

PLATFORM

edition 14 winter 2013

words from the west



PROFESSIONAL WRITING & EDITING^(TAFE)

The Professional Writing and Editing department at Victoria University (TAFE) not only conducts classes at the St Albans campus, but also encourages students to step outside formal walls, by taking their learning into the community to explore writing through social, publishing and literary events in various locations throughout Melbourne's west. Students gain industry knowledge they can employ throughout their working lives.

The core of our courses is a two-year Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing, which includes subjects on creative writing (short stories, memoir and novel), poetry, non-fiction, journalism, business and other formal writing, editing, desktop publishing and traditional publishing, photography and many related fields. Writing for, editing and producing Platform is part of our second year Publishing Studio subject. We also offer short courses.

When students finish our diploma, they can apply for one year of credit towards a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Communication with Victoria University's higher education department.

We invite you to join us.

Certificate 4 and Diploma courses
www.profwritingvu.wordpress.com

Short courses

Contact the office (03) 9919 2681

Rotunda in the West

Conversations with Australian Writers

Facebook: TWZ (TheWriteZone)

www.thewritezone.com.au

CONTENT

Editorial	2
Dear Kids , Paul Mitchell	3
Tom , Lorraine Jones	4
My Old House Reminiscence , Peter Le	10
Dancing Alone , Phuong Nguyen	10
On Miraculousness , Brian Doyle	11
Interrupting Lives , Emma Janes	13
Dear Father , Luisita Reyes	14
Angourie Crescent , Nickie Idrus	14
A Last Hope , Aimee Morcos	15
The Power of Words , Anna Brasier	20
SolY Sombra , Ailsa Piper	22
A Poem for All of Us , Mary Camera	24
I Admire , Luong Tran	24
Flight from Iraq , Jeremiah Ganicoche	25
12.48am One Summer Night , Daniel Micallef	27
Short , Tom Petsinis	27
Garden of Erstwhile Delights , Andrew Williamson	28
Our Little Box of Treasures , Bethanie Hutchins-Tribe	29
Books , Ashleigh Marks	31
Kissing Strangers , Kristin Henry	35
Letting Go , Kate Prendergast	35
Language Barrier , Carmel Riordan	36
The Cell , Majd Rustam	39
So it Goes , Maria Vavala	41
I was Born in Poland , Monika Athanasiou	41
The Secret Garden , Kathy Petrova	42
Balnarring Beach Circa 1983 , Kathryn Bail	42
Afterlife , Craig Henderson	43
Love and Work , Cate Kennedy	48
Agile , Kurt Steward	48

EDITORIAL

The images on the front cover of Platform 14 highlight the landscape of Melbourne's west. They are snapshots of our community, both new and old. Inside you will find another type of community — our writing community. We provided the geography — the Platform — and writers from all levels of experience populated it with their stories, poems and reflections, turning the otherwise barren pages into a diverse and interesting landscape.

Our community is strong and its voice demands to be heard. The writing is vibrant, sometimes raw, sometimes reflective, but always honest. Like the landmarks on the front cover, the stories are recognisable, yet surprising in detail. We may pass these places everyday but never take notice of their beauty or quirky humour.

Our community of writers have captured life's details. With their words they have exposed the intricacies of the things we take for granted. They have committed their thoughts and feelings to print for others to read, discover and share.

Thank you to Beata Cranswick and her students at Victoria University's Design Studio for designing the cover and inside pages, Jenny Allen for letting us use her photos on the cover and Susanna Bryceson's Editing 2 class for proofreading this edition.

Immerse yourself in our community. Let us show you our lives.

 *Emanuel Cachia and Anna Brasier*

Platform 14 Editors

Commissioning Editor

Bruno Lettieri

bruno.lettieri@vu.edu.au

Editorial Panel

Susanna Bryceson

Bruno Lettieri

Editors

Emanuel Cachia

Anna Brasier

Cover and Layout Design

Design Studio

College of Arts

beata.cranswick@vu.edu.au

Front Cover Photography

Western Patchwork#1, Jenny Allen

Want to contribute to Platform?

Please contact Bruno via

bruno.lettieri@vu.edu.au

DEAR KIDS

It's just so fantastic
that you're alive.
You can live all you want.
You can be something.
Or nothing at all.
You can do both & then
decide to be neither.
You'll be happy. Then sad.
Then happy again. You'll hear
The Police sing, 'Walking
on the Moon' while you're
walking on the moon.
Dumb people will say
they're smart and you'll know it.
No one will ever jump on your guitar.
If they do, play piano right back at them.
Don't listen to me! Then listen closely.
Have a bite to eat. Fly away.
Then come back.
I'll be waiting in my wings
with my heart outstretched.

 **Paul Mitchell**

*Paul is a performance poet, short story writer
and teacher, and has featured in a number
of Rotunda in the West events*

TOM

Whenever I met Tom it was like stepping through a crack in time. His weathered brown skin, lean rangy body and piercing blue eyes, sparkling and dancing with knowledge beyond my reach, made him an arresting figure. His stiff black hair, laden with the grime of wind, dust and neglect, thrust itself out from under his woolen hat and thumbed its nose at expectation. I sensed the deep-rooted elemental connection that tethered him to the land. It drew me closer and made me want to step back at the same time.

The measured tread of his well-worn boots clumping across the deck heralded his arrival. A momentary pause as his eye, gleaming with land lore, cast itself across the valley. I could almost hear him thinking, 'Citrus needs mulching. Fence needs fixing. Gotta cut back that creeper or it'll get in the garden. Jesus, they still haven't mowed the orchard.' He shook his head and sighed, inevitably disappointed by the lack of knowledge and commitment that hijacked every townie's attempt to live off the land.

That sigh, quiet though it was, momentarily squeezed my heart and left me brushed by guilt.

Clearly, we were just wannabes, 'hippies' wasting twenty-two acres that could've been put to better use. He mourned the loss of real farmers and woodsmen. Bill had been here, on and off, for nearly fifteen years. I'd met him three years ago during an 'off' period, when he'd been living and working in town to earn money. Together we'd been here for nearly a year now. It was a big change for me. I'd never lived in the country before.

Tom told me his mum had cleared off when he was seven. He'd lived on the land with his dad after that, herding stock up and down the country and taking on farm work when they needed money. It was a man's world. You grew up quick living like that. When his dad eventually died it had left Tom drifting without an anchor. It wasn't till he'd finally bought a few acres down off the old beach road that he'd been able to staunch the wound. It hurt him to know he was one of a dying breed, it reminded him that he too was getting old and that soon he would be gone. The loss made his bones ache.

He knew better than to hope one of us could be caught and tethered to the land, assuming guardianship when the Earth Mother, Gaia, called him home. But he could do with a chat and a cuppa. He got lonely living with the chickens and the dogs for company.

'Yeah, gidday, Luv. 'Air goin'?' Boots thunked outside the door. Hat in hand, hair a spectacular prickle, he settled himself onto a suspiciously fragile looking kitchen chair and nodded in answer to me holding the kettle aloft. Absentmindedly he lent down and flicked bits of straw and chaff off his socks. I resisted the urge to sweep them up.

When Tom was feeling distracted or dispirited his conversation became repetitious and boring, and I writhed uncomfortably on the hook of politeness, hoping for relief. But some days he'd take me aback by launching into a glimpse of times gone; a detailed description of how to make a decent stock whip from the scrotum of a bull, or perhaps an adventure from days droving and working with his dad, before the townies started changing everything.

Trying to drink tea out of a sissy china cup and swilling the gnats-piss city slickers called tea was almost not worth the bother. I saw his eyes flick to the wood box, then outside through the back window to the woodpile.

'Tell Bill I'll be back in the weekend and cut down a tree for ya. Looks like you're gettin' a bit low on firewood. I've had my eye on that one hangin' over the track. If he's got the tractor hitched to the trailer I'll take that rubbish to the tip on ma way home.'

'Okay. Thanks, Tom. I'll tell him. What day?'

'Aw ... make it Saturday morning. I'll be here by ten. Tell the lazy bugger he'll have ta get up early

for a change.' The unrestrained raucousness of the bellow that was Tom's laughter always jarred my 'citified' senses as it echoed down the back valley. But I really liked Tom. He had a good heart. And I think he liked me, knew a worker when he saw one. He'd watched as I cut, slashed, pruned and dug in the garden, then painted, curtained and chivied Bill into helping renovate the house.

And perhaps we both sensed the loneliness of displacement in each other. He never said, but I knew he thought, I was too good for Bill. Lots of people did.

'Stay for lunch after, Tom. I'll cook a roast.'

'Yeah, okay.' Thrusting his hat back on his head, he leaned forward and pushed himself up. Feet thrust into boots and laces tied, he turned back. 'How're ya going for meat, Luv? I got some mutton if ya wanna drop by and pick it up.'

'I'd love some. You sure you don't need it?'

'Nah. No sweat. You come down tamorra. I got plenty. I'll get it ready then.'

'Okay. I'll drop by late morning. Thanks, Tom. See ya.'

Bye, Luv.'

The next day I called by after I'd done the shopping. There was something about Tom's place that drew me. At the same time it appalled me. Everything about it asserted 'my world is not your world'. Car and truck wrecks grew into the front paddock and nestled close to the house. The sound of clucking chickens clattered on the wind as Tom's dogs lopped through them on their way to investigate my intrusion. A small flock of sheep grazed on the other side, farm implements propped or hanging from the fence. A dirt path wound

amongst clumps of tall grass, petering out to a scruffy patch of bare earth in front of the concrete doorsteps. Avoiding the muddy patches, while fending off the nudging noses of his dogs; absorbed my attention.

‘Hi, Tom! You home?’ I called.

‘Come on in, Luv. Be there in a minute.’

I heard the scrabble of claws, the squawking of hens and a muffled expletive. Then the clump of boots.

Tom’s head emerged from the door. ‘You need a hand up, Luv?’

‘I’ll be right.’

Tom’s yard was one thing, but entering his kitchen was something else. A determined chicken was stalking back through the laundry door, clucking her outrage at having her carpet scavenging interrupted. Tom’s dogs tried to sidle in unnoticed and the white peacock out the back rattled its tail feathers.

‘Get outside ya mangy bastards!’ was followed by a flurry of animal activity. Shooing the animals outside was Tom’s way of acknowledging my ‘girlie’ sensibilities. As was the swipe of his hand that cleared a space amongst all manner of paper and debris that normally collected on the sofa.

‘Have a seat, Luv. Won’t be long. Just gotta sort out this stuff.’

Hoisted by my own politeness, I reluctantly settled onto his couch.

‘Hang on. I’ll just put the kettle back on. I reckon I got milk here somewhere.’

I cast my eye over the kitchen table. Half-opened packet of butter, jar of honey, Marmite, pile of newspapers and mail, bits of wire, engine pieces

— and dust. Lots of dust.

‘I reckon I got some biscuits,’ said Tom, heading to the table and lifting papers and packages.

‘It’s okay, Tom. Tea’ll do.’ The first time I’d been here Tom had proudly shown me his new extension, an extra bedroom. Storm damage a while back had wrecked one of the beach houses in the bay and the insurance company had condemned it. Tom’s scavenging antenna, ever alert, had immediately signaled an opportunity. By the afternoon a deal had been struck. In return for taking it away, Tom could have the bedroom.

Calls to a couple of mates, a truck loaned, trailer hitched to a borrowed tractor, chainsaws filled and hoisted onto truck beds, and he was back. Hammers, nails and scrap timber had the bedroom braced in no time. Using strategies that only a ‘real bloke’ would know, Tom and his mates managed to lift, load, transport and reposition the bedroom so it was wedged tightly to the back of Tom’s house. Another whir of the chainsaw to cut a doorway into the back of the kitchen and the bedroom was done.

My contribution to Tom’s new addition was a patchwork quilt, brown and white, with thick Dacron wadding. I worried about those aches of his. He needed something to keep him warm. His eyebrows rose when he saw the white. Of course he was right. Still, before long, dirt would likely cover it and you wouldn’t be able to tell.

When he proudly announced he now had a spare room, and people could come and stay, it was my turn to raise an eyebrow. People stayed here?

But today was about collecting meat. I’d bought a pot of homemade jam. One thing I enjoyed about country living was being able to indulge my

Earth Mother inclinations. I jammed and preserved, baked and sewed, swapped recipes and had time to stop for cups of tea.

