66.2

New Writing from Western Australia
Fiction
Creative Non-Fiction
Poetry
Essays

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Westerly

‘Defective’
Annabel Smith

Do you want to? he asked, quarter-heartedly.

The writer in me thought: if this was a novel the narrator would say, That was the moment she knew her marriage was over.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Westerly

From the Editors

Change is a rhetoric. Some of this is cheap or jargonistic: change processes, forces of change, life-changing, changing hands, hearts, minds, spots, seas… Some is more deliberate: the discourse of social change, policies of reform altering standards and conventions, climate change spoken of in terms of climate crisis—language used definitively to convey imperatives of action. But change phrasing is used (ironically) by conservative forces as regularly as those seeking something of revolution. With the uncertainties of global pandemic, growing awareness of ecological catastrophe and newly reimagined nationalisms, this is perhaps a realm of language ripe for creative attention.

While change and evolution can produce liminal and conflicted states—discomfort to be kicked against, as a baby growing in the confinement of the womb—they can also be the catalyst for extraordinary creative endeavours. This year has been a paradoxical one for Australian writers and creatives: while as a nation we are moving forward to a future in which we can hope to return to pre-pandemic freedoms, the shadows of uncertainty continue to plague us; while creative work has been lauded as necessary relief, and writers' festivals and other literary events are returning, working within the arts continues to be unstable and unpredictable. This liminal space is the environment from which *Westerly* 66.2 has been birthed: a chiaroscuro of hope and fear, kindness and violence, past and future.

This issue seemed to us to be imbued with the destabilising energies of a changing moment, the collective work marked by contradiction, juxtaposition and antithesis. In many contributions, an awareness of both the immense weight of history and the imminence of change is registered through the bodies of people, animals, even the earth itself. In Reneé Pettitt-Schipp's 'Elephant Rocks', for instance, the 'feldspar and alkali, quartz and sanidine' of ponderous geology draws an awed respect; while on the island of Clare Murphy's 'The Kissing Disease', memories embedded in 'the rhyolites of hardened lava to the north and the gravel-and-sandstone layer-cake to the west' are threatened by recent centuries' destructive and accelerating rush of change. There are emotions in flux, too: anxiety, fear, despair, and conversely hope, playfulness, confidence, love—both for others and for the world we find ourselves (re)making. From a haunting sense of impending violence in Jasper Paterson's short story 'Tree in the Rock', to the fierce tenderness of Nadia Rhook's poem 'something specific about this *boodja*', this issue shows simultaneous realities can be entertained within the space of the page.

In the space of newness, alongside our selection from general submissions, the issue features work from Annabel Smith, the second of our two Mid-Career Fellows in this inaugural year of the Fellowship, working through and inviting a changing sense of self. It also features new work from our Writers' Development Program, pieces which are confirming and confronting in equal measure. Newness is, of course, part of the rhetoric of change. But in this instance, it is pointing to the emergence of the next generation of writers to take on the challenge of speaking to our world. John Kinsella's review essay of Emily Sun's *Vociferate*/詠, which describes a work that creates and makes communities, 'both osmotic and private, […] mutual, but also aware of the falsehoods out of which they are often built', helps frame that rhetoric.

Of course, the counter-position to change might perhaps be cultivation. Cultivation is not antithetical to change, but there is an energy of investment within cultivation which subsumes change in moving through it. As an activity, this exists outside time, or at least in a unique temporality. We cultivate our pasts as readily as our futures, we cultivate ourselves and our relationships with others. Creatively, the cultivation of a piece of writing can function simultaneously as response and as instigation. We hope these works offer both these functions for you.

As always, this issue is the product of a dedicated team. We are grateful to our external editors Timmah Ball, Susan Midalia and Paul Munden for their generous reading. Cassandra Atherton and Lucy Dougan have again been astute Commissioning Editors, and Chris Arnold and Melissa Kruger make up a web-based wonder team. Our interns Ashleigh D'Alonzo, Ellie Fisher and Cat Jones have been invaluable in helping us prepare *Westerly* 66.2 for production, with expertise offered here by Becky Chilcott, Keith Feltham and Marie O'Rourke. Biggest thanks, as always, to the writers who have trusted us with these works. We are grateful to you all.

Catherine Noske, Josephine Taylor and Daniel Juckes, November 2021

Life Assertions

Declan Fry

Declan Fry is a writer, poet and essayist, born on Wongatha country in Kalgoorlie. Declan has written for *The Guardian*, *Saturday Paper*, *Overland*, *Australian Book Review*, *Liminal*, *Sydney Review of Books*, *Cordite*, *Kill Your Darlings* and elsewhere.

I have consulted the plants
growing haphazard from the soil,
looking to divine intention
in the rough and tumble world.

Read the stooping tall trunks
standing awestruck as exclamation marks,

fussed about their stems,
their sinewy being,
all the complications of leaves—small, waxy,
elliptically waving
in a cool southerly breeze.

Open vented boughs broken with flowering, cascading
bees evade the breathing
pull of roots anchored inside the earth.

Soil sustains life,
wires excavations
through a world in miniature.

Or maybe says something else entirely,
for purchase speaking in run-on prose written upward
through skies branched only
by black lines.

I have translated every one.

Once or twice, lifting them up
from the rooted past,
back when things were still legible
and meaning could be telegraphed
to the next plot,

I heard them speak—whisper—
(indifferent to their readership)
so you are cultivating us again

Holding those roots in my fingers, aware
of their spindly claim, the soft permanence of life
emblazoned through soil,
how it says something fibry, porous,

or lays limp
and discreetly paragraphed
in the palm of a hand,
knowing life for a second
before forgetting again,

as if every second of waking thought
had stumbled through the earth before, lost
in the interstices, the grainy indexes of dirt,
patchwork glossaries
of bone and blood.

So we are fortressing.
So we are mulching.

Archiving earth,
we are always
asserting life.

Down there
in the soil,
opening
and closing
my hands,

I am hoping, again,
to grasp this.

Elephant Rocks

Reneé Pettitt-Schipp

Reneé Pettitt-Schipp is the author of the award-winning collection of poetry, *The Sky Runs Right Through Us* (UWA Publishing, 2018). Reneé currently lives in WA's Great Southern where she is working on her second collection.

To reach the beach we must pass through history
the pressure of it, billow of boulders high overhead
surge of Southern Ocean rising to knees
stealing in swift as a thief

we arrive, passage opening to sky
to stand stunned in Djeran's crystalline light
towels still wedged under armpits, shoes held in our hands

from translucence the grand monoliths rise
each a narrative unearthed; violent acts
of upheaval and molten births
it makes our lives read differently, dwarfed
by geology we do not know but understand
white sand spilling perfection
out into the blue-green bay
where a herd of elephants—
feldspar and alkali, quartz and sanidine
make their slow way back out to sea.

Life Support

Carol Lefevre

Carol Lefevre is a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide. Her recent novella, *Murmurations* (Spinifex, 2020), was shortlisted for the 2021 Cristina Stead Prize in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards.

Rifle-crack, bird flap: some mad bugger with a gun. Jesse peers into the scrub on the far side of the clearing where the dawn landscape looks stonewashed, but no-one runs towards him waving a shotgun. It is his second morning in the car, the first alone. Ozzie had gone late yesterday, trudging towards the highway to hitch to town. He'll have said he slept at a mate's house, that no-one woke him for school. Ozzie's old man will've given him a spray. He'd wanted Jesse to go with him.

'What's the point in staying out here?'

But it wasn't Ozzie's mother's car they'd slid out of the drive in the early hours and run aground here on the edge of the scrub.

She'll be waking soon, his ma; Freddie. Jesse pictures her curled in the big, rumpled bed, Benny snoring alongside. Across the hall, his sister Sheena will be out to it, her head on the pillow—gnawed-looking yellow hair with fierce dark roots.

'It's a thing!' she'd said when he asked her why she liked it.

'Yeah?'

'Rooty blonde. It's trending on social media.'

'Sick.'

His ma never goes to the hairdresser, not since she read how swimming with dolphins helped some kid like Benny. Any spare cash goes into the dolphin fund. But that time they'd driven him to the beach Benny had screamed his head off—at the waves foaming in scallops at their feet, at the seagulls squabbling over scraps. They had walked to the end of the jetty, and Freddie had held Benny up to face the mirror-ball glitter of the ocean. But Benny had screamed even louder then, and when eventually they'd soothed him with ice cream, he'd sat digging sand with his back to the water.

'Digging deep enough to get to China,' Freddie had said, and she had laughed, but her eyes had welled up.

Jesse knows they'll never get Benny near the ocean, and even if they do, he'll be freaked out by dolphins. Swimming with them might do his ma good though. She's strung out most of the time. Jesse rubs at his sleep-crusted eyes. She'll be panicking because he's missing. He pictures her smoking, the nervy way she flicks at the lighter. She'll have smoked a lot last night. Smokes are the one thing she spends money on, and he wishes she wouldn't. He hates seeing her hunched out on the back veranda, because since Benny was diagnosed, Freddie has never smoked inside the house.

He's wrecked her car—well, the engine sounds terminal. When he saw the keys on the table, he should've resisted the impulse. He hears his teacher Miss James telling him it's time he started making better choices. Miss James. Emily. She's the nicest teacher he's had in twelve years of school. Once, when he'd arrived late because he'd had to walk Benny to day care, and on the way there his little brother had darted into the road and nearly got run over, Miss James had noticed his hands shaking. After class she had kept him behind, and he'd blurted out that he'd been frightened, and then angry with his brother for almost getting killed.

'What's the point of Benny,' he'd said, 'if he can never have a decent life?'

And he had felt at that moment that it might have been better if the car hadn't swerved, if at the last moment the driver hadn't spotted the figure dashing on a collision course with his front bumper.

Miss James had sat beside him. 'Jesse,' she said, 'never forget that Benny, for all his difficulties, was made with a purpose.'

He knew she meant God, and at that moment he'd been willing to believe, if only his brother's life would add up to something, or at least become manageable. His mum thinks the same. Not that God made Benny the way he is for a reason, but that he was born to grow her patience, to make sure she will always have something to live for. Because she had struggled to keep going after Dad's accident. They'd all been gutted, but for her it was worse.

The day it happened, he and Sheena had been at school, and the principal had called Sheena to his office and told her they were to go straight home. Benny was just a toddler then, but they already knew he had a major problem. It had really bothered their dad, and Sheena thought maybe it had even contributed to his accident. Jesse doesn't see how it could've, but he doesn't argue. It was weird, but Benny being diagnosed had kicked their mother into gear. From then on, she had dedicated herself to living, because Benny will grow bigger, but he will never grow up. Sheena will leave home as soon as she can, and Jesse knows that if anything happens to their mother it will be up to him to look out for Benny.

The chill falling off the windows sets him shivering. He reaches into the back for his spare hoodie, and that is when he sees the fox. She is standing between the car and the scrub. Thin sunlight kindles a blaze in her coat, and as the light intensifies, the fur flames. Jesse blinks, as if protecting his eyes from the blaze. His hand moves to the door handle with the ridiculous intention of crossing the clearing—as if she will wait tamely for him to stroke her fur. Before he can open the door, the fox turns towards the scrub, and the pristine white chest is streaked with blood. She is gone before he can unfold his sleep-cramped limbs out of the front seat—her exit, though marred by a limp, is graceful, a rufous blur.

When Jesse reaches the spot where she stood there are drops of blood on the grainy yellow soil. He squats to scrutinise a smudge in the dirt that might be a paw print, and then his eyes fill, and his chest tightens and heaves. Jesse puts out a hand to steady himself until the jagged sobs subside. After a few minutes he stands and wipes his nose along his sleeve. What if someone saw him wussing. But there is no-one to see, not even the wounded fox. Not even the mongrel who shot her.

The sun warms his back as he reaches into the car for his drink bottle. He will have to leave before he runs out of water. That is, if he intends going back. Jesse sips, careful not to swallow too much, although he wants to gulp it down. It is the first time he has admitted there might be an alternative to going home.

Jesse squints towards the tortured shapes of blackened branches, at the explosions of new growth on what Ozzie reckons are peppermint gums. The fire that swept through here, summer before this one, is already half forgotten by the bush. The sun flares over the rim of the hill; thoughts come at him in a rush. He sips again from the bottle, and shrugs. His phone is in the shallow recess between the front seats—he misses the feel of it in his hand, but it's low on power; if he turns it on there'll be missed calls and texts from his ma, and he doesn't know what to say. He still isn't sure.

Walking away from the car, Jesse squats to stare again at the blood. A lizard slithers into a bush; from further away comes the dry, protesting cry of a crow. A breeze stirs the new leaves of the peppermints, as Jesse follows the fox's trail.

• • •

Freddie Barry wakes, and fumbles under the pillow for her phone. Benny lies on his back beside her, so still and silent that she scrambles her other hand free of the bedclothes to touch his cheek: his skin is warm and smooth, and there is the faint movement of his breath. Reassured, she rolls away and stares at the phone, but there is no message from Jesse.

She slides out of bed and hurries along the passage to his room, where everything is as he left it two nights ago; it smells of Lynx deodorant, and another, fainter boy-scent that reminds her of her brothers. The emptiness is a kick in the guts, and Freddie hugs herself as she stalks towards the kitchen.

The hum of the kettle is lonely this morning. She tries Jesse's number, but his phone is still off. Making coffee one-handed, she calls her brother.

'Don? He's still not back.'

Her brother's voice is thick with sleep. 'Try his friends again. Mates always know.'

The sun on the back deck warms her arms, her cold hands, as she makes the calls. Jesse hasn't posted on social media. No-one has seen him. Nobody knows. Ozzie O'Donoghue sounds even more evasive than when she spoke to him yesterday.

'Ozzie, if you know—'

'Don't worry, Mrs Barry. I'm sure Jesse is fine.'

'Yeah, well, thanks,' she says lamely.

Freddie brings up her brother-in-law's number on her phone and stares at it for a long moment, then swipes it away without calling. The coffee tastes bitter, and she flings the rest of it over the side of the deck and goes indoors.

Jesse has taken her car, and if she reports it, he will lose his learner's licence. Freddie stares through the kitchen window at the empty carport—maybe he ought to lose it, teach him a lesson. Benny will wake soon. Her stomach churns—she is already exhausted, and the day has barely begun. But it's Benny's morning for the special needs place, so at least she has a breathing space.

Freddie takes cereal from the cupboard and finds Benny's Spiderman bowl. When she was Sheena's age, it was their mother who'd caused them grief; she remembers the toe-curling shame of having a mother people gossiped about. But every family has its dramas, and one of these days they will find a treatment for Benny. In the meantime, it would help if people could just accept him for who he is.

• • •

Ozzie hates lying to Mrs Barry, her of all people. Two or three times a week she asks him to stay for tea. Even though anyone can see she has her hands full, she sets another place at the kitchen table like it is no bother. Ozzie tries to remember whether his own mother was like that, welcoming his friends as if they were family, but there is no picture in his mind. Probably he'd been too young to have friends over when she went away. It was a long time ago. His old man never asks anyone to eat with them. And fair enough, because he has to work, and the shopping and cooking are extra.

His father is banging around in the kitchen, and Ozzie has to get his clothes on before he talks to him. He messages Jesse—*text your mum*—and wonders whether Jesse still has any charge on his phone; he wonders how much trouble there'll be about the car, and about the maths test they've missed. He needs to get his clothes on because his teacher wants his father to come to school for a meeting, and Ozzie has to break it to the old man before he leaves for work.

• • •

Freddie calls a taxi to take her and Benny to his special needs class. When she leaves him there and steps out into the street, she begins to breathe for what feels like the first time that morning. The weight of the house, of Jesse's empty bedroom, no longer presses on her skull. Freddie dawdles along the wide, dusty footpath towards a sandwich board that announces coffee and homemade cakes. The Little Flower Café and Collectables is quiet this morning. Freddie pays for a flat white and a muffin and carries them to the corner furthest from the till. The customers, mainly mothers hoping for ten minutes of peace, smile and nod, but they do not invite her to sit with them. Being widowed keeps them at a distance, and Freddie's lips curve in the glimmer of a smile—silver linings are to be found in even the darkest pocket.

She will never be certain if Ryan's death was an accident, but it was her doing, no question. There was no traffic that morning on the racecourse road, just Ryan on his motorbike with his helmet unbuckled. He often wore it dangling loose, despite the message it gave the children. But you couldn't tell him it was stupid bravado he should have outgrown years ago. You couldn't tell Ryan anything, only she had told him things that morning that had got his attention.

'I'm pregnant,' she'd said.

He'd put down his can of coke, grinning at her. 'How long have you known?'

'About three weeks, but don't get excited because I want a termination.'

'You can't be serious!'

He'd tried to put his arms around her, but she had held herself away from him, shoulders stiff.

'I've already talked to Doctor Walsh.'

'Without telling me—'

'Ryan, I can't look after a baby, not with Benny.'

At the mention of their son, Ryan's face had darkened. 'It's not likely to happen twice, Freddie. They told us that. You heard them.'

'I did. But I'm saying Benny is all I can manage.'

'Come on, Freddie, you won't have to do it all on your own.'

Resentment, bottled up over nights when he went out with mates while she stayed home with the children, rose in Freddie's throat. Mornings when he had promised to help out later, and instead went to the pub, or the betting shop. He would promise help with a baby, but help would never come.

She had wanted to hurt him, to seize control.

'I'm not sure if it's yours,' she'd said.

'You *what*?'

She shook her head. 'I'm sorry, Ryan.'

His hands were heavy on her shoulders; she felt the press of his thumbs at her throat.

'Well, who the fuck then?'

Freddie's legs had started shaking. 'It's yours. Of course, it is. I was being flippant.'

He'd stared at her, assessing. She had managed not to look away.

'It was a bad joke,' she said. 'I'm sorry. But I meant it about the termination.'

He might have hit her, but instead he slammed out the door, and she heard the Honda's roar.

His brother Jordan had come to break the news about the accident. They stood in the kitchen avoiding each other's eyes, the two of them shocked, guilty. Ryan was in ICU, Jordan said. His helmet had come off in the crash, and there was brain damage.

'Did you... Did he...' He looked at her for the first time, stricken.

She shook her head. She'd been going to tell, but with Ryan's hands on her she'd suddenly felt scared witless. Three children they'd had together, and she'd realised in that moment that she didn't know Ryan Barry, not really.

At the hospital, her thoughts chaotic, she had told the doctor they should switch off Ryan's life support because he wouldn't want to live with brain damage.

'He couldn't stand it,' she said. 'And we have a disabled child.' All at once she was sobbing. 'I'm not capable of looking after another living soul.'

The doctor had stared at her gravely. 'Mrs Barry, there is nothing to "switch off". Your husband's condition is critical, but for the moment he is supporting his own life.'

Freddie sips her coffee. It tastes no better than the brew she made at home. She can't eat the muffin.

A neighbour stayed with the children while she went for the procedure. There was no-one else she could have asked. For the first time in years, she had longed for her sister, but Mazz was overseas. Ryan's parents never knew she'd been pregnant, and she hadn't even considered telling Jordan. A week later she was at Ryan's bedside when he died, though God only knew if he'd wanted her there.

Freddie has started writing a letter to her sister. She pulls it out of her bag and looks over the start she's made. She could finish this and post it on the way home, but with the pen in her hand, she can't think of anything to write.

'Oh, Jesse, please come home!' She has whispered this aloud, but when she looks around the café it appears no-one has heard.

• • •

The path is uphill over red, powdery soil. It's hard on Jesse's calves. He should be fitter, and he'll suffer when footy training starts—if he goes back home. The fox is losing more blood; there are continuous dribbles now rather than drops and splashes.

He'll run out of water. How long would it take to die, he wonders? How painful would it be? His mother would be broken up about it, but it'd be one less of them for her to worry about. Jesse knows he'll never be as selfless as his mother. One day Benny will be man-sized, and when Jesse thinks of a future in which he'll be responsible for his brother, his chest feels like it's filled with rocks. If Benny was made with a purpose, it means that he was, too. And Jesse wants a different life, a life on his own terms.

The fox is stretched out in thin shade, pink tongue hanging from her open mouth. She's dead, and her fur is dulled; her white front is soaked with blood, and all the heat and light has faded from her. Jesse squats and runs a hand over her fur. Her body is warm, both from the sun and from the life that has only recently departed. He looks around for something to cover her with, but there is nothing. And then he sees that she's been feeding young.

He pushes on up the last few yards, to an opening between two boulders. There in a shallow burrow are her two pups, tiny creatures with blunt, questing noses. When he scoops them up, they squirm in his hands, hearts palpitating against his palms. They'll die without their mother. Death by starvation and dehydration. Jesse looks around for some clue to saving them, but there is only silence, and the sun climbing higher in the cobalt sky. He'll have to put them out of it. Jesse's never killed anything, but he

thinks he can manage. One quick knock for each pup—they'll hardly know what's hit them.

He puts them on some leaves and finds a lump of rock, weighs the heft of it in his hand. But the pups start squirming towards him as if they want to be picked up. He gazes at them, tiny, helpless, and he knows he can't dash their brains out. The fox's body is still warm. Maybe the young can feed—a last drink to tide them over. It's gross, feeding from a carcass, but Jesse has no better plan. He carries the cubs to the fox, and they latch on. Watching them suckle, he thinks of his mother the night before he left, white-faced with exhaustion and mashing potatoes while Benny banged a wooden spoon against the saucepan cupboard. Jesse takes a careful sip from his flask.

When the cubs drop off, he nestles them in the front pockets of his hoodie, and his throat thickens with grief. What's the point of foxes, he wonders? There is a heaviness in his head like he sometimes gets when he goes to Ozzie's house, the two of them on their phones, camped in a wilderness of unwashed clothes and dishes, while Ozzie's old man sits in front of the television, watching sport and drinking. It's the mess of all of their lives that disturbs him, though he has no clue what can be done about it.

The pups sleep in his pockets, paws twitching against his belly. Jesse wipes his eyes on his sleeve—he could take them to his mother's old aunt, Nancy Gerrity. Nancy keeps all kinds of injured animals people bring her, nurses them to health. Last time he saw her yard it was a grim place, with packing-crate hutches, and everything roofed with corrugated iron and fastened with a twist of wire. But no grimmer than starving to death out here for lack of milk, and anyway, animals don't care what things look like.

He thinks of Miss James's gentle demeanour, and doesn't doubt that she would believe in the fox cubs' purpose, their right to live. It is warm, but Jesse can't take off the hoodie. When he reaches the car, he leans into it for his phone. He swigs the last of his water, and sets off towards the highway. Behind him the sun slants over the hill, and the trees and bushes throw down long shadows.

Property
Riley Faulds

Riley Faulds is an Environmental Consultant in the streets and a Creative Writing Honours student in the sheets. His poems have appeared in *Rabbit* and *Westerly* and he is the 2021 Editor of *Pelican Magazine*.

John is selling the Far Block.
Up the road from The Block
which Michelle swapped with the mine
to build her dream house.
She moved

not long after it was built.

You tell of afternoons herding cows
from Home, up the railway line
for milking at The Block. Walking slowly
from cowpat-waft to warm grass-smell
and, in spring, the scent of the colour
of scentless flowers.

Sometimes, trains would come up the incline.
You'd scream for the cows to move. Camille,
always, told you to shut up stupid, train honking
and cows standing until the last moment.
You never lost one to the tracks.

Today, inspecting the roadside for orchids
(walking stick tight in your hand)
there are dozens of drying wildflowers.
By the mountain marri, of the toxic blood,
we realise: when John sells, Home
will be the only block
still in the family.

something specific about this *boodja*

Nadia Rhook

Nadia Rhook is a non-Indigenous historian, educator and poet, currently lecturing in History and Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia, on Whadjuk boodja. Her first poetry collection is *boots* (UWA Publishing, 2020).

Aditi Machado, 'Then', 2019.

Something universal in this way you become

I try to pause systematically before I drop you at childcare

on the way to the car we watch pearly dew slide along the
leaves of a debatably toxic shrub, the father in me
wanting you to love the leaves as much as you love risk the
mother in me wanting to keep you
far away from all things remotely poisonous as if
it's possible to separate imported trees from care from
trips to the children's hospital where
an Australian family are demanding to hear why their daughter's
case was not escalated why not all bodies appear equal in
this story why not all suburbs are built from the soil that lies beneath them

tomorrow I'll find a way to explain to you why you
should stay suspicious of rules that pertain to keep
planets from colliding but ignore the way it's impossible
to separate gravity from movement
from breath

sweetheart there are celestial bodies there are living breathing bodies,
there are bodies marked for immediate medical attention

in the
car I sing you twinkle twinkle en Castellano wondering if it's
familiar to you yet taking pleasure in three minutes of
deviance from
this colony's language sure you must hear in my elastic
vowels the way Castellano has yet to travel from my tongue through
my bellybutton into the evenly spaced grammar of my spine sure you can
hear that this language neither belongs to the *boodja* speeding
beneath us

estrellita, donde estas?
quiero verte titilar

at the traffic lights we stop

two stars

held close to earth only by seat belts burn our specific selves
high above the warmed clay bricks of Maylands

Note

In May 2021, a seven-year-old child died of an infection while waiting for medical care at the Perth Children's Hospital. Subsequently, her parents pushed for an investigation. As a result of the Chavittupara family's pressure on the McGowan Government, a report was delivered that observed a 'cascade of missed opportunities' leading to the death. The report listed eleven recommendations, including a clear pathway for parents to escalate concerns to staff and a review of cultural awareness for staff.

Waiting for something

John Catlin

John Catlin's poetry has been published in various journals (*Westerly*; *New Poetry*) and a small collection (*Lone Hand*) with Fremantle Arts Centre Press. He also writes for theatre and television.

I didn't know where we came from. As if we fell out of the air, washed up on the beach.

We were slight and vulnerable. On those days when the ocean was swallowed by the scorched sky, we were silent fauna tiptoeing across the hot sand, skipping soft tar on the road.

We breathed my father's air. In retreat from a war, from petty officers, from his mother. We were more than shy, a bit suspicious, clumsy. We seemed to be waiting for something.

On Sundays Bonnie called her mother a thousand miles away from the red phone box. One child sat on a thick phone book and fed coins into the slot, buying intimate minutes, for speaking of love, new chapters in our small lives, bodies pressed close in the red phone box.

The Kissing Disease

Clare Murphy

Clare Murphy is an MPhil candidate at Queensland University of Technology with an interest in creative forms for understanding ecocultural identity. Clare is of Scottish industrial and English rural parentage, born in outer Meanjin and bound for inner Tulmur. She has written and edited across the arts, education and environment.

I am ten when my mother leaves me on the island with my great aunt, her mother's sister, to recover from the kissing disease—though I do not remember being kissed.

I remember the tremble that lurched through my mother's fingers so that she could not thread a machine. The tears she could not seem to stop. She had left me that time with her own sister.

I remember the hunch that crept across my father's back as he launched a full-shouldered hurl. The crashing of furnishings. The warning too true to be funny: 'Don't clean it up. I'll only do it again.' That's when she had left me to board a jet for her mother country, to recover from telling my father to leave. To see her still-English son.

But I do not remember the kiss that puts me on a barge to the island. Only the groan of steel meeting timber as the waves narrow down to a shark-netted pool. The sideways stares of the curlews; the thrill of their full-throated call. The neat arc of the hoop-pined hill up to the small fibro house festooned with fish floats, with its lawn like a loose net strewn across sand. The green vinyl settee, where I lie slack-limbed and lazy, immune for the moment from my great aunt's barking: at the horse that drops manure on the grass she calls a green; at my great uncle who is home late from the pub for his chops; at the boys I call cousins—her grandchildren—whose bare weekend feet pedal fine white particles between their Grandma's house and their Nan's.

'Inside. Or outside,' she barks in a voice that belongs to the Yorkshire dales. 'But I'll not have you in and out all day.'

I am ten when my mother leaves me on the island with my great aunt, her mother's sister, to recover from a kiss I cannot recall.

• • •

The island itself is three hundred million years old and it, too, has known upheaval. Consider what memories the island's headlands contain—in the rhyolites of hardened lava to the north and the gravel-and-sandstone layer-cake to the west. Imagine the cataclysms captured in its sands.

Tumbled and separated into quartz, rutile, ilmenite, zircon and other glistening minerals, the windblown dunes that blanket the island's bedrock are swept here by rivers and ocean currents; they are bits and drifts of granite and sedimentary rock that once climbed the sky as mountains in New South Wales. They are smashed souvenirs of the fissures where Antarctica and Australia joined as ancient Gondwana. Across the island, their gathered profiles silhouette the air that danced here between 300,000 and 6,000 years ago (Barram & Carew 15). They dip and rise and undulate, spawning hardy heath with toothy blooms that are the first to thrive in their folds.

I am not of the island, not Goenpul or Noonukul or even Ngugi of Mulgumpin, nor of Quandamooka Country, but my cousins are—my cousins and their mother and those before her. They belong to this island, its waters, its skies, porpoises, visiting whales; they belong in a way my great aunt and the rest of our family cannot, and not just because my great uncle heads out to the mines each day after bacon and eggs to bulldoze the island's sands into places they should not be.

I am ten when my cousin tries to explain this, when he downs his bike and furrows his brows, which are owlish like my great aunt's, his Nan's.

'You know,' he says, 'this island isn't yours, don't you?'

Bright spears of sunlight freckle my nose through the paperbark canopy. The heat of a retort stirs in my lungs. The triangular brace of my girlish fists press into my still-boyish hips.

But words will not form because I cannot quite grasp what he's asking.

The island's stories are as unknown to me as my own.

I do not know that the island itself is one hundred thousand years old or thereabouts when, down below the bedrock, it begins to catch its cascading rains. Or that cupped in the palms of open dunes, freshwater lakes float upward, pushing the sea and salt that creeps in beneath back out. That these perched bodies of freshwater are fed filtered rainwater through settled strata of sand and soil and the life that has come before, now hardened with age. That the springs, streams, lakes, lagoons and mangroves that bejewel the dunes are strung together where an aquifer feeds them, syphoning ancient strife back into thriving habitats. That scientists will call this 'a unique assemblage' of interconnections long after Quandamooka people have sung the tracks of Kabul the Carpet Snake and understood how he moves here (Delaney 17).

• • •

I am ten when my mother leaves me on the island with the great aunt she will not allow me to call 'Nanna' like my great aunt wants me to, like all my cousins here do because for them it is true. Because they are, more precisely, my second cousins on their father's side. But I am a child of a partial family migration who does not know how to count degrees.

I am cosied up on the sleep-out's green vinyl settee, staring up at the louvres set at half-mast to act as shelves for conches, and starfish, and bottles enveloping letters flung from Fijian cruise-ships, and wallaby skulls, and jettisoned pieces of coral reefs. The air is sea-rinsed, the light as clear as the four o'clock rockpools we stare into in search of starfish and soldier crabs, and whatever will let us glimpse it. I am fresh from the bath that is tiled with purple poodles, my hair soft with bore water, watching my grandmother's sister scoop up my cousin, my agemate, to bat the length of his lashes against the fuzz on her cheek. And I am turning over his question, my mind a tumbling wave, as my great aunt sing-songs us made-up names to chuckle at when we complain.

Little do I know, she is taping us to play back to the family later on. Little does she know, I am taping everything myself to play back in my mind just for me: the lurid blue rings of the octopus she has told us never to touch; the sweeping wave of a mine-cut dune, clenched like a fist behind her head—her curls pushed flat against the sand-pricked wind. My cousins' backs glistening in the tea-coloured waters of a sedge-lined lagoon. And that question, that is tumbling and turning, gathering sediment as it tries to form itself into an answer.

When I stumble off the barge on the mainland, my dress is crinkled with a lemonade farewell, and I am almost well again.

• • •

I am ten when I learn that it is my mother's way when things go awry to set them alight and smoke them by the sea.

We hitch a caravan to her Kingswood and move away to live in a bayside park where there are late-night drinks and interstate men, and endless cigarettes.

In exchange for the life we have left behind, I choose cherry-red knobs for the cupboards above the caravan's bed. I comb the sands lit orange by picolytes, scanning bits of broken glass for moon snails and the cast-off claws of ghost crabs.

Across the bay, the island's sand mines glisten like newly formed scars upon the ocean's skin.

The tide comes in.

'I have a surprise,' my mother tells me.

The tide goes out.

Back on the outskirts of the city, she buys a house and reinstalls my father.

• • •

The island is two hundred and ninety-nine million nine hundred and ninety-two thousand five hundred years old when sands settle over a dip where the dunes meet the water table and Karboora, the sacred blue-watered lake, opens like a window above the aquifer. For 7,500 years Karboora's purity, stability and unique biodiversity—its acid frogs, its broad-shelled river turtle, the ornate rainbowfish that live here among the endemic spike rush—settle into a balance so finely tuned, so exquisitely unperturbed that it will make headlines the whole world over (Barram & Carew 71).

