The pain started again and this time I cried out.

I couldn't help it.

Leigh ripped himself out of my embrace. I shut my eyes to the pain and cradled my head against the noise as the agony saturated my body.

For all I knew the world could have ended and I wouldn't have noticed, but maybe that was part of the point.

Hands gripped my biceps and pulled me to my feet. I opened my eyes and found myself staring into Leigh's whiskey coloured eyes. I focused on him and tried to ignore the pain.

'This is why I left. I was trying to save you from this pain,' he said.

'You. Jerk,' I wheezed out, scrunching my eyes to try and force the bile that threatened to climb up my throat back.

'Oh, Lyr, you say the sweetest of things to me.' He laughed and rubbed his hands over my arms, his touch helping chase away the edges of the pain.

'How. Could. You. Not–' I cut through the words and cried out in pain '–Tell. Me.'

I wanted to crawl into his arms and not move, I wanted to cry it out

and not have to think about the outside world. Like I used to. When it was all too much I crawled into Leigh's lap and he held me, calming down the pain and making me see the light.
What I wouldn't give to be back in our home, on our couch, doing exactly that.
'Because I wanted to save the argument.'
'You just left me!' I cried out at him. He slipped his fingers between mine and pulled me away from the epicentre of pain. Or so he thought.
'Lyra, oh god. I'm sorry,' Colt said and I felt him try and stifle his pain.
I cried out and gripped Leigh's hand tighter. He pulled me close and held me against his side. The warmth of his body distracted me from the pain.
'Don't, don't do that,' I whispered to Colt.
In his eyes were unshed tears and I knew that with the loss of his wife, he was going to crumble.
'Dad, pull it together. Don't bottle it up,' Leigh said.
They were the exact words that would have come out of my mouth if I could find the words to say.
'I was trying to save you from this, from this amount of pain, but you, my sexy and stubborn wife, refused to see it,' Leigh said to me without looking my way.
Bodies tried to move the tent, pushing and pulling like it would make a difference and save the battered bodies of those who were part human.
'We have to get everyone out of here,' Colt said and I could see that he was already trying to reign back his pain.
I cried out and my legs went weak again. Leigh held me tight against his body.
'Makeitallstopit'stoomuch,' I jumbled out.
Leigh helped me to my feet and took my face into his hands. 'This is why you shouldn't be here.'
As I stared into those brilliant eyes, the rest of the world melted away and there was only me and Leigh. No one else seemed to matter. It took away most of the edge, and I could breathe again when I focused in on him but there was a shift in the pain.
'We can't get everyone out, it's about to get a hell of a lot worse,' he said without taking his eyes off me.
And I searched his gaze, relished in the warmth of his body. I felt the pain ebb away but found the real source of the agony.
His eyes hid little from me and now that I could focus on him and no one else, I realised that the bulk of the pain was coming from him. It wasn't because of his mother's death, that was there, but there was...
'No. No,' I firmly said. 'Fuck no. No, you are not going to sacrifice yourself. I don't care what you think you're doing. Leigh you ca—'
Leigh crashed his lips against mine, hot, fierce and demanding, always so demanding. It reminded me of the first time we kissed, the electricity and magnetism that took my breath away and stole my heart. I balled his shirt in my fist and pulled him closer, almost wanting to slip inside his skin with him, but it didn't last. He ripped himself out of my embrace and ran out of the tent.
'Leigh!' I screamed. I tried to go out after him but Colt wrapped his arms around my waist and held me there.
He was the God of War, after all, and just as strong as I was, if not stronger.
'Let me go, Colt!' I screamed at him.
'He has to do what he needs to do, Lyra. Trust him.'
I pulled at his embrace with everything that I had in me but I knew that it wasn't going to be enough. I twisted in his arms to look him in the eye. He and Leigh shared so much in common and it didn't matter how many other children he had. Leigh was his pride and joy.
'You, of all people, shouldn't be stopping me. I'm not going to let him do thi–'
A loud crack cut me off. I looked over my shoulder and saw a branch crash onto Leigh in slow motion.
'Nooooo!' I screamed and ripped myself out of Colt's arms, like the proverbial 'mother lifting a car off her baby' sort of reaction. I used the strength I never dared to use. The God of War couldn't keep me away from my husband.
Leigh's screams cut through the fog and pain. I could faintly hear cries from the other gods and goddesses in the tent but no one else would dare follow me. They knew it was a death sentence.
I jumped over a fallen branch, with my hands in the air to hold my balance. I stopped just short of another that came crackling down. The rain fell harder, taking my sight away from me. I took a deep breath and moved forward, intuitively finding Leigh. I saw the haze of him and slid across the muddy field of green and tried not to move him.
'Get back to–' he coughed '–safety. Lyra don't do this.'
I tried to lift the branch, but it didn't budge. Through the rain no one could see the tears that were falling down my cheeks.
'No, you're not leaving me. You promised me, Leigh Denali. You swore an oath under that stupid oracle-seer-marriage guy that you are not going to break.'
He laughed and it ended up in a cough. His free hand reached up and cupped my cheek.
'You always were so beautiful when you were determined.' His eyes crinkled in pain and my heart jumped.
There was a time when the thought of pain like that would make me relish in the kill, in the torture, but that look on Leigh's face was enough to make me crawl out of my skin.
'You aren't going to leave me, do you hear me?' I could hear the way his heart was beating dangerously slow and the pain was moving through his body. Soon he wouldn't feel it anymore and that would be worse than feeling it.
'I love you, Lyra. I loved you even when I wasn't supposed to, before we even met.'
'Shut up,' I whispered to him, holding back the sobs.
I looked at the branch before casting my gaze up to the sky. I knew what they were doing. The Elders were egging me on. They wanted me to use my power and they were about to win.
After close to five years of them searching and baiting me, they'd found a circumstance where I wasn't going to back down. They were threatening my whole life.
'Lyra, go back. It's okay.' He coughed and blood coloured his lips.
My body ached and I heard his heart slow further. I was going to lose him.
'I'm not leaving you,' I said to him and he groaned. His hand dropped from my face and his eyes shut.
I choked back a sob and around me I could feel the very fibres of pain in the air. As I dropped the human gaze I had become accustomed to, I saw the angry swirls of red and maroon threads in the air. The pain was tangible and my pain mixing with others was all I needed. Each strain hovered around me, trying to stick to my skin through the rain. I could pull on them and cause more pain in the air or I could use them for an even more selfish reason. My tear-stained gaze held Leigh's unnaturally shaded face. I could feel Anders trying to make his way over to us. The God of the Underworld was coming to collect a soul that didn't belong to him. And I wasn't about to let him. He'd have to come through my dead body to get it.
So I broke the stipulation that had been placed on my abilities when I fell. I pulled in that pain and shoved the tiny fissures of threads into Leigh. My vision tinged red as the pain flitted through my skin into him.
Leigh's heart started to beat again, soft and gentle at first before it thumped loudly. He inhaled sharply as he came back to life.
'Lyra,' he wheezed.
And that was enough to give me the determination to use the strength that I hadn't used in five years, the one that I was forbidden to use. As I stood I lifted the branch off him, throwing it far away from either of us.
I covered my body with his and held him tight. 'You stupid jerk, how dare you do that to me!' I was sobbing and I wasn't even sure if I made sense but I knew that he would understand it.
'Kivutar. You don't have authorisation to be on Earth. You've been hiding for too long.' The voice of The Elders was androgynous, a mixed cohort to terrify the gods and goddess of every pantheon.
'Fuck,' Leigh whispered.
He'd heard the voice too.

Serendipity

Michael Freundt

(Inspired by the opening of Dan Simmond's *The Fifth Heart*)

Pollution saved my life. Air pollution gives us glorious sunsets but it was the watery kind that prolonged my life: as I breathed the water in - and that is what I knew I had to do – it was not easy, and it tasted vile so I spat it out again – Mah! - and immediately clambered out of the sewer-like river thinking of guns and poison. What a hideous mess! I should have chosen the pristine waters of a rural river, like Virginia Woolf, rather than the urban drain I had decided on. That primary stupid decision finally convinced me that perhaps I had not given the whole thing quite enough thought: I had reacted illogically to what had happened back at home. Now, however, my primary decision was about my ruined clothes - Look at me! Mah! - and how I was going to get to whatever destination I would soon have to choose. The fact still remained that if I was not going to kill myself I would have to face the fact that I had just killed my wife, but maybe, just maybe, it could be possible that the authorities will conclude that it was an accident; but probably not. I am not a very good liar. However, it is truly curious that the brain, in circumstances like this, prioritises decisions so effectively that once I was standing, dripping, and during the hours that followed, I was in no doubt what it was I should do next. If you have never witnessed a death, or attempted to cause your own, you may understand - but whether you believe me or not is of no concern to me, but as I stood on the dark river bank, in the overgrown grass strewn with more urban rubbish and vainly attempting to brush myself down, to regain a little of my lost dignity that complete saturation destroys, I was suddenly aware of what I must do: go home. It became incredibly important to me to get into clean, dry clothes, despite what such a decision may bring.

(What interested me as I finished the above paragraph was the tone. It was a line early in The Fifth Element; you know, I've scanned those pages and still can't find what sparked the thought train that led to the above; but it was the voice, the tone that got me writing. I love it when reading can do that, even if the book didn't grab me – I didn't finish it – sometimes a line, an image can get the juices flowing. My narrator, not yet named, sounds like a self-opinionated, stylish homosexual, arch, willful, and from the Inner-Eastern suburbs of Sydney. Note the use of the word vile in the first paragraph: very queer. I like the tone, but I need to be careful: he is straight - self-awareness and a rich vocabulary are not the sole domain of the homosexual - but giving him 'gay' and knowing characteristics creates a unique individualism. Let's see how it goes.)

I must have looked a sight as I walked up the few tiled steps to the verandah of my inner-suburban terraced house and the look on the police officer's face confirmed it. My wife's body had obviously been found. The night was cool and calm so very little evaporation had occurred and my feet still squelched in my shoes: they were my favourite pair and now completely ruined. Mah! The exertion of walking all the way from the river to my house had obviously kept me relatively warm but the longer I stood still, forced to do so while the police officer talked to someone on his phone, his superior I assumed - I had told the young man who I was - I could feel the cold creep over me like a sinister blanket.

In a very short while a tall attractive uniformed woman came out of my well-lit house to confront me. I told her who I was.

(It's important that he finds her attractive: it could be useful later. You see, I'm not sure where this is going but I hope you're as interested as I am.)

"I'm afraid sir," she said in the usual formal dry tone, "that I have to inform you that your wife has been found ... deceased."

"Yes, I know," I said. Did she first think of saying 'murdered'?

Despite her experience in such matters she hesitated, but then said, "And how do you know that, sir?"

"Because I ... found her."

"And was it you who called triple zero?"

"Yes, it was."

If my unusual appearance had not impinged on her before it did so now, probably brought about by the fact that I had started to shiver violently.

"And why sir do you seem to be completely saturated?"

Now that my primary decision to go home had been fulfilled a new primary decision had automatically taken its place: it was absolutely clear to me what I had to say.

"Because I tried to kill myself."

"And why did you try to do that, sir?"

It may give you some insight into my personality when I tell you that my immediate feeling now was of annoyance that every one of her questions had begun with a conjunction.

"I thought you would think I did it." I did do it but not the way you think.

(I thought I should amend that line to "I did do it but not the way you may think. The use of the second person – referring to the reader - in prose fiction, by the way, is rare now. It used to be common – the opening to Elliot Perelman's Seven Types of Ambiguity – great title - is an unusual modern example that springs to mind – I must read that again one day; but I like using the second person. It adds a personal touch, a writer-reader sense of confidentiality. It's the word may that I am concerned about. I cannot be certain what a reader might think but it is this note of uncertainty I do not like. I am very aware of words like maybe or perhaps or could because they always weaken a phrase – except in dialogue, of course, where such words can be character-building – but may sounds like one of them. No! I will leave it out.)

I expected another, and obvious, conjunction-led question but my shivering had become so intense that she said, "I think you had better come inside and get out of those wet clothes."

I was not allowed upstairs into our bedroom, now a crime scene or something - I wondered what they would find and what they would think it means - and so a young underling was sent to get me a complete change of clothes. His choice was completely unsatisfactory - why would anyone match royal blue with that brown?

(That last phrase gives great insight into his character, don't you think? I spent quite some time agonizing over what colours to choose. Fashion today, to always embrace the new, has accepted anything with anything. I'm old enough to remember when paisley was in, and then when it was definitely out. Now I've seen paisley matched with floral. Mah! My narrator would only have block colours, I'm sure; maybe a stripe or check for summer; never floral, and never paisley. Brown and blue can at times go well together but his hatred of the match with that particular brown and blue reinforces his opinionated sense of fashion. He so knows his own mind.)

The young officer appeased his appalling fashion sense by bringing me a towel, but then my assessment of him plummeted again

when he did not leave while I changed. I decided to ignore him. I undressed completely, toweled myself dry, resisted the urge to look up at him to see what he was looking at, and redressed as quickly as I could and refused to look in the living room mirror as I already knew I looked a fright.

(Is the use of the word fright too arch; too queer?)

"Please take a seat, sir," he said politely and when he did not leave the room I supposed he had been ordered not to leave me alone. I have always found it difficult not to talk to people when I find myself in close proximity to them but he was just standing there looking at nothing in particular so the urge to talk was weakened. I tried to attract his attention to the pile of wet clothes on the floor making it clear, I thought, that I expected him to do something about them: they were dampening the rug, but he paid no heed. I got up – he became alarmed a little at that – and removed them to a wooden chair. I resumed my seat on the couch and he relaxed. I remained as silent as he did.

(It would be correct to use the word him here: "... I remained as silent as him" – he for the subject, him for the object – but it sounds wrong, or, at least, clumsy; so, as he did it is; to stop any reader with a fluffy grammar fixation getting annoyed. "Oh, thanks, Darling!" My partner, Tommy, just bought me a cup of coffee. He's forgotten he's brought me one already, poor man. It's getting worse.)

Eventually the pretty female officer entered without an iPad but with a note book and pen. How old fashioned! I needed to stay calm, but not too calm. She looked good in a uniform.

"Can I have your full name please? she said.

"Patrick Osman," I said.

(I chose a 'foreign' name and you will soon see why: a particular beef of mine.)

"Turkish?"

"Australian"

"I beg your pardon."

"It's Australian," I said more pointedly.

"Sounds foreign."

"It is."

She looked at me quizzically like I was a cheeky schoolboy with a bad record.

"All white Australians come from somewhere else," I said. "Even you."

"I was born here."

"So was I."

"And your point is?" she said as neutrally as she could, which was not very.

"An authentic Australian surname would be something like Yunupingu, Gulpilil, Noonuccal," I said, pedant that I am.

"I see," she said with exasperation but also, eventually, understanding: annoyed understanding. She took a breath with intent as if to challenge me further with, I expected, European names for indigenous people, but obviously thought better of it. 'Smartarse!' she probably thought instead.

"Mr. Osman, tell me what happened tonight."

"My wife has – had – symptoms of early-stage dementia, one of which was a faulty sense of balance. She had just showered, then fell, and hit her head on the corner of the glass coffee table and died instantly."

The attractive police officer was obviously flummoxed by the brief and precise description. She stared at me without writing anything down.

(You see, I know where this is going now. Creative moments like this often cause younger, brasher writers to cry, "Oh, the writing process went so well; it wrote itself, actually." No, it didn't, darling, you did! Just like I am; but sometimes creative momentum can take over and you have to know when to let it, or reign it in. So, do you know where this is going? I hope not. Not yet.)

"Could you please elaborate?" she asked.

"You've been in the bedroom. The sofa in the bay window, the coffee table, the wet feet, the wet floor, the body, the blood; doesn't it look like that's what happened?"

"Or made to look like that's what happened."

I chuckled. I could not help it. "I see. You think I picked up that large, extremely heavy and cluttered coffee table, hit her with it and then made it look like she fell on it?"

"Mr. Osman, your flippant tone isn't helping you."

"Do I need helping?"

"Without credibility, yes."

I was disciplined enough to understand what she meant and so remained silent. It was then that she started to write something down. I waited.

"You said before that you were afraid that we might think you had done it."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I am on the public record, a television interview two weeks ago, as a supporter of euthanasia."

"What was the name of the program, date, and time?" I told her. She wrote that down. Eventually she added, "So how would you describe what happened tonight?"

"Serendipitous."

"I beg your pardon."

I resisted a comment reflecting her possible ignorance of the word and forced myself to assume she was surprised by my supposed flippancy. "She died unexpectedly, accidently, quickly, as opposed to gradually, sinking into confusion, a withering brain, organ dysfunction, pain, senility, a coma, then death. She loathed that scenario. Who wouldn't?"

"Did your wife share your views on euthanasia?"

"Of course."

"Did she also take part in that television interview?"

"No." She wrote that down too.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to take you into custody based on what you have told me."

(I'm resisting here to get bogged down in police procedural matters. My knowledge of the medical aspects of this story I have acquired from personal experience. However, when it comes to research for the sake of pedantic accuracy I find it unnecessary as it is safe to assume most readers are familiar with television police dramas from a wide spectrum of sub-genres, and possible procedures; and readers are willing to suspend disbelief for the sake of the story – up to a point, of course. Absolute reality is not necessary if procedural information decided on by the writer for the purposes of the story falls within the realm of possibility; besides, what is important here is the dialogue between these

two characters and the development of plot and intrigue. I am talking here about what is more important: I don't need to study aerodynamics to jump a puddle.)

"You're arresting me?"

"No, but you're the only witness."

"Are you going to charge me?"

"We'd like you to assist us with our enquiries."

(Oh, look! Tommy is sitting in my reading chair reading McEwan's Amsterdam. He will not remember a thing he has read, of course. He's read it before, when he was well. Maybe it is muscle memory at play. He used to read for hours every day. I don't even think reading is possible for him anymore. If I had time I would watch to see if he turns the page. His balance is getting worse, too. And that is not all. However, the idea of making it look like he is doing something normal, requiring working brain function, is proof that something is still operational in that brain of his. Meanwhile I am worrying about continuing this interrogation here or back at the station. The stakes would be higher at the police station. OK. And there needs to be a developing expert who has been rabbiting around the scene, collecting information while Patrick has been questioned by the cute officer.)

As I was led out of my house a dozen or so people, all clad in white plastic looking like workers in a nuclear power plant, passed me and invaded my house like ants. And yes, the police officer, the same one who saw me naked, did place his hand on my head, pushing it lower, protecting it from damage, as he directed me into the back seat of the police car. The ride to the station was uneventful: no one spoke. I was later led politely into an interview room and offered a cup of coffee. I asked for tea, English Breakfast, and the young man stared at me for a moment, either in ignorance or distain, but then went away to get it, maybe not English Breakfast, but he went away. I sat and waited. There wasn't a vast mirror on the wall; you know, a two-way mirror for investigators to sit behind and watch proceedings, making clever but snide remarks, but there was a CCTV camera in the corner of the ceiling. At least some modernization is occurring in our police force. And, lo and behold, a little red light went on as I was watching it. A few moments later she arrived.

