

# Anthology

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**I** look at the lace curtains across from my bed and I see an eye, small, baleful, peering, no, staring at me. I look closer. It is a tiger, quite beautiful, judging by what I can discern of its head, but I am sure, completely sure, it is dangerous, watching me, waiting for its opportunity.

It is not a trick of the light, of the way the curtains hang, of my imagination, as Agatha implied yesterday when I mentioned it to her. I know what I have seen. Perhaps the great cat does not want to be observed by Aggie. She is so shut off, closed to anything out of the ordinary.

Last summer, when we were at our holiday cottage on the edge of the lake, Aggie told me that the scraping on our roof was only the trees. Or possums. But I knew better. I could feel the spirits, intending us harm. Agatha was so angry at my insistence that we return home, but it was for our own good.

I look again at the curtains. The tiger seems to be receding. Now all I can see is tall grass, and eyes watching, waiting, menacing. I hear a scratching sound under my wardrobe and the hairs on my neck prickle. When I shine a torch, two large golden eyes look back, eyes filled with fear, not menace. Lexie this time, terrified of the builders working downstairs. Poor puss.

I shut my eyes. I am tired and the workmen have been here now for almost two days. Agatha supervises everything so they don't bother me, but Lexie is feeling the strain.

The light has dimmed and the tiger has left for the day. I like tigers, but I fear them too. Which is only sensible,

...

When I wake this morning, the day is drab and the pain in my right leg is intense. Strange for something which no longer exists to ache so much.

Aggie bustles around cheerful as ever, not noticing that I merely pick at my breakfast, and, unusual for me, take little interest in the morning papers. Perhaps she is preoccupied because it is her day out for the week, if only to collect the groceries and restock my array of medicines. And I know that she likes to take in the latest Hollywood film too. The trashier the better it seems, but who am I to deny Aggie her innocent pleasures, when she has sacrificed

New England  
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 For people who love writing and reading

## TIGER

by  
JANICE  
BURN



so much for me.

When she is about to leave, she says, "Oh one thing I nearly forgot to mention. The builders will be working inside today. In the kitchen. But they won't disturb you at all." With that she departs. I notice she has taken more trouble than usual with her appearance, but I say nothing.

It is only a few minutes later that the tiger appears in my curtains. I can see the mighty beast crouched in the long grass. It opens first one menacing eye then the other. The tiger is watching me intently,

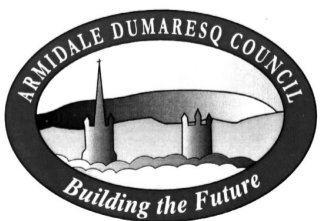
waiting its chance, but I know instinctively that I am safe so long as I don't turn my back on it.

I can hear the workmen downstairs, the scraping of furniture being moved and snatches of male voices. They must have turned on a radio, judging by the thumping bass reverberating through the floor. If Agatha were here, she would tell them to turn it off, knowing how I hate anything discordant.

I hear the steady breathing of the tiger. Numbers won't come. My door swings

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# Armidale Dumaresq Council

by Wendy James

The publication of this collection of stories and poetry is the realization of several years of students' work in the New England Writers' Centre creative writing workshops, and represents the third, culminating phase of the writing program. In the first phase, students are made familiar with aspects of the mechanics of writing - voice, character, plot, structure, technique - through a series of writing exercises. In the second phase, stories and poems that the students have brought to first draft standard (some of these originating in the earlier 'exercise' classes!) are read and critiqued by the class, and then redrafted and re-presented. Workshopping in this manner is an intense, sometimes painful but ultimately satisfying experience, requiring not a little courage on the part of the writer, and considerable sensitivity on the part of the reader/critic.

It gives me great pleasure to see this wonderful work - so much of it familiar - in print. American novelist James Salter has asserted that "To see one's work in print is the real desire, to have it read..." and to be able to realise this often elusive, but essential aspect of the writing process is a great achievement.

We have been fortunate to have our class collection expanded and augmented by the contributions of other local writers, and to have access to an established readership through the anthology's inclusion in *The New England Review*.

The stories and poems that make up this collection deal with all manner of things - there are tales of family life, of mystery, of travel, of war; works that grapple with vast, transcendent questions, others whose concern is with small moments, with the domestic; some whose realm is the personal, some public, others meld the two; some are comic or satiric, others of more sober intent and complexion. What connects the various and disparate works is their common concern with what it is that makes us human: the complex, sometimes contradictory nature of love, hate, despair, hope, loss, desire. And all exemplify what Canadian poet and novelist, Margaret Atwood, contends is the one characteristic that all writers share - a compulsion to enter the darkness and "with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light". For you - the reader.

## Acknowledgements

Imaginary Countries - Michael Sharkey was first published in LiNQ.

Krystal Yee's Life Tides was first published in Verandah.

Shari Kocher's Drowning Not Waving won first prize (student section) in SA Unibooks Short Story Competition 1995 and was first published simultaneously in On Dit, Empire Times and DB Magazine, September 1995

New England  
WRITERS  
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For people who love writing and reading

The New England Writers' Centre is for people who love books - writing them, or reading them.

Every year we bring the best writers in Australia to the region to run workshops, take part in forums, or give readings of their work. We cover all genres of writing - poetry, script-writing, short-story, journalism, writing for children, non-fiction, and all kinds of fiction. Many non-writers attend readings by visiting authors.

We have regular writing groups where people can read their work and get feedback, or listen to others;

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we have a regular poetry/story reading night in a cafe; we help to showcase the work of local writers in our newsletter and anthologies, and we have sponsored local writers to perform at major festivals.

Members receive five newsletters a year and concessions on most events. Full membership is \$27 per year. For students under 18, it is \$6.50. Organisations with more than five members can join as a group for \$22 per member.

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The Centre is in Kentucky St, Armidale,  
Newling Campus, almost opposite the cnr of  
Kentucky/Faulkner.

\* Our monthly cafe readings are at Caffiends-on-Marsh in Armidale, third Thursday evening of the month at 7pm. Contact Tony Bennett 6772-4999 (bh).

\* Upcoming events include 'A Writer's Life' - a talk by Sophie Masson on how to survive and succeed after you've been published; a visit by Anne Deveson; children's writing workshop, poetry workshops and readings, indigenous writers reading, weekend intensive workshops in short-story writing for beginners (May) and advanced (August), and visits later in the year by several major authors.

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## Getting a Lover

What do you get when you get a lover?  
All those friends of his and hers,

And a history which, by the time you've learned  
To say 'Yes, I know', is as dull as your own;

New manners and habits, and fashions in clothes,  
Recordings and books you've always known

Should have been at the op-shop long ago;  
His travels, her parents, a brother who's mad,

And a sister whose specialty's talking at length  
About every lover your lover has had.

Your house contracts, your debts expand:  
Is it worth it? You journey to places so dull

You wonder why you started it all.  
And the compensation? You've got a friend

Who, in spite of squabbles, will stick to the end,  
Prattling of money or children and work.

At times you sit, while tsunamis of talk  
Wash over your life, and you look at the lips

That move up and down and sideways, but never  
Once pause, except to draw breath.

In bed together, you try new tricks  
That you learn from manuals and magazines,

Imagining anyone else in the scenes.  
You exist in a memory that someone else writes:

A farce, perhaps; it can't be sad,  
Since life's a comedy: blink, you appear,

And blink, you grow up, and blink, disappear.  
And will that be all? Your lover will live

To recite every secret you kept from view,  
And to paint the warts on the portrait of you.

