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TEXT poetry

Martin Villanueva

4 poem suite

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of language provided by medicine.
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twisted. A poem that's straight.
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The poem as measure of velocity.
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The poem as dead lantern.
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Have you forgotten what we were like then
– Frank O'Hara

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A poem about your name
grating the roof of my mouth.
A poem about what I do
when you're away, photographic
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if you cared to look. A poem
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and the end. A poem that bows,
the audience small
yet approving. An electrocuted
poem. A poem hung
by its hind legs, blood drained
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picking at its rot. A poem
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of want. A poem like
animals. *O you were*
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A poem for when kindness must
give way to what we haven't
admitted. A poem for the throat
that clogs after speaking. A poem
for what we mean. A poem
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withheld smile. A poem
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a picture of in case I'd relapse
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A poem in the instant ramyum
packet, in the shorts and tee
still in my underwear and sock
drawer, in the crook of my neck,
in the swing tied to the hoop
in the house two blocks into
my late afternoon walks. A poem
that submits, like a blade so thin
it can be barely felt as it sings
through skin. A poem
and a spool of thread. A poem,
a chisel, and a piece of wood.
A poem and what we beg
to believe. Poetry as set
of instructions, how to bury
a five-year-old, for example,
with exact measurements for each
plank of wood. Poetry as magic
trick, fifty-two possibilities
and she knows which one each
time, the awe that gives way
to staleness, too often now
irritably. Poetry as kite
whose string is tied to a bottle
buried in sand so the flutter
snaps violence into the quiet
sky. Poetry as self-portrait
too on the nose. Poetry as homing
device as sharp as your nose.
A poem about the strangers
we've become. A poem about tears
leaking out of every one
of our pores. A poem about what
we're scared of. A poem about
the boredom we kept warm
for each other. A poem about
the swelling of our brains
against our skulls when we're with
each other now. A poem about
hair that clogs the drain.

A poem that takes a plunger,
drain snake, or a combination
of baking soda and vinegar.
A poem that considers boiling water
or calling someone else.

Martin Villanueva is the author of the poetry collections Account *and* This is How to Mean No Harm*, and of the essay collection* A Pig Was Once Killed in Our Garage*. He is the literary editor of* Kritika Kultura*, and teaches at the Ateneo de Manila University.*

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TEXT poetry

Edward Caruso

Wellspring

1

vacillo tra un pensiero Leopardiano ed Hegeliano
I vacillate between Leopardian and Hegelian thought
– Graffito, Bologna

voices that come back
their tones distilled
notions
few seek

2

I'm so happy 'cause today I've found
my friends, they're in my head
– Graffito, Garibaldi statue pedestal, Lecce

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the found poems
of divine powers
or aliens
other poets clutch them from dreams
some claim to leave their bodies
while transcribing them
others snatch them from infancy
a number talk to their dead
as if alive
and to the living
as if beyond
or to oneself on another page or dimension

others channel them from slumber
or from séances

3

forse quello che cerco neanche c'è
maybe what I'm searching doesn't exist
– Graffito, Bologna

verse will out even
when overheard
in adjacent hotel rooms
late at night
during escapades
or delays on trains
the sounds of the sea
a backdrop

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4

ha le sue paranoia, ma sa affrontare i suoi problemi
he may be paranoid, but he knows how to face his problems

* * *

you're not falling apart, you're falling together
– overheard conversations, Bologna and Lecce

passers-by
listening just listening
between signs
that other world
if it exists
a vast grey
or infinity of highways

words evoked
eavesdropped or
written on walls
defying permanence

Edward Caruso has been published in a number of journals. These included A Voz Limpia, Australian Multilingual Writing Project, 'La Bottega della Poesia' (La Repubblica, Italy), Burrow, Communion, Kalliope X, Mediterranean Poetry, Meniscus, P76, StylusLit, TEXT, Unusual Work *and* Well-Known Corners: Poetry on the Move*. His third collection of poems,* What Distance Means*, will be published by Hybrid Publishers in 2025. He has featured on 3CR's* Spoken Word *program. Since 2024, he has co-judged the Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize.*

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TEXT poetry

Gayelene Carbis

2 poems

Academic Path, or How My MA in Creative Writing Was Supposed to Lead to a PhD

the switching-point

I missed the bus but there's a tram
rollicking along

it's slow, that's for sure
I can almost run beside it
I think I'll hail it down call out

the driver staring straight-ahead
a gaze as vacant as an empty seat
thoughts loom over the line

aimless as
a thesis without a thesis
ambling treatise

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heart in hand
they weren't
looking for murmurs or ruptures only

slates clear as the cord you pull
as you near your destination

that flawed thing behemoth
a dead-duck
my swan-song

I'll be my own conductor then

find my own track back
learn to read the Melways
or discover means of mapping

another route that's home

Nemesis

The narrator of my life has been dreaming.
I think about firing him. He doesn't listen.
He does whatever he wants to do. I say
Look, I've had my fill, and he just laughs.
I've asked him to lift his game, but he sees
no need for it. He seems to think
everything should be as it is, behaves
as if he has no need of me. I'm not sure
how much longer we can continue, I suspect
I'll be forced to take drastic measures.
I've thought of murder but who wants
to do Life. Besides, I know he'd follow me,
or at least, his shadow will. I'm going to try
reading him stories at night before he falls
asleep. Seduction might work, although
who knows what I'll be left with
when he's gone.

Gayelene Carbis's second book of poetry, I Have Decided to Remain Vertical *(Puncher and Wattmann) was recently awarded the Writers' Choice Award 2025 in Greece. Her book won the Eyelands Book Award for Poetry 2024.*

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TEXT poetry

Jan Cyprian Dayop

Murder the pen

Murder the pen

Welcome to the reign of the mob
Where urchins mount royal stools
Welcome to the regime of the hawks
A land where impunity crowns kings
Where Ak47 scoops more respect than the creatives.
In this reign, I ink daily in acidic hunger
Constantly painting my syllables in vain
While the state nurses the ego of the illiterate
His sword more profitable than my pen
Because the state aims to murder the pen
My metaphors, rhymes, a boredom to the illiterate king.

For my intellect, uncertain the dividends
And certain, the frustration, certain, the danger
For the bandit, certain, his merriment
Be it for a kill
Or to nurse the ill
Still
Constantly turning, is the profit from the criminal's wheel.

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To the creative, doom, his tomorrow
For the herder
Boom his adventure, his unholy sojourn
Daily, I languish in the wilderness of my writings
While the nonentity endlessly belches with constipation from his slander
Of the citizens.

In this reign, brain is slain
Sanity stained
While the irritants are trained
The scholar's degree is demonized
The nonentity's lawlessness glorified
The writer's prize is petty
The killer basks in millions from the sweat of the poor.

The killer rejoices in the pleasures of his vice
And the creative, for his audacity, pays the price
This reign rewards criminality with ceremony
And the venom of the pen sees acrimony.

Killing Wiwa

The sovereignty of evil
The supremacy of terror
And the audacity of the emperor
Have engraved our nation
Our land is soaked in red oil
Oil not baked from trees
But squeezed from human veins
Our water is fouled.

Kindly purify the air
Wash the sky clean
Dust the wind of abominable particles
Cleanse the stones from the stains of the emperor
His Godforsaken nitwits have slain Wiwa.

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Wiwa journeyed to the great beyond
No thanks to the injustice of men
His pen, his crime
How dare he write?
Write about the atrocities of the land?
Does he not know that the king thrives in impunity?
Is that the fate of the men of the pen?
The creatives with only tools like words?
Do they deserve to die?
Die because they can write?
Is that the fortune of the intellect?
This land is cursed!

Touch not my Anointed

Here, there are the 'Anointed Untouchables'
The Indefatigable Impossibles
The initiates, the impenetrables
Men who walk without lamp at night, yet don't get drowned in the ditch
Touch them not
Write about them not
But Dele broke the calabash
He dared the un-dared
And painted his words on the forehead of the fearless.

Then his words became his nemesis
His satire, his crucible
Because his innuendos ridiculed the ego of the mighty
His craft must be tossed to the bin
His book banned from the shelves
How dare he urinate on the records of the country's legal don
Senior Advocate, Senior Abrogate
Was offended
Therefore, Dele must suffer
For the sins of the things said
Even those done in the night unseen.

Was he not taught in school
That here, it's impunity not the pen that rules?
And all saintly voices are overruled?

Nurse of words

My route is often a torturous one
It makes me cultivate the patience of a nurse
A nurse of words whose path is curated by transcribing thoughts into written symbols
My process of creation is not a microwave model
I conjure the sounds, mould the syllables
Until the rhythm can fly at the altitude of the eagle
Mine is a trip into the labyrinth of language with elusive goal.

Like a lawyer
I debate the logic of my clarity
As a judge
I pass strong verdicts on my grammar
And convict my ability guilty or not
Every object and subject around me is a tool
I am a carver, but not of woods
I carve imagination
And design emotions.

I use the eyes of the night
To see that which men do in the dark
I am a retailer of words
I hawk words to the doors of the ears of the stubborn
I initiate the journey of a thousand, change with a word
I wake dead ears
I listen to things unheard.

My name is Jan Cyprian Dayop from Nigeria. I am a poet and author.

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TEXT poetry

Willo Drummond

2 'pantentos'

Gretel waits for mother
*a pantento**

Is this *the world we wanted?*
It was better when we were
together in one body.
All who would have seen us dead

believe it will be better when we are
dead. I hear the witch's cry
the call of all who would have us dead.
Thirty years. Screened.

Now dead. I hear the witch's cry
through the green glass.
Thirty years. Screened
in the moonlight through a sheet

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of glassy green
sugar. God rewards
in the moonlight through a sheet
filtered into my bones

like godforsaken sugar. My reward?
Why do I not forget,
as it is filtered to bone,
your eyelids with / two kisses?

I can never forget
that *house.* Its *years.*
Your kiss. Your eyes lidded.
Knowledge of the unborn

housing the years.
No one else *remembers*
all that unborn knowing
of *night, the moon.*

No one remembers how it was
when we bodied together
all night, under the knowing moon
spinning the world we wanted.

* Italicised lines are from Louise Glück's 'Gretel in Darkness' and 'For My Mother'.

Last night I dreamed of Rumi
*a pantento***

Last night in my dreams
you lit a fire to the fragrant wood
and body of song in me.
Watch the smoke rise

through silent woods on fire.
Catch hold of the thread's hidden end, you said,
rise like smoke when no-one's watching.
So, *I cloaked myself in night*

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and my silent body, my spirit
emerged a shining moon
unselfed by cloak of night.
There are treasures within you, you said

bright as the waxing moon.
Whatever the ways of the world,
said you of the treasures within,
split the melon, hand them out

as you go your way in the world.
Intone your body of song
tender as split melon
flesh sweet as dream of night.

** Italicised lines are from four Rumi poems (Trans. Haleh Liza Gafori): 'Salt dry land', 'You shattered my cup', 'I'm not that lion battling an enemy' and 'Whatever the ways of the world'.

Note

These poems are examples of a hybrid form I call the 'pantento': a pantoum that is also a cento. Arising from a continuation of my interest in the dialogic and intertextual in lyric poetry (established in Drummond 2021, 2023 and elsewhere) the pantento combines elements of pastiche, remix and dialogue from the cento with the 'evo[cation] of time past' (Strand and Boland 2001) and slow, circular journey of transformation of the pantoum. Unrhymed, but otherwise following the formal rules of the pantoum, lines A though D of the first quatrain and lines B and D of subsequent quatrains are quoted material from other poets, with original lines emerging via repetition and variation at lines A and C as the poem progresses. By the final quatrain, the original voice has emerged from the dialogue in entirety, while gesturing at a sense of return to lines A and C from the first quatrain.

These pantentos each make use of lines from multiple poems from a single poet – Louise Glück in the case of poem one and Rumi in the case of poem two – though there could of course be other fruitful approaches to source material. This particular approach (what we might call a 'single source pantento') generates an intimate dialogue that nevertheless can be considered both intramural and intermural. That is, it engages a conversation between *poems* of a single poet's oeuvre, and between *poets*, as the new voice (the voice of the author of the pantento) emerges from the exchange. As such, the poems might be considered performative of what Brophy

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(2009) terms the 'transgenerational conversation' of literary influence, as source material by a single poet shapes and informs the emerging voice of the pantento, eventually becoming actively absorbed and transformed.

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Dr Willo Drummond's debut poetry collection Moon Wrasse *(Puncher & Wattmann, 2023) was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and commended in the Five Islands Poetry Prize for a First Book. In 2024,* Moon Wrasse *was selected as one of 6 Australian poetry titles to feature in the Aesop Queer Library. Willo has been the recipient of a Career Development Grant (poetry) from the Australia Council for the Arts, shortlisted for the Val Vallis Award, the ACU Prize for Poetry and the South Coast Writers Centre Poetry Award, runner up in the Tom Collins Poetry Prize and longlisted for the Liquid Amber Poetry Prize and the Grieve Writing Awards. Her creative work has been anthologised in* Best of Australian Poems*,* 100 Poets *and elsewhere. Willo's doctoral research into creative writing and literary influence was awarded a Vice Chancellor's Commendation for Academic Excellence and included a volume of original poetry in dialogue with the poetry of Denise Levertov and with Levertov's personal index to the* Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke *(1946, trans., R.F.C. Hull). In 2023-24 she co-edited, with poet Stuart Barnes, 'Queering Ecopoet(h)ics', a queer themed issue of* Plumwood Mountain, an Australian and International Journal of Ecopoetry and Ecopoetics.

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TEXT poetry

Caitlin Kotula

Fragments of ChatGPT

In conversation with '24A' by Sappho, as translated by Anne Carson

I don't have personal experiences]
or a past] *you will remember*
like humans do,] *for we in our youth*
did these things

yes many and beautiful things
so I don't have memories]
or a 'youth']
to reflect on.]

Note

'Fragments of ChatGPT' is an experimental 'Twin Cinema' poem (Pang, 2020) exploring the tensions between AI-generated text and human-generated poetry. It engages with Anne Carson's translation of Sappho's poem '24A' and her use of open brackets to typographically indicate the loss or destruction of the original text

(Sappho, 2003). Inspired by the translation's intertextual potential, I used the brackets in '24A' to guide my poeticisation of ChatGPT's response to the prompt, 'Do you remember what beautiful things you did in your youth?' (OpenAI, 2024). By intercutting the two texts, I created a palimpsest that fabricates a previously non-existent dialogue between the ancient Greek poet and Generative AI model. This decentring of human experience challenges anthropocentric perceptions of temporality and memory and forces the reader to confront assumptions of human domination over nonhuman entities (Mellamphy, 2021). 'Fragments of ChatGPT' presents a provocative, existential meditation on dis]connection.

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Caitlin Kotula is a creative writing Master's student at Curtin University, and the author of Worm Food and Bone Sand *(2022). Her most recent work includes "Muscae Volitantes" which was shortlisted for the 2024 Brilliant Poetry Competition and has since been translated into French and Spanish. She is fascinated by the poetics of place and space, and her current creative research explores feminine rage as an apt response to affective injustice and poems as sites for feminist resistance.*

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TEXT poetry

John Leonard

2 poems

The art lesson

‘There’s one part of the teaching’, she said,
‘That few of my students grasp:
They learn how to draw so their work
Shows the subject Is As It Is;
But the part that’s hard to pick up
Is drawing so that it Is As It Isn’t
(In order for people to accept
The drawing as true to life).’