Karboora is three thousand five hundred years old when the earth's great drying starts. All around it, bodies of water shrink and change, but Karboora remains suspended in its balanced state. Flushed by filtered rainwater and purified by sunlight that reaches right down to the lakebed's floor, Karboora sleeps undisturbed (Barram & Carew 71).

But not for want of disturbance.

• • •

I am eleven when the trembling returns, when my father resumes hurling the furnishings. When, again, my mother cannot thread a machine.

The tide comes in.

I help my mother pack the car for another seaside town.

• • •

I am fourteen when my great aunt touches my fingers to the mysterious ridge of shingles on her shoulder blade and gives me a case of the pox. Fifteen when my great aunt is told she must part with her breasts.

My great aunt bears this new indignance like the former, with no secrets to be guessed at, no description left unfelt. Soon after, she will bear the pert handiwork of a cosmetic surgeon for all to see, unaware of the treachery her body is plotting against her.

'You don't need to go to her funeral,' my mother tells me.

But I am sixteen now and cannot be stopped.

• • •

The tide goes out.

I am months away from seventeen when my mother marries a Californian with one working hand and a failing heart, who drinks vodka until expletives form sentences. She reinstalls us back on the outskirts of the city, and goes alone to smoke by the sea.

'Do you know where your mother is?' he asks me one night, wall-eyed, waiting for an answer that will not be right.

In his back, a hunch I've seen somewhere before is forming.

At my best friend's house, her dressing-gowned father checks the locks behind me. At home, with his one good hand, my mother's new husband hurls the furnishings through my window into the night.

• • •

The island is three hundred million years old when the ocean begins to trickle into the aquifers, when its edges change faster than the creeks can follow (SIMO). In a pinprick, in a space of 200 years, the balance begins to tremble. That's seventy years of dredging, of moving dunes, of pushing through the protective humus, of habitats losing their unique assemblages. That's 200 years of European clearing, of introducing species, of attempted erasure, of overfishing and, for some of that time, of keeping watch for warships, keeping the Goenpul and Noonukul peoples on the mission, and keeping the sick and destitute hidden away from the mainland.

• • •

I am twenty-three when I next see my cousins at a family wedding. I am wearing clothes still creased with buyer's folds, so stoned I can hardly speak.

'Are you avoiding us?' my cousin asks me.

Avoiding his eyes, I tell him 'no'.

What we know of each other has become second-hand. A decade has blown in between us, shaped by winds that cross upon the compass. We are family, sharing blood brought here on boats, but we know each other's lives likes maps where others have scrawled their warnings.

For close to a decade, I hold my headlands together; let them come apart. I crash in and out of courses, bluff my way into jobs and leave them in a bluster. I move houses, units, exchange housemates for new ones. I circle the city the way I circle relationships, like a sea eagle too wary to land. There are times when I do land, and a stillness wells up, soothing for as long as it holds. That question, tumbled and turned, lies buried in sediment at the bottom of my mind.

The tide comes in.
I begin to think I have become an island.
The tide goes out.
Or something like what I think an island might be.

• • •

The island is three hundred million minus one hundred years old when a storm brings the turbulence of the Jumpinin channel to the slim isthmus that linked the island to its other southerly half. Here, where the island dips beneath the ocean, an estuary forms, mingling salt with the waters of an aquifer-fed creek that has travelled from beyond the high dunes, waved on its journey by cabbage tree palms and enveloped in vine forest, to merge with the mudflats and saltmarshes where so much ocean life begins (Barram & Carew 70). It is where whimbrels wade on spindly legs, through the seagrass to the samphire and beneath the mangrove ferns to pluck minyulan (MMEIC 51) from shells painted with pink-grey rainbows, before pushing themselves up into a tailwind that will nudge them northward to Siberia.

The island is a drowned island, part of the mainland where the sea rushed in and left high places for the dunes to rise and fall. What is left, all that lies within, lies within a sanctuary that is connected to the skies, the seas—by its own life—to the life of other islands, to the mainland. Its isolation and its connection make it vulnerable, make it strong. When biogeographers talk about the island, they use words like 'matrix', 'connectance' and 'dynamic'; it makes them think about how full of islands the mainland must be.

• • •

I am thirty-two when I take my three children to build sandcastles out of quartz, rutile, ilmenite and zircon beside Caspian Terns. To comb the beach; to see my children's backs glistening in the tea-coloured waters of a sedge-lined lagoon. To see my cousin again. To hear my cousin say that he will teach my children the island, to know its history, to understand its ways.

My cousins are of the island. I am ten when I first try to understand this; I am thirty-two when my cousin next lets it bubble up from his chest.

We part again and I send him a message. When he does not reply I do not try again. I don't know what holds me back from asking if he can help me answer the question. But something does. Perhaps it's the constant circling. Or the constant threat of the tide.

Or could it be that a question given away is the not the asker's question to answer.

Another decade blows in and about between us.

• • •

The island is three hundred million years old and I am thirty-six when the Quandamooka people, the people who belong to the island, are officially recognised as its custodians (QYAC). When eighty per cent of the island is pledged to become Naree Budjong Dajara National Park; when forty-eight of the island's animals and thirteen of the island's plants have become hard to find, classed as either rare or threatened; and when one—the overpicked Christmas bells, whose bobbing heads have prettied far too many vases—has become extinct on the island (DESQ).

I am thirty-six when Jandai, one of the island's three languages, finds its way back onto the tongues of its speakers after being discouraged for 200 years (MMEIC i), when only two of eighty-five ancient shell middens on the island remain (Barram & Carew 33; 67).

I am forty when Yulingbila, the humpback whales, who visit the Quandamooka people each winter, begin to recover from 120 years of turning the waters red. When scientists warn that the waters off Antartica are warming and the whales' diet of krill might be elsewhere and lower in numbers when they arrive (Shelley).

I am forty-three when the sandmining finally ends and the companies are told they must cover their tracks. Leftover sand, scraped into uniform humps, replaces the snaking climbs and lilting falls that formed from mountains and breeze over ages. Nutrients drain from these approximations too quickly and lonely stands of black she-oaks take hold, their snare-brush needles whispering where the chorus of a eucalypt forest once sang (Barram & Carew 31).

I am forty-four when the country announces that it is on target to lower greenhouse gas emissions to 2005 levels within twelve years; when the world's carbon level reaches '409.8 parts per million—higher than at any point in at least the past 800,000 years' (Lindsey). When, over the island, a pattern of less than usual rainfall emerges. When the swamps and wetlands turn their peat to the sun and begin to burn, and when the fires burn longer and further than they've burnt before (SIMO).

• • •

The island itself is three hundred million years old when I learn that water is drawn from the island's aquifers to pipe to the thirsty mainland.

For decades, I have made my way over to the island to drink down guilty gulps from that well of calm and bring it back away without visiting my cousins, without listening where I've had the chance. I think about the forces that shaped the island, the memories held in its headlands, the stories that move through its waters. What is the difference, I wonder, between dozing the sand, disturbing the water table, and avoiding the hurt in the question?

• • •

I am forty-four when my cousin calls the family to a picnic.

My cousin has been learning his language, spending time with his elders, thinking about the past, the present and the future of the island. He gently explains why the nouns of his Nanna's tongue, which is mine and his father's, collapse dunes, rock pools, malaleuca into arbitrary shapes. Why my description of thyme-honey myrtle, beach bean or pig face is like a beginner artist's drawing of one, of one seen somewhere else (in a book, on the TV, in the mind) conflated with this one here.

'I don't point to that tree and use the same noun for it as the tree on the mainland up a hill,' he tells me. 'Not when that is the tree by that water.'

Juxtaposition, the linguists call it, when qualities cosy up to a noun without a verb or a tense. When those qualities are essential to understanding the nature of this noun and the relationships that define it, linguists call this 'inalienable possession' (VCAA). This is when the part cannot be physically separated from the whole, in the same way that you cannot give away your nose or your brother, or your father's clavicle (Dixon 94).

Or your cousin.

My cousin doesn't name the mistakes my great aunt's husband and son—his grandfather and father—have made, nor do I speak of the trembling tides and the hurling of furnishings. My cousin says simply: 'We need to do better'.

The island is Minjerribah. The island in the sun. Minjerribah is three hundred million years old. Like an outstretched arm along the Quandamooka coast, Minjerribah cradles us where the sucked-in belly of the bay begins to exhale.

The island is my cousin's family. My cousin is my family. Beneath the island, life rich in clarity flows through upheaval to meet the life it supports.

I am forty-five when my cousin's father, my uncle, says: 'The family that bought the old place found a photo of you and your cousin on the wall up behind a cupboard.'

I don't belong to the island but somewhere inside me, I am ten and the island is three hundred million years old.

I can't remember being kissed.

And yet I was.

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Yesterday it came in the form of

Elise O'Sullivan

Elise is a writer living in Walyalup, Western Australia, amongst friends and an almost-perfect dog who likes to swipe tubs of butter from the bench when he's alone. She's inspired by home and being away from it, other queer authors and reflecting on our collective experiences through writing.

soft blonde grass strewn
across a boy's neck
quivering. Last night it arrived thick
in my mouth dream-feeding
your new woman
your rowdy stay-a-while
who has slyly ripened into
a hulking lounge suite.
When I was still wide-eyed I woke up
to purring pigeons folding
into my Babcia's shoulder
as soft as a lamb. Down the road
muted bodies of water wrapped us up like milk.
The dense smell of chlorine pried
windows and lids open
for us to admire the rabbit in the fat
side of the moon sucking
on thumbs and upside down spoons.
Since my jaw has run slack
I am my own warm bath.
I try hard not to hurry
or to think of your middle name. This morning
it landed quietly again
lapping a peach over the sink then
clapping loudly alone in the garden at
fresh buds where I admit
anything good I've grown
has been steadily tended to
by all manner of hands.

Switzerland 911

Marc Vincenz

Marc Vincenz is a poet, fiction writer, artist and musician. He has published seventeen collections of poetry, including, more recently, *Einstein Fledermaus*, *The Little Book of Earthly Delights* and *A Brief Conversation with Consciousness*. He is publisher and editor of MadHat Press and *New American Writing*. He lives on a farm in rural Western Massachusetts with his wife, Miriam, and their Australian Cobberdog, Emily Dickinson.

All hail the Alps and their glassine ice-stream, the *Stube* with her calvados and *Kaffeecreme*, or the sausages air-dried in glacial attics in every barn across the heartland; oh, and the cheeses, the little holes that harbour untold secrets even from the magic of physics. Outside, watch the Ibex ascend the tallest crags like stairs. One night we are drinking beers and *Kirsch*, playing blackjack with American tourists. *What did they call it? Six-card stud?* And Armin, decked out in his Swiss Army uniform. The epaulette put him at the rank of Colonel, a leader of men and machines in the hearty mountain division. All hail the Alps and their hollowed out interiors—some place in the Vaud there's an entire city embedded in the mountain below the chasm, cleared for centuries by avalanches and foxes, and lone bobcats who pounce for field mice. On the central square inside the mountain city, there is a soccer field where the goal posts are just a few feet further apart, and Alesh, the local policeman, dribbles his way toward the end line. *Tor! Tor!* are the cheers that echo Thursday nights across the valley. Finally, you light a cigar and the smoke finds its way up the stairs. On your way up you give me a wink and a note. *My room is 911*, it says. I bow out of the last hand, fold on a perfect bobtail straight. For you the idea of time is self-evident. It must be spent before ascending those final steps where birds migrate the Milky Way, or deep into the liquid of mathematics all compasses pointing true north. So up I arise, engineering and economics leading the way, and in 911, your navel becomes the heart of the galaxy, a black hole collapsing in on itself, all those calvados atoms swirling in a haze of Swiss bravado.

Mid-Career Fellowship

With the support of the Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund and the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre, *Westerly* Magazine is proud to publish writing from its inaugural Mid-Career Fellowship program. Here, we present a creative non-fiction piece from the second of our 2021 Fellows: Annabel Smith. Poetry from our first Fellow, Maddie Godfrey, is featured in *Westerly* 66.1.

Defective

Annabel Smith

Annabel Smith is the author of interactive digital novel/app *The Ark*, US bestseller *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot* and *A New Map of the Universe*, which was shortlisted for the WA Premier's Book Awards. Her short fiction and essays have been published in *Southerly*, *Westerly*, *Kill Your Darlings* and the *Review of Australian Fiction*. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Edith Cowan University.

Defect (noun): something imperfect or faulty, lacking or deficient.

Defect (verb): to rebel or break faith, renounce or repudiate.

If you kiss beneath Magere Brug in Amsterdam, you will remain in love forever. Or so they tell you on the canal tours.

Get ready! the tour guide said as we glided through the calm waters of the Amstel River.

My husband turned to me. Do you want to? he asked.

When I try now to find a word to describe the spirit of his question, I struggle. A thesaurus offers me unenthusiastic, disinclined, grudging, resistant. None of these words convey the emotional depth I'm seeking. Half-hearted comes closest, with its reference to the heart. But if I had to assign a fraction to the portion of my husband's heart that wanted to invest in a gesture which conveyed his desire for our love to endure eternally, it would be much less than half.

Do you want to? he asked, quarter-heartedly.

The writer in me thought: if this was a novel the narrator would say, That was the moment she knew her marriage was over.

Two months earlier, we had 'celebrated' our twelfth wedding anniversary. At the restaurant I had booked, my husband chose to sit at the bar, more interested in making small talk with the bartenders than engaging with me. We argued, left the restaurant without eating, and were back in our hotel room by 8 o'clock, where I took a sedative and cried myself to sleep.

Shortly afterwards we began weekly sessions of relationship therapy. In our seventh session, my husband, who had appeared to engage in the

process but revealed little, said that the biggest problems in our marriage were my depression and my eating disorder.

My depression. My eating disorder.

The fault lines within our marriage were an extension of the fault lines within me: my foibles, my failings; the broken parts of myself I had failed to fix.

I broke my coccyx giving birth. I couldn't stand up or sit down without assistance, or lift my son from the trolley-crib they had placed beside my hospital bed. On the first night of his life in the world, his life outside my body, he was cared for by the midwives in the night nursery.

I have heard mothers speak of anguish at being separated from their newborns, but I felt only relief that I might be spared responsibility for his wellbeing for a few more hours.

When I woke the next morning and heard the cribs being wheeled from the night nursery to the ward I thought, Not yet. Please, not yet.

In the early weeks of breastfeeding I felt hungry all the time but had neither the energy nor time to prepare food. Holding my son in one arm, I ate dry crackers washed down with milk, rows of chocolate squares broken off a 'family-sized' block. I bathed my son and sang to him; pureed organic grass-fed beef mince with sweet potato and broccoli. Some days I wrote about the good parts in a journal, for him to read when he was older. Many days there were no good parts. My son cried or fussed incessantly, and barely napped. I felt I was failing as a mother. Sometimes, eating chocolate felt like the only pleasure in my day. I cried and swore and shouted. One day I knocked my own head against the wall in despair.

When I took my son to Baby Rhyme-Time at the library, loading the pram with carefully selected pop-up books and board books with inserts of fabric and sandpaper and shiny plastic for sensory stimulation, I always brought home something for myself: books on parenting, self-help, pop psychology. When he was eight months old, and I was diagnosed with post-natal depression, I thought about the 'still face' experiments I had read about in one book, conducted by a developmental psychologist named Edward Tronick in the 1970s (Goldman), in which caregivers briefly stopped responding to their infants' cues, causing obvious distress in the children. I lived with perpetual anxiety that my mental health was affecting my son's development. Eventually when he was two, I asked my psychologist if I could bring him with me to a session, to have him informally 'assessed'.

In the first session she gave him two plastic dinosaurs to play with. He shoved one as far as he could down the other's throat. Was he failing the test? Was I failing the test? At the second session he spoke to her about 'fightin feelins', but also, thank god, about 'jokin feelins'.

She said he was a happy, healthy, developmentally normal child.

Some years later, when he was seven or eight years old, I discovered a note on his desk, on a scrap of paper, in his childish handwriting:

I hate myself—I never get surprise playdates—I'm always ashamed—that's all.

After my grandfather died, when I was in my late twenties, I began exchanging letters with my grandmother in the UK. Sometimes she added newspaper cuttings, memorabilia. In one letter she enclosed a school photograph of herself aged five or six which, as an older child, she had defaced with the words, She is daft.

Two things I remember about my grandmother from my childhood: she was fat and she liked sweets. I don't remember her size ever being discussed, but as a child, when I thought of her, fat is the word that came to mind. This was in the 1970s, before euphemistic terms like overweight, or medical terms like obese, came into popular use. She was the only fat person I knew, the only person I cuddled who was soft.

I found the photograph of her—along with the note from my son—a few months after my marriage ended, when, riddled with feelings of self-loathing and unworthiness, I was engaged in the process of investigating my schemas, or sets of ideas about the self and the world and/or the self in the world. My psychologist believed my sense of identity and worldview was governed by a schema she called defectiveness, a persistent sense of being not good enough, 'bad, unwanted, inferior, or invalid in important respects'; a fear that if people knew the real me they would not like me.

As my son grew up I began to cope better with being a mother. Most of the time, I did not feel depressed. But when I attempted to come off anti-depressants the depression would swiftly reassert itself and I continued to see a psychologist, though much less frequently. I was still using chocolate to self-soothe, and gaining weight, year by year. As I became fatter, my husband began to monitor my eating.

Are you sure you want that? he would ask, when I took a second helping.

For a few brief periods I managed to control my eating and lose weight. But in time, my cravings would overwhelm me and I would return to my pattern of compulsive eating, regaining the weight I had lost, and inevitably some additional weight. It was not until my son was ten that I came to understand that my cycles of restricting and bingeing formed a pattern of eating which could be described as disordered.

My husband did not accept that I had an eating disorder. He believed I was simply greedy and lacking in willpower. After many arguments he stopped commenting on my eating choices. Instead he watched me as I put food on my plate, as I lifted a fork to my mouth. One day, over lunch, I challenged him again on his behaviour.

It's my body. It's my choice, I said. What makes you think you have a right to monitor me?

It's unattractive, he said.

When I was growing up in England, Nanna and Grandad lived only a few miles from us and we saw them often.

Do you want some ju-jus? she would ask when they came to visit, and me and my brothers would each be given a packet of sweets from her handbag. When we went to their house, we would go straight to the junk drawer in the kitchen, near the back door. We didn't have to ask. We knew the sweets would be there for us.

Nanna had her own ju-jus, fruit-flavoured jellies coated with sugar crystals; rough on the tongue, but soft in the middle. She kept them in an ornate crystal jar in a glass-fronted cabinet in the living room, beside a wind-up ceramic ornament of two white doves which played the theme from *Love Story*. I never saw her eat them but somehow I understood that she did; that there was a relationship between her ju-jus and her being fat. What I didn't understand was the relationship between love and food; between food and the sense of self; between love and the sense of self.

Now I wonder: Did Grandad tell her she was unattractive? Did she eat them in secret so he wouldn't watch her lifting the heavy lid of the jar, count how many she put in her mouth?

When Annabel was a baby, she was so ugly, we called her Alfred Hitchcock, my Dad said in his speech at my 21st birthday.

I laughed. When I laugh my left lower lip refuses to pull itself down to mirror my right, making me look lopsided. From as early as I can remember having a sense of self, my crooked mouth was part of that sense. The story goes like this: When I was six weeks old, Mum took me to her doctor to show him.

You mothers! he said to her. Go home and look in the mirror, see if you're perfect.

When I was two, my mother's dentist suggested she take me to a specialist. When I refused to open my mouth for the specialist, he pinched me to make me cry, and told my mother it was nothing to worry about.

I have no conscious memory of the specialist. But that does not mean I don't remember it. Pre-verbal memories, experiences we cannot use language to make sense of, are housed in the limbic system, the ancient brain. Is it from an implicit memory that I became so conscious of my crooked mouth, of this part of me that was not right and could not, or would not, be fixed?

Ugly.

Unattractive.

Defective.

When I was perhaps six or seven, my older brother told me Nanna was a bastard. Bastard was a swear word; a word for a bad person or a person who had done something bad. My dad explained that Nanna hadn't done anything bad, but when she was born her mother was unmarried. I now know that Nanna was put into foster care at birth, in 1925. Her biological mother went to work as a housekeeper for an antiques dealer with an ailing wife and three young children. After the wife's death, she married the antiques dealer and reclaimed Nanna from foster care.

Like many arts undergraduates, I encountered Sigmund Freud in first year psychology. More recently, I learned that Freud was one of the first psychoanalysts to hypothesise that, in an attempt to deal with information that is incomprehensible to them, young children perceive themselves as responsible for everything bad that happens to them. At four years old, Nanna not only had to relinquish her foster family—the only family she had known—and adapt to life with a new 'mother', step-father and three older step-siblings grieving their mother's recent death, she also had to make sense of the fact that if her mother had 'come back for her' she must first have abandoned her. She almost certainly internalised the notion that if her mother had given her up, it must have been because there was something wrong with her; she was defective.

Research into abandonment trauma led me to psychotherapist Nancy Verrier, whose clinical work with adoptees explores how postnatal separation is experienced as trauma in the preverbal child, citing research which demonstrates that human infants know their mothers through multiple senses, showing, for example, a preference for their own mother's milk. Thus, when an infant is separated from its birth mother, even if the birth mother is replaced with a loving and supportive carer, the infant is aware that the new carer, who does not smell or sound the same, is a proxy, and thus feels and experiences the loss of its biological mother as an abandonment, a traumatic event. Taking this idea one step further, in his YouTube video 'Adoption and Addiction', addiction counsellor Paul

Sunderland explains how a break in mother-infant bonding results in a reduction of serotonin, the neurotransmitter responsible for soothing.

Shortly before my marriage ended, and again recently, I attended a support group for women with Binge Eating Disorder. Most of the participants had been victims of trauma, including childhood sexual abuse. Like many adoptees, most lived with a pervasive sense of shame or worthlessness. Almost all were living with some degree of depression, and over and over they talked about using food to self-soothe. Food is the good girl's drug, one participant said.

Sunderland's work elucidates the connection between adoption, serotonin and addiction. Given that one of the most reliable and readily available ways of increasing serotonin is sugar, it is not surprising then that abandonment trauma is a known contributor to eating disorders.

Was it abandonment trauma that led Nanna to deface her own photograph with a message of self-loathing? Was it abandonment trauma that compelled her to always have a supply of ju-jus on hand?

In the television series *Counterpart*, two identical versions of the world exist side by side, including two initially identical versions of every human. Sometimes, people cross the border, temporarily inhabiting an alternate version of their own lives, created by an alternate version of themselves who has made different choices. Sometimes people defect permanently to the other side, preferring this other version of themselves.

Intellectually, I knew that I was not solely responsible for the break-down of my marriage, that my 'problems' were not the only thing that eroded the connection between my husband and me. Then again, hadn't I been wrong since birth: ugly, crooked, flawed?

And yet, hadn't I read all those self-help books? Wasn't there some part of me that believed people could change? Couldn't I too be one of those people? I yearned to shed the sense of self constructed for me by my family, my husband; to defect from the version of my life in which my identity was of a person irreparably damaged, unworthy of love; to cross the border into an alternate version of my own life.

I began at the source: my parent's house, scouring photo albums forty years old. In the digital era we might take a dozen shots to get the perfect photo, deleting any in which people are eating with their mouths open, squinting into the sun, caught in awkward poses. But in the seventies and eighties, when we paid for photos to be printed, they all went into the albums. Here were all the photos of myself I remembered—with cold-sores, buck-teeth, bowl cuts: boundless evidence of my 'ugliness'. And yet, there were other photos which told a different story; photos I would need to create the back story for my new identity. I peeled away the plastic film that preserved them; prised them from the sticky pages of the albums and took photographs of the photographs. Evidence. I saved my favourite as the 'wallpaper' on my mobile phone. In this photo I am three or perhaps four years old, in a ruched summer dress with puffed sleeves, in a field, on a bright day, holding a long stick. I am laughing: my eyes closed, my mouth crooked.

Is that you? people asked when they saw it. You were so cute!

And I can see that I was.

A few weeks later, when my son was at his father's and I was alone at home, I opened the archive box in which I had been saving cards, letters and other memorabilia for most of my adult life. I sifted through primary school reports, love letters from old boyfriends, birthday cards from school friends and print-outs of emails from friends travelling overseas, examining thirty years' worth of documents for proof that I was worthy of love.

The words I read inside that box were so at odds with the way I had come to see myself, they were difficult to comprehend. I wanted to believe them. I needed to believe them if I was to successfully cross the border. I made them into a word cloud in my diary, colouring the ones that appeared most often: inspiring; unique and beautiful; all energy and enthusiasm; courageous, authentic, loving, fun.

My grandmother never had the opportunity to build herself a new identity. She did not have the freedom that I have to learn about these things, to speak about them, to bring them out into the light and examine them.

I wish I could talk to her. I wish I could tell her what I have come to understand; what I am teaching my son so he won't repeat the same pattern. We are all lacking, deficient, flawed and imperfect: defective in our own ways.

I live in a larger body than the bodies my society deems attractive. I take medication for the neuro-chemical deficiencies that cause my depression. I have a crooked mouth.

But I am also joyous; refreshing; someone who knows the special art of listening; a bright spark; a one-woman riot.

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How not to build a girl

Emma Lee

Emma Lee's publications include *The Significance of a Dress* (Arachne, 2020), and she co-edited *Over Land, Over Sea* (Five Leaves, 2015).

It's a wire fence but I'm looking at a grid
the embroiderer in me wants to stitch. I don't
know which side should be the reverse.
The squares can be seen through but the stitches
would fill them in, make the barrier more solid,
block views of me or stop me from seeing beyond.

Would that matter? It's hardly a trap, the fence
can be climbed and has a gate. I'm this side
because I should be listening to the games teacher.
I sum up what I know: I don't like netball.
I do like embroidery and remember a museum trip
and seeing satin-stitched lotus shoes for bound feet.

I got caught up and almost forgot their purpose.
The bound foot that couldn't remember its original
shape. Players drilled into position don't stray
over the court. The more elegant the embellishment,
the closer the binding. The drill at home tighter
than the games teacher's rules. I wanted to quit the game.

Darning

Dana Sonnenschein

Dana Sonnenschein is a professor at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, CT, USA. Her collections of poetry and prose poems include *Bear Country*, *Natural Forms*, *No Angels but These* and *Corvus*.

Who does not love
to make broken things whole?
As a child, I liked to hold

the wooden darning egg
by its odd handle, to wave it
over the button jar, playing,

until my mother showed me
how to pull sock over egg
and weave in miniature—

stitches anchoring the warp
a bit past the worn-through spot
so repairs wouldn't ravel

then the needle going
under over under over
to the other side, and back again.

I matched my father's socks
with black or brown thread,
dull strands as businesslike

as the shoes on shoe trees,
the suits on wooden hangers,
the pale shirts with pointed collars.

How could strands so soft
have withstood my father's weight,
his anger and unhappiness?

I don't remember knotting
the thread, but I must have.
So my father walked

for years on tiny knots
like periods ending sentences
about not wasting or wanting.

I didn't take running stitches
to square my darning either,
so the man who balanced

his checkbook, knotted his tie,
and meted out discipline exactly
stood on puddles of mending.

He didn't complain about it,
I remember, as I take up the egg
and my purple and blue sock.

My feet are small but wide
like his, with the same high arches.
It's been a week since he died.

Teeth and Knucklebones

Eliza Henry-Jones

Eliza has published four novels with HarperCollins, which have been listed for the ABIA, Indie, CBCA, NSW Premier's Literary Awards, QLD Literary Awards and Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction. She is a PhD candidate examining how historic sites of trauma manifest in the environment.

It was the most recent bodies that rose up from the bogs to begin with. Some of them so fresh that they were barely tanned red from the acid. These were the ones who had been buried in peat rather than submerged back when the bogs were mostly water. Murdered, most likely. We learnt quickly not to think too hard about it.

They continued clawing their way to the surface—even the older ones that didn't seem to have any bones or organs left.

Some of them could walk. Most of them were too wobbly and knock-kneed or boneless like a tanned hide long prised away from flesh and bones and organs. Some of them didn't even try to walk, although their legs seemed in good working order. Da said that wouldn't do at all; the not walking. He said that the Lord had blessed them with a miracle and that the very least they could do is to try to make the most of it.

• • •

I want to ride to the bog, even though the garda and Da and probably Jesus himself don't want us to go.

I tell Ciaran, ask if he wants to come. He shakes his head, pulls the blanket up to his ears and groans.

'Scared?'

He yawns. 'Feck off.'

The boneless ones are brought into labs and museums for testing, but the more recently buried are harder to catch. They are the colour of shadows and damp earth. They are startled easily into the wilderness by cars and voices and the crunch of boots on gravel. They don't need to eat. They never speak or even breathe. But, God, out in the cold they shiver.

• • •

During these weeks when they first emerge, Da is not to be seen without his good rosary beads. The ones that he usually keeps on a hook by his nightstand. He seems to be expecting something momentous to happen, but nothing does. The bodies come out of the bogs and shiver and are sometimes caught and that's that. Da glares at the tellie; drinks too much whiskey. Sometimes he gets so worked up that he starts muttering things in Irish. Pacing.

The only body spared his ire is a small one—a boy once, maybe—who Da finds limping around the street out the front of our house. He swears, at first. Hurries Ciaran and I past the body and into the hallway. But then Da goes very still and keeps peering out the window at the small, lopsided shape outside. He spends a good fifteen minutes like that, stiff and deliberating. Not even Ciaran tries to say anything smart; even he knows better when Da is in a mood like this.

It begins to rain. Da begins to fuss—that's what Mam had always called it. *Your Da's fussing*. He picks at the hem of his jacket and shifts from foot to foot. As the rain gets heavier, he straightens and strides outside.

Da calls the body Oisin, just like that. He coaxes Oisin indoors with digestive biscuits from the tin with the tractors on the front. Oisin chews on them with his strange, chalky teeth and spits the dried pellets of them onto the floor. Ciaran and I both spring away, glance at each other and then back towards the tiny body. At Da's renewed stillness, which has suddenly become a soft and inviting thing.

Da beams, holds out another digestive. 'There's a lad, then.'

• • •

Oisin has one nicely preserved foot with five peeling toes and a strong and sturdy heel. His other foot finishes halfway between his heel and where his toes had once been. He rocks when he moves, a rolling gait that always seems to teeter on the point of him crashing sideways. He is not allowed outside—it would not do for someone to see him leaving or entering the house.

Da spends hours training Oisin the way he had trained the dog we'd had when I was young—with biscuits and a crooning voice and the same words, over and over, until the house seems to lose all its air.

• • •

At night in front of the telly, Da begins to set aside his usual wood whittling and will instead place Oisin on his knee and carefully brush out Oisin's bronze coloured hair. It sometimes comes out in chunks, but Da will just stick those chunks back on, holding the hair against Oisin's scalp until

the glue sets. Da will grunt when reports about the bodies come up on the screen. Bodies being dismembered and left in fields. Bodies being locked in boxes and bins. Bodies tied to the back of a car, being laden with stock feed and made to carry the weight for miles. Bodies being set on fire and weighed down in wells and lakes and seawater. Da will watch, chewing on the flesh of his own tongue. Insatiable.

Occasionally during these segments, Oisin will grow restless and shrug away from Da to limp around the edges of the house, delicate fingers trailing along the walls and windows. On these nights our da smells of his cigarettes and the damp, rough odour of the bogs.

He grunts, head still cocked towards the telly, standing up to coax Oisin back onto his lap.

• • •

Ciaran starts seeing how many cigarettes he can steal off Da without getting caught. He normally only steals one at a time, and rarely, and with his face all flushed with the danger and thrill of it. But now he can stuff handfuls of cigarettes into his pockets and Da doesn't notice.

'They don't taste the same,' Ciaran tells me, as we stand out in the icy evening air behind the garden shed. He offers me a drag and I accept and we stare into the uncurtained window of the house. Sometimes Ciaran feels so much older than I am, although there's barely a year between us.

The cigarette tastes like peat.

• • •

Ciaran tells me this: that he caught Da taking Oisin's finger into his mouth and biting down on the knucklebone and watching Oisin's face and biting down harder and watching and watching until Ciaran had to look away and go outside and kick a wall.

'That's a load of shite,' I say, but Ciaran just shrugs and cuffs me over the head and takes off at a sprint towards the bus stop.

