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TEXT prose

Julia Prendergast

Today is tomorrow

I love running but I'm sick of running. Between the meetings and to break the work, I run. I could stop doing it only I'm desperate for the after-feeling, like the old world is still possible. The feeling is full and then empty like things I don't want to draw attention to, here. Am I running to or from? Suddenly running feels empty. Full-empty. What does that even mean? The world is losing meaning.

In the first weeks of isolation I looked forward to the meetings. Now I hate them. I love-hate them, like running. In the virtual gatherings I see me as others see me, literally not figuratively. I see my (not virtual) background – the dressing table with the long mirror. In the mirror I see my bed. I see the bed in realtime if I look forward, beyond my screen, and I see it in the mirror-background, behind me. It looks like a scene I'm trying to write, a temporally shifty scene that's not working yet. It's a side effect of the virus. Dissolving time. Future past. Or past future. Is there a difference?

It's night-time. The energy picks up as the daylight fades, people emerge from their rooms as if something is going to happen, but it's only dinner and that was hours ago, now. I answer a few more emails, messages from across the seas where it's still yesterday. I'm taken with the idea of talking to yesterday, in realtime. I should go to sleep except I'm not tired – I'm not even slightly sleepy. I should have run twice day. I should have gone harder, faster, to and away from.

I stare at the lap-top screen. In my background two lamps flank the dressing table, one stained-glass, the other hand-painted pottery with a textured lampshade, like shifting tide-marks on the sand. I long for the sea but so what? People are dying. The base of the lamp has swirled markings in green and clay-yellow, painted swirls, and etchings in the swirls, like teeth marks. The teeth marks belong to another story, but the loss of meaning and the emptying of time blends stories. The lamp with the swirled markings looks like Ancient Greek pottery, like wind and teeth in paint and clay, like the Trojan women, wailing. When she gave it to me, she said: 'If I'd known it was a lamp, rather than a vase, I mightn't have given it to you so readily... See the hole,' she adds, 'for the cord?'. There is an old perfume bottle on the dressing table, too, also hers. The glass is textured, refracting lamplight, pinging amber.

At night-time, if I stare at the screen, it's like I'm in a meeting. I can see my background in the screen's reflection, just like my framed face, at the meetings. I join a meeting from the future to see if I'm right, to check if it really does look the same.

The host says: 'You're the only one in the meeting.'

'I know,' I say. 'I know.' I laugh but it's not really that funny.

Is the platform the host? I think so. I decide the platform is the host and I am the organiser. I wish the host would bring me another glass of champagne. I don't like the hallway at night.

I read my stories aloud, in this room, and now I'm talking to the host, who is a platform. If my children are awake, beyond the door, they will think I am the madwoman in the attic.

In the daytime I like the hallway. It's cluttered with things people have shifted out of their bedrooms. A small bin, painted wire – a large cushion with a frayed edge, split, duck down scattered like the soft feathers of dead ducks. I think the feathers should stay there until we have a vaccine – I spill a few more out. 'Why are you doing that?' he says.

Each day there are new things in the hallway – a school bag, defunct (I take it as a statement against home-schooling). I refrain from comment because I don't care and I don't want to discuss the pile – it's like a social experiment except the pandemic is real and it brings stuff out of people's bedroom and

into the hallway. He adds a kettle to the pile (it's a perfectly good kettle – he bought a new one and he is very pleased about it – he is not a buyer of unnecessary things). I think about it while the kettle boils. I wonder what it means, precisely.

Who is to say what is useful now and what's not? Or what means something? Or whether meaning is altogether necessary? I'm interested in the things in the hallway as individual objects but more so, collectively. I want to add a curve ball, something useful and meaning-heavy, but I'm too interested in observing. I don't want to interfere with what's happening in the hallway.

In effect I started it. I put two long, timber sitting benches there, from under my bed. I cleaned the wooden floorboards by hand with fig-scented spray. I needed my workspace to smell nice. I didn't bring the benches back because people started adding on, as if this were a thing, like a garage sale in our hallway.

Sometimes, at night, I walk from room to room and listen to their breathing. With some of them, I can get really close without invading their dreams, so close I can feel the vibrations of their breath, like when they were babies. I walk from room to room, collecting their breathing. I know how lucky I am to have breathing people in my house, a whole collection of breathing people, only at night-time their breathing seems louder than it really is. It's like I can hear it when I'm not close enough to hear it. It bothers me and so I get up close to their breathing to remind myself it's real. Later I stand in the hallway of unused things and I put their breathing together in my mind.

I go back to my desk because words make things meaningful – words collect objects as a composite picture that makes some kind of sense, even refracted sense is okay because of the work of association. Only today I can't make the words breathe and I feel that the hallway is without associations and, at the same time, over-laden. It's too much. I go back to the hallway and listen for things I shouldn't be able to hear. I wish I was a horse so I could stand here all night. I could sleep (not-sleep), standing in media res, among the things we're letting go of.

I should go to bed, it's late enough, after midnight. I open my calendar to check tomorrow for front-facing meetings. Twelve-thirty and four o'clock. 'Go to sleep you idiot,' I say, holding my arms, firmly and kindly, as if I'm someone else which, to be fair, I kind-of am.

In the beginning I made my bed for the meetings. Feigning order. I'm not a bed-maker. I've never really seen the point. Now I make the bed only sometimes. To some extent it depends on who's in the meeting. I'm not in the mood for meetings, anymore. Things have shifted. Meetings are so yesterday. I'll perk up tomorrow, no worries. I'll run first thing, wash my hair, put a fresh bra on – not this sweaty sports bra. I take a black lacy one, hang it over my chair, in readiness. It will make me feel better, I think. It's a champagne thought, black lace ridiculousness. In the night-time light, with the lamps and the candle, it's like I'm inside a kaleidoscope, colours pinging, hurtling towards me from multiple directions. I'm not seeing them so much as feeling them. It's true. I'm not making this up. It's not the champagne.

I respond to my friend from across the seas. 'I'll sort that out tomorrow,' I say. 'It's two am,' I add. 'Today is tomorrow. It's a good title for a short story...' I've barely pushed send and he comes back: 'OK. I love that title – who's gonna use it first?'

'We both are,' I say. 'Seriously. I'm going to have a crack at it tomorrow'. As I lay my head on the pillow, I remember today is tomorrow and that means I should have a crack at it now but, finally, I'm tired.

Today is tomorrow and I'm in a meeting. It's so annoying – being in meetings with yourself. In the dressing table mirror I can see my bed, because looking forward is looking back... I rarely make the bed now because time is for other things and it's night-time somewhere. If perchance I am one of those who will die, sooner rather than later, I want to spend my time doing things that feel like they have a point. Not bed-making. I don't want to see myself, anymore, in this stupid fucking meeting. I reach for the mouse, blank my image. I subscribe to the chat on the side, a conversation in writing. 'Connectivity issues,' I type. I think it's, perhaps, the truest thing I've written across this empty-full time, where today is tomorrow, a forwards-backwards yesterday, but for words.

Julia Prendergast's novel, The Earth Does Not Get Fat was published in 2018 (UWA Publishing: Australia). Julia's short stories feature in the most recent edition of Australian Short Stories (Pascoe Publishing). Other stories have been recognised and published: Lightship Anthology 2 (UK), Glimmer Train (US), TEXT (AU) Séan Ó Faoláin Competition (IE), Review of Australian Fiction, Australian Book Review

Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize (AU). Julia's research has appeared in various publications including: New Writing (UK), TEXT (AU), Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience (UK). Julia is a Senior lecturer in Writing and Literature at Swinburne University, Melbourne. She is Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing in Australasia. Julia directed the Australian Short Story Festival, held for the first time in Melbourne, in 2019. She is an enthusiastic supporter of interdisciplinary, open and collaborative research practices.



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TEXT prose

Peter Nash

Gone Fishin'

In considering non-traditional research outputs, research is defined in the same way as it is for traditional outputs as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way, so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, and understandings in the relevant discipline area(s). This might include the synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative in itself and/or leads to new and creative outcomes. Consistent with a broad notion of research and experimental development – whether defined as Basic, Strategic, Applied, Practice-as-research, or Interdisciplinary – the research for traditional and non-traditional outputs alike will be undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge (including knowledge of humanity, culture, and society) or to use the stock of knowledge to devise new applications.

Imaginative ideas: 'In considering'

Unorthodox ideas: 'non-traditional research outputs,'

Delineated ideas: 'research is defined'

Traditional ideas: 'in the same way as it is'

Orthodox ideas: 'for traditional outputs'

Innovative ideas: 'as the creation of new knowledge'

Facilitating ideas: 'and/or the use of existing knowledge'

Inventive ideas: 'in a new and creative way,'

Dynamic ideas: 'so as to generate'

Ingenuous ideas: 'new concepts, methodologies, and understandings'

Appropriate ideas: 'in the relevant discipline area(s).'

Inclusive ideas: 'This might include'
Interpretive ideas: 'the synthesis and analysis of'
Extant ideas: 'previous research'
Quantitative ideas: 'to the extent that'
Original ideas: 'it is new and creative in itself'
Inspired ideas: 'and/or leads to new creative outcomes.'
Accordant ideas: 'Consistent with'
Extensive ideas: 'a broad notion of research and experimental development'
Characterised ideas: ' – whether defined as Basic, Strategic, Applied, Practice-as-Research, or Interdisciplinary –'
Malleable ideas: 'the research for traditional and non-traditional outputs alike'
Orderly ideas: 'will be undertaken on a systematic basis'
Expediting ideas: 'in order to'
Furthering ideas: 'increase this stock of knowledge'
Anthropomorphic ideas: '(including knowledge of humanity, culture, and society)'
Applied ideas: 'or to use the stock of knowledge'
Avant garde ideas 'to devise new applications.'

Gone Fishin'

The river seemed weird. It flowed upstream and downstream. At the same time. Sometimes rapidly. Sometimes slowly. And sometimes not at all. And most of the time, cogs and gears and wheels choked the river. At other times the river appeared empty. As if those mechanical agents had retired. *Gone fishin'*.

And when the river took a notion, great schools of fish surfaced. Thorny fish and fish of taste and of the most delicate constitution. Plain ordinary fish and exotic electric fish. Surface swimmers and fish existent at depths beyond comprehension.

