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2019 NORTHERN TERRITORY LITERARY AWARDS

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ISSN 1449-9886

Published by Northern Territory Library

Printed by Zip Print, 2/418 Stuart Highway, Winnellie NT 0820

2019 NORTHERN TERRITORY LITERARY AWARDS

Acknowledgments

Established in the early 1980s by Darwin Community College, a predecessor of Charles Darwin University, the Northern Territory Literary Awards celebrate the richness of our literary talent across the Northern Territory. Since taking on the administration of the Awards in the early 2000s, they have formed part of the Northern Territory Library's ongoing commitment to nurture and inspire emerging and established writers of all styles and genres.

The Awards highlight the importance of literature in our society, providing us with insights into the evolving nature of the Territory, its past and its future, and what it means to be a part of this place. As a reflection of the diversity of our vibrant literary community, the Awards are presented across seven categories: poetry, essay, short story, flash fiction, non-fiction, youth and theatre.

The Northern Territory library is proud to administer the Awards with the assistance of annual sponsors and supporters whose contributions help make this event possible.

Congratulations to the finalists and winners of this year's Northern Territory Literary Awards and thank you to everyone who submitted works. The success of the Awards relies on your ongoing contributions and we thank you for continuing to entertain, inform and inspire us.

Note: The entries printed in this book appear as they were submitted by the writers.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

1

Zip Print Short Story Award

4

Winner Glen Hunting
Centring

Finalists Barbara Eather Stephen Enciso
Going The Distance Sam

NT Writers' Centre Poetry Award

29

Winners Susan Fielding
Lyapirtneme / No return

Finalists Johanna Bell Penny Drysdale
What doctors think about nightcliff
when they close their eyes

Carol Maxwell Meg Mooney
Melting snow 'Forgotten' history

Catherine Parsons
Sick of Her Flowers Trilogy

Charles Darwin University Creative Non-Fiction Award

47

Winner Roland Bull
Still Flossing

Finalists Stephen Enciso James Murray
On Eagles' Wings The Birds

Charles Darwin University

Essay Award

72

Winner Jacob Fajzullin
The Effects of Online Sexual Activity on Adolescent
Development and its Implications for Northern Territory
Middle and Secondary Schools

Finalists Julian R Murphy Adelle Sefton-Rowston
Bush Court: Rough justice Greater Expectations:
at courts in remote prison writing and its effect
Indigenous communities on prison transformation

Kath Manzie Youth Award

102

Winner Elisha Pettit
A Liar's Colour

Finalists Leila Heinrich Fleur Liveris
red bees/blue sea A Meal

Flash Fiction Award

111

Winner Lee Frank
The Colours of an Arm

Finalists Liz Bennett Romany Maunder
Shared Risk Being Aunty May

Worthington Smelling
The Masked Lapwing

Brown's Mart Theatre Award

120

Winner Mary Anne Butler
One More Hour

Finalist Thomas Midena Kristy Schubert
Not all dreams wear capes The Mission



Zip Print

Short Story Award

Winner

Glen Hunting

Centring

5

Finalists

Barbara Eather

Going The Distance

12

Stephen Enciso

Sam

21

Centring

by Glen Hunting

I think someone handed me a card one day in the Rundle Mall—some outfit called Australian National were hiring. I didn't realise who they were until I saw inside the building. Next thing, I'm standing in a little office with this bloke with hair oil and tortoise shell glasses, and he's staring at me and almost licking his chops. I can't think what the hell he saw in me. A touch of the Old English charm, perhaps? Maybe he thought he could save on tailored cloth or something, because my skin was hanging off my bones by then. Anyway, he asked me if I could make cups of tea and carry trays, and I said, 'Yes'. Then he asked if I could wear a suit and tie, and be courteous to customers. The new Ghan would turn its wheels for the first time in November, he said. A new railway line, with new locos and rolling stock for a luxury passenger train between Adelaide and Alice Springs, out in the middle of this enormous island I'd come to. Did I want in?

Like I said, I don't know what he saw. He couldn't have seen what I'd really come from. This is how it was: I had only two O-levels to show for staying the full distance at school. And that was two extra years of not contributing to the family upkeep. Even if it was the dole for a while before someone took me down into a coal pit or tacked me onto an assembly line, my parents wanted my pay-cheque and they wanted it now. It was the same for everyone where I grew up. Me and all the other kids in my neighbourhood knew what was coming for us from the time we were ten years old.

So what I did hardly seems strange now, given what life back there was going to look like. But my Mum and Dad and brothers wouldn't have known what to make of it, if I'd told them. My uncle thought he was gifting me some

money to sow some wild oats in Spain for a month. I couldn't even tell him that I was lighting-out for Australia.

Six weeks later I was standing on the tarmac at Perth Airport, swooning with the eucalyptus smell that hangs around, and nobody knows it unless you're from somewhere else. And that was just the start of things. What I hadn't appreciated was that, in 1980, the Australian economy was in just as bad a state as Britain's was. I had to hitch down the coast when I couldn't get a job in Perth. The way south was just a single-lane highway, meandering past the fibros and the blue, blue ocean. Lines of cars trapped for half a mile behind some dawdler with his caravan. And then these great big stands of trees that seemed to be always breathing out, and the wet echoing of the birds in the boughs, and the soft meadows cleared between the woodlands. It reminded me of the Forest of Dean, which I'd been to briefly when I was small—all that calming greenness overhead, dotted with acorns and chestnuts, and the leaves like thousands of fluttering hands, waving for joy. I know the difference now, of course, but dappled light and undergrowth tend to have a similar effect on you, wherever you are. Especially when you have to leave them in a hurry, when the calm and the safety—or the work—you hoped for turn out not to be there.

Margaret River, Nannup, Northcliffe, Walpole—none of those South-West towns had any jobs to speak of. So I climbed in the back of a tarp-covered truck and rode it all the way to Adelaide. Three days of noise and dust and darkness. I never even saw outside except when it was night-time, when the lorry man pulled over for his keg and his kip. I must have looked like a bomb had gone off when I got out at the other end; the driver thought I had scurvy or something, and he left me exactly where I stood.

I was practically a dosser when I got that card and I got that job. But that's how I got myself Centred, and the rest, as they say, is history. A lot of history is routine, of course. There's a routine to every train trip, even if they're amongst the greatest train trips in the world. The picture-postcard account of mine starts with the murmur you get through the floor every 10 a.m. on Thursdays, platform nine at Keswick Terminal, and the folks on the concrete start sliding like rain streaks past the windows, until they work out that the train's moving and then start waving like mad. And then the pace

picks up ever so gradually, like a streamer unfurling from a hibernation, out past the weatherboards and factories of Elizabeth, then through the stubbly paddocks beyond, the soil becoming beige and mottled towards the sandpit at Port Augusta. You've got the Flinders on the right, like a fortress, and the plains hiding the salt lakes on the left, just over the horizon. A bloke called Eyre was heartbroken when he first came out here, because he couldn't get through it. He couldn't find the gaps between the lake beds, and the beds themselves were too boggy for him to walk across. He ended up turning around and trekking across the Nullarbor to Albany on account of it. Silly beggar nearly killed himself doing it, too.

The land's got itself a tan by the time we turn right, past Tarcoola, and a few trees struggle up to garnish it a little. The sky seems to swell with all the space and no relief. And then, if you haven't been tracking the time and the itinerary, and you feel the inertia beginning to take hold, the ground suddenly stretches its shoulders like a giant waking up, and the MacDonnell Ranges shepherd us into the railyard of The Alice, slung beside the township on the right.

That's sort of how it goes, anyway.

There's a routine to the people too. Laos, Japan, Canada, Switzerland...they come from everywhere, apparently. Sociologists and professors wanting a comfortable 'Wow!' they can take back and brag about to their colleagues and friends. Or backpackers using every sight and sound to send them onto the next new thing. Other than that, they're homebodies from the suburbs, venturing out for the first time in their lives on some big anniversary. I remember a woman in a white dress whose son was coming home from Cambridge soon. She'd just got divorced and was having a train trip to celebrate. That must be fifteen years ago. I can't remember now if she'd told her son about the divorce, or if she was waiting to tell him when he got back. And that's the point at which most of all the other details escape me, too. It seems we all escape each other, eventually. The travellers and I are bonded only from the time they board to the time they leave—there's no fuss, no reserve, just every courtesy from us both for this brief interlude. I don't know why it should happen this way, why it should be so earnest on each side, and

so...ephemeral. Each of these two qualities seems to make the other more so, but there's almost no reason for it. No reason that's helpful or illuminating.

And yet we all go on, serving the same strange impulses day after day, year after year. Well, some of us do. Some stewards insinuate themselves too much, and some can't even pretend to be interested. It's like a professional gold standard with me, at least on the professional level. But I never worked on this technique of mine, this way of, well...relating. I never knew I had it to offer when I first got the job. Perhaps the passengers and I are the way families should be, taking in and letting go exactly when required. All that forgetting shouldn't be part of it, though, especially after all the professional attention. I wonder if they think that that's what it will be like, at some point in their lives. I wonder if they ever try to remember the cascade of people and places that are lost, and that keep on getting lost like water running through a weir.

Then there's the routine of the country. The passengers would hate to hear me say there's such a thing, not to mention the company that runs this show. But it's true. These are the oldest, barest, most sun-struck tracts of land in the world—ancient upheavals left to sear and wear down for all the millennia afterwards. It might have all been perched halfway to Greenland once, at the dawning of the earth itself. But I can't imagine this surface a hundred and fifty degrees northwards and having glaciers and ski fields, as some younger version of itself. I can't even think of it as an inland sea, which is more likely to have happened. The sun, sky, and land have been devastatingly intimate for half a billion years out here, without change. The very creek beds are etched into the ground by the white-hot air and the radiation from space. And yes, it'll rain once or twice a year, and the country will turn grey and soggy for a week or so. But beyond that, it hasn't changed a bit for me in all my time with it.

You might say the land's given me my daily bread, given the job I do out here. It gave the indigenous peoples their sustenance too, however they managed it. And it gave them everything else besides. Or so it's said. But even they must have had their routines and their casual disturbances. Even as we pore over the artefacts stacked on the shelves in the craft shops, or spread over a *kungka's* blanket by the side of a road. We're not supposed to

ask if they ever found their country too routine, or too unnerving—the glare, the flatness, the sparseness. The heat and the hunger and the searching, always searching, for food and water. I wonder about the far-carrying eye, you know. I wonder if it carries with it wonder, or dread. What did they say to themselves when they could find nothing to keep themselves alive, and none of them knew if they would before it was too late? Could they feel the country and the spirits mocking them with their silences? And what did they feel if things got better? Could they trust their environment again, in their supernatural hearts? Or was there never any lasting relief for them?

No-one really knows where the ideas come from, or which ideas came first. Some say it was the unseen ancestors that moulded and carved out the land with their creative acts. Others reckon it's their so-called descendants who've given it its rough burnish by explaining it the same way. And yet either or both of those versions could be my own Chinese whisper by now. In any event, I can see how the indigenous needed their beliefs to survive. Almost anyone would get religion if they were stuck out here.

But I never got religion.

The time just before daybreak is best. The passengers don't know this. There's something about being free of the lure of sleep in that hour. You're up and about, and you're okay, and the darkness almost protects you. You could almost be a kid again in your fleecy pyjamas, peering around a doorway early on Christmas morning, or basking in the fridge light when you open the door for a midnight snack. You feel safe and strong, like you're more than a match for whatever the day will hold, because you're there and functioning when everyone else isn't. You're the milkman, or the bloke who used to bring up and turn down the street-lamps. The fella everyone relies on for their comfort and security. And then the bacon starts frying and the coffee starts brewing, and the aroma invigorates you even more, and then you oh-so gently coax the passengers out from their bunks, with a steaming mug and a full plate of breakfast, and a smile. It isn't just pride, you know. The day is warm and alive at that point, and I'm a part of that. I *am* that, when it happens.

And then, sometime not long afterwards, the sky and the air outside get their piercing sheen, like there's a strange kind of sheet-lightning

everywhere above you, and the sun suddenly grows like God's put a giant magnifying glass to it, and you see the plains burn up into their colours. You watch the glow of it, the great endless furnace of it. You try to find the beauty, the benevolence. They used to be out there, when you first looked out there, and they remained for a good few years after that. But they're all burnt up now, and what's left just gets burnt back into you. And from then on, until the cosmos returns every night, you know that everyone's a shady character in that train. The patrons just nod and drowse behind the venetians, disappearing into the salad and the Chardonnay. The lounge becomes a wide brown hat-brim with which to pretend there's nothing else there, or to pay a half-hearted homage without confronting or even considering the threat. And at least one shady steward has to keep on weaving amongst it all, bestowing his shady care and averting his everything else.

Perhaps I shouldn't be so harsh. Perhaps I've just turned into the parent I might have wished for myself, if I'd stopped to wonder what I was trying to break free of when I left home. My mother was a dolorous enigma to me; she secluded herself in plain sight, with barely a spark or diversion. My father, on the other hand, craved his diversions, even if they rarely gave him succour. The only reliable succour they gave were to the local licensees and bookmakers. It didn't happen all the time, but the rest of us never knew when we'd be several quid short until his next pay-day because of it. Then one night he blew every penny at the dogs, the fourth night we were away on that holiday in Gloucester, in the Forest of Dean. The only family holiday we ever bloody well went on. And he packed us all up and drove us back to Brixton before dawn, before the daylight could expose his disgrace. We had to run away because we were cleaned out, kaput, and I had no say in the matter, just had to watch the wilderness slide back into grime and smoke and soot, and I couldn't cry or even squeak for fear of my father's back hand or my brothers' scorn. And I never even remembered it until I got on that truck in Walpole, and I hid under the tarp and hoped to come out somewhere that was half okay, wherever we ended up, because there was nowhere else I could go. Trapped in the underbelly of the world, waiting to be saved or picked off. Tearing myself away from a childish ideal, a sanctuary of trees that wouldn't keep me the second time around. And all just to tumble the dice again, those dice that I'd

weighed-in to hold before I reckoned the odds. The forests and the valleys lie to us—they're all killing fields that just look pretty, and the birds can't help but sing because they don't know how fragile their lives are. Or how easily wasted.

So this is where I've come to. And no; I'm not just a shady steward. I'm a benevolent gaoler in my thin silver cell on wheels. But I'm the gaoler who has to keep himself under lock and key. Because I don't know how to deal anymore with that sun-flooded terror past the glass.

They've been building the line down from Darwin. For the last two years now, after decades of promises. It will link up with The Alice very soon, and then The Ghan will cross Australia from south to north, and back again. Like it was always supposed to.

They reckon it's a miniature Miami up in Darwin, with lots of condos and high-rise apartments. Could be too flashy for me now. They'll probably take on new staff, anyway, and make the rest of us reapply for whatever jobs are left. I'm not the wide-eyed boy I was when I came here anymore. But then there's the Indian Pacific to Perth, and the South-West beyond. A one-way ticket only, if I go that way at all. God knows what I could offer them down there.

Darwin up the top might not make the bit in the middle any better. I could be running through the same wilderness just to get to a dead-end pier. But maybe anywhere can be like that. Does the monsoonal downpour make the humid build-up worthwhile? Does the day end better if you can watch the lightning over the harbour? Or do the days improve with heavy mists and giant trees, or rolling surf and cows in fields? Some of these things I've seen, and some I've only read about. Maybe you can only read about a place by being in it, by standing helpless before it. Maybe the first inhabitants out here knew that from the beginning. But how can any of us ever know if we're reading things right?

Going The Distance

by Barbara Eather

It was the middle of an autumn afternoon in Burgos. Businessmen in suits hurried by. The siesta was not observed in this city. The waiter at the café on the edge of the square sneered at the two women. Or maybe it wasn't them he sneered at. Maybe his derision was for the old man who approached their table shortly after they sat down, for he and the waiter had exchanged quick words, too quick for the two women to understand. The old man wore a navy blue suit coat. The older of the two women didn't seem pleased when the younger one, the pretty blonde, said he could join them. Other tables were empty.

Seven days ago the two women had met on the steps of the pilgrim *alburge* in Logroño. 'I'm looking for a sign,' the older one, the Australian wearing the straw hat with the blue floral band, had said. 'So am I,' replied the younger woman, the one from New Zealand, the pretty blonde swathed in a red woollen poncho. They were saved, for then they both saw it, on a lamppost, the yellow arrow that pointed the way along the pilgrim trail across the north of Spain to Santiago, where the bones of St. James the Apostle are said to be buried. Before they had walked two blocks they found a café and, as breakfast was overdue, they went in. There they shared a table with a seventy-year old English woman who wore a thick brown cardigan. She'd had enough of walking the pilgrim trail and was about to catch the bus back to Pamplona. 'To run with the bulls?' the Australian asked.

In the square in Burgos pigeons fluttered and a busking violin scratched out a tune. The younger woman and the old man sat smiling at each other. He smiled at the older woman but she didn't smile back. The younger woman went inside to order the old man a cappuccino. While she was gone the older woman turned her head away from him. She noticed that there were many pigeons in the square and that very few people threw coins in the case of the busking violin. Michael, a Catholic priest from the Philippines, limped past. Three days ago, over a bottle of vino tinto at a bar in Azofra, he had told her that even though his feet had exploded with blisters, he still felt blessed for he knew that Jesus Christ was with him in his pain. Then she couldn't get away from him fast enough. Now she waved to him as though he was a long lost friend.

The old man wanted to know their names. The woman from New Zealand handed him his coffee.

'Diana,' she said.

