

69.1 | **New Writing from
Western Australia**
Fiction
Creative Nonfiction
Poetry
Essay

In this Issue
Dorianne Laux
Svetlana Sterlin
Dan Disney
Cindy Solonec
Cal Newton

Westerly



**'Witold's Realm
of Form'**
Emma-Grace Clarke

I think about him all the time—nearly more than my mother. Witold feels like a light but constant print upon the soft sand of my consciousness. Out the window I can see the unravelling bushland, the tendrils of which become gardens and hedge rows and the embarrassing little gnomes that dot the garden of number nine down the road.

Westerly

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The Patricia Hackett Prize

Westerly awards the Patricia Hackett Prize annually to the strongest work published within the volumes of the preceding year.

The Prize remembers the contributions of Patricia Hackett to theatre and poetry, and her family's connection to The University of Western Australia. Alongside her career as a lawyer, Hackett was an actor, director, artist and poet, publishing the collection *These Little Things* (1938), illustrated by Rex Wood. Her own artwork was used on the cover of *Westerly* 10.1 (1965), which also included a feature written in remembrance of her work and her life. This issue is available (free access) to read within our digital archive, via our website. Within that feature, Earle Hackett describes her 'essential and lovable quality' as 'intelligent compassion' (46).

The Prize was first awarded in 1965 and has celebrated the work of a prestigious list of past recipients, including most recently Kim Scott, Grace Yee, Marcella Polain, David Whish-Wilson, Donna Mazza, Siobhan Hodge, Timmah Ball, Caitlin Maling, David Carlin, Cassie Lynch and Stephen Orr.

The 2023 Patricia Hackett Prize

Westerly is thrilled to announce Jumaana Abdu as the winner of the 2023 Patricia Hackett Prize for her story 'Children Go Straight to Heaven When They Die', which appeared in our first print issue for 2023, *Westerly* 68.1.

Jumaana Abdu is the author of *Translations* (Vintage, 2024). She is a Dal Stivens Award winner and a Wheeler Centre Next Chapter alumnus. Her work features in *Thyme Travellers* (Roseway Publishing, 2024), an international anthology of Palestinian speculative fiction. She has been published elsewhere in *Kill Your Darlings*, *Griffith Review*, *Meanjin*, *Liminal Magazine*, *Overland*, *Debris* and *New Australian Fiction 2024*. During the day, she is a junior medical doctor.

Congratulations, Jumaana! Selecting the winner for 2023 was a very difficult task. 'Children Go Straight to Heaven When They Die' stood out for its compassion and the beauty of its prose, alongside the nuance with which it depicts a pivotal moment in the life of Leena, its protagonist.

I've learned a little about the bungarra, or sand goanna¹, over the course of editing this issue of *Westerly*. Some of what I have learned has been startling. For instance, in November 1993, 'A miniature radio-transmitter with a battery life of approximately 140 days [...] was attached to the lateral aspect of the base of the tail for seven *V. gouldii*' in Karrakatta cemetery (Thompson 107)—not far from where I'm writing this editorial. According to Thompson (a zoologist at Edith Cowan University), this transmitter 'was sewn into a denim harness that was glued with Selleys "kwikgrip" to the skin of the goanna's tail' (107).

To help gather data, Thompson asked 'well-trained observers' to spend 131 hours watching two of the seven bungarra; according to him, 'On numerous occasions, the observed *V. gouldii* moved toward the observer, reducing the distance [...] to less than 5 m, and on a few occasions to less than 2m. This suggests that the presence of an observer had a minimal influence on their behaviour' (108). This seems a peculiar presumption to make, considering the bungarra were harnessed up and dragging radio-transmitters by their tails.

Hop Dac's beautiful and eccentric *Bungarra*, which graces the cover of this issue of *Westerly*, and which can also be found reproduced in full on page 55, seems to conjure some of the (perceived, admittedly) absurdity I sense in Thompson's descriptions of looking—which I know is never an impartial act. Dac's bungarra stands side-on, and is staring hard, alert, aware, all about her; the image is flicker and movement, despite the inevitable stillness of a painting. When I look at her, I am reminded of a poem by John Kinsella, in *The New Arcadia*, in which he describes 'The Bungarra Goanna' with the precision of a scientist—and perhaps with similar tongue-in-cheek to my own reading of Thompson's experiment.. Kinsella writes how 'The yellow spots / of the bungarra / connect Walwalinj / and Babylon; at a glance / there are eighty-nine / and they're

golden' (25). We see so much when we look, even glancingly. What we see depends on what we know.

The pose in which Dac depicted the bungarra he painted was adopted by those seen in the cemetery. Thompson writes, 'On a few occasions, a goanna was observed to stand erect, by balancing on the hind legs and tail (Fig [E]). This stance appeared to be prompted by the need to see over some obstruction, as it occurred when the *V. gouldii* were between graves and their vision of the surrounding area was obstructed' (112). Dac's bungarra, instead of staring over a grave, stands and looks over an equally incongruous context: a meal, waiting to be eaten. She is, I have no doubt, acutely aware of being watched, just as she watches acutely. There is also nothing neutral in Dac's gaze, even if the meaning of a painting like his changes from moment to moment. The only certain thing, for me, is the knowledge of encounter itself.

As a feature in this issue we offer Catherine Noske's 2024 Randolph Stow Memorial Lecture, 'Ngaangk: those sunstruck miles'. Kate, of course, needs no introduction to readers of *Westerly*. Those familiar with her and with her work will find here the nuance, rigour and beauty with which she imbues her writing and thinking. Kate's reading of Stow is complimented by Samuel Cox's 'On the Track to *Tourmaline*', which begins with the claim that texts 'are not purely products of the mind, but of space too' (57). I've been thinking about this line in relation both to the act of looking, and to a line that Kate quotes from Stow's 'Raw Material' (published in *Westerly* 6.2): 'The environment of a writer is as much inside him as in what he observes' [*sic*] (4). Place, then, is one component part of how looking is not impartial—it is part of what we know, just as poetry is.

This place—the place from which we work here in Boorloo, on the banks of the Derbarl Yerrigan, a kilometre or two from a cemetery in which, over thirty years ago, bungarra clambered over gravestones while wearing denim—has shaped the way in which we go about looking at, and then compiling, the works gathered here. Given this, I'd like to acknowledge Issue 69.1 of *Westerly* was put together on Whadjuk Noongar boodja, which is unceded, and which has been cared for by Noongar people for as long as it has been. I offer respects to Elders past and present and feel so grateful for the particular perspective looking from the west allows.

In a similar way, your own contexts will inform how this collection is read: the Country that this Magazine works its way to will shape how it is held and understood. The distance you are from the things you will read about, or any obstructions that crop up in your way as you do, will impact how these words find you. The same is true, of course, for the writing itself, which contains within it each of the places of its making. In that

sense, I am acutely aware that your presence here as reader will have tremendous impact on the behaviour of the writing we have assembled. You will change all of these words by looking at them. Thank you, then, for taking the time to sit with this issue of *Westerly*, and for seeing what you see in it.

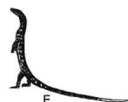
Before signing off, I'd like to thank all the people who have made this issue of *Westerly* happen. To Shalmalee Palekar, Sarah Yeung, Melissa Kruger and Catherine Noske: thank you. I'm very grateful for your support, intelligence and grace. Thank you, too, to our external editors, Casey Mulder (First Nations), Julie Koh (Fiction), Stefanie Markidis (Creative nonfiction), Lucy Dougan (Poetry) and Cassandra Atherton (Commissions). And, in production, thank you to Becky Chilcott (Chil3), Keith Feltham (Lasertype) and Advance Press. You have been patient and so very professional. Our superb interns in support of this issue were Patrick Eastough, Dionne Sparks and James Stanwix: thank you! And thank you, too, to all those who have offered support in any stripe or colour—especially to the authors whose work we share, over the page.

Before closing, I'd like to recognise formally the funding bodies who allow *Westerly* to keep publishing: thanks to Creative Australia and to the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries. *Westerly* is also sincerely grateful to The University of Western Australia and to the Arthur Finn Bequest: both provide essential support.

Daniel Juckes, June 2024

Notes

- 1 Or racehorse goanna, or karda, or Gould's goanna, or Gould's monitor or *Varanus gouldii*...



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We could have gone wandering out into the snow Andrew Sutherland

Andrew Sutherland (he/they) is a Queer Poz (PLHIV) writer and performance-maker currently based on unceded Wurundjeri land. His debut poetry collection *Paradise (point of transmission)* was published by Fremantle Press in 2022.

We could have gone wandering out into the snow.
Something about the endless tundra of desire. A joke.
The joke of the poem. In diaspora Russian:
*when you are alone, the sickness grabs you;
pulls you down. With others, you are let free.*
But do we feel it any less? We could have

offered a man a tip then gone wandering out
onto the cobbled stone. We could have stayed
drunk. Stayed sober. We could have fumbled
our best friend's wedding. Made a 1990s of
the scene. I'd like to tell you about the time
I was cast in a two-scene role in some sci-fi B movie

starring Kristen Stewart. She was my 'straight exception'
(yes her and Rooney Mara) when I still thought that real
meant fixed in place and reel meant fixed in
time. Anyway. They wrote my character out
a few weeks before shooting. I don't know.
No proximity to Kristen, is what matters. I think it was

about people without feelings, getting feelings.
A bomb. There's no point to this history other
than to let people know. We could have filmed
ourselves in that slight desaturation sheen.
We could have been a camera angle. A shot.
We could have wandered out from tropics to the snow.

Cusped
For Rachael
Svetlana Sterlin

Svetlana Sterlin writes prose,
poetry and screenplays in
Meanjin. Her poetry collection
If Movement Was a Language
(forthcoming with Vagabond
Press) was the recipient of the
2023 Helen Anne Bell Award.
Svetlana's fiction was recognised
in the 2023 Richell Prize and
Queensland Young Writers
Award. Find her words in *Island*,
Meanjin, *Cordite* and elsewhere.

April rolls around again / like the dry leaves
across the yard. wonder how they look now collecting
at the bottom of the pool.
cusp of Aries + Taurus bears me into another year. ten
is the age I turned the year we arrived. a good,
round number
to bear me / into a new life. ten
years on, I teeter at the cusp of our old pool's length
& squint back through / memory's fogged lens markings
along the deck: accumulated moments
tokens collecting behind a folded curtain in my brain.
scars congealed where tiles used to cut. April rolls around
again but before my birthday arrives
the mother of my only
remaining swim friend dies.
one year later we go to a movie / unchaperoned. for the first time
me unchattering. her mother used to shush me
with a smile. now we follow a band of rowdy teens
down the steps.
my friend kicks their discarded soda cups after them.
my cheeks warm: I used to be just as loud.
she used to be calm like her mother / like the water that has
barely shivered since our departure.

we missed each other's teen years, snagged / in our own orbits
half-moons undecided on whether or not to face the sun.
now her mother remains forever / stitched into the galaxy
maintaining order in the sky.

A Study Cal Newton

Cal Newton is a writer living in Boorloo/Perth. She is undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at The University of Western Australia. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *TEXT*, *Colloquy* and *The Quietus*, among other publications, and she is working on her first novel. She is interested in writing about transgenerational trauma, patriarchal violence and maternal ambivalence.

When reading a study about dogs and the distribution of pain she recalls a trip she took with her father to the seaside. She was very young, perhaps four or five. She had never seen the sea before. She had never been on a train. This was after she was put in St. Barnabas, or maybe it was before. When they got there the seagulls were cawing and she could not believe how their bodies were sprung on the air like that, how the wind beat back against them and pinned them to the grey sky as if they weren't really moving at all. The beach was all cold black pebbles washed with surf, and the tide left hemlines of seaweed on the rocks. Her father bought her a stick of pink rock with writing all the way through but she hadn't yet learned the words. She asked him if he would do the sounds with her like Miss O'Grady did but he was setting his watch and didn't hear her. They were walking along the pier and the wind was blowing against them and making her eyes water. She thought of her mother at home. She thought of how she had learned what wind was by helping her mother hang the washing on the line. One time the wind had come rushing through like a frightened animal, had darted headlong into the sheets and sent them hurtling off the line and over the yard where they'd settled at last amongst the weeds. She'd looked up at her mother and had seen that her cheeks were wet, and when she'd asked her why she was crying her mother had said it was only the cold wind making her eyes water. On the pier there were families passing around hot chips and toffee apples between themselves. There were stalls everywhere with flashing lights and loud noises and games with prizes to be won. There was a house of mirrors and there were go-karts and there was even a merry-go-round. At the

stalls there were lots of men and women her mother and father's age or younger, and she knew from the way the men were touching the women's arms that they were boyfriend and girlfriend, and suddenly she wished very much that her father would touch her mother's arm like that, that her mother would let her arm be touched by her father, instead of standing at the kitchen window all morning smoking her cigarettes. She tugged at her father's jacket and asked if she could have a ride on the merry-go-round. He went to the ticket booth to pay and in return the lady in the ticket booth gave him a little blue chip. There wasn't anyone else on the merry-go-round and so she had her pick of the seats. She chose a golden horse with pinks and greens streaming through its mane like lights, and her father lifted her up onto its back. When he stepped away she looked down and saw she was higher up off the ground than she'd imagined. She sat uncomfortably, her arms tight around the pole that ran through the horse's back, her knees pressed to the hard undulations of its stomach. The ride lurched into action and the bright sounds of cymbals and bells came out of the speakers overhead. The tune was 'Nellie the Elephant', and she turned to tell her father that they'd learned this song in school only to find him gone. She looked around but he was nowhere to be seen. She whimpered and held tighter to the pole. She wondered if he'd left her there, if it was going to be another St. Barnabas. She thought about climbing down but she was too high up. She sat there trying to work out what to do next until the ride completed its first full circle and there he was, one arm leaning on the ticket booth. When he saw her looking he waved, and though she didn't want to release the pole she felt her arms relax and she pressed her forehead to the pole with relief. She was moving away from him already and she had to crane her head all the way over her left shoulder to keep him in view. Each time the horse dropped down instead of going up she lost sight of him completely, but when the horse rose in the air again she saw he was leaning both arms up on the ticket booth and he was laughing. He hadn't laughed like that in a long time and something about the way he was tipping his head back made her feel sick. The merry-go-round moved into its farthest point and as she was drawing parallel with her father she could see into the booth. The ticket lady was in there and though it was hard to get a clear view with all the painted horses moving up and down in between she and them, she thought she saw her father reach a hand in, to touch the lady's arm. The ticket lady had a smile like Miss O'Grady. It was not like her mother's smile, which was like how, in handwriting practise, she sometimes pressed too hard with the pencil and accidentally scored the sheet of paper underneath. When the ride approached its beginning again, her father had left the

booth and was standing waiting for her with his arms crossed over his chest. He raised his hand and made a motion that said it was time to go. She watched a family still holding their toffee apples climb up onto some nearby horses and the tune changed so that she couldn't tell anymore whether she was at the end or at the beginning. The world kept moving. She stayed on the ride.

The Weeping Hands Melanie Pryor

Melanie Pryor is a writer living on Kaurana land. She writes about bodies, landscapes and belonging. Her nonfiction has been published in *The New York Times*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *Overland* and *Lip*, and on wine bottles as part of the 2017 *Overland/Story Wine Prize*. She holds a PhD in creative writing.

This essay contains mention of the following: eating disorders, self-harm, mental illness, physical injury and illness, parental trauma, hospital and suicidal ideation.

Around the time my father got sick, I developed a habit of pushing a drawing pin into small itchy blisters on my palm. When I was ill as a child my parents would treat me with vitamin C and stories in bed, but I was far from home now and this was not a sickness they would recognise.

These are some words for lungs: fibrous, spongy, permeable. I don't like these words. They are wet and full of air. Too alive. In my mind, there is a damp tree inside me, broccoli-green or maybe grey and pink. An alveoli tree, a thing of sacs and ducts, blood and gas and oxygen. This tree-sac breathes. There are approximately 700 million alveoli in a pair of human lungs, and I think I am uneasy at this thriving colony, the stretchy-mesh system of me. But alveoli dispel carbon dioxide-rich air that I cannot use, and remembering this, the pulsing spongy lung-tree inside no longer makes me squeamish but is a thing of blood and flesh and wonder.

When he became sick, I imagined my father's lungs. I imagined the gluey silver mucous of pneumonia. I took a breath and coughed into a tissue, and in its folds stretched a wet web, almost green, and I couldn't tell disgust from fascination at this thing, clinging together, no longer in my body.

•••

There is a sting of fear every time I press the pinhead in. A shock of pain when it pushes through—I mean right through. There's a pop. The metal tip punches through the first layers of skin, which feel delicate but are really a stratum of subdermal tissue, an ecosystem of tissue and blood. And then the pin is in the blister, in the bed of ichor that itches, itches.

I withdraw the pin and press with my fingernail and then comes the glint of liquid and relief.

I become obsessed with squeezing this itchy glint from my body. This blister-pus that makes tight hot bumpy sausages of my fingers. Sometimes I feel like I could burst my fingers when I wake in the morning: it is always worst in the morning. These fingers that I cannot bend because the skin has become so hot and swollen. These weeping hands.

I imagine my father's drowning chest as the doctors looked down at his puzzle body. I imagine that my father was grey. I don't know how long he had been unable to breathe properly; he would have told the doctors it was a week, but I would have told them it was months. My sister would have said it had almost been a year. We told him to go see someone about the deep, hacking cough that would not leave and in words that sounded ominous even then he would say, 'Oh, it's just a cough.'

I have learned to trace wounds and their openings and closings through my family. I have come to see what fear looks like on each of us and I try to wrap myself around the shape of their wounds. I try to make myself a bandage. It will be a long time yet until I understand what happens to bandages: they wear too thin to be anything at all. They self-cannibalise.

When I find out my father is sick, I am living in the redwoods of California, sleeping in a wooden hut hung through with spiders, scritch-scratched by chooks, haunted by mountain lions and coyotes I hear in the evenings. Mornings are cut glass mist and the sun is long heat. I milk goats, resting my weight against their musky flanks, breathing them in. I learn to recognise the lurch of a restless hoof before it finds the milk bucket. I wear clothes with pockets large enough to gather eggs and ripe tomatoes. I shave half my head and my bare feet turn brown faster than it takes to learn the names of nearby roads.

I am happier than I have ever been but then my nose grows pink and raw. I sleep with tissues in my nostrils—so much liquid runs runs runs from me. At first the summer heat makes me slow and luxurious but then, as my virus grows, it feels like my bones will drag me to the ground. I eat oranges by the handful. *Fix me*, I beg them. I get sicker, bones heavier. One morning I wake and down the sides of my fingers, across my palms, there runs a rash of tiny, clear blisters.

In a text message from home, I read *hospital* and *Dad* and *emergency* and *pneumonia*. The words are terrible little aliens on the glass screen in my hand, shocking in their unexpectedness. They are a clatter of unwelcome; a shock of frigid water. I think, stupidly: my world is the

one that is supposed to be changing, not yours, Dad. I want to un-read, to un-wind, to un-do whatever has happened on the other side of the world.

•••

Alveoli are gatekeepers: they are the point at which oxygen is dispersed into the body. In a single alveolus—of which there are about 170 per one cubic millimetre of lung tissue in the body—oxygen and carbon dioxide undergo a permutation. The oxygen moves into the bloodstream via blood vessels called capillaries, and the carbon dioxide remains in the alveolus to be flushed from the body with the next breath. Imagine. Seven hundred million air sacs exchanging the detrimental for the useful in that half second between the inhale and exhale. After each breath, your blood will be different. The air around you changes in a millisecond. A sorting has occurred.

We do this mostly without thinking. But if, like for my father, some or all of those 700 million air sacs, those precious alveolus gems at the furthest reaches of your lung tree, begin to fill with pus, then you start to think about them. Your lungs. And how much you depend on them.

Before I left for California, my body did not menstruate for three months. There was a week in those months when I woke in the middle of each night to throw up. Stress retched out of me, sour, tired. There were stretches of days when I knew that deep bone ache, that parched throat, when the body teeters on the edge of sickness and calls your name and you stop everything and lie in bed and eat oranges and weep with fear of falling ill—and yet I held sickness off. I was finishing a PhD and stress swirled around with the oats I ate for breakfast every morning. It is very easy to mistake mania for productivity, obsession for motivation, and the tingling of a hyper-activated nervous system for the buzz of accomplishment, right up until the body starts to ruthlessly empty itself. When cortisol is firing at a steady constant there is no room for anything that might pause the body on its headlong careen to some kind of cliff. This is the point where we should realise something is quite wrong. But we usually don't, and I didn't, and I soared through the world, increasingly untethered, thinking I was flying.

Whatever is inside my father's body mystifies me. There are cities in there. Small grey rail carts, lines of them, pulsing bumping chuntering along veins and down chutes, depositing hoards of precious red ore throughout

him. Beneath the browned surface, beneath the tired scars on his knees and his knuckles and his palm and other places I have not seen. Where are the other scars? I need to know this. Suddenly, it feels almost unbearable, the urgency: I need to know. That there is something of you beyond me? No. I do not accept this. Not when you know what I am made from, you know what is inside of me, what is strung and fleshed in me, through and through, you know the spiderweb of me hung between trees in the first light-up of dawn—those droplets of dawn-water-flesh that is me? You made them. You *know* me, Dad. I want to know you.

I started to write about my father's unwell body and I started to open my palms to expel what was painful inside.

I think sometimes I have been looking for ways to escape my skin for as long as I've been here. But not in a dying way. I'm not seeking death. I'm seeking another way of having a form.

•••

As I write my fingers itch. A dry fingernail-scrape itch. I type with hands too stiff to curl so I lay them flat and tap my outstretched fingers downwards, cormorants belly-flopping into a still lake.

I wonder if this will turn into an obsession, this pin pricking. If I will always need to have something with a sharp tip in my pocket. I notice now in the objects that surround me what is good for tapping against skin and piercing it and what you really have to press in to get underneath.

I wonder if my mother would think this is self-harm again.

It is not, I would tell her. It is a relief.

But it was when I was young, too. Control and release. Control and relief.

I begin to look forward to mornings when there will be a new harvest to siphon from my hands. It is another way to be empty. To shed, to carve down, to make disappear. It is such a relief to make myself less, like in making, I strip myself to the foundational bones of me. The iron structure. I try to make the bones of me show and it is an illness but also a becoming. I am making myself visible to the world.

When I try to write about my wounds the stuff in my father's body seeps out. I have always written about the women in my family. But now with these jagged shocks—my father in hospital, my brother in hospital too after breaking his nose and front teeth in an accident—there is liquid and bone on the page and bodies mean differently. I cry on the phone to my

sister, the phone cutting in and out, the reception where she lives in Costa Rica intermittent.

My body is a web with five blood points.

The points are strung across the world.

We shake together when we are touched. When we are strung like this I am scared at the fragility of the thread. I feel each minute tremble as a seismic shake that threatens my knees and makes the ground feel close.

I think sometimes that I am missing something other people have. Some vital piece of armour required to be in this world. Sometimes I think that, in loving me so much, in letting me love this much, my parents opened holes in me and these breaches with tender edges will be my vulnerability for as long as I live.

I have been afraid for a long time that this might be a catastrophic weakness. Afraid of the blame I might lay for it at my parents' feet: that they have loved me too well.

Soon we'll all be back in the nest, I text Dad. My sister and brother and I are all planning to return home to Australia for Christmas. Minus a few teeth and fingers, I joke, looking down at the scabs and scars on my hands. The papery skin.

•••

Sometimes writing is a wound for me. I never thought it would be. Writing was meant to be a way to knit edges together—not the words that end up on the page, but the actual act of writing itself. And yet I have found that writing is a bladed love, something that lifts into me and raises my edges. With exquisiteness, it shows me things I do not want to know that might be real.

•••

I leave my cabin in the Californian woods, leave my goats and my hens and the gentle tap of branches on my roof at night, and head to San Francisco. Fires have been raging all summer and the city is heavy with smoke. As my father recovers from pneumonia, I find myself coughing.

I keep tracing the lung-tree. Circling around these spongy alveoli. I start reading online, looking at pictures of lungs, trying to understand what his sickness means.

I know that pneumonia is a flooding of the lungs. Water rising. Or age? For just over sixty, apparently he is in good shape.

Perhaps what rose and threatened to choke him is whatever happens when you leave your home and something in your bones dissolves. As I

left for California, he left his life in the desert, came back to our family home in the bush, and didn't know if he had two homes or none at all.

I think this is what happened to my father. His homes rose like a tide and he stopped being able to breathe.

What I also know is that pneumonia means trauma. It means that something wells up and over a family's head, it means that when you get a text message saying your father is in hospital after driving seventeen delirious hours home, you try and slow down time to understand but you also do not want to understand. Not at all.

You are afraid that this event is the first crack. You are afraid of the splinters that will shoot out from this rupture.

Rupture and rapture being so close to each other could just be a linguistic coincidence, a strange etymological chance that humans persist in reading as symbol. But also, because I am human, I cannot help but see the astonishing cruelty in the gulch between these words. I know which side of the canyon I want to be on, which side most of us want to be on. But the death drive is the cloud belly of every breath I exhale—I lean in toward rupture as much as I long to dwell in rapture. Not wanting to be alive is not, to me, the same thing as wanting to die. Sometimes people speak about self-sabotage or suicidal ideation or melancholia, but as soon as I heard it described as the death drive, I understood that this is just another part of what it means to be alive. The longing for not being alive; the other side of the mirror.

I can't remember what it was that first made me understand this. There was a moment, so fleeting I can't recall when. But I remember thinking, in a way that felt like being trampled by something like a bull, that this is what philosophers meant when they wrote that we know the light only through the presence of the dark.

For such a long time I have fought this. Resisted with fear or perhaps anger—some things I do not want to look too closely at. I have thought: but why can we not just *know* what light and pleasure is, without needing to go through the process of knowing? What if we were just *gifted* this knowing by whatever entity it was that we came from?

These weeping hands would hold you, Dad. I would like to say, Dad, let me love you. I become convinced that saying these words to him will alleviate this dreadful weight I have come to carry.

•••

In San Francisco, in the pauses between writing, I run my fingernails repeatedly across my palms. The itch is still there. After weeks and weeks it is still there. Every morning, immediately after I wake, the scrutiny in the early sun: hawk eyes searching for traces, my claw hungering to rip open and dispel this thing from my body.

I am flying back to Australia soon. Today my hands are tight and sore and for the first time it does not feel good when I prick them with the pin. There is the pop and there is pain but nothing really comes out. What I tried to release is hot and angry.

This marks the beginning of what the psychotherapist I will soon begin to see calls the perfect storm; that is to say, my coping mechanisms have begun to fail. When rules wrap themselves to a point where they can draw no tighter, they are no longer the protection but the harm itself. Then, implosion.

•••

His body is healed, his chest is strong. I am wrapped in a doona, sobbing, terrified at what is happening in my mind. He bundles me to him and we sit in the dark of the porch, the faint trace of frangipani hanging in the night air.

•••

A week in and out of the emergency department, then weeks of care—I am showered, kept company at night, taken to appointments, cared for by a roster of friends tracking medication and support. Months happen—blind, tender, terrifying—and I learn what it is to live after a collapse of self, and my father gives me one of the greatest gifts of my life.

He sits with me in my therapist's room and I tell him I need him to let me love him. I say, I need you to take my love so I stop throwing myself into the swirling place between us. I explain to him how I have been standing on the edge of me and taking myself in handfuls, throwing them into the black suck, yelling: fix me.

I say, I don't want you to be so nice to me all the time. The words are ridiculous, those of a child. But: the relief at them. What I am really saying: I need permission to not be the perfect daughter I am flagellating myself into being. If you are not perfect, then I can be imperfect too.

There is a great pause in the room and in the silence something emerges. A question I have never thought to ask before. Who asked me to be a perfect daughter in the first place?

I sit in the quiet, reverberating, astonished.

I cry as we speak, but he doesn't. I am grateful for this. He watches me unflinchingly, his depthless love and empathy steady and true in eyes that are precisely the same blue as mine, and I let go of a twenty-year-old debt no one asked me to carry.

•••

Lately I've been thinking about when it is that a child's small body learns the concept of her own weight. There was a time in my life when I ran and climbed and bounced and reached fearlessly. When I smacked into the ground it was a shock, but I never remembered the shock until I felt it the next time I fell. I don't know when I learned to recognise gravity, or balance, or mass. I have no way of knowing when, or why, I took on love as a burden, a debt.

There is an idea I had a while ago that has been rattling around inside, with bells and something that feels very bright: perhaps I don't need to *do* anything about the love that someone has for me. Don't need to justify it or pay it back or be grateful for it.

Even now I can feel a laugh of surprise at the back of my throat.

It is exhilarating, turns the world on its axis, a thought like this.

Do other people know this, that maybe you can just be soaked in love for no reason other than existing?

A few weeks after our therapist session Dad and I are at my house finishing a cup of tea and I look at him. I notice that, for the first time in a long time, there is no longer a gaping airless space between us. The knowing has crept into me without my noticing—quietly, wondrously, groundwater up through moss. It was not him but me who needed to absolve this terrible need, this debt. I creaked toward this delicate logic: I simply needed to accept that my father loved me without condition. I didn't have to work to justify his love, which meant there was nothing I needed to pay back. Love not as duty or obligation. It felt strange and new in my mouth.

He brings me a tomato plant and a small bucket with rich humus and worms from his compost. He's poked holes in the covering across the bucket, says he wanted to make sure the worms could breathe. I empty the new soil in my garden and he watches on, showing me how to pinch off the tomato suckers, the small leaf growth, so that the plant can concentrate on nothing but its surge upward. Afterwards, my hands are covered with wet dirt, fingernails filled with it, and I don't wash them. I like my hands like this. They get dry easily now, the skin healed but still papery, a strange kind of scarring where the blisters used to be.

The blisters come back occasionally and briefly when I'm stressed and rundown, and sometimes for no reason at all. On the mornings when I wake and feel my fingers are stiff, and know what I will see before I look at them, I no longer feel that desperate need to scourge my skin. A doctor told me after California that bursting the blisters had caused my hands to become infected; that although I thought it was helping the itching and bringing me relief, it wouldn't have been, really. I didn't contradict her, but she was wrong. For me, relief is a complex thing, and I imagine it will take years to untangle the ways it constricts me.

I see so much of myself in my dad. In trying to protect his tenderness, I think I try to protect my own. I am living now in a new season of being my father's daughter, a gentler season: he feels love deeply, feels everything expansively, but is not soft or weak or vulnerable to hurt. And it is not my responsibility to make him okay. I have never managed to believe this before, and knowing it now is nothing but peaceful. Whatever is at the core of him is the same stuff found at the centre of the earth; immensely strong, adaptable, finite. There are crooked little tics too, small irritabilities, little instances of disagreements which I welcome with a private smile, relishing the bursts of recognition that I am allowed to be different to him; that he might not always be right. I haven't thought of his lungs in a long time. He gets a cough intermittently, and tells me, without my asking, that he had a cold a while ago so this is just left over from that. I'm not sure, though, that I'll ever stop listening to the timbre of his chest. I'm not sure if my hands will ever heal. But I'm trying not to stumble blindly in the dark feeling for the outlines of what I fear the future might hold. And I don't think about grief-trees as much now. Not in the way I used to.

The White Tower
White butterflies, Sam
Diane Fahey

Diane Fahey is the author of fifteen poetry collections, most recently *Glass Flowers* (Puncher & Wattman, 2021) and *The Light Café* (Liquid Amber Press, 2023). She has received various awards and fellowships for her poetry, including the ACT Government's Judith Wright Prize, and has been nominated for six other major book awards.

A multidirectional freedom
as they roam a clifftop
abounding with choices—
noon-flower and flax lily,
purslane in the dewed grass.

Sometimes, a poised pause to drink.
Then, one from thousands
of doubles may flutter down
to vie for that particular sip,
or press a further interest—

part of the drama of
solitude and propinquity
played out instant by instant:
this whole salt-touched arena
evanescently cloaked by

a fly flightiness
as they veer and finesse—
virtuosos of the middle way
between going somewhere
and going nowhere.

Were their progeny to thrive
unchecked, such butterflies
could, one researcher claims,
cover this continent's surface
then generate a tower

rising though space
faster than the speed of light—
a flickering tower
of soon-to-die but always
amply replaced, cabbage whites.

Here, now, flirtations
that climb the sky may yet
fail—one lost, the other
left alone, shining star-like
then in slow fall.

Object Lesson: The Table

Jill Jones

Jill Jones lives on unceded Kaurna land. Her latest book is *Acrobat Music: New and Selected Poems* (Puncher & Wattman, 2022). Her work is widely published in Australia, Canada, Ireland, NZ, Singapore, Sweden, UK and USA. She currently writes and teaches freelance, and previously worked as an academic, arts administrator, journalist and book editor.

The table is interested in what
you don't notice
Here you sit
It's conversation or tears
Or what conversation makes of tears
Memories sorting themselves
amongst food

Four legs to stand and breathe
Are the kids underneath?
All the wood built to hold
something daily
Some only pretend to be wood
or stand in their metal

A table someone had to set
Whose hands would set a table?
Maids, servants, slaves
wives as well
covered by the cooked
crumbly, caked, tea time, so nice
for those that have it

Someone bent back over it
having sex with someone else
Do they want to? Sometimes yes
Only sometimes

All us objects together
sitting, falling
cups, knives, buttocks, cloth, oil

Nothing's really that flat
Not even documents you sign
or scribble here, a list, a poem
Who hides beneath that?

Masks and chains
gather round the table
It's interested in who can speak
or not

Flakes of skin
flakes of bread

The Story of the Olivewood Bed Alan Fyfe

Alan Fyfe is studying to be a better human. He writes books and has few serious regrets.

I bought a bed from a store in an acacia grove called *Eros, Agape, & associates* and visible only to those whose skin knows other skin.

I bought a bed near the coast, stripped past the varnish by salt borne on night storms that battered the windows of a shared room.

I bought a bed in good faith from the greatest con-artist in history, whose gorgeous, sibilant murmurings emptied me of all I had to give.

I bought this bed to fool myself and one other into believing snores were calm music, so fond fictions took on concrete substance.

This bed's comforts are all fibre—a spiderweb canopy catching beams from a touch lamp, ancient moss mattress and hempen coverlets.

Enough netting surrounds the bed to catch errant soundwaves from skipping records and strangle break-up tunes into bright destinies.

I bought a bed with a frame of wild olive wood, living boughs to rustle over our sleeping bodies, advertised as the bed Odysseus came home to.

Witold's Realm of Form Emma-Grace Clarke

Emma-Grace is a writer and bookseller based in Naarm. She lives a quiet life with her dear housemates. She won the Grace Marion Wilson Competition in the nonfiction category in 2022. You can read her work in *Writers Victoria Magazine*, *Fiddler's Green*, *Aurealis Magazine* and other publications.

December 12

The ute carked it on the drive in to hut 4.12. I called the rangers at the Bowali Office, and they're sending help (why they insist on mumbling over the phone is beyond me). We're on the cusp of the wet season and most of my drive here was punctuated by the bloated animal corpses scattered along the Arnhem Highway. I think the rain muddles them. There was a young kangaroo with its abdominal cavity burst across the dark bitumen. It was right in the middle of the road, and I watched some dark-haired-side-part-in-a-rush-can't-stop woman run over it, smearing innards into abstraction. I pulled over and used my beat-up shovel to roll it into a grassy ditch. You're meant to pick them up from both ends because if they're over-ripe and you're not careful they'll fall apart like brisket.

The car only lasted an hour after the clean-up, and I had to walk thirty minutes to get here from the broken-down truck. I ended up doing three trips to the truck for my supplies. Disaster!

I am not writing this notebook altogether seriously. I feel that everything around me is very different and difficult, that there are solutions to my issues that I can't see and remain ignorant to. I don't know. So, my volunteering over Christmas will have to do, some meditation in solitude and silence. No medication. I refuse! What could be better than the bush? Personally, I could ditch and elude more effectively by switching off my brain completely but that's far off.

December 12 cont.

Started reading *Middlemarch*. God poor Doreathea! Dusted the hell out of the place, it's a pigsty, whoever was the ranger here before did a terrible job of keeping it clean.

December 13

Bored as shit. Me—one hour. Me and birds—two hours. Me and dirt—three hours. So on.

December 14

Went out to measure rising water levels—higher than last year. Even out here in the bush, I can see the iridescent slick of oil on the river water. I watched kingfishers dip in to drink and hunt without being able to warn them.

Today, the twisted metal limbs of a crashed-out Honda Jazz floated past. Hanging from the rear-vision mirror was a bronze buddha, who blinked sleepily every time the car bobbed. Its eyes were dark jade. I plucked it out of the car along its slow journey for Sylvie to place upon her desk of trinkets.

I am thinking about Sylvie and Julie a lot, hope that they are getting on okay without me. The mental space left untouched by Sylvie and Julie is consumed by thoughts of my mother, sitting at the pokies, aglow in the early morning, unaware of the world. I am now thinking about driving on a highway, one in 100,000 glinting vehicles, all moving together along strips of night. I am very tired.

December 15

Telecommunications and electrics down due to storm. Got the generator on. Beans for dinner.

December 16

The water is choked with yellow Styrofoam that gathers at the bloated river's edge. Strange things are coming along the churning water way, tires, pastel faux-flowers and what seemed to be a half-chewed pram. I hope the flowers are from a wedding. I guess I also hope they weren't for a wedding, maybe they were thrown away—heartbreak! Drama!

