

# 2023 Wyndham Writing Awards **Anthology**

**Short Story**

**Poetry**

**Flash Fiction**



Wyndham City Libraries  
Wyndham Writing Awards Anthology 2023

Short Story  
Poetry  
Flash Fiction

Proudly funded and supported by Arts Assist



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# INTRODUCTION

As Wyndham's Learning City portfolio holder, I am delighted to showcase the amazing and exceptional creative talents of our community through the '2023 Wyndham Writing Awards Anthology'.

This year we received 431 entries, making the shortlist is an outstanding achievement.

Wyndham City's commitment to develop the next generation's literacy skills is evident through encouraging creative writing and imparting the sense of wonder in our readers and writers.

By sharing the joy of reading and writing with our residents—we are making an essential contribution to their development and Wyndham's vitality and prosperity.

Inside this collection of winning entries presented here, are extraordinary and surprising worlds and characters that evoke and illustrate the unlimited potential for imagination and inspiration and illustrate the power of the written word.

They also remind us of the countless ways literacy enhances our lives.

From flash fiction, to poetry to prose, great written work resonates and provides meaning and insights and provides a window into a larger world.

Each category has an overall prize winner and an Arts Assist Local Encouragement Award for a local Wyndham writer.

I am thrilled to share this anthology of dynamic and vibrant creative expression.

I am sure you will love it as much as I do.

*Councillor Jasmine Hill*

*Learning City portfolio holder, Wyndham City*

## JUDGE'S COMMENTS

It was an honour to judge the Wyndham Writing Awards. It was my job to find the top pieces in each category of poetry, flash fiction and short story. Each judge will look for different things but what I am looking for are stories or poems that move me as a reader. I am looking for evidence that the writer is refining technique, that they understand story structure, that they are experimenting with language and imagery, and that they are using description to further the story or create atmosphere, rather than just including it for its own sake. In short, I want to feel like I am in safe hands when I settle down to read.

*Vikki Petraitis*

## SHORT STORIES

*In My Head*

K. E. Lata

*Illimitable Space*

Aelius Ray\*

*Red Rattler*

Katy Knighton

*Transferable Skills*

Catherine McElroy

*Breathing Room*

Hannah Duffus

*Where Idle Weeds Grow*

Natalie A. Vella

### *Short Story Winner*

*In My Head* by K. E. Lata—*In My Head* is an observational story about a man called Bern, shut-in his mind after an accident. He is a sharp observer of the world around him, and he watches the drama play out with those he loves and the hospital staff. It is a clever story broken down into small time increments, giving the reader a glimpse into the world of someone who sees but isn't really seen.

*\*Arts Assist Local Encouragement Award*



# IN MY HEAD

K. E. Lata

## *Monday after dinner*

Enter Stacey. She looks tired, but then she always looks tired.

She smiles her faded smile at me and opens her mouth to immediately fill the silence. Here we go.

‘Hi honey, so sorry I am late. You wouldn’t believe the traffic. It just gets worse and worse. Of course, it’s still not as bad as Melbourne, never as bad as Melbourne, so I shouldn’t complain, right?’

Blah blah blah, next would be the updates about the weather, the kids. Although they are grown up and not kids at all. I am impatient. Get on with it.

‘And as if I don’t have enough to worry about, your sister has gone and done it this time!’ Finally! I try to look interested, drawing her in with my eyes but I have learned that it’s exceptionally difficult to express all emotion through my eyes alone. That old saying about eyes being the window to the soul? Complete rubbish! I must have done enough though. Stacey turns her big brown eyes my way and continues.

‘Gretchen has let him move in! She’s so reckless. She doesn’t know this man. He is just a no hoper. He will bring her nothing, add no value.’ On and on Stacey droned. I tuned out from there. Stacey is always resistant to change. She would be happy if the same daily, weekly, yearly routines would play out the exact same way for ever. She takes comfort in the tradition and the predictability. I don’t. Well, I never used to. And I guess I still don’t. Although my idea of change

has also changed a lot recently. Change is so small sometimes, you have to really concentrate to see it.

Exit Stacey. Her obligatory 45 min is up. A quick kiss and she is gone.

### *Tuesday morning rounds*

Enter a bunch of people, but the only ones I am interested in are Dr Briggins and the lovely nurse Olivia. Now I am not a sappy man, far from it. But the energy sparking between these two is the highlight of my day! I never used to notice these things, being the type of man I was. But apparently the man I am today *does* notice. And does more than just notice. I love it.

I am Team Olivia, if truth be told. There is apparently another nurse, someone called Betsy, vying for the good doc, but as I've never seen her, I am Team Liv, all the way. If Betsy wants my support, she should do a shift or two in my ward.

The medical jargon rumbles past me like it always does. I used to listen, I really did. But not anymore. It's the least of my worries. I am locked in. I know it, they know it. I follow them with my eyes, but that is the extent of my communication. They try not to, but they all think I have a brain injury. I used to mind that. I don't now. They are much looser around me this way.

Today Liv is not looking at the Doc at all. He is desperate for something from her but gets absolutely nothing. He's trying so hard to not look at her, but not succeeding at all. What happened there?

### *Tuesday lunch delivery*

I'm playing one of my favourite tricks. I refuse to look at the nurse and the orderly as they bring my lunch and my meds. I say lunch, but it's a bag of feed formula. Haven't eaten actual food since the accident. When I refuse to look at them, they often turn to gossip. Today is gold!

'Betsy and Glen left together last night, but came in separately this morning. I wouldn't have thought he was a "kick-em-out-and-send-em-home" type of guy.'

'She is smiling all over the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. She didn't seem to mind.'

'Poor Liv, though, right?'

'Nah, she got what was coming to her, I reckon.'

### *Wednesday, after dinner*

Stacey's rant about her work is mercifully cut short as my favourite troublemaker sister breezes in. This should be fun.

Stacey doesn't even try to control herself. You'd think she would have some more composure, what with being in a hospital, with her husband lying here and all. Obviously not!

'What the hell were you thinking? You let him move in, MOVE IN ... just like that!'

Now Gretch is having none of this, and rightly so ... her life is her life after all.

'Yep,' smiles Gretch. I love her *less is more* approach to confrontation. Not half because it works a treat to fire up my wife.

'He will be on your couch, eating chips, drinking beer, contributing NOTHING to your life, your home, your future. I hope you will be happy to pick up his wet towels for the rest of your life because that is what he is, a towel dropper!'

And with that Gretch drops a kiss on my cheek. 'Sorry Bern. I'll drop back later in the week for a better chat. Don't worry about me, I've got this.' She smiles at Stacey, and breezes out again. All class is my sister.

Stacey promptly bursts into tears and rests her head against my arm. It's heaven to feel her warmth on my skin. I'd touch her hair if I could.

For once Stace is not talking a mile a minute. She is forcing the words out. Things must be bad.

'Bernie, if only you could see him. He is no good at all. A dead beat. He doesn't work. He's gonna bleed her dry. I worry about her, you know,' Stacey looks me in my eyes, finally. For the first time in days, in forever. It's my one opportunity so I put everything I can into my eyes. After a minute, Stacey laughs.

'Fine. I know, I know. I haven't spent more than 5 minutes with him. I don't know him. Don't judge a book etc. Geez, when did you get all wise? You would have been the first to hate him before. I'll give him a go. Maybe I'll invite them both over for a barbeque or something.'

Stacey tidied up a bit, chatting more about nothing. These moments when I feel like I am actually communicating are what keeps me going. I'm smiling on the inside.

### *Friday afternoon, wound care*

It's my lucky day. I have a bed sore. Nothing serious, don't worry. But it's apparently the excuse for Liv and the Doc to both be in my room at the same time. I have my most attentive eyes and ears on today.

'Plans this weekend, Liv?' he starts strong.

Liv has her head down, concentrating on the very superficial wound on my elbow. 'You know it, big date, heading to a winery to watch the Sunday afternoon band. You?' A lie, if ever I heard one.

Dr not-as-smart-as-he-looks Briggins, falls for it and looks deflated. I'm staring at him, trying to convey positive vibes. Don't listen to her, ask her out. Grow a pair, man.

'Sounds fun. What is it jazz, folk, country?' Please! Music ... is that what you really want to talk about!

'An acoustic trio, just doing laidback covers. Probably no jazz, folk or country in any of it, sorry to disappoint.' She looks up and smiles at him now. She knows he's wanting to ask her out but for whatever reason is happy to follow his conversation into no man's land.

'No, I didn't mean that, I don't really like jazz, or country. I just wondered ...' and like a complete amateur, the Doc blunders and blushes.

Before I know it, they have redressed my elbow and he walks out.

'Sorry about that Bern. I'm sure you don't need awkward conversations like that in your room. I could have made it easier. Betsy probably makes it real easy.' With a pat on my shoulder, and no expectation that I understood any of that, she is gone.

And I'm alone again before I can shoot her my most encouraging eyes.

### *Saturday afternoon*

Gretch has dropped in. Now she can talk, and talk she does. It appears she is head over heels for this Guy. That's his name, Guy. He is not working, but is sweet, and energetic (oh God, don't even go there, please). Gretch knows that Stacey doesn't like him and is thinking about bailing on the barbeque.

Today I am much better at the encouragement, because by the time she leaves she has talked herself into going to the barbeque after all.

### *Sunday morning*

This is the time I feel most low. I admit it. I'm upbeat most of the time. It's a stretch to say I enjoy my life, but with enough activity and noise around me, I do cope. Sundays are the least busy day around a hospital and I get too much time to think.

I have been lying here now for over a year. I should have been moved to some kind of long stay ward, or nursing home, or something, but it never seems to happen. There is always something to monitor, something unstable, just wait a few weeks. So here I stay.

Obviously, this is not how I used to be. I could give you the full sad story and yes it was sad. Heartbreaking really. After the accident, God I was angry, I was volatile, I was grieving, I was all of it. But as it was

only ever in my head, no one ever knew. No one helped me through it. Just time, I guess.

Now I am more observant, more aware, more connected to the people around me than I ever thought possible. The irony, I know.

Mostly today I am waiting for the day to pass, because tomorrow is going to be a ripper.

### *Monday morning rounds*

Well, hello there. If the good Doc and Liv aren't even more weird with each other than usual. Her voice is an octave too high, trying to seem cool when it's anything but. He is more uncertain than ever. He looks at her, trying to figure out her mood. Admittedly, she is a bit louder, a bit more full on than usual, in way that is glaringly obvious to me and the Doc.

I am begging them to do my wound again.

### *Monday dinner*

My disappointment at not having my wound attended by Liv and the Doc is crushing. My former self would be teasing me no end, for the soap opera my life has turned into. But I get it now. People matter. What people feel matters. And how they communicate it matters.

### *Monday after dinner*

Enter Stacey. I am dying to know about the barbeque. But as per the routine, Stacey must go through her list of topics in order.

Traffic—pretty good. Monday RDO for some industry workers makes for a good drive.

Weather—raining today a bit, but ok because the weekend was fine. I'm relieved. The winery might have been a lovely afternoon.

The kids—didn't come over on the weekend. They haven't been to

see me for weeks. Not that I blame them, but Stace needs them and it makes me angry they aren't there for her. Next time they do come in, I'll glare at them for sure.

The BARBEQUE!—Finally. 'It was a bit hard, Bern, I've got to say. I didn't realise how much work you actually did at a barbeque.' I don't want to say *I told you so*, but I am preening! Damn right I did the work! 'It's hard to keep up the drinks, keep up the banter, keep the snacks going, and cook the meat all at once. I was exhausted.'

Now when I said I want to know about the BARBEQUE, the logistics were not part of it. I try to raise my eyebrows, telling her to say more.

'Oh look, Bern. It almost looks like you raised your eyebrows. Like you used to when you wanted me to get to the end of a story. I talk so much, don't I! What do you want to know? About the meat ... You were always so proud of the good meat you served at our barbies.'

I glared at her ... Meat indeed!

Stacey laughed and finally put me out of my misery. 'Fine, I'll tell you about Guy but no *I told you so*, ok?' I make no such promises, but try to raise the eyebrow again. Did I do that before, or are we just in sync enough that she knew I wanted to?

'He was ok. Better than ok. Unemployed yes, but not without a plan, and it seems the money to pull it off. The best bit, he had good manners. And he looks at Gretch like she is his world. And she shines like the sun. I am backing off and will try to be more supportive. Happy now?'

I am. My baby sister needs some good luck with men, and my wife needs more family around. This is good news.

### *Wednesday after breakfast*

It's my monthly full obs. They are looking for any sign of hope. I have been practising my best eyebrow lift for this moment.

And best of all, I am in luck. Olivia and the Doc are here together,

so I am on full alert.

There is stone cold silence and the barest of professional communication between them. Geez, what happened at that winery? If I am not mistaken, he went along, so how did it go so wrong?

And if that wasn't heartbreaking enough, neither of them looked at my eyebrows at all. Not even once. Shit.

### *Friday night*

Stacey has come over and is eating her dinner with me. We always used to do Friday night takeaway and she still does it. My heart fills with love for her. She is truly committed. For better or worse, right? And I am selfish. I don't want her to lose faith either. I need her so much.

But honestly, the smells of her pizza are sent to try me. I've not tasted real food for over a year now. And don't get me started on the taste of formula as it refluxes. Vanilla, my arse.

Stacey is happier today. The kids will come visit her on the weekend, and Gretch and Guy, now officially knows as G&G, will help her on Sunday with some gardening.

As she leaves, Stacey stares at me. 'If you can hear me, give me a sign,' she whispers. I tear up, I can't help it. And I raise my eyebrows. I am ambitious, I try for a wriggle. She sees nothing, sighs, gives me a kiss and leaves me alone.

### *Sunday afternoon*

G&G pop over to see me. I am officially introduced to Guy. And I am ropable. He is not a nice guy! He doesn't look at her like he is her world. Stacey's instincts were right in the first place, and I am proud of her. He is a tool. When he thinks no one is looking, his eyes tell the truth. He is playing her.

For my part, I am a complete brat. I refuse to look at him. I close my



eyes until she sighs, gives me a kiss and leaves.

I can hear her on the way out. 'He has his good days and bad days.'

