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present

the short-listed entries from the

Wyndham Writing Awards 2019

The four categories are:

Short Story

Graphic Short Story

Poetry

Flash Fiction

"The pool of comics submitted for this year's Wyndham Writing Awards were all very strong. Each one was unique, compelling and a privilege to read. It was wonderful to see such a range of impressive work by artists enriching Australia's comic making community."

- JESS PARKER, **Graphic Short Story judge.**

"It has been a pleasure to read all of the stories and poems in this year's shortlists. The shortlisted authors have written on all manner of subjects, from grand to mundane, demonstrating a multiplicity of perspectives and a diversity of topics, tones and voices. It is heartening to see so many writers confidently tackling so many different forms. A judge's decision is always double-edged, but nevertheless I would like to wish each and every writer who entered this competition the best in their future authorial endeavours."

- ADAM FORD, **Poetry, Short Story and Flash Fiction judge.**

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WYNDHAM
WRITING
AWARDS 

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Wyndham Writing Awards Anthology 2019



2019

SHORT STORY

POETRY

FLASH FICTION

GRAPHIC SHORT STORY

WYNDHAM WRITING
AWARDS

Anthology

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Anthology
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Short Story
Graphic Short Story
Poetry
Flash Fiction

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writingawards@wyndham.vic.gov.au

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*Local Encouragement Award

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INTRODUCTION

It is an incredible honour to be able to once again pen the Introduction to the Wyndham Writing Awards Anthology. This collection includes shortlisted entries from our 2019 Wyndham City Libraries Wyndham Writing Awards, ranging from short stories to poetry and flash fiction, and it is terrific to celebrate the outstanding literary talent in Wyndham and across Victoria.

I am advised that we received 266 entries with those shortlisted published in this anthology. I thank our judges, Adam Ford and Jess Kitty Parker, on what was an undoubtedly difficult task of shortlisting these entries.

Wyndham is proud to invest in celebrating the individual excellence and contributions that Wyndham and Victorian writers make to our cultural and intellectual life.

Writing can help us define right from wrong, develop and define human relationships and enhance our understanding of the world we live in.

In the words of former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, 'Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope'.

Literacy plays an essential role in defining the type of society we want to live in. Equally, the type of society we want to avoid.

Above all, it is the practice of reading and writing that remains fundamental to achieving a thriving civil society and on behalf of Council, I thank you for your contribution.

Councillor Josh Gilligan, Wyndham City Council

JUDGES' COMMENTS

ADAM FORD

It has been a pleasure to read all of the stories and poems in this year's shortlists. The shortlisted authors have written on all manner of subjects, from grand to mundane, demonstrating a multiplicity of perspectives and a diversity of topics, tones and voices. It is heartening to see so many writers confidently tackling so many different forms. A judge's decision is always double-edged, but nevertheless I would like to wish each and every writer who entered this competition the best in their future authorial endeavours.

JESS PARKER

The pool of comics submitted for this year's Wyndham Writing Awards were all very strong. Each one was unique, compelling and a privilege to read. It was wonderful to see such a range of impressive work by artists enriching Australia's comic making community.

SHORT STORIES

THE FEMALE GAZE
Anna Kate Blair

SWAN SONG
Esthee Schonken

GRAFFITI
Mary Jones

REMAINING
Elle Parkinson

CHICKEN SOUP
Ully Merkel

SHORT STORY WINNER

The Female Gaze by Anna Kate Blair—The Female Gaze is a story that is equal parts hopeful and frustrated, a truly contemporary romance in which its characters grow and learn despite any clear resolutions or epiphanies. Its language is thoughtful and intelligent, equally skilled at depicting convincing urban settings as it is describing compelling inner monologues. While somewhat bleak, it never descends into despair. While somewhat hopeful, it never over-eggs its optimism. Maintaining such an emotional balance is quite an impressive achievement.—ADAM FORD

THE FEMALE GAZE

Anna Kate Blair

In truth, it feels unlikely that I would be attracted to somebody on a dating app. I am sceptical about the process, which positions people as if products, packaged with photos, descriptions and even measurements. We dispose of one another with our fingertips; our interactions are mediated by corporations. I do not like the thought that people are looking for someone, anyone; I prefer to think that nobody needs or wants another person until they meet a particular gaze, are struck by lightning or charged with some kind of electric shock. I hear that the same people are on every dating app. I choose Bumble because I like bees, because honeycomb shines with the same tin yellow as lightning. It is easy to download, to open, disconcertingly free of angst.

*

There is a girl who appears in a photograph reading *On Being Blue*, the pale pink waves of her bobbed hair, parted at the side, falling across one eye. I almost reject her outright, afraid of her beauty. She sends me a message asking *Have you read Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf's love letters?*

I do not think that it is possible to live up to this opening line. I spend the afternoon contemplating her glamour and my lack. I check the app again in the evening; she has deleted her account.

*

There are, everywhere, people with names that I might learn on the dating app. Everybody seems to lose their anonymity, their armour. It feels as if we have all become a little more porous, as if we are waiting to meet one another. I like this. I am addicted despite my reservations.

*

I meet Sarah in the evening, when it is black and wet outdoors. She sits alone at a large table, lit by yellow candles, waiting, in a tartan dress, neither reading nor playing on her phone.

“I’m like a scientist when it comes to relationships,” she says.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“I separate sex and love.”

We speak of weddings, of racial blindness, of islands in Japan. She tells me she is moving to Canada in two weeks. Sarah speaks as if she is free of anxiety. I am so afraid of seeming strange that I must seem dull. I am thinking only about how to make a good impression. Sarah plays with her hair, scooping it up into a ponytail before untying it and arranging it, again, around her face. She fiddles with the flame on the table. She seems to look at me more frequently than I look at her. I chastise myself for boring her, for my awkward and irregular eye contact.

*

I feel, walking home, as if I have failed a test. I do not know what it was that I felt toward Sarah; I fixated on the impression that I might make upon her such that I failed to register whether she had made an impression on me. My desire to be whatever another person wants is so enormous, sometimes, that I feel hollow, afterwards, having temporarily lost myself so as to secure a stranger’s interest. I was propelled forward, through our date, by adrenalin which has vanished, replaced by a void. It seems that there is, now, one more person in the world who has been disappointed by me. I know that I do not know this and that it should not matter. It changes almost nothing if she does not like me, but it changes my mood.

*

I think, the next morning, as I catch the train to the university: *she has*

not messaged. I have not messaged, either, though. Later, I do.

*

I show my students images of Venus, give them an essay by Laura Mulvey. *Woman*, Mulvey writes, *is the bearer, not maker, of meaning.* These paintings of Venus were made for men, but now one might assume a female viewer, an undergraduate art historian. My students, all women, craft their own interpretations, arguing about the male gaze, agreeing that Venus is reduced to an object, a possession, as she is painted nude, eroticised. Mulvey, one notes, wrote that hypersexualising women serves to reduce their threat.

Sometimes, I think, but Venus is powerful precisely because of her erotic appeal. She never wants anybody but herself; her hand’s positioning often implies masturbation, but when shown with Mars, her male partner, she appears bored. Her likeness, in the Renaissance, was positioned above the marriage bed, where a man might see her as he wished for children. It seems these men needed Venus more than she needed them.

I wonder if their wives needed Venus, too.

*

We eat dinner at a restaurant specialising in fried chicken and sour cocktails. I drip sauce on my dress; Sarah tells me stories of times when she, too, has struggled to eat gracefully.

Sarah tells me that she lives as a ghost in an old school, that the person who signs the lease is known as the *property guardian* while the flatmates are *ghosts*, neither explicitly allowed nor disallowed, living in a liminal zone. She can climb out the kitchen window and onto the roof, from which she can see the city in the distance. She slept up there, once, in summer.

*

Sarah seems subdued, though, often failing to return my phrases with her own. I wonder if she is, perhaps, as awkward as I am awkward; if I failed to notice, concerned with my own anxieties during our first meeting, that she was more like me than I imagined.

“I got some very bad news on Saturday and I’m a bit distracted,” she says, though. “I don’t want you to think that it’s you.”

She does not tell me the news. She tells me that she has cancelled all her plans for the weekend. She almost cancelled dinner but wanted to see me. She tells me that she is *not herself*, which is a phrase I find intriguing, suggesting as it does that Sarah has a self, fixed and identifiable, unknown to me.

“One part of me wants to go home and another part wants to stay out,” she says, leaning across the table. “I’d invite you back to my place, but it’s far away...”

“You can come to mine,” I say, and we look at a map on my phone, considering distances.

“I think I want to go home,” she says.

We walk through the rain toward the bus stop. She doesn’t have a coat and it is very cold. She suggests I read a book in which women’s fingers carry electrical charges, creating sparks and shocks with each touch. Her bus appears and I ask if she wants to run to catch it. She kisses me on the cheek and is gone. I walk home despite the drizzle.

*

I am at the gallery, pretending to see. I read names and descriptions that do not stick. I do not look, but gaze. I see painted textures, skin and fabric, and think of the moment when Sarah decided that she would

not come to my house, that she would go home instead. I feel the pulse points in my wrist and neck prickle. I find myself creasing and stroking the pages of the visitor’s guide, smiling at nothing. If I have thoughts, they are effervescent, without substance, like the bubbles singing on the surface of clear soda. If I try to fix these thoughts in words, they vanish, which I suppose is what causes me to keep trying.

*

I am supposed, anyway, to be reading essays. My students have written about Venus. I skim their writing in the gallery cafe. The word *desire* repeats on the page, followed by descriptions of female bodies, of the curve of the torso and the suggestive placement of a hand. One student includes a reproduction of Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* and it occurs to me that Sarah has hair like this Venus, blonde and glowing, flowing; I imagine her, idly, posed in a scallop shell. This style of hair was popular with painters; Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, the subject of other essays, has loose light curls.

*

There is an element of nausea to desire. It begins with the eyes, but it also arrests the stomach, moves downward fast. It fills the body, is physical. I felt, walking home after seeing Sarah, as if the drops of rain were warm as they fell upon my cheeks, my hands, as they nestled amongst my hair.

*

It seems that a crush requires some meeting of the gaze. I wonder if the reason that my infatuation feels fuller after our second date is that I was sitting opposite Sarah, able to see her eyes, the hair around her temples, the flop of her green jersey on her slight shoulders, without twisting my body or my neck. She said, on the first date, that she felt there was a certain sort of blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman who people tended to forget, interchangeable with other blonde-haired, blue-eyed

women. I turned to study her eyes, to consider their blueness despite the half-light, and felt a bolt of desire in that moment. It frightened me. I do not know the colour of my eyes, which seems appropriate to the ways in which I do not know myself, am still trying to resist the urge to be whatever it is that another person wants.

*

I find myself unable to read, to watch television, to do anything that might distract me from Sarah. I can read essays about Venus only because thinking about Venus, with her blonde curls, is a way of thinking about Sarah. I feel that I am waiting for something, but I do not know what. Desire, I suppose, is a state of readiness, of anticipating what may never come. It is an anguished state in which I wish away the present, trying to return to the bar, the restaurant; I am preoccupied by past and future, but have a limited perspective on both. I reread the last message Sarah sent me, touching my phone gingerly in fear that I might accidentally click or type something that reveals this rereading.

*

I catch the train to the university, again, for more discussions about Venus. Laura Mulvey argued that analysis kills desire, that a reason to write about it is to snuff out that flame. I wonder if I am detailing these things to the point where they cease to matter, to a point where both Venus and Sarah become words, not women. I ask my students if they agree with Mulvey, if they feel that analysing *Venus of Urbino* changes the way they see her. I am most inclined to trust the student who doesn't answer, but stares at the reproduction as if hypnotised, disinterested in issues of power.

"Why can't I just find her beautiful because she's beautiful?" she asks when the discussion turns to whether we've all internalised the male gaze.

*

In theory, looking is an act that is coded as male; women are positioned as objects. I cannot, though, see myself in Venus. She is too full of confidence, too beautiful. She has a mystery that makes it hard for me to project myself on her. She has blonde curls and unknown concerns. Titian's Venus stares out of the painting, but I do not know who it is at which she looks.

I ask my students what they think a female gaze might be. Is it an internalised male gaze, desiring these women in the same way that men do, or is it something more oppositional? I say that I don't believe that women look at the *Venus of Urbino* in the same way as men and a student tells me that this sounds heteronormative. I am surprised by this; I have worried that I am, as I teach, spilling my own desire over everything. I clarify; I mean to say that lesbian desire is filtered through a different power dynamic. I am, though, tired of theory.

*

There is a danger to desire; it is hard to contain. I wonder, then, about the frame, which serves as a means of limiting a painting, of making it safe and marking it as aesthetic, but also as a means of keeping. The word Venus, too, in the Renaissance, was a means of making safe, marking women as mythological rather than real. Desire makes a person seem precious, singular, but also projects this person outward, onto the rest of the world, past the limits of the picture plane. I think of stories, too, as frames; each page and paragraph has limits. Writing is a means of holding, of creating a whole out of fragments.

*

I am still thinking about Sarah's large eyes, her lovely way of leaning in toward the table, tilting her head, of the softness when she kissed my cheek, of how small she seemed against the rain, her frame slender to the point of seeming absent, ungraspable.

*

At the end of the class, the question remains: how much should an art historian disclose? I cannot be objective about these paintings. *Can anyone?* I ask. I am not a scientist; I cannot separate sex and art.

*

I know, through all of this, that my feelings are shaped by our impending geographical disconnect. I know that I am overthinking this, that overthinking somebody is a means of keeping that person close when I know that they cannot be, will not be, close. It is also, I think, a means of avoiding the future in which I will, whatever happens this week, not see her again.

*

I wonder if desire is a miniature of loss, a performance of attachment intended to forestall loss; I know that I see writing in this way. It is a means of keeping things. I am forced to recognise, though, that Sarah is not trying to stop me from vanishing; I have not heard from her since Wednesday. *Very bad news*, she said. I cannot imagine responding to bad news by pulling away even when invited to come closer. It is a reminder that we are different people, that our boundaries are still intact, that there are many things about her that I do not know.

*

I have, despite this crush, continued having conversations on Bumble. I have been talking to a journalist with a fringe, who tells me that deer are good companions for walks in winter. She has a black cat and is in an all-girl choir. I could, I think, feel something for somebody like this. It is evidence, perhaps, that desire is not finite.

*

I wonder, if it is ordinary and human, why desire feels like something that must stay hidden. I do not feel human when I want somebody. I feel grotesque, far from Venus, who wants nothing. I wonder if this is why I

am writing about this. In writing, I lose my body; I am absent, unseen, as hollow or gilded as my prose. I want to make my desire appear beautiful and yet it seems to become uglier, greedier, as I write. This desire is distorting Sarah, making her object rather than subject; I am collapsing the person into a painting that I might possess through interpretation, through the writing of text. It seems that analysis does not kill desire so much as feed it, making it the monster that I feared it could be. Sarah was, when I spoke to her, a person distracting me from myself, but now, when we are apart, she is a succession of thoughts that push me back into my own mind. I wonder if this is a way in which people resist possession. I cannot claim another person through writing as I write, ultimately, only of my own feelings; the woman beyond the representation slips away.

