UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Professional Writing & Editing
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Victoria University of TAFE
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Cover image: Pam Kleemann

Editing and production: Kim Cook, M. Hart, Danielle Higgins, Amila Hussain, Jean Kerwin, Chantelle Langanke, Andrew McKenna, Rose Moebus, Simone Murcutt, Samantha Vroom

Layout and design: Kim Cook
What we see is what we get, but what we don’t see makes us miss so much more. A writer is someone who is not fully seen, or may be seen best through the prism of their writing. The Professional Writing and Editing book has been put together to show you the whole of us, not just a part. The writers who have contributed to this book have opened themselves up to the world, demonstrating not only their talents and skills, but their heart and souls.

We present to you *Up Close and Personal*, the 2013 Professional Writing and Editing Anthology, shining a light onto the inner workings of Professional Writing and Editing students at Victoria University.
Foreword
Andrew McKenna

Let’s face it, we are creatures who love a good story. We’re schooled in stories almost from the moment we are born. We love sharing our stories. Welcome to Up Close and Personal, Victoria University’s Professional Writing and Editing course’s end-of-year anthology.

Every year we settle on a different theme for the anthology, a theme informed and guided by the students, as is the book itself.

‘Up close and personal’, of course can be interpreted in many ways. We threw around notions of intimacy, sexuality and family, but the overriding notion was that of sharing: the intimate sharing of ideas and our own creative exploration. Students studying PWE have explored their ideas and creativity separately and together over their years of study at VU, and for some it has culminated in the production of the delightful book of stories you are now holding.

As our cover so beautifully conveys, the act of writing, while usually a solitary pursuit, becomes an intimate expression of creativity and individuality when shared through reading.

The staff at VU have helped guide our writing students through their studies here, but we have not instilled their love of words into them. We can’t do that—that’s something they bring to us, and bring to us year after year.

The students have written, edited, laid out and managed the production of Up Close and Personal, and completed the multitude of jobs in between.
We are constantly thrilled and delighted at the way they rally, guide each other and produce a marvellous book each year.

We hope you can get up close to their stories.
Contents

Editorial 9
Leaders 10
Porch steps 12
St Albans central, 10 am 19
Elysium 21
Forever in flight 29
Last words 30
Living with fear 34
A man of few words 39
Love is 40
The spark of life 42
We begin as students, frightened and sceptical about where these classes will lead us. We struggle with textbooks and print-outs, heavier than our bags can carry. We breathe sighs of relief when the term draws to a close and panic as it re-opens, bringing more stress and chaos, more than the term before.

We make friends and we trust strangers to tell us the truth, all for one single goal: to reach our dreams.

We write for hours on end, only to scream at the screen and toss aside some of our better work. Our hands cramp and our heads ache from stressful sentence structures and grammar errors, fixing and fidgeting and tweaking and deleting until that final moment when we find peace with our work.

To our fellow Professional Writing students, we bid you to look upon this book with pride and to see just how far those endless hours of creation have brought us. What you see before you is not just a book but a reminder that all those days of hard work and persistence have paid off. What you see before you is something you can show the rest of the world.

Something that shows that if you follow your dreams, anything can happen.
Leaders
Craig Henderson

Selling lies as truths
Truths as lies
Dangling carrots
To those without a horse
Or even a wagon
Paying for someone else’s war
Feeding corruption
Not the poor
Sacrificing freedom
On the altar
Of good intentions
Riding on the backs
Of the downtrodden—
The sheep
Long slaughtered
For the gravy train
Called war
Lead us not
Into temptation
Tempt us not
With false trails
Blazed by Indian givers
And fools

Cling to power
With what remains
Under the fingernails
Of all you have
Taken for granted
Or simply taken

Integrity
Respect
Trust
Promises
Bleed from
The wounds
In all our backs

Take the blame
Or pass it on
Fall on
The pointed finger
Of all you’ve done.
A stuffed, purple elephant appeared on the flat top of the mahogany display cabinet.

‘What do you see, Bessie?’

The purple toy, Bessie, rotated from left to right. A thin arm reached up and placed a blue elephant, its vibrant colour faded with love, beside its friend.

‘What about you, Mr Sniffles?’ she asked.

Footsteps thundered quickly across the floorboards, the vibrations tickling her knees. They click-clacked closer to her. She knew that noise.

Mummy’s high shoes, she thought, and poked her dirty blonde head up from behind the cabinet.

‘Mu—’

But it wasn’t her. Auntie Kaitlin rushed past, knocking the corner of the cabinet with her knee, sending it rocking back into the small girl’s chin.

‘Ow!’ the girl and her aunt cried together.

Auntie Kaitlin bent down and rubbed her knee. A red patch of skin was visible through the tear in her sheer pantyhose.

‘Damn it,’ she muttered, her lips pursed as she rubbed ferociously.

The little girl cupped her reddening chin in her hand, her eyebrows laced together and eyes stinging.

The woman looked up and her eyes flashed beneath her flicked lashes, the corners slightly smudged with black.
‘Elouise, what are you doing?’
The little girl’s chest heaved; her breath caught inside her lungs.
‘Your mother has been looking everywhere for you.’
‘You hurt my chin,’ the girl said in a small voice.
Her aunt reached out and, taking the girl by the top of her hand, wrenched her out and around the cabinet.
‘You’re all dirty.’ She patted at the knees of Ella’s thick, red stockings, wiping off patches of lint and fine dust.
‘Will you kiss it better?’
Auntie Kaitlin shook her head and straightened the hem of Ella’s black dress. Small, embroidered butterflies danced and looped around the ruffled edge.
‘Please?’ she asked.
‘Go into the kitchen and get something to eat,’ her aunt said, ignoring the plea of the red-chinned girl. ‘Don’t touch anything on the dining table. That food is for the adults.’
‘Please?’
Auntie Kaitlin stood up and turned away from Ella.
‘A kiss to make it better?’ she said to her aunt’s back.
Her shoulders slumped. She lifted Mr Sniffles up, level to her face, and pressed the fuzzy tip of his trunk against her chin.
‘Thank you,’ she said, smiling and stroking the edge of his ear. ‘All better now.’
With an elephant in each hand, she moved through the house. Faces hovered above her. They stood in small groups speaking in hushed tones and holding small, daisy-patterned, china plates of cakes and sandwiches. They smiled down at her with wet eyes. Some patted the top of her head as she passed. She stopped in the middle of a circle of people and looked up, taking in the face of each individual, one by one.
‘Hello there, little Elouise,’ a lady with wispy red hair said.
‘Don’t call me that,’ she scowled. ‘My name is Ella.’
The lady chuckled lightly. ‘Well, then, hello there, little Ella.’
‘That’s better,’ Ella said. ‘Have you seen my Grandpoppy?’

The chatter amongst the circle stopped, and the lady’s throat bobbed, as though she was swallowing something hard.

‘Pardon?’

Ella held up Bessie and Mr Sniffles to the lady. ‘It’s Thursday,’ she explained. ‘On Thursdays, we go to the park to feed the ducks with Grandpoppy. Mr Sniffles, Bessie, Grandpoppy and me.’

A high-pitched whine came out of the lady. Her eyes screwed up and her shoulders started to shake, almost like she was laughing. The man next to her reached out and wrapped an arm around the lady’s shoulder. She curved into him, her head buried in his chest, and howled.

Maybe she’s hungry, thought Ella. Her dog, Snoopy, always howled when he was hungry. Perhaps the lady with wispy red hair needed kibble?

Ella wound her way around the people to the kitchen. Opening the fridge door, she removed a bag of bread and took it to the bench. Positioning her stool, she stepped onto it, placing her elephants gently to the side where they could watch without getting dirty. She took out a slice of bread and gently, slowly, started to tear it into bite-size pieces.

She didn’t like today. It was all wrong. It had started when her breakfast had been all muddled. Auntie Kaitlin had made her porridge with sultanas in it.

‘I don’t like sultanas in my porridge,’ Ella had complained, picking the shrivelled lumps out with sticky fingers. ‘They look like poo!’

She had dressed herself in her favourite Thursday ensemble: her ballerina dress and gumboots; the purple ones with white, pink and green polka dots. Auntie Kaitlin had fussed about it and tugged the dress down by the shoulders, wrestling her into the boring black dress, red stockings and winter boots.

In church, she’d played in the back pew, crawling along the floor with Bessie and Mr Sniffles, humming quiet, made-up songs to herself. The box at the front, under the stained glass windows, was scary. Big, long and shiny
brown, like a giant jack-in-the-box. She covered her eyes as the grown-ups approached it, white tissues poking out from their fists.

‘Don’t touch it!’ she had begged. ‘Jack will pop his head out and scare you.’

No, today was all wrong. Even Bessie and Mr Sniffles thought so.

‘Don’t worry,’ she told them. ‘I’ll get the bread ready for when Grandpoppy comes.’

She bounced on the balls of her feet slightly. Thursday afternoons were her favourite. She would hold Grandpoppy’s big, wrinkled hand and they would walk down the white pebbled pathway to the lake. Just the four of them. She would hold Bessie in her right hand, and Grandpoppy would hold Mr Sniffles with his left, swinging him gently as they strolled.

Grandpoppy knew the names of all the ducks.

‘Hello, Matilda. G’day, Petunia. Afternoon, Phillip,’ he would greet them, tipping his hat and tossing a piece of bread as he acknowledged each one.

‘Oh, don’t forget Elsbeth!’ Ella would point out the chubby duck that was always wandering alone, walking in circles with his wings flapping.

They would sit on the bench by the water’s edge, Ella’s legs swinging against the wood slats.

‘Quack, quack-quack, quack,’ a duck, Reggie, announced as he wiggled his swollen bottom past them.

‘I know,’ Grandpoppy said. He smiled proudly, his cheeks crinkling like the sheets of an unmade bed.

‘Quack, quack.’

‘I know,’ he agreed.

‘Quack, quack, quack, quack-quack-quack.’

‘You don’t need to tell me,’ Grandpoppy said. ‘I agree with you entirely, my good man.’

‘Quack!’

‘Exactly!’ Grandpoppy nodded at the duck as it turned and waddled back down to the still water.

‘What did he say, Grandpoppy?’
‘He was simply informing me of what a cutie-pie little Grand-munchkin I have; as if I didn’t already know.’ Grandpoppy snorted.

‘Then what?’

Grandpoppy put his arm around Ella and scooped her right up to his side.

‘He said that I had better not let you grow up, or you’ll run off to the big smoke and have no time to see your dear old Grandpoppy.’

She looked up at him. ‘Don’t be silly, Grandpoppy.’

Hand-in-hand, the four – two humans, one big, one little, and two furry elephants with curly noses – would stroll back to the small cottage where Grandpoppy lived. The fire in the living room would spit and crackle enticingly, warming Ella’s cheeks to a rosy pink. She would lie Mr Sniffles and Bessie down on the hearthrug beside Chuckles, Grandpoppy’s round cat. After kissing the elephants and the cat on the tops of their heads, she would climb up onto Grandpoppy’s lap. He would be reclining on the threadbare, La-Z-boy with the spine of a picture book cracked open and waiting. He would read to her in a low voice, rocking her softly until her eyelids drooped closed. Putting the book aside, he would rest his saggy-skinned cheek on her hair and close his eyes.

That was what happened on Thursdays.

‘Ella!’ her mother cried.

Ella paused, her bowl—its mouth full of shredded bread—clasped in between her hands.

‘What on earth do you think you are doing?’ She dumped the pile of dirty plates that she was carrying on the bench and pulled the bowl from her daughter’s hands.

‘Getting the bread ready to feed the ducks,’ she explained. ‘For when Grandpoppy comes.’

Her mother stopped and stared at the little girl.

Silence.

‘It’s Thursday,’ Ella said.
Her mother sniffed and shook her head.
‘Get down from that stool and go somewhere else, please,’ she said firmly.
Ella watched as her mother tossed the entire contents of the bowl into the bin, the lid flap closing with a snap. She gasped.

Tucking the toys under each arm, she walked over to the bin, pushed back the lid and peered down at the ruined duck feed.

‘B-b—’

‘Ella!’ her mother snapped, dunking the empty bowl into the water-filled sink. She sloshed water around the bowl, her head bowed and her mouth moving without noise.

‘But—’

‘Go outside and play.’

‘But there are no other little kids to play with,’ Ella whined.

Her mum’s hands scrubbed at a plate and a small splash of foamy water slopped onto the floor.

‘But there are no other little kids for me to play with, Mum,’ she said, louder this time.

‘You have no problem playing by yourself any other time,’ she said. ‘Play with your toys. I buy you toys and they sit in your toy box, untouched. Other than those dirty, old elephants.’

‘I don’t want to play by myself! I always play by myself! Why can’t you play with me?’

Her mother lifted the soapy dish out of the sink and dropped it onto the dish rack.

‘Why can’t you play with me?’