• • •

The smallest part of a body to rise from a bog is the tanned remains of a pinky finger. This is stored in a jar with cotton buds and does a few rounds of the news stations. The fact of the pinky, its smallness, is not enough to stop people from chopping the bodies in half; from taking arms and legs and fingers and noses from them like butchered carcasses. It does not stop the people from burying tanned heads into the peat and waiting, patient and curious and ferocious, to see what happens next.

• • •

Oisin spends his nights in our house locked in the laundry. It's hard to tell whether the bodies sleep; they are generally very still and, like Oisin, they don't have eyes. His hair is beginning to grow fuzzy from Da's nightly brushing. It's beginning to become clotted from the glue. Da digs out an old denim jacket of mine and won't let me reclaim the rusty badges from its sleeve.

'Let him have them,' Da says. He holds the jacket and its badges above Oisin's head. Rattles them. 'Sit down, Oisin! *Suí síos*!'

Oisin sits slowly down on his haunches and Da gives him the jacket and badges and a digestive pulled moistly from his pocket. 'Good,' he says, touching Oisin's head. 'Good lad.'

• • •

Ciaran begins sticking signs onto Oisin's brittle back. Things like *kick me* and *zombie trash*. Oisin does not appear to notice the rustling of the papers as he moves. Not even when Ciaran sticks so many on that the paper explodes from his shoulder blades like wings.

One night, I catch Ciaran bent over Oisin's fingers, checking them carefully, flexing them, running his own fingers over Oisin's exposed knucklebones and leathery skin. In this moment, he looks like Mam.

Oisin's fingers close over Ciaran's so that it looks like they are holding hands. Ciaran extricates himself, more gently than I would have expected. Then he clears his throat, sticks another sign to Oisin's back, and bolts for the back door.

• • •

After giving up on the cigarettes, Ciaran starts drinking Da's good whiskey out the back of the house when Da is busy (always) with Oisin. I sometimes go out there, too. We drink together, don't say much.

Never the peated stuff, though. We've lost our taste for that.

• • •

Oisin smells like the rooms of our house. Like dust and damp stone. Like toast with a faint lacing of detergent. And glue. The bog.

Tonight at tea-time Ciaran and I get canned beans from the press and eat them cold on toast. Da does not join us because he is busy pulling out Oisin's teeth, one by one, holding Oisin's small mouth open with the boulder of his knee.

Ciaran and I sit at the table eating, pretending not to notice. We contemplate our beans as Da comes in with a file and carefully buffs each discoloured tooth, like milky stones cast across the lounge. We gnaw on

the crusts as Da collects glue and goes back into the other room where he jams each tooth, one by one, back into Oisin's jaw.

After Da has gone to bed, I unstring his good set of rosary beads and line them up on the cement pavings in the backyard. Later, I watch as Ciaran crunches them under his booted heel, one by one.

• • •

Quite a few people begin digging up their dead from cemeteries. It becomes such a thing that the Garda are not enough, and security guards are hired to patrol the boundaries of the cemeteries.

Some people manage to extricate their dead. By scaling fences, maybe. Or paying off the patrols. They then transport their dead (in the boot? Belted into a seat?), bribe the Institute workers stationed at the perimeter of the bogs, and rebury their dead in the dark peat.

I supposed they pray. Or something similar. I know from the news reports that they wait and that some of them light candles.

It isn't worth the fines, in the end.

The reburied dead do not rise.

• • •

Da digs his fiddle out, spends a whole afternoon tuning it. He hasn't played since Mam died and Mam had died when Ciaran was just starting school. I don't even remember Da ever playing it; just the shape of the fiddle itself. The resin, wooden smell of it.

Now, he plays for Oisin. Hours at a time. At first, Oisin goes very still and then he creeps closer and closer to Da, his hands curling on Da's knees. Ciaran and I sit in the kitchen and pretend not to pay attention. But the music is beautiful—the sort that seems to change the rhythm of blood in veins. The sort of melody that can alter a mood like cloud passing over the sun.

'Jesus,' Ciaran says, loudly. He rubs at his eyes, like the fiddle is giving him a headache. 'Jesus *fucking* Christ.'

I expect a smack from Da, Ciaran being sent to his room. I expect something to happen, but nothing does. That jolly, lilting tune goes on and on and on.

I twist my neck towards the room. In the crooked space between the tellie and the armchair where Da is playing his fiddle, Oisin has begun to sway.

• • •

Later that night, I find Ciaran in the lounge room, his hands around the neck of Da's fiddle. I think of the Institute; of the mismatched pairing of Oisin's tiny feet. Pearly, filed teeth. The feeling of bursting silver—smoke and cold air and whiskey with no peat.

Ciaran places the fiddle back into its case, nestling its hollow, wooden skin against green felt. He moves across to me in the dark.

'Did you hear?' Ciaran asks me, quietly. 'They're offering rewards now for any bodies not already locked up at the Institute.'

A gleam.

'You wouldn't. It'd kill Da.'

• • •

Da plays the same songs, over and over. The ones that Oisin seems to like the best. He plays those songs so much that we begin to hear them, even when the world is quiet. If Ciaran or I call out a request, Da pretends not to hear us. In between, he rosins his bow and tunes his strings, brushes Oisin's hair and feeds Oisin digestive biscuits when Oisin sits or stays; lies down or shakes hands.

Good lad.

Ciaran and I retreat outside. It's cold, particularly at night. Da's whiskey warms us up. I imagine the whiskey turning us red, acidic. Preserved from the inside.

Sometimes it feels more like a prayer.

The wind is the sound of the bodies; the creak of trees is ancient skin and bone. Inside, the sound of the fiddle.

The shadow of the tiny body, swaying.

Schwarzsee

Amy Crutchfield

Amy Crutchfield is a poet living in Melbourne. Her work has been published in a number of journals including the *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Island*, *Stilts* and the *Poetry Review*. She won the 2020 Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize and read at the Ten Days on the Island Festival in Tasmania.

Strange mess this nest of
sticks and limbs,
collected on a sill
of ice fifteen fathoms
down, his jacket the
colour of a cloudless sky.
What has wedged him
here, as an eyrie
in this sheer, unearthly
blue sheath of air?
Nail to phalange
the frost advances,
fractures pierce him
as he shivers. Confusion
like an evening deepens.
The enchantment
of margins brought
him here, to these
thin places where
life is most. Edges
where life swells
and resolves. But
now an abysmal
thrumming
summons him
to tumble, tumble.
Until. *Hello?*
A human music
sounds. A steady
Swiss voice,
I'm here to help.
And now his
single, mangled
bellow. One
rescuer rappels
into the river's
gill, others reel
him mute and
rigid. More giant
fish than human,
eyes vast and
distant as a
bluefin's.

Deployed

Sam Morley

Sam Morley is a poet whose work has been published by a number of journals including *Cordite*, *Red Room Poetry*, *Hunter Writers Centre*, *Portside Review*, *Canberra Times* and *Bluebottle Journal*, and appeared on noted shortlists including the ACU Poetry Prize. He lives in Melbourne.

The day the parachuter landed
summer grass hissed at his knees
way out in the back corner of the paddock
where we knew brown snakes lived.

His parachute would have followed him
a slow silk dome folding grace
and in the split second after landing
he was a child again under falling bedsheets.

We bunched two steps behind as Mum
stood hand on hip, talking to this silhouette
this fly wire jet fighter who saw districts
ahead and could stride three fields long.

By then his veins had stopped shuddering
he'd packed his collection of sky into a bag
the plummeting youth of the day was gone and
all he wanted was to find a way back home.

Writing from Life and the Limits of Privacy in Gabrielle Carey's *Only Happiness Here*

Gemma Nisbet

Gemma Nisbet is a writer and PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia, researching objects, memory and the personal essay. Her work has appeared in publications including *TEXT*, *The West Australian* and a number of Australian anthologies.

In life writing studies, research relating to privacy tends to concentrate on the ethics of representing other people's lives. What is discussed less frequently are the ethics and the effects on life writers of representing their own lives. There seems to be an assumption that because someone has chosen to write about their experiences, their private details are fair game: as Claire Lynch puts it, 'writing about one's own life is, of course, potentially exposing, but at least the revelations are self-inflicted' (13). Maureen Perkins observes that 'the autobiographical imperative implies that everything must be told, that secrets are the equivalent of a betrayal of the autobiographical pact, and that an author should hold nothing back' (271). This rhetoric—that if you're not revealing yourself fully, you may be doing your readers and writing a disservice—is often accompanied by the ostensibly admirable sentiment that life writers should strive for honesty regarding their mistakes and failings. However, it also tends towards oversimplifying what it might mean to write the 'truth' about one's life. Writing based on real experience will only ever be a partial representation of it and, as Blake Morrison suggests, confessional writers 'make conscious and considered choices about what to reveal' (206). For many life writers, these choices will be based, at least in part, on balancing self-revelation and autobiographical restraint.

It is worth acknowledging, too, that writing about one's own life is a vulnerable act that can have personal costs, particularly when doing so might traverse traumatic or taboo subject matter. For some writers, these costs might constitute serious threats to their personal freedom and safety (see, for example, Stroińska & Cecchetto 2015). For others, they might be less dramatic, but still tangible. I count myself in this latter category: the question of how to manage privacy when writing about personal experience is one that has arisen in my practice-led research as I undertake a PhD in Creative Writing, working on a collection of creative

nonfiction pieces that could be described as both personal essays and life writing. This writing frequently covers deeply intimate territory, such as mental illness and family history, which seems to demand some degree of personal revelation in service of the stories I want to tell and the ideas I want to explore. But how vulnerable to embarrassment and self-consciousness—or worse—should I and other life writers be prepared to render ourselves? How much might we want to keep private, and how much *can* we reasonably keep private, in the circumstances?

Life writing literature might offer some insight. An instructive example is Gabrielle Carey's 2020 bibliomemoir *Only Happiness Here*, which intertwines research into the work and life of Australian-born novelist Elizabeth von Arnim with Carey's own experiences in the aftermath of 'the worst year' of her life (3). It is an instance of life writing that is not only explicitly invested in the value of privacy, but also responds to the kinds of questions that have arisen in my creative practice. Carey describes how 'reading and writing about Elizabeth would become one of the essential keys to my recovery' (3) following her traumatic year, and in studying what she sees as von Arnim's ability to find joy in simple pleasures even in difficult times, she offers the reader nine 'principles of happiness' derived from von Arnim's life and work. One is 'privacy', which Carey suggests was vitally important to von Arnim's sense of wellbeing and is more broadly essential to a contented life. Carey's interest in privacy is partly prompted by one of the defining events of her 'worst year': a serious instance of identity theft, perpetrated by someone who rented her home on Airbnb and used the information within it to apply for bank loans in her name. However, Carey also situates this incident within a broader technologically precipitated 'crisis of privacy' which, she contends, is 'just as much a threat to human existence as climate change' (70). This interest is, furthermore, enacted in the book's consideration of how von Arnim attempted to balance self-disclosure with self-protection, and the decisions Carey makes about what to include, and not, in relation to the ways von Arnim's story intersects with her own.

One personal anecdote that Carey does share relates to a substantial wall, a 'favourite feature' of her garden that had begun to crumble, prompting her to rent her home to the eventual thief to help fund the repairs (66). The image of a wall is a suggestive one in relation to privacy; indeed, Carey writes that one thing she liked about hers was how its height provided privacy. However, I would suggest that a different metaphor—one of distance—best conceptualises the ways Carey and von Arnim can be seen to attempt to protect their respective privacies in the account offered by *Only Happiness Here*. Their various strategies are linked by attempts to create or emphasise what we might call 'narratorial distance': something like what Elizabeth Kadetsky has described as 'the author-narrator gap'; that is, the distance between the authorial self (or selves) writing the narrative and the narrative persona(e) represented in it. In *Only Happiness Here*, creating or calling attention to this distance can be understood as an attempt to shield the self from the loss of privacy that can accompany literary self-revelation, potentially offering a way forward for self-life writers such as myself seeking to strike this balance between disclosure and restraint. However, in examining *Only Happiness Here*'s possibilities for life writers concerned for their privacy and how such considerations might be received by readers, it is important to recognise that writers and readers may have different expectations and desires around privacy, and that the 'success' of these strategies may therefore be difficult to reconcile.

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These discussions can be situated within a growing body of scholarship interested broadly in concerns relating to privacy and surveillance, and more specifically in how people negotiate the balance between disclosure and privacy as part of the intersubjective negotiations inherent to human relationships (see, for example, Roessler & Mokrosinska) and in the context of the increasing ubiquity of online social networks (Cardell et al.; Ellison et al.; Locatelli). Ethicist Marijin Sax notes that 'there is persistent disagreement in the literature on privacy's proper meaning and definition', but suggests that one common way scholars define the term centres on the concept of control: that 'privacy is about the control one has over access to oneself'. He writes: 'Access to ourselves or our information is not undesirable per se; what matters is that we have control over this access' (145). This is what privacy scholars often call 'informational privacy' (Walther 4), and clearly resonates with Carey's experience of identity theft: an instance of a catastrophic loss of control over access to her personal details. Rachel Robertson defines privacy in similar terms in her essay on the effects of her life writing on the people around her. Privacy is, she says, 'about control [...] over our body, space and possessions and control over information about ourselves' (311). This definition is contingent on several assumptions. It presupposes that 'information about ourselves'—the details and narratives of our lives—is something we can and should claim ownership over; that it is something we 'own' in the way of possessions. Secondly, as Robertson notes, it assumes a model of selfhood based on the existence of 'a discrete, autonomous self' (313) that is fixed and immutable—and that is a model

of the self that life writing studies is often interested in questioning (see, for example, chapter two of Eakin, 'How Our Lives').

Despite these caveats, this definition of privacy as control does start to get at what I am thinking about in my writing practice and what Carey appears to be grappling with in *Only Happiness Here*. It suggests the way that acts of self-narration are contingent, to some extent, on offering up details about our lives and experiences in service of our narratives even as we lose some control over them through publication. Memories of our experiences can be conceptualised as the 'raw material' of (some) nonfiction writers' work (Carlin & Rendle-Short 11) and disclosing such details can be an important way to build trust, create emotional connection and impart a sense of authenticity to the reader (Sala 3; Kidd 120). Indeed, Paul Longley Arthur and Leena Kurvet-Käosaar argue that in life writing, 'sometimes the most secret memories or the most private remnant of information are also those that can lead to the most profound insights' (120). However, disclosing such experiences in our work means that we relinquish some control over how they might be interpreted as that work makes its way into the world. Writing about difficult or traumatic experiences is, Morrison notes, often framed as healing, cathartic or even empowering; a way to take 'possession of your own life' (224). And while we have control over what we reveal in a piece of writing and the way in which we reveal it—a position of power (Sala 4)—once we publish, we sacrifice some of that control as readers make their own interpretations. John Paul Eakin writes that 'we are all of us judged when we tell the stories of our lives' ('Breaking Rules' 113), and so the risk is that we might be misunderstood or interpreted in a way we did not intend.

Eakin also suggests that 'theorists of privacy seem to agree that space or social distance is a precondition of privacy' ('How Our Lives' 161). Creating narratorial distance might thus allow the self-life writer to foster a sense of psychic or emotional separation between the self or selves that exist outside of our writing and the narrative personae that exist within it as a way of making the latter less identifiable and less interchangeable with the former. Doing so can thus allow us to (attempt to) exercise control over our personal information to shield the 'private' self from some of the negative effects that can accompany literary self-revelation. However, as the example of *Only Happiness Here* illustrates, the 'success' of such efforts is not guaranteed.

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One way a self-life writer might create narratorial distance is by adopting a narrative persona as a distinct character: what Robertson calls a partial self-portrait (305), which might be both similar and different to the private self-image. This is something von Arnim did, for example, in her semi-autobiographical first novel, *Elizabeth and her German Garden*, which she published under the pseudonym 'Elizabeth'. (Von Arnim was born 'Mary' and was not yet known as Elizabeth in her private life at this point.) Carey says this book gives 'the impression of being a slightly fictionalised version of [von Arnim's] life at the time' but acknowledges that it remains debateable how autobiographical the book was and how closely the persona 'Elizabeth' resembled the real-life Mary (35–36). Depending on how distant this persona was from the authorial self, it might also constitute fictionalising lived experience, which is another strategy that von Arnim used, for example, in her 1917 novel *Christine*[1] and 1921's *Vera*. However, this fictionalising of lived experience is not a technique I want to dwell on here, given my focus is on the kind of life writing that both Carey and I are engaged with, which makes claims to being nonfiction.

It is instructive, however, to consider von Arnim's motivations in adopting the 'mask' of Elizabeth. The author was adamant that *Elizabeth and her German Garden* not be published under her real name, citing 'family reasons' to her publisher (Carey 55). Carey speculates that it may have been necessary for von Arnim to shield her identity due to the disapproval of her husband, his family or the conservative German aristocracy of which she had become a part—or, indeed, all three. Carey posits that a so-called 'lady novelist' may have brought 'shame to the family' (55–56). She also suggests that the book's subversive themes relating to marriage and female independence may have been potentially troublesome, noting that: '*Elizabeth and her German Garden* looks like a book about gardening and yet within it the author bluntly and boldly inserts statements such as: "I don't think a husband is at all a good thing for a girl to have"'—a 'revolutionary' sentiment in its context (53–54). Whatever the rationale, it seems that in publishing under a pseudonym, von Arnim wanted to avoid associating the potentially socially unacceptable opinions or actions of her persona 'Elizabeth' with the aristocratic wife and mother Mary[2].

Eakin conceptualises this kind of social pressure when he notes that 'while we may well have the right to tell our life stories, we do so under constraints; we are governed by rules, and we can expect to be held accountable to others for breaking them' ('Breaking Rules' 113). He identifies 'three primary transgressions […] for which self-narrators have

been called to account', one of which is 'failure to display normative models of personhood' (114). His discussion focuses on relatively extreme examples of this, such as people affected by serious memory loss, but the concept can be extended to encompass writers who may be challenging social norms, as von Arnim was doing. It is thus evident how, to protect her privacy, von Arnim has attempted to put distance between her 'private' self and persona—so much distance that the connection between the two might be obscured from public view. Her motivation appears to be that she is attempting to control her personal information to ensure she continues to remain acceptable to the society she is living in and thus avoid some of the potentially negative consequences of her act of self-narration.

The effectiveness of this persona/pseudonym in terms of shielding von Arnim's private self from public scrutiny is questionable. As Carey notes, the press began speculating fairly quickly that 'Elizabeth' might be von Arnim (55), and though the author did eventually begin 'to openly identify with the persona of her pen-name' after the death of her first husband (126), she took further steps throughout her career to protect her privacy, including burning her personal papers to 'prevent her secrets being revealed by hungry biographers' (147)[3]. One reason the press could quickly begin this successful speculation appears to be that von Arnim's persona did not create sufficient distance from her private identity. Carey writes that 'soon after publication of *Elizabeth and her German Garden*', the *Daily Mail* proposed three possibilities for the identity of 'Elizabeth', one of whom was von Arnim (55), implying there was a limited pool of candidates who fit the biographical details gleaned from the book.

This is suggestive of one of the challenges for self-life writers attempting to utilise a persona to protect their privacy. Robin Freeman and Karen Le Rossignol note that, in terms of scholarly debate, the nature of the relationship between the writer and narrator in personal narratives is not a settled thing (6). But there is, arguably, always a persona at play when we write from the position of the autobiographical 'I': as Mary Goldschmidt contends, autobiographical writing involves 'the construction—rather than the unproblematized [*sic*] representation—of self' (100). Scott Russell Sanders observes that 'the first person singular is too narrow a gate for the whole writer to pass through' (669) and so, as Phillip Lopate suggests, 'all autobiographical first persons are highly selective and therefore distorting representations of their owners, even when they do not bother [...] to employ an alter ego or pen name' (qtd in Klaus 2). However, convention does place limits on these personae. The line between fact and fiction in life writing is notoriously slippery, but

for writers such as myself and Carey whose work makes claims to being nonfictional, the persona represented in it should generally not exist at such a distance from the authorial self that it feels untruthful to the reader.

This is part of what Philippe Lejeune famously called the 'auto-biographical pact': the implicit agreement or 'contract' between the reader and writer of autobiography 'that there is *identity of name* between the author [...] the narrator of the story and the character who is being talked about' (12; his emphasis). Although numerous scholars, including Lejeune himself, have since critiqued this notion (Allamand 52–53; Missinne 223–226), it suggests one of the limits to the construction of the self-life writer's persona: that, as Freeman and Le Rossignol contend, the 'gap between writer and writer-as-narrator [...] creates space for the perception of unreliability' (1) and that the smaller the gap, 'the more easily first-person creative nonfiction can be read as "true"' (7). Too large a gap thus risks another of Eakin's 'transgressions': 'misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth' ('Breaking Rules' 113–114).

From a privacy perspective, failing to sufficiently differentiate the persona from the authorial self might also prove problematic, as it may fail to signal to the reader that the persona is a version of the authorial self rather than interchangeable with it. Indeed, while scholars and many practitioners of life writing tend to understand the persona as a partial self-portrait, readers may not interpret the autobiographical 'I' in the same way. Vivian Gornick, among others, has observed how readers often equate the first-person narrator of nonfiction directly with the author, writing of a party guest who 'had come expecting to have dinner with the narrator of' her book *Fierce Attachments* and was disappointed to find the real-life author 'not exactly the same' (1).

Carey has similarly written about meeting a reader who felt let down to find she was 'so short', even though she apparently wrote 'like a tall person' ('Confessions' 98). Indeed, it is telling that I have been reflexively referring to the 'I' of Carey's book and Carey herself interchangeably in my discussion. I could seek to justify this on the grounds of simplicity of expression and/or the fact that Carey does not appear to signpost a purposeful adoption of a narrative persona in *Only Happiness Here*, but the latter point is not necessarily an indication such a persona does not exist. Instead, it seems to demonstrate that the privacy-protecting distance the life writer may be looking to create through a persona may not translate reliably to the reader.

It also suggests that life writers wishing to utilise this strategy may need to consider ways to signpost it to their reader for improved efficacy. This could be accomplished by, for example, directly discussing such

a process, or by using less explicit signals such as switching between past and present tenses, referring to one's past self in the second or third-person (as in Indigo Perry's 2020 memoir *Darkfall*), or by giving the persona a different name, as von Arnim did and as contemporary life writers such as Robertson have done (as in her 2008 Calibre Prize-winning essay 'Reaching One Thousand'). However, I would argue that Carey is more reliant on other techniques in *Only Happiness Here*.

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Anne Ruggles Gere writes of how 'discourses of personal writing privilege articulation over withholding' and 'implicitly position speech/writing as "truth" and oppose it to the "lie" of silence' (206). She argues for reconceptualising silence not 'as speech's opposite' but 'as a part of speech', making the case for a 'productive and empowering aspect of silence' that can have, among other things, an ethical dimension in providing 'an alternative to exploiting another' (207–215). We might extend this to avoiding 'exploiting' the self. Indeed, silence is a technique that Carey uses in describing the intersections between her experiences and von Arnim's story, as she omits or renders opaque certain details in what can be interpreted as an attempt to protect privacy.

The most striking example of this is the second incident that made the year prior to writing *Only Happiness Here* the worst of Carey's life: a 'catastrophic event' that befell her family, about which she reveals essentially nothing (2). This may be out of respect for the other people involved, which would go some way towards illustrating the limits of an individualised model of the self in a life-writing-studies context in which, as G. Thomas Couser asserts, 'it is now a critical commonplace that all *auto*biography is necessarily *hetero*biography as well' (x; his emphasis). Either way, it can be seen as a distancing strategy to protect privacy: Carey is ensuring the 'catastrophic event' is sufficiently removed from the reader that it is clear it happened while the details remain out of view.

This is the most marked example of this kind of autobiographical restraint in the book, but it typifies the brevity that tends to characterise Carey's references to her own experiences. As Emily Paull remarked in a review of *Only Happiness Here*, when Carey 'begins to talk about her own life, the reader is given only a page or so worth of a glimpse'—and, in fact, frequently less. Paull suggests this 'often assumes that the reader already knows much of the story', and certainly some of what Carey mentions are things she has written about previously. Indeed, it is worth noting that *Only Happiness Here*'s interest in privacy could appear somewhat surprising, given that Carey's work has been described (by herself and others) as 'confessional' (Stanton) and that she continues to be best known to many as the co-author of the notably frank semi-autobiographical novel (and later film) *Puberty Blues*. Certainly, Carey has written candidly and often self-critically about her life throughout her career, including in her numerous works of memoir and bibliomemoir.

Here, I would make two points. Firstly, Carey has written about how she has valued privacy since the early days of her career when, according to her essay 'Confessions of a Teenage Celebrity', she and *Puberty Blues* co-author Kathy Lette responded very differently to the attention generated by their book's success. As she puts it, 'I wanted to go private, she wanted to stay public' (85). And yet, in the same essay, Carey characterises writing as an activity for public consumption. 'A book, a story, an essay is very much like a message in a bottle', she writes. 'It doesn't matter who fishes it out of the ocean, as long as someone reads it, as long as it connects with someone' (97). All of this speaks to the central dilemma of the self-life writer: this need to balance a drive for self-disclosure with a desire to protect oneself.

Secondly, it is worth stating that although I am arguing that the techniques outlined here can be credibly interpreted as having the effect of shielding Carey's private self, I am not necessarily suggesting they are all deliberately employed to this end. To do so would be to claim a level of insight into Carey's intentions that I do not possess. Indeed, the fact that I have sought to interpret *Only Happiness Here* in this way may serve to underline the inherent subjectivity of readers' interpretations. My reading of Carey's book speaks not only to the substance of what it contains, but also to my interests and concerns at the time I encountered it.

Having said that, there is, for this reader, a sense of being held at a remove in *Only Happiness Here*. When Carey describes how her experiences connect with von Arnim's, she tends to report rather than describe her emotions, and to recount these events in generalised summaries rather than in-depth scenes. She describes them with a sense of reflective distance and of explicitly looking back, rather than seeking to immerse the reader in these moments as they are seeming to take place. For example, in discussing von Arnim's affair with the much younger Alexander Frere-Reeves, Carey succinctly refers to her own affair with a younger man, which:

> began purely out of physical desire while my husband was overseas for two months on a work exchange. I had no intention of allowing the affair to last but once it had started, it seemed impossible to end, no matter how many times I tried.

> The fall-out for my family was devastating: divorce, the loss of our beautiful home, and serious upheaval for my children. The relationship, however, endured for ten years largely because we continued to enjoy the deep, consoling pleasure of sex. (206–207)

This passage isn't Carey's final word on this incident—she returns to it a number of times in the narrative—but her matter-of-fact tone and reflective distance do lend a heightened sense of these things having been experienced (and enacted) by a past self. Significantly, Carey is often critical of this past self: she self-depreciatingly presents herself, for example, as having failed at romantic relationships, referring twice in one page (in slightly different wording, and perhaps with tongue partly in cheek) to her past 'failure as a wife' (31). In seeming to suggest that she has developed the self-insight to avoid similar entanglements in more recent years (133), a degree of separation between these past and present selves is emphasised, working to shield the latter from readers' (potentially unfavourable) reactions to the former's actions and emotions.

At other points, narratorial distance is created as Carey quickly shifts from the specifics of her experiences to something broader, sublimating the individual identity of the autobiographical 'I' to a first-person plural 'we', a second-person 'you' or a third-person 'one'. When Carey is discussing the aftermath of von Arnim's disastrous marriage to Frank Russell, for example, she identifies with von Arnim's suspicion that 'she had *believed* she was [in love] and hadn't understood the difference between believing and the genuine feeling' (her emphasis).

> I can well understand such doubts and have similarly duped myself on many occasions. Being in love is such a blessed place to be that it is tempting to convince oneself that you're in it even when you are not. Illusion and self-delusion are two areas in which writers excel. (171)

The effect here is one of progressively greater (albeit not straightforwardly linear) relational distance as Carey's prose directs the reader's attention from the realm of the individual 'I' to 'oneself', 'you're' and the collective 'we' implied by the reference to 'writers'. Carey thus claims these sentiments as more universal than specific: rather than telling us how *she* felt, she suggests this is how *people* feel, this is what *writers* do.

A technique that has a similar effect is Carey's tendency to turn to literary antecedents when relating moments of emotional intensity. For example, in trying to describe the emotions that accompanied the identity theft, she writes that 'violated is the word most commonly used [...] but that doesn't capture the sense of invasion and loss' (68). She then says the incident reminded her of a Truman Capote short story ('Master Misery') 'in which needy people are offered money in exchange for recounting their dreams' but later regret it, are unable to buy back their dreams and are left 'with gaping psychic holes that cannot be mended' (68–69). Perhaps Carey is using this reference to express something she is finding difficult to voice, with the story functioning in the way of a metaphor. It can also be interpreted as an attempt to distance the self that experienced those intense emotions from the persona recounting them by expressing the sentiments partially through another writer's words and ideas. The emotions are thus deflected or distanced from the autobiographical 'I' to become associated, at least in part, with a third party—in this case, Capote and his story.

There are other examples of this, and indeed it is possible to read the book as this device writ large. Carey describes writing about von Arnim as a way to recover her capacity for happiness, but perhaps it was also a way to allow von Arnim's words to speak for her to some extent: to gain narratorial distance and allow her to write about this traumatic period without having to reveal too many intimate details by depicting it in more generalised terms. Carey's discussion of von Arnim might, then, be working in relation to Carey's own experiences in the way of a simile: in describing her experiences as similar to aspects of von Arnim's life, Carey can tell us what the experiences were *like*, without necessarily having to directly describe how they *were*. Again, this works to shield the self by creating separation between the selves experiencing the emotion and recounting it[4].

Assessing the efficacy of these techniques from Carey's perspective is difficult, given that, unlike in the instance of von Arnim, I am not privy to the details she seeks to keep private. It is possible to consider their impact on the reader, however. Here I am interested in whether Carey's writing may have created too much distance and rendered these events too opaque, given that self-narration is a dance between revelation and restraint. That was the conclusion I gestured towards when I wrote a press review of *Only Happiness Here* after it was published, suggesting that 'readers may well be left wanting more' of Carey's own story. These kinds of reviews seem to demand such judgements, but I have felt decreasingly sure of this conclusion as time has progressed (and this, again, might suggest the failings of a singular, fixed model of identity that does not accommodate a reality of selves-in-process liable to change their minds)[5]. Indeed, I am not sure I have arrived at a settled answer to this question.

Even if we accept that some disclosure is required to drive self-narration, judgements in relation to this will be deeply subjective: one person's unseemly confession is another's courageous honesty. Furthermore, the question arises of whether Carey is required, as a writer, to reveal everything that we as readers might desire in the way of personal details. What might constitute 'enough' self-revelation in this case?

Perkins has referred to 'the many strategies that authors use to retain privacy while appearing to confess' (271), alluding to the idea that life writers might attempt to give readers the (necessarily false) impression they are baring all. I am not suggesting Carey is attempting to appear as though she is revealing more than she is in *Only Happiness Here.* Indeed, my reading of her book poses the question of whether the feeling of 'wanting more' could be the sensation a writer seeks to impart to a reader to underscore how expectations around privacy might take on different and sometimes competing forms for the reader and writer of a text. Certainly, Gere suggests that the aesthetic dimension of 'productive' silence can be 'self-consciously deployed' by writers of personal narratives to engage in 'a dialogue with silence' to acknowledge 'partial understandings, gaps between lived experience and textual representations' and the like (212). This seems to suggest a possibility for life writers such as myself: offering 'more' not in terms of our personal details, but in reflexivity around how our writing enacts our interest in protecting privacy by being clear about where we have chosen to draw the boundaries between self-disclosure and revelation. Carey may not explicitly do so in *Only Happiness Here*, but reading her book as an attempt to create narratorial distance as well as an assertion of the importance of privacy does endorse it as a valid concern and a potentially attainable goal for life writers.

Notes

1 Von Arnim further distanced *Christine*, which fictionalises her teenage daughter's death, from her private and existing public identities by publishing under the pseudonym Alice Cholmondeley.

2 In considering the social context of von Arnim's writing, it is interesting to note that while von Arnim was writing at a different time to Carey (and me), her era was one in which a number of the ideas that continue to underpin our cultural understandings of privacy came to be widely accepted, including the concept of 'privacy as an ideal and aspiration for every citizen' (Keulen & Kroeze 28).

3 There is some irony in Carey writing about this in a book that is partly a quasi-biography of von Arnim and partly an affirmation of the value of privacy. Indeed, at one point, she wonders whether she is 'just as guilty as my home invader' in her 'search for details of Elizabeth's life that she may well have preferred left undisclosed' (68–69). Carey doesn't necessarily come to a conclusion about this, but does write, with characteristic self-depreciation, that she likes to think von Arnim 'would appreciate an Australian author, albeit untitled and commercially unsuccessful, attempting to resurrect her literary legacy' (167).

