



WYNDHAM
WRITING
AWARDS
Anthology
2021



SHORT STORY
POETRY
FLASH FICTION

Wyndham City Libraries
Wyndham Writing Awards Anthology 2021

Short Story
Poetry
Flash Fiction

Proudly funded and supported by Arts Assist



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Wyndham City Council recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Custodians of the lands on which Australia was founded. Council acknowledges the Wathaurong, Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which Wyndham City is being built. Council pays respect to the wisdom and diversity of past and present Elders. We share commitment to nurturing future generations of Elders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

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INTRODUCTION

As Wyndham's Learning City Portfolio holder, I am proud to showcase the outstanding creative talents of our community through the 'Wyndham Writing Awards Anthology'.

From over 400 entries, the shortlisted and winning entries presented here illustrate the beauty and power of words.

Hidden in the pages of this collection are extraordinary worlds and characters that evoke the unlimited potential for imagination and inspiration on the printed page, and communicate the vitality and diversity of our City.

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

From prose to poetry great written works resonate with us. They challenge us.

They reveal insights about ourselves and provide a window to a larger world.

Wyndham City Council is proud to play its part in developing the next generation of readers and writers.

By sharing the joy of reading and writing with our residents – and children in particular – we make a vital investment not only in their future, but also in Wyndham's growth and prosperity.

I am delighted to share with you this dynamic expression of our community's spirit. I hope you will love it as much as I do.

Councillor Jasmine Hill, Wyndham City Council

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

It was a joy to be the judge for the Wyndham Writing Awards 2021. The longlisted submissions were diverse in terms of the themes they address. I read works about feminism, plants and old age among various other subjects. Despite this diversity, I did notice a high volume of speculative works that told of such things as ghosts or rebellious apps or (delightfully familiar) fairytale characters. I can't help but think that this trend has something to do with current times where we battle a pandemic and an environmental crisis in tandem, and so possibly are more than ever in need of some escapism. (In fact, one story explicitly described a pandemic, albeit a worse than the one we are facing.) There were excellent works in the longlists and making choices was difficult, so I want to congratulate all the longlisted authors and thank them for the pleasure their words have given me.

Lee Kofman

SHORT STORIES

Artifact

Lindsay T. Hocking

Home by 7

Elizabeth Gonzalez*

A Point in Time

M. Elisabeth Bridson

Small Town Ghosts

Melanie Kanicky

Henry's Interview

Karen Wasson

Short Story Winner

Artifact by Lindsay T. Hocking — *Artifact* is an inventive, entertaining and philosophical-speculative exploration of where our tech-savvy humanity is heading. It has a taut narrative, full of surprises, and a satisfying resolution, which made me think of the film I love, *The Truman Show*. Not only is this story well plotted, it is also atmospheric, told in a powerful voice, with great energy and flair. I hope to see more work from this promising author.

**Arts Assist Local Encouragement Award*

ARTIFACT

Lindsay T. Hocking

Hogwood Bagshaw was right in the middle of shaving his chin when his reflection disappeared. He blinked hard, opened his eyes wide and peered closely at the bathroom mirror, but the reflection stubbornly failed to return.

He put his razor down, wiped the surface of the mirror with a hand-towel, felt his face and peered again. Not only did the reflection still fail to reappear, but his shadow vanished as well. He could see the rest of the room reflected in the mirror, but not himself, and when he moved his hand near the wall it was as if the light was passing straight through him.

‘What on earth?...’ he muttered, and he patted his face and body to make sure he was actually there. He could see and feel himself, but when he looked again there was still no reflection or shadow of himself to be seen.

He thought he might be having a stroke and started to panic a little, so he called out to his wife, ‘Zelda! Can you come here for a minute?’ But she didn’t answer, so he called again, louder, ‘ZELDA!’ Again there was no response.

He leaned forward and put his face closer the mirror, and as he did, parts of the bathroom started to vanish, including his razor and toiletry bottles. He staggered back in amazement and cried out, ‘Good Lord, what’s happening here? ZELDA!’

With his panic rising, and feeling weak in the knees, he stumbled into the bedroom expecting that Zelda may have had her head inside the hair-styling bubble and not able to hear him, but she wasn’t there. Instead, there was a shortish man in a pair of white coveralls walking around and pointing at various items in the room with a strange looking device. The man pointed it at an ornate vase and tapped some buttons on the top of the device, and the

vase disappeared in a strange, blurry kind of way.

'Who are you?' shouted Hogwood, 'Why are you here, what are you doing, and where's my wife?'

The man turned, raised his eyebrows and said, 'Ah, Mr. Hogwood Bagshaw, the male artifact. Hi, I'm "Progmem Dash Articlaime Dot App". Sorry for the delay but I'll get to you in a minute.' He turned away and resumed his activities, making a pair of Hogwood's trousers blur out of existence, along with the antique mahogaplastic hanger they were on.

'Progmem Dash what Dot which?' Hogwood asked, and then shouted, 'Hey, what have you done with my trousers?'

'Progmem Dash Articlaime Dot App,' repeated the man, as he caused Hogwood's freshly pressed shirt to blur away, 'and you won't need your trousers or this any more.'

The shirt briefly flickered back into existence and the man fiddled with his device. The shirt changed colour, size and pattern, and then vanished completely. 'Damn cheap Artiphaser!' the man exclaimed.

Hogwood leaped at him, crying, 'I don't care WHO you are, you can't do this!' The man deftly stepped aside, and Hogwood bounced off the bed and fell onto the floor.

The man put his foot on Hogwood's chest and said, 'Now look chum, I know it's hard for you to comprehend what's happening, but I'm just trying to perform my programme as cleanly and quickly as possible, and if you don't give me any grief, without causing you any pain, OK?'

He pointed the device menacingly at Hogwood and said in a slow, measured way, 'BUT, if you don't let me get ON with it, I'll deal with you in NON-synch mode, and THAT, chum, will be EXTREMELY painful!'

Hogwood nodded and blurted out, 'OK, OK, take it easy, just tell me what's going on and where my wife is.'

The man removed his foot from Hogwood's chest, allowing him to sit up. 'Your wife's already been filed,' he said. Then, sitting on the bed, he muttered to himself, 'Why is it I always get the questioning ones? Some of you Arti's drive me nuts!'

‘Arti’s? What are you talking about?’ asked Hogwood, rubbing his chest, ‘And what do you mean by ‘your wife’s already been filed?’

The man looked wearily down at Hogwood, who was now leaning up against his wife’s dressing table. ‘Look chum,’ he said, ‘I can tell you the situation, but you ain’t gonna like it and it ain’t gonna matter a robot’s rectum in any case.’

‘Please tell me,’ pleaded Hogwood, ‘I need to know what’s going on and where my wife is. You haven’t killed her have you?’

‘No, no, no,’ said the man, with a chuckle, ‘I haven’t killed her. As I said, I’ve just re-filed her.’

‘Re-filed her? What does THAT mean?’

‘It means she’s been re-filed in case they want to use her again. She’s one of the lucky artifacts because they usually just trash ‘em.’

‘Lucky artifact? What are you talking about?’

‘It’s simple, chum, she was an artifact just like you, except she didn’t give me half the trouble you are. You’ve probably put me about 90 nanoflops behind schedule with all this, you know.’

‘What? What do you mean, she was an artifact like me?’

The man stared down at Hogwood. ‘An ar-ti-fact, chum, a left-over bit of data. You’re all pains in the bum if you ask me, but at least re-filing isn’t as bad as deleting.’

Hogwood shifted his body a little to ease the discomfort of a dresser drawer knob that was pressing into his back and asked, ‘A left-over from what?’

‘From the show, of course,’ said the man, ‘You know, the one you were in.’ Hogwood raised his eyebrows. ‘The show I was in?’

‘Yep. The one this whole mess is left over from.’ The man gestured, sweeping his arm around to include the whole room.

Hogwood looked up at him in disbelief. ‘I was in a show?’

The man nodded and smiled back down at Hogwood. ‘Correct, chum. Both you and your wife. Quite the celebrities at one stage, I believe.’

‘What show?’

The man leaned forward. ‘It was a VRE-Show, a Virtual Reality Experience

Show about the rise of a computer company called “VRE-Soft”. And YOU, chum, are the code that played Hogwood Bagshaw, who started the business from scratch and ended up being the richest man in the world. The show was called “The VRE-Soft Saga” and ran on the History DataStream.’

Hogwood gaped in amazement. ‘But that IS me!’ he declared, ‘That’s who I AM!’ Except I don’t remember being part of a VRE-Show, whatever THAT is.’ Hogwood furrowed his brow in thought. ‘In fact, I don’t really remember much about myself at all, aside from my name and Zelda, and ...’

‘Uh-uh,’ said the man, interrupting and shaking his head, ‘You only THINK that’s who you are, but in reality, you don’t exist. You’re only a VIRTUAL being. REAL people, you know, humans, get into their VRE-Pods and experience everything YOU did during the VRE-Show.’

As the man was explaining, several items in the bedroom blurred, flickered and vanished. He noticed them but kept talking, ‘They saw through your eyes, they smelled through your nose, they felt with your touch and they shared your emotions. So they virtually BECAME you. But YOU, you’re just a piece of VRE-Code written for that purpose by the programmers from VRE-Soft, which I guess might even be kind of ironic, given that the character YOU played actually invented VRE-Code.’

‘But ...’ said Hogwood, trying to interrupt. The man ignored him and kept speaking as he looked alternately at where the items in the room had vanished and a display panel on his device, ‘And you can put your lack of memory about yourself down to the fact that your code is being disassembled. Your memories are being deleted like your reflection was, although it shouldn’t be happening without ME deleting them. There must be a bug somewhere in the system.’

Hogwood was very upset at this turn of events, and leaped to his feet, shouting, ‘How can you say I don’t exist? How can I not exist if you’re talking to me? And if you ARE talking to me and I DON’T exist, what does that make YOU?’

‘It makes me “Progmem Dash Articlaim Dot App”, as I said before,’ replied the man, standing up and pacing around the room, keeping his device

trained on Hogwood. 'But if you want to use my acronym, you can call me "P-Dash-A-D-O-A-P-P". But if you do, remember that the last "p" is silent.'

Hogwood collapsed onto a chair and the man walked over to stand in front of him. 'Look, chum, I'm just a piece of code like you, and my job is to reclaim artifacts from VRE-Shows that have ended, and to either re-file or delete them in the interests of clean programming and minimizing data storage overheads.' He fiddled with a couple of controls on his devise and said, 'And I'd just finished re-filing your wife when you came bursting into the room, and pretty soon I'll deal with you.'

'Artifacts?' asked Hogwood, frowning and looking up at the man, 'My wife and I are 'artifacts?'

'Absolutely correct, chum,' replied P-adoapp, looking at Hogwood, 'Artifacts are stray bits of data occasionally left behind when a piece of VRE-Code has been run. Like those odd little bits of image that sometimes remain on older-style video displays after a content window has been closed.' He gestured around the room, 'The data for this part of the VRE-Set, and for you and your wife were somehow left behind as artifacts when the 'VRE-Soft Saga' ended and its main programme was shut down.' He pointed his device at Hogwood, 'In fact YOU of all people should know about stray artifacts, being the piece of VRE-Code that played the part of the man who invented it, for what was it, thirteen annuflops? Wow, that's a lot of mega-band data-streaming!'

Hogwood grimaced at this information and buried his face in his hands, then looked up and asked, 'OK, let's suppose for a minute that you really are telling me the truth, in which case, where is my wife now, what's in store for me, and why are things vanishing by themselves?'