At times it seemed the river spawned fish apropos disposition. Bait appeared surplus and at such times the fish appeared to hook themselves. So many fish they had to be mulled over and weighed accordant to value.

The exotic electric fish were most prized. For those fish the fisher-folk fished judiciously. And on those rare and sublime occasions when electric exotic out-spawned plain ordinary, the cogs and wheels turned and by degrees powered the river. And the river responded in some strange understanding. Great visions emerged. Artists created all forms of art. Art that appeared to mirror reality. And art that did not. And art that forged new from old.

The river seemed weird. It flowed upstream and downstream at the same time.
At times flush with fish. At times empty.

With apologies to the University of Sydney's Guidelines for Non-Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs): <https://www.sydney.edu.au/dam/intranet/documents/research-support/reporting/ntros/ntro-guidelines-sydney.pdf>

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TEXT poetry

Andrew Leggett

3 poems

Smoking gun

Spreading on the mattress
of a nicotine deck chair,
Hemingway's clone raises a lighter
to a stub of Havana cigar,
catching the eye of my Canon Legria,
snapped with the legs
of his sextogenarian blonde
companion sticking out
in the lower right-hand
corner of the frame.

Given a push,
with timed exposure
and a tumble on the path,
the snap of the legs
at the greater trochanter,
caught by the magnetic
resonance image scanner,
gives a surgeon joy.

Racked retractors
make the way for the jigsaw.
The whining blade bites bone,
spattering the face mask
like the head in the brush chipper
in that scene from *Fargo*.

The surgeon perks
as the old arthritic hip gives way,
wielding his ceramic ball
in its titanium socket.

With a couple of bangs
as sharp as Christ on nails
with a sock around the throat,
soon the old man will spray
and dance the can-can,
if I delay the shutter speed
and he keeps right on puffing.

Steady now,
his belly rises,
portside out,
starboard home,
rocking on a makeshift raft
with a Galapagos tortoise
blowing the sail with a bellows.

I squat, peer into this snapshot,
then tap a sniper's view
into the keyboard, mind's eye
raising steel to my shoulder.
Plugged between his dentures,
the stub of that flaming stogie
positions in the crosshairs
of my infrared sights.

Lazarus

Few men who stink as I do
have been pursued by poetry,

whether the muse be chimera, sphinx,
or other distortion of the great cat.

Why must I be the kill to whom
she returns at the end of her prowl?

Fresh from the sepulchre,
mine are as fleet as any athlete's feet.

I rise, reeking of tinea and sweat
less fragrant than vanilla

since my sweet sister poured the myrrh
I missed all over Jesus' feet.

Yes, I am up for it, stretching
at the door of the tomb at dawn,

ready to break into a run before
poetry springs to maul me again.

Last night I dreamed of slow recovery
from injuries inflicted by the beast.

I found myself bandaged
in a military hospital. All I could do

was swing my plastered limb
wildly to starboard as my good arm

tugged at the triangle on the iron cot
at the nightingale end of the ward.

Our Lady Phosphorescent
cast candle light into the hollows

where once there were my eyes.
With no defence to mount,

I tossed a glass of atomised sago
into my tangle of sheets

and promised weeping Jesus never
to give up the struggle to rise.

Simpson and his donkey, 1915

As I pace the memorial
late in November,
distracted from revision
of a writerly paper,
mythology brays at me
from a gauche statue.

Children wired poppies
into the bridle
of the bronze donkey,
where they remain
from Remembrance Day.

Side saddle,
the wounded digger
keeps his slouch
as a shell burst
shrapnels his chest.

Simpson's blind.
The intelligent eyes
are those of the donkey.
Why, oh why,
must the ass die?

Andrew Leggett is a writer and editor of poetry, fiction, interdisciplinary academic papers and songs. His two poetry collections Old Time Religion and Other Poems (1998) and Dark Husk of Beauty (2006) were published by Interactive Press. In addition to medical degrees and postgraduate qualifications in psychiatry and psychotherapy, he holds a Research Masters degree in creative writing from the University of Queensland and a PhD in creative writing from Griffith University. He was editor of Australasian Journal of Psychotherapy from 2006-2011 and is the current prose editor of StylusLit. He is a Conjoint Senior Lecturer in the University of Newcastle School of Medicine and Public Health.



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TEXT poetry

Judy Durrant

3 poems

Looking for the cormorant

in a shaft of mirrored setting sun – i'm shot
but in that hot film's black emulsion
in that balm of mellow orange flame
its khaki plumes imploding
fix an after-image in my head
its dendrites' furious stacking
inks in green
a heartbeat's nesting brain

~

midges
rove amorphously in company
ducks silver-ice a deeper lake
dragonflies
tread time with iridescent bling

the shoulder-blade wings
of this mythical snake-headed combo
could be a silver-cast figurine dragon's
poised to leap the crystal-ball rows

of two-dollar-shop replication
or simply – wet umbrellas propped
they hang out to dry

arm crooked
to throw a striped-yellow javelin
her neck and beak instead
offhandedly tweak tail for oil
execute a shining liquorice twist
an esther williams back-flip dive
to crimp and preen
careless of the wider screen

stout as a weathered stone
from a singular log – she observes
smooth as a chocolate silk stocking
gently squeezes – sleekly wrings
all the rigmarole
the fuming bridge-stuck manacle
obligatory whistle – mandated ding ding ding
the walk track's zealotry of marching
from her back
even the punctuating spat of farks and farts
the distant wail – leaves her ethereal //

and there's you
sweat pricking in the shaft of your own
heavyweight beam
where green implosion pounds insistence
that death is just a sentence short of living
that the hot exhaust thrust up your tract
determined to expel you from the universal ileum
demands you alchemise some luminary valium
else be floored struck dumb – a block of stone
before its spreading rash of lava flow

for where a photo
eviscerates your tree of person to veneer
where your genes are scuffed of half their paint
by baton pass

by design intelligent enough
time's attire will wear your brand name
on the other side revealing who you are
stave off reflection's – insidious anonymity
in your decrepitating mirror

from the grave of my moment
a mournful aaaark parodies my silver-rose
my apricot-quicksilver closing day

'eternal lines may garland gods
words fork lightning
but when your black wells black and fathomless
when the cinematic lake has put to bed
the technicolor sky
brilliance soars alone in empty gliders
your body's existential thesis – logic barbed
your stiffened wings hung out to dry'

in the light of that shaft – i'm stilled
but in that repellant flash
in that rush of reel's unspooling
a wingspan's warming cloud
will sometimes plume around me
a dendrite nest
... be stacked inside my brain

when the grave is shot to pieces
on each occasion
my *nom de plume* and i go gliding
our flesh and blood transcending
far beyond
a pedant's mortal plane

Ref: 'eternal lines': William Shakespeare
'words fork lightning': Dylan Thomas

The build up

*It's just the thing to settle dirt
my ghostly grey bloom
the feel lingers before it arrives
redolent pheromone heavy and thick
i tease the nose brush the skin
elude the frisk – crack concrete*

‘pasture wilted and spent
if only that indolent odalisque
would let down her milk’

*– and to aphrodite acclaim
coax impervious pentagon
disarm oil slick in its deflowering
relieve bitumen of its black steamy heat?*

*xenoglossiac insect
stung by my tantalus eye
you ping the patois of bloodstream
soar its glissando-ing pink-water froth
the caprice
of its rapturous quickening*

the heat of her long season
passes through my broom
leaves a handle
unencumbered by white plastic bristle
blunt hair falls from my calves
a neat pyramid endows legs
with a close shave and fine

you rasp at my skin
my winters hone parchment
by glimmer's break –
i wax shine with your rain

Learning to fly

can you conceive of an actuality
without detritus?
as Ravel places your fingers on its keys
your being augments into becoming
it rives you – even as you cleave to it
strip the earth of her autumn leaves
and beneath lies her dark damp dirt
and the worm
enriching everything with its cast

one strings catgut to lace feathers to bone
in whose hollows they find their burrowing
another plays the harp-found strings
in a sycamore seed's vanes
lofts their net to capture the lucent
in a bubble's iridescence flying
or in the glassy gauze of veins flown
sundered from their torso

they cradle wings in their arms
together apart they tunnel within
and without
without – and with everything

their guest sites its strains to arrive
as a series of lights strung in stars
it is all or nothing
wake up and the ring in your nose
switches the lights off
to find the stars gone

and its underground city's audacity
discards a hydra's impertinent
shunt of their chopped-liver selves
into aspic – jumps you
one loon ahead of its crack's crazing
both impelled and propelled
into tunnelling tunnelling

towards your damp-dark earth's
everyworm's cool pluck's arriving
your torso-held wings
 latched on into flying

Judy Durrant's poetry has been published in The Age, Cordite, Meanjin, Overland, Prosopisia (India), and LinQ amongst others; shortlisted in the Newcastle Poetry Prize and others; second placed in the Overland Judith Wright Prize and first in the Welsh Poetry Prize. She has a BA in Languages from Monash University and lives in bayside Melbourne. japant@bigpond.com



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TEXT prose

Joshua Baird

Brando

‘No, no, this is not how I intended it at all. Not even close.’

‘It’s not? Looks spot on to me.’

‘I sent the canvases stacked in a carefully organised stack. They were to be hung in the exact order in which they were stacked. How could this possibly have happened?’

The decorator bit down on his tongue, pinning it to his bottom lip, and scanned the painting as if examining it for flaws. Admittedly, it seemed that there were none, but that didn’t erase the truth that what hung on the wall before us did not, in even the slightest of ways, resemble the original product.

‘I, uh, sorry about this, but...’ he sputtered, ‘but when I stopped the trolley, right over here on the carpet, a bunch of the canvases slipped off onto the floor and got jumbled up. I took it upon myself to piece the painting back together. Like a jigsaw puzzle. Start with the corners.’ He looked from top to bottom at the arrangement of canvases that hung on the wall. ‘And if you don’t mind me saying, I thought I did a pretty bang up job ‘til you turned up.’