4 This also suggests the ways certain creative nonfiction forms and structures might similarly act as metonymic devices to protect privacy by creating a degree of distance within an autobiographical narrative. For example, Brenda Miller has described how the braided essay form can offer a 'kind of armor when venturing into dangerous or risky material', allowing 'the strong emotions involved in dealing with sensitive, emotional material' to be 'contained' within what she calls the 'container scenes' of the interwoven but separate and more 'impersonal' strands of the narrative (106–107). The lyric essay, which has been described as tending 'to rely on metonymic techniques where parts of a life—often fragments of recounted or imagined experience—stand in for a whole', might also be suggestive in this regard (Robertson & Hetherington 38). This distance could also be conceptualised as something more literal using, for example, blank space to signpost silences in a text.

5 Cardell et al. make the case that the ephemeral narratives facilitated by many social-media platforms (such as Instagram's Stories feature) may better facilitate the representation of such a 'self in flux', suggesting the limitations here might be not only conceptual but also technological (169).

Note

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Contents

Francesca Jurate Sasnaitis

Francesca Jurate Sasnaitis is a Melbourne-born writer and artist of Lithuanian background. She lives in Perth and has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Western Australia. Her poetry, short fiction and reviews have been published online and in various print journals and anthologies.

after Paige Clark's contents page
She is Haunted (Allen & Unwin, 2021)

That dead summer we deserved better—good fortune and snow
Angels from the winter before—before we were haunted
By our mothers, daughters, the devil; before we were parched
Ghosts ourselves and excised fear and that sense of control we loved
Too much; before we stopped seeing cranes peering in windows
And staircases that began nowhere, with nobody, and had no end

Like Jacob's ladder climbing into thin air; before we were lost
Or we lost our hair or mother hacked it off and auntie was buried
With a hank in her coffin and we started eating in private, conversations
Our brother would've loved about trees or women in love or women
Who'd never be filled, like cracks in a roomful of chatterboxes
Who wanted to be you, safely in somebody else's shape, lying

Canticle for a Dancing Man

Stephen Gilfedder

Since 1970, Stephen Gilfedder's poetry has been published in literary magazines, newspapers and anthologies of new and prize verse. His collection *Way Stations*, with selected published poems from the past forty and more years, was published by Recent Work Press in 2021.

It has come to this, the embalmed fifties
Flat is all that's left for my declining friend,
After eight years still mourning a lost love,
In half-light, half-blind, drinking vodka
From late morning, all skin and bone
Among his treasures, traymobiles, valve radios,
Boat shoes on, drapes closed against the day.

Half a lung removed, a personal trainer comes
Daily, needs aerobics now to make the stairs.
In other times he danced on tabletops
In Turkish slippers, roamed bathhouses hidden
Down blind alleys, rowed shimmering tides
Stripped to the waist, singlet balled in the prow,
Ghostly crews left haunting hallway walls.

Over the same ground always, stories
Ballooning in implication with repetition.
Nothing left to say, I leave him, anchorite,
Not knowing where we go from here
Framed at the door among polystyrene boxes
From the Council, scrawled delivery notes,
Pharmacy receipts, empties from the liquor stash.

Walls outside carry messages from beyond,
Tagged hieroglyphs alive with cartoon faces
That could be us, rendered to a demotic script.
Heaven sent, a local shaman has come to bless
The scene, weaving towards me, holding forth
To one and all, arguing with himself, skipping down
The street crabwise, showing some sort of way.

The Matisse Cut-Outs

Michael Mintrom

Michael Mintrom lives in Melbourne. He has recently published poetry in *Cordite*, *Meniscus*, *Quadrant* and *Rabbit*.

I visit my mother, canvas bag in hand,
and give her a book on Henri Matisse.

All afternoon, we sit side-by-side
cutting coloured shapes

then making arrangements.
My mother talks as we work together

and tells me about her brother Paul.
(Uncle Paul died years ago.)

'He's heading south,' she says,
'and he's changed his name to Pablo.'

Pablo drops in. With his thumb,
he traces around each shape.

'I used to be a painter,' he confides.
'I drove a van with my name on the sides.'

A food trolley floats by. The setting sun
bursts through clouds. We call it a day.

Stepping into the twisty breeze, I cross
a green square and a blue square, then look back

at Pablo, my mother, and Henri Matisse.

Two Seasons

Kim Aikman

Kim Aikman is a writer and artist dedicated to fiction-writing and print-making. She lives in Fremantle with her husband and four children.

She woke without him lying next to her, which was fairly common these days. He started work early, for the ward round, and Gemma was finding it hard to rise before eight, after years of springing out of bed to meditate before rushing to the gallery. Maybe it was the pregnancy, or maybe just that she had nowhere she needed to be.

But Dan wasn't absent because of an early start at the hospital today—instead, he was a plane ride away running a remote clinic in a community, and she would be alone for two days for the first time since they'd moved here from Melbourne, eight weeks ago. It felt like a world away from the life they'd had there, more than they had anticipated. Not that this was good or bad, just different. They'd arrived in Darwin at the end of The Dry, had survived the build-up (a time so unpleasant that men once sent their wives to Perth, rather than live with them through it), and were settling into the new pattern of The Wet.

With her cheek pressed into the pillow, she watched the shadow from the louvres move over the woven pandanus mat that hung on the adjacent wall. Today was Bella's birthday, three days before her own. 'Friends from birth', their mothers claimed. They'd had gaps, times when they'd hardly bothered to keep in touch, but it didn't matter—when they got back together, it was always as if no time had elapsed. They just carried on their long, never-ending conversation. Except it did end. This wasn't just another gap. There would be no reunion. She is gone, thought Gemma, awkwardly rising from the bed with seven months of baby pressing on her bladder. Dead.

'It's the sort of place people end up,' Bella's mum had said, when they were talking about where they'd like to travel. She was a dreamy, vague woman, prone to bouts of depression, who sporadically delivered unexpected pearls of wisdom.

'What does that mean?'

'Oh, you know, when everything goes wrong. That's where your Uncle Frank went when Meggie kicked him out.'

They'd smirked then—knowing what Uncle Frank had done to deserve such treatment—but this declaration lodged itself in Gemma's head, an intrigue to one day be explored.

They kept the bikes under the house, leaning against a concrete pillar. Never bothered to lock them. Gemma's was passed on to her by a colleague of Dan's. It was pretty good—just clinked when she changed the gears from fourth to fifth. Last week, she'd noticed a stick hanging on the frame, about three inches long. Something about the angle of it made her look a little closer. A praying mantis! Cool but creepy. Feeling brave, she had left it on there, but by the time she dismounted at the pool, it was gone.

She tucked her phone and keys into the centre of the rolled towel and placed it in the black wire basket at the front. It was a new towel, peach-coloured, still plush and soft. They bought lots of new things when they first got here; couldn't see the point in transporting up all their old gear from Melbourne.

Trying to avoid the rotting mangoes, she steered her bike out across the gravel. They picked the fallen fruit up every day or two, but there were so many. It felt wasteful, but they could not eat them fast enough. They already had a freezer full of bagged-up cheeks. This old, gnarled tree had survived Cyclone Tracy, as had the house (although the roof had come away and was now tied down). That made the tree and the house older than Bella. She would have been turning thirty-seven today.

Balancing the handlebars against her rounded belly, Gemma managed to swing open the high gate, almost losing the bike when the wheel swivelled. Everywhere was fenced and gated here. When they first arrived, she'd found it disconcerting. Dan joked that it was to keep out the crocodiles, but Gemma suspected it might have more to do with all the homeless people sleeping under the bridge and along the foreshore.

Her centre of gravity was a little off balance now, so she cautiously lifted her leg over the frame of the bike, and pushed off, riding down the centre of the road. There was a gentle descent as she headed towards the water gardens. A squashed cane toad passed beneath her wheels, dried to a crisp and paper-thin, and she couldn't help feeling victorious. Peculiar to celebrate the death of a once living-creature, but they were nasty toxic pests. One of their neighbours, a woman with waist-length dreadlocks the colour of algae, had told her of the tragedy of their beloved dog, who fell suddenly sick and passed away within a day. Later, they'd found some cane toads in a torn cardboard box under the house and her partner had backed his car over the box in an act of retaliation.

The hands clutching the handlebars did not look like hers. They were swollen, along with her feet. Her breasts also now belonged to someone else; they were twice the size, with nipples that were darker and more prominent. Her fat had redistributed itself, arms and thighs thickened and dimpled, while her calves were slimmer, her bottom flattened. And she seemed to be sprouting body hair, more abundant and faster growing, in places where before there had been merely downy fuzz. Dan wasn't fazed: he was fascinated by her metamorphosis.

They'd been delighted to discover the pool, shaded by palm trees, overlooking the Timor Sea, and only a short ride away.

'I didn't think you were ever going to come out,' he'd said after their first swim.

'I wasn't planning to,' she'd laughed.

She had never loved the water so much. It held her, weightless, as she held their floating child inside. Her body ceased to be an enemy and was just there. She wasn't grumpy or sore or cumbersome. She moved effortlessly. The thin gauze of her top drifted around her, swirling jellyfish-loose, no longer an irritant. Her skin felt smooth: silken not itchy, taut not tight, full not stretched. Her heart, like the baby's heart, the gentle rhythm of the water, always moving, always filling.

It was one of those moments in life, when you realise how happy you were before, and you didn't even know it. Nothing had been the same since Bella's diagnosis. Before long, she was taking a cornucopia of drugs and her head was as smooth as an egg, eyebrows completely vanished. It didn't seem to worry her—she no longer cared about appearances, perhaps she never really had. 'Life's too short' had always been her default expression. Gemma's was 'shit happens'.

When she got back to the house, her skin was already slick with sweat. She'd given up on make-up—it just slid off her face. Standing at the sink, she ate a mango, the skin pulled back from the yellow flesh, rivulets of juice dripping down to her elbows. It was sensual and delicious, devouring the soft, sweet fruit in this way, and so worth the stringy bits she'd have to floss from her teeth later. She would hang out the laundry, have a shower, and then what?

Now that she wasn't working in the gallery, she'd assumed she would get back to her painting, but oil-painting in this humidity was insane.

Nothing ever dried. And the turps made her head reel. But it wasn't just that. When they'd first decided to move, she imagined she'd *want* to paint—that all the fecundity of the subtropical landscape would inspire her—but she wasn't inspired or motivated. It was as if someone had thrown a handful of dirt onto that smouldering part of her and extinguished any embers. It will come back, she kept saying to anyone who asked about her painting, but she wasn't so sure.

As kids, they'd played a game in which they were sisters, both having babies at the same time. It was a twist on the traditional mum-and-dad scenario because neither of them wanted to occupy the dad role. Neither had a dad, not really, not the useful type. So, they took it in turns to be the boy, wiggling briefly on top of the other, delivering a fleeting kiss, before discarding the male characters from the narrative. With pillows stuffed up their dresses, they waddled about until it was time to push their babies out, at which point they became tightly swaddled dolls. Then it was all about taking the babies for walks, feeding them with bottles (the kind the milk disappeared from when tilted), and changing stinky nappies. Aside from those games, Gemma was never very interested in babies, but Bella was. She loved them. Couldn't keep her hands off them. Knew from the age of fifteen that she would be a midwife.

'We need to drain the pond,' she'd stated, a week after they moved in.

'Why?'

'Because of the baby.'

'In case it falls in...?'

'Yes'

'But it's covered with wire mesh.'

'It's not safe.'

'Okay.'

He didn't argue with her. He never did when her voice went shrill. Gemma knew it was probably silly—an overreaction—but she couldn't help it. For days and days, it had been gnawing away, keeping her awake. She was seeing the disasters again, the tragedies playing out in her head. Such strong images—sometimes she had to remind herself to take a breath. It was exhausting being this irrational.

They'd both always liked their food; been strong girls with muscled legs—no chance of a thigh gap—and big boobs. Over the years, they'd tried a few diets together and never been any good at it. Too in love with the pleasures of food and alcohol. After school finished and team sports came to an end, dancing on the weekend became their main exercise, with the odd swim at the pool or walk (an excuse to gossip). But Bella's body was shrinking, the cancer greedily consuming all her energy. There was a sharpness to her features, a dullness to her skin. Angel wings where once there was toned definition, and the rungs of a ladder on her scrawny chest. She moved uneasily, as if her muscles could no longer achieve the same fluidity. They barely had the strength to hold her together.

She painted Bella's nails—black cherry, as requested—rubbed rose oil into her skin, which was dry and thin, vulnerable as an old person's. It should have been soft, firm and supple. Gemma wanted it to be like those days when they took it in turns to do each other's make-up, straightened their long hair, tried on every bloody outfit they owned, but it wasn't.

'The night Banjo was born we saw a snake in the garden. Olive Python. Big one. About four metres.'

The parting words from the previous tenants. She'd looked wide-eyed at Dan and he'd laughed at her. They'd never seen it themselves, but she sensed it was there, in the damp darkness, curled and waiting, beneath the rich green foliage.

She hung out the laundry under the house now, instead of on the Hills Hoist. Told him it was because of the rain, which it was, in part, but also because of the huntsman, as big as a side plate, she'd found loitering in the folds of her shirt one day. It must have fallen from the trees above. The garden was more untamed jungle than tropical paradise. The trees hung over the house, tangled in vines, the grass was coarse and patchy, none grew under several of the denser trees. She had tried to lie on a blanket on the lawn, but she could not relax for a moment. There were unknowns all about her, the clicking and buzzing and pulsing of life, the spaces between the plants where god-knows-what lurked, watching her. In Melbourne, they'd lived in a warehouse apartment with only a tiny roof garden, little more than a postage stamp on which to drink a glass of wine and smoke some weed as the sun went down. She'd often lamented their lack of garden, longing for barbies, plentiful vegie beds, some clucking chooks, and drawn out lunches under shaded vine-entwined pergolas. And now she had the garden, it was this: a hostile place with peripheries she did not dare explore.

'We must all grieve in our own way.'

That's what Bella said, after she stopped sobbing. It was a rare admission of how sick she was. There was snot on her friend's top lip, mascara smeared all over her blotched cheeks. She knew then that Bella wouldn't

leave him. That it wasn't even a possibility. Gemma had never really understood the attraction of Joel.

'You really think that this is his way of grieving?'

'Maybe.'

'To fuck someone else on a stag weekend?'

She shouldn't have said it, not like that. Bella's shoulders slumped forward so far that it was almost comical. It reminded Gemma of the inflatable clowns that had appeared one summer, seemingly overnight, all over town, advertising the circus. A strong wind left them in a state of disarray, and they had laughed so much at the sight of the clowns in their contortions. Bella, her oldest friend, was dying, collapsing in on herself, and Joel had betrayed her. She wanted to howl with rage.

She had a shower to rinse off the pool water and the sweat. Didn't bother to dry herself, left wet footprints along the hallway, and lay down on the bed, naked with the fan running flat-out above her. When she woke, the sun was already low and she pulled the sheet around herself. A whole afternoon lost. She turned on her side, listening to the scrub fowl in the garden building their nest, or whatever it was they were so intent on doing. She wanted an icy cold beer so much. The baby was moving. She reached a hand down and cupped her belly. Under the tight skin, she felt the pressure of a limb push back against her palm.

Two blue lines on the pregnancy test. A happy surprise she couldn't share with Bella. It didn't seem relevant in those final days, as her friend moved in and out of consciousness. And it didn't seem kind. She tried to protect her, while he had told her the truth. Had Joel just done it for himself? A confession to relieve the guilt. He'd hurt Bella so much; why couldn't he just keep quiet? Held that nasty secret inside. They had no future; no chance of a thirty- or forty-year marriage ahead of them. She was dying. Why couldn't he save her some pain and keep quiet?

She found some leftover pumpkin laksa, heated it in the microwave, and ate with her back leant against the cool fridge door. Her enthusiasm for food had disappeared with the morning sickness—not that she'd actually been sick, just suffered exhausting, incessant nausea for weeks and weeks. Now her appetite had come back with a force that reminded her of being a ravenous teenager. She ate salt and pepper squid at the Sunset Markets, washed down with huge smoothies packed with fresh tropical fruit, yoghurt and obscene amounts of honey, and on the weekends, pawpaw salads, and mango and toasted almond crepes. Then there was the fish and chips devoured on the Nightcliff foreshore. Bathed in the golden light of the lowering sun, nothing had ever tasted so good as the salt and the juice and the oil licked from her fingers.

After the funeral, she thought she would vomit. Joel played the grieving widower so well, and the condolences poured out at his polished black-booted feet. Gemma could not even look at him; flinched when he tried to catch her eye. Those full lips curving in a smile that could easily have been a grimace.

'Joel's throwing everything out.'

His sister had called. Her voice was panicked.

'All Bella's stuff. Everything.'

It was the day after the funeral.

Lumpen black bin liners heaped by the back door, knotted tight.

'I'll take these for you,' Gemma said, loading them into the boot.

'And this too.' He held out a grass weaving that he and Bella had bought together in the NT. It was beautiful, delicate and intricate, the colours warm and earthy, evocative of that landscape. Bella had loved it, her eyes often turning towards it when she was in the most pain, during those final weeks. Gemma stared at him, incredulous, but all he said was 'please'. He propped it up on the passenger seat and slammed the door. She pulled away and did not wave, did not look back. What right did he have to erase Bella?

She didn't go to the op-shop, and instead drove straight home. Inside the bags were clothes, jewellery, shoes, books, even framed photos of Bella and Joel.

'I don't want to stay here,' she'd said, after sobbing onto Dan's shoulder that night.

'Fine. Let's go somewhere far away.'

'To Darwin?'

'To Darwin. Why not?'

Gemma missed that cosy feeling, when you shut the day out and cocoon yourself in your home. It was too hot and sticky to curl up with a blanket, and she felt constantly on edge, expectantly awaiting that terrible scuttling, scrabbling noise of an approaching cockroach. Woken by the cramps in her legs and an insatiable thirst, she'd crunched one under her foot, walking down the hallway in the middle of the night to get a glass of water, the soft innards smeared across the underside of her foot. In the day, it was bad enough, but once it was dark, every shadow seemed to accommodate a skulking creature ready to terrify her. The night belonged to them; the dark house belonged to them. There was even a green tree

frog residing in their toilet, only occasionally making its presence known with a leg lowered below the rim. Once when she was desperate to pee, it was floating in the toilet bowl, tiny, beautiful and defiant. She'd squatted in the bath instead.

Gemma peered through the louvres, through the dusty fly wire, out into the night. What was out there? She felt as if she was being watched. Why wasn't she scared? She pushed open the screen door, made her way cautiously down the steps, her hips tight after the morning bike ride. The ground was still warm from the sun. She stood by the drained pond, listened to the bats in the mango tree, the thud of fruit falling on the roof. The frogs were silent but soon the rain would wake them from their inertia. The temperature had fallen slightly—it was only a matter of minutes now. She could hear it as it passed over—the roofs, the streets, the park, the pools, the tree canopy—and moved nearer. A wave rolling across the land.

She looked up and there was not a star to be seen, just mountains of cloud, billowing and pluming, as densely as bush fire smoke. The rain pummelled her face. She closed her eyes and felt it run over her eyelids, down her cheeks and over her jaw. This garden could swallow her. Moist and hungry, it had lungs that filled and emptied, a beat like a heart.

In the garden, there's a snake. An olive python. Four metres long. The words slither over her. High above her head, the snake, with eyes of black ink, glides along a branch of the mango tree that juts over the roof of the house, the house that survived Cyclone Tracey, older than her and older than Bella will ever be. Its tongue flickers, the baby turns inside her, and Gemma swallows, sighs, opens her eyes.

After a while, she goes back inside, towels herself dry. It is late but she isn't tired. She switches the kettle on to make tea, and her phone, lying on the countertop, lights up. Dan. It is too late for anyone else. But it isn't. After all these months and on this day: Joel.

Annunciation

thinking of Fra Angelico

Rose Lucas

Rose Lucas is a Melbourne poet and academic. Her first collection *Even in the Dark* (UWA Publishing, 2013) won the Mary Gilmore award. 2021 sees the publications *This Shuttered Eye* (Girls on Key Press) and her collaborative project with artist Sharon Monagle, *2020 Shelter in Place* (Liquid Amber Press).

An ordinary girl she looks up
not to see the sky split an over-ripe
fruit disgorging celestial wonders but

suddenly || right here in her yard a creature
neither male or female human or
bird toes barely touching the scuff of the ground and

a coronal glow of somewhere else
somewhere not even glimpsed
warms her like hope

filling her body its secret
crevices feather and
flesh

carrying the future beneath the bones
of her chest fingers reaching up
through thrumming wingbeats of air

Shadows

Holly Isemonger

Holly Isemonger was the joint winner of the 2016 Overland Judith Wright Poetry Prize. She is the author of the chapbooks *Hip Shifts* (If A Leaf Falls Press, 2015) and *Deluxe Paperweight* (Stale Objects dePress, 2016). She co-edited *Cordite Poetry Review*'s DIFFICULT issue 87.

Dream 1
I have submitted a poem to a competition. I am excited and proud that they have accepted my poem. I walk onto a stage to present my poem to the judges and the audience, but I have walked onto the set of a reality cooking show. I am disappointed when I look down at my hands and see that I have not prepared a poem, I have prepared some fried rice. Everyone thinks my fried rice is delicious but I am still disappointed.

Dream 2
I live in a world where desire can only be understood as geography and space. A man walks up to me and prods me with a compass. I laugh and tell him that he has the wrong kind of compass—he can't draw a circle around me! But it was a sharp compass… steel, circa 1960. I stop laughing now. I'm bleeding, he's laughing, I'm dead.

Dream 3
I send my mum an email with photo attachments that detail evidence of sunshine in Glasgow. Mum does not know how to access the attachments. She calls and says 'You must have been very tired when you sent us that email, there are no photos, it just says "evidence of sunshine in Glasgow."' But I was not tired and the attachments are there. Now it is dark and I am very tired. Too tired to talk to my mum about evidence of sunshine in Glasgow, while she is in Australia, standing on the back deck, in the sun.

Dream 4
I'm running up a hill, I can't see its peak. Brambles lash my ankles and leeches spot my legs but I'm high on endorphins—I can't feel pain. Clouds creep into the sky and soon it begins to rain. I slip in the mud, I fear for my phone. The slimy fat creatures inch up my calves, my thighs, my stomach. My phone crackles, I need to keep it dry or it'll die. I cradle it like a candle, the pale light plays across my face and the solution dawns on me: I pull a giant leech from my belly, it leaves a bloody hole the size of a tennis ball. Carefully I push the phone through the hole and into my stomach, it feels warm and tingly inside. I refasten the leech so my guts don't fall out. 'Now I will never be lost, I will never be alone' I think to myself as I continue running up the hill. I'm still running up that hill, in the rain.

Dream 5
A man is driving through the countryside. He stops and gets out of the car. He is angry, he takes off his watch and screams 'THIS IS AN AWFUL PLOT DEVICE' and hurls it into the field.

Dream 6
I have this dull, heavy pain. I keep trying to lift it… but I am not strong enough. I get bored and play tricks on it: pain knocks on the door and I open it, but I am not there, the door opens onto a desert filled with 2D shapes. *I am hiding behind the shapes.* Pain is confused and closes the door. *I am laughing behind the door.* I open the door, again, and pain punches me in the chest. I stop laughing pretty quickly because I am winded. I am happy that I have the strength to close the door, but it is a lonely life out here in the desert.

Amateur Female Impersonator

Soon Jones

Soon Jones is a half-Korean, full-lesbian writer and failed missionary from the rural countryside of the American South.

I ran into an old co-worker and he asked
if I was transitioning.
I said no, it's just cancer tax, and we laughed.
I didn't say I've thought about it, that I've spent my life
wondering what it means to be a woman,

or that I've always been called boy,
sir, man, that guy over there,
hey bro can you give me a hand oh sorry,
even when I still had the big tits,
or how it made me feel both seen and unseen.

When I was four I used to cry
at my reflection
in my mother's jewelry box mirror:
all I could see and hear was someone who
was not a girl, so therefore must be a boy,
and was disappointed.

Where does womanhood reside
when parts can be added, removed, transformed?

Nevertheless, I carry my mother's legacy
in our shared hacked chests,
our shared uterine lining that refuses to shed blood
every month like a proper woman's.

Twenty years after her death,
I found a VHS documenting my infertile
mother's miraculous pregnancy.
She knew before the pee strip did
because she dreamed an angel handed her two babies,
one girl, one boy, and believed
she would have twins until the ultrasound
revealed only me.

With the tape were two baby pictures
side-by-side in a long-buried photo album.
Me in a red dress. Me in a blue striped shirt and ball cap.
Grinning wide in each with certainty,
and my mother's handwriting, identical to my own:
'Am I a girl? Or am I a boy?
Don't you know
who I am?'

Prevailing Wind

Belle Butler

Belle is a writer, musician and photographer whose short fiction has been published in various Australian literary journals. She is currently a participant in the WestWords Academy, and she has just been awarded a WestWords Emerging Writers Fellowship for her novel manuscript, *White Pigeon*.

The bus hit the dirt road. Tourists shut their windows, preferring the heat to a face full of dirt. But he kept his open, leaned into it, let the dust coat his skin. He breathed it in and felt that old tightness in his chest. He had never noticed the bend in the trees before now—how they were all bowed in unison with the prevailing wind. Like some defeated army in retreat. The few defiant branches reaching stupidly into the onslaught would eventually be snapped or bent with time.

His mother would already be there waiting for him, wringing the fear out of her hands—that he might have a new piercing or tattoo, or that the bus might crash before she'd ever get to see him again. 'You're late,' she would say. She wouldn't say what she really meant—that he never visited anymore, that he never should have gone in the first place.

For a while she would treat him with the distrust of a ghost, and then it would be like the old days again. Making what she thought were his favourite meals, bribing him to work at the shop, doing his washing, and trying to set him up with the neighbour's daughter.

'Ma, I'm married,' he wouldn't say.

The water had come into view now. The bus driver slowed down for the tourists to snap a few photos. He looked straight ahead.

For a while he would be himself, dropping maggots of unspoken truths. His mother would clean them up and throw them away before they could hatch. Then it would be like the old days again. He'd buy her bags of seed to feed the birds, make her endless cups of tea and go down to the harbour with his mates in the afternoon.

Down there on the jetty he'd notice how handsome they had all become, the unique landscapes of their skin. Then he'd turn away before they could see him, seeing.

Hurling himself in, the water would stop his breath, wash his skin and fill his ears. Freedom. Then he'd come up for air and the wind would drive dirt back into his pores.

The bus stopped.

He watched the tourists pouring out. He watched his mother judging them. He watched the driver, looking back at him in the rear-view mirror.

The driver gave him a nod.

Then the bus was rolling on and he was still on it, while his mother stood there waiting, the wind making a mess of her curls.

Wet Check Shirt

Carolyn Abbs

Carolyn Abbs is author of a poetry collection, *The Tiny Museums* (UWA Publishing, 2017).

1.
He sits cross-legged on damp grass
like an underfed buddha. Can of beer, just one.
Enjoying the sun, he calls, face weathered and
reddened, neither young nor old. Wet check shirt
spread-eagled alongside, flat as a cardboard cut-
out, as if winter sun will dry it.

2.
Never wear damp clothes, my nan said.
Airing cupboard at top of the stairs, hot tank
clad in padded coat, apple tree smell of laundered
linen folded on shelves. Shirts from the line hung
to air over the tank. We warmed our hands there.

3.
Further across the park, grass is lush and wet.
Sodden leaves mulch beneath Plane trees. I shiver
at the thought of him wearing the shirt. I want
to suggest he drape it over a fence to dry, to air
in the sun, but already he's pushing his arms
in the sleeves.
Hot lunch at St Pat's today, he calls.

Tree in the Rock

Jasper Paterson

Jasper Paterson is a software engineering student at UWA. He writes for both humans and machines.

We are climbing the forest path, following the light of the stars beating through the canopy. Tonight they seem more dense than ever, as if a thousand streetlights have sprouted among the trees like a foreign species.

My son giggles as he hops in and out of the spotlight. He slips off a stepping stone into a stream but hardly falters. Now wet footprints follow him across a log, already fading as new ones are made. Another solemn passer-by glances at me disapprovingly as they overtake. They trek on alone until they disappear into the gloom above. I look back and notice the log is already dry.

'Daddy, I'm hungry,' he says as he leaps off a boulder into my way.

'We… we'll take a break soon, mate. Why don't you walk with me for a bit?'

We are both sweating in the humidity. He is going to run out of energy any second. It would be a shame for him to sleep now. I hope I won't have to put him on my shoulders.

The path forks and curves around both sides of a large stone, which sits still and smug in its eternity. A leaf clicks off a branch above and lands on the stone, before gently sliding to the floor. We take opposing routes around the stone and join up on the other side. The lights shine on the stone, revealing its grooves and its cracks, and grow a little brighter.

Another, smaller stream flows lazily beside us as we trudge upwards. Already the stone feels like so long ago it could have been part of another life. Now, velcro runners make tiny squelches in the soil.

'Dad, what are we going to do tomorrow?'

Tomorrow—so constant, so dependable. 'Why don't we just focus on where we are right now? We have a big mountain to climb.'

'I wanna swim tomorrow.'

No use. He runs onto a large mossy rock flat that protrudes from the incline. Without the greenery I see one small boy against a backdrop of

endless stars. I imagine this moment over, though it has only just begun. The sky flashes violently and a spray of white comets pass overhead. We watch in silence.

The moment fades. I try not to think of it as the past, but as a past present. I hear laughter approaching from downhill. A young couple appear behind us, arm in arm. Their exposed legs work like pistons while their smooth skin soaks up the light with ease. I can't help but admire the young. I feel like they know something I don't, though I was once in their exact place. The couple cut through the bush while we curve around. They wave at my son through the trees.

I search for my youth but find only still frames accompanied by momentary pangs of emotion. Maybe this is all memory ever was. One fragment unlocks another that never could have sprung to mind on its own, as if no experience is ever forgotten but only pushed further along mental tendrils, out into the fringes of the deep past.

We are cooling down by a waterfall that hides off the trail. The night only gets warmer and warmer. Warmer and brighter. The sting of cold water allows only for the here and now. I let out a long exhale and duck my head back under the stream. I notice my son's uncanny ability to imitate my movements. Little hands splash less water on a smaller face. I raise an eyebrow down at him.

'Ready?'

'Ready.'

The present continues to consume the future. Little legs knock against my chest as I wind around trees and squeeze past rocks. He is tapping on my head, occasionally in time with the tune he is humming. My legs burn. Another traveller has caught up to us. He doesn't overtake.

'Evening.'

'Evening.' I grab hold of my son's ankles.

He looks above my head with an expression of amusement. 'Does he know?'

'I don't think so,' I say quietly. His carefree attitude seems more like that unpredictable kind of abandon to me. I tense up, but I have a small boy balanced on my shoulders and can only keep on walking. I try to keep the man in my view while knobbly knees bob up and down in my face.

'Have you had a good life, son?' he asks.

I hear no reply from above. Good boy. I'm not sure whether to slow down or speed up. The traveller looks at me and smiles. I maintain the silence, assessing the intent in his eyes.

'So, did you mean to have him?'

I pause. 'Yeah, we meant to have him.' I could only think to say the truth.

'Lot of people would call that cruel.'

I can only look at him again. The man laughs. I have to get my son off my shoulders. I reach up and grab him by the waist. The man leans in... but only laughs again. I place my son down on the opposite side of my body. The man keeps on smiling, almost vacantly. Then he turns sullen. I start to think even he doesn't know what he's going to do next. We walk in silence.

'Well, I'll seeya at the top I guess.'

My son waves goodbye, none the wiser.

Ghostly rays illuminate the spores in the air. It's probably the middle of the night. The trees we pass are smaller and less dense than before. The path is more gravel than soil. Rock formations start to loom higher beside the path. Everything is slick from gentle, warm rain.

'This is taking forever, Daddy.' I stifle a bitter laugh. We scramble across an avalanche of fallen rocks that cover the path. They are just leaves that have clicked off ancient stone branches. Water trickles over the rocks and the lights bounce off them in a thousand shards.

I am crying. I stare straight ahead. I trace a single line through infinite possibilities. Nothing could have happened any other way. I think back to the tree-in-the-rock that we passed at the base of the mountain: roots clinging to the hollow veins of the granite, begging: 'Please, just a little more time.' My son gently takes hold of my hand but doesn't look up. I wonder how he knows to do that.

Rusty metal rungs snake upwards between two opposing rock faces. I had forgotten about this part of the hike. I give my son one last snack before discarding our pack. Something makes me toss it far downhill. It sinks into the bush.

