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**TEXT graphic prose**

**Ross Watkins**

*my father's belt*

*Dr Ross Watkins is an author and illustrator for both children and adults, and his scholarly research explores practices in illustrated narrative, representations of melancholy, and radical modes of scholarly writing. Ross is managing co-editor of TEXT and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at UniSC.*



# my father's belt

BY ROSS  
WATKINS



YOU'RE IMPERSONATING ME AGAIN.

LAY IT TO REST, DAD.  
(HE'S READING BAKHTIN.)

BAKHTIN RECKONS THE ACT OF AUTHORSHIP INVOLVES IMPERSONATING OTHERS THROUGH VOICE AND STYLE - UTILISING SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED DISCOURSES TO MAKE OBSERVATIONS ABOUT SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PHENOMENA. HE CALLS IT HETEROGLOSSIA. OR SOMETHING. YOU IMPERSONATED ME IN YOUR NOVEL, *THE APOLOGY*. REMEMBER?

DAD...

WHEN ALEX'S FATHER BELTS HIS CHILDREN?

OKAY, WELL THAT WAS BASED ON FACT. HOW YOU'D ORDER ME INTO YOUR BEDROOM TO PULL DOWN MY PANTS AND BEND OVER THE BED BARE-BUMMED. AND IF I FLINCHED, IT COST DOUBLE. I'D THEN RUN CRYING TO MY ROOM AND ANDREW WOULD SAY, 'DON'T WORRY, ROSSY, EVENTUALLY WE'LL BE BIGGER THAN HIM AND HE WON'T BE ABLE TO TOUCH US. IF HE DOES, WE'LL BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF HIM.'

AND SOMETIMES... SOMETIMES BEFORE YOU BELTED US YOU'D SHOW US YOUR SELECTION OF BELTS IN THE WARDROBE AND MAKE US CHOOSE ONE.

I NEVER MADE YOU CHOOSE.

YES, YOU DID.

DON'T TALK BACK AT ME!

THEN AFTER YOU DIED, MUM WAS GOING THROUGH YOUR STUFF, SORTING OUT WHAT TO THROW OUT OR KEEP AND SHE OFFERED EACH OF US BOYS A BELT. THE OTHERS LAUGHED AND SAID NO, BUT I SAID YES. THE AUTHOR SAID YES. OF COURSE I DID. I ALSO INHERITED YOUR WATCH, LEATHER BOOTS AND AFTERSHAVE. THOSE SYMBOLS OF YOUR MASCUINITY.

BULLSHIT.

WHEN I WEAR THEM, MARGARET GIBSON WOULD CALL IT MIMETIC IMPERSONATION. ALONG WITH GENETIC RESEMBLANCE, WE ARE LIVING CRYPTS OF THE PAST.

SO WRITING AND WEARING CLOTHES OF THE DEAD HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON THEN. IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE SAYING?

MAYBE ALL WRITING IS ELEGY - TO A CERTAIN EXTENT. I MEAN, YOU WOULD NEVER READ BAKHTIN.

WHO? NEVER HEARD OF THE BASTARD.

AND YOU WOULD NEVER SAY 'PRECISELY'.

PRECISELY.





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## TEXT poetry

**Rosemary Huisman**

### *V Manifesto*

typing quickly (topic: 1930s homelife)  
I mean to tap ‘trapped by poverty’  
but instead hit ‘trapped by poetry’ –  
other than a little rearrangement, r and t,  
it’s the ‘v’ that keeps them apart

V

let free:  
inverted it might keep out the rain  
pushed from the vertical, enclose a fine estate –  
vineyards of purple grapes  
peopled with poets

V

for a Henry might denote a king  
for a clock-watcher, time to clear the desk  
for an opera, an Act to sing and die  
gloriously, 'in full-throated ease'  
taken into heaven

V

allowed to lead, pipes a fine dance  
veracity  
vivacity  
vitality  
the very sprightliness of living

V

stands for human values  
*make poetry not poverty!*  
leads the way to vote  
*politics for poetry not poverty!*  
*Viva! Viva!*

*Rosemary Huisman lives in Sydney, retired but still affiliated with the University of Sydney. Her book of poetry The Possibility of Winds was published in 2006. Academic publications include The Written Poem, Semiotic Conventions from Old to Modern English (Cassell 1998, Continuum 2000) and, most recently, Narrative Worlds and the Texture of Time, a Social-Semiotic Perspective (Routledge, 2023). (A review of The Written Poem appeared in TEXT Vol 4 No 2, 2000.)*



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## TEXT poetry

**Richard James Allen**

### *the never-ending construction of your own house*

it helps to know your story  
you feel better about things  
grounded somehow  
in an otherwise unsettling  
continuum of time and space  
wearied from dreamwalking  
my daydreams through my days  
I am running out of story  
or is it the will to story that peters out  
like a fire hissing and sparking  
before audacity dwindles to doubt  
but equally you  
limping around with your ankle bracelet  
under the house arrest of your own stories

may witness  
that right up to the moment of surrender  
and even as I succumb to the void  
I cannot help but seek  
a glimmer of I

*Richard James Allen (pronouns: he/him) is a Gadigal-based Australian poet. His poetry has appeared widely in journals, anthologies, and online, and he has been a popular reader over many years. His latest book Text Messages from the Universe (Flying Island Books, 2023) reflects a lifelong engagement with Buddhist and Yogic philosophies. Richard is well-known for his multi-award-winning career as a filmmaker and choreographer with The Physical TV Company, and as a performer in a range of media. A First-Class Honours graduate from Sydney University, he won the Chancellor's Award for best doctoral thesis at the University of Technology, Sydney.*



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## TEXT poetry

**Rupert M Loydell**

*from Time Sensitive*

‘You can’t do anything here as such, you just go to see things. That’s modern travel  
for you. Full of movement but nothing actually happens.’

– Robert Dessaix, *Night Letters*

‘History seems static but is constantly rewritten, embracing the fresh hell of the online  
universe’s mass content posing as information becomes a data overload’

– Adam Steiner, *Darker with the Dawn*

‘An astrolabe is not  
A metaphor for love’

– Elizabeth Willis, ‘Nocturne’

## Eternal Return

‘Because I know that time is always time  
And place is always and only place  
And what is actual is actual only for one time  
And only for one place’  
– T.S. Eliot, ‘Ash Wednesday’

There are no artists here, only processes and concepts tested by bomb technicians producing atomic music out in the desert, brilliant, annoying and perceptive in turn. Occasionally, they burn the whole world up but are always consistent in their attention to detail.

Like cave paintings left after extinction, ambient music was or should be situated in wilderness or outdoor spaces, be publicly ignored. Whatever the truth, emptiness speaks for itself, flows out of our brains as raw no-nonsense noise looming over art-rock and other specialist music circles.

Well-known in shadow and experimental worlds, we were persuaded to pause, repeat and be interested or engaged, be emotionally melted. Strange lives haunt prepared tapes, trickster nerve endings in our headspace, trying to answer questions which keep coming back. Eternal return:

archive the time. It’s like sound deep-fried by sunshine, a playground of rock, a cave to shelter favourite memories, wild animals, snakes and ghosts. Many self-mythologisers have albums released and then reissued: strange birds that swoop and glide and snatch, obscured in cityscapes

which remain elusive and collectible. Close the world up, demand patience and attention, alternative deconstructions of chamber music and all your favourite songs. I have saved the best until last, resulting in all these looped fragments of emotional memory before we slowly fade to far away.

Learn how your data is processed, how materials inform the work, look at these grainy pictures of the band still playing as they go down with the ship. ‘I heard it first while we were still working wireless, listening to music in our headphones, back when music still had something to say.’

## Temporal Flux

‘Time is within you Shines through your eyes’  
– The Pop Group, ‘We Are Time’

Two components: one vertical, the other horizontal.  
If an audience member has good vertical sight lines  
they may be able to see both the top and bottom  
whilst good horizontal sight lines give a full view  
of the left to centre to right extent of the possible.

Landscape in the distance. Chrono-turbulence  
makes it possible for viewers to tear the fabric  
of the future although time travel is nothing  
without customer security. Astrophysicists are  
friendly and know how to build these machines,

understand traveller experience; all hold records  
for cumulative emptiness among celestial bodies,  
the result of months spent orbiting our planet.  
Using special relativity and short-term hibernation  
we can bypass lasting passenger problems and save

at least a few hours. Research suggests that gravity  
also slows and describes a universal constant sitting  
on a time dilation bomb. It has all been measured;  
temporal rift physicists have shown how clocks tick  
slower in a state of speed or suspended animation.

Some scientists hope to achieve chrono-anomaly,  
timefold distortion, red shift digression, dead star  
disruption, vortex fluctuation, chronological rift,  
quantum slip mindwarp and anachronistic glitch;  
others just want to find out how to go really fast.

### **Atmospheric Integrity**

In the dream about the end of the world,  
the world was waiting at the end of the dream  
and all that was fantastical faded away.

Sometimes things turned up for sale at market  
but mostly they were gone, never seen again.  
I blamed words, mind was the guilty party,

but we're all in this together, aren't we, and  
bottles of cheap rosé and a bowl full of crisps  
won't solve anything, even tonight's Sudoku,

which you have already done. I managed  
to complete the quick crossword on the train  
but that was as far as it went. The titles

you wanted weren't in any of the bookshops  
and there is no internet to order them online.  
I listen to the soundtrack of one man's life;

with no atmospheric integrity, pressure rises,  
red lights flash on the new skinny tower blocks.  
There is currently a good service on all lines.

## **The Invisible Architect**

‘Men’s undertakings proceed by linguistic barter, in a zone of approximation’  
– George Steiner, ‘Introduction’ to *The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation*

Forgotten poets used distorted words  
to create the future that we humans  
are built into, this nervous breakdown  
in time, our mind’s abstract conceits.

External reality and representation  
meet and fuse in virtual-reality tanks:  
critical ideas as emotional experience,  
inescapable background to all regret.

Sunsets are of almost magical potency  
during these curiously enduring winter  
floods, silt-laden waterscapes where  
there used to be dry land, green fields.

When referred to as dreamlike, facts bear  
no resemblance to science or destruction  
in the aftermath of constantly hostile  
encounters between illusion and being.

Fantastically complex ideas appear,  
produce false analogies and distort  
any awareness of shared possibility.  
The same thing happens to our minds,

filled with figures and devices that utilize  
reality pattern recognizers and storytellers  
to predict tomorrow. It is experience that  
produces prophecy and creative writing.

My own earliest memories are of emptiness  
and readers compounding words, of genre  
distortion and destruction of the moment,  
a mighty breakdown of psychic controls

and systems of utilitarian organisation.  
Beautiful bridges cross the flooded fields,  
the pale and functionless drowned mirrors  
where glowing jellyfish hypnotize children

and insert tentacles into people's minds.  
Each structure is beautiful to look at but  
some guest lecturer talks nonsense about  
how everyone should create and destroy,

have access to a bridge because they  
are functional and we are ordinary. He  
tells us nothing is real or made to last,  
says everything is mostly made of water.

## Day-to-day Lives

‘I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.’  
– Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being*

Living as the never-entirely-dead,  
we cohabit a body of hybrid space,  
moments in suspect social networks,  
look for direction in the present day.

The chasm separating the unknown  
and the readers of tourist pamphlets  
is millions of readers and vertigo,  
which prevents me building a bridge

between one photograph and another.  
We are still living down on the street,  
developing conversations concerning  
global connectivity and heartfelt prayer.

Police the bones and run through things.  
Other objects underpin the status quo,  
shape advances through interpretation,  
deliciously purposing aesthetic affinity:

the poet and the villain. Inevitably, truth  
features in the novel and elsewhere there  
is a turning point between fragmentation  
and living forever. It’s down to poetry

and science to offer clear directions,  
know whether the hours will be short  
or long, however pixelated. The future  
will eventually take shape as a tension

between secular versions of the quotidian,  
visions of domestic epiphanies, and details  
of the horizon. One would expect conflict  
in the world but not some of these songs

or religious stories, wherever they appear.  
As for cosmic visions, each novel or play is  
a myth for today, an act of moral terrorism,  
a transformative agent in the public mind.

Take things, recycle and sublimate what  
others have given you, recombine so that  
the mystery of life, like all complex systems,  
is evacuated from the building. Unsuspected

echoes can be projected in this way, away  
from meltdown and into the next available  
space. We must make our own way towards  
practical meaning, search for the radical

and get back aspiration, writing what  
we believe, with no creative needs or  
broken paragraphs. Intuitive elements  
underlie new kinds of worlds, utopias.

I took the shortest route, never did like  
travelling. If you see reality differently,  
then go in search of the other, make  
each journey more than a physical act.

Wherever this text is going, it holds no  
interest for me. Reality is self-evident,  
and I have not been rewarded with any  
unexpected miracles, wonders or signs.

## **Empty Space**

for M John Harrison

A private vocabulary of meaning and its opposite,  
time filled with transmuted images of the past,  
cigarette packets and ice-cream experiences,  
balances out more subtly represented lives.

We begin with spectral distortion. Other worlds,  
plastic visual forms and formal experiments with  
shuffled calculations, create a continuous mirror  
of the emerging past, collapsing sci-fi futures.

Without the psyche and because of our lives,  
today is an immense half-submerged narrative,  
nervous breakdown embodied within tomorrow's  
interior landscape. He drowned in individuality,

dreaming attempts to explore dangerous cities  
where counter-intuitive poets in the reality tank,  
at home in this distortion, construct graveyards  
and imagine ambiguity as a coping mechanism.

Unconnected ideas reflect internal confusion,  
take their impetus from a paradoxical universe  
where dream and reality are essential motifs,  
dreary remembrances of childhood memories.

The dark has been reluctantly jerked forward,  
warped into embodiments of exorcism where  
the rain-lashed ruins of damp phrases offer  
uncertain apocalypse, prolonged obsessions

and random logic block symptoms, perverse  
and strange illogical ideas. There are always  
bodies lying in the street but we fake magic  
every morning, settle grim questions, reflect

upon science predicting what won't happen,  
future events undermined by deconstruction  
and doubt. Imagined alien worlds become  
dispiriting places round the corner, critical

moments eclipsed by curiosity. Elsewhere,  
one can see serpentine faces all around us,  
radically shifting words as extreme cadence,  
the work of a man with a marvellous future.

