



being

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA
VICE-CHANCELLOR'S INTERNATIONAL POETRY PRIZE 2023

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*The University of Canberra
Vice-Chancellor's
International Poetry Prize*

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First published in 2023 by
Centre for Creative and Cultural Research
Faculty of Arts and Design
University of Canberra
ACT 2601 Australia

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ISBN: 978-1-74088-574-4

Cover image: Australian National Maritime Museum, Object number ANMS122[024]: Photograph from a series depicting the sinking of RMS TAHITI, 1930. Reproduced via Flickr Commons, with thanks.

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>		7
<i>Judges' report</i>		9
<i>Winner</i>		
Damen O'Brien	Natural causes	13
<i>Winner, International</i>		
Jeannie Wallace McKeown	Climate emergency	17
<i>Runner-up</i>		
David Mason	Moon on the Huon	21
<i>Highly Commended</i>		
Jo Gardiner	Requiem for a city	25
Indrani Perera	Notes from the diaspora	27
Sara M Saleh	All the places my father lost his faith	29
Petra White	Elegy (6)	30
BEING HERE		
Paula Bohince	A hillside in Elkins	33
Margaret Bradstock	Selling the Ryde house	35
Tug Dumbly	Outside the chicken shop	37
Adrienne Eberhard	Home/here	39
David Jockel	Mum	41
Peter Lach-Newinsky	A quickening in the emptiness	42
Kristen Lang	As if	44
Wes Lee	Air	45
Wes Lee	Montana	46
Alexandra McCallum	Transformation	47
Glenn McPherson	Glissando	48
Gemma Nethercote Way	Brute	49
Peter Ramm	Stone walking	50
Mara Adamitz Scrupe	News from Agnieszka just across the border	52
Sara Vasefi	Blisters	54
BEING HUMAN		
Chris Andrews	The listener	59
Amelia Bradley	Black fruit	61
Coral Carter	These things happened	62
Shastra Deo	The year of cats	64

BEING HUMAN (*cont.*)

Tug Dumbly	Spillway	65
Es Foong	Every poem I write is a lie	67
Nasim Khosravi	Abraham	69
Daryl Lim Wei Jie	Imperialism the highest stage of capitalism	70
Isabella G Mead	What to forget when you're expecting	71
Isabella G Mead	The wing	73
Damen O'Brien	The burning house problem	74
Indrani Perera	Landline	75
Felicity Plunkett	Wound	76
David Regan	Why are all your women weeping	78
Kevin Smith	A day spent	80
Kevin Smith	Afterwards	82
Patricia Sykes	Argument with an avatar	84

BEING

Tug Dumbly	Home	89
E. Andrews	Postnatal expression	90
Davide Angelo	The mound	92
Magdalena Ball	Ghost city	94
Paula Bohince	Accordion music	96
Michelle Brock	last glimpse	98
Michael Cunliffe	The other end of the line	100
Cath Drake	Snow burial	102
Irina Frolova	white birches blue gums	103
Jason Gray	Autopsy	105
Dimitra Harvey	<i>Ninox Strenua</i> (Powerful Owl)	106
David Mason	Raven observes the world	108
Shaine Melrose	Hold me together I am dying to live	110
Jenny Pollak	A confluence of parts	111
Peter Ramm	Severe weather sestina	112

<i>Biographies</i>		117
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Editors' Foreword

This anthology marks the seventh iteration of the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize, which was offered annually from 2014 to 2019, went into a COVID-19 hiatus from 2020, but has now returned. The 2023 prize attracted a wide array of fine entries from poets located across the globe, with submissions coming in from North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and also from South Africa, India, the Philippines, Singapore and elsewhere. Many of those who submitted work are very established poets; others are new to us, or have a small publishing profile to date, but the quality of their poetry points to the likelihood of an excellent future.

We were delighted to see a number of poems submitted by tertiary students; and also to see submissions for a new section of this prize: the International Poem. This section sought entries from poets living in nations with 'developing and in-transition economies' (determined on the basis of the UN's 'Country Classification'¹). This new initiative is designed to support the University of Canberra's values, and its standing as an equity institution.

The judges for this year's prize are, like the poets themselves, both international and multicultural. We were very conscious of the importance of having different perspectives on the poetry submitted, of including more than one aesthetic in the judging team, and of finding judges who understand the wide range of language and culture that emerges in the form of poetry. Mani Rao (from India) and Dr Tony Barnstone (from the US) read all the entries and then worked together to create the longlist, which comprises the poems in this anthology. After this they revisited the longlist poems to select the winner, runner-up, International winner, and four shortlisted poems. This is a difficult task for judges, particularly when faced with fifty-plus excellent poems with very diverse form, content and voice. Our thanks to the judges for their sensitive and generous readings of the poems, and for giving us this lovely body of work.

The University of Canberra is strongly committed to poetry, and the way it enriches and enlivens national and international cultures, building bridges between people and celebrating the value of complexity. Research into poetry, conducted by the University's International Poetry Studies poet-researchers and our colleagues, continues to contribute the worldwide understandings of the significance and value of poetry everywhere – in the past, now, and into the future. This 2023 anthology joins the previous anthologies produced from the Prize – most of them available online, as PDFs, at <https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/cccr/resources>. We welcome you to download and read these previous collections along with this new volume.

The cover image for *being* (2023) has been selected by our designer, Dr Caren Florance. It features a remarkable photograph of RMS TAHITI at the point of sinking, in August 1930.² While this was a disaster, thanks to the proficiency of the crew and the swift intervention of two ships sailing in the area, no lives were lost. The photograph is one of many taken by

¹ https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wesp/wesp_current/2014wesp_country_classification.pdf

² See Australian National Maritime Museum Flickr Commons

survivors and rescuers; this one shows the ship framed by the porthole of a rescue vessel. We were taken by the poetic drama of the image, and its reminder of the precarity and beauty of life.

Professor Jen Webb & Dr Kimberly Williams
Editors

Judges' Report

We had an absolute blast reading the submissions. The natural landscape of Australia featured prominently. This was never just for the sake of description – the landscape seemed always in meaningful conversation with the poem's events or characters, and grief and loss dominated the emotional landscape, which could be a post-Covid reality. The poems were in a range of styles – from tight, metrical poems to stream-of-consciousness prose poems. Congratulations to all the poets who won as well as all the poems in the long list for the anthology.

FIRST PRIZE: Natural Causes

This poem had immediacy, humour and a disarming pathos. Anchored upon a moment in a lover's argument, it contextualises the moment and projects it into a potential future. The narrative was elliptical and yet complete. We loved the unexpected imagery ('the stars that were its eyes / crossed out and gone') the exciting verbs (birds that 'missile down'), the mind leaping from this to that, and the wry, dry, humour that allows a poem about loss to include a joke about nuclear fusion. 'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader,' writes Robert Frost. There are plenty of tears and surprises in this elegant, smart, emotionally intense poem.

SECOND PRIZE: Moon on the Huon

This poem is written in rhyming sprung rhythm couplets, yet feels natural and idiomatic, never overwrought and artificial. A flowing enjambment makes the poem river through the form without the jingly epigrammatic closure that is too often the downfall of poems written in rhymed couplets. This poem about the death of a father, metaphorised as the moon, shows us how hard it is to read the world in one's grief. This poem had a lot of heart, and a terrific ending.

INTERNATIONAL PRIZE: Climate Emergency (Australian fires, December 2020)

This poem reaches from the very south of Africa to an Australia in the grip of bushfires. It has a visceral feel to it, contrasting the safety of the poetic persona and the environment and the life that teems therein from which the poem is positioned, to both the current catastrophe in Australia, and the coming catastrophe for the world as a whole. Strongly imagistic, it functions as a call to readers to 'hold in care / a future which stretches / beyond our own capped spans.'

Mani Rao & Tony Barnstone

winner

DAMEN O'BRIEN

Natural causes

A bird fell out of a clear sky while I walked off our latest stupid excuse for an argument, its feet curled into the undercarriage of its body, the stars that were its eyes crossed out and gone. Is that how they go about their deaths? Pattering down like unexpected rain long after missing all the other curtain calls – the teeth, the traps, the noisy shots, the shadow spiralling out of the sun? I've never noticed sudden squalls of birds. I'd thought they'd come unglued from their perch, slipping slowly like a loose watch upside down, bending like a flaccid cuckoo clock. But perhaps they mostly missile down in storms, or over forests, or uninhabited land, perhaps they do this all the time and I've not seen them do it, maybe they rarely get to the coroner's conclusion: natural causes, nothing else to see, because predators keep on shaving down their odds. If you live long enough, that's what coroners write – natural causes. It doesn't really matter how you go, nature's waiting grimly in the wings to take the credit. Now that scientists have built those frosty smoking vats, a kilometre long, colliding stuff, smashing ever faster atoms into lead, running all the stop signs with a beam of sharp and acid light, they're making stranger elements all the time – brief and lonely things collapsing too quickly to ever see them go, the fastest things that ever were and weren't, the forensics of their death the only proof they ever lived. Natural causes. Natural causes as monstrous as Frankenstein's creature, as natural as that old joke about two physicists driving Mitsubishi's which crash headlong into each other and for a pico-second become a limousine. Is that how all relationships go? Even ours? Two heavy elements crushed into one space, to make something beautiful but shortlived. If that were so then I would hope that the end comes out of an honest sky, the two of us without a mark upon us, our wings still perfect, folded over our hearts. From natural causes, nothing else to see.

winner,
international

JEANNIE WALLACE McKEOWN

Climate emergency

Australian fires December 2020

I step out of the bush,
 onto the long, smooth strand.
 Ocean a calm cobalt,
 South African sky a clear blue.

Seagulls swoop, strut,
 cormorants dive, rise, with fishes in beaks.
 A ruler-straight horizon,
 waves blowing back salt
 and clean kelp scent.
 My breath flows free and deep.

I wear no lifejacket;
 no need to shelter in the waves.
 No flames rage behind me.
 No smoke masks, or hastily packed kit bags.
 No coughing children.

Footage of the fires
 plays on every screen.
 People, animals, forests,
 houses, highways, cars.
 Beaches.

Under black, orange, red skies
 people huddle at the shorelines,
 cough, dodge embers.
 Navy vessels in their home waters
 ferry refugees state to state.

Where I live is not immune;
 drought stretches over years and distance.
 The slightest spark and we, too, burn.

Across the world we share three things:
 our communal atmosphere;
 the geologic crust;
 and this deep human flaw,
 an inability to hold in care

a future which stretches
beyond our own capped spans.

Across the world
the air carries
the reek
of burning.

runner-up

DAVID MASON

Moon on the Huon

Like an old man's head, haloed with white hair,
caught mid-sentence and suspended there,

a thought among the stratocumulus –
who's to say it can't remember us?

Mirror, mirror, mercury bleeding out
from a wound of light across the river's mouth.

The moon's full stop unravels in a cloud,
resolves and punctuates the story told

minutely in procedural detail,
a mind insisting that it will not fail.

I found it on a night of broken roads
turning me back upon their foreign codes

without direction, judged by every face
only my breathless waking could erase.

It was the moon, again the moon on water,
the moon on grass and gum trees, all disorder,

knowing and unknowing like my father
howling in the whirl of his own weather.

I love you, I would say, and he returned
the words like moonlight with its freezing burn.

Repeat the words and maybe they will mean
I love you. I am surfacing from a dream

I know, and I will see the moon head-on
and hear my father's voice though he is gone.

I love you, I will say. The earth will roll
away from that old man like a dropped ball.

highly
commended

JO GARDINER
INDRANI PERERA
SARA M SALEH
PETRA WHITE

Requiem for a city

*Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears...
Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once if I speak of it...
Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased...
Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities*

Night presses a dagger to memory's throat and warns it not to speak lest all be lost. But the moon, lately returned from exile, opens a heavy-lidded eye, pulls the sea into its arms, and remembers waves of incense drifting

in with the litany of the late service sung from the Redentore. A dream dipped into water develops its own particular light, and in the silver tones of evening thick with summer's breath, like a family of mirror makers,

fishermen cast out their nets across the ink-stained lagoon and haul in schools of swimming stars. To a cantata of gulls and bells, their liquid voices sing of shrimp and cuttlefish as *vaporetti* stream in a long sigh past painted

rooms inside the parade of *palazzi*. Their reflections chase the sleek black gondolas tugging at their tethers like spoiled, impatient ponies.

At Zitelle, the green tide strikes over the Fondamenta Croce, strung

with seaweed flashing under lamps like hair on a head that once turned in sunlight along a boulevard of orange trees bloomed from stone and burnished like Fortuny's burnt-apricot brocades hung in luscious folds,

or the beaten-gold pages flown loose from the Marciana. Persian oranges release drops of fragrance into air already saturated with musk and honey and white smoke, stirred in with diesel fumes, and sweet sewerage stench.

*

This was before the nectaries of the flower gardens all died down, fleshy red berries appeared, and the scent of ash haunted the air; before leaves dropped away from branches and lay in damp piles, forgetting. We cannot

claim we're like the angels who apprehend it all, but are powerless to act: as gulls mewed their morning prayers at Zatterre, the horizon polished bright sun into flame on the Adriatic – its fire stretched across the sea,

and you could smell its heat, like freshly melted wax of the candle you believed would burn on and on. We did not act, and hordes with selfie-sticks marauded through these golden pastures; the *sirocco* blew up a surge

tide – a seiche – and we let the city moored on elm-wood stilts, subside
in silt. The *acqua alta* rose to gag the beseeching mouths of angels. Crypts
 flooded. Mosaics dulled. Bells rose against the beating waves and rain
 streamed over the old white Istrian gate, the mooring posts – already half
 eaten by salt – and onto marble gutters, into stairways, flooding chambers.
 Water dragged the city into the lagoon’s slow-flowing darkness, and she
 sank like a cormorant, feathers slick with boat oil and rendered heavy.