I watched as he whisked the woolen tea cozy off the old enamel teapot and plunked in three heaped teaspoons of loose tea. My tongue cringed in anticipation. At the same time my nose was shrieking in distress. What was that smell? My face must have given me away.

‘Got those blahdy fleas last night. The little bastards were all over the carpet.’

‘Fleas? In the carpet? Now my toes were curling as well. ‘What’d you do?’

‘Doused the shit outta the buggers with kerosene. That got rid a’ them quick smart. You shoulda seen ‘em dancin’ all over the place.’

My eyes riveted themselves to the wood stove and the flames that flickered in the wood box, then across to the overflowing ashtray and the roll-your-own sagging from his lips. Every part of my being implored me to leave and go home, right now. I was determined to tough it out. Of their own accord the muscles in my feet and legs poised themselves ready to sprint. My tongue signaled its willingness to withdraw its protest about the tea, so long as I drank it quickly.

Finally, Tom rose. ‘Let’s get that meat, aye?’ As soon as his back turned, I bolted.

Tom emerged carrying a belt that supported a couple of wicked looking knives and a sharpening steel. ‘It’s down the front paddock. Come on.’

I trotted quickly behind Tom’s long and sure stride, watching the ground so I didn’t step in something unexpected. Of course, if I’d been a ‘real’ country girl I’d have worn gumboots, but, in my

mid-twenties, I was still too young to want to dress entirely on the basis of practicality.

He reached the fence and clambered through. Glancing back at me, he nodded towards the fence line and said, ‘Reckon you’d best wait just there,’ and strode off across the grass.

I wasn’t quite sure why we’d stopped. I thought we were heading to his truck. I guessed Tom had seen something that needed his attention. I relaxed and concentrated on trying to rid my nose of the kerosene smell that clung to the hairs in my nostrils.

Next minute, Tom broke into a quick trot and lunged at one of the sheep grazing in the paddock. Expertly, he flipped it onto its back, secured it in a firm grip, reached back for his knife and calmly, while muttering ‘Keep still yer stupid blahdy sheep,’ slit its throat.

Everything in me stilled. My brain stuttered as it replayed the scene. Run. Sheep. Lunge. Knife. Blood. Spurting. I was brutally reminded that this was what meat was. No plastic packaging and tantalising shelf display to mask my awareness today.

Once the sheep stopped twitching and kicking, Tom quickly cleaned and sheathed his knife. He wiped his hands on his jeans and said, ‘Yeah, that oughta do it. I’ll butcher it later and bring some down for ya. Wadda ya reckon — a leg and some chops? You wanna forequarter too?’

‘Hey, that’d be great, Tom. Thanks very much.’ I hid my horror. This was a gift; Tom’s equivalent of me sharing pots of jam. I waved, walked to the gate, opened and closed it carefully, then drove home. That was the thing about Tom; he was steeped in ‘real’ life. But his real life was so different from mine. His life was deeply rooted in self-sufficiency and

independence. Mine needed people and a place to build from. But life can be a funny thing. You never know when it'll change.

For Tom, it was the day a freak accident made him a cripple. He'd been working alone up the back of a farm across the way. Investing in a posthole borer that could be run from the tractor had got him a lot of work. He'd never had a problem. But this day, driving up a hill, something had jammed. Jumping down, he'd leaned under the tractor. For reasons no one was ever able to identify, the heavy posthole borer suddenly tipped from the back of the tractor, knocked him out and pinned him to the ground. He couldn't move. During the times he was conscious, he yelled for help. It was dusk before Bob, going outside after tea, thought he heard something. In the country you don't ignore things like that.

By the time they found Tom he was in a bad way. His back was cut up and crushed pretty bad. A lesser man would have died.

I'd been away when Tom was hurt. On my return I found his absence, in subtle and unexpected ways, changed things. It was a gradual, mostly unconscious process, but without his fatherly eye and ever present knowledge, I realised I didn't feel safe here anymore. Bill's inadequacies were suddenly more marked and less acceptable. His lack of commitment to learning how to manage his land aroused my resentment. Swirls of discontent were, for the first time, nipping round my ankles. My nose prickled with the scent of approaching storms. Part of me quietly started storing memories.

Tom was away a long time and when he came home it was with a cocktail of painkillers and a stiff, laced-up surgical corset encasing his body from chest to hips, which had to be worn day and night.

If he'd been a dog or a horse they'd have put him down. Being a bloke meant he had to grimace and bear it. Life was a bastard sometimes.

He'd made them let him out of the hospital. The food and company was okay for a while, but it drove him nuts, all that fussing and noise. The good thing was he'd been fixed up with a disability pension. For a man who'd never needed 'charity' it went against the grain. But it meant he could take it easy and concentrate on recovering. The pain that constantly nipped and snapped at his heels had him corralled and cornered and removed in an instant the objections that would have been the hallmark of his 'normal' life. No 'blahdy dole bludging' for him. Now the neighbours were the ones dropping by, bringing groceries, checking he was okay and providing company.

Inevitably, having to wear 'that bloody surgical corset' led to changes. Chopping firewood for the wood stove was out of the question. Once the pain let him move about a bit, he scavenged round and found an electric stove no one needed. That meant finally getting the power connected. But on nights when he was twisted up with pain, he conceded that flicking a light switch or pushing a button to turn on a heater was a bloody relief. Eventually, he managed to adapt his cooking style to the limitations of electricity. No more leaving a stew pot to quietly simmer all day.

'Blahdy stove burnt the arse off everything,' he told me irritably. And he trained himself to listen for the bubbling of the electric jug instead of the whistling kettle on the hob. 'Burnt out a coupla elements before I got the hang of them damned electric water boilers. New-fangled, blahdy things.'

With the extra time he now had, he knocked up a chicken coop. When I admired it, he shrugged.

'Gets the chickens outta the house and means I don't have to hunt every blahdy where for the eggs; don't trip over them neither. Stupid, blahdy things.'

But there was one thing he embraced wholeheartedly. Deb had given him her food dehydrator when she moved back to the city. He used it to dry fruit, but what chuffed him the most was his own adaptation. 'Works a beaut hatching the peacock eggs. Reckon I'll have enough peacocks now to sell some off. Blahdy beaut little thing, this.'

Tom was coming late and reluctantly to the relative ease of modern living, but he was willing, if pushed, to concede. It was a big help, under the circumstances. Tom would never have slowed down without the accident. Angels bestow their blessings in strange ways sometimes.

Now the boots that tread across the deck are more hesitant and Tom offers eggs instead of tree felling. The china cups are still sissy and my tea hasn't stopped tasting like gnat piss. He still sighs when he looks down the back valley. I still feel brushed by guilt. Gaia is loosening the hold that kept him tethered so tightly to the earth, but holds him closer to her heart these days. And Tom still thinks Bill's a lazy bastard. So do I.

 *Lorraine Jones*

*Lorraine won the Adult Short Story category in the
2012 Brimbank Literary Awards*

MY OLD HOUSE REMINISCENCE

I sat alone in the old house on the mountainside, pondering silently. The house always seemed old and tired, and perhaps slightly bored of her surroundings after sitting there for all those years. Lonely, too, perhaps, since she only had the elements to talk to. There was Wind, shaking his dandruff stricken head. She moaned in protest as her old beams were shaken by his roaming voice.

Sometimes Rain came to visit as well, though he usually found the solitary mountainside too cold for his liking. Whenever he did come, however, he liked to announce his presence by an irregular tapping against the window panes, getting louder because the old, near-deaf house could not hear him, or perhaps she could hear him and was simply ignoring him, not wanting company that day.

Wind's company, however, was more welcome and he came with trunks of snow and ice, carried by those long, cold fingers. I personally detested Wind as I was forced to walk around wearing multiple jumpers and sweaters. Despite herself, the old house seemed to enjoy his visits, with his long fingers extending their way into every corner and crack of the house. Wind seemed to put the house in good cheer and she would shake with laughter as he told her his adventures of travelling all around the world.

If she had a choice, I'm pretty sure the house would have barred me from entering. She hated me. I suppose. I couldn't blame her for being cranky sometimes; it must get frightfully lonely up there on the mountainside whenever Wind and Rain were off travelling and she was trapped, alone and cold on that solitary mountainside.

 Peter Le

DANCING ALONE

A row of trees along the street act as tour guides. They show the way to Highpoint.

Among them, there is a different tree — the tree is a refugee girl.

Maybe, she was born in a poor, war-torn place. Now she has the opportunity to live in peace. She looks refreshed with her brown body, the bark of the tree the colour of her skin.

She dances in the traditional style of her homeland. Floating green leaves soft and silky in the space.

She is cheering alone, her arm branches raised when the wind comes as she breathes the fresh air of a free country.

 *Phuong Nguyen*

Peter and Phuong studied their Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA) with Victoria University (TAFE) in 2012 and were part of a diverse group of students from many different backgrounds, experiences and walks of life

ON MIRACULOUSNESS

A while ago I was shuffling along the roaring shore of the misnamed Pacific Ocean, humming to myself, pondering this that and the other, when I saw a crippled kid hopping toward me. She was maybe four years old and her feet were bent so sideways that her toes faced each other so she scuttled rather than walked. I never saw a kid crippled quite like that before. I thought for a minute she was alone but then I noticed the rest of her clan, a big guy and two other small girls, probably the dad and sisters, walking way ahead of the crippled kid.

The crippled kid was cheerful as a bird and she zoomed along awfully fast on those sideways feet. She was totally absorbed in the seawrack at the high tide line – shards of crab and acres of sand fleas and shreds of seaweed and ropes of bullwhip kelp and fractions of jellyfish and here and there a deceased perch or auklet or cormorant or gull, and once a serious-sized former fish that looked like it might have been a salmon. In the way of all people

for a million years along all shores she stared and poked and prodded and bent and pocketed and discarded, pawing through the loot and litter of the merciless musing sea.

She was so into checking out tide-treasure that her dad and sisters got waaay out ahead of her and after a while the dad turned and whistled and the crippled kid looked up and laughed and took off hopping faster than you could ever imagine a kid that crippled could hop, and when she was a few feet away from the dad he crouched a little and extended his arm behind him with his hand out to receive her foot, and she shinnied up his arm as graceful and quick as anything you ever saw, and she slid into what must have been her usual seat on his neck and off they went, the sisters pissing and moaning about having to wait for the crippled kid and the dad tickling the bottoms of the kid's feet, so that I heard the kid laughing fainter and fainter as they receded, until finally I couldn't hear her laughing anymore, but right about then I was weeping like a child

anyways, at the intricate astounding unimaginable inexplicable complex thicket of love and pain and suffering and joy, at the way that kid rocketed up her daddy's arm quick as a cat, at the way he crouched just so and opened his palm so his baby girl could come flying up the holy branch of his arm, at the way her hands knew where to wrap themselves around his grin, at the way the sisters were all pissy about the very same kid sister that if anyone else ever grumbled about her they would pound him silly, and this is all not even to mention the glory of the sunlight that day, and the basso moan of mother sea, and the deft-diving of the little black sea-ducks in the surf, and the seal popping up here and there looking eerily like my grandfather, and the eagle who flew over like a black tent heading north, and the extraordinary fact that the Coherent Mercy granted me my own kids, who were not crippled, and were at that exact moment arguing shrilly about baseball at the other end of the beach.

I finally got a grip and set to shuffling again, but that kid stays with me. Something about her, the way she was a verb, the way she was happy even with the dark cards she was dealt, the way she loved openly and artlessly, the way even her sisters couldn't stay pissy but had to smile when she shinnied up their daddy's arm, seems utterly holy to me, a gift, a sign, a reminder, a letter from the Light.

In my Father's house are many mansions, said the thin confusing peripatetic rabbi long ago, a line I have always puzzled over, yet another of the man's many zen koans, but I think I finally have a handle on that one. What he meant, did Yesuah ben Joseph of the haunting life and message, is that we are given gifts beyond measure, beyond price, beyond understanding, and they mill and swirl by us all

day and night, and we have but to see them clearly, for a second, to believe wholly in the bounty and generosity and mercy of I Am Who Am.

