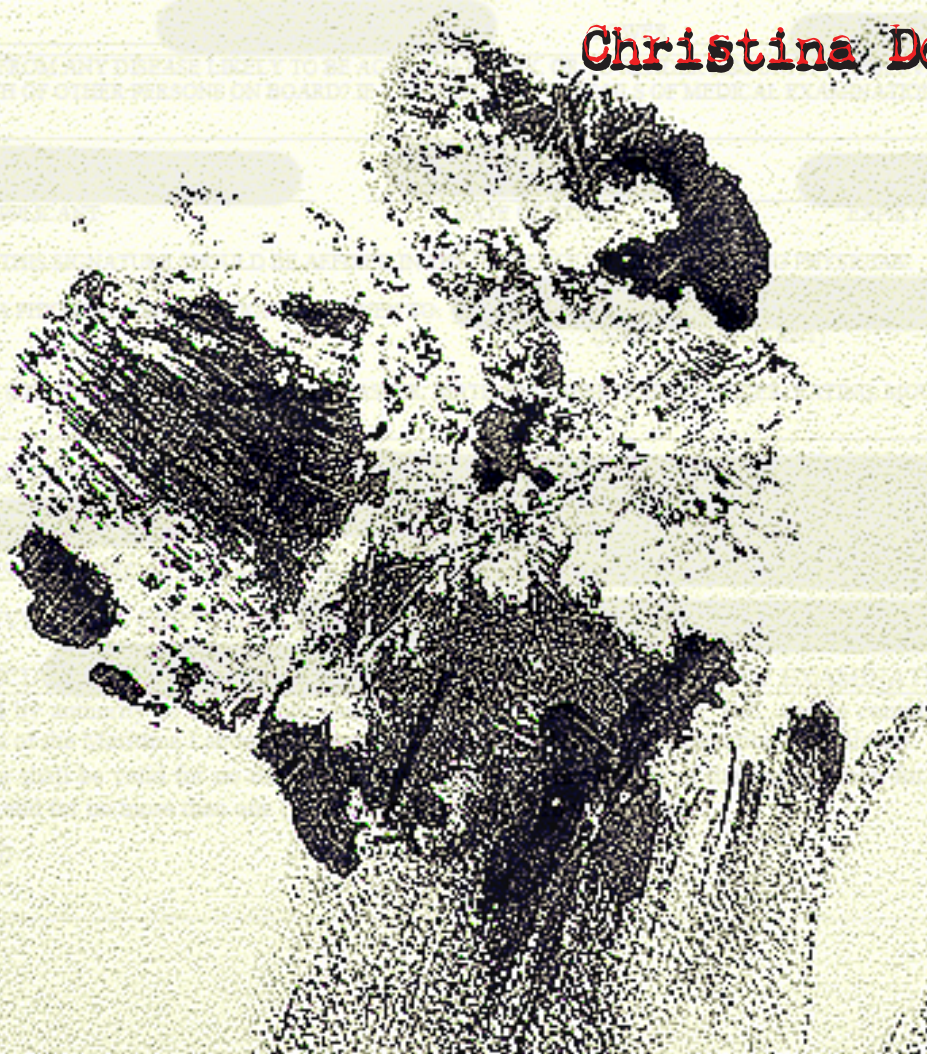


Patient Zero.

Edited by
Christina Donoghue



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The Writing Zone / Writing and Society Research Centre

The authors, editors and publishers of this book acknowledge the Darug People of the Darug Nation and their Ancestors who are the Traditional Owners of the Country where much of Western Sydney University resides, and on whose unceded lands this book was made. We acknowledge and offer our respects to past, present and emerging Elders of the Darug Nation.

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An earlier version of Geneva Valek's story 'The Rat' was published in *ZineWest* (16 October 2021) and placed third in the *ZineWest* 2021 Awards. <https://nwg-inc.com/word/?p=5792>

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Patient Zero

Editor's Note

Do you ever get the feeling you are living in one large, overdeveloped petri dish? Where you are the subject who is either encouraged to grow, or who is intermittently starved of nutrients, and yet still your spirit writhes outside of your chest and your determination to thrive trumps all else. This speaks to the development of *Patient Zero*. Its young writers have nurtured their own and each other's creative impetus, facing complex challenges in any way possible: on Zoom, via WiFi, on Discord (an online chat that has taken on a life of its own), and over phone calls that have connected this disparate community of writers, deep into many *insomniatic* nights.

Looking back, writing from this time will no doubt be categorised as the beginning or 'patient zero' for an era, examined under literary microscopes for the cracks of trauma, analysed for the rapid changes and observable compensations that we made to cope with our *unprecedented* circumstance. Scrutinised for trickle-down effects on the art of COVID generations, whose imagined identities were remade in crucibles of fear, mistrust, and societal insecurity. Maya Angelou said, *you don't know what your legacy will be*. But the following pages embody a youthful grappling with, and re-imagining of, *what is* and *what is possible* through shapeshifting forms that will not rest.

Patient Zero is the third book by The Writing Zone, a three-year program designed to support young writers from Sydney's Western Suburbs to tell their stories, polish their craft, and build creative community. Directed by the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney, The Writing Zone generates publication, editing, employment, and performance opportunities for writers under thirty. This chapbook is by the second group of Western Sydney writers to be selected for this program. All are at different stages of their writing, artistic and scholarly careers. Some have published work in the world, but for others, this is their first experience of a wider public audience.

The editing of this work was done entirely by email, phone and Zoom. There was no theme, and the title was awarded retrospectively. The writers were encouraged to submit some of their best work. As a result, *Patient Zero* gathers poetry, creative non-fiction, memoir, fiction, YA fiction, plays, essays and futurist fiction. Cohesion across the anthology relies upon curation, and upon the shared global environment in which these works were created and now exist.

Thank you to the writers who have contributed to The Writing Zone. It takes an infinite degree of courage to place your creative work in the hands of strangers, and even more so when you are developing as an early career artist. Your generosity and careful handling of each other's work exemplifies a compassion, curiosity and selflessness that promises fertile ground for lives well lived.

I celebrate and appreciate you all: Laneikka Denne, James W. Goh, Harvey Liu, Brianna McCarthy, Benjamin D. Muir, Anith Mukherjee, Lucia Tường Vy Nguyễn, Natasha Pontoh-Supit, Grace Roodenrys, Katrina Trinh, Geneva Valek and David Vrtaric. Thank you to The Writing Zone project team—Kate Fagan, Melinda Jewell and Catriona Menzies-Pike—for your mentorship, faith and most of all kindness and humour that has been restorative in ways that extend beyond the page. Thank you for continuing to invest in The Writing Zone in a way that can only be described as ‘all in’, meeting our passionate 2021 crew with all the energy and commitment you can manage, even through the mists of home-schooling and bad internet connections. This chapbook simply wouldn’t have come together (in time) without you. Thank you to Suzanne Gapps and Ivor Indyk. Thanks to the 2019 Western Sydney Arts Education Initiative of the Packer Family and Crown Resort Foundations; to the Writing and Society Research Centre; and to Western Sydney University.

My wry laughter and heartfelt gratitude go to writer Benjamin D. Muir for allowing us to steal inspiration for our anthology title from his piece ‘Final Stages’. *Patient Zero* seemed to encapsulate and springboard the unrest and sardonic extremes of this serious and silly time. There is something about vaccine wars and mind eating mushrooms that attends to the admitted hopelessness of the era, utilising the collateral of inappropriate Aussie humour to point to something that is yet unquantified, but is being shared through congregations of pixels and from 1.5 metres away.

Christina Donoghue

Program Officer, The Writing Zone, 2021

Picturesque

Anith Mukherjee

Lately, I've been dreaming of Nicky. Her conversation is lively, keeping the nights entertaining. This morning I recall an afternoon we spent together sharing tacos. They were flavourful, cheap. As I brushed taco shell crumbs off my lap, I realised I had nothing to say, though it was more the sudden idea that I never learned to speak. Socialising for me always meant maintaining boredom of one kind or another. When I told Nicky this, about my perpetual social boredom, she replied that 'boredom is peaceful.' I never thought about it like that. My understanding was that there was always something better to do. A 90s hits playlist was being streamed through the restaurant speakers and Nicky ordered a glass of Riesling. We sat together for the rest of our lunch, quiet, enjoying nothing. Sitting in my room, I drink a breakfast coffee and organise my day. I scroll through events I've been invited to. Being single again, I'm learning how to navigate the vagueness of my time.