*

About three months ago, a giant man – whose nose and hands, despite his enormity, were too big for the rest of his body – walked through an art gallery in Morgan’s town centre. He did not usually stop to admire paintings; art

wasn't something that interested him. However, there was a particular painting at this particular gallery that caught him, as if it had cast a net over him and slowly dragged him towards it. It was a painting of a yellow weatherboard cottage with a white roof, a river flowing behind it, a hunch-backed old lady tending to something in the garden on the right-hand side of the little house.

There was no emotional reason for this painting. I don't paint in order to convey some kind of deeply moving political message, or to explore the inner workings of my mind and soul, or to do whatever it is that a passionate artist is *supposed* to do. I painted the cottage because I'm an excellent painter and I surmised that a riverside cottage was as aesthetically satisfying as any other subject.

Yet, as he gazed upon this painting, the huge man felt something swirl softly beneath his skin and blood and bones. There was something that lit a spark of recognition in his eyes, something to do with the grey hair of the old lady or the red circles amongst the leaves of the apple tree, and for this reason, he thought that the painting was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

It was also for this reason that I opened my front door to find this man, stooping so that his head wasn't cut off from my vision by the top of the door frame, his hand reaching for a handshake from mine.

In a deep voice, he introduced himself as Grant Veridia, owner of the Veridia Theatre in my hometown of Morgan, and he requested that I paint something to be displayed in the lobby. There was a strange desperation in his voice, an insistence, as if he *needed* this painting, and he needed it painted by *my* hand. I agreed, more for the money than anything else.

The painting he wanted was so enormous that, for ease of transport, I decided to take a more experimental approach. Across fifty-four smaller canvases, nine tall, six wide, I painted a gigantic portrait of Marlon Brando, so intricately detailed that you could see the pores in the skin of his nose, the individual threads on the green fabric of his t-shirt collar. When the canvases were placed alongside one another, the painting was roughly the size of a cinema screen, and I had to clear my living room of furniture to make space for it on the carpet.

'There's something incredibly human about it all isn't there,' Veridia said, his head turning with his eyes as he looked across the canvases. 'The size of it, it's like some kind of monster, yet he is just a man with stubble and sweat. Art does not usually ignite these flames within me, but your paintings, Mr Hartwell, they really are something else.'

I had meant it to be nothing more than a faithful depiction of Marlon Brando's features, but I suppose I was flattered by the comments.

The next week, the decorator had hung the canvases on the lobby wall of the Veridia Theatre. However, when I looked up at the painting, the canvases did not bind together to form a giant portrait of Marlon Brando staring down at me. Instead, the canvases had been rearranged in a way so that, inexplicably, they resembled a towering tulip with a grass-green stem and open, pink petals. Marlon Brando's nose, which had been in the centre of the original portrait, was now near the top, the canvas flipped on its side so that the nose was now the tip of one of the tulip's petals. The miniscule beads of sweat across Brando's forehead had become droplets of rain that had settled on the flower. The green of his shirt had become the stem. Yet somehow, not a thing looked out of place. The decorator had completely transformed the painting, and now gazed up and down his masterpiece, nine canvases tall, six canvases wide.

'How is this possible?' Although I was awed by the painting's transformation, I was also offended by its replacing my original artwork. 'Take it down, put it up properly. I'll give you directions if need be. Mr Veridia wanted Marlon Brando.'

'Why don't we let the big man decide for himself?'

Grant Veridia had arrived to meet us. He resembled a giant from the movies, stepping over mountains as he approached us. He came to a stop beside us, stood before the painting, gestured to it with a humoured smile and said, 'Mr Hartwell, what's this? What happened to Brando?'

'Can't explain it, sir,' the decorator answered for me. 'Picasso here said he painted Brando. The canvases got all mixed up, I put them back together, now we have this.'

The flower was bent over and seemed as if it was staring down, ridiculing me.

'Shall we take it down then?' I suggested. 'See if we can get Brando back?'

'Not a chance,' Veridia replied. His mouth hung slightly open as he admired the painting, from way up at the tip of the tulip's petals, down to the blades of grass at knee height. 'There's something beautiful about it, isn't there?' He asked it as if it were a genuine question, not a rhetorical one. 'Something delicate, yet so horribly ... I'm trying to find the right word ... erotic.'

'If you're leaving it up there like that, it won't be under my name,' I told Veridia.

‘Nonsense!’ he insisted as he laid his huge hand across my shoulder blades. ‘As long as the strokes are from your brush, your name shall remain on the painting. And its title shall remain “Brando”.’ It was sometimes difficult to determine whether Veridia was persuasive because of his insistent demeanour or his intimidating size.

So, for months, the canvases were laid out across the wall of the Veridia Theatre’s lobby like a misquotation. Although my name, Hartwell, was inscribed upside-down along the side of one of the canvases in the middle of the painting (it had originally been signed in the bottom right corner), I felt as if my own masterpiece had been outdone. The compliments I received were not for me, they were for this transfiguration, this supposed improvement imposed upon my own work.

I must admit, I felt some twisted joy when I’d heard, months after the reveal of ‘Brando’, that part of the theatre had been vandalised, and most of the canvases that composed the artwork had been pulled from the wall and strewn across the maroon carpet of the lobby. Veridia requested that I repaint those canvases that had been damaged and restore the flower that loomed in Veridia Theatre. I recreated those canvases exactly, and when it came time to put the canvases back up, I secretly ordered them so that they would once again compose the portrait of Marlon Brando.

I’m not sure what went wrong. I had replicated my original painting perfectly, precisely ordered the canvases, made sure they were oriented the right way, and supervised closely as the canvases were fastened to the wall. But as each one was put in its place and a picture slowly spread outwards from the top left corner, it gradually became clear that the painting would not depict Marlon Brandon. But neither would it depict a giant pink tulip. Across the top six canvases, the shades that previously formed Brando’s green t-shirt now formed a sickly, cloudless sky. As each of the fifty-four canvases were placed, more of the picture was revealed, until finally it depicted a blood-spattered feast – three wild wolves tearing at the carcass of an indeterminable animal, its stomach ripped open so you could see its jagged ribcage, bits of its flesh hanging from the wolves’ teeth.

‘Take it down!’ Veridia boomed. ‘We can’t have this here, Hartwell – it’ll make our customers sick!’

‘This is not what I painted.’ I almost felt myself cower.

The decorator and I pulled the canvases from the wall, laid them across the floor of the theatre lobby, and tried to find the portrait or the tulip hidden within them.

It was the strangest thing; no matter what order we arranged the canvases in, we could not recapture the Marlon Brando portrait, nor the tulip. Even stranger, though, is the fact that every single combination of the canvases revealed a new picture, almost perfect in its presentation: A dimly lit stage featuring a ballet performance; a hammer driving a chisel into stone; a bonfire; a shield and sword; and a hand lifting the chin of a crying boy. The colours and lines seemed to transform as we moved the canvases. The pinks of flesh turned into the reds of blood, the greens of leaves into the ocean's blues. Over the course of several days, Veridia invited painters, critics, owners of art galleries, and a collection of other experts to attempt to recreate the tulip – or if that was unachievable, then at least restore Marlon Brando – but with each new arrangement came a new unique picture.

On top of all this, each of the pictures would only ever appear once. We would rearrange the canvases to find a tiger hiding among the tall grass, then move the canvases again to reveal a severed head. When we then tried to recapture the tiger, in its place within the tall grass was a toucan. Every picture that was created, we would only see it once before it was lost forever among the canvases.

As the painting transformed before our eyes, I could feel my mind unhinging; the pictures had become a fog behind a haze, and I could no longer determine the difference between a human and an animal, a limb and a landscape. They had all simply become brush strokes – I couldn't tell if I was simply imagining pictures where there were only lines and scribbles.

Finally, I created something that satisfied Veridia. The canvases had been organised in such a way that they depicted a yellow cottage with a white roof, a river running behind it. It was almost identical to the painting I had done years ago, the one that first captured Mr Veridia, except the weatherboards of this cottage had aged and rotted, the garden was unkempt, and the old lady was no longer there.

Veridia gazed up at the enormous painting, a gap hanging between his lips. He was softly clenching and unclenching his fists as if it helped whatever he was trying to comprehend. He looked at the cottage the way a boy might look at his wounded father; a wicked mixture of sorrow and admiration upon his face. Standing there in front of the many canvases, he was a tiny man lost in the vines that crawled their way up the cottage, along the weathered roof.

'So, are we okay to leave it like this?' the decorator asked. 'I can't look at these canvases much longer.'

‘Thank you.’ Veridia spoke so quietly that his voice hovered between a deep rasp and a whisper. ‘This one can stay. It’s moving, isn’t it? I can almost feel it move inside my body, over my face and my skin.’

The decorator and I glanced at each other with raised eyebrows. It was almost difficult to tell the difference between this picture and the countless others we had arranged over the past few hours. They had all blended into one painting, coming to mean the same thing.

I was surprised; I preferred the original cottage – the one hanging in Morgan’s art gallery – but Veridia seemed immobilised by the one that hung before us. Perhaps it was the sheer size that captivated him, or the fact that if you looked closely, you could see the miniscule cracks in the weatherboards and the pattern of the lace curtains through the shattered window.

The decorator and I left Veridia standing there, mesmerised. I saw him once or twice over the next few years. I visited the theatre sometimes, glimpsing my artwork on the way into a show. I never saw anyone stop to look at the painting except for Mr Veridia, and the cottage stayed on the lobby wall even after the theatre closed down decades later.

I most recently saw the painting a few months after the theatre’s closure. The building had been abandoned and a window had been smashed, leaving a jagged hole that led into the lobby of the theatre. Walking past one morning, curiosity captured me and I stepped in through the hole. I could still hear the echoes of voices in the lobby, the din of music humming behind the closed doors that opened to the stage. I could feel Grant Veridia standing in the lobby, though I don’t know what happened to him. To my surprise, my painting still hung on the lobby wall, vandalised again. Several of the canvases were missing and the remaining ones had streaks of paint splattered across them, obscuring the cottage. You could no longer tell what was depicted within the painting. It was a mess of nothing, indecipherable. I gazed at it for a while. Still, there was *Brando*, a tulip, a pack of wolves, and innumerable other things hidden within the remaining canvases covered in graffiti. As I continued to look at it, feeling Mr Veridia standing there beside me, the painting seemed to have been destroyed, but despite all that, I’ll admit that I didn’t find the picture altogether unappealing.