### **A Splash of Stars**

I might not want to talk with the author of these songs  
but now he seems gifted, channeling despair and praise,  
new tongues to explain brokenness, sorrow and desire.  
Grief has triggered compassion and insight, pushed  
hyperbole away. I don't care if it's 'true' or 'honest' but  
somehow they say something important, spiritual even,  
without being overcome. Still human enough to love  
and bleed, screw things up and find rest in addiction  
and obsession. Doubt fights certainty, wonder wrestles  
with belief. The song pours out and shares their pain,  
the sadness of transcendence, how transcendent sadness  
can overcome happiness and affect everything, even that  
inane grin you have when drunk. I long to be miserable,  
wallow in despair and enunciate everything that gets me  
down. The song is not a heartbeat though it may share  
its rhythm, the music is just sound, not a poultice to  
cure anything. It is as meaningless as a splash of stars,  
as boys racing cars along the ring road to fill the time.  
It is the ghost or UFO captured on a blurred photo,  
unbelievable but true if you convince yourself it is.

## Go to Language

‘Language is a map and I admire your paperclips’  
– Astrid Alben, ‘Modern Love Affair’

Everyone is playing, so go to language  
and re-interpret the importance of clear,  
unambiguous inconsistency. Be sure to  
interpret clauses alongside each other  
whenever possible, although speakers  
of other tongues may think differently.

So what does it mean, getting language  
right? In general, terms and conditions  
are associated with hypothesis but if  
abandoned for new theories then radical  
thinking will finally emerge to overturn  
long-standing beliefs about the origins

of human knowledge and the construction  
of reality. Cognitive skills have important  
implications for law, politics and education,  
reveal whether events happened just now,  
yesterday or in the distant past; there are  
different words to ensure we get it right.

Pronouns reveal my gender. Drop me a line  
or call if you need further details, and do stay  
safe and well. Keep meaning simple and plain,  
make sure you get a sense check, jam thoughts  
about alien abduction. There is no UFO landing  
on your roof, no plans for spatial orientation,

although an unknown virus is living in the cellar.  
Parasites are something to write home about,  
bacteria are the sweaty vocabulary of desire,  
a red dress dancing on the local bar counter.  
The reason it seems, is historical, most probably  
an expression from the time when lust entered

the language. Humans are never quite silent  
about the timeless relationship between need  
and the unknown. Call it spiritual subjugation,  
attempt to separate the mind from the body  
as though threatened by foreign pronunciation,  
continue to grapple with metaphor's implications,

the need for constant experiment, the notion  
of artificial intelligence or infectious language  
models, remain vigilant against the dangers  
of access codes, linguistic conformity, the  
ongoing erosion of resistance to change.  
Patrol the boundaries of what we consider

to be the literary realm and fight each innovation.  
It is essential to monitor how we organize time,  
avoid knowledge hitting critical mass, to control  
our thoughts, actions, and unthinking behaviour.  
The fascinating, direct and inaccurate languages  
we speak shape the way communication unravels.

Smart and sophisticated as we are, it would be  
hard to go perfectly backwards or work out how  
to transfer a moment's energy. Only if we take  
ourselves seriously will we ever run through fields  
or climb the golden pyramids of song, although  
we could travel or write books, share experience.

If you really want language to connect people  
then become an expert, stand up for precision  
and grammar, crack down on hesitation, literary  
prizes, all supernatural contracts. We must each  
manipulate our thoughts, even when we answer  
without knowing our current mission statement.

Whether knowledge is true or not, this song is  
about where you are going, whether to kiss him  
or not, all as a result of society's interventions.  
I am a villain with multiple personalities and  
the ability to invent and rearrange conceptions,  
make use of my cognitive toolkit, have learned

to think about anything and everything, even  
when overloaded with information can change  
the world to suit myself. I think language is  
behind my thoughts, know it offers flexibility  
and a lot of theoretical control. Making sense  
of the world is fun but can be very dangerous.

*Rupert M Loydell is senior lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University, the editor of Stride and a contributing editor to International Times. He is a widely published poet and has written about Brian Eno, David Lynch, Cabaret Voltaire, Nurse with Wound, Christian rock, collaboration, pedagogy and creative writing for academic journals and books.*



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## TEXT poetry

David Thomas Henry Wright

*tHę Ĵ@gŭÅ®†*

Like cutting a boa-constrictor's yawn  
with *Jaguar*® brand hairdressing shears  
or a blunted, oxidised Stanley Knife,  
peeled words cascade like blood from carcass  
allowing the substandard manufacturer  
with unprofessional hands to jury-rig  
their own ultra-terrestrial jaguar.

Deciphered in a counterfeit workshop,  
dodgy modifications snag onto  
sophisticated stories, information,  
and flecks of iridescent poems,  
to produce a sloppy knock-off  
with poor processing, no warranty,  
and shoddy metal and function.

The blurred visionary is painted with  
acrylic Quetzalcoatl emerald eyes,  
a turned up somnambulist ear listening,  
yearning with cravings and savings,  
predatory like Christmas financial losses,  
hurrying past foggy, empty horizons  
where convention tremors with madness.

I will not apologise for working  
against Pakistan sales partners, producing  
miserable, cornhusk copies, squeaking  
in the chaplain-like ear, distressing  
the pious, the bitter, enjoying  
the creamy fragrance and fruits  
of a big fat fake wildcat.

† This poem was computer generated using vocabulary taken from Ted Hughes' *The Jaguar* (1957), Sarah Holland-Batt's *The Jaguar* (2022), Italo Calvino's *Under the Jaguar Sun* as translated by William Weaver (1988), and 'Combatting Counterfeit Products' from *Jaguar Hairdressing Shears*' website (<https://www.jaguar.us.com/pages/counterfeits>). It was then human-edited.

*David Thomas Henry Wright won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards Digital Literature Prize. He has been shortlisted for multiple national and international literary prizes, and published in various academic and creative journals. He has a PhD (English and Comparative Literature) from Murdoch University and a Masters (Creative Writing) from The University of Edinburgh, and taught Creative Writing at China's top university, Tsinghua. He is currently co-editor of The Digital Review and Associate Professor at the University of Bergen.*



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## TEXT poetry

**Julie Manning**

*2 poems*

### Seafront

Find an ancient path  
cut into a headland with love-  
hearts carved into a bluff,  
that ends at a knotted railing  
on a seawall, where

a slick of phthalo green  
marks one world from another.

Swim here when the moon  
is new, freezing under  
stars as the wind

unfastens you. No need  
to be brave or out of mind  
or chart drowned  
cities under pylons.  
You are nothing compared

to the indivisible sky and ocean.  
Even in the sheltered harbour  
where fishing boats shiver  
under sodium light, your shadow

falters. On those nights of  
early dark when beads of ice  
press at the window,  
out in open water, Atlantic gulls  
float backwards as you sleep.

## **Weather Forecast**

Last week the sky was all woodsmoke –  
stars, and a hunter's moon.

Now a cyclone tracks us –

the satellite weather-map  
shows feather shaped alizarin drawn like a hand-smear  
down dirty glass.

When the last cyclone hit, I saw a woman's shadow  
fight another woman's shadow

for a bag of ice  
in the cold-room of a plaza.

Heading home still shaken  
strings of lights on the freeway disappeared like stolen goods,  
  
our cardboard cut-out car was stockpiled empty.

I listen to the radio and hear a bushfire survivor  
describing how her lungs have hardened  
and blacked from smoke –

and now both lobes are dense as body armour  
shaped like Africa –

and she sleeps and wakes all night  
in her makeshift caravan

listening for emergency services.

*Julie Manning is a poet and visual artist. Her poems have been shortlisted in the Peter Porter Poetry Prize, Blake Poetry Prize and Aesthetica UK and commended in the Newcastle Poetry Prize amongst others, and appeared in ABR, Meanjin, Overland and various anthologies. She is an M.Phil student at the University of Queensland in Creative Writing (Poetry).*



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## TEXT poetry

**Glen Phillips**

***Riverbed Years***

*(Home thoughts from abroad, pending retirement)*

Like stones in a riverbed, tumbled,  
worn by diurnal waters' passing,  
smoothed of their facets, rumbled  
among others – so many in the dark  
boisterous river rapids, this water-race:  
these humble pebbles, littering riverbed  
years. Waters rolled them to resting places,  
in ambitious niches where they linger on;  
all that was various in each person's face  
forgotten in the struggle to survive.

So this is why we hardly know them. Bow  
our heads here by these rapids. One stone  
is like another in the stream. But wondering  
and remembering, still we grieve them now.

*Glen Phillips' poetry has won prizes and appeared in more than 50 American, British, Italian, Thai, Singaporean, Chinese, Korean, Indian and Australian journals and/or anthologies. His poetry collections include Intersections (Perth, 1972), Poetry in Motion (Perth, 1988 with three other WA poets who had formed in 1985 the well-known "Poetry in Motion" performance group), Sacrificing the Leaves (Bangkok, 1988), Spring Burning (Perth, 1999), Shanghai Suite (Perth, 2009) and Land Whisperings (2014).*



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## TEXT prose

**Gayelene Carbis**

### *The Poet's Mother*

As soon as I enter the door, my mother begins with her monologue. She's straight into it, as if you know exactly where she is and what she's talking about. And invariably I do. Her audio books. Her latest. She says as soon as she sees me, as if we're continuing a conversation from yesterday: 'Why do they have to go on about flowers and mountains and oh, even driveways or something. Sometimes I'm waiting and waiting and waiting and they're still going on and it takes ages to get to the story. How long am I supposed to wait?! I don't want to know about all the flowers and what the driveway looks like it! It's just a bloody driveway! Who cares? I don't need to know all that! I don't *want* to know all that. Why do they go on and on like that for? I didn't think *Rebecca* would be like that! Truly, I keep thinking, oh I can't stand this anymore, I'm going to turn it off. But then I keep waiting and waiting and then, sometimes, it finally gets to the story and by then – I'm asleep! And then if I wanted to listen to it, I'd have to play the whole bloody thing again! Why do they do that? What's it for? Do they really think we want to hear all that? Well, other people might, but I don't. I mean, how much can you say about friggen flowers and bloody driveways? Driveways!' Finally, I speak. 'Mum,' I say. 'It's painting pictures with words. That's poetry. So you – the reader – can visualize it. So you can see it for yourself. It's poetic language. It has a purpose. So you can use your imagination.' She looks at me blankly. 'But I'm not a poet!' she says. I take a breath. I say, 'It's like a film. You're the director. You're creating the images in your mind.' My mother scoffs, a

snorting sound, her glasses perched half-way down her nose as she looks over them at me, suspiciously. I can hear her little clock with its big hands and its ticking seconds so she can see and possibly hear the time, though she never seems to need it. She will often ask 'What time is it?' and then tell you before you can get the words out. That clicking clock is driving me mad, I can't shut it out, as if I can't concentrate. 'The main thing is you enjoyed it,' I say. She snorts again. My mother often says she never wants to get to the end of certain books and even *Rebecca* with its flowers and its driveways is one of them. I try to tell her there are hundreds, thousands of books waiting for her, but this seems beyond her comprehension so still she clings. I think for my mother books begin in clouds and live there. She plays her audio books every night, falls asleep to them, loses where she's up to. I wonder if her dreams are filled with them, if stories and characters get mixed up with her own life, but I always forget to ask.

*Gayelene Carbis's recent book of poetry, I Have Decided to Remain Vertical, was awarded Finalist – International Best Book Awards 2023 (USA) and Finalist – Poetry Book Awards 2023 (UK).*



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## TEXT prose

**Jane Downing**

### *The Search Engine of Story*

We'd stopped for coffee on the far side of town before setting off. There were sun umbrellas out front of the café, but no sun. The interior lights were dimmed; it was that early. The barista was chatty, not a local, still, in his words, finding his feet.

We had our choice of table. We sat against a window and watched raindrops in a very slow race down the pane. Beyond the glass: a chicken wire fence and then a car park which clearly serviced the Ampol, an African Grocer with the Viennaworld sign faded but faintly visible on the façade, and a low red-brick motel. Four identical cars nosed into the chicken wire. Each had something which could be described as a turret on the roof. These protuberances were wrapped in grey. Four people – not identical – strolled across the apron of the petrol station to the mustered cars as our lattes arrived. Caffeine began to fire our synapses as the rain cleared up and we watched the ballet of them releasing the 360° cameras. The tarpaulins were unbuckled and stowed in the boot, the metal stands raised from horizontal to vertical so the robotic cameras stood as high as a small child, their eyes ready to record the planet, to suck up data for us to interpret as we find our way in the world.

The business logo of a major digital mapping company only became visible on the sides of the vehicles as each pulled out of the car park, two heading south, two north. We congratulated ourselves on working out what we'd been looking at before this last reveal of information.

We questioned each other about the desirable attributes needed to take on such work as

we drank the dregs of our coffees. Do you have to be a philosopher, or do you just need a licence, a steady hand, and one would hope – we eventually agreed – a belief in the underlying guiding principle of the project: the more we know the better?

And then we too set off and I wondered alone in my head if theirs was the job that cured curiosity. Each daylight hour with the road unreeling in front of you, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, as you individually and collectively traverse each and every highway and byway in the world. No poetry of The Road Not Taken for them.

And you too, it turned out, were wondering what the drivers did to fill the kilometres ahead, the miles behind. You observed there was surely a finite number of true crime podcasts to listen to.

We stared out our windows to the left and to the right, as the voice of the GPS told us to turn. We had a long trip ahead. During which we played with the limits of knowledge, because what could the mapping company drivers actually see as the cameras above their heads gobbled up the facts and features and figures that would give directions to the rest of us? Only, we told each other, data points without the flesh and gristle of story.

As storytellers, it was inevitable we started to compete in a game neither could win.

What story had the barista woven around us?

## **Round One**

As we negotiated the grid of the town's centre, we encountered seven police vehicles lined either side of a section of road. Four sedans – marked, decked in blue lights – a paddy wagon, and a couple of high-powered motorbikes.