### *Monday morning rounds*

Nothing! Liv is not on shift today and the Doc is uber-professional. No news there.

### *Tuesday after breakfast*

Liv is back. She is in a good mood, caring. Funny that I can now sense the smallest nuances of change in the mood of people who matter to me.

She is bathing my face and giving me a shave. She doesn't talk about the Doc, and I can't seem to bring the conversation around to that. She does chatter pleasantly about all sorts of things, things that I can't remember now. I was concentrating on timing my move. I have one good eyebrow lift in me, and I want her to see it.

She finishes the shave and pats me dry. Looking me straight in the eye, she says 'There you go, handsome, good as new.' I hold her eyes and go for the lift.

I actually have no idea if I am even moving my eyebrows. I feel nothing. But since that day with Stacey, I'd been practising every day and willing this to happen.

Liv looks at me, narrows her eyes and says again. 'There you go, handsome, good as new' and she watches. I go for the lift again. Change is so small sometimes, you have to really concentrate to see it.

She smiles at me, her eyes filling with tears and says 'Welcome back, Bernie.'

# ILLIMITABLE SPACE

Aelius Ray

What do you do when a dead god washes up on your doorstep?

Two weeks ago, an unidentified blob of mass washed up on the beach ten-minutes from my house. An old co-worker of mine called me first thing in the morning, and screamed at me to get down to the beach, now. Bring a camera, any old equipment I have from my previous job—and document *everything*.

By the time I arrived, the sun had yet to rise, enveloping the mysterious creature in darkness. There were roughly twenty, thirty people standing by, too terrified to dare move any closer—aside from curious mid-teens.

Jogging over, I immediately froze, my camera suddenly weighing a ton in my hand. *'Photograph it'*, my co-worker had demanded, *'quick, before someone damages it'*.

Instead, I stood there among the community, shakily whispering to each other, trembling in the cold winds. One, a frail woman in her eighties, gripped her cane with white knuckles, turned to me and said, 'Bad. This is very, very bad.'

By the time my former co-worker had arrived an hour later, majority of the coastal town's community had shown up. I'd managed to snap a few photographs before it got too crowded, and scribbled down some notes in a journal I hadn't used in years.

Even now, I don't know how to describe it—the image of it is fuzzy and unclear in my mind, as if it were merely a dream. Everyone else

I've talked to has the same issue. While the fear that embedded itself in their hearts that day remains, sprouting into long, curling branches that will never let go—they can't recall a single thing beside emotion.

The nausea, the gut-wrenching terror—the strongest willed sailors in this town tense up, and look like they're about to puke at the recollection.

If not for the notes I wrote down, I'd have nothing, too.

Spanning 50 feet across the beach, it had snow white, rubbery skin that broke every blade that dare challenged it. Axes, chainsaws—everything we had. Nothing stood a chance. But luckily for us, there was already a small incisor in its body; exposing not guts nor bone, but blood.

Crimson blood that pooled all over the sandy beach like the ocean waves, which almost appeared to recoil away from the substance. It had spit it out, and did *not* want it back.

More and more scientists flooded in, pushing the frightened community aside. Rather than join my former co-workers and friends, I lumped myself in with the jostling crowd, observing from the sidelines, until the man who I can hardly call a friend now, the one who dragged me here in the first place, spotted me and ushered me over.

I didn't want to go.

I felt so small up close to the creature, my mind filled with cotton as scientists discussed amongst themselves, snapped photos and scribbled down notes, theories. Samples of the blood were taken. They took no caution, aside from the general rule of gloves. They had no fear.

Despite my "friend", Matthew, loudly rambling about his theories right beside me, I registered none of it. All I heard, which snapped me out of my daze, were the words;

'This is—this is huge. Natalia, do you know what this means?'

I just stared at him, hoping he'd connect the dots from my

expression. He did not. He just grinned from ear to ear, like a child entering a candy shop for the first time.

A child.

‘There are more of these things out there.’ He pointed to the ocean, still withdrawn from the shoreline. ‘And we, my friend,’ he gripped me by the shoulders, ‘are going to *find them*.’

I shoved him aside, and threw up right there on the beach.

Let me be clear, I did not want to do this. I am only here, so that someone else isn’t. Someone who is in way over their head, lured in by morbid fascination with the unknown—determined to satisfy their questions, no matter the danger.

I had been that person, once. Enraptured by childhood story books depicting old myths of krakens, mermaids, and other wretched sea beasts that’d tear down pirate ships and eat the poor men onboard whole.

Now, nearly six years after my last voyage into the abyss, I climbed into a recently built submarine smaller than a car, that weighed more than a bus. A ball with a single window, about to be lowered into relatively calm, silent waters.

My mind screamed at me to abort, to claw myself out of this death sentence and run for my life, never to look back. I glanced at Matthew, who had been both surprised and thrilled by my quick response. Even now, he hasn’t changed.

I can’t blame him. Maybe when he inevitably finds what he’s searching for, things will be different. But I’d be stupid, downright selfish to let him enter this thing.

‘Are you sure about this?’ He asks, though his voice lacks real concern. I stare blankly at him, studying his features. He adjusts his glasses and says, ‘We’ll be right here, observing your coordinates the entire time. You have nothing to worry about.’

If damaged in the slightest, the sub will activate an alarm—but I know they're depending on *me* to steer myself to safety. Their (claw) can only reach so far, nothing else can sustain such pressuring depths. If I stray too far, get over myself—then it is out of their hands.

But that's exactly what they require me to do. Either way, any footage captured by the camera installed into the ship will be directly sent to their lab, displayed on a big screen for everyone to see.

I don't say anything to Matthew, but nod, and climb down the small ladder, closing the lid above me.

Then, as soon as I settled into my seat and grip the handlebars, I am dropped.

I screamed. There was no audio recording, so I screamed as loud as I wanted, cursing myself out for doing this *again*—when I had sworn to loved ones, friends and newly acquired enemies that I would never step foot in the ocean again. Even the tiniest wave tickling my feet at the beach sends shivers up my spine and has me sick to my stomach.

A deeper, darker part of me long tucked away, blossomed. For years, it craved not cawing seagulls and the smell of salt, but to be concealed in pitch darkness, save for glimpses of bioluminescent light swimming past. It yearned to see specimens twice the size of the submarine, to have things out of view bump into me.

It is what kept me sane as I delved lower, and lower.

Common fish swam by, urgently darting past or coming to take a closer look. Their features became more abstract, and they were more hesitant to draw closer as my surroundings darkened. Colourful coral turned to swaying seaweed, to moss on rocky walls and floor.

I almost crashed a few times, the sub's light only illuminating a quarter of my surroundings.

Here and there, something brushed against the sub; fleeting light taps, or loud bangs that gently push me aside. It became less and less

frequent, until all I saw were distant silhouettes.

Rubbing my eyes, I cautiously rested the sub by a mossy wall. Unlike specimens I encountered earlier, those feeding on the moss did not immediately flee, but pretended I did not exist, or stared right at me. I gazed back into their dark, hollow eyes.

I wondered what they were thinking. If they viewed me in similar terms; a strange, seemingly intelligent creature—its purpose and life unknown.

*Is it dangerous?*

Suddenly, all of the fish evacuated, vanishing from sight. I steered the sub to the right, headlight slicing through the darkness, then to the left.

Nothing.

I relaxed into my seat, sighing. My eyes half open, I lazily steered the ship forward. Within seconds, something shot out of the darkness—a flash of white—and wrapped around the front of the sub.

A large patch of white, covered in suction cups, obscured my entire window. Slowly, it moved, dragging across the glass. The sub groaned and creaked. I should have moved, steered myself out of its tightening grasp.

Gripping the controls, I was about to draw back—when a long, melodic wail stopped my heart. Low and guttural, I swear I felt it reverberating through the sub, forming small cracks in the metal.

Withdrawing its tentacles, it swam off to my right, out of view.

Gone, just like that.

Jumping out of my seat, I pressed my face and hands against the cold glass, desperate to catch one last glimpse. An endless void, darker than the night sky, gazed back at me.

Faint bioluminescent lights twinkled in the distance. This place, wholly disconnected from dirt and civilization above, is the closest I will ever get to exploring space.

The beast was gone. I slumped back into my seat, mind utterly blank; overwhelmed by it all. Head in my hands, I took deep breaths. In and out. My job was done, I could return to the surface for the last time.

Straightening my posture, I held onto the controls and opened my eyes.

It had been waiting for me. Its pupil took up the entire window, a thin white outline distancing it from the empty space. Or, I could have been imagining things, gazing out into an endless abyss, pretending I wasn't alone.

Slowly, I rose from my seat, and pressed my hand against the freezing glass, colder than earlier. Exhaling, my breath materialized against the window.

The creature blinked.

I do not remember steering myself back to the surface, watching the shadows sink below me, only breaching the water. I scrambled to the ladder and threw the lid open. Arms grabbed me and lifted me onto the dock, where I fell to my knees, gasping for air.

I wheezed and coughed, akin to a deep-sea creature forcibly dredged up, collapsing in on itself from the air and pressure. Matthew got down on his knees as well, grabbed me by the shoulders, and looked me dead in the eyes.

In his, I saw remnants of a man long gone, pieces of him floating in the ocean. He asked me, 'Did you see it?'

Everything stopped. The buzzing in my head fell silent, leaving behind excruciating pain. I rose to me feet, a little unsteady—a few scientists held onto me before I could fall overboard back into the water.

I looked back at Matthew, and his face twisted in fear. That was the first time I had ever seen him genuinely terrified. His eyes were still on me, not behind me or to my right. But locked onto my hunched over, trembling frame.

Shrugging off the scientists, I stumbled towards him, and he instantly recoiled, hands raised. Mouth agape, I waited for him to say something, *anything*. But not a single thing came out.

In the silence, all I could hear was my long, ragged breaths, lungs struggling to take in air. Straightening my posture as much as I could, I walked straight past him—and he raced out of the way so fast he nearly lost balance and went over the edge.

I walked home, and did not look back.

Once there, I tried sleeping, but the uneasiness in my chest refused to give me peace. It whispered things to me, only getting louder as I shut my eyes tighter and curled up in bed. Incoherent things, words that didn't make sense, but provoked a heavy feeling of dread.

Hours passed, and I didn't move, despite being wide awake. I only scratched at my wrists, searching for whatever swam beneath my skin, up and down both arms. I scratched until I drew blood, a deep crimson. Even then, I gained no relief.

The voices grew louder, but this time, I understood them. Alongside them, I heard the ocean's crashing waves, water trickling into my mind—and an echoing, melodic cry.

It called to me.

My phone rang, lighting up to display Matthew's name. Paying it no mind, I walked out of my room and past my cat, Missy. She meowed to no avail, trailing behind me to the front door. Over and over again she cried, rubbing against my legs as the door opened, and sitting at it patiently when it closed.

Waves crashing against my mind guided me down the street, dismissing familiar faces who greeted me. Underneath my skin, something squirmed, dripping blood onto the pavement.

The whispers erupted in glee as I stepped onto the beach, where the unidentified blob remained, guarded by yellow police tape flailing in



the wind. A low, guttural wail reverberated through me, scattering goosebumps across my skin.

I faced the ocean. It slowly stretched across the sand towards me. Quieting down, the voices abandoned me as the water swept over my feet. Cold fingers curled around my ankle ...

I closed my eyes and breathed in. The voices sang.

And the hand, burning ice into my skin, *yanked*.

## RED RATTLER

Katy Knighton

What she liked most was walking outside and having no one else around. Her property backed onto State Forest, and the only other dwelling on her dirt road was the decommissioned train carriage. It was a mystery how it had arrived, and who had arranged to put it there. People would stay in the Red Rattler—drifters, unemployed, swagmen, single mothers fleeing with their scrappy kids. Sometimes Anne heard the hum of a generator, or drunken yelling, or smelled the reek of meat being cooked on green wood. She supposed there must have been a way of sharing knowledge about squats like the Red Rattler.

Anne didn't mind the sparsity of human contact, in fact she preferred it. She had chosen this life. If she felt lonely she would ring the mechanic, who had been first on the scene of the crash. They would meet at the footy oval and drink beer while saying nothing. Then they would drive off separately. It was the only friendship she had.

'Hello.' A young girl was staring at her. She wore a red dress that was too big and her feet were bare.

'Hello,' said the girl again.

'Hi,' replied Anne.

'What sort of trees are these?' asked the girl.

Anne wanted to laugh because the obvious answer was *gum trees*, but the girl was so serious she turned it into a cough. 'I'm not sure.'

'Do you think they might be sugar gums?'

'I don't know, I don't know much about trees.'

The girl took a few steps forward. 'What are you doing here?'

The question was so innocent and direct that Anne was taken aback.

'I don't know that either.'

'Are you a man or a woman?'

'A woman, I think.' Anne hadn't thought of herself in these terms for a very long time.

'Are you a Missus?'

'Not any more.'

A man's voice echoed faintly through the bush, but Anne couldn't catch what he was yelling.

'Dad wants me,' said the girl, pulling a fallen dress strap onto her shoulder. She made her way back into the bush, stepping high to avoid sticks and branches on the wallaby path.

Anne was busy typing and cursing.

'What are you doing?' said the girl, from the doorway.

'Writing.'

'Oh.'

'Shouldn't you be at school?'

'It's the holidays.'

Anne nodded. 'Ah.' She was out of touch with the timing of school holidays.

'Do you want to go for a walk?' said the girl.

'Yeah, why not. Hold on a moment, can you?' Anne saved her work and took the pouch with its orphaned sugar glider, nestling it under her top and pulling the zipper up.

'What is that?'

'A baby.'

'Awww ... can I see it?'

Anne unzipped her top a little and loosened the pouch with a finger so the girl could see.

‘It’s so cute! Where did you get it from? Can I have one for my own?’

‘I’m helping it grow into an adult because it doesn’t have parents.’ It struck Anne that she had never talked about her job in these terms, and how sad she was about this statement.

‘Are you going to set it free?’

‘Yes, when it’s ready.’

‘How do you know when it’s ready?’

‘That’s complicated. It’s different for all the animals.’

‘How many do you have?’