*Michael Sharkey*



## Tadpole Pond

Autumn late afternoon, pond water  
is the dark side of summer  
full of life  
like the yeasty clouds  
that rise golden brown in the east  
the wrigglers gobble the interface of air  
while the kids use last season's  
butterfly net

I was at the bottom of the pond  
blind to the autumn afternoon  
the yeasty clouds gold with drunkenness  
I'm food for the wrigglers  
the boys are catching with last season's butterfly net  
that's life, the hermit's cell  
divides, grows, puts on a tail and eyes  
breathes water, gets legs, finds air, walks  
and is a frog  
meanwhile a great prince in prison lies  
at the bottom of the pond  
waiting for something with a rake  
to clean out his filthy cell

*Julian Croft*

## bathing the baby

the baby's body is slippery  
in the bath  
the woman's panicking hands  
clasp and reclasp  
her fingers circling the newborn arm  
limbs firm and certain  
like monkey bars  
the woman is swinging from the baby  
not sure if her own arms are strong enough for this  
the baby's head nods  
she suffers no confusion  
the woman feels anxiety  
slipping over her mouth like a hand  
tickling her under her arms  
someone larger is holding her up  
it would be easier  
to let the baby swim alone.  
in her pram with the cicada wheels  
the baby promenades  
the woman can't stop the wheels' pull  
dragging behind, she leans back  
away from the hurtling pram  
all her energy thin  
against the power of the baby's recklessness  
this dare-devil baby  
lies quiet at night  
learning the face of the room  
her eyes drop shut against the woman's privacy  
click open like a doll's  
the baby is a neat clerk  
in a cardigan  
monitoring, detached, observant  
the baby jumps trains in the dark  
the pull of the baby is deafening  
the baby sings underwater

*Felicity Plunkett*



## That's Life

She  
was on a ventilator  
and I said  
"How goes it, dear?"  
and she shrugged  
and said  
"That's life"  
and I looked for something  
to say, and said  
"Our son's got a baby"  
and she said  
"Is he married?"  
and I said  
"Well, no..."  
and she said  
"There's a lot of it  
around"

*Susan Dunn*

# The Last Straw

by Ann Lax

A wedding dress fit for a princess," simpered the bridal shop manager. "Thank you," Sybil accepted the compliment absent-mindedly knowing quite well that at thirty-five she no longer fitted that category (not that she ever did) as she pivoted on her heels in a froth of white tulle and lace in front of a mirror.

"Pity about the prince," observed her mother tartly.

Sybil, who was mostly immune to her mother's sharp tongue, frowned briefly at her before inspecting herself again in the mirror. The blue polyester was more practical but Sybil's preference for the lace and tulle was an emotional one. This was her first marriage and Jonathon did make her feel young again.

"Is white really quite suitable Sybil?" said her mother disregarding the now smirking assistant.

"Really. Mother," Sybil was surprised to find she could still blush like a schoolgirl. Why did she feel like a dartboard around her mother? There had been no shortage of these stinging comments lately: And the short engagement had been a catalyst for her mother to sashay down her cliché path. -Marry in haste...." And "Fools rush in....". There was no mistaking either, her mother's meaningful glance at her waistline. But it was not what her looks were insinuating. She had gained weight because her relationship had been so fulfilling. On the other hand, knowing Jonathon's love of his nephews she had considered falling pregnant to encourage a proposal.

Her mother's remarks however, had caused twinges of anxiety. Jonathon seemed to be having "last minute nerves." It had been a roller coaster ride for four months from the moment they met at a mutual friend's Bon Voyage party. With her décolletage, her expensive perfume and older woman status Jonathon found her irresistible. Sybil liked beating the competition. He was tall and athletic and would be a handsome accessory. She had been so busy climbing the corporate ladder that romance came off second best. Now the suitors were dropping away and she was starting to feel twinges of desperation. Jonathon was her first serious boyfriend in eight years.

"Mantrap' breathed her friends enviously.

They dallied at trendy nightspots, dined at "spot the celebrity" restaurants and sailed on the harbour on balmy weekends where Jonathon asked her to marry him.

Sybil was an executive in an accountancy placement firm and Jonathon a struggling photographer so Sybil always picked up the tab. Mrs Searle, Sybil's mother, never let Sybil forget it, or Jonathon for that matter.

...

When the assistant stepped out the back to find more gowns Mrs Searle, who was a widow, once more turned on her unfortunate daughter. "Who is going

to pay for this wedding might I ask? Not your toy boy.

I swear if she brings this up once more I'll explode, Sybil said to herself. "Well it's not your concern. Mother. We'll manage. It's our wedding and we'll do what we like. And don't go saying any more to Jonathon."

In spite of her mother's comments about the white lace and tulle gown, Sybil bought it.

Three weeks later she was standing apprehensively with her bridesmaids outside a fashionable church in an inner suburb. There was no sign of Jonathon. The wind picked up the flower girl's rose petals and scattered them willy nilly down a nearby drain.

The best man got out of a car and handed her a folded note. Sorry darling. A lifetime of listening to your mother's sarcasm would be too much. We both deserve better. Love, James.

Although her bubble had burst Sybil was never one to throw away her hard earned dollars so she danced at her own wedding reception to the tune of I Will Survive to the bemused gazes of her guests and the silent fury of her mother.

On her first day back at work Sybil's spirits sank like the level of the water cooler opposite her desk. Jonathon's rejection had only made him seem more attractive. Going "solo again on the singles scene was not something she fancied any more. She refused for the time being to take calls from her mother to save irritation from that quarter. Her mother's voice on the answering machine had displayed real sympathy but Sybil feared such an unaccustomed reaction from her mother would bring on a bout of tears. Glances out the window at the yachts toing-and-froing on the harbour brought on fresh anguish and her boss complained finally about her tear-stained deadlines. It was these deadlines that had brought her to work and the need to escape a mother who for some unfathomable reason had managed to avoid saying "I told you so."

Her colleagues tried to cheer her up.

"It's too bad," said her boss.

"Now that you're free as a bird, how about dinner tonight?" asked Steve an old flame

"I never did trust him," said another.

But their platitudes only left her more dejected and unable to concentrate so she played "hit and miss" with the Kleenex and her wastepaper basket until it overflowed with damp tissues.

Her mind scrolled down like a computer program. Jonathon's dream was to holiday in Hawaii flying first-class all the way. She'd get it for him. With her of course. But she'd spent all her money on the wedding. The gleam from her solitaire diamond engagement ring caught her eye. She would sell it; Jonathon had said it had cost him an arm and a leg. In her lunchbreak she would go to a nearby jeweller to have it valued and then sell it.

The jeweller was a tall thin man with a goatee and dressed in a pin-striped suit.

was serving a customer and a tray of rings lay glittering on the counter.

"Can I help you Madam?"

The jeweller scrutinised her ring, inserted his eyepiece and twisted the ring around again in his pudgy fingers. There was an awkward silence except for a dozen clocks whose uneven ticking sounded as if they were racing to keep up with each other.

"I'm sorry. Madam. This is a fake. A cubic zirconia. Worth very little. He turned to the other customer. Sybil grasped the counter for support. James had lied to her.

The jeweller and customer moved down the counter leaving the tray unguarded.

Sybil glanced at the rings - solitaires, just like her's. She was good at cards. Just a quick sleight of hand. A quick swap. These people could afford it. There was a pounding in her ears like the roar of surf. What if she got caught? She'd go to jail. Her hands trembled like a pair of pinned butterflies.

The jeweller hovered over like a praying mantis. "Is there a problem, Madam?"

Sybil stared at him for a moment then fled the shop.

Sybil felt quite sick at what she had nearly done and took a couple of days off work. Her best friend's advice that Jonathon was a fly by night she'd dismissed as jealousy. Jonathon was incredibly handsome. In her eyes he could do no wrong and the momentary lapse in infatuation in the jeweller's was forgotten.

She borrowed the money for the trip using her apartment as collateral. After a fortnight Jonathon finally answered his phone. Her pride sank to zero as burying a snarl in her voice she asked him nicely to come back to her no explanations needed and a trip to Hawaii into the bargain. Just as nicely he refused and said he was in love with someone else.

Sybil spent a night staring at her ceiling before deciding she had to see why Jonathon had chosen his new girlfriend over her. A mutual friend told her he would be at a downtown restaurant that Friday night. With Steve in tow she confronted Jonathon and his new friend.

He gasped when he saw her, stared at her with open mouthed surprise then just as quickly his mouth snapped shut like a hastily closed door.

She was not his type— a Barbie doll with a chest as flat as an ironing board. There would be no sailing on the harbour at weekends with that milk white complexion

"Do introduce us, Jonathon". Jonathon's friend cooed to Jonathon.

Sybil stared. She had a voice like her mother's budgie.

Jonathan winced and looked uncomfortable. "This is Sybil and Steve"

Unaware of any tensions, Jonathan's barbie didn't wait for any further introductions. "I'm Tiffany Meyer. You've heard of us? The hardware chain. Do join us".

So that was it. She knew Jonathan had a mind like a cash register. Sybil declined to join them knowing when she's been routed.

Later that night she sat at her dining room table with a cup of tea opening the day's mail and planning further strategy. She turned on the TV for the start of Casablanca as she opened her Bankcard statement. Her glance stopped at an entry of a Gold Coast resort their honeymoon destination. He still had her Bankcard. How could she have forgotten? The heel. She'd really been in cloud-cuckoo land. He'd taken that "barbie-on their honeymoon. She switched off Casablanca. Who needed romance? Now where was that lawyer's number?