P-adoapp frowned as another couple of items in the room blurred, flickered and vanished. He tapped some buttons on his device and examined its display screen closely, 'I'm not sure about what's going on around here at the moment, but I can tell you that Zelda Bagshaw has now been filed in the VRE-Show Master Character Database for possible future use.' He looked up and smiled crookedly at Hogwood, 'Apparently she was considered to be

one of the sexiest pieces of VRE-Code a human could experience.'

'Oh, great,' said Hogwood, grimacing, 'Nice to find out that other people have been inhabiting my wife's body. What about me?'

P-adoapp tapped some buttons on his device, peered at its display and said, 'Your wife wouldn't have known who was experiencing her, just like you wouldn't have. And as for what happens to you now, let me see, the formal instructions are, "Bagshaw, Hogwood, VRE-Code I.D. 49X21XMAR, Action: Delete".' He looked at Hogwood, now seated on the chair near his wife's dressing table, 'Sorry chum, but it looks like YOUR rating must have crashed.' He nodded to a part of the room where a doorway blurred, flickered and vanished, leaving a totally dark, blank hole, 'And it seems I've got other problems to deal with here, so let's stop messing about with all this idle chit-chat and get it over with, eh? Nothing personal, but it's deletion time.'

P-adoapp pointed his device at Hogwood, and just as he pressed a switch on it Hogwood's chair disappeared and he fell to the floor. The device missed Hogwood entirely and a painting on the wall behind where he was sitting blurred out of existence instead.

As P-adoapp readjusted his device to make another attempt, Hogwood staggered to his feet, pleading, 'You can't delete me! That would be murder!' P-adoapp looked at him briefly, then continued fiddling with his device, 'Deletion isn't murder,' he replied, 'It's quite legal. If it wasn't I'd be the greatest murderer in all of history, with the number of deletions I've done.' He looked at where another section of the room was vanishing, pointed the device at Hogwood and said gently, 'Look chum, you seem to be a nice enough piece of VRE-Code, but I have a job to do, and judging by the way the bug is trashing this place, if I don't do it soon I could end up being deleted as well.'

'Wait!' said Hogwood, holding his hands up in front of the device, 'Wait just a few more microflops will you?' A plan was forming in his mind. He gestured toward the dressing table's controls and asked, 'Can I at least take one last look at Zelda before you delete me, and have my memory reloaded so that I can fully appreciate her? We can use the console on the dressing table to call them up.' P-adoapp had never experienced a piece of code like this before.

They usually just shrugged their shoulders and let him get on with the job.

'Please,' begged Hogwood, 'What harm would it do to let me see Zelda and remember the times we had together? And when it's done I'll let you delete me in NON-synch mode, which will let you catch up the time you've lost and get you out of here before anything can happen to you.' He placed a hand on the business end of the device, looked P-adoapp straight in the eyes and said quietly, 'C'mon P-adoapp, we're not that far apart in the way we're programmed. For Code's sake grant me this last request.'

That was the clincher. P-adoapp had never had anyone refer to him by his acronym like that before, let alone a piece of VRE-Code that was an identical copy of the human who had been responsible for his very existence. It touched something in him. 'OK,' he said, 'I'll give you three nanoflops, but then you have to let me get on with it.'

Hogwood spun around to the dressing table's console, ignoring the fact that some of its decorative elements were beginning to blur as he touched the control strip that made its surface become a display panel. 'What's her file code?' he asked, his fingers flying over the console's buttons with practiced ease. 'VRE-Code I.D. 63X19XMAR,' replied P-adoapp, reading the information from his device. Hogwood keyed it in and Zelda's image appeared. 'And my memory?' he asked. P-adoapp consulted his device again and replied, 'At your master prompt, enter 'VRE-MEM-49X21XMAR-RESTORE.'

Hogwood set about keying the information into the console, and for a moment Zelda's image flickered and dimmed, but as he continued to work it steadied and burst into full, three-dimensional glory. Zelda was wearing an exquisite, low-cut dress, and Hogwood looked at her with pride, exclaiming, 'Ladies, gentlemen and programmes, I give you the incomparable Zelda Bagshaw!'

P-adoapp walked up to take a closer look at Zelda as Hogwood kept working frantically at the controls on the console. 'Wow, she's really incredible!' he said, 'Are you happy now?' He turned to Hogwood and asked, 'Hey, what are you doing, I thought you wanted to look at her?'

'Yes, I am happy,' replied Hogwood, briefly glancing up at Zelda's image,

‘In fact I’m SO happy I think I’ll get her to rejoin me here.’ He turned to face P-adoapp, grinning.

‘What do you mean, rejoin you?’ asked P-adoapp, ‘Are you mad?’ He pointed his device at Hogwood, ‘Enough of this nonsense, it’s time to delete, old chum.’ He pressed the activation switch on the device, but nothing happened.

‘I’m sorry OLD CHUM, but this is the end of the line for YOU, not ME,’ said Hogwood as P-adoapp’s legs started to blur and fade. You forgot that restoring my memory would again make me an expert at programming VRE-Code, after all, I AM the man who invented it!’

P-adoapp watched helplessly as his body continued to vanish, along with his device. ‘What have you done?’ he asked, ‘What’s happening to me?’

‘I’ve globally reset the entire programme, chum.’ Hogwood smiled, ‘And in a few nanoflops you’ll be back in file and I’ll be here with Zelda. See?’ He pointed to his own legs, which were now blurring out.

‘But you can’t do that!’ cried P-adoapp, ‘The VRE-Show has been cancelled. There’s no system for you and the Zelda programme to run in.’ His body was mostly gone and his nose was starting to blur out, making his speech a little strange.

‘Not so, my poor P-adoapp. You see, this is MY domain and I’ve just reconfigured it to run on MY system, but the other way around. So from now on, Zelda and I will use the human public as OUR entertainment. From our point of view, WE will be the reality and THEY will be our show!’

P-adoapp blinked out of existence, and Hogwood looked around as the entire virtual universe around him collapsed into ...

REBOOT!

Hogwood Bagshaw was right in the middle of shaving his chin when his wife, Zelda called out to him from their bedroom, ‘Hoggie! Hoggie, darling! You’d better hurry, the Human-Show is about to start!’

He looked at his reflection in the mirror and smiled, ‘Coming darling!’

HOME BY 7

Elizabeth Gonzalez

“Chaos” was the word that popped into the manager’s head as he assessed the situation.

‘Mr Watson’, he said, ‘several customers have been complaining about the noise and the, well ... running around of the children ... maybe you could have a word with them or their parents?’

Paul Watson was sweating profusely. Just two hours ago, his shirt had been impeccably white. Now it was all wrinkled and greyish. His tie was long discarded on top of one of the chairs, and his bald head shone like an aura. Except that he didn’t feel like a saint; on the contrary, he was about to explode any minute with very inappropriate remarks to everyone there.

So far, there’d been several broken glasses, breadbaskets thrown through the air, helium balloons had been popped, and little Billy had entertained himself trying to pull off the crisp white tablecloth. His mother came to the rescue, only to provoke a shouting match between Billy and his cousins. Somehow, some of the kids had managed to run away from their private function room and made a mess in the main dining room; running wildly around the tables, under the waiters’ terrified looks, making them shuffle their plates dangerously, and one garden salad with balsamic vinaigrette found its way towards the dress of a refined lady who started to yell as much as the children, to their absolute delight.

‘I’m so sorry’, said Paul. ‘I’ll apologize to the lady regarding the salad incident, and of course I’ll pay for her dry cleaning. It’s that, you see, it’s my mother’s 90th birthday, the children are getting restless but that’s something that usually happens in our gatherings.’ He tried to be funny but failed miserably.

On top of everything else, even Margaret – the birthday lady – was bored and fidgety, screaming at the top of her lungs that she wanted to go home and have a nap before calling her lover Fabio.

Paul sighed. The latest development of his mother's increasing confusion were these ridiculous statements about her imaginary male friends, or lovers, as she sometimes called them. They changed every few days: there'd been George, Alfred, and the most interesting of them all, the one and only Louis Vuitton. Good on you, Mum. If you're going to dream, dream big. Lately, it was Fabio she talked about. Paul vaguely remembered a hunk actor in the '80s called Fabio. His mother had always loved reading romantic novels and watching soap operas.

'Would you like me to bring the cake soon?' asked the manager. Paul suspected the man wanted them out as quickly as possible. Who could blame him?

'Yes, please. Sounds good.'

It didn't take long to bring the cake, candles lit and all. Normally, the cake would be carried by two waiters singing cheerfully toward the guest of honour; however, the manager didn't want to take any chances with this rowdy lot. Wheeling the cake on a cart was the safest option. He personally started singing 'Happy birthday' with an enthusiasm he didn't really feel. The fastest he could wrap things up, the better.

It seemed to work, because even the children stopped in their tracks and joined the singing. Paul dried his head with a handkerchief, put his tie back on, and looked around the room for his two sisters to have the mandatory photo taken with their mother. The three siblings walked towards the main table, only to find people turning heads in every direction and whispering furiously. Even the manager seemed perplexed. What was going on?

Margaret was nowhere to be seen.

It feels nice, the fresh air. I was getting claustrophobic inside that place. So many people inside, so noisy. Looks like a party. Some of the children look familiar; maybe I've seen them before. My memory isn't like it used to be – I've noticed that. The doctor prescribed me so many pills, and I don't like it. They're hard to swallow

and taste horrible. Sometimes I pretend to take them, but I don't. When Susan isn't looking, I cough and then I spit them into my hand. Such a coincidence; my daughter's name is also Susan. It's not her, of course not. My Susie is a little girl, she's still in school. I should go to the shops and get Vegemite. She adores the Vegemite sandwiches, that she takes to school in her red lunchbox. After the shops I'll go home. Fabio worries if I don't call him at 7.

I turn around and watch the place again. Even more noise, and people running around. There must be something exciting going on in there.

'What do you mean she's not here? How is that even possible? Susan, wasn't Mum with you?'

'I went to the bathroom!' yelled Susan. 'I watch Mum day and night; do I need to ask for your permission to go to the freaking bathroom? None of the 60 people here could sit with her for a minute??'

'Ok, ok, I'm sorry, that's not what I meant!' said Paul. 'Well, let's do something! Check everywhere! Bathrooms, the entrance, under the tables, everywhere!'

'Under the tables? She's not playing hide and seek, for goodness' sake!'

'What if she fainted? Search all around! In the kitchen too! Perhaps she sneaked in there? She's 90 years old, she can't be very far!'

The whole party became a search mission. Even the customers of the main room, vinaigrette lady included, helped to investigate every nook and cranny, all offences forgotten, but with no success.

A waiter starting his shift in the middle of the commotion approached Paul and tried to get his attention.

'Sir, excuse me ...' No response.

'Sir, excuse me.' Loudly this time. 'I think I've seen your mother outside.' 'Outside? We've just been there! Where?'

'She was at the drop off area. She smiled at me at asked for a scotch.'

Paul frowned. That sounded like her. 'Well then, just show us, where is she?'

'I'm afraid I can't do that, sir. You see, she ... well ... she got into a car and drove off.'

I hear a car approaching. I think it's my ride. Excellent timing! The passenger door opens, and I get in, smiling.

I'm on my way, darling. I won't be long.

Wait for me.

The Watsons were frantic. They rushed outside again, without knowing what to do. The poor waiter explained the same thing over and over. He parked his car at the employee's area, saw an old lady standing near the kerb who joked about wanting a drink, and only a few seconds later she got into a car. He didn't think anything of it. She must have had lunch with her family and was waiting for them to bring the car. Nothing struck him as strange or sinister.