Auntie Kaitlin click-clacked into the kitchen and put another dirty plate down beside the sink.

‘Auntie Kaitlin, will you please play with me?’ Ella asked.

‘God damn it, Ella!’ Her mother spun around, her arms raised above her head and threw a plate down on the floor. The plate shattered into thick shards and a hairline crack squiggled across the tile at her feet.

‘Go outside and play. Right now. Leave!’ she screamed.
Ella turned and scrambled from the room, her heart pounding against her elephant friends that she held closely to her chest. She pushed her way through the crowd of legs, not bothering to look up at the faces to see who they belonged to. Pushing through the front door, she felt the cool air bite gently at her nose. She looked around the porch. Flowers: pink ones, blue ones, orange ones and big yellow ones with long petals that fanned out to look like the sun. She reached out and plucked one from the bunch, letting a small card with curly blue writing on it slide to the floor.

‘Mmmm…’ she sighed as she held it under her nose and drank in the smell. ‘Smell,’ she said, burying each of her companions’ noses deep into the pollen. She hugged the elephants close to her chest and sat down on the top step, putting the flower at her shoes. She would wait for Grandpoppy to come and she would give him the flower.

Yes, she would wait right there. Grandpoppy would play with her.
St Albans central, 10 am
Peter Dewar

With a name like St Albans and surrounded by Sunshine and Caroline Springs, you’d expect a pleasant sunny hamlet. Driving along the flat strip of road next to a train line and passing under huge electricity lines, the reality begins to sink in—you’re way out west.

Sadly, in St Albans you have a higher chance of being robbed, assaulted or watching your child mauled by a bull terrier than in most parts of Melbourne. Then there’s the beast.

It’s taken more lives than the big fish in JAWS—sixteen so far. This monster has terrorised residents for decades while governments have poured money into more worthy causes. An overpass is all that is needed to stop it.

The railway crossing on Main Road in St Albans looks harmless enough. There are boom gates and traffic lights to control vehicles and pedestrians. A solitary advertisement—X-ray imaging—on the station fence is the only hint of something more ominous.

Entering the crossing, you quickly realise it’s a race to beat the traffic lights. Stuck behind cars obeying a red light at the nearby street, waiting to turn or—heaven forbid, stalled—and you can find yourself across railway lines in the path of the 10:10 from Sunbury. (You can hear the train driver sound the horn desperately but there’s nowhere to go.)

Town planners mustn’t have realised that a railway crossing at the intersection of two main roads nestled in between two busy streets is a deadly
mixture. For good measure, a railway station and shopping hub were thrown in.

On foot, the crossing’s menacing potential is more apparent. On one side of the line, waiting for a bus or latching your bike to the stand, you can reach over the derelict cyclone fence and touch a stationary train.

The other side isn’t much better. Mid-morning, the station is full. Two hundred commuters stand on a platform that’s made for a school class. It’s impossible to walk along the platform without crossing the yellow line, designed to keep people a safe distance from thousands of tons of train.

If physical danger weren’t enough to cope with, it’s loud. Added to the usual commotion of general traffic noise, are drivers impatiently tooting car horns, boom gates clanging as they close, the metered tapping of a pedestrian crossing, and a 90-decibel train horn.

At 10:00am, in the vicinity of St Albans crossing, you’re in the middle of a cattle stampede at a rock concert.

Most disconcerting of all are the St Albanites happily going about their business.

‘Having a good day? What are you writing in your notebook?’ an elderly woman asks with a warm smile.

The laughter of high school kids on the station platform means they’re up to no good and loving it. The fresh-produce shops close by are full of friendly faces.

If it weren’t so hectic, I’d swear the mood was festive. Don’t they know this is St Albans?
Even with the door closed, Eve can’t escape the smell—some nauseating combination of industrial-strength disinfectant, vegetables cooked down to a soft mush and the nose-prickling medicinal reek of sealed bandages and antiseptic lotion. Is it bottled up, she wonders, running her fingernails back and forth across the hard plastic surface of her uncomfortable green chair. She can’t sit still; her heart pounds in her chest, frantic, desperate. Does someone in a factory somewhere slap an ‘Eau du Hospitale’ label on a bottle and ship it out to every hospital around the country, so that patients know what to expect on admission—just like a McDonald’s?

She laughs, folding her hands on her lap, unfolding them again. The chemical odour does more than give her a headache: it seems to strip colour and light from everything it touches. This room, with its sad greyish-pink walls, grey-brown carpet, flesh-coloured frames around faded prints—had it been colourful, once? Maybe the prints on the walls featured sunflowers and poppies instead of—she leans forward, frowning, unable to decide what those pink-purple blurs had once been.

Impressionism, she thinks, hides a lot of sins.

The door creaks open, bringing with it a gust of antiseptic sharp enough to burn her nostrils. Wheels rattle outside and she hears a trolley or a wheelchair banging over the linoleum floor, human voices low and loud. Deep inside the glass and concrete prison, surrounded by layers of plaster and steel, she can only hear the trees whisper inside her dreams—a whisper that grows fainter
with every passing day. The creak of bough and the clean eucalyptus scent follows her into wakefulness, however, the summons playing over and over again in her mind: *Eve, Eve, Eve…*

‘Eve. I’m so, so sorry for making you wait.’ The door clicks shut behind her and Linda crosses over to the desk, dropping a set of keys and a pile of folders on the bare surface of her desk. She smiles her white-woman white-bread smile as if she’s glad to see Eve, her face light and relaxed—she’s the best pretender Eve’s ever known. Even Dr Johannes’s smile slips at the corners, but Linda never looks anything but happy to sit down and talk. ‘I won’t bore you with the tale of what happened with the neighbour’s cat…’

Eve shrugs, staring down at her hands to hide from Linda’s warm brown eyes. The cuff of her shirt sleeve has crept up her arm, revealing the start of the pale red cuts, jagged and uneven; she grabs the cuff and yanks it down, and then wonders why she bothers. She can invent a lie—everyone knows she’s clumsy, always breaking things because she’s too lazy to be careful—but it won’t matter.

‘Eve?’

She looks up and meets Linda’s eyes. Linda perches on the edge of her desk, a pen and notepad in her hands. Her black skirt suit, her bobbed hair, her make-up are all as boring as her office, which makes everything easier. Dressed in green jeans and a purple shirt and sporting wiry blue hair that’s just starting to grow out, Eve feels like a bruise, an assault on pale skin, something that doesn’t belong. It’s easier to ignore Linda when she knows she’s never going to fit into Linda’s ordered, professional world—easier to say good-bye.

‘I understand,’ Linda says in her soft, quiet voice, leaning forwards as if she’s willing to listen, ‘that you want to go home.’

Home. She supposes it’s as good a word as any—is it Eve’s fault that everyone else thinks of ordinary human things, of houses and roofs and families, when they say that word? How is she lying if she chooses not to correct them?
‘Yes,’ she says, folding her arms across her chest. ‘I’m on my meds. I’m going to take them—I said I would. I’ll go to the psych. The outpatient program. I won’t do anything…’ She pauses, hunting for the right word to frame the act of glass piercing skin—the kind of word that makes her sound ordinary and sane. ‘Stupid.’

She expects Linda to nod and agree with her, but she frowns, lips pursed, writing something on the notepad. Eve tenses, but Linda just looks sad, and she holds her silence a little too long for the expression to herald anger. Eve lets out a long breath, tucking her shaking hands further under her armpits—and then frowns. Why isn’t Linda angry? Why isn’t she beginning the usual stream of loud concern and louder criticism Mum and Dad wield in all similar situations? Eve said the wrong thing, so why isn’t Linda telling her that?

She supposes it has something to with the cutting, with meds and diagnostic words like mental illness and clinical depression. People are supposed to treat the crazy with leather gloves.

‘Depression isn’t stupid.’ Linda shakes her head. ‘You were depressed and miserable and trying to express that, none of which is stupid.’ She sighs, staring at Eve until Eve nods. Okay. Don’t use the word ‘stupid’ around Linda—not that it matters. But she can do that; she can avoid saying the word until this last torturous session is over. It’s not so very much to ask. ‘Do you mean to go back to your parents?’

She nods, staring at her hands and not Linda’s eyes, afraid the lie is too visible in her face.

‘I’m concerned about that. I don’t think you should go back.’

Eve jerks her head up in surprise. ‘What—run away?’ The words sound too defiant and she shakes again, afraid that she’s betrayed herself in one moment of shock. People like Linda, after all, spend their days putting together the puzzle of someone’s soul, patching together the bleeding and broken. Eve meant to tell Linda, during their first session, of her fucked-up desire to turn her body into art—how she couldn’t resist the lure of her own brown skin, how beautiful the spill of blood looked once she’d parted her
skin with the glass shard. The words came out strange and twisted, though, because she told the tale of the glass slipping from her fingers and the sound it made when it shattered across the floor. She talked about Dad’s booming shout and the way she cried, always the cry-baby, while he pinned her against the wall and bellowed: *stop being so fucking careless, do you think I’m made of money, I’m tired of fixing all your fucking mistakes, what are you crying for, do you want me to really give you something to cry about?* She spoke of the way Mum frowned once Dad stormed out of the room and told her that he wouldn’t have yelled if she just stopped crying, and how that made her cry harder. She found herself sitting there and saying, in a strange, twisted, distant voice, that she wanted to kill herself, although she didn’t know until that moment that death was what she meant by making the shallow cuts on her wrists and forearms with the largest piece of the broken glass.

Linda gave her more words, the kinds of words that sound like the shrinks on TV, the ones that convince teenagers to hate their parents: *trauma, emotional abuse, self-harm.*

‘Yes! Run away!’ She puts her notebook down on her desk, learning forwards so far Eve can’t help but wonder why she’s not falling. ‘Why should you go back? You don’t deserve how they treat you. Why should you put up with it?’

Eve shakes her head, her throat constricting. ‘It’s my fault. I’m a cry-baby.’ Tears well in her eyes, proving her point, so she shakes her head, saying the first thing that comes to mind to keep from crying: ‘I won’t do anything, I promise. I’m better now.’

Linda lets out a long sigh. ‘I’d rather you stay here than go back to your family—okay. What’s going to be different now, if you go back? What keeps you from hurting yourself again?’

No. She can’t keep Eve here, can she? Not when Dr Johannes already agreed that she’s stable enough to return home, as long as she takes her meds and joins the outpatient program? Not when she’s packed her bag and called Jessie to come and pick her up? She can’t stay, she can’t—not in these white walls where nothing smells real, where the living flowers wilt and die and
only the plastic flowers endure and thrive. How can she answer the trees if she can’t even feel the touch of the wind? How can she escape when glass and concrete separate her from the sun?

‘I’ll take my meds.’ She stares at her lap, trying to command her hands and voice to steadiness. ‘I won’t … I won’t be what I was.’ Dr Johannes seems to think her meds will make a difference, if she tries hard with therapy. Eve doesn’t know how any meds can be so magical, but it doesn’t matter—she doesn’t need meds. She needs the trees.

Linda stares at her, however, letting the silence hang, so Eve rushes to explain, to sound like someone who means to do all the things required to stop being crazy. ‘I won’t cry then. I’ll … talk to people, and laugh, and things will be better. It’s my fault … because I’m in my room all the time. A freak. But I’ll get better.’ She jerks her chin and meets Linda’s eyes. ‘I’m not crying here.’

Linda shakes her head. ‘Do you think that might be because nobody’s abusing you here?’

No, no, why is she muddling this all up? No. Eve doesn’t need to be here, in this pretend temple honouring lifelessness and sterility: she needs to go home, where she can sleep with her quilt outside on warm summer nights, wriggle her toes in the soft earth of the vegetable garden, laugh at the chattering parrots, press an ear to the trunks of the tall river red gums down by the creek.

She needs to leave before all she can hear are the noises made by people. ‘Eve?’

She bites down on her lower lip to try and keep from crying. ‘I just want to go home!’

Linda nods, giving her a warm, patient sort of smile. Eve stares at her, digging the toe of her shoe into the carpet. Why isn’t she yelling? Why is she smiling when Eve’s being so stubborn?

‘I know you don’t want to stay here.’ She waves a hand at the wall and the faded print. ‘It’s a bit grim, I know. But you deserve better than to go back to a place where they’re going to hurt you again—you deserve so much better
than those people.’ She shrugs, still smiling. ‘Can you stay with a friend? A relative? Can you live on campus?’

Friends? Relatives? She wants to laugh. She’s the cry-baby eighteen-year-old who likes gardening and talking to trees and painting pictures with the blood from her arms; friends are a scarce commodity. She doesn’t have enough money to pay anyone board—how do crazy people get and hold jobs when she can’t even manage the first semester of university?—and none of her relatives are going to want to live with a girl that can’t wash a single lot of dishes without breaking something and crying over it. ‘I don’t…’

‘There are services that can help you. I can put you in touch with a social worker.’ Linda leans forward further and then loses balance, snatching at the edges of the desk; it doesn’t slow her strange, passionate words. ‘You don’t have to go back there, Eve. You don’t. You can get out. You can start a whole new life away from those toxic people.’