She turned on the recording device on the table between us, stated the date and time, my name, and her name, "Detective Constable Lena Marinos." She asked me the same questions she asked me at my house and I gave the same answers, minus some of my attitude: I thought it only fitting. I was curious what line of questioning she would take but she did not continue. Instead another person entered the room.

He was a large man in a cheap suit. He had pages in his hand. Paper. This station is so behind the times.

"Joined now by Chief Inspector Mullen," said Detective Constable Lena Marinos for the sake of the recording but who did not see fit to introduce him to me.

"Mr. Osman," said the new arrival referring to his bits of paper, "you said your wife had just showered and had walked into the bedroom drying herself presumably." He spoke like a rugby player, all mumble, few consonants,

(I won't bore you with writing his dialogue phonetically; you get the idea.)

"But the floor and her feet were dry."

"Shouldn't a lawyer be sitting quietly next to me?" I asked in the politest tone I could muster.

"We haven't charged you with anything," said Marinos.

"You're just …"

"Yes, I know," I interrupted, "just helping you with your enquiries. It probably evaporated."

"What?" said Mullen.

"The water," I said helpfully. "It probably evaporated."

"What work did your wife do?" he asked, ignoring my comment.

"We run a business together: an employment service specializing in relief staff for the medical industry."

"Did she understand medical …" he waved his hands as he sought for the word, I expected him to say 'stuff', "… procedures?"

"She was a trained nurse with many years' first-hand experience," I said.

"Was she up with, ya know, trauma cases?"

"Most of her career was in the emergency department."

"So she knew about trauma injuries."

"That's what usually happens in an emergency department; yes."

"Did you see her fall?"

"No. I was about to sit but looking for a space on the cluttered coffee table to put my gin and tonic; she was walking from the en-suite drying herself."

"She was naked?"

"She was drying herself with a towel, so, yes and no."

"And talking at the same time."

"Yes. She could do that." I instantly regretted that line. Marinos looked at her hands.

"What was she saying?" Mullen asked.

I did not hesitate. I thought little about what I should say, but I was aware that an instant reply was necessary, otherwise they may think I was working something out; weighing my options for a better answer. "Her condition was constantly on her mind, what to do about it, be in control of it, avoiding the medical and legal outcomes. I don't remember exactly what she said but she always spoke about that, ever since she was diagnosed."

(I want you to believe him. Do you?)

"I think I was thinking about all the coffee table clutter: where did it come from, what could be tossed. I don't remember exactly."

"Are you aware that aiding and abetting a suicide is a criminal offence?"

I chucked incredulously, "Yes." I could sense a goal he was steering the questions towards. A goal he so desperately wanted.

"Do you remember when you realized something was wrong?"

"I hadn't sat yet, or had I?" I thought about it. What did I remember? Oh, yes. "No, I hadn't sat down yet. I heard a sound. A surprised sound. Like an 'oops' but it was soft, sharp but soft. Not alarming until I looked up." I sighed deeply, closed my eyes, and flopped my head back.

"What did you see?"

I was trying to recollect the sequence of events, their order, their connections. Did I remember the sequence or did my brain fill in the gaps with invented logic? "It was just before she hit the floor."

"The floor or the coffee table?"

I could feel their logic. "The floor. She was in the air, facing up." I could see her as if caught in a photograph, suspended in the air. "Her backside hit the floor first, and then her head was thrown back sharply, whipped against the corner of the coffee table. The

sound was like a bottle breaking on concrete."

(I worried about the words arse or backside. He's a man who would say arse, never bum; but given the circumstances, would he choose backside as more polite when referring to his now dead wife? Backside, I think. Oh, dear! Here comes Tommy with another cup of coffee. Oh, now he's staring at the used, empty cup on my desk. If only I could know what he is thinking at times like this. Now he has turned back to the kitchen with the fresh cup, confused no doubt. Poor man. Mah! Poor me!)

"How did she come to rest?" asked Marinos. "On her front or on her back?"

"On her back," I said. Yes, I can see her lying on her back.

"Where was the towel?" asked Mullen

"I don't know."

"Was she wearing it?" Marinos asked.

"Yes. No! I put it over her after I called triple O."

"Mr. Osman," said Mullen in a winning tone, "your wife was found lying on her stomach with her towel wrapped around her and tucked in above her breasts, like women do."

"But the wound was to the back of her head," I said aware of the flutter in my voice.

"Yes. So, you moved her?"

"I remember closing her eyes." Did I?

"Mr. Osman, I put it to you that you colluded with your wife to end her life. She knew exactly where a blow would have an instantaneous effect. She talked to you about this. You planned how it should look. The shower, the water on the floor, the cluttered coffee table, everything. An accident. She needed you to aim her head at the exact spot. That's why you remember her eyes. You were holding her head aiming at the correct spot and with great force you jabbed her head onto the corner of the coffee table and achieved your shared goal. Putting her out of her misery. A noble deed, Mr. Osman, but an illegal one."

"So you believe me," I said quietly. "You said there was no water, so you believe me about the water. Hah? You believe me! You just ....." I could not help myself. "Chief Inspector Mullen!" I wanted to say 'Mullet'! I shouted vehemently. "Do you understand how ludicrous that sounds? That is the most ridiculous story I have ever heard and that any courtroom has ever heard, or may still hear, no doubt. Why didn't she just put a bullet in her head? Why didn't she just jump off the roof? Why didn't she take a handful of pills and slit her wrists in a hot bath like any sensible person? Why go to all this ridiculous trouble?"

"Because she loved you Mr. Osman," said Marinos sweetly. "And you loved her. She wanted you to be her last image. There you were face to face. A kiss perhaps? Your face was the last thing she saw: you, then nothing. Her face was the last thing you saw: her, then she was gone. Over. Finished."

I stared at her feeling moisture in my eyes and then said to stop it, "You've been watching too much Swedish crime drama."

I never did get my cup of tea.

There was a trial. A short trial. The police's story sounded just as ludicrous in the courtroom as it did in the station. I was acquitted. There was such a lot of truth and fiction thrown around in that courtroom; so mixed up, no-one was ever sure which was which. One thing I do know though; I'm not such a bad liar after all.

(Oh, Tommy! What - are - we - going - to - do - with - you?)

Still Lake

Chelsea McPherson

You stop at the edge of the lake. A cool wind blows from the north, caressing your bare shoulders. Goosebumps prick your flesh and you hug yourself just a little bit closer.

They told you to meet them here, at the Still Lake, at ten minutes past midnight. And you are here, and there is nothing else. Just the Still Lake and its serene, mirror-flat waters. The moon is full and reflects off the lake's very centre. Yet you can't help but notice there's no stars reflecting. It is unnerving but you quash the urge to run and never come back. You shouldn't have listened. But you did and now you're here and now you can't return to normalcy.

Something ripples in the lake's centre, disturbing the moon's reflection. You blink; did you see that correctly? You shake your head after nothing else happens. Surely, surely you were just seeing things.

You turn your back to walk away, no longer frightened, just angry and upset. You were fooled, led to believe someone or something would be here...

Something cold and wet and long wraps around your throat and you choke out what was supposed to be a scream. It squeezes and pulls you back. You thrash and scrabble and claw at the shape but it's no use, you can't break free. You feel the water soaking through your shoes, seeping up your jeans, spreading up your shirt. It rushes into your lungs and fills your vision and you begin to flail, sobbing, breathing in more water. A low rumble resonates through you, the grip around your throat tightens, and the pressure on your body intensifies as the surface and the moon drift further and further away.

It's strange. Your body ripples with the water. Breathing has become easier. And there is nothing but darkness around you. A warm darkness, safe and comforting. And you can see the surface, the sun shining through, despite being so far down. Voices fill your eyes, and splashes vibrate against your body. You growl and swim closer, hungry, saliva filling your mouth as you imagine what it would be like to taste fresh meat.

Take them, a voice whispers in your mind as you see gently kicking ankles. Hands break the surface every so often and laughter makes you snarl. That voice, that sweet laugh with a condescending undertone is familiar to you. Familiar makes rage rear its ugly head in your heart.

You haven't felt such a strong emotion since you abandoned your human form. Or, well, since your human form was taken from you and scattered to the silt at the bottom of Still Lake. And you want someone to feel the same fear you did. You want them to hurt like you did. But they won't get the satisfaction of having your fate, oh no. Because you like the strength. You like the power to take revenge.

And as your jaws snap shut around the paddling ankle, you accept the mantle of the Monster of Still Lake, and the blood tastes sickly sweet on your tongue.

The Accidental Politician

Liddy Clark

Her partner went out late on Saturday morning to gather the papers. She was hiding at his place on the other side of town after a murder of crows had gathered on the nature strip outside her house. They were all there: the tried and long-toothed television political reporter; rotund photographers; jaded tabloid writers; men, women, no children—they had probably eaten their young. Camera trucks lined her street with the occupants leaning against their vans, dragging on durries. To an outsider it looked like a reunion; to the initiated it was much more sinister. They had gathered outside her place because they smelled blood. A wild dog camp snarling, yapping, drooling, sniffing each other, wanting the titbit.

She had fled before microphones could be thrust into her face. With dog in tow she had backed the car out and with a queen-like wave she was gone. She knew they would put the second eleven on sentry duty. It wouldn't be safe to go home for some time.

"Did you get them all?" She was sitting at her partner's large dining table, staring vacantly out the window with a knot in her stomach and not really knowing what to feel. She was exhausted.

"Australian, Courier and Gold Coast Bulletin. Gird your loins, darling, you made the front page of all three." He let the papers fall, and time moved in slow motion as they hit the table, making a splattered pattern. She wasn't eager to look. Murdoch stable rags, Labor minister; it was manna from heaven. Her partner broke her foreboding.

"Coffee? I have croissants." He turned and went toward the kitchen. She stared at his back and then moved her eyes to the papers.

Of course, it was the most unflattering photo they could publish. Her once pristine white shirt and black trousers looked like they had been slept in. The shirt revealed flesh as it crept up, the wind blowing her messy hair, hands clutching a bottle of water, her face like a smacked arse. She had been up since six that morning and the shot was taken at five in the afternoon after a long, hot, embarrassing February day. Bastards! "Sorry, coffee. Yes please, black and strong."

She tentatively opened the daily paper colloquially known as the curious snail. Curious, its writing was not—it was a tabloid trying hard to be cutting-edge and failing dismally; editors 'in charge' taking riding orders from the big man. She turned to page two and three, double-page spreads with at least five photos. They'd dug up the obligatory Play School presenter image. Page four and five, more photos, more misinformation. She didn't read all the commentary; she was now intent on counting. She stopped at page fourteen. It occurred to her that there was no news on the terrible train crash in Spain where people had lost their lives. What sort of journalism was this—she was being hung, drawn and quartered without trial and world events weren't getting a look in. Investigative journalism at its worst.

Her coffee was cold by the time she had gone through the other papers. Her phone rang and her stomach lurched. She stared at the phone and willed her partner to pick it up. He did with a look of determination; he was ready for the fight.

"Oh hi … Yes, she has counted the pages, fucking arseholes … Yes, come over for lunch."

She stopped holding her breath. Friend, not foe.

"Keep breathing, darling," he said after hanging up the phone. "No one can believe there is no news other than 'Winegate'. Before coming over tomorrow she will drive by your place to see if the mongrel camp are still pissing on the lamp posts."

"I can't believe it either. Shit, when did it become Winegate, for heaven's sake?"

It was ringing again. The blood drained from her face and her body tensed. Her partner snatched up the phone; he was still maintaining his 'don't fuck with me' stance. It was her campaign director, a fine human being. She often referred to him as a 'true servant of the public'. He was a senior counsel and had been her campaign director and confidant across three elections.

"I'll put her on. Oh, okay … Right … Thanks, I'll let her know … Yep, tough going. We'll come over tomorrow." He sat down beside her and gave her the details of the call.

Their federal member had been trying to contact her. He strongly urged that she fall on her sword immediately, no discussion, no workshop, just do it. Right or wrong, it didn't matter. It was the only way out, it was the only way to survive. It would stop the opposition and the press haunting her every move. Career suicide would be enough to call the dogs off. 'The Premier will survive either way. You need to look after yourself, and quickly,' was his advice.

She was torn. It sounded so easy—say she was in the wrong, get dumped from the ministry, return to the backbench and everything would be okay. She looked at her partner. He looked at her still with the same fire in his eyes.

"I think you should fight it."

Both options made her fearful. The press would have a field day with a mea culpa, and the Premier would make sure that he wasn't seen as having an unstable ministry, that he hadn't made an error of judgement by giving a rookie MP a seat at the cabinet table. No matter which way you looked at it, it was going to be messy.

"Don't let those bastards win. Stand up for your principles."

Stand-and-fight men are good at that.

With fear and trepidation, stand and fight was what she finally decided to do. But it was not well thought through, and turned out to be a bad decision that she never really recovered from. If she had fallen on her sword she would have been the shortest-serving minister in the history of the parliament—not counting the Labor kamikaze act with the abolition of the Legislative Council in 1922.

You're wrong, Shirl and Red. Ego is a dirty word.

Politics can be ruthless and unforgiving. She was about to learn this the hard way.

It was her second term as a member of parliament when she scraped past the post again. What had been a historic Tory seat was now in the hands of Labor, much to the chagrin of the Liberal hierarchy. She would like to say it was her campaigning and oratory that won the good people over, but to be frank, she had to thank Pauline Hanson for helping her into her seat. It was definitely a vote against racism that pulled the margin to a respectable five per cent and 800 votes past the post. It also saw the demise of one of the most hated men in politics. For one small moment she was lauded.

There is always a lot of cut-and-thrust when it comes to ministerial appointments, but her elevation was somewhat different. The argy bargy was for the last spot on the frontbench. The factions were equal with their numbers but there weren't enough women. The Premier's choices were to cut the ministry and be savaged for not having enough women, or put in a non-factional rookie. The left faction fought hard to get her over the line—not so much for her, but to thwart the right.

*

She was in her electorate office, in shorts, t-shirt and sandals and waiting for the seat to be declared, when she got a call from the Premier. As her electorate officer put the call through they looked at each other, wondering what she had done wrong. Even after all these years she felt like a schoolgirl facing the principal. Introductions were brief.

"So, you gonna win?"

"It's pretty close, but I think so, yes."

"You'd better. What do you think of the cabinet so far?" It was an interesting question, as none of the cabinet names had been released—was it a test?

"Ah, well, I'm not sure who you have yet, apart from the obvious. Lots of factional warring, no doubt?" She was feeling stronger, feet up on the desk, chewing the fat with the Premier!

"What about you, would you be interested?"

She laughed a little too loudly as her tummy did a backflip. "Yeah right." She then went into an unprovoked tirade on what needed to be done in the party and in her electorate—the naivety of an accidental politician.

"Yes, we will talk about all that. Can you come into the office now?"

"Now? Yes, I'm in shorts."

"See you within the hour."

By this time her legs were off the desk, and she felt dread at being summoned. Her electorate officer handed her the car keys. "I'll organise a car space."

*

The executive building was a seventies high-rise, the carpark subterranean, the Premier's office on the fourteenth floor.

She drove down to the carpark. "I have an appointment with the Premier."

"We were expecting you. If you could proceed to bay forty, please."

She smiled and did as instructed. There were ministerial drivers cleaning their cars in readiness for their new ministers. She waved casually as she walked past them on her way to the lift. The lift driver was as old as Methuselah and the size of a house; he had been in this position for a lifetime. He took her express to the Premier's floor. Security were expecting her and let her through. She walked into an opulent waiting area, now feeling decidedly underdressed. Why hadn't she gone home to change? Her lipstick did match her shoes, though.

Sitting on one of the four couches were two members of the right faction, dressed appropriately in suits, their heads close together. She doubted they were whispering sweet nothings to each other; more likely who was going to the thrust the knife and into whom. She smiled nervously. The look they gave her could only be described as the look someone gets when they've trodden in dog shit. It was fleeting, and when they tried to be warm it came out tepid.

"Hello. What are you doing here?"

"I've been summoned by the man who will be obeyed."

"Really? Right, okay." Their faces said it all: What the fuck is SHE doing here? And back they went to whispering. She sat down on the opposite couch and awaited her fate.

When it was her turn she was ushered into the inner sanctum. The Premier and his chief of staff were behind the Premier's desk. She sat in the chair opposite and curled her bare leg underneath her. The Premier looked serious; his chief of staff wore a poker face.

"People tell me you are going to win, so I am offering you a cabinet position. I need an answer quickly; I'm being screwed by the factions. They won't like my decision, but I need another woman and it's you."

Her lip was curling into a smile. She had to stop herself from letting out a chuckle. "You're joking, right?" Here she was, sitting in the Premier's office in shorts and being asked if she wanted a ministerial position. If his face hadn't been so serious she would have thought it was a joke. "Um … the arts?" she asked.

"No, the arts is a senior portfolio and will go to someone experienced. We have created a new position I think will suit you down to the ground. It's not going to be easy, but I will surround you with good people and you will have me; I will look after you. So, what do you say?"

Her heart was racing. "Can I make some calls and let you know in an hour?"

"One hour it is," the Premier responded with his trademark Cheshire cat grin. Lambs to the slaughter. The Premier and his chief of staff looked at her and looked toward the door. It was time to take her leave. She made it to her car, not knowing whether to laugh or cry or sing or scream or … Best to breathe, she told herself.

Back at the office, her electorate officer stared at her in disbelief. "But you haven't won yet."

"Apparently they think I will, so you know what this means, don't you? You will have to come to the ministerial office and we will replace you here. You have to come, I'm not going without you."

The electorate officer looked at her with a maternal look, her hand trying to pat the mass of curls on her head into place. "We will cross that bridge when we need to." Always the steady hand.

She rang her partner. "I can't talk about it on the phone. It's not bad—well, it depends on how you look at it. Can you come over straight away?"

"Now you have me worried. I will be there in fifteen."

Within those fifteen minutes she and her EO discussed, dissected, screamed, laughed, stared, and finally she made up her mind.

If only someone had said, 'don't do it'. She was non-factional, which meant she didn't have any heavyweights to caution her. She only had an actor's ego, a partner who was thrilled, and an EO who probably knew better but didn't let on.

*

In that month of February, with the Premier's ducks all in a row, new and returning MPs were called to a meeting in the members' reading room of Parliament House.

As all the elected and re-elected members walked across the promenade from the annexe to the 'old house' for the meeting, journalists were swarming. The usual suspects—ABC, Channel 10, Channel 7—were all on a first-name basis with many of the long-term members. This time around it was her name that was being called, with microphones at the ready. "What's it like to be a minister? Your seat hasn't been declared yet? Be embarrassing if you don't win? Have you thought of that? Are you confident? Anything to say?" She smiled, being pushed along the path by the momentum of the others, no time to talk. There was that question though, with many of her colleagues thinking the same thing—what if you don't win? There was still no word. At last count they were two hundred votes ahead, and that's about where it remained.