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# The Long Fall

by Richard McLennan

When Stanislaus Buemanne was arrested for shop lifting, on a hot November afternoon in a country town he was unshaven and appeared unwashed. His tall slim figure was dressed in tatty shirt and jeans. He looked down, said little and walked slowly beside the store official. To some shoppers he was probably a most likely thief. Stanis wondered how he'd cope with this new burden.

It was Wednesday, some weeks later, and Stanis stood immaculate before the court in his hired suit. His solicitor represented him strongly. Stanis admitted respectfully to the magistrate that the woman's perfume was found in his bag. He claimed that someone had planted it there. The magistrate noted that Mr Buemanne had no criminal record and that no-one had seen him take the goods. He therefore dismissed the case, but not before some aggressive remarks reminding Stanis about the evils of stealing. The remarks troubled Stanis and lingered.

He worried about the charge, though it had been dismissed, because he was sure this sort of data stayed in the system forever. Stanis thanked his solicitor, and left the court. Some people stared in his direction. His case had been mentioned in the local paper without giving his name. But everybody knew it was him, he felt sure of that.

Stanis was grateful for the magistrate's ruling and his solicitor's effort, and relieved the ordeal was over. However, it left him feeling anxious and insecure about his future.

He returned the suit and received his deposit. With this he'd do his shopping. If he'd been fined he would've bought only a small amount of food and had just one meal a day.

After leaving the hire shop he paid the gas bill and a fortnights rent.

With rent only \$120 per week Stanis was expected to keep the garden in good order. The unit had two bedrooms, a dining room and an adjoining tiny gas kitchen. Here he'd keep warm at a minimum cost in winter. His greatest concern was that the rent might rise and force him out. He placed his prescription at the chemist and walked to the supermarket nearby where he bought fruit and vegetables, well wrapped sliced meat and frozen meat pies. A free newspaper was used to wrap the frozen pies once more.

Stanis didn't need cheap whisky this week. He'd made a habit of keeping a good store of cheap whisky and prescription drugs in the unit in case he needed them. It gave him a sense of security.

The previous Saturday's newspaper was always kept for him at the newsagent's so he went and bought it.

"Thanks Mr Buemanne," the girl said, "an' Merry Christmas."

"Thanks," replied Stanis without smiling.

After collecting his prescription drugs and

wrapping them in a sheet of newspaper he started walking home.

Stanis relaxed a little at the end of the shopping block. The road stretched three kms ahead.

He recalled his past as he walked along. His parents had survived the War and come to this land of promise. His father worked on a hydro-electric scheme for many years without injury but was killed one night crossing a street in the capital city. Stanis and his mother felt grief for his father's death, and worried about their future. They sold their house and moved to a larger city where his mother found a job and worked hard to keep Stanis at school. Their small house was almost mortgage free so they lived comfortably with the usual cost cutting of no holidays.

Without warning his mother became very ill. It had something to do with work because apparently she'd not always worn her face mask as instructed and developed a cancer. After her death Stanis felt very alone.

With effort he completed TAFE certificates and began work with a large national company where he rose quickly to become a Middle Instore Manager.

Halfway home Stanis rested awhile, and contemplated the romance in his life. It had led to marriage and two children. They were so happy together. This was the sunshine after all the sadness and hard work. Theirs was a fortunate home with laughter and contentment.

For no apparent reason everything changed so quickly. They were unhappy and arguments were frequent. One day one of the children asked:

"Where're ya going Daddy?" Unsuspecting he answered with a smile:

"A business trip for a week, and I'll bring ya all a pressie," at which the children shouted and jumped up and down.

It was a shock, on his return, to find the front door with a new lock, no-one answering his knock and a letter for him from their solicitor in the mailbox.

Stanis gathered his bags and walked along remembering the aftermath of the divorce. They'd agreed she'd keep the house and forgo maintenance because her new friend could easily care for the family. Stanis learnt to live elsewhere. He had no relatives so he had no-one to turn to. He found his friends were very busy now, and couldn't help him. Some co-workers suggested an overseas trip or a few one-night stands. Neither appealed to him.

Alcohol quickly began to shape his hours away from work. However, he was so alarmed one morning, when he woke in his car at an unfamiliar location unaware of how he got there, that he decided to drink much less.

The shock of the divorce led to depression, sleepless nights, and eventually a dependence on prescription drugs.

To make matters worse Stanis's company decided to 'downsize.' Middle management

was halved, Stanis's job went, all workers were placed on a casual basis, and he heard after leaving that unpaid overtime was encouraged.

Stanis's health slid towards psychosis.

The unimaginable then happened: he applied for and gained unemployment benefits to help him pay his way.

He next moved to a country town where living costs were lower.

Stanis stopped as he walked up the path to his unit; and wondered at the bright flowering dandelions. Their lives would soon be snuffed out. He frowned as he walked on and planned to work in the garden the next day.

He entered the unit and opened some windows. He added the newly bought drugs to those already stored in a shoe box, and then ate some sliced meat and fruit.

Stanis made a mental note of his assets. His material goods were a few clothes and toiletries, some kitchen utensils, pens and paper, and needles and thread. His greatest asset was the lately acquired disability pension. His working skills were lost due to lack of use, and he had little confidence. He thumped the table with his fist in frustration.

Stanis recalled applying for almost every conceivable job one year, when the replies and lack of them said the same thing. A recently attempted TAFE course showed that competitively he was always last now.

The court-case had diminished Stanis's sense of self worth. It had forced him beyond his accepted social bounds and there was no return.

That evening the magistrate's threatening remarks nagged Stanis. For relief he turned to the local Times. It explained, however, that an approved town commercial development would bring pressure on local rentals within a few months, and this caused him to worry.

Stanis drank a very small whisky and took his prescribed drugs before going to bed. Unfortunately he woke soon after midnight. He was tense, and rose to sip more whisky, eat a sandwich and read newspapers. Nothing settled him down. He decided it was the unit that was on his mind.

Returning, to bed he dozed uneasily and rose routinely at 7.00 am. His head wouldn't clear so he busied himself in the garden and waited until after lunch for a rest. This usually meant reinvigoration and a healthy change of mood. It didn't happen, and he remained stressed.

A letter from the Real Estate Agent, some days later, requested Stanis's co-operation with the exterior painting of the unit. It didn't really need painting. He became concerned that it might be sold in a few months. The next days mail informed him of a rise in the rental to \$160 a week commencing with the introduction of the new lease in March. Cheaper lodging could be found if required. This he doubted. He was angry because he was being forced out and no-one had spoken to him. Hadn't he

kept his end of the bargain?

It was almost Christmas and the greetings that were offered routinely from shop assistants he had come to resent. He didn't feel any joy, and was relieved that his parents were dead. Former friends somehow cost more than they were worth, he began to recall. Stanis' anger gave way to an unexpected sense of satisfaction and decidedness. He wouldn't degenerate to searching garbage bins, sleeping in doorways and drinking metho. Such people had frequented his company's store occasionally, to his disgust. Feeling no regret but an unexpected self assurance he closed the kitchen window and door, turned the gas on and numbed himself with drugs and whisky.

It was the following Friday when the assistant at the newsagency wondered why Mr Buemanne hadn't collected his newspaper.



# For Father's Day

by Helen  
Evans

I remember my Father. He held me on his knee. "Poor little girl," he said and he rubbed my hands that so ached with the cold, that I couldn't keep back my tears. "Poor little girl. Hold my cane. Then you'll feel better." My hands still ached but I took the cane, a symbol of his love.

I remember my Father. He carried me on his shoulders. "Come on Daddy's little girl. Come and see the ducks"

I looked excitedly over the high fence. "I can't see them." I said. He held me higher. But a thief had stolen them away in the night.

I remember my Father He sat on the chair and it broke with a loud crack. I cried. But he laughed. A long, loud rippling laugh. Then he swung me into the air and hugged me.

I remember my Father. He wore his soldier's uniform. I couldn't hear his voice. The train was packed with soldiers

shouting and waving from the windows. The guard whistled, the train coughed and sighed. I waved my white handkerchief.

I remember my Father. The postman brought letters. I clutched them tightly and ran inside. We gathered round to hear our Father's words. "Keep your smiles in working order till I come home," he said.

I remember my Father. He sent a parcel for my birthday. Tiny cane chairs for my dolls and a funny coconut face. I kissed the coconut man goodnight every night.

