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60.1 | **New Writing from
Western Australia**
Memoir
Fiction
Poetry
Essays

Westerly

Memoir | Dorothy Hewett
The Empty Room 10

Fiction | Ben Walter
Timing the River 20
Nick Couldwell
The Same Weight as a Human
Heart 98
Bel Woods
Jola Can 106
Kerrin O'Sullivan
Larnaca 119
Deborah Hunn
The Russian Boy 123
Brooke Dunnell
Neighbourhood Watch 134
Mingjuan Tan
The Schizophrenic
Flatmates 146
Donna Mazza
The Exhibit 153

Poetry

William Byrne
First Dance 14
Geoff Page
Allegro 15
Paul Hetherington
Five Occasions of Water 16
Michael Farrell
Into A Bar 18
Dick Alderson
tree 40
A.R. Giles
line of london planes 41
Ian C. Smith
State of Emergency 42
Aidan Coleman
Cartoon Snow 43
Jonathan Hadwen
Three Short Poems 44, 45, 46
Jill Jones
Lose Your Grip 47
Marcella Polain
A hill road 48
Marjorie Main
Another evening 62
Susan Fealy
Lake Mungo 64
Martin Kovan
Trade Routes 74
India Poulton
Aloft 76
Anna Ryan-Punch
Night Fishing 96

Poetry

Stuart A. Paterson
High Tide at Sandyhills **103**

Rose Lucas
Daughters **104**

Richard Schiffman
Boys Running **113**

Kevin Gillam
the boys **114**

Tim Edwards
Returning **115**

David McGuigan
Nursing-Home Memory **116**

Molly Guy
Stargazing **118**

Long Quan (trans. Ouyang Yu)
Notice of a Missing Person **122**

Andy Jackson
Molly **131**

William Miller
Taaka Vodka **132**

Wes Lee
Ointment **144**

Kia Groom
Pre-Emptive Eulogy for Tooth
Not Lost **152**

Ashley Capes
shreds **162**

Rachael Mead
The Wild Grammar of
Leeches **164**

Nausheen Eusuf
Ode to Apostrophe **165**

Essays

Tony Hughes-d'Aeth
Spinning *The Dreamers*:
Jack Davis and the Drama of
Assimilation **24**

Nandi Chinna
Poepatetics: walking and writing
in the Anthropocene **50**

Catherine Noske
In Momentum—Writing
Place **65**

Kate Leah Rendell
Encountering 'Magnificent
Country': Randolph Stow
at Forrest River Mission,
1957 | A Photo Essay **77**

Submissions **166**
Subscriptions **167**

Neighbourhood Watch

Brooke Dunnell

Brooke Dunnell is a WA writer whose stories have been published in *Westerly*, *Meanjin* and other journals.

7.

The first time, I see him in the car park.

I've been flat-sitting for three days when I need to take the first of Lauren's lavender-scented double-tied bags down to the bin room, a caged-off area near her parking spot in the basement. This building is in a lovely location, on a West Perth hill with views of Kings Park, but its bins smell like everyone else's: shit and rot. Holding my breath, I open the nearest one, shove the bag inside and leap back through the wire door, letting it slam and rattle behind me. The sound reverberates through the concrete structure and as it dies off I hear an accusatory voice:

'Hey!'

The man is tall and focused on me as he hurries over from the lifts. This is what I was afraid of when I was asked to look after the apartment: the suspicion of wealthy neighbours. Lauren and I have been friends since primary school, best friends for half that time, but I'd barely been here at all before she said I could stay while she went overseas. Most of the friends Lauren went to high school with have already moved into their own places, but I'm still with my parents, biding my time. I asked if she should tell anyone else in the building that a stranger would be here for three months, feeding the cat and opening windows. Lauren just laughed. Now some guy thinks I'm stealing the rubbish.

'Wait,' he calls, though I haven't moved. Despite an appearance of speed, he's taking a while to get to me because of his weight, which is as abnormal as his height. 'Is that your car?'

I assumed he was going to say something about me rifling through the bins, so I'm confused. 'What?'

The man's lips and neck are splotched purple and white like a radish. He points to my Datsun, Dolly, parked in Lauren's designated bay. She's

lent her Audi to a different friend, and even though it's so generous of her to let me stay at all, I wish she'd left the car as well. Entering and exiting the building would feel much less conspicuous in a vehicle worth more than a fridge.

I nod and the man's face pinches. 'These spots are for residents. Visitors have to use the paid parking on the street.'