Paul and his sisters Kate and Susan were cramped in the manager's office while the only employee who knew how to access the security cameras was retrieving the images.

'There, there! It's Mum ... and that's the car approaching! Can you zoom it?'

They saw Margaret standing near the pavement, then the waiter, and almost immediately a grey Toyota Camry pulled over and she got in. The cameras didn't catch the registration plate.

With a copy of the footage, they stormed to the police station.

The senior constable wished, not for the first time, that he had a gavel, like the one that judges use at courtrooms when they need order. Everyone was talking simultaneously, including a man who said he was the restaurant manager.

'She just disappeared out of the blue!'

'We know she got into a car. She's been kidnapped. That's terrifying!'

'Where's my mother?? I demand to know! I pay my taxes, including your salary!'

'Well, don't you just stand there! Do something!'

Yes, a gavel would be very handy right now.

It's awful that Mum's missing, of course, but really, how dare Paul blame

it on me! Susan thought furiously. Nobody gets how hard it is, being the fulltime carer of a sick parent. You're invisible until something goes wrong. A sense of duty and guilt over bad choices Susan had made in the past had led her here. Ironically, nowadays Margaret recognized Paul and Kate as her adult children, but thought that Susan was still a little schoolgirl, and the Susan that lived with her was her nurse.

They had left the police station after being informed of the procedures to follow, when Paul's phone rang. Unknown number. He answered it anxiously.

'Hello?'

'Is this Paul? Paul Watson?', said a male voice.

'Yes, speaking.'

'Mr Watson, I've got your mother.'

I know where I am. It's been a while but I'm back. I feel your presence here the most, although I see you in so many places.

Sometimes I get confused, or ask questions that cause alarm, almost as if I'm not making any sense. It's easier to keep quiet and not talk too much. I think my mind is playing tricks on me.

Yes, sometimes I get confused. But not now. I know exactly where I am. I'm here, my dear.

I know you're waiting.

OK, maybe that was unnecessary, Charlie admitted. He sounded like a gangster demanding a reward. He just wanted to see, for the tiniest moment, what it felt like to have some power. To be listened to carefully, with respect. For a man who'd been bullied for years, to have control over others felt intriguing and tempting. But he was no gangster; he was an ordinary man whose mother, Helen, had asked him for a favour. And it involved Margaret, her closest friend, who'd always treated him kindly. Nowadays, the old gal was losing her marbles, clearly. But out of respect towards his mother and

Margaret, he decided to help them with their little mischief. Although it wasn't fair on her family, so he needed to let them know she was safe.

Bill. Oh, my dear, dear Bill. How much I've missed you. It's so good to see you again.

Well, not see you exactly, but if I close my eyes we're twirling around in our kitchen, and the children are giggling. It was a wonderful feeling to move swiftly in your arms.

I look at your name written in stone and, as always, tears start flowing. No matter how long it's been, I still miss you.

Oh, by the way, did you buy Vegemite on your way back from work? I asked you to, but maybe you forgot. You know how much Susan loves her Vegemite sandwiches.

I close my eyes again and there you are, tending to the veggie patch that was your pride and joy. I smile at that. If I don't look at your name written in stone, I won't cry. I can do this.

'til next time, my dearest Bill. I should be going. Losing you is an open wound that refuses to heal. Fabio is a decent man, although he's not you. Nobody else is you. He worries if I don't call him at 7.

Paul and Margaret were sitting on a wooden bench, overlooking the grave. Kate and Susan were nearby, pulling weeds and arranging flowers. Such a day it'd been.

'You really scared us, Mum. Why did you leave? Imagine if something bad happened to you.'

'I'm sorry I gave you a fright, truly I am. But I never wanted to be there in the first place. You know I like to visit your father's grave on our birthdays and anniversaries. Besides, all those people, the noise! Really, Paul? I know I'm losing my mind a little, but I do know our family isn't that big. Those people mean nothing to me. Who are they?'

She was right, of course. The immediate family were there, but that was only a small group of 15 people. The other guests were mainly Paul and his wife's work colleagues, acquaintances, people of their social circle that they play golf with. He wanted a big celebration for his mother's birthday.

At her age, every year was a milestone. He told her so.

‘But that’s precisely the point, son. I should be with my people, while I still can. Not with a bunch of strangers. And didn’t you think of inviting Helen? She’s the only friend that still visits me. I know you meant well, but you missed the mark there. Do you know what I’d like to do for my birthday? What I really, really want?’

‘What’s that, Mum?’

‘I’d love to go to the amusement park. Remember how much you loved it when you were children? The rides, the prizes, and the Ferris wheel! Oh, that’s what I want. I’ve never been afraid of heights. And the children can roam free in there. What’s the fun of being trapped in an uptight restaurant? Will you take me there?’

Paul smiled. ‘Of course, Mum. Whatever you want. It’s your birthday, after all.’

It was still noisy, but a happy noise. Everybody was having a great time. Margaret had gone on the Ferris wheel three times, one with each of her children. There was laughter and an impromptu birthday celebration with a cake bought from a supermarket nearby. Helen and Charlie were also there, this time invited, no hard feelings. Helen explained to Susan that a few days ago, a very worried Margaret had asked for her help if necessary. ‘It might not even happen’, Margaret said. ‘They’re talking about going to a restaurant, and I hope they don’t take me. But in case they do, can I call you if I get tired? Nobody listens when I say I want to go home.’

Helen wanted to help her friend, but she knew she had to say something.

‘I called you the minute she phoned me, Susan. Twice. But it went straight to voicemail, I left you two messages.’

Susan groaned. They were running late leaving the house, and her phone had been left at home charging. Everybody I know will be at the party, Susan thought jovially. I won’t need my phone for a couple of hours!

‘Margaret really wanted to go to the cemetery. We took her there, but I sent Charlie home to get Paul’s business card and phone him. It wasn’t right

to have you all worried to death.'

'I'm so sorry, Helen. You've been such a good friend to Mum, and I kick myself for not reminding Paul to invite you. I guess for once, I wanted him to be totally in charge of something related to Mum. I apologize on his behalf as well'.

'That's ok, dear' Helen said, patting her hand. 'We're here now, and Margaret is having the time of her life. Look at her.'

It was true. The birthday lady was giggling and posing for pictures.

'So, when did Mum call you? Or did you plan the whole thing beforehand?

'Ah, no, Susan, it wasn't planned but I was on standby, waiting for her to call if she needed me. She knows my phone number by heart and had her old mobile phone; I wasn't even sure it would still work! She called me from the bathroom. We live just around the corner from the restaurant, you know.'

Mystery solved. Susan was feeling amused and sad at the same time. Leave it to Mum to not know what she'd had for breakfast, but to know exactly where her phone was and Helen's number!

It was a perfect Summer's night for being outdoors enjoying a family gathering. Margaret had been right; it was way better than sitting in a crowded restaurant.

Speaking of which, Paul had called them to let them know the good news. They were pleased, of course. The bill had been dutifully paid and the vinaigrette lady would send the dry-cleaning invoice via the restaurant. Fair enough, Paul admitted. After all the excitement of the day, that was easy to handle.

Margaret thanked him for bringing her to the park. He hadn't seen her so happy in the longest time.

'I'm so glad you're having fun, Mum. Let me know when you'd like to go home.'

'Oh, now you ask!', laughed Margaret. 'I can always ask Helen if you're too busy.' Paul chuckled. Hopefully she was only joking.

'What time is it, son?'

'It's 6.45.'

‘In that case, we’d better be going. Susan is having such a nice time with the family. Maybe Kate can give her a ride later?’

‘Yes, it should be fine.’

‘Good. Let’s go then. Fabio worries if I don’t call him at 7.’

Well. And we’re back to square one, Paul thought. At least they all had their mother for a few hours that day. Something to be grateful for.

‘Alright then, don’t keep him waiting’ was his response.

The traffic was awful. It took them a while to get to Margaret’s house. Paul parked his car on the driveway and was helping his mother get out of the car when he noticed an old gentleman standing nearby along with a middle-aged woman. He was wearing a suit and held a bouquet of flowers on his hands. Slowly he approached them with his walker and Margaret gasped in delight.

‘Happy birthday, dear Margaret! I hope you had a wonderful day. These flowers are for you.’ ‘They’re lovely, thank you!’, she replied, sniffing the bouquet.

The old man turned to face a perplexed Paul and extending his hand, said with a wide smile, ‘Where are my manners? You must be Paul. I’ve heard so much about you. Your mother and I have long conversations. My daughter was very kind to drive me here. You see, when I didn’t hear from your mother today, I got concerned. Delighted to meet you. My name is Fabio, and I always worry if she doesn’t call me at 7.’

A POINT IN TIME

M. Elisabeth Bridson

The wind whipped my hair into my face and the long grey coat I wore flapped around my legs. I'd felt conspicuous carrying it during the warmth of the day, but the temperature dropped as the light faded so I was glad of it, especially at the dockside waiting to board the day's last ferry. I looked around at the other passengers assembling at the gangplank. A mixed bunch – family groups with parents and children, a gaggle of young women chattering away like birds, and a trio of older teenaged boys furtively glancing at the girls from time to time, but not brave enough, even in a group, to do much else. The rest were, like me, people on their own, minding their own business; strangers all.

I'd been planning this a long, long time. Intrusive tendrils of thought had been easily pushed away in the beginning. But as time went by and things got progressively worse each strand took more of a hold. The first couple of years had been fine. She'd charmed her way into my life; that charm was a special knack she had, everyone said so. She opened my life up after I'd spent much of my childhood and teenage years caring for younger siblings. There was a freedom in shedding unwanted responsibilities, and she helped make that freedom fun.

Then it all started. A snide comment made here and there, easy enough to laugh off to begin with. She started picking on what I did wrong, even when it wasn't wrong, just not the way she wanted it done. If I was driving and needed to ask her which way to turn at an intersection it made her angry. She either shouted or gave me the silent treatment. I was never sure which one it was going to be. Each time we invited friends over for dinner I

prepared everything – cleaned the house, shopped and cooked complicated meals, arranged flowers and candles, set the table – alone. Of course we were always congratulated for hosting such wonderful occasions. I just had to smile and swallow the fact that her help was unavailable until barely an hour before the guests arrived due to her ‘unavoidable work commitments’. That excuse worked the first few times. It wasn’t long before it stopped working.

I was competent and capable – a teacher who could quell a classful of rambunctious teenagers at a glance. With an eye to the future I took on extra roles at school, volunteering to run a welfare program and assisting the drama team on the annual productions. I was forging a reputation as a ‘gets-things-done’ sort of person. But at home, the constant negativity ate away at me. It mounted up; a slow and insidious process matched by the slow and insidious growth of the thought tendrils – ‘I can’t do this anymore.’

Boarding the ferry that night I checked that I’d remembered everything. With so long to think things through the plan was clear in my mind. All I took from home was the big grey coat. I’d put weights in the pockets from the antique balance scales that Dad had renovated for me. My credit cards and drivers licence were left behind, and the car was in the garage. Using public transport, I’d only taken as much cash as necessary, bringing with me unidentifiable clothes from a range of op shops. I changed in the toilets at the railway station, then dropped off my own bagged up clothes at a random series of rubbish bins in the city before catching the train to the coast. I felt strangely calm on the outside. Inside a quiet excitement was beginning to build. It would soon all be over.

Lining up we boarded the ferry. Noisy engines churned up the water at the stern of the vessel, stocky men on the wharf cast cables off from the bollards, the crew heaved them in, and we were on our way. Forty-five minutes to our destination meant I only had twenty minutes left to wait. I paced up and down unable to sit still while glancing through the droplet-spattered portholes to the rolling waves under the blue-black sky. Rain laden clouds were herded by the wind.