Joshua Baird teaches Creative Writing at Deakin University. He recently completed a PhD thesis which focuses on links between masculinity and unreliable narration in first-person fiction.



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TEXT poetry

Lucy Alexander

2 poems

Skull

Just beyond your sideways glance there are always suspended constellations. They are whirling axis data motes, thoughts thrown, spun on pitch-slide of now, whole galaxies of petrified bones forming pinhole lights that sting their way through the skull you are sealed in. They hover – looking a distant purple-green from so close and seem promise something beyond the stifle of love, outside the cotton-wooled mind, each one a tunnel to a new possible, each one a kiss on your solid brow.

Pinch

Never relative the ones you love, never love the ones you study, never open the door if you know who is there and be sure to love the door. Always pinch the bigger half, if you can carry it. Always love your relatives and study them for uncertain opportunities. Always look through the crack between the door and its jamb before you open it fully – it will be a relative, a witch, or nothing but the wind. It will always be hard to tell the difference. Always take a pinch of a dream if you find one. Pinch dreamers. Never choose an aqua coloured door that is blue. Never argue it is green. Never love the aqua wind. Always prefer the certain door. Never study a pinch, never dream the wind, always

wind the relatives, always pinch the study. Always, always without fail, love the witch.

Lucy Alexander is a writer and poet. She works from a studio at Gorman + Ainslie Arts Centre. In 2019 she was a HardCopy non-fiction stream participant for her quirky manuscript 'Calling Your Dog'. She also received an ArtsACT grant to be mentored by Isobelle Carmody for her work of fiction 'Mela's Aqueduct' in collaboration with digital artist Paul Summerfield. Her poems have recently appeared in Cordite and Meniscus and reviews in Verity La. She lives in a happy menagerie with her four kids and loving husband.



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TEXT prose

Dean Kerrison

Green-eyed monster diary

A woman scans my forehead's temperature at the drive-through border of northern and southern Cyprus. I'm on foot, walking past signs saying 'United Nations Buffer Zone: Keep Out' and queued-up cars travelling from the Turkish to Greek side. This is the only border point currently open, far from the city centre, all the other crossings were closed in the last week. A man in his car yells at me for skipping past the vehicles, so I let his seat-belted family through first. The passport control officer gives me a flyer: 'Attention: Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)'.

City centre of Nicosia, the world's last divided capital. At the shut Ledra Palace border, protests are going on about all the closures. I've met up with my mate and his Cypriot girlfriend who say that people in the south can't access cheap oil and cigarettes now. They stay back as I edge forward. Around us individuals and families are chanting. Signs with peace symbols and words in languages I don't understand. Elderly gazing down from their balconies with coffee in hand. Policemen in helmets dividing the two populations, amid EU and Cypriot flags, and the Turkish further down. YOUR WALL CANNOT DIVIDE US, the signs say.

We meet his girlfriend's three friends at a cafe. Frappes turn into beers, at least for my mate and me. One friend says the north is an internationally unrecognised state, only acknowledged by Turkey who's illegally occupied it

since the 1974 war. Later at a bar, an Iranian girl I've just met frustrates me, going on about how we must be so careful with this virus, while we drink poison. She says she's worried about her family at home, where hundreds are getting infected or dying each day. What brings you joy in life? I ask.

I'm walking along the harbour of Kyrenia, on the upper coast of Northern Cyprus. The castle makes me wonder if there's time to visit Othello's Castle to the east within my limited days on the island. In Shakespeare's play, the Venetians sent Othello here on a ship to help watch the Turks who were up to no good. Five hundred years later, not much has changed in the region. It's night time now and a British girl who's half Turkish talks about the Greeks being the aggressors, and I joke about stealing a boat and sailing beyond the horizon together. The two of us sit and drink Corona beers on the rock wall, teasing each other and making out under the Mediterranean full moon.

Othello murdered his wife out of jealousy, the green-eyed monster. But the British girl's ex simply screamed and they stayed friends till they weren't. Now we walk to her car and drive around and pull over somewhere quiet to hook up. Later she drops me home but the next night, my last night, she decides she's too busy. My appetite wanes and perhaps I'm a little envious of the person I could be.

In Famagusta the next day, I stampede through the town trying to find Othello's Castle, laptop and clothes bouncing around my backpack. 55 minutes till my bus to the airport leaves. Only now I realise the entire old town is contained within the castle. But old Othello's got a tower here somewhere. Touristy shops. Doner durum kebab. European retirees sipping Efes beer wondering how to spend the rest of their time. Othello Meze Restaurant is closed and a German tour group congregates around an old church. At the saved Google Maps location for Othello's Tower, nothing exists and I'm spinning around and got no internet. 40 minutes. A map on a sign was way back at the castle entrance. I run back. 30 minutes. Knowing where to go now, I sprint past the Efes-drinking boomers who'll probably gossip later about this guy running from trouble, weave through the Germans and their guide past the Othello restaurant, and find the damn tower. 20 minutes.

A bronze statue of Shakespeare's head. The tower is cast-off on the castle's edge, away from the centre where the churches get all the glory. No one cares about Shakespeare anymore, I guess. There's *Game of Thrones*, reclining cinema seats, Netflix. Elizabethan English just doesn't make sense these days.

But a year ago, I had bronchitis in China and on the worst day I could barely breathe. Euthanising myself off my 14th-storey balcony was a valid solution. But Shakespeare's words in *Macbeth* helped me through: 'Present fears are less than horrible imaginings.' If I could get through this one day coughing my lungs out in bed, it was nothing in the bigger picture and others had it much worse.

15 minutes. The tower ticket guy takes his sweet time as no one else is in sight and my feet are tapping and I try not to tell him to hurry the fuck up. No time to appreciate the rooms and courtyard and rooftop that I blast through. I guess Iago felt this same stress in his jealousy of Othello and Cassio. Or Othello's trembling when he's tricked into thinking his wife cheated on him. Images of the play's wine-fuelled sword fight come to life, and memories re-surface of watching the performance live in Australia with an ex too, stems of red wine glasses between our fingers but our swords loosely kept at bay for the meantime. Ships and containers are docked in numbers. A crane's screeching is Othello's cries of regret. And sweat drips down my limbs outside the bus with two minutes to spare.

The words I write in my diary involve so many other words I don't understand. Placards, signs, chanting, theatre speeches, whispers in the back seats of cars...

When the British girl asks if I'm still in Cyprus, it's too late. I'm gone, back to Alanya on the Turkish mainland. I suggest returning soon if she's up for it, but she says Cyprus has now banned all entry for non-citizens.

In my apartment, news videos show Australians almost killing each other in supermarkets, jealous of those hoarding more toilet paper. Sure, it'll wipe shit off their asses but it won't help to clean up the mess of romance. Only a dagger to the green-eyed monster will do that.

On Alanya beach, the few sunbakers avoid the cold water. Kyrenia harbour is over 100km away beyond the mist. I should've taken more swimming lessons.

Dean's tales are often internationally focused, touching on travel, religion/faith, history/culture and dating, appearing in the Bangalore Review, Allegory Ridge, Global Hobo, ABC Open and Flourish. He's been involved in literary groups and

events in Australia, China, Georgia and Bali, and is a member of Asia Pacific Writers & Translators. He commences his first novel in 2020 as part of a PhD at Griffith University.



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TEXT poetry

Gershon Maller

Palimpsest

Would it be true, if under the influence of Pentothal, everything I said about truth serum was false. It might vex the patience of the avid reader if I asked, how would you know? My body resisted the trip I shot into my vein, as my truth, which flows straight from the heart, and the serum, each moved by force of erasure, traced over the trace over the trace over the trace in the blood left by the other on arterial walls. It was under the influence of that reliable sera that I report the following incident recorded in my journal. X was a tourist met near Oświęcim, a town in southern Poland. He was taking a selfie outside the gates of a deserted holiday camp, below a metal sign that read *Über Macht Frei*. His face, lit by autumnal flare of late afternoon as the sun slid below distant hills, was angelic. He saw me among gaunt arbour shadows and despite my waxen skin and blue striped pyjamas, embraced me with a flourish of genuine warmth: ‘Bless you, my friend. The woke shall inherit the Earth’. ‘Indeed,’ I replied, ‘I have no doubt that we will.’ He turned and walked swiftly to his limousine. I wondered if his feet touched the ground. I waved him farewell until darkness closed over strawberry taillights vanishing through forest.

Melbourne based poet and academic editor, Gershon Maller, is author of Night Breathing and Nights in the Gardens of Spain. His poetry has appeared in Going Down Swinging, Meanjin, Overland, Poetry Australia, StylusLit, Unusual Works, TEXT, The Australian Jewish News, The Sydney Morning Herald (AU), and The Muse Apprentice Guild and The Wallace Stevens Journal (US), among others.
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TEXT prose

Ann Nonn

Dear Colleague

Dear Colleague,

There are a few good guys in the Academy. I am saddened to learn that you are not one of them.

Disappointed,
The office next door.

Dear Workmate,

I'm in shock. It's Tuesday afternoon and one meeting with a student shifts everything I think I know.

I'm not in denial though. The student is easy to believe. The story is full of things I know to be true. Everything fits into place. But suddenly I am looking at everyone differently now. Questioning my judgement.

We work in a university, so we like an intellectual challenge, but this one is emotional too. How did I miss this? Who can I trust?

Upset,
A.

Dear Fucker,

Why is it so hard to keep your pants on? I really don't find it difficult.
Just keep that zip zipped up.

I don't even find it difficult to surround myself in the work-place with other people who are fully clothed. Of course, I don't have complete control over others, but I've never inspired someone to spontaneously disrobe in my office.

If you have trouble keeping your pants on, perhaps this is not the job for you. Perhaps you'd be better off in a profession with less interpersonal contact, in every sense.

FFS,
Ann

Dear Friend,

I know now that you have lied to me for years. Manipulated me and others around us, to keep your dirty secrets. I realise that this is part of the fun for you. I did not want to play your sick games. But your lies meant that I had no choice.

