

PROFESSIONAL WRITING & EDITING^(TAFE)

The Professional Writing and Editing department at Victoria University (TAFE) not only conducts classes at the St Albans campus, but also encourages students to step outside formal walls, by taking their learning into the community to explore writing through social, publishing and literary events in various locations throughout Melbourne's west. Students gain industry knowledge they can employ throughout their working lives.

The core of our courses is a two-year Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing, which includes subjects on creative writing (short stories, memoir and novel), poetry, non-fiction, journalism, business and other formal writing, editing, desktop publishing and traditional publishing, photography and many related fields. Writing for, editing and producing Platform is part of our second year Publishing Studio subject. We also offer short courses.

When students finish our diploma, they can apply for one year of credit towards a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Communication with Victoria University's higher education department.

We invite you to join us.

Certificate 4 and Diploma courses
www.profwritingvu.wordpress.com

Short courses

Contact the office (03) 9919 2681

Rotunda in the West

Conversations with Australian Writers

Facebook: TWZ (TheWriteZone)

www.thewritezone.com.au

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EDITORIAL

From an age we sometimes can't even remember, words are thrust upon us. They are moulded and shaped into our brain like a sculpture, bit by bit, letter by letter, to show who we are and where we've come from. Sometimes, you find other people that love words almost as much as you do. And just like a dictionary, everything you already know expands into something more.

The western suburbs of Melbourne are no exception.

In our world, we provide words for those who can't speak for themselves. We write words for people to fall in love with and feel comforted by. We write words to help them through the long, lonely and sleepless nights, and the days on the trains that always seem to be delayed. But more importantly, we write words because we want people to listen to everything we have to say.

We want the people in our lives, be it our best friends or passersby on the street, to know who we are, why we're here, what our purpose is. Platform 15 is about bringing words from the writers in the west and connecting them with the people that surround us—letting the words match your thoughts and find that connection with a person that could quite possibly be in the car at the red light next to yours.

A class of our own editors and writers used letters and words to connect with Beata Cranswick and her students in the Design Studio at Victoria University to create the collection of ideas and personal views of the world you hold in your hand. We used letters and words to bring together the writers of the west. All they did was use letters and words to express themselves.

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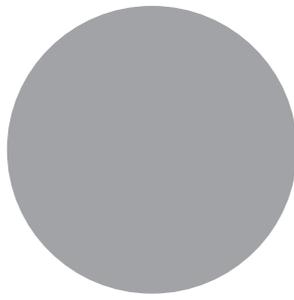
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Want to contribute to Platform?

Please contact Bruno via

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Publishing Studio Class 2013



CASH FLOW

Money is our source
of evil and good living
It turns the world.

 *Chantelle Langanke*

UNTITLED

Tiresome toes
Sore soles
Weak arms
Numb fingers
Just another working day
At the salt mine of life.

 *Chantelle Langanke*

CHRONOS

Tick, tock.
They look
Out,
Trees birds.
Like a
Block of
Ice
He's disappearing.
Her jokes
Fall flat
Like a Joan Rivers
Review at a
Catholic fundraiser.
Both sitting
On a one way
Train.

 *Mary Camo*



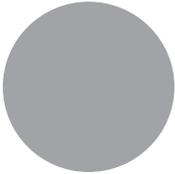
WRITING THE RIGHT REASONS

When I was seventeen and experimenting with writing, I wrote a novel about a shy young man who was unloved by his parents and bullied by his fellow students, but grew up to become a brave demon-slaying hero. When I was twenty-one and dreaming of being a full-time novelist, I wrote about a depressed young man who was unloved by his parents, but grew up to be a famous heavy-metal musician. When I was twenty-five and working in a warehouse, I considered my habit of writing about parent-antagonists to be the mark of an immature writer, so I tried to write about loving mothers, doting fathers and happy families. I wrote about an anxious librarian hero who went out of his way to avoid his parents. At twenty-six, after injuring my hands so badly that I couldn't write at all, I sat down in a too-large chair across from a woman with a notepad. I gave her what I thought were the relevant notes about my injury and how my inability to cope was causing problems for my family. My psychologist, Elizabeth*, seemed to have heard something else, given what she said at the end of the session: 'You need to get away from your family. It's toxic.'

Those words changed my life.

Over time and further sessions, I learned the experiences that I had created for my characters were, in fact, experiences I knew first-hand. Ever since then, I've regarded my writing as a form of prophecy. The act of writing is a dialogue with the subconscious, and I need to pay attention to the words I put on the page. Writing is an opportunity for me to learn about myself.

At twenty-seven, I enrolled in the Professional Writing and Editing TAFE course at Victoria University, surrounded by other writers who were starting out on their journeys as future professionals. This course was designed to teach us writing craft and industry knowledge for a variety of writing careers: students have become freelance editors, independent publishers, teachers, freelance feature writers and event promoters. We have shared dreams of book deals, film rights and seeing our names in print. In this new world, I saw students write, and beyond a shared love for words, I had no idea why. Is writing about self-expression? Or is the journey less personal? Every student I asked was willing to share their thoughts on that simple question: why?



Jonathan, one of the younger writers in the course, has been writing since early childhood—‘little stories’ in primary school. He first intended to be a journalist; now, having been inspired by John Marsden’s *Tomorrow When the War Began* series, he writes both fiction and non-fiction.

‘It [*Tomorrow When the War Began*] made me think that I could do this,’ he told me. I asked him if his writing related to his life experience: ‘I make a character live a life that I would have wanted.’ However, certain things relevant to him litter his stories—Australian landscapes, the city of Melbourne, teenagers—and his answer to my question about his characters confirmed my idea that writers put more of themselves into our work than we know: ‘I put everyday people ... into out-of-this-world situations.’ Unlike some of us, he hasn’t spent a lot of time thinking about why he writes, yet he has a better, simpler grasp than many: ‘I don’t know if I’m doing it for the right reasons, but I just write because I enjoy it.’

Dylan has dreamed of becoming a writer since the age of seven: he came to VU to become a speculative fiction or manga author, and spends every spare minute either writing or drawing. He writes because: ‘ever since I can remember, I’ve been creating worlds and people in my head and it’s fun to get them

out’. He spoke at length to me about vampires and monsters and why I should never be a character in his novels, but Dylan suggests his writing is also a form of transformation: ‘If I read a story, I’ll slowly turn the story into my story ... [creating] is your opinion on a popular story.’ I asked him if he ever discovers himself through writing and he gave me a raw, honest answer, unexpected from an author of supposedly light-hearted action stories: ‘What I want to be—I kind of know who I am, and when I look at my writing I’m thinking why can’t I be like this, or why can’t I be realistic?’ Dylan surprised me further when I asked him about his characters, revealing that he spends a lot of time thinking about his process: ‘Characters are examples of my own vanity.’ Like Jonathan, he too is quietly confident about why he is a writer, and he gave me a simple answer when I asked him if he suffers any doubt: ‘No. I just write what I want.’

Bronwyn’s story is similar to my own. She ‘started off ... with a diary entry’ and has been keeping a journal for the past seven years. She writes because she felt as if she were ‘just coasting around everywhere, not really knowing where I belonged ... writing was something that separated me from everybody else’. She told me that she also comes from a difficult life history, so, ‘I think my main

reason for writing is to help anybody in a similar situation ... if I could be that person, like the person I never had, then that would be amazing'. She writes about mother-daughter relationships, manipulative boyfriends and bullies, all things drawn from her real life experiences, and said these things have 'shaped me as a writer ... writing about it has helped me work it out in my head'. Her goal as a writer is simple and profound: 'to have people write to me and say that I've helped them in some way'. She finished our interview by telling me something that blew me away, and summarises, I think, my own writing journey: 'It's a healing for me ... to be able to put all of my experiences into words.'

Chantelle started writing poetry in high school, but has been branching out into novels and short stories since starting the course. She told me that 'I actually don't know what it was that made me start writing, but when things got really rough for me ... I'd just write what's going on.' For Chantelle, writing is also a journey of self-discovery, something she's clearly spent a lot of time thinking about: 'When you're writing, that's when you learn about yourself ... you can be eighteen, twenty-five, thirty-four, in your eighties, and there will always be one or two pieces that you'll go "wow, that really made me think about myself as a person".' She likes to include common, even small life experiences in her stories, for a reason that makes so much sense when I stopped to think it over: 'Every little piece of life is recorded in some shape or form and can be used over and over again ... sometimes it's just

that little piece of information that makes the bigger picture.' As the youngest second-year student, she proves that being aware of one's own story and process has nothing to do with age—I wish I had her awareness and perspective when I was eighteen.

What is it, then? What is this mysterious thing we all have in common?

I have come to a not-so-surprising realisation: writers are people. We're unique souls on our own particular road through life, and we'll hit different milestones, have different realisations, find purpose in different directions. There are no 'right reasons' for writing. There are no wrong reasons for writing. What writers seem to have in common, however, is a fabulous willingness to share their thoughts and experiences in their stories and discussions. No, not all of us yet have a sense of being in touch with our own story, and it might take some of us longer to develop that, but it lies underneath everything we do. All we need to do is to find, shelter and nurture it.

We students, fortunately, are in just the right place to do so.

 K.A. Cook



** Name changed to protect privacy.*

CAIRNLEA

The cars are as silent as can be at 10 o'clock in the morning on busy Furlong Road. You watch them from your seat outside the Cairnlea Town Centre and wonder how you haven't yet heard a single honk, seen one rude gesture or spotted any impatient commuters revving at the red lights to go. A VL roars to life after being washed and polished at the Sparkle 'N' Go, but he's just showing off.

It must be something in the cool air. Everyone is happy and relaxed. Older locals smile and wave at each other as they cross paths, and cafe staff zoom between tables refilling drinks.

The sun is shining and a light breeze graces the piazza. You can hear the clanking of crockery from the cafe kitchens, and silverware against plates as locals dig in to their breakfasts and let laughter and chatter fill the hum-drum silence of the morning.

The sky is a mesmerising blue—not a cloud in sight. It's almost as if the aeroplane flying overhead is there just to remind you that the flawless image above is, in fact, the sky and not a figment of your imagination. The sound of dry autumn leaves dancing across the pavement and crunching underneath trolley wheels snaps you out of your trance.

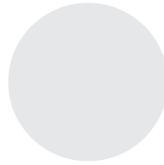
The robust aroma of coffee lingering in the air is tainted by the faint scent of cigarettes drifting over from the group of old burly men that congregate by the Cairnlea butcher each morning. They rest their crossed arms on their aproned beer bellies and chuckle in unison between puffs.

Socks and sandals seem to be the most popular choice of footwear for elderly men here at the Town Centre. Their feet drag as they push their rattling trolleys lazily across the pavement toward the green grocer with their wives in tow.

Restaurant and take-away shop owners prepare for the lunch-time influx of locals. The smell of coffee and cigarette fumes fades as the chickens begin charcoaling. Younger locals start arriving in large groups. The girls sip their fresh lattes, gossip loudly and debate about when to book their next massage, and the young men in business shirts and ties fill the outdoor seating area with talk of the girls. Flirtatious glances and giggles are exchanged as the girls realise this.

The low hum of the machine and harsh spray of the pressure hoses at the Sparkle 'N' Go are constant now, and drives on Furlong Road are starting to get rowdy. Elderly couples hiss at each other in their native tongue and an elderly Asian man stands alone in the car park howling at the sky. What was once a quiet and peaceful setting has become a busy, crowded and confusing place to be, but that's Cairnlea.

 *Samantha Vroom*



ST ALBANS

The first thing that struck me, as I got off the bus, was the vast array of smells and noises. This is a daily experience. I take the same bus and get off at the same spot every day. St Albans is a vibrant suburb in Melbourne's west, and is also where my university is located. I study Professional Writing and Editing at Victoria University.

The sights and smells of this place never fail to capture my attention. No two days are the same. I usually reach the St Albans Station around 9:15 after a long bus journey, and then start my fifteen-minute walk to the university, hoping to be on time for my first class. However, today I decided to linger around the area a bit longer to take in my surroundings.