She looks so sincere that Eve opens her mouth, wanting to reassure Linda that she has no such intention—that the glass and her arms and telling Linda that she did want to kill herself had shown her that much. If she’s such a fuck-up that she wants to turn her arms into bloody art, if she can’t manage school and work and behaving like a normal person that doesn’t cry over stupid things, what’s the point of pretending otherwise? No, she won’t go back … but she stops, closes her lips, swallows until she’s buried the impulse to speak. If she tells Linda her plan, Linda will tell Dr Johannes, and then no-one will let her leave—she’ll stay here, trapped behind these plain walls, until the trees stop calling.

‘I only mean to go back for a little while,’ she says. Looking down at the floor or her hands seems too obvious, but isn’t looking at Linda’s eyes also just as obvious? Eve settles for Linda’s lips, but the words still feel fake—how can Linda not know she’s lying? ‘Until I’ve saved money. I’m going to get Jessie to help me find a place to stay. She knows … about all this. Me. She’ll help.’

Linda sighs and nods, her shoulders sagging, her lips soft and downcast. ‘Good. If you need my help, I’m here.’

Eve stares at her, her heart pounding in sudden hope. ‘I can leave?’
Linda pushes a lock of hair away from her face. She looks tired, too tired for such a short conversation. ‘I’m not a doctor. I can’t keep you here.’

Relief makes her feel faint, dizzy, but also guilty. Eve looks away, at her hands, feet, at the walls, not sure where to look, what to say. ‘Thank you for helping me,’ she says finally, the words sounding strange and awkward in her dry mouth.

‘You’re welcome, Eve. If you need help, anything at all—please ring. Please.’

It shouldn’t be that easy, but somehow, it is. Get the last of her paperwork, get her prescriptions, have a final word with Dr Johannes, reassure her and the nurses that Jessie is coming to pick Eve up, head downstairs to the foyer doors. The medicinal reek in the hallway is just an annoyance now: she can almost hear the wind beneath the clatter of wheels and beeping machines and human voices. She can see the sky through windows. Eve turns her head, afraid that Linda has seen through her lie, has followed her, will drag her back to the ward, but no-one stops her as the glass doors slide open and she steps onto the footpath, surrounded by asphalt and car exhaust and the roar of traffic on the road ahead.

It’s enough, though, that Eve can feel the wind brushing against her cheeks, cool and salty; she twirls around in circles, skipping forwards, giddy with the rush of air. Yes. With the sun warm on her hands and face, the hospital only a shadow at her back, she can imagine the rest. The lavender bushes at the back door release their soft, woody scent into the air. The boughs of the old peach tree drop their autumn leaves, surrounding the trunk with a corona of orange and brown. Rainbow lorikeets squawk and flutter in the tall stringybarks in the bush beyond the back fence, a darting riot of bright colour. Underneath the clamour she can hear the soft whisper of the wind through the leaves.

_Eve, Eve, Eve._

She stops to pull off her socks and boots, tossing them aside, wriggling her toes through the rough, prickly grass before the fence. There she pauses, her heart pounding in her chest, for she thought she heard someone shout—
but this time the trees scream louder, their voices thrumming through her blood. _Eve! Eve! Eve!_

She turns and scrambles up the fence, jumping off the top rail and into space.

In the far-off distance, she hears the screech of tyres on asphalt and the crash of shattering glass.

Eve lands and stops, shaking, waiting … but the parrots chatter and the breeze, tangy with eucalyptus instead of car exhaust, teases her hair away from her face. Yes. _Yes!_ She smiles, laughs, screams until the lorikeets take startled flight—and then skips through the underbrush in search of the trees calling her name, singing in time to the wind.
follow the dying sun, follow it
till you seek no more
candy orange and violent red
stain blue landscape
the sun’s rays
stroke your face
but the silence stays
forevermore
as you follow the fading light
into Neverland

you shall stay and never grow
watch and listen
as your friends change and evolve
grab a boat and ignore the signs
row up the stream
and past the bandits of time
hoping there’s still a chance
for you to grow old
too many butterfly keys
slip through hands like golden syrup
keep rowing before the hour glass takes its final turn
Human thought is like a monstrous pendulum. I can’t remember who said that, but it’s true, don’t you agree? I’ve been going through these recordings for the past few weeks. It’s part of my job, as Marguerite’s replacement, to familiarise myself with patient files. While all of our cases are unique, many are what you might consider to be standard, containing similar elements of cause and effect. This one is anything but standard. The patient is a 22-year-old woman named Anya. According to the case notes, she wanted to undergo this form of hypnotherapy to recall details of her parents, whom she was separated from when she was a child. Listen closely for the whispers in the background. I didn’t catch them at first, but now they’re impossible to miss.

Click.
‘I see something.’
‘Tell me what you see, Anya.’
‘I can’t tell what it is. I have to wait for my eyes to adjust.’
‘Is it dark?’
‘Yes, but I see a brightness. I think it’s a window.’
‘Take your time.’
...
‘Yes, a window. I can see the moonlight through the curtains. It’s so close.’
‘Does this feel familiar?’
‘No.’
‘What else can you see?’
‘A mattress. The rest of the room is dark. Everything is still.’
‘Do you know where you are?’
‘I’m not sure. I’m numb. Weighted. I don’t like this feeling.’
‘You’re deeply relaxed; that’s good. That’s a very good thing. Focus on your surroundings.’
‘… It’s my bedroom. There’s my armoire and my scrollwork bed frame.’
‘An old bedroom?’
‘My current bedroom. Everything is opposite, though.’ … ‘And my father’s old writing desk is here.’
‘There’s a symbol of your father. Would you—’
‘Shit, I’m walking, but I don’t have any control. Tell me what to do, Margot.’
‘Let your body guide you.’
‘This is terrifying.’
‘You’re completely safe in this memory. You’re not alone.’
No.
‘Where are you walking?’
‘I’m being pulled.’
‘Don’t let your fear take over.’
…
‘Anya, where are you?’
‘I’ve stopped at the desk. There’s a sheet of paper—there’s writing on it.’
‘What does it say?’
‘It’s another language, I think. Five letters.’
‘Can you draw them for me?’
‘I’ll try.’
‘Here you are. I’ve put the pen in your right hand.’
‘I’m left-handed.’
‘… I’ve switched it over. The notepad is on your lap.’
‘I can’t feel it. Am I drawing? I can’t—’
‘You’re drawing.’ … ‘That’s an interesting language.’
‘No, I’m walking again. I can’t finish.’
'That’s all right. Tell me everything you see and feel.’
‘It feels like I’m floating now.’
‘Where are you?’
‘I’m moving towards the hallway—oh, no.’
‘What is it?’
‘There’s stairs at the end of the hallway. I don’t want to go down there.’
‘Anya, take a deep breath. Relax. This is a memory. You’re not in any danger here.’
_Soon._
‘You’re right.’
‘Will you go downstairs?’
‘I don’t have a choice.’
‘I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.’
…
‘I’m getting some feeling back in my feet.’
‘That’s good.’
‘And my legs. I’m gaining control.’
‘Are you going down the stairs?’
‘I am now—wait, I see something.’
‘What do you see?’
‘A coat. At the bottom of the stairs.’
‘Does this mean anything to you?’
‘Oh, God. I think it’s a person. I think they’re dead, Margot.’
‘Can you see who it is?’
‘No. I can’t tell. I want to stop. Please.’
‘Calm down. These are just your memories, remember?’
‘These aren’t my memories.’
‘These are your memories. We’re close, Anya. Wouldn’t you like to know if this is your father?’
…
‘Anya? Do you have full control?’
‘I don’t know.’
'Would you like to see who it is? Let’s see who this is and then we’ll come back.’
‘… Oh, shit.’
‘Is it your father?’
‘No.’
‘Can you see who it is? Tell me who it is.’
‘Stop.’
‘All right, let’s come back. Are you ready?’
…
‘Anya?’
…
‘Yes?’
‘Let’s come back now. By the time I count to five, you will be wide awake. You will feel wonderful: at peace, refreshed and alert. You will regain all control and awake feeling like a new person.’
‘Marguerite.’
‘One, two—are you—what are you doing?’ … ‘Anya?’

Click.

This is the last of the tape; somebody turned off the recording here. I found the drawing that Anya made of the letters. I’ve been in touch with a linguist and he tells me that this language was a creation by John Dee and Edward Kelley in the 16th century. It’s called Enochian: commonly referred to as the Language of Angels. I’ve been informed that the letters Anya was able to jot down were translated as ‘hell’, likely supposed to be ‘hello’, considering there were five of them. I think you can agree that something went truly wrong here. Perhaps Marguerite’s unprofessional use of hypnotherapy was part of the problem, I’m not quite sure, but I believe this was more than just a bad session. Can you help?
Living with fear
Bronwyn Cran

It began when I was roughly fifteen and in year 10. For everybody around me, it happened suddenly, but to me it was a gradual change. I became introverted, wanted little to do with those around me, and couldn’t even bring myself to go into the local supermarket. I stopped being able to do a lot of things by myself.

It even became a struggle to sit in a classroom with other students because it made me uncomfortable and nervous. By the end of those changes, it seemed there was little hope left and, despite all the good in my life, I always failed to find positive, happy things to hold on to.

At school I felt like a black sheep amongst a herd of white. Of course, everybody was oblivious to my distress, but I was certain that they were all well aware of what was happening to me. I knew that every pair of eyes were fixated on me, watching my hands and legs shake, my pulse throb through my temples, my cheeks light up like a crimson sky at sunset, and sweat accumulate across my forehead.

Other people only saw students focused on the teacher’s endless speech or their books, and doodling around the pages of their work, while I was somewhere in the background, frantic and panicking, yet managing to stay unnoticed. The worst part was having what doctors call ‘extreme cognitive thinking’, which was accompanied by a constant fear of going insane. Every night, I lay in bed with my mind in constant over-drive and a never-ending
whir of exhausting thoughts that kept me awake until the early hours of the morning.

Obviously, this affected my schooling. The constant processing of thoughts caused irritability and made me lethargic. People’s words and movements or facial expressions had to be analysed in so much depth I caused myself massive amounts of stress that would turn into anxiety attacks. Whenever I had one of these episodes it felt like the world was coming to an end, and I was the only one who knew.

Somehow I had to try to let everybody around me know the situation before it was too late. Most of the time I was so panicked, my words rarely made sense, and nobody knew what to make of my hyperventilated speech.

For many years I struggled through everyday life, not knowing or understanding exactly why everything seemed so difficult for me. Some days were worse than others—some were bearable and others were impossible. On the impossible days I didn’t even bother to leave my bed, and on the better days, I was lucky if I left the house. Either way, I knew things were taking a turn for the worse.

The consequent loss of relationships was something else that I found devastating. My condition became overwhelming for a few of my close friends. This led to them abandoning me and in no way do I blame them for walking away.

I admit I was more than a handful during my stages of depression and, for those who are not strong-minded or emotional, I can see how it was difficult to sit by the bed of someone who refuses to talk about anything but ending themselves. The looks on their faces when they realised they had made no difference in their efforts to convince me otherwise was a look of failure I will never forget. Some friends felt I was in so deep that their only coping mechanism was to pretend that I had already done what I kept threatening to do—end my life.

Despite this, I am still friends with most and even closer with those who stayed by my side. I also had my parents, who tried their best to support me, but even they struggled to understand exactly what was happening. Because
of how random and irrational I was behaving, they thought that maybe it was all an act, an immature plan to get me out of going to school or some strange attempt to gain their attention.

Unfortunately, it was neither. A lot of the time I felt as though my parents were beyond acknowledging my panicked fears of dying or losing my mind. And I can’t blame them either. I know how difficult it is to understand the complexity of such a non-linear mental illness and jumbled thoughts that jump from one extreme to the next, especially for a person who has never experienced it first-hand.

Although I had many close family members and friends who were used to helping me with my problems, not one was able to help me with this. When I gained the courage, I tried to talk to them about my illness. By their concerned and confused looks, I knew I may as well have been speaking another language.

Three years passed before I found enough courage to see my local doctor about it. By then the problem was so severe I had become bed-ridden and refused to see daylight. Fortunately, I got to a point when something in my mind just said ‘enough’, and I listened.

After all that time in bed; I finally got up, dressed and told my dad to take me straight to the doctor. A tiny ray of hope shone through my dark and cloudy mind, and drove me to somebody who could really help. In a way this said to me, in the deepest parts of my subconscious and despite my miserable thoughts, I was desperate to get better.