Creative writing class

Do not try to express yourself;
What you write, however hard you write
For a market, will tell who you are.

And don’t try to please, but to be
True to yourself in whatever time
So you please or do not please.

Read other writers, but don’t copy
Their mistakes, particularly not
The mistakes of those you admire.

Find a story that you already know
And live in; if you are lucky, or cursed,
Others will know it too, and be neighbours.

And make sure that what you write,
Told mainly by hints and inference,
Is clear, but could support either interpretation.

John Leonard is an Australian poet, well-published over the years, with five collections to his name and poems appearing in publications in Australia, the UK and internationally on the web, including some in translation. In 2020 he was a juror for the Montréal International Poetry Prize. His novel Shakespeare in Virginia *was published in 2024 in London.*

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TEXT prose

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

The Darling Exchange, vol 2

Introduction

This is the second thread of *The Darling Exchange* (the first thread was published in 'TEXT Prose and Poetry April 2025', *TEXT* 29.1). *The Darling Exchange* is a collaborative collection of sudden writing springboarding from the ubiquitous 'Kill your darlings' writing advice. It 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.

Each contributor has offered a darling line from a previous project that, for one reason or another, had to be cut. These lines were then 'adopted' by another writer and used as a prompt for a very short prose/poetry piece. This is the second and final thread of responses, though the hope is that it will provide proof of concept for a larger project in the future. We begin with a short ode to darling lines from Owen Bullock.

BONUS

Darling Lines by Owen Bullock

Darling lines,

I cut you

but I'll always love you

you're the ones I thought of afterwards

that made me feel good about myself

that I was clever or profound

I thought you'd hit people in the third eye

or impress with your dexterity

I should have known something simpler was stronger

leaving things implied by the previous image

often you were last line blues

overstated, just to be sure

not trusting the reader

when the penultimate line

made a better ending

sometimes, as my mentor suggested,

slashing six of you was best for the poem

it's the poem that matters, not the lines

you're the building blocks, I'm the builder

the reader lives in the house, shack or castle –

I wonder what the carpets are like (if there are carpets)…

***

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

Adopted by: Cassandra Atherton

*

Mastering Destiny

Weeks after you leave, I'm still living in the hotel room with your ghost. In the mornings, we drink vodka on the rocks watching re-runs of the Winter Olympics. Sometimes you lift my hair and kiss the nape of my neck. The shiver of your lips is kismet.

Your disappearance is a ghosting of light and breath on my sheets. I live in spaces we used to warmly inhabit, where the air is thin and cool. You become the rasping of skate blades under my skin even as the Zamboni resurfaces our desire.

I leave your half-finished bottle of sparking water in the fridge's door, sometimes unscrewing the top and putting the bottle to my lips. In my dreams we're skating across a frozen landscape, flying and falling. You hold onto me, but in the end, I'm the hazard.

I take your ghost to the bathroom to erase the scarlet stain from our faces. When I wipe the sticky halo from around your mouth, it reappears—a vermillion planetary ring as indelible as the outline of your hand on my stomach.

*

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

Adopted by: Dominique Hecq

*

Beware the Ides of March

Women at some time are masters of their fates. When they die there are no comets. The moon itself, all bloodied blazes forth.

All moonshine descends upon Earth where history resurrects its spectres. How not to die of stage fright?

Artaud twitches his paws softly against my back. I breathe in. Hold. Out. Crooning in my head *I'm not a sort of person / who falls / in and quickly out of love*. Joan Armatrading's 'The Weakness in Me' is still my favourite song.

Eyes like crows at the roadside peering at road kill. I'm not doing as well as I hoped. The clerk's gaze is hollow She stares at me with a shipwrecked look as if my body were an islet she's washed up on. Can't find your name, she clarions. I'm dizzy. Out of breath. Sway. The nurse's computer pings. HD1M300561, she says. What brings you to emergency? Heart beating too fast as if I were under arrest, I squelch.

Heart attack, is high mark on the triage scale. Next of kin?

Me, says a voice off.

Straight to door No 3. Not you, Sir.

A technician and a nurse explore the island of your body hooked up to a machine. They gather data: temperature, blood pressure pulse, electrical activity. They collect blood. Whisk you out to radiology, then admissions.

You inhabit the denouement of a story that does not end. The only certainty is you do not want to die. You miss your dog.

That morning on your walk, you cut through the park and paused by the pond. You croaked at it like a toad. Artaud cocked his ears. Swivelled his head and stared at you as if to say bitch, you is crazy.

We galloped back home as if to trip entropy. To flee intimations of WW III. The anticlimax of the century.

Between wolf and dog. Two mortal bodies lying back-to-back heave in stifling heat. The dog keens. A shiver runs down his spine from his trembling animal soul. You dream about frogs.

The Frogs. In that play, Aristophanes uses satire to attack the state. If there's a message, it's that economic rejuvenation of the theatre is dependent on the recovery of Athens' political power, but resuscitation of the polis is dependent on revitalisation of the theatre. What do you want a poet for? Asks Euripides. Dionysus replies: To save the City, of course. If the city isn't saved, there won't be any more drama festivals, and then where shall I be? (p. 208). Ha ha ha. Here, laughter is rebellious, celebratory and deadly serious.

We don't want the leaders who fan party strife

When what we all need is a peaceable life. (p. 170)

I'm not a sort of person / who falls / in and quickly out of love. The dog twitches his paws softly against my back. I breathe in. Hold. Out.

The world is not a stage. It's a paper-thin screen.

*

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: If that was so, why this?

Adopted by: Eugen Bacon

*

You Make Me Feel

You texted to say you're getting better. That you're back at the gym and moving house from the share house that hosts tricky foxes and throaty bitches way back in Footscray, an inner suburb still finding itself from the pulse of the metropolis. Your words are so far away, my love. I knock on your door, listen forensically for Movement. You're in the house—why won't you come out when I call?

If you boil the coffee pot, please take your hand, say good things bravely and give you a hug. That's exactly what I would do. You say no worries.

Listen here, you little stiff. **If that was so, why this?**

Your new text says dw.

Dunno why? Dunno when? Dickhead what? Discuss why? Dumbest wuss?

You have forgotten that it's me who needs you, sweat and tears. Who craves assurance that *we* are fine. The neighbours think I am falling apart. At least that's what their looks say. Eyes like crows at the roadside peering at medieval art.

I might be dreaming, but I'm not doing as well as I hoped. Showbiz isn't for everyone, that's why you're hiding in plain sight, no spotlights on you. And here I am in full beam on a monologue, breaking the fourth wall without an iota of the eloquence of Kafka.

Talk to me, darling. I miss the gravel and rainbow of

how

you

make

me

feel.

*

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 and Philip K. Dick awards as well as the Nommo Award for speculative fiction by Africans. Eugen is an Otherwise Fellow, and was announced in the honour 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: 'Are you lost?' he said. 'I can help you find your way.'

Adopted by: Gay Lynch

*

Clenching his phone, Trevor ignored the jazz band riffing in his brain and snuck out the back door. Off the main drag, he slummocked towards the creek. Surely none of the book-fetish festivalgoers and their egalitarian dogs would have broached the cool sanctity of the creek. Couldn't a man duck out at lunchtime to cry his heart out beneath his favourite tree, without a stranger busting in? Trevor wiped his face with a hanky, squinted into the midday sun.

On the bank below, wearing navy shorts and a button-up blue shirt, leather bag over his shoulder, a man shouted a monologue across the water. Trevor descended the slope to read the slogan on the man's peaked hat: Boredom Patrol. Rehearsing for what, at a book festival? He looked like a postman. Had Trevor missed a textual clue?

The man turned suddenly and called out. 'Are you lost? I can help you find your way.'

Trevor held up his hand. 'No, just no, MATE, I live here.'

Undeterred, the man took out a spiral-bound notebook, scribbled and read back. 'Local,' he said. 'Creswick Creek.'

Trevor took in his blue suede desert boots and white crew socks, his comic mobile face, and fled to lie on his single bed, to commune with the only being who cared – a huntsman spider with whom he shared his studio space at the back of the patchouli shop. The spider

advanced across the ceiling and down the wall to make eye contact. Waited. Quiet. Unjudgmental. Much better than when he dropped onto his face at two am.

Trevor brooded over his phone and the evidence that would entrap him in the town; put a stop to his idealised life in Sydney. The email informed him that, yet again, he had failed his NIDA audition. His relationship with Centrelink would continue and sporadic gigs at the pub, where they served Buddha bowls with canned asparagus, strips of fake cheese, and – ugh – white rice.

'You'll never believe it,' he said to the spider. 'A two-bit busker offering to show me around my own town. Today of all days.'

After an hour, he went across the road to nurse his mug of hippy water and illegally occupy a café chair. Soon enough, the faux postman came prancing along the pavement, aping bystanders, befriending innocent babies, cracking unfunny jokes. Rimless specs – toned brown legs. Mmm. Next, he peeled a page from his jotterbook and dropped it on Trevor's table:

I know you.

Meet me below the bridge.

You won't be disappointed.

Trevor tried to access its meaning. On, the man cavorted. Must have stalked him online.

During his descent to the creek, dust kicked up by bibliomaniacs caused Trevor to clear his throat with unspecified anxiety. Beneath the birches, the actor beckoned, proffered two melting waffle ice creams, their creaminess flecked with rhubarb. One foot planted higher than the other, Trevor hesitated. Disrespect made him sensitive. Carlton cans, for instance, airborne during comedy routines.

'Where do you live?' he shouted.

'Sydney.'

Trevor stepped forward.

*

Bio: Gay Lynch writes essays, novels, and stories on unceded Bunurong land and adjunct to Flinders University. In 2025, she judged 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: The song is shimmering, and I realise I have followed it across oceans.

Adopted by: Jen Webb

*

A plane climbs slowly out of the city and into an apricot sky while the buildings, just now turning on their lights and locking their doors, raise towers and finials in farewell. The plane murmurs its own goodbyes, waggling its wings, singing out in words I can't capture, and the sky turns mauve, then scarlet, and the plane levels out and heads toward a long night and a better day. And hours pass, and days, and we are still aloft at 40,000 feet, and the plane is still singing, its song shimmering, and I realise I have followed it across oceans.

*

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: Six projects on the go and no dress code

Adopted by: Jessica Seymour

*

That Sunlit Fever dream

Thirty-something, ten years post early-career. The big break broke on barren rocks and washed away in waves that she'd flinched at when she should have been surfing.

It's fine.

She's got all the time in the world, watching the clock tick by until the end of the month when she will get on a plane. Unless she's already found a new job in some far off, beautiful country … where the weather is nice and the people are nice and the work is nice and she can finally get onto those big ideas she's been cooking in her heart for so –

blink

It's April.

…

well, fuck.

Now, sat in a loveseat by the windowsill watching clouds roll over the sky in frothy ripples, with an iced coffee in one hand and a kindle in the other. Reading about Kings and Hemingways and Angelous and the rituals that made them famous.

i should make myself a ritual. would that save me?

Six projects on the go and no dress code working from home making art the way she was meant to. But is it working if no one's paying?

Perhaps not.

Sat in the loveseat, staring at a windowsill littered with the corpses of flies who couldn't outfly the swat. And yes, sometimes she thinks about paying bills with her meagre savings and her skin starts to feel a bit tight. But it's a cost-of-living crisis. Everyone feels that way.

anxiety over money doesn't make me special
it doesn't even make me rare

She's blessed to have this loveseat. To have this coffee. To have this ten, fifteen, twenty minutes to read. To make art. For free, but isn't that all artists nowadays?

She would have made more money learning to code. She could have helped build the software that killed her industry.

It could be so much worse.

Six projects on the go and no dress code.

summer ~ that sunlit fever dream ~ is long gone

She's here. Plugging away at the work that she loves, having fled from work that paid the bills at the cost of the muscle on her bones and the light in her eyes. It was worth it. It will be worth it. She's sure of it.

If not … well.

better make the most of the loveseat
and the windowsill

*

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 *Hello Horror*.

***

Darling prompt: The sky was lanced with starlight

Adopted by: Julia Prendergast

*

Flight

I'm seated at a window near the wing of the plane, contemplating the moon's elliptical orbit, lolling in the opening and closing of the wing flaps, considering marriage as inhale and exhale, betrothal of mind and matter, flight and departure.

I peruse the stars, think of Dr Genius injecting needles into my head—lancing syringe as acute as a baby's teeth against my nipple, ducts of air opening in my scalp like breastfeeding let down—surge and relief, foiling forks of electricity, migraine fuckery.

Your face is thin, she says. *Would you be a model for dermal fillers? No charge.*

I've noticed my face—caving in, falling away—I kinda like this hollowed portrait of myself, momentarily envisioning my more youthful self alongside this version.

As the seatbelt alert is flagged, I note the time in Austin, set my phone to US time, willing my body clock to depart from Australia—all the while ruminating upon the forthcoming wedding, my "status" as mother-of-the-groom…

As soon as the seatbelt sign is turned off, I order Cointreau on ice, back it up with gin and tonic—starlight spirits for breakfast, Texas time. I order another gin, moonlighting as my second self.

On the ground at Austin airport, windswept without warning, face flagging in the icy onslaught, I note the rumble of thunder, count the seconds to the lightning, calculating the proximity of the storm.

*

Bio: 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.

***

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

Adopted by: Katrina Finlayson

*

Kiss

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

Long yellow grass whispers ugly words in waves across the hillside and the sun beats down with a fury. We lie still, bodies pressed flat against parched dirt, faces turned towards one another. Weak bodies, all hunger pains and deep muscle aches from rough sleeping. Above, wide blue sky curves away forever with cruel empty promises of freedom and possibilities. Fear is a stone in my stomach. We killed a man in a servo on the edge of a nowhere town. Dammit. You pushed him as we struggled to grab the cash, and he stumbled, hit his head hard on a counter edge as he fell. Maybe he's still alive, but he sure didn't move after, just lay there all strange. And I think I hear sirens.

I remember that one afternoon in your house, do you? Sunlight sliding in the side window next to the oleander and there we were, sitting on that worn red couch, our knees sometimes touching. You wrote names of boys we knew from school in the back of your notebook, used what you said was a guaranteed scientific formula to find our future husbands. I watched your perfect slim fingers move a lead pencil gripped tight.

'So, you add up letters as numbers, like this, and then we find out,' you said.

'Well,' I said, my fingers twisting the ribbed cuff of my jumper, 'who do you want it to be?'

I didn't want to know; you wouldn't say my name. I mean, of course, duh, I kinda did want to know, but only so I could somehow try to be that boy. You just smirked, fire in your ocean eyes. And once the numbers filled the page, one boy's name linked to yours by science and fate, you turned to me.

'I guess we'd better practice kissing, so that we're ready for love,' you said.

I shrugged. 'Sure, I guess. We uh, we can, if you want.' Played it super cool, even though I looked way too much exactly like a stupid heartache girl.

'It's nothing,' you said, and you leaned in.

Dust motes danced in a sunbeam as the afternoon paused. Sunlight caught loose strands of your golden hair, and your peach skin seemed to shimmer. Your ruby lips, impossibly soft, pressed against mine.

'See,' you laughed as you pulled away, 'not really anything.'