'Daddy, why did you do that?'

'We... won't need it again,' I say uncertainly.

'Okay.'

He grabs hold of the first rung with those small fingers.

We stand on a wide plateau. A short distance away the young couple are snuggling into one another. Their legs dangle over the edge. They turn and smile shyly. I nod. They turn quickly back to the view.

We climb on past the plateau, searching for our own spot. The stars groan and dilate and spin like electric orbs. White lights flicker orange and purple for an instant. Later, there is a huge crack, like thunder.

The man from earlier is standing on the edge of a cliff, looking down. He raises his hand and smiles weakly. I make a face that is either a smile or a grimace. I put my hand on my son's back and keep walking.

A shot of panic enters my chest. Until now, I think some part of me still never believed this moment would arrive. I feel somehow cheated now it

has. We pass a few more travellers who have settled down to watch the sky. I tell myself I will always be in this place, at this time. I hold out my arm and watch the lights gently shifting on my skin.

We are tucked away on a ledge just beneath the peak of the mountain. Land and sky extend on forever. The hike is gone. We may as well have teleported here. My son sleeps peacefully in my crossed legs.

The present replaces the future. It is sweltering now, and so bright. It seems like daytime but for the black emptiness behind the lights. The cracking and fizzing grows in frequency.

Rain beats down but never reaches us. It swirls above the land, projecting rainbows of starlight in every direction at once. Steam rolls up the mountains through the trees. The meteors come into view. Everything is so beautiful.

Sunday Paper Amid the Disaster

Larry Blazek

Larry Blazek lives in a tiny cottage on the side of a remote hill. He plays his old guitar, gardens, and builds things. He has been published in *Undinal Songs*, *Red-headed Stepchild*, *Red Coyote* and *Nig*.

after the hurricane
you go to the damaged
mini shopping mall
to get the Sunday paper
the delivery-man is late
you see him discard
several damaged papers
you pick one up
that is slightly wet
you take it home
spread it out on
the kitchen table
to dry
it is readable
it contains marvels

The Curly-Haired Blonde

Larry Blazek

wearing a black leather
vest as a top
reads something
that she received
in the mail
she laughs

A Thin Dark-Haired Girl

Larry Blazek

wearing a tight dress
loosely woven of
green fluorescent yarn
with a matching
hairnet-like hat
has her back to you
she begins to dance
when the music starts

Ruby
Chelinay Gates

Dr Chelinay Gates aka Malardy Mulardy is a Karajarri artist, author and Doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

I can see ya … looking at me
I know your friends have gone
But still your heart is here
Where them cherubs sang
For youse blackfellas staying here

I can see ya … it's okay my friend
Although you didn't know me then
I love You now
As if our love has always been

I can see ya … Ruby Nugweea
I'm going outside
Come, put your hand in mine
I'll show ya where them fellas laid ya
When ya died

I can see ya … ya smile's as broad as mine
Ya hand's so warm and kind
And ya fingers so long and fine
So this is 'it', dear Ruby?
This little cross, your shrine?

I can see ya … it's okay to cry
Let me pick them yellow flowers
I'll add a Boab leaf or two
And tie it up with strands of my grey hair
This bouquet's just for you

I can see ya … your life's been real tough
You arrived at just eleven and died thirty-seven
A leper most your life
Were they kind to you out here?
Were your nights filled with fear?

I can see ya … ya know I have to go
Them shadows are growing mighty long
The sun sets quickly in Bungarun
That white fella won't stop beepin' his horn
'Til I get in that van and we're gone

I can see ya … through the whirling dust as we drive off
You're standing in the graveyard beside that little cross
Howling at the top of your voice, 'Come back! Come back!'
Them words break my heart in two
There's too much time and space between me and you

I can see ya … the lonely ghost of Bungarun
Clutching the yellow flowers and boab leaf bouquet
And that chunk of my heart that broke with grief that day
Endlessly you pace around the message I scrawled so long ago
In my dreams you recite it in whispers,
'Ruby, I promise to set you free'


lonely ghost

God bless those in the livestream

Danielle O'Leary

Danielle O'Leary is a lecturer in Professional Writing and Publishing at Curtin University. She has a PhD in Irish Literature from the University of Western Australia.

The last time I was in her kitchen, it was a hot summer evening. We didn't spend much time in there, just grabbing whatever we needed—plates, cutlery and glasses—to bring out to the deck.

It was an unusually hot night for Ireland. We had just arrived.

They ordered takeaway from around the corner. While we waited, her children played restaurant, with menus written excitedly with crayon. Cocktails they didn't know how to make and melted icecream that had been left on the counter for too long were on offer.

Her husband and my fiancé drank Malbec that we brought over from Australia, even though it didn't suit the Indian curry.

She and I drank French champagne that we bought in the airport. It didn't work with the meal either, but we joked that we could get used to it on a weeknight.

We took group photos in the garden because the night felt special. We had never done that before.

The summer light lingered as late as it could. We sat outside until it became cold again. Blankets and jackets were found in an attempt to keep the night going.

•••

I lived in that house nearly ten years before. The kitchen is bright with big windows on three walls. The room is centred around a square island that I would lean on as she cooked. I told myself that it was helping, but it was distracting and eating in the name of learning and company.

I've had every possible meal there—from a rushed breakfast before going to university to searching the fridge at 2am to counteract an impending hangover. She once made me a homemade pizza for lunch when I was sick—freshly kneaded dough, and all. I have thought of it—and craved it—during every cold since.

The best meals were always Sunday dinners. Nothing seemed to be difficult, everything was done with ease. She would always welcome any last-minute additions to the table. They had built this generous, welcoming home together—my cousin and his wife.

The wine would be breathing. The potatoes would be crispy. The dessert would be homemade.

•••

There was a knock at the door while I waited for the funeral to start. I pretended I wasn't home.

The priest began the service. I put the oven on.

I missed what was said as an email pinged through. It was a student query.

The puppy began to bark. He scored an extra treat to be silent.

I had not been to church in a long time, and wondered if this counted.

•••

I am the daughter of migrants who moved from Cork, Ireland to Perth, Australia. The experience of being far away from family in moments of crisis is not new. Before the pandemic, when a family member died, one of us might go back to Ireland. Not every time. Always, those left in Australia

would do something to mark the day of their funeral. It could be a special meal, or a visit to the beach at sunset. We would be sad, though the reality never hit us until we went back home, to Ireland.

A delayed grief could hit, weeks, months or years later. The loss is felt in the space they once lived, the space that was theirs, the space that you were with them.

The space where you saw them last.

•••

I was early for a date, nervous. I rang her from my car. She knew the dress I picked—she had helped, despite being in another country.

'You'll be grand,' she said. 'Just have fun. I have a good feeling about this one.'

Seven years later, near the same parking spot, I stepped out of a wedding car to marry the same man.

'I'll be there for the first anniversary,' she messaged. 'You'll have to do whole the day again for me .'

She died on our second wedding anniversary. She will now be with us for all of them.

•••

It was Tuesday, and her funeral mass—Requiem Mass—was the next day. Easter was fast approaching, and they don't wait in Ireland. It was scheduled to be at 11am in Cork, 6pm in Perth.

The screen captured a silent service; noise came only when someone appeared at the solitary microphone. The majority of the screen featured a wall—the same wall that they married in front of twenty-one years earlier. The rest captured the speakers and the floating heads of the few people allowed in the room.

I kept busy while they were not speaking directly about her, when they read passages from the Bible. I baked for my students and thought of how she could chat while effortlessly throwing ingredients into a worn bowl. Somehow, a perfectly risen cake would always appear.

'You're lucky that you can watch the funeral,' a friend said. 'You'll have a sense of closure now. It'll feel more real and you'll feel better, I'm sure.'

In a way, my friend was right. The pandemic has given us access into moments previously unattainable because of distance. Hearing her husband talk about her with pride, love and tenderness was comforting. He somehow managed a recognisable humour and reminded us that she is more than what she died of and that he felt lucky to love her.

In a way, my friend was wrong. I could see her family pacing nervously waiting for the service to start, but could not console; I could see an attempt to make a joke to ease pain, but could not offer a soft laugh; I could see tears, but could not hug.

Floating in silence, in my dark kitchen in Perth, no-one could see or hear me, like a fish hiding in an aquarium.

•••

The oven timer rang. The puppy waited for attention.

'And God bless those in the livestream,' said the priest.

It was over.

I watched her family hug each other as they stood to leave the church. As they walked out of view, I closed the laptop.

I took the cake out of the tin. Somehow, it was perfect.

Edwin Thumboo's Votive Pen

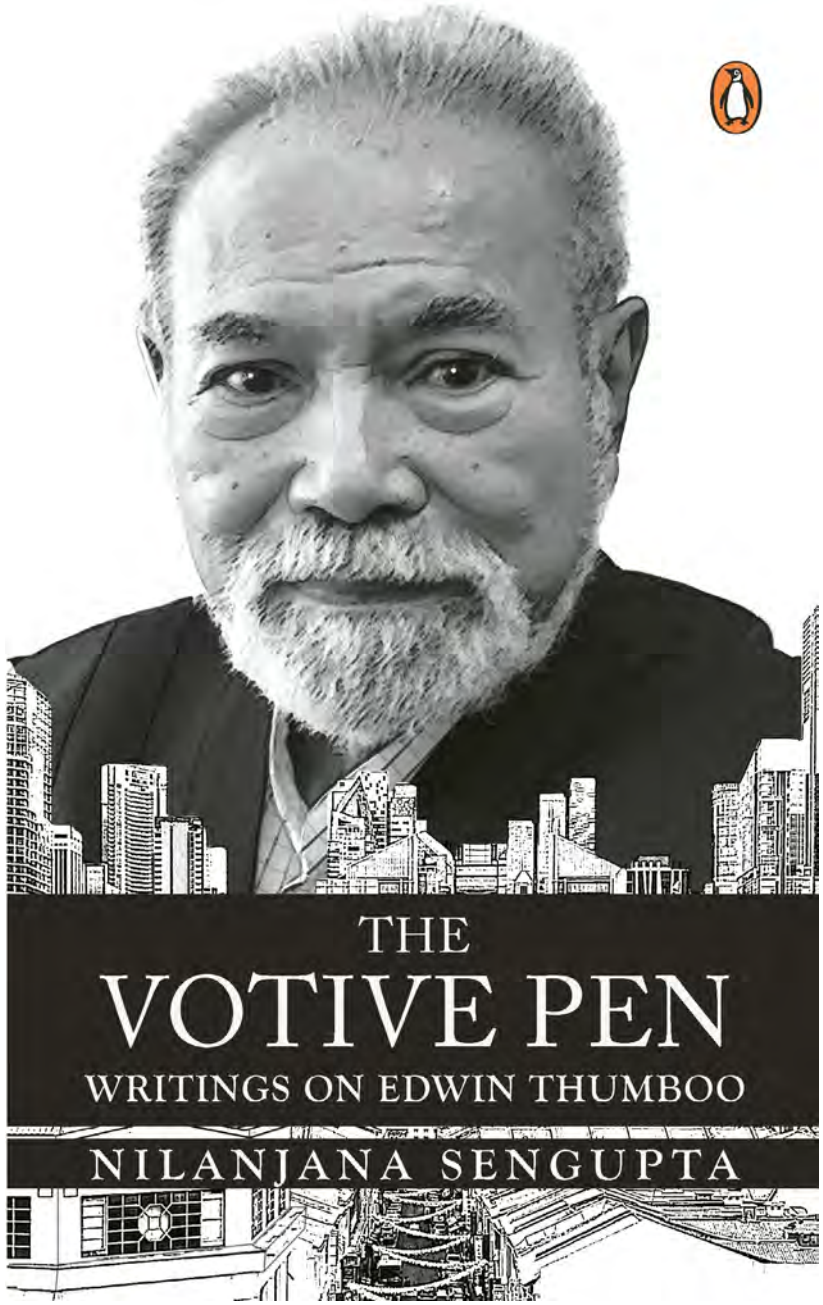
Dennis Haskell

Dennis Haskell is a poet and literary scholar, Emeritus Professor of UWA and past editor of *Westerly*. A visiting lectureship at the National University of Singapore in 1987–1988 gave him an ongoing interest in Asian literature in English and Australian-Asian connections.

Edwin Thumboo looks straight at you above a pen and ink sketch of Singapore on the cover of Nilanjana Sengupta's *The Votive Pen: Writings on Edwin Thumboo*. The cover is entirely black and white (apart from the Penguin logo), which softens Thumboo's face, and his eyes are seeringly calm—which sounds an oxymoron but seems accurate.

If this peacefulness is true, it has been hard-won. Now eighty-eight years old, Thumboo has lived, and written, both his and his nation's way through British colonialism; Japanese occupation during World War II; racial riots in the 1950s; nationhood with Malaya to form Malaysia, then a mix of withdrawal and expulsion from that new nation to form a fragile, independent Singapore; the foundation of a literature and of a university system; and both the country and the literature's continued maturity and adaptation. He is by common consent the 'father of Singapore poetry' (Singh, *Interlogue Studies* 16), 'Singapore's widely accepted "poet laureate"' (Hsieh Fu Hua, in Sengupta 5), 'the doyen of Malayan letters' (Gwee Li Sui, in Thumboo & Sayson 200), and has lived 'the single most interesting literary Singaporean life of his generation' (Gwee 5)—I would argue, of any generation. Peter Nazareth has declared that there is 'absolutely no doubt' that during Singapore's 'early years [...] Thumboo and his poetry were an indispensable part of the Singaporean cultural psyche, the literary DNA' (6). Not only as poet but also as literary critic, editor, anthologist, literary ambassador, educator and university administrator, he has been a major figure in forging a Singaporean culture and a South-east Asian culture more widely. His achievement, by any measure, is stupendous.

The Votive Pen arises from a series of in-depth interviews Sangupta conducted with Thumboo, so is a mix of critical biography and literary criticism. Edwin Thumboo has had a considerable hand in it: he provides an Introduction, an Appendix, an 'Official Timeline of the "Unofficial"



Poet Laureate', a list of what he views as his ten most important poems, and a substantial amount of commentary. Given Thumboo's stature and authority this must have put Nilanjana Sengupta in a difficult position, but she handles it with aplomb. Always respectful of Thumboo and his views, she maintains a degree of independence and is not frightened to make the occasional criticism, but not being a poet she writes only about the content of the poems she quotes. Thumboo notes that '*The Votive Pen* is the sixth investigative book on my work' (xvi) but one is a bibliography, one a Linguistics study, and at least two are by close friends, so their approach is more cosy than critically considered. Sengupta has managed to induce Thumboo to offer a great deal of useful information about his life and work; she has done us all a great service.

Thumboo is the most interesting commentator on his own work. In the book he confirms details made previously in other interviews and essays, maintaining a stern but thoughtful honesty about himself and his writing. Thumboo has strong connections with Australia, especially Western Australia and with *Westerly*, contributing poems and acting as a Consulting Editor. In one of his poems, 'York, Western Australia', he reflects on 'the many ways of connecting dreams' and on how he and Bruce Bennett (a past Editor of *Westerly*) 'hit upon a seminar that still thrives' (*Third Map* 134)[1]. This is the biannual (until Covid hit) Symposium on Literature and Culture in the Asia-Pacific, which has produced many of the most important essays on literature in English in the Indian Ocean and South-east Asian region. In one essay Thumboo remembers how he experienced an educational system that 'emphasised strong discipline' under the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 and that, while he was 'Young and protected', he 'grew up rapidly in circumstances of adversity' (Singh, *Writer's Sense* 230). These become characteristics of the man and his poetry, at least until recently, and they have been characteristics of his nation too. A focus on Thumboo's work inevitably also becomes a focus on Singapore.

It is for this reason that Thumboo has fitted the figure of unofficial Poet Laureate. Many have thought this because of his writing of poems about Singapore's economic and physical development and about institutions such as the National Library and the Regional English Language Centre but it is also because of the austere, somewhat impersonal nature of those poems. Thumboo felt it a duty to write such pieces, declaring that 'a poet in Singapore, and especially someone from my generation, has certain responsibilities' and 'a certain public function' (Nazareth 159). In a personal essay from one of the symposiums he wrote that

> My generation was perhaps the last to grow up in that interregnum between full-fledged colonialism and emergent nationalism. It was curiously privileged because it faced twin challenges: recovering from the effects of colonialism and facing the tasks of nation building. (Singh, *Writer's Sense* 231)

At another symposium he declared that 'Unformed nations […] are still in search of self-realisation. They face daunting challenges in almost every area of national, regional, international life and are busy building up institutions' (Bennett, Doyle & Nandan 15). In the West serious poetry seems a personal activity, the most intimate of all the arts in creation and reception, and when public it is almost always poetry of protest against government and other authority, but Thumboo saw poetry as part of the project of nation building. Incredibly, he succeeded. The poet and academic Leong Liew Geok has paid tribute to this achievement, saying that

> Thumboo has staked out a considerable and robust domain of lyric definition and construction—of self, nation, nationality. His enterprise has given poetry a relevant and acceptable niche in a decisively pragmatic society. (Singh, *Interlogue Studies* 46)

I have written elsewhere that 'the most frequently used word in *A Third Map*', Thumboo's *New and Selected Poems*, may well be 'memory' (Tong, Pakir & Ban 41). History is public memory, and Thumboo's poems encompass both his own and modern Singapore's history. A poem such as 'At Mandai' sets about 'arranging / The shaded layers of memory' to recall his and his sister's growing up in what was then countryside, listening to their grandmother's tales of China, long before all Singapore was 'redone rewritten reinforced' (112–113). Thumboo is no Wordsworth saying 'I cannot paint / What then I was' in childhood and immediately proceeding to do so[2]; his is very much an adult voice and arguably more discusses what his experience of Mandai was like rather than evokes it. However, the poems are not without emotion, even if it is always held in check. A pensiveness prevails in '1st April '45, 42 Monk's Hill Terrace, Newton' (Sengupta 2), the address to which the Thumboo family fled from Mandai 'driven' by Japanese shelling. The family, he recalls, 'got dispersed into a seemingly long sadness' and the children had 'pre-war comforts stolen away'. It is characteristic of Thumboo's work that even in these recollections and that of being bullied by 'Bigger boys' when he was first working, there is no explosion of emotion in the poem.

One issue that has stayed in Thumboo's memory and has strongly affected his aspirations for Singapore is that of being bullied and discriminated against because he is a *chap cheng*, a person of mixed race—his father being Indian and his mother Chinese. In the Appendix to *The Votive Pen* Thumboo writes that 'As a Tamil-Teochew, I had suffered from those who believed in "racial purity"' (235). Sengupta reports that these experiences in childhood and youth, together with the race riots in Singapore and Malaya, left Thumboo 'in little doubt that racial unity was the only answer for Singapore and this unity could be found in a common usage of English' (102). Thus, the poem 'RELC' [Regional English Language Centre] begins, 'Here our languages have a home', and Thumboo muses that while 'History left us separate' now 'we enter the rhythms / Of our many peoples, understand / [...] / The deep grammar of their hearts' that can 'Gather our peoples toward each other' (82). At the time the poem was written, these claims were at least as much a matter of hope and persuasion as of fact. The poem hides personal issues behind the public but it is entirely to Edwin Thumboo's credit that he has always argued for a multicultural Singapore, one in which all the races, including the Eurasians, are respected. 'We are / New and multiracial' he writes in the poem 'Still Travelling' (Sengupta 19). His poems include dramatic monologues and various character portraits, whose multiculturalism can be discerned even in their titles. One of his poems, simply titled 'John', begins by naming 'John Watson, John Tan / John Harniman, John Raja / John Cawelti, John Waiyaki / John Sinclair, John Kasaipwalova' and celebrates that 'I know them all, know they / Can meet, be equal' (74).

At the same time, Sengupta perceptively observes that 'his own multi-racial background and the rupturing experience of war would leave him with a recurring sense of inner fragmentation and, consequently, duality, and a resolution thereof would be a leitmotif of his poetry' (102–103). Sengupta argues that 'It is this third identity born of syncretic cultures that constitute [sic] the "third map" of his existence' (202), thus providing the title for his most important poetry book, *A Third Map: new and selected poems*. Thumboo has always been conscious of Singapore as a tiny 'multi-ethnic, multicultural island republic where density of population is 10,000 per square mile' with 'cultures co-existing cheek by jowl' (Thumboo, in Bennett 43). It began as a nation with 'a residue of distrust between communities that the pre-Independence racial riots had left in their wake' (Thumboo, in Sengupta xviii). Singapore being 'small, a boil / On the Melanesian face', Thumboo was adamant about its need to 'Break racial stubbornness' and 'make a people' (53–54).

Not the least of the racial discrimination Thumboo suffered came through colonialism, and he was one of a small number of young writers who worked at the University of Malaya (then in Singapore) in the cause of nationalism. Personal experience lies behind his statements that:

> Colonies were not intrinsically, internally important. In the hundred years from the mid-nineteenth century especially, they were pieces in a game of chess reflecting rival European interests. The deep-seated needs and aspirations of the colonised never figured except when they appeared threatening and were directly suppressed or subverted through the divide and rule principle. (Thumboo, in Bennett 227)

Thumboo and his friends were harassed and sometimes arrested by the British for their troubles (see Sengupta 86–87). In the Introduction to Sengupta's book Thumboo posits 'colonization [*sic*]' as 'the one experience that deeply affected me and many in my generation' (xviii). He recalls that at school and university the 'major movements of the history we studied excluded us' (Sengupta 34). In the much later poem 'Games' he simply observes that when he looks at the newspaper 'Princess Anne is speeding', when he looks for 'sarong and baju / They sell Levis', when he despairs 'for a drink / Get served Coca-Cola' (64)... Whatever he does, what he meets is Western. Alphonso at tea, in the poem of that name, reflects that 'In part we grew from imperial dreams' in which 'East is East; West is West' so that 'early Singaporeans' felt 'dual, / Interim, shaped by loam, fire and prejudiced / Bluster, a snap of fingers'. Even the 'call to / Poetry' revealed 'the great tradition [...] at times / Too confidently marked by empire, self- / Investiture, a hand which ruled from habit' (96). The angry poem 'May 1954' recalls how 'My father felt his master's voice, / Obeyed but hid his grievous, wounded self' and asserts that 'There is an Asian tide / That sings such power / Into my dreaming side' (76–77). The Yeatsian manner of these lines is no accident: Yeats provided a model for poetic nationalism and rebellion against the English, and Thumboo has often attested to his admiration for the great Irish poet. 'May 1954' baldly commands, '*Depart white man*', saying ironically, 'You knew when to come; / Surely know when to go' (76). The anger does not make for great poetry but the fierce rhetoric is admirable.

Despite his strong identification with an independent Singapore, Thumboo is aware that the British Empire bequeathed some benefits, among them elements of the education he received and the English language. One of Thumboo's most hearfelt poems is 'Fifteen Years After',

an elegy for his school English teacher, Shamus Frazer. Frazer, who had left Singapore, is remembered as 'teacher and friend' and contrasted with those who came after, 'revivers of clichés' and 'full of themselves' (49–50). Thumboo said in a long interview with Peter Nazareth,

> Colonialism is an absolutely mixed blessing; it's more sin than blessing, but there were a few blessings and the English language, I think, is one of the interesting remainders of any colonial experience because the English-educated [such as himself] were drawn from all communities [...] it was multiracial. (Nazareth 168)

Thumboo believes that he could 'look at the competing interests of the various [ethnic] groups [...] because of the English language' (Nazareth 167), and he may have been aided in this belief by predecessors in India such as Rabindranath Tagore. Yeats helped Thumboo recognise that although it was the colonists' language it was not any one racial group's language and could be used in a Singaporean manner. Thumboo 'realised first-hand that English was a fabulous, creatively available language. It was there for the re-making [...] with your own way of saying [...] your idiolect' (Thumboo, in Sengupta 72). Thus, in the poem 'Language as Power' Thumboo finds:

> Wordsworth in the tropics: daffodils mutate.
> [...] a fresh
> Vocabulary, equal, reconciling Englishes
> [...]
> Defining room for mutual, fresh realities (109)

Singapore could use English to 'start [...] speech communities' and 'extend language into power' (108).

Thumboo has long had a writer's awareness 'that words are knowledge, / Means, deep vital memories / Of what we were, and are' (83). Wang Gungwu, who was a slightly older colleague at the University of Malaya and published the first book of poems by those early nationalists, writes in a Foreword to Sengupta's book, 'We imagined that we could bring to life a new national identity with poetry that would enable us to swim in ever larger waters' (xii). However, Wang became 'convinced [...] that national literature could only be written in a language native to the country' (xii). In their study of *Southeast Asian Writing in English*, Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden say of Singapore that 'Much of the early writing turned to the genre of poetry, which continues to be the elite genre preferred among writers' (42). Aided by his reading of Yeats and of African writers

who also found the value of a neutral language, Thumboo has been a major force in making English language poetry the strongest genre in Singaporean literature. Wang now observes that Thumboo 'emerged as the leader of a new generation of poets' who made it possible 'to think of the poetry written [in English] with local cadences as national' (xiii). Patke and Holden declare that *Rib of Earth*, Thumboo's first poetry collection, published in 1956, 'puts together a small body of writing confident in making English viable for poetry in the Malayan peninsula' (53). Of course, English language literature has also been made viable through Singapore's adoption of English for education and economic purposes, but even so, given the racial situation in Malaysia and early Singapore, Thumboo's achievement is a major one. The first poem in *A Third Map* declares 'Words are dangerous' (3) but his work helped make poetry in English a 'calculus for fellowship of language / As power, as making, as release' (109). He has had a 'lifelong urge to speak of the softer elements, the language, the poetry, the words, elements that often get pushed aside in a nation's journey towards economic progress' (Sengupta xxi). In contemplating both the rural Mandai he grew up in and the modern city where 'all is made redone rewritten reinforced', through words, he argues, we

> [...] discover yet again
> There are two imaginings, perhaps
> More, between pages, between lines,
> Ways to unfold, digest visions. (113)

In his work 'lines' is a word that consistently has a double reference to direction and poetry.

In considering those visions and the recognition that words provide 'knowledge, / [...] / Of what we were and are', in the poem 'RELC' Thumboo is acutely aware of the importance of history, noting that 'our languages / [...] / [...] remember / Past, present, future' (88). Thumboo has never sought to move forward by denying or ignoring history, his reading of T. S. Eliot perhaps helping him see history as past but also as a kind of present. In his Introduction to *The Votive Pen* Thumboo says 'History has been a recurrent theme for me' and that his 'poetic mission of many years' has been 'to give voice to a tradition [...] and to provide significant correlatives to an emerging culture in terms of "events" or "types" or "places"'(xx). One aim of his poems is 'To spin the past and let it sing' (23). Contemplating some Chinese vases and statues while conversing with a friend, 'Conversation fades— / Time splits itself. / There are centuries here, / In these images' (86). It is hardly surprising that a person with Indian and

Chinese heritage would have a sense of long history, and in the creation of a new country Thumboo found a need for continuity as well as change. Especially in his early poems Thumboo presents many statements and images of uncertainty that contrast with the settledness which tradition provides. Contemplating the town while dining in Chiangmai, Thailand, Thumboo imagines figures of 'ancient tribal song', their 'Limbs rich with centuries' so that 'We [...] / Move into another time' (22).

In this poem, 'Khan Tok in Chiangmai', time indeed 'splits' and takes him into a mythological realm. Mythological figures and events take place outside time and so might be seen to contrast with history, but in an Asian sensibility inherited myths readily seem a part of history, at least psychologically. Thumboo wrote a postgraduate thesis on African literature, and Sengupta argues that Thumboo took from Wole Soyinka 'the idea of an author as a myth-maker' (138) since for Soyinka 'myth was what made the African past relevant to its present', demonstrating 'how so often social behaviour was but an unwilling obedience to [...] ancestral memory' (135). She quotes Thumboo as saying myths 'hold the fundamental values or "truths" of a society' (172). Thumboo elsewhere has described himself as 'a myth-inclined poet' (Bennett 4) and, given that the 'store of Asian myth and legend is vast', expressed the 'hope that other poets writing in English will respond' to his work 'and help re-establish myth and legend as significant grammars of experience' (Bennett 6).

That hope seems to have proved forlorn in economically driven, scientifically-minded and pragmatic modern Singapore. I think it correct to see Thumboo as 'myth-inclined' but not as a 'myth-maker'. Thumboo does not invent myths in his poems but recognises myths handed down in both his Indian and Chinese traditions. While in 'Evening by Batok Town' Thumboo looks at the sky's clouds and references 'A troop of dwarfs', 'a grey-gold dragon', 'Krishna's chariot' and 'Arjuna' and claims that 'These shifting runes / [...] touched my father, now my son' these seem to belong to the past 'as memory anoints earlier days'. The poem sounds more convincing when it gets to 'high-rise and high-way' and the young of 'the computer-mind' who 'Turn memory shorter than the land's' (118–119). Similarly, Thumboo's most famous poem, 'Ulysses by the Merlion' ends,

> Perhaps having dealt in things,
> Surfeited on them,
> Their spirits yearn again for images,
> Adding to the dragon, phoenix,
> Garuda, naga those horses of the sun [...] (81)

The most potent word here seems to me to be 'Perhaps'; a valuing of mythology is not the first thing anyone associates with pragmatic, commercial, modern Singapore and it is not prominent in the work of the younger poets. Despite Singaporeans, especially older Singaporeans, keeping 'some memory of their race' their reputation in South-east Asia accords more with the earlier lines in 'Ulysses by the Merlion': 'They make, they serve, / They buy, they sell'. The poem seeks to establish a new myth, having Ulysses sail into Singapore and meet the Merlion, but the Merlion is a creature of commercialisation, a plastic statue created by the Singapore Tourist Board. In an interview with Peter Nazareth, Thumboo has described it as 'This marvellous merlion symbol' and claimed 'how effective' the 'manufacturing of mythology [...] can be' (Tong, Pakir & Ban 181) but in truth mythology and culture can never be manufactured. Sengupta describes the young Thumboo as 'on a continuous search for orders of society which were inherent, organic, deep-rooted and not artificially imposed for purposes of political dominance or economic advantage' (37). However, the merlion is exactly the latter, and Sengupta describes it as 'distinctly plastic' (191). 'Ulysses by the Merlion' is Singapore's most discussed poem[3] and Sengupta properly gives it a great deal of attention, noting that it 'brought ET fame, as it triggered criticism' (190). Thumboo rates it as one of his ten best poems but I would argue it is programmatic, with the poet having to *tell* us that the merlion is 'wondrous [...] / Touched with power' and a 'powerful creature', while the voice of Ulysses sounds as factitious as the merlion statue.

One service Sengupta has done is draw attention to Thumboo's decade working in Singapore's public service before he secured an academic position. As she notes, 'these ten years are all but missing in most accounts of his life' (112). I have never heard Thumboo talk about them. Sengupta reports that 'it was a daunting period for him when he learnt new ways to say yes and no' (112). He declares, in an interview with Ronald Klein, that 'I have rendered too much unto Caesar. Work took time away, and as a poet, work and time go together. And it's not so much the time problem [...] Your best energy [...] should really go into poetry. Instead it goes into administration' (Klein 70). This lament, very recognisable for modern poets, appears in various poems but has hardly been noticed by critics. In the poem 'Renewal' Thumboo, in Yeatsian fashion, remarks, 'That wild creative urge / Which rippled in the sun / Has turned to murmured discontent, / Maimed, quartered by gradual tasks' (21). When he discovers an old letter from poet friend Ee Tiang Hong, who was suffering the same problem, Thumboo reminds Ee and himself:

[…] we still owe
Each other and to ourselves,
Those words, uncertain poems,
Put off,
Because some official
Was sat on by his wife to take her shopping
Or was off to golf […] (34)

The 'poems were unwritten' and Thumboo has no sympathy with the Romantic idea that 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter'[4]. The poems unwritten are 'words left alone to die / Lose their heart in clear / Official use […] / Reduced to explicate and tie' (36).

