

# platF<sup>☀</sup>ORM

age to youth... youth to age





# Home

by *Madeleine Herron*

Every time I write a sentence, I'm filled with guilt because I don't want to commit to any of this *being real*. But once it's real I think that's when I will start living for real. So I'm going to write a story about home, and someone who used to be my mother.

Early on in my life, I lived with just my mother in a small dilapidated apartment right on the beach. I don't remember much because these form my most fragmented memories (when you want something so bad that your heart feels like it's about to explode—it's probably in your best interest not to remember it).

If I could tell you something about this home, what I remember the most are the flowers—frangipanis and hibiscuses. The frangipanis were vibrant white and yellow with a fascinating rubber texture. Their smell was soft and baby-like and made me feel quietly content. The hibiscuses were never the same colour—they were yellow and red; white mixed with pink; pink mixed with yellow. One day my mother and I went for a walk to check out all the different types on our street. This happy memory is painful in its singularity, and also because I hold it close to the one of her standing with my belongings in a rubbish bag at the front door, telling me to leave.

The problems all started when my mother met Steven. After they married we moved into a brand new house. This house grew into a hovel. The carpet grew soft with decay, the kitchen sink was always piled up and the ironing sat high-up on the lounge room chair. I rarely had friends over as I was too embarrassed about the mess. I was also scared that Steven would greet them with names like 'big tits', or, if they were particularly unlucky, 'no tits'. It wasn't much fun going back to school with a story like that. Steven was an alcoholic. He was the subtle kind of alcoholic where nobody really knew that he had a problem, or if they did, it was never acknowledged. But I knew, mostly because he made my mother become one too.

One day I was fixing my hair in the bathroom and my sister yelled out, 'Hey Sis, you're on TV!' I went into my bedroom to check the TV and sure enough a picture of my bathroom was on it.

'Go into the bathroom, Mal,' I demanded. When I saw an image of Mal on the TV, I ran into my mother's bedroom. She was breastfeeding my brother.

'Fuck off,' she said.

I ran outside and told Steven.

**Madeleine Herron studies Creative Writing at VU.**

'Bullshit. Stop making up crap,' he said.

I then ran to the phone and called Steven's father. He said he would be around to check it out soon. My heart was racing and I was sitting on my bed just wondering what the hell was going on when my mother and Steven walked into the room.

'Who have you told?' my mother asked.

'Steven's father,' I said.

'Well, Steven put the video camera in your bathroom—he wanted to see why you were taking so long in the shower. I guess that's fair enough—you do take forever. I've told him to get rid of it. He was just worried. Anyway, you mustn't tell anyone else.'

I believed her—she was my mother.

So, that was pretty much the end of it, until he got rid of the camera and the stupid bitch made me say thank you for his efforts.

A few weeks later, Steven said, 'I wouldn't mind having sex with you. Don't tell anyone; or I'll take your whole family away from you.'

But I did. And he did. So I moved out when I was sixteen.

I've spent the last ten years hating Steven and chasing my mother who acts like I don't exist. But now I realise my hate was misguided.

Steven is not a chess player, moving a pawn about on the board. My mother made her own choice. And right now, as I sit here and write this piece in my new place that I've rented all on my own, I've realised something. I don't need to chase an elusive memory of some apartment, on some beach, with somebody who used to be my mother. From now on, I'm going to take the opportunities that I previously thought I didn't deserve because my mother abandoned me. And looking around, it seems 'home' is something I am about to create. I am capable of creation; my home is where I am.

I do exist, even if she doesn't know it.



# Editorial

by *Bruno Lettieri*

Contributor and lovely man, Hugh Deacon, zaps us a *Platform* piece. It's been commissioned—sort of. It poetically recounts a red double-decker bus loaded with poetry-lovers swaying its way over the Westgate Bridge at twilight on its way to god-knows-where.

The energy of the piece is palpable. A poet/teacher is the first to recognise this and excitedly tells me so. This is writing that captures some of the feel of the zany twilight poetry bus. I love Hugh's presence in *Platform*, love its recount of exuberance and moonlit piers oozing poetry and delight. I love writing that alerts us to those qualities that can still be awake in our common world. I love a university that gets on a bus and sways.

'Thanks for forwarding this on and congratulations on yet another brilliant edition of *Platform*: it just goes from strength to strength; the quality and the energy of the thing is truly impressive...'—Paul Bateman (frequent contributor).

I realise it can be self-indulgent to just cherry-pick praise. Yet, isn't it a delightful spirited way to talk about something? How often will a note sing and energise in that kind of way? I'm reminded to sway as I try to write. Energy begetting energy. Sometimes I love the notes that follow as much as I love the noted thing.

'Dear Bruno,  
Always good to hear from you and I admire what you do.  
I'm afraid I have nothing original to offer. I just haven't had any writing time lately.  
Would you be interested in something that has been published before? I do apologise.  
I encouraged my good friend TF to send a story. He is working part-time for VU at present although he lives in NSW. I hope it reached you OK.  
Hope our paths cross soon.  
With all good wishes. Michael.'

Michael McGirr wrote a piece for Issue 5, and like all our contributors, sought no fee. He's been widely acclaimed, had many books published, and been an editor and publisher. Yet, all he gives me is graciousness and encouragement.

Viva la note! Viva its quietness and sustenance!

Greg Baum (senior journalist for *The Age*) launched issue 4 at the end of last year at Footscray Nicholson's Terrace Restaurant. He's been supportive of our magazine and wrote an original piece for it too. I'm staggered that busy need-to-meet-deadline writers don't just smash our requests for writing out of the park. He tells us without too much fanfare, he wishes for his two university-going sons—who love newspapers and care about writing—to experience a *Platform* launch and a Rotunda gathering. I quietly send out my invisible telescopic educator's arm and give him the tightest hug.

Martina and Megan (editing and layout) write a spirited invitational email about *Platform* and their willingness to bring it to classrooms and sing its intention and hope. They send it hither and thither across the university. I'm struck by its crispness and lovely purposefulness. I'm struck by the efficiency and ease of its delivery. I speculate that a jaded teacher perhaps receives it, straightens just a little, and senses the energised possibility that could be coming their way.

Barry wrote the lead, 'Harambe Conversations', for the last edition. The marketing people read it and want to expand the scope of the story and use Barry's insight, depiction and informing spirit as the stimulus for another piece to go into another magazine. His piece too, sways its way over the artificial borders, demarcations and through the managerial labyrinth, and seems to reach attentive ears.

You know, you're welcome to write for it. We'd be delighted to send copies to you for your class group. We hope it's enticing young folk and all folk to have a go. We hope that Hugh and Paul, Michael, Greg and Barry, and Megan and Martina, have warmed you to the gentle art of swaying—with words.

# Welcome to my life

*by Deng*

Find people you know so you can talk to them. I remember one day coming home from school and trying to go out with my friends to the club. But I went off crying because I just wanted to write about my life. I've always known I was going to write a book about my life. I think I had to get to the place in my life where I knew what the story was from my life that is so sad. This is because I don't know what to do in my life. I like to go visiting new places like New South Wales. I hate school because I don't like to get up in the morning. Classical music plays a big part in my life. I'd love to meet someone who is positive. I'd like to visit France to see people over there and how they're doing. I put my life into God's hands and say, 'I'm going to do the best that I can everyday'. I like to go to parties on the weekend with my friends.

**Deng is a VCAL Automotive Literacy student at VU.**

# Suddenly I had superhuman powers

*by Thai Luu*

This story is about a seventeen-year-old boy by the name of Peter. His birthday was in a couple of days. Peter went to Powers High School; he wasn't really the popular type and was always getting bullied and pushed around. The day before his birthday, Peter took a shortcut instead of the usual route that he takes to get home. During his walk home, he encountered an unusual rock that was glowing green, he stood there and thought to himself, *what is this weird rock and should I touch it?* Out of curiosity, he touched it and as soon as he touched it he flew right back and was knocked out of consciousness. After the whole incident he woke up and looked for the green rock but it wasn't there, so he checked his watch and saw that it was already getting late so he quickly ran home. The next morning Peter woke up with a headache and felt uneasy so he stayed home. During his time at home, Peter was hungry so he went downstairs only to find a weird looking creature, the ones that you only find in games, eating his food. The creature looked at Peter and started to attack; Peter shook with anticipation and started running. Peter tried to run up to his room but got caught by the creature's long tongue. Peter was stunned by the thought of him being a 'goner'. Fire started soaring around him; instantly the monster backed off. Peter fought off the monster using his new powers.

**Thai Luu is a VCAL Automotive Literacy student at VU.**



# It was the most terrifying moment of my life

*by Ekias Ayele, James Polson, Poe Pray, Silver and Tiara-Jade Barton*

I guess the most terrifying moment of my life was the day that I nearly drowned. When I was seven years old my dad took me to the pool. It was the one in the community leisure centre. It was very nice, I remember it as one of the happiest places in my childhood, and we used to go there pretty often. This one day it was only Dad and I. I was already wearing my swimming gear. He told me that he was going to the bathroom to change and told me to stay there! And don't go in the pool! So what did I do? I went to the swimming pool, even though I was seven, didn't know how to swim, and had never been in the deep end of the pool. But somehow I thought that it would be a good idea to jump in the water while Dad was away, so I did. And I remember going in the water and not knowing how to get anywhere in the water. I was drowning! I swallowed a lot of water and felt the terror of realising at a very young age that I was going to die right there at that moment. Just then I felt the lifeguard pulling me out. He asked me if I was okay. I was coughing up all the water but apparently I was not in such a bad shape, since he let me go. The whole thing lasted like, four minutes. I went back to the chair where Dad put all his stuff and waited for five more minutes until my unsuspecting father came out. he saw me all wet but didn't say anything, I don't think I ever told him.

**Ekias Ayele is a VCAL Automotive Literacy student at VU.**

My name's Silver. This is a true story that happened in my life. It was the most terrifying moment of my life. I was driving my dad's car with my learner's permit. I drove the car with the learner's permit for one year without any driving school instructor. I just drove the car by myself and carried my family around. But the police never knew what I did in my life because when I go driving I pray to God to protect me whatever I do and wherever I go.

I know God is always with me but sometimes when I drove the car I was scared of the police but they never pulled me over. You know, always when I drove the car I put a green 'P' on the car. Sometimes the police were in front of my car, sometimes at the back of my car but they didn't know I only had a learner's permit because I was a good driver. Now you know what I did? I stopped driving the car with a learner's permit because I'm doing the driving test so I stopped everything that I did before.

I don't want police to pull me over and take my learner's permit because I want to get my P's. God is always with me and he never leaves me alone in the world. That is all about the most terrifying moment of my life.

Thank you so much, God. What I have done is the wrong thing but you never let me down.

**Silver is a VCAL Automotive Literacy student at VU.**

One day when I was walking home from school I saw this van following me and I started to run but the van sped up. I had to jump peoples' back fences. As I jumped the first fence, there was a pit bull dog and the dog chased me through the backyard and just before I got out the dog bit the bottom of my pants and ripped the leg off my pants. After my pants ripped I jumped over the gate and ran home and told my mum.

She said, 'Tell the police,' and I said, 'I didn't get the rego number.' So I couldn't tell the police. And then I went out and I saw the van again and it was following my friend so I told him to run and jump peoples' back fences. And then I started to get followed again and this time I got the rego number so I went to the police and told them about the van so they said they will handle it by getting the van and locking them up and that was the most terrifying moment of my life.

**James Polson is a VCAL Automotive Literacy student at VU.**

I don't know why my life is going easy. I'm very worried about my future and I don't want to be a beggar.

I can't speak English very well; I don't know the correct way to say every word that I spell or pronounce, and I have to work out the meaning of what is said, and I usually have to ask someone questions. It's hard. And, also, I think about how I can get a job? How can I say the right words to the manager in an interview face-to-face? I'm feeling so confused about me going through my life. I did not know how to use the computer and make new friends with the other people, this is also hard.

It was the most terrifying moment of my life.

**Poe Pray is a VCAL Automotive Literacy student at VU.**

Dad was having everyone over for dinner and drinks; we were all sitting outside having a laugh and playing pool. My dad's mate brought his dog over; she is very viscous and protective.

Everyone was laughing and mucking around while my dad was sitting on my sister's lap, and I was waiting for my next shot at pool. When all of a sudden my sister screams, then all I see is my dad stand up with his hand over his mouth and blood dripping from it.

Everyone went pale. I'm shaking and my sister is crying. I thought Dad was going to pass out. I go to run inside to get Dad something to stop him from seeing the blood when all of a sudden I get to the door and the dog that has just bitten my dad is

there. I was terrified, shaking uncontrollably.

Then the dog starts growling at me. It was the most terrifying moment of my life. I scream for the owner to get the dog before it gets me; next second, the dog's in a headlock getting dragged to the car. I grab a cloth from inside to try and stop the bleeding. When I return outside, dad is sitting there with most of his lips gone, the dog's owner in tears, my sister shaking and crying.

Everyone was shocked and confused. No one had actually seen it happen but everyone can see the damage. This is a true story!

**Tiara-Jade Barton is a VCAL Automotive Literacy student at VU.**



## The separating of parents

by *Wittaya Mala*

This story is about a fourteen-year-old boy who had been affected by the separating of his parents when he was studying year 8.

The time before his parents separated he was a good boy. He behaved like other children do, coming to school, playing with friends, listening to his parents. But after his parents separated, he sometimes missed coming to school because his friends said something about his parents to him.

Then he quit school at year 8. He left his family and came to the city to work with his sister. He missed school while he stayed with his sister. One day he told his sister he missed school so much he wants to go back to school. His sister agreed with him and said, 'I'll support you.'

He went back to his old school; fortunately they let him continue year 8. Then his sister supported him until he completed year 12.

What do you think about this story? How much can the separating of a child's parents affect their child?

**Wittaya Mala is a VCAL Automotive Literacy student at VU.**

## The small but lonely hut

by *Daniel Costales*

It was getting dark. I needed to find somewhere to camp fast before it got pitch-black. I then came across an old bark hut in the middle of the bush so I decided that I'll camp there if no one was there. So I knocked on the door and there was no answer, so I decided to twist the door handle and it was unlocked. I slowly and carefully pushed the door open and stuck my head in but nobody was home. Inside the hut were a fireplace and a single bed so I said to myself, why not crash here for the night? So I got the fire going and the night was dead and still. I couldn't hear a thing. All I could hear was the fire in the fireplace, so I decided to go to sleep. I kicked off my Blucher boots and put them beside my bed and fell to sleep.

I woke in the middle of the night and there was a ghostly figure sitting at the end of my bed, and I shit myself. I remained quiet for a while and just watched to see what it would do. It sat there for a while. Eventually, it must've known I was awake and it turned around to face me, and in a deep, horrifying and terrifying voice said, 'Oh, there's only the two of us here.'

I couldn't see its face but just the outline of it. So I didn't answer him I just kept quiet. Eventually, it said it again and I was shit-scared and wide awake now, so I thought I better say something or answer him back. I said, 'Tarzan, my old mate, when I find my boots there will only be one of us here.' So, I finally found my Blucher boots and out the door I scooted, and I reckon that I ran that fast that I lit the ridges up with the sparks of my Blucher boots. And even to this day, I've never slept or gone near that hut again, because of what happened in that small but lonely hut.

**Daniel Costales is a VCAL Automotive Literacy student at VU.**

## Surfing it up at Torquay

by *Nina Stinton, Jesse, Jatila, and Charlotte Nealer*

We were all asked to meet at the TOTEM house at 9am and no later than 9:30am. Once everyone had arrived we got on to the bus and drove to Torquay. When we arrived at Bankoora surf beach, we were then introduced to the surf instructors who gave us all wetsuits to put on. Putting on the wetsuits was a challenge for some; they were very tight and a bit weird for the girls because they were wetsuits designed for guys. After everyone had got into their wetsuits we were all given a surfboard. We walked down to the beach and sat around in a circle on our surfboards while the instructors demonstrated what to do. Once we all knew what to do it was time to hit the water.

Once I had successfully ridden on the board a few times my adrenalin was pumping! I just kept going back for more, trying harder each time to stand up. We surfed for about two hours; everyone looked like they were having fun. Then it was time to get out of the water and head off. We peeled off our wetsuits and thanked the surf instructors, got on the bus and left. We arrived at another beach to have lunch.

Everyone was really hungry after surfing. We ate and talked about what we just experienced. I loved the view looking down on the beach from the top of the hill. Law was feeding the seagulls and they were taking the food right from his hand. We then went to Torquay village to look around at the shops. Jess and I bought ice cream. After everyone had finished looking around we got back in the bus and headed back to the TOTEM house. Driving back everyone was silent. It was an exhausting but fun day!

**Nina Stinton is an intermediate VCAL student at VU.**

On the 26th of March we went to Torquay to go surfing. We met at the TOTEM house and waited for everyone to turn up; seven members of our class came along. Sam drove us to Torquay, and Cameron was the photographer. We arrived at eleven o'clock. We had to wear wetsuits that were really hard to get on because they are so tight. It was really funny trying to get them on!

First we learnt how to move on the board on the sand, then we had to pretend we were in the water. First you have to bend your arms, then pull yourself up onto your knees and quickly get to your feet. We then went into the small shallow waves to body surf. Then we did knee surfing and then tried to stand up. I stood up a few times but kept falling down. I was too scared to go out to the bigger waves so I stayed in the little waves. We surfed for two hours. Then we got very tired and went to another place to eat lunch and have a rest. We then went to the outlet shopping centres but we were too tired to shop. We came home in the bus at 4pm. It was a fun day and I'm glad I went because I love the beach and now I can surf. I really appreciated Sam organising this for us, because the group became closer to one another.

**Jatila is an Intermediate VCAL student at VU.**

We met at the TOTEM house at 9am on Friday 26th March, and left for Torquay at 9:30am. We drove there by bus. When we arrived we changed into our wetsuits, and then had our surf lesson. It was good for all of us. We got to know each other better. Nobody could wipe the smile off their face! After the surf lesson we went and had a picnic, but it was windy and cold. So Jatila, Charlotte and I went into the bus to eat. We talked and stuff. After that

we went shopping. Nina and I didn't buy anything, just ice creams. After that we went home.

**Jesse is an Intermediate VCAL student at VU.**

The constant sound of waves crashing and my class laughing all as one, made my day surfing a great one! Boards gliding over my peers and tearing legs out of the wetsuit armholes. Sounds funny just reading this! Surfing is by far one of the greatest adrenalin rushes in my life, and something I hope to do again very soon with a great bunch of people who also contributed to the non-stop, jam-packed, laughter-filled day!

**Charlotte Nealer is an Intermediate VCAL student at VU.**



## **From that day on**

**In Loving Memory of Ronald F. Nealer**

*by Charlotte Nealer*

From that day on,  
I grew to see  
What his lonesome soul,  
Meant to me.

From that day on,  
I began to know  
That just like trees  
My heart will grow.

From that day on,  
I remembered, I listened  
That my empty self  
Still glistened.

From that day on,  
I no longer frowned  
My life went on,  
Without his voice, not a sound.

From that day on,  
I tried not to cry  
But I escaped my fear,  
And said goodbye.