'No, I am a resident,' I say, fumbling in my pocket for my driver's licence, which will only prove that I live elsewhere. 'I mean, I'm house-sitting for a resident.'

'Who?'

'Lauren Walford.'

His back straightens like a wild animal smelling food. 'Where's she gone?'

'France.'

We stare at one another for a few seconds. The discolouration in the man's neck slowly spreads upwards and I smell the bin room in my hair. He sticks out his hand.

'I'm Rory,' he says loudly, nodding in the direction of my car. 'We're neighbours.'

My hand's been in his warm sea-creature palm for a while before I realise he's referring specifically to the Holden Commodore in the spot beside Lauren's. Most of the residents' vehicles are parked in rows of four separated by thick pillars, but mine and the neighbour's are in a separate little nook, bordered by load-bearing walls in front and to the right of Dolly and the bin room on the passenger side of the Commodore.

'How long you here for?' Rory asks, letting go of my hand.

I don't want to be specific. 'A few weeks.'

Nodding, he pats the boot of his car, leaving a moist print on the paintwork. 'These spaces are pretty small,' he tells me. 'Careful your car doesn't get scratched.'

I snort. Dolly is thirty years old and looks it. 'I don't think anyone will notice.'

Rory pulls a large set of keys from his shorts pocket and smiles. 'Have a nice day.'

6.

The cat I'm looking after is an old, slow tortoiseshell, a gift to Lauren on her tenth birthday. Mr Bubbles is a humourless animal, but I respect his age and scepticism. Lauren treats him like a difficult roommate. 'When he dies I'm getting a Persian,' she's said, ever since he was six or seven. Now he's thirteen and seems to be living just to annoy her.

I have a part-time job on the checkout of a swanky deli and bottle shop in Subiaco, not far from Lauren's. When I got the job I thought I might end up seeing her more often, though that didn't really happen. Now, a week after my first encounter with Rory, I'm running late for work. I was all right until I saw Mr Bubbles in the kitchen on my way out, his expression disdainful. 'Shit,' I said, letting the door close. I forgot to feed him last night.

The cat food Lauren buys is expensive and inconvenient, packaged in small tins without ring-pulls, and her can opener doesn't work well. My hands are cramping by the time I get the lid off and slide the jellied pink meat into the bowl. Mr Bubbles watches but doesn't move. He won't be seen eating.

Rory is at his car as I come out of the lift, his expression again bruised. I wonder if the Holden won't start or he's locked his keys inside. I don't have time to help. 'Hello,' I say shortly, trying to convey busyness.

'Can I talk to you about parking?' he says.

Again, I'm so prepared for a different topic that the question stumps me. I stop. 'I have to go to work.'

'I had an agreement with Lauren,' he says. 'She was really good about parking.'

I look over at Dolly, who I've tucked courteously in the nook, nose right up against the wall. Her wheels are a little bent but definitely inside the line.

'My spot is smaller than the others because of the bin room.' Rory wipes his wet forehead. 'Mine's the only studio apartment in the block, so they figure the smallest apartment gets the smallest spot. But that doesn't mean I have the smallest car.'

I'm looking at the white rectangle marked around the Commodore, trying to work out if this is true. It looks the same size as mine, though it's hard to judge since his car is bigger.

'What Lauren used to do was really nice. She always reversed her car into the spot so it was right up against the wall there.' Rory nods at the wall to the right of Dolly. 'It made it easier for both of us.'

'Oh,' I say, squinting. I'm not great with spatial awareness, which is why the Datsun is lined up crooked, but I think I can picture what he's suggesting. 'Well, if Lauren—'

'Right,' Rory interrupts. 'When you come back, just reverse in.'

'Okay, well, I have to go,' I say, edging between Dolly and the cement wall to get in. Even though I've left room, it is hard to squeeze through the driver's side door. Probably it'll be better if I go in backwards. Lauren is really terrible at parking. If she can do it, I should too.

5.

The third time Rory comes to the door late at night, almost unacceptably late, but I'm still up. I've spent two hours trying to decide what to do about dinner, whether I have the money to buy pasta stuff at the convenience store on Hay Street or the courage to carry take-away McDonald's into the lobby and risk people seeing. Eventually I found a box of old water crackers in the back of the pantry and sat in front of Lauren's TV, eating them plain. The whole situation has skewed my sense of time and appropriateness, so when the neighbour knocks, I open the door.

Rory wears a soft, thin T-shirt that strains against the heft of his stomach and breasts, and his face is concerned and damp. 'I had to park my car on the street,' is what he says this time. 'It wouldn't fit in the spot.'

'But I reversed in,' I say, my voice cracking. It's the first time I've spoken all day.

I'd parked downstairs the day before, after work. The Commodore wasn't there. I was pretty hopeless at getting in backwards; it took about five goes to line up properly. I had other things on my mind. When I'd gone to my locker at the end of my shift there were two missed calls from Lauren on my phone, but even though I rang back four times she never answered.

'I really need your car closer to the wall,' Rory says. Away from the bin room I can smell him; dirt after rain. 'They gave me the smallest spot in the building.'

'Okay, sorry,' I say, going to shut the door.

Rory's eyebrows shoot up in alarm. 'My car's on the street,' he tells me again.

I pull the door back fully and stare at him. It's after ten o'clock at night, a chilly night despite Rory's T-shirt and shorts, and he wants me to go down to the basement and move my car because he's convinced his can't fit in a standard space.

'Okay,' I say.

Downstairs it takes me another five tries, three of which Rory misses because he's bringing the Commodore around. When I shut her down Dolly grumbles at the number of tiddly manoeuvres. With my luck the battery will be dead in the morning.

It takes Rory longer to get out of his car than it did for him to park it. 'That's good,' he nods. 'That's how Lauren does it.'

Rory gets in the lift but I hang back, trying to memorise what it is he wants. The space between our cars is wide and easy, marred only by the

minor obstacles of the driver's side mirrors: Rory's on the top left facing out, mine on the bottom right looking in. They remind me of hands in a barn dance, reaching for one another.

As I head back I check my phone, but I haven't missed anything.

4.

Lauren never returns my call, but I chat to her online a few days later. It's one a.m. and I'm working the morning shift, but Lauren is hard to pin down. She doesn't tell me why she rang the other day.

Paris is wonderful and she's having a fabulous time. She's there to take a fashion course and improve her French, which she studied in high school but hasn't needed for ages. Her dad thinks all of this will be useful. Perceptions of usefulness correlate with levels of wealth: my own father telling me to 'make myself useful' means I should get him a beer from the fridge or pick up the vacuum. As we've got older and grown apart, my dad has called Lauren the Rich Bitch, though he's still nice to her face. I wonder what Mr Walford calls me.

So what's going on with you? her message bubble finally asks.

Of course nothing's going on with me. Nothing is ever going on with me. My biggest news is that I'm living in my childhood friend's swanky apartment for three months. I tell her about Rory. *This guy has a serious obsession with his parking spot.*

It takes Lauren a while to reply. *The tall fat guy?* she eventually sends. *Is that his name?*

He thinks his spot's smaller than everyone else's, I respond, aware that I'm becoming the weirdo who's obsessed with parking spots. *Did you have an arrangement with him or something?*

She sends through a confused emoticon, a bright yellow face with a twisted mouth and purple beret. A confused *French* emoticon, of course. *I don't think I ever spoke to him,* she adds.

He thinks you have. When there isn't a response, I type, *He's weird.*

You know he killed his kid? Lauren types. Then her status switches to 'away'.

Is that a joke? 'Away' has greyed Lauren out so I can't respond. I'm left staring at the screen for six cold minutes, cracking my knuckles over and over again.

Lauren does this; I remember from school. She likes secrets and leaving people hanging; saying enticing stuff and letting it sit, waiting for someone to pick it up. When we were little kids she was a consummate liar. She told me she overheard our teacher tell the principal he didn't like me, and pretended her family pool was haunted, letting out a distorted

scream any time I put my head underwater. She doesn't lie any more, not as far as I know, but she likes to have 'news'; that is, gossip. Whatever she says, I remind myself, you have to doubt a little bit.

Finally the 'away' disappears and I send, *What?*

Someone told me. He moved here after he got out of jail.

Maybe it's the detachment of this kind of communication coupled with being on the other side of the world, eight hours in the past, but Lauren seems like she barely cares. I try to be as cool. *How did an ex-con get an apartment in such a nice block?*

It's his aunt's or something?

I can't help it. I type, *Should I be scared?*

Though her status remains available, Lauren doesn't say anything for another three minutes. Meanwhile I've got up and dead-bolted the door. It's half-past one and my shift starts at seven.

Like a firework, Lauren flashes back briefly: *Ignore him. Gotta run, have fun, bye!*

I go to bed and get three hours' sleep. In the morning I inch Dolly out in millimetre increments, afraid of scratching a murderer's car.

3.

On my lunch break I stay in the staffroom, Googling variations of 'child', 'murder', and 'Rory'. Most of the results refer to a one-year-old with that name who died in Queensland a few months ago. I read a few of the articles about the trial and whether or not his mother was suffering from psychosis when she drowned him in the bath. From Queensland Rory I click through to a few of the linked stories but the sadness is too much—newborn twins killed in a car crash, the refusal of a terminally ill child abductor to tell parents where the bones of their children are, kids falling into dams, off play equipment, out of windows.

I want Lauren to call and explain more. She doesn't.

Back at her place I idle in the driveway for ages, listening to the pops and rumbles of Dolly's engine. It's highly unlikely that Rory is a killer. Just because he's an enormous, jittery, hyper-hydrotic man living in an apartment complex way outside of his apparent price range doesn't mean anything. I can't afford a place in this building, either.

Besides, I reason, pushing the clutch in further, Lauren only *heard* he'd been in jail. And she didn't sound worried.

A car pulls up behind me and beeps lightly, rousing me from my trance. I aim an apologetic wave at the rear-view mirror and put the Datsun in gear. Anyway, I think grimly, descending into the basement, if Rory only kills kids, I'm safe.

My heart pumps a shot of dread when I see the Commodore in its bay. I turn Dolly around jerkily and ease back into Lauren's space, getting as close to the wall as possible. It only takes a couple of attempts this time and I'm sweaty but relieved as I open the door.

Rory is in his car.

My gasp of surprise turns into a coughing fit. By the time I stop Rory has got out and is moving freely between the two cars, the right side of his bulk brushing the Holden but not Dolly. So I've *definitely* left enough room.

'Lauren used to fold in her side mirror.'

'Jesus,' I say.

Rory thinks I've said this because he startled me. 'I only just got home from work,' he explains. I try to remember how long I was stopped in the driveway.

'I have talked to the strata company about this,' Rory continues. There's a seam of panic in his voice. 'I suggested they give me the whole corner and put Lauren's bay over there.' He points at the parking spots closest to the entryway. 'Some people get two, which isn't fair.'

I think he means the occupants of the building's twin penthouses, each of which has the space of three apartments and hundred-and-eighty-degree views. I've seen the owners' cars lined up: a Mercedes, a BMW, a Peugeot, another Mercedes.

Rory doesn't tell me the outcome of his appeal, but I can guess. He wipes a forearm across his beetroot-dipped face and I remember he might be a murderer. My heartbeat increases. 'Do your side mirrors fold in?' he asks.

The Datsun's mirrors are dusty, the rubber dry. I swivel the one on the driver's side tentatively, and though it squeaks, it does turn. When I step back Dolly looks like she is raising an eyebrow at me: *Really?*

Rory grins with relief. 'That should work.'

He walks away, big stomach swinging from side to side like a girl's ponytail. I can't bear to share a lift with him so I go into the bin room, pretending to have junk. The cage is warm with decomposition. When I see the lift doors close I go over to Dolly, pull out her side mirror, and drive back onto the road.

2.

There's free parking on a vacant block two streets away. It's sandy and there's broken glass from the pub next door, but there are no signs about private property and the office workers who use it don't leave their cars overnight.

I think I've found Rory online. A few years ago there were a batch of articles about a man in Geraldton who shook his girlfriend's baby. The guy's name is Rowan and in the one accompanying picture he has a jumper covering his face, but he's very fat and tall compared to the policeman leading him into a van. The toddler, Scarlett, isn't dead but brain-damaged; there's a photograph of her as well, a glamour shot taken at a shopping centre, weeks before the injuries took place. She is blonde, with eyebrows so fine they disappear into her rose-gold skin. Apparently she had an ear infection and a piercing, constant scream. I wonder if Rory sweats because he keeps seeing that face, lovely girl, her future ahead of her. He might not be Rowan. I think he is.

I don't mention him to Lauren again. Instead I send her emails about Mr Bubbles' health, with no reply. On Facebook there are self-conscious pictures of her at French tourist attractions, eyes crossed, jabbing a thumb at the structure or painting behind her. Random European-looking people sometimes join her, looking sleek and unshaven, arms around her shoulders, her waist. They leave comments in French and she answers quickly, with lots of smiley faces. There's an option to translate the messages, but I don't.

I ring my parents to check in. Dad is sarcastic. 'How's the mansion?'