Speaking to my doctor, still driven by that tiny ray of hope, I discovered I had anxiety as well as depression. I was terrified to go out in public, and it was the anxiety that had made me house-bound. Occasionally, my friends and family forced me to go out, and then I would have anxiety attacks. These manifested as intense paranoia where I was constantly concerned that not only was everybody looking at me, but talking about me as well.

After the visit to the doctor, that ray of hope vanished and I was left in gloom again. I spiralled back down into the hell I had settled in before and knew I was in for a long and torturous ride. In my depressive state, I couldn’t
see any point to my existence. Constantly, I questioned the basis of my life and the reason for my still being here. At this stage, I had also developed phobias. After a number of years of convincing myself I was physically sick, I became obsessed with trying to make myself ‘better’. I can recall times of hysterical panic; when I screamed and begged for my parents to take me to the hospital. They just stood there and looked at each other and then at me with disbelief, unsure of what to do.

I lost a part of my life when I had depression and anxiety. I lost my independence. I had little to do with friends and created a solid distance from family. During this time spent in isolation, the most important thing I learned was that life goes on. It goes on with or without you. In a way, that helped me to find myself again. I had become empty compared to my friends, and their busy, exciting lives made me regret that I didn’t see a doctor sooner. To this day I can’t help but think of those three years I will never get back.

After a second visit to the doctors I was referred to a clinical psychologist, which was something that I had already decided against. In hindsight, resisting the sessions wasn’t a great decision. At the time, I was judgmental because I desperate for a quick fix. It didn’t promise to make me better now, but promised the possibility of getting better in the future, which wasn’t soon enough.

I didn’t see a future for myself. I was severely disappointed in everybody, including my parents and best friends, for even suggesting that I take such a clichéd and corny solution to what was a far more serious problem than what some apparent anxiety and depression expert could handle. My vast, spacious mind was filled with narrow and negative thoughts, and I believed that there was no reason my parents should have to pay $100 an hour for a service I was getting at home for free.

When I finally met this psychologist, I soon discovered this phoney wasn’t a phoney after all, and was deeply disgusted in myself for showing so much hatred towards her profession. She, herself, had fought the long-winded fight to beat depression and anxiety, and I related to her more than anyone I’d
ever tried to compare notes with before. It was almost like talking to myself. Everything she said was exactly what I had been experiencing, and this was before we had even discussed my experience.

She too had felt the uncontrollable emotions and strange thoughts I’d been suffering with. After many sessions and long conversations, a massive weight lifted off my shoulders. To know that I wasn’t the only one, in this big wide world, with that kind of stuff going on in my mind was so relieving. I could finally breathe again, and I could physically feel myself getting better.

To think that at a point in my life, there were times when I hadn’t showered in a week, or left the house in over three, makes a big difference to the person I am today. I know that just by sitting here today and reading this aloud, I have come a very long way. By living through that journey I discovered that, although mental illness may be discussed frequently and is in the public eye, nobody can understand it like someone who has experienced it.

I feel it’s really important for people to get together and talk about their feelings. I now know that it’s better to get them out in the open rather than bottle them up and just hope that they’ll go away.
A man of few words
Samantha Vroom

When I’m thirteen and running away from home in my night gown, he pulls up next to me in his car, laughs and says ‘get in’.
When I’m sixteen and behind the wheel of his Falcon, his breathing is steady and he tells me to stay calm.
When I reach for a pair of hedge clippers and they fall on my face, he walks calmly over to me and calls me a ‘dick’. He’s silent as he yanks my bleeding nose from left to right, and then assures me I’ll ‘be right’.
When he hurts himself he doesn’t whine, he just throws his favourite mug full of hot coffee at the brick wall he rendered.
When his nail gun backfires and shoots straight through the bone in his hand, he calls me and says, ‘open the garage door. I’ve shot myself. I’ll be there in a sec.’
When he was having a heart attack his eyes did all the talking.
He has never uttered to me the words ‘pretty’ or ‘beautiful’, but one night he called me ‘a butterfly’.
Love is
Craig Henderson

Love is a story inspired by words.
Life is what happens between the lines.
Imagination binds truth and fantasy into a rough estimation of reality.

Can you write someone else’s story from such a lonely perspective?
Omniscience is just a point of view easily exploited by opinions balanced beyond the individual.
Seeds grow in isolation
but do not flourish
in the shadow
of self-importance.
By placing words
in someone else’s mouth
you shall receive
lessons gleaned
from an experience
you have not known.
So cast out the lure
for lives unknown.
Haul in the answers
that wish to be told.
Embrace the mystery
of what lies beneath.
Meanings hidden
in pages unwritten.
Words that are thought
but rarely spoken.

Live for the love
and the fear and the joy
of discovering life
where it wasn’t before.
Words, like love
can be taken for granted.
But stories remain
forever implanted
when love and life
have long since departed.
Sophie locked the front door, skipped lightly down the front steps, and crossed over the narrow street to the laneway opposite her cottage. The air was crisp. Hands thrust into pockets, she walked quickly to warm herself up. Thank God it was Friday, and work was over for another week. She could already feel the pressures of work slipping off her shoulders.

Coming close to the end of the laneway, Sophie noted the young guy from number 33 coming out of his back gate. She prepared herself to say hello, as they occasionally did, but he didn’t notice her. She was surprised to see him look around as if to make sure he wasn’t being watched, walk a few metres and remove a brick from the wall which lined the lane. He reached into the cavity and put something small into his pocket. He replaced the brick, checked again that he hadn’t been seen, and then walked quickly to the corner and was gone.

Sophie stepped out from behind the tree she had used as cover. ‘What on earth? Why would he be doing that?’ Her curiosity was seriously piqued, and as she continued her walk, she pondered possible reasons for his subterfuge. What was he hiding, and from whom?

A persistent voice cut across her thoughts.

‘Sophie, Sophie, wait. I have some somezeeng for you!’

‘Maria, hi. Sorry, I was miles away.’

Maria’s ample bosom heaved as she struggled for breath after the few hurried steps. ‘Ah, new man, Sophie? Away on cloud seven?’
Sophie laughed and shook her head. ‘Nine, Maria, nine.’
Maria dropped her smile. ‘Nine new men? Oh Sophie, eez not good idea!’
‘Oh my God—no! Cloud nine, Maria!’
Maria beamed. ‘Ah, is even better than cloud seven, Sophie.’ She held up a bag of tomatoes. ‘Here, zeese are for you ... just picked fresh!’
Sophie took the tomatoes and smiled. ‘Thank you, they look wonderful,’ she said, and then added, ‘Gratsi ... pomodoro ... bella!’
Maria laughed. She enjoyed Sophie’s attempts to speak Italian and did her best to speak ‘Australian’ in reply.
‘You can make a dead horse, no?’
This one had Sophie baffled. ‘A dead horse ... dead horse ... oh, sauce! Yes, I’ll make sauce.’
They both laughed, although for very different reasons.
Deciding a little discreet detective work was in order, Sophie directed her conversation around to Maria’s neighbour, Dave.
‘Do you give your tomatoes away to all your neighbours?’ she asked, nodding her head in the direction of his house.
‘Dave? Oh, if I see him. He keep very much to himself—is friendly, though.’ Maria’s eyes sparkled knowingly, a mischievous smile on her lips. ‘I know. I will invite him to dinner, and you must come too!’
Sophie started to protest and then stopped. In fact, she wouldn’t mind a chance to find out more about the secretive Dave.
‘Well, alright. If you really want me to.’
‘I will ask him for Friday, at seven. If no good, I will let you know. Maybe I will give a barbie a hurl!’
‘Hurl? Oh, you mean give it a burl—give it a go. Not hurl. Hurl means ... well, never mind. See you Friday.’
‘Ciao.’
The air had grown cold and Sophie shivered, deciding to curtail her walk and return home.
Sitting on her front step, coffee mug in hand, she inexplicably found herself looking forward to Friday night, musing on what she should wear.
A vision of Margaret Rutherford as Miss Marple in a sensible tweed hat and coat popped into her mind, accompanied by the phrase ‘sticky beak’!

‘Am not,’ she said out loud. ‘Just a concerned citizen—you wait and see,’ she warned the cat. ‘There’s something fishy going on at number 33.’

The cat, Agatha, stretched out and went to sleep; she had heard it all before.

After dinner, Sophie settled down in front of the computer to continue writing the Great Australian Detective Novel. She had the plot outlined and was halfway through chapter two. Her main character, Sara Schofield, was an amateur detective who seemed to have an uncanny knack for being in the wrong place at the right time. Much like Sophie, she saw her mission in life as being the eyes and ears of her neighbourhood (perhaps one day the world), thwarting the attempts of those of dubious character to undermine the very fabric of society.

Sophie gazed at the screen. She knew the story needed to take a more dramatic turn. ‘Light and shade,’ her writing tutor kept telling her, ‘light and shade, Sophie!’ She searched her mind for the spark of an idea, but found nothing except the excuse for another cup of coffee. She stood up and stretched, scooped up Agatha and flicked the jug on.

A sharp knock on the front door startled her. The cat stiffened, the hair on her back standing on end, and she squirmed to get down. Sophie let her go and Agatha quickly disappeared as Sophie called out, ‘Who’s there?’

‘It’s Dave Macy from down the lane at number 33. Can I speak to you, Sophie?’

Sophie turned on the porch light and checked through the spy hole in the door to see if it really was him. It was. Oh, God, he must have seen her hiding behind the tree—how could she explain that? She could say that she had heard of the benefits of tree hugging and thought she would give it a try—universal love and all that.

‘Hello?’ he called again.
She opened the door, leaving the security screen closed. Cool, calm and collected would be the go. With just a hint of impatience, as if she was really busy. ‘Yes, Dave? What can I help you with?’

He was caught off guard, not expecting her to be so officious. ‘Oh, um ... sorry to disturb you. Maria invited me to dinner and I just wanted to know what sort of wine you would like. She said to leave it up to you.’

In her eagerness to open the screen door, Sophie stumbled against it and it flew open, hitting Dave in the nose. He reeled back as blood spurted down onto his white shirt, missed the top step and landed heavily on the path below. Still holding his nose, he looked up and said thickly, ‘No need for violence. A simple red or white would have done!’ Behind his hand, a shadow of a smile crossed his lips.

Sophie was horrified at the sight of Dave injured and covered in blood—all her fault. She hurried down the steps to help him up, but he held up his hand in protest.

‘No, please, stay there. It would be safer for both of us! I’ve got just one question, Sophie.’

He waited.

‘Yes—what?’

‘Red or white?’

‘What? Oh, red, thanks.’ She painted on a smile.

‘Fine. I won’t trouble you any further. Good night.’ He turned and limped away into the night.

Sophie spent the rest of the evening asking God, ‘Why? Why does it always happen to me?’

No explanation was forthcoming.

The following afternoon, Sophie took her usual walk.

‘After all, he’s the one creeping around hiding things in walls. Why should I be nervous?’

There he was. She couldn’t believe it. She stopped. Again—the checking and the taking out of the brick; this time he put something in, and then disappeared through his back gate.
Sophie stared after him. This was getting ridiculous. ‘Enough is enough.’ She walked over to the loose brick in the wall and, looking around to make sure no one was watching, removed it and took out a small tin box inside. *His drug stash, I’ll bet,* she thought, lifting the lid expectantly, but the only contents were two small keys held together by a red ribbon. There was a tattered tag attached which read ‘22 Wright Street.’

She knew Wright Street well; it was only a couple of minutes’ walk away. Why would he have a key? Why hide it?

Sophie hurriedly replaced the box and the brick, and then returned home, anxious to record the address in her notebook. She would have an early dinner and head out after dark.

She waited until seven, taking her torch and a small multipurpose screwdriver with her. She wasn’t sure what the screwdriver was for, but felt reassured by its presence. Passing the back of Dave’s house, she had a good view of the well-lit kitchen and could see him talking on the phone. She hung back in the shadows and watched.

He was obviously angry and thumped the table as he spoke, shouting into the mouthpiece.

‘Can’t you save it? Please, I’m begging you!’

He slammed down the receiver and headed for the back door. Sophie hid while he frantically retrieved the keys from the wall, and as he turned the corner of the lane, he broke into a run.

Fear flickered across her mind. Should she follow? What if he saw her? Was he dangerous? What the hell was going on? She had to know. She ran to the corner, but he had already disappeared.

After taking the shortcut, she emerged onto Wright Street and was stunned by what confronted her.

The house at number 22 was a blazing inferno. Roaring flames leapt from every window, the heat searing the very air that was feeding it.

The once-grand home was burning to death, beyond salvation. Chaos reigned as neighbours evacuated their homes, clutching whatever items
were most cherished. Sparks and embers whirled in the wind, alighting indiscriminately on fresh fuel.

Sophie anxiously searched the street for Dave, pushing through the crowd until she spotted him.

He was standing still, watching the house burn with tears running down his face. He turned and looked into her eyes. ‘Have you ever lost a part of your soul?’