From that day on,  
I started to learn  
That one amazing day,  
His beautiful soul would return.

**Charlotte Nealer is an intermediate VCAL student at VU.**

# A Suburban Murder

by Rachel Merrigan

Oceanview Horizons was a new settlement on the outskirts of the city limits. It is termed these days as a 'planned community'. Previously unproductive farmland was bought up by property developers who, after breaking it up into sizeable blocks, sold it to eager home-buyers for a tidy sum. Nowadays, a grand entrance-way signalled its existence with an imposing water fountain pouring over its silver-lettered title. Despite being an hour's drive from the nearest ocean, the name was felt by its founders to give an appropriately relaxed atmosphere to the burgeoning little community.

The streets of 'Horizons', as it was fondly referred to by its residents, were broad and winding. In fact, not a single street in this entire community travelled vaguely in a straight line. There were courts and cul-de-sacs, avenues and boulevards, all meandering around the newly tree-lined streets and landscaped gardens. Each house was built in the last year and in the most up-to-date and fashionable styles. Muted browns and slate greys merged with accent colours of vivid reds, lime-greens and burnt orange. While it was true that the houses had a somewhat uniformed look to them, being variations on the 'Malibu', the 'Santorini' and the 'Tuscan dream', the residents added their own versions of individuality such as a designer letterbox or one-of-a-kind handcrafted house number. And besides, while the exteriors might look similar, the interiors were completely different. For example, the Mallards had put their entertainment room at the rear of the house but the Hughes family had theirs at the front.

The people were friendly and often organised get-togethers where the children would play in the street and the adults would laugh smugly and drink Shiraz. Theirs was a safe community, professional families who volunteered at their children's primary schools and sporting clubs. They certainly weren't plagued with the same levels of crime which other, less affluent, suburbs were. Influxes of new migrants who didn't bother to learn English, let alone attempt to fit in with the pervading whiteness that epitomised Oceanview Horizons, were not welcome here. Not that they were racist. Rather, the families living within the walled precinct had merely made a decision to live with those who shared similar views and values. They even socialised freely with the Nguyen family who had assimilated to the Horizons-way-of-life. The comment often heard when discussions about the Nguyens arose was that you couldn't tell they weren't Australian. They gave freely to charities and sponsored African children whose photographs were stuck to many-a-fridge.

But this story centres on the Brody family. Model citizens of Oceanview Horizons and one of its earliest settlers: Mitchell Brody and his wife, Tanya, had met in high school. He was an IT consultant and she managed a small business. They had two children: Montana was five and Brooklyn, seven. It was the time in their life when they had achieved everything they had dreamt of when taking their vows so many years ago: good jobs; the perfect house; charming children; and a Rhodesian Ridgeback named Rocky.

But perhaps all was not as it seemed. They were happy. Not ecstatically, but comfortably. Maybe there were things that hadn't worked out as they had hoped, or if they did, had not elicited the feelings of bliss that they had expected. But the couple told themselves that most people felt this way. It would be exhausting to feel happy all the time. And after so many years of marriage, of course there would be a level of boredom.

And boredom was something that could be abated by indulging in secret flirtations with the deli-boy at Safeway, or hiring a saucy receptionist in a thigh-high skirt and spiky heels. They were never unfaithful. Both drew a distinct line between adultery and a little casual fantasy. But the thrill of having something of one's own, something that existed outside of the plural they had become, was intoxicating.

For Mitchell, however, the fantasies had become harder and harder to imagine. It had been so long since anything spontaneous or impulsive had happened to him that the best he could come up with was the well-worn scenario of the receptionist sweeping her hands across his desk, seductively scattering its contents onto the floor. But even then, the reality of the situation would nudge its way in. He worked in a cubicle; it was cheaper than having real walls. And should his laptop be swept onto the floor, it would probably break and he would have to spend hours trying to retrieve the lost files.

Who knows why he finally snapped. Maybe it was the rumours of potential downsizing. Or maybe it was the news that interest rates had risen yet again making the mortgage which they could barely afford

in the first place, near impossible. Or perhaps it was the overheard sounds of the receptionist, Rhiannon, gossiping to her girlfriend about the pathetic, middle-aged loser who followed her around making puppy-dog eyes. Or the virulent abuse which poured through the phone because he had forgotten to pay the dog psychologist's bill again. No-one will ever know.

What is certain is that instead of driving home, Mitchell went to the local RSL. He was greeted warmly by the barman who only received a vague grunt in response. After ordering (and then drinking) copious amounts of some nondescript spirit he stumbled and weaved his way back to the station wagon. An idea had occurred to him. Maybe it had been an idea that he had toyed with before that night, fantasised about, but had never taken seriously.

It was dark now and in the gathering gloom, the neighbourhood took on a much more sinister appearance. Through the identical windows of the matching houses, the flickering of oversized plasma screens could be seen, casting a greenish glow over the gravelled driveways and uniformed lawns. He was almost catatonic now. It was surprising that he could keep the car on the road but perhaps he had driven this way so many times it had become second nature.

Time jumped and sputtered and he had no recollection of opening the front door, which must have been unlocked, or climbing the stairs to the master suite. His wife's sleeping form lay under the floral cover, her face obscured by the shadows. Perhaps at that moment he was thinking of the freedom he would have once she was gone. Perhaps he considered how different his life would be without the dull tedium which married life had become. Perhaps he wasn't thinking at all. The knife cut through her throat quite easily and she barely made a sound as life slowly seeped out, staining the mattress a vibrant red. The simplicity of it almost made him laugh. But as the alcohol haze lifted and he focussed on the face which looked back at him through unseeing eyes, he realised it was not the face he had looked at everyday, day after day.

You see the family next door had also liked the 'Malibu' design. And the two matching homes were built side by side, identical in all but name and number. It had been a point of contention between the two families but neither had had the imagination or inclination to alter the design. And now Christine Mason lay dead in her bed for no other crime than a lack of originality.

**Rachel Merrigan received first prize in the 2009 Brimbank Short Story and Poetry Awards for this piece.**

The 2010 Brimbank Short Story and Poetry Awards are open Monday 14th June and close Friday 30th July 2010. The Awards are open to all persons who work, live or study in Brimbank. Over \$3,500 in prizes with no charge to enter.

For more information visit [www.brimbank.vic.gov.au/arts](http://www.brimbank.vic.gov.au/arts) or contact the Hunt Club Community Arts Centre on 9361 6600.

The Short Story and Poetry Awards are part of the 2010 Brimbank Literary Festival.



# The passionate teacher

*by Judith Rodriguez*

Hands up those who've cowered under the dreary put-down of those who can, do; those who can't, teach? Paatti Miller wrote a passionate debunking of this easily-memorised, sadistic cliché talking about writers who teach being people who are fuelled by contradiction.

Being alone with words or being in a crowd with words; the teacher's blood responds to outside temperatures and they enjoy the rising thinning tingle and concentrative slowing.

The passionate teacher probably told long rambling stories to other kids on the way to school. The passionate teacher may have been attacked by the parents of the kids she told all about sex, as soon as she had read it in the little book her mum gave her.

The passionate teacher may enter the semester with the expression of someone about to negotiate a marathon jungle course among hostile tribes. But five minutes in the batteries are recharged and the negotiating skills are into high. The pipe tunes rise from the thickets as creative fervour flows free.

'People who experience passion in no other area of their lives still deserve at least one passionate teacher.'

Not everyone wants this 'lunatic' at the time. A remarkable number of creative people remember, and tell, with gratitude how they took up Miss so-and-so's suggestion; they started reading and found a different life. They remember how the calculus flowered, demonstrated by the teacher who knew, with certainty, it was fascinating.

A high proportion of these creative start-ups feed upon, and feed into, the creative arts. In times when people are urged to life-long education, chances of enjoying this relationship are high. Lucky students! Lucky teacher!

**Judith Rodriguez is renowned Melbourne poet and teacher. We thank her warmly for allowing us permission to republish this piece.**



# The Imperial pilgrimage of Yuan Shikai

by Tony Foley

If you stare long enough at another's face  
it shifts,  
changes,  
flows like melting wax,  
becomes another face,  
another person,  
there is something wrong,

You feel an itch at the base of your skull,  
You are not yourself...

You feel inconstant desire,  
a tidal surge ruled by the moon  
like your face is ruled by eyes,  
eyes gazing across a plaza littered with bleeding statues  
see completion in rubble,  
totality in entropy.

Can you ever understand another's emotion,  
know the deepest content of another's thought?  
You grasp at symbols as a drunkard grasps the bottle,  
hunt for archetypes in bewildering fecundity  
under the world canopy jungle.

You awake as Yuan Shikai<sup>1</sup> on a cherry blossom  
morning,  
but the Imperial pilgrimage has ended  
and you will never occupy the Dragon Throne,  
you are the skeleton of a warlord  
with vacant eye sockets which never see the lotus;  
an insect skimming across a stagnant pond,  
separated by surface tension from the muddy depths,  
above divided from below,  
the face in the mirror is not yours.

You pluck pieces from a mosaic created by unknown  
hands,  
your fingers bleed  
cut by splinters of worthless glass,  
a window closed to that distant world  
once so near,  
now lost to my mind,  
you are not me,  
I am not myself,  
not in this fragment of feeling.

Perhaps you are Akhenaten<sup>2</sup> replying to the mayor of  
Byblos.  
Eternity waits for you to die the true death,  
misunderstood,  
forgotten even by the pale rays of dawn.  
But no,  
you are not Akhenaten,  
he has long become one with the dust of millennia,  
you are not Akhenaten.

You are not yourself...

The vine hangs heavy with sorrow,  
your instinct is to hack and slash,  
money is your machete,  
your structure is a complex problem in organic  
chemistry,  
your creed an open-cut mine,  
a containment pond overflowing with the last flood of  
misery,  
your tears are sulphuric acid,  
your saliva strontium 90,  
your heart is public property,  
there is leprosy in your soul.

Your life is a flowchart with branches always leading to  
the negative,  
avenues of negatives lined with crucified dreams,  
the no, no, no, of yourself,  
endless denial of yourself,  
infinite reflection of infinite regress,  
bottomless pit of Being.

Is it ignorance or complicity which attracts  
punishment?  
If despair has many faces can innocence sleep in peace?  
You, me, and a song on the breeze,  
a name called from dreams,  
is this a foretaste of pain or lick of astringent pleasure?

You must stay in a difficult equilibrium,  
buoyed by the minor victory of life  
as absence of personal death,  
then slink back to that unearned solitude,  
relieved of responsibility,  
free to be nothing but the scent of a rose,  
the hum of a bee.

You are the winds of change,  
the mind of God,  
a journey without purpose,  
destination without substance,

If you stare long enough at another's face  
it shifts,  
changes,  
flows like melting wax,  
becomes another face,  
another person,  
there is something wrong,

You feel an itch at the base of your skull,  
You are not yourself.

<sup>1</sup> Yuan Shikai was military Governor of Beijing at the fall of the Qing Empire. He became the first President of the new Chinese Republic. He later declared himself emperor and was undertaking the traditional imperial pilgrimage to various significant Taoist locations when he died in 1916.

<sup>2</sup> Akhenaten was Pharaoh of Egypt for seventeen years until his death around 1336 BC. He attempted to introduce a form of monotheism based upon Aten, a Sun deity. He was the husband of Nefertiti and father of Tutankhamen

# The thieves

by *Eva Chen*

Miss Drake from number 333 is a witch. She was the most detestable animal any of us had ever met. We'd hear things about her that made even our noses screw up in dislike. The gossip would travel like bullets in our small obscured homes; we'd live anywhere away from the witch and her kinsfolk. Everyday, the gossip would tell us of how she would cackle at our poor children on the street and kick them around. She would taunt us with mouth-watering aromas of her concoctions. Although she was evil, the smells of her food were enough to make us dribble on the dirty brown ground.

We'd watch from the street to see her coming out from the door of her horrible white vehicle with large black wheels that spun and spun around. She would come out carrying a large broomstick. We would watch in revulsion from a safe distance, behind a bush or in it, and through the sunny air and chirping atmosphere we'd whisper, 'Witch!'

But the hiss would fade before it got to her inhuman ears.

When she wasn't outside on her veranda, she'd be inside her den. Inside that lair with the heavy door and ominous looming beams that rose up to join the balcony. It was covered completely in wood—a sanctuary for her, a hell for us. We'd hear her and her kin talking and laughing. Noises would blast out through the curtained windows also. Music, we thought they called it.

During those times, her kind would walk into her den holding plates of gourmet food, dressed in the most bizarre clothing: robes that cut off at the knees and bared their shoulders, and feet elevated on shoes with sticks. Heels? The men would wear black and look as though they had no outline, just one slim rectangle all the way down to their shiny black shoes. The only thing un-black was their little coloured bow ties under their chins; they looked quite like mouse whiskers actually.

But that day, when we waited in the bush, it was silent. There was no Miss Drake or booming noises. Silence. But the aromas were still there. The fragrance drifted lazily into our noses and we all dribbled with hunger. Miss Drake was apparently busy for another one of her gatherings tonight.

'Hooray!' we cried as we zipped through the path and up to the veranda.

Luckily, there was not one of Miss Drake's kinsfolk anywhere. She was gone—for now. Aromas were taking over our every sense as we made our way quietly inside the house.

It was big. We gasped at the vast wooden walls, wondering how long it'd take for us to reach them. And the blue sky above was replaced by a white ceiling. Large sofas loomed and tables stood their ground, even when we bumped them. The rugs proved a long trek as we frequently got tangled in their curls. We finally made it into another room, this one tiled white. Here, there were more benches holding dishes and cutlery on top and a large broomstick lay against one table with ten chairs set around it.

The scent here became even more powerful—manipulative. Without another thought we each zipped off, dashing with excitement in search for the unknown wonder.

Then the door that we entered through unlocked at the latch and shrieked open. Fear burst into our bellies and we all rolled under the table to avoid being seen. The dust was enough to cause us to sneeze.

Loud footfalls pounded against the wood as they moved into the room. We held our breaths as Miss Drake walked in carrying a copper pan that she set high on the surface of the table above us.

Her red shiny shoes kicked up the dust. One of us sneezed and our bellies twisted in horror.

But Miss Drake was speaking. Her incomprehensible voice drowned out every noise. We let out staggering sighs of relief. With unwavering alertness, we saw her move away from the table. Held against her ear was a small, thin, rectangular object. Her sneering red lips moved rapidly against it.

Without warning, our stomachs literally growled with hunger. We all gazed longingly up at the underside of the table and beyond to the copper pan—our goal was inside. The scent wafted out with such intensity, we were entranced.

Then our chance came. Miss Drake continued to yak as she turned and stepped out the door again. Her footfalls faded.

Breathless with hunger and excitement, we dashed out from under the table.

We wondered if committing a crime in the witch's lair would be terrible. What if she found out? Her broomstick was merely an object, yet it looked as if it would zoom out to alert her of any unlikely robbers. Our stomachs clenched at the thought as we climbed onto its evil handle, making our way up onto the table; the pan looming closer. We scrambled furiously into it and dove into its contents. Apple Pie! It was so large! We rejoiced as we all dug in.

A few minutes later the entire pie had disappeared and we lazed on the table. Feeling full we rubbed our plump bellies. Then sleep overcame all of us.

It was faint, but we all heard it—a high-pitched scream tore at our eardrums. We woke with a start.

But before any of our eyes adjusted pain erupted. The table was no long under us; we sprawled on the tiled floor.

We squeaked in utter fear. It was Miss Drake. Her long billowing-brown hair whipped like tendrils around her mad face. Her broomstick was in her hands. The witch cursed in a different tongue before she lunged, swinging her weapon. We were sent flying out of the room, overcome by sheer strength. We landed painfully on the hard surface of the veranda, our backsides aching. Miss Drake was still shrieking; still crazy. She whacked with her broomstick and we tumbled into the bushes below. She screamed hysterically again and brandished her knuckled fists at us. Then she disappeared back into her lair, door slamming shut.

Night came now. A slow breezy wind ran through the witch's town.

'Witch!' we all hissed grumpily, as we made our way home battered and bruised.

Life was tough being a rat.

**Eva Chen won the Hobsons Bay Youth Services Creative Writing and Poetry Competition in 2009. She is a student at Mount Saint Joseph Girls' College. She writes as a hobby and enjoys discovering new ideas anywhere and everywhere.**



# Were I you

by *Peter Lingard*

Were I you young man,  
I would live a life  
not as mine began  
when religious strife  
and national pride  
churned up the earth.  
War on every side  
created a dearth.

Polluted the air  
and destroyed the land.  
Poisoned waters fair,  
catered to demand.  
(Excused all for God,  
despised odd mortals.  
My life was a fraud  
spurred on by baubles.)

Supported bent pols.  
Lined the deep pockets  
of both crooks and molls,  
makers of rockets.  
(Led a sordid life  
with a mansion, two  
and celebrity wife  
who soon said adieu.)

You must make a stand,  
be the new trustees  
Take care of the land,  
mounts, rivers and trees.  
Make peace through the world,  
set every man free.  
Leave all flags unfurled,  
end adversity

Look out for the young,  
protect them from harm,  
no matter their tongue.  
For them let's disarm.  
Make waters run pure,  
clean up our beaches.  
For disease find cure,  
protect all species  
Retire the soldier.

Let him till the soil,  
be an achiever  
using honest toil.  
To combat terror,  
be decent and true.  
Rule without error  
and peace will ensue

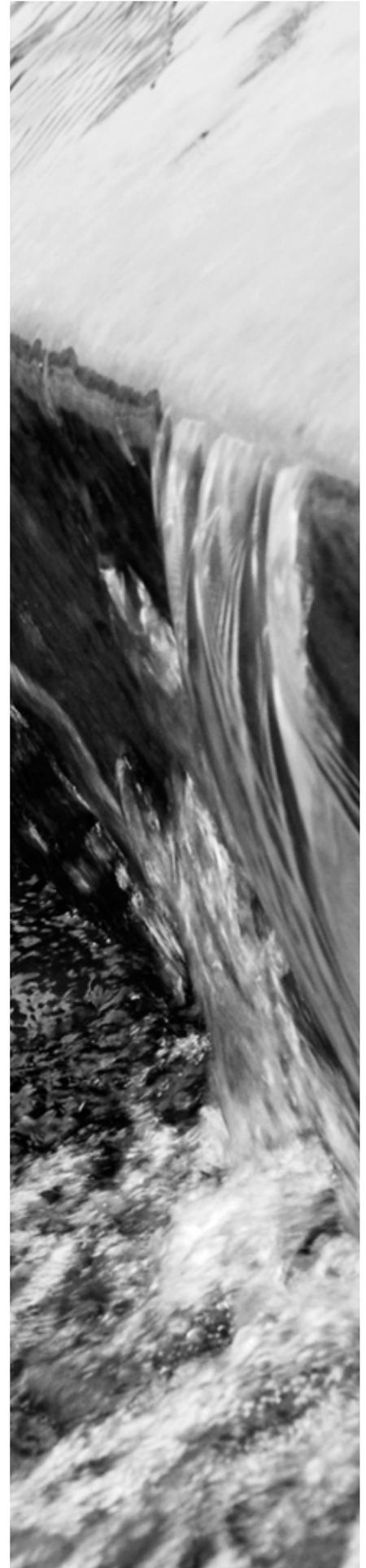
End plastic landfills,  
ban chemical waste.  
Stop deadly oil spills,  
we are a disgrace.  
Wean young from all drugs  
and alcohol, too.  
Encourage more hugs,  
they're long overdue.