The blue eyes drained away; the body washed up below Eufemia Bridge,
 arms flung out into foam, seaweed flowing from between her open lips.

*

The coffin lay on the flower-bedecked gondola wading its way to St Michele.

The priest and grave diggers grappled the casket from the boat and bore
 it across the uneven terrace saturated with the acrid scent of regret as mist
 lowered its shroud across the water onto Fondamente Nove. Monks
 in cassocks wandered the ducal tombs. The tang of cypress grew heavy.
 The ground jolted as if a *vaporetto* had rammed a pontoon – the engines
 rumbling in a reverse swirl of foam and diesel fumes. The headstone
 trembled when heavens parted, and earth shook loose an inlaid eye of lapis
 lazuli. The priest’s eyes rolled white. The church threw down its bells.

Cypresses shuddered and dropped their needles into the grave. Two marble
 angels toppled to the ground, their terrifying black wings cracking. Now,
 dusk flows in full tide across the boat factories of Giudecca where oars
 were hewn, to San Giorgio Maggiore who keeps the silence of all that
 is divine. The evening bell rises from the campanile beneath the lagoon
 and ruffles a surface that’s soon smooth again: the face the ibis sees as it drifts
 above – itself an eye of grey sky. The grieving moon shines on the sails
 and hulls of lost *bragozzi* on the water. Below their shadows, drifts a dream –
 a city drowned in sea. That was some years ago now, and it lies there still.

Notes from the diaspora on returning 'home'

You cannot own this exclamation mark
that spears the surface of the pool,
an azure-winged common kingfisher
who feathers off drops of belonging

from the telegraph wire above.
Hands that grasp can't hold
the boulders of dogs sleeping
in the bend of bitumen

like full stops at the end of a sentence
as the van shears a new paragraph
with you, your daughters,
partner and parents in it.

Or the hounds walking towards
the glass in the windscreen
where you watch the future
unfolding as if it could be yours.

A painted crane curves into the water
like a question mark looking for answers
as it sieves the day's words from silt.
The blush of pink on its tail

a reminder that you can't understand
what your aunt says to you.
The evening migration of bats
throws a net to sink sun.

Commas punctuate the sky
and with swift wing beats,
mark where you must pause for breath
– lungs filled with the scent of soil

the breath of *sepalika*, the joy of return.
You are asleep when they make
their return migration
and miss the map that shows

your way here. *Naga*, the king cobra, slides
through the grass. A tilde dissecting
this life from that. Separating the past
you didn't have from this moment
that should be home.

NOTE: Sepalika: also known as night jasmine because it blooms in the evening and loses its flowers by day break.

All the places my father lost his faith

my father lost his faith at the stale fringes of the brown carpet in the apartment.
at his 15-hour shifts but always made it to bedtime, tended to us with his tales of Sindbad the adventurer.

my father lost his faith at Camp David, at the cold peace, at Abdel Nasser's Egypt eroding.

my father lost his faith at my grandfather's goodbye, begging us to go somewhere safer.
my father lost his faith during delayed take-off; he missed my grandfather's death by an hour.

my father lost his faith in a country of men. he cried with the love reserved for son when all he had were daughters.

my father lost his faith at the cafe, longing for the kind of koshary black tea that bathes each rib.

my father lost his faith at his accent scratching its way out of his multilingual throat:
at EFTOPS, at BORGAR, at HANDED BERCENT.

at the rejection letters that came in the dozens,
at his degree he pulled out like a birthmark, a covenant, an eleventh finger,
all the generations of men before him in the folds of that paper.

my father lost his faith at my thirtieth birthday dinner, red velvet and his leukaemia diagnosis delivered that day.

lost his faith at the hospital where the nurse kept missing the vein, his arteries recoiling with each tap.

my father lost his faith at the windowless rooms
resplendent rows of pokies calling. a culling of fathers everywhere.

my father lost his faith when we lost the house – an immigrant's downfall.
our last night in it, my father cried.
his cries little, lonely fires. they cling to me like a legacy.

I should have cut him in half, see what's eating at his rind,
what parting of seas sutured him together: his want for a life of more.

I think I was terrified of seeing him then.
it would have been my first lesson in loving something
that stopped knowing how to love me in return.

Elegy (6)

The future was almost a memory we would not remember,
as our children leapt from wishes into form,
wildernesses, deserts, seas rolled back like seals, showing
their glittering roils, an illumination beyond our capacity,
and satisfied with that, we went home, did the washing, swept the floor,
put the children to bed with their strange little dreams
of the infinite, of god, how slender the door we opened to it,
our memories already forgetting us as we stretched out in time,
in the bed that held us like a comfortable stranger
loving us for the night, while in many places hell lived out its dreams,
voices reaching pitch, bodies expended, cities falling
as if that's what they, and all cities, were built for, as if dust was our element,
thin veil through which we touched each other, pressed together
like beginnings and ends, tumbling into morning, the stiff procedure
of fastening the child's helmet, wild leap of remembering lunch,
a folded glory in tea towels, bright dishes, effort of scrubbing something pure,
we were not looking for anything, only respite of a moment,
sunk deep in an ordinary dream, who or what would wake us,
and still it was there, and towards it we nudged our children,
bundling them up in hats, snowsuits, mittens,
pushing them out into sparseness of day, into time-saying shadows
that branches make, in the silvery hard shell we weave for them,
out to the limits of love, its hands waving goodbye, the quiet world
receiving them, there, this innocence, whatever we could call it –
when we turned our backs on the path where the children disappeared,
and paused by the mirror and saw ourselves looking through time –
as if we could see it, a space, an opening, something once that admitted us,
there was nothing we could do with it but make it a story.

being here

PAULA BOHINCE
MARGARET BRADSTOCK
TUG DUMBLY
ADRIENNE EBERHARD
DAVID JOCKEL
PETER LACH-NEWINSKY
KRISTEN LANG
WES LEE
ALEXANDRA McCALLUM
GLENN McPHERSON
GEMMA NETHERCOTE WAY
PETER RAMM
MARA ADAMITZ SCRUIPE
SABA VASEFI

A hillside in Elkins

1.

Flour for the jelly jar biscuits and a skinny stream
 of buttermilk flooding the basin. Snow flowers over the pregnant
 mother in the cabin, a mother for winter and a mother
 for spring, for always. Snow sends down its felicitations and haloes over the boy's
 white birthday cake. One childhood picture remains: him
 in a dirty scowl and sailor outfit. Rabbits slung
 through the dens' furrows land on the shoulders of uncles.
 Softness gets skinned while the kindling takes shape like a family
 burning through centuries. When it's time,
 the boy takes the palomino to the matinée to watch silvery cowboys shoot
 at some boulders. Coat of chipped paint
 and intoxicant of mane. *Mine*, he thinks, as his mother
 leans into the pain of early delivery.

2.

White stones of the graves. A bride driven past
 shakes her wedding handkerchief stitched with saxifrage.
 Coal shakes in its crib, lifted from blasted hilltops, from hidden webs,
 and uncurling like spiders come men
 quenched only by lemon peel soaked in sugar, elixir of bitter sunshine
 made from tainted water. No need
 to pretty it up. To cut the throat's dust, to ready their voices
 for the evening's fires, they drink from a jug.

3.

To know the first pluck from a passed around banjo,
 hens bobbing before twilight tucks them in, is to be blessed by Saturday's
 strawberry moon and a hootenanny's harmonica bliss,
 which is sorrow overcome, spark-flicked fog
 of folk and vixen in the shadows. The leaps and licks make strange
 the holler's kin. To be of them
 is a story of blood in its meander, pick lifted
 in darkness and lain likewise, one's bucket endlessly lugged.

Rest at the whistle and eat in the mine by headlamp light, its bouquet
of brethren filaments. These are the minutes
for medicine of mustard and pickle and hog boiled out back,
torn clean off the bone and transformed into sandwich. Work
until the miniscule church offers its sips
and its wafers, drone of promises and kingdom come, then hunt
with the pastor in his flannels and long johns.

4.

Our song's a bituminous hymn of possum
lifted up by the scruff and set down in its dunce cap. Our gospel
is flickering doe and lamentation of buck strung up,
left to drain into a hole dug for just that. Titmice converse
on the porch, and Pappy bids them no mind but bangs a boot sometimes,
rattling bottles and panes,
aunties upstairs knitted against windows, aging in layered summer
dresses, then dancing a two-step together at weddings. Chatter of the old
language drowns over English, the centenarian
nodding in sleep, sleeve pinned up where an arm once was, daisy
boutonnière drooped in the drenched, moonshiny air.

5.

The baby girl's bones, almost gelatin, are buried in a doll's dress,
in the arms of her twenty year old ma who leaves behind two orphans:
the younger who'll swear it was all a dream, the elder who can't forget.
No liniment, no ribbon-dressed hank to save in a wallet, just wrongness jack-knifing
a line inside Woolwine Run, the Cheat, Chenoweth Creek, the namesake bodies
where trout and muskie marry, blubber of mourning above them,
cottoned by air they won't ever touch until pulled by a trick,
to grunts and gasps, the new world, *Lookie thar ...*

Selling the Ryde house

In sleep, he's always lost in strange hotel rooms, in the midst of teeming crowds
and alien faces. Waking is part of the dream. Someone's left the door unlocked
in the dementia ward (again). Grabbing a travel bag, he heads for the highway,
walking vaguely north with fresh purpose. When the Ryde 500 rumbles
over the horizon he jumps aboard, no Opal card, but who's checking,
travels to the end of the line, like a musician's riff. Now he's on home ground,
knows the way to the familiar street, the old house, an auction sign
on the new-mown lawn.

He has no key, where is it? He came here once, as a young husband,
with a wife and two small children, and he held the key then.
But he remembers the window with a faulty catch
forces his bulk through the small frame, landing head-first.
Furniture is missing, no TV or phones, no food in the fridge,
cupboards and cutlery drawers stripped by strangers.
They find him sitting in his favourite chair,
nowhere left to go. *It's sad no-one lives here,* he says.

*

Now that the squatters have moved on out, the clean-up job is ours.
Fifty-five years of dust and memories rise up like Christmas ghosts.
The linen closet disgorges marital sheet sets, patchwork aprons,
threadbare towels and bathmats, as well as unsought gifts –
tea towels, face washers, placemats embroidered by the children,
his mother's knitting wool and crochet.

In the spare room, a box of music scores, valve trombones, French horns,
giant tuba echo the past, Friday nights at the Orient Hotel,
the baby upstairs in a basket, or awake on a table-top
at the Abraham Mott Hall, drinking in the blues, that heartbreak song
After you've gone...

A double bunk, once shared by siblings or their partners, backpacks
and sleeping bags, some never used, paints, wedding outfits, broken fans,
artworks, broken dreams.

Outside, old cars rust in the long grass, a metre-high pile
of discarded furniture awaiting council clean-up.
What's to salvage, the guts of an old piano
spilling its lost notes onto the sidewalk? The music is in us now
our mantra, and I am grieving, for what I don't yet know.

*

Tall Trees no more. The name, given by previous owners, somehow stuck:
a swinging wooden board, etched with Xmas card fir trees.
In time, a headstrong teenager planted saplings
that, like the proverbial beanstalk, grew and grew, threatening the roof.
Now the house is gone, the old shed, trampoline, the tadpole pond
where dogs and children sometimes came to grief, the BBQ
where students gathered, a haphazard lifestyle
promising much more.

Just a muddy block of land, ridges flattened, scars across
the sweep of green lawn, bulldozers chopping up the past
awaiting developers, a new era of inner-city dwelling.
And the trees are gone, birds gone, trees with torn roots
reaching up, broken limbs barkless, whitened
no longer providing shade and memories
where no one was a gardener, but the trees grew wild.

Outside the chicken shop, near the station

a bum plays *Flight of the Bumblebee* on a street piano,
bits of Beethoven, Bach, the Entertainer ...
his childhood repertoire maybe.

Who left the piano there? Who cares?
Could be some council street-art thing,
in which case the bum's getting his
Public Art dollar's worth, pounding
this shipwrecked machine, full pedal-down sound
crocodile rolling into the afternoon traffic
that bumper-kiss zippers Newtown ...

then Rasta Man comes by with a didge
and they make jam, impro some Blues,
outside the chicken shop, near the station,
the bum now standing from the stool
to attack the old tusker, smacking full-fat
ten finger chords, the didge farting and barping
on top, whooping like a goose as Rasta Man
chucks his dreads and spare arm around ...

and commuters shoal up from the afternoon trains
and catch the smile of this little Baroque Rave,
Rasta Man & the Bum, outside the chicken
shop, near the station ...

I call the piano player a bum, but that's
a cheap shot, he's just a man, this man,
one of the street irregulars who gladhands longnecks
in brown paper bags in the Pigeon grotty sun
over the way, outside the needle exchange,
which is near the police station, which is
next to the courthouse, which is next to the pub,
which all makes a nice little one-stop shop ...

and the other shops and the hospital
and the rehab and the 12-step meets
and the doctors and the funeral home
are all just a spit away too, like a toytown
village, life and death laid out neat

as Sunday clothes on a bed, a go to woe
 Truman Show in a Cheers Bar run by the Salvos
 where the cops all know your name
 and everyone's stamped In Transit ...

And now released flocks of schoolkids screech
 past the jammers, and laugh and dance and
 arse about, a Lorikeet identity parade,
 outside the chicken shop, near the station ...

And I blot it all up from over the way ...