In the evening I attend a live music and reading gig. I'm excited to be going to events alone, to be giving myself space for nourishment. I arrive early and use my digital Zip Pay card to buy a can of beer. Joining the audience, I sip my beer and look around. As the event starts late, I have the half paranoid thought that there is no live performance, but that the entire event is a façade, a way to gather people at a venue and let them sit around until we grow the courage to speak with each other. Eventually, though, the performances begin. I close my eyes and listen. Afterwards, walking to the bus back home, I pass a kebab and pizza joint. They are selling slices of butter chicken pizza. 'There's nothing I want more. I check my bank balance, let the disappointment fade, keep walking. At home I microwave chocolate cake in a mug, eat it for dinner.

The following morning I watch the man at the Centrelink office type on his computer. He tells me what I'll need to do to continue receiving payments. I consider all I've been through, to avoid working in one way or another. So many buildings, offices, people, forms. Drugs, cards, folders, appointments. I wonder if organising education, a love life and finances throughout my twenties will itself one day lead to a kind of complex trauma. This idea comes to me first sarcastically, later as a genuine concern. He closes his folder.

'So could you do that before our next appointment?' he asks.

'Sure.'

The case manager swivels away from his computer, stretches his neck. It's eleven in the morning, he's already having a long day,

'Thanks for the help,' I add.

Sitting on the train to film school, I think about socialising, finishing assessments, creating production ideas, finding time to eat lunch. The concentric circles of anxiety expand until the tension in my body reminds me to breathe and slow down. I listen to music and daydream for the rest of the commute. When I arrive, I sit in class next to a friend.

‘You seem tired,’ she comments.

‘I keep dreaming of previous relationships.’

Opening my laptop, the desktop is a mess. I highlight everything and transfer all the items into a folder labelled *Desktop*.

After classes I walk around, to decompress, looking at the evening sky. On my way back to campus, the security manager is playing a game on his phone.

‘How are you tonight?’ he asks as I walk by.

I shrug.

‘How are you?’

‘Are you asking?’ He puts down his phone.

I squat next to him, while we talk. He speaks openly about living in Lebanon and Sydney as we discuss belonging in different countries. Holding out his hand, he points to his fingertips.

‘A person needs three things,’ he says. ‘You are safe. You have your friends and family. You can build a life.’

Inside campus, I sit down and eat a burrito. My friend finds me and sits across the table.

We finish our assessments, not talking much. The security manager walks past, to buy a drink from the vending machine.

‘You want anything?’ he asks.

‘Bottle of water.’

He places a bottle of water on the table. I drink it.

The next day I skip classes to sit outside in the sun. Isha walks across the lawn, sitting beside me.

‘What class do you have today?’ she asks.

I shrug.

‘I’m thinking about whether to use tungsten or LED lighting for this shoot.’

‘Trust your eye.’

Watching the sunlight hitting the tree on the other side of the lawn, the green leaves and all around the blue of the sky, I notice it's been six months since I quit smoking. I take a celebratory breath. Isha scrolls through her phone.

'You never talk about yourself.'

'I don't want to go to the afternoon class,' I reply.

Throughout high school, I would walk from the train station to school in the morning. It was nicer than the crowded bus. During that half hour I'd listen to music, buy a chicken bun from the Chinese bakery, think about stuff. My friends were Korean, Indian, Arab, white. Most students graduated into medicine, law, finance. Often we skipped class to eat man'oushe down the road or play Xbox or do nothing. Class was easy, I was friends with everyone. Afterwards, everything became very complicated.

'Where can we get a good dinner?' I ask.

'How long's the train ride to Lakemba?'

Outside Lakemba station, it's raining softly. I stare at a streetlamp. I can see the flow of light simultaneously reflecting, refracting and scattering in every direction through each falling raindrop at once. Something in my brain clicks over. The noise quiets. Isha taps my arm. We walk through the suburb. She asks how I am.

'I'm good but I'm stuck,' I answer.

'Stuck how?'

'Money, sex, social life.'

'It'll come. Take it easier, yeah?'

We find the café. Inside, Isha orders two cups of masala chai. We sit on bright orange chairs. The tea is sweet, aromatic. Tonight, this feels like enough. To let myself pause for a moment and chill. Only after relaxing do I notice how much tension my body's been carrying. Around us the restaurant is vibrant with colours, there's the clanging of the kitchen below, familiar languages being spoken by the other diners. Bringing her chai to her lips, Isha takes a sip.

The Rat

Geneva Valek

Lately I've been waking up in the middle of the night, and no matter what I do, I can't get back to sleep. I've tried reading, having a cup of warm milk (I think that's supposed to do something), a Marlboro (definitely not a good idea), sleeping pills, ASMR, masturbating, YouTube, sleep hypnosis, an eighty-dollar lamp from France that supposedly trains you to fall asleep the way whales do on long journeys, you name it—I tried it, and it didn't help.

I lie in bed and try to slow my breath but my mind races to the paper towels I need to pick up from IGA. I'm also out of cheese. Did I lock the front door? I get up and check it's locked (it always is). When's the deadline for that report again? I need to text my Mum, there were too many heart-eye emojis in her last text, that always means she's worried. A twig snaps underfoot outside my window—probably a serial killer finally coming to get me. Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez, Ivan Milat's vengeful ghost. Thrumming under these waves of thought are snippets of songs stuck on repeat: *Blue moon, you saw me standing alone...* *Baby shark doo doo do doo di do...* *Mister Sandman, bring me a dream.* I give up trying to sleep and stare at the ceiling. I play Ultimate Poker on my phone until my eyes feel rusty. I flick through Instagram and wince at all the people I went to high school with and their ruddy-faced babies or the bulbous engagement rings on their veiny extended hands. I throw my phone on the floor. Fuck, I need to pee. I stumble to the back of the house and stub my toe on the same goddamn chair-leg that I always stub it on. The light in the bathroom is too bright and I can feel the weight of sleep in my eyes. I piss hard and fast, wipe and stand in front of the mirror, ogling the red lines scattered across my eyes like spider webs. The puffy, red-rimmed sockets. I walk out onto the back porch, turn on the light and watch the moths and gnats congregate, flying toward it in brainless, helical loops. I like to think I am their queen but really, I'm just another idiot with nowhere to go. *Blue moon, you saw me standing alone.*

I switch the light off and walk back into the house, fumbling along the kitchen wall for the switch. As the fluorescents finally flicker to life, *the rat* and I lock eyes.

When I was young, we lived on a sprawling farm in a colonial limestone monstrosity atop a hill. At night Sydney glistened on the horizon. The house was always disgustingly clean; Mum would brag that you could lick any surface, but she'd yell at me whenever I did.

Lemon myrtle, eucalyptus and cut paspalum would simmer and despite Mum's constant latherings of SPF30, the summer sun would strip away layer after layer of my skin. But with the symphony of birdcall, the canopy of gum trees and the kangaroos that hopped about at dusk came an underbelly; redbacks, funnel webs, possums foaming at the mouth and unknowable things that lurked in the shadows.

One day, Mum and I pulled into our driveway to find a red-belly black snake in a luxuriant sprawl across it, like we'd caught him sunbathing.

Mum approached him slowly in the car and stopped a few metres away, intense, focused. I undid my seatbelt and crawled up to see the action, but Mum didn't notice. Her eyes were locked on the snake, flared, like she was sending it some psychic message. Mum turned off the radio, her breathing heavy in the silence. The snake was seemingly unperturbed by the looming presence of our giant white Tarago. Mum started to inch forward, towards it. Its head turned to us—beady yellow eyes reflecting our headlights. I could feel it looking at me, asking me a question I couldn't understand. But before I had a chance Mum white-knuckled the wheel and slammed on the accelerator, flinging me back in the seat and knocking me forward like a pinball as she screeched to a stop, just past the snake. I sat up and rubbed the back of my aching neck.

'Put your seatbelt on,' she demanded, her voice staccato gravel.

She drove back and forth over him for about twenty minutes. The whole thing became quite dull eventually. Slimy pink and white oozed from jagged tyre marks on the snake. When Mum was satisfied, she pulled back and we sat a while, staring at the red-belly from a distance.

I don't remember getting out of the car. Time has erased the particulars. But I *do* remember what we did with the snake: *absolutely nothing*.

I remember thinking, surely it'd be someone's job to deal with it. The local snake man? The pastor from the church could come over—perform a... ceremony? Dad could put it in the bin? But no one did anything.

The red-belly passed through all the phases of decomposition in the middle of our driveway. Its seeping insides dried and hardened, the pigment drained from its scales, it stank and then it didn't. Meanwhile, we drove over it constantly, going out and coming home.