Put an end to greed  
and urge charity.  
Do this with all speed  
unabashedly.  
Let love rule the day  
in all decisions  
and never betray  
or make accusations

Look to the future,  
learn from our mistakes.  
Not all was failure,  
it's never too late.  
Create rustic idylls  
where copses and streams  
and bright daffodils  
all bathe in sunbeams.

And when the time comes  
in the autumn years  
to drop wise crumbs  
on receptive ears  
remember these words  
and bring them to date  
so listeners are stirred  
to care for their fate.

**Peter Lingard is a Professional  
Writing and Editing student at VU.**



# Fast cars

by *Michellina Van Loder*

AC/DC's 'Highway to hell' is pumping out from the stereo. My boyfriend and I are at the traffic lights. David is revving his beloved original XU-1 Torana. The guy next to us is revving his Monaro; it's yellow and shiny. *Oh no, not again*, I think to myself. The light turns green and David hits the pedal to the floor. I am fourteen and this is my third date with him. I have to be home by midnight. It's six-thirty, a warm summer night and there's still plenty of fun to be had. In line with my rebellious nature I am not wearing a seatbelt—I never do.

I watch the speedometer quickly reach 100. We're approaching the Goodwood Road underpass; the speed limit is 60km. Before I know it, we're down in the underpass shaped like a tight 's'. 'Slow down tight bend up ahead 40km'. An electric alarm is ringing through my body. The speedometer is up to 140 and we've passed the Monaro, but I don't feel excited about winning the drag. For some weird reason that I've never understood I reach for the seat belt and clip it into its holder.

As we come out of the underpass the speedometer reaches 160. I look up and see—almost in slow motion—a white car coming out from a side street on the right. It looks as though it has stopped in the middle of the road right in our path. The Torana slams straight into the side of the car. I close my eyes in fright; I feel terrified. The Torana bounces to the left and slams into a concrete telegraph pole, with steel bollards on either side. It doesn't stop there. It flips over onto its roof and travels another fifty meters up the road.

I'm hanging upside down in the car. I open my eyes but all I can see is red—blood. I know I'm bleeding, but I feel no pain. The screeching of metal is loud in my ears; it's deafening and seems to go on forever. I start to pray, 'Please don't let me die!' Inside, I know everything will be alright—I know it.

Finally the car stops and everything goes silent; the music has stopped. David asks me if I'm okay—I can't answer; I'm in shock. My nostrils fill with the smell of petrol. A passerby stops, kneels down, puts his head through the passenger window and asks if I need help. I still can't speak. Someone yells out, 'The petrol tank is leaking—the car's going to blow!' Spurred into action, I find the seatbelt clip, even though I can't see, and land on the roof of the car. I feel broken glass pierce my knees. I climb out onto the road and lie there. Someone scoops me up, carries me across the road, and puts me down to lie on the cool grass. I look up and see a cross; I'm lying on a church lawn. I hear sirens in the distance.

More people stop and get out of their cars; soon there are a dozen people standing around. The ambulance arrives and paramedics treat me; they place me on a stretcher and drive me to the hospital.

In the emergency ward I start to feel the pain. I ask the nurse what's wrong with me.

'You have cuts to your face and head as well as a broken ankle.' She tells me to lie still and the Doctor will be in soon.

I try to sit up because I want to see. My left foot is twisted inwards and points to the right at an unnatural angle; my ankle is broken in half and I can see into it; blood and bone. It looks a mess. I start to scream. The pain is now much worse.

When my parents arrive, the looks on their faces deepen my fear. I am given something for the pain, taken for x-rays, and then to the operating theatre. I undergo two operations: an ankle reconstruction and micro-surgery to my left eye. The top part of my head and face went through the windscreen on impact, and my left eyelid needs to be stitched back in to place. I receive a further 156 stiches to my scalp and forehead.

David cut his feet when getting out of the car and received no other injuries.

**Michellina Van Loder is a Professional Writing and Editing student at VU.**

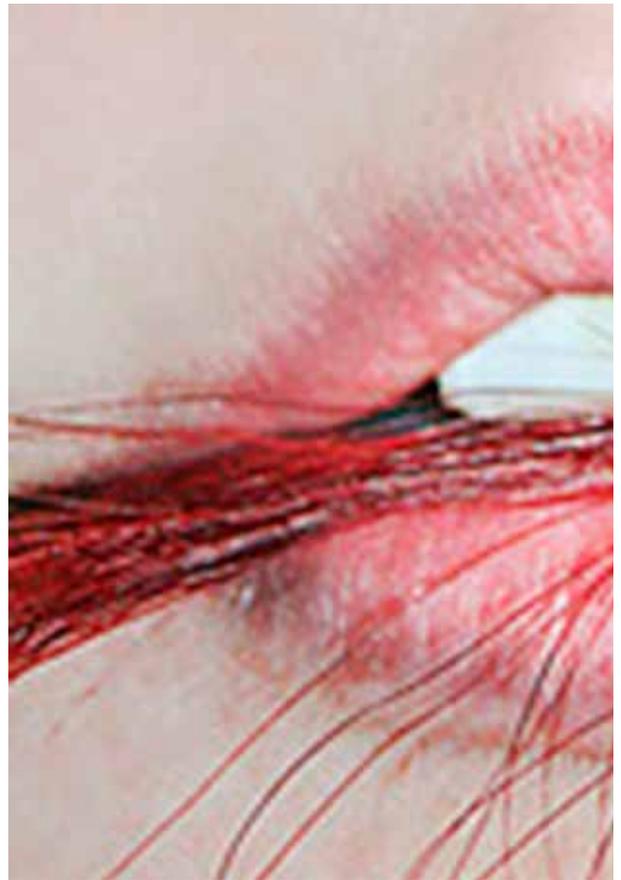


# Live

*by Kassie Blair*

Life is too short  
To wake up with regret  
Love the people who treat you right  
Forget the ones who don't  
Believe that everything happens for a reason  
If you get a chance, take it  
If it changes your life, let it  
Nobody said it would be easy  
They just promise it will be WORTH IT!

**Kassie Blair is a Work Education student at VU.**



# The past

*by Daniel Thomson*

Part 1

The past hides many things, some considered to be merely legend and myth. But once the past catches up to the present everything changes. An ancient mystery has been solved and sparks confidence to solve more ancient mysteries. But, one mystery accidentally awakens an ancient evil that has laid dormant for 1000s of years, and has come forth to wreak havoc across the world. Only two teenagers can stop it, for they are the descendents of the people who locked it away centuries ago. They now have to defeat it because they can't lock it away anymore.

To be continued...

**Daniel Thomson is a Work Education student at VU.**

# Lionheart Summer

by *Kevin Densley*

(*Adelaide , 1980*)

The vines twisted around the pergola  
in my grandmother's backyard  
were gnarled and old;  
the afternoon heat unbearable.  
But when evening came  
the sea breeze wafted through  
and we'd sit outside drinking beer or wine  
until the darkness fell.

Inside the bluestone house,  
the temperature never rose;  
afternoons I'd fold  
into a comfy chair,  
frosty Southwark Bitter in hand,  
and watch Test Cricket on TV.  
Or else I'd lounge in the parlour,  
on the carpet, near the piano,  
leafing through sheet music like 'Ramona',  
a South Sea maiden on its sepia title page.  
On the wall was a hand-tinted photo  
of my step-grandfather in soldier garb,  
blue-eyed and full of vigour,  
taken before New Guinea .  
Now he'd be coughing  
in the next room, battling  
emphysema and losing.  
That summer at my grandmother's,  
I'd bought Kate Bush's Lionheart LP.  
Flame-haired English beauty Kate

posed on the cover in a lionsuit,  
a pantomime lion head nearby.  
A song on her record  
was the summer's refrain:  
'Oh England , my lionheart,  
I'm in your garden  
fading fast in your arms ...'



**Kevin Densley lives near Geelong, Victoria. His poetry has appeared in various Australian publications, including *Quadrant*, *Adelaide Review*, *Space*, *Verandah* and *New England Review*, and numerous UK magazines, including *Other Poetry*, *The Journal*, *Monkey Kettle* and *Cadenza*. He also writes plays (with Steve Taylor). These have been performed Australia-wide and in the US. Densley and Taylor have co-authored twelve books and one CD-Rom, mainly play collections for young people. Densley's latest book is a poetry collection, *Vigorous Vernacular*, published by Picaro Press in 2008.**

# Artwork

by *Ashley Vincini*

My feet make a slapping sound as they pad around the vinyl floor. It is always cool, but never cold. Looking around my bedroom, I consider just how much it has changed since I was young. Now the walls are a deep purple; we repainted it this year as I had become sick of the chipped and faded light blue paint. When I was fourteen you could barely see what colour the walls were. I used to cover them with pencil and Texta manga drawings and posters of my favourite band, Green Day. I liked this at the time; it reminded me of one of those night-time coffee shops or blues clubs they show in movies. I look at the left corner of my room from the door, where I had set up a small table and covered it in pagan ornaments: candles; incense; tarot cards; crystals; bowls of salt. I still remember sitting on the cool vinyl floor with a lit candle. I would stare at the flame and let my thoughts wander.

When I was fifteen I got rid of the table; I wasn't as interested in paganism anymore. I also took down all the drawings and placed them in display books which are still here in a crate somewhere. Instead, I pinned a sari on my wall that my friend, Christine, bought me as a gift. It covered half the wall in tie-dye orange with black print images of dolphins, yin-yangs and tribal markings. It was silky to touch, although it was often covered in dust. That was one of the reasons I took it down a year later; the second reason was because I was getting rid of anything my friends from school had given me. As I run my hands along the wall I can feel the pinholes. From one of the pins holding up the sari I hung a blue glass pentagram. My friend Jeane knocked it and I was worried she had broken it. I guess I just couldn't part with that side of me just yet. I think this was also the case with my Green Day posters; I took them off the walls and placed them inside the doors of my cupboard instead. Eventually, I did find the courage to throw them out. One drawing from the past stayed on the walls for many years later; a manga girl holding a scythe with a crescent moon hanging in the sky, rendered in graphite pencil. Now, the gold frame it was in remains, but the picture is gone. Instead, a blue water dragon rendered on Adobe Photoshop lives there. I love the blurring and smudging effects.

Only two years later it all changed again. Year 12, and I felt I needed room for notes, so half the walls were covered in butcher's paper. I can still remember the, 'that's like crazy people who write on walls' comment from my friend, and future boyfriend, Steven. The rest of the walls were covered in oil and acrylic paintings. I can see two still remain. The first is a half-finished replica of Van Gogh's *Irises* which ended up with song lyrics scrawled in permanent marker all over it. The second is a black-on-white painting of female eyes and only the nails of a hand held up to her implied face...I could never throw away art; it was too much a part of me. This was also the time I decided to use my window-sill as a bookshelf. I recall the smell of the books when I would open them; they smelt like old paper and vinegar. A whiff from my new book cupboard proves some of them still do.

Nowadays, my room is purple. When we first painted it I nearly had a heart-attack; it was way too bright! I told Mum it looked immature and stupid. But, once it dried, it seemed to change depending on what light it was seen in. In natural light it would be vibrant with pinkish hues and the room would look huge, but by the yellow light of my Japanese-style lamps it would make the room look warm and cosy. There are five new paintings, each a testament to the natural elements as well as the temples in the video game, *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. I believe they are the best home-decor attempt I have made. I thought I would hate my walls being so bare after so many years of clutter. In fact, I now find it makes my room look cleaner and more inviting; less like the home of a psychopath. Running my fingers along the wall, I can still feel the bumps of old pinholes and paint chips. It seems that whenever something in my life changes, my room changes too. It was when I stopped hanging around with people who I used to play guitar with that I took down the Green Day posters. I think I did this not because I was angry or upset, but because having those things just didn't feel right. It was as if the tune of my life had a subtle difference—a dissonance—and removing the Green Day posters restored harmony. I now realise my room is an extension of myself; it is the canvas of my life.

**Ashley Vincini is a third-year Bachelor of Education student.**

# Poetry twilight bus tour...take II

by *Hugh Deacon*

A merry band of poets: Kristin Henry; Tom Petsinis; Lisa Gorton; and, poetry lovers, gathered at Footscray on the evening of 26th March, 2010, to set off on another adventure organised by Bruno Lettieri.

Once again, he had managed to score a red double-decker bus. Before setting off, the driver came upstairs and warned us of some perils we might encounter: tree branches; shop awnings; low-hanging powerlines; and maybe, the bus rocking about in the wind. Great; I was starting to think I should have stayed home to watch the footy.

The trip down Melbourne Road was rather tame, and then we hung a left onto the Westgate Bridge. The wind was coming in from the south and the bus started to sway a bit. I wasn't scared; until someone pointed out that we had a convoy of cars following us with their headlights on. It was like being in a funeral procession. Omg, we're all going to die! I threw down a glass of red and every thing was rosy.

Our first stop was a little cove in White Reserve. It was overcast and a light drizzle of rain was falling. It wasn't unpleasant, everyone huddled together and thoroughly enjoyed the poets' enthusiastic readings.

Back on the bus and off to Lagoon Pier for the second readings. Bruno was busy providing light and coats for the poets. We were sipping wine and nibbling on snacks. In the background the Westgate was lit up and snaked toward the sky adding to the magical ambience.

The third reading was on the pier at Kerferd Road. The poets and their audience were still enthusiastic. A group of fisherman arrived for their night time activity: sinking a few VBs and wetting a line.

It was back on the bus and homeward bound. But it didn't stop there. Margaret McCarthy read her prize winning poem Westgate sister as we travelled over the bridge; a fitting end to a special night.

Judging by the feedback, next year will be even bigger. Bruno is going to need a red triple-decker bus! And he is just the man to arrange it.

**Hugh Deacon is a VU writing graduate.**



# Dead in Melbourne

*by John Reeves*

this morning I woke up dead in Melbourne  
mashed and mangled beneath the wheels of the St Kilda tram  
passers-by stopped and looked, held their mouths in repulsion  
not a pretty sight but they do run trams down the middle of the street  
so such tragedies cannot be unexpected

today I woke up dead in Melbourne  
I threw my self off the West gate bridge, several times  
proving the fact that you can bounce  
when you hit the water at terminal velocity

today I woke up dead in Melbourne  
I went back to sleep just to make sure and woke up dead again  
got up went out and bought The Age to check the obituaries  
seems I didn't rate a mention at all

today I woke up dead in Melbourne  
beaten to death by a gang of drunken lesbians from Thornbury  
who cut off my testicles and stole my sperm to inseminate  
a future race of male independent females, i guess  
that's something to be proud of as I wasn't using the sperm much anyway

today I woke up dead in Melbourne feeling something less than trendy  
sprawled against the Gucci shop window in Toorak Road  
I might as well have been invisible  
no one stopped to check if I was alive until about 11am

today I woke up dead in Melbourne in the back seat of a black and yellow cab  
as it circled the city looking for rides at 5am  
the cab driver let me off the fare saying,  
'sorry mate, yer dead, I am honest man I can't charge you for that'

today I woke up dead in Melbourne with a fresh uneaten kebab in my hand,  
that an old Greek guy had given to me cos he thought I looked like I needed a good feed,  
a kind gesture to be sure but it didn't keep me from dying

today I woke up dead in Melbourne in the park across from the Dandenong train station  
I was sleeping under a tree and a mob of bored urban youths  
stoned me to death for the fun of it, seemingly under the impression I was a no good bum

today I woke up dead in Melbourne in the morgue of the St Vincent's Hospital  
I smiled, the morgue attendant just rolled her eyes and slammed the fridge door shut  
obviously not in the mood for jokes Monday being what it is and death being a busy business

today I woke up dead in Melbourne  
and lived to tell the tale

**John Reeves is a poet/songwriter and musician.**

# Questions for you on Mother's Day

*by Madeleine Herron*

From what was your ignorance born  
What gives it sustenance each day  
What reason is so compelling  
To deny what you created  
To sacrifice at birth is a dull ache  
To wait until the fifteenth year is a burgeoning disease

From what was your ignorance born  
How do you breathe blackened air  
How does joy survive in your gritty wasteland  
Do you choke on your failure  
Do you scratch the unrelenting itch  
Do you hear me screaming while you sleep

**Madeleine Herron studies Creative Writing at VU.**



## Two years ago

*by Martin Flanagan*

The man next door  
was beaten as a child.  
Until two years ago,  
He had never mentioned it.  
Now, in drink,  
he talks of little else.

Two years ago,  
I looked at my parents  
and saw old flowers  
of the sort one finds  
in an over-run garden,  
hidden by growth  
yet each year re-appearing,  
taking their place  
in the sun, wind and rain.

**Martin Flanagan is a senior Journalist at *The Age*. This piece is from Martin Flanagan's booklet of poetry, *Shorts*.**

# Fetters

by Marie James

*The story continues...*

The ticking of the clock became louder. Her stomach was churning and she prayed silently that she wouldn't be sick.

Her ears pricked and she heard the doorknob turn. She took a deep breath and couldn't stop herself turning slowly from the waist to watch the door. It stood ajar and remained that way for a long moment. The scent of the cologne in the room was suddenly stronger. The door was pushed open and there he stood, all six-foot-two of him, in his perfectly-pressed Armani suit, shiny Italian loafers and dark purple tie.

They watched each other for what felt like hours until Trey took a deep breath and turned away. He shut the door behind him and strode around to the other side of his desk, all the while avoiding looking at her. Andie turned slowly in her chair to keep him in sight.

The leather swivel chair squeaked when Trey sank into it. He rolled it forward and then folded his hands on the desk in front of him. Almost absentmindedly, he reached out and adjusted the position of the photo on his desk just slightly to the right. Only then did he raise his gaze and look at her again.

Most people, Andie thought, would take all this to mean that Trey was willing to talk. But she knew better. Sitting behind the desk put him in the position of power. From there he could control what was said, or so he thought; Andie had never been one to let someone dictate what she said or did, as he well knew.

'Andie.'

His voice was professional, as if she'd come in for a consultation, and her stomach tightened even more. Any stranger listening in would never have known that they'd been best friends in high school and then married just after graduation. They wouldn't know that the two of them had spent hours careening around San Francisco in the black BMW he'd been given for his sixteenth birthday or that they'd wiled away weekends watching black and white movies when they should have been studying. In a school populated by snobby rich kids who Andie, even with her wealthy family, had never been able to relate to, he had been her saving grace.

'Andie.' He sounded impatient now. 'What are you doing here?'

She licked her bottom lip and turned her phone over in her hands. 'I'm here to apologise.'

His eyebrows shot up and he let out a short, harsh laugh. 'Apologise? Aren't you about ten years late?'

Her gaze fell to the desk. 'Better late than never.'

'It doesn't work that way! You left me! And you couldn't even look me in the eye as you did. I got home from work and found a note saying you'd gone to visit your sister. A week you said you'd be gone. And four weeks later I received divorce papers. How do you think I felt?'