That afternoon, that house, that easy distance between us: all so far behind us now. There never were husbands. Just a string of crimes binding us together forever. It started small but you always loved a thrill, and I…well, I love you.

We never meant for anyone to get hurt, but now we're here, hiding in this field, as a net of police steadily closes in. And I'm tired, so bone tired. We could give up, get a meal, somewhere to rest with no burning sun. But they'd tear us apart, and from that ruby kiss on, I was always yours. No, we'll have to keep running.

*

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: All of my nightmares have your teeth

Adopted by: Owen Bullock

*

All my nightmares have your teeth
but they don't all scare me
maybe I can get used to your teeth
the thirteen angles
you're actually the first person whose teeth
I ever noticed –
why would I look at teeth?
I'm not a dentist
if ants had teeth I probably would
I watch ants a lot
but it's the overall movements I'm into
& the cryptic messages that might be in them
do ants have teeth?
some of my nightmares contain messages
like the gangster and nazi ones, being pursued –
when I fought back they went away
if these nightmares are resolved, will I stop noticing your teeth?
will they straighten of their own accord?
I assume you're too old for braces

*

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: 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 pit bull terrier.

Adopted by: Paul Hetherington

*

Skink

Gretta loved sitting on the rock formations extruding from the soil of the local park—granite marked with fractures and deep lines—imagining herself as a prison escapee. A skinny creek wound through the rock formation and fell into a deep trench. Last year, a schoolfriend of hers stood next to it and said she was going to jump. But, after ten minutes of staring, she'd shaken her head and walked back to school. Gretta had wondered at death's proximity to such quotidian concerns, bunched in contradiction. Now she watched as a blue-tongued skink swayed toward her. It was unfazed and soon nudged her bare leg. She knew its bite wasn't venomous but was careful not to upset it. It butted her leg then turned toward a patch of sunlight. Her biology class had studied blue-tongues and she knew this was male. She thought, 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 pit bull terrier. She thought of her schoolfriend facing the waterfall and talking about the boyfriend who'd dumped her; of her copious tears. 'It's not worth it,' she'd said. 'Come and sit with me.' But her friend was inert even as emerald-green light beautified her long, brushed hair.

*

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 sky was lanced with starlight

Adopted by: Shady Cosgrove

*

What keeps

Georgia opens the fridge, peers in. Still there, on the shelf above the fruit and veg drawer: a moonlit lawn with a Hills Hoist in the back corner. She has to squint, the perspective a little off, but Georgia knows the yard, could be gazing out from the back steps of the old house. It's soothing, having it here, safe, inside her fridge. Every time she opens the door, that familiar view—night-time, sky lanced with starlight, smell of cut grass and the old clothesline listing to the right. She used to stand at that back door in the middle of the night, savouring the house-murmurs and shadow-quiet. She doesn't miss the daytime house—ugh, not at all—but sometimes she misses the weight of the air and the comforting sky when she stood on those rounded concrete steps, almost-alone. Memory's fallible, she knows. But still, fondness is nourishing and there's gratitude in front of that tall rectangle of light.

*

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 prose

Gayelene Carbis

2 short pieces

Risking Roundabouts

On going to Willy Lit Fest 2023: for Anne Casey-Hardy and Angela Savage

You get to Carnegie station, dragging your trolley-case, see people standing on the other side of the road. Ok, no trains, probably replacement buses to Caulfield, but when you join the people standing on that other side of the road, someone says the bus goes all the way to the city, stops at the Arts Centre, but you don't want to go to the Arts Centre. A bus arrives, the driver asks where you're going, city/Southern Cross, driver says, 'Get on get on – going to Caulfield!' Many of us get off at Caulfield, then the driver and the Metro staff ask us where we're going and they tell us to get back on the bus, this bus goes to Burnley then you get off, take the train to the city. So you get to Burnley, get off at Southern Cross, ask Metro staff which platform Williamstown is on, they tell you, you get there and the sign says Williamstown but the next train arrives an hour from now, that can't be right, you go back to the Metro staff, they say they'll call someone, they get on the phone, they tell you, 'Take a train to Laverton then a replacement bus to Williamstown, this is the quickest way to get to Williamstown.' Laverton! Laverton is on the Werribee line. Williamstown is the end of its own line! Other station staff tell you to wait for the Werribee train, but then you hear an announcement say something about Newport for those going to Williams-

town, and someone else at the station confirms it, says why would you go all the way to Laverton?! Then I meet a man on the train who used to work for Metro, now he drives trucks. He couldn't stand the trains after three years. I ask if it was customers or staff that got to him and he says, 'Can I be brutally honest? It was both.' I wondered at the brutal, why he needed it. He told me, 'Management Know Everything, but don't pass on the Information to the People on the Ground who Need it.' I wonder out loud why people are like that. Why? 'Well, people! Institutions! The Public Service! Politics! All filled with people!' So I get off at Newport without any idea if Newport will lead me to a replacement bus to Williamstown (North, to be exact). At Newport, I discover there's no replacement bus, why would there be, says someone. You just take the train from here to Williamstown! It says so on the sign. But Melbourne public transport has taught me: never trust the signs! Nor the people! People at the station, people who work there, people standing on the platform. Anyone! The Man Who Used to Work for Metro and Now Drives Trucks gets off at Williamstown North too. I ask him if he knows where the Town Hall is, 'I know it's close,' he tells me, says, 'Yes, you can walk, but I wouldn't. It's dangerous. There's a big roundabout at the main road and this time of day, there's traffic from all directions. Better off taking the bus.' He points me towards the bus stop. Another bus! I thank The Man Who Used to Work For Metro and go and stand at the bus stop, look up the timetable, think – you'll get there so much quicker if you just walk! It's what? Two stops? Three? You decide to risk the roundabout. You cross the roundabout with a woman who's wearing a brighter jacket than you are, you're in black, any colour is brighter. You both survive. Later that day you listen to the writer Anne Casey-Hardy talk about her book *Cautionary Tales for Excitable Girls*, a book you've read and loved. A book you're excited about, excited to meet the writer, live. The interviewer Angela Savage is also very excited about the writer and the writer's book and the excitement is contagious. You fall in love all over again with *Excitable Girls*. The writer says, 'You can try to stay safe, but it won't necessarily save you. So you might as well...' After all this, you're going to have to find your way home on public transport. Brace yourself. You don't have the Public Transport Victoria app on your phone, you can never work out the PTV website. You tried once to work out how to get to Castlemaine from Carnegie. All you can say is you survived it. Oh, let no one say you're not still an Excitable Girl! You're still risking roundabouts.

*

My Love is Like

for my father, with love

'What's that?' my father said, noticing something on the empty seats next to us on the train. I look over, I'm about to say, 'An umbrella' but my father's already up, holding it in his hand. A long-stemmed red rose wrapped in cellophane.

We've been to the launch of *Finding My Feet*: *An Anthology of Poetic Voices*, new, emerging, established; a kaleidoscope of diversity; proudly published by Melbourne Poets' Union. I was invited to read/perform my poem from the book. It's Valentine's Day tomorrow.

My father picks the rose up saying, 'I'll give this to my better half. Might earn me some brownie points. Might get me a cup of tea.' I have a moment's twinge where I think: you could have given it to *me*.

As my father takes that rose, he also takes note of my face, says quickly, 'Maybe I should give it to you – for your poetry.' And I say immediately, 'Sure' and reach across and snatch it away before he can say something else. I ask him if they celebrate Valentine's Day, him and my step-mother, and he says, 'Nah – never have, never will.'

But then, a red rose for a daughter? Valentine's Day? How Oedipal! The rose, you see, is a substitute, a symbol, of course. For my father has said nothing of me or my poem. My performance. The MC though (one of Australia's greatest writers – poetry, prose; an Emeritus Professor, awarded an OAM; my former boss at Melbourne Uni where he was Head of Department in Creative Writing for so many years) – the MC said: 'Now we have one of the freshest and most surprising voices in Melbourne poetry.' And then said my name.

This meant as much to me as any awards I've ever won, or been shortlisted for, including the two international awards I was Finalist in with my second book. The MC – Kevin Brophy, of course! – saying this! (Even though, he *was* the publisher of my first poetry book so presumably he liked my work! And even though he wrote one of the blurbs for my second. It's not that I don't know he likes and often loves my work. It's not that.) I felt sort of shocked, stunned, as I headed towards the stage.

I asked my father afterwards, 'Do you remember how Kevin introduced me? I can only remember he said "freshest" – do you know what the second word was? I was so surprised, I can't remember!' But my father said no, he couldn't remember either. 'Brightest, maybe…' my father said. But that didn't sound right. My father always raves about Kevin, his poetry, his prose. His perform-

ance. ‘He’s a great writer,’ my father says. He says my ex is also a great writer. His poetry, his prose; his performance. How he speaks, what he says. One of the ex’s poems my father says is one of the greatest poems ever written. My father never says anything to me about my poetry or my prose. Or my performance.

I know this is the way of certain people. Families. Men of my father’s generation. Fathers. I know, I know. I KNOW.

Later my father says something about how I ‘purloined’ the red rose. It’s a good word. I think about my Oedipus Complex and wonder if I’m giving it a good run for its money. (I often mix metaphors, am I doing it now? That stops me but I move on). The rose was free. The rose was stolen by my father. He’d say taken, and why not? No one’s going to claim it. No one’s going to call Lost Property over a single-stemmed rose. My father would say the poor sod probably has no idea where he left it (and he’d assume it was a he).

But before my father rather reluctantly gave me that red rose – and I say gave me with some restraint for I doubt he would have, had I not reached over and taken it – he said, ‘But do you have vases?’ This instantly irritates. I say scornfully, ‘Of course I do! Don’t you remember – on my birthday – my housemate bought me long-stemmed yellow roses, you saw them, I was raving about how beautiful they were!’ ‘Oh yeah, yeah. I remember,’ my father says.

Even as I say it, I know I am holding up my housemate as an example of how some men treat me – even my new housemate, someone I barely know, thought enough of me to get around the street early on Christmas Eve to have those gorgeous roses ready when I came back from doing my laps at the local pool to say – *Happy Birthday! Here. These are for you.* As if he knew me, knew I’d like them. Knew I’d love them. Knew these things matter. And last.

‘Surprising’ came back to me, later.

Gayelene Carbis’s second book of poetry, I Have Decided to Remain Vertical *(Puncher & Wattmann), was recently awarded the Writers’ Choice Award 2025 in Greece. Her book won the Eyelands Book Award for Poetry 2024.*

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TEXT prose

Luca Demetriadi

Method Reading Murnane

It's late autumn in London, which means it's springtime over their shoulder on the central eastern coast of Australia where the jacaranda trees that line the uneven footpaths of Sydney's suburbs will be blooming in supernatural purple.

They walk to the British Library every weekday since moving to London, stopping at the Greggs in the ticket hall of St Pancras International Station for a bacon roll with brown sauce. They eat their bacon roll as they walk along the street on the eastern exterior of the station, which takes slightly longer than the most efficient route to the library – through the station – but it allows them to walk directly into the low sun for the length of the street. This is a pleasure in London in autumn when buildings tend to block any light that would slant towards the city.

They tend to reach the piazza of the British Library at 09:25, five minutes before the library opens, when a queue has already formed by those who want a seat with a power socket in the main section of the library, around the glass cube containing the books donated by King George III, where readers don't need to adhere to the reading room's strict rules for entry. But they don't mind the reading room's silence or the ban on ink and water, so they don't join the queue. They sit on a bench in the piazza in a fragment of sun and chew a piece of spearmint gum because they've tried to stop smoking and replaced the moments when they used to smoke with chewing.

They still think a lot about smoking. As it relates to dating and the social paraphernalia that comes just prior to dating, they can't work out whether smoking was helpful or not. On the one hand, if the other person doesn't smoke, it isn't nice to smell and have yellow teeth and faded

hair and skin. On the other hand, if they don't smoke but the other person does, then they still suffer these negatives but in the other direction, and without the bonus of nicotine. If they smoke and the other person also smokes, everything would be much easier. They could bump into each other on the street outside the piazza and borrow each other's lighters and get talking and then walk to the bin together to dispose of their butts. If no one else in the world was a smoker, then the decision for them to quit smoking would be easier.

They don't think that the other person is a smoker. When they used to go for a cigarette after a day spent in the reading room, when the sun was colouring the reflected facades of tower blocks and made them smooth and breath-taking, the other person would sometimes walk past them on their way out but would never stop for a cigarette.

*

The central character in Gerald Murnane's *A Season on Earth* (2019), Adrian Sherd, in the fourth and final part of the book, has dropped out of a catholic seminary and has an identity crisis. Adrian finds solace in reading and does so obsessively.

He begins to enact the lives of his favourite authors, like a trainee monk might wish to enact the lifestyle of a saint he studies. Adrian dresses how his latest literary hero would dress. Adrian walks as he supposes his latest literary hero would walk. Adrian believes that such role-playing might teach him to write as his hero wrote.

*

They're a graduate student at King's College in London, researching contemporary Australian writers. Murnane is particularly relevant to their work. Murnane is often characterised in American literary magazines as an eccentric recluse and in academic monographs as a solipsist.

The narrator of Murnane's novel called *The Plains* (1982) plans a filmscript in a library unlike the British Library. Over the years, the narrator falls in love with a woman who sits in a nearby nook of the library and between whom there is an unspeakable distance. They would quote from Murnane's novel to illustrate their own unspeakable young person sitting somewhere behind them in the British Library, but they don't want to wait seventy minutes for a copy of the novel to be brought up from storage. They will paraphrase the narrator of *The Plains* instead.

The narrator can't traverse the conversational boundary within the library because nothing he could say would be as vital as the remarks available on every wall of the room. The narrator thus determines to write and publish a book of his own and have it placed on a shelf near the nook of the woman in the library, where its bright and unusual spine might catch her eye. She will read it and see the name and picture of its author and, looking up, notice him sitting across the library in a column of afternoon Australian sunlight through a gap in the blinds.

*

Reading Murnane, they've developed a habit of only sitting down to write a story when they've fallen in love with someone they barely know and whose attention they're too careful to gain so they sit down and write their story and hope she might read it.

They're writing about a young person in the Humanities reading room of the British Library where they sit at a desk numbered 2296. They don't know the name of the woman with whom they've fallen in love, nor have they ever spoken to her, which is why they're writing their story, in the hope that one day she might read it in her favourite online magazine, over there at her desk, and look up from her laptop and notice them.

*

Last year they began a graduate degree at the University of Sydney, which seemed more apt for studying the material which they've chosen to study, but they missed their friends and family and abandoned that degree and enrolled in one at King's and returned to brutal London on an airplane with a twenty-hour stopover in Bangkok during which they met a girl called Nina.

Their seat number was 44A for both legs of the flight, the window seat on the left side of the economy cabin. The airplanes were almost empty because Thailand had only recently reopened its airport for transit. Nina moved to sit with them on the second leg so they could talk and sleep and even have a little cuddle. They landed in the morning and arranged a drink for the evening. They had to cancel the date when they tested positive for a popular virus.

They wrote a fictional story about Nina and airplanes in which the narrator meets and thinks they've fallen in love with a young woman called Nina, in the hope that the Nina they had met might pick up some literary journal and read their story about a character called Nina and recognise an experience that she'd shared with the author and contact the journal to obtain the author's details and contact them and then live together happily.