One day I was playing on my bike and noticed the outline of where it had been. As I approached, I realised he was still there—thin, sunken, chipped scale and bone, crackled under the harsh Australian sun. I picked him up, strangely solemn, and held him to the light, admiring his translucence, his stiff, devastating beauty. I kept his precious skeleton in my room, hidden atop my wardrobe; that is, until Mum found him and chucked him in the bin.

At some point, my childhood proximity to the snakes and spiders of the bush metastasised from comfort to intense, knotted fear. My apartment on Oxford Street, and the expansive (expensive) wonders of the city, turned my country gumption into immense urban ineptitude.

I remember crawling into the foetal position as my housemate used her paperback copy of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* to kill a huntsman the size of a fifty-cent coin. I couldn't breathe and I couldn't cope.

There were a lot of things I couldn't do back then. If there'd been an apocalypse I would've been first to go (probably still will be). But gradually I learnt how to cook rice, use a dishwasher, mop a floor, redirect mail, put together IKEA furniture, how to break up with boys and girls, how to hail a taxi when you're so drunk you can't stand. When I first left home, my kitchen was what my mother described as 'the depths of hell'. The benches were covered in thick splotches—some, pasta stains, others as unidentifiable as the Tamam Shud. The fruit bowl was an at-home science lab exhibiting the various stages of decay. Sticky red splotches and crisp black blobs covered the stovetop—every meal left its mark. I would empty the bin regularly, but I still waited for someone else to do the little things, which was bad because by then I lived alone. For some reason I was hard to live with.

Eventually, everything annoyed me enough that I learnt to wipe or scrub or scour it. I stopped buying fruit that I knew I wouldn't eat. I googled 'how to clean a microwave' and landed on the god-tier wikiHow method: bicarb and vinegar (it really works).

But at some point, amongst all this learning, I forgot how to sleep.

It's somewhere in the wastelands beyond three a.m., and my eyes are locked on a giant rat sitting on its hind in the middle of my breakfast table. I feel panic prickling up the back of my neck, but instead of running or crying or calling the police or calling my Mum, I pull out a chair, sit and nod to him, a truce. He twitches and twiddles his little hands, as unsure as me about the customary decorum of rat/human interaction.

'It's okay,' I say. 'You're okay.'

Why the fuck am I talking to a rat?

The little guy falls on all fours, seeming to sigh. We continue staring at each other, growing comfortable with our new company. We listen to each other's breath and the whir of cars that shoot past on the M4 outside. I boil the kettle, pour a cup of sleepy tea, light up a Marlboro and fetch him the last speck of Bega from the fridge. 'Replace it tomorrow, replace it tomorrow,' I mumble to myself. I push the cheese across the table and he picks it up, nibbling as I sing to him. *Blue moon, you saw me standing alone.*

An Example of Coping with a High-Pressure Situation

Harvey Liu

Over the top of her romance novel, Marnie scouted the waiting room. There were five potted ferns yet only two chairs—the blocky, angled kind which are impossible to rise from gracefully. She'd arrived half an hour early and had sunk into a comfortable position, stifling a laugh when another job candidate—a stoic-faced Asian man wearing a cactus-print tie—arrived and collapsed into the other empty seat. The third candidate was an older woman. Marnie considered offering to stand. Maybe that could be construed as patronising? Yet with each passing second, Marnie became more aware of the missed opportunity, and so sank deeper into her seat of regret as she flicked a page, pretending to be absorbed in the narrative. Two more candidates arrived. One looked familiar but Marnie avoided their gaze. Four more pages were turned and no words read.

Seven minutes after the communicated appointment time, a man with dark hair and a white button-up came to collect the five hopefuls. His shoes squelched against the rough blue carpets. He came to a full stop before speaking.

'Hey everyone, nice you see your smiling faces,' he said. Most of them were still looking at phones and none of them were smiling. 'My name's Claude, I'm the HR Superstar at JMP. Let's head over to our brainstorm room so we can get to know each other a little better.'

In horror, Marnie now realised that with everyone watching, she would need to stand up. She made a tiny movement but the chair squeaked. Eyes flicked to her and back to Claude. In an attempt at nonchalance, she pushed down on the armrests but inexplicably they too were as firm as jelly, and despite a visible and audible effort, she failed to rise. The interviewer snickered, offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet. Arriving early was Marnie's deliberate attempt to make a good first impression and she hated that it now worked against her. She dusted herself off and joined the group waiting in front of a double set of heavy wooden doors. Claude's hand rested on a curved gold handle.

'This might be unusual for some of you, but we usually begin our interviews with a bit of music.' He clapped his hands together and shook them up and down as he talked. 'We don't take things too seriously here, so feel free to get comfortable, and show off your best dance moves on your way in.'

As Claude threw the doors open, techno pulsed from a Bluetooth speaker at the centre of a marble boardroom table. The five job candidates walked to places around the table. Marnie sussed out the interviewers while nervously swaying to the music. The dark-haired man was vaguely European, and his sunglasses dangled from the button of his shirt as he did the cabbage patch. The

other interviewer was a woman with a tight blonde ponytail, waving jazz hands around her face. The Asian man's cactus tie flapped with each outlandish movement and the rest of the candidates kept a few steps away.

Once everyone was seated, the volume was dialled back so conversation was possible. Claude stepped forward and swept his arm across in a flourish.

'Welcome to our marvellous company!' he proclaimed to the back wall, before lowering his eyes to the candidates' level. 'I love the way dancing loosens everyone up before we ask the first important question.' He paused for a breath. 'Why. Are. You. Here?'

Marnie soured. She did not want to be here, to have her life and accomplishments measured out and assessed. She glanced at the others, considering if any of them were ready to throw out a curveball answer. She noted cactus-tie man, two middle-aged women, and remembered the last man—she had matched with him on a dating app a few months back and he had ghosted her. His name was Romil, she thought. And with Marnie, that made five hopefuls, vying for the privilege to enter data into spreadsheets. For money.

'Take a deep look at yourselves, and each other,' Claude continued, 'before you give your answer. Think about who you are, what you want to achieve.'

Marnie felt that she was weighing up the competition. In the reality TV shows she used to force herself to watch so she could make small talk at her previous job, the contestants would speak like gladiators—always monologuing about the biggest threats, the targets, the sly deals. She imagined narrating her own experience to an indifferent camera man: *I didn't come here to make friends. I came here to win the grand prize.*

Remembering a dozen outright rejections and another three *we'll keep you posted* emails, she pursed her lips tightly. She needed this job. But then after another cursory peek at the four other hopefuls, hands pressed stiffly into their laps, was it wrong of her to be so selfish? The others certainly needed this job too. Otherwise, why else would they be here? For fun?

The interviewers were now scanning the room, sussing out who might be best to ask first. To Marnie's left a hand was raised.

'I'm really just here for fun,' came a rapid answer—it was cactus tie. 'I want to challenge myself in an agile and exciting environment.' The piercing look on the young hopeful's face was unmistakable. It was a look which demanded: *I'm different from the others. Don't you dare forget me.*

'Killer answer,' said the ponytailed woman. 'What's your name again?'

'Marcus. Nice to meet you,' he straightened his tie. Silence followed. The dark-haired interviewer leant forward, eyebrow raised.

‘Anyone else?’ Marnie counted the seconds in her head, deciding that she’d answer if no one else said anything before she got to seven. Between five and six, a voice perked up on her left.

‘I think JMP is a very strong company. With a good record. I think it would be a privilege to work here.’ It was one of the middle-aged women.

‘And your name?’ asked the other interviewer again, barely looking up from the stack of papers on her desk.

‘Jeevika,’ the woman replied. Claude coughed and glanced over at the stack of papers. ‘Jee-vi-ka,’ he said, drawing out the spaces between the syllables. ‘Go by any nicknames?’

‘Pardon?’

‘You know, something shorter.’ His hands mimicked flowers blooming, or maybe small fireworks, by flicking open his fingers. ‘Something that pops. Like Vicky? Or Jeeves, maybe?’ The woman’s posture tensed.

‘I don’t mind,’ Jeevika said.

‘Okay, thanks for that Marcus, *Jeeves*. We’re gonna have to move on, we don’t have time for more awkward silences,’ Claude chuckled. ‘I hope people aren’t nervous, we don’t mean for this to feel like an interview, more a welcoming ceremony so to speak.’ His gaze swept the group, from right to left. ‘We’ve read your resumes already so there’s no need to do all the boring wordy stuff you were probably expecting. Let’s start with an opportunity for each of you to demonstrate your skills.’ On cue the ponytailed woman flicked through a manila folder to find an assortment of pages containing numbers and tables. ‘We planned this as a team competition, but since there’s an odd number...’ she began, before Claude tapped her.

