

Span Community House

Anthology

2022

Writing by Span's
Creative Writing
and Thornbury
Writers' groups

Span Community House Anthology 2022

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Introduction

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After two years of Covid lockdowns, we are embracing the cliché ‘new normal’ — back face to face at Span. Mostly. One of the positive things to come out of recent challenges is ‘blended learning’, where we can include in our classes participants who might otherwise be unable to attend. We are regularly joined by writers, via Zoom, from Coronet Bay to Canberra. There is no excuse now for missing a class!

During the tumultuous times, Span’s writing classes were not only about writing, but also caring for and supporting each other. We had a lot of fun too: plenty of laughs, story sharing, learning, lively discussion and, of course, loads of terrific writing. For inspiration, we had visits from published authors including Graeme Simsion, Ingrid Laguna and Anna George. We did Tanowrimo again in November — a bit like Nanowrimo (National Novel Writing Month), but not as hard!

I’m not surprised that many of the pieces in this collection are about home, and places and people near and dear to us. I think isolation and lockdowns made us acutely aware of the important things in life.

In the anthology this year, you will find pieces from experienced writers alongside work from some of our newest writers. **Marcus Barlow** joins Creative Writing via Zoom all the way from Canberra. Marcus is a screenwriter who is exploring fiction with his incredible imagination.

Rose Catalano writes in a few different genres: moving memoir, joyous children’s stories, and a little bit of humour. Rose is also working on a long- form project based on her personal challenges

powerful writing voice and an awesome imagination; he has been workshopping his novel in the Thornbury Writers' Workshop.

Glenda Fleming is one of our most prolific writers. Her descriptions of nature are wonderful, as are her memoir and speculative fiction pieces.

Robyn Crawford is the newest member of the Thornbury Writers' Workshop. Robyn is a talented writer, visual artist and graphic designer who has worked on some awesome comics.

Another talented writer, **Barbara Fitzpatrick-Haddy**, has recently joined Creative Writing. Barbara is working on a novel based partly on her family history, interwoven with Irish folklore, and she also writes exquisite poetry.

Renee Nicol joined the Thornbury Writers' Workshop this year, and she is working hard on an intriguing fantasy novel with a twist. Renee also writes short stories and poetry.

Nick Stott is a very committed writer, who writes both fiction and non-fiction. I am very proud of his work on *Heart of Burgundy*, the first in a series of epic novels with important themes.

Mick Cairns returned to the Span family after a short break. His legendary sense of humour and unique writing voice brighten Wednesday mornings for the Thornbury Writers' Workshop. Mick is also an artist and his stunning painting *Agenda for Monks* appears on the cover of our anthology.

Josh Hollingworth also returned to Span. Josh has a unique and

Alycia Deske, long-time member of the Span community, has had some terrific writing achievements this year, including performing spoken word on stage at Mojo Festival. Alycia continues to work on her fantasy novel, and she also writes powerful memoir pieces.

Chris Keogh is an extremely talented writer and one of our biggest procrastinators. She continues to entertain us with her humour and wow us with her prose as she gets closer and closer to finishing her gothic thriller, which I would put money on being a bestseller.

Lucy Osborne is in the same boat as Chris when it comes to talent and procrastination. She is still working on her middle-grade novel, which is also destined for great success — she just needs to finish it!

Helena Kidd's recent achievements are too many to list, but here are a few: author talks at writers' festivals and libraries; producing a short story picture book; her memoir *When the Past Awakens*, which was shortlisted for the 2020 Victorian Community History Awards, has just been acquired by Athens Library, Greece. Helena is working on a second memoir in Creative Writing on Tuesdays.

Veronica Power has completed an accomplished and moving memoir, for which she is exploring publication options. Veronica is working on a political second memoir, and she amazes us with the stories she creates from writing exercises.

Sue Robertson, a prolific writer with an extraordinary imagination, continues to craft gorgeous poetry and prose. Sue is also a talented artist and has a novel project in progress.

Last but certainly not least (like Heather Locklear in the credits of *Melrose Place*), **Margot Sharman** has chalked up a long list of incredible achievements this year — for her art and photography as well as her writing. Margot published her photography book *Eclectic Carlton*, which was launched at Readings bookshop in Carlton; her paintings have been included in several exhibitions; and she has recently been awarded a City of Melbourne grant, which will help bring her new exhibition *We Were Resilient* to life.

I am so proud of all my writers for their work in this anthology, for sticking with their ongoing projects, starting new ones, and for all their achievements. Thank you for keeping me excited about writing.

Please enjoy the writing from Span's Creative Writing class and Thornbury Writers' Group celebrated here alongside artwork from the Art for All Abilities groups.

Tania Chandler
Creative writing tutor

Prose poetry

Turning point

Marcus Barlow

No matter how hard I try I always seem to fail, every door shuts in my face, every friend leaves me to die, every chance fades away and only causes more trouble. Is it me, is it my fault, am I the one to blame?

Surely not — all I've ever done has been for the safety of others. It's almost like the world doesn't want to be happy.

There's always so much more bad than there is good, yet supposedly that's balanced.

Every time I try to stop something, something goes wrong.

Someone always has ulterior motives driven by greed or power or ignorance. Why won't they listen to me?

It's like fate is trying to tell me to stop.

Every failure is another red light in my face and I'm coming awfully close to breaking. I take a deep sigh and look at where I am chained up hanging from the roof,

fighting a fight I was never going to win on my own.

The only people I thought cared about me were too scared to continue.

I want to blame them for this but the only thing I can think of is all the mistakes I made, maybe I pushed them too far, maybe I deserve this,

I guess this is what I get for trying to play the hero. I no longer want to do this.

If there is one thing I could do before I die now it would be to say sorry, to say sorry to all of them but, mainly her.

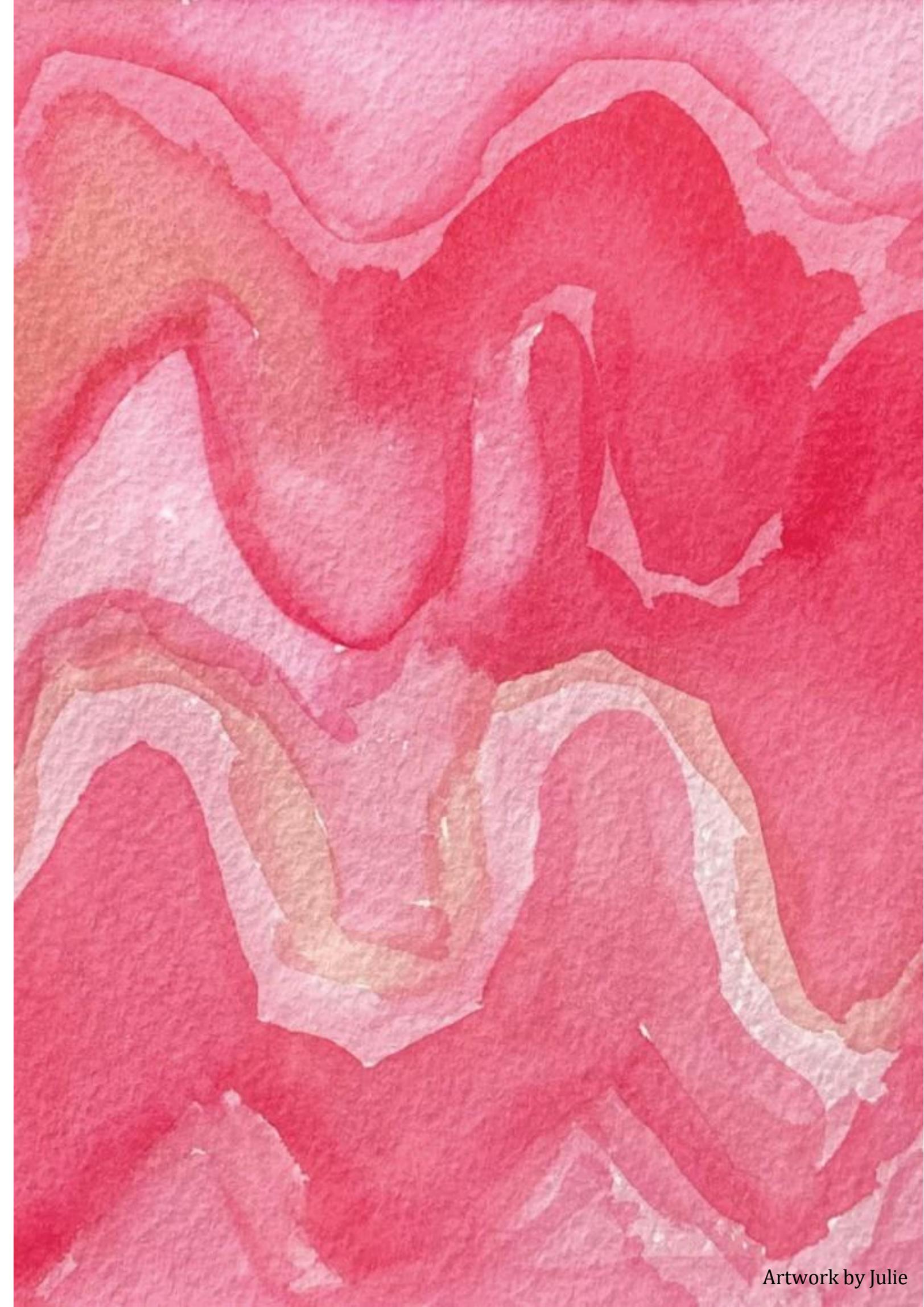
I lied, I pushed, I tried and I failed. She was right, she always was.

I should have trusted her.

There are some things in this world you can't stop.

Maybe it's better to help the victims than to stop the cause.

Marcus Barlow is a young aspiring writer from Australia, who believes that movies and storytelling of all sorts are important artforms. Marcus is determined to prove this by writing works with deep meanings and lessons, and hopes to draw people in



The gig

Mick Cairns

Clement Bradshaw sits alone in his dingy cramped flat. He takes out a DVD of Shaun Micallef's 2000 talk-show satire, *The Micallef Programme (with two mm's!)* and presses play. He likes Micallef's individualistic playful sense of fun. The not knowing what will come next. It also seems to him that the great double acts like Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy were also funny. They were like old married couples sparring endlessly. Sight gags. Was that the secret? Why does he like comedians and comedy so much? A simple answer would be they cheer him up. Take him out of his depression.

Clement pushes on, day after numbing day. He meets his friend of 30 years, Aaron Fulbright, at their local pub, The Brunswick Hotel. There's a sign out front advertising *Tuesday Comedy Open Mic Nights*.

'How hard could it be? Just stand up and ... What do you think, Aaron?' There was a long pause.

'Come on your thoughts, Aaron please. Would you listen to me for ten minutes?' 'Well ... I ...'

'Telling jokes. Cracking jokes. On stage.'

Fulbright remained impassive, before taking a full swig on his beer. 'If they were funny.'

Clement attends the Ernest Rones Mind Hub in Coburg, painting and doing lunchtime healthy eating classes. His depressive episodes are held in check, but with Bradshaw ... you never know.