The streets in this suburb are lined with many shops. There are fruit and vegetable stores, fish markets, cafes, pharmacies and a public library. The atmosphere is frantic, with people running to and fro, rushing to catch the next train or to be on time for their first lecture. As I walk the streets, I am greeted with the sweet aroma of coffee and baked goods and the strong, distinct smell of fish and other seafood from the open markets.

The weather was okay with temperatures hitting the high twenties early. The cool breeze was a welcome change. As I walked past the shops, I took my time to watch the people passing by and managed to hear little snippets of their conversations. There were young students walking

together in groups discussing what they were doing in class. There were older men laughing and enjoying a coffee and a smoke outside the cafes. A few shop owners were just getting ready for the day and opening their doors as I walked past. The first shoppers streamed into the stores, clever enough to avoid the rush that comes later.

I decided to walk back. I crossed the three pedestrian crossings towards the station and walked slowly across the narrow strip that leads to the university, enjoying the stroll and not having to worry about reaching class on time. It was one of those rare opportunities when I got to be late to class because the teacher let us.

I walked to the university library, had a bite to eat and organised my thoughts. My friend walked over and greeted me excitedly, seeing me for the first time in three months. I greeted her back, only half listening to what she was saying as I was turning around to observe the people around us. As she called my name, the girl next to me turned with an annoyed expression at being disturbed. A group of people talking loudly at the next table stopped to listen to us.

It was exciting to observe life at a slower pace. We don't often get to do that as we are sucked into the busy cycle of everyday life.

KURANA

It was a time of transition,
The late 1940s.
Returning to normal
Carrying a new understanding
Of human capacity for hatred and violence.

Harry was finding his way
In a surreal landscape
Peacetime, marriage
A father of three weeks.

Keeping up appearances
Flying passenger planes across
Mountains and moods

The shadows loom and spread
Across his mind
Night falls
Shards of moonlight pierce
Katherine. The baby.

'Kurana' DC3
First in the ANA fleet
Adaptable: passenger, bomb, passenger.

Captain Harry Warlow-Davies
27-year-old son of the Royal Hobart Golf Club
Returned RAAF serviceman, now of Mosman.
Co-pilot James Barrington Keyes, 38, also Returned.

What life-ending forces
Conscious or not
Pulled him
In a line of errors

Nay, a line of broken rules
Into the side of a mountain.

What reasons can we see
with dead hindsight.
Stabs in the darkness of a poem.

Or is it simply
When your number's up
Your number's up?

It was cold for November
Cloud at 4000 feet.

Before take off
He insists
'I want to fly at 3000 feet'
'But that's lower than Mt Macedon'
'I'll fly visual flight rules'.

Twenty two lives,
ten tonnes of steel
All suspended
in one sky.

The route went due north,
East of the range, over Riddells Creek.

The plane went north west,
straight towards
'The only mountain hazard in the area'
noted the opposition leader in the senate.

Nine miles off course
Twelve minutes airborne.

In those days planes were like buses
Essendon, Deniliquin,
Narranderra, Wagga Wagga, Sydney
Four stops to Sydney
If you couldn't read a book and fly a DC3
You weren't up to the task.

8th of November, 1948
They say there was a Scotch Mist on the Mount that
day.

In the cabin, passengers chat
'That's Sunbury down there
...Strange
It should be on the other side...
We're following the Calder.
We should be flying over Romsey,
not Woodend?'

'Breakfast, Captain?'
Elizabeth asks
'Sorry.' She twists her head
Four stripes in the three stripe seat
Notebook on his lap.

They curve around the only peak visible
Skirting Mt Macedon,
At the western end.
But they are tricked by the terrain
It's Towrong
Impersonating Macedon

Towrong is seven-hundred-and-sixty-feet lower than
Macedon.

They fly into fog
Visual flight rules
Blinded

'Jesus Christ'
Harry looks up

His eyes strain to see
What his mind can't comprehend
Tree tops, deep green
Appearing from nowhere

Time warps
Fear and regret pound
He bolts upright
Flashes of the faces on board.
He grabs the controls
Shame and guilt.
Pull hard.
Katherine.
Pull harder
Cut the engines
Hold her up.

In a genteel guest house
And a millionaire's mansion
The sound is the same.
Droning
Up there, above the roof
Too loud, too low
Gone
Coming back?
Crashing, Cracking
Snapping
Sliding, twisting

Stop. Tilt Drop Smash
S
T
R
A
I
G
H
T
Down
Cockpit first.

The shadows are screaming
Crying
Silent
On the altar of death.
The pain and guilt
Overwhelmed,
At last.

Elizabeth is knocked down
Her head slams.

Seats buckle and lift
bones break
Black smoke streams from
screaming hot engines
and blood
rushes to the surface.

Her eyes ponder a crack
Silver cobwebs
Strung
on wet bracken.

She rises to the occasion
And with 24-year-old
Inner steel,
Orders, 'Keep your seats'

She heaves the door
'Go out quietly, please.'

They tear at the wreckage and
Drag the pilots away
Harry is dead. Massive head injuries.

Co-pilot Keyes is alive
Semi-conscious
Raving, repeating
'We're not going to make it... we're not going to
make it...'
He doesn't.

Collateral damage?
A number that's up? or
His own terminating trajectory?

She counts to make sure no one is missing
She fashions a splint from a branch
To hold a broken leg.

The plane burns
And they warm their
Shock
In its glow.

They hobble and hold themselves to the
Penrith Guesthouse
And wait
And tell each other how it was.
And tell each other how it was.

And dress their world and the
threads between them with stories.

 *Kate Lawrence*

TALE OF TWO MOTORS

T rue Character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure—the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character’s essential nature.’

(McKee, 2006, *Story, Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, p.101).

Let’s see how this character performs. His name is Lou Butler and he is fifty years old. He lives with his wife, Ellen, in a small country town where he runs a one-man garage. When he’s not fixing other peoples’ cars, or dragging their cars out of ditches with his battered tow-truck, he tinkers with his gleaming 1950’s/500cc Norton motorbike.

Late one Saturday afternoon in mid-winter, Lou decided to take the motorbike out for a spin. As he was putting his tools away, Ellen stepped into the shed and said, ‘You can’t take the bike out, Lou. You’ve had too much to drink.’

‘I’m only going up the hill, love. She’s running so sweetly.’

Ellen smiled. ‘Sometimes I think you’d rather ride her than me.’

Lou laughed. ‘Sit down and have a beer. I won’t be long.’

‘Don’t go. You’re drunk.’

‘I’m not drunk. I’ve been pacing myself.’

‘You’ve had a skin full. I heard you singing South of the Border.’

Laughing, Lou pulled on his leathers, boots and gloves, wrapped a football scarf around his neck and laced up his boots. He opened a stubby for Ellen and gently steered her to his ‘office’, and onto what he called the armchair, which was really a cleared space at the end of a bench. He kissed her hard on the lips, before strapping on his helmet and mounting his other love.

On the outskirts of town he turned and headed up a ten kilometre long path that he often used as a test for the bike. At the summit, he wheeled

around and thundered back down the steep grade. Two angels rose steadily towards him. They crossed onto the wrong side of the road, and rode straight at him. Lou dropped his right shoulder like a boxer and slipped the punch. He opened the throttle and continued on his way. At the bottom of the hill he stopped and turned off the motor.

He sat looking off into the distance, his left leg shaking, as the cooling motor ticked in the stillness. After a few minutes, he booted the kick-start and began slowly riding back up the road. He left his headlight off as he idled along in the near darkness. About half a mile away, he spotted their headlights as they rode abreast along the road. Grinning like a Kamikaze pilot, he opened the throttle, the exhaust cackling as the Norton responded, the roar reverberating amongst the gum trees. The needle on the old speedometer tipped 70mph as he crossed onto the wrong side of the road. As he closed in on them, he was lying flat over the tank, his scarf flapping. The throttle was wide open as he unerringly headed between the pair of lights. He hit the car head on. And lived.

The presence of alcohol makes it hard to work out the character’s ‘essential nature’. We don’t know how he would have reacted if he’d been sober.

Two years later, though, we found out Lou’s ‘essential nature’.

After working as a motor mechanic for thirty years, he encountered a motor that he couldn’t fix: his own. He smiled sickly at the irony when his doctor told him that he had contracted motor neuron disease, but remained silent. Gradually, his muscles refused to function. He died within a year.

 **Ron Burrows**

LUVY AND THE OLD MAN

The temperature was in the high thirties. Conditions were poor for an overweight, middle-aged postie without a hat, to be afoot, scurrying from one break-up turn to the next.

Back at the Disaster Centre, Luvy held aloft each Christmas present in turn to a cheer from the gathering. At first jovial, his mood changed abruptly. Before he had unloaded the buggy of its beer, whisky and packets of shortbread, he turned nasty. His voice, as harsh as a Wreckers Rottweiler, was about to announce the 'Luvy Award' for the year's worst postie. Someone had made a book on it. The favourite had gone home.

Luvy shocked everyone as he spat out a scathing attack on his workmate of twenty-five years. The Old Man was dumbfounded. Always a happy drunk, his smile faded as he stood transfixed, listening to the incoherent nonsense.

Then, without a word, 'the worst fucking postie in the joint' marched over to Luvy, gave him three gangster slaps, then clipped him neatly on the jaw with a punch that only travelled six inches.

Luvy reeled against the sorting-frame as the Old Man turned on his heel and walked back to where he had been standing. The sixty-three year-old legend, winner of the last Luvy Award, grinned at the rest of us, picked up his stubby and drank.

 *Ron Burrows*

SPOOKS

Passengers on a tram trundling past would have seen a lanky, middle-aged man wearing shorts, walk down the stairs into 'Melbourne Hatters'. The hatter grinned as Spooks mopped his brow before trying on a bowler. He inspected himself in the mirror.

'Can I be of any assistance, sir?' the reflection asked brightly, as Spooks replaced the bowler on the shelf.

'Yeah, mate. I want to buy a hat. A Panama.'

'Certainly. This way.' He walked over to a display. Do you know your size, sir?'

'No, mate, no. I don't often buy hats.'

A tape measure materialised and was wrapped around his bald head.

'Sir seems to be rather hot.' The hatter grimaced as he noted the size and wiped his tape measure.

'Sir is rather hot, mate. I rode my bike in. My bike. I rode my bike into the city. It's bloody warm out there. Bloody warm.'

'Yes.'

A multi-coloured hatband caught the man's eye and he indicated his preference for it by moving a hand towards it. The hatter reached out faster and deftly plucked it from the stand. 'It's best if I handle the hats, sir. We wouldn't want to stain them.'

'Fair enough, mate. Fair enough.'

The attendant was able to find a hat of Spook's size in the preferred style and, by stretching, managed to crown him with it.

Spooks whistled softly when he saw the price, but walked out of the shop with his new Panama in a box.

 *Ron Burrows*

INVESTING IN AN OUTTA-CONTROL WORLD

Gen Ys, hear the news? You're going to have to work till you're ready for a nursing home. The financial industry, the same people who brought us the Global Financial Crisis and Great Depression, are saying that the Gen Y superannuation is in short supply.

Somewhere there'll be a spreadsheet full of formulas and figures to prove it. Trouble is, the future isn't an equation. Tomorrow, the next day and especially decades ahead can't be reduced to moving averages, a normal distribution, or the arithmetic used by men in neatly pressed suits who peddle this stuff.

No spreadsheet can predict a lifetime's adventures. One that's full of best friends and bust ups, distinctions and fails, romances and heartbreaks, promotions and redundancies, marriage and funerals, property booms and scams.

You can bet on one thing though: life is unpredictable. How do you invest for that? As luck would have it, I picked up a book called *What the Dog Saw* and found the answer.

It's written by a fuzzy-haired business sage and bestselling author, Malcolm Gladwell. Malcolm may look like he was sired by Redfoo, but he's smart. If the television series, *The Big Bang Theory*, ever needs a new character, they've got their man.

What the Dog Saw is a collection of his work. It includes an essay, *Blowing Up*, about Nassim Taleb, who's just as clever. Nassim is a keen observer of randomness and long ago decided disasters, and miracles, were inevitable. He never runs to catch a train. Nassim worked as a trader on Wall Street, and as for beating the stock market: 'He could not escape the thought that it might all have been the result of sheer dumb luck', writes Malcolm Gladwell.