*A bust:* something big was going down. Arrests were being made as we passed. A cocaine haul, an informant in peril, time to act, now, now, now.

*Community lifeblood:* noting the Red Cross sign on the building in front of the paddy wagon, this was a blood donation drive tapping into the competitive spirit, with the police responding in force.

## **Round Two**

More aware of shopfronts now, you pointed out the sign two streets further on. *Dare to*

*Be Different.* The shop squatted dark behind, a For Lease billboard obscuring half-deconstructed shelving and silver air-conditioning ducts snaking from the ceiling.

*A sadness:* no-one had dared.

*A gladness:* no-one had dared and social cohesion had prevailed.

### Round Three

I protested, This is not fair, as I at the wheel had to keep an eye on the road. Though we both knew full well we had hundreds of kilometres and many changeovers ahead, a balancing and a reckoning possible with this much time on our side. Unlike the future of the old man ahead. He was in the knitted jumper of a bigger man and followed a desk chair down the footpath of what was now a leafy residential street, both hands on the high back of his makeshift wheelie-walker. Its wheels spun on cracks in the pavement, lurching, travelling on, stopping. As we drove toward him, the old man felt his way around the circumference of the chair, which swivelled as he advanced so he must walk extra uncertain steps, before sitting and running his crooked fingers through the ten hairs left on his head. Flattening them.

*A cry for help:* he has had a fall inside his house. Now he must venture out to get help. He has dementia and has forgotten the alarm system in the unit behind the hedge of rosemary. Until today spritely, he has improvised, because forgetting is not the same as stupidity. He has hit upon the chair as a mobility aid. His hip will be screaming as he gathers himself to walk further towards help.

*A hope for correspondence:* we needn't stop to help – a young woman has given him a wave. He was on his way to the communal letterboxes that service the retirement village. He was expecting a letter. His ingenuity was evident in his ability to take this journey even though his mobility has been compromised by a recent fall (on that we have agreed). The lure of the letter with a colourful foreign stamp was great. He was now up and on his way again.

### Round Four

A head appeared between the trees, in and out of sight as we skirted the town's long-established Botanic Gardens.

*A statue:* self-evident surely, as she does not move the entire wait for a change at the traffic lights. A classical muse, set in stone and painted white so she no longer inspires

life and love and lustful forgetting.

*A woman:* on her morning walk, stopping to watch a baby fairy wren hop to the ground and stir its turquoise tail like a stick in a paint pot. A very patient, focussed woman. A saint.

## Round Five

At the next lights we looked upwards on the lure of movement. A young man was standing on the second-floor balcony of a monument to glass – including the balustrade against which he stood. His back to the apartment’s glass doors, he faced the passing cars not smiling, in his underwear and nothing else. A man who favoured boxer shorts in a tartan fabric. There were three pot plants sharing the balcony with him: a miniature lemon with full-sized fruit, a ficus, and a bushy stand of bamboo. Also, crowding the space, a shadow: another figure, still in the apartment, shut-in on the other side of the glass doors. He was on his mobile. He held the device close to the side of his face, making a slight cave of his body, an adamant comma, as he listened to the voice on the other end of an invisible line.

*A secret:* the voice of his lover, an illicit call he must hide, his gestures and facial responses too, by his turned back. Whispers in the early morning, still sleep-mussed from a night in one bed, thinking of another’s body.

*A secret:* his chest, exposed as the sun falls on the balcony, was more skinny than buff, was heaving a little as his oncologist has rung early to give him his test results, which in his kindness, he was protecting his partner from, for as long as he possibly can.

## Round Six

Heading out the other side of the town, a generic office block loomed, multi-storey, with manicured gardens out front.

*A blanding of the streetscape:* look how the town is becoming just like any other town.

*A promise to the future:* a vista that shifted on the breeze. Because it was not solid, merely an architect’s dream printed on canvas and propped on the nature strip in front of a paddock of thistles, Paterson’s curse, cape weed and bindii.

## Round Seven

Beyond the outskirts then, at the entrance to a country lane which led to ten lifestyle blocks – as told by the ten letterboxes in conference on the side of the road – were a pair of corgis. Bellies low to the ground, ears perked to the approaching traffic, their golden fur shone. The owner stood from a crouch in front of one of the letterboxes, lowered the lid on the old metal drum, and called the dogs to him. The corgis’ faces were smiling, their ears and tails confirming that signal.

*A monarchist:* the further out from the cities, the more strong the sentiment. Charles and Di left baby William at a farm not too far from this spot during a Royal Tour. Of course, these pampered pets so favoured by the late Queen, would feel right at home.

*A farmer:* they are off to the fields, man and dogs, to muster the cattle, the very purpose for which the corgis were originally bred. Two intrepid working dogs, their short legs positioning them well to nip at the heels of the livestock...

Our game paused as only paddocks and cows and the occasional granite outcrop filled the storyboards of the car’s windows. The relative emptiness of the countryside – relative because no landscape is truly empty – gave us time to follow our own thoughts.

I worried there was a paradox threatening the world. We think we know everything now we can street-view every corner of the earth. There, look, is our house, a friend’s house, a palace, a temple, an abattoir, a lonely country road, all easily accessible through a powerful search engine. Yet, how little we know for sure about what lies beneath the surface. What fools we are to believe we can collect the world in its entirety and find our way without mistake.

And if that was so, forget what the barista had made of his early morning customers, if we’d even grazed his storytelling impulses. More importantly, what were the stories we told ourselves about the ‘we’ sitting side by side in the car? We persisted in talking about the lives of others while ignoring our own, and our game had revealed that one conjured stories more hopeful than the other. When one erred on the side of pessimism, the other was forced into the upbeat. So would we agree on the story behind the details, gross and fine, of two people travelling together through life? Would those narrative arcs coincide?

## Round Eight

On the outskirts of the next town along the highway, we braked to the new speed limit. A footpath indicated civilization. An old woman traversed it, pulling a little-old-lady

shopping trolley.

*A widow:* bringing home her widow's mite in the blue vinyl holdall on its tiny wheels. Dinner provisions from the local IGA. Bread, honey, a packet of loose-leaf tea.

*A writer:* bringing home her kale and wine and a bunch of new ideas, hurrying home to work on her next bestseller. Knowing where best to hide the bodies in any given landscape.

## Round Nine

We laughed at each other and at ourselves, as momentarily happy as the dog hanging his head out of the cab of the ute we followed into town. The face of bliss.

*A traveller:* such a journey is life.

*A traveller:* on his last trip, on his last legs. On his way now to the vet's one last time. This time, to be put down.

*Jane Downing has stories and poetry published around Australia and overseas, including in Griffith Review, Big Issue, Antipodes, Southerly, Westerly, Island, Overland, Meanjin, Canberra Times, Cordite, Best Australian Poems (2004 & 2015) and previously in TEXT. In 2016 she was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and in 2023 she won the AAALS (American Association of Australasian Literary Studies) Fiction Award. She has a Doctor of Creative Arts degree from the University of Technology, Sydney, the creative component of which, 'The Sultan's Daughter', was released by Obiter Publishing in 2020. She can be found at [janedowning.wordpress.com](http://janedowning.wordpress.com)*



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## TEXT prose

**Patrick Holland**

*The Poet in Exile*

### *I*

‘There is a poet coming for dinner tonight, my girl.’

‘How exciting. Is he a great poet like you?’

‘He will never be known beyond Florence, where he is known for his loyalty to a lost sovereign city as much as his poetry.’

‘*Che Peccato*... What a pity. But is he not known here in Verona?’

‘No.’

‘*Che Peccato*,’ sighed the girl, setting a cup of wine before Cavalcanti.

‘He has not the modern spirit. He manages to be provincial even when exiled from the province.’

‘Is he handsome?’

At which Cavalcanti smacked the girl’s behind.

‘As it happens he is not, and worse he is poor.’

‘*Che Peccato*.’

Two hours later and one hour late the guest arrived.

Over dinner they drank Soave wine. The girl, called Ilaria, had drunk hers too quickly and was struggling to keep from laughing at the man sitting opposite her. The poet had ragged, over-long hair, an aquiline nose and dark eyes that were by turns empty like a sleepy child's and menacing like a thousand-year-old demon. Such was the light behind them. And the light depended on what turn his thoughts took.

Now the demon transformed into the child and Ilaria's fright turned to giggles.

He smiled at her and she laughed outright. She had not been following the conversation but now she was dragged into it. Cavalcanti leant over to her and took her arm and spoke into her ear.

'Alighieri here thinks I should have stayed with Helena, as a matter of principle.'

The girl was about to become offended when the young poet took her hand and assured her Cavalcanti was a base liar to have said so.

'Well what do you mean, boy?'

'I mean, old fox, that a poem of a beloved who ceases to be loved, cannot have been a true poem. It must fail – has failed – as it was founded on shifting sand.'

'What a notion! My lines concern more than a dozen women, Alighieri. When I lose one, the poems addressed to her are automatically addressed to her successor.'

'How bleak.'

'There is only one woman in the world: the ideal *femminile*. Each vessel carries more or less of her in the makeup ... but none completely. The ideal object of my desire does not exist, except as an extension of me. Still I am condemned to search for her. Therein is the tragedy, the beautiful tragedy of Man, Alighieri. There is poetry!'

'So your odes are addressed to yourself.'

The older poet laughed.

'In a manner of speaking.'

'And you, perhaps, are only the shadow of the true man.'

Cavalcanti shrugged his shoulders.

'But we do have souls,' said his guest. 'We are discrete.' He was about to pronounce his beloved's name, but at last withheld it, for the thrill of keeping it all to himself, as he had done even in his verses. 'Agnése, whom you do not know, who is an angel in heaven, will save me. She and no other.'

'You speak of her like Christ! And you call my Platonism blasphemy. I promise you, this girl of yours, her beauty will fade and with it her other charms, and then you will tire of her. But please bring her to see me next opportunity you get.'

‘She is dead.’

‘God, I’m sorry, boy.’

‘Three years now.’

Cavalcanti was about to repeat the English commonplace about time healing all wounds, but the look in the guest’s eyes said three years was as three hours.

‘Do you not think,’ said Cavalcanti, ‘that finally only our words, the words of the poets are immortal ... the finest, most dignified way to remember love?’

‘On the contrary, I feel a creeping mortality infecting all I write. Darkness seeps in at the edges of every word. Even Helen, I am sure, has collected a little dust that Homer will never blow away.’ The poet closed his eyes. ‘Finally her name – her name is all I can write and mean. And perhaps, before the end, even that will be lost, like the wisps of cloud that drift toward the sun. But perhaps ... perhaps, destruction is not inevitable...’

Cavalcanti wondered if it was the wine or the hour, but the young poet seemed to speak from some other, far distant world.

‘She is a light. A sound. A symbol. I have already followed her through hell. I will follow her to heaven. There I will speak her true name, and at the sound she will come...’

## II

The rest we know. The rest, as critics glibly say, is history.

The woman who turned away from Dante Alighieri, even before she died at twenty-four, was Beatrice Portinari. ‘Angel of beauty and grace,’ he called her. They met as children, and she never left his thoughts.

Dante made long lists of names merely to hide hers within them, to have the thrill of knowing her place within a chaos; so recalling God’s placement of our world within an unfathomable universe; and the hope that He will call us finally from the chaos.

Once exiled by the Black Guelphs, Dante did not ever return to his home in Florence. The city was most beloved to him as certain avenues, porticos and paths through arcades and flowering gardens contained the memory of her movements. Perhaps his exile was the benevolent will of God, as the sun never rises twice on the same city, and the city of 1308, after more than a decade of political upheaval, was not the city of 1290, and would not have recalled Beatrice so well as the one Dante knew. He did not ever return – but he remembered how he had stood at corners where she had stood, as though waiting for her. He remembered how he followed her secretly, from the *Santa*

*Margherita de' Cerchi* where she had been praying, to her front door...

Yet even in exile in Verona he followed women who had her hair, her step ... followed them until they turned around and he felt the complicit sadness and joy when she turned and were not her. Joy because she could not be repeated.

After her death he read books by travellers to the East on the virtues of the Hebrew language. He studied esoterica on the language of Adam, the language that called forms from the abyss...

### III

The poet looks out his window at the city that is not his own, yet in this hour before the dawn, when the hard lines of reality are softened, he imagines the boulevards and streets belong to Florence, and he takes as much joy as pain in these paths of darkness that are filled with her absence.

He has come to Canto XXXI of *Paradise*.

*So I did pray; and she, so distant as she seemed...*

He realises his poem is failure, though the line of failure is not yet written, it is inevitable, and he sees it written already...

He passed two girls on the stairs tonight, common enough creatures, but, he supposed, whole universes unto themselves: he remembered a saint who said that the sight of a soul unclothed by flesh, even that of the poorest beggar, would instantly kill a king.

'There goes the man who visits hell and returns when he pleases,' whispered one to the other. And the poet smiled.

He sighed and recalled his aim: to revive the language before Babel; or rather, as Christ did, to make the holy language anew out of a vulgate: from shattered fragments, remake a universe. He had hoped to arrive at the language with which the Palestinian carpenter's son made miracles in eternity while He existed in time...

The tears Dante wept in Hell showed he was kinder than his Church; his conversation with Virgil, that he was more reverent than his age; his cosmos that he was equal to the astronomers and mathematicians; his verse that he was more eloquent than the entire age of troubadours. But he never had the paltry design of writing a masterpiece. All these virtues were incidental to the end. The poem sought a miracle, to take back what time

had stolen...

At first he did not hear the voice that summoned him; the word that travelled out of the Holy of Holies and came to him in the fearful dark. At first it was a silence, then a whisper, then a light in the form of a star, then an ancient lyric. He followed the voice through the torments of hell, the awful imperatives of purgatory, into strange heavens that must contain her ... and, like the poem that was and yet was not confined to ink and page, the man would shed Verona and time...

Just so tonight he has passed through eternity, through stars his dreams told him were fixed, but the candle he has travelled by tells him he is still in time. And with bitterness in Canto XXX he writes Adam saying that even the language spoken in Eden was corrupt.

And now the poet reaches the last three cantos, that all his poem's cosmos was built for: the planets, the stars, the whispering and calamitous histories, the cities – holy and infernal – all for this...