Her head shot up. 'What about me? I had to sit around in that stupid apartment all day while you went to college or work! You thought it would be a good idea if I took a year off, got used to being married. I was eighteen! I got lonely; bored.'

'So you decided to disappear? What have you been doing all this time anyway? Shacking up with someone and then driving away after he's left for work?'

'No!' She slammed a fist down onto his desk and his photo jumped. 'There has been no one since I left, not until recently anyway, and he's the reason I'm here.'

'Why, so you can buy my silence? Did you tell him you were pure and innocent?'

'Actually, he told me to come and see you. We have a life together and I love him so much, but he knows that the only thing I was never able to let go of in my life was you, because I felt guilty. So don't you sit there and condemn me. I came here to set things right, knowing there was a very good chance you'd kick me out the moment you laid eyes on me. And if you want to do it now, fine, go ahead. At least I can go back to Doyle and say that I've done my bit.'

She took a shuddering breath large enough to make herself light-headed and then stood, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

'I'm sorry I came. Obviously I should have left the past in the past. I won't bother you again.'

Andie spun on her heel and stalked to the door. Her hand had just closed around the knob when he spoke.

'Doyle?' he asked quietly.

Clenching her hand around the knob, she turned to face him. 'Yes. That's his name. Well, it's his surname. His first name is Blake, but no one calls him that.'

He stared off into the distance for a long time, making Andie think he had nothing more to say. She was just about to turn away when he mumbled, 'Where do you guys live?'

She sighed. 'Little place called Riley's Dawn in Arizona.'

He frowned and swung his gaze back to her. 'Arizona? All this time you've been practically a neighbour?'

*To be continued...*

Marie James is a Professional Writing and Editing student at VU.

# It Doesn't Stop

by *Katie Dircks*

Weigh me down.  
I fear I'm falling off this wagon.  
Tether me down  
with a bucket of pills  
a handful of cheese  
and keep your fluids up.  
It's very important.  
Everybody's searching  
for the next best thing  
but not me  
I'm moving to the sticks  
where nobody lives  
where I will find  
the next best place to begin.  
'I'm not looking down at you!'  
You shout from high atop  
that pedestal I built  
as you looked down on me.

We were never a match  
just a spark to ignite  
for a flickering flame  
that goes out alone on cold nights.

Anyway  
that match was cancelled.

So we'll call it a scapegoat  
call it a day  
but don't call me  
my ears are ringing  
my phone is not  
it's off the hook.

And so am I for now.

But it doesn't stop.

**Katie Dircks is a first year Creative Arts  
Industries student at VU.**

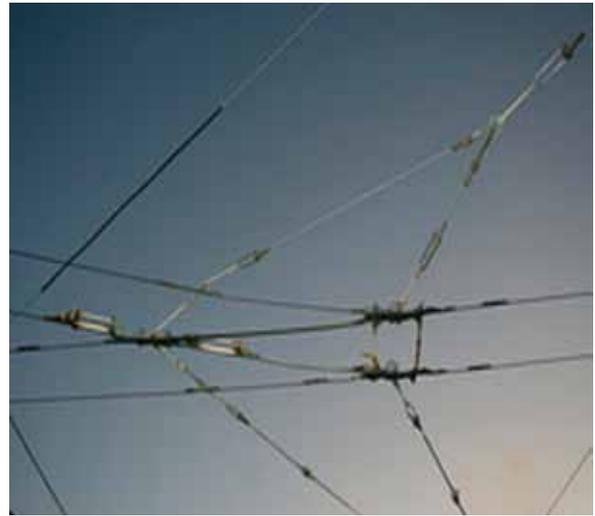


## History as it was

*by Monika Athanasiou*

Never will my brethren see my downfall,  
Ha! I will not give them the satisfaction!  
They like to see me as old and babbling,  
Betrothed to the memories they take no  
interest in.  
They are busy with their own lives  
And their own version of history,  
What do they care for the recollections  
Of one who has lived it?  
They try to tear the fabric of my life  
And refashion it into a patchwork quilt  
After their own liking.  
I will not let them.  
I will guard what is mine to the end.  
For they are not my friends.  
They are my enemies,  
Who work against me  
Towards their own mischievous ends.  
They demand proof and written fact.  
An old man's memories are no good to them,  
Even though those days are clear in my mind  
—clearer than they've ever been.  
They want proof? I'll find proof!  
I will dig it out of dusty trunks and tattered  
photo albums,  
But I will not give it to them.  
I will save it for someone worthy  
For these are no friends of mine:  
They've betrayed the truth.

**Monika Athanasiou is a Professional Writing  
and Editing student at VU.**



## I can still feel

*by Steven Clark*

The sun is shining outside  
I can still feel the cold air  
Going through my body  
  
My body is starting to give up too easy  
I feel the flood of aches and pain  
Throughout my body  
  
It's taking longer for my body to  
Fire up these days  
  
It's taking my body longer to get up  
From the chair  
  
My eyes keep on closing through daylight  
And stay awake through the night  
  
The sun is shining outside  
I can still feel the flood of coldness  
Going through my body  
  
My body is starting to give up too easy  
I feel the fire throughout my body  
  
My body is on the edge of a breakdown.

**Steven Clark is a Professional Writing and  
Editing student at VU.**

# Rough Towels

*by Carolyn Sandford*

At the age of fourteen, going into the city on the train by yourself to a big department store to apply for a casual job was the thing to do.

I worked at the Buckley and Nunn Emporium. Now it's called, David Jones. On more than one holiday season, I was assigned to Manchester (downstairs). I spent at least two Christmas periods working there.

Buckleys held their famous White Sale at Christmas. People came from all over the country to take advantage of the special offers. While the floor seemed extensive, I felt I knew where most things belonged. It was important for staff to know all about the stock. In familiarising ourselves with the products, their prices and location, as well as any overnight changes that occurred, staff should be able to answer any customer query.

It was a busy morning on White Sale day. With quite a few sales already processed, I felt I was really earning my money. My desire to relax and do my own thing for forty-five minutes made a lot of sense. Lunchtime was never spent lunching. It was a genuine pastime then, to go browsing through the LPs in the upstairs 'market' of the Inn Shoppe. The time to go back always came by so swiftly. On the big clock against the back wall it showed 12:45. I took off.

Rushing for the staff entry at the end of the laneway, I was hoping not to get caught by the floor lady as I quickly raced to my area. All was well, so I straightened my clothes and breathed a sigh of relief. And, as things go, without me even trying to sell, a lady walked right up, intent on making a significant purchase. She said she came from a farm property a few hours away and never missed the White Sale. She asked me where the towels were. I led her to towels arranged for a promotional display. Just as I was about to inform her of their merit, she caught me with a gentle tap on the arm.

'No! no! 'These are no good.'

I was stunned by her comment and she noticed my dismay. In a softer voice she quietly explained how soft towels never dry. She said they seemed to slide over your skin leaving a tacky film. The towels she wanted were an English brand and she knew they were here.

After a walk around the display she took a package of two cream-coloured towels from underneath a nearby shelf—the bulk of the stock was kept on shelves. The cream coloured towels were protected by see-through plastic. She wanted to buy all of them. Turning one pack over, she opened them.

'Feel that!' she said. They were indeed quite rough, but also beautifully made.

In every linen cupboard that I have ever had, hidden from display, is my collection of well-worn, but neatly folded, rough towels.

**Carolyn Sandford is the VCAL Automotive Literacy teacher at VU.**



# A few angles on Saturday Night

by *Chris Blüms*

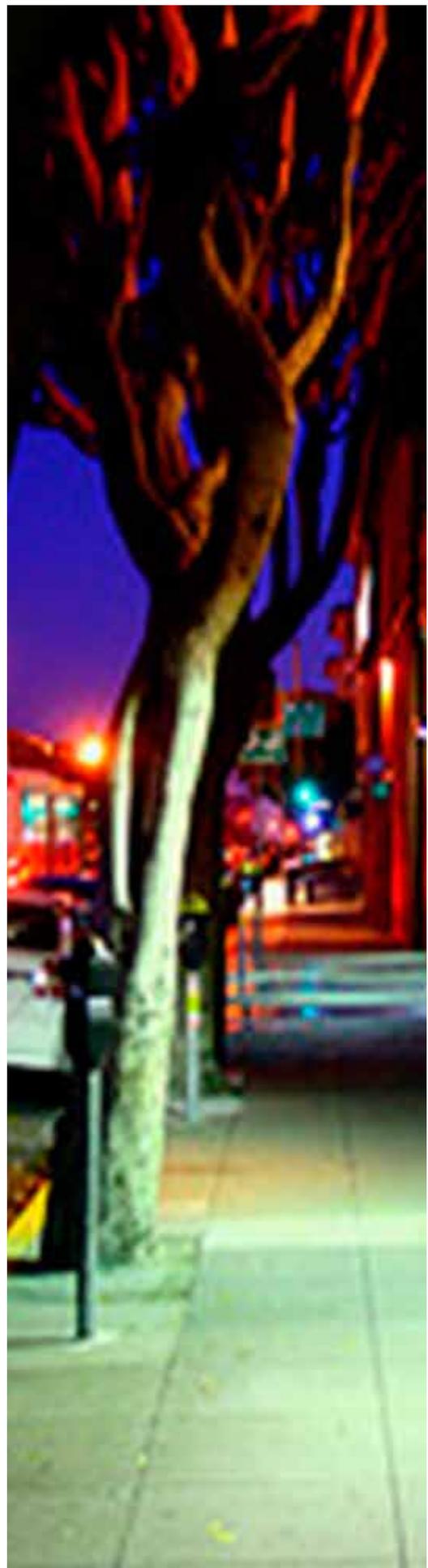
Saturday night.

The Night... Where dreams are made.

The Night... Where Nightmares become true.

Saturday Night, Saturday Night. So many things happen on Saturday night for so many people. And it's pretty cool, yeah? All those big time players, tryna get themselves a piece of somebody are out with there cheesy lines, Those lines which they've worked so hard against a mirror in the bathroom. Tryna play smooth, tryna sound good for whoever is lucky to flirt back. Saturday Night is good for those romantic fools who believe there is only one person on the planet. And this is the night to take them out and give them a part of the world that is often replicated in the Hollywood movies. It's been a long week of 5 days, 9 to 5. and what a nice time to take that lovely and special person who tickles the soul for a couple of hours on this night, where you don't need to worry about battling the snooze button, next morning? Saturday night where John Travolta is challenged every freakin' night by some of the craziest and most energetic dance performances of all time. These dances just don't make it to the big screen, but they're just as good on the dance floor. I'm surer there are plenty of cats out there who are just willing to bust a move, making a scene at the nightclub, walking in, strutting in, winking at the ladies, and high fives to the fellas. The music hits and bang, it's on. Saturday Night, Where the warriors of the football code tie on their colours, Head out to battle the enemy just to keep them selves alive in the imaginary ladder of points. We got the networks watching, We got our fans watching, and We got the hostility rising as these gladiators of today are taking these rocks, and breaching the defence all in the name of competition and entertainment. Saturday night is sometimes, is just A good night to catch up with those friends you ain't seen in a while, How's work been? How's school? didn't you hear? Oh yeah, what about her? Yeah! I heard about him too! Good to see ya, mate! It's been a while, Thank you for Saturday night. And On this night, some people can just unwind and relax on their own, at their own pace, by themselves, and just sticking it easy at home. by a warmly lit lamp light, with the television on in the background accompanied by the wandering and forming imagination, all reading a book. Legs up on the couch. In comfortable clothes. That's a good Saturday night. Either way...It's what we make it. Saturday Night.

**Chris Blüms is a music teacher.**



# Excalibur

*by George Athanasiou*

She's uncomfortable tonight  
As she dances in the limelight  
The loud man thinks she's easy  
Makes her feel uneasy  
And he's being rather sleazy  
So I rush to her side  
like the on-coming tide  
With my conscience as my guide  
And my eyes open wide  
But she's still not aware  
The reason that I'm standing there  
I exchange a quick glance and a stare  
But she doesn't seem to care  
So I bring out Excalibur  
For a girl of her calibre  
Inside the dragon's lair  
I smell the stench of dirty air  
The smoke plumes are everywhere  
And I'm right in there  
By her side  
With my eyes open wide  
And my conscience as my guide  
Hopefully she'll begin to cotton-on  
It shouldn't take that long  
As she dances to her favourite song  
I wonder do I have the strength to go on  
As I throw my body in the way  
To protect her from the on-coming foray  
Then I remember...  
For a girl of her calibre  
I carry Excalibur.

**George Athanasiou is a Professional Writing and Editing student at VU. He has two poetry collections published: *An Observer's Tales* (2005) and *Tales of Light and Darkness* (2008).**



# HAIKU

*by Christine Kowal*

Yellow willow leaves  
Fletched shafts dropped from slack bowstrings  
Targeting the grass

**Christine Kowal is a teacher and is studying Professional Writing and Editing at VU.**

# Diana, the virgin goddess of the hunt<sup>1</sup>

by *Helen Cerne*

The first time I heard 'Diana' by Paul Anka I was with Gunta, my very best friend, who was Latvian and we were at Sam's Coffee Pot, a café at the busy junction of Geelong and Somerville Roads in West Footscray. At lunchtime this was a haunt for loud truckies and big sweaty labourers who ordered large greasy hamburgers with fried onions and the lot, decades before the ubiquitous blank-yank versions arrived. But the yanks had already invaded our headspace with television and rock'n'roll. It was 1958 and I was nearly eleven. The smell of frying meat wafted all the way down to our school, Kingsville Primary, beckoning us to go out of bounds to buy our lunch in this world of juke boxes and grown-up leering men. Gunta was my age, but always seemed older; she had breasts that bounced, flared skirts with can-can petticoats and she knew how to walk so that her long pony tail and hips could swing in rhythm. I was skinny, flat chested wore little girl cotton dresses with striped or floral patterns, tied at the back with a bow. My long neat plaits never swung even when I twirled real fast and got giddy.

We loved 'Diana', a wonderful song, full of yearning lyrics, pulling us into a world beyond our age. The words ached for something we also felt. As Anka swooned.

We listened and danced together, constantly imagining what it would feel like to have a groovy boy, longing for us as if he was in pain, especially if it was someone like Wayne. Gunta and I had both fallen in love with an older man, a tall blond boy in first form at the local tech. He was thirteen. Every weekend we would go to Sam's and play the juke box and rock together waiting for Wayne to walk by. We'd hide if we saw him coming then follow him to the milk bar where he'd have a malt-shake or shadow him in the newsagency where he'd flick through mags and we'd duck behind the comic stand, or tail him heading for the busy bakers where he bought pineapple pies drowned in whipped mock cream. We were on the chase, in mad pursuit. We wondered about what would happen if we caught him. What would we do then? We dreamed and sang 'Diana'.

One Saturday arvo we followed him all the way to his home. Closing in fast, a hundred yards, then fifty, then twenty yards behind him. We hid behind shrubs, behind trees, behind fences so he wouldn't see us. Then ten yards from his house he stopped, turned and faced us. We stood exposed. He looked different, older, angry, and then he snapped, 'Piss off, you little pervs!'

Gunta and I were mortified. We felt as if we'd been kicked in the guts and cried for a week. When we had time to think about it we realised his voice hadn't sounded like Paul Anka's at all, more like a squeaky animal grunt.<sup>2</sup>

In first form of high school a few of my friends got bikes, which made it easier to pursue potential heartthrobs. We chased one boy in Form Two until he escaped into a phone booth. Ha ha! We'd caught our quarry, but just as we were moving in for the kill a school prefect showed up.

Then to complicate matters Gunta and I both fell in love at the same time with an actor on 'Disneyland' who played Beethoven. When we confessed to our gang about our manic crush, they were appalled, 'Not that curly-haired mad creep!'

We then noticed a boy at school in Form 4 who had the same wild kinky hair as the actor but also had a jaunty swinging walk. We began to hope he too was a tortured musical genius, maybe even tragically flawed, even deaf. One Friday lunchtime, at the school charity fundraiser dance held in the central quadrangle, he asked me to dance; my heart was beating so loudly I couldn't hear the record over the loudspeaker, let alone what he was saying. But then he started to move. My curly-haired creep wasn't deaf; it was worse, he was totally unco—a real dill, awkward and clumsy, all angular limbs and discordant moves. He couldn't even keep time with the beat. Gunta and I quickly walked away from 'Beethoven'.

And then the shoe was on the other foot. Boys started chasing me. One boy with a woeful crew-cut had a crush-and-a-half. He would walk behind me and when I looked around he'd throw a Violet Crumble or a Cherry Ripe right at me as some sort of offering. Then he'd hide behind a bush—pathetic. Then there was this cute boy at the footy. I found myself standing next to this good-looking, smooth-talking, smiling cool guy. The following week he was there again and handed me a photo of himself with his phone number. I rang him twice from a public booth as my parents did not approve

of me dating boys at thirteen. We planned our first date in to the city the next Saturday arvo. We planned to meet at Yarraville station. He got there early and as I approached I saw him standing with a group of girls, chatting up two of my class mates, even handing them his photo with his number. Disgusted, I walked away.

And then there was try-hard Billy: a red-haired, freckly blushing lad at my church youth group, who'd show up any time at my place to chat with my polite mother, or hang around after church making small talk so he could walk me home, even when I was rude to him. I tried avoiding him. Early one Saturday morning I saw him crossing the road to my house. I went upstairs, had a long shower, washing and drying my hair for over an hour, but when I came back down to the kitchen he was still there, smiling, glowing red and waiting for me. I'd finally twigged how bull-headed he was.

The next Sunday he told me the church youth club was going to the flix in the CBD the following Saturday night to see *West Side Story*. Did I want to go with them? Did I? I was dying to go as I loved the idea of a musical based on my favourite tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*. With its thwarted love and dramatic death scene, it was just my cup of tea. When my parents dropped me off outside the pictures there was Billy—standing, smiling, all alone. He handed me a box of Jaffas which matched his freckles and my fuming face. We went inside, because I still wanted to see the movie, but I sat through the movie pushing his tentative hopeful hands away. I plotted how I would sool my dog on to him when I got home, swearing no boy would ever trap me again.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Known as Artemis to the Greeks.

<sup>2</sup> Artemis or Diana (Roman) was the virgin goddess of the hunt. One hot day Actaeon a prince saw her bathing nude, she threw water at him and he turned into a stag.

<sup>3</sup> Acteon's own dogs caught him (the stag) then tore him into pieces.