She shook her head. ‘No,’ she said softly.

They stood together and watched as the fire truck arrived and poured thousands of gallons of water into the house, finally quelling the tempest inside; spiralling clouds of smoke and steam rose up into the night air as if from a funeral pyre.

The chief fire officer came over to Dave, accompanied by a police officer. ‘Mr Macy?’ asked the fire officer. “A neighbour recognised you from when you used to live here. It was very lucky the house was empty, but we’ve got no chance of saving the home, I’m afraid.’

The police officer spoke. ‘We do believe it was arson and we’ll be conducting a thorough investigation. It has a sad history, this house. I knew your parents.’

Dave was silent, stunned.
‘Are you able to make your way home alright?’

Dave still looked blank, and Sophie spoke up quickly. ‘Yes. I’ll look after him, Officer. I’ll see he gets home alright. Thank you.’

The officer nodded. ‘Goodnight, then. We’ll be in touch. You’re around in Sutton Street now?’

‘Yeah, number 33. Thanks.’

Sophie gently took Dave’s arm and they walked back to his house. She could see he had been traumatised by the fire and wondered whether to leave him alone or not.

‘I know who did it.’

‘What? Who?’ She felt compelled to look into those sad, dark eyes.
‘My twin brother, Ryan. He always said he would pay me back.’ A flood of anguish broke and gushed out of him as he wept, great racking sobs welling up out of a darkness that had been endured for years. Silently, Sophie held him as he clung to her, sobbing, exhausted.

Running his hands over his face and through his hair, he sighed heavily and gave her a thin smile.

‘Well, I suppose I owe you an explanation.’

She smiled back and shrugged. ‘That’s entirely up to you.’

‘Come inside. I could do with a drink.’

She settled for coffee and he poured himself a large scotch. They sat at the kitchen table and Dave started to talk.

‘It was our family home up until ten years ago. I loved that house. I loved my family—I loved my life. But things started to go wrong with Ryan. He lost his job and just bummed around. He became insanely jealous of me and kept saying I was Mum’s favourite. He started hanging out with the wrong crowd, trouble with the police—that kind of thing. Anyway, he ended up going completely off the rails and spent a couple of years in prison.’

Dave took a deep, shuddering breath, reliving the emotion. His voice wavered as he continued.

‘He went in a boy and came out a man. A bitter, angry man, with a renewed hatred for me that knew no bounds. He would get drunk and go on about how Mum and Dad had written him out of their lives. I had moved out by then, but he would arrive at my door with a loaded shotgun and point it at my heart. It wasn’t true, of course, they loved him, but his brain was so fucked up by drugs and booze that his thinking was totally irrational. He broke in here once and trashed the place, looking for Dad’s old fob watch. It had belonged to our grandfather and great grandfather, and Dad used to say that he would pass it down to Ryan when he died, because he was the eldest, but he never got the chance. Ryan became obsessed with it—saw it as some sort of badge of honour or something. Christ knows! Just to be on the safe side, I hid it in a place I knew he would never look.’
Stunned, Sophie stared at him.
He looked into her eyes and asked, ‘Have you ever heard the story of a couple being murdered in their sleep in this area?’
She had. ‘Yes, I think—’
He didn’t wait for her to finish. ‘Anyway, without going into all the gory details, that was my parents. Of course, he got off by pleading insanity, although he was institutionalised—supposedly for the rest of his life.’
Dave’s anger was obvious; his fists were clenched. ‘I could never make myself go and visit him, although apparently he used to ask for me. But to me, I no longer had a brother—’
His words were cut short by a loud thumping on the back door, followed by an ear-splitting cacophony of clattering paint tins and ladders as whoever it was escaped over the back fence.
Dave wrenched open the door and ran out into the backyard. He was shaken, his face white. Realising Sophie had followed him outside, he shouted, ‘Get back inside, for Christ’s sake.’ He grabbed her arm and propelled her back into the house.
‘Dave, ring the police!’
‘Wait, let me think.’
‘Are you serious? Right, I’m ringing them, then.’
Dave grabbed the phone from her.
‘Dave ... Jesus, this is unbelievable.’
He looked at her and sighed deeply. ‘Yeah, even I didn’t reckon on this. It’ll be Ryan for sure. The psychiatric hospital rang tonight to tell me that someone had slipped up on their shift and left Ryan unsupervised. He managed to escape and they called the police. They’re out looking now.’
‘Dave, I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through. I don’t know how you’ve coped. All this time I thought you seemed to have it together. You seemed so self-contained.’ She touched his face and he put his hand over hers.
'Thanks, Sophe.' He smiled. ‘I thought you were like some sort of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. You always seemed so carefree and happy. Come to think of it, just what I need, probably.’

‘Dorothy? Let me tell you about my deepest and darkest secrets, Dave.’

‘Hang on. I think I need another scotch before I hear this! You?’ He held up the bottle.

‘No, I’ll make another coffee.’

He watched as she moved around the kitchen—as if she belonged there. She brought her coffee over, sat down, and told him just enough about her life to make it sound exciting and mysterious. But he knew she was trying to comfort him in her own quirky way.

Just then, his phone rang. ‘Yes, Sergeant? Oh my God, no ... no!’ His voice shook. Tears welled up in his eyes and he brushed them away. ‘Yes, thanks, Sergeant. Yes, I’ll be here all night. I’ll see you then.’

‘They’ve found him?’

‘Yeah—down by the river. He’s shot himself through the head.’

‘Jesus.’

‘Yeah.’ He poured another scotch, a large one. ‘It’s funny, you know, I always thought I’d be relieved...’

Dave stopped talking and laid his head in his hands. The nightmare of the last ten years had finally played itself out. There was nothing left. He was empty.

‘Hell of an introduction,’ he said. ‘You must be wondering what the hell you’ve struck!’

‘Not at all. If you ever want to talk ... anytime...’ She trailed off. It seemed such an empty cliché.

‘Thanks. Um, I don’t suppose you could stay a while? I could do with the company.’

He looked so sad, so completely spent, that she couldn’t refuse.

‘Yes, of course I can. Oh, and I meant to say, I hope you didn’t hurt yourself too badly the other night.’

He looked confused. ‘Sorry?’
‘You know ... when I nearly broke your nose and you fell down my front steps.’
Dave stopped smiling.
‘Wasn’t me, Sophie. I’ve never been to your house in my life.’
Circle
M. Hart

You wake me in the night with your crying, and tell me you dream of Golden Gate suicides and a need to be noticed, but no notice is needed when you’re evicted from our conversation with the back of my shoulder.
‘This is the final time,’ I write to you in a letter that I pin to your door, and I crumple up your face in my mind. ‘No more.’
You leave the next morning via the second story window, swan dive through insecurity, and your body is found in the shape of a cross.
In the downstairs parlour, they tell me of your beauty, but they only speak in shades of black.
Their veils are evidence of long-distance phone calls and Christmas cards.
You’re a seed in a coffin, and I wait for your limbs to rise through the earth (my petrified saint) to touch the sky. Birthdays fly out of sight, but you never grow.
On the anniversary of your death I sit up all night crying and realise that I’m one breakdown away from a Golden Gate Bridge.
I never meant for this to happen
Simone Murcutt

The waiting room felt more uncomfortable than usual. The curtains were drawn tighter than before; the silence was more deafening and the smell of coffee seemed a lot stronger. I sat in my chair, shaking my legs and picking at my nails. Every so often, I would tuck hair behind my ears to give me a better look at the butterfly tattoo on my wrist: the one reminder that I could emerge to be beautiful, that this nightmare was only a nightmare. I wanted so badly to believe that I had beauty within, that I was a strong, kind person. I stared helplessly at the clock, wondering why my doctor was running later than usual. I turned to the white wall where the paintings made by patients in the hospital hung, the familiar canvases and bland paint colours used in Three East’s art room. My head became light and dizzy and I thought I would be sick with fear. I couldn’t help but feel that sinking terror in my stomach that I would become familiar with that ward again after this appointment.

My mother sat in the chair next to me, flicking through the week-old newspaper left on the coffee table. She kept reaching for my hand and squeezing it, trying to hold back tears. She knew too. This made me feel even sicker. Next to her, my father sat dressed in his suit, glancing every minute at his watch and rejecting important calls on his iPhone. That was the thing about my father: work came first, but when it came to me and my illness, he would drop the whole world to be by my side.
I felt guilty taking time out of my loving parents’ day to take me to a clinic, knowing all too well the outcome.

‘Hope? Come on through.’ My doctor summoned me into the little room. I sat in the usual chair and went through the same rehearsed conversation as every other time: that I’m doing better, feeling better, more confident. Doctor Melissa took my blood pressure: low, but not as low as it had been. She checked my pulse.

‘Bit nervous, are we?’ she asked with a smile. Clearly my pulse was running rancid. She guided me to the weighing room. As I walked out of the door, I tried to avoid my parents’ eyes. Here we go, I thought: time to disappoint. I undressed and took a shaky step onto the scales. If I was one kilogram lighter than last week, then I wouldn’t be seeing my bedroom for a while.

The numbers bounced up and down before finally settling on their decision. I felt light-headed and let out a gasp. The noises of the clinic were drowned out over my mind screaming the horrific number on the scale. I used to feel relief with a combination of dread at what was to come, but I knew better. Of course that voice in my head was satisfied with the drop of the number, but I knew it was bad. I looked at Doctor Melissa who in turn gave me a look of pity and exited the door while I got dressed. No words were needed; we both knew there was a bed waiting for me back in Three East.

The elevator opened to level three in the hospital and I took a step out. I walked alongside my parents down the hall towards ward three and opened the heavy doors. As the doors opened, I immediately detected the smell of Microshield and cleaning products. I froze mid-step and absorbed the memories: the succinct sound of heels tapping fast along the corridors; the cries of the schizophrenics in the next room as they grew more prominent when night fell; the steady beeping of heart machines that comforted me as I tried to sleep, giving me hope that my friends would survive another night. That was something to actually smile about.

I remembered the mood changing dramatically as we all sat in the dining room eating bland hospital food off blue plates, blue bowls, with blue cups on blue trays. It set the mood: blue. The nurse’s scared eyes would stare at
each of us, waiting for a fit of complaint. But we behaved, to a degree. We knew what to do. Every scrap eaten, every drop in our cups drunk, only then were we allowed back in our rooms. We knew the consequences; refusal to eat led to the nasogastric tube and an extra week added to our sentence. The butter smudges and bits of food stuck underneath the red dining table always went undetected, a little victory just to get through until the next meal.

The head nurse remembered my ‘beautiful bright blue eyes’, as she would always say, and gave me a big hug. Her name was Ange; she was everyone’s favourite nurse. Her wrinkles seemed deeper than I remembered, but it was the same friendly face I loved.

‘Oh, Hope, what are you doing back here?’ she said as she held me out in front of her. Ange was a lot shorter than me and had to stand on her toes. She was a comforting figure in my life who got me through my last admissions. I suddenly felt a tear roll down my cheek as I fell into Ange’s arms again. She led me to the room and showed me where my bed was. She pointed to the corner next to the window, thankfully, a little luck for the day. I set down my bag and waited with my parents for the doctor on duty to appear. I wiped away my tears and remembered I must be strong. I wanted to apologise over and over again to my parents, explain that I never meant for this to happen. Although upset, they both knew all too well this was bound to happen. They left to gather my belongings at home, but I knew they needed time alone.

I settled into my new bed, finally having some time to reflect on how this all happened—again. After six months of getting my life back on track, I seemed to have ended up back in this hole. I slumped down on my back and stared at the roof, disappointed in myself as recovery was just around the corner. I was in mid-thought when I heard several footsteps coming towards the room. Immediately I knew the other patients must be back from group activities. I wondered if I would know any of them.

I lost contact after my last admission: I was afraid of speaking to them in case they disturbed my chance for recovery. It seemed selfish, I know, but I had to focus on myself. The footsteps rounded the corner and I saw
no familiar faces, just ten new victims of this hideous disease. Amongst the newcomers with glints of hope in their eyes, I was an example of a failed recovery.

But it was time to start getting better all over again.
My boots are brown from walking across the farmland, leaving nothing but dust in my wake. I see my home from a distance—it looks like a tiny triangle on a mountain of weeds and dead grass. My life is engraved into this land: my footsteps, my hard work, my blood, sweat and tears, and my fortune. My job is to sink below the surface, scour the tunnels, search for coal and mine anything of worth. People see the desert ranges as a troublesome and deserted place. That’s okay—more money for me. I built my house from the ground up, because I had to go underground to even begin.
In January 2013 I hopped on a plane and headed to Durban, South Africa, on a two-week volunteer trip. This was my second international trip and the first by myself. I was scared. Not only was I going to Africa, where I didn’t expect to find a lot of the comforts we take for granted here, and home to some of the world’s deadliest animals, but I was doing this without knowing anyone. By the time I got to the crocodile centre, a week after I had landed, that nervousness and fear was long gone. I was excited, not only to help the workers of the croc centre, but also to learn what I didn’t know about the animals.