Did I ever really know you? I replay our daily interactions and see disquieting nuances, ominous machinations. Was there ever an encounter you weren't gaming for your own ego and amusement?

Collaterally damaged,
Ann

Dear Cliché,

It's all so utterly familiar, almost predictable. Of course, she's half your age. Of course, she's blonde. Of course, you told her you'd left your wife and kids. That's how this always goes with men like you, isn't it?

I guess you'll ride off into the sunset in a new red sports car or a loud motorbike, just to complete the picture.

Should've seen it coming,
Ann

Dear Teacher,

You used the institution as your alibi. You cultivated a façade as a person of insight, learning, generosity. The institution gave you a place, a title, a role, that allowed you to swan into people's lives and shatter them.

The institution gave you a position of power. With that seal of approval, people gave you their trust. You exploited all this. You exploited her.

I hope you can learn to be a better human.

Always a teachable moment,
Dr. Ann

Dear Thinker,

I know you like to style yourself as a Thinking Man. An intellectual. Deep.

So, what the hell were you thinking? Others have already suggested that you weren't thinking at all, but driven by something more primal. I disagree. I suspect you were thinking about your own power, the irresistibility of your body, the magnitude of your brilliance. You were thinking entirely about yourself.

What are you thinking now? Do you see the ripples of impact radiating from you? Do you trace the implications?

Confused,
A.

Dear Problem,

I was planning to draft a journal article this week. But instead I meet with staff in Human Resources about how to handle this. You. I meet with your student, with my boss, with your boss.

I was planning to read and think and develop ideas and construct arguments. But instead I check policy, I consult, I document. I spend my days trying to tidy up a mess you've spent years constructing. It cannot be tidied, of course. But the careening snowball takes effort to stop.

Exhausted,
Ann

Dear Predator,

You have damaged a vulnerable young woman. She came to you to learn. You manipulated her. You toyed with her. You hurt her. I want you to carry the weight of that damage with you for the rest of your life, as I guess that she will.

This pain is not part of the learning experience. This pain is not fodder for your next novel or even hers. This pain is completely unnecessary. This pain is caused by you.

Horrificed,
Ann

Dear Workshop Leader,

I know you're good at cultivating intimacy with students and I think that's part of what makes you a good creative writing teacher. You encourage students to feel confident exposing their vulnerabilities, because it makes for compelling writing.

You support students to open up and accept each other's limitations without moral judgement. This fosters productive feedback. The workshop is a space

for testing ideas and their expression, which means that sometimes writers get it wrong. We work, side-by-side and together, on improving our writing and our understandings of each other.

A good writing workshop can reveal deeply personal feelings and experiences. Some even argue that it should. This helps the writers and their writing to connect with issues of social significance, to connect with their readers.

As teachers, we share in these intimacies along with our students. This is part of what makes teaching creative writing so draining and so rewarding. But good writing teachers also draw boundaries, explicitly and implicitly. You're not so good with boundaries, and I think that's part of what makes you a bad creative writing teacher. This is precisely where students need our guidance, because learning intimacy without boundaries is a sad story with an unfortunate ending.

Work in progress,
Ann

Dear Employee,

How did your meeting with the boss go? Did you sweat? Did you squirm? Did you admit to your transgressions?

Was she stiff, formal, harsh? Did she reprimand?
Was she enquiring? Did she sympathise? Did she educate?

Did you rationalise? Did you minimise? Did you spin more lies?

Wishing to be a fly on the wall,
Ann

Dear Creep,

Where can women go to escape your leering gaze? Where could she have gone just to learn? To experiment, to be challenged, to be respected? Is there a place beyond the dull hum of your rapacious desires?

She followed directions, but the timetable, the classroom, the office were not safe for her. Because of you.

Disgusted,
Ann

Dear Ex-Colleague,

You tell me that you're sorry. About what you did? Or just sorry that you got caught?

You say you'd like to rebuild trust. Save that for your wife.

I guess what you mean is that you want to rebuild your career. I'm not sure you deserve that.

Yours truly,
Ann Nonn

Dr Ann Nonn is lecturer in Creative Writing at an Australian university.



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TEXT prose

Oliver Wakelin

Thalatta

I walked past the old wrought iron gate to the heavy wooden door of the Paddington terrace. There were thick metal bars across the ground floor window. Through the bars I saw movement inside and the warm glow cast by the lamps. I heard laughter and music. There was the sound of chair legs groaning and screeching as they were pushed back hard on wooden floorboards.

I used the central knuckle of my middle finger to rap on the flaking black paint of the door, ignoring the big brass knocker. The sound wasn't very loud. I walked to the window and put my eye to the crack between the curtains.

A large group of people I didn't recognise were standing around the coffee table. I heard a familiar voice shout, 'James'.

A palm was pressed against the inside of the glass. I placed my palm against the window. I returned to the door. When it opened Michael threw his arms wide and shouted, 'James! My very good fine gentleman friend James.'

We embraced.

Mike said, 'How is my very good friend James?'

I said, 'You know, I'm very, very well.'

Mike kept an arm draped across my shoulders and steered me to a room at the base of the stairs which contained a fire place and the long wooden dining table. Most of the places at the table were occupied.

In the adjoining room, which contained the window that looked onto the street, were many well-dressed people standing and socializing vociferously. I sat down at the last unoccupied place at the table. On the table were cheeses, salamis, olives, and soft drinks.

‘Happy New Year’s,’ I said to everyone who was seated.

‘James,’ Matt said.

‘Hello mate,’ Min said.

‘James,’ Anh said. ‘Can I get you a cider?’

She reached into the white plastic bag by her feet and fetched a bottle of cider away from the cardboard that was keeping the other bottles together. She offered the bottle to me. She smiled and then I smiled too. I took the bottle. I unscrewed the top. I put the cap on the table and took a drink.

‘Hello Hayley,’ I said to the woman sitting next to Min. ‘And Liz too. Is that everyone?’

‘Victoria is upstairs,’ Min said.

‘And Jim will be coming back later,’ Anh said. ‘Rob’s in the kitchen.’

‘Hello,’ Rob shouted from the kitchen.

I looked at the hands of the ornate analogue clock on the mantelpiece behind Matt’s shoulder which gave the time as 9:17.

From the people in the room adjacent came a loud chorus of laughter. I turned and saw the women were wearing colourful summer dresses and sandals. The men wore variegated button up shirts with sand hued chinos and brown or black leather shoes.

I leaned in close to the table and said, ‘Who are?’ I flicked my head towards the second group.

‘Friends of our housemate,’ Matt said. ‘You know David.’

I said, ‘Oh yes.’

Rob entered the living space from the kitchen, holding four wine glasses. He put these on the table then retrieved a chair from kitchen and sat down next to me.

‘Who are these people?’ I said to him intimately.

‘You know David the Rhodes scholar. He came top of every one of his subjects at Oxford. He got the medal for best all round Oxford student.’

‘Crikey.’

‘He’s about to start his PhD at Harvard. Sally is a scientist, something to do with the brain. She’s at Princeton. The others are mostly at Oxford and Cambridge too.’

‘Sweet mercy.’

‘It’s a high-powered group.’

‘Wearing a lot of collars,’ Min said.

Min’s shoulders were at that moment high and tight, her face wan. She wore a T-shirt with a faded but visible paint stain over the right hand side of her stomach. She had on her jeans and some shoes with checkered canvas over the toes.

Min stared down at the table after her remark. I turned to Rob and raised the eyebrow that was not visible to Min. Rob raised both his eyebrows in return and looked down at the table.

Liz said, ‘Well yes. It’s lovely to see you James. How have you been?’

‘Well. Well thank you Liz.’

‘What have you been doing?’

‘I have been doing regular things. I have been studying, and doing some writing. Anything except getting a job. How have you been? Anyone here a Hollywood star yet?’

Liz said, ‘Vicky’s been cast in the next Mjólnir superhero movie.’

‘Amazing. Huge achievement. So what’s the plan tonight?’ I asked.

Mike said, 'Well, we were thinking dinner. Then either get a cab somewhere to watch the fireworks, or watch them on TV again. Best view in the city is on TV.'

'I thought you would be at your parent's,' I said. 'Surely that's the best view in the city?'

Mike said, 'We're on a break.' He walked behind my chair and started massaging my shoulders. He said, 'How have you been my big sexy boy? We don't see you no more.'

'You have to invite me over more.'

Vickie began coming down the stairs.

'Vickie,' Liz said.

'Oh yes, hello everyone,' Vickie said with a quick flick of the wrist. 'My fiancé will be joining later. Not before dinner.'

'Alright,' Rob said. 'Time to go. What are we thinking? Does Japanese work for you James?'

I said, 'Yes. Japanese is good for me. It's mostly milk and gluten that're no good so Japanese is generally pretty good.'

Rob asked, 'Everyone happy with Japanese?'

There were nods and shrugs of agreement. People stood up and began pulling on their coats and jumpers and gathering up their alcohol.

'Do we take booze with us?' I asked.

'Yeah, that should be fine,' Matt said.

Mike said, 'I'm going to hang out with the other team. Soz.'

People began to forward out. Anh and I were at the back of the group. I put my arm around Anh's shoulder. Then I took it away.

'How are you, dear Anh?'

'Well, Jamesy. How are you?'

'About the same. Looking forward to getting away.'

'That's right. Where are you going?'

‘Pearl Beach. For a couple of nights. Just to clear my head and write. See if I can make something out of that manuscript.’

‘Yes. What is it?’

‘It’s an old historical account I’ve been trying to turn into a novella.’

‘But it’s racist?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Sounds tough.’

‘I think there’s something in it that can be used. His name was William Buckley. He was an early settler. A convict. Lived with Aboriginal groups for thirty years. When old sources have a lot of nasty views, I start wondering whether it’s worth trying to turn it into fiction. I start thinking I shouldn’t be trying to revive interest in the document. I guess it’s something that people who write historical fiction work out for themselves. How is Anh Le?’

‘I’m well. You know. Just usual things.’

We walked on the busy side street, toward Cleveland Street which was bumper to bumper as the hordes taxied and Ubered around the city. I saw glowing neon signs. The dazzling headlights of cars as they turned into the lane.