I am not stupid all the time, and I saw how crippled that kid was, and I can only imagine her life to date and to come, and the tensions and travails of her family, and the battles she will fight and the tears she will shed, and I see and hear the roar of pain and suffering in the world, the floods and rapes and starvings and bullets, and I am too old and too honest not to admit how murderous and greedy we can be. But I have also seen too many kids who are verbs to not believe we swim in an ocean of holy. I have seen too many men and women and children of such grace and humor and mercy that I know I have seen The Holy Thing ten times a day. I think maybe you know that too and we just don't talk about it much because we are tired and scared and the light flits in and around so much darkness. But there was a crippled kid on the beach and The Holy Thing in her came pouring out her eyes and I don't forget it.

In my Father's house are many mansions, said the skinny Jewish guy, confusingly, and then in his usual testy editorial way, if it were not so, I would have told you, and then, in a phrase I lean on when things go dark, I go to prepare a place for you.

But we are already in the doorway of the house, don't you think?

 **Brian Doyle**

*Brian is the editor of Portland Magazine
and author of The Wet Engine*

INTERRUPTING LIVES

Endless thoughts
Running
Always through our minds
Never knowing
Forever searching
Always searching
What for?
A conclusion. A conclusion to life, to love, to loss,
Where do we find such a thing?
Is there ever a real ending. A real beginning
Is anything real?
Objects yes. To touch must mean it's real
Then what?
When it is gone, what feelings then?
Do we subject ourselves to only feeling?
Feeling only flesh. Only the effects of flesh
Then what?

Questions. Always asking questions
Is it this, or is it that? Was that my reason
Did I ever really feel?
And then. What happens next?
We forget. Lose touch. Lose reason
What was it that we really lost?
Was it just an interruption?
Do we interrupt our own lives?
Is life like a conversation
Starting with a subject, then being interrupted?
Or, do we lose sight of the point altogether

Do we control anything?
I mean do we really have control?
Is control an illusion? Something we have conjured
That interrupts our lives
Like a bad conversation that doesn't stay on track
Then, we realise, is it at this point
That we lose touch
At that point, at which, we lose control
Lose command of what we have never been in control of?
Not our lives, or our feelings
We just lose it. Everything
Everything we thought we had
When really. It was all an illusion we had conjured
An illusion we conjured, because, we believed it
made us powerful
We believed it made us feel

Life is an illusion of control
Of questions being answered
This, we, ourselves, have conjured
For appeasement
For all of our life
To have a semblance of control
Now that we have lost it
Now what do we do?
We forget. Lose touch. Lose reason
What was it that we really lost?
Or was it just an interruption?

 *Emma Janes*

*Emma is studying a Diploma of Professional Writing and
Editing at Victoria University (TAFE)*

DEAR FATHER

Dear Father,
I remember when you taught me how to cook
and we used firewood to cook the rice.
I remember when you visited me in my school and
gave me money to buy my lunch.

On Christmas you cooked pudding for me, we ate
together. I was so very happy.

I remember when you opened your old, tin money
box full of coins and gave me all it contained.
But I also remember how we sat on the floor and
you lectured me.

'All I can give to you is education. Money can be
pinched but education no one can take away because
education is in your brain.'

You brought me books, pens, everything I needed
in school.

I remember when I cried, thinking that you were
still alive because I still talked to you in my dreams.
I know you're now one of the angels.

I wish that you had lived forever.

 *Luisita Reyes*

ANGOURIE CRESCENT

We have a special bond
The house at Angourie Crescent and me
I miss its swimming pool
Its blue L-shape

I wear my two-piece bathers—
Fashionable but modest
Angourie Crescent dresses modestly, too
Dull coloured curtains and grey carpet

I dive in the pool and have fun
When there is sunlight
Angourie Crescent also enjoys the day
Its bricks being soaked in the sun
Until the day becomes dark, dull and cold

In the night time the stars shoot in the sky
Right in front of my very eyes
I lie down on the ground at Anjourie Crescent
We reflect on our day
The months go by

It is time to say goodbye to Angourie Crescent
I could leave with hugs, handshakes, high fives, high
tens or a kiss
And I will still think about the good memories of
Angourie Crescent

 *Nickie Idrus*

A LAST HOPE

The scent of lavender was overpowering. I walked through the awkwardly shaped front gates of McArthur Academy, or as I like to think of them 'the gates into hell', carrying my art diary and backpack. It was the only day out of the roughly 365 days of attending school that I actually looked forward to, not that I disliked school but some of the teachers were odd and snobby. For example, Mrs. Trait, as wacky and weird as anyone could get, wore a rubber band around her wrist and every time she did something wrong or not to her standards, she would strum it against her wrinkly old skin. Though she does have a sense of love and care in her somewhere, even if you have to search through a haystack for a nail, it's there.

It was art day at school and the big running race. Anyway, I continued to walk towards my classroom, watching the juniors running to class after the bell like it was free pizza day and Georgia Avery guarding the toilet door charging people to go in. There sat a freckled, blond-haired girl wearing a hoodie over a long sleeve, tight pants and laced-up Converse, but she seemed interesting and quirky, kind of how I like people to be, perfect is boring.

She sat upon my seat; my seat was the desk that sat in the corner of the room beside the window. I walked directly to her asking who she was.

'I'm Jessie Bell, and you are?'

'I'm Sean Clark, and you're in my seat.'

'Well, Sean Clark, there's a seat over there beside Boogie Bailey.'

Boogie Bailey was the youngest kid in the class and for some odd reason hadn't completely grown up yet. He always picked his nose, digging for treasure, and would store it under the top lid of his desk. I thought that I should keep a close eye on Jessie; she seemed out of the ordinary and different.

I walked over to the seat beside Boogie Bailey, sat down with my books and tuned to Miss Evans, explaining the schedule of the day. Miss Evans was the nicest and youngest teacher at McArthur. She loved art and music, just like me, so I find that I can relate to her easily.

It was time for the race, everyone stretched and prepared, but I didn't, I thought I had it in the bag.

The gun shot, and we were off, I was leading until Jessie came out of nowhere gliding before me, I pushed harder and harder but it wasn't enough, I had lost. The clock struck three. Class was over, and everyone rushed to get to the buses and on their way home filled the halls with chaos. Walking onto the bus, I observed the seating choices people made to keep caution of Georgia Avery's seat located in the middle of the back seat of the bus which was reserved for ninth graders. Then my cautious eyes laid upon Jessie sitting in that hard leathered seat looking like there was no problem.

I walked straight to her and expressed, 'What are you doing? That's Georgia Avery's seat, and no one sits there but Georgia Avery,' pointing to the signed cushion.

As Georgia Avery was beginning to walk onto the bus, I rushed to the back, grabbed Jessie's arm, pulling her to a free seat in the middle of the bus. 'You don't know how lucky you are, Georgia would have ripped you to shreds.'

Jessie looked at me in a confused way and did not speak, just smiled. The bus turned the corner into my street. Usually I was the only one who got off at this stop, but today Jessie did too.

Looking at her awkwardly, wondering why she got off, she walked over to the house next door. She must be part of the new family who just moved in that mum was telling me about over breakfast.

Jessie, looking back at the bus, waved to Georgia Avery as she turned to look at Jessie. Jessie smiled and waved like they were all good.

'You're really asking for it,' I told her.

'Well, we're off the bus, so why not have a little fun,' said Jessie.

'Getting Georgia Avery wound up is a weird way of having fun,' I replied.

'Well, what's your way of having fun?'

'I don't know...' I replied to Jessie.

Jessie looked up in a manner of thinking and said, 'Race you to the end of the road? On your mark, get ready, set, go!' And we were off, racing down through the evergreens and quiet ponds with the sound of birds chirping and sheep strolling around.

'Hey look at that,' Jessie yelled, as we came to a stop.

It was a long thick piece of pine wood lying upon a river.

'That's been there for a long time, I wouldn't trust it,' I explained to her.

With her eagerness she of course had to try the wild crazy thing. She pressed her foot on it checking it was strong and sturdy, grasping onto the log she slowly walked across. The log creaked and cracked, but she got across safely.

'Come on,' Jessie said, forcing me.

'Umm ... okay.'

I gripped the log and slowly but steadily walked across, almost running at the end to get to the land. Reaching the end, I grabbed Jessie, breathing fast, thankful that I was alive.

Sitting down upon the bank, Jessie said, 'I wish there was a place just for us, where there was no Georgia Avery or Jamie Wall.'

They were the two meanest kids at McArthur academy, Georgia blaming people for things, stealing kid's lunch money and making them pay to use the bathrooms, and Jamie, just a pain, it's unexplainable.

Jessie ran through the clearance, exploring the dark woods.

Looking up as the wind blew through the trees and squirrels ate nuts, I began to be cautious about this odd place. I ran ahead looking for Jessie.

She popped up from behind a bush, she whispered, 'Come on.'

'Wait up then,' I yelled back.

'Not so loud,' Jessie exclaimed. 'They'll hear you.'

I asked her what she was talking about.

She kept quiet and continued to walk onwards.

'Wow!' I heard Jessie call out.

Running to her I yelled, 'What is it?' There stood a wrecked broken down Ute.

'Wow, they had gotten so close,' she explained.

'Close to what?' I asked.

'The kingdom.' She looked around, hearing the rattle of key chains, explaining that they were the sounds of the dark master's prisoners shaking their chains.

We ran through the openings of the trees and came upon something magically interesting. A wrecked, damaged, dusty tree loft high in a tree. Circling it, we were amazed, touching the old wood that was still smooth, feeling the old, rough leathered seat on the swing, we stood back and couldn't say anything but, 'Wow.'

Jessie, spotting rope and a sort of stair structure, climbed up.

I followed, looking around at the high trees and the surrounding nature. A dragonfly flew up and stopped in front of us. Jessie called it a warrior from the tree-top provinces.

'Jessie, I don't know this game.'

'Game? This is real.' She continued to climb up to the upper level and said, 'This is the ruins of a great fortress whose people have been imprisoned. Sean, we have come to free them. Here, listen to this, then tell me if it's not real,' Jessie yelled out. 'Prisoners of the dark master, hear us. We have come to free you. Do you hear us? Show me that you hear us!'

The wind in the trees blew loudly. Jessie smiled down at me.

'You just got lucky,' I told her. 'The wind has been blowing off and on all day.'

Smirking, she yelled, 'Can't hear you.'

This time it blew even louder. Running back down the same path in the sunset home, we waved goodbye and she disappeared into the bushes. Looking up through my bedroom window, I smiled at the sunshine peering through the shutters, thinking about Jessie.

Every day after school, as the bus pulled up on our stop, we ran off down the path. Pulling wrecks out of the way and bringing in pieces of wood and steel to repair the fortress. Working as a pulley system to lift supplies and tools up, carrying a blanket stuffed with food and goods. We were keen on the fort and worked hard on it. In the following days, we carried crates, nailed wood and sewed a canvas to block the cold from getting in.

The next day in class, we had Mrs. Trait, we studied about World War II and I'm grateful for learning about it, recognizing all the men and women who risked their lives to create peace in the world.

Looking back at Jessie, I finally had a reason to smile. Georgia strutting to her seat, fell and told Mr. Bush, our bus driver, that I had tripped her, so I had to walk home. Getting closer to my house I saw Jessie sitting on a log. 'What happened to you?' I asked.

'Georgia Avery is a very talented person, she can throw packets of ketchup up to four rows of seats.'

I laughed as Jessie washed up at the tap outside the greenhouse. We talked on top of the fort, then pinecones fell down on us from the sky. Picking one up, I thought there were some kind of grenade so I threw it back.

Warriors of the dark master, viscous looking squirrels with two sharp teeth sticking out of their mouths and a collar of spikes, they could climb trees as well as run on the ground.

We threw grenades back at them, then one came flying at me from a tree branch, I clenched my fist and swung at it. It was amazing, not one scratch or bruise on my arm, like we had magical powers here.

Back at the house, I was drawing what I could remember of the squirrels features, then my dad

pulled down the curtain, and my whole family was there singing happy birthday to me, holding a cake. I sat up and blew the candle's flame, not forgetting to make a wish first.

That afternoon, I played the new car racing game Dad got for me. One car stopped half way. I listened to Dad explaining it was cheap junk and that he will get the box to return it, but I didn't think that, not for a second. I loved it.

My youngest sister, Carmen, ran in yelling, 'Come quickly, there's something in the greenhouse.'

Dad, glancing back at me, ran out as I followed. Most of the veggies were on the floor, their pots shattered and the soil scattered. Dad got really frustrated from this, he put a lot of hard work and effort into the greenhouse so that we didn't have to buy expensive produce.