‘Put the Asian in a duo,’ Marnie gleaned from his whispering lips, ‘he’s gonna smoke the rest of them.’

The interviewers split the teams this way: Marcus and Rezia, the other middle-aged woman, were Team #1; Marnie, Jeevika and Romil were Team #2. The loose leaves of paper landed in front of each team with instructions on top: *Analyse these sales statistics for a variety of popular chocolate bars, sorted by buyer demographic. Based on the data, make three suggestions to improve revenue.*

‘Hope this talk of chocolate doesn’t make anyone too hungry,’ said Claude, as the two interviewers started a circular pace around the boardroom table.

‘Excuse me,’ Romil slapped the desk, and raised his hand. ‘This is an interview for data entry, isn’t it? Wouldn’t this task be more in the scope of marketing?’

‘There’s no need for questions like that,’ barked the ponytail interviewer. ‘Just show us what you can do.’ Claude cleared his throat.

‘What my partner means, Romil, is that we don’t believe in silos at JMP. I’m sure everyone here is talented in a variety of fields. We’re more interested in your problem-solving skills, and your ability to think on your feet.’

Marnie stifled a smile. In her imaginary reality show, Romil would have been eliminated first. Still in his chair, focused on by spotlights, slowly descending into a person-sized hole in the floor while sad music played.

Jeevika took the lead in Marnie’s team, jotting percentages and outliers onto the data. Marnie noticed Romil shooting glances at her often, rolling his eyes, as if to say: *get a load of this nonsense. Also, heyy girl*. She avoided these looks by poring over the spreadsheets, making notes and highlights here and there, appearing as busy as possible, especially when she felt the two interviewers watching. Across the table Marnie spotted Marcus and Rezia getting along, mouths furtively moving, and scrawling solutions into every margin.

‘They didn’t even give us a time frame, Marnie thought. In her head she counted seconds... *seven*.

‘Okay, what do you think our three suggestions should be?’ she asked. She was the first person on Team #2 to talk.

‘These are clearly fake numbers,’ Romil said, pointing at the outliers. ‘No way does Cherry Ripe pull that much revenue.’

‘Cherry Ripe seems to do well with teenage males,’ Jeevika noted. ‘Let’s make a note of that, maybe we could suggest marketing the other products towards older demographics. Divide and conquer.’ Marnie highlighted the numbers which stood out to her and soon a story started to form. The team kept the suggestions simple: push the current strengths, take calculated risks, maintain consistency.

While they were still deep in conversation, the candidates’ trains of thought were interrupted by a blaring air-horn sound. Everyone looked up to see Claude with his phone held high in the air, smirking.

‘Alright, enough chit-chat teams, let’s come back for our pow-wow!’

Jeevika offered to be Team #2’s spokesperson, and although her ideas were earnest, they were no match for the audacity of Marcus from Team #1. Marnie watched him improvise a three-step business plan with confidence and theatricality and wondered if those were values that JMP advertised on their website.

Once both groups were done, Claude took centre stage again.

‘I think everyone did well with that one! But there were a few quick thinkers who were bold enough to take the lead, don’t you think?’

Marnie wasn't sure if this was a question for the group or solely for the ponytailed woman. Either way, Claude sat everyone down again with some distance between each.

'You know I don't usually like to do this, but there's a few questions we need to ask of everyone,' he said, smoothing gelled hair across his forehead. 'Standard HR mumbo jumbo.'

Marnie read the expression off Romil's face. It seemed to say, *finally, something normal*.

The questions breezed by without impediment.

'What's your greatest strength?'

Everyone gave the common answers. Marcus dove into a philosophical parable. Romil hesitated for more than seven seconds.

'Why did you apply for this role?' Nothing stood out. Rezia stuttered.

'Give us an example of when you coped with a high-pressure situation.' Various anecdotes. Romil mentioned a university assignment. Marnie conceded to embellishing a crunch period at her past role, taking care to not spill that it was also her first and only past job.

'Thank you for your time, we'll be in touch.'

Both the interviewers packed up and left the room. The ponytailed woman gestured to Marcus to follow. The remaining four candidates exchanged looks of apprehension, bewilderment, relief, hunger. Marnie noted the conspicuous absence of music on departure.

'So... do we keep these?' Romil jibed, pointing at the spread of paper on the boardroom table from the previous exercise.

'Maybe it's a final test,' said Rezia with a chuckle. 'Like, whoever cleans it up gets bonus points.'

'Yeah right,' Romil scoffed, and was first out the door. As the others were heading out too, Marnie decided to linger and, unable to find a bin, settled on rifling the pages together into neat piles—one for Team #2 and one for Team #1.

Now alone, Marnie became aware of her position: a trespasser in a foreign office. She could see people at desks, coffee mugs with sardonic slogans, obligatory indoor plants. The sight compelled her to leave with haste. She took the elevator down five floors and was relieved to burst out into blue sky and fresh air.

Marnie had parked her car far away, avoiding all the empty spots which were nevertheless marked as reserved. The JMP offices sat in an innocuous blue-glass building in front of a six-lane highway. Five minutes down the road there were suburban houses. Waiting for the lights to change, she noticed Jeevika from the interview at the adjacent bus stop, occupying only the very edge of the cold metal seat even though no one else was waiting there.

'Hey! It's Marnie, from the interview. Which way are you headed?' she called out.

‘West, towards Sunnybrook,’ the older woman replied, ‘That was a strange two hours, wasn’t it?’

‘I’m relieved I’m not the only one who felt that!’ Marnie realised she was yelling now. Her voice fought and lost against the wind of cars sweeping by at 80km an hour. It had been a while since she had met anyone new, even longer since she had met someone not her age, and she felt this realisation pushing her to be more open than normal. She chanced on the change of lights to speak again.

‘How did you think it went?’ Jeevika asked.

Marnie shrugged. ‘As well as it could have.’

‘You were good with the sorting activity,’ Jeevika said.

‘And you were good with the introductions,’ Marnie replied. ‘I think you made a strong impression.’

‘Not as strong as that young man with the cactus tie though.’

‘Marcus.’

‘Mar-cactus,’ Jeevika said, and they both laughed.

The image was still so fresh in Marnie’s brain, an exception from the rest of her morning which now felt like it had melted into a past lifetime. It was probably some psychological trick, to wear something outlandish to appear more memorable. There was a world of deception beyond Marnie’s reach, which seemed like the one barrier between her and her dream job. It was a relief to hear Jeevika, someone older, being just as alien to it all.

‘If you’re heading west, maybe I could give you a lift? At this time the next bus might not be here for half an hour.’ Marnie studied Jeevika as she considered the offer.

‘Are you sure? I don’t want to cause any trouble.’ The lights had changed again. A black Mercedes honked aggressively at a silver Toyota, which was a second too slow responding to the green.

‘No trouble at all!’ Marnie struggled to shout while still appearing nonchalant. The rush of traffic whipped her hair around her eyes, so she signalled in the direction of her car. The two walked, side by side, with hands over their faces to shield from the dust.

Marnie slid into the driver’s seat. Her relief at entering the familiar space inverted when she remembered she had invited a stranger into her vehicle. Before Jeevika could open her door, Marnie haphazardly threw back the debris which accumulated from months of driving solo. A jacket, an umbrella, a travel brochure, a coupon booklet, an empty soft drink can, all landed in a heap in the rear.

‘Please don’t judge,’ Marnie said, while Jeevika lowered herself into the compact space and fumbled with the seatbelt. All she did was chuckle.

Marnie thought it was fortunate that her new connection needed to go to Sunnybrook, only two suburbs over from her own apartment. She would have offered to drive Jeevika to wherever she needed to go. The JMP building was about fifteen minutes by car, and forty by bus. Marnie was all too familiar with the meandering routes public transit took, having endured it for years.

‘Do you not drive?’ she asked, stopping at a red light.

‘My husband and I share one car,’ Jeevika said. ‘We’ve only got one parking space at our flat, anyway.’ Marnie was unsure if she should apologise. The radio insisted on playing a sultry R&B song, which bothered her, but not enough to change the station.

‘Hey, can I ask you for an honest opinion?’ said Marnie, breaking the silence. ‘Did I look nervous today, to you?’ She kept her eyes forward on the road, even though she was aware her question invited Jeevika to study her, to make judgements.

‘I didn’t notice anything, why do you ask?’

‘It was my first interview in a while. I wasn’t used to the atmosphere, or the requirements.’ Marnie paused. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to spring that on you.’

‘I don’t think about that much, it’s good to be upfront.’

‘Is data entry your main field, Jeevika?’

‘I’m accounts, but I will settle for whatever I can find. You?’