I like sitting afternoons on the steps
 of the old Hub porno theatre, in the shade
 of the planes and Plane trees.
 It's my duck hide from which to watch
 the free street theatre, all the happenings happen by ...

then my boy's bus arrives and we walk home
 to the sound of Beethoven reimagined
 for didge, incongruous cuz to a piano
 melting to Moonlight Sonata, fainter, ever fainter,
 as we head downhill into Erskineville,
 an Indigenous Germanic Jamaican jam
 blipping on the breeze, bars of the moon
 rippling through water, from afar, farther, farthest ...
 til declension declines,
 from outside the chicken shop, near the station.

Home/here

i tea tree/kelp

forty years the gate has graced this garden
wrought-iron curves weathering southerlies

salt air a portal to another place unlatch
step through the world shifts

from tea tree hedges lit with blossom
nuts tight as filigree breathe the sea

that pours and seethes cross the grassy space
to where water spreads all lift and hum

silver-blue body sinuous
just hills and sea sky and air

everything caught in the reflecting light
of kelp baubles honey-coloured chambers

that bloom with winter cold lift on the surface
float golden tiny flags pointing to our future

ii blue gum/musk lorikeet

these trees teach patience stitch quiet and stillness
to the shortened days waiting until the sudden burst

frilled florescence lacing sand-coloured centres
eloquent with life and out of nowhere birds come

excited rising voices emerald flash flocking
trees tuning until radio static transmits all day

needle-green flickerings shockingly-red flames
gathered here next to sticky faces shining like suns

spinning air into sweet entanglements
into beak-deep clamour

these trees stitch patience into our skins
hold us here hoping

iii homo sapien / galah

standing between these trees witness
to the wild cacophony of galahs

woman / witch standing with arms
outstretched summoning her familiar

feeling birds wheel in face and hair
reaching to pluck feathers from air

their dart and flight a coven's gathering
sea swirling like a cauldron below

growing earth in her skin cajoling
and the bird circles eyeing knowing

wings arced ready to fold and fall
claws bent like twigs ready to catch

this human branch to perch on this shoulder
and dance she croons and the bird lands

all around winged creatures
air unyielding with swerve and fervour

bird / woman stilled eyes closed
they lean into each other yearning

iv moon/metamorphosis

last night you filled the sky with light
lantern glowing above deep water

rays illuminating shadowed trunks
tea tree flowers a gleam of ghosts

you rose in a semi-circle above cliffs
nibbled-bare a fan of feathers

foreshadowing an evening to shed
our clothes and lie like statues

waiting for silver light to shaft our skin
cast us with kelp's glimmer and gleam

to rise in the morning unearthly creatures
bodies re-cast with your pearly sheen

Mum

Billions upon billions of amygdalae whirl around and around the Sun
Who knows to what end

Perhaps they form a groove
for a stylus
A celestial gramophone
an SOS to be trumpeted out
not by a master's voice
to a nearby dog
but by spinning neurones
to a distant god:
Help! Save our souls!

Or perhaps this orbit of amygdalae
traces a fiery Catherine wheel
shooting sparks out into the darkness
embers of fear and love and yearning
pinpricks of light
above, below and everywhere

*

The childhood garden sprinkler is made of metal.
It's a plain one, just a round lump of metal.
It sits on the ground, attached to the hose. It doesn't move.

Some families have fancy gardens sprinklers with rotating arms and wheels
I have felt envy and desire for those fancy sprinklers
but there was something solid and heavy and strong about ours
that I liked.

And it worked. Nothing could go wrong.

And the dependable pattern
of sparkling water that flowed up into the blue sky
and down onto the green grass
was as beautiful and as happy and as sad as my mother's smile.

A quickening in the emptiness

*Every true poem is a spark,
 and aspires to the conditions of the original fire
 Arising out of the emptiness.
 It is that same emptiness it wants to reignite.
 It is that same engendering it wants to be re-engendered by*
 Charles Wright, 'Body and Soul II', A Short History of the Shadow, 2002

Reignite, engender, maybe more like a quickening,
 some subtle foetal stirring around the midriff,
 something not a thing hovering on some edge
 teetering between word, feeling, idea, elan,
 something arising from an unknown
 elsewhere, an emptiness I'm not and am.

Contingently triggered, it's a kind of flowing
 neither conscious nor unconscious,
 but both, a kind of in-bent attentive
 openness, benevolent listening without ears
 to the wave of the wordless, words
 emerging into the LED-blue light of day.

Sometimes there may be a vague sense
 of intention directed towards something
 concrete like the felt sense of that bird
 on that branch or towards some cloud-like
 cluster of an idea dancing in the mist, and if
 "intention", then that of a board-rider keen
 to merge with the mightier wave's intent.

Once flowing, words are like European cows
 spring-released from winter's acrid stables,
 leaping, bouncing off each other as if
 entangled particles from the word go, formless
 superposed wavicles until observed into form,
 interrelating, birthing themselves in vibrating
 resonance to their own sounds and senses,
 wide fields or auras of connotation, tone,
 images more vaguely felt than seen,
 without eyes, darkly in the proverbial glass.

Often, especially if out walking,
 the powerful river of cadence, rhythm
 of words, phrases, sentences, pauses
 carries all before it with a certain sense
 of inevitability like any good conversation,
 novel, song, symphony, life.

Filings of sensory memory spontaneously
 link up as if drawn by some invisible magnet,
 the utterly incongruous synthesised
 into new collocation, metaphor, although
 stock phrase, cliché always lurk waiting
 like thieves, schoolmasters, your own
 habitual thought-police of conformity to all
 the creaking mechanics of the drearily known.

After the flow of this slow big bang
 it's all spit, polish, edit,
 tinker, tailor with all the common tools
 of the trade and time, for hours, days,
 maybe years. *Fail better*, Beckett
 famously advised then it's back
 to spacious waiting, quietly attending
 to the quickening emptiness
 and its dark spark.

As if

I travel slowly, wanting both
 the coast and the highlands,
 when it dawns on me,
 I'm breaking nothing. The fabric
 of air and stone, wave
 and moon, barely creases.

How hard
 we believe in being here.
 Framing again the narrowest
 of our arrivals, 'here', we say,
 'or not here', as if the stuff of us
 was never entrenched in the space-
 time chance in which we
 are the flash-lit shimmer
 of a fleet
 configuration. All
 the shifting atoms.

I raise my arms,
 and the tree
 I surely am, like the sky,
 like the lake on the mountain,
 like the eel snake
 and the whale shark, every
 living thing at once
 reveals itself, as if
 we might all remember, lay
 down our weapons, fall
 into the Earth, and know
 the only song worth singing –

 the swell of it
 taut in the curve of the Sun.

Air

after Joanne Burns, 'Keyhole'

Wearing the night like a note hidden at the bottom of the rubbish tin.

like leaving something out. primates huddled
around a child at the beach. *bring me your need*
he would say. *come to me* he would say. like a draft
before you ruin it. despair is easy to play like keys,
waiting like the keyboard for you to pick up
where you left. *the riddle that runs through you until*
you are no more. you pack everything away for the
day and think of how you can make it better.
wearing the night like being young just minutes ago.
like de Chirico's long shadows. like earning our
air. agoraphobia before everyone had agoraphobia.
like purity. *I lived. I was alive.* the last wave of your
mother's hand outside the house. *one thing I do know*
is I don't want to even pretend I know anything. wearing the
night like the bruise on your doctor's cheekbone.
like a pill you take to slow your heart.

Montana

after Joanne Burns, 'Keyhole'

Wearing the night like the warm heaviness of a stranger

beside you on the train. like loving the fallen
(anything, anyone). the desire to drive to Montana
and start a new life. shards of crockery reforming
on a beach. the white of midnight. the whole
dreamlike thing, like it has happened before.
*like an internal policeman hiding in plain sight in the
powerful shadow world.* like a whale sleeps vertically.
diving into the wreck. flicking the remote
to a remote and happy island. wearing the night
like flowering late. an animal balloon. the fantasies
we have about being human. watching a family float
a pale chrysanthemum into the sea. the way you
know an aria sung in Italian is about pain.

Transformation

after an installation by Karike Ashworth (see below)

There was a woman here before
slumped on the 3am concrete
for the comfort of smooth, solid silence
after a 200 hour day.
Overwashed hands like tissue paper slacken
into sleep; but feel the weight of bedpan after bedpan.
She feels nothing when the red hem on her uniform
twists, unmakes and remakes her into
into cascading petals mistaken for a mess.
And only you were here to see it.
Later, they swept her up with her own broom.

Karike Ashworth installation:
<https://flyingarts.org.au/2022-queensland-regional-art-awards/#jp-carousel-37793>

Glissando

Morning sunlight and wind catch at the very end
of an umbrella stood upside down in a corner.
The workmen have been hauling reinforcing steel
since dawn and if the Lord has mercy,
concrete trucks will pour today. I don't need to see
the last leaf fall from the plane tree
or the anticipated arrival of grass parrots
in late August to recognise the absence
in their colour when you receive word that she died ...
And you are worried about the boys.

I am alone at work.
A fluorescent bulb sputters to life.
As I enter the office Bach's Mass in B Minor appears
and disappears in the earphones
of a cleaner. He told me once of how he lost three fingers
in a windlass accident at sea, and how
he was restoring an old Datsun to drive to his daughter's
wedding in Walcha.

7.15 am: The faint smell of chalk dust
and oxy acetylene and I'm back there again at 14 by the river.
Three large catfish circle each other in a bucket. Carp
I hang see-sawing from the low branches of a sheoak
in a strengthening wind. If I had this memory only I could live forever.
Where did I leave you father? Somewhere in the tuning-fork of those trees
are mouths wider than the stretched plastic grin
of dried fish, louder than stuffed noise in stiff gills
while you wait for me in the car by the gate
to Crown Land, an instant coffee in a builder's mug
almost empty on the dash.

Brute

after Camille Claudel

Give me the dazzled
 Isle of Wight
 the salt blooming
 on our tongues
 the glint switchblade of our minds
 give me your house with its green
 sea rooms your house
 at the foot of the cliff
 the garden its hedge of fuchsias
 glorious
 drowned by tide –
 give me my open mouth
 my life before I was arranged
 as fable
 my life when I lived inside
 the meat-scent
 of my heart
 when I was surge
 & blood squall of creation
 when I was brute
 & luminous
 my hands
 miraculous
 huge as God's

Stone walking

*It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away.*

– Seamus Heaney

*This is how everyone who will see this in the future,
will know that the Persian man ruled in Egypt.*

– Dagger Inscription (DSab)

I

Spring. The cherry blossoms are daubed in blood; thick globs in our hands.
My son wants to climb the trees' rough bark and reach the newness of leaves
scything the buds, but the crown is tall and his shins are sapwood

soft. I lift him beyond the fork of the trunk to branches
wreathed in the season's duty, mapping an empire of footpath
and fence line – petals spilled in conquest like the fallen corpses

of Marathon. It seemed to want to embrace him at first
but his mounted insurrection was short lived in the tallness
of the moment, and the shape of the world foreign to his eyes.

II

I'd spent that night on the statue of Darius at Susa
– The Great King, greywacke black, headless and royal. His torso
hacked like cork; chipped by Alexander's archers—his now fragile

authority. I thought of how many fathers send their sons
after ghosts. And how many find them? How the young Xerxes ran
his hands down the stone reliefs – the glazed bricks of the palace

Lion, passant and prowling. How in the distance, the Karkheh
River gathered storks for winter – whether our souls truly rest?
Did Darius hold his palm, draw fingers down the arterial

III

Lines, grip him tight by the roadside? But now, my son is in two minds,
at the gravelled edge of the curb. The dregs of morning traffic
are mixed thick with fog and there's a man opposite harnessed

by two German Shepherds, great bulls at the gateway – noses
tacking against the wind. So, we pause, and he nods. The dogs move
like water, overlapping in their leads and our statue stance

dissolves into stride. My son is still learning his place, as am I,
in the lives we walk, the way we inscribe ourselves into each other.
He brushes his arm over the checker-plate skin of the trees,

IV

An army of apple bearers on parade, a bodyguard
for the prince. On their limbs, blooms burst like wounds, flame red and purple.
The canopy bows its headdress: turban, bonnet, tiara

– All imperial, the shapes of a thousand people. A hush
hangs over their mourning like drops of rain in the mist. Xerxes
will send for the carving of his father on his death, the outer

satrapy will rebel, and the son will find himself at war

– The earth collecting us all back, one way or another,
in stones, in songs of the shrikethrush, in the footprints of children.

News from Agnieszka just across the border

In 1882, during Bismarck's Kulturkampf campaign, great-great aunt Agnieszka emigrated from Prussian-held Poland, one among millions fleeing war and seeking freedom in the New World.