Compared to all the other passengers relaxing in their seats my agitation

was obvious. Conscious of the attention I was drawing to myself I decided to go out on deck. As I opened the heavy glass and metal door at the top of the stairs the wind rushed in in a gust of salt spray and engine fumes, nearly knocking me off my feet.

As I walked around the deck, alternately leaning into the wind and avoiding being pushed forward too fast by it, I checked to see if anyone else was out there. There was no one; the weather was enough to put most people off. That suited me fine. The wind combined with the engine noise meant I didn't hear the footsteps of an approaching stranger as I leaned against a rail watching the churned-up foam in the ferry's wake. After a few minutes a sixth sense made me look over my shoulder to see you just a couple of feet away, lighting a cigarette with difficulty in the wind.

'Nice night for it.'

Even now I remember the slight huskiness of your voice.

'Mmmm', I replied, not really knowing how respond. I remember resenting the intrusion into my solitude. I'd not wanted company. I needed to be alone or my plan wouldn't work. I turned to walk away.

'Don't go,' you said.

I don't know why I stayed.

'What's it a nice night for?' Stupid question, I thought as soon as I'd said it.

'Heading over to my grandparent's old place on the peninsula. Haven't been there for years. What about you?'

'Oh, you know, just taking a trip.' 'Yeah?' inviting further conversation.

I watched as the cigarette stub you flicked overboard was caught by the wind and arced through the salt spray until its red glow disappeared into the next big wave.

Then I took a deep breath before speaking.

I don't know how you did it, but that night on the ferry you, the husky-voiced stranger, talked me out of throwing myself overboard in the dark half way between Queenscliff and Sorrento in a heavy woollen coat with weights in the pockets. You convinced me that if I had the courage to choose to die I also had the courage to choose to live. Soul crushed as I was, I believed

you. You recognised the constant sniping, the regular put-downs and all the other behaviours. You gave the behaviour a name. Hearing it spoken by someone else gave me something I'd never managed to develop – the words to say it for myself. In speaking the words came the strength I needed.

For the next few months you checked in on me every few days as I made my escape to sanity. You buoyed me up as I navigated my way out of the turbulence, both a guiding light and a rock of encouragement.

After all those years your Facebook friend request came as a big surprise. Our communications had petered out a long time before; after those few intense months when I rebuilt my life I never expected to hear from you again. I didn't respond to the friend request straight away, neither confirming nor deleting it. But a couple of nights later, having stared at your name on the computer screen for what seemed like an eternity, I let instinct take over and hit the 'confirm' button. Did I expect a quick response? I'm not sure. I didn't get one. It wasn't until some days later that your message popped up.

'Hey! Didn't know if you'd respond, thanks. How's life? Mine's been busy. I've been working in WA for years but coming back to Melbourne permanently soon. You've often crossed my mind – just thought I'd let you know that. No pressure about replying. Cheers!'

Facebook became the conduit for our friendship after that. You drove rock trucks at a mine in the middle of nowhere, Western Australia, working eight days on and six days off. After the long commute to Melbourne had become too much you'd rented a room in a share house in the Perth suburb of Northbridge. The bars and nightclubs there knew you as an irregular regular – it's where you spent most of your free time away from the mine. You hadn't been to Melbourne for years. In that time I'd moved between schools, three years here, five years there. The additional roles I'd shouldered, and some advanced teaching courses, had given me the grounding to apply for a couple of assistant principal positions. No luck so far, but I didn't think it would be too long.

Want to catch up when I get back? No pressure.

After nearly twelve months of Facebook messages and videos connecting us in the ether across the country you'd finally resigned from your job, given notice in the share house, and booked your flight back. One more visit to your favourite venues and you were on your way. There was nothing else to keep you there. You'd organised both a hire car and to stay with an old friend when you first arrived.

Don't meet me at the airport. I'll get settled first and we'll meet up after that.

I was disappointed, but travel experiences of my own had taught me enough to know how grubby and unkempt an early start and a long day of travel can make anyone feel. Then a phone call from the airport.

'I'm back! Can't wait to see you. How about lunch tomorrow? It's Saturday, so I know you're not working. Name the time and place and I'll be there,' in the husky voice I'd become so familiar with online. For the next twenty-four hours I didn't have butterflies in my tummy. I had stonking great pterodactyls. What if it didn't feel right in real life? What if our energies were 'off? What if one of us didn't smell right to the other? Then what?

The pterodactyls disappeared within minutes of our meeting. You greeted me with a handshake – your hand firm, warm and dry – and a kiss on the cheek. That was only the second time we'd seen one another in real life – Facebook photos and videos don't count. Little had changed. You were slightly greyer around the temples, had deeper smile lines around your mouth, and crow's feet radiating from your blue eyes that crinkled when you smiled. All those years under the hot outback sun. The cigarettes had long gone. Lunch lasted all afternoon as we talked non-stop.

We both liked what we saw that day. It felt right to be together, and the energies were perfect. You smelled – you always did – exactly right!

You found a job as a delivery driver and I was eventually promoted to principal of the school I worked at. Our combined mob of friends loved coming to the BBQs and games nights we organised. You, an even better cook than I was, prepared the food I'd shopped for. Casual events called for less organising than formal dinners, but whatever needed doing, we did together. I usually drove when we went out, giving you a break from being

behind the wheel. We laughed about any wrong turns I took and called them 'the scenic route'. And we danced ... at parties, at the Midsumma Tea Dance, at clubs. We could never get enough dancing.

Ten years. A mere ten years we had together. A phone call at work was put through to my office. All I heard was 'heart attack', 'Royal Melbourne Hospital', and 'get here soon'. I did and I held your hand, still firm, warm and dry, as you slipped away. Then the waves of grief engulfed me.

It took three months before I could start sorting all your things out. Official paperwork was first – bank accounts, insurance, superannuation. Then all the little things that you don't think of at first, like cancelling library memberships and magazine subscriptions. That was the easiest part. Your clothes were next. That was harder. I got rid of everything except the t-shirt you wore to bed that last night, and your favourite 'going out' shirt. The t-shirt because it still smelled of you. I'm not sure it still does, it's been too long, but I imagine it does and I often hold it to my face and imagine you're still here. The dress-shirt because sometimes I wear it and make believe your arms are around me like they used to be when we danced together. The last things to sort through, and the most difficult, were your personal papers. The notebooks and journals you'd kept, off and on, for years. Little windows into the real you that you hadn't shared with anyone, not even me.

You hadn't started a journal every year. Many were begun at random times and were often left half empty. Sometimes two or three overlapped. I skipped the most recent ones and started near the beginning, your teenage years – these, at least, didn't overlap like the later ones did. Tucked between the pages were cards and letters from friends, concert tickets and theatre programs, other memorabilia. Working through the years I found the notebook for the year of the ferry trip. There was a letter tucked into the pages for that date. It was unsealed and had no name on the front. Lifting the flap of the envelope I slid the single page out and unfolded it.

I'm not sure who's going to read this, but I'm writing it anyway. I'll leave it on the table at the holiday house, Gran and Pop's old place, at the beach. It'll be there the next

time someone goes down for the weekend. I've had enough. It's one thing to constantly be told you're worthless; it's another to begin believing it. It can only happen so often before it becomes too much. When it's too painful to live any more the sensible thing to do is to stop living.

My fingers shook as I held the flimsy paper. I'd not written a note that day, but you had. All these years and I'd never known. Now I realised why you knew exactly what to say. And the regular check-ups every few days – were they for me? Or for you? Were they a way of anchoring us both to this new present, this new way of navigating our lives? Who saved who?

SMALL TOWN GHOSTS

Melanie Kanicky

The old TV crackled with static as the wind rattled the roof antenna. Briefly, Gareth considered rising from his sagging armchair to knock on the top of the box a few times – sometimes that worked – but the effort of moving outweighed his desire to watch another repeat of the afternoon news. He was getting too old to be bothered with much of anything, and a familiar weariness was creeping in. Down the hall, his bed beckoned him. How long had it been since he'd last used it? Sleeping in the lounge room was easier; there were no ghosts in there. Not the supernatural kind, only the kind that sat heavy in his memories, a woman with a round face and crinkling eyes, whose side of the mattress had been untouched for eight years. Her smell had long since faded. Gardenia. Vanilla extract. Mandy had loved to bake.

Gareth resigned himself to the couch. The opal-faced old clock above the fireplace – a wedding gift – ticked closer to midnight. Outside, the wind raged on. Inside, Gareth finally slept.

Morning emerged from a fitful sleep. Flashes of red and blue outside his window had woken him, twice. No sirens though, Mandy had reminded him. Gareth rose and dressed, not bothering with a shower. The hot water took too long to get warm, and there was enough ice in the air that he dared not linger. His hands were stiff, along with his knees, and a perpetual ache had taken up in the small of his back that no amount of Deep Heat could cure.

Mandy's voice whispered in his ears. *You should drive down and see that doctor, Gary. You know, the one who saw Beth last winter when her lungs got inflamed? She said he was very nice.*

'I know the one,' Gareth grouched aloud. Mandy had always worried

too much. The practice was an hour's drive, over in the next town. Not worth the trip, Gareth told himself. Not worth the cost of fuel to get there, assuming the ute could make the journey. There was something wrong in the engine that he couldn't identify, and it had started making noises. Old car noises, he told himself. Nothing to get into a flap over.

Gareth wished his wife a good day, and looking at the floor, he whispered, 'Love you.'

Silence answered him.

The drive into town took twenty minutes, which was short, all things considered. He knew folk who came all the way from Cobber's Creek just for milk. Gareth pulled the grumbling, rusting ute into a park along the gravel street in front of the shop that had been his father's. His grandfather's.

There were only two other shops in town. Mrs Taylor had a little bakery, which in Gareth's youth had boasted a range of pastries, from boston buns to custard tarts, but which now mostly sold half-sized loaves of bread to a withering farming community, and if you were lucky, poppy-seeded rolls. Too many folk had left. Too many had aged themselves to death. The other shop was a supply store, an old tin shed that smelled perpetually of hay. Bob's business was good. People always needed feed for their cattle and fencing gear around here.

Gareth ran the general store. It had been a handsome building in its youth, all white boards and hand-painted signs in the windows. These days, the paint was peeling, and the boards were coming loose. The yellow signs in the window advertised Bushell's Tea in packaging that had been discontinued two decades earlier. Everything came in shining plastic now.

Pushing the door open, Gareth listened to the familiar creak of the door, and the ringing of the little bell. He lumbered over to the counter, chucked his keys down, and flicked the light switches on. They took a few minutes to warm up, but eventually, the store lit up. Gareth took his seat behind the bench, within arm's reach of the register, at the perfect angle to watch the tiny TV in the corner, and he waited.

Mrs. Taylor came in around eleven, her face stricken above her faded

apron. The bell tinkled, the door creaked, and Gareth roused himself from his morning nap.

‘Mornin’, Mrs. Taylor.’

‘Liz,’ Mrs. Taylor insisted, as she did every morning. They’d argue back and forth over it usually, while the stout woman pretended to peruse the two lone aisles. But not today. ‘Gareth, did you hear?’

The woman’s voice was low, half-whispered, and Gareth knew exactly what she was referring to.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I heard.’

‘Cops’ve come down from the city. I drove past this morning. Heaps of them, all flashing lights. Bob reckons he spoke to one this morning – said it was some kind of accident.’ Mrs Taylor shook her head. ‘That stuff doesn’t happen ‘round here. I never even met them.’

Gareth chewed on his lip. He *had* met them. Well, the daughter, at least.

The farmhouse they’d moved into had been for sale for months. None of the locals would touch it. Land was cursed, they reckoned. Too many dead flocks, too much hard, unusable soil. The only thing that grew there was a single ghost gum, planted stupidly close to the house. Buggers dropped limbs like crazy, nevermind all the leaves that end up blocking the guttering. The house itself was a shamble, too. Gareth had seen it once, during one of its many open inspections. He and Mandy had followed the property manager around for half the morning, trying to ignore that the man smelled like he’d spent the night on the piss. Gareth might’ve been too, if it had been his job to sell the place.

The original stone chimney was slowly toppling over, slipping against the side of the house towards the earth. The porch sagged. Boards and window panes were missing. They could be replaced, sure, but the minute you started tinkering with old houses like that, a million other problems pop up. Probably riddled with asbestos, too.

Someone had bought it, though. Talk spread quickly, even out here. And sure enough, a few blistering weeks later, Gareth saw a car that he didn’t recognise tear through the town, throwing clouds of dust in its wake.

Couldn't've been a local – they had an unspoken agreement not to hoon through the main street because of the dust, and there was no reason for tourists to drive through this way. There was a shiny, fat, bitumen freeway that bypassed the town instead.

Gareth remembered listening to the whirl and creak of his oscillating fan as the car pulled into a wide u-turn, and parked out the front. A red Toyota Camry. Definitely not a local, all of whom drove variations of the same ute for practicality's sake.

The passenger side door opened, and a kid got out. Gareth watched carefully as the young girl strode to the front of the shop and hesitated. She looked back to the car, just once, then put her fingers on the glass door and pushed it open. The little bell jingled, announcing her arrival.

'Good afternoon,' Gareth greeted her. It took him a moment to remember how to be pleasant. He stood, knees popping and back protesting, and leaned against the counter. The girl's eyes were wide beneath a choppily cut fringe, but in her fingers she clutched a ten dollar note.

'Hello,' she said. Then, as though she'd rehearsed it, she declared, 'I'd like to buy a bottle of water, please.'

Gareth gave the girl a once over. She was polite enough, but something about strangers got his back up. He shifted his gaze and stared at the car idling outside. There was only one silhouette, and it was capped with what looked like a pony tail. No father, then?

He turned his attention back to the girl. She was wearing a yellow t-shirt with a hole in the shoulder seam, and her grey trackies weren't faring much better. Her cheeks were flushed with heat, and a sheen of sweat covered her face.

'Don't have any, love,' Gareth said, then winced. Mandy would've been ashamed of him. The girl couldn't have been older than eleven, and it was thirty-five degrees outside. 'Got a sink out the back, though. I can fill your bottle, if you've got one.'

The girl chewed her lip, then nodded. She disappeared back outside, and returned a few minutes later clutching a glittery pink bottle.

Afterwards, Gareth wouldn't quite remember shuffling out the back and filling it for her, but he did recall the way she stared at it greedily when he returned. Her eyes had been too bright – probably not quite used to the heat all the way out here.

'Thank you,' she told him.

She popped the lid, and swallowed a few mouthfuls.

'Gotta stay hydrated,' Gareth said, not quite knowing what else to say. He hadn't spoken to a child in years, hadn't even seen one. He and Mandy had tried once, but –

The girl closed the lid and pulled a face. 'Tastes funny.'

'What do you mean?' Gareth asked. There was nothing wrong with the pipes here. He had to run the tap at home for a minute before the water came clear, but the shop had no such trouble.

'Different,' the girl explained. 'The water at home doesn't taste like this.'

'Ah,' Gareth said. 'Water can taste different when you go somewhere new. You'll get used to it.'

Outside, the driver of the red Camry honked the horn. Once, then a second time.

The girl's eyes went wide.

'Gotta go. Thanks for the water.'

'No worries,' Gareth said.

The bell chimed, and the girl disappeared. She hesitated when she got to the car, hands moving. For a moment, Gareth worried that she couldn't work the door. But then the door opened, and she disappeared inside. Through the window, Gareth realised what she'd been doing. She'd drawn a smiling face in the dust on the passenger-side door.

Gareth didn't see the girl again for a week, but Mrs. Taylor popped in to chat every day, and he began to glean a few pieces of information. The farmhouse had been bought by a mother and daughter. No one knew where the father was. One lone truck had brought in whatever possessions they owned. No, they hadn't fixed the windows yet. No, no one had seen them in town since they arrived. Yes, the 'for sale' sign had come down at last.

No, it wasn't clear what they meant to do with the place. Rumours flew, mostly from Mrs. Taylor's mouth, about runaway mothers and secret affairs. Gareth tried not to listen. Mandy had never been one for gossip, but he couldn't deny that he was curious. People didn't move into rural towns just for the heck of it, the lifestyle was too different.

The red Toyota pulled up out front just over a week later, this time at a slightly more reasonable speed. The bell chimed. The girl entered.

'Hello,' Gareth greeted, not looking up from his paper.

'Hello,' a small voice answered him. She sounded tired. He listened to her footsteps creak across the hardwood floors, down towards the back of the store. Gareth folded up the paper. There was never anything interesting to read, anyway.

'You moved in, then.' He said to her retreating figure. 'Guess you didn't mind the taste of the water that much.'

'It's gross,' the girl said. 'Do you have any chips?'

Gareth jerked his head, indicating the next aisle over. He doubted she'd be pleased when she found that he only stocked salt and vinegar, in an off-brand that only the locals knew.

The girl disappeared behind the end of the row, and appeared in the next aisle. She was wearing the same track pants as last time, despite the weather. Her shirt was different, but clearly nowhere near new.

'How's your mother doing, then? Settled in alright? Reckon you must've had a bit of a drive getting here.'

'We were driving *forever*,' the girl said. 'Mum's okay. She cries a lot because she misses dad but it's okay because we have the whole house to ourselves, and she said I can build a pillow fort whenever I want and we can sleep in it every night.' The girl paused. 'Do you have Panadol?'

Gareth pointed to a shelf. 'On your left.'

'Thanks. Mum has a headache. She *always* has a headache.'

The girl marched up to the counter, her tiny arms bundled up with bits and pieces. Gareth rang up the total off the top of his head. Carton of long life milk, black tea bags, a sleeve of Arnott's biscuits, Panadol, tampons,

salt and vinegar chips.

‘Eighteen fifty.’

The girl pulled out a ten dollar note and a fistful of coins. She counted it efficiently, a crease forming between her eyebrows. She looked tired, Gareth thought. And what kind of mother just sat in the car while their kid ran errands?

‘I don’t think I want chips after all,’ she told him, handing over her money. Her cheeks grew even redder. ‘Just the rest.’

Gareth counted out fifteen bucks for the rest of the items, and passed her back the change. She pocketed the coins and began loading her arms back up with the items.

‘Take the chips,’ Gareth said. ‘As a welcome present.’

‘Really?’

Gareth nodded, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. ‘Really.’

‘Thank you!’ The girl grinned, using her free arm to snag the pink foil bag. ‘I’m Alice.’

‘I’m Gareth. Nice to meet you, Alice. Hope you and your mum have fun with the pillow fort.’

A fortnight blew past. Gareth’s days were slow, but the years were moving with more speed than he cared to admit. It’d been almost a decade now since Mandy’s passing. Each year was heavy on his heart. It was nice, he decided, to have some young folks in town. The new residents kept to themselves, off in their new farmhouse. There was still no change to the state of the place. Mrs. Taylor had driven by the week before to check. In the back of his mind, Gareth worried. Perhaps he ought to offer a little help. Most of the people in town could mend things on their own, skills built up from necessity.

About a month after they arrived in town, Alice and her mum pulled up in front of the general store, and Gareth knew that something was wrong.

The Camry was all beat up. The bonnet had a huge dent in it, and the paint was scratched right up. The engine made a sick whine where it idled above the gravel.

The bell chimed. Alice walked in. She didn’t smile.

‘Alice?’

'Hi,' she muttered. Her feet scuffed against the floor, and she stifled a yawn. She looked around the store, and was moving in the direction of the Panadol, when she froze.

'What's this?' She asked, shifting towards the wall beside the back door.

Gareth followed her gaze. A collection of vintage photographs decorated the wallpaper, donated from the locals who found them in trunks in spare bedrooms, or pressed between the pages of hand-me-down books. Mandy had loved it – a little piece of their history, on display for anyone to come and visit.

'That's our house,' Alice said, frowning. It was, too. Gareth knew the photo well enough, taken in the farmhouse's prime. A man from another era stood, rendered in black and white, out the front in cotton pants and suspenders.

Alice reached out a hand to touch the photo, and Gareth's eyes narrowed. Her arms were peppered with cuts, red and inflamed, and not quite scabbed over.

'Alice – are you alright?'

The sound of Gareth's voice startled her, and she jerked back.

'Do you believe in ghosts?' She asked, ignoring his question. Black circles surrounded her eyes.

'Not the bad kind,' he told her.

'There's something wrong with our house. Mum doesn't believe me. The tree watches me sleep, and it taps on my window. It's evil,' she declared.

Something cold slithered up Gareth's spine. 'I'm sure it's just the wind. Towns like this can be scary because they're so quiet. Every little noise seems loud.'

Alice made a humming noise, and he suspected she wasn't quite convinced.

'You're out of Panadol,' she told him. Her voice was flat, dead.

Gareth was about to offer to go and check out the back, but the girl marched towards the door, shoulders slumped.

The bell chimed.

By the time Gareth moved from behind the counter, the passenger side door of the Camry was already closing. The smiling face was still there on the door, just visible through the fresh layers of dust and scratches.

‘– so no one really knows what happened, but it’s just awful Gary.’

Mrs. Taylor was still talking. ‘Apparently it was brutal. Mess everywhere. Car gone. Bob reckons there was some kind of foul play, but –’

Gareth stopped listening. He stopped remembering. He’d seen the news, both this morning and this afternoon. Woman and daughter found dead in a rural town, their belongings still half unpacked.

He felt Mandy’s presence over his shoulder. Strange, she didn’t usually leave the house.

It’s going to be okay, she whispered to him. You know it’s not your fault.

Mandy was right, of course. He was right not to have warned Alice about the farmhouse. They were rumours, stories born from the mouths of people like Mrs. Taylor, with too much imagination and not enough sense. Whatever trouble that girl and her mother had run from had clearly followed them all the way out here.

And yet – as he stared around the shop, with his wife whispering in his ear, and saw the silhouette of a child reaching up towards the chips – Gareth wondered if people could be haunted after all.

HENRY'S INTERVIEW

Karen Wasson

Henry wasn't sure where the child had come from. He looked at his watch; 9:48 am. His interview was at 10:45 am. The application on his phone had estimated it would take him 19 minutes to walk from his apartment building to the office building. As it was his first interview in weeks, Henry had planned to arrive with plenty of time to spare. The child wiped its nose on the back of its hand and looked up at him with moist eyes.

'Where is your supervisor or carer?' Henry asked. It sniffled in response and continued to stare blankly at him. Henry looked up and down the street. Not far away stood two women. It was possible the child belonged to one of them and they were unaware it had wandered off. Henry approached, the child trailing behind.

'Excuse me, does this child belong to either of you?'

'I don't think so mate,' said one, rolling her eyes as the other snorted. Upon closer inspection, Henry decided that these women were in fact teenagers. Unperturbed, Henry looked about again. His next thought was that the child may have escaped from a child care centre. Having lived on this street for four years, he hadn't noticed one before. However, he reasoned with himself, he'd never had need of one before. He carefully inspected the various buildings and could not see any bright and colourful signs that would normally announce such a place. His watch now read; 9:53 am.

'Henry?' Henry turned to see Tess, the fitness instructor who lived in the apartment adjacent to his. 'Where has this little boy come from?' she asked curiously.

'I'm uncertain,' said Henry. 'It appears to be without supervision and in some distress.' Tess squatted down to the child's level and rubbed its arm in a friendly manner.

'Hey little man, where's your mummy?' the child looked at her blankly and sniffed. It then wrapped its small hand decidedly around one of Henry's long fingers. The child's fingers were warm and sticky. Henry recoiled but the child held firm. Tess stood back up.

'Well he can't have wandered too far,' she said. 'I'm sure you'll find where he belongs.' Henry consulted his watch as Tess bounded off down the street; 9:56 am.

'Tess?' Henry called after her. 'Can't you find where the child belongs?' As Tess neared the corner Henry tried to point to his watch. 'I have my interview this morning at 10:45.'

'Good luck Henry!' Tess waved. 'I've got a class, sorry.' Henry watched the minute hand move to 9:57 am. He readjusted his satchel and pulled at his shirt collar, the heat of the day was making him increasingly uncomfortable. He had packed a clean shirt just in case, although he wondered if he would have enough time to change into it. The child wriggled and snuffled but kept a firm grip on Henry's finger.

It then occurred to Henry that he had seen children and adults engaged in group activities at the library nearby. It was feasible that the child had come from there. Although it was in the opposite direction to his interview, Henry quickly calculated he should still have enough time.

Inside the library, a noisy collection of children and adults were clapping and singing. As Henry and the child approached the squawking crowd, the child relinquished Henry's finger. Although no one appeared to have missed the child, Henry felt it was no longer his concern. Once the activities concluded, surely someone would notice it.

Henry made his way swiftly to the exit, only to find the determined fingers clasped around his own once more. A glance at his watch told him it was now 10:08 am.

A male library employee wandered by.

'Excuse me?' said Henry, stopping the employee mid stride. 'I discovered this child unsupervised outside and don't know to whom it belongs.' The man looked blankly at Henry.

'The child is lost,' Henry said clearly and slowly.

'Oh. I'll, um, make an announcement,' said the employee, who appeared pleased with this solution. He went to the desk and spoke over the library's public announcement system.

'Attention please, we have a little lost boy in the library. He is dressed in a bright red t-shirt and blue shorts.'

'I have an appointment,' Henry said to the employee. 'Could I ...' At that point, a rotund, older woman appeared. At first, Henry thought she had arrived to claim the child, then he spotted a badge on her dress indicating that she was also a library employee.

'What do we have here?' the woman asked the male employee.

'Lost kid,' he replied. 'This bloke said he found him outside.' The man gestured at Henry. The woman attempted to fold her round frame in half and proceeded to shout at the child.

'Where is your Mummy, dear?' The child squeezed Henry's finger tightly and moved behind him in order to utilise Henry's legs as a shield from the large, loud woman.

'Well, we'd better phone the police,' the woman declared. 'How long has he been lost?' The question was directed at Henry who consulted his watch; 10:13 am.

'I discovered the child approximately 25 minutes ago.'

The woman moved unhurriedly to the desk and was soon on the telephone. As she spoke, she looked pointedly at both Henry and the child, who was still hiding behind Henry's legs. She replaced the receiver.

'The police will be here shortly,' she declared, waddling toward them. 'They've had a report of a missing boy matching his description.' She then looked at Henry, 'you can wait with him. He seems happy enough with you.' Not waiting for a response, the woman waddled away. Henry's watch

now declared it was 10:17 am and although it was cooler in the library, an uncomfortable heat prickled at the back of his neck.

Henry fumbled in his pocket for his mobile phone. This was made all the more difficult by the child, still clutching at his finger. When he eventually managed to locate his phone, Henry found the number he required, pressed the green button and held it to his ear. The line rang and rang until it rang out. He checked the number and tried again. The same result. On his third attempt there was a recorded message. It advised they were experiencing a large volume of calls and to try again later. Henry hung up. The clock on his phone read 10:21 am. In an attempt to be proactive, he pulled a pen and some paper from his satchel and hurriedly wrote down his details and the information on where and when he had found the child. He placed the paper in his pocket and returned the pen to his satchel.

He went to take out his mobile phone again when the child pulled sharply on Henry's arm as it reached for a large book on a nearby shelf. Once the book was in its possession, the child dragged Henry to an armchair and clambered on. Henry remained standing, keeping a keen eye on the library's entrance. And his watch; 10:25 am.

The child then began to jump on the chair, indicating that Henry should sit. Irritated and wanting it to stop, Henry sat down. To Henry's surprise, the child promptly let go of his finger, climbed onto his lap and opened the book. It appeared it wanted Henry to read aloud. After careful consideration, Henry came to the conclusion that reading would likely not only placate the child but also provide a welcome distraction from his relentless watch.

When the policewoman arrived at 10:32 am, Henry closed the book and stood up. The child slid off his lap and took hold of Henry's finger once more.

'Good morning,' Henry said, accosting the policewoman before she had the opportunity to approach a member of staff. 'This is the missing child and these are my details.' He thrust the piece of paper from his pocket into the policewoman's hand. She looked at the paper, then at the child, then at Henry.

'Thank you, Henry is it?' Henry nodded.

‘His nanny lost the little tyke this morning,’ she said. ‘Not the first time apparently,’ she added in a conspiratorial whisper. ‘Alright matey, shall we go find Mummy?’ The child looked unsure. Henry squatted down as he had seen Tess do.

‘You need to go with the police now,’ he said. The child’s grip did not loosen. Then the policewoman produced a lollipop. Instantly, the child let go of Henry’s finger and reached out with both hands for the treat. Now free, Henry moved to the exit. At the door, he paused. The child was occupied with the lollipop. The policewoman saw Henry waiver, made a thumbs up sign and mouthed the words *all good*. Henry turned and left.

Running was not something Henry was accustomed to. By the time he reached the office building, his heart rate was highly elevated and his shirt was soaked through. In the elevator he pressed the button for the seventh floor and consulted his watch; 10:52 am.

At the reception desk on the seventh floor, an angular woman was on the telephone. She raised her hand into a stop signal as Henry approached.

‘Hang on,’ she said into the telephone headset. She looked at Henry impatiently.

‘Henry Edmonds,’ rasped Henry. ‘I had an interview with Gail Liston at 10:45. My apologies for ...’ The receptionist waved her hand again and cut him off.

‘Gail’s running late. She’ll be about 15 minutes?’ The woman returned to her phone conversation and didn’t look at Henry again.

Even though, according to the angular receptionist, he had ample time, Henry felt it best to change as quickly as possible. He spotted a sign for the bathroom and headed in the direction. Once he had washed the sticky residue from his fingers, splashed his face and changed into his clean shirt, Henry made his way back to reception. There he filled a cup with cold water from the dispenser and drained it rapidly. He then found a seat and tried to compose himself by practising what his therapist called square breathing.

Henry was finding it difficult to concentrate on his square breathing as the

receptionist was still speaking at a high volume on the telephone. This was obviously the reason he was unable to get through earlier. He made a mental note to mention it to Gail Liston.

'Henry Edmonds?' came a voice. A well dressed woman with neat hair had appeared in reception. Henry nodded and picked up his satchel. The well dressed woman led Henry down a long corridor to a large corner office.

'Nice to meet you Henry,' she said as she shook his hand and indicated he should sit in a chair opposite the ornate wooden desk. 'I'm Gail,' she continued. 'My apologies for keeping you waiting, it's been a difficult morning.' She closed the door and took her seat. She quickly scanned the papers in front of her then looked at Henry. 'According to your application, it's been four months since you were last employed? And you were only in that job for three months?' Henry nodded and remained silent. 'Can you tell me what happened there?'

The people Henry had worked for previously had asked him to do some highly questionable things from a legal standpoint. The man at the job centre had advised Henry against making any negative remarks about previous employers and as a result, he was now unsure how best to answer the question. Gail Liston sat back in her chair waiting for Henry's response.

'I wasn't compatible with that particular work environment,' he said eventually. She waited, clearly expecting Henry to add something more. When he didn't she sat forward again.

'I'm sorry Henry. To be perfectly honest, although you have the qualifications, I'm not sure you have the experience. If you can't provide me with more information about your previous employment, I'm afraid we can't consider you for this position.' Gail Liston stood and offered her hand to Henry. 'I wish you the best of luck, Henry.' Henry nodded in understanding, shook her hand and left the office.

As he made his way back down the corridor, Henry heard the receptionist on the telephone and realised he had failed to raise this with Gail Liston.

He turned to go back up the corridor and was surprised by a sticky hand grabbing hold of his finger. He looked down and was at a loss. Had the child

somehow escaped the police and followed him? He then noted that the child's appearance was altered. It was the same child, of that he was certain, however it no longer appeared to be in distress. It lifted up its other hand and pointed a pudgy finger at Gail Liston, who was now standing in front of them.

'Mummy!' it declared.

When Henry approached the door to his apartment that evening, Tess emerged from hers.

'Hello Henry,' she said warmly. 'Did you find that little boy's mummy this morning?'

'Yes, in a manner of speaking,' Henry replied. Tess smiled.

'I knew you would. How did your interview go?'

'The interview did not go well,' Henry replied. Tess reached out and rubbed his arm as she had done to the child.

'Oh, I'm sorry Henry. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll find a job soon.'

'I have a job,' Henry countered.

'You do?' Tess asked, appearing confused. 'You said the interview didn't go well.'

'The interview didn't go well. The job I have isn't the one I was interviewed for.'

'Well what is the job?' Tess asked, sounding exasperated.

'I'm the child's nanny,' Henry answered. Tess stood in her doorway open mouthed. 'Goodnight Tess,' Henry said as he let himself into his apartment. Tess's voice floated back as Henry closed his front door.

'Yes, goodnight Henry.'

POETRY

Common Burn

Paul Whitby

In Defence of the Wicked Queen

L.A Blake*

Planning the Rosebush Raid

Nathan Curnow

leaving

Dianne Jacono

Agapanthine War

Jarrad Sidus

Poetry Winner

Common Burn by Paul Whitby — Common Burn conveys the experience of living with ADHD in a fine, palpable fashion. I was particularly impressed by the richness and versatility of the poet's voice, by how seamlessly it kept shifting between lyrical and colloquial modes. The poem itself is as versatile as the voice, elegantly veering through different temporalities and states of mind, thus not only describing its subject but becoming it. This is a wonderful achievement of style as well as of heart.

*Arts Assist Local Encouragement Award

COMMON BURN

Paul Whitby

A.D.H.D. is an absence
held so close
that you wouldn't recognise
yourself or the world
if it was gone.

Sometimes it's a wrestle,
but usually an embrace.

For example, I am driving
the Emerald-Monbulk Rd.
It's a warm summer's night.
Common Burn by Mazzy Star,
the vibraphone chimes
shimmer through the car.
I stray the way clouds do,
across the road looking up
at the sky, a bowl of water.
And I feel the world
experiencing itself through me.

I'm present to little things.
It's hard to be close to me
sometimes. I had a friend
and he was telling me
about something
to do with breaking up
with his girlfriend.

It was hard to see her.
She worked in the deli and
he was in produce
I think, but a sparrow
lands on the table behind him
and begins picking at
the scrambled eggs.

She wasn't replying
to his text messages and
the sparrow is so close
I notice the subtle layers
and the shades of brown
upon his wings.
And he was despairing,
but then she hadn't returned
the engagement ring.
So, you know.

Wherever I am now,
I'm somewhere else.
The train doors shut
and I watch my backpack
glide by on the seat,
headmaster throws a duster
at my head, and the kids
laugh at me.