"The war is over. Daddy is coming home," said Mummy. We laughed and jumped and danced and sang and ran round wildly and I climbed to the top of the tree to see if he was coming yet. Mummy bought new clothes to meet Daddy

I ran the messages for Mummy. I practised running faster and faster to show Daddy when he came. I burst proudly through the bedroom door. I'd been so

quick bringing the medicine for my sick sister. But she was crying. Mummy was crying. "Your Daddy has gone to live with God" said Mummy

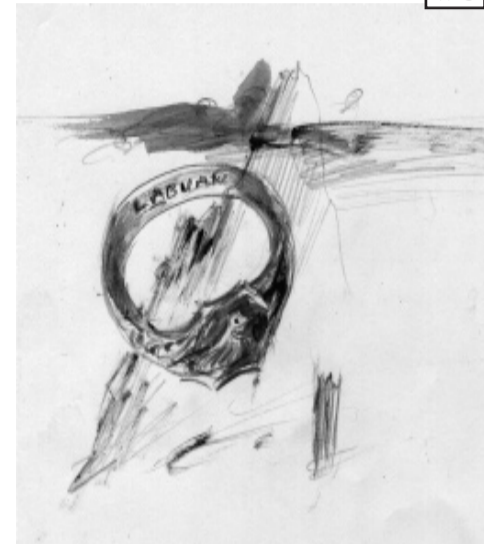
I remember my Father. My childhood over, I have read for myself all the letters he sent us. Letters brimming with enthusiasm for life. Letters full of fun. Letters full of hope and love for us all. I have travelled with my sister to see the wonders of Asia that our Father described so vividly.

We stood at the campsite. A place in the shadow of Mount Kinabalu. This was a place of torture, unspeakable horrors, starvation, death. Only the mountain shrouded in cloud has not changed. This place, this campsite, is now a place of peace. A place of beauty. We looked at the mountain and felt its peace and we remembered our Father. Next day we read our Father's name on a pillar at the memorial at Labuan. We thought of his bravery, his sacrifice as we walked between

the graves. His nameless grave, like so many, is inscribed, "An Australian soldier, known unto God."

We remember our Father. And we weep.

NE  
WC



## Anzac Day 2003

1.  
I am holding my neighbour's hand.  
He is three. And loves me.  
He told me today.  
His mother lifts his brother.  
I offer him a higher view too.  
Now a solemn granite child  
sits astride my crumbling hip.  
He studies the guard  
from under frowning brows.  
They're sleeping, he breathes.  
So they seem. Resting  
on their rifle butts.  
Still and silent.

His mother and I join in singing  
the old hymns of empire.  
Captains and kings. Shouting and tumult.  
Lord gods and ancient sacrifice.  
Lest we be forgetting.  
He watches our mouths.  
Sees how we share the words.

The Last Post echoes through the grove.  
Beau Geste in a desert fortress.  
A painting of white skeletons and ghosts  
rising out of a battlefield.  
My father's burial.  
My father's best friend's funeral.  
Thousands of young backpackers  
strewn amongst the graves of Gallipoli.  
A small boy tilting his head  
to catch all the notes.

The catafalque party slow marches in  
and around the memorial  
drawing the stirring guard  
back into its khaki ranks.  
The mother gathers her boys

round the stroller of the little sister  
and the family unit moves  
off across the park  
with two small outriders  
left and right hands gripping.  
One free hand flaps bye-bye.  
Oh, fare thee well.

2.  
As I turn a piper begins The Lament.  
I am jolted to a halt  
and shocked beyond tears.  
I have never heard such grief before  
in its broken-hearted, staggering beat  
or the gut-wrenching despair of its howl  
woe on woe on woe:  
survivors search for loved ones on countless killing fields;  
the returning limp, maimed and blind, over the glens  
and down the gangways of ships or planes, or  
home in bodybags to horrified silence.  
Woe on woe on woe  
go the wailing, gasping, sobbing pipes:  
shadows on classroom walls,  
a thousand paper cranes,  
six million pairs of empty shoes,  
infinite generations of the lost young  
and the gathered wisdom of their elders  
blasted  
and all that love  
Forever. No reprieve. No mistake.  
she, he, they dead and gone  
their mourners utterly bereft.  
The notes of the dirge turn  
ever and away from any resolving  
skirling its pain  
never forgetting  
never accepting  
Woe. Woe. Woe

Kaye Mill

## After The Fire

After the fire  
had put out its red tongue  
and licked us  
it jumped the road  
and spat its way  
across the valley  
then roared  
and changed direction  
and belonged  
to other people

Not long after,  
it seemed,  
we saw the gums  
pulling on their green  
tracksuits  
as the world  
began again  
and we made lists  
and chatted

on the way to town  
Susan Dunn



# Big Sky Country

by Sophie  
Masson

The sky takes up most of the space here. Walking along the dirt road between the houses I am dizzy with the sensation of looking up: funnelled like a time-traveller into an exhilarating blue vastness. It is a swaggering thing, our sky; not pretty backdrop, not meek scenery, but overbearing, wild, almost scary. Skyscape is the main game; wildlife rituals and dramas more obviously enacted than on the secretive low-rolling subtly-shaded landscape.

It is as if the denizens of sky have permission to defy the colour and noise taboos of the modest, almost morbidly modest, Australian bush. Writers of the bush have often been accused of a dun-coloured realism; perhaps few of them lifted their eyes from the land and into the gaudy wildness above them. Here are birds in improbable, fairytale colours screeching galahs in preppy pink and grey; rosellas in an ice cream cornucopia of raspberry, lime, lemon, and a wild, chemical blue; riots of black cockatoos, with strident yellow or red tail-feathers; fairy wrens with blue breasts, firetails carrying their sparking brand behind them; blush-cheeked king parrots, their

backs a powdered-soft yet luminescent green. The eye is staggered by the range of it, the boldness of it, the proclamation of Nature's passionate excess.

There are other birds, more suitably attired, yet even these are surprising: the harridan-eyed magpie or currawong, in their sober black and white, meat-eater's sharp beaks open to carol some of the most beautiful of all bird songs to be heard anywhere; pretty, toy-like crested pigeons in dusty blues, pinks and greys, taking off in a clockwork whirl and whistle of wings; swallows darting in the soft autumn air, giving you a *deja vu* of spring; the solemn flock of ibis, strutting in the paddock like an Egyptian mural come to life; the kookaburra, with its brisk kingfisher's manner, sitting on the telephone wire, with the brown snake it's just killed dangling off the wire next to it, like a discarded, wrinkled tie.

Sometimes, a group of clouds hangs in the sky against other clouds, like a scrim on a stage, and then you might see a pair of wedge-tailed eagles, who make their home in the painted mountain just to the west of us, soaring in between the layers of clouds, like gods appearing in a Greek play. In the bright blue of an autumn sky—so clear and clear, in this high tableland, that it rinses

the eye—a hazelnut-and-cream-coloured kestrel, which has been hanging steady as a melody for several seconds, plunges suddenly, sickeningly, down to the bleached-blond grass. Meanwhile, a willy wagtail alights on the roof of the greenhouse, wagging smugly to itself, dancing through sheer *joie de vivre*, it seems, whilst a string of silvery notes glitters from its throat.

Crows, as Norn-like and gloomily eager for slaughter as their brethren the world over, call querulously expectant portents of doom across a sky filling with battleship-grey cloud, while single-minded wild ducks descend in a flurry of neat legs and sleek dark heads, aiming for that patch of luminously green clover that seems so pleasantly to appear for them each year. A white-faced heron rises from the dam, turning imperceptibly from lanky fisherman to graceful skysailor in seconds. And a wattlebird, opportunistic and wary as a sneak-thief, beats a hasty retreat from the grapevines as we approach. It flaps up into the lower reaches of the sky, with the lack of urgency born of dim-witted stubbornness and cunning. It knows, as we do, that it'll be back later; we can't keep watch over the fruit all day, and even with the nets covering it, it will find a way...

At night, the drama in Sky Country becomes more one with the land, the edges blurring and smudging, though Sky itself, on clear nights, is black silk pinned and needled with thousands and thousands of stars. Bird-life becomes



quieter, more modest: the hunters of the night are by their nature and necessities less like liveried warriors swaggering in the open, and more like hidden snipers. Once, though, we saw a tawny frogmouth, its face not all eyes, like an owl's, but all mouth, opening and shutting like a fairground toy's, and its body like weathered wood. And on full moon nights, when restless light bleaches land and sky alike, there can be strange sights, strange sounds: an errant magpie in otherworldly gleam, singing a song seemingly composed for the moon, hollowing out the silent blackness of the night, and making us wake often in a light, uneasy sleep.