To be enlisted posthumously into competing national memories, bolstered by the numbers of which your life has become a part, is to sacrifice individuality. It is to be abandoned by history, which begins from the assumption that each person is irreducible. – *Timothy Snyder*

Poland is the natural bridge between East and West. – *Norman Davies*

i of all the objects that ever were blessed
 & blasted medallions prayer cards of daily devotion / leaflets
 & a lipstick tube rolling across pocked
 pavement & a rat's nest snarl in a hairbrush
 & for all troublemakers & advisements in all
 the alphabets & words in the whole wide

ii *of all the barriers / boundaries of granitic gneiss which
 I & my stock my tribe on which I lie in its pinkiness in stony
 bands of white & black & gray we left as well walking
 & running & for altogether different & yet
 & beginning again a sea away shamed in this new place
 I became rock / I became the oldest boulder in this new
 world / day by day infinitesimally but this
 was a very long this was a hundred this was another*

iii of all the once-white flower-figured lace at
 our classroom windows billowing black / a curtained lair
 for all the once / a teasing thief of twisted rebar
 & blown-out concrete & blossoming Saint Agnes
 – the agnus lamb at her side – chaste & more anxious & less
 calm & the little ones after the shelling – deep river clefts cut
 exposed in bedrock or right now in small potholed silhouettes

iv *for all the 1,000,000 who first crossed
 & the 4,000,000 more & for what we know & not not
 & who may speak as chattel in this powerless
 bluster / tirade / blanching of high crimes in the singe
 of fear back & forth from one power / aggressor / tyrant
 in breathless shadow of indurated smiles*

v of all the families opening their homes & all
the beds donated & refugees with IDs traveling by any
means throughout & the whole free next door they say
across the & they can use the health care they can send
their children to schools & nurseries for now next door across
& medical supplies & ambulances fire trucks until

vi *and for all that between us we are*
fleeing & we fled & we are always we were facing & we face
& the tanks & we are now under & your
немовля hush baby hush & old she's ancient бабуся
who knows this like the back of her I am her & all
whom you are / women with children & elders
at the margin between us & the perimeter / safe the bond
between us now / just across another brittlewo

vii what I have to say is generosity is alive still
still & something to strive – but words alone won't
do & we are all – & it is so much closer than – & we
are every Ukraine & Poland & Romania & Baltic we are
all & a moment of opportunity & dignity alone won't
– despite such bravery & pride & we are all we must all –
& pra-pra cioca knows standing by won't

& the safari goes on / everyone everywhere
with a weapon shooting & every tree & bush &
building a shield & by what dark dumb human
soul come hypersonic bombs so low to the ground they're
undetected by & long-departed Agnieszka won't

go easy absolve forgive that black hole of a world
leader making martyr cities in block-by-block urban
battles & all the buildings knocked & thumb-sucking
children queued solemn-eyed bundled up curled
on cots set in gymnasium rows rocking
rocking *rocking* their cats & dogs
snuggled inside their winter coats

Blisters

Newscasters announce
 the obvious: bushfires
 lay siege to the city. I breathe
 the smoke of forest and field
 but my mind
 remembers pages ablaze.

I run and hide behind
 black fig trees in the garden to watch
 my grandmother burn my uncle's books.
 She loads words into the furnace to save him,
 should the guards come to arrest him.

I wish a flight could fetch the blisters
 as we turned books to charcoal
 in the yard where the fountain stood,
 where we hid from the men when they came.
 But the garden lacked the courage of those stories.
 It cowered under the boots.
 Until its last breath, the pillars that held
 the roof were hopeful.
 Still, the walls gave way and the windows
 collapsed for thirst and freedom.
 The house, in its perpetual silence, stood pairing
 like mismatched sandals. On the other side
 of the street, a jeep loaded our
 aspirations and carried them to the bonehouse.

The black pomegranates on the street
 turned out their lamps and shrank away.
 At the news stands, felons gathered.

The blisters on our hands are scars now,
 wrinkled and lonely. Never mind.
 Grandmother's candle holder still fits my palm
 laurel takes root in another,
 its vapour rises
 between streams of hypochondria
 in the stateless earth.

You say you don't believe
that anyone writes the truth,
that everyone reads what they will
into the past or the lines; you say
no one sees shining bowls
where a child froze memories
in the back of the fridge. It is difficult to explain
But I know that those who dream
disperse like the ashes of burned books.

being human

CHRIS ANDREWS
AMELIA BRADLEY
CORAL CARTER
SHAstra DEO
TUG DUMBLY
ES FOONG
NASIM KHOSRAVI
DARYL LIM WEI JIE
ISABELLA G MEAD
DAMEN O'BRIEN
INDRANI PERERA
FELICITY PLUNKETT
DAVID REGAN
KEVIN SMITH
PATRICIA SYKES

The listener

One brief, late season in the world of being two
 and he was back with the odd, the shy, the untouched.
 My people, he thought. The envious, the relieved.
 The arguments of couples still riveted him.
 Most were rote – the grinding of an arthritic joint –
 but somewhere ages hence the pair to his right now
 in the café would be remembering this scene
 of pianissimo opera. The man: “So why?”
 The woman, head high, staring away: “I couldn’t
 go on waiting to say: I knew this would happen.”
 “So you made it happen now?” Her face was crumpling.
 She stood up and walked off, touching the backs of chairs.
 He half rose, gave in to gravity, then followed.
 The hunger moving everywhere came to a point
 in the beak of a mynah raiding their table.
 The listener cocked a brow at his favourite waiter,
 stacked the coins, and set off in the same direction.
 It was his way home, as it still felt strange to say.

If only he hadn’t been in such a hurry
 to leave that dull meeting fifty-one years ago
 and get back to his turntable and two LPs
 (*Abbey Road*, *Almendra*), he might have slipped away
 when the others came out, massed, and rushed the cordon.
 If only he hadn’t let his flaky cousin
 persuade him with a mirage of studio work
 to migrate again, he would have had an accent
 but not this cramp, this exhausting hesitation.
 But how could an “if” be “only” if there were two
 and many more? Something inside him was shifting
 slightly as he walked into the December dusk.
 Tinnitus was waiting to conjure up his time
 “at the disposition of the Executive”,
 but if only for now the past was not a mass
 promising to crush him. It was a space, not safe
 perhaps, but open, vast, faintly lit there and here,
 where not everything was evidence in a case
 and he could retrieve the precious irrelevant:
 the toy arrow on the cover of *Almendra*.

This half-empty suburb must be the realest place
for someone, he thought, the scene of intensities
never to be matched. Perhaps for the two ahead.
The woman staggered as a manhole cover rocked
underfoot. The man's hand stopped shy of her elbow.
His words were drowned out by the thunking of a train.
A scent of toast ash drifted from a red-brick cliff.
A pug wheezed. A woman in faded leisure wear
stepped onto a balcony and rested her hands
on the rail as if at the bow of a liner
bound for the undiscovered, unconquered Old World.
A magpie tipped out the last sweet dregs of its song.
Beyond a curtain of gum leaves rustling pinkly,
vigils met gaming in the children's hospital.
With each step he took, the knees of the listener crunched.
The adjustable joint in his walking stick clicked.

Black fruit

She's learning how to rot –
out the back there with a hammer,
crouched on a concrete slab, tap, tap,
tapping at macadamias and cracking
open their skulls. Some have gone bad
and blackened inside and they crumble
when cleaved from their shells. It's hard
to tell the difference: on the outside
they all look the same through the clueless
blue of a child's eye. Above, the tree looms
blameless with its offerings of food
and evergreen shade, while all around it
the fallen lie sprawled as a graveyard.
In the house, her little siblings
compensate and appease dutifully,
as she clobbers the brains of another
throwaway nut. A smarter girl might discern
a more urgent matter: find the firmest husk
and learn how not to break beneath the blow.

These things happened

Across his room in a hoist my naked father was swung spraying a parabola of shit. The toilet urge had become a bizarre circus act. I had never seen my father naked and now at ninety he was the main event. We watched, our jaws slack, mouths open with fear and shock.

When his best friend visited, during the conversation our father told him that he had pissed himself twice that morning. He wondered as they shared a cup of tea and piece of cake if he was going mad.

He wanted to go home but which home he wasn't sure. The home overlooking the lake, the home where he grew poppies or his mother's abandoned house a few hundred metres up the street. It was there he fed the ducks in his childhood. Was that where he was headed, crawling out of the door and into the passage in the days before he died? He knew he had to go somewhere.

We discovered a long silver scar on his forearm. Visible now as the arm hair had fallen away. We ran our fingers along it. Looked at each other. How did he get it? We will never know, too late to ask. now.

He fell asleep eating a pie and apple turnover in the sunshine next to an overgrown and unloved garden. An empty pond where dragonflies searched for water. Spilled crumbs rose and fell on his chest as he slept. He still loved mandarins, left the skins on the arm of his chair. And his other love, lollies. Kept one half-chewed in his pocket. He began to sleep for days at a time. We sat by his side, until he woke ravenous.

The mean wardrobe hunched in the corner. Family portraits hung oddly. The stained chair, the constant television, the nasty narrow bed where he was cold at night. The window in his room that wouldn't open and the door to a courtyard sealed shut. No escape for a man who believed a trip to the bush was a cure-all.

Outside in the empty corridor full of labelled doors, with loud echoes of commercial television for BCFing fun and fanfares for Spencer Gulf Nightly News, I ranted in his last hours about The Point, doubting there was one and when finally, he had gone I thanked a merciless god I didn't believe in.

The year of cats

Sun sets like orange jelly in the refrigerator
 chill of winter afternoon and birds eat
 holes in the cirrus, watched by the
 furious eyes of the tiniest tigers
 this side of town. We are waiting for you
 youngest of us pacing the hall bawling
he-wroh? He-wroh? Middle child
 snoozing her baby years
 into being. You're stuck in traffic, probably
 bopping to Dolly at 5 along Coronation
 Drive. No maternity leave applicable
 for these adoptees. In a home
 full of sapphics, each cat knows to clasp
 her paws for *Jolene*. I cannot compete
 with their soft fur sawdust smell
 or eyes of autumn green
 but I'm a pussycat in other ways that count.
 You'll come home and kiss me as though
 we won't meet again in this life.
 One summer I read every
 poem called *Grief* to a chorus of purrs
 even those not yet written. I stopped
 because I was so happy. In times
 like these every poem
 is an indulgence. We lie. We sleep. We
 dream of you. We are altogether
 ordinary animals. Greedy for
 tap water, greedy for spring.

Spillway

Fill a child like a cup to the fizzing brim,
 it spills and runs all over your hand,
 it runs and runs
 and you, poor mop,
 come late to understand

*I won't always have you.
 I haven't got you now.*

I drew you like a breath
 I tried to keep the sketch
 it wasn't mine to keep
 you crumpled it, threw it
 on a heap.

 You grew
 I shrank
 we saw eye to eye
 for a while

 two lifts
 momentarily
 aligned

then bye bye ...
 you up your way
 I down mine.

Please hold me,
 hoop me in time

and I'll helmet your head
 like a fruit tree net

I'll protect soft produce
 from bullet and beak
 as your plum brain rides
 a peachfuzz lip

and we'll one day yield
a famine killing crop
(to save us from I know not what)
a field of green and swaying ears
horse eye high.

Please hold me
hold me
hoop me in time.

Though I know not love's want,
nor what nor why.

Every poem I write is a lie

(ars poetica)

and each syllable complicit, my body on a ferry,
 mattress rolling
 under me but my mind takes me home, lays
 a blanket familiar
 with jasmine and camphor over my knees.

Every poetry teacher delivers their lessons on
 meter and rhyme,
 iambs tongue-kissing alliteration, metaphors
 taking artful nudes
 of images boldly posing, all in service of ever
 more beautiful lies. Not a one says, tell
 the truth. Straight
 or slant, my mother waves a knife at my small
 chest, I brought
 her the wrong plate, too small for the fish
 -cakes, blue cornflower edge bleeding. What's
 missing here
 is the mother's perspective. On a podcast I hear
 someone say
 they want to tell better or different stories,
 or to tell stories differently, it could change
 the world, only
 every story is a fib, no way to fit so many
 perspectives onto
 the face of spinning plates. Need has taken truth
 hostage. My friend survives a cancer-scare
 only to return
 to her shitty job, and I want to shout, what
 about the wild
 geese! But I am on a ferry, or under a watery

blanket, or bleeding ink at the edges, each life
more precious
than the last lie I told, and maybe if I keep
trying, the poems
might one brittle night rise in formation and
find their own way home.

Imperialism the highest stage of capitalism

I am speaking in the now, the royally lubricated now – yesterday the deliveryman came & I told him I hadn't slept for three days so he let me moisturise his missing knee – America forgot all about us & realising this I wept in a controlled manner into my bowl of gasping goldfish – after a few drinks I start to mumble to the pockmarked barman that *there is only nature or there is no nature* & he rejects my radiant advances – poetry emerges as a searching jackal-like need from the groin – the latest cholesterol numbers are a gripping read said the Times Literary Supplement still a much favoured organ this side of the Yangtze – I love drug names & when the doc prescribed me pseudoephedrine I wrestled him to the ground & made him moan those syllables again & again in delicious submission – my tongue has already begun to worm its way to new sources of indignity – this near-poem does not contain any advances in technology – I am sitting in the front room waiting for the light to catch me – I am waiting for the latest cock to grace my being – a missile launched from Hawaii lodges in my glossy sanctum – overnight all the QR codes are linking to the same photograph of a child's bloodied severed ear – the mouth has always been a site of atrocity – tonight there are as many truths as there are flavours of Oreo – in my country when something goes badly we say jialat meaning *eats the energy* & each passing day in this age of exhaustion is more & more jialat jialat jialat – I take a pigeon from its nest and bite into its wriggling flesh – now if you want to be called sir might I suggest you go to the nearest McDonald's or at a pinch Taco Bell.

What to forget when you're expecting

I FIRST THINGS FIRST

Put down the birthing manual, the melon-heavy book
of directives: a poem is enough.

This and your mother's living ghost will cleave
a space for nuance, air enough to breathe.

II YOUR PREGNANCY LIFESTYLE

Acclimate in brown-tiled bathrooms.
Expect to misspend weeks studying the shine of basins,
sipping water that tastes like the boiled sea.
Press beneath your tongue a square of ginger,
dark and sugared like tree sap, and hum.
Eat salt. Eat the pickle, drink the brine.

What you put in your body is interesting to everyone:
expect looks. Expect hands bold and opaque
like brass work. A tall midwife will glide
her Doppler, dolphin-like, over the gleaming dome of you.
A baby is shaped on currents of grey static.
It sounds like *wow-wow-wow-wow*.

III ALL ABOUT PUSHING AND DELIVERY

When the body's hip-shaped roadblocks obstruct,
metaphors may assist: in theatre, a blue sheet
is a hitched tent. Doctors are gowned archaeologists
on a dig. Replace *caesarean section* with *excavation*
and you may share in the excitement
as the baby is lifted from you, silver-skinned,
an intact amphora or bag of precious coins.

