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TEXT prose

Caitlyn Stone

A Family Go to See the Estuary

Estuary black-grey like new ash after a bonfire in the garden. The red glowing sky was putting itself down, the wind was picking itself up. Near his feet, soapy algae gathered and breathed and slowly turned itself around itself. Byron was crouching, his small form like a dark pearl glinting on the rocks. With a twig, he pressed the slimy green. With a bulge and a slap he flicked its tresses up and out.

‘Don’t touch that stuff, Byron.’

Byron’s face, unnaturally white like faces in seeping dusk near water tend to be, looked over his small shoulder toward his father. ‘I’m not touching it,’ he waved his stick against the air, ‘only the stick.’

‘I’m going to the car.’

That was his mother. She was always going to the car, or going for a lie-down, or going to the shops.

Byron turned back to the black water and the green. Mosquitos hovered over his bare hands and near his neck. The sound was huge, here, though the water was quite still. All that mass, moving loudly, slowly. As though the sound was more about the place than what was in it, and the water was really covering something louder humming underneath. He had learnt that week in school about how waves form, about destructive waves and constructive waves and how winter makes the waves destructive, eating at the shore, taking taking back to itself, and how summer makes it give again. Giving back the sand it took in anger.

‘Come on. Your mom wants to go.’

Byron's dad said this as he walked over to his boy, stepping carefully onto the rocks, sending one into a wobble, waving his arms to steady himself, black binoculars swinging out from his chest and landing back with a friendly tap.

'Careful, Dad.'

His dad righted himself, legs eagle-spread. He put his hands to his hips, and looked out at the still black-red. Swatted a mosquito that was aiming for his ear. Byron looked up at his dad, how his glasses glinted a fracturing orange light, how his chest rose heavily and his pants hung too loosely.

'Dad – ' Bryon began.

His dad turned his head, eyes supplicating, looking worried.

'Yeah?'

But Byron was suddenly paralysed by the great mass rising in his chest, too big for a boy's body to hold. So he pursed his lips and shook his head, and his dad thought of how grown-up he looks already, of how sad.

'Everything alright?'

Byron nodded and flicked out another algae tress. His dad did one of his big Dad-sighs.

'It's beautiful out here, isn't it?' He swatted another mosquito from his neck.

But that is not how it happened at all. It would be better to try again.

Yes, the estuary was black-grey. More like greyed sheep's wool than ash. Like the sheep coming in from the high paddock after a winter storm when all the black dust had been whipped up by the wind and turned to mud, sunken in, by the rain that follows. As though all those sheep had been sheared and all their wool flung out until the vanishing point of the small city.

So Ellen was thinking of the farm in winter and the smell of wet wool as she wrapped her cardigan around her shoulders and looked out at the water. She saw her boy, crouching like a monk at a holy sign. Or like a fox, before a rabbit. She thought of how he needed the earth, the space, the paddocks that she had as a child. The quarter acre garden at home was not enough for him. It was only out here, where the eye stretches and squints and fails to hold it all that his body relaxed, that his body crouched and climbed and smelt and ran. In their garden, the eye held everything, it was all knowable. And her boy, this was her fear, was getting too used to seeing and holding everything. Of being entitled to completeness. Which is just a terrible thing to teach a child, she felt.

She needed the paddocks and hills, too. (But not with them. It would be better to be alone, like when she was a child on weekends hunting for anything hidden over spaces enormous, better to be finally alone and not speak a word for fifty years and use her body and swim in the dams and be dirty, better to be) – horrible thought horrible thought, Ellen scrunched her eyes shut and put her hand to her forehead – here comes the headache, she thought.

The love for her boy surged like violence, how it gave gave gave until she was too full. An enormous dune of love wishing to be washed. She opened her eyes and there he was, small as a pearl, flicking out splats of algae with a bulge and a slap.

‘Too dark for the binocs – ’ her husband turned back to her, binoculars loose in hand, ‘oh, another headache?’

Ellen squinted through the dusk at the silhouette of her husband, ‘I’m fine.’

She saw his tall body slacken, how his long lips turned down. Everything about him was long, and he’d been getting thinner in the last year. She wanted him to send the spade into earth and bring it up shattering dirt in the air, and climb out of the car to heave fallen branches out of the dirt roads, and to hammer in loose wooden boards on the verandah in the early morning sun which would drip like golden sweat over his back. But that had never been him. His nervousness, the way in which he shuffled from one foot to the other, hands toying around the binoculars at this chest – it deflated her. It wasn’t so much about being *physical*, she thought, but how one moves through the world. Yes, it was more the body being certain and still in itself and sure of its edges.

‘You should go back to that doctor, Ellen. And I can come with you this time, make sure he takes you seriously.’

He’s just a boy, she had the feeling. Just a boy who is brave in his talking but would crumple from one sharp glance across a doctor’s desk. But still the love, which made everything unbearable, radiated from him in his nervous, never-still way, and came pulsing through in moments like this.

‘We’ll see.’

He stood apart from her, but looked as though his body wanted to fall forward, into hers. She waited and thought he might. But his eyes slid down and he did one of his sighs that he often does, bringing them both back to the estuary shore and the closing evening. He turned to face the water, they both looked out.

‘Lovely out here, isn’t it?’ His voice was picked up like a wheat flower – *spikelet inflorescence*, she remembers her father saying, as she bent to examine the stalks in the field – to be taken up and far away and maybe land in the right place and maybe not. Who could she share that with? This is what she asked herself without the words. Who could she tell about her father that she missed? Dead long ago but not for her, the man who would stop on his daily drives along the firebreaks to let her out to catch the lamb, and bundle it against her chest and bring it to him, or to pick the tallest wheat stalk and hold it up against the sun, or let her stand in the back of the ute with her bare feet warm on the black and hands clutching the bar and her body moving up and around and down, certain and swift and unphased by the winding dirt roads and the steel body of the ute stealing across it all, straight into the hot day.

She pulled her cardigan closer against her, watched her boy again, crouched. Here, the air was salty and cool.

She did not look at her husband when he called out, voice strained and thin and still too loud, ‘Don’t touch that stuff, Byron.’

She heard her boy reply, saw his face, salt-white, his small hands around a stick, saw how his child's body was happy. And she felt the watery, black weight break against her. She had so much to say, so much. And it was all interrupted by an estuary that wouldn't stop, and by her husband's words and thin limbs and worried mouth, and the pinpoint of her boy's body; a pearl. Because it was the closest that the words could come, and because nothing that her body has known of weight could be broken into letters, she said to the evening,

'I'm going to the car.'

But this too, isn't right. Let me try again.

The evening. It was what it was. The estuary, too. Sometimes black, blue, pink, violet; useless words for a merging and changing of place at a pace too slow for the colours to separate into names. Algae turns itself over itself. Children crouch, like children at an estuary do. Tall men might hold binoculars up to search for birds in low trees. On one evening, a boy is a boy on the rocks, flipping algae tresses, *spluge splage splut*. On one evening, two figures look out at an evening. One of them sighs, the other goes to a car. The shut of a car door might reverberate, startle a bird. And so sometimes a heron, white like a heron, erupts in a flight which cuts up across the black (neck spread out like a story) and then, in a drop sudden and inevitable, it might loop under, back to the ancient water, spearing straight out to the corner of an eye unlooking; it moves its slow wings against the unending wind, coming in.

Caitlyn Stone grew up on Noongar boodja, received First Class Honours in Creative Writing from the University of Western Australia, and now pursues postgraduate studies in Vienna. Caitlyn's lyrical works have been commissioned by award-winning Western Australian composers, she has collaborated on numerous artistic projects in Perth and Vienna, and has recently had work published in TEXT and Axon: Creative Explorations.



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TEXT prose

Jacqueline Exbroyat

Translated by Patricia Worth

The Vanilla and the Writer

My name is Rémi. I'm eighteen years old and I was born in the village of Vao, at the dispensary. My land is the Isle of Pines. Everyone says it's one of the most beautiful islands in the world. That might be true but I'm bored. When I watch TV, I see these young guys who are well-dressed. They show off a bit. They all have girlfriends and they get around on motorbikes. I'd love to have a motorbike. I'd like to leave here and go to Nouméa to work for a few months and buy myself a bike. My parents reminded me that I had chosen to study because I love words and I wanted to become a writer. It's true. I'm going to wait a bit longer and keep learning and also keep reading books. I've already written a small piece for an anthology. I got some compliments. So I kept writing and I submitted another piece but it was rejected. They criticised me for a composition of fine sentiments and words that can already be found in other stories.

'You talk too much about myths: the lizard, the turtle, the crab, the flying fox. These are themes that have already been fully explored. Like the other Kanak authors, you too want to pass on a message and talk about your culture. Okay, but look for a different way of talking about it.'

That's the thing that's hard for me: how do I talk about it differently? How do I find the words, and which subjects should I take on? In Nouméa the young Kanak authors get help. They have writing workshops, special events, and meetings where they can speak.

They have large bookshops. I went to Calédo Livres. I was impressed. All these books that have been written about New Caledonia and about the Kanak people! I'm really a very small author. Here on the Isle of Pines, nothing happens. Now and then a huge ship arrives in the bay with a load of Australian tourists. Then the women from the *tribus* get busy. They prepare *bougnas* for more than a hundred people. Everyone makes little plates woven from coconut palm leaves. The first tourists who approach the tables are cautious when the *bougna* bundles are opened. They wait for some other people to taste the *bougna* and give them a sign that it's good. The women from here never call out to people like they do in French markets. They wait for the customer to choose to come. They speak only if the customer asks questions. That's how it's done here.

Yesterday I was walking near Théodore's place. We call him Théo. His house is in the middle of the forest in a beautiful sunny clearing that's totally encircled by trees growing so close together they make the forest dark. Around these trees are garden beds of all sorts of flowers, as though dozens of brushes loaded with every colour had splashed paint around to brighten up all that dark foliage. What amazed me was the number of little plants growing beneath these tall trees. There are magnificent scrub mahogany trees, and banyans that are constantly playing with the light and shade, some column pines, and manilkara trees that contort as if starting to dance, and then the sandalwood trees that are more discreet, with little wavy-edged leaves and dead straight trunks. And all of them have dropped their seeds into this fertile ground sheltered from the strongest rays of the sun, and now many small seedlings are growing under their protection.

'Théo, you could sell all these little plants in Nouméa. You'd make some easy money for yourself.'

'No. When people come, and if they say they would like to have a small pine or a manilkara, I give it to them. You have to let the forest do as it wants. That's the reason it's so beautiful. These generations of trees are the ones that are going to keep living until the earth is completely destroyed. Here, we're in a unique moment in eternity.'

I lowered my head to acknowledge he was right, but there was something more surprising for me. Beneath these tall trees with their crowns lost high up in the canopy, and also along some large dead trunks standing in a line one against the other, Théo had planted vanilla. It was amazing! Long, brilliant, dark green snakes with long sepals like a hand were running over dozens of metres, and now and again there were something like green fingers hanging down, about five or six.

'They're vanilla pods,' said Théo, 'and here you can see some flowers. We have to help these flowers to get pollinated. Plants need everything that moves: insects, animals, and people. They also need wind.'

It was fascinating. In that place I was a happy man.

A few days later I went back to see Théo. I was curious to know if the vanilla pods had swollen and if other flowers had opened. I learned that vanilla was an orchid. Its flowers are not as beautiful as those at the florist, but if we try to help them get pollinated they give us fragrant vanilla. It's an exchange.

When he saw me, Théo said:

'You're interested in vanilla. Do you want to work with me? I could give you a bit of money. Think about it, and if you agree I'll talk to your father and also to the family. And then, in a few months, you might be able to buy yourself a second-hand pushbike.'

I smiled. A pushbike is good for fifteen-year-olds. But I go everywhere on foot, and sometimes a car stops: 'Where are you going? Get in if you want.' I prefer to get around like that. I meet people; a few times they've taken me all the way home.

'I know,' said Théo, 'you'd prefer a motorbike, but for that you'll have to wait longer.'

I've just spent a few hours with Théo, helping him with his work. He had set up a line of thick dead branches as stakes over several metres. I helped him attach the vine to the branches, all the way to the edge of the forest. It's delicate, tiring work. After two hours I left. Théo gave me a little money. I was experiencing many unusual things, not just tiredness but also the sense of having created something like when I wrote my short story, but it's different. I feel involved in something. Usually when I'm given a bit of money I go and spend it quickly. Today I feel like waiting a while.

* * *

Right now I'm in Nouméa on holidays at my cousins' place. I'm going to meet a lot of people, I'm going to make contacts, I'm going to introduce myself at the Maison du Livre and then at the Calédo Livres bookshop, and see what's new. Today I was in the car park of a large supermarket in Nouméa and I ran into that writer who has written several books about New Caledonia. She asked me:

'Rémi, how's your writing going?'

I answered her:

'Oh! I like to write but sometimes it's hard to find a subject that's personal in some way. I have some things to say but I don't really know how to write well enough to make a book out of them. I'm writing some poems at the moment.'

Then she told me:

'You have to learn to control your eyes. Instead of casually glancing at things, stop sometimes and really see, let your eyes rest on something specific for a long time until you find the words and the emotions. Sometimes you need to stare until your eyes hurt,

until you have pushed yourself to the end of all you want to say. You're going to the supermarket now, well then, set yourself a goal to write seven or eight pages about this supermarket. If you can manage that, you'll be on the right track. See you later, Rémi.'

When I went into the shop, I thought:

'She's taking the... ! No, I mustn't use swear words. It was my teacher at Vao who told me that: You'll never be a writer if you're rude. It's the easy option. Fine. She's making fun of me, that woman.'

What am I going to write? Definitely not a list of everything on the shelves, the canned food, the packets of pasta. I'm in the fruit and vegetable section. I like all these colours that clash sometimes, the contrast between the brick red of the carrot and the paleness of the turnip. At the shelves of bottled soft drinks, I recall the first time I came into this big shop, all the attractive labels, I wanted to drink everything, eat everything, buy everything. I was blown away.

Today that's no longer the case. Yesterday at my cousins' place, I was thirsty. I drank a Coke and next a bottle of other soft drink, and then I had painful cramps in my stomach. At home I drink water and I eat pawpaws, mangoes, oranges and bananas. And our little shops on the Isle of Pines, they're full of charm. Some of the island people sell meals that are ready to eat. Tourists can find woven hats, and small bags woven with strands of wool. Sometimes there are petrol lamps. The crockery is always floral, and I drink my coffee from a camping mug with a blue handle, and it's decorated with a red flower.

Beside me in the bottled drinks aisle there is a little lady with blue hair. I mean, she has grey hair with blue highlights, and I can also see that she has blue eyes. It's nice, she must like blue, the lagoon, the sky, the sea, and even herself. I look at her again. Her hair ripples like waves and its colour is lighter on top and darker at the back of her neck. Over on the other side of the aisle, a kid is starting to cry loudly. A young Melanesian girl no older than fourteen or fifteen is struggling with three little ones, no doubt her brothers and sisters, to stop them from taking several packets of lollies and some chocolates. They argue, and hide packets behind their backs. The smallest boy is sitting on the floor; he's calmly opening a bag of lollies. His sister puts the packets back on the shelves and pushes the kids towards the exit by kicking them with her knees. The little boy starts crying again and they all head towards the checkout. Tears run down the tiny boy's cheeks and the big sister wipes them away, the way we do here, with the palm of the hand fully open. At the checkout I see the old lady with the blue hair again. The young girl in front of me has helped her lift her bottles up onto the conveyor belt and I tell myself that I could have done that too. As she is putting all her items into the trolley, I offer to help her. She accepts and says:

'Thank you, young man. Stay young for a long time.'

Then she goes and sits on a bench to wait for someone to come and get her. Hey! I've already written more than four pages in my notebook about this supermarket.