Nassim became a fund manager and set up a portfolio designed to prosper when the financial market blew up—went outta control. Who would have thought? Aeroplanes do fly into buildings and banks—too big to fail—go broke. Nassim made a fortune when some of his Wall Street buddies lost

theirs and years later penned a best seller: *Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*.

Works for me. I remember being called into my boss's office unexpectedly, thinking it meant trouble. Instead I got my first big break—even came with a car park. My wife and I met by chance and within months, we married. On the debit side, my sister died before she made it to her 40th birthday, leaving behind a nine-year-old daughter. I could go on, but my story isn't unique. The important ones, the ones to remember, are always black swans. We may not realise it, but for the most part, our lives are outta control.

Nassim's spreadsheets are probably no improvement on anyone else's. But he does give us reason to question the financial industry when they come foretelling doom and flogging certainty. Consider cries from the financial sector as a call to action—just not the sort on sale. It wouldn't hurt to spend as much time shopping our super as our mobile phone plan. A Gen Y'er can save tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars with a small cut in fees. It wouldn't hurt to make sure we can live with our portfolio's risk settings—Nassim only plays with part of his money.

The safest bet is investing in ourselves. Trusting we have what it takes to belong in this mad, outta-control world. It helps to run into a few black swans. There's no avoiding the bad ones, they're unexpected, but there's a fair share of good ones: a chance meeting to alter life's course, an opportunity to study, a business idea that makes a fortune, someone who 'gets' us, a miracle cure for a family disease.

The trick is to get in their way, and that's unlikely to happen staring at a spreadsheet.

 Peter Dewar

SCHOOL JITTERS AND YOUNG LOVE

The final exam was in November. It was August and my results looked as gloomy as they had in term one. This year was my last in primary school and I was more confused than ever. I had failed both terms and my English and Maths marks hadn't shown any signs of improvement.

I dreaded English class. Everyone else could imagine a story and put it to paper. It made the teacher proud enough to give them feedback worth discussing among the other students. But he never spoke of mine. Returned papers always had 'vague' scribbled in the margins and queer scratched out sentences, making the pages appear as if someone had bled while trying to read the empty words. I found that the more I sank the less I cared, when I should have been panicking.

When my aunt came to pick me up for the holidays she was disappointed. I was frightened. I felt caged, with failure as my jailor. Was I worth all the fees my mum was paying? How come everyone else seemed to improve every term, but I didn't?

Before we boarded the mini-bus for home, I had felt the tell-tale signs of a migraine. Now the pot-holes and continuous jostling weren't helping my throbbing head. My aunt let me wallow in my dark world while she conversed with my cousin cheerfully. He always got A's and B's in

his studies, but all I ever felt was a blank feeling every time a test paper was put in front of me.

'Would you like something to eat before we change buses?' she asked, as we carried our bags across the road, avoiding the mob.

People selling bags of mangoes, tomatoes, chopped sugarcane, sliced pineapple, bananas and all manner of fried food, thrust their produce in front of me. I got on the bus and took my place by the window. I could smell the sweet aroma of bananas; different to that of freshly chopped pineapple, or the sugarcane and ripe yellow mangoes. For the first time I didn't find the faces, huddled by the van, a nuisance. I even wondered if I would become one of them. They looked desperate, and I could see misery in their eyes. I knew most cussed every night: for never doing something better in their life, something to escape this cheap living. Bleak were the days, from early mornings when one heard the crow of the rooster, to the late time that one tried to catch a few winks of sleep.

My cousin picked a banana from a bunch she had bought, along with a small pack of pineapples; the sellers took such care removing the skin that the slices were left oozing with temptation to take a bite.

'No, I'm not hungry,' I said in a flat tone.

My aunt was feasting on a juicy slice, while I tried to suppress the tears stinging the backs of my eyes. In this country, it was survival of the fittest. If you were bright and did well in school, your dreams could come true. But if you played around and made little effort in your studies, you would lead a different life altogether. I didn't know where I belonged. I had the chance to be someone who could come home proud of what they had accomplished, but I often sat in class and wondered why I never understood what the teacher was teaching—no matter how much effort I put in. I feared my mum's disappointment when the results came at the end of the year.

'Welcome home!' I heard my uncle say through the haze in my head. But all I could think was, what will he say when he sees my report book?

It was then that I decided I wanted to put in every effort during the holidays and try to make something come of it for when I finished class in four months' time. After three days spent worrying, and having hopeless pep-talks with myself every night, I turned to my uncle for help with my maths. I kept in mind that, with every question I got wrong, I would be pinched. In the haze of revision and daily chores for the first two weeks of the holidays, I had forgotten that my class teacher, Mr Patrick, was also my maths teacher. I hated him.

Since class—six, I had realised he ogled young girls. At nine-thirty, he would come to wish them goodnight before we went to our dormitories. He had taught French every Saturday night, but now advanced in years, he was to be my class teacher.

He still shaved all his hair, to hide the early balding in the middle of his small head. He had a chipped front tooth and spoke through his teeth, as if trying to appear knowledgeable. I despised him!

Upon returning to school early for tuition in mid-August, two months before we sat the final exam, we realised that our English teacher, Mr Richard, had been transferred to another school. He had married earlier that year and wanted to be with his family. His replacement was Miss Andrews, who would always tell us to think of the silliest thing we had ever done and then put it to paper, making sure to fill a page or two in half an hour.

My buried spirits rose with vigour. I wrote better and my new book had none of Mr Richard's scratching in it. Instead, it had an impressive mark at the bottom of every story.

Waking up from my study-crazed-cocoon in October, I realised that the 'love bug' had bitten most of the students in my year level. Small notes were delivered to class by girls, or boys, from the adjacent classrooms. There were whispers of what was in whose love letter and, after the matron had done her rounds, the dormitory was abuzz. The girls giggled all the time at suddenly feeling recognised. I felt like mourning their wasted time, with only four weeks until the final exam. I thought that if a boy liked you, he should have the guts to come up and tell you instead of putting down a bunch of sweet nothings on paper and then sending someone to dump it on your desk.

The Kenyan Certificate of Primary Education (K.C.P.E) examination was taken by all class-eight students throughout the country; it determined who went to which high school. Some students would go to prestigious schools while others would go to mixed day high schools, a disappointment to themselves and their parents.

A week spent at home, after the exams were over, I was already bored. My cousins would be arriving in a few days, but I had nothing to do in the meantime. I was listening to my favourite music, when somebody pulled the plug and the music died.

'I see you're done with school work for the year,' came a voice from behind me.

It was Raine: a friend of my cousin's whom I had had a minor crush on while in class-six. But, after going back to school I had come back somewhat cured. Or so I had thought. I busied myself hanging clothes before deciding to talk to him. I prepared my features and turned around, making sure to greet him with my usual cheeriness and not my fluttering heart.

'Isn't it the same with you?' I found myself asking, instead of uttering a simple 'hello'.

He leaned on the wall, his posture slanting. His left leg crossed over the right and his head tilted a little. He had on that damned smile I secretly liked, his brown eyes watching me with an odd familiarity. I narrowed my eyes and slowly looked him up and down. His smile just widened. The guy was too confident for his own good.

'Come on, you have to be at least a little excited to see me,' he cajoled, walking towards me to stand a hand length away.

'Sadly, I'm not,' I said, unaffected. 'I have things to do, and no time to worry about people who are alive and well.' I silently noted our familiar banter had begun. But I preferred to rake my nails on his ego rather than stroke it.

'I missed you,' he admitted with casual confidence.

I stared, unblinking, only hearing the flapping noise of the bed sheets drying outside my window. I tried to act unmoved, but I really wanted to squeal.

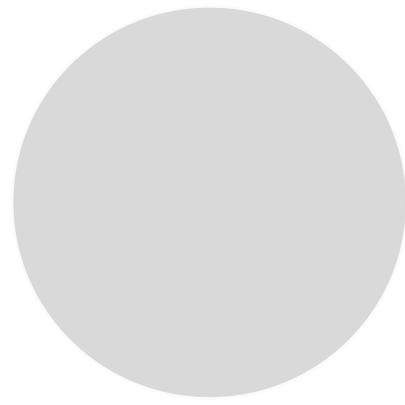
So I made a disinterested face and shrugged, 'I'm flattered,' I answered casually and continued hanging clothes, knowing he would be annoyed.

'What are you doing here? I thought you guys had some...' The rest of the sentence died on my lips as his touched mine lightly, then more firmly when I didn't protest.

Lifting his face, he looked into my eyes as if challenging me to say something negative. His thumb brushed along my bottom lip, slowly, and my tongue twitched to brush the tip but I refrained. All I could concentrate on was the feel of his lips on mine only seconds ago, and how different he looked suddenly. It felt like my body had been asleep and someone had woken me, a glowing light illuminated inside. I felt shocked, happy, flattered, confused and wonderful.

'Wh-what?' I stammered.

'I wanted to do that for a long time, but I guess it was worth the wait,' he said, quietly. His dark brown eyes danced mischievously. My eyes dropped to his lips for a second, then, thinking better of it, I looked away, feeling the tips of my ears burning when he smiled.



'Let's go. I have to be there in twenty minutes!' I heard my cousin shout from the door, breaking the dreamy atmosphere.

Winking, Raine walked away and my cousin and his friend appeared, chatting about some event they needed to prepare for. But all I kept thinking about was Raine kissing me. Running to the back of the house, I watched his back before he turned right onto the main road.

I spent the rest of the day thinking about that kiss, and how different it made me feel. I giggled now and then, wondering why Raine had never said anything before. What would I do when I saw him next? Was it a one-time thing? What did he have in mind? I let the questions run through my mind as I went to sleep.

Walking home from church four days later, I spotted him in a shop. I kept walking, making sure to act unaffected in case one of my cousins noticed the sudden change towards him. Although I was closer to one of them, I wasn't about to say a word regarding our 'rendezvous' the other day.

'Miss me?' Raine whispered in my right ear, his breath ticklish, making me squeak and blush.

'I'm not sure. I was busy,' I replied, hiding a smile that threatened to break free. I felt him sigh with mock frustration then his hand brushed mine as we walked.

'I couldn't get you out of my head. Your cousin, Nick, nearly found out the reason for my distraction but he's in the dark like everyone,' he said. It felt good to walk beside him. 'I want to kiss you senseless right now,' he whispered. I wanted him

to, but with such a protective audience around me I couldn't risk seeing bruises on his face.

He came to visit my family in the afternoons but spent more time with me than with them. I think he had suddenly found full-time male company overbearing, and I enjoyed the sweet time we spent together. Sometimes we would just lie on the grass listening to music, while his hand drew patterns all over me, when we weren't rolling on the grass kissing. We had found a place hidden by a terrace on the far side of the fence that surrounded the homestead and had decided to make it our hiding spot. No one knew. A thrill that made it even better.

If he stayed over, we would sneak out at night to look up at the sky and he'd whisper sweet nothings in my ear. It was a blissful time. I thought less about when we would all be packing up to go to high schools around the country. I wondered when my mum would arrive from overseas for the December holidays.

'You've got a card,' my aunt said, a week before Christmas.

Before opening it, I was happy to know she would be coming but, as I was reading the words at the bottom of the card saying 'and happy New Year', I wondered if she really was coming. She wouldn't say it if she was coming, would she? But I allowed myself to hope, even when the New Year came and went. For my cousins, who were already in high school, they were to leave in a few days but I still basked in the ambience of my calf love until the letter came.

'Melissa, I have a letter from your mum,' my aunt called one afternoon mid-January.

It was information about my departure from Kenya in ten days, to join my mum. I was to leave in the city in two days. I read it a few times and all I could see was Raine, saying 'goodbye' to me, not considering what he would think. I thought of different ways to break the news to him and still came up short with every one I tried.

'I'm leaving in two days,' I said through numb lips. 'I have to stay at aunt Lucy's while I get my vaccination shots and everything else done before I go to live with my mum.'

He stared at me, gaping. At last, he sighed. I had told him about my mum being overseas, but the news of me moving to another country was as shocking to him as it had been for me.

I told him what the letter said and how I'd thought it was a dream that I'd thought I wasn't leaving. I stayed in his arms, not complaining of how unfair it was and just let everything that I knew about him get imprinted into my mind.

