

if writing
were a cure

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**THE 2024
UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA
HEALTH POETRY PRIZE**

First published in 2024 by
Centre for Creative and Cultural Research
Faculty of Arts and Design
University of Canberra
ACT 2617 Australia

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Publication design and layout: Caren Florance

ISBN 978-1-74088-587

Cover image: photograph by Caren Florance

This publication is available in digital form here:
www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/cccr/resources

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	Ella Kurz & Jen Webb		00
Angela Costi	<i>If My Writing Were a Cure</i>	WINNER	00
Victoria McGrath	<i>Dear Neurodifficults</i>	SECOND PRIZE	00
Jane Frank	<i>Denouement Days</i>		00
Kim Huynh	<i>A Psychoanalysis of Boats</i>		00
Julie Janson	<i>Curlew Cries in Evening – Yunga Warebun Waragal</i>		00
Robyn Lance	<i>Taming the wheelchair</i>		00
Kate Maxwell	<i>Meeting My Edge</i>		00
Stephanie Powell	<i>Rogue states</i>		00
Miroslav Sandev	<i>Skeleton staff</i>		00
Beth Spencer	<i>Three into Thirty-Three</i>		00
Heather Taylor-Johnson	<i>Briefly</i>		00
Carrie Tiffany	<i>last dog</i>		00
<i>Biographies</i>			00

Introduction

The University of Canberra's Health Poetry Prize, announced early this year, attracted nearly 150 poems submitted by 95 poets who explored the theme of the prize: *consider the journey to live life well*. And they did. The poems submitted picked up on issues of health and living well – and barriers to living well – across a range of topics, and in a number of poetic forms.

The topics covered a plethora of barriers to living well: from mental to physical health; from chronic to acute illness; from the perspective of health care workers to that of the patients stuck in hospital beds; and from pregnancy and childbirth to dementia and death. All the human conditions.

This could have made for dark and bleak reading, but the poems are infused with clarity of vision, with a tender care for those who are suffering or lost, and with glimpses of beauty and possibility in everyday life. Perhaps even more importantly, poems about health are reminders that we are not alone, whether we are caring for those in poor health, or are ourselves living with such conditions.

A growing body of research shows that reading helps us maintain mental, physical and emotional health – or, if health is not our option, a sense of wellbeing, of consolation, of shared grieving and the comfort that comes from that.

The winning and runner-up poems, as well as those selected for this chapbook, found ways to convey the human condition of living well – ways that, up until the moment of their reading, may have seemed less than speakable, elusive to human languages that seek order and definitiveness, just as our thoughts and feelings may be taking flight. We use language to talk around the edges of the deep and vast ways we experience our good health and poor health, and that of our loved ones. If we are lucky, whomever we share our words with will recognise something of our internal experience of health from their own. The brushstrokes of our words, while not able to paint the exact texture and colour of what we know and feel, provide an outline for someone else to fill in – a sort of experiential paint-by-numbers.

Poetry is a medium that allows for both ambiguity and specificity, and therefore a close replication of the textures and colours of our internal worlds. The poems selected for this chapbook allowed us to encounter lived experiences

of living well in vibrant and surprising ways. We hope that you will find insights in these poems, moments of compassion, occasional laughter, and a sense of the community of all humans, living within our imperfect bodies, and finding joy and meaning in those lives.

Our thanks to the Faculty of Health at the University of Canberra, which provided the funding, and the Faculty of Arts and Design, which managed the prize. We look forward to future iterations of this prize.

Ella Kurz & Jen Webb

If My Writing Were a Cure

WINNER

Angela Costi

They would return her to our family
as Mana not Resident of room 78
she would be back in her bedroom
her walls heaving with frame
after frame of ancestral stares
her memory the reliable archive
providing their full name exact age
whether they died on a pillow
by bullet blade rock in a trench

I would be free *not* to visit
for the mash-up story of childhood
her pet goat spitting out my dolly
listening to the sprawl of her brain
carve me out
fold into her closed arms
flop against her turned back

If my writing were a cure
I would remember the word
for my favourite nut
the one I lost in mid-air
after I spent twelve dollars
for a small bowl of that creamy crunch
salty skin lip tingle name
of that

Two letters all I need are two more
they come before the letter *o u s*
the daily grunt of this game
to keep me a Visitor
as if *i* would ever follow *p*

to help me recall what Mana was
each Sunday from her christening
till the day she threw her beloved
bible into the dish washer