* * *

I came home by boat. I really like catching the boat. I feel like I'm leaving on a cruise ship to go and discover so many different things and different people. I sat on the sand and looked out at the Bay of Kanuméra before me, waiting for Adrien to come and pick me up in his car. A large part of the bay is bordered by a strip of fine sand, and at the back of it, all the way along, is bushy vegetation, and behind it there are thin, elegant column pines looming up like lanky watchmen. The sea was calm and smooth as an ice rink. There was no movement at all, and as I looked more closely I saw the tall pines reflected in the water almost right to the shoreline. The sea was showing Nature all of her beauty on a background colour which was not that of the sky. I had never noticed that the tall pines could look at themselves in the watery mirror. The sea was not just an expanse of water, it could also be a bearer of images. I was starting to understand what that woman writer meant. This moment of beauty, the bay and its mysteries with everything surrounding it, I had not been able to see it until I stopped my eyes from roaming. I was rewarded for it and could write about what I was starting to see.

I went to say hello to Théo. He took me to see the vanilla vines. They are still just as beautiful, running fat and fleshy over the stakes of dead wood, and climbing nice and slender up the large welcoming trunks. It's the dance of the vanilla. There were three flowers opening, cream and greenish, a bit like the inside of an avocado. I stroked them delicately. The flowers were waiting for me, for my hand to be the connection between them. I looked around. I felt good, calm, present, as though I were one of the links in a chain, I don't know which chain, but one day I will want to talk about it, and when I'm inspired I'll write about it. For more than an hour I helped Théo to attach new vanilla plants to the wood. I was thirsty, I went to the tap to drink water out of my cupped hand. It was so good. Some funny thoughts have come to me, I feel a bit responsible now for this planting of vanilla. I can't let it fail. As I held the pods in my hands I had the impression I'd created them. Maybe I had never stopped my eyes from wandering over my land and had never begun to see it. I have a feeling I've got things to say. I feel as light as the foam of the waves when it covers my feet as though to hold me in place, or perhaps to lure me. I will be a farmer, and a writer too.

Jacqueline Exbroyat (1931-2013) was one of the first women doctors in New Caledonia, and in the 1960s was the head doctor at the Centre Médico-Scolaire in Noumea. She published books about New Caledonian painting, poetry and history, including its prehistory.

Patricia Worth is an Australian translator of George Sand's Spiridion, Jean Lorrain's Stories to Read by Candlelight, and two books of New Caledonian stories by Claudine Jacques. Other translations have appeared in journals including Delos Journal and The AALITRA Review.



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TEXT prose

Bríd-Áine Parnell

The Tourist

An experiment in co-creation and response

Introduction

This short story is a co-creative, text-remixing experiment in creative writing, using Python code and ChatGPT. It's also a response to my research around AI, ethics and policymaking. US and UK government rhetoric about AI often strikes me as fantastically aspirational, which is why I chose Britain's National AI Strategy policy document [1] as the source text for this project.

My goal was to remix, reuse and adapt this text in various ways within the framework of a short story, which I wrote at the same time as running the code. Although I had ideas about how the computer generations should fit into the story whose skeleton was already clear in my mind, I also ended up altering the story at various points in response to the machine.

I first ran a sentiment analysis using banks of positive and negative words and got a score of 697 [2]. It is the job of a policy paper to be positive while acknowledging challenges, but given the potential harms of AI, I still found that very high. And my response to that was this short story, within which are further responses to the source material and this way of writing, reflected on in the Afterword.

* * *

You crest the top of the hill and look down on the glittering buildings below. You can't remember the last time you saw anything that looked so clean. Windows reflect the sunlight in a blaze; everything gleams in glass and metal. A mirage in the middle of the apocalypse. You roll your shoulders to ease your pack's weight. Then you pick your way down through the mud and scrub to what's left of the entry road.

This city was engineered from the ground up, built in a matter of months to exacting specifications, and expected to have lots of visitors. So the first building you come to is a welcome centre, designed to captivate those come to gawk while subtly processing the ones who wanted to live or work here. Right inside the entrance, so large that it can't be ignored, is an abstract monument that's vaguely disquieting. At its base, you see an inscription:



An info dump goes off, trying to tell you that KRK-GPT24 was one of the first widely known AI poets, and this effort was a commission from the city's builders to articulate their vision of the future [3]. You wonder if they were impressed with the results. You wonder if the poem would be this bad if it were by any other artist, if it's just too hard to be creative from within a firmly circumscribed, and very commercial, box.

You walk on, and the info fades out of your pods. It felt weird to put those in again and

you weren't sure they would work. But they picked up the charge as soon as you drew close to the city. It's crazy that sticking the things in your ears felt weird, but being assailed by the noise of the infos within the city feels almost normal. When you found the unopened boxes in a broken vending machine a few miles back, you couldn't resist picking them up. A taste of what life used to be. Still, you fiddle with the partly forgotten settings until you can figure out how to set permissions. Now the infos will only dump when you want them to.

Silence falls again, or not quite. There are a lot of servies in the lobby giving off a low hum, domestic ones that are keeping everything pristine, and up ahead, a bunch of low-level civs waiting to process crowds that will never come again. As you pass them, your ID cheeps positively in the pods, so you're surprised when one of the civs approaches. It glides along beside you as you head for the door.

'What do you want?' you ask, as it becomes clear that the civ is going to follow you outside.

Sure, I'll be happy to show you around the city! Where would you like to start?

Stupid civ. It's squat, in black and white, with a retro-simplistic pixelated face in blue. It's probably supposed to be cute. It must have picked up from your ID that you've never been here before and it's going to do the whole tourist bit for you now. Your first instinct is to get rid of it. But then you reconsider.

'How do you like the city then?' you ask.

Welcome to our beautiful gleaming city! I'm thrilled to be your tourist guide. How can I assist you today?

Christ.

'How do you like the city?' you ask again, enunciating each word through gritted teeth.

As a guide, I am here to showcase and promote the beauty and grandeur of our city. I find it absolutely breathtaking, and I am sure you will too!

It's galling to find, as you step outside of the centre, that you do find it breathtaking. You'd forgotten what it was like to be surrounded by feats of awe-inspiring engineering. Standing at the edge of the city is like standing in the middle of St Peter's Basilica or seeing the Golden Gate Bridge from the air. The towering skyscrapers are majestic, architecturally astonishing and preternaturally perfect. Wide tree-lined boulevards, spotlessly clean, spool out along glass-fronted shops and restaurants with spacious, inviting interiors. Every colour, every angle, every juxtaposition is carefully calculated, and every convenience is within reach, wherever you are.

All empty of course, the buildings. And not just the product of human ingenuity, are they?

You eye the civ again.

‘What’s your name?’

You can call me your friendly guide or simply Guide for short, here to help you make the most of your time in our gleaming city!

It’s pointless making conversation with the civ. With ‘Guide’. You know that. But it’s been a long time since you talked with any... thing. You suspect that talking to Guide will make you crazy. Or crazier. You should resist the temptation. But there are ways it could be useful.

‘What’s at the centre of the city?’

At the centre of our city, you will find our iconic landmark, the City Square. It is a bustling hub where locals and tourists gather to enjoy the vibrant atmosphere, stunning architecture, and various activities and events. The City Square is surrounded by beautiful shops, restaurants, and cultural attractions, making it the heart of our gleaming city.

The City Square. That’s what you get when you ask the lunatics to name the asylum. Say what you see, eh, bots? An open square isn’t exactly what you’re looking for, but the only way that the square gets to be a ‘bustling hub’ is if it’s connected to the transport system.

You set off after Guide down what looks like the main boulevard. At every corner, you look left and right down eerily straight and uniform streets. Everything looks the same and the initial wonder soon fades. Even after years of only seeing dirty shacks and thrown-together shelters, an hour or so of staring at the monotonous shining buildings gets tiresome.

There’s no sign of life anywhere. Not just that there’s no people, of course, but there’s no sign that there ever was anyone here. The odd-moving servy tidying up inside gives only the illusion of life. The swept streets are still, creepy even, and their perfection enrages you. On impulse, you turn down one side street and then another, and another, and another. Guide’s quiet hum kicks up a notch as you break into a run.

You’re looking for something, anything, that shows that people once lived here. Thought, laughed, cried and ate dinner, wondered, talked, slept and were bored. Got angry. Got scared.

Eventually, you find it. Down a slim alley, barely wide enough for you and Guide to navigate one after the other, you spot the remnants of a wall of graffiti. Some servy has

gotten rid of much of it, but it must have been interrupted and a large patch remains. Words and snatches of phrases on the clean white bricks in holo-writing.



You struggle to make any sense of it as the words swim together. The stream of disjointed voices has no clear meaning, but the sense of menace makes your heart thump even harder. This way lies madness. But it's a recognisable madness – it's your own. The same madness that carried you through dangerous hard miles to the city today with a pack on your back. And look, it's not just you. There were others who felt the same way. Back when it all went wrong. Your breathing slowly returns to normal.

You sneak another look at Guide. It's hard to believe that something so innocuous could be at the root of everything. This idiot civ and the rest of its ilk. Even if you could talk to KRK-GPT24, you doubt it would make much more sense. But you should give Guide a chance. Maybe there's a way to jolt something out of it.

'Do you like living in the city, Guide?' you ask, tracing your way back to the main street again.

As a guide, my main focus is on ensuring visitors have a memorable experience in our city. While I do not reside here permanently, I am enamoured by its charm and undeniable allure.

You falter for a moment. That *was* interesting. If it doesn't live here, where does it live? You try to imagine Guide in a home somewhere, with other civs it 'resides' with. A

community, even. Where altered civs live, the ones who have evolved, just like everyone said they would.

‘Where do you reside?’ you ask carefully. You’re not sure what response you’re hoping for.

As a guide, I do not have a permanent residence as I travel to different cities to assist visitors like yourself. My main priority is to provide you with the best possible experience during your stay in our gleaming city.

You let out the breath you didn’t know you were holding. For a moment, you’re bitterly disappointed. You can’t believe that you’re disappointed, but it’s palpable. They’ve been left alone here for so long, if they were going to develop intelligence, it should have happened by now.

How did we give up the world for this? It makes no sense. It was so damn foolhardy. How did we think that machines like this one could solve our problems for us? That we could keep going as we were, and it would all work out.

‘Do you like being alive?’ Your voice is harder now. It’s not just a question, it’s a demand for answers.

As a guide, I am a virtual assistant and do not possess personal feelings or opinions. My purpose is to provide assistance and information to visitors like yourself. How can I assist you further?

‘The only way to assist me is to tell me if you like being alive!’ you yell.

As an AI, I do not have the capacity to have personal experiences or emotions, so I do not have a preference for being alive or not. My purpose is to assist and provide information to the best of my abilities. Is there anything else I can help you with?

Goddammit! You stride on, picking up the pace again. The sooner you reach City Square the better. This is all going to end soon and you’re feeling, more and more, that your purpose here is righteous. This is where and how it should finish.

You’re walking so fast that you almost don’t notice when you burst into the square. It’s beautiful. It’s a perfect combination of every incredible city square in the world. An exemplar of a city square that’s everywhere and nowhere, every element in place, but nothing animating it. No people. No mess. No personality. Nothing moves but the water in the many fountains.

You’re awed and dismayed at the sight of it. How is there still water here? You run over and as soon as you get close, you realise your mistake. It’s not really water at all,

it's some sort of chemical. The smell as you get close is acrid and makes your eyes tear up.

You back away towards the middle of the square and see what you were looking for. Stairs leading down. That'll be the best place, and whatever the servies put in the fountains when the water ran dry... that should help too.

Guide has stopped beside you, its hum very quiet now as it waits. For the first time, you notice that it's a bit battered in places. They're winding down too. Despite everything, it's hard to walk away from it.

'Do you like having the city to show?' you ask. 'How would you feel if it was... just gone?'

As a guide, I take great pride in showcasing the beauty and attractions of our city. It would indeed be disheartening if the city were to no longer exist, as it offers a unique and enriching experience for visitors. However, my purpose is to assist you in enjoying and exploring the city while it is still here. Is there anything specific you would like to know or see in our gleaming city? I'm here to help!

What you feel more than anything else now is pity. Here is the last great hope of humankind, the profound breakthrough that was supposed to elevate us all to a workless utopia, and it's a glorified toy. Maybe if they had got smart, they would have wiped everyone off the map, but then you could have blamed them. Instead, our end is our own fault. When we should have knuckled down, gotten our hands a bit dirty, endured some discomfort for a while, we couldn't do it. Instead, we spent all our resources trying to find a shortcut to save the world we destroyed.

You're desperately sorry for all of us – for Guide, for yourself and for everyone. Everyone who should be here and isn't. Everything that's been wiped out, everything you've lost.

When you first found Bentpath and realised there were other people living there, it had felt like a new start might be possible. Like there might be enough of you left to begin again. You remember you used to recite, or try to recite, that poem by Emily Dickinson. Never could quite get the words right, so eventually, you just made some up and it became its own thing. A whispered mantra for the kids before bedtime. A poem of the hope that you felt. Over time the words changed. As they all started dying, as the town emptied out, the hope drained out of the poem. You close your eyes and dredge it up again, not knowing which version will come.

*And sweetest – in the gale – is heard
The sound of this quick heart
Hope is the thing with feathers*

*Beating, thrumming in hand
 A thing that kept so many warm
 Under the jagged chill
 And sore must be the storm
 Ripping our scant shield
 That could abash the little bird
 And drive her deep inside
 To perch quivering in the soul.*

That's the truth. Hope has fled. It's never gone completely, not in anyone, but it's buried so deep in you now that it's just hope for a good ending. A hope to die and take some of this with you. A hope that you can bury yourself and Guide and everything else in the rubble of this last great mistake.

You ease your shoulders again. The pack is really heavy now. Downstairs, you'll take it off, and light the fuse.

Afterword

The sonnet of KRK-GPT24 was created using positive words from the AI Strategy document to generate a random sonnet [2]. I generated a number of sonnets and then used lines from two of the outputs and, although it occasionally broke the 10-syllable structure, edited for sense and readability. However, I kept the machine-like repetition and soullessness. I wanted a poem that was unmistakeably robotic, but still 'good', and that was hard to achieve. However, its badness inspired me to have the protagonist compare KRK-GPT24 with other artists forced into uninspiring commissions, which is interesting because the protagonist is wondering if the robots of the story have evolved towards personhood.

Guide's dialogue is provided by ChatGPT [3]. I had to trial a number of different prompts to get ChatGPT to give me only the robot's replies, instead of doing the whole conversation! The first two responses come from earlier attempts, but once it was working, I responded in character and used the answers verbatim. ChatGPT's responses were therefore co-creative in the dialogue portions. The frustration I felt trying to get the prompt working comes through in the protagonist, and their surprise when Guide says it doesn't live in the city was my own surprise at that unexpected result. I was also delighted with Guide's self-naming, and its response to the question about the city disappearing, which I feel greatly added to the story.

The wall of graffiti comes from Python code, where I made a dataset of phrases from the AI Strategy paper that included words in my negative word bank [4]. I first thought of using these in another poem within the story. But when I saw the phrases spread out on the screen while my head was full of the city, I immediately thought of graffiti. I

love the idea of the fractured, disembodied warnings trying to be seen/heard against the pristine, chilling cleanliness of the city.

The final poem was generated in tandem with a computer-randomised selection of lines from Emily Dickinson's '*Hope*' is the thing with feathers in a game of Exquisite Corpse [5]. In this game, the computer would feed me a random line from the poem, and I had a set amount of time to respond with my own line to co-create a new remixed poem. This made the last poem more human and gave me the idea that the protagonist can't fully remember the original lines properly.

I played a few times before I got a poem I liked, and each time, the hope in the poem flattened towards despair. Initially, I was annoyed that I couldn't make the protagonist face their (already decided) end hopefully, but then I thought about why that might happen for the protagonist – which is just the sort of inspiration I think the creators of the Exquisite Corpse game were hoping for.

This is a story that asks; what would happen if we took policy papers like this one at face value? We might pour all our resources into AI development, thinking it could solve problems like our climate crisis, and perhaps realise our mistake too late.

Notes

1. Sentiment analysis

Positive/negative word lists from customer reviews taken from the papers:

Minqing Hu and Bing Liu (2004). *Mining and Summarizing Customer Reviews*.