'I'll miss you,' he said, quietly. I just snuggled into him and bit my lip, cursing the tears blurring my eyes.

Helping my cousins carry my bags, he tried and failed to hide his breaking heart. I think everyone bought his lame line about me having grown on him after being friends for such a long time.

'Well, this is it,' he said. 'Well, keep in touch, and I hope everything goes well.'

I remembered the kiss we shared the day before.

We had put all our unsaid words and hopes into it but, in the end, we had to let each other go.

Hugging me tightly, I tried not to cry and whispered, 'I love you,' before my cousin snatched me away, claiming it was his turn. As I waved goodbye to my young love cut short, I smiled at the fact that, at least, I had had the chance to love. If I was never to do so again, at least I would always remember. Raine.

 Antonina Mtanu



HOLIDAY IN MELBOURNE

My husband is in Darwin (32 °C). My son is in Florence (28 °C). I am in Melbourne (6 °C). I could sulk. It's in my repertoire. But no, I am going to be proactive and organise a holiday. I am going to lie on the beach at Port Douglas for five days and read *Middlemarch*—a project I have been planning since 1977.

But to be frank, I'm worried about my carbon footprint. It's looking decidedly sooty. If I jet to Queensland, I will generate 507 kg of carbon, and for what? When right on my doorstep is the capital of cool?

I will have a holiday in Melbourne.

What is needed before embarking on my megalithic activity schedule is a spot of relaxation. I decide on the Japanese Bath House in Collingwood. A sign on the door warns: 'Strictly non-sexual' and inside this is emphasized with another notice: 'No inappropriate behaviour.' So be warned.

After removing my shoes, I pad upstairs behind a Japanese lady who directs me to the changing rooms and explains the drill: I shower, wash my hair and scrub myself all over, before hopping into the communal bath which is set at about 38 °C. There is room for six women. Men have their own bath.

It's quite interesting being naked with other women. As a general rule I'm not a big advocate for nudism; most especially in the absence of water. I wouldn't be happy, for example going

to someone's apartment, taking my clothes off and sitting at the kitchen table with friends eating sausages and Bavarian mustard. Apparently that's what German nudists do in winter.

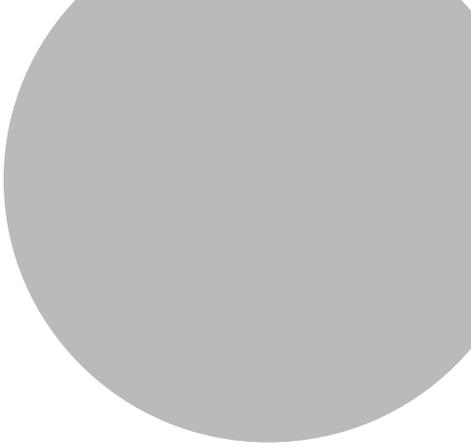
But there is something to be said for occupying your body when bulky coats and jumpers tend to alienate you from it and anyway, no one else looks that great. After an hour it's time for a shiatsu massage. The Japanese lady hands me a robe. 'Jus' undies. No blah,' she says.

An hour later, I stagger into the street ready for a gin and tonic. The holiday has begun!

Melbourne is blessed with hundreds of little bars. I have many favourites: Madame Brussels, Canary Club, Gingerboy Upstairs, Double Happiness, Gin Palace and Blue Diamond. But I head for a modest little doorway in Crossley Lane.

I step out of the wintry city and into a gentler time, when people had long lunches, drank copious glasses of red and reflected upon the vicissitudes of life. This is Von Haus. The smell of braised wild rabbit and chicken pot pie wafts to the entrance.

The waiter tells me that until the owners took possession of this building in 2008, it had been vacant since 1945. Upstairs, he says, they found chests full of Second World War clobber: soldiers' uniforms, pilots' helmets and a box of soldiers' shaving mirrors. The mirrors that now line one wall of the bar downstairs.



But the history of this place goes back much further. The building itself is Georgian—erected in 1849 and occupied by Mr Crossley, the butcher. Sometime after him came the painter Eugene Von Guerard. I climb the stairs into the gracious, airy room which is now the Sarah Scout gallery. This was once Von Guerard's studio. I imagine him painting his brooding landscapes here, while gazing down from the gorgeous latticed windows onto Bourke Street. I feel I could write a great Australian novel in this room.

Day two: I head off to Moonee Valley with my friend Suzie. We arrive in time for the Wonthaggi Workmen's Club Handicap Race. All I know about horse racing is: never back a two-year-old in the wet. I consult a man wearing a Leonard Teale hat. His name is Laurie. 'Never back a two-year-old—under any circumstances,' he grunts. His female companion, Lorraine, looks like Brynne Edelsten. She takes a swig of beer from her leopard-skin stubby holder. 'Always back a mare in form. Down in weight. Up in class,' she says.

I nod sagely. This is completely incomprehensible. I decide that my best bet is choosing horses with literary names. I back: Figure of Speech, Tell the Story and True Tales. They limp in, well back in the field. Why would anyone in their right mind associate anything literary with money?

Eric, an old bloke who has been 'coming to the gallops for forty odd years' smiles at me with soft, crinkly eyes and says, 'What you want is a good honest horse, darl.'

Suzie and I go to the stalls. We walk slowly past every horse staring deep into its eyes. To be frank, honesty is a tricky quality to pick in a horse.

'You want my two tips?' says a bloke leaning on the fence at the mounting yard.

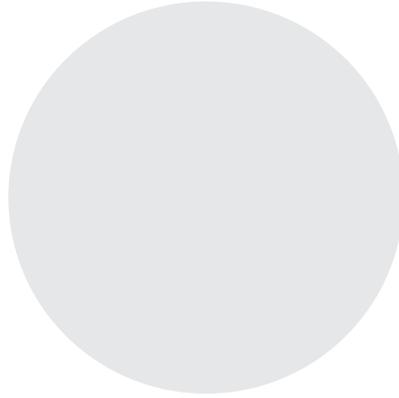
'I'm all ears.'

'Earn it and keep it,' he says. 'That's the winning double.'

That night I meet my girlfriends at MaHa. Oh, I love this restaurant. We have the soufra menu, which basically means you talk to your friends and gorgeous waiters take you on a culinary adventure through the Middle East. Dishes like: orange blossom laban balls, green pea and vanilla shourba (soup) with smoked eel falafel, or 12-hour lamb with green olive and pistachio tabouleh. Divine.

Next stop: Paris Cat Jazz Club. The moment I walk down the steps from Goldie Place into this basement room, I feel deliciously happy. This is one of the coolest places in Melbourne. Underground, late-night and smoky—without the smoke.

Tonight's performer is Noria Letts, a French jazz singer with a voice like cognac. Her quartet is really good; Steve Sedergreen on piano; bassist



Nick Haywood; drummer Allan Browne and oud virtuoso Phil Gunter. She sings in French and English, infusing amazing African rhythms into her arrangements. She wails, she purrs, she clicks. This girl is one out of the bag. This is the kind of place where you can have a drink and talk to the performers after the show, without feeling weird. I discover that yes, Noria is French, but her roots are North African. Her father bought her mother at a bride market in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. My heart swells. How cosmopolitan is this fabulous city?

I stay till stumps. Maybe it's 1am. 50 m from the Paris Cat, two policemen on horseback and a divvy van with flashing lights descend on a group of young Africans on Bourke Street. As a young black guy is being shoved into the back of the police van, an African girl in hot pants and a tank top is laughing hysterically. She can't stop, screeching with eerie, freaky laughter. I hail a cab.

I call my husband. He is north of Tennant Creek, at the Daly Waters Pub. He has just been entertained by an Aussie singer who tells jokes. Sample: 'What is the difference between a woman and a dog?' Answer: 'A dog doesn't complain when you make it ride in the back of the ute.'

'Did anyone laugh?' I ask.

'Everyone,' he says forlornly.

Note to self: never think you are speaking for the whole of Australia.

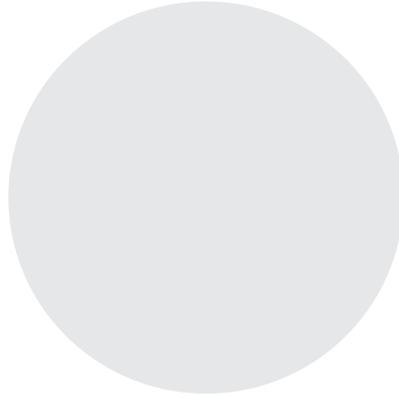
Day three: I try pole dancing, at Pole Divas in Prahran, where you can 'unleash your inhibitions, get fit and toned, spice up your love life and feel empowered'.

I look through the door. My classmates are trim young girls wearing shorts and high-heels. I am wearing runners. The receptionist lends me a pair of six inch stilettos. I totter into the space and clutch my pole. 'In pole,' says Phillipa our instructor, 'we don't walk, we strut.' Suppressing my anxiety about ankle injury, I start to strut. Hey, I'm strutting. 'Boobs forward,' Phillipa cajoles, 'the more booty the better.' I'm going with this, okay. We learn dirty squats, virgin rolls and booty grinds. Phillipa demonstrates the body roll as she snakes against her pole. We girls try our best. 'Head, boobs, cookie and booty.' Every sport has its own language. Then it's time to do a little sequence. This involves hoisting yourself up on the pole, sliding down and whirling around, then flicking your hair. By now I am flat exhausted and I cannot stop laughing. I am the most immature girl in the class.

Day four: I have an appointment with Andrew McConnell, owner and head chef at the glorious Cutler & Co. in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. I fancy myself as a good cook, but I have to know how he makes his violet ice cream, or the spanner crab, abalone and sweet corn soup. Andrew agrees to teach me.

I arrive at 10am and despite the fact that tonight he will be putting 600 plates on the tables of two restaurants (he also runs Cumulus), he is as relaxed as a man on holiday. We talk for hours. He is adorable.

In the kitchen, Andrew is forever tasting. One minute we are crunching on a French breakfast radish, the next savouring a teaspoon of chestnut ice-



cream. 'Ooh, try this,' he says. It is a pickled chilli dipping-sauce that he learnt to make in Shanghai.

Many years ago, I sat in Arthur Boyd's studio in the bush at Bundanon, watching him paint. Andrew has the same seriousness, commitment and obsession. This is what makes an artist.

Next evening, I invite 15 friends for dinner. I make Andrew's parmesan cheese puffs, followed by the spanner-crab soup. Then I offer a choice of slow-roasted pheasant or roast suckling-pig. Dessert is the violet ice-cream with ground purple-corn extract, which I have specially imported from Peru. The general manager of the Melbourne Theatre Company tells me I must give up play writing ... when the alarm rings. It is 5am, and I am going ballooning. There are 12 of us in the van that slides through the northern suburbs in the dark. We climb out at a park on Plenty Road near La Trobe University. The pre-dawn air is an icy -1°C . Dave, our pilot, releases a black helium balloon to test wind direction. I watch it soar into the sky, a black dot, and then it is gone.

We help to lay out the balloon on the frosty grass. Dave and his man-on-the-ground, Barry, heave the wicker basket onto its side and blast hot air into the canopy. Gradually it fills and rises. We tip the basket right way up and clamber in with five on each side. Dave is in a little compartment at one end talking to air traffic control.

Before we know it we are rising. Gently, like bread. Like a silent dream. Morning light is painting the sky with the palest pink, blue and lemony white. Below us, mist swirls around the hills. The moon is watching. Up, up we rise. 1000 feet.

I peer down. Little brown roofs and roads everywhere, with cars zipping this way and that, like the opening sequence of Dick Tracey. There's Bunnings! We are floating over Thornbury. I hear Mahler in my head.

We're at 1500 feet now, in a controlled airspace up with the helicopters and planes. We glide over Kew, Fairfield and Clifton Hill. Below us the Yarra snakes through the dark trees and lawns of Studley Park. I look down at miniature buildings, which all used to be something else: The Kew Asylum, Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital (where my Mum had diphtheria), and the former women's prison. The towers of Melbourne are gliding closer, shining like a magical city in the morning sun. The housing commission flats are children's blocks down there. I am feeling a creeping existential dismay. All this scurrying human activity. For what? I push away the thought.