Scientists say the crocodile and its family first appeared around five million years ago. When you see a crocodile up close, or stare one directly in the face with no fence between you and it, you truly get a sense of how prehistoric they look, and how grumpy they become when you wake them up.

For years people have feared, respected and worshipped these animals; the ancient Egyptians along the Nile are the most famous case in point with their part-man, part-croc god, Sobek. It was wise not to piss off Sobek, as he controlled the gates of the Nile, and consequently, caused the annual flooding of the banks on which the ancient Egyptians lived.

At the croc centre, our guide took us down to a crocodile pen, and it was our job to take out all the crocs that had outgrown the pen (some about as long as I), and move them to another pen. These were teenage Nile crocodiles, one of the biggest croc species on the planet. Looking into the pit, I felt both
excited and nervous, thinking that we had to climb in there and help get them out.

Our guide jumped into the pen, armed with nothing but a large stick and a long rope tied off into a noose. The only hi-tech thing he had was a camera that he used to film us and the crocs, but he had forgotten to charge it the night before. Despite the danger a croc could pose, I didn’t really feel scared; I had looked forward to this. I grabbed the end of the rope, straightened it out and tried to keep it out of the guide’s way as he used the stick to wrap the noose around the croc, either around its neck or the upper jaw. He threw the stick away and pulled the croc out of where it was sunbathing; it ran straight into the water, moving as fast as a toddler, and started rolling viciously. Crocodiles tire quickly, so our guide waited till the death rolls slowed before hopping out of the pen and pulling the poor croc out.

These are not animals to be messed with. A single crocodile can kill a fully grown wildebeest or zebra. Even elephants are wary of them. But most human deaths can be attributed to arrogance and pure stupidity. Yes, some deaths can be blamed on the crocodile, but at the croc centre, I saw a man (a tourist) holding a tree branch and trying to poke a young croc’s tongue in hopes of getting the croc to move. I wished the croc would scamper up the branch and attack the man. It is people like that who get killed by crocodiles.

We now had an angry, teenage Nile crocodile on the same patch of grass and concrete path as us. The only thing stopping it from running was the rope still around its neck. Two people had to be on the rope, holding it flat on the ground so the croc didn’t run off. This, however, didn’t stop the croc running forward. The only time I felt scared was when I was staring down at the fourth and last croc we pulled out, by myself. The third croc actually charged a little at the people on the rope, causing them to back up before our guide jumped on it. To keep it from going anywhere, our guide had to get a blanket and throw it over the croc’s head, then he and two volunteers jumped on its back. Sitting on top of a croc felt like sitting on a person, just lumpier.

We then got the job of ‘sexing’ the croc, which is not as nasty as it sounds. A volunteer had to stick their finger up the croc’s privates and feel around.
If they felt something, it was a guy, if not, a girl. I didn’t sex a croc; I wasn’t brave enough to do that. Stare down a croc, yes. Sex it, no.

After that uncomfortable business, our guide and two volunteers had to pick up the croc and carry it to the new pen. Normally the mouth is taped, but the guide had forgotten to bring tape, so he had to hold it shut. I got my chance to carry a croc. Despite how heavy the bastard was and how the spines on its tail were digging into my side, it was one of the best experiences of my life. People may think crocodiles are rough with sandpaper-like skin. They do have rough skin, but that’s if you run your finger towards the head. If you run your finger towards the tail, you’ll find they are very smooth, because this reduces water drag.

Crocodiles kill more people than sharks and lions; they are ranked as the top predators in the world, and because they are masters of ambush, able to strike quickly, it is most likely over before you realise you’re being attacked. At one pen, our guide had to bang on the steel walls for a few minutes before a Nile croc, known simply as ‘the bitch’, burst out of the water, with no warning.

I carried the third croc, leaving two others in the pen with us, and the gate was closed behind us. Luckily, the other two didn’t attack us and had disappeared, so we put the croc down and, on the count of three, headed to the gate. I was a bit jittery, but in my head I was thinking, ‘I’m not going to run, I’ll stroll casually out’. I ended up jumping at ‘two’ and doing a short jog before walking the rest of the way. One of the other volunteers strolled after me while our guide used the blanket to keep the croc away.

Crocodiles are hunted for their skin and meat; often in revenge or fear. Their skin has been used to make clothes and items for centuries, but in the modern age, they have been hunted in the thousands, maybe even millions, for greed. Today there are licensed crocodile farms where they are bred and raised to be harvested, while elsewhere conservation centres and zoos care for the animals.

While we were at the crocodile centre, we were told about an incident that had occurred a few days before we arrived. Two fully-grown male crocodiles
broke out of their pens and attacked each other. We walked past the spot where the fight had occurred. I could fully understand a crocodile’s strength when I looked at the thin, steel-bar fence: it looked like an average person could move it. I grabbed one of the fences and tried to move it, even a little, but it did not budge.

Stepping out of a croc pen after releasing one is one of the best feelings I have ever had. Despite the danger and damage they can cause, I would go back in a heartbeat, even jump in the croc pit with our guide, albeit carefully. They also taste good straight off the barbecue: better than chicken.
A summer in Anglesea
Samantha Vroom

You are the frozen margaritas,
the sand-covered feet
You are the lizards, the snakes, the skinks
You are the warm breeze
that stokes the wood fire
every night on the porch
You are the giddiness we feel
Wait, no, that’s the vodka
You are the balcony on which we lay
at day to see the sun set,
at night to see the stars
You are the reason we dance
on the roofs of our cars
You are the fresh summer salads
the fruits and the ice
You are the cocktails and the dancing
the music and the soft pink sky
YOU SIT AND LOOK AT your hands and fiddle with your wedding band. Your body is lead, heavy with the weight of the crowd’s eyes upon you. They watch your every move. The service is long and your eyes burn with unshed tears.

You look at the yellow roses and are glad you spent the extra money. The arrangement is beautiful, although you’re not quite sure they were his favourite colour. Nineteen years you slept by his side, cooked his meals, ironed his shirts and kissed him ‘goodbye’ and ‘hello’ everyday. All those years and you don’t know.

You chose his dark-grey suit, blue shirt and the soft, grey tie with the fine pinstripe; it’s amazing that you remembered shoes and underwear. You have a vision of the undertaker struggling to pull his jocks over his naked, unyielding body. You look towards the coffin and the funeral director catches your eye and nods. Can he guess what you’re thinking? How many times a week, a month, a year, does he dress the dead? Like a child playing dress-ups on a doll that won’t bend and can’t talk.

Three days ago you answered the door in your dressing gown. Two police officers stood side-by-side, a man and a woman. The man spoke first. He stared at the coffee stains on your gown, not at your face. You held the door frame tight and felt the early morning chill around your ankles. You looked down at your slippers, once a vibrant pink, now a faded, murky mess.
You lay awake during the night listening for sounds that never come: the car engine rumble as it turns into the driveway, his footsteps on the veranda and the key in the door.

You looked past the officers to the row of camellias along the fence, their branches heavy with graceful blooms. You thought you saw their petals tremble. The policeman checked details on his clipboard and made notes as he spoke. His words shot out like bullets.

Car over-turned.
Wet, slippery road.
Single occupant.
Dead on impact.

He paused between each bit of information as if waiting for you to respond or fall apart. You did neither. Instead, in a calm voice, you thanked them for their time and bid them good morning.

The bend on that road is nasty on an icy night.
The woman spoke and then turned to go.

You managed a weak smile and closed the door. He had given you his card, which you scrunched in your fist and shoved into the pocket of your gown. It was most likely still there.

Inside, you hugged yourself and fell to the floor almost choking on your sobs. All that night you were awake and wondering where he was. You never imagined he was driving away from the city, away from you.

The congregation rises and you stand automatically. The pall bearers guard the coffin on either side: his brothers and friends. They wait for you to take your place at the front. The priest hands you the roses and the funeral director nods for you to proceed. You focus your eyes on a distant spot up ahead and walk with slow precision. Eyes follow you. You can’t bear to look at them.

Outside, the glare of the midday sun greets you. You reach for your sunglasses, thankful for the relief. The crowd swoops on you and you are touched and hugged endlessly. Cheeks press against you, caring whispers sound in your ear and hands squeeze your body. So many people here, yet
you feel so alone. Sounds are muffled; you are swimming underwater, your vision refracted and voices are in a bubble. Your legs wobble as you imagine him skidding over the edge.

You open your eyes and someone holds out a plastic cup of water. It’s your cousin, and with her other hand she’s fanning your face with a sheet of paper. You smile as you realise it’s your eulogy she read on your behalf. Fifty years condensed onto a single sheet of paper.

You’re ok, she tells you. Just the heat, love.

It is hot. Thirty degrees in late April. The world has turned upside down. It’s cold when it’s meant to be hot and hot when it’s meant to be cold. You faint at your husband’s funeral because you can’t bear to know that he was driving away from you. Now he’s left you for good. No more perhaps, ifs or maybes.

Somebody, get her a cup of tea.

It’s not tea you need but you keep quiet and take the cup when it’s offered. The plastic cup bends as you squeeze it tight and tea splashes out onto your hand. The pain it brings is almost relief. You look ahead to the moment you will get home, slip your shoes off, and shed the black funeral layers. You’ll walk to the cabinet, open the glass etched door and reach for the decanter. Its angular cut lines will press into your warm palms. The liquid, when it slides down your throat, will burn and make your eyes sting as it spreads a veil of numbness throughout your body.

Drink your tea, now.

You sip it like a child resigned to their medicine, but there is no sugar to wash it down with. It scalds the roof of your mouth, but there is no sweet body-numbing relief. Only more people coming to squeeze your hand or pat your shoulder. Is this what it all comes down to? No words, just squeeze and pat, squeeze and pat.

Speak to me, you want to scream.

Tell me he was a bastard! Tell me I’ve been spared or that we don’t have kids to worry about, anything. Just say something. But there is only squeeze, pat … silence.
Days go by. It’s been two weeks. The phone stops ringing and you’ve got two casseroles left in the freezer. The postman delivers the usual bills instead of sympathy cards.

Another week and you can’t look at the cards anymore. You pick them off the mantle one by one, leaving cookie-like shapes in the dust. You look past their soft pastel pictures to the floor. You don’t read them again and you don’t write thank-you cards.

After the service, the funeral director presented you with a signed guest book.

A special keepsake for you, Mrs Chapman.

You took it from him, knowing you would never look inside it. That too, you take from the shelf, and place it under the pile of cards. It would be so easy to throw it all in the bin. Instead, you unravel the florist’s ribbon from the faded flowers and proceed to tie the bundle securely. You place it in a shoe box and, climbing the step ladder, push it as far back along the top shelf of your bedroom wardrobe as you can. Let the blankets and linen keep it company. You don’t look at his side of the wardrobe as you close the door.

You throw the dead flowers onto the compost.

Your feet crunch on fallen leaves. You remember him with the rake, the mower, the secateurs, and avert your eyes when you walk past the shed.

The days pass surprisingly fast. The Indian summer of April has led to a bitter and devastatingly cold June. You wear his grey woollen jumper to keep warm. It’s the only item you’ve kept. The rest you packed into boxes and left at the front gate for the Salvos to collect. You imagine homeless men around the city wearing his old clothes and wonder if they appreciate his good taste.

You’re up and out of the house by seven. Your boss is impressed by the extra hours you put in. She rewards you with an ‘indulgence facial’ gift voucher from the new day-spa in town. You thank her and mail it to your cousin with three children under seven.

Your colleagues never mention his name. They just talk. A lot. They love to complain about their friends, parents and husbands. You want to tell them
how lucky they are that they have someone to complain about. You want to
tell them how empty you feel inside and how lonely the house feels when you
get home at the end of the day and you realise that no one will be there with
you. You feel jealous of their blindness and remember that you were once
blind like them.

You complained when he forgot to screw the lid back on the jam jar.
You complained when he left his clothes on the bedroom floor.
You complained when you found half-empty coffee cups on the wooden
side board, their contents almost solidified by time.
You got particularly vocal when he came home slightly drunk from after-
work drinks. You badgered him until he could stand it no longer and he
slept on the couch, waking in the morning to find him still in his smelly pub
clothes.

Yes, you remember that blindness.

The cold seems to go on forever. You wear bed socks at night and sleep
with an extra blanket. You reach your arm across to the other side of the bed.
The space is cold and vast like Antarctica. You let the dog in and don’t mind
so much that she likes to sleep next to you. You listen to her breathing as she
sleeps her deep puppy sleep.

On the weekend you decide to work in the garden. Three months and the
weeds have taken over. You catch your breath as you open the shed door and
find his old work clothes hanging on the hook. You slip the faded blue flannel
shirt on over your clothes and grab a shovel. You work your way around the
garden beds. The ground is hard and you get blisters on your hands.