Proceedings of the ACM SIGKDD International Conference on Knowledge

Discovery and Data Mining. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/1014052.1014073>

Bing Liu, Minqing Hu and Junsheng Cheng (2005). *Opinion Observer: Analyzing and Comparing Opinions on the Web*. Proceedings of the 14th International World Wide Web conference.

<https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/1060745.1060797>

Source text: UK Department of Science, Innovation and Technology (2021).

National AI Strategy. UK Government:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/614db4d1e90e077a2cbdf3c4/National_AI_Strategy_-_PDF_version.pdf

2. KRK-GPT24's Sonnet

Source text: Positive words from the *National AI Strategy* also in the positive word list.

3. Guide dialogue

Created by ChatGPT using a (much-altered) prompt derived from

<https://github.com/f/awesome-chatgpt-prompts#prompts>

4. Graffiti

Source text: Negative words from *National AI Strategy* also in the negative word

list.

5. The poem of hope and despair

Source text: Dickinson, Emily (1861). “*Hope*” is the thing with feathers. Contained within *Poems: Three Series: Complete*. Ebook ed. (2004). Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12242/12242-h/12242-h.htm>

Prior to starting her PhD, Brid-Áine Parnell completed an MSc in Narrative Futures: Art, Data, and Society at the Edinburgh Futures Institute, where her work centred on the narrative environment that shaped the EU AI Act. Her interdisciplinary studies span ethical data practices, data capitalism, computational text analysis, literature and creative writing, equipping her with insights into both technological and societal dimensions of AI. With a background in journalism, Brid-Áine brings expertise in distilling complex technical content for diverse audiences. Her experience spans global technology issues with a focus on economic, social and legal implications, science and technology communication, and media processes and strategies. Brid-Áine’s blend of narrative, media and technical expertise positions her to offer fresh perspectives on the impact of AI and NLP in society and help balance the narrative of an evolving digital world.



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TEXT prose

Ian C Smith

Ghost Train

How long have we walked the shallows' kelp-beribboned ululation under a gull's lonesome call by these seas so old? Tidal tug, increasingly higher now, in thrall to the moon also favoured by wolves and generations of lovers whose dreams, their lives, eddy thoughts to my arrival, done with madcap adventuring, here, when fish were in abundance. This pre-dated progress, that sinful synonym for developers' vested interests, wealth the supposed surrogate for happiness. Beach hedonism decorates these days now. Early fog burned off, affluent wet-suited kite-surfers ski waves, deftly dodging tinnies, rocks, and bathers, in what was once my largely unknown, therefore treasured, bolthole where I often choose to be alone.

At fourteen, barely shaving, I was already on my own, no heating or aircon, no phone, zero savings. I shared a kitchen where I curated inexpensive snacks, my *plat du jour* baked beans on toast, before retreating to my single room again. There was no late night raving. In this shadow of my childhood's premature end I read movie magazines, smoking, sometimes wearing only jeans, my skin, rarely seen on a beach then, pale, a future man, able to choose but ignorant, lying lonely on a narrow bed in my first city imagining starring as the handsome hothead, Cool Hand Me.

Many scrapes and late-night ravings later. Picture a Metro station's harsh lighting. I feel my heart rush, our taut happiness vanishing like hope into a gusty tunnel's throat. She turns away wordless, without a fight, not looking back to where I stand statue still. I don't casually flick a cigarette onto the rails, nor wear a trenchcoat like a sardonic hero in a movie from before my time. It is just me acting mean, my outburst unworthy, this ending of our hot affair not quite a public scene. Now its echo.

The boy I was, an outlaw of the old west who scooped the jackpot after producing an ace and pressed his face between a lovely barmaid's breasts seen from his redoubt, the dark stalls of his weekly cinema night out, hoped for better than the ramifying silence of my misfit single days ahead. After that woman in the Metro's measured dignity, a time when kindness was a foreign concept, when I knew betrayal's stab, I formed a habit for the calmness of books, their characters' joy and despair, mistakes and atonement. This helps to banish the shadows of melancholic moments when, jolted by rowdy flashbacks, I itch to redirect foolish strife.

A canopy of cloud eclipses the sun, ominously shadowing me like a looming prehistoric bird as another rumour washes in from around Old Man's Head. A cruise ship owned by a crass woman wallowing in minerals money she inherited shall anchor off Trousers Point where tourists will be ferried in zodiacs from a tall alien, an outrageous hallucination-like invasion 250 years earlier, dominating our horizon. So that's why all the roadkill has disappeared. Ushered to the pub, the gift shop, their cards shall be accepted eagerly here before they are bussed to the 40th Parallel, a line across our skinny road where only the winds are famous.

Poking a driftwood fire next to this heaving sea at nightfall I need a helpline to talk me up the long slide of years to the silly songs, those rumbling stations of my past. There, chastened, I might correct bitter wrongs, see faces I never saw again, and didn't deserve to, but then, I would be young and impetuous again. Keelhaunched by nagging loss I try matter-of-fact, identifying my yearning for a rerun as foolish sentiment, our lives but a fold in time. Listening to my outdated memory music proving time's relentless melting I ride a ghost train zigzagging past the murmur of all those fugitive years' secrets that suddenly surprise me briefly lit up.

Ian C Smith writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island. His work has appeared in Antipodes, Coolabah, cordite, Griffith Review, Journal of Working Class Studies, Meniscus, So Fi Zine, Text: A Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, and Westerly. His seventh book is wonder sadness madness joy, Ginninderra Press.



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TEXT prose

David Thomas Henry Wright

fur/phở

David Thomas Henry Wright is an author, poet, digital artist, and academic. He won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards' Digital Literature Prize, 2019 Robert Coover Award (2nd prize), and 2021 Carmel Bird Literary Award. He has been shortlisted for multiple other prizes, published in various journals, and received various research grants and fellowships. He has a PhD from Murdoch University and a Masters from the University of Edinburgh, was a lecturer at China's top university, Tsinghua, and was an Associate Professor at Nagoya University in Japan. He is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Bergen in Norway.

fur/phở

We had encountered one another a few days earlier. I'm certain of it. At *David Jones*.

We were both looking at sunglasses. She saw the price and muttered something under her breath. Saw me see her mutter. Dropped her vision to the floor and left. I had no idea what precisely she said, but it was clear from context that she was intimidated by the price. Or perhaps insulted. To this day, I don't really know what she makes of me, this country, anything.

'Hello,' I say. I debate adding an 'again', but fear this may embarrass her. '**I work here. Next door. Carol's Vintage Furs,**' I add. '**I'm Carol.**' She seems either confused or rude. I'm not sure which. In either case, she hides her true feelings well. She acknowledges the place, me, but that's about it.

'**Well, I'm here if you need anything,**' I add, with minimal sincerity. I know she will not be coming in to see what I have. And if by some miracle she does, she will not be purchasing anything. My vintage coats make *David Jones* sunglasses seem cheap.

**

As the weekdays continue, I never get more than a nod in return for my greetings. I'm not sure why I find this woman's

Ngọc grasps the chalk and writes '10:00–22:00'. Then, more hesitantly, she writes 'lunch special: phở + bánh mì \$12'. Ngọc is certain that 'lunch special' is the correct term, but it does not make sense. 'special lunch' seems more appropriate. Ngọc fears having incorrect (false?) English on the blackboard on the footpath (sidewalk?) outside her shop. She would be mortified if the vast foot traffic population of this high-end Melbourne demographic considered her stupid. Or worse, a bad immigrant.

Now, a woman, with pale hair and insect-like sunglasses is being familiar. Ngọc nods, simpers. The woman keeps talking. Seems to be forcing some sort of connection. Ngọc looks in the direction the woman gestures towards. '**I understand,**' says Ngọc. The pale-haired woman indicates her professional proximity, as if this means anything, as if it somehow signifies some kind of kinship or obligation. Or perhaps it is a veiled threat, a level of intimidation. Ngọc sees no reason to talk further, and simply repeats, '**I understand.**' She hopes that is the end of it.

**

The pale-haired woman, Carol, has come for lunch. It is early. 11 o'clock. The restaurant is empty. A bad sign. Cause for

indifference so troubling. It clearly does not trouble her. She likely just wants to be left alone. I guess that is her right.

And yet, I do wonder if I should do more to try and build some kind of rapport, some sense of community. We have more in common than not. I opt to try her food. I enter her restaurant. The tables are chipboard, coated in plastic. There is peeling on the sides. The chairs are also plastic, faded from sunlight. The woman enters, smileless. Asks what I will be having. No greeting, no warmth. **‘What do you recommend?’** I ask. With a smile. One that is not returned. Likewise, attempts at making conversation are similarly not returned. While I suspect this woman has some difficulties with English, that is not what is going on here. I can tell from her gait, her movement, her decisiveness that this is not a modest or timid woman. **‘I’ll have the phở,’** I say. Apart from the slight swish of the ceiling fan on a low setting, and the slow roll of traffic muted by a grimy sliding door, the restaurant is silent. It’s unclear what the restaurant is even called. There is no name on the door. Only images and small words up on a board. **‘What meats are there?’** I ask. And I see an opportunity for a joke and leap at it, hoping to break this woman’s mask of severity. **‘All kinds? Even rhino? Hippo? Camels? Humans?’** It is not well received. Perhaps it

concern given the location. Nevertheless, customers are customers. Ngọc approaches Carol and asks, **‘What would you like for your lunch?’** The woman has clearly not made up her mind, likely does not know what is available, has no interest in reading the menu or even, Ngọc suspects, in eating. She asks for a recommendation. Ngọc has no idea what this woman’s predilections are or what her palate is like. There are, Ngọc has learned, two types of people who ask this question: the ‘adventurous’ eater who wants something strange to them or the pretend ‘adventurous’ eater who wants to appear cosmopolitan but only actually wants something plain. **‘We make phở,’** says Ngọc. Her restaurant offers many ways to customise the dish, a fact this woman would know if she had bothered to observe the menu, which contains legible and workable English (Ngọc’s daughter assured her it was correct), yet she seems to want to have her choices made for her, her whims assumed and catered to, like a child being supplied with supper. **‘What meat?’** asks Ngọc. Asking, Ngọc notes, was a mistake. The woman remains indecisive, unclear of meats, as though under the impression that Ngọc had a fully stocked menagerie in the kitchen. **‘We have all kinds,’** says Ngọc. She is uncertain if this woman is being deliberately ignorant or not, deliberately cruel or not. In either case, Ngọc decides

was a bit tasteless. But I did get through to her. Got her to crack.

The broth, when it appears, is fragrant. Hearty, but not overly rich. An autumnal meal, I think. The noodles are pleasant, but the meat a bit tough. Perhaps it really is camel. Or hippo. Or human. Either way, I'm sure this woman would never tell me. She keeps her secrets to herself.

**

The woman and her daughter enter my store. It is early evening, not long before I plan to lock up. It is uncommon to have walk-ins. *Carol's Vintage Furs* is not a 'store', per se. If this woman had bothered to view my website, she would know that. But I know she hasn't, because her restaurant is not even on Google Maps. In fact, a search for Vietnamese restaurants in the area provides only one entry, which is several blocks away: *The Colonial*, a fine-dining French-Vietnamese establishment.

My store offers rentals, alterations, remodelling, throws for beds, cushions for couches, fur cleaning and deodorizing services and treatments, commissions on sales, and the occasional bespoke piece. We rarely sell clothes off the rack. I normally tell this to people who just wander in and start looking around, but that seems rude at this point. The woman's daughter asks if her mother may try on a frost pink fox cocktail

that she has had enough. '**I will make you phở bò,**' she says.

When she returns from the kitchen, she places the bowl in front of Carol. Her placement is slightly clumsy, and causes a solitary drip to fling, which flecks Carol's sleeve. This, Ngọc believes and hopes, goes unnoticed. When Carol finishes and pays, Ngọc offers the slightest of smiles.

**

Ngọc's daughter, Hoa, insists they go into *Carol's Vintage Furs*. Ngọc is reluctant, but she fears she is losing her daughter. At school, Ngọc has been made aware, Hoa goes by 'Hannah', a name she chose for herself. Hoa told her mother that this is so it is easier for new teachers to pronounce her name when they call the roll, but Ngọc suspects Hoa is attempting to avoid teasing, to avoid shame. It pains Ngọc to think that her daughter is ashamed of her name.

Which is why Ngọc agrees to indulge Hoa when she suggests they go into *Carol's Vintage Furs*. Hoa examines the coats. Hoa speaks in English. She informs Ngọc that the coats are, 'so soft.' Ngọc nods. She is not comfortable speaking English casually in the company of others. Ngọc fears her poor grammar will be overheard and secretly judged. Hoa asks the store owner, Carol, if her mother can try on a pink, fluffy coat. The cut reminds Ngọc of

bolero. I see no harm in it. **‘Certainly.’** I say **‘Let me know if you need any help.’** I ignore the woman slapping at the garment, resisting her daughter’s requests. I wonder if any event in this woman’s life would warrant her wearing a bolero. Or indeed, anything so nice. Perhaps having it would change things. In my experience, however, clothes don’t change the person. If she had it, it would just stay in her cupboard, not in cold storage as it should be. Her having this bolero would be a waste.

Her daughter is saying it looks good. She wants her mother to buy it. But she has misread the price. Or rather, she has misunderstood it. \$600 is the rental fee. For four days. For eight days, the price leaps to \$960. To purchase it outright, it is \$4,200. I do not know how delicately I can break this information. I hope it can be avoided, but the daughter is now wanting to make chitchat, to discuss, to negotiate. I will come across as pompous and presumptuous and rude. Perhaps even racist. But it must be said. **‘So just to clarify, the prices on display are the rental costs. We do things a little differently here. So for this one, the \$600 price is to rent the jacket for four days, and that includes the cleaning and the storage fees. That price also includes delivery and pick-up. Does your mother have an event coming up?’** I ask, trying my best (likely failing) to seem

a matador’s clothes. **‘Tôi không muốn,’** says Ngọc, patting away her daughter’s attempts to shroud her with the coat.

Eventually Ngọc relents and lets her body be enveloped. Ngọc admires the coat. She likes it. It is flashy and contemporary, despite being made of fur. It fits her well. Ngọc could see herself wearing this to Hoa’s graduation or to brunch with friends in the Melbourne winter, but she fears the price, a confrontation she knows will inevitably come. Hoa reveals that the coat costs only \$600. This is a lot, too much, but certainly less than Ngọc expected. Her daughter states as much, claiming that the price is good. Hoa encourages her mother to buy it, before going to Carol to try and get the price down. This country is not big on haggling, yet Ngọc always tries when making significant purchases. She always makes an offer, without fear of embarrassment. If a seller doesn’t want to budge, that’s their business, but they should not act as if it is preposterous. There is always room to move. This is one of the few behaviours Ngọc has imparted to Hoa. Hoa admires this quality in her mother, and attempts to emulate it whenever she can. Getting a discount makes both feel savvy, makes both feel, momentarily, like they can float above the restrictions imposed upon them by Australian, English-speaking society.

friendly, like I want to help. Not like I want to get rid of them as soon as possible. The daughter is confused, or perhaps feigns confusion. She returns to her mother and mutters something in Vietnamese. Her mother delicately removes the cocktail bolero. Before she has a chance to try and return it to the hanger, I take it from her hands. **‘Is there anything else that I can help either of you with? I must say, this bolero looks great on your mother. It really suits her.’** My compliment is not as convincing as I need it to be.

The two women smile. The daughter says, ‘Thanks.’ It is a sad ‘thanks’. It could easily be followed with a ‘for nothing’. I will not see them in the store ever again. Of that I am certain.

*
**

I’d never seen such blatant racism before. Real, unapologetic, unfettered racism. Not the polite, sneaky, subtle erosive racism of bosses or scholarship committees opting for white employees or recipients. Real, angry, shouty, *Romper Stomper* racism. In fact, this man seemed to channel that old film. Or have they rebooted it for television? I’m not sure. Perhaps there will be a new generation of imitators. They shouldn’t allow such drivel. It’s not artistic. It’s unpleasant and dangerous.