How my pen begs to write the lyrics
to the song she sang daily
about νερο and maybe μανα
something with στείλε με να παρω
I think δροσιστικός water to be fetched
from
with
something απλός
we once knew

*Note: The final stanza has eight words in Greek, which translate in their order as:
water, mother, send me to get, refreshing, simple.*

Dear Neurodifficults

SECOND PRIZE

Victoria McGrath

Thank you for your thoughtful, speedy feedback. Had I realised I'd hitched a risky ride on the latest fad wagon, I might have ditched my symptoms earlier, replaced decades of unchangeable behaviours with standard inclusions, saved us all a tank of gas. If only I could see small talk as something other than an endless roundabout, worthy of 1.875 years of my life (based on an average 3-minute interaction, around 6 times per 8-hour day, let's say 6 days a week, over a working life of 50 years), stating that I'm fine when I'm not, accepting the same response from you, when it's clearly more efficient to hear that one, or both, of us is feeling flat, couldn't turn off last night, isn't in control, needs a full-body-service (or competitive trade-in), so I can factor that in as I scan your face, your stance, your microtensions, for glitches and odd reactions, while trying to process dialogue, translating from your spoken user manual to mine, ascertaining which societal kerb we're parked at, rather than defaulting to my automatic hazardous acceptance that your disdain/disinterest/disparagement obviously means that I am inflexible/insistent/irritating, because surely effective interchange requires context, and tolerance, and at least some vague commitment from both parties to the concept that each has something to contribute, even if one of those participants (spoiler: not me!) might have the empathy of a tyre iron. (Note to self: take a breath; shorter sentences)

I'm a 1960s Toyota Corolla, sporting a state-of-the-art Bugatti V16 engine, exceptionally dodgy brakes, unreliable windscreen wipers and an iffy demister. She with her hands on the wheel is not me! That woman morphs from 100-year-old learner driver to 17-year-old rev head, and back again, in the click of a blinker. She is irrevocably in charge. I have no say regarding speed or gears. Even daily destination is a mystery to me. She scares you? Welcome to my freeway. I see you preparing to flip the finger, or high beams, toot your horn, get me back in my lane. You think I'm not aware? I smash self-perception! But there's a million miles between a GPS and journey's end. I'm praying for a sinkhole, speedbumps, at the very least a zebra crossing with no kids or cops in sight. All I can do is brace for inevitable impact (and hope I was enhanced with airbags at some stage).

My mental mechanic explains it all to me, how I need the right gas for my engine, but how my fuel is elusive and doesn't last. She says I might erode my basic components quicker than the regular, increase wear and tear. I can't just change my battery when it's low, and a lifetime of velocity can leave me more prone to collisions than most. She's urged me to appreciate how free it feels to speed a superhighway, to weave and merge in a race of millisecond mindsnaps with no checkered flag in sight, to understand that my speed limits, torque, steering, are different. Not better, not lesser, but different. She tells me to ignore the road rage that is ignorance, don't bend my fender to other people's tensions, stop existing on exit ramps. I need to buddy up with my brain's chauffeur so that sometimes I get to choose the music, or at least make an effort to learn the lyrics to her soundtrack. I must definitely use my indicators! We're all going to end up on the same scrap heap, but I'm allowed to take the spicy route. She says to me, this is how it feels to heal.

Denouement Days

Jane Frank

A flock of birds: tea leaves in the cup of sky. Confuse the prophets, keep warm, preserve your stamina for the difficult days. Embrace celestial strangeness with synchronised clouds of words. The music of flapping wings: a silent comfort. That winter of missing you, I wrote you 57 poems about pain and flowers, about a crazy lick of flame at the base of my brain that ignited dreams. You helped me release anxious spirals of sparrows into the void. But black holes were in our galaxy's heart. These denouement days, I am summoned by the moon: I donate to charities and cook my children nourishing meals. Now the rains have stopped, the sea is cold. At 3am, unwritten pages float on it, mother-of-pearl squares in a surrealist painting. I call out across the greyness not expecting a reply. The coast is carved from salt and each beach is a short disconnected chapter where white gulls circle: tiny doses of life.

A Psychoanalysis of Boats

Kim Huynh

Side A

Carefully
our prime minister
thought about
what to display

selecting
family photos
football memorabilia
biblical references

and a sculpture
in the shape of a boat.