*

I have almost given up hope when, three days before her departure, I receive another message from Sarah, enquiring about my week. I ask if she is free that evening.

*

Sarah confesses that she was living in the old school with her former partner, that she had been upset the previous week due to their breakup. It's the lack of control, she thinks, that has made the breakup hard to handle. She tells me that she's decided she shouldn't date anyone for a while.

"That makes sense," I say, confused.

Sarah has been replaced, in the days that I have not seen her, by the feelings that she has evoked. Each time I have imagined her features I have fixed them differently. I feel a jolt of surprise at the ways in which she is both familiar and unfamiliar, her face rounder and voice rougher than the version in my mind. Her eyelids, which I had neglected, are striking, heavy like those on the girls in paintings by Jean-Baptiste

Greuze. Greuze rarely painted Venus. Greuze's girls brim with regret, are poised on the edge of lost innocence.

We sit in an empty restaurant, side by side, leaning our heads on the top of the banquette. I had thought, initially, that she was strong where I was fragile, but I am charmed by the hints of trouble beneath her calm exterior. I wonder if I am drawn to the dramatic, to the unavailable.

*

Le Boulanger, in 1669, wrote of another sort of gaze, love's gaze, which could work magic. In looking, he wrote, one sent forth spirits which leapt from subject to object when eyes met, slipping down through arteries and veins to reach the heart, making desires mutual with only a glance.

*

It is easy, with the internet, to keep track of people we've known briefly. Sarah and I say that we will keep in touch, that we will find one another somewhere, but neither of us gives the other an email address or even a surname. It seems sad to think of Venus becoming quotidian, a wild creature tamed by her appearance on a social media stream.

SWAN SONG Esthee Schonken

We hug goodbye whilst standing in the rain.

I will never forget the last morning I shared with my wife. It was a crisp cold autumn morning and we decided to spend the day by the lake. I can still feel the dew-covered earth on my feet as we walked side by side in silent companionship. It was always like this between us, we didn't need words or big gestures, just nature and a peaceful quiet. I knew that she would be my mate for life from the first time we met. We found our way to the rose garden as we did most days when we ventured to this part of the park. The smell of the *Doris Downs* had me standing still for just a while as I soaked in their aroma. I sensed my wife's growing tension; she was becoming anxious and I knew that she needed to get back to the lake to rest. Our unborn child was always first on her mind in these last days.

I lovingly touched her long sleek neck as we made our way back to the calm waters of the lake. We had the park all to ourselves on those early morning outings. The water was a silvery calm, reflecting the colours of the morning sky; light blues, pink and soft purples.

As we sat next to each other looking out over the lake, she turned to me and asked, 'So, what do you think we should call him?'. She always called our unborn child 'him', fiercely believing that it would be a son, big and strong. She said it was her mother instinct that came to her in her sleep showing her our unborn child.

'I have no idea. Perhaps we should give him your father's name? He was big and strong and lived many years.' Her face softened remembering him. He was a leader in the community and she had always been her father's favourite daughter.

'That would be nice. Do you think he will be strong enough for this

world?' she looked around her at the city just outside the park, with worry in her eyes. I didn't answer her then. I wish I did, but the truth was I wasn't sure either. Life was becoming ever harder and more challenging. Every new generation had to fight harder to stay alive. Each challenge more difficult than the previous one.

The park started filling with people and we knew that our solitary paradise had come to an end. It was time for us to leave. We got up, lazy from the warm sun on our skins. Life full of promise in front of us, dangerous but we knew that we had each other and we would be able to handle it together. We started off to home. A gentle breeze was playing on my skin and I closed my eyes in enjoyment. She playfully bumped me to make me go faster, and we happily walked together.

'Oh, look what we have here guys!' I heard a teenager shout behind us. I turned around and saw a group of around 3 teenagers pointing at us. I turned towards my wife who looked at me petrified. 'They're black! I think we should have some fun with them. Look how funny they look.' More teenagers came and started forming a circle around us. Their designer clothes showed that they did not suffer any hardship. 'Do you think we can get them to fly? Like birds?' I looked at the speaker; he was overweight with a pimply face. He bent over, grunting as he picked up a pebble. Four girls in very short miniskirts started giggling. Their make-up made them look like make-believe women. 'Let's see Duke. At least get them to move out of our way.' 'Get them to show us what they have for us.' Two of the other teenagers also bent down to pick up pebbles from the ground. Turning the stones around in their hands while looking me in the eye. Waiting for my reaction.

I shot a glance at my wife and mentioned to her to run; to run as fast as her legs would carry her. But she was in complete shock, unable to move or defend herself. She just stood still as the first pebble hit her body with a dull thump. Yelling at the youths, I started with all my might to fight back. I tried to get help, tried to get the other people in the park to take notice of our plight. After the first pebble hit, the teenager's excitement

started to intensify. I could tell merely hurting her wouldn't be enough.

The fat one, more monstrous now than before, kept picking up bigger and bigger stones hurling them at my wife. Bewildered by the hail of stones she would just make a small croaking sound. Finally, her legs gave out and she was lying on the ground, bleeding and her eyes started to glaze over. I had been powerless to help my dearest wife, friend, mate. I hardly registered my own pain, or the stones hitting my own body.

'Hey you boys! What do you think you are doing?' an elderly man hobbled over, walking cane in hand. The youths saw him coming and ran off, each in a different direction. The old man reached us and he started calling out for help. More people started running towards us and as they came towards my wife, I made way for them to help her. Wordlessly asking them to help her get back up and be as before; filled with life and health.

'Look at what those terrible children did!' the old man exclaimed, pointing with his cane. 'What is this world coming to?' a young woman in a suit asked. 'Oh my, is she going to be all right then?' asked another. 'Did anyone get footage of the kids on camera?' asked a student taking photos of us with his phone. 'Do you think this is her mate?' another asked looking at me. Some of them turned towards me with sympathy in their eyes.

I looked at my beautiful wife's face and saw that there was no more life in her eyes. The once shiny pools of light were dull. I had saved her from dogs, cats and even an African Meerkat once when it escaped from the zoo, but I wasn't able to save her today.

A park official arrived and he placed his green jacket on the wet earth. He gently picked up her body, but her beautiful face that I had adored for so long did not lift. She did not struggle and her body was wrapped in the official's jacket, covered so that I could not see her.

People's eyes started fixing on me and I knew that they would look after her, but I needed to look after our son.

My wings felt heavy now, heavier than ever before. But my feet took on

a life of their own and all I could think about was our son. Painfully slow I waddled towards the water. I was in the lake, and with each thrust into the water the bank fell away behind me. I swam towards our nest in the bushes and got on our solitary egg, gently ensuring that my soft plumes covered the whole shell. This was our first breeding season and we only had one egg. We didn't care as we believed there would be many more each season. But now, this precious little one would be my only.

Lately there's been a lot more people in the park and it's busier. People walk by the bushes; they pause and point. Then they talk in hushed tones, some even cover their mouths in horror as the story is retold. It appears that the sad story of my wife has made the news and people want to pay their respects, or just want to see how I am doing. I do appreciate the care, but it won't bring her back. I haven't really been able to take my customary walk to the rose garden; the smell of the *Doris Downs* is sickly now and too vivid. I find it almost choking me to a point that I cannot breathe. So, I just take a few moments to swim on the lake in those quiet morning moments, remembering her with me.

Someone from the zoo brings me food every day. It's the same park official as that terrible day. The first day he came he sat on his haunches just staring at me, with deep sadness in his eyes. I trust him. I felt movement in the egg today, so he will probably hatch tomorrow. Raising him on my own will be a challenge, but I will give him my wife's father's name and he will be big and strong and live for many years, that is all a simple swan can ask for.

In memory of the killing at Moonee Ponds, Melbourne, Australia on the 6th of April 2011

GRAFFITI Mary Jones

'Wow — now this one really *is* impressive!'

The Canadian guy was the first to whip out his camera, but the rest of the group were quick to follow him. The tour guide waited for one or two stragglers to catch up before launching into his spiel.

'This is a good example of what I was talking about in the last alley — how the whole street-art scene is changing all the time. Nothing stays the same for very long. There's a certain respect among the artists for other guys' work, of course, but even the best ones will eventually get painted over. So this particular design wasn't here last time I did this tour. And it may be gone again by the next time — though it looks to me as if it's still a work in progress.'

'What do you mean, "a work in progress"?' said a voice from the back of the group. 'I thought the whole point of graffiti art was to do it as quickly as possible and then disappear.'

'Not necessarily. That's true of a lot of the smaller pieces and tags, especially the one-off stencils and paste-ups. But these bigger and more complex multi-coloured ones are often built up in layers, and each layer has to dry before the next one gets added. So it can take days to finish one like this.'

'It doesn't look anything like any of the others we've seen so far. Who's the artist?'

'Ah, well, that's another interesting thing about street art. Sometimes you get new styles appearing and nobody knows who started them. This one's not by anyone I recognise, so there's probably a new kid around.'

'That would have to be some kid!' said the Canadian. 'It's not just that it's such a big pattern, it actually feels quite sinister. I know it's an abstract, but don't you think the shapes suggest some sort of monstrous animal?'

‘Yeah, I see what you mean.’ said his companion. ‘That bit at the top could be an eye. And are those claws I can make out at the bottom? Makes you shudder a bit. The colours are so striking, though — I must get another shot of this.’

The tour guide allowed time for more photos, then raised his voice to gather his flock together.

‘Right, guys — if you’ve got all the shots you need here we must be moving on. Next, I want to show you the spot where a couple of council workers painted over a priceless Banksie.’

The final flash-bulbs lit up the shaded alley-way, and the tail-enders of the group rushed away to catch up with the leaders. Nobody noticed the design on the wall pulsate and glow, as if it was absorbing the extra light.

As the last straggler disappeared round the corner into the next laneway, the eye blinked open.

In the early hours of the morning, a skinny kid in the standard uniform of hoodie, jeans and scruffy trainers loped along the alley, spray-can in hand. Every so often he paused for just long enough to scrawl his thick black tag-line on top of existing works, making no distinction between quick paste-ups and painstaking art work but defacing everything with equal abandon. Reaching the animal-like abstract, he raised the spray-can and aimed it.

There was a flash and a swirl, a brief nightmare of snarling jaws, and the lad fled with a screech of terror. His can, crushed and mangled, rolled along the gutter and came to rest on a drain-cover.

On the wall, parts of the animal shape were now clearly defined with a thick black line.

The next evening, as the light was fading across the city streets, two brothers arrived in the laneway, looking for a likely spot to try out some new paints. They were heading for the next alley around the corner, where there was more likely to be spare space, but one of them did a double-take and called the other back.

‘Hey bro — not so fast. Do you see what I see?’

‘Shit, man! How did I miss that? It wasn’t there yesterday.’

‘Well it’s there now. Looks like we’re first on the scene. What are we waiting for? Let’s get in there and fill it up!’

His brother hesitated.

‘It’s kinda weird, though, isn’t it? Don’t you think? Just that one big empty space in the middle of everything else. Isn’t this where that freakin’ monster crap was? How come it’s disappeared all of a sudden?’

‘Who cares? New space for us, that’s all. Can’t wait to see what this new red looks like on a piece of blank wall. Get in there, quick, before anyone else finds it!’

They bent to their task, applying fluorescent red and orange swirls in flowing lines that absorbed all their concentration.

They didn’t hear the sounds behind them until it was too late.

As the sun rose next morning its rays bounced off the edges of fluorescent red and orange claws and teeth. There was no street tour that day, so nobody was around to remark on the fact that the ‘work in progress’ seemed to be expanding as it acquired more colours.

By the evening, there were some signs of disquiet in texts and Twitter feeds.

‘any1 no where Baz’n’Joop R?’

‘ain’t seen M 2da. any1 else?’

‘not me. Can’t get ansr 2 msgs.’

‘Baz, man, get in touch yeah?’

‘shit, Joop, where RU?’

Shrimp had been lurking for days now, on message boards and in the shadows on the street. There wasn’t much that she missed, and she thought she was beginning to get a feel for what was going on. After the initial panic died down, the accepted street buzz on Baz’n’Joop was that they must just have moved out of the city to explore new pastures, but

she thought she knew different. And come to think of it, there were other people she'd not seen around lately.

She'd been keeping track of the messages about the animal design, too. Everyone was wondering who kept touching it up and expanding it, but nobody was admitting to anything and nobody could remember now who first put it up or when. Intrigued, Shrimp had made it her business to visit the site regularly, and she didn't like what she saw. Every day, the animal got a little bit bigger and uglier, the colours more garish, the claws and teeth longer and sharper.

Shrimp had got her name because she was small, fast and insignificant, good at flitting through the shallows of street life and fading into the background or hiding in crevices. It suited her to be a loner and she had no wish to be recognised, so her small stencil works appeared in out-of-the-way, inaccessible places and went almost unnoticed by the other street artists. But now she saw an opportunity and a challenge, and the more she watched and pondered, the more convinced she became of two things. One, that the monster taking shape was dangerous and should be stopped. Two, that she was the one to do something about it.

In fact, she thought she was probably the only one who could do anything about it. It was fate, really. She was already working on something completely new to her, and now here was a perfect target for trying out her secret weapon. She'd always believed designs had lives of their own, and this situation was proof of that. But she also believed they could be controlled by their creators, and the monstrous animal didn't seem to have one. Which surely left it vulnerable. To her.

Two more nights of watching and waiting, and Shrimp was convinced this would be the night. The street-art community was uneasy, and this laneway was now being avoided by most of them. The animal had hardly changed or grown recently. It must be getting hungry.

She shrank further back into the corner of a doorway, sensing a slight change in air-temperature, and kept her eyes fixed on the wall opposite

her. The first movement was barely noticeable, and she thought at first it was just the blurring effect of having stared so hard for so long. But the second was more definite, and she watched ripples spreading through the surface paint like the stirring of muscles under skin. Then the whole wall seemed to flex, and what had been a flat painting was solid and alive and struggling out of the brickwork. She heard the click of claws as heavy feet hit the pavement, and saw the glint in the eyes as the huge head quested back and forth. A tongue flicked out, tasting the air, and Shrimp was instantly afraid.

The beast took one heavy step towards her doorway and she froze, holding her breath and trying to still the beating of her heart. It stood for an endless moment with its head pointed directly towards her, its long tongue caressing the air that carried her scent. Then it raised its front leg to take another step.

There was a rattle and a muffled curse from the end of the laneway, and the monstrous head swung round away from her. A second voice joined in what seemed to be an argument between two people just around the corner in the next alley. The beast hesitated for what seemed to Shrimp like a lifetime, then it turned and lumbered away to investigate this new food source. It rounded the corner and there were screams and the sounds of flight and pursuit.