**Helen Cerne is an employee of VU.**



# Shipwreck

*by Kim de Koning*

She sails the sea whole and proud  
Moves slowly in calm waters  
Travels in and out of many ports  
Weathers numerous storms  
One day a trouble storm hits  
Rocking her body to-and-fro  
Making her feel sea-sick  
Waves rushing over her trying to drown her  
Pushing her to the rocky cliffs  
Smashing her frame against the rocks  
Throwing her precious cargo over-board  
Sinking it to the bottom  
Her mask is broken and bent  
Some of her wooden planks float on the water  
She has just survived the worst storm  
Shattered and wrecked  
Limps into a port for repairs  
Anchors where unlit she is able to sail out  
To find her precious cargo  
That sits on the ocean floor covered with sand  
So she can once again sail whole and proud

**Kim de Koning has been a Rotunda enthusiast for years.**



# Sunbury Campus

*by Lesley Gale*

Behind the high brick wall  
Under a darkened or moon-lit night  
The pathway snakes its way  
Through the vast garden  
Coils its way around ancient buildings  
Casting their shadows  
Upon the township of Sunbury  
Past a silent Rotunda  
A row of tall, trees dominating the darkness lit by  
pathway lights  
Towards a special place in the garden where rabbits,  
romp and ghostly beings, wander  
Sadly now in the stately, buildings  
Teachers no longer hold classes  
Nor students, pens scrawl across papers  
Nor do well-known artists in the upstairs room of the  
Rotunda Writing Centre  
Play their music, tell their stories nor sing their songs  
Smell the exotic smells, seeping from the hospitality  
kitchen  
Sunbury, campus ceases to be  
Behind the closed gates, the residential ghosts Whisper  
not of the institute's dark, days  
But of recent times  
When gentle voices, song and laughter  
For a short while  
Washed the past away

**Lesley Gale completed a Writing and Editing Diploma at VU and is a regular contributor to *Platform*.**

# From Grey Mare Bogong

*By Murray Alfredson*

The storm front strode  
forward from  
the Bogong High Plain  
and Feathertop,  
marched ridge by ridge  
toward the Grey Mare.

The western sun  
behind it lent  
gold and crimson  
glories to  
that rain-veil hung  
in folds from clouds' black.

The walkers sat;  
rapt they watched  
that pageant beneath  
the storm's drum-rolls  
until the ragged  
clouds crackled  
close enough to  
touch. They ran.

**Murray Alfredson is a retired lecturer and poet.**



## Released

*by Nikki de Koning*

You sit  
In judgment  
Your throne  
Spun from rumour  
And lies  
You hail  
Your accusations  
Over me  
I pretend to cower  
To justify  
Your mighty rage  
But inside I smile  
Your words  
Have no meaning  
For I feel nothing  
For you  
At all...

**Nikki de Koning studied writing at VU.**

# The Convent Barber

by Tony Flynn

The town was so completely familiar I had no reason to ever think about it: I was born there; I played in the streets that bounded our block; my friends all lived within sight; it had always been there, central to my life. It was a town, but, because it had a Cathedral, they said that technically it was a city, a Cathedral City—an English way of looking at things my dad said. Whatever way you look at it, it was still a town of about eight thousand people, still small enough for us to be able to pick a stranger's car in the main street on a Saturday morning.

If you stood on the top of South Hill you could see most of the houses on our side of the creek, the streets were straight, with only a little undulation down to the distant willows on the creek bank, they followed the lie of the land. The rest of the town was laid out on a grid pattern that varied only because of the creek in the middle and the railway line up the south end. From where we were, if you stood on the back steps you could see North Hill in the distance. We stayed pretty much on our side of the creek and didn't know very much about the north side.

The people who lived in the houses were like us, most families were larger than mine was then, and all the kids knew who lived where and what their people did. We knew whose father would cross the railway line very late on a Saturday night, heading for someone else's home, and that he often didn't come back until just before sunrise and that once his wife cried during Mass the next morning. We knew which homes to stay away from on Saturday evenings after the pubs had shut and which house had a man who watched us from behind his mothers' lace curtains in the front room when we were playing catchies in the street.

We played in the streets and in each other's yards—boys in short pants to their knees. Even in winter, when it snowed and sleeted, we wore shorts. Older girls wore dresses handed down from older sisters—their mother's even—cut down and refashioned. But no matter the skill of the seamstresses, they always looked a bit out of place on the slender figures they were meant to conceal; the patterns and colours were wrong—better for older bigger women. Our parents and their friends would talk cryptically about the length of a dress or a hole in the sole of a shoe, giving their words weight with glances exchanged and barely raised eyebrows, we listened and learned their silence. It was an unspoken understanding that no matter who was inside them, clothes were never for discussion. We all knew how short the distance was between enough and poverty; clothes were the markers of where you were on that steep and slippery slope, and far too eloquent in themselves to need explanation.

I was the only child in my family and I didn't have to wear other kids' clothes, and, my mother made sure that my clothes didn't draw attention to our circumstances. It wasn't done to be different. All of his life my father walked to his work down the hill, whistling quietly to himself when he came home in the afternoon. Other fathers did too, but Dad wore a jacket and tie and, probably more important than a tie, a white shirt. In summer he took his coat off at work and pulled his sleeves up away from his wrists and held them up with elastic metal bands around his arms above his elbows. The white shirt was difference enough.

When Mum thought that the seat of my short blue-serge school pants was showing signs of a shine they were replaced.

'Hazz.' She always called him that. 'We've got to get Paul new pants for school.'

Then I'd go with her to the draper's, most often at the beginning of the year, and measurements were taken, round my waist and between my legs.

'He's certainly grown since last time, Mrs Ryan.'

And I'd be taken to a cubicle with a curtain to try the new ones on.

I'd take my shorts off and wait for him to push the curtain aside and hand me the new ones. Standing there in my shirt and underpants I'd pull the curtain back across and then, because it wouldn't go all the way, I'd try to pull the front of my shirt down further than I knew it could go. He could see me through the gap.

Then mum had a look and there was much consideration of me in the new short pants from back,

front and sides, two fingers were put into the waist band and pulled about, then he would put his hand between my legs and feel and say, 'There's room for growth there Mrs Ryan; there's no need to be worried about the fit; what are you in, sixth class, Paul? It won't be long now.'

And he would look at her and smile, and Mum would hold the clasp of her handbag with two hands and look at the floor.

'Thank you, Mr Cooper,' she'd say.

'Shall I wrap them for you then? Two pairs?'

'Yes, thank you, and Harry will be in on Saturday morning to pay.'

'Of course, whenever suits. Do give my best to your mother.'

And it was over until the next time. I knew that as we left he'd try to ruffle my hair with his hand and I'd duck to get away from him and he'd wink at me. Mum asked what the trouble was, why did I do that, and I told her that I didn't like him; he made me feel funny. And she said not to be silly, he was just trying to be friendly. The grey shorts of the state-school kids never seemed to have the same problem with the shine, they were made by Crusader and came with a packet of small cards in the pocket; those cards never came with the blue pants we had to wear.

Mum said that if they were replaced at the right time no one would ever know they had been, but, if you let them get a bit shiny, then new ones were more obvious. She said that a lot of people were doing it hard and there was no reason to make it even harder for them by strutting what you could afford when a lot of people knew they couldn't do it for their kids. It was being sensitive to other people's circumstances, she said.

Once, when she and Dad were talking about new pants for me I heard her say, 'No one will ever say behind my back that my son is a shiny bum.'

The wearers of the usual two or three-piece blue serge suits with trouser seats shiny from sitting on a chair at a desk were privately scorned for having risen above themselves, which really meant that they had achieved a level of social status that saw them leave their families behind. A waistcoat was the sign of a bank manager or an owner and often wrapped a big belly, there were no waistcoats in our couple of blocks, but South Hill, where the doctors lived, had a couple.

'The worst of the lot of those shiny bums,' she said, 'Is that Andrew Grant who works at the College. His father was an engine driver these forty years and they never visit his parents; not him or his wife, or any of those three boys of theirs. Never, ever. And they only live a couple of blocks away up the hill—he can see his dad's chimney from his side garden for God's sake! He's ashamed of where he came from! Hazz, you know as well as I do that he's never been seen there since he got married and his eldest boy was born a couple of days this side of our Paul, and that wife with her ways, he married up and don't tell me he didn't. They never see their grandchildren. It's a sin.'

'Now then, Gert,' Dad would say in his mild way, 'We don't know what goes on there, do we?'

'I do and so do a lot of people, particularly with that hussy he works with. No good will come of that, mark my words.'

'But...Gertie, Gertie, how can you know this?'

'I have friends who know; one works up there. She has seen them. Dead to rights.'

And with that she drew her cardigan tightly across her chest, buttoned it up and folded her arms.



That was that and there was nothing more to be said.

I looked carefully at the seat of my school pants and never saw any shine, but they were still replaced.

The decision to have the state kids in grey and the Catholics in blue, was made by someone long ago; it stamped us then as members of one of two camps. It was those camps that decided who we were, where we worked and, more importantly, our futures, the rest of our lives, who we danced with, who we married, what pubs we would drink in, where we were buried and, when we died, whether we went to heaven or to hell.

When I was in fifth and sixth class at the Cathedral school sometimes we'd get out at the end of the day and, instead of wandering off home, a bunch of us, nearly all about the same age, but with a few younger kids, went across the road to the park opposite and waited, sometimes they didn't come, but most times they did. The State school, The Demonstration School they called it, was up the hill three blocks and it took about ten minutes for the Protestant kids to get down the hill and gather at the opposite end of the park, their end. There were some scraggy old pencil pines and two or three elms, but mainly the park was grass that browned-off in summer. When we met to fight it was on either side of an old war memorial that was shaped like a bass drum lying on its side, and around the sides of its cylinder there were plaques with the names of the men who had enlisted and gone to the wars and who'd been killed there, their names had a little cross beside them. It had a small fountain in its centre that sprayed water at an odd angle and on winter mornings it iced over, it wasn't thick, but it was ice.

So there we'd be, us in our white shirts and blue short trousers and long blue socks with two narrow bands of red in the turnover, the State kids in blue shirts, grey shorts, and long grey socks, two yellow stripes on their turnover. We'd eyed each other across the gap, we all knew each other by sight, the little kids standing behind the big kids, peering through the gaps, trying to be part of it, but not too much, and quick to step aside and hide behind a larger back, a hand grabbing a brother's belt maybe, their heads tilting to find a gap and quickly look again and then at some silent signal a hail of rocks and stones would come across the memorial. The Prots pretty much made the first move, and the skill lay in keeping an eye out and dodging the missiles while getting a couple back at them. There was merit in getting hit. If a little kid was hit it was very important to not cry, but a trickle of blood down the side of the face was much admired, and 'Jonno got clipped yesterday,' slipped around the playground the next morning. If it was a wound that needed a bandage of a bit of torn-up sheet, all the better, the lucky bearer was careful to be offhand when the girls inspected it and made admiring, motherly noises. The rocks were hurled with shouts of 'Catholic frogs' and 'Proddy dogs' and 'Why doncha go back to Ireland where you belong.' This was a puzzle for me as my father's people had come out in the 1850s and Ireland was as remote to me as the moon. We danced defiance and threw their stones back at them and shouted that their fathers were 'six-bob-a-day murderers' and I didn't know what that meant either. This went on after a fashion until the older boys tired of it, it probably seemed longer that it was, and we went home. I didn't know why we did it, but we did, faithfully, maybe once a week, until we went to high school, and then it just stopped dead. I didn't understand that either, but I think it might have had to do with the girls. In primary school only the rain would stop us when a fight was on, the girls' fingers were so soft when they touched your face where the stone had hit. I used to hope that I would be hit so that a girl who didn't know I loved her would touch my face.

To be continued...

**Tony Flynn is a VU employee.**



# Pencil

*by Tom Petsinis*

It lay in a corner of your tool-box:  
Red, black-edged, the rectangular stock  
Providing rough fingers a firmer grip;  
The gold of *Columbia* almost faded;  
Lead flat, substantial for wood and brick,  
And last sharpened by a razor blade;  
Its length whittled to less than a third  
By crosses, numbers, lines, never words.

Working, you wore it behind your ear  
That always blazed crimson with sunset.  
A man's best friend, you instructed,  
It marks and remembers, keep it near.

A lifetime later I heed your advice  
And start sketching the first draft of this.

**Tom Petsinis is a lecturer at VU.**  
**This piece is from the collection: *My Father's Tools.***



# Easy to be Born again

*by G Raymond Leavold*

I want to pull out all my teeth, the ones I have left,  
To begin again, rediscovering  
All I've forgotten  
With my mouth,  
To suck on lemons, oranges, melting snowballs,  
The dog's tail or snout,  
The breast, awaiting my gaping hole,  
& have an excuse not to smile,  
to be thin-lipped and content,  
my mouth full of secrets  
no one will ever remember

**G Raymond Leavold is a writing student.**

# C'est la vie

by Megan Green

i figured this time  
well, more so than past  
that one such fine possible  
could mean 'thank God, at last'

'but, oh dear, excuse me  
such arrogance'

\*sips tea\*

'dust off your shoes fella  
the quintessential cynic  
arrives at three'

oh, and he's a fine one  
lordy, how is he?  
the beatnic poet  
sublime edges and scruffy  
forgot to shave again  
oh  
but how much does it suit thee

makes a woman reach out  
to run a wanting hand  
along that incredible jawline  
aching to touch with lips, body and psychological  
glands

but alas, not today  
not tomorrow, nor ever

'oh my, were you serious?  
was merely testing the waters'

'yeah, I got that, thanks, gee'

turns out he's a wanker

'it's not you, it's me...'

he's tortured, he's lost, he's the hurting kind  
a braggadocio, narcissistic wee boy  
full of star-shine  
'I think you're wonderful' (early Monday)  
'get off me' (by nine)

'pick up your jaw girly  
I'm outta your league  
I'm edgy and moody  
a vagabond, a sculptor  
an artist

but you're great, no really  
it just aint me'

'oh, please, get over yourself  
pack up your battered retro-gilded smarts  
and shuffle through pot-holes, spot-lights and tarts  
a knee-patch clutched  
to desire for five  
doesn't mean I was planning  
to walk that last single mile

just so you know, you're not as hypothetical as you  
think  
not so much, let me tell you  
dirty wanderings  
shady carpets, and a crowded sink  
an urban definition  
of the single guy  
who let this fine woman  
pass right on by'



Megan Green is a Freelance Writer and Editor, and Co-Editor of magazine.

# Penguin Island

by *Myron Lysenko*

My father drove a hundred kilometres  
as I sat beside him in the front seat.  
We didn't talk much, as was our way  
so I pretended we were in a race.  
The finish line was every third traffic light  
and we won many races until we left the suburbs  
and I had to think of something else to do.  
I would read out loud every sign I saw  
and sometimes my father corrected  
my words in his heavy Ukrainian accent.

We crossed a long bridge and heard  
the cries of sea birds on the water.  
My father parked the car on a dirt track  
near a cliff above the dark ocean.  
He took out our sleeping bags  
and lay them side by side on a groundsheet.  
'We will sleep under the stars' he said,  
'And I'll talk to you about becoming a man.'  
He drank from a small bottle and told me  
to take a sip. It burned my throat and he said:  
'It will protect you from the cold'.

We lay in the tall dry grasses looking  
at stars and he told me their names.  
He talked about the birds and bees  
in short, uncertain sentences  
but all I could hear were the howls of wild dogs  
and sounds of the ocean crashing on rocks.  
I went deeper into my sleeping bag and realized  
he was waiting for me to answer a question.  
'I know all about it,' I lied, 'We learnt it at school.'  
I stared at the stars until I became one of them  
and I rode across the sky all night.

The light and heat of the sun woke me  
and my father remained curled up in his bag  
so I found an orange in the car and ate it.  
I walked off to explore the cliffs and beach.  
On the sand dunes I found two penguins in a hole  
with flies buzzing around them. They were dead  
and much smaller than I thought they would be.  
The smell was terrible so I moved away  
and found another two dead penguins under a bush.  
A tire lay half buried in the sand  
with more cute penguins rotting there.

I ran back to my father and woke him  
shouting that I'd found a penguin cemetery.  
I asked him what was going on.  
He said 'All living things die,  
even the love between a man and woman.'  
I knew he was talking about himself and my mother  
but I didn't want to hear about that.  
I said 'The penguins are dead but they're still  
together.'  
I walked among the birds as a storm closed in on us  
and my father said it was time to go home.



**Myron became a professional poet in 1989 and he has published six books of poetry. He helped Kevin Brophy co-found and co-edit the vibrant literary journal *Going Down Swinging* from 1980-1995 before passing it on to new editors. His poetry has appeared in literary journals over 444 times in Australia and internationally since 1981.**

# Lost for words: Lessons from NaNoWriMo

by Lucia Nardo

[www.nanowrimo.org](http://www.nanowrimo.org)

National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) has become a worldwide phenomenon for writers of all levels of experience. The concept is simple: churn out 50,000 words of a new novel in the month of November.

I'd heard lots from writers who'd taken on the challenge, but never thought about doing it myself. On impulse I registered. To my surprise I discovered a NaNoWriMo-me. She taught me a lot. This is some of what I learned:

Meet the challenge

An eager novice, I gave myself an appropriate user name, 'whatamithinking'. I sat at my blank screen filled with a mix of trepidation, optimism and a good dash of caffeine and with one part of my brain singing my mantra, 'What am I thinking?'

NaNoWriMo-me argued, 'This could be fun. Get to know me.'

So, I wrote.

Persistence pays

First day I churned out two thousand words. I was on my way! Until Word crashed and consigned my document to an inaccessible part of the PC. I'd need the entire 'Without a Trace' team to have any chance of seeing it again. So, it was only day one and I was ready to chuck it in. But hey, I was on the Gold Coast and sunrise was around 4:30 a.m. I figured rising early would give me a chance to catch up. By day two, it was clear that holidays and dedicated writing didn't mix. Sun, sand and surf beat out the screen each time.

'You'll find time if it's important,' said NaNoWriMo-me.

I found pockets of time during the day to write—five minutes here, ten minutes there. The word count climbed.

I kept writing.

Carry a toolbox

The NaNoWriMo website provides lots of tools for the writing journey. Graphs and charts to measure your progress, a merchandise store (where not surprisingly the book, 'No Plot? No problem' is the only 'sold out' item). There are regional groups you can link with, writing

buddies, events to attend and regular 'rah-rah' emails from mentors. NaNoWriMo-me didn't use all those resources, but it was good to know they were there.

I kept writing.

Tell someone who cares

Each day I'd give my husband an update of the numbers popping up in my word count.

'That's great,' he'd say not taking his eye off the news broadcast.

Don't get me wrong, he loved the fact that I wrote, even though he didn't entirely get why I'd write all those words and not use them. A number of 'non-writer' friends agreed, giving me a blank-faced 'why?' when I told them of the 50,000-word aim. NaNoWriMo-me learned quickly who was on 'My Team'. NaNoWriMo-me didn't talk much, instead she conserved her energy for the page.

I kept writing.

You don't have to write well, you just have to write

Here was the thing: I never had a plot to lose. I had one-dimensional characters, most of whom I decided I didn't like. Don't ask me about landscape, setting, or theme. My timeline travelled more than the complete series of 'Dr Who'. Dialogue seemed to flow, but sensory detail was absent. My inner critic screamed, 'loser!' in an amplified voice. NaNoWriMo-me ignored it.

I kept writing.

Don't look back

My tale started with a contemplative woman in her sixties, who through some convoluted story-lines reflected on her days as an unwitting porn star. (Don't ask. I didn't.) Despite my lack of direction I wasn't tempted to edit, focussing instead on pouring the words onto the page. Would I get to the word count 'Holy Grail?' I pushed on like a desert explorer moving toward the oasis mirage.

I kept writing.