The Australian told the old man that her name was Bianca. Diana looked at her strangely. That wasn't the name she had been using for the past seven days. The old man didn't tell them his name, nor did they ask him what it was.

In the café in Logroño the English woman wearing the thick brown cardigan had eaten a bowl of muesli while Diana and the Australian munched on croissants filled with chocolate. They all drank coffee – café noir, café con leche, cappuccino, and talked about their pilgrim experiences. They had each been walking alone, but from time to time had trekked alongside others – Brazilians, Belgians, Canadians, and even the occasional Spaniard. It was agreed that it had been very convivial. And safe.

'I wouldn't do this at home,' they voiced.

The Australian shuddered, 'No way, too many Ivan Milats in my country.'

'Ivan Milats? What are they?' she was asked.

So because she had been asked, and because none of them seemed keen to dash from breakfast onto the searing stones of the pilgrim trail, she told them

all she knew about Ivan Milat, serial killer, and how he had, over a number of years, snatched at least seven backpackers off the side of the road.

'He murdered them brutally, in the state forest, and evidence showed that he had kept them there for a while, torturing them.'

They hunched towards her.

'For years he went on living a normal life, going to work, slipping in and out of the forest as though he belonged there. Some people reckon he didn't act alone - too brutal, too drawn-out, too contrived - one body stabbed thirty-five times, another shot in the head ten times, and a decapitation. He kept some of their belongings. Not the sort of stuff you'd kill for. Not truckloads of Byzantine gold. Not anything worth killing for - a water bottle, a sleeping bag, a Benetton jacket, just what someone would travel with.'

They sat looking into each other's eyes. She wondered what anyone would keep of what they had with them. Her straw hat with the blue floral band? The English woman's thick brown cardigan? Diana's red woollen poncho, or ornately carved trekking pole?

'It was as though he was collecting trophies, but it was a private collection. It wasn't out in the open like the frenzy for relics that made this pilgrim trail great - which church had whose skull, which monastery had the armour of a particular knight who'd met his end badly.'

Silence hung over empty coffee cups.

'Anyway, I've probably said too much, come on girls, it's all about going the distance.'

The English woman and her thick brown cardigan went to catch the bus to Pamplona.

The woman from New Zealand asked the Australian,

'Can I walk with you for a while? You've scared me with all that talk of serial killers.'

On the outskirts of Logroño they plodded along paths that meandered past lakes fringed by weeping willows. A wrinkled man rode by and gave them each a packet of biscuits from a cardboard box strapped to the back of his bicycle.

'Slightly stale,' declared the Australian as they walked on munching, 'but free nonetheless.'

The day before she had reached Logroño, where she had met Diana and her red woollen poncho, Bianca's morning had started with a slow two-hour walk that took her to Viana. There she had breakfast. Weary, she sat for a long time without moving. So long that her muscles seized. Dragging herself out of her chair she strolled around the town. Pausing beneath the ornate facade of a heritage building restored as a *parador*, the finest class of hotel in Spain, she considered checking in and sprawling naked across a four-poster bed opulent with red velvet drapes. Bianca knew she should walk on. That was what she was here for. But her pack had rubbed deep red sores on her back. She needed a rest day, why go on? Her inner battle was interrupted by a gentle prod on her right shoulder. She turned to face Dominique, a rotund Frenchman who she'd met briefly at the *alburge* in Torres del Rio the previous night. He sucked on his pipe and gestured to the stone gargoyles above them. 'We could get a room here,' he grunted.

She quipped back, 'Oh yes, we could wash our socks in the bath.'

They laughed at this proposition, which was no less ridiculous than the first, if in fact it had been a proposition.

'Come,' he said, and she followed him inside. For the next hour they made ridiculous conversation over beer, Perrier and tapas. They scoffed at their crumpled images in gleaming mirrors framed by polished brass. They giggled at the sight of his dust-encrusted socks and sandals and her worn boots sullyng the expanse of black and white floor tiles that spoke of wealth – but not too loudly. The mood was broken when Dominique received a text message. Overnight something had attacked the poultry at the estate near Vezelay where he worked as a gardener.

'My wife she left me for a ninety-one year old man, but I was never very faithful. I work for a man who looks after the security services for a Saudi prince who puts much of his wealth up his nose. My doctor he tells me the cholesterol it is bad, so I tell my employer the cholesterol it is bad, so each year I do this, I walk a thousand kilometres and the cholesterol it go down. It's the only way I can do it. And now this happens to my chickens.'

French daybreak had revealed corpses bloodied and torn, and the half-dead in an even worse state.

'Perhaps it was a cat, or maybe a fox?' Bianca proffered.

Dominique clenched his pipe in a tight fist. 'No, no. It is the work of a madman.'

In the square in Burgos, Bianca, whose real name was something else, thought back to that time in Viana. After their tapas, she and Dominique had emerged into a sun-seared afternoon and set off for Logroño on a dusty trail lined with vineyards. It was a hard slog. Bianca told herself that if she hadn't been saved by Dominique's grunting French charm she might have given up and spent the night curled up in the shrubbery on a bleak Spanish hillside waiting for wolves to pick up her scent. I trusted Dominique, trusted him instantly, she thought, as Diana and the old man in the square in Burgos sat smiling at each other, yet he could have been an axe-murderer.

The old man asked Diana if she was staying long in Burgos.

'Just tonight,' she said, 'I start walking across the *Maseta* tomorrow.'

'Alone?' asked the old man.

'Yes, alone. My friend here is catching the bus to León.'

The Australian looked at the old man's hands and tried to figure out what he had done for a living. Perhaps an office job, or had he worked in an abattoir? In the shop window behind him preserved hams hung, like carcasses.

Days earlier, somewhere near Logroño, the two women had caught up with Dominique at a café stalked by pregnant cats. Together they walked another two hours to the small village of Ventosa. Passing lorry drivers tooted at them cheerfully. Bianca confessed that she had been having motor vehicle fantasies.

'Every time I see an Audi, I want to steal it. Especially if it's a gleaming black one.' Dominique grunted. Diana laughed. The next morning they were out of Ventosa just as light blushed over the horizon. Clouds of white smoke billowing from Dominique's pipe cut the pink of dawn. They plodded towards Azofra under a rising sun. Along the way they picked grapes from the vineyards that lined the trail.

'Is this stealing?' asked Diana, 'or is what I've heard true, that the row of grape vines closest to the trail is meant for the pilgrims?'

'Dunno,' responded Bianca, grape juice oozing from her mouth, 'God helps those who help themselves.'

At high noon they launched into loud renditions of each other's national anthems. By early afternoon their pace slowed. Dominique pulled out his GPS.

'Do you know you are walking at two kilometres an hour? I think for me this pace it is not enough.'

Bianca murmured, 'It's all about going the distance.'

'You Australians always have such big packs. In your country it is important to be prepared.'

'We have to be prepared. Saving you lot from world wars has taught us that.'

'No, I mean it. Your country it is very dangerous. You have deadly snakes. You can get lost and die of thirst.'

'Yes, quite easily, no water fountains every few kilometres like here. And don't get me started on the serial killers.'

When the trio reached Azofra, Bianca and Diana farewelled Dominique who wanted to keep walking. They hugged him goodbye outside *Carniceria Delores* where chunks of flesh hung on hooks in the window. That evening, in a dimly-lit bar in Azofra, the two women feasted on *paella* and shared the bottle of *vino tinto* that came with it. Michael, the Catholic priest from the Philippines joined them and they helped him drink his bottle of *vino tinto* until he started talking about Jesus and suddenly they were very tired and had to go to bed.

Pigeons cooed in the square in Burgos. The old man reached inside his coat and pulled out an exercise book and the stub of a pencil. He opened the book to an empty page.

'I draw you a map.'

It was a simple map of Australia. It wasn't very accurate. Cape York wasn't long enough, the top of the Northern Territory didn't exist and there was no Tasmania.

'I draw in your great rivers. This is the Darling.'

He placed a squiggle on his map. It was more or less where Bianca could remember the Darling being when she had been at school.

‘And this is the Murray.’

The old man drew a long curving line that was a reasonable approximation of where the Murray meandered.

‘Like the Mississippi, the Murray is one of the great rivers of the world.’

Bianca nodded. She didn’t tell him that the Murray was in a bit of trouble, but he wasn’t going to get away with his too short Cape York and non-existent top of the Northern Territory. She reached across the table, took the exercise book from him and motioned for him to hand over his pencil. She extended Cape York and the great north, but didn’t bother about Tasmania.

‘Here are the really great rivers.’

She drew in the East Alligator, the West Alligator and the South Alligator.

‘The South Alligator is five miles across at its mouth. And it is all floodplain there so you don’t really know where the river ends and the sea begins.’

She didn’t explain that the names were fundamentally wrong. There were no alligators. The earliest European explorers should have identified the great saurian beasts they had seen as crocodiles. The old man studied the corrected map with his beady eyes. Almost yellow they were, thought Bianca, almost like those of a crocodile.

The shadows in the square lengthened. The old man lent forward and wished the two women all the best for their pilgrimage. And then, because it was always going to happen he asked if they could spare him just one euro. Bianca glared at him. Diana reached into her money belt and gave him something shiny. The old man looked at it, seemingly bemused, stood up, bowed slightly and melted away. The waiter slapped his cloth on the empty table next to them. Bianca flinched. They were pilgrims, not gypsies. If she’d spoken enough Spanish she would have told him so. Instead she turned to Diana.

‘What was that you gave him?’

‘A key ring,’ replied Diana.

‘A key ring? You gave him a key ring?’

‘It was worth more than one euro. You gave him nothing. And why didn’t you tell him your real name?’

‘You can’t be too careful. At least I fixed his map. He won’t look stupid when he draws maps for Australians again. But a key ring for an old man who probably doesn’t own a car and might not even have a home?’

‘How do you know? Maybe he is a high class Ivan Milat with a Maserati parked around the corner.’

‘Maybe you’re right.’

The old man in his navy suit coat hadn’t looked homeless. He hadn’t smelt homeless. But how could you tell? This was Europe. This was Spain. Even the staff in supermarkets wore suits.

When Bianca and her straw hat with the blue floral band arrived in León she went to the cathedral where she inhaled air filled with centuries of belief and bathed in the aura of some of the finest stained glass ever created. That night she lay in a dormitory bed in an *alburge* run by the Benedictines. When a nun with a strident voice called everyone to prayers she pretended to be asleep. She’d read somewhere that compliant children were more likely to be targeted by serial killers. Sometimes a little disobedience was not a sin.

On the morning that Bianca caught the bus to Leon, Diana left Burgos also and started across the *Maesta*. It was said that the nine days walking across that flat wind-swept plain could send you mad. An hour into the day a beat-up white car drove by. Spain was filled with these. For every gleaming black Audi purring by there were several beat-up white cars. The first time it passed, Diana thought nothing of it. Vehicles where the pilgrim trail followed a road were not unusual. But the second time, when it slowed down alongside her, she looked intently at it, straight into eyes of a young man – eyes that she didn’t like the look of. The third time he came back Diana was thinking faster than she had ever thought before. When the car disappeared over a low rise she figured that those eyes were scanning the trail to see just how alone she was. Where was a pack of Brazilian pilgrims when she needed them? She threw her ornately carved trekking pole into the bushes, turned, and ran across country. Walking twenty kilometres a day for the past three weeks had done her good. She flew up hillsides, her red poncho and golden tresses flailing. What had that Australian with the two names said? ‘It’s all about going the distance.’ Diana felt no pain. She felt nothing, not even her pounding heart or her strained achilles. Her breath rasped in and out. She did

not look back. Eyes still wild she stumbled into Burgos, went straight to the railway station and caught the first train to Barcelona. There, in an internet café, she tapped out an email. It began, 'You and your Ivan Milat stories.'

Sam

by Stephen Enciso

People didn't get how we could be friends. But you're so smart and he's so dumb, they'd say. And it was true that, academically, I excelled, while he lagged behind. But Sam wasn't dumb, he just didn't care. And the teachers knew this, because he was constantly in detention. They were threatened by him. They even used to warn me to stay away from him.

I was puzzled by the contrast, it didn't make sense to me. I saw in him something that perhaps most people didn't—I saw his creative energies, I read his poetry. I thought he was a better person than I was. He could be mischievous, passionately mischievous, but never cruel. Not cruel like I could be, in that detached intellectual sort of way.

I can't remember exactly how we became friends or when. I know we met in Year 7 – we had a friend in common – but we didn't really start hanging out until Year 9. We discovered that we both liked the same girl, and that's when we truly bonded. We talked obsessively about her, we found a place during recess where we could sit and observe her discreetly, we planned how to get her to leave her boyfriend, who we both agreed was an asshole.

Some of the best nights of high school for me were the sleepovers at Sam's house. He lived out in Howard Springs on a big block with all his family. It was so quiet out there, especially at night. There were no barking dogs to interrupt my sleep.

I was fascinated by that family, by the fact that his parents weren't married, by the weed plants growing unashamedly in the garden.

And yet they were very strict about certain things, like limiting screen time. Sam was only allowed to use the computer for a couple of hours a day and, at night, the Wi-Fi was turned off. It felt like the greatest injustice. After everyone had gone to bed, we would sneak out and turn it back on.

It was because of him that I bought my first iPod. We spent hours on our iPods, huddling on his bed in the darkness, trying to keep our voices low. Sam showed me the poetry he had written, about her, about desire, beautiful words that reverberated in my mind for days. I tried to write poetry too, but it was weirdly biblical and I didn't show him.

We barely slept on those nights. Sam introduced me to the best porn sites. He knew a lot more about that sort of stuff than I did. He'd had *oral sex* – I hadn't even kissed anyone.

It took me a while to acclimatise to the sheer nakedness in those videos. The words, the movements, seemed too vulgar. I was thrilled by the provocative poses and the seductive tones, but, as soon as more flesh was exposed, I was embarrassed. Sam flicked confidently from video to video, talking about his favourite porn stars.

Sometimes we snuck out and sprinted along Barker Rd, giggling furiously. I loved those nights. Sam had a sort of energy about him that was intoxicating. I wanted to soak up as much of him as I could.

There was nothing more sacred to Sam than a dare. I smoked my first cigarette because he dared me. I also wagged class one day, me who had never missed a day of school in my life, because he dared me.

No matter how hard I tried, I was never up to it. The cigarette I smoked too fast and had a coughing fit. He had to clamp his hand over my mouth so his parents wouldn't hear. Wagging was fine on the way there, but Mr Middleton saw us coming down Berrimah Rd with ice coffees from the servo. He took me aside and told me he was very disappointed. I had to run off to class to hide my tears.

It was also because Sam dared me that I found myself anxiously masturbating in public places. I did the Botanic Gardens and I did Cas beach, but there was no way I could do the back of the bus. I just had to resign myself – I would never be good enough. He was capable of things I could never do, that I found offensive. He spray-painted a penis on the principal's car. He ate his homework – scrunched it up and started chewing it – right in front of the teacher's face. Once, he even grabbed a Stanley knife and threatened to drive it into his outstretched arm. He kept the blade firmly against his skin, pushing down, so that it seemed that, at any moment, it could burst through and draw blood. I thought that was too much. The poor Art teacher had turned very white.

Sam not only surpassed me but compensated for me. I was on the SRC and I got A*s for every subject, but I still felt that I lagged behind. I didn't know how to open a beer bottle with a lighter. Still less did I know how to make a bong out of a plastic bottle and some garden hose.

More importantly, I was terrified of sex. My girlfriend kept wanting me to sleep over, but I always made up excuses. At first I said I was waiting until I was sixteen, and then I just cycled through a list: my mum was sick, we had visitors, it was a friend's birthday, I had too much homework. She finally broke up with me because I was too frigid.

The day after, she and Sam hooked up. He told me they'd almost got caught having sex by the teacher on duty. I wasn't angry at him, but I was bitter. I worried even more about my penis size. I had caught sight of Sam's penis one night at his house and the image of it, confident and bulbous, had stayed with me. For months I tried to stretch mine out, using exercises that I found online. I wanted at least half a centimetre more, but it didn't work. I was just glad that the lights were off when we wanked together.

I wanted, more than anything else, to be close to Sam. When I felt him holding back, it depressed me. I just wanted to know him, to be given access to his internal world. I hoped that he would just come to trust me eventually, that if I hung around for long enough, I would become an extension of him. But he always held back and the hesitation was palpable. It was as if a window

were separating us, a window that I pounded at but was not strong enough to break.

When he disappeared very suddenly, at the start of Year 11, without saying goodbye, it crushed me. He turned up at my place one night, completely announced.

"Can I stay over tonight?" he asked.

He'd ridden all the way to Woodroffe on his tiny BMX bike and was sweating profusely. He tried to hide it, but there was an unmistakable tremor in his voice.

"Of course," I said, pleased but also unsettled, "What's wrong?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

My mum set up the spare bed in my room. I still had to study for a test in the morning, so I sat at my desk, while he lay on the bed, furiously scribbling on a notepad. He was so agitated. I was worried about him, but I didn't want to disturb him with questions in case he got angry and left. It was so comforting to have him there with me. I tried to focus on my study, but I kept imagining ways I could soothe him and then glancing over to make sure he was still there.

Sam had already fallen asleep by the time I finally finished studying. As I was turning off the light, I caught sight of a loose page of his notepad. He had shoved it in his bag, but you could make out what he had written, over and over: *I hate you so much*. It took me a while to get to sleep. I kept rolling those words around in my mind, worrying that I had done something wrong. Maybe I should have asked him questions, maybe I failed the test.

When I woke up, he was gone. He wasn't at school the next day, nor the next. I thought constantly about those words, unable to concentrate in class. At the end of the week, when he had still failed to materialise, I decided it was best to call.

His dad answered the phone.

"Is Sam around?" I asked.

There was a long, suspicious pause before he answered.

"They've gone back to Alice, mate. The fucking bitch has done a runner."

You can do me a favour and fuck off as well.”

He hung up rudely and I burst into tears.

So my friend was gone.

Life was hard without Sam. We went from seeing each other every day to not speaking at all. I tried to keep in touch, but I had no fixed number. And anyway, it had been hard enough for him to communicate in person.

It became such an effort to get up in the mornings. I felt so heavy. My dad resorted to switching the fan off, so that the heat would force me out of bed. I tried to concentrate on school, but the teachers started to annoy me. Even Mr. Middleton, who I had always liked. I was annoyed by his praise, by his kind smile. I almost told him to fuck off once, but I was saved by the bell.

The quadrangle seemed so dreary without Sam. At recess time, I locked myself in a cubicle and cried. I didn't want to sit in our usual spot and watch Jessica. She could fuck off as well as far as I was concerned.

I pulled myself together when I got a C for a Chemistry test and Mr. Leeman looked at me as if to say, *I misjudged you*. I concentrated more on my studies. There were internal assessments to do, exams to study for. It was a welcome distraction. Sometimes I was so busy that I could go a full day without thinking of him. But when it was time to catch the bus back to Palmerston, the bus we used to catch together every day after school, I lost my composure. I had to pretend to yawn to hide the tears.

In the years since, I have only spoken to Sam a handful of times. The first time was that same year, in the last term of school. I bumped into his cousin Gary who gave me a number I could reach him on.

I had to try three times before I had the confidence to let it ring.

“Hello?”

Suddenly, he was there, on the other end of the phone, and I didn't know what to say. I told him I'd been elected school captain.

“You always were a teacher's pet,” he said.

His voice sounded harsher, like crunchy gravel. I also picked up on a note of bitterness that was new.

I changed the subject, asked him about Alice.

He told me he had dropped out of school.

"They're all cunts there anyway" he said.

Then he had to go and hung up.

I was sad for a while after that conversation. I had wanted to tell him how much I missed him, but it had felt like an immature thing to say.

The next time I heard from him was after I'd graduated. Year 12 was exhausting. It was constant work to stay on top of things, but I threw myself into it, and I managed to dux the school.

This time it was Sam who called me.

"I saw you in the paper," he said, "I always knew you were a smart cunt."

It was nice to hear from him, but it made me wary. His life seemed to have become inexplicably intertwined with violence. He told me stories about Alice, about the things that happened to him:

"My cousin and I were riding home when this Hilux ute pulls up and, I shit you not bruss, the biggest cunts you've ever seen get out and start coming for us, saying they're gonna kill us, saying who the fuck do we think we are just riding around, that we're black scum and all this shit, and I'm like to my mate, go cunt, fucken go, and we start pedalling away like fucken crazy, and when I look back the two cunts are at each other's throats. Like, fuck, bro, it was insane."

He spoke as if he relished it all, as if the unpredictability of the crazy new world he lived in was thrilling to him. He told me other stories as well: the time he almost got stabbed, the time he was in a brawl at the pub. I was horrified. Once again, he was surpassing me. I was not made for that world, there was no way I could have survived it.

I also realised something that made me angry. He had known my number all along. He could have called anytime, but he didn't. God, I wanted to punch him. I didn't care much for that harsh new way he had of speaking. He was putting up more defences, thickening the window that separated us. I wanted to shake him and say, *just tell me how you feel!*

But I had little time to dwell on Sam because I had to organise moving to Melbourne for uni. There was a lot of rushing around: buying clothes, packing, searching for places to live, choosing my units, filling out forms. This time it was me who left without saying goodbye.

It was another two years before I spoke to him again. Melbourne swallowed me up, took my breath away. I loved being at university, loved the new friends I made, the books I discovered. It was by chance that I was back in Darwin when he called. I had been planning to stay in Melbourne during the break for a bush doof, but my mum wanted me home for her birthday.

One morning, the phone rang. I had managed put Sam so far out of my thoughts over the years that it took me a while to register his voice. We had a long talk, though I barely said anything. He told me he'd had a rough time of things. His mum had kicked him out of home when he started using ice. He'd also spent some time in jail for attempted robbery.

In a way, I wasn't surprised. I knew he had a tendency to overdo it. He was doing well now, though. He was working full-time, a shit job but it paid the bills, and studying on the weekends to get his NTCET. He lived with his girlfriend in a caravan on her dad's block.

"You know her," he said.

He didn't even have to say her name. I knew it was Jessica.

"Yeah, we stayed in touch all this time, bro. She's really been there for me."

He told me how he had written her a poem and left it in her letterbox, the day before he and his mum had left Darwin.

"I never thought I'd see her again, but her dad got a transfer to Alice."

Jessica had told him to stay in school, but he hadn't listened. When he was broke, she gave him money. And she had helped him get off the ice.

"I don't know where I'd be without her, ay."

As I listened to Sam, I felt my insides collapsing into a vague, but overwhelming sense of despair. My new life in Melbourne suddenly seemed hollow. I should have tried to contact him more often, I should have been there. I kicked myself for leaving without saying goodbye.

Maybe I could have moved to Alice. There was a university there, after all. I

could have visited him in jail, made sure he had everything he needed. I felt despicable.

“Oi, bruss, you still there?”

Jessica had done it, done what I couldn’t do.

I saw myself there, hammering my fist feverishly on the window, watching them, watching Sam read Jessica a poem he had written her, watching Sam embrace Jessica, watching them fall onto the bed together. I saw myself there, pounding and pounding on that glass, begging to be let in. But he was oblivious to me. He couldn’t see me, he couldn’t hear me.

“Yes, I’m still here,” I said.



NT Writers' Centre

Poetry Award

Winner

Susan Fielding

Lyapirtname / No return

30

Finalists

Johanna Bell

What doctors think about when they close their eyes

34

Penny Drysdale

nightcliff

36

Carol Maxwell

Melting snow

38

Meg Mooney

'Forgotten' history

41

Catherine Parsons

Sick of Her Flowers Trilogy

43

Lyapirtneme¹ / no return

by Susan Fielding

Everyone's talking about
last summer
like it was out of the blue.

How the days and nights
burned hotter than ever,
and didn't stop.

Country drew into itself
like a pomegranate
ready to leave the tree

browned off
and sucked dry.
The mobs of brumbies

desperate,
their hollow corpses
found folded together-

you can see them
on their knees
in that final collapse.

And not a drop of rain
from the Top End.
Nothing from cyclones

that blew across the north
flooding the place
with record falls.

Instead, a fire
along the flanks of Tjoritja²
burned white-hot

in rainforest gullies
of fig and cycad,
spearwood vine.

Not even
the shadow side of things
could offer salvation.

Birds wandered stunned
by heat, gap-mouthed,
sucking at the air.

And in our tangelo tree
the stiff carcass
of a white-naped honeyeater

looks up from its nest,
mouth open,
eyes open.

How the aircons hummed
and dripped around it
the day it died.

I wish I could say that rain will save us.
I wish I could say this drought
will end

and new shoots will sprout
in the cool crevices
of Angkerle Atwatye³

Yet one by one
we shore up exit plans,
bring them forward

say, 'I can't do another summer here',
as if these changes aren't happening
everywhere.

As if leaving solves anything.
As if some could ever dream
of leaving here anyway.

¹ Lyapirnteme (Arrernte): returning

² Tjoritja (Arrernte): West MacDonnell Natural Park, Central Australia

³ Angkerle Atwatye (Arrernte): Standley Chasm, Central Australia

What doctors think about when they close their eyes

by Johanna Bell

how do you reverse

a curved spine

down a gravel drive

once the vertebrae are fixed

crunching under tyres

and ligaments

rubbing bone

howling names

on the steering wheel

in the surgeon's face

sweaty and limp

our eyes behind glass

on the road ahead

unremembering

the white of your grip
focused only on the task at hand
your neck in my lips
and the constant beat
of heart thumping
across screens
knocking at the edges
of cardio dreams

nightcliff

by Penny Drysdale

it's sunday and I'm laid out on stone

my head propped up comfortably looking at water

I cannot enter

I have been dozing

a few strands of casuarina have fallen on my stomach

I leave them rising and falling

the ants are too busy

to bite it is the barely visible crabs who face the long haul

dragging someone else's carapace to cross rock

after rock

that is white or mustard or dry blood red the colour of a wound

just starting to heal over

little birds land a black outline

framing egg blue faces a ship out there strange it still doesn't

seem to be going anywhere

just an artifice trapped between

two shades of blue trapped beneath voluminous white clusters

of bodies mostly women who lost

their heads or a limb waiting

for the next storm waiting to turn grey or turn dark or to make

an impact or perhaps to turn back

the birds make their noise
and it makes me remember where they came from just how long
it took to get here all of us to get here
only to leave and leave
again

I hear foraging scratching the sound of leaf litter turning
and I turn to see quaint orange feet and large browning leaves
scraped from one pile to the next by a dark crazy thing
a reminder
there are so many fallen leaves to get beneath

Melting snow

by Carol Maxwell

How strange now, that meeting—again moment
in a bar in a town we had never shared,
me tasting stout, you talking with friends.

I remembered how, years ago I'd been stopped by your voice;
wanted to know how your hands would feel on my skin,
how our lips might feel if they met.

Years later, weeks later, you were here again,
ostensibly
on work—your smile.

How exhilarated I was when you steered the small of my back
ran your hand down my chest
as we picked our way along the Boulder Bank in the wind.
We never questioned the peril of waves knocking
against white sunshine on the Tasman sea.

I was away from home
blinded by a night when it snowed.
In the morning it is still snowing,
the woman in the supermarket car park,
shrunk flat inside her puffer jacket
feels the need to stop me,
needs to tell me that there is no milk—
that the trucks are snowed in, down south.

I buy wine where there is no milk,
plough North on a whim,
drive—drawn to a man
with a crib behind a shingle beach.

When I get to the settlement
I walk on that beach with its invisible horizon
the white in white on white
of snow falling on surf
a white so solid that when I reach out
to stroke its flank,
its fetlocks float in on the surf.

Snow falls in the pine forest;
the orange of its floor is patched like a calico cat
soft static fills the blank spaces,
between trees in a wood becoming more wondrous
the more dangerous—your smile.

He led me up his garden path
with his wild hair wide smile;
our conversation wandered for hours
looped across a lounge
full of cushions and corners.

In a room with doors barricaded by drifts
I briefly knocked against moral maps
lit with places so brilliant
that I shielded my compass.

We drew blood in a white bed
that had portraits of children
hanging above its head.

The phone rang and rang.

Months later, we kiss on the cheek after the movies.
You drop me home.
We hug as friends do.

It has passed.

'Forgotten' history

by Meg Mooney

The square building
from the distance
a broken lego block
alone on a bare windy plain
stretching to the blue mountain

close-up: beautiful walls
the stones fit so neatly
around two tall empty door frames
a tiny window

battered by a hot wind
I pick among bits of glass and iron
looking for memories

the house where my grandmother grew up
with the sisters who survived
is a few pitiful piles of rubble
across a barbed wire fence

an archaeological dig there found marbles
a glass doll's eye, parts of a toy tea set
a cup with the words 'for being a good girl'

the building with the beautiful walls was a stable
the report from the dig says
but in the folder my father put together
the District Centenary Book Committee
quotes a tenant farmer from the 1930s
he describes two strong doors locked with long iron bars
a square hole near the top of each
the farmer thought they'd come from the lockup in the town
he knew my great-grandfather was 'an old-time policeman'
then he says
'I was amazed to learn about the gaol'

the report goes on
'It is said the prisoners were marched out from the town
chained together'
notes also
'The history of the small gaol has been largely forgotten' –
did they want to forget?

so now I see that hot wind throwing itself
around two small stone rooms with a tiny window each
housing prisoners like Flourbag, a known sheep-thief
while a little girl, my grandmother, plays
just across the paddock
with a doll with glass eyes

Sick of Her Flowers Trilogy

by Catherine Parsons

I

Menopausal Monopoly:

The game you play while waiting for cessation,
for ages 44 and over.

No get out of jail free

No passing go

Expending everything.

Buy up houses on streets like

Appalling Maul

Unfair Square, and

Getting-Cross Station.

II

Chunks of ruby marshmallow maternity
caress the exit.

Like an unconscious frog it slaps the side of a bowl,
the trail indelible
mingling with liquid at the bend.

Searing belly-ache
without birthing cry
without prospect,
the indelible trail without terminus.

Suspended floating mattresses by day
and by night
submersion,
submission,
sink and swim,
make it to water's edge
so that
chunks of ruby marshmallow maternity
can caress the exit.

III

'Sick of her flowers'

I get it now

I totally get her.

The issue of blood

The Flood

of biblical abandonment.

She has spent her all

on physicians

in positions to prescribe isolation.

I get that.

I am there with her.

With her that is sick of her flowers.

A lonely business.

Unclean until the evening

expending her all

until a touch

ends the falling –

the deciduous mauling.

She can choose to wear white
be out at night
and be touched,
passing the aisles
stacked with mattresses
absorbing the curse.

A full purse.

Without flowers.



Charles Darwin University

Creative Non-Fiction Award

Winner

Roland Bull

Still Flossing

48

Finalists

Stephen Enciso

On Eagles' Wings

58

James Murray

The Birds

65

Still Flossing

by Roland Bull

I remember the dusty air carrying rice husks across the horizon. The smell and sound of sheep being sheared, the sting of blades of grass as they cut my infant feet while I whizzed about the front yard.

That was the country. Deniliquin.

Famous now for the Deni Ute Muster, back then what put the town on the map was housing the biggest rice mill in the Southern Hemisphere. Don't all start planning your weekends at once though: it's been decommissioned.

Rice was the perfect metaphor for Deni in a way, because all the goodness the place managed to cultivate was eventually shipped out to other parts of the country, leaving a hollow, tasteless husk of a community that really only served to get stuck in your teeth.

Apparently, I'm still flossing.

When I was tiny, my Mum would take me to her sewing class where I would strut beneath the high tables serenading the other ladies with an innocent ditty I'd learned at home: Sweet Transvestite, from the Rocky Horror Picture Show.

I didn't know exactly what a transvestite was, but I was definitely a sweet one.

True to form, I made my pre-school debut wearing a floral, cotton dress, accessorised with a sparkly, pink tiara. It was apparent at this point that Mum and Dad were conducting their own, localised experiment into the

nature versus nurture debate, and were hoping to steer things in a particular direction. And it was around this time that I learned something about myself, something that can actually be traced back to that first day of preschool. I was gay. Still am, in fact.

But it wasn't revealed through a miraculous, rewarding period of self-discovery. It was just something people started to tell me.

I remember kids coming to pre-school and saying, "You're gay". I had no idea what that was either, but I soon found out that it was me. And that it was bad.

I've always felt this was a huge failing on behalf of the town's parents. I mean the kids hadn't gone home and suddenly had an epiphany, 'Hang on! Cute dress? Stunning accessories? That boy's going to try to fuck me in the ass...!'

They were clearly told. Overheard. In the car, around the dinner table, at nap time.

"That boy's gay", the parents will have said. And like a rice husk on the wind, the kids carried it to pre-school with them.

To be fair, there were signs. Beginning with the dress.

And it probably didn't help that my two favourite films were the Wizard of Oz and the Rocky Horror Picture Show.

And it certainly didn't help that one of the first jokes I ever learned, courtesy of Mum, went:

"What does 3-day-old cum smell like?"

Breathes

But despite the uncanny accuracy of Deniliquin's diagnosis, it still seemed premature to let me know what my sexuality was at such a young age.

Soon enough, I discovered that my sartorial instincts were incompatible to the expectations of mainstream Deniliquin society and started to wear 'gender appropriate' clothing, dressing like a good, country boy.

Life became a breeze! I got good grades, I was a standout member of the community. I was even one of the school's sporting champions, although I avoided the change rooms like the plague for fear of an unwanted erection.

(To clarify, an unwanted erection would have been my own. Even back then I was quite eager to encounter someone else's).

Soon I was voted School Captain, then Junior Mayor of the town. The gay taunts still bubbled to the surface every now and then, but people also seemed to notice some attributes aside from my flagrant homosexuality.

As the years wore on, so did Deni life. And it soon came time to attend high school, a melting pot in which all the town's youth came together in one ugly, adolescent penitentiary.

And once I arrived, all the good things that had happened in primary school – the grades, the sport, the contributions to the community – were eradicated by one sweeping recollection.

I'd worn a dress on the first day of pre-school. I was gay.

Again.

There's a particular aroma to a thick, green glob of mucus flying through the air on a 40-degree day in rural NSW. It smells like a kind of acidic fury. It burns. Not the skin, but the air around it, then floats up the nostrils and sings the brain.

That's what I remember from my first day of high school. Walking out with the crowd at the chime of the bell. Thinking everything had gone smoothly. Happy enough. Until I heard it. The retch of the glottal cleanse and grubby whistle as the projectile took flight. I didn't feel it land, but knew it was for me. I knew because of the directive guiding this missile to target.

"Faggot".

I glanced behind me and saw the spitter snicker to his friend and march away. Chin up, chest out. A proud homophobe.

I stopped, took off my jumper and frowned down at the glob of green phlegm glinting in the sun. Then I carefully rolled it up in poly-cotton of traffic-light red (what torturous human designs school uniforms anyway? Don't they realise adolescence is hard enough without mass sartorial shaming?) and stuffed the sad bundle into my back pack.

I arrived home to a mother brimming with enthusiasm, desperately hoping that high school would be a continuation of my positive but tenuous social trajectory.

I tried to match her mood as she enquired about my day, but a few moments into the chat I handed over my jumper and asked her to wash it. My smile wavered slightly as I did so, but I didn't want to drop the ball.

That's the thing about arbitrary discrimination: you don't just put on a brave face for yourself, but for those around you as well.

Very soon, high school demonstrated that my efforts to be a good student and a stand-out social citizen were in vain, so I decided to take the low road. I gave up school and sport for drugs and alcohol, finding a new community amongst the town's other self-destructive misfits.

Flailing desperately, my parents soon shipped me off to boarding school in Ballarat in the hope that big city minds would be less crushingly closed than those of the local townsfolk.

It's possible you may have some romantic ideas about boarding school, and I don't want to disappoint, so let me say this from the outset: yes, it was exactly like Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Burnished, brick towers framed an ancient boarding house, replete with turrets and tunnels. Classrooms and corridors brimmed with crowds of pre-pubescent young men just waiting for an opportune moment to experiment with their wands.

Wingardium leviosa.

Petrificus totalus.

Expelliarmus.

As luck would have it, I soon picked up some talented wrist work to apply to my own wood.

Jerking off really defined the boarding school experience to be honest. It was all anyone really wanted to do or talk about.

I remember bunches of guys standing around in the communal showers jerking off together while I diligently brushed every square millimetre of my watering mouth.

Actually, sometimes they would branch out of the conversational circle jerk and want to talk about sex. With girls.

And as I was only interested in about 50% of that conversation, when the boys started talking about girls, I started day dreaming about my roommate, Brendan. Brendan Tool.

Good name, right?

Brendan was always on my mind. Day and night. His heavily gelled, brown hair. His handsome face, friendly persona, throaty laugh. The perfect curve of his perfect ass...

I often snuck glances at him in the shower too. Glances that would linger as he soaped up his tanned, smooth, body, rinsed off the suds, dried himself and then made his way over to the sink, where he would put on his bed time boxers: silky, shiny satin, with a Superman print. I spent a lot of time looking at the Man of Steel in those days.

I remember wandering into Brendan's cubicle in our room one day, when no one was around. I think I was there for an innocent reason, to borrow a pen or smoke a cigarette out the window. And there he was, strewn lazily, sexily across the bed: Superman.

I stared at him for a moment, checked to make sure I was alone, and then gingerly picked him up from Brendan's pillow. Gently, as if he were the most precious thing in the world.

I caressed the silky fabric and held Superman up to the light.

And then without a second thought, I pressed him up to my face.

The aroma of adolescent man filled my senses, that fabric having clung to Brendan's tool for hours, days, months as he slept.

The first moment of truth came with those boxer shorts.

It was the first time I admitted to myself that I was attracted other guys. Internally. Silently. But an important step nonetheless.

Years later I found Brendan on social media and saw that he was happily settled in Melbourne...with a boyfriend! I was so touched to think we might have experienced some of the same things together at boarding school.

And I couldn't help but wonder whether he'd ever cautiously wandered over to my bed, checked to make sure no one was around, and started to inhale Homer Simpson.

But I also felt a little sad. Sad that we weren't living in a world in which I could coyly bail Brendan up after class, the Basics of Biology covering my adolescent erection, and say 'Hey, do you want to go out with me?'

There's something so beautiful about awkward, high school romance.

Unfortunately, boarding school wasn't the panacea we'd all hoped it would be. Despite my steadfast commitment to remain closeted, people began to notice my points of difference and, once again, let me know that they made me a lesser human.

A sharp drop in classroom attendance ensued. But I made up for it with more drugs and more alcohol. And then it was time to come home. Back to Deniliquin High, to see if round 2 might be more successful.

I was happier, I guess. I was growing up, and so was everybody else. But that toxic glob of phlegm had left a pretty stubborn stain.

"Faggot!"

I'd been sitting around, snacking at a local cafe, feet up, relaxing with a couple of girlfriends. We were eating hot chips with chicken salt and BBQ sauce. A ritual. We were around 15.

The noise came out of the blue, "Faggot!", along with a random punch in the face.

I sprang up, shocked, and looked up at my attacker who was already striding angrily, purposefully down the street. Chin up, chest out.

I'd never seen him before in my life. But he clearly knew who I was. Or at least, *what* I was.

He turned on his heels and strode back towards me. "He's a **fucking faggot!**", he announced to the stunned people at the café, as if that would be an adequate explanation for his behaviour and they'd all calmly go back to their meals.

I pulled out my mobile phone to call home for a lift. I wasn't comfortable walking with this guy around.

"Are you calling the cops?!" he screamed, standing over me.

I was speechless. Terrified. How could a person who I'd never met harbor so much hatred for me? How could he be so sure that I was gay? And why was it a problem?

It was the final straw. The last hate-filled husk.

The high school taunts had now spilled out onto the street and Deniliquin was no longer a safe place to be.

The whole family moved this time. To Melbourne. And it was refreshing.

I remember the wide streets, the tall buildings, the seasons. Deniliquin didn't ever seem to have seasons, just heat, husks and prejudice. And Ballarat was basically just masturbation en masse to ward off an encroaching chill.

I enrolled to finish year 12 in a very special high school called Swinburne Senior Secondary College.

It was a college for misfits drawn from all over Australia. Hippies, punks, goths, gays. Not just the students, but the teachers too. A mixed bag of non-conformity. The school was quite novel, more like a university than a high school. No uniform, a 4-day week, you called the teachers by their first names and everybody smoked, so nobody got in trouble.

Pretty soon I'd graduated and settled into Melbourne life, and much of the homophobia was drowned out. I was getting older now. 17. And there was something exotic and interesting about fluid sexuality.

Despite all the odds though, the pre-school dresses, Superman sniffing, phlegm and "Faggots!" hurled my way, I still hadn't managed to come out to my family. It was getting a little ridiculous.

Looking back, I think it was because of those early years in Deni and then again throughout high school, when people just kept telling me I was gay. I think I was waiting for the opportunity to tell *them*. It was my news after all.

Obviously the hints kept coming, mainly relating to my general behaviour and interests from birth.

I was camp as fuck.

All my friends were women.

I wanted to be a theatre performer.

I used to ask Mum to tape *Queer As Folk* for me every Friday night then drop me at Melbourne's biggest gay bar.

And if all that wasn't enough, the internet search history was probably a rainbow flag. Not many straight dudes regularly peruse guysuckingdicks.com.

It wasn't until I started dating though that I ended up bursting out of the closet in a cloud of glitter with a couple of high-kicks and a shimmy, drunk at a family dinner.

Mum and Dad almost flat-lined from lack of surprise. I was so offended.

In Melbourne the homophobia was far less prevalent. In fact I was shocked when it would surface, which sometimes made it worse. Things often sting a bit more when you let your guard down, so I learned to just not let it down very often at all. I became preternaturally defensive. Not that it helped much.

I remember walking through Flinders Street Station one day, older now, around 19. I was striding down a platform to meet a friend when I heard it again: "Faggot!". I looked up and was met by a familiar scene: two guys snickering as they walked away. Chins up, chests out.

I'm not sure what it was that gave me away that afternoon. My choice of scarf, perhaps? It was winter and I'd knitted it myself.

Not long afterwards I was walking home from work, casually, normally, up Little Collins Street. No scarf this time, just a plain, black suit. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a man cross the road towards me but thought nothing of it, until the onslaught came.

Two swift punches to the nose and mouth, followed by the familiar, "Faggot!" as he marched back across the road and down the hill, teeming with rage.

That one didn't have his chin up or his chest out. He was struggling with his own demons by the looks of things.

The scars are still with me. Literally, I was left with a noticeably larger top lip, which eventually, being the eternal optimist (well, kinda), I managed to fashion into rather a fabulous comedy character. An embrace of all the things they didn't like about me, and some that I didn't like about myself.

Good years followed, so I won't bother going into detail. No one wants to read a happy story. And now I live in a small town again. Alice Springs. Smack bang in the Red Centre.

How I dreaded the thought of being back in the closed-minded countryside when I first moved here. Feared the prospect of falling victim to discrimination and bigotry again.

But the NT is far more accepting than I ever could have imagined. I'd be more comfortable kissing my boyfriend at the local watering hole here than in half the bars in Melbourne.

My big, lop-sided lips are a constant reminder of past vitriol though. Vitriol and lingering regret.

I wish I'd been braver back then. Been someone who had paved a blazing trail and stood up and spoken out and made life easier for those who came after. I just couldn't see how the world would ever accept me, how it would ever accept any of us, so I hid.

But attitudes towards homosexuality clearly aren't static, and Australia is progressing as we make ourselves known. As we permeate the artistic and cultural landscape of the nation.

I love being a part of that now. Being unapologetically gay.

Where once I was silent, now I tell my story. Wear my scars on my sleeve.

And so far, people seem to be enjoying it.

On Eagles' Wings

by Stephen Enciso

Like most children, I was very inquisitive. I wanted to know how things worked – how everything worked. I asked about the stove, the washing machine, rainbows, traffic lights, etc. I would ask many questions, and many more supplementary questions. Simple explanations were not enough. I needed total information. As I grew older, my curiosity expanded into the abstract realm and I no longer really cared how a stove worked. I became far more engaged in grander questions, questions of meaning and purpose. I wanted to know the answer to: “Why are we?” and other such existentialist queries.

At the same time that I began to grapple with these difficult, non-physical concepts, I was also regularly attending church. Every Sunday, my mum would take me to mass, in Palmerston, and it had been that way ever since I was baptised. Up until that point in my life, Catholicism had firmly imprinted itself as a guiding principle. To a young me, the idea of God was an awe-inspiring otherworldly presence. It was something so much *more* than that which was imaginable – an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent energy. It was an incredibly powerful force, existing perfectly and ultimately in an elevated, divine state.

Inevitably, as I began to toy with deeper questions, I looked to my religion for the answers. I remember reading the bible at least three times. I wanted to know what I was supposed to do with my life, and sure enough, the bible had the answer: I was to devote myself to the worship of the Lord, for that was the reason for my existence. For the first time, I had understood religion

on my own terms. I had derived meaning from something which had been a pervasive feature of my life. But since I was a hyper-curious, restless adolescent, I was always quick to identify further points of clarification, so my exploration of my faith created significantly more questions than it actually answered. I went into a state of reflective overdrive. I asked “why?” a lot. Too much, in fact. Fr. Tom, the local priest, waved me away in annoyance. Deprived of dialogue, I had to turn inwards. I became really good at that kind of metaphysical examination of the world which culminates in the sentiment: “Oh, but what’s the point of anything?” Luckily, I resurfaced from that chasm.

As I weaved more and more complex webs inside my mind, of questions and ideas, I found it increasingly difficult to reconcile my Catholic faith with my person. I perceived myself in a paradox: that if I believed in God, I would not question his existence; I questioned his existence, therefore I did not believe in God. It scared me that I could entertain doubt because it meant that I was not a true believer. I did not find comfort in the reassurance from others that they also, often, had doubts. I felt that my doubts were on a much deeper level. It worried me that I could not agree with some of the things that I read in the bible, such as Leviticus 18:22, even if they were just metaphors. There were apparent contradictions which made me feel uneasy and confused.

But despite my turmoil I still prayed every night to God. I prayed for the health of my family, for good fortune. I wondered if I had to pray for world peace as well, or if someone already had it covered. Most intensely, I prayed for God to show me a sign that he existed (cliché?). It is worth mentioning that I was very loyal to my Catholic faith. I thought mine was the correct one and that the others had it wrong. It was unthinkable not to worship Mary! Not to cross oneself! But I started questioning all that too. Was it not pure chance that had me born into a Catholic family rather than a Muslim family? This thought worried me because it did not quite fit with the idea that God had a plan for us all.

At some point – I can’t quite remember how – I discovered the works of Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist. I was a massive reader back then, but I mostly read fictional, fun-filled novels. *The God Delusion* was the

first serious book I took on, and it changed everything. The opening line of chapter two seared itself into my mind:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Each of those adjectives felt like an arrow in the chest, so brutally were they deployed. And the gall to call the Old Testament *fiction*! Nowhere had I heard anyone talk irreverently of the Lord. It is very difficult, I have realised, to hold an idea with any sort of conviction which is not the norm in your social circle. I had all of these seemingly endless questions about my religion and some timidly developed answers, but no confidence in them. With Dawkins, I finally had an authoritative reference with which I boldly made a stance on the issues that had plagued me for so long. He gave me the ammunition, the resources, to articulate myself in ways that could not easily be refuted. And so it came to pass that I left my Catholic faith behind.

For a while I was angry, bitter and resentful. I could not understand why I had been forced to be Catholic. I felt betrayed by my parents, by my church, and I loathed religion in all of its forms. I wanted to see it expelled from humanity for the injustice that it had done to me. It had caused me to believe something which was not true! Even worse, it had tried to get me to believe it unquestioningly. I remember thinking that religious faith was the world's largest conspiracy.

With my newfound belief – or lack thereof – I acquired an arrogant personality trait. Dawkins had set me alight, set me a-flight. I soared above my peers, soared above my parents. Only I had the full picture. I had 'seen the light' and it was my duty to 'help' religious friends by pointing out where their beliefs were simply wrong. They would thank me for it. So, I often worked myself into frenzies which descended into spiteful comments and ridicule. I was very black and white about it. I argued that if you were going

to be religious then you at least had to follow all of the rules, aggressively insisting that my friends simply could not be Christian because they did not want homosexuals to be put to death. This phase in my life carried over from middle school to high school and it was epitomized by a spectacular event.

In my final year of high school I was elected School Captain. Suddenly I had power and a platform. Every two weeks there was a whole school assembly at which I had the opportunity to speak to over nine hundred people. I decided that this assembly was the perfect forum for me to preach my ideas about religion. The conditions were right: it was the moment to strike. Now, my school – which doesn't exist anymore – was owned by the Anglican and Uniting churches and so every term there would be a compulsory chapel service, but that was about the extent of the religious involvement in the curriculum. By no means at all was religion shoved down our throats. Nevertheless, I was on a mission. The night before an assembly early in the year, I stayed up late drafting a speech. Into it I poured all of my pent-up post-religious rage. I knew I was about to do something very controversial. So I told no one about the speech.

When it was time for me to open the assembly, I fumbled about in my pocket for the piece of paper, cleared my throat and nervously began: "There is a problem in this school, and that problem is compulsory chapel service." I remember stunned silence, from both the staff and the students. I went on. I explained the changes in the world, explained how the triumph of science over superstition simply made religious belief untenable in our modern day. I painted the school as a cunning institution usurping our very capacity to think. What a grave injustice we suffered! Nobody so much as twitched in the couple of minutes it took me to finish speaking. When I was done, I felt righteous. I felt like I was changing the world.

Afterwards, there were mixed reactions. Mr. Cassar, the Physics teacher, went out of his way to shake my hand. Mrs. Cummins, the Biology teacher, refused to even look at me in that morning's class. I had polarised the school. Inevitably I was called to the principal's office for the verdict. I was thrilled to see that a number of students from different year levels had turned up in support. I steeled myself. I thought I was going to lose my captancy, but I

would go down a martyr. I would die gloriously. In fact, the principal calmly explained that I had made a poor diplomatic judgement and that my speech had upset the Reverend. I had made her cry.

I went home that day shocked at the power of words, mere words. I had not set out to harm any particular individual. My target, my enemy, was religion *per se*, and yet it was the Reverend, a living, breathing person, a kind woman, who had been hurt by my words. I had never made anyone cry before. I realised how inconsiderate I had been. *Of course* she would have felt like my speech was a personal attack. After all, she was the one who did the chapel services. I was dumbfounded. I did not know how to weigh all the cheer and congratulations against the criticism and condemnation. The Reverend's tear-filled eyes haunted me and I also cried that night.

From then on, I toned down the militancy. I began to question if the approach I was taking was the right one. This period of questioning took the better part of two years and many varied experiences, but I finally realised what the problem was: I had lost touch with that incredible curiosity that had given me such illumination in the first place. In my indignant haze I had become an arrogant, self-assured bully, just like Richard Dawkins himself. That was the point – I had wanted to be him! It had felt so good to inhabit that position of certainty. I truly thought I was invincible. But actually, I had done a grave injustice to myself because I had run the risk of becoming permanently prejudiced, of losing touch with the mandate of continual inquiry and justification that I'd had as a child. It was obvious that I needed to re-engage with the most fundamental questions and re-evaluate how to best live my life.

In the years since, I have slowly been repairing a fractured relationship with religion. Though I remain a nonbeliever, I have allowed myself to celebrate some of the positive things to come out of it. The idea of selfless devotion, of devotion to a community of people – an idea so completely embodied in my mother – has no better advocate than religion. And the teachings of Jesus are simply phenomenal. His message of love, compassion and openness to the Other is so relevant to our world today. I do continue to dislike the institutionalisation of it all, but I hold a more balanced view than I did before.

Plus, I've come to see that religion is not the true enemy. Not by a long shot. What keeps most of the world in abject poverty? The answer is not religion.

The most profound thing that my life has taught me so far is that I should never stop questioning. Indeed, if I could prescribe a mantra for life it would be: "inquire, critique, justify!" Only in this way can we ever really do justice to each other and get closer to the truth. For a while, I had Bertrand Russell's words on my wall:

The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the cooperation or consent of his deliberate reason.

If we work on casting aside the prejudices that restrain us, previously unfamiliar possibilities may present themselves in a plausible light and we may become unsure of our convictions. This is a very vulnerable position to be in, but it is important. It is important for unlearning assumptions, about ourselves and about others, that we have internalised from the way we have been socialised. It is important for moving towards a more just society. I think a commitment to self-criticism and self-doubt leads to humility and grace, much needed qualities in the pursuit of justice.

It can, of course, be done wrong. It should not take the form of Descartes' *Meditations*. While I admire Descartes a lot for his intelligence and the clarity of his prose, I don't think that the programme of radical self-doubt he promotes is very useful for the pursuit of justice. You need to be acting in the world, trying to change people's lives for the better, not simply writing about it from the armchair. You need to take risks and be prepared to be wrong.

Through constant reflection, application and evaluation we propel the truth process forwards, discarding that which is false, which may have deceived us, in favour of that which now seems true. This process, which most certainly repeats itself, moves us towards ever greater heights of understanding and makes us better-informed, more ethically-minded people.

My commitment to philosophical inquiry has led to many changes in my life that I would never have expected, but which I have embraced wholeheartedly. I know that there will be many more times that I'll have the rug pulled from under me and, to be honest, I can't wait.

The Birds

by James Murray

What he liked most was the birds. He liked the coral, too, of course, and the fish, in all their brilliant splendour, and he floated above the reef transfixed, mesmerised, sent to seventh heaven, but every now and then he'd lift his head up into the air, to adjust his goggles, to let some water out or put some in and out, and he'd tread water and look back at the steep green mountainsides towering over the narrow beach, and he'd hear the chirp and coo and crow and warble of birds. He'd hear the individual coo, the individual warble, above the occasional outboard droning on the back of an outrigger, above the occasional motorbike making its way along the coastal road, above the occasional generator of the workmen on their building site. He'd hear them above the shouts and laughter of the young children playing in the shallows in the late afternoon. He'd hear them, though the reef was a full hundred metres from the shore. He'd hear them at midday, when they were at their most quiet.

He'd hear them because the land was alive with them, and because he'd listen out for them, and because it was *so quiet* that nothing drowned them out. The sea was still, the air unblemished, adorned only with their jewels.

He'd hear them, treading water. He'd hear each piping note, each piping throat. Then he'd put his head under and hear the white-noise static of coral-crackle, and his breathing through the snorkel, the even quieter world.

It was the birds he remembered most, back in the traffic-soaked suburbs, in the sealed air-conned rooms, the ceiling fans and hum of fridges. He remembered the coral and the fish, too, of course, and when people asked

him what he got up to he'd say 'snorkelling', but it was the birds, the crystalline birdsong, that struck him most, that penetrated him deepest, that stayed with him, that rose within him as he waited to cross the road, as he sat at his desk, as he lay on his bed. It was those moments, looking back at the steep green mountainsides towering over the narrow beach, and hearing the birds! These were the greatest moments of his life. He wondered what it would have been like, to have never heard those birds, to have lived a barren crammed-solid existence without them.

He had breathed them in. They had entered his blood stream, and now they flew throughout him, singing.

John caught the slow boat to Kutampi, on Nusa Penida. He knew nothing about Kutampi, but that's where the boat was going, with eight women returning from the market at Lembongan, where he'd spent a night. Penida was a new place for him, a new way to escape the tourists, to snorkel, to walk, to read and write, and speak his broken, slowly-improving Indonesian with people who had no English. And if he could catch some gamelan, that'd be great. A musician, John had a fascination with Balinese gamelan.

Kutampi had two 'homestay'. Fifty metres apart, they were almost identical: by the beach, with two rooms each, in backyards behind shopfronts, owned by men who spoke no English, managed by their some-English sons. One homestay was a year old, the other barely finished; neither were in the guide book. John went to Wayan's first, because Wayan had literally grabbed John off the boat, saying, 'hotel', pointing. He dumped John and his backpack on the veranda, and went off to get his son, who was there within a minute.

'How long Mr John stay?'

'Don't know.'

'Because Thursday my friend from Australia come. Four people have two room for three day.'

'Okay,' said John. It was Sunday.

John liked Kutampi. The reef and the neighbourhood and the room and garden were good. Wayan's son, though, liked alcohol, and music with his mates in the yard, playing guitars and singing, and John joined in and jammed with them, but by Thursday it wasn't the quiet place he wanted. So he didn't mind packing up and going fifty metres to Made's, where Made and his sons were friendly but shy with him, and he had the garden to himself, to write in the mornings, and the afternoons, finding space amongst the swimming, eating, sleeping, walking, reading and talking. And so, even after the Australians left Wayan's, John stayed on at Made's.

He'd see Wayan daily, and they'd chat, in Indonesian, Wayan speaking slowly so John could keep up. But John staying on at Made's put a strain in the relationship.

'Why Mr John no stay Wayan?' Wayan's son said it.

John didn't beat himself up about it. What was he supposed to do? Leave Kutampi and not come back, to avoid upsetting anyone?

He stayed for three weeks. He remembered it later as a long idyll, a long slow dissolution of the mass of his life. At times, floating face-down above the reef, his arms and legs fallen, his eyelids would droop and close, and he'd awake, reborn, to a world astonishingly beautiful, complex and varied. It happened at other times: in the *warung*, lingering after his *campur*, washed by the unfamiliar Penidan patois about him, or up the steamy mountainside, his glasses fogging, he lifted off, he unhinged, he let go. He lost himself in his walking and in his breathing, and in the groove of his writing, and he slept long and deep, impossibly rich with dreams.

He stretched his stay to be there for *Nyepi*, the New Year celebration, and their *Ogoh-Ogoh*, the purification, the scaring away of evil spirits. He'd been hearing them rehearse their gamelan in the late afternoons, and seeing them make their giant statues, seeing the four- and five-metre mythological demons take form, and finally the horned, hatchet-bearing, horse-haired ogres stood on their bamboo platforms at the crossroads for the days before, blocking traffic. The village was alive with religious ceremony, and John

marvelled at the uniformity: everyone was ancient Hindu, everyone was ancient Penidan animist, and even Wayan's son's muso-gangsta mates – tattoos, dyed hair – were unwaveringly strong on it, sarong, white shirt and headpiece.

The Ogoh-Ogoh started at nightfall. The five-metre figure was held aloft by twenty-four men, six to a side, each with a bamboo pole to a shoulder. The four-metre monster had five to a side, twenty. These were all men in their late teens and twenties. The thirty men who stood around their gamelan were older. Most held their array: bronze gongs in one hand and stick in the other, or cymbals, or flutes. The biggest gongs hung from poles that rested on the shoulders of two men, with a third to strike. John recognised faces: the fisherman, the guy at the shop, the guy who sleeps on the street, and there's Made's son, in the band. Wayan and Made wore their 'cultural police' uniforms and held walkie-talkies.

Suddenly, the drummer called them together, and a groove began, and a trip, the circus ambling and stopping, ambling and stopping the mile along the coast to the village of Buyuk, ambling and stopping the mile back, then the mile onwards to Sampalan, then back to Kutampi, two hours, and the orchestra played without a moment's break, and the men shouldering the Ogoh-Ogoh performed their marathon athletics without respite, because in the frequent 'stops' – every at every junction, at every site of significance along the route – they crouched and lifted and whirled and tilted and spun the giant creatures about, lurching them rapidly into the faces of the women and children and old men onlookers, who screamed in terror and excitement.

John was absorbed in the band, walking with them and around them, hearing them, watching them. In Buyuk, he walked away from them, down a dark road to the Buyuk crew, with a thirty-piece orchestra playing the same piece as the Kutampis, their gamelan tuned distinctly Buyuk. He spent a quarter-hour with them, then headed back to the Kutampi crowd for another quarter-hour, then walked ahead and caught the Sampalan Ogoh-Ogoh, then went back to the Kutampis. The scene around him became increasingly wild, increasingly bizarre and dreamlike. People collapsed on the wayside, convulsing,

screaming and arching their backs, and bystanders knelt and put their hands on them, and soon they were sitting up, dazed. Women threw buckets of water over the steaming men shouldering the whirling dipping demons, and as the second hour progressed, John – an atheist, a rationalist – reasoned that a miracle must be occurring, for the human frames to expend so much energy unceasingly for so long. Surely, too, this music, this complexity and precision and ease, was a miracle.

Years later, somewhere else, he met another traveller, an Australian, a musician, and John tried to describe it. 'They had this eight-beat ostinato, the bass gongs going...' and he hummed the bass-line a few times, 'like, funk, and there was this four-note hook, played by four guys, a little gong each, going,' and he sang their tune, and he described the other parts, that held, or varied, or soloed, and by the time he got to the cymbal players and the drummer he was on his feet and waving his arms about, and he knew he had to get to the point. He'd just met this guy.

'The thing is...' he said. 'The thing is, the virtuosity. The insane virtuosity! The drummer! The *Ceng Ceng!* Unbelievable. I've seen nothing like it. You would never find it in Australia. If you gave the Sydney Symphony six months, they couldn't do it. And this was three villages, right? Each little village had its own orchestra, and they play this repertoire specific, and some of it is so complex, you think, savant, genius, freak. How is it possible, to remember such long sequences? More than remember it, they play it, cool as, immaculate. And it's the fisherman, the farmer. Anyway...'

John hadn't made his point. The other guy had stopped listening. They were waiting for a meal. *We don't get it, in Australia. We get musak, in Woollies. We get the three-minute three-chord pop song. We're three-year-olds. We're three on the Richter scale, those guys... They are at the extremes of human accomplishment. They're so in tune with the cosmos they have epileptic fits, tidak apa apa. And there's the reef, intricate, beautiful, glorious, and there's the forest, intricate, beautiful, glorious, and there they are. Plenty of fish. Plenty of food, the soil's fantastic, the rain. So, what do they do? Glorious, intricate, beautiful. They tune the gongs to be slightly out of tune with*

each other, so the beats of slightly-out-of-tuneness are beating, rippling, shimmering, like the forest shimmers in the breeze, like the reef shimmers...
But he couldn't get to his point. The point is... the point is: human beings are capable of so much! The scope of human consciousness, of human spirit – John never said such things – is infinite!

Finally, after a quarter-hour climax back at their home temple, the Kutumpi band stopped, and the young men put their demons down and sprawled on the road, gasping, groaning, vomiting, weeping. John stood there for a few minutes, then he went back to his room, at Made's.

Almost immediately, Wayan was there with him; he must have followed John home; he was still holding his walkie-talkie. He told John – too quickly, and John had to slow him down – that he was going to the mainland in the morning and he wouldn't be back before John left. He wanted to say goodbye now, and happy travels, and please come back. And he wanted John to give him a shirt, to remember him by, so John gave him a T shirt. Wayan pulled a little white plastic bag from the folds of his sarong and put the shirt in it, and promptly left. Back to his duties, John guessed.

But as quickly as Wayan left, Made and two of his sons were there, agitated. 'What did Wayan want? What did Wayan say? Why was he here?' they wanted to know, some English, some Indonesian.

John sat on his veranda while they frowned and paced about him, and patiently, slowly, repeatedly, he told them what Wayan had said, though he omitted the thing about the shirt. None of their business, he thought, but had they seen the plastic bag? Then he asked his own question.

'Untuk apa? Mengapa? Why do you ask? What is it to you, why Wayan was here?'

They looked at each other, then the best-English son came out with it. 'Wayan bad. Wayan bad man. Very bad. He angry. He say lie. He say I lie. I not say lie, he say lie. He very bad. He problem.'

And John saw the two upstanding families of the village, neighbours, pillars of the church, at war with each other. And on this night of forgiveness and rebirth and spirit purification, John looked into their faces, and a great wave of disappointment washed through him. 'Oh!' he felt, a long, long deflation. 'Oh! It's just like in Australia.'

He packed and left in the morning, walking the white beach to Buyuk. A slow boat was going to Lembongan in the afternoon. He got *kopi* and *campur*, then he grabbed his snorkel and goggles, and, leaving his pack in the warung, he hit the sea, and the reef, here just off the beach. He drifted in the barely perceptible current, and listened to the coral crackle, and his breathing, slow, through the snorkel. And every now and then he lifted his head up into the air, to adjust his goggles, to let some water out or put some in-and-out, and he'd tread water and look back at the steep green mountainsides towering over the narrow beach, and he'd hear the chirp and coo and crow and warble of birds. And John, purified, flew with them in the sunshine, singing.



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Jacob Fajzullin

The Effects of Online Sexual Activity on Adolescent Development and its Implications for Northern Territory Middle and Secondary Schools

73

Finalists

Julian R Murphy

Bush Court: Rough justice at courts in remote Indigenous communities

85

Adelle Sefton-Rowston

Greater Expectations: prison writing and its effect on prison transformation

95

The Effects of Online Sexual Activity on Adolescent Development and its Implications for Northern Territory Middle and Secondary Schools

by Jacob Fajzullin

Introduction

While young people's accessibility to and proficiency with the internet and online devices has revolutionised education and continues to bring forth many virtues for social connectivity and attainment of knowledge, the hegemony of the online world also poses a number of dilemmas. The prevalence of young people partaking in Online Sexual Activity (OSA) is having a number of effects on development of contemporary adolescents; while some of these impacts can be considered beneficial for sexual exploration and identity, a range of studies across different cultures have found that participation in OSA can have detrimental effects on the development of adolescents. While these challenges create wide ranging consequences for peer groups and families, secondary schools are also being confronted with the consequences of their students' involvement in OSA. Research demonstrates policies which ban the online practices of adolescents or shame adolescents with punitive measures are further damaging young people rather than addressing the problem. Thus, middle

and secondary schools in the Northern Territory must meet their obligations to positively develop their students by embracing new perspectives which help adolescents safely navigate the dilemmas of OSA. In order for schools to address OSA and its effects on the sexual development of adolescents, a number of questions must be posed regarding how prevalent OSA is among adolescents, the risks and harms of OSA, theories which have been proposed to comprehend OSA, what major studies indicate about the significant OSA dilemmas facing female students, and finally, which approaches can be used to address OSA by those working with young people in secondary schools. Firstly, it is important to understand exactly what constitutes Online Sexual Activity.

What is Online Sexual Activity and how prevalent is it among adolescents?

OSA encompasses a range of different activities involving technology and sexuality of which secondary schools should be informed. Boies (2002, p. 77) defines OSA as the use of the internet for any practice involving sexuality for the purposes of “recreation, entertainment, exploration, support, education, commerce, and/or seeking out sexual or romantic partners”. A specific type of OSA known as cybersex involves sexual gratification stimulated by partaking in online chat sessions (Beyens & Eggermont, 2014) which can involve online masturbation by oneself or with other online participants (Boies, 2002) and often includes the use of webcams to stream video content. Moreover, sexting is another key term pertinent to the study of OSA and adolescents. As explained by Comartin, Comartin, & Kernsmith (2013, p. 38) sexting involves “the use of technology to send or receive sexually explicit messages and photos”. Such technology can include smartphones and webcams. The basic definition of sexting has been built upon by Charteris, Gregory, & Masters (2016, p. 2) to also include “ephemeral messaging” which involves sending image and video content which are shared only temporarily through smartphone applications like “Snapchat,... Blink and Glimpse”. The authors note that such technology commonly elicits sexual content which is intended to be fleetingly available but can be recorded by receivers.

Research indicates that it is relatively common for Australian adolescents to participate in OSA and this should be of particular concern to the secondary schools. To provide context, a study on Canadian university students conducted by Boies (2002) found that 44% of the students who participated in OSA had started partaking in such activities before the age of 16 (p. 82). Obvious limitations of this study include that it is approximately fifteen years old and that it was conducted in Canada rather than Australia. However, many studies have built upon Boies' initial research to further explore the prevalence of adolescents active in OSA. In a more recent, Australian study, *The National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2013* (Mitchell, Patrick, Heywood, Blackman, and Pitts, 2014) involved more than 2000 secondary school students across every jurisdiction of Australia. Mitchell et al. (2014, p. 63) found that 25.9% of participants had sent a sexually explicit photo or video of themselves and 41.9% reported receiving a sexually explicit photo or video from someone else. The study indicated that males are marginally more likely to partake in OSA than females. Alarming, nearly one in ten participants reported that they had sent a sexually explicit image or video of someone else. A major strength of this study is that it was conducted with a range of Australian secondary school students from a diversity of backgrounds.

An increasingly problematic concomitant of OSA has recently been named image-based sexual abuse which has legal and well-being ramifications for secondary schools. The Australian Government Office of Children's eSafety Commissioner defines image-based abuse as "when intimate or sexual photos or videos are shared online without consent, either to humiliate or shame someone, or for the 'entertainment' of others" (2017, Online). DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2016, p. 2) explain that image-based sexual abuse is often referred to by the media as "revenge porn" and that this "non-consensual pornography or involuntary pornography" is perpetrated not only by ex-partners, but by others for a variety of other reasons, and sometimes for "no particular reason at all". While not yet published (at the time of writing), Monash University (2017, Online) and RMIT University recently conducted a survey of 4200 Australians regarding image-based sexual abuse. According to the press release, research indicates that approximately

"1 in 5 Australians" are victims of image-based abuse, "1 in 3 people aged 16–19" reported at least once instance of "image victimisation" and that males and females were equally at risk of being victims (Monash University, 2017, Online). A current limitation of this study is that it has not yet been published and therefore specifics regarding methodology and samples are as yet unavailable.

What dilemmas do young people face regarding Online Sexual Activity?

OSA should be considered a serious dilemma for adolescents when the associated harms of cybersex, sexting and image-based abuse are taken into account. Firstly it is important to acknowledge OSA can be broadly considered as sexual exploration which, according to Koyama, Corliss, & Santelli (2009), is healthy and important for adolescent development. However, there are also consequences of OSA which are detrimental for the health and wellbeing of young people. Gabriel (2014, p. 105) states that adolescent participation in OSA can "compress childhood and adolescence" and negatively accelerate sexual development for younger adolescents. Englander (2016) found that sexting, particularly for those younger than secondary school age or not in a stable relationship, commonly caused trauma in participants. Moreover, adolescent's negative experiences with OSA are associated with risks such as "sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, substance abuse, ...cyberbullying, ...incarceration, depression, and even suicide" (Ahern & Mechling, 2013, p. 23). The severe potential consequences of OSA for Australians have been further explored in the aforementioned Monash University–RMIT University Study (2017, Online) which found that 75 percent of victims whose images were shared without consent experienced "moderate to severe depression and/or anxiety"; many participants in the study also reported feeling that their personal safety was at risk. Considering the prevalence of OSA and its potentially severe consequences for partakers, it is clear that secondary schools must be aware of dilemma and take appropriate strategies to protect the wellbeing of students.

It is also crucial for those who work with adolescents in secondary schools to understand which characteristics put students at risk for the

possible negative consequences of OSA so they can give focused support. Adolescents are far more vulnerable to the negative consequences of OSA than adults as young people more frequently use the internet for leisure, partake in more risk taking behaviour and are experiencing an increased period of "sensation seeking" (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010, p. 439). Comartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith (2013, p. 39) suggest that adolescents are biologically more at risk of OSA behaviour the "decision making and risk-taking regions of the brain" do not develop until the late twenties. While it is clear that adolescents are more prone to risk taking with OSA than adults, there are also adolescents who are more at risk than others. Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Zheng, & Drew (2009) argue that youth who have difficulty forming interpersonal relationships and those experiencing depression or mental illness are particularly at risk of partaking in OSA compared to other adolescents. The authors also suggest that females are more at risk than males to partake in OSA but this is contradicted by Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter (2010) and the recent Monash University-RMIT University study (2017, Online). While it can be difficult to discern exactly what makes an adolescent more likely to participate in online risk behaviour, some interesting theories have been proposed regarding adolescents' motivations for participating in OSA.

What do key studies indicate to Northern Territory secondary schools about the substantial dilemmas OSA poses to adolescent females?

It is crucial that secondary schools are informed how OSA raises significant dilemmas for adolescent females. While males and females have been shown to equally participate in OSA (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010), young women are "more likely to be negatively impacted by" practices like cybersex and sexting and there is a suggested link between OSA and "gendered sexual violence targeting women" (Walker, Sanki, & Temple-Smith, 2011). Choi, Van Ouytsel, & Temple (2016) conducted a study of 450 adolescent girls to explore the connections between offline sexual coercion and involvement in OSA. Alarmingly, their findings show adolescent females who experience offline sexual coercion are more likely to be pressured into sending explicit images or receive explicit images without consent and vice versa. Choi, Van Ouytsel,

& Temple (2016, p. 167) note that this means sexual coercion is “no longer limited to in-person interactions” and perpetrators can “use coerced images to further harm women with blackmail or threats”. Secondary schools must be aware that when OSA incidents occur with adolescent females, this “can be a marker of lifetime victimisation of sexual coercion” (Choi, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2016, p. 167). Strengths of the study include that it included a relatively large sample of 450 adolescents, compared to many of the studies on adolescent females restricted to small focus groups, as part of an ongoing longitudinal study. However, weaknesses of the study include that it involved self-reporting and was regionally based in Southeast Texas which means it may not be an accurate representation of the rest of the United States or other Western nations like Australia (Choi, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2016, p. 167).

Through OSA, young women are particularly at risk of exploitation due to the emergence of value systems based on explicit images. Ringrose & Harvey (2015, p. 205) conducted a study of “mediated body parts, gendered reward, and sexual shame in teens’ sexting images”. The study found that within secondary school peer groups, value systems and hierarchies of images or videos of body parts are established. Ringrose & Harvey (2015, p. 210) state that boys could attain value by collecting images of girls’ bodies in “a system peer ratings” where images of females deemed less likely to send an explicit photograph would garner “greater reward for the boy if he acquired one”. This economy of explicit images of young females is problematic and has recently been observed in Australian secondary schools with websites being created specifically to collect and request image-based abuse content of adolescent girls (Hunt, 2016, Online). A perceived limitation of Ringrose & Harvey’s (2015) study is that it only involved 35 adolescents aged 13 – 15 in London. Obviously, this is a very small sample in a geographically restricted area. However, the research was conducted through a combination of “focus groups and interviews” (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015, p. 207); compared to some of the aforementioned large-scale studies based on electronic surveys, a strength of focus groups and interviews is that responses are in much greater depth and a personalised approach could provide far more honest insight into the OSA experience of adolescents.

What approaches should be implemented in Northern Territory Middle and Secondary Schools to address the developmental dilemmas associated with Online Sexual Activity?

Secondary schools must take informed action to implement policies and procedures to address the dilemma of OSA and its impact on students. Manzo (2009, p. 3) states that OSA isn't merely a dilemma for student well-being, but schools' failure to implement protocols which address OSA is resulting in "serious [legal] trouble" for educators which is evident in a number of lawsuits cited by the author. According to Gabriel (2014, p.106), there are three main ways schools are responding to OSA: the first method involves attempting to restrict or entirely ban adolescents' access to online media which an "ultimately unhelpful" response; the second type of response involves imparting blame on the adolescents involved in OSA which supports the outdated deficit approach to youth development resulting in the "demonisation of young people"; the third option emphasises educating young people about "ethical and safe media use" and encourages secondary school students to "critically engage with what they consume". Here, the third option of education seems to be the most sensible and effective approach. An example of OSA education are the films, *Let's Fight it Together and Exposed*, which Slonje, Smith, & Frisen (2012) believe are an effective way of educating about OSA. However, Dobson & Ringrose (2016, p. 9) directly criticise the aforementioned films as a form of "sext education" which promotes a culture of victim blaming and invigorates "discourses of sexual shame". While there are many sources criticising secondary schools' approaches to OSA and adolescent development, it is important to focus on perspectives which explore how the dilemma can be best addressed.

There are some effective approaches and strategies Northern Territory middle and secondary schools can take to effectively address the OSA dilemma with their students. Firstly, Ahern & Mechling (2013, p. 26) argue that schools must be informed on the risks, warnings and behaviour associated with OSA and "proactively educate youth, parents and the community". Some other approaches emphasised by Ahern and Mechline (2013, p. 26) include incorporating OSA in the school curricula, creating partnerships with parents and the community so warning signs and risks in students can

be recognised, develop concepts of positive body image with students to establish that “they are in control of who sees their body”, and create a team in each secondary school to address the OSA dilemma which should include school nurses and counsellors. Moreover, the Office of the Victorian Privacy Commissioner (2013, Online) has developed an excellent resource which could be used to initially introduce OSA awareness into secondary schools; *So You Got Naked Online...* assists teachers in educating students about what sexting is and its risk but, more importantly, encourages reflection after being involved in sexting and where to obtain help. It is important to empower adolescents rather than shame and vilify them for participation in OSA.

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach should be adopted by Northern Territory middle and secondary schools to best address the OSA dilemma while maintaining the well-being of students. As aforementioned, focusing on the deficit approach by punishing, shaming and victim-blaming students for partaking in OSA is detrimental to their development and does not address the dilemma (Gabriel, 2014; Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). Instead, Gavin, Catalano, & Markham (2010, p. 1) assert that the PYD model, which recognises the agency and strengths of adolescents while bolstering “the adolescent’s ability to respond to developmental changes in effective ways”, is the best approach to address sexual education and, therefore, dilemmas posed such as OSA. This is due to the proven ability of PYD programs to help adolescent students to “strengthen relationships and skills, embed them in positive networks of supportive adults” (Gavin, Catalano, & Markham, 2010, p. 1) as well as building resilience which prepares young people to respond to challenges posed by negative OSA such as image-based sexual abuse. Supporting the PYD approach in the context of OSA, Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Zheng, & Drew (2011, p. 89) write that schools must develop in their students “problem solving, decision making, communication, assertiveness...” and assist students to form supportive offline relationships with teachers, parents and peers in order to prevent negative consequences of OSA but also build resilience for when they occur.

Conclusion

Online Sexual Activity, which encompasses practices like sexting, cybersex and image-based abuse, is a contemporary adolescent dilemma which poses unique challenges to secondary schools in the Northern Territory. While OSA can sometimes be a relatively harmless exploration of sexuality, it is more likely to have harmful impacts on the development of young people with research demonstrating that young people who partake in OSA have a higher risk of substance abuse, sexual risk taking, mental illness, and being victims of sexual coercion. Adolescent females particularly face OSA associated dangers not associated with young males. Ultimately, it is important that Northern Territory schools are informed regarding OSA and base preventative strategies and interventions on Positive Youth Development principles rather than a deficit approach involving punitive measures and shaming.

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Bush Court: Rough justice at courts in remote Indigenous communities

by Julian R Murphy

One hundred years ago, colonial criminal law applied to Indigenous people in the bush was rough justice, if it was any sort of justice at all. Historical surveys describe police officers and judges visiting remote communities in a whirlwind of terrifyingly swift and often arbitrary criminal punishment.¹ Over half a century later, in the 1970s, "bush courts", as they came to be known, were more formally incorporated into the criminal justice system. Even then, the courts still focused on efficiency rather than justice. Accounts from that time include descriptions of court hearings in the Alice Springs region where Aboriginal defendants were herded together like cattle for group sentencing exercises unlike anything permitted in the southern capitals.² Now, another fifty years later, we have come some way, but not so far as we might like to believe. People living in remote Indigenous communities continue to be afforded a second-class justice system, the reality of which is largely unknown beyond those communities and the lawyers that service them. This essay seeks to expose the troubling goings on at bush courts to a wider audience.

The early days – colonial courts, Indigenous defendants and early Australian criminal law

The colonial frontier in Australia was a largely lawless zone, at least in the sense of “law” as we of white Australia use that word. There was law and order of sorts, but it was a law of individual application. Powerful white colonials on the frontier would determine which crimes involving Indigenous people ought to be prosecuted, and which excused or ignored. If the whim of those in power tended against the Indigenous person then they might be shackled and painfully transported to the closest colonial outpost with a courthouse. This sometimes meant that people in Alice Springs were marched hundreds of kilometres to board trains ultimately bound for courts on the South Australian coastline.³ The 1905 Western Australian Royal Commission on the Condition of the “Natives” described police indiscriminately arresting Aboriginals and shackling them in chains. The final report was scathing: “your Commissioner has received evidence which demonstrates a most brutal and outrageous state of affairs ... Children of from 14 to 16 years of age are neckchained ... in addition to neck chains, the prisoner may be still further secured with cuffs on his wrists ... or on his ankles.”⁴

In the Northern Territory, “Native Courts” were established to administer justice to Indigenous people on what were called “reserves”. These courts had special powers to impose punishments above and beyond what could be imposed on non-Indigenous people. For example, an Indigenous person sentenced to a caning could receive 8 more cane strokes than a non-Indigenous person sentenced for the same crime.⁵ In other States remote areas were under the jurisdiction of Justices of the Peace, or “JPs” as they were colloquially known. In general, JPs were not legally trained, instead they were considered to be police officials.⁶ Obviously, this created a problematic perception (and likely a reality) that the judicial process was an extension of policing. (This perception continues today, with Patrick Dodson describing the perception in some Indigenous communities that police are the “boss of the courts”.)⁷

The advent of the modern "bush court"

The problematic proximity of the judicial and police processes was physically manifested when bush courts were formalised in the 1970s. Starting in 1970 in New South Wales, Indigenous legal aid services began opening across Australia. Apart from providing legal services to Indigenous people in urban courts this development allowed, for the first time, a more regular and formal schedule of courts visiting remote communities (usually once every few months). This was the birth of the modern bush court.

Initially, most bush courts were held at the local police station or a nearby council building. An early Northern Territory legal aid lawyer, and then judge, described the typical bush courtroom in the following terms:

"the Court does not have a proper courtroom, but sits in a small room which is part of the local police station. The furniture is rudimentary, with witnesses in very close proximity to the Bar and Bench. There is scarcely enough room for the Magistrate, prosecutor, defence counsel, accused, witness and interpreter and almost no room for spectators. This creates serious issues about the appearance of the independence of the judiciary."⁸

In some of the most remote communities there was no appropriate building in which to conduct bush courts. This meant that court was held in a tin shed. Reminiscing about these courts, legal aid lawyers describe scores of clients being represented in an unorthodox *en masse* style whereby the single Aboriginal legal aid lawyer would stand up at the start of court and announce that they represented all of the persons accused before the court that day and every person would be saying "not guilty".⁹

Bush court today: fly-in, fly-out justice

Despite being largely unknown outside of legal circles, bush courts continue to operate throughout Australia every week. Writing in 2009, a former Indigenous legal aid manager explained: "Bush courts exist to *process*

Aboriginal people ... in respect of quite minor crimes".¹⁰ The writer, perhaps unintentionally, used the verb "process" and there can be no better way to describe the administration of bush courts; it is conveyor-belt justice delivery.

A typical day¹¹ at bush court sees the judge and court staff arrive in a light plane at around 9am. They will be picked up from the airstrip by a police car, which will drive them to the "courtroom", usually a local council office sometimes not much bigger than a shipping container. One community has even resorted to holding bush court in the kindergarten library¹² Once there, court staff will unpack and assemble their laptops, printers, microphones and recording equipment, like a SWAT team setting up a temporary base on foreign territory. The defence lawyers (normally there will be two) and prosecutor (just one) will have arrived the night before and attempted to meet with clients and witnesses ahead of the court day. Inevitably, however, most clients meet their lawyer for the first time on the day of their court appearance.

When they arrive at court, clients will be asked to put their name on a list and then will sit and wait, often for up to six or eight hours, before they are seen by a harried and apologetic defence lawyer. This waiting is perhaps the characteristic experience of court users in remote communities. Hours of sitting and waiting. Not on benches in air-conditioned court foyers (there are no such things), but on the dusty ground, leaning against fences, or sprawled in the trays of utes parked in the shade. Notwithstanding the long wait, when the lawyer finally gets to see them the conversation will rarely last longer than a few minutes. Sometimes the client will get no more than a few words frantically whispered at the door to the court as the Judge orders the matter to immediately be brought on. At the busiest bush courts, lawyers will sometimes ask a dozen clients to line up before calling them in one at a time for the inevitably perfunctory court hearing. Experiences like these have led such courts to be described as "sausage-factory justice".¹³

The volume of people required to attend a single day of bush court can be staggering, with up to 150 matters on the list. When one takes into

account the fact that some of these matters can be quite involved, requiring up to an hour for a complex sentencing matter, the time remaining for the other individuals is impossibly short. Such time pressures result in some bush courts dragging late into the evening (if there is no return flight to catch). I have personally appeared in bush court until after 8pm. The mental resources available to the lawyers and the judge at this time are obviously depleted. There can be no doubt that mistakes are made that would not be made if everyone had the luxury of time. Indeed, the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory will occasionally refer to the intense workload of judges at bush courts in order to excuse or explain what might appear to be errors or insufficiencies in their judgments.

By no means are the mistakes only made by judges, lawyers make as many if not more. Lawyers see so many clients over the course of a day at bush court that it is not uncommon for a lawyer to find herself halfway through her oral submissions to the court only to realise that she is describing the wrong client – another person in the queue outside. Sometimes the submissions are so brief that it would barely matter if it were the wrong client. Here is an example of my scribbled note for a recent bush court sentencing hearing:

- 21 y / o
- no priors
- two kids
- been through ceremony
- plays footy
- fishing
- band
- started drinking 15 years old
- never knew dad

Finally, and saddest of all, the mass processing model of bush courts means that pressure is exerted on the community members attending court. Lawyers will often only have time for a few quick questions about the alleged

offending – Did you drive that car? Did you know it was stolen? – before advising the client to either plead guilty or contest the charges. If the client wants to contest the charges they will inevitably have to return to court the following month (and then likely the month after that, and the month after that) as the Prosecution gather further information and corral often unwilling witnesses into giving evidence against their neighbours or family members. The drawn out process of contesting charges is well known in remote communities, and creates an insidious incentive to plead guilty, even if there might be a basis for defending the charges. I cannot begin to count the number of times a client has told me “I’ll say guilty, I just want it finished today” even after I have advised them that they are innocent of the crimes charged against them. I am not the only one to have this experience. One long-time legal aid lawyer described clients saying “guilty” in court without even knowing what they had been charged with.¹⁴

Because of the high volume of people “processed” through bush courts, and the manner in which they are processed, the court proceedings fulfil almost none of the traditional aims of the criminal justice system. There is no individualised justice because time constraints require judges to sentence offenders on scant information, almost solely relying on their age and prior criminal record rather than any relevant personal circumstances; there is no deterrence of future criminal behaviour because neither the individual nor the community receives adequate explanation of the court process and sentencing objectives; sometimes, the sentences do not even achieve any punitive impact at all, because fines simply accrue against a person’s impossibly large Centrelink debt (that they may have incurred as a result of earlier court appearances, often for driving offences).

In light of all of the problems with bush courts, it is unsurprising that many community members see them in a dim light. For many people, “the whole thing flies in like a travelling circus and before you know it we are gone again”.¹⁵

Another way

There can be no doubt that Indigenous Australians living in remote places are entitled to access justice at home, in their own communities. However history suggests that simply transporting the criminal justice apparatus from urban centres to remote communities – often attended by extreme time pressures – produces a two-tiered justice system, with remote Indigenous people receiving a sub-standard service. How can we do better?

First, we need to start listening to the people in these communities as to how they feel that their area would best be served by changes and innovations in court processes. As Aboriginal activist Larissa Behrendt reminds us: “A community must always decide for itself what is best for its members. Only the community knows what is best for the community.”¹⁶ Aspirations will inevitably differ between communities such that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach. Yet innovations in a few places can serve as jumping off points for similarly situated communities.

In Western Australia, the Law Reform Commission’s Inquiry into Aboriginal Law identified a feeling amongst Indigenous communities of being alienated from courts and judges.¹⁷ Members of these communities expressed “a desire for a ... reconfiguration of the layout of the court itself to make it more accessible and comprehensible to Indigenous people.”¹⁸ This might mean building more culturally appropriate court structures or it might simply mean re-arranging court furniture into, for example, a “sentencing circle”.¹⁹ Physical changes of this nature could be implemented immediately, and might hopefully begin to improve Indigenous court users’ experience of the bush court justice system.

In the Northern Territory, one distinct community-led innovation has been the creation of local “Law and Justice Groups”.²⁰ These groups are comprised of significant individuals in the local community – Elders, Traditional Owners and other community leaders. By arrangement with the visiting judge, such Groups will provide input into the appropriate sentence to be handed down to particular individuals before the court. This input is

usually by way of a written report describing the individual's circumstances and the community's views as to the appropriate sentence. Ideally, however, members of the local Law and Justice Group will sit in court with the judge during the sentencing proceedings and engage with the individual and the court to make recommendations as to the appropriate sentence. While the judge is not bound to impose the recommended sentence, these recommendations are given considerable weight and rarely departed from.

Finally, and related to the Law and Justice Groups, there is the concept of "Community Courts".²¹ These courts operate to formalise the involvement of Indigenous community members (particularly Elders) in the sentencing hearing. Community Courts commenced in the Northern Territory in 2003/2004 in East Arnhem Land in response to growing calls from Indigenous leaders for more meaningful involvement in the sentencing of members of their community. To their credit, the Northern Territory judiciary took these calls seriously and developed a formal set of guidelines for such courts. From 2004 until 2012, there were over 200 sittings of Community Courts in 18 different locations. Anecdotal reports suggest that these courts were well received in Indigenous communities, but were suddenly disbanded due to insufficient funding and legislative constraints.

Innovations like reconfigured courtrooms, Law and Justice Groups and Community Courts are just some of the ways we might move beyond the problematic bush court paradigm. It is not essential that the past models are adhered to; to the contrary, law and policy makers should be listening to each individual community about how they want justice administered there. This will take time, it may be a process of trial and error, but given the current state of bush courts there can be no question of continuing on the present path.

1. Harry Blagg, *Crime, Aboriginality and the Decolonisation of Justice* (2nd ed, 2016) 77; J Evans, "Colonialism and the Rule of Law: The Case of South Australia" in B.S. Godfrey and G Dunstall (eds), *Crime and Empire 1840-1940: Criminal Justice in Local and Global Context* (Willan Publishing, London, 2005).

2. Jon Faine, *Lawyers in the Alice: Aboriginals and Whitefellas' Law* (Federation Press, 1993) at 54, 111, 143.
3. Dean Mildren, "Public Lecture: Aboriginals in the Criminal Justice System" (2008) 29 *Adelaide Law Review* 7 at 8.
4. W Roth, *Royal Commission on the Condition of the Natives: Report* (Government printer, Perth, 1905), 13–14.
5. *Native Administration Ordinance*, reg 7.
6. Bridget Harris, Lucinda Jordan and Lydia Phillips, "Courting justice beyond the cityscape: Access to justice and the rural, regional and remote magistrates' courts" (2014) 23 *Journal of Judicial Administration* 158 at 159–160.
7. Harry Blagg, *Crime, Aboriginality and the Decolonisation of Justice* (2nd ed, 2016) 80 quoting Patrick Dodson.
8. Dean Mildren, "Public Lecture: Aboriginals in the Criminal Justice System" (2008) 29 *Adelaide Law Review* 7 at 19 (paraphrasing the observations of Jenny Blokland, now a Judge of the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory).
9. Jon Faine, *Lawyers in the Alice: Aboriginals and Whitefellas' Law* (Federation Press, 1993) at 156–157.
10. Glen Dooley, "The Thick Khaki Wall: The 'Intervention', Operation Themis and More of the Same for Aboriginal People?" (paper delivered at Criminal Lawyers Association (NT) Conference, 2009) (emphasis added).
11. Here I write from my own experience, which is of bush courts in the Top End of the Northern Territory.
12. Natalie Siegel, "The Reign of the Kangaroo Court? Exposing Deficient Criminal Process in Australian Aboriginal Communities: Bush Court" (2002) 1 *Indigenous Law Journal* 113 at 123.

- ¹³Natalie Siegel, "The Reign of the Kangaroo Court? Exposing Deficient Criminal Process in Australian Aboriginal Communities: Bush Court" (2002) 1 *Indigenous Law Journal* 113 at 146.
- ¹⁴Jared Sharp, *Churchill Fellowship Final Report* (2012) at 8.
- ¹⁵This observation comes from Nick Espie, an experienced Indigenous criminal lawyer who has worked in bush courts in both Western Australia and the Northern Territory. "Good communication of legal issues in the community, with clients and in court", panel discussion at *Language and the Law III*, conference convened by the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory in Alice Springs on 5–7 April 2019.
- ¹⁶Larissa Behrendt, *Aboriginal Dispute Resolution* (1995) at 108.
- ¹⁷Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, *Aboriginal Customary Laws: Final Report: The Interaction of Western Australian Law and Culture* (2006, Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, Perth).
- ¹⁸ Harry Blagg, *Crime, Aboriginality and the Decolonisation of Justice* (2nd ed, 2016) 110.
- ¹⁹See generally Julian R Murphy, "Architecting Aboriginal Access to Justice: The Courts as Doors to the Law" (2016) 18 *Flinders Law Journal* 269.
- ²⁰ See generally Dean Mildren, "Public Lecture: Aboriginals in the Criminal Justice System" (2008) 29 *Adelaide Law Review* 7 at 19–20.
- ²¹This summary of Community Courts is taken from the helpful scholarship of Thalia Anthony and Will Crawford. See Thalia Anthony and Will Crawford, "Northern Territory Indigenous Community Sentencing Mechanisms: An Order for Substantive Equality" (2013/14) 17 *Australian Indigenous Law Review* 79.

At time of entry this essay was submitted as an unpublished work and has since been accepted for publication in the Griffith Review 65: Crimes and Punishments, due for publication 6 August 2019.

Greater Expectations: prison writing and its effect on prison transformation

by Adelle Sefton-Rowston

In 2016 the Four Corners program 'Australia's Shame' revealed the ongoing abuse of youth in Darwin's Don Dale Youth Detention Centre and sparked many reasons why a penal system that does not rehabilitate at-risk children should be completely transformed, if not abolished. Footage from the program showed children as young as twelve years old being punished with the use of restraint chairs, covered in spit-hoods and locked up in isolation cells for indefinite periods of time. Such cruel and archaic forms of punishment are reminiscent of times between the 14th and 19th centuries in Europe when criminals were punished with infliction and discomfort to their bodies through humiliation – or to a worse extent, maimed, flogged or sentenced to death. In Australia, Ronald Ryan was the last man to be executed at Pentridge Prison in 1967. The death penalty remains formally abolished, yet the increasing number of Aboriginal deaths in custody is of dire concern. Prisons are not safe for Aboriginal people who may already have pre-existing physical or mental health issues. Removing people from country is also means of disconnecting people from family, languages and culture. In this sense the punishment very rarely ever fits the crime. Yet even after the thirtieth anniversary of the Royal Commission into the Aboriginal deaths in custody there remains a lack of willingness to transform prisons into places of support and rehabilitation for those incarcerated (who are mostly victims of domestic violence, the poorest of the poor and those suffering

from mental illness). The absence of a model of care to transform prisons in Australia points to a gap in national consciousness regarding the humanity of those incarcerated.

Seeing and understanding prisoners as human beings who have a prospective future of hope and freedom has for long time remained an interest to readers and writers of fiction everywhere. Charles Dickens' classic novel *Great Expectations* (1860) for example, explores the mysterious duality of a person convicted of a crime, yet how their potential to do good for others is manifested when they themselves are treated kindly and given hope towards freedom. Pip, the young protagonist of the story helps an escaped prisoner from his iron shackles by bringing him a file. He also brings him a bundle of hearty food to eat: 'mincemeat, meat-bone, bread, cheese, and pork pie' (p.19). The escaped prisoner is at first suspicious of Pip and asks him if he has betrayed him by bringing someone else with him. Pip answers "No!" And the man replies: "Well I believe you. You'd be but a fierce young hound indeed, if at your time of life you could help to hunt a wretched warmint, hunted as near death and dunghill as this poor wretched warmint is!" Pip watches the man ravenously eat and says "I am glad you enjoy it". It is Pip's act of kindness that foreshadows the pervasive mystery around who actually bequeathed Pip his inheritance and changed his whole life's trajectory. The opportunities he is given as a young man to be educated and earn a decent living is antithesis to the prisoner's life at the beginning of the book. Yet here we are over 150 years later asking the same questions as readers of the classic tale: what is prison really like? How do people end up there? What becomes of those who escape the gallows?

This essay reflects on the importance of writing about crime and punishment in contemporary fiction, as well as how the Western prison system has been represented textually over time – offering readers the ability to look backwards and forwards in terms of cultural understandings of incarceration bequeathed from the British colonies since invasion. Can writing about prisons and the humanity of those incarcerated help to inform real life discussions about prison transformation?

Since the Four Corners program a number of fiction books on the theme of Indigenous incarceration in Australia has been published, including Kim Scott's *Taboo*, Paul Collis' *Dancing Home* and selected stories in Tony Birch's *Common People*. Similar to Dickens tale, all these recent texts include the bitter fear of an alleged offender being chased by police authorities and the appalling circumstances of incarceration once they are caught. From a different perspective than the classic tale however, these contemporary texts show how the grit and determination of a few characters can transform prisons into places of freedom when culture is strong, when there are opportunities to write and share stories, and learn traditional languages from the inside.

According to *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* edited by Elizabeth Webby, a number of famous Indigenous authors did write, or learn to write, in prison. Kevin Gilbert for example began writing in the 1960s while serving a prison sentence, as did Robert Merrit, Robert Walker and Graham Dixon (Webby, 2000). Similarly, Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo) served eighteen months in Fremantle gaol as a teenager where his interest in writing developed before moving to Melbourne (State Library Archive, 2012). Poet Laureate, Jack Davis also spent time behind bars and his tribute-poem to John Pat is inscribed on the John Pat Memorial at Fremantle Prison (Webby, 2000).

The challenge for creative writers and their pedagogues therefore is to allow stories to work in ways that ensure continued oversight of the penal system's reform. As mentioned, the prison system is an archetype that continues to be of interest to creative writers and their readers. How one writes in prison, about prisons or even on the walls of prisons says something about the current existence of the prison system and perhaps the need for change. Often writing that informs a discourse about Indigenous rights also informs a discourse on prison abolition since racism and sovereignty are always tangled up in the systems of colonial institutions. The same is true in America for example, and as reported in *The American Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island: Red Power and Self-Determination*, on November 20, 1969, a group of American Indians formed the Indians of All Tribes organization

(IAT) and occupied the abandoned prison on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay claiming that abandoned federal land should be returned to American Indians (Johnson & Fixico, 2008). Over the course of two years hundreds of Indians travelled back and forth to Alcatraz, leaving pro-Indigenous rights graffiti and messages all over the walls of historic buildings on the island such as "Peace and freedom welcome home of the free Indian land". Graffiti writing is used not only to express the cultural significance of first nation Indians but to create sovereign space through an act of writing colonial subversion with particular tools of textual transgression.

To write is one of the most empowering acts of rebellion one can fore take – whether in the form of a novel or as text written on a concrete wall – to write is to protest by creating the new formation of words in a different order to realise something new. Graffiti has a broad yet unique readership, it is not always read by choice, but nonetheless it has a fluid and encompassing range of readers. The writing of graffiti is not an autonomous or mono act but can for instance speak to many people. In prisons, graffiti may communicate with inmates, prison staff or perhaps even tourists if the text survives long enough. Perhaps then graffiti becomes part of a literary monument appearing in public for others to see, yet staining architecture in such a way that it disrupts civility: think of the pink nail polish at the old Gaol of Newcastle for example – gesturing towards the outlawing of same sex marriage.

Some say that graffiti writing cannot be learned to teach. It is a raw and personal writing form that defies writing conventions without redress or editing. That is its necessary worth. It can be illegible but interesting or it can be literate yet meaningless and boring. The story of the writer however, is always compelling. And we would get many different responses if we were to ask every graffiti artist the same question: Why write? Paulo Freire proved that teaching literacy and teaching social justice go hand in hand. He is one of the most prolific educators of the twentieth century and founder of the critical pedagogy theory. Freire is remembered mostly for the vital role he played in developing a highly successful literacy campaign in Brazil during the early 1960s, and his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' explains how critical pedagogy is not concerned with teaching to the 'test' but as a practice

of freedom. Students become informed citizens who participate in the civic imagination by becoming self-reflective about public issues and the world in which they live. The purpose of an education for freedom is not to up-skill students for the labour market necessarily, but to inform an ever-evolving substantive democracy. Writing and thinking are thus always a political struggle that, like graffiti, requires courage to challenge the status quo by making institutions appear ugly, flawed and grotesque. The case in point being that to learn to write from within or about prisons and unjust forms of punishment is therefore to speak to that world without fear, even when one is incarcerated, being chased by police or has outstanding fines.

In response to the atrocities that occurred at Don Dale Detention Centre in 2016 and the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, a group of academics at Charles Darwin University (CDU) are developing a creative writing program to implement in prisons in the NT. The project is inspired by Dylan Voller's prison graffiti seen on the Four Corners program that raises questions about the purpose of graffiti for one's self-preservation and self-esteem. Moreover, the carving of Dylan's name on the walls of his isolation cell raises questions about how graffiti and other forms of prison writing may serve as indexical witness to unjust confinement. Creative writing has many therapeutic benefits and provides opportunities to express emotions and imagine alternate realities even under harsh and enduring circumstances.

Dylan Voller's graffiti makes literal a place to locate a writing program in the NT. Since his release from prison Dylan has gone on to publish poetry in *Honi Soit* that reflects on his treatment in Don Dale, and in 'Justice for Youth' he writes: 'I have a lot of questions I really want answered. Like why weren't my first cry's out for help ever answered'. Such a topic informs 'poetry as witness' and allows others to respond from reading. The Royal Commission's report into the treatment of youth in detention states that the importance of transparency in highly secured places is necessary for prison reform: 'Oversight is an important tool in monitoring a "behind closed doors" environment, in which there is always the potential for staff to abuse their power against the vulnerable' (21). Writing, like Dylan's poem in *Honi Soit*

contributes to such measures of oversight, making readers and community members on guard so these atrocities are remembered and never happen again.

It is important that Indigenous people write and tell their stories from behind bars. In *Meanjin* Indigenous author Alexis Wright argues (in response to the atrocities in Darwin's Don Dale Youth Detention Centre), that the 'over jailed' and 'over policed Northern Territory' is 'linked to the national narrative, to story-making, to the way that stories are told, to keep the status quo in place' (2016). She asks: 'What can I do as a writer?' And 'Why do I write at all?' Wright's public response inspires the name of CDU's prison writing project: 'YWrite' as a catchcry that summarises the central purpose of providing a program for writers who are vulnerable and therefore must write.

The YWrite project seeks to investigate the role of creative writing in prisons and develop a state of the art program for groups incarcerated in the NT. The workshops hope to teach inmates how to express themselves through creative writing forms of prison prose, graffiti and story-telling. Graffiti constitutes a special genre of writing that has been deployed by prisoners to reflect upon their circumstance, to protest their incarceration, or even to transform their understanding. Because 'graffiti' remains unconstrained by traditional writing conventions (of spelling, grammar, and punctuation), such writing provides a space for writers of lower literacy levels to write intuitively. A writer of graffiti can articulate messages with a sense of urgency, uninhibited by conventional expectations of normative writing.

The aims of the project are to foster motivation and self-efficacy through creativity, which in turn can lead to improved self-image and reduced emotional stress, an increase in literacy, and more post-release opportunities. A major outcome of the program will allow detainees to share *their "stories"* through the publication/exhibition of their work which will in turn contribute insights into society's understanding of effective prison arts programs and the effects of writing to transform.

The most significant benefits of the prison writing program will be for the students to participate in graffiti writing to explore who they are; what is

important to them and to develop an artistic relationship to the world as a 'free' person that exceeds far beyond their time of incarceration. The *YWrite* program at CDU will help students understand how storytelling can inform one's own identity in a social and political world. The impact of the program will potentially contribute to both attitudinal and psychological growth in the students but also improvements to their general literacy and development of creative writing tools. With these tools, perhaps those who imagine a different life from behind bars are best placed to imagine a whole new way of being without prisons.

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Kath Manzie

Youth Award

Winner

Elisha Pettit

A Liar's Colour

103

Finalists

Leila Heinrich

red bees/blue sea

106

Fleur Liveris

A Meal

107

A Liar's Colour

by Elisha Pettit

The colour of Violet's yelp was a maroon brown, unlike her name. The name was a lie- her colour was autumn yellow, not violet. This was fitting, because Violet Walker was a liar. (This was also fitting, because 'liar' is a violet coloured word.)

On Tuesday the 4th of September, I was sure of exactly three things:

1. Violet Walker had told untruths in her life.
2. Someone had discovered her lies and did not like what they found.
3. Violet Walker was no longer alive.

Through all the time I had known her, I had never had any prejudices against Violet. In fact, I would say that I liked more than disliked her. We had our occasional disagreements, but she was kind and warm. At the time, it would have been hard to find a reason that would warrant her demise. She was an artist, which is where the first lie came about- she said she knew about colours, but she was wrong. Laughter is not silver, like tinkling bells. It is a different colour for everybody- Violet's laughter was a crimson apple colour, while Mr Shakes, our neighbour, had a barking teal laugh. The first lie was pear green.

There was one smoky-grey sounding car outside Violet's house this afternoon. The driver was not Violet's husband or son, both of whom had departed the house that morning, although the man looked her husband's age. It was not a policeman, for there were no flashing lights or screaming

mauve sirens. The man departed when no one answered the door after two rings of the lime doorbell. He did not notice the new paintings inside, visible through the window.

I think that Violet's murderer was angry when he discovered her lies. I do not know if he was angry because of her lies about colours, or her lies about where she got her colours from- It does not take that long for a mother to pick up paint from another man's house.

On Wednesday the 27th of June, I was on the bus for a school trip when I saw Mrs. Walker exit a house next to the road, holding bright tubes of something in her hands. A man followed her outside and they kissed in a way that a woman only kisses her partner, although the man was not her husband. Unfaithfulness, people call it. I knew that the man was Dante, an artist and art supply seller. When she married Mr. Walker, Violet had vowed to be faithful. The second lie was the colour of nickel.

The third lie was simple, a grapefruit pink one, easy to miss- "I love you," she said to her husband in a beige voice. This statement did not become a lie until it was discovered that she was unfaithful- lies are the truth until otherwise proven. Unfaithful people do not love the people they are being unfaithful to. Mr. Walker was in danger when Violet said those words- liars are dangerous and not to be trusted. Mr. Walker had to be protected.

This protection came into existence on the 4th of September. Someone entered Violet's house in the morning, after Violet's husband and son had left. The intruder was young, younger than Violet. Their shoes squeaked creamy white on the linoleum floor. There were blank canvases on the kitchen bench that had not been there at the beginning of the day- Violet had evidently paid Dante a visit after the house was emptied. Violet was not in the kitchen- sounds came from further inside the house, too muffled for colours to be identified.

She was mixing paint when the intruder reached the doorway of the room. The object in his hand was hard and cold, much like the truth, the intruder thought. It would provide adequate protection. Although Violet was

mixing shades of blue paint, the sound produced by her mixing was chestnut brown. Her skirt rustled dull copper when she turned around, and her slight intake of breath was cedar orange as something like recognition flashed in her eyes, and then horror. People's eyes change when fear, the most primal emotion, takes over. Her eyes widened, became almost animal as her pupils dilated. She yelped maroon brown before her eyes became as hard and cold as the object in my hand when I drove the knife into her chest.

Violet Walker was a liar, and liars had to be eliminated to protect others. Violet had not lied about one thing- she had lied about three, which was thrice as bad. I painted a canvas red, the true colour of her laughter, then hung it up on the wall so that the truth could not be hidden. I did not have to open any tubes or mix any paint to achieve the rich crimson colour. I did not use a brush because my fingers sufficed. I knew that Violet's husband would be home the next morning, back from his weekly work trip. I also knew that Dante would come around in the afternoon, as he did every Thursday when Mr. Walker and Violet's son were out of the house. I had carefully noted every detail of the pattern. Violet's body had to be hidden, so I hid it in the unlocked shed. Then I cleaned the floor until the smell of bleach made my nose burn.

Mr. Walker came home the next day. I was waiting for him. He was used to new paintings frequently appearing and disappearing off the walls- he did not notice the new piece of work. The once-crimson colour of laughter had dried to a maroon brown, the colour of Violet's yelp. Like Violet, his eyes widened in recognition when he saw me, opening his mouth to speak. Then I wrapped my hands around his neck and silenced him.

"Dad!" I cried in relief as he returned my embrace. He was now protected from danger, from Violet and her lies.

red bees/blue sea

by Leila Heinrich

red bees ricochet off my periphery
only to turn yellow, innocent, courage.
I try to call myself something brave,
yet as I wander silence becomes me.

a pen is a pen, a page a page,
it stays still, no need for change.
for even if my mind does break
the poet blood remains.

this is only an ocean; I am adrift at sea.
my treasured life raft is almost here, and,
these wild thoughts are beasts of water
from which the sand will set me free.

and so I'll find a distant shore,
why sink when you could swim.
or dive headfirst, into shallow water,
leave and then go back in.

A Meal

by Fleur Liveris

I was a meal to be feasted upon

There is one use for my mouth and it is not speaking

Bruised lip and broken heart, left in the gutter

I am a flesh hole, a sexual currency

My body, a full course meal for you to rip into

Tears stinging my eyes, blood ridden skirt

You have taken away the only innocence I have ever known

The absence of that part of me is like a missing limb

This protruding pain lasts lifetimes

Swallowing words I need to say but cannot

It is I who will stand trial if I do not come forward immediately

You were afraid of my voice

So I decided to be afraid of it too

There is a tightness in my chest, butterflies swarming

Creating a ruckus within me

Stumbling up to the stand and pulling the lump out of my throat

Chewing my words so they are easier on the ears

"We made out earlier, why would she wear lacey red lingerie if she did not want anyone to see it, she came on to me, she was drunk and so was I, she did not say 'no'"

As soon as we attempt to hold you accountable you lose your appetite

We should feel sorry for you, you will lose your scholarship, your reputation, your girlfriend, your mum's respect

Let's send you on your way

So one more innocent can suffer, the world is once again your hunting ground

In the deep darkness of the night or the broad daylight

A place to prey on those vulnerable, too drunk or are simply going about their daily lives

In my world roses are not red, the grass is not green, the sky is not blue

Birds do not chirp and the sun does not shine

For me, the world is a revolving door, a black hole

The idea of shrinking is hereditary

A seed was planted as soon as I emerged from the womb, fully in-grained in my impressionable mind

That soon enough, I will be violently "BANGED, SKREWED, NAILED"

I have been under your control for far too long

My feet will no longer be bound, I will no longer be mutilated, I will no longer be numbed by your strategic oppression

We are treasures and we should be treated as such, not pitstops for your pleasure and power

Do not undermine me when I talk about women and rape victims

To suppress a survivor's story

Do not compare the statistics of female assault victims to that of male assault victims

To overlook the astonishing rates of sexual assault and rape against women

Do not diminish the story of a survivor to make your point that “women change their minds and call it rape”

Your joke made a survivor re-live their story, no wonder women are afraid to report assault and rape

Now do not you shrug your shoulders and make your joke into a triumph

So if I don't laugh, I cannot take a joke?

And now you want to change the topic?

You see, I have lost sympathy for those people who feel the need to hurt others

To feel powerful

I have lost all compassion for those men who feel the need to dominate women

To feel strong and worthy

You see, I have lost kind-heartedness for those who are not outraged

Watch closely as I reclaim the narrative

As I plant seeds underneath my feet

As vines grow up, over the scars you left on my skin and inside of me

As I build a kingdom from the thoughts I have of you

From your smell, from the bruises you left

I am more like a bonfire than a candle

I am more like a phoenix rising from the ashes

I am more like a storm that will stop at nothing to create havoc

These triggers do not own me

I own these triggers

I own this story

As there is no socially acceptable time or place to talk about it
It is a secret that is wide out in the open but it is often looked over
It does not have a particular taste nor a face

We cannot be the fraternity boys at Yale who chant “no” means “yes” and
“yes” means “anal”

I can assure you that these perpetrators are not sweet, they are deadbeats
So please take a seat, while I teach you how to feast on this ‘meat’

Silence is not consent

Flirting is not consent

A relationships is not consent

Kissing is not consent

Going into a bedroom is not consent

Being unconscious is not consent

We can be mercurial

“Maybe” or “no” is not consent

Only “yes” is consent



Flash Fiction

Winner

Lee Frank

The Colours of an Arm

112

Finalists

Liz Bennett

Shared Risk

114

Romany Maunder

Being Aunty May

116

Worthington Smelling

The Masked Lapwing

118

The Colours of an Arm

by Lee Frank

He came to a well in the desert and found an arm.

Not just any arm. It was soft, white and beautiful like the wings of a moth loosed from the moon and it was drowning.

The man lowered himself to the water and brought the arm to the surface.

Above them the sun had a vicious glint. Around them the rocks had edges to lacerate; and the grass long, tapering blades with tips that snipped off to burrow through clothes and prick droplets of blood; even the clouds had forms that seemed cruel and bristling.

The man strapped the arm to his pushbike and rode away.

The man cared for the arm – washed it, set it on folded blankets and soothed it with balms and ointments. He removed burrs and thorns and tics. And the colours of the sky at each day's end that had sustained him as he rode, began to form from the depths of the arm and slowly shimmer to its skin.

In time he sung to it.

The arm could not speak but it could write and the man fell in love with the arm's words and colours. He thought they were for him but they were for the other arm – the arm that had drowned in the well. The arm could not tell him that, though. Indeed, the arm needed to seduce the man so he would return it to the hardness of the desert and the darkness of the well.

But the more the arm pined for its twin, the more exquisite the colours that rose from its depths and shimmered along its skin; and the more the colours gleamed the more the man believed he was the force behind the spectacle.

The arm wrote of its need to return to the well saying to go back to where they had first met would bring it to a degree of happiness words had no right to convey. The man stroked the arm and said

“How you can desire more happiness? Look at you.”

The arm wrote that these colours were merely shades of the real colours of joy; and if he beheld those, the man would be truly dazzled.

So the man wrapped the arm in the softest of cloths and rode back to the desert.

They came to the well.

The man settled the arm on a cushion. Its hues pulsed and shone as the arm, unable to restrain its longing, dragged itself towards the well.

The man laughed and taking a small saw out from his panniers said

“You think I didn't know? I only came back here to see deeply you loved your other and how far you would go to deceive me. But you're mine and I'll prove it.”

The man hacked at his right arm and tossed it into the well.

Shared Risk

by Liz Bennett

The American at my dining table is dressed in a polo shirt and chinos – tidy, but suitable for climbing ladders. I have made us mugs of tea. He works for a firm that sends insurance assessors to natural disaster sites around the world. Local firms don't have the staff to cope, he says, so the jobs need to be contracted out. He tells me that people in his line of work are called Catastrophe Adjusters. I smile at the term. What's an adjusted catastrophe, I ask – a moderate inconvenience? It occurs to me that he must have heard such quips before, but he betrays no sense of tedium. He is used to dealing with people under stress.

He's here for TIO after Tropical Cyclone Carlos. We have two palm trees down, and water through the lounge room ceiling. The American has measured, photographed, questioned. He is efficient and kind. This is a nice gig for him, he says. No deaths or serious injury. The people are friendly, and used to cyclones.

He sips his tea and tells me of airports, rental cars, and hotel rooms booked promptly by his firm after news comes in of another disaster. He has kept this up for years now. Between jobs he feels like a veteran surrounded by civilians. Things are tough with his girlfriend back in Texas.

He's had a call offering the Christchurch earthquake. The assessment alone is a two-year contract. Steady work is tempting, but he'd be stuck in group house with a bunch of other adjusters for the duration. And with earthquakes,

he says, survivors are exceptionally traumatised. There's something about the ground giving way that's particularly hard to recover from.

I shake the American's hand with something akin to awe before he walks to his car. This quietly spoken man with a clipboard and mini-packs of tissues has a perspective on the planet that is apocalyptic. This is a man who knows that buildings can topple, that the heavens can shower ash; a man who captures the fragility of existence one tick-box at a time.

As I wave goodbye with a smile I have no clue that within weeks I will be uninsurable. Cancer, enmeshed in muscle and spread to my lymph nodes. The body that I had thought was a tidy suburban bungalow was actually a rubble-filled street in Kathmandu. In the year that follows I am measured, photographed, questioned. Medical professionals are efficient and kind. I think often of the American. I hope he has managed to avoid earthquakes; or if not, that his housemates are a good bunch. I hope things are OK with his girlfriend. I think he's a good man. He knows that the ground can cave in beneath you, and that in the face of this there is inestimable value in a friendly chat over a cup of tea. And that if you're lucky enough to survive a catastrophe you need to gather your resources, and adjust.

Being Aunty May

by Romany Maunder

"Aunty" Hollered Jayson.

Aunty May rolled her eyes but turned to look at him anyway. He stood at the front of a rag tag mix of youth. All elbows and knees in a shirt that was too big for him and a cap pulled down low. He swaggered through the aisles of fresh fruit towards her.

"Hey Aunty." He said again and she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Jayson had so much of his father in him. When he was little this had brought joy to her heart. But now as he approached his mid-teens it seemed as if he was on track to following in his father's footsteps. And try as she might she felt the same sense of helplessness she had a decade before.

"Aye." She grunted. Dropping a bunch of bananas into her basket.

"Can you spare some change? We're a hungry group..." He drawled looking up at her through his long lashes. For a moment his hard exterior slipped and she saw uncertainty cloud his chocolate eyes. Suddenly to her, his position as ring leader of the motley band seemed precarious. His group of supposed friends stood too close. And watched him with hungry eyes.

"Jayson, you know I barely have any money for myself." She sighed. Deflated, his shoulders slumped. As he opened his mouth to respond one of the other teenagers butted in.

"See." He gloated triumphantly. "I told you he couldn't get us any money." He said, with a smug grin plastered across his weasel like features. Aunty May's eyes cut towards him and she saw him shrink away from her. Bony shoulders folding and weasel nose twitching. Rarely did she dislike someone on a first encounter. Her cold stare left no room for confusion over who had recently joined that short list.

"I have no money." Her voice cut through the air, sharp as a knife and although they were standing in the supermarket, with background music playing, you could hear a pin drop. "You lot can come home with me and cook your own lunch. If you're *actually* hungry." Her eyes which had been scanning the faces of the group, now came to rest on Weasel. She stood, waiting for his frantically darting eyes to meet her own. He shuffled his feet and refused to look up. The movement and noise of his new sneakers squeaking on the floor broke the spell.

As one the group shuffled. Realising that they were a gang of youths and she was an old frail lady with joints crippled by arthritis. The group began to disband. Weasel jumped to the front and began making fart jokes. His eyes briefly found Aunty May's again and she felt a tinge of satisfaction watching his Adam's apple jump. With an angry wave she sent the group on their merry way. Jayson looked at them wistfully once more before turning around.

"So what's for lunch Aunty?" He beamed and she felt her heart breaking all over again for the brother she had lost.

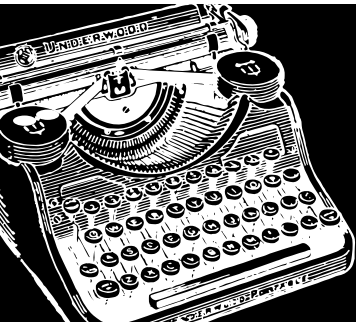
The Masked Lapwing

by Worthington Smelling

The thought of the Masked Lapwing makes me anxious. I say that with the conviction of the newly enlightened, because it's only been in the last year or two that I've realised that the sensations I might feel within my torso and head, that I might or might not be aware of, is the exact same thing called *anxiety* that I've heard of, that I thought I didn't suffer from. And I can report that when I think of the Masked Lapwing (which is a bird, by the way) I feel the sensations, which nowadays I can articulate as increased heart rate, tightening of arteries, shortness of breath, hormonal and electrical imbalances, nausea, vertigo, disorientation, and feeling of impending doom.

I don't think of the Masked Lapwing very often, but by chance Bec asked me about curlews, knowing I know a bit about birds. She's heard them crying in the night, but what are they like? What are they doing? I used to see a lot of curlews at Uni, and I told Bec a few things, and I was going to tell her a story about seeing five ground birds in a little group on the Uni lawns, from five species: curlew, ibis, scrub fowl, godwit, and a Masked Lapwing, but I didn't get near telling it. Instead, I went on a long and agitated rave about being hassled by security guards at Uni when I was homeless. Afterwards, I wished I'd told her about the group of five birds from five species communing together, when she'd asked me about curlews, because that would have been relevant, and because it's a lovely and uplifting image, in stark contrast to what I did tell her. But I'd seen the little group at dawn, when I was sneaking a shower in the bathroom on the second floor of the Technology Building, hoping to avoid security guards.

And so, I explained to Bec next time I saw her. I see her once every six weeks – she’s part of my parole, part of the politically-correct bleeding-heart nanny-state where grown men are encouraged to get in touch with their feelings, as if a grown man might know one end of a feeling from another. It was Bec who got me onto *anxiety*, whereas I had previously said *feeling a bit crook* about spending the afternoon in the foetal position under the table. ‘I meant to tell you,’ I said, and I told her about the five birds. I explained my wild tangent in her terms: I *associate* the Masked Lapwing with the Uni grounds and the Uni grounds with being hassled by security guards. Then, regrettably, I went on a loud and disinhibited rant about being hassled by security guards at Uni when I was homeless, and how the thought of the Masked Lapwing makes me anxious.



Brown's Mart

Theatre Award

Winner

Mary Ann Butler

One More Hour

Finalists

Thomas Midena

Not all dreams wear capes

Kristy Schubert

The Mission

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