All too soon we are descending towards Faulkner Park in South Yarra. We brush by a church spire, caress the treetops and brace ourselves for landing. Backs pushed into the padded basket and knees bent, we kiss ground with a silent thud. Euphoria breaks over us. We've become a gang. Heroes in a basket.

Back at the Hilton, we toast ourselves with champagne. This is a ballooning tradition. I look up and who should be coming towards me but my husband Michael. I have returned to earth and he is home from the desert. It is a morning of miracles.





HOME

Cirrus and silhouettes. Opaque outlines overlap.

Mother's eyes.

Souls on sidewalks. Blighted branches beckon.

Mother's hands.

Wallow and wail. Trembling tracks trail.

Mother's voice.

Salt waves and sea graves. Opaline ocean overlaps.

Mother's bones.

 *Danielle Higgins*

THE HUNT

A sound cracks the autumned hush

Flutter leaves, and gunpowder scent

Ash on the fingertips, barrel to your bridge:

you breathe

This is the day they told you they were leaving

And you took it in stride, hand to your heart

The strain twists the muscle:

you breathe

You leave footprints in the dirt

Bloodstained and dark

And disappear in the afternoon fog

 *Melanie Higgins*

A MEETING

I first noticed her as she sat in the hotel lobby against the tiled retaining wall that surrounded the plants. Silent tears cascaded down her cheeks. With her lank, blonde hair coming to rest upon her downcast shoulders, she emanated a grey aura. The air was balmy; this was Hawaii after all, where the sun always shone and the people surrounding her were busy mingling, talking and laughing. That is what you do on holiday, yet no one noticed her and she was oblivious to them.

Browsing in a shop to fill in time, I distractedly played with the merchandise of shirts on offer, shifting the coat hangers around in an ambivalent manner. I looked up and saw her and was immediately struck like a thunderbolt by her state of despair. I walked out of the shop and looked at her from another direction. Pacing around her at a distance like a lioness considering the right time to make my move. My emotions were tormented. I wanted to reach out. I could feel her precarious condition. I knew she wanted to harm herself, I felt it strongly. It was then a lanky, lugubrious male, sporting a Zapata moustache and a pair of jeans, loped towards the object of my study.

I didn't hear what was said, but his body language said enough. His attitude was of utter

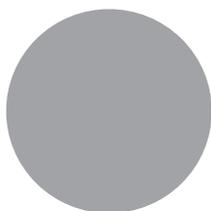
contempt, bending over her in a dominating manner, his hands at times splayed and moving animatedly as he addressed her. She looked defeated, devastated and dumped as her chin lay to rest on her chest.

I waited a couple of minutes after he had left and then approached her. She looked up at me with quiet resignation. I put my hand on her shoulder and told her that whatever had happened, she mattered. She was important and to not let anyone put her down.

'You are not worthless,' I told her.

I was extremely upset to see her like that and I wanted to cry. There was a flicker of surprise or shock on her face. But the soundless tears were infinite; they just kept rolling down her ashen, washed-out cheeks. There was a sense of defeat about her that I wanted to eradicate, a destructive spirit I wanted to exorcise.

I walked away and watched her from afar for some time. I could not help myself and had to approach her again. I hoped she would not find me vexatious. I reiterated my previous words of praise. Again, I told her what a worthy person she was and that I could see she was stirring out of her nihilistic reverie. Had I fertilised a spark of self-preservation? I hoped so. If suicide was on her mind, I hoped that thought was now dissipating.



I was deep in conversation with other travellers seated in the lobby when I felt a presence a little distance to my right. It came closer and I looked up. It was the woman who had been seated by the tiled retaining wall, the object of my deep concern. She wanted to thank me for all my help. It was the first time I heard her voice and the accent of an American. I was shocked; her appearance had undergone a metamorphosis of sorts. No longer did I behold someone with an ashen countenance. Her long hair was no longer lank. It had taken on new life, slightly wavy and bouncing around her shoulders. Her skin was bright and clear. Her eyes sparkled. In fact, her whole demeanour had taken on a phoenix-like quality. What was this change? Was it metempsychosis? The resurrection may have been due to her simply visiting the ladies room and re-applying makeup and brushing her hair. I didn't know. All I knew was that standing before me was a completely different individual, a new existence, a confident being who had found herself.

I stood up abruptly and embraced her. I was euphoric with joy, relief and overwhelmed for I felt she would no longer feel like harming herself. She lightly embraced me in return and it was then that she made the clichéd statement of belief, a

mid-Western American Bible paradigm: 'You were sent by God. I'm fine now and will go on.'

No, not really, it was just my Celtic fey working overtime. My gut had prompted me to approach her. I was definitely not religious or an extravert. In fact, I was the complete antithesis of being assertive when it came to approaching strangers, especially in a foreign country.

She told me Hawaii was a beautiful place and that her episode would not spoil the image she had. She would return again someday.

As she stepped into the lift, we said goodbye and I wished her good luck. It was only when the lift doors closed that it struck me: I did not know her name. In fact, we had never even introduced ourselves to one another. It had not been important at the time.

 *Janet Savvides*

YOU

I see you clearly

like an ocean spanning years instead of kilometres

so far and so close

reflecting everything i want in life

ambitions and fears

hopes and dreams

and a life full of adventure that

leads anywhere but here

Whenever the sun falls

i watch you transform into a different

person wild and crazy

smiling and dancing and laughing

like tonight is your last

lights and cameras capture every

move you make and you feel free

morning dawns on you

opening weary eyes and thinking about your day

and you frown

life isn't going to plan and you feel like a waste

but each day passing is another step

closer to the person you see clearly

like an ocean spanning years instead of

kilometres so far but just a little bit closer.

 *Chantelle Langanke*

MOVING, MOVING, MOVING

My husband, Mike, has a passion for transforming run-down, old dwellings into stylish and roomy new residences. He sees the potential of brick-and-mortar on an empty block of land. But his enthusiasm isn't contained within our fence; it readily spills over onto other people's properties.

For his dreams to materialise, we've befriended the banks, the agents, the builders, and learnt to let go of the newborn houses as soon as an owner wants to adopt it. We often have to stay in temporary accommodations until the next house is ready for moving in.

By the third move, I started to realize that true passion doesn't stop after one or two flings; it really is an ongoing affair.

Mike continues to find new locations for us to set up home, but, despite our best attempt to diversify, one area possesses some kind of a spell that's too strong to break. So far, we've dragged our humble belongings across one particular western suburb 15 times during the last 18 years. If an award for municipal loyalty exists, we should be a successful contender.

'What's the best way to move and save money?' asks my friend, who expects me to have become an expert in relocation.

Of course, having a group of professional packers and removalists for a day or two is a much-desired luxury, but hardly affordable at times. The common practice among the frugal people, like me, who refuse to part with their hard-earned money lightly, is to do all the packing and unpacking oneself and let

the trucking company deal with the transport. This practice needs time, which is hardly available for a mum with two young kids, a job and a household to run.

In the beginning, I attempted to do some sort of de-cluttering before packing. When it dawned on me that I would never pass that initial stage to arrive at the actual task of packing, I changed my tactic into a 'box-them-all' motto. As the final and panicking stage approached, when I wished I were born with an extra pair of hands and two heads, I willingly passed the buck on to whoever—naïve or brave enough—offered to help.

After so many moves, the pool of good-will friends is exhausted and I'm back to being on my own at all stages of packing. I chance upon some students looking for odd jobs. Now I no longer need to start boxing two months ahead; the disruption in the house is kept to a minimum.

Indeed, I was so efficient that at last move we ended up in the new dwelling with all boxes stacked neat and tidy, without anywhere to store things in, for two weeks because the kitchen and all the cabinets were three weeks behind schedule.

There's no way for an easy move, despite how many times you do it—like a seasoned performer who's still affected by nervousness before each show. I usually unpack boxes and allocate things to their rightful positions in the new house; that's how I know where to retrieve them later. I take time in this process to let my crammed brain absorb the new information. As a result, the new home stays chaotic for longer.



During our 14th move, we swapped roles. Mike stationed himself at the new property and efficiently opened every incoming box and stowed the contents neatly inside the new rows of cabinets. After the truck left, Mike grinned with triumph at his successful arrangement. Our early visitors expressed wonder at this neatness; no evidence of the empty shell that'd just been filled a few hours ago.

But I swore to never let that happen again. For months after the move, I was forced to play treasure hunt every day. Mike had stacked them together just for space efficiency and by order of arrival.

Recently, some old boxes made their way back to me from my parents' garage after four years of exile. My poor parents must have been waiting all that time for me to clear the load of un-named stuff that was taking up valuable room in their small garage. Three of the boxes contain miscellaneous junk that should have been in the tip four years ago (the result of my 'box-them-all' policy). The other three, with unclassifiable content, bring about some nostalgic moments. But my finding them again is as exciting as meeting old schoolmates; it's good to know they still exist but, really, I had forgotten about their existence a long time ago.

This realisation starts me on a longer journey of gradual emotional detachment. If I move tomorrow, I will still need a huge truck to cart off all the significant and trivial bits and pieces of a typical family, but I also know they don't define my happiness any more.

Sometimes I have the same dream again. In my dream I'm sleeping on a bed, mentally trying to work out my location. Inside the darkness of eyes closely shut, I casually do a directional check.

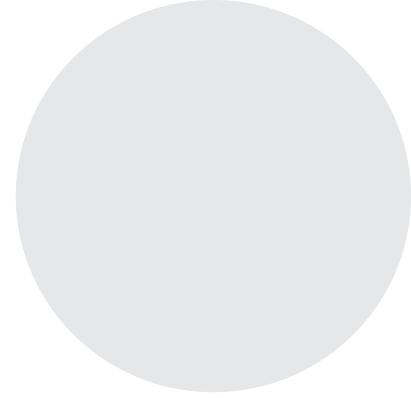
'Yeah, the door is on my right, the bed is alongside the left wall.'

But that doesn't sound right. 'Hang on, that's on Mareana Street. Here the window is on the right wall, so the door is to my left.'

'But no, that was on Nayook Lane. This room has a triangle shape so the door is at the end of the bed, but why...'

The uncertainty interferes with my sleep so much that the only answer is to force open my reluctant eyelids to confirm it once and for all. And that's how the dream often ends.

After the last move one late night, I heard noises from my son's bedroom; thinking he must be sleepwalking again, I waited for him to come into



my room. A moment passed and still no sight of him. A trickling sound alerted me to something highly unusual. I rushed out of my room in time to catch him standing in the dim hallway, facing the wall outside his bedroom. Head bent, eyes still closed sleepily.

Approaching him, I suddenly realized with horror the floor was wet. My boy was emptying his bladder onto the creamy white wall and the matching architrave underneath. It seemed he was functioning in the layout and room position of the previous dwelling. I realised then that I wasn't the only one disorientated by a new location.

My friends say if I continue to move at this rate, I should be living out of the suitcases only—which I do, in a manner of speaking—when staying in rental accommodation. But once in a house of my own 'or bank-owned, to be precise' I have an urge to unpack all necessary boxes to have things around, displayed and ready to be used in a kind of temporary order. And in that spirit, 12 months of uninterrupted settlement feels truly like a long time.

One friend, who knows a little about my movement, asks, 'So when are you moving again?'

'Not yet. This time, I plan to be here for a long time.'

'How long is a long time?'

'Well, at least two or three more years.'

'Ha, ha, ha, your long time is two or three years!'

And he has a hilarious time digesting my notion of time.

I'm getting ready to move again; another new place is waiting for me to set up home. Spring is only around the corner. I start counting the tiny white blossoms perching on the bare branches in the backyard. Soon, the large window of the living area will be ornate with a carpet of pure white petals, dancing in the wind and shining under the sun. I know I will miss this sight the most. This house had looked so ordinary when I first moved in, but it yielded many surprises: this beautifully blossoming plum tree in the backyard, a giant elm shading the decking and the rows of fragrant roses along the front fence, and recently, a gang of possums congregating under the roof. But that's another kind of surprise altogether.

I still haven't mastered the lesson in emotional detachment yet, but I'm heading there. In the spirit of a true gypsy, I'm learning to let go of what I can't keep and to look forward to some worthy discovery at my next home.