She had coveted the arts portfolio, having been an actor and in the creative industries for a lifetime. Arts, always an addendum portfolio, historically went to a senior minister who often had little connection to the field apart from accepting free tickets to opening nights and reading the odd poem. To fit her into cabinet they created a new portfolio: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (ATSIP). It came as a surprise; she was known for her strong opinions on the subject of our first Australians, but felt it was being politicised. She was not an

expert, just another 'white fella' with a big stick. Or maybe a woman, her, could make a difference?

ATSIP was a policy portfolio—another reason for the press and opposition to have a field day. The arts fraternity were disappointed but incredibly supportive and happy for her; finally, one of their own was in a position of power. The tried and true politicians gave wry smiles.

True to form, she hit the ground running. It was a steep learning curve, one that she relished. She relied heavily on her director general, the department and her political staff. Being a member of the cabinet and the Executive Council was an enormous privilege, and terrifying. She was playing with the big kids and had to be ready. Read, read, then re-read. When the cabinet bag arrived, more reading. She quietly thanked her lucky stars for her time as an Acting Deputy Speaker in the previous term of government; at least she had an understanding of how the parliament worked!

There was a distinct buzz in the department and in her office.. This was a significant portfolio and she was going to make her mark. It was decided that she would travel to remote communities as soon as it was practicable. Before her appointment the portfolio had been with the Police Minister who, prior to the election, had begun the process of introducing alcohol management plans (AMPs) across remote and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It now fell to her and her department to implement the plan. Consultation to that point had not gone well.

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Preparation for her first trip to the Cape York Peninsula was underway: a meet, greet and listen trip. Government delegations were perceived as 'fly in, fly out', so it was important to make a good first impression.

It was extraordinary, eye-opening, fascinating and sad. The country, the people, the dirt, the dogs, the heat. The minister plus two advisors, two fellow MPs and her director general made their first stop at Pompuraaw on the west coast of Cape York, the home of the Thaayorre, Wik, Bakanh and Yir Yoront people. It was there that she tasted crocodile for the first time. There were many firsts on that trip.

They then made the short journey to Napranum, home to about forty different clans, before heading to Weipa where they would spend the night.

By the time she had met with departmental people from Cairns and a number of the locals it was the end of a long, hot, and from all accounts successful day. She took solace in a cold shower before dinner at the hotel bar with some of the officers from Cairns. Her colleagues had friends in town and went off after dinner to see them. She stayed and spent some time talking to the pilots before turning in; it was going to be another early start.

*

She had to smile as they all boarded the government jet for their trip to Lockhart River; it was obvious that some of her merry band were slightly worse for wear. She went through the notes of the day with her director general. There was to be a tour of the community, an arts initiative launch, a meeting with the mayor and councillors, and lunch.

They were driven into the township in four-wheel-drives via the beach. The expanse of water glistened in the sun, and the vista appeared like a blooming flower. It took her breath away. One could understand the importance of the land and water. You could feel its strength.

Lockhart River's population of between six and seven hundred included about thirty white people who worked in the community. The local school seemed to be thriving, and the council office and administration were in work mode. Apart from their famous fishing, Lockhart was also a breeding ground for young and old artists alike, with a bourgeoning art community. As a new minister watching painters at work, a passion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art was ignited in her, and still lingers.

It was her task to launch the artist-in-residence program. People gathered around the steps to the art room, their smiling faces all eager to know who was going to be part of the new program. It was easy for her to talk to the crowd; she had seen their work and was impressed.

Then a cold wind crossed. She noticed people at the back whispering and her director general speaking with some of her staff, their faces furrowed. She tried to focus on the task at hand, keeping people interested and making her speech sound light-hearted, but she could feel the panic in the air. Something was going down.

She made the announcement that everyone wanted to hear, and there were cheers and clapping as she invited everyone to partake in the afternoon tea that had been prepared. She shook hands and spoke to a number of people, all the while desperate to find out why her team had been so distracted while she was speaking. Her ego felt they should have been focused on her, not some idle gossip. Finally she was able to extricate herself and crossed to her DG. His face was drawn. "Minister, we have a problem..."

The Premier's office had informed him that his counterpart in Brisbane had received a call from the manager of the airstrip, saying he had discovered a bottle of wine on the government jet.

*

Her team assembled at the council offices, awaiting riding orders. The air was thick with fear; phone calls broke the silence. When it came time to go, farewells that should have been full of warmth were lost in the haste to get to the airstrip. There they were greeted by two constables from Lockhart River, who were to detain and question the minister and her team. There was a palpable feeling of impending doom as they arrived at the police station and congregated together, not knowing what was going to be asked or what they were going to say, not realising that their behaviour would be seen as collaborating.

It was some hours before they were finally allowed to leave. The flight home was long and silent. Unable to take calls, they were travelling blind.

*

In Brisbane, the first of the headlines appeared: 'Police have confirmed they are investigating claims a Queensland Government plane took wine into a community which has alcohol restrictions.'

The Lockhart community had signed an alcohol management plan in May the previous year. The airport manager's grievance was that if he couldn't drink due to the AMPs then he would bring the government down. A premeditated act. The Brisbane counterpart, instead of ringing the director general immediately rang the Premier who, in his uninformed wisdom and without first speaking to the minister, launched a knee-jerk investigation. The fact that the airstrip was on federal land was a moot point.

By the time her travelling troupe finally touched down at the government air wing in Brisbane it was about eleven pm. Their phones were clogged. Her driver was waiting—a sight for sore eyes. As they left the airport a convoy of media cars tailgated them. With a sinking heart she realised they were following her home, to her sanctuary. It was surreal; a movie complete with car chase.

Normal practice would've been to let her out at the front curb, but this time he drove down the shared driveway to the back door. Before she could get inside to calm the yelping dog and turn on the lights, photographers were banging on the front door. Her phones rang incessantly. It was pitch black outside, the media folk silhouetted by the light from the streetlamp. She had a quick look through the wooden shutters and saw a man on her doorstep peering in. She hurried to the middle of the room.

"Come on, Minister, a quick photo and we'll leave you alone." "A quick grab before we call it a night, eh?" "Minister, is it true? What sort of wine?" "Come on, we're not leaving until we get a quote."

She was shaking. This was all new to her, being stalked, having her privacy invaded. The banging on the door persisted. They were not quite baying for blood, but close to it. As though in preparation for a cyclone she hid in the shower, feeling ridiculous. Finally, she rang the Premier's media advisor asking him to call them off. He did and they left.

Sleep was fitful, listening for cars, listening for the knock on the door.

The following morning, by the time she had showered and dressed, the media were setting up camp. They were standing around with take-away cups of coffee, chatting. Her driver arrived. She kissed her dog on the nose, then gathered her dignity and walked out the front door. Microphones were immediately thrust into her face. She managed the obligatory "No comment". She knew she looked wretched.

*

The Premier decided that she would travel back to Lockhart immediately to personally apologise for the alleged misdemeanour. She was ordered to go along with four journalists. What was he thinking? A self-confessed media tart, the Premier delighted in dealing with the media.

There were photos of the Premier with his shaken minister, drinking water. By that stage the story had blown out of all proportion.

Accusations flew, barristers were engaged. The opposition called for a Crime and Misconduct Commission inquiry.

She had been a minister for a month.

*

At first, the headlines were, 'Staffer takes bottle of wine into dry community'. Then, with the help of the opposition, it became, 'The minister and her director general lied about their knowledge of the bottle of wine', and, 'The Premier had misled parliament'. Then the pilots were also in the firing line.

The media and the opposition were relentless. They could smell the opportunity for a scalp in the first month of a new government.

In a bizarre twist to the Winegate affair … Premier refuses to sack minister … The government faces more questions today … and the obligatory Play School reference … "I'm going to need this water for something special in Play School today" …

Amidst the chaos she couldn't help but think of the adage, 'don't let the facts get in the way of a good story'. The apparent good story went on for months while the CMC investigation took place.

Having a barrister was also a first. It was important to have someone in your corner when facing up to the CMC lawyers. Her first meeting was daunting. It was in a small room in a modern legal building—it had that legal, rarefied air—with round table, tasteful chairs and an imposing man trying hard to be ordinary. He questioned her about the planning of the trip, who sat where, who said what. He interrogated her about what had transpired on the ground before leaving Lockhart and upon return. He left no stone unturned. She was in a lather, gesticulating wildly. It was a harrowing ordeal, and at times she felt guilty, such was the pressure. After two hours he stopped.

"You can't possibly have made that up. I believe you. Now, we do the hard work."

*

Her electorate work continued. She still had to go to schools, meet with constituents and continue her parliamentary work. Question time was taken up with queries about wine, which of course the other MPs all found hilarious. One factor lost in all the mud slinging was that it was one bottle of Wolf Blass Red—not even the Grey label. It was a six-buck quaffer and anyone who knew her knew that her tipple was champagne. A self-confessed wine snob, she wouldn't drink at all if there wasn't anything decent on offer.

That, of course, was incidental to the story. It didn't matter the quantity or quality of the wine; the issue was that someone allegedly took wine into a dry community.

It brought into question the alcohol management plans and instigated another round of hostility between the communities and the government. She had to win back support, which meant more visits to remote communities. She had the support of a number of the communities and local Murries, but they were suspicious of the government. This was a lot for a first-time 'embattled' minister.

On one of the many trips to Cairns, a departmental officer who worked with the communities sidled up to her. "Can I have a word, Minister?" He looked grey and dejected.

"Of course." They moved to the side of the room.

"I have a confession to make." He intimated that he knew what the manager of the Lockhart airport had intended to do but kept the information to himself. The alcohol management plans were interfering with the manager's social life in the community, and he had said very loudly on a number of drunken occasions that 'the next bloody government jet that flew in, he would hang it on them'.

The officer regaling the tale was in tears. He blamed himself and believed he could have stopped it all if only he had made a call.

There was nothing she could do with this information. The issue's trajectory was running its own out-of-control course; it was impossible to curtail it. She felt sorry for the officer.

The police at Lockhart thought the whole episode was ridiculous, and if it had been up to them they wouldn't have pressed charges against the minister and her team. The Deputy Premier informed her they didn't really care if she had taken the bottle on the jet or not; the Premier just wanted a bit of publicity to show he was in command. Indeed, the Deputy Premier had advised the Premier to drop it.

The final CMC report went into details of no consequence. The triviality of the saga was obvious to all, even the media, but they had their jobs to do and they were not going to give up while the story still had some mileage.

After many months and sessions with the CMC investigators she was exonerated from any wrongdoing and her staff reprimanded. But the opposition continued its attempts to undermine her.

"It will blow over eventually," said her partner and a number of colleagues. She hoped so, but she often thought of the advice given to her by the federal member early in the saga. Had he been right? If she had fallen on her sword at the beginning, history may have been kinder. It could be said that she didn't ever recover from Winegate, especially when it was coupled with the riots on Palm Island …

The Hand of God

Alexandra Mavridis

The hand of God was swift, in her adroit way as she set upon creating a world of form and colour. She commenced her artistry by spreading a thin scrub-in of raw umber across the blank surface of the earth, as it was white and without texture.

As the foundation had been placed, and observing that it was opaque and without hope of any fruitfulness, She recognized that the earth needed light and dark. Carefully wiping away the particles of pigment that blocked the mantel of the earth's crust She revealed a patina of tonal gradation. Gradually She blocked in the position of the foreground, middle ground and background of the earth's picture plane.

With great acumen the milieu of the earth began to take form; in her wisdom She used simple tools to paint the surface, which was still flat and shapeless. Requiring further clarity She created definite edges, adjusting the site of the terrain, the heavens and the underground.

Using her palette of sumptuous colour and tone, and observing the space, She set the objects in an order of visual priority thus producing perspective and detail. Objects in the distance being smaller, cooler, and less defined, and in the foreground She gave more light, scale and definition.

Great delight fuelled her broad brushstrokes as She worked steadily in all areas of her canvas, moving from pure cadmium red on the fruits of the flora that were highlighted with alizarin crimson, to burnt sienna as an under painting of the warm sky and clouds. The heavens became iridescent as She added cobalt blue.

Shadows and mid-tones mosaiced in and around the void; creating a feeling of movement in a once static place. Depth became apparent as She underlined the shapes with ivory black, bleeding it out and feathering titanium white lightly over the top view of the land. With her finger She spread a highlight on the focal point.

Initially it was a perfect world it seemed to her, but there was no life and as such it was empty and sedate. Using her liner brush, She gestured across the sky making lines that were uneven and irregular creating the first of bird life. Stippling with burnt umber, God dotted across the horizon shapes that grew into hoofed and webbed animals. Yellow ochre was spread using her palette knife across the foreground of the land and She then scratched away fowl and mammals.

Quiet was the land as there was no babble or movement. This troubled God as her work felt incomplete and shallow, for She knew that a land without purpose and meaning for its life form was like a black and white image, two-dimensional, empty and without richness.

As the eternal wise one She breathed the essence of voice into all the living beings, and gave the element of movement into each living cell. Her creation was panoramic and all encompassing.

The Reunion

Shella Shpigel

I drove over the West Gate Bridge and looked into the rear-view mirror. Sharon probably hadn't seen the city skyline for a long time, I thought to myself. She had missed many things. She wasn't there when Lisa got married or when John had twins and she wasn't around when Kylie finished nursing school.

The car wheels were turning, the city was becoming smaller and smaller. From a distance, it looked very peaceful and beautiful. Quite the contrasting landscape I was driving towards. I imagined her place of residence to be like those featured on American reality TV shows. Dark, cold and intimidating. And that's how I would describe Sharon too.

I hadn't seen Sharon in over 9 years. Prior to that, we didn't have much of a relationship. She wasn't exactly what I call a (role model) mother. Growing up she always had different boyfriends around and spent most of her time smoking weed and arguing.

There were six of us kids, each with different dads. We spent our days on the streets trying to survive. Sometimes we would shoplift from Coles just so we could have dinner at night. Other nights, we would come home and Sharon would be out. The doors would be locked. We were forced to spend the night in the backyard.

I think Sharon had it in for Lisa and me. We were the youngest. She didn't like Lisa because she claimed Brett touched her. That was Sharon's boyfriend at the time. Sharon was furious at these accusations. She didn't want anything getting in the way of their relationship. As to why she didn't like me, she reckons the police came around too much looking for me. I did like to mess with them because I was bored. I once slashed their tyres outside the police station and they weren't very amused when they showed up at our house.

Eventually Department of Human Services intervened and Lisa and I were sent to foster homes. Mostly, we would run away and go back home. But Sharon would call the police to come and get us. She would tell them that we broke in and stole from her. We were forced to return to our foster parents and the viscous cycle continued until I became an adult.

Today's reunion was important as I had significant news to share with Sharon. I felt I owed it to her since she brought me into this world. In times of crisis she was the last person I would turn to. But, this situation called for it. It was the right thing to do. Even my siblings said I had to let her know.

What was I going to tell her? How was I going to break it to her? What was her reaction going to be? 'So Sharon, its really good to see you after all these years but I have some horrible news to tell you.' Or 'Sharon, I'm really sorry to tell you that things aren't looking good for me.' 'I don't know how to break this you and it's really tragic.'

I wound down the car window as I was driving along the freeway. I lit a cigarette and turned up the radio. The song 'Don't Worry Be Happy' came on and I burst into tears. I threw the cigarette bud out the window and began chewing gum quickly. I began tuning the radio dial incessantly. My palm started to feel moist and beads of sweat started forming on my forehead. My temperature was rising on this autumn day. I thought, maybe this was a bad idea and I should turn back. Fuck the old bitch! But I could hear Lisa's voice in my mind: you owe it to her! At least have the decency to tell her. And she was right. I turned on the air-conditioner; I turned off the radio and started deep breathing. Besides, the exit point was approaching and I had come all this way already.

Shorty after I exited the freeway, the landscape changed dramatically from the concrete jungle of the city. It was baron. Dried grass from the summer, over grown as far as the eye can see. Dotted with the occasional factory, some of them decrepit and abandoned. It was a wasteland. Deteriorated landscape where only semi-trailers passed through. I turned into the final street and a long deserted road confronted me. I'm pretty certain if I screamed nobody would have heard. And that's what I certainly felt like doing from the window of my car. Anxiety had set in again. But there was no turning back now.

As I arrived at the premises the first thing I notice was a police helicopter circling around. It continuously went around the perimeter of the compound. It was what you would expect to see. A 5-meter high solid grey fence, lined with razor wire coils and hundreds of electronic surveillance cameras actively moving at 360c views. I approached what is known as the Gatehouse, a large heavy door with a small windowpane and a buzzer. Directly above, a surveillance camera was watching. It was now or never. I breathed deep, pressed the buzzer and waited. There was no reply. I watched the police chopper circling around and wondered what they were looking for. As I got lost in my thoughts, suddenly a booming mans voice responded over the loud speaker. "Can I help you?" he roared.

"I'm here to visit Sharon Wells," I responded.

"Do you have her CRN?" he asked.

"The number is 567219," I said.

Unexpectedly, the large metal door unlocked and I was inside. Inside the Gatehouse the security screening took place. A friendly baby-faced man in blue uniform sitting at a desk politely asked for my identification. He smiled and thanked me. I wondered if this was the same man that had come over the loud speaker. This was not how I imagined him. He explained that I was not allowed to bring any possessions inside and issued me with a locker. After I had stored my items away, I had my eyes scanned, put my shoes and jumper through a security x-ray machine. Then I went through a metal detector machine and then another machine, which sprayed smoked all over me.

Finally, I was given the all clear and the next door was unlocked. This time unveiling manicured gardens, cottage style houses were visible in the distance. The visitor's centre looked like a school cafeteria. But the people inside were not school children. Families in casual clothes sat with those who they were visiting in green jumpsuits and security staff milled around in blue uniforms.

After surveying the room, I sat down and waited. I began to bite my nails, my feet were tapping on the floor and my eyes were darting around the room. I think I even spotted Judy Moran. But it wasn't much of a distraction. I started thinking about what to say to her over and over again. Hi Sharon, it's been a while since we last spoke. Hi Sharon, how are you keeping in here? Hi Sharon, give us a hug.

Suddenly I looked up and Sharon was being escorted over to me. She was a petite woman with frizzy shoulder length black hair and piercing green eyes. She once may have been attractive but as she came closer, I saw skin that had been exposed to the harsh Australian sun: she had the appearance of a leather handbag.

She thumped down onto the chair, spread her legs wide open and said in her croaky voice, that of a chain smoker, "G'day love". I think it was the first time in my life I saw her smile. Her teeth were yellow and some were missing too. You could see this woman had a hard life.

After much small talk, Sharon began rambling at a fast pace. "It's so fuckin' hot in here. Turn on the air-conditioner ya bloody bastards! I'm startin' sweat. Stupid pricks!!!

"So, ya been watchin' Fat Tony's? Those bloody fools have got the story wrong! They can't even act! What were they thinkin' getting a bunch of idiots on there!

"Hey, do ya have any money??? Do ya reckon you can buy me a can a Coke? C'mon treat ya old mum!"

The vending machine inside the visitor centre sure was popular. Every where I looked, there were Coke cans being sipped between conversations, pink packets of salt and vinegar chips being shared over a laugh and chocolates being consumed by every man, woman and child. So much that there was queue to get access to the vending machine.