‘Just this one and a wombat joey right now. After the bushfire it was too many. I even had a pair of owlets.’

‘Wow,’ breathed the little girl. ‘Where are they?’

‘Grown up. They’re on their own, now.’ On still nights she was convinced she heard them calling to her, *hoooh hoooh ... hoooh hoooh*.

‘You’re wearing the same dress as the other day,’ said Anne.

‘It reminds me of mum. It used to be hers.’

The bluntness of their conversations wore a gap in Anne’s resolve to suppress her past. ‘You know ... I have clothes that might fit you. What’s your name?’

‘Becky. Bec.’

‘Becky-bec.’ Anne smiled.

‘You can call me that. It can be the name that only *you* call me,’ Becky-bec said generously.

‘Come with me,’ said Anne.

In her spare room were various animal enclosures and a wardrobe containing boxes wrapped with thick plastic. Anne hadn’t opened them since moving—knowing what was inside would make her weep if she did. But today she managed to unwrap the top box without tears.

They were just clothes.

She tried to be business-like about it, shaking each item open. She wanted to smell them but resisted.

'Oh, I like this one,' said Becky-bec, taking a pair of overalls. 'Look at all the pockets!'

'Try them on, if you want.'

Becky-bec jammed her legs in and the red dress bunched up around her waist. She wrestled her arms through the straps and put her hands in the pockets.

'Would you like to try a t-shirt under the overalls? This one?'

It was pink with a unicorn on it, and had been a favourite of her daughter's. Anne was suddenly very glad Becky-bec was here.

'Ok. But I still have to wear the dress,' said Becky-bec sternly.

'Of course,' said Anne. 'I will leave the room so you have some privacy.' She still had the sugar glider, and it needed a dropper of feed.

'What's your name?' Becky-bec called.

'Anne.'

'I like you, Anne.'

Anne wanted to cry, but held herself together.

Becky-bec appeared in her new outfit, the red dress over her daughter's clothes.

'Do you want shoes?' asked Anne.

'No,' said Becky-bec, 'I like bare feet.'

They set off through the bush. The Red Rattler wasn't visible from Anne's house, and at first Anne thought they were making their way towards it along the narrow wallaby path. But Becky-bec abruptly went off-track, stomping down a hill toward where Anne knew there was a fern gully.

'Shouldn't you tell your dad where you're going?'

'He knows.' Becky-bec picked her way through the undergrowth. 'I

told him I was going to visit the fairies.

A pang went through Anne. *Fairies.*

'Oh, yeah,' she said. 'Of course.'

'Do you believe in them?'

'Yes,' said Anne, looking right at her.

Becky-bec put her arms out for balance as she walked a fallen trunk. 'Look at this moss! My favourite kind is cushion moss, though. What is yours?'

'I like cushion moss, too, I think.'

'Luuuu LA!' a man's voice echoed. The birds ceased their trills.

Becky-bec stopped dead. 'I have to go.' She scrambled off the trunk and pushed past Anne, high-stepping and hopping along. Anne watched Becky-bec, or Lula, until she was no longer visible.

'Why do you live here?' It was Becky-bec's voice.

'Where are you?'

Becky-bec stood up. She was wearing the overalls. Anne smiled. Becky-bec held a stick and looked like she had been poking at holes with it.

'What are you doing?' asked the little girl.

'Nothing much,' said Anne.

'Can I do it with you?'

'Ok.'

Anne made bread. Becky-bec helped to knead it and chattered about all the types of bread she had ever eaten. Anne noticed the little girl didn't mention where they had come from, or how many different places they had stayed, or why.

'My favourite is wholegrain with lots of crunchy seeds. One time, dad sprouted wheat and put that in but it was disgusting and I got in trouble for spitting it out and wasting the food.'

They put the loaf aside to rise. 'Does your dad think you're looking for fairies again?'

'No, I told him I was with a friend, and he said it was okay.'

Anne wanted to ask a thousand questions—how did her dad know it would be okay? Had he seen Anne? Heard about her? Did he think Becky-bec's friend was imaginary? Wasn't he scared something might happen to her? Had Becky-bec told him Anne was a fairy?

Becky-bec watched Anne's face change, and said, 'I have to go.' She trotted off.

A wind was picking up. Some of the taller trees creaked as they absorbed incoming gusts and a pleasant wood-fire smell with the quality of properly seasoned wood drifted Anne's way. Usually, when the Red Rattler people lit a fire, the forest canopy would hold stinky clouds from hastily cut timber.

Tonight there would be the kind of sideways rain that wet everything and made trees come down. She settled in for the night, and imagined Becky-bec and her dad doing the same in the Red Rattler.

Becky-bec appeared, breathless, on her doorstep with something in a bundle.

'Can you help it?' she plaintively asked.

It was clear the run-over animal was close to death. For the purpose of euthanasia Anne had a gun, but obviously it was ridiculous to shoot something this small and besides, she wasn't a monster, she wouldn't use the gun in front of a child. The gun also replaced the need for a dog, and the need for a man, neither of which she didn't think she would ever want again.

'I don't know,' Anne lied.

Becky-bec stroked it. 'Can we name it? Do you give names to the

animals you rescue? Are they like pets? Do you tame them?’

‘No, they aren’t tame. No, I don’t call them anything.’

‘Are they ... why do you help them, then?’

Anne was silent. She thought about the crash and the sensation of tipping over and tumbling. They had swerved to avoid a kangaroo, knowing the impact would be deadly. It was unclear how much time had passed before she was pulled from the wreckage. She called for her husband and daughter, thinking they had been taken out first, but they never answered. The lights and noises made it hard to work out what was going on. Later, the mechanic had visited her in hospital to give her some keys. ‘For when you’re ready to drive. It’s a spare.’

Becky-bec’s chest began heaving. The little animal had died. She sobbed, ‘Why would someone run it over and keep driving?’

Anne wasn’t sure what kind of comfort to give her.

‘Can we bury it?’ said Becky-bec.

They dug a rough grave. Becky-bec gently placed the bundle into it, sprinkling earth and saying, ‘Now we lay you down ... what are the words?’

Anne improvised. ‘You were a wonderful creature whose life was cut short. Now you are in the big sleep. Goodbye.’

‘Is it different for animals? They said something else for my mum.’

The general store was a long walk away. This was the first time Anne had seen them walking by the road, and she pulled over to offer them a lift. Becky-bec jumped into the front seat before any offer was made, and her dad slowly got in the back. Anne was surprised that he wasn’t mean looking, or cross, or wire-thin. She didn’t know why she had been expecting him to be these things. He had kind eyes, and he was quiet, with clothes that were clean but well worn. Becky-bec chattered until Anne pulled up outside the store and said,



'I'm dropping my car in to the mechanic. He's giving me a lift back home, and can pick you up too, if you like.'

'That's fine. We'll be ok,' said the dad. Anne couldn't remember either of them exchanging names and felt awkward while they got out. 'Chris,' said the dad, amused, and patted the car roof farewell.

Anne laughed. 'I'm Anne,' she called out the window. She flicked a look in the rear view mirror after she pulled away and saw them go into the store. Her wish was that they would return to the Red Rattler, an easy wish, as they had taken no luggage with them.

'Dad says we are going to make you dinner and bring it over,' said Becky-bec, 'to thank you for the lift. Dad found a road-thing and he's cooking it.'

Anne felt repulsed by the idea of this meal. 'Oh. That's good of him,' she said.

'It won't be yuck. He's good at making dinner.'

'Are you sure?' asked Anne.

'Yes! And we will see you tonight.'

It was a great dinner, in the end. Chris knew how to treat whatever the road-kill had been with the dexterity of a good hunter; the meat cut free of bones (wallaby? possum?), stewed with potatoes and carrots, and a touch of flour to thicken the gravy. He had arrived with a guitar slung over a shoulder, and after they ate he strummed quietly while they all stared at the fire. Becky-bec produced a harmonica from her pocket. She was surprisingly good. They worked through their song catalogue together.

Anne didn't say anything; she didn't want to break the spell. Something dormant in her was allowing enjoyment of this moment, so long as she didn't speak. Becky-bec pocketed her harmonica and cuddled up to Anne's side. Anne put an arm around her. Chris kept

strumming. Becky-bec yawned and was soon asleep.

‘Where were you before you came here?’ asked Anne.

‘Further north. We picked fruit for a while. Lula wanted to see a forest and we heard about the train carriage.’

So it was true, then. Drifters passed on the knowledge about Red Rattler. Anne wanted to ask him if he had found a job here. They didn’t have a car, which was unusual. Even the single mums with their tired, ratty kids had cars.

‘Is she bothering you?’ asked Chris.

‘No! It’s lovely having her around. That is, if *you* don’t mind. To be honest, it’s like having a therapist drop in. This is the most talking I’ve done in ages. Is her real name Becky-bec? Or Lula?’

‘She likes you,’ said Chris, smile-lines radiating, not answering her question.

His voice was unexpectedly resonant and she wondered if he had ever worked in radio. He was well spoken. Anne wanted to make him feel welcome to stay in the Red Rattler forever. This evening made her miss her family.

‘There’s a good primary school, you know, for when the holidays are over,’ she said.

Chris shifted his weight. ‘We’re taking a year off. This is better, for now.’

They thoughtfully examined the coals.

‘How did you end up here?’ he asked. ‘Or have you always been a local?’

Anne said, ‘My husband and daughter died in a car crash.’

‘Oh, I’m so ...’ Chris reached a hand toward her.

‘I was driving.’

He blinked rapidly, speechless, and fumbled for his guitar. Anne wondered what he thought about the unicorn t-shirt and overalls.

She said, 'I couldn't face my old life anymore, so I moved here.'

He had his eyes shut. He began playing the guitar, and she wondered if she should say something about his wife.

Anne closed her eyes.

When she woke propped against the couch it was morning. The fire had gone out. Becky-bec and her dad weren't there. She got up stiffly, and cared for the animals before making tea and toast. The evening with Chris and Becky-bec had awoken a sense that the future, her future, would be brighter for having them next door. She had to thank them. Anne held the wombat joey in the crook of her arm and got another bottle of wombat milk replacer ready. She would let Becky-bec do it.

Anne had another idea as well—a book and pencils. Anne rummaged in one of the plastic wrapped boxes, and thought that next time she saw Becky-bec and Chris she would hand over the rest of its contents to them.

Outside the back door someone had written with a stick in the moist earth. *Thank you.*

Holding the wombat joey, the bottle, and the present, she picked her way along the wallaby path, imagining being allowed to drive Becky-bec to school one day.

But when she got there, the Red Rattler was cold and empty, and they were gone.

## TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Catherine McElroy

At Patrick's fortnightly JobsPlus appointment, Sheynelle spends lengthy amounts of time talking about hypnotherapy and how it could be really good for him. Sheynelle is his Employment Consultant. She is a stout woman, much younger than Patrick, with a distinctive perfume which reminds him of the toilet air-freshener at the Insurance company where he'd worked six months earlier.

'I was eating a block of chocolate every night after work,' Sheynelle says. 'Size of that.' She holds up her A5 Spirax NoteBook.

Patrick assembles his face into a mild *wow* expression.

'You don't believe me?' She says.

'I do, I do.'

'Hypno saved my life. Don't touch the stuff now.'

Patrick looks discreetly at his phone. 'Ok, I might give it a go.' The hypnotherapy talk has taken up twenty minutes, which he wouldn't mind, only these meetings—mandatory, if he wants to keep receiving his welfare payments—frequently creep into the hour, despite being scheduled for thirty minutes. He supposes this is the reason she is always running late.

'You should.' Sheynelle says. 'You've been with me, what, almost twelve months?'

Actually, three years. But it wouldn't help matters to be specific. Patrick nods. 'Around that.'

'Just saying, it could help get you unstuck. From whatever's holding

you back.’ She looks at him over the top of her glasses.

He coughs. ‘I’ve got to pick up my sister’s kids,’ he says, apologetically. ‘I’ll have to be out in another fifteen.’

‘Shit, we’d better get cracking,’ she says. She opens her Notebook. ‘How do you feel about real estate? Trainee position.’

Patrick rubs his neck.

‘These guys are good fun,’ she says. ‘They want someone with a passion for the industry. They’re a top notch company. You get a foot in here, Patrick...’

‘Sheynelle,’ he says.

She puts her chin on her hand. ‘How do you know if you won’t give it a go? You’ve got to help me out. No job is easy, Patrick.’

‘I have *never* had a passion for real estate.’ His hand creeps to the collar of his shirt. He feels hot.

‘Alright.’ She sighs.

Way back when he’d first come into JobsPlus, Sheynelle had been confident about her ability to find him long-term work.

‘I’m a guru,’ she said. ‘Trust me.’

In those three years she has placed him in five or six casual short-term positions, the last being a three-week contract with the Insurance group. At the time, Sheynelle had declared the company *always* renewed the contract.

‘I’ve placed four other clients there,’ she said. ‘All permanent full-time now. One guy, he’s a team leader.’

‘I just don’t think I was what they wanted,’ Patrick said, when he turned up in Sheynelle’s office three weeks later.

‘Never mind,’ she said, looking at her screen. She was disappointed, he could tell. It was his one reliable skill: disappointing people. It wasn’t the work. It was the ‘cultural’ fit he found hard.

He didn't mix well. They couldn't sack you for that, but they could fail to renew your contract.

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'What if cars looked like trees?' Four-year-old Slim says, from his booster seat in the back.

The interior of the car is quiet while all three occupants consider this.

'That's dumb.' Daisy decides. Glancing in the rear vision mirror, Patrick sees Slim smile, unperturbed. But Patrick feels a pang, a stirring of resentment against the classroom where his seven-year-old niece has learnt what counts as normal. Or maybe it's not school, maybe it's spending more time in the world in general. Jesus. Is he turning into his father, who had derided school when Patrick was small. He remembers the guilt he'd felt, because back then he'd loved the order and safety of the classroom. He bites his lip.