He exclaimed to me, 'How am I going to pay to fix all this? That's another six, seven hundred dollars out of my bank account. Why don't you make yourself useful and draw me some damn money, huh? How about you draw me some money?'

I ran off upstairs with a tear in my eye.

The next day I told Jessie about what happened. She offered to help fix it, but didn't know what else to say. On the bus, Jessie tapped my shoulder and told me to grab something under the seat. It was a brown leathered drawing diary; I loved it and thanked her. The next morning the phone rang, it was Miss Evans asking if I wanted to go to the new art exhibition in town.

'Hold on a sec,' I told her. I walked over to Mum and Dad's room, and asked Mum if I could go.

She replied with, 'Mmm.'

I wasn't sure if she meant yes or she had just woke with a moan, but I took it as a yes. 'Yeah I can come,' I replied.

'Great, see you soon,' she said and hung up.

On our way out, I glanced over at Jessie's house, not asking her to go because I wanted to be alone with Miss Evans. We walked through the long, wide open halls at the gallery, closely observing each painting. There was always one artist who inspired me, he used paint colours modestly and had crowded scenes. Staring at it, I smiled.

Miss Evans came over. 'Ahh, George Hanns, one of my favorites too.'

I thanked Miss Evans for the day and walked through the front door.

My family happened to be on the couch with worried faces. Once they had a glimpse of me they all stood up with relief and stockness. Mum, crying, came over and hugged me.

'What's wrong, Mum?' I asked.

My oldest sister Helen called out, 'We thought you were dead.'

'Dead,' I said with a confused look.

Dad walked up to me and placed his left hand on my shoulder, 'Sean, your friend Jessie is dead. She went behind the bushes and hoped to get across a deep river, but the log snapped in half and she drowned.'

'No, it can't be. It's not that kind of log. You're all lying,' I cried, running to the Bells house.

Police cars and sirens surrounded the house.

I ran to the river. There laid upon the river was nothing. I ran back home, straight upstairs, shut the door of my room and shoved the dresser over to block the door.

At school, usually when we had Miss Evans and everyone sat on top of their desks, happily playing instruments and singing loudly, everyone sat calmly in their seats and sang low pitched. I didn't sing at all, just stuffed my head in my arms, looking back at Jessie's empty desk.

When I went home, I grabbed all the paint tubes Aunt Anna bought me a few years ago and emptied them into the river and set a sail to a picture of Jessie upon a raft. I thought that I should build a strong and mighty bridge at least for the next adventurous couple of friends who chose to keep their minds wide open.

I used the left over lumber the Bells had in front of their house and gathered twigs from the trees. I took nuts and bolts from Dad and left over paint that I had aside. Besides the strong bridge, I made a sign that sat on the very top point of the arch entrance I had to the bridge. It read 'Nothing destroys us,' spoken from Jessie herself.

But this kingdom needed a princess. I went back home to my sister, Carmen. 'Can I trust you to keep a secret? It's our place and you can't tell anyone, not Anastasia or Danielle, not even Mai.'

'Promise,' she replied.

Grabbing my hand, we ran off into the bushes, making sure she kept her eyes closed.

'Okay, open.'

'Wow, did you make this, is this real?' she asked.

'Only if you believe it is.'

She closed her eyes and re-opened them and she saw the kingdom with its mountains and trolls and wonderful people, and especially the castle. 'Are you the king, Sean?' she asked.

'Only if you want me to be.'

She nodded and out came a troll and placed a gold crown upon my head and a silver tiara on Carmen. Carmen laughed sort of how Jessie did. The troll looked somewhat like Georgia ... odd eerie ... bad turned good?

 **Aimee Morcos**

Aimee won the Teen Short Story category in the 2012 Brimank Literary Awards

THE POWER OF WORDS

In 2005, at the age of three, my daughter was diagnosed with autism. The day I received the doctor's report is forever burned in my memory. That is the day I left a safe and secure world for a new and unknown world of parenting a child with a disability.

When the doctor said, 'Your daughter has autism,' my heart froze. In that moment I felt the weight of the word and all that it implied, not only for my daughter's future, but for mine.

Later that day, as I read through the report, other words leapt from the page: lifelong disability, global developmental delay, inadequate social skills; each word triggered explosions of fear inside me. I felt helpless.

My initial reaction of fear and helplessness was soon replaced with acceptance and an urgent need to help my daughter to be the best she could be. I wanted to use her diagnosis in a positive way. The only way I

knew how to do this was to take control. I needed to flip things around and be the one with the strength and power. I wasn't going to let those words beat me.

Could these words that are so hurtful, lose their power over time?

I began by reading anything and everything that I could get my hands on about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Autism is a lifelong disability that affects how a person communicates, thinks and socialises. There are three areas that are significantly affected; communication, social interaction and imaginative thought.

In all the reading that I did, I realised that it didn't matter what my daughter could or couldn't do, but how important it was that I knew what she had. Her diagnosis had given me the power to help her. Without it, I wouldn't be able to get the help she needed to live a satisfying and rewarding life.

Getting the right diagnosis is crucial in gaining the correct type of support. It is the key that opens doors to funding applications, early interventions and education options. Once I realised this, I felt relieved that, as difficult as it was to accept the diagnosis, I had one. It was my strength in moving forward.

The words that initially sent ripples of fear through me now contained the power to help me. One of the criteria used in determining my daughter's funding level was to measure her ability to use language; both expressive and receptive. In other words, the number of words she could say together with the number of words she understood. Once again, words held the power to her future.

I considered myself lucky for I had learned that ASD isn't always easy to diagnose at an early age as there are many factors that can mask an accurate diagnosis. For instance, some children may be able to communicate well enough with adults, but struggle to socialise with their peer group age. Others may be able to talk at length about a special interest, but unable to converse on any other level. Individually these behaviours may not ring warning bells and the child may seem to be nothing more than a little eccentric.

Another hindrance to early detection is the long waiting lists that most public health systems have. Getting an immediate diagnosis can be expensive for families, especially if they don't have private health insurance.

Autistic, Aspergian, disability: these labels do more than describe a condition; they also have the power to help the individual gain assistance and

understanding. Those words that frightened me so much have lost their power. I used them in a positive way in order to gain the right tools for my daughter's education — they became my weapon, my strength.

They enabled me to acquire school funding, speech therapy, occupational therapy, social skills group work and respite care. Without these interventions my daughter would still be closed to the world around her. These interventions have drawn her out of herself and have helped her live within our society. Our family life is so much richer for sharing it with her. The definition of those words will remain the same, but they no longer frighten me.

In the eight years since her diagnosis, my daughter has made great progress in both her family and school life. Since then, my other two children have also been diagnosed with ASD; my son has Asperger's Syndrome and my youngest daughter has Pervasive Developmental Delay (PDD). I accepted their diagnosis with confidence and strength gained from past experience.

Over the years I have come to recognise that the word autism is just that — a word. I have also learnt to appreciate new words such as, artistic, individual, extraordinary, expert, unique and beautiful.

My children are outstanding whether they are labelled as autistic or not.

 **Anna Brasier**

Anna Brasier is studying Professional Writing & Editing at Victoria University. She is also a mother of three children on the autism spectrum. Anna writes about her life as a carer on www.amillionshades.wordpress.com

SOL Y SOMBRA

I write this on my mother's birthday. Mum loved an occasion. Christmas was a day-long fiesta that started at dawn when she woke before we did. Mother's Day was tea with toast burned by us as she pretended to sleep. Birthdays were top of her pops. She insisted they be celebrated. Her last wish was that every year we raise a glass on the day she was born.

Often I slip up when toasting her birthday and refer to it as the day she died. It's as though her birth has become inextricably linked in my mind with her death — as though I can't think of her beginning without remembering her ending. Maybe it's because I can't recall her full-force gales of laughter without immediately seeing her reduced to a coiled spring of suffering in a hospital bed.

Mum died almost two decades ago, her hair still dark and with few wrinkles, although cancer had begun to etch itself into her face. Now, when I think of her, she is birth and death, pleasure and pain, joy and grief, simultaneously.

After a city birth, I went home with Mum to the family sheep station, where my world was bounded by the fences my father regularly rode out to check. Desert country. Unyielding.

But Mum gave me other possibilities. Each night, she recited Edward Lear's *The Owl and the Pussycat* to me until I went to sleep. She did it for years, until I could recite it back to her.

Surrounded by drought-afflicted soil, she whispered of a pea-green boat bobbing on a star-lit sea. In a place where every drop of water was precious as platinum, she described lush bong-tree woods, and a runcible spoon scooping slices of impossible-to-imagine quince. Strange fruits and lands, exotic and enticing. And, of course, there was that impossible couple, owl and cat, dancing under a distant moon.

I know the poem by heart. By my heart, and her heart.

Just after I decided to walk 1,300 kilometres across Spain from Granada to Galicia, I heard a psychologist talking about the importance of the tales we're told

as children. He believed the best any parent could offer was *The Owl and the Pussycat*. Think about it, he said. The central characters celebrate their differences and set out on a great quest, with plenty of all they need — honey and money. The decision to marry is instigated by the cat, and the owl loves her strength.

Not a bad template for life.

Some people were dismayed when I part-financed my Spanish walk by selling the two paintings I'd bought with my modest inheritance from Mum, but I think she'd have approved. I used her legacy to take myself out into the world, whispering our poem to unfamiliar skies.

One day on the road, in a one-burro pueblo called Laza in the mountains of Galicia, I hobbled into a supermarket and struck up a conversation with the woman behind the counter. We talked about mothers. When I told her mine had been my best friend, and how I missed her, the woman's professional face cracked. She said her mother had died only a year before, at the age of eighty. I said I often walked with mine; that I still felt her absence, after all these years. Suddenly, we were both crying, hugging like intimates.

Through her tears, she said life is *sol y sombra* — sun and shadow — and you don't value one without the other. She kissed my hand as she gave me my change and I walked into the late afternoon oblivious to the possibly-broken bone in my right toe.

Sol y sombra.

I wondered about it as I limped to the town's cemetery and looked across the gravestones to the surrounding hills. I remember thinking how Mum would have loved it all — the silent grey stone town,

the quince paste I'd bought in memory of the poem, the donkey grazing on lavish grass studded with white and yellow daisies, the clouds whizzing ahead to road's end. The swishing sounds of Spanish. The moss and lichen on granite fences. The mists. The otherness.

Mum never got to go to Europe. Sometimes I think my yearning for the road is in part a wish to wander on her behalf, a quest for bong-trees.

Sol y sombra, I whispered, my bones aching for heat in that cemetery swirling with winds blowing chill from the north.

Sun and shadow.

I think the lady in the shop was right. We do value the sun more when we have known shadow.

Why is that?

I refuse to believe suffering is necessary for happiness, but it certainly puts it into sharper relief. I don't want to believe I love my mother more for having lost her, but it makes the love, all loves, more precious.

Later along that road, I learned the Spanish have a drink called *sol y sombra*. It's equal parts Cognac and anise. Not for the faint-hearted.

Maybe next year on Mum's birthday I'll shout myself a glass of *sol y sombra* and drink to the sunshine Mum gave me to navigate through shadows. Maybe I'll raise a glass on the anniversary of her death, too.

No.

Why wait? Loss teaches us to seize our days.

I'll find a *sol y sombra* tonight and raise it to love.

 **Ailsa Piper**

*Ailsa is an Australian writer, director and author of **Sinning Across Spain***

A POEM FOR ALL OF US

a date
is just a number
a wooden house
turns into ash
a nasty jibe
becomes a hurtful
memory
a pat on the
back becomes
a cherished
slap.

Ash Wednesday
Morphs into
Valentine's Day
Fires burning
in hearts in melb
churn thru bush
in W.A.
Memories
gone, quietly
or violently
the bushfire
reaps
story to be
told
by the lucky
escapee
who weeps.

 *Mary Camera*

I ADMIRE

I am proud of my parents and I admire them the most. They are not famous at all, but their achievements are very important.

My father passed away over twenty years ago. He was a little man, who spoke little to his children. However, when he did choose to speak to us we had to listen. He always told us to be confident and lead moral lives. My dad was born early in the 20th century, therefore his opinion was, 'Love children with a rod. You spoil them with sweet words.' But we still loved him and agreed with the system he taught us.