## Palm Saturday : London, 1966

Dear Diary. Rob and Di and I to a party in Shepherd's Bush.

Many Misses, lots of lovely lads.

I on a windowsill, smoking,  
watching them rock  
till my view is blocked.

Sober blue eyes

under a prickly crew-cut  
keeping company with long slow vowels  
all at odds and so polite.

Would you kindly chance a dance  
with a lonely stranger, please ma'am.

I agree, amused, but he  
all elbows and knees

despite a fine breadth of shoulder,  
so soon found beer and chairs.

He holding my hand, said

I am a US Marine on weekend R & R  
between West Berlin and Vi - et - nam.

I, retrieving my hand, asked, what's there?  
And turned his to study the lines of his life.

A real sure-fire shootin' war, I do dearly hope  
and expect.

Round the cool beer bottle  
I wrapped his burning palm

and escaped to a loo.

Shaking. And chucking.

Sick with superstition.

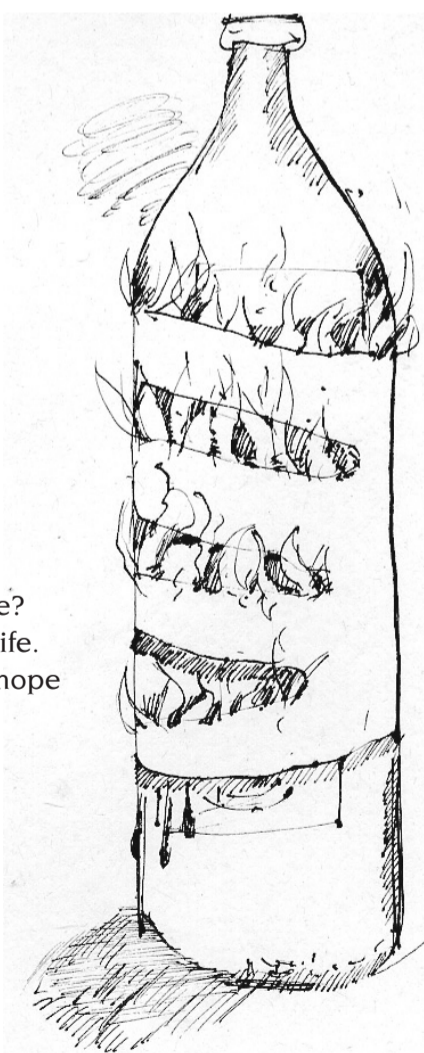
I've never seen a life-line so short.

He won't last a week out there.

...

I read palms for fun when I was young  
His was the last one.

Kaye Mill



## In Our Element

My mother grows bonsai  
in my lunchbox.

They thicken like gnarled ideas.

We play happy families  
while my father the fireball  
fumes at our hearth.

My parents try for understanding  
but the syllables freeze on their lips.

They make love in glacial air  
and their passion smoulders  
like dry ice. I blow bubbles

with my little pipe to engender peace  
but as they speak

their words catch fire  
and the ashes float like minnows

under water across my feet.



Ann Lax

# Signorina Nina: A Christmas in Rome

by Gwen  
Kelly

In Rome we stayed at a pensione in the heart of Trastevere. I was not impressed then by the narrow street, the worn stone water spout at the entrance and the grubby, uneven cobbled road, but later I came to love its feeling of past time. The door of the pensione was black, solid and locked. We knocked. Black eyes veiled by lace peered out the window, and then, after a perceptible pause, the door opened. I expected the mafia to step out from the arched and hooded portico. Instead a long, bony, angular woman opened the door. She stood with hands folded over her apron, a somewhat self-effacing woman. "Buon giorno" she said. "Buon giorno," we replied. She led us into a cave like room, where the dim light fell on a crib and a Christmas tree. Behind a desk in the middle of the room brooded an old fat woman in black. Her hair was grey, but her eyes and skin were a deep brown. She was the Signora and the pensione belonged to her but later I was to remember the house as the realm of the bony woman, not bowed and fat and wrinkled, but thin and straight and "bellissima". Signorina Nina.

Neither of the women spoke English and I could say nothing to them apart from halting clichés about Christmas, babies and of course, the weather. I learnt to mutter "Arriverderla" as I passed through the room on my way to the front door and they always answered politely "Arriverderla." For the most part, however, the life of the Italian household washed around me on a wave of unintelligible sound in which my husband's Italian resounded like an Australian counterpoint.

On our arrival, the Signora handed us over to the Signorina who walked straight and tall like an aged ascetic nun up the marble stairs to conduct us to our room. As she opened the door light flooded over her and we saw clearly her long, coiled grey hair, the dark brown other deep-set eyes and her red cheeks. She turned on the radiator and opened the long glass doors on the other side of the room to show us the little park-like courtyard imprisoned by the backs of tall buildings. She beckoned and we followed her along the tiny outdoor porch guided by her black laced shoes. Proudly she drew out a key

and opened a door at the end of the yard. She stood back smiling. There was a real, hot shower and just around the corner a real bath. She watched my eyes with mischievous pride to catch my surprise. I tried not to disappoint her although I had not known that few pensiones possessed such wonderful facilities.

Inside the room, the tiles of the floor gleamed white and cold brightened only by a green, leafy border. It was mid-winter. A 16th century lady smiled graciously from one wall while a madonna gazed serenely from the opposite side onto the largest bed I had ever seen. It was covered with the heaviest eiderdown ever fashioned. Signorina Nina drew the glass doors together, closed and locked the brown shutters against prowling gangsters, smiled at us with the beatitude of a Mother Superior and glided silently away.

In the morning, she reappeared with a tray- two rolls, not hot, two pats of butter, two tiny crocks of apricot jam, two cups and a pot of coffee and milk. The pattern was established. The Signora never appeared to leave the front room. The only presence in the house was Signorina Nina, working and working and working. She carried trays, drew shutters, wiped the shower recess, cleaned the bath and scrubbed bed sheets her straight back bent almost double over the low squat bath then draped them across the tiny yard, pegless, on two wire lines.

At night voices in other rooms echoed round us. "Signorina Nina. Signorina Nina". Christmas came and with Christmas came the Signora's grandchildren: dark lithe boys round, angelic girls, along with mamas and papas for whom the best rooms had to be prepared. Late into the night, they chattered and laughed while the children played hide and seek in the corridors.

"Signorina Nina" called the children "Signorina Nina" called the parents.

We snuggled into our voluminous bed but through the walls came the voices of Signorina Nina and the Signora. Signorina Nina was obviously angry. The Italian rose, crescendo, too fast for my husband's ear. Next morning Signorina did not smile as she delivered our tray, did not say-bon giorno." There was only one crock of

apricot jam. Outside in the corridor there was now a huge edifice, somewhat like the tomb of an English king in Westminster Abbey. It was covered with a resplendent tapestry quilt red velvet and gold tassels. We were puzzled but early next morning we peered out of our room and saw Signorina Nina, long plaits uncoiled, asleep beneath the grand quilt. Obviously an overflow of the Signora's relatives.

Every night in a room the other side of our wall, an old man coughed and coughed his life away. Signore. The mate of Signora? Who knows? But caught by a paroxysm of coughing in the depths of the night he called for Signorina Nina. And we heard her pad down the corridor in her slippers. On the fourth day of Christmas there was no apricot jam, merely rolls and butter.

I walked along the yard to the shower. I pushed open the door of the lavatory. A dapper, little man sat perched on the seat with a brown cloth hat clamped firmly on his head. A startled cough reminiscent of the night rose from his chest. He was smoking. I retreated muttering an apology but I am sure I heard a low laugh from the bathroom where Signorina Nina was washing yet another set of sheets to drip in the misty rain. I never again saw the Signore, for even a glimpse of my feet sent him scurrying for shelter.

Were there other guests? We never saw them although we occasionally heard them. On the fifth day of Christmas two pairs of feet moved into an adjacent room and an American voice said to an inaudible companion, "It's a great place. I tell you. I always stay here when in Rome. If you need anything you have to do is yell for Signorina Nina."

The American took his own advice. He celebrated his one night in Rome too well. He returned late. We woke in the black winter light of the early hours of the morning to the sound of vomiting next door. An agonised American voice cried "Signorina Nina". We heard the steady footfall of nun-like feet and a comforting murmur of Italian. That morning there was only one pat of butter for our breakfast.