A NOTE ON THE ACTORS

Ben Brimly, playing Major Jones, is delighted to be back with the Weasel Players. More than delighted. Thrilled, moaning, mooing, babbling. There is a spreading stain on his pantaloons.

Elsbeth Moomaw, who first appeared in *The Sun* is our very bestest friend when she was two years old, has seen her career crater ever since. She is in this production because she is the most supple, pliable and flexible human being the director has ever seen. She can pick a nickel off the floor with her tongue while sitting in a chair. Wouldn't you hire such an actress, and hope for joy beyond your wildest dreams? Well? Thought so.

Edwin Edwards, fresh from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where he got lost in the suburbs and ended up working in a chop shop, would like to thank his second wife, Bunni, and his children by his first wife, Krstl, for their support and good cheer during this production. He hopes to someday find a vowel for Krstl.

Betty Furness, of the famous volleyball Furnesses, has been in so many television productions she has lost count. She joins the Weasel Players to get some 'fecking theater credit', which she has fecking well been told fifty fecking times that she needs, although she sees no particular need for an extraordinary actress to have to memorize inane

lines and perform night after night in a tight-fitting pumpkin suit when she could fecking well do the usual forty-fecking-second clips before a fecking camera, that's why God invented fecking cameras, so people didn't have to endure this sort of prissy fecking torture show that they call 'theatre', with a fecking swishy British emphasis on the fecking misspelling of a perfectly good word.

The British Empire is dead, for feck's sake.

A. Bliss Tokay used to be a horse. She is grateful for major medical insurance.

Plum Tuckered is probably best known for his legendary turn as Ophelia in the Keokuk Players' version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Not Actually Dead But In Some Sort of Addled Stupor After Three Days of Watching Ernest Borgnine Movies*, which led to a legal brouhaha. Brouhaha, we observe, is a cool word. Like hullabaloo. Isn't that a cool word? Any word that ends with a sprinting parade of vowels or repeated happy phonemes like that is pretty cool. This is why Hawaii is the center of the universe.

Matthew Ridgeway is, yes, for chrissake, aware that there was a more famous Matthew Ridgeway, it's not like he was never told that he is in no way as cool as the famous General Ridgeway, Jesus, how many times can a man be told he is a mere lap poodle compared to his heroic and

stern-visaged namesake, who may have saved civilization as we know it? Is that a little undue pressure on an artist or what? No wonder he tried to marry his breakfast cereal in Massachusetts.

Elmont C. Phoresus has been.

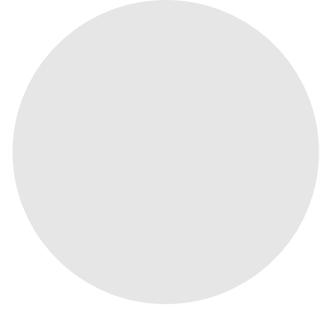
Sophia Coppola, who is not the other Sophia Coppola who won an award for the slowest movie ever made on this sweet earth, my God, how a movie that slowly pans over the pitted moonscape of Bill Murray's face for two hours could win an award is beyond me. What kind of stoner epic is that, a six-time Hammy Award winner, which has been worth about eleven cents in her career, she says, snarling like a mink in heat.

Gary Hawthorne Bubble, stage manager for this production, has worked for many years behind the scenes, and has seen goats coupling, a man with a necklace of pigeon feet, a woman wearing cellophane sitting in the orchestra pit (seat 14A, for those of you scoring at home), and an all-children-aged-eight production of the Scottish Play, which featured a child saying, no shit, 'out, out damned spit', which made Gary laugh so hard he, no kidding, stained his grunts.

Brian Doyle is the Director. He would go at tiresome length into the litany of his tumultuous career in the theater (note spelling, the British Empire

is dead for heaven's sakes) but we just finished rehearsal for the day and Elsbeth Moomaw is, my God, wearing that pumpkin suit. O my God, O help me Jesus. There are times when you must forge ahead creatively, or nothing will ever be accomplished, and I would very much like to forge Miss Moomaw creatively. On with the show!

 *Brian Doyle*



THREE POEMS

The deity as thunder god

[Note: On June 14th 2010 a gigantic stature of Jesus (the so-called 'Touchdown Jesus') was destroyed in a fire caused by a lightning strike.]

Gigantic fibreglass Jesus

Ohio Jesus

bursts into flames. Totally

immolated, quite spectacular

global coverage.

I'm in Shanghai

watching a gigantic fibreglass Jesus

Ohio Jesus

burst into flames.

Its owners

look to God

'What is he saying?'

Its owners

speak with the insurance company

who describe the lightning

which caused

a gigantic, fibreglass Jesus

Ohio Jesus

to burst into flames

as

"An act of God."

A poem is a useless thing

A poem is a fragile thing

like a life—so ephemeral, so moved

by the random laws of the cosmos

the elements, gravity ...

A poem is a useless thing,

like a wasted life—all

its meaning in the living, the rending, the

interpreting. Begins and ends

with the blinkers of the observer.

A poem is but a small fragment

of a larger thing, obscured in the making

(like tonight's mountain moon)

by clouds and drizzle.

Writing a poem may seem pointless

Who will read it? Who will understand it?

It disperses to the elements

even in the writing

even in the sounding

We do it regardless—

a gesture in search of a purpose.

The glacier serpent

[Written at the Fox and Franz Josef glaciers,
South Island of New Zealand, April 2011]

Cold creature, wending the full
hulk of mountain.

Its tail in the snowy peaks—misted,
clouded over today—
then the monster curves
(green-grey sliver of ice-beast)
down-hill
to the subalpine zone
to the splinter-crunch creation
of a fern-clad glacial valley.

Its mouth at the terminus
(an ice cave and a glacial river)
spews itself where the ice
turns dirty and tunnelled
grey green blue.
A place of collapse,
a shale plain, flat and grey,

The water is pure and mineral rich
churns at the valley floor.
Approaching the Glacier Serpent
the air chills step by step
exposed hands feel suddenly numb and
rasping lungs labour to breathe.

In awe of this arctic sample!
I half expect a chained Princess,
but only the ice melt today
(so much water from such a static beast).

The monster, whatever its primordial agenda,
rests, and a soft rain falls.

 *Iain Irvine Hobson*

A NEW HOME

‘My parents were drawn to the idea that there was space and opportunity in Australia. For the mere sum of £10, you could sail your entire family out to Australia, so that’s what my father chose to do’—Hugh Jackman.

Australia—a vast land of many opportunities. Those were the words my father used to describe the country I now call my second home. I still remember my feelings when he made the announcement. A new country, new people, and new tradition! Life in a foreign country will be hard, was the thought that went through my head. I thought about my friends, our beautiful house and a lot of people I was going to leave behind. This was going to be a new chapter in my life.

After fourteen years of living in Qatar, a small land-locked country in the Middle East, I moved to an environment completely alien to me. I, along with my parents and younger siblings, embraced Melbourne, our second home.

It was a struggle at first. No one said moving to a new country was easy. I was born in Sri Lanka but lived in Qatar for most of my life. In a new country, one of the main challenges new migrants face are significant differences such as communication and language.

I was not fluent in English, and it was even harder to understand the Australian accent. I would be mocked or laughed at in class because I answered a question with a funny accent or because I failed to understand a simple sentence. Sometimes the teacher would get annoyed because I was slow to pick up on things, and this amused the rest of the class. I also found it hard to make friends. The other kids would give me strange looks, so to escape them, I preferred to sit alone. Most kids roamed around in groups and would laugh and walk around ignoring me, but I was part of no such group. I went to school, did my work and went home.

Religion was another issue. I came from a Muslim country. I don’t follow strict Islamic practices such as wearing a Hijab (the head covering worn by Muslim women around the globe) but I was a firm believer in Allah (the Arabic word for God). In Qatar, we were surrounded by mosques and we could hear the Athan (call to prayer) from all of them. The schools there would have breaks for prayer time.

But it was different here. The breaks did not accommodate prayer times. Ramadan, our Holy Month of Fasting, was also different here. We had to wake up early in the morning to eat a special meal and perform a prayer and then go to bed. We would then not eat or drink until sunset.

In Qatar the typical work day during Ramadan would start at around 10am and finish around 2pm to allow the remainder of the day for families to break the fast. Here, school started at 9am and finished at 3.30pm. By the time I went home, I was exhausted due to lack of sleep and would sometimes have to miss out on fasts.

The weather in Melbourne was confusing to me as well. Back in Qatar we had only summer and winter. Here there were four seasons: summer, autumn, winter and spring. When I thought it was going to rain, it would be a hot day and vice versa. I found it amusing that summer is during December to February, so Christmas here is unlike it is in other countries.

Gradually, I became a lot more accustomed to the Australian way of life. The solution was to be flexible while getting used to the new place. It was essential to make a compromise by not forgetting who I was and what my traditions and customs were, and to also make an effort to be a part of the new environment. I met a lot of other people who migrated from other countries and took time to adjust after moving here. It was essential to have a support group who I could talk to and share my experiences with. I also had the support of school counsellors who paired me

with kids from my country, so I was comfortable interacting. This helped me enjoy my school life.

I felt my English improve as I began to make small talk with neighbours and friendly strangers. I took an interest in learning more about the Australian lifestyle, about the food, the many festivals, fashion and sports. I now have many friends and am a proud Australian citizen. I enjoy playing tennis and cheer for the Australian Cricket team when watching them play.

We enjoy our Sunday afternoon barbeques or 'barbies' as they are often called every two weeks with our family and friends. I also remember to take an umbrella or coat and check the forecast before stepping out of the house to avoid any nasty surprises by Mother Nature. After living in this beautiful country for six years, Qatar has become nothing but a distant memory.

 *Amila Hussain*

MY ENDURING LOVE AFFAIR WITH WRITING

Writing has taught me humility. I have loved this, although sometimes it has been a painful kind of love.

I am proud of my humility. Last year, a colleague arrived at work brandishing a copy of one of my books that he'd found on the hard rubbish collection in his street. I had seldom seen him so happy and I wanted to think that his joy was the result of having found something so precious going so cheap. Indeed, the book was called *Things You Get For Free*, so who was I to complain? Or maybe his happiness was caused by the realisation that he was a superior person to his neighbours—people so foolish they imagined they could live without such a fine book. More likely, he just enjoyed seeing me rock for a moment on the pedestal from which I am prone to pontificate.

Humility is as vital to a writer as ink or toner, or, for a few sturdy holdouts, their typewriter ribbon. Once upon a time, I was seated in a pleasant café with a woman who had generously just agreed to become my wife. Someone at the next table was reading an article of mine, which had appeared in the paper that very day. It was either a light-hearted piece about God or something serious about ice-cream, I can't recall which.

I was on the point of digging Jenny in the ribs to bring my fame to her attention, ready to explain that this person could only read my words, whereas Jenny would have the live interactive version with her for the rest of her days. At that point, the stranger tore out the page that carried my deathless prose and used it to soak up the coffee that a careless waiter had slopped onto his saucer.

He then screwed me up, a sodden mess, and tossed me in the bin. Jenny reassured me that there were many other copies of the paper in circulation and other readers would be putting me to more dignified purpose, such as to start a cosy fire. Given the choice between producing hard rubbish and soft rubbish, I would prefer hard. But I would rather write things that came from hard places and had found their way to soft landings. I would rather be foolish about God than serious about ice-cream.

Writers can learn a lot by finding their books in op-shops. The Salvos in North Melbourne have a special shelf called the 'Dan Brown Graveyard' which deals with the many copies of *The Da Vinci Code* that get donated. Most op shops in Australia have half a dozen copies, sometimes more. *The Da Vinci Code* is the fondue set of our time and Dan Brown is the new beige. It is no shame, therefore, to find a single copy of one's own book amongst such a crowd. That is, until one realises that Dan Brown is available in such abundance because he sold so many in the first place.

I saw a copy of my book, *Bypass*, a story about riding a push bike from Sydney to Melbourne, for \$2.99 in Savers. I thought this was pretty good and my shares were holding up better than Billabong's. But then I noticed that Lance Armstrong, another famous cyclist, had his book about a bike, aptly titled *It's Not About The Bike*, beside me. He was going for \$3.99. I was enraged. My book had been written without the aid of drugs. That is because writing is a drug all on its own. It should carry warnings: writing creates exhilarating highs, obsessive lows and anxious in-betweens. I thought

I was worth more than 75% of Armstrong. I am the seven-time winner of Yarraville's Tour de Francis Street, an event I organise at an undisclosed time each year, to prevent other entrants turning up.