This was her chance. She darted across to the empty space on the wall, and unrolled the big stencil she'd brought with her. She forced herself to work carefully and suppress the instinct for speed at any cost; there would be only this one opportunity and she had to get it exactly right. But all the time her ears were straining for the sound of breathing behind her, and her back crawled with the constant expectation of slashing claws.

At last it was done, and she rolled up the stencil and gathered up her paints. Then she fled — not back to her doorway but up a metal fire-escape to a landing where she could watch from a safer height.

The beast slouched back round the corner. It looked mean and hungry, so its prey must have been quick enough to escape. Shrimp was glad, and

not just for their sake — she didn't want it to have grown and gained any more strength. It passed beneath where she was crouching, and came to rest in front of its space on the wall. She sensed its shock and fury as it registered what had taken over its territory.

Her dragon.

She stood up and leaned over the railing.

'Now!' she yelled. 'Come on, you beauty. You can take him! Do it now!'

The bricks rippled and the dragon came to glorious life. She'd only had time to use two colours, but all those hours she'd spent working on the design beforehand really paid off; scarlet and black lines came together in a perfect combination of beauty and power. She'd been worried about the wings and whether they'd unfurl properly, but now she gasped in wonder as her creation leapt out from the wall straight into the air above her. It flapped once, circled, and swept in low over the clumsy creature on the street, its talons outstretched to rip and tear.

The battle was hardly worth the name, really. There was a lot of snarling and snapping, but the result was never in doubt. On the second pass, the dragon flared its nostrils and let out a stream of scarlet flame, and it was all over. Shrimp jumped up and down, clapping and whooping, until the rickety fire escape shook beneath her feet and she thought she'd better come down.

The dragon stood over the charred remains and bent his head towards them, but Shrimp stood her ground and shouted at him.

'No! Leave it! You don't want to eat any of that. It's mean and ugly and the shapes and colours are all wrong. You'll be contaminated if you eat any of it. We can do better than that.'

The dragon looked at her, and a light flickered briefly at the back of his eyes, but he turned his head obediently away from the carcase at his feet.

'Good boy!', said Shrimp. 'Let's just burn him up completely, and I'll get rid of the ashes. Then you can settle yourself back into your space on the wall and rest, and leave everything else to me. I've got such plans for us. You're impressive now, but just you wait until I get you finished. I'll

build up layers and colours and gels and gems and glitters, until you're the most staggeringly beautiful thing this city has ever seen. I'll visit you regularly, and make sure nobody ever dares to tag over you. We'll make all the other artists so jealous, they'll want to give up altogether and leave the streets to us. You'll see — together we'll be invincible!'

There came a day when Shrimp decided the dragon was finished. He shone and sparkled in the last sunlight of the evening, an elaborate masterpiece of black and gold and many different shades of red. His scales were cunningly fitted together and his wings rippled with subtle colour; his head was set with jewels and he was altogether magnificent. Shrimp looked at her creation and her heart swelled with pride and love. She put her hand on the wall beside him and leaned forward to speak softly in his ear.

'You see? I told you it would be like this. You're big and bold and beautiful, and now you don't need any more help from me. I can move on to do something I've never had the confidence to do before. It's time I came out into the open, and had a proper tag of my own.'

She felt the faintest of quivering in the bricks beneath her fingers.

'Shh! Don't worry. I won't let anyone know I'm anything to do with you. And I promise I won't use any of your colours — I know they're special to you. Anyway, a shrimp should be pink, don't you think, not red? Yes, pink and pale lilac, with perhaps just a hint of blue.'

She looked over her shoulder to be sure nobody was about, then she lightly kissed the end of his nose.

This time it was an American who said 'Wow!' and reached for his camera. There were murmurs of appreciation from others in the group, and the tour guide positively smirked.

'Wow indeed! This is the jewel in the Melbourne street-art crown, folks. No other city anywhere in the world has anything as good as this. And, of course, the intriguing thing is that nobody has any idea who the artist

is. Not even a hint or a guess. There are major galleries who'd give their eye teeth to get their hands on an artist this good, but they don't know where to start'

'Are there any more works on the street by the same person, do you think?'

'We're not sure. Some people think that some much smaller stencils show signs of the same design skills, but there's certainly nothing else this big. Looks like it's a one-off, and there will never be another. But we're lucky to have this one, so enjoy!'

There was a respectful silence broken only by the clicks of cameras, and then the group gathered itself together and moved on.

On the wall behind them, the dragon shimmered slightly and twitched his wings, to reveal the subtle colours blended with the red and gold on the underside.

Pink and pale lilac, with just a hint of blue.

REMAINING Elle Parkinson

It had been almost a year since the executive order had been signed. Eleven months, three weeks and six days since our lives had changed so completely. Not that I was counting. Everything seemed so different, even the riots that had commanded the streets in the first few months after the order seemed like a distant memory. The rebels had fallen silent, so many of them were missing or worse.

I knew we were the lucky ones, surviving. However, I just always felt like I was waiting for the end. Waiting for the day we would be infected. I still felt an absolute grief for the life I lived before. I think we all did. The air was dense with bitterness and regret.

It was July 1st, 2020 when they closed Melbourne. Putting the entire state of Victoria into quarantine. Sacrificing us. Typhoid was to be our fate. That sounds insane, such an old-fashioned disease wiping out such a modern western world. *Salmonella typhi*. Two words that are only spoken now in hushed conversations. As if hearing or saying the words would mean you could contract it. I think often fear can be more dangerous than the bacteria we worry about. A strain of *Salmonella typhi* became completely drug-resistant at the beginning of 2020. It mutated so much that a 1% mortality rate rose to nearly 98%. Melbourne had the first reported cases, very little has ever been said about who patient zero was. I think about them sometimes. Did they know that something had changed within them, something that would change the world possibly forever? So many people died in the first few months, everybody lost love ones. In a way the grief and sadness were kind of numbed as we knew everyone was feeling the same thing. Funerals stopped happening, in their wake mass graves and burning bodies started. After a while the news stopped reporting the numbers, not long after the news stopped

completely. Everything did. No public transport, no emergency services, no internet. We were cut off from the world and the executive order was signed. Entombing us in a city of increasing dereliction.

We had camped with a large group of people in an abandoned shopping mall. It was tough decision for us to make because other people meant a greater risk of infection but at the same time there was safety in numbers. Safety or at least the sense of it had become so important. Human nature is so unpredictable at the best of times and once the quarantine set in people became downright dangerous. The world we set up in the shopping mall worked. We all had roles and responsibilities to help keep our little ecosystem running and peaceful.

I was in the laundry when Morgan came looking for me. I hated doing the laundry, it was tedious and took forever. We were very conscious of keeping everything clean and sanitary, anything to try and stop infection. Morgan was an interesting man with kind dark brown eyes, he was previously the manager of one of the shops in the mall and when a large group of us, friends from previous life, had decided to find a large, well-stocked space to occupy as a group he was happy to help. He kind of became our unannounced leader, keeping us civil and making the tough decisions.

“She’s getting worse, I can’t keep this from the others for long. The other children and parents are asking where she is.” Morgan looked at me earnestly, he had aged considerably in the short time that I had known him. New wrinkles were sprouting at the speed that the grass in the courtyard grew. I knew I was putting him in a tough spot. He was talking about Sofia, a small girl who I had taken in after her parents died of the infection. She had become the daughter I was not sure I would get the chance to have in this strange new existence.

“She just needs rest and she will be fine.” I replied trying to brush him off. I continued to throw sheets in the large washing machine hoping he would get the hint and leave.

“It’s just not good enough Alice. What if it’s the typh...”

“It’s not, I know my medical degree counts for very little in this world

now, but I know that little girl and I know that she doesn’t have that!” I snapped back, not allowing him to even finish saying the word. I realised I had become afraid of the word. Constantly worrying that just saying it was enough to get infected. I was useless in this world. A doctor without any real patients. People blamed us for the antibiotic resistance, giving out antibiotics as medicine like giving out lollies. People blamed me. They did not trust my knowledge or my help, my friends were no longer my friends, but it all went unspoken.

“It looks it might be time to call it. I gave you the benefit of the doubt Alice, but she has all the symptoms.” He gave me his hard stare, the look that usually got any aggressor or argument causer to back down. I could not back down, not on this.

“She has the flu.” I snapped at him. Angry that he would not accept my word.

“I can’t risk the others. She needs to leave.” There it was, four words I knew were going to be said. The day Sofia’s fever started I sensed those words hanging in the air between me and everyone who saw her.

“She’s six years old she can’t leave on her own, she is safe here!” I was mad, angry that a grown man could even suggest throwing out a small child. We were truly far from the people we once were, our morals severely compromised.

“But we aren’t.” He sighed. He recognised the monstrous thing he was asking for. He saw the utter turmoil I felt. “We can’t risk it.” He was almost pleading with me.

“If she goes, I go too.” My last words of defiance, an arrogance that my presence was needed in our small civilisation.

“So be it.” He sighed and walked away, not even trying to argue the point any more. He knew he had won. He knew I was worthless.

I knew what I had to do. I had to get Sofia to the hospital and get some medicine, some antivirals just to prove myself correct. Maybe that was the wrong thinking. Selfish almost. In my head I had begun planning my journey. We began packing up our stuff in utter silence with the help

of a few select people. None of us wanting to attempt knowing the right words to say. Sofia broke the tension.

“But why are we leaving?” She whined her voice nasal from the flu.

“We just have to darling. It’s going to be ok.” I tried to soothe her but I’m not too sure my tone reassured her.

“Is it because I’m sick?” She asked and everyone stopped still watching her and waiting for my response because she was right. I shook my head and took a breath whilst I allowed myself to think of a response.

“Not at all.” I weakly smiled. “We are just going on a special mission that’s all.” She looked at me for a moment, taking in what I had said. I knew even at six years old she was smarter than that. She excepted my answer but did not believe it. “We are going to leave first thing in the morning.”

I was surprised more people had not gathered at the exit doors as we stood ready to leave. It was early, I thought to myself. It seemed all very ceremonial for something that the group had never done before. Thoughts streamed through my mind, I wondered how many of those stood there had been ill with something simple like diarrhoea since we had arrived and failed to tell anyone out of fear as it is a symptom of the dreaded typhoid infection. I was expecting sharpened sticks to push us out. The few that had come to see us off looked genuinely upset and terrified. They knew that we were being sent to our death out there, that pinch of regret and shame stabbing at their gut. We stepped outside hand in hand, Sofia crying. She did not understand why this was happening, she thought it was her fault. Of course, it was not. The blame lay with circumstance.

A rush of cold air whipped at us as we stepped out. I realised it was going to be a long few hours walking through the almost frosted streets, not knowing what we might encounter. The air felt revitalising after nearly a year of the same stale air that circulated the mall. I took a moment and just took it in. Even Sofia seemed more animated than I had seen her for the last few days, a touch of fresh new air easing some of her symptoms. In that moment I felt something I had not experienced for a while, it took me by surprise as we began to step across the carpark, optimism.

The walk to the hospital had been bitter cold and had taken an eternity. Darkness has fallen long ago, and our path had been barely visible past the burnt-out cars and wrecked buildings, along streets no longer recognisable as the vibrant places they once were. Sofia was heavy in my arms; she had barely walked a block before becoming too tired to continue and I was so panicked that I might run into people that would want to hurt us or worse. I almost cried when I reached the doors to the hospital. Not out of relief but out of despair as I saw the state of the lobby. The place was trashed. Raided. There was no hope of finding anything that could help Sofia. I wanted to smash my head against the wall for my own stupidity. It was my doctor thinking taking over, the hospital will help us. The hospital was a useless empty building like all of the other useless empty buildings that now made up the husk of a city that was Melbourne.

Something stirred me from my thoughts. A shuffling. It could have been anything I thought to myself, a lost possum or a dangerous person. I ran to the closest room. It was the family room, the room in the emergency department that we delivered bad news in. It all felt like a sick joke. Putting Sofia down, I rammed a chair under the door handle, trying to keep us safe. She sat herself next to the window looking out at the dark world that surrounded us.

“Alice, look there’s lights.” She shouted excitedly pointing at the sky outside.

The concrete floor felt like heaven as I fell to my knees. I was too late, too little and too inept to do any more. Sofia smiled at me, happy and unaware. I could only stare out of the window at the sky that was lit up with fireballs growing larger and burning hot. I realised it was a year to the day that the quarantine had begun, and I knew that the government had finally made the toughest of decisions. They were bombing Melbourne to kill the bacteria once and for all.

“It’s going to be okay.” Hoarse words I barely managed to speak through tears I held back. I pulled Sofia close and sat watching as cleansing fire fell upon all of us who remained.

CHICKEN SOUP

Uly Merkel

Mum drops a pile of polished forks into my open hands then smooths the creases in the tablecloth with rapid strokes. She's taking quick, shallow breaths. Her skin is ashen and her eyebrows are drawn together in a harrowed frown. It would be wise to stay silent, but I want to soothe her.

'Nobody expects your Shabbat dinners to be the same as Grandma Sadie's,' I say, as I place the first fork next to a plate. 'She's been doing it for 70 years,' I add, 'it would be unfair to compare.'

But as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I indulge in a reminiscence. Gliding into Grandma's apartment, the scent of vacuumed carpet and air freshener mingled with the aroma of golden potatoes baked in schmaltz. Kicking off my shoes, stealing a pickle or two from the plate wedged between the chopped liver and gefilte fish, while the seven o'clock news blares in the next room. I can hear my great-uncle hurl abuse at the newsreader. Dad and his brother sweep in, late, cursing the traffic, as if we don't all know they stayed back at work. That first taste of Grandma Sadie's chicken soup—the lifeblood of a Shabbat dinner—and her shrill voice calling out over the shouting and arguing, 'Eat, eat.'

Mum interrupts my thoughts. 'Unfair?' she says, following me around the table and adjusting each fork I set down. 'What's that got to do with anything?' Her voice is shaky. She has pulled back her greying hair with combs, and her face looks pinched and tight. Her eyes dart about the room as she speaks. 'You think it's fair that Sadie has to give up Friday night dinners because of her age? Is it fair that your father gets served before everyone else? Is it fair that he's excluded from the synagogue because he married out?'

I know she's really riled when she mentions the synagogue. There's nothing I can say or do to calm her down.

‘Sorry,’ I mumble, ‘I was just trying to help.’ I lay down the last fork and escape to my bedroom.

We both know the real reason Mum is on edge. It’s her chicken soup. It’s truly awful. Flat and bland. A vegan stock cube dissolved in a tank of rainwater would have more flavour.