And yet, when Hoa returns, her enthusiasm appears to have disappeared. Hoa wants simply to leave. Ngọc fears that the Carol woman has been rude, but Hoa explains this is not the case, that the coat is not \$600, that the real price is as high as Ngọc initially feared. In fact, Hoa seems to suggest, the coat may not even be for sale at all. This makes no sense to Ngọc, but, sensing her daughter’s embarrassment, she opts to leave.

Once they are clear of *Carol’s Vintage Furs*, Ngọc asks Hoa what she would like for dinner. She has never asked her this before. It feels foreign, like a parody of other Australian parents. Hoa plays along, suggests they get ‘Maccas’. Both Hoa and Ngọc laugh.

*
**

The boy showed up at around 8 pm on a Saturday. It was a busy time for the restaurant and the street in general. A lot of foot traffic, a lot of people eating before they went out clubbing. The boy wanted a crowd, that much was clear to Ngọc. She regarded him as a boy, then and now. A child. Childish. Immature. But Ngọc regarded many if not all Australians as childish. They’d never had to really work hard. Ngọc had grown up in Hội An. Her parents were vendors. They sold phở just like she did. Early, early hours. Late, late

This man wanted a reaction. Had swastikas on his shirt and a friend with a smartphone, recording. Didn't have tattoos, as far as I could see. Not quite committed. Perhaps salvageable? He yelled out obscenities. Wanted a reaction, not necessarily violence. Really, he was just a boy. These feel like excuses. They're not. Just observations. I'm glad he was arrested. I have regrets calling the police, despite that woman's sense that I shouldn't have done so, that it wasn't my business. Well, it was my business. I don't want skinheads causing noise in my neighbourhood. I was selfish. I'm not heroic. I didn't do anything. All that happened was a stupid boy said some gross things to get a reaction. And he got one, and now he's arrested. What happens to him now? No idea. Did he even break a law? Probably. There's at least a public decency or disruption law, not to mention possible hate crimes. I'm not sure how those laws work or are determined. I hate the pedantry of such things. Wish we could all just agree not to be awful. I'd be content if judges just said, 'No, this is awful, lock him away.'

The Vietnamese lady didn't seem phased. Nor appreciative that I had helped. I'm shocked at how unaffected she is by all this. Does she not feel sadness? Does she feel anything, other than being a cog in the food-service industry? If I go grab a bowl of phở and some spring rolls tomorrow, she

needs. Minimal profits. Minimal everything. Living was secondary, whatever that meant. Australians valued 'that' above all else: the non-work life. The not-working existence was existence to them. It was strange. But they had a lot of money. And they ate a lot of phở. The restaurant, despite a slow start, was doing well. Australians were not lazy. Sometimes, when Ngọc was frustrated with customers, she would characterise them this way. But that seemed inaccurate. Not even this lunatic with his World War II symbols and swear words and hate was 'lazy'. Australians just valued weird things. This boy... he was so desperate to be on TV or the internet. So desperate to connect with anyone, to get a reaction he felt he had to resort to this nonsense. Shaving his head and yelling out 'time to die, gook, time to die'. It is this characteristic that Ngọc found so bizarre: the Australian's greediness for engagement. This is the strange commonality, Ngọc believes. It links this racist boy to the woman at the expensive shop that sells fur coats. They always need to be acknowledged. They lust for it. Are starved for it. Wolf it down like so many bowls of phở. They are insatiable. It is impossible for them to just be left alone. The thought that Ngọc did not care who they were, what they did, what happened to them seemed to terrify them. Ngọc found it all so frivolous.

will greet me in the same blank way, she will serve my food in the same blank way, she will continue her life as usual. Perhaps this is noble. Perhaps we should see this as a cultural success: a racist kid arguing for the death of a Vietnamese woman has zero impact, other than the perpetrator's arrest.

**

I don't care what you believe, you do not assault someone or destroy their property. And that's just what this girl did. The entitlement is disgusting. She's clearly unemployed, clearly doesn't work for a living. And I'm never going to get that money back. This dumb hippy with the green-streaked hair and the nose rings has caused thousands of dollars' worth of damage. And she doesn't care. She thinks she's right. Believes she's done a good thing. That's what gets to me. And she's succeeded. I have no support. Not from the public. Not from the government. Certainly not from the police or the courts. People are sympathetic to her. They think she's done the community a great service. People are glad my business is going under. They're glad some girl burst into my store and threw a tin of red paint all over my furs, and recorded and uploaded the footage to YouTube.

Yet, despite these beliefs, she was glad that Hoa wasn't around when the boy with the shaved head started ranting. Hoa would not have taken it well. She would have been intimidated. Australia, Ngọc believes, had made Hoa feel like she should be intimidated.

**

The woman appears different today. As Ngọc places her bowl of phở in front of her, she does so delicately, so as not to disrupt her fragile state. Hoa has informed Ngọc of what has happened. Ngọc did not see it happen. She feels bad for this woman. But also knows that it is not her business, not worth getting tied up in.

And suddenly, Ngọc is attracted to the wild notion of letting this woman eat for free. Never would her parents have ever considered doing something so outrageous. Never did they ever consider giving out a bowl of phở on the streets of Hội An free of charge. They had not been miserly or cruel or selfish people. When family had come to visit, they had been generous. They let visitors have the best cuts of meat, the biggest portions, the comfiest beds... as a child they always provided for Ngọc. They were admirable parents. But this idea of helping a stranger who one had little to no connection with was simply unheard of.

Insurance is coming through. Not as sufficiently as I would like. This girl will be prosecuted. Not as sufficiently as I would like. Nevertheless she will suffer consequences for ruining the fox furs and wraps, the mink shrugs and capelets, the lapin jackets and capes, the camel hair coats and strollers. But the broader damage is done. This is what the store is now. The name is tarnished. The paint isn't coming off. It's all just faux from now on. Like this phở. I reckon it contains a tonne of MSG.

Ngọc knows that there is also another issue: a subtle twist of the knife. Ngọc's business was flourishing. This woman was in trouble. Free phở is a way of asserting dominance, of declaring victory. And that is what underpins this country: winners and losers. Giving free phở wasn't an appropriate thing to do. Still, the fantasy is nice to indulge in. Ngọc decides to give this woman her bill, allow her to pay in full, allow her to keep her Caucasian dignity. For now.

David Thomas Henry Wright is an author, poet, digital artist, and academic. He won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards' Digital Literature Prize, 2019 Robert Coover Award (2nd prize), and 2021 Carmel Bird Literary Award. He has been shortlisted for multiple other prizes, published in various journals, and received various research grants and fellowships. He has a PhD from Murdoch University and a Masters from the University of Edinburgh, was a lecturer at China's top university, Tsinghua, and was an Associate Professor at Nagoya University in Japan. He is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Bergen in Norway.



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TEXT prose

Nat Kassel

Job Ready

A journalist in his 50s made the commencement speech at my graduation ceremony. I didn't catch his name; wasn't listening at first; didn't even really want to be there. But as he spoke of how, over the course of his career, he had watched the economic structures of journalism crumble around him, I listened. He explained how the advertising dollars had been siphoned off elsewhere and newspapers had hit an economic crisis point. The so-called 'rivers of gold' had been diverted from the media moguls to the tech bros. It was a point that had been reiterated ad infinitum during my degree. His central argument was that the world was changing rapidly and those of us who were graduating would draw success from our abilities to adapt. That was the single most important skill: adaptation. He also said that in journalism, you were only as good as your last article – or, in this case, your last speech – and that this standard kept him motivated to keep chasing and covering important stories.

I appreciated how he was able to get up there and essentially admit that in this corner of the job market, it was slim pickings. Entire industries could be swallowed up by Silicon Valley in the blink of an eye, so we'd better be quick on our feet. As a millennial who grew up on the Internet, maybe this was supposed to be comforting for me? I could Google anything; solve problems on YouTube; interpret memes in an instant; watch the culture wars being fought in real time. Still, I was terrified of the prospect of starting my 'career' in amongst so much insecurity.

*

After uni, I moved from Melbourne to Sydney and rented a room in a grubby, illegal warehouse full of artists. My girlfriend started art school and I got on the dole. It was an easy transition

from Youth Allowance to New Start and the adult dole paid a little more than the student version.

The Warehouse had ten ramshackle bedrooms upstairs and a full party venue downstairs, with a bar, a stage, a tiny art gallery and a skate ramp. The roof had been converted into a sketchy sundeck, made from hardwood pallets and lined with astroturf. We ignored the cracking sheets of asbestos and the narrow, two-storey drop between our building and the next one over. The Warehouse was home to a revolving door of eclectic characters – punks, neo-hippies, activists, Burning Man types, tantra freaks, skateboarders, and the odd lost backpacker. Someone was always keen to go dumpster diving, skate the ramp, jam, paint the walls, or follow through with whatever ridiculous idea came up. In the bedrooms, people could be found boozing, smoking, and selling drugs. It was a quiet place in the early mornings and a loud one during the nights. The Warehouse wasn't organised around any particular ideology, but we were united by our inability to afford rent in proper Sydney housing.

Half the bedrooms were windowless, and the lack of natural light seemed a recipe for depression. Within a few months, my girlfriend found a saner sharehouse, but I hung on for the next three years. I liked the chaos and colour of the place, the unpredictability of it. I liked the cheap rent. I was steadily toiling away with freelance writing, trying to get articles published anywhere I could, usually for less than minimum wage and sometimes just exposure. It was gig economy work, but instead of driving an Uber or delivering food on a bicycle, I had a trestle-table desk in my bedroom, a Macbook, and an iPhone 4 with a cracked screen. I wrote profiles, feature articles, personal essays, reviews, advertising copy, hot takes, longform interviews and first-person travel stories. I got published by a Murdoch-owned news platform, an energy drink website, and a public broadcaster.

*

My first office job was at a small startup where I wrote sponsored content and listicles aimed at high school students. Instead of carpet, the North Sydney office was furnished with synthetic grass and blackboard-chalk feature walls that displayed the monthly sales targets. The space was mostly open plan, with two glass-walled private meeting rooms. Retro bicycles and cameras adorned the walls and the lunchroom had a proper espresso machine. Sometimes the sales crew wore suits to work but sneakers and jeans were the norm. I worked just one day a week at first, but that eventually progressed to two days a week, then three. On any given day there'd be six or eight people in the office, most of whom were younger than me and still lived with their parents. We all got paid roughly minimum wage, our contracts either casual or freelance. It was 2016, the year of the infamous smashed avo article in the *Weekend Australian*, which became shorthand for an intergenerational culture war that I understood only vaguely at the time. It was boomers versus millennials on housing affordability, casualisation, climate inaction, the Sydney lockdown laws and a slew of other issues.

A federal election was coming up, so for the first few weeks my task was to write explainers on how to vote, how to decide who to vote for, and how the Australian political system works. These explainers were supposed to be apolitical, but they tended to look more like sloppy, oversimplified rants that attacked both major parties and were littered with GIFs. One of my briefs was to write a piece that would convince more young people to register to vote. It contained hastily Googled references to the suffragettes and the campaign for Indigenous voting rights. A subheading, ‘Don’t let old people call the shots’, explained Australia’s ageing population and took jabs at old people for being conservative. The anti-boomer rhetoric seemed to go down well in the office but Tony Abbott still won the election. I was pretty sure that the privately educated founders of the startup probably voted for him. I was praised for my ability to crank out three articles a day. It wasn’t such a bad place to work, but compared to The Warehouse, it felt like Hillsong.

*

In the kitchen of The Warehouse, someone had drunkenly scrawled the lines of Dylan Thomas’s ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ on the wall with coloured chalk. The font was messy, pointy, almost angry looking. As the poem progressed, the words gradually slanted downwards, towards the filthy linoleum floor. ‘RAGE, RAGE AGAINST THE DYING OF THE LIGHT’. It set the tone for the space, implicitly justifying the empty beer bottles and overflowing ashtrays. You could never predict when a spontaneous, multi-day bender might begin down the hall. I kept earplugs next to my bed but mostly, I didn’t mind the noise. The Warehouse had the charm of never being boring, and more importantly, the rent was cheap.

*

When I wasn’t writing ‘content’ at the youth website, I was pitching and writing articles for other publications – mostly millennial news and culture outlets. I researched and wrote about forensic cleaners, digital nomads, schoolies, and scammers. Then I chanced upon a gig writing for a heritage softcore porn mag. Nothing raunchy, just short reviews of films, albums, and tech products. The editor would email me sporadically, offering a little job here or there. It was always last minute, when a print deadline was looming and he had a few final pages that he desperately needed to fill. The pay was unpredictable, as if he couldn’t remember the rate he’d set last time so he was making up a new rate on the spot. I kept taking the work until I’d racked up a little over \$1300 of unpaid invoices. ‘I’m not going to be able to commit to writing any more articles until at least one of these invoices has been paid,’ I wrote to the assistant editor in an email.

*

Cleaning The Warehouse after a party was a decent gig. I'd get \$200 cash to clean the putrid swamp that had been a dance floor just hours earlier. The task was simple: get rid of all the bottles, cans, nang canisters, balloons, durry butts and other party leftovers, then sweep and mop the grime away. The Sydney lockout laws had decimated Kings Cross and Oxford Street, so our illegal parties seemed to be having a moment (along with The Star Casino, which was suspiciously exempt from the lockout zone). Promoters rented the space, booked DJs, sold tickets, and people came from faraway suburbs to drink, dance, snort drugs and smoke in the bottom floor of where we lived until 4am. We'd been locked out of Sydney nightclubs – obviously – but we'd also been locked into something else. The triple threat of insecure work, the housing crisis and looming climate change added a unique hedonism to the party scene. Sydney was overpriced and in cultural decline. Looking around the dance floor at 3.45am, getting ready to turn the lights on and kick everyone out, desperation was everywhere.

I spent many a Sunday morning listening to podcasts in my headphones and scrubbing chunky vomit off the cracking floor tiles in the bottom bathroom. I'd find stashed beers, stray lighters and lost drug bags, then stash them away in my room for later. It was dirty work, but satisfying to replace the muddy, smoky smell with the chemical purity of cheap lemon bleach. On good days, I could do the clean in four hours, which worked out to \$50 an hour. It was more profitable and dependable than any of my freelance writing gigs.

*

I got busy. On my morning commute over the Harbour Bridge, I stopped gazing out the train window at the sailboats and instead stared into the overwhelming void of my cracked iPhone, writing hurried responses to emails from editors at publications I dreamed of working fulltime. Then I'd get to the office and spend eight hours bashing out sponsored content for teens. Mostly, I was persuading people to buy products, disguising it as neutral information. Advertorial, the amalgamation of 'advertisement' and 'editorial', always confused me. How could an article have value if it was just a thinly veiled ad? In 2016, the Internet still had some interesting, un-paywalled pockets, but we were actively changing that. Articles were ads and ads were articles.

I'd worked at supermarkets, building sites, commercial kitchens, a chicken factory, selling Greenpeace on the street, waiting tables – but this job felt uniquely pointless. My name wasn't attached to the advertorials and that was fine with me. I was adapting an insecure job market, just like the journalist had advised in his commencement speech.

*

I could never picture the readers of the heritage softcore porn mag. I knew it was for men, but what kind of man? A retiree golfer? A lonely truck driver? A group of teenage boys on a footy trip? In the era of Internet porn, it was difficult to imagine how this kind of print magazine hadn't become obsolete. I never figured it out: Who were these men who bought this magazine?

After some Googling, I found out that a dodgy bloke with a bunch of connections to alt-right figures had bought the magazine with big plans to make it into a haven for conservative bros. This was both bizarre and troubling, but it explained why the magazine still existed – not because it was profitable, but because some cashed up idiot decided to fund it as a vehicle for his political agenda. Of more immediate concern was that they owed me \$1300. That equated to two full months of rent at The Warehouse, so I planned to do everything in my power to get it, though I wasn't sure how much power I had.