I said, ‘I never know what’s happening with Anh. If I sneeze I tell you. But you get cast in major productions that I don’t find out about it until the thing’s nearly over.’

‘Well.’

‘Just modest.’

‘Oh, not really, James.’

We turned onto Cleveland Street and weaved silently in and out of the other pedestrians until we came to the glass door of the Japanese restaurant. I saw the others were already seated and flicking through menus.

‘I can only stay for a few minutes,’ Anh said quietly.

‘Don’t leave me,’ I said.

I made a pouty face then pushed the door open and we sat down across from each other at the table at the two seats closest to the entrance.

Min said, 'Lots of collars in here too.'

I looked down at my own collared shirt. People looked at menus and then placed their orders with the waiter.

Anh said, 'I won't order. I have to make the bus if I'm going to get to this other party.'

'Oh no,' I said.

She kissed everyone and said her goodbyes and was gone. The group watched the door close behind her in silence.

Vic said, 'Why don't we go around and each say what we've been up to?'

The sushi came on big platters. I had a miso soup. I drank more cider from the six pack in the plastic bag that Anh had left behind. Everyone took a turn to speak, except Vicky who I noticed remained silent.

I said, 'So what have you been cast in, Vic?'

'Oh, just Mjölnir.'

'Wow,' I said. 'Why don't we ever go and celebrate these things? We should go out on the town every time something like this happens.'

Matt scoffed. Vicky looked away abruptly. I looked at Liz who met my gaze evenly.

We ate from the plates of sushi which kept coming and coming. There were seven large empty plates on the table when we had finished. When all the sushi was gone, and the conversation had begun to wane, Liz stretched and then put her hand into the arm of her jacket. People began collecting their belongings and standing up.

'How will we pay?' I asked.

Matt said, 'The normal way.'

Liz said, 'Let's see how far we can get with cash.'

She looked at the bill and divided it by the number of people. We each began searching for thirty-two dollars. The money piled up in the centre.

I said, 'I've only got a ten and a twenty.'

Matt said, 'I will cover your two dollars, James.'

I saw him lock eyes with Min.

Matt said, 'Remember when you forgot your wallet, James?'

Liz said, 'OK, we've got it.'

She carried the heap to the till at the wall furthest from the door. 'Thank you so much,' the cashier called. The door was held open by the waitress. She bowed slightly to each as we left.

I fell behind as we returned to Vicky's share house. The night air was warm. It was quieter a few paces back, away from the group. Liz peeled off to join me.

'Hello,' I said.

'Hi. Enjoy dinner?'

'Yes.'

'Did you enjoy the food?' Liz asked.

'I thought the food was great, thank you. Really, really great. Did you like it?'

'Oh yes, of course. Jim should be at home when we get there.'

I said, 'Wonderful. That's really wonderful news. Anything new?'

'Just working,' Liz said.

'I'll have to give it a go.'

She said, 'You going to get a job soon?'

'Good things come to those who wait. Right?'

'Seek and ye shall find.'

I said, 'Aren't writers supposed to write full time? I read that if you don't write full time, you're unlikely to make a living as a writer.'

'Didn't Agatha Christie write two thousand words before work in the morning?'

We walked slowly in silence. When we arrived at the terrace, Vic opened the front door. Jim appeared in the hallway. The pitch and volume of people's voices rose as they greeted him.

All the lights were turned back on and people began to settle in the television room. Some drinks were poured and people began to get comfortable. The television was turned on and switched to the cricket highlights.

I relaxed into the deep couch. I tuned out for a few minutes. I looked at the television while it played reruns of the nine o'clock fireworks over the bridge. The television was muted. Jim sat down next to me.

I said, 'Fishing.'

He said, 'Yeah mate.'

We both looked at the television.

I overheard Rob say, 'You need ten thousand hours of practice.'

I said to Jim, 'Fishing soon?'

Jim said, 'Yeah mate.'

I turned my face to the wider circle. Rob was talking earnestly in his South African accent about the Myers-Briggs System.

He said, 'James, you'd be an INFP I think.'

I said, 'What's that?'

'Intuitive feeling perceiving. It's the mediator. Artsy. You would be that too Anh. My mum is INFP.'

'Ooo, Bronwyn is an INFP,' Vic said. 'You should get in touch, James.'

The room returned to silence. The television was playing adverts on mute.

'Any sport on?' Rob asked.

Matt and Jim began talking about cricket.

'I will go,' I said. 'I've got a long drive.'

'Where are you driving?' Liz asked.

'I'm driving to Pearl Beach.'

‘Oh. Who are you going there with?’ Vic said.

I saw Vic and Min make surreptitious eye contact. Liz, over the top of her wine glass, made quick eye contact with Vic also.

I said, ‘Just going by myself. I booked a motel. Need a few days. To start the year. And finish writing something I’ve been working on. Sometimes it helps me to be isolated to finish a project. Be sure that I’m getting the best clarity I can get. Not being influenced by something. Or someone.’

‘Ooo, exciting. What are you writing?’ Matt asked.

‘Just reworking an old historical document. It’s quite racist but I think there’s something in it that can be rescued.’

‘Sounds interesting,’ Matt said. ‘You will have to let us know how it goes.’

I said, ‘Bringing a finished project into the world is a good feeling. I can’t afford kids.’

I looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was ten minutes to midnight.

I said, ‘I might as well stay for the fireworks actually.’

‘Yes, stay for the fireworks,’ Matt said.

I sat down.

‘So,’ I said to Jim in a lowered voice.

People turned to listen.

I said, ‘Been playing sport?’

Jim said, ‘Just a bit of tennis. But that’s coming to an end. How about you?’

‘No. Have you heard that Churchill quote about exercise? How every time he felt the urge to exercise, he would lie down till it passed.’

‘That’s very funny, James,’ Matt said.

‘Thank you, Matt,’ I said.

The group sat quietly.

‘Nearly time for the fireworks,’ I said.

Matt said, ‘Ooo yes. Let’s watch the fireworks.’

Jim switched the TV to the right channel. We listened to the reporters at the water’s edge talking excitedly about the entertainment, and the atmosphere, and the fireworks. Then there was a count down and the fireworks began. I heard them on the television and also the distant rumbling of the explosions themselves. The colours were bright, dazzling, luminous.

When they had petered out, I stood up and said, ‘Time for me to go.’

‘On your retreat,’ Matt said. ‘To begin the summer of writing and editing.’

He looked around. I didn’t see anybody make eye contact. People were looking at their laps.

‘Alright, it was great to see you all,’ I said. ‘Really great. Happy New Year.’

I moved towards Rob to shake hands but then waved to the group and began walking towards the front door.

‘Good luck with the writing project,’ Matt said.

‘Thank you, Matt,’ I said. ‘Goodbye everybody. Thank you. Good evening.’

I drove north through the bush until I saw Umina beach passing way down beneath me on my left. I saw the outline of the curvature of the sheltered beach in the moonlight. I plunged into the bush again.

Then the incline was steep and when I finally came to the top of a ridge I looked up and saw the moonlight dancing on the water. It was Pearl Beach I was looking down on, and in the distance were the heads and between them the open sea. *Thalatta! Thalatta!* I felt that effervescent clarity coming.

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TEXT prose

Craig Billingham

On the novel I did not write

Twelve months into my Doctor of Arts candidature at the University of Sydney I realised that the writing project I'd set myself, and on the basis of which I'd been accepted into the program, was something I would be unable to complete. In retrospect there were two main reasons. First, having published an early section of the novel, I subsequently lost momentum; I came to think of this, perhaps ridiculously, as *the voice* having run out of breath. Second, and more important, I now felt that I could not, in good conscience, write the novel I'd initially proposed, namely, to fictionalise the circumstances surrounding the death of the Australian poet Michael Dransfield (1948-1973), and to riff on questions of literary milieu and posthumous reputation. Although it was an anxious period I did not consider withdrawing or suspending my candidature. Perhaps naïvely, I assumed that my enthusiasm for the novel as originally conceived would return, and that I would resolve the ethical quandary, but neither of those things happened.

1.

In 2016 *Southerly* published 'The Final Cast', the story I'd hoped would become the first chapter of the creative component of my thesis. The publication was something to be pleased about; up until that point I'd published more poetry than prose fiction, and thus I felt I was making headway in the genre I'd chosen to pursue during my candidature. As a poet

I'd become accustomed to sending out poems as I finished them, and hoping, once a sufficient number had been selected for publication, that a collection might ensue; in submitting my story to *Southerly* I was simply transposing the habit. And once the story had been accepted, I thought I knew what would happen: it would appear, and then, with more confidence and an added sense of legitimacy, I would carry on writing, adding, expanding, progressing towards a novel length manuscript. Unfortunately, the publication had a deadening effect, delivering not the impetus I'd hoped for, but a logjam. I sensed I'd finished even before I'd properly begun.

The one aspect of the story to have worked, I allowed myself to think, perhaps rather smugly, was the voice, which, as I'd learned in an extract from a book by Richard Cohen, an extract I'd encountered in a unit of study that I was obligated to complete as a condition of my candidature, 'refers to a specific aspect of style, the aspect that makes the words on the page sound like those of a human being talking, with a personality' (Cohen 114-5). I felt my story's first-person narrator had a personality, in the sense meant by Cohen: warmly neurotic, downwind of self-deprecation. However, on seeing 'The Final Cast' in print, the voice struck me as alien. While writing the story I'd tried only to maintain verbal momentum, the fluency and/or the impression of fluency – fluently-warmly-neurotic – which for this particular story had seemed apposite, but I wasn't confident that I could re-inhabit the voice, or have it re-inhabit me, for the duration of long form prose. Furthermore, I was concerned that readers, were there to be any, would prove unwilling to endure such a voice for upwards of forty thousand words, that being the self-mandated, though in essence quite arbitrary, minimum length for a literary novel, it seemed.