My mother was different. With her short, white hair and simple clothes, she was calm and never shouted at us. When we were young and when we did something wrong, she spoke softly to us. Whenever she approached a problem, she tried patiently to find a solution.

My mother's hobbies are looking after her children and grandchildren. She loves cooking Vietnamese food, and when I was a boy she still made clothes for us despite having six of us to dress. She is clever too. When we were young, she was very interested in the economics of Vietnam and advised us children so we had money to buy a house and land.

My parents always worked very hard. Sometimes they worked until midnight, but even though their lives were hard, they liked to help their friends and poor people when it was needed.

I believe that my parents were a good influence on my siblings and me. If they had had a higher level of education, had been born in the 21st century, perhaps they would have had more 'success' and my siblings and I might have learned even more. However, I'm happy with what my parents' system taught me and I'm very proud of them.

 *Luong Tran*

FLIGHT FROM IRAQ

Iraqi refugee, Adil Solaka tells Jeremiah Ganicoche about the conditions in his country of birth and his reasons for embarking on the journey to freedom.

Adil Solaka is a big man with a bald head and dark skin who talks earnestly with wide gestures of his bear-sized hands. He fled Iraq after civil war broke out in 2006.

'It's very hard when the civil war start. Many weapons, many peoples, many militia they have,' Solaka says. 'Every party, they have militia with weapons. Like Shia, they have militia. Sunni, they have militia. Just the Christians, they don't have militia.'

How Iraq could get worse after Saddam Hussein, Solaka finds difficult to put into words. 'I can't explain it to you. It's very hard to explain what he do. You can't live and you can't leave.'

But with Hussein gone and Iraq imploding, Solaka decided to flee.

'I didn't say to anyone, goodbye. Even my friends,' Solaka says plainly. 'It's a very, very hard moment when you want to leave. In this moment, maybe they catch you.'

Solaka had three suitcases with him when he crossed over with his wife and family into Syria.

'Even my mother and my father, they don't know I leave Iraq.'

Solaka waited in Syria for two-and-a-half years, supported by his family in America and Australia, as well as receiving supplies from the United Nations.

'We go and put our name and they give you a ticket,' Solaka says of applying for United Nations assistance. It was three months before he was able to receive rice and cooking oil. He was only able to make an application to be placed in another country as a refugee after he received a card officially confirming his status.

‘They give you a card like a refugee and they give you like paper, “You are under Act this, this, this,” and they put all your pictures and the family name,’ Solaka says of the card identifying him as a refugee. ‘I feel very happy and I call my mother and I call my brother, “I get this card,” because it’s something like safe for you. It’s something safe.’

Equipped with his human rights and a card to prove it, Solaka was still not completely in control of his destiny. ‘I don’t decide anything. The United Nations decide.’

Solaka pronounces the whole name, United Nations. To him it is not a two letter intangible but a very real and powerful entity that has had a definite effect on his life.

Despite being told he was to be resettled in America he was sent to Australia. Solaka says he knew he would be sent to Australia because Egyptian saint, Father Karras, came to him in a dream and handed him a strip of paper with Australia written in gold on it.

‘This person came in my dream and he tell me, “Don’t do anything. This is for you,”’ Solaka said.

After the dream he boarded an Emirates flight from Syria to Australia. Despite waiting almost three years in Syria, it was important to Solaka that he leave Iraq on his own terms. ‘I leave with everything. They respect me when I leave.’

He says the plane ride over was dignified and he was proud of his choice to leave Iraq in the manner he did. ‘I see some person, he had my name and when I come, “You are Adil?” I say, yes. “Come with me,” and he do everything for me. Everything. I just stay here like that.’ Solaka crosses his arms. ‘He tell me, “Sit here. This is your ticket to Australia.”’

Not speaking any English when he arrived,

Centrelink provided 500 hours of English classes. After being here almost four years, Solaka says Australia is now his home and it has made him feel welcome.

‘We lived in Iraq maybe 40 years. We didn’t get anything from Iraq, anything. Just when we arrive in Australia we got everything,’ he says. ‘They give you everything. They give you Medicare, they give you a healthcare card. One day I came here to Australia, second day they give me everything. I live in my country 40 years and I didn’t get anything.’

Solaka sees Australia’s current boat arrival debate quite clearly. ‘If you are the owner of a restaurant and I come to you [and] I tell you, “I want you to book me for today, 500 people to eat lunch,” what do you do? You see in store if you can do for 500 or no,’ he says.

‘Always they accept the people, Australia. When they come to Australia in boat they put them in the camp and they give them everything, food, treatment, everything they want. Maybe in one year or two years they accept them to enjoy with the Australians.’

Does he think that time is too long?

‘No, it’s not too long. My sister she lived in Jordan nine years. If you want something, you do everything to get this thing, if you want to do something. I want to leave Iraq, I do everything and I forget everything.’ He says, ‘That’s my target. I want to leave. That’s it.’

After having made a dangerous and uncertain journey, Solaka says he would never go back to Iraq. ‘In Australia, you sleep all the night. In my country I can’t sleep. I don’t know who is come and take my wife, take my children. You don’t know. Now everything is alright for you, you can sleep. In my country, you can’t sleep.’

12.48 AM ONE SUMMER NIGHT

The light
 a constant
harsh and white against the wall
 a constant
call to Christmas beetles
who flicker and hum buzz
and dive bomb Kamikaze like
 or maybe
they just fall.

 **Daniel Micallef**

*This poem won the Adult Poetry category in the
2012 Brimbank Literary Awards*

SHORT

Tall, straight as an iron-bark gum,
They considered him a stumpy olive tree:
But he pressed cold weights in summer,
Sinewing muscle to bone-hard will.

Tenacious, a young pit-bull terrier,
He mauled the shine of opposition stars,
And went for broke in bruising packs,
Passing to runners on the fringe.

His stature grew with winter rains,
On playing fields levelled to unbiased mud,
When each goal struggled to break loose
From a ball burdened with gravity.

He scrambled on hands and knees,
Working the ground, like those immigrants
Who'd paved the way to a better future,
Pushing forward, liberating the game.

 **Tom Petsinis**

*Tom Petsinis is a Melbourne-based poet,
playwright and novelist*

GARDEN OF ERSTWHILE DELIGHTS

‘Potatoes, one! Carrots, two! Parsnip, three! Beans, four!’ I smile, hearing my father’s voice in my own. This was a ritual of the Sunday roast of my childhood, now repeated weekly in my own family. As kids, we would search through the piles of warm, soft, crispy-skinned roasted meat and veg on our plates, looking for different vegetables. It was a celebration of my mother’s cooking, a kind of ‘Grace’ that we shared before tucking in.

For us, Sunday roast was our weekly mass, a sacred meal that brought our family together through my childhood and into my teens. As teenagers, our social lives and sporting commitments reduced the time we spent at home, but it took courage to miss a Sunday roast! Granny would come over, even towards the end when her mobility was challenged. We were three generations of family around that table, counting vegetables each and every Sunday.

Now settled with my own family, I notice various rituals from my past creep into my present, usually adding my own twist. We still wade through the gravy to count vegetables every Sunday, but we have a second, complementary exercise: counting the vegetables harvested from our own garden.

I’m a city kid from a long line of Anglo city kids. As a kid, I longed for the lunchboxes of my Greek and Italian mates and couldn’t understand their desire for tuckshop alternatives. As an adult, my best mate tells stories of his Dad’s overflowing garden and shed filled with home-cured olives, pickled giardiniera and sun-dried tomatoes. I love the humble romance of this kind of self-sufficiency. I’ve dreamed of creating this for myself.

We bought a house in Footscray about a year ago and have spent countless hours transforming the vacant backyard into a productive garden. There is a busy herb bed, young fruit trees and four dedicated vegetable plots. Months after our garden started to yield reward for effort, the pride and joy of cooking vegetables that I’ve just collected still overwhelms me.

I plan evening meals around seasonal crops, ‘Risotto with peas and lemon tonight, hon,’ and wedge as many varieties of veg into the Sunday roast as I can. ‘Our own beans, one! Home-grown beetroot, two! Your amazing pumpkin, three!’ We compete to find all these tasty triumphs. ‘There’s a bay leaf in the gravy! And thyme! And rosemary! Herbs are vegetables, too!’

Our clamouring gives way to the sound of cutlery on crockery, of chewing and murmurs of contentment. My satisfaction is almost complete. The only challenge remains is that set by my mum twenty-something years ago — can I beat nine vegies in a single Sunday roast?

 **Andrew Williamson**

Andrew is an Associate Dean at VU, and CEO and principal of the Australian Technical College in Sunshine. He has a passion for vocational education and training, young people and pathways to and through trade careers

OUR LITTLE BOX OF TREASURES

Lauren piled the ornate box with photos, batteries, lolly wrappers, an old broken camera, an ink-filled pen, pretty much anything they could find of theirs or anything on the beach. While she was doing that, Joey carved their names, the date and an infinity symbol onto the box.

When she was finished, Lauren smoothly let her fingers run along the shells encrusted around the perimeter of the lid of the box, her long, treacle brown hair flying crazily in the icy cold wind.

'Are we really going to do this?' she asked, watching the cool water rub against her feet and then suck back into the tide. She stared intently into her somewhat nervous chocolate brown eyes in the reflection of the water that had just shuffled back onto her feet.

'Well, why not?' Joey looked up from his carvings, cautious not to drop the knife. Lauren sighed nervously. 'What if no one finds it?'

'Stop overreacting, Lo. It'll be fine. This is the beach; people always dig up sand to make sandcastles and things like that. Someone will find it. It's my promise,' Joey reassured.

That convinced Lauren slightly. She trusted Joey, and he always kept his promises, especially if they were for her. At that moment, she felt a cool breeze, like a sigh of relief rubbing calmly against her skin.

'Okay.' Lauren sighed, groping the shovel by its handle and ambling over to the rocks on the far left side of the beach to dig a small hole big enough in the dry sand for their box, looking away at times to prevent the cruel wind from blowing sand in her eyes.

With Joey's help, ten minutes later there was a hole big enough for their box. Joey's carvings read:

Lauren and Joey
19/04/2015



Not to be opened until the year 2099

The teenagers heaved the full box into the hole and started to shovel the sand back over the box, making it hidden in the sand.

They marvelled their work in silence. This kept going for about five minutes.

'Let's go,' Joey announced. Lauren grabbed his hand and gave him a slight kiss on the cheek. They walked off in to the sunset hand in hand.

EIGHTY-FOUR YEARS LATER, IN THE YEAR 2099

It was a perfectly calm day at the beach. Not too many people, and not too little.

Meredith grinned and giggled slightly as Dylan tackled her into the sand, messing up her dark brown hair. She shook him off of her playfully. Dylan, with his dorky glasses and blinding white teeth, saw what Meredith was doing out of the corner of his eye as he stood up and shook all the sand off of him. He ran from her as Meredith lunged toward him, a handful of sand with small portions of sand flying in all directions with her laughing.

She was still far away from him, so he decided to dig a large hole and put Meredith in it for fun. After searching, he found a suitable spot for her near the rocks on the far left corner of the beach.

He started digging at rapid speed, until his arm hit something square and hard. It was a time capsule.

'Meredith!' he called. She wasn't so far behind now.

'Lauren and Joey, nineteenth of the fourth two thousand and fifteen,' Meredith read aloud.

'Wow,' she marvelled, looking at the photos of the young couple in the old pictures. The young lady was adorable — brown treacle hair, clear skin, a transparent white smile, chocolate brown eyes. The boy had a mane of dark brown hair, chocolate brown eyes, a small goatee and a crooked smile that made his eyes sparkle.

From a beach house not so far away were two ninety-eight year old people standing at the window, watching the two young children looking through the box. 'I told you someone would find it,' the old man retorted, a wrinkly smile forming on his lips.

The old lady grinned, with memories from her past coming back.

 *Bethanie Hutchins-Tribe*

Bethanie won the Children's Short Story section in the 2012 Brimbank Literary Awards

BOOKS

Books. Colourful covers protecting pages filled with words. Words ordered in just the right way, creating pictures more vivid than anything made with paint. Words that transport the reader anywhere they want to go. Words handed down from one generation to the next. Words fill books, and books fill a life — my life.

They have always held a significant place for me. Mum didn't even wait for me to be born before she started reading to me, and things have only grown from there. There's just something exciting about them. All of them.