It's 1am. Suddenly there's a loud thumping on the ceiling of his flat. It's Luigi Squadron. What the fuck does this lunatic want? What's he doing? I'm only watching the telly! Clement turns the volume on his TV up. DVDs help him through the night — porn, sometimes a movie, music. He loves The Boss, Bruce Springsteen, who he is playing now. LOUD. OK, maybe Luigi has a point.

Clem finds sleep very, very difficult these days, often going without it for 24 hours at a time. His blinds are open, so the overhead streetlight floods his bedroom, offering solace against anxious thoughts till sunrise. The thumps grow louder. 'Shut up! Shut up, Luigi!'

Luigi Squadron works as a chef at a cafe in Sydney Road called Bananarama. Clem visits occasionally, sampling the food. Sometimes Squadron cooks lasagne, Bradshaw's favourite Italian dish. He knows the volatile Italian will calm down. Eventually. He always does.

Aaron is a good friend. No, thinks Clem, a *magnificent* friend. Next morning, he is with him in his flat sharing coffee.

'C'mon, Aaron, next Tuesday?' 'What?'

'The open mic. Stand up? Jokes.'

'Don't leave your day job. Oh, you don't have one.'

‘Exactly, so I’ve got absolutely nothing to lose.’

Luigi Squadron clatters down the stairs. ‘Hello, my friend,’ Squadron says as he passes the open door. He has obviously forgotten last night. He is like that. Unpredictable.

Bradshaw inserts the Micallef DVD into the player. ‘Have a look at this, mate.’ As the DVD plays, he looks across at his friend. ‘This guy is completely in his element. Everything just flows. I know it’s edited, but that’s how I want my spot to go. Flawlessly.’

Aaron laughs. ‘I’m your friend, Clem. You’re not serious about this?’ He sniffs, then says loudly, ‘You’ll just make a fool of yourself.’

Bradshaw looks him straight in the eye. ‘Tell me you’ll come, for some support.’ ‘No. Don’t do it. Ask Doctor Ainslie. She knows you.’

‘Fuck Doctor Ainslie!’

In the six days leading up to the open mic night, Clem does little preparation, such is his belief in himself. He writes only one joke: *The Big Finish*. The audience will be convulsed with laughter. It will end with a standing ovation.

He asks Aaron one last time to come with him. ‘No. I don’t want to see a train wreck, Clem.’

To be continued...

Mick Cairns is currently working on a variety of stories for publication. Mick’s legendary sense of humour has brightened Wednesdays in Span’s Thornbury writers’ group for four years; and he has lived with mental illness for five decades. Mick is also an artist, and his painting ‘Agenda for Monks’

appears on the cover of our anthology.

Memoir

Introduction to Melbourne, 1953

Rose Catalano

Melbourne seemed to get dark much quicker than it did in Europe. The young lady grabbed her crying child by the hand and ascended the steps of the tram. People rushed through the noisy traffic like birds of prey looking for food. She tightened her grip on the crying child as tears welled in her own eyes and her heart raced.

Where is the street? Maybe that was the wrong tram stop. She remembered the gloomy grey hotels lining the street. Looking around she became increasingly distressed.

Could she ask one of the passers by? But she couldn't remember the name of the street. English names were difficult for her; she was unable to read, speak or understand English.

Now the darkness had truly taken over the streets. The child cried uncontrollably. She picked her up in her arms and, with her bag over her shoulder, ran, aware that people were staring at her and her sobbing child.

She felt lost and ashamed. The faces and expressions of the people staring at her showed no compassion as she ran faster and faster. Melbourne was covered in darkness, but the dim city lights became brighter.



Artwork by Isabelle

Music and lace

Rose Catalano

There was a lady in our village who no one ever visited. She never left the house, so my mother and I would visit her regularly. Her pale skin and long dark hair fascinated me as she lay prettily on her bed, propped up by white-lace pillows. Her fingernails were painted bright crimson and Mother would put lipstick on her quivering lips as I helped to brush her beautiful hair. There was an old gramophone next to her bed, which constantly played Edith Piaf's 'La Vie En Rose'. That room has remained imprinted in my mind, and every time I hear 'La Vie En Rose', I remember that lady.

Years later, as I became more familiar with the beautiful music of the tormented French singer, I would always picture the beautiful lady lying calm and motionless on her white bed with the lace-trimmed sheets. I can still see the perfectly starched lace doilies on the mahogany dressing table. There were always fresh violets in the small crystal vase and the sad refrain of Piaf's music filling the dimly lit room.

The people in the village were horrified that my mother and I would dare enter that house. It was a disgrace, they said, to take a small child in there. The old ladies in black made the sign of the cross, clutching their rosary beads when they passed that house. The village priest would visit her weekly but always in the silence of the evening. He would bring his large black missal and bless her with his small bottle of holy water, which he would produce mysteriously from under his voluminous black coat and then leave quietly from the back door. My mother and I continued the ritual of visiting the lady in spite of the disapproval of my grandmother and the others in the village. It seemed such a mystery to me that her husband was not there to comfort her, and I could not understand why everyone whispered her name and crossed their hands as they looked towards the sky as if in solemn prayer to God.

One morning, it was so beautiful to see the snow had melted and the sun was shining shyly through the bare trees. Tiny green leaves were beginning to appear on some of the branches. Soon it would be spring. I had gathered a small bunch of violets to take to the lady. I was delighted to find on entering her room that she was sitting up propped by pillows and had a faint pale smile on her face. She held out her thin arms to embrace me and then, to my great joy, she beckoned me to climb next to her in the big bed. She pointed to a little jewellery box on the bedside table. I opened it and found some bright red nail polish and lipstick.

We spent the next hour painting our nails. It was one of the most memorable moments of my life. Then she allowed me to apply some of the lipstick. I snuggled next to her for what seemed a long time, feeling an incredible peace. The sun streamed through the huge window creating little crystal drops on the sill. The lady seemed too weak to speak, and her face was delicate and transparent in the light, but she kept pointing to the gramophone to repeat Piaf's song. My mother became anxious for us to leave but I clung to the lady, hiding my face in her lace bedjacket. As I finally let go after kissing her on the cheek, which was soft like tissue

paper, I looked up to see her husband standing at the end of the bed smiling. He was a handsome man with a short dark moustache. He wore an army uniform. He was talking gently to my mother and seemed to thank her as he kissed her hand. I slid quietly from the bed and saw that there were tears streaming down his face.

The next day I was looking forward to visiting the lady. I hoped she would let me play with her jewellery box again. As I skipped down the stairs, I was shocked to see my mother crying. The whole village was crying. I was not allowed to go to the funeral, no one told me what had happened, but I knew that the lady had gone away somewhere up in the sky to heaven.

It was a mystery to me why the beautiful lady had died. There was discussion of a weak heart, but I heard years later that it was the disease that no one dared to mention back in those days. Cancer.

If I close my eyes, I can still smell the fresh violets, and 'La Vie En Rose' is the only song I can play on the piano.



Artwork by Louise

When all else fails, just eat chocolate

Rose Catalano

It was one of those hot summer days when it seemed the heat had stopped the world from turning. People with sweaty red faces and little patience wandered aimlessly around supermarkets, not to do shopping but to escape the furnace outside.

I had done my shopping quickly and was feeling pleased with myself for being so efficient. I jumped into my steaming hot car and sped home.

At home I dragged out my shopping bag, which seemed heavier than usual, and hurried inside. As I started unpacking the groceries, I realised that this was not my bag. I had mistakenly taken someone else's shopping home. After uttering a few words that thankfully no one would ever hear, I threw the contents back in and dropped the heavy bag on the couch.

It was far too hot to return to the supermarket, so I turned the air conditioner to high, removed most of my clothes and collapsed beside the bag on the couch. May as well look inside. There were numerous bottles of detergents, lots of soft drinks and blocks and blocks of dark chocolate. I tried to picture what kind of person would purchase these items and no real food.

I started to slowly eat some of the delicious chocolate. The hours went by and my children came back from school to find their mother on the floor in a strange state of euphoria with her face smeared with chocolate.

They stared in alarm. 'Mum what are you doing?'

'It's been a hard day,' I said, heaving myself from the floor to the couch. 'I lost my shopping. I mistakenly picked up someone else's bag and here I am. Don't look at me that way.'

'Can we order KFC then, Mum? I'm collecting their stickers,' my daughter said, laughing, and completely ignoring my discomfort.

'OK, do whatever you like.' I wiped the perspiration from my face with discarded papers from the chocolates, which were now scattered all over the lounge room floor.

'What's going on here?' asked my husband as he arrived home from work.

'Mum lost her shopping today.' The children laughed hysterically. 'We now have lots of chocolate but no food for tea.'

'Settle down!' I shouted. 'Don't you people realise? WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, JUST EAT CHOCOLATE.'

Rose Catalano is passionate about writing. She is working on several projects including a memoir, fiction short stories and children's books. A migrant, who arrived as a child from Europe, she is keen to share with her daughters and grandchildren her challenges

of growing up in two different cultures.

Pandemics, bushfires and war

Tania Chandler

I interviewed June Harkness, and wrote this story, during the 2021 COVID-19 lockdown. We 'met' in Zoom, and June told me about her formative years, of living through the polio outbreak, Black Saturday bushfires and World War 2. For June, COVID is 'just another thing'. 14

June was born in Preston in the winter of 1929. She was named June, not because it was her birth month, but because her mother — the oldest of six children — had a younger sister called Jean, who died at birth. June's grandmother objected to the name, so she was given the one nearest it.



June's childhood home was in Reservoir, not far from where she lives now with two of her five sons. She went to Tyler Street Primary School, and remembers that school went to Grade 8. In Grade 6, students — or, more likely, their parents — decided if they wanted to complete primary school or leave and go to a high school or a technical school. Girls went to high school to learn about cooking; boys went to tech school to learn about woodwork. Those who stayed on until Grade 8 learnt more about arithmetic, history, geography, spelling and writing, with 'a little bit of cooking or woodwork on the side'.

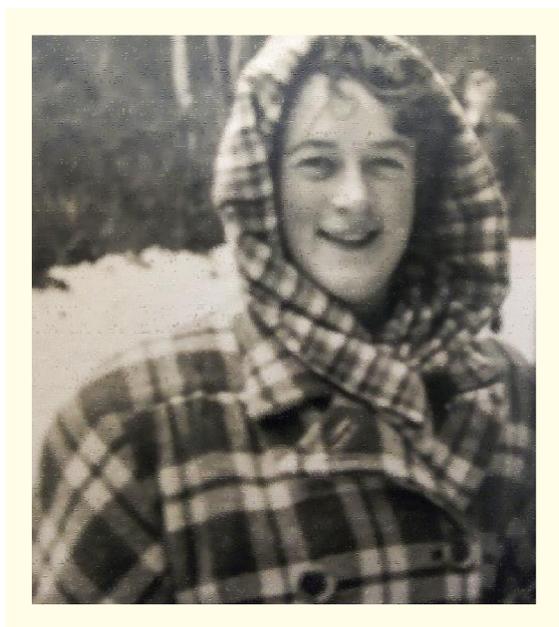
In 1937, June's parents were notified by the school about a frightening situation: a poliomyelitis (polio) outbreak. Polio is a highly infectious, sometimes fatal, viral disease that largely affects young children. It can attack the nervous system and cause paralysis. June remembers her school being closed for three months. Children were not allowed to leave their properties for any reason. June was an only child — her brother Keith hadn't been born yet. The family at the back had two children; fortunately, there was a gate in the adjoining fence, so they could all play together. June recalls it as a terrific time, and feels sorry for children who have been alone during the current lockdowns.