Where had the voice for my story come from? Contrary to what I once had thought, and what on many occasions I'd heard and read in the types of author interviews one finds, even now, in the weekend supplements of metropolitan newspapers, the voice had not arrived *sui generis*, divinely given, but rather, in part, had emerged from an earlier, liberating bout of *influenza*, which is always embarrassing to admit: I'd been under the sway of the Chilean poet and novelist Roberto Bolaño. As Chris Andrews, one of Bolaño's two main translators into English (the other is Natasha Wimmer), and the author of the monograph *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction – An Expanding Universe*, has suggested, 'the invigorating effect of Bolaño's stories...concerns their forms and rhythms. His prose has a contagious, joyful energy, even when treating desolate themes' (10). 'Contagion' was correct: if one 'gets' Bolaño one reads him quickly, even feverishly. By way of an example, here is the opening to *Distant Star*, the first of Bolaño's novels that I read:

I saw Carlos Wieder for the first time in 1971, or perhaps in 1972, when Salvador Allende was President of Chile.

At that stage Wieder was calling himself Alberto Ruiz-Tagle and occasionally attended Juan Stein's poetry workshop in Concepcion, the so-called capital of the South. I can't say I knew him well. I saw him once or twice a week at the workshop. He wasn't particularly talkative. I was. Most of us there talked a lot, not just about poetry, but politics, travel (little did we know what our travels would be like), painting, architecture, photography, revolution and the armed struggle that would usher in a new life and a new era, so we thought, but which, for most of us, was like a dream, or rather the key that would open the door into a world of dreams, the only dreams worth living for. And even though we were vaguely aware that dreams often turn into nightmares, we didn't let that bother us. (3)

This I found intriguing, exhilarating even. I knew something of Allende, and of Pinochet; indeed, it was the type of thing I prided myself on knowing. Walter Benjamin. Rosa Luxemburg. Steve Biko. My sympathies were reflexive, and I shall say nothing about them here. Of more interest, for our purpose, was my being caught immediately by the 'joyful energy' of the prose, for which Chris Andrews, having transported it from the Spanish into English, deserved a great deal of credit. Taken in isolation, the maddening sentences border on naïve, but in the aggregate, their effect is to fuse voice with narrative momentum. Or perhaps another way to say this: Bolaño's prose leans into the void, where it produces a vertiginous effect, all the while conveying a bruised mimetic content, or perhaps, or rather, one feels Bolaño's world is accessed through a bruise, or through a series of such bruises. Vulgar and acquisitive as it may be, and it came to seem this way, I wanted some of Bolaño's 'verbal proliferation' for myself (Andrews 3).

There were other things to learn of and from Bolaño's work. For instance, in the chapter titled 'Bolaño's Fiction-Making System' (33-68), Andrews discusses, among other techniques, 'overinterpretation'. Andrews uses overinterpretation non-pejoratively 'to refer to the way certain characters and narrators seize on minimal detail, invest them with weighty significance, and invent stories to connect and explain them' (56). Some of these narrators seem to 'manifest a benign form of apophenia, which the psychologist Klaus Conrad defined in 1958 as "unmotivated seeing of connections [accompanied by] a specific feeling of abnormal meaningfulness"' (56). The narrators' apophenia, I came to understand, via Andrews, was in fact contagious (that word again): readers acquired it from the prose, which is to say, the prose, shaped and sprung, functioned as the medium. How then was it possible, on reading the

opening to *Distant Star*, for a reader not to connect President Allende, poetry readings, revolution, armed struggle, and the coming nightmare? How could a reader not sense the ‘abnormal meaningfulness’ of such connections? And who among those readers would not read on to see how the narrator ‘invent[s] stories to connect and explain them’? As with apophenia, so too with overinterpretation. The effect is set in train by the novel’s very first sentence, which seems at once analeptic – the narrator ‘flashing-back’ to his former self – and proleptic, in that readers learn that the narrator’s former self will see Wieder again (as in, of course, auf Wiedersehen), just as they know that Allende’s presidency will end, an awareness that for many readers is made more acute by their extra-textual knowledge. Bolaño’s narrator is narrating from beyond the moment of the nested prolepsis, such that readers do not yet know, on reading that first sentence, who the narrator is (or is going to be), or where the narrator is presently located (that is, the time and place of narration). These are questions of an as-yet-absent-but-emerging context, all of which pertained to the story-world Bolaño was only just beginning to open up. The first sentence, over-interpreting for a moment longer, might be thought of as ‘the key that would open the door into a world of dreams, the only dreams worth living for.’ And which dreams were those? Literature, poetry, the novel qua novel, but also this particular novel, *Distant Star*.

For Bolaño, I learned, again via Andrews, poetry was the preeminent dream ‘worth living for’. Andrews argues that in Bolaño’s oeuvre, poetry ‘stands synecdochally for what Giorgio Agamben ... calls “neotenic openness”’ (193). ‘Neotenic openness,’ writes Andrews, ‘to allow the expression its broadest sense, is a youthful openness preserved beyond the age at which it is typically lost, and therefore a quality that is distinctly manifest only in individuals who are at least relatively old’ (193-4). In other words, writing poetry, but also reading it, *beyond a certain age*, is emblematic of the openness one typically associates with the young. I rather liked this formulation; it was more congenial than others I’d heard, and infinitely kinder than ‘when are you going to get a proper job?’ ‘Youthful openness’ was enervating. And yet, might poets and readers of poetry feel frustrated that poetry had been afforded a symbolic value within the economy of the novel, rather than being met, which is to say, transmitted and received, according to its own valences? The irony, of a poet setting poetry aside in order to write a novel that would trumpet the importance of poetry, was not lost on me. All of which is to say that Roberto Bolaño’s prose, and *Distant Star* especially, as translated into English by Chris Andrews, was a powerful influence on the voice of my short story, not that anyone else would necessarily make the connection. I did not set out to imitate: the influence happened in the background, in the sleeper-cells of my writer’s brain.

2.

My intention, then, had been to fictionalise the circumstances surrounding the death of the Australian poet Michael Dransfield. For this I would have ‘mined’ – excavated, made my own – Felicity Plunkett’s article ‘Haunting an old house: The posthumous career of Michael Dransfield’, and Patricia Dobrez’s *Michael Dransfield’s Lives – A Sixties Biography*, both of which reiterate Dransfield’s ‘romanticism’, though the point of Plunkett’s article was to question, or ‘problematise’, just such a notion.

To summarise, for reasons of expediency: Michael Dransfield is commonly referred to as a member of the ‘Generation of 68’ poets, and he is often described as a Keats or Shelley-like figure (Plunkett makes this connection, as does Dobrez, who in addition refers to others who have done so, including Rodney Hall and Geoff Page). Dransfield was one of the twenty-four poets to be included in John Tranter’s seminal anthology, *The New Australian Poetry*, which itself owed much, as a publishing venture, or intervention, but also to the influence of those poets included therein, to Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry*. To simplify, the ‘Generation of 68’ celebrated ‘progressiveness’ and experimentalism in form and theme, and was contrasted, especially by its own members, with the more ‘conservative’ poets of an earlier post-World War II generation. Such claims and counterclaims were signs of vitality; a drab consensus, or at any rate, hypothecated pockets of drab consensus, often facilitated by nepotism and/or self-interest, and whipped to a grey lather of soft regard, would have been infinitely worse.

Dransfield, then, afforded an opportunity to pursue a local example of what H.J. Jackson (2) has called ‘present and future fame’, namely, the reasons for an author’s popularity during his-her lifetime, or lack thereof, and the reasons why the work might still be read, or discovered, in the years after the author’s death. Jackson shows how literary merit is only one factor, and not necessarily the preeminent one. Others include networks and literary politics, as alluded to above, but also changes to intellectual fashions, the existence of posthumous archives, preferably containing one or more unpublished manuscript (in Dransfield’s case, what would become *Memoirs of a Velvet Urinal*, and *The Second Month of Spring*), and the efforts of a committed advocate (Rodney Hall, who as poetry editor at *The Australian*, was an early supporter of Dransfield’s, and would later edit *Michael Dransfield: Collected Poems*). The nature of Dransfield’s death, following the self-administered injection of an

unknown substance, according to the Coroner (Dobrez 509), contributed to Dransfield's mythopoeic aura. All of this, I thought, made Dransfield's 'story' congenial to narrative fiction; he seemed already like a character from a novel.

And so, on reading Jackson's study of the Romantics and their various posthumous fates, I began to imagine transposing other 'characters' and histories from Romantic England to Menzies and/or Whitlam Australia (1949-1975); this, I thought, was a personal instance of apophenia. If Dransfield was so widely considered a Keats/Shelley figure, who might the Wordsworth be, the Coleridge, the Mary Shelley? Might there also be a poet to 'raise from the unread', such as the Romantic era's Robert Bloomfield, whom Jackson identified as a 'potential candidate for recovery' (204). And would it not be useful to have a character who might argue against the prevailing mood, or rather, against the mood from which one perspective on the era is said to have prevailed, against 'progressiveness', etc., a heretic to speak some other truth? And wasn't Whitlam our very own Allende? Wasn't he too, at least in some sense, 'assassinated'? And Dransfield had died in 1973, the year of the military coup in Chile; were there not obvious connections to make, replete with abnormal meaningfulness? The material was laid out before me, begging to be written.

3.

Which brings us to the second reason I did not write my novel: Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*. As you may know, the narrator of James' novella, a literary biographer, travels to Venice to acquire from Juliana Bordereau the papers of the great, dead poet Jeffrey Aspern (Bordereau and Aspern had been lovers). The narrator's apparent motivation is to celebrate and enhance Aspern's reputation, though from the very beginning the tone of the narration indicates his self-interest and sad pomposity. A famous exchange during section VII, a little over halfway into the novella, will serve to establish the conflict between the narrator and Juliana Bordereau, and to crystallise the dominant theme:

She looked at me in her barricaded way. 'If you write books don't you sell them?'

'Do you mean do people buy them? A little – not so much as I could wish. Writing books, unless one be a great genius – and even then! – is the last road to fortune. I think there is no more money to be made by literature.'

‘Perhaps you don’t choose good subjects? What do you write about?’
Miss Bordereau inquired.

‘About the books of other people. I’m a critic, an historian, in a small way.’ I wondered what she was coming to.

‘And what other people, now?’

‘Oh, better ones than myself: the great writers mainly – the great philosophers and poets of the past; those who are dead and gone and can’t speak for themselves.’

...

‘Do you think it’s right to rake up the past?’

‘I don’t know what you mean by raking it up; but how can we get at it unless we dig a little? The present has such a rough way of treading it down.’