"Ya must be thirsty love. I can't see ya drinking the tap water over there. Hell, I wouldn't even drink it," Sharon said.

"Are you after anything else besides a Coke, Sharon?" I asked. "Fuck, I hate it when ya call me Sharon. Ya know I'm ya mum right? Maybe not the best mum but I popped ya out and it hurt like hell. You weighed 6.6 kilos. Fat little baby ya were, but ya were mine."

"My fat days are well and truly behind me mum. I'm as fit as a fiddle now. I ran a charity marathon a couple of months ago with a team from work. Work is going great too. I have been promoted to second in charge. And I won an award for my contributions to the CFA. I wished you could have been there to see me. Your kid has turned out alright mum," I said.

"You are an angel when you want to be. If you want to be an angel right now get me a Kit Kat and Coke okay? Nothing more than that alright? I have to watch me weight for when I get out. Darryn said he'll pick me up and I want to look nice for him. I still look sexy in me old age don't I love?" Sharon asked.

I proceeded to the vending machine and I could still hear her carrying on. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to buy her a Coke? I mean she was already clearly bouncing off the walls as it was. Constantly talking a million miles and hour, twitching and so full of energy. By the time I came back to our seats, snacks in hand, she had already managed to change chairs and was rocking back and forth. She snatched the Coke and Kit Kat from my hands. First she guzzled the Coke down in one gulp and then she virtually inhaled the Kit Kat. It was as though she was a child trapped in a woman's body. And, I certainly wasn't about to remind her to say thank you. I mean what did I really expect?

"I'm going to kill Lucy if she starts with me again. I already had some business with her Mrs the other day. I mean who do they think they are? Running this fuckin' joint? I reckon they are in with the screws. Probably payin' them for favours. I mean it's just a load of bullshit," Sharon snarled.

"None of that nonsense in here mum. You want to get out and see us all soon don't you? John's kids want to have a grandma around. I'd like you to meet my girlfriend too," I said.

"I didn't raise you to be gay. You are just like Lucy. You people need help. Her and her Mrs disrespected me. I told that bitch I had enough so I went and pissed on her sheets," she said.

"Look there is something important I came here to tell you," I said. "Geez love, let me finish me story would ya!" she said angrily.

"Its serious! I got some bad news when I went to the doctors a few weeks ago," I said.

"Quacks are all full of shit. Don't believe a word they say! The quack here reckons I need to go on a higher dosage of meds. But I reckon he should shove it up his arse. I'm not crazy!!!" she yelled.

"It's not too much longer for me ya know. Ill be outta here before ya know it. Then nobody can tell me what..." Sharon ranted.

"Its time," said the prison guard. "Time flies when you're having fun," I said.

"It was good seein' ya love, you should try come again ya know. Think of your poor mum stuck in this shit hole," Sharon said.

As the guard escorted her away, I could still her voice chattering a million miles an hour. "Wendy, is the gym open yet? Do ya reckon I can go use the gym? C'mon Wendy. Why aren't you answering me? Wendy!"Hey, Wendy you know that's me youngest daughter. She works at a crèche. She is real good with kids. She turned okay didn't she Wendy? I did my best with them lot you know," she explained to the guard.

Suddenly Sharon diverted her attention back to me and yelled out from across the room: "It's not me fault ya have brain cancer!" The door closed and Sharon was gone.

Unexpectedly, Wendy the prison guard appeared before me. "I have been hearing about you for a long time Crystal. She doesn't talk about your brothers and sisters much. She told me she even started praying for you recently. Anyway, it's none of my business but I just thought you should know," Wendy said.

"Thank you. It means a lot," I said. I got up, walked outside the gates, holding my head high and smiling.

Where Do My Hands Come From?

Shella Shpigel

There is a little girl called Mila who has two hands and ten fingers.
Her mummy has two hands and ten fingers too. Her mummy is painting her nails today as Mila watches on.
Mummy says: "We use our hands to draw pictures". Let's draw pictures together."
Mila draws a picture and looks at mummy's hands. She thinks: 'mummy's hands are darker than mine.'
Mummy says: "We use our hands to cook dinner. Let's cook dinner together."
Mila helps cook dinner and looks at mummy's hands. She thinks: 'mummy's hands are bigger than mine.'
Mummy says "We use our hands to brush our teeth. Let's brush our teeth together."
Mila brushes her teeth and looks at mummy's hands. She thinks: 'mummy's hands are wrinklier than mine'
Mummy explains that it's time for bed so she tucks Mila in with a goodnight kiss and closes the door. Mila lies in bed and stares at the shadow of her hands on the ceiling. She wonders: 'where do my hands come from?'
The next day, Mila wakes up and quickly eats her breakfast. She must to speak to her bear Ted.
Mila asks Ted: "Ted, where do my hands come from?" Ted shrugs and shows Mila his hands. Mila says: "Ted your hands are softer than mine."
Mila decides asks her doll Georgie: "Georgie, where do my hands come from?" Georgie shrugs and shows Mila her hands. Mila says: "Georgie your hands are frecklier than mine."
Mila asks Monkey: "Monkey, where do my hands come from?" Monkey shrugs and shows Mila his hands. Mila says: "Monkey your hands are hairier than mine."
Mila decides to ask mummy: "Mummy my hands don't look like yours. Where do my hands come from?" "Your hands come from your daddy and maybe one day you will meet him and see for yourself. But what's most important is they are yours now. Your hands. That's what makes you special Mila. Not even Ted, Georgie or Monkey have your hands" mummy explains.
And your hands can do anything. Your hands can heal sick people. Your hands can compose music. Your hands can win tennis matches. Your hands are yours and only yours. Your hands can do great things in this world.
Mila smiles to herself. She then picks up her basketball and runs outside to shoot a hoop.



She Moves by Amanda Kennedy

Curvature

Sarah Irene Robinson

The week has been an eternity. A whole eternity. How I am supposed to live outside of this week? When I was depressed and living mostly in my own mind, the weeks would fly by. I would blink and a year would have passed. These days, I live four days in one. I get to the end of the day and try and look back at the start, but I can't see it because the curvature of the earth is in the way. Back when the earth was flat you could probably look and see the start of your day, the start of your life, the start of your parents' life even. That overlapping of time now seems too complicated to lay out and be spoken of. We now just hang out and take for granted that we are all living at different speeds. I don't even know how many days my mother has lived this year, let alone in her whole life. Some days, I bet, we lived exactly the same. I think that's what happens when you get real close and cosy with someone; you start rowing at the same bits and sitting back at the same bits and falling out at the same bits.

Don't be Afraid of Virginia Woolf

Michael Freundt

On 7 February 1910 a telegram was received from Sir Charles Hardinge, the Permanent Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs, by the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet and the captain of the H.M.S. Dreadnought, the flagship of the British navy, then lying off Portland, Dorset. It informed him that Prince Makalin of Abyssinia and his party were arriving in the afternoon and were to receive every attention. When they arrived by private train carriage they were received with an honour guard and taken ceremoniously on board. The chatter of the dusky-skinned entourage was completely unintelligible although one of the party, Prince Mendax, wearing a sky-blue silk robe, beard, jewels and a turban, constantly murmured "Bunga bunga" which their interpreter explained was Abyssinian for "Isn't it lovely?" They refused all refreshments which the interpreter again explained was due to their religious beliefs as they could not be served food or drink with the naked hand. Gloves were not available.

A few days later the officers and crew of the Dreadnought were amazed and dismayed to learn, via the Daily Mirror, that it was all a monumental practical joke and the Royal navy was pilloried and laughed at for weeks in the national press and at every dinner table in the land. It has become known as the Dreadnought Hoax and was reported all over the world.

One of the hoaxers, Prince "Bunga Bunga" Mendex, was, in reality, a young girl who was quoted as saying "I found I could laugh like a man easily enough but it was difficult to disguise the speaking voice. As a matter of fact the only really trying time I had was when I had to shake hands with my first cousin, who is an officer on the Dreadnought, and who saluted me as I went on deck. I thought I should burst out laughing, but, happily I managed to preserve my Oriental stolidity of countenance."

This young lady was the 28 year old Miss Adeline Stephen, who two years later married and became Mrs Woolf. We know her better as Virginia.

Apart from being a practical joker, Virginia Woolf was a very beautiful woman. This is certainly not how we think of her today but all the people who wrote about her, and there were many, used adjectives, especially those that knew her well, like, beautiful, mischievous, intelligent, talkative, and inquisitive. She would say things like, "You said you went for a walk, but what made you go for a walk?" When out walking herself with a friend she would see a farmer tossing hay and say, "Look at that farmer pitching hay. What do you think he had for breakfast?" It was this inquisitiveness that made her attend to everything you said to her; and attend with real interest. When you talked to Virginia you always felt that you were intently listened to, and, once literary fame came into the picture, you didn't even mind that she was mining you for information, words and reasons for human behaviour; in fact, you were flattered that such a famous and beautiful woman was hanging on your every word; gazing into your eyes and eagerly waiting for your next pronouncement. Of course under such scrutiny, if you simply said 'I don't know' you could be sure that she would lose interest immediately and seek someone else's company. She had a habit of forcing you to search your brain for the right words, because nothing less than the right words were always expected.

She was tall, with a thin face, slender hands and always wore shapeless clothes of indeterminate colours: fashion was of no concern to her.

She was born Adeline Virginia Stephen in 1882 but almost immediately was called Virginia despite the confusion of initials with her elder sister, Vanessa. She came from a good family of landowners and was well but home educated. She was the third child of her father's second wife and an incident with her half-brother, George Duckworth, was to have a profound effect on her.

"I still shiver with shame," she wrote many years after the incident, "at the memory of my half brother standing me on a ledge, aged about six or so, exploring my private parts." Then, many years later, when her father lay dying from cancer three floors below, George would fling himself on her bed, kissing and hugging her, aged in her early 20s, to console her, he later said. Quentin Bell, her biographer and nephew, would write, "in sexual matters she was from this time terrified back into a posture of frozen and defensive panic." She briefly considered accepting Lytton Strachey's proposal of marriage knowing that he was homosexual so she thought a simple brother-sister sort of marriage may be preferable to one that included the 'horror of sex'. She wanted to be married, since being a spinster was considered a failure and finally accepted the proposal of Leonard Woolf and they were married on August 10 1912 after an engagement that, her sister wrote, was "an exhausting and bewildering thing even to the bystanders." Virginia said to him "I feel no physical attraction to you, ... and yet your caring for me as you do almost overwhelms me. It is so real and so strange." They were planning a honeymoon in Iceland (how metaphoric) but settled for a Mediterranean one instead. Michael Holroyd wrote,

"There seemed some unfathomable inhibition that made male last, even when compounded with love, if not horrific, quite incomprehensible to her. The physical act of intercourse was not even funny: it was cold. Leonard regretfully accepted the facts and soon brought the word in line with the deed by persuading her that they should not have children. It was a sensible decision for, though she could never contemplate her sister's fruitfulness without envy, children with their wetness and noise would surely have killed off the novels in her: and it was novel-writing that she cared for most."

In 2002 the film The Hours was released with much fanfare and a stellar cast. It was written by David Hare and based on the Michael Cunningham Pulitzer Prize winning book of the same name, which in turn used Woolf's novel Mrs Dalloway (1925) as the core of the film about, not only Virginia Woolf and the writing of the book, but also its effect on two women. one in the 1950s and one in the 1980s. Readers can find Mrs Dalloway curious, annoying and tedious but when you read you must not let the words wash over you as one lets light from a fire without looking into the flames; into the terrifying beauty at its core.

Her novel of 1928, Orlando, is dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf's friend, neighbour and sometime lover and tells the story, over a period of 300 years, of the romantic adventures of a man called Orlando, who suddenly, miraculously, half way through the book becomes a woman. This is revealed in the film as Orlando with his long, straight, reddish blond hair gazes at himself standing naked in front of a full length mirror and seeing the reflection of a long, straight, reddish blond haired naked woman staring back saying, "Same person, different body."

Virginia confessed her affair with Vita to her sister Vanessa and in a letter to Vita describes the moment.

"I told Nessa the story of our passion in a chemist's shop the other day. 'But do you really like going to bed with women' she said – taking her change. 'And how'd you do it?' and so she bought her pills to take abroad, talking as loud as a parrot."

Uncharacteristically a lot happens in Orlando but It's not plot that interests Virginia Woolf ("facts are a very inferior form of fiction") but the feelings, nuanced emotions that precede the action, or arise because of it; she was more interested in, not the 'What', but the 'Why', and, more importantly, how one would describe that

'Why'. Nowhere is this more evident than in her novel (most call it her masterpiece) To the Lighthouse (1927). The very title is full of expectation and when the possibility is revealed to little six year old James he is transfixed, incapacitated with the joy of it. This is the opening, including the title which is really part of the first sentence.

"To the Lighthouse"

"Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," said Mrs Ramsay. "But you'll have to be up with the lark," she added.

To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail, within touch. Since he belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss. It was fringed with joy."

And what is illustrative, most of all, of her genius, and her deep and all-consuming curiosity of human intention and behaviour, and her determination to create art, is that by the last page the lighthouse itself disappears into a mist and we, the readers, along with the remaining onlookers in the house, can only assume that they have arrived.

Someone once said that Leonardo de Vinci fought tooth and nail to acquire a particular block of marble, also much coveted by Michelangelo because he knew that inside there was a statue of David and all he had to do was chip away the extraneous rock to reveal the body within. If Virginia Woolf were present it would be the act of chipping the marble and the chips of marble lying on the floor that would attract her interest and not the finished, polished figure.

Janet Vaughan (a medical scientist and friend) had this to say about Virginia Woolf and 'genius'.

"Well, it's a sixth sense. It's somebody who jumps a gap which other people would need a very, very solid bridge to walk across. She didn't do it as a scientist might, she did it by interpreting what she saw and what people might be thinking and how they interacted with one another. But she had this quality of jumping gaps."

And similarly Vita Sackville-West describes it thus: "I always thought her genius led her by short cuts to some essential point which everybody else had missed. She did not walk there: she sprang."

But it's the adjectives 'mischievous, witty, warm and humorous' that are most intriguing. She loved to tease and teased most those she was most fond of; and those teased seemed to love it and certainly were not offended by it since the teasing was done with such warmth.

In the early 20s Virginia Woolf used the name of writer Berta Ruck (albeit mis-spelt) on a minor character, and a subsequent tombstone, in her novel Jacob's Room (1920). Angus Davidson, friend, literary critic, and manager for a time of their publishing house, The Hogarth Press, said this was done unwittingly. This is hard to believe as the name Berta Ruck is quite distinctive and her name and the names of her novels were emblazoned on the tops of London buses. However Ms Ruck was a writer of a very different genre than Virginia's. She wrote romantic stories and almost seventy novels (Khaki and Kisses, Love on Second Thoughts, etc) where beautiful young women were treated dismissively by fathers, brothers and men in general but who fell in love with one of them and lived happily ever after. One can imagine Virginia Woolf thinking this scenario extremely unlikely and with a name like Berta Ruck, and the married name of Mrs Onions, perfectly ripe for mischief. Ms Ruck, however, did not see the humour in the incident and with urgings from her indignant husband, wrote to Woolf in sorrow and indignation threatening legal action. Virginia wrote back rather sarcastically, "I am more pleased than I can say that you survived my burial. Never will I attempt such a thing again. To think that you have bought my book." It took Ms Ruck eight years to discover the slight so Woolf could hardly have taken her seriously. However they 'made up' via correspondence and almost a year later Ms Ruck got her own back by becoming the success at a party by singing a very risqué song, "Never Allow a Sailor an Inch Above Your Knee." Virginia was reported as being "filled with amazement and delight." All animosity was forgiven.

Unfortunately, the memory of her is clouded by her diaries which record her mental suffering and her depression even though her husband, and editor, went to great pains to explain; "...diaries give a distorted and one-sided view of the writer, because, as Virginia Woolf herself remarks, one gets into the habit of recording one particular kind of mood - irritation or misery say - and of not writing one's diary when one is feeling the opposite. The portrait in therefore from the start unbalanced."

Her bouts of illness sprung from the effort of writing, and in particular the exhaustion from finishing a particular work. Her headaches would begin and if left unchecked, she would lose coherence of speech, and her brain would race with images and noises (birds crying out in Greek) and delusions (King Edward VII, among the azaleas, swearing in the most foulest language). Complete rest and quiet would eventually restore her normal life but her recovery would be ridden with doubt and worry about the worth of her just-completed work. Praise and encouragement were oxygen to her. So eventually with Leonard's care and concern, her own courage, immense courage, she would roll up her sleeves and begin to write again, knowing that creation was hard, completion fearful, and a bout of madness inevitable.

And then this: her final piece of writing; a short letter to her husband, written on the day she died.

"Dearest, I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier 'til this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that — everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been. V."

She then put on a hat, a coat, grabbed a walking stick and headed to the river. There she put down her stick, took off her hat, put rocks in her pockets and disappeared into the water. When Leonard found the letter, he, along with the house keeper, Mrs Meyer, searched the house, the grounds, and the surrounding countryside and when they found her stick and hat assumed the worst. Three weeks later her gruesome body was found by children as it bumped against the bank of the river many miles downstream. She was 59.

Remember Virginia Woolf as a beautiful and intelligent woman, a prankster, a great and innovative writer, the creator of the outrageous Orlando, and the cheeky biographer of Flush, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's little cocker spaniel; she was a curious and inquisitive human being, a tease, a lover, and a writer who launched modernism on the literary world. And remember that when her little nephews, nieces, and their friends were preparing for a party who was number one on their invitation list?

"V-i-r-g-i-n-i-a!" they would shriek with delight, because Virginia always made them laugh.

Finding an Australian voice among a chorus of American superheroes

Brad Webb

If asked to name a superhero, a person's response would likely be a character from either the world of Marvel or Detective Comics (DC)—such is the extent of their influence and power. From DC's Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman to Marvel's Spider-Man, The Hulk, and Iron Man, these giants of the comic book industry seemingly possess a limitless ability to churn out personalities at an alarming rate, flooding the world with goodies (and baddies) through a multitude of expanded universes and alternative realities.

Every corner of the world has been allocated their own particular (and occasionally, peculiar) super hero or villain. Many of these early adopter archetypes are a conglomerate of racial and sexual stereotypes whose genesis can be traced back to the mid twentieth century—a time of seemingly unchecked bigotry and xenophobia. One such example is 'The Ancient One', the vaguely sinister sometimes mentor of Marvel's Doctor Strange. Up until the late 1980s this male Tibetan mystic was represented, in one form or another, as a stereotypical Asian whose exaggerated features borrowed copiously from illustrations that featured in Western culture drawn from the dark days of the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

However, in an attempt placate a growing Asian consumer market and, in particular, China's expanding cinema audience, Marvel announced that in the movie *Doctor Strange* (2016) The Ancient One would be played by Tilda Swinton, a Caucasian female. Decried by many in the West as an act of 'whitewashing', a statement from a Marvel Studios spokesman defended the hiring of Swinton:

> 'Marvel has a very strong record of diversity in its casting of films and regularly departs from stereotypes and source material to bring the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to life. The Ancient One is a title that is not exclusively held by any one character, but rather a moniker passed down through time and, in this particular film, the embodiment is Celtic. We are very proud to have the enormously talented Tilda Swinton portray this unique and complex character alongside our richly diverse cast' (Rosenberg, 2016).