Expect to tremble like the earth. Your greatest fear:
that she will slip out of your arms and dissolve
like a dream against the hard, washed ground.

IV AFTER THE BABY IS BORN

She will anticipate nothing but goodwill:
 love ushered like a ferry over water,
 a window filling with light.

V WHAT YOU MAY BE WONDERING ABOUT

You must forget that the sun will not last forever.
 4.5 billion years – give or take – before it swells
 and contracts, turns red-then-white-hot.
 Eventually it will eat the Earth, strip the ice from Pluto.
 Advice from relatives, other mothers, that woman
 at the bus stop, accumulates like rind on fruit:
 coarse and orbital. It is expressed as *breathe*.

Breathe: your baby will not live to see our best star die.
 Your baby is here. A ship set on a chanced breeze.
Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.
 You have something. Take another breath.

The wing

after an image of moth wing scales, Kevin Mackenzie, Wellcome Collection

A mother's wing is very small. Too small
to excise or to see with the human eye.

Sometimes I feel mine straining
against my shirt. You may be wondering:

what good is a single, imperceptible wing?
It does not fly, it is not beautiful.

Scaled in leaf-prints. Soft like a snake's
rested body on the eve of summer.

I first noticed mine unfurling in theatre.
The doctors wore blue gowns and my eyes

filled with partition blue. I did not know
whether she lived or for how long,

and the wing fluttered to remind me
I was still a mother, had still given breath to

or in the world. And she did breathe:
the baby took in lungfuls of sweet air, became

pink with it. Even mothers who have lost
retain their wing. Too inured to chance

and unfavourable winds, too insubstantial
to be clipped. It comforted me, then, to know

no one could take it away. The wing
or the name that grew from me.

The burning house problem

Another burning moral dilemma call-out. The sixth this year. My crew and I dress quickly, get the truck running, check our ontological hoses. Will this be the one where my dog is caught behind a blackened door, a desperate man I do not know behind the other? Or the one where the scientist who has found the cure for cancer, leans out coughing from one window, while a child waits frozen in fear on a windowsill? I hate that one. Or the one where my mother entreats me from her choking refuge while five strangers clamour from their flame-licked apartment? My crew are good, they know their jobs. We've practised for every scenario, weighed up the best of bad choices and they know I won't blame them if they get it wrong. They can see I understand. This is a young man's job. It requires a decisive mind. Sure, I've had my share of hotheads cycled through my crew – the ones who'll bundle in with their fireman's axe, their oxygen tank, without once considering the social dimension, without balancing loyalty with utility, the greatest good with the hardest necessity. But they can be trained up and generally settle down. It's the ones that stand before the fire so long the choice is made for them. The ones that hesitate until the old lady with a week to live is burned with the young mass murderer. They're the ones I can't abide. I won't have them on my team. Nor the ones that try and beat the system, who search for the metaphorical sprinklers, who think they'll find a solution that lets everybody live. They look for tricks. But there are no tricks – there is just the fire and the Choice. What do they think they've been doing all their lives? From that dull spurt that made them long ago, that fingerling, that single cell that lived. They've snipped the other choices from the cloth – the road they drive on, that could have been a town, the food they eat that could have fed the poor, the country they live in with its football stadiums, its submarines, which could have paid for hospitals. But it's easy to pass judgement when you've been called to as many of these thought experiments as I have, when you've fought so many moral fires. I am only five days from retirement. If I stood on my balcony with the black smoke behind me and nearby some young fool who thought he knew it all, stood among the cinders and the sparks, and I was asked to choose between us, I do not know which choice I should make.

Landline

A can of beans
emptied and rinsed.

A hammer and a nail
to puncture a chasm.

A fray of twine
to bind a voice

and string a line
between here and there

– you and me.
Stretch it from when

we were kids to now.
Make it reach from

when we used to talk
to now that we don't.

I'll pick up
when you call.

I promise.

Wound

Someone wound meaning
into time and you unwind
it like a scroll.

Hold this grief gift, gauzy
tissue of pain
that wraps forgetting.

*

Some carry a pebble, some
a boulder. All night
you weigh invisible ache.

Your shoulders shift. Cold
pushes the pane you breathe
into. Winter fogs over.

*

All you have is a dream's
bones. Bones hang
around though. Bones last.

Here is his jumper, pick
and amp, her boots and pencils.
Here is your breath, taut.

*

When to put down the candle
you tend, let go
the spectral hand?

Remember each step, each
step is anchor,
pulse and way.

*

Heart sponge, what seas
you went through, softening
to take in straggle and hook.

Soft hold. She held
her child's hand. Let
go. Now no one knows.

*

Wrap in gauze his fret,
her pain and the smile
it forgot. You won't forget.

In time you'll unfold
meaning from these wounds,
read their precious scroll.

Why are all your women weeping

Picasso handed me a piece of charcoal. Sunlight flooded through the studio doors. It was hot. *Draw a line*, he said. *Make it last forever*. He wore a white tee shirt and shorts with slip-on espadrilles, the same colour as his black don't-mess-with-me eyes. He was much shorter than I had imagined.

Draw a line make it last forever, he said. It was hot in his studio in the village in the hills above the Cote. *Let it never end, meander in waves*, he said, watching me. I'd heard he was short but was still surprised. Height belies stature they say and his was the fiercest gaze I had ever encountered.

Let it never end, meander in waves, he said. In the village, in the hills above the Cote Picasso circled his hands over his head as if he were imitating the ceiling fan. The intensity of his gaze was the fiercest I had ever encountered and it seemed he was drawing a line in the air that only stopped when he stopped waving.

Picasso circled his hands above his gleaming head as if imitating the ceiling fan. It was the summer of love and the air was dense with heat. He seemed to be drawing a line in the air that only stopped when he stopped waving. He lit a Gauloise Bleu and stared at the young artist in his studio.

It was the summer of 68 and the air was dense with the heat of love. In the city on the beach far below the hills dancing throngs spilled in the streets. Picasso exhaled smoke through his nose and stared at the young artist in his studio. His eyes, without compassion, were small black pearls that sucked in the light.

In the beach bars of Cannes dancing throngs spilled on the streets. *Let there be no determinant* he said *and when you tell me you have finished I will send you back*. Those eyes sucked in the light so that any hint of possible compassion was lost. He was muscled like a bull, his body hardened by a lifetime of work with his hands.

There is no determinant and when you tell me you have finished I will send you back again. Why are all your women weeping I wanted to ask but his gaze cautioned me. He had a frame like a bull hardened by a lifetime of work with his hands and a heart made infamous by the women he loved. The question was on my tongue

but how could I, a young artist in Picasso's studio ask Picasso about his women. His gaze was like steel. *Never cease to be curious*, he told me. *An artist must question and never stop questioning*. In matters of the heart he did not tread lightly. *Tantos tamizar el sol para el oro*, he said pointing at me, his eyes blazing.

He had told me to be curious, that an artist must question and never stop – it felt like a challenge, go on I dare you, ask about the women – but then, *only fools sift sunbeams for gold*, he had continued, qualifying, gesticulating, his eyes as ablaze as the cigarette burning to ash between his fingers.

If it was a challenge I failed. I didn't dare. I didn't ask about the women.

I turned my gaze, I turned away from his black pearl don't-fuck-with-me eyes and watched as his Gauloise burned to ash between his fingers.

Sunbeams flooded through the French doors dancing like children at his feet.

A day spent

*We drive home in the dark after a day
spent at the hospital. At last they've inserted
– under Rachael's skin below her collarbone –*

*a port-a-cath. "All the other scars
I can hide", she said. Five stitches
seal a wound covered with waterproof dressing.*

*No swimming for a week. But this won't stop her stepping
into a wintered pool in the morning. Her arms
– a landscape of bruises, and punctured skin like fumaroles –*

*Are no longer needed to feed the chemo in,
or the vitamin C, or to provide practice for nurses
who struggle to find with needles deflated veins.*

*And there in the dark, not far from home, on the edge
of the road, we pass my son. In dark clothes
he walks the bitumen, tempting fate – that he might*

*Be invisible. His white shoes, worn through
the soles, the only clue to his being there. Our headlights
splash across the road as we turn around*

*To pick him up, and a car behind us blasts
its horn to wake the dead when we pull off
the road. He ambles towards us, unconcerned*

*My son, opens the door and gets in. He's on
his way to town, he says, from a mate's place.
He didn't tell his mate's name and we*

*No longer ask. I'd seen him in town that morning,
had stopped to talk with him. His eyes darted
up and down the street, refusing to settle*

*On anything. "How's it going", he said, having
said it twice already. When I asked
if he was looking for someone, he turned away,*

*Suspicion rising in him and we, strangers
again. He stared at the clock in the park as if
it was lying about the time, its blank face*

*His proof. All my offers this morning – breakfast,
a night at home, a shower – rejected. But tonight,
he accepts. In the car, in the dark, he lays his head*

*Against the window glass, his eyes falling
into the night, afraid they'll see the ghosts
he doesn't want to see. He kicks off his shoes,*

*The skin of his feet blazing red and fissured
deep. At home, Rachael makes him a meal
he can't eat fast enough. Later, he spends*

*An age in the shower trying to wash away
his demons, his mother's death, and all the things
he'd done not yet regretted. Morning comes.*

*The door open to the room where he'd slept says
he's left already. And he – I'm soon to learn –
with my wallet in his pocket. Outside,*

*The plainsong of a rufous songlark. I stare
down our long drive, then join Rachael
at the table. She puts her hand on mine.*

Afterwards

1

After our father died, then what? A house fails at its foundations. We, mute as stone, our stone eyes fixed in stone faces. Walls flung out.

2

We buried him in a cemetery outside town. Bone-dry pathways cleave the rows of graves, his coffin swallowed by a hole cut six feet deep and falling. A breeze sighed through spindly gums carrying with it wisps of smoke and burnished haze from fires lit at the rubbish tip over night. Grief – a veil – covers a sunlit day, a winter chill, a fog that lifted early, as if it knew.

3

By midday, the frost gone, the house hollowed out. This the end of what we'd always been: now we are eight. We stood around in rooms, curtains drawn against the eyes of the world. A house lacking attends its absence. But how? We steer clear of the front door, a future lurking beyond its plyboard panelling.

4

I find my sister sitting on the end of our parents' bed, the fug of death around her. I sit beside her. She tells me our mother had stood at the door and watched her cry. Then she left. A hole opened in the silence. We look at ourselves in the dresser's mirror, red-eyed with grief. Behind us, a blank wall.

5

My mother is a well, a stilled surface. We watch for ripples – ones we hope for, ones we dread. The house almost spiritual – a thing it had never come close to. And she is stone, a temple dog crouched on the edge of an ugly brown couch, guarding against the unsaid, the unknown. So quiet, it could have been an ashram. All of us wondering, what now?

6

In a drunken phone call deep in night on the anniversary of his death, my sister, with slurred words, with defiance, will remind me that – of us all – she our father's favourite.

7

Something in my mother holds the tears she won't let go: how she left him there that morning – after the fall – lying in the back of his car where his friends had left him, and she, like them, thinking he was sleeping off his drunkenness. The mill calling, she left for work. The coma he lay in discovered hours later. By then, too late.

8

An icy silence. Winter four days young. A wind blows through the Hills Hoist. Pegs clacking on strung wires, we take to be the crisp clicks and creaks departure makes. In deepening quiet, the muffled careful folding of freshly laundered clothes. An empty wardrobe, a door blown open.

Argument with an avatar in 24 cadences

1. radically speaking (she'd argue)
celibacy is neither religious
2. nor eccentric, consider
a male octopus
3. how its colours morph
into prison stripes as it
4. sidles towards a female
risking its eight arms
5. for an hour's coupling
(*that's true captivity!*)
6. (she adored emphases)
that reliance on instinct
7. that hedging of bets
in case the sex goes wrong
8. does nature have a choice
(her favourite jab) between
9. the urge to reproduce
and the hunger for survival?
10. what are *we* but gritty twinkles
on night's ocean floor
11. what we birth ruptures more
than a sac, does conception grieve
12. when parenting is blighted?
don't forget (she'd admonish)
13. psychology's refrigerator mother
once schizophrenia's putative cause
14. should the egg blame the sperm
or the sperm the egg? (scoff, scoff)
15. if that pairing had never
would another have fared better?

16. *"it is better to have loved ... etc."*
her eye roll derided
17. the romantic
celibacy her one ally
18. *Sabotage by Genitalia*
her title of choice
19. she'd grimace as she wrote
as if tormented
20. by proof: pessimism's
distortion mirror perhaps
21. or despair's brain-fog
she did not lapse
22. she died in situ
sometimes on windless nights
23. I hear her voice among the darks
still arguing, still predictive:
24. *"creature by creature
the small torn futures"*

being

E. ANDREWS
DAVIDE ANGELO
MAGDALENA BALL
PAULA BOHINCE
MICHELLE BROCK
MICHAEL CUNLIFFE
CATH DRAKE
TUG DUMBLY
IRINA FROLOVA
JASON GRAY
DIMITRA HARVEY
DAVID MASON
SHAINÉ MELROSE
JENNY POLLAK
PETER RAMM

Home

Old Slav women rewild a sea
of trees.

The last of their fertile selves
gone to skin bark
chlorophyll leaves.

Stained grass widows
they won't leave.

My pretty green Chernobyl
this is my home.

In case of emergency break heart
break reliquary breast
draw green ink
up a saint's finger bone.

There's no leaving the leaves.

My boy was my green core.
Then he was a fireman at the plant's core.
Then he melted in a cloud. He was no more.
They poured him in concrete
in this green glade.

His hand will never grow
to mother soil
his body never tendrill home.

But mine can.
I stay to lie
in this green wound.