‘Oh, I like the past, but I don’t like critics,’ the old woman declared, with her fine tranquillity.

‘Neither do I, but I like their discoveries.’

‘Aren’t they mostly lies?’

‘The lies are what they sometimes discover,’ I said, smiling at the quiet impertinence of this. ‘They often lay bare the truth.’ (108)

The familiarity of James’ concerns was astonishing. They were continuous with our own as to the evaluation of literature, history and biography, memoir versus fiction, the nature of truth, a writer’s penurious existence, the attendant anxieties, etc. How could so much have changed and yet so little? I saw also how the ironies of *The Aspern Papers* issued from, while at the same time indicting, the bathetic, even unpleasant narrator, and on this point I was quite aggrieved; after all, I’d written ‘The Final Cast’ in the first-person, and naturally I worried that the narrator’s personality, his character, with its numerous bunions and foibles, had issued from my own. Is that how it was, with merely a cigarette paper between us?

To read *The Aspern Papers* when thinking to write a biographically based novel about Michael Dransfield, a poet who, as with Aspern, had ‘suffered an early death’ (52), was undermining, to say the least. James’ narrator seldom mentions Aspern’s poetry, but instead is fascinated by the poet’s life, hopeful

of rumour and innuendo and intrigue, of finding some new poem or biographical titbit from which to profit, that being the cardinal reason he wishes to acquire the letters Aspern wrote to Juliana Bordereau. There is nothing noble in the narrator's pursuit; indeed, in Tessa Hadley's words, the man is a 'literary property developer' (315). And there was I, proposing something similar with Dransfield. Perhaps the lives of dead authors should be off-limits to 'publishing scoundrels', as Juliana Bordereau calls James' narrator (127), and to which one might add unscrupulous fiction writers, not to mention scumbag wannabes, for a time equivalent to copyright? For 'literary specialists', Hadley tells us, there is something even more chastening to *The Aspern Papers*, in that it delivers a second recognition:

Perhaps as well as being a fable of literary "discipledom" and its ignominies, the story is also a fable about the ignominies – the appropriations, the disingenuousnesses, the manipulations, even the coarsenesses – implicit in the very act of writing. As well as opposing the "literary industry" to "art", might it be that the story opposes "art" to "life", in a complex ironic act of self-critique?... As the story progresses the reader may begin to wonder whether writing itself (and by extension our enjoyment of and community with the writing, in reading) is not, as Joan Didion expressed it, "an aggression ... an imposition ... an invasion of someone else's most private space". (320-1)

Recalling Jackson, one acknowledges the essential role played by advocates – critics, fellow writers, biographers, disciples – in securing an author's posthumous reputation, but one sees also that biographical writing, and perhaps in particular, biographically based fiction, is all at once a dirty, invasive, self-interested business. There is, quite obviously, an ethical question when drawing on the lives of actual persons, which extends to authors, namely as to one's putative right to trespass, and James' novella, though a work of fiction, proves instructive. *The Aspern Papers* implies that a will-to-trespass is inevitable, even, in some sense, that just such an appetite is constitutive of the craft. Hadley notes James' culpability in this regard, qua author: it is he inventing and writing, not his narrator (321). Indeed, Gary Scharnhorst has argued that *The Aspern Papers* draws not only on an anecdote concerning Lord Byron's papers, that there had been an attempt to 'pilfer' them from a former mistress, but that James was, rather guiltily, reflecting on his own practice vis-a-vis the use of papers and letters in the critical essay/biography he had written of Nathaniel Hawthorne. James, in other words, knew how an author's archive might be obtained, scoured, and used for one's own purposes, not the least of which is to make progress in one's own career, because he himself had done just such a thing. Scharnhorst suggests this experience as

both a source for *The Aspern Papers*, and a contributing reason as to why James, ‘when his health began to fail’, burned his files (216). ‘The example of Hawthorne,’ writes Scharnhorst, ‘had convinced him [James], it seems, to trust no one, not even an executor, especially an executor, with his own literary estate’ (216).

And so: *The Aspern Papers*, and the associated research, was the second reason I did not write the novel I’d intended. I came to believe, ultimately, that I had no right to trespass on the life and death of Michael Dransfield. My decision augurs poorly for my future as a fiction writer, especially one with an interest in the lives of actual persons – perhaps I’m confusing ethics and propriety? Perhaps I’m weak-minded? – and yet, I’ve been unable to talk myself around.

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TEXT poetry

Sean West

3 poems

On the Shores of Miraflores

with my belly full of stale
bread and overpriced rosa náutica
I do not think of love

as I watch young drunk locals hold
hands through an afternoon malaise
I would not write of love

while they walk their dogs, kiss
and butcher poetry beneath olive trees
I should not speak for love

as they skim stones over black waves
then plunge like cormorants into sea
I cannot dive into love

with my feet bare, crushing
rotten crab bones into concrete
I could never walk with love

when condors circle clifftops, slice
through paraglider's laughing screams
who could ever dream of love?

I pelt a pebble at the same ocean
that stole and swallowed you whole
I write only of you.

Shallow Bathers

We watch the giant pod
of local surfers paddle out
as I press pen to paper

They swim into deep water, shift
through shallow bathers like jellyfish
while I write of their blonde hair

The pod melts like icy poles
as we shield our eyes. I turn
their tan bodies into similes

They form a surfer's circle, link
arms. When they splash water high
I notice I am dry head to toe

They could carve each swell
with ease while I never learnt how
to stand on a board. I ask a nearby

local what they're doing. He peers
at my frantic pen and notebook
mutilated by scribbles. He says

a girl took her life last week
I cap my pen, close pages, melt
into the sand at his feet.

Fleshing Out

She's saved these yellow pieces
fragile and creased, that paddle
right back there with a skim read

We trace decades with a finger
cut from an oyster shell, hooked
inside his mouth like guilt

Mum and I pull him
from these scraps. I neglect
to ask her why she's saved

them all this time. She couldn't
have been holding onto these
clippings for me or my sister

Did she hoard them for herself?
Was she going to write about him
first? We dig our arms in down

to our elbows. Sea lice bite
at the webbing between our fingers
as we twist truth like a scaling knife

through gills. I hold back from asking
why she kept him buried here
beneath winter clothes and mothballs

It only matters that we flesh out
these words before they fade like scales
on a deep sea fish pulled up too fast.

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TEXT prose

Julia Prendergast

Endgame

I want your legs, stretched long beside mine in the murky light, under the table.

I like the murky light but I'm not sure you've captured the moment on the page.

I want your clean-kind fingers, digging into my thigh – for buried things, as you say.

Let's hear him say it in "realtime". Why are his fingers both clean and kind, and why would you hyphenate it?

Tell me again, say it over again, the thing about honeycomb and stone. That felt true – as if you could see what I wasn't showing you.

It's passable dialogue. I quite like it, really, but I'm not sure you're there, yet.

I wish you'd told me how you felt before you slept with her. Why couldn't you fuck someone else? Don't you see? She played you. Don't be fooled – I blame you, not her. She is a cunt, but she is not in this story.

Maybe she should be in the story. Perhaps she is the missing plot-point. It's not what you want to hear because you'll have to spend time considering her backstory. Abuse, maybe, or an "everyday" women-hating childhood.

Is she, *really*, a cunt and, if so, what does that mean, precisely? Don't tell me. Give it to me on the page. Concrete and specific detail – sensory detail. *How* did she play him?

In the end...

What about the beginning? And the middle? We need more possibilities. Bring this back to honeycomb and stone – what *is* that? Don't talk. Write. Let it dissolve on her tongue. Or his... What's going on there? Consider the metaphorical possibilities.

Why did you have to do things the wrong way around? I'm in tailspin, backwards spinning time.

I see what you mean but it's generic, bordering on cliché. Stay in scene... The entry points are all over the shop. It's temporally shift, which can work but it's not. The beginning is an endgame – too much, too soon. You can't ask the reader to un-know things. Hold something back, for later. Forever...

That hurts...

What? What hurts? Remember Kafka – apparitions rising from the left-hand hole... Let the subject matter take you. *Go there.*

Neck bent awkwardly, wrist counterflexed, fingers gnarled like twigs...

This sounds contortionist – too many body parts. Whose neck? Whose wrist? Whose fingers? Point is – I can't see the bodies *in time.*

His fingers, gnarled like twigs...

Clean-kind, before. Gnarled like twigs, now. *Maybe...* But why? Think associatively. The twigs are more sensory than clean-kind. Where's the connect? Go back. Interrogate the juxtaposition. Make me wonder about the transformation of his hands. Review the progression in narrative time...

I want to be back at the wine bar with you. I want that afternoon in the cobblestoned alleyway. I want you to finish what you started to say, about loving and being in-love. Pull it apart a bit. Pull me...

This could work. It's backwards looking but there's a future in it. It needs tuning but it has promise.

I'm glad you went the wrong way around. I'm glad you banged her before you were bold enough to tell me how you felt. Otherwise I might have fallen. I want fun, not falling. I'm no good at falling. I land too hard. I take longer than other people to GET BACK UP. And why should I fall for your clusterfucking speeches? For dissolving things...

I like the muted reference to the honeycomb. I'm not sure about clusterfucking – I like it and I don't. Overall, something has shifted in her attitude and I'm not sure why and that's interesting. Is it something he has done or failed to do? She's angry, now, and the goodbye is riddled with longing. You may have something...

Julia Prendergast's novel, The Earth Does Not Get Fat was published in 2018 (UWA Publishing: Australia). Julia's short stories feature in the most recent edition of Australian Short Stories (Pascoe Publishing). Other stories have been recognised and published: Lightship Anthology 2 (UK), Glimmer Train (US), TEXT (AU) Séan Ó Faoláin Competition (IE), Review of Australian Fiction, Australian Book Review Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize (AU). Julia's research has appeared in various publications including: New Writing (UK), TEXT (AU), Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience (UK). Julia is a Senior lecturer in Writing and Literature at Swinburne University, Melbourne. She is Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing in Australasia. Julia directed the Australian Short Story Festival, held for the first time in Melbourne, in 2019. She is an enthusiastic supporter of interdisciplinary, open and collaborative research practices.