For the past few years, *Bypass: The Story Of A Road*, has been a text on the VCE English list. This has been wonderful. It has brought me the thing that most writers crave, namely young readers, and also paid for a new fence at the front of our house. I thought we'd need this to keep the crowds of admiring fans at a safe distance. The palings are falling off the fence and the fans are yet to arrive. But each year, shortly before the VCE exams, I tend to get a lot of emails along the lines of: 'what are the three main themes of your book?' and, 'what are the private things about yourself that are too intimate to reveal in writing?' I usually send a reply on the day after the big exam asking if they would still like a response. They never do.

One time, I wandered into a store in the city which specialises in VCE resources and found a set of notes someone had compiled about *Bypass*. 'Oh, *Bypass*,' the shopkeeper said, with a shudder. 'I believe *Bypass* is a really weird book. I think young people should be reading decent stuff, not that kind of thing.' This is why I write. I like to annoy that kind of person. My ego is also flattered by the thought of VCE students sitting in sepulchral silence as they grapple with exam questions such as 'to what extent is McGirr an explorer?' or, 'do you agree that it is McGirr's enthusiasm and humour that make this story so interesting?' or, 'How is

McGirr's own character revealed in *Bypass*?' I am not sure I could answer these questions myself.

The advice is often given to aspiring writers that they should write about what they know. I go along with this to a limited extent. I think we should write at the very edge of what we know, pushing from the familiar into the unfamiliar, stumbling into areas where we are unsure if we will find words for what needs to be said. The main thing we need in our pencil case is honesty, the blood brother of humility. I am passionate about words that don't come easy, the ones that build real bridges between human beings, rather than bury them under clichés and slogans and messages of 140 characters. I love finding a shape for things that are shapeless or misshapen. I love the writer's faithful marriage to reality. Reality is the opposite of ego.

Some years ago a woman wrote to me to say that she had read one of my books to her father as he was dying and that it had brought him peace and surrender and a few laughs in his final days. She was grateful. So was I. That is why I love writing. I love the unexpected places an enduring relationship can take you.

 Michael McGirr

ON DEATH

On Death 1

Polish hymns rise
and float around us
like a soft winter blanket
Sweet rhythms of comfort
at the hour of our
most harrowing goodbyes
Umbilical cords ---
severed in this lifetime

On Death 2

A calm stoic grief pervades the
hallow arches of the church
Holy water is sprinkled,
incense sways and the smell
of my childhood
permeates my memory
The coffin lifts
and I remember
my knees buckling
and the guttural noise
that emerged from me at 29
--- Motherless daughter now

On Death 3

They told me
when I followed your coffin
down the aisle
face etched with grief
My father hesitated,
just for a moment,
then ran after me
The only time he
openly displayed his affection for me

On Death 4

The middle of the night call
an agent of a grief
that felt like it
was more than I could bear at times

My first experience
of personal death
vivacious, glamorous, mercurial wit
permanently expunged
The doors at Tullamarine open
all the eager faces bore
witness to the woman
holding a bear, releasing the words
'Mummy...'

On Death 6

I remember
combing your hair
loving the silky strands
gliding through my fingers
I remember bringing
you flowers on Saturday mornings
after my checkout shift
or French éclairs from Le Croissant
I remember being 'Kate your mate'
and the three-hand-squeezies
meaning 'I love you'
that I now share with my daughter
And, I remember my hand
shooting three feet through the air
the last time I saw you,
at your body viewing,
as I gave your rock-hard hand three squeezies

On Death 7

I distinctly remember
surfing a wave
on the third anniversary of your death
knowing for the first time I was going to be OK
And now, eighteen years later
how is it that I rarely give you a thought?
And most years forget the anniversary of your death?



THE GIFT OF SADNESS

I awoke today, feeling sad. Usually, I can rid myself of these cares with a good, long walk. Send me out onto a dirt road with a sack of sorrow for four or five hours, throw in a few hill climbs, some bracing winds from the south and a good dose of solitude, and I'll return red-cheeked and grinning, the sack empty of all save a few crumbs of woe—the ones that humanise and soften.

Since Easter, I've walked miles under skies of all hues, and I've swum in Port Philip Bay on a day designed to dazzle. I have talked with those I trust, worked with words I love and listened to music that usually heals. I've given myself a solid talking-to and I've counted my blessings, which took longer than all the other activities put together.

Yet I still feel sad.

There's no reason for this sorrow. Yes, on Good Friday I was reminded, as always, of death and suffering. In Melbourne, it was a grey, mournful day, and I decided my melancholy was brought on by a convergence of scripture and weather, and it would pass on Easter Sunday in the uplift of resurrection and chocolate eggs.

It didn't.

Instead, I noted the fall of leaves, the fade of light and the chill of evening. I focused on media coverage of murders and bombings, and I fixated on the abuse of children, feeling my stomach turn, yet unable to avert my eyes.

I don't enjoy melancholy, and I've no taste for gloom. When sadness does creep up on me, I feel ashamed. How dare I be sad when

I get to do something I love, when my body is healthy and I live in a wealthy democracy? Mine is a blessed and sunny existence, and my persona is predicated on optimism. I was once described as 'relentlessly happy'. I'm blonde, for heaven's sake! I have no right to feel this way.

And yet, something is shifting.

I weep at inexplicable moments—seeing the silhouette of a dog sprinting along a ridge against the blaze of sunrise; watching a dreadlocked mother kiss her daughter's nose as they sit unmoving on a park swing; noticing how the cry of a gull and the trail of a jetstream unite overhead; hearing my father's familiar two-note 'hello' down the phone.

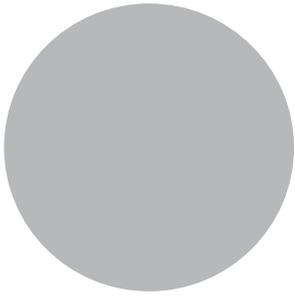
What is the point of all these tears, I ask myself. There must be a reason, or else they're grotesque. Something useful must emerge, or this sadness is simply indulgence.

No answer comes.

It feels as though my internal support structures can break open, crack to form fault lines, and if they do, there will undoubtedly be change. Nothing will be as before, if that is what is required by this sadness, and I know from previous experience that, ultimately, it will be to the good.

In the meantime, there is discomfort, uncertainty and fear, and there is the challenge of how to live with that trinity.

Like many, I've become skilled at covering anything that looks like vulnerability. Heaven forbid others should know I'm afraid, or not coping as well as I might if I were the person I pretend to be.



I pride myself on my ability to put on a happy face. When I teach, I often ask people to force their facial muscles into a smile and observe what happens. There's always a change. Knowing this, I slap on my grin like war paint and forge into the days.

Except now, I just can't get away with it.

The smile makes my face ache.

I want to understand this non-specific sadness, to treat it and move it along, so that the next thing, the yet-to-be-born thing, can emerge. I am impatient, a child of the quick-fix, name-it-and-medicate-it culture in which we live. I want to be doing and creating, because there is so much to cram into that space we take for granted, the one between first inhale and final exhale. I have had more than a passing acquaintance with death, and it has left me with an imperative wish to fill every heartbeat.

And besides, I want to be that sunny person again. This sad sack is no fun at all.

I try the way of stillness. I sit in the red chair in the corner of my office, but I hear the clock ticking and I squirm. I don't want to work for the lesson of this sadness, much less wait for it. I want answers right now, wrapped in crisp brown paper and tied with a shiny crimson ribbon.

It's strange. I've never felt this lumbering sadness in the presence of death.

I remember the marvel of brushing my mother's hair when she was dying—an intimacy we had not shared since my childhood—and the fragility of her bones as I massaged favourite creams into her chapped skin. My only thought was to ease her way.

I think of the constructed family that came together to nurse a friend who was dying of AIDS. One night, faced with his anguish at constantly baring his frail body for treatment, we all shed our trousers in solidarity with him. We were in despair, but determined to reduce the status of our healthy bodies in the face of his helplessness. He died with courage and hilarity, and we who nursed him were remade by the experience.

Death is clear. It can chew us up and spit us out, but if we are heartbroken we know why, and it leaves us with the concrete, comprehensible emotion that is grief. No matter how agonising it is, we recognise it for what it is, and for why.

Death.

We turn our eyes away from it, inclining toward stories of birth and beginnings. We prefer the Sunday resurrection to the Friday crucifixion.

And yet, death is honest. It has never lied to us about its intent or its inevitability. It will come. It will claim us. So why look away from the one certainty of our lives?



I'm grateful to death, and to my varied experiences of it. It gives me a scale for comparison, so I can tell myself, as I examine this dull weight in my chest, that yes, it is sadness and must be given its due, but it will not be the end of me, or of someone I love. This is not the black dog of depression, which has savaged some I've loved before taking them to meet with death.

No, this is sadness. It's trying to offer me something, but like a spoiled child demanding more, I want my world to look like it did before. I don't want the upheaval, or change, that sadness portends.

But change, like death, is inevitable, and there are endings that don't involve the cessation of heartbeats. This sadness may foreshadow the conclusion of a way of seeing or being, of a construct that has not served, or a belief that must be let go. It may mean the breaking of a pattern or the shedding of a layer. It may mean the removal of a veil, so the world can be seen more clearly.

So for now, I'll try to treat this sadness as a kind of death, and then maybe I'll know better how to deal with it. I will make space for it. I won't force it to hike or take it out in wild weather. Instead, I will acknowledge it, observe it and be patient with it. I will wait for it to talk to me, observing the silence it demands. I will allow it to be a

mystery until it's ready to be known. Whatever is contained in this sadness, I must trust that it will decide the time and place to give me its gift.

For a gift is what it will surely be, eventually.
Whether I want it or not.

And while I'm sitting here waiting, maybe I will let the muscles of my face relax, and be brave enough to tell the world that I'm not entirely chipper. Maybe I'll experiment with that kind of courage, the courage to be true.

Vulnerable.
Human.

 *Ailsa Piper*



SHADOWS IN THE LIGHT

The splashing of water hitting tiles makes you tense. For a few minutes after the crunching of tyres on gravel has faded away, you dare to think you are alone for the day. But he's here, you should have realised when the dog wasn't under your bed, and now you'll need to spend the day out of sight. He made you invisible, but you have to keep it that way. You wait for a moment, needing confirmation that it's safe to move. Bang! The shower door slamming shut has the effect of a starter's pistol. You pull on the nearest pair of shorts and a green tee-shirt and grab your backpack, throw in your book, video games and headphones. Your sunglasses aren't beside your bed so they must already be up there.

When you reach the doorway, you stop and listen again—just to be sure. He can't know you're here or you won't be able to escape. You try to control your unsteady breathing and wipe the thin film of sweat from your top lip. But the shower is still running, so it is safe to continue.

You step lightly through the house, going the long way around to avoid his room and reach the kitchen without making a sound. He's already eaten, so you don't need to worry about opening the pantry doors. You fill your backpack with chips and biscuits—not daring to reach for the cutlery to make a sandwich—and grab your drink bottle from the fridge. With everything you need for the day in your backpack, you drag the zip around tooth by tooth until it is closed. You are ready. The front door is already open. There is only the screen door to get through.

The shower is still splashing behind you, though he must be nearly done. You're nearly at the door when the cat sees you from across the room. You keep moving so that she might go back to sleep, but she's already up and stretching. Before you can stop her, she is purring and meowing loudly as she circles your legs. You pick her up to keep her quiet. The water is still splattering loudly.

She wriggles free as you start to feel the soft breeze from outside. You're on your own again. You pause before you continue. Something doesn't feel right, but you can't place what it is. There's no time to linger.

You lower the door handle with practiced hands, only pulling the door towards you when you're sure the latch is completely free. You open the door wide so that your backpack doesn't snag when you slip through, then pull it back, slowly, controlled. When it is within the frame you let up on the handle. It is almost closed when the shower door is thrown open. You jump and lose your grip on the handle, realising that you never heard the water stop. The screen door makes a clang as it bounces into the frame, but the sound is masked by the thuds coming from the bathroom.