Postnatal expression

The other mothers,
They are the arrows;
I am a shadow.

I, the idle froth,
The drip that sits
On the dark leather

Of the chewed green
In the child's eyes,
The bark in her ears.

The bottom of the bowl,
The tear that slides,
The vomit that flows

From the bowel at birth;
The high, mad mirth
That skids and collides

With the smudged floor,
An overgrown girl in half before
The thousandth-time rhyme.

A dust-crust ed oval relates
The pudge on the sides
Of ham-hog thighs.

And the doggy-sobby stereotype,
Stay-at-home blubber,
Carrion carrier-on

Is a cymbal, made of paper.
A joke's butt, later
Smoking glow-orange,

Presses into sagging fat,
Singeing the arm
That held its head

To the dim flesh
And the breast's star-song.
I am her; but she, unlike they

Is wrong, wrong,
wrong.

The mound

The days were long and hazardous, full of the future's brutal offerings.
 Every backyard had a burn barrel and you could burn anything
 and everything, even nightshade and never was a blade of grass scorched.
 I remember the priest who (I learned later was just a man)
 asked me to call him Father, promised to release lost souls trapped
 in what he claimed was the void between this life and the joys of heaven.
 The inner suburb rose out of the volcanic plains, the quarry
 blue basalt curb sides, chimney spines and foundation stones
 as prologue, the lake, a mirror scummed over. On scaffolds
 in factories, crescendo of small repetitions, infernal over-time
 doubles of our ghostly mothers and fathers and multitudinous paths out
 to be free of emergency, to be free of struggle and abstraction.
 How we thrived in the sweep, in the distances between us and the outskirts
 in dark blue-collar monochrome, indifferent to our stilted dialects
 we licked our plates clean as an easy expression of love.
 I loved all the mothers of my street mothering me, simmering ground
 coffee beans and sugar, talking quick and loud, their hair hidden
 under hijabs that I guessed was luxurious and raven black. I loved
 the blue lady of the milk bar, her blue dress, coat hanger antenna radio
 static floating out darkly, showed me the shape of her body through the fabric.

There's a carpark where our house once stood. They even took the tilted apple tree
 where I cruelly peeled chrysalises off its mottled limbs. My council believes
 in the mystical inclinations of clean concrete, sends out experts daily to prepare
 the solvent as a sacrament to vanquish dark delinquencies. But the skateboarders
 have learned to catch themselves with their own hands. I've read the book about risk
 how risk is the trick to ward off neuroticism and future loneliness, how my children
 need to climb a tree, become experts in the art of falling, feel the gravity of playing
 rough to win, learn that the ground under their feet is a boneyard.
 One morning years ago, after the rain stopped, I took them to the snails feasting
 on loose rusted nails in the palings (black shapes, impetuous shadows, slow silver
 eyes on grave wood faces) of our failing fence. We listened to the banter of the season
 its hurried claims, electricity escaping from the wires, wings unseen, rattling loose
 and fast. How do I explain a mystery as death in the service of art
 how it can only be solved by observing closely? It's no coincidence we begin

screaming or in solemn silence, both accorded the same deference. And now, my daughters' good luck animal on a bed of cotton balls almond shaped eyes like mine, baptismal pools, mirrors of memory and dangerously high places. Sometimes it's hard to resist leaving the ground after you've buried something beautiful and all that's left to speak of is the mound and the dirt under your fingernails.

Ghost city

Once a city is gone, nothing will bring it back.
Time moves forward only, entropy increasing,
unless you count dreams, astral planes,
the unlit space between dying and waking.

I've stopped counting since you've left,
sloughed off the physical, nothing for
nothing, travelling the eck without a body
or passport, your favourite song on repeat

like the Pied Currawong singing
out my window, its yellow eyes somehow
full as if it were crying minutes before,
nodding slightly, cognition or madness.

The city I called home, lost, and I can only imagine
how much space is left, body to body, an old
apartment hallway, the scent of sex lingering,
discarded condoms, Anthora coffee cup happy

to serve you, burgundy lipstick staining the rim, same
colour I wear but not mine. I feel no tug here, floating
above cigarette butts, other than the old compulsion
to clean up, until the cracked, art deco tiles shine.

That impetus came from you though you let it go,
along with the rapid heart rate, wiping door handles
long before I found myself here, waiting for the
red rotary bakelite resurrection phone to ring.

Every street was the last, women in hot pants,
thigh-high boots, flashing theatre signs, a cart
with pretzels steaming at two am when we were
anything but safe, head down against a rising wind.

It's gone for sure, an act of self-love or immolation,
but let's be honest, there's not much left to lose
other than some notion already tidied into a simulacrum
before you left this little (gorgeous) world.

I'm ready. Your frail twittering grabs my throat,
breaks the silence of my room, my lapsed nationality,
alters the present tense, running along the length
of my spine, removing tendons with the tenderness

of a mother. Tell me, did you think we would
really meet here like this, after all those secret
notes, skipped meals, the way you guided me
through the hunger right to this place where you are

finally free. Everything that hurt you, your home-made
chains, piles of rubbish against the door, inundation,
erosion, hoarded electricity that now charges only
traces of a ghostly song for our ruined city.

Accordion music

The homestead was the whole of their wealth,
and it was much mud, and it was
cement crack and stump, stink of tar and bee-stung
pump, and it was

handed down like a seed pouch
or lye-combed baby clothes or this
warmed-up hearse
through whose bellows I levitated

in its *Please* and jolly heave,
an anvil strapped to Baby King,
in his eighties, who lived the breadth of his life
there, runt of six living brothers

and one sister of granite, Aunt Urša who kept house
for a family and got to visit the cape once
a year to mind the children,
a silence who swept the glass when I

went flying and wore an apron of cabbage
roses and closed her eyes to the whine
of the porch glider and rested.
White hair and baldness, they were Queen

Anne's lace, sprung everywhere,
leaning in, unknowable. Sure, I was eternal.
I was barely on earth.
If they had emotions or motives

or tonics for the limp
or black lung or heart condition,
I didn't know them. By tipsy polka, I floated
as the rhubarb's grit on my tin held steady

beside kielbasa and pierogi.
We were ignorant
as sunshine, illiterate
king strapped to his box and my doomed

daddy in clover, in blown beer foam
like dandelions in July. Motes
now, my people, but an oompah-pah buoyed us
as it once brightened the edge of a Slovenian lake

where a girl held her hem
and waded in, our lives
inside of her and inside of him,
the one who held out his hand, the husband.

last glimpse

watching ripples form a figure eight
around our fishing lines
I sit beside my father on the riverbank
in just-washed sunshine

a cormorant
slips below the surface into
stillness . . .
I sift the silence
for my sliver of belonging

between too few words I gather threads of memory –
my father chortling with the magpies at our feet
curling his tongue and whistling to the butcher bird
responding with a soft woo-woo to a frogmouth

a raptor rises
wings outstretched
inside my chest
the brittle call of a caged bird
mired in longing

my city lips only learn to call suburban sparrows
and pigeons cooing from parapets and windowsills

breezes whisper

in the shadows

at dusk

somewhere
the flutter of wings
a black crow
caws a requiem
for a falling leaf

after rain

spider webs shimmer like crystal chandeliers
between the gravestones of my grandparents

in the bush cemetery

scattering
my father's ashes . . .
I regret
not knowing more about
the lives and songs of birds

The other end of the line

The line grows and it grows. Take a ticket, join my queue.
By the time you reach the front I won't want to talk to you.

Lifeline, The Black Dog Institute, Beyond Blue.
Help is out there but – again – seems you've rejoined my queue.

You're talking – talking – a gulp of paracetamol, a mouthful of diazepam,
escitalopram or clozapine – a rope around your neck. You. You.

Blade in hand. Shard of glass in your bag. Talking. Talking.
You just can't do it anymore, you can't take it, can't cope. You.

I don't want to talk. Not to you. I don't know you.
I am a voice on the other end of the line, not your breakthrough.

You don't know me. I signed up – eighteen years ago, I applied, I signed –
but not for this. To help, yes, it's true – I signed – but I never knew.

How was it worded? *"Answer emergency calls for assistance"*.
Yes, something like that. So long ago I signed up, it's true.

Back then it was a break-in – a stolen car – an armed hold up – a rape –
a traffic crash – a croc attack – a lunatic running around in undies and a cape –

two shirtless males throwing punches amid peak hour traffic –
domestic violence – online revenge-posting of an ex-partner's nude pic –

I didn't know how things would change. Things. Things.
How much the world changed every time that phone would ring.

Now that damn phone rings and rings – its bleating sting –
it sings and sings of a disconnected world, changing, changing.

Those rings, I hear them in my shift-work dreams – your voice
once light as air, dandruff I brushed from my shoulders – a choice,

a career – now your words fall heavy – they weigh upon me –
morning – afternoon – night – I try to sleep through, to stay asleep

but the volume grows and grows. Over years my belly grew soft,
my hair greyed and slowly thinned. The dandruff no longer brushed off.

Still the volume grew and grew. I grew thinner. Then came Robert's call.
I know why he rang. I know he meant well. He even apologised.

He said, *"My niece is upstairs, I don't want her to find my body."*

He wanted to be sure that the police would arrive, be the ones to find,

slide the glass door open and come across him first.

"Nothing you say can change my mind." I was trained. I tried and I tried.

He asked me not to bother. The cancer had already spread too far.

I engaged, tried to keep him on the line. He politely thanked me three times.

He knew. He terminated the call. It was clockwork, a jigsaw
meticulously puzzled together. When the police slid open the door

they found him – shotgun in his hands – lying on the floor.

An end he chose. He chose. After thousands upon thousands of calls

this is the one I can't forget. Robert. He had apologised,

he said it wasn't fair, he knew he had no right

but he had to ensure his niece did not make the find.

And that was that. His time. His choice. His suicide.

And now my scalp is dry and itchy. I scratch and scratch, and it drips.

And that phone, it rings. I hear it. It rings and it rings.

It's you. It's you in my queue, you ring and you want to tell me

but I am full, full to the brim. I am overflowing.

It's you on the phone again, you want to talk about suicide.

About yours. About his or hers. Everyone else's. Not mine.

I struggle to feel. I struggle to recall. I think at some point I cared,

but I don't know you, you're not real – I am nobody to you,

nobody at all except a voice, a someone at the other end of the line.

You are a ringing, a ringing, another voice in my queue

but the sound of you has faded – your desperation, your sadness,

your horror – it's no longer black, not even dark grey – you – you –

you have become a light shade of icy grey, faded – all faded away.

You rang last week. And yesterday. Again today too. You –

I don't want to talk to you – I am at the end of my line,

still that phone rings and rings, and again it's you in my queue.

Snow burial

My friend, you once told me if you ever get to ninety
you'll go to a frozen country and lie down naked

on the snow to die. If you're serious, I'd ask
to come with you. We'd talk all the way

about what us childless people do and how
you once helped your mum prepare for an operation

by getting up at four to disinfect her whole body.
I'd be a sheet of emotion, a weather front

and you'd say *I'm fine* as you always do
even when you aren't, yet this time you'd show me

how fragile that feels. I'd remember all those times
you threw a blanket over me by just talking.

I'd have made you a thin sprawling silk cloak
in red-purple-blue-yellow sewn with hot country flowers

from home: Swan River Daisies, spider orchids, wattles
and I'd lift it, billowing over your head, over

your fragile congested body and would you let me
brush your hair and pin in pink and white everlastings?

Then, for both of us, I'd go over everything from the start –
how far we've come, and we'd laugh like the woods.

As you close your eyes, I'd say, *It's alright, I don't need you
to mirror me anymore*, Debussy bursting from a tiny speaker

and that's when a hawk would dip close to the earth
and give you a last look at the spectacular.

white birches blue gums

slender their bones
lean over a path
of my childhood

long past summer
bare of its vigour
they poke holes

in the sky
its grey shawl
binds them

my mother's once-tall figure
stoops over a cane
moves slowly

the sight of her
ashen skin
chokes me

she doesn't see
me at first

mama

my daughter calls me
across time zones

I tell her
of the white birches
the winter sunrise

that takes its time
unveiling
frame after frame

the familial branches
spread through decades
and continents

there's a photo of her
standing beside the blue
gum tree

her white dress softens
the vigorous
summer sky

Autopsy

Thanks for the worries of love
that patched me together
while drip-feed heartbeat
was my most consistent thought
when no one could
look each other in the eyes
Thanks for shoes clapping on hospital tiles
screeching round corridors into waiting rooms
in times when “no worries”
doesn’t fix a fucking thing
Thanks for bad advice about drying tears
well-meaning glitch
as the numbers counted down on the monitor
and 80s pop grandeur ‘The Final Countdown’ intruded my headspace
Thanks for the tears and sympathy photos, never-ending
that I sometimes must avoid
Thanks for the spaced-out grief
when no one wanted to say a thing
Thank you to the counsellor
who talked to us one by one on the phone
though I remember none of the advice
Thanks to the nurse who was straight with us, saying “he *will* die”.
Thanks for running down the corridor, uncle,
after travelling back
from a holiday up on the North Coast
when urgency was the order
but my hope was already gone
Thank you for the autopsy too, coroner,
and the system for breaking me
in just the necessary ways.

Ninox Strenua (Powerful Owl)*'You think that people can't see you in the dark, but the owl people can see you.'**Nyungar Elder, quoted in Owl Beliefs in Nyungar Culture,
prepared by Ken Macintyre and Barb Dobson, 2017*

Your song's a doped pulse. Your song's a soft,
double-struck gong. Your syllables globed,

bass as blood, they bloom from threaded shadows,
then fall away to their mineral root.