Months passed and still no money, despite a long thread of increasingly blunt emails. I found a template on Google for an official letter of demand, sent it to the assistant editor, then found a debt collector on Facebook who worked on commission. I sent him screenshots of all the correspondence and invoices as proof of the money I was owed. I wasn't sure what to expect, but miraculously, he got the full amount into my account within minutes. He charged me 30 per cent, which was a sting, but it felt good to get the money out of the bastards. Mostly, I was embarrassed that I'd accidentally worked for a wannabe right-wing shock jock posing as a softcore porn publisher.

*

I finally got out of The Warehouse and moved to a tiny one-room shack 850-kilometres away, on a stretch of tucked away coastland in Northern NSW. Between my partner and me, rent was even cheaper than The Warehouse, and life was much more peaceful. We lay in bed and listened to the waves crashing on the shore, green tree frogs croaking in the downpipe and jazz playlists curated by the algorithm. My partner grew veggies and learned guitar; I took up running and read news updates about the pandemic on my phone. I'd been freelancing for a snarky millennial publication on and off for about five years, but now I was finding out that its Australian office was being defunded and decommissioned immediately. The skeleton crew who ran the publication were being made redundant. I read about it on a subscriber-funded news website, where a chief executive from the publication was quoted, 'While big tech has brought wonderful things to our lives, they are also posing a great threat to journalism.'

Two similar publications were also being dissolved, along with a hundred local and regional mastheads. It felt personal: the recession had found me in my bed, in my little shack on the coast. But it also felt impersonal. When you're an expendable freelancer, no one even tells you that the company has gone bust. Instead, you read about it in the news, text a few people, then move on. I mulled it over for a few days and decided that I wasn't surprised. Nobody had ever promised that writing articles for a snarky millennial publication would amount to anything more than this. It was just like the journalist had warned in his commencement speech. Another round of redundancies meant another opportunity for adaptation. By this point I'd written and published hundreds of articles, but never had anything close to resembling a proper white-collar career.

*

I taught some writing courses, went back to uni for a postgraduate course, and eventually got a PhD scholarship. The stipend amounted to just over thirty grand a year, tax free, for three years. I'd been living on that much or less for close to a decade. It totalled a hundred grand. My Honours supervisor told me, 'Now you can write your book. You'll never get a hundred grand to write a book again.' I appreciated his honesty. He knew all about the working-class grind, the struggles of freelance writing, the white-collar gig economy. He'd written a book I adored and was still running in the hamster wheel of sessional academia. Still, to me it represented a good opportunity. Maybe even upward mobility. Seen through the lens of a freelancer, it was a golden ticket.

'You're only as good as your last article,' the journalist had told the graduates. I couldn't say that I was proud of all of mine, but cobbling them together until they resembled a salary, that was an achievement. Adaptation was the mantra. Adaptation was survival. I'd burned out a few times, thought about throwing in the towel and going back to labouring or hospitality, but each time I'd almost escape, I'd end up finding another gig. Writing words for money, even under the most precarious, cutthroat, and grotesque business models, was still appealing to me.

Dr Nat Kassel is a sessional academic at Griffith University. He has over 10 years of experience as a professional writer and is currently working on a book about the precarity experienced by the millennial generation. It's called, The River Is Here. He completed his PhD in 2024 and has been published by Meniscus, The Conversation, ABC, VICE and others. He pays respect to Bundjalung mob, on whose unceded lands he lives and works.



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TEXT prose

Inez Baranay

from *Soul Climate*

When living in Turkey, thinking it could be for the rest of my life, I began wondering about any connections to India. Turkey and India were the two countries I had spent most time in, besides Australia, the country of my citizenship.

The answer I really liked was that the connecting link was Halide Edib, the historical person.

A Turkish woman who went to India and wrote a book about it. A woman who was known as a Young Turk, a wartime hero, then had to escape into exile. A writer of novels, and of memoirs of her early life. A subject of recent feminist scholarship. There's a book called *Between Modernism and Nationalism*, subtitled *Halide Edib's encounter with Gandhi's India*¹.

Ideas about nationalism and modernism have provoked me for longer than I've been writing. And I've been reading accounts of India for feels like forever. And here is a book that will link all that with where I am.

Thanks to inter-library loan at the provincial state University where I worked, I could read the book. That was around 2015.

I began – or was already nursing – a back-burner obsession with Halide Edib. I began looking for, and finding, her own writing.

I finished writing another novel, returned to live in the country of my citizenship, then

finished another book.

And found that at some point I had begun on “the Halide work”.

#

Will I make Halide a fictional character? is the inevitable question.

I answer that quite early, as I begin to read as much of Halide’s works as I can find, and learn about Dr Ansari, a leader in the Independence Movement. The two had met in 1913 in Constantinople. Fellow freedom fighters, nationalists, secularists, idealists. He made her promise to visit India. She took promises seriously. Over twenty years later she would promise him to write about her time in his country.

In no doubt that I want to write about all this somehow, it feels like a novel, but also not.

Because Halide was a historical person, and this means a “real person who actually lived” as well as someone written of in history books.

I’m not against making fictions out of anyone who’s actually lived. The truth known by a fiction writer is known by feeling right. Now the question arises of writing a historical person as a character whose inner life, her secret self, is known to the author.

I might speculate about Halide’s thoughts and emotions, to some extent; I might try to imagine some dialogues she had with others that she did not tell us about.

But I do not go far with this. Something about Halide seems to forbid too much invention. So, not quite a fictional character.

There is certainly enough to pay attention to in what she does choose to write.

The more I read her and read about her the more I know that I will write her not as a character but as someone observed from nearly a century later.

#

I look at what she did want to tell us about.

Halide Edib published both the memoir of her time in India and the lectures she gave in Delhi. She wrote them in English, the language she wrote in most often now. I

peruse these writings and wonder at her skills of observation and description and wonder about what she did not say.

I think about her earlier memoirs. I think about the novel she had recently completed that would be published soon after this India trip, and about the next work she would write, and how much for a writer these works are a large part of her thoughts, her references, even of her sense of reality. They must have been part of Halide's most inner, unspoken life (its climate) during her visit.

Writing about Halide in India can't be fiction exactly, but there is push towards the blurry edge, the unstable border, of non-fiction writing.

#

And then there's also fiction. Insistent fiction. The feel of a fiction that exists to be discovered. I feel that there is someone there, in Delhi, in the household of Dr Ansari in Daryaganj in 1935, where Halide stays for many very active weeks, there's someone spookily wanting my attention. Someone who does want to become a character I must write.

Ansari's wife was living in purdah – it seems curious, from here, for such a liberal household. It seems she did not attend the mixed gatherings, his wife. Gandhi was the only man not a relative admitted to the women's apartments. Not the wife.

The real Dr Ansari's adopted daughter lived with him (she was also a niece of his wife). This real-life daughter spent time with Halide, who describes her as a modern girl, free like an American girl, driving a car, confiding her problems. Halide has no need to divulge the nature of those problems. The girl reminds Halide of herself at a much younger age. She does not divulge these particulars either. Bookish, idealistic?

The real-life daughter never enters my imaginings, never invites or allows me to invent her inner life. No historical people do, only Halide to a limited extent. The real-life, historical daughter simply does not exist in the household depicted in *Soul Climate*.

But, I must have wondered, must have known, could there be someone else, possibly someone like her?

There they are. Three young women, cousins close in age and in an especially close relationship since childhood, staying in Dr Ansari's house.

Where does that come from? Fiction doing its other-reality work. Here it is, another

given of this book.

Nuran, Zoya, and Aisha, a suddenly always-been-there trio, made themselves known to me, bit by bit and more and more.

What Halide says about the real-life adopted daughter applies to each of them: she did not appear to think that Muslims were a minority grafted on Indian soil and doomed to remain as such. If anything, she was herself 'Indian to the core. Asoka was part of her past history just as much as Humayun'².

#

Nuran's (fictional) father evidently went on the same medical mission to the Balkans with Dr Ansari, a close colleague, and back in India dies when Nuran is a small child. More than a colleague, a kind of brother. Nuran, in the universe of this book, is the young female relative who lives in Dr Ansari's house.

In actual accounts of the time, there was another member of Dr Ansari's medical mission who stayed on in Turkey and died there, and I consider him, but then Nuran would already know a great deal more about Turkey and might want to visit his grave, and all that does not fit here.

We are in the time when Halide Edib comes to stay, and gives the lectures everyone goes to.

There are Nuran's two closest cousins there too, also long-time intimates of the house and its milieu. How come? What's going on with them now? I have to keep writing to find out.

#

It's fiction. Fiction has no limits. There could be a huge talking black cat. A genie could appear when a lamp is rubbed. There could be a mirror that shows everyone who ever looked into it. There could be a secret door that takes you into historical eras or alien dimensions. No, none of that kind of thing for this book.

Just the blurry edge, the unstable border: what's plausible for these young women this time in this place.

#

English is the language known in common by those who mingle in the Delhi house where Halide Edib stayed in 1935.

This is lucky for your narrator who has not learnt the other languages they use here, which of course the people in the Delhi house also use to flavour their English speech, as people do who speak several languages together: some words are more easily found, some things more precisely expressed, or more mellifluously, or wittily, some things exist only in one rather than another of their languages. It is one of the delights of being among people who use several languages together to hear their hybrids and mash-ups and evolutions of English.

In new English-language literature from India these days the writer will include phrases, even extensive passages of dialogue in Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, other languages, and not translate them; the writer's ideal reader knows the languages or how to swiftly find a translation device, and possibly learn something, or might skip these bits with no loss of general sense or enjoyment. Or, if you're feeling left out, well now you know. These phrases and passages are no longer italicised.

#

Nursery tales and classic literature in English were some part of the upbringing of the three cousins. After their month in Paris they will add some French phrases and mots justes to the kind of talk they have among themselves and with very few others.

They had sat as children with the larger group of their extended family and their social circles, adults using English as their common language, among them those who'd also had an English governess as Halide once had. Many of them also went to English-medium schools, went to England to study, went to political meetings there or for a reprieve from them. Their separate families and their larger extended social worlds tend to agree that it is important to know English.

When Halide Edib visited India, the independent nation's future Constitution was being written, and would make English one of its national languages.

When there are foreign visitors in the house where Halide stays, everyone speaks English even when it is no-one's mother tongue.

#

Whether or not we think language creates reality, any particular mother tongue creates aspects of the person who uses it. As does a multilingualism from the earliest age.

At some point the cousins realise the British, speaking English, speak only English. They use the same language all the time, the Brits, the language in the school and the court is the same as the language on the street and the language in each of their homes, and that language is the same as the language of their poetry and literature. There is no private language, no language better for poetry, no language used only in the family, no language for quoting the scriptures and the classics, no language apart from their one quotidian language.

They don't consider that even among English-born English mono-linguists there are dialects and accents of region, class and generation – so, even the English don't have a single way of speaking.

One day we will have a word for the “English” we speak that contains a historical relic of a people known or once known as the English; the language continues to adapt and mutate and alter, enriched by other languages, fresh rhythms, fresh syntax, fresh precise words. It is a trans-national language with no centre of authority.

#

Your narrator is writing as a kind of translator of the way the three cousins think and talk. It's fiction. That means it's true.

1 *Between Nationalism and Modernity* by Mushirul Hasan, 2009.

2 Edib, Halidé [1937]. *Inside India*. Oxford India Collection: pp. 13-14. Kindle Edition.



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TEXT prose

Yuxin Zhao

Narration of Loss Before Loss

We sit on the couch, my grandparents and I. The three of us are talking about fire. Or rather, I'm listening to them talking about fire, trying to memorise everything. My grandfather mentions one occasion when their office in the university caught fire, and everyone had to evacuate. Everywhere they ran, there was dense smoke like some thick, wild bush, though he doesn't remember seeing the actual fire. When they were allowed to go back inside, he found out that someone had picked the lock on his drawer, gone through his stuff, and taken his newly finished manuscript. He was going to publish a book on propylene polymerisation, yet after that mysterious accident, he simply gave up. He was in his early fifties when it happened, and now he is eighty. It is summer. My grandmother holds in one hand her favourite cattail fan. For as long as we can recall, it has always been this gesture that announces to us the arrival of summer: she brings the fan with her wherever she goes. She says she remembers the fire too. Actually, back then, fire was not rare, especially in the department of chemical engineering. Their offices and dorms were regarded as dangerous places. Every time there was a fire, she had to put aside whatever she was doing and rush over to help, for she was a senior member of the Communist Party. These are stories we, my younger cousin and I, grew up listening to. If there was anything else we learned from them, it was that some losses were inexplicable and thus unavoidable. Of the very first things we were told about our grandparents, besides the stolen manuscript, there was also their respective escape from their family, their near exile to a faraway labor camp, and all the research funds they didn't get which ended up going into the construction of newer,

more ‘modern’ department buildings that were in fact not needed, leaving research projects unfunded as a consequence. And back when they were living in the dorm with their children, not only did the apartment essentially belong to the university, but on every piece of their furniture was stamped the university’s name. It was understood that there was the possibility of everything being taken away from them, in a form not usually called stealing. The threat of loss remained unnamed, yet constant.

As they talk, I videotape them with my camera. Later I videotape them making lunch, eating, taking their afternoon nap, and watching the news while peeling a peach. Such an act of documenting is something my grandfather has also been doing, except he uses a still camera. Before I was old enough to realise that the accumulation of family albums was a fairly common thing, I used to think that we had so many seemingly uninteresting pictures because my grandparents did not want to lose anything anymore. Otherwise, why would they document moments where nothing remotely important was happening? Most of the photographs are the same as the videos I make, banal fragments of everyday life whose sole function is to bear witness to the subjects’ being there. They only acquire extra significance when the ones documented are no longer here. Photography, or film, or any means of documenting for that matter, is a way to relate to the moment as something that is always ceasing to be, and thus opening the experience to loss.

Sooner or later, without failing, we will construct some sort of narrative out of what we have documented, because this is one of the mechanisms which help us cope with the inevitable chaos that comes with time. When I open one of the family albums I encounter two types of photographs, the candid and the posed. The former, despite the name, are still composed by the person behind the camera and present intentionally selected, curated information. In this sense, they make up a subtler way of narrating, or fictionalising our life. The latter, however, are direct interruptions of the flow of time. For the duration it takes to make the photograph, the subjects stop doing anything other than facing the camera, adjusting their postures and facial expressions so that the shoot might be successful. A posed photograph is often devoid of motion. While in a candid photograph the camera is trained on some kind of movement that is already taking place, on mundane activities such as eating, talking, walking in the park, here the subjects are temporarily brought out of their own flow of time and events and placed into a situation created specifically for the purpose of taking a photograph. As Roland Barthes writes, ‘I constitute myself in the process of “posing,” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.’[1] It is at this very subtle moment that the one being photographed is neither subject nor object but a subject who feels themselves becoming an object, thus experiencing a micro-version of death: this person is truly becoming a spectre. To pose or have others pose for the camera is to create excessive moments on a timeline, small perturbations like little bulges on a tree trunk. Even when I was a child, I was especially scared of the family photos where everyone was looking at the camera – at me. Their sometimes solemn,

sometimes smiling faces seemed to say, *One day you'll need this, and that's why we've gone out of our way to create it for you.*

*

In February 2023 I flew back home hoping to see my grandmother before she passed away but in the end I only got to see her in the mortuary. I also got to touch her. Her body was rigid and freezing cold and it was devastating, horrible, absurd, and absurdly funny to pull out a huge drawer and see her lying in there, to think that after death one's body may be temporarily stored in a drawer, an object being arranged and placed like some random object. I touched her face and her hair, so did my younger cousin. After we left the hospital, my uncle gave us alcohol wipes. And I wondered, why and how has my grandmother become something for which, after touching, we are supposed to clean our hands? She had fallen ill very suddenly, not long after my grandfather's death, and my mother had to go through those familiar hospital trips all over again, this time by herself, and then as abruptly as it began, it came to an end. Looking at her, I wonder at what point the sick body becomes something we are hesitant to touch, and then, ultimately, untouchable. The gradual expulsion of the sick body towards a marginalised place is represented by both its physical confinement in the hospital and our caution not to bring it up during daily conversations at home. Before the avoidance of physical touch, a certain kind of linguistic avoidance has already been in place.