‘Same boat. Wherever will have me.’ It was good to share this boat, Marnie thought. Struggling together was better than succeeding alone. She was about to announce it when the radio went dead and her phone rang through the Bluetooth.

‘Sorry,’ she said. It was an unknown number.

‘It’s okay. Take it.’

Marnie slowed at an upcoming yellow light, lowered the stereo volume, and answered.

‘Marnie, Marnie, Marnie!’ It was the deep voice of their interviewer, Claude. ‘Lovely to meet you today. Is now a good time to chit-chat about your application?’

With her hand moving to her face to cover an oncoming blush, Marnie nodded. And then, realising her mistake, said, ‘Yes.’

‘We’re just getting in touch with each of our candidates, putting in negotiations. Great dance moves today, by the way.’ In her mind, Marnie could see Claude giving her finger guns. ‘I just wanted to check what your salary expectations would be for this role?’ Marnie paused. The car behind honked its horn. How long had the light been green for?

‘Sorry, are you driving?’ Claude’s voice filled the entire car, accusatory.

'You're on speaker, it's okay,' Marnie said. She stole a glance left at Jeevika, who seemed even to be breathing more quietly. The older woman put a finger before her lips and nodded. Pretend like she's not there.

'Look, we're in the process of some negotiations,' Claude said, 'can you give us a ballpark of what you'd be expecting?'

Marnie looked in all directions. To the right, a construction site, and ahead, a dusty ute. To her left, Jeevika, typing a message on her phone, holding it up to her: *don't give them a number.*

'Uh, I...' Marnie said, as the car followed a bend in the road. 'I'm happy with the uh... the standard rate. For the industry. Entry level of course.' She bit her lip. Did she hear Jeevika scoff? Quietly, under her breath?

'That's great,' Claude said, 'Fantastic. Well, I'll be in touch. Might be an offer, who knows?' He laughed and hung up. Marnie let out a held breath and leaned her weight onto the steering wheel. They were nearing Sunnybrook. The radio was advertising a dietary plan, the kind that delivers frozen meals daily.

'They'll call you any moment now,' Marnie said, and killing all conversation between the two. At each set of red lights Marnie glanced at Jeevika, and Jeevika glanced at her phone. Nothing.

At last, Jeevika asked, 'If it's not too much trouble, do you mind dropping me off at the shops here? I need to get my groceries for the week.' Marnie nodded. She had to do a shop as well. After the interview, the thought of grocery shopping was therapy to Marnie. At Sunnybank Coles, the aisles were crowded and wide, with no one giving her any more than a brief glance.

It was one of those moments where a goodbye seemed artificial and futile, since they were still traversing the same spaces, so they stuck together. Both mostly kept to the essentials, favouring the cheaper brands. Both took free samples from the promoter hawking aged cheese and waited until two aisles away to discuss.

'I didn't like that.'

'Me neither, too sharp.' Both went back for seconds. They went their separate ways and met again in the snack aisle.

'Check your phone,' Jeevika said. 'Did you get any messages from JMP?' Marnie found nothing in her inbox. She shook her head.

'Did you?'

Jeevika raised her screen to Marnie. *We regret to inform you that your application was not successful. While we thought you were highly accomplished, we had to make the difficult decision for the following reasons: **culture fit.***

The last two words were in a different font.

‘That’s good,’ Jeevika sighed. ‘If you still didn’t get a message, that means you might have gotten it.’ Marnie apologised.

‘At least it’s one of us two,’ said Jeevika, ‘not one of the boys.’

‘I got the phone call,’ Jeevika said. ‘It was the lady, I forgot her name, but she said the same thing as Claude in the car.’

‘What did you say?’

Jeevika grinned, a mischievous look which Marnie hadn’t seen her give before.

‘Same as you.’ Marnie tried to match her smile and walked away intending never to see her interview partner again. But minutes later, in the canned goods aisle, Jeevika spotted Marnie grabbing two cans of chickpeas and a can of lentils.

‘You buy these too?’ Marnie laughed. In her head she listed off the benefits. Faster cooking, less messy, no risk of food poisoning, goes with anything. Aquafaba, and more space in her mini-freezer for ice cream.

‘Ahh... it’s cheaper protein than meat.’

‘How do you cook them?’ Jeevika added. It was one of Marnie’s fears for that day. She realised an innocent question would reveal her deep personal shortcoming.

‘I... uh... usually I add them to a salad.’ Dissatisfied at herself for lying, she added, ‘Or sometimes I’ll have them plain.’

‘If you want, come downstairs after. I’ll get something for you.’

Downstairs was what Marnie had assumed was a convenience store; a closed one at that. No windows, but rather, opaque ads for Lebara. Didn’t everyone migrate to FaceTime a long time ago? What Marnie found inside was an Indian grocer with narrow aisles packed full of ingredients she could not recognise. Jeevika greeted the cashier confidently, before darting through the aisles.

‘The things here are better than at Coles,’ she explained, picking out a few packets and jars.

‘Who’s this?’ the cashier asked while scanning through Jeevika’s purchases. Marnie waved hello out of obligation.

‘A friend. I met her today.’ The cashier stopped on a bright orange packet and smiled. ‘This is for her?’ Jeevika nodded, and the cashier laughed this time. ‘Bahut masaledaar.’ Marnie thought she could hear someone else deeper in the store laughing too.

Don’t be unkind,’ Jeevika interrupted, ‘he’s saying it’s too spicy for you. Are you okay with spice?’ Marnie measured ‘a little’ with her thumb and index finger, unsure of what she was getting into.

‘Okay, okay, I’ll give you this one,’ the cashier said, striding down an aisle. He was tall enough to cross the whole store in a few steps. He came back with a different box. ‘This one is easy. Cook

with chana, then simmer it with some onion. Lemon juice and coriander at the end. Eat it with rice, or bread, either will be tasty.'

Marnie took out her card to pay and Jeevika waved it away, and in turn the cashier waved away Jeevika's card.

'It's fine,' he grinned, 'a little favour between friends.'

'I'll definitely be back!' Marnie called out as she turned to go.

Before leaving, Jeevika insisted on trading phone numbers, just in case.

'We should look out for each other,' she said. 'Good thing the interview today made us teammates.' Marnie felt that refusing would be impolite, though she contemplated it as a possibility.

It was dark when Marnie got home. She flicked the switch to bring light into her living-room-cross-kitchen. She had taken care of the place to an acceptable extent, given it was the first time she had an entire abode to herself. The second bedroom was empty since her friend left a month ago. The rent was steep, but her savings would cover a few months, and solitude was more desirable to her than the financial support of another tenant, at least for now. Dropping her bags onto the carpet she announced to vacant space: 'I'm done. I did many things today. I'm happy with that.'

She considered cooking with the packets from Jeevika but remembered that her pan was unwashed from an omelette in the morning, and she was reluctant to wash, then cook, then wash again. 'I'm happy with that,' she continued to announce, with less conviction. 'This is a momentary setback which definitely doesn't foreshadow further dysfunction.'

With her speech over, Marnie was in the mood for pizza. It was appropriate restitution for a day that had thoroughly defeated her. With her phone out, ready to order, Marnie was surprised by an unfamiliar notification. A message from JMP, the same automated rejection message. *For the following reasons: **Aptitude**.*

There was another message, from Jeevika.

I just got my rejection message

Did you get the offer?

Marnie ordered her pizza. She replied.

Yes.

Congratulations! I'm so happy for you!

Seems like the best person won.

Thank you.

How was the masala?

It was wonderful!

I'm glad to hear that. Congratulations on your new job!

Thank you!

And I'm sure you will find something soon!

Marnie finished the pizza and the romance novel that night. She deleted Jeevika's number from her phone. Alone, she tried to drown her thoughts in the artificial glow of reality TV, and then, in darkness.

The next day she would continue her search.

Six Poems

Grace Roodenrys

Walking backwards

Walking back through my life
along a line down the middle

I am trying to be gentle
in case I move things around.

What if I step backwards
and knock the dresser

or tear a sleeve
on my sequined dress?

How strange if I turned
and saw myself

strange to be a thief
inside my own past.

There she is at the dresser
brushing her hair

and there am I
in the mirror behind.

If she glances back we'd fall
out of the tenses that fix us

it would pull the spine
through the centre of life.

Galahs

Where do you see them?

High on their branch

Do they watch you?

I can't say

What is their name?

It blooms from the throat like a fat pink flower

Do you remember?

A stranger is wearing ballet slippers and there's half a rose-pink moon

Love song: april

I like the moment of openness
when a thing is moved around.

As in a room, a sentence,
a bed in which lovers swap places.

Everything that has been said already
can be said a different way now.

I am crossing through worlds
to meet you: wait for me now.