Since he has written poems about public institutions and poems in favour of the Government's programmes of economic and physical development, 'Mapping our growing nation' on an 'invented island' (123), some have thought Thumboo has continued his work as a public servant in his poetry. Sengupta notes the poet Lee Tzu Pheng's claim that 'his poetry has become too externalized [*sic*], conscientious acts of will to feed his public purpose' (197). Shirley Lim long ago argued that Thumboo's public stance has affected all his work, so that his 'private poems […] show a strong reticence at work […] as concerned with masking, disguising, concealing or taking refuge in generalities and abstractions as with expressing the inwardness of experience' (Bennett, Ee & Shepherd 31). This business of the public versus the private and the associated critique of a lack of lyricism has been a major issue in discussions of Edwin Thumboo's work. He has recognised this himself, writing in the poem 'Gods Can Die':

We understand and try to seek a balance in the dark
To know the private from the public monument,
To find our way between the private and the public
argument (59)

Sengupta quotes Lee Tzu Pheng as calling this poem and the book which it titles '"extroverted poetry" with little self-searching' (203). She also records Thumboo's 'defence':

> Lyric poem—that's where I started and that's the kind of poetry I like to write but I got sucked into writing about the nation, because I knew if I didn't, nobody else would. (203)

This begs the question of whether anyone had to, but the whole issue arises because Thumboo's aesthetics differ from those in any age since the Romantics, including the present. The Romantics turned poetry inwards, towards vision, emotion, uncertainty and lyricism, whereas most of Thumboo's poetry accords more readily with an Eighteenth Century, Augustan aesthetic. Augustan poetic form included more epistles and essays than lyrics, and while most of Thumboo's poems are short they often contain essay-like elements, such as evaluations, judgements and directives, and a use of imagery to illustrate statements rather than to embody meaning.

When you are old and
Fat and fifty, comfortable in a rocking-chair
Remember it is never easy to propose (40)

The City is what we make it.
You and I. We are the City (56)

In a poem that is both private and public, 'Victoria School', Thumboo uses as epigraph his old school's motto, '*Nil Sine Labore*', and declares, 'The changing age confirmed severely: / Nothing without labour, / Nothing is for free', and the poem ends, 'We do not return to you, / We never really left' (94–95). His is a masculine voice in a masculine world—apart from his wife in recent poems, almost all the people in his poetry are men—and his voice is often stern. In many ways these are elements of a Confucian culture. Keats said that 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design on us'[5] but Thumboo, contrary to much modern literary theory, has insisted that 'intention […] counts from the word go' and 'criticism that removes the intention is a bit silly' (Klein 73). His is also a reflective poetry rather than one of dramatic immediacy. Striking images—such as that of 'a lipless sleep / where the teeth are shutters' in his elegy for Peter Wee (12)—are extremely rare, and emotional expression is muted.

In his Introduction to Sengupta's book Thumboo declares,

> For long have the arc lights remained trained on the public purpose of my poems rather than my private quest. It is that quest which is behind my poetry, as it makes me what I am. I hope with this volume the compass will somewhat change direction. (xxiii)

In part Thumboo's complaint is justified, because he does write more notionally private poems than public ones, particularly in recent years, when he has retired from public roles. However, as I have indicated, the critical view of his work comes from his style as well as his subject matter. In his interview with Thumboo Peter Nazareth notes,

'Peter Alcock says that there is no music in your poetry' (Nazareth 195). In response Thumboo quotes lines from his long early poem 'The Cough of Albuquerque':

> At Kepong where the hills begin
> You grew a day infinite.
> Breasts firm, your hands gently secret
> Untied my rupturing fever.
> Where stream arrives,
> The rock speaks with silver waters
> Sudden the discovery of beauty in pollen [...] (Nazareth 196)

Thumboo exclaims, 'If that has no music, I'll be darned!' I can recognise that the impulse of the lines is romantic but its stops and starts and the clipped lines make this musical in only a limited way. Thumboo has discussed the way his style evolved and the strong influence of his teacher Shamus Frazer and of Arthur Waley; the latter especially made him feel that 'some form of free verse was the probable answer' to the question of how to write Singaporean English verse (Bennett, Ee & Shepherd 3). He claims that the 'overriding impulse behind my style hungers for a lyric intensity' but that he 'decided to loosen my style [...] so as to cope with public subjects. There are now elements in it which are close to conversation, to plain statement' (Bennett, Ee & Shepherd 5). None of this is conducive to musicality and although in recent times he has tried to write short lyrics and haiku (see Sengupta 200–204), it seems to me that one way in which he differs strongly from Yeats is in musicality. Thumboo, despite their common cause of nationalism, has far stronger links with the Enlightenment and 18th-century poetic ideals. For this he needs to make no apologies, even if those ideals are unfashionable. All his poems have a firm, directing voice—there is little Keatsian gentleness and no belief in negative capability; all are direct in manner, seek clarity and have a strong sense of purpose.

It is certainly true that one reason for Thumboo's poetic stature and influence is his craftsmanship. In interviews he has said to Ronald Klein that 'The art for me means technique [...] Technique is the eternity of poetry, really' (Klein 72) and insisted to Peter Nazareth that 'while inspiration plays a part, the poet is first and last a craftsman' (Nazareth 79). At the same time he is very aware that 'There is no end to the craft that makes the art' and in this poem, 'A Poet reading', he also declares that 'our words don't / Take in all' and that 'The perfect poem is future tense' (Sengupta 239). It is also important to recognise that there are more elements to his poetry than he is sometimes given credit for.

Leong Liew Geok claims, 'Were it not for Thumboo's fervent belief in a national poetic, he could be seen as an unmitigated apologist for the ruling party' (Singh , *Interlogue Studies* 42) and 'clearly writes a laureate's poetry' (Singh, *Interlogue Studies* 43). However, his poems include many critiques of 'all that governmentness' (38) or of 'proud' men 'Drest in a little brief authority' (75) or 'Of heaving, / Unattended, selfish pride' (129). Thumboo is 'convinced' that 'political stability [...] is the major cornerstone of national health' (Singh, *Writer's Sense* 229) but he is not a blind follower of the People's Action Party. Sengupta discusses Thumboo's poem 'The Interview', concerning 'the trial of the radical Tan Jin Quec, the gradual wearing down of his resistance and final humiliating confession [...] on national television' (144). The poem argues:

> We concede again
> (Or some of us at least):
> The state above all else,
> Above extremes of personal liberty.
> But it should not break,
> So alienate painfully a man.
>
> It is a deadly game this politics. (48)

In his poems Thumboo is always insistent on individual integrity. Rajeev Patke has observed that 'Thumboo was still declaring in 1970 that the poet should resist co-option into any simple nationalist drive' and quotes Thumboo as saying:

> I have always thought the poet is an individual aware of, if not actually guarding, his freedom. (Singh, *Interlogue Studies* 93)

In the poem 'A Quiet Evening' Thumboo writes of a dinner at which Lee Kuan Yew was guest of honour,

> Our President
> Spoke with a proper turn of mind.
> We were loyal, ordinarily; even wholesome;
> Would support the national cause; co-operate,
> Give both hands; make minor vows
> For the love of country, but retain an
> Academic claw or two. (51)

'We' are dutiful but a little ambiguous about the commitment. Patke notes 'Thumboo's eschewing of irony as a mode of self-expression' (Singh, *Interlogue Studies* 97) but the overdone statements here are ironic, as

is the poem's title. The poem ends, 'The evening was an open heart / Dressed properly with coat and tie' (52). Verbal irony also appears in poems such as 'Proposals' and 'Scene', while dramatic irony is evident in 'A Boy Drowns', where a boy drowns in a pool built by the Japanese when they were resting and had 'Retreated from war and violence' (43).

Sengupta's book does have a discernible argument, which is that Thumboo's life and poetry trace a journey from uncertainty and disunity, both personal and national, to something like Yeats's Unity of Being and a sense of tranquillity. She points out that 'his own multi-racial background and the rupturing experience of war would leave him with a recurring sense of inner fragmentation and consequently duality, and a resolution thereof would be the leitmotif of his poetry' (55). He writes purposeful poetry and 'the purpose very clearly remains to move from tolerance and understanding to fusion and harmony in the Singaporean context' (Sengupta 55). She finds the poems of *Gods Can Die* (published in 1977) 'rife with incessant speculation and debate, a relentless catechismic self-questioning' (139); against this she sets Thumboo's conversion to Christianity and recent writing of religious poems as well as love poems to his wife in attempted lyrics. He claims that his recent poems are 'less knotty, shorter' (Sengupta 227), his words 'yielding centre, voice, / Tranquillity, order, place' (100).

In retrospect Thumboo's poetry might well seem to mark a restless search for order and tranquillity but Sengupta also notes how difficult he finds it to surrender his ego. A life of exercising willpower does not easily lead to 'yielding centre, voice'. Christianity marks a return to his father's religion, in 1992. In his Introduction to *The Votive Pen* Thumboo declares that he has 'always known and believed in a creator but with the panoply of religious influences in my family, it was more of an eclectic belief' (xxi). Sengupta observes, 'Faith does not come easily to him' and that 'he himself confesses […] he knows daily struggle with his spiritual practice, finds it difficult to surrender his fully awakened mind to the dictates of the heart' (54). In another poem, memory of his father brings 'unquiet ways / To still the turbulence of odd, dyspeptic days' ('Father 4' in Goh 74). It is hard to think of Thumboo's stern intelligence and 'itch to know' (Thumboo, in Sengupta 13) settling into tranquillity, but Christian belief seems to have given him some of that serenity which stares at us from the cover of Sengupta's book and released him from the sense that, as an early poem says, 'time that bitter acid / Reduces all to a boneless ash' ('Pendulum', in Brewster 49). At any rate, Thumboo is right to see Singapore as 'Our prodigal Little Red Dot' ('National Language Class', in Sengupta 111) and he is undoubtedly one of its prodigies.

Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from poems are from *A Third Map: new and selected poems*.
2 William Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', in Stillinger 109.
3 See Rajeev Patke in Haskell & Shapiro, 184–191, and Dennis Haskell in Tong, Pakir & Ban, 32–45.
4 John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in Cook 288.
5 John Keats, Lettter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 February 1818, in Gittings 61.

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Heavens, yes.

Helen Ivory

Helen Ivory is a poet and visual artist. Her fifth Bloodaxe collection is *The Anatomical Venus* (2019). She edits the webzine *Ink Sweat and Tears* and teaches creative writing online for the University of East Anglia / National Centre for Writing. She has work translated into Polish, Ukrainian and Spanish as part of the Versopolis project. She has a chapbook, *Maps of the Abandoned City*, with SurVision, and a book of collage poems, *Hear What the Moon Told Me*, with Knives Forks and Spoons Press.

Most of my practice involves play. I place things together in the same enclosure to see how they will get on. I need some manner of logic, before I reach for the glue to make their relationship permanent. Often that logic is a dream-logic; this is cemented using words cut from old books and encyclopaedias. I am interested in the way that words and images jostle against each other and shift their meanings and connotations.

This piece started with a postcard of a couple I found in a flea market in France a few years ago. I was attracted to the melodramatic idea of romance and thought I might have a little fun with it. The images of the stormy sea and the hand that writes the story, as I saw it, came next. Then the words are from Arthur Mee's *The Children's Encyclopaedia* (1950s) and the UK *Housewife* magazine (1940s). I rather fetishise the way that in collage, paper stock is varied, the materials are of themselves, and one can move a shark about till it comes to its natural resting place.

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On Making a Garden

Rachael Petridis

Rachael Petridis is a Western Australian poet. She has published in journals and anthologies throughout Australia. Her collection *Sundecked* (Australian Poetry Centre, 2010) was commended in the Ann Elder Award. Her second collection, *Horse on a Roof*, was published in 2020 by Sunline Press.

he imagines his garden
shades of yellow hints of white
towering scarlets

soil turned over and over
ground cover humming
a perfumed blue

he measures the pebbled path
a scribble of shrubbery
depths for peering through

considers how he might brush
his landscape
with slant of moonbeam or
stroke of sunlight
in a breeze of lingering scents

how he might feel earth's tendrils
reach into him blossoming
his arms lighting his face
softening the pain

Where fragile things meet ordinary air

Shey Marque

Shey Marque is a former medical scientist who defected to poetry, winning the Queensland Poetry Festival Emerging Older Poet in 2018. Her collections are *Aporiac* (FLP, 2016) and *Keeper of the Ritual* (UWA Publishing, 2019).

It's me who's thrown. He holds up the image to the light box,
pointing out the lack of hands and feet, the amphibious stumps.

Pectoral limbs extended laterally, the ventro-dorsal position
gives an impression it came into the world ready to fly. *Foetus*

—born without a head. It was blue, he says, flashing the
radiograph. *It looks like a frog*, I wail, both hands hovering over

my mouth. Hanging out of the waste bin, a heat-proof, foil bag
from the rotisserie chicken he'd x-rayed out of boredom. Our

giggling is interrupted by a caterwaul coming from the street
below. Through the timber sash window I notice a span of roof-

tops. When I look a second time, beyond the point of focus,
I see a mother from years before, her stricken face hollering

at the bedroom door, an aunt calling over and over, unable to
reach the doctor. Outside, I'd been watching a father filleting

raw tadpoles on a rock, to place upon the tongues of us children
for the leap factor—an athlete's secret. He was busy plucking

four little gaping mouths from the goldfish pond in the moment
a breathless, blue baby wrapped warm in a blanket went quietly.

Last appointment of the day

Kirwan Henry

Kirwan Henry is a teacher living in Perth with her husband and two children. She is rediscovering her love for writing poetry after life got in the way.

We already knew you were gone
before we got to the clinic.
Our appointment was the last of the day.
The lady did not see us waiting.
She walked by wearing her designs on the afternoon.
'... have to tell them about a miscarriage'
was thrown to a colleague over her shoulder.
She said it like babies were bottles of water
or cups of tea. I did not tell her
we had already done our shopping for the week.
Instead I pretended I hadn't heard.
She must have realised too late
that our ears were in range
and well and truly shot.
Still, I worried about what she thought of me.

Your father worried too. When we got home
he proposed helpful phone calls and a weekend away.
I buried the forms and pamphlets the lady gave me
in the bottom drawer where I keep my scarves.
I do not wear them. I do not feel pretty. I am an open sore.
I cry on and off like in books and songs.
Your father holds me close as if I am overflowing.

Every morning I take a form out of the drawer
and offer my insides to a nurse
who reminds me of my aunty.
We discuss the fineness of my veins.
When I get home I keep busy.
The lady from the clinic interrupts my lunch
to let me know how little of you is left. I thank her
and tear up all but one of the pamphlets
she pressed upon me. The one I keep I file under
'Miscellaneous'. It does not belong under
'Receipts and Warranties'.
I cannot say 'Fix this'
and I do not want a new one.

Writers' Development Program

Westerly presents a selection of writing from the three participants in the 2020–21 Writers' Development Program. We are proud of the writers' efforts, and grateful for the support of the Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund in funding the Program, and the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre for their partnership in Program delivery.

Maiden Shame
Lisa Collyer

Lisa Collyer is a poet and educator. She writes poetry with a focus on women's bodies and how their experiences shape their everyday lives. She is a Four Centres' Emerging Writer, a writer-in-residence with the National Trust of Western Australia, and an invited writer-in-residence for the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre (2022). Her work appears in *Cordite*, *Not Very Quiet* and *Rabbit*.

Before a nymph learns to gag
I sieve the letters you explete
bilious S L
U
T like you know
delinquent fingers
give pudency the slip
prise the cache to peak
threefold.
It's only the summit
but one stands taller than the rest.
A bundle of sticks
clenched and stones thrown.

In Search of Loss

Lisa Collyer

A possum-like inflorescence
gestates beneath gums
cream, gold, and brown
I tangle fingers in woolly hairs
belly, bottom, ears, and mouth
like lanugo in utero
intact.

I count your parts
like Ferdinand Bauer's
Banksia illustrations
anatomically correct
floral head, stems, and bracts
fingers and toes.

Seasonally, I imagine
I trod a different path
I follow the natal trajectory
of Artemis' arrow and I keep you
intact.

A whimsical thought
of feminine birth
I bury our placental bond
(the interface of our intimacy)
swaddled in teatree-infused bark.

But I return to accuracy
when the blunt point pierces
my womb—

a wooden cone
whose nut stops growing
my body burns
a follicle bursts
and you evacuate
unable to handle
crisis.

And I evolve teeth.

Fractals of Domestic and Family Violence

Adele Aria

Adele is a queer disabled writer, advocate and artist whose writing, informed by lived experiences and studies, focuses on human rights and social justice. Their non-fiction, poetry and performance writing has featured in local, Australian and international publications and events. Adele has been awarded several emerging writer and development fellowships. A person of colour, Adele is grateful to be living on Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar.

I have rewritten this essay many times.

Invisibility serves coercive control, giving it agency and power. While bruises and bones heal, leaving scars that fade, unchecked coercive control may rewrite neural pathways, jam vigilance into an ongoing state and reach far into a fragile future.

Yet speaking from lived experience presents quandaries I know others share.

People who are societally marginalised face demands to serve up deeply personal details, labouring to humanise ourselves. I am resistant to performing trauma as consumable insights. I worry that doing so panders to expectations that we purchase inclusion with the dissection of our selves. It potentially perpetuates the power dynamics that oblige us to overcome socialised distrust of our otherness. The typical price of legitimising my perspective while arguing for many different voices to be heard is a fine line to navigate. I anticipate there may be a cost to my transgressive visibility.

I am also aware that dissection of abuse can exacerbate the distress of people who have endured or are still living with domestic and family violence (DFV). Recently, a friend wept in the darkness after a panel discussion, asking why we must repeatedly hear recitals of appalling statistics we already know, as bids to convey the seriousness of DFV in Australia.

Although I feel strongly about the need to draw attention to issues, writing this essay feels fraught as well with the potential that it might appear as an indictment of some people who also work to eliminate DFV.

Difference in perspectives, experiences and opinions has a generative potential to shape our futures. My hope is for more voices to be heard.

Domestic and Family Violence, and Coercive Control

Coercive control is an invisible cage that deprives people of liberty; Evan Stark notes that it exerts a long-term pervasive impact upon the daily lives of victim/survivors of DFV. One of the earlier theorists of the phenomenon, Stark draws attention to how the terror and habits of survival extend beyond the exposure to abuse. Understandings of DFV as a complex phenomenon continue to evolve to encompass increased recognition of its many forms (see Fitz-Gibbon et al.; Hill). While definitions and terminology referring to DFV might vary, many victim/survivors and specialist workers speak of coercive control as one of the most potent aspects, requiring urgent attention and action (see McMahon & McGorrery).

A group of Australia-based researchers and advocates, strongly informed by victim/survivors' accounts of their experiences, describe coercive control as including 'behaviours that one person (usually a man) uses to intimidate, humiliate, surveil, gaslight and isolate another person (usually a female intimate partner) and strip them of their sense of autonomy and self-worth so as to have control over them' (McGorrery et al. np). This control might include the use of financial, psychological and technology-facilitated tactics, creating cognitive, emotional and social effects (see Walklate & Fitz-Gibbon; Woodlock et al.). Shaming is common, including belittling and humiliation.

Recently, Australian activists, researchers, advocates and frontline workers who labour to reduce DFV have turned their collective attention to coercive control as a significant high-risk indicator of physical violence, often preceding homicide (see McPhedran & Baker; Monckton Smith 'Femicide'). Victim/survivors frequently find every aspect of their existence closely scrutinised and their lives made to shrink to what their abuser can control.

One of several enduring misconceptions is that physical violence is a defining feature of DFV; however, controlling tactics often dominate patterns of DFV behaviours and there may be no explicit threat or use of physical violence. It seems we have some way to go in public education and understanding when many don't realise that violence may not come in the form of a raised hand or closed fist.

It has also been reported by both perpetrators and victim/survivors that they did not realise there are more forms of sexual violence than assault, including demands and threats to manipulate a victim/survivor to engage in sexual acts they don't want (see AIHW 'Family Safety'). In some

cases, people reported it was safer for them to do as demanded, but this isn't the same as consent (see Loney-Howes). Abusers also often control reproductive choices. Not so long ago, the criminal justice system didn't recognise assault within marriage, and it seems attitudes supporting male entitlement might still linger within attitudes towards sexual abuse.

Stark argues sexual inequality shapes the tactics typically used by men into 'patterns of dominance that entrap partners and make them subordinate' (199). Some suggest coercive control is inextricably linked to patriarchal social dynamics, a feature of coloniality in Australia that positions masculine figures as leaders, particularly in families and households (see ANROWS & McMillan). Outmoded stereotypes of masculinity serve to entrench the preservation of this dominance and control.

He's smiling at me from the other side of the kitchen as I cheerfully ramble on about lunch with a mutual friend and assure him she's well. I know he hasn't seen her in a while and isn't very good at initiating a casual Hello, how are you? conversation, so I usually try to create a bridge between them, as if supporting this connection will nurture some gentleness towards me. But the thudding at the base of my skull reverberates through me and I feel like part of me is floating up and away, a lost helium balloon. I shouldn't have said anything but I'm not sure about what. His sweat reeks, bitter like expired milk. His good mood has gone rancid and I swallow the despair of not knowing what's coming next.

I begin desperately looking for crucial details in his shifting posture and slow blinking. Friends and colleagues have often commented enviously on my ability to read people but my breath is becoming staccato. I can't predict him.

He draws himself up, no longer leaning against the countertop, and his shoulders seem to swell in the stretched black t-shirt. He is a storm cloud, filling the space between us. My neck prickles with heat and the crescent moons of fingernails carve into my palms.

Maybe, this time, if I figure out the puzzle of his rage, if I can work out how best to behave, it won't go so poorly. I won't be held prisoner again so soon by desperate navigations of a bad mood that will only build until it envelops our life together.

How can I ever explain to anyone the inescapable demand I feel in the shift of his posture, the way he smells when his aggression is building? How it drives my desperate attempts to figure out how to please him?

I press myself into him with a big hug, and each murmur of affection escaping my mouth fills my own ears with pleading.

My lived experience energises my commitment to addressing DFV, but a disturbing consequence of the trend towards professionalising the specialist sector is a mistrust of lived experience in executive and leadership positions, as if our capacity for rationality becomes non-existent and emotions have no place in this work. Like others, I have been cautioned that disclosing my experience of domestic abuse would not only undermine my activism efforts, my career and reputation would also suffer. Ultimately, my increasingly disabled body can no longer sustain the demands of the professional roles that once enhanced the perceived value of my voice and my advocacy for communities which remain under-served or additionally harmed by the current responses to DFV.

Even were I to share personal experiences, I doubt they would be as valued as the expertise that wears the idealised veneer of impartiality assumed about professional roles and academic credentials. Different forms of knowledge have long been hierarchically valued in coloniality. Although I am reluctant to defer to the knowledge gained through institutionalised research that complies with notions of epistemic superiority, paradoxically, I pursue a PhD. I write to expand conversations and create change, while recognising the constraints of such knowledge-systems.

One of several drivers behind my PhD aspirations is my frustration at how coercive control, like the broader phenomenon of DFV, is still often discussed and investigated with a focus on heterosexual intimate relationships. So many people and their experiences slip through the cracks from either being unable to find, or not realising they have a right to, appropriate support.

The Shadow Pandemic

With a pandemic reshaping how we live, the prevalence of DFV is growing while the myth of its rarity is being dismantled.

Australian bushfires engulfed news coverage as 2020 was ushered in, but the world soon shifted its attention to COVID-19. By mid-2020, rates of DFV skyrocketed across the world and United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres was urging on global efforts to 'end the "shadow pandemic" of gender-based violence once and for all' (United Nations). The shadow imagery conjures the secrecy of the intimate spaces in which gender-based violence frequently occurs. DFV has been camouflaged by illusory social ideas that delineate and separate public and private lives. In Australia, the violence occurring in public spaces is policed in distinctly different ways, with serious consequences less likely to be enforced for harm inflicted in personal settings.

The 'shadow' in 'shadow pandemic' also alludes to the unintended and potentially devastating effects that may trail public policies and system designs. The public health threat of the COVID-19 pandemic has driven many government mandates restricting people's movements (see Pfitzner et al.). Together with the virus itself, abusers have become better equipped to use new and enhanced tactics of control, exacerbating their victims' social isolation and vulnerabilities. Recorded upward trends of frequency, forms, severity and numbers of DFV cases quickly exceeded early predictions. Home has long been known to be one of the most dangerous places for many women and children. As the pandemic worsened, so did the endangerment.

Lockdowns create a unique caging effect, enclosing perpetrators of DFV in close quarters with their targets—often partners, but also children, elderly relatives, housemates and pets. It is even reasonable to suspect that the higher than projected figures of this shadow pandemic are lower than the reality, because these constrained living arrangements obstruct attempts by victim/survivors to connect with support services, let alone report their experiences. Instead, women must slip from the slumbering embrace of their partners to send urgent emails in the heavy darkness of night.

As women's vulnerability to gender-based violence increased in the countries embroiled in earlier stages of the pandemic, one incident in Australia shocked the community into a reckoning with coercive control (see Pfitzner et al.). The odious murders of Hannah Baxter nee Clarke and her children, Aaliyah, Laianah and Trey, were committed mere weeks before multiple lockdowns would be introduced. Hannah had not yet completed legal processes to separate from Rowan Baxter but, in an act of solidarity with her thwarted intentions, media coverage shifted to refer to her as Hannah Clarke (see King).

Details of Baxter's coercive control tactics would eventually emerge, including physical, emotional, sexual and financial abuse (see McKenna & Roberts). Initially, the fatally violent acts were understood as the first physical manifestation of years of intimidation and violence. The murders confirmed a pattern of risk well known to researchers and specialist workers: the period of leaving an abusive relationship can be the most dangerous (see McPhedran & Baker).

However, in an arguably unprecedented shift, media reporting and public discourse began to consider the experiences of humiliation and intimidation as aspects of DFV. People's understanding of the personal terrorism of DFV was prised open as Hannah's stolen life headlined across the globe. Public shock made the appetite for change contagious.

A lavish breakfast spread decorates the boardroom table we mill around, its colours contrasting with bleak conversations. We begin another meeting, typically arranged for our self-organised collective to share encouragement and the challenges we face as executives and leaders.

Predictably, talk turns to the recent murders of Hannah and her children. It evolves to lament the pervasiveness of DFV and we reassure ourselves that community outrage will be strong enough this time to compel political and social change. During a lull in conversation, a well-timed quiet voice asks if anyone has ever experienced DFV. Time seems frozen as I look around the silent room and notice more raised hands than might be expected, according to oft-quoted statistics.

Walking back to the carpark, a familiar pulsing headache reminds me to unclench hands I hadn't meant to tighten. I realise the question was framed as historic. It seemed we were drawing a line. Were we shying from the intimacy of DFV, even in friendships fostered over time? Were we avoiding the pain of knowing someone was currently in danger? Perhaps we had collectively relied upon a common myth that people in professional or socially powerful positions are somehow inoculated against DFV or can easily escape it. Looking in my rear-view mirror, I recall how hard it had been for me to realise what was happening, let alone tell someone and look for help. Changing gear, I begin driving to the rest of my day.

Eyes shut to the ribbons of nightclub lighting decorating smoky air, I'm dancing within the music, engrossed and tipsy. When I feel a tap on my shoulder, I turn to see two women huddled together, clasping each other's hands. I already know what conversation we're about to have, and the sharp edges of sobriety snap me into focus. Leaning into one another, we retire to a quieter corner. They tell me they've walked from another suburb to find me because of what happened at a different venue.

I can't be their saviour or therapist and I mustn't give that impression. Surviving is hard enough and another unfulfilled promise unbearable. I've heard too many promises, He'll never do it again.

DFV wears many faces but now it has seeped into every corner of my life.

I post a letter to my Facebook wall, explaining my break from social media and news, needing space from the constancy of Hannah's torment. I recognise the apology in my words, but the fatigue of sleepless nights is building, my body curling into a permanent question mark. Hannah's torment has become unavoidable, the details of her life laid out for speculative discussion. I find myself wishing I was shocked by the barrage of escalating hostility when anyone challenges the blame cast at her. The

forgiveness for her murderer and speculations that his actions were an inevitable response to his distress are corroding me.

Excusing myself to an act of self-care, I encourage others to be gentle on themselves. My reminder is as much for myself as others: taking care of ourselves will not undermine our commitment to the eradication of DFV.

It seemed inevitable that victim blaming narratives would feature as public discourse and media coverage about Hannah Clarke's situation continued. Often, victims are expected to make the violence stop. They are judged for staying, more than abusers for inflicting harm. There is a persistent underlying idea that abusers are provoked into terrorising others, unwitting agents driven to violence. She should have left; it can't have been that bad for her or the kids; she was probably a nag or ungrateful. He must have been so devastated, so desperate; he was a nice guy driven temporarily insane. In these scenarios, the abuser 'snapped', having been pushed to their limit—as if the cruelty inflicted upon a partner or child could be earned by bad behaviour. The power dynamics are ignored, neglecting how complex it can be to survive within range of an abuser's reach, or how a person's core sense of self and hope can be eroded by the weight of intimidation, shaming and assault.

Cases drawing high-profile media coverage, such as Hannah Clarke's, while appreciable in raising public awareness and will to address DFV, have a simultaneous effect of rendering nuances invisible. The common depictions of a white woman shrinking into darkness and shielding a bruised face as a white man towers with a raised fist influences public understanding as well as policy makers and legislators. People living with coercive control may not see themselves in these images, nor people facing violence from same-sex partners, relatives, or fearing for their children, beloved pets or visa status. I wonder whose lives, pushed to the margins, aren't counted. I wonder what barriers they face that are unrecognised or downplayed.

Flaws in the Systems

The contemporary systems in Australia which are most relied upon to combat and reduce DFV have faced years of criticism. Amongst many concerns, victim/survivors and perpetrators from various community groups, cultural backgrounds and social identities continue to face systemic marginalisations (see Blagg et al.; Durfee). Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, queer people and disabled people are but a small portion of people frequently finding these systems aren't designed for them.

The case of Charlie, murdered by the same person who assaulted his mother, Tamica Mullaley, seemed to elicit considerably less public outcry than that of Hannah Clarke when it happened in 2013. The Commission report finding that no police misconduct had contributed to the homicide didn't spread across global headlines (see Allam; Western Australia CCC). By mid-2020, when Charlie's surviving family campaigned for an inquest, it garnered little broader support, even as Hannah's story continued to circulate. Complicating factors—including racism, queerphobia and ableism—aren't typically raised when Australian media and public conversations continue to centre white heterosexual cis-gendered intimate relationships. Systems, especially the criminal justice system and child protection, may only add to an abuser's arsenal against victim/survivors.

Court findings and orders also often subordinate victim/survivors' safety, agency and autonomy. Some survivors find themselves mandated to maintain contact with their abuser when they would choose otherwise, navigating shared custody as if children are not victim/survivors too (see Brown & James; Chung et al.).

A legacy of colonial thinking provides the background to such lapses. Institutionalised academia, grounded in Eurocentric colonialist ideology, narrowly defines the legitimacy and value of voices, creating a hierarchy in which the truths of whiteness and colonialist solutions reign (see Dotson; Fricker). This has shaped the historic evolution of theories and solutions for DFV in Australia.

Assuming white cis-gendered heterosexual lives as the default unsurprisingly means that attempts to address DFV have often neglected other identities, relational dynamics and social factors. Activists, survivor advocates and some researchers repeatedly argue the need for the spotlight to expand beyond this narrow focus. As an example, a recent LGBTQ-focused survey found multiple respondents thought they couldn't have experienced DFV, believing it could only happen in heterosexual intimate partnerships (see Gray et al.).

Instead, mainstream responses tend to address gaps with complementing activities, added later if there is spare funding. Intersecting social forces of marginalisation are seen as additive rather than magnifying factors (see Crenshaw; Durfee). Additionally, not-for-profit and community service organisations are compelled to trade upon the labour of dedicated staff, securing funding by meeting success measures that rarely illustrate safety and long-term change. These entities competitively accumulate fiscal power to exert influence and secure the ongoing operations of their services.

Precarious funding is an ongoing challenge and directs attention and energy to organisational risk management. Despite the admirable dedication and extraordinary perseverance of specialist workers and advocates, the effect of these diversionary demands pushes questions like *Will this person be safer?* down the queue.

Although frustrations are expressed about capitalist distractions from vital work, there are few organisations that pause to consider if they can appropriately meet or support the needs of particular communities (see Droogendyk et al.; Giridharadas). Saviour positioning is rarely transparently questioned. Even the well-intentioned may be using and perpetuating the violence of colonialist power dynamics.

Meanwhile, questions are growing around claims that coercive control is a feature mostly found in intimate partner violence (see Gray et al.; Segrave; Victoria and Family Safety Victoria). Ongoing biases may have misshapen the dominant understanding of DFV, overly restricting historic research, recognition and records. This has been a likely driver of the poor recognition and understanding of DFV within family and social relationships and structures that Australia likes to call 'non-traditional'. Potentially, it means coercive control is currently largely defined with limited recognition of diverse experiences.

My capacity to work dwindles along with my bank balance. Multiple medical conditions are wearing away my health, along with my options. I can't afford nor can physically do what the police are recommending. My friend tells me I should just leave. I assure him I have considered the ideas he's sure will solve my situation. I understand the nuances of my life are hard to comprehend but I know my body is reminding me of what I have survived. My wrist and ankle ache as waves of exhaustion pulse through me. Anxiety spikes when I feel I must defend myself or my choices.