You CAN be brave at your keyboard

Our writing class was advised to write about what we were afraid of writing about. So I did.

Prim and proper me wrote sex scenes. My 'Inner Critic' tried talking me out of it.

'What if your kids see it? What if someone thinks that's what YOU do?'

But NaNoWriMo-me did the cheerleader thing: 'Go for it!'

Sometimes I'd laugh out loud at the sheer drivel I wrote. Sometimes I was surprised by the eloquence of a line.

I kept writing.

Enjoy your destination when you get there

My writing GPS may have been wonky, but I managed to hit 50,000 plus words on day twenty-two. My progress bar on the official website turned from blue to green. I did a little jig and gave myself a round of applause. I'd now be getting that PDF certificate in which I could write in my name and hang on my wall! I'd met my goal. I took a deep breath and...

...I stopped writing.

Celebrate the surprises

The big surprise is how much NaNoWriMo-me taught me about my process as a writer. I now know where I get stuck. I know what excuses I use to put off getting those words down on paper. I can tell you exactly at what point my brain will tell me it's tea-and-biscuit time. NaNoWriMo-me taught me it's ok to write really badly without my perfectionism gene going into overdrive. She gave me permission to not have structure and plot all cemented in place before I start and that in the absence of these I can still write.

Since NaNoWriMo ended I've found new energy for my other writing projects. I don't know yet if I'm a better writer for the experience, but I'm okay with that. What I do know is that I can commit to getting a story onto the page.

Would I do it again? I don't know, but I wouldn't mind spending another month with NaNoWriMo-me. I quite like her. She's never lost for words.

**Lucia Nardo is a Melbourne writer and producer.**

# My Child in the World

By Helen Garner

My daughter Alice, grade bubs Alfred Crescent Primary, is decked out in a bizarre array of garments, ill-fitting and brightly coloured. The gingham uniforms she thought she wanted, before she became a schoolgirl, she has stuffed away in her bottom drawer. Her hair is short and her legs, in black tights, are wiry and knobby-kneed. I hook her little case on to the handlebars of my bike, and with one arm swing her skinny body on to the cushion behind my seat. She sits there, effortlessly balancing, dreaming towards the pigeon cages on the shed roof, and grabs the back of my shirt in one hand as the bike bounces over the wide gutter and i push out into the traffic. Easy we roll, in the autumn sunshine.

Her dreamy litany begins. 'Con lives near here, and Angelos. I know where Angelos lives. Angelos is in grade three. She waits for me. I go to her house...'

I have never seen Angelos. I don't know if Angelos exists. We rattle across the stones and sweep grandly into the crescent. Her ragged skirt flutters in the corner of my eye. The street is full of mothers and children.

'Can I come in with you today?'

'Oh yes!' She says. 'Will you stay till the bell?'

We chain the bike to the fence. A girl we know runs to the gate as we go in. Our mouths open to greet her, but she tears straight past us, yelling, 'Good morning, Mr Hitchcock! Good morning, Mr Hitchcock!'

'Where do you go now?' I ask.

'I put my case inside! Don't you know *anything* about schools?'

Kindly she takes my hand. The concrete floors are clean and we step over pools of water. She leads me to an old wooden locker, heaves her case to shoulder-height, and slides it in. She turns her bare, pure-skinned face up to me and smiles. 'Now we go outside.'

I follow her black legs out on to the sunny gravel. Has she got a friend? Does she know I think it matters? She runs to the climbing frame and pushes through a crowd of small boys. One has a sugar cigarette in his mouth; she spots it and flashes me a grimace from behind his back. I feel big and noticeable with my overalls and chopped hair. Some children stare at me, others are engrossed in their private thoughts, standing about waiting for the bell. No one has greeted Alice. My heart starts to thump. I make quick comparisons between her clothes and theirs. She looks wacky.

'Watch me!' she calls throwing herself on to the climbing frame. 'I'll show you! Watch me! Watch!' She is fearless on the frame. Her limber body, taught by the grown-ups she has for friends at home, executes turns and flips. Again and again her shining forehead turns up towards me.

'Good, it's good,' I say.

She lands at my feet with a confident thump, and drags me to the fence. 'A big girl showed me how to do this.' She spans the gap between the ground and the first rail with a tremendous straining of one black leg.

Someone shouts out her name. It's Raani, her pretend brother from the household where we live. But he's in grade one, he belongs over there in the big kids' yard. Alice gazes at him yearningly, through the mesh of the cyclone fence,

The bell, and they're scattering like rabbits. 'See you!' yells Raani. He's only a blond blob among the running heads. Alice leads me to a door outside which her grade is gathering. 'Watch me line up?'

I sit on a wooden bench among the Greek mothers in black.

Out of the chaos emerges a ritual: each child must have a partner; they march into school in pairs. I watch Alice approach the front boy in line and reach for his hand. He brushes her away without a glance. She whirls round with a skip and a terrible smile, puts out her hand to a girl in white

stockings. The girl frowns and shakes her off. Alice smiles again, flicks her hand and shakes her head and smiles and twirls to the back of the line. She comes to rest on her own, turned away from the line of perfect couples, her left thumb in her mouth, staring and searching out across the yard.

Is it a partner she is staring for? God, make a partner come spinning across the gravel for her, but the line is moving to the scratchy marching music and feet scrabble and the children march and the sun shines on the clean brown head of my lonely child with her thumb in her mouth, cracking hardy, looking over shoulder at the yard full of purposeful pairs.

She drags along behind the others, still staring behind her, and as she disappears round the red-brick corner of the building I can't bear it, I jump up and run after her and catch her going up the concrete steps, last in line and very small between the drinking taps and the lockers.

I grab her hand. 'Alice!'

She spins round and sees me. 'Where *were* you?'

It's *me* she was looking for, in the yard. 'I was sitting on the bench! Couldn't you see me?' She is holding my hand tightly. She has been at this school every day for six weeks. Is it like this for her every day?

'Come into the classroom? Stay? Will you stay?'

'I'll come in for a little while.'

'No-for a long. Stay till we go out to play.'

The teacher nods and smiles to welcome me. I sit on a tiny chair at the very back of the room, and watch them twinkle fast and slow with their fingers, and sing, and draw a spiral, each on a little blackboard.

A boy is pushing Alice with his shoulder. I see her scowl at him, I lip-read her insult. He pushes, pushes, grinning at her, twice her size. I crouch foolishly on my little chair, watching her get up and move to a different place on the mat, watching him half-crawl, half-walk after her and push, push, push. I would ram my fist into his grinning face, I would strangle him on the spot, but for all the hope I've got of controlling anything that happens in this room, I may as well be back in the third row of Miss Lonie's grade in 1947 at Mainfold Heights, Geelong, where I pissed my pants and soaked the shorts of the boy next to me because I was afraid to ask to go to the lavatory during lesson time.

But Alice's back is very straight. Her face is bright and open. She is drawing, as she is told, a curvy line on her blackboard with a piece of chalk. 'Blackboards under chins!' cries the teacher. Alice turns her board around and flashes a sharp look at the girl beside her. She turns and waves at me over her shoulder. She is smiling.

**Helen Garner is the acclaimed author of, *The spare room, Joe Cinque's consolation, True Stories* and many more. She is a dear friend of Rotunda in the West and has kindly allowed *Platform* to re-publish this piece.**



# Old memories young dreams

*By Denise Ogilvie*

Smooth, round but not perfectly round. Couldn't really call it oval. Shades of grey. Lightest palest grey, mottled greys through to the darkest of ebony greys. Little veins of cream criss-cross the surface.

An old chipped bowl. Shades of green shimmering in the light floating through the translucent curtain. It sits in this old green glass bowl amongst the treasures—shells, pebbles, small fossils.

All memories of journeys. Picked up on distant beaches, remote deserts, small towns made up of little more than a few tin shacks. The biggest shack is always the pub. It takes time to find treasures. Time taken wandering dry river-beds, climbing ochre-red rocky hills. Given as a gift from people in these remote places.

A child enters the room. The child spies the bowl and wants to touch the objects.

'Of course you can,' you say.

The child wants to know everything about the objects, especially the smooth round, but not perfectly round, object. The child trails his fingers around the creamy veins. Where did this come from? How did you get it? The questions flow. You answer them as only a grandmother can. The child holds them all one-by-one but returns to the smooth grey object.

'Tell me more about this one, Grandma.'

You tell the child of the places you have been, the place where this special object came from. It is special now because the child finds it special. You tell the child of the place this smooth shiny piece of earth came from. You describe the cliffs and rocky outcrops worn down by millions of years of rain, heat. How this was once a huge inland sea, where great dinosaurs roamed the land.

The child's eyes light up with excitement. The dinosaurs; he wants to know more about the dinosaurs as he holds the small pebble in his hand. 'I can feel the dinosaurs walking,' he says, as he continues to stroke the pebble. 'I can feel their feet stomping across the rocks.'

'Do you want to keep the pebble?' you ask the child.

He looks up at you, eyes open with the innocent excitement of youth.

'Can I, Grandma?' he says. 'Can I really keep it?'

'Yes,' you say. 'This pebble told me to bring it home. Now I know why.'

The pebble comes from an ancient land, so ancient it is the land time forgot, the land peopled with an ancient race, and now the pebble is in a modern land, a land so full of noise and urgency that the pebble looks out of place. It doesn't belong here in this busy place; it belongs with the child in the special world that only children can inhabit, a land far removed from this busy world of adults and in this land the pebble will once again find the peace and tranquillity of the ancient river bed, of the ancient river that once roared through the valleys and canyons of the ancient land where it lay for millennia until one day a traveller wandered down the dried-up old river-bed soaking up the peace and tranquillity of the ancient land until they looked down and saw the pebble and knew that the pebble was speaking to her, telling her to pick it up, to touch it, to feel the ancient land coursing through the pebble as she closed her eyes, gently running her fingers across the surface feeling the tiny ridges of creamy veins.

'You don't understand,' you say to the child. 'This pebble represents the country you live in, the country of your birth.'

The child looks up quizzically. 'What do you mean, Grandma? I do know about the pebble, the pebble is speaking to me now as I hold it in my hand.'

He holds out the pebble to you. 'Feel it, Grandma. Feel the pebble; it will talk to you as well.'

Then he hands you the pebble and gently closes your hand around it. At that moment with his hand on yours you can feel it, you know what he means. As soon as he removes his small hand the pebble no longer speaks to you. It remains silent.

You look at the child, then place the pebble back into his hand.

‘This is why the pebble belongs to you now,’ you say.

Giving up the pebble wrenches at your heart. You want to keep the pebble forever, for the memories it brings you every time you touch it, every time you look at it. Why do you give it up so easily? But you know why. The pebble has become part of you, part of your soul; for one tiny moment you feel emptiness deep within your troubled spirit. Your heart somehow knows your mind is troubled. The sadness overwhelms you. Then you look down at the child, at the pebble held tightly in his hand and you know you are wrong. The child understands instinctively, it is you who doesn’t understand.

The child steps forward. He wraps his strong young arms around your middle-aged waist and says, ‘Don’t worry Grandma, it’s safe with me. I’ll bring the pebble to visit you.’

You know at this moment this is the trinity of your life—you, the child and the old worn pebble.

**Denise Ogilvie is a Professional Writing and Editing student at VU.**



## **I can't tell**

*by Matt Hetherington*

you, and all the things i don't need  
to want; the sky like a black dare  
to make a stab at truth; that noise—  
from somewhere inside or maybe  
the fettered garden outside, or  
maybe even that strange new man  
next door; how long the rain has  
gone on making notes; why that  
woman thinks she's fated to only  
remind men of how much they miss  
their wives; why this one never  
seemed to fill my teacup up far

enough; how the heart can shatter  
so slowly; the attraction in all these  
splenetic kings of sonorous doom;  
how so often even when my eyes  
are clean something else gets in  
the way; whether or not you can  
see what i'm saying; the windows  
which keep the sound of others  
out.

**Matt Hetherington is a Melbourne Poet.**

**This piece was originall published in *SpeedPoets*.**

# Honour to the fallen

by *Sandra Lewin*

In April, 2009, I embarked upon an adventure of a lifetime, travelling to a wide selection of countries and cultures, giving me the opportunity to meet many people. To visit Turkey and Greece had been one of my long-held dreams. As the plane was taxiing towards the airport I wondered if my expectations would be realised. I was so excited I could hardly breathe.

My intention was to travel far inland, towards the borders, where tension is still very much an issue—where the tourist does not usually venture. I went out into the rural areas to see the Turkish culture. I attended the Anzac Day service to offer respect and commemorate the Australian and New Zealand soldiers at Gallipoli.

Along the way from the airport were many mosques, their exterior covered in tiles, with minarets attached, some small and extremely beautiful. My impression was that each suburb, perhaps, belonged to a different sector of the Muslim religion, like our churches within the sectors of Christianity.

Istanbul is breathtaking, located on a magnificent stretch of water: the Bosphorus. This divides Asia and Europe. The Ottoman era was a splendid time; the architecture would be almost impossible to replicate these days. The Ottomans believed in their capability; they desired beautiful palaces, old mansions, fortresses and mosques. Istanbul's metropolis is amazing. The main streets feature tulips in full bloom.

I walked through local shopping, and residential areas, off the beaten track. This was a bit daunting as I didn't speak Turkish; I couldn't read the street signs. I had the hotel business card with me in case I became disorientated. The people were friendly and communicated with sign language and smiles. I felt safe and enjoyed the opportunity to witness Turkey's lifestyle.

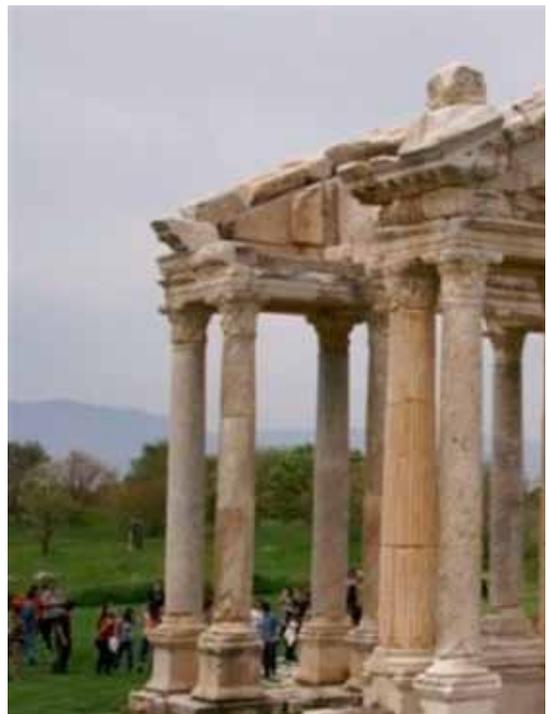
My journey through Istanbul took me thousands of kilometers and nearly four weeks. It included sights my research had identified, but I wasn't prepared for the total experience.

I have been privileged to fly at dawn by hot-air balloon over Cappadocia, known as the cradle of Christianity, where Christians sheltered from Roman persecution by hiding in the fairy chimneys. I visited Goreme's rock-carved churches and crawled underground to where the ancient Troglodyte dwellings were located. I walked the ruins of Ephesus for five hours, along the roads that Cleopatra and Anthony had once traversed. I travelled along the Silk Road to visit Konya; I was entranced by the Whirling Dervishes (who believe in tolerance and graciousness), who were intent upon their devotions.



I prayed at the Little Church of Mary (Meryemana in Turkish) and visited the Green Mosque and Grand Mosque in Bursa. I walked the ruins of nine cities at Troy, where Alexander the Great cut the famous Gordian Knot. I saw the remains of the ancient church where the Ecumenical Council decided in 43AD that Mary was the Mother of God. The Hittite Museum, mausoleum of Ataturk and the, so-called, most preserved Roman Theatre in the world, were spectacular.

The weather varied. We swam in the Mediterranean in the searing heat, trekked through snow and were swamped by heavy rain, depending upon the region. Turkey's food and wine was interesting, and for the most part, delicious. The people were delightful, especially out in the rural areas not yet spoilt by tourism. Women wore long skirts over cotton trousers, head scarves, and worked alongside men on farms and in orchards. We were welcomed with genuinely warm smiles at each village.



We frequently stopped at the roadside where there were stalls selling lush ripe apricots, juicy figs, honey, and a bountiful selection of nuts and pulses. Often, an elderly woman would squeeze fresh orange juice by hand while you waited. It was sobering to realise these stalls and mobile grocers were Australia's equivalent of a shopping centre.

We arrived at Canakkale and crossed the Dardanelle Straits by ferry. Upon landing on the shores of Anzac Cove, we visited the emotive Lone Pine Cemetery. We spent a day walking around the graves, identifying headstones and reflecting where our relatives had made the ultimate sacrifice. Turkey's Government and its people have enormous respect for the Anzacs and the memorial erected at the top of the hill. The memorial was simply perfect and beautifully inscribed. It stood just above the remarkably small fox-holes and bunkers.

At midnight, we joined 6,000 other pilgrims on wooden bleachers to wait for the dawn service. The number of people able to attend was strictly controlled due to the small area available. The Australian Government managed the event efficiently, issuing passes to visitors, coordinating parking, caring for returned servicemen, and provided everyone with food and water. During the long and cold wait, the wind constantly blew, while entertainment was provided. An army band played, big-screen movies were shown, the ceremony was rehearsed, and interviews conducted with dignitaries.

As the first light of dawn crept into the dark skies, an eerie silence enveloped everyone. We watched in awe as floodlights were beamed onto the water; everyone gasped at the shimmering, silvery strip of light. National flags were lowered, anthems played and everyone was in tears. I had one of the most emotional experiences of my life.

I wondered how this foolishness could have occurred.

The sky turned pink, wreaths were laid, prayers offered, and hymns rung out. The respectful gathering, concluded with a joyous rendition of patriotic songs.

At the same time I texted my family in Australia who would have been watching the Dawn Service on television. I was very emotional.

After the service, we enjoyed a picnic breakfast dockside while waiting for the ferry to return us to Canakkale. There was much of Istanbul still to discover.

**Sandra Lewin hopes to study Creative Writing.**

# Confessions at the church

*by Katherine Hubbard*

Your tidy heart beats  
As a closely-wound clock  
The rosary spills from your mouth  
Red words disperse on the wooden floor  
You stoop to collect the confessional  
While I try to hold the little moment  
In my hands  
Stop it escaping through the door

You hold my heart  
My fingers estimate your touch  
Holding the thin fingers  
I stare at the donation box  
You study the ceiling's gothic ribs  
'I love you,' says the ghost  
Bit instead I blurt, 'I only have enough  
For the bus fare home'  
You tuck yourself in  
Donate your money but not your hand  
Tuck in the soft pieces of yourself  
Like wings that span then close  
Somehow we lose the essence  
Now we must go home  
Before the shadows grow tall

Footnote:

My love, my pauper throat aches  
With all the poor music I wanted  
To sing to you but didn't...