Although none of June's family or friends contracted polio, she remembers seeing people afflicted with 'the horrible disease, being wheeled around the shops in wheelchairs, and lying down in long half-bed-half-wheelchairs'. Some patients were confined to an 'iron lung': a huge metal box attached to a respirator. Electricity blackouts were more frequent in those days, and June remembers that people with iron lungs in the home were notified to seek alternative power arrangements when thunderstorms were forecast. June also recalls her five sons — Leon, David, Gary, Trevor (passed), and Neil — getting 'the pink stuff on the spoon', along with

other vaccinations, many years later. The oral Sabin polio vaccine wasn't available in Australia until 1966¹ — 29 years after the outbreak which closed June's school, unlike the recent COVID vaccines that have been produced relatively quickly.

¹ <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/polio-vaccine-introduced-in-australia>

June also recalls tuberculosis (TB), another disease for which there was no vaccination, being prevalent when she was young. TB is a bacterial infection, which usually affects the lungs, but can involve the kidneys, bones, spine, brain and other parts of the body.² June remembers there was a TB sanatorium at the back of Mont Park and Larundel. This was Gresswell Tuberculosis Sanatorium for males, which sat on the grounds of Mont Park Hospital in Macleod, and admitted TB patients between 1933 and 1970.³ 'In those days it was just paddocks and bush out there,' says June. And for her generation, there was no such thing as vaccination.



June's great uncle, Edward Anderson, owned two timber mills in Marysville and, in the dry summer of 1939, June and her mother went up to Mill No. 1 for one of their regular holidays. They travelled by 'service car', which you caught in Flinders Street in the city — from there it took you to Marysville via Kew and Healesville. If, like June's parents, you didn't have a car, service cars were the only means of getting to places like Marysville. They were big, long cars, which June describes as 'like a limousine is today'. The biggest ones took about ten passengers. June recalls the service car passing through Croydon and Lilydale, 'which was country in those days', and up the narrow, winding Black Spur forest road. Once they left the

main road, it was all dirt tracks and a dribble of a creek.

² https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/S_T/Tuberculosis

³ <https://www.findingrecords.dhhs.vic.gov.au/collectionresultspage/Gresswell-Sanatorium#gresswell-history-in-brief>

On 13 January, fanned by fierce winds, the bushfires that came to be known as the Black Friday fires, swept across large areas of Victoria. Flames leapt great distances, and the ferocious winds ripped out large trees. Townships, including nearby Narbethong, were completely destroyed.⁴

When June saw the footage on TV of the Black Saturday fires in 2009, it reminded her of the fire she survived as a little girl. The tops of the mountains surrounding Marysville were ablaze that night, and the fire was coming down. Flames jumped treetops as they leapt towards the mill. 'We relied on people making it up the Black Spur and advising ahead of what was coming, how long we had to get out.' When it was reported that the fire was close, a timber worker drove June and her mother to June's great aunt's house in Marysville. They were lucky; the car behind them became trapped and never made it out.

All the men had gone to protect the mills, so it was up to the women to save the town, including half a dozen guest houses and a hotel. They had to turn June's great uncle's horse loose. June's great aunt drove one of her two cars into the centre of Marysville and left it there in the middle of the road where she hoped it would be safe. She then ran back to her home and drove the second car down into town as well. The woman who worked at the picture theatre was moving things to safety when her hair caught fire.

Ten-year-old June, her mother, and her great aunt were up all night,

beating away with wet hessian bags the flames on the trees, and any sparks that landed on the veranda. They wore clothing made of thick velour — 'velvet-like stuff, like under-floor coverings, made mostly of wool, which doesn't burn quickly'. They saw one half-built house on the mountain go up in flames.

⁴ <https://prov.vic.gov.au/about-us/our-blog/black-friday-1939>

‘There was no communication like there is nowadays,’ June says. ‘In the country, you had a phone on the wall, you turned the handle and were connected to the post office, who put you through to who you wanted to talk to.’ With the fires, all the lines to the city were inaccessible. Nobody could get through. June’s father had no way of knowing if June and her mother were alive or dead. Nor did the women in town know if the men who had gone to save the mills had been burnt, or if they would return.

June’s great uncle and his timber mills did survive. Mills were built near creeks, and their surroundings were clear of bush so the logs wouldn’t catch fire. Mill No. 1 was a little settlement: 12 unpainted weatherboard houses where the mill workers with families lived, and a bigger weatherboard ‘boarding house’ for the workers who were single. Only two of those houses were left standing. The men survived the fire by lying down in the creek or on the cricket pitch they’d made on the bare earth.

After the fire, the men walked up the narrow rail- track — which was normally used to haul cut tree logs via a trolley from the top of the mountain to the mill — and then down into Marysville through ashes and burning trees. Some men were badly burnt and very sick. Years later, June’s great uncle was driving his timber truck up the Black Spur with the window down and his arm resting on the door when a truck coming the other way took his arm off. He eventually died from lung cancer, attributed to breathing the heat from those bushfires, as did most of the men who were there.

The next day, trees were still burning and smouldering as road workers started

clearing them from The Black Spur. There were no machines in those days; the clearing was all done manually. June and her mother took one of the first service

cars that made it through in the afternoon to pick up anybody stranded or wanting to go home. The car was forced to stop often as still-burning trees crashed down around them. 'The Black Spur was the worst part.'

With all the phone lines down, it was unknown to June and her mother that June's father — driven by June's great uncle — was on his way up to Marysville as they were coming down. 'It was such a relief to reach Healesville,' June says. Not as much of a relief as it must have been to June's father learning from locals that his wife and daughter had survived. Nine months after the fires, June's brother, Keith, was born.

'In those days, there was no way to let people know when fires were going to go hit Marysville. Nowadays, they know exactly where and when fires are going to go through,' June says. 'It was like the war — people didn't know what was happening until one or two days after'. June would go to the movies with her friends on a Saturday, and news was shown before the pictures started. That, and the radio and newspapers, were the only ways they got news. 'Nowadays, it's right there in front of you as it's happening'.

June remembers hearing news of the impending second world war coming through the gigantic polished-wood wireless, and the smaller radio that sat on the

kitchen mantel. She describes the lead-up to the war as 'the frightening part', when shocking stories about Hitler and gas chambers were being broadcast. Years later, when June's husband, Jack, an industrial chemist, was working at a chemical company owned by a Jewish family (the Kormans), June noticed a number tattooed on Mrs Korman's arm. 'I was so shocked,' June says, shaking her head.

During the war years, primary school children knitted khaki woollen scarves and socks to send to the soldiers. Food was rationed. Families were given coupons for food and clothing. It took five or six weeks for supplies to arrive by ship from Europe. Neighbours swapped coupons depending on who needed what.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, if you didn't get your milk from the dairy, it was delivered in a billy by a horse-drawn cart. Cream wasn't delivered; you had to go to the dairy for that. Ice, however, was delivered. The roads in the northern suburbs were all unmade, and children would chase the iceman's cart down the dusty streets, breaking off chunks of ice to suck on. 'We didn't have different foods, like Asian food, back then like we do now,' June explains. Coffee came in liquid form to which you added milk. 'I hadn't heard of a cappuccino'. Nobody drank coffee much. To order coffee at a café was seen as 'different'. Most families had come from England where they all drank tea. Along with sugar and butter, tea was rationed as it wasn't produced in Australia. These days, June drinks more coffee than tea. She says, 'When cappuccinos came in, they were great!'

Once Japan became involved in the war, people started practising for air raids like those in Darwin that killed over 230 people.⁵ Each street had its own air warden, whose job it was to check that households were doing what they were told: everything had to be in complete darkness. Black-out curtains were pulled down over normal blinds, so no skerrick of light was showing outside; inside, people hid under solid tables. The air warden in June's street took his job very seriously, and enjoyed wearing his cap and brandishing his truncheon

perhaps a little too much. 'The chap was so particular. He liked organising *everything*'.

⁵ <https://lant.nt.gov.au/story/bombing-darwin#group-4>

He wanted an air raid shelter in his front yard because he was the warden, so he dug one himself. Concrete was scarce in those days; he used mostly heavy timber. One night, after a couple of rainy days, he was sitting there in his air raid shelter when the whole thing fell in. He was submerged in clay and mud.

—

June's father had fought in Gallipoli in WW1, but he never talked about it. He didn't march or go to the RSL; he believed those types of things glorified war. The only time he mentioned the war was at the table when June refused to eat the crusts on her toast. He would tell her that children in other countries could live for a week on her wasted food. He had been camped near the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where the soldiers had survived on little more than tinned bully beef and tomato sauce. At night they heard children crying because they had nothing to eat.

June's mother was a dressmaker. She bought her material from the Myer bargain basement in the city. The Victoria Market was another place June and her mother liked to shop. 'You could always get more material for your coupons there. The shops there used to "cheat" a bit, give you a bit extra from the rolls of material'.

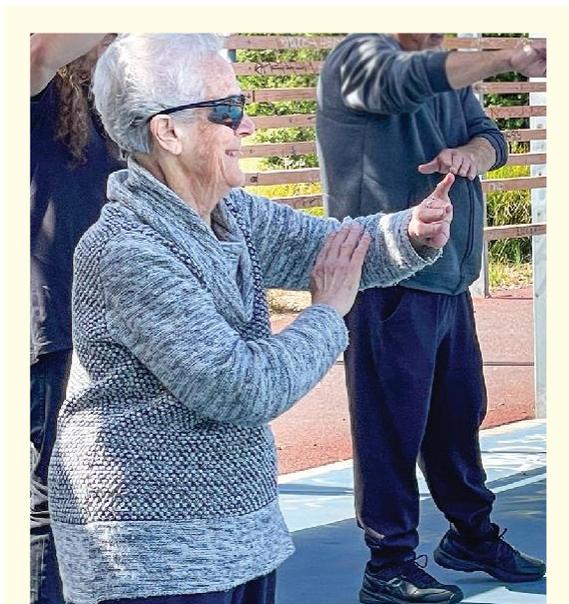
June vowed she would never become a dressmaker like her mother. At school, she hated writing essays, but she was good at business letters. She completed Grade 8 and then went to Northcote Business College. At fourteen and a half, she graduated as a fully qualified stenographer and bookkeeper. She

started work at a secretarial service in Collins Street in the city, and twelve months later got a job with the Dutch government. In those days Indonesia was called Java and was owned by the Dutch. Even though she was working full time, at home June was

still 'under the thumb'. 'Going out with someone, as a couple, didn't mean what it means today'. June went out with a couple of American air-force officers when they were in Melbourne. 'There were some nice Americans. They were good company and happy. They liked to march, and they liked to dance'. The Trocadero dance hall — where the Arts Centre is now — was *the* place to dance. Other places to go out included Flinders Street Ball Room, above the train station; and the Arcadia Ballroom in Thornbury, where the last of Melbourne's cable trams ran along High Street.