Three days home

She's made up my bed
in the hour since I called her.
There's flowers on the nightstand
and a glass of water
where for three days of childhood fever
she once held my hand.
This week I'm sick again,
turning a second time in that three-day fire.
But I'm burning up
inside my drug-sick mind this time.
I don't tell her, but she already knows:
this year I've fought so hard for distance
that I've circled back to need,
I haven't been home in three months
and for twice that time I've been lonely.
Love for us has always been like this:
fraught, complicated, a turning in
then away. On the third day
I'm well again, whatever that might
mean. Somewhere near me
she opens a window, braids my hair.
All this love I'll use against her.
After three days in her arms I refuse her.

Love song: august

Tender, this tension between seasons

tender as the distance between hands
that meet but never touch

And slender the margin between dream
and memory

I saw you first in a light-filled church
and your hair

was filled with pollen

Mynas

They don't belong here, a girl I knew once told me
pointing at one across the fence
as it lowered its head into a mound of crinkled rubbish.
My mother says she pities them,
that they're only here because once they were needed
and we owe them only distance now they're obsolete.
Hold it between thumb and finger and snap the neck fast:
how the girl I knew said she killed them.
If you shoot it, you must aim right through the heart.
I saw that day how death could be necessary,
how it's easy to distance the object
but harder to lower the trap on the myna
or wish it someplace kinder as you cock the gun.
You have to kill it quickly, she told me. It's what they're owed.
I wondered about the debt she was speaking of,
what exactly we owe a thing and how we know.
The girl I knew is at my shoulder now
and helps me aim the gun. When I fire a window breaks
and the myna shakes into blossom in my palm.

OI

Laneikka Denne

SYNOPSIS: When a turbulent teenage girl undergoes a traumatic sexual experience, she must face her own violent bravado head-on. 'Oi' explores the stigma around 'catfights' and how hyper-sexuality can occur when feminine rage isn't accepted.

EXT. SCHOOL QUAD—DAY

A continuous shot. Nepean High. We start on one side of the quad. Across the oval, a tiny figure smokes a dart in the distance. This is JASSIE, 16, a hardened baby face. We move towards her. A group of year 10 boys run towards us, trying to punch each other in the dick. One of the boys takes a swipe at us. TANYA, 15, comes into view, striding towards Jassie. We follow her. Her bum hangs out the bottom of her straight, navy blue skirt, tugging at it as she walks, fast.

TANYA (O.S.)

Jassie!

Closer now, Jassie nods—'The fuck?!' Tanya speeds up. We see Jassie's face, she blows smoke. Tanya looks at her; a moment. Tanya whispers in Jassie's ear.

JASSIE

Are you fucken—?

And Jassie is off—

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL—DAY

Jassie rampages through the corridor. Tanya and KAYLEE, 16 can be heard following Jassie.

TANYA (O.S.)

She's not gonna.

KAYLEE (O.S.)

Nah she fights like a guy. She'll fully go her.

At full force, Jassie swings the classroom door open, heading for TOBY, 18, and HANNAH, 17, about to punch on. Forehead to forehead, Jassie looks at Toby, exhales before: Jassie grabs Hannah's hair, pulling her to the ground. Jassie kicks Hannah in the stomach, pounding her face with a fist. A crowd of students pour in like animals, they roar, applauding, exhilarated. Title insert: OI.

EXT. SCHOOL CANTEEN—DAY

A row of legs wait for their lunch orders, bike shorts under skirts, cellulite. Jassie and her friends sit around silver seats. CLOSE ON: Toby and the boys whisper, hungry eyes, hidden behind cheeky smiles. Tanya and Kaylee, arch their backs like they're in their own hot girl movie, artificial. Hannah looks to Jassie, a tiny smile. We pull and stay on Jassie's face, she's magnetic, everyone else is just noise.

JASSIE

Tobs, you should get me a meat pie.

TOBY (O.S.)

What's in it for me?

JASSIE

I'll blow you...

A moment, she laughs.

JASSIE (CONT'D)

A kiss.

Success, Jassie's eyes follow him. Jassie looks to the girls.

KAYLEE

Such a slut for a bit of meat.

TANYA

Own your body gal. V liberating.

Jassie doesn't respond.

TANYA

Where's Ty though?

KAYLEE

Oh shit—

TANYA

He—Oh my god I'm so sorry did he break up with you—

TANYA (CONT'D)

Just like Aaron—

KAYLEE

And Caleb—

JASSIE

Where's your pie Kaylee? Or are ya legs always spread that far?

A moment, Hannah snorts, blushes. A scornful laugh from Tanya and Kaylee. Jassie smiles, the fakery.

EXT. STREET—DAY

Jassie walks home from school, muggy. The outside of her bag is covered in names, her wrists covered in friendship bracelets.

EXT. JASSIE'S HOUSE—DAY.

Cranebrook, an asbestos filled duplex, a weathered couch rests on the porch.

INT. JASSIE'S HOUSE—DAY

An empty kitchen. An empty bedroom. The words 'Kevin's a cunt' are etched on a hinge.

EXT. JASSIE'S HOUSE—DAY.

Jassie takes a bite of a lime splice before throwing it in her front yard, licking her fingers, she spots something: Jassie's neighbour JAY, 40s, androgynous, tatted, washes her car. Jassie watches her, fascinated. She yells:

JASSIE

OII

Jay looks over at Jassie. Jassie gives Jay the finger. Jay smiles, gives Jassie the finger and waves it. Jassie laughs and waves her finger back, she turns it into a peace sign. Jay's smile widens, she makes a peace sign. Jassie giggles, composes, puts the peace sign to her mouth and licks... A moment. Jay hesitates, moving her fingers closer to her face before turning her peace sign into an 'up yours.' Jassie cackles. A tiny laugh from Jay, nods, goes back to washing her car. INSERT: A discarded lime splice, melts in the grass.

EXT. SCHOOL QUAD—DAY

CLOSE ON: Jassie's face, sitting near her friends, chatting. They're talking about Jassie, who is elsewhere.

INT. SCHOOL CLASSROOM—DAY

Fifth period. Toby nudges his mate. Toby locks eyes with Jassie and lets out a little moan, an offering. We pull to Jassie, smirking, she moans, we stay on her. Toby moans a little louder. Jassie moans back, a few others in the class join in trying to moan louder than the others, it builds. Jassie lets out the loudest, longest moan, the class roars.

TEACHER (O.S.)

Alright, Jasmin, out.

JASSIE

What Miss?

TEACHER (O.S.)

Out.

JASSIE

But he was doing it.

Jassie snaps back at the teacher, rage.

JASSIE (CONT'D)

The boys were fucking doing it!

The class roars, they know it's hit a nerve.

TEACHER (O.S.)

ALRIGHT I'LL GET MR SMITH—

Jassie sees red, stands, ready to fight.

JASSIE

GO GET HIM THEN. Go on. Do it. Do it. DoitdoitdoitFUCKING—

CUT TO:

EXT. RIVER—NIGHT

A gatho around a bonfire, a bag of goon is passed around. Across the fire, Jassie and Toby gaze at each other, Hannah watches this.

EXT—RIVER—LATER

From a distance, we follow Jassie walking along the edge of the water, giggling, buzzed. Toby trails behind.

JASSIE

Oi look at this!

Jassie flashes her tits to the river.

TOBY

I'll show you one better.

We run with Toby, Jassie cackles. Toby tackles Jassie to the floor, his body on top of hers. They laugh, Toby kisses her, pushing her further into the dirt. Toby takes off his shorts, Jassie pulls down her swimmers. Toby hesitates for a condom, Jassie watches for it. Instead, Toby leans over and kisses her, an attempt.

JASSIE

(tiny laugh) That's my leg.

They adjust, a couple of attempts, a struggle, water brushes their legs.

TOBY

I didn't think it'd be this tight.

Pull to Jassie's face, we stay here. A few more attempts, it doesn't work. Toby exhales, annoyed, he puts his shorts on and walks off. Jassie's eyes follow Toby, she sees Hannah, watching on. The river washes over Jassie's body.

INT. JASSIE'S BEDROOM—NIGHT

Jassie sits in front of her mirrored wardrobe. Jassie edges towards the mirror. Jassie closes her eyes. Hesitantly, Jassie kisses the mirror, deeply, keeps kissing the mirror.

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL—DAY

CLOSE ON: Tanya's mouth laughing her guts out.

INT. SCHOOL—DAY

A group of boys whisper about Jassie. One of the boys yells 'Oi' and lifts up his top, they cackle.

INT. SCHOOL—DAY.