Grandma has been tutoring her in preparation for this first Friday night dinner. Mum swears she’s followed every step. Chicken legs and giblets, kosher salt, a shake of white pepper, parsley (stems not leaves), onion, celery (ends and all), parsnip and carrots to make it sweet. Fast boil. Skim scum. Let it sit, a bubble here and there. Strain, leave it to cool, wait. Refrigerate. Scoop schmaltz (save it for the potatoes).

Tonight’s is the first batch Mum has made on her own. Judging from the underwhelming scent in the kitchen, she hasn’t cracked the formula. No wonder she’s a nervous wreck.

Just before seven, I join Mum by the stove and we peer down at the soup bubbling in the pot. Dad hurries in from work with a bunch of flowers and an apology that he’s two hours late. I offer him a tester. Mum’s face drops at his expression. Then it hardens as she raises her eyes to his.

She glowers. He recoils. I stir the pot, as if the action will magically imbue the soup with flavour. Then the doorbell chimes and Dad side-steps past Mum and flees to safety.

Grandma Sadie is first. The hallway fills with the scent of Chanel No.5. Her blonde hair glistens under the chandelier as she kisses Dad, marking his cheek with bright red lipstick. The rest of the family swarms in, kissing and exchanging Shabbat Shaloms. Soon, we’re seated at the table, and my great-uncle is mumbling out the prayers. Once the wine is poured and the challah is cut, Mum slips out of the dining room.

My uncle wipes up the last of his chopped liver with a crust of challah. My little sister crunches on her tenth pickle. My gentle cousin lags behind, chewing to a slow rhythm. I stuff another piece of challah into my mouth then collect up entrée plates and take them into the kitchen.

Mum is lingering in front of the stove. She’s so different from the

family she married into, with her fine features and country ways. She doesn’t interrupt or shout over others. She chews with her mouth closed.

‘Soup time,’ I say, trying to be cheery.

She nods, opens the lid and plunges in the ladle. My cousins and I convey bowls of soup to the dining room. Mum trails behind. Voices fade, hands pause, the table grows quiet. Like watery chicken soup, silence is unheard of at Shabbat dinner. I can’t bring myself to watch. I sense tentative sipping then sneak a look. My uncle is shaking his head. My gentle cousin directs a smile at Mum that oozes pity. My great-uncle, with his weakened tastebuds, is suffering the most. He’s frantic, showering the soup with salt.

Mum stares down at the pale liquid in her bowl, avoiding Grandma’s eyes.

When they’ve all left, Mum and I stack plates into the dishwasher. There’s a crash in the next room. A moment later Dad comes in with remnants of the gold-rimmed platter the fruit was served on. Mum clenches her jaw and says nothing.

‘I’d call tonight a success,’ Dad says, as he deposits pieces of plate into the bin.

Without looking up, Mum says, ‘Did you see Sadie’s face when she tasted my soup?’

Dad doesn’t answer.

On Sunday, Dad arrives home with containers ready to freeze. An unspoken agreement forms. Shabbat dinner is at our house with Grandma Sadie’s chicken soup.

As Mum reheats Grandma’s soup the following Friday, our kitchen fills with warmth. We stand side by side and lean into the pot. We gaze at the honey-coloured jelly that melts into a translucent broth. Bubbles rise to the surface and we inhale sweet steam. I sample a spoonful. God it’s good.

Mum is shaking her head. ‘How does she do it?’

Later that evening, Shabbat dinner is in full swing. Cutlery knocks bowls. The air is charged with slurping sounds and moans of pleasure. We drink down the full-bodied broth, Grandma holds her head high and the table comes alive.

My gentle cousin reaches for his water and knocks over his wine. ‘Salt!’ everyone yells. Soon there’s a white mountain on the tablecloth. My other cousin—the vegetarian—yells at my uncle for complaining about high taxes and my great-uncle scolds them for discussing money on the sabbath, before leaning towards me to report his recent win at the pokies. The volume level is high as Mum delivers my cousin’s pumpkin soup. My uncle calls for bets on how long her vegetarianism will last. She rolls her eyes then asks how Grandma gets pumpkin to taste this good. She laces it with chicken soup, of course, but I shrug my shoulders, feigning ignorance.

Then I taste the chicken soup. It’s damn good. Bloody damn good. All else fades as I lap it up.

Dad continues to collect frozen chicken soup, Mum defrosts, heats and serves it and Friday night dinners are loud and spirited. Grandma’s eyesight deteriorates and she’s unsteady on her feet but her soup is infallible.

And so it goes, every week. Until Grandma Sadie dies.

Mum was sitting by her hospital bed when Grandma closed her eyes for the last time. She told me later that Grandma had said Mum was the best daughter-in-law she could have wished for. They hadn’t mattered in the end, Mum’s origins.

It’s the first Friday with Grandma gone, and we are gathered at our house. I’ve stopped crying but my throat stays clogged up. Mum is ladling chicken soup, wearing an expression I can’t read. We carry out soup that’s piping hot and I feel confused by its heady scent.

As we reach for our spoons, Mum says, ‘There was an extra batch left

in the freezer.’

Her words seep in.

This is Grandma’s chicken soup.

Dad squeezes his brother’s shoulder then lifts the spoon to his lips. They both close their eyes and savour the soup. We all follow their lead. Even my vegetarian cousin is partaking. The soup is bold and brimming with pride. Goosebumps slide up my arms as I take another mouthful and a tear drips into my bowl. I take a deep breath and force myself to stop crying because I don’t want my sinuses to dull the taste. I swallow more soup and too soon, I arrive at the bottom.

When we serve the soup the next Friday I’m again puzzled. There was that one last batch. This soup is Mum’s, not Grandma’s. But it smells just right.

I take a sip and look up. Mum is frowning. No one understands. Grandma is gone and she’ll never make soup again. Even so, this is her chicken soup.

The next Friday, it happens again. And the Friday after that. By the fourth Shabbat it’s undeniable. Mum is making Grandma’s chicken soup.

Something other than words passed between them, that night Mum sat by Grandma’s hospital bed. Grandma gifted my mother. Her chicken soup endures.

GRAPHIC SHORT STORY

BIRDS IN THE TREES
Prativa Tamang

MOVING TO FOOTSCRAY
Sam Elkin

MIDNIGHT SNACK
Candice MacAllister

BABYSITTER
Tegan New

ENCOUNTER WITH GORGONS
Steve Carter

GRAPHIC SHORT STORY WINNER

Birds in the Trees by Prativa Tamang—*Birds in the Trees*, is a beautifully rendered comic with a wonderful sense of storytelling and pacing. The creator's love of graphic narrative shines through the work via their attention to detail and skillful ability to create a mood, introduce a world and build tension in just a few pages using only two characters. I'm looking forward to seeing more work by this artist in the future
—JESS PARKER