Every Wednesday, before COVID-19 lockdown, you could find June in a tai chi class at Span Community House in Thornbury. Now, like many of us, she's on Zoom. June says the classes are as much about the company as they are exercise, but 'it's not the same as human connection'.

During lockdown, June has gone for daily walks at the oval near her house. Neil, her youngest son, has done all her food shopping. The thing she misses most — aside from tai chi at Span — is picking out her own fruit and veggies. She says she hasn't bought anything new 'in yonks' and is also looking forward to getting some new clothes when things open up.



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Tania Chandler teaches Span's Creative Writing class and Thornbury Writers' Workshop. Tania is a writer and editor. Her novels have been published in Australia and internationally, selected for reading programs and shortlisted for awards. Her

third novel *All That I Remember About Dean Cola* was published in 2021, and she is currently working on a fourth.

Find out more about Tania at taniachandler.com



Artwork by Joanne

Contractually obligated

Robyn Crawford

Herchibald 'Hersh' Jenkins passed away peacefully in his sleep at the age of 104. Though he was alone in the end, he was content and happy. His affairs were in order, and he was proud of his lifetime of hard work on his 100-acre sugar cane farm.

A cloud of smoke formed at the foot of his bed, and, from it, a spectral figure emerged clad in a black- hooded cloak, a large scythe by its side. Hersh awoke and lifted his head from the pillow, running his fingers through his thin white hair. He took his time to prop his small, frail body on the edge of the bed.

The figure towered over him and extended a bony finger in his direction. 'Herchibald Jenkins, your time has come.'

'I'm ready,' Hersh replied, slipping his feet into two well-worn slippers. 'I've led a rewarding life, and I'm looking forward to a nice long rest.'

"There'll be no rest where you're going, old man!" the hooded figure bellowed, lowering its finger to the floor.

It had been so long that Hersh had forgotten all about the deal he had made, but it came flooding back to him: the contract he signed when he was 18 and penniless. In exchange for his earthly soul, he was granted a bountiful harvest that year and his crops had thrived.

"That's rubbish!" Hersh cried. "I got *one* good crop out of that deal and within a year it was ravaged by insects. I spent eight decades of back-breaking work to turn that farm into what it is today and I'm not going to hell for a stupid decision I made when I was a teenager!"

"The dark lord doesn't take kindly to people breaking contracts but if you read the fine print, you would know that the only way out of this, legally, is to become a reaper like me.' Darkness enveloped the room as the figure's voice grew louder. He produced the contract signed by Hersh and, pointing to the clauses, shouted 'You will collect ONE HUNDRED MILLION SOULS weighing no less than a human infant, to be sent immediately to hell.'

"That's a bit morbid, isn't it?" Hersh replied.

'Look, Beelzebub wrote this 2000 years ago and we didn't know what a kilogram was ...'

Something tweaked in Hersh's head and he stared up at the figure. 'Fine, I accept these terms and will fulfill them to the letter,' he proclaimed, 'and then you will tear up this contract and take me to heaven.'

The dark lord, Beelzebub, sat confidently on his throne as the hooded figure approached with a sullen expression.

‘He chose to fight the contract, my lord.’

‘I’ve waited 86 years, I can wait a little longer,’ Beelzebub said, shifting in his seat. ‘There’s no way a centenarian can collect one hundred million souls. He’ll be down here soon enough.’

‘About that, sir, you *really* need to update your contracts.’ As the figure spoke, a fat, slimy cane toad descended from the flames above and landed in Beelzebub’s lap with a loud *plop!*

Gazing upward, Beelzebub saw toad after toad fall from the sky above his palace. Before long it was raining cane toads in hell at a rate nobody could keep up with. He looked down at the toad sitting in his lap. ‘What the hell is that?’

‘That’s a cane toad, sir. A species introduced to Australia 80 years ago, whose population now sits at over one hundred million. I’d say that one in your lap is about the weight of a human infant, my lord.’

Robyn Crawford is a writer and visual artist who joined Span’s Thornbury Writers group this year to kickstart that creative spark again. She has predominantly worked in comics and graphic design in the past but is excited to finally try her hand at short stories

and beyond.



Artwork by Jane

Lemons

Alycia Deske

On a street in Melbourne — where shrubs hang over fences, shadowing the paths — a brick house stands. The house has a few cracks and a fence that could crumble at any moment. I think about that, about how the concrete would pummel the path, and settle as dust on the weeds. Beneath the gnarled wasp-infested lemon tree, the weeds have grown flowers. They sway and dip in the wind, dancing the Greek Zorba. Their costume is green and gold, Australia's sporting colours. I reach for one of those weedy flowers and hold it close to my heart.

I remember Yiayia. She's standing under the lemon tree, hosing the concrete. Her pink, fluffy slippers are worn down, her cracked heels hanging over the backs. The lemon tree stands tall above the red geraniums and white roses. Yiayia's blue polyester dress from Myer is snug around her middle. She turns to me and says 'Go inside or you will catch a cold.'

I could be sitting inside chowing down on lollies and watching Sailor Moon save the universe. Instead, I roam free in the yard, wearing my sleeveless New Kids on The Block t-shirt, chasing chickens and stray cats, stepping over globs of duck poo, and climbing the tree. I reach for the highest, ripest lemon, careful to avoid the ones that are cracked like Yiayia's heels. Twigs and branches scratch. Golden orbs of fruit drop and scatter on the ground. My foot slips, my throat pulsates and I almost fall like a lemon.

'Be careful,' Yiayia says.

She turns the hose off. I watch her collect a lemon, and then carefully climb down the branches, until I reach the ground.

'Come here,' Yiayia says. She dusts me off and extends her arms. I feel her warmth, her chest against mine is like hugging a hot water bottle. So close to her, I can smell her breath. It's garlicky. Her arms release me and she lifts my chin to look at her. She stares at me. She says I am a good girl and will find myself a good husband one day, and a well-paying job. She promises that I will become the next Jennifer Keyte and tells me that I can watch the Olympics today — but, on the condition, that I must follow the Greeks.

'Are you Greek?'

'Yes, Yiayia.'

'Good,' she says.

'Do you speak Greek?'

'Yes, I can — a bit'

'Count to ten ...'

'OK, Yiayia.'

She hands me a plastic bag and I collect lemons, counting them out loud: '*Ena, dio, tria ...*'

I twist the weedy flower in my fingers. *If only I could speak more Greek. If only I could have spent more time learning Greek ...*

‘What are you doing there?’

I drop the flower at the sound of my uncle’s voice. He is standing at the front door, wearing a fashionable brown woollen jumper with dark cargo shorts, like he’s just stepped of a Country Road advertisement. Almost. He is eating a bag of hot chips and wearing navy socks with sandals.

‘What happened to the lemons,’ I say. ‘There’s a few around,’ he says.

I look towards the soil, which was once rich in colour. The lemons are now chalky and white with brown beak holes in them.

‘Birds got into ‘em that’s all,’ he says.

I follow him into the house, careful not to trip on a squashed, ant-infested lemon on my way.

The hallway is dark, brown, gloomy. It smells like an old man’s sock drawer and tuna. *Yellow Pages* are piled up in a green milk crate by the door, waiting to be delivered around the neighbourhood. On top of the glass-doored cabinet is a picnic blanket, a lemon in a cane basket, an old black rotary phone, and three miniature figurines: an American Indian on horseback, a brown lizard, and a blue-and-yellow sailboat. Underneath the figurines is a note written on butcher paper: *Welcome home. From uncle, the Indian, the lizard and the boat. Brrr!*

‘I remember these, so cool, so nineties.’ I turn to my uncle and we laugh.

‘Well, they’re worth a bit now.’ He scrunches his empty chip bag into a ball in his hand. ‘Come let’s get you something to eat.’

Following him to the kitchen, I stop at Yiayia’s door. Her key still sits in its lock, bronze, rusty and old, shaped like a club. I envision her toothless gummy grin, her false teeth in a glass of water on her bedside table. If I were to knock, she’d tell me about life in Greece again. I place my hand on the door and run my hand down, soft and gentle. I imagine her voice saying *Yes?* And how she’d tell me to eat something. My stomach gurgles. *She’s ... She’s gone.*

I hear my uncle in the kitchen. The tap squeals and water runs into the sink. A pan clangs on the stove. Bottles rattle, the fridge door closes.

I follow the waft of oil through the living room. I pass the only painting — it’s of a boy in blue shedding a tear. A portrait of being sad.

In the kitchen, Uncle opens a cardboard box. He drops a battered fishcake in the pan. It spits and splatters juices onto the worn orange and white lino floor. Careful not to slip, I pull up a chair and sit down.

‘Salmon alright?’ he says.

I shrug my shoulders and say OK.

Yiayia loved lunchtime. She had two kitchen tables pulled together in the centre of the kitchen. She cooked enough for many people, even when there were only a few. Lemon-and-oregano-infused chops, salad, stuffed capsicums with mince, rice and, occasionally, fried octopus. Ricotta was a side at any time of the day. She enjoyed slicing the cheese and

smearing it on her toast, thick and smooth like paste. Her favourite way to eat this toast was to fold it and dunk it in black tea first.

One Greek Easter, when Yiayia had baked and laid out red eggs with shortbread (*koulouria*), I heard a hiss. A grey cat jumped down from the window ledge and ran into the house. Yiayia cussed in Greek and waved her arms about, shooing away the cat from the table laden with food. I stood back, not knowing what to do, chewing on my fingernail.

Yiayia yelled at me to catch it.

I did my best. I grabbed a towel and broom and chased the stray, but it ran up the curtains. 'Do something!' Yiayia shrieked.

I froze. She shotput an egg at the cat, and then scooped up a handful of ham slices and threw them out the door. The cat ran out after them.

Later, after dinner when the dishes were washed, dried and put away, Yiayia used an old tea towel as a mop. She dragged it along the kitchen floor with her right foot, trekking around the table leaving skid marks.

'You love your yiayia?' she said. 'Yes, Yiayia.'

'You Greek?'

'Yes.'

'You love your dad? 'Yes.'

Uncle?'

'Yes, Yiayia.'

'Your pappou?' She glanced at the black-and-white portrait of her and Pappou smiling, taken in Greece. Suddenly, she was in a faraway place, missing him. 'Oh, Dimi ...' A tear ran, she wiped her eyes, dabbed her face and said: 'What your mum cook tonight?'

I thought about this for a moment and was not sure about how to answer. 'Spaghetti,' I said, deciding to play it safe.

'Good. You're too skinny.'