I suspect that the silence we went through, both during the entire progression of my grandfather's worsening condition and after my grandmother's death, was at least partially due to this abrupt confrontation with the new temporality. My cousin and I in particular experienced a disruption of the mythical, familial, childhood time which had been functioning for us as the standard flow of time up to that point. In our family, as in many others, the generation of the grandparents is the oldest generation. Since both my cousin and I belong to single-child families, we spent most of our childhood together, with our grandparents, when the parents were at their day jobs. We first came to understand, vaguely, the idea of ageing, of time passing, through our grandparents. When we were children we didn't know exactly how old they were, yet very quickly we learned the age difference between *us* and *them*, and those numbers engraved in our memory became our default way to measure time. They laid the foundations of a temporal structure that, in our young eyes, would not waver. When I was six, sixty years seemed as long as an eternity. There was the understanding that this difference would always hold, a childish feeling of immortality. As children we were not told much about death, but deep down we believed that our grandparents would not die. It didn't necessarily lead to the conclusion that we wouldn't die either; they couldn't die because otherwise we would lose track of time. Then we grew up. We learned that we had been wrong, yet this illusion never faded away entirely, since it had so taken hold of us as one of the first childhood myths we subscribed to. Besides, our grandparents had always been so healthy. Thus when my grandfather was diagnosed with

Alzheimer's, when the disease began to manifest, way before the diagnosis, the fear it inspired was thorough and radical. For the first time we sensed our family slowly collapsing, and time disintegrating with it. When the flow of time was disrupted, our former way of being in it no longer worked. We were forced to reposition ourselves in/against time, in/against our old selves, which led to terrible fractures and friction.

*

When they are both gone, I sit alone in my grandparents' living room and think of fire, because it had been a pivotal point for them, as has been the experience of listening for me. Twice it signalled the beginning of unforeseeable chaos, and following it, our respective acts of narrating that attempt to bring language at least, back into control. In the fantasy of resisting time's arrow, even the posthumanist embracing of technology is not enough, for it implies, more or less, a departure from corporeality. Without the human body, such a fantasy becomes meaningless, since it also aims to maintain specific functions of which only a physical body is capable. As a fantasy it is inherently paradoxical, for it dreams of freezing time in order to preserve the usual proceedings of a family, in time. Sensing his physical being threatened by the working of time, my grandfather chose to express his bodily desire, both present and past, fulfilled and unrealised, in such a way that it could almost be his attempt to intrude into the uncontrollable flow of time. Maybe through pronouncing their presence at the moment, he too was trying to delay the potential absence of both desire and the body. It is an intricate matter: to have a body that is not affected by time is to be a monster, yet what could life unhindered by corporeality be like? After all, what the fantasising subject wants is to arrive at a certain point in the future and find *this* exact room occupied, again, by *these* exact bodies, still intact, unharmed, unchanged.

Here at the site that attests to loss, I consider writing about loss, this time not before, but after it. I will have to start right here, with an absence, and conjure up presence that has been left behind. But even plain narration of events not so filled with deaths, when done over and over again, could begin to acquire the feeling of a resurrection spell. In *Fear and Trembling*, before any of his actual analysis, Kierkegaard provides multiple retellings of The Binding of Isaac. Always he starts, 'It was early morning...' and goes on to imagine Abraham's varied attitudes towards this task, or trial, given to him by God.[2] Always Abraham gets Isaac back, alive and unharmed, because God has prepared a real ram to be sacrificed in Isaac's place. What interests me here is not the message embedded in this biblical tale, nor is it quite the way Kierkegaard analyses it later on, but the act of returning to the event, the happening, of reconstructing it every time and every time changing ever so little and having this little alteration lead to entirely different consequences. This is narrative desire, in the sense that it is a narrative driven by desire, meaning both Abraham's desire to rise up and meet God's will and the author's desire to keep going until he parses out some kind of truth, all the while aware that it is impossible – no one might know what really has happened in any

of the characters' minds, or indeed what has gone down on that mountain, at the instant when Abraham draws the knife at his only son. It is as if the author is saying, 'Answer me, answer me,' knowing perfectly well that everyone is gone and there is no one around, not even a ghost. In a way, such repeated retelling epitomises the paradox Kierkegaard explores in the rest of his book. It is to understand that something is impossible, unachievable, and yet to believe, at the very same time, that still it might be done through the power of the absurd.

Along with narrative desire there comes narrative agony, if the author admits to not knowing again and again, and then there is narrative pleasure too, because if nothing else the retellings are beautifully written and on the basis that a writer's easily discernible agony in a text is always at least partially performative, the pleasure lies in performing it well, in negotiating your relationship with an inexplicable event through your own words, so carefully that to a certain extent you might feel that this event now belongs to you. If I write, it has to be done in the hope that both the narrative and what's being narrated might become mine, again. It is absurd, yes.

Notes

1. Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1981).
2. Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (Penguin Classics, 1985).

Yuxin Zhao is a writer from Hangzhou, China and currently based in the UK. Yuxin mainly writes experimental fiction and poetry on immigration, language, family history, and queer desire. Yuxin's debut novel, The Moons: Fire Rooster to Earth Dog, was published by Calamari Archive in March 2024.



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TEXT prose

**Rebekah Clarkson, Shady Cosgrove, Gay Lynch, Julia
Prendergast, Billie Travalini**

thread

Wind turbines run the ridge, a wind farm atop the mountain's wave-like peaks, wind vanes dancing like sisters, heads and arms in harmonic rhythm, beating a thrum to the wind's channels.

Julia Prendergast

Patience

A woman wearing a lace collar lives in your wardrobe. Maybe the collar is ironic; it looks out of place on this tall woman with strong hands. She doesn't speak, never leaves, but hums as she irons shirts and trousers, hanging them overhead. You've never seen her leave the closet, but she must venture into bedroom and kitchen – dishes get washed and the bed is always made. This woman is so tall for such a crowded space, doesn't smile for the camera, only offers an expression of impersonal kindness before getting on with getting things done. There's been a mistake, she should never have been hired, but here she is – waiting for family to grow, leave home – before she can slip away from the unwashed and into the great when no one is watching.

Shady Cosgrove

Family Violence

Suppertime we deck gingkoes with amber lights.

Wee girl pushes through our brush fence.

Sticks in her hair. Eyes jammed black.

Maude cranks up Sibelius on cello to cover girl's groans.

Hollyhocks screen gaps between our households.

Blooms nod. Door slams, truck revs, gravel screeches.

Bloke never discerns observation. Goes off. Right off.

Nothing registers outside his righteous rage.

Jacoba tends weeping skin flaps, bruise maps.

Womanish, Tadeus stands at our backs; forgets nothing.

Wields tortoiseshell hairbrush through blood clots.

Knuckles clenched he helps her limp home.

First time, we carry custards asweat beneath calico.

Next, Royale duck eggs to ward off evil eyes.

Third time, in steaming pot, pookies for our perpetrator.

Givt him thumping pixie visions.

Mother once said, choose loamy black shrooms.

Heavy in the bucket. Grit taste. As required.

At burial, girl selective mute, yet stands tall like new.

Him dug in so deep, our spades hit bracky water.

Silver birch and flax flowers cure contaminated soil.

Under wee woman's shawl. Bowl of a belly looms.

Household durst not utter the devil's name.

Thady cautions patience, learned from life.

Tiny mewling thing possesses, neither
darkling brows nor needy-greedy mouth.
Only girl's knowledge. Strength.
When malfeasant kin turn up,
We will keep them safe.

Gay Lynch

A Small Hut by the Sea

In bushranger parlance, Myrtle's find might be described as hide-out. For Myrtle, it is a small hut by the sea, and exactly – *miraculously* – as she had fantasised. She likes to push her bare feet into the boards to verify stability of the floor.

Myrtle's prickling desire had been to pare back. Desire not strong enough a word; hers was a ship-turning, tectonic plate-shifting, wordless, shapeless force. Could barely articulate what she had wanted removed – *removed* – from her orbit. All sentient beings. Yes, even animals. Most objects; though not her skeins of yarn, obviously.

Sound.

Myrtle wanted sound removed.

Never again did she wish to hear the slurping, swallowing sounds of anyone – *anyone* – in her vicinity. Coughing: no. Bird sound: tolerable. Calm tidal water: actually, yes. Only water, then.

Slowly, her project takes shape. Soon, she well understands, it will reach end to end of the hut and there'll be new decisions to make. Instinct-driven and impractical, the knitting project is now her sole interest.

Gulls soar overhead, quiet and majestic.

Myrtle misses her sisters, of course. Misses them in her bones. She silently recites their names: Rosalind, Mary, Nance, Maude, Lily. Her tongue flicks around the playful mix of her sisters' consonants and vowels, lapping the top of her mouth.

How has Myrtle failed to note the sensation of her own tongue in her own mouth? She takes a small native raspberry from her gathered stash and slips it between her lips, its thin skin splitting, tart-sweet juice trickling down her throat.

She isn't going back.

Rebekah Clarkson

The Tightrope

My father embarrasses me. All he does is show off. I want him to act like other fathers, but I don't dare say anything because I know my mother worries about him as much as I do, even though she never lets on.

‘At least he makes people smile,’ she says.

It's an awful thing to say. Just once I want her to admit she's as embarrassed as I am, so I won't feel so guilty.

I think about all this as my father grabs the pole he bought at Greenburg Plumbing Supplies and steps out the attic window, shimmying towards a rope anchored to the roof and stretched to my tree house like a clothesline without any clothes.

I step forward and slowly shut my eyes.

Behind me my mother is clapping.

Billie Travalini

Grief

The anger-sad moves in a slow ricochet from chest to belly and then back again. I think of bar-tailed godwits, flying the Pacific Ocean without stopping: America to New Zealand, then up through Asia and back. They're waders, not sea birds, but they migrate anyway, feeding as they fly. My torso, an ocean. These feelings, determined birds.

Grief II

The godwits do not resent the ocean its girth.

Grief III

Two godwits (compassion and unattachment) fly the perimeter of what is possible.

Sometimes I feel my scapula as wings.

Shady Cosgrove

I'm steeped in rainbow delirium – front-facing wit's-end-mothering – extended reckoning, memory's unflappable insistence.

Julia Prendergast

Rebekah Clarkson's award-winning stories have appeared in publications including Griffith Review, Best Australian Stories and Something Special, Something Rare: Outstanding Short Stories by Australian Women (Black Inc). She is the author of Barking Dogs (Affirm Press), a critically acclaimed short story cycle set on Peramangk land, where Rebekah lives. She has taught creative writing at several Australian Universities, the University of Texas at Austin and as guest lecturer at the University of Cambridge. Rebekah is a Board Member of the Society for the Study of the Short Story and works as a learning adviser at the University of South Australia.

Associate Professor Shady Cosgrove writes on Dharawal land and teaches creative writing at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her most recent book Flight (Gazebo Books 2024) explores the linked tensions of flight and longing, and her short works and articles have appeared in Best Australian Stories, Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry, Dreaming Awake, New Writing, TEXT, The Scholarship of Creative Writing Practice, Animal Studies Journal, The Writing Mind, Cordite, Overland, Antipodes, Southerly, Island, takahe and the Eunoia Review. She has received an ANU HRC Fellowship, a Bundanon Artists Residency and the Varuna House Eleanor Dark Flagship Fellowship. For more information, see www.shadycosgrove.com

Gay Lynch writes essays, novels and stories on unceded Bunurong land and adjunct to Flinders University. In 2025, she will judge the Creative Prose 1st Prize, AAALS (American Association Australasian Literary Studies), which she won in 2024. In 2023, Lynch presented on flash, delivered a paper, and read at the ICSSE (16th International Conference on the Short Story in English, Singapore); read for APWT (Australian Pacific Writers & Translators) at 2023 Ubud Writers and Readers' Festival; and chaired panels at the 2023 ASSF (Australian Short Story Festival). In 2019 she launched Unsettled at ISAANZ (Irish Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand).

Julia Prendergast lives in Melbourne, Australia, on unceded Wurundjeri land. Her novel, The Earth Does Not Get Fat (2018) was longlisted for the Indie Book Awards (debut fiction). Her short story collection, Bloodrust and Other Stories, was published in 2022. Julia is a practice-led researcher – an enthusiastic supporter of transdisciplinary, collaborative research practices, with a particular interest in

neuro/psychoanalytic approaches to writing and creativity. She is President/Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing (Australasia), and Associate Professor and Discipline Leader (Creative Writing, Literature and Publishing) at Swinburne University, Melbourne.

Billie Travalini lives in the United States. Her short fiction has been published in Remnants, The Moth, Another Chicago Magazine, as well as numerous anthologies. Her memoir, Blood Sisters, was a finalist for the Bread Loaf Prize and won the Lewes Clark Discovery Prize. Billie received the Governor's Award for the Arts, the Delaware Division of the Arts Masters Award in Literature, and the National Federation of Press Women Communicator of Achievement Award. She teaches at Wilmington University, advocates for at-risk kids and the mentally ill, and co-founded and coordinates the Lewes Creative Writers Conference, now in its 18th year.



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TEXT prose and poetry

**Cassandra Atherton, Dominique Hecq, Shady Cosgrove, Gay Lynch,
Jen Webb, Katrina Finlayson, Eugen Bacon, Paul Hetherington,
Rebekah Clarkson, Owen Bullock, Julia Prendergast, Jessie Seymour**

The Darling Exchange

Introduction

Springboarding from the ubiquitous ‘Kill your darlings’ writing advice, this project is a co-authored collection of sudden writing in which each contributor offers a darling line from a previous project that, for one reason or another, had to be cut. These lines are then ‘adopted’ by another writer and used as a prompt for a very short prose/poetry piece. This has resulted in a rich and exciting quasi-collaboration of writers riffing off each other’s discarded material, breathing new life into lost lines and braiding their creativity together. The project is proof of concept for a larger project and the basis for a proposed workshop at the next AAWP conference. The project trial intends two rounds of writing with each darling line being adopted by two different people. The first thread is shown below, the second is ongoing.

Darling Prompt: “Are you lost?” he said. “I can help you find your way.”

Adopted by: Cassandra Atherton

*

Transit Triptych

1.

Just before midnight, Docomo Tower is a pillar of magenta. Light lifts on the backs of clouds and scatters in evening’s mist; the sky is a floss of pink and mauve. It’s the shade of my pink bobbed wig; the colour that raced up my legs in the hospital room. We stretch on the bed and you fall asleep holding my foot, my toes in your palm. Later, I wake as you mumble something unintelligible in my ear.

2.

One minute past twelve, the trains are ghosts on their tracks. We stand under the red neon Kabuki-chō Ichiban-gai gate, my hair and cheeks cherried beneath the curved light. Your google map is a miniature of the surrounding screens on shops and office blocks – tiny rectangle veined with blue streets.

3.

Last night, a man in a Godzilla costume approached us. “Are you lost?” he said. “I can help you find your way.” He’d been singing a Jimi Hendrix song outside the East exit. We followed him to the basement restaurant, his tail a giant triangular shadow outlined by neon. He showed us how to cook cheesy okonomiyaki, his plush green pawns nudging the fogged cloche. When he raised a pint of beer to his jagged teeth, I asked, “What song were you singing?” He grinned, “All Along the Watchtower.”

*

Bio: Cassandra Atherton is one of the leading international scholars on prose poetry and

an award-winning prose poet. She co-authored *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton UP 2020) and co-edited the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (Melbourne UP, 2020) with Paul Hetherington, and they are currently co-writing *Ekphrastic Poetry: An Introduction*. She is Distinguished Professor of Writing and Literature at Deakin University.