When I pick up a new book, feel the weight of it in my hand, hear the binding crackle as I open it for the first time, releasing that wonderful new-book smell, I know its potential. It has the power to take me anywhere and turn me into anything. Once I start reading I am no longer in control, the words decide where I will go, who I will talk to and even what I will say.

When I was young, books were always a special thing that could only be read with clean hands. There was no drawing in books and no colouring in the pictures if the publisher

forgot to. Bookmarks had been invented for a reason, so there was no need to fold pages.

Bed time was exciting because Mum would always read me a story until, just like my favourite Flopsy Bunnies, I was feeling soporific and sleepy. Beatrix Potter was our favourite, and I was given a special present one birthday: an amazing hardback collection with coloured pictures and a fancy ribbon so that I never lost my place.

Having grown up with books, it felt only natural that I would aspire to be a writer. I wanted to see my name on the covers of books and shelves lined with those books. I wanted to walk down the street and hear people talking about my novels, without them knowing the author was barely a metre away. I wanted a big castle with suits of armour, huge libraries and revolving bookcases that led to secret rooms. But most of all I wanted to earn my signature, so that I could sign my books. I thought if I did something really important I would be given my signature, after all, it's an important thing, not something you can just make up yourself.

And then, at the age of eight, my dream became a reality. I won my first writing competition for my essay about 'Why I Love Where I Live.' The awards ceremony was at the Reedy Creek town hall, and half of the town turned up. Yep, thirty people in that one little building. Then they called my name. I made my way to the front, with all those eyes watching, and I was presented with my very own copy of Roald Dahl's *George's Marvellous Medicine*.

It was the first thing I'd ever won and it didn't stop there. Word got around the playground: Ash Marks is an award-winning author. And I even had the certificate to prove it.

Teachers congratulated me. I had to read my winning entry to the class. Everyone wanted to see my Roald Dahl book. It was almost too much. Until the local paper came out, and there I was on page sixteen, with a black and white photo and my name spelt wrong.

I'd made it. I was famous.

That was when I knew I had to get serious. I cleaned my desk, nicked a notebook from my brother's room and found a pencil. But I didn't know where to go from there. So I decided to take a break. I got a snack and turned on the telly. I asked Mum where ideas come from. She told me that ideas are everywhere and anything can be an idea.

My career was back on track. I finished my snack and, with dramatic theme music playing in my head, I started to write. And I kept writing, only stopping to sharpen my pencil.

In time, I learned that there's a name for what I did that day: copyright. Apparently, it's illegal to write your own

episodes of *Pokemon*, even if your mum told you that anything can be an idea.

I was back where I'd started, only worse — there were no snacks left. To cope with this devastating setback in my career, I read. The more I read, the more I fell in love with books, and the more I fell in love with books, the more I read. It was a great cycle.

Like so many others my age, I discovered the incredible world of *Harry Potter* and my life was changed forever. I started reading to discover new places and meet new people, but it became much more than that. As the tension in the house grew and the fighting got worse, books became my escape.

My bookcase was my pride and joy, as every shelf held a world. When it got too much, I would pick a shelf, a world, and dive in. I would hide out in *Narnia* where I could help Aslan keep the white witch at bay, or at *Hogwarts* where I could complete my studies while thwarting all of *Voldemort's* attempts to take over the world. I would walk around *Middle Earth* or *Alaegasia*, where I could fly on dragons or giant eagles and feast with the elves. I would escape into my books where I could forget. I would stay there and laugh and play with my friends until it was safe to return.

After discovering all of the places books could take me, I no longer had any doubt in my mind about what I wanted to be. I knew I wasn't alone in using books to escape, and that there were any number of kids in the same situation as me. I decided I wanted to write so that I could help kids escape their problems, just as *Rowling*, *Lewis*, *Paolini* and *Tolkien* had all helped me.

Through high school I started writing as much as I could. It didn't matter where I was, I would find a way to write. I had fragments of stories and chapters throughout all of my school workbooks, and trying to put them in order to type up at the end of the day was an interesting task.

As I would stick with the same story all day, but change books every time I moved to a new class, there were paragraphs everywhere. So a story might be set up in English, the inciting incident would happen during science, tension would rise through history, and the climax would come half way through maths.

Studying for exams was always exciting because I would get to revisit the early stages of my novel. But it would get annoying after a while, as it was constantly being interrupted with dot points about when to use trigonometry or timelines from the French revolution.

I also had to wait anxiously for my teachers to mark my tests and return them, not for my grade, but so I could retrieve the few hundred words from the back of the page. I found an easier alternative once we started using the graphic calculators in maths, the ones where you can input words, one letter at a time. I managed to write fifteen hundred words before my teacher realised I wasn't using Pythagoras' Theorem to write them. She took my calculator but, when she saw how much I'd written, she didn't have the heart to press clear. Instead she gave it back at lunchtime so that I could rush to the library to type it up and finish the work I should have done in class.

My confidence grew as people read my stories and liked them, and not just because they're family and they have

to. They encouraged me to enter some competitions, and I even managed to win a couple. This recognition, so early on, took me by surprise. For complete strangers to like what I had written, without ever meeting me, was a new experience. I started to think that maybe I could actually make it as a writer. With each win I became more determined to reach my goal.

When I was twelve I wrote my first novella, *Thirteen*. I was proud. When I was fourteen I entered it into a local literary competition and it won the junior award. I couldn't believe it, and judging from the hug that seemed to last hours, neither could Mum. The prize was twenty-five copies of my book, printed and bound.

Every day after my name was announced, I'd get in the car after school and ask Mum if my books were ready. This went on for months, to the point where Mum would call out 'No' as soon as I reached for the door handle.

One day, seven months after I won the award, Mum took me down the street to the printers. And there, in a neat stack on the counter, were twenty five copies of my book.

I couldn't believe they were real. After years of dreaming, I had a book with my name on it. I ran my finger down the yellow spines, along my name printed again, and again, and again.

I picked one up and flicked through it, staring at all of the words, the words I wrote, just to be sure that it wasn't someone else's book — I still couldn't believe they were mine.

The printer offered me a box to take them home in, but I couldn't bear to part with them, so I carried them and held them the whole way home, unable to take my eyes off them.

It was a surreal feeling.

And it got even better — I made thirty-five dollars in royalties.

Nothing could stop me now. I kept writing. I entered every competition I came across, whether it was local or national, or anything in between. Some of them I won, some of them I didn't. Every win was exciting, because every time a judge chose my story, it told me that someone read what I wrote, and liked it. And that was all that mattered. That was enough for me to keep writing. The prizes were just a bonus.

For me, the first draft is the most exciting part. Forming the first few sentences and discovering how the story can twist and turn is where I have the most fun. Finishing the first draft always fills me with a sense of accomplishment.

When a story completely takes hold of me and needs to be told, it gushes out in a frenzy of words that cannot be held back. I am no longer in control, and there is no time to stop and think. I can only wait to see where the characters take me.

When my characters take on a life of their own and become unpredictable, I know it is working. I thrive on the rush I get when writing something new. Not knowing its potential or where it could take me as I explore new worlds is exhilarating.

Everything I write, I write for me. Being able to share it just makes it that much better, and seeing people enjoy things I have written is the best feeling of all.

I have spent the last two years studying professional writing and editing at Victoria University. Being able to study what I love with teachers and other students who share this devotion to all things books has been fantastic.

It has been an incredible two years and I have learnt things I never dreamed of. Like in one exciting editing class, we learnt about the interrobang — this little guy: It instantly became my favourite symbol. I mean, what's not to love? It looks awesome, and it has a great name!

Then we learnt the first rule of the interrobang: Never, EVER use it.

Now, I still live in a different world every week — currently I'm passing through Hogwarts on my way back to Middle Earth — and I'll soon need another bookcase. I have a nephew now and I can't wait to start taking him to all of my favourite places, because nothing can describe the feeling of travelling to a new world for the first time. I will continue to explore new places, and I'll never stop writing. I know I'll never give up, because books are my life and I'm not content to live in just one world.

If there's one thing I've learnt, it's that those people who see their dreams come true have someone giving them endless love and support.

King Arthur had Merlin. Batman had Alfred. And I have my Mum.

 **Ashleigh Marks**

Ashleigh completed her Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing in 2012, and is currently studying a Bachelor of Communication

KISSING STRANGERS

I thought I knew your mouth.
I've watched it forming Os and Ms
and devastating smiles for years.
I've been enchanted by its pouts and puckers,
limp each time
it lit a cigarette
or licked a stamp.
So it's funny now,
when we finally kiss,
to find that no amount of watching
makes another mouth familiar.

Yours is thinner than the one I'm used to
and opens wider than my own.
Your tongue is hard as a shoe horn.
It moves too quickly
and comes farther than invited:
pushy, mannerless.
Even your teeth surprise.
We scrape and bang together painfully.
Thank God our eyes are shut.

We will have to sit here
working each other's lips
like homemade bread
until they warm and swell and soften.
And when we get it right
we must arrange to meet tomorrow.

 *Kristin Henry*
(from *Slices of Wry*)

LETTING GO

It's time to let go
Let go of all that no longer serves us
Letting go of fear
of resentment, sorrow, regret
of holding onto past sorrows
and hurts of broken hearts
and dreams of shattered realities
of pregnancies and births and
marriages that were
never meant to be so
Time to let go of holding on,
HOLDING ON, HOLDING ON, HOLDING ON
to this weight that only serves to punish
you and make you miserable and so tired
Holds you back from living and serves
to feed your self-loathing and guilt
for how it was all never meant to be
Years gone by and still you stay stuck
shattered, quietly, resolutely
Fooling nobody
It's time to walk to the cliff
gently, slowly
I know you are afraid my dear
but come to the edge
and I will show you how to soar again
It's time to put yourself first
And love and honour all that
you are and crave
Your creativity, your artistry, your spirit,
your soul is ready for the next part of the journey
it is time to heal and move back to LOVE
ONLY LOVE where it all began
and ends in all that ever shall be, Love...

 *Kate Prendergast*

*Kate studied Certificate IV in
Professional Writing and Editing at VU in 2011*

LANGUAGE BARRIER

Even when living nearby, relationships between neighbours can take many seasons to blossom.

She is screaming at me. I can't understand a word. She doesn't speak English and I have no riposte to this fortissimo Italian attack. She bares an incomplete row of stumpy yellow teeth. She has wispy white hair and a sizzling glare. There's no one to interpret; it's just her and me. What have I done?

She is standing in our shared back lane in her slippers, floral apron and black dress, gesticulating and screaming. I shrug my shoulders and mime an exaggerated expression of bewilderment. She grabs my arm and leads me to where the bluestone laneway makes a dogleg, at the corner of her back fence. She expresses her discontent. I give up communicating by mime and tell her plainly, 'I've got no idea what you're on about. I'm going home now.'

I shake my arm free of her grip. She holds up a hand. Wait. Then she disappears around the corner. As I go to make my escape, she shuffles back into view, arms stretched out in front of her, turning an imaginary steering wheel. Then she shoulders into her fence.

She is watching me and pokes me in the arm. She points over my shoulder, a little higher up the hill, to our house. It looks like a doll's house, with the kitchen demolished and the frame of our new living room on view. All it needs is a giant hand to put some people in there. She jabs me again. There's a scrape of metallic green and a dent in her fence. She sees the knowledge bloom on my face: the bloody builders! They've backed up the lane where it's narrow. They're good at demolition, this mob. I hope they're equally good at construction.

I shrug my shoulders and put on a 'such is life' kind of face, but the Academy isn't awarding me any votes for my performance. I check the imaginary watch on my wrist. Exit stage left. I jump up through my back gate, slam it shut and shove the bolt in place. I'm panting. She bangs on my fence. It's wood; she'll get splinters. I feel like I'm ten and Mum's after me with the wooden spoon.

During the first Melbourne Cup Day party in our new house we hear loud smashing of metal on metal. I take a look out the back window and there's the old Italian lady, standing on a ladder, hammering steel stakes

into the ground. What on Earth? A metal forest, taller than her, between the almond tree and the wood pile. She's planting tomatoes! Only two metres separate our back fences, but she still lives in the first half of last century and also in the opposite hemisphere. Every year she puts her tomatoes in on the same day. When it's time to harvest, her brother comes around. They do the bottling in her back shed, working all day. Then, when it's done, they sit on the painted seat by the back door and he'll have a smoke. They drink wine and speak loudly to each other. Later the screen door slams. A soft yellow light from her living room glows around the edges of the closed venetian blinds and stabs of blue flicker from the television.