**Katherine Hubbard is a poet and actor.**



## this story

by *Kristin Henry*

Don't stop me if you've heard this one. It's time to honour the art of repetition. God was the last original. Some people have always known this; people from places where they've danced the same dance right down to the slightest lift of their finger tips for thousands of years, and not because they lack imagination; people from places where they tell a story over and over again and it's more than what happens next that makes you listen. They know a story isn't born whole, it takes the storyteller time to chisel and mould, practice to remember exactly not just plots but all the tiny inflections. And children know this too. Try to change their stories and they'll send you back to the beginning. They want it right, not different. And for them and us the spaces between are also part of the story. It takes everybody time to memorise the stretch of silence, the intake of breath. Anticipation's best when you know what you're waiting for. This story is not new. Not a surprising story. This story is for reminding. This story is for making you feel like you feel when you know the words of a song or a prayer in church. This is a story about where you came from so it's a story about where you belong and it doesn't change, it's not supposed to, it's the story of how you got so strong and it's the story of the story. Every now and then I'll want to tell you how it was and even though you know the way it all turns out you have to listen with your heart open, the very heart by which you already know the words. But sometimes listen with your eyes closed, as if it was an opera in Italian, and don't worry about the language, just vibrate to the colours and get ready for those high notes. They're coming. This story delivers what it promises. Lie back and float on the waves I make with the gestures of my hands. Yes, I'll repeat myself. You can move your lips a little, you can even join in when it gets to your favourite part. Here there is no edge for cutting, and no garde for avating, there is only the same old story, fresh as resurrection.

**Kristin Henry is a Melbourne poet and teacher and has contributed generously to many editions of *Platform*.**



# His Father

by *Brian Doyle*

Well, here's a story I never told before, but it's been haunting me, so I think I have to tell it, because I'm pretty sure no one else will, and if a story doesn't get told, isn't that a door that never gets a chance to open, and isn't that a shame and a sin?

So then.

I was in college. This was in the middle of America thirty years ago. It was the last night I was ever in college. There was a huge roaring tumultuous party in our hall. It was a very old hall with ironwork everywhere and vaulted ceilings and all the students who were not graduating yet had gone home so our hall echoed with music and shouting and laughter and chaos and merriment. Of course almost every student who was about to graduate had family members arriving for the weekend, so a few sisters and brothers and even a dad or two joined the party, and everyone tried to chat up the new girls, and then people from other halls who heard the roar from our hall wandered over, and soon it was midnight and the party was throbbing and even the shyest people were dancing and giggling and shouting.

It was a really great party.

At about one in the morning I noticed that the dad of a friend of mine was in the corner drinking hard and telling funny stories. He got drunker and drunker until at about three in the morning he started shouting and cursing and some glass smashed and finally he fell down. Seeing a dad huddled in a moist heap on our linoleum floor was a great shock. I had never seen a drunken dad before. My dad liked to tell of the three times he had been drunk in his whole life, once in the war and one time with the neighbors and one time in the city, but my brothers and I thought he was probably exaggerating to prove that he was like other dads, which he wasn't.

At the party that night my friend picked up his crumpled dad, and held him in his arms like a fireman holding a child, and slid grimly along the wall to the door, and propped the door open with his foot, and carried his dad outside. I watched him do this but did nothing to help. I just stood there. Not the first time and not the last that I will stand silent and useless and frozen.

Over the next thirty years I never said a word about that night and neither did my friend. Here and there he would leak a story about a moment when he was a kid and his dad was carried home by the police, or about getting his dad out of the drunk tank, or about the morning his mom changed the locks on their house, or about how his sister went to live with their dad but came home grim a day later, or about how one of the brothers died in a car crash and the father didn't make the funeral, or about how when the dad died finally they put his ashes in a whiskey bottle, but we never talked about that night at the party. All the rest of my life I'll remember my friend's face as he carried his dad in his arms that night, though. I'll never forget that. You think we have words for this sort of thing but we do not. All we can do is witness and report and hope that somehow stories turn into prayers. All we can do is drape words on experience, and hope the words give some hint of the shape of the moment, and pray that our attentiveness matters in a way we will never know. I believe, with all my heart, that it does. What do you believe?

**Brian Doyle is the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland. He is the author of nine books of essays and poems, most recently, *Thirsty for Joy: Australian & American Voices* ([onedayhill.com.au](http://onedayhill.com.au)).**



# Holding on

by *Carolyn Garner*

I went manic on Friday night—or, as manic as I get. I went to bed at 11pm and woke up at 2am. I watched a movie for about two-and-a-half hours, then I decided to get some homework done so I tackled the editing. Next I wrote a shopping list and went to Safeway at 6am. When I got home I put away the shopping and rang my brother—had a great chat to Nev on the phone. I had so much to say the words were tripping over my tongue to get out.

Baz got up so I bent his ear until he got a kind of glazed look on his face. I breezed through the rest of the day, talking to anyone who would listen at double speed. It was wonderful. However, halfway through the afternoon I could feel a sense of desperation. If I stopped now would I come crashing down?

Sunday was spent catching up on the sleep I had missed. I felt like I had been neatly steamrolled. On Monday I saw my GP. We gave him the run down on what had been happening. He clearly didn't know what to do with me. He kept going back over the old notes.

Then he said, 'I think you should go back to Midwest' (that's Midwest Area Mental Health Service). He even rang them while I was there. I guess he was pretty worried I was starting to relapse.

So how do I feel now? Is going back a step in the wrong direction? Am I sick because of Uni and the study load? I don't know but I do know that in the past a change in circumstances has affected my mental health. I don't want to give it up though. However I am stressed about the assignments. I really don't have a clue how to do the ones for Fiction Elements and Story Structure. Editing is easier; it's either right or wrong.

I hope I don't get depressed. It's like walking through thick sand all day long. Like losing something really valuable that you know you'll never see again. I must do something to stop it. Maybe if I concentrate on my 'routine', if I go for a walk, if I keep the house really tidy then nothing bad will happen. I just don't know, that's the thing about bipolar, it sneaks up on you when you least expect it causing all sorts of havoc. I wish it would go away.

**Carolyn Garner was a member of Rotunda Writing Centre in Sunbury and is now studying Professional Writing and Editing at VU.**



# The pleasures of reading

by *Thanh Lam*

When I was eight, I left my family and began living with my aunt for three years in order to complete my primary education. Despite living apart from my family, I didn't feel sad or lonely at all, because I always had a few children's books by my side.

I have enjoyed reading since I was very young. My favorite book at that time was *Les Grand Coeurs* by Edmond De Amicis (translated by Ha Mai Anh). This book contains many short stories, each of which contains a valuable lesson that young students should follow. It has influenced children over many decades.

At thirteen years, I began to attend a Catholic, boarding high school. Three years later, I realised that I wasn't good at maths, so I decided to choose literature as my main subject for study. I pursued one aim patiently: to become a teacher when I reached adulthood.

At seventeen years, I had my own bookshelf at home. I had been spending most of my savings on books, and had many volumes, ranging from the famous authors of South Vietnam to translations of foreign writers. For example, *Les Lettres De Mon Moulin* (Letters From My Windmill) by Alphonse Daudet, *War and Peace* by Leon Tolstoi (the former was translated by Huy Phuong and the latter by Nguyen Hien Le).

Nguyen Hien Le (1912-1984) was a great scholar in South Vietnam. He wrote many famous books in different fields and translated many Chinese, French and English works. He was also very fortunate as a South Vietnamese writer, as he didn't go to prison, due to the fact that the communists took note of his modest way of life, and his contribution as a writer whose books contained many key points that youngsters would have to consider if they wanted to be successful in life.

When the Communists took over South Vietnam, over one week they destroyed all books written by South Vietnamese writers. They burnt all the books in the main Saigon library. Looking at the way they behaved—they seemed demented—the population was able to predict what would happen to them, and large numbers tried to escape.

My father persuaded me to destroy many of the books that I had collected up to that time. My heart tore as I watched them burning. However, I tried to hide two books, namely, *The Importance of Living* by Lin Yutang and *How To Stop Worrying And Start Living* by Dale Carnegie (both of which had been translated

by Nguyen Hien Le). Before I escaped from VN, I placed them on the bottom of my trunk, but I never saw them again because they were eaten by insects.

I hate the communists because they are dictatorial and very cruel, which is why I escaped from VN. Nevertheless, I have returned to my country many times, for family reasons.

When I came to Australia I was thirty-three. I really wanted to become a teacher again (I had been a teacher in my country), but my dream was never fulfilled because I had to look after my son and rebuild our lives in this new country.

Every night I spend at least one hour reading before going to sleep. To me, reading is excellent mental exercise. It not only helps me to develop my knowledge, but also to forget all the troubles that I have to confront, and all of the complicated problems that I have to solve by myself. Further, books are the most faithful of friends, given that our friends may change but our books patiently and faithfully keep us company and dialogue with us.

My son has the same hobby as I. He ordered *Time* and *Reader's Digest* magazines annually when he was at high school. I was able to share with him when I had spare time, and, from that time, I took the opportunity to gradually build up my vocabulary.

I stopped working in June 2006, and enrolled in an ESL course at VU TAFE in 2007. I am currently taking the course, Certificate IV for Further Study. If I pass this year, I intend to enrol in a library course. I'm not sure whether I'll be able to manage a Liberal Arts course, because it seems to me to be very difficult; I don't want the stress and I need to relax.

I enjoy my weekends reading the newspapers via the Internet such as, *The Age*, *Herald Sun*, *The Australian*, as well as a few Vietnamese newspapers published abroad (including in VN), and of course, I enjoy doing my homework.

According to my doctor, I need to look after myself, not only physically but also mentally. However, as a student, I always try to fulfil my responsibilities; I really don't want to disappoint my teachers. In fact, I have never wanted to be a model student.

As for when I retire, I'll spend subsequent years reading.

**Thanh Lam is a VU student.**

# Time with Agnes

by *Paul Bateman*

I visit my grandmother twice a month. Agnes lives in an aged care facility in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, near a public swimming pool. So I visit her and then I swim.

Her accommodation is better than people fear when they imagine their dying days in a home for the elderly. Her place might be a little dull but it is, by any standards, modern, bright and clean.

Agnes is pretty much confined to her room. She visits the dining hall three times a day and shuffles around the perimeter of the property for exercise and a change of scenery—but these activities leave her tired.

Agnes stays in her room because her body is stooped and her bones are dry and brittle. I call her 'my old, old tree' and she giggles with approval.

Giggles, not laughs. Giggling is what children do—and Agnes, 96, is growing back to childhood, a process as strange and contradictory as it is real and constant.

I have recently returned from America. I travelled across the country from sea to shining sea. Agnes has only one question: 'America, is it big?'

'Yes,' I say. 'It's very big.'

The answer delights her and occupies her tiny frame as swiftly and as surely as ingesting lemonade; she bubbles with excitement and giggles like a three-year old.

This is not to say that her mind has gone or that her powers of concentration are diminished beyond reason. Sometimes she surprises me with the depth and subtlety of her insights and inquiries.

But equally it's very clear that her grasp of time and facts is rapidly deserting her. Our conversations are increasingly erratic and almost always repetitive. She will call me by my father's name and ask, a dozen times over, if I have money for a taxi.

I try to keep things simple and to find, in each of my visits, a single moment of true connection. We play a word game based around a eucalypt that stands outside her bedroom window: who can best describe the tree in a single adjective?

I say 'melancholic'. She says 'dignified'. Agnes wins. I say 'stoic'. She says 'faithful'. Agnes wins again.

One day, after heavy rain, the sun poured through a fold of clouds and splashed its rays like thick, bright paint on the branches of the tree. Agnes called that 'luminous'.

Her world grows ever smaller yet increasingly authentic. I can not say if what she sees outside her bedroom window is simply a reflection of her own internal world or whether, in fact, confined to her room, the world outside her window has imprinted itself upon her soul.

I think Agnes is the eucalypt and the eucalypt is Agnes.

There was a time, some years ago, when I would leave my grandmother's room with feelings approximating guilt: that I am young and blessed with strength, vitality and health. Or I'd take upon myself, in misplaced empathy, the pain and incapacity I imagined to be hers.

But not any more.

My old, old tree is quite content, settled by her window. I visit the pool and swim my laps, and then I swim a dozen more.

**Paul Bateman is a Melbourne writer.**



# Footy Dreaming- Chapter Two

by *Michael Hyde*

The story continues...

Jonah waited for the bus outside the Bakery. It was a cool morning and light rain fell on the town of Marshall. In the valley, the low clouds that formed a whispering veil of mist slowly lifted. Jonah pulled up the collar of his bomber jacket to ward off the cold. He was feeling good, full of pancakes but late as usual. He gazed down the street and saw his Mavericks teammate, Archie Lawson mooching towards him. Lawson was younger than Jonah but they'd both known each other since Auskick, played a bit of basketball together and had become friends. Footy friends at least.

Marshall slowly came to life—the supermarket advertising the week's specials, a couple of clothes and sporting goods stores, takeaways, the Bluebird Café—and there was his cousin, Alan, who gave him a wave from the service station as he began work on a car up on the hoist. A mate of his Dad's swept the footpath in front of the pub, while someone from the post office placed advertising boards on the pavement.

A headline from the local paper outside the newsagency caught his eye:

New Season Starts. 'Talent best in years', says coach.

'Nothing like a bit of pressure', thought Jonah as his mind wandered back to his dream, his never-ending dream. Archie joined him.

'Wha's up?' Jonah gave his routine greeting.

'Bloody cold, eh?' Archie said, pulling his jacket tightly around him. 'Go for a run this morning?'

'Geez, not you too. M'Mum was getting onto me about that this morning as well.'

Archie chuckled. 'Feeling the pressure, eh mate?'

Jonah pointed at the newsagency. 'Stuff like that doesn't help much. I just wanna play footy. All this other stuff I can do without.'

'G'day Jonah. What's happening?' Jonah and Archie turned to find a boy who everybody called, Little Tony.

Jonah glanced at the kid. 'Nothing much.'

'Footy season coming up. Heard you might have a chance?'

Jonah looked straight ahead as the rain made small pinpricks in the oily puddles on the road. 'A chance at what?'

'Making it, of course. Development squad, Bushrangers, the whole bit.'

'Yeah, well. Maybe. We'll see, won't we.'

Tony cast a sideways look at Archie. 'How d'you reckon you guys'll go this week?'

Archie ignored him. Jonah shrugged—he wished the kid would shut up and he had a feeling that this chitchat was leading some place he didn't want to go. There was a small group of kids who secretly ran a betting book on local and AFL games, making up their own odds and for a few, starting a costly lifetime habit. The school principal frequently gave stern lectures about 'illegal activities' but the gamblers were never caught. Like the SP bookies from fifty years ago, nobody wanted to dob them in.

Their leader was a guy called Marcus White but Little Tony was in it up to his ears as well.

Tony started to bite his nails and after a few minutes of silence he said, 'Fancy a bet on the game, Jonah?'

'What game are you talkin' about?'

'The one you're playing this Saturday. Mavericks and the Kookaburras. Under 15's.'

'Nah, sorry mate. I don't bet on footy. I don't bet on nothin'. Had an uncle who was a gambler, big time. He went down the gurgler—lost everything.'

'Fair enough, Jonah, fair enough', the kid wheedled and then paused. 'You reckon you're gonna win?'

'You and your gambling mates want some inside information, eh?' Jonah laughed. He liked keeping this idiot on the hook. He also liked having a reputation as somebody who could play the

game which meant that guys like the bookie treated him with a bit of respect.

'I'll tell you what's going to happen, mate', Jonah said softly with a small wink at Archie. He leant towards Little Tony who thought that some deadly secret about the upcoming game was about to be divulged.

'You know what we're going to do?' Jonah looked around as though he didn't want anybody else to hear.

'You wanna know what our game plan is?' Jonah beckoned the kid to come closer and rested his hand on Little Tony's shoulder. The kid looked at Jonah like a puppy about to get a leg of lamb.

Then in a whisper Jonah said, 'We're going to whip— their—arse.'

Archie cracked up while Little Tony looked at Jonah who grinned from ear to ear. 'Very bloody funny, but the Kookaburras aren't a bad team. That kid, Ben. Plays on the flank, sometimes sweeps across the backline—he's bloody good.'

Jonah didn't reply.

'Y'know him? Think his last name's Meredith. Ever played against him?'

'Maybe—can't remember. Oh yeah. He's in a couple of my classes—yeah, he's in Maths. Think we played against each other one time. He's good, is he?'

The bus arrived and Jonah and Archie quickly chose a seat up the back to get as far away as possible from the kid's babble.

Of course, Jonah knew who Ben was. Ben Meredith was a gun player for the Kookaburras and the town gossip placed him and Jonah in the same category—'the two most likely kids to make it to the big time'.

He didn't know Ben very well and had no reason to dislike him. He was just one of those kids you saw around town who hung with his own small group of mates. Maybe they nodded to each other in the mall, sometimes they might have played kick-to-kick at school or saw each other at the pool but they never really connected.

If there was anything that tied them together it was footy and the hope that they'd be noticed by footy scouts, invited down by the Bushrangers, taken on board, end up in the Draft and one day play on the MCG. But having the same dream didn't make them mates.

Jonah stared out the window as the bus travelled through the industrial part of town—factories, welders, farm equipment, the big Southern Cross Hardware but all dominated by the cannery which was the main employer in Marshall. As they passed, the tea break whistle blew and Jonah thought about his Dad sitting down with the paper and a mug of coffee poured from his thermos.

The bus stopped to collect more passengers, then continued on its way. 'Of course people'd think about me and him in the same breath. Both of us with big hopes, both of us with the same dream. Probably got the same posters on our walls.' Jonah smiled to himself. 'It'd bug me though, if he got to play on the G and I didn't.'

Jonah felt Archie staring at him making him realise that his words had slipped out for all the world to hear. He quickly returned to looking out the window, hoping the rest of the bus hadn't heard his innermost thoughts as well.

The game on Saturday between the Kookaburras and Mavericks Under-15's announced the start of the football season but this season had an added importance. If you were going to start to be really noticed by the scouts and those that mattered in the footy world, then now, this season was the time to make your play. Jonah knew it. Ben knew it. And so did most of the footy-mad town of Marshall.

To be continued...

**Michael Hyde is a lecturer at VU and this extract is the second instalment on *Footy Dreaming*.**

## Street faces 4

*by Cam Black*

there is a couple on my tram tonight  
they are known to me  
not by name, but as faces  
that i see regularly in my travels  
they sit as they always sit  
he on her right side, she...on his left  
they never smile

they appear a little alternative  
his hair is almost as long as hers  
he reads from music mags,  
and rolling stone, guitar  
she never speaks unless to respond  
to his occasional muted side-of-mouth comments

they don't hold hands

they are moving now on this  
near-empty tram, looking disgruntled

away from the one person near them  
they are wearing long scarves their  
team's colours flying  
i know from the guys back at the pub  
that their team won

they do not look happy

and now as i walk beneath  
trees on this midnight autumn street  
from the tram to my home  
i wonder, and i hope  
that somewhere they have beauty  
that maybe they, too

kick the leaves

**Cam Black is a Melbourne poet.**



## Last writes

by Anson Cameron

In this age where we tweet, text, email and blog, communicating more but saying less, Anson Cameron laments the loss of the letter.

I HAVE a letter from my father, written after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, that begins:

My Dear A.J.