An Irish journal eventually published the story about Nina and airports, but they haven't heard from Nina yet.

*

Once the queue outside the library has resolved, they go downstairs to the locker room that smells like lunchboxes and change their tote bag for a transparent one. They take a picture of the number on the locker with their phone. They walk up the stairs and drink a paper cup of water from the metal fountain. The water tastes like metal. They work in the HUMANITIES ONE reading room. Every day they sit at the desk numbered 2296 and make notes on Murnane in pencil.

They don't sit at the desk numbered 2296 every day for any particular reason. They used to sit at any of the desks on the long row of tables of which 2296 is a part, or else at one of the adjacent or consecutive rows of tables. They chose this area of the reading room because their eye was drawn to it the first time they came here. Every time they've entered the room since, their eyes are naturally drawn here again. Over time, they refined their habit of sitting in this particular section of the library to sitting at this particular desk in the library, numbered 2296,

for all the reasons given above, and because it came to feel like their nook in the city.

They sit and work here every day during the week. The young person whose name they don't know also comes to the library every day during the week and sits in this general section of this reading room, even if she doesn't have the same habitual rigour as them and a desk that is uniquely hers.

The library has its locals like a pub. The elderly man snores to their left. The woman opposite them touches her nose and they think it's because she's seen something in their nose, so they touch their own nose. Gum isn't allowed in the reading rooms, and they fancy a cigarette. The young person is sitting somewhere behind them, they think.

They don't look at the young person or talk to her because they don't know who she is and don't want to make her uncomfortable. They couldn't tell you what she looks like. They keep their eyes guarded. They always sit at this desk because it should be easier for fate to swirl them together if fate knows what they're usually up to on an average day. Their eventual intersection can't be creepy if it's organised by fate, they don't think.

*

Adrian Sherd's imitative practice of reading and writing is akin to how a method actor practises acting: a process of getting inside the head of an author by embodying them in everyday life. A method actor, even when they are not doing their traditional work of playing a character while a camera is pointed at them and rolling, continues pretending to be their character to understand them better.

Method acting emerged in America in the mid-twentieth century. It remains a popular source of intrigue in the work of certain actors today. This physical and psychological occupation of another has often been associated with obsession or madness, which is perhaps why it's so enticing (Isaac Butler's 2022 book *The Method* notes its simultaneous rise alongside psychotherapy). Method acting was formally substantiated as a dramatic pedagogy by Lee Strasburg, who differentiates the method from psychotherapy on the grounds that psychotherapy strives to alleviate mental disarray, while his acting method strives to exploit it.

One implication is that a method actor/reader is unsure in their own identity and so needs to look elsewhere for a crutch upon which to hobble his personality. This is true of method reading. What starts as a perverse pleasure in reading the private diaries and letters of an admired author becomes extravagant. The method reader pursues the author across all their works to uncover more sentences and identities.

Many people share in the urge to method read, but in minor and more touristic ways: they may take a copy of Wordsworth's poems with them to the Lake District; they might hike the Basho Wayfarer trail in Japan following the poet's footsteps and read each haiku where it was written along the route. But when they return home, they are no longer interested in imagining themselves as Wordsworth or Basho.

The most committed method reader hopes their performance of the author becomes quotidian and embedded. A Nabokov fan might develop an interest in butterflies. An Ernaux fan might start a diaristic Substack on their dating life.

*

They think they're perfect for each other. They walk with their hands in their pockets and, walking past each other once, in the moment before they turned their eyes to their phone, they couldn't avoid noticing that the young person also walks with her hands in her pockets. They both wear Dr Martens. They're both too shy, it seems, to talk to each other.

So they communicate in other ways. They bring books from their flat to the reading room that they don't intend to read at the library. They leave them around the desk and hope that she might see them and imply their personality. At the moment, on the left side of their desk, they have the collected short fiction of Katherine Mansfield, an Oxford history of Australian literature, a large photo-book of the best swimming holes in New South Wales, and a copy of J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, which they keep hidden at the bottom of the pile (they're only reading it for a module on their course and it doesn't represent them as a person). They change the books weekly and wonder if she's thought about them.

They haven't looked back at the books on her desk, but they wonder if she's doing the same.

*

One method reader might take their dating cues from Murnane, which isn't a good idea.

*

Sometimes they think that they should tear a piece of paper from the spiral binding of their notebook, place it on the outside shell of their laptop to give a hard surface for a message written in pencil, write a brief note, fold the paper in half, and leave it on the desk of the young person sitting somewhere behind them as they're leaving the reading room on a Friday. The note would ask the young person if she would like to get a coffee at some time in the future. It would have their first name and phone number.

She would have an easy and comfortable means of rejecting the coffee by not texting them. By handing the note to the young woman somewhere behind them as they're leaving the library on a Friday, they can limit the discomfort of their continued presence if the note itself discomforts her.

If she says yes, they would have the whole weekend to get a coffee and get to know each other before they would need to be back in the library for work on Monday, when she could sit at either of the desks numbered 2295 or 2297.

*

But they haven't left a note yet. They remember year nine of school when they thought it was a good idea to ask the girl who sat opposite them in their English class, who had been nice to

them but never really shown any romantic interest, whether she wanted to be their girlfriend via a text from their first smartphone. They sent the text during the last week of the term before Christmas, when they wouldn't have lessons together for a month, to limit any potential discomfort, or to give them the month of the winter holidays to get to know each other without the tittering of their cohort.

When their text didn't receive a response for a day, they assumed that it would never get one.

In the dark space between Boxing Day and New Year's Eve, they sent her another text telling her not to worry and they'd gotten the message she didn't want to be their girlfriend and they hoped that she was enjoying the holidays. They reread the message and added a snowman emoji.

*

Whether it's on a tram, a plane, in a café, or anywhere else where people come together but separately, the Murnane fanatic will find a stranger to fall for and then write about it.

But they should be more careful. For every Natalie Portman there's a Jared Leto. Although it's worth noting that Portman said after *Black Swan* that method acting is a "luxury that women can't afford".

This could be the same for method reading – a luxury for eccentric white men who write and study (really, though, someone should tell them Murnane is not a man to emulate).

*

They look forward to reading this story in a few years' time to the young person who sits somewhere behind them in the reading room of the British Library, when they are happy and together and buying a cottage and laying a fire and settling down to read under their blankets, or maybe reading their Kindles on a beach in Australia in one of the national parks up the central east coast where there is no one else but them and eucalyptus groves and dingo tracks, and they think that it's time to tell this story which they had published under a pseudonym before they'd ever spoken, which is about them working in the British Library reading room, and they will both laugh at their idea that she might have stumbled upon a story written about her by someone else sitting in the reading room, and they will both laugh at how grateful they are that they had lost hope in this story ever reaching her and instead went directly to ask her to get a coffee, which all sounds nice, but they have a bad record with these things.

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TEXT prose

Ruth Jackson

The swimming pools

1.

In a photograph I had printed and enlarged from a slide, I'm sitting on a round sky-blue painted steel rung under a diving board, holding on to the side rungs, looking away to my left. I'm in the shade – Sodere is a hot dry place, often 35 Celsius or 95 Fahrenheit – the pool is empty. Many of the tiles on the side of the pool have lost their glaze – probably from the highly saline water – the small light-blue tiles and gray-brown concrete are like a marbled abstract work of art.

The Sodere Hot Springs Resort with its 10 feet deep – no shallow end – Olympic-sized swimming pool was emptied every Sunday night, cleaned, and then refilled so that by the end of the week the pool would be full for the crowds of people who would show up on Saturday or Sunday. Sodere is around 75 miles southeast of Addis Ababa but it took three to four hours to get there in our second – or was it third-hand cream Opel Kadett A 3-door Car-A-Van (Estate). When we stayed for a two to three week vacation – we stayed twice, the first time in a basic cabin, the second, camping in a huge, borrowed army tent – we would experience two or three cycles of emptying and refilling the pool.

I have no memory of my father taking the photograph – I'm thirteen or fourteen; it was 1973 or 1974 – but I would have deliberately looked away if I'd known. The slide film must have been damaged when it was removed from the camera; there's a streak of light on the side where I'm gazing into the trees.

I saw this slide for the first time about 10 years ago; it was a reminder of who I once

was or possibly who I felt I could be.

2.

A missionary family must act in accordance with mission policy, willingly, yielding to the printed rules and regulations. (Research: from the 1930s, the entry point for mission work in Ethiopia, corresponded with Emperor Haile Selassie's modernist goal to wring as many hospitals and schools as possible – not to mention threshing machines and Ford automobiles – from the missionaries, writes Donald L. Donham in *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*.) At the mission station in southwest Ethiopia where my parents were stationed, my mother ran a dispensary and out-patient clinic, not a hospital; my father oversaw things at the school and performed proselytization activities.

Missionary families were instructed to take a vacation each year; my parents would not have done so otherwise.

3.

I don't suppose anyone called me a precocious child; I was apprehensive and nervous to counter the many punishments I received; I was unexceptional except for my perpetual use of '*Why?*'

Spanked. Food at The Boarding School for Missionary Children. The most remarkable was the rancid grayish-white mucus-like lumpy wheat porridge and the gray-white dishwater milk made from milk powder that came in 50-pound cement bags that must have sat for months on the wharf in the sun in Djibouti before being mixed with water in 44-gallon drums. Here, other children ate their porridge and drank their milk every morning. And here, every morning and every night, one child sat looking at the half cup of milk in a thick sick-pink melamine cup, trying to decide whether sipping it would be best, or if holding her nose and drinking it down all at once would be better.

Whacked. Nose pushed into wet sheets in the morning.

Shut away. Young children abandoned at the School for Missionary Children were instructed to pray for parents doing the Lord's work, saving souls of heathen men and women.

My father said Satan's favorite attack point was the children of missionaries.

Good children do not question.

The language of children when there is no question by the adults.

In 1923, one of the founders of the Schools for Missionary Children in Africa wrote: *Any other hardships incidental to missionary life are insignificant compared to that*

which demands the breaking of the dearest, tenderest ties of earth. No one can stand unmoved, who knows aught of real human love, when the crucial moment of separation comes, and parents have to unclasp the little clinging arms and give the last kiss and hug of years – to go back to the land where perishing souls call for someone to save…

The principal from one of those schools published an open letter of apology, contrition, and of seeking forgiveness regarding the sexual abuse of children – which, I did not experience – only 'punishment' from him on many occasions: *...I want to offer my sincere apologies to any and all students … and seek forgiveness for my blind naivety… I ask forgiveness for any punishment I administered as well…*

In 2007, a woman who had worked for my mother in the late 1960s in southwest Ethiopia said: '*You were a pretty, but naughty little girl.*'

Not long ago, my mother said: '*You were always so independent*.' Her tone: disapproval, disdain, damnation.

4.

All my childhood had this pervasive atmosphere but at least there was summer vacation respite from being flung back and forth between discipline and disappointment.

And at the very least, there were swimming pools.

5.

My first encounter with a swimming pool was, in actual fact, a year before our first vacation: on the *SS Oriana*, before the Port of Aden, en route to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia.

A Saturday afternoon. September 1966 in the Lido Pool on A Deck (with the water level lowered) because it was reserved for children between 9.30 am and 10.30 am, and again from 2.30 pm to 3.30 pm.

My second encounter with a swimming pool was later the same afternoon in the Dragon Pool, on the Veranda Deck (reserved for adults only). I use the word 'in' deliberately; I was 'in' both pools that afternoon.

This is how it happened. After splashing about in the Lido Pool with my brother – he had just turned five and was a year or so younger than me – we were taken to our cabin for a shower and instructed to put on our Sunday clothes. We went back to the deck and sat close to the Dragon Pool. We were good children, sitting quietly in our deck chairs.

A large wave hit the *SS Oriana*.

When me and my deck chair were floating on the top of the water in the Dragon Pool

after the wave hit the side of the ship, the man with a big red beard jumped in to rescue me and recover the deck chair. The man wearing red swim shorts, lolling in a deck chair next to his female companion on the other side of the pool. The woman in a lipstick-red bikini. This was the first time I saw an adult's body – or most of it, of them. I had been unable to take my eyes off this couple thinking there was something improper, unbefitting, between them, no idea what it was.

6.

When I was floating on the top of the Dragon Pool, I remember I was unafraid.

I did not know how to swim.

7.

Thinking now of summer vacation respite, my third encounter with a swimming pool was the floating pool at the place mission families referred to as 'Bishoftu' – actually it is Lake Babogaya, Lake Bishoftu-Guda or Lake Pawlo (or Paulo) – around 30 miles southeast of Addis Ababa. It's marginally warmer and drier at Lake Babogaya because it's 1,640 feet lower in altitude than Addis Ababa's 8,000 feet above sea level.

At the School for Missionary Children, we had been taught that the earth's creation took seven days but we never learned that Lake Babogaya is one of seven water-filled crater lakes or maars with closed drainage systems – fed by rainwater runoff and underground inflows – in the Bishoftu volcanic field formed by tear faulting and molten lava activity during the Late Quaternary. When I was trying to find the name of the lake where we vacationed, I read that there are so many name changes of the lakes or maars that liminologists need to pay attention to keep track of the history of the lakes. Bishoftu, the town, formerly known as Debre Zeit, is always referred to as Debre Zeit by Ethiopian friends, never as Bishoftu.

The 'Bishoftu' mission guest house with its large central building – kitchen, dining room and living areas – and its small family bedroom cottages on the steep rocky hillside, gardens planted with passionfruit, purple bougainvillea and orange flame trees, and spindly paths leading down to the lake, to the children's floating swimming pool. The lake was 'unsafe' for children: it was about 23 feet deep at the edge and over 200 feet deep in the middle.

I taught myself to swim.

After this, on vacations at 'Bishoftu', at Lake Babogaya, I would push the giant tractor tube from one side of the pool to the other and jump onto it. When I tired from jumping and splashing, I would lie in the sun on the narrow timber deck around the edge of the

pool as the water with its dark bottom layers was very cold below the surface.

Was the floating swimming pool on Lake Babogaya before I learned how to swim? Perhaps we were only allowed in the separate shallow concrete pool for very young children with its water ankle-deep (shallow-end) to mid-calf (deep-end) before then. After one vacation, a young boy from another missionary family wandered off: we all heard the sad and distressing news of his drowning death in this pool.

8.

Consider Wikipedia's disambiguated definition of a swimming pool: an artificially enclosed body of water that can be used for swimming. Consider that the largest swimming pool in the world is the 30.13 acre $5.5 billion Citystars Sharm El Sheikh in the middle of the Sinai Desert in Egypt. Just over 300 miles from the crystalline lagoon in Cairo, the Egyptian government has serious concerns about water as most of Egypt is uninhabitable and its 100 million plus people – the population is projected to increase to over 150 million by 2050 – depend on Nile River water flowing from 11 African countries.

Over 1,240 miles away from Cairo is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the largest dam in Africa – fifth largest in the world – holding back 84 billion cubic yards of Blue Nile water in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region of Ethiopia. It's about nine miles east of the border with Sudan.