Our extension is finally finished. Our baby is born. The backyard has been paved. I plant a lemon tree in the back corner. We don't get enough sun to grow tomatoes. I plant herbs in olive-oil tins and attach them to the fence to catch the afternoon sun. But they never thrive.

We face east. She faces west. In late summer I hear the cockatoos screech. Every year they know when the old lady's almonds are ready. Yellow combs raised, they

hang upside down, stripping the almonds off with their claws, cracking them with their beaks. For all her territorial vigilance, my neighbour never seems to be around when these raiders fly in. Then the almond tree makes a final bow as the persimmon by her side gate takes centre stage. Great ripe orange orbs on bare branches herald autumn. She ties foil containers to the branches, but the birds still attack.

From my kitchen window I can see her bent black figure, working in her garden while I wash the dishes. In the years since we moved into our cottage, I've come to recognise the first signs of the changing seasons from the growing, ripening and harvesting of her vegetables and fruit. Today she's cutting the corn. It's Anzac Day. I hear the shriek of jets. Then I see them flying in formation, wing tips almost touching as they flash over the housing commission towers, past the highway and towards the city. She continues cutting down the corn.

I dip my hands back into the suds and then I hear the drone of the Lancaster bombers. I go out onto the back balcony to watch. She stops her work and looks up at these World War II workhorses churning the sky, her hand

shading her face from the autumn sunshine. The sound of these planes flying across Europe in the 1940s must have been terrifying. The drone recedes. She turns around and sees me. I offer her a kind of bemused smile. She gets back to work.

My son, Tom, is now old enough to connect cricket bat to ball. I bowl underarm to him, between hanging out loads of washing. Ball after ball, I bowl and field. He hits them all, but already the yard seems too small. Over the fence goes another tennis ball. I open the gate and he jumps down into the back lane and retrieves it before it rolls down the hill to the next street. Some we never see again. I read a statistic once: Australia imports close to 14 million tennis balls each year, and most of them go missing. We're doing our bit. I can see two on top of her shed, but I'm not game to ask for them back. And I've learned that my miming is not that convincing.

Another winter. My herbs have died. The lemon still hasn't borne fruit. The cumquat I planted in a pot a couple of years ago has pale yellow leaves. Her almond tree and persimmon tree are bare, giving me a clear view

of her big white bloomers, black dresses, black skirts and black tops pegged on her clothesline. Tom kicks the footy around our tiny courtyard. He laughs as I fumble and make a clumsy handpass. The footy goes over the back fence again. We check the lane. No football. Where did it go? Over the old lady's fence! End of that game for today. We are both scared of her.

The next day we're in the backyard again. Another load of washing to hang out. Tom is playing with his racing car. I hear a thump and the footy sails over the back fence and bounces into our yard. Tom yells out 'Goal' and I call out 'Grazie'. She calls back. I don't understand what she says but I think we've cracked the language barrier.

 *Carmel Riordan*

THE CELL

There he was held, somewhere under water in a very tightly enclosed cell such that there was no room for him to move a muscle and so dark as if his eyes were blindfolded.

Though the place seemed a little frightening and smothering, it was so warm and really comfortable. Whenever he felt afraid, there was the Touch, very tender and very soft that it made him forget all about his fears. Sometimes loneliness took over him, but soon that very Touch came back to assure his safety and peace of mind. Serenity, despite all the chains, unleashed his inquiring mind to wander freely, and his passionate heart to unfurl.

At first, he couldn't figure out what sort of connection was between him and those touches that soothed his craving of an unknown, unconceivable desire. Day after day, this connection grew deeper and stronger, deeming him helpless and incapable of living a day without at least one touch.

Then, all of a sudden, from within the mist of the horizon flamed a light, a faint sort of light casting a cold mysterious breeze. He could barely see his own hands, but, to him, this was quite enough. He started sensing and

checking everything around him: his face, his body and particularly the Walls imprisoning and holding him. All felt as soft as silk.

Later on, a thrilling Noise came out of nowhere, breaking through the absolute silence and disturbing the calmness of his world. He was thus confused that he hit the walls begging for a touch. Of course, his request was immediately answered (for those touches were devoted especially for him). As he calmed down, he realized that it wasn't just one Noise; in fact, there were two noises, one from within, another from without, beating simultaneously in perfect harmony — just like two musical instruments giving the same note — pumping him with life.

Moreover, through the walls, Voices were heard. To be more precise, there were two distinguished Voices accompanied with two different Touches; the first provided him with stamina and courage; the other, passion and sentiment. He listened to their talk, every word of which triggered an everlasting joy. It was mostly directed to him. Although he wanted to reply, he couldn't.

Gradually, this place became more like a paradise, where there was neither pain nor hunger and every wish is

granted. Nonetheless, he was never satisfied; he was eager to break out of that cell. He was most of the time seeking the exit desperately, for it was way out of his reach. He became so fed up with that dull life, so curious to discover what existed behind the walls. Being beyond reach of any human aid, he resorted to God and wished for an escape to the other world — the so-called world of happiness and freedom.

Then, an angel appeared and vanished in a glimpse, granting him adequate power to open the Door. He noticed a look of anger on the face of that angel, which was obviously a sort of warning, but which he instantly ignored and forgot all about. Submitting to his curiosity, he didn't hesitate at all and rushed straight to the exit, unaware of what awaited him out there. He made the ultimate decision.

However, the moment he touched the door, everything began to shiver in weaker to stronger and more violent tremors that the whole place seemed to collapse. He was petrified with terror of what was ahead. The walls contracted, surrounding and squeezing him fiercely. He screamed and cried loudly for mercy and almost suffocated before he was forcefully expelled out, as if unwanted.

He was at last out of that cell and into the world of mystery. Yet, he was unhappy and felt uncomfortable realizing there was never a way back; that he was out for good. The faint light became so bright that it made him almost blind to see things as they really were; only blurred reflexes were visible to him.

He kept crying out of fear and pain, with all the huge white-dressed aliens around him, and couldn't stop until he was put between Her arms — she, who always made him feel secure and warm.

However, a question kept wandering in his mind finding no answer: 'Is it worth that much suffering? Am I free now? Or was it just a transition to a larger Cell?'

What to expect of a life that welcomes us with pain?

 **Majd Rustam**

*Majd won the ESL Short Story section in the
2012 Brimbank Literary Awards*

SO IT GOES

I am swimming between two oceans
I cannot swim
so I am drowning
in a chasm of green
blessed by the gods
contaminated by man—

I cannot drink it
nor bathe in it
instead I float and pray
ahead I see an island
a chimera
I think—

hope not
my arms move with a steadfast determination
I ache and yet I swim
until I cannot any more
and I let myself be guided
arms open
the sea is my friend—

I tell myself
I close my eyes
and dream
until I can dream no more

 *Maria Vavala*

I WAS BORN IN POLAND

I was born in Poland.
There I learned to smell the trees
and run around in the rain
and to let red tulips in May give me joy
and know that pain
happens to us in life.

I learned from the seasons
that there is no moment of death:
death comes unnoticed.
We only know it had been
when we feel the spring
inhale again.

I've learnt important things
but not my name
or that I was Polish
those I was told.

 *Monika Athanasiou*

BALNARRING BEACH CIRCA 1983

THE SECRET GARDEN

Behind an ivy-covered door
lies a secret
a secret
with birds and with trees
a beautiful garden lies there
undisturbed by humans for years
Roses grow wild among
the old walkways
and snow drops grow
under the shrubs
A little red robbin
sits in his nest
and watches the garden
grow old



Kathy Petrova

*Kathy won the Children's Poetry division of
the 2012 Brimbanj Literary Awards*

In the early 1980s, summers were spent at Grandma's weatherboard holiday house. Life was simple at Balnarring Beach. We relaxed, no worries, well, except for the mozzies, who worried us a lot.

The bedrooms were downstairs. It was cold and dark down there, but I wasn't lonely. Double bunks meant more kids than just my sister and I. As a bonus, we were always welcomed by the spiders. They might have sent out invitations there were so many of them. I think they enjoyed, like me, the fires we lit downstairs to keep ourselves warm. It was fun to watch the sparks and see the flames make strange shapes and listen to the crack and crackle from the burning wood.

In the morning, I had to use my chubby legs to climb the steep stairs to the kitchen and family room. It was like another house, warm, light and spacious with a long balcony. It seemed to me that we were in the treetops. Maybe the kookaburras thought that too as they came to visit us on the upstairs balcony, not invited, but very welcome.

We would sit outside on the balcony and look out through the trees to the paddocks and see the cows who seemed as relaxed as us as we waited for friends who were coming to stay.

I miss our simple summers and the sights and sounds of Balnarring Beach.



Kathryn Bail

AFTERLIFE

Fog drew itself around us like a net, cutting off the outside world — whatever was left of it. Four of us sprawled around a huge shell hole, like twigs cast up by the high tide of lost expectations. I wondered where the scooped out earth had gone — disseminated like the rest of our platoon, perhaps.

The fifth member of our group stood in the middle of the shell hole, knee deep in mud and blood and the remains of friends and acquaintances. He was a young private named Thomas, fresh meat for the offensive that now lay shattered and bleeding into the ground. Thomas kept exhorting us to fall back under the cover of the fog, but we ignored him.

‘Come on,’ he pleaded again, ‘we have to go, before it’s too late.’

It was pointless arguing, so we talked amongst ourselves.

‘It’s so quiet,’ said Barker, pulling out a tobacco pouch wrapped in an oilcloth rag. ‘Maybe there’s a

ceasefire to collect the wounded.’

The soldier closest to him, a veteran named O’Grady, cleared his throat loudly and spat into the mud in front of Thomas. ‘Didn’t hear no all clear, there’s no ceasefire.’

Barker finished rolling his cigarette and pointed it in my direction. ‘What do you reckon, Knowles? You’ve got the stripes, you should know.’

Their eyes turned to me, but I glanced away, trying to see something, anything, through the impenetrable fog. Barker was right, it was far too quiet. At first the intermittent chatter of machine guns and crump of mortars had kept us company, but the silence had gradually drawn out until there was no way to ascertain a set timeframe of its existence. O’Grady was also correct, I’d heard no all clear either, and by now one side or the other would have stumbled on us if a ceasefire had been agreed on.

Thomas tried to drag himself out of the bog of

earth and entrails holding him fast, but slithered back and slumped onto his backside in defeat. Throwing his head back, he spoke to the sky, or at least the fog, in the absence of a clear horizon. 'You men don't understand. We have to go, now, before it's too late.'

Barker signalled again with his cigarette, and I realised I hadn't answered his question. Smoke spiralled up from the glowing stub, seeming to merge and add to the miasma surrounding us. I was about to speak when Barker exhaled, and I was momentarily caught off guard. For, though smoke trailed from the tip of his cigarette, it was as if he actually inhaled the fog, rather than exhaled smoke. I rubbed my eyes vigorously with thumb and forefinger, determined to erase this further assault to the senses.

'I know one thing,' said O'Grady, 'we'll be sitting ducks when this fog lifts.'

Before I could think of a reply, Hennessey, a wry and taciturn man of mixed Scottish heritage, spoke up. 'There be no ravens.'

O'Grady raised his head. 'You're the only one ravin' apart from... ' He looked down at Thomas and away, refusing to acknowledge what we all knew.

'He's right,' said Barker, 'there's no ravens. There's always ravens.'

I held my breath, hoping for some confirmation we were not alone. Silence echoed in my ears. There were no ravens feasting on the dead, as Hennessey had rightly pointed out; no cries for help or moans of agony from the wounded; no spotter planes sputtering overhead in search of targets. It was as if the war had ended and both sides had retreated, taking with them the secondary participants and

innocent onlookers without bothering to inform us; the discarded punch-line of some obscure and elaborate joke.

Barker flicked his cigarette butt and it landed next to the splayed fingers of Thomas's right hand. I waited for him to reach out and lift the butt to his lips, but saw from the stark whiteness of his fingertips he was not a smoker.

'Maybe the Huns have tossed it in,' said Barker, not taking his eyes from Thomas. 'Maybe we can just get up and go.'