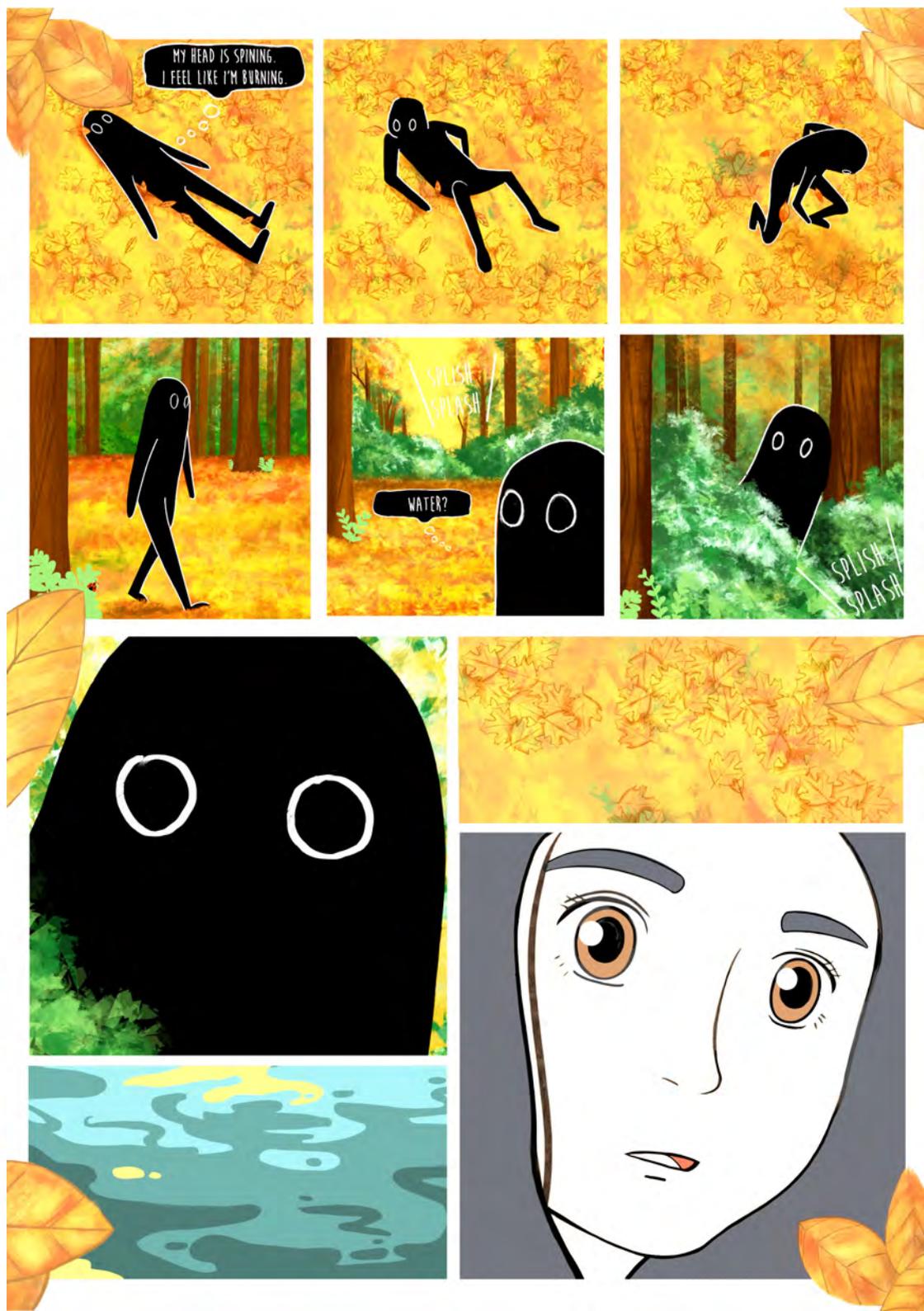


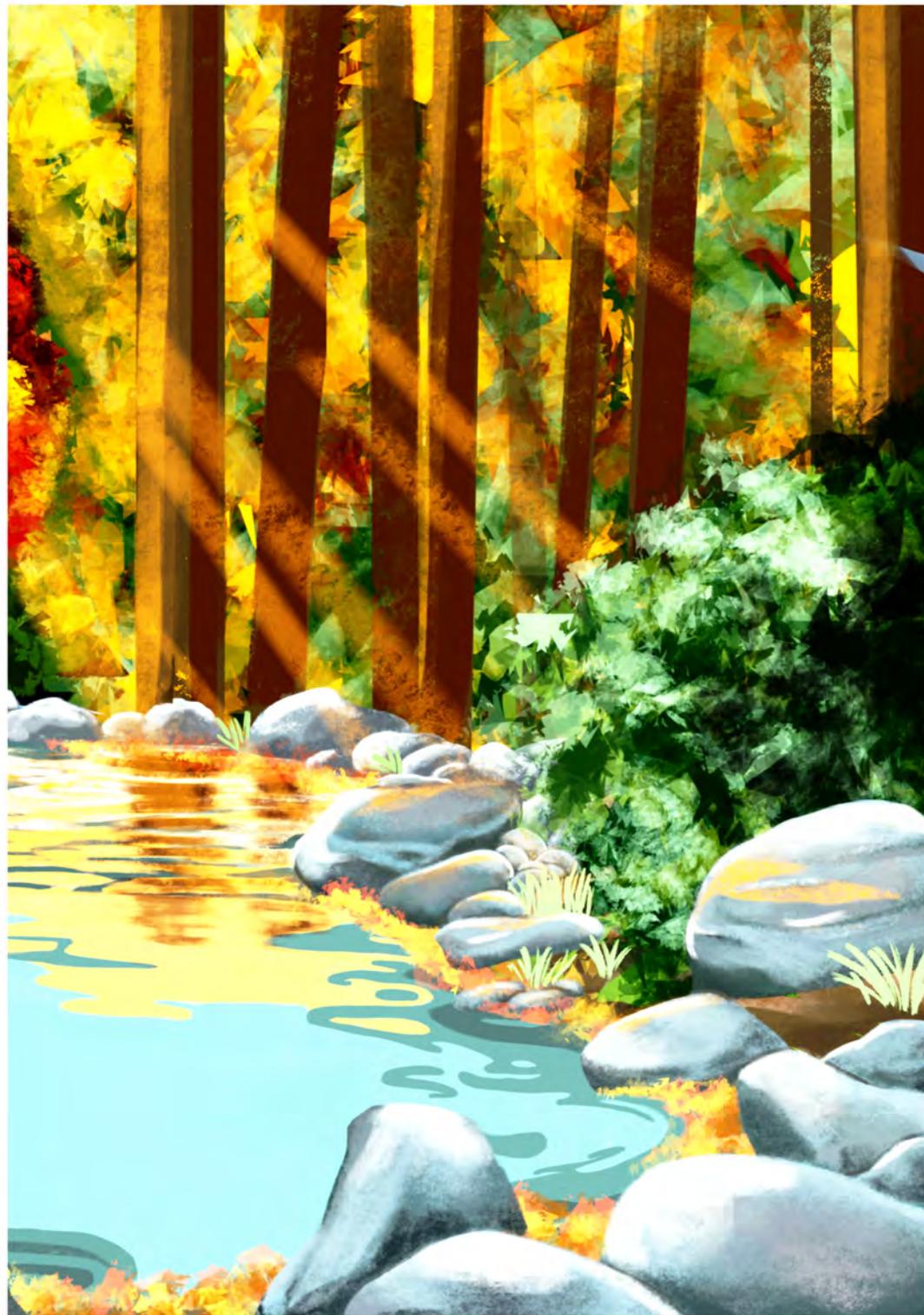
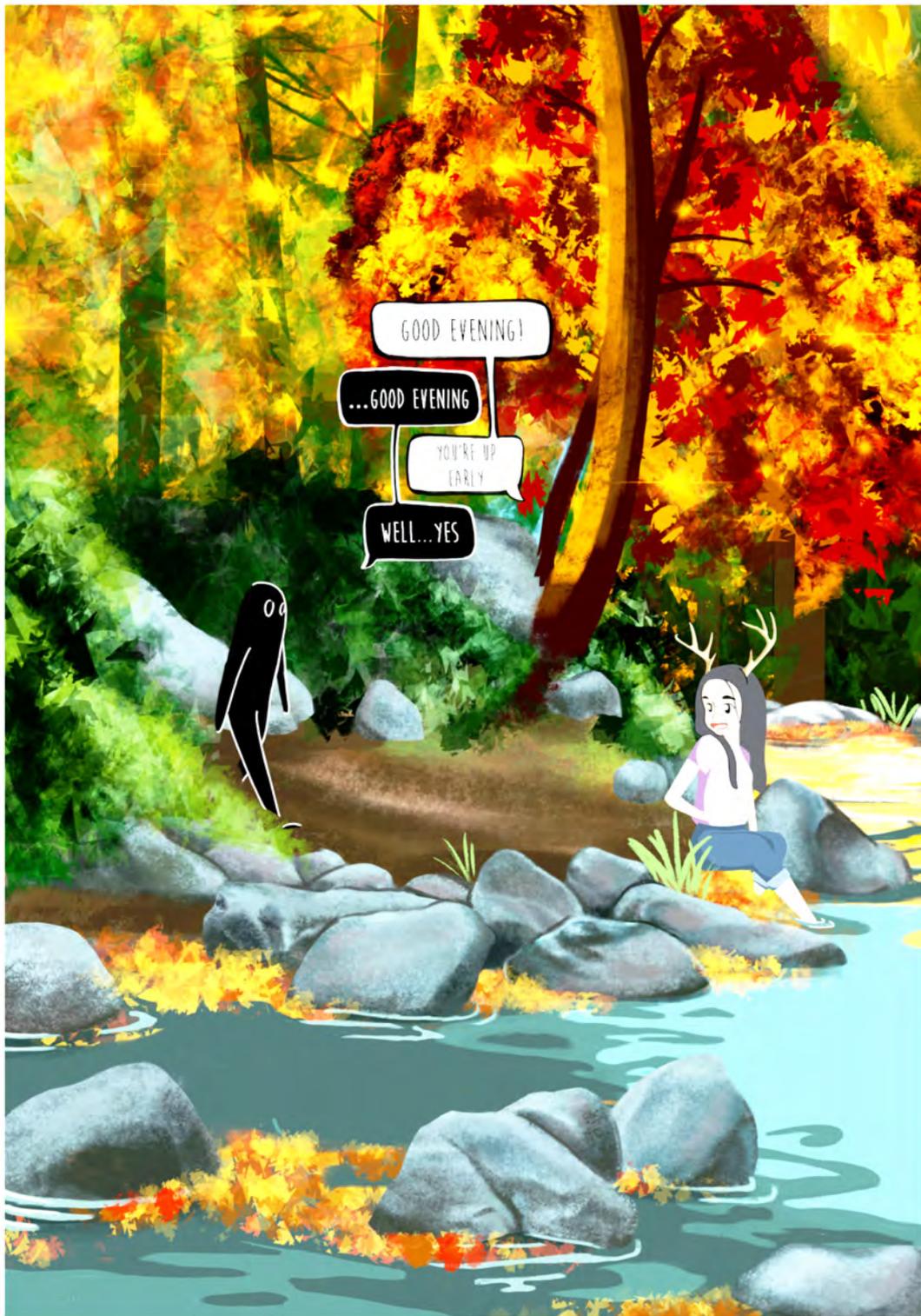
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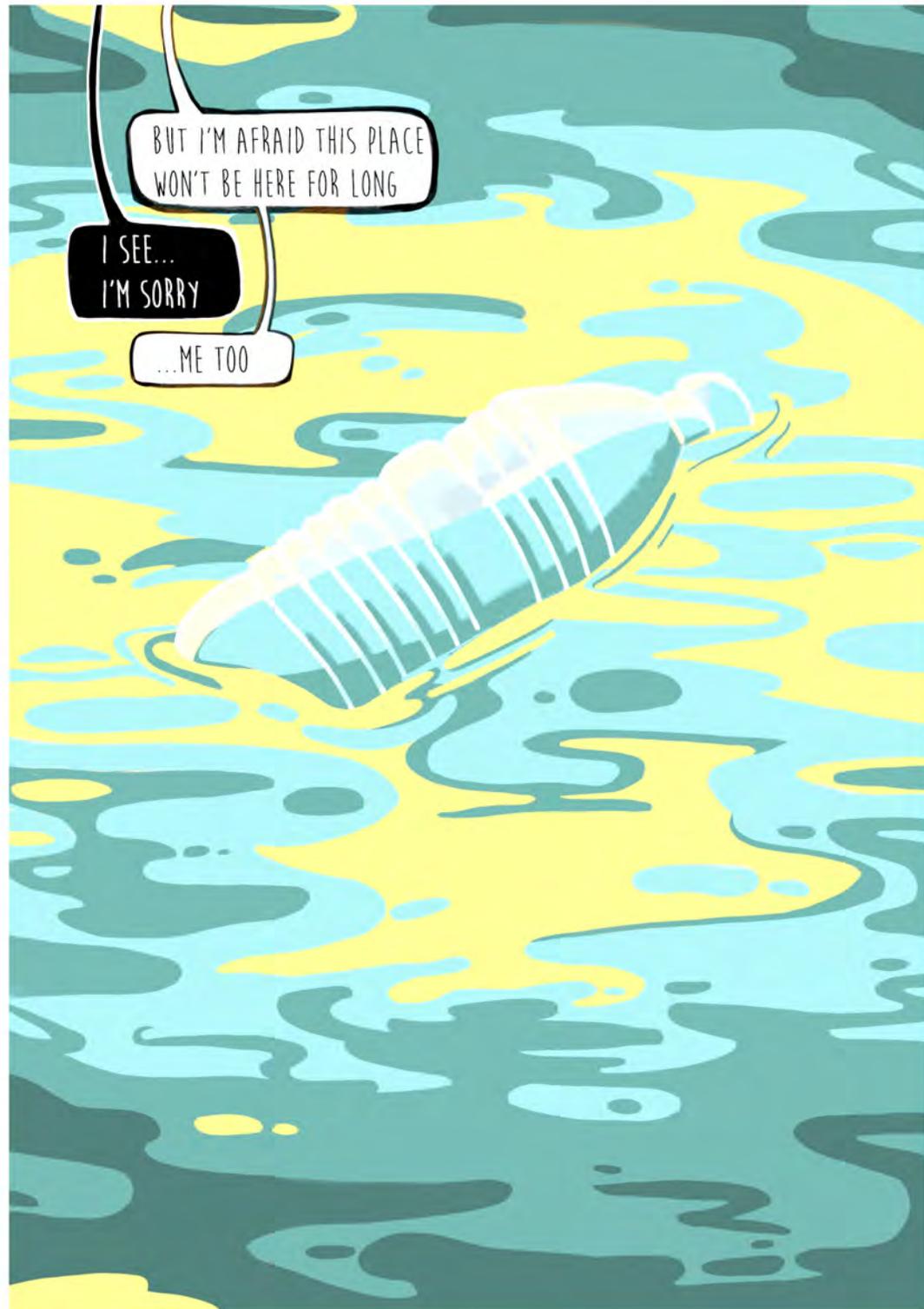


I CAN FEEL IT IN MY GUT

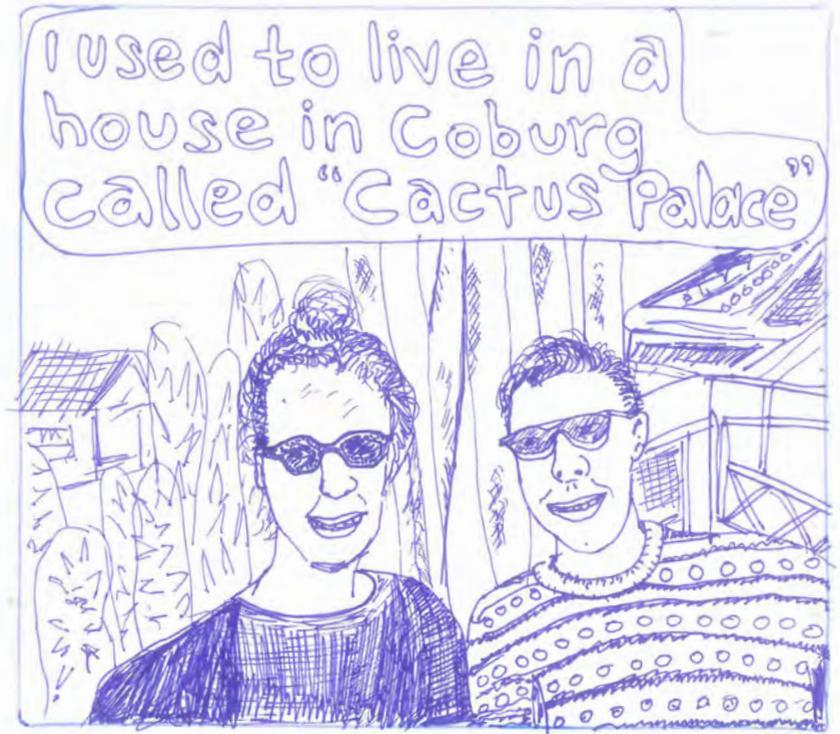












So I moved around the corner to Gemma's family fruit shop



Gemma tells me I'm not a real local because I'm no good at pushing in at the Banh mi shop

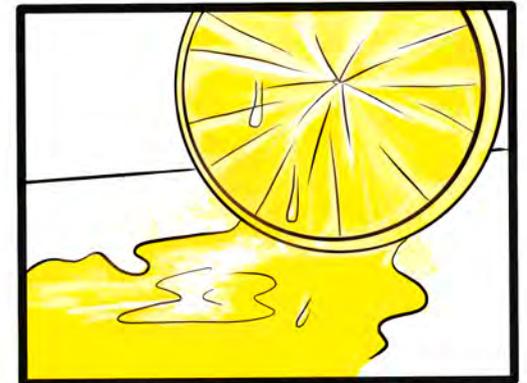
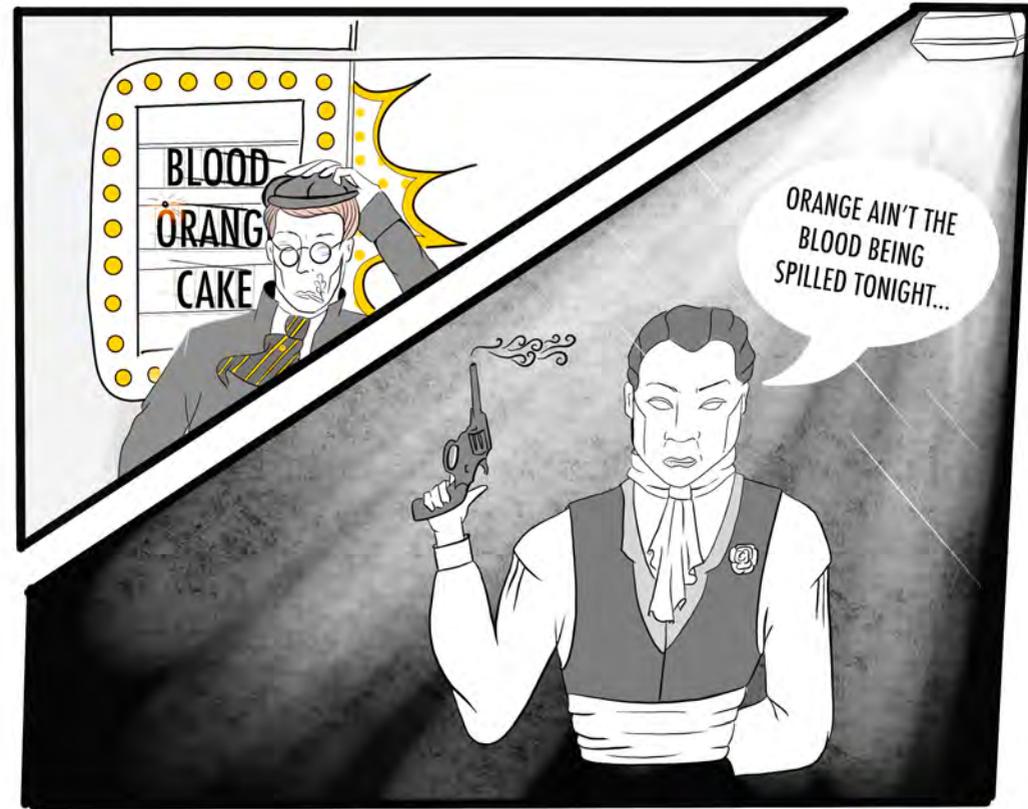
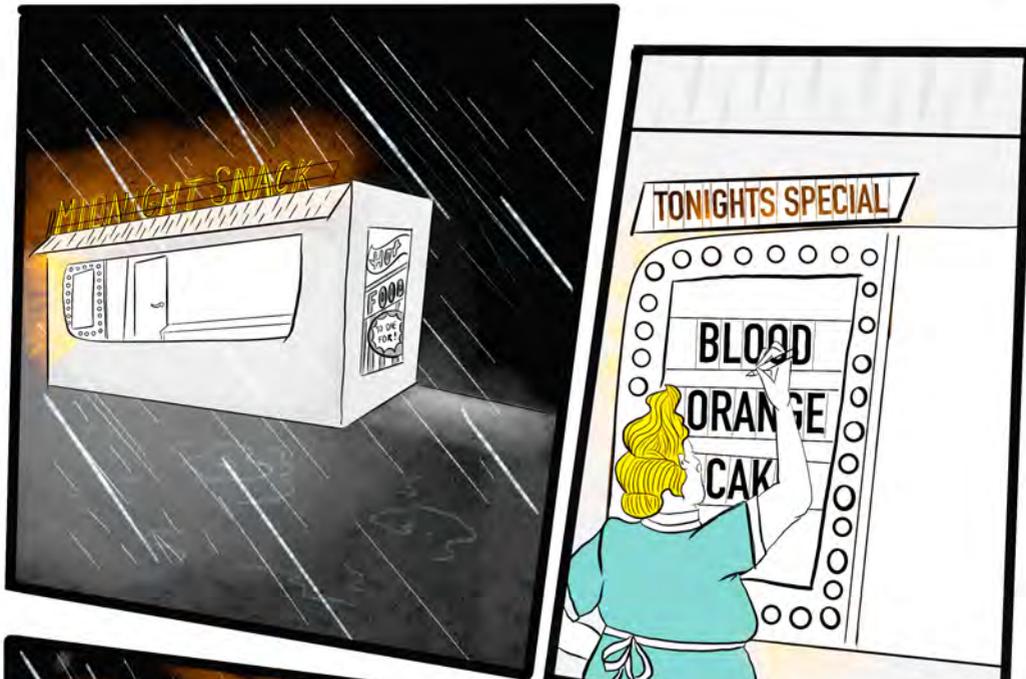