I looked at my hips and stomach. I was full of meat, potatoes, cheese and all the sweets that a pimply twelve-year-old could manage. *Am I too skinny?* I knew I was unlike the other girls. They were born to Australian parents, fair, athletic. I was dark haired and plump, round like an apple and as lazy as a dropped lemon.

When I was 14, Yiayia started showing signs of Parkinson's. My life was more about friends and dramas now, and I didn't see her as much. I was in high school. My uniform was a navy-and-white jumper and slacks; on weekends, I wore low-cut Britney Spears jeans and tank tops. My hair was always pinned back, held firmly in place with Christina Aguilera butterfly clips. I smudged black makeup around my eyes, thick, like Shirley Manson from Garbage. Mum had only pink and red nail polish in the bathroom, so I coloured my nails with black Texta. I exercised to Mum's old Jane Fonda VHS videos and weighed myself in at 39 kilos. I wanted to get down to 35. I was a workout junkie who wanted to be like the Australian girls,

and the calorie-counter book was my bible. I survived on a diet of bananas, water, low-fat yoghurt, carrots and rice cakes. When I did go to Yiayia's, I did under-the-table trade with Kevin, the Border Collie:

I passed him Yiayia's lemon-infused chops and steak from my plate, in return for pats. Until I got caught out one day.

'This is why you are so skinny?' Yiayia said.

My body froze, my cheeks burned, and Kevin was shooed away from the table.

I'm an adult now and I live in an apartment. It has a courtyard with large green ferns. Roses and geraniums grow wildly by my door. Summer is coming, the sky is turning from a dull grey to an endless stretch of blue and white. The lawns in my neighbourhood are green, quilt-like and sparkling with morning dew. Birds tweet outside my window and as the sun streams through my venetians, I reach for my bag and go out for a walk. I pass many new houses, they all look the same. I stop at an old boarded-up house from another time; it is surrounded by overgrown weeds. A lone lemon tree stands tall, reminding me that renewal and growth is inevitable when you live between two cultures.

Alycia Deske writes memoir, short stories and slam poetry. She is also writing an epic novel, which has been on and off the backburner throughout her time at Span. Alycia prides herself on creativity, and sourcing opportunities. In 2022, she performed spoken word on stage at Mojo Festival, presented by Schizy Inc. Her lived experience of diverse mental health and trauma informs her work, studies at Span and creative writing. Alycia loves a good coffee,

and can be seen mind-boggled on trivia nights at her local pub in Thornbury.

Release

Alycia Deske

I spend days under a tree near the moat, staring up at the trees. The clouds floating like fairy floss and the water flowing, dribbling and gushing like a running tap. Ducks waddle along the bank, and I put my earphones in to listen to Enya. I too want to sail away and be at the Caribbean blue. I feel the weight. I open my backpack, full of books and pens. I notice that my water bottle has spilled on my reader titled *Theory Culture and Society*. Something like that. Sociology. I grab my jumper from around my waist and pat dry my reader. I turn the page.

I am reading the work of Durkheim, but I'm not reading the words. They read like a series of words all put together and jumbled. I am stressed, but not about my uni work. I am stressed because I don't know how long I've been sitting here. I realise that I am cold. But I don't get up. To get up and move would mean I might, maybe, see someone I want to avoid.

It's getting dark now. I can't see the clouds. I can only see the lights from buildings switch on and people walking. They are in groups, talking, laughing, carrying their loads. What would I ever say should we cross paths? Do I talk a load of BS? Do I smile politely? Those people notice me, and I look down. The last people I want to see are my best friend and *him*. A guy that I crushed on.

Sitting cross legged on the floor of my bedroom, tearing up paper. Last semester's essay, last semester's sweat, last semester's pain, hate and love. In Reservoir. I hear footsteps and the birds nattering away in the trees. I also hear pans clanging on the stove, echoing. A voice, unfamiliar. In my mind or is it? Get out, they're gonna get you, say the birds. I have no shoes on but I bolt. Running, running and running.

I wake up in hospital. The psych ward. I make friends. Christmas and New Year's ruined, or are they? There's food to eat here. Plenty of company. No stress from study and no worries about friends. LG. Life is good, until I am medicated. I zombify. I become sleepy. I sleep so many hours each day, and the side effects — we all know about those.

I am released. I reach out and embrace people. I continue my studies part time. You can do anything you want in life, I am told. I'm a student, a survivor too. A student of life and that's what matters after all.

Poetry

Chewing the fat

Barbara Fitzpatrick-Haddy

We chat across the fence
strange days, storms
fallen trees, high pollen count
this curious short term
neighbour hanging by the
pool
dreams of cocktails, summer holidays
escaping her little darlings

Coat wet as usual
mottled brown with patches of
mauve striking layers of thick
eyeliner highlight dark focussed
eyes
her long elegant neck
shortens head bobbing with
every word chest puffed
with indignation —

willingness to coo in
agreement as if to say *oh I*
know

Feet balancing
precariously always on
the fence this one
opinions, reflections
ordinary to sublime
behind her partner
flaps sees but ducks
for cover in one
swoop —

not getting into this
conversation ladies
leaving it to us to
ponder life's
mysteries matters of

the heart
whether good luck exists or intuition is the
domain of women

She
takes
her
leave
gone in
second
s
leaving me in
mid sentence
fence marked
by her
presence old
neighbours see
me lonesome
mouth moving,
arms flapping

Eager to coo in agreement
*oh I know — neighbourhood has gone to the
birds.*

Poetry

Don't wig out — earwigs in my daisies

Barbara Fitzpatrick-Haddy

Antennae up seeking bright
lights nocturnal scavengers
scurry from rotting dark
domains
along paths well worn
for their digestive pleasure

Whoops — another daisy

Stealing the essence of Nymph
Belides as she hid morphed into
blossoms of laughter and joy
seeking refuge from lustful advances of
Vertumnus

amorous God of seasons,
gardens and change
angered pinchers raised as
they rip her limb by limb
piercing her
abdomen
devouring her core

Whoops — a daisy

Thundering Celtic Pagan Gods roar
from the heavens
while the
energy of sun
and stars
is devoured in one sitting

Becoming bold
not caring if it is day or night
eyes open or shut
they gorge destroying
symbols of fertility,
sensuality
as Freya Goddess of love foretold

Having their fill, deep sleepers
they seek towards big ears they
crawl
burrow deep within fertile
thoughts laying eggs of
mischief —

a metamorphosis of blind ugly
nymphs disturbed foul odour
ravagers of
muses' joy
creators of
madness
their songs of
woe fall upon
deaf ears.

Poetry

On the beat

Barbara Fitzpatrick-Haddy

Same footpaths, trees and fences
same shoes sky
the path knows my feet

Different talks same
talks same words
different words new
ideas old ideas

Mask on mask off —

Sit and have a coffee
mask on coffee breath
where's the breath of fresh air

Round the blocks
looping round and
round
down to the creeks and
rivers surface sparkling in
the sun while depths murky
eroded

Floating bottles drowned masks

Dogs in the river
one sole seal down stream
getting his fill of eels
showing off to inner city

flow
you can breathe it all in just don't drink it in

dwellers Mask on mask off —

One lady swims goggles on
getting strange looks
she doesn't care
she knows what the dogs
know the rivers free no
restrictions just go with the

with her partner, two kids and three fur babies; and enjoys gardening and connecting with nature.

Barbara Fitzpatrick-Haddy's love of writing was rekindled recently in a poetry course, and, by serendipity, she found the creative writing course at Span. She is grateful to have joined such a supportive writing group and excited about bringing to life her story based partly on family history, and interwoven with Irish folklore, myths and legends. When not writing or reading, Barbara teaches yoga; wrangles a lively household



Artwork by Dominique

D. Reid

Memoir

A view of my garden

Glenda Fleming

Looking out into my backyard on this rainy day. What do I see?

Well, it's a small space. At the back is a wooden fence covered with some sort of vine. Eventually, I will trim them. For the moment, I'm leaving them alone as a pair of doves have nested there.

On the ground, fresh shoots rise towards the sun. Until they bloom, I won't know what they are, because the area was cleared before I moved in. There is the stump of some sort of tree. I think it was cut so the pergola could be built.

Against the left-hand side of the fence is a small shed. I've not been out there to look at it carefully — it's been too cold. Next to the shed is a small fold-up clothesline, which will be good in summer to dry my washing.

The pergola is in the middle of a brick floor, suitable for a chair in warmer days. Two big succulents sit in pots sit on either side of the pergola. They were left by the previous tenants.

The birds are enjoying searching the earth for bugs. Some have found worms to eat.

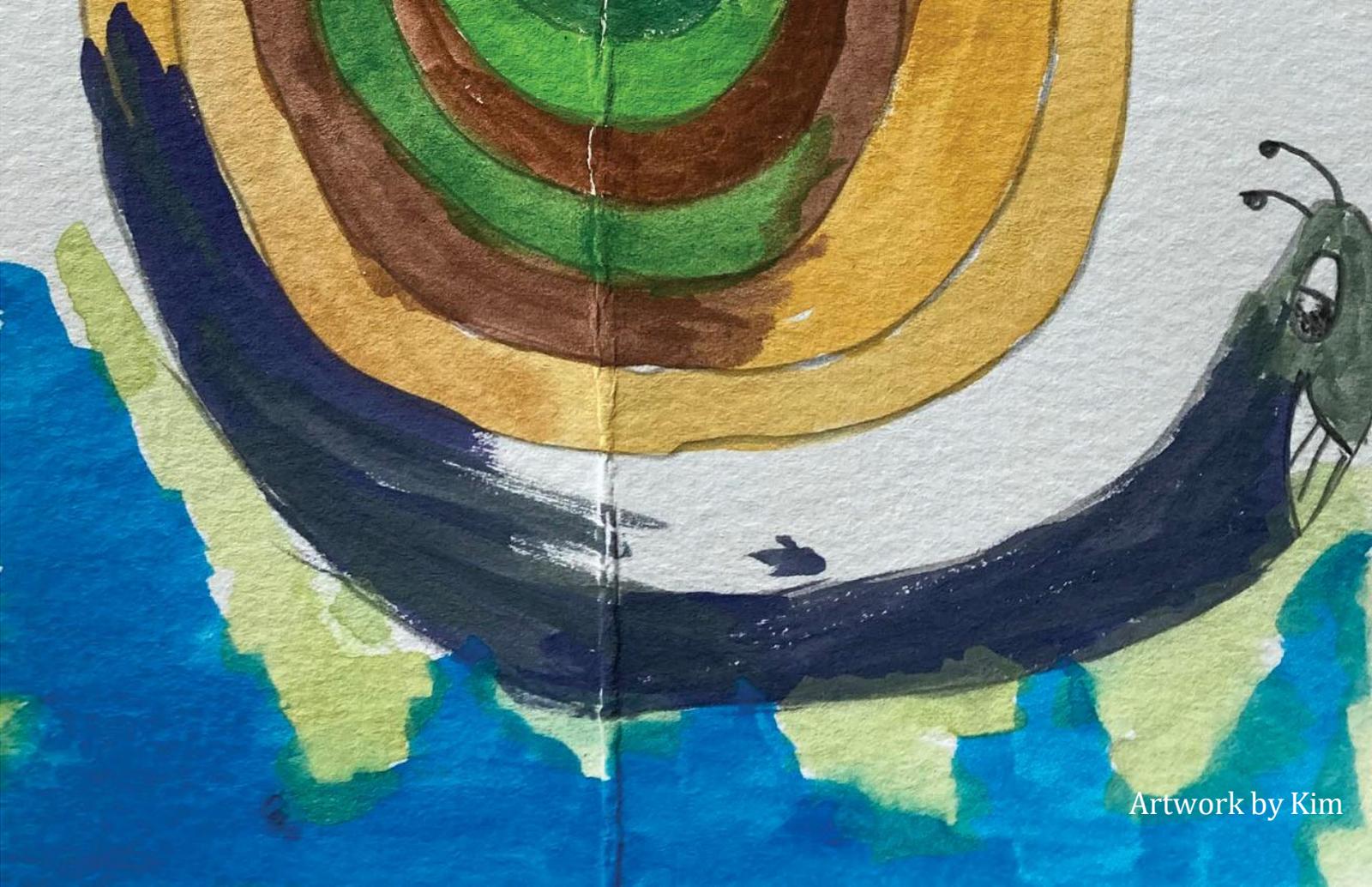
Looking out last Saturday, I saw I had a visitor. It had a blue tongue. I'm glad it had four legs too! I believe it is a shingle-back lizard — a very welcome visitor who will enjoy the days when they become warmer.