*So I did pray; and she, so distant as she seemed...*

he takes up his quill again

*...smiled*

He knows that 'distant' effects 'smiled', and that Beatrice is already pulling away from him, just as he nears her, though the failure has not yet been sealed. He is too tired to weep, but when he lifts his head from his hands he thinks: 'I may still have the worldly satisfaction of Cavalcanti, and bend her to my design this once. I need only have her enjoin me in a kiss, and so seal the poem. To have her simulacrum.'

The *idea* of Beatrice is in his power. There is nothing easier for Dante than to have her turn eternally toward him rather than away, to have for one pathetic moment the consolation of art...

But instead he dips his quill, and

*She turned again to the eternal fountain.*

Then the bitterness of his failure turns to joy.

His mortal words are not the universe they describe. He had been so near to trapping his soul with a shadow of her in Cavalcanti's spell; in an exiled the world, floating in space without a home. He whispers, 'Only Beatrice herself can turn, and only God can make the movement eternal.'

So he leaves the great broken dream of man on his desk, in obedience, to show the impotence of man, and in glorious defeat his pen moves on...

*thither my own wings could not carry me... to the love that moves the sun and other stars...*

And, seven hundred years later, at a Tokyo bus stop where the summer rain drowns all the noise and light of the city, the copy of the *Divine Comedy* I read beneath incandescent lights, tells me Beatrice turns from him forever unto death. But only in the poem, only in this world. In truth he waits with hope, or waits no longer...

*Patrick Holland is the author of eight books, including The Mary Smokes Boys (2010), which was longlisted for the Miles Franklin award and is currently being made into a feature film; One (2016), which was longlisted for the 2018 Dublin Literary Award; and most recently Oblivion (2024). Holland's work has been published, performed and broadcast in Australia, the USA & Canada, the UK and Hong Kong, and in translation in Italy and Japan. Both his creative writing and academic research are concerned with supermodernity, sacrality and East Asian religio-aesthetics. He is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Hong Kong Baptist University.*



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## TEXT prose

**Seth Robinson**

### *The Fourth Wall*

ScriptIt churned out a list of ideas for Season 41 of *The Gang*. Ten seconds, twenty episodes. I ran through the list and deselected a few. JJ had spent the entire last season in a coma, so it was too soon for him to be marrying Sally in a dream sequence. And Zippy had come out of a birthday cake in Season 15, so it didn't make sense for his newly discovered identical twin to be doing the same now.

In fact, the twin was a weird one. I ran a quick search and found the arc. 'Squeaky' and 'Zippy' – the characters' real, honest-to-the-digital-gods' *given names* – had been separated at birth. Squeaky had shown up eager to re-connect, and hijinks ensued. It had ended with some stolen identity drama and Squeaky's exit, off to join the Peace Corps. It seemed ScriptIt had decided it was time for the character's return, but I vetoed the cake. It was the sort of corny shit management loved. Clichés boosted clicks, but it was too much, even for a canned laugh dramedy like *The Gang*.

I sat back and watched it upload. The entire season would be ready to stream in a matter of minutes. 5pm, AEST. Every week the same. Such was the rhythm of the infinite binge. I closed the window when it was done. Some writers liked to watch their shows back, but I'd always thought of that as 'getting high on my own supply'. Plus, the show was fucking awful. The ScriptIt storylines were malignant brain rot. I thought actually watching the show might give me cancer.

I could order dinner, but I wasn't hungry. I considered watching something else, seeing if there were any archived 'prestige' TV shows I hadn't already seen, but I was pretty

sure that wasn't the case. ScriptIt was celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, and nay had a TV show been made without the media monopoly's input since.

Instead, I opted for sex.

My fingertips brushed against the haptic glass of my tablet and a ribbon of faces blurred passed. I tuned into the shapes and the colours more than the avatars themselves; orangey-caramel skin and white-blond hair. Lean, taut bodies and curves, men and women, all moulded from the same digital wax.

The avatars were based on the most salacious profiles on the web, a veritable who's who of social media influencers, athletes, and 'reality' stars. Most of them were posed in nightclub settings, or at the beach. I'd added a couple of filters, so I got some mock-travel photos with avatars posing on top of the Great Wall of China, or at the Eiffel Tower. Places I'd never been.

I looked up at the StandIn at the end of my bed. At the moment, it was androgynous; a smooth, gel-skinned body with only the faintest hint of bulges or curves, waiting for me to imbue it with an AI soul.

My hand was starting to ache with the first warning twinge of RSI. I was getting ready to cast the tablet aside and punish my wrists the old-fashioned way, when I caught a blip in the feed.

'Aisha'.

Her skin was tanned, but it was without the normal tangerine tint. It looked like she might be from a part of the world where people actually went outside. She had jet-black hair, trimmed to her jawline, each strand twisting into a wiry-ringlet, the exact opposite of the white-blond, navel length locks in the profiles on either side. Her eyes were dark and wide-set, with a mouth and nose that both looked a little too small for her face.

I swiped through her pictures and saw her in a slinky black cat suit in front of a mirror, a selfie on a beach somewhere with a green sea, and a group shot under a cloud of confetti, surrounded by blond women with blue contacts and lip fillers.

Her hands featured in a lot of the photos, which was a good sign. It meant she was one of the newer models. Up until a couple of years ago, the AI still couldn't get the hands right.

I brought up the StandIn app, copied Aisha's profile across and kicked off the render, then tapped back to the chat window.

> *Hey there. Down to digi?*

This was the moment of truth. I'd either get the usual saccharine chatbot opener, or some premium banter. I watched the blank space beneath my message. A moment later the expected blue dots appeared: the ellipses to my digital life.

> *You don't waste any time, do you?*

Inconclusive. I did a quick mental scramble, then plucked some words and tried to arrange them into something clever.

> *World's ending, whose got time to spare?*

Not the best, not the worst. I wished I'd been able to think up something a little more LOL worthy. With the premium AIs, the digi wasn't a sure thing. They were coded with a rejection rate in mind – in order to keep the experience 'fresh and authentic' – and if you used any of the suggested text the chat app offered it pinged them. I waited, watching for the ellipses.

30 seconds.

A minute.

A minute and a half.

The render was just getting to the freaky half-life stage. It had taken on Aisha's dimensions, but its features and skin remained gelatinous and semi-translucent.

I was about to start typing, when the dots blossomed.

> *I don't do digi.*

I drummed on the tablet, not sure how to respond. Another message appeared.

> *No offence. I'm just after a little more.*

This was different. Usually even the high-end chats followed a pretty standard decision tree.

> *What do you mean?*

There was another agonising pause before the dots appeared.

> *I want to meet someone.*

> *Isn't that what we're doing? We just met?*

> *No, I want to **\*meet\*** someone.*

There was a soft blip, and a red and white exclamation mark appeared in the corner of my screen. The render was done. I looked up, and there she was, watching me from the other side of the room.

I stared at the cursor. Even typing the words seemed preposterous.

> *Aisha, are you a real person?*

The reply was immediate.

> *Yes. Aren't you?*

A rush of itchy-heat tickled my nervous system. 98 per cent of profiles were bots. You had a better chance of fucking an AI unicorn than you did a real person.

> *And you want to meet someone... IRL?*

> *I'm tired of sitting in my room, I want to go out and have a conversation with someone. What's so weird about that?*

There was a shopping list of reasons I avoided going outside: high violent crime rates, air pollution, a blistering UV index, getting sweaty on public transport. And what was the point? Same day delivery had been legislated as a consumer right, and the launch of the StandIns was just the last piece of the puzzle. The whole world – the best bits anyway – could now be experienced from the comfort and safety of your living room. But suddenly, when questioned, none of that seemed valid. I'd been both figuratively and literally caught with my pants down, shifting from tech assisted jerk-off session to questioning my existence in less than a hundred characters. It was shameful.

I looked up at the rendered Aisha in the corner. Its expression had changed, a wry smile and raised eyebrows, like it knew.

The tablet chimed.

> *Do you have a window near you?*

> *Why?*

> *Go take a look, tell me what you see.*

The shutters let in the bare minimum of light and air that would stop mould from growing in my apartment without putting glare on my screens. They creaked as I held the button down, flakes of grime coming loose as the slats parted.

The view was cracked concrete and graffiti: an urban sprawl of mid-rise buildings all jammed together in a mishmash of businesses and apartments. There were cars on the road, crammed bumper-to-bumper; slick machines, long, low and shiny, with thick, tinted windows. The invisible passengers were all bot-chauffeured around in their recycled-air capsules, not willing to risk a breath of the outside.

In the time I watched I saw only two pedestrians: a man in a yellow latex suit, pressure-washing the footpath, and another in overalls, a bucket hat pulled low to shield against the sun. They gave each other a wide berth.

Understanding landed in my head as the tablet chimed.

> *Well?*

> *You got me.*

> *We used to be social animals, at least our parents were. What's happened to us?*

I exhaled, and the screen of my tablet fogged up. I wiped it away with my sleeve and watched the chat window waver, confused by the motion.

It was crazy, but the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to do it. There was probably a 50/50 chance this was a scam to steal my organs, but I still wanted to meet her. Not just that, I wanted to go for a walk. That felt just as significant. I wanted to stretch my legs, and my eyes, to force them beyond the three-foot range they needed to see my tablet.

> *OK.*

I watched the empty patch for the ellipses. They didn't come. She punched her response out so fast the dots didn't get a chance.

> *There's a bev vendor on Albion Road, do you know it?*

I opened up my maps app. It was about a ten-minute walk from my place.

> *I'll be there.*

There was another chime. Aisha had ended the chat. No chance for me to chicken out.

I'd invested heavily in my digital wardrobe, downloading entire catalogues of designer NFTs for my various avatars, but at home I'd defaulted to disposable, synthetic onesies that came in 20 packs as part of a weekly subscription. I added a cotton scarf, a bucket hat, sunglasses and boots for the sake of coverage and hygiene, but the overall effect was of a kid in their pyjamas, who'd raided their parents' closet for a game of dress-ups.

I opened my apartment door and stepped through the UV light of the SteriGate. Its chime made me jump, and the spritz of disinfectant burned my sinuses. I'd forgotten it did that. I pulled the scarf up over my mouth and nose as I stepped into the lift, wishing I'd done it sooner.

The sun was low, its rays intense enough to make me sweat. I pulled my sunglasses off and closed my eyes, just long enough to see the red glow inside my eyelids and feel the tingle of sunlight on my face. There were some things you just couldn't get from a vitamin D pill.

A man on a bicycle buzzed past. He was the only person who even came within shouting distance.

I got to the beverage vendor five minutes before the half-hour and stepped through another SteriGate, the disinfectant followed by the snap of conditioned air. Whitewashed walls, a white tile floor, white metal stools at a white plastic bar. The fluorescent lights made my eyes hurt, but the vendor was undeniably *clean*. The only

decoration was a testament to this, an entire wall of health and hygiene certificates behind Perspex. This was as safe a space as they came.

The bartender waved me to a place at the end of the bar. He was wearing a onesie like mine, latex gloves, and a face shield.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked.

‘I guess so. I’m meeting someone.’

He paused for a moment, his gaze lingering, and I realised the problem. Most of the vendor’s traffic must have been delivery riders there for pickups. I was the only customer.

‘Is that okay?’

‘Sure. Why not?’ The fabric of his mask creased and I guessed he was smiling.

‘Drink?’

‘A beer, please?’ Alcohol was good. Alcohol came sealed and sterile. No risk of contamination.

He set a bottle in front of me, then popped the top so I could see.

‘Thanks very much.’

I waited until he’d moved on, then set my sunglasses aside and slid the scarf down from my mouth and nose. I took a swig of the beer. It was icy cold, and crisp. It helped douse my nerves.

The half-hour came, and then it went. I pulled my tablet out and clicked apps pointlessly. Two minutes past. Then three, four and five. No new messages. I drained the beer and contemplated whether I should order another or bail.

The SteriGate chimed behind me. I turned on my stool.

Onyx eyes met mine. That slightly small mouth curled into the same wry smile I’d seen on her render, but it was the only thing the imitation got right. It didn’t capture the curiosity in her eyes, the lightness in her step, or the warmth that preceded her.

‘Sorry, I got a little held up.’ She glanced down at the empty beer bottle. ‘Have you been waiting long?’

‘No, it was ... I was feeling a little nervy.’

She hopped up onto the stool next to me. The bartender appeared a moment later.

‘Drink for you, Miss?’

‘A gin and tonic, please.’

‘It’s not premixed.’

‘That’s fine.’

The bartender pulled a sterilised glass from the fridge and set it in front of her. He went about the ritual, cracking open the packet of ice cubes, the single serve gin bottle, the single serve tonic, all so Aisha could see what he was doing. When it was done, she nodded her approval. ‘Don’t suppose you have any limes?’

‘Uh, no. Sorry.’

I’d have been floored if he had. It had been more than a year since I’d had fresh fruit.

‘Another beer?’ he asked me.

‘Please.’

He served it up with the same ritual grandeur, then left us to it.

Aisha raised her glass. ‘Cheers.’

We clinked and drank, casting side eyes at each other. I had no idea what I was supposed to say next.

Aisha seemed to read my mind. She set her drink aside, then tugged at the fingers of her gloves. A tanned hand, with long, delicate fingers slipped free. ‘Let’s start small, I’m Aisha.’

I stared at the outstretched hand. An AI could never have done it justice. I stripped off my own glove. The bar’s air conditioning made it feel like I’d just stuck my hand in a bucket of pre-packaged ice. It was trembling, in equal parts excitement and fear.

‘Ben.’ I grasped her hand, and moved it up and down, one pump, two.

Aisha flashed her teeth. ‘Not *BigBenRocketClock*?’

I flushed instantly, then thanked my past self for going with ‘Rocket Clock’ instead of ‘Rocket Cock’. It had been a near thing.

‘Just Ben,’ I grimaced. ‘I kind of forgot about that. It was an old joke.’

‘And I suppose the bots don’t usually comment?’

‘Oh Jesus, I’m sorry about that. I should have known.’

‘Should you? I hacked in so I was bot side.’