Egypt has long opposed the dam because most of its population live on the riverbanks of the Nile. Sudan has concerns about its own water supplies and dams. Stop-start talks over many years have gotten nowhere even with outsider mediators. The disputes are not just over how much water is in the dam, but how much of the water Ethiopia will use given that around 85 percent of water flowing into the Blue Nile comes from the Ethiopian highlands. For Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed Ali, it's about 'exercising its right to economic development': providing electricity to more than half of the Ethiopian population who don't have access to power, and, for export to neighbouring countries. At close to US$5 billion, it's the biggest hydroelectric power plant in Africa.

A dam is not a very large swimming pool – or at least it shouldn't be – but for the 20,000 Gumuz farmers and others from 5,391 households from 14 different locations, who once swam, bathed, washed their clothes, collected water for themselves, and managed their livelihoods through hoe agriculture, beekeeping, poultry and animals rearing, fishing, and panning for alluvial gold from the banks of the Beles River, a tributary of the Blue Nile – it was *their* swimming, bathing and water collection spot. Gumuz women gave birth near the river; it was taboo to give birth near the fields.

The adverse consequence of relocating everyone near the dam site who lived below

2,000 feet above sea level to sites above that altitude, however, has resulted in entire communities having little or no access to drinking water, sustainable water-supply points, or groundwater.

(More research: the 'scourge' of schistosomiasis, also known as bilharzia, probably evolved among Egyptians living along the Nile River thousands or millions of years ago. Two existing Nile dams in Sudan and the Aswan dam in Egypt have all worsened transmission of schistosomiasis. See *Dams and Disease: Ecological Design and Health Impacts of Large Dams, Canals and Irrigation Systems* by William Jobin.)

9.

Building the mission guest house at 'Bishoftu' – at Lake Babogaya – rather than any of the other seven lakes, was most likely because it was the only explosion crater lake deemed free of the larval forms of parasitic blood flukes of the genus *Schistosoma*. Schistosomiasis is a parasitic disease affecting more than 250 million people from 78 countries. The Carter Center's informative infographic illustrates how miracidiae larvae hatch, seek out the snails – each of the five *Schistosoma* species that infect humans infects a different genus of snail – the miracidiae larva multiply and produce more larvae called cercariae which are released into the water. In the next phase of the cycle, cercariae penetrate human skin and transform into larvae called schistosomulae. The schistosomulae mature into worms in the blood supply of the liver, intestines, and bladder. It's not the worms, but their thousands of eggs, that can cause damage to the urethra, bladder, kidneys, intestines, liver, or lungs. When the eggs are released into the water in urine or faeces they restart the cycle.

(A review of the literature on the distribution of schistosomiasis from 365 communities in Ethiopia by Kloos and others in *Social Science and Medicine* focused on altitude and climate, snail ecology and government economic programs. From 1961 to 1986 most irrigation schemes were located and developed without prior assessment of the risk of schistosomiasis; most irrigation schemes did not provide potable domestic water and latrines for the people living nearby; and, most irrigation schemes didn't screen migrant workers for schistosomiasis and were expected 'to facilitate transmission and disease spread.')

Every body of water is unique, of course, but freshwater volcanic lakes – including Lake Babogaya (Lake Bishoftu-Guda or Lake Pawlo [Paulo]) – maars and dams are potential sites for the proliferation of malaria and scores of other parasitic diseases besides schistosomiasis: onchocerciasis, dracunculiasis, opisthorchis viverrini, leishmaniasis, cryptosporidiosis, giardiasis, trypanosomiasis, loiasis and filariasis (commonly known as elephantiasis).

10.

Joan Didion was obsessed with water – not the politics of water though – just the water itself. When she published her essay 'Holy Water' it was a year or so after California had been through severe drought. Didion visited the California State Water Project Operations Control Center because she wanted to learn how water was moved around, and to learn data about water projects: the evaporation rate behind the Aswan Dam in Egypt; the difficulties closing the last two sluice gates on the Guri Dam in Venezuela. She wanted to know how water moved through 'aqueducts and siphons and pumps and forebays and afterbays and weirs and drains, in plumbing on the grand scale'; and, she wanted to learn how the schedule to open and close the gates was made, how the water flowed and how water deliveries were made.

Joan Didion always wanted a swimming pool. Not as a symbol of affluence, she wrote, but because swimming pools are a symbol 'of order, of control over the uncontrollable. A pool is water, made available and useful, and is, as such, infinitely soothing to the western eye.' It doesn't need extra water once it's filled and the filter cleans and recirculates the water.

11.

When I mentioned to friends that I was going to write a piece about how my childhood vacations in Ethiopia were always associated with swimming pools, it was difficult to explain why I felt compelled to do this.

I've never wanted a swimming pool with all its cleaning, scrubbing, disinfecting, water treatment, water filtration, water testing, stabilizing, and checking for calcium hardness once a week to prevent scale formation. And I certainly don't want to be the one filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

'Water is important to people who do not have it, and the same is true of control,' Didion wrote in 'Holy Water'. Putting aside her obsession with water, I did a double-take reading, and then rereading this sentence. I can't help but think now that of all the ways I remember the past, perhaps questioning and asking 'Why?' was an important 'control', the *only* control I had, even though – I was six years old – I still have no idea why I started questioning and asking 'Why?', and then continued, even though the 'Why?' always resulted in chastisement, in some form of discipline.

Perhaps a child's journey – my journey – from dependence to independence was learning that compliance had been mistaken for growth (per Winnicott) – hence the spanking and whacking and confinement – and my true or essential self was hidden and deprived of experience. My awkward, questioning, acting self, never experienced how the outside world could be endowed with personal meaning. (In deciding to write about

the School for Missionary Children, my intent here is to say that my parents' response was the same; they were unable to, or would not, respond to their children's basic needs – our needs were unacceptable, or 'unchristian' – and my parents too sought to have compliant children, children who lost touch with their deepest needs by trying to convince themselves they weren't the things they needed in the first place.)

(Since I started writing this essay, I made the difficult decision to stop providing in-home care for them, these elderly parents. To say that it was impossible to continue is only part of the story. The past two or three years revealed this: my parents failed in their attempts to control me. Whatever they believe, their religious fundamentalism has rendered them judgemental, narrowminded, and untrusting. This is nothing new. I might still treat them with respect; but they have never changed and remain steadfast in their beliefs. Writing this has forced me to take another look at things.)

I have never stopped asking '*Why*?' (My doctoral research started with these deceptively simple questions: '*Who* is giving birth, *where* and *why*?') Asking '*Why*?' is how I define myself, so it's then just a matter of following that life endeavour to gain 'satisfaction and completion'.

It is Audre Lorde who offers the right words in '"Uses of the Erotic": The Erotic as Power': it's the need to 'live from within outward' to 'begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense' so much so that once we know how this feels, we can observe which of our life endeavors brings us closest to that fullness.

I wanted to think about why I had always longed to return to Ethiopia – and to think back about the swimming pools – was it just about needing to learn that living outside ourselves – outside myself – on the directives of others – the teachers at that School for Missionary Children and my parents, was simply longing to find a way to live? It's through returning to Ethiopia many times as a researcher that I've learned how to scrutinize aspects of my existence, and not to settle for the convenient, the expected or the safe, as Lorde says. Returning to Ethiopia many times, I can say I have truly learned how to live.

12.

There's another slide of me aged nine or newly ten wearing a sky-blue but worn-faded bathing suit, with Lake Babogaya in the background. I'm half-smiling, partly in the shade, partly in the sun, looking directly at the camera this time. My brother, the one who studied visual art but says he's rusty on iconographical analysis, told me it's 'a typical snapshot with a centrally positioned subject, nicely framed with foliage at the sides and the lake in the far distant background'. Why did my father take this photograph? Probably only because he was on vacation and it was his role to take the family photographs; my mother never touched the camera.

If there is 'something else' going on in the photograph (Panofsky), it's obvious that if you were to jump into Lake Babogaya (Lake Bishoftu-Gude or Lake Pawlo [Paulo]), for a swim as I expect I was on my way to do, you'd be entering a body of water surrounded by steep slopes fed by runoff in the rainy season and groundwater inflow that corresponds with the ways people use the water and the land around the lake. Was it a high-risk venture to build a guest house on the side of this volcanic lake given the potential risk of schistosomiasis and other parasitic diseases? People who live outside the guest house, people who don't have access to clean drinking water and sewage systems – who don't have 'control' – are the most likely to get schistosomiasis. And they're less likely to be able to afford healthcare to treat it if they do.

Some of us who had miserable childhoods in boarding schools offset those memories by recalling summer vacation respite from discipline and disappointment. At the very least, there were the swimming pools – the hot saline spring water pool, emptied, cleaned, and then refilled every week or the volcanic crater lake or maar floating cold water pool with its unstable stratification below the surface and its dark bottom layers inefficient at storing CO_2 that means it's unlikely to be associated with liminic eruption – to plunge feet first into.

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TEXT prose

Julia Prendergast

From Blent

GONNA BE WILD, says Christos, arms upstretched to bring down the plastic awning at the front of the tavern. *Rare, this kinda downpour,* he laughs, spitting rainwater. *Blasting every-which-way.*

Can I help? I ask.

As you were, he says, triceps twitching as he works the ropes. *DON'T WORRY!*

The Greeks all say this. Thing is, they mean it.

I sip dry white wine. Smoke and watch. It's mesmerising to see this sleepy cove roiling in mere moments. Surely people are going to die in this storm, caught off guard by the sudden severity.

Perhaps *this* is my afterlife scene…

After watching the film many times, I switched off the subtitles, blasted Sting's 'Fields of Gold' on repeat through my earphones – wandering the memories Dave and I envisaged for each other – pre my absorption in my deep failings, my alleged narcissism, the fuckwittery choir.

The thunder belts a warning. I look out. One of the lads from the enormous pirate-looking vessel is heading to shore on a paddleboard. Impossible he's managing it in this squall. On his knees today, but still.

As the boat-boy arrives at the entrance of the tavern, Christos remains busy with the awnings.

The boat-boy is dripping, laughing. He pulls a towel from his backpack, dries himself off at the front table, left of mine.

Christos heads over to him. They shake hands, exchange greetings in Italian. In English, the boat-boy orders eggs.

I nod in reply to Christos, indicate I'm ready to order. *Imam please*, I say. *Katerina set a portion aside for me (no cheese).*

I love watching the cooks at work in the morning. As I wait for coffee, I take note of their methods: snap frying the eggplant before slow baking, bringing the leathery skin to glossy silk, purple-black.

I'll bring the fish, says Christos. *Mostly big ones today*, he adds. *Haul before the storm.*

The zucchini flowers, I ask, pointing at the menu. *Flour?*

Yes, he says. *Fried, with other things too. No good for you.*

Christos returns with the ruby snapper. The eyes look alive, fish flesh sparking – eyes startle-stuck as if they, too, are in the memory asylum, charged with choosing.

750 grams and 800, says Christos, pointing to each of the smaller fish. *The fat one is a kilo.*

I'll have the fatty, I say, determined to settle in for the storm. *Also, may I please have some baby zucchini with the fish. Actually, is there any briam left? I could LIVE on that.*

I am salad, says the boat-boy, interjecting from a nearby table.

Pardon?

No flour. No grains, he says. *Like you.*

Easy to manage here, I say. *Have you tried the briam?* I add. *Slow-baked, Greek-style ratatouille.*

He shakes his head. *Ignazio*, he says, pointing to this chest. *You eat here every day, too.*

Where else? June, I add, taking a puff of my cigarette.

We turn to the sea as the thunder cracks. I count the seconds from thunder to lightning, calculate the proximity of the storm – fixating on the smaller boats closer to shore tumbling like rough-cut fish heads and prawn carcasses in Maria's soup stock.

When the fish arrives, Ignazio has already done away with his eggs. He chats intermittently from his table.

Join me, I say.

I slice the fish along the mid flank, pull the soft white flesh away from the centre, place some on a side plate before passing it to Ignazio.

He talks in spiel about the boat captain and the chef, in conversation with himself as much as me. *I hate her,* he says. *She and the boat captain are like this*. He intertwines his middle and index finger.

Lovers? I ask.

I don't think so. Maybe. Probably. Thick, he adds*. I HATE the food. Tinned beans, tinned tuna. Unless there's leftover from the guests*.

What do the guests eat? I ask.

Anything they want, he says. *Chef cooks what they say. We go where they say. I used to call Dad whenever I was having a rough time on the boat. He made me feel … armour.* He pounds his chest, fist clenched. *Steadied me if I was on the verge of telling them to-hell-with-it. Weather is nothing,* he adds, gesturing to the sea.

I push fish flesh from the top half of the fish, the fat half, place another large piece on Ignazio's plate, waiting for him to continue. *Eat, Ignazio. Please*.

Iggie, he says, taking the fish between his fingers as if they're chopsticks. *My name means fire. Fiery one. My dad says we are our name*. *Said – he is no longer.*

Ah, I say. *My mum, too.*

Throat cancer, he says, shovelling fish into his mouth.

I pass him the bowl of briam. *Please,* I say, *it's to share.*

The afternoon he died, the nurse called Mum, asked us to return to the hospital, the very day we moved him to palliative care. They said he had a few weeks!

Ugh, palliative. End-to-the-end, I say, covering my mouth, full of fish and briam.

Iggie pauses, stares at me with snapshot fish-eyes. He shovels snapper with rope-tying fingers. *Mum put the phone on speaker. The nurse said he needed to tell us something he'd never told anyone. It would make sense of everything. His FAILINGS. By the time we got there he couldn't talk. I'm not sure if he could hear us. They said he could. That pissed me off. We're the ones who knew him.*

I refill our glasses from the jug, flip the fish, begin again with the bottom half, pulling flesh from the lateral line, like a middle spine.

I reckon failings was the nurse's word, says Iggie.

Why do people wait until they think they're gonna die to tell us? I gesture to Mae's handbag, touch one of the diaries halfway-out. *My friend's,* I say. *Missing,* I add. *Last seen here.*

Iggie reaches. I push the diary down, out of sight. With glistening fish fingers, Iggie touches the handbag. Mae wouldn't mind. She was okay with sticky, as long as we didn't talk about it.

Everything okay here? says Christos, his gaze shifting from our plates to Iggie's hand on Mae's bag.

May we please have another jug of the white? I ask. *The fuller bodied one, this time. To watch the storm.*

The tavern is empty but for us, unheard of at this time of year. Everyone is in hiding from the weather. *Join us,* I say to Christos, gesturing to the chair beside Iggie.

Thank you, says Christos. *Maybe later.* Collecting the menus, he adds: *You two look cosy enough—*

There's no-one here, I say, with a sweeping arm gesture.

I've been *desperate* for some alone time with Christos.

I'm seven weeks in, fuck-all progress on the book, wandering Poros like the walking dead.

It's time we talked, properly.

Christos' eyes-on mum and Yiayiá are nowhere to be seen today, and Iggie is a convenient buffer. We can play-act – strangers – though Christos knows things for sure, looks after me like I'm a royal guest.

I *know* there are things he wants to ask me.

Iggie was telling me about his dad. Passed recently… Recently? I ask, turning to Iggie.

Eight weeks ago, he says.

It's madness out there, I say, following Christos' gaze to the water. Two smaller boats smash against the concrete jetty. People alight from one of the boats, decked in life jackets, assisted by those onshore. *Surely people will die in this storm,* I add, gesturing to the water.

I turn to Iggie, berating myself for mentioning death on death.

Water people will be okay, says Christos.

Iggie nods in agreement.

Will you go back out, today? I ask Iggie.