Oh, I hope the days become warmer soon. At present, I am freezing.

Glenda Fleming is enjoying retirement and coming to the Thornbury Writers' Workshop for fellowship of like-minded people intent on developing their writing, and the excitement of seeing her work in print.



Fun
Launch



Artwork by Kim

Queens Road

Josh Hollingworth

A five-storey complex run by Sacred Heart, which houses one hundred people, give or take. Each resident owns an access card, which grants access to their apartment and relevant elevator floor. Sacred Heart staff have their own office on the ground floor. The apartment of residence is to the left when you step out of the elevator on the fifth floor. Inside the apartment there is a hallway only a couple of metres long. A door on the right of the hallway leads to the bathroom. Inside the bathroom there is a shower in the far-left corner, with glass fitting and a door. A towel hangs over the glass on the gap between the shower wall and roof. Along the right wall is a shelf with a basin and taps in the middle, above which hangs a mirror about a square metre in size. In between the shower and shelf is the toilet. After leaving the bathroom, at the end of the hallway, you will find a kitchen, with cupboards and elements on the right. Then the living space beyond.

The bed is placed in the far-right corner, toes pointing to the hallway. A bedside cabinet sits next to the bed against the wall. On top of the cabinet is a small ceramic Western-style dragon, covered in black hair ties. Next to it stands a painted yellow Chinese-type dragon with a Thor action figure, holding a small metallic sword, sitting on its back. Beside the cabinet is a single-seated stuffed leather armchair, which appears to be the 'throne' of the room. Along the left wall is a large chest of drawers full of clothes. The TV and a video game system sit on top. On the near side to the kitchen is a desk set up for the computer. In the far-left corner is an electric guitar and amplifier. Next to the sofa is an open window with a chain mechanism, and an ashtray on the ledge. A five-storey drop awaits outside the window, along with a view of the carpark and part of the Albert Park Lake.

Josh Hollingworth is a thirty-eight-year-old male who has written a novel, which is currently being workshopped in Tania Chandler's Creative Writing class. He hopes to one day have it completed, both edited and illustrated. When not writing, Josh enjoys heavy metal music,

collectable trading cards, martial arts and
the Richmond Tigers football club.



Artwork by Con

Fiction

Saying goodbye to Evie

Chris Keogh

We were surprised it was at the Catholic church — who would have thought she'd bother? You could not have known a more dissolute rager than Evie, but here we are. Everyone mills outside, the ragged bunch of smokers gathering around the corner, on the cobblestoned path. The sun tries to find its way through the dark cloud and old friends emerge amidst the crush of strangers. I say 'friends', but I would never have known them except for Evie, she was the glue. I could still pick the younger versions behind middle-aged paunches, balding heads and sensible jackets. Back then, sundrenched kitchens with dishes piled in sinks, grimy stoves with pots of vegetarian slush that passed for student food, notes in fridges and lists on doors. How did we survive the shit cooking, never mind the long card games extending into lost weekends with the help of matchbox kif and cheap wine. Today I will see where we have all ended up. Much older, not much wiser.

Her son, Kieran, stands on the top step of the stone entrance, ushering us inside. His hair the same golden blonde, a perpetual grin with big teeth — a vision of Evie. He has inherited her sunny expressions, the easy way of gathering everyone in, Evie's great skill. Her house was where it all happened.

We shuffle in like reluctant schoolkids to the high ceilings of the musty inner suburban parish. Glory days of wealth and worship long gone, now mixed with badly drawn socially aware messaging from the junior school group. Vague memories of the eternal masses on Sunday, bored out of our brains, looking at the dust spiralling in the air, counting our rosary beads, examining the coat fabric on the lady in front. Anything but listen to the fat priest who loved the sound of his own voice, which got louder for latecomers until they had settled into their seats. Every week we missed out on the safe back rows, and had to slink our way to the front. Big Catholic families had too many kids to wrangle *and* be on time.

There are the usual prayers, the formal part of a mass. Evie, did you really want us to sit through all the palaver? God, if I didn't need a drink before, I will after this. A work colleague, with long-winded recounting of achievements that most of us don't know about, is mercifully cut short when he drops his notes, changing his mind as they flutter to the floor. Muffled laughs from her mates who whispered that she was here to save us again. Blah blah from the priest who obviously didn't know Evie from the homily. People are straining in their seats, coughing, shifting. Any performer worth their salt would take the hint. Time to move on. One of our old crowd, John, makes his way to the front with his guitar. His huge- knuckled hands gently slide along the frets, long grizzled hair hanging. Kieran stands beside him. They nod.

The guitar starts, sweet and simple. We are all poised on the end of the sound, our attention and devotion to the line between them and us.

'Of all the money that e'er I had, I spent it in good company ...'

Time stops. The sun hits one of the stained-glass windows — this is what the church was designed for, to glorify the poor sinners with those royal colours beaming down, soaring acoustics in the century-old stone. Kieran's hair catches the light, his voice fills the air with the song's regret and love. All the memories, yearning and youthful dreams converge here in this moment. A tear falls onto my lap, I am surprised. Next to me, Daniel — did we really almost get together once? He puts his hand on top of mine. I let it linger.

Oh Evie, are you still getting people together after all this time? There is always an upside to days like this. Ah, there is that sun finding its way through the clouds.



Artwork by Priya

Chris Keogh is an actor, improviser and a producer. She loves stories — hearing them, telling them and writing them. She has enormous fun in Tania’s class, and *Saying goodbye to Evie* is a story written for a class exercise.

Grieve alone

Helena Kidd

My teeth are clenched until I blow puffs of air out with force, like a nervous singer on a reality show, trying to relax. It doesn't work. Tears sit ready to fall, I hold them back a few more seconds. Why do we do that? Hold back natural emotions? We should embrace grieving. My mother has died; she's worth all the tears I have.

Tears now fall, safe in the cemetery, a light breeze tossing my hair. I walk past graves with mounds of earth covering fresh graves, withering flowers atop, more marble headstones have been erected. This new section of the cemetery where your coffin rests in is filling up fast. Avenues are named after Australian trees: Silver-leaf, Red-gum, not sure if there is a Ghost-gum Avenue. I take in the surrounds, and my grief eases, until the noise of the freeway brings me back to this big cemetery resembling a housing estate with small plots of land just for one person, or maybe two.

I sit on the ground at the edge of a concrete rim by your unfinished grave, cradling my knees to my chest. My sister's been here, white roses from her garden sit in a plastic canister. Above is a temporary white cross and gold plaque with your name: Maria Avraam 30-6-1923 to 16-11-2021.

I whisper to the clumps of dry earth near my shoes, 'You left us knowing we were fine, our lives in order. We were blessed you stayed so long and just got old, but it still hurts. I love you and miss you every day. The Greek coffees we shared, they don't taste sweet anymore drinking them alone. You won't be revealing secrets to me as I clasp your frail hands. But you wrote them down in a diary long ago to rid them from your soul.'



My grieving started when I noticed the difference in your body; it slowed down, things you used to do became impossible. Your arthritis was so advanced, I'd put your coffee in containers with lids that were easy to open. The honey in squeeze bottles, plates at bench height. I'd prepare meals and place them in ramekins for you to microwave. You could make your own toast with honey every morning; it took longer than before, painful to watch but it was important I didn't help. Every few days I'd wash the honey bottle and the sticky section in the pantry and pick up broken glass from the kitchen floor. We stopped talking about your chronic back pain, your pinched face revealing what is not said. Would I have been as brave? Many times I cried while hugging my adult son, when I didn't know what else to do.

Your heart's faint beat was keeping you warm, you

waited until I arrived. I stayed for your final breath. I hesitated parting the curtains of your cubicle and walked out. But I returned to look at your face one last time.

Not headlice again!

Helena Kidd

Calandra hops into the car and throws her school bag on the back seat. Leon is in his first year of high school and will be making his way home on the Whitefriars school bus.

‘Do I have to go to the dentist?’ says Calandra, before I can ask how her day was.

She mostly answers the same: boring, unless she has had art, sport or drama. As I pull away from the school the rain pelts down. I flick the wipers on and before I can tell her we’re not cancelling, she says excitedly, ‘I got into the school production. I got a speaking part, the lead role. I’m playing a boy. I know exactly what I’m going to wear.’

‘You always get the speaking parts, but that’s fantastic getting the lead.’

At the traffic lights, I turn the wipers on high when more rain hits the windscreen. When I look over at Calandra, she’s reading her book, her hair all over her face, ponytail ripped out. Her hair seems to be moving, and I reach over and pull at her it.

She looks up from her book. ‘What are you doing, Mum?’ I scrape a plump head louse from a hair strand.

‘Ouch! The lights are green, Mum.’

As I accelerate, I squeeze the louse between my fingers. ‘Show me, Mum, show me.’

With one hand on the wheel, I uncurl my fingers to reveal a huge louse, flattened but still moving. I squish it again, find a tissue in the console and wrap it up tight. ‘Put your hair back in a ponytail,’ I scream.

‘Are we still going to the dentist?’

‘Yes. Do you know how hard it is to get an appointment after school? Then after your teeth I’ll pop into the chemist and get some KP24. You can stay in the car.’

At home, I rush her to the bathroom; she gets a clean bathmat to kneel on and a hand towel for her face. The routine’s the same: I put my shower cap on and tuck all my hair in before I wet her hair with the hose, the one I use for my hairdressing clients. Then I apply the KP24 with gloved hands, rubbing it vigorously deep into the roots. The chemical scent hits my nostrils; I never think to wear a mask. Calandra never complains I’m too rough. The suds subside and I place a disposable shower cap on her head and a fresh towel around her shoulders to catch any drips.