The American came and went. Two or three girls came and went. The relatives came and finally went. One morning there was a knock on our brown shutters. We were startled. No one but us ever came into our room through the brown shuttered glass doors. My husband opened them cautiously, first turning on our light for it was still dark within. There was

Signorina Nina holding our breakfast tray and laughing and laughing. She had surprised us. Her dark eyes glowed. Her red cheeks shone. Christmas was over. On the tray were two rolls, two pats of butter, two crocks of apricot jam and a pot of milk and coffee.

NE  
WC



Continued from page 1

## Tiger

I pick up the newspapers and try to read, but my leg is burning. All I can do is shut my eyes and wait for the pain to ease. Voices whispering near my bed bring me back to wakefulness. No one is there. The tiger is still crouched in the undergrowth, head on paws, eyes closed. I am safe. I close my eyes again.

From somewhere, quite close by, I hear a noise. I open my eyes and the room is dim and the house is quiet. The clock says mid-day. I must have been asleep an hour or two and the builders have left for lunch. What was it I heard?

I hear it again. A quiet movement in

the hall. My door is ajar. I glance at the curtains. The tiger has gone. I know it is on the move, stalking me. If I count backwards from a hundred perhaps I can forestall it. I start. 100, 99, 98, 97. There is a soft sound again, as though of giant paws scrunching leaves. 95, 94, 93. The door moves slightly. I count faster. I can hear the steady breathing of the tiger. Numbers won't come. My door swings fully open. The smell of tiger is intense. I can't call out. There is no one to hear me.

I peer into the gloom of the passage. At first I can see nothing, but then the tiger appears. Whiskers, then the smile, quite malevolent, followed by the eyes glowing in its ghostly face. Last of all those black

stripes etched across its coat of gold.

The tiger prowls forward with such grace that I feel faint with its beauty. I want to call out to it, to speak its name, but I have no words. I close my eyes waiting for the inevitable. The power of the tiger.

•••

There are people crowded around me and voices speaking, perhaps to me. But they are too late. I am far away in the tall reeds where it is cool and green by the edge of the lake.

NE  
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# Walking in a Circle by Louisa Butler

“I hate poplar trees.”  
“It seems to me that you hate a lot of things. In fact you seem to hate most things.”  
“That is not true, in fact there are many things which I care for very deeply.” I said.

His words stung. This was my first serious relationship, and I felt the need to impress this strange young man with sad eyes. I loved him dearly, but often felt awkward beside his denim clad confidence. Paul walked quickly, keeping about a pace ahead of me. I looked at the naked, straight trees. They stood tall with their spindly branches curved outward and then upward, in an obscene, grasping gesture, thick grey clouds moved above and behind them.

It was obvious that Paul did not feel like talking. I risked a look at his face and noticed that he seemed sullen, or maybe he was just intent with his own thoughts. My thoughts returned to the trees. I knew that many people saw them as beautiful, especially when they were clothed in fresh spring leaves or during the glory of their golden autumn. But to me, poplars are ugly and dirty. I kicked at the brown leaves on the ground and was once again a lonely child in a very cold school playground. Each Friday we had sport, and I would look across the oval at the six poplar trees against the unpainted, vertical board fence. It was a scene bleached of all colour and feeling. Sometimes I would force myself to walk across the oval and trudge through the piles of dead leaves. It was my way of facing my fear of dirtiness. I guess I hate poplar trees because they make me relive the cold lost feelings of a child struggling to find its way out of childhood.

“What is your earliest memory?”  
His words startled me out of my reverie. I was anxious to grab the renewed attempt at conversation and willingly shared my earliest memory with him.

“My father had a Willey’s army jeep. My earliest memory is driving around the paddocks with my parents. My mother was nursing me in the front seat, and I remember looking at my shadow moving over the long dry grass. I watched as my shadow-hair blew in the wind. It was long and I thought it was very beautiful.”

I looked at Paul waiting for him to respond to my memory. He kept walking, head bent forward and did not say anything, the silence made me feel anxious, and so I added some more detail.

“I really liked my long hair, it felt like part of me. Like who I was. I remember how sad I was when my Mum got it cut short, so that it would be neat for me to start school.” I looked toward Paul, but still no response. It seemed a silly place to leave my story so I continued.

“It happened when I was in Tamworth. I did not realise that I was getting my hair cut short, and felt devastated when they showed me my reflection in the mirror. I felt that the, real me had become lost. My Nanna had also come to Tamworth with us. She pretended not to know who I was. This made me cry, it is my earliest

memory of sadness and somehow it seemed to become part of me.”

“There you go again! Always dwelling on the negative. Why did you have to talk about getting your hair cut?” Paul exploded.

“No reason, I just thought that you were interested in who I am”

“Isn’t it just as true that the real you, was an only child brought up in an idyllic setting? How many children get to drive around in the sunshine with their parents, knowing that they owned all they could see? For Chrissake, most kids get their hair cut, this is normal.”

I breathed heavily as the gravel road began to ascend. The cold air burnt inside my chest. Maybe Paul was right. Where did the truth lie? It is possible to dwell too much on the past. I seem to spend all of my time trying to analyse and define the exact moment that I began to feel like an outsider. I looked at Paul’s handsome slim frame. He seemed not to be puffing at all. I admired the way his defiant black plait hung halfway down his back dividing his spine in half. I felt frightened; it would hurt too much to lose this beautiful man.

My parents did love me. It is true. But it seemed that they were so caught in themselves, that I spent most of my time on my own. I made my own fun and probably became strange from too many hours alone with my thoughts.

A favourite past time of mine was to tease ants with a handheld mirror. Ants use the sun to navigate and I would direct light on to them and confuse them. There were however certain rules to this game. It must never be done when the sun is too hot in case you hurt them and secondly it should never be performed late in the afternoon in case you prevented them from finding their way home. At the time I called it my science experiment, it was probably more accurately, a child’s first experiment with complete power.

“You never even asked me what my earliest memory is.”

Paul’s voice whined with indignation and I immediately felt regret. Perhaps, I am too caught up in my own thoughts to share the experiences of other people.

“I would love to know.” I said, steering the conversation to what I hoped was safer ground.

“I bet you would.” He laughed rather bitterly.

I did not to reply. I had already stated my willingness to listen, and was uncomfortable with the role of coaxing his memory from him.

At last we reached the top of the hill. The wind brought violence and anger to the grey clouds. I looked toward the thick build up in the west and noted the purple tinge. I would not be surprised if we got snow during the night. I love clouds.

Cumulus clouds are my favourite. As a child I would lie on the lawn and make pictures and shapes from the clouds. I would often spin my cousin Elizabeth stories, about how each night I would climb through the manhole in the ceiling of my bedroom, and

would enter the world beyond the clouds. I had fantastic adventures in this place. The stories would always end the same way, with me returning to my room via the manhole by sunrise. I swore to Elizabeth that the stories were true and made her promise not to tell them to anybody else. One afternoon my cousin interrupted me, when I was in full flight with one of my tales. She said that her mother had told her that they were not true and that I told lies. The magic evaporated and I did not visit the world beyond the clouds again.

Paul’s voice interrupted the silence. “My earliest memory is of when I was two years old and my mother was giving me a bath. Suddenly she pushed my head under the water and held it there I can remember looking at her through the water, her white face bent over me and her black hair hanging down so that it touched the water

“That is horrible. What did you do?” I asked.

“Nothing! I just lay there and did not struggle. She took her hand off my head and started to cry and kept saying “Sorry, Sorry, Paulie I’m sorry.” But you know the thing I remember the most about it... her cigarette. The ash was about three centimetres long and I watched as it fell off into the water. It floated for about three seconds. Then it sank before it began to break up” I looked at Paul’s sad eyes. At last I thought, I understand. His sullen manner and moodiness were immediately forgiven. I longed to hug him but I didn’t.

“What happened then?”

“Life! That is what happened then. You see that is the difference between you and me.

You are so full of yourself that you have to hang onto every negative experience. I just get on with it.”

I looked at Paul, and wondered whether this was really true. Sometimes his anger felt so intense that I wondered what he was getting on with. Many times it was directed against me, I wondered whether I deserved it.

I read somewhere that dreams are a message from your subconscious. Your higher self trying to tell you something. When I was a kid I used to dream that I went to school and that I had forgotten to wear my underpants, or even worse, sometimes find that I had forgotten to wear any clothes at all. The dreams always ended the same way, with me hiding between a cotoneaster and an old wooden fence. Last night I dreamt that I was walking in the mall and that I caught a reflection of myself in a shop window. I had forgotten to get dressed and had no clothes on. I felt the same panic, the same heat in my face that I did in my childhood dreams.