My ankle is broken in a way the ED doctor describes as 'catastrophic', my brittle wrists won't hold unlockable doors shut, and my trachea clicks instead of releasing screams. Nightmares of an inescapable monster are now rare but I suspect will long haunt me. In them, my body is a sampler platter of past injuries.

Depleted by constant pain, dynamic and degenerative illnesses and disabilities, I know few friends or colleagues realise how taxed I am. My abuser manipulates my invisible vulnerability. Playing the hero, he carries me upstairs and deposits me on a chair. A mutual friend cheers his gallantry. I am left trapped, waiting for him to move me.

Across professional and personal spaces, I have watched people being rejected or denied special support, including crisis accommodation or counselling, because they don't meet common eligibility criteria. They mustn't have contact with abusers, sometimes also other loved ones. They are not allowed to use alcohol or other drugs. Eligible women have made decisions aligned with someone else's ideas of what should happen. Alternatively, some have felt the pressure of expected compliance, relinquishing power and choice. It seems too close to DFV power dynamics for my liking.

Women have reconstructed their lives, extracting themselves from the lives they've built, but safety is about more than living beyond an abuser's reach. Without social connection, understanding or hope, it becomes harder to enjoy mental and emotional wellbeing.

These conditions are imposed in an attempt to reach more women (supports for other genders are still rare), regardless of whether this furthers the efficacy of such programs. I understand the reasoning and share frustration that a capitalist system demands prioritising numbers for proof of a program's value rather than whether people feel safer.

Many people, even strangers, have shared stories of DFV with me. Their journeys have taught me that frustration, despair and exhaustion at hurdles and barriers are common themes. Adults and children describe feeling unheard and endangered when court orders protect an abuser's parental rights. Already practiced at surviving, many are expert at maintaining safety in their situations. Each time someone tells me it would be worse for them to sever ties, I believe them. I have been sure of my own assessments of risk and escalating danger for me and my loved ones. Only I had the intimate knowledge of how he could hurt me.

Criminalisation as the Next Step

While coercive control has increasingly been acknowledged in DFV and mainstream media coverage, most states in Australia have yet to incorporate it into legislature. The criminal justice system is incident based, only responding to discrete events after they occur (see Walklate & Fitz-Gibbon). Proponents of criminalising coercive control argue this will enable the justice system to respond instead to the terrorising patterns of behaviour used by perpetrators (see McMahon & McGorrery). The destructiveness of coercive control makes a compelling case for urgent action.

In 2020, a coalition formed across Australia to champion the criminalisation of coercive control. The campaign has been gaining momentum. Yet while there is consensus around the need for expanded

and more inclusive responses, there are doubts about whether this is the best course of action, with many expressing concerns (see Australian Women Against Violence Alliance et al.; Lee; Sisters Inside & Institute for Collaborative Race Research).

Criminalisation relies upon systems which we already know have failed some and been the source of harm for others (see Sisters Inside & Institute for Collaborative Race Research). Pointing to those ongoing patterns, some anticipate further negative consequences in turning again to a problematic criminal justice system. Legislation grounded in criminalisation theory assumes would-be perpetrators will weigh up potential consequences of actions (see Paternoster). However, the effectiveness of punitive threat has yet to be agreed upon and, worryingly, criminal justice responses may drive rather than deter violence (see McPhedran & Baker). There are differing perspectives on what justice should be and whether the criminal justice system provides it.

In recent years, coercive control-focused laws have been introduced in places such as the United Kingdom (UK), and in 2004, Tasmania's Family Violence Act expanded to include patterns of intimidation, with Western Australian legislators making amendments to multiple Acts criminalising persistent abuse in 2020 (Australian Women Against Violence Alliance et al.; Department of Justice & Quigley). In Australia, criminalisation proponents argue the recent UK approach provides valuable insights and suggests positive outcomes could be replicated here. However, we have yet to hear many victim/survivors say those additions were desirable or effective. Key contributors to Scotland's suite of new laws, lauded as a gold standard, also remind us that any changes are in their infancy (see Dale). Although recorded offences have risen, suggesting police perceptions are shifting, this does not yet prove success.

Looking to the UK for guidance may also sustain historic deference to imperialist ways, compelling us towards further reliance upon a criminal justice system already known to be flawed and harmful. The processes of colonisation embedded specific concepts relating to expertise and justice in Australia, with the criminal justice system founded on and shaped by a violent colonial legacy (see Bhambra). Narratives of colonialist superiority justified the establishment of a nation state forcefully imposed on unceded lands. First Peoples, judged as undeserving of dignity, autonomy and respect, became the first to face patterns of epistemic and ontological violence still rarely acknowledged in policy and legislative discussions (see Blagg, et al.; Sisters Inside & Institute for Collaborative Race Research). Criminalisation modelled upon UK experiences may further import Eurocentric ways. Disconcertingly, this may replicate colonialist violence, and the rejection of First Peoples' sovereignty and knowledges of life on these lands (see Martin & Mirraboopa). The terrorism of dehumanisation in colonisation and the destructiveness in the denial of sovereignty seem to reverberate in DFV.

If criminalisation occurs, determinations of culpability will be complicated given controlling behaviours are often influenced by diverse social and cultural norms (see Walkate & Fitz-Gibbon). It is difficult for outsiders to objectively assess whether coercive control has occurred, and internal experiences of endangerment might be even harder to prove (see Barlow & Walklate). Many victim/survivors refer to subtle and highly contextualised cues, coded references to past conversations developed between them and their abuser. These can be as specific and minute as a look. The threats and demands of compliance which achieve the stranglehold of control can appear innocuous or insubstantial to an outsider.

Given Australia's societal hierarchies continue to prioritise and platform voices and narratives that comply with colonialist values, the exploration of further criminalisation has been dominated by the amplified influence of some. Simultaneously, we are witnessing silencing of others, as policy and legislative processes perpetuate the inherent violence of undervaluing other forms of expertise. Not portraying a model victim, people who already carry the scars of existing laws and systems must speak unemotionally; the potency of trauma responses affecting a person's advocacy are not adequately considered when certain behaviours are found unacceptable. Dissent is dismissed as hysteria.

Some are not against criminalisation, but rather champion different priorities. Communities have created localised and culturally responsive supports, formal and informal, often without long-term resourcing. It is possible to provide for the unmet needs of victim/survivors and those who use violence to ensure safety, with people speaking positively about their experiences in such cases (see Kaba; Piepzna-Smarasinha). Despite the success of these and other community-led initiatives, the small-scale programs continue at the fringes or disappear due to a lack of funding.

He growls. I have upset him by telling him I am hurt. The way I did it was wrong. Should I not have said anything?

I want him to see me and care enough to listen. Listen enough to care. But I haven't met his vision of what I should be, and so I haven't earned his care. Instead, I am choking on my responsibility for provoking him, the apologies stones tumbling in my mouth. I haven't earned his respect to speak… or feel the way I do.

His displeasure worries me more than my distress and my survival depends on my agreeing with him. When he tells me I am lucky he cares for me when no-one else would, and keeps me by his side, speaks for me, he is being the hero in our fairy tale. Perhaps, he is right—the flaws are mine, having misinterpreted his actions to mistakenly feel hurt.

I should trust him, my self-appointed hero.

I am concerned when the discourse about criminality and coercive control is framed as conflict and debate. Proponents of criminalisation seem to stand on one side; on the other there are concerned people, requests for the investigation of alternatives and abolitionists. It mimics the adversarial nature of the Australian justice system, assuming opponents set against each other will ensure an ideal outcome.

It is because coercive control is such a significant component of many experiences of DFV that I raise an alarm about possible polarisation and barriers to collaborative innovation. Yes, I believe we need to evolve recognition of and responses to coercive control. I believe it because I've absorbed countless testimonial stories from victim/survivors and the family members of those who did not survive. I believe it because I've read numerous studies and papers on it. I believe it because I've lived it. But it seems irresponsible and dangerous that the setting for this important work is a society with still largely unchallenged forces of privilege and oppression. My disquiet grows that we may be building a future which extracts costs from people who have been pushed to the edges. Those who are already busy surviving a hostile society may again be positioned as recipients of good intentions and unintended consequences. It is critical we recognise the untapped potential in the lived expertise of victim/survivors and perpetrators, and in the power of community to support improved safety, while upholding the agency and self-determination of the individuals for whom this work matters most.

Who is still absent from our collective attention and conversations? Who isn't being heard—or even given a seat at the table? People whose lives are already obscured by a society founded in colonialist violence wait in the margins. I've seen the ways I and people like me have been spoken over or erased. I have previously been invited into crucial conversations in rooms others might not know exist. As I stand outside those doors again, I wonder how many voices are fading, exhausted through asking to be seen or heard. I cheer on everyone engaged in the middle and the edges of the conversation, but those edges feel sharp with the potential cost of exclusion. At the moment, I worry too few stories and voices guide the future we might create.

Note

While some citations only detail a single source, multiple sources and studies for each element have been considered over a lengthy research period. The full bibliography is included in the online version of this essay, on *Westerly*'s Editor's Desk. Where 'women' are referred to in the essay, the language is not intended to imply other genders don't also face DFV but relates more to how women are the predominant victims of gendered violence.

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Revival of a Dying Town

Ben Mason

Ben's short fiction has been performed, awarded and published, including in *Westerly* and *Overland*. *Home Invasion*—his collection of short fiction—was long-listed for the 2019 Fogarty Award. He has won spoken word competitions, and finished 3rd in the 2019 WA leg of the Australian Poetry Slam State Final. In 2020 he was a writer-in-residence at Mattie Furphie House for the Fellowship of Australian Writers WA. He is currently working on a novel.

It's hard to believe that only a few years before Matterson was featured on rural getaway programs and in Sunday magazines, the closure of our town seemed imminent. Barely a moment went by that our dire situation—falling cattle prices, withering community groups, foreclosures, etcetera—was not discussed, whether running into someone at the newsagents on Main Street, down the pub during the three hours it remained open, or in the bedroom on our sleepless nights. Some of us had only moved to Matterson because our original hometowns had become memorials: old town halls on obscure roads with signs that read 'Here once stood'; places we fondly yet sadly pointed out on Sunday drives. That is to say, everything carried the weight of worst conclusions. Many of us would have eaten the dirt and moved to Silverstone, the nearby regional centre and home of our archrivals. Those of us a bit more crowd capable—though no less disgusted—would have moved to that other place we'd spent our lives taking the piss out of: the city.

It was a decision we did not have to make.

• • •

Lachie Brodie was born to Wombat and Kathy, descendants of pioneers, who raised him on the war plot south side of the gully that had been given to his Grandfather, Stan, after World War II. There was nothing too remarkable about Lachie growing up. Nothing prodigious nor sinister. He grew into a good country bloke: stocky, not too tall, a smattering of freckles, brown ochre-tinged eyes, curly hair and auburn stubble, and tree-trunk forearms that gave him an arm-wrestling reputation in the Western Districts. The type of guy who you'd call if you got bogged or needed help with a fence, and who shouted a round down the bar after a win on the trots. We can still see his cheeky grin by the bar, in stained cricket whites, rehashing the day's play. Or the sombre look on his ash-blackened face after we'd sleeplessly fought the fires of '05, returning to the white tarp on Finnigan's Hill where the CWA ladies fixed up bacon and egg sangers. As many of us switched careers from dairy farming into long-haul truck driving, he doggedly pursued the farming dream, doing cattle runs across the border, and stacking shelves part-time at the supermarket over in Silverstone. Lachie was a stubborn bugger and ignored our warnings that farming wasn't what it used to be.

It was towards the end of the seventies when things started to change: ruthless banking procedures lead to the foreclosure of many mum-and-dad farms, and the McMahon family, who already owned half the properties on Main Street and sent their kids to exclusive inner-city boarding schools, began poaching neighbouring war-plots; this practice progressed into incorporating in the '80s and floating onto the stock exchange in the '90s. Our prized cordial factory collapsed due to overseas competition; the timber mill due to environmental regulations. A new highway bypassed town. It was so quick, the way everything changed. Towns disappeared off the map—Plenty, Jaka Jaka, Lahara—and while we cashed in on their elderly and alcoholics, our good young stock fled like sea birds sniffing a storm. A flurry of for sale signs plummeted land value. The pubs dropped off: first the Royal, then the National and then The Farmer's Arms, which steadily decreased its hours to those three on Friday and Saturday nights, and where lumps of frozen food cost way too close to fifty smackers. The football side became a skeleton crew of fifteen- and fifty-year-olds getting pummelled by a hundred points every week (two hundred when playing a top side). One café and the Chinese restaurant remained open, as well as Dessie Cooper's costume shop; a source of constant amusement that shook our cheery heads.

Wombat rolled the tractor on the back paddock and his shotgun discharged into his head.

The wake was held at the Matterson Saints Football Club. Lachie approached the mic stiff-lipped, except for the shaking sheet of A4. A quarter of the way through his speech, despair clutched his throat. A forearm struck the pulpit. Screeching feedback. Our breath deserted us while we pinched our thighs. Shannon, Lachie's sister, comforted him, before she finished his speech. The hat got passed around and we dug into

our proud pockets. They were a little shallow. But not for want of reach. We never spoke about it at the time, but we could all feel it, our wobbling identity.

The insurance company refused to pay out.

Like our bottom-of-the-ladder team, we continued accepting defeat with weary resignation. There was a certain wisdom in this. In the spirit of our times, of the profit and the loss, the winner and the loser, the city instead of the town, we just happened to be on the wrong side. And to try and fight the times is like trying to piss into the wind without copping blowback. Sure, we were all ripping the coasters with a certain venom, throwing the darts a little too hard, sick and tired of chasing leather for one and a half Saturdays after being bowled out in under twenty overs. And yes, we got pissed and yarned about what the exceptional towns had done: co-operatives, fancy pubs, folk festivals, a decent farmers' market. It wasn't that we wouldn't have done what needed doing, just that the gale we'd been walking into for the last thirty years had weathered us.

Lachie didn't care how strong the wind was. He was going to whip the old fella out and let rip.

Lachie had inherited Wombat's threadbare farm, like the other remaining small farms in the area. Then one day out of the blue he's down the auctions with big fat heifers. Like someone had painted his grass green overnight. We were happily envious. A European aunty had died, worth a small fortune, he explained. Plus, he'd been testing fancy farming practices. He was happy to share the technology, but he still seemed far from content. Holding himself up on the brick wall after closing time, he spoke over the hiss of piss: 'A pub that opens three hours at a time. Pig's arse.'

More luck followed, this time in investments, placed conservatively in gold and the Australian Dollar before the crash. He bought the Farmer's Arms, employed many of us to help restore and renovate it—which caused some resentment amongst some of the boys who missed out, Bloody Billy Dobson and his sidekick Jake Pike, who kept half the town awake by punching their turbos late at night—hired a chef from the city and, despite the empty seats, kept it open every evening. He teamed up with the mayor to apply for regional grants and revamp old public spaces: the disused train station, the post office and a Homestead. A plaque on each building bore the name 'Lachlan Brodie'. Another café opened. A new tourist business that sought to make use of the walking trails in the hills nearby—also a joint venture with Lachie. He paid a bunch of footballers to live on the dongas he'd built on his property and lift us off the bottom of the ladder. 'They help out on the farm too,' he said, before adding, 'Them city boys wouldn't know how to shear sheep if they saw it on a YouTube video.'

'How big was this aunt's inheritance?' we asked.

'It was whopper,' he conceded. A wry grin flashed through his tipped pot glass.

Our ancient volcanic soil proved a boon for the wineries that opened, quickly taking out Tempranillo awards in National Competitions. The pub grub changed with our new chef (not to all our tastes, we must admit) but was well reviewed in the state rag. Some of us turned coin opening our granny flats as Airbnbs. The tourists began trickling in, enough for us to make jokes about the weekend traffic. But not all changes were for the better.

It didn't matter what time it was, day or night. We could have been walking our dogs on a Wednesday arvo, when the late sun bakes the rolling pastures, and suddenly, schizophrenic doof-doof music would thud from certain weatherboard houses. Pasty people larked garishly in the front yards. Chomping cheeks. Scowling stares. We could have been picking our kids up from school, before someone might appear in the middle of the road, talking to themselves and scratching their faces.

If there was one demographic we hated, it was the druggies. Before, we had tolerated them as symbiotic with the town's decline. But as Matterson gained prominence, and the number of druggies grew, a common belief emerged that they were holding us back from the significant growth we had believed possible. Now, we were playing for sheep stations.

It was Lachie who shifted our thinking. Growth and success should not only be possible for a few. We were a town: a community; not global citizens competing in the rat race. We needed to give people the proper means to get off the gear. We needed a rehabilitation centre. Work to give them a reason to do something else. And guess which town, when everyone else was screaming out for them, was able to secure its own pioneering Ice Rehab Centre?

But this was an addiction the likes of which we'd never seen. Word was a big-time gangster operated in town. Drug dealers began brazenly lapping Main Street in their souped-up cars, blaring their thug music. A year after the rehab centre, Lachie cracked, 'You give these mongrels every fucken chance in the world and they don't want to listen. I mean they've had every fucken chance, haven't they?'

Every chance, we assured him.

• • •

Jenny Carrol took her walking seriously.

She was a peacock of fluoro colours, the lycra, the head and sweatbands, the runners. She took these massive steps that caused her to lunge awkwardly, but found rhythm with the wild swing of her arms. There goes Jenny, we'd say driving past, tossing up figures for how many kays she'd clocked. One July day, due to a thick white mist, she had to concentrate very hard on where she was going. She stopped on Main Street, at the corner of the pub, for a song change. She spotted a pig's head atop the town's only stop sign and figured some town teenagers had nothing better to do on a Saturday night. She scrolled for a banger. She turned back to the head. Recognised it. Bloody Billy Dobson. She started laughing. Kudos, she thought, to whoever went to the trouble. The paints and papier-mâché. The sculpting and... and she pulled very hard on the red waxed spikes at the back of her head, and checked off carrots, celery, barley—she was making a soup that night—chicken stock and hot sauce... and it was still there. The head. Billy Dobson's. Stuck on the stop sign.

Rumours ran around town that Elliot Scott, son of Steve (our local councillor), who ran the local hairdressers, had been dealing out of his shop. Blood smeared the windows. The fog didn't lift until after lunch, in time for the journalists to arrive. Then one of them pointed above the red rolled aluminium arches of the Glenfield Bakery, which Elliot also owned, and asked 'What's that?'

A limbless torso. Whip marks and cigarette burns.

Jake Pike went missing too. And two other people, rumoured to be part of another crew of dealers, ended up in hospital. One with broken legs, the other in an induced coma. The torso did not belong to Billy or the missing men (the leading theory is the old mines were put to work). Our coppers—good blokes, we must point out—bumbled more harm than good, according to the city detectives. (As if they did any better...) Rusty Dalton's warning, about it being only a matter of time before things were taken into their own hands; well, didn't the media love that. Let the dogs eat each other and get on with things; it's true, some of us were quoted. But don't a portion of people, generally speaking, think such logic of gang-related violence? The truth—if that's what you are concerned with—is that we railed at the intrusion of city nihilism. Moral purpose and solid truths, or at least its appearance in the triumph of relativism, are why one chooses to live in a place like Matterson. And anyway, the headlines and controversy impacted our local economy. We did not want this, much less... and nothing has ever been proven.

Many druggies applied to the rehab centre, or fled to neighbouring towns, sparking nicknames like 'Antarctica', 'Snowtown' or 'Methville'.

Police began clamping down on minor drug offences. A number of properties hit the market, and what didn't sell was quickly snapped up by Lachie Brodie in order to hold the value. He renovated and rented them or waited until the market picked up to sell them to good sorts.

The mayor, Floppy Moran, once a haggard man built like a hoe, now stood tall, as he had more important ribbons to cut. Stacey Williams developed the Matterson Folk Festival and, with a budget others could only dream of, poached big-name bands and the accompanying crowds that had once gone to similar events in the region. Town meetings were held—always at the Farmer's Arms—and Wendy Stevens was put in charge of developing a town co-op. Using our new-found capital, with Lachie of course putting in the lion's share, we bought a petrol station, ensuring a steady source of income for our town's future. All the money from the projects would be democratically managed by town votes. The Police Department and Sargent McGuiness's drug program were used as a national model in how to eradicate crime, and when the big sarge refused to be keynote speaker at a conference unless they held it in Matterson, guess which hotel all the big shot coppers stayed when they flew in? Lachie still drank beers with the boys in stained cricket whites, humouring our airs as we accorded to the great rule of pub talk: never let the truth get in the way of a good story. But we laughed a little harder at his jokes, perhaps too eagerly offered to buy his beers. Never one to blow his own trumpet, if someone raised a glass to sing his praises, he'd say, 'It was the town that done this. It was our never-say-die attitude, the way we looked out for each other. Our character.' All the television shows and magazines started flocking in to get a piece of Matterson. What made the town what it was? Who were the people behind it? How could we share our secrets? It was hard work, we liked to say. A bit of belief goes a long way. Smarts, you need to have your wits about you. Anyone could do it! We're just ordinary Australians. Good people.

In late spring, just as the wildflowers started to die, three black bricked trucks, military looking, sped through the centre of town. Jezz O'Neil, whose farm bordered Lachie's, woke to banging at his door. On the other side were seven or eight gunmen kitted up in black coveralls, one of them pointing a Black Mamba in his face, the rest holding a sub-machine gun or shotgun across their bodies, identifying themselves as police. They pushed poor Jezz into the living room of his house and yelled at him to do what they said, otherwise they would kill him. One guarded Jezz to ensure he couldn't get word out, while the others exited through the back door. Through his kitchen window, Jezz spied the black figures stream across

the golden paddocks. The donga doors on the back of Lachie's home flew open, and the football stars sprinted in the opposite direction down the gully. What happened next? We can only go off what the police said. Some of us have our doubts.

The Special Ops stormed the house, kicking in doors, clearing rooms, screaming their identity and demanding surrender. After finding one door locked, a voice called out, identifying itself as Lachlan Brodie, and stating it was coming out unarmed.

A gunshot sounded. Bounced off the gully.

It was strange, after they busted down the door, one of them admitted. Lachie reminded him of a proud war hero who, under investigation for a crime, had fully suited in badges and stripes. Like he'd done what he did out of honour. Lachie wore a red and black flannelette—colours of the Matterson Saints—impeccably folded around those thick forearms, blue jeans belted with a brown leather buckle, polished brown leather Blundstones and, on the made bed, was his Akubra. Wombat's shotgun lay across Lachie's legs.

Smoke rose out of the hole that was his head.

A town doesn't get over that sort of violence in a hurry. Not with all the rumours flying around. We must have seen something, the crime journos demand, on their annual pilgrimage. We must know something. More people had to have been involved. The tall poppy syndrome in this country; how quickly some wish to lop off heads. Any condoning of the violence was just big noting in the watering holes. The suggestion that half a town... is plainly ridiculous. The town found itself in something much larger than it could have hoped to control. But entertain something for a second. We never welcomed cutthroat competition. We faced extinction. Now we're on all the fancy tourist programs. Entertain something for a second, please... even if we did...

Could you blame us?

blind men at the gym

Ron Wilkins

Ron Wilkins is a Sydney scientist who has had poems published in *Antipodes*, *Australian Poetry Anthology*, *Best Australian Poems*, *Cordite*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *Quadrant*, *French Literary Review*, *Shanghai Literary Review* and other journals. He has published a book of drawings and poems, *Fistful of Dust* (Delphian Books, 2012).

first I saw the dog then the form of a man threading its way
noiselessly through the close-packed forest of gym machines
I called him mate told him there were only two of us this morning
watched his fingers flutter over the holes of the weight stack
insert a pin before he began to use the DUAL AXIS ROW machine
satisfied that he was independent and gym-trained not to stare
at others I faced the wall to work the ABS CRUNCH then moved
to the HIPS where lying on my side I became concerned my sudden
backward flexing could cause him injury even as he fixed my location
by sound I placed him by the tinkling clink to be on the OBLIQUE
surprising myself there were things I knew without knowing
that I knew now I was tuned to the machines' unique metallic voices
the clanks and clunks of moving weights the grinding gears the strain
of cables all came to the fore of my consciousness as if we were two
men moving in a dark room with only sounds to place the other
under supervision by the dog a living talisman for our protection
now at rest but instantly alerted by a low-waved hand
signalling a move between machines apparently along
a predetermined path still incomplete as I left the gym freshly aware
of the scuff of shoes on concrete the diverse engine tones of cars
the patter of little feet the dry scratch of a wind-blown leaf on pavement
and from somewhere near the tiny cymbal crash of dropped keys

Pumping Station

Isi Unikowski

Isi Unikowski is a Canberran poet who has been widely published in Australia and overseas. His first collection, *Kin/tsugi*, is forthcoming with Puncher & Wattman in 2022.

Bowler-hatted, unsmiling, moustachioed,
a group of men stand beside their machines;
apprentices crouch at their feet, caps awry as their grins.
The manager's wife flaunts the region's first car.
In these huge posters by the ticket office,
it's easy to mistake the time the shutter took to descend
for gravitas, as if watching us.

Once inside, the polished, gleaming semi-darkness makes
the glare barricaded at the entrance look cheap and flat.
Huge pistons are poised, about to resume
their genuflections, giant flywheels stationary beside them
as though the parts of some celestial clockwork
had been dismantled and lined up.

The guide balances a coin on the casing
to show how smoothly the piston rods perform,
without the least vibration, in greased silence.
Our kids, from a world of few moving parts,
where whatever machinery is left
is so well-hidden it might as well be magic,
go back outside for better reception, unimpressed,

but we linger out of curiosity:
for all the size of these components,
there was an amenable logic
and purpose to the way rocking beams, cranks, rods
moved and pulled and pushed, visibly connecting
to the task or purpose
of lifting and conveying the most basic elements of a city
from one place to a much better place

and nostalgia too, for the reticent confidence
in machinery tooled with such precision,
yet still decorated, made beautiful in filigree and ornament
as though sludge had its sacral moments too
for all the boilers' black, bulky
indestructibility; to make a machine
that could operate with such grace,
as if all that was needed to keep the world in motion
was someone in overalls proudly standing by
with a little can of oil.

The Building of the Half Shut Eyes

Wendy Brandmark

Wendy Brandmark writes short stories and novels. She has published short stories widely and won the Bridport Prize. Her last book was a short story collection, *He Runs the Moon: tales from the cities* (Holland Park Press, 2016). Her novel, *The Stray American* (Holland Park Press, 2014), was shortlisted for the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize.

She comes every morning. It's one of those gated Bloomsbury squares with a brief spread of grass, tended flowers and trees obedient in their plots. There's a little café, really a stall selling tea and coffee, muffins and pastries. A few tables set out. The man who serves greets her with formal friendliness. She doesn't know why she has settled into that square, that stall, as the necessary start to her day. At that early hour there are few people, those on their way to the nearby universities who might stop to grab a cappuccino but never stay to be watched over by Fabre. She knows his name and that he is French and also Tunisian because once his friend came and they spoke in Arabic and then she asked.

Her waking is slow. The bed holds her tells her she mustn't leave the room. Then she thinks of the square with its tended flowers and the pillar with the stone head of a woman whose inscription she's never read, and Fabre handing her a cup in a ruffled holder to protect her fingers from the heat of the coffee. She puts on her trousers and sweatshirt, even swirls a scarf around her neck.

The metal chairs and table are still wet from the early morning rain. Fabre gives her a paper serviette to dry the seat. She thinks he is kind not pitying. One morning she could not lift herself out of bed to come. The next day he did not say anything but looked at her with a question in his face. Her steady gaze was her answer. You are not to worry because today I am sound.

She stays there till the hour the museum opens. She walks from room to room so the guards will not think she is loitering. It is not boring for her to go there every day, to stand before a rough clay urn with the finger indentations of its creator or to wonder at the strange language carved into a stone, like those words which became foreign to her. She begins to remember the markings from one visit to the next, to translate them into her own language when she cannot sleep.

She takes a nap while others eat their dinner or stand outside pubs drinking after work. When she wakes the daylight has gone. She gathers herself to walk outside. Even in the gloom of a fog she walks till she stands before a building tiered with narrow windows like half shut eyes. Not one lighted up. Inside the security guards patrol the halls after the students and professors have gone, checking, checking, to make sure no-one has been left behind. A student asleep in the library, a professor so entranced by her writing that she does not notice the lights dimming and the footsteps of the guards clanking their keys and torches. If the guard is bored or wanting very much to return to his warm bed he might forget to check one of the offices or not see the light under the door. When the professor reaches the end of her words she notices for the first time the deep silence of being left.

She keeps a vigil on the building, watching the doors, but the students and professors have probably gone hours ago. After a time she turns with some relief and a feeling that she has done what she could. She walks back a longer route through the narrowest of streets, alley ways, passages, the darkness a balm, before she reaches her hotel, a faded grey Georgian and her room up two flights of stairs.

It begins again tomorrow. If she thinks beyond tomorrow, which is the same as remembering, it will take some time for sleep to find her. She imagines herself standing before the coffee stall telling Fabre which coffee and choosing her breakfast pastry. The choosing of the pastry from a selection which is always the same sends her to sleep.

How long has she been here? That unwelcome thought comes through rays of sun moving across her bed. When she rented the room she asked if anyone could know she was there. The man said who do you hide from? No-one I just want to be undisturbed.

She has slept too long and too well, past the hour when she usually arrives at the café. Does Fabre think of her as he sets up the stall, grinding coffee beans and arranging the packages of muffins and pastries? But he was there before she came and will be there after she has gone.

Her legs feel so heavy that she worries they might refuse to carry her. When she reaches the square she sees a grey haired man with glasses sitting at one of the tables. She is later than usual that is why. He looks up as she approaches, studying her as if deciding where to place her in his mind. She takes her coffee and Danish and sits at the other table with her back to him.

She drinks her coffee in little sips waiting for him to leave so she can eat her Danish in peace. She hears the sound of his chair moving against the stone paving but he does not leave. He comes round to face her. Don't I know you he says. She shakes her head, not even opening her mouth to answer. He gives her a smile which says of course I do and you know me, before hoisting his knapsack on his shoulder like a man embarking on a journey he knows well and walking away.

Fabre looks down at her from the opening in the stall. Perhaps he can see how her legs no longer heavy are shivering as if they are bare in the morning damp which the square holds longer than the streets outside.

She must not be shaken from her day. She will go to the museum. Even if she is later than usual it will not matter. She always enters through the back entrance but today there's a group of school children leaving a coach and heading for the museum. She turns around, walks on side streets, circling around and coming back when the entrance is empty.

Maybe it is the presence of the school children, though there are often groups of them, which makes her aware of people pressing on her. Whether they are eager to see what she is examining or following her, she can't be sure. But this means she cannot spend a long time gazing at an alabaster god or the columns from a broken temple. She moves quickly from room to room, climbing the stairs till she finds a small room with a canopy of windows where ivory caskets like small coffins surround her, each one carved with tigers and winged dragons, guardians of the jewels once stored there. She imagines some high born woman in ancient days drawing out necklaces of gold and rubies as she dressed for the court. What pleasure she felt to wear the jewels against her neck softened by oils her servant rubbed into her skin.

It is tiring to give each casket her attention so she rests in a chair meant for the museum guard. Maybe she slept because when the guard touches her shoulder she thinks it is the man from this morning. She must have spoken in her sleep for the guard, a burly man with a bald furrow down the centre of his head, says you had a bad dream didn't you?

When she returns to her room she goes to bed but the brief sleep at the museum has ruined her naptime. She lies there watching a succession of clouds through the stained windows. Those high born women were buried with their caskets of jewels. Or did they lose them as they tumbled into eternity?

She has no jewels not even a ring though she remembers being given a gold ring set with a small pearl when she was thirteen. The money she has is all she has. She keeps a little store of food, cheese, oat cakes and apples, for her cold dinners. When this runs out she'll go again to the small shop where the man asks is there anything else as if he's surprised at her meagre shopping.

Something troubles her that's why she can't nap. If she walks out now so early in the evening she might meet the grey haired man coming from the building of the half shut eyes. But she will not stay any longer in her room where windows of night are like her own eyes before sleep. She takes a longer route of narrow streets but even there are pubs with drinkers outside who stare as she passes. She wonders if she has forgotten to dress but when she looks down she sees her trousers, sweatshirt and scarf as if some spirit put clothes on her. She reaches the quiet street with the building of the half shut eyes. There are lights, one two three, the half shut eyes see her.