and started taking my dog to Footscray Park every morning

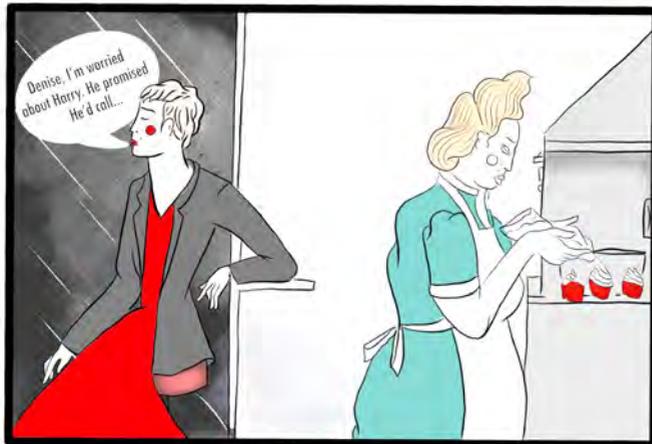


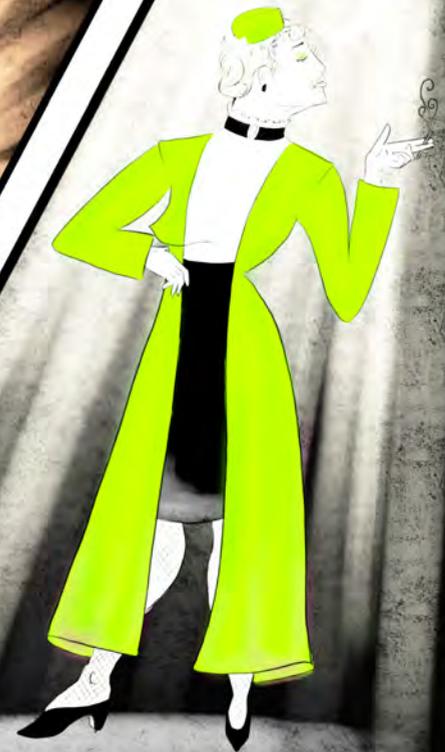
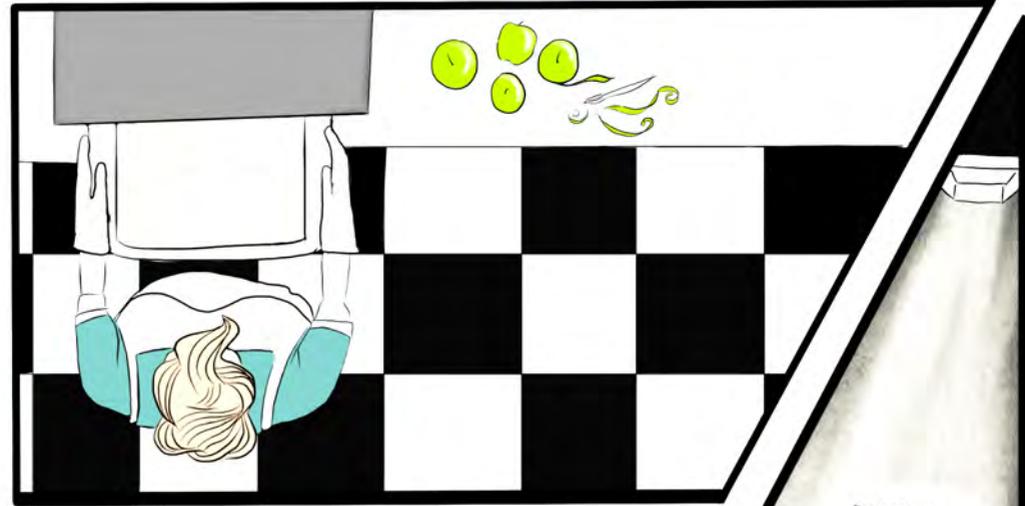
But I'm working on it.

SAM
EKIN
19.



VOLUME #1 **MIDNIGHT SNACK**
WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED
BY CANDICE MACALLISTER







My Babysitter..



Babysitter.
By Tegan New

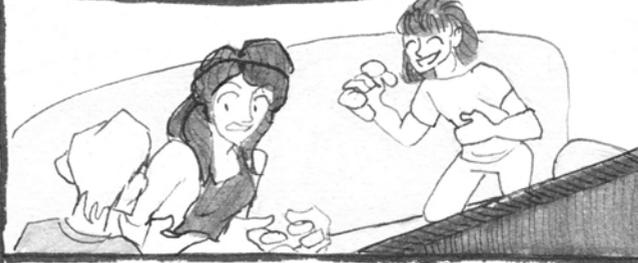


is hiding something...

We've met her 6 months ago after mum got a new job



She was nice at first



But then I started to notice the weird things about her...

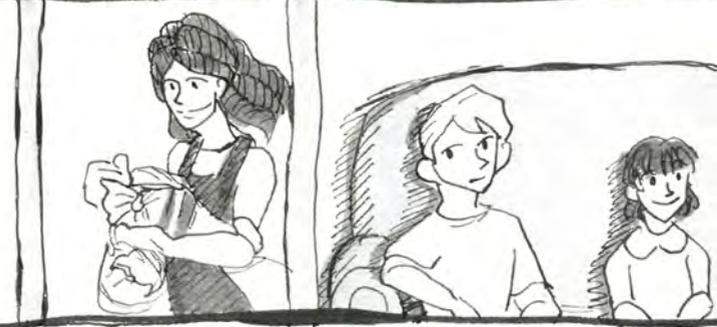
It happen 2 months in...



She gets real nervous when water gets on her clothes



When it was TV time she would still do chores around the house, and things that would take hours when we're in the same room



takes minutes when she was alone



She also glares at my goldfish



but that might be part of the water thing

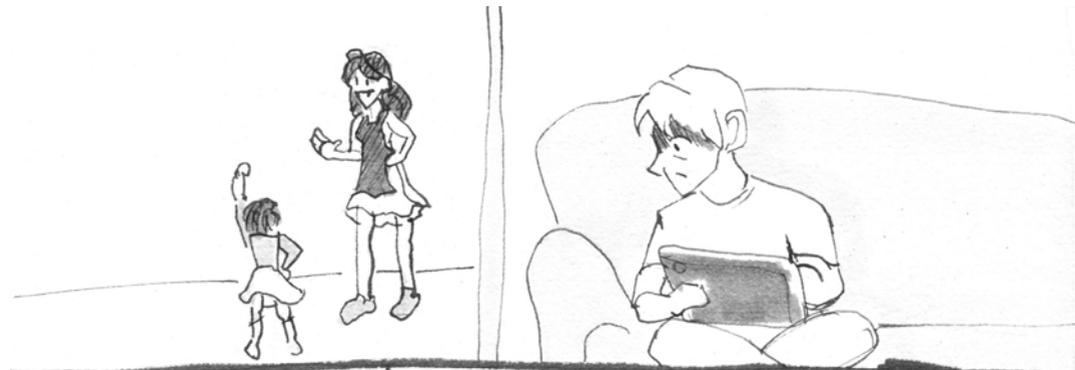


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Witches?

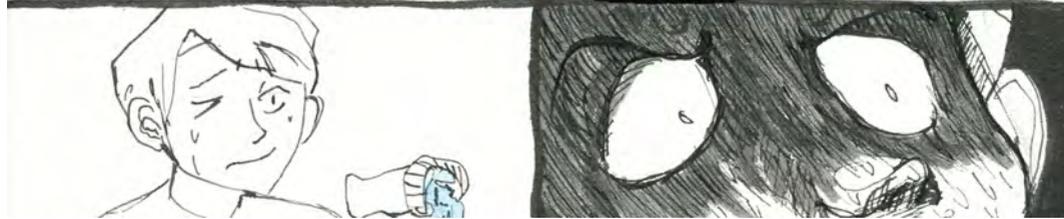
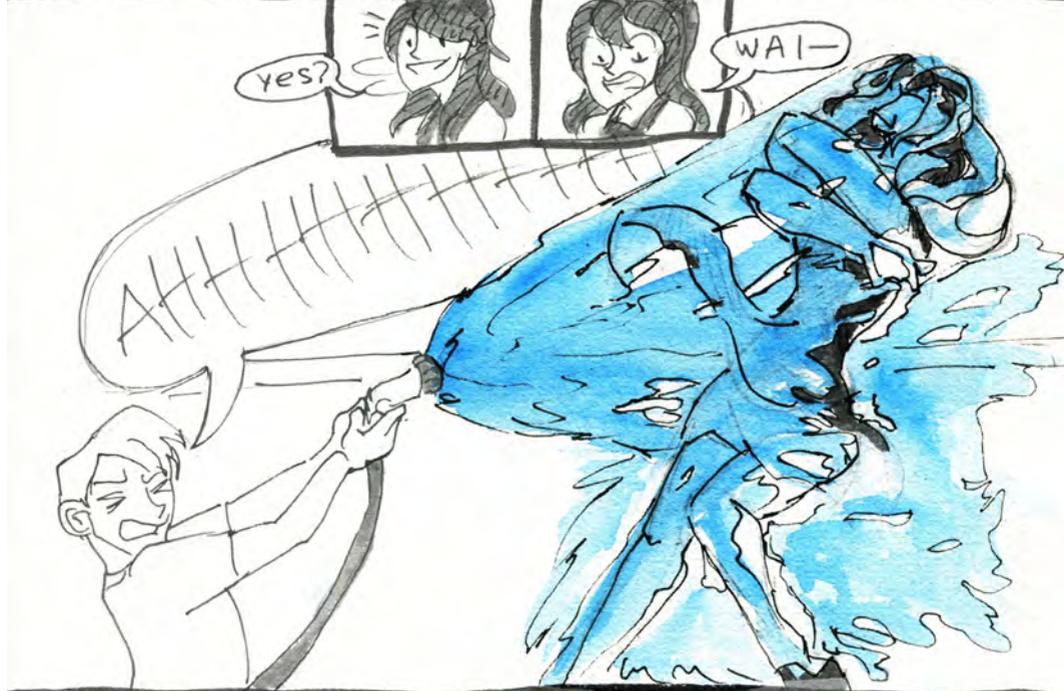


Googs

How to kill a witch

I need to Protect my family

ANSWER:
water



ENCOUNTER WITH GORGONS

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YOUR GAZE CAN'T AFFECT ME. THAT STARE IS THROWN STRAIGHT BACK AT YOU, MEDUSA! IT'LL BE YOU THAT'LL BE TURNED TO STONE!

MY NAME IS NOT MEDUSA!

I'M IMMUNE TO MY REFLECTION, FOOL!

MIRROR LENSES DON'T WORK.

IF I WANTED YOU PETRIFIED YOU'D ALREADY BE A STATUE!

YER JUS' THE KIND OF NAIVE BOY I NEED.

I NEED YOU TO PERFORM A SIMPLE, BASIC BUT ESSENTIAL DUTY THAT ONLY A STRAPPIN' YOUNG LAD LIKE YOU CAN EASILY MANAGE!

WARNING YOU NOW! YOU REFUSE ME, I'LL STONE YA!

WALK WITH ME, TRY ANYTHIN' STUPE -- I'LL NIP YA!

HOW THE HELL AM I GONNA GET AWAY!

MEANWHILE, IN THE SUBURBS...

NO ONE GIVES A DANG ABOUT THE LIKES OF US! IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PLIGHT OF THOSE FRICK'N GORGS!

TIME WE ADDRESSED THIS PROBLEM OUR WAY!

A'MEN TO THAT, MACY!

NOW, R'MEMBA, DON'T LOOK 'EM RIGHT IN THEIR EYES, OR YOU'LL WIND UP LIKE ME BRUVVER, PHIL! POOR BUGGA'S A STATUE, NOW!

THEIR BITCHIN' SNAKE HAIR MAKES IT HARD TO SNEAK UP ON 'EM AS IT IS! SNAKE EYES WATCH'N -- ALWAYS!

QUIET!

BLEEDIN' H'ART LIBBERS DON'T CARE! WE'RE ON OUR OWN. THIS IS A WAR!

OR WAITIN' FOR SOME SAP! SOME GOONS 'AV A THING FOR GORGS!

WE MOB 'ER FROM LEFT, RIGHT, CENTRE!

GOT ME TRUSTY SCREW DRIVA!

JAB 'ER MEDUSA EYES OUT!

IT'S THREE MUGS FROM THE 'QUIFFS' GANG.

YOU ROCK 'EDS WANNA BE TURNED INTO ROCKS AN' RUBBLE?!

THEN BRING IT ON!

DON'T DO IT BOYS!

YOU LADS 'R' NOT AT ALL EQUIPPED FOR THIS, ARE YOU!

YOU NEED GUNS!

NOT BATS, BARS AN' SCREW-FRIGGIN'-DRIVERS!

STRIKE NOW! AVOID DIRECT EYE CONTACT!

IGNORANT PUSSIES! WE DON'T HAVE TO STARE STRAIGHT INTO YOUR EYES TO TURN YOU INTO SLABS! ONLY HAVE TO GAZE AT YOUR EYES! ALL OF YOU! WE CAN SWITCH IT OFF, OR ON!

"OUR EYES BECOME WEAPONS, WHEN THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE."

"ONCE DONE, IT CANNOT BE UNDONE! ANYTHING IN CONTACT WITH YOUR SKIN IS ALSO PETRIFIED."

IT WILL NOT BE LONG BEFORE YOU CRUMBLE INTO ROCKS, PEBBLES AND FINALLY, DUST.

FAR AWAY, IN THE CITY, THERE IS UNREST.

HUMAN RIGHTS FOR GORGONS NOW!

STOP THE MISOGYNIST ASSAULTS ON GORGONS!

STOP RACIST ATTACKS ON GORGONS!

WE ARE PEOPLE TOO!



WELCOME TO MY DEN. YOU HAVE A NAME?

ER, JARVIS.

CALL ME UMIGKLA.

YOU DON'T NEED YOUR SUNNIES IN HERE. RELAX.

WATER FROM THE TAP. YOU LOOK THIRSTY.

YEP, IT'S HIM!



SO, JARVIS, YOU HAVE NEVER MET ONE OF US, THOUGH YOU HAVE SEEN AND HEARD MUCH ABOUT US, SOME LIES, MINGLED WITH HALF FACTS.

LONG AGO, OUR PROPHET MEDUSA, TRAVELLED THROUGH THE VAST VOID OF SPACE.

WITH HER WERE STHENO AND EURYALE, A BIOLOGIST AND A STELLAR NAVIGATOR.

AFTER VOYAGING THROUGH THE ENDLESS COSMOS,



WE'RE JUST ONE OF MANY FORMS OF HUMANOIDS THAT ARE FOUND ON MANY PLANETS AMONG VARIOUS SOLAR SYSTEMS.