CLOSE ON: *mid laugh, Kaylee's mouth, she makes a 'whoosh' sound, it echoes.*

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. SCHOOL QUAD—DAY

The same moment as the opening scene, one continuous shot. CLOSE ON: Tanya's mouth, whispering in Jassie's ear. Jassie, she puts her ciggie out, rage. Jassie rampages into the classroom, Tanya and Kaylee are overheard following Jassie.

TANYA (O.S.)

She's a full-on whore if she did it though.

KAYLEE

A fake one with a small vag.

TANYA

Oh my god Kaylee—you'll be in the fucking scragfight next!

Jassie approaches, through the classroom door window, Jassie spots Toby. Toby sees Jassie and tongues Hannah, he doesn't take his eyes off Jassie. Jassie swings open the door and heads for Toby, forehead to forehead, she exhales and whispers 'woosh' to Toby. Jassie pulls Hannah to the ground and pounds her. Jassie punches Hannah, hard.

INSERT—SLOWMO ECUs on:

- *Jassie's eyes rage.*
- *Jassie's hands grip Hannah's neck.*
- *Jassie's knuckles hit Hannah's jaw.*
- *A white singlet, the outline of Jay's chest.*
- *Jassie's face, dazed, enthralled.*
- *Jassie's fingers press against Hannah's lips.*
- *Jay's mouth, an exhale.*
- *Jassie's face, choking, hands grip harder and harder, an act of self-hatred.*

A tiny moan escapes Jassie's mouth before—back to Hannah's face, confused, horrified. We pull to Jassie's puffed face, she releases Hannah, flushed. Jassie looks around, all eyes are on her. Everyone is silent, one student yells—

STUDENT

(chanting) Girl on girl... girl on girl... girl on girl—

Everyone starts chanting 'girl on girl', a chaotic shaming. We follow Jassie as she gets up and leaves the classroom.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. JAY'S HOUSE—DAY

Jassie, red faced, walks to Jay's front door, knocks. Jay answers, they look at each other. Jassie buries her face in Jay's body. While comforting Jassie, Jay takes Jassie inside.

INT. JAY'S HOUSE—DAY

Dark wood walls lined with vintage playboy posters, a rust leather couch. Jassie sits on the couch next to Jay, it feels like an awkward 'after the formal' moment. Jay sits on the other end of the couch. Cautiously, Jay looks to Jassie, who hides her nervousness by not looking at Jay.

JASSIE

I think about you.

JAY

Really?

JASSIE

Yeah. Washing your car.

JAY

(laughing) Washing my car?

Jassie slips off the shoulder of her shirt.

JAY (CONT'D)

Jassie—

Jay holds the shoulder of Jassie's top, stillness.

JASSIE

Feel this.

Jassie takes Jay's hand and puts it up her skirt. Gently, Jay pulls her hand away.

JASSIE (CONT'D)

Sorry, but—I didn't mean to make you think, this was, anything—

JASSIE (CONT'D)

OK sick.

JAY

Jassie—

JASSIE

No one fucking wants me—fucking fuck yourself then.

Jay tucks a strand of hair behind Jassie's ear.

JAY

No, no—

Jassie hits her.

JASSIE

Get off me—

JAY

Talk to me Jassie—

JASSIE

GET OFF ME YOU FUCKING RAPIST—

A moment. Jay restrains Jassie, as Jassie calms down, Jay loosens her grip.

JAY

I'll listen.

Jay gives Jassie a proper hug. Silence.

END

Severance

James W. Goh

And so when he began to travel for his studies, the boy found his mobility offered him a vantage point from which to relate to people and place. The boy would commute every weekday of his teenage years to and from his suburban home in the southwest and his selective school in inner city Sydney. After his final class of the day, he would catch the school bus to Central, the train from Central to Bankstown Station, and another bus from Bankstown to home. These trips, without which his formative years could not be related, took him farther and farther afield, on various detours, and into contact with different people each time such that these journeys offered him their own education. In this way, as he began asking for more from the world, the boy came to learn about proximity and distance.

At Central, he talked, laughed, and bickered with friends who came from suburbs all over Sydney, suburbs he would come to know vicariously like Carlton, Holsworthy, Kingsgrove, and North Sydney. He would wait with them on their platforms until he could no longer ignore the imminent arrival of his 15:49:00. Sometimes, he would even catch the train to Redfern or Sydenham with them and then change trains, just to squeeze in a few more minutes together. Other times, when he had an early mark or a free period, he would take a detour along different lines and coordinate where to meet up on the inevitable ride home. Through all this planning, he learnt how Sydney was connected at Central—the stairs, exits, and tunnels for the quickest changeovers and the escalators which mark the threshold between Intercity and suburban—and how Sydney expanded radially: the train lines, coloured ribbons that looped around the city before reaching into the suburbs and back.

Once he figured out these connections, the city, an alpha city, seemed to contract because of its accumulated familiarity. Then, he would yearn to be somewhere bigger than his city, a place where global histories would flourish, not realising what was all around him, history the groundwater linking out here and over there.

On his platform, the boy would reconvene with the other boys he had seen on the way to school. In their junior years, they took the carriage that stopped at the mouth of the stairs closest to the school bus drop-off spot. In their senior years, they took a carriage further down the platform, near the front (Front and Back flipped like the reversible seats each morning and afternoon). Whether this was primarily proof they were moving up in the world or a strategic move to find a less crowded carriage, no one could be sure.

Because of their large numbers (four to twelve), the boys would often be dispersed in the carriage as the train filled up. It stayed full until they reached Sydenham and would begin to empty after Campsie. When the train doors opened, one or two of the boys would dart forward like scouting parties, searching for three-, four-, or six-seaters for the group. Those slower and less bothered were left stranded in the vestibule, clinging to the metallic pole or flattening themselves along the stairwell. Whenever a seat opened up, one of the seated boys would go and tell the others so that they could all sit together: space becoming sound.

On those train trips, the boys earned nicknames which like battle scars and war trophies would either dignify or haunt them as they moved through puberty. They would quarrel, make fun of each other, and play a slapping game until either their hands or egos gave out. It's just banter, bro. That's what they said to assuage the bruising. And, of course, they would catch each other up on what happened each day: who got in trouble, funny things that happened at sport, hints or tips about upcoming exams. In fact, they talked about marks and speculated about who the Mysterious Maths Examiner might be in the same way that some of them also talked about tits. When they studied together, there was a solemn silence, broken only by the inevitable question about galvanic cells, circle geometry, or Harder 3 Unit maths. After they couldn't take it any longer, they moved on to the 'Overheard' and 'Here's Looking at You' columns of the *mX*.

BABY GOT BACK: *To the Asian guy with the red backpack at North Sydney today. I wish I was that backpack. Coffee?—Y*

If the boys weren't reading the *mX*, studying, or making ten with the digits of the carriage number, they would be watching one of their own play the newest smartphone game. As they graduated from Doodle Jump to Flappy Bird, some of them became more sensitive while others became more prideful. When Clash of Clans came around, the same boy, who winced at the hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality around him, would ask in jest, 'Why are you always playing COC? Why are you always playing COC?' These were his earliest attempts to push back against peers who tied their masculinity to their rugby tries, their supposedly infinite libido, and the number of fucks they pretended not to give.

Although he did not think about it in such terms then, the boy came to understand how the city was divided. He learnt to anticipate who would board or alight at different stops, who had Places To Be, whose baggage could be held, and whose burdens were buried in the arch of their spine. His own crew embodied a migration history of Sydney: a Korean in Campsie, a Punjabi Muslim in Lakemba, mainland Han Chinese, Hoa, and Kinh Vietnamese in Bankstown. Through

his friends, he learnt that living closer to the city, which his parents could not afford, bought not only the newest iPhone or Samsung but extra sleep.

On some afternoons, he would see men, usually in pairs, sit in four- or six-seaters. They were alone, in the murky sea blue seats, even as there were people standing and wanting to sit. These men had dark skin and wispy black facial hair. They wore hi-vis tops and had their white helmets on the seats beside them. They would sit diagonally opposite each other, one next to the window and the other closer to the aisle. The former propped his head on his palm and stared out the window, seeming to wish he were somewhere else. The latter leaned back into his seat with both feet resting on the opposite seat, watching the video playing on his small phone. Whether it was out of expediency or solidarity, the boy would make eye contact with these men, summon a smile, and then take a seat with them when he was alone. Admittedly, he was a little scared at first, afraid that they might lash out at any moment. However, he came to realise that he was projecting the evening news onto them. When he sat down, they were unmoved. They, like the boy and his crew, just wanted to be home.