Inside a woman sits in her office. Her screen has gone to sleep and she can't wake it. Maybe she has been sitting too long because the screen's blackness numbs her heart, seals her throat her mouth. The page she has been reading becomes a blinking blackness which falls over her eyes like the mourning veil of an old fashioned hat. Her eyes are still blinded when she hears the guard bang on her door. It is time to leave he says and stands in the doorway. He appears in the narrow window of her sight. She shuts her eyes hoping he'll go away. Because she cannot stand up.

A door of the building opens and a woman speaks and someone answers her but the words don't make any sense, almost as if they are a language she's never heard before. She closes her eyes hoping they will pass on the other side of the street. When she looks again the three half shut eyes are dark. She is alone on the narrow streets as she walks back to her room in one of a terrace of grey houses each with a sign that says there is a vacancy or none.

When she climbs into bed she hopes to wake early just when Fabre opens his stall, for the grey haired man will not come at that hour. But she wakes at her usual time, not late, not early enough to ensure that he is not there. He will arrive carrying his knapsack filled not with gold necklaces and jewels but white lined pads and a silver laptop and a smile he will pull out and wear when he sees her. She tells herself that he has never been before, only that time when she was very late. Then she imagines staring back at him till he turns away and never returns.

She could stay in her bed all day as she did before she came to live in the room. How heavy the casket is which rests on her heart, with the dragons and tigers carved in ivory upon her. How can she lift it off and rise again?

She thinks of Fabre, he might puzzle over her absence. Had she found another place to have her coffee, abandoned him after all the genial

mornings? She pushes herself out of bed. The casket with all its jewels falls to the floor and the creatures who once guarded it disappear into the sunlit stain of the window.

The tables in front of the stall are empty. Fabre says good morning as he always does and waits, not asking what she wants. He knows she will tell him when she is ready. There is a light drizzle but she stays sitting. He brings out an umbrella which he fits to her table. How well he takes care of her.

Renée Vivien in the Second/ Various Persons

Josie/Jocelyn Deane

Josie/Jocelyn Deane is a student/freelance programmer living on Wurundjeri land in Naarm (Melbourne). Their work has appeared in various places, including *Overland*, *Australian Poetry* and *Southerly*.

Renu Bora, *Novel Gazing: queer readings in fiction* | ...the caress is not a simple stroking; it is a shaping...

Sappho, fragment 130, trans. Anne Carson | Eros the melter of limbs (now again) stirs me—

Sad Bakkhai

The day doesn't pierce the woods, spell
-bound by the night's beauty,
with princeling arrows
now. This time like broken water
when the Bakkhai dance
under the good choke of slow rhythms.

Their entwined hair, weeping blood
of vine, sprightly feet
light as the wind's breath, their rose
bodies, supple lines,
people the forest with glittering teeth.

The youngest—however—sings a death-rattle;
her love's throat is heavy with tears.
No resemblance to the others—pale,
her dress, the bitter taste, cloudburst of flowers.

At some point you mention Renée Vivien, and I become interested in translating her. It might be in Maddox, drinking coffee. You give me her life, in outline. How she translated Sappho and made the queerness of the fragments explicit. That no-one could tell where her poem-as-translation ended, and Sappho began.

You make the point—I remember, possibly—that male critics objected to this like gamers on Twitter. You describe—I think I remember—the cycle: the queerness of a translated piece is made sub-textual when not just erased wholly by the translator. You are to blame—then—for interrupting the text with your queer reading, your queerness at large.

The wine, a vintage where a harvesting sun is still
present, no longer brings a gracious
oblivion. Half-drunk, self-forgetting wreathed in
sadness. Black carnations twine whitened breast.

Everything beside her ringed round
with flawed merriments—
a foresight of cold, hard mornings that
come corrupting the ember and honey
of caresses. She dreams
among the roses and sumptuary.

There she remembers the kisses forgotten
in time—she will
never learn a desire without suffering,
the kind that notices, always
with melancholy, over the course
of orgiastic nights, the wilting of flowers.

You recount how she moved to Paris and started writing exclusively in French, and I think of Samuel Beckett in *Vogue*—another famous lesbian. A poet I knew said, Every canonical writer wants their work to be considered a part of creation, like shale in Dorset, or the ammonites in cliff-faces. Which is to say, silence and nothing. According to legend, Sappho threw herself from a cliff for a ferryman—a normal guy—a Redditor.

Free Sonnet

The pride of heavy rings, the pomp of glamour
glinting—the art of your unnatural charms;
gardenias in corsage, arranging winters
die from dissolving—caresses in your arms.
Your mouth—gossamer with glass engravings—
translates the glass of verse perfectly.
Beneath satin curtains, knowing—billowing
open—your breast bursts in pale luxuries.
The sapphire's reflection darkens your blue eyes;
the uncertain whirlpool, your roiling body
tracing gold wakes in the glimmering water.
When you pass, guarding a private smile
—gold pastel, laden with perfume and finery—
I dream of your body's splendour, free, naked.

of gold arms [
Sappho, fragment 6, trans. Carson

if you lose the thread of this intimacy, both your soul and your whole world might subsist forever in some desert-like state of ontological impoverishment
Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love* (168)

I think you brought up reparative reading here, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Maybe you hadn't used the phrase yet; what you said assumed a kind of parable quality.

Parables—roleplays, even—lend themselves to fragmented/yet-to-be-realised projects. I remember you—maybe—talking about a kind of deliberate, aggressive 'falsifying' reading/re-writing that Renée Vivien undertook of Sappho, to blast open the petrification around her work.

Three things stayed with me, or presented themselves as you spoke, and refused to leave:

1. It's always the unfinished projects, projects that demand—even—to be unfinished, which offer a kind of radical openness, of transmissibility. A reparative reading, left vague by Sedgwick's death. They endure/haunt.

Uncertain Dawn

Like courtesans under a new turn of fortune
we are waiting for dawn to open her eyes
with hope. Lingering dreams pursue us
still. Your eyes are blue as morning.

While I was dreaming of past delicacies,
your hair was breathing out the scent of sleep.
In fear of seeing the sun set the trees
alight, our night grew longer, laughing, weary.

Like a light, ghostly shroud, the morning
fog stretched out before evaporating, and
the world echoed with a vast haha… unless?
Dawn was uncertain as you, gazing at me.

You seemed to divine my agitated ecstasies.
In the shade, I thought I saw you grow
pale at last, I hoped—at last—the sigh
of our entwined hearts, our tangled souls, would
    burst

and our selves quiver in voiceless spasms.
We'd have hoped to attain self-love,
its terrible arduousness, its supreme clarity. And
yet the sun rose, like all other days.

here (once again)
Muses
leaving the gold
Sappho, fragment 127, trans. Carson

That's one of the things that 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically
Sedgwick, Tendencies (9)

2. Translation seems self-consciously fundamental to ancient texts. It's almost foregrounded: the text-in-antiquity was a muse-gift, of whom Sappho was the unofficial 10th, like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. A quick transmission of the divine into mortal terms: the muse of lyric poetry and gay. Joseph Brodsky said that we can imagine/figure antiquity, but antiquity cannot do the same for us (235). But when I read Sappho and think hell yes that's that gay shit, what am I responding to? Translation as a form of reparation? A sense that queerness has always existed, has always been radically alien, resistant to translation, like antiquity itself.

Free Sonnet

Speak to me, in your voice like running water
your breath as confession, rendered up at last.
Speak to me—if you're so driven—in words
cruel and mocking, but shelter me in your heady
chants. In this veiled tone that charms and
intoxicates me, when my caress goes astray
in your tangling hair, express your hopes, regrets
    and
desires, O my lover, full of harmony
and music. I will listen to your voice and delicate
song. I will no longer seek to understand, I will
listen, seeking—if not total oblivion—rest
at least. Because, if you stop, if only a single
moment I would hear… I would hear in the depths
of the silence, something awful, crying terribly.

3. The idea of writers who wrote in a new language, what that entails. Diasporic writers of English vs. Samuel Beckett and Renée Vivien self-consciously abandoning it, from a position of privilege. Studying linguistics—it's frozen inside me, I told you—I think of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. I imagine writing poetry across different languages at once, how you would observe a tree/rose/familiar poetic jobber afterwards, or read its connotations. Arbre, as in arboreal: the roots, the bole, leaves, bark, circulatory systems, phloem, xylem, vs. Tree. There, mute. I remember wanting the same, to write in French, in high-school, to prove I could. To derange the sense of my name.

A Cry

Your blue eyes, through half-closed
eyelids, are concealing
the glow of unknown treasons.
The breathing of this rose
—violent and deceitful—
wastes me like a wine
in which poisons are sleeping.

[I was dreaming of you but]
just now, goldsandaled Dawn
Sappho, fragment 123, trans. Carson

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English […] A mask […] Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved?
Samuel Beckett, letter to Axel Kaun (518)

Approaching now the time
fireflies are dancing
madly, the hours shining, and
a desire for the present in
our eyes, you tell me again
flattering words, vainly.
I hate and love again
abominably, joyfully

You sent me the Sedgwick texts, to get a sense of reparative reading, or a trace of its ghost. There's an irony—it feels—knowing it was never wholly defined, as you told me, scanning a text on the inadequacies of a hermeneutics of suspicion for incriminating signs, like a highbrow detective.

Two Sonnets

1.

Your unreal hair, in cold, clear reflection
with pale glimmers and blonde duns.
Your gaze maintains the blue of ethers, waves.
Your dress the shimmers of storms, forests.

I burn to kiss the blanching of your fingers.
The night air spreads the dust of worlds.
Yet I don't know how, in the breast of night's
depths,
to see you in the ecstasy of long ago, now.

their heart grew gold
they let their wings down
Sappho, fragment 42, trans. Carson

no one can appreciate more fervently the act of magical faith by which it may be possible, at last, to assert and believe, against every social possibility, that the self we see can be made visible as if through our own eyes to the people who see us […] Dare I, after this half-decade, call it with all a fat woman's defiance, my identity?—as a gay man.
Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (250–251)

The moon brushes you with a slantwise glamour
as terrible as a prophetic bolt of lightning which
reveals the horror at one core of beauty

I live—like a flower that we see wilting—
on your lips, like the auroras of summer,
and wrinkle a smile like an old courtesan.

It reminds you of 'Ozymandias', by another famous lesbian. A perfect sonnet about the impossibility/irrelevance of a perfect sonnet. Sedgwick—elsewhere—talks about the 'potentially queer' rhythms of grammatical and syntactical structures, how enjambment—the continuation of an impulse, from one line to another, ignoring the break—could have transqueer erotic implications… What could be done with a sonnet by denying the final couplet, the rhyming? The level sands stretch far away, each particle a fragment.

I thought I might end it here, a blank text box, as a riff, but that seems a poor use of the space/time.

As you described reparative reading, eternally undefined/open, at True North café, and I thought about translation, the thought, 'Where do the words go before they're put into one language, and after they leave the other?

2.

Listen… the people over there, the musicians…
Their presence like the echo of a caress,
their breath in the air thick with gentle quivers and
the oh so slow accords of lesbian languor…

Watch them pass: their bodies ready for flight
meld in the harmonious silence of the woods,
narrating their loves of yesteryear in chorus
to the luxuriant tones of antique lyres

These choirs, lamenting, sing in the heart of night
and mix their clamour, shivers and cymbal crash
through forests muffled in silence and shadows

We sense them hesitate, see them open their
mouths
as if to exhale a song, or a long sigh
and only the poet hears them coming back

and gold chickpeas were growing on the banks
Sappho, fragment 143, trans. Carson

What kind of medium do they travel through?' popped up.

In the book *Piranesi*, by Susanna Clarke, a pocket dimension, fed by the ideas/history of our world, manifests an infinite series of halls/vestibules, inhabited by endless Grecian statues. Sappho might be there, and Renée Vivien and Eve Sedgwick, alongside a statue of the first computers, running vinyl-sized floppy disks/software/instructions to read. A symbol of hard, marble definition, and endless, indefinite transformation. Despite myself, I start thinking of this place as 'the House of Reparation', where texts go to be opened up, unpetrified, despite appearances/insistence to the contrary. Marble statues were colourful/alive, back in antiquity. Then you showed me your essay on Jameson and I told you I ended my essays with ecstatic prose poems, and that hasn't changed, yet.

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Of Service

Steve Denehan

Steve Denehan lives in Kildare, Ireland, with his wife Eimear and daughter Robin. He is the author of two chapbooks and three poetry collections. Winner of the Anthony Cronin International Poetry Award and Twice winner of Irish Times' New Irish Writing, his numerous publication credits include *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Acumen*, *Prairie Fire*, *Westerly* and *Into the Void*.

It was a program about urges
compulsions, obsessions
hard to watch
hard to look away
it documented a town
built for, and occupied by, sex offenders
Miracle Village, Florida, USA

a man was interviewed
a man with twenty-seven convictions
for violent rape and extreme sexual assault
he was part of a project
not quite rehabilitative
but designed to ensure
that he does not rape again

he had been given a doll
an artificial human
a prototype
life-sized
produced at a cost of $18,000
he used it to satisfy
what he called his
appetite

he explained
that afterwards, after the act, he is dead
that only during, is he alive

the doll sat beside him
she had some damage
gouge marks, missing hair, several puncture wounds
her cheek appeared to have been singed
she had been given a rudimentary artificial intelligence
in order to be able to respond
with the correct amount of terror
the correct amount of fight
the correct amount of screams
screams that could be adjusted
for volume and frequency
using an app
on his phone

she was asked how she felt
there was a slight pause as this was processed
before she blinked once, smiled and spoke
to say, in a soft and gentle voice,
that she was glad to be of service

The Heart of the Advocate

Angela Costi

Angela Costi is the author of five poetry collections. The most recent is *An Embroidery of Old Maps and New* (Spinifex, 2021). She is called Aggeliki Kosti among Cypriot diaspora.

'One word can change a truth into a lie.'

With some help, she was able to turn her story into an affidavit. However, the story is fighting to escape the format of the form. The sequencing of events needs to focus on dates and times. Each and every word uttered, gesture made, sound heard, visual cue should be documented as if it were an inventory. What did he say to her, how did he put his body into hers, when did she say No, how did she say No, did she say No, how long for? His Word. Her Word. His Body. Her Body. Their Body. No Body. No. Yes. No. And *if* he did, what were *her* motives?

'One doubt can change a truth into a lie.'

She is thirty-one years old. Her middle name is Haralampo, which is her father's first name. She wanted to be a lawyer before she became an Assistant Manager at IGA. It wasn't her manager. It wasn't her boyfriend. She was a professional soccer player eight years ago. Her father coached her. She kept a diary. She set her diary free in a fire, when she left home. Her older sister is not talking to the family and lives somewhere in Sydney. Her mother is beginning to forget the ingredients for spanakopita. Her middle name is Haralampo, which is her father's first name.

'Justice must not be confused with law.'

When the story first arrived in my office, it was pent up with years of outrage and guilt. It was the feral cat, the wild horse, the charred koala. Taming, containing, coaxing the story towards the malignant law is difficult when the client is clinging to hope. And it's painful when my heart whimpers with the strain of upholding a library of outdated words.

The story is now confined to the form. The document lies passively on my desk as I reach over with my pen. This pen will have her sign the document imprisoning her truth. But there's a problem. She is sitting across from me, daring me to look into her eyes. Not picking up the pen.

'Betrayal is harder to compensate than rape.'

police liaison

Noemie Huttner-Koros

Noemie Huttner-Koros is a queer Jewish performance-maker, writer, teaching artist, dramaturg and community organiser living on Whadjuk Noongar country. Her poetry has been featured in *Australian Poetry Anthology 2020*, *Rabbit* and Perth Poetry Festival, and she was the winner of the 2020 Venie Holmgren Environmental Poetry Prize.

i put my hand out for the policeman to shake &
I do not remove it until he has shaken it,
until he has acknowledged its presence
in the 50 or so centimetres between us.

i will my eyes to meet his.
i do not look away
i pull myself up to my full height (which is still pretty small),
but I will my presence to surpass the limits of any building,
to reach every horizon, to transcend this body.

i wish my presence could stop this mine we are protesting.
i wish my presence meant something
beyond this interaction, beyond this room.
So i plant my feet firmly, as we plant seeds of resistance.

i put my hand out for the policeman to shake &
I do not remove it until he has shaken it.
I tell the policeman my name and i make him say it back to me,
pronounced the right way.

Points of Emphasis: *Vociferate*|詠 by Emily Sun

John Kinsella

John Kinsella's recent books include the poetry volume *Open Door* (UWAP, 2018) and *Displaced: a rural memoir* (Transit Lounge, 2020). He is Professor of Literature and Environment at Curtin University, and a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge.

Emily Sun, *Vociferate*|詠. Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Press, 2021. RRP: $29.99, 114pp, ISBN: 9781760990220.

Titles provide the focus for reading a book, and with Emily Sun's first full-length collection of poetry, *Vociferate*|詠, this is emphatically the case. Sun's book examines and excoriates demeaning social structures, and the hypocrisy surrounding denial of gender oppression, and denials of cultural insensitivity and systemic racism. It refers to the Confucian notion of the 'ideal woman' as occupying an inferior position to men—the three obediences and four virtues, and the irony of not only such a tradition but all the Western equivalences that persist while purporting not to do the same. The position of the viewer and subject experiencing this abuse and offence is vital to understanding the verbal and intellectual range of these poems. As geographies of encountering injustice shift, the same patterns are exposed: and who will experience the full force of this systemic and social opprobrium, and to what degree.

In 'Tour Guide' we find a 'polite' observer 'addressing' a police officer as to why kids are being targeted: 'Excuse me officer, I can't help but notice that all these boys have tanned skin…', with the poem ending, 'I walk away. Pale yellow skin guilt.' The poems in *Vociferate*|詠 are multipronged considerations and decortications of injustice. It is a book of ethical concern, confrontation and dilemma.

A complex work of examination, *Vociferate*|詠 is also a narrative of migration, diaspora, cultural belonging and resisting cultural appropriation, and also community and self-identification; an active and searching feminism informs all polyvalent considerations. This feminism connects with heritage and inheritance, of grandmothers in particular, but is also about working the future into the past. It is a book full of positive inversions in meaning, with a poem taking you to discordant places to

challenge expectation, with prosody shifting and responding to tone shifts. Images run into statement, statement into images, making for a verbal-written dynamism of engagement.

The work is an ongoing dialogue set against an internationalist sense of both belonging and disruption, with its inherited, transferred and even 'adapted' cultural knowledges, especially those of an Australian of Chinese heritage defining presence and belonging in and against 'white-settler' majority Australia. *Vociferate*/詠 both travels and revolves around what home was, is and might be.

Regarding the book's powerful feminism, I had to ask myself if I was in a legitimate position to offer more than a rendition of 'reviewing'. I have yet to answer this question, but felt compelled to write this piece. Though I consider myself a feminist, I still feel intrusive talking about gender issues of visibility with regard to some of the poems. Yes, I am very interested in many of the issues of culture, migration and language, and especially with regard to challenging systemic bigotries, but I do feel a legitimacy issue regarding my 'voice' and gender and not falling into a role of passing 'comment'. So, these aren't comments; they are interactions insofar as the book allows me, but not beyond the points of respect. I also acknowledge here that my partner, Tracy Ryan, was the consulting editor for this work, though I never saw or discussed it during that process or this review.

Emily Sun was born in Hong Kong, then lived in England and migrated to Australia when she was eight. She has long had an interest in the shifts and slippages between languages, and in thinking polylingually—'translanguaging' is an essential part of her sense of belonging. Hers seems decidedly a semantic view of interculturality, in which the play on a word or expression can become a key point of entry into juxtapositions and discrepancies that expose injustices and bigotries, or emphasise points of deep personal or cultural contact. To highlight culture in this dynamic is not to do so arbitrarily—rather, culture as differentiated collective sharing/reality is played against constructions of culture (especially through movies, song, music compositions, television, literature) that represent what can't actually be represented: 'mass' versions of the same culture, because culture is always nuanced through regional, familial and personal differences. Western classical music is parsed through the oppressive mechanisms of the same history, popular Chinese-language songs are read in a similar way but with different power-dynamics.

Sun's poems don't so much flow from language to language as use language differences in juxtaposition, or as a dialogic comment or conversation with each other. This highlights similarities and differences, and emphasises the generative 'nature' of disparity. The Cantonese or Mandarin characters that follow an English word, or that augment or complete an expression, or that offer a completely different expression 'unavailable' culturally or linguistically in English, work tonality in the English via context, and also bring a reconsideration of the specific and the vague in any expression, especially as recorded and recounted 'speech'.

I constantly found the 'monosyllabic' counterplays really exciting; they confronted what I had already accepted as 'said' in preceding English or following English after the Chinese (pin yin or Sun's own transcription notes are provided). 'We Need to Talk About Immigration' is an interesting case in point because readers of diverse heritages encountering the columnar, as well as linguistic shifts, are repositioned (the idea of 'dis*orient*ated' might be worth considering semantically when searching for a descriptor), so we wonder at what point cultural appropriation begins and ends and at what point is there a binary or is it dissolved in interculturality. Sun's work is not about cultural purity; it is about cultural respect, intactness, awareness, participation, belonging... and also fluidity. That's one of its great complexities.

'There is no culture because
culture belongs to everyone.
We do not discriminate,'
a bestseller and an actress repeat.

Everyone else looks the same to
them too: mediocre.

It means you can take my dialect,
shorten it and turn an affectionate
curse into playground chants
about dirty Chinese laundry men

啊傻 啊傻
that makes the ABC cry but
the 大人 就笑哈哈.

Vociferate/詠 is in three sections, with each bleeding across to the other in meaning and prosody, though retaining intactness of intent. *Beginning*, *Wandering*, *Continuing* are as much statements of intent as reflections on geo-personal locations. Each section has its highlight poems that work entirely in their own terms but amplify the section's and book's greater concerns; I will discuss at least one of these from each section. But the book is also very much a whole, and has an interlinearity about it that can be traced from poem to poem, and accumulates. The force is in the collective voicings of the 'one voice'.

Sun lives in Perth on Whadjuk Noongar boodjar (as I write from Ballardong Noongar boodjar), and she writes childhood memories that, as with all migrant experience, are inflections of 'old' and 'new' places, long-term cultural and heritage experience, and how these accord, clash or are

placed under stress by living in a 'new' community. 'Lord Ewart's Street' from *Beginning* is a strong example of how a Sun poem states ironies with such directness, without diffusing or explaining them, expecting if not challenging readers to get her tone. That tone is frequently ironic and that irony is often pained and anguished with a sense that bigotry is unsurprising but, nonetheless, deeply distressing.

It might vaguely be argued this tone is a defensive stance, but I think not—rather, it is a truism of experience, of being female and of Chinese heritage in a predominantly white (or Westernised) suburb of Perth. This same tone is at work in dealing with similar ironies of life in Britain, and applies to senses of difference and belonging/unbelonging in Hong Kong and China. Always 'backdropped' by Western colonial rapacity, the poet who is of the English language, and constructs her poems with English as primary lexicon and syntax, is also displaced within the language by other people's potentially orientalising ways of reading. The ironies almost make a narrative critiquing disturbed 'acceptance', as if the targeted person is expected to adjust to racism and bigotry, and be grateful if there are side-effects that leave them safer or at least left alone:

> we slept with the doors unlocked
> our neighbour hated japanese
> thus we were safe

The racist 'all Asians are the same' subtext here finds its correlated refutation in the quote from Edward Said that opens the book: 'I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature'. We make culture out of nature and are not a default setting of nature. Sun uses an almost 'new' (certainly invigorated) form of shifting irony (that most recognisable of literary 'devices', though there's something unfamiliar for me at least in Sun's irony-as-survival as well as excoriation) in which 'nature' and the made, the 'human' and the 'natural', language and the production of entertainment, all sit at odds but *also* together. Her poetry confirms that anything other than a polyvalent way of talking about who we are and where we come from is reductive and bigoted.

The unfamiliar can result in alienation, but we can connect all experience with our own sense of who we are. Not understanding or not finding relevance doesn't prevent a deep immersion and processing of the new, the unfamiliar:

> I copied words and more words from
> the chalkboard. running
> writing something about captains and banks.
> drew pictures of botany I'd never seen
> sang school songs about condemned convicts
> a self-fulfilling prophecy.
>
> was it even supposed to be ewart or did
> someone deaf confuse them with tuarts?
>
> there was one red gum tree
> an asbestos house
> in the wetlands now wasted.
> ('Lord Ewart's Street' 20)

As it slips through puns (banks and Banks, Joseph Banks and botany, Captain Cook through to convicts) the metonymy aligns us with the subject and we process irony with a kind of wonder embedded in the trauma of the history that's not being told. So not following is because truth is not being told, and Ewart Street might distantly be William Ewart Gladstone, might be a colonial family ascription, might be a Tuart tree (native to the Southwest of Australia)... which is a redgum tree along with an asbestos house in the destroyed wetland. This potted history of colonial rapacity is inflected through the alienation of the child who isn't but is now part of it, a 'part' rejected by many of those who would claim and admire such an invasive narrative. The description of place depends on the experience and cultural language we take to it—the English-language Western subject descriptors developed out of colonialism are no more accurate (and at times stunningly less accurate) than Chinese cultural-language descriptors.

'National Treasures Coming Home' is a powerful poem around which many of the book's concerns seem to concretise. It is a poem I would expect to appear in anthology after anthology, which is part of the irony in the curation of culture. But to understand this poem in *Wandering*, maybe we have to consider the opening poem of that section, 'Orientalist Me'. A justified 'prose poem', the play is on the movie-set as conceit for stereotyping, cultural distortion and control through demeaning. The 'Asian' performs the role of 'Asian', and Western cultural capital's urges—fetishistic and orientated around servitude—are appeased: 'The chef must be played by one of the Tony Leungs. The kitchenhand can be anyone ... as long as they are Asian. Cut.' (42). The filmic counterplays are throughout the book.

In 'National Treasures Coming Home', the foci of this irony are stretched and concentrated. Roles of objectification and fetishisation of object are twisted around history, heritage, pillage, theft, the

fetishisation of 'artefacts' by the collectors, the modus operandi of the bigot seeking to impress with 'authentic' objects and authenticity of 'knowledge', and social manipulation. Through stanzas beginning with a personalised observation, we go into indented stanzas that list or discuss the provenance of stolen items, cultural appropriation and control, by inducing discomfort, as if the subject is a cut-to-object-shape fit with the items on display. Going to dinner with her boss (and co.), the protagonist notes:

> I usually pay to admire stolen goods, encased in glass cabinets,
> national treasures and ancient clays I cannot afford to buy.
> (65)

And varieties and versions of cultural fetishisation (and bragging) are undone:

> But my cousin says that our people were peasants who woke
> early to pick grains
> of rice or maybe it was wheat with our hands,
> we were foreign to the Forbidden City.
> I ask him what I should wear to a meal with the descendants
> of drug dealers who poisoned a nation with opioids
> rendered it sick
> too yellow and diseased
> to walk in leafy green meadows
> when they could not cure their addiction to yum cha. (65)

The cascading and accumulating ironies of this stanza are at the core of Sun's modus operandi. The irony comes with its own irony. The fascinating thing about Sun's tonality in the English is its potential for subtextual replaying of the irony of Bruce Dawe's 'Not So Good Earth', which is a critique from outside the pain of being on the receiving end of bigoted cultural collecting, and that can only ever be that. I am also reminded of the irony of John Forbes, which is another irony in myriad ways! But the 'vociferate' aspect of all Sun's writings is a refusal to comply with tonal convention and to inflect her lines (a kind of 'opening of the field' lineation at times) as they require.

Irony doesn't live alone and the suffering beneath this collection that often adds emotional complexity comes out in allusions to personal crises. In the entangled crisis that is suburban Australia with its often-overlapping prejudices and conflicted codes of reading 'outsiders' or the unfamiliar, or just something that challenges their accepted opinions, we might entangle trauma from beneath the critique:

> I will pick you up from the station because
> you wear a head scarf for reasons other than
> complete hair loss through chemotherapy
>
> if you choose to walk to my place
> you need to have that *je ne sais quoi* stride
> especially when you walk past the
> house with the 'Love it or Leave it' SUV
> ('Come Visit Us' 87)

A distance on life might develop (and that's ironised!), but it's a life-filled affirmation of language in dealing with platitudes as much as spiritual questions surrounding mortality. The demi-prose poem 'So What if I Smash a Bowl' which deals with anxiety and being 'neural atypical' is a fine example of disparities building to bring a reassurance that can't be given in a world that necessarily provokes anxiety. A shared if different set of anxieties. Not to be anxious would almost be absurd, yet that anxiety needs to be held in check in order to survive. But the end is grim:

> … and you were my little analgesic and i yours … and you
> believed in magical dragons and santa claus … now he's an
> intruder at night … reading is no longer reading … it is data …
> reading is money … money is god now.
> it is too much.
> it is too much.
> it is too much.
> it is now survival of the anesthetised. (98)

To return to my hesitation over my ability to do justice to the book's feminism and readings of gender, I need to add that I have a highly fluid view of gender possibilities and choices, and even as a male I have always felt doubt and questioning over masculinity. I never felt I belonged in my 'category'. However, this also brings problems of access and privilege, because the reality is that I have mostly in my post-youth enjoyed the direct benefits of being identified as male. This privilege is both a default and a luxury that shouldn't be. Emily Sun is eloquent in her identification of subjections and control—tacit and overt—over the visibility of women in discourse.

This is a feminist book because it not only critiques injustice of equality, but analyses the nature of the gaze and how, whether invited or rejected, interaction with patriarchal systems inevitably pivots around availability and rejection, and 'worth'. The strength of the poetic persona, the protagonist of this book, resides not only in throwing back in the face

of oppression, but outwitting it always. It's not a matter of proving oneself, but of being oneself. And in the intersection with racial marginalisation and preferencing, a dynamic is made that works across many cultural alienations, manipulations, divides, associations and disruptions. From 'Causeway Bay' where the Japanese department store in Hong Kong (1960–1998) becomes a nexus for a collision of desire and imposition:

> 大丸
> placebo playground
> grows an economy
> even with the sun setting on the union jack
>
> Pretty in pink and tartan skirts
> and baby FM boots
> distractions grow economies
> built on land, speculative elation (11)

Through to 'Romeo Would, Were He Not Romeo Call'd' and 'when We developed her principles eight' and the reconstructing of this through orientalist, gendered and sexualised construction:

> people demand a refund for my
> jade table and whip
> for I dare not dig my spurs into the horse. (13)

Through to 'Billy Was Just a Kid' with its voice-weaving of 'myself into their narrative':

> I should've asked for an understudy
> to play the girl who stares into
> his sea-green eyes
> this space is not for me.
>
> I'll ask for the girl at the Panda Express. (47)

And 'Impulse Buys':

> back in our dorm,
> we mix the cherry blossom scented
> powder with 温水 from my thermos
> mix the paste with our fingers
> in plastic bowls
> not knowing if the mixture is
> concocted in animal testing labs,
> leftover flour, or worse. (56)

This is a polyvalent intersectional feminism that might be read through the highlighting (not backdropping) of the collection's numerous social and cultural concerns.

Vociferate/詠 is vociferous, and it is often subtly so. Frequently the obvious wrongs are the thin end of the wedge, and what we take as granted and don't see as being in error in ourselves (or in the self of the poet-protagonist-subject), is the thick end of the wedge. Read this book from beginning to end, and then read it again, for all the things that aren't declared until you understand its accomplished means of making the poem in itself, and the poem that keeps on speaking and growing. A rhizome of ironies and an ironised rhizome? Recall the poem 'Clichéd Rhizomes' ending: 'The exposition was good, wasn't it? / But it was better when we were truly strangers.' (49). How much can the reader get to 'know' the poet, especially with the baggage we bring to any reading? There's a negotiation of caring, of it all mattering a great deal, that offers a means for attempting to crack the code of why migration is so necessary and why it is often so misunderstood, and why we join communities and resist their oppressions and work with what we can.

Vociferate/詠 is a book of repair and a way through the wrongs, the injustices, the prejudices, because the poems create and make communities that are both osmotic and private, are mutual but also aware of the falsehoods out of which they are often built. Yes, it's a compounding picture. Emily Sun is able to express why traditional culture and country must be respected and how there's a difference between cultural appropriation and cultural interaction. The language is not only alive in this book, it is growing. If we listen to the rustling leaves of 'Psithurism' we hear:

> Go home
> 回家
> 回国
> au revoir
>
> But to where? (67)

This is both an irony and a lament, it is a double-edged truism and a crisis.

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'Shadows'
Holly Isemonger

Dream 5

A man is driving through the countryside. He stops and gets out of the car. He is angry, he takes off his watch and screams 'THIS IS AN AWFUL PLOT DEVICE' and hurls it into the field.

With writing and ideas from
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