The car slides along High Street, past Bob Jane T-Marts, the Furniture One showroom, car dealerships; stopping and starting in the after-school traffic. It's Mandy's car they're in—a black Saab. Hugh, Patrick's brother-in-law, said he wasn't going to have his kids in Patrick's car, it was barely road-worthy. So on Thursdays and Friday afternoons Patrick leaves his Hyundai in the street outside Mandy's and takes the Saab to collect Slim from daycare and Daisy from school, spending the next three to five hours with them until their parents get home.

'All the faff,' Mandy said. 'Getting someone for those few hours. It's much nicer this way; they know you. You're family. We'll pay you, naturally.'

'Please don't,' Patrick said. 'I'll enjoy it.' And he did. In truth, spending time with the kids is the best part of his week.

'If something comes up, of course ...' She waved her hands.

She meant if he got a job. 'Of course,' he said. He didn't think

something was going to come up all that soon.

Though not a car guy, behind the wheel of the Saab Patrick feels just a bit taller and better looking. Feels, with his borrowed car and his borrowed kids, a different man, a more confident man. Feels what life might be like, in a more cushioned and moneyed life.

‘You don’t have any money do you, Uncle Pat?’ Daisy says. ‘Daddy says we have to give you money.’

Patrick grips the wheel. Damn Hugh. Why tell the kids that? The money his sister gave him was from his own rapidly dwindling savings, savings which had been tucked away in Mandy and Hugh’s mortgage-offset account, in case the small amount jeopardised his welfare payment. It’s a sad fact Patrick is tempted to launch into a complicated defence of his situation. Instead, he swallows.

‘No,’ he grimaces. ‘I have no money.’ After all, the gist of it is true.

‘Never mind,’ Daisy says soothingly, a small echo of Sheynelle.

In the park Patrick takes the kids to every Friday, there’s brightly coloured play equipment and, beside that, a grass-covered miniature hill. Children climb to the top and roll down lengthways like rolling pins, slowly gathering speed. Daisy is a pro, her rolls are executed to perfection. Usually, Patrick and Slim sit on the grass under a tree and watch Daisy, clapping when she springs to her feet at the bottom. Last week, for the first time, Patrick and Slim climbed the hill together, Slim clasping Patrick’s hand.

‘Look Slim, it’s easy. Just do what I do,’ Daisy instructed. She lay lengthways and tumbled down the hill vigorously. At the top, everything looked faster and steeper. Patrick felt Slim’s small hand tighten its grip on his thumb. ‘You don’t have to do it,’ Patrick said. ‘Not if you don’t want to.’ Slim’s eyes were big. He said nothing, but carefully

crab-walked forward down the hill. An older child jeered. Patrick swung around to fix the kid with a glare, but the throng of kids was oblivious, gleeful and jostling for position, the moment already gone.

Today, Patrick watches as Slim clammers to the top unaided, and then rolls down the hill without hesitation. He can scarcely believe it. Sometimes he has to catch his breath at the unfolding of his niece and nephew.

‘Did you see? Pat, did you see?’ Slim runs to him, face alight.

Patrick’s phone vibrates. He looks down to see a new email notification, a response to a job application. The message is short: *BRD Logistics has indicated that your application for Data Entry Officer is unlikely to progress further.* He puts his phone back in his pocket.

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When they reach the house, before Patrick can grope for the keys in his backpack, Hugh opens the front door, one hand holding his phone to his ear. He ruffles Slim’s head and puts his finger to his lips; gives Daisy a side-on squeeze. He holds up five fingers to Patrick and walks back into his office.

Patrick trails behind Daisy and Slim down to the living area at the other end of the house.

‘Thanks mate,’ Hugh says, coming down the hall. ‘New chick in the office. Brainless. You wonder what people have been doing all their lives. Keeping busy?’

‘Ah you know.’ Patrick says.

‘You got time for a drink?’ Hugh opens the fridge and pulls out a Heineken stubby.

‘No thanks.’ He’d given up reminding Hugh he didn’t drink. ‘Just had a coffee at Beechworth Bakery with the kids.’

Hugh leans back on the sink. ‘You need some cash for that?’

Patrick shakes his head. ‘No, no.’



Hugh takes another mouthful of beer. 'Well, it's been great. You helping out like this.'

'Not a problem.' He hands Hugh the Saab keys. 'See you next week,' Hugh squints, as if his mouthful of beer tastes bad. 'You've spoken to Mandy, right?'

'What about?'

'Oh shit man. She's got someone else arranged. For the kids. Well, I thought you knew.'

'Oh,' Patrick says.

'It's the stability she's thinking of. You know. You're welcome any time, though.' He holds out his hand. Patrick looks at it for a moment before shaking it. Hugh's hand is cool and dry.

Patrick gets into the Hyundai and drives around the corner, then pulls over. He feels strange. He has a pain in his side, which could just be the custard danish from the bakery, but he also has a sharp pain in his throat. It's ridiculous to feel like this. To feel as if he's been sacked again, except that it is never exactly a sacking, just a failure to renew—a moving along.

'Why?' He says to Mandy over the phone. It's ten pm.

'Hang on.' There's some shuffling as she moves rooms. 'Pat,' she says. 'It was never a long-term thing. I thought you understood that.'

'Sure, sure.' He says. 'But it's working fine for now, isn't it?'

She's silent on the other end. Then: 'Look. It's just this woman came up. We won't find another like her. She's perfect.'

'This is Hugh, isn't it? What's his problem? He doesn't trust me.' He's aware how petulant he sounds.

'What?'

'I know it's him.'

‘No,’ she says, finally. ‘No, Pat. It’s me.’ She sighs. ‘Hugh’s always saying you’re so good with the kids. It’s me. Don’t take it the wrong way. This girl is really everything we want, she’s got a diploma, she’s worked for years in the field. She’s qualified, she’s got a suitable car.’

*Qualified?* He thinks. Is that the problem? He’s not *qualified* to look after his niece and nephew. He bites down on a strong surge of anger. ‘Yep, ok I get it,’ he says. ‘I got to go.’

‘Pat.’

He hangs up.

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As usual, Sheynelle is running late. Patrick has been sitting in the waiting room for forty-five minutes. His time doesn’t matter, that’s the loud and clear message sent by outfits like JobsPlus. But there are no longer kids to collect, or a Saab to drive. Patrick tells himself he is done caring. The thin guy beside him is growing fidgety, though, more restless by the minute. Patrick casts a sidelong glance—an error, he realises too late, because it’s taken as an invitation to dialogue.

‘They’ve got us on a string,’ the guy mutters.

Patrick grunts at his phone in a noncommittal way. The guy has some serious nervous energy radiating from him.

‘No respect. My appointment was an hour ago.’

This guy is right. The hoops they jump through.

‘Sheynelle. You got Sheynelle too right? The fat slag.’

Whoa. ‘She’s doing her best, mate,’ Patrick says. He’s probably being overly generous to Sheynelle here, but the guy needs to rein it in.

‘Bitch,’ the thin guy hisses.

Patrick is full of regrets. He regrets being unemployed; he regrets each fortnight he must sit in this waiting room with unstable people. He regrets waiting forty-five minutes for yet another mind-numbing conversation with Sheynelle about hypnotherapy and how it could

change his life. He specifically regrets sitting down today in this precise chair without scoping out the weirdos in neighbouring chairs.

The guy is twitchy as hell.

‘You all right?’ Patrick asks quietly. He sees the receptionist throwing anxious looks in their direction. But just then Sheynelle emerges from her office, and Patrick doesn’t get a reply.

‘Geoff, come in. Be fifteen, Patrick, okay?’

The thin guy—Geoff—stands and follows her in.

Patrick zones out.

He doesn’t know how long he has been staring at the mute television, when an awareness of raised voices pricks his torpor. He stirs. Raised voices, in fact, emanating from Sheynelle’s office. The receptionist is frozen, her head turned in fright towards the noise.

*It’s not my problem, Patrick thinks. They will handle it.* But he stands up, ostensibly to stretch his legs, and he wanders down the corridor and he sees through Sheynelle’s partially closed door—*Christ*—he sees Geoff has picked up the heavy office chair with the uncomfortable ergonomic design, the chair Patrick has spent so much cumulative time sitting in—hours, days even—and Geoff is holding the chair above his head, blocking the door, blocking Sheynelle’s escape route.

Patrick looks behind him because there must be security or something. But no, just an empty waiting room, the receptionist fleeing down the opposite corridor, phone to her ear. For a second, he hovers in the doorway. He takes in the scene in its entirety, the before and after, the sadness and anger and fear. He takes in poor Sheynelle, stuck to the wall behind her desk, perspiring, with her mouth stretched into a silent O, who admittedly does go on a bit, but in no way deserves to be assaulted with an office chair. And he takes in poor Geoff, clearly a weirdo with anger issues, who is misdirecting his anger here, and

will feel no better for throwing the chair at Sheynelle—not his enemy, just the messenger—who is just doing her job under difficult circumstances. (And here, Patrick muses, Sheynelle was right after all, there is no such thing as an easy job). Geoff is at tipping point, is beyond tipping point, is now at a place where things can only end badly—but still, there are degrees of bad—and though Patrick's instinct is to retreat, he knows he must try to mitigate the unfolding badness. Underqualified, with no qualifications whatsoever, he steps into the room.

'Geoff,' he says carefully.

'Stand back,' Geoff hisses.

'Geoff. Let's put the chair down and talk about it.'

It's the wrong thing to say. 'I am *done* with talking,' Geoff screams, and Sheynelle wails too, a quavering cry behind her arms which she has raised in paltry self-protection.

'Okay. Okay.' Patrick says. 'Geoff, I get it. But this won't solve anything.'

'The fuck would you know! Shiny pants like you.'

Huh. Patrick feels a brief flutter of pleasure. He looks down at his pants. When he raises his eyes he catches sight of Sheynelle's mute terror. *Do something*, her eyes beseech him.

'Twelve fucking months coming here listening to this shit,' Geoff says. 'Do you have any idea what that's like?'

'Yes.'

Geoff snorts.

'I do know. In fact, I haven't had a job in three years,' Patrick says. 'Ask her.'

Geoff's eyes dart to Sheynelle; she nods.

Now he has Geoff's attention. 'Seriously?'

It's not entirely true. But everyone tells small lies about themselves.

'More or less,' Patrick says.

Geoff looks at Patrick, and his face moves through a range of emotions, starting with incredulity and ending in creases of concern. He appears to have forgotten he is holding a chair over his head. 'Shit, you're in a bad way mate,' he says. He lowers the chair thoughtfully to the ground. Sheynelle scampers around the desk and out of the door. Anger flares again momentarily on Geoff's face, and Patrick braces himself. But then Geoff looks tired, defeated. He grimaces and rubs his biceps, sits on the chair and puts his head in his hands.

'I guess I shouldn't have scared her like that,' he mumbles.

'No,' Patrick says. 'But, no harm done.' Not entirely true. He can hear the faint sound of police sirens approaching. He puts a hand on Geoff's shoulder and guides him gently back into the waiting room.

Geoff slumps in a chair, and Patrick sits beside him. The room feels hollowed out; the receptionist's desk is empty. Geoff puts his elbows on his knees and lets his head hang. He has crumpled, there is nothing loud or angry left inside him, just tears leaking from his eyes onto the stained carpet.

'It will be ok,' Patrick says, although Geoff is clearly a long way from ok, and they can both hear the sirens drawing closer, the sound of vehicles pulling up outside, and now blue light pulses through the high windows onto the walls and ceiling of the waiting room. 'It will be ok,' Patrick says, to himself and to Geoff, because it could have been worse. Patrick and Geoff wait together, and as they wait, Patrick's mind goes elsewhere. He sees the kids grow and advance with extraordinary speed. Slim gets slimmer, shoots up and out, and becomes a tangle of impossibly lean limbs. It's a thought he's always pushing away—a future when the kids are no longer small and no longer need his help. But now, strangely, the thought gives him hope. As they sit and wait, Patrick puts his hand on Geoff's back and rubs it.

He rubs Geoff's back in slow, firm circles, the same way he would rub Slim's back on evenings when Hugh and Mandy were late home, after he and Slim had together checked for monsters under the bed, and Slim lay belly down in his cot with the torch still gripped in his tiny hand. Those nights, he would rub Slim's back gently until his breathing calmed, and his small fingers slowly unfurled from the torch. He rubs Geoff's back, and Geoff, hunched and small, doesn't resist. 'It's going to be ok,' Patrick says.

# BREATHING ROOM

Hannah Duffus

Donna had no-one to pick her up, so the police dropped her home.

She'd have died before she let a cop in the house, and spent what felt like her last breath rejecting the young constable's offer to help her inside. By the time she reached her chair, Donna's fingernails were blue beneath their chipped layer of gold.

There had been a time when Donna hated the sight of the oxygen machine in her living room, but tonight its bright blue case and four little wheels made her want to weep with relief. The television had been sold earlier that week, and now the machine and the chair were the only objects left in the room. The *Everflo* sat at Donna's feet like a dog as she pressed the mask to her face and willed her stiff lungs to expand.

The irony of Donna's situation had not been lost on the police: seventy-two years old, dying of emphysema, and caught flogging prescription vapes to school kids. She'd heard them laughing in the corridor when they went to fetch her a cup of water. Of all the people in town, they'd said. In spite of her predicament, Donna had felt touched; it had been years since she'd thought of herself as part of the town.

Back in her one-bedroom unit, Donna felt more alone than ever. Curled in the battered leather recliner, she pictured herself cupped in the fleshy folds of a giant hand: a baby bird plucked from the pavement. She wished she could stay that way forever, still and quiet and warm. But she had to know. Breathing through pursed lips the

way the nurse had shown her, she rocked to her feet, took three quick steps across the carpet, and came to rest against the window. The *Everflo* trotted behind on its leash of plastic hose, sending out encouraging blinks of green light.

Even by the town's standards, it had been a scorcher. The glass was warm against Donna's forehead as she searched for movement in the windows of the house next door. But the small brick unit—a mirror-opposite of her own—was flat and featureless in the dark. She forced herself to take a deep breath: in through the nose, out through the mouth. The cops had taken Tala in first; surely she should be home by now.

Donna dug in her pocket for her phone. The lone conversation in her inbox was labelled ♡TALA♡. Her neighbour had set it up for her that way when she gave Donna the phone. This way we can talk, she'd said.

Donna refreshed the screen once, twice, but there were no new messages.

Tala had been coming to Donna's house after school for nearly a year when she asked about the vapes. Tala's mother, Alma, worked at a nursing home one town over. Money was tight, so she left Tala with Donna whenever she was asked to work overtime. The arrangement suited both women: Alma gained a little breathing room with Tala's private school fees, and Donna's fridge was kept topped up with foil-wrapped nursing home dinners. Plus, Donna appreciated the company; living alone was one thing, but living alone with emphysema was, frankly, shithouse.

Most afternoons, Tala collected Donna's prescriptions on the way home from school, checked her mail, and made her a cup of tea: white, two sugars. Donna watched as Tala spooned loose leaf tea into the



kettle, admiring her small, deft movements. The tremor in Donna's hands had gotten worse recently, and she couldn't even make herself a cuppa anymore without spilling tea leaves and sugar all over the laminex benchtop. Teabags just weren't the same, and she relished Tala's after-school brews.

Don't forget the biscuits, will you, love?

I won't, *opo*.

They passed a packet of Scotch Fingers back and forth across the table as Tala worked through a small mountain of homework. She planned to study medicine when she finished school, and each afternoon she spent hours at Donna's kitchen table, quietly balancing chemical equations and labelling cell diagrams behind her curtain of long, dark hair. The words *Pag may tiyaga, may nilaga* were etched into the lining of her pencil case. One evening, after Donna had read her *Woman's Day* twice cover to cover, she asked Tala what they meant.

No pain, no gain, said Tala, capping her gel pen with a small smile.

Private school fees were a slog, but Tala's steady string of scholarships and Alma's tireless work ethic had almost got them over the line. Year Nine was a low point: Alma had worked evenings at the fish and chip shop for six months so Tala could attend ski camp. The shop owner was a creep, and Alma would return home reeking of hot oil and buried fury. But Tala was in Year Eleven now, and had just secured a scholarship that would see her through her final year of high school.

It was late in the year—Term Four—when Tala entered Donna's kitchen one afternoon clutching a pair of envelopes. Addressed to THE RESIDENT(S), they were identical aside from the *a* and *b* in the address line, representing Donna's and Alma's units. Tala placed them in the centre of Donna's dining table and stood silently under

the weight of her school bag.

What you got there, love? said Donna, glancing up from *Millionaire*.

I don't know, replied Tala, twisting the crucifix that hung on a chain around her neck. There's one in every letter box.

Donna's eyes were back on Eddie. Read it for me, there's a good girl.

Tala's voice was so quiet as she read the Notice of Proposed Rent Increase that Donna had to mute the telly. The photocopied form was accompanied by a handwritten note: *Times are tough—we appreciate your understanding!* On the kitchen bench, the kettle sat cool and empty.

I don't understand. \$350 ... That's got to be ...

Twice what we pay now, said Tala. It's double.

That can't be right.

I don't know, said Tala through gritted teeth. *Times are tough*, Donna.

Eyes down, they agreed on a cuppa. They had learned enough about one another's lives to know there was no money to spare, and been raised well enough to know not to bang on about it.

The next morning, for the first time in her life, Tala failed to hand in her English homework. She, Alma and Donna had spent the previous night composing a letter to Consumer Affairs requesting an investigation into the rent increase. The block contained six units, and over the course of the evening so many neighbours dropped by to add their signatures that Donna had to resort to teabags. Someone brought a tray of *baklava*, someone else a pot of chai. It was long after midnight when Alma dried the last mug, placed it in the cupboard, and kissed her daughter on the forehead.

I'm proud of you, *iha*. We'll work it out, you'll see.

But the next day, Alma dropped by the fish and chip shop. Just in case.

It had started small. After their request for an investigation was rejected, Donna began to sell things. Tala helped her list them on Marketplace—whatever that was—and strangers came to collect them.

The kitchen cupboards were emptied first. I can't boil a bloody egg, joked Donna as she directed Tala towards a heavy Dutch oven, a wedding gift from her mother. She couldn't watch as the framed Collingwood jerseys came down. Tala lifted them from the living room walls and hid their numbers inside black garbage bags. Donna tried not to think of body bags as they were carried out.

Tala was lifting china from the good cabinet when she came across the vapes. They were still in their packaging: long, narrow boxes with pharmacy stickers on the sides. Balanced on a kitchen chair, Tala cracked one open and examined the metallic tube within.

What have you got these for, Donna?

Donna scoffed. Silly bloody things. The doctor gave me a script when I was trying to quit.

She was sitting at the kitchen table, wrapping teacups in pages from *Woman's Day*.

You know what they taste like? she said, waving a page emblazoned with Prince Harry's face. Bloody *blueberries*.

Tala giggled. You know these are illegal now. Without a script, anyway.

Are they? Well good, so they should be.

Tala stepped down from the chair clutching a vape. Donna, she said. I think I can sell these for you.

Sell them? To who?

Tala shrugged. Kids at school. They're obsessed. And these nicotine ones are hard to get.

Donna looked up at the near-empty china cabinet, then turned her attention back to Prince Harry. They're all yours, love.

Tala was a shrewd businesswoman. She enforced a strict policy of only selling to senior students, and never parted with her product on school grounds. Cash only. No IOUs. She was equally strict with Donna, who soon had second thoughts. *A Current Affair* had done a segment on vaping in schools, and it didn't sound good. When Tala placed the first crisp green banknote on the dining table next to Donna's cup of tea, Donna's cheeks flushed beneath her mask.

This feels wrong, she said.

Hmm? said Tala, opening her biology textbook.

Donna pulled down her mask. I said this feels wrong, love.

Tala shut her eyes. Donna, she said. We always do the right thing. You, me, Mum. And where does it get us, really?

Donna said nothing. She hadn't touched the Scotch Fingers.

The girl who bought from me today, said Tala, snapping a biscuit in two, will own this block of units one day. And the one down the road. She'll be right, *po*.

Before long, Donna's three-month supply of vapes had been sold. Word had gotten around that Tala could get the good shit. The doctor was bemused but compliant when Donna requested another prescription, then another. He knew from her latest respiratory function tests that she wouldn't live past Christmas—he supposed the little time she had left was hers to spend however she saw fit.

With the exception of these doctor's appointments, Tala and Donna's routine remained the same. They swang in happy orbits between tea, telly and bickies, buoyed by the secret knowledge that—for now, at least—things were okay. Donna surprised Tala one afternoon with a packet of Tim Tams. I know where to get the good shit, she winked, licking chocolate from her fingers.

Even Alma's nights spent sweating over the fryer were made

bearable by her pride in her daughter. Something about her seemed different, lately. She was calmer. Steelier. Watching Tala curled over her homework late into the night, she knew they would make it through the next year, and whatever came after that.

Term Four was winding down. Up and down the street, plastic reindeer on stakes were driven into yellowing nature strips. Donna spent long days stuck to the leather of her recliner, watching the Ashes. Truth be told, she'd never been mad about cricket. But she didn't want Tala or Alma to notice that she was finding it harder and harder to get up from her chair. The feeling was hard to describe. It was as if there was no room for the air she tried to pull into her lungs. Like tipping water into an already-full bucket; there was nowhere for it to go. These days, the red lines etched into her face by the oxygen mask never completely faded.

Tala heard Donna before she saw her. The sound was like a clogged vacuum hose. Donna lay face down on the carpet, gasping for air. Her oxygen mask was fitted, but the force of her fall had ripped the power cord from the wall. On the top panel of the *Everflo*, a red light blinked above the words ACTION REQUIRED.

Tala sat with Donna's head in her lap, straining to hear sirens over the murmur of the television. She'd turned it off when she called the ambulance, but once she'd hung up the sound of Donna's high-pitched wheeze had felt terrifyingly loud. The skin around Donna's collarbones was stretched tight as a drum, and her eyes were glassy and bulging. One of the paramedics pressed a tissue into Tala's hand before the ambulance left. She's lucky you found her, the paramedic said. Tala hadn't realised she'd been crying.

Donna was discharged from hospital the evening of the street Christmas party. They'd decided to hold it at Donna's place this year.

Though not all the neighbours knew her well, they'd all heard the sirens.

While Alma went to collect Donna, they swept through the unit like a summer storm. When they'd finished, paper snowflakes floated dreamily beneath the light fixtures and the empty china cabinet was strung with Christmas stockings. The oven was cranked despite the heat, churning out scalding trays of samosas and sausage rolls. Working on hands and knees, Tala twisted tinsel around the power cord that connected Donna's oxygen machine to the wall.

When Alma steered Donna through the kitchen doorway, the unit erupted into cheers. Donna's oxygen mask had been swapped for a nasal cannula so that her face was visible beneath her sequined Santa hat. She sat like a queen in her chair as the neighbours took turns bringing her gifts and pulling Christmas crackers. Everyone turned to watch when Donna's stocking was lifted from the china cabinet. With shaking hands, Donna unwrapped a bottle of gold nail polish and a brand new mobile phone.

This way we can talk, said Tala, typing in her number. Whenever you want. I might not be able to reply right away, but you'll always have someone to talk to.

Later that night, Donna reclined in her chair as Tala painted her nails. Laughter spilled from the kitchen where Alma was entertaining the remaining guests with tales from the nursing home. A slip of paper reading DARTH VADER was stuck in the fold of Donna's Santa hat, shyly deposited by a neighbour's child during a game of Celebrity Heads.

Listen, breathed Donna. I need you to sell the telly.

What? said Tala, looking up. Why?

Donna repeated the doctor's explanation, pausing occasionally for breath. The palliative care specialist could give her something called

Ordine: liquid morphine. It wouldn't help her breathe, nor change the fact that she would soon die. But it meant that, during the time she had left, she would be able to think of something other than securing her next breath.

I just need enough for the consult, love.

Tala protested, but Donna was firm. Don't cry, she whispered, squeezing Tala's hand. It's only the cricket.

Tala heard the ambulance half-way through her end-of-year biology exam. A hundred Year Elevens looked up from their papers as she sprinted to the front of the hall, ignoring the shocked protestations of the invigilator. She upended the plastic tub containing the students' mobile phones, sending them spilling over the sides of the desk. As soon as her fingers closed around her phone, she was running.

It wasn't until they arrived at the police station that Donna and Tala learned what had happened. The eleven-year-old sibling of a Year Twelve student had stolen her sister's vape and somehow swallowed the nicotine liquid. When she complained of nausea, her parents let her stay home from school; when she vomited a third time, they called an ambulance. It wasn't long before the doctors figured out what had happened. The police pulled up outside the block of units as Tala was beating down Donna's front door. They were driven in separate cars to the station.

The sun set blood-red that night. Curled in her chair, Donna stared at a tiny fleck of gold nail polish that had dripped and set on the leather, now set ablaze by the sinking sun. She watched as the light faded, then disappeared completely.

The police interview hadn't lasted long. Donna was too shocked to tell them anything but the truth, in as few words as possible. She hadn't left the house without oxygen in well over a year, and found

it increasingly difficult to follow the sergeant's meaning: *minor ... thousand ... okay?* She pieced together the rest from the slip of paper he handed her, listing the charges and the date of her court appearance.

Alone again in her unit, Donna thought only of Tala. She tried texting, then calling, but there was no answer. All night she crossed the carpet between her chair and the window, until she fell into a restless sleep. Donna dreamed of a baby bird calling helplessly for its mother.

Around midnight, Donna was awoken by the sound of the kettle juddering in its cradle. Her heart swelled at the sight of Tala spooning leaves into the water.

Tala, she croaked. Love.

I'm sorry, said Tala, tears leaking from her eyes. This is my fault.

No, said Donna. No.

Sitting at the kitchen table, they talked. Tala was suspended from school, but her spotless record meant the police had let her off with a warning. The eleven-year-old girl's sister had texted Tala to say she was okay. But her mother led the school council, and had made it clear that Tala would not be welcome back in the new year.

Year Twelve at a public school, murmured Donna. They'll tear you apart.

Tala gave a watery smile. I've got street cred now, don't forget.

Ha, said Donna. *Pag ti yagga ... ti yagga ...*

Tala snorted into her tea.

*Pag may tiyaga, may nilaga*, she corrected, wiping her face on her sleeve.

Just before daybreak, they saw a light flick on in the kitchen next door. Through the window, Donna and Tala watched Alma fill the kettle at the sink, the shoulders of her nurse's uniform damp from her shower-wet hair. She rested a long moment with her hands on the benchtop before she set the water boiling.



## WHERE IDLE WEEDS GROW

Natalie A. Vella

It was the season of the southwest monsoon when I found it growing out of a crack in the ground outside Aunty Edna's house on a dusty lane off Aluthmawatha Road. The wiry plant had two fern-like leaves and a thin green stem, not much taller than my index finger.

I sucked King coconut water up a straw and circled the sapling's surroundings of grit, sand and rubble. Wind-blown or dropped by a bird, the seed landed here and made itself a home.

I called out to my younger brother, Evan. He'd taken refuge from the beating sun under a neighbour's tree, bouncing his soccer ball and sulking from our recent fight.

'Come and have a look at this,' I called. I was fifteen and curious. He was thirteen and homesick for Australia.

He picked up his ball and dragged his feet across the road, sending plumes of dust that stuck to our slickened skin. He stopped, mopped the sweat from his neck and stared at my pointing finger. 'So what?'

'Look at this plant, this life, growing from nothing.' I tried to sound intelligent. Mature.

He crouched with his ball hooked under his arm, suddenly interested. 'What is it?' He appeared to be studying it.

'Dunno.'

He reached out and tugged at the plant.

'What are you doing?' My voice sounded hollow.

He looked up with a wide smirk. 'It's a weed.' He curled his fingers

around the plant and tugged with both hands. 'It doesn't belong here.' The ball slipped from under his arm and rolled down the lane.

'Stop!' I grabbed his arm, tried to pull him away.

He gritted his teeth, squishing up his whole face from wrenching the poor plant. It slipped from his hands. He fell back onto the sandy ground, small glossy leaves shredded in his palms.

'Bloody idiot. Why do you have to destroy everything?'

He sniffed his fingers. Scrunched up his nose. 'Puh. It stinks.'

'What are you doing there, men?'

I hadn't noticed Auntie Edna standing at her front gate. She had a way of sneaking up on you. Her dress, patterned gingham like Mum's tea towel, fluttered in the breeze.

'Come inside, will you? Lunch is ready.'

'He's trying to rip out a plant.'

'It's a weed,' Evan huffed.

I grabbed my brother's hand.

'Get off me.' He tried to wriggle free as I brought his hand up to my nose. It smelled strong, like curry and lemons. Puberty hadn't yet transformed his scrawny body. I dragged him, squirming, to the front gate and shoved his palm under Auntie's nose.

'What's that smell, Auntie?'

'Karapincha.'

'Karapincha?' I repeated slowly.

She held my confused gaze as if I should know the name. 'That's the Singhalese word for Curry Leaf, no? You didn't know that? I have a big tree in the backyard.'

My brother pulled his hand away and shrugged sheepishly.

'It's in all the food. Doesn't your mummy cook with it?'

I shook my head. I wanted to say Mummy doesn't cook Sri Lankan food because European Dad hates it. But I kept my mouth shut.

‘When’s Mum coming back?’ Evan asked, his tone sullen because Mum had left us, left *him* to visit a sick relative in the Hill Country for a few days.

‘Next week. Come in. Food is ready.’

I hoped it wouldn’t be the leftover chilli crab curry from yesterday—it was so hot I had to suck on ice cubes.

‘My ball,’ Evan spun around.

‘Get it later.’

As soon as they disappeared into the house, I ran to Evan’s ball and kicked it across the busy road until it popped under the wheel of a car. I returned to the plant. It didn’t belong in the crack, much like me here on my ancestor’s land. I was tired of the stares at my foreigner face, of the swollen mosquito bites engulfing my arms and legs, of the whoops of ‘Shane Warne’ from neighbourhood kids with cricket bats when they found out I was from Australia.

I sat down and crossed my legs. Plucked the smallest corner of a torn leaf from what had survived from my brother’s assault and inhaled the aroma. I sniffed until Auntie shouted at me to come inside.

The following day, with news that the JVP political party had threatened to blow up Colombo, we were forbidden to leave the house. Auntie’s miserliness kept the air conditioning switched off causing our skin to prickle from the heat. When my brother and I weren’t fighting over who would sit in front of the portable fan, we were watching Tamil soap operas we couldn’t understand or napping.

Auntie found us sprawled on our beds. ‘You want something to do? Go and get me some curry leaves from the backyard for lunch.’

Evan raced to climb Auntie’s old Curry Leaf tree she’d planted decades ago. The trunk was mottled white and bushy in parts where she’d trimmed it regularly and straggly where she hadn’t.

Evan’s legs stretched to reach the gnarled limbs. I stood at the

bottom of the five-metre tree, watching flashes of his red t-shirt disappear into the fern-like foliage. Auntie surveyed us from her bedroom window.

Small plump berries, some the colour of coagulated blood, others green and unripened, clustered at the ends of the feathered branches.

‘Catch.’

My face caught a flying berry, marking my skin with a tiny sting. ‘Watch it, will you?’ Then a rain of berries fell on my head. I picked some up from the grass. Imagined how the seed had made its way into the crack in the ground outside Auntie’s house.

I squished them between my fingers. Yellow pulp oozed out, leaving a hard pea-sized seed that I immediately flicked away. When I licked my fingers, the flavour engulfed my tongue. It was stronger than the taste of a curry leaf, more intense. I spat it out, deciding I didn’t like the taste after all.

‘Stop playing and come down now, will you?’ Auntie appeared at the bottom of the tree, her eyes slits of anger.

‘I’ve got some leaves,’ Evan called out.

That seemed to loosen the thin line of Auntie’s lips. Evan’s blue shorts appeared as he stepped down, one branch at a time, clutching handfuls of green.

‘There’s a nest.’ He stopped to peer inside. ‘Two babies. Their mouths are open.’

‘Leave it alone. Come down, now.’ The thin slits returned to Auntie’s eyes and lips.

But Evan couldn’t help himself. He was always poking and prodding, touching things he shouldn’t.

Perched on a higher branch, a small, black-crested bird squawked, a flash of red near her tail. It must have been the mama bird feeding on the red berries. I’d noticed them in the trees as the driver weaved his

tuk-tuk around potholes on the roads.

‘Leave the bird alone,’ I shouted, clueless. I braced the trunk and pulled myself up to the first branch, my feet sliding in my thongs.

Aunty held out her arms as if to catch us. ‘Both of you come down, now.’

Evan turned around to get a better look at the nest. I grabbed the edge of his t-shirt and pulled. His foot slipped. The rest seemed to happen in slow-motion as he fell to the ground. Neighbours rushed over to hear what all the crying and screaming were about. I ran inside and watched from the window, picking the skin around my fingernails.

When Mum heard what had happened, she left the Hill Country with her driver, bribing her way through road blockades to get to Aunty’s. She stormed through the door, fanning her face, and gave me a tongue lashing for causing Evan’s fall.

Of course, Evan lapped up all the attention from Mum and the neighbours with his broken arm entombed in plaster while I was sentenced to Aunty’s hot kitchen to seethe at the sizzling chatti pots spitting black mustard seeds. Aunty’s ancient *Ceylon Daily News Cookery Book* scribbled with her notes, was always close by.

Aunty tried to take the sting out of my punishment. ‘You’re a good cook.’

‘I don’t want to cook.’ Bitterness dripped from my lips.

‘I’m hungry,’ Evan called out from the bedroom where our grandfather had died several years earlier.

Aunty handed me a plate of sliced mango. ‘Go and give this to him, will you?’

‘Did ... grandpa really die in there?’ The hair on my mosquito-bitten skin bristled.

‘Many have died in this house.’ Aunty smiled at me. I realised it was

because my face had dropped. She touched my cheek with her slender hand. 'Be a good girl.'

I strolled over and dumped Evan's plate on his lap—half of his delicious mango filled my mouth. He retaliated, punching me in the guts with his able arm. I slapped him across his face. As punishment, Auntie made me handwash all her dirty underwear.

Two weeks later, we said our goodbyes and dragged our suitcases outside to wait for a taxi. Evan circled the dying plant, what was left of it. Then he squashed it with the heel of his sneakers. 'It's dead now.'

'You're a dickhead.' I shoved him square in the chest. He fell backwards, revealing smooshed green leaves on the bottom of his sneaker.

'Stop crying over that stupid weed and get in the car, will you?' Mum ordered.

It was only after I slid into the back seat that I realised my face was a flood with tears.

\*

I didn't recognise the house at first as I carried my loaded backpack up the dusty lane. Tuk tuks honking from the main road bled into the distance as I climbed the small incline, jetlagged. A new apartment building had sprung up since my last visit fifteen years earlier, shading most of the street from the relentless sun. Colourful saris and t-shirts hung from clotheslines on balconies.

I stopped in front of Auntie Edna's. Her fence was shielded by a large shrubby tree, branching three metres by three. Its umbrella-shaped canopy of glossy pinnate leaves shimmered in the warm afternoon breeze. A Bulbil perched in her nest on the top branch, drinking nectar from plumes of creamy flowers.

*It couldn't be.*

I stepped over its bulging roots. Closing my eyes, I beckoned the

memory long ago of a sapling in the crack of the pavement. The tree. It had survived. The sapling that Evan had stomped on. That I thought he'd killed.

*Evan.*

I dropped my backpack and splayed my hands on the trunk, pressing hard until the pain seared my palms and its long history written about thousands of years earlier in South Indian Tamil Sanga-era poems marked my skin.

But all I could see in my mind was Evan—who'd pulled the steering wheel from me in a fit of rage during an argument five years back. Who'd spat ugliness as our car mounted the curb and slammed into a giant gum.

I began to shake, watching the scene replay in my mind. The blood. His gasping.

I needed to climb this tree. Scale the twisted, mangled branches and inhale the leaves. Despite Evan's attempts to destroy it, despite the pollution and the dust, this tree had survived, and Evan hadn't.

'Myra. Is that you?'

I wiped the wetness from my face. I wasn't sure if it was the air, heavy with moisture, or my tears.

In her sombre kitchen painted the colour of Colombo's blue sky, Auntie Edna moved at a snail's pace between the fridge and the stove, preparing lunch. Now eighty, her eyes weren't what they used to be. The *Ceylon Daily News Cookery Book*, filled with her scrawls and decadent recipes, lay dusty on the bench.

We were preparing a simple dry curry of potatoes with a side of rice and coconut sambal for tonight. The curry leaves and mustard seeds sizzled, suffusing her kitchen with forgotten memories. I picked up a coconut, and while scraping the white flesh, I fell into the past;

to the day I picked up Evan from work. We were going to talk. Make peace after our long estrangement. But as soon as he sat in my car, our rivalry returned. He was a grievance collector, determined to collect on past grudges. As the rain pattered the windscreen, he battered me with his lies and insults. And then he—

‘Myra?’

The blade caught my hand. I winced, rubbing the near miss along my reddened skin. I looked up and saw the curry tree, the idle weed framed by the kitchen window, its distorted habit, oddly shaped, shading Aunty’s front gate.

‘Why didn’t you chop the tree down?’

A woman stopped and began cutting the tips and placing them in a plastic bucket.

‘They all love the tree, men.’ Aunty’s face caught the soft afternoon light. ‘The neighbours chop it for cooking and give it a little water. Be a sin to take it down, no? It also reminds me of Evan and your mummy.’

‘But Evan tried to kill it.’ The coconut shell fell on the floor. Mum couldn’t have cared less about the tree. I suddenly hated the tree. ‘Mum blamed me. She always blamed me,’ I spat.

‘Don’t speak ill of the dead, child,’ she scolded.

My cheeks burned as if she’d slapped me.

Aunty sat on her rickety stool, rubbing her sore legs. ‘You grow a curry leaf in Melbourne from the cuttings I gave you?’

‘They all died,’ I mumbled, still feeling stung by her scolding. I thought of Dad’s love in his final years before he died, despite losing Evan. But Mum—she blamed me for her grief. When she lay dying in the hospice, I stroked her hair and washed her face, but it was still Evan she called out to.

Tears cracked my carefully built wall.

Aunty patted my hand as if fearing she would break me.’



I wiped my face. 'I tried to grow another Curry Leaf tree. But they died.'

\*

Fifteen years had passed since the wooden slats of Auntie's mattress poked my back through the thin foam mattress. I stared at the groaning ceiling fan, churning sultry air around the bedroom. The civil war in Sri Lanka was over, but the scars were wrought on the faces of the population, the landscape of incinerated cars, the rubble buildings.

The years had stretched between visits. I'd succumbed to middle age. Aches and pains and menopause had crept up on me. Life had gotten in the way, and I realised, too late, that Auntie Edna was all I had left.

Time slowed at the height of the afternoon. She breathed softly in light sleep next to me. At ninety-five, her hair was glossy grey, her face small without her dentures. Sunken. Papery thin arms crossed over her chest.

She no longer left the house, ground fresh coconut, nor cooked in her sky-blue kitchen. Those simple tasks had faded along with her memories. Auntie muttered something so quiet the fan took it away before it reached my ears. I pulled myself up onto my elbow.

'What did you say, Auntie?' I moved in closer to read her lips.

'Raj is taking down the Curry Leaf tree.' Her voice was soft, like steamed rice.

'But why?' I stood up.

'The council ordered it.'

There were no chainsaws as I ran outside. Raj, who'd lived next door since boyhood, took an axe to the six-metre Curry Leaf tree that had branched around the fence and smothered the front gate. Its roots had widened cracks, lifted old pipes and started throwing out suckers that would one day grow into new trees, uprooting the newly sealed road. For a moment, I saw a flash of Evan's blue shorts near the top

of the canopy, and my breath caught in my throat. Then he was gone.

The neighbours gathered to watch. To mourn. Its loss lined their faces. Lined mine. My stomach twisted like the bulging roots. For a handful of the crowd, it was a weed that should be removed. Others enjoyed the food source. But most relished the community around the tree. Neighbours from nearby apartments without gardens had nurtured and loved the tree.

Two men approached and pulled on Raj's axe handle, begging him to stop cutting. The tree had fed them and provided branches for their children to climb.

'But it's blocking the gate,' Raj pleaded. 'It's tearing up the road, and the council says it has to go.'

I shouted at Raj to stop cutting. But it was too late. Some wept as the branches fell. Others stacked the leaves into their arms to take home. I took a few branches inside.

I found Auntie lying on the floor. The neighbours helped me move her to the bed, and I called for a doctor. Her breathing turned ragged.

I pulled up a chair. Held her hand. 'The tree is gone, Auntie.'

People stood nearby, praying.

'Did I tell you? I grew a Curry Leaf tree in Melbourne from the last cutting you gave me. I thought it had died, but it was only sleeping. It bounced back one spring. All it needed was a warmer spot.'

Her breathing slowed the same way I'd watched Evan's breathing slow in the tangled wreck of my car. He was slumped over the dashboard, bleeding. Staring at the minor scratches to my head with his battered eye. We were alone. I could have pulled him from the wreck and called the ambulance straight away. He was still breathing. But I waited. I watched him and waited until his chest stilled.

Auntie struggled for air. I held out the branches of the Curry Leaf tree. Held her recipe book. Read lists of ingredients from strange,

old-world recipes. Then her eyes opened, sharp and alert, and she turned to me, 'Evan, go and get me some curry leaves from the tree, will you?' Her watery eyes held my gaze as her last breath left her body.

## POETRY

*Our Father in Heaven*

L. Beloved

*A Successful Life*

Charity A. Milne\*

*Red*

Shannon McCarthy

*Woman in Her Father's Coat*

Jan Price

*Marked by Opposite Extremes*

Laura Moller

*If Snow Fell*

J. E. Rudd

*Poetry Winner*

*Our Father in Heaven* by L. Beloved—This poem perfectly catches a moment of despair, and the struggle to find both meaning and solace. The imagery is strong, and the poem makes some profound observations about finding signs when we look for them and the tricks our minds play on us.

*\*Arts Assist Local Encouragement Award*

# OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

## L. Beloved

Before I start, I should note that I am no longer religious.

The path to God always reeked of desperation.

I will admit: I would never have put up my hands to pray if

I wasn't covered in it myself.

It didn't matter who was out there as long as someone was listening.

I was drowning, flailing my arms helplessly above water  
in a final attempt at salvation.

I needed some sort of a higher power to reach out to.

I needed someone to cling to.

Maybe God. Maybe my father.

Here's the thing: If you stare at a blank wall long enough,  
your mind starts to play tricks on you.

The shadows dance, the colours shift,

the nothingness wraps around you like a blanket of sickly comfort.

If you ask for a sign, you seek it out everywhere.

A blue butterfly, a yellow heart,

a pair of kind eyes.

In fact, if you ask for a sign, you'll take what you can get.

You are already doomed.

No, no, you are desperate.

But maybe that's the same thing.

He loves me. Of course, he loves me.

I was sitting on an orange-tiled bathroom floor,  
the tears already dried up on my face.  
But the ache was still so sharp in my chest that  
I was afraid I would find an open wound there if I looked.  
The world outside went on as it had,  
and it didn't make sense to me.  
Everything was there,  
except for all that wasn't.  
Except for all that I had lost.

Before I end, I should note that there is nothing religious about suffering.

But the two are so tied it's hard to tell them apart.  
I sat there on the floor, an invisible pool of blood around me, and  
I tried to find meaning in the sink,  
in the drops of water that dripped from it.  
I was young and desperate and drowning.  
I needed sturdy arms around my tired limbs  
and a steady voice guiding me to the light.  
I needed something divine and parental,  
carrying me out of the bathroom and pulling me out of the water.  
I needed someone.

Maybe God. Mostly my father.  
But neither speak to me anymore.

# A SUCCESSFUL LIFE

Charity A. Milne

A woman blinks  
rubs her tired eyes  
cracks her worn knuckles  
and goes back to type, type, typing on her high-end computer.  
Her shoulders are sore  
and she's eager to go home  
to her kids, to her dog, to her two-story, large backyarded, suburban  
house  
but not eager to be back here, at her desk  
12 hours later.  
She wonders as she types, types, types the hours away  
when did this happen?  
When did she get stuck, in this repetitive, 'Groundhog Day'-esque life?  
She asked herself the question yesterday  
she'll probably ask herself again tomorrow.  
It's been a few minutes since she cracked her knuckles, she cracks them  
again  
The woman keeps  
type, type, typing.

A younger woman sits,  
alone, in her apartment, at her tiny desk  
under the guise of touching up her resume.

In actuality, her resume is perfect  
any desk job she applies to  
is pretty much secured.  
The degree she worked  
so very hard for  
highlighted proudly at the top.  
But before she clicks, clicks apply  
to the many, repetitive options  
She hesitates.  
Is this really what she wants?  
No one answers, except  
the ding of her email.  
Rent is due in a few days.  
The younger woman shrugs, and clicks, clicks apply  
and is soon sitting at the same desk,  
click, clicking 'accept',  
to a job that is the best  
out of the many, repetitive options she has.

A younger, teenage girl,  
sits at the family dinner table  
her mother secure by her side  
as they scroll together through university options.  
"You can be anything you want to be",  
her mother says.  
The girl smiles, responds  
"I know that"  
and searches up the average salary  
of every job that she thinks she could maybe, probably be okay at.  
The options are limited, and not very appealing



but, the girl is 18 now, and thinks that that  
is probably just how life goes.

An even younger, gap-toothed girl  
Laughs,  
And plays,  
And dreams.

One moment she's an astronaut, jumping through space,  
The next she's a doctor, band-aid-ing away peoples' hurts.  
The world is at her fingertips, and she is not afraid.  
She is five (and three quarters), and is not afraid  
To be anything she wants to be.

RED

Shannon McCarthy

Our tiny cabin, my light my heart my home

At the forest's edge.

Mother's arms. The safe place. Tired eyes and apples and fear.

Always fear.

Fear the forest, fear the dark, fear them sniffing at the door

*sniffing circling waiting*

Sharp knife, light the fire, bar the door.

But somehow, I grew unafraid—

torn hems grazed knees faster than the boys killed a rabbit

first blood on my hands

My shiny golden heart. I want to be brave

For her. Mother so afraid trying to hide it. But then—

Fever cough. Death knocking. She sent me to grandma's. No choice.

[Truly]

I was not afraid

I should have been.

Thick canopy of leaves, sparkles of sunlight on my crimson cloak

A muddy old path. I lingered.

Seduced by trees grass sunlight breeze flowers

Sun falling, suddenly cold

*fresh meat prize hunger*

Then them

the stories were true

Claws digging my soft flesh  
 Wet teeth dripping is it my blood

*keep whole for pack-feast*

Dragged from sweet grass and dappled light  
 Thrashing in wolf-man arms, I lost my knife  
 Tossed me before the fire on my knees in the mud  
 Cloak torn from shaking thin shoulders

*waiting hunger waiting hunger*

Cold shivering time to die rip me apart flesh and bones  
 no

Up onto my feet shaking

*fighting exciting*

Hunger in yellow eyes thinking

*keep pup grow eat later better*

Didn't die

sometimes wished it

Years.

Cold bones sweat work tears alone skinning rabbits  
 Men cursed by the bite

*pain stop forgetting*

Yellow eyes, fighting desire for my flesh

*scent hunger can't*

Tried to escape run again caught again punished again  
 broken by trying [hope]

Losing time. Losing mother. Losing myself.

I must try to remember who I am.

No more tears Mother's girl no longer

no more fear

become the beast

On my knees in the mud in the forbidden dark

Found my knife, lost no longer

*beast-pup how*

Sticky blood, warm flesh sagging, skin myself a pelt-cloak

better than rabbits

Until it was just me the stars the fire cooked flesh and my knife

Fill my belly with beast-flesh

Fear no more

*I am the beast.*

# WOMAN IN HER FATHER'S COAT

Jan Price

You land on my doorstep  
in a box  
disguised in outdated newspaper  
a second-hand envelope  
a new stamp over old  
and a foreign address scribbled through  
above my spider-swept name below  
with no return address.  
I pull off the pinned note  
from the coat you always wore  
and it says you're dead  
signed by a woman in violet  
texta with an exotic name  
so I hang you from the hook  
on the back of my back door  
and punch you  
in the heart  
but you don't fall  
so I plead you by the cuffs  
and scream *'Why did you leave  
without me!'*  
their threads catch my nails  
tangle my fingers I drag back

to leave you behind  
and by the way  
your dropped shoulders don't fool me.  
I snatch you from the hook  
shove my arms through your arms  
pull your buttons right through  
anchored loose at their shanks  
then see them  
mended with red thin cotton.  
I snap your saluted collar up  
but feel its protection against insult  
plunge my fists into your pockets  
daring a *miss you* word on note-scrap  
but find a seashell that I hold  
to an ear like a child with a smile  
after hearing the wind lift the waves  
I need to throw it back into an ocean  
to stop its spirit corroding.  
And in the other pocket  
among a scattering of brittle crumbs  
a handful of bread tags.  
I reach for a needle and hover over  
shades of wild camel cotton to match  
but my right hand chooses red.

# MARKED BY OPPOSITE EXTREMES

Laura Moller

I started forgetting. That was the first blanket of concern.  
Wrapped around my shoulders.  
Time stretched like warm toffee, stuck. Where did my weekend go?  
Another layer.  
I wandered the streets, air shimmering with the unreality of a plastic bubble.  
A cling film sheen.

The blanket stretched and covered the sun.  
Or perhaps I retreated beneath the mothball warmth.  
My world shrunk.  
A thread unravelled to fibre.  
Shapeless.

Can't touch. Those clothes. This room, too small, too bright.  
Not safe.  
The meds do nothing, but I want out.  
Cigarette smoke clings to me. Their currency, their threat of riot.  
I never liked the smell.

Time.

Cling film rips. Plastic bubble cracks.  
Better?  
I thought so.

I fashioned my blankets into a cape.  
I could do anything. Fly?  
Tasting colours, feeling thoughts, never so alive.  
Inhibition rushed through my hands.  
Joy bloomed a wealth in wildflowers.  
It was a lie.

I woke up one day, blanket crumpled on the floor.  
Filled with holes I hadn't noticed.  
I left it there.

You feel entirely too far, they said.  
Below the earth, above the sky.  
We must anchor you somehow.  
I smiled. I'd had quite enough of space.  
Light on oxygen.

Knowledge is treatment is stability.  
I took it as a shield.  
And started knitting my own blanket.  
Knot by knot.  
Line by line.

People say they knew me.  
I weave pain with joy.  
Strong fabric.  
It blends together admirably.

I tear up the old blanket. A backyard fire, flames are warm.  
Faces smile, laughter, chilled evening air.  
Watch us warm the world a little.



# IF SNOW FELL

J. E. Rudd

If snowflakes fell in colours  
I'd catch a blue  
for the winter sky  
cobalt  
clear.

And an orange  
for that streak  
along the snowgum's trunk.

A silver for glistenings.

For the mountains' folds  
a green so deep they turn black blue  
bending trees to dense and darkened shapes  
that have no definition.

I'd reach for a bright light green for the spread of sphagnum moss.

Gold for the burnt brass of yellowed grass  
that spikes like whiskers  
from beneath  
flakes that fell before.

Pink for high plain heath  
and the lone wild orchid in spring.

Grey for boards on huts  
weathered too long  
smoothed to slate.

Red for the wings of a parrot King.

If snow fell in colours  
I'd ski through a rainbow wall of ribbons  
that ran before me  
forever  
down.

If snowflakes came in colours  
I'd catch a bunch  
a beanie full  
to keep till Christmas  
then all through the summer long.

## FLASH FICTION

*Lemon Coloured Envy*

Doug Wroe

*The Ocean and Her Revenge*

Briana Pruscino\*

*Word Count*

Matthew Mostovac

*Sleep, Perchance to Dream*

Pauline Cleary

*You Turned Fifty*

Scott Hoffman

*Hearts*

Susan Yardley

*Flash Fiction Winner*

*Lemon Coloured Envy* by Doug Wroe—A clever and astute glimpse at the vagaries of a writers' group where personalities clash and the masterful one wins over all the others. The story is an ironic juxtaposition of a crisply written story lamenting the point-of-view's character's lack of writing talent.

*\*Arts Assist Local Encouragement Award*

# LEMON COLOURED ENVY

Doug Wroe

James was beginning to dislike the enthusiastic writing group member sitting opposite him at the rickety table. His name was Patrick and the bastard wrote beautifully, like saffron across a sunset. His characters bounced off a page and were vulnerable and real. He was so accomplished at his craft that it made James dissolute with envy.

The countless writing workshops James had undertaken had no impact on his written output. A three-year part-time editing and publishing course accounted for zero as the words rolled out onto the page. A mass of staid barely coherent squiggles, a style better suited to directions on a packet of frozen peas.

Patrick soared like Icarus as the other group members floundered, earthbound extolling the virtues of a missing cat, a missing love, and in James' case missing talent. Patrick used words James had never heard before as they were placed perfectly on a page linking characters together with subplots and intrigue. Even his full stops were like black pearls from the deepest of oceans, giving pause to another beautifully crafted sentence. Unlike James, who was always reluctant to read his work to the group as his prose only confirmed his minuscule talent and his frustration at being ordinary.

James often wondered if it was Patrick's Irish brogue and the reassuringly dishevelled appearance that made him so charming to the group. Member Kathy Masters was particularly smitten and had started wearing make-up and her corporate suits complete with

killer high heels to meetings. Her crumpled tracksuit with permanent coffee stains now relegated to the bottom of her washing basket. Even crusty stalwarts like Jean Saunders were under his spell as she raised no objection to him tampering with the air conditioning controls on hot nights.

Group leader Rob Barton had relented some of his control of meetings since Patrick had started to bring in surplus lemons from home for the group. This was a moot point with James who had clashed with Rob on occasions regarding coffee cups. Patrick was quite happy to leave his in the sink and have Jean clean up as he held court at the front gate after meetings. He had even started to be driven home by Kathy Masters who had let it slip she was having relationship problems.

'Good bit of prose tonight James,' remarked Patrick. Trying to catch James's eye as he stormed out of the front gate angry at the world.

'Really,' he stammered.

'Yep, you write well. Your character development is very advanced.' James was speechless.

'Your story on beekeeping was captivating. I have been meaning to tell you but you leave so quickly.'

'I just need to get home,' James lied. There was no one there not now anyway.

'Do you want to do the pub one night and chew the fat for a couple of hours?'

'You Sure?'

'Absolutely! By the way, could I get a lift home?'

'Oh! Yeah. Sounds good,' replied James, a bag of lemons in his hand.

# THE OCEAN AND HER REVENGE

Briana Pruscino

You see something in the water.

You had heard the myths but seeing it with your own eyes freezes your heart. You grip the fishing rod as if it might save you. As if it's a sword.

You see a creature with grey scales. Eyes yellow. Black teeth bared. It resembles a woman, but barely.

You see a monster and realise it's too late.

You see *me* and I almost feel sorry for you. I know you're a good man. Just a boy, really. But that doesn't matter.

Your brother is who I really want.

He's the one who made me like this. A monster born from revenge.

Before this, I was just a daughter who lived in a lighthouse. Innocent for the most part, although raised by a madman who enjoyed yelling and breaking things.

My father was the first man I killed.

That's another story though.

Your brother found me alone on the beach one night. It was a full moon. I liked sitting on the sand. Feeling the grains between my toes.

When I first saw him in the pale light, I thought he was handsome. He had the kind of face that was rare in this town. Skin not yet weathered by the sea breeze.

I lifted my hand to greet him.

He hit me on the back of the head with a piece of driftwood.

I screamed but the waves drowned out any noise.

Your brother hurt me. Defiled me. It was so painful. At that moment I decided I didn't like the beach anymore. I didn't like how rough it was beneath me. How it cut into my back as your brother violated my body.

He left me there in the bloody sand. He left me there for dead.

It would have been easier to wish for death.

Instead, I was angry.

I was filled with a tempest of hate and regret. How dare my life be taken away from me already? I was barely a yet woman. I had years left. I was supposed to run away from this place and *live*.