Marvel's statement appears to be a measured response, essentially in saying The Ancient One is more a title than an individual persona, so Tilda Swinton, an Anglo-Scottish-Australian, is establishing a new vision of the character. Also responding to a number of critics who suggested The Ancient One should be have been played by a Tibetan or Chinese actor, *Doctor Strange* co-writer C. Robert Cargill, contends that The Ancient One's comic book origins are rooted in racist stereotypes, which makes it impossible to avoid controversy when bringing the character to the big screen.

> 'He originates from Tibet, so if you acknowledge that Tibet is a place and that he's Tibetan, you risk alienating one billion people who think that that's bullshit and risk the Chinese government going, "Hey, you know one of the biggest film-watching countries in the world? We're not going to show your movie because you decided to get political." If we decide to go the other way and cater to China in particular—if you think it's a good idea to cast a Chinese actress as a Tibetan character, you are out of your damn fool mind and have no idea what the fuck you're talking about' (Rosenberg, 2016).

Closer to home and, once again thanks largely to American ink, Australian characters from the Marvel and DC universe appear as increasingly stereotypical genre based 'ockers'—their roles are usually clichés, typecast, or frequently both. While DC's clean-cut superhero Superman was adopted by a grateful United States, Australia was 'blessed' with the supervillain George 'Digger' Harkness, better known as Captain Boomerang. Created by John Broome and Carmine Infantino, the Captain made his first appearance in *Flash* #117, December 1960. As the nemesis of The Flash, resplendent in a ludicrous blue smock emblazoned with boomerangs and sporting an airline hostess style cap, Digger's appearance was designed to elicit a sense of terror in Barry Allen (Flash's alter-ego), however, for the reader, it likely evoked fits of laughter.

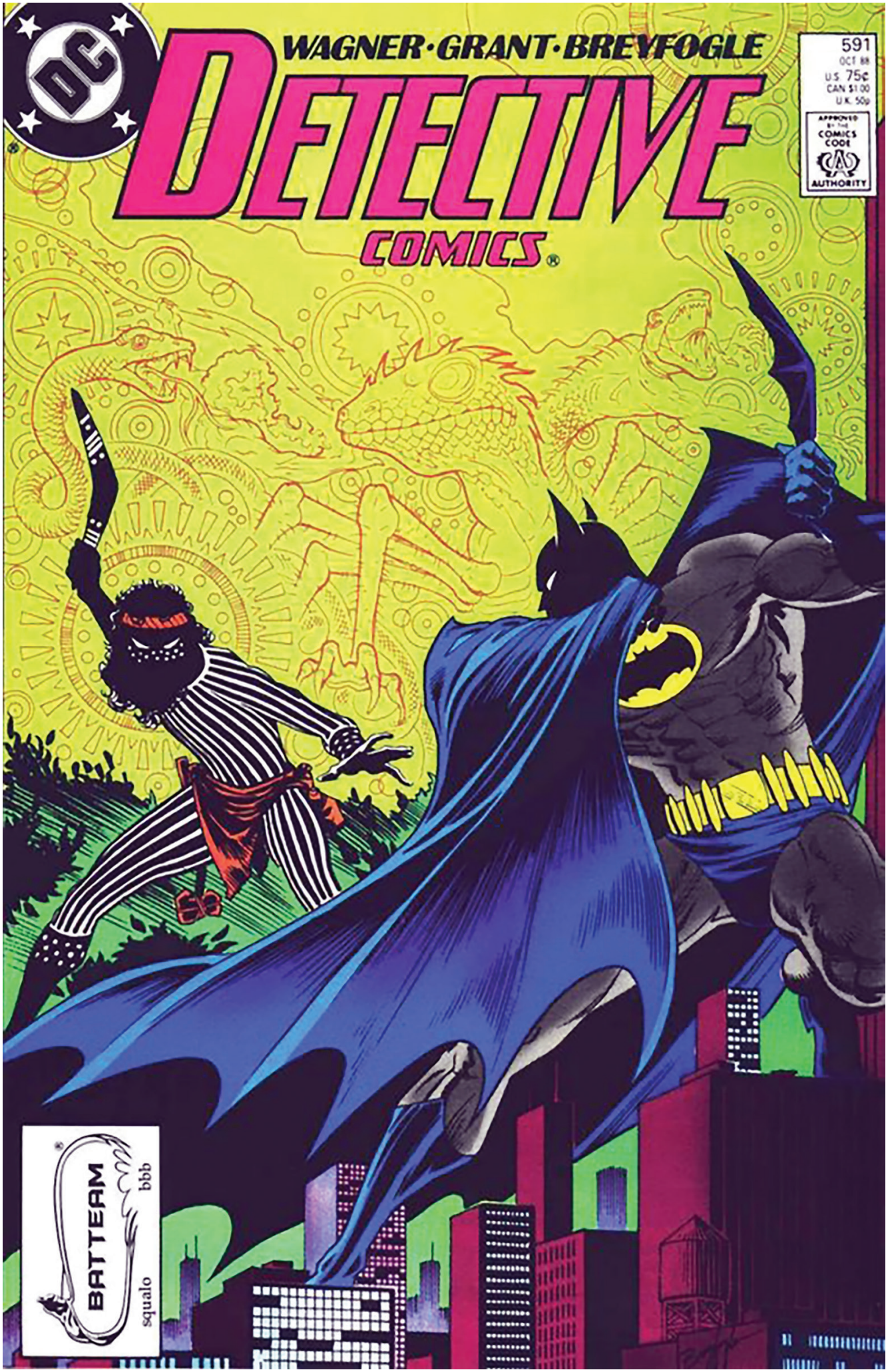
Besides the stereotypical ability to throw boomerangs, the good Captain was also prone to bouts of racism—in a number of editions of *Suicide Squad*, 'Digger' Harkness would refer to black team member Bronze Tiger as an 'abo'. With such a mountain of clichés piled onto Captain Boomerang's shoulders it's surprising he never gained his powers from drinking a can of beer (in the same way Popeye derived his strength from spinach). In the 2016 big screen adaptation of *Suicide Squad*, Captain Boomerang was a least portrayed by an Australian actor, Jai Courtney. The character successfully managed to fulfil his stereotype quota, as the Aussie beer swilling ocker, by downing countless cans of golden ale. Even in the midst of a war ravaged city it's pleasing to think there's still places to get an ice cold beer. Thankfully, Courtney's costume was sans blue smock.

Not to be outdone in the uninspiring comic character stakes, Marvel also produced their own Australian supervillain by the name of—wait for it—Boomerang! Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, Boomerang made his first appearance in *Tales to Astonish* #81, July 1966. Boomerang's abilities include being a world-class baseball pitcher (no mention of cricket), a skilled marksman and a street fighter. Naturally, the character wields a variety of lethal and gimmicky boomerangs, however, he also manages to fly via a handy pair of jet boots. Boomerang is constantly pitted against Spider-Man and obviously comes out worse-for-wear on a regular basis. Frederick 'Fred' Myers (Boomerang's alter-ego) was born in Alice Springs and was then raised in the United States. This may go a way in explaining how Fred went from initially speaking with an American accent to an Australian one when he grew up (actually, no it doesn't).

> 'I told them I was born in Australia, so they made me Boomerang. This is why the whole world hates you, by the way. An entire nation boiled down to what you can remember from that time you got high and watched Crocodile Dundee. Guess I should be glad I didn't end up some kinda kangaroo guy.' Boomerang (*The Superior Foes of Spider-Man* Volume 1 #1).

Relying on writers and illustrators from countries like the United States to determine what guise Australian superheroes and villains take goes a long way in explaining why Australia has no relatable characters. How can a reader sympathise with, or respond to, a character they cannot identify with on a basic level—that of being Australian? Discounting American-centric bias, understandable seeing literally every major publication now originates from the United States, actual home grown characters are scarce indeed. For while Australia has adopted characters like The Phantom, and introduced story lines relevant to our region, publishing titles and making territory specific stories boils down to pure economics. Will it sell?

And what about collaborations? There have been some fine Australian artists and writers who have worked for multinational publishers inside teams developing comics with an Australian centric theme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or circumstance. With someone on the 'inside', what could go wrong? For starters many of these projects originate in boardrooms far removed from the talent pool. The creative team is usually presented with a detailed synopsis, story board, or script; time lines and narrative arcs to develop and maintain; and, occasionally, a convoluted plot, back story or future self which needs to be integrated into the current assignment. Creative expression and freedom to explore are subjects rarely associated with DC, Marvel, or any of the other large comic enterprises. Home grown talent is no guarantee that a 'down under' themed comic produced in the United States will resonate with readers in Australia. And with their eyes firmly set on the American, United Kingdom and emerging Chinese markets, why would an editorial team deliberate the finer issues concerning cultural or historical accuracy? After all, it's just a comic book. Who cares if they insult a few Antipodean sensibilities?

While the level of artistic capability, primarily the dexterity of detail, and the paper and print quality of comics has improved significantly over the past thirty years (Katz, 2014), the story telling transformation has been slow to evolve. Although casual racism and sexism have essentially been removed from today's comic books (unless the script calls for an antagonistic villain), story lines set in 'exotic' places abound with presumptions and clichés. A popular destination for comic story lines is Australia (primarily Sydney), along with outback scenes depicting the Aussie lifestyle as envisioned by Paul Hogan's *Crocodile Dundee* (1986).

In October 1988, DC Comics Inc. released *Detective Comics* #591 *Aborigine!* which pitted Batman against Umbaluru, an indigenous Australian who had travelled to Gotham City to seek the return of a stolen artefact known as the 'Power Bone of Uluru'. Featuring a storyline with more than a few parallels to Crocodile Dundee II (1988), when Mick moved to Manhattan with his girlfriend, Umbaluru is powered by the 'Earth Mother' who seeks revenge for the murder of the Bone's indigenous guards. No doubt the writers were conscious of Australia and had investigated some indigenous creation stories. The first few pages touch on The Dreaming which helps link the story of the Bone to the comic's narrative. There's even a mention of the 1988 bi-centennial with a shop window display that gets vandalised by Umbaluru near the end of the story. He changes 'Happy 200th Birthday Australia' to 'Happy 50,000th Birthday to the People'.

The composition of the Umbaluru character is a relatively accurate depiction although, as a stand alone comic, there's little room to develop his personality beyond the one dimensional, seek and destroy, Terminator figure. Yet, while the concept is commendable, the execution smacks of uninformed racism. Unlike DC's other indigenous character The Dark Ranger, with his educated, urban background, Umbaluru is cast as 'the naked Central Australian with a limited understanding English styled trope which is so often employed by writers, despite the vast majority of us being from the coast, and living in cities and major regional centres' (Koori History, 2016). Umbaluru is constantly referred to as an 'Abo' and in one panel an antagonist yells, 'Stinking primitive – this'll teach you' as he attempts to bash Umbaluru's skull in with a hammer. Umbaluru is also referred to as 'the aborigine', both in the comic and again online in the DC Database wiki page. Granted, *Aborigine!* was published in 1988 and the character of Umbaluru has not been seen since so the contributors to DC's wiki page would most likely be unaware of 'the negative connotations the use of Aborigine(s) or Aboriginal(s) has acquired in some sectors of the community, where these words are generally regarded as insensitive and even offensive' (*School of Teacher Education*, 1996 p.1).

By the end of the comic Umbaluru prevails, throwing the main villain out of the window of a skyscraper but not before he fights Batman who's keen to see Umbaluru answer for his crimes of murder in a court of law. This doesn't end as planned for the Dark Knight, with Umbaluru telling him, 'White man's justice? For an Aborigine? Where have you been past two hundred year?'

There is no doubt the writers at DC attempted to portray Umbaluru in a sympathetic light. Even Batman gives pause during their final confrontation when he learns the truth about the fate of the Bone's Uluru protectors. However, Batman's sense of justice compels him to bring Umbaluru down. That Batman is ultimately unsuccessful raises the question of who actually prevailed over this confrontation and what lesson, if any, was learnt? Umbaluru successfully manages to regain the 'Power Bone' while exacting a bloody revenge on those who murdered his brothers. Batman is left brooding on a roof top while the narrator observes, 'By his account, the men the aborigine killed deserved to die. And perhaps they did. But he can make no allowance for righteous murder. All killers must be brought to book'. Nice sentiment except Umbaluru did escape, his mission was a success. The world's greatest detective was outsmarted by an Aussie. Chalk up a win for the away team.

> America has shown a fondness for utilising Indigenous Australian characters within the US comic industry coupled with limited attempts at depicting diversity, but it's not alone in such endeavours. The Japanese manga series *Silent Möbius* is home to Toyko police officer Kiddy Phenil, a redheaded Aboriginal woman with cybernetic implants. (Koori History, 2016)

In Marvel's 2005 series *The Incredible Hulk* (Volume 2 #83–85), supervillain Exodus rules Australia, assisted by Pyro and the Vanisher. They see humans as nothing more than servants. This brings them into conflict with the Hulk's alter ego Bruce Banner who happens to be living in the Australian outback. Banner has found a peace he's never known amongst a tribe of Aborigines—they even bestow the name 'Two Minds' onto him (even though this naming custom is closer aligned to Native America). But when their safety is threatened by a battle orchestrated by the ruling totalitarian mutant government, the Hulk is forced to intervene. He attacks the President (no Prime Ministers here!), taking Exodus out, and proceeds to claim leadership over all Australia (Chez, 2009).

As an Australian, the whole series is a four-part WTF? moment. The story was written by Peter David, an American seemingly influenced by Steve Irwin's *The Crocodile Hunter*. In one scene the Hulk says 'G'Day' as he wrestles five incredibly large predatory semiaquatic reptiles. The indigenous population, who are central to this narrative, are portrayed as a cross between grass-skirt wearing Polynesians and nineteenth century head-hunters from the New Guinea highlands. Needless to say the Sydney Opera House also features in this story arc (the Hulk destroys that too, as he doesn't like opera). This is just one example where multinational comic publishers portray Australia as a destination and its inhabitants as nothing more than pawns or extras. There's no attempt by any of these corporations to create an Australian based superhero. What's the point? If Australia gets into any trouble America can just send over one of their superheroes to sort out our problems. Is this simply art imitating life?

Comics often parallel other avenues of entertainment. Up until the late twentieth century, many Australian characters were depicted in American cinema and television using American or British actors attempting Aussie accents and lingo, to laughable and often cringeworthy results (think Meryl Streep as Lindy Chamberlain in *A Cry in the Dark*, 1988). Many of those characters drew on conservative and anachronistic stereotypes that did not represent or reflect the cultural, ethnic and racial diversity of contemporary Australia. Thankfully, the entertainment industry has begun to embrace multiplicity—driven largely by customer demand wrought in part by social media strategies. One such campaign was aimed at the video game *Mad Max* (2015). Produced by Avalanche Studios for worldwide release, this open world action-adventure was based on the *Mad Max* franchise but the storyline was not directly connected to George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).

The initial beta release had the lead character Max Rockatansky speak with a 'generic' American accent. When Stephen Farrelly, a writer and editor with website www.ausgamers.com, asked the developer why, he was told: 'Because we're trying to create our own vision.' Farrelly was incensed. 'Max is such an iconic Australian character, it's wrong to do that. And they've recreated that iconic Australian car, the XB Ford Falcon Interceptor, even down to it being right-hand drive, so why change the character? (Quinn, 2013).' Thanks to an online petition and a horde of angry gamers (myself included) venting their displeasure on the developers social media platforms the voice was changed to an Australian accent.

It was a case of history repeating. Despite the international triumph of the original *Mad Max* (1979), when the movie was released within the United States its distributor, American International, wrongly believed their audience incapable of understanding the Australian language so they had it crudely dubbed by American actors. This version removed all the Aussie slang which significantly altered the overall 'feel' of the movie. Coupled with a poor marketing campaign *Mad Max* failed to get the audience it deserved inside the United States despite its huge success everywhere else (Harper, 2014).

When *Mad Max 2* (1981) was released, Warner Brothers picked up the American distribution rights and changed the title to *The Road Warrior*. Unaware of the impact this Antipodean pop culture phenomenon, with its original Australian sound track restored, had made in the United States through cable television they mistakenly believed Americans knew nothing of *Mad Max*. The movie initially suffered from low attendance until word got around that it was actually *Mad Max 2*. Subsequent DVD and Blu-ray releases have reverted back to the original Australian titles. It highlights, again, the fact that American businessmen do not always know what's best for their audience.

In 2015, DC Comics released an official mini series based on *Mad Max* which centred around the fourth film, *Fury Road*. Written and inked by Australians, with final editing rights overseen by George Miller, the four part series had a distinctly 'girt by sea' feel. While successive movies within the franchise have devolved their Australian origins, the story of *Mad Max* is still regarded as quintessentially Australian. *Mad Max: Fury Road*'s story arc was a prelude to the 2015 big screen production which bears the same name. The publications received critical and commercial success but George Miller has no further plans to expand the series. While this is disappointing to *Mad Max*'s millions of fans, it does highlight the fact that, if done correctly, there is a market and an audience eager to pay for and consume, on a world stage, Australian pop culture.

Unlike the landscapes that dominate the *Mad Max* franchise, Australia isn't a barren wasteland when it comes to superheroes. We've had a number of attempts in the past and a few even survived into middle age, but all were retired far too early. Recent efforts lacked general appeal and, more importantly, a product range. The international heroes have come to dominate the marketplace on the back of significant marketing which includes, in no small part, merchandise—toys, clothing, and accessories. And it's not just the big names like Batman and Spider-Man. Lesser known heroes and villains, such as The Black Panther and Harley Quinn, have pushed themselves to the fore thanks to Marvel and DC backed blockbuster movies. With each cinematic release, a range of collectables and consumables find their way to department store shelves to be eagerly grasped by frenzied children and collectors alike.

Since the late 1970s, the comic scene in Australia has primarily been driven by self-publishers who have created, printed and distributed their own works. A few publishers, such as Phosphorescent Comics were willing to publish the work of others, although they have now seemingly vanished. Others, namely Gestalt Publishing (which is acknowledged as Australia's largest independent graphic novel publishing house), have managed to become professional publishers of Australian comics and graphic novels. While their stable of titles is small and distribution limited, they have managed to survive against the larger monopolies by clever product placement and a loyal fan base. A recent coup was Gestalt's contract to produce the *Cleverman* comic book series whose television rights were sold to the ABC in 2016. Since the early 2000s international publishers have begun to publish graphic novels by Australian comic creators, beginning with The Five Mile Press, and Slave Labor Graphics and, more recently, Allen & Unwin, and Scholastic. However, membership to the Australian superhero club remains very thin on the ground.