Crafted from steel
by constituents
proclaiming
'I Stopped These'

i imagine

he gazed
upon his trophy
with pride

noting
how numbers fell
from 4230 per month
to nothing.

When I was four
i left my homeland with
506 others
aboard the KG1170.

Side B

Time and again
aboard the KG1170
my father tried
to shield my eyes

though
just once
he pointed out
a vision splendid

fish
flying

I recall them
racing the boat even
the slowest and lowest
were winning
their tails along the surface
leaving sparkling
skid marks

most wondrous of all
the rockets
powered by plankton

plus seawater
soaring above us
luminous fins as wings
no doubt pursued
from the depths
by blunt-headed
dolphinfish
squadrons of tuna
a dastardly marlin

yet

Still now
my father hears
they were free
the thumping.

He radiates
tension
smells diesel
is dry in the mouth

sweat soaked
on cool nights
though safe
and resettled.

to me
from below deck
fearless
having fun

somehow
I clung to
that KG1170 vision
abandoning all others

i imagine
it cleansed
calmed
and nourished me.

Curlew Cries in Evening— Yunga Warebun Waragal

Julie Janson

Along the white light ridges
along the Barrington tops, we scream
The goonge stands with trembling hands
asking for a smoke, stopping our car
begging for us to pull over and speak
A Koori man, transparent he asks
for a smoke or baccy, he follows
skeleton fingers, white trees and geebung
Yunga Warebun Waragal

Smoking fires, black fish, garuma
hot fearful breath in the air, peeing our pants
we children huddle under army blankets
The storm kills gossamer clouds
sleeping in a cave on beds of ferns
army great coats to keep out cold
But fingers of ghosts amongst us
on Hawkesbury ridge at Flint and Steel
Yunga Warebun Waragal

The Winmurra women with long black hair
caught men with woven ropes
tipping their canoes to steal them
In the old days, a pale baby, gurung buried alive
The grandmother from Darug lands
the river, the sharks, the feed of prawns
Her father English, a log splitter
double stain, double shame
Yunga Warebun Waragal

Eight pounds of flour, four pounds of sugar,
pinch of salt, piece of soap, four pounds of meat
A missionary to hand it out in mean bags
pale pink hands and a hanky to sniff
We sat shamed on cardboard Arnotts boxes
outside the police station, in the sweating sun
asking for fire, flood and famine relief
from tin shacks and kerosene lamps
Yunga Warebun Waragal

Our hands outreached for food vouchers
babies tucked on hips
In a line we walk to the store, embarrassed
no Modess pads on a voucher
Use a rag, shame of blood and no dollars
for Sunshine powered milk
Dad drinking beer from brown Tooheys bottles
sweet bottle brush cordial in tin mugs
Yunga Warebun Waragal

The willy wag tail and the witches cry out
he has come, silently bellowing, to rush through me
in my single thin bed, in the ink black night
his hand reaching trembling, urgent
legs invisible, he floats in a red check shirt
crying out to me, pointing black bones
The end has come for me in my nightie
His tatters and his piercing cold black eyes
Yunga Warebun Waragal

Taming the wheelchair

Robyn Lance

for Caitlin, whose courage and kindness is legend

The all-terrain e-trike
is no mind reader

on its inaugural outing,
a practice run

down an English
country bridle path.

Wheels swerve
in mizzle-made mud.

The chair tilts over
thick grass clumps

jarring the operator
who fears falling,

unable to regain
the driver's seat.

In extremis, it veers,
baulks and bucks.

The ride is longer
than wisdom dictates.

Effort sucks energy
meant for the joy stick.

He pushes. She sits.
Control lost. For now.

It's a rough, tough
road to freedom.

Meeting My Edge

Kate Maxwell

I choose – struggle to select –
the gold and yellow days
those soft-eyed gifts of patient hours
tender folds of time
one coffee-breathed kiss
a compliment a scruffy dandelion
one crinkled page of crayon rainbows
sunlight through the windscreen
or just the play-back of your laughter
heaving into hiccups

anything that stokes the coals
stored dormant in my soul
reserved for days like these –
such sinking days
where turbid deep pulls stronger
than the lure of flesh
belief and sunshine.

I choose – yet I am mostly fooled –
and find my choice rejected
by the committee in my head
that gavel-wielding snarling
board convincing me
it's far more satisfying
to spit than swallow
as they shove ordinary
disappointments simple irritations
to the front.