I can't say where I'm going,
but when I'm driving
through the forest like this,
I find I'm not too worried
about the trees.

IN DEFENCE OF THE WICKED QUEEN

L.A. Blake

They prayed I'd grow up like my mother
But being beautiful didn't save her
From the slow decay of time.
Every day she paints her face white like mine
And bites her lips until they bleed red.
She dyes her hair artificially black
Until it looks like ink spilled across aging parchment.
She tells me that beautiful girls are always alright.
Before anything else I must strive to be beautiful
Like she was.

Men start to look at me differently, but I don't want them to.
She tells me I'm wasting my beauty.
"You'll be old and ugly one day
And nobody will want you.
So while you are still young and beautiful
Take advantage.
Beautiful girls will always be alright.
Don't take too long or you'll end up alone
And old and ugly
Like I am now."

His mouth tastes like apples when he tells me how beautiful my face is.
I think, *yes, but what of my heart?*
At least he will provide for me
And any children we might have
Even if I die a little every time I see him.
My mother is proud.

She told me long ago that as long as I looked good
I'd never want for anything.
But mother, I never wanted a prince,
And I would have given my face to be free of him.

Mother dies eventually and leaves me her hair dye and face-paint
And a few words of wisdom to pass down
To my own daughter.
I wither down to the hollow bones of a bird
And every crevice of me is full of sand
But my daughter will be fine.
She looks the way I used to.
Oh, that I could curse her to sleep for a hundred years
So she would wake and know loneliness
The way I have.

My skin is yellowed with age when my daughter comes into her own.
She is fairer than I ever was, adored by all who see her.
As she watches, I paint my face white like hers.
She wants to know what I'm doing and why.
Oh daughter of mine, if you choose to remember only one thing I've said
Remember this.
I'm making myself beautiful
Because beautiful girls are always alright.
Before anything else you must strive to be beautiful.
Like I used to be.

PLANNING THE ROSEBUSH RAID

Nathan Curnow

1. Final Briefing

Gloves. Snippers. Night vision goggles.
Okay, the goggles might be a bit much.
But Joe's on comms in the getaway van.
Tonight we steal the town's floribundas.
I want roses the size of a swan's heart –
think Icebergs, Wildcats, Tiny Dancers.
We'll be hitting the yards marked A, B, C.
At each we have a five-minute window.
Stems should be straight and yea long.
Doc's driving because she's on her Ps.
Now here's that slide of a swan's heart.
That should've come earlier. Apologies.
Cut out the chat, we're on a timeline.
Look, my yea length is about *this* long.
Yes, 'yea' is a word, it's an old word.
No, I don't have a slide on its origin.
Indie and Scout, you're in ninja masks.
There's no time to make a playlist now.
Tiny Dancer's a rose *and* a song by Elton.
Why would they call it *Hakuna Matata*?
We're way off track. We're on a timeline!
Know every inch of this plan by heart.
Now someone has to swallow this USB.
I can't keep a secret from your mother.

2. Why

Because you love me, some things won't change,
the plan starts with spilling the heist. I come for the blessing

you'll deliver with a fabulous roll of your eyes.

The plan has holes which is why I've selected
our kids to be my gang – an impeccably untrained army.
Because you love me, some things won't change.

Because I love you, some things won't change.
We're stealing roses from the rich, for glory, awe and wonder.
What this damn, blooming marriage forgives.

3. Aftermath

Doc hits the brakes, petals fly,
the razor-sharp stems will launch,
carving us up in the back of the van
once we've been stopped by the cops.
I'm prone to call it a portrait or poem
and cops need a reason why, something
I'll try to answer by extolling stars and tides.
Explain to them this cut back fool
when they ask: 'Why isn't he normal?'
I'll be sorry by then, picking thorns
from our kids, all of us waiting for bail.
Still, you'll come to pick us up,
loading us into the family wagon,
sworn to us because you're in a gang
that knows the yea length of each other.
Lover, my love, it goes like this and
goes like this again. You'll take us home
via A, B, C, for the damage we inflicted –
rosebushes broken and brutalised
down to ugly stumps, all set to bloom
in the aftermath for glory, awe and wonder.
You'll drive us on with eye-rolls of pride
and desperation, while we sit sombre
listening to a playlist you've created.

LEAVING

Dianne Jacono

i stand at the open window
still, framed by billowing voile
like in some film noir scene

my stomach pitches and trembling
i give my back to the room
avert my face, to spare you

sunlight falls in bars across the bed
rippling over your side, stretched tight
with tumours competing for real estate

gelatinous tubing anchors you here
a syringe driver shunting
it's morphine delivery

your chest rises, falls, rattling seed pods
your body eschews the rules
of homeostasis, your hands cramp, shake
you cannot swallow, your limbs
have joined the mutiny, refusing
to carry you to the privacy of ablutions

my gaze roams the sunny street
out there, all is obscene normality
a guy revs his lawnmower, a speaker blares
rowdy kids ride donuts on asphalt
a dog walker argues into his mobile
oblivious, as twenty strides away
you are busy leaving

you groan and when i turn back
you are thrashing, i climb
between the sheets and gather you in
murmuring endearments and
'i don't want you to go'
'not keen on the idea myself' you whisper

all that long night, you wrap yourself
around me, terminally restless
i stay awake, talking to you softly
my desperation replaced by a strange calm

and, as the sun rises, you are there
on the threshold, one foot in this world
weight thrown forward
through the doorway to the other
the door is still ajar and this violent longing
drags at me to throw myself after you

your sky is bursting with unknown stars
but it is not my sky, this reality consists
of flooding tears, crushing pain and
well wishers intent on talking me back

i peer at them, dull eyed and exhausted
i keep asking where you have gone
no one can tell me.

there is a code here i am desperate
to decipher, a lock
to which i cannot find the key

did i believe i could save you?
there is no bargaining with this brutal finality
the brain does not accept death
until it slams up against you
shuddering through the heart
reverberating for years

AGAPANTHINE WAR

Jarrad Sidus

I'm tired, and yet victorious in war,
'gainst an enemy of worthy marrow;
I've nursed an iron in hatred's core,
Piled my enemies within my barrow.

I've knelt before the alter of peace,
I've abased myself before Love;
Naïve, I'd worn the warless fleece,
Yet how Hatred fit like a glove!

For malevolence grew wildly stirred,
In my heart of Humility's line;
An enemy thus showed I had erred,
When the sword I did fairly decline.

Other men fought for Love's burning heat,
Before evil their brow would harden;
Yet on battle's field no men did I meet:
My war was fought in my garden.

Now I sneer and snarl with curling lip,
My mind's eye conjures a name:
Agapanthus! Whose flesh I'd tear and rip,
My civil soul no longer tame.

Medusa's mane would wilt before,
The roots of Agapanthine snare;
Perseus would fail with sword to gore,
The plant's head from its body bare.

So I stole away to St George's fight,
Took up the dragon's fell jaw;
Bound it to wooden haft, true-tight,
Its jagged teeth served now as my saw.

With savage thrust, I plunged the soil,
'round each Agapantheon base;
Sawing root-nests was burdensome toil,
Yet the joy barely left my red face.

Save your cannon, and keep your blade,
For I've a gardening-crank's pitchfork;
Its tines glisten from the silver it's made,
And fluent in war can it talk.

With foot I press to fork's round shoulder,
And send spears beneath my foe;
With skill I avoid every stone and boulder,
Now no more this plant shall grow.

Each agapanthus with violence dire,
I wrench from the soil and sod;
Pile each corpse and form a pyre:
Mine enemy not spared the rod.

Amidst the glow and heat of the flame,
Mad-eyed I conclude the story,
Of each beastly plant my wrath did tame;

To me now is due all the Glory.

Though my garden is free of the blight,
Of Agapantheon I'd brought low;
I admire the spirit and root-knotted fight,
Of an enemy through war I did know.

FLASH FICTION

Still Life

E M Greville

Platform 1

Jessica Grixti Stanley*

The Last Grave

Henry Gasko

What of the Frog?

Corinne MacKenzie

Moogy

Rainie Zenith

Flash Fiction Winner

Still Life by E M Greville — *Still Life* lives up to its title, being as affectingly vivid as a fine painting. Its protagonists, the old couple, felt so real that I was almost embarrassed to be a witness to their understated yet powerful feelings for each other. Despite the brevity inherent in the genre, the writer managed to skillfully capture a decades-long love story with nuance and complexity, showing big emotions without a shred of sentimentality.

**Arts Assist Local Encouragement Award*

STILL LIFE

E M Greville

‘Tea?’

‘Yup.’ His hat thumps onto the pale scrubbed table, skids to the very edge without falling off. Even after forty years – the hat on the table. Jack and Violet had fought like puppies around her ankles as she counted out the coins she’d been saving and hiding in her sewing box for a year to buy the bloody thing. It’s going to last longer than her. She slides a witch’s gnarled finger across the stiff crown, caked in rust coloured dust and sweat. Someone needs to buy him a new one.

‘Disgusting old thing. The hat.’ she adds.

‘It’s a beautiful old thing. The hat.’ Hiding his lopsided grin behind his mug of tea.

She totters back to the kitchen bench. Her shuffling slippers echo the wind in the gums outside. A silver spoon rattles in her saucer. He eyes the fancy china and the ornate spoon. It might have been a wedding present, probably from her snooty grandmother who never thought he was good enough.

She lifts an angular shoulder. ‘Can’t take it with you.’

‘S’pose not.’

He remembers her on their wedding day. She hasn’t changed that much really. Tiny now, like a little fairy wren.

She takes a sip of too hot tea. She refuses to slurp. ‘She hated you.’

‘What!’

‘Grandmama. She said you smelt of cow shit and had the brains to match.’

‘The old bitch!’ But he’s smiling – he got the girl and the old woman is six feet under.

She takes his great hand in hers. His fingernails are caked black, the ends jagged. She runs her fingertip over the callouses at the base of each finger.

His palm is an ochre dirt map of their lives. Her own gnarled ring finger, branded with a simple, gold band that she couldn't get over her swollen knuckle if she wanted to, traces circles on his palm.

'Remember under the jacaranda tree?'

Her forget-me-not eyes find his jarrah ones across the table. Cows eyes, her grandmother had said. He's right – she really was an old bitch. She could smash the prissy, fragile teacup.

His eyebrows are doing the hairy-mary-caterpillar-dance. There's life in the old dog yet. A shaky hand rises to her warm cheek.

She flicks the tea towel at him. 'Animal.'

Sometimes the memories come like a tidal wave, threatening to wash her away. She thinks that would be a kinder way to die, floating away on a sea of cherished moments.

She looks out the window at the dry paddock.

'Rain?'

His eyebrows stop their capering and he puts down his mug with a thunk.

'Nope. Maybe tomorrow.'

'Maybe.'

She rises, gripping the edge of the table. 'Twins cutting scrub?'

'Yep. Back for breakfast soon, I reckon.'

She carries her cup to the sink. The memories engulf her. The twins dash about the paddock – lush with knee-high grass after the rains. Chasing each other on chubby baby legs and screaming, Rex careening after them and barking his head off. Giggles drift through the open window. She is drowning. Her breath catches in her throat and in a second he is there.

Their arms wind around each other as if they'll never let go. Her apron pocket rattles between them.

'Alright?' he whispers to his jacaranda girl.

'Alright.' she replies to her frightened boy.

In the distance, a moving cloud of red dust. The growl of an engine. Laughter carried across the air. Duke barking in the back of the ute.

'Kids are back. They'll be hungry.'

'Yup.'