You long for spring to come. You want to see blossoms instead of bare
trees. You want to see flowers and bursts of colour instead of grey. You wonder
if this bleak winter will ever end, and try to remember summers past, but all
you can think of are past hurts.

You remember that summer in Sorrento when he got sunburnt on the
first day and then refused to go to the beach for the remainder of the trip. He
spent seven days doing crossword puzzles and watching cricket while you lay
alone on the sand watching children splash in the water.
What if you had remembered to pack the sunblock? What if you both had enjoyed the beach together and taken long walks along the sand? Your head hurts from remembering. Stretched behind you are nineteen years of ‘what ifs’. It’s a heavy load to drag around. You stop and sit down on the faded garden bench.

What if there had been Christmases filled with happy little voices, instead of chilled silence?

What if there had been a baby? Would he still be here today? Would he have felt the need to escape life and drive to his death?

You force yourself off the bench to tackle the herb garden. The weeds have been less vigorous in this patch. You get down on your knees and brush the scattered wood chips aside. You discover three oval-shaped mosaic tiles with blue and yellow writing.

*Our Herb Garden.*

A lump forms in your throat and you wipe a dirty hand across your brow. What if, just once, you said ‘I’m sorry?’
What happens in the kitchen
Jonathan Rivas

Chris heard kitchen cupboards being slammed, and pots and pans thrown around on bench tops downstairs. ‘Lisa, what are you doing?’
‘I’m looking for Narnia, what do you think?’ she replied. ‘They’re coming.’
‘Who’s coming?’
‘My parents!’
‘Okay, okay! Keep your hair on!’ said Chris.
Lisa was red and flustered with hair messier than her usual stay-at-home ‘do’. ‘Don’t just stand there. Help me!’ she said.
‘What do you want me to do?’
‘Go to the shops. I need eggs, milk, flour, chocolate, whipped cream and strawberries. Could you also go by the Asian takeaway place and get a family meal?’
‘Would you like fries with that?’ Chris chuckled.
‘Chris!’
‘Alright, alright. I’m going.’

Forty minutes later, Chris came back with the groceries and the Asian food.
‘Took you long enough,’ Lisa said with a huff. She snatched the bags from Chris and slammed them on the bench, disregarding the fact that there were eggs in one of the bags, and spread out the ingredients. She took out the measuring cups, then began to pour cupfuls of flour through a sifter, while Chris stood there watching.
‘Well, it looks like you don’t need me then,’ he said.
‘Yes, Chris, go sit down and watch TV. I can do this all on my own,’ Lisa said sarcastically.
‘Cool,’ Chris said with a grin as he walked out the kitchen door.
‘Oh my God,’ Lisa called out, ‘come help me, you dumbarse.’
Chris came back, separated the egg whites for her, and whisked them in a small bowl. ‘Lisa, why are you so mean?’
She took the eggs from him, stirring them in with the cake mixture, and didn’t answer.
‘Lise? Everything OK?’ Chris noticed her eyes well up; it seemed as if she was trying to hold back from breaking down.
‘I’m great,’ Lisa said with a broken voice.
Chris hugged her. ‘You’ll be right. I’m sure everything will go well with your parents.’
‘You don’t get it, do you?’ Lisa said. ‘Dan left me. My parents think they’re coming over for dinner with us. Now what am I going to say?’ Lisa walked over to the stove, moved the melting chocolate from the low flame, then poured the batter into a cake tin and placed it in the oven.
Chris didn’t know what to say. He felt awkward after what Lisa told him. They sat in silence, and avoided any eye contact while the cake was baking.
‘Can you help me? I need you to hold the bowl up while I decorate the cake with the chocolate,’ Lisa finally said.
‘Hey, don’t worry. He’s a nobody. There are plenty of guys out there. You know who the loser is? Dan. Any guy who leaves you is an idiot. You’re a special girl,’ Chris insisted. ‘And on the plus side, I’ll finally get to meet your parents.’ He laughed.
Lisa teared up, smiled and hugged him. After realising how long she’d been hugging him, she frigidly let go. ‘Um... the cake still needs to be decorated.’
‘Oh, yeah, sure. I forgot,’ Chris said awkwardly.
Lisa poured the chocolate bit by bit over the baked cake, using a spoon to spread it all over, while Chris put everything away, washed the dishes and
cleaned the bench. Lisa swirled the whipped cream on top and was just about to place the strawberries on when the doorbell rang.

‘Oh my God, that’s them!’

‘Have they met Dan before?’ Chris asked in a hushed voice.

‘No!’ she said. ‘Great. Now they’re going to think I’m a loser.’

‘How about you just answer the door?’ Chris said. ‘I’ll finish putting the strawberries on the cake.’

Lisa gave him a smile of appreciation, before going to answer the door. Chris was placing the last strawberry on the cake when the voices from the door grew louder.

As Chris turned around, Lisa extended her hand to his. ‘Mum. Dad. This is Dan.’
Eye of the storm
Jan Sanchez

thunder, lightning and heavy rain
erupt from the grey sky
preventing me from wandering to
the sweet abyss of clouds, moon and stars

your empty basket lies in my view
your crumpled sheets, untouched
waiting for you to rush through the door
and nuzzle your teddy bear and pillow

but you aren’t coming back
no more wet kisses or snuggles
no more

when I answered the phone
my heart sank
pierced by an iceberg
suffocated by the maelstrom
that claimed you.
She stands in front of the mirror just like she did yesterday and the day before, and the day before that. I don’t understand why she does this to herself. She takes off her pyjamas, leaving only her underwear barely hugging her hips, and her bra with straps falling off her shoulders.

I sit in front of her pillows amongst her other teddy bears—the only friends she thinks don’t judge her. People at school are making fun of her again, saying she’s anorexic because she refuses to eat, and then calling her fat when she’s forced to eat.

She wraps the measuring tape around her stomach, her eyes hollow with darkness. She wraps the tape once, twice, three times around her waist. Yeah, she’s lost more weight again.

Last week her parents were fighting, saying she needs help, but refusing to follow through. Her friends are concerned only for her image, telling her boys won’t like her because she can’t find a perfect balance.

‘Boys want girls with curves, but you can’t be too fat otherwise they won’t like you.’

‘Boys want girls that they can pick up and carry, to make them feel manly. If you keep eating and forcing yourself, you’ll be too big and they won’t like you.’

‘You are so skinny you might as well not exist. Boys will see your bones and they won’t like you.’
No one ever tells her she’s beautiful. Maybe if someone appreciated her for who she is and not what she looks like, this wouldn’t have happened. Maybe she would be happy and proud.

But she’s not.

The measuring tape is a noose waiting to choke her to death with its judgments.

I watch as she wraps it around once more, just to check if she was right, just like she did yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that.
If the sun were to darken
Dylan Marshall

If the sun were to darken, the moon to turn to blood
Then you’re going to get drenched.
Andrew spent a good five minutes trying to wrangle the hook, with half his bait still on it, out of the fish’s mouth. No luck, it was jammed. He felt sorry for the fish; undersized and firmly dead, it never had a chance.

‘Shit! Would’ve been cheaper to buy fish and chips,’ he said as he cut the line and threw the unfortunate catch over his shoulder for the seagulls circling above him.

‘Hey, ya bloody idiot! What the hell do ya think you’re doing?’

Startled, Andrew looked around. Behind him stood a guy, built like the proverbial brick shit-house, holding the dead fish in his hand.

‘You talking to me, mate?’

The man looked around. ‘Well, I don’t see any other bloody idiots around here, do you?’

Andrew shrugged. ‘What’s the problem?’

The man stepped closer. ‘That fucking fish you threw away just hit me square in the snout, hook and all. You wanna be more bloody careful, that’s what.’

Andrew, surprised by the big man’s overt aggression, thought better of mouthing off. He grinned and stuck out his hand, hopeful of some instant reconciliation and male bonding.

‘Geez, mate, sorry about that, didn’t see you there. Andrew Myers—you live around here?’
The man scrutinised Andrew’s face for a moment then shook his hand, almost crushing his fingers in a too-tight grip.

‘Dave Sutton. Yeah, I own the entire North Foreshore—all along here and back up in the hills, as far as you can see.’

Andrew was fairly sure that no one could own the foreshore, but knew it probably wouldn’t be wise to argue the point right now.

‘Right … well, guess I’m trespassing, then. I’ll pack up my gear and be out of your way.’ Andrew bent down to pick up his fishing tackle and bait bucket, and saw Dave’s shadow move closer behind him. The hairs on his neck began to prickle and he turned sharply to look at Dave.

Unexpectedly, Dave grinned. ‘No harm done, son. Just came down to see what you’re up to. Had a coupla buggers trying to bring a shipment of heroin through here a few days back. Got the coppers straight onto the bastards. Don’t want any o’ that shit going down here, eh?’

Andrew doubted the story, but went along with it, anxious to convince Dave of his own innocence.

‘Hell, shit no. No chance of that, mate, not my scene at all. Dirty bloody stuff,’ he added for good measure.

Dave was silent, as if deciding something. Andrew waited a while for a comment, then tiring of the power game Dave seemed to be playing, started packing up his gear.

Finally, Dave spoke. ‘What’s the hurry? I was just about to put the billy on for smoko. Fancy a brew?’

Andrew hesitated.

‘Come on, whaddya say?’

Maybe he had misjudged the situation. After all, he’d be pissed off too if someone turned up on his land. It wouldn’t hurt to stay for a quick cuppa, just to keep things smooth.

‘Got it all set up in the back of the ute,’ Dave said. He cocked his head toward a vehicle parked a short distance away behind a tree.

Andrew was surprised he hadn’t noticed it before. ‘Yeah, okay. Guess I could spare half an hour. Thanks.’
Dave looked pleased and slapped Andrew on the shoulder. ‘Good on ya, mate; I’ll get it on then. I’ve got a map of all the good fishin’ spots ‘round here. Might let ya have a squiz at that. Come over when you’ve packed up.’

Dave was boiling the billy and cutting two large chunks from a slab of fruitcake when Andrew walked over.

On seeing the cake he commented, ‘So there’s a Mrs Sutton then, eh? You’re well looked after.’

‘What? What do ya mean by that?’ Dave asked.

‘The cake. Did your missus make it?’

Dave stared at the cake as if seeing it for the first time. ‘Yeah, yeah, that’s right. She’s a good girl, sets me up for the day.’

Suddenly a man of few words, thought Andrew. ‘The house further up the hill then, is it? You been here long?’

‘Geez, what are ya, a fucking detective?’ Dave snarled. ‘But, yeah. You can’t see it from here—nice and private, just the way I like it.’ He handed Andrew a mug of black tea and a wedge of cake. ‘I’ll get the map.’

Andrew wondered what he had said to make Dave arc up like that. He obviously didn’t want to talk about the wife. Maybe it wasn’t such a happy marriage. He certainly couldn’t picture Dave as the romantic type.

Dave returned a minute or two later. ‘Here it is. Ya can have a look, and then I’ll have to kill ya!’ He laughed uproariously at his own joke.

Andrew smiled tightly and took a bite of the cake, and washed it down with a large gulp of tea.

Dave settled his ample backside in his old camp chair, his big hands wrapped around the hot mug, elbows propped on the chair’s arms.

Andrew took in the magnificent scenery. The swaying palms, spiky pandanus trees and weeping she-oaks, lining the clean white beach and the green seas beyond: like something out of a travel magazine, it formed the veritable epitome of paradise.

He watched Dave relax his manner for the first time and was intrigued to see a look of contentment on his face.
‘God’s own country, son. None of them thieving money-grubbers are gettin’ their hands on this piece of paradise. Lived here since I was a boy I have.’

‘Is that what’s being planned, then? A development?’ Andrew asked.

‘God’s own country,’ Dave repeated, seeming to drift off into remembrance. Then he looked back at Andrew. ‘Eh? Oh, it was on the cards for a while, no show in Hell now. All fixed up.’

‘Right,’ Andrew remarked, sneaking a look at his watch. Jesus, how long was all this going to take? He really wanted to just get in his boat and piss off. ‘So they’re not developing it now? Why not?’

Dave threw the mug aside and rose up out of his chair. ‘You ask a hell of a lot of questions boy! Why don’t you just fuck off?’

Andrew was stunned into silence. He stood up and put the mug on the tray of the ute. Anger rose up inside him but he squashed it down. Christ, don’t react, just get out. The guy was acting like a bloody psycho. He turned to go, but Dave stood in his path. He measured a good foot taller than Andrew—hands on hips, arms the size of tree trunks—with his massive legs planted astride.

‘Leaving already, Andrew?’ Dave looked surprised. ‘Here, take the map with ya mate, but mind ya keep it a secret!’ He placed a finger in front of his pursed lips like a child and smiled. ‘And pop in next time ya passin’. Ya can meet the missus. She’d love that.’