No, he says. *My night off. Lucky timing! They won't go far. The other side of Neorio. Around the point to Mikro Neorio. Maybe Love Bay,* he adds, gesturing right.

Where will you sleep? I ask without thought.

Iggie takes a cigarette, glances at Christos whose eyes are still fixed on the people alighting the boat, turns back to me, eyes slightly narrowed, smiles – raises his brushy eyebrows, lights up.

Join us, I repeat, reaching to touch Christos on the forearm. *Red or white wine?* I add. *My shout. In homage to the storm. The WIND!*

Christos returns with a half jug of white and a half rosé.

Tell Christos about your dad, I say, taking Iggie's glass as Christos seats himself at the table. I pour the wine – rosé for the boys, white for me – three equal measures.

Silence.

I watched a movie on the way here, I say. *Over and over.* I light up. *I don't usually watch films, but I couldn't concentrate to read. Who can sleep on planes? The movie was about a bunch of unconnected dead people, choosing a memory to live with, for eternity. In the end, I watched the first half of the film on repeat. The choosing.*

What's the movie called? asks Iggie, taking his phone from the table.

I could live with this scene, I say, gesturing to sea. *If there was ever a day she'd turn up…*

I place my free hand on Mae's bag, inhale like it's my last puff.

I came here to find her, get closer to what was. Exhaling, I blow smoke towards the whitewashed timber buttressing the pitched roof. *I'm STUCK,* I continue. *Thinking about everything that WASN'T. Missed moments. All my failures. More memory than memory. If I was in that movie, I'd be choosing between all the scenes I nearly lived. Might have. Should have…*

Tell me one, says Iggie, glassy-eyed. He winks at me, or blinks a single tear, brushes it away as if it's a fly.

Enough from me, I say. *You tell me. And you, Christos. Then I'll go. Let's call it 'Tell Me'. Like truth or dare in a storm.*

The boys stay quiet.

If a scene is too intimate, I say, *how about what you'd do if you could have had another job, or another kinda life? What would it look like?*

I missed it with a girl, offers Iggie. *Julietta. Broke me. Christos knows all about it… I love boats. I was an athlete. A skier. Internationally competitive. Skiing is like balancing on the sea. My heart is for the ocean. I need water because I am my name.*

Iggie takes a cigarette from the pack, turns it lengthways, end-to-end, as if he's not sure which end to light. *Julietta's dad said a boat-worker wasn't the right fit for his daughter.*

What a cunt, I say.

Iggie laughs, coughs, lights up.

Fancy. Jeopardising your child's happiness like that, I add.

Yep, cunt, says Christos.

You two swear harder than the crew, says Iggie, puffing steadily.

My chiropractor says I could swear for Australia, I say, reaching for the right side of my neck, thinking I'll say yes to one of those shoreside massages, tomorrow, if the sunshine returns.

Will it be sunny tomorrow? I ask.

This is POROS! Christos laughs.

Your turn, Christos, says Iggie, offering Christos his deck of cigarettes. *No holding back because June's here.*

You first, says Christos, turning to me as he lights up.

My friend was raped, I say, circling my wrist with the strap of Mae's handbag. *That's how she lost her virginity. I failed her, in all I did and did not do.* I finish my glass of wine in a greedy gulp, refill for everyone. *No one forgets how they lost their virginity. It informs every intimate relationship, thereafter. Everything we want. Everything we will and will not abide.*

What did you do when she told you? asks Iggie. *What is abide?*

We fucked, I say. *Abide is like … tolerate,* I add.

My dad is dead, too, says Christos. *He and Mum split, then got back together. He died shortly after they rekindled. Gone as soon as they began again. Second chance dead in the water.*

We all turn to the sea.

What's the worst part for you? asks Iggie.

I want to know why they split. Mum won't speak of it. More than anything, I want to know why he disappeared when they were apart, even though he was just around the cove.

Shame, I say. Christos stares at me, waiting for me to say more. *So complex, long-term relationships. Was he the kind of man who would talk to you about this, if he were here?*

Nope, says Christos. *We were kinda strangers. Maybe I only need to know because he's dead.*

I met him, I say.

WHAT?

Decades ago. When I was here with Mae.

And … AND?

He had a consumerist attitude to women, I say.

HOW? That's just a line. Give me an example.

This is a long conversation, I say. *Not for now.* I stub the cigarette. *We were young. I'm just one person with my own memories. Failings. Ask your mum—*

I'm asking YOU. Tell me! You started this game.

He and Mae were lovers. I had a thing with him, too, before Mae. It broke us apart though we didn't admit it. Never even spoke about it. How fucked is that? We were best friends.

How long ago was this? Were you with him once? Many times? What about your friend? Were they a thing or was it a fling?

For her it was DEFINITELY a thing.

Not for him?

How the fuck would I know? He ate women.

Iggie: *Did you love him?*

Yes, I say, lighting another cigarette, drawing heavily, exhaling slowly.

Christos touches Iggie's deck of cigarettes. Their fingers meet momentarily, Christos' index finger against Iggie's forehand. Iggie nods. Christos lights, turning to me. *Did you know my mum?*

No. But Mae did. Well … she knew of *her. It's in here*, I say, taking the diaries from my bag, smudging the covers with olive oil and snapper, rubbing the oil into the leather as if I'm massaging sunscreen into Mae's neck.

GOD! says Christos. *Mum said she wasn't welcome, here. She was banned! I had to meet her covert. In town. We 'convened',* he says, using his fingers for inverted commas. *That's what Mae called it. We met at the wine bar Mum said was pretentious tourist nonsense. Someone else's words. Not Mum's way of speaking. She gave me one of those books.*

GIVE IT TO ME!

He looks at me as if he's been given three seconds to add me up, deliver his verdict.

I'll give it back, I add.

IF I give it to you, will you answer anything I ask? Truthfully.

Big ask when I don't know your questions, I say.

Iggie interjects. *My dad says, if there's nothing at stake you're not living. Used to say,* he adds, hitch-voiced.

I reach across the table with my left hand, place it on top of Iggie's, pour wine with my right.

I'll get more wine, says Christos.

Iggie wipes his cheeks, pierces me with his young man's stare, cocks his eyebrow again. This time he definitely winks. I take another cigarette from the pack, don't light, roll it between my index and middle finger – considering dopamine blockers, reward-seeking behaviour.

As Christos pours the wine, I contemplate the stakes.

Let's book swap and then decide if we're up for the truth telling, I say.

You'll need a mediator, says Iggie*. Another of my dad's teachings. I can be a silent mediator. Yes?*

I turn to Christos.

Deal me in, he says.

I turn to Iggie. *No such thing as a silent mediator*, I say.

~

A couple of hours later, the storm has shifted across the shoreline.

I see it across the way like thick grey cobwebs, obscuring the ridge of the mountains, no sign of the wind girls.

The rain is softer.

Christos retrieves the missing diary from the trunk of his bike. We exchange. I extend my spare hand. His right eye squints, twitching rapidly, dimple-side. Wet-eyed, we embrace.

When can we meet? I ask. *Thursday? Fourty-eight hours?*

Yes, at four.

~

Iggie and I stumble towards the water, peruse the fast-moving cloud, rainbow halo around the moon, pitch-perfect replica of the shoreline rainbow, only spherical.

I light a cigarette, inhale, allow the smoke to escape of its own accord. My face and body are still as stone. I imagine I look like a sculpture, sepulchral, incense burning within.

Can I come up? asks Iggie.

I blow the last of the smoke as if he's administered an opioid antagonist. I've no idea what that feels like, only seen it in a movie – rude awakening to real-time.

I don't want this to look like something it's not, I say.

What is it?

What is anything?

He waits for me to speak again, palms outstretched, catching rain mist and soft sea spray in his grateful-for-snapper fingers.

Wait ten minutes, I say. *Come up the narrow stairs on the left, beside the yellow house that flanks the studios. I'm first on the right. BE DISCREET.*

What is anything? He laughs. *Feel like I've known you a long time, June-girl.*

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.*

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TEXT prose

Heidi Harrison

The Thaw

One of my earliest memories was my mother telling me to suck my stomach in. I cannot remember a time before I was conscious of the fact that the body I inhabited was 'undesirable' at least in some way. I had my mother's bones, she would often lament, which I understood quickly was not a good thing. My father would take me jogging, telling me that I should not grow up to be like her: he did not have to say the words 'fat' or 'lazy' out loud for their meaning to be heard. I was six when they enrolled me in dance lessons to help with my apparent un-coordination. Years on, I wonder if that was another code for 'fat', but I haven't asked.

> Fat bodies, and fat women's bodies in particular, are represented as a kind of an abject: that which must be expelled to make all other bodily representations and functions, even life itself, possible. (Kent, 2001, p. 135)

From a young age I tried to shrink myself: suck in my stomach, limit my food, not contribute to conversations out of shyness. I was a bit of a wallflower, but never in the studio. The one time I truly felt beautiful was when I was dancing. I was good, which I knew because I was frequently told. Praised by my instructors and other parents who would come to watch their children and come up to me afterwards and say they couldn't keep their eyes off me. Yet these affirms came with their own conditions. My ballet teacher told me that I was good enough to be a professional dancer someday, but that I would need to lose weight. She thought I was beautiful, but I didn't have a typical dancer's body.

> Objectification theory posits that girls are typically acculturated to internalise an observer perspective as a primary view of their physical selves … this may help account for an array of mental health risks that disproportionally affect women. (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1996, p. 173)

For hours every week I would observe myself through the walled mirrors of the studio. Checking the lines of my body, my positioning, my pose. Self-correcting. Watching closely. I recall Lacan's mirror stage, defined as a 'turning point' after which 'the subject's relation to himself is always mediated through a totalising image which has come from outside … the mirror image becomes a totalising ideal which organises and orients the self' (Gallop, 1985, p. 79).

Who was I outside of that studio? So much of my own self became defined within that space, under the gaze of others with my own eye fixed upon the mirror. Lacan refers to the non-totalised body as *le corps morcele*: the body in bits and pieces (Gallop, 1985, p. 79). When I was dancing, I knew what I was for. Outside of it I felt formless, undecided.

*

I received my second tattoo on my 23rd birthday; hungover as hell, shivering and sweating in the tiny shop along the coastal strip, the smell of saline and antiseptic wafting through my pores as I pressed my head through the tiny plastic cushion on the tattoo bed. As I tried to keep my breathing even, my tattoo artist told me that she liked the way tattoos hurt. She liked the ritual of it, that you had to go through something difficult and that at the end you received something beautiful, like a gift or talisman of sorts, a symbol of your tribulation. That without the pain, they wouldn't be as meaningful.

I've thought about that a lot in the years since. I've been tattooed again, although never hungover. The pain is never as bad as I remember, and certainly never as bad as on a nauseous stomach with quivering limbs. Sometimes I can even enjoy the thrum of the needle, its buzz soothing like white noise until it heats up. The wipe of the cool cloth against the worn skin like a small nirvana. It is, I agree, worth the price of wearing something beautiful forever. But some part of me still resists what my artist said all those years ago. Should something have to hurt for it to be meaningful? Does something have to be hard won to be deserved?

About a month ago I was lying in shavasana when my yoga teacher's calming voice washed over the room:

> *Shavasana is always more rewarding after practice*
> *Just like day and night*
> *You cannot know one without ever having the other*

Like the lotus flower that blooms
Out of the dirt

Walking home I furiously typed the words in my notes app, trying to make sense of them. I could concede that there is something about shavasana that is a lot more rewarding than simply lying on the floor at home. That there was some bridge that had to be crossed before arriving at peace. It reminded me of an old acting exercise, *stomp and shakuhachi*, where we stamped our way around the room for three minutes before falling to the ground, rising and delivering a monologue. Covered in sweat and half breathless, the words would come spilling out without a moment to second guess, feeling altogether *released*.

The concept of catharsis is attributed to Aristotle, although the term appears in *The Poetics* exactly once, without introduction or explanation (Nellhaus, 2021). The definition has been much debated and has been interpreted in various ways over time, although its modern understanding has been solidified in conversations about art making, in particular, in regards to theatre practices. As Eduard Muller stated in *Theory of Art in the Ancients*: 'Who could doubt any longer that the cleansing of these and other passions consists precisely in the transformation of unpleasure, which inheres in pity and fear, into pleasure, or at least stands in the closest connection to it' (Bernays and Rudnytsky, 2004, p. 322).

What my tattoo artist and yoga teacher were trying to tell me were the same thing: that something beautiful could emerge out of something difficult. In the words of my favourite poet, Richard Siken: 'the gentleness that comes not from an absence of violence but despite the abundance of it' (2005). But still, I resisted. Maybe I didn't want to go through something difficult. Maybe I didn't want to suffer. In writing this piece, I didn't want to have to reveal something about myself to write. But the words came out anyway.

*

I was thirteen years old, sitting in the courtyard at lunch time with a group of friends.

'My ballet teacher told me I should "eat like a bird",' I explained, delicately nibbling at the end of an Arnott's Salada to demonstrate.

My friend stared at me. 'I don't think that's what she meant.'

*

Meditation has always been for me, like many others, a struggle. I find it difficult to switch my mind off, to keep it centred. It wanders and ambles; I start thinking about how nice it is not to have to think about anything, only to realise that for the thought to

have occurred in the first place I was … well, thinking. I used to practice meditation a lot. When I was emerged in actor training, I worked with a company that engaged with Eastern practices: yoga, meditation and Butoh. I have always felt rather attuned to my body, though I don't pretend to always understand it. To understand my centre was a completely different story.

I often found it hard to surrender in Butoh practice, too concerned with 'getting it right' (the concept does not exist in Butoh). A byproduct of my ballet days, I had difficulty with control.

> Women who are fat are said to have "let themselves go." The very phrase connotes a loosening of restraints. (Cecilia Hartley, 2001, p. 63)

I craved rigidity, structure and most of all, approval. This dance that I couldn't 'get right' challenged me in ways that I wasn't ready for at the time. I recall the first time that I was able to truly let go and fall into the meditative state that the dance evokes. I can't remember the fall into, only the emergence out – the sound of the teacher's voice calling us back into our bodies, back into the room. Blinking my eyes open in the dim light, I remember feeling a shocking wave of emotion. I had finally, after years of practice, gone to some other place that I had to come back from. I had gone *away.* For years I would be chasing this feeling, that wave of emotion and the accompanying relief at arriving back in my body. It was simultaneously terrifying and sublime.

*

The end of my actor's journey arrived two years before its ultimate demise. Sitting at a kitchen table of a dear friend surrounded by mugs stained red with wine, she confided in me something that had been said about me by a mentor of mine. The words stung, but more than that, confirmed something which I had always secretly feared: that I wasn't talented. For years I kept creating, with the words that had been repeated back to me collecting dust at the back of my mind. Even speaking them out loud in therapy couldn't exorcise them from my mind, couldn't release the ache of shame that accompanied them.

Shame researcher Brene Brown defines shame as 'the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection' (Brown, 2015). This rejection, coming from someone I perceived as a mentor, cast a deep shame in me that I am still working through. My whole life without even realizing it, I had been relying on approval from my teachers. I needed their praise and their gaze to tell me who I was, to know that I was worthy. In doing so, I was inevitably setting myself up for failure when I wasn't meeting those standards.