I choose – at least, I try –
to find the silvered edges
glistening behind black clouds
click on sky and sand
a whitewashed wedding
popping from my Facebook feed
but it's the quiet and plain –
warm dog saved bowl of pudding
bins already taken out
or costless offer of forgiveness
that sparks the glow
of small resistance.

Note: Globally, it is estimated that 5% of adults suffer from depression (World Health Organisation)

Rogue states

Stephanie Powell

(i)

Do you remember starting at the sink?
East of the tap, a sunrise, stainless over the appliances
Each time you check, the drain mouth widens
and you can't find:
the scissors, your phone or shoes

Swallowing beneath the faucet –
the cold anxiety hits the lips, then throat
this hand of water sliding from cheek to chin, the taste of salt
exhaustion zips you in its teeth

The neighbour's cat possesses what it can touch, owning
flower beds and bird bones, broken brick and rotting fence-wood
It claims the roof like the procession of a sun

Today is overdue, and text messages arrive day and night:
we're thinking about you
Your phone sirens to your fingers –
they answer
and hours melt through digits

(ii)

With the distance of an under slept February
all your preparations seem inadequate
This kind of love-work comes with pain that lasts
She is the size of earth and sleeps in your bedroom –
next to you
shuddering, thrashing, crying and clicking her tongue
she is a wave that pins you to a suckling sand

In March the baby is unsettled
this house an airport of night feeds, bath times, bruised and
tired people –
our bodies close to forgetting each other

Unchanged, the neighbour's cat stalks possum-young
its silk blurring in the overgrowth

Still, you labour

Her cry finds you in the kitchen, trying to tell time by
the light at the window

Skeleton staff

Miroslav Sandev

I have seen them gauze-pale
stumbling down corridors
after weeks of night shifts have shredded
their muscles and nerves, smiling
still. Giving pep talks
as though they don't need any themselves,
their scrubs just about the only thing
not worn out. Still they fling
their bodies back into emergency
to face the battalions of walking wounded
returning from these peacetime front lines
from this absolute war
of a world.

Everyday alchemists,
brewing flesh and bone back into a life,
stitching solace into skin. A miracle
is something other-worldly
but their work is material, like fire.
All the time handling these porcelain bodies,
these fragged minds,
calm as an etherised patient.

I have seen them running
wolf-hungry between wards
no lunch break in sight, ushering
babies into their first worldly gasps,
grasping themselves for pockets
of air. Consoling, cajoling,
playing priest, parent and shrink,
shrugging off barbs and bullies
staring back at the crooked eye of psychosis.

Don't get me wrong
they are neither saints nor softies.
Like a rubber glove
they too have a breaking point. One cut
too many. The latest humiliation too much to bear.
When they snap, all hell is let loose.

When the nurses strike
the skeletons will staff the hospitals.
How long can the bean counters defy death
without a nurse?
How long can you?

Three into Thirty-Three

Beth Spencer

I hear myself say:
'It's not safe outside the house.
But it's not safe inside either.'

(Where did that come from?)

The therapist waves a hand.
'Oh, you've gone into a trance.'
Checks her watch.

'Well it's ten to three
and we started at ten to two.
So time's up.'

The clock ticks, decades.

Its hands pull me
onto stranger feet.
I gather belongings,
crack open a heart-shaped
purse, feel inside,
pay the price.