Boom outside the window, across the night's
capillaries of frost. You draw me from sleep

when the sky's a breastbone sutured with stars,
when the moon's a scalpel, jabbed in the hills,

the sky porous as pumice, the wind bellowing –
drought-wolfed – and I think what prayer can I make?

We're burning up everything. I've stood vigil
for the swab of your wing, the sigil of a talon raking Aquila –

but I've never seen the grotto of your face.
Now rheumy and bruised, the moon siphons midnight

to a vein's blue translucency. In my chest, that beat
squirrelling through my ribs, at my throat –

a fretting metronome beneath your call's pulse.
I close my eyes – the highways like shearing tracks;

the suburbs like brands, or amputations, cauterised.
The hills – all curving spine and branching limbs.

If I could palm your song from the wind
would I find two eggs roosting on my heartline?

And if I lanced the shells and sucked each yolk
pooling in its serums – would you lend me your vision,

your pupil huge as shock? I dream of your ferrous
notes cupped in the greenhood, in the love creeper.

I dream of peppermint gums – whale trunked,
hollowed by a century's seasons – of those who first
logged them – their sun-burnt hands squeezing
the blades back and forth, the squeal and shriek
of the trunk as it falls, the shadows rallying,
the tipping light: history dissolved like dusk into darkness.

Half-awake I wonder – were you roosting nearby?
Were your chicks in the nest when it fell?

Have your wings buffed air above that platform
of sandstone with the half-etched hand?

Memorial now, to homeland taken away – theft's
bloodless euphemism. Did that hand proffer fire
to country like medicine, custodian of aeons?
What prayer can I make? Would you nurse my vision
through this eclipse of ash – the woodlands, grasslands,
septic with drought. You're that feathered river
pulsing through my sleep. Sometimes I startle to shrieks,
to stars prickling like thistle seeds, and I go out into
clover clotted with frost. The threaded shadows throb
with your love songs – but I've never seen the grotto of your face.

Raven observes the world

I found myself looking down on my death
 from the cracked limb of a far cedar tree.
 What holds me here is something like a story,

or like an eye, a pair of eyes that saw
 the history of one who had a name
 and fell, but that was simple gravity.

My gravel voice is gone and I am grave
 or gravely happy. The world is still my toy.
 Its creatures are my curiosity.

The humans are a strange estranging species
 dwelling in their dream of separateness,
 tensed at the rain, which is an invitation.

I watch it turn to snow and keep on dancing.
 But when I died all living creatures died,
 all grass decayed and feral waters vanished,

till I saw through my death like any death,
 the death, let's say, of one whose mind was clear,
 who knew, the way a raven knows the world,

that we are used by living, used again
 and again, material rearranged
 and something else, some energy or cloud

scudding on the wind. We see it move the grass
 and ruffle feathers of the slightest birds.
 Could I have been that man, that woman falling?

Could I have been that fish inside a shark
 just long enough to clean bacteria?
 That dry shrub catching fire and talking smoke?

My very cells are universities
in which the sun will study till it dies.
And down below me I can see the eyes

I used to laugh with, open, clouded over.
Soon they will be welcoming the rain
that speeds decay and means new life is coming.

The tree I'm perched in died so long ago
its roots are hollows in the ground, its crown
a skeleton descended from a mountain.

New bodies rise from old and fail again,
turning and returning and going on,
eternally recurring echoes sounding . . .

I cock my head no longer like a head
and turn my eye no longer like an eye
and wait for that new stirring in the air.

Hold me together I am dying to live

Stitch me in time to cutting incisions,
cross the room with your suture line,
sew me deftly, cocooned in blanket

stitch me. With your elaborate threads of colour
embroider, push me gently through time,
go blind or back, zig zag while running.

Thread a buttonhole around the knot of me,
press needle through linen, through body tissue,
with fingers gloved or cupped in silver.

Feel the pressure of fine steel piercing muscle memory,
repair the seams, ripped flesh unspeakable and torn,
of snapped and cracked bones plain-purl, knit me

use kintsugi. Weave me back and forth, untangle me,
collect earthy reeds and sedges entwine and plait me,
bring serrated margins closer, let them be touching.

Stich me in time, save nine, my star is dying.
If you have no dexterity *velcro* me, coarsely mend me,
press nylon into waiting room wounds, clasp me.

Hold me together, let our borders touch
our tears soothe the dry need for love,
darn this gash of death, sponge the blood.

Spin the wheel, turn flax to thread, repair me,
stitch the ripped seams of life, lover cradle me,
let our edges be touching.

A confluence of parts

i

And while we scrolled and liked and deleted, and didn't look up,
sixteen yellow-tailed black cockatoos pasted their precise requiem to the sky.
And as we posted and texted, and selected our inexact emojis for the emotions
we probably weren't feeling, for the first time in thirty years a Royal Spoonbill
landed, and sifted the water's edge for a good fifteen minutes before leaving.

ii

The footprints of the mouse come close but don't touch me.
The mouse is not its footprints. I am not the sum hours of my solitude,
though I love them.

I put all my love in the poem. Because where else to put it so it can be something?
The bee returns again and again to the same flower. The sun is so low
you'd think it wanted to roost in the trees. Now it's just myself and the still air.
The insects and high whistles. Not being able to distinguish myself from the bird;
the bird from the dead branch on which it's sitting.

Severe weather sestina

March. Rain gathers
 on the parade ground;
 pounds the slant side of the flagpole
 hangs itself on she-oak branches
 – droplets play the pavement like God's hand
 run through a sack of rice. Flood waters
 tell the tide on the Hacking River –

Everything here seems an answer.
 River
 boat masts are metronomes in the foreground
 and the sailing club across the water
 takes its last drink and downs the whisker poles.
 The wind writes scales in a shaky hand
 on the surface – in inlets and creek branches

It pools like memories
 – blue gum branches
 Whispering secrets before the storm.
 Rivers,
 they say, hold our history in their hands.
 I think, the truth lies somewhere in the ground
 – here, the first time I cast a fish-pole
 with my father at Bundeena, the river
 recounting how the flathead lurched,
 the water
 un-spooled from its gills; how the bones branched
 out from its spine
 – symmetry splayed down its poles.
 How much wider and deeper the river
 felt at that point. I pressed my feet to the ground,
 felt the sand twist and groan, my father's hand
 outstretched like a book
 new in my hand.
 His skin, unread leather, dripping scaled water
 and blood.

Thick drops of life sunk through the ground's
 sieve and the dunes, motionless and branchial
 said nothing. Yet, today, the river
 is a chorus of hulls and the polemic
 brawl of thunder in the bloating clouds.

Rampole

Blackwoods scrape and scratch at the sky, their hands
 empty and lifted for alms.

The river

carries its answer in mud, the waters
 sift the debris, the brackish tide branches
 back to the shore and runs the waves aground.

If I stand on the edge for long, the water
 will clear,

the rough barked apple branches
 will rise, and I will return to the ground.

NOTE: Rampole is an alternate to the more common *rampike*, meaning a dead tree, especially the bleached skeleton or splintered trunk of a tree killed by fire, lightning, or wind.

biographies

CHRIS ANDREWS taught at the universities of Melbourne and Western Sydney. His third collection of poems, *The Oblong Plot*, will be published by Puncher & Wattmann in 2024. He has translated books of prose fiction, including Liliana Colanzi's *You Glow in the Dark* (New Directions, 2024) and Kaouther Adimi's *A Bookshop in Algiers* (Serpent's Tail, 2020).

E. ANDREWS lives in Queensland, where she has spent most of her life, and is currently studying music. She previously worked as a data analyst after completing a degree in mathematics and has no other literary publications. She has two children.

DAVIDE ANGELO's poems have appeared in Australian and international publications. Several have been shortlisted for prizes, including Montreal International Poetry Prize, Bruce Dawe Poetry Prize, and Melbourne Poets Union International Poetry Prize. He lives in regional Victoria, with his two daughters.

MAGDALENA BALL is a novelist, poet, moderator, reviewer, interviewer, vice president of Flying Island Poetry Community, and managing editor of Compulsive Reader. She is the author of two novels and seven poetry books, most recently *Bobish*, a verse-memoir published by Puncher & Wattmann in 2023. Find out more at her website: www.magdalenaball.com

TONY BARNSTONE teaches at Whittier College and is the author of 21 books, a tarot deck and a music CD. His most recent publications in *Pulp Sonnets* (Tupelo Press, 2015), the co-edited anthology *Republic of Apples, Democracy of Oranges: New Eco-Poetry from China and the United States* (U Hawaii Press, 2019), a co-translation from the Urdu of *Faces Hidden in the Dust: Selected Ghazals of Ghalib* (White Pine Press, 2021), and a creativity tool, *The Radiant Tarot: Pathway to Creativity* (Weiser, 2022). He is a translator or co-translator of world literature, primarily Chinese but also Spanish and Urdu. His awards include the Pushcart Prize in Poetry, The John Ciardi Prize, The Benjamin Saltman Award, and fellowships from the NEA, NEH, and California Arts Council. Tony was one of the two judges for the 2023 Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize. <https://www.whittier.edu/academics/english/barnstone>

PAULA BOHINCE is the author of three poetry collections, most recently *Swallows and Waves* (Sarabande, 2016). Her poems have appeared in *Australian Book Review*, *The Australian, Island*, and elsewhere. She was the grateful recipient of the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize in 2019. She lives in Pennsylvania, USA.

AMELIA BRADLEY is a poet and fiction writer from the Sunshine Coast, Australia. She completed a degree in Creative Writing (Honours) at the University of the Sunshine Coast, and has put her PhD plans on hold while she and her family relocate to Europe for a taste of expat life in Portugal. Her work has appeared in numerous online magazines and journals.

MARGARET BRADSTOCK, a Sydney poet, critic and editor, lectured at UNSW for 25 years, has been Asialink Writer-in-Residence at Beijing University, co-editor of *Five Bells* for Poets Union, and on the Board of Directors for Australian Poetry. Collections of poetry include *The Pomelo Tree* (winner of the Wesley Michel Wright Prize) and *Barnacle Rock* (winner of

the Woollahra Festival Award, 2014). Editor of *Antipodes*, the first Australian anthology of Aboriginal and white responses to 'settlement' (2011) and *Caring for Country* (2017), Margaret won the Banjo Paterson Poetry Award in 2014, 2015 and 2017. Her most recent book is *Brief Garden* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2019).

MICHELLE BROCK is an Australian poet and short story writer and loves exploring various forms of Japanese poetry. Her tanka, haiga and tanka prose appear regularly in Australian and overseas journals and anthologies. She lives on a bush block near Queanbeyan, NSW, and finds her inspiration along rivers and beaches and in the company of other writers.

CORAL CARTER lives in Perth but grew up in the country. A guest in the Queensland Poetry Festival 2013, inaugural writer in residence for Northern Territory Writers Centre 2013 and guest at Perth Poetry Festival 2014, Coral was shortlisted in the Newcastle Poetry Prize 2022 and won the Looking Forward/Looking Back poetry prize 2023. She has published *Descended from Thieves* (Mulla Mulla Press, 2012) and *Backyard Listening* (Mulla Mulla Press, 2019).

MICHAEL CUNLIFFE sprouted from an alien seed pod rumoured to have been scattered in the Scottish Highlands by the sons of the notorious Ragnar Lothbrok around a thousand years ago. At an unknown point in time he found himself transported by some little-known form of alien technology to the strange lands of Far North Queensland. Later in life he became a hippie, grew his hair long, drank schooners of ice-cold beer and listened to articulate neo-Grunge Rock artists. He enjoys peace and quiet. And he writes poetry. Quite a lot of it, actually.

SHASTRA DEO was born in Fiji, raised in Melbourne, and lives in Brisbane. Her first book, *The Agonist* (UQP, 2017), won the 2016 Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize and the 2018 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. Her second book, *The Exclusion Zone*, was published by University of Queensland Press in 2023.

CATH DRAKE is from Perth and lives in London, UK. *The Shaking City* (Seren Books, 2020), longlisted in the international Laurel Prize and highly commended in the UK Forward Prize, followed *Sleeping with Rivers*, a Poetry Book Society choice & winner of the Seren/Mslexia pamphlet prize. Published widely in anthologies and literary journals internationally, Cath has been shortlisted for the Venture, Bridport and Manchester Poetry Prize, plus placed second twice, and highly commended in the international Ginkgo Eco-Poetry Prize. A mindfulness teacher and an award-winning environmental nonfiction writer, she hosts The Verandah, online poetry events. <https://www.cathdrake.com/>

TUG DUMBLY is a Nowra-born poet / performer who has lived in Sydney for millennia. He has worked lots in radio, venues and schools. He has been resident-poet on ABC radio (Triple J, ABC 702), and released two spoken-word CDs, a poetry book, *Son Songs* (2018), been shortlisted for lots of prizes and been published in some decent places. He won the 2023 Bruce Dawe Poetry Prize.

ADRIENNE EBERHARD is a poet and educator. She holds an MA in English, teaching poetry from year 1 to undergraduate students from 2008 to 2023. She has published five

collections of poetry, most recently *Chasing Marie Antoinette All Over Paris* (Black Pepper, 2021), which was longlisted in the Tasmanian Literary Awards.

ES FOONG is a poet and performer living on the lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation. They want you to know that you are a wild, precious and unique expression of possibility and you are cherished. Their debut poetry collection *Clot and Marrow* (2023) is out now from Recent Work Press. They live online at waffleirongirl.com.

IRINA FROLOVA is a Russian-Australian writer residing on Awabakal Country in NSW. Irina headed the Lake Macquarie branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers in 2022–2023. Irina's work explores the themes of immigration and belonging. You can find her poetry and prose in *Live Encounters*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Kalliope X* and on social media: @irinafrolovapoet. Irina's first poetry collection, *Far and Wild*, was published by Flying Island Books in 2021.