Publishers like Australia's Convict Comics are well aware of the significance of public consciousness. They understand that if you have a ready made character which an audience can empathise with, in their case an alternative universe Ned Kelly in their series *Ned Kelly: Ironclad Alien Killer*, much of the hard work is already done. By choosing a persona with an existing background, the reader will have a familiarity or affinity with the subject. People pick up a *Doctor Who* comic as they are aware of the narrative. Unlike Batman's seventy-five plus years of myth, Convict Comics did not have the luxury of time, or the depth of resources, to create and nurture an unknown character to maturity. So, much like what Marvel did with *Thor*, Convict Comics's 'superman' was pulled from the pages of history. And while the *Ned Kelly: Ironclad Alien Killer* series was short lived (only three issues were released before the publisher switched genre), it did underscore the point that a well written and illustrated comic can attract an eager readership well beyond our sandy shores.

However, it's not just American pop culture that impacts Australia. Located in the Asian sphere of influence, globalisation plays a significant role in shaping our international identity. Through preserving traditional folklore and customs via regional culture and by better understanding how transnational experiences can contribute in the development of new-media delivery, recent and emerging publishing technologies can be leveraged to overcome limitations and obstacles encountered by current print and distribution processes. This flow-through of knowledge could ensure the longevity of an indigenous comic based enterprise and reward Australia with its own superhero. But simply making the superhero Australian isn't guaranteeing a comic book's success or longevity. *Captain America* has survived decades because the character continues to be well written and illustrated, not solely because he's American. No doubt regional factors play a part in the success or failure of a character because readers are attracted to exotic locations and storylines, but even the Black Panther must leave Wakanda occasionally.

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Lab Rat

Martin Markus

Every new medication which is introduced to the community needs to pass a rigorous screening process that is supervised by the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). This is in order to prevent medications with unacceptable side effects being released. The most profound example of this is when Thalidomide was released. It is considered the Titanic' of all pharmaceutical drugs. Thalidomide was designed to treat morning sickness in for pregnant women but caused unfortunate side effects. These included: babies with missing limbs, misshaped heads, and low IQs.

The process of screening a new drug involves initially injecting it into a small group of mice or rats. If there are no obvious side effects like exploding mice, then the drug is tested on a much larger group of rodents. If the drug has been safely tolerated by smaller mammals, that are 92% genetic match to humans, it enters the next phase of human testing.

I was that human. For 16-days I would be testing a drug treatment for Inflammatory Bowel Disease. Although, please note, there is nothing wrong with my bowels! The drug testing centre was looking for healthy young participants and paying close to $4000. It was a nice little sum of money for essentially doing nothing.

The initial screening was a standard medical check-up. And, also involved signing a waiver which stated in red uppercase: "I ACCEPT THAT WHEN PARTICPATING IN A CLINICAL TRIAL THAT THERE IS A RISK OF UNFORSEEN SIDE EFFECTS BOTH IMMEDIATE AND IN THE FUTURE." I took a deep breath and signed my life away.

On arrival for the study, I was given a bed in a long corridor that resembled a public hospital. The hospital was shared with 40 other paid lab rats like myself. The only privacy away from the other lab rats was to draw a curtain around your hospital bed. The first day involved an assault of medical tests which included: ECG, BMI, blood tests, and many more which I didn't fully understand. Once the results were in, the supervising doctor said I could proceed with the trial. I was going to be the second human who would be tested with the drug. The first, would be the backpacker who was sleeping beside my bed.

The following day numerous staff members launched into action. I was given a whirlwind of blood tests before it was finally time to ingest the drug. I was asked to sit up in my bed. I was then given a little glass bottle. Two staff members formally confirmed who I was and the drug I was about to take. This process was repeated again by two different staff members. Then the moment came.

I was surrounded by 4 nurses, 3 medical assistants, 2 junior doctors, 1 consultant doctor, and 1 representative from the pharmaceutical company in his suit and tie. This single moment had the power change the course of my life. All eleven staff members had their eyes fixed on me. They appeared to hold their breath, in a mixture of anticipation and dread, as I lifted the small glass bottle to my lips.

I emptied the magic potion into my mouth and then nothing. All at once the staff gave a heavy sigh of relief. One Doctor incessantly repeated: "Look Martin, it's very important that if feel unwell at any point, you need to notify staff immediately." I lay back in the bed and waited for my Zombie transformation to commence. But nothing happened. Minutes passed, hours passed and still nothing. The days flew by and before I knew it, I was discharged and $4000 richer. I don't know what the future holds, but I hope I don't end up with missing limbs as a result of being a lab rat.

Leathery Face Local

Martin Markus

I caught a bus to a nearby Japanese village and commenced my adventure. I trekked through the lush green lower altitudes and then started my way up the mountain. The vegetation quickly changed to a rocky alpine landscape encrusted with snow. I pitched my tent outside a rustic base camp with the intention to negotiate the summit the following morning.

I crossed paths with a leathery faced local that night, who turned out to be one of the park rangers. During our conversation, he discovered I planned to attempt the summit. He was quick to ask about what equipment I had brought along. I replied that I had warm clothes and strong trekking boots. The park official then asked in his broken English "what about your ropes, ice-axe and crampons?" I explained that during summer the mountains were not a technical climb and there was no need to invest in that type of equipment. The leathery face local suddenly became gravely concerned and said: "I don't recommend you climb without equipment. It's very, very, very dangerous. You might slip and hurt yourself. Many people die on the mountain!"

I was unconvinced that there was any real danger and perhaps over-confident with my own abilities. It was just recently that I effortlessly bounded up to Everest Base Camp in Nepal. I decided to challenge the official and said: "So, is it law that I can't climb without equipment or just a recommendation?" The park ranger repeated: "You must not climb, it's very dangerous!" So, I pressed him further: "law or recommendation?"

The conversation went around in circles until finally the park official submitted to having no legal power to stop me. But he explained that there is snow at the top due to the colder high altitudes. And this meant slippery conditions. He again warned against attempting the climb without the correct equipment. I refused to take the advice on board and promptly hit the hay to be well rested for the big day.

After sunrise, I packed my gear and began labouring up the mountain. The soft snow quickly began to harden and the gradient of the slope increased. It didn't take long to realise that I was essentially walking on rock solid and very slippery ice. I wondered if perhaps, that leathery face local actually knew what he was talking about. I looked up and there was still a long way to go before reaching the summit. And the was gradient only getting steeper.

I continued walking by placing my boots in natural divots in the ice. This gave some traction but it was becoming abundantly obvious that if I slipped, it was going to be difficult – if not impossible – to stop myself from careening down the icy mountain at dangerous speeds. I took a few more steps and was about to call it quits when that serendipitous moment happened. My feet flipped out from underneath me and I fell hard on solid ice. I pathetically tried to dig my numb cold fingers into the ice to create some friction but the laws of physics were already taking hold. I began to slide. Slow at first, but I kept accelerating despite my best efforts to dig my boots, my elbows, or anything into the ice to slow down. It was useless. Within seconds my speed had picked up to the point of no return.

My body felt like it was being run through a giant icy bench grinder as it shredded into my clothes and into my bare flesh. The natural divots in the ice battered me with no mercy. I was alone on the mountain and beyond human help. I looked up and saw that I was headed for a rocky patch. I collided with the rocks at great speed. The rocks were my saviour. They gave the friction that I needed to slow down. I stuck out my arms and legs to maximise the collision. The rocks did their job and I stopped.

I lay still on my back and stared at the Japanese alpine sky and felt the pain slowly creep into my body. I then assessed the damage. My hands and wrists were badly grazed but no serious bleeding. I also had some wicked bruising to my back and hips. Several layers of warm clothes had buffered me from further injury. The only thing now was, to get back down without incident.

Descending was going to be a long and hazardous journey. I couldn't afford to take any further risk. So, I tobogganed down the slope sans toboggan. I also used a long sharp rock as my pseudo 'ice axe' to continuously ram into the ice and prevent any build-up of momentum. This worked a treat although felt as though it was suffering from frostbite.

Once I successfully reached the bottom, I was able to stand up and feel all the aches and pains throughout my upright body. At this point I felt foolish as the park ranger had warned me. I admitted defeat to the mountain and started heading back to civilization with my tail between my legs. However, I made sure to avoid the base camp in order not to give the leathery face local his well-deserved, 'I told you so!'

Letter to an Old Friend

Amanda Kennedy

Elissa, Elissa, Elissa,

I have no idea how you've been these past months – nay, years – since I've seen or heard from you. I don't wish you ill health, but if I'm to be honest, and it seems that you were – unabashedly – I just don't care how you've been. I don't miss you. My life is no less rich without you in it. If anything, it is simpler, less draining.

This is generally the spot where I would give you a précis of the state of my life at this point but I won't because I don't wish to reconnect with you. That is over.

Epistolic protocols attended to, let's get to the heart of the matter. When Shane first spoke of you, then introduced us, I was hopeful that we would get along well. Friendships have their own unique organic timeline and these things can't be rushed, no matter how eager he was for us to bond. As it happened, it seemed we survived the demise of your and Shane's relationship. Trust me, I've divorced a husband and I know these things can be tough and people drop off along the way.

I think we would have become closer over time had I not begin to feel your tentacles reach out into my very core. Frequently turning you down for a coffee catch-up was as much about me wanting some time for myself as it was me not feeling up to dealing with your stuff. You are the kind of person who always seems to have some drama in their life.

I recognise that you carry residual social anxiety from being attacked one evening walking home. I'm grateful that I've never had to deal with something like that. I'm not going to tell you to get over it because I don't know how I would feel in your shoes. I will say, though, that life goes on. Jobs still need to be attended to earn money to buy food and pay rent. The food package that I brought over to you so you would have something to eat was a way of me reaching out to you, saying 'I won't let you go hungry.' It seems you thought we were about to buy friendship necklaces for each other. Two people rarely see anything the same way.

You wrote me, accusing me of ignoring you, saying that I hurt you with my nonchalance. I was keeping you at arm's length because I found you very draining. Six months in and you rang crying down the line, saying you felt like ending it all. It shocked me. I thought, 'Don't you have anyone that you're close to? Am I really the person you choose to call before topping yourself?' Hours were spent on the phone as I listened to you drag out every aspect of your life, pining for a lost relationship that you chose to step out of. My hands would go numb while my stomach rumbled as I sat there listening, the hours ticking on. The first time, you managed to talk me out of driving over to your place, explaining that the phone conversation had helped. I am grateful for that. I didn't want you to succeed at suicide.

The second time though, I had figured out that you were never serious about killing yourself. You were just seeking connection. Recently having moved here, you lacked a core group to fall back on. Being a freelance writer lacking work didn't help either. Your anxiety skyrocketed as you remained in your unit, too broke to go out. When I read your social media post about your bike being stolen, I understood that was a difficult time for you but all I could think was, 'It's never going to turn up. They never do. Bikes are stolen every single day in the inner city and the bottom line is they just don't turn up.' I didn't say that though because you didn't want to hear it. I said 'good luck' because it was easier than telling you the facts. I admit that I took the cop out route that could be perceived as nonchalance.

From a positive perspective, Shane always told me that he thought you came into the polyamorous lifestyle with a very open and grounded attitude. You knew that he had multiple partners, including me. I was happy to get to know you as one of his met-amours. The constellations of partners and friends in polyamory is complex and friendship is not always assured. We tried to be friends for him, and then later just for us. It's okay that we failed. In the last few months, I didn't notice that you had cooled towards me as I was busy myself juggling a new relationship, a parent with ill health and teenage daughters. I should thank you though. You've taught me that it's okay to draw boundaries with people and that it's okay to let people go.

I thought we had more of a friendship than that. Amanda, I really did.

We didn't. And by the way, only real estate agents and telemarketers call me Amanda. My friends call me Mandy.

Letter to Gay Bilson

Amanda Kennedy

Dear Gay,

You don't know me, though I like to think that I know you. In fact, I like to imagine you are my neighbour. You'd hand me a bag of freshly-picked broad beans still warm from the sun and tell me what to do with them. 'Steam them lightly then douse with a glug of the good olive oil.' I'd bring over a recipe that I'd cooked and was proud of. You'd implore me sit at your kitchen table, the wood worn soft and shiny from years of use. No fancy dining room for you (ironic as dining rooms receive no less than six entries in your seminal book). Your table is your writing desk, pastry bench and more. Only as I was departing would you suggest a simple way to improve the dish.

I'm glad you are not my mother though, as we would butt heads and things would be too loaded.

But being my neighbour would be just fine.

I can tell you appreciate quality. The first time I came to learn about you was upon seeing your book Plenty: Digressions on Food in my local bookstore. Its delicate duck egg blue cover and the thick decal-edged pages were so sensual in my hands, its essays meandering not in any timeline but according to your own lines of thought. Through these digressions I gleaned so much about you, from your childhood home in Melbourne to your love of a simple congee. For five generous pages, you talk about this rice gruel, its history and its contemporary state, before giving us a recipe of congee to serve 250 people. I love that only a fool would jump straight to the recipe.

Like me, you know the importance of small things. Your homage to Sei Shonagon's The Pillow Book in Plenty made my heart skip a beat. As both she and you do, I also make lists of things that please, things that should be painted or things that are rare. Though I came to know of The Pillow Book through a movie of the same name, I'm sure yours was a more literary discovery.

I admire you for admitting your mistakes. In a piece for The Monthly you detailed an incident where you forgot that the chowder you had brought to vegetarian friends contained bacon. The fact that they ate it anyway (the husband commenting that it reminded him of a dish from his Danish youth) perhaps speaks of your culinary skill as much as their respect for your friendship. Admitting our mistakes is part of showing our humanity and our fallibility. I vow to be more human, more fallible.

If I come across your name online, I have to click through to the article. Your words flow easily, like a impassioned discourse over a second glass of wine. You speak about food as a means of bringing people together across cultures as much as around the table. You champion knowledge of where our food comes from and how it is produced. Greater knowledge and greater connection to our food go hand in hand. Whether it's an omelette constructed from a neighbour's eggs or apples bought from the grower at the local Farmers' Market, we tend to respect food that we know more about. I am almost reverential towards the herbs I grow, making them the star of the dish instead of an after-thought thrown on top before serving. I visualise you doing the same.

An autodidact like myself, your writings are littered with references to chefs and food writers from years past who have things to offer us still. Twentieth century writers like Jane Grigson and Elizabeth David share equal space with older, more canonical gastronomes such as Brillat Savarin and Escoffier. A recipe for lemon posset is given no less respect than a more intricate recipe for florentine biscuits. We both know that a healthy appetite for real food, devoid of numbers or fake fats, is key to a good life. Pastry, handmade with almost equal parts butter and flour, is not the devil. If we wish to be healthier, we should just eat less of it. I smile as I read this, snacking on creamy, juicy papaya, the plate resting on an unstable tower of books.

Though you've run multiple restaurants, you now live quietly in rural South Australia. Literally miles from the competitive restaurant world of the big cities, you've managed to finally be alone. I, too, need to carve out time alone, particularly when my day job is also in hospitality. Books and art soothe and quieten the voices echoing in my head after a day of others' demands.

So perhaps it is to a peaceful small town one state over that I must relocate if we are going to be neighbours. South Australia has such a strong, local food culture and I have loved the times I have travelled there. But, if I'm to be honest, I'm not sure I can move so far away from my family. My daughters have just embarked upon adult lives of their own and I get to bake big vegetarian lasagnes to drop around unexpectedly. My sister-in-law regularly phones me up with a cooking dilemma that needs immediate answering. Also, and possibly more importantly, what about my veggie garden? I've got several large fruit trees and a bay tree which I'm not sure would survive the move. My silverbeet patch needs harvesting every few days in this warm weather and the potatoes won't be ready 'til later in the year.

So, Gay, maybe we could just be pen pals instead.

Letter to my Mother's Disease

Amanda Kennedy

Dear diabetes,

I'm well, thanks for asking.
I'm not going to ask how you've been because I don't care.
I wish I'd never met you.

You've robbed my mother of her sight. Not all of it, mind you, but enough to suck some of the sweetness out of life. I can picture her, many years back, sitting on the couch next to dad, crocheting a toy or blanket for one grandkid or another. Now she just sits on the couch, staring ahead at a fuzzy pattern of shapes and colours, hands idle in her lap.

Thanks to you, my sister and I have now inherited the abandoned craft supplies. The crates of fabric from under the stairs went to my sister who sews. My daughters and I happily received boxes of wool, knitting needles and crochet hooks. Yes, the cats do love chasing the wool but I am also relishing the chance to teach my daughters to crochet.

Mum, like her mother, was always happy to let us kids have a go at craft. I can still see Nana sitting in her floral chair by the window so she would catch the natural light, knitting needles in hand. Somehow, she was never short with me as she attempted to figure out what on earth I'd done with the wool. It usually involved a drop stitch or three. So I'm not being sarcastic when I say thank you. The craft supplies that have been passed on to us means that we, too, allow our children to play around with creating.

The ability to have a go and accept failure is something my mother encouraged in me from a young age. She is not the type to take the pencil out of my hand to draw something for me. She would suggest I walk around it, pick it up and get to know the thing I wanted to draw. Her time at art school in the 60s was not wasted. Her paintings and sculptures filled the house. But once again, thanks to you, diabetes, now she can't even paint. The half-finished canvases rested against a wall in the garage, blank faces poking out under a layer of dust and cobwebs, until they too came to live with me.

As a child, I remember my grandfather had a shed that smelled of wood shavings and engine oil. His tools hung neatly on shadow board which lined the walls. I recall stories of Papa making a home brew system from discarded fuel tins. My mother inherited her ingenuity from her father. She also inherited his diabetes, developing it late in life as he did. So damn you diabetes for cursing my Papa as well.

While you reduced my mother's sight so that she can no longer drive, you you did not succeed in curbing her independence. My mother simply upsized her phone's display and downloaded a public transport app. So once again, I must thank you. Thank you for nudging her into the modern world. Buses, trains and trams have now replaced her car but she will not be hobbled. We are both viciously independent people and though you may try, you will not limit our wanderings.

It's not just diet and insulin production you impact. You affect the eyesight, feet and healing ability of people who get too close to you. The strong genetic link looms over my life so I'm actively working to remain free of you, damned diabetes. I exercise regularly so that you can't catch me. I eat well, so that you'll not join me at my dinner table. I have inherited many things from my mother – my body shape, my love of creating and my independent streak. But I will not inherit diabetes. I will not inherit you.

Mushrooms

Terry Chapman

Denise Chapman (once Davey) bounces with her shopping down Rucker's Hill. Bastings Street is slippery steep, and the string bags of meat and produce pull on her arms like eager dogs. It is all she can manage to not run nor slide, not wanting to drop her bundles of good food, bought in good time, paid with good money.

The plastic handles bite deep into her puffy hands. Gradually, her gait finds gentler rhythm. The clack of her boots, the only shoes to still fit, slows and softens as the gradient eases, finds a beat that lulls her into a kind of morning reverie. The sunshine tingles, warms her pale skin and melts the steam from her breath. She is still doing two feeds a night, but is not yawning so much today.