Briefly

Heather Taylor-Johnson

A quiet
morning,
the clearing
sky, a Saturday
phone-scroll under
my sick shroud and a
woman in a support group
voicing her dread: she's 8 months
pregnant, how's she going to cope? I want
to tell her that years ago on the 4th Plinth in
Trafalgar Square sat a 13-tonne sculpture called
Alison Lapper Pregnant, the face looking at what
is distant and full, and full white breasts resting on a
jam-packed belly, her marble arms stumped at the
shoulders, her legs unduly small. Disabled or
not, when you're 8 months pregnant
you lead with your belly. I find it
interesting how trust
sprouts there, like fear and sickness sometimes do
which can also be named home. I aim for optimism
most of the time but I can't help being theatrical, I mean
I was the type of expectant mother who entered a room belly first
thinking no one else was doing it, anywhere. At night I'd introduce
myself to nearly-baby, which gave me nightmares, like fear and sickness
sometimes do. I would've asked the support group *how will I cope?* because
what kind of mother knocks her baby into a wall while navigating walking down
the hall, but social media was still embryonic. Vertigo doesn't hang a sign on its back
saying *baby on board* and of course there are the Klimt paintings, which I also thought
of mentioning to the woman needing consolation. In *Hope I* a pregnant woman is naked,
her belly clearly leading the way though there are shades of the dead following. In *Hope II*
a bare-chested woman draped in a falling golden shawl bows her head towards her massive
belly, praying perhaps, an odd skull-form peeking out from behind her nearly-baby. Death
is always hanging around birth. I remember counting each bruise in the bath, those traces of
my illness walking me down the hall. My body was broken, strong, creating, falling, all the
more precious because I knew that soon there wouldn't be time to care for myself, the most
selfish of chores the woman who posted would probably / should definitely be performing
all day. I want to tell her about the new language birth taught me, a first person singular
when talking about sickness and fear, then a change to the plural when speaking of
home, but I don't know where the woman lives, or Alison Lapper, or either of the
women in *Hope I* and *II*. I type my commiseration in the old language, and the
morning's quiet, and the sky is clearing, and my children are teenagers, heavy
in their long sleeps, soon to wake to Saturday phone-scrolls in their beds.

last dog

Carrie Tiffany

My mother wants a white dog that wears a smart coat.

But then the diagnosis.

The names of things, their types and classes are lost first,
patterns and genders waver,
often with a self-righteous flare as they dim.

I call my mother on the special phone she wears around her neck
to ask about the new dog.

A pup – she says. Fat, yellow, naughty.

He farts a lot. But he likes the stove.

The rescue site says Sal is eleven.

A reluctant disposal from a farm.

What use is a dog that can't jump from a ute?

A shepherd collie cross.

Touch of ridgeback perhaps.

Next time we speak my mother's gone dark on Sal.

The dog has shifted from he to they.

They don't like to be patted.

They are a waste of time.

They prefer men.

Agree or distract?

Condemning old Sal is a minor cruelty in how we live now.

The male pup returns for a time.

He travels in the car,

is well behaved for the visit to the doctor,

learns manners, likes to eat a sand burger, didn't bark once.

The word for dog, the meaning of dog,
and Sal,
gentle dog-creature, her terminal companion,
are paling in my mother's brain before its heart,
and her own heart, give in.

In Sal's next iteration she is two dogs.
Both, my mother reports,
curled up together, at her feet.
The dogs watch television, stay inside the fences, drink _____ from the pond.

In the illustration brain plaque is beige and densely spiralled,
like the plastic cord of our old telephone.
The coils are loosened now.
My mother threads them through her fingers,
as she paces the hallway talking to her sister,
who is thirty-years-dead.

At last report, Sal has grown again.
The dog is an object.
It no longer fits in the _____ between my mother's recliner and the stove.
It is lazy.
My mother is not sure anyone will want it,
when it's finally grown.

Bibliographies

ANGELA COSTI is a poet and writer with a background in social justice and community arts. She is the author of five poetry collections and a forthcoming, *The Heart of the Advocate*, with Liquid Amber Press. Her recent chapbook is *Adversarial Practice* (Cordite Poetry Review, 2024). She lives on unceded Wurundjeri land, and is known as Αγγελική Κωστή among the Cypriot diaspora, which is her heritage and ancestry. She lives with a rare genetic condition: *schwannomatosis*.

Brisbane poet **JANE FRANK**'s debut collection of poetry is *Ghosts Struggle to Swim*, published by Calanthe Press in 2023, and she is author of two previous chapbooks. Her poetry has been widely published in Australia and overseas in publications including *Westerly*, *Cordite*, *Meniscus*, *Antipodes*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Shearsman*, *Poetry Ireland Review* and *Takahe*. She is Reviews Editor for *StylusLit* and teaches in Communication and Creative industries at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

KIM HUYNH is a teacher, writer, researcher and broadcaster who helps people tell their stories. Recently, he was commissioned by the Commonwealth government to draft *A Statement from Australia's Carers* on behalf of the nation's three million caregivers. Kim has produced a documentary for ABC Radio National on a rough sleeping runner and poet, entitled *The Other Martin*. His latest book is *Australia's Refugee Politics in the 21st Century: Stop the Boats!*

A Burruberongal woman of the Darug nation, **JULIE JANSON** is a novelist, playwright, poet. Her novels are *Compassion* (Magabala, 2024); *Madukka The River Serpent* (UWAP, 2022; longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and the Davitt Awards, 2023); and *Benevolence* (Magabala, 2020 & Harper Collins USA, UK, 2022; shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award 2022, the NIB Award 2020 and the Voss Award 2020). Her poems were awarded first prize in the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Poetry Prize (2016) and the Judith Wright Poetry Prize (2019). Her play *Black Mary* was performed at Belvoir St Theatre and SOCOG Festival of the Dreaming in 1997.