I wonder what these dreams mean? I hope that they don’t mean that the real me is so terrible that I have to hide it from other people. I wonder whether Paul sees bad things inside me?

It is getting dark. I can see the town, a smoke haze gathers as people bum wood fires against the cold. We have almost completed our circuit along the gravel road. Paul still strides a little ahead of me, his head is down and he does not seem to notice the town. I think of the baby Paul in the bath. My stomach fills with electricity and a longing to protect him. I want to tell him these feelings, but I look at his closed body and say nothing.

NE  
WC



## Imaginary Countries: The Necessary Fairyland

Stranger things than children can invent occur in this land,  
Where some infants are discovered fully formed without a parent  
Or where mothers feel no birth pains and no periods exist.

Children may be eaten here by ogres with no surnames.  
Elder-wood is also death to infants,  
And brings doom into the house.

Numbers can be fortunate or fatal.

Language here is riddles, and the serpent's ancient question,  
'Why not?' frequently is asked.

Swans and seals are women who may pine away on land.

Caves are where the trolls live,  
When not practising their craft, pursuing humans.

Asses, cats and dogs and hens may sometimes sing art music,  
And an educated wolf speaks decent Hochdeutsch  
To young pigs and scarlet women bearing gifts on forest paths.

All this was occurring when the Fall was in the air,  
Before the gods declined to fetishes with logos on their breasts.

People danced in circles, round a fire.  
Life was fado.

Rudiments of happy songs still linger  
In the skipping rhymes of children who have legs.

Moving from the shadows, Goya's pictures  
Of the accidents of conflict came to life.

In Fairyland, the good are always white.  
They have fine weapons, horses, dogs and,  
If they plan to be Lord Mayor, a chatty cat.

Animals and fishes, birds and humans, ghosts and goblins speak  
A common tongue. It helps.

Heroes of all sexes wear such colours as delight the eye:  
The fabric may permit invisibility, a useful thing in life.

Children have the knack of walking out and being lost  
Or finding lodging in a sweets-shop.  
Some of these may turn out to be killers of old ladies.  
All is not as it appears.

Poppets who decide to chance the forest  
Bearing gifts of comfort food for their grandmothers  
Should consult an ophthalmologist before they do the run.

No one may mine minerals in this country  
But the dwarves, between their bouts of minding women with amnesia.  
It is never clear whose land rights are respected  
When a man at arms appears.

Animals and vegetables have grown beyond proportion.  
Horses turn themselves to mice.

Beans provide a stairway for a peasant boy who seeks  
To plumb the sky where ogres live.

Remorse and guilt are absent in this world of changing shapes.

A talking mirror wins a rhyming contest with the consort of a king.  
A monarch may walk naked through the streets,  
Or dine on crow pie, hear string trios,  
Or decide to slay the suitors of his daughter whom he loves.

What we know as politics does not occur in this land

Where duende takes its place.

No- one but witches, ogres, suitors of kings' daughters  
And a hiss of dragons bred for sacrifice.

Children, when the colour trickles from them,  
Pop into the Land of Nod.

*Michael Sharkey*



## Travellers by Susan McMichael

I've always wanted to return to paris a third time as a backpacker,  
to find my soul, my third self- but at the rate i'm travelling,  
i won't even make it to melbourne where the architecture reminds you  
of l'opera with stone columns. i might get as far as canberra  
with a swimming pool, but going there, i will lose my soul.  
These days it is dangerous to fly dangerous to dance the tango on a dance floor  
with a stranger. everyone is giving up on back packs, single households,  
\$394 telephone bills. they are packing and sorting damask linen, giving away  
the flowered sheets that burst the cupboards, everyone is driving back home  
to mum and dad, aunty grace, gran, and the strawberry patch.  
the road toll is rising.  
soon we will be safely locked in twin sets, pearls and fourteen-hour jobs.  
our parents will roll their eyes and our grandparents will roll in their graves.



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# Life Tides

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by Krystal Yee

There's a poem I read years ago in a school magazine. A poem about a girl alone, with wind in her hair and sand whipping her legs. A girl who knew if she kept walking into the ocean there'd be no wind and the sand would stop stinging.

Sea smells flirt with my nose, tickle it like the bouquet of a not fully seasoned wine. The waves are flat and grey, still half asleep. Behind me, the dunes are grown over with bitou bush and separate me from those not yet awake. Though I like the green, I know the natives are being choked out and the bushes must go. To the south, the sand is still packed hard from a tide that peaked when no one was watching. Strands of seaweed show where the water has been, but there are no other marks. No dogs, no people, not even the pronged prints of a seagull. Still, the air has already lost the night and by nine o'clock, it will be hard to believe it's the same day.

I place my camera carefully on the sand and do a few stretches. My muscles relax and my mind sets itself to the rhythm of the waves. Music and lyrics from my youth weave themselves into the wash of water and sand. I think of Gillie and the day she burst into my life. Like a djinn, swift and just.

*Who do you think you are!* She'd shoved my tormentor away and retrieved my lunch box, yelling so loudly, I'd trembled even more. But then she put her arms around me, and held me till my breath came back. Six years old and already way ahead other peers.

I change my position, and my mind moves too. It can do that, the mind. Slide the dimensions of time up and down, back and forth. Like a Magic Square puzzle with one empty space. It moves around the emptiness, and if you keep playing, something always fills it up. But you need a blank to play.

At seventeen Gillie was a girl—woman who stood firm with her hands on her hips. She spoke without apology, didn't blush or shy away. She even laughed at her own jokes, firing airy pellets of mirth

from some place between her belly and her throat. When she was serious, she ran her fingers through her fringe and caught a few strands to twirl while she talked, confident we were listening. So unlike me, too young to have an opinion, too scared to voice it if I did.

With Gillie as our captain, we crashed parties, stole flowers for our mothers and spent long days at the dam, our wide inland sea. We'd take turns behind her parents' boat, using one ski or two, concave or convex, the best did jump-starts. When Gillie drove, she'd eventually put the boat too a tight spin forcing the riders off. We fell recklessly, knowing we'd get up again.

Once when it was her turn to ski. Gillie wove in and out of the wake with one arm raised, poised like a showgirl, mocking of course. The wheat belts version of a Surfers Paradise ski princess. Our lives were bright with health and laughter. The days rolled on, easy and endless.

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'I'm still working in the mountains,' my brother said. 'I saw Gillie. We had lunch. She's keen to see you, you should call her.' I thought about it. For years only our mothers held us together. I heard her stories, she heard mine. She loved the city and left it before I ever arrived. She moved from town to town and I moved from job to job. Along the way, both our stories changed.

Months after I saw my brother, I called. When I saw inside her house, I couldn't believe it was pink. But the cobwebs on the cornices and in the furniture joints came as no surprise. Gillie would harm nothing and let the spiders stay. We sat in her garden. I had a cigarette while she smoked a joint. She still told jokes but her laugh echoed in little clangs, like the sound of galvanised iron after a child has jumped on it. She took me to see her rock. A granite tor, proud and immovable, surrounded by bushland. Her retreat from the world.

Back inside, I drank coffee while she made lunch. Her hands were the same. Square like her body, fingernails trimmed close. I noticed her hair was still brown

and the gap between her front teeth still made her s's whistle. But the lines around her mouth, though fine, were deep and the blue other eyes had faded. She asked if I liked capsicum... watercress... a certain type of cheese. Once she wouldn't have bothered.

She was working, she said, taking underprivileged kids on excursions. She'd stopped caring for old people six months ago, it was too depressing.

*Old people are just so.... you know, they're dying. Kids are easier and it's only for two days a week.*

Gillie asked about my marriage, about him. Twelve years and they'd never met. She told me about her lovers and said she didn't expect me to understand.

*There's no such thing as lasting love. I'll give a relationship two years, no more.*

She wanted me to listen. So I did, adjusting my position against the bench top, leaning into and out of the conversation. Words tumbled from her unrestrained. That hadn't changed. But she had. Everyday things made her wary. She no longer found her way around obstacles she'd once have pushed aside. Instead she pushed against the mesh of life, fighting to stay afloat in a place where she found no equilibrium.

Gillie talked greedily, wanting to catch the time we'd missed with words that might have been spoken. There was a quiver in her voice when she spoke. The ends of sentences trailed upward in an emotional pitch, only to be pulled down when she checked herself and turned to safer ground. I missed some of what she said when she shifted too quickly from one topic to another. She darted from the past to the present, hoping neither would catch her. She was like a child ready to spring for its mother at the approach of something unfamiliar. Once I recognised her anxiety, it stretched between us, vulnerable as glass beads on a worn thread.