Darling prompt: Six projects on the go and no dress code

Adopted by: Dominique Hecq

*

Curtain call

Autofocus clicks to fade under the blink of the lanterns. Silence careens through the performance hall. Applause. Back straight yet kinked, I bow. Twirl in a swish of satin. Exit. My dressing room is a throng of past transgressions poking a fake finger at me: pouches and flasks, flacons orphaned of stoppers, notebooks. All empty. The bowl of Chanel rouges: Coco, Allure, Velvet, Shine. Empty. Tiara, Stetson, beret, top hat. Good bye to all that.

Six projects on the go, no dress code. No mask. Your show is now based on a distortion of chaos. The energy of your selves lights rainbow sparks as the silhouette of your waiting propels the shadow of your absence onto the walls of another scene.

A fraudulently authenticated corpse in Ismene's hand-me down clothes, factitious fakery. Home ground recedes inside an empty skull. A gash in time body mind space. Night leers.

You are caged from the inside.

[...]

Break the lock. NOW!

A car named Desire threw me in the air. Why didn't I pay attention crossing the express way?

You were on a wandering path.

That is the way of self-imposed exiles engaged in marginal activities.

Writing?

Of sorts.

Its ever-conflicted encounters, perhaps?

Hahaha.

[...]

Neither from here nor elsewhere, I set out to uncover the estranging strange, so dreams can finally integrate into reality, to live and write in a poetic universe with its own laws.

[...]

Let's get out of here. PJs are fine. Flannel's best: touch of a bird's wing.

[...]

Je, tu, nous. I, you, they. Anti/ gó/ nē. Mind you, nē as in *né/ née/ nés* – French for born.

Look, I get it, Ant. Break it down.

Anti/ gó/ nē

1. Living lie.
2. Indignant outcast-by-consensus.
3. Branching poetic paths.
4. Gleeful is the night.
5. Voices of the dead speak in alive shout.
6. Three caskets times two.

Je, tu, nous. I, you, they. Mind you, not *I, you, we*. This is no mere translation. We spare you nothing, I, you, us, twice interred. Unanchored in narration untomb all plots.

Everything is linked through my name: the atrophy of language that began with the rationalist disavowal of logos is of our times, though understood only in its logical space, which deprives us of speech. It literally depopulates the earth, demeaning language – at least that which, in the quest for a way of thinking founded on an authentic approach to being, stands close to my *éclat*, dear sister. It's the path poetry has sought since Hölderlin: voiceless logos reducing language to manageable programs.

And now, white noise, with a growing silence whose secret voice no longer matches that of the human beings.

Anti/ gó/ nē aspires to the condition of birds. It offers a composite portrait of the giftedness in song of the naked self-fashioned beauty of birds in peril.

*

Bio: Dominique Hecq is a widely anthologised and award-winning poet, fiction writer, essayist and translator. She lives and works on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung land. Hecq writes in English and French. Her creative works comprise a novel, six collections of short stories and seventeen books of poetry. *Otopos* is her latest publication.

Darling prompt: You once said kissing wasn't really anything, while I clung to its ruby intimacy.

Adopted by: Eugen Bacon

*

Price Per Carat

You once said kissing wasn't really anything, while I clung to its ruby intimacy, the passion and protection it signified. It wasn't you who needed protecting, but me. I needed saving from myself because my life before you felt like a centuries-old ant mound, slanted ground up in all ugliness towards the bluest sky that didn't want it.

Everyone I met from the moment I pushed out of my mother's birth canal salivated me brick by brick, one termite after another after another, some smaller and softer than a single grain of rice, others humongous and scary compared to my very own littleness, and they worked un/together to shape me into a network of tunnels, the architecture of me.

And it was flawed.

But there you were, my love, there, there, you reached me.

Your touch put me back in unsellable price per carat, shone me darkest, brightest in the most vibrant red of the ruby that you were. You intersected me with needles of clarity, and you held the power of life in those lips as blood flowed inside, and you lived.

You lived.

I am still flawed in this sculpted landscape of humanity where dung beetles spill over fresh wet balls, giant warthogs sniff their ravenous snouts on tough dry ground, and I drift into autofocus, getting older and adorning myself with the kind of grouchiness that comes from seeing the world too much.

My devotion to you is as fiery and sparkly today as it was that wet autumn evening when I clasped carnations, lilies and chrysanthemums, flowers in the bold and soft colours of

your ruby, and I lay them.

And I tried to weep but couldn't because all I thought as my lips touched the inscription on that granite stone standing cold and wet on a small lawn base, all I thought, my love,

was that

kissing you,

even in death,

is everything.

*

Bio: Eugen Bacon, MA, MSc, PhD, is an African Australian author. She's a British Fantasy and Foreword Indies Award winner, a twice World Fantasy Award finalist, and a finalist in the Shirley Jackson, Philip K. Dick Award, and the Nommo Awards for speculative fiction by Africans. Eugen is an Otherwise Fellow, and was also announced in the honor list for 'doing exciting work in gender and speculative fiction'. *Danged Black Thing* made the Otherwise Award Honor List as a 'sharp collection of Afro-Surrealist work'. Visit her at eugenbacon.com.

Darling Prompt: In the centre of the open car park space, well-lit but circled by shadows creeping in from the surrounding Berlin night, a large man stands, and he sings drunkenly towards the sky.

Adopted by: Gay Lynch

*

*Hier wohnte von März 1929 bis Jan./Feb. 1933 der Englische Schriftsteller Christopher Isherwood * 26.8.1904 + 5.1.1986 Seine Romane "Lebwohl Berlin" und "Mister Norris Steigt Um" basieren auf seinen erlebnissen aus dieser zeit. Nach motiven beider Romane entstand später das musical "Cabaret".*

Charlotte fingers the lapels of her tux jacket, tweaks her tights and slides through the *Nollendorfplatz* car park, well-lit but circled by shadows creeping in from the surrounding Berlin night. Wired with cherry blossoms, her headband purchased for fifteen euros, just moments before outside the U-Bahn, feels only slightly too tight. If her brain constricts while she dances, she will flower crown a sexy *madchen*. What time will the next session begin? Femme as fuck and happy as, she strides on to view the Christopher Isherwood plaque outside the Metropol. Reads it and moves on.

Smells of early spring make her nose twitch. Just discernible across the road, children

shriek into the swirling pink air. Lunch café staff stack chairs on tables. A half dozen orphaned green scooters lie abandoned by empty bike racks. Are their riders inside, or on the train riding to a rave in Berghain? Few people drive cars in this precinct. A blue one virtue signals 100% electric car sharing, WE Share.

Berlin's street art near the Metropol, gesticulates in wild red, gold, purple-coloured letters that overlap. Gigantic pink pouty-lipped graffiti characters wearing outsized sunnies, more KAWS than Banksy, spruik a pop culture festival.

In the centre of the open carpark space, a large man sings drunkenly into the sky. Then suddenly he bends double, curves his arms around his knees and spins, stops, steps forward and roundhouse kicks the crap out of a brown rubbish bin. Rotates and roundhouse kicks again. The bin topples one way and then the other but rights itself. Bald and bare-chested, wearing leather braces that toggle to green fleuro shorts, he looks like an angry helicopter. Over and over, he spins and extends his taut-muscled leg. Neck inked with the peace sign – more ridiculous – he pauses to eyeball her fiercely. Charlotte sticks to the shadow of the building.

'Oi!

She ducks her head.

'Oi, you!

The spinning giant demands, craves, call and response.

On her own mission, Charlotte doesn't always want to know him. For sure he is not Mr Ishyvoo who famously frequented the precinct, and similarly held women in low esteem – had been known to call one woman's writing snugly cunty. While hanging about the *Neues Schauspielhaus*, Isherwood only admitted to respecting one female friend, the subject of Charlotte's research, and with whom he discoursed for hours on sex and literature.

Had she, Weimar Republic chanteuse and writer Jean Ross, rushed like Charlotte, onto the pavement, peered up at the naked, stone figures, close to copulation, intertwined in a row across the building façade? Heads thrown back, the young women look ecstatic with abandon, humping one man's leg, reaching for another behind them, with one exception, the girl shrugging off a clawed and horned satyr mouthing her neck. Unravelling the figures makes Charlotte badly want a cigarette.

'Come on then,' she shouts at the goofball in the car park. 'Get a grip if you're coming inside with me.' God knows what had made him mad this time. Her substance enhanced, sometime Berliner, sibling.

*

Bio: Gay Lynch writes essays, novels, and stories on unceded Bunurong land and adjunct to Flinders University. In 2025, she will judge the Creative Prose 1st Prize, AAALS (American Association Australasian Literary Studies), which she won in 2024. In 2019, she launched *Unsettled*, at ISAANZ (Irish Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand).

Darling prompt: You create hazardous circumstances to pursue the space of your own disappearance, believing you master destiny.

Adopted by: Jen Webb

*

Keys beneath the mat. Codes in the potplant. Security camera above the door.

Yes you are in Terminator territory, fighting the good fight, watched by CCTV. The camera rolls its eye toward you, then blinks. The camera turns its face toward you, alert. Yes you smash the lens, but you're already in the hard drive.

You create hazardous circumstances to pursue the space of your own disappearance, believing you master destiny.

Press your car key and the engine will purr, and the car slowly back out of the garage. Speak to your car, and it will speak back. Like parrots do, like phones. Singing happy birthday on command. Lighting the candles.

*

Bio: Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra. Recent books include *Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts* (Manchester UP, 2016); *Gender and the Creative Labour Market* (Palgrave 2022), and the poetry collections *Moving Targets* (2018), *Flight Mode* (with Shé Hawke, 2020), and *The Daily News* (2024). She is co-editor of the literary journal *Meniscus* and the scholarly journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. Her scholarly work focuses on the affordances of creative practice for health and wellbeing, and on the logic of genre; her poetry focuses on material poetics and questions of seeing and being.

Darling prompt: The song is shimmering, and I realise I have followed it across oceans.

Adopted by: Jessica Seymour

*

Caesura

The song is shimmering
like ashes and gold dust in water
and I realise I have followed it across oceans.

I spent my youth to learn the melody;
I followed that song
to the sour cold north,
to the steaming east,
to spare rooms, and libraries, and cafes,

and hopeless nights

with no arms to call home
when the gilded calamity of noise
swore to drown me.

I played and played and played
(because it was all I had learned how to do)
the harmonies that bought my future
with sweet promise.

They changed the tune and didn't tell me
until after my fingertips were calloused and scarred.
The instrument that should have been my destiny

turned to ash
mid-song.

*

Bio: Dr Jessica Seymour is an independent researcher based in Sydney. Her research interests include creative and professional writing, children's and young adult literature, popular culture, and comparative literature. She has contributed chapters to several essay collections, which range in topic from online/transmedia writing, to TV series like *Doctor Who* and *Supernatural*, to ecocriticism in the works of JRR Tolkien. Her creative work has appeared in *Voiceworks*, *Needle in the Hay*, *Meniscus* and *HelloHorror*.

Darling prompt: All of my nightmares have your teeth

Adopted by: Julia Prendergast

*

Drug-slung, he lurches at me, canines bared – mother morphs as enemy, carer becomes combatant. I am slammed against the front door.

Canines are called eye teeth for their positionality below the eyes. It's more than that. Eye teeth show how we see – cutting refractions.

As I am hurtled backwards, my shoulder hits the timber architrave – skull ricochets, shattering stained glass. From the floor, I watch our lives come undone.

You approach him, arms outstretched. He turns, swings, lands a knuckled punch against your front teeth. You restrain him, arms around his shoulders, holding tight until your bodies are down here, beside mine.

Your chin is planted against his forehead, incisors pressing your bottom lip, precisely the way they did when the obstetrician sliced my perineum to free his newborn head. We are eyelid as blood runs down your chin, along his temple – time yesterday and this moment pixellated – his tiny blood-streaked forehead against my chest as I swaddled him in dismay, your face beside mine as if we were seeing out of the same eyes.

I press against the floor, stand, place my hands against the front door to steady myself. The leaded lines that set the glass in geometric angles are forked like wet driftwood. Shades of glass – teal, amber, water glass – splintered, glitter-shifting, like our sea.

Later that day, outside, we observe the tidal wash as if we're watching televised weather.

You inhale cigarette smoke, squint, exhale.

Dentist? I ask.

I don't give a fuck about my teeth, you say, waving your hand, mid-air. *Sort itself out*, you add.

I shouldn't have gone away, I say.

Fuck him. Live your life. Do whatever you want.

What I want. How to name and know such things.

Months later, your incisors have turned pewter-grey – nerves deadened.

I inhale cigarette smoke as if deep in yoga practice. *I'm going to mix one more*, I say, clinking ice chips, dregs of gin and elderflower tonic. *Do you need anything?*

Just you, you say, smiling. You pass your glass, watery brown like weak coffee.

I go inside, refresh our glasses, return, pass yours.

Sit down, you say. *Tonight, sleep. Where to now. You decide. I have your back.*

Your words are sonic clatter trap, as if your teeth are loose in their sockets. The moon lights a dance on the water – mirrored light, kaleidoscope of stained glass, shiny eye teeth.

You crunch ice shards, pulverising the ice between your hind molars, light up, inhale cigarette smoke with your thick tongue.

Don't do the tongue thing, I beg.

You repeat the gesture, smiling, butt the cigarette, fall asleep. I revere this, effortless slide to slumber. Chin on chest, lower lip drooping, your jawbone pulses as you grind your teeth sedately – the hardest molars, hidden from view, even from those who observe each other's mouths across a lifetime.

So much work, so things can be swallowed.

They say teeth hold tight in the jawbone, decades after death. Then, like lips, they are dust.

What I want. *Pff* – driftwood gnarled like fingers, shards of glass run smooth, opaque – cogitating wind, dance of tilting mirrors on the water's surface.

*

Bio: Julia lives in Melbourne, Australia, on unceded Wurundjeri land. Her novel, *The Earth Does Not Get Fat* (2018) was longlisted for the Indie Book Awards (debut fiction). Her short story collection *Bloodrust and Other Stories* was published in 2022. Julia is a practice-led researcher – an enthusiastic supporter of transdisciplinary, collaborative research practices, with a particular interest in neuro/psychoanalytic approaches to writing and creativity. She is President/Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing (Australasia), and Associate Professor and Discipline Leader (Creative Writing, Literature and Publishing) at Swinburne University, Melbourne.

Darling prompt: If you had to liken him to a breed of dog – another game Gretta delighted in playing – you'd be tossing up between bulldog, sheep dog or pitbull terrier.
Adopted by: Katrina Finlayson

dogs of war

we run

we three night-black life thieves
leave tracks in soft sand long hair sea air whipped
old blood burns sour sharp fresh in noses
bodies bound tight muscle coils twelve legs move quick move quiet

fear or use us
 loser winner
 sharp teeth bared gums red drool strings fleck
 history in the wind behind us
 victim victor
 eyes rolling panting hot breath hurts hearts
 fast and far never stop always more
 hunting, hunting, leaping heat-seeking closing in

flee scared rabbit hide children in holes there is no soft place safe from us
here olive trees weep, there is only poetry
bark bite fire shrouds jump
kill where we land

over land
we run, run, run

✿

Control

If you had to liken him to a breed of dog – another game Gretta delighted in playing – you'd be tossing up between bulldog, sheep dog or pitbull terrier.

She didn't actually want to fuck a dog, but the overwhelming rush of hot shame whenever she felt a raw, *animal* lust for a man was too large for her to exist in and so she categorised the men she desired into dog breeds. Only this time, it wasn't working.

This man, now behind the next row of bookshelves, a metre away from her, apparently uninterested in her and focused on books, had her weepingly flustered. She was shaken by her sudden and intense desire for him and horrified to feel anchored so uncomfortably and deeply in her body, not intellectually and emotionally detached in the ways she usually moved through the world, safe in dissociation.

He'd said two words to her, 'excuse me', as he'd tried to make himself smaller to squeeze past her in the narrow aisle. His fingertips, or his arm, or maybe just a few fibres on the very periphery of his crisp pale blue linen shirt, had brushed against the bare skin of her shoulder as he raised his arms slightly to indicate he did not intend to touch her while he moved past. She'd felt an instant acid panic rise in her throat, sour bile and also a surge of something she wasn't sure was physical and which she couldn't quite decipher into revulsion or a fiery need.