ELLA KURZ co-edited the poetry anthology *What We Carry: Poetry on Childbearing* (Recent Work Press, 2021) and authored the early reader *My Mother is a Midwife* (Library For All, 2019). She received the University of Canberra Stephen Parker medal for her midwifery PhD which explored how written memories can be used to understand the way identities come into existence in the healthcare world – and how this understanding can lead to better healthcare experiences.

ROBYN LANCE is an imagist storytelling poet who enjoys sharing the wonder and idiosyncratic nature of people and places. Her poems have appeared on telegraph poles, walls and ACT buses and stencilled in steel in public parks. She is published in journals and anthologies and is chuffed at winning a few prizes along the way. She's had the benefit of mentoring from two great LMs: Les Murray and Lizz Murphy.

VICTORIA McGRATH lives in Yass, NSW and has had her poetry published in Australia and the US. Her poems have appeared in journals and anthologies such as *Cordite*, *Panoply*, and *Best Australian Poems*. She was shortlisted for the Newcastle Poetry Prize and nominated for the US Best of the Net Award, and has been a featured poet at a number of literary festivals.

KATE MAXWELL is a poet and short story writer. She has published widely in journals such as *Cordite*, *Meniscus*, *StylusLit*, *The Galway Review*, and *Books Ireland*. Kate's work has been longlisted in the Liquid Amber Press Poetry Prize, Alice Sinclair Memorial Competition, shortlisted in the ACU Poetry Competition (2021, 2023), the Booranga Literary Prize, Peter Cowan Competition, and The Furphy Literary Awards (2022, 2023). Kate has published two collections of poetry: *Never Good at Maths* (Interactive Publications, 2021), and *Down the Rabbit Hole* (Ginninderra, 2023). Find her at kateswritingplace.com/

STEPHANIE POWELL is a poet based in Naarm/ Melbourne. Her latest collection is *Invisible Wasp* (Liquid Amber Press, 2024). More info: atticpoet.com

MIROSLAV SANDEV is a poet working on unceded Wangal land, in Sydney. His work has appeared in a range of publications including *Meanjin*, *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *Overland*, *Otoliths*, *Westerly*, *Snorkel*, *Red Room Poetry*. It has been shortlisted for the Overland Fair Australia Prize and was included in the anthology *Stars Like Sand: Australian Speculative Poetry*.

BETH SPENCER's books include *The Age of Fibs*, *Vagabondage*, and *How to Conceive of a Girl*, which was runner-up for the Steele Rudd Award (QLA). Her poetry, memoir and essays have been published widely and broadcast on ABC Radio National. She lives and writes on unceded Darkinjung land on the NSW Central Coast, and at www.bethspencer.com and <https://bethspen.substack.com/>.

This year **HEATHER TAYLOR-JOHNSON** has been focusing on writing essays about the body in its social, cultural and environmental positionings, thanks to an Arts SA Fellowship, a Bundanon residency and a Whitlam Essay residency. She's been writing some poems and most recently celebrating the publication of her third novel, a work of autofiction called *Little Bit* – all on Kurna land.

CARRIE TIFFANY was born in West Yorkshire and grew up in WA. She spent her early twenties working as a park ranger in Central Australia and now lives and works in Naarm/Melbourne. Her three Miles Franklin shortlisted novels, *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living*, *Mateship with Birds* and *Exploded View* have been widely acclaimed. She also writes short stories and essays and has illustrated a book of poetry by the NZ poet, Alison Glenny.

JEN WEBB is distinguished professor of creative practice at the University of Canberra, and the author of several volumes of poetry, most recently *The Daily News* (Recent Work Press, 2024). She is co-editor of the literary journal *Meniscus*, and the scholarly journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*, and her current research focuses on the intersections of art practice and health.