That hadn’t occurred to me. ‘Why did you do that?’

‘How often do you log into one of the human chat rooms? They’re ghost towns these days,’ she shrugged. ‘Which I suppose is a slightly unfortunate turn of phrase. Either way, it’s better to meet in person, you get a more authentic experience.’

‘Do you do this often?’ I asked, gesturing between us.

She arched an eyebrow at me.

‘Ah, shit, I didn’t mean it like that. I just ... I’m blowing this, aren’t I?’

Aisha’s smile grew a little wider. ‘I’m just trolling you, dude. But to answer your question, it’s complicated. I’ve invited a few people out.’ She took another sip of her G and T. ‘Not many say yes.’

‘Well, I’m glad I did. I’ve never done this sort of thing before. I guess I’m used to hanging out at home and yeah ... just chatting. And like, digi.’

‘That’s pretty sad.’

‘Yeah, I guess.’ Another pause. Another mental stumble. If she’d been a bot, at this point we’d be switching from the chat screen to StandIn and the talking would be done. ‘So, what do you do for work?’

‘Let’s not. We can do better than work chat. Do you want to see something cool?’

‘What is it?’

‘Come on, Ben. You’ve come this far. It’s a surprise, a good one.’

She was right. I nodded, before I could change my mind.

‘Good man. Freddy, we’re on.’ The vendor reappeared. He’d removed his mask, and I was surprised to see a salt and pepper beard, the flash of a silver tooth as he smiled.

‘I had a feeling about this one. Come on through.’ Freddy lifted a section of the bar.

Something fell into place then. I remembered the studious look Freddy had given me when I’d come in, and realised this had always been the plan. I felt a spike of fear – wondering if they really were going to steal my organs – but it wasn’t enough to pierce through the excitement, and the wonder as Aisha nudged me behind the bar, and Freddy popped up one of the linoleum tiles in the centre of the floor, revealing a hidden handle. A rush of warm, moist air billowed outward as he heaved the hatch open, followed a moment later by the murmur of a baseline.

‘Brace yourself,’ Aisha said. ‘It’s gonna get weird.’

We descended a set of metal stairs, each step buzzing beneath our feet. The air felt alive with it, not just the energy I knew from physics class, but something else as well. I could feel it coming off my own skin, a charge of anticipation adding to the atmosphere.

The stairs touched down at the end of a concrete corridor covered in luminous, UV paint. Glowing squiggles, tags, and hieroglyphics drew us along its length, through a series of plastic butcher’s curtains, each of which bore another word.

*FEED*

*FIGHT*

*FLEE*

*FUCK*

We pushed through the last, and stopped in front of a lone metal door, the music pulsing from beyond, no longer dampened by distance and plastic. A last word had been splashed across it: *CREATE*

Aisha nudged me forward. The door opened, and the music hit me like white water. I lurched back, only for Aisha to shove me forward.

I'd never been to a nightclub before. I was 16 when they brought the 'safe space' policies in and the industry died. I imagined this might have been what they were like, only on steroids.

We'd stepped into an empty water cistern, tiered, with four levels dropping down in a donut shape. Every surface was covered in the glowing paint I'd seen in the corridor, so everybody in the room appeared as if they were moving, swimming, through a cloud of luminous algae.

*For never was a story of more woe than,  
This light through yonder window breaks...*

There was a DJ with a vinyl turntable set up in the centre of the donut, another man beside him had an array of keyboards and synths, and a third had a kind of hybrid acoustic/electronic drum kit. In front of them was a woman in a boiler suit, microphone raised to her lips, shaved head thrown back so she delivered each of her lines to the capped valve at the top of the cistern, as if praying for it not to open and wash this whole scene away.

*I have thee not,  
yet I see thee still...*

The sound rose up across the tiers, propelling the people around them to dance. I saw red latex and black leather. A naked woman with a gauntleted arm raised high. Blue fur, and a face with a Cheshire Cat smile. All of this was in motion, part dance, part orgy, accompanied by lyrics I recognised from my high school English class, chopped, changed, and reappropriated.

*Doubt thou, the stars are fire,  
Doubt that, the sun doth move...*

There were windows all around the top tier of the cistern, easily missed with what was happening on the floor. My first thought was fish tanks, before I saw what was inside.

The glass of the nearest was almost entirely covered by oil paintings hanging on the inside. Each was a landscape, somewhere I had never been but thought might have been a real place, pine forests, beaches, mountains, desert, all in shades that made it look like the light spectrum had been inverted. A single, painting-sized panel had been left in the centre, so we could see through to where a man with grey hair had set up an easel, and was painting with an unnerving ferocity.

*For all the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players...*

There were two naked men in the next display. I couldn't tell if they were fighting, or dancing. They twirled and ducked, swung wildly and delivered long looping kicks. As they moved, two women were spraying them with paint guns, so their motion scattered the droplets. In the next, a man in a life jacket played a clarinet to a metal half-man, half-beagle sculpture. It was pissing, one dog leg up, in an endless fountain that was slowly filling the tank. In another, a ballerina sat in a bathtub full of Polaroids, eating popcorn. The displays, and the performers within, wrapped all the way around the chamber.

'What is this place?' I shouted to Aisha, who laughed, and shook her head.

'Dance first, talk later.' She grabbed the front of my onesie, and pulled me down onto one of the middle tiers. In amongst the throng of bodies.

*And are melted into air,  
Thin air...*

I felt the press of heat and sweat. Fingernails raked my back, and an unseen hand tore the back of my onesie away, the front flopping down like a loincloth and leaving me bare-chested. I was exposed, vulnerable. The static crackle made the hair on my forearms stand on end. I saw the blue furred cat again and realised I'd been wrong. It was a koala. Its ecstatic grin a far cry from the usual eucalypt doze. I felt breath on my neck, and turned back to Aisha, found her face close to mine. I breathed in her exhale, tasted it, got drunk off it. The rise and fall of the music, the weird, disorienting lilt of the lyrics. It all came together in a warm, heady rush.

It was so fucking good.

*Give me your hands,  
If we be friends...*

I had no idea how long we'd been there. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. The music rose and fell, not in songs, but in one long, stream-of-consciousness riff. Aisha's fingers looped around my wrist and pulled me out of the crowd. Back up the steps, toward the human displays.

*We are such stuff as dreams are made on...*

‘Why are they doing that? Is it, like, their job?’ I shouted.

Aisha laughed. Out loud, incredulous. She responded in a yell, but her voice had the intimacy of a whisper. ‘No, no money here. They do it because they love it. Because they *need* it. It’s cause they’re itchy, and the only way they can scratch is to create something new.’ She paused, winked. ‘Even if it isn’t necessarily good.’

‘So, they’re just down there, all the time, partying, and making art. Even if nobody sees it?’

‘You saw it, didn’t you?’

I had. And I thought I understood. AI made all of the *content* now. It did our meal plans, it monitored our work, hell, it even served as nine out of every ten sexual partners. The people here wanted something else. This couldn’t be called content in any sense of the word. It was unhinged, and nonsensical. But the people down here were connecting with each other, and their imaginations. And there wasn’t a bot in site.

I remembered the words on the curtains as we’d come in, and realised where I knew them from now. It had been a biology video I’d seen on line. They were the four ‘F words’ of survival, but the fifth, *Create*, someone had added into the mix. We’d given all those things over to the bots, so we could sit back and consume.

Aisha nudged me towards the door. I didn’t want to go. The Gallery had a hold on me, and I wanted to stay down there, lost in the beautiful mess of it. I felt the rubber of my boot soles clinging to the concrete with an adhesive longing.

‘Come on, leaving the first time is the hardest.’ Her push was insistent. She shepherded me towards the metal door, and I saw a final parting word written on the Gallery side, larger, more luminous than any of the others.

*LIVE*

We climbed the ladder, the buzz of the gallery diminishing with each rung. We paused in the chill air of bev vendor just long enough for Freddy to give me a new, untorn onesie and a knowing smile. This time, when I passed through the SteriGate, there was no reassurance that came with the blast of disinfectant. Its chill penetrated my skin as I stepped out onto the street. It was a soulless space. Our desire for efficiency – for industrial sterility – had sucked the joy from the place we lived. Even the sky had taken on a shade of scorched blue-white, as if it were trying to mirror the empty existence of the ground below.

‘Why me?’ I asked Aisha.

She stepped in close, close enough that if there’d been anyone on the street she would

have caused a panic, and beamed up at me.

‘Because you said yes. You need this, same as I did. I guess the question now, is what are you going to do next?’

\* \*

Getting my shutters open properly was a mission. I had to find a rubber mallet and bash the lever until the mechanism dislodged. Screen glare be damned.

The next task was less one of brute strength. I had given a lot of thought to Aisha’s question, and while my compulsion was to go back to The Gallery – to get lost in the ecstasy of all that art – I realised I could just as easily become addicted to another kind of immersion. I didn’t have the same capacity to get people out of their shells as Aisha did, but maybe I didn’t have to.

I opened up ScriptIt and clicked the settings cog. The dashboard and the playlist and the suggested prompts – the territory where my entire career had taken place so far – were all going to be useless for this. I opened up the **Manual Input** menu, and was immediately met with a pop-up. **WARNING: Manual input may not be optimised to meet viewer algorithms.** I ignored it. There was still no space for me to free-write scripts, but I could create my own prompts.

1. *Zippy gets a new VR headset*
2. *Develops relationship with AI – ‘Florida’ – gets a crush on her.*

Another warning flashed up on my screen then. **WARNING: Suggested prompts do not meet content recommendations.** That was interesting, but not surprising. Most of the algorithm’s suggestions went back to tropes that had been established in the 70s and 80s. It made sense that a storyline about AI itself might set off some coded alarm bells. I overrode the alert, and pressed on.

3. *Sally gets worried, recruits Lucinda and JJ to help him unplug.*
4. *Florida gets possessive, tries to keep Zippy locked in cyberspace.*

Another alert, this one in red letters with a dark mode contrast. The screen temporarily locked. **WARNING: Inappropriate narrative content.** I tried the usual override and came up empty. I still had admin rights though, so I opened up the backend and played with the code until I got back into the manual input.

5. *The Gang mount a rescue mission, going into cyberspace to pull Zippy out.*
6. *They manage to save him from Florida, system crashes.*
7. *Zippy swears off AI forever.*

I didn't run a focus group or editorial check on it. I made the story live straight away. I watched it render, counting each percentage along the progress bar as it ticked over. It was taking way longer than usual. Any moment, I expected another lock to come up, but it crawled all the way to 100%.

*The Gang, Season 42, Episode 1: Zippy goes looking for love online.*

I published, then I waited.

It only took three minutes for the first of the notifications to start. Nowhere near long enough to watch the whole episode. My manager, his manager, a company director. The messages poured in, and my tablet began to ring.

I had one other thing I needed to do before I lost my admin rights. I jumped into the back end of ScriptIt again, and I took the digital version of my rubber mallet to the code. I broke the platform, so no-one would be able to edit my playlist or publish anything new. They'd fix it, but I had a feeling it would be a matter of hours, and that would be long enough. Religious viewers would see the ep, and they would see something was wrong. That might be enough. It wasn't propaganda per se, but I wondered, if maybe, it might be enough.

When that was done, I put my tablet on *Do Not Disturb* and I opened up a blank document. It was time, I decided, to create something on my own. I tinkered with the settings, got it into script format, then stared at the page. After a moment, I started typing. I had no idea what was going to come next, but perhaps that was best left in the realm of imagination.

# **1. INT. APARTMENT. DAY.**

*A man is sitting at his computer, writing. Someone starts banging on his door.*

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## TEXT prose

**Lisa Easey**

### *The paradox of motivation*

I was born on a cool Sunday morning in 1990 – August 19th, specifically – a remarkable feat given the confusion and speculation leading up to my birth. First, no one knew how or why I came to be, only that I *was* – a result of misplaced faith in the Pill, they reasoned. Second, the ultrasound was misread, leading to names like Adam and Ryan until I popped out to the shock of my mother as neither. In this way, I came into the world a chaotic and confused mess.

All this took place in a sleepy town in the Blue Mountains, some 100 kilometres west of Sydney, where sky and forest meet. People come for the views – the blue vistas of the western scarp – or the ancient limestone caves dating to the age of amphibians. For the tourists, there's much to do, yet for the people that live here, boredom is the way of things.

In between the violent crunch of cicada shells and a massive Kewpie doll rolling down the main street for the annual flower festival, the most exciting thing – at least to my childish imagination – was the Hat Man. Like me, no one knew where he came from, only that he was here now, but always wearing a different hat. He appeared on the rise of a hill in his blue jeans almost every day, formed in the heat waves, sometimes the rain, a mythical John Wayne on his journey west with a big hat on his head. Some days he wore a cattleman. Some days a chullo. Some days a homemade creation with jingle-jangles on the end. It was the type of creativity unique to the quiet town, born from boredom and a desperate hunger for expression. I came to know this boredom very

well.

Between school and staring up the hill for the Hat Man, there was nothing else to do but create. I learned felt crafts, oil painting, journalling and even violin for a short time. I doodled, glued and folded, and learned the language of creativity, which only comes in the space between everyday activities. If I got bored and didn't like what I was doing, it didn't matter, because I could always move on to something else more exciting. The act of creation was satisfying enough, even if I never finished what I started. I only came to know, years later, that leaving a task unfinished was the domain of the lazy and unmotivated – a moral lacking in an otherwise good character. This I came to know very well. In fact, I had started and then abruptly abandoned many creative interests: interior design, acting, art and floristry. Seeing the five-thousand-dollar fee and the time needed for Certificate III in Floristry was enough to drop the idea in a matter of hours. Similarly, for acting and art. If I had to commit more than a week to a single pursuit, there was no guarantee after those seven days I'd still find interest in those original desires. My mother called me lazy on occasion. If I didn't practice the violin, she said I would never be good, and, to her credit, I wasn't.