‘Go sit still for 40 minutes,’ I say. ‘But the packet says 30 minutes.’

‘It doesn’t matter what the packet says, I’m the hairdresser.’ ‘I’ll do my homework then,’ she says.

I hear the laundry door open, then a few minutes later Leon makes an appearance,

'Phew, the house stinks. Not head lice again!'

I kneel on the bathmat and start rubbing the KP24 into my own hair knowing I probably don't have head lice but can't risk it. My clients wouldn't be happy if I passed the buggers to them.

'Mum, it's 40 minutes.'

'OK, come and sit on the edge of the bath.' I place paper towels on the toilet seat to wipe the lice onto. I rinse her hair for ages, while black specks float away down the plug hole. I plonk conditioner into her hair and then, with a fine comb, I start at the nape of her neck, combing small sections. More lice come off the hair shafts, and I check if they're dead.

'Let me see,' says Calandra.

I wipe three dead lice bathed in conditioner onto the paper towel. 'Wow they're monsters, bigger than last time,' says Calandra.

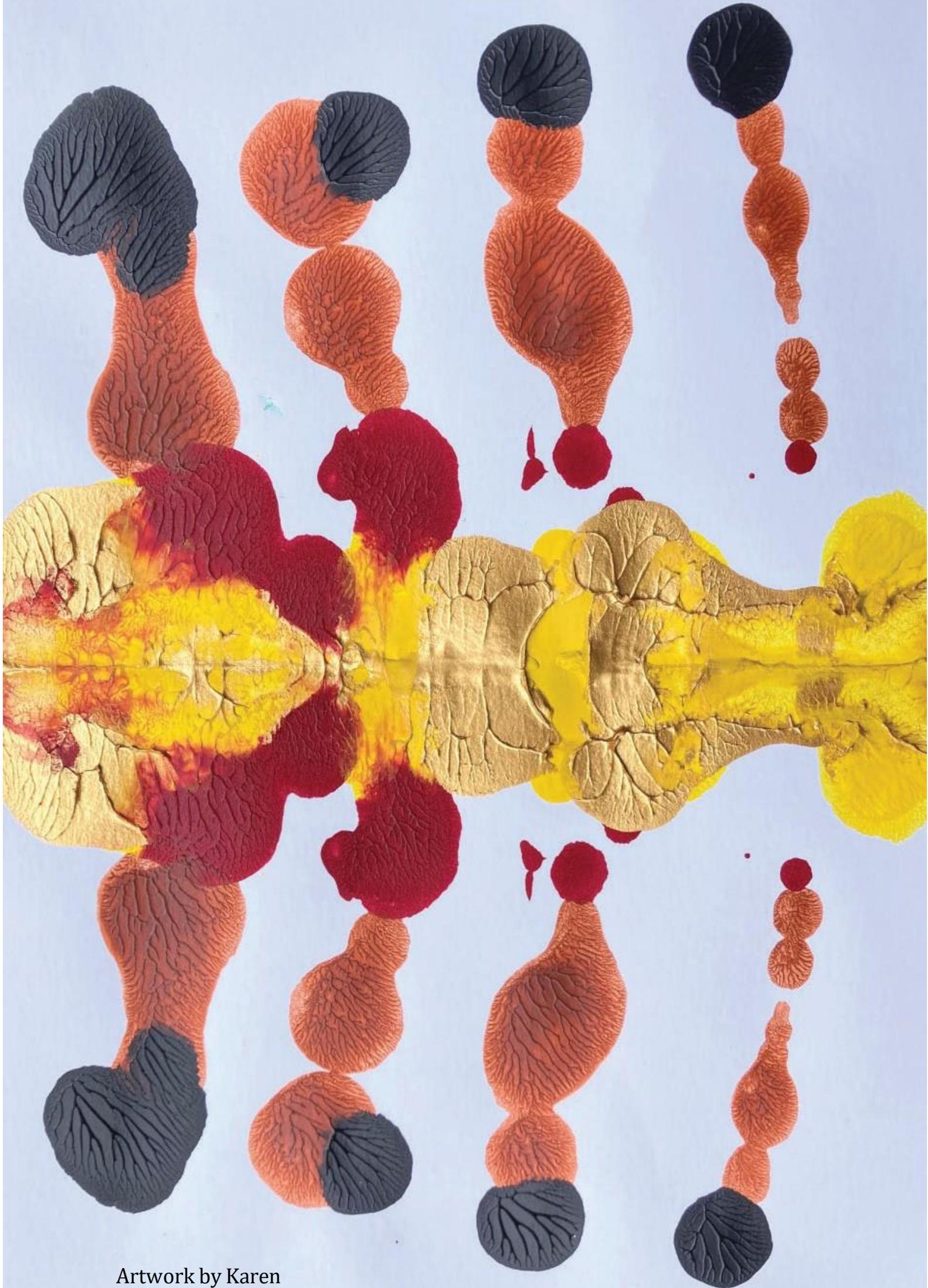
'Didn't you feel itchy?' says Leon when he pops his head into the bathroom again.

'I did, but I thought it was the new shampoo,' says Calandra.

Helena Kidd's memoir, *When the Past Awakens* — co-authored with her mother Maria Avraam — was shortlisted for the 2020 Victorian Community History Awards in the category of 'Community Diversity'. In 2022, Helena produced a short story picture book, *Dreams that Come True*. Span's writing course offers Helena a safe and positive place to explore the English language and the art of writing beautiful sentences, and to continue her storytelling journey with her own memoir.

When the Past Awakens is available for

purchase from the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, and *Dreams that Come True* from ArtSpace, Wonthaggi; and Turn the Page Bookshop, Cowes.



Artwork by Karen

Poetry

Random poem

Renee Nicol

When I was young I got upset and tore my dreams to shreds
As I grew older, I lost my dreams and became trapped in my
own head Even older now than I was then, I think I'm finding
my way

In slow motions, one step at a time, taking it day by day.

I'm in awe of the books on my shelves

For how much it must have taken their authors to dedicate
themselves In slow motions, one step at a time, to take it day
by day.

Renee Nicol joined the Thornbury Writers' Workshop this year, and she is working hard on an intriguing fantasy novel with a twist. Renee also writes short stories and poetry.

Artwork by Michael





Artwork by Socs

The deer

Lucy Osborne

The car was still driveable. The engine turned over the first time, even though Rachel's leg was shaking on the accelerator, jerking like in those dead frog experiments where they run a current through its muscles. 'Are you OK?' she asked her teen daughter, Jess, whose phone was still glowing in her hand where seconds earlier she had been selecting her favourite Taylor Swift songs for them to listen too. The only sound now was the gentle roar of the heater, pumping air onto the windscreen, and the wipers pushing the light rain across the glass.

'Yes.' Her voice sounded too loud and clear.

Their faces glowed in the light of the dash. When had it got so dark? They were in a gully, surrounded by hills of farmland. The horizon was blocked by the impending night and misshapen gum trees lining the side of the road. Through the branches Rachel could just make out a dark-rose tinge to the overcast sky. She pulled the car off the road.

'What was that?' Jess said.

'A deer.' Rachel closed her eyes. 'A deer.'

Its last moments replayed in her mind, like a David Lynch movie. High definition, wide screen. It had come across the road from the right. Tall and majestic. Bright against the darkening road. Rachel remembered braking hard, making the choice not to veer right into possible oncoming traffic, or left into the trees. The deer was going to make it across — they hadn't hit it. Then it turned, so it was galloping directly in front of them, perhaps having the same thought — the road is safer than the trees.

It meant they hadn't seen its face on impact. It was like one of those computer games where you mow something down from behind. The soft white fur underneath its tail showed as it ran, like a rabbit's. Rachel thought it got one gallop in before the front bumper collected its back legs, and then it bounced up onto the bonnet, the windscreen, the roof. Bang, bang, bang.

Her daughter asked the question Rachel didn't want to think about, 'What do we do now?'

She had the familiar dread that single parenting had never managed to abate — of every decision being hers, the weight of a decade of never having another adult to turn to. What would she have done if she was alone, could she have just driven on, as if nothing had happened?

'You wait here,' her voice was too sing-song in her attempt to sound normal, 'and I'll go check how they are.'

'Will they still be there?'

She had an urge to laugh. Of course, they'd still be there. They'd killed her! Hadn't this child learnt anything from this crappy world?

'I think ...' She breathed in, trying to steady herself. Should she lie? No, her daughter was fourteen, not seven. Facts, she reminded herself, just tell her simple, not too graphic, facts. 'I think they will probably be dead, but I need to check, and to make sure they're off the road — so no one else has an accident.'

Maybe she shouldn't have said that last part out loud. She was starting to watch herself from the outside, like she was performing in a play. This is how a good parent acts, like it's a

documentary for her daughter to replay in the future. This is what you do when you have an accident: you don't drive off, you're responsible, you make sure everyone is safe. Later she would continue this charade and inspect the car for damage.

The torch on her phone made a surprisingly big circle of light on the unlit country road. The deer was further away than she'd thought, a grey lump in the middle of the road. Even from a distance Rachel could see it was still alive. It was swinging its antlers to and fro — trying to get traction to get up, but it wasn't working. Its legs must be broken. Perhaps they could back the car up to put the deer in the back seat. She and her daughter could bandage its broken leg at the holiday house they'd rented. She shook the thought away — this wasn't a Disney movie.

She forced herself to keep walking until she was within a few feet of it. Its eyes were big and dark, with lots of small white circles of light reflected in them — like those cutesy manga eyes her daughter drew. The deer looked smaller and there was a row of spots, lighter than the rest of its fur, in a line down its spine making it look even more incongruous in the wet Australian countryside. Where had its deer people come from originally? Afghanistan? Turkey? Austria? Those people would know what to do — strong mountain people who knew their land and animals. They would know how to slit its throat, carve its dark red meat into chunks to carry home. What was a useless white woman supposed to do?

She needed to get it off the road, like she had said to her daughter, so it didn't get hit again, so no one would die. There was no blood; maybe if she dragged it to the side, one of those wildlife people could come and take it and x-ray and plaster it up and make an uplifting YouTube clip about its release back into the wild after it had lived with them for a year.

As she leant in, it grunted and thrashed its head in bigger and bigger circles. She had to put her phone in her pocket, so she could use both hands. She could barely make out its antlers now without her phone's light. She tried to grab it, managed to brush its wet fur before the antlers hit her arm. She stood back, the rain starting to fall in solid straight lines. Her hair would frizz up now in the car's heating and they would probably struggle to find the house in the dark.

She took a big breath in, and came at the deer from behind, forcing its antlers down low before it realised what was happening. She bent her legs, leant back and pulled hard. It started to shift immediately. Her body thrummed with the achievement. It was heavy, but she could do this. She didn't stop, the bitumen road gave resistance, she could feel the roughness as she pulled, and hoped that it wasn't scraping too hard, that she wasn't dislodging vertebrae in its neck. The wet grass on the verge slanted down and it was easier here to pull the deer across. She stopped when a branch on the side of the road scraped her back. She'd done it. She pulled her phone from her pocket and shined its torchlight on the deer. Its eyes were open, but it was still. Maybe in shock? She needed to get back to the car. How long had she been gone? She couldn't make sense of what her phone-torch illuminated. A puddle of blood spreading bigger in the rain, and then what looked like a trail of intestines and other organs leading to the heap at her feet. She looked again at the deer.