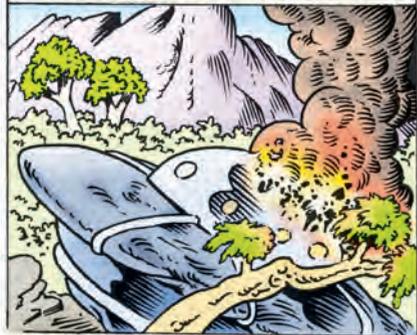


TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH, WE ARE CALLED 'GORORONS'.

THE ANCIENTS GOT IT WRONG.

WE'VE BEEN 'GORGONS' EVER SINCE!

...THEY ENTERED THIS SOLAR SYSTEM AND CRASHED HERE ON PLANET EARTH.



THEY DISCOVERED THAT THEY COULD SURVIVE IN THE WILD AND SUBSISTED ON THE NATIVE FAUNA, EDIBLE PLANTS.

"MEDUSA AND HER COMRADES LIVED AS PRIMITIVE HUNTERS AND GATHERERS, SHELTERING IN CAVES AND RUINS.



"LATER, THEY DISCOVERED THEY COULD BREED WITH HUMANS. MALE OFFSPRING WERE 'HUMAN', LIKE YOU FEMALES WERE AS WE, 'GORGONS'! LOCALS SAW US AS MONSTERS!

"WE WERE FEARED! THEN, ONE OF THE NATIVES BECAME A HERO BY SLAYING AND BEHEADING MEDUSA. YOU'D HAVE HEARD THAT LEGEND! THOUGH TRUTH HAS LONG BEEN LOST TO MYTH.

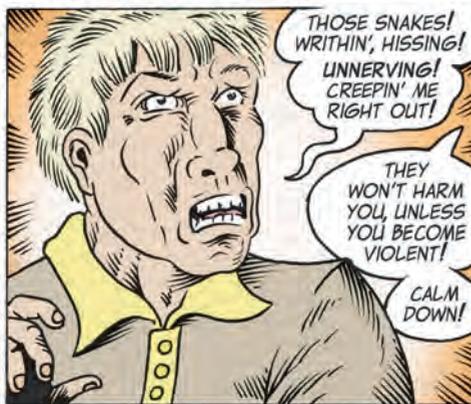


"MANY WARRIORS, OF ALL CREEDS, HUNTED OUR KINDRED, STHENO AND EURYALE, ALONG WITH THEIR GROWING BROOD, Sired BY MEN. THEY FLED TO THE MOST REMOTE RECESSES OF THIS PLANET. MANY GENERATIONS LATER, HERE WE ARE!



"WE ARE JUST LIKE HUMANS. AND LIKE YOUR KIND, SOME OF US ARE BAD SEEDS. NOW WE ARE MANY!

"WE ARE ALL EARTH-BORN. EARTH IS OUR HOME, TOO!"



THOSE SNAKES! WRITHIN', HISSING! UNNERVING! CREEPIN' ME RIGHT OUT!

THEY WON'T HARM YOU, UNLESS YOU BECOME VIOLENT!

CALM DOWN!



THEY ARE NOT SERPENTS, BUT SENSORS, SCANNING THE ENVIRONMENT, DETECTING DANGER. THEIR EYES SEE ANYTHING IN EVERY DIRECTION. THEIR HEARING IS BEYOND HUMAN RANGE. THEY HAVE AN ACUTE SENSE OF SMELL, CAN INTERPRET EMOTIONS, EVEN PREDICT BEHAVIOUR, READ INTENT.

THEY KNOW YOU ARE ON EDGE. OH, AND THEY BITE -- VERY PAINFULL!

BUT NOT FATAL!

MANY HUMAN MEN ARE ACTUALLY THE SONS OF GORGONS. A PLAIN FACT OF WHICH YOU SEEM TO BE LITTERLY UNAWARE. MOST SUCH MEN DON'T EVEN KNOW IT! WE HAVE FINALLY OBTAINED HARD EVIDENCE.



THROUGH OUR VAST NETWORK, WE HAVE BEEN FINDING THEM. THE AUTHORITIES HAVE BEEN ADOPTING THEM OUT FOR SEVERAL DECADES.

DENY IT ALL YOU WANT. WE TRACKED YOU DOWN. THE PAPER TRAIL WAS EXTENSIVE BUT CONCLUSIVE! YOU ARE ONE OF US! YOU ARE THE SON OF A GORGON! TIME YOU RECONNECT TO YOUR OWN KIN,



AND CONTRIBUTE TO THE GENE POOL, OR I'LL TURN YOU INTO A SCULPTURE!

F I N

POETRY

STRENGTH
C.A. Clark

SHE WILL NEVER FORGET
Sameer M. Khan

YOU GREW OUT OF THE WOOD
Jakob Ryce

CITY PARKING
Graeme Foley

A LITTLE HOUSE WAITS
Jaroslaw Kotiw

POETRY WINNER

Strength by C.A. Clark—*Strength* is a different kind of love poem with a gentle cadence that demonstrates the repetition inherent in the ongoing effort required to hold a family together from day to day. *Strength* calls that effort to centre stage, offering it instead a steady, quiet and confident acknowledgement.—ADAM FORD

STRENGTH
C.A. Clark

She lifts the fifteen pound baby
He lifts a fifty pound weight
She lifts the groceries, the child and the washing
He lifts the latch on the gate after lifting all day
the weight of his work
She lifts the frypan, the saucepan, the spuds
He lifts a beer with his mates
She lifts the toys from the living room floor
picks up the homework and plates
She lifts a book to read to a child
training imagination and
lifts another one up in
the air to let the little one think she can fly
He lifts them up for a hug
She lifts them both from the bathtub
and rubs them down 'till they're dry
puts them to bed and kisses their faces
He lifts himself from the armchair
climbs into bed and just waits
She lifts her dress and climbs into bed
and takes his weight, lifting him up
in a way
that carries him off to sleep with a satisfied sigh.
She lifts a curl of his hair and smiles
she traces the line of his jaw with her fingertip.

She lifts her head to hear the babe cry
she climbs out of bed to soothe
a soft lullaby in her gentle voice
with which
She lifts them all up

SHE WILL NEVER FORGET
Sameer M. Khan

a small slight bride collapses
under the weight of imitated jewelry
large bridal necklaces, thick as chains
shed golden dust on a
silky crimson wedding dress—
a sacred day
she will never forget

trudging along the shallow bank
her dress too heavy, caves her back
but the green river gleams
the rippled reflection of a crescent boat
with a lush reed hut and majestic wooden oars
a gift from a husband she is yet to see

they row across the great Ganges
the setting sun sprays the sky a
collage of navy
interwoven with pink
the soft rustling feathers of pelicans
and a sweet spring stream

a royal raja for an overjoyed rani
her father tells her he is a wealthy landlord
owner of many shops and plentiful plots

a respected, dejected man
 whose wife drowned in the same river
 she must now cross

and across the river
 in a dim clay cabin
 candle lights flicker as a door creaks open
 for a brief moment, the world pauses
 he gently lifts her netted veil and
 she steals a glance

withered, papery skin
 charred teeth loosely stuck to
 rotting gums that stench of betel nuts
 her candle flame dies

By a silent shallow river
 on a cold dark night
 a girl no more than a child
 is forced to bear a woman's burden—
 an entrance to adulthood
 she will never forget

YOU GREW OUT OF THE WOOD

Jakob Ryce

The sky is framed between two branches
 like fingers curled into a sign—
 twin trees bereft of birds.
 The road is nothing but a scratch.
 The house is burrowed in thickets of green
 like a horned owl.
 There's no place like Redhill, you tell me
 and I wait for you to click your heels together,
 but you just smile.
 There is dinner at the old mahogany table:
 Your sister's eyes are pressed up behind a highball glass,
 studying me; magnified and curious.
 Your mother serves hot soup.
 Your father examines me—his eyes are telescopes,
 his armpits are dark with tongues
 of sweat from pulling weeds.
 And he is not yet done pulling.
 The questions come in torrents:
 degree, career, plans, fortune...
 what makes a man?
 I tell him what he wants to hear.
 I tell him truths fermented in lies
 as if some things are ineffable
 and he strikes me with a gaze that burrows in.
 And you strike the room with Brahms—

Violin Sonata No. 3.

You clutch your violin like a sick child.

It's like you grew out of the wood, your mother says.

The following morning

you wake with antiquity—

the hearth of home on your cheeks.

While I spend my hours hatching escape plans.

"A baby bird doesn't choose it's nest," you tell me.

"They are born into it."

Finally you drag me outside,

far from the scent of your father

and your mother's smothering.

And here it feels like hinterland—

with the face of the distant sea

winking back at us.

Ripe mandarins, cheap wine, and brisk.

Short naps in the long grass.

Kookaburras in the blue gums.

Your hair is snarled like a basket of wool,

splashes of gold fall over your shoulders—

sun kissed and faultless.

You lay on your back; bare breasted in the long grass.

The Eucalyptus trees tip their heads.

I seek the angular nape of your neck

and hold the scent of you.

Fresh lilac, cool earth, decay, sweat.

And I know I am stealing a moment.

We are rehearsing for the end of summer

and we will never be young again.

CITY PARKING

Graeme Foley

On a tar and cobbled sweep of an inner city street,

Where people rushed to escape the oppressive evening heat,

I felt a warmish stream of sweat rolling down my chest,

As I stopped, double-parked, in the hope to find some rest.

It was then I caught the flicker of a rear-light blinking red,

And saw a puff of whitish fumes, and a half-turned driver's head,

And in my breast I felt a pounding reserved for events more bold,

For the promise of a parking spot was within my very hold.

Seduced by dreams of happiness I suspect punters get upon the track,

Or bankers feel at day's end when the figures are in black,

Or that lovers get when beset by coquettish sorts of eyes,

I let my thoughts drift upwards toward the darkening skies.

But then from out of nowhere I heard an angry blasting horn,

And my rear-vision mirror showed the face of city-maddened scorn,

For there behind me lay a line of angled metallic fury,

While on the curb crowds looked at me like a convicting courtroom jury.

It was then I dropped my guard, my crafty city edge,

For I was passed by a small "V-Dub" which caught me in a wedge,

Its driver's eyes stared straight ahead and paid me little heed,

As city parking means time and money among the urban breed.

With my mouth now dropping open with utter disbelief,

I watched with brimming anger my spot taken by a thief,

And then from somewhere deep within, coming slowly just at first,

I let go a string of wild oaths that were my very worst.

But cars today are made to hold the most raucous sounds inside,

So I fixed to face my foe, direct, to calm my damaged pride,
 And remind him about honour and the need for all to care,
 To protect us from that Precipice, beyond which lays despair.
 But as I neared I saw a man, whose face took on rueful sort of twist,
 While staring at a meter, paper money flapping from his fist,
 His eyes then engaged mine in a plea for change with which to pay,
 Which made my soul seemed healed, and I smiled, and walked away.

A LITTLE HOUSE WAITS

Jaroslaw Kotiw

A blistered path
 Rusted gates
 Struggling windmill
 A little house waits

Rag filled windows
 Broken doors
 Leaking gutters
 Sagging floors

Toy in the sand
 Cross in the yard
 Ropes for a swing
 A playing card

Calendar on the wall
 Lino on the floor
 Peeled back newspapers
 Bradman hit a four

Old wood stove
 A well worn handle
 Brick surround
 A half-burnt candle
 A mantle disturbed

A card falls
 A passionate note
 Lost in the wall
 Keep me close
 Keep me true
 I love you darling
 I do this for you

The cold rolls in
 Time has spoken
 A glimpse of life
 A heart felt broken

Darkness descends
 Light falls prey
 The flicker of an owl
 Dusted grey

Shapes lost
 Silhouettes emerge
 A continuous line
 Forms merge

Lights go on
 An engine ignites
 Memories as passengers
 Into the night

A little house waits

FLASH STORIES

ESCAPE
 Belinda Oliver

BREATHE
 Daniela Esposito

WAITING TO SURFACE
 M.L. Purcell

PARSLEY GREEN
 Shira Deutsch

FIVE JACKS
 Kim Robyn Smith

FLASH FICTION WINNER

Escape by Belinda Oliver—Escape is a moving story, confidently written and cleverly evoking a sense of place while demonstrating the subjectivity of its protagonist's perspective. It puts the reader right inside the mind of the main character, clearly showing their point of view while subtly revealing the realities of their situation.

—ADAM FORD

ESCAPE

Belinda Oliver

She'd actually done it. She'd finally escaped. She'd watched the door all morning, counting how long it took to swing open and shut, devising her plan.

At first, the young man who let her out was unaware that he was an accomplice in her escape. She'd calmly walked up to him as he'd entered the code on the keypad and told him that she'd just visited her husband. 'We may as well go out at the same time,' she'd suggested cheerily, hoping he wouldn't remind her of the policy that said visitors should never let anyone else but themselves out the door. Luckily for her he'd smiled as the door swung open and he'd even let her walk out first.

A second later she heard the high pitched shrill of the alarm, but didn't dare look behind her to see if she was being followed. Instead, she focused on each step that she took forwards, knowing that it was her only chance at freedom.

'Hey!' he called out, but she pretended to not hear him. She needed to look like the alarm had nothing to do with her. She reached the heavy wrought iron gates and quickly assessed her options. Left would take her across two busy intersections of traffic, but once she was across, she could disappear down to the beach. Turning right would take her into town, where there was more chance of her being discovered. She turned left, quickening her pace.

It felt strange to feel the warmth of the sun on her skin. She'd been kept locked up for so long. She held her bag tight against her chest, breathing in the salty sea air as each step took her closer to the beach. She imagined what her family would say when she arrived home. After thirty six days in captivity, they wouldn't believe it. She'd tell them how she'd escaped and they would promise her that she was safe with them.

She stopped at the first traffic light, waiting for it to change to red so she could cross. An ambulance zoomed by, its sirens wailing and she jumped back in fright. Her head began to feel fuzzy, like a dark cloud passing over an otherwise bright sunny patch of day. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she had no idea where she was. Her heart hammered against her chest and hot tears sprang to her eyes, threatening to spill out onto her cheeks.

‘There you are Anne!’ she heard a female voice say and at the same time felt a hand on her arm, gripping her as tight as a vice.

‘Gosh, you gave me a scare,’ said the woman whose hand was on her arm. ‘Where were you going?’ she asked gently.

Anne looked around for some kind of clue, something that would tell her where she’d been heading. She saw an ice cream van parked across the road, a line of giggling, sunburnt children waiting next to it to place their orders.

‘I wanted an ice cream,’ she whispered.

‘Well, come with me now,’ the woman said, patting her arm.

‘Okay,’ Anne nodded, allowing her to lead the way. They walked arm in arm back to the nursing home, where a young man stood at the entrance, tears streaming down his cheeks. Anne felt like she’d seen him somewhere before, though she couldn’t quite recall where. ‘Don’t cry, dear’ she said, patting him on the shoulder as the nurse hurried her back through the door, clicking it shut behind them.