Then in COVID, like many others, I became isolated from my creative community. In the years after that, the feeling lingered. I didn't create anything. I still cooked dinner, I still picked out clothes for myself, I still got tattooed and I still made cocktails for the bar in which I worked – but I didn't make *art* in the meaningful way that I thought I would dedicate my life to doing. I had buried a part of myself deep down, submerged beneath layers of shame. But it was still there, burrowed in hibernation, waiting for the thaw.

*

Any woman will tell you that not all mirrors are made alike. Some mirrors were constructed by the devil himself, casting shadows over the dull pallor of your skin, showing where you've sunken, illuminating the places you swell. Others are crafted by gentler hands, cradling your body in their loving caress. You twist and turn as you examine yourself approvingly. Of course it's not about the mirror at all; it's to do with the light.

> Men "act" and women "appear". Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at. (John Berger, 1972)

I have always been a little terrified of the attention of men. A late bloomer, or so they say, I still find myself growing into my looks. As someone who grew up without it, male attention can feel exhilarating in a slightly dangerous way. Like missing a step on the escalator, or the first crackle of thunder on a hazy summer night. In the past, I have sought the affection of those I know I cannot have in an act of self-flagellation. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy: I berate myself for losing a competition I was never truly in the running for.

In the end I didn't make it as a dancer. I'll never know if it was because of the way that I looked, or if I just wasn't good enough. Some days I wonder if I tried enough. If I should have eaten less, practiced more, pushed myself harder. These days I can go months without thinking of my weight, then obsess over every mouthful. Sometimes I get drunk and listen to Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev in the Uber on the way home, tears stinging in my eyes.

I didn't make it as an actor, either, but I'm not sure my heart was ever fully in it. In a way, enacting a character was just another mirror I sought myself through. I still find myself looking, searching for a reflection that will stick.

*

I have always loved telling stories since I was a child, preferring to spend hours constructing convoluted narratives between my barbie dolls than playing outside. I had always been a bit embarrassed by my own timidity until my mother told me that I was

more like my father. When he was a child, during family gatherings he could be found underneath the table playing with his action figures. Knowing that made me feel closer to him and somehow, more understanding of myself.

> Every child at play becomes like a creative writer … it would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real. (Freud, 1908, p. 421)

It's not lost on me that my first realisation I wanted to be a writer came to me in second grade, after a teacher praised the first short story I had ever written. It was another doorway, another opening, *this is something I could be good at.* I wonder if this in-built need for approval was learnt or another inheritance.

Anna Gibbs elucidates how writing dictates itself to us by way of 'dimly remembered melodies' which stem from unlocatable parts of our bodies (Gibbs, 2005). Storytelling is a part of me, an heirloom passed down from my father tucking us into bed, reading us *The Hobbit*, or my grandmother's winding tales at the dinner table. It was my birthright, and in my late 20s became a life raft, bringing me back to myself.

I recall sitting on the bus with my mother, telling her about the time I had come home from a work party on a bus and thrown up on myself. I told her how I had gotten off at the next stop and proceeded to walk home an hour in the dark, not knowing what else to do. I had been so embarrassed, and it had weighed on me for weeks. The first thing she asked me was why I hadn't called her to pick me up. The simplicity of her question caught me off guard. Why hadn't I? The thought had never occurred to me. That there was a hand there – help – if only I had asked for it. She then told me similar stories, her own drunken nights and disasters. Slowly, the weight eased and by the time we reached our destination, I was laughing again. The shame had lifted.

Catharsis is a term highly debated by theorists but in my own life I have lived it over and over again. Catharsis is shavasana after flow, shakuhachi after stomp, having a transcendental experience and returning to the body … but it is also sharing stories, telling the truth and being met with grace and acceptance. It is a hand reaching out, saying '*yes, that's how it is*' (Tompkins, 1987, p. 170).

These days I see my reflection in the glow of the laptop, in the blink of the cursor staring back at me. I see it in the face of my peers when I read aloud in class, in my housemate on the opposite end of the couch after a long day. I hear it in the voice of my mother on the phone another state away. Sometimes, in it, I even catch myself smiling.

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TEXT prose

Ian C Smith

Tales that we tell

We go around this long table to hear what students have written so far. I want to be the most innovative teacher I can be. The 'pen-pushers', my borrowed term for the capable crew of young women working in the caring sector who ardently give their time as volunteers, read and/or transpose for those whose impediments or shyness make it too difficult for their work to be understood. Some students guffaw inappropriately. This could be caused, I think, by a lack of social inhibition, or nervousness. The simplicity, absence of self-pity, and celebration of life that shines from the heart of their efforts, and their kindness, are lessons for me. They shall be heard, not hidden. This is the People with Disabilities creative writing project.

> Feel my heart, Maria, my former teenaged girlfriend said, her voice veiled, guiding my fingertips to a place below her collarbone but not where I believed our hearts beat. Initially I thought she was hurt, then it felt like a box beneath her skin. I recoiled like a frightened boy as she said, It's a pacemaker. After years apart I had traced her due to a stubborn, albeit amateurish, persistence, her unusual Italian maiden name, and incredibly good luck. Wanting to learn more about my earlier self, details I had forgotten, the spoor of a good story from that hotbed of lust when I loved the taste of her, had driven my quest. For a long time, I had kept a photograph of her clutching a lucky cat to her breasts.

Charlie chooses to have his pen-pusher read his piece to us. I suspect his emotions, not his slurred speech, cause this choice. A scoliosis sufferer, he is much older than Natalie

whose cerebral palsy doesn't prevent her from using a pen. They met at a time in Charlie's life when almost everybody had given up on him. I have heard stories about the institution where he wasted years – we hear them in this room, shuddering, eerily enthralled – but he can still smile despite black moods that grip him as suddenly as seizures convulse another writhing student. His repetitious story is a clear statement of love for Natalie and the ensuing joy now his luck has finally changed. While we listen Charlie stares fiercely down at his wheelchair wedged hard against Natalie's, wheel to wheel.

> After being self-deprecatory, a pose, therefore false, I heard about Maria's mistakes, marriages, and betrayals. Havoc. Time's spinning wheel of fortune had shaped us differently, reminding me of when our images in a carnival's hall of mirrors reflected us, laughing, distorted, absurdly changing years before. I said I would help her stop smoking, concerned she could drop dead, her nose frothy in her cappuccino, no longer needing the facelift she would buy if she won the lottery. I was disappointed because she said nothing unflattering about me in our shared past. Despite my disingenuity I craved honesty betwixt us about those tempestuous days of young love, especially the dramatic finale when she had dumped me, possibly the last good decision she made.

Jock, a hydrocephalus patient, lightens the mood that lingers in the almost silent murmur following Charlie's bared heart stunner. After tales of personal suffering, I sometimes struggle to keep our session professional. Some of my valiant assistants' eyes glitter and I know they look to me for guidance, perhaps not realising my heart is going *boom-boody-boom*, too. Jock's story about childhood memories, holidays in the sun with specific names of people and places written in the first person, past tense, is funny and convincing. I lead the way with relieved comments because everybody expects me to, uttering some status quo about the importance of family recollections. Jock then lets my tyres down by saying he made it all up. While the room ripples with laughter at my expense I take advantage exaggerating surprise at this fantasy, this touch of magic snubbing the darkling plain of his affliction. Jock grins with pride, but with a look my way that says, Sorry mate.

> When younger, I thought Maria had the lot, looks, family, personality. An early school leaver always in trouble, I lived and looked like a refugee. Fate and the years can combine like events in a Thomas Hardy novel. My heartbeat was strong, the comfort of stories a blessing. Each time Maria called she sounded petulant, alone with only love's distant aftertaste. She insisted she was still young, claimed I talked slant, that I not only sought, but mourned, the lost past.

Hair cut and clean-shaven for the occasion after scrutinising the careless printer like a hovering hawk, I buy a new white shirt for our apotheosis, the launch. We meet for our final, celebratory stage, old soldiers joking drolly at a reunion. One discreetly vomits. Some stroke my shirt, plant lipstick on my pale jaw, tell me I look better spruced up.

Jock keeps playing the harlequin so I dub him Jock-in-the-box as he cracks on about a fanfare for a blockbuster movie of our slim book with those trusting smiles on the cover. After the event my students, aides, and some family supporters, voyagers washed up in a carpark, listen to the rollercoaster ride of my developing back story, Maria's tale. Then it is time. As we each go our separate ways into the black tunnels of our future I think of how, at first, I took this job for the pay, feel now how I did when walking over the flattened ground the day after that carnival left town.

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TEXT prose

Heather Taylor-Johnson

Looking at Birds

The book is large, longer than my torso, awkward to hold. I sit back in the giving arms of a swivel chair, which I've moved so I am in sunlight's reach, ready to settle into the read. The black of the book is shiny, whether illuminated by the sun's rays or not. It almost shimmers in my hands as the backdrop to an otherworldly jungle: a blue bulb with bright green spikes, hot yellow-petaled pods with orange pimples, a bloom of fire, pink buds. In the centre of the jungle – or forest – is the book's title: *The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness*. If I run my fingers over it, I can feel the words and the flowers. I see it as a true work of art before I even open it, something I can look at, really see. I have read in many places and heard from many people that one way to slow down your life is to take the time to look at the what's around you.

I have come to the place I run to regularly when I'm unwell, when the sound of my voice vibrates too much and I mustn't, if possible, talk or move. I have been this way for three weeks, yet it feels as though there was never a time when I wasn't this crashed. At home, I talk a lot, I move a lot, I organise myself and the lives of others and I don't stop doing or thinking and I'm rarely still. I know this is the right place for me to be now because when I enter this tiny town, there is a welcome sign in which a large, metal pelican greets me, and my shoulders drop immediately, and I give thanks to the pelican, or to the *nori*, as the Ngaarrindjeri people of this land call the striking bird. Here, for four days, I will practice patience because my body has demanded I slow down, and I'm beginning with this book.

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It's laid out like a picture book for children, though not the children whose parents want to ensure their innocence is untouched. At just over one hundred pages of small chunks of text and illustrations to match, I read it yesterday, quickly, because I was home and there was a very long to-do list and I'd prided myself in even finding the time to pick it up, thought it indulgent. Here, in this tiny town filled with pelicans, it is 10am, and the only thing I want to do is reread the book, slowly, over the course of the day.

> Even before he was born, he was cherished.
> But there was, even then, deep within him, a seed.

From a dreamy underwater view, we see a heavily pregnant woman in a bikini, gliding toward the surface. We know the boy to be but a seed himself, resting inside the birth sac of his mother's belly, protected by all of her good fluid in the same way that she is protected in the Earth's good fluid. It's a sort of joyful picture, though the portent of the words takes me somewhere else. A place where the only noise I can hear is the underwater rush of silence, and I think that silence, in some circumstances, is unnerving.

Eventually the seed that is a boy is born, and he grows, as does the seed within him. The author / illustrator Matt Ottley uses space in such a way that my eyes don't take in too much on any single page. Thousands of days lived by this young boy with dozens of stories wrapped inside each one, all told in a mere few pages with much use of light and shadow. In fact, it's the light and shadow that create the space as much as it is the absence of images in a large area. One of my favourite illustrations is of the boy, maybe four years old and drawn to the size of my pinkie finger, walking through a white world into a dark grey one, wearing only a pair of shorts. There is no horizon, no delineated ground – just space, though it is a textured kind of space with different shades of white and different shades of grey – and he looks over his shoulder at me, vulnerable and alone. Already I'm concerned about this boy. Already I'm connecting with this boy.

> Some people called him odd,
> others eccentric.
>
> Children teased him.
> His friendships didn't last long.

I'm remembering a girl named Gina from my sixth-grade homegroup, who seemed excitable in an enthusiastic way one moment and in an angry way the next. Everyone said she was annoying, but I don't know if that's fair. Isn't everyone annoying? I don't think anyone annoys me more than I, myself, do. In this illustration, the boy is alone in a room full of books and pictures, staring at a window too high for him to see through, looking at what's both possible and unattainable. The room is cluttered, the light through the window creates space.

It becomes clear the boy has seen many doctors, who've all told him the seed inside had sprouted and bloomed into a tree 'whose flower was ecstasy, and whose fruit was sadness' and that it would always be there. There were rumours Gina saw a psychologist. Mental health in 1980s America, when and where I grew up, was only challenged on a few television shows, and not very successfully. For us, if a person was sick in the head they were somehow dangerous so, I admit, Gina scared me. The doctors gave the boy / Gina medicine that helped and then it didn't. The tree within them grew so large that 'Soon,' the book says, 'he could not even speak' and soon, in eighth grade, Gina overdosed on pills and died, killing the tree inside her. The boy, however, gave in to the tree, which grew and grew and grew, pushing out through his mouth, choking his throat, strangling his entire body, until there was nothing left of him but knotty bark and leafless branches, though his mind, finally, could now be released.

What does a released mind look like? In the book, it is a winged salamander crawling out of a hole in a tree, and then it's flying. It becomes rat-ish, and it's flying. It turns into a cow with wings, a horse with wings, a swan until, at last, it's a perfect, small, blue bird. When we metaphorically leave our bodies, why are we so often birds?

I've been searching out poetry books that incorporate illustrations, curious how they might change the overall experience of reading poetry. I think most people are caught up in a reductive definition of poetry that centres on emotion and pushes story to the back, as if story should be relegated to fiction, and fiction (also reductive) is plot driven. Like the text that accompanies a painting in a gallery, illustrations in a book direct. In Matt Ottley's book, they emphasise feeling in the plot's drive. In poetry, they might insert plot into the feeling, or highlight certain themes, and themes require a kind of story. Because I am thinking about poetry and illustrations and now birds, I'm specifically thinking about 'Your Updated DSM Diagnosis' in Anna Jacobson's simple book of poetry, *Anxious in a Sweet Store*, which is incredibly complex. Or it's a complex book that is incredibly simple. I believe the best art a person can take-in is full of juxtaposition. *Anxious in a Sweet Store* is a book about childhood memories, anxiety, hospitalisation, adulting in a questionable world. The poet writes about a 'psychosis diagnosis / beyond the DSM –' DSM stands for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a handbook health care professionals around the world use to determine what it is a person is living with and how detrimental the living-with might be. It's clear to me you don't want to burst through any of its charts. On the page opposite the poem is a drawing of Anna's, where a bird is flying over what I see as cloud and land and water. What's on top of the bird is tricky: I either see a veil on top of its head (perhaps because it's a happy bird feeling fancy) or I see a scribble of a person that is steering the bird while seated on its neck (perhaps because the poet is in charge of their mind). It can be either of these things and it can be both since the drawing is surreal, which I establish from the illustrations below the bird and its vista: another bird flying upside down, its neck drooped and one wing hanging, as if it's about

to drop in a drunken spiral into – are they flames? are they dangerous crags? – something like not-water that is also upside down.

Cycloid
cyclops
cyclone(d) –

the poem begins, then later

Your body did whatever it did.
People did things to it –
you do not know what –
you were not there.

No, the poet's 'you' is flying into metaphor, either expansively or limply, depending on which way I turn the book. Juxtaposition is crucial to the diagnosis, and again when the mind leaves the body, the mind is a bird, flying. This one looks like a dove. Ottley's looks like a splendid fairywren or a blue jay. What would mine be? Did Gina have one?