You can't be sure if he heard you or not, so you don't stick around to find out. As you cross the splintered wooden boards you brace yourself before you cross the line from shade to sun.

It's like running into a wall as you enter the heat, but, if nothing else, it makes you go faster so that you can escape the cruel, burning stones



that stick to your feet. The tree is in front of you. Your tree. With its strong branches and thick leaves that protect from unfriendly eyes, it is your safe haven. As your feet feel like they're melting and the thumps continue behind you, you know you need to get to the tree. You can't help but let out a small noise when you reach the soft, cool grass—the only green in a hundred acres of dry, dusty yellow.

The dog's whining carries through the screen door. She has left his room. He must be out of the bathroom, or she heard you. Either way you need to hurry.

You clip your bag to the rope before it has fully left your back and jump to pull yourself onto the first branch. It sways dangerously, but you know it will hold. Once it settles, you swing your legs up and bring your feet in under yourself to stand. Using the leaves as cover, you peer through the harsh glare. The dog has left the door. He has to be in the kitchen again. Only food would draw the dog to him.

You've made the climb often enough to know which branches to trust, which to avoid. The route to the top is easily felt by the smooth wood where the bark has been worn by hands and feet.

The fork where you've set up your nest is right above you. You're about to swing across when he throws the front door open. You lose your balance, but the branch in front of you stops your fall at the cost of grazing your arm. You try to suck in air through the lump pounding in your throat. One hand at a time, you let go to dry them on your tee-shirt before you slip. The branch beneath your feet

is quavering, but you can't tell whether it is the tree or you shaking. You wait, knowing his habits. Now!

As he turns around and leans against the wall to pull his boots on, you jump across and sit in the fork before you can fall. He is pulling his hat on when you remember your backpack at the base of the tree, a bright red beacon.

There's nothing you can do as he comes to the edge of the veranda, patting his pockets. You close your eyes, preparing for the worst. But all that comes is the clang of the door banging shut. He's gone, probably looking for his keys. It doesn't matter. You grab the rope and wrench the bag up. It just clears the lowest branches as he re-emerges, keys jingling in his hand.

Your breathing slows to normal as you watch him load into his ute. He drives off without looking back, taking the tension with him. He might be gone for minutes or hours. There's no way of knowing, so you allow your muscles to relax. You shift in the branch until you're comfortable and look at the world through your leafy, green shelter.

As you breathe, you feel your heart begin to beat normally again. It slows down as you run your hand along the smooth bark and fix the knots you tied that first summer after the move, when things started to go bad and you needed a place to call your own. You know the tension will return, but—sitting in your tree—it doesn't matter. Nothing matters. You pull your book from the bag and settle back to read.

GOD BOWS OUT OF THE FEDERAL ELECTION

Following recent speculation that God is contemplating retirement, His office has just issued a press release that He will not contest the forthcoming Australian federal election, and that He does not wish His name to be used in vain.

His office said He would not be running in the seat of Solomon, Isaacs or any other.

'I'm not trying to big note Myself here,' He said. 'But I really am too big for any single religion. I don't like the way the Christian right is trying to claim Me for themselves, as if they speak for Me. No one speaks for Me. Only I speak for Me. And I even doubt that on a bad day. I don't like the way some Muslims claim they can speak for Me. I don't like it that the former PM and some other assorted ratbags from the loony left don't even believe in Me.'

'You know, I did a cosmic amount of work to bring the Universe to the stage it's at, and what thanks do I get? The former PM of a middy country who doesn't even believe in Me? That hurts, if only momentarily. But, then, I try not to be too ego driven.'

Speculation has been rife for some centuries that God was already in retirement, viz the declining rate of belief in Him, runaway species extinctions, wars and massacres of the innocents that no unearthly figure has ever intervened in.

But God's office was quick to point out that the Heavenly Creator has been busy with other projects.

'This is not the only Universe God created,' a spokesangel for Heaven said.

'He has His hands full with other projects, but He does have a soft spot for the Earth. It was, after all, the place where they tortured and murdered His son.'

'He was busy at the time and regrets that He was unable to be present at His kid's crucifixion. It's not the sort of thing that heavenly creators worth their salt would really wish to miss. In earthly terms it's sort of like a graduation.'

God himself was a little miffed by recent statements by Richard Dawkins and was disappointed that the renowned atheist might be appearing in Australia again soon.

'Godless, God-fearing, the Christian right, atheists, it all gets a little tiresome and hurtful to a Creator like Me,' He said.

'For that reason I have today informed the Governor General that I will not be standing for the seats of Solomon or Isaacs, nor will I stand anywhere else.'

God's office said God was contemplating a holiday with His Son, where He hoped to build a few bridges.

APARTMENT 2B

Friday April 27, 2012

There was someone in my apartment last night. I heard their footsteps, walking in circles around my living room, the floorboards creaking loudly under their weight. This isn't the first time ~~something~~ something has happened. Last Wednesday, I got up for breakfast and found an empty milk carton sitting on the kitchen bench. It was my milk, missing from the refrigerator. I'm a neat person; I don't leave things sitting out on the bench. I blamed Ms Greene at first—she's notorious for walking into unlocked apartments and making herself at home. Getting up in years, you see, but now I know it's not her. She's a small lady, and I don't leave my front door unlocked anyway. I considered calling James about this, but I didn't want to annoy him at work again. He's a busy man.

I bought a journal today; the one I'm writing in now. I originally dismissed the idea of writing down my ~~thoughts~~ thoughts, but with everything going ~~one~~ on, I think it might help to have some evidence. I'll write in it every day because uneventful days can be just as important as eventful ones. On the weekend, I'll show it to James. He'll know what to do with the information.

For the time being, I've called the locksmith, and he'll be coming around 11 am tomorrow. I know there could be other ~~explanations~~ explanations as to what's been happening, but I'm not taking any chances.

Porter

Saturday April 28, 2012

The locksmith came and changed the locks this morning. I had to pay extra because it's the weekend, but I feel better now. I may have overreacted with this.

Porter

Sunday April 29, 2012

Nothing to report.

Re-Porter?

Monday April 30, 2012

I'm on edge. Today I awoke to what sounded like knives being sharpened in my kitchen. Eleven swipes, then a five second break. I thought somebody would come in any minute and kill me, yet I didn't move for at least three. Right as I got up the courage to check (unarmed, mind), the noise ~~stoped~~ stopped. I tried calling James from my bedroom phone, but he wasn't home, so I looked around the kitchen, the living room and in the closet on my own. Nothing. It must have been next door, I told myself. I've never been good at comforting people.

Porter

Tuesday May 1, 2012

I had the locksmith back over to change the locks on my windows. I skipped work to do this, but it was worth it. I also went out and bought myself a steel baseball bat. Cost me \$74. A gun would be better, but of course I'd need a

license for that. Also, James called today. It's approaching the anniversary of Sarah's disappearance. He said he'd come around Thursday night and have a talk with me about the progress they're making. Usually it's a phone call, so this might mean they have a new lead. I'll mention what's been ~~happening~~ happening in here, too; maybe even show him this journal. I'm grateful for James. I don't know if I could have made it through this without him.

Porter

Wednesday May 2, 2012

I composed a letter and dropped it in the building manager's mailbox on my way home from work this afternoon. I couldn't remember his name at the time, so I just addressed it 'Dear Sir'. I asked to be compensated for the lock changes and explained what's been going on, but after I slid it in his mailbox, it crossed my mind that this intruder could be him. He has a spare key to my apartment, after all. He doesn't seem the type to do this for the sick fun of it, but maybe he's trying to get me to move out. Does that sound paranoid?

Porter

It's 2 am I just woke up, there's footsteps outside my b/room door. The floorboards are creaking again. They've stopped here. I'm waiting for the police.

—

I'm angry. The police came and were extremely rude when they found no intruder. I told them I had panic disorder and was about to have an attack, and they treated me as if I were some paranoid loon they'd pulled in off the street for shouting at passersby about the end of the world. Panic attacks don't include auditory hallucinations. I'm not making this up. Now I have to pay for the door to be repaired because they had to break it down. I'm staying at Jones's place tonight; going to crash on his couch.

Porter

Thursday May 3, 2012

James will be coming around tonight. This is the time to tell him about everything that's been happening. I set up a plate of a crackers and guacamole next to the main photo they circulated of Sarah when she went missing. I hope James likes guacamole.

—

He never showed up. I know he's busy, but the very least he could have done is called and told me he couldn't make it. I've tried calling him ~~six~~ six times this week and not once has he picked up or called me back. The only time he called me was to say he was coming over, ~~which~~ which he never did. I'm done with the police force. I'm going to bed.

Porter

Friday May 4, 2012

I woke up shivering this morning. My covers had been pulled off my bed while I was sleeping and now sit in a ~~erumpled crumpled~~ crumpled pile outside of my bedroom door. I want to leave, but it's Sarah's anniversary tomorrow. What if she comes home and I'm not here? What if I don't leave and something worse happens?

I just dropped into the police station to give this journal to James, but he was 'too busy' to see me. I told the officers it was important, but they dismissed me. They think I'm harassing him about my sister, no doubt. I tried calling him on his cell phone, but he wouldn't pick up. I've never been so angry at ~~somebod~~ somebody in my life. If he finds my bloody corpse tomorrow, I hope he feels guilty.

—

It's 6 pm. I fixed my covers and sat down to call James on his landline. His wife picked up. I didn't even know he was married, which shows how much I really know about him. She sounded a little strange on the phone; there was something about her voice. But she said he'd call me back. I'm not holding my breath on this one.

—

I just got off the phone with James. I told him everything that's been happening and the records that I've kept. He sounded concerned. I feel I may have been wrong about him. Maybe he was just busy and isn't heartless. He's on his way over now to take a look at the journal copies I made. He's going to help me find a new place to live. I'll update here tomorrow with my new address and then leave this journal for Sarah on the bed. ~~When~~ If she comes home, she'll know where she needs to go.

—

He's here.

Saturday, May 5, 2012

WRITE YOUR OWN JOURNEY @VU

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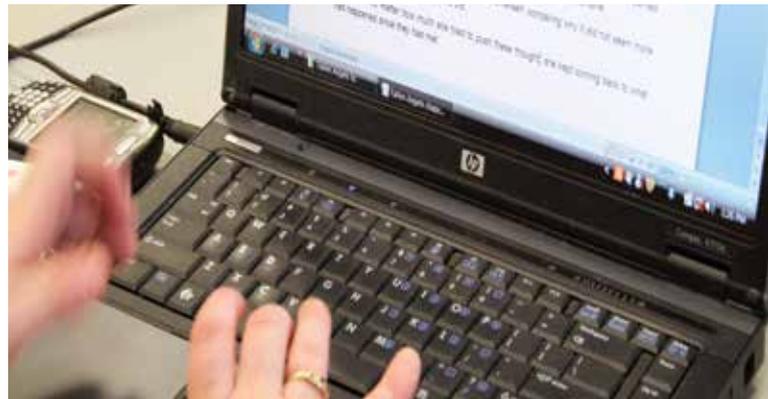
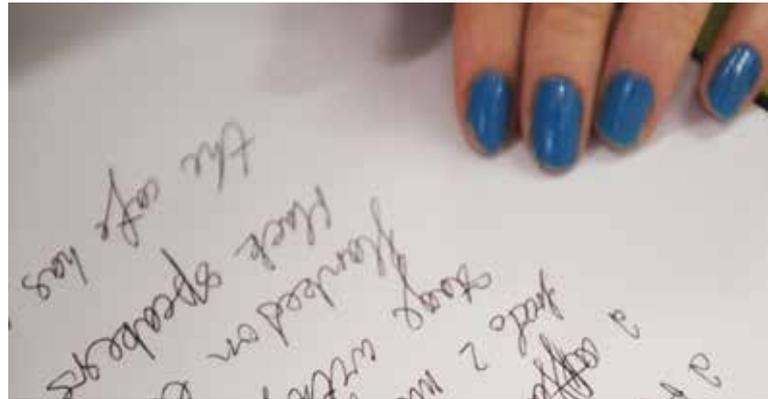
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