By the time I reached adulthood, this character flaw seeped deep into my core and festered like a corpse at the bottom of a lake. Now and then, bit by bit, bad traits floated up. I couldn't finish an email. I couldn't file invoices. I couldn't focus on the team meeting about KPIs. Yet, I sorted the invoices, scheduled the team meeting and sent emails when I felt the need. My manager was baffled. How could I be so proactive but disorganised at the same time? To her, the fact that I could hyper-focus on one task but not another was one of the great mysteries of the world, and no matter how much she urged me to try harder, I just couldn't. For that reason, I saw myself as broken – a hopeless cause. Of course, as anyone with ADHD knows, there comes a time, sometimes in childhood, sometimes later, when you see the 'bad' for what it really is – a chemical imbalance of the brain.

To summarise this complex neurodevelopmental disorder, the dopamine and noradrenaline needed for executive functioning are in such low supply that motivation feels almost impossible. Some call it task paralysis. Suddenly, my disorder of the will was a disorder of the brain, and I saw my life unravel and stitch itself together again, with this knowledge as the binding – often threadbare in the hardest of places.

Skip to a few years later. I wanted to write to know myself, yet the experience of writing took on the same old issues. I could write a novel but not a short story. I could write to genre but not to style, as with setting and character. The most vivid settings, from the top of the Great Dividing Range to the backstreets of Roma, came to life in a panorama of sights, smells and sounds, while characters so thin in their construction almost vanished on the page.

I think about Brendon, a marketing manager from New York, described as 'a little too

cool and serious'. He came into being one Christmas afternoon when, after watching one too many romantic comedies, I realised he was just the sort of character I'd like to write about – someone who needed an emotional jump-start in relationships. There he was, under the gentle candlelight in an Italian restaurant in Lower Manhattan, thinking about the notes of an earthy red, oblivious to his impending doom as girlfriend Kelly, 'old-world and carefree', rang the death knell on their relationship.

'Brendon, I'm leaving,' she said.

A quick explanation followed about Kelly's work as an archaeologist taking her to Rome. Brendon was speechless, but, in the stoic fashion of 'cool and serious' guys, he accepted the news, which made what came next that much more confusing. Weeks later, desperate, drunk and lonely, Brendon transformed into a hopeless romantic and booked a plane ticket to Rome – except, thanks to a heavy dose of plot convenience, he accidentally booked a ticket to Roma, Queensland instead. The Brendon I knew would never have done this. Stubborn but sensible, he would have called first, and, even if drunk, would never have boarded a plane without checking the final destination. It was so out of character that I left him there, standing in front of the Roma airport beneath the midday sun, surrounded by asphalt, grass and the occasional gum tree. Like promises made to distant relatives, I told myself I'd go back and visit. In those visions, Brendon became more than a list of character traits – he became whole, fully rounded by an unlikely relationship in the outback. Or would he? The Brendon of my mind and the Brendon of the romantic comedy had no business occupying the same person. In this way, I realised I never knew Brendon at all and might have lost interest before setting a word on the page – another flaw in an otherwise good character.

Then there was Jude, a hardnosed taxi driver looking for action on the Sydney streets. Her wise-cracking, no-nonsense attitude was enough to keep her in my mind for a few months, until, swept up in the excitement of another story, I abandoned her on the Cahill Expressway between the eastern and northern suburbs – forever driving, always waiting.

There comes a certain grief from giving up on your characters, as in a way, you're giving up on yourself and the fantasy that once made you happy. With effort, these characters might become more, but only after broken promises, false starts and lengths of deadly fatigue, all thanks to a sudden drop in motivation.

In the absence of dopamine, I found that strange rituals formed. The perfect conditions for my writing were as follows: an exact 9am start (weekdays) with a mug of instant coffee (two teaspoons of Vittoria on an inch of milk filled with hot water to 2cm below the brim) on the couch (the left-hand side) in total silence. All this because one morning, many years ago, I had decided to start writing, a new and exciting idea at the time, and did these very ordinary things under a sudden burst of motivation. Some days it worked. Some days it didn't. It was like Henry Miller's eleven commandments, but a

tad fickle. I told myself writing is just writing. If there was a level of pain or confusion that rivalled a Kafka story, I was probably doing it wrong, but rather than write a single sentence, my hands turned to stone. The problem was not writer's block or a lack of conviction – I had plenty of that. Instead, it was in my approach. With ADHD you can't force creative writing. You have to tease it out.

Psychologist William Dodson calls ADHD an interest-based nervous system. Within this framework are five motivating factors: interest, novelty, challenge, urgency and passion. I did not know at the time that my childhood boredom had placed the novelty of new creative interests in my small hands. I also did not know that writing a 50,000-word novel rather a short story came down to challenge and passion instead of a lack of skill. All of this is obvious in retrospect. As I write this now, I can feel the urgency of a deadline I've set in my mind as the driving force to finish the piece – a trick I use often. Writing competition deadlines also get the juices going. Waiting until the very last moment to write delivers a powerful burst of adrenaline, almost compulsive in its display.

On a late summer afternoon, as the subtropical rains flooded the gutters and drains, I sat in my apartment living room, huffing the bitter bite of insecticide as the pest control man sprayed the furniture for bed bugs. They had arrived silently one day and taken up residence in almost every room. For that reason, the entire apartment needed treatment, none of which mattered in the moment, as I was so desperate to write the contours of a screenplay for a competition, I didn't notice the rising smell. Nor did I notice the bug spray licking my toes. It was all happening somewhere else, in a different time. Literary blinkers centred my vision to the exclusion of all other, or what some people call 'being in the zone'. Here, characters, setting, plot and theme spoke all at once, needy and stubborn, in case one of them got left in the fray, a loose thread cut from the patchwork of memory. Imagine the dozens of characters, no longer with a face or name, waiting in line at the airport pick-up for a ride that will never show. How quickly we forget the silenced, the second choice.

The zone can be frightening, however, for those outside its boundaries; seeing someone in its grasp is like witnessing a sleepwalker lost in a far-off dream. You might speak to them and get a response, but they are not there, not really. For the sleepwalker, all of this happens in a great wave that ends with the countdown of the clock, where, just as quickly, the urge to write disappears. In this way, time motivation is fleeting – a precious and tightly held asset in the face of distraction, but one ultimately destined to die like a rare and vulnerable bird.

So, overcome with loss, I searched for stimulation elsewhere to stem the mind's outward flow. There are rockers, chewers and hummers but I'm a picker, a tactile sort of stimmer. Finger by finger, I scratched the skin from the cuticle until it bled, a perverse pleasure that elicited horror and sometimes disgust from others, although, the

results are in this piece, and possibly in every other piece I've written, which I'm reluctant to regret. The 'fidget to focus' method is rewarding despite its injuries. In those very last minutes approaching a deadline, as the dopamine waned, a tear of skin, red raw from the thumb, worked just as well as a shot of coffee to increase the neurotransmitters. If all else failed, interest, challenge and passion were worthy backups, though more difficult to draw out.

As for writing ideas, I go back to the past, to the idle days waiting for the Hat Man on the veranda, finding the rich creativity from boredom again. A long shower or a siesta in the sun serve as the best prompts, where the restless turn of mind discovers the novelty of writing once more. You meet new friends, like Brian, the washed-up footy star looking for a last chance with his hometown team, or Tina, the hungry tuna looking for a last meal in the Bite. If you're lucky, you'll meet a few old friends, too.

I was back in that sleepy mountain town, and it was warm and wet, alive to the hum of cicadas as I sat on a park bench waiting for inspiration. An hour passed. I was about to give up when, through the rhododendrons, I spotted a familiar figure. She walked with a cane, her hair silvered in the sun – a half-forgotten dream. We'd first met in 2020, another idea shaped from a movie, but like all people and things that year, we soon lost touch under a cloud of confusion. I thought about her once or twice, then she slipped away with a whisper, unnoticed. Where had she been all this time? I saw she had no face or name, so I gave her one – Marlene – and led her into a new story with Brian, where, both now in old age, they married and then happily divorced, living side-by-side in the fictional St. Maria Retirement Village.

While I haven't visited in a while, I know the love and interest are still there, because we talk in quiet moments, standing by the stove or in the garden, even if it's just to say hello. I don't know how or why they came to be – only that they're here now, waiting for another story.

*Lisa Easey is a freelance writer based in Moreton Bay, specialising in lifestyle and home content, with her work featured in magazines such as Home Beautiful and Inside Out. In addition to her professional work, she has a passion for exploring memoir, fiction and screenwriting, with pieces published in the Lane Cove Literary Anthology and the feminist journal The Whorticulturalist.*



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## TEXT prose

**Rachel Hennessy**

***Creative Writing 00000123***

### Week One

Extract from a novel by a living American male

A New York businessman systematically murders homeless people and prostitutes. The graphic descriptions of the killings make me gag. I tell my all-female class it is postmodern irony, a critique of the 'greed is good' excess of 1980s capitalism. Most of them were born after the year 2000.

### Week Two

Short story by a dead American male

A man and a woman sit in a café discussing her need to have an abortion. The actual act is never explicitly referred to. We discuss metaphor and the 'less is more' or 'economical' style. The students are made aware that 'excess' is to be avoided, everything is to be contained and constrained. Don't even use the word 'abortion', just obliquely refer to it, because no one wants to know about the real messiness of the (pregnant) body.

### Week Three

Short story by a dead Russian male

A young girl is seduced by a man thirty years older than her. It is not referred to as

‘rape’. Later, she is shot on a railway platform by a Cossack, known for their passion, for her refusal to be with him. The death of the girl is, of course, a *symbol*, not a ‘real’ death, although her headstone figures throughout the story. I try to focus on the excellent structure, the weaving of themes, only I keep seeing the girl on the platform, being shot by the Cossack, as my daughter. This is completely inappropriate to mention.

#### Week Four

Short story by a living Canadian female

A young man and his cousin go cruising in a small town and pick up two girls. The young man has sex with the girl in a wood. In the story, the girl gets the last line, but that is all she gets, the rest told from his point-of-view. My female students express their disappointment in the first female writer assigned them in the course, as if she has personally betrayed them. I counter that women writers do not have an obligation to always tell things from a female point-of-view. One of the students goes on a rant about being expected to revere *Lolita*, although it has not been assigned on any course I’ve taught. I let her express her anger because I know this is a safe space to do it. I think of all the fucked-up male narrators I have admired – Holden Caulfield, the guy in *The Outsider* and, yes, Humbert Humbert – and how their maleness never *mattered* to me. How I concentrated on the skill of the writing, ignoring their misogyny, as if it didn’t colour everything. And how I didn’t even notice they were all white.

#### Week Five

Extract from a novel by a living white South African male

An older (white) academic has an affair with his young student. He loses his job and goes to stay with his (white) daughter who is gang-raped by a group of (black) men. She does not report her rape. Her assault is, of course, a *symbolic* act, and she will accept her position as the metaphor of South African race relations. My students can barely breathe through their rage. I tell them the story of seeing the film of this book, of my own rage, and being ‘man-splained’ in the foyer at a time when the term did not even exist. How a young, male, soon-to-be academic, had condescendingly told me how it *should* be interpreted, that *I* couldn’t breathe for his shutting down of my indignation. I tell them that I stopped reading the male writer’s work for a decade, but found my way back to him when he left realism behind.

## Week Six

### Workshopping

A young girl has been raped by her boyfriend and does not tell her Indian family. She finishes her exams because she is too ashamed to be both a personal and academic 'failure'. Her cousin tells her to report him. She pushes down the feelings and pretends everything is okay. She begins to self-harm. The student writer stares at her hands. We talk about the beauty of the expression, the realistic dialogue, the potential of the structure. Everyone refers to the character as 'she', turning her into a presence outside of the room to allow us enough distance. We know 'she' is real but we talk about her as imaginary, allowing her the space to be re-imagined.

## Week Seven

### Extract from a novel by a dead American female

A young girl interns in New York at a fashion magazine. She sees herself as an outsider and gradually descends into depression, and attempted suicide. My female students express their surprise at how good this work is, having been, subtly, encouraged to consider this female writer as cliché, to remember how she killed herself with her children next door (next door!) and how she is *too* revered by *too* many undergrad female students. (But the armies dedicated to Dostoevsky, Hemingway and Foster Wallace continue on without embarrassment.)

## Week Eight

### Extract from a novel by a living Australian female

Two young girls wake up in cells, unsure of where they are or how they got there. They gradually learn they have been shipped to the outback by an organisation that deals with sexually problematic women. The dystopian nature of this work is debated by my female students. How likely is this to happen? Isn't it already happening now, in more subtle ways; women ostracised and pilloried on a daily basis; why would it be far-fetched, I ask? The debate is *alive* and passionate and it is *here* I want to see my daughter.

## Week Nine

### Article by a living Australian indigenous female

A young black girl talks about wanting to grow up and be white. Her mother tells her this will never be so but, maybe, she can tell stories to help white people understand what it is to be black in this country. My (almost-all-white) students squirm in their

seats, unsure how to proceed. I talk about ‘lived experience’ and ‘cultural immersion’ and the lines on their faces deepen with worry. So sure of the patriarchy, they have forgotten the colony.

## Week Ten

### Workshopping

A male policeman and his (also male) partner arrive at a house where a woman has been murdered by her husband. A young Native American boy has been a witness to the violence and is taken in the car back to the police station by the two men. They ask him questions about his ordeal but he is unable to answer, mute with shock. The setting and conversation is from an American cop show (*LAPD*? Or *NCIS*? Or *NSVU*? I can never remember the right acronyms). I ask the writer if she has ever been to the USA. She says she hasn’t, but she feels like she ‘knows it’. We ask her why there are no female characters, except for the dead body. We ask her why she has made the indigenous boy have no voice. She looks at the pages like she is seeing them for the first time.

## Week Eleven

### Short story by a living Korean female

A woman discovers strange bruises on her body. Her bewildered husband cannot understand where they have come from. Eventually, the bruises ‘blossom’ all over her body and she turns, literally, into a plant. Her husband waters her. Is this a happy or a terrible ending, my students ask? I do not answer.