JO GARDINER writes and lives in the Blue Mountains in Australia. Most recently she was shortlisted for the 2024 Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize, gained third place in the 2023 Newcastle Poetry Prize, and was a finalist in the 2022 Montreal International Poetry Prize. This follows publication of poetry, short fiction and nonfiction in *Meanjin*, *Westerly*, and *Island*. Her novel, *The Concerto Inn*, was published by UWA Publishing in 2006.

JASON GRAY is the Mauritian-Australian author of prize-winning book *HAUNT (THE KOOLIE)* by Subbed In (2019), and the winner (2012) and judge (2018–2019) of Zine West Word. He has published and read widely, including *Overland* (2023), Liminal Mag's *Collisions* (2020), *Zine West* (2009, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2018), *Griffith Review* (2017), and *Seizure* (2014). He was a recipient of a West Words Varuna Fellowship (2018). Twitter: @jasongray85; Instagram: @connectionrevolution

DIMITRA HARVEY was born in Sydney to a Greek mother and grew up on Wangal country. She is the author of *A Fistful of Hail* (Vagabond Press, 2018). Her writing has appeared in *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *Cordite*, *Mascara*, *SBS Voices*, and *Openbook*, as well as anthologies such as *The Best of Australian Poems 2022*. She's been longlisted in the Peter Porter and Newcastle Poetry prizes; her poem 'Cicadas' won Queensland's Poetry's 2021 Val Vallis Award.

DAVID JOCKEL: Studied professional writing at UC decades ago. Semi-retired after nine gruelling years as a Hansard editor. When young, always assumed I would become a great writer/world-renowned genius. Currently trying to muster the courage to read a poem or two at the local open mic to a small crowd of desperados in a dimly lit room. Highly suspicious of my motives in wanting to do so.

NASIM KHOSRAVI'S artistic journey, spanning two decades, weaves theatre, poetry, and playwriting. Born in Iran, she honed her craft in Farsi literature and contemporary performance before her voice was silenced due to her political activities. Moved to Australia, she founded Baran Theatre in 2013 – a platform for exploring cross-cultural fusion and innovative approaches to interactive theatre. Through it all, a signature poetic voice has persisted, now finding expression in English poetry.

PETER LACH-NEWINSKY: Four poetry books: *When Stillness Comes* (Mark Time Books, 2021), *Cut a Long Story Short* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2014), *Requiem* (Picaro Press, 2012) and *The Post-Man Letters & Other Poems* (Picaro Press, 2010). Awards include the Varuna-Picaro Publishing Fellowship Prize (2009), the Melbourne Poets Union International Poetry Prize (2009 and 2010) and the Vera Newsom Poetry Prize (2011). Runs a 20-acre permaculture farm in the southern highlands of NSW.

KRISTEN LANG lives in mountainous country in lutruwita / Tasmania and is working to understand and encourage Earth- rather than human-centricity. *Earth Dwellers*, published by Giramondo in 2021, was one of 20 books longlisted for the international Laurel Prize. *SkinNotes* (Walleah Press) and *The Weight of Light* (Five Islands Press) were published in 2017.

WES LEE lives in New Zealand. She has three poetry collections, and her work has appeared in a wide array of publications, including *Best New Zealand Poems*, *Westerly*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Australian Poetry Journal*. Most recently she was awarded the Heroines/Joyce Parkes Women's Writing Prize 2022, in New South Wales. Shortlisted for the Kathleen Grattan Poetry Award 2023 (Otago University Press), and The *Poetry London* Pamphlet Prize 2023.

DARYL LIM WEI JIE 林伟杰 is a poet, editor and translator from Singapore. He is the author of *A Book of Changes* (Math Paper Press, 2016) and *Anything but Human* (Landmark Books, 2021), a finalist for the 2022 Singapore Literature Prize. He conceptualised and co-edited two anthologies: *Food Republic: A Singapore Literary Banquet*, which won a Special Award at the 2023 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards, and *The Second Link*, which invites Singapore and Malaysian writers to reflect on the unique relationship between the two countries. He also translated *Short Tongue*, a collection by the Singaporean Chinese poet Wang Mun Kiat. He won the Young Artist Award in 2023, Singapore's highest award for young art practitioners. www.darylwljlim.com

The former poet laureate of Colorado, DAVID MASON is now a permanent resident of Tasmania, where he lives with poet Cally Conan-Davies. His books include *Ludlow: A Verse Novel* (Red Hen Press, 2010), *The Sound: New and Selected Poems* (Red Hen Press, 2018), and *Pacific Light* (Red Hen Press, 2022), along with four collections of essays and several opera libretti. Mason's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Best American Poetry*, and many other periodicals and anthologies.

ALEXANDRA MCCALLUM writes poetry, fiction and performance work. She is also an oral storyteller and community cultural development facilitator. In 2023 she was selected for Varuna's online poetry masterclass with Felicity Plunkett. Her poetry has been commissioned by online platform *Running Dog* and published in *Bluebottle Journal*. She has a particular interest in conveying visceral experience and in poems which draw on mythology or an expanded sense of the real.

JEANNIE WALLACE MCKEOWN is a South African poet, writer and editor. Her first collection, *Fall Awake*, was published by Modjaji Books in 2020. She has published widely in journals, and her poetry appears in anthologies including *For Rhino in a Shrinking World* and *Voices of this Land ed. II*. Her upcoming collection will be published by Modjaji in 2024, and she is currently enrolled for a PhD in English (Creative Writing) at the University of Pretoria.

GLENN MCPHERSON is a Sydney-based poet. He has been widely published in leading journals and anthologies. In 2023, he was a finalist in the Gwen Harwood Poetry Competition, and shortlisted for the South Coast Writers Poetry Prize. In 2024, his poetry has appeared in *Songbirds* – Sedoka Journal, *InDaily* – Poets Corner, and are forthcoming in *Antipodes*.

ISABELLA G. MEAD is a poet from Melbourne whose debut poetry collection, *The Infant Vine*, will be published by UWAP in 2024. Her work has also appeared in journals such as *Meanjin*, *Island*, *Westerly*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and *Rabbit*. She is currently a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Monash University where she researches ekphrastic poetry and digital images. She lives with her young family on unceded Wurundjeri land.

SHAINE MELROSE is a queer writer/poet and retired gardener, living and working on Kurna Yerta in the Adelaide hills. While challenged with disabling chronic illness, Shaine likes to grow vegetables and hang out in the garden with her kelpie Ned. In 2022, Shaine was shortlisted for the Judith Wright Poetry Prize, and her chapbook, *Shooting Words from My Soul*, won publication in Friendly Streets Poets, *New Poets* #23.

GEMMA NETHERCOTE WAY lives in Naarm, Melbourne. Her poetry has been published in *Westerly*, *Australian Poetry*, *Axon*, *Meniscus* and *Not Very Quiet*. In 2023 she was longlisted for the UC Vice-Chancellor's Poetry Prize, and in 2019 was shortlisted for the Anne Edgeworth Writer's Fellowship.

DAMEN O'BRIEN is a multi-award-winning poet based in Brisbane. Damen's prizes include The Moth Poetry Prize, the Peter Porter Poetry Prize, the New Millennium Writings Award and the Magma Judge's Prize. Damen's poems have been published in seven countries, highly commended in the Forward Prizes for Poetry, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Damen's second book of poetry, *Walking the Boundary*, is out now through Pitt Street Poetry.

INDRANI PERERA is a Sri Lankan/German/Australian poet and author of *Defenestration* and *pas de deux* who lives on unceded Wurrundjeri Country. Her poetry has been anthologised, shortlisted for major Australian awards including the Nillumbik Prize and Jean Stone Award and published in journals in national and international journals. She is the editor of the *Pocketry Almanack* and creator of The Circus of Similes poetry portal. www.indraniperera.com

FELICITY PLUNKETT is a poet and critic living on Wangal land. She is the author of *A Kinder Sea* (UQP, 2020), *Vanishing Point* (UQP, 2009) and the chapbook *Seastrands* (Vagabond, 2011), published in Vagabond Press' Rare Objects series. She edited *Thirty Australian Poets* (UQP, 2011). She has a PhD from the University of Sydney and is a widely-published essayist and critic. She was Poetry Editor with UQP for nine years.

In 2012, after spending most of her life as a full-time artist, JENNY POLLAK began writing poetry. She has since been published in various journals and anthologies, including *Meanjin*, *Cordite*, the *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Red Room Poetry*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *Verity La*, *Australian Award Winning Writing*, and the *Newcastle Poetry Prize Anthology*. Her first poetry collection will be published in 2024 by Liquid Amber Press.

PETER RAMM is a poet who writes on the Gundungarra lands of NSW. His debut poetry collection *Waterlines* (2022) was published by Vagabond Press. In the same year, he won the prestigious Manchester Poetry Prize. His poems have been shortlisted in the Bridport, ACU, Blake, Newcastle, Peter Porter, Tom Collins, and KSP National Poetry Prizes. Peter's poetry appears in *Westerly*, *Cordite*, *Mascara*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *The Rialto*, *Eureka Street*, and more.

MANI RAO's poems have been published in *Meanjin*, *Cordite*, *Takabe*, *Printout*, *Iowa Review*, *Wasafiri*, *Indian Literature*, *Tinfish*, *Zoland Poetry*, *Penguin Book of the Prose Poem* and other journals and anthologies. Her books include *Sing to Me* (Recent Work Press, 2019) and *Echolocation* (Math Paper Press, 2014). Mani was one of the two judges for the 2023 Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize.

DAVID REGAN is a Westernport Bay/Bunurong-based poet and visual artist. He began writing and reading poetry while at school but in the past five years, coinciding with a change in lifestyle, it has become his primary focus and passion. He is in the process of preparing a book of original photos and poetry.

SARA M SALEH is a writer, race critical lawyer, organiser & the daughter of migrants from Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon. Her writing has been widely published in English and Arabic, and she made history as the first poet to win both the Australian Book Review's 2021 Peter Porter Poetry Prize and the Overland Judith Wright Poetry Prize 2020, amongst other shortlistings and honours. Sara's debut novel *Songs for the Dead and the Living* and poetry collection *The Flirtation of Girls* were both released in 2023.

MARA ADAMITZ SCRUBE is a poet, visual artist, and documentary filmmaker. Her publications include five full poetry collections, selections in generational anthologies, and poems in key literary journals. Twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize, she has won or been shortlisted for many prominent international literary awards. Mara serves concurrently as Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Liberal Arts, University of Minnesota Morris, and Dean and Professor Emerita, University of the Arts, Philadelphia.

KEVIN SMITH has worked as teacher, writer, actor, and workshop facilitator. Two collections of his poetry have been published: *Awake to the Rest of My Days* (2021) and *Another Day* (2023). His poems are often anthologised. In 2022, he placed 2nd in The ACU poetry prize, and shortlisted in The Newcastle, and The Bridport. This year, he won the prestigious 2023 Newcastle Poetry Prize.

PATRICIA SYKES is a poet and librettist. Her poems and collections have received various awards and have featured on the ABC's *Poetica* and *The Spirit of Things*. Her collaborations with composer Liza Lim have been performed in Australia, Paris, Germany, Russia, New York, and the UK. She was Asialink Writer in Residence Malaysia, 2006. A song cycle by Andrew Aronowicz, based on her poetry collection, *The Abbotsford Mysteries* (Spinifex Press, 2011), is available as podcast.

Dr SABA VASEFI is a multi-award-winning scholar-journalist, poet, and documentary filmmaker. She is an academic at the University of Sydney, and an Honorary Postdoctoral

Associate at Macquarie University. Saba is an executive council member at the Sydney Peace Foundation, the editor of Writing in Resistance for Red Room Poetry and the chief editor of *Borderless, A Transnational Anthology of Feminist Poetry*. Her poetry has been featured in journals, including the *Best Australian Poems 2022*, *Wasafiri Magazine* (UK), *MAI: FEMINISM & VISUAL CULTURE* (UK), the Art Gallery of NSW, *Cordite Poetry*, *Australian Poetry*, *Axon*, and *Transnational Literature*. She was twice a judge for the Dolatabadi Book Prize for the Best Book on Women's Literature and Women's Issues, and a judge for the BR4R Seeking Asylum Poetry Prize.

JEN WEBB is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra. Recent poetry collections include *Moving Targets* (Recent Work Press, 2018), *Flight Mode* (with Shé Hawke; RWP, 2020), and *The Daily News* (RWP, 2024). She is co-editor of the literary journal *Meniscus*, the scholarly journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*, and Bloomsbury Academic's Research in Creative Writing series. Jen was co-chair of the 2023 University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize.

PETRA WHITE was born in Adelaide in 1975 and currently lives in Belfast. Her most recent collection is *That Galloping Horse* (Shearsman Books, 2024).

KIMBERLY K WILLIAMS is the author of three books of poetry, including *Still Lives* (Life Before Man, 2022), which won a Canberra Critics Book Award in 2022, and *Sometimes a Woman* (Recent Work Press, 2021), which won the 2022 WILLA Literary Award in Poetry. Her most recent publication is the translation of a book of poems by Benjamin Valdivia, *New Hymns to the Night*, from Spanish to English (Grañén Porrúa, 2023), co-translated with the author and Jaime Herrera. Kimberly's own poems appear in many journals and anthologies around the world. Originally from Detroit, Michigan, Kimberly is a lecturer at Central Queensland University. She was co-chair of the 2023 University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize.

William Carlos Williams argued that a poem is 'a field of action': a place where something happens, a place where there is intense engagement with the contemporary world. The poems in this Prize anthology bear this out, in finding the most contemporary language and structures in which to deal with the age-old concerns of love and of death: the very stuff of being. These poems test the air; shift perspective; challenge traditions; celebrate – with equal enthusiasm – the past and the future, the built and the natural worlds.