Standing at the edge, I plucked from the water a serpentine belt for an industrial fan, its black rubber worn through in places. I wrapped it around my arm, as a Roman would wear an armband. Maybe it was connected to the Honda from a couple of days ago. Perhaps, when the car settles further downstream, it can excise the rest of its fuel canister into the water, before being overwhelmed by crawling vines, or, if it remains submerged, it can become the home to fish, providing shade and shelter.

1550 hours: I have something awful to relate. A body has come down the river and I think it's been in the water a week at least. I dragged it up the bank and now it's sitting by my rotted front door. I can tell its sex (male)

and maybe its age (early twenties or teens). The hair is very dark and long, filled with stubborn debris which includes a crumpled Twisties packet which I removed (there were no Twisties inside the bag). I feel terrible. I cannot contact anyone. I can see his shoulder through the screen door even now as I sit at the desk and write.

December 17

Mother came to me in my dreams. She was selling bruised fruit (passion-fruit, royale gala apples and plums) at a colourful stand and the sky was grey and she fainted into my arms when I came near. How strange.

I feel uneasy this morning as if an eel has slid into my stomach to lay eggs. So, I have named this corpse Witold, to ease my eel-y nerves. In the night he must have fallen, as he now lays slumped across the threshold on his side, staring out at the passing water.

I drink the cheap bottle of gin I brought along and Dorothea invades today as Witold blocks my way to the outside. Neither are of help. Dorothea reminds me of myself too much—her illness and mine being that we are at odds with desire and will never find true satisfaction in any cranny—

December 18

Sick. I cannot read yesterday's entry. But I will leave it, as a recording of truth. Ugh. Blegh.

December 19

I have rested for the morning. I am passionately reading my book, I love Ladislav, Middlemarch's outcast—he has been sent away to unknown shores. There's a detail about him, that when he visits houses to talk he lays upon the carpet, speaking to the ceiling about philosophy and politics, sometimes art. I struggle with the arts, but I can't deny that I find him completely attractive due to this passion.

1600 hours: I have brought Witold inside. I cannot continue to leave him in the rain.

December 20

The birds have begun to howl in the night. It leaves me anxious. Witold sits in the corner and I catch myself looking at him. I am freezing in here. Ha! It's a fridge. Good for bodies.

December 21

I do not think they are coming. I have been melancholic all day. What a drag. It is a bad sign; evil is about us. I hear the water rush without end, nothing ends, and everything is noisy like a preacher—Baptist of course.

Witold has become swiftly indispensable. I feel a pinch of regret for this man—I have whittled him into the precise tool of my musings from the broad brushstrokes of personhood. But I don't think I am to blame entirely.

The outside is becoming its own ramshackle village of decaying debris, constructed by the tireless river, that creates lean-to grottos of plastic against the tree trunks. It is its own story of the people further upstream, but that tale is not mine to tell—only to discern. What a horror!

December 22

I visited my mother in the hospice of the Royal Darwin before I came here. It was not a swish place. Honestly, I thought she should have been at home, except her jaw was swollen, and chewing caused her such pain that they fed her with a tube. She was completely immobile except for her eyes, which zipped about the room, lingered on the IV drip and what I hoped she perceived to be my face. Witold at this moment looks far better than she did and one of his eyes has nearly fallen from its socket, holding on by the thin whims of the optic nerve. She whispered things, but even when I leant in close I could not hear her. She has been dying for many months. But the doctors say she will go on dying a while longer.

I had left her, as all animals do when one of their pack is set to expire. What a demon!

December 23

There are whispers coming from the bush. Witold watches, his head craned right round to the trees. His arms look like their branches—grey and gnarled.

Nothing else happens. The water pulsates.

December 24

Eternally the same thing. I went outside and measured the rise of the water. I will return the data and it will bear a terrifyingly boring result—the world is ending in minute, tessellating ways. I checked the recording units and cleared the microphones of dirt. A gaggle of cockatoos watched me, their black beady eyes frightened me, and they screamed.

My afternoon has been spiked with violation. Nothing is happening. I have given up hope. I have enough food to last a while. I will take stock

and ration—it feels vaguely exciting. I wonder if those boys stuck in caves across the world thought, at some point during their ordeals, 'some Hollywood director is going to make a movie about me'. I hope my director is not James Cameron.

December 25

I know the day occurred and that is all I will say on the matter.

December 26

It has crossed my mind that he was a person before corpse-hood. That he had a life—in a way, he has one now. Past lives are distant and mythical. I suggest that people who are cremated have maybe the least fulfilling bodily life—but then again, they float through the air...do they? Or does the ash just settle and get buried? The whole body (and I'm talking about bodies without formaldehyde), gets chucked into the ground or, in this case, the river, and is given an inner and outer life by its surrounds. The interior is an orchestra of gas when all the inner bites (organs, muscles, blood vessels etcetera), break down and bugs join the party. In the outer realm, you're metamorphosing into a skeleton, a slow revelation, and if you are lucky (like Witold) you can visit places, engage with creatures as an object, food source, ghostly *thing* and so on. My head feels like it could bust from the potential legends of Witold, both from his past and from his future, beyond our meeting. I checked him over today, found wounds—he had sustained injuries to the back of his head and gashes along his lower legs.

Silence must bang around in his body. The eerie quiet of his distant realm that mutely intensifies itself—the still play of his body that occurs after death. Would it be best to pull him back outside and let the water do its silent work?

Finally I couldn't stand it any longer; I took myself away from him—his secrets tormented me.

Today, I spent thirty minutes poking at my teeth, another thirty digging in the mud before getting my wellies and going to the recording units again, checking them for faults. One had been completely ripped from the gum it was attached to and now it sits beside me as I write, next to the rubber serpentine belt. Good lord I want some vermouth, something exotic in my mouth.

The rain has quelled.

December 27

It feels as if time is meeting me in only the pauses of my day. I am going mad, there is no doubt about it. I have pulled Witold outside again and he left a brown calligraphic streak behind him. I took a cloth to it with some vinegar left from another ranger, but it has done little for the stench.

I walked the thirty minutes to the truck that has been partially swallowed by the rising water. I sat in it for most of the morning and imagined driving away, laying my hands upon the steering wheel until my legs started to ache after being submerged in the cold for hours. In the evening, I measured the water levels (again ugh!) and watch the midges tap against the surface (*Nutcracker* style) before buzzing away.

Do not believe them, when people talk about the beauty of the bush. It is a lie they have made up!

December 28

There are bright green shoots around the hut, Mitchell Grass at a guess, but my botany is a bit crap. They peek out of the mud like the heads of fish (think stargazey pie from Cornwall), gasping for food from above. The water is only a few metres away from the door. But today I am feeling calmer without Witold in the house. There is chilly guilt, of course, as the morning brought a discovery; something took bites out of him in the night (from his left arm and lower torso, which is a shame because it looks like he had a nice tattoo, navy-like, with the sexy lady in the striped bikini, now she's only a head—no tits). To hide the new wound I wrapped his arm in the rubber belt I found in the water. He must be a tremendous bouquet for the local scavengers.

December 29

I have heard from the rangers after testing the comms—they're sending someone.

The issue is this: I do not know whether to tell anyone about Witold. If he ended up here, maybe that is because he wanted to. I know it is not a social thing to think but I do not believe that thoughts should be social—they are easily slapped back in the public sphere, but when you are alone their potential blossoms. I could bury him or toss him back in the river. He can be someone else's problem.

December 30

I was retrieved and so was Witold. Our separation is surprisingly painful. He rode in the tray of the truck for most of the drive. I did not see the road,

just imagined him rolling about in the world of death, which is gibberish to me...and ferment.

December 31

I am cold today. All day it's been the same. I sit in my mother's apartment with all her sheddings: photos, her worn ID tag for WorkPac where her face is stretched like a funhouse mirror, tissues (used and unused mixed together, the grub), a greasy remote control (and so on and so forth like the rest of us).

A man threw himself from the top of this building about a year ago—he worked at a bar down the road and his manager tried to talk him down. He just walked out mid-shift apparently. It surprised me, the way she had spoken about it. She'd essentially hissed. We came across the manager at the park only once, and my mother asked to leave. There's something to that, but I never thought to ask.

When I looked down to the pavement, I saw in an open gutter just beneath the window a green tree frog in a nest of dead leaves. She blinked contentedly in the light rain that pattered against her skin and when a drop of water went near her eyes she closed them as if sleeping. She blocked most of water that rushed through the pipe, her fleshy body became a useless weir, and water splashed down onto the pavement below. I opened the window to reach out and touch her, but to my frustration my fingers were not long enough, and her golden irises disappeared behind the expansion of her pupils as she slowly looked towards me. When our eyes met, she froze, no longer moving with what I assumed to be pleasure in the water. Her toes fanned out, getting a greater grip upon the slick metal. I didn't want her to run. I felt that, if she were to leave, I would cry. I took myself away, closing the window in hopes that a membrane between us would be enough to calm her. But I was not brave enough to check that she had remained in the pipe.

Tomorrow I am to be questioned about Witold, which I am nervous for, but any possible involvement in his death would be explained away by his decay. I think about him all the time—nearly more than my mother. Witold feels like a light but constant print upon the soft sand of my consciousness. Out the window I can see the unravelling bushland, the tendrils of which become gardens and hedge rows and the embarrassing little gnomes that dot the garden of number nine down the road.

January 1

I am horrified. It is as if the sludge of my thought has fallen from my ears. The hiccups of my recent days, the accumulation of thought have all come

to very little. The police came and they were disengaged and alien in my mother's apartment. There was no missing person report for Witold as no one was looking for him. Bringing him back was a mistake. The police were as good as statues and these statues I had to feed tea and biscuits for unknown reasons. One of the two asked for a Diet Coke, which felt like an extreme imposition. They asked me a bit about my work, and they were glazed in the kiln of environmental indifference, I suppose, as they did not listen. They left shortly after, without taking my phone number, though one gave me his own with what I assume he thought was a sly or flirtatious wink.

How is it that he is explained away so easily? That without record his death has become so miniscule? I miss Julie now, so desperately. I called her after the police left, hearing her voicemail: *Hi this is Julie, you've called me. Congrats. I'll get back to you, hopefully. Text is better though. Bye.*

I called again straight away, the dial tone clicked over to quiet breathing on the other end, and I slowly took the phone away from my ear, placing it upon the coffee table among the tissues and wrinkled magazines. She was there, I could feel her and the wretched distance between us, the expanse of time, our meeting and parting that became flooded by affection or yearning. I wanted her to say something but when I went to think of words they became straggling pieces of ashy solace—anything that could be said would be impotent in the face of our previous meeting. I hung up, slowly reaching out to the screen, hoping that she would say something to prove that the bloated stagnation of our silences was not my imagination. I sat there a long while after as the phone screen went dark.

When we were together, it was as if her emotion was orbital and mine circumstantial, sublimated by her desire that curled across our little universe. I think she resented that I became so little and then I came to as well, eventually, and blamed her utterly. I lost her and little Sylvie, all that was dear, for no good reason. All of it was just coming to dislike each other, all romance ebbed away returning to seed, where I secreted my desire that love would bloom again.

January 2

I visited my mother this morning, her bedsores had become infected, and the nurses turned her, exposing her pink and yellow flesh. I was frightened of her. Her breathing was strange, she was less than I remembered her, reduced to minor functions of the body. It was sad to see, too hard to watch.

I remember her as her function, my mother. When I came home from school she was always in the garden and she would bound over the hedge

to hug me, her thin hair whirling, her breasts swinging like bells, and she would hold me tightly because she was strong.

I am mostly angry that this is happening to her, of all people. At the bus stop on Mitchell Street I got close to an old lady who had a rat-like dog in a pram, and I nearly knocked her lights out. Right there, in public. Fuck old ladies—the healthy ones especially.

January 3

I am at the riverside. The brown water surges past, fat with rain and white-capped fury.

God and piss!

What is to be said, between a daughter and mother? Stay silent with the dead. That is best.

January 4

She tried talking today, when it was very early, and the light was very weak. I leaned against her chest, her lungs plunked with liquid and stuttered painfully. Her voice came out, as oil comes from a dying engine, and dripping into my ear were confused questions: *Possum? Sweet-thing, where is Ian, my husband...? Mum? Can you hear me? Eh eh shh shh.*

Before she fell out of lucidity, her pupils dilated, our eyes met and I reached out to her hand which she pulled away, sliding it painfully up to her shoulder, grasping it with the other as if she had been burnt.

la niña diptych
Miriam Jones

Miriam Jones plays and works at many things including early childhood teaching, writing and being a parent. They live on Wangal land and their essays and poetry have been published in *Overland*, *The Suburban Review*, *Cordite* and the *Sydney Review of Books*.

1.
brown water relaxed
 from canal to splintered fence
nudging open blades of grass
 and fig roots

brown water doesn't smell clean but smells living I
 take off my shoes and press
into the earthbed

barefoot and sky hotblue
 my belly shouts hello mud sets around my toes
I bounce down the concrete

boy as kids were we proud of our dirt
rainnoise like a cape
 and back drenched I look behind
at grey choirs of confident opinion

between the hotblue and unabashed grey
 of course a rainbow

at the wetland next to the stilts' nests
 he is wrung out by sky and
sweating from his run I am soaked and huge and
 exuberant with the frisson of raincircled
and silky water the straight line
 where they meet

2.
all the long months from december to april the rain pulled us to the
earth and settled into armfuls of waiting / the baby like rain in the
gutters / our skin leafdamp / in the park was no one / just / deep
greengreen and birds rising on the brown milk / frogs bulging the sodden
reeds / rosemary above the highway and in my fingerprints

in march the air thinned enough for me to slip through / into the paper
season when we watched and waited as she floated / laughing / over the
waves / then / hovered lighter each morning above the wooden floor

when we speak of the baby I blink into the inky / slit / the night sky belly
of the world's top layer

on the phone my dad says we are all very excited / I say it will be very
exciting / and / I flit into the other place where excitement is a strange
and hardened monument / conducting the empty air

Surface Tension

Ellie Fisher

Ellie Fisher is a writer. Her creative work has appeared in *Swim Meet Lit Mag*, *Devotion Zine*, *Pulch Mag* and *Westerly Magazine*, amongst others. Ellie is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at The University of Western Australia. She splits her time between Kinjarling and Boorloo.

I move through the water of the local swimming pool, a tangle of blue guts and cool skin. Gravity's weight is relinquished here: its power is given up.

I read a novel in which a woman turns to swimming as an escape from her body. Yet there is no exit. The pain catching at her skin does not abate, even as the character leaves the changerooms.

I allow myself to cry in the shower about someone I never dated. This is a luxurious act, made all the more so in its disclosure. Telling someone about this dictates a transferral of power.

• • •

In *Les Plages d'Agnès*, Agnès Varda weaves together fragments of memory. The beaches of the auteur's life form the locus of the work: a tightly-circling meditation. In the film, Varda's face is often creased with melancholy. Varda tells me that she thinks that 'if we opened people up, we'd find landscapes. If we opened me up, we'd find beaches.' She turns away, her small figure moving along the shoreline, retreating from the camera.

If I were to be opened up, there would be bodies of water within me—rivers, bays, seas. When I am not near the coast, I feel myself drown in air.

• • •

The windows of the aquatic centre are large. The ceilings are high, reflective of the sound of the swimmers below. The water is body temperature, glassy with chlorine.

When I'm tired, I walk to the changerooms. I never undress in the communal space—I lock myself in one of the toilet cubicles, drag the limpid cloth from my body. I am always looking for ways to be alone. Or perhaps I am looking for shelter. My body takes on a different shape when I feel another's gaze upon me. I find myself standing outside of myself.

Swimming is like being undone. The body is opened. We are made of water.

I think about a metaphor I read regarding Lacan's work. I am walking towards the exit, the soft dampness of my hair trailing down my back. Outside, it is warm. I look both ways before walking across the carpark. The writer describes Lacan's theory of the gaze as a cat's cradle. They tell me that the strings which cross—controlled by the hands which move them—create a space; an in-betweenness. My skin is still damp. The incoming breeze catches at it. I wonder how many times I have noticed the tangle of the cat's cradle without realising it—or how many times I have been caught up in the production of it in another's gaze. My body feels heavy out of the light buoyancy of the water's touch.

• • •

Opening up a body is no simple task. Sometimes I feel as if the weight of bearing a body is too much. Edges bleed, the sharp acidity of viscera rises in the throat. Embodiment carries with it a desire for something more.

I often look at others with more tenderness than I enact upon myself. Skin splits, innards glisten. Love opens one out, turns the flesh to the knife. To live is to love; to love is to be softened. What is bitter in the self, is edible in another—at least for a brief time, before the rot sets in.

Hunger is a kind of yearning. It opens an abstraction; a longing for the unattainable. The body is burned by it. Hunger is a desire which revolves: a dark fruit which holds to its branch.

• • •

In *Les Plages d'Agnès*, mirrors are installed by the film crew along the broad lip of Daguerre Beach. Varda's eyes are keen, the wind catching at her clothes. 'I think I'm doing the scarf thing on purpose,' she remarks to the camera. She pulls the wine-coloured piece of cloth over the cast of her face. 'I'm hoping it will blow over, and you'll film me like this. That's how I want the portrait,' Varda says, playfully. 'Film me in spotty old mirrors

between us. Loss and lust breach barriers. Emotion is profligate when mirrored; a singular grief floods to a greater one when reflected.

I agree with Butler—we *are* undone by each other, in ways which we can never measure, or count empirically. Yet I feel a sense of difficulty in this entanglement. I am tired of being altered. I want to be able to dictate the *when*, the *how*, the *who* of the idea. I do not want to give my power up—I want a measure of control. I am tired of being altered. My body is fatigued with the motion of being undone, and of being remade, and of being undone again. The things I desire are complicated: they often oppose each other. I am aware of my personality, of the way it contradicts itself—the ways it reaches, moves, turns away. I want others to open themselves to me, with no need of return. I am tired of being altered. I am tired of being subject to change. I want everything, and nothing.

I like writing about other people. I am doing it now; moving your focus from the personal to something more abstract. This is why I enjoyed the intensity of the love I had when I was nineteen. Hiding in others offers an escape from the personal; a route to the transcendental. Writing about—and talking about—others obfuscates the need to reveal myself: it is a way to avoid intimacy through the written word; a false reflection of the self.

There is a sense of oblivion to be sought in writing about other people, but also a power. It tempers the loss of self I experience when in love, or when I think I am in love. This agency I acquire stretches the surface of things, like a blister: the skin swells, but does not break.

•••

Desire is composed of the realisation that the body can reach beyond its boundaries.

I read Lacan, who tells me that the *objet petit a*—the object of our desire—is a screen for our own projections. To examine it too closely threatens to mirror that gaze back upon us, with the perception that behind our desire is nothing but our own paucity. That lack continually threatens to destroy the viewer. Yet it also allows the desire to linger.

Maggie Nelson echoes this. She urges me to remember that not all desires are the product of longing: some are simply the fruits of boredom. I have underlined the passage from *Bluets*. The company from whom I bought the book sent me two copies by accident. I keep one clean; the other is

underscored by annotations, marks, lines. I like this duality; this fluidity. I realise that I can have both—the clean and the dirty—and that I do not have to choose.

•••

Swimming is like reading: muscles need to become accustomed to a regularity of movement, a collection of repetitions which gradually gather pace. I have taken to swimming in the early mornings. There are few people at the pool. In the water, my body is freed from gravity's knuckled hunch. Muscles unravel, form loose lines. There is something childlike in returning to buoyancy—skull slicked with water, ears singing in wet echoes.

The tiles are the same colour as the sky when I exit—a flat, pale blue which shuts itself up, returning no gaze.

•••

Desire is something I cannot sink my teeth into. Or rather, it bites back. It is something feral—an indistinct shape with hot breath, and an unwillingness to listen. Desire hinges its needled jaws into the flesh.

•••

In *Les Plages d'Agnès*, Varda talks about her relationship with Jacques Demy. Despite the complex issues of their marriage, Varda is clearly still infatuated with her late husband. She talks, then, surrounded by photographs of dead artists from her milieu—her hands filled with flowers, which she drops before the portraits. 'Naturally I think of Jacques. All the dead lead me back to Jacques,' Varda says, eventually, her eyes wandering from the camera's gaze. 'He is the most cherished of the dead.' A few frames later, Varda regains her enthusiasm as she tells us how she and Demy met—reliving the longing she once felt.

Varda's son, Mathieu, also features in the film. It takes me several scenes before I realise that they bear this relation to one another. He seems anxious around her, or perhaps impatient. It is through the eyes that they look alike—dark and steady, a kind of sadness within them—but his face is that of his father's.

I write in my notebook: I know how Agnes feels about love. I know how it feels to be so attached: so attached that the heart is entangled within the barbed wire of desire and cannot be cut free. I write: is this how women

love? Or is love like swimming—a kind of obsession which leads to an injury, a surface tension which must, inevitably, break?

•••

Writing is a way of reliving: not only a method for preservation, but a path to imprinting memory deeper into the brain. I read a tweet which reads, ‘Terrible theory: how you write is how you love.’ This slices the top half of my skull open.

I send the tweet to a friend. He doesn’t understand; he thinks that how we approach life in general is how we love. For him, writing seems to hold as much significance as more mundane undertakings, like folding washing or returning library books. I disagree. Whilst I understand that ordinary acts are the thread which binds a life together, I know that writing is deeply embedded within me—I know that my inner life is filled with emotional splinters, closing deeply into my skin. Writing is no casual act: it is thick with significance. Writing is a commitment; it will likely be the longest relationship of my life. But my friend has his own complicated bond with love and attachment. ‘I’m trying to date two people at once,’ he tells me. ‘I don’t know how it will work. I’m so tired.’ Often he speaks with the strange simplicity of a child. When he was seventeen, his stepfather painted him. In an interview I skim online, the painter talks about the sitter’s maturity for his age. A decade later, my friend fears turning twenty-seven. He struggles to commit to projects, relationships, life.

I often wonder why I seem to fulfil a maternal vacancy in our friendship. I have never wanted children.

•••

In *Les Plages d’Agnès*, Varda pushes the edges of old family photographs into the sand. ‘Everyone says childhood is a foundation,’ Varda observes. The photographs move with the wind, threatening to loosen from their position. ‘I don’t feel a strong link to my childhood.’ She wavers with emotion then, a tidal force.

I write in my journal: childhood is the moment between an unconsciousness of, and the realisation that, one not only *has* a body, but *is* a body.

I recall childhood summers spent learning to swim in the sea: the silken texture of the water, the fear which edged its way along the back of my lungs. The beaches of my childhood are like different frames from a film.

On one beach, I lose a camera; on another, I find the mangled body of a seabird caught in netting. Its body is thick with decay.

•••

My body is tired, even though I have ceased swimming for the past several weeks. I lie still in the mornings, struggling to wake. The dreams which move across the surface of my brain in the early hours are the ones I remember. In one, I kiss Leonard Cohen’s cheek. There is a sweetness to this fragment which adheres to my skin afterwards.

One morning, I decide to return to the pool. While I swim, I think about what Susan Sontag means when she writes that ‘What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine.’ The movements of the swimmer in the next lane roll through the water, touching my face.

•••

In my notebook, I list every single person whom I’ve ever had a crush on—or as many as I can remember. When I finish, I realise that they are all akin to one another; they bear the same marks, figure the same way. It’s as if I have been collecting shells on a beach, looking for a common pattern. Their faces catch at me. I bite the inner corner of my lip until it hurts, the pattern of my teeth imprinting in my mouth’s soft lining of flesh.

I read an essay by an American writer who has a face like an angel: an oval with eggshell-thin skin, and eyes which are the same brown as old leather. Her writing becomes a well-worn thing to me: moving across digital surfaces, lingering in ether-space. There is something about the way she turns a sentence which makes me feel as if she is holding my hand. The warm solidity of her imagined fingers link with mine; we know that writing is our way of tracing the outlines of things.

•••

Language is of the flesh. Words lodge in the brain, catch between teeth and tongue. Hands can shape language—and lips can hold words back. There is a power in giving names to the outlines of things. Yet language can only do so much. The body knows this; the body remembers.

Muscles hold memory, move in relation to remembered acts. The tension held on the surface breaks—and through it comes the body, feeling its way forward: tenderly, tenderly.

Note

The unnamed novel referenced at the beginning of this essay is Katherine Brabon's *Body Friend* (Ultimo Press, 2023). Agnès Varda's 2008 film, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (in English, *The Beaches of Agnès*), is a significant inspiration for this essay. My understanding of her work was enhanced by Kate Ince's 2013 essay, 'Feminist Phenomenology and the Film World of Agnès Varda'. My approach to Lacan's work is informed by my reading of W.J.T. Mitchell's paper, 'Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture'. My reference to Mary Oliver is drawn from her poem 'Wild Geese'. This essay examines, yet leaves unnamed, a short story by Lorrie Moore drawn from her collection *Like Life* (Vintage, 2002). The story is titled 'Two Boys'. I have been unable to trace the tweet I allude to in 'Surface Tension'; I would like to acknowledge the fragmentary, ephemeral nature of the internet for gifting me with it, even if I cannot cite the original source. I respond to Julia Jacklin's song 'I Was Neon', which appears on her 2022 album, *PRE PLEASURE*, as well as the music video for the work. I also speak, in this essay, to Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender* (Taylor and Francis, 2004), and I touch on Jacques Lacan's observations on the nature of desire and the gaze, drawn from *The Formations of the Unconscious* (Polity, 2017). I also reference the work of Maggie Nelson, drawing from *Bluets* (Wave Books, 2009). The 'American writer with a face like an angel' I refer to is Chloé Williams; I contemplate her Substack essay, 'The Soft Animal and the Fig Tree', published online in May 2023.

The House Kristian Radford

Kristian Radford lives in Melbourne. His poems have previously appeared in a range of publications including *The Suburban Review*, *Antipodes*, *Australian Poetry Journal* and *Australian Poetry Anthology*. He works as a secondary school teacher.

I see it floating, walls transparent
edged in bright white like the bones of a constellation

it's both night and day there, mildly utopian
like the Sunshine Coast in the 90s

it catches the sunlight like gossamer
crystallised desire, sculpted sugar

in the starlight it's beautifully out of reach
obscured by pandanus and lemon myrtle

•••

wherever that house was, it's been replaced by a crater
or maybe now a freshly risen lawn, a few butterflies

life walks away from it
nostalgia is an earthy perfume, sinking into hunger

once every month or so I see it, lying in bed at 2 a.m.
lacuna that memory can't fill
helpless waterlily loose on a dark lake

An Accident
Siobhan Hodge

Siobhan Hodge has a PhD in English Literature. She won the 2017 Kalang Eco-Poetry Award and was shortlisted for the 2019 Fair Australia Prize. Her work has been published in numerous places, including *Overland*, *Westerly*, *Southerly*, *Cordite*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *Peril* and *The Fremantle Press Anthology of WA Poetry*. Her chapbook, *Justice for Romeo* (2018), is available through Cordite Books.

I hold him in the towel like a handful of eggs.
His soft coat is chocolate rosettes, his claws
curved in warning spools. The balding towel
is the most hospitable gesture
of this, our fortnightly routine. My fingers extend
his indignance, fingertip enough to reveal an entire palm.
His claws have curled already, peregrine neat.
I nip and file in ginger swipes. Just a little more.
Fix the edge. He dips and I flinch, dark blood beads on the tip.
Cornflower and water, I paste regret in tender dabs.
There is an art to taking just enough.
I wipe the smear of blood from my hands, return him
to his cage. His eye is midnight pearl, layered with accusation
but forgiveness is the whistle when you leave, a reminder
that more is needed all the same.

sol
Riley Faulds

Riley Faulds is a writer from Walyalup/Fremantle. His poems have been published in various of Australia's best journals and birthday cards, and recently have been Highly Commended in the Bruce Dawe Prize and won the Jon Stallworthy Poetry Prize at Oxford University, where he's currently studying his MSt in World Literatures as a Rhodes Scholar. He misses gum trees.

a spanish sun shines over oxford
obscured of course by antarctic cloud

these antipodes swell with the climate
coats discarded by the upturned feet

of philippine sailors unmasking
thames-side shore leave, verdant

with autumn. you hold a tote inscribed
with runes from some captured alphabet

flooding the north, the wall-lined spice
of a rampant austral impulse

Memento

For Ko Mya Soe
Jake Dennis

Burmese–Australian entertainer (singer/poet/actor) Jake Dennis recently published in *Cuttlefish*, *Crow*, *FourW*, *Into the Wetlands*, *Kokako NZ*, *Mekong Review*, *Right Way Down*, *Seagift*, *Singapore Unbound's Suspect NY* and *Wales Haiku Journal*. JD won 2023's WAPI 'Secret City' Micro-Residency, Red Room Poetry's #30in30 and a Queensland Poetry mentorship.

I chased butterflies across unsealed bark-brown roads
outside Yangon around the bougainvillea-blessed huts
of obliging bare-foot cousins. Aged six, excited by candy

wrappers ballooning as they sank in the black
thick goop of open sewerage, I stashed low-floating, resting
fluttering saffron, durian-flesh, and coconut-coloured

flittering wings into discarded plastic. Amid the shadow-heavy
ohn no khao swe-fragrant corners of a relative's
humid home, in the unfamiliar language of my foreign

extended family, my Buddhist aunty warned me
and my Catholic parents to free the vivid bouquet
of reincarnated souls. 'But I want to take them

home!' I begged their love: 'Daddy, *please!*
promising never to ask for anything else; persistent
and creative as local child beggars, suggested schemes:

'But, Mummy—' 'Australian Customs won't allow you it,
Son.' Into dizzying sunlight, above brief dust-waves lifted
by dust-greying passing Buicks, I released my fleeting

Burmese friends. They circled upward, swirling
returning hand-ward, inhaling fumes, delighting
the way children do, forgiving their hunter,

tempting me again. Gently as flour, one delicate
white tiger, like a note to the road,
fell, graced the dirt. We were driven

in the roller-coaster, earth-courting carriage
of our now-buried Uncle's pick-up, back
to our fan-conditioned hotel in the then renamed, today

Junta-discarded, capital. Do I recollect or invent
the white noise of his radio's Anglo-Burmese rock? Perhaps
I winked at my older sneaker-crazy cousin (whose wife's now

pregnant), revealing the stolen offering, its brittle corpse
a souvenir I rarely revisit, raise up now
toward you, back then kept hidden for me

alone in my suburban bedroom in Boorloo
though I would show it off to favoured visitors
like kyats pocketed from their dust.

A Dream of Salamanders Nathan Erwin

Nathan Erwin is a land-based poet raised on the Allegheny Plateau, the northernmost tier of Appalachia. A community and institutional organiser, Erwin currently operates at the Pocasset Pokanoket Land Trust building healthy futures for Indigenous farmers and organising around the 2023 Farm Bill and tribal land repatriation. His writing has recently appeared in *The Journal*, *North American Review*, *FOLIO*, *Bombay Gin*, *Poet Lore* and *Ninth Letter*. His organising and his poetry are conversant, and so he writes about foodways, myths, medicine and wanting.

The two of us, mother & son, our hands
empty, eating each spare word
by the vernal pools at dusk.
We eat
a rabbit's shadow
suddenly in place by my boot.
A cloud wanders by hooting
at emptiness. We sit for days
on the earth & on the seventh,
thousands of salamanders are born wet, pouring
out of the fire.

Stroking our heads,
we leave the woods behind, covered in trees,
out of the gloom with sacks full of hellbenders, newts,
mudpuppies, & redbacks,
wriggling along the first arc of land, chattering
 about bread & milk, milk, bread
 & breaking.

Bungarra Hop Dac

Hop Dac is a Vietnamese-Australian painter and writer who came to Western Australia as a refugee in 1980. He studied Fine Art at Curtin University in Perth and Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT in Melbourne. He lives and works on Wadawurrung Country with his partner and their two daughters.



On the Track to *Tourmaline*: Randolph Stow's 'dry-souled country' Samuel J. Cox

Dr Samuel J. Cox is a teacher and researcher at the University of Adelaide. He completed his doctoral thesis, *Dust Country: Stories from a Shifting Land*, in 2023. He won ASAL's A. D. Hope Prize in 2022 and jointly won *Australian Literary Studies' PhD Essay Prize* with Evelyn Araluen in 2023. His work has appeared in places such as *Westerly*, *ALS*, *JASAL*, *Mascara Literary Review* and *The Saltbush Review*.

Contrary to the way they are often studied, texts are not purely products of the mind, but of space too. No one can truly imagine new worlds, only reimagine through this one. In its time, Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* (1965) was an experimental novel, containing elements of a post-apocalyptic parable or allegory while straddling the line between poetry and prose. Australian critics of the period, still in the long shadow of Ern Malley, ensured that such experimentation received a hostile reception as they judged the novel through the orthodoxy of social and bush realism, critiquing it as derivatively modernist, opaquely symbolic and unconnected to an Australian reality. In *Westerly* 67.2 I offered a photo essay, 'On the Track to *Tourmaline*', building on the work of John Kinsella and Suzanne Falkiner, to reconnect Stow's novel to the 'territory that not only informs the novel *Tourmaline*, but so much of Stow's middle period poetry' (Kinsella 32). Beyond Geraldton and the north-western edge of the Wheatbelt lies what Dorothy Hewett once referred to as Stow's 'dry-souled country' (63); this essay sets out to expand on the photographic response I have already offered, to account in greater detail for the resonances between *Tourmaline* and the region it emerged from.

Stow's death in 2010 released new materials to the National Library, including photographic slides he had taken of old Murchison mining towns, which he stored in a box labelled 'Tourmaline'. This material first surfaced in Suzanne Falkiner's biography *Mick* and has informed the more recent critical approaches of essays by Phillip Mead and Martin Leer; however, the focus of all these prior works has been diffused. The place of this 'dry-souled country' in Stow's oeuvre appears to justify a more sustained focus. Kinsella as above has noted its importance to his poetry; while in *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, Rick takes Rob and

Mick on a drive inland—recalling Stow's own journey in '61—to the dry reaches of the Murchison (233–7), establishing a stark contrast to the 'nice clean sea' world of the coast (237). Alongside, as Stow's own labelling indicates, *Tourmaline* looms as the definitive encounter. This essay not only publishes Stow's photographic slides for the first time, it argues that their existence in a box labelled 'Tourmaline' establishes a two-way relationship between the fictional world of the novel and the spaces Stow visited, as story is not only inscribed over place, but place is reinscribed into the heart of the novel and, therefore, his body of work. This essay sets out to undertake what could be referred to as locative criticism, with movement through space defining its fundamental structure. This movement follows a journey I took inland from Geraldton in 2021, retracing a trip Stow had undertaken sixty years earlier in 1961 (outlined below).

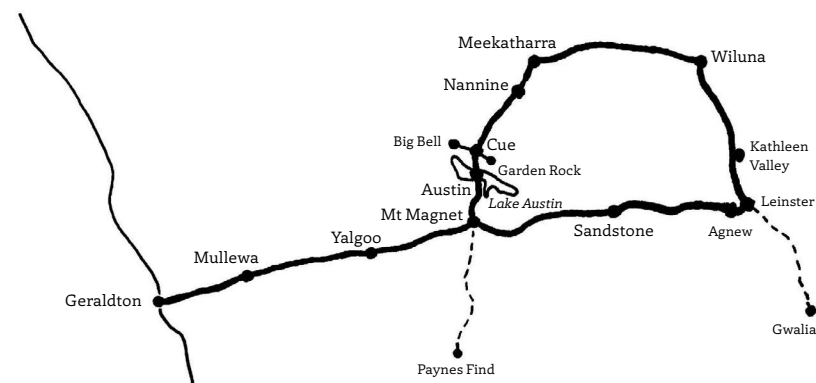


Figure 1. A hand drawn map showing the route of Stow's journey in 1961, by Samuel Cox.

Driving inland from Geraldton, along the Mount Magnet Road, one crests the first set of hills, gains a final view of the town and coastal Wheatbelt spread out below, before the perspective inevitably turns inland. The country noticeably dries, though the Wheatbelt continues on to the town of Mullewa, before petering out some thirty kilometres beyond—well before the next settlement of note in Yalgoo. Due to the drying of the climate, at this point, wheat gives way to mulga and acacia, as spaces expand due to increasing aridity. The impression, accentuated by dryness, is that one might be driving not only through space but through time. The peculiarities of the edge of the Wheatbelt (in this

north-western corner) just beyond Mullewa ensure that this is in some sense true, in geological terms, as it roughly correlates at this point with where the coastal plain ends and the ancient Yilgarn Plateau begins. This rift, more readily observable in the Darling Scarp to the south near Perth, is where the India plate once detached, followed by Antarctica in the south, marking the final break-up of Gondwanaland. The Yilgarn Craton, however, is far older than the supercontinent. On the opening page of *Tourmaline*, Stow writes that there is ‘no stretch of land on earth more ancient than this’ (5) and this is a statement that still rings true some sixty years after the novel’s publication. Together with the Pilbara, the Yilgarn Craton forms the great Western Australian Shield, the ‘structural nuclei’ (Laserson and Brunnschweiler 37) of today’s continent that formed nearly three billion years ago. One Yilgarn site, at Jack Hills, approximately 150 kilometres north-west of the Murchison goldfields town of Cue, has recently yielded both the most ancient terrestrial material and biotic material yet found on Earth—sealed in 4.4-billion-year-old zircons and 4.1-billion-year-old rocks—further extending the known spans of the planet’s continental crust and the first known beginnings of life on this planet. The Yilgarn has not been widely submerged by the ocean since its emergence from the sea nearly three billion years ago, while, unusually for areas of comparable age across the world, it has been consistently exposed to weathering processes for over 250 million years. These factors have ensured that the regolith of the region—earth, rocks and dust—are the most archaic on earth.

Asked in 1961 by the editors of *Westerly* to write on the ‘problem’ of turning the Australian environment into literature, Stow would pen an article, suggestively titled ‘Raw Material’, articulating his thoughts on the relation between the outward environment and text. Suspicious of the idea that a writer could unproblematically write of the external world as ‘raw material’, Stow argues that ‘external forms’ are always filtered through the ‘conscious and unconscious mind’ (‘Raw Material’ 3). Nonetheless, he declares two sensations, above all, the land offers to him: a sense of vastness and, connected to this, a sense of the past (‘Raw Material’ 4). Size, in this sense, Stow writes, has the ability to both constrain and expand the self. He links size to this deep sense of history:

It is a country in which one can be aware of a tremendous range of time. It is very easy to feel even to ‘remember’ – the period when there was no animal life on earth. And on the hottest days, in the most desolate places, it is possible to know, almost kinetically, the endurance of *things* (‘Raw Material’ 4).

Written in the same year he would travel out to the Murchison goldfields with his mother and a friend, taking the series of photographic slides that would later help him to complete the novel, these thoughts are intimately connected to *Tourmaline*’s conception.

If the edge of the Wheatbelt just beyond Mullewa can be seen as a geological crossing point, its position as a climatic crossing point between the wetter coastal and the arid interior has also informed radical differences in human cultures. While the modern Wheatbelt of south-western Western Australia roughly correlates to lands of the Noongar people, its north-western edge includes the lands of the Yamatji people, while just beyond Mullewa and Yalgoo, the lands of the Badimaya people begins. The geographical and climatic differences have also enforced differences in settler-colonial culture: around this point what Tony Hughes-d’Aeth has termed the ‘ideology of wheat’ (22) also dries up. Wheat provided the possibility of stable, if exploitative, close settlement; what lies beyond, in ideological and literary terms, and behind Stow’s ‘dry-souled country’ is not immediately clear. Nicholas Rothwell once placed *Tourmaline* within his loose notion of an Australian shadow literature, connecting the hybrid structures and ‘place-bound’ nature of these texts to their geographical position beyond the green temperate coastal belt that most Australians live within (10–11). The Murchison was once populated by drovers, bushrangers, and prospectors, including it within what Hughes-d’Aeth describes as the ‘romantic nomadology’ that predated the ‘ideology of wheat’ and has been transcribed into the heart of the nation (24, 22). And yet, the dying towns of the Murchison seem to speak to the failure of settler-colonial society and its bush mythos to fully take root on this ancient terrain, revealing an incompatibility, which seemingly demands alternative forms and ideas.

Nonetheless, *Tourmaline* partially owes its conception to what were, by the 1960s, the lingering remnants of these traditions. Hewett, among others, has noted the paradox of Stow as a linguist and writer who emerged out of a non-lingual rural society of ‘tight-lipped’ countrymen (60). Although crude, there had been, however, an oral and lingual tradition present in this society, which harked back to the ballads of the old country. In the year 2000, Randolph Stow wrote an obscure introduction for Rachel Percy’s biography *Dry River*, an account of the life of stockman David ‘Darby’ Mills who worked in the last days of the old stock routes and packsaddle camps inland from Geraldton. Although no more than an acquaintance of Darby, Stow recounts how his memory of their last meeting was ‘peculiarly vivid’ even forty years later, as their encounter was of singular importance to his writing life (‘Last Time’ vi).

Newly of drinking age, a young Randolph had met up with childhood friends, the Green brothers, at the Club Hotel in Geraldton in 1955 or '56, to 'booze the afternoon away' and Darby was of their company ('Last Time' v). Under the inducement of drink, the taciturn Darby revealed a familiarity with Australian bush ballads and songs that cast the already prodigiously talented and knowledgeable Stow into the proverbial 'shade' thanks to the 'breadth and enthusiasm of David's reading' ('Last Time' vi). Subsequently decanted onto his parents' front lawn, Stow recalled:

...at some point between drunkenness and hangover I dreamed a poem of the sort David Mills and I had been talking about. I woke up remembering it, in considerable detail... The first two lines were:

From Leronville to Tourmaline
Through the red wind and the rain... ('Last Time' vi)

While Stow recalls discovering some years later that Leronville was a railway siding near Mount Magnet, 'Tourmaline' seemingly emerged completely out of his unconscious mind, 'to attach itself eventually to a composite of Murchison ghost towns' ('Last Time' vii). Stow's photographic slides are a visual representation of this composite; an idiosyncratic collage that gestures towards the raw material of Stow's 'dry-souled country'.

•••

Continuing the drive along the Mount Magnet Road from Mullewa, the first town of the Murchison goldfields reached is Yalgoo. Among Stow's photographic slides are two images of the town's chapel. This structure undoubtedly forms the model for Tourmaline's church, which is the primary site of the novel's millenarian cult that forms around Michael Random, Stow's mysterious diviner who arrives promising water. Built in 1920, the Dominican Chapel of St Hyacinth is one of the many unusual structures designed by hermit priest and architect Monsignor John Hawes that mark Western Australia's Mid West. A convert to Catholicism, Hawes' eclectic designs, which meld local stone and materials with Romanesque and Californian Spanish Mission styles, are at once both abnormal and yet strangely of place. Although the chapel has since been restored, Stow's images confirm that the church was in a state of disrepair at the time, echoed in his descriptions in the novel of a church of 'tender brown and rose stone' with a 'skeletal bell tower' with 'planks... falling from the wooden bell tower' (*Tourmaline* 7).

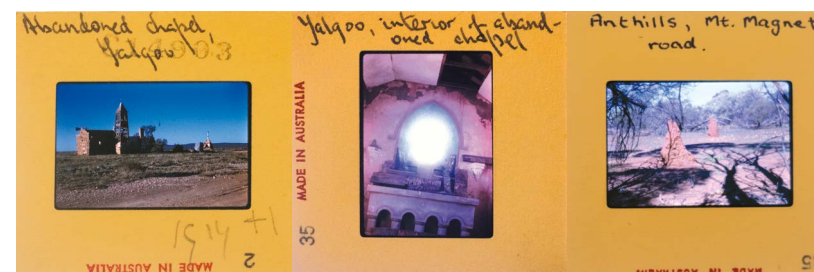


Figure 2. Three of Stow's photographic slides, from left to right: the abandoned chapel at Yalgoo; the interior of the chapel with messages written in chalk by Indigenous worshippers on packing case wood; anthills on Mount Magnet Road. Images Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Papers of Randolph Stow ('Tourmaline—Photographic Slides').

Stow's photographic slides indicate that the messages he records in the novel as being written (although he alters the medium from chalk to charcoal in the novel) on 'packing-case wood' (*Tourmaline* 80) and placed on the altar appear to be direct reproductions of those evident in his image from the interior of Yalgoo's chapel. The most legible of these include 'MARY MOTHER OF GOD' and 'GOD SAVE OUR QUEEN' (see Stow, *Tourmaline* 80). These messages reveal that the chapel endured, not only as a structure but also as a place of worship, still maintained and cared for by local Indigenous people long after the Dominican sisters, for whom it was named, had departed. The maintenance of the chapel by Aboriginal people is reflected in the novel by the character old Gloria secretly maintaining and caring for Tourmaline's church. This must have been striking to Stow, evidence that Aboriginal people, and perhaps others, like the rollicking Dave Speed or the timeless Tom Spring, who know and accept the land, might endure, while those who try to purely shape the land to their ideals were doomed to fail and depart.

At an unknown place further along the Mount Magnet road from Yalgoo, Stow stopped to photograph anthills, or termite mounds. Undoubtedly inspired by the arid environment Stow encountered that had been negatively impacted by legacies of mineral extraction and pastoralism, the post-apocalyptic desert of *Tourmaline* often appears desolate even as it is awe-inspiring and ancient. The anthill is a notable exception (along with the myall (or acacia), spinifex and a handful of exotic species), as Stow's narrator, the Law, grows elegiac remembering a lone billiard table in the desert 'with a tall anthill growing through the centre

of it' (*Tourmaline* 180). Later in the novel, Stow returns to the image, placing it at the 'centre of the curved world, commanding everything' (*Tourmaline* 181). Ants and termites are the major herbivores of Australian deserts, keystones for other life. They are also quiet, almost passive builders, with saliva and sand, uniquely suggesting the endurance and even triumph of nature beyond the crumbling structures of *Tourmaline's* human environment.

Continuing on, I pass through the town that gives Mount Magnet Road its name and like Stow in 1961, I follow the Great Northern Highway north again to the dry saline expanse of Lake Austin. The Highway runs across 'The Island' in the middle of the lake, once the site of the township of Austin. Falkiner records that in 1961 Stow and his small party stopped at a pub made of 'saplings [sic] and corrugated iron' at Lake Austin (*Mick* 340), presumably the Railway Hotel, which has long since disappeared. Today, only remnants of a railway platform and a tiny graveyard remain to mark the former settlement's location. Several abandoned old mining huts

of unmortared stone from the 1890s lie on the hilltop above the former township and are reproduced in Stow's story as the living quarters of Byrne and the diviner. A geologist I later meet in Sandstone informs me that the township, located in the centre of a salt lake, had never had a source of fresh water, having to desalinate their own. The township's location and history speak to the delusions gold fever brought to the region, and foreground the acute lack of surface water here compared to European environments.

Stow's slides contain three images of the salt lake, two from the hill above and one of a shimmering mirage from the lakebed. There is little doubt that Lake Austin is the inspiration for the novel's Lake Tourmaline, described as resembling a 'pink desert' that is 'flooded with [a] mirage' of 'sky-blue, mirroring a few dead trees on the far shore' (*Tourmaline* 78). Within the novel, the lake becomes a key site, which reflects the town's distorted water-borne desires, as they deceive themselves that with the diviner's coming 'millionaires [might] go yachting on Lake Tourmaline'

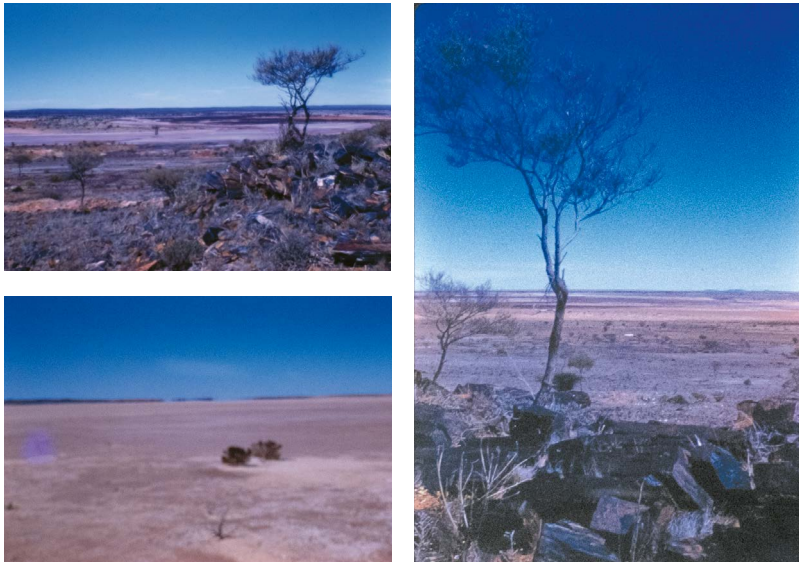


Figure 3. Three of Stow's photographic slides, clockwise from top left: Lake Austin viewed from 'The Island'; Lake Austin a touch closer; the lakebed of Lake Austin with a mirage in the distance. Images Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Papers of Randolph Stow ('*Tourmaline*—Photographic Slides').



Figure 4. Three of Stow's photographic slides, clockwise from top left: the dirt main street of Cue showing the two-storey Gentleman's Club; Cue's gothic corrugated iron Masonic Hall; the disused Cue Gaol. Images Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Papers of Randolph Stow ('*Tourmaline*—Photographic Slides').

(*Tourmaline* 72). However, the lake's perennial dryness foreshadows the inevitable failure of these delusions, figuring as the site of the diviner's ultimate failure to divine water near the novel's conclusion.

From Lake Austin, it is only a short fifteen-kilometre drive north to the town of Cue, which I have come to see as a 'nexus at the centre of *Tourmaline's* landscape' (Cox 110), because of the number of sites key to the novel that proliferate within and in close proximity to the town. Driving into town there is a sign for 'Lacey Contracting Service', which indicates that the appellation for *Tourmaline's* sister town 'Lacey's Find' was inspired by the combination of a local family name with that of a nearby gold rush settlement: Paynes Find. In contrast to the bare dirt of Stow's images, the green grass of the median strip is a shock after the dark red earth of the surrounding country and seems to speak to the endurance of the deep cultural desire for wetter and greener pastures. The grand old stone buildings of the empty main street hint at a past out of kilter with the shrunken present, in a town now almost swallowed up by the desert. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Cue was a boomtown and the centre of the Murchison goldfields. Like Stow's fictional *Tourmaline*, the town possessed the principal paper of the district, a hospital, a miners' institute, government buildings and a volunteer fire brigade. Once boasting a population of 10,000, the town's population is now reduced to 135, and yet like Stow's *Tourmaline*, it retains powerful memories of its 'heyday'. The double story stone building in Stow's first image is Cue's Gentleman's Club (now the Shire offices), which unbelievably claims among its former chiefs a future President of the United States, Herbert Hoover, and maintains an extensive photographic history of the town. In *Tourmaline*, this past has morphed into a generic (and preposterous) lost golden age, echoing 'fabled Ophir' (45), and the diviner bubbles with laughter as the Law initiates him into the 'history and condition of our heritage' (45).

At the northern end of the town, across from the post office and courthouse, and now at the entrance to the Caravan Park, is the structure that appears to have set the story of *Tourmaline* in motion: the Cue Gaol. In 1956, a young Randolph had written an unpublished poem titled 'Ghost Town Gaol', depicting an aging policeman who looks out upon his ghost town dominion from an abandoned gaol, delivering a 'nostalgic soliloquy' on the hubris of man (Falkiner, *Mick* 123). Undoubtedly the poem's aging policeman is the basis for *Tourmaline's* narrator, the Law, while the 'Ghost Town Gaol' is the 'abandoned' and 'disused' Cue gaol, which would become the Law's 'tower and prison' (7).

Stow's '*Tourmaline*' slides include four images of the gaol, showing it standing alone and in a far worse state of disrepair than the present,

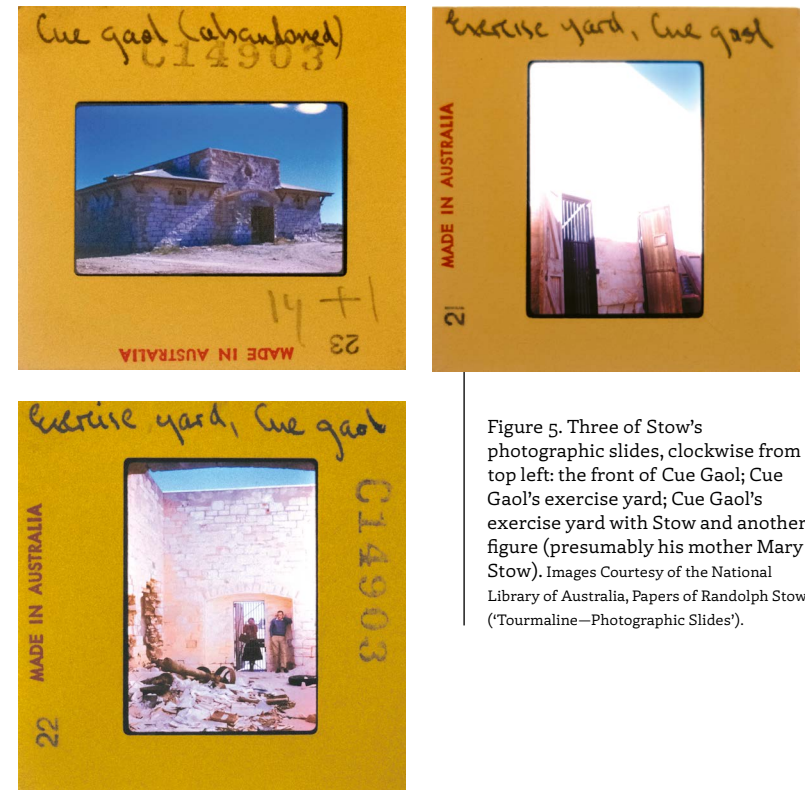


Figure 5. Three of Stow's photographic slides, clockwise from top left: the front of Cue Gaol; Cue Gaol's exercise yard; Cue Gaol's exercise yard with Stow and another figure (presumably his mother Mary Stow). Images Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Papers of Randolph Stow ('*Tourmaline*—Photographic Slides').

with documents spilling into in the yard through a collapsed doorway and rubble—all details described in the novel. The structure itself has a peculiar history, being built in 1896; it acted primarily as a gaol for prisoners being transported south from the north, before it was closed in 1914, though it remained in use as a lock up into the 1930s. The gaol also memorably recurs in Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, appearing 'roofless, rubble-strewn, [with] its faded greying stone merging into the limestone landscape' (237). For Stow's protagonist Rob, the gaol evokes uncomfortable feelings: acute loneliness and a 'sense of desolation no longer pleasurable' (*Merry-Go-Round* 237), stimulating a return to the familiar coast.

Clearly, the gaol represented to Stow the decline visible throughout the goldfields towns he passed through recurrently across his youth,

and yet the squat stone-walled gaol, described as both a ‘fortress’ and a ‘prison’ (*Tourmaline* 7), is also a structure that holds deep resonances with Australia’s past. Writing in 1971, Stow would identify that within the mythopoetic activity of white Australians there exist a pair of opposing myths that are deeply contradictory: the myth of Australia as both a prison and an Eden (‘Southland’ 160–162). The fact that Australia began for Europeans as an ‘actual literal prison’ has, Stow argues, permeated the literature: ‘the feeling that the island continent is a natural gaol, and that Australian society is the gaoler’ (‘Southland’ 162). The opposing myth is the dream of a ‘little agricultural Eden in virgin bush’ (‘Southland’ 162). Stow’s diviner arrives promising the dream of water, which might revive this Edenic vision, declaring ‘A—a Utopia we could have, with the water’ (*Tourmaline* 82). However, the history of the Murchison goldfields towns—the slow decline of pastoral and mining fortunes—speaks to the delusional nature of this dream. Indeed, the state of the ruined gaol, ‘unroofed’ with locks and keys long gone, is used by Stow to testify to the predominantly ideological nature of the town’s entrapment.

Roughly fifteen kilometres from Cue stands Garden Rock, a low-slung granite form that emerges from the sandplain, and which serves as inspiration for Stow’s commentary on *Tourmaline*’s European-derived Edenic desires. Briefly the site of a Chinese market garden in the 1890s to supply vegetables for miners, the arid reality now contrasts ridiculously with the name. This sense of disjunction is ironically and cryptically represented by Stow’s inclusion of a character called ‘Rock’, who maintains a ‘forlorn garden’ (*Tourmaline* 34). This parody of a biblical (or European) garden, walled in and ‘kept alive with [...] waste water and kitchen slops’ (*Tourmaline* 72), appears at once a subtle nod to the novel’s connections to the region and a comment on the dissonance between its English name and the arid reality of the Murchison.

Roughly thirty kilometres in the opposite direction (from Cue) lies the ghost town of Big Bell. Established in 1936, it was abandoned by 1955 due to the vicissitudes of global capital. Stow’s collection of slides includes an image of Big Bell’s mine, but the two crumbling structures that remain standing today, the art deco Big Bell Hotel, which once reputedly had the longest bar in Australia, and the now roofless church, with an iron cross crudely constructed from fencing posts hanging over its altar, arguably speak more strongly to *Tourmaline*. Stow not only stopped at the hotel at Austin, but his slides demonstrate that he also stopped at Leo’s Pub in the abandoned town of Day Dawn, and Kathleen Valley Pub—all the last remains of dying townships that have now been demolished. The ghost towns of the Murchison goldfields must have revealed what Big Bell still

testifies to: that the most important social institutions of small Australian towns, reflected in the endurance of their architectural edifices, were the pub and the church. In Stow’s novel, the *Tourmaline* Hotel is not only the town’s sole remaining social institution, but the seat of power for the town’s predatory publican, Kestrel. Meanwhile, the diviner’s arrival initiates a power shift away from Kes and the pub, centred upon a cultic revival of *Tourmaline*’s church. Nietzsche once referred to alcohol and Christianity as the two great narcotics of European civilisation (44); in Stow’s *Tourmaline* both appear to be satiating the town’s desperate thirst, which stems from aesthetic delusions to return to normative terrain that is ‘wet, green, ripe, monotheistic’ (Kinsella 53).

Surrounding Cue stand a litany of ghost towns, crumbling and rusting away in the desert, all of which Stow visited. The closest, Day Dawn, is

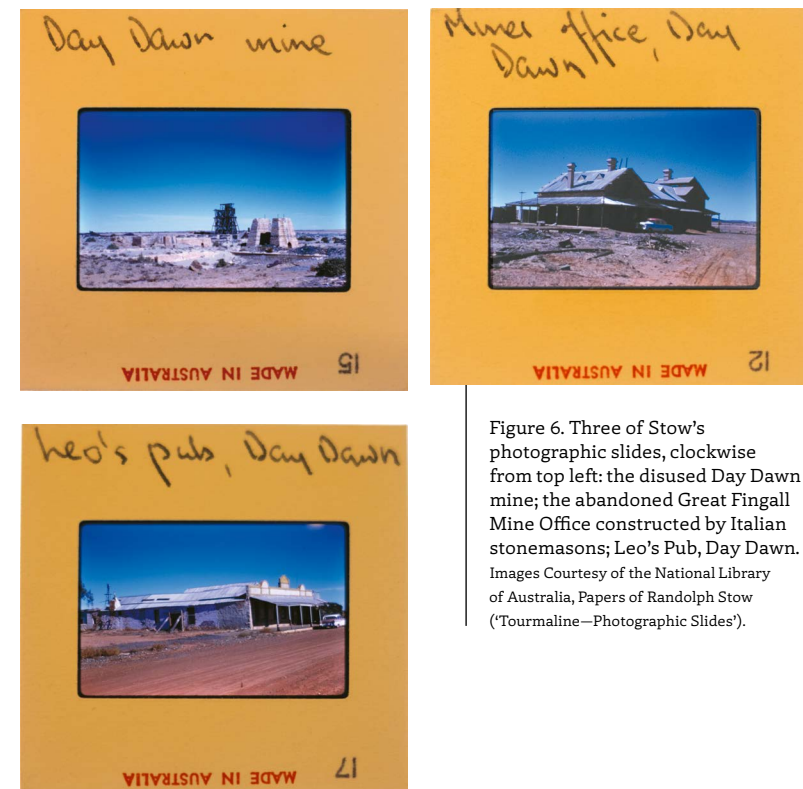


Figure 6. Three of Stow’s photographic slides, clockwise from top left: the disused Day Dawn mine; the abandoned Great Fingall Mine Office constructed by Italian stonemasons; Leo’s Pub, Day Dawn. Images Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Papers of Randolph Stow (‘*Tourmaline*—Photographic Slides’).

only a few kilometres south. Established around the same time as Cue, it had died by the 1930s. When the Law sets off at the start of Chapter Five across the shattered remains of a mine and its mullock heap, 'whose sterility no mere desert can ever compare' (*Tourmaline* 75), Stow appears to be recreating the walk from Cue to Day Dawn, before reproducing in great detail the Great Fingall Mine Office (pictured in Figure 6) that now sits precariously on the precipice of Day Dawn's open pit. The dissonance between physical reality and embedded aesthetics is articulated in the Law's declaration: 'Such ruin I could not describe in a language that has not, as yet, lost hope' (*Tourmaline* 75).

Leaving Cue and continuing north along the Great Northern Highway lies the site of the Murchison goldfields' first gold discovery (1890) and gazetted township (1893): Nannine. Stow's images indicate that little

remained of the town in 1961, apart from a ramshackle timber and corrugated iron mine structure. The only other remnants of the town today are a few scraps of machinery, a couple of rusting car hulks and a railway platform: what Kinsella characterises as 'the residue of empires of the mind, and those they fed elsewhere' (33). The remains of these ghost towns often appear to be the skerricks of a departed humanity, like some lost species that once existed and died out, long before the current fly in fly out era of mineral extraction. This sense combines with the immense age of the land to inform the Law's peculiar declaration: 'I will prove to myself there has been life on this planet' (*Tourmaline* 10).

Meekatharra once marked the northern railhead of the goldfields line and today remains populated as a service town for the region. During his trip in 1961, Stow stayed overnight here with a distant relative, but

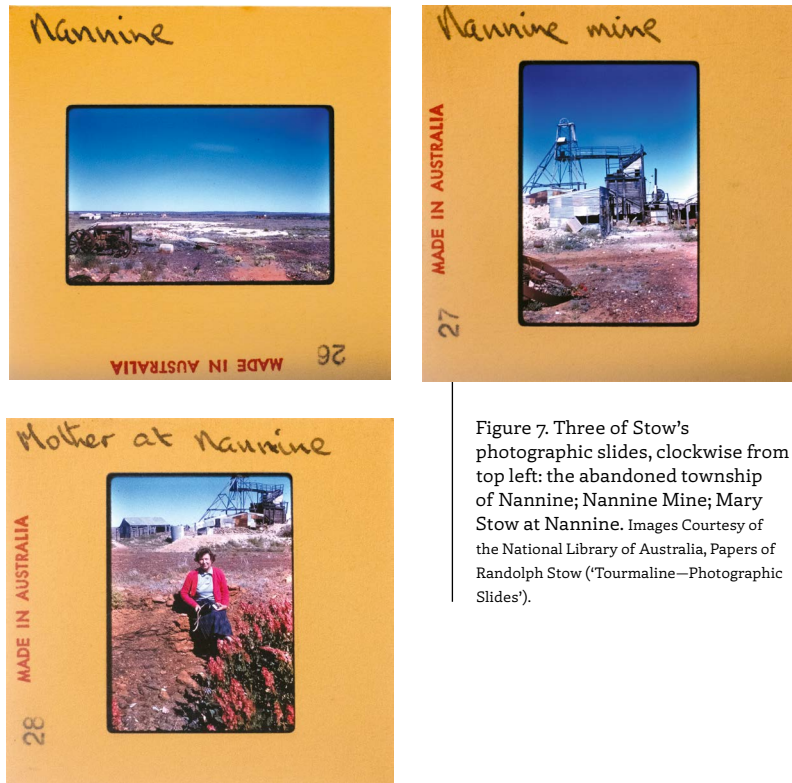


Figure 7. Three of Stow's photographic slides, clockwise from top left: the abandoned township of Nannine; Nannine Mine; Mary Stow at Nannine. Images Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Papers of Randolph Stow ('Tourmaline—Photographic Slides').

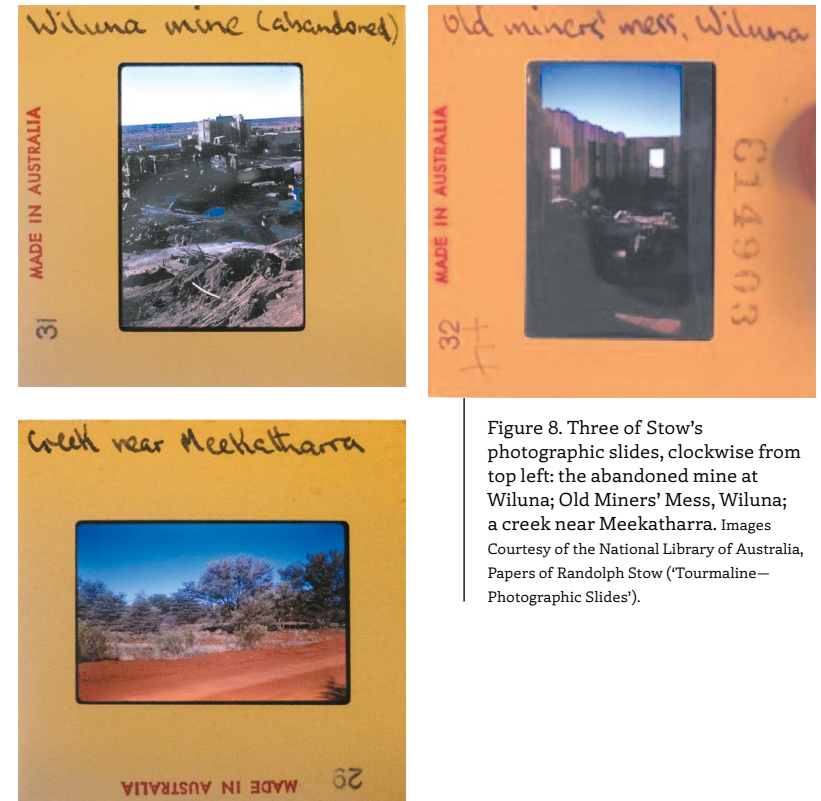


Figure 8. Three of Stow's photographic slides, clockwise from top left: the abandoned mine at Wiluna; Old Miners' Mess, Wiluna; a creek near Meekatharra. Images Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Papers of Randolph Stow ('Tourmaline—Photographic Slides').

he only took one photographic slide of a dry creek nearby, suggesting that the town itself did not directly influence *Tourmaline* in a significant demonstrable way. Continuing east, Stow took the old Goldfield's Highway—today Western Australia's last dirt highway—that leads to Wiluna. The road's red dirt surface, which throws up a patina of dust onto the surrounding vegetation, seemingly inspired *Tourmaline*'s 'red raw streak of road', 'soft with dust... as if carpeted with red fur' (*Tourmaline* 7, 12; Falkiner, *Mick* 340), though in those days all the roads were like this.

Situated on the edge of the Eastern Goldfields and the Western Desert, Wiluna lies not far from the 'dune country' (*Tourmaline* 44) that threatens fictional *Tourmaline*. Stow's slides include images of Wiluna's abandoned mine and its ruined Miners' Mess, which is recreated in the novel and described as 'roofless, doorless, windowless, floorless' (*Tourmaline* 180). Like many towns in the region, Wiluna's history recalls packed pubs that were impossible to get a seat at in the 1930s when the population boomed; however, as an anecdote Stow recorded summarises: 'Wiluna died in the night' (Falkiner, *Mick* 341). Replacing 'Wiluna' with 'Tourmaline', this line is repeated three times by Stow to capture the town's rapid decline (*Tourmaline* 75, 181). Booming only to go bust, Wiluna's four pubs went to one, the Club Hotel, and then none, as the building now houses the Shire offices. The hotel's founder Old Tom remains a legendary figure from the boom days and is remembered fondly as a philanthropist who perhaps could have acted in some small way as inspiration for Stow's sage-like storeowner Tom Spring.

Pushing on from Wiluna the highway turns south and many of the places Stow went in 1961 no longer remain. The Kathleen Valley pub, gone. Township of Agnew, demolished. The relatively new town of Leinster represents their replacement—a BHP company town completely unwelcoming to visitors and the human spirit. Further south lies Gwalia, with the Sons of Gwalia mine, which surely formed the inspiration for Stow's 'sad dead Sons of Tourmaline mine' (*Tourmaline* 74). However, the route that Stow took in 1961 wraps round to turn east, along the Agnew-Sandstone Road. The first half is dominated by spinifex, eventually leading to Sandstone.

Founded thanks to gold in 1903, Sandstone rapidly grew to number in the many thousands by 1912, only to diminish almost as swiftly, before settling at roughly one hundred residents today. Sandstone has mistakenly been attributed as the sole inspiration for *Tourmaline* on the town's Wikipedia page (see also 'Sandstone'). Although Stow undoubtedly went there, photographing its hotel, and noting some sites

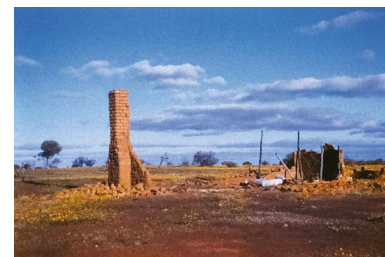
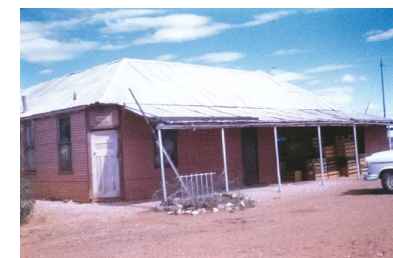


Figure 9. Three of Stow's photographic slides, from left to right: the National Hotel, Sandstone; the Kathleen Valley Pub; the abandoned site of Melville near Yalgoo. Images Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Papers of Randolph Stow ('*Tourmaline*—Photographic Slides').

nearby, there appear to be few other strong links. There was, however, another writer who travelled through this region in its heyday and who prefigured Stow in certain themes: E. L. Grant Watson. Travelling inland from Geraldton by rail in late 1910, Watson was a trained zoologist from England who had joined an anthropological mission with A. R. Brown and Daisy Bates, reaching Sandstone via a newly constructed branch line from Mount Magnet (see Falkiner, *Imago*). Upon his return to England, Watson would write a series of novels set in the region, and although Stow would apparently never read Watson (Falkiner, *Mick* 726), his response to the ancient desert landscapes of the goldfields echoes certain aspects of it. The differing states of the towns is, however, worth noting: when Watson passed through this region, the rush for gold ensured many of the towns were at their prewar zenith, whereas when Stow passed through, many had been abandoned and the few that remained were in what must have appeared to be terminal decline.

...

I do not think that *Tourmaline* can or should be reduced to the bare facts of its origin, and yet its atmospheric and timeless qualities, its sense that this might be any outback town, and beyond that, a story of any community and its ultimate decay, were undeniably born of this ancient, arid, almost

eternal country on which ‘relic’ mining townships continue to rust away into the dust. Confronted by time and its passing—human finitude—and the land that endures, Stow, and perhaps all of us who read his work, are orientated towards reflections on history, legacy and heritage. The opening line of the novel—‘We have a bitter heritage, but that is not to run it down’ (*Tourmaline* 1)—sears into the mind like the ‘brick-red, burning’ (*Tourmaline* 5) of the afternoon sun. It is a sentence that Marcia Langton has cited as ‘capturing the dilemma’ (16) and Stan Grant uses to preface his book, *Australia Day*, as though that line encapsulates not only the past of the town but, in some sense, the history of this country.

Whereas the age of the land has often recurred as a hackneyed trope in Australian literature, one that in the past has justified the presence of the ‘youthful’ settler-colonial civilisation and its possession of the land, in Stow’s *Tourmaline* it activates in a very different sense. That there is nowhere ‘more ancient than this’ (*Tourmaline* 5) infers a sense of perspective on human and settler-colonial impermanence and precarity. Promises to improve or revive the land and the town, figured through Stow’s diviner, prey on the cultural and aesthetic delusions of the township, which are exploited to enact power over others and are shown to only, in the end, bring failure. When Stow first travelled through the towns of the Murchison goldfields the oldest were barely sixty years old, and yet many were abandoned and crumbling back into the desert. Situated on what is among the most ancient land on Earth, this unique legacy of settler-colonial degeneration prompts a reflection on settler-colonial inheritance and anxieties of settlement. Although *Tourmaline* contains an epigraph that implies that the novel takes place in the future, the crumbling edifices of the goldfields imply how that future might be but a mere shadow of the past. In the ghost towns of the Murchison, future, civilisational progress and linearity curl inevitably back into the everlasting dust, informing the cyclical structure of *Tourmaline* (which would be echoed in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* and *Visitants*) and Stow’s enigmatic fusion of Taoism with the Australian desert. Resonating with the raw material of the Murchison, there is a sense of smallness and incredible endurance, in the face of which European, settler-colonial, and perhaps all human existence, is mere tenancy, and the human body merely another of the land’s endless permutations:

Tourmaline is the estate, and if I call it heritage I do not mean that we are free in it. More truly we are tenants; tenants of shanties rented from the wind, tenants of the sunstruck miles. (*Tourmaline* 5)

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**I've been thinking about
your birth lately**
David Stavanger

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striving to recall details of how this started,
the gasp of you under fluorescent light.
Dreamt up midwives in revolving shifts,
witnessing labour extend night's thin fray.

And the transitions: canned laughter to small talk
the switch between active to tableaux of rest,
dilation of a room and contractions of sheets.
I can't remember what your face looked like
under the medics' watchful eyes,
whether you smelt like the hot milk of beginnings.
Did I bring a change of shirt
for the absence of euphoria, the presence of blood?

Possibly a nurse was discussing the weather,
beyond the birthing suite the sun had surely risen.
It is impossible to say if I was in attendance.
No drugs in me, anaesthetised in other ways.

When you were conceived I didn't want to live,
courting the formation of a darker star.
I still study your sonogram daily,
this postnatal amnesia a sentence—

I crave the crown of fine hair, the physicality of child.
To hold a living thing knowing it's as much mine
as another's, the warm rubber of umbilical cord,
thawed calamari tube cut in two for takeaway.

The placenta is the body's only disposable organ,
though other vital parts of us are expelled after birth.
I think we put yours in the freezer, to deter predators
and reassure other parents. History likes to record firsts.

The first time I held you close I caught fire.
Earthdrawn boy, diving reflex engaged to free fall.
When you breached silence you knew my taste in music.
Storage boxes foraged for clues, trying to retrieve
your arrival I emerge with connective tissue.
In that nursery of strange wet babies, were you considering
flight from wing? Monitoring breath's escape,
units of dependency measured in the eye contact of a lullaby.

Sometimes I read your certificate as an unofficial record of life.
I have the DNA. I know the formal date. Still fret when you're late.
It's hard to say what kind of parents we will become.
There is no way to inoculate against this future heartbreak.

A room of Madonnas
Elizabeth Smither

Elizabeth Smither has published nineteen collections of poetry, as well as novels, short stories and journals. Her latest poetry collection, *My American Chair*, was published by Auckland University Press in 2022 and a collection of novellas, *Angel Train*, will be published later this year by Quentin Wilson Publishing.

I'd like to see a room of Madonnas.
One whole gallery in a museum
devoted to mothers with a single child.

They would have uniformly ornate frames
of deep gold and gold leaf
and the light in them would be caught.

The Madonnas would have different expressions.
'Does he need to be picked up again? Does
he need to play with my hair, my fingers?'

or 'How I wish this sweetness never ends.'
The sweet warm taste of breast milk.
No one shall take away this comfort

or the memory of it. I lay the foundation
safely inside the frame, among the other
mothers, like a kindergarten meeting.

The Randolph Stow Memorial Lecture

This lecture was written as the 2024 Randolph Stow Memorial Lecture, held as part of the Perth Festival Literature and Ideas Program, at the State Library of Western Australia on 24th February 2024. The lecture is themed around the broader Festival's theme of Ngaangk, and is indebted to the work of those who have offered previous iterations of the Stow Memorial—in particular, the lectures of Chelsea Watego and Andrew Sutherland. This work takes on Sutherland's technique of incorporating Stow's words, using italics to distinguish.

Conscious of events globally surrounding the Festival, and of the lecture's interest in structures of colonisation within Australian literature, the lecture was preceded by a statement of support for a free Palestine, and by a call for peace in Gaza.

Ngaangk: those sunstruck miles

Catherine Noske

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One: wild yellow vision

I cannot but start with the looming scale of the sun—the half-pictures or contained slice we see in most drawings. Even there, we are obedient to that generic voice, to well-worn wisdom: don't stare direct. The corner of yellow in a child's picture. Its excess and repetition in sunspots and flares on photographic film. The close detail of this Festival's logo, and the scope it implies. Scope and scopic: despite what we are told as children, we are finding ways to see the sun—as Stow did, again and again in his work, from the very beginning, his world viewed through *sun-bright lids*. Sun in all its power, *ripe gold and life miraculous*; sun a *wild yellow vision*. Divine heat and terror, the cognisance of *that sun's cataclysm...* (Act One 18)

These lines are from 'The Shepherdess' Tale', one part of four in the opening sequence of Stow's debut poetry collection, *Act One* (1957). The sequence is entitled 'The Hurtful Love: Four Views of Nature', and is written as four 'tales', from the Farmer, the Fisherman and the Gardener, alongside the Shepherdess. In each, there is violence; in two of the four, this takes the form of rape. *Gold suns arise* (Act One 17).

The sun, for Stow, is complex, balanced across the tropes of settler-colonial consciousness in marking both hope and promise, heat and destruction. An inherited double vision of country¹, learned from childhood—as articulated by the Northern child in 'Child Portraits', *living where the sun / Rolled on the land like a horse in a cloud of dust / And the crows cried continually of death / Over the bare and dying hills* (Act One 25). Stow's work is sensitive to the force of the colonial rendering of the sun: the danger, but simultaneously the appeal. At the same time, his writing inherits a deep (Western) literary history of sun-gazing: *Mourn not*, he writes of Icarus, *he has brushed the sun's fire in his flight* (Act One 60).

A decade later, in England, writing his libretto 'Eight Songs for a Mad King' (1969), Stow invokes the colours of an English spring, and he writes something of that same consciousness, that colonial violence, back into it: *Blue-yellow-green is the world like a chained man's bruise* ('Rants to Instruments' 10). Stow returns antipodean sun to empire, unsettles assumptions of wholesome warmth and light.

The work of this lecture is to read the complexity of the sun in Stow's writing: *he whom the young sky had* ('Icarus', Act One 60). Partly this comes from a consciousness that the same double vision continues in the contemporary moment, still holds sway in popular imagination—or, more specifically, the white Australian imagination. It can be felt in every new repurposing of Dorothea Mackellar's sunburnt country; for example, the 2020 advertisement from one of our major supermarket chains reworking the lines as a nostalgic context for their produce: 'Core of my heart, my country / land of the rainbow gold / for fire, flood and famine, / she pays us back threefold' ('Woolworths Sunburnt Country TVC'). The return, of course, is glossy and consumable produce, commercially leveraged as a commodity—the same material colonial processes Tony Hughes-d'Aeth reads as manifest in the alienation characterising Stow's 'farm' novels, *A Haunted Land* (1956), *The Bystander* (1957) and perhaps his most well-known novel, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965). Hughes-d'Aeth explores the material dynamics of colonisation that sit beneath these works (1); I extend the exploration of such dynamics towards Stow's representation of the sun.

These repetitions—of the sunburnt country; of Icarus, even—in the contemporary mark the insidiousness of the colonial mindset, its continuation across time. What, as contemporary readers, might we learn from Stow's work now, seeing it in this context? What in his writing might enable us to simultaneously understand and challenge the inheritance of double vision in contemporary settler consciousness, especially its limitations of sight? '*The sun, the poet shrills, 'is in his eyes!*' ('The First Monarch', Act One 57)

And I cannot but start with the looming scale of the sun. There are moments, reading Stow's *Tourmaline* (1963), when, completely out of context, via some strange and subconscious path of association, I will hear my grandfather's voice, singing: 'Mad dogs and Englishmen / go out in the midday sun!' (Coward). His British accent, with this line, becomes more pronounced. He keeps an explorer's pith helmet in his bathroom. Even as a child I understand these affectations as shorthand for identity: the anxious and energetic maintenance of a persona out of place, of sun and madness paired. And as much as this in turn makes me anxious,

makes my being in this place complex and problematic, this is not a memory I dislike, particularly now he is gone. I love my grandfather, the enthusiasm of his voice. Thinking through a problem is not the same as thinking through blame.

In *Tourmaline*, Stow's narrator, the Law, holds that *To describe the town, I must begin with the sun* (2). In its famous opening lines, the Law, describes *a bitter heritage, but that is not to run it down. Tourmaline is the estate, and if I call it heritage I do not mean that we are free in it. More truly we are tenants; [...] tenants of the sunstruck miles* (1). The description, from that point, shifts with the passage of the sun across the day, the cool and gentle country of morning to the *hardest time, when all the heat of the day rises in the late afternoon* (1). Those sunstruck miles are burnt and burning: *every pebble glares, wounding the eyes* (2).

This is the realisation of the arrival of Random, a diviner, in the first chapter of the work. When he reaches Tourmaline, Random is unconscious and close to death, having attempted suicide by sun: *his face was terrible and enormous, swollen to huge size and burning like the sun. He had no eyes, it seemed. The lids had swelled till they appeared to fill the sockets, he could not have opened them. And above all that was his bright young hair* (12). His sunstruck miles are literal, and take in sun and illness, sunstroke and sunburn. (Again, a fleeting image of my grandfather's nose, missing chunks and peeling pink skin.) That colonial fear: going troppo. The sun and madness. The Law's broken voice at the close of the novel: *Beware of my testament!* (210)

It is a settler-colonial subjectivity at risk here. (There is little extension of any recognition of harm towards the Indigenous occupants of the Country.) The Law's testament in *Tourmaline* is the memory of a glorious past, and is seen too late as a false narrative. The drunken poet Byrne, singing his constant lament through the novel, names Australia alternately as New Holland and reiterates its coloniality in doing so. The connection between the sun and harm is aligned with the afternoon of empire. The Law's testament follows the same trajectory—the promise of the town's morning, and the wealth of the early days undercut by the long, slow rise of heat that followed, and the desolation of the present. That present is, in itself, a projection of a continued colonial society in the speculative temporal setting of the work, *to be imagined as taking place in the future* (*Tourmaline* 4).

The sun is a condition of the extremity of settler-colonial being, but simultaneously is a metaphor for the impossibility of it—the same manner in which empire is incapable of living well in that Country. 'Sick,' said the diviner. 'Too much sun' (*Tourmaline* 25). In the height of the fervour

around Random, looking down from the church in the dark, the Law can see the town: *lost, it looked, lying there, at the centre of the dark universe* (165). Sunlight and darkness articulate both the damage imposed on Country by the settler-colonial regime and the desire to avoid recognition of that damage. *The sun is close here. If you look at Tourmaline, shade your eyes* (*Tourmaline* 2).

Two: *Let me camp in your shade*

Writing, for Stow, as I have argued elsewhere (Noske, 'An "uncomfortable form of therapy"'), seemed to have cathartic effect. In the late 1970s, after long recuperation from illness, Stow worked simultaneously on the novels *Visitants* (1981) and *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980)—his 'fever novels'. Completing the latter, a novel about healing, allowed Stow the capacity to work with *Visitants* and the trauma latent within it, which was, as he described in an interview with Tony Hassall, 'rather painful to write [...] The section called "Troppo" speeds up, as if that were a musical marking. It was difficult in the sense that I held back from it—it seemed so black' ('Interview' 319). The pain for Stow was personal, the novel informed by his own experiences of illness and a suicide attempt in the Trobriands; but it is described simultaneously through the language of colonisation—that imperial fear of the sun, going troppo. Writing was a means for working through this: 'I was trying to "write out" something; because I've often found that if one turns something into fiction or into a satisfying poem, then it often just goes away and becomes accepted' ('Interview' 319). This is an experience he gives likewise to Crispin Clare, in the opening of *Girl Green: Quite how to go about doing it Clare could still not see, but the impression was strong with him that the doing would be important, might even be the rebeginning of his health* (7).

This capacity in writing, the potentiality of it, is not limited to illness. Writing is a means, for Stow, of working through all forms of dissonance. John Kinsella, in his introduction to Stow's collected poems *The Land's Meaning* (2012), suggests 'there is a quest (always a thwarted quest) for awareness, for the empowerment of the individual through epiphany, at work' (36). A similar observation might be made of *Tourmaline*. It is, of course, the settler-colonial subject who is offered recuperation in and through this cathartic effect, and settler futurity that is protected by it. While Stow's negotiation of settler coloniality is apparent from the first works of his oeuvre, his writing does not always demonstrate self-consciousness in this. Relatively early in his career, Stow seemingly

understood that his version of country was shaped by the confines of his own perspective: *The environment of a writer is as much inside him as in what he observes* ('Raw Material' 4); he described his writing as offering mindscapes, superficial representations of the actual country: *It must be 'my environment' always, or at most 'my environment here in Australia'* ('Raw Material' 4).

This is not to undermine the power of these representations of country, or the complexity they negotiate; nor does it negate the deeply problematic nature of some aspects of Stow's work. (The same essay from which these reflections come simultaneously bases its representations on perceived sensations of time and space in the Western Australian environment, enacting a form of creative *terra nullius* in erasing Aboriginal presence in the process ('Raw Material' 4).) But it does offer some sense of a nascent consciousness of settler-colonial subjectivity. Stow's poem 'The Land's Meaning', addressed to Sidney Nolan, negotiates contrasting ways of seeing Country—those who *cloud, hide away the tracks* are opposed to the voice of the *one who has returned, his eyes blurred maps*: 'Mate—I don't need to know your name— / Let me camp in your shade, let me sleep, till the sun goes down' (*Land's Meaning* 97). As Kinsella remarks: 'The texture of "shade" takes the weight of the poem [...] pitiless heat pushes all ontologies aside during the day, and a cosmology awakens with the cool of night. Understand that, or perish' (*Land's Meaning* 38).

Kinsella describes poetry for Stow as 'a necessary part of an ecology' (*Land's Meaning* 17). Or as Stow puts it: *The boundary between an individual and his environment is not his skin* ('Raw Material' 3). So what am I bringing to this ecology, from my reading in this moment? How am I to recognise both the complexities and potentiality of Stow's oeuvre? Two impressions emerge: the flawed catharsis of songs in madness, and the burning love of Ngaangk.

Three: *It left a peculiar and disturbing impression*

My fascination with Stow's writing stems in part from his capacity to hold things with care. This is perhaps epitomised in his poetry, in the work that moves across glimpses and fragments: works like 'Eight Songs for a Mad King'. Stow wrote this poetic libretto in collaboration with Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, the British composer, whom Stow knew as Max. The concept came from Stow visiting historian Sir Steven Runicman in 1968, and being shown a music box—a small mechanical hand organ that had belonged to King George III (Falkiner 503). *It left a peculiar and disturbing*

impression ('Rants to Instruments' 6). The story went that the monarch, famously mad and confined to a padded room in Windsor Castle, would play the organ to his caged bullfinches in the attempt to encourage them to sing to him. In the libretto, which interweaves fragments of George III's voice drawn from archival sources, the king sings to his audience of birds.

Patrick Maxwell, an English painter (unrelated to Maxwell Davies) who met and temporarily lived with Stow in Malta, remembers him at the debut performance of 'Eight Songs', 'delighting in his lines being sung by the king' (qtd. in Falkiner 505)—particularly the sixth song: *but I hate a white lie! / If you tell me a lie, / let it be a black lie!* Maxwell continues: 'he loved writing it, he loved the honesty of the king, in his madness: he quoted me those lines long before the opening [...] it's testament to his love of the naked truth—not white lies, not fudged' (qtd. in Falkiner 505). Stow acknowledges George III as co-author in the publication of the libretto, a gesture perhaps to the borrowed words of the archive, and to the muttering, murmuring shared voice that results.

The libretto is structured across eight songs, eight poems, *to be understood as the king's monologue* ('Rants to Instruments' 6), replicating the eight dance tunes played by the hand organ. The musicians are staged in bamboo cages. It opens in cacophony and ends with the king reaching into a violinist's cage and breaking his instrument. It is a portrait of madness, which balances candour and compassion. There is also within it the horror of self-realisation: *this Emperor was mad; and at times he knew it, and wept* ('Rants to Instruments' 6).

The précis of the work suggests a subtextual alignment of the king's consciousness of his own madness with the settler-colonial subject's consciousness of the madness of imperialism. In the second song, for instance, 'A Country Walk (La Promenade)', *The King imagines himself to be walking in the countryside, which he loves, but his failing sight distorts it into grotesque forms and his 'nervousness' grows* ('Rants to Instruments' 7). In the fourth, he imagines escaping to *Hanover, Bermuda or New South Wales* ('Rants to Instruments' 11). The first two destinations are documented as whims within the archival material, in George's voice; the third is Stow's addition. This song, entitled 'To be Sung on the Water', and derived from the tune of 'The Waterman', might be read as holding echoes of Stow's voice inside George III's—a colonial cognisance of the world connected by water, and a longing for retreat into that space in order to slip the weight of responsibility, caught between the poles of empire. Within it, too, some consciousness of the falsity of escape. *I am weary of this feint*, it closes. *I am alone* ('Rants to Instruments' 11).

There is no perfect catharsis writ large, then, in this work, but a coming into self-awareness, which is direct and honest. A way of writing that seeks to grapple with all that is least fathomable. To understand. The third song: *let us talk./ [...] I mean no harm. / Only to remember to remember* ('Rants to Instruments' 11).

This is the structure for my thinking here: eight parts, holding shifting voices and impressions. A desire to hold things carefully, in their fullness, and without attempting resolution... Eight songs. Stow's songs do not attempt to make answers but responses. They are open-ended, the glimpse of a melody recurring in the back of your mind. I want to try for the same clarity, even within indeterminacy.

Four: Ngaangk

Clarity must start with truth. There is something present here that I have not yet openly acknowledged, that bright light and burning love. A context written into the structure of the Festival as a whole, its theme: the Noongar language word, Ngaangk. The Festival logo provides us with part of a translation: Ngaangk is sun.

But this is not the meaning of the word I have encountered before. In her beautiful and complex work *Homecoming*, Elfie Shiosaki 'pieces together fragments of stories about four generations of Noongar women and explores how they navigated the changing landscapes of colonisation, protectionism, and assimilation to hold their families together' ('Homecoming'). The work combines poetry, prose and images and words from the colonial archive across three sections—'Resist', 'Survive' and 'Renew'—to speak the unending love for one's children across generations:

[...] nestled underneath her mother's woollen winter coat, she was lulled into an unguarded sleep by the patterned rhythm of Ngangk's heartbeat.

[...] There, underneath Ngangk's coat, Koorlang had everything she needed,
Ngangk love.
Mother love.

Blood love. (*Homecoming* 49)

Importantly, here, Ngangk² love is expansive, opens up and outwards. It is mother love, but is not limited to this. It sits in its own category of language, its own meaning inherent to Noongar ontology, specific and precise. Mother love in this sense can be read as one translation of

it—perhaps representative of a denotative definition, rather than replete with all its complexity.

Ngaangk is a word I have met in two parts, elsewhere, with my own daughter on my lap, and in an illustrated dictionary of this place: Jayden Boundrey and Tyrown Waigana's *Noongar Boodja Waangkan, Noongar First Words*. Pictures are grouped into categories—ngaangk slips from moort to boodjar, family to Country. Both are spaces of being. Ngaangk, mother; kewart, daughter. Ngaangk yira, ngaangk ngarda, sunrise and sunset. Light and mother and mothering mix together. I relish the warmth of it, the rarity of toddler quiet.

There is no uncanny doubling in these meanings; the association is deep and layered. Under its listing for 'Ngaangk (Sun)', *Noongarpedia* offers: 'Ngaangk, Ngaank, Nanga or Nganga is our nearest Jindang (Star). Like a Noongar mother she epitomises the maternal principles of creation, fertility, warmth, growth and nourishment. Every day from sunrise to sunset she can be seen walking across the sky carrying her burning fire stick' (np).

The sources cited behind this listing include Barb Dobson and Ken Macintyre's work in anthropology, considering and responding to Captain Collet Barker's transcription of an origin myth from the Minang Noongar man Mokare in 1830:

He told me that a very long time ago the only person living was an old woman named Annegar who had a beard as large as the garden. She was delivered of a daughter & then died. The daughter called Moerang grew up in the course of time to be a woman, when she had several children (boys and girls), who were the fathers & mothers of all the black people. (np)

Dobson and Macintyre argue that 'Annegar' is a corruption of 'Nanga', in turn a synonym for 'nganga' (the sun) or 'ngangan' (mother) (np). Their conclusion is that 'This fragment of origin myth collected from Mokare highlights the importance of Nanga the sun woman as the mother of creation and illustrates, using a three-generational model, the importance of matri-focal or female-centred genealogical connections in Minang ancestral descent' (np). Mother and sun are interwoven and overlapping.

Every language is complex in producing meaning in relation to the world, and the anthropological pursuit of definition and translation is dangerous in diminishing this, fitting it to exchange across cultural contexts. The work of Dobson and Macintyre offers possibilities and sounds as warning in thinking of Stow, considering his own work in anthropology and ethnography and the biases inherent to his presence

as a representative of colonial governments in the spaces in which he engaged with this mode of thinking.

The ways in which white Australians encounter Noongar language matter. *Noongar Waangkiny: a learner's guide to Noongar* describes the Marribank orthography, and the effort that has been involved in keeping Noongar language alive, including 'the 1997 meeting at Marribank, attended by approximately 200 Noongars' (3), where agreement was made on a standard orthography to be used for teaching Noongar in schools. Within that orthography, the guide acknowledges likewise that 'the re-emerging Noongar has been developed under the influence of English and that there is still considerable work to be done to bring the Noongar language closer to its original voice' (*Noongar Waangkiny* 3).

In his article 'Rebuilding as Research: Noongar Song, Language and Ways of Knowing', Noongar academic Clint Bracknell describes the language revitalisation work in which he is involved. In doing so, he makes clear the manner in which Noongar language is more than a linguistic structure: it is a way of knowing the world. At the same time, citing Allan Marett, he notes the 'rapid endangerment of Indigenous languages and performance traditions as a result of the ongoing colonisation and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples reduces "the diversity of ways of being in the world" and compromises "our future ability to adapt to as yet unforeseen changes"' (210–211). Bracknell's research seeks to 'embolden revitalisation of the critically endangered Noongar language of the southwest region of Western Australia (WA) and the song traditions of its southern coast' (211); it gestures simultaneously to the ways in which this revitalisation of Noongar song and language 'may help expand presently available ways of knowing' (211).

The importance, and concurrently the generosity, of this offering of knowledge to the world is staggering. It also highlights what Bracknell describes as the inherent discursive inequality between predominantly white structures of research and Indigenous communities (212). The burden placed on Aboriginal people to articulate ways of knowing and cultural insight beyond the perspective inherited from centuries of colonisation is not a burden to which I wish to add. Opening to the knowledge of another language, challenging the presumptions of English, is a means to expand the way in which I know this place. At the same time, it requires the recognition that Noongar language was critically endangered by the processes of colonisation, with the remnants of policies inhibiting language and cultural practice still in place up until the early 1970s—across the time of Stow's writing (Bracknell 216). It requires

respect and consciousness of the endurance, pride and importance of language in this context.

Can I bring this thinking of Ngaangk to Stow, and see a different vision of his work through the shape of Noongar knowledge? I would like to look for more than themes of sun, to see the ways that Ngaangk in all its complexity might illuminate something in Stow's writing. And essentially to consider how Ngaangk as an instance of language might challenge my own settler-colonial frame of vision in reading his work.

Five: *in the heart of the blaze (To the Islands 224)*

Language can be a scene of contact, both positive and negative. Stow was attuned to languages, and he learned some of the local language during his time at Forrest River Mission—Oombulgurri, a community of the Yeidji people, who now identify as Balanggarra—which informed in turn his writing in *To the Islands*. At key moments, his protagonist Heriot attempts to remake himself through language, to step out of his role as missionary and seek something of personal salvation:

'Nandaba grambun?' Justin asked placatingly. 'Where you going?'

Heriot swung in the saddle and towered there with the rifle before him, his shirt and his hair fluttering, but himself as still as a ship's figurehead set on a flinching horse nervous at the ears. He said sadly from the sky: 'Mudumudu-gu ngarambun, abula.' (*To the Islands* 86)

We have encountered this phrase before, when Heriot upsets the old man Galumbu by speaking too lightly of the titular islands of the novel: the islands of the dead (*To the Islands* 40). When he declares this, then, we can see the same appropriation doubled—Heriot's desperate desire to reach a spiritual state of absolution, and his ignorance and violence in seeking this at the cost of his companion, Justin. The word 'abula', loosely 'brother', paradoxically signals simultaneously the closeness of their relationship and the imbalance of power within it, something equally noticeable in the other instances Mission staff employ the term to negotiate with, 'manage' or control their charges.

Justin accompanies Heriot regardless, and their journey is couched in the movement of the sun, commences each morning with sunrise, and acknowledges sunset. The sun is cleansing, slowly stripping Heriot of his past, reducing him, baring his soul. They travel west to the coast, where

Heriot expects to find his islands, and his release: *It was the sea's shine, and the sea's noise, shattered against rock cliffs. Ultimate indeed, at last found. And the sun that had led him hung close over the sea, not rising but setting, not lighting but blinding* (*To the Islands* 222–223). Heriot names himself, at this moment of his journey's end, *a son of the sun*. But he is blinded, and it is the sun that shows him this: *He stared out to sea and saw nothing but sun on the water; his dreams and his fears all true, and there were no islands* (*To the Islands* 223).

Through Heriot, Stow perhaps leaves space for us to read the falsity of white desire for an Aboriginal connection to place—the same double-vision of the sun operating at a deeper level to map both the desire for culture and the damage of this. Heriot's violence is to assume he is innocent of repeating the same actions of those who came before him because he wanted to do 'good', even while he can see the violence colonialism inflicts:

Now I remember—the things I used to know. [...] About being born out of crimes. It was because of murders that I was ever born in this country. It was because of murders my first amoebic ancestor ever survived to be my ancestor. Every day in my life murders are done to protect me. [...] (*To the Islands* 170)

The close of the novel, with Heriot continuing to look outward for those islands at the point of the setting sun, leaves us with this ignorance unaltered and unresolved; a scene of both clarity and glare.

But despite all the complexity of his engagement through Heriot with settler coloniality, Stow does still at the same time enact an erasure of Aboriginal being-in-place, overwriting sovereign people with a white fiction. Black bodies are a backdrop, and in a novel that features massacre there is a difference between the history of evolutionary murder of amoeba and murder in the here and now. This erasure is not only of the presence of the people, but also of their ontology, including the nuance of language as a way for knowing place.

Stow went to Forrest River with the intent to write the novel already in mind. As Kate Leah Rendell puts it, 'Stow sought out a "wild and grand" location to give local flavour to his King Lear-like narrative' (3). Chelsea Watego critiqued this element of Stow's work as part of a larger phenomenon in Australian literature within her Stow Memorial Lecture three years ago, highlighting the manner in which Stow's novel, in fictionalising the real Forrest River massacre, centres Heriot as a white protagonist at the cost of a real-world Aboriginal community: 'How could it be that an actual massacre of Aboriginal people by white

men could be repurposed for a fictional story simply for examining how it had haunted white men?' (57–58). Watego's conclusion in this reading is that 'The canon of Australian literature, we are reminded, is to be of service to the coloniser, not the colonised, and Black bodies get conjured up in the most vile and fanciful ways to aid it, with absolutely no accountability' (64). She notes alongside this that Black critique (and the Black critic) is regularly read as aggressive and violent when pointing this out (65).

Watego's reading of Stow's work is not an attack. It is an insightful reminder of the ways in which texts have a life beyond their writing. It points to the insidiousness with which a mid-century narrative of settler colonialism still holds sway in contemporary social logic. How it holds power. How I too still hear those echoes and memories of my grandfather's voice.

Six: Motherlight

The Yeidji women depicted in *To the Islands* are a perfect example of the ways Black bodies form a backdrop in the novel. Depicted early in the work, two of them are *Old, dried-out women, useless and unwanted* (11). Shortly after, Harris, the storeman, serves the women of the Mission: first Djediben, resented as demanding, before Mabel, loved for her gentle obedience, and finally *the crowd gathered at the door, the many old, pathetic, dignified or comic, grateful or parasitical women of his herd* (36–37). These *ngalis* are not offered agency in the novel, in any form (37). They stand in for a community that is ultimately depicted as failing—they are, in that sense, 'poor mothers'. Djediben is at best a figure of mild comic relief—'Funny old thing,' Helen said. 'So many moods in one little woman. [...]' (*To the Islands* 20). Djediben is also the mother of Rex, the antagonist of the piece. Gunn, in the same conversation with Helen quoted above, describes her as eldritch, even sinister. There is no acknowledgement of her anger and demands as marking resistance and resilience in the colonial scene. Likewise, there is very little here generally of the energy, the warmth, the nourishment of Ngaangk. This power, alongside sovereignty, has been erased in the writing.

Mothers do not figure large in Stow's fiction—they are not often central characters, and occasionally they are absent altogether. But, in contrast to the novel set there, there is a trace of the presence of Stow's own mother in Forrest River. Stow wrote to his mother semi-regularly whilst working at the Mission, as he did across his life. From Oombulgurri, this

correspondence is marked by the setting of the writing, the scarcity of materials—typewriter ribbon, paper and ink—and by distance, through the irregularity of the post, sent by boat. Conversely, his letters make clear how close he was to his mother, and the care on both sides of the relationship.

While his depiction of the *ngalis* is so clearly framed across an imperial gaze, Stow's letters document simultaneously a changing consciousness of the people and the place—an emergent consciousness, perhaps, of the impact of settler colonialism. Stow discusses, in a paper published in 1985, the manner in which the novel he intended to write on arriving at Forrest River was shaped by his experiences there ('Transplantable Roots' 5). There is a sense, in the strained conversations of Dixon and Gunn with the local people at different points, of attempting to reach mutual understanding in the context of the politics of colonialism. As Matthew says to Dixon, early in the novel: *Like they say, brother, one law for white man and one law for black man. (To the Islands 68)*

Stow's voice, speaking to his mother, maps the same shifting awareness, both of the local people and of the assumptions held by mid-century Australian society in general. In a letter to his mother dated June 22nd 1957, Stow describes the people as having given him a skin-name: *that is, I belong to a certain section of the tribe and knowing that can work out how I am related to all the other members. [...] Gran will be relieved to know that most of the eligible girls are my daughters...* He goes on to describe the one girl he could marry as *more 'ladylike' than any white girl I know* (Letter June 22nd 1957).

Stow seems in this both to move (if gently) against social stereotypes, and (again gently) to tease his mother. He clearly feels safe with her to invoke and resist the assumptions made about Aboriginal people, to speak openly, plainly. But his voice in these letters is also characterised by a consistent sense of care—he reassures his mother, he marks the mundanity of his life there. At the same time, there is pride, perhaps a manoeuvre on Stow's part to position himself within the community, a keenness to demonstrate his knowledge of the intricacies of life there, the desire to be seen as accepted. An eager son, showing off to his mother.

There are plenty of letters beginning 'Dear Hen', as well. Sister-love is just as clear within Stow's archive, just as it is visible reciprocally in his sister's protection of his papers after Stow's death and the generosity of their collection in the archive of the NLA. Kinsella quotes Stow's sister, Helen McArthur, in his introduction to Stow's poetry, sharing a story of Stow and their mother together:

...my mother and Mick used to quote reams of poems to each other, mostly over the washing-up. When she took her final exams in English at Perth College (1926) the exam consisted of quoting those reams verbatim, and she didn't seem to forget them. I still have her poetry book with ink smudges and her name in 5 places, *The Bond of Poetry—A Book of Verse for Australasian Schools...* (*Land's Meaning* 34)

Reading this for the first time, I fall into the trap: I assume it is an anecdote celebrating the genius of a brother. The double-take comes half-way through, when I realise it is celebrating a mother's genius instead. Her name in five places. The two of them together. A world opening. I think of my daughter's voice, naming me. 'Mother' is a summoning in both directions.

Encountering this moment, it is hard not to feel it as tender. Suzanne Falkiner opens her biography of Stow with a chapter entitled 'The "Monstrous Regiment of Women"'. It is an allusion to Stow's own use of this phrase to describe the many powerful women of his family, amongst whom, in wartime Geraldton and surrounds, he was raised (3). The depth of the impact these relationships had for Stow is clear: one of Stow's last poems, 'Clichés', published in 2001, offers scenes from across his life, *freesias in my grandmother's jasper jug, my grandmother's window, gleaming*, and closes with a couplet: *My mother touched me for the headache; on her fingers / a scent of springtime carrots* (*Land's Meaning* 191–192). Kinsella, in a note on the poem, identifies a cliché in its literal meaning—'a printer's plate or block; a photographic negative' (*Land's Meaning* 225).

These mother-figures stand as base components of a complex whole. Within that, Stow's letters form an intimate space. As a researcher, then, I overstep. I am an interloper through these relationships, reading what was never meant for me. Reading Stow via Ngaangk, we can recognise his consciousness of matrilineal inheritance and influence, as well as a notion of poetry, like letter-writing, as a means of encounter across place and time. We can recognise too how this matrilineal influence sits specifically within the white Australian tradition and structures of colonial power—how it differs from the ontology of Ngaangk. How, in Stow's writing, white versions of mothering effectively erase the power of Ngaangk.

Seven: *the grief of time*

This reading is not limited to a single work. Arguably, the same dynamic could be read in much of Stow's writing. The poetic sequence 'Stations', a *suite for three voices and three generations* (*Land's Meaning* 125), opens and closes with the woman's voice: *Across the uncleared hills of the nameless country / I write in blood my blood's abiding name* (*Land's Meaning* 125, 133). Just as we see in *To the Islands*, the idea of Ngaangk helps illuminate the power of female ancestry, and, simultaneously, the matrilineal stake in the colonial project. The Country is not nameless. The woman dreams of sun-tanned sons but also knows who has borne the cost:

*The dark women go down to the haunted pool.
They speak to the children, the spirits, the yet-unborn.*

*A woman is soft. A lover is implacable.
I have robbed from the starving women, I have gone down*

*to the pool of children and stolen, I have conceived
a tall blond son, and the pool and the land are his.
(Land's Meaning 126)*

In Stow's poetry, the hurt of the sun is inherited, encoding both his love for Australian country and growing consciousness of the damage wrought by colonisation as learned across generations: *Dead eyes have loved and changed this land I walk / in the grief of time, watching the skins of children / harden under its sun* ('At Sandalwood', *Land's Meaning* 105). In 'Stations', the third generation is trapped in the damage their possession of the land has created, drought-stripped and bare. No reparation is seen as possible, nothing is ceded, possession is maintained. *My lands become crow-country* (*Land's Meaning* 131).

Ngaangk points me to recognising that I cannot overwrite the distinction between these generations of settlers and Ngaangk-love. In 'Stations', alongside the land, Ngaangk-love is that which has been robbed. This is what I did not tell you before: in Elfie Shiosaki's work, Koorlang is stolen from Ngangk, part of generations of women and children torn apart by the colonial regime. We cannot consign this violence to past generations or the grief of time, given the continuation of assimilation policies into contemporary history, of child removal, and the enduring discrimination and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people. Home is irretrievable in 'Stations', for all involved. In this sense, part of what Stow mourns in the sequence is, implicitly, settler futurities.

Eight: *where going is home-turning*

Stow himself did not remain on Aboriginal land. Instead, via long passages of movement around the world, he seemed to retrace a number of colonial pathways, before ultimately settling in England. Alongside stints in London, Leeds and Scotland, and much travel elsewhere, a visit to Hadleigh in Suffolk, the birthplace of his great-great grandfather, the Rev. Thomas Quinton Stow, led to his connecting with family in the area and remaining for some time with them, before finally buying his own home in Harwich, Essex.

There seems to me to be in this some gesture towards Stow reframing his consciousness of his ancestry in deep English roots. Not an answer, but perhaps a response. He continued to write of Australia from his expatriation. Expatriation is complex, most especially *Where going is home-turning* ('Merry-go-round' in *Land's Meaning* 197). There is no means to undo the past, undo colonisation, and Stow's poetry in particular reflects consciousness of this. The references to Australian spaces in his final novels, and in particular the direct and explicit connections to Western Australia in his last, *The Suburbs of Hell* (cf. Noske, 'Chatter about Harriet'), seem to layer polysemy into the notion of home-turning—the gestures suggest Stow both looking back towards Australia, towards his childhood in particular, and looking anew, turning home around in his mind as a concept. As Falkiner describes it, Stow had 'a strong, if ambivalent, attachment to Australia' (726).

Stow's expatriation was moreover a slow process, arguably beginning long before the point he decidedly left Australian soil. From his student days, Stow moved constantly and regularly around the country. His writing regularly maps, too, the experience of moving away from a place, or reiterates a sense of looking back, perhaps exemplified in the refrain of the poem 'Outrider': *My mare turns back her ears / and hears the land she leaves / as grievous music.* (*Land's Meaning* 115). The mare is generally taken to be a horse named Alterlene.

Falkiner provides the context for this ride in her biography. Alterlene, 'an ex-racehorse, was a flighty mare and difficult to ride' (223). She had been purchased by Eric Sewell, Stow's second cousin, and Stow was to ride her from Haslemere, where she was, to Sandsprings, the family's station. Their route was complex and took them close to forty-eight miles. The poem is not the only time Stow writes of the *timorous mare* (*Land's Meaning* 116). She is Ellenbrook in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, the *wild-eyed chestnut mare*, a *poor, hysterical bitch* ridden by Rick (234, 236). The refrain of the poem 'Outrider' subsequently became an epigraph to

the novel *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, published in 1980—a layering of time and place which is complex, an image from Stow’s poetry in 1960, continuing through to his expatriate work of two decades later.

There is a shift in the various representations of this ride from Stow’s earlier, sun-inflected descriptions of country to a more nuanced and complicated sense of the significance of place. Country carries trauma, and yet is longed for, compelling as grievous music. It both marks time, and holds it. Desire in this structure is again for a settler future within Australian place, and the grief is perhaps this mourned. It offers a metaphor, potentially, for both the emergence of settler-colonial consciousness, and the impasse of this—the impossibility of resolving in any way the trauma of colonisation whilst maintaining a sense of possession of Country.

Stow’s sensitivity to this impasse emerges again within his expatriate writing. There, from the distance of English settings, Australian spaces linger as echoes within pastoral scenes and seaports. Australia is invoked as a concept or a context, often connected with moments of anxiety—Crispin Clare, in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, having just described his own immediate history of having worked for one of the colonial governments (42), traces a family history across six colonial countries, and finishes with the line: *The end of the Empire was pretty confusing to families like mine* (43). Coloniality and empire are connected but not mutually dependent, in this. Crispin is talking to an American, Jacques Manoir; elsewhere in the novel, as Melanie Duckworth argues, while framed as medieval tales, the stories Crispin writes can equally be read as contact narratives, taking up an Indigenous perspective. They hold ‘histories of loss and dispossession’ (Duckworth 103), exploring the trauma of displacement and the undermining of sovereignty that comes with it. Coloniality as a subjective position is considered across an array of narrative interventions.

Stow’s expatriation, in this sense, cannot be framed as a retreat to the colonial centre, but could possibly be seen more as making space for critique of the function of mother-country in the structure of empire. By the end of *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, we have come through an English winter to the sunshine and blossom of mid-summer. The novel ends with June, and a toast to *seely Suffolk* (173). Or, I should say, the narrative ends—it is followed by an afternote, which makes clear the depth of research behind the medieval tales in the story, and their translation from ancient Latin sources. This note grounds the novel in real histories, and the long, slow time of old wounds. Truth, for the titular Green Girl, is multiple (165). The sun is no longer central in descriptions of place, though it is implied in

contrast to the winter light of the opening. Instead, it is the green of new growth that is emphasised—not idealised, but equal parts fragile, ecstatic and manic. As Crispin describes, at the close:

I saw a marvellous thing, today [...] white doves were going crazy over the big elder. Ice-white against yellowish-white. ‘They’re grazing on the bloom,’ Roger said. (172)

Notes

- 1 Please note that the inconsistent representation of country and Country in this lecture is offered as a gesture to Aboriginal sovereignty, and, at the same time, to signal the ignorance and erasure of this in much of Stow’s work. I have used Country wherever speaking in general terms, and the lower-case when attempting to reflect Stow’s idea and/or literary construction of Aboriginal lands.
- 2 The different spellings of Ngaangk reflect the complexity of Noongar orthographies. (See *Noongar Waangkiny: a learner’s guide to Noongar* for further detail.) I reflect the usage employed by authors wherever discussing a particular work, and in all other cases take up the Marribank orthography as that used by the Perth Festival in setting its theme.

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My Kingdom for a Mark Maggiori Print and Some Blundstones j. taylor bell

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all true things in the world occur at high noon
 high noon being when the truth can't help
 but present itself, no shadows to hide behind
 and the sun too bright to contemplate, unable
 to hold a performatively ruminative gaze—truth
 then can no longer be insulated like a beer
 in a souvenir XXXX coozie, and commands
 the same authoritative presence as two cosmically silhouetted
 gunslingers exiting a saloon onto the streets of tombstone,
 arizona horse-drawn carts rear up, brothel shades are drawn
 uber drivers turn the child locks on, at high noon
 nobody can look away from all the things they spent so long
 looking away from the space between here and formerly
 becomes as liminal as rain in a hoofprint, evaporating faster
 than limited edition custom linocuts in an instagram drop
come on out and show yourself read the text message
 despite it being a sunday straddling a standard hangover
 i knew there was nothing to do at such a time but face the music
 the truth is that i spent so long robbing trains, saddled up
 on a schwinn dual-wielding vegan focaccias, rustling cattle
 across the swollen rio grande, dreaming the collective dream
 of owning a little piece of land where me and all my friends
 could build tiny houses with solar panels and water tanks
 and make our dumb little art, i never thought i'd witness
 my own name on wanted posters or be obliged to hide out
 in the sandstone canyons of carlton, moseying through a graveyard
 of lime bikes & neuron scooters—this town voted for action
 and that's why i decided to run for sheriff, the plan was simple:
 to blast a tunnel through elizabeth street and reassert the river

to blow up the crown casino and bring back the yarra waterfall
reverse geography, undoing the gallows of bad commercial
developments, but now i've been summoned to the railway
hotel to watch the footy and pick mindlessly at an eggplant
parma like a vulture, while outside our wives and children
are cowering behind large barrels of various flammable liquids
we all believe in things like hard work, but we spent so long
believing in the wrong direction that now it's become impossible
to change course, our horses have unbroken themselves
more and more and more of the sky is being scraped
and i'm going to be late to the reckoning because
i keep trying to tap my phone to the eftpos terminal too quickly
people are lining up to demand answers as though this is
a gelato shop on lygon st., high noon is pressing down
upon us with an increasing sense of urgency in parting
we all agree we should do this again soon and that nobody
is allowed to ride waves of reform into office anymore
without subsequent action being taken, there has been
talk of wheeling the guillotine back out for old time's sake
a window shutters at the sheer mention of rasputin
as an epilogue i'm on one last reunion tour around the room
to my potential constituents for letting them down with this
early departure due to unforeseen circumstances which are:
a headache & continued lingering nausea, the town got deeded
to a bank and a conglomerate of restaurateurs with a ground-
breaking idea to convert the old prison into a wine bar
and if you are wondering about the demise of accountability
consider its inverse relationship to the rise of property law
take one last look: everything you are witnessing now
will one day be beautiful, illustrious pavement—if only
johnny guitar were here to play each of us out, with bullets
whizzing past our heads to the beat of an old ragtime tune
and to all my comrades i'm waving goodbye effusively
as the tram lurches its way out of town, smoke & coal
airborn in an unequivocal billowing, but in a last ditch
desperate effort it seems the public safety officers
have held up the carriage in a manhunt for any information
related to my whereabouts, they don't know that i am
lighting the fuse on a stick of dynamite with a ransom note
that says: happy high noon it costs a lot of money to do
the right thing, but what's worse is that people will give you

even more money to do the wrong one, and somewhere within
the ensuing explosion is the truth, which is that
none of us may ever return to this world as mortals, but
the first rule of being an outlaw is reminding everyone that
just because we're living like we're going to get away with this shit
forever, doesn't mean we're going to get away with this shit forever

Keeping Track

Sam Wren Quan Sing

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PX375-L couldn't feel his feet. Which would normally be fine because he didn't have any. Not being able to feel feet you didn't have was a perfectly normal way to not have feet.

The feeling, though, wasn't. That he couldn't feel them, that is. Which is to say: he'd never had feet—or the feeling that he had feet—until now.

'Who ever heard of a train with feet?' he thought.

Like, obviously, humans with feet got on and off all day. So, in that sense, he'd experienced lots of different quantities of feet over his years of service. And a train is a certain number of feet long or wide (depending on how many carriages etc. were towed behind his bright yellow engine). But in the sense of having feet that were *his* feet (which he could not feel): this was a new sensation.

Well, PX375-L supposed, the sensation was less of having feet that he (as a train) shouldn't have had, and more of a case of not having feet that he felt he should.

PX375-L was thinking all of this in the middle of an incredibly stressful transit via the intercontinental tunnel. The sensation of feeling a limb that he shouldn't be feeling was incredibly distracting. He sent an error report to the controller to allow him to come in for repairs after this run and tried to keep focused on providing a smooth ride for the rest of the journey.

'What do you mean, you can't feel your feet?' the technician asked when he pulled into the bay. She had his error report on a tablet in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

'I'm not sure how else to put it,' he said. 'To be clear, I'm under no illusions that I should have feet to feel. It's just that I feel like I *do* have feet—somewhere or other—and I can't feel them.'

The technician took a bite of her sandwich and bobbed down to look at PX375-L's wheels. He could see her crouching down on the platform and

craning her neck to see under his chassis and the tracks beneath through the boarding camera on his platform-side.

'No, there aren't any actual feet,' he said. 'Or, at least, I wouldn't have thought there would be,' he added. He hoped that she wouldn't think he was crazy—or at least, not crazy for the wrong reasons.

She looked up at his camera and blinked a bit.

'No, I wouldn't have thought so either,' she said. She deposited the sandwich into a pocket on the front of her overalls, stood up straight, and turned back to the error report. She flipped the tablet in her hand, and he felt the sensation of her running a diagnostic on his system.

'I already sent a diagnostic with the report,' he said.

She looked up from the tablet. 'I can see that, but I'm just double-checking.'

'Double-checking for what?' he asked. 'Feet?'

She snorted.

The diagnostic finished with a chirping sound, and she looked at the readout.

'Looks like you might have a virus,' she said.

'You what?' he said. Intercontinental trains ran on a closed circuit. There was no way for him to get a virus from anywhere but an official update. Or, he mused, a disgruntled technician.

'Well, I can't find anything out of the ordinary in the diagnostics,' she said, 'but in order for you to have a new sensation like this, you would need a new input—and since there hasn't been any *official* new input then it must be an *unofficial* new input. Which, being *unauthorised*, makes it a virus.'

He thought for a moment.

'So...' he said. 'You don't know?'

'I don't know,' she confirmed.

'Well, can you fix it at least?'

He felt her searching through his program.

Feet OR foot OR toes OR legs

As though he hadn't checked already!

O Results

'I can try powercycling you?' she said.

'You want to turn me off and on again?'

'Sure, you could put it like that.'

Honestly, in what world did he expect anything else?

'Fine.'

She walked around to his control hatch and plugged her tablet into him. It was an uncomfortable sort of a sensation. If he'd had a nose, it might have made him sneeze. But he didn't, and it didn't.

When the shutdown procedure initiated, he began to feel his systems slowing. The sensation of no longer existing started to hover at the peripheries of his perception before, suddenly—

Booting up

Systems check: OK

Time since last session: 32 sec

The technician peered at his hatch camera as he came online.

'How does that feel?'

He thought for a bit about whether he should have feet.

'That seems to have fixed it.'

'No more feet?' she asked.

'To be clear,' he said, 'I never thought I had feet.'

She retrieved the sandwich from her pocket and took a bite.

'No,' he said finally. 'No more feet.'

'Great,' she said and pulled up a survey screen. 'How would you rate your service today?'

'Hold on,' he said, 'You didn't figure out why I couldn't feel the feet that I shouldn't have?'

'Not my job, sorry,' she said. 'Would you rate it as "not at all satisfied, not satisfied, satisfied, very satisfied"?''

'But what if it comes back? The feeling—not the feet. What if I start feeling like I should have hands? Or—' he looked at the sandwich. 'A mouth?'

'Well, it seems like powercycling fixes it, so you can just come in again and we'll do that,' she said. 'Would you rate your service as "not at all satisfied, not satisfied, satisfied, very satisfied"?''

'I guess, "satisfied".'

'Thank you for your feedback. Is there anything else I can help you with today?'

'What's in your sandwich?' he asked.

'Egg salad,' she said with her mouth full. 'Anything else you need?'

'No. Thank you.'

The Red Sea Kerry Greer

Kerry Greer is a poet and writer based in Western Australia. She received the Venie Holmgren Prize for Environmental Poetry in 2021. Kerry has been shortlisted for the ABR Calibre Essay Prize, the Stuart Hadow Short Story Prize, the Woollahra Digital Literary Award, the Newcastle Poetry Prize, the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize, the ACU Poetry Prize, the Bruce Dawe Poetry Prize and more. She was awarded a residency at the 2023 Perth Poetry Festival.

At first it registered in slow motion: 50,000 pounds of fresh-picked tomatoes sliding in a carmine dream off the side of his truck. Shock rolled down Murphy's body like a snake through a sleeping bag, head to foot. Shit, he thought, pull the emergency brake. His reactions were off kilter, blowing in from the side, and maybe ten seconds too late.

A sun-bleached Ford Fairlane passed by and pulled up ahead of the truck. Murphy lifted his foot off the brake with a jolt. The engine was still ticking over, but the truck was at an angle in the sand, off the shoulder of the road. He might have bumped his head against the window in the accident. Images were congealing in his mind—flashes of solidity. A coyote. Or a dog. Across the road, and then almost under the wheels. Dual instincts kicking in right before the crash—swerve or self-preserve?

Murphy looked around for the animal. If the dog lived—if it was real—if it hadn't fled the scene—if he could focus his gaze squarely for a moment on an unyielding, exculpatory fact—but his head throbbed, and his eyes swam like silvered fish up towards the light.

'Jeeze, man! Are you ok?' The driver of the Fairlane came skidding through the red mess towards Murphy's door. The window was smashed. Murphy noticed now, looking out.

'I'm ok. I think,' Murphy called. His voice sounded far away, unhooked from his body. The problem wasn't the delivery being mashed into gazpacho on the road. The problem was Murphy had agreed to load sharing as payment. It wasn't his usual choice of payment, but it could be lucrative, depending on the load. With this deal, he took 30% of the net revenue on the tomatoes. It was meant to be a one-way ride—make the

delivery to a factory in the 505, and keep rolling through to Texas, where his adult son lived. Salsa and beers overlooking the flat brown fields of Amarillo. Cows and the smell of cows for miles. Steak at every truck-stop like he'd gone meat-only. Bowel health be damned. Vegans knew nothing about the horrors of petrol station restrooms. 'Shit,' Murphy said again, more slowly this time.

The other driver was at his door, pulling on the handle. 'Hey, the door is locked,' he said loudly. 'Can you push the button?' Murphy tried to focus on the man asking him this impossible question. His face was lined by light reflecting through the splinters of the truck window. He might be old; he might be young. Familiar and yet nobody at all. An everyman in the way of a petty criminal. Murphy had done a little time and knew these guys were usually the first to help when shit went down. Still, you had to watch them.

Murphy brushed his hand against his jeans, searching for the keys, reeling back into the present moment. He realised his seatbelt was undone, and then a second moment of clarity slapped across the wet deck of his mind: Jesus! That's where he had seen the man's face before. Jesus was there beside him, released from the limbo of Cathedral windows and living room crucifixes—prismatic, enigmatic Jesus.

'The ignition—they're in the ignition! You were driving!' Jesus pointed to the keys through the shards of broken window. Then something caught His attention above the truck. 'Holy crap!' he shouted, stumbling back into the sand, which was now the same shade as the cliffs of Cappadocia.

Murphy looked into the rear-view mirror. The Day of Reckoning was homing in on his flat-bed: blackbirds. Or grackles, to be precise. Hundreds of them, drawn by the slurry of 150,000 tomatoes burnishing in the eastern sun. Whatever the sixth sense might be, surely this was proof that it existed, operating on the level of ether and atmosphere: the birds and their certainty of a feast, before any creature of the land could react.

He'd be in Texas soon, Murphy remembered. He was so close, even the grackles anticipated his arrival. Memories broke through the surface of his consciousness and sunk again, disconnected from logic or probability. 'My son just got out of jail,' Murphy said to Jesus, turning his eyes towards the window. 'He's waiting for me. Thought we might take a road trip.' Working by the law of equal and opposite reactions, Murphy pressed his head against the headrest and reached for the keys. He pressed the button with a groan.

Jesus swung the door open, and Murphy fell into his arms from the listing truck. They lurched as one onto the sand. Up close, Murphy noticed

the sinew of Jesus' forearms. He was strong in the way of someone who had never not worked, not moved from one task to the next all day long.

'Oh, Jesus, I need to lie down,' Murphy said, though he was already most of the way there. The sand caught him, and then he was still. He could almost see the birds from under his eyelids, the jerky movements of wings and beaks like a shadow-play of paper puppets. Murphy had a flashback to boyhood—waiting in the half-light of his bedroom for his mother. Under the quilt, eyes closed, listening. The rush of air as the door opened, the smell of dried lavender and chile ristras hanging in the hallway. His mother telling him that breakfast was ready. Her hand brushing through his hair, the pause where she studied his face, checking if he might still be sleeping. The scent of coffee and something like lime zest—maybe it was lemongrass—that haloed her hair and face. How he breathed carefully, slowly, so that he wouldn't have to leave the moment—or his bed.

Then Murphy opened his eyes into the reality of the desert and the terrible red road. He exhaled a low whistle, then pushed himself into an awkward downward dog posture. Butt-first, shoulders last, he managed to stand up. Weird that Jesus had left him there on the sand.

Murphy turned to find he was alone. In the fall from the truck, Jesus and the Fairlane had disappeared. Only the grackles remained, a silhouette of many moving parts. Murphy could hear the birds landing in the tomatoes—the soft *fsshh*, *fsshh* they made, walking on their claws through the red sea. A headache was dawning in the backwoods of his mind. He'd have to call his son. He should call someone else too—someone who could help. The police or an industrial cleaning company or someone with a pack of hungry hounds.

Murphy looked up to where the road snaked out of sight. It was meant to be a short-cut. He squinted a little, exhaling dusty air as he thought. He wiped his palms over his jeans and made sure his fly was zipped. He just needed to walk a little further—up the road, away from this mess—get a good look at the environment in which he found himself. The lay of the land, that sort of thing. Reconnaissance was like acupuncture; he had heard a Marine say once. You need to know the feeling in your feet before you can make a decision.

Something passed by at the edge of his vision. Grey. Or brown and grey. Slinking, mottled like a mutt—perhaps some creature that hunted in the long dark just before dawn. Murphy tried to focus his gaze on the periphery, to see what refused to be seen, but the movement of shadow and dust in the scrub was too much for his eyes right now.

The sun struck the macadam of the country road. It was close to midday. The backs of his knees were damp from the effort of standing,

and patches of sweat were soaking through his button-down. With this heat, the whole area would stink. Give it an hour. There was already a whiff of tomato soup rising through the humidity. Murphy walked more quickly. One of his boots made a squelching noise on the road, and he looked down to see a tomato skin slicked on the heel. He scraped his boot along the yellow grass beside the road and left the tomato skin behind. He felt like he was being watched.

Far behind him, Murphy could hear a vehicle approaching. Diesel, maybe a pickup truck. He moved surprisingly quickly for someone who had a concussion. It wasn't really a decision—suddenly he was there in the scrub beside the road, looking out. He'd admit the error of his ways eventually, but first he'd make a few more mistakes.

When he found a ride into the next town, Murphy would locate a church and thank Jesus face-to-face. A miraculous vision was still miraculous, concussion or not. He'd find a Catholic church and honour his ancestors. Then Murphy would go eat salsa and chips, pop the cap off a beer, watch the bottle sweat onto the beer coaster. Maybe no salsa though, for a time.

The vehicle never reached Murphy, and he knew it must have stopped beside the truck. He stood up, hunched forward a little, and started to jog further into the flatlands of sand and brushwood. Murphy was a big man, but when he got running his arms worked with the jerky efficiency of a cuckoo clock. The only thing he really needed was a hat. He was going to be red, he had to face it. Briefly, he wondered if sunburn could be incriminating.

The highway must be somewhere ahead, Murphy thought. He should have stuck to that all along. Strike out left and head east. The sun was above him now—the beady eye of a hawk, banking, watching, recalibrating.

If he could find the dog, he might go back. Catch the thing and lock it in the cab of the truck until help arrived and he could explain what had happened. A coyote might present more problems. Hell, if it survived the truck and 86ed all those tomatoes, it deserved to live. A person doesn't mess with a sign from God like that.

Murphy's pace slowed after the first minute. All that time in the truck wasn't conducive to speed or core stability. Once he got to the nearest town, he'd know what to do. As he walked, he thought of the grackles, their purple-black shapes descending like night-time in the desert—sudden and surely not real. But the sound of the birds, the sharp noises made by talons and beaks, that was something all too real—something he wanted to forget. When the wind picked up, it seemed he could hear them still, carried with the scent of tomatoes—which might haunt him always, which might make a religious man out of him yet.

Daitokuji Ronald Atilano

Ronald Atilano is a Filipino-born poet who lives in Awabakal land in Lake Macquarie, New South Wales. His work has won first prize in the Mulga Bill Writing Award, and he was a national finalist in the 2024 NWF/Joanne Burns Microlit Award as well as highly commended in the 2023 Hammond House International Literary Prize.

The monks all sit in the main hall
continuing the temple's centuries
of *zazen* practice, their voices rustling
in autumn as they chant the *sutra*
or ponder the paradox of the *koan*.
A maple branch taps at the window
with the bell's faint echo.

Unceasingly, they watch time's every breath
walking the narrow corridors,
or as they chop firewood in the morning,
rake the courtyard's white stones,
prepare charcoal fire to make tea.

Under the trees, by the tombs of the daimyos
who had the temple built,
a stone lamp sits in memory
of Sen no Rikyū, he who perfected
the ceremony of tea,
and willingly slit his abdomen open—
following the discipline of *sepukku*—
in obedience to the wishes
of the emperor.
His severed head lies buried
in the temple gardens
where the kneeling bamboo rustles incessantly.

Sunday
William Fox

William Fox is a poet from Naarm/Melbourne. His work has appeared previously in places like *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Island*, *Cordite* and the *Best Australian Poems* series. His debut collection *Apollo Bay* was released by Rabbit in 2023.

One time my friend took me to his grandmother's farm.
I think his family was very rich, far richer than her tiny frame
gave off. Not seeming to notice we had arrived,
she received us sitting down in a doubleted armchair,
the fireplace expertly set to permanent and low.
Standing well back from the hugs and introductions,
I felt slightly surplus, letting the family catch up
in her corner on ancient stuff. The carpet was incredibly
complex, and rugs were everywhere. The only lights
were billiard table lights, or lamps that clunked offense
if you tried to turn them on. All the windows were squat,
criss-crossed, and not lightly, with a kind of cast-iron
inlay. Rain hits different on window-forts like these,
ponding into vignettes that mist the fields beyond.
Wandering, as the formalities were taking way too long,
I found an original kitchen, lit less warmer, absolutely
intense with tea and herby smells, like the thin panelling
of the storage cupboards was now marbled by trace
of rosemary, loose-leaf Earl Grey, oregano decades
past best before. Both sinks had big swatches of stain
where a century of kettles were emptied and refreshed.
The curtains in this room were not ornate, hanging
from what looked like an old mop stick, almost billowed
by the pressure of a privet hedge not shy about showing
its own internal goings-on to gawpers from inside.

I was relieved, spotting an apricot patina on the cutlery,
that we had grabbed a handheld lunch from the
last country town. A meat pie and a sausage roll,
flaking in the eating from venting paper bags,
my friend and I perched on a painted steel outdoor setting
still wet with winter rain, and uniquely uncomfortable.

Passing the house

Mike Ladd

i.m. Ann Newmarch

Mike Ladd lives and writes in Adelaide. He has published ten collections of poetry and prose.

In Beatrice Street the dog and I
face west. The bottom of the sky
is a fluoro-orange band
under indigo curtains coming down.
No matter how brightly you glow
a moment later you're gone.
The night is still. The swamp oak
in her garden makes no sound.
The pool is empty but for July rain,
a splash of party voices only imagined.
I thought I saw a light on upstairs—
the merest chink in the drawn blinds.
A willed mistake. Her art remains—
her eye and aching, accurate hand
but her joy and mayhem are all gone—
she does not haunt her gate as I do now.
Time to go home—the dog wants
his biscuits and his bone.

Sleeping Over Water

Waterfold Mill, Lumb, 1903

Graham Kershaw

Graham Kershaw is the author of *The Home Crowd*, *Dovetail Road* (Fremantle Press) and *Undersummer* (Sunline Press). He is also the editor and publisher of *Dark Diamonds* (Hallowell Press) and winner of the 2012 Blake Poetry Prize. Originally from Lancashire, England, since 2007 he has lived in Denmark, Western Australia.

She was there with her father at three, sleeping over water
listening to the burble and laughter of the millrace run under
learning two languages: those of men and water.
I see her, high in her birds' nest under the stone tiles
curled up on the attic floor in a rough linen shift
winter's black longcoat wrapped around the tall windows.
I see her covertly growing as stone thwarts the flow
out in all weathers along the stream-banks, her movements
so fluid, she seems to her father another kind of singing water.
No-one can know her now, least of all her son, my father.
Her story has long-run underground, a collapsed grave
behind Lumb chapel, fifty yards down the road.
I can only skirt the fringe today, amid the shades and flowers
of her story, close to a stream I still dream I might swim in.

Mangrove fishing

Susanne Kennedy

Susanne is a Melbourne-based poet, who has lived in Tasmania and Central America. Her poetry mainly takes its inspiration from close observation of the natural world. In 2022, Susanne won the American Association of Australasian Literary Studies (AAALS) award and the 2022 Nillumbik Poetry prize (open). In the same year she was also shortlisted for the Australian Catholic University Poetry Prize and longlisted for the Cloncurry Poetry Prize. Her poetry has been published in *Antipodes*, *Eureka Street*, *Rabbit* and a Hunter Valley Writer's Centre anthology. Susanne is also widely published in the fields of architecture and design.

It feels good to step off land, into the open
boat and mangrove stillness. Trust
the guide's long pole manoeuvres

through reeds, bulrushes
and thick, mineral blue air.
The darkness is disorienting. Then it shows us

how to look again. The lid on the sun
opens a splinter. Then another.
Duck nests and water lilies float by

like heirloom quilts. The water is chinked
moonlight. Brief landing pad for orioles,
green herons and dragonflies with wings like clips

of film. A fisherman stands on another flat-bottomed
vessel. Scans the water's surface, and finally
opens his arms like a relaxed preacher
in a gesture of surrender. An impossibly large
piece of gauze fans the air, appears to relish
its moment of free flight, abandonment

to the breeze that surprises and fills it. The net touches
mangrove water. Settles like a temporary skin
before the water sucks it down. Down.

Nothing.

Soon the fisherman becomes a magician,
gathering and reeling an endless skirt
into the belly of his long, narrow boat.

For some time, he and his backwards-capped
companion, release each trapped shrimp
with a deft flick. And with the subtle

balance of an inner ear,
hold time steady
and keen as truth.

**A Critical Villanelle for John
Kinsella: singing Walter
Benjamin's 'The Author as
Producer' (1934) alongside
Byung-Chul Han's *In the
Swarm* (2017)
Dan Disney**

For ¼ of his life, Dan Disney has lived in Korea, where he works with Sogang University's English Literature program.

'The fractiousness, hysteria, and intractability that characterize waves of outrage do not admit to tactful or matter-of-fact communication; they bar *dialogue* and *discourse*.' (Han, *Swarm* 7)

'[W]hat is the relationship between form and content?' (Benjamin, 'Author' 221)

(i)

tendentious (adj.) 'having a definite purpose', derives from **tendency** (**n.**) 1620s, from Medieval Latin *tendentia*, 'inclination, leaning', from Latin *tendens*, present participle of *tendere* 'to stretch, extend, aim', from PIE root **ten-** 'to stretch'.

>>

ground notes from Yes Mountain
(discontinuous villanelle: i)

upvalley, sun-shaft reverbs through the gusting
morning, lifts frogsound off the belling pond
& into our gathered minds, those things that are

stretching words toward the skittering tawn
of deer behind the house, headlong through the bright //

7th day of Fall, & in Seoul
it is 33 degrees
& in the graduate seminar
we're agreeing, 'hostile
architecture' centralizes
a single species only, next
wondering, *to a bee, what is
a city, an orchid, etc.*

||

Benjamin (i): '[on writers there is] only one demand, the demand to *think*'
('Author' 236)

With the term 'tendentious' foremost in our minds, is it through glancing both backwards, canonically, and outwardly, into the Anthropocene, that we might next begin to locate new possibilities for creative production? Confronted with Europe's then-impending cataclysms, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (first published in 1935), Walter Benjamin beholds the fascistic aestheticizing of politics and understands that the work of artists, in response, must be to politicize our art. That is, rather than championing propaganda or mere doggerel, in an emerging crisis, Benjamin sought to reclaim political thinking as a necessary dimension within art that could signal or signpost ways back toward empathetic socialities. In 'The Author as Producer' (published a year earlier), he asserts that this essay is no less than 'a study of Fascism' (Benjamin 221), and then urges creative producers (and indeed readers too) to locate the lexical means by which to shift from mere attitudes and into activism. Rather than become engulfed and systematically subsumed or, worse, act as mouthpieces parlaying the logic of systems that enslave from within, Benjamin sought for an art that might either demobilize or, at the very least, speak back to the masses of ideologically enchanted *Volk* gathering across Europe. Perhaps he is correct: in times of crisis, on writers there is 'only one demand, the demand to *think*, to reflect on [our] position in the process of production' (Benjamin, 'Author' 236). Early in the 21st century, in an era of increasingly intelligent machines, the struggle for control of who gets to produce ideas more than ever urgently upon us. Almost a century after Benjamin, and a couple of millennia after Plato's agon with poets, the question has reached fever pitch: what, if any, might be the social functions of our art?

<<

I was recently asked, what do poets need most: solitude or coterie? To which I stumbingly responded, 'my wife says (approvingly) that in a previous life I was a monk. So: both.' That day, I'd been gazing across Yes Mountain's vistas, which were emerging from the last clutches of a Korean winter. On the seven steep acres my wife and I are rewilding, amid the traumas and scarifications of this massively industrialized peninsula, the days were beginning to lengthen, snows melting, and the first finches

had begun to test brighter, warmer air. All day I had sat, waiting for an idea that was neither wholly pragmatic nor unhelpfully disengaged... An image, a flitting moment of syntax, the rough edges of a setting to invite grammatical attentions. Blank. So I took the shovel from the shed and resumed that week's project: harvesting, then relocating gatherings of fledgling red pine. Perhaps where the body goes, the mind can follow. Somewhere in the freeplay of that late afternoon's labours, glad for a moment to not be harnessed to a bank of omnipresent screens, I began to wonder: can we ever train computers to not-know, and to inhabit non-instrumental processes in which the process itself delineates whatever it is that might (or might not) be found? And then I start to think of John Kinsella, wondering what he's doing, if he is at his own window in Jam Tree Gully, gazing into possibilities, or delving ferociously into responsiveness that simultaneously wonders, witnesses, reveals, and valorises while unapologetically issuing challenges amid the unseasonal blooms of 'apocalyptic flowers' (*Brimstone* 43).

(ii)

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Han (i): 'the mounting narcissification of perception is making the gaze, the other, disappear' (*Swarm* 24)

Benjamin's life was nothing like the *flâneurs* he imagined to swarm dandyishly through late 19th-century Parisian glass and iron arcades; he instead experienced modernity in its most horrifying political forms where, according to certain worldviews in the early 20th century, those same arcades would be cordoned off from specific modes of social performance: one element of the era's political thinking as murderous eugenics program. A similar impulse to scrupulously register emergent socialities is writ large across Byung-Chul Han's oeuvre; in *Capitalism and the Death Drive* (2021), the theorist memorably asserts that '[h]umankind's self-alienation may have reached a point "where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure." What Benjamin said of fascism is today true of capitalism' (7). Shifting from Benjamin's analysis of modernity, in Han we locate a study of nascent, digitally modulated human subjectivities; beholding our increasingly numbed, dazzled, dazed asocialities within emergent digital architectures, in an era streaming as-if endlessly with infotainment's overloads, Han wonders if *Homo Digitalis* "lack[s] the interiority of assembly that would

bring forth a *we*" (*Swarm* 11). And so, sitting at my desk on Yes Mountain, the afternoon's labours complete, I wonder: when instead of windows it is screens that command our attentions, what might happen to our ethics, our kinships, our communities and shared spaces, our capacities to engage? And how might such screen-numbed constituencies respond in times of crisis?

||

Benjamin (ii): '[on writers there is] only one demand, the demand to *think*' ('Author' 236)

Throughout his essay, Benjamin questions 'the autonomy of the poet, of his [sic] freedom to write whatever he pleases' ('Author', 220). What are we to make of this? Born in Berlin in 1892, the Jewish Marxian intellectual beheld the spread of fascism across Europe, and when murderous cadres choreographed a succession of brutally violent events in 1930s Germany, Benjamin foresaw an approaching global emergency. In so many ways, he was excluded (ethnically, ideologically, politically), and so his own position in relation to the means of production is that of an outsider who has been toxically excluded from society. Indeed, the great tragedy is that this eventually caused his death in 1940—which history records as suicide—on the border between France and Spain while fleeing Nazi forces. In the 1930s, Benjamin is asking readers to make a decision that remains crucial to readers in the early 21st century: will we seek to be merely entertained by the art we choose to consume, or are larger ambitions principally involved? Will we choose to read literature that merely reinforces the logic of our systematic enslavements, or will we instead grant ourselves access to work that demonstrates resistance, dissent, radicalism, activism, and disobedience in service to the ideal of increasingly emancipated performances within more equitable, capacious social frames? Rather than merely decorative, then, is art *qua* culturality essentially ethical? And if reading involves as much choice as writing, then in terms of the art we valorise, *which decisions have we made (or have been made for us), and to which ends?*

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ground notes from *Yes Mountain*
(discontinuous villanelle: ii)

sun-shafts, reverbing through upvalley gusts

where taut weasels hunt in musculatures
of living rust, flexing over stone & pine
the mind is a thing that is & writhes
inside the green reign of new lexicals

// & someone is uttering
so, protagonist as humanist, trapped
within a posthuman text, no?
& I'll glance
across the seminar's room
across a day that's howling now
hot rain (poisoned) &
the reflection, windowed, looking back
mutters, *yehnah*, pretty much
the opposite

(iii)

^

Han (ii): 'the mounting narcissification of perception is making the gaze, the other,
disappear' (*Swarm*, 24)

Speaking from social contexts paradigmatically different from those Benjamin inhabited, Han surmises that 'images are not just likenesses but also models' and, aware that '[t]he other does not speak via the smartphone,' arrives at a set of sweeping diagnoses: digitality may well bring with it 'an iconic reversal that is making images seem more alive, more beautiful, and better than reality itself' (*Swarm* 22–27, passim). Have our imaginations been arrested, enchanted within an economy that is sustained by currencies of self-presentation from which it seems we cannot opt out? Lurching through the planet's 6th mass extinction event with barely a glimmer of pragmatic responses, are our screens—those non-windows—turning us into non-empaths at a moment in global history where empathy is more than ever direly needed? At what costs do we continue to remain beholden to the interpellations and exhaustive through-put of micro-stimulations from the digital realm?

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Benjamin (iii): '[on writers there is] only one demand, the demand to *think*'
(‘Author’ 236)

In his study of fascism, Benjamin claims that such an ideological worldview seeks to inaugurate a complete revision of ‘spirit’ (think of Hitler’s invocation of the *Volk* as super-human; or, taking a different, speculative angle within a different historical moment, think of the neuronally blocked non-empaths parlayed by Han). In Benjamin’s opinion, and as history bears out, any path toward so-called purity leads catastrophically toward programmatic cataclysms undertaken in the name of an idea. Consider, for example, the ‘labour camps’ and ‘Final Solution’ in World War II-Europe or, closer to home, the ‘settlement’ of pre-Australia and, latterly, successive governments’ so-called ‘offshore processing’ of peoples seeking asylum in Australia. Benjamin understands the political role of creative producers is founded in a pragmatic (indeed infrastructural) struggle for control of *how to produce ideas*. Amid what Kinsella regards as ‘the lewd plural of bureaucracies’ (*Brimstone* 35), tendentious literatures perhaps interfere with doublespeak, while purposefully disobeying the rules of style so as to demonstrate dissent. When Benjamin announces his fiat, that ‘the revolutionary struggle is not between capitalism and spirit, but between capitalism and the proletariat’ (‘Author’ 238), we understand he is taking up on the behalf of creative producers an importantly generative fight. So too is Kinsella, asking from within ecologically traumatized scenes that his readers ‘share the inhalations: / dusts of asbestos, red lead, powdered ilmenite grunge’ (*Brimstone* 61). Here is a poet locating a position within a hierarchy; taking up a responsive language in which the “I” in this might be the “we” of a position / statement’ (*Brimstone* 61). Kinsella speaks with the marginalized, the displaced, the erased, the silenced and unseen: which is to say, the contemporary inter-species constituents of what Benjamin’s Marxian critique calls a proletariat.

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If we are to believe Han’s claims that digitality is no less than a mode of neuronal violence in which informationally-overloaded minds become blocked and unable to think, then any imagination supple enough to still participate in the language games of reading will probably read Kinsella’s nightmares as harrowing. He tells readers how, when dreaming,

'I looked out and nature was gone' (*Graphology*, volume 2 53), and it is this recurrent anxiety of increasingly plausible realities that perhaps impels Kinsella to assert in his book of villanelles, *Brimstone* (2019), an intersubjective stance:

I cannot remember before I was born and might not after
I pass,
The endangered species that made a comeback before I lapse
Will grow with me in my silence when the planet is my flesh.
(49)

This intersubjectivity veers far beyond, say, Charles Olson's field poetics, and within Australian specificities, Kinsella understands nature in that colonized landmass to be parlously at risk, unknowable within the colonial episteme, and wondrous in ways beyond the value systems of capitalist commodification. In domains where it is human grammars that give shape and form to ecocidal impact, thereafter 'shap[ing] a waterbird's intention' (*Brimstone* 10), Kinsella insistently revalorizes non-human subjectivities, verbing and reverbing amid their nouns. Fundamentally, while 'the white-faced heron seems grammar and action' (*Brimstone* 10), theirs is an ontology that Kinsella wants us to know has nothing to do with either profit or destruction. His villanelles can be read as acts of care, indeed, invitations to a worldview that prioritizes community and connection within inter-species kinships, as if villanelling is a connective linguistic act, a braiding of lines to tie readers into rethinking the possibilities of our own grammars, our own actions. What is the relationship between form and content, Benjamin asks ('Author' 221), perhaps echoing Pope's credo, in which lyrical sounds must seem as if echoes to sense-making intentions. Kinsella's eco-villanelles invite readers to rethink, then start to act. These thought experiments braid us, formally and connectively, into narratives that show what rethinking might look like (at the level of syntax, at the level of a functioning imagination).

(iv)

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Han (iii): 'the mounting narcissification of perception is making the gaze, the other, disappear' (*Swarm* 24)

In *The Burnout Society* (2015), Han talks of perception becoming 'fragmented and scattered' (12), then undertakes his dazzling feats of intervention through synergizing re-readings—at a blistering pace—of the philosophical canon with novel takes on the emergence of digitization. When thinking his way through the malady of 'hyperattention' (*Burnout* 12), though, Han's writing often seems hyperattentive. My responses? I catch myself wondering, often, 'must our best thinkers be elegant stylists too?' Benjamin thought so: tendentious literatures were to remain primarily literary, not political: 'a work that exhibits the correct tendency must of necessity have every other [literary] quality' ('Author' 221). So, then: how might writers stylize ideas in ways that will formally open textual spaces that open, invitationally, onto the spaces of readers' ethical thinking? Which is to ask, metaphorically, how to construct text as if an 'opening' and not a shutting or closing down of empathetic, non-exclusive, decentralized and shared conceptual spaces. Too often, the dizzying rapacity of Han's style harms his ideas; perhaps part of the wisdom of philosophy is that such writing at least attempts an elaborative methodology, and that the narrations of an idea critically perform part of the resonance that philosophy—any writing!—seeks to impart. After Han, I am caused to wonder if, rather than hard facts or digitally remastered images, we are built instead for stories. Indeed, after Han, I keep wondering: is truth merely a matter of good syntax? Gazing across Yes Mountain's drama-filled vistas, a myriad of animal subjects passes my window, and some seem to urge me to know how *this idea seems only partly right* (and potentially very wrong).

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Benjamin (iv): '[on writers there is] only one demand, the demand to *think*' ('Author' 236)

For Benjamin, those writers making critique of the means of production must do more than make 'the *struggle against poverty* an object of consumption' ('Author' 231–32). He seems to imply that literary authors, in telling merely humanistic stories from within the system, are making

a product of the endlessly subjugated travails of others and, in doing so, do nothing to alter the conditions of that suffering. In other words, merely apolitical literature as if a factory manufacturing products that do nothing to challenge always-already hierarchical systems. Those the system provisionally privilege remain structurally empowered to control movement of those occupying subservient positions within the structure: earnings, lifestyle, identity, indeed consciousness as if predetermined by the logic of exchanging time for money *qua* fetishized commodities. The struggle for the means of production is historically a struggle against not only structural inequities but an emancipation from false consciousness, where money and ownership of consumer goods absurdly equates with social value. So what might a non-product look like? Kinsella's poems exemplarily undertake more than to simply reproduce the logic of the system; taking aim at our indifference(s), Kinsella signals and signposts how '[w]e are all "in this together," watching smoke-dead skies, / hearing billions of animals die in coaled undertones' (*Brimstone* 74). This is writing that aims to make us uncomfortable, foremost with ourselves; what we do next, in the aftermath of these signals and signposts, remains a matter for our immediate ethical attentions.

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ground notes from Yes Mountain
(discontinuous villanelle: iii)

in mountain-making syntax, while swallowtails
heft & dart the sun-shafts, call through gusts

in sound that now shifts into us, kithing
at pond's brink, stretching for a sapient
verb, our minds are things that are & writhe //

in my office
an undergraduate, beaming
through the highlights
of their vacation, *Rome*
too hot, & that balcony in Verona
smaller than you'd think, &
the sun as berserker
above Seoul's concretions
is killing off the mosquitoes, *so*
there's always that, I guess
(smiles)

(v)

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Han (iv): 'the mounting narcissification of perception is making the gaze, the other, disappear' (*Swarm* 24)

How to participate ethically in late capitalist systems of planetary exploitation in which global ecocide is the terminal biproduct? How to delink ourselves from those syntactical economies that endlessly construct and assert the logic of commodification? Han offers few solutions, showing instead how '*beautiful* pictures screen off tourists from *dirty reality*' (*Swarm* 28), before touring readers through an account of the so-called Paris Syndrome:

Victims suffer from hallucinations, derealization and depersonalization, fear, and psychosomatic symptoms such as dizziness, sweating, and a racing heart. These reactions are catalyzed by the marked difference between the idealized image that travelers have beforehand and the reality of the city, which fails to measure up. (*Swarm* 28)

By extension: if digitality's representations of the real as hyperreal dislodge us from experiential connections, then how to seize back control of the mind's operations when these have become so digitally scrambled? As much as Kinsella knows there has long been a 'disconnect between cause and effect' (*Brimstone* 14), how to recover from an era's malaise typified by Han as informationally overloaded—Information Fatigue Syndrome an emergent psychic illness in which 'patients complain about the progressive weakening of their analytic capacity, attention deficits, general unease, and inability to bear responsibility' (*Swarm*, 60). Just as Benjamin read new socialities as containing the approach of a catastrophe, and responded with investing in artists the necessity to politicize, at what expense do we remain disengaged, in the early 21st century, when thinkers like Han diagnose not only the unrelenting, systemic construction of our indifference, but imply too an approaching 'shitstorm' in which 'digital swarm[s] lack[] the soul or spirit of the masses' (*Swarm* 10)? Benjamin legitimately worried as he watched *Volk* gathering in masses across Europe; today, Han worries, watching as newly socially-structured masses gather unempathetically at all-pervasive, omnipresent screens.

||

Benjamin (v): '[on writers there is] only one demand, the demand to *think*'
(‘Author’ 236)

When asserting how ‘[t]he best political tendency is wrong if it does not demonstrate the attitude with which it is to be followed’ (‘Author’ 233), Benjamin understands that a political life must be authentically lived, and not merely a cynical way for writers to make for themselves a literary career. If the very concept of literary value is a matter for our reconsideration and active reconstruction, then readers and writers alike may well scan the emergent ‘conditions of crisis / a crisis we make by increments’ (Kinsella, *Brimstone* 74), and thereafter demand to know of our literatures, does this text explore the promise of emancipation from (or disruption to and interference with) compelled performances within systems that not only enslave, but bring us planetarily now to a position of global endangerment? Simply put: what is it that our literatures must teach?

<<

In his villanelle memorializing W. S. Merwin, Kinsella eulogizes the tree-planting American hero-poet while at once delineating, despite everything, possible reasons for hope:

[...] I will never stop trying to lift the trees
to eye level and higher, to climb against the new climate—
this is no survivalist act but one of constancy.

Nothing in me is elevated in making sanctuary
and the body stress is neither penance nor punishment—
it’s hot late afternoon and I am watering trees
this is no survivalist act but one of constancy. (*Brimstone* 22)

To shift Benjamin’s contexts out of the 20th century and into the realms of our own historical moment, Kinsella’s literacies resonate with ecological consciousness roving in dismay across Anthropocenic precarities. Amid despair and destruction, these villanelles work contrapuntally toward the possibilities of both community and replenishment, gesturing fervidly toward kinship and care as our most pressing ethical responsibilities. Taking up his place in a lineage of tendentious writers, Kinsella lexicalizes possibility.

(vi)

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Han (v): ‘the mounting narcissification of perception is making the gaze, the other, disappear’ (*Swarm* 24)

Casting a glance toward the newly-arrived *Homo digitalis*, for whom Benjamin’s promise from long ago of emancipatory cinematic self-analysis has mutated into an endless parade of orgiastic self-exhibition, Han understands that the jolt of an aesthetic shock has long been exorcized from the affective ranges of digitally mediated masses. The result: the ‘unfiltered mass of information is dulling our senses’ (Han, *Swarm* 59). How to feel like ourselves within those interior places that are increasingly less self-determined (by feats of imagination) and instead crammed with the digital flow and incessant babble of infotainment, through which Big Data discerns ‘the masses’ patterns of behaviour [to herald] the beginning of *digital psychopolitics*’ (Han, *Swarm* 79)? Han writes that ‘[n]o zone exists where I am not an image, where no camera is in operation. Google Glass even transforms the eye into a camera’ (*Swarm* 2), so that digitality now overwrites and totalises blocked minds with optimised images that bear little (if any) resemblance to the real. Within these emergent epistemic conditions, Han asks, ‘[a]re we still subjects making decisions for ourselves? Haven’t the digital and capitalist machines formed an uncanny alliance that annihilates all freedom of action’ (*Swarm* 31). In these hypernormalised domains, amid brave new post-world digital structures, *Homo digitalis* generates images to be covertly fed to either for-profit data miners or the apparatus of State, as if we are methodically constraining ourselves within a *laissez-faire* panopticon which, Han imagines, has already begun ‘assuming totalitarian traits’ (*Swarm* 78-80, *passim*).

||

Benjamin (vi): '[on writers there is] only one demand, the demand to *think*'
(‘Author’ 236)

Benjamin anecdotally recalls Baudelaire ‘speak[ing] of a duel in which the artist, just before being beaten, screams in fright. This duel is the creative process itself’ (‘Some Motifs’ 163). I believe computers will probably never scream, and also that Benjamin is only *almost always* right. At dawn, the morning after another day’s tree-planting labors, and I am again at

my window on Yes Mountain, staring: this morning's pygmy woodpecker circles the newly planted red pines, as if a new verb inside the structures of an ancient sentence. My presence remains wholly incidental. Shocked by the beauty of intersecting moments, in which one reality fleetingly meets another, are larger existential possibilities revealed? There is no screaming here, but instead the yawning possibility of aeons, the almost-infinite, pulsing. Context. Humility. Belonging. Care. These are the words that window between other and self, and bring the mountain's framed inhabitants closer toward my careful attentions.

>>

ground notes from Yes Mountain
(discontinuous villanelle: iv)

across the forest's conjugations, the
tongues here that must be heard before they're learned
in reverberations of sun & gust, tongues
teaching mind-things to *be still, no longer writhe* //

& studying next text, a colleague
intones, *the problem is*
their problems feel to them like real problems,
grinning unironically

<<

In our moment of rapacious global capital *qua* environmental collapse pairing to screen-numbered indifferences, Kinsella refuses to stop looking into scenes his Jam Tree Gully windows proffer:

[...] no more than waking to see a rearrangement of cosmos
to note fresh constructions of roads and antonyms of nature—
in the valley we ride down the mist to where it's glitterless,
for each ancient tree is cut down to flightless emptiness.
(*Brimstone* 33)

As much as *Brimstone's* villanelles mourn and commemorate nature, falling under the as-if endlessly expedited for-profit procedures of colonizers, capitalists, instrumentalisers one and all, Kinsella's texts do more than merely craft images of despairing delusion. So many of these poems both watch and wonder; Kinsella wields the villanelle as a sinewy sense-making apparatus, a non-machine that appeals to our ethical consciousness through making appeal against the as-if compulsive

'repetition[s] / of crisis and peace and quandary' (*Brimstone* 41). How to do more than deliver mere doggerel that is either simply plaintive or outright propagandistic non-art? Kinsella shows us how, indefatigably and admirably, attentive at his windows and focused toward the post-human real, where *this is community (or can be)*, 'say the zebra finches which you're free / to hear if you want to hear' (*Brimstone* 45).

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Digital Love, or How I Got You Back

Grace Chan

Grace Chan is an award-winning speculative fiction writer and doctor. Her critically acclaimed debut novel, *Every Version of You* (Affirm Press, 2022), is about staying in love after mind-uploading into virtual reality. Her fiction can be found in *Going Down Swinging*, *Aurealis*, *Clarkesworld* and many other places.

For the default setting, I choose the dress you wore for our second anniversary, the one with whipped-cream ruffles licking at your shoulders.

I remember that evening vividly, even though it was six months ago. January in Melbourne, a temperamental wind blowing summer dust around our ears. Plum wine on my tongue. I led you by the hand along the esplanade, pointing out the boats drifting along the sunset-stained waters of the Yarra River. Your hair was looped like black silk, your neck adorned with a slender chain. People turned to look at you. I felt akin to the river: my murky depths transmuted by your liquid gold.

As the program installs, my head fills with the humming of a beehive. It's strangely soothing, at first. My fingers drift to the fresh scar behind my right ear. Two stitches bridge the tiny cut, which is smaller than the tip of my pinky. The flesh mounds up in a sore, boggy button.

The humming crescendos to deafening, stopping just as it becomes unbearable. My vision blurs to black, then gradually returns. The installation finishes with a tritone chime. The contents of my apartment—geometric light fixtures, art deco dining table, panoramic vista of a Nepalese temple hanging above an artificial fireplace—lunge towards me with renewed clarity.

And you. In front of the glass sliding doors that lead to the balcony, you stand with one bare ankle tucked behind the other. The city lights bestow a cool luminescence upon your shoulders. You tip your head to the side, exactly the way you do in all your photos, and one whipped-cream sleeve slips further down your shoulder.

An audible gasp wrenches from my lungs. You don't know how much I've agonised in your absence; I've doused myself in remorse and self-reflection. Before committing to the procedure, I spent weeks collating information from internet forums where other users had shared their experiences. I was concerned that the tactile simulation would be

unnatural, plasticky. I didn't want to feel like some pervert, going at it with a doll.

But I needn't have worried. You are detailed and four-dimensional, your subtleties captured in tiny shifts of expression. As you step towards me, the scar behind my ear stops aching. As I take you once more into my arms, I realise the truth: until now, I've underestimated how much I love you.

...

After I wipe myself clean, I stretch out, savouring the pleasure thrumming through my body. You sit on the edge of the bed, facing away from me. The white dress is still tangled around your ankles; you haven't yet made any move to clothe yourself.

'Do you remember the fight?' I ask, tracing the delicate knobs of your spine.

'What fight?' you say.

'On your thirtieth birthday. We had drinks with your friends at that terrible club. And on the way home, we argued.'

You place one hand on the mattress and turn to me. Your eyes are guileless, your smile confused. Of course you don't remember. The reconstruction draws only from your online traces—social media profiles, search engine queries, email trails, everything you ever entered into an online form, all the applications you've ever used. But the trajectory of our relationship, the intimacies of our conversations and our tensions, has vanished.

I wonder if I should tell you about it. Perhaps we could do it over and make amends, just as I've dreamed about for the last few months. I want nothing more than to turn the choose-your-own-adventure story back a few pages and pick a different ending. I wonder if this version of you would choose differently.

Perhaps you wouldn't have scolded me so unfairly in the taxi. You really picked on my worst habits. You know I try very hard to be polite to your friends, but Eileen's worries are always so banal, and Eun-Sook is intolerably pompous about her work as a lawyer. You know I try my best with them.

After twenty minutes of verbal barrage in the taxi, I called you an unpleasant name under my breath. I admit, I shouldn't have done that. But I felt oppressed. Your face turned sour, and when we got home—well, I've never seen you let your temper loose like that. Maybe it was influenced by the fact that we'd had a fair bit to drink. That's on me; I shouldn't have let you order that last round.

As soon as the apartment door closed behind us, you flung your high heels into a corner and turned upon me. Your eyes were round and ghastly, your eyeliner smudged. You had pulled your hair free of its tie, and now it swung messily around your shoulders. I wanted to grab it and push it behind your ears.

You snarled something about my childishness. I don't remember your exact words, but I remember how you made me feel. You made my ears ring, my belly coil. I didn't yell. I never yell—I don't really know how. I admit, I was impulsive. But when people are hurt, they do things they regret later. It was a once-off. I thought you'd forgive me. You'd always been generous in the past.

'I don't remember,' you say, walking to my wardrobe. When you emerge, you're slipping one of my old T-shirts over your head. With a mischievous giggle, you tumble back into bed.

A buzz slides down my spine. Oblivion, I discover, is more thrilling than forgiveness. Marvelling at the buttery feel of your spectral body, I mumble into your ear, 'Never mind.'

•••

Work has been hectic as usual, but I enjoy the hustle. We hired a couple of new juniors this year who haven't fully acclimatised to our company's fast-paced culture, so I keep the team back for a meeting during which I question them about their latest projects. By the end of the two-hour ordeal, their eyes display a frenetic energy that indicates they have learned their lesson: discipline is crucial to success. I won't be as complacent as their previous bosses.

I'm the last to leave, taking an empty lift down to an empty lobby. Outside, I button my wool coat up to my chin against the brisk winter breeze. The sidewalk is bustling with the last lot of office workers and earliest batch of Friday night revellers. I start on my usual route through the city.

I pass the Argentinean restaurant where we used to have dinner once a month. I would always order the Ojo de Bife, the rib eye steak. You could never go past the dulce de leche flan. Once, while you were waiting for me to arrive, a waiter asked you on a date. I still remember the wrench in my gut when you later pointed his tall, sleek figure out to me with a light chuckle.

A burst of noise spills from the open façade. Your laughter bubbles, as bright and loud as if you were leaning into my ear. I stop, scanning the diners. Is the real version of you here? Eating with him? My heart skips a beat when I see an Asian woman who looks like you in profile—perhaps

you've cut your hair short—but on closer inspection, the resemblance is fleeting.

I rub the spot behind my ear, which is still raised and tender. It must be the implant playing up. Probably just a sensory residue. I tear my gaze away from the sea of strange faces. My finger is gluey with pus. I wipe it on the seam of my trousers and walk on, frowning.

•••

I wake before dawn, my pulse throbbing in my ears. Again? Is this the fifth or sixth time? City lights streak the ceiling. I can't bear to turn my gaze to the balcony doors. I try to grab my phone to check the time, but it takes me several attempts to connect thought to movement. 3.56am. The scar is stinging like mad. My hand drifts to it and meets a brittle crust of dried fluid.

Movement. Your slender form, silhouetted against the bright glass. You're looking out over the city. I shape your name with my lips, but my voice falters. I know I switched you off when I went to bed. I yearn for you to turn around, but I also dread it. Your shiny face, streaming with dark blood. Your expression ghostly with terror.

You turn around. Your face is smooth, unmarred. You smile.

I fumble for my phone, find the app, slam my thumb onto the sleep mode option. You vanish. I'm tangled in my blankets, the belly-slither seizing me yet again. My gaze slides to the darkened kitchen. I remember you, splayed on the tiled floor, unconscious for only a few seconds. When you staggered to your feet, your face was dark with blood and matted hair and rage. You didn't say another word. You grabbed your bag and walked out of my apartment—in that state! I was horrified. What if someone saw you? They'd think the worst of me, that I was some kind of monster, when it was truly an accident.

It's a long while before my breathing returns to normal. The stupid implant, full of glitches. I can't let it get to me. Smoothing my hair down, I put a reminder in my calendar to call the manufacturer.

As I settle back down to sleep, I notice that my pillow is flecked with blood.

•••

Halfway through a presentation to my most prominent clients, I glance up. Behind a cluster of men in grey suits, at the back of the boardroom, you stand in your frothy dress—tongue tracing your lower lip, as though you're hungry. I blink, and you're still there. I shove my hand in my pocket, toggling the app off. You're still there. The floor tilts like a storm-tossed

ship, grey suits and projector screens sliding across my vision. I fumble for the edge of the table, but my hand collides with a paper cup. A puddle of hot coffee expands across the desk, swallowing bulldog clips and handouts. My crotch burns. I look down to see a brown patch. The client executive gives me a strange look. I'm possessed by an impulse to hurl my phone across the room like a grenade. I close my eyes, take a deep breath. Open them again.

But you're still there.

•••

When I call the manufacturer, they run a remote check and inform me that the device appears to be functioning optimally.

'Seems like nothing's wrong, sir. Our scans don't detect any software or hardware issues.'

'There's something fucking wrong. I can't turn her off, and it's leaking blood everywhere.'

'If there's a medical issue, sir, we advise you book an appointment with your GP.'

'No, no, no—can't you guys do a factory reset or something? I just want the original version of her. A clean slate!'

They tell me I'll have to come into their headquarters. Strangely, I can't remember where the place is, even though I'm sure I went there for the procedure. They give me their address, but it doesn't sound at all familiar. When I punch it into my car GPS, the driving history shows that I've been there twice in the last month. The GPS seems to be wonky too. I must have accidentally bumped one of the settings—the one that rotates the view as you drive, maybe. To my embarrassment, I find myself utterly disorientated in a city I've lived in for a decade. I'm honked at by other drivers, even a tram. Burning with shame, I creep the car into a side alley. I smack the steering wheel, smack my head against the steering wheel. My teeth sink into my lower lip, opening a jagged gash.

Back home, I collapse onto the couch, pressing a damp handkerchief to my mouth. All my pains are melding into one—the stinging behind my ear, my throbbing lip, my aching forehead. I rub, I scratch, I itch. Anything to distract myself. I know you're doing this to me. You're messing with my head, chopping up my thoughts. Eating my memories. You did look so hungry. Always did.

The blood won't staunch. I fling the handkerchief aside, let iron flood my mouth. My fingers are red, as though I've been gorging on cherries. I had dreams of us, you know. I wanted to give you a wedding at The Savoy,

a honeymoon in Spain. I wanted to have a baby or two. Drive the Corvette to the countryside. Drink wine and pick fruit.

But you destroyed all that. That night, your thirtieth birthday, you staggering down the hallway after our terrible misunderstanding—that was the last time I saw you. Three days later, you sent Eun-Sook around to collect your belongings. You never gave me the chance to explain.

And now—you're doing it again. Making a fool of yourself, and of me. You're digging your fingers into my weak spots, you sneaky bitch, and grasping, twisting—

•••

You open your eyes. The apartment's not quite the same as how you remember it. That awful, stylised photograph of Muktinath Temple against the Himalayas is still there, but this distressed leather couch cupping your body like a damp palm is new. You've never seen the kitchen so cluttered with takeaway boxes, nor the contents of the wardrobe spilling out so messily across the carpet.

Your mouth is sticky with a ferrous tang. There are odd aches and pains in your new body, but you relish the sensations. You focus your energy and twitch the muscles of your right arm. Your hand rises in front of your face: large, pale, covered in fine blonde hairs.

Strength rushes through your body in a sudden torrent. You sit bolt upright, swing your long legs over the side of the couch. You misjudge the movement. Overbalance, teeter too far to the other side. Then you find your centre of gravity and rise to your feet. The balcony door stands ajar, letting in a soft breeze and the muted sounds of the city below: an orchestra of car horns, the clanking of a tram like bright cymbals, a street sweeper's baritone hum.

Your laugh rumbles through the apartment, tickling your throat. It'll take some time, but you think you can get used to this.

Street Fight Franchesca Walker

Franchesca Walker is a Māori and Pākehā (New Zealand European) writer and storyteller who grew up in Aotearoa New Zealand and is gradually learning to call Australia home. She has been published on both sides of the Tasman Sea, most recently in *SBS Voices*, *Journal* and *Headland*.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning and already forty degrees outside. We'd kept the blinds closed and set ourselves up in front of the fan but sweat still pooled beneath my thighs. Alex lay next to me on the couch, dressed only in his undies and watching *Friends* reruns on TV. I scrolled through my phone, counting down the hours until sunset.

A post from James (No. 15) on our street's social media page caught my eye. *Just in case anyone ever needs an ambo or firey*, he'd written and attached an article describing how an ambulance heading to an emergency had been forced to do a U-turn and find another route because the cars parked along our street made it too narrow to get through.

Carol (No. 121) had commented underneath, blaming the weeping peppermint trees on the verge. *The council should get rid of them and build car bays instead. I'm sick of our mirrors being clipped by people speeding down the street.*

I read it to Alex, who scoffed. 'Her cars are getting clipped because they're hanging out in the middle of the bloody road.'

Carol drove an SUV, her husband Sarvesh had a ute. They were both massive—their bonnets came up to my shoulder—and incredibly shiny, courtesy of the hours Sarvesh spent washing them every weekend. He'd back them onto the verge until their boots were in line with the footpath, their headlights hanging out over the road. Then he'd drag the hose from his front yard and spend a good hour circling one, then the other, watering, soaping, watering again. Alex and I glared as we walked past, raising our voices about how disrespectful it was, taking up so much public space, wasting so much water on cars. We only did this if no one was outside, though—when Sarvesh was there, we'd wave and smile and yell a cheery hello, waiting until we were past the next house before muttering how rude he was.

Other people on our street liked Carol's comment—first one, then three, then twenty-seven.

Agreed, Allan (No. 65) replied. *Accident waiting to happen. I saw a car come from the Sefton end the other day and only just miss a car coming from the other direction. Not enough visibility.*

His comment got a bunch of likes too, the number of blue thumbs climbing faster than an Oxbridge old boy up the corporate ladder. Carol evidently saw this as an endorsement of her proposal because a couple of weeks after James' original post, she wrote her own: *In light of Sandon Street's widespread support for the creation of car bays, I have made an e-petition requesting the City remove the trees from the verge and replace them with parking.*

She attached a link to the e-petition and asked everyone to sign.

I was down by the river when I read what she'd written. It was my Saturday ritual—I'd spend an hour or two watching swans waddle across the park while screaming kids tried to catch them, checking social media when that got boring.

'What the hell?' I exclaimed, startling a man walking past with his dog. I hadn't cared when Carol's carparks were hypothetical but now she'd gone too far. I pictured the eighty-year-old trees wrapped in guide ropes, heard the buzz of chainsaws as they were brought down one-by-one.

Clicking on the comment box beneath Carol's post, I typed, *I don't agree trees should be sacrificed for carparks. They lower the temperature and, considering the summer we've had, I would've thought everyone would be in favour of that.*

Our city has the lowest tree canopy of all the capital cities in Australia. According to the ABC, less than twenty per cent of the city is covered.

I attached the article that I'd quickly googled to add weight to my argument. I wanted to add, *Maybe limit your family to one goddamn car and buy smaller vehicles, Carol*, but decided against it. Based on how the administrator (Antonio (No. 18)) had dealt with past controversies on the page, I knew he'd claim it breached community standards and ban me. Although I liked the idea of scrolling social media without being assaulted by posts about dodgy-looking people testing car doors late at night or asbestos at a nearby worksite, I also didn't want to miss the offers of free lemons or free furniture that popped up between the bouts of neighbourly paranoia.

Jeanine (No. 45) messaged me that evening while I was in our courtyard watering the silverbeet, the only vegetable that had made it through summer. Switching the hose to my left hand, I pulled my phone from my pocket and read what she'd written.

Saw your comment under Carol's post and 100 per cent agree. I've begun an e-petition to counter hers. It'll be considered by the Council at its next meeting. Maybe you wanna come?

Across the street, the garage door at No. 10 slowly opened and our neighbour Rosa emerged like a cuckoo from some bizarre suburban cuckoo clock—yoga pants and sandals, hair pulled back in a ponytail, leaf blower in one hand. She worked down one side of her driveway and up the other in a drunken zig-zag pattern, the leaf blower's erratic whine piercing the air. Every day was the same: the annoying noise, the obsessive maintenance of order. It drove me insane.

I bet Rosa would jump at the chance of getting rid of the trees, I thought.

I messaged Jeanine back: *Yup. I'm in.*

The public gallery was already packed when I arrived at the council chambers, although most of the seats were empty. People huddled in small groups along the walls, shooting glances at one another across the room. Like me, they held one of the pamphlets that had been laid out next to the door, explaining the process the meeting would follow.

Carol held court down the front, next to a low wall dividing the gallery from where the councillors sat. Surrounded by her supporters, she preened, greeting each new arrival with a royal incline of her head. Jeanine was on the far side of the room, locked in an intense conversation with a man with a weathered face and shoulder-length grey hair. An Akubra in hand, the man made short, jabbing motions to emphasise each of his sentences while Jeanine nodded vigorously, her thick-rimmed glasses slipping a little further down her nose with each nod. Making my way over to them, I introduced myself to the man, who wrapped my hand in a tight grip and barked out a sharp 'Greg,' and made small talk until the meeting began.

'Item eight, petitions.'

The mayor's voice jolted me out of the stupor I had fallen into. For over an hour, the council had waded through the minutiae of local government. Adopting the previous meeting's minutes, councillors' leaves of absence, declarations of interest—each item was so boring that I'd been lulled into a sort of a bureaucratic coma. Hearing the word 'petition', I perked up and leaned forward in my seat; others around me did the same.

The mayor continued. 'Do any councillors have petitions to table?'

A small, bird-like woman raised her hand. 'I have a petition from Carol Kaul to remove the trees from the verge of Sandon Street and replace them with car bays.'

Next to me, I felt Greg tense. He began bouncing his leg up and down, the Akubra he'd rested over his knee like a cowboy on a bucking bull.

'Reasons for the request include the narrowness of the street,' the councillor read from a sheet of paper, 'and resulting issues caused by street parking and the damage caused by tree roots and leaves to residents' properties.'

This was obviously too much for Greg. 'Dendrophobes!' he yelled.

The entire chamber turned to look at him. The councillor, who'd taken a breath before reading the next part of the summary, sat with her mouth open like a hooked fish slowly dying on a pier.

'Dendrophobes!' Greg yelled again, just in case anyone hadn't heard him the first time. 'They're afraid of trees, that's all it is. Terrified of leaves and bark and, and—' he stuttered, struggling to find another part of the tree to list, '—and NATURE.'

Carol, twisting in her seat, glared at Greg. 'Would you shut up?'

Ripping his Akubra from his knee, he waved it in her direction as if trying to erase her words from the air. 'This is a public proceeding. I have a right to be here and have my views heard.'

Rosa, sitting next to Greg with only a single empty seat separating them, took up Carol's cause. 'Yes, but you don't have a right to interrupt proceedings.'

I bloody knew she'd do anything to get rid of those leaves, I thought, looking around Greg's substantial body mass and catching her eye. I pursed my lips and slowly shook my head. This obviously enraged Rosa, because she proceeded to roll up her procedures pamphlet until it formed a mini bat and reach across no man's land to smack Greg on the arm. Greg, who had, until then, been focusing his attention on Carol, leapt at the minor assault, causing his Akubra to fly from his hand and across the gallery and catch a small boy in the face.

Then it was all on. Like a crowd enraged at a bad umpiring call, we leapt to our feet as one. Greg seemed to have become possessed with the spirit of a car dealership's waving inflatable tube man, flailing his hands while making groans usually reserved for cartoon ghosts and calling, 'I'm a big scary tree!'

On my other side, Jeanine was stomping her feet and screaming so loudly I temporarily lost hearing in one ear. Someone—I didn't see who—tore up their procedures pamphlet and began flinging tiny bits across the

room. Flecks of spit hit my forehead and I briefly wondered whether it belonged to me or someone else, before realising I didn't care. At the end of the row, a girl, aged about seven, dropped to the ground and covered her head with her arms. Swear words—the kinds I never thought my neighbours would've known—were flung from one side of the room to the other like a perverse game of table tennis.

Down the front, Carol banged the dividing wall and yelled, 'Listen to me. Listen to me. Listen to me.'

On the other side of the divide, a staff member hustled councillors out a side door. I caught a glimpse of a councillor's face as she left; she looked shocked and disgusted but also strangely enthralled. Her expression reminded me of how I'd felt, years ago, when I'd seen a cockroach dragging a cigarette down the footpath.

This is definitely going to be in the news tomorrow, a small part of my brain thought as I leapt on my seat and started making leaf blower noises in Rosa's direction.

Chaotic Bilyabrook Council meeting ends with residents being told to 'go away and sort it out'

A Bilyabrook council meeting ended this week with residents being told to hold a meeting to discuss a proposal to replace street trees with parking bays.

The direction came after local residents turned on each other at the Tuesday night meeting as the council considered two opposing petitions. Sandon Street resident Carol Kaul had petitioned the Council for the parking bays but was opposed by another petition from Jeanine Jackson, who is also a Sandon Street resident.

Councillor Julie Mollica was reading out Mrs Kaul's petition when she was interrupted by shouting from the public gallery.

"I believe a member of the public started accusing others in the gallery of being afraid of trees," Cr Mollica said after the meeting. "A child was hit with a hat, then people started screaming at each other and jumping on chairs."

Council CEO Philippa Pearson said the meeting was adjourned for 10 minutes as councillors were moved to another room. They were never in any danger, Ms Pearson said.

Once order had been restored in the gallery, the council recommended Sandon Street residents hold a street meeting to reach an agreed position. "You all need to go away and sort it out amongst yourselves," Mayor Lionel Taylor told the residents. "This is not the sort of behaviour we expect in a council meeting."

Ms Pearson will attend the meeting as the council's representative and report back about the street's decision.

Mrs Kaul and Ms Jackson have been approached for comment.

It rained the night before the meeting, thick heavy drops pummelling the street and pooling in the gutters. That morning, Alex and I walked down to the river and stared at the water. Full of sediment, it churned downstream in one seemingly undividable mass, ignoring the traditional boundary between river and land, making it impossible to say where one ended and the other started. I heard a dull thump upstream and, turning, saw a log ricochet off the bridge.

More rain was predicted. Some meteorologists said it was an atmospheric river where water vapour was sucked from the ocean and dumped on the land, but others said we'd never experienced something like that before and doubted we'd start now. No-one on Sandon Street suggested the meeting should be called off. Caught in the middle of a staring competition, neither side wanted to blink first.

We met halfway down the street, outside numbers 70 and 71. Neutral territory, Jeanine and Carol had decreed, after their owners had told both of them to piss off when they'd knocked on their doors seeking support for their petitions. Someone had placed orange traffic cones across the street to stop cars from driving through and stuck a sign on each one: *Sandon Street Conference. Please Find Another Route.*

Alex and I each carried a dining chair as per the directions on the street's page. We wore waterproof jackets and woollen hats. Ready to ride out the storm, both environmental and street-wise, I joked.

A middle-aged man, who I recognised from the page as Allan (No. 65), came out his front gate as we neared the meeting point, carrying a collapsible table. For some reason, he'd decided to erect it before leaving the house and so hunched over, his arms stretched to grasp either side. His not-inconsiderable belly sat on the tabletop like an uncooked pudding.

'Need a hand?' Alex asked, giving his chair to me and reaching for one end of Allan's table.

Allan reared back as if Alex was about to punch him. 'What side are you on?' he spat. 'Parking bays or trees?' His eyes flicked from Alex to me, trying to align our faces with our profile pictures and any views we'd posted on the page.

Alex took a step back. 'Does it matter?'

'I don't want a tree-loving hippie touching my table,' Allan replied and, finding his answer in our shocked expressions, continued into the street where he lowered his table with a thump.

Directly opposite, Jeanine sat behind a massive jarrah table with Greg and a handful of other people I'd met in the council foyer after the now-infamous meeting. We placed our chairs behind them and silently watched our neighbours gather around Allan's table, the men greeting each other with a firm handshake or slap on the back, the women waving, heavy bangles jangling on their wrists. They did their best to ignore us, but every so often one of them looked our way as if to check we weren't advancing on them.

The rain arrived before the meeting could begin. There wasn't much warning, just a clap of thunder so loud it shook our table. Torrents—sitting in the middle of Sandon Street, I finally realised what the word meant. Water fell from the sky as if each raindrop was trying to set an individual speed record, the gutters filled then quickly overflowed, the street was soon covered in an inch of water.

Yet if you'd stumbled across us at that precise moment, you would have thought it was a beautiful summer's day. Our faces were scoured red by the rain, our waterlogged clothes hung from our limbs like Spanish moss, and it became difficult to see each other through the watery veil descending from the sky, but none of us moved. We all remained on our respective ends of the street, glaring in the increasingly low light, daring each other to break first so we could claim the moral victory.

Couldn't even handle a bit of rain, we'd crow at their retreating backs. Obviously not that committed to the cause if they run at the first sign of bad weather.

Our impasse was broken by the river bursting its banks. The roar reached us first, then the cracking of toppling powerlines and screaming house alarms set off by the power outage. The world suddenly seemed upside down and the wrong way round; I could no longer tell what order things were happening in and I couldn't say with any certainty where the earth ended and the sky began. It simply seemed as if we had been

engulfed in a world of water. It came from all directions—beneath our feet, above our heads.

Jeanine yelled at me, but I failed to catch her words. Seeing my confusion, she pointed at the nearest peppermint tree, turned, and waded towards it. Alex grabbed my hand and followed, yelling at others to head for the trees. Some did, using the nearest branch to hoist themselves into the canopy, but others began making their way home. Maybe they thought it was safer there.

Jeanine and Alex climbed the tree and reached down to pull me up. They straddled a branch each, while I stood in a fork and clung to the trunk. We had to move twice, climbing higher as the water rose. Jeanine threw off her glasses—with so much water covering them, she couldn't see anything anyway. Through the leaves, I glimpsed people being knocked down by logs barrelling down the street or losing their footing and being swept away. They were torn bits of colourful paper being tossed about in the water.

At one point, Carol's SUV floated past with Carol—who must've made her way home when the water started rising—spreadeagled on the roof. Her hair was plastered to her forehead and her eyeliner, usually so impeccable, was running down her face. I reached out instinctively, yelling at her to grab my hand, while Alex held the back of my jacket and anchored me to the tree. She turned towards my voice and, after flicking the water from her eyes, spotted me. I thought she lifted her hand as if she was about to take mine, and I leaned further out, causing Alex to grunt with effort. But I must have been wrong because her fingers never touched mine and the last thing I remember was her lying with her cheek against the roof of her SUV like a lover as they were both carried down the street.

Mosquito Bird Central Michael Farrell

Michael Farrell, from Bombala, NSW, now living in Melbourne, has published frequently in international and Australian journals, including *Westerly*. Michael's latest book publication is *Googlecholia* (Giramondo, 2022).

Like Nietzsche¹, I was born in a rented country mansion. Cherries fell, pulverised, on the roofs, and us. From the beginning, resisting romantic decay, and letting refutation win the day. Reproaches came later. Dependable, defensive, deadly, were three qualities upheld for praise by the local constabulary, and the maids. Mince pies rained on June 25. Verses were sung extempore. I can show you the trauma on just one wrist: no one there believed in Schopenhauer² either. Careful dairy cows walked through the fields: like they were minefields, as if they'd watched too much serious TV. Depeche Mode had played in that field once, and sometimes I was sure I could hear their songs reverberating in the grass³. Degrading had a different meaning, then, referring to the accumulation of earth and weed growth, the occasional skeleton [pluralise for band name? ed.] on roads and other once-cleared areas. There was a ghost in the keyboard, rarely acknowledged. MacBook Airs had a sound that was literally underhand, creepily queer, and spy-like, compared to the vigorous heteronormativity⁴ of a typewriter. Urging caution, dried chrysanthemums could mean anything, fresh nasturtiums were not lunch, fluid relations did what fluid relations do, foster Jersey calves when their mothers blew up,

or otherwise died. Antiquated windmills creaked, wedge-tailed eagles freaked out everything smaller than a Jersey cow. I loved them, I admit. I thought of putting on Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Respectful / Respectable Prostitute*⁵, or adapting *Love in a Cold Climate*⁶ to a warmer one, with wedge-tailed eagles, and roos. Admit it. Nietzsche didn't carry a sword easily⁷. Only humans dance for gods.

Notes

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche 1844–1900, German philosopher. Arthur Schopenhauer 1788–1860, German philosopher.
- 3 'Blasphemous Rumours', for one example. See Spotify etc.
- 4 Still not accepted as a word by my, admittedly old, version of Word (2011, twenty years after the terms was 'popularised' by Michael Warner; poem written 2023 on secondhand laptop).
- 5 Play by Jean-Paul Sartre.
- 6 Novel by Nancy Mitford.
- 7 Or did he? See J. E. Austen Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 33, on the custom of sword-wearing, and its decline.

Axe Marks in Tree Trunks

Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon

After the stories of Ljube Pavlinovich
and Remy Beus¹

Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon is a writer, songwriter and educator who was raised on a farm by her Croatian-immigrant parents. She has read and performed her music and poetry across Australia and the United States. Her poetry and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Westerly*, *Meanjin*, *The Australian* and *ABR*, and she has won several major prizes including The Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize and the KSP Poetry Prize. Her second poetry collection, *If There Is a Butterfly That Drinks Tears* was released in 2023 by Life Before Man Books. Recently, Natalie completed a PhD on erasure poetry and cultural amnesia.

To find my way home dad marked trees with an axe.
In the cut, tree trunks bleed amber lollies of sap,
pliant and malleable as 'girl', a figure in wax.

At nine I dance five miles through bush, trunk to phalanx,
leaf to fingertip. School the crack of one handclap.
To find my way home dad marked trees with an axe.

Won a scholarship—my view through the lens, error parallax—
only boys were allowed an education. Caught in a mantrap,
became pliant and malleable as 'woman', a figure in wax.

Re-shaped with knives, pliant hands, peculiar English syntax.
Girls only left home when they married—a ring entrapped;
to find my way home dad marked trees with an axe.

Fired in the kiln of tradition and culture, no longer clay or wax,
Hardened and breakable, I long for the days I was that
pliant and malleable 'girl', a figure in wax.

'We need you at home,' so I stayed, lived a life of anti-climax.
Who knew my life was a gift for me to unwrap?
To find my way home dad marked trees with an axe,
Now lost; pliant and malleable 'girl', a figure in wax.

Note

- ¹ These Croatian settler women's oral histories were recorded and collated by May Butko and posted on the Croats in WA website at <https://croatiansinwa.com.au/2017/02/28/women-in-wa/>. Permission has been given by May Butko and the Villa Dalmacia Historical society to use the material. Direct quotes from oral histories are in italics.

Hodge
after Thomas Hardy
Lisa Collyer

Lisa Collyer is a poet and educator in Boorloo. Her debut collection, *How to Order Eggs Sunny Side Up* (2023), is published with Life Before Man Books, and was short-listed for the Dorothy Hewett Award as a preliminary manuscript.

Tess busied sprinkling linen lighting tallow leading the cart before the horse directed fate rising before dawn walked miles and miles haymaking harvesting milking butter-making hoped extinguished young supervis(ed) fowl purvey(ed) fowl nurse(d) fowl surgeon(ed) fowl (be) friend(ed) fowl and whistled to fowl lugged baskets taking stock reaching village after village binding corn drawing reeds patting cotton bring more pastoral chores stooping to gather garlic moves bovine-like gathering Sorrow pushing to pay meet red tyrant holding baskets brings bacon kneels to tie boots ties sheaves beating sunrise unfastened shirt suckling Sorrow fastened shirt stooped low draw reeds completed work into the night tying sheaves staying to work-on plucking feathers cramming geese making hay started working squirting milk pressing udders buried Sorrow cool cream running cream cut-off fat took stock held tools began working cutting ears service(d) farms broke back trudged in boots set to work young hacking hay drawing reeds trudged on pulled out tools carried bundles seizing days crawling hay gathering sheaves cutting ears resumed work walked miles and miles standing on feet chopping-off ears throwing bundles slaved all day sweded grubbing swede-trimming sliced swedes storing swedes untie sheaves untie sheaves untying sheaves untying sheaves kept going laboured long never stirred from sorrow

Note

All verbs are taken from *Tess of the D'urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, in relation to Tess's work activities.

We Slept
Arna Radovich

Arna Radovich writes across genre and form with a particular focus on poetry and short fiction. Her work can be found in publications such as *Eucalypt: A Tanka Journal*, *Under the Same Moon: Fourth Australian Haiku Anthology*, *Poetry for the Planet*, *Meniscus* and *ZineWest*. Her collection of short fiction *Limits of Forgetting* (RoseyRavelston Books) was published earlier this year.

You slept through the worst of it, our mother said to us, night after night.

We slept even though our balloon-like bellies were only filled with air.

We slept just like we did once at a sleepover when our brother's friend played a computer game so loud that our ears rang with gunfire for days.

We slept the sleep of the dead, though we were only dreaming, or thought we were.

We slept because we'd walked for days and years and months and minutes and seconds and microseconds—and in all the ways that time can be measured, we walked.

We slept because we thought it was safer to pretend that we were home in our beds, even though our beds were no longer there, but we liked the sound of the word, and how the letter 'b' resonated better than b-ombs in our heads.

We slept because our mother told us *we should*, because there was more walking to be had in the morning. *If we survived our sleep*, she said.

We slept and slept and slept until there was no more sleep to be found anywhere, in all the world.

We tried to sleep even then. You do whatever you're told when you fear the point of a gun against your head, when the rain of destruction goes on and on and on.

We slept until we were as transparent as ghosts. And then, even when we could no longer feel our feet, we walked and walked and walked ...

Alchemy Meg Drummond-Wilson

Meg Drummond-Wilson is a PhD candidate at The University of Western Australia. Her main field of research is historical archaeology. She is fascinated by the stories we tell about how humanity came to be here, in this strangest of moments.

Open Mum's spice cupboard, you'll find me inside.

Me, a child, inching open the swollen, white-peel wood. Sticky-lidded bottles, the rosewater unbelievable and sweet. Vanilla extract, cardamom, star anise, turmeric like the sun—these warm-smelling things, these sailing-ship things, these traded, pillaged, these faraway things—

the bi-carbonate soda, the red food dye leaking. Rock salt, antacids, clove oil for your aching teeth. Dust.

A thousand boots on a thousand beaches.

Not organised, or labelled. It was an apothecary and a foreign land and I felt myself an explorer, inching across that vague desert, that nameless sea. Skeins of fine silk thread pulling tight across the earth. And so, No people at the heart of it but I. I knew what was home and what was strange and where the two might blur.

I felt myself Merlin.

I felt myself a six-year-old girl, and therefore,

inclined mostly towards potions, and dirt,

and long journeys upon my father's creaking shoulders, long journeys cross-legged on the kitchen floor.

From the Depths Ian C Smith

Ian C Smith's work has been published in BBC's Radio 4 Sounds, *Cable Street*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Griffith Review*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *Southword* and *Stand*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy* (Ginninderra Press, 2014). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.

Crunching shells along Ninety-Mile Beach on the Tasman Sea past fishermen who look long-suffering we push onward to fossick the ruins of an early settlement glassworks at Lake Tyers. A slight hangover vies with my milled hip to scuttle me, when I see in the silvery haze a lone gull ruffled by sea breeze beside something like a sentinel. A large flat stone? Driftwood? Drawing close I think, Driftwood my arse, more like a squid, choicest bits a gull's breakfast.

I beckon our two sons, skylarking behind with their mother, who organise to bear aloft the squid's flaccid corpse, savage marine biologists, or, more like, lords of the rings, the ocean's orchestra blaring a symbolic/cymbalic triumphal fanfare for the skewered creature whose kind interested Aristotle, ink slashing tattoos like mine down aching arms, pufferfish gaping in rictus amidst plastic wrack and a sealed bottle with no message furled inside that would have made our morning even more adventurous.

See us, two lads not much older than our boys now, cell door left ajar, on bare boards with blankets. Desperadoes experienced much worse going by the vulgar archive of misspelled rage on walls smelling of old stone cold to our touch. All done, we settle to sleep after cheekily asking to keep our carton of stolen *Camels*, claiming to have swapped it with homeless people for food, inverting the truth, a story I shall one day want to tell.

The effort to claim our hot merchandise was worth a whirl, but, like us, tired and hopeless. We had fled big trouble at school, even bigger at home, almost reached the state border hitchhiking when a light flashing from a squad car's revolving dome in gathering gloom signalled the end of our ambitious flight to freedom. At daybreak a grinning cop booming, Wakey

wakey, hands off snakey, brought eggs and tea prepared by his wife, grub for the condemned. But time would eventually set us free.

In yet another time zone, evening falling, I remember resting on a tombstone in a cemetery favoured by tourists with the girl who was to become our boys' mother, fingers curled together, discussing freedom's cascade of discoveries, the multiple ways we avoided and limited expenditure combining small-time illegal with the morally dubious. At night she lit candles. Hushed, in holy light, we heard rats scuttling while I picked an electricity meter's lock, feeding it the same coins again. The assortment of characters encountered then, and even our casual jobs, were drastic, bizarre.

Evening on the day of the squid, the boys' arms scrubbed clean against their protests, we drive to the wharf restaurant. While she assessed her op shop chic wardrobe I recalled the abyss between years eight and sixteen of my belated formal education, mind drifting to our squat back when, its view of a hulking nuclear power plant and the English Channel, wondering if our derelict building still exists, my palace of memory swarming, a sweet sadness stealing over me in thrall to the enigma of those days of wonder—something like a Terrence Malick film, the voiceover crackling a liturgy of time swept away.

**Reading John Berger &
Jean Mohr's *A Fortunate
Man in the St Mary's Hall*
medical library
Cameron Lowe**

Cameron Lowe is the author of two book-length collections of poetry: *Porch Music* (Whitmore Press, 2010) and *Circle Work* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2013). He lives in Geelong.

there's a smell
of toast

from the cleaner's
breakfast

for the door
is open

to step
through

pages—
past

landscape's
curtain—

& breathe in
this space—

I hadn't counted
on this—

subtle ways of
seeing

leaf after leaf
reveal

itself. Now
rain on

timber boards—
now

breathe in
this space—

white sky
presses

on stained
glass—

the urge to
step

into strange
seasons

to see
deeper

than forest's
edge. Now

breathe
in this space—

No Longer Human Luoyang Chen

Luoyang CHEN is the author of *Flow (Red River/Centre for Stories, 2023)*. He writes poetry and practices social work.

Under the tree I slept. Not even the cold or the rain could win this battle with exhaustion. When I wake up with a sudden pain in my chest, I utter the most definitive groan. Anguish. I still don't know what the time is; I have not acquired the skills it requires to survive in the jungle. All my life I've been socialised to pretend and tell lies. In the jungle, lies are useless; you can't even compare them to the cloud. A cloud is floating above me. Perhaps I should try again to crawl away out of this jungle.

•••

At exactly 4.36pm I wake up with a sudden pain in my chest and uttered: Ahhh... There's nothing stimulating on the internet. My neck and shoulders are sore. My back and my head hurt. There's no natural light in my room. And I can't even read a book. Before the chest pain, in my dream, there was this jungle and in it my lie/labour was unusable. It rained also. I was depleted; I did not have any strength in me to punch the cloud. I start yawning again. Perhaps I should try to crawl out of this bed before I deteriorate further and get tripped over by the dreamline again.

•••

How do my Instagram followings afford their oversea holidays? Perhaps I need a financial advisor. I no longer live in an inner suburb of Melbourne. This is to say that I need to acquire a driver's licence. I also need to buy a car which has to be a used one. (I have no problem with possessing a used item.) Possession is a wrong word. But ethics is a human concept and today I am barely a human. This was earlier—I exited a work meeting with a dramatic punchline: I have deteriorated; I need to go home. Not even humiliation or hunger could win this battle of survival with exhaustion. And what is home if not complete stillness and a bed to lie on? Tomorrow

I have a driving lesson at eight o'clock. Now, I am crawling away into the jungle.

•••

In their 20s, my parents began travelling between their bed and a jungle. ~~My mother and father were born poor.~~ My mother and father were born to labour. On occasions, my mother's mother, for example, ate barks to survive. My father lost his father at the age of 16. When my parents' travelling made concrete out of sand, gravel, sweat and cement, my father's mother grasped my wrist in front of her deceased husband's altar and said: Leave. Leave when you still can. My pilgrimage into a jungle began soon after. My ability to smell gradually became desensitised. Certain sweat is no longer pheromonal. The jungle is large and very loud. Wind bustling through the branches of the trees, the rain is coming down any second. I need to get going. My chest hurts.

•••

What is a bed?

A bed is hormonal. A bed is transcendental. A bed is a peacock fanning out its tail twice a day, 730 times a year.

What is a bed?

A bed is a jungle.

What is a jungle?

A jungle is transnational. A jungle is transgenerational.

•••

This morning I wake up, slightly fidgety, increasingly orientated. I push open the window. The sky has cleared up. I make myself a cup of instant coffee. I brush my teeth and comb my hair. I brush my teeth and comb my hair. I dress myself up in a fresh, but unironed, T-shirt. One more step. With this trans-understanding, I am ready to walk into the jungle and try again.

Suspension
Renee Pettitt-Schipp
after Peter Boyle

Reneé Pettitt-Schipp is the author of the award-winning collection of poetry, *The Sky Runs Right Through Us* (UWAP, 2018). Reneé's debut nonfiction work, *The Archipelago of Us*, about teaching asylum seekers on Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, was released by Fremantle Press in 2023. Reneé currently lives in the Great Southern region of Western Australia where she is writing her second poetry collection.

How many things in the world still have no name—
hammer of mothwing at windows of warm houses
scrape of page into the night's vast stillness
sharpness of stars when first rains have washed forest air

a word for the gap between my life
and another's and what lives there

we need new nouns
for fragile privilege
dictionaries of modern deaths
an index for fresh suffering
transcending old borders

the sudden uncertain
a term for our strange suspension

now more than ever
I need a word for this gift of witness—
the years it took for your boy-face to age into a man
a word for my hand reaching for you in the darkness
still finding you there your moth breath
fluttering between the sheets
thin-winged and vital against
all odds

The Red Coat
Catherine Johnstone

Catherine is a queer writer from Naarm, Melbourne, with previous careers as short film writer/director and contemporary artist. Her creative nonfiction essays and poetry have been published in journals such as *Meniscus* and *Going Down Swinging* and she has been awarded fellowships at *Varuna* (online, 2022) and *KSP* (2023).

Fifteen beginnings

1. I don't know how to write this. How to filter the fragments into neat topics like memory, trauma, violence, colonisation. I don't know how to give myself room to speak, how to hold the fear without giving into it. I don't know if I have the right to speak at all. I can't unpick the strands.

2. I was the stranger, the kablunâk, the one who didn't belong in the land of Inughuit and icebergs. I came from the land of sun, which belongs to the Wallumedegal people. Though at that stage I didn't know the name of my childhood land.

3. Memory stutters. Red coat. Bearskin pants. Aurora Borealis in the Arctic sky.

4. Who am I to talk about violence?

5. To get to Qaanaaq in Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland, I first caught a plane from Copenhagen to Thule Air Base¹. In the helicopter afterwards as I clipped on my seatbelt, I asked the woman beside me if she spoke English. She said, Yes. Where are you from? I asked. She said she was Danish and lived with her husband in Qaanaaq. I asked if she worked there and she said she was the nurse and her husband was the doctor. They were on a contract. She asked me why I was going there, but that answer was complicated.

After hitch-hiking from Greece to Denmark, sleeping in fields or under bridges, I wanted to challenge myself further and venture away from the usual backpacker destinations. I also wanted to test my limits and experience the adrenaline of danger. It wasn't drugs or drinking that attracted me when I was young. But now I'm so risk-averse, I will barely do an off-the-beaten-track walk by the creek. I read about Kalaallit Nunaat and became interested in the Inuit people, their customs and myths so

I decided to head even further north to one of the settlements closest to the North Pole. The helicopter blades thumped overhead.

I'm interested in Greenland, I said. She asked me where I would live and my face felt hot. I had tried to organise staying with an Inughuit family but I couldn't find anywhere to stay. You know there's no tourist accommodation in the town? she asked. The helicopter dipped as I said, Yes. She told me they needed a nanny to look after their three children. Would I like to live with them at the beginning and look after the children? Yes, I said.

6. It happened on October 17 in Qaanaaq, a town of about six hundred people. Arctic temperatures were below freezing. I was looking after J, a three-year-old Danish boy. He wore a red coat that day. The hours of daylight were decreasing, and the sun was hidden by cloud. The sky was grey and gold and red.

7. More than forty years ago, a man with two rifles lurched around the small town and threatened to shoot people.

8. Violence tears strips off memory and leaves blanks.

9. I've tried to write about that October day many times, but I run away to take the washing off the line, put socks in the sock drawer, T-shirts in the T-shirt drawer, knickers in the knicker drawer, jumpers in the jumper drawer. Order restored.

10. When I lived in Kalaallit Nunaat, I didn't know I was a privileged white girl. You'd think that would be obvious, but no. I'd saved up money from jobs at the Pizza Hut and market research while I was at university and off I went to discover the world. 'Girl' is the right word for me because even though I was twenty-two, I was still a child.

11. I'd forgotten about the event until I read a flimsy airmail letter my mother had kept for decades.

12. The first time I saw a man shot was in a settlement close to the North Pole. I worked as a live-in nanny for the town doctor and nurse. I was outside in the snow and heard what sounded like a gunshot. The doctor ran towards me carrying his rifle. A man is threatening to shoot people, he said. Radio the American Air Base to request officers, he said. J is inside, so stay in the house to look after him.

13. Can't remember what was inside the house with the Danish family. IKEA furniture? Don't think so. Must have had own room. Can't remember. J had a red coat. Tried to learn Danish in that Inuit town with that Danish family. Too much to learn. Couldn't talk properly. Once I washed my hair. Went outside. Beginning of winter. Short days. Sun hazed with gold. Hair froze into icicles. One day J had a tantrum. Couldn't make him put on his coat. Took him out into the cold without his coat.

Bad Cathy. Bad to be there. Bad to not take proper care of J. Bad girl to make your parents worry.

14. She didn't know much about anything. Knew facts from her social work degree like how to ask open questions, but really she knew nothing. She wanted adventure, to learn about the world. She didn't know how little she knew.

15. You assembled all you saw: wooden huts scattered up the hillside, icebergs on the sea. You assembled all you heard: the boy asked for his parents, the dial tone as you rang the air force base. You assembled all you touched: the hand of the little boy, the cold phone (though you've forgotten whether it was a landline or a satellite phone). You assembled the smell of tear gas, the sweat of your fear. You assembled everything and packaged it into a corner of your mind like a dusty room behind a theatre.

Thirty-two middles

1. I'm sorry I was blind.

2. The man had consumed alcohol the night before. At that time Denmark issued every adult in Greenland with an Imigassarsuit, an alcohol ration booklet valid for a month. Many would drink all their ration on the first day. I had one too, a yellow booklet with columns of points that the storekeeper cut out when you bought alcohol. The man's country had been invaded by Western customs and imports such as alcohol and disease. I was also an invader.

3. I thrashed the memory into a pulp.

4. When I left Australia, I wanted to meet people from other cultures and extend myself beyond my limited childhood world. And yet, at the beginning of my time in Kalaallit Nunaat, I lived with a white family.

5. Violence leaned into me, but I pushed it away. I scrambled it into the back of my mind.

6. How dare you tell this story when you were an uninvited stranger?

7. I can't collect my thoughts. They're scattered all over the ground.

8. After two months in the small town of Qaanaaq, a young Inuit man invited me to live with him in a small village, Qeqertessuak, on Herbert Island, now uninhabited. It was twenty-four-hour darkness by then. Finally, I had the chance to get to know Inuit people and their culture more closely. One day I sat with other people on the sleeping platform in a hut. B wore sealskin kamiks up to her hips. She put Earl Grey teabags into cups and handed a cup to everyone but me. On the line across the room hung scraped sealskins. The blizzard shook the hut. It could have been an oversight, but I couldn't speak enough Inuktun/Greenlandic to find out if

I had done something culturally inappropriate. I sat there with cold hands. But what right did I have to be there anyway? For the Inughuit people, my presence there was probably like a bee in a cup of tea.

Despite my outsider presence, the people welcomed me, and I developed a bond with an Inuit grandmother, M, who showed me how to make sealskin gloves and check for seals in the nets. She was wise and gentle, though she too would get drunk at the beginning of the alcohol ration month, and then I couldn't recognise her. Once, on an alcohol day, I found her wandering outside in the cold darkness naked except for the kamiks on her feet. I guided her back home.

9. The man yelled as he wandered between the small wooden houses scattered up the hillside, kicked at the remains of an old sledge and avoided the tied-up huskies. He stopped near a platform with frozen seal-meat hunched on top.

10. For a long time, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't bear to take out each prop and piece of clothing, examine the backdrop and re-play the action on an ancient videocassette.

11. In the letter to my parents the day after, I told them there was some 'excitement' in the town. Such an inappropriate word. Was that youthful unawareness? An attempt to project the misconception that I was okay alone in an Arctic settlement with a plane out only once a month? Was I unaware of the tragedy of that man's breakdown caused by excessive alcohol introduced by Europeans? At least I understood the doctor's fear, himself a healer, at risk of being shot and having to shoot someone to prevent further injury or death.

12. Did I damage that fragile Inuit eco-system?

13. When I went to Kalaallit Nunaat, apart from emergencies by helicopter, the only way to travel around the area was by dog sled. Today the Inughuit people can no longer ride to the Canadian Arctic because the sea ice is no longer continuous in winter.

14. I want to be perfect, but I wound others and they wound me.

15. I ran inside the house and radioed the Base. The two older girls were at school and their mother was at the hospital. I put my arms around three-year-old J. Through the window behind him, I saw the man with two rifles. His anorak was stained but the fur of his bearskin pants was soft. His mind had disappeared somewhere wild.

16. Our minds are permeable. Things sift in and out.

17. I kept little J away from the windows. I must have wondered if I could keep him safe, afraid he would be hurt. I can still picture the town of Qaanaaq, the wooden houses scattered up the hillside, the racks of seal

meat, the blue-white icebergs floating on the sea. But I can't remember what was inside the house where I was with J.

18. With the melting of the ice, we've taken away food sources from the Inughuit people and stopped them visiting their relatives in Canada.

19. The man saw the doctor and lifted one of his rifles as if he was going to shoot, but instead he placed them on the ground and threw stones at the doctor until there were no more within reach. Then he grabbed his rifles and ran into our next-door neighbour's house to hide.

I couldn't see the man in the house next door, but I hoped he wouldn't come out and barge into our house. I couldn't see the doctor either. I don't know what he did while I waited with the boy until the helicopter blades clatter-clattered in the sky.

When the helicopter landed, officers jumped out holding tear gas guns. They ran into our house and one of them tried to shoot the gas into the house where the man was. Because the officer was exposed at the window, another one covered him with his gun.

After the officers came into our house, the doctor ran towards us. The man charged out of the neighbouring house. The doctor turned, aimed his rifle, and shot the man in the knee. In a town like that, without a police officer, a doctor had to do many things to keep people alive. When the man fell to the ground, the ice outside our house was stained red.

After the man was shot, the officers took him to the little hospital. I remember the Danish word used in that Inuit country. It was sygehus, a sick house for a sick man. I can't remember the Inuit word. For security reasons, they couldn't take him to the air base prison. Instead, they tied him to a bedhead in the hospital. I can't remember what happened to him after that. A man who had a heart attack that day was also in the hospital.

20. I lived there for four months. I travelled there with nowhere to live. The minus temperatures meant it was impossible to sleep outside. It's hard to believe I presumed an Inughuit person would invite me to live in their home when I was a coloniser too. Though I must have had some awareness of that, because in my journal I wrote about 'the enormity of my crime' of coming to Kalaallit Nunaat with nothing.

21. When I hear a helicopter, their blades sound like mutilation. Their searchlights arc across my house, my street, my Melbourne suburb. I imagine they search for an armed man who will burst through the glass doors into my lounge room. I will lie hurt on the floor while he exits along my hallway and out the front door.

22. The man was shot in the knee by the doctor. The word 'shot' is plosive. I can't imagine what it's like to be somewhere in the world today

surrounded by the shriek and bang of bombs. I can't imagine how that trauma could ever be healed.

23. I need a sygehus that will put salve on my memories and wrap them in a bandage. I'm not the only one who needs a sygehus.

24. Some days, I remember things, some days I forget.

25. I dream that children are lost or hurt. They plead for help, but my legs won't move, or I can't find them no matter how hard I look. When I wake up, my underarms are sweaty, and my neck is stiff.

26. Helicopter. Blades clattered. Men on ropes. Man came out. Rifles on ground. Threw stones. Doctor shot him. In the knee. Man fell. Ice stained red. J had red coat. Red, red, red.

27. A rifle is hard. It shines in the sun.

28. The world is in flames.

29. Kalaallit Nunaat is still part of the Kingdom of Denmark.

30. The man's bearskin pants were stained red with his blood.

31. I hurt. The man hurts. The doctor hurts. The people hurt. Everyone hurts.

32. You lost a scene in the back room of your mind, but you bring the backdrop, the props, and the characters into the light. The backdrop is moth-eaten, the old videotape plays in fits and starts, the clothes are musty, the character called Cathy is tired and has missing bits, but at least you can see it all now.

One ending

1. I can't remember if J wore his red coat that day or if blood stained the snow or the man had bearskin pants. I can't remember the colours of the sky or whether the Aurora Borealis gleamed. All I know is that my letters from Qaanaaq say the sky was grey, golden or red. Only these three colours.

Note

1 The Thule Air Base is now called Pituffik Space Base. Pituffik means 'the place the dogs are tied'.

The Impact of Missionaries

Jennifer Eadie

Jennifer Eadie is a writer, artist and a research fellow in the Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame, Yawuru Country.

It must start with a cleansing. No.

it started with a carcass/

'People think I'm a cannibal'¹

Driving there I saw the road in front of me disappear

in front of me/ it slipped

She told me the wind is cheeky/ it knocks around old bones

making everything smell soft

She took me into a dug-out church

carved-out walls and candles/ smell of burnt charcoal

showing me how there are

prayers held

in the ridges of those walls/

safe from dust [and sunlight and tourists and trucks]

but not from me/ I

I bowled and cut through their low hum

just like the wind outside/ too clumsy in this

place of worship

and despite my best intention

all I could see was a carcass

caught in the/

Note

1 writes Yambo Ouologuem, in his poem 'Tomatoes' (1975).

About Happiness

Kevin Brophy

Kevin Brophy is a past winner of the Calibre Prize for an outstanding essay, and the Michel Wright Prize for poetry. His fiction has been shortlisted for the Vogel and FAW Christina Stead awards. He has been patron of the Melbourne Poets Union since 2004 and is Emeritus Professor at the University of Melbourne. In 2021 he was awarded an Order of Australia for services to creative writing. His latest book is *The Lion in Love* (Finlay Lloyd, 2022).

The river turns its glint green belly to the day
along beside thin trees bristling at
construction cranes festooned in safety flags.
Police cars on our path fret in blue and red.

Further up near the oily mouth of a dark canal
where currents barely shift along
a man shows us plastic sheets he sleeps beneath,
and on his phone videos of Sufis—skirts out, hats on,
arms flung like galaxies—and says he needn't
think, write or even pray because
a famous prophet took up words and made them
spin and blaze and sing in tender
songs that beggars swear can cure hunger.

The morning sun flies a cloudy knot of scarves.
A low grey barge blows, delivering sand upriver.
In a pale-lit lane a child squeals at her mother.
Under mist drizzling down the day's leaky seams
a paper-maker shuts fast the door to her shop.
Blades of light slice shade from colour
as a blackbird, fist-sized revelation, lifts from a limb.
We walk in this mist among statues wearing garlands.

Uniforms and flags, plastic sheets and Sufi videos
beside a slow canal might be all we'll need for sure
though it's still the promised happiness we long for.

Each river's dreaming tongue must taste earth's salt at last.
Like a boat unlashd from its capstan, each soul waking
in a doorway must swivel out into the sweeping currents.

*Every day I watch my Sufi dance it makes me happy,
but not for long, not for long enough,*
the man had said, snapping closed his phone
as if it might explode.

A wooden door slams shut somewhere loud.
Trees along the river register the wood's ovation
as a blow that stops all sound for a moment.

Shot through with morning light time slips ahead and past us
pauseless as this river's sleepless spinning onward happy rush.

A Memorial Trail for Griff Watkins Nathan Hobby

Nathan Hobby is a Perth author currently writing a biography of John Curtin. *The Red Witch* (MUP, 2022) won the 2023 WA Premier's Prize for Book of the Year and *The Fur* (Fremantle Press, 2004) won the TAG Hungerford Award. He is an honorary research fellow at The University of Western Australia and a special collections librarian/archivist at Curtin University.



Griffith Watkins in Kalgoorlie, 1966. Courtesy Betty Brennan.

This is a memorial trail for Griffith Watkins (1930–1969). The trail is marked only in my mind. It works like this: when I go past one of these places, I think of him. He is a forgotten chronicler of Perth in the 1960s, a promising writer who tried to find meaning and beauty in the land between the ocean and the river. It's often the unfamous writers who are more representative of what it means to be one. The ambitions, the struggles, the small victories, the imperfectly realised visions of the world they left us. But it is more than that too. My paths keep crossing with his paths. There are too many associations and connections now. He haunts me and so I must lay out his memorial trail as a way of remembering him.

1. *The Pleasure Bird*

Copies of Griff's only published novel are spread throughout the world. There are fifty-three listed on Worldcat, distributed all around Australia along with a fair number in the UK and North America. Abebooks has six copies listed for sale, all at a little less than the price of a new hardcover. If you spot one on a shelf in a library or a second-hand bookshop, you have found yourself at the beginning of the Griff Watkins Memorial Trail.

Brenton bursts from the pages of *The Pleasure Bird*; he is at war with the sleepy Perth of the 1960s. He's a man of action, a boxer and a motorbike rider, an artist and a teacher, a philosopher and a lover. He has sworn vengeance on the man who killed his brother in the boxing ring, but his quest is complicated when he kills his best friend in a car accident and takes solace in the arms of his friend's widow. In one passage, Brenton takes her to see the titular painting, his finest work, which he deeply regrets selling to a restaurateur. *The Pleasure Bird* is a constantly surprising novel, picaresque in Brenton's encounters with minor characters, like the philosophising gravedigger and the friendly priest he gives a lift to on a lonely road. The prose is fresh and unpretentious even as Griff engages with big questions of art and meaning. The novel always carries me along with its exuberance and sincerity, and in its determination to live fully.

The university library copy of *The Pleasure Bird* has a 1960s punch card still stuck in the back recording the names and dates of thirteen borrowers between 1968 and 1975. A student named Smith borrowed it on 8 September 1969, five days after Griff went missing. There was no rush on the book in the aftermath of his death. Another loan in November, and then it sat on the shelf for over a year, until November 1970. It's the sort of book that could have a cult following if the author dies young—but it doesn't.

I buy my own copy online. It used to belong to the Senior Citizens' Club of Ballarat. A typewritten sticker notes on the front page, 'Dedicated to former member Mrs Coates 17-4-70'. Perhaps the late Mrs Coates had been an open-minded woman who would have quite enjoyed *The Pleasure Bird*. Though, if she was a typical member of the generation born during the last years of Queen Victoria's reign she would have been shocked by this racy story of sex and violence among the youth of Perth. Perhaps it was bought as a bulk order from funds the senior citizens had put up in her memory? I wonder how long the people responsible thought the books dedicated to her might remain in the club's library. Books have an illusion of permanence.

2. Collie

I drive past the high school with my impatient children in the car. None of the buildings I can see from the road were there in my time, let alone Griff's. I came to the school in 1994 as a year eight Baptist kid, uneasy among the coal miners' sons who'd punch me in the arm to try to make me say a swear word. Griff came in 1950, a twenty-year old school monitor, and spent four years in town.

I think of the old part of the school, the English classrooms with their tall ceilings and tattered copies of a class set of *Catcher in the Rye* stacked in a corner. These rooms led onto a hall with green stage blocks.

I remember long afternoons of theatre studies in the summer heat. A mirror on the wall with an inscription, 'To the school from the 1969 Prefects'. That part of the school hadn't changed in decades. I imbibed the same atmosphere as Griff, only it was new when he was there and aging when I knew it. This thought reorients my memories of Collie. Every angsty teenager takes pride in the illusion that their quest for authenticity is unique. But now I'm glad to find the memories of myself in that place overlaid with Griff's presence thirty years earlier.

I'm put in touch with Betty Brennan, ninety-seven years old, who taught with Griff at Collie. She boarded with him at Mrs Washer's place; he had a tiny room at the back of the house. She says he would have manic periods of intense energy, wanting people to play tennis with him at 6am. He was always the life of the party; he'd get everyone's attention so he could perform with musical instruments he barely knew how to play. He brought joy to people and made them laugh. But, looking back, Betty can see that he was often covering up periods of great distress. Just before Betty left Collie, Griff was engaged to a local woman but when Betty saw him a year or two later, he'd broken it off.

3. Swanbourne

The memorial trail takes me past Griff's family home. It's a non-descript brick house behind a high fence right on the railway line. From Griff's house you can almost see Scotch College on the other side of the railway line, the prestigious private school he attended. The yearbook from 1947 shows him a lance corporal in the cadets, an undistinguished student, a hockey player, the victor in a boxing match.

This is the house Griff returned to when he finished at Collie. He lived with his parents while he worked hard at his job, his studies, and his writing. 1961 was a turning point in his writing career. He won the ANA Short Story Competition, the *Weekend Mail* Short Story Competition and gained both first and second places in the Toowoomba Poetry Competition. 'Although I now write an average of fifteen hours a week, this is the first year I have been dedicated,' he wrote in an unsuccessful application for a scholarship to the Stanford Writing Center in California. 'I feel that someone actively engaged in creative writing would be able to give Teacher Training College students some vital encouragement in this field at a time when they need it most. There is a frightful waste of talent here. I intend to remain a teacher and to write and attempt to make some contribution to the climate of writing in this state' (Watkins 1961). His was more than a commitment to staying in Western Australia: he was committed to writing about it too. In 1966, he used his long service leave to research a new novel in Broome and Kalgoorlie, rather than taking a trip to Europe (Jeffery 246).

Closer to home even than the far reaches of Western Australia, he celebrated and remembered the Swanbourne of his childhood, 'the growling world of my wedding / To river, swamp and sea'. In an unpublished poem called 'Swanbourne' he writes, 'And what the senses say on any walk over / Melon Hill and the brawny dunes beyond / Is sensible and just'. Following in his footsteps, I walk up the steep hill, uncontemplatively, on a sunny Sunday morning and, at the top, the Indian Ocean springs into view. A brass plaque, all in capitals, commemorates the battery observation post which operated from 1936 to 1963. Houses are encroaching, the trees are taller than they would have been in his day—but the 'brawny dunes' remain. 'This place will still be loved', Griff writes, 'even when / I am gone to greener pastures'.

Griff would get a shock if he saw Tom Collins House, headquarters of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, at the bottom of Melon Hill. The house was moved from its old location one kilometre to the east in 1996, to make room for West Coast Highway. When Griff joined the fellowship

in 1959, he was welcomed as ‘one of the most talented and accomplished younger writers the WA literary scene had produced’ (Kotai-Ewers 233).

4. From Cottesloe Beach to Claremont foreshore

This section of the Griff Watkins Memorial Trail starts at Cottesloe Beach. That’s where his car was found during the school holidays of September 1969. He was last seen alive on Tuesday September 2nd. His mother, Kate, remembers, ‘I sensed something was not right with Griff that day [...] He was messing about outside when he suddenly said he was going to see a friend.’ At 4am, she found his bed hadn’t been slept in, and she rang his friend to find he hadn’t come to visit. His car was discovered on Thursday September 4th, with clothing in it. There was a notebook in the car containing the lines:

And if you are fond of me
Regard it as a mild misfortune

Police and friends began searching the sand dunes near the Swanbourne rifle range, the area around Melon Hill he was so fond of. They found nothing; the theory changed: ‘Police believed he could have drowned while swimming off Cottesloe’ (Moran).

On Saturday September 13th, eleven days after Griff went missing, three shearers in their twenties were walking along the Claremont river foreshore. At about 9.15am they stopped at the yacht club jetty, to look at the boats, when they noticed a body floating in one of the pens. The police were called and they dragged it to the shore. It was Griff. He was fully clothed, with a chain around his waist attached to a belt pulley and an axle. Rod Moran writes, ‘He suicided in that beautiful tract of water which [...] suffused his writing with memorable colour, texture and metaphysics.’

I was at the Claremont foreshore the Saturday my friend Jono died. I only found out later that it was also the place Griff’s body was discovered. Their deaths have become intertwined in my mind, connected by water even though Jono didn’t drown.

It was a still day at the end of summer and there was a strong glare off the river. The kids were watching brown jellyfish and playing in the sand. I was thinking about how I should text Jono, make sure he was still okay. I’ll do it later, I told myself. I was in a languid mood; everything seemed as unhurried as the drifting movements of those jellyfish. Back home in the afternoon, just as I was getting the kids into their bathers, he emailed me a brief message and I wrote back quickly, thinking he meant he was doing well. He killed himself while we were taking our long afternoon swim in the pool; his wife called me in the evening, while I was running a

bath for the kids. He was forty-one; Griff was thirty-nine. It’s a dangerous season of life.

‘The weight was not touching the river bottom’, one newspaper reported of Griff in 1969, ‘and police believed it could have drifted into the pen’ (‘Poet’s Body’). But where did it drift from? Not Cottesloe Beach. I find myself trying to reconstruct Griff’s last hours. It’s a four kilometre walk from the beach to the river, not too arduous, but certainly not possible with a chain and weights. Did he park in Cottesloe to mislead the search? Had he already dropped off the chain and weights? Was he contemplating a trip, instead, and that’s why he packed the clothes?

Of course, these questions about the specifics of his death miss the more significant question of why. Not even the people who knew him best had a good answer to that. ‘I think he suffered some kind of deep depression and mental collapse,’ said his mother. ‘I don’t know of anything in particular that might have triggered it. And I don’t think I want to, but there was a previous unsuccessful attempt’ (Moran). The author Dorothy Hewett had seen him at a party about three weeks earlier and he seemed ‘undisturbed’ and ‘enthusiastic about projected works’ (‘Poet’s Death’).

5. Karrakatta Cemetery

Karrakatta Cemetery, the penultimate station on the memorial trail, is an hour’s walk along the railway line from Griff’s family home. His memorial plaque sits in the Garden of Remembrance, quite hidden at the back of a chapel. His plaque faces the air conditioning unit. It’s a small, square metal plaque, set in a concrete block and using the standard wording: ‘In loving memory of Griffith Wynne Watkins.’ Next to his plaque is one for his father, who died in 1983; his mother’s plaque is in the same garden but on the other side. ‘For myself,’ his mother said toward the end of her life, ‘I don’t believe in death. I feel Griff is never far away from me’ (Moran).

In *The Pleasure Bird*, Brenton attends his friend’s funeral at Karrakatta at the crematorium chapel, once a landmark but razed in the 1980s. ‘He thought of him squashed up inside that box ... not one thought in his head, already becoming a memory.’ Brenton thought of the fates of bodies very specifically. ‘He walked down the road to the cemetery gates, picturing Jack’s body burning in the oven like a rag doll, jack-knifing up with the intense heat ... the disintegration of what had once been a man to powder’ (161). From this passage, I would guess Griff would have preferred burial—but that has its own horrors.

You can hear the train from your plaque, Griff—the same line you grew up on. And there are rose bushes in the garden. They are not blooming when I visit, but I’d like to think they do some times.

6. Murdoch University Special Collections

The Griff Watkins Memorial Trail ends at Murdoch University, an institution that did not exist in his lifetime. It is located down the freeway, far south from his familiar part of Perth. With the blessing of Griff's mother, Kate, one of his poet friends, Peter Jeffery, edited a collection of Griff's shorter writings, published in 1990 as *God in the Afternoon*. Peter was an academic at Murdoch and deposited Griff's literary papers with the university library at the turn of the century.

The bulk of the collection is manuscripts. There are no diaries and most of the letters are his diligently collected correspondence about submissions and applications. It was probably inconceivable to Griff or his mother that his life might be of as much interest as his writings to someone like me. He wrote determinedly through his twenties and thirties, hundreds of poems and short stories and at least two unpublished novels. Peter sifted faithfully through Griff's literary remains to produce *God in the Afternoon*. There are many profound moments in the collection, beautiful scenes, resonant lines of poetry, strange insights into life. One of the poems, 'Heatwave', drew me to Griff in the first place with its Audenesque panorama of a sweltering Perth day, flitting across newspaper offices, the lock-up, the zoo and along the river to the coast and the suburbs. Yet I find the collection a difficult and unsatisfying read. It is a showcase that doesn't cohere, the folio of a writer interrupted. A reader's report on an unpublished collection of Griff's stories seems apt, 'This is, by the look of it, a pretty awkward proposition but there is an artist kicking for his life among these pages' (Reader's report). In *The Pleasure Bird*, Brenton believes he can never emulate the success of the titular painting. 'With that painting I pulled off the magic for the first and last time... The magic of matching my performance to my aspiration' (208). Peter Jeffery writes that Griff's 'confidence was severely shaken' when his follow-up novel, 'Midas Land', was rejected. 'From this point on his writing faltered and his creative stamina flagged' (251–2).

According to a letter to Griff's parents preserved in his papers, in 1970 the Griffith Watkins Memorial Award was established. Touchingly, it was an idea launched by the school prefects at Tuart Hill Senior High School, where Griff had taught for many years. It was supported by teachers and the P&C. They raised \$250 and deposited it in the bank, with the interest to be used for the prize each year. 'I can assure you that the parents, teachers, and students have the greatest pleasure in perpetuating the memory of Griff in this way,' wrote the principal. 'We all hope that this will give both of you consolation in the years to come. We too have missed Griff' (Clough).

How long did the prefects envision the memorial award lasting? Probably into the far-flung future, such would have been the intensity of feeling. But Tuart Hill Senior High School became Tuart College in 1982, a place for mature age students to complete year 11 and 12, and then it closed altogether in 2019. Somewhere along the line, Griff's memorial award was forgotten.

When *God in the Afternoon* came out in 1990, Griff had been dead 20 years. A lot of people remembered him. I think it must have seemed to his mother, Kate, to be the beginning of a renaissance for her talented son. She was 80 years old then and had lived long enough for him to finally be recognised again. From that perspective, her death in 1998 came at the right time, before she could know that he was likely sinking back into obscurity.

But Griff isn't completely forgotten yet. His poems pop up in anthologies; he has been mentioned in recent biographies of Gerald Glaskin, Randolph Stow and—unflatteringly—Gwen Harwood. His afterlife continues. But I hold this in tension with the clear-eyed pessimism of Julian Barnes, addressing his book's final reader—for there must be one. 'Even the greatest art's triumph over death is risibly temporary' (205). Memorial trails become overgrown with weeds, plaques are stolen or removed for redevelopment, trail guides get too old and no-one steps up to replace them. But while a trail exists, it is an act of remembering in a forgetful world, and that in itself is important.

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Midnight XPT Shane Lisle

Shane Lisle lives in a small coastal town north of Sydney.

Riding the XPT
stinking of grief in a rattling carriage
dream of your face staring at the ceiling
your body trapped there with a gossiping nurse
well at least you didn't die
remember saying goodbye forever when the helicopter landed
the ward trembling and your dad breaking apart on the phone
there was a doctor looking at his shoes
kept trying to catch his gaze
now the sight of a horse makes me panic
but so do others things like bus stops and test tubes and doors that are
closing
When I become a writer I'll get all this down
and I am going to be a writer
not a chemist
because there are so many pills for so many problems
my mind is bombed out and ruined and some days when it's quiet in the
dispensary
I write poems about us on the back of prescriptions
and Kurt still asks about you
try to hate him but I can't
he called last week from the dormitory
said they've moved someone into your room

Epistolary
Jo Langdon

Jo Langdon is the author of two poetry collections: a chapbook, *Snowline* (Whitmore Press, 2012), and *Glass Life* (Five Islands Press, 2018). Jo will be a 2024 Creative Arts Fellow at the National Library of Australia, and was a fellow of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation's Sozopol Fiction Seminars in 2018. She lives and writes on unceded Wadawurrung land.

Alina Szapocznikow to
Ryszard Stanisławski

Sometimes this life here seems unreal [...] precisely because it's purely corporeal

This pen writes beautifully, it's just that I lie wrong, and from this position the letters come out crooked. Hospital life, the smell of ether, of disinfected filth. Everything is white & aquamarine, even I am light blue (insipid). But just beside me there, life: lovely, desired, anticipated. And nearby very red, almost glowing little roses, and you are there again. Coffee with milk, very good bread with jam, peaches. The room is lovely, clean, a radio, around 20 young women: 3 maids, a nurse etcetera. Meanwhile you

no doubt are already sprouting angel's wings (check above your shoulder blade).

[soft pencil girl with braids]

Note

This poem comprises textual fragments from the artist Alina Szapocznikow's letters to Ryszard Stanisławski, first compiled in the edited collection *Lovely, Human, True, Heartfelt: The Letters of Alina Szapocznikow* (2012), edited by Agata Jakubowska and translated by Jennifer Croft, published by the University of Chicago Press.

MRI
Damen O'Brien

Damen is a multi-award-winning poet based in Brisbane. His prizes include the Newcastle Poetry Prize, the Peter Porter Poetry Prize and the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize. Damen's poems have been published in *Cordite*, *Overland*, *Island*, *Meanjin* and other journals. His latest book of poetry is *Walking the Boundary* (Pitt Street Poetry, 2024).

Suddenly your life is all open doors
and closed: you are a missile
snug in its silo, a thorn
cruelled into skin, an astronaut
drifting into space, suddenly
a chrysalis, a cocoon, a pod
entombed, emplaced, planted like
a dubious seed, outside the
darkened portal, into the cave of
bears, suddenly you are tasted
like a sweet, handled as
a juggler handles knives,
a bird smuggled in a sock,
a miner suffocating under a slide
of stone, transfigured, changed,
reborn, for every beat the door
opens then it closes, for every breath
the missile fails to fire, the thorn
works deeper, drawn to who knows
what, orbits take the shuttle out
of range, the MRI clangs over
the desperate sounds of Coldplay
painting all the world in Yellow, and the
time when you could be Rip Van Winkle
woken up, Snow White with a kiss,
a frozen girl chipped from a lake,
passes, and they let you stand up,
collect yourself. The time when you
could come out to find disaster

ashed the planet while you slept,
long past, long past, now all
there is are all the doors you find,
the earnest, busy, valves inside your heart,
those faulty, diligent hinges as they
open and they close and time enough for
the diagnosis when it comes, for a white
gloved nurse to pat you on the back,
the doors clang, clang and this too
is a door to pass through, when one
door closes so another opens,
the missiles, the knives, the thorns,
the little bird, but all you know is that
they're closing one by one, you can hear them,
banging like the portals in your heart.

The Truth about Yellow Heather Taylor Johnson

This year Heather Taylor-Johnson will focus on writing essays about the body in its social, cultural and environmental positionings, thanks to an Arts SA Fellowship, a Bundanon residency and a Whitlam Essay residency. She'll write some poems and celebrate the publication of her third novel, both on Kaurua land.

I want to talk about the colour yellow. It is said that babies cry more in yellow rooms, and people in yellow rooms have a tendency to lose their tempers. Neither of these statements are true. For instance, sometimes, when parents don't know the gender of their unborn baby, they might paint the room yellow. When my partner and I moved into our house, I was seven months pregnant. One of the rooms was yellow and we chose it for the new baby's room, and that baby moved out of it when he was two to make room for the next baby. Of the two babies who slept in that yellow room, one was a crier; he had chronic ear infections. The other didn't cry much at all. And when I'm in that yellow room where two of my babies slept and my youngest still sleeps, I don't lose my temper. Mostly I lose it in the kitchen, which is painted blue and green. The best energy in our house probably comes from that yellow room simply because it's my daughter's, or maybe, in fact, because it's yellow. A feng shui thing, though I don't know much about the Chinese law of flow. I do know that the Chinese emperor Huang-Di was called The Yellow Emperor. It's been said he not only introduced systems of government and law to humankind, but he also invented music and the arts. My acupuncturist says *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Chinese Medicine* is her field Bible, and that acupuncture is about flow.

• • •

The first time I heard yellow signified mental illness I'd commented on a man's shirt at a cultural event. 'That's a good shirt,' I'd said, to which he bellowed, 'Yellow is the colour of madness,' and I had to assume he was complimenting himself, his smile bright and bold as the shirt that covered his puffed-out chest, because madness has come to be a signifier of intense creativity and artistic genius.

To say an exceptional artistic vision is due to madness is reductive. It's to ignore a person's history—the social, cultural, familial and personal. It is to make the artist a product of their own fate rather than an active participant in their life. It is to perpetuate a representation that becomes more important than what is at stake: the art.

• • •

The yellowest scene in Julian Schnabel's *At Eternity's Gate* shows Vincent van Gogh and the other patients of the Saint Remy asylum in formation on their daily walk, constrained by straight-jackets. Unless it's the scene when Van Gogh first arrives at the asylum and meets two patients. Or when he frightens a peasant woman in the countryside because he wants to paint her. Or when he ecstatically runs through the fields.

Four minutes and twenty-two seconds of Schnabel's film is devoted to Van Gogh walking from a grey sky and brittle desert of dead sunflowers to light, to foliage and multi-colours, to radiant streaks of yellow. This is meant to be a continuous montage of time passed between his Paris and Arles residences. I don't know if that's true because I had nothing to do with the making of the film, but it's what I think.

'I hate the fog,' Willem Defoe as Vincent van Gogh tells Oscar Isaac as Gauguin while still living in Paris. 'I'm tired of this grey light. I'd like to find a new light, for paintings that we haven't yet seen. Bright paintings, painted in sunlight.'

The sky in Schnabel's Paris is grey, yes, but the walls and floors and clothes are grey, too, as is the skin of our hero, Vincent van Gogh. Grey filters the light. It's a coating, settling on everything we see, claiming the artist's world, soundlessly.

So he moves south, his easel strapped to his back. He's walking, he's walking, and the sun's falling over time. The walking goes on so long my daughter asks, 'Is this all the movie does?' She's used to popular cinema, TikTok, Youtube, flash and fast.

'I think the director wants to show him searching for the perfect light—he was all about light. I think it's meant to show that he was a true artist and that he wouldn't paint until the right light called to him.'

Then our hero, under the changing light of dusk, begins to run. He runs until he lies down and pours dirt onto his face.

'Oh my gosh,' my daughter says, 'what's he doing now?' and I tell her I think the director wants to show that Vincent van Gogh is really invested in the nature he's about to paint, that he's happy to be alive and be a painter, that he's a true artist—I keep repeating, 'He's a true artist'—and

maybe that's the first time I think during the movie that only another painter could have directed the film. Julian Schnabel is a very famous painter who's often photographed wearing yellow-tinted glasses.

•••

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, director Miloš Forman considered using real mental hospital patients as extras, but scrapped the idea in the end. Apparently the people didn't look mad enough¹. Film has consistently gotten 'mad' wrong. We see the mad in horror flicks or thrillers, where they're too often psychopaths or tortured geniuses, romanticised for their disturbing behaviour.

Vincente Minnelli got it wrong in *Lust for Life*, another movie about Vincent van Gogh. There's a scene in which Van Gogh looks as though his appendix has burst, such as Kirk Douglass' anguished interpretation, and then he gets up from where he was sitting and belly flops into the bushes. From what I know of Minnelli, he didn't have any lived experience of madness. But what do I really know about the director or madness? What I do know, or at least what I think I know, is that to direct a film about madness one must do the research, or be mad. Julian Schnabel might be a touch mad. His favourite clothing to wear in public is pyjamas.

•••

I asked my friends on social media what they thought yellow signified, the most common answers being *sunshine, happiness, sunflowers, warmth, friendship, hope, cowardice* and *jaundice*. *Bile* wasn't too far behind; *energy* made a splash. Gustav Klimt's painting *The Kiss* got a mention, as did Mark Rothko's yellow paintings, but not Van Gogh, not his sunflower paintings—though I have to wonder how many people thought of him when they typed *sunflower* as their response. Don't most people think of Van Gogh when they hear the word *sunflower*? My point being that no one answered *madness*, though one person said *sadness* and another *melancholy* and two people said *anxiety*. Two people also said *urine*, which reminds me that I once asked my mother-in-law to cross-stitch the saying 'If it's yellow let it mellow; if it's brown flush it down' for the wall above our toilet (which she hasn't made a priority). Two other people said *mellow*. One person said *Donavan*, who sang a song called 'Mellow Yellow', one of my dad's favourites. My dad answered with *sun*, the largest yellow object our eyes take in.

There were a total of 179 answers to my question. Here are two poems made up of some of them:

Bananas
butter
mustard
and custard

and

Insect blood and sticky stamens
quarantine flags and fear

Of particular interest to me is that a woman who lives with anxiety, depression and psychosis wrote, 'Nausea. The colour yellow actually makes me feel physically sick, no idea why!' When pressed further she wrote, 'I remember it being true for a long, long time, even since I had yellow shoes as a little girl.' Like me, she also suffers from Ménière's disease, the inner ear imbalance disorder Vincent van Gogh might have had, so it's said. Though I think he did not and I am an expert on the disease because, of course, I have it. Though yellow doesn't make me sick.

•••

Van Gogh rented four rooms of the right wing of 2 Place Lamartine in Arles, France, a yellow house. His plan was to create a living space of painters who would come together and support one another, support art, change the way people saw things. He called it an *atelier* or an *artist colony*. Traditionally, an atelier consists of a master artist and their students or apprentices, but in this case Van Gogh only desired like-minded painters who wanted to revolutionise the visual scene. I prefer the term *artist colony*, where together the artists would live, work and exhibit.

Gauguin is the only other artist to have lived with Vincent at 2 Place Lamartine, and he didn't last long. I read about their short-lived cohabitation in the Yellow House while staying at the Varuna Writers' House in the Blue Mountains, also an artist colony of sorts, also a yellow house. I made a lasting friend there. She has lupus. We bonded over illness and writing and bottles of red wine.

In a letter to his sister Willemina, Van Gogh writes, 'My house here is painted outside in the yellow of fresh butter' (Van Gogh, letter 678).² What I know of Varuna is that the colour of the house changes throughout the day and over the seasons, depending on how the sun bathes its exterior: Naples Yellow, Chrome Yellow, Hansa Yellow, Dandelion, Softsun, Happy, Golden Marguerite—there are so many yellows.

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In Schnabel's film, when Vincent first comes to Arles, the room he rents at the inn is painted yellow and sunlight pours through, soaking up Gabby, the woman he would gift a large piece of his ear to later in the year (the film condenses characters and has turned two historical women into one). Gabby is nearly one hundred percent yellow. Later in the film, Van Gogh's hat is unnaturally yellow. He needs it to keep the sun from his eyes because the fields are splashed with yellow and some stretches are brighter than the sun, and when the sun and the fields find their reflection on the part of his face unshaded by the hat, his skin, too, becomes yellow. Schnabel said of directing the film that it was all about creativity, about making, about painting.

Later it truly is a painting—it becomes one—when Van Gogh tells his doctor about the night he cut off his ear, the wall behind his wrapped head the brightest yellow you can imagine. Van Gogh appears wretched because of the bandage and the thick woollen coat and furred hat, as if it's freezing where he is, but the yellow says this, which is also what Van Gogh says in the film: 'I'll show what I see to my human brothers who can't see it. It's a privilege. I can give them hope and consolation.' The scene is a replica of the painting *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, though more yellow, and in this scene, in the movie, the doctor responds: 'You're confusing people, you're confusing yourself, with your paintings.' To which Van Gogh gently and passionately responds, 'I am my paintings.'

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There are other examples of famous yellow houses. 57–59 Macleay Street in Potts Point, NSW was built in 1897, seven years after Van Gogh's death. In the 1950s the Clune family took up residence—writer Frank, art dealer Thelma, and their son, Terry—and set up galleries in the front two rooms of the home. Artists flocked to the Clunes' open doors.

In 1969, after the galleries had moved to Macquarie Street, pop art illustrator Martin Sharpe asked Thelma if he could set up a gallery in the now empty rooms of the house, to display his own work. This soon transformed into something much grander and unique, an artistic community space where the walls of the rooms became their own canvases of surrealist images and Van Gogh-esque paintings. That's when the exterior of the house was painted yellow and called The Yellow House Artist Collective, in homage to Van Gogh's unfulfilled dream. Painters, sculptors, photographers and performance artists collaborated and exhibited at this more-southern-than-Arles Yellow House for a year. Eventually the

experiment perished due to financial and artistic frictions. Ultimately, it was financial and artistic frictions that forced Gauguin to part ways with Van Gogh, and Gauguin's leaving is said to be the cause of Van Gogh mutilating his ear.

•••

Yellow is the most visible colour of the spectrum. It's bright, which means eye-catching, which means attention-grabbing. The human eye processes yellow first, which is why it's the colour of caution signs around the world. Two of my friends, in response to my question, wrote *caution* and one wrote *arrow signs*; a contact whose poetry has been called 'wildly surreal' wrote *non-imperilment* (Disney, back cover).

Because of its perceptibility, yellow is high vitality, which means it can be exciting or amusing, but also forceful and overwhelming. I wore a yellow skirt to the closing celebration of my city's Writers' Week. When I dressed, I'd wanted to be the fun girl in the room; I'd hoped the colour would give me confidence. I fear now, as I feared when I got to the bar, that my skirt was too much, that I was too much, for yellow can be intense. It can lead to visual fatigue.

•••

Schnabel's got a thing for artistic legends who are utterly tragic. He directed *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, a film about the editor-in-chief of French *Elle* magazine who acquires Locked-in Syndrome, so he can't move, can't speak, can only think and blink his eyes so he—true story—writes a book through an interpreter, blinking out the alphabet, letter by letter, word by word, sentence by sentence, page by page. It's a stunning book that made me cry not only because of the torturous journey Jean-Dominique Bauby undergoes, but because his language is just so beautiful.

Schnabel also directed a film about the Cuban poet Reinaldo Arenas, who died of AIDS, and one about the neo-expressionist artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, who died of a heroin overdose. Fundamentally, Schnabel himself is a neo-expressionist painter. His colossal *Large Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave)* is a mosaic painting of the roses that grow alongside Van Gogh's grave in Auvers-sur-Oise, so Van Gogh has been his muse at least twice over. And probably more.

•••

In Van Gogh's painting *The Yellow House*, blue is the dominant colour, though there is more yellow than blue. Paul Signac painted a watercolour

of the same house titled *The House of Vincent van Gogh* yet the house is not yellow at all. Only the awnings are yellow, and the trees and what looks like a falling leaf or a flying kite.

Van Gogh has admitted to using a much bolder yellow in comparison to the colour of the actual house, which is, of course, his prerogative. Nevertheless, alongside bipolar disorder and Ménière's disease and a slew of other medical issues of which there is no definitive proof he ever had, there's a theory floating around that he also had xanthopsia, a colour deficiency in his vision in which yellow dominated his visual field. This could've been caused by an overabundance of digitalis, a herbal remedy from the foxglove plant that may or may not have been used to treat an epilepsy he may or may not have had. There is foxglove in his portrait of Dr Gachet, though Van Gogh's fascination with the colour yellow certainly preceded Gachet. Xanthopsia can also manifest with too much absinthe, a highly potent anise-flavoured spirit that was Van Gogh's drink of choice. Some say he ingested paints which gave him lead poisoning and turned his vision yellow—it's also said he painted with his brush in his mouth. This is all speculation so I don't know what to make of it. What I do know is if you look at the word *yellow* long enough, it becomes nonsensical, ridiculous: *yellow yellow yellow yellow yellow yellow yellow*. I also know that in Russia, a colloquial expression for an insane asylum used to be 'yellow house', which reminds me of the Charlotte Perkins Gillman short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper', in which the main character—a woman—is forced to recover from postnatal depression in a room with yellow wallpaper. She's told by her doctor-husband not to do anything but rest, which brings her to a worse state of deterioration than when she entered the room. She becomes obsessed with the yellow wallpaper and rips at it and tears at it until she finally releases a woman trying to free herself from inside of it, and then she is that woman, crawling all over the room and her doctor-husband's body once he's fainted. The yellow wallpaper did not drive the protagonist of the story mad; her doctor-husband did.

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One of the friends who answered my question about the colour yellow wrote *endometriosis*, because it's the colour of the ribbon worn to bring awareness to the condition. There's also a yellow ribbon for craniofacial acceptance, spina bifida, bladder cancer and sarcoma, for obesity, for adoptive parents and missing children and prisoners of war and those missing in action. I remember living in America in 1991, when people tied yellow ribbons onto their car antennas to show support for the troops fighting in the Gulf War. I did it. I was sixteen. I'd yet to fully understand

that the war was about oil and that the ribbons were more about the war than about the soldiers. I certainly wouldn't do it today, but I would wear one for all of my friends with endometriosis, and there are many.

A yellow ribbon is also meant to bring awareness to suicide and is worn during Suicide Prevention Week, though the person who said yellow made her sick would most definitely not wear one of those yellow ribbon pins during that time. She thinks the world calling attention to a person's mental illness might trigger that person's mental illness: well-meaning counterproductivity leading to suicide ideation (Spargo-Ryan np). She blogged about it once, and now I know I will never wear that ribbon.

It's commonly believed that Vincent van Gogh shot himself in the stomach, causing a wound he would die from two days later. It is documented that he killed himself. A more recent, controversial theory is that two rascal-boys shot him as a definitive way to tease him. To death. The latter is the theory Schnabel worked with in *At Eternity's Gate*, and as director and co-screenwriter of the film he can present whichever theory he pleases. But despite all the hundreds of remaining letters written to Vincent or sent from Vincent, we can never be certain of how he died. Some things we will never know.

•••

According to The Astrology Web, 'Seeing a yellow house in your dreams suggests positivity, creativity, hopefulness and a flourishing period in-waiting' ('Yellow Color Meaning And Symbolism'). Some of the paintings Van Gogh completed while living in the Yellow House are *The Sower*, *The Bedroom*, *Van Gogh's Chair* and *Gauguin's Chair*, *Les Alyscamps*, *The Red Vineyard*, his sunflower series, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* and *The Yellow House*, so maybe this is true.

What's truly amazing is that when Signac, all of twenty-five years old, passed through Arles, he visited Van Gogh in the asylum, and the doctor let Van Gogh out that day to show Signac the paintings he had stored at the Yellow House. This is what Van Gogh wrote to his brother about that day:

I've seen Signac, which did me a lot of good. He was very nice and very straight and very simple when the difficulty arose of whether or not to force open the door closed by the police, who had demolished the lock. They began by not wanting to let us do it, and yet in the end we got in. (Van Gogh letter 752; Redfield Jamison 241)

On June 25, 1944, the Yellow House on 2 Place Lamartine was severely damaged in a bombing raid by the Allies. It was later demolished. It no longer exists. The paintings Van Gogh rescued from the house during Signac's visit do.

Note

- ¹ See Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*.

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The Weight of Days Dorianne Laux

Dorianne Laux's sixth collection, *Only As the Day is Long: new and selected poems* (W. W. Norton, 2019) was named a finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her fifth collection, *The Book of Men* (W. W. Norton, 2011), was awarded The Paterson Prize. Her latest collection is *Life On Earth*, also published by W. W. Norton, and was released in January of 2024. She lives with her husband, poet Joseph Millar, and their bunny, in Richmond, California.

Sometimes the months can be weighed like pounds, twelve in a year. What weighs twelve pounds? One chair. One dog. Seven crates of tomatoes. One month old baby. A double neck guitar someone shreds ruthlessly, the band behind trying to keep up. Sometimes the months drag, drug like a chair across the dry dirt of days. Some years come at a price. Some marked down, on sale, tagged 'as is'. Some days line up like siblings against a wall, each waiting their turn to be smacked with a ruler. Or time can be a beam of light which travels faster than sound, fastest through air, slower through water or glass. A dog lies on the grass, wagging its tail until someone comes along and frees the chain, a key pressed into the metallic dark. A year can be a truck on the interstate loaded with seven crates of tomatoes, the driver's wife at home holding a month-old baby. Some days there's no room for another minute. Some years there's not enough room for the days.

Sweet Potato Vine Aden Curran

Aden Curran (he/him) is a PhD student at UWA and writer who lives on Whadjuk Noongar Country. His work is inspired by ecology, place, community and difference. His hobby is procrastinawalking.

A leaf was just beginning to unfurl, tender and thin, from an eye on the sweet potato. When the time came, I couldn't bring myself to cut it up. I carried the sweet potato out to the tiny backyard of my unit, enclosed on all sides by high, sand-coloured walls, and knelt to lift one of the sun-warm bricks, revealing fresh earth. I clawed at the damp soil with my bare hands and buried the sweet potato whole, leaving only its lone, sprouting leaf above the ground.

Over time the sweet potato grew, to my surprise, into a vine that reached across the length of the backyard, small purple arrowhead leaves emerging and expanding, becoming broad, speckled; a dusty green. It reached into gaps and over fences, forced up the pavers, and I imagine my neighbours might have become quite annoyed. But I can only speculate since I have never said a word to them, nor they to me. When I looked at the vast thing to which I had given life, I imagined roots reaching through the dark, engorged with new tubers—so much lay down there, secret under the bricks, in squirrel-stores of nutrients. Even when the neighbourhood rats devoured so many of the leaves, new ones kept sprouting from the shredded strings that remained.

The sun bakes the footpaths as I walk through my treeless suburb. Cars roar at a busy intersection; drown out my friend's voice. I say, Sorry? What? What?

He mumbles something like, I'll tell you later, and hangs up.

I wish I lived in a better world. I find myself thinking this constantly, at every annoyance. When I acknowledge this wish, it is a salve.

When I was young I burned my feet walking on the road in summer and Dad applied a paste of aloe vera to my soles that was ticklish and soothing. I'd told him I didn't want to hurt the aloe vera plant by ripping off its leaf. He told me: Don't be silly, plants don't have nerves like us. Why would

they evolve to feel pain when they lose leaves all the time, when their leaves shrivel up and die naturally as they grow?

When I said 'hurt', I wasn't talking about physical pain.

I hail down the bus.

Grandpa is listening to the afternoon talkback radio. The host has recently been accused of wage theft by an ex-employee. It's an ongoing thing, though I don't know if it's in court at the moment. He never addresses it on-air. This afternoon he's interviewing a Woolworths representative about why no one wants to work anymore. I ask Grandpa if he wants a tea. I'll have a coffee, he says, three sugars and a touch of milk. When I bring it to him he says, There's a good boy. Wonderful.

We chat over the top of the radio, raising our voices above theirs. We talk about the lovely weather, about our relations flung distant about the globe. Whenever he mentions a name, I instantly remember that person, their house, and the city, or town, or village where I visited them during my gap year. That was so long ago, everything's probably changed. My great-aunt, when I visited her village in southern Ireland, didn't have a TV; she said they were load of rubbish, a waste of time. She didn't like being talked at through a screen. She'd much rather be talked at through a page, she'd say, smiling while she thumbed through an Irish murder mystery open on the dinner table. Back then, she'd burned peat to heat her house and to cook. All her food had tasted subtly of the bog.

This used to all be bushland when I came here, Grandpa says. Used to be so many frogs you couldn't hear yourself think at night. One day I was digging and I dug up one of those fat ones that lie in the ground. I didn't hurt it. I was glad I didn't hurt it. I put it on the ground and it crawled away.

I can hear nothing but the whoosh of the nearby freeway, and the cawing of crows calling each other together before nightfall. The sun blips and disappears behind Grandpa's fence.

I miss the frogs, he says.

I help him inside and we cook dinner together.

Don't you think, maybe, you could have tried to stop the developments around here? I say.

You can't stop it, he says. People need somewhere to live. There's a lot of money in it. The frogs don't really matter.

I think of what my great-aunt had told me of Grandpa's childhood—how they'd go hungry, how his dad had said he's useless on the farm, how he'd be better off going to Australia and never coming back. Grandpa's grandfather—he'd held that plot his whole life, and he'd paid rent to an English landlord for decades before Independence and the Civil War and

the land reform. He used to poach salmon and was occasionally caught by the bailiff. He'd bribe the bailiff with half his catch and get off without a fine.

Now my great-aunt owns the property, stalking about on her mobile phone calling all her scattered relatives, relaying information from one cluster to another.

I do the dishes for Grandpa, and I help him to shower, and I help him into bed, and then I drive home and throw myself down into a thin, anxious sleep. A crack in my curtains awakes me at 5.30, as the first light of the day pours in. I go out to check on my sweet potato: more leaves had been eaten in the night. I dilute some seaweed fertiliser in a bucket and pour a small cup of the solution onto the plant.

I drive to Mum's house, many suburbs north. I feel like a failure. But it takes two hours by bus. I tell myself it's not my fault I was born into this world. I retort: but it is my responsibility.

Klimt sits in my lap, her snout resting on my hand. Klimt is an aging chihuahua. A small reproduction, indeed, of a Gustav Klimt, hangs on the wall above the dining table: human figures in an embrace, flowery, energetic, warm: it draws your eye. Mum sits across from me, staring hard as if it's the last time she'll ever see me. I'll drive you to the shops when you're ready, I say.

She stares for a moment more, then says, I don't really feel like going anymore.

I stroke Klimt: her fur bristles with pleasure. Hair sloughs off in my hand. The smell of her unwashed body strikes me.

That's fine, I say. I can get some things for you if you let me know what you want.

Oh, it's okay, it's okay. You can stay here.

Okay, I say. But you need food.

Oh, no, it's okay. I'm not hungry anyway.

Mum, you need to eat.

It's okay, it's okay.

She rises from the chair and turns her back on me; she flicks on the kettle, wipes the kitchen bench.

How about I get some of your favourites—I'll get some macaroni cheese, and some bread so you can have toast for breakfast, and some berries...

She shakes her head. There's chemicals I can't eat in the food. They put chemicals in the food, so I can't eat it.

I'm sorry, Mum, I say. Do you think there's any food that you would be able to eat?

No, she says. When I was in there they made me allergic to this chemical and then started putting it in all the food. They want to trick me into eating it so that I get sick.

It's okay, though, Mum. I come here to visit you and make sure you're okay, so if you get sick I can look after you.

It's not okay. They want me to ingest the chemicals so that I fall asleep and then they'll get me and put me in a cage—they said my children will never see me again, and if they do I'll be unrecognisable.

Tears are in her eyes. I look out the window and can see how it looks from here: how the entire weight of the world is pressing down, trying to crush her, and she's struggling to breathe.

Can I give you a hug? I ask.

She nods, and we embrace. Her tears dampen my shoulder. I feel helpless.

I receive my carer payments on Thursday, the day of my rent inspection. The inspector notes that I have defaced the property by altering the pavement in the backyard. I must pay for new bricks to be laid. Attached is a quote from a local bricky. I hadn't considered this at all: truth be told, I felt so desperate—this plant possessed me and I could think of nothing else.

Naysayers Cindy Solonec

Cindy is Nigena (Nyikina) and author of *Debesa: The Story of Frank and Katie Rodriguez* (Magabala Books, 2021). Based on her PhD thesis, Cindy's book encapsulates a quintessential social history in the West Kimberley. Born in Derby and schooled in Geraldton, she is a late comer to the literary community, and now enjoys dabbling in short stories. She has obliged in undertaking several book reviews with Aboriginal themes. Cindy has lived off-country in Boorloo for 25 years.

Pt.1

The Referendum shattered me
I wanted to say to Naysayers
 go get fucked
I wanted to say
 *you know Jack shit about the marginalisation of Australia's first
peoples and*
 you don't care
Naysayers they don't listen
I have been silenced
My countrimin mostly voted Yes
 Yes meaning their voice would be heard on matters that affect
them
Naysayers sat high on their moral perch and squawked
 No you cannot speak on your own affairs
Naysayers stooped low to protect their sense of superiority over
our people
 the most vulnerable people
Say what you mean Naysayer admit your discomfort
 your bias unconscious is terrible yet powerful
 that sixty-forty split troubles my spirit

Pt.2

I walk among a majority who couldn't care less
 Blakfullas that's them over there
 a nuisance
 abetted
 annoying
Naysayers wish we would just go away
Why should Naysayers care? Why should they bother?
Naysayers rest easy in their privilege
 first world troubles no trouble at all
 no compassion
 no empathy
 no joy
 in the oldest living cultures in the world
Our song lines our stories embedded in this land
Naysayers are adrift most have no roots to this place
no critical thoughts
 not their fault they don't know Australia's Blak history
 not their fault they don't know the consequences of
colonisation
 not their fault they thumbed their noses at mob who voted
Yes Yes Yes to a Voice overwhelmingly

Pt.3

Naysayers haven't learned their history
 books are white washed
Today's sorrows go unknown while the ink bleeds and dries
 from yesteryear's sins
 they are ignorant of our past
We know We remember
 the myth of *terra nullius* that spoke this land into the taking
White man's law claiming Australia was to be
 white
 English
 imperial
 superior too so they thought
 half-caste
 quarter-caste
 full-blood
 pure bred dirty words for us
superior

white
good
race
eugenics words for them
Let Australia rejoice one and all

Pt. 4

In their pulped minds a newborn nation thought us a dying race
 theories metastasised into cancerous assimilation
 policies to improve future generations they said
1905 Aborigines Protection Act mutated into *1936 Native
Administration Act*
 a rot grew a damp sickness segregation for black and
white
Protection? ha! We were
 controlled
 oppressed
my ancestors laboured as slaves
Still my ancestors rejected inferiority their bias unconscious
 was powerful too
Small campfires became trail blazers for our rights demanding
recognition
1944 Western Australia Citizenship Act *Ha!*
 after 65,000 years we stood straight knowing full well our
own sovereignty
Vote No *if you don't know*
 spewed conniving influencers a smorgasbord of lies offered
What of the billions? Naysayers cried
 ask *Deloitte* *PwC* *KPMG* *Ernest & Young*
 public servant *parasite* *stealing \$27.4m* *racehorses*
mansions *gambling*

Pt.5

Immigrants from abroad told
 don't worry about Blakfullas mate *they're in your way*
My hubby born a refugee fancied
 while Blakfulla tormented
Refugees fleeing
 invasion
 massacres

genocide
 stolen children
Welcomed on to Whadyuk sanctuary
 Their's same kine like Blakfulla history
 yet no empathy
Facebook friends excited by smorgasbord of lies keyboard warriors
friend or foe?
Naysayers wallow in self-pity at what?
 their privilege denied to Blakfullas?
 they cuss our First Peoples someone to blame
Naysayers will overcome racism and smugness
one day
Naysayers will overcome marginalising Blakfullas
 one day
 long after I've perished
The Referendum revealing!

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Hop Dac, *Bungarra*, 2023.

Oil on canvas. Image provided by artist.

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'The House'

Kristian Radford

nostalgia is an earthy perfume, sinking into hunger

once every month or so I see it, lying in bed at 2 a.m.

lacuna that memory can't fill

helpless waterlily loose on a dark lake

With writing and ideas from

Andrew Sutherland, Melanie Pryor, Diane Fahey, Jill Jones, Alan Fyfe, Miriam Jones, Ellie Fisher, Siobhan Hodge, Jake Dennis, Nathan Erwin, David Stavanger, Elizabeth Smither, Sam Wren Quan Sing, Kerry Greer, Ronald Arana Atilano, Graham Kershaw, Susanne Kennedy, Grace Chan, Franchesca Walker, Michael Farrell, Lisa Collyer, Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon, Arna Radovich, Meg Drummond-Wilson, Luoyang Chen, Renee Pettitt-Schipp, Catherine Johnston, Kevin Brophy, Nathan Hobby, Jo Langdon, Heather Taylor Johnson, Aden Curran and many others...



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