She ducks the overhanging trees, skirts the bushes spewing over front fences from unmown yards, damp green jungles behind which weatherboards peel and tin roofs ping. Lace curtains shift and Venetian blinds part as the clacking heels announce the laden girl from Coburg. The one young Barry got into trouble.

Denise is not unaccustomed to whisper. She has grown under the glare of parents hard and harried, has long sensed the mistake she'd been. There were already enough mouths to feed and bills to pay, on top of the mess of war-damage to cope with. The latter was done with beer and bad temper. She was the runt of the family, too spirited by half. Well, they intoned, she was never going to be much. And look, goes the whisper behind those Venetians, how right they were. The teenage mum smiles back at the blinds. No, you are wrong.

Elvis is in her head. He is swaying with her big floral frock, a new tune she heard this morning as she readied them for the High Street. She makes a note to turn the wireless back to the racing station before Barry gets home. And to do the chops just short of burning, the vegies boiled and buried in gravy. Long days down those manholes, he needs everything just so, silence his thanks. He laughs when she says she'd like to get her licence, scoffs when she suggests a party for him. Too bloody busy for a twenty-first, bangs down the salt-shaker, a wedding gift. What's to celebrate?

Norma is coming up soon too. Wonder if she'll have a do, after Joan's had to be called off. The beer had been ordered and the backyard decorated, half of Coburg were coming. The ice had to be collected, when Dad's heart had dropped him, beat his liver to it. Mum's face hardened further as she and Joan wound in the streamers, while John returned most of the beer. Norma, Denny, turn that record off and bust those balloons! The sandwiches can keep for the wake. Folding up the borrowed tablecloths, Denise wondered if she would have a coming of age. There were five years to think about it.

Denise did come of age – though much sooner than expected. With Dad not snarling from his fireside chair and Mum gone daily to the button factory, her teenage wonderlust was allowed some air. She left school for factory to do her bit and with what penny left, she and girlfriend Liz took the tram into town. In Myers and Waltons, DJs and Allens, the girls giggled and gawked and tried on what the world had to offer. A coat. Some lippy. Bobby Darrin single. There, Denise discovered her gift for extracting the very most from what lay in her purse, got the best of bargains and still kept some tucked away. Just in case.

The heaviness of her string bags lends testimony to that skill. She smiles at the bulging parcels, newspaper-wrapped, the extra pound of sausages she earned with her sharpness at the counter. The High Street push from butcher to butcher, comparing and counting and planning out meals. Minced meat and mutton, lamb's fry and brains, kidney and rabbit. Haggling with loud, friendly men behind big, bloodied aprons, sharpening knives as they holler, sawdust on the floors and elbow-room at the glass, skinny doors so the prams stay out on the footpath. Barry wouldn't know how well she did with what he gives her.

Same, earlier at the green-grocers. Italians that jabber, as cunning as she, keen on her smarts. The cauli and cabbage, the carrot and parsnip, spuds to wash and peas to shell and pumpkin to bloody near break your bag. And always a free apple for the bambino. Ah, such bright blue eyes, just like his mama. Yes, but no teeth. She will take it home to stew. It will taste the best of all.

Denise stops and lowers her bags to the concrete. She shakes her arms, watches the blood drain back into her plump fingers. Except that one that stays white. A plain band of gold digs into the maternal fat, cuts circulation. Norma once told her that is how they de-sex dogs. She laughed, because dogs don't have fingers.

She breathes deep, is conscious of the baggage on her hips, the two stone of "mummy fat" they said would be shed soon after. Well, it has been a couple of months, and she's barely dropped a pound. She swings on the spot, faces up the hill, dips and picks up her load once more. Just a change of hands can sometimes help. She turns, and takes another step.

The September sun carries a warmth she has not felt for some time. Not since coming to Northcote, that's for sure. She wishes she'd loosened her knitted scarf, unbuttoned the cardigan, but does not want to drop her load again. A rare patch of grass catches her eye, nature-strip green sprouting through the mud, sparkling with stubborn dew. She can smell the soil, feel the life, knows that the mushrooms at home would be pushing up right this minute.

The open paddocks next to Merri Creek, she and her sisters would be sent after school to collect them. Every autumn and every spring, a festival of fungus, with buckets in hand and thistle to dodge and horses to keep away from. Know to tell what was edible, what was toadstool, how to pluck them unbroken yet shake like such, the spores they reckon, fall to the soil for next season. A patch of them here, a forest over there, on and on the bounty would flow and there just wasn't a bucket big enough to do it all justice.

The paddocks became her fields of dreams. She wafted in the lushness, tingled in the sunshine, skipped over the mud puddles, drifted with the clouds. And her daydreams bore fruit, delivered food, and earned unlikely praise around the Davey table. Denny is the best mushroomer, Norma and Joan would agree. And Dad would look up from his pie, glance at her, mouthful of beer and a cough. Well, he'd say before the fork got back in his mouth, everyone has to be good at something, don't they.

His dying put no dent in Denise's mushrooming joy. When Norma got distracted by the boy on the motorbike, she went alone, buckets in both hands. Even later, passing the paddocks from the tram stop, she would still be drawn to the white caps, walking home up Murray Road holding the hem of her good dress, her harvest cradled before her. Norma's boyfriend would yell up the street, We can see yer undies, Denny, and her sister, leaning on his bike, would cack herself with him. Mum would cook them up while chastising her flashing her legs for the whole bloody world to see. Don't you turn out the hussy your sister has!

At the bottom of the hill, where Bastings Street flattens, momentum slows and Denise feels the pinch. She again eases the string bags to the footpath, rubs her hands, massages the ring finger. Feet are swollen hard into her boots. With a tug of her scarf and a straightening of the cardigan, she pictures her mother's flushed face as she'd lugged into the kitchen the groceries hauled from Sydney Road. The sharp release of breath as she lifted her load onto the table, the closest Mum coming to verbal complaint. Have you chopped the kindling? she'd yell to John. Of course, he had. Denny, done the potatoes? She was just about to. When are you going to grow up, girl? She was about to do that too.

Her mother's lips pressed hard when Denise told her the news. Took ten minutes to part. Where's he from? Northcote? Catholic, no doubt. Dinner done, wiping her hands on her apron, she turned to her youngest with the tea-towel. The other three screamingly quiet in the lounge-room. By God, Denny, you were the one with half a brain. No shock Norma getting knocked up. Why you? The closest thing to love Mum ever said.

The church was cold; dead leaves swirled in the yard. Barry's family sits the other side to hers, most of them strangers. John walks her to the front. Eyes burn her tummy; Barry's kid-sister, the only one smiling. She does not feel beautiful. The races are on the radio as the car pulls up out front of the Chapman house. Streamers down the sideway. Denise watches her mum walk in the gate with Joan, best hats, veiled faces. Her mother stops and pulls from a rose bush a page of blown newspaper, looks around for a bin.

It's not far now til the house. It will be a relief to sit down. It's not a bad place, she supposes, built cheap by Barry's uncle. It's home anyway. Her breast tingles. Becomes a throb that out-pulses the ache in her arms, the cry of her feet. Of course. He is probably due for a feed. She stops. Jesus. The pram. Outside the butcher's. Oh, you bloody idiot. No.

Denise spins on the spot; her big dress twirls and the string bags swing. She pants to God; Venetians shift again to the staccato clack heading back up Bastings. The plastic handles stay stuck to her palms as she powers up the hill, the pull on her arms, the pinch on her finger she cannot feel. What on earth had she been thinking?

Old Healing Bricks

Lucia Valeria Alfieri

One day at the end of October 2016.

I'm here, in the room that has been my classroom for a while.

Everyone has gone, and soon I'll have to do the same. There have been goodbyes, but they seemed like we were going to meet again. As if this was just the end of the last semester of the year, and after the summer holiday we'd all see each other again here. But it's not like that, and the question the teacher has thrown to us about our plans for the future bring us again to the reality that we are leaving for good. And although this means the pressure of the assignments has finally come to its end, there is already a bit of nostalgia for this time that won't ever return.

But I'm sure that I'll come back here. I'll find some excuse to again walk through these corridors and pretend just for a moment that this is still my time, that I'm still a student and this place still belongs to me.

I spent three years here, and I feel as if it is part of me. In some places in particular I feel at home. Teachers know me by my name, and vice versa. I know the secretary and she knows me. I know the librarian by his name, but I doubt he can claim the same. Nevertheless, he definitely recognises my face, and he is often open for a quick chat.

But soon, I know, this won't be my place anymore, nor of the other students who have had the same interest in writing and editing as me. We have been kicked out. Soon, there won't be any student of Writing and Publishing; soon, there won't be any Writing and Publishing course. The sour news that the course is closing down has, unexpectedly, been thrown upon us, although on closer inspection there had been some signs—such as the growing number of empty seats year after year. The feeling is like perceiving some sort of unease for a long time, but because you are not prepared to face it, you repress it and pretend that everything is fine. That is, until at last, that wretched foreboding becomes a reality.

This room is smaller than the previous one, but I probably like it more. It has created a more intimate space among us, not to mention our own compositions. It's a room they've given after kicking us from our prior one. They had to renovate the space to give it to students of another—perhaps more profitable—course. They couldn't wait till the end of the semester; there was a definite rush to throw us out of it.

From the window of this room, I can see our former building. Built with red bricks, with a few benches outside on which, on sunny days, we spent our break time after hours of sitting and typing on our computers. Below this room, I can barely see the fig tree whose fruits I anticipated and savoured throughout the year.

I was told that, in the past, this building was a sanatorium, where people with some diseases spent time recovering. I believe that this place has never stopped being what it was: a healing place. At least it hasn't for me.

When I stepped onto these grounds for the first time, I was scared and uncertain of what to expect from this course. I had a low esteem of myself and my capabilities, but a high ambition: founding the bases to become an editor. I knew I had on my side passion, as well as certain characteristics deemed desirable for an editor. For instance, my love for reading and for the proper use of the language, the incapability to stay silent when someone made a grammatical mistake, and instead to be, by nature, pushed by an uncontrollable instinct to correct them. These are traits that have always accompanied me. This gave me hope to continue.

I always wondered how authors could write a book, and create words that flowed one after the other. To me, they were magicians who, instead of rabbits, hid words under their top hats, which were then perfectly combined to create stories.

I could never dare to wish to become one of them. But, to be surrounded by books was all I wanted and by reading them I dared to dream of working for a publishing company.

I had read that the tendency of correcting language mistakes is one of the elements that identify editors. Therefore, I was on the right track! But this natural instinct belonged to me in my other life, the one that scrolled in the Italian language. Now, living in my second language, I was the one in the need of being corrected; how could I dare even dream to become an editor, let alone invest time and money in it?

By taking the course, I knew that I could be a fool or a pioneer. Moreover, this awareness was enforced even more when I came to know that I would be the only International student of the course.

The old but well-preserved red brick building, the surrounding plants and the roaming resident peacock gave me a sense of relaxation and peace. And this peace reverberated inside me with a whisper: "You can do it!"

It was only a silly voice that was unfailingly shut down as soon as I entered the classroom, being bombarded with a foreign language I could only in part decode.

How many heavy headaches wrapped me for days in the first year of study?

Warmed by the sunlight, those iron benches that I see from this window evoke in me so many moments in which, seated on them, I would find a pause for my brain. Sometimes, I could only wish for the end of those daily lessons, but sometimes on those benches, caressed by the sunlight I could hear again that whisper.

Perhaps I felt just like many of those patients who had lived in this building before me had: contradicted. Moments alternating between feeling like I could make it or that I couldn't. I feared but also loved this place that put me in difficult situations I wanted to escape from but didn't, because something inside me prevented me from giving up. Perhaps it was my determination or a sense of duty, not to mention a more pragmatic reason related to my visa condition.

Feelings of being a fool and a failure predominated all those years and walked over my more glorious hope of being a pioneer. What has made me keep going was probably the pleasure I felt while bringing many of those assignments and projects to fruition. I put passion in them, and while little by little my dream to become an editor has revealed itself to be a mirage—at least on Australian soil—a new interest has grown in me.

The writing was hard, but little by little I discovered in it a vent for my insecurities, for my hidden feelings that were unable to loudly express themselves. On paper and with words, I've been able to free myself. Within those old red bricks I found people who have encouraged me to go ahead and pushed me to believe in myself a bit more. Little by little, I experienced the pleasure of being the creator of words that flowed on the paper. I was able to do it!

I entered this school without ever having had a strong interest in writing, but I leave it wishing to have a future in it.

It is said that things and objects keep the energy of the person who they belong to, and this energy passes to its successive owners. With bitterness and sadness we are forced to leave this building, but I hope that its healing energy will never be shut down.

The Death of a Matriarch

Nicola Miller

My grandmother, affectionately known as Nan, was a working class woman who never thought of herself, only others, and what she could do to help them. She was the most selfless woman I ever met, and I always think of how lucky I am that she was my grandmother.

Sheila Horgan was born during the Depression in 1927, and grew up in rural Victoria. She raised three children (my father included) in the '50s and '60s in Ballarat, working odd jobs to bring in the money that her alcoholic husband (Pop) threw away in the pub almost every night. She remained married to Jack Horgan until he died in 1995 from health complications; I imagine it was related to his drinking and smoking. I have no real memories of him but the photos from his 70th birthday sum up his character: grumpy, red faced, holding a VB in one hand and a ciggie in the other.

Nan was always there for her grandchildren. She may not have been able to give her children everything she ever hoped for, but she made up for that with us. My parents weren't exactly financially stable when I was growing up. They both had to work, something they couldn't have even considered if Nan wasn't around to help. She was always babysitting, picking us up from school, taking us to the beach in summer, taking us to 'the pictures' during school holidays. As I grew older she continued to help, particularly financially. She lived modestly in a two bedroom flat in Ballarat's suburb of Alfredton, only buying what was necessary for herself and splurging when it came to her family.

She was a strong woman, quiet and observant, only stepping in to say something if it was important. I recognised Nan's observance when I was 15 and deep in the stage of self hatred, particularly towards my changing body. I felt uneasy with my physical appearance, having put on a lot of weight after my upwards growth stopped at the age of 12. I was at her house one day, with the rest of the family, and feeling quite uncomfortable in a pair of shorts, pulling them down over my thighs all day and remaining quiet and in my own shell of teenage inner reflection. Before leaving, she pulled me aside and said,

'You've always had good legs, Nicola. Don't forget it.'

Nan stood at 4'10 or 11, her back bent from years of manual labour and undiagnosed scoliosis. The 24 years I knew her, she always had short white hair and dressed only in the plainest and most practical of clothes. Her wrinkled face was warm and when she smiled it was with a perfect smile made up of false teeth. She'd had all her teeth removed at the age of 12 and went with the popular and cheapest option of the day: false teeth.

Nan was a trooper, and I always believed that she would live to 100. Up until her 80th birthday she still drove, took her toy poodle Sally for walks, was sprightly and always engaging in conversation, and completed daily crosswords. But then a series of events happened that led to the quick and surprising decline of her mental and physical health. I believe the downside to living so long, and being so healthy in both mind and body, is that you then have to witness sickness and death in those who you love.

She was the oldest of five and all of her siblings passed away before her. I can't imagine what that kind of loneliness might feel like. People who know you and have shared intense and personal memories with are no longer there, an identity of your past materialising with them into the grave. It was when her younger sister Mavis passed away, that we all noticed a change in Nan's demeanour. Mavis and Nan were the closest of all the siblings. Despite living in Geelong, Mavis would visit Nan, and vice versa, at least once a fortnight. After Mavis' passing, Nan simply became sadder. Her frequent jokes and cheekiness lessened, she mentioned her dislike of attending so many funerals 'these days'. She took it hard.

Then, there was the car accident. Nan's green Mazda served her well since the mid '90s, and she it. But one day news came of her rear ending another car, and the little Mazda becoming the main victim in the whole situation, and being written off. Nan blamed it on, 'the setting sun in my eyes.' She decided not to re-sit for her license and as a result, lost her independence. Never one to rely on anyone, she now had to rely on a community bus for seniors, or family members to take her shopping. She resented the whole thing. By now, she was casually dropping hints of not even wanting to be alive anymore. Thinking about it in retrospect, she was probably becoming depressed.

Then, Sally was put down. Sally had been Nan's companion not long after Pop had passed away. They had a funny relationship; Sally was a cheeky, demanding little dog, barking at people walking past the house on the footpath and always giving Nan grief with health problems. But Nan loved her and loved the companionship. It wasn't long after this that Nan moved into an aged care facility called Nazareth House. A notion I found unbelievable at the time, but she was becoming more frail and was finding it hard to keep on top of the housework by herself. She dropped a lot of weight and Dad and Lucy (my aunty) became worried about her. In the end she made the decision for herself and we all agreed it would be best for her.

I was well and truly settled in Melbourne by then and didn't see Nan as often as I would have liked; with a busy schedule of work and uni. The visits at her new place at Nazareth House were brief. She didn't like people staying for long and she'd politely say that it was time for everyone to go after half an hour. She wasn't her usual self. The first time I visited I felt special in that she showed me around her new abode, zooming around with a brand new hip and walking frame. She seemed happy.

It was quite sudden that Nan became thinner, less enthusiastic, and sad. A few back and forth phone calls between family members and I was in Ballarat. It was a weekend in the beginning of July. Winter is pretty harsh in Ballarat, it's only about three degrees colder than Melbourne, but there's an Arctic breeze that chills you right to your bones. I rugged up. I drank with friends on the Saturday night and on the Sunday I went to Mum and Dad's place. Dad was home, he made us coffee and we talked about Nan. My cousin Brig called and I said I'd be up at their place soon. We all went out for a nice lunch and avoided talking about Nan. We parted ways on a good note and my sibling El and I drove up to Nazareth House to see Nan. I wasn't expecting to stay long but I was not expecting what unfolded.

Nan always left her door open, we walked part way through the frame and I knocked hesitantly. She was lying in bed, something I'd never seen her do during the day in all of my 24 years, and she looked very ill. I immediately said, 'we won't stay too long, Nan.' And she agreed that that was a good idea.

'Is there anything we can get for you, Nan?' I asked.

Her eyes squinting against the low light of the curtain drawn window, she said, 'yes, Nicola. Can you get my purse for me?'

I rummaged through her bag on the ground, produced her purse and sat it on top of the the quilted doona on her bed. She struggled to use her hands but finally managed to pull out two $50s, two $20s and a fiver. She shifted them around in her two hands, frowned, began again and repeated the motions twice before giving up and weakly saying, 'I can't even count it'. I counted the cash for her and she told me to take it all. She was under the impression that she hadn't given me a birthday present which had been the previous month.

'Nan, I really appreciate it but you already gave me birthday money.'

I gently pushed it back into her hands, but she was adamant that I keep it. She looked as though she might cry, another thing I had

never seen her do. I took $50 to make this strange situation a bit less awkward, a bit less confronting. I put the remaining notes in her purse. Her body resumed its resting state and it was time to leave. We took it in turns to hug her goodbye, I whispered, 'get better soon, please.' And she replied, 'I hope I do.' Before finally shutting her eyes again.