I told her she should visit. An hour and a quarter, that was all.

*I hate the city. When I go there I you know I haven't been there for two years*



The mountains swaddled her. I knew she wouldn't leave, even for a day. And I knew the city would consume me as soon as I left the freeway.

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The drone of a seaplane pulls me back to the beach. The ocean has brightened from grey to pale blue and the waves are arching their way into the day. There are still no surfers, just one fisherman a little to my north. He stands thigh-high in water, his waders the colour of sharkskin. A straw hat protects his face from the sun and a pipe extends from the right side of his mouth. He holds it comfortably between his teeth, no sign of tension around the lips or in the jaw. A bucket of pilchards and an esky mark his spot. When he casts, the gang hook and swivels give weight to the trace while the main line plays in the air. He's spinning for tailor and I'm looking for dolphins.

A little to my right the sun and water meet. I know it's only my fancy but, just there, it seems the waves have more life

I remember Gillie's last phone call. 'I think I'm going mad. But I've got friends and you don't have friends if you're mad. We've always been friends, haven't we?'

I didn't know then she was saying goodbye.

I hope it happened the way it did for the girl in the poem. That it was like walking and walking till she was part of the sea. A gradual overflow of her senses that embraced her till everything went blank

Before I leave the beach, I take five frames of the fisherman, his silhouette bold against a mirror-bright ocean.



# My Rapunzel

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by Jill Adamson

In the sunlight, she stands by the kitchen window, when breakfast is all done, and the dishes are piled in the sink; she props her elbows on the window sill, a faraway look in her eyes. I stand hidden in the shadow of the water tank, by the rotting timber platform, and watch her, lost in her dreams. She is my dream. I don't need to reach into a mental bag of tricks to escape. Large as life, beautiful, she leans over the window sill and plucks a pink geranium from the pot below.

Her lips form the shape of words and I

hear snatches of a tune as she sings softly to herself in her native Spanish. Through the air, her nostalgia travels like waves to the beach, breaking on the shore of my heart.

Her long black hair tumbles down the wall like a modern-day Rapunzel. I long to run across and climb it, drown in those deep brown eyes that never look at, never see me.

In the afternoon, when the light is fading from the sky, she stands by the window and on her cheeks I see the glistening of tears. I know she runs far from here, in her heart,

far across the oceans to her homeland. The shadow in her eyes haunts me like a dream. Her songs run through my veins in my sleep. I wait in the wings of her life.

Desire feeds desire: On her day off, I stand by the old water tank, her presence shimmering in the hot summer air like gold. Is she at the window leaning on the sill, or is it a trick of the light in the heat haze? My heart no longer cares. She is my dream, and the dream is enough.



# Drowning, Not Waving by Shari Kocher

**D**rowning is a peaceful business. I do it quietly, taking refuge in the silence. It's my way of having the last word. Looking up, I see sharp edges, lines of sea and sky that slice my eyes, striking blue, blue, hot, white blue across the retina. I taste again our summer house - fingers and sandals sticky from ice-cream mixed with sand - and I want to stay. The water rushes in over ear and over tongue; I sink against its cool embrace like a lover consummating desire on a marble floor, and this time there's no regret. I feel the water sliding in heavy release against my skin. The touch is gentle, the tide is with me. *When we were in the fishing boat, the tide was out, way out and the seaweed smelt like rotting flesh, despite the salt. Out there we hauled them in, line over hand over line, waiting for the night, cutting up the fish-flesh and throwing the heads beneath the seat where they lolled around in the muck, staring, staring with wide astonished eyes.*

*'The tide goes over, the waves ride over you  
And let their shadows down like shining  
hair.'*

...

That was 'Five Bells', but I hear no ringing. Only quiet bubbles rising, dying as breath dies on guilty speech. *A baby is not a baby until it has a brain, he said. That means that brain-dead people are not people, so they may as well be dead, so they may as well turn it off and let the line go flat, I said (line over hand over line, hauling them out of the darkness, out of the secret darkness like dead babies in a bucket). He said that's different and other things, other lies talking on and on into the night...*

It was beautiful sitting on the sea at night, the cool, dark sea, watching the lights bobbing between the boats and the voices bobbing between the lights, and the soft puck-puck of oars in the water, the oars in the oar rings rubbing against the wood and the hands holding the oars and

holding me, light and strong, sitting on the hard seat made of wood, listening to the stars...

*...but I wasn't listening because he wore gloves and his clean hands made me sick thinking that he would never touch the blood, thinking your child is safe with me, may god rot you and gut you (slicing them up the gullet) but your child is safe with me!*

I go guiltlessly. Yes, in this wordless place I go with no lie on my lips, not even a promise. I taste the salt grinding over bones; I see them bleached and naked under the tide and the brine is bitter. *I never promised you a rose garden, he said.* The fish are floating past me, they are floating with their mouths open, gaping at me through the water—I said nothing, thinking of thorns and blood and falling roses - they are groping through the weed, touching me nowhere and everywhere - *thinking you shall not cut me* - and my hand flails - *though you have calculated and copulated, thinking you are guiltless in a white coat, but you shall not cut my child up!*

Clenching, unclenching, clean hands, clean heart (or so they say), but that's another lie. Take cleaning fish: coarse work and brutal (but you want to eat, don't you?) the dull thump of flesh on a stone slab and scales slipping - *as cells slip over the rim, the tiny star-shaped fist clutching at the red tissue, clenching and unclenching, crying in the darkness against the night, against — the unseen light, crying out child! child! and the pain heaving her off the bed to vomit in a bucket* - scales slipping in shards under the nail where the skin is tender and most prone to fester, the hook repaid in kind, cruelty heaped on cruelty like dead fish stacked in an ice-box, but no fouler than the false high word crackling in empty air...

God, the rushing is upon me, windless, wordless, it is whipping past me - *He will*

*not know what to say - hair streaming out - though he uses words like fishermen use their hooks - like seaweed in the tide - I remember - tasting agony - when the fever used to come, I saw it in waves, hundreds and thousands of little lights pricking at closed eyelids and the grey crushing weight squeezing the feeling out - I feel cool darkness - always a cool hand when*

*the fever came across my forehead holding back the night - stretching and searing the silence - I go as mutely as a fish - the hot - it was like I was burning up and down all over- white - but her hands were always cool- blue - blue day.*

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## Spoons

crowded in drawers or leaning precariously by the sink their metal mouths pursed and shrinking the way my mother shrank from us as if each child that swelled inside her gouged her out a little more

until we became, mouth by mouth a set of spoons unpolished mostly bent sideways out of shape



but for the one sterling silver boy who would save us, take us all away to some shining place someday or so I saw and blindly hungered for in that swift brief look of love she reserved for him

which seemed to linger in a space of light framed by the door where he had stood or the kitchen window, his hair alight his toast encrusted knife plunged handle—up in the butter dish the lemons on the tree outside vivid against the foliage, hardly stirring the way she looked at him

the pause of her spoon and her mouth.

Shari Kocher

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## Willandra by Janice Burn

**D**ust catches in the throat, a fine film coating skin and clothes and hair. Killing. Only crows enjoy the feast of corpses. Roo, emu, sheep, all joined in death, bones stripped clean. Hard times for all. Ngiyampaa dryland people lived here first, lived well on quandong, apple bush, wild banana, on goanna long gone, on snake and emu. Red roos were totem of country, a land well stocked on grass where plains meet sky. Ripe for Europeans. Strange sicknesses weakened the Ngiyampaa. Told to choose - toil or leave or die. Ngiyampaa reborn as drovers, cooks, domestics, stockmen. Live bonded in their land. Worse still to come. Round up and dispersal. Cries disregarded, pain ignored. Removed to Menindie, Barkinje river people's country. Missionaries want to save souls. Usher

in fear, sickness, death. Dust blows bones through the camp, Barkinje bones, Barkinje land. Dust drifting, Ngiyampaa drifting, back to country. Roos replaced by sheep. For years on years, merinos were king. Shorn in sweat and heat by men from Bendigo and Harvey Bay, from Tenterfield and Wagga Wagga. Blue singlets gritted with dust or caked with mud. Shearers - Irish, white, black, tortured backs, crushed guts. Find strength in their unions, struggle for a living wage. Wind swirls around the sheds, their quarters, chilled at night, scorched by day. Deserted now. Land ravaged. Today roos occupy the homestead lawns. A place of ghosts, of pain, of dust.