Andrew was afraid he was going to shit himself any minute, but managed to utter a few words. ‘You bet, Dave, will do. Thanks for the cuppa, mate.’ Then he walked down to the boat, as fast as he could without actually running.

Twisting the ignition key, he willed the boat to fire up. ‘Start, you bastard, start.’ The motor roared to life and, thank Christ, life once again seemed to have an ongoing potential. He looked back at the shore.

Dave grinned and waved as though fare-welling his best friend. ‘See ya soon, mate. Anytime,’ he called.

Andrew forced a grin and waved back. ‘Thanks, mate, see ya,’ he yelled, adding under his breath, ‘not fucking likely, you sick whacko.’
After picking up his car, he drove on determinedly, checking the rear vision regularly, just in case Dave had managed to hide in the back seat.

Still rattled by the encounter, Andrew pulled into the local drive-through before heading home.

Tom Cooper ambled over to the ute. ‘Gidday, Andy, what can I do ya for?’

‘Bottle of Bundy. Thanks, Tom.’

‘No worries, comin’ right up.’

Tom returned with the rum. ‘Heard the latest about old Marge Baker?’

‘No, not sure I know her—what’s happened?’

‘Someone’s done her in. Bashed her bloody head in. She owned all that land running down to the foreshore on the North side right back up into the hills. A hundred acres odd. Worth a squillion. Her daughter Sue came home and found her just a few hours ago.’

Andrew stared at Tom. He ran a hand over his clammy face and wiped the sweat on his jeans. ‘Any clues?’

‘No, not really. Funny, though, she did have an offer on the land just last week from some developers. Wouldn’t blame her for sellin’. It’s been tough for her on her own since Jack died. Useless son of hers pissed off years ago.’

‘Maybe it was a robbery gone wrong?’ Andrew offered, hoping for some sort of explanation.

Tom shook his head. ‘No, doesn’t seem so. Apparently, Sue said as far as she could see, the only thing the murderer took was a bloody fruitcake!’
Past the future
Craig Henderson

Who hides behind this façade?
Is it the same person
Who seeks to escape
From all he knows?
Eyes passing over
What can’t be seen
Acknowledging all
That can’t be done.

A sideways glance
Tugging the corners
Of a forgotten smile;
Sarcasm sliding like tears
Shed in anonymity.
Words chasing thoughts
Scattered in false trails of hope;
Seeking a future in the past,
Looking for answers
In questions never asked.
Is this the way forward?
    Or a path skirting
All that could have been?
A reluctance to admit
    The future and past
Will flow through
    To a present
We will never see?
This thing called gender
Kim Cook

I’m not a woman—ignore my passport. That ‘F’ was assigned to me by doctors on the basis of certain body parts that I have, an assumption that a baby’s gender and sex will match. It’s not true. However, I’m also not a man. No, I don’t know which toilet to use. Yes, I get stared at every time I pick one and do my business—my appearance has even caused people to exit and check the sign on the door.

Sometimes it makes me laugh. Sometimes it makes me cry.

You see, it’s this thing called gender.

I’m not what I’m supposed to be.

It’s not just toilets. Sales assistants stumble over the greeting, unsure whether to call me ‘sir’ or ‘miss’. I have no idea what to tick when I fill out the sign-up forms for social media. In summer, I have to decide whether being seen as female by the people around me is more or less stressful than sweltering in my chest binder. I still feel anxious when I walk into a clothes shop and head to the boys’ section, afraid that someone is going to wonder why a woman is holding shirts up to her chest for fit.

The problem is that I live in an either/or world of male and female. This is called ‘the gender binary’, where people, clothes, behaviours and bodies are considered male or female. We know, of course, about unisex clothes and colours and pastimes, but people are male or female, and are expected to live as one or the other. Society knows this because of the signs on toilet doors!
By now, most of us know about transgender people—people who feel that their bodies, presentations and birth certificates don’t match their true gender and/or sex. Binary trans people might access a range of options so that their lives and bodies better match their male or female selves, anything from dressing in different clothes to surgery or a new name. In a less complicated world, this might be seen as no different to any other modification people make to their bodies all the time—something that allows us to live more comfortably inside our skin.

What society knows far less about are those who aren’t seeking to live as genders in opposition to the letters on their birth certificates, but are seeking to live as something else entirely. These people can be without gender (agender or genderless), be of neutral gender (neutrois), switch between genders (bigender) or blend genders. ‘Genderqueer’ or ‘non-binary’ are two umbrella terms often used.

Yes, it’s confusing. For every writer on non-binary gender, there is a different understanding of what words are correct and how they should be used—non-binary people haven’t been present as a vocal community for long enough to standardise our language. (I’m not so sure that we should even have to.) All I can do is pick out the words that speak to me and ask the people around me to use them.

Me—I’m genderless. I cut my hair short and bind my chest flat, like a boy. I wear striped stockings and skirts, like a girl. My interests are a patchwork of things that are male and female and neither. Living as a single binary gender, male or female—and I’ve tried both—makes me feel as though I’m a square peg in a round hole, for other important parts of me are overlooked and erased. I find no comfort and validation in gender, so I’ve decided to stop pretending that I have one. I’m hoping to pursue top surgery—breast removal—and speech therapy so that one day my body will better match who I am and be less readily gendered by others.

I’m not seeking to be a man.
I’m just seeking not to be a woman.
The problem with that quest is that our language is based around the same binary assumption. Though the need for a gender-neutral pronoun set has been discussed for over a century (Sweden has acknowledged this need by recently introducing the gender-neutral ‘hen’), there is no English word in common usage. ‘They’ used in the singular is still disliked by some writing professionals; ‘it’ I consider to be dehumanising to the extent that I ranted at the poor editor who introduced it into my manuscript.

The non-binary community has yet to invent a standard gender-neutral pronoun. I ask that people refer to me as ‘they’ instead of ‘she’, but there are people who prefer ‘ey’ or ‘ze’ or ‘hie’ or even ‘ou’. Which pronoun should be standardised, or whether or not individuals should adopt a standardised pronoun, is the subject of ongoing debate. This is also confusing to outsiders, as non-binary people break all the rules society has internalised about how to identify and refer to people.

We learn from birth that certain voices, presentations and body types will, most of the time, equal a specific gender or sex. We assume—automatically and subconsciously—based on these things, and most of the time, we’re correct. I don’t hate people for making the mistake, but I’m expected to live in a world where my title is wrong (what gender-neutral title options are available to people unable to complete a PhD?), where forms have no or few options for non-binary people, where finding a GP who understands my non-binary needs and identity is a challenge.

I’m expected to live in a world where I’m not quite real—where it’s far easier to pretend to be something I’m not.

Because of this, it’s vital that the words and terms used online start to become common and ordinary in day-to-day conversations, so that non-binary people have the same presence and acknowledgment that men and women take for granted.

What can you do? What do you do when you meet me on the street and you realise that my voice doesn’t match my presentation? Do something radical and ask me what gender I am. I know, it runs counter to all the manners your parents taught you—we’re supposed to know someone’s gender
and therefore the words we use. With the increasing presence of transgender and non-binary people, however, the chance is growing that you don’t.

So—ask. Just ask. I’ll tell you what I am and what words I’d love you to use, and then I might grab you in a sudden hug, because you just made my day. You became one more person that cared about my comfort—in fact, you made me real.

I promise you, there’s nothing more polite than making sure you’re referring to someone with the right titles and pronouns.

Oh, and if you ever find yourself creating a form for social media registration: at least include a ‘neither’ checkbox, okay?
Contributors

Anna Brasier has recently completed her studies in Professional Writing and Editing at Victoria University. Her articles and stories have been published in a variety of print publications such as: Offset, Melbourne’s Child and Carers’ Victoria, and online articles in Weekend Notes. In recent years, Anna has had four short stories published as finalists in The Ada Cambridge Prize. Anna writes about autism and Asperger’s syndrome on her blog.

URL: http://amillionshades.wordpress.com

Kim Cook is a genderless, feminist queer driven to write about non-binary and unconventional souls, mental illness, chronic pain and strong women. Currently a Professional Writing and Editing student and an editor-publisher in the making, Kim dreams of starting an e-press publishing queer non-romance genre fiction. In the meantime, Kim spends their time collecting swap cards and fashion dolls, blogging, and coming up with ever more inventive ways to turn their life experiences into fiction.

URL: http://queerwithoutgender.wordpress.com/bookshelf
**Bronwyn Cran** is a born dreamer, who loves to lose herself in the world of fiction and its endless possibilities. Having spent most of her life paralysed by anxiety and depression, she is now more determined than ever to break free and aim for the clouds. Currently experiencing the life of a Professional Writing and Editing student, her ambitions are well underway. In her spare time she is supporting animal rights, baking, collecting ceramic owls and planning her next short story.

**URL:** http://inspiretheuninspiredeveryday.blogspot.com.au/

**Peter Dewar**, having had a successful career in business, now enjoys non-fiction writing. A collection of his recent work has been published on the *Japan in Melbourne* website and in their monthly newsletter. The craft of writing fascinates Peter; so much so, that after finishing a Post-Graduate Certificate in Communication, he returned to study and is currently undertaking the Certificate in Professional Writing and Editing at Victoria University. Peter sees poetry in daily stock market reports and one day will combine both his interests.

**M. Hart** is an experimental writer who dabbles in a variety of mediums. Primarily a poet and short story writer with a focus on horror, crime and confronting themes, M. Hart has now branched into screenwriting, and is currently in the process of writing a television series.

**Craig Henderson** has written several prize-winning short stories. His stories have been published in *Offset* and *Platform*, and the collection *It's all about the writing*. He has always been fascinated by the power of the written word to explain what common sense cannot. Craig is studying part-time at Victoria University, and is employed part-time as a child wrangler.
Danielle Higgins is a screenwriter who enjoys experimenting with poetry, flash fiction, and novel. Her poetry has been published in US magazine *Strange Horizons*, and she is currently working on a television series. She enjoys writing character-driven mysteries with elements of the supernatural and horror.

Chantelle Langanke is a fiction writer and poet, as well as one of the youngest students to complete the Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing. Writing from a young age, Chantelle uses poetry to express her mind and help others live through her everyday life. Her future endeavours will hopefully take her towards teaching the younger generation and producing a collection of self-published books.

Dylan Marshall is a 20-year-old Australian writer, artist and gamer. He studies a Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing at Victoria University’s St Albans campus with dreams of becoming a manga author, emphasis on the writing side. He enjoys reading, writing role plays with his friends, drawing, gaming and lazing. An active daydreamer, he spends more time inside his own head than outside, and he often confuses people when he talks. Dylan writes mostly speculative fiction, something that is furthest away from reality, and often uses elements such as superpowers and supernatural or fantasy worlds.

**URL:** http://dylanmarshallblog.wordpress.com/
Rose Moebus has a colourful background involving tutus, court rooms and everything in between. Currently completing her Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing, Rose is an aspiring novelist, short story and children’s chapter book writer. She daydreams about completing a chapter book series about a dog detective, and travelling to Ireland and Scotland in order to complete research on her novel. She would love to see her name on the spine of a book in everyone’s bookshelf.

URL: www.lulu.com/spotlight/rose_moebus_author

Simone Murcutt is a positive body image advocate. She dedicates her time to writing blog posts with help and advice for those suffering from poor self-esteem. Simone is affiliated with the Butterfly Foundation, which follows her blog. She is a Professional Writing and Editing student who will go on to study Communications in 2014, majoring in Public Relations. She wishes to work for an organisation which deals with mental illness and fundraisers by contributing with her communication and writing skills.

URL: www.simonemurcutt.blogspot.com.au

Jan Sanchez is a new fantasy writer, currently working on his novel The Legend of The Zodiacs; he hopes to release it in the near future. He is currently a Professional Writing and Editing student, spending his time in writing poetry and other works of fiction that often focus around the themes of family, friendship, isolation, love and humanity. Jan also enjoys travelling to different countries and learning about different cultures, myths and legends that have an influence in his writing.
Janet Stapleton has been writing for 12 years. Her work includes short stories and essays, and she has begun work on a novel—a romantic comedy set in Melbourne. She is currently undertaking a Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing at Victoria University. Her writing includes feisty, independent female characters and themes of self-realization and empowerment. Staying true to her Australian identity, her down-to-earth style incorporates a mixture of humour, an investigation of the male/female dynamic, family relationships, and a resonance with issues that affect all those who are brave enough to follow their hearts.

Samantha Vroom is a Professional Writing and Editing student passionate about health and wellness. If she finds herself writing for, designing or editing magazines, she’ll never work a day in her life. Non-fiction is her passion. In her spare time, Samantha writes novels, and hopes to publish her first psychological thriller by 2018.

URL: www.samanthavroom.blogspot.com