You see my problem. Though I think I've done well enough with the looking – it's been an hour and twenty minutes and I'm not even a third of the way through *The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness* – I can go no further. I have gone from the young boy to Gina then birds to the poetry of Anna Jacobson and back to Gina. I've lost focus. Or patience. I guess they can be the same thing.

I decide I need to move, even though when I'm unwell like this, it's best that I don't. I came down here to be quiet and still, but maybe I can be quiet and still while walking. Maybe stillness has all sorts of definitions and maybe, since I'm practicing patience, I'll discover one I hadn't known.

I hit the road. This South Australian town, founded on the banks of the Murray, where good fluid feeds the earth, is full of wetland and limestone. The river runs into the sea near here so sometimes the water expands like a lake, sometimes it looks like a gentler form of ocean. There aren't many houses, very little traffic by airplane, automobile or even foot, and the sky is enormous. No matter how often I come down here I am amazed by the space. For birds, it's a haven. I've seen terns, swamphens, gulls, fairywrens, cormorants, galahs, rainbow lorikeets, swallows, darters, ibises, kites, magpies and yes, pelicans.

I walk fast, though my body doesn't want me to move this determinedly. I get a sensation of the world bouncing from my heavy steps with each one I take, though I know, of course, it's only the world inside of me, so when I come across two pelicans swimming together near the bay's shore, I stop, drop, and sit. I want patience to find me right here.

Maybe the smaller pelican swims off because I've disturbed them. I'm glad it doesn't go too far and that the two birds can see each other. The remaining bird is perched atop the water about fifty metres in front of me, bobbing with the small waves made by a slight autumn breeze. It looks at the other pelican, then the horizon and the land nearest and furthest, then at the other pelican again, then the distant boat, the reeds, then me. It flaps its wings, a span well over a metre long, and moves to perch on the wooden structure that cordons off a safe place for children to swim during holidays in the summertime without fear of snakes and rogue jet skis. It looks around some more, uses its beak to fiddle with its chest and below its left wing. As the other pelican returns, it watches its approach, then together they both use the wooden plank as a place to sit and look at the world around them. Overhead, two more are flying in a lazy circle.

I decide I want my mind-as-bird to be a pelican. I like that they're not flappers; they can't sustain the action of flapping their wings while flying, just as I can't sustain the action of taking steps while walking. They can stay in the air from sun-up to sun-down and cover hundreds of kilometres, but to do this they must soar, and soaring is essentially the art of stillness, and it takes patience to be still. I think about their bills, too. How they can expand and create space to fish. By plunging them into water and scooping up prey, along with litres of its habitat, the pelican uses its gular pouch as a net, tucking it into its chest and draining the good fluid away, leaving the meat. They are true fishers, and you've got to be patient when you fish, something I have never been able to do. As I watch the pelicans in flight, I imagine that their cargo-carrying bills can metaphorically carry the weight of my voice.

When the smaller, more adventurous of the two pelicans splashes back into the water and swims away, the remaining one looks out toward the dock, the cliffs, the trees and the clouds. As do I. Silent and still, I lose more than an hour looking at the pelican and its sustainable view and I gain much-needed rest.

When I return to the house and the book, I find it open to where I'd stopped reading and looking. On one of the pages the blue bird is flying over a river toward mountains. On the opposite page it is all clouds, we're in the clouds, it's nothing but cloud and space and this short text:

> Eventually he emerged
> into a world of beauty
> and wonder.

I turn the page then think better of it, decide to start over because to pick up where I left off seems disrespectful, to Ottley's telling and to my reading. The sun is still up, my day is not done, and I came here with a plan.

> Even before he was born, he was cherished.
> But there was, even then, deep within him, a seed.

Patience doesn't mean passivity or resignation, but power. It's an emotionally freeing practice of waiting, watching, and knowing when to act. I'm thinking about birds eating seeds, about Anna Jacobson's seemingly upside-down bird finding a seed amidst the fire and crags and nourishing itself enough to keep flying, about Gina as a baby in her mother's womb and how cherished she must have been. My mind keeps moving, it can't stop moving, but I'm looking.

Heather Taylor-Johnson is a multi-form writer living on Kaurna land near Port Adelaide. Her most recent poetry books are the verse novel Rhymes with Hyenas *and the collection* Alternative Hollywood Ending*. She is the editor of* Shaping the Fractured Self: Poetry of Chronic Illness and Pain*, winner of the Mascara Avant Garde Award and read in disability circles around the world. Her latest novel is a work of autofiction called* Little Bit*. Her novel* Jean Harley was Here *was shortlisted for the Readings Prize for New Fiction. With her essays on illness and art, she won* Island*'s Nonfiction Prize and was shortlisted for* ABR*'s Calibre Prize and also received a major Arts South Australia Fellowship to continue writing. Heather is an arts critic and an Adjunct Research Fellow at the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide, where she also earned a PhD in Creative Writing.*

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TEXT prose

Md Mujib Ullah

Telepathic echo

I visited your imaginative home three times, but you were never there. On my return, I watched the electric train leave the nearest station, gliding on time toward your city – a silent thread stretching between us. Along the winding path, a boatman steered his craft toward a captivating country yard. Five passengers shared the voyage: two with cameras, capturing sky, sand, trees, and shore, preserving moments like fragile treasures. A young man sang a folksong, his voice weaving through the air while his shadow danced upon the rippling water, as if a beloved whispered back across an invisible wave, caught in a telepathic echo. The other two, clearly a pair, held a gaze that spoke without words – a tender closeness, unspoken love that needed no romance to be real.

A quiet ache settled inside me, born of your absence and the longing it stirred. I wish I were a space bird – an albatross soaring across rivers and skies – to fly straight to you, to share a single moment, a whispered date beneath endless horizons.

Md Mujib Ullah reads, researches, thinks, and writes. His work has appeared in Journal of Poetry Therapy, TEXT, Capitalism Nature Socialism, Asiatic, Postcolonial Text, The Goose, Borderless, Prachya Review*, and* Dhaka Tribune.

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TEXT prose

Lucinda Strahan and Angela Glindemann

Here We Are: a script for spatial thinking and attunement

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Here We Are: a script for spatial thinking and attunement

This creative work is both an essay and an interactive script for spatial writing experiments. It began as epistolary program notes for the fourth edition of Writing in the Expanded Field at the Australia Centre for Contemporary Art in 2022. Lucinda Strahan is the leader of this experimental writing program, and Ange Glindemann was then a participant, now a PhD candidate under Lucinda's supervision with Professor Naomi Stead. Lucinda's original expanded writing methodology (Strahan 2019) applies Krauss's (1979) mapping of an 'expanded field' of sculptural practice to the experimental turn (Singer & Walker 2023) in nonfiction. The gently declarative statement 'Here we are' had become something of a motif in Lucinda's program materials by the fourth edition of Writing in the Expanded Field, performing as it does a shared relation of being in space and place that is part of the program's methodological enquiries. Ange's subsequent doctoral research has identified the deictic qualities of this unassuming sentence – deixis being the linguistic term for words with meanings depending on temporal, spatial and social contexts.

This work is an imaginative essaying of the shapes, directions, and material relations of our spatially attuned writing and reading practices. It is an invitation to other writer-readers to explore spatial thinking and situation in their own practice, a move that is also necessarily an invitation to attend to embodiment. Following Braidotti (2014, p. 182), we find that these experiments are part of the "crucial" task of developing "adequate figurations" to account for the ethical complexity of the current moment, an approach that "enlists the resources of the imagination as much as conceptual thinking". Writing researchers are essential where "the systems of theoretical representation we have inherited from critical theory in the past are simply inadequate to the task". We bring Kristeva to this conversation also, reconsidering her notion of intertextuality via Schlosser (2018, p. 26), who finds Kristeva's "extension of intersubjectivity to the text bears some overlap with topological theories often deployed in geography". Playfully we hold this idea beside Braidotti's (2014, p. 173) cartographic figurations, with her calls to remember in a minority mode, to "defeat linearity, to open up spaces of movement and of deterritorialisation that actualise the virtual possibilities which have been frozen in the image of the past". At three points, the reader will find hyperlinks leading out of the reading space of these pages to interactive digital spaces that might unfold beside or layer with their reading experience. The first leads to Open Street maps, where visitors are invited to drop their location and/or diarise their contribution to this map alongside the global community. The second leads to the AITSIS map of Indigenous Australia, where visitors are invited to acknowledge on which Country they are reading. The third leads to the plaintext web canvas Your World of Text, "an infinite grid of text editable by any visitor" open and ongoing, where we invite any reader to write *into* this work by sharing notes from their own spatial writing experiments.

hello,

writer essayist researcher critic poet storyteller artist reader-writer, whoever you are

here we are
(where?)

at/in the spaces

we occupy
in this encounter

you and I
us and you

and we acknowledge everything you bring to this *situation* of reading

and writing

sometimes we (writers, academics) fall into an "occupational tendency" to "under-attend to the rich dimension of space" (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, p. 9)

this script (why a script? why not just an essay?) is designed to provoke your thinking *with* and *from*

"prepositionally"
(Rendle-Short, 2021; Villanueva, 2022)

(a script is something that is not just read but performed) you are invited to enact its ideas

and write *into*

1.
here we are
(where?)

together . . and . . apart

here / here : : always some *where*

a deictic claim

: we are touching
some *thing*
enfleshed subjects :

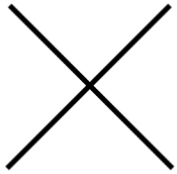
: feeling *something*

there / there : reading-writing

exchanging
. .
affinities
. .
affective interlinkages

2.

in place and space



every *where* is crossed

by histories social, cultural forces, environmental and human geographies: “the geopolitics of institutions, inequalities, autobiographies, languages, and places” (Livholts, 2020, p. 8).

“The extreme strangeness of reading is constituted by your private relationship with a public document made in words that we mainly can parse or define.

“The extreme strangeness of reading is that your body is involved in response, even if we have been taught to repress or downplay that fact.”

(Blau DuPlessis, 2019, p. 30):

where are you?

where have you come from?

and none of our multiplicity needs to be reduced; we don’t have to *form an orderly line*

we can

and
and
and
and
and
writing subject(s) and addressee(s)
and
and
and
and
and

3.

being beside some *thing*

you are beside

here

textures and surfaces touching maybe human and non-human materials subtle or gross

skins stones

under your fingertip(s)?

the side of your hand

is it resting on something?

soft? hard? sloping? smooth? padded? lumpy? silken? grainy? firm? woven?

"a number of elements may lie alongside one another but not an infinity of them" (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, p. 8)

now

walk/move/mobilise in any direction

until you feel a place to be still

where are you?

4.

feeling *something*

fluttering, pulsing
membranes
moisture
heat

how is your breathing?

are your cheeks hot? are your feet cold?

can you feel your own heart beating?

tap a finger each time

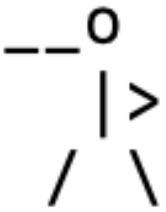
can you feel your scalp

tightening?

tongue plump in your mouth

maybe you can't feel very much
just blank or neutral

hasten slowly



5.

where is *here*?

(I was here)

you and you and I?

(you are here)

what is this *we* missing?

tell us

what are *we* becoming?

ʌue

/

u

and all this empty space

(read: all this white light)

[here / here:

a misheard echo of British Parliament:

hear ~~him~~. hear ~~him~~.]

is there a clear here?

now

"The only thing that is clear here

take this script somewhere else

be there

"there / there"

is the messiness of the situation."

(Finbloom, 2019, p. 70)

[unknown origin,

but something comforting nonetheless,

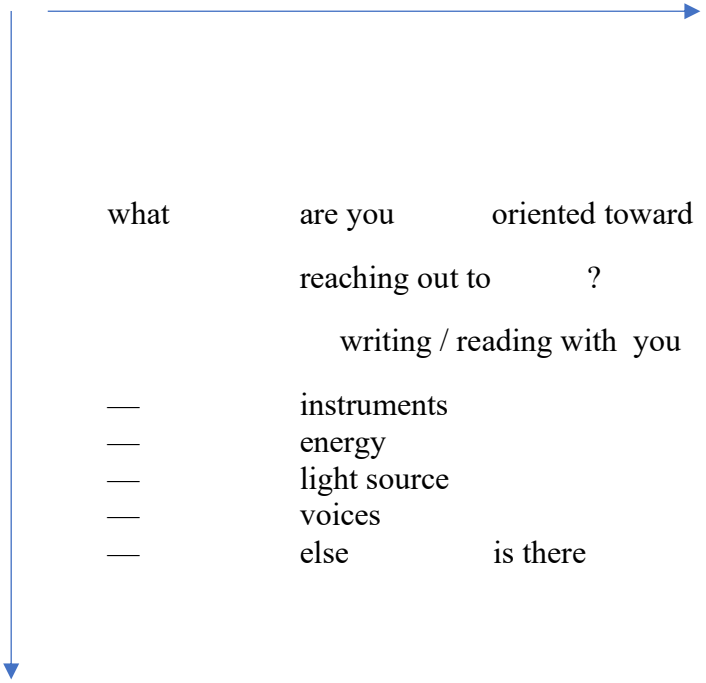
the suggestion of an action]

6.
the shapes of *here*

connected

by relations

horizontal



and

what are you oriented toward ?

vertical

reaching out to ?

writing / reading with you ?

— instruments
— energy
— light source
some say — voices
— else is there

triangular

becoming

s p r e a d o u t

here

zig zags

7.

we are *here*

we meet where

(Blau DuPlessis, 2019, p. 25): “Deictic words acknowledge that my here is
not your here;
my tomorrow is not your tomorrow.”

my you is not your you

(unless you are me, only later, perhaps.)
(depending on your perspective.)

reader my collaborator:

We meet when
“The words take on specified meaning spoken from and to a located situation.”
Blau DuPlessis (2019, p. 25)

Finbloom (2019, p. 71):
"The phenomena of deixis
reveals a more radical contextuality–
namely that some words have referents
that change depending on the
context. This quality in deixis hints
at the possibility that
all language
itself can be contextual–that words
themselves
are empty vessels
to be filled in
by the context
in which
they are
uttered."

Meanwhile, on intertextuality,
Schlosser (2018) quotes Kristeva
(2010, p. 66) as saying:
"The word's status is thus
defined *horizontally* (the word
in the text belongs to both
writing subject and addressee)
as well as *vertically* (the word
in the text is oriented toward
an anterior or synchronic
literary corpus)" (Kristeva, 2010,
p. 66, as cited in Schlosser, 2018, p. 24).

Elsewhere in this paper,
Schlosser (2018, p. 25)
notes that Kristeva "differentiates
the commonly understood notion
of time as a linear succession of
'presents' from psychic time,
or time that intersects with
sensation and experience".

where does this text live now

until next time

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Angela Glindemann (writing creatively as Ange Crawford) is a writer, editor, educator and PhD candidate living on unceded Wurundjeri land. In her doctoral research at RMIT, she is exploring spatial writing, with a particular interest in ambiance, gesture and porosity. Her debut YA novel, How to Be Normal*, won the inaugural Walker Books Manuscript Prize and was released in March 2025. Ange also recently contributed an experimental essay on writing and its sensory and material context to* Someone Like Me: An Anthology of Non-fiction by Autistic Writers *(UQP). She has a book publishing background and volunteers with local artist-run initiative Seventh Gallery, where she runs para-academic writing programs.*