I'm enjoying the company of Mr Bubbles. The cat is the one constant in my uneasy life at Lauren's, his presence stately and reliable. He likes to be in the same room as me, though at a distance of at least a metre, and I'm still not allowed to touch him. At night we sit on either end of Lauren's leather couch, watching TV in companionable silence.

One night there's a key in the door. For a moment I think it's Lauren, that she's made the improbable decision to fly back and hang out with me and Mr B, before I realise it's her dad letting himself in. It's nine o'clock and Mr Walford is still in his suit. 'Oh,' he says when he sees me. His surprise is mild enough that I don't suspect him of trying to bring a secret girlfriend over, which is a relief. 'I didn't think anyone was here. There's no car downstairs.'

'No,' I say, getting up awkwardly.

We shake hands because it seems necessary. It's really bad. Mr Walford used to go in the pool with us, throwing us in and doing bombies. I don't know how long it's been since I've seen him. 'I thought Lauren said you had a car?'

'My car isn't here,' is all I can say.

'Right.' Mr Walford takes a couple of steps further into the apartment. 'Thought I should fulfil my landlordly duties.' He looks around. 'How's everything?'

‘Fine.’

His brow creases slightly and I wonder if I should have been more effusive. He spots the cat, arched around the armrest to see what the disruption is. ‘Hello, Bubbles.’

Mr B withdraws.

‘Right, well.’ Lauren’s father nods at me. ‘So, no problems?’

Obviously he doesn’t want me to have any. What would I say? Something like, *I’m too scared to use the car park. I leave the car a kilometre away and I haven’t spoken to Lauren for a month. Or, Did someone in this building kill a kid?*

I say, ‘Thanks so much for letting me stay.’

1.

My last encounter with Rory won’t happen for a couple of weeks. Not using Lauren’s car bay means I don’t bump into him, although whenever I come in and out of the building I try to widen my peripheral vision; to see him before he sees me. Lauren’s father stays away. No one comes to the apartment. It’s just me and Mr Bubbles, opening tins of food and looking out at the city lights.

Lauren has a French boyfriend. She’s been invited to do a year-long fashion internship at a label I haven’t heard of and is going to tour Europe before it starts, probably with the boyfriend. I learn this from the status updates she posts in English. Mr Walford phones to say he’s going to let out the apartment, but as the current tenant I have first dibs. I ask what the rent will be. When he tells me I’m strangely flattered he thinks I can afford it. I say I’ll be out before the weekend.

On my last day of house-sitting I park Dolly in the basement so I can bring stuff down. Along with the clothes and books I brought with me I fill a plastic bag with fancy food from the pantry and a couple of Lauren’s things that I like. I know I won’t see her again.

I’m making my last trip to the car when the door to the bin room opens. It’s Rory. He looks smaller than the last time I saw him but his face is just as purple, just as pained. ‘Hey!’ he calls in the same reproving way as the first time I met him. ‘You’re still here.’

His hand holds the metal doorframe and I think of that hand around Scarlett’s soft arm, squeezing with frustration. If that was him.

I use my knee to nudge open the Datsun’s unlocked boot and drop in an armload of clothes. ‘I’m moving out.’

‘Is Lauren coming back?’

‘No.’ I close the boot.

When I look at him Rory's eyes are shifting over my car with uncertainty. 'You haven't parked here for ages. I thought you must have left.'

I shrug. 'Thought I'd give you some extra room.'

Rory looks embarrassed. There's a ridge of sweat on both his eyebrows. I feel sorry for him for the first time, knowing I won't have to see him again.

'So who's going to live in the flat?'

'They're renting it.'

'To someone with a car?'

I think of the rich or irresponsible or both sort of person who will rent the apartment for the amount of money Lauren's father wants. Of course they'll have a car, and I don't think they'll negotiate with Rory about the space. I think they'll look straight through him and his sweaty nerves and banged-up Commodore. The first time I met Rory I found out his name. Lauren lived here for two years and only recognised a vague description.

'I don't know,' I say, and open Dolly's door.

I'm just about to duck my head through when he says, 'Thanks for the space.'

I take one last look at Rory's oversized car and regular-sized spot, trying to work out why he feels the need to have so much room. As I glance through the back window, for the first time I see a child's car seat fixed to the passenger side. A small blanket is folded across it, to warm the legs of a kid that isn't there.

I get in and start the engine, bringing Dolly to life. It's easy not to look at Rory as I reverse out of Lauren's spot and drive back home.