The age of letter writing is of course gone but I have always been better able to express myself in writing, especially where emotions are involved. I wanted to write to you at this time to say a few things while I have reasonable clarity of mind...

Five pages later the letter ends:

My uttermost blessings and wishes for your lifetime health and happiness and that of Sarah, Asta and Freya.

Love Graeme. (Dad)

P.S. NO reply of course!

In my reply (of course) on a page headed SENTIMENTALITY, I offered my own fond memories and love. Then on another page titled BUSINESS I offered to help him end his merciless decline with a bottle of scotch and a conversation and some carbon monoxide and a view of the Strathbogie Ranges.

He then wrote me another letter, which began:

My heart bled and my eyes welled when I read your wonderful, gallant offer to stand by my side at the edge of eternity.

There was nothing wonderful or gallant about it; it was one possible next step in a friendship. But this was the opening sentence of a letter in which he took two pages to knock me back.

No father and son were better friends, I think, but if we hadn't said these things in letters they would have remained unsaid. For we are not European or Middle Eastern men. We are Anglo-Celts and we have no easy recourse to emotion. We cannot weep or wail in each other's presence. We cannot hug or make spoken declarations of love. We had two powerful communications. We could shake hands while looking into each other's eyes and therein see and swap a story. Or we could write letters.

But Graeme (Dad) was right; the age of letter writing is gone. And I reveal these extracts from his letters only to give an idea of the profundity, love and honesty hand-written correspondence so easily contains. A letter seems to me a magical vessel, one of the few that can hold all that is in a person's heart.

There is the expectation that your letter will be read and re-read by its recipient at leisure, in isolation. It will be studied, its every nuance and mood explored. It is, after all, a considered, composed communication.

Would I have said the things I said to my father in an email? Could I have said them in the 140 characters of a Tweet? Could we have had this conversation on Facebook?

Computers and phones are rightly regarded as porous devices and anything we say on them must be understood to be said in a semi-public domain. What chance true honesty if you suspect you might be pouring your heart into the Town Crier's ear? What chance a declaration of love? And what fool would offer assistance to a friend to end their curdled mortality over the internet? People writing computer-to-computer know what they are saying is potentially public and are wary of revealing too much.

Historians have routinely mined the letters of the famous dead to flesh out their humanity. The letters were not always an accurate guide to the man, of course. Famous people are at least as duplicitous as the hoi polloi and many (especially writers) had an eye to posterity when writing their letters and were therefore writing for history, enhancing their legend.

Even this was no bad thing for the historian. If one was painstaking over one's letters because one expected them to be kept, then good, the writer was in effect penning for us the outline of an autobiography. At their best a collection of letters could give a picture of a private life, and an X-ray of an inner life.

CHARLES Darwin was a shy, non-combative, tense and often ill man who lived a double life. He sat on his theory of natural selection for seven years before he wrote to botanist Joseph Hooker in 1844. "I am almost convinced (quite contrary to the opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable".

His class and family hated the "fierce and licentious" radical hooligans who would tear down the social order without God to stop them, he worried. And he didn't want trouble with the church, his scientific friends . . . or his wife, who was deeply religious.

It was a full 20 years after its inception that Darwin finally bared his theory. Luckily we have his notebooks and 14,000 letters to and from him in which he made and broke friendships, equivocated, courted supporters and extracted knowledge from others.

His fears concerning his revolutionary theory are laid bare through the letters. In 1843: "I believe (though why should I trouble you with my belief, which must & ought to appear the merest trash and hypothesis?) . . . P.S: Will you . . . keep this one letter of mine to be returned; as at some future year, I shall be curious to see what I think now."

Can you imagine such an exchange via email? Most emails are deleted. And knowing they will be, why bother to make them good? Never mind linguistic muscle or anything edging on profundity, most lack basic punctuation. And yet they are ubiquitous. The Radicati Group, a tech market research firm, estimates 247 billion emails were sent in 2009 something over 3 million a second.

Richard Sellick, professorial fellow at Melbourne University's Centre for the Study of Higher Education, laments the surfeit of computer information. Everything a business does is on computer. Researching it is like watching that company's history in real time. And the cost of archiving information means emails usually remain on computers. And even if a computer is kept for 20 years, who after that time has the technology and know-how to access it?

Then there is the stuff of which letters are made. Handwriting can be as intimate and reminiscent as a person's voice or scent. A letter arrives and you recognise the hand from the address. It is from a close friend you haven't seen for years and you smile as a throb of memory passes through you.

In 1846 Charles Dickens wrote to a friend, W.C. Macready:

My Dear Macready,

The welcome sight of your handwriting moves me (though I have nothing to say) to show you mine, and if I could recollect the passage in Virginius I would paraphrase it, and say, 'Does it seem to tremble, boy? Is it a loving autograph? Does it beam with friendship and affection?'

A friend's handwriting can beam with friendship, love and affection; it is their voice, and thus their spirit, laid magically before you. Historian John Barnes, now working on a biography of La Trobe, says the man's handwriting became terrible when he was under pressure, a nightmare to decipher. Tweets, texts, emails and Facebook messages are at least easy to read. But then blots and crossings-out can say a lot about the state of mind of a person writing a letter, too. As an execution or an expedition approaches, the script becomes fevered with telling amendments.

Strangely, the things that have killed the letter are not like the letter. They do not replace it or replicate it. Facebook differs from a posse of idle

teens sitting in a mall only in that Facebook teens are wearing pyjamas and slathered with pimple lotions to resemble the Sioux made ready for war. It is more a spoken communication than a written one. A conversation. And like most conversations it is reflexive, speculative, inexact, rambling and repetitive. Thoughts and inanities are yammered as they occur. No editing, no shaping, no contemplation. The moment a comment is received an answer is expected.

The historian who has taken to trawling through Facebook for anything of value has accepted the stone from Sisyphus. Unless some search engine is invented with a relevance filter fine enough to find a fact in this bletherworld, she will search forever because the content is limitless. Every second thought or musing is now sent to some acquaintance, or a group, many of whom will respond. Nearly all is dross. And Twitter? Tweets can offer real-time news-bites of earth-shattering events that help determine how we see those events. But they are more often a form of mental dandruff that falls from the gods, offhand observations from the famous whose every act or musing is a fascination and a wonder to the followers who hang on their tweets half-believing they are eavesdropping on a conversation between semi-divines who might, at any moment, reveal some molten gossip about an all-star DNA swap-meet in a toilet cubicle at 30,000 feet.

Not quite. Ever. Beyonce has just bought some cool black knee-high boots at Dolce and Gabbana. Andy Roddick hates trains. President Obama thinks English kids are cute. Wil Anderson is bored by awards nights. These are tweets.

One might have optimistically expected communications to gain in potency as they diminished in size; that they would distil into poems, sonnets, haiku and aphorism. They didn't. Most tweets resemble fortune cookies written by cats. And they are without number. (Without comprehensible number, anyway. Twitterers are tweeting 50 million messages a day; 6000 tweets a second.)

Texts are something composed on a tram while an iPod is injecting Arctic Monkeys in your ears. I have taken the trouble to translate a famous letter into a text to demonstrate the relative paucity of this new communication from the historian's point of view. The letter was written by the Koshoviy Otaman Ivan Sirko and signed by the Zaporozhian Cossacks of the Ukraine to the Turkish Sultan Muhammad IV who was demanding subjugation.

Thou Turkish Devil!

Brother and companion to the accursed Devil, and secretary to Lucifer himself, Greetings.

What the hell kind of noble knight art thou? Satan voids and thy army devours. Never wilt thou be fit to

have the sons of Christ under thee. Thy army we fear not, and by land and by sea in our chaikas will we do battle against thee.

Thou scullion of Babylon, thou beer-brewer of Jerusalem, thou goat-thief of Alexandria, thou swineherd of Egypt, thou Armenian pig and Tartar goat. Thou hangman of Kamyanets, thou evil-doer of Podolia, thou grandson of the Devil himself, thou great silly oaf of all the world and of the netherworld and, before our God, a blockhead, a swine's snout, a mare's ass, and clown of Hades. May the Devil take thee.

That is what the Cossacks have to say to thee, thou basest born of runts! Unfit art thou to lord it over true Christians. The date we know not, for no calendar have we got. The moon (month) is in the sky, the year is in a book, and the day is the same with us here as with ye over there - and thou canst kiss us thou knowest where.

Koshoviy Otaman Ivan Sirko and all the Zaporozhian Cossack Brotherhood

A rich stream of bile from which a historian might pluck narrative.

But given a similar political drama in the year 2010, this Cossack's response to that Sultan's demand, sent as a text, would likely read:

Yo Mo,

No go on the subju, shiteater.

Sirko & Co.

If this is the age in which communication was finally

democratised, and the few clear voices were joined and subsumed by the myriad incessant chirpings of everyman, then perhaps we should mourn the loss of those few voices rather than rejoice in the many.

Could it be that the very ease of communication has now devalued communication? That given our technological advances communication has become more conversation than literature? That it will be more anodyne and everyday, and less profound, truthful and eloquent?

Emeritus Professor Barnes says that during a recent experience of grief he has witnessed emails every bit as emotionally forthcoming and fully fleshed as any letter.

So, there is evidence the grand tradition of friends writing intensely and compassionately to one another in difficult times will continue via email.

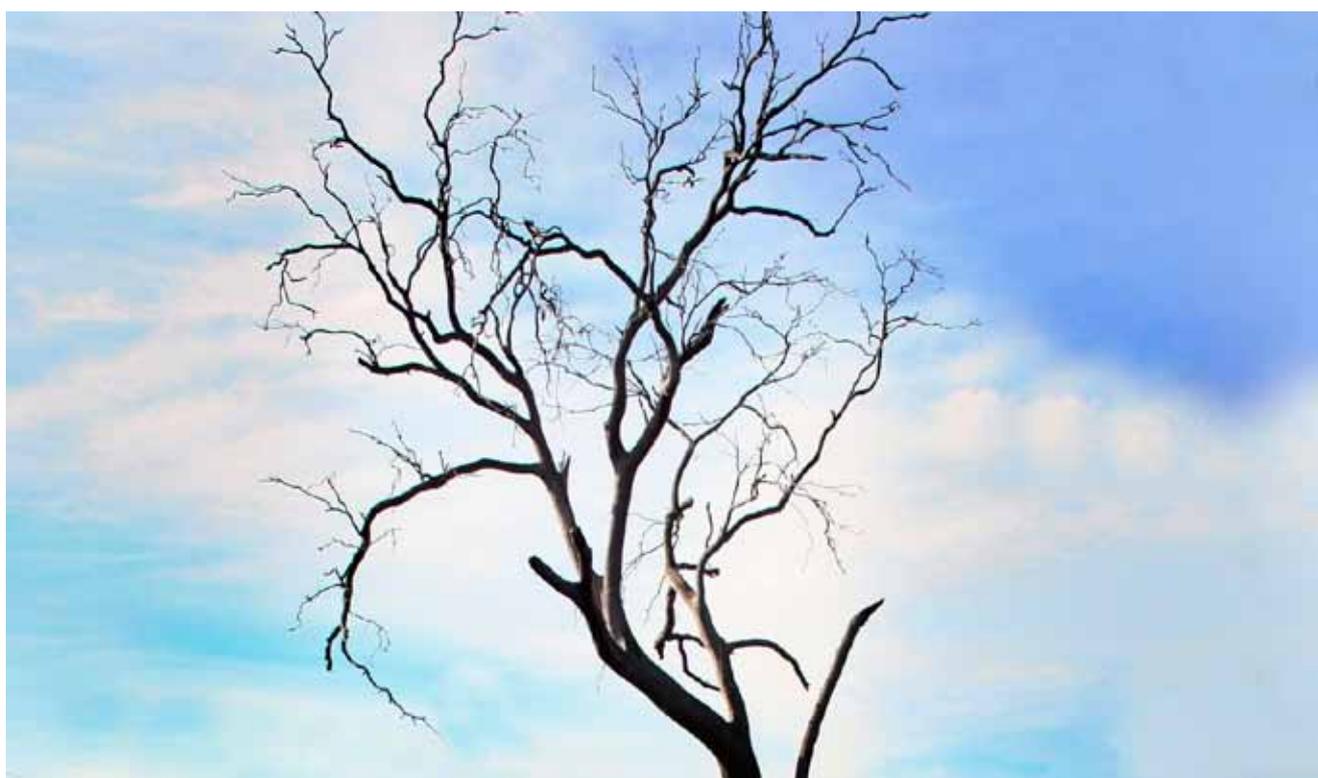
Professor Sellick admires the immediacy of emails. They are frequently hot-headed, dashed off in anger base metal for a historian.

But what of young lovers? And politicians and soldiers and tycoons and . . .? What of those with private, delicate or secret things to say, like Darwin, or my dad? What trace of self and secret will they leave now the age of letter writing is gone?

**Anson Cameron is a journalist at *The Age*.**

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# White Glory

by Michelle Smart

I trudged up the worn cobblestone path, up into the depths of the hills. I knew every nook, creek, and every spec of grass by now. It bored me to see the same thing each day. I headed up the hill, my legs strong, pushing against gravity. I reached my destination. I came upon the clearing. Against the green trees, the clearing held white—buds of silky wildflowers. In the midst of the knee-high grass Kiara danced in a white dress that reached her knees. She was like a wildflower swaying in the breeze, dark tresses fanned out like her dress as she twirled. I never got why she liked it here so much. Why she liked to dance here. She said the strangest things like, ‘Why do butterflies only touch on a flower for a second?’

I watched her, entranced; she spotted me. I caught the flash of her pearly teeth. The sun seemed to gift her, to make her glow like a mythical being. She was sunshine in everyone’s life but most of all, mine. But, it all changed. The frown appeared on her tiny brow. She had the fire of an Italian woman—fierce like a mother-wolf protecting her cubs. She stalked over.

‘Why are you wearing a uniform?’ She said.

I shrugged knowing what would come. But I was uncomfortable just the same. ‘I leave today.’

Kiara gasped, her face crumpling. I should have told her, but she would have tried to stop me.

‘You are not your father! Just because he dreams of a glory he can’t have, he shouldn’t wish death on another son!’

‘Kiara, we’ve been through this. I am going. You can’t stop me this time. And when I come back he will finally accept me.’

‘But what if you die like Joseph?’

‘I’ll come back; I won’t leave you alone,’ I whispered.

She turned her eyes to the hills, past vineyards; past farms of fruit and fresh air, down to our little village where cows and birds morphed together in symphony with the church bell.

My father, his crippled leg a reflection of the war, approached from the shed.

The cart rolled up with men aboard.

‘I won’t fail you, Papa. I will bring Joseph’s body home.’

‘Bring home a medal, or don’t come back at all.’

I watched his retreating back; anguish gripped my heart. But, I could change that, that’s why I had to go, why I had to leave her—a sacrifice for the greater good.

Kiara touched my arm. I looked down to her. She smiled sadly.

‘Bring him home and hug me again.’

She put her arms around my waist and kissed my cheek lightly. I climbed onto the cart and it rumbled into action. My father never looked back. For all he knew, I would not return.

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I couldn’t feel my body. I could see blood as I glanced around in horror and fear. Pieces of men I knew, faces empty, eyes filled with fear, an instant before death took them. I glanced about dazed, this single movement drew so much effort. Memories overcame me—warmth, comfort and her laughter. She appeared to me, as she had on the day in the clearing, and again she danced in her white dress with her arms outstretched. It was like I could actually feel her embrace; her tears on my skin. I reached out desperate to move against the cold which had engulfed my body. She stayed, just out of reach.

‘Kiara,’ I coughed, using the last of my breath. Exhausted my head fell back. I felt heavy.

A cry went up, ‘We’ve got a live one, boys!’

---

I walked up the cobbled pathway with the biggest bouquet of wildflowers I’d collected on my way. The air was fresh and drinkable; sun was warm on my skin, and I lifted my face to greet it. The vibrancy of the trees sent a thrill through me and it was as though I was experiencing my home for the first time. I came to the clearing, and to rest at her feet. The wildflowers danced through the knee-high grass like her little white dress.

‘I told him, Kiara,’ I said to her. ‘I told him where Joseph’s body is. I slammed my medal on the table and said, “Here, keep your glory, because I have mine.” From ninety-seven men, I was the one that lived that day—ironic,’ I said.

From the ground protruded a prettily carved tombstone. The grass swayed around it, a butterfly landed on the edge, kissing the stone for a second. I placed the flowers lovingly down and took a deep breath. I sank into the swaying grass, letting it bury me beside her. I turned onto my back to look at life and all its glory.

**Michelle Smart studies Creative Writing at VU.**

# Mum memory

*By Barry Garner*

I can't believe it's nearly three years since you passed away, but it is. I'd like to use a cliché like, 'Not a day goes by without...', but there are days that pass without me thinking of you. Life and the business of living have a habit of catching us out, dragging us along like a river with an undercurrent of unstoppable time—days when we all just get caught up with trying to work out what to do next and how we'll find the time to do it. But in the midst of all that, there are moments when I think of you. Times when I realise how much you are still part of my life, and that a huge part of my story is part of yours.

I still have times when I forget you are gone. Sometimes, I'd love to give you a ring and just catch up on what's been going on. I used to love giving you a call. I didn't even mind the fact that we'd almost always have the same conversation. You would always reminisce and tell me stories of when me and the boys were growing up in Carlton, stories beyond my memory—stories of a family in happy times, innocent times.

Often you'd get confused and mix up just who did what, but it didn't matter; I liked listening anyway. You always wanted to talk about the days when Dad was still with us, but not mention the years that followed. They were hard years for you after Dad died, times when the innocence of Carlton was replaced by years of trying to forget. Years with your second husband who drank and was sometimes violent. Years when you drank, I guess, to forget what you had lost.

I wish I could call you now and let you know we're doing okay, to tell you all about your grandkids and their kids, and of their innocent years. They are all doing well; living, planning and building a future. Wish I could tell you how I treasure my memories of you, and how I would give anything to listen to you again. I'd like to tell you we have moved to a nicer house, had a trip to England and hopefully grown a little wiser.

I miss you, Mum. Miss the drive up to sleepy old Nagambie to visit you. I even miss the kids sitting in the back and chanting, 'How long till we get there?' But most of all I miss you asking, 'How are you love?' And caring about the answer.

**Barry Garner is a Professional Writing and Editing student at VU.**





## Murray River Poem

(for Les Murray)

by *Lisa Gorton*

Rivers start the way dreams turn into morning  
as early rain makes the sound of days commuting:  
song of the soft-shoe horde for idlers and layabouts  
with the sound of stilettos window-shopping  
whenever leaves feed their pure ideas to shadow:

Out of Kosciusko near Mount Cobberas  
past Khancoban, out of the high places  
from the hunter's long raging hunger-

But it is not its names the river repeats as if  
trying to memorise something. It is made of fingers that  
hold you in the current of forgetting and what it collects:

Anabanches, scrolls, meanders,  
billabongs and backwaters, shoals  
or shadows, snags, a taste of vegetable decay-

Some rivers travel as the subconscious of light  
but our one big river is dirt-coloured and  
deliberate. And where it goes  
in straight canals through the Mallee plains,  
it is as we imagine forbearance to be.

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