We signed out of the building and made our way back to the car. The icy breeze tore through me and before we got back into the car I said to El, 'give me a minute.' I began to cry, unable to fight back the tears which caught me by surprise. El's eyebrows shot up and they walked over and embraced me. My little sibling three inches taller than me and holding me tight. They said, 'it's alright, Nic. I kinda forgot that you haven't really seen her like this yet.'

Not liking the attention and sympathy that tears bring, I composed myself and we hauled ourselves into the car. I decided to drive the long way home around Lake Wendouree. It was deathly quiet and the skies were as grey as I always remembered them to be. Everything felt slow. A black swan had waddled into the middle of the road, not caring or noticing the cars. I slowed down and waited for it to cross. It stopped dead in the middle of the road. El wound down her window and shouted 'MOVE IT, YA SWAN!'

This simple and ridiculous gesture turned my sadness into laughter. We drove back home and the events that took place in the afternoon that followed felt like a strange dream, and that I was merely observing them all through a glass window. I had a cuppa with my cousin and stared at the wall. Dad wanted me to take a photo of him for his business website and he put on an old suit coat that he wore when he was 20 kilos heavier. It struck me then how old he was and how much he had shrunk, he looked like a kid playing dress ups. I felt disconnected and sad again realising how much I missed because I lived in another city. I went with friends for a beer at a pub we used to frequent as 18 year olds, that one of my friends now owned. I caught a V/Line home and listened to King Krule, my mind wandering through a myriad of complex and simple thoughts that I could neither hold onto or make sense of.

The next week I went through the motions.

The following Friday I was on a tram to meet a friend in Carlton for a coffee. I got a call from Dad, which I knew would be ladled with bad news, he never called out of the blue. He told me that Nan had been given a week to live and she was on a lot of morphine, so at least she wasn't in pain anymore. I said I'd be down the following Tuesday to say my goodbyes. We hung up and my head filled with images of death, funerals, tears, loss, all of it, and I tried holding back the real life tears. I met my friend at Heart Attack and Vine and instead of coffee, we drank wine and lots of it.

The following day was Saturday, a usual working day for me. I told my boss everything that had happened. I went on my break at 2, it was a lovely, sunny day. I sat in the park and soaked up the sunshine on my face, I closed my eyes and listened to the birds and the rustle of leaves in the trees, the children laughing and shouting as they played. Suddenly, Brig called. I answered and she was crying.

'Nic I think you need to come back to Ballarat. Mum went to see Nan and she's not gonna make it through the night.'

I walked back to work in a daze and before I could even explain the situation to my boss I cried. She pulled me in for a hug and whispered, 'it's okay,' three times into my ear. A customer looked on in bewilderment.

For the third time in that week I caught a V/Line.

Brig picked me up from the station. It was awful outside – cold, rainy and windy. She drove me to Nazareth House and explained the situation. Mum was at home cooking everyone food. Lucy had gone back home to shower to settle in for a night by Nan's side. Nan was sleeping, still on her heroic dose of morphine and pain free. Brig just dropped me off – not wanting to come inside again. My heart thumped as I entered the building, I signed my name into the visitors book and made my way down the dark and dimly lit hallway. I'd never been here in the evening before. I knocked on the door that said, 'Sheila.' I entered nervously and found Dad and El sitting in there quietly, with only a lamp on. I hugged them both said to Nan, 'Hey it's Nicola, I'm here to visit.'

She was lying in bed on her back. Her mouth was parted and her breathing was haggard and loud. Her eyes were sunken in her head and slightly open, revealing the brown of her irises.

I sat and we all talked softly, as if none of what was happening was really taking place. Mum soon arrived with dinner for everyone and some lavender oil to sprinkle over Nan's chest, her favourite scent. Lucy arrived shortly after that, bringing in Brig with her and we all sat around the bed. I studied Nan's face, not saying much, letting my mind wander back to old memories; at the beach, at her house, at the movies, of her patience.

Then it was time for everyone except Dad and Lucy to leave. We all took our turn to hug her and say goodbye, to say 'I love you' for the last time.

Brig, El, and I picked up a bottle of vodka on our way home. At the kitchen bench we made drinks and played card games The three of us back together again – sisters – like we always were as kids. Brig and I smoked a couple of cones with some foraged weed from the bottom of her bag. She also supplied us with some Valium. We talked non-stop about everything. We got drunk and danced in the kitchen, El lay on the ground with the dogs. It hit 2am and we all passed out in our respective sleeping places.

I woke at 8 to Brig at the door and a cat purring by my head. I was dry mouthed and exhausted. I couldn't see Brig's face, the day lit behind her.

'Nic it's happened. She passed away this morning at 7:35,' she said.

'Oh... shit,' I responded. A conversation I barely remember ensued. I slept again. I woke again. Completely disoriented. I texted a few people. Dad called me and repeated the news. I asked if he was okay, he said he was but I could hear something in his voice I'd never heard before. I got into bed with El. We lay together in silence. We were both so tired.

It was a truly miserable day outside and at 4pm I caught the train back to Melbourne. I wrote on the train and took many breaks to stare out the window at the green scenery and dark clouds. I tried to read but found it hard to concentrate on the words. At home I took a bath and let sadness and grief descend on me. I lay in the water until it grew cold and my fingers looked like prunes. In bed, exhaustion hit me like a sledgehammer and I passed out, grateful to stop thinking for a while.

On Nan's 70th birthday I was five. She had a party at her flat with extended members of family invited. My parents gifted her an insane candle, it was tall, in the shape of a star and multi-coloured. The most '90s candle I can think of, the colours reminding me of the opening scene for Art Attack. I was obsessed with this candle. I asked Nan over and over again to light it, to which she would respond, 'I'll light it on my 80th!'

Well I began to count down the days. The candle sat in her living room next to the heater and I would always make a point of bringing it into the conversation on those Sunday afternoon tea sessions.

But by the time her 80th rolled around, she cheekily declared that the candle would now be lit on her 90th birthday. When Nan moved into Nazareth House she told Lucy that the candle was for me. I proudly, and sadly, kept it in my bedroom. Last year she would have turned 90, so on her birthday I sat with my friend Lauren drinking whiskey. We lit the candle and watched it burn.

When I was a Gardener

Sarah Irene Robinson

I just replaced the throttle cable on my lawn mower. Wowee! This is a thing I have never done before. Minimal swearing, only one nap and a few borrowed tools. I am aware that this feat isn't so much a feat to some, but for me and my brain it was a challenge.

I was working in the sun the other day and the identical twins came up to say hello. It was only today that I realised how identical they are. They usually shout out pleasantries from across the street and I assumed they were very close friends who maybe lived in a women's home and had their daily outings together. They are in their twenties I'd say, brown hair, very slim, tall upright, and completely identical. Today they came over to inspect me closer, one of them offered me some lipstick, pulling an uncapped bright red lipstick from her clutch bag, it was covered in bag dirt, she looked at me with open eyes, offering it to me delicately. These two are the only things I like about this job with the leaf blower and cement that never seems to end.

I want to tell the story of this tree, but I cannot tell it myself properly. It was an old eucalypt, white wattle-like flowers, it must have fallen over years ago, but it kept growing, the roots twisting out of the ground, and I'm not sure why, maybe to balance itself, it had grown back around the way the way it came. And had formed a full circle from a birds' perspective. Then some children had put a tire swing in it, hanging from a branch in the middle. It was the perfect cubby or escape or private place. Then things got rough and life got in the way and beautiful people died. They hired me to help them plant things and one day I saw this mess of blackberries and asked if I could clear them. It took the whole day, me and Robyn and as we got further in we fousnd this beauty, and it all came rushing back for her and it was amazing I had never seen such a thing before. We were both covered in blood and crusty sweat and fresh sweat and then crusty sweat again. We drank wine in the middle as the rains finally came in, after such a dry month.

I fixed the throttle cable and then sat in the yard with the birds until it got all dark and cold and my feet had had enough and the cool grass had gotten into the heat of my body enough.



Bluebell by Amanda Kennedy

Author Biographies

Organised by author's surname

Robert Bennett

Robert Bennett is a writer, editor and illustrator who revels in the unusual and absurd aspects of life. While studying creative writing, Robert realized that he was a postmodernist with leanings towards speculative fiction. As a result, Robert's work is informed by far too much television and eclectic tastes in books, films and the arts. Robert proudly wears his eccentricities like a hair shirt.

Anna Bilbrough

Anna Bilbrough is a writer and editor based in Melbourne and Ballarat. Anna's fiction work has been published in Yarra Bend Press's 2017 anthology, *The Last Word*. She also worked as an editor on *The Last Word*. Anna's non-fiction work from her 2017 travels to Iceland will be published in a cultural guide in 2018 by Global Treks and Adventures. More of Anna's writing can be found at: annabilbrough.blogspot.com.au/

Adam Casey

Dr Adam Casey has been writing and publishing his short stories, poetry and critical essays for over 20 years, and is working on his second novel. He is currently the Head of Program for the Master of Creative Industries at Melbourne Polytechnic.

Terry Chapman

Terry Chapman had three fun years doing the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing at Melbourne Polytechnic from 2012. He met lots of good people and learnt a lot about the many facets of the writing game. Some of what he learnt ended up in the self publication of a memoir-based anthology of his short stories, just in from the printers. As much as he loves writing, he also loves his three boys (now life-sized teens) and they need feeding and stuff. So he is still teaching in central Vic, still scribbling bits and pieces, still wondering what is the great Australian novel.

Liddy Clark

By profession Liddy works in communications in the local government sector. A nice follow-on from her time as member of parliament in Queensland. Her background is in the theatre and it was her time in the business of show that sparked her interest in writing. Her novella *When the Train Doesn't Fit the Platform* is with a literary agent ready to go to the highest bidder She is currently the Melbourne reviewer for Stagenoise at: www.stagenoise.com/

Chester Eagle

In 1971, Heinemann Australia released Chester Eagle's first novel *Hail and Farewell!: an evocation of Gippsland*. He has subsequently authored another six commercially published books including *Mapping the Paddocks* published in 1985 by Penguin, and then, in 2008, *The Well in the Shadow* published by Transit Lounge.

This book examines a number of Australian writers and their seminal works including Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*. Don Watson featured an excerpt from Chester's book *Hail & Farewell!* in his 2016 literary collection *A Single Tree: Voices from the Bush* which explores European settlement in Australia. In 1984, Chester issued his first self-published book *The Garden Gate* and since then has written and self-published over twenty-five books and twenty-nine mini mags.

Michael Freundt

Michael Freundt is an Australian writer living in Bali, Indonesia. He publishes on the Tablo platform (tablo.io) out of Melbourne and blogs about reading and writing. He holds a creative writing Master's degree and writes long and short form fiction, play scripts, and poetry when the mood takes him. A novel *How to be a Good Veronica* and the short story collection *My Brother, My Love & Other Stories* can be found in iBooks. You can find Michael at: michaelkfreundt.wordpress.com/

Nicola Miller

Nicola Horgan is an emerging writer (who likes to use the pen name, Nicola Miller) and editor who completed the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing in 2017, and worked as Senior Editor on *The Last Word* anthology. Nicola enjoys, and likes to think she's pretty decent at, writing short stories, memoir pieces, conducting interviews and editing. Nicola is also a self described cat lady who loves to support the terrible heavy drinking writer stereotype by drinking a lot of cheap wine and reading, mostly at the same time.

Amanda Kennedy

Amanda Kennedy lives in Melbourne, Australia with her two cats and her partner. She loves reading, writing, movies and has been hooked on stories from her earliest days. Kennedy also creates art – mostly paintings and mostly of women. She has started podcasting but she plans to work on that more. She is up for collaborations of any types because she likes working towards realising ideas with other people. Get in contact if you feel like it: Artbyamandakennedy.wordpress.com/

Amanda Kontos

Mandi is a writer, writing practice coach, dreamer and Master's student empowering the writerly insides of those who choose to show up at their keyboards. She is breaking internal editors, sabotages and procrastinators to bring writing into the lives of everyday women and men to help them feel at home inside their haven created by a writing practice that empowers them to get the most out of their lives.

Martin Markus

Martin Markus is a social worker who is passionate about mental health issues and writing. He one day hopes to publish a book on his experiences working with refugees and prisoners.

Alexandra Mavridis

Alexandra Mavridis is a third year student of the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing at Melbourne Polytechnic. Mavridis equally enjoys producing fiction and non-fiction and has been published in student magazines such as *Catalyst* RMIT, *Infusion* NMIT and Melbourne Polytechnic's *The Last Word* anthology. Currently, she is working on her first novel *Grecian Silhouettes*, a piece of literary fiction that gained her short-listing award in the 2017 Deborah Cass Prize with Writers Victoria. She is a thinker that works in a variety of media, exploring the creative process in a plethora of genre.

Chelsea McPherson

Chelsea McPherson is a self-published author and an editor at Culture of Gaming. When she's not writing or editing, she's reading, playing video games, or thinking up ideas for her next novel.

Tom O'Connell

Tom O'Connell is a writer, editor and tea enthusiast. He has a Bachelor of Writing and Publishing and has had work published in various anthologies, including *The Literary Nest*, *Crack the Spine* and *Page Seventeen*. Follow his writing at: artofalmost.wordpress.com/

Kit Riley

Kit Riley is a writer and artist who lives in regional Victoria, Australia. They are currently studying a Certificate III in Natural Area Restoration at Melbourne Polytechnic. Kit makes work about things that live on the fringes of sense and meaning. You can find Kit online at: noparticularbusiness.com/

Sarah Robinson

Sarah Irene Robinson is currently doing her bachelor of writing and publishing at Melbourne Polytechnic at the Fairfield campus. She owned Through the Looking Glass Second Hand Books for three years in Belgrave. She currently lives in Parkville.

Shella Shpigel

Shella is passionate about writing and social issues. From a young age, she won poetry competitions and volunteered in the community. She is currently completing a Bachelor of Writing and Publishing and Commencing a Bachelor of Social Work Her professional background has been in the community sector working with offenders. She hopes to continue working with disadvantaged people and use writing as a medium for therapy.

Lucia Valeria

Lucia Valeria Alfieri was born in Italy, some year in the '80s and came to Australia in 2011. After having improved her English, she studied at Melbourne Polytechnic for three years obtaining the Bachelor in Writing and Publishing in 2016. To her surprise, she was awarded as the Outstanding Higher Education Student of the Year for the School of Creative Arts for 2016. Writing is a passion that has grown with Lucia over years, adding itself to her first love: painting. It was combining these two passions that in 2017 Lucia realised her first children's interactive bilingual (English-Italian) ebook, *Mick and Michele*, for which she is the author and the illustrator. Available from any Apple devices, on iTunes or iBooks app or through the following link: itunes.apple.com/us/book/book-title/id1260960112?ls=1&mt=11/ In the same year, two of her writings (a vignette and a poem) were published in *The Last Word* anthology, published by Yarra Bend Press. Although editing, writing and illustrating are activities of her spare time, Lucia aims to turn them into her main occupation.

Brad Webb

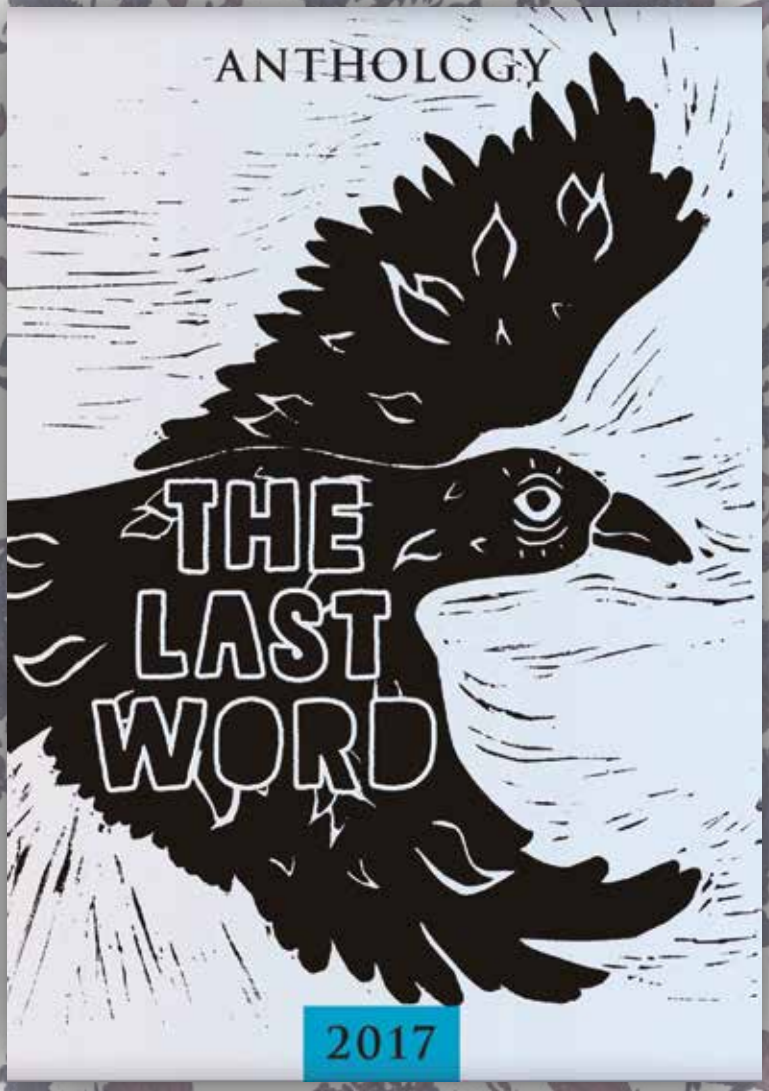
Brad Webb holds a Master of Publishing and Editing from Monash University and is currently completing his PhD at the University of the Sunshine Coast on the impact of American pop culture on the Australian comic book industry. In 2017, New Holland Publishers released Brad's biography on Australia's most infamous son, *Ned Kelly: The Iron Outlaw*. He is currently working on his second novel.

Emma Ziccone

Emma Ziccone is a 22 year old woman with Asperger's. She enjoys writing poetry as a way to deal with thoughts, feelings and emotions. It helps her make sense of the world. She often writes about unrequited or lost love, as she finds it to be a very interesting topic. Hopefully others who have experienced this can find solace through her words. Emma does not intend for her poems to rhyme perfectly or have correct structure. It is something she writes from the heart. The best poetry comes from there.



There Was A Time When We Had Fun by Lucia Valeria Alfieri



The ***The Last Word*** anthology is a collection of writing from past and present members of Melbourne Polytechnic. The theme of the anthology is memory, which was chosen by the BWAP Editing Committee in reaction to the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing course coming to a sad end. Within the contents of ***The Last Word*** is a wide range of genres, which include novel excerpt, short story, flash fiction, memoir, creative essay, poetry, and song lyrics. Each of these pieces touch on various concepts, every one of which is unique. These talented writers have been fostered by the university and have demonstrated incredible writing skills. ***The Last Word*** anthology is our gift to you. First published in 2017 by Yarra Bend Press ***The Last Word*** (ISBN 9780987319234) was edited by students from the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing and is available online at **issuu.com/yarrabendpress/docs/the-last-word-2017/**



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