I knew of the story. About the Ocean granting wishes. Everyone in town did.

As I lay there dying, I wished for power. Wished for the strength that had been ripped away from me.

The Ocean heard.

When Her saltwater caressed my fingertips, I transformed.

I had been hoping for a fairytale, but it was a nightmare.

My skin turned to scales. My nails turned to talons. My hair turned to seaweed.

I became a beast of the Ocean with the voice of a siren.

I began taking back the men with evil in their souls. There are many in this town. I lure them to the gulf and tear out their hearts, gifting them to Her.

I've started to enjoy the look in their eyes when they realise what's happening. I enjoy the taste of their blood. Their flesh between my teeth. Their intestines beneath my claws.

After watching you, I almost hoped that I wouldn't have to kill you. I thought you might have been my saviour with that sword of yours. There's something romantic about it, isn't there? A beautiful boy saving the girl.

But I don't want to be a girl anymore.

I hope you understand why I must do this. Perhaps your brother will finally return.

You look at me with such fear, but that's all right. I felt the same when the Ocean first took me.

I promise I'll make it quick.



## WORD COUNT

Matthew Mostovac

You rummage through old milk crates full of words you haven't seen in years: *suspend*, *wasted*, *resemblance*. Your hands are shaking, you can hardly read the words as they blur, flipping through your fingers.

Your friend disappears amid the fervent neighborhood dwellers and bargain hunters. You don't care—you've found a crate labelled: free to good use. It's packed full of still very usable words like *weeping*. You snatch them and congratulate yourself for arriving early.

Around you, people carry cardboard boxes and wheel shopping trolleys stacked full of words they haven't used since high school. They may be frayed and bent like old vinyl record sleeves, but they're the real deal, printed on cream card with a stamp in the bottom right corner.

With these originals organised in your garage, no random audit can startle you. You'll have the sleep of your life. You'll show these relics to your kids who'll have never heard them said aloud. You'll recite whole movies and impress people at parties.

Your friend waits in line at the prize wheel in the garage. It's their turn. They drop fifty cents in the bucket, spin the wheel and—hooray!—they win *fumble*. You've never seen a smile so big.

You find the three-for-a-dollar crate. These ones are good: *gamble*, *cake*, *squirt*. How did you ever live without these gems? Pile, pile, into your arms, into your jacket pockets, flick, flick through the crate.

Someone behind you says this is criminal. Your ears perk up. You know *criminal* isn't on the base plan. Base plan only has ten thousand

words and *criminal* isn't one of them.

'What's so \_\_\_\_ about this?' you ask.

'What's so what?'

'You said this is so \_\_\_\_.'

He explains, and it's clear he's on unlimited: 'Formally such a gathering would be coordinated and structured. Now any degenerate can host a cleansing and round up the remainder of the neighbourhood pigs to feast on their leftovers.'

You turn away wondering if the word *pompous* might be here.

You find the homeowner, hand over twenty-five dollars and walk out with a garbage bag full of goodies. Your friend loads up the wagon, jams the door shut and dusts their hands for emphasis.

You think of asking if they found *master*, or *mental*, but it'd be better not to risk disappointment.

In the passenger seat on the drive home you call your mum to tell her what you got. She doesn't understand because she's on premium.

You tap in to your phone, because temptation is still there. A sale is on at the moment: pay twelve months up front to get thirteen percent off premium. Subscribe now. You roll back your head and lock the screen.

A small consolation is that tomorrow is rotation day. The next round will be out. You haven't said some of these since the beginning. *Enlivened. Transparent.*

You wish just once they would release the big ones. *Voice. Expression. Reason.* Couldn't they stream them for just a few seconds? Just enough time to shout them to the sky and hear them roll over the hills.

That won't happen.

You pass a billboard that says next week for a limited time only, *joy* is coming out of the vault.

# SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM

Pauline Cleary

It's two in the morning and here I am again, awake and prowling the house like a banshee in a horror story. This problem with getting to sleep has bugged me my whole life. I blame it on my older cousin and a story she used to tell me as a kid.

It was one of those scary stories that stay in your mind, especially on very dark nights when you lay in bed and the house seems to creak and groan. It starts with a kid waking up and hearing the front door open and footsteps begin slowly ascending the stairs.

I remember looking up at my cousin as she whispered, 'Step by step, closer and closer they came' and I shook in terror, waiting for some horrible apparition to emerge and seize me. Not that it ever came to that. Every time, she got to this part, my mum would come flying in and yell at her for scaring me. My cousin would retreat to her own room but not before sending me a gleeful smile as she disappeared.

I'm thirty now and live alone and every night is the same. I toss and turn, unable to fall asleep. I've tried having a regular bedtime routine, soft lighting and music, meditation. Sleeping tablets don't work for some reason. I tend to sleep in stops and starts and consequently I'm tired and grumpy a lot of the time.

It's my next-door-neighbour who tells me about the woman two doors down who's some sort of healer.

'A bit of a miracle worker,' she says. 'Fixes all sorts of illnesses. Or phobias.'

It takes me a while but I'm desperate, so after a week or so, I knock on her door.

A quite-ordinary-looking woman in her fifties answers. Doesn't look like a healer.

I ask if she helps people with sleeping problems and she nods, listens as I tell my story. She asks me inside, dives her hand into a drawer in a small table near the door.

She passes me a single pink tablet.

*Ha, I think. As if—*but I pay her the \$100 she asks for—*steep or what?* I go home, sure that I've been had.

I wait till midnight to even go to bed. I'm angry at myself for being so easily hoodwinked and I'm tired and lethargic as well.

It's only when I'm in bed that I remember the tablet. I get up, retrieve it from the pocket of my jeans and turn it over and over in my hand. So I won't think about it anymore, I swallow it in one gulp and climb back into bed. I'll read—till morning if necessary.

I'm on to my second page when a sweet lethargy creeps over me. My body feels soft, floppy. I am sinking into the bed. I feel dreamy, floating on a gentle cloud. My eyelids are heavy. It's an effort to keep them open. The book slips from my grasp, falls to the floor.

My eyes are closing.

It is in that moment that I hear it.

The faint click of the latch on my front door and the soft tread of a footstep on the stairs.

# YOU TURNED FIFTY

Scott Hoffman

You turned fifty yesterday, but the party is today. After birthday lovemaking your wife tells you that age is all in your head but the grey hairs that flow over and under her fingers as she strokes your chest say otherwise. She adds, tongue very much in cheek that you're still a stallion and you both laugh. She is six years older and your response that the old grey mare is not what she used to be is received in kind. You love each other still, somewhat a miracle in your circles.

Her support helped make you a big success early, first in your own business and later after a well-timed sale (timing is everything), CEO of the division and coming last month, the offer of a seat on the board. It doesn't matter now though. The Board insisted on a medical before joining. Not your doctor, one the company use. Just routine, until he feels the lump on your testicle. Further tests say there is more cancer in you. So no board position for you, buddy. The board already knows so you need to tell her. But the party is today.

Tell her after the party or before? When you stand in the shower and luxuriate in the stream of hot water beating on you from a showerhead that is criminally not water saving you can't decide. You reflect that the bathroom renovation cost you the best part of \$120,000. And for what? Suddenly it all seems so pointless. And that is why she finds you sitting on the floor of the shower crying, the showerhead beside you where it fell after you wrenched it from the fitting. And you go through it there on the bathroom floor.

Explain how together you have an appointment on Monday with the specialist. How the odds look ok but not great. She seems to simultaneously shrink and grow. Her body hitches in time with yours as you hug but it feels different somehow.

She knows you though.

‘Well let’s stop feeling sorry for ourselves and get moving then,’ and she passes you a towel. Then she says, ‘And today, what are we going to say today?’

‘Nothing,’ you reply. She nods and says, ‘Good.’

You dry the body that you now feel has betrayed you, forgetting all the good times you’ve had together.

You put on your new glasses. You notice your hair is thinning and the brush’s bristles are wrapped in a spider’s web of hair confirming it. Even though some of your friends and colleagues have scalps that were clear felled of hair years ago you were in no hurry to join them. Chemo will change that.

You dress and go downstairs. She is in the kitchen loading the dishwasher. She needs you to pick up the meat, scoop the leaves out of the pool and show the barman where to set up.

You turned fifty yesterday but the party is today.

# HEARTS

Susan Yardley

I follow my father along the sand, placing each small, bare foot inside the soft hollows left by his boots. I stop to pick up a seashell, shaped like a tiny, white heart.

‘Look Daddy!’ I call into the wind.

But he doesn’t turn around, his shoulders hunched against the dying light, hurrying onto the old pier where my mother liked to fish.

We sit together, our legs dangling over the side and as the sun slips away, scatter her ashes into the darkening sea.

The waves take her.

I press the heart shaped shell into my father’s trembling hands.

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

### **L. Beloved**

Born in Nigeria but growing up traversing the globe, Lois is a medical student, teacher and amateur artist. When she's not surrounded with words or covered in paint, you can find her cooking, reading comic books, riding her bike around town or spending far too much time on her computer.

### **Pauline Cleary**

Pauline Cleary lives in northern Victoria and is a keen short story writer. She writes children's stories and dabbles in poetry. She has stories in several anthologies and has won the Stringybark Short Story Competition twice. She is a keen member of a local writers group and loves sharing writing.

### **Hannah Duffus**

Hannah is a teacher and aspiring writer living on Peek Whurrong Country (Warrnambool, Victoria). She writes her stories in the silent hours before sunrise at a desk overlooking the ocean.

### **Scott Hoffman**

Scott Hoffman loves to read and write. He thought that you needed credentials or permission to write. His wife said that was ridiculous, his musings were as good or as bad as anyone's and he should have a crack. He also likes gritty streets and a clean ocean.



**Katy Knighton**

In 2021 Katy won the Peter Cowan Novice Award. Since then she has been shortlisted for a Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Award, published in *Overland* (online), and longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and Furphy Literary Award. She will have stories in two forthcoming anthologies, *ACEIV* and *Strangely Enough*.

**K. E. Lata**

Karen was born in Geelong, Vic and lives there with her husband, children and extended family. Her writing reflects her fascination of family dynamics, relationships and what makes people tick. Despite writing stories and journals all her life, she only began submitting stories in 2023.

**Shannon McCarthy**

Shannon is an endocrinologist currently living and working in Geelong. A lifelong lover of storytelling in all forms, she is completing a BA at Macquarie University in her "spare time". Her Creative Writing tutor will be thrilled to hear that she was brave enough to submit this work.

**Catherine McElroy**

Catherine McElroy writes flash fiction and short stories. She has been published in *Island*, and online at *Barren Magazine*, *Ellipsis Zine* and *Empty House Press*. She lives in Bendigo, on Dja Dja Wurrung land.

**Charity A. Milne**

Charity is a casual writer trying to procrastinate studying for her year twelve sacs and exams.

**Laura Moller**

Laura grew up in tropical Darwin, before making Melbourne her home 10 years ago. She's always loved writing poetry and the fun of occasionally snapping the rules of language. She proudly identifies as queer and

disabled (bipolar disorder). Her day job is in digital accessibility (making websites/apps easy to use).

### **Matthew Mostovac**

Matthew Mostovac has a degree in literature and philosophy. His fiction, *Highly Evolved Creatures Talk To Me*, was featured in *Montreal Writes*. He lives in Melbourne with his partner and their foster rabbit.

### **Jan Price**

Jan's poetry has appeared in literary and university journals, newspapers, magazines, radio, funeral booklets, road signs, in Australia, the UK and across America. Her artwork has been featured on literary covers and postcards. Jan loves entering Open Mic Sessions and poetry competitions which she occasionally wins.

### **Briana Pruscino**

Briana Pruscino, an aspiring writer, has a passion for crafting magical and eerie stories in her spare time. She enjoys myths and fairytales, drawing inspiration for her storytelling. When she's not writing, she works as a Legal Assistant and resides in Wyndham Vale with her fiancé and cherished pup, Daisy.

### **Aelius Ray**

Aelius Ray writes a variety of genres from fantasy and horror to modern day romance, mainly in YA or middle grade. Their biggest inspirations are their cat, Pebbles, their friends, *One Piece* and *God of War*. More about their writing can be found on their card at <https://aeliusray.carrrd.co/>

### **J. E. Rudd**

Jan Rudd is a Melbourne writer and psychotherapist raised on a farm in rural Victoria. She holds qualifications in creative writing and child psychoanalytic psychotherapy. She has published poetry, had scripts and

award-finalist plays performed, and writes short fiction. She is currently completing a memoir related to intimate-partner homicide.

### **Natalie A. Vella**

Natalie A. Vella is an award-winning writer and a graduate of the Professional Writing and Editing degree at RMIT. Natalie's fiction has been awarded prizes in Apollo Bay WordFest, the My Brother Jack Awards and the Furphy Literary Award twice. Her podcast, *Memoria*, was a finalist in the Australian Podcast Awards.

### **Doug Wroe**

After spending more than 30 years working in education local writer Doug Wroe is enjoying the creative rush not found when writing endless school reports. He has flourished since joining his local writing group. Doug enjoys writing Australian-themed short stories of hardship, loss, and humour.

### **Susan Yardley**

Susan Yardley writes short stories, screenplays and YA fiction. Her work has appeared in various anthologies. In 2015 she was shortlisted for both the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Bridport Prize. She currently has a feature film script in pre-production with Unicorn Films and is working on a second novel.

# WYNDHAM CITY LIBRARIES *Present*

## The short-listed entries from the Wyndham Writing Awards 2023

THE THREE CATEGORIES ARE:  
Short Story • Poetry • Flash Fiction

"It was an honour to judge the Wyndham Writing Awards. It was my job to find the top pieces in each category of poetry, flash fiction and short story. Each judge will look for different things but what I am looking for are stories or poems that move me as a reader. I am looking for evidence that the writer is refining technique, that they understand story structure, that they are experimenting with language and imagery, and that they are using description to further the story or create atmosphere, rather than just including it for its own sake. In short, I want to feel like I am in safe hands when I settle down to read."

**Vikki Petraitis : Judge, Wyndham Writing Awards 2023**



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