There had been talk of an armistice for six months, rumours Jerry was on his last legs, scraping to get troops up to the line. But no one believed the rumours anymore. There seemed only one way out of this hell, and that was by trading it for another.

'Be home for Christmas,' said O'Grady, laughing in a manner that precluded any sense of hilarity. Hennessey shrugged, pushing the barrel of his rifle deeper into the mud so he could lean his hands and chin on the butt. We were all watching Thomas, I realised, awaiting his next outburst, perhaps requiring it as confirmation of our own mortality.

As if on cue, Thomas tried to rise on his haunches, but was drawn back into the mud by his own weight. 'You men,' he wailed, 'curse you, you've damned us all. We should have gone while we had the chance. Now it's too late, now we're all—'

'No more,' yelled Hennessey, pulling his rifle from the mud with a horrible sucking noise that drew my insides towards my bowels. Hennessey balanced the rifle in his hands, elbows supported by his knees, and aimed roughly at Thomas. 'One more word,

laddie, just one more, so help me.'

O'Grady laughed again, a disturbing, hollow sound that rattled in his throat like the cough of a tuberculosis sufferer. 'You're daft, Hennessey. Thing's so full of mud you'll likely blow your own head off.'

Hennessey swung the rifle to O'Grady. 'Maybe I'll try it on you first.'

O'Grady hacked out another laugh, reaching out with thumb and fore-finger to shoot back with an imaginary pistol. 'Don't matter who you shoot, it'll likely blow up in your face.'

Hennessey grimaced, dropped the rifle and pulled out his service revolver. 'How about now, O'Grady, whose head will I blow off now?'

O'Grady turned away, looked at Thomas who was rocking slowly back and forth, giving the mud a life of its own. Barker fumbled for his tobacco pouch, but it spilled from his trembling hands and fluttered down in front of Thomas like a peace offering. If he noticed, Thomas gave no sign, just continued rocking, emitting a low humming that was both annoying and somehow soothing; a mother lulling a child to sleep while taunting those within earshot of their lost innocence.

Barker's hand slipped to the holster at his side. 'By Christ, I'll finish him myself if he don't stop that racket.' He hoisted the .38 Webley at arms length, but it wavered erratically from Thomas to a point midway between the ailing private and where I sat, directly opposite Barker.

I could see the barrel sniffing me out, while Barker's eyes flicked from his tobacco pouch to Thomas and sideways to O'Grady and Hennessey. My

fingers scabbled for my own .38, but came up empty. The pistol must have been torn from my grip during the maelstrom, snatched away by the bombardment that created this bizarre stand-off.

Thomas's discarded rifle was the closest weapon, the anonymity of my corporal's stripes now readily apparent in the greater scheme of things. I thought of lunging for the rifle, but some worm of intuition told me O'Grady was far too accepting, too subdued for the situation playing out around him.

He reached one hand into his tunic, fist clutched beneath the heavy cloth. He slowly withdrew his hand, revealing the grenade in his hand. He hooked a finger through the safety pin and tugged it out, flinging it into the mud next to Barker's tobacco. The strike lever pressed against his palm was the only thing preventing the grenade detonating. If he released it, we had four seconds at most before the explosion.

'Okay, lads,' I stammered, my voice sounding weak and hollow, 'maybe we should head back to our lines while we have the chance.'

It sounded ridiculous, even before O'Grady offered his rebuttal. 'Good thinking, Knowles, but which way are our lines?'

I looked left and then right, into the pervasive fog, at the same time patting down my tunic for the compass that should have been there. O'Grady's hands whirled and a dark object flew my way. I jerked back, thinking of the grenade, but a small round disc landed in the mud beside me. Regaining my composure, I flicked the compass open, searched for a heading.

O'Grady laughed, flexing the fingers that held death in his palm. 'Which way, Knowles? Is there a way out of here?'

The needle of the compass flickered wildly, never settling in one spot for more than a fraction of a second. I stumbled to the lip of the shell hole, holding the compass before me, but still the needle fluttered indecisively. There was no indication of true North, nothing to guide me. I hurled the compass into the directionless fog, feeling chastened and child-like afterwards.

'See,' said O'Grady, 'we're lost.'

Thomas shot both arms into the air and fell forward in prayer. 'Dear Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

Hennessey swung his pistol at Thomas. 'I warned ye, laddie.'

Barker's identical pistol trembled and shook. His eyes were closed.

I was about to make a grab for Thomas' rifle when O'Grady rose to his feet, the Mills bomb held aloft.

'Hold your fire, fools, you'll give away our position. You want that, Hennessey? You ready for that, Barker? Jerry don't waste bullets on the likes a you. They'd peg you out with your own bayonets and leave you for the crows...' O'Grady's voice trailed off into the fog, as he perhaps remembered Hennessey's earlier observation.

'Stand down, all of you,' I said, trying to lend an air of conviction to my voice. 'Save your energy for the Huns.'

Barker lowered his weapon, hugging his knees into his chest and burying his face from view. I thought I heard Thomas sobbing, but realised it was Barker.

Hennessey holstered his Webley and eyed O'Grady nervously. 'Aye, it's the lad dragging us down. A man can handle death, gets used to it, but ghosts, more dead than alive and howling for the afterlife, that takes the wind out of any man.'

O'Grady shook his head and laughed. He seemed to enjoy playing devil's advocate. 'He's no ghost, nor the living dead. He's somewhere in-between — in no-man's-land, like us, only his is the no-man's-land between life and death, and ours is ... What do you reckon ours is, Knowles?'

O'Grady's tone was wearing me down, insinuation in his voice whenever he spoke.

A breeze rolled in, driving the fog before it in a constant stream. The fog enveloped me, draining what warmth there was from my body and setting my teeth chattering like railway tracks, the train of my thoughts steaming on, unperturbed.

O'Grady smiled, clenching and unclenching the fingers that gripped the grenade, never quite allowing the strike lever to disengage. What did he know or want? And why didn't he just come out and say it?

Thomas had grown silent, resting on his haunches, hands by his sides, a red stain surrounding the innocuous hole in his back. I was glad he faced away from me, glad I couldn't see the exit wound exposing his secret to the world.

'We're in purgatory,' said Barker, the words barely decipherable through the hands covering his

face. 'For what we've done, what we've become. God's abandoned us, left us for dead.'

Hennessey pulled out his revolver, passing it back and forth from hand to hand while alternately shaking and nodding his head. 'Aye, judgement's been passed, sure enough. Can't argue with the will of God.'

Both men turned to O'Grady, then levelled their gaze in my direction. O'Grady moved forward until he was level with Thomas, but a few feet above the cesspool where the younger man cowered. Thomas's rifle was all that spanned the distance between O'Grady and I, the butt at my feet while the barrel reached out to O'Grady.

'The way I see it, lads, we was just following orders. Corporal Knowles here was in charge. Wasn't you, Knowles?'

The fog seemed to enter and swirl within my mind, and I became aware of a throbbing pain in the back of my head. O'Grady's outline shimmered and darkened, began to fade and enter the fog within and all around.

A hand reached out of the gloom, inching towards O'Grady's boot.

'You ordered us, Knowles,' said O'Grady. Jerry had us pinned, had us dead to rights. Someone had to go, didn't they? Why one of us? Why not the new boy? Got to earn your stripes, don't you, Knowles?'

The wind howled, and as if swatted by a huge hand, the figure before me tilted sideways and slid from view. The fog expanded and intensified into a dark and menacing presence — I could barely make out the rifle at my feet — and the wind swirled and

moaned, sucking O'Grady's surprised scream from his lips as hands dragged him down into the quagmire.

I attempted to bend and scoop up the rifle, but as I did an explosion threw me back into the mud, and the fog blossomed into a black cloud that funnelled into the sky above, shrieking in my ears like a banshee until darkness overtook me.

When I came to the fog had lifted, replaced with a brightness that seared my eyes. The breeze had died to a stillness that was disconcerting. For, though I wanted to get up, the stench of rotting corpses pinned me to the ground.

I closed my eyes and feigned death as an incessant cawing filled the air. The sound grew louder, closer — rushing to enter the dark and empty space that would remain forever hidden within.

 **Craig Henderson**

Craig's writing has been highly commended in a number of national short story competitions. He is studying a Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing at Victoria University (TAFE)

LOVE AND WORK

The moment will come, next year or else today,
no one talks about it, but it's true:
grief is work, implacable, in our way,
a snarled, exhausting thing we need to do.
It waits for us. We'd rather it grew weeds
like a burned-down house, or rusted wreck,
than see its scalded bulk beneath the reeds
and haul its wreckage up onto the deck.
And grief is like Pompeii, each shard a clue
to be painfully recovered on our knees,
no one talks about it, but it's true:
we must kneel down and name it piece by piece.
We falter at the task that lies at hand,
the hard-won pattern we must pick apart
the broken class that we must sift like sand

the knives we turn on our constricted heart
and all the bloodless scars we hoped to leave-
we do not get to shirk, or even choose
to see the world the way we would believe.
This world which uses us. This world we use.
Love and work, Freud tells us, is the cure
but love, this tapped vein that has bled too much,
has left us just with work, and now I fear
the toxic half-life of this thing still warm to touch.
Darkness hides the waiting shapes of day
that will lie there will we steel ourselves to start.
Here comes the light. We cannot turn away-
seeing is the hardest but most necessary part.

 *Cate Kennedy*

Cate won The Age Short Story Competition two years in a row and has a number of best-selling poetry collections. She has featured in a number of Rotunda in the West events, including our annual poetry bus

AGILE

Acrobatic, almost swift like Jonathan and his spiffs.
Gaining on the light, almost like a bird in flight, gliding through the air.
In this trait, there are many speeds of which we take the lead.
Love the power, love the run, let's go together and set off at the gun.
End now, time to go, race tomorrow so don't be in sorrow.

 *Kurt Steward*

Kurt won the Teen Poetry category in the 2012 Brimbank Literary Awards

WRITE YOUR OWN JOURNEY @VU

It doesn't matter where you begin,
it's where you end up that counts.

Whether you're a 17 year-old budding PR guru,
a practicing professional in need of a skills upgrade,
or a 70 year-old first time novelist,
we can help you get it write @VU.

We have a whole suite of courses, certificates and diplomas
in communications, professional writing and editing,
creative writing and public relations that you can tailor to
suit your writing journey.

With multiple entry and exit points all the way from TAFE
certificates and diplomas to bachelor degrees and PhD studies,
you'll find the writing challenge and the accreditation you
seek in our programs.

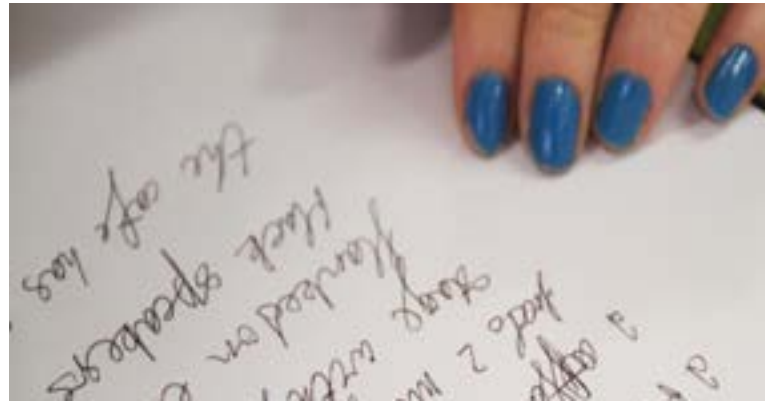
Get it Write @VU.

Find out more at;

www.profwritingvu.wordpress.com

and <http://www.vu.edu.au/courses/bachelor-of-communication-abco>

Join us on Facebook at [TheWriteZone](#)



STUDENT LEADERSHIP AWARDS 2013

APPLICATIONS ARE NOW OPEN!

These non-academic awards recognise and celebrate students across Victoria University who play a significant leadership role. Up to 10 awards will be granted annually with winners receiving a cash prize.



CLOSING DATE:

20 SEPTEMBER 2013

FOR MORE INFORMATION, EMAIL:

SLAWARDS@VU.EDU.AU

REGISTRATION LINK:

GOO.GL/N85rM

Nomination categories include:

- Individual Awards
- Team Awards
- VU Spirit Award
- Volunteer West Award
- Clubs and Society Award

vu.edu.au

CRICOS Provider No. 00124K



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA