



Works by

Winners & Finalists

NORTHERN TERRITORY LITERARY AWARDS 2024



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FOUNDER'S FOREWORD

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

My wife, three kids and I arrived in Darwin in 1983 for me to take up a lecturing position in English at what was then the Darwin Community College (to become the DIT, then Charles Darwin University). The city was still in recovery from Cyclone Tracy, and even seven years on, the Humanities and Social Sciences academics were marooned in a Winnellie warehouse to do their teaching. Rough as it was, my NT years were special, truly one of the best times of my life.

Why? For starters, the students were smart, eccentric and feisty, aged from 18 to 80, some of the most opinionated I ever taught. Most were studying literature for the love of it, and they always read the books! I was also very lucky because my time in the Top End coincided with the most productive (and generous) years of the Literature Board of the Australia Council. The exotic, faraway appeal of the NT—with its unique blend of ancient culture, art and practices, extreme distances, backwoods ways and distinctive characters—meant that when I requested Lit Board dollars to bring some of Australia's finest writers to the Top End, I got my wish every time.

In a matter of a few years my students and I, and many Territorians, had embraced the extraordinary opportunity to get up close and personal with the likes of Thea Astley, Elizabeth Jolley, Les Murray, Bruce Dawe, Christopher Koch, Roland Robinson, Peter Mathers and Mark O'Connor. All of them were so generous with their time, generating a remarkable period of creativity and wonder. It produced an atmosphere many people fed off.

Inspired by what was happening around me, I happened to be chatting with a Community Development project officer one steamy Wet Season afternoon in early 1984, and raised the possibility of getting government support for a literature award of some kind for the Territory. Support came so quickly, so enthusiastically, that the inaugural NT Literary Awards took shape in a matter of months. There were four categories: Red Earth Poetry (Open and NT) and Arafura Short Story (Open and NT). They were busily advertised, and we were inundated with entries from across the continent.

At the time I was Literary Editor of the DIT journal, Northern Perspective, and for the Wet Season 1985 edition its Guest Editor. It gave me the chance to advertise, up in lights, the range and diversity of the inaugural Awards winners and those highly commended—and what a group they were. Unknowns rubbing shoulders with big names, something that has continued for decades.

My own NT story fortunately did not end when the Headons headed south for family reasons. I was so enthused by the creative talent I had observed and encouraged that when I was invited to co-ordinate the Territory's contribution to the Oxford Literary Guide to Australia in 1986, in no time at all what I thought would be a straightforward task rolled on for the next five years as I put together a 350-page collection of Northern Territory literature entitled North of the Ten Commandments. It is still widely regarded as the best anthology of regional literature in the country, praise it received at the time of publication in a number of media outlets. This was solely due to the sheer quality of the content—and there has been no sign of it declining. Perhaps it's time for a new and enlarged edition, including the harvests of new writing since the mid-1980s.

I am genuinely honoured to have been asked to provide a Foreword for this important publication celebrating the milestone 40th anniversary of the Awards, proud of their footprint in the red dust over such a long time, and keen to see what the future brings.

David Headon

Foundation Fellow, AuSI, ANU

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BROWN'S MART THEATRE AWARD

The 2024 Brown's Mart Theatre Award entrants explored theme, form, and character in true NT fashion—no two works were alike! Writers embraced a wide range of approaches to crafting their narratives. From deeply personal stories to bold, experimental pieces, the variety showcased the depth of talent and creativity within our community. The works that truly stand out in this category are those that speak with truth and confidence, resonating with authenticity and a clear, compelling voice. Each script is a testament to the power of storytelling and the unique perspectives that our playwrights bring to the stage (and page).

**Judge's
Comment**

Winner

Sarah Reuben

She Sits

SYNOPSIS

When a Jew dies, their body is seldom left alone. Loved ones will sit Shemira until the moment of burial: sometimes in silence, sometimes crying... Sometimes they have a killer a hangover, smudged eyeliner and a wicked sense of humour.

This Jew takes you on a journey sitting Shemira for her grandmother. Through her grandmother's story of Holocaust survival and joy for life, the Jew comes to terms with her own place in the world and how stories live on through humans that love them.

Due to printing restrictions, full length scripts and screenplays cannot be included in this publication.

CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY CREATIVE NON-FICTION AWARD

This year's submissions were of a particular high calibre - demonstrating a high standard of creative writing and language skills. The topics ranged from the very sad and moving experiences of caring for loved ones with a terminal illness to travelling the personal spaces of one who lives and works in the Territory. There were expressions of grief and how it never leaves us - articulations of how we grow around grief instead, like a garden grows within one's home

**Judge's
Comment**



Winner

Dave Clark

Remember

Finalists

Clare Bizley

Jim Jim Falls (In and Out of Love)

Rachael McGuirk

What am I here for?

M. C. Smith

Loss of Faith

WINNER

REMEMBER

by Dave Clark

An hour west of Krakow in Poland, Bek and I walk with a tour group under a wrought-iron sign. 'Arbeit Macht Frei,' the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Work makes one free. The lie sold to every prisoner sent to this death camp. The lie told by the perpetrators of the violence carried out here on a million people.

Most buildings and razor wire fences are in their original state, captured in time and preserved by historians. We walk on the very paths and steps that we have read about in books, shaken our heads at during documentaries. I burrow cold hands into thick jacket pockets, unable to stop my body from shivering.

At each stop through the camp, our Polish guide implores us in her crystalline English to learn the truth, to remember the horrors of the past.

We stand quietly, reverent, sombre in front of the hundreds of stolen suitcases, names scribed on the sides of leather. *Hana Reinor. Lemel Rosenzweig.* A window the only barrier between us and forty thousand heads of hair, what remains of the female prisoners shaved and humiliated on the final days of the war. The mounds of Zyklon B pesticide cannisters used in the gas chambers only two buildings away.

I feel ill at these places of atrocity. I feel guilt and relief at being able to come and go freely from these grounds. There is a warmth in my chest seeing that most of our group is young and, hungry to learn. This sensation mingles with sadness and fierce anger, of what has happened and how similarities are playing out in our world today.

My thoughts are racing about what occurred here and why. My feet weigh heavier as the tour goes on.

After an hour and a half at Auschwitz, we bus our way eight minutes down a local road to Birkenau extermination camp, purpose-built for maximum

barbarity. The bright skies that met our arrival darken as we walk the dirt path to the killing chambers. Light rain builds up to outright chunks of hail. We stand at the monument marking the crematorium. The sky hammers down its verdict.

As the guide finishes up the tour, she thanks the group for coming from all over the world to honour, to remember the past. To bring dignity to people like her grandparents.

She whispers, 'They were killed here.' Tears form in her eyes.

It seems shallow to tip her for the pouring out of her heart, for the re-living of her family's trauma. I slip her a fifty zloty note anyway and mutter a thank you as the dark skies continue to heave.

*

It's two days later and Bek and I are enjoying a plate of pita breads, roasted eggplant, hummus and labneh cheese in the Kazimierz district, a ten-minute walk out of Krakow's Old Town. The restaurant has a library wall to my left, colourful cushions and carpets at one end and an open dining area. A small dog laps water at the table next to us.

We start talking about how many of the places we have been to remember the past in thorough, truth-telling ways. It strikes us how quickly people wanted to remember, to learn from what happened.

Less than two years after Liberation Day
Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps
became a place

of memorial, sacred ground
for the profound realisation
of what horrors had occurred

Less than a year after tearing
the Berlin Wall down,
its remaining one kilometre was handed over

to artists to paint their expressions
of freedom and fear and wishes
for better futures. A memorial to past,

a reaching for better times

We chewed on pita and the experience a week earlier of walking through the uneven field of 2,711 concrete blocks in Berlin, commemorating those killed in World War Two II by Germany. The memorials engaged with their history, owned up to the colonising and exterminating actions. No excuses. No whitewashing. The full ugly truth remembered. The lives lost honoured.

Berlin's memorials dug into the nuances of suffering. There was a looping video memorial for the atrocities directed specifically at the same-sex community. A haunting violin tone played at a memorial to the Sinti and Roma communities targeted, a triangular steel stone at the centre of a round water basin signifying the different coloured triangles sewn into their prison clothing by the Nazis.

Bek and I sip from our cardamon lattes and show surprise at the levels of openness and honesty at each memorial, so used to living in a country that actively forgets its own mistakes.

Australia is not a world leader
in dealing with its history

We commemorate wars far
yet deny ones near,
the ones on our frontier

Our very doorstep dripping

with the holocaustic mission to wipe out
those first here

Bek hops up to order us baklava and pastries and I find myself recalling what I overheard in a Berlin laundromat. A local woman had passionately spoken while sitting on a dryer, telling a British backpacker who had complained of what he felt was the city's 'overkill with sad history' that

we must remember
without excuse or edit

History repeats what is denied
until it is seen with eyes

and minds wide open

Bek comes back to the table and our conversation turns to the messages we are getting from friends and family in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). The national media is blowing up again about the town and a youth curfew is being put in place.

A short-term reaction that ignores the long-term contributions. Again.

We live in a town that knee-jerk-reacts to unrest. Avoids the context, the history, the tragedy that underpins the current overspilling of trauma. We are seeing the ongoing consequences of colonisation, but we call it a youth problem. Curfew the streets instead of addressing the needs of housing and safety, alleviating poverty and telling the truth about this town's history.

We live in a town that has a four-metre-tall monument congratulating a so-called pioneer. He's holding a gun – you know, the usual implement people take on peaceful excursions – and he towers over those who are homeless and sheltering below. A celebration of colonisation, land theft and attempted genocide.

Can you imagine celebrating the start of WWII

Cheering Hitler's extermination of the Jews

How that would leave victims so confused
and their purple hearts bruised

Yet this is what we do

Each step we tread
here is a felony. This is still stolen land

We have benefitted from the organised crime
of colonisation. I didn't start the gang
but it's sure lined my privileged pockets

And to say it never happened
or that we don't need to look back
is world class thuggery

Annihilating a people
then annihilating their story

Doesn't get more unholy than that

Australia is not a world leader in dealing transparently with its history.

But we could be.

As we were walking down the cobblestone streets of Krakow after lunch, the Yoorrook Justice Commission began its first public hearings in Victoria. This body is investigating the injustices against the First Peoples of Victoria since the beginning of colonisation, including its present-day impacts. It is the first formal truth-telling process of its kind in Australia, working to establish an official record from the people most impacted and will make recommendations for healing, system reforms and changes to law and education based on its learnings.

Yoorrook is meeting people on Country, to hear their stories in culturally safe and appropriate settings. People can choose how they wish to share their experiences and trauma-informed practices are at the forefront of proceedings.

The first step in addressing the past is listening to the truth about it.

Those of us who are not First Nations
have an obligation to listen, to learn,

to burn with indignation

'til every subsequent generation knows
the truth, the whole truth and nothing

but the truth

No need to dress up what happened as pioneering spirit. Let us call things for what they are. Invasion. Land theft. Attempted genocide. Victim blaming and shaming. Writing of myths that privilege white stories, and white heroes and erasing millennia of First Nations accounts. Refusing to engage with our history and its impacts. Leaving First Nations people to suffer while demanding their silence and complicity.

We do ourselves no favours by blunting these accounts. We do the people harmed no justice by suppressing these truths.

As we stop to peek in the window of a Polish ice creamery, Bek recalls the quote by George Santayana, a Spanish-American writer, that now hangs above the door of one of the prison quarters in the Auschwitz camp:

'Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'

For families, towns and countries to truly reconcile their pasts, to be able to step towards justice and healing,

we must
first remember

Jim Jim Falls (In and Out of Love)

by Clare Bizley

A romantic trip in the heart of Kakadu (perhaps; I have no idea of the lay of the land – it's big, uncompromising, incredible country) to a magical place called Jim Jim Falls. We wonder if that is the original name; perhaps a version of it, albeit a simpler one for us English language colonizers. We drive past a sign for a billabong that has about 19 letters in the name, so probably some bloke called Jim just named this majestic place after himself, but who knows? There is little information here about how the land was settled (stolen), but further research teaches us it is named for 'Andjimdjim', the local Indigenous name for the water pandanus surrounding the creek.

It's hard to find out much information about the place, like how far off the highway it is (50 km), how bad the road in is (early August well-graded and not muddy to the campground, after that – you better have 4 wheels and know how to drive). Side note – I don't understand four-wheel driving at all. I don't really enjoy it; it's kind of scary, uncomfortable, and noisy, but I do love a woman who loves camping – and here we are.

We are about to spend four days together, which is our longest stint in the twelve months we have loved one another. I'm nervous, mostly about camping for that long a period (I hate pooping out in the bush, in public toilets, or heaven forbid, in a long drop toilet. I mean, that's not the only reason I'm nervous, but it's a definite factor). I'm nervous that I'll be annoying. I'm nervous that I'll be irritated (by her, by the heat, by the fellow campers – do not get me started on the Yo-Pros with their expensive Land Cruisers and fancy tents). I'm nervous I won't like it, and she will go away with other friends and my heart (or perhaps my ego) will hurt at being left behind.

It's the Dry Season; the nights and mornings are cool, the days sunny and breezy. The Top End offers folk from 'Down South' a reprieve from their cold winters, an outdoor paradise with crocodiles, buffalos, and plenty of things that are capable of killing you. You'd be mad not to come.

Day One – we get to Jabiru just as the sun has set. We find an enormous, extremely well-laid-out campground with a wonderfully big pool and an extremely

expensive 'restaurant'. We set up the tent (it's a rooftop; it takes two minutes to put up and another two to lay out the mattress topper and sheet. Very convenient and, other than spending time with her, certainly the thing that gets me excited to camp). We head down for a swim, in our finest evening camp wear, which includes high-arched purple thongs, a mustard short skirt, and a retro 70s swimming top. Our fellow campers are similarly dressed up, with some ladies at a nearby table taking out the award for best-dressed bogan with their Croc shoes, crop tops, and thigh-split skirts on bigger bodies. Bravo. The pool water is icy, the food delicious, if a little costly. Sated, we go to bed and sleep well.

Day Two - we wake up to the echo of campers across the ground telling one another that the water is off. We go to the bathroom to wee; it's already a literal shitshow so we head to the pool. A man makes me giggle uncomfortably when I hear him say 'no water - but what about happy hour?' in reference to regular morning pooping time. I feel terrible for the cleaners, who are probably just European backpackers doing everything at the campground for \$17 an hour. We leave quickly, accidentally fill the car up with 98 fuel that gives the car more life than I've ever seen and depletes our budget ahead of schedule, but it's worth it. The car feels happy, and so do we.

We arrive at the Karnamarr Campsite after driving on a dirt road for 45 minutes. It's the beginning of a long weekend in August, and we drive past the grader sorting out the road. They do a pretty good job - on the way back it is super easy and smooth. The campsite is gorgeous; we are nestled within the high, dark ranges of Kakadu, under a tree, with only two other campsites taken. It is a peaceful, quiet, contemplative space. We eat lunch, wraps with salad and falafel, delicious, and I'm thoroughly enjoying it until she says, 'Do you hear your jaw?'

'Nope,' I say, mouth full, heart accelerating. I'm learning she can sometimes be critical and even when it's constructive, it's unsettling.

'It's clicking. How can you not hear that?', she says. I feel her displeasure, or perhaps discomfort.

'My Dad's jaw used to do that, and it drove me mad. I have PTSD from it', she tells me. 'I'm trying not to be triggered by it'.

I don't know what to say so I open my mouth to take another bite and there it is, a click, or almost a clunk. I assume it sounds different to someone outside of my body; to me, it's just a sensation, not a disruption.

I try to take smaller bites, but still, clunk, click, clunk. I'm suddenly so conscious of my body, the sounds I make. I want to make light of it, but how? I've never really

noticed it and now here, in this beautiful place, it's all I can hear and think about.

I want her to love me, despite my faults. I want her to relish my body, not be triggered by the noise I make when I eat. I want to be able to be myself, without fear of feeling shamed or embarrassed. It's not the first time I have felt like this, and I feel the sense of worry, deep and low and quiet in my stomach. Either I'm unlovable or she isn't able to love me enough. I don't want it to be the latter, so it will have to be the former. Perhaps I'm too sensitive; I'll add it to the list of Things To Talk To My Psychologist About. Lucky lady.

We pack our backpacks for a short walk into Jim Jim with the plan of swimming and relaxing all afternoon. We've heard it's like an inland beach, that the walk-in is graded Difficult. The first ten minutes are easy enough, and I make the mistake of saying this out loud, so within moments, the track gets tougher – we are stepping on small rocks, bigger rocks, and finally climbing over boulders, taking whichever path we deem correct for our own legs. It reminds me of our relationship, this heading towards something, some place, together, as individuals, working out how we show up in our ways but finding our way back to each other, without too much fuss, or drama.

The walk takes us, two reasonably fit early-forties Outdoor Enthusiast Lesbians (a fun game we play whilst in the bush is guessing whether fellow women campers are Outdoor Enthusiasts or Lesbians. Or both. The fishing shirt fashion can be confusing. Don't get me started on the hiking boots.)

We walk for about 45 minutes. It's arduous, and I would not recommend it to anyone with bad knees. I am of the bigger body variety, much to my satisfaction, and I was no more puffed out than my athletically bodied dreamboat of a partner. We are greeted by an oasis, white sands, towering cliffs, dark, cool water that looks like it houses more than one variety of crocodile. Other people are swimming, quietly, gently, and we strip off our boots and join in. Safety in numbers, perhaps.

On one stretch of sand, there are bright pink markings around a small fenced area, which we find out later are the eggs of a freshwater croc that has resided in the area for several years. How wonderful, but ridiculous. She would not be small, but still, thankfully, not out to eat us, more afraid of us than we of her – not exactly true, just perhaps more places for her to hide.

Soon enough more people arrive, and the place gets noisier, the sound echoing off the cul-de-sac of rock around us. Young men splash loudly in the big pool, drowning out the quiet of thousands of years, interrupting the peace, and taking

over, as they tend to do. The water is icy cold and for hours afterward my nipples threaten to harm anyone who gets too close. I relish the sun breathing into my cool skin, so refreshed, so alive. We walk back, again choosing our paths, coming back together when it suits.

By the time we arrive back at the campground, it has doubled in numbers, and three different stereos are playing either Aussie rock, trance, or pop. Sometimes I just don't understand people, or for that matter like them very much.

The campsite manager comes around on his bicycle to collect our camping fees, we have a lovely chat and are enamoured by his tales of traveling around Australia with his partner doing this as a job at a variety of campgrounds. It sounds like it is both hard work and wonderful, and perhaps a version of me in an alternate universe could do it, but not this one. Fixing fences and telling drunk campers to turn the music down would make me cry, even in a place as beautiful as this.

We drink a few beers, eat some dinner (I'm slightly more relaxed about my jaw noise now the serenity is over, probably she is as well), have a glass of whiskey, play some Yahtzee and head to bed at the grand old time of 7.42 pm. We can't sleep, the noise of the campers too disruptive. Fortunately, we have a small stash of 'camping Valium', and we each pop one, share the earbuds, and drift peacefully off to my favourite classical music playlist, wrapped in each other's arms. There is nowhere else I'd rather be, this physical connection so meaningful, so rare to have found. I feel loved, safe, and happy. We sleep gently.

Day Three - we wake early and after coffee and a light breakfast drive to the start of the Twin Falls walk. We have water, some snacks, and sunscreen in a backpack that we will take turns carrying. The walking guide suggests allowing six hours for the hike, which makes me quite nervous, but we figure we can give it some good pace and be back by lunchtime.

The first twenty minutes are uphill, slightly rocky, and in full sun. Sweat pours off me, and I fight the urge to give up. My persistence pays off (or perhaps it's my refusal to fail in front of this incredible woman I want to be loved by), and the landscape changes, it flattens out, and we enter a windy canopy of lush plant life, cool and refreshing. The views are already spectacular, and we aren't even close to the top. It takes about an hour of walking, and we reach the peak of Twin Falls, dry now, rocks shiny and polished from the enormous amount of water that flows across each monsoonal season, for so many thousands of years.

There is another couple at the top, taking selfies, far too close to the edge for

my maternal nature. I offer to take a photo of them and ask them to return the favour. I feel my partner tense at this; she doesn't love photos, especially staged ones, but I want this moment captured, I want proof that we were here, mostly in love, together. They turn out to be beautiful photos, we look happy, relaxed, and comfortable with one another.

Months later my Mum goes overseas to visit extended family and takes a printed version of this photo to show them, her daughter and her lesbian partner hiking in Kakadu. It's a meaningful gesture, not just an acceptance of this relationship but a pride in it. It makes me feel warm and loved, and as good as this hike and spending time with this incredible human was, it's this photo in my Mum's 'Brag Book' that has lasting meaning.

We do the full walk, through the sandy creek bed at the top of the Falls that is mostly hot and dry and slightly arduous. Walking through sand is the worst, do not recommend. We rest in the shade, hydrate, share an orange, conversation and stories. She has a way about her that allows for silence as well as animated chat, comfortably.

I know at times I am too loud, perhaps too much for her, but I also know I've spent a lifetime seeking to meet and accept myself, so I will just keep doing that and hope to be loved for it. Loved by myself and her, if possible.

We share a moment on the way down, resting on a fallen log, eating warm dolmades from a tin when we are joined by a funny little black, blue, green, and yellow bird. Neither of us knows what it is; I'd seen a sign that said to keep an eye out for Spangled Drongos, though they don't seem as colourful and it's such a strange name for a bird. This guy scuffles around in the undergrowth, aware of us but not concerned, we delight in him/her/them pottering about, a treat, a visitor (or perhaps most certainly we are the visitors), a rare sighting. It's a highlight, this little bird and us, a moment in time together.

Later that evening we drive to the nearest pub, The Bark Hut Inn, classic NT, again slightly confused as to whether the women in fishing shirts and Bunnings hats are fellow gays or chicks who love fishing. I suppose it doesn't matter.

We use the bird identifier app to try and work out whom our little mate was, using colours, size, location. Every search tells us it was a Spangled Drongo and I am relishing in possibly being right, even though I'm also very aware that the bird we saw wasn't a Drongo. Thankfully there is a tour guide at the next table, so we ask him, straight away he says, 'Sounds like a Rainbow Pitta – lucky you' and we know without even googling it that he is right.

Upon further investigation we discover the Rainbow Pitta is a monsoon-dwelling, territorial, monogamous bird. Sometimes shy, but at times approachable – much like our little mate. It feels like a significant event to have shared the forest floor with such a charming bird and we wonder together about getting matching tattoos of the little creature. We never do, but for a time it's a sweet commitment to talk about together.

Day Four – We come home. Sun-kissed, relaxed, connected but also both ready to get back to our own selves, our separate lives, our independence. It has been a good trip and I want more of this with her, more time, laughter, shared moments of humanity, and witnessing this beautiful country.

We do many camping trips in our time together. She grew up 'Down South' and loves to go bush, to get out of town and be outdoors. I grew up in the desert, so nature often reminds me of flies and sand and hot sun or freezing nights, but again, I will camp with her, I will do whatever it takes to spend time with her, to find our belonging.

We explore many places in the Top End, swim in beautiful waterholes, walk along hot and sweaty trails, take visiting family to witness this incredible country. We make memories that I treasure, and I hope, I think she does too. Funny how things change, how unsure I am now, after the experience of love and of trying to let go of it.

Alas, we know where this is going. I knew the minute I started hearing my jaw click, that as much as we tried to make it work, perhaps as much as I wanted to make us work, we didn't. This place will never feel like home to her, even though maybe sometimes I did.

She leaves me with a legacy of having traversed places I never would have, here in my backyard. She leaves me with a knowing that I was loved. I don't know what I leave her with, perhaps, hopefully, just the knowledge that she too was loved, deeply, though it wasn't enough.

I wonder if I will ever meet another Rainbow Pitta in the bush, if I will ever be lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. If that Pitta will let me see it, even just for a short time. I hope so, but if not, it's enough that I once did, that I shared the moment with someone I loved, that we tried.

Even though love was not enough, maybe I can be.

I hope so.

WHAT AM I HERE FOR?

by Rachael McGuirk

Leaving Mparntwe Alice Springs by air always feels otherworldly, like the bubble of a small place bursts at takeoff, and I see from above just how far removed I've been from everyone and everything else. Each time I fly home to the East Coast – if home is where you spent most of your life – it's for reasons I don't want to return: a funeral, a breakdown, a breakup. This time it's to find my mother, not for the first time, bedridden. She's laid here for days with the blinds shut, the air around her hot and stale. When I turn the light on, it burns her eyes but more so her mind. 'Hi honey,' she says, with both softness and shame. I kiss her on the forehead. Just yesterday she cried on the phone and said, 'I just don't feel myself' and I knew, like I've always known, as if her pain is carried in the depths of my own bones, that she was – in fact – not herself.

Mum's one of almost half Australians who've experienced a mental health disorder in their lifetime. Of these people, less than half of them will access treatment, which is 50 per cent less than those who seek treatment for physical suffering (Black Dog Institute, 2020). The last time she was unwell, she only received the treatment she needed when her mind shut her body down long enough for blood to collect as thick, painful clots. She was taken to ED by ambulance and once the physical ailment was treated, she was transferred to the mental health ward with 'psychomotor retardation' and interchangeable diagnosis of bipolar and schizophrenia.

Turning the light back off, I lay next to her on the bed, not saying anything for a while. Then this time I ask her if she trusts me, and she says yes. I hold her hand and in between breaths she says, 'but not the others.' I'm both relieved she trusts me and burdened that I'm the only one she does. She's off her meds and is convinced that everyone around her has an agenda, conspiring together to end her life. I lay there in this lightless room and imagine my body going inside a CT machine. On the scan it reveals how much fuel inside me I've got to give. Right now, it's almost 100 per cent, but I've just arrived. I feel guilty for thinking about myself, but I've been here before and I know the true cost of caring.

A report published by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, estimates that women spend 64.4 per cent of their total working week in an unpaid caring capacity (2020). This includes duties of providing physical and emotional support and assistance to others, usually family or friends – as well as contributing to the care and wellbeing of people with a disability, the frail aged, and those with a mental health or chronic condition. The labour also includes domestic work and ‘household production’ – not to be confused with the idea of leisure, for this is work some can afford the luxury to pay others to do. Unpaid caregiving is Australia’s largest industry. If we were to purchase the unpaid work – preformed predominately by women in primary caregiving roles at a rate 70 per cent – it would equate for half of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at a total of 77.9 billion dollars annually. Despite this, unpaid care remains absent from equations of the GDP (Carers Australia, 2020). In 2020, the estimated foregone earnings for Australian carers was a total of \$15.2 billion dollars. In the case of raising children, economists believe women lose at least 17 per cent of their lifetime wages, many of whom move into ‘mother-friendly’ occupations which are lower paid than their pre-birth positions and do not reflect a woman’s human capital: her abilities, education or work experience. Perhaps it’s simple for some to draw the conclusion that this is a woman’s choice, particularly in the area of raising children; but no mother, daughter, friend, or partner signs up for the details and demands of these roles per se – there’s no contract, no tangible end, no reimbursement, and often, very little credit. The idea of credit seems foreign and so far away when the mere recognition of this role as labour is largely absent.

When my brothers are first assessed for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) – both suffering from mental health conditions and drug abuse – my mother is incorporated into their plans as their primary caregiver. During her most recent breakdown, my brother’s services are tripled to meet the duties normally performed by my mother, taking thousands of dollars from their plans that she’d otherwise compensate. When my mum’s sick, I ask one of my brothers to do the dishes. He throws a spoon into the sink and says, ‘I’m not doing a fucking slut’s job!’ It is the very notion of gendered-roles and stereotypes of what a woman is, of what she ought to be providing, that underpins the fundamentals of the power over mentality that permeates abuse and violence in this nation – the grandiose delusion that something is owed to men, that they are above nature, not part of it.

When I'm with mum and no one else is around, which is almost all of the time in these early days of coming home, she screams in pain with every movement. It's hard to discern the physical from the mental, but both are clearly suffering. She tells me someone's trying to kill her. She says she cannot walk. I am her legs and she is heavy. After hours of trying to get her up to go to the toilet, I explain to her that I have to call the ambulance. When two men arrive, they say they've driven from Macksville, 55km South. They ask mum what's wrong and she minimizes the severity, as she's always done, saying she's just in a 'little pain'. One ambulance driver looks annoyed when mum says she doesn't want to go to the hospital, and he leaves the room. The other says 'well we can't force you to go anywhere, darlin.' But I want them to force her. I want them to carry her to safety. I want them to see it's almost impossible for me to manage this, alone. They tell her to take some Panadol and leave. Her limp legs look detached from the rest of her body and hang over the side of the bed. I try to gently align her legs with the rest of her body and she screams. She howls like a dog on a chain who hasn't been touched in years. I hold water and a straw up to her dry mouth and say things like 'please, one more sip.' I set my alarm for 1am, 2am, 3am – hourly intervals to wake and check her pulse. I lay back down on the hard-wired single mattress in the smallest room in the house and see myself back inside the MRI machine, vital energy sucked from my core.

The next day I wake with the sun pushing through clouds, it's humid and unlike the air of the desert. My dad is in Melbourne packing up the house of his dead brother, and while my own brother is here in a way, pacing in and out the door in a daze, searching for cigarettes and things to latch onto, I feel entirely alone. I sit on the side of my mum's bed and plea with her to go to the hospital. I tell her that I'll take her in, that I won't leave her, that she won't be in for months like last time. Getting her down the stairs takes a tremendous amount of coordination and effort. My brother and I stand on either side of her while she slowly makes it down the stairs and to the garage, crying out with each painful step. My brother giggles, although nothing's funny, it's just what he does. In a way, it breaks my heart to see him care for his mother in this basic, simple way when he can barely care for himself. Then I remember all the other days.

In the triage room, mum looks at me, confused, and asks 'what am I here for?' It has always seemed to me that the quality of care you receive, both from the health system and those around you, is very much dependent on the language you use and how well you can articulate, point to, and explain what's going on for you. Just a few years ago, at this same hospital, a 42-year-old man

self-presented for mental health issues and concerns over his drug use – he was sent home with a Valium. He returned the next day and allegedly exaggerated a story, claiming to have a violent criminal past, which meant he could be a danger to others and was sectioned under the Mental Health Act (2007). His mother later said he made this up ‘so they would admit him so he could get the help he was screaming out to get.’ After waiting hours for treatment as staff questioned the lawfulness of his admission, he was transferred to the mental health unit, and without being searched and no substance history collected, was found dead in his room the following day. An autopsy indicated he died from multiple toxicity, a mix of drugs he had prior to entering the hospital and those he received in care. He did not receive standard observation checks, blood tests, or examination of drugs in his system.

When mum presents in hospital, she complains of back pain and very little else. Previous discharge notes from her treating psychiatrist read: ‘her illness is perpetuated by her stigmatized view of mental illness, on a number of times she labelled her son’s mental illness (both are diagnosed with schizophrenia) as similar to her illness, but didn’t want to name it.’ Shame: it thrives in silence. I look at mum and apologise for talking for her, then tell the nurse that yes, she’s in bad physical pain and can barely walk; but that she got this way after coming off her antipsychotics and spending weeks in bed. The nurse takes mum and I to a waiting room and mum looks at me in fear. Later she takes small bites of a cheese sandwich and mumbles ‘gas chamber’. At every point, I have to try and preempt mum’s thoughts and feelings in order to reduce the darkness of them. When a nurse starts to wheel her away without saying anything, mum looks back at me in a panic. I ask each health worker to please clearly explain what’s happening, where they are taking her, as she silently fears they will kill her. She’s moved to an old ward while the hospital is undergoing upgrades. The doctor tells mum she has a severe UTI and five bags of fluids drip through her veins slowly. She’s started to take her antipsychotics again, but her mind is incredibly fragile. I text a friend and say, ‘I’m not sure what to do next.’ He replies, ‘You have a home now, take her there.’ ‘Mum’, I say, ‘We’re going to the desert.’

Sometimes, when my mind entertains the scenarios it spins, I’d see myself at my mum’s funeral. I’d be driving along the highway or flying through the sky and then in my mind I’m standing behind the pew, trying to put together some rambling eulogy. The problem I face is that these final words are always so exterior, as if the aim of this last goodbye is to get the members in the

audience to nod along in recognition, to think yes, that's true of the woman I knew. But for mum, and many women, these people here know very little. The brothers, the sons – all they see is what they lose, not what she's lost. I can't simply say 'what a generous woman she was,' because her generosity is intrinsically, delicately interwoven with the expectation of labour, of motherhood, of survival. I know already that there's a certain type of sadness that comes with the impossibility of peace. How can I accept the ending when the life lived feels robbed, stripped of dreams and energy by the hands of others? I stand here knowing better than anyone just how much was denied in order to serve. I'm angry up here, on this stand and in my mind, in front of all these fools and familiar faces, who wipe tears before they fall with handkerchiefs, she probably washed for them.

After three connecting flights and fourteen hours in transit, we arrive in the red, pulsing heartland of the country. Mum slowly unpacks the small amount of belongings she has on one side of the bed as if they're all foreign to her and says things like, 'I don't want to be a burden, honey'. I kiss her on the forehead and tell her, for the first of so many times, that she is anything but a burden. For many people it seems there's something incredibly healing about Mparntwe, Alice Springs. Friends drop by with homemade meals for mum, others take her to the galleries and gardens when I'm at work. When I'm not at work, mum is with me all of the time. She's unable to be left for long periods and although the only alone time I get is while I'm sleeping, it's incredibly isolating to care for someone in this way. It's the generosity of those around me in this community who keep me afloat when I sink into the often-solitary depths of caring. I slipped almost seamlessly from being a daughter to being a carer – although never really saw myself as one. I come to believe that you cannot do this alone – that it's impossible to maintain all elements of your own life and someone else's – but yet, currently 3.5 per cent of the country as primary carers do just that (ABS, 2019).

It's kind of ironic in a way that one of the things that helped my mum heal in those weeks of being in the desert was being immersed in water at the town pool. The pool is a space in this often-divided town that feels like an equal space for everyone. A town where Indigenous kids can't go to the library unattended by an adult, where shops hang signs that say, "no school, no service." Here though, everyone's floating and diving and the place smells like free BBQ and chlorine. Mum comes to the pool three times a week for water aerobics. On Mondays, I join her, and on the other days, an old boss of mine

takes her to move and stretch underneath the water's surface. At times, it's a battle to convince her of the value of showing up for the class. She's happy there's social distancing in the water as she's still paranoid about the people around her. By the second week, though, this becomes her happy place. Most of these people here, a majority of them women, are in their 60s or 70s and come for social connection as much as exercise. Teacher's play old school tunes and instruct with enthusiasm and there's a rare beauty in the collective synchronicity of aging bones dancing under the water. Some days, I hang off mum's back like the little kids do and she laughs and spins me around. I tell her the extra weight is good for her, but really, I just revel in the feeling of switching back roles, of being the child whose mum can carry her for one brief, weightless moment.

My own fear was never of dying; of snake bites or public speaking; of earthquakes erupting or darkness or blood; it was of being mad. As seen as mad. A woman they'd all label hysterical, sick – point to and motion their twirling fingers around their ear. A woman in a white gown, a woman having lost control, a woman whose identity had been stripped because she was now not a mother, now incapable of mothering, as if that's all she ever was. My greatest fear was to be my mother when she'd lost her mind, when agency dripped from her, was poked out of her, prodded, shocked. Whenever my mind spiraled, whenever I pushed the boundaries for too long, left broken and embodying shame on a random Tuesday, I saw myself being wheeled in, being stripped and, being dressed in a cheap cotton gown with ass-cheeks exposed at the back, sticking to the leather of thin beds and sunken chairs; forking mashed potato, spinning useless clay, floating in a sea of the unwell. My fear, I think, was ultimately to be perceived as only the actions of thankless labour; laying in the hospital bed thinking who am I? If I'm not folding the tea towels, then what am I here for? If I'm not preparing dinner for others, is there any point in eating? If no one recognises the aging cracks in my skin, are they even really there?

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CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY ESSAY AWARD

This is a well-argued essay which brings a controversial moment in the beleaguered history of bilingual education in the Northern Territory back into view. It builds its case with a judicious backstory, and raises intriguing speculations.

**Judge's
Comment**



Winner

Steve Hawkins

The Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours of Each School Day policy (2008, NT): an evaluation.



WINNER

THE COMPULSORY TEACHING IN ENGLISH FOR THE FIRST FOUR HOURS OF EACH SCHOOL DAY POLICY (2008, NT): AN EVALUATION.

by Steve Hawkins

The final years of the first decade of the 21st century dramatically impacted remote Aboriginal school policy in the Northern Territory (NT). The radical intervention of the federal government with the Northern Territory Emergency Response, along with the precarious position of the NT Labor government after a disastrous 2008 election, led to knee-jerk policy responses to heightened public, political and media scrutiny. One such initiative was the *Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours of Each School Day policy* (commonly known as the 'First Four Hours Policy', hereafter FFHP) which was announced in October 2008.¹ Released during a political scandal linked to the sacking of Department of Education CEO Margaret Banks, and after the release of poor National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results, the policy was ostensibly aimed at improving education outcomes in remote Indigenous schools but was a complete policy failure. Over the ensuing months and years, the policy was 'reviewed' and 'clarified' until it was quietly rescinded in June 2012, three years after its implementation.² This analysis will provide background and contextual information on the educational and political environment in which the policy was developed, consider the degree to which Aboriginal Northern Territorians impacted by the policy were consulted and analyse and evaluate the justification for the policy and its effectiveness.

THE POLICY, BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The FFHP was unexpectedly announced by then Northern Territory Minister for Education and Training Marion Scrymgeour, a Tiwi Islander and Australia's first

female Indigenous Cabinet minister, on 14 October 2008.³ All NT schools were directed to deliver the first four hours of education programming in English, impacting primarily on the nine schools delivering a “step” model of bilingual education (that is, with an Aboriginal language as the primary language of instruction in the first years of schooling). Language and culture programs could be scheduled for the afternoons.⁴

In framing the need for the policy shift, Minister Scrymgour tabled data suggesting bilingual student achievement scores in NAPLAN were lower compared with English-first students.⁵ She posited that a shift to an English-first model would improve student reading and writing in English allowing for success at school, lead to improvements in Year 12 completion rates and more effective involvement in the social and economic development of the Northern Territory.⁶ Less than four months after announcing the policy, Scrymgour was removed as Minister for Education and Training in February 2009 and resigned from cabinet less than a week later for personal reasons.⁷ It has been speculated that Scrymgour’s handling of the bilingual policies were a contributing factor to her removal as education minister.⁸

Created in haste,⁹ and seemingly at odds with the Department of Education and Training’s own strategic plan, the policy was conceived and developed without broad engagement with the Aboriginal communities, schools and educators affected, prompting strong opposition.¹⁰ However, Scrymgour claimed she represented the views of parents, arguing that while teachers, linguists and other school personnel favoured bilingual approaches:

Then there is the broader community in which many Aboriginal parents, when you sit down and talk to them, will say: ‘We want our children to learn English. Our job is to teach our kids, and reaffirm and ensure that language and culture is maintained in our communities’.¹¹

This view was supported by Walpiri activist, Bess Price, who said:

The whitefellas’ job is to teach our kids English as a second language. We want them to be able to speak to the whole world and the whole world speaks English. Our job is to teach our own language as a first language. Nobody else can do that for us.¹²

After the policy announcement, but before its implementation in the beginning of the 2009 school year, Scrymgour engaged in consultation with affected communities, stating that when she explained the FFHP to Aboriginal elders, parents and teachers they understood and supported the change “in every

single community.”¹³ Some who attended the consultations, however, claimed that Scrymgour was heckled by Aboriginal educators at a public meeting in Batchelor and that her senior advisor was ordered to leave Areyonga community when she arrived for the consultation.¹⁴ While Scrymgour strongly disputed these events,¹⁵ media accounts reported the Areyonga community felt distraught, hurt and angry at the policy,¹⁶ and they later lodged a complaint on the policy with the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2010.¹⁷

Similar frustrations over the policy and lack of consultation were evident in other communities. Scrymgour met with an angry delegation of Yolngu educators in February 2009 (after her removal from the education ministry but prior to her resignation from Cabinet).¹⁸ Djuwalpi Marika told the Minister that, “...instead of bureaucrats making decisions for us...we want our children’s education in two languages. The government is telling us what to do and not allowing our leadership to decide,” with Rarriwuy Marika saying, “...you talk about partnership here but there is no partnership. You have already made the decision and will not listen to what we are saying”.¹⁹

Additionally, two public letters from Aboriginal educators were published and the NT Government was presented with petitions in opposition to the policy from Maningrida and Lajamanu communities.²⁰ According to informal meeting minutes, Scrymgour attempted to downplay this opposition by stating that 8 out of the 10 communities were supportive of the FFHP policy, though this may be explained by the fact 8 out of 10 schools had submitted their policy action plans, but not that they necessarily supported the policy.²¹

POLICY EVALUATION

The FFHP policy can best be evaluated by analysing the arguments presented by Minister Scrymgour to support the policy and determining if improvements in these areas were identified. In response to questioning in Parliament in October 2008, Scrymgour justified the FFHP by suggesting that comparative attendance and achievement data between bilingual and other remote Aboriginal schools indicated bilingual schools were failing. She suggested that competence in English was necessary for success, both at school and in contributing to the social and economic development of the Northern Territory and the nation. She also argued that the FFHP would not prevent schools from continuing to engage students in language and culture programs in the afternoons.²²

In terms of improving attendance and achievement data, and in maintaining student engagement in language programs, the policy was a failure. Only the Northern Territory Government ministers responsible for the policy spoke in its

favour before it was finally abandoned in 2012. The policy was sharply criticised by many prominent Indigenous activists, including Mick Dodson, M. Yunupingu, Larissa Behrendt and Tom Calma, as well as institutions including United Nations Human Rights Council, United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Australian Human Rights Commission, and the Australian Linguistics Society, among others.²³

On student achievement, the data on bilingual schools used to justify the FFHP policy was questioned from the beginning.²⁴ Minister Scrymgeour tabled data in the NT Legislative Assembly that she claimed indicated comparative poor performance from remote bilingual schools.²⁵ The data suggested that in 17 out of 19 tests in the 2008 NAPLAN, non-bilingual schools achieved better outcomes. However, the data was immediately criticised for poor sampling and inaccurate presentation of data.²⁶ Further analysis concluded that the rationale for FFHP was based on “inaccurate analysis of NAPLAN data”,²⁷ and that bilingual schools outperformed like schools in five additional NAPLAN tests.²⁸

Questions were raised as to whether NAPLAN data for bilingual schools is an appropriate measure to judge achievement. At a Yolngu educator meeting in February 2009, Yalmay Yunupingu noted that NAPLAN data is a poor metric for students who speak English as an additional language, and that an equivalent test in Yolngu Matha would demonstrate educational achievement.²⁹ It was also argued that as data from all remote Indigenous schools (bilingual or not) is significantly different to national figures, bilingual education alone cannot account for the disparity in outcomes.³⁰

The policy’s objective in using English-only instruction to improve educational outcomes was not achieved. NAPLAN data from subsequent years analysed by The Australian showed no improvement in NAPLAN results and that in most instances, achievement data in formerly bilingual schools declined dramatically.³¹ At Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic School in the Tiwi Islands, Year 3 students who substantially outperformed like schools in the 2008 NAPLAN tests were below like schools in 2009.³² Similar results led Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda to argue that bilingual programs in the Northern Territory should never have been scrapped.³³ A study by Peter Buckskin from the University of South Australia found no proof that teaching students only in English would result in better literacy and that if the evidence used by the Northern Territory Government to continue with the FFHP policy exists “we can’t find it”.³⁴ The assertion that English-first programs are required for improved outcomes was also challenged by the Australian Council of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Associations, which stated:

The move to English-only classrooms will be as ineffective in Australia quite simply because it flies in the face of all current second language acquisition research which clearly demonstrates the multiple benefits of bilingualism for cognitive development and the maintenance of social and cultural identity. Quite simply, the best indicator of success in a second language – which English is for many Indigenous students – is competency in the mother tongue.³⁵

In responding to the FFHP, NT opposition leader Terry Mills, from the conservative Country Liberal Party, stated:

As a linguist and former school principal I believe bilingual education is a better approach to teaching children who have very limited English language skills when they first attend school. I would need to see persuasive research to convince me otherwise.³⁶

Despite assurances language and culture programs would continue, the English-first approaches failed to effectively engage students resulting in declining attendance rates. Acknowledging that the impacts of the NT Emergency Response also influenced engagement, Yawuru academic Mick Dodson noted that some explanation of the “massive fall-off in attendance rates” was due to the scrapping of bilingual education programs, and if that were the case “they ought to be reinstated”.³⁷ Attendance and achievement data analysed at four Walpiri schools found that after the policy was implemented, previously bilingual schools were achieving lower results for attendance and achievement, at rates similar to the (previously poor) all-English school results.³⁸ Similarly, attendance at Yuendumu halved to 30% in the two years after the FFHP was implemented.³⁹

SCRYMGOUR’S RESPONSE: CLARIFICATION OR REVISIONISM?

In the period subsequent to the FFHP, Scrymgour has sought to defend the policy, and to clarify both its intent and her role in its implementation. In extensive correspondence with the National Indigenous Times, Scrymgour attempted to present her case in response to harsh condemnation from that publication, as well highly critical pieces in Crikey and New Matilda.⁴⁰ Scrymgour admitted that she got the policy wrong, but only in how she framed it.⁴¹ She acknowledged a failure in consultation and regretted an emphasis on the phrasing “first four hours in English” suggesting it detracted from the broader

³⁵ It is important to note that despite the leader of the CLP supporting bilingual education, others in the party openly rejected any form of Indigenous language being included in the curriculum (see Northern Territory, Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Assembly, 26 November 2008).

policy position.⁴² Writing in the *New Matilda*, Scrymgour also argued that the policy only sought to amend the 'step' model of bilingualism in favour of a "two-way learning" approach which gives equal weight to both English and the first language.⁴³ While it is true that a position paper associated with the FFHP does not prohibit the use of a first language during the first four hours (if it supported the teaching of English) this was not included in the press release associated with the policy, which unequivocally states "that the first four hours of education in all Northern Territory schools will be conducted in English."⁴⁴ Additionally, Scrymgour's initial comments on the policy in the Legislative Assembly do not raise any concerns with the "step" model of bilingual education.⁴⁵ Indeed, the title of the policy – *Compulsory Teaching in English* (emphasis added) – suggests Scrymgour's later clarifying statements were little more than attempted atonement for poor policy and a defence against the subsequent high level of criticism. Regardless, if the FFHP was aimed at rectifying issues with the "step" model of bilingual education (as Scrymgour notes), the evaluation of the policy shows that it still failed on this measure in terms of student attendance and achievement in those schools.

FFHP AS POLITICAL COVER?

As the first female Indigenous Cabinet member in any Australian political jurisdiction Scrymgour had long supported policies on Aboriginal languages and culture. She later quit the NT Labor Party in response to policies undermining Aboriginal Homelands.⁴⁶ In advocating for a policy seemingly at odds with her political motivations, it is worth considering the political climate of the time to consider why it was initially proposed. It has been postulated that the FFHP was quickly implemented to detract from political scrutiny associated with the sacking of Department of Education CEO Margaret Banks, after Scrymgour stated Banks retired when instead she was forced to resign.⁴⁷ Scrymgour denies this motivation but did agree that the policy was put together in a few days after Banks' departure.⁴⁸ Considering the timing and timeframe of the policy development, one could argue that the decision to drastically change bilingual education was made for politically expedient reasons rather than to address any educational need. As Scrymgour's tenure as Minister for Education and Training ended soon after the FFHP was implemented,⁴⁹ if expediency was the primary explanation for a hurried, non-consultative policy, it still failed to achieve its objective.

CONCLUSION

The FFHP had a detrimental impact on bilingual education in the Northern Territory, negatively impacting students and teachers in remote communities as well as urban-based education officers tasked with supporting its implementation. These impacts exceeded the life of the policy.⁵⁰ The eventual rescinding of the policy was important if only to reinforce the reinstated value of the NT Government on language and culture programs. As Dickson states:

No matter how much the Department tried to say they valued Indigenous languages and cultures over the past three or so years, the “First Four Hours” policy stood out like a neon sign saying “Your Indigenous language isn’t good enough”.⁵¹

Later policies such as the *Framework for Learning English as an Additional Language* and the current *Keeping Indigenous Languages and Cultures Strong* policy contains a First Language Pathway, and seven schools use an Aboriginal language as the main medium of instruction.⁵² The *Keeping Indigenous Languages and Cultures Strong* plan allows for schools and communities to embed language and culture into the curriculum, as well as to include language revitalisation initiatives. Despite the hit, bilingual education in the Northern Territory is now on stronger, though perhaps perpetually shaky, ground.

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¹⁹Gosford, "Ex-NT education Minister meets with Educators."

²⁰Gosford, "Ex-NT education Minister meets with Educators."

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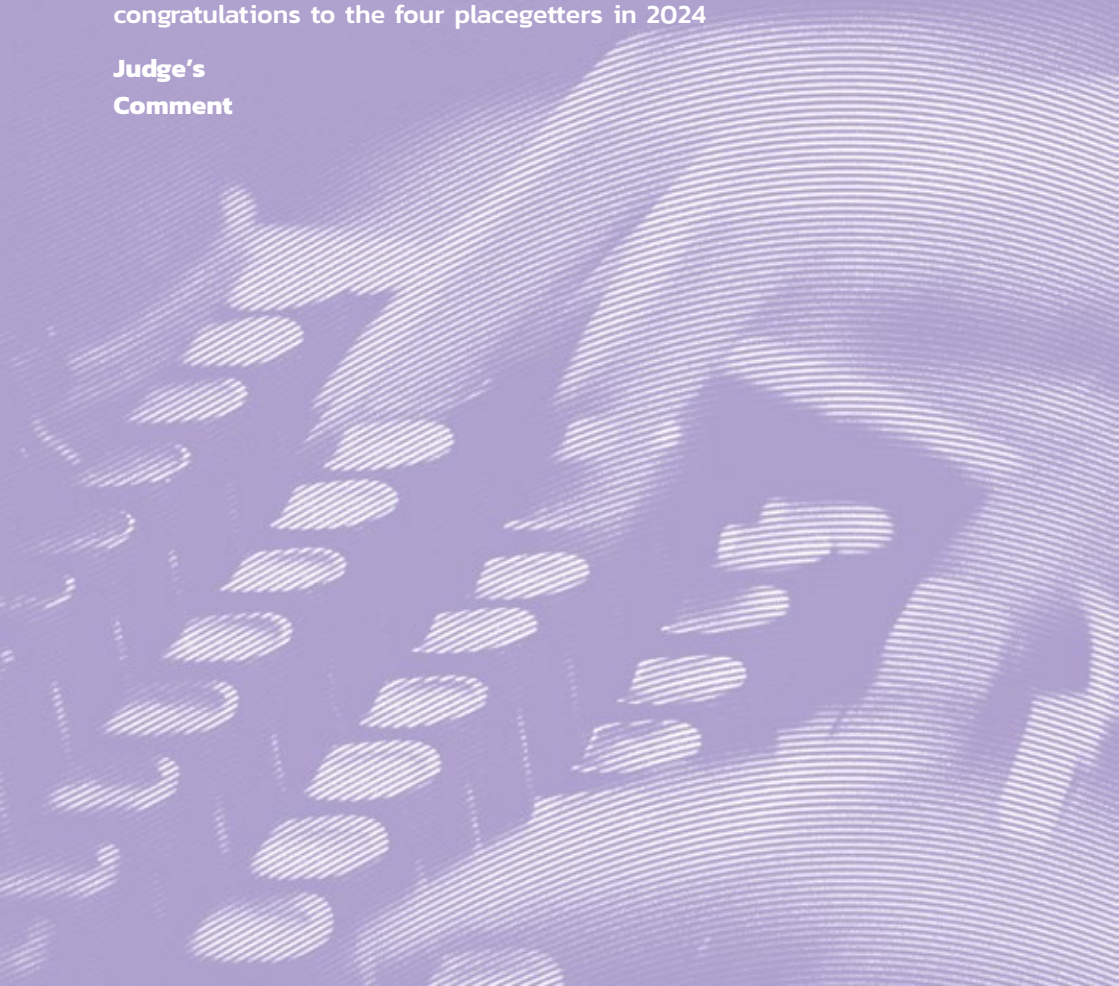
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FLASH FICTION AWARD

The finalists and winner of this year's Flash Fiction category of the NT Literary Awards all featured original observations, an engaging narrative voice, and a deft control of tension and implication within the constraints of the form. My hearty congratulations to the four placegetters in 2024

Judge's Comment



Winner

Lee Frank

The Earth Flickering Beneath our Mobility Devices

Finalists

Joe Abraham

Sirens

Alley Pascoe

Daddy Lessons

Cyra Sebastian

Heat Index

The Earth Flickering Beneath our Mobility Devices

by Lee Frank

“Pa? Pa?” Mia cries.

And then Esme.

“Daddy? Daddy?”

I bring myself up slowly. Stop. Wait.

No words follow.

That lyrebird.

I swear I’ll wring its neck.

How long has it been now? Ten days? Three weeks? I trudge the path over and over.

From the footbridge to the hut. The weather swivels, searing heat and brutal light to bare skies with icy winds ripping off the Southern Ocean. What assaults me no longer matters. What matters is my feet upon the Earth- the mud, the rocks, the loam, whatever form the earth takes here just as long as my feet step across and wear away a track into this godforsaken edge of Tasmania.

Arieta and the girls will find me. They’re clever. They know this place; know the towering mountain ash beside the footbridge, and they’ll spot it, press their feet upon this path and return to the fold of our little hut of wood, and stone, and fire and love.

That’s if they’re lost. If not, it means they’ve fallen into the flickering, the one by the footbridge where I found the girls’ hoverboards.

“Pa? Pa?”

Three seconds.

“Daddy? Daddy?”

Two weeks it took for the lyrebird to imitate my kids. The same time it took for us to come to grips with what we’d gotten ourselves into. We, as in humanity. What had begun as a quirk—preferring machines over legs—metastasized into something unimaginable, and hoverboards, zero-g boots, cars, jet packs, and scooters were our death sentence.

Our girls knew the risks their toys would bring. I’d sat them down and explained what was happening. From now on, we would have to walk everywhere all the time, more than we’d ever walked before.

But they’d gone behind my back and gotten the boards drone-dropped off anyway.

The flickering shimmers by the footbridge, a sifting, paper-white sinkhole.

They appeared haphazardly at first. A football field in Sydney, a tenement block in

Calcutta, a school in Venice, the Pyramids, all flickering and gone.

Within a week, a quarter of our land mass had been lost to them. When I posited the reason behind the phenomena, my colleagues dismissed it as ‘dark matter nonsense.’ But understanding nature’s nuances was my specialty, particularly geckos. Their ability to cling to surfaces by altering the charges in microscopic follicles on their feet was a marvel of evolution. We had our own trick—we walked the earth and kept dark matter at bay with the soles of our feet or shoes, but we didn’t know. Not until we chose our devices over our legs and fashioned ourselves out of existence.

Wallabies are what separated me. I’d gone hunting in the next valley. Away for three hours, no more. When I returned, my family had disappeared—my wife and daughters had either panicked at the sudden appearance of the sinkhole and fled into the bush or been swallowed by the pit itself.

The lyrebird cries.

I wear my bloodied feet into the earth.

SIRENS

by Joe Abraham

Sirens.

The warning whirs become the riff for my lulling.

*"Don't cry child,
your Mama has only
just cried herself to sleep..."*

As we rise, so does the dust. Always the damn dust. It coats everything. As I inhale, the shards pierce my nose, scratching the inside of my lungs. We stink—the whole camp a miasma of sweat. Fear–sweat, exhaustion–sweat, and something else, something rotten and bitter that clings to the skin and doesn't come off. No washing, no scrubbing could cleanse that scent. It's bitter like sin.

The shelter is just bearable—there's barely room for me and the child, my child. She needs food.

I hear the whistle of a shell. Another bomb. Another scream. Then, the taste of unfulfilling ash. The hunger wraps its wretched fingers around my gut and squeezes. I force thin gruel, gritty with dirt, into her tender mouth. My hand trembles. She is getting weaker.

No matter what I do, this place will kill her.

For now, I wash her.

But even the water is tainted. Brown with rust, or dirt, or shit.

So, we let the wildflowers drink first. Our gift.

Lord, see our offering.

We drink what's left like pigs, because not drinking is dying.

Days bleed into nights, which dry back into days.

The sirens never sleep.

So, we never sleep.

Months since my last bleed, maybe longer. Even my cycles have abandoned me. I am too exhausted, my eyes, too exhausted for tears.

We have no more water.

The child whimpers, eyes big and pleading. Cracked lips, tongue swollen. She's thirsty. Something bubbles up in my throat, thick and coppery. I spit what I can onto my hand—blood, dust, and something foul, yellow-green. She drinks.

Lord, save us.

The sirens shriek. The earth rattles. We quake to the bomb's roar. The child's gone. Silence. The silence devours me. Her scent lingers on a rag enveloping a bundle of the sun-kissed wildflowers, creased by her clenched fist.

I stumble looking for her. A hand pokes through the rubble.

A shiver escapes as I clear the debris.

It's not her.

The world tilts. The Lord glares. I feel his condemnation.

Lord, look away.

The smell of charred flesh and dust motes dance, a death waltz on the dead wind.

My cries claw at the callous cloud.

I whisper for the child like an incantation.

A fractured prayer to a dead god.

"Don't cry..

Sand, just sand, twisted metal, and forgotten dreams suffocate the horizon. My leg pulses with agony, a wet, ripping sound with each heartbeat.

Mama...only...

I am nothing. Invisible to Mercy's eye.

just cried herself to sleep."

The song floods back, and with it, her name – Aya.

My sweet Aya.

The wildflowers for your hair.

For you dear.

Crushed in my pocket.

Grow old, Aya.

Sirens.

DADDY LESSONS

by Alley Pascoe

He said it with such sincerity. But the words didn't match his earnestness. She had asked her father a serious question. "What are you afraid of?" "Road trains," he answered without hesitation. He meant it. The bitumen beasts scared the shit out him. Long, loud and sketchy to pass. Especially when you're driving with a longneck of VB between your legs, as he often was. What had she expected him to say? That he was afraid of losing the last of his mind, of never seeing her again after she turns eighteen, of dying alone? No, it was road trains he was scared of. Something far removed from his everyday life. Unlike the very real threats of his mania, his loneliness, his mortality.

She should've known better than to ask him a genuine question. When she was even younger, she'd asked him for his life advice.

"Lose the baby weight before you have another kid," he answered. "Your aunt Debbie didn't after she had her brats and look at her, she'll never lose it now." Noted.

She was eight, so she didn't really understand the advice, but she pocketed it like a mintie she was saving for later. She had a collection, you see, of strands of advice from the men in her life.

"Buy a lime tree," her grandad told her in the fruit section at the local IGA where limes were \$1 each. "What a rip off."

Her grandad had worked for every dollar he had. He was a house painter. He'd climbed so many ladders his knees were fucked, and brushed so many strokes his shoulders were too.

Every time she smelt turps, it reminded her of her grandfather.

Every time she smelt a dead animal, it reminded her of her stepfather.

She wasn't allowed to call him her stepdad, though, because he wasn't one.

"That's the fat guy who lives on our couch," she said in a teenage snarl to a friend who was sleeping over. She hoped he heard what she said.

He wasn't any kind of father figure. He was her mother's boyfriend and a meat boner at the abattoir. He kept his knives in the laundry downstairs, all eleven of them, sharp enough to slice through bone like butter. He made sure they knew how many knives he had and just how sharp they were. In the laundry.

Downstairs.

She changed her mind. She hoped he hadn't heard what she said.

What advice had her not-stepfather given her? She pulled out her notes.

"If you're ever going to catch a possum, use a jumper."

Of course.

She carried the pieces of advice around like the loose change in the centre console of her father's car that smelt like stale VB.

Lose the baby weight. Buy a lime tree. Use a jumper to catch a possum.

Curiously, she'd never asked her mother for her wisdom. She didn't need to. She knew exactly what she'd say.

"Don't take advice from men."

HEAT INDEX

by Cyra Sebastian

The night is thick with it, the hum of cicadas and humidity –and something else. It spreads through your chest as you sit, legs dangling on the adult-sized chair. You slap at another mosquito. In the dark, you don't see the blood. While he gestures beside you, his words silver-tongued and smooth in the waxy heat, you emit a low hum. Trying to harmonise with the atmosphere, feel out this moment –and you find it familiar. A chance to prove yourself.

You're staring at the stars, the three of you. You on one side, Aaron on the other. Him in the centre. The Sun. Aaron's feet are just scraping concrete, the paper-thin grazing of calloused soles cutting through the thickness, ice-cold. You can feel his irritation before he can. You mentally will Aaron to stop, still humming. The swinging continues.

He falls silent for a minute, and you inhale sharply. Anticipation. But as his stillness settles, you realise it is merely a moment: a pause, for the grandeur of his knowledge sink into the sky. See the vastness of the cosmos paralleled in his words.

"I want to go to bed, too many mosquitoes," Aaron is half-asleep on the chair already. You curse him. Why can't he feel the electricity in the air?

But tonight must be a night where patience is in abundance, because he chortles, says he doesn't even notice the bites, his skin is so thick. You're scratching yourself ragged in the darkness, of course. Biting back whimpers of clawed skin, giggling, making intermittent, well-timed 'mm' sounds. You don't want him to feel like he isn't being listened to. He doesn't like it when he isn't listened to.

Besides, he says, do you really want to miss all this? Even though you can't see it, you know his arms are stretched wide, as if he, personally, is holding the universe for you both.

Exactly, you echo, how could you sleep when whole galaxies are waiting on our doorstep?

You feel his eyes gleaming beside you, and you glow a bit brighter at the prospect. One of the bites on your leg won't stop itching, so you claw until you strike bone.

Your mum is probably inside in the air-conditioning, he scoffs. It's strange. There are all kinds of bad words you're not allowed to say, but any word could be spoken to sound a thousand times worse. Like air-conditioning. Or your mum.

You think of her, in that room. The window is only a few metres away. She's asleep in the bed that's broken on your side. She's been sleeping since she came from work, and she'll sleep until it's time for work again. He says it's because she doesn't exercise enough. Not like him, who bikes the ten-K's, to and from work, in the baking sun. So, you ignore the sheen of perspiration on your skin. And you ignore the pricks of blood she will have to wash from your sheets. And you hum.



KATH MANZIE YOUTH AWARD

The entries for the Kath Manzie Youth Award were interesting with a great variety of themes on show.

**Judge's
Comment**



Winner

Gabriella Francis

Bittersweet Seventeen

Finalists

Jemima Carter

Letting Go

Maisie Davis

Wildflower

Grace Johnstone

Hip Flask - A recovery Story

WINNER

BITTERSWEET SEVENTEEN

by Gabriella Francis

I quickly make my way from the overcrowded bus depot. It's a steamy wet season afternoon: the air is humid and heavy, and presses the world's weight on my shoulders. The slight breeze carries a sticky, earthy smell, a combination of overripe mangoes fallen from their trees and this afternoon's lingering petrichor. Despite the overwhelming heat, there is something cathartic in the motions of my fast pace, and the sweat pouring down my back. It's my favourite part of the day: no schoolwork, no people, just time to live inside my head.

My rhythmic motions are suddenly interrupted by the sharp noise of impatient tapping of perfectly polished dress shoes making their way down the eroded concrete pavement. My nose is assaulted by the poignant cologne that fills the air as Mr Mitchell speeds past me. He is a man of consistent characteristics: his hair has never greyed, his pace has never slowed, and his cologne has never faded. Mr Mitchell has been the same man every day of his life. Not me. It's not fair that some people get to be the same person forever, while all I have for me is a lifetime of growing, changing, and mourning the loss of the girl that I was. Now I am seventeen, trying not to be burdened by the world, but yesterday I was thirteen, and tomorrow I will be seventy.

By the time I make it home, I am exhausted to my core. It's strange, I feel not only emotionally spent, but my bones tremble with the pressure of hiking my short legs up the stairs. After much concentrated effort, I finally embrace the relief of letting my earth-heavy backpack slip from my shoulders while I search for my keys. That's when I look down and remember: my school bag is buried under piles of memories, my hands fumbling the keys are old and frail, and I lean on my stick to walk up the few short stairs. Today I am eighty-seven. I am not seventeen anymore, and I haven't been for a long time.

After finally unlocking the door, I walk into the kitchen, contemplating the hundreds of photos that cover every square corner of my house. They are supposed to 'stimulate my memory'. Most days, they are simply fuel for my delusions – they speak to me sometimes.

For instance, I am pretty sure I saw a ghost this morning. It was the ghost of the man that I loved when I was twenty-seven. I didn't look into his eyes, but I assume they are still blue (*do ghosts have eyes? Or just a soul?*). I guided him into my kitchen, poured him some iced tea, and cut a mango into squares for him, welcoming the sweet smell. Here is the love that I forgot to give to you, I said, here it is in the form of a mango, to feed your ghostly soul. I used to be able to see his soul through his eyes, his blue eyes. Blue, not like the ocean, not opal blue either. They were blue like the sky; dark, stormy, and grand, carrying the secrets of the world. I never saw a summer sky in his eyes though, maybe I could see them in his ghost, if I looked. But now both the ghost and the man are long gone, and I left the fridge wide open, the bitter iced tea staring at me from the shelf.

Ghosts are not real, I remind myself. Shuddering at the bitterness of the memories, I walk to the bathroom and open the drawer. Staring blankly at the mess of products that I do not need or use, I think about how it symbolises the state of my mind, just like the wilted flowers mimic the state of my frail physical body. How did those flowers get there again? And what was I trying to find in the bathroom?

I stare at myself in the mirror: my hair (and my one vanity) is radiantly silver, and deliciously curly. My skin is wrinkled like the bark of the old bunya pine tree in my garden. A tear traces the lines down my face – my eyes frequently weep all by themselves. Allergies, tiredness, memories.

Suddenly, I am back at high school, watching an emotionally charged documentary of the great evil, Cancer. Remembering all of the other things that make me sad, and fighting the tears. *Blink, blink, blink. Hands shaking, fidget with anything I can find. Fight, fight, fight. Bounce my knee up and down. Blink. Look at my watch, don't be in the bathroom too long. Look in the mirror, then look away quickly. Look up. Ignore the echoes of my thumping heart. Feel the scraping of the scratchy paper towel, exposing my dry and blotchy face. Calm, calm. Make the tears dry. Calm.*

I stare at myself in the mirror again, shocked to see my skin so leathery and worn, instead of young and burning. I inhale sharply with a gulp, then exhale, willing the fist around my heart to soften its grip. It's a blessing and a curse that I have never become desensitized to the world, the sharpness of the emotions of girlhood is still translatable through memory, it's all still real. All too real, as my mother's battle with cancer has become my own.

With shaking breaths and trembling knees, I close the cluttered drawer, and

hobble back out to the kitchen to close the impatient fridge, forgetting once again to pour my iced tea. My eyes slip closed as I sink into the soft and worn couch. I am slowly closing the open drawers and moments of my life, slowly becoming the woman of eighty-seven, and leaving all the other girls I have been. Most days, I think I must be remembering things for the last time, and the fragments of the people, places, and things that formed me are slipping into the ether. Soon, I'll also become a memory.

LETTING GO

by Jemima Carter

Helen stumbles through the heavy rain, the water seeming to mock her as it falls from the sky in an amount that feels heavy enough to drown her.

She sighs, then stops. Debating with herself as she looks down at the pink flowers in her hand, ruined from the rain.

She shouldn't be doing this again; she knew she shouldn't. She did this every day, and every day, it didn't seem worth it. Not to then go home to a messy house and a husband sitting on the couch, watching some game, and ignoring life – as well as ignoring calls and texts from his own wife. She hates him for that.

She looks up from the flowers which also seem to mock her. Every time she went into that damn florist shop to buy some new flowers, the petals on the flower displays made her want to scream and claw at her face. They just sit there, looking so perfectly clean, and so...she can't think of the right word. Innocent, perhaps?

Yes, innocent. They were just too damn innocent, and she hates it. She hates how they looked and how much they reminded her of how those same flowers used to grow in her own backyard. Back when her—

"Enough!" Helen hisses at herself "Just stop it. Put the flowers on the grave and walk away. You always do this, and today is not any different."

Helen takes a deep, shaky breath. She blinks water from her sunken eyes and trots forward.

Every step she finds herself taking towards this graveyard feels as though it is feeding an addiction. Visiting the grave is an addiction. Something she can't stop herself from doing. She needs to see it once or twice a day. She does it three times a day when things get really bad. Once she'd caught herself going six times and staying there for an hour each time. Her husband wasn't happy with her about that day.

But she doesn't care if he is happy with her or not. He never seems to enjoy

anything at all these days, like he doesn't even want to put any effort into life — not even for her, not even for a bloody second.

Helen catches herself. When was the last time she was happy?

She frowns, guilt making her feel like a hypocrite for thinking this way. She tells herself she can't remember the last time she had been happy...This was a lie; of course she can. She remembers the date, a memory she desperately clings to.

The last time she felt happy was when she woke up four months ago, on February 24th, 1997. The Day It Happened. The day that took her life. The date she now loathed. The day which crushed heart and soul into so many pieces they were impossible to count. Or put back together.

Finally, fighting her way through the wet grass and the mud, she arrives at the grave.

The white marble is engraved with neat cursive letters. Each inlaid with gold. Showing the world how important the person who rests here has been.

Eleanor Penelope Gracia

1989–1997

Beloved Daughter

How important she was to Helen anyway. Nobody else seems to care. A few people had approached her during her visits to the graveyard. They would frown at the years inscribed on the grave, sit with her for a bit, give their condolences, then leave her all alone.

She wished they'd stay a little longer. Maybe even hug her.

She cannot remember the last time someone hugged her. Sometimes she thought she could feel warm arms wrapped around her when she desperately needed comfort, but there was never anyone there.

Not anymore.

Helen stops and stares at the grave. This was the part that was addictive—just looking at it.

She didn't talk to her daughter, tell her about her life or recount memories. All she did was stare, sometimes for hours. She re-read the simple words countless times, trying to convince herself that it was real. No matter how many times she visited Eleanor's grave, it never felt real. She had to keep coming back to make

sure. This was the part that was killing her from the inside out.

Helen sighs and feels tears prick her eyes. She cries, yes, it sometimes seems the tears will never stop. But the lump that has been in her throat since February 24th 1997 stops her from screaming out her pain and loss and sorrow for the world to hear.

The flowers feel heavy in her wet, shaking fingers. She lets them slip out of her grasp. They fall sideways just in front of the grave; the heavy rain drops crushing the petals.

Helen covers her mouth with her hand and races back to her car, running between rows of neat, wet graves. All the pretty flowers placed on them by mourners crushed by the rain like her own have been.

The heavy grey clouds overhead roar with distant thunder as Helen approaches her car. She clings to the door handle and gasps, trying to get air into her lungs before she passes out.

She wants to go home, crawl into bed and cry herself to sleep like she does every night. While her husband watches sport until he passes out on the couch surrounded by empty beer bottles and dirty plates.

She holds onto her car keys with a shaking hand; the jingling noise they make jarring into her brain. A warning to get in the car and not do anything stupid. A warning she isn't sure she wants to listen to anymore.

She lifts her gaze to the graveyard and the urgent need to gaze upon her daughter's grave returns. The desire grows stronger with each ragged breath and Helen squeezes her eyes closed against it. Without realising what she is doing, Helen takes a step. And then another.

Now she is sprinting, some unknown force guiding her. Not back to her daughter's grave, but past the graveyard and toward the forest. It seems to offer freedom and the guiding force is pulling her toward it.

Her legs don't ache, her mind doesn't race, her eyes don't burn, and her head doesn't pound. What she is feeling isn't desperation or longing, or even grief. What she is feeling is serenity.

The strange calmness felt alien after so much loss and despair. So much depression that Helen often felt she had lost herself to it. She didn't know where this calmness came from, but she wanted it to stay. She wanted to stay in this state of serenity, and this was what was making her sprint toward freedom.

She doesn't understand, but she also doesn't care. She hasn't felt this free in months and does not want to let it slip away from her. She wants to embrace and feel every bit of it. She doesn't want to let it go, even for a second. It drowned out the ringing in her ears, the heavy feeling in her chest, the shaking of her hands, the numbness in her fingertips, and even the irresistible urge to return to and stare at her daughter's grave.

Just moments before, she had felt like she was drowning in her own tears. But now, she could breathe.

She keeps running. The ground ahead of her blurred from the rain dancing past her eyes and the fog from the rain was creating walls of itself in the long grass.

She isn't aware when she leaves the graveyard and enters the forest. All Helen knows at this moment is not to stop. Even when her legs ache, and the constant rain becomes lighter.

As abruptly as it came, the feeling of serenity is gone, the sudden loss of it jolts Helen to a stop. Cold, wet, and shivering, she is standing in a muddy puddle in the middle of the forest with no idea how to get back.

As the last of the calmness slips away, she finds that fear and desperation—two emotions she has become all too familiar with — slip back in to replace it. Now, it is back. The ringing in her ears, the heavy feeling in her chest, the numbness in her fingers. But strangely not the urge to gaze upon her daughter's grave.

She feels as if there is something here, something she needs to do or find before anybody else can. She blinks, and the water from her eyelashes trickles down her face. Following the same path her tears always do. The urge to find something grows stronger. Helen cannot fight it. She doesn't even try.

The forest is dark and gloomy, wet from the rain, and the trees howl as the harsh wind blows through them. The rain has died down a bit, but it is still spitting, and it is freezing.

Helen grabs her soaking elbows in a futile attempt to warm herself up. Or maybe she is doing it to try and comfort herself. She really is not sure.

She looks around, her eyes darting to spot any dangers. She has never been in this forest before; not because it was dangerous, but because she has never had a reason to. Nobody seems to come here; this forest is empty and as lonely as she is.

She doesn't know where to start, her mind races as she forces herself to pick

a direction and starts walking. Her body shivers and shakes as she splashes through muddy puddles. Even though she cannot shake the urge to find whatever that something is, she still wants to get out of this cold and lonely forest.

Although it isn't far from town, the forest feels isolated. Its own separate world. A part of her wonders if all other forests are like this. Lonely, cold, and overgrown. It doesn't feel scary, not at all. It feels sad, as though every tree has a tragic story to tell any who bothered to listen.

Helen tries to concentrate on getting out of here, rather than finding the something that lurks at the back of her mind. But she can't, she just can't get it out of her head. The urge feels like a drug, like she must do it or else she will die.

Her fingers become more numb as her walking slows, and her ears ring even more. She doesn't want to listen; she just wants to go home. A part of her wishes that she hadn't let the feeling of serenity take her over, but another part of her is thankful that she had. Just to have felt as though everything was okay, even for a moment.

But now everything was not okay.

She grips her elbows tighter and forces herself forward through the mud and the soaking grass.

The direction feels right, she is sure it was the one she needed to go to get back home. Everything inside her tells her this is the correct direction.

But there is this aching urge to run back into the forest and find whatever that *something* is.

She hates this urge. Having her body and her emotions pushed around. Hates being so out of control. Anger building inside her, Helen gives in to the hate.

Turns herself around and runs back into the forest.

"What?!" She shrieks at the trees as she runs by them. "What are you?! What do you want?!"

She realises how crazy she must look doing this, but she doesn't care. If she can't find out what that something is, she will stay out here until she either freezes to death or dies of exhaustion.

Helen finds herself back where she started, standing in the muddy puddle, cold

and shivering.

But this time, the hate and anger drove her.

“Just tell me what you want!” She screams at the wind. “Please!”

There was no answer.

She feels her knees buckle and starts to collapse into the mud in which she stands.

Something red catches her eye as she does.

Her first thought is that it is blood. Her blood... maybe she'd scrapped herself whilst running and hadn't noticed. Turning to face the red, she sees a red butterfly. Not just red in colour but dripping bright red spots that look like blood.

She watches as the creature hovers, endlessly dripping blood. She is so confused and scared. How can this... blood butterfly be real? How has it not been crushed by the rain the way the petals of her flowers were?

But she felt that was the least of her worries now.

The butterfly spins around. It seems to be looking at her. Waiting for her.

“You want me to follow you?” She asks the creature. The butterfly bobs up and down, as though it is nodding.

Helen feels as though she has gone crazy. Talking to a butterfly made of blood that seems to be answering her, in the middle of a forest in the rain.

“Okay.” The word slips off her tongue. The butterfly bobs up and down again before turning around and flying off slowly.

Helen takes a deep breath and follows it.

She doesn't know where it's taking her, but everything inside of her tells her it was leading her to the something she felt so desperate to find.

Helen follows the strange butterfly for a while. Suddenly, they were out of the forest, and back in the graveyard.

How had it known to lead her back here?

She didn't care and continues to follow.

The butterfly floats past all the graves, Helen following closely behind.

Occasionally the butterfly spins around, as though to ensure she was still following.

Finally, it stops. At Eleanor's grave. Helen feels herself freeze.

Eleanor is there! Standing by her grave, holding her hand out.

The butterfly floats onto her opened palm and disappears. Eleanor lowers her arm and smiles gently at her mother.

Before Helen knows what she's doing, she runs towards Eleanor and scoops the child up into a hug.

Helen couldn't speak, and her throat was too tight. She feels Eleanor's warm arms reach her back, the warmth of the hug sinking into Helen's body.

They hold each other for a seemingly endless moment. Eleanor pulls away and frowns at her mother.

"Mummy," she says, raising her hand to wipe away Helen's tears, "you need to stop."

"S-stop what? I don't under—"

"I know you don't understand what's happening, mummy. But I do. I see you. Every time you come to my grave, you're not happy. I can feel it; you're always sad." Eleanor sees the confusion in Helen's eyes.

"I'm dead, mummy," Eleanor says the word so calmly and so casually. "I'm dead. You need to let me go, it's killing you, mummy. Don't forget me but let me go."

Eleanor raises her hand for a pinkie promise.

"Promise me, mummy, that you'll tell me things each time you visit me. I want you to be happy; I don't want you to be sad anymore. I'm always here." Eleanor uses her other hand to point to Helen's heart.

Helen stares at her, she feels tears in her eyes. Not the tears of pain and loss, but tears of love.

"I promise," Helen raises her hand. "I promise, my sweet girl."

Eleanor smiles and says: "I love you, mummy." As she intertwines their pinkie fingers.

Helen feels a flash of warmth and light before her eyes, making her close them.

When she opens them, she's by the car. Her keys are in her hand, still jingling. Tears stained her face, but now she feels no need to cry.

She looks back to Eleanor's grave.

And for just a moment, she sees her little girl. She stands there, lowering her arm. Eleanor's smile is one of innocence and acceptance.

Then she vanishes into nothing.

Helen blinks, then smiles.

She walks back to her child's grave. She sits down and tells Eleanor everything. Knowing that her child was truly listening this time made it easier.

Helen tells her everything. How she hates the rain, how she thought the flowers in the florist shop were mocking her, how she hates her husband, her child's father, how she cried herself to sleep every night, and about the urge to look at Eleanor's grave all the time.

But she also makes Eleanor's promises.

She promises to love the rain, to bring Eleanor her favourite flowers without hating them, to learn to love her husband once again, to sleep peacefully, and never to forget her child.

Helen suddenly feels warmth at her side. It felt like a hug, like the warm arms she has missed so much.

The warm arms were from Eleanor, and she knows that now.

Helen smiles and waits until the hug fades away before leaning forward to adjust the flowers.

"I love you too, my sweet girl."

Helen stands up and smiles at the grave one last time. Then she gets in her car and drives away.

The serenity was back.

WILDFLOWER

by Maisie Davis

As I enter into her living room, I find myself lost in an ocean of memories, desperately grasping to the wish that it would go back to how it used to be. I sit beside her, the pictures on the walls staring back at us with frozen smiles from days that are now long gone. These captured moments of delight shine a dull light in the darkness of her fading mind, yet now she struggles to hold onto their warmth in the ways she used to.

A glance out the back window prompts recollections to come flooding back to me about our times in the garden together. Over the years, our garden, an assortment of colours and scents, has become more than just a yard but rather a canvas painted by the ever-growing blooms of our bond. I invite her outside, and with a gentle smile she slowly rises from her armchair and follows me through the door. Stepping into the garden, the surrounding beauty stands as a testament to the endless love and commitment that she has poured into it every day for as long as I can remember. In the same way that she used to nurture me, she tends to the plant's needs, watering, pruning, and weeding them to help them flourish. As we stroll past the flower beds, her arm around my shoulder, I feel the strength of our relationship reflected in the beauty of the flowers that we've planted. Particularly, our favourite yellow wildflower standing tall above the others.

*

As I return to visit her again, I excitedly anticipate the beauty of our garden, envisioning the vibrant fireworks of colour, the heavenly fragrance of the flowers, and the orchestra of singing birds.

The wooden front door left slightly ajar, invites me inside. It's open angle hinting at my mother's forgetfulness. Worried, I frantically enter to find Mum perched at the kitchen counter. A wave of relief washes over me to see that she is okay. 'Hey Darling. How are you? I haven't heard from you in weeks,' she inquires. My heart sinks. I visited yesterday. The doctor had prepared me for this moment, but I hadn't expected it to be so difficult. Not wanting to worry her, I swiftly answer her question before changing the subject. 'I've been good. Wow Mum, the garden looks beautiful.' I look out of the kitchen window and into the back yard.

But to my surprise the garden doesn't look beautiful. Invasive weeds hide the mulch, leaves droop, and the assortment of flowers appear defeated. I notice the tall yellow wildflower, once a glowing ray of colour, now muted. It's head bowing in misery. She has seemingly forgotten about the garden. The wilted petals, a cruel reminder of her wilting memory.

With Mum preoccupied with her cross-stitch, I quietly sneak outside, clinging to the beacon of hope that I can restore the garden to its previous beauty. Though doubtful of success, I unravel the hose, twist the tap, and spray a gentle shower over the dry soil and crippled foliage. As droplets trickle down the limp stems, I expect a slow response. Yet to my amazement, within minutes the wildflower's bent stems gradually straighten and the petals slowly revive. Despite having been forgotten, they exhibit a soft strength, displaying their resilience to adversity. Giving the world a second chance to witness their beauty.

As I return back inside, concern for my mum's health weighs heavily on my mind. 'Mum, I've been thinking,' I begin. 'I think you should consider moving in with me. Then I can take good care of you.'

'No thank you Love, I'm fine on my own', she insists determinedly. She has always been independent. Inspired by the wildflower's compassion, I try to be understanding of her wishes, yet I worry about her safety when she is alone. 'How about this,' I suggest. 'You stay here but I will visit every day to check in.' This way, I can take care of her and her garden. She willingly agrees.

For months, we continue this newly developed routine. Each day I cook her meals, do her chores, and care for the garden. While it is great to be with her, I observe the slow erosion of her once vibrant mind.

*

As usual, I arrive at Mum's house. I let myself in and make my way down the long hallway, the floorboards creaking under each step. The house seems darker than I'm used to, and there is an unfamiliar musty smell lingering. I locate her bright white shirt through the back window. She stands amongst the garden beds, her back to the house. It excites me to see her in the garden again. Maybe she has finally rediscovered her love for flowers. Hurrying out the backdoor, my eagerness is quickly replaced with shock. I freeze at once, as I watch her clutch fistfuls of petals, crumpling them like used tissues. She uproots the wildflowers and forcefully discards them onto the path. The mangled mess of crushed petals and splintered stems echo the chaos destroying her from within.

My tears burn my eyes as I search the bare soil, hoping to find a way to salvage it. But it is too far gone. The wildflowers are no longer strong. Resilient. Understanding.

'Mum? What are you doing?' I call out. She turns to face me. Her blank gaze meets my eyes, but there is no recognition. No understanding. Chills run down my spine as she opens her mouth, her voice hoarse and unfamiliar. 'Who are you?' she croaks. Her words cut through me like a sharp knife.

A storm of emotion stirs within my gut. Helplessness. Sorrow. Anger. I am full of anger. But not at her. How can I be angry at her? I now understand, she isn't really my mum. Not anymore.

There is nothing that remains of our favourite yellow flower. Nothing that remains of our relationship. Nothing that remains at all.

The wildflower is dead.

HIP FLASK - A RECOVERY STORY

by Grace Johnstone

I sat forgotten on a shelf for years, a useless souvenir from a foreign land, until one day, Barry's soft hands grasped my body and polished me. This was the first time in years I felt something. He grasped my neck and flooded me with light and soothed me with the silky feeling of whiskey. Finally, I had a purpose. However, not everyone appreciated me like Barry did.

"We can't keep doing this Barry. It's bad enough you never see her sober, now you have the nerve to ask for half custody?" Kat, Barry's wife, shrieks. I can sense the emotion, though the conversation is muffled as I sit in Barry's pocket.

"You can't take her from me. She's my kid too. You love me don't you Suzy?" This was the first time I heard Barry crack. The first time his actions were called out by his wife. The first time it got physical. Barry raised his arm. A resounding crack echoed as Barry's hand made contact with Kat's face.

Susan, the sweet apple of both her parents' eyes, starts to cry. "I'm sorry daddy, but I don't want to be here anymore. All you do is hurt me." At this moment, Barry whipped me out of his pocket and sculled the remaining whiskey. Tears stream down Susan's face. The door slams shut, and the night sky is blocked.

Barry hurt me that night. His soft touch became firm, the soothing whisky suffocated my insides. But he was grieving, so I forgave him.

Ever since that day, I get to be with Barry, but now he shows me off on the prime spot, his hip. Every Sunday, he polishes me. He rubs the softest cloth slowly over my body. His hands arouse me as his fingers explore me like a foreign island.

However, I've noticed I've felt emptier over the last few weeks. I've felt a yearning for Barry's fingers to hold my body, for his soft lips to meet mine. Barry is changing. Changing from the person he once was. I can tell that he gets lonely. He regrets what he did. It's just taken him time to realise sobriety was how he would get his old life back. I fear that I will also return to what I once was- a decoration.

We sit in a cold room with nothing but the hum of a boiling kettle to break the

silence. Slowly, the circle of chairs fill up, and Barry shoves me into the pocket of his faded denim jeans. I hate the darkness. It forces me to think about the night Kat and Susie left. A cluster of muffled voices grows louder, and I can interpret the unfamiliar words. Recover. Alcoholic. After what feels like a lifetime, we stand and leave the room. In the taxi, Barry transfers me to his bag. I feel like a burden.

Still in the bag, I feel myself fall onto the tiled floor. In the distance I hear the clank of metal hitting the chipped, tiled floor. I hear him grunt "one...two...three" Is he working out? The teeth of the bag are zipped open, and I let out a sigh of relief. His hand brushes me and I feel myself blush. The feeling disappears just as quickly as it started when he grasps the plastic bottle beside me instead. I'm filled with jealousy as his hand caresses the figure, running his fingers over the creases, without hesitation.

I now spend my days on the glass shelf that sits high above the living room where he placed me. I know I am no longer useful to Barry. I'm now stuck next to his tarnished cricket trophy from 2012. I remain empty, not a drop of sunlight or the familiar rattle of Barry's metal hip in my ear.

Most days, silence reigned.

"I'm so proud of ya Bazza." The voice has me instantly alert. "Finally dropping the booze! It's a good look on ya."

I sit on my shelf, confused, and upset.

"Thanks mate, keeping the flask as a trophy. That's what they said at rehab."

The two men look up and a new warm feeling consumes me. I think this might be pride. I match Barry's posture, standing tall.

For years I sit proudly on my shelf, a token of sobriety. I spend my days observing, keeping Barry safe.

The phone rings and the atmosphere shrinks as my ears focus on Barry. After a long pause he lets out a cry that pierces through the room. He drops to the floor, his body folding, unable to bear the weight of the news.

"What do you mean," he pleads, his voice cracking with disbelief. "She can't be gone. She was my only child."

Susan and Barry used to spend all their time together. Their home resonated with the melody of her laughter... before the alcohol found him. Now she's gone.

Day becomes night, and the room dims, aside from the glow of the TV casting elongated shadows that dance mournfully across the walls. Barry sits still and silent, his gaze fixed on a void only he can see, grappling with incomprehensible emptiness.

Suddenly, I feel my rusted body shake and, I'm blinded as sunlight pierces my insides. My insides burn and a feeling of shame flows through my neck. His hand strangles me. He's hurting me again, but this time I can't find forgiveness. I sense some hesitation and suddenly, everything goes black. I hate the feel of my rusted lid, grinding against my body. I tighten myself, trapping the fire inside me. My body trembles and the liquid swishes around inside.

Barry screams.

I fly.

I hit the ground.

Barry screams again.

I'm stuck face down with the echo of pain bouncing off my sides. My perfect body is now damaged. I lie on the carpet, the fiery liquid swishing inside as it settles.

Despair fills me as I realize—I fueled him.

But he destroyed himself.

And I can never forgive him for that.



NT WRITERS' CENTRE POETRY AWARD

The short-listed poems were those that lifted off the page, offering a fresh voice and new ideas. They explored insight into the politics of the NT, or from across the globe. They were poems that tackled complex social and cultural issues, such as the fallout from the Voice Referendum, or the devastation left after bushfires.

Judge's Comment

Winner

Fiona Dorrell

Precious Thing

Finalists

Susan Fielding

Moriac

Meg Mooney

Repair with megafauna

Dani Powell

When the tides turn

Emma Trenorden

husk

WINNER

PRECIOUS THING

by Fiona Dorrell

There's a place I want to take you to—if I can manage I promise I will—in the weave of dry riverbeds stretched over the frame of country in the old map book of tracks made by cars and animals there is a curve in the arm of the world. You will not need many things here maybe a metal cup maybe an old black kettle maybe a dog friend to sleep between your knees. We'll know we have arrived by the big trees their bodies wide and solid feet in underground streams. Others have camped here too, with cars and guitars and children but there's no trace of that now though you might still feel something. There are signs of past water here you can see the brush stroke of river across face of the rock here where rain rose and clung and subsided again. Maybe you will come to know the way the sand changes maybe you will see the budgies multiply like clouds of insects maybe zebra finches are falling like leaves and lifting again. Day is closing into night now and cold air creeps in. Soon our campfire is a hot bright circle hanging like a raft in the middle of an empty ocean. There is heat and colour here all our darlings are here—all of them lined up in swags the sand holds our bodies more gently than any hand. Overhead the stars arrive like shoals of tiny fishes twisting and catching the light there are more than you can count even if you tried and they are all here for you—they are always here even when you cannot see them they are basking now in the pleasure of your noticing see how they glow. Beyond the firelight not one thing moves the birds all sleeping no insect wings across the fire glow no wallaby or kangaroo feeding no tiny hopping mouse no bat or cat or dingo hunting not even air moves the leaves all still they do not turn or tremble the quiet out thick across us—holding us. All that moves is the light from the fire and the spinning stars all you hear is sap boiling and spitting in flame. There is a cave of glow worms inside you now they illuminate one by one there is a river passing across your eyes and underneath you. Somewhere all the moons are rising and setting—there are infinite phases happening all at once can you see a moon undress herself

behind the curve of everything can you see a lacey crescent hang like the ridge of a tiny shell or the edge of your fingernail. Try to imagine yourself walking to the edge of the universe it is a red brick wall and you will balance along it like when you were a child so you can see out into all that space. For now there are no worries you do not need to do anything the galaxies are spinning like eddies in a river the sky is drifting away in all directions time is drifting you wish it would stop still. Maybe one day country will let you in maybe one day you will remember this feeling maybe one day I will bring you here. Make detailed notes now. Write in vivid precocious colours. You will be sure to need to come back. Maybe one day you will bring a beloved yourself.

MORIAC

by Susan Fielding

You didn't have to say anything
I mopped the floor
with the old plastic mop
I have to wring out with my hands
and we stood at the bathroom door
leaning into each other,
awkwardness evaporating
in the heady steam
of lemon-scented Pine 'O Clean.

Down the hall
your front door opens
to a spray of silver wattle
at the white picket fence.
Birds fuss in the honey banksia
planted last year to bring them in.
I close my eyes,
and imagine life
with height and depth
and flight.

Months have become years
love and exhaustion
twist up my spine,
the loneliness
of living between lives-
yours, a slipping, slippery thread
mine, a jacket three sizes too small
tight at the wrists,
tight at the neck.

You call from another room
what day is it
because if it's Sunday, it's bin night
and we mustn't forget.
But it's Monday
and we count the days again
look in the diary,
at the new digital clock.

By nightfall
what has to be done, is done
and put away
and you sleep deeply
company close by,
while I toss, wide-eyed
in a knot of sheets,
afraid that love is not enough
to hold this all together,
and reckon with the loss.

By morning,
bright frames of childhood
shine through the tangle of time
like beams of light,
and you gather them around you,
turning each one
over and over in your hand
like a nub of quartz,
tossed smooth,
held polished and warm
to your cheek.

Somewhere in the sea of your mind
is a current of love,
untouched by change.
You walk past the honey grevillea
but notice the wattle,
and remember the windswept graveyard
at Moriac
where you laid your husband
and first son.
How you stood at the end of each day
those first years
and looked through
its fine branches at the last light,
faithful into the night.

REPAIR WITH MEGAFUNA

by Meg Mooney

A clearing with a log to sit on
the familiar sour smell of gidgee
early sun

flutter of robin
jet black head
crisp white chest

the cloth of a good life
spreads around me
I can see it reaching

across slopes
of dry, tangled grass
and prickles

to a small gathering
around a campfire
talk of bones

broken off and cracked
you need to glue them, repeatedly
before you pull them out

I stick myself together
with birds
the lingering red wash of sunset

the day-to-day of legs, jaws, vertebrae
the holy grail of skulls
mistakes and fixes as we dig

I fill gaps with
the ease of company in the pit
line breaks with laughter

until I'm ready
to pull myself out

WHEN THE TIDES TURN

by Dani Powell

Kangaroo Island, summer 2019

when the tide turns
you can find blue swimmer crabs
we're told
by the fishermen who line the pier like lone trees
mirror to the weathered pylons
exposed by peeled-back sea

by the fishermen whose faces bake and blacken
with the sun
who say when to come
what fish are about

blue swimmers when the tide turns

behind us the fires burn
and it's like the whole country is waiting for deliverance
or just praying for reprieve
bent beneath blood-orange skies
in portraits of a summer turned sour

on our screens
horses, dogs, masked children huddle
stranded between flames and sea
in echoes of Gildas –
the barbarians drive us to the sea
the sea drives us to the barbarians

here on the island
we watch the wind and learn its names
we trust that while south-easterly prevails
it holds the fires at bay

that's a hunting term, I'm told
from bay: *to bark*
when the dogs, kept apart from their prey
strain, hungry for the hunter to shoot

but when the wind turns
we abandon the shack
we follow the high beam along the night road
all shadowed by trees

we find safety in the harbour town
tent pitched on curbside green
at night the fires are a pack of wild dogs circling
a flight of dragons spewing flames
a many-headed monster, a demon unleashed, insane
or something else, unthought of yet
(is this how mythical beasts are made?)
and we are as if hunted to the edge of the earth
still, it might strike from any angle while we sleep

so we don't sleep
we lie and listen to more cars arriving
canvas tent door sucking, smacking

it's only the sound of the canvas in the wind, my darling

we calculate the distance between camp and sea
could we carry our child into night waters
if it came to it?

later we see that the five little flames that burned before bed
across the map of the island
have spawned offspring
have become fifteen

where we went only yesterday
has today become the fire ground
where we paddled up the river
planes circling overhead
showering pink retardant on sleeping koalas
like lolly-water rain

back at the pier a ferry is moored in wait
the morning fishermen resume their posts
they tell us what we need to know
about the tides and the winds
and the waiting

garfish and squid on the incoming tide
whiting on the out-tide

while on and on the whipping of the wind
while we hold our fears at bay

the fires make nonsense of everything –
bird shows, bike tours, wilderness walks
the heat of summer takes a new and ugly face

and the fires make nonsense of us
or show us up at least
for we have forgotten how to read the winds, the tides
we have forgotten how to heed the dragons

it is quiet on the water now the tourists have gone
just the whistle and splash of squid lines
off a pier splattered with ink

*Gildas was a 6th-century British monk whose work De Excidio et Conquestu
Britanniae includes The Groans of the Britons – the final appeal made by the
Britons to the Roman military for assistance against Pict and Scot raiders.*

HUSK

Emma Trenorden

we return to a home in pieces
scattered piles of corrugated iron

debris ripped, blown around,
as if cardboard

beams of steel that once held up a roof
lie drooped, like melted chocolate in a hot car

my legs give way and I find myself kneeling
pressing down into the chalky ash

beside the gutted house
a stoic mountain gum smoulders

I see the smooth shine of its trunk
and wonder at the shape of its roots

reaching down into the ground
into the cool, moist earth

holding water still
in these perilous times

I rise to my feet
a cicada husk clasped in hand

my fingers curl around it
press into the emptiness

and don't let go



ZIP PRINT SHORT STORY AWARD

From dystopia to fantasy to very immersive expressions of Territory stories, this year's entries covered a lovely range of different streams of thought and expression.

Judge's Comment



Winner

Barbara Eather

The Madness of Being Loved

Finalists

Dave Clark

Make Some Noise

Alister Pullman

Lines in the Sand

The Madness of Being Loved

by Barbara Eather

The pink-rimmed eyes of Floyd the cat glared at Sandra as she moved a small carload of belongings into Vanessa's spare bedroom. That night, over several glasses of wine, Vanessa laid down the rules.

'Do not tell him you are here. I mean that, no matter how hard he pleads. Do not tell any of your friends where you are. He will get it out of them. Park your car on the footpath, behind the palms. And keep an eye on your rear-vision mirror. You don't want him round here. I don't want him round here. He cannot be trusted.

Back when Vanessa and Sandra had worked together the hierarchy had been reversed. But now everything was different. Even the drive to and from work each day had to change, worded up by Vanessa that she had to make sure she wasn't being followed. Back at Vanessa's, she dodged Floyd's passing swipes.

'He doesn't like me,' she said to Vanessa.

'He's like that old Pink Floyd. Get over it. He's been here longer than you.'

Just what I need, thought Sandra, as flat-faced Floyd tried to bite her when she passed him in the hallway.

But Sandra had a bigger worry than a hostile cat. Brian. She had moved out of their home three months ago. Well, that was how Sandra described it. Already the history of what happened had been rewritten. Brian contacted her friends, people he had nothing to do with for the ten years of their relationship and bled to them,

'She walked out on me.'

Sandra's version of events was different. After another argument Brian had carried her out into the garden. She thought that this was just another one of those times he would lock her out of the house and drive off, leaving her to sit

outside in the dark for a few hours getting bitten by mosquitoes, too shamed to go to the neighbours for help, even though she knew they heard everything. But this time it had been different. He didn't wrench her keys out of her hand. Instead, he forced her into the driver's seat of her car, and threw armfuls of clothes and shoes in after her. He slammed the back hatch shut and yelled 'Fuck off' so close to her that his spit landed on her face.

'But I don't have any underwear,' she'd wailed.

He'd yelled back,

'Coles is open twenty-four hours,' and laid his boot into the door of her car.

Two days later he demanded that she return. But after two nights sleeping on a friend's floor, Sandra resolved never to return. As their relationship had unraveled, Brian's bullying had escalated. One morning he locked all her work clothes in the shed, telling her she could only have them back once she agreed that she was the problem in the relationship, how if she didn't fall asleep in front of the television every night maybe he'd spend more time at home. On another occasion after he complained that she paid more attention to their two cats than to him he took them to a cattery. To make her 'see sense' as he put it. When she arrived home from work, and found that they were not there, she could not believe someone could do this to her, and to them.

'Give me back my cats,' she screamed.

'You're not getting them back until you talk about us.'

'I do not negotiate with terrorists.'

Brian seized a rolling pin, brandished it at her and, when she cowered on the sofa, stabbed her hard between her legs.

'Take that you frigid bitch.'

Although weeping and afraid, Sandra refused to be intimidated. By the end of the next day Brian, full of remorse, had retrieved Squid and Pippa.

But now, kicked out onto the street, Sandra looked at the world differently. Sandra had heard a story, almost folklore it seemed, about a woman who had been one of the 35,000 or so people evacuated from Darwin in the airlift immediately after Cyclone Tracy annihilated the city in 1974. When she arrived in a southern port she refused to be registered, refused to give her name, and told the Red Cross to stick their cup of tea.

'I've been trying to get away from the old bugger for years and this is my best chance yet.'

Sandra knew how that woman felt. Brian was very good at saying sorry. He'd said sorry many times. When she told Brian that she wasn't coming back he was inconsolable. He promised he would look after the cats, until she returned. She didn't know if she could believe him, but it was all she could do at the time. But a sensible adult conversation one evening, where she thought there had been a mutual agreement to respect each other, imploded into something else very quickly. The next morning when she pulled into her reserved spot in the multi-story car park near her work, he was there. She didn't see him at first. He waited until she was out of her car and walking towards the elevator before he stepped from behind a pillar.

'What are you doing here?' she gasped.

'We need to talk.'

'Well, I don't want to talk to you. I'm going to work.'

'Work, that's all you think of, you frigid bitch?'

Sandra stepped around him, avoided the elevators, and trotted down the stairs, Brian hard on her heels, breathed down her neck.

'Don't you dare walk away from me.'

Out on the street, Sandra realised she couldn't out pace him. She stopped.

'Can you please just let me go to work, I really don't want to be late.'

Nor did she want this embarrassment to follow her all the way to her office.

'Work is that all you ever think about? What about us?'

He brandished a piece of paper at her.

'Sign this,' he hissed.

Sandra glanced at the document. It began – Contract Between, and listed both their names. Then she read the fine print. And laughed. There was no way she was going to agree to have only joint bank accounts. But it was the condition that she agree to have sex, with him, twice a week that cracked her up as people walked past carrying their morning coffees.

'I'm not signing this load of crap.'

Brian snapped at her,

'A relationship is a contract.'

'I know that. But writing it down makes it ridiculous.'

She threw the piece of paper back at him. It fluttered onto the ground as she fled.

'You come back here and pick this up you slut.'

Sandra kept walking, conscious that anybody nearby was treating her as though she was invisible. Brian paced behind her, bending down to spit obscenities into her right ear. What do I do now, thought Sandra, thinking he might follow her all the way to her desk. Outside the building where she worked on the third floor, an older man from the pearling company on the second floor stood finishing a cigarette. Sandra looked into his eyes, pleading for him to do something to stop this monster leaning over the top of her. But even though her eyes were locked on his, he found her invisible. She rushed into the foyer. As the doors of the elevator opened, she stepped inside, turned and placed her open palm in the middle of Brian's chest, and pushed as hard as she could. As the doors closed, separating them, she glimpsed the man from the second floor looking at her through the glass walls of the foyer, impassive, as though he was watching television.

Once at her desk, Sandra logged onto her computer, conscious that some of her colleagues would have seen what had just happened and more than one would be compiling a dossier on her, for of course lack of control in your personal life could be used as a weapon in your professional life. But how could one function properly at work when even where you lived was never certain, or safe? Over the last three months Sandra had stayed in six different places, keeping just ahead of Brian as he tracked her down. Vanessa had been right about not telling anyone where she was living. Already Sandra's whereabouts had been revealed by those who didn't realise that any snippet of information helped him find her.

'He seemed genuinely pleased that you've taken up indoor soccer.'

Three nights later Brian's Subaru Liberty was on her tail when she left the football centre. She ran two red lights shaking him off.

Brian knew all the tricks on how to wear out welcomes for her – random visitations, phone calls at three in the morning, but worse still, bleeding heart

gratitude. He delivered presents and thank you cards to her hosts, at one place three large bottles of spirits. In a household that liked to drink, this gift sat untouched on the coffee table, mocking Sandra whenever she walked past. She wanted to tip the contents down the sink and smash the bottles against her head. She was told more than once,

'We don't need this in our life.'

But sometimes nothing had to be said. It was merely inferred by a silence of shame that perhaps it was time for her to move on. More than one hasty departure resulted in damaged friendships. There was no going back, not even for coffee. As for Brian, success at having her evicted became an opiate. He told one of her friends,

'If I keep making things difficult for her, she'll have to come home eventually.'

Homeless again, Sandra had called Vanessa. She hadn't seen Vanessa for years. It had been a mistake to invite her round for a cracker night BBQ that time. Halfway through the evening Brian began to contradict anything she and Vanessa said. Vanessa wouldn't take being challenged and left the party early. She phoned Sandra the next day.

'Don't ask me to your place again. Nothing personal against you, he just makes me feel uncomfortable.'

Almost a decade later it hadn't been difficult to convince Vanessa that she needed somewhere to hide. But it wasn't a perfect sanctuary at Vanessa's. At the end of her first week there Sandra looked forward to a Saturday evening in front of the television. Until Vanessa spoke.

'Hey, can you make yourself scarce tonight? Mario's coming round in half an hour.'

Sandra had met Mario twice that week, when he'd popped round. Both times Vanessa had been out, so they'd chatted over a glass of the Chianti he'd arrived with. Mario was large and male, and oozed testosterone. She needed someone like that, someone to scare Brian away. But Vanessa had her claws into him, and didn't seem keen to let go.

Lamenting her lack of tenant's rights, Sandra did as she was told, leaving just as Mario, all Mediterranean smooth, arrived.

'Aren't you staying to have a drink with us?' he asked.

He waved another bottle of Chianti. Vanessa glared at her. Sandra made a polite excuse about a party that she was meant to be at.

'A party! Where?' Mario exclaimed, 'We could come too?'

Sandra muttered that it was a girls' night, and fled. Floyd followed her to the gate and stared at her blankly as she walked to her car. But what to do on a Saturday night with nowhere to go? Sandra drove around until she figured that yes, definitely she had nowhere to go, but couldn't afford to waste fuel in aimless motoring. She parked near the jetty. She could see into some of the houses that lined the foreshore, other people's lounge rooms, other people's kitchens, each like a different television channel. Perhaps she could knock on a door and say,

'You seem to be having an ordinary life. Mind if I join you?'

Instead, she settled in for a long wait. The moon rose slowly and made evil silhouettes of the Pandanus.

She realized, as she sat there, that she hadn't thought to ask Vanessa how long she should make herself scarce for. Well, that was an oversight. Funny how stress meant her brain didn't work properly. It was harder than ever to make decisions about anything, harder than ever to make sense of what was going on. Sitting there in the dark, snippets of conversations wafted back to her.

'You are both two intelligent people. Why is this happening?'

'Well, you have to make a decision sometime, preferably sooner rather than later.'

'Why are you still hung up over this guy? You should just move on.'

'Clearly you haven't told him it's over.'

'Why are you allowing this to happen?'

'But he really loves you.'

'Surely you are making some of this up?'

'But those are small things. He loves you.'

'What have you done to make him behave like this?'

'He seems like a reasonable man.'

'Are you having an affair?'

'He's devastated. What if he commits suicide? Would you like that on your head?'

Sandra couldn't believe how useless she was at deflecting such talk. She hadn't been able to tell everyone what had happened – the clothes being locked in the shed, what he'd done to her cats, the incident with the rolling pin, being locked out of the house for hours on end. Some people had believed her, others hadn't, and there were some she hadn't told because she knew they would never believe that she was speaking the truth.

Sandra knew Mario couldn't stay all night. At midnight she headed home. On the main drag leading to Vanessa's there were only two cars on the road, hers and another, a few hundred metres away. Vanessa's words snapped into her head – 'Keep an eye on your rear-vision mirror.' Did it mean anything that the other vehicle appeared to be gaining on her? Did its headlights look familiar? Vanessa hit the accelerator hard, and then braked heavily as she scooted around the corner into Lakeside Drive, painfully aware that her Mazda 626 had a distinctive roofline. She flicked her headlights off, took several turns at random, pulled up and bolted on foot, cursing silently every barking dog that told everyone where she was. She paused in the shelter of a Clumping Fishtail Palm. There was no sign that anyone was following her. Perhaps she was just being paranoid.

It took Sandra a few minutes to get her bearings. She'd ended up in a concentric web of streets named after the postal workers who'd been killed when the Japanese bombed Darwin. She scurried through the dark streets, circling backwards and forwards. Everyone said you shouldn't walk around at night by yourself, and there she was doing just that, hoping that she didn't encounter some random crazy loony whilst trying to escape from a deadly serious non-random crazy loony.

The scent of Frangipani hung heavy in the moonlight as she arrived panting at Vanessa's front gate. There was no sign of Mario's throbbing black ute. Presumably he'd gone home to Mrs. Mario. Sandra let herself in the back door. Floyd's eyes glowered at her from behind the coffee table. He paced forward and rubbed himself against her legs. Sandra shrugged him off, and slunk into bed. Above her the ceiling fan chugged, its feeble downdraft taking forever to dry her sweat-drenched body. She lay there listening to the geckos barking at each other. She'd almost fallen asleep when a car crawled down the street, unmistakably Brian's Subaru Liberty, its headlights on high beam. She held her breath, and put her head under the pillow. If Brian stood at the locked gate and

yelled her name, if Brian stood at every gate in the suburb and yelled her name, she would not be drawn into his spell. Eventually dark and quietness enveloped her.

Just on dawn a monsoon squall barreled in. Sandra pulled herself out of bed and stood clenching the louvres. Her fingers made patterns in the dust. Shivering slightly, she inhaled the sickly-sweet aroma of soaked earth.

'Petrichor,' she muttered to herself.

Outside Carpentaria Palms flailed against a sky churning with charcoal clouds. Rain smashed on the roof. A mist of spray hit her bare shoulders. Out beyond the foreshore thunder rumbled. Two orange footed scrub fowl lurking under the African Mahogany warbled loudly. It was too early, and too wet, to retrieve her car. Sandra flopped back into bed to find Floyd there. He wedged himself close, purred raggedly, and dribbled on her.

Three streets away, her car glistened in the rain. The air had been let out of two tyres. A sodden note under the driver's side windscreen wiper promised undying love, and eternal damnation.

MAKE SOME NOISE

by Dave Clark

For two years, I've been a bully's wet dream.

Isolated, coming to a new school of a thousand students where I knew no one. Gangly, a lone tree rustled by the slightest breeze. Bookish glasses. A candle shaped head. The topography of my face is pimply mountainous, skin with more oil reserves than Iraq.

And I don't speak up for myself.

It's no surprise then, really, that I am the bull's eye for bullies.

School orientation was having chairs pulled out from under me, my chin hitting the desk on the way down. I got to know the floor intimately that day. I was followed around each classroom, razor blades and metal rulers swiping at my arms and legs.

Day four and dope was hidden in my belongings when the police dogs sniffed through the school. I got lucky. The labradors must have had a blocked nose.

After most recess and lunch breaks, locker doors are slammed onto my hands and head as I reach in for textbooks.

Those books, and me, are regularly pushed down flights of stairs, no one caring enough to help me back to my feet.

By the second term, my time at home was invaded too. I am taunted incessantly, group chats extending the name calling into the evening. No rest for the wick head.

Threats arrive daily and all sense of safety is shattered. I cover up the bruises to body and soul as well as I can.

There's no fight left in this beast. I tried that approach, and it ended up worse. I flight my way now through each day, counting steps and minutes, avoiding cracks and those who want to crack my skull, permanently tensed for the next hit.

If only they gave out grades for being bullied. I would be the dux of the school.

Mum knows something is up. She can read me well, even though I tear out the pages of my day and present her with a bland narrative of mumbles and 'alright, I guess.'

I wish she knew. She'd give me more cuddles and biscuits if she did. I just can't find the words to explain it. How do you tell someone that you have been treated like trash for years? I want Mum's help, but I think I'd get her pity.

Dad, well, he'd drive up to the school and go in swinging. And he'd miss. Would end up causing more issues than it's worth. And I don't feel I'm worth much anyway. Not his time, his support, his grunts back to me. I sit next to him as he reads his paper after work and even the page thirty-seven ads about the local fair garnered more interest from him than I do.

At least I can sit next to him and not be targeted.

Though, being ignored or targeted – which one is worse?

Dad leaves the paper on the couch as he goes to relieve himself. I snatch it up. I like to read the news, and to look for pictures of hot chicks. Anything to get the blood flowing.

Nothing more than a bit of leg is shown in the first twenty pages though, and I am about to put the paper down when a headline draws my attention, probably because I read it as saying 'Robocop.' I glance again and it's Robodebt. I have no idea what that is but am hoping it is robots paying off our loans. I still owe the parents forty bucks for my bike's new tyres and would be happy to see that wiped clean.

But it looks like some scheme to get back money from people who can't afford it. The article mentions a lady called Beryl. She gets hounded by automated phone calls telling her that if she doesn't pay back a few thousand bucks, she's in big trouble. And she's freaking out. So are her pensioner friends. They aren't schemers but are being targeted like they deserve trouble. They all might lose their houses, their savings. They're definitely losing their health.

So many articles I've read in Dad's paper over the years talk about big businesses paying no tax, and yet the government decides to go after a ninety-year-old instead?

Beryl says in the article she feels like no one is listening, no one is helping her out. She is on the ropes, being pounded by these spineless thugs.

I know what that's like.

My body shudders. This isn't right.

The article brushes over Beryl and goes onto the details of what's happened. I find it hard to concentrate on the numbers. I am buzzing, fire pouring through each limb. I don't even know who Beryl is, but I am furious for her. How can this stuff go unchecked? Why are they going after this bag of bones? Someone's gotta do something for her.

I hear Dad's footsteps returning and I shove the paper back on his chair. We briefly smile at each other then give our attention to the telly. All I can notice though is the feeling of a little possum stirring inside me, growing bigger, growing claws.

A couple days on, the English teacher gives us a free-choice task, which really means they haven't planned anything for the lesson. This guy doesn't give a rat about our 'creative expression.' He needs a piece of paper with ink on it so he can mark something and get paid.

I can't stop thinking about Beryl. I decide to write a letter to the editor. Dad's often reading those out loud, so maybe if I write something there, someone who can make a difference might read it too.

I write Dear Editor and then stare at the page for ten minutes. What the heck do I even want to say?

'You need to write more than that,' says the teacher, looking over my shoulder.

No friggin' derr, mate.

'And you need to hand something in by the end of lesson,' the teacher chirps to the class. Because creativity always benefits from being rushed, right?

I just need to spill something out. I start scrawling.

Dear Editor,

I feel so angry about this Robodebt thing.

*Why is our government kicking up a stink
about possible overpayments of Centrelink?*

*A system that lets big business
loophole their ways out of tax
but targets old punters*

who can't feed their cats.

It's a relief to start writing. There's a rhythm, a route for my anger to run along.

*Pushing the vulnerable down
while protecting the big end of town.*

*Yeah, that's the feral smell of abuse.
There's this lady called Beryl who is herded
into poverty, chased with subpoenas,
calls of threats made to her home.*

*This pensioner bruised,
systems hounding her
instead of housing her.*

I'm on a roll. It feels good. I don't see what goes on around me, I'm so in the zone.

*A five-property owning politician
goes after those who maxed
out their plastics
just to afford rent
on a one-bedroom thumb tac*

*Any polly who makes it their mission
to bleed dry the small fry
while protecting fat cats and big dogs
is a flat-out thug*

so no wonder this bullying bugs me...

My arms and chest begin to shake. These lines feel dangerous to write. I look down at my white school shirt. I've sweat through most of it and am starting to reek. My eyes dart around the room, feeling a weight of threat pushing from all directions. I'm sticking my neck out and it is petrifying.

I look for another piece of paper, to start a different piece, a safer story, but the bell rings. I jump in my chair.

'Hand up your work on the way out,' says the teacher, as students rush for the door.

With reluctance, I hand over the letter to the teacher, wait for the crowds to leave the hallway and grab an apple from my bag for recess. I sneak down the

emergency stairwell, which opens to the far end of the oval. I can't see any of the usual suspects who try to pull my pants down, and so I walk over, fully clothed, to a huddle of lads by the footy posts. I play cricket on the weekend with some of them. They've never invited me to hang out with them, but they've also never said not to.

I stand on the periphery of their circle, lingering as awkwardly as a nun at strip poker. One of the guys looks at me and nods. I take that as permission to stay. I go all in.

Six hundred days and I have my first bully-free break.

It is blissfully boring. And scary. I am deeply unsettled. I can't stop looking over my shoulders.

I know that abuse and harassment will find me again, probably in a few minutes time. It's not that simple to walk away from. These things are webbed masters, and the faster I run, the more tangled I get.

But what I am also getting is some spirit, some mettle.

And with it, I am going to start making some noise.

LINES IN THE SAND

by Alister Pullman

Well, it was night again. Dinner was eaten, the dishes put away. A healthy, practical breakfast was prepped and a few simple steps away from being the same. Andy even had his quasi-uniform ready to go on the dining chair, for another early start at his quasi-, albeit practical, job.

He was standing across the bed from Hannah, who was staring back at him with the same blue eyes that he was looking at her. She sighed, looking away and shifting uncomfortably on her feet. He managed to catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror behind her and followed her gaze up the wall awkwardly.

"Look, we need to work some things out," Andy said.

"I know," Hannah replied.

Of course she did. How couldn't she? These feelings have been gnawing away for a while now. He'd only just admitted them to himself but maybe she'd acknowledged them sooner and come to the same conclusion he did. Who can tell?

"I don't know if I can do this anymore," Andy said.

"I know," Hannah replied.

"So, what are we going to do?"

She stared back across the bed to him. She knew.

They grew up in a small town. Well, proportionally small, compared to other, larger, towns. It was big enough that most lived a fairly comfortable life without an intense desire to escape. Small enough that eventually everyone becomes a familiar face regardless of role, social position, or creed. So, it makes sense that their first encounter was in high school. That's pretty common though, isn't it?

Looking back, really looking back, they had more to do with each other, earlier, than they realized. Small towns with a smaller high school, maybe. Their time there was spent normally enough. They'd share the occasional class together and Andy was eventually able to recognize her face as he passed a window,

and for a long time that was enough. He doesn't remember speaking to her at this stage, but he definitely noticed her. He doubted he could have told you her name though.

Andy had a consistent, normal sized group of friends. That's not surprising. He was a friendly guy, got along well with almost everyone, and was outgoing enough without being painful and exclusionary like the theatre clique could be. He was a fine student too, normal grades, modest aspirations, the teachers liked him. He had options back then.

There isn't much to say about the two of them at this time. He has one distinct memory of quietly bringing Hannah up with a few of his closer friends. She was... not well received. Mostly met with a very casual disdain rather than an outspoken dislike, it nevertheless drew a clear line in the sand, and he didn't bother to bring her up again.

Life continued with the regular ups and downs of a high school student. All very normal and his parents didn't have much to complain about as far as raising a teenager goes. He probably was never going to be a doctor, but he had the potential to be happy, and that would be enough for them. The years went by. Andy grew up and nothing really changed.

Eventually, high school was close to finishing. Andy found himself, predictably, in the middle of a pretty mediocre pack of students. There were a few burnt out "gifted" cases, that everyone secretly felt sorry for, but the cohort had, largely, signed themselves up to peak in middle management positions across the country, and that's not always a bad thing.

Andy was still doing fine. He was sociable enough and got along well with most people. As he experimented with casual employment across various retail positions, he discovered he could be useful at times too. This was a big moment of realization for him. He was particularly thrilled when he earned the nickname "Handy Andy," eventually shortened to just "Handy," by one of his more creative middle managers. He was now, officially, a problem solver. He had solutions.

An indeterminate amount of time passed and Handy found himself quite settled working in a locally owned café. In his final year of high school, it had been determined that he wasn't "university material" for several thousand reasons. No one would stop him, if that's what he really wanted to do, but it was made clear that, as an investment, it was unlikely to come to fruition in his lifetime.

So, he grew comfortable in his job, serving people, making drinks, keeping the peace on both sides of the counter. It was here that he started noticing Hannah again. Slowly at first, but as he settled in more comfortably, she became a regular appearance and, as he was making up her daily coffee, he finally joined the dots and worked out her name.

It didn't take long for him, at this stage, to make the decision and move out of his parents' house. Work was going well as he moved into a semi management position, and he didn't have a lot of expenses because he hardly ever went out. A small, simple apartment was all he needed. A place of his own, privacy. His own space to do his own thing, whatever that may entail. He may never have been able to own it, but renting was enough for now.

As if on cue, he began to see Hannah everywhere. The café, grocery shopping, the bus. Everywhere he went, there she was. How he never noticed her before was beyond him. But this was all fairly normal, wasn't it? He'd must have seen a hundred Hollywood films in his life that followed this exact formula. He wasn't crazy so the only logical step he could take was to acknowledge her and, as simple as that, their lives were intertwined. Just like Hollywood said they would.

Handy didn't have anyone to tell these days, so he didn't tell anyone. There must have been some change though. Something about the way he acted, or maybe even looked, because people started treating him differently. Some were nicer to him, some not. Most adopted a carefully curated, forced apathy. It didn't affect him much, even as he wandered around buying groceries or whatever mundane activity he'd chosen on his time off work, which wasn't much. He'd earned himself the nickname "Handa" for his slow-paced lifestyle. All his life he'd been told that he couldn't change how other people felt about him, so he did his best to ignore them, with mediocre results.

From there it felt instantaneous, but logical, that Hannah was living with him. A constant presence in his everyday life, sharing his bed and eating his meals. It felt like the only time she wasn't nearby was when he was with his parents, which was occasionally enough.

Handy was careful not to mention Hannah around his parents because he knew they wouldn't approve. One day they did comment that he seemed different, eventually attributing it to a newfound degree of happiness in his life and left it at that. Oh, if only they knew, the shock they'd feel. But Handa wouldn't have known how he could tell them about her, even if he thought he could.

Since Hannah was now deeply entwined in Handa's life he could see how

different they were. Polar opposites; night and day in some respects. Where he was neat, she was untidy, where he valued order and systems, she seemed to revel in chaos. His apartment deteriorated accordingly, and he told himself that this was a good thing. Even convincing himself to welcome it to a degree.

This was what it was like to move into adulthood, wasn't it? To move away from his childish, teenage ways and forge a new path for himself. A mature, developed personality. Individual. Unique. Valued? This was all normal, right? And if he was struggling, that must be normal too. Transitioning from one state to another, growth, is always going to be work. This must be right. Change is a good thing.

Not bad, just different. As Handa adjusted to this new lifestyle he could feel himself relaxing. Work was going well; he was taking on more responsibility and the business was doing fine. He was keeping up with his bills and even managing to put some away for savings. It wouldn't be long before he could start thinking about considering taking a holiday. This must be what a dream coming true feels like.

Weeks turned into months before the cracks started to appear. After careful consideration Handa decided to ignore them, which, in the hindsight of now staring at each other across the bed, was a bad choice. Live and learn, or something like that.

Hannah was a restless soul. The apartment was stifling. There wasn't enough. She wanted more. He did what he could, he told himself. Handy looked at the numbers, saw what he was capable of, painted a picture and drew a line in the sand. Hannah acknowledged it, maybe even agreed that there was a logic to it. It was, after all, hard to disagree with Handy. Too bad that didn't change anything.

"Meet me in the middle," said someone, apparently.

Things would be fine for a time. Hannah would try to be sated, she really would. Then there would be a slip, usually during their weekly shopping trip, but that was forgivable. Wasn't it? No one was perfect and she was trying. Surely that was enough.

"Meet me in the middle," that person said again.

Another day, another slip. Bigger, more obvious. Increasing in frequency. Months, maybe even years drift by. Handy suggested trying something different. It was a Friday night, and he wasn't working the next day. A bar, or even a nightclub was a normal activity for someone their age and Hannah thought it was a stroke of

genius. After all, they had all of this “stuff” they’d bought with his job, they may as well use it. They had no idea where to go but there must be somewhere, even in a town this size, they could just sit and be themselves.

Loud music, loud people. Hannah loved it, Handa didn’t. But that didn’t matter, this isn’t about him. It never was and it never will be, increasingly so. After some research, there were two venues that stuck out as potential spaces for them. So that’s where they went. Their first stop was the more timid of the two, Handa hoped at least. Not crowded but still full of noise and drinking.

It didn’t take long for someone to wander past and compliment Hannah on her dress. An innocent enough comment and justified too, as it was a very cute dress. Pleasant enough words were exchanged back and forth before the other person left in the direction of the dance floor. By coincidence, they ran into that person once or twice more before the night was out. More kind words, a proper introduction, and a shared drink before Handa made the decision to end the night. He couldn’t decide how grateful he was to not be included, or even acknowledged, in that conversation. But that was a normal enough interaction, wasn’t it? Wasn’t that how you made friends as a mature, developed adult?

And just like that a habit was formed and Handa found himself preparing to go out every week. It makes for a very long day and if he’s working the weekend he really struggles, but Hannah is sated and that’s enough. She quickly becomes a regular face; the bartenders know her favorite drink and other regulars greet her as she moves through the dance floor to her normal chair. This was about as good as it gets for some and Handa couldn’t help but be happy for her.

Andy caught a glimpse of himself behind Hannah in the mirror again. It was just a flash, but it was enough to bring him back into the room.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Andy said, again.

“You don’t have to,” Hannah replied.

“Someone has to.”

Andy tried; he really did. It felt like every step he took forward for her was a step back for him. He couldn’t work out what he was losing, but there was something, or who was gaining what, if there was anything. Where would it stop? Should it? What if this was just what life was like?

The cracks were as plain as day, right where the old lines in the sand had been, and it felt like he was stumbling over every one of them. But eggs had cracks in

them too, they were meant to. Maybe this was just part of the process.

Something had to change. Something was about to.

Handa looked across the bed to Hannah. He loved her, for who she was, for who she could be, but couldn't see how he could ever be enough. He could kill himself trying, fail, and he doubted if anyone would notice. Maybe that's not such a bad thing.

What she wanted wasn't the world, but at her core her drive was relentless, insatiable. It was everything he had, maybe more. But without Hannah, what was he? Even now, what was left? His parents would notice a change, a bad one, without Hannah. The same for the people he worked with. He had no real social outlet, no friends anymore, not like Hannah at the club. There may have been some support nearby if he looked, but what was the point?

It wasn't that she didn't care for him. She did. He knew she did and knew that she felt the same way he did. How couldn't she? After all this time, without him, what was she? Could she continue without him? Handy doubted it. Not easily. Not well. Not in a positive sense. Well, maybe.

Handy turned to the foot of the bed and Hannah did the same. He walked around it until he stood in front of the mirror, looking into her eyes, the blueness reflecting back into his. He wanted to see her up close, nearby, properly.

Things hadn't been terrible. They'd been fine, but it wasn't enough, and they couldn't keep going like this. Another line in the sand would just become another crack and even the thought of that was almost too much. Things had to change and change they must. Some part of this equation had to be removed. Maybe even all of it.

The safety razor had seemed like an extravagance when Hannah had bought it for him. Just another thing to add to the "stuff" that she accumulated. But it was going to earn its keep now. It was a fresh blade, sharp, and Handy wasn't sure how long it had been in his hand. Looking in the mirror he saw the same in Hannah's, the freshly removed nail polish still just visible in the reflection. Things couldn't stay the same any longer, but, fortunately, they wouldn't have to.

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