Its whole abdomen was open now, like a botched surgery. How had there been no blood before? Dead. It was so dead, not shock. Rachel turned the torch away. She skirted around the body, the blood, as she ran back to the car, to her daughter.

Lucy Osborne joined the Span Creative Writing class in the hope that the peer pressure of a weekly class would change her procrastinating ways and she would complete the middle grade fiction she began seven years ago. Instead, she has written all

manner of things, and looks forward to Tuesday mornings when she can discuss metaphor and voice, listen to the exquisite writing of her classmates and, most importantly, debate the difference between a hyphen and a dash.



Artwork by Colleen

Grief

Veronica Power

Grief

is as impenetrable as a rock, yet as porous as a
sponge is the silence of a grand final football
match

is forgetting how to breathe, eat, drink,
cry is closure keeping doors and
windows open is hiding like Santa Claus
on Christmas Eve

is as painless as a sword in the
heart is the ebbing and flowing
of the tide is love intertwined

with hatred

is a nexus from here to

there is universal

Grief is an abyss

Veronica Power was born in South Africa in 1939. She has lived in Central and East Africa through interesting changes and political times. She migrated to Australia in 1969 and has written a memoir of her experiences.

Fiction

Sammy and the Bengal tiger

Sue Robertson

I heard about the escape of the tiger on 3RRR only half an hour ago. And now here it was — an eighteen-foot-long Bengal Tiger complete with thick white whiskers — standing in front of me.

I first heard the tiger as it strolled past my old linen press in the hallway. I was reading, or rather re-reading, one of my favourite novels, when she walked into the sitting room and came up to me. I did everything I could to not cry out in fright.

The 3RRR newsreader had said that the tiger was an escapee from Bulleen's circus in Flemington Road, where they were holding nightly circus performances, right next door to the children's hospital. What I wanted to know was why the tiger had chosen to walk several blocks to my street, down my narrow garden path, through my front door, and why I had left that same door open this morning — and why the tiger was in my living room gazing at me now.

I had been hoping for a quiet morning after a late-night at the MTC. My plan was to have an easy morning in preparation for an outstanding performance tonight. I had only a small part in the play, but I was aiming high. Still in my sky-blue dressing gown, I was lounging on my carefully stacked pillows. The novel I was re-reading was *Animal Farm*, one of my favourites since high school. The irony bypassed me.

I noticed the tiger looked at me most lovingly, which sent a quiver through my body. Then she crouched down on her large hind haunches and, with breathtaking ease, jumped up on my soft cushiony couch, circled a few times, and sat down on the middle of my chest. She was facing me, swishing her long tail from side to side. From being shocked, I kind of went the other way. Despite thinking this was not a good time for talking, I heard my dislocated voice — it sounded like it was coming from the moon — saying, 'Excuse me, I was reading that book!' as I watched *Animal Farm* being masticated between giant white teeth. Then the tiger stood up on my chest. She looked very tall and magnificent as she began clawing me with her long sharp claws. Normally I wouldn't tolerate anyone ruining my favourite gown, but I didn't give two hoots because I was feeling the opposite of hate for this tiger. She circled around and lay down on me again. I could barely breathe with the huge weight of her tiger body, but I didn't care. Her gorgeous eyes had drawn me into that special place where nothing else exists

but the two of us. Then she spoke. Her voice was long lost, yet so familiar and precious to me that it made my soul ache. 'Hi there, Sammy,' she said, 'I'm back.'

Poetry

The brief reign of red

Sue Robertson

It is almost too much this
vivid red seeping into how
you expect the morning
should be.

The image you hold in your
mind is blemished now by
what
you see in the growing
stain on the right side of
the valley.

Yet blessed be now to repaint the
scene a bold brush to wipe a thick
track
of crimson across the dominance of green.

Scarlet splashed to lift an anaemic
sky, and there, bled into a
composition taking on an altogether
different scene —
the brief reign of red.

To speak of the inland

To perceive a voice that few
hear whispering in the dry
heat.

Not the sound of the wind
folding around fleshy ears,
but the brush of air
scampering over smooth rock,
or combing through clumps of
stunted scrub.

Here everything moves
quietly, as if in reverence
to a history
worn down to a prostrated hush,
where now, a solitary shadow
glides noiselessly over stony
ground
in search of scarce prey.

Sue Robertson has loved writing stories and words since childhood. She really enjoys the creative writing classes at Span.

Memoir

Hearing and seeing

Margot Sharman

For a writing exercise, Tania asked us to write about sound. 4 October 2022

A meditation practice that can quieten our mind is to listen for sounds. Beginning this practice, sitting on the couch, I am alert. My eyes settle on the narrow lap-and-sash window. The glass has soft ripples; we thought it had sagged, old and weary. We were told that the glass for the window was handmade in the 1890s when this house was built. I like to think of the touch of hands on it, creating. It is broken now, unable to stay up. The thick rope that once held the window in place for fresh air to blow through the small rooms, on the hot days of summer, now lies frayed, the end looking like a fancy tassel. *It reminds me of the colourful handmade tassels I saw in Florence.*

Beyond, I see the new leaves bursting on the Japanese maple on my narrow front veranda, bright green, each leaf pointed like a star. *Ready for many wishes to be made.*

Beyond the strong cast-iron fence, keeping the world out, I see the thick, grey-brown of the trunks of the elm trees in the park. They are bare, nature not yet giving them their new season. *This helps me be still, calm, all things are not yet ready.* As I watch, two little colourful lorikeets, babies, emerge from their nest, convenient in a hole where a branch has been lopped. Nearby is a spindly branch that is facing to the northern light. As I watch, the birds look left and right — *just like we do before stepping out onto the road.* Little wings flutter and stretch. In a moment they try, and succeed, for the branch that dips as they land. *I am joyful, a safe landing achieved. I bet their parents are too.*

Beyond the park and across the road is a grey cobblestone laneway, now ground smooth by the council, most of its charm removed along with the rough surface. *It's what they want to do to all of us.*

It was only a week ago I could see the back of the two-storey house at the end of that laneway, with its outdoor, rusty, metal spiral staircase that leads to the door of the first floor. Now the tree in their backyard is covered with leaves, the house hidden until seasons pass.

There is no noise, the world is quiet, I can be calm in silence.

Poetry

Three haikus

Margot Sharman

Writing exercise, 25 October 2022

Choose one of the following as a writing prompt:

- *The thing that ruined my chance was...*
- *The thing is, I am suspicious that...*
- *I can't believe that...*

I couldn't decide so I used them all to write haikus.

The thing that ruined my

chance was that I
didn't try so how

\$

could I win

The thing is I am

suspicious of
Tattslotto and how

\$

many people win

I can't believe that

I hope to win
Tattslotto When
others do too

\$

The thing is, I am

stuck within this
writing piece and need
to finish

Margot Sharman is hard at work writing a story that is going well. She is also an artist and photographer. Her paintings have been included in several exhibitions and she self-published her photography book 'Eclectic Carlton', which was launched at Readings in Carlton in 2022. Margot has just been

awarded a City of Melbourne grant, which will help bring her new exhibition titled *We Were Resilient* to life.

Find out more about Margot here:

www.margotsharmanartist.com

Non-fiction

Tennis blog post

Nick Stott

This article looks at the way the tennis world operates and what could be changed to make it better. It is aimed at people who know the basics about tennis. I will discuss three areas, starting with grand slams.

Grand slams

I think that having four grand slams is inadequate. With the Australian Open, tennis fans get an appetiser of the world coming together for two weeks of entertainment, and then it disappears. There needs to be more for the fans.

I propose to have six grand slams and to televise some of the less important ones. My idea is that we retain the four current grand slams and leave the Australian Open as it is. The next one would be in late March or early April, with an earlier French Open. Wimbledon could follow in early June, and then maybe China's indoor carpet grand slam in August. That leaves two more. The first in late September could be another European or South American country on grass, and finally the US Open to finish in the middle of November. Given the scope of the US Open, I think it would be good to finish on that.

Before I move on I have a comment about the televising of the U.S Open. Previously it only showed the quarter finals and beyond. That was pathetic. However it has been fixed and the tournament can be watched in the

mornings in Australia. Every grand slam should be televised

because these are the best players in the world and it is very entertaining. If time issues are also a problem for the French Open and Wimbledon, Channel 9 Gem could combat the issue by replaying the coverage so Australians could watch it whenever they were awake. This would work as long as there weren't any spoilers. The viewers would need to turn off the news until they have watched the match. Finally I think that some of the lead-up tournaments could be televised also to remind the fans of what can be showcased.

Sexism in tennis

There is inherent sexism in grand slam tennis. Women play best of three sets but men get to play best of five. Where is the fairness in that? It sends a message that women are incapable of lasting five sets, which is nonsense. Women don't play against men, so it is the same for both. There is only one issue with the best of five: the time it would take. However, this challenge is not insurmountable. In the second week there are very few singles and a lot of doubles games. I am not a big doubles fan; I find it boring. The point is that you could catch up later on. It's possible to

have rounds one and two and so on over more than one day, then in the second week have the leftover matches from the last two days. The other option is to install some lights and schedule more matches at night. Also channel 9 could have more channels so more matches could be viewed.

Five sets, tie breaks and the domination of the champions

I think if a game goes to five sets, it should be first to eight points and then if it's a tie break it's first to fourteen with a two-point lead. Previously, without a tie break, matches have gone on forever. One match was decided 70 – 68, and that is too long. With this alternative way, the winner of the tie break thoroughly deserves it because 14 points is still quite long. One extra fact to consider is that players like Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Serena Williams win all the time. They have earned that right, but I wonder what could be done to give other seeds a chance without making it too difficult for the champions. There might not be an answer but I'm simply exploring the idea of an equalizer. Maybe if a champion has won a competition twice in a row, the third time there could be a handicap, but if they don't win, the next time the handicap wouldn't apply.

Nick Stott is a very committed writer, who writes both fiction and non-fiction. His is working on a novel called *Heart of Burgundy*,

which is the first in a series of epic novels with important themes.

👉 *Time stops. The sun hits one of the stained-glass windows —this is what the church was designed for, to glorify the poor sinners with those royal colours beaming down, soaring acoustics in the century-old stone. Kieran's hair catches the light, his voice fills the air with the song's regret and love. All the memories, yearning and youthful dreams converge here in this moment.*

—Chris Keogh, *Saying Goodbye to Evie* 👉

Span Community House Anthology 2022 celebrates the work of the Creative Writing class and Thornbury Writers' Workshop, and includes artwork from the Art for All Abilities groups. Our writers and artists come from diverse backgrounds and meet weekly to develop their skills and share their work.

This year's anthology includes fiction, memoir, non-fiction and poetry — inspired by home, and places and people near and dear to us.

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