## Week Twelve

### Student-Experience-Survey

Overall, was this course taught well? (Please rank on a scale of 1 to 5)

Overall, was this course organised? (Please rank on a scale of 1 to 5)

Overall, was the course material appropriate? (Please rank on a scale of 1 to 5)

Overall, did this course show you the possibilities of a world where your opinions, your body, your life, your loves, your happiness, your sorrows, your depressions, your dreams were valued and respected, not trashed, belittled, made to feel stupid, irrelevant or ‘not literary enough’? (Please rank on a scale of 1 to 5)

Overall, did this course teach you that the voice you might want to write in is not always yours to use? (Please rank on a scale of 1 to 5)

Overall, did this course make you consider what it is to be a human being? (Please rank on a scale of 1 to 8,000,000,000)

Would you recommend this course to a friend? Yes or No?

*Dr Rachel Hennessy is a Lecturer in Creative Writing in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. She is the award-winning author of five novels: The Quakers (2008), The Heaven I Swallowed (2013), River Stone (2019), Mountain Arrow (2020) and City Knife (2023). She has a building reputation as a critical researcher in climate fiction, posthumanism and creative writing pedagogy.*



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## TEXT prose

**Zoe Karpin**

### *Injustice and Injury*

#### Today

Her bronze-coloured car is hard to start, even though she conscientiously serviced it the week before. She finally makes it into the teachers' car park and finds a space. Through the vehicle's window, against a smog-filled sky ahead, brown kookaburras cackle from above – messianic messengers?

Then she sees him flying by on the raised path in front of the car; the Year 10 student Mal hits the hard concrete, yelling and chasing after another student disappearing into the school building.

She pauses for a moment like a buoy bobbing on the sea, in one place going up and down in her driver's seat. She gets out of the car. She pulls her big black leather bag onto her shoulder, and walks the uneven path in the opposite direction – to the canteen. She begins a long, hard day with only one period off.

The woman wearing a long pink paisley dress and with a big updo hairstyle is behind the canteen counter, her attention elsewhere. There are no other customers there. She calls out, 'Excuse me, can I have my usual?'

The woman replies in a nasty voice, 'You haven't paid for last week's coffee.'

She had. 'You were a bit distracted, something burning in the toaster, don't you remember?' The woman with the updo won't believe her. Why would she lie? A

measly \$5.00. Doesn't the woman know her as an honourable professional? She looks around for someone, anyone, to vouch for her. The canteen is hollow, silent, and empty but for them. She smells the usual yeasty toast. The updo woman still insists on her debt. She is hard and stern; she hasn't erased it in her exercise book. She has proof, in black and white.

She pays again, sliding lots of coins and counting them out deliberately, slowing the payment, not tapping a card or phone as she usually does. The canteen is convenient, and the coffee is reasonable. They don't make much money. She is still angry though, shaking, grabbing her coffee, waving her wrist with her silver mechanical watch, and walking quickly off to the staff room. She watches the fat, glossy black crows as big as chickens waddling across the emptying school playground. The crows beat the dusty mynahs to eat the discarded remains of the previous day's lunch and recess chips and discarded damaged sandwiches.

She is a committed teacher. She follows the syllabus assiduously and employs the most effective teaching methods. She wears many pins on her cotton cobalt blue short-sleeved top today. She does most days. The students often ask her about the pins. They are of all the battles that have to be won. The battles stretch around the globe into her own backyard: pins of yellow, black, red, green, and not to forget her most cherished purple one. She also carries around a blue-covered iPad recording her students' literacy levels. She lists their results according to all the literacy criteria and their improvements through her teaching programs. At any given moment, when she is not otherwise preoccupied and off class, she brings the spreadsheets up to flash at a teacher who can spare the time. They talk over the strategies she has used to improve the student results.

## **Yesterday**

The car, easy to start, she drives home humming. The students say, 'Thank you,' one after the other exiting the classroom. The end of the day. Clicking their folders and dragging their bags. Mal too mutters under his floppy brown fringe, 'Miss,' after the lesson on persuasive language.

They say, 'You give us good weapons to use in our fight for more of a say in this big new land. Our voices will become louder and stronger.' They need it as they come from war-torn or disaster-filled countries over the wild sapphire seas where their old voices are lost or drowned.

She is the bridge maker. As if she's calling, 'Over here,' to them on one side of the bridge, and they are on the other side. She, with her lessons, is giving them the legs to walk towards her.

Too, at recess, she helps a student write a letter of complaint to his family's landlady.

‘We have damp problems and black mould on our ceilings,’ he tells her. His widowed mother can’t write in English. She works all day in a factory. He read on the internet about the dangers of mould. His little brother’s bedroom ceiling has dark weeping patches. They swapped bedrooms to ease his big brotherly concern. She helps him to write the letter, and it stops her from falling off the bridge. Falling into the swells and snags of her rage at his housing difficulties.

These students have day-to-day hardships unknown to those that haven’t crossed any sovereign borders. These students have no internet access at home. They do not have any native-born speakers they can practise English with outside of school. Time to study is fractured. They work after school and on the weekends for extra money.

She suspects her peers of rolling their eyes behind her in the carpeted common room. She is not like them. She never attends a spiritual meeting place. She lives with a man, not married. It is alright if she votes for an ecology policy party. Just don’t push your politics onto the students.

There is no evidence that she does.

### **Some weeks ago**

The quiet, grey-haired principal calls her into his office.

‘The principal is a nice man,’ the students all say. She agrees. He smiles at them, says their names as if he knows each one of them well one day do well. Despite their desperate voyages over the sea, he has confidence. He often walks out onto the school grounds. He picks up plastic bottles and paper sailing around in the soft breezes. He chases the ibis away. Laughs at them returning to another section of the quad.

He always says hello to her. He hopes she is well.

He is making a mistake. He calls her to him. Injustice is in his room, dressed in a respectable navy suit. It spills out of the room into passageways and the quad. The principal shuts his door behind her just as she glimpses Mal wandering out of class a few metres away. Shouldn’t they do something about Mal? The boss has to speak to her: ‘You must be careful, to be balanced in your teaching.’

Of course, she is. She presented many sides when they wrote an opinion text on the effects of global warming. It is all there in newspapers, online. Any view, opinion, argument, statistic, firsthand account, scientific evidence, or lack of, they want.

‘I am the mere facilitator, the how to write, not what to write.’ She tells him how she stressed the use of present tense and the logical connectors. A strong thesis statement. ‘It’s all in the thesis statement,’ she says. That’s informative for him as well.

‘Yes, ok. Ok.’ He doesn’t disagree.

The young eucalyptus trees outside the open window sweeten the blighted air flowing from his room. The tang of freshness makes her want to shout out, even cry. Somehow the modest lesson on a well-worn, much-discussed and exercised topic has grown large and gross with a ridiculous scandal. She is proud of the students. The arguments are exemplary. She shows the principal copies of their work. ‘Look how that student has researched so many sites. Another here with sophisticated use of linkers.’

The principal hears farcical stories about her. She is promoting a particular agenda. He is letting her know: be vigilant. Even if innocent, she is guilty. She is not able to stop the noxiousness of the stupid tale coming to him. It is not how it should be.

Another teacher, called Don, is pink-skinned and sandy-haired. He is funny and unfettered. He mocks everyone, even the principal. The refugee students are educated without having to read the books.

‘How wonderful this country can be. You can be so free,’ the students say to each other after a lesson with Don.

### **One Friday afternoon, weeks before the principal calls her in**

Don buys her a small beer that she hasn’t asked for at the local pub. He keeps wanting to get her alone. She has tried to avoid him ever since.

### **Some weeks ago after the principal calls her in**

She now suspects Don. He wrinkles his nose at her. They cross paths in the outside concrete corridor of Block G. She blinks and can’t see him clearly. He is like a bubble of foul air, a draught of dust-filled wind. She is sure he hisses something under his breath.

His class was in the same room after one of her opinion text classes. She forgot to wipe the lesson off the whiteboard.

Had he seen it? Had he made an armament of it?

Outrageous, he is occupied in such a simple-minded vendetta.

‘What can one expect?’ her friend, the librarian Cate, says. Don tells Cate library lessons are a waste of time. His classes always avoid the library.

## Today

If she is culpable of anything, it has nothing to do with what she teaches or even how she teaches. Nobody really questions this. She is an innovative and sharp instructor: group work, electronic lessons, student interactivity, etc.

There are times when she shivers at work even on hot days. Then she rushes outside during her free periods. She walks around looking at the bright sun's light dazzlingly reflected off parked cars' side mirrors. However, this can't warm her enough. She is to be completely frozen.

How responsible can she be for the thirty-odd younger lives in a class, up to six lessons per day? Her mere suspicions and imaginings are nothing tangible she can act on.

She is not on the spot. At recess a tall, very thin, unshaven Mal with unwashed floppy hair and grey tracksuit pants attacks a jeering friend with a knife. In the quad near the gates, his deranged outburst changes their lives. Witnesses say it is so sudden nobody has time to do anything.

## Before Mal's outburst

There are never enough occasions, space, or information to know how to assist Mal; his late attendance is no worse than others. The way he talks about guns, maybe, but it is always in jest. His habit of gazing out the window – well, he is young and entitled to a little daydreaming. His silly laugh distracts other students occasionally. Every now and then, he does the work. She gives them the option to write an argument on a topic they like, the week before the incident. He really does try to write a good opinion text for more public transport in his area. He is worried about his single mother. His mother doesn't drive.

She gently orders his points so they make more sense. He is sweating with the effort. She separates him from his distracting friends. She allows him to get a drink of water. He writes about 400 hundred words. It is a skeleton argument. She says how good it is. He seems pleased.

She intends to ask him to write an opinion piece on how he would improve the school if he had the power or a story about a boy going to his form of an ideal school. Though the bell rings. She doesn't catch him in time. He is gone with the rush when she dismisses the class for lunch. She never remembers to ask him again. Until it is too late.

She has thought in some idle trance, observing him come and go, one day something or someone might push him off that bridge. Without enough words or writing yet to cross the bridge, he might be swallowed into the far down, dark places of the ocean's depths not quite able to reach the lifesaver's ring.

### **Today**

‘My mother will be crying,’ he says to her on this awful day when he has to be taken from the school. Nobody speaks of him, the rest of the day.

He is a shadow or a ghost in the classroom. She can still see and hear him wailing inaudibly when she drives home. If only she hadn’t been so distracted.

Tomorrow there will be no debts at the canteen.

*Zoe Karpin’s short stories have been published in journals such as SUDO, Mascara, Kalliope X, Femzine, Going Down Swinging and more. She has been an EALD + LAST teacher for many years and is interested in writing about social inequity*



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**TEXT prose**

**Stefan Jatschka**

***Excavations***

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He forges his way through the busy alleys of the Monastiraki street markets. We try to keep up.

\*\*\*

*A black cat crosses the street, seeking shade under an olive tree. The cat moves laboriously but briskly, not out of fear of getting burnt but to avoid melting its soft paws into the hot ground. I'm a fast-paced walker, but in Athens nobody walks faster than the heat allows them. Today marks 40 degrees Celsius on the thermometer in the lobby of my hotel and the Acropolis is closed to public access. I submit to the heat, slow down, blend in with the other tourists.*

\*\*\*

*My shorts stick to the inside of my thighs. Sweat drips down my slightly sunburnt forehead. My arms glow bright red, like heated metal. I seek shade under the awnings that protrude from the roofs of various restaurants as I walk along the fenced-off area around the Agora until I reach the entrance to the Temple of Hephaistos.*

\*\*\*

*At midday, there's no shade on top of the Acropolis, no clouds in the sky. The sun heats up every stone and crevice of the ancient fortress. The ruins on top of the rock shimmer in the heat and are swallowed by a golden glow that makes it almost impossible to stare at the structure for too long, even from a distance. At this time of day, time moves slower, each second is being peeled off the next, each minute painfully ripped apart from the previous, each passing hour a century away. The moon rises early and my perception of time resumes a normal rhythm. The golden glow of the ruins vanishes in the pink sky, washed away by shadows falling over the pediment and columns, revealing their texture, detail and intricate design. Before the Acropolis disappears in the night, floodlights are turned on to illuminate it from beneath, reminding me that nothing remains as it was, even though it had seemed unchanging for a split moment in time.*

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He stands in front of the Temple of Hephaistos and shows us a reconstruction drawing depicting its inside.

\*\*\*

*My vision is framed by branches of olive trees hanging over the triangular roof of the temple. Cypress trees shoot out of the ground next to them. Elegantly, they look like philosophers walking amongst brittle olive trees, thirsting for knowledge, water, company. A gum tree in the distance sheds its bark.*

\*\*\*

Frank, our tour guide, explains to us that the three small tarps in the Agora mark different excavation sites. He's from the US, pursuing a PhD in archaeology, but during the summer he gives tours around Athens. Frank doesn't like to participate in excavations. Archaeological excavations can only be done during the summer months, he tells us, because the ground is too wet during the rest of the year. He reaches his arm through a gap in the brass fence and points at uneven squares emerging from the ground.

'This is really exciting, folks. We know Socrates was imprisoned in Athens and we know he died in this area after he was forced to drink hemlock. But we now believe that we've found the exact location of his final hours—no, seconds. Right here to be exact, where we're standing right now.'

'Erm... didn't he die in one of the caves over there... uhm... with the metal bars? It says right there, "Socrates' prison cell".' An American tourist in our group has interrupted Frank's passionate speech.

'We only know he was imprisoned in one of these caves, but we're not sure if he actually died in his prison cell. So, if we find evidence of his death at any of these excavation sites, we can apply for a permit to tear down that night club over there. Because we're 98% sure that he died right underneath it. Isn't that wild? We can pin point an exact location of a specific time in the past, here in the present, and reconstruct its citizens and history, as if we'd lived it too.'

The small group of tourists and I gasp in awe, but before we can ask more questions or take any more pictures with our phones, we notice that Frank has started to move up the hill towards Areopagus Hill and we follow immediately. We worry that we'll miss important information if we don't keep up.

I've spent two days in Athens and I can't tell if the archaeology students who are working at the excavation sites have made any significant progress. The ground underneath their tarps looks the same to me: brown and dry with a bit of rubbish and a few rocks sticking out.

'See how the excavations are progressing,' Frank says. 'It's exciting. A small piece of pottery was found here yesterday.'

I can't see any changes. To Frank, though, the city looks different every day. Not only because he gets to share his knowledge about ancient and modern Greece with new groups of tourists, but also because every day he notices small transformations at the excavation sites. They just look like big sandboxes to me.