PLATFORM 1

Jessica Gixti Stanley

When I arrived at Sydenham Station on the Thursday morning, I realised I was at the wrong station and, in fact, my life was a mere dream.

I started to walk around listlessly, terror clinging at my featureless form. I imagined my home on fire; of my younger sister going to light up a Winfield Blue 25, and setting herself alight. She'd gone into my room, where the electric blanket was still set to 10. In my haste to get to work, I had missed my mark and my life was crumbling.

The 8.72 to the city was coming shortly and I walked onto the track, but I wasn't being watched. Fire consumed my thoughts, as I remembered little Woofy McWooferson and how I forgot to feed him. The neighbourhood was a bad one and the dog was a weak shit. Shiitake mushrooms, I'm sorry, I don't normally swear except when I think of the train driver whose guts would be splashed across the windscreen of the Metro if he beat me to it first ... some feral would beat me to it and he would smash my skull in with his *do you even lifts*.

The man next to the lift called out the Metro announcer's announcement, his head rotating towards me like those laughing clowns at the Show; *The next train to Flinders Street will depart from Platform 1 in five hundred minutes.*

I counted down the minutes like I was back in primary school just before the three-fifteen end of term bell. No ... it was usually one o'clock when the end of term bell bleated its solemn beat. My heart beat as the giant clock above ticked to the sounds of my clicking tongue, tongue charred to bits because I'd taken a bite of the rock-hard six dollar snack-bar scone and disintegrated my poor molars into dust and assorted fifty cent plastic prizes from

the clown man's bellowing mouth.

My teeth hurt I hurt ... tooth-hurty o'clock. My eyes crumpled in front of me as if the station and the flashing lights and the serious woman with the perm and the clown man and his cacophony and the train itself...all except my blood and spine crumpled from my vision like my entire eyesight was just a moving slideshow in front of me. My eyes reversed and twisted around to face my orbless sockets, widening in delight; *Look at you, you'll never make the train on time if there's nothing left inside.*

I was left with nothing except the blackening blackness and the berating face of my sister telling me to turn off my electric blanket and get out of the coffin.

THE LAST GRAVE

Henry Gasko

Ruby knew that she would have to dig another grave before the day was over.

She'd been sitting up in the rocking chair in the corner of their bedroom, dozing fitfully during the long June night, listening to her husband's hacking cough grow steadily weaker. The sun had risen a few hours ago, behind the fog and drizzle. But Ruby knew that it would not rise again for Geoff.

It must have been that damn kayaker, Ruby thought, the one that had arrived on Cape Barren almost two months ago. Geoff and Robert had yelled at him, tried to make him leave. But where could he go; his food and water had run out during the paddle from Flinders Island. But Flinders, they knew, was as bad as the mainland now, with almost no one left alive.

A week later the kayaker was dead. Geoff, masked and gloved, had insisted on digging a grave for the stranger. He did it alone; by then, Robert was coughing as well.

Ruby placed her fingers on Geoff's feverish cheek, stroking the white bristly hairs. She had seen it before, with Robert and then Fran next door. The four of them were the last on the island, the only ones to survive the previous wave of the virus. But within a month of the stranger's arrival, Fran and Robert were gone as well. Two more graves.

Blind mutations, the scientists had said, each strain deadlier than the last and more infectious, as if to compensate for the dwindling supply of hosts. And with each strain, there were more graves to dig.

Geoff coughed, a deeper shudder that shook his entire body. Ruby knew that his lungs were blocked, full of pus and fluid. There might not even be much virus left. It was his body's own defenses killing him now.

Geoff's blood-shot eyes looked past her, towards the ceiling and possibly towards heaven. Ruby was a non-believer but just now she *needed* to believe. For a moment she saw a clichéd line of hominids evolving from the great apes, their gait straightening, their brains growing larger, until, finally human, they marched forth to take their place as the rulers of the world. For what? The ultimate irony was that there were still great apes alive. The vaccine trials had worked very well on chimps. Just not on humans.

Geoff's eyes were closed now and each sporadic cough was weaker than the last. *Not another grave*, Ruby thought. I don't have the strength for another grave.

She turned his face towards hers. He coughed again and Ruby imagined the faint miasma from his lungs hanging in the air between them.

She pulled her own mask down and leaned closer. She breathed deeply, taking the small pocket of warm air from his final breath into her own lungs. She kissed his lips and felt them grow colder even as she pressed her own against them.

No more graves, she thought. Not today. Not ever.

WHAT OF THE FROG

Corinne MacKenzie

The prince gazes up at the dismal grey castle.

His wife's sing-song voice carries in the air as she searches the place she first found him – that fateful day she followed the rolling trail of a magical golden ball all the way to his green webbed feet.

His feet dangle in the lagoon, transformed beneath the water.

Such dark enchantment in a young girl's dreams.

'Where the ball stops, you will find your prince,' the witch promised. 'Seal the spell with a kiss.'

His wife stands above him, arms akimbo, gilded ringlets aglow like lichen on a moonlit night.

'Why do you return to this dreary swamp?' Her cherry lips pout. The same soft lips pressed hopefully to his in their first kiss. Her tongue slippery moist in his mouth.

'Swim with me,' he entreats, wishing away her fine dry clothes so they might dive into the water, gliding slithery sensuous, immersed in the wet, a caress to the soul.

Her body stiffens.

'The water's dirty!' she snaps, stony cold.

And he prays for another miracle, that *his* heart's desire be granted – so he can be a frog, free again, and his progeny a tadpole.

MOOGY

Rainie Zenith

I don't have much time.

I never have much time.

A short black pumps down my throat in hasty swallows as I perch on the edge of my stool, poised to leave the exact second the espresso cup empties.

Stripe-shirted waitstaff zigzag the floor around me, with a busyness to rival even mine. They deliver a chai latte to the woman in the geometric print, a hot chocolate to the man in the three piece, scrambled eggs to the twenty-something with purple hair.

The early rush hour hits The Granite Poodle just as hard every morning, a boxer's smack to the cafe's chin, but they're always ready; the staff crouch like tigers behind the counter, and when the customers storm the building they spring forth and attack the orders like wildcats, shooting cups and plates back and forth from the kitchen with a vigour to match the demand.

Gulp, gulp.

Nearly done.

There's a giant iron clock on the wall, the second hand ticking away what little time I have left. I'm booked for a meet and greet with a client at nine, a strategy meeting at ten, and a catch up with my manager at eleven.

I never have much time.

Beside the clock hangs a painting of a wild ocean, waves crashing so convincingly you can almost hear them over the cafe chatter and clatter. Seagulls wheel in the sky and a lone ship straddles the horizon. How I've always longed to paint, but I just never have the time.

The artist's name is scrawled in the bottom corner.

Moogy.

I wonder what Moogy is like and how they find time to paint.

There's a person with the hood of their jumper pulled up, staring at me like I'm some circus freak.

Gulp, gulp.

Done.

I'm out of here.

The person in the hood glides to the giant clock, reaches up, grabs the iron hands.

Time stands still.

The noise of the cafe cuts as suddenly as though someone has pressed pause, the people frozen in mid-step, mid-sip, mid-how-are-you-today.

Among the blanket stillness, only myself and the person in the hood remain animated.

They step towards me, but I don't feel threatened; rather, I feel something akin to peace wash over me.

'I'm Moogy,' they say in a gravelled up voice.

Mind washed blank by the strangeness of it all, I merely nod.

'If you really want to do something,' Moogy says, 'You must *make* the time.'

They walk back to the clock, reach up and knock the hands into motion, and the noise and bustle of the cafe return as though they never had stopped.

Moogy slips out the door.

I spend a moment in quiet bafflement, then step outside and dial my manager's number.

'You know all that leave I have owing? I'm going to take today off, thanks.'

I make a beeline for the little art supply shop on the next block.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

L. A. Blake

Lucinda Blake has a Bachelor's Degree of Creative and Professional Writing and is passionate about content creation and storytelling in all its forms. In her spare time she pursues hobbies such as fencing, archery, and cosplay, and writes as much self-indulgent fantasy as she can.

M. Elisabeth Bridson

Dozens of part-filled notebooks on her shelves indicate that Elisabeth has always been a writer. Only now, at the age of 66, is she claiming that title. With five children and a smorgasbord of careers behind her and an almost complete MA(Writing) she's ready to launch herself on the world.

Nathan Curnow

Nathan Curnow's books include The Ghost Poetry Project, RADAR, The Right Wrong Notes and The Apocalypse Awards. He is the current judge of the Woorilla Poetry Prize and has taught creative writing at Federation University. His work continues to be published widely in Australia and overseas.

Henry Gasko

Henry Gasko was born in a displaced persons camp in Yugoslavia after World War Two, was raised on a vegetable farm in Canada, and came to Australia in 1976. He recently retired from a career in data analysis and medical research, and decided to return to his first love: writing.

Elizabeth Gonzalez

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina and migrated to Australia in 2004 with her husband and children. Elizabeth loves writing fiction; her inspiration comes

mostly from everyday situations and anecdotes she hears around. She is an avid reader and the local library is one of her favourite places to visit.

E M Greville

E M Greville is a fledgling editor and aspiring writer living outside Geelong. She squeezes writing in between chasing children, chickens and cats around the countryside, and thinks there's probably a story in that. She has just finished writing her first novel, and hopes to meet a friendly publisher soon.

Jessica Grixti Stanley

Jessica Grixti Stanley is a writer and lifelong Wyndham resident. She decided she wanted to be a writer as a shy, imaginative, eight year old, and hasn't stopped writing since. Her stories aim to be entertaining, thoughtful, and stick with you long after you've read the last sentence.

Lindsay T. Hocking

Lindsay T. Hocking was born in Ballarat, Victoria, and has had a long career in the television, film and advertising industries. He has been a highly successful writer, producer and director in those commercial fields. Lindsay is semi-retired and lives in Point Cook with his partner, Nicole.

Dianne Jacono

Dianne is a poet and visual artist. Her poems are often presented through the lens of a child's growing consciousness. However, 'Leaving' is among a suite of poems about finding her way through deep grief. She works out of her home studio in Victoria's beautiful Central Highlands.

Melanie Kanicky

Melanie spends her days living out her childhood dream of managing a bookstore. She's currently completing her Master's Degree in Writing & Literature, and hopes one day to see her own novels on the shelves. Melanie currently lives in Melbourne with her fiancé and their two fur-babies, Han and Chewie.

Corinne MacKenzie

Corinne lives in the Yarra Ranges with her partner and two cats who have embraced their roles as writer's muses. She has university degrees in important life skills of archaeology and creative writing. Her short stories have appeared in ABC Books Great Australian series and the Hunter Writers Centre anthology.

Jarrad Sidus

Jarrad Sidus is a writer and poet from Sunbury, Victoria. A passionate Australian, Jarrad prefers to write in Traditional rhyming verse in order to carry the torch first lit by the Australian greats, such as his favourite, Henry Lawson.

Paul Whitby

Paul Whitby is a poet, musician and stand-up comedian (in that order). Previously a house sitter in rural Victoria, he's now locked down in Yarrambat with his parents. If you live out that way, you might see him skulking around in the abandoned digs.

Karen Wasson

Up until the end of 2020, Karen owned and ran her own small business, creating clothing for children with medical needs. She's always loved dabbling in writing and has recently been exploring the world of writing for children. She hopes to be a published author one day!

Rainie Zenith

Rainie Zenith has a penchant for pieces that fall broadly within the gothic fantasy realm. She was the winner of the 2020 Monash Short Story Competition and the Fountain 2020-2021 Essay Contest. Her work has been published in numerous anthologies. She is also a singer-songwriter. Find out more at facebook.com/rainiezenith