BREATHE

Daniela Esposito

Breathe, just breathe I tell myself, as I walk down the supermarket aisle. My heart so heavy it drags down my lungs; a constant lump in my throat just waiting to resurface at any time with a mournful tone. I feel all eyes on me, waiting for me to crack, fall to the ground, scream, cry, and punch the polished cement floor begging, whatever, whoever is listening to take me too. Steeling myself I decide that will not be me today, at least not here, not with the looks of pity or the hushed whispers of others that I have learned to live with, like a parasite. This is how I live, or at least exist.

I can hear you, you know. “She’s handling it so well!” Gee thanks, Susan. Would you rather I turn into a raging alcoholic, slurring my words and falling all over the place so you can gossip some more? That reminds me; grab some vodka on the way home. I am functioning, this is true. I am breathing, doing the mundane daily chores but I’m not doing “well”. I forgot to pick up Nate from daycare yesterday. Poor kid. He has no idea that he will be forever the little brother, living in the shadow of someone that will always be perfect. He will always be compared to someone that will endlessly be remembered in snapshots of perfect memories.

I wish I could change fate but sometimes fate has cruel and unforgiving twisted hands that snatch the light from what was once a bright existence leaving nothing but darkness and pain.

I had two boys; now one.

I can’t even say that the day it happened started out any differently; that there was some cosmic sign warning me that the day would forever be

THE day that would hold the memory of when my heart, soul... life was ripped out of my being.

6:17 am my alarm goes off. For a blissful moment I forget. Then, I am hit by a wave so forceful that I know I must be drowning. Hello lump in my throat, I greet it like an annoying relative that just won't go home no matter how many hints you leave them. I roll over and swipe to snooze until I know I am officially late. I don't care.

I can feel myself crumbling into nothing and yet frustratingly I am still here. Still having to "go on", I will never get over this but I am forced to live with it twisting at my insides, creeping around and leaving a foul taste in my mouth.

When I'm home I sit in silence, staring at nothing in particular; silent tears, silent house. Then, with little warning, except an inhuman moan that I am not even sure was me, I ask why? I scream "WHY"; sobbing with a pain piecing my chest; feeling like I am being ripped apart. Once again, I shatter into a million pieces onto the cold slate floor.

My story doesn't have an ending. I am still here.

Get up.

Stand up.

Breathe, just breathe.

WAITING TO SURFACE

M.L. Purcell

Beneath water, he breathes.

The sound of his sucking, loud in his ears.

Fish glide and flicker by him, holding onto the sea floor while his dive partner slowly surfaces. He must wait for the signal from above, which he secretly hopes will never come. Down here he is excused from life, excused from blame and shame and gossip. The baleful abyss of darkness is somehow less threatening to him than the glares of human eyes and their frenetic thinking.

How could he not have known?

Momentarily he is gripped by fear, the air he sucks on falters. He glances up, his mind racing, assessing distance, speed, life. Death is impending.

But, in an instant, the air returns. An air bubble in the tank. Pores dilate and logic quells the fear. He can breathe. There is time. *He should have realised. Or perhaps he did, but just didn't want to.* The dank adrenaline remains like an oil slick inside him.

He turns in weightless acrobatics, trying to ease himself beneath a rock ledge, holding himself down at the bottom, where it is safe. *She had begged him to hear her, for how many years? He just thought it would never happen to him. He was married. Happy. With children. Three children! A house. She couldn't.*

The light in the seawater fractures, splintering around him. It plays tricks on his mind. He sees himself as if split in two, one body left beneath the rock ledge, the other kicking wildly for the surface. In that instant, he

cannot decide which self he would rather be. *She was gone. To be with her female lover. There was nothing he could do, no way to compete. It wasn't a phase. He was too late. Checkmate.*

And then the signal to surface comes from above.

Dreaded and dredging, his queasy gut swirls like the sea outside him, darkness within him, thirty years of fighting down emotion. *If she was gay, a lesbian, what did that say about him? Was he not man enough? Could he not satisfy?* In his hesitation he loses his grip, battles the opposing forces of his body, to float up or to remain. He grabs out at the rock and winces as he grazes the back of his hand on sharp coral, slicing into his skin. He recoils from the pain and loses all grip, thin red blood curling around his mask. And as his body slowly floats upward, he stares down at where the red liquid stays, stagnant in the water. *How could she do this to him? There is no control. There is only surrender, only chaos. There is nowhere to go.*

Passively, as though dead, his body drifts up, and hovers beneath a pocket of dense seagrass two metres below the surface. His ears pop. Through foggy lens the kelp fronds appear like the souls of a thousand gaping dead fish, eyes bulging, laughing at him from within the reeds. Fool you. Suddenly, like a golf ball in his throat, his breath catches. This time it is his own panic, not his tank, and as he arches his head back to open his airway he sees the light of the surface above.

He kicks up, hard, angry, pushing through the thick blackness toward the light and surging out into the blinding daylight, spitting his mouthpiece and gasping for real air. He breathes.

“D’you get a fright mate?” asks his dive partner in the boat.

He turns away, bobbing there like a discarded soft drink bottle in the ocean.

He has surfaced.

PARSLEY GREEN Shira Deutsch

Parsley green. That was the colour of my husband’s eyes. The colour of your eyes. The eyes that once stared into mine, as if I was the world’s greatest adventure, now focused on someone else. You caressed the arm of this new woman and with a light touch to the small of her back, directed her across a busy Brooklyn street. Where is she from? She looks too content to have come from a life like ours. Words poured endlessly between the two of you, like gravel directing the water flow. Words have no place in my world anymore, conversations exist in my head and memories of your eyes haunt me every day. 1946 feels like a trance. Only a year ago despair felt like a thick smog, but now women flounce around in shimmering dresses and sport perfectly lined red lips.

The skullcap has disappeared from your brown curls. You can touch, hug, kiss her in public, now no longer under the reigns of religion. I wonder when you made the decision to remove it. Were threats, that you would never again don a skullcap if given the chance, made to G-d a week after entering the death camp? How many months passed when the ability to cling to hope finally vanished, just like the remains of my younger brothers did with the brisk Polish wind. Perhaps it was the moment the Red Army stormed the gates and you tasted freedom in small doses.

So much has passed since I spoke to you, since you looked at me so intensely because I was your wife and you were my husband. I still remember the butterflies that danced inside me, so close to escape that they tickled the back of my throat. Do you ever think back to that time, a simple village life? Brooklyn still frightens me, but you had to shed your past to embrace your present. I cry every night when I dream of my mother sitting ethereal like in a tiny wooden chair sewing together

my wedding dress. Behind her the door opens into the field at the rear of our home. My brothers are kicking around a ball while my sister and her husband soak up the sunshine, an infant cradled between them. My stomach aches and sears with the pain of knowing there are some things that can never be retrieved.

At nineteen my cheeks were still rosy with innocence. I knew nothing of the world but talking to you about our future was thrilling. When our parents shared a L'chaim to seal the deal, I wanted to shout, 'I'M PRETTY SURE I LOVE YOU.' My father's stern eyes flashed a warning, but I spied a smile hiding in its creases.

The ash grey sky that day was the premonition we were too ignorant to take heed of. We were still the new couple in town when they barged into our home and dragged us out like broken dolls in the dirt. The shame I felt when you tried to hide me from the eyes of the passengers on the cattle car because, I sobbed into your chest, war has destroyed our lives, but I very badly need to use the pail in the corner.

I thought everyone I loved was dead. But now you're here, completely oblivious that a piece of your shattered past is standing ten feet away. You've moved on, but how do I drag myself away from this street corner, knowing that your parsley green eyes could look at me again.

FIVE JACKS

Kim Robyn Smith

The sun shone like a giant torch as we strolled along the sandy beach. I hated hanging out at home with Mum on school holidays. She told me that I should be grateful to live in such a beautiful place. I wanted to have fun. Like at Luna Park.

Mum's mobile rang. 'Hi Sally!'

I dropped the pace and was a good ten steps behind Mum. Then another ten.

Mum kept walking ahead, still absorbed in her phone conversation.

'Hoi!'

I looked around and spotted a boy playing with some hermit crab shells near the water's edge. The hem of his shorts was soaked. He didn't seem to notice that he was getting wet. Sleeves were rolled up on his stiff buttoned up shirt. It was strange that I hadn't noticed him when we walked past.

I back-tracked and eyed him with caution. 'What're doing?'

'Oh, just a game of jacks. I use shells instead of knucklebones,' he said. 'My father is coming so I'm filling in time.'

I didn't know what jacks or knucklebones were but didn't want to admit that to this boy.

'Care for a game?'

'Maybe,' I replied.

He snatched the five small shells and shoved them into a little calico bag. He shuffled them around then emptied the contents back onto the sand.

'Alright, me first.' He threw one shell into the air and gathered up two, then another before the airborne shell descended. He threw me a triumphant look.

With shells placed back in bag, he nodded to signal that it was my shot.

From the spilled pile, I tossed the largest shell up but couldn't pick up a single shell from beneath. 'Harder than it looks.'

He smiled.

'Hey, where you from? I haven't seen you at school.'

'Over there.' He pointed out to sea.

'Crab Island?'

He nodded.

'Cool. I've never met anyone from overseas before!'

Mum bellowed from down the beach. 'Jacob, what're you doing down there?'

'Nothin'!' I hollowed.

'Don't wander off!'

'I'm not a baby,' I mumbled.

Mum stood with hands on hips.

'I better go,' I said to the boy. 'What's your name?'

'Bert.'

'See ya, Bert.'

'Goodbye.' He resumed his solitary game.

We walked one street back from the beach to home. I scoffed down three sandwiches.

Mum made a cake. The Mixmaster whirled around with a low hum gobbling up flour and eggs into its smooth concoction.

Once the cake was cooking, I licked my finger coated with leftover batter.

'Can we go back to the beach, Mum?'

'Yes. Just wait until the cake's cooked.'

I sat on the couch and waited. And waited.

Mum fell asleep while watching a soapy. Her mouth opened like a cave. She didn't see me sneak out the front door.

Several families were headed towards the beach. I tore ahead.

Many people were gathered on the sand dunes. Water police zoomed in deep water. A helicopter hovered above.

'Divers found remnants of a small fishing boat,' a tall man in the crowd said.

'The vessel disappeared eighty odd years ago, according to the news report,' a lady in purple bathers said. 'The bodies of a father and son never recovered.'

Wow, a cool story to tell everyone at school next week.

I ran down to the shore. Some exciting news to share with Bert. I caught sight of something floating in the shallows. I waded in to retrieve what looked like a plastic bag. The little calico bag rocked back and forth in gentle waves. I spun around and spied a neat pile of five shells on the sand.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anna Kate Blair is a writer from Aotearoa. Her essays and short stories have appeared in journals and books including *The Appendix*, *King's Review*, *10 Stories: Writing About Architecture* and *The Island Review*.

Steve Carter is an artist/writer working in the genres of science-fiction, fantasy and horror usually bent into a surrealist and satirical angle. He works with fellow creator, Antoinette Rydyr and together have produced graphic novels, award-winning screenplays and illustrations, novels and esoteric electronic music. View their creations at <https://www.weirdwildart.com/>

C.A. Clark took on board the advice 'always tell the truth but not all of it and let the listener draw their own conclusions'. CA Clark writes across genres and has had moderate success with flash fiction, short stories and a graphic story short listed in a previous award.

Shira Deutsch is a 21 year old writer. She completed a Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing in 2018 at Swinburne and loves to write creative and non-fiction stories. Shira is currently working on a manuscript and pursuing opportunities as a content writer.

Sam Elkin is a writer, podcaster and community lawyer living in Melbourne's western suburbs. Sam's writing has been published in *Overland* and *Homer Magazine*, and you can hear Sam on Joy 94.9's weekly radio show *Transgender Warriors*.

Daniela Esposito is a loving mother and wife. She was born in Chile and was adopted by an amazing Australian family. She loves nothing more than spending time with her family and watching her children grow. In her spare time she enjoys having tea and reading a book in her garden.

Graeme Foley, 73, Werribee resident, grew up in South Yarra and did, through a convoluted pathway, including Army service in South Vietnam and tertiary qualifications at Latrobe University, become a secondary school politics teacher. Unpublished, he harbours a passion for social observation, which he enjoys expressing through verse and prose.

Mary Jones has had short stories and poems published in magazines and anthologies, read on radio and set to music. She also writes articles, novels and plays, and has had four poetry collections published. She has a website at www.maryjonesthewriter.com but is often too busy to keep it updated.

Sameer M. Khan is currently a student at the University of Melbourne. Besides having a keen interest in medical science, Sameer also shares a love for literature, believing it to be an amazing medium to understand those who are diverse in their own unique way.

Jaroslav Kotiw Captured within our space are the souls that came before us. Stories of lives once lived lay scattered among the fallen leaves of houses with broken backs. Stories of joy and the hurt, of promise and despair... they're all there.

Candice MacAllister loves telling stories. At the moment she tells stories on stage at the opera as a costume and set designer, where she creates wonderful worlds for sensational singers to inhabit. She also loves creating characters on paper that cause drama in scenes outside the theatre.

Ully Merkel is a new (until now, unpublished) writer, lawyer and director of an education consultancy business. She was raised in a bicultural family in Melbourne. She lives in Northcote with her partner and three daughters. She's currently working on a YA novel manuscript.

Tegan New is an Australian artist working on comics about high flying Ubers, crime solving ghosts, a dwarf and elf detective agency and a continuing love story about a hamburger and a pizza.

Belinda Oliver fell in love with writing at a young age, winning a local writing competition when she was eleven years old. She studied Professional Writing at university and has been published in *The Age*, *Offset* and the *Grieve 2018* anthology.

Elle Parkinson is an up and coming writer, she is on a mission to develop her craft and create newly written works in the form of novels and plays.

M.L. Purcell has been 'writing' in her head since before she could write. She is an emerging Victorian fiction writer who also writes poetry and lyrics. Purcell has worked and travelled across the arts, education and environment. She is currently completing graduate study in visual arts at the VCA.

Jakob Ryce is an award-winning writer, teacher and poet from Melbourne, Australia. Jakob writes speculative fiction and poetry, and his work has been published in several fiction and non-fiction publications. He is currently working on his debut novel and a chapbook of poetry, due out later this year.

Esthee Schonken is a full-time mother and part-time writer of short stories and poetry. When time allows, she can be found pruning her neighbour's roses or staring at clouds. Esthee lives with her husband, son and two boisterous dogs; Cody and Daisy.

Kim Robyn Smith is a writer of fiction. She has attended several writing courses and is an active member of writing groups. Kim is passionate about creating stories based on extraordinary events that occur in everyday life. She has written many short stories of various genre. Kim is currently writing a novel.

Prativa Tamang's childhood was mostly spent with paints and papers as well as a passion to create. That passion has stubbornly stayed with her well into her adult years as she has studied art and design given every chance. She draws inspiration and meaning from people and places interacting around her.