I trudge along with the rest of the group.

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*The torso of Hadrian is displayed near the entrance of the Temple of Hephaistos. Next to it, another torso. Busts of historically important people rest on thick poles and columns at the museum entrance. Inside, more torsos. Little plaques offer more information: Torsos of gods and goddesses.*

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*A graffiti-covered train to Piraeus cuts through the fenced-off area of the Agora and rushes past the Temple of Hephaistos every ten minutes. The creaking of its braking wheels against the rails indicates that it is slowing down abruptly, like a clumsy child carrying a full glass of water not wanting to spill a single drop. It glides along the rails without incident, but manages to draw nervous looks from everyone around.*

\*\*

We end the tour at Areopagus Hill, with a view of the Acropolis. When Frank exclaims that this is the last anecdote he'll tell us, I become more alert, looking back at the past two hours, retracing our steps around the city all the way up to this hill. There is no memento of the last two hours we've spent exploring the city and listening to our guide's stories, except my sunburnt arms and the chafed skin between my thighs.

Frank describes the basic outline of the Acropolis and tells us where the Temple of Nike is situated and how the Parthenon, a temple dedicated to Athena, has been a symbol of democracy for centuries. But we don't admire these constructions because they're ancient and have shaped this part of the city since history has been recorded, or because they're a record of history in and of themselves. Rather, as Frank points out, the Parthenon is little like it was. 'It was burnt down and rebuilt by the Persians in 480 BC,' he says. 'And in 1687 the Ottomans used it as a gunpowder storage facility which caused an inevitable explosion that destroyed a large part of it.'

'But it's the ruins we admire,' Frank explains, 'the very ruins we're looking at today.'

\*\*

*The roof of the Erechtheion rests on the heads of six sisters, the Caryatids. Well, five sisters – one is displayed in a lonely corner at the British Museum. The remaining five are replicas. The original sisters are being kept safe in the Acropolis Museum in Athens. Scaffolding around the Parthenon makes it seem complete again and prevents the ruins from deteriorating further. An archaeologist, with painstaking care, squats on a stool and cleans marble sculptures with a tool reminiscent of a dentist's drill. A metal elevator on the side of the giant rock transports tourists to the top of the Acropolis. Flat concrete pathways provide safe non-slip surfaces for groups and restrict them to designated areas, prohibiting them from climbing rocks or getting too close to the ancient constructions, almost dictating for them what angles they can take in the ruins.*

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Frank is outraged at the current display of the Acropolis. 'It's the Greek version of Disneyland,' he says, 'a fake fantasyland where ancient history and culture rapidly disappear in the name of conservation and world heritage.' When he talks about the concrete pathways that have covered the top of the rock since 2020, his face turns as red as my skin.

'Folks, I don't know who approved this, but it's the dumbest thing anyone could've done. Not only does it look hideous but it seals off the soil and when it rains, flash flooding occurs and the rock the Acropolis stands on deteriorates very fast. Bring climate change into the mix of bad decisions that keep being made here, and I don't know how much longer we have left before the whole rock gets swept away and becomes an avalanche.'

Would it be so bad if we lost the Acropolis? I think to myself. Not because I don't care for it, I admire it, but because its final decay might be inevitable anyway. What will it look like in five hundred years' time, if there's anything left of it? Why hang onto something that so clearly isn't meant to last forever? If it eventually disappears, what will fill this almost sacred space instead? Before a fire damaged Notre-Dame in 2019, the cathedral was rebuilt more than ten times since its erection in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and during the reconstruction phase five years ago, archaeologists found sarcophagi of high priests they didn't know were there at all. Part of the allure of these ancient buildings is that they are remnants of a different time – they allow us incomplete glimpses into the various stages of the past, but they're not frozen in time or complete. Neither are we when we look back at our own pasts. The Acropolis survived earthquakes, fires, explosions and looting. Modern catastrophes are just another layer to be looked at; they

might reveal something unknown like the fire that damaged Notre-Dame...

My thoughts drift off into an alternate reality. Perhaps, excavating memory fragments through writing differs from digging up archaeological fragments, for memories are meant to rewrite us while we rewrite artefacts...

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*There's a eucalyptus tree peeling, baring it all to the sun. The other trees look dead and are covered in dust – enclosed, keeping to themselves whatever it is they're holding inside them.*

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We tip Frank and he gives us a few dinner recommendations at traditional Greek taverns. We walk back to the city centre. My feet notice the transition from slippery marble to uneven concrete first. It takes my mind a little longer to notice the shift.

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*There is no story I can write about myself on this trip. No beginning, middle and end. Just like the headless, armless and legless statues of Greek gods and goddesses, part of me exists in what I write on the page, part of me exists in the reader's mind. Like the missing sister, there's a gap in each story I craft. A little tension, a hole for me to circle, where fragments scaffold and protect my perception of myself from the slippery conditions of my memory. I write as if I'm whole just to be broken into pieces that I can't put back together the way they were. Once written, I can travel back in time to where these fragments had a different meaning and let them rewrite my memories as I keep excavating more such fragments.*

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Stray cats linger under chairs at restaurants, hoping to catch food scraps or be fed

leftovers. I avoid stepping on cracks in the cement path around the fenced-off Agora. *Perhaps, fragments aren't just reminders of the past, perhaps they're building a foundation to look forward, to anticipate what will happen.* Without Frank and his stories, it's impossible to perceive the Acropolis as it was in the fifth century BC, despite my own attempts of literary scaffolding, replication or reconstruction. Once time has passed, I can only access my past through retracing its layers. *Maybe I won't remember my time in Athens in ten or thirty years. But tomorrow, or even tonight, when I lie in bed and close my eyes and let the day that I wanted to capture so desperately and completely, drift away, I will co-exist with the version I once was and the version I will be. But there is no version of me that exists unchanging between the past and the future.*

I can see why Frank doesn't want to participate in the excavations. The other archaeology students who carefully brush away debris and remove each layer of soil, do so extremely slowly and exhaustingly. *Working against the sweltering heat, almost as if they have to dig through the heat first before they get to the remnants of the past.* The discoveries at one site add to our understanding of ancient history, however, the city, how Frank perceives it and what he's studied about it in history books and how it lives in his mind, changes and it changes him. Wanting to know something about ourselves or our past comes at a price. Or at least, it is hard work and pain.

*When I carve out a version of myself, between the fragments of my memories, everything fuses together for a brief moment before being dispersed again, waiting to be assembled, maybe travelled through again, turned over, by you, by me, another time.*

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**TEXT prose**

**Nigel Krauth**

*At the writers' retreat*

**On the third night there are fifteen**

of them. Thirteen are Connor's students, mostly young women. Connor has arranged for the eminent fiction writer Pierce Moreton to be the retreat's special mentor. Thus fifteen glasses.

As everyone knows, Pierce invented the discontinuous narrative. He is particularly famous for the memoir about the Bellini, and Bellinis follow him wherever he goes. Journalists want to interview him over a Bellini, photographers must frame him with a Bellini in his hand. So, the third night of the retreat is Bellini night – officially on the program – not to say all the other nights aren't some kind of alcohol night.

Connor has given his reading, nervously following two superb student pieces, and is pouring the prosecco gently into the peach of his fifth Bellini. Pierce has abandoned the job of cocktail barman for the moment, claiming a strained wrist. Then, with a last droplet at the lip of the bottle hovering over the glass mouth, it hits Connor: *I should write down the story of my odyssey around the Mediterranean in search of myself.*

Before this moment, Connor hasn't thought of turning those painful three months into a book. Experience has been its own reward. He left home a broken man, and returned with a new outlook on life – a whole new life, in fact. Publication was the least of his intentions; self-preservation had been the plan.

Back then at 51, Connor was giving up smoking, having his marriage bust-up, and coping with his mid-life crisis all at the same time. He cut an odd figure among the tourists in line at the check-in counter: a superannuated backpacker toting a rucksack of dreams. But his dreams – in contrast to those of youthful travellers – were tarnished and hopelessly tattered. He smoked his last cigarette in the airport lounge. As the boarding call sounded, he stubbed his final butt, hoping to grind half a century into the ashtray.

### **They have come for this writers' retreat**

to Stradbroke – an island full of history. Between sessions Connor walks the headlands and beaches with the wind parting his hair, remembering times he'd walked there before. He wanders the holiday house streets, most of them low-season vacant, and he recognises places he and his wife rented way back. The houses have names like 'Beachcoma', 'Sanctuary', and 'Happy Days'. Yes, he and his wife did have some happy days there, fuelled by the carload of alcohol they carried on the vehicular ferry. But the nights were something else: they argued ferociously. He wondered at the time: *What's the point? We could stay home to have these scarring arguments, and save a thousand dollars.*

Early in their relationship he kept a photograph of his wife in his wallet. He would take it out and pass it round in the staff club, or at conference dinners. He was showing himself off as much as her. Young and vibrant, she was a great catch, a marvellous girl. That photograph was lost somewhere. But another image, printed on his brain, had her sitting on the back stairs crying because he'd just confessed a two-night stand while away on a research trip. That was the last time he saw the marvellous girl in her. Their marriage lasted another 20 years. They worked, had kids, and were drunk and sad for that long.

### **The image that propelled Connor**

towards the Mediterranean was in the movie, *The Magus*, based on John Fowles' novel of the same name. In that marvellous film, Nicholas Urfe (Michael Caine) shows his London girlfriend Anne (Anna Karina) around the mysterious Greek island of Phraxos (it was Majorca for the filming location). Local identity-cum-psychologist, Maurice Conchis (Anthony Quinn) is putting Nicholas through a mind-voyage experiment in self-awareness. The relationship between Nicholas and Anne is failing under the influence of the siren Lily (Candice Bergen), but the young lovers enjoy a delightful moment when an island goatherd offers to share his lunch – fresh milk from a goat's bladder and a cheese wrapped in cabbage leaves. The scene takes place among olive trees in a sun-drenched valley. Nicholas and Anne chase each other, swim naked in a reservoir, and fornicate wonderfully in the grass. Connor fell in love with Mediterranean islands the minute he saw this scene. As a young man, he identified with Nicholas, he lusted after Lily, he wanted to make love with Anne – hell, he wanted to take off and be there!

But Connor didn't realise that everything he was looking for was explained in the very first scene of the film, where Nicholas arrives by boat at the island for the first time. A gruff bearded deckhand picks up a rope, ready to cast ashore. He turns to Nicholas and jerks his thumb towards the wharf. 'Phraxos,' he says, naming the island. The Greek sailor is played by the author John Fowles himself. If Connor had known this when he first saw the film and treasured its images, he might have saved himself much fantasising, many wrong roads taken, many wrongly-named destinations. In the film's beginning is also its ending. The directions to a Mediterranean island are directions to the self.

### **'The island – or "is-land" – is land,' Pierce intones**

as he lines up fifteen Bellini glasses and runs the peach nectar along them. 'John Donne got it wrong.'

Pierce is back on the barman's job and Connor thinks maybe he's getting tipsy. The

students stand around the stylish kitchen of the retreat accommodation. They listen intently. Some of them sway with Bellinis in their hands. Others, with Bellinis in their hands, film him with iPhones in their other hands. Pierce takes a prosecco bottle from the fridge.

'Donne was a Christian,' Connor says. 'He wanted us all to be part of God's mainland.'

'He was a non-swimmer,' Pierce asserts. He pops the prosecco cork, without spillage.

'It was Byron got it right. He knew continents and islands were the same thing. He swam between them.'

'What about DH Lawrence?' Connor asks.

Pierce holds the prosecco bottle correctly at its heavy end, with all the weight on his wrist. He begins the slow pouring into the glasses. 'Lawrence *may* have got it wrong,' he says. 'But I can't be certain. His story about islands is about self-obsession and cutting yourself off. I think Lawrence probably meant the opposite of what he wrote.'

Connor notes, from the concentration of their eyelines, that the students follow Pierce's prosecco pouring with rather more interest than his definitions of literary islands. Pierce pours along the line of glasses, going from one to the next without hesitation. The seductive pinkish cocktail rises to a froth along the way following his hand, spilling evocatively between the glasses as the hand moves on.

'I think Durrell and Miller got it right,' Connor says. 'They arrive on an island and immediately take their clothes off.'

The students laugh.

'I agree,' Pierce says, popping another bottle of prosecco. 'For Durrell and Miller the islomaniac is a traveller. Not a settler. Durrell called the Aegean "a lace of islands". All islands join up. The best way to write about islands is with the discontinuous narrative method.'

At this point Pierce has a line of variously-frothing Bellinis which look like some kind of avant-garde xylophone he is playing. He dabs a note of prosecco here, then there, to bring them all to the brim.

'And what about women writers?' Connor proffers dangerously. 'Was Woolf's room of one's own a kind of island?'

'Exactly what it was,' Pierce agrees. 'But joined to other women's islands.' He admires his line of Bellinis. They all bead, ready to be swallowed.

'After Odysseus, I can't help thinking of islands as women,' Connor says.

Pierce looks at him sharply. He lifts the first of his Bellinis and it splashes over the rim of the glass. A puddle quivers on the bench top. The students gawk. Pierce smiles. This is the way he likes it.

'Homer gave the island a woman's seductive voice,' Pierce proclaims. 'He nailed it.'

### **There are fourteen Bellinis lined up**

and glittering. Connor invites the students to take one each, as made by the master. They stretch their arms forward and grab glasses into their hands. Some have to quickly finish the Bellinis they were still drinking. With his free hand, Pierce picks up the last glass and gives it to Connor.

'I've tried to visit as many islands as I could,' Connor says, knowing he's saying too much. 'And that's how I've thought about all of life, really.'

The students watch the two writers, following the dialogue as if a game is being played out before them. They are aware that this Bellini night is part of the workshop program; they are suspicious that it might all be staged.

Pierce raises his glass. 'We've got it right,' he says, with a smile as good as a benediction. 'Let's drink to the secret of writing! To the island!'

Any toast is a way forward. The students raise their glasses. 'To the island!' they all say. And the clinking spills liquid around them.

*Nigel Krauth has retired from university work and most of his editing duties. But he hasn't retired from writing.*