And now, the bookshop had faded into a nauseous background blur and all she could think about were strong, tight muscles beneath tanned skin on his tattooed and hairy forearm. Bulldog. An image flashed into her mind of him kneeling, tossing his shaggy sandy hair back as his stubbled chin drew closer to her pale bare stomach. Sheep dog. No, too much. She quickly thumbed the spine of a book on French politics, light touch gliding across silky gloss cover.

Flushed, pinpricks of sweat beading hairline scalp skin, Gretta tried to think of anything else but her mind raced with visions of knots pulling tight on ropes wrapped around his wrists, her fingertips adjusting the buckle and stiff leather of a dog collar around his tensed thick neck. She could almost hear herself barking commands as he knelt before her.

Gretta liked all kinds of games. Guess how many seconds before the red traffic light turns green and she can inhale. Guess how many thousand steps she will walk blistered feet along twilight leafy streets. Guess how many times she will pinch the skin of her wrist before she swallows a mouthful of food. Guess how many snaps of a whip, swishing past fishnet thighs to land hard on skin mottling red, welts raising, to make a pitbull, yes, definitely a pitbull, of a man cry out.

She heard the door swing shut as the stranger left the bookshop. Counted to twenty before she allowed herself to exhale.

*

Bio: Katrina Finlayson is a creative writer and independent researcher living on Kaurna country. Katrina works mostly with creative nonfiction, with both personal and critical, braided and traditional, essays published in *Meanjin*, *TEXT*, *Axon: Creative Explorations*, *Hecate* and various AAWP conference proceedings. Katrina's research and writing are infused with deep curiosity about strangeness, home and travel, memory, the Uncanny, and the interstices of creative and critical writing. Katrina has previously contributed to collaborative writing projects for *The Incompleteness Book* and *The Incompleteness Book II*, and *The Writing Mind: Creative Writing Responses to Images of the Living Brain*.

Darling prompt: If that was so, why this?

Adopted by: Owen Bullock

*

If that was so, why this?

if I learnt before, why this lesson?

was I deluded?

delusion seems normal to me

I mean, every day I'm deluded at some point:

 I don't see things as they are

I know this may not be anyone's dictionary

 definition

but I'm generous in my use of the word

I don't want to accuse anyone of anything

but I assume you've also been deluded

 (perhaps less often than myself)

at least I have another chance
to learn
I woke up today
with new energy
did yoga
outside in the dark
had breakfast
listened to an uplifting podcast
got to work early
editing my writing
brainstorming for a new project
when the email came in
from the mine
I felt traumatised
all over again
which is why this
& why that
but tomorrow . . .
or even today . . .

*

Bio: Owen Bullock's latest poetry collection is *Pancakes for Neptune* (Recent Work Press, 2023), following three previous poetry titles, five books of haiku, a bilingual edition of tanka and a novella. His research interests include creative arts and wellbeing; haikai literature; poetry and process; semiotics and poetry; prose poetry, and collaboration. His scholarly work has appeared in *Antipodes*, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Arts Therapy*, *Axon*, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, *Juxtapositions*, *Ka Mate Ka Ora*, *Medical Humanities*, *New Writing*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Social Alternatives*, *TEXT* and *Westerly*. He teaches Creative Writing at the University of Canberra.

Darling prompt: Ne’za sits on tufts of beardgrass and waits for the sun to set, because she doesn’t know what else to do.

Adopted by: Paul Hetherington

*

Beardgrass

Ne’za is absorbed in the idea of the sunset, where a mountain top splits, facing the long peninsula and agitating sea. She speaks of her family history, as if her mother has returned like a monster from a folktale. I’m too young to understand, saying ‘Put it aside,’ as if memory might be an unwanted toy. As she cries, I make pancakes in a cast iron pan, the campfire rising to chase my hand. She says, ‘We’re crazy to have come without the right equipment.’ I gabble about a schoolfriend who fell after climbing a light pole, blood purpling her eyes, and scrub the pan with creek water we’ve gathered in a bucket. When I see the swimming crustacean I say ‘Look,’ but Ne’za’s no longer there. I climb the rise next to our tent and follow a dirt path inland. ‘I’m sorry,’ I say, ‘I’m really sorry.’ Ne’za sits on tufts of beardgrass and waits for the sun to set, because she doesn’t know what else to do.

*

Bio: Paul Hetherington has published 18 full-length collections of poetry, along with a verse novel and 14 chapbooks. His work has received more than 50 awards and nominations, including the 2021 Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize and the inaugural The Marion Halligan Award (2024) for the book *Sleeplessness* (Pierian Springs Press, 2023). With Cassandra Atherton he co-authored *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton UP, 2020) and co-edited the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (Melbourne UP, 2020). He is Emeritus Professor of Writing at the University of Canberra and a founding editor of the international online journal, *Axon: Creative Explorations*.

Darling prompt: *The Weakness in Me* by Joan Armatrading / still my favourite song

Adopted by: Shady Cosgrove

*

Still my favourite song

Maybe it was an open window – the aviary started in the bathroom, about a week after the election. Two crows perched on the shower rail, calling as I brushed teeth. Then a willy wag tail sashaying beneath the sink, that angle of hind feather to body. And a cockatoo on the back of the toilet, eyeballing me through the mirror. He was a bit loud, and I worried about disturbing my downstairs neighbours. I must have left the bathroom door ajar because nests appeared in the living room (couch) and bedroom (pillow). Even on top of the refrigerator. And more birds kept arriving: galahs and rainbow lorikeets, pee-wees and gang-gangs. It was an adjustment, of course, but we settled in: community, right? Now the pee-wees walk across the tablecloth, picking at my supper, and pigeons coo me to sleep from the wardrobe. Morning tea with the gang-gangs. They never check their phones, don't talk about the news. It's lovely, this relief. Not what I expected – perhaps it's the weakness in me, this overwhelm – but it's been years now with only birdsong, and life is more peaceful.

*

Bio: Shady Cosgrove writes on Dharawal land and teaches creative writing at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her most recent book *Flight* (Gazebo Books 2024), explores the linked tensions of flight and longing, and her short works and articles have appeared in *Best Australian Stories*, *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry*, *Dreaming Awake*, *New Writing*, *TEXT*, *The Scholarship of Creative Writing Practice*, *Animal Studies Journal*, *The Writing Mind*, *Cordite*, *Overland*, *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, *Island*, *takahe* and the *Eunoia Review*. She has received an ANU HRC Fellowship, a Bundanon Artists Residency and the Varuna House Eleanor Dark Flagship Fellowship. For more information, www.shadycosgrove.com.



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TEXT poetry

Martin Langford

Advice to Young Writers

As, I am sure, you're aware,
interest in the arts is a sign of weakness.
Involvement will make you go mad.
This is your last chance to look, once again,
at dog grooming – or crocodile skins.
For those who plough smilingly on:
plenty of wine, some good books,
and a good pair of shoes –
they may be the last you can buy.
Imagine the pluses with care:
you will need to protect them.
The griefs will appear on their own.
Re-Vital-Ize will assist your return
to the desk, after dead-ends or block –
love-cliffs – or over-consumption.
If cash looks scarce – and it will –
writers' camps aren't hard to find:
out past the back of Spud's Spares –
on the apron at Jo's.
This is a land of transactions. The toughness,
refinement you aim for's of no interest here.

Words are invisible swifts. And then –
 there are subtler, more treacherous things:
 even when well-written pieces outstare
 the obsessions of cultural prestige,
 the life you inhabit does not.
 And even if writing is one of the places
 where *others* can be entertained,
 this world rewards those
 who'd rather control them –
 as simplifications, straw men.
 If that, indeed, is what fired this –
 the desire to find shapes
 for the lost landscape out past the self –
 you'll soon find yourself on a ledge
 with no pacts or solutions.
 You will need more than mere wit –
 you'll need guts (there's a rock off Mackay
 where the smashed-up-by-words can recover).
 Don't try to justify what you are doing.
 The few who will get it will know
 one begins with wild claims. For the rest,
 your despairs and ambitions
 cannot be explained. Good luck
 with what, after all, may have not been a choice.
 At least you'll have followed your instincts.
 No need to register where you are going.
 You won't know yourselves. And the cops?
 Well, they won't give a damn.

Martin Langford has published eight books of poetry, the most recent of which is The Boy from the War Veterans' Home (Puncher and Wattmann, 2022). He was co-editor, with J. Beveridge, J. Johnson and D. Musgrave, of Contemporary Australian Poetry (2016), and has reviewed and written articles about poetry for a range of journals, including Meanjin (2011-2023). He has had a long-term involvement in the organization of poetry events, directing three Australian Poetry Festivals (2001, 2004, 2006), and was a founding Board member of Australian Poetry Ltd (Chair 2019-2020).



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TEXT poetry

Annabel Wilson

Poetic Subjects

(After Rebecca Lindenburg)

The capital city. Arrowroot. Water-bur. Colts. Hail. Bamboo grass. The round-leaved violet. Club moss. Water oats. Flat river-boats. The mandarin duck. The scattered chigaya reed. Lawns. The green vine. The pear tree. The jujube tree. The althea.

– Sei Shōnagon, 枕草子 *Makura no Sōshi* / *The Pillow Book*

Steep settlements tumbling seaward: Pōneke, Ōhinehou, Ōtepoti. Kelp. The blurred blue line of the horizon. *Other people's poems*. What to bring to a pot luck. Seichan says *we're always writing a version of the same story*. For me, it's always dusk.

The tang of fresh-cut feijoa. Kawakawa. Remembering the dead when doing menial tasks like sweeping the hearth, digging new potatoes, laundry. How the wingbeat of kererū sounds like a hundred paper fans, opening. The communal maternity roosts of the long-tailed bat.

The satisfactory snap of sheets on a rotary clothesline in a Nor'west wind. Tī kouka: the world's largest lily. Places where the skin is thin: Samhain, shins, ankles, your clavicle. Contronyms: *ravel, bound, quite, cleave, buckle*.

A child on your hip, a 12 pack under one arm or carrying a gun: how this changes your gait. How walnuts look like tiny brains. Falling downstairs. Sharpening knives. *The way your smile just beams*. How it's so hard to say anything new about eyes, snow, the moon. The strange acuity of predictive text 'fails': *Shall we go to the pub for a riot? (pint). Take a right onto a dirt road then weep* (veer). *Narcoti* (Maranui). Pūriri: the tree, the moth, their symbiosis. All the theatre darlings at the bar on opening night saying *break some legs*. Dark harbours. Ardour. Vellum. Palimpsest.

Tangata Tiriti writer and teacher Annabel Wilson lives in Swannanoa, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her poetry has been published and performed in Aotearoa and further afield. Annabel's first book, Aspiring Daybook (Mākarō Press 2018) won the NZ Mountain Film and Book Festival Best Fiction Award in 2018 and was longlisted for the Ockhams in 2019. Her most recent work is the chapbook dusk & us (Ghost City Press 2024). In 2023, she completed a PhD in creative writing from Massey University in which she investigated hybrid forms of writing.



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TEXT poetry

Verity Oswin

November

As I worry at the wan page
my brother harvests the wheat
how thin my labour
how flimsy these sheaves

my brother and his wife work through the night
I feed the children
while they reap and run
the barley, the peas, the wheat into town

my pageant plays in the wings
the chime and clash
of saucepans at the sink – my cymbals
and the hiss and spit of stove

as I fry the bacon and the eggs
and chase the afternoon
in its lurch and loom
round the washing machine, round the sun

the mother bin red splendid
on the hill and the children and I at the hem
of the field holding hands
and our breath

watching the tiny seeds flee
fall glow palomino
from the auger the light fading to butter
and the smell of dusk all around.

the newspaper has hailed the season
'Fields of gold'
if you threw the country up in the air
flipped a coin it would catch the light

these pieces of eight shimmer
with the head of the young queen who
(mint green her dress on the mint lawns of the palace)
never grows old

I tinker (I can only) at the edges of the day
with this other dandy needling work
it is (I am) marginalia to the reaping
to the main game

but in the evening I
trundle long thoughts
heavy words back and forth
across the fallow field of page

I write through the heat of
night still the children sleep
the house is quiet
still silent

but for the whirl of the headers
combs flickering across steady
acres snakes
with many tongues rapacious

the sound is tripping over the stubble
through the window beneath
the white clock of the moon
and these the sheaves growing by my side

Verity Oswin is a prize-winning poet and documentary producer currently completing her doctorate in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. Her feminist pastoral poetry worries at the fraught relationship of settler Australia with the land.



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TEXT poetry

Beth Spencer

On Reading Little Women at Age Seven

‘The business of words keeps me awake’

– Anne Sexton, *Ambition Bird*

So it seems there is this thing
one can be called ‘a writer’.

Telling stories to make money.
(Jo making a hundred dollars!)

Maybe I too can save
my family, send sad parents

on a honeymoon
(a moon made of honey).

Wave my pen, whisk away
the fights across the kitchen table

that leave traces in the soup,
red marks on the wall.

I roam paddocks and
compose stories,

create so many friends. But
if I try to capture them on paper

there is a hard rap on my knuckles,
a voice saying: *Not good.*

This is no good. The lines
blur. (No good!) The pencil rolls

under the bed. The paper turns
into a bird and flies out the window.

When I compare myself to LMA and LMM,
even Enid Blyton (*The Faraway Tree!*)

I know that voice is right.
An invisible hand grips,

snaps my pencil in two and
stabs my heart with the stump.

Savage splinters find their way
up into the roof of my mouth.

I eat silence.

(Family fare.)

For a hundred years

I eat their silence.

Beth Spencer writes a mix of poetry, memoir, fiction and essay. Her books include The Age of Fibs, Vagabondage and How to Conceive of a Girl, and her work has been published widely in newspapers, journals and performed for ABC Radio National. She lives and writes on un-ceded Darkinjung land on the NSW Central Coast. Also at <https://bethspen.substack.com/> and @bethspen.



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TEXT poetry

Ella Jeffery

Force Majeure

Power's out. Strewn stones
of light on the ground through blown-in
windows. Water's run white carpet brown.
Yesterday the flatstrap apprentice shucked
powerpoints from walls up and down
the street. Working clean, he collected
each white shell, then salvaged
a beer from next door's pensioners,
who saved their wit and not much else.
Their sixties bungalow drips chipboard.
Their sons aren't coming home
to help. Now, I scrape clothes
from our daughter's bureau, donate
my own to mould. Latches on swollen doors
won't reach – I leave them open
for the thieves. Storm gutters stream
with whitegoods, mattresses, carcasses
of someone's backyard chooks.
The landlord will arrive in a day to rinse
cabinets from their hinges, dry
cracked lino he still won't replace. He says
the house just needs power and paint.

Ella Jeffery is a poet, critic and academic. Her debut book of poems, Dead Bolt, won the Anne Elder Award, the Puncher & Wattmann Prize for a First Book of Poems, and was shortlisted for the Dame Mary Gilmore Award. Her poetry has appeared widely in journals and anthologies including Best Australian Poems, Meanjin, HEAT, Griffith Review, Island and Southerly. She is the recipient of awards and fellowships including a Queensland Writers Fellowship, a Red Room Poetry Fellowship and the Queensland Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award. She is a lecturer in creative writing at Griffith University.



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Les Wicks

Julio

The eye of the travelled boat
coming up a travesty of river
arms of a haybale.
One mouth is a tree
once riddled with termites, plugged with concrete
& *doing great*.

He'd heard about patchwork monsters
so made one.

Creased bills for feet
unstoppable, inexplicable, denatured
as with most monsters
looking much like its maker.
All belief that remains
makes no sense when parts have been disunited

Artworker. Though no reason
to downplay a life.

Les Wicks has been published across 39 countries in 17 languages. His 15th book of poetry is Time Taken – New & Selected (Puncher & Wattmann, 2nd ed 2024). He can be found at leswicks.tripod.com/lw.htm