And years later when he caught the train by himself, he would miss seeing his Bankstown Line Crew. He would look up and down the platform, always checking in case there were familiar faces—even the ones who were prone to homophobic or misogynistic turns of phrase back then. Of course, they would never now show that side of themselves to their clients or patients. He wanted to believe that they had left all that behind, but he knew deep down that their dispositions had only hardened. He would tell himself that they were still good guys though. He had grown up with them, and it was hard to forget that even when he knew he had to protect himself. These were friends he lost, gave up on, or let go of (it was hard to tell the difference) when he went off to study the humanities.

When his train pulled up in Bankstown at 16:30:00, he had to sprint to make the bus. Downtrodden and tired, passengers, all around him, streamed out of the trains and up the stairs like schools of fish. Excuseexcuseexcuse. The crowd at the bottom of the stairs hardly budged, but still the boy twisted into the gaps he could see, insisting that he could carve out the space he needed. Hijabs, round brim hats, metallic shopping carts. Left and right, everyone marched up the stairs, looked down at the steps, as their bags pulled their shoulders to the ground. Step. Step. Step. He wanted to break away from the bodies, like blood from a wound. When he reached the top of the stairs, however, he found himself amongst the people he thought he had left behind.

In the crowd, the boy would be one of many Arab and Asian bodies who arrived. Together but by no means commensurate, they, the mass are the memento mori of Lebanese and Vietnamese collective life. They are what Jodi A. Byrd, citing Kamau Brathwaite, terms ‘arrivants’. They are fragments of a social wholeness, which has been subjugated by French colonialism, upended by American interventionism in civil war, and reforged as migrant labour on unceded land in a former outpost of British Empire. At the ticket barriers, the people would come face to face with the police: imperial debris against the glare of settler-colonial authority.

The two police officers, like the boy, were regulars at this train station. The man had blue eyes, the woman dark brown hair tied into a low bun, and pink flushed both their pale cheeks. The man would hold onto his belt with one hand and talk with the other. Listening, the woman would rest her hand on the walkie-talkie that protruded from her right pocket and chuckle in her polite, controlled way. Although they were chatting away next to the ticket machine, everyone in the station knew that the patrols could turn towards the ticket barriers at any moment. The boy had a lot of questions he wanted to ask, but he knew better than that. Everyone who grew up here knew that the last thing you wanted to do was get involved with the police. Still, the boy wanted to ask whether it was satisfying to look for something where there was nothing.

Slowly but surely, the arrivants shuffled into the ticket barriers. They were all tired. Tired from working to live, to pay off an historical debt they had inherited through their bodies. Displaced and unfree, they plodded on beyond the enclosures, in the long shadow of the Human. To pass through checkpoints overseen by police, then, was to have their bodies opened up, hailed, and incorporated for profit and for governance. A flood of arrivant bodies indiscriminately funnelled into the ticket barriers, yet individuated by red teeth snapping. Pay up, pay up, they say. ‘Economies of dispossession’, the boy would later learn from Jodi A. Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan Reddy, ‘are at once epistemologies of commensurability and differential devaluation’.

When he walked up to offer his student pass to the tongue of the gates, he knew his uniform—a wool blazer, a sky blue or white dress shirt, a chocolate or maroon silk tie, grey shorts, knee-high socks, and black leather shoes—coupled with his straight black hair made him less deviant, if not socially respectable even, and, thus, unremarkable to the cops. And so, every time he passed through the ticket barriers, he felt his mobility wetting the rocks upon which others slipped.

The station concourse opens to North Terrace and South Terrace. In this way, the station, following the train tracks which serve as arteries through the area, splits Bankstown along an axis of global asymmetry. Nevertheless, the boy on his travels always felt that Bankstown had at least three sides: the Side of History, His Side, and the Other Side.

The Side of History, the white side, anxiously repeats its mythologised past in sign and sculpture. When he was a child, however, the boy hardly heeded these contrived revisions. Instead, he made his own memories by borrowing books for Summer Reading Club, soaring on swings at Paul Keating Park, and sprinting up the stairs at Hoyts.

On the opposite side of the station, on His Side and the Other Side, the people made the space their own. On His Side, there was a South Vietnamese flag and a monument commemorating the journeys made by boat people. The boy thought about this side as His Side because it was the part of Bankstown he knew most. That meandering strip was where he ordered bún bò Huế and sinh tố bơ together, where he had his hair cut and teeth cleaned, and where he heard his mum speak a language she rarely used at home. Then, there was the Other Side. He thought of it as the Other Side simply because he seldom passed through it. All he knew was that dad used to go there to buy charcoal chicken. And so, for the boy and his brother who often did not get to see their father before they went to bed, Chicken Tonight, a Friday event, was a love language of garlic sauce, bread without crust, and charred skin that momentarily dissolved the remove of time which had been exacerbated by the boys' budding English.

His Side and the Other Side met where women sold pork rolls, manicures, and hijabs alongside each other. The stand for the 911 Bankstown to Auburn in the middle.

The boy would wait for the bus in the foyer of the Commonwealth Bank, behind the bus stand. Behind the glass panes, he soaked in the free air-conditioning while he watched as people flocked to the stand. It was mostly women and children—those who didn't have the luxury of a car or those whose loved ones were using the family car to bring food to the table. From the station or the shops on His Side, elderly women would drag their shopping trolleys to the stand. They staggered towards the metallic seats and crumpled into them. Behind the seats, away from the stand, there were students from a local comprehensive high school that had once offered him a scholarship for which he had never applied.

When he returned home one afternoon in Year 6, the boy found an A4-sized white satchel waiting for him—a paper pelican break protruding from the letterbox. The package was thick so his mum told him to wait. She found the silver letter opener, slipped it under the seal, and scraped it against the fold. Ce. The boy leant in and an O formed on his lips as his mum pulled the stack of coloured paper out from its bone white sheath. His mum scanned the first page from top to bottom, and then, she paused when she saw the name of the school. Yes, the package was special, but it was from the local public high school that she had always described as 粗魯. Although this phrase refers specifically to culture, it was the connotations of race and class that made the words heavy in the air. The mother had gotten her son baptised to avoid this problem in kindy, to enrol at the Catholic primary school because it was Safer there. 教會學校安全點。

Although they would never take seriously the offer, they were still curious about the package, or rather what it revealed about a social world they had been accustomed to avoid. The packet consisted of a hand-signed letter from the principal, a report outlining recent achievements at the school, the canteen stocklist, and more. As for the scholarship itself, the high school offered to waive its annual voluntary contribution—around \$500 each year—for all six years, which mother and son found incredulous. They were absolutely flabbergasted. They didn't want to be ungrateful, but this 'scholarship' made a mockery of the \$30,000 annual full rides that they had heard were awarded at elite schools. And to think the offer was unsolicited too! It would have made for a funnier story if they hadn't ended up pitying the school, if it hadn't said something about the area. How, then, were they able to relish this turn of events with such mischievous grins? Perhaps it was relief rather than joy that their laughter betrayed. To see desperation on the page and believe that it was external to them, as if they had been marked safe from a natural disaster on the other side of the world. The satisfaction of the moment came from the realisation that they could be picky, that the boy was wanted, that her son had Prospects, had 本事. The mother knew not to get ahead of herself lest she invite bad luck. Nevertheless, mother and son indulged that fantasy that afternoon—a fantasy founded upon the knowledge that Opportunity Class students usually ended up at Top Selective Schools. In the worst case scenario, they could pose as Catholics once more.

Months later, the mother would rouse the boy from bed one morning and lead him to the boxy family computer. The red numbers on the digital clock read 5:52AM. It was his selective test results. Against the obtrusive white light, he searched the document for the all-important score and found the word 'Offer.' Mum had promised him a new computer if he got into this school. It was good news, but he needed to pee and went back to sleep. His mum had woken up early that morning—or perhaps, it was more accurate to say she struggled to sleep that night—as she had done so every day that week, to check if the results had been released. If the boy had been more

alert, he would have seen the red shadows around her eyes. She would tell him about them and that morning, six years later. There was this English phrase that she never really understood. It seemed contradictory: happy and sad put together. But, it was on that morning that she discovered that it was indeed possible to cry tears of happiness. She just wanted the boy to have choices in life, and that's exactly what the school enabled.

Unlike the others at the bus stand, the three boys, he observed, were boisterous. In this alone, they were not too different from his friends on the train even though they more closely resembled his peers from primary school. To kill time, the three boys passed a basketball around, chatted up girls, and, sometimes, smoked.

The boy would sit in the rear of the bus, in a seat behind the bump which curled over the wheel. Although the bump once made for an interesting footrest, he sat farther and farther back as his legs grew longer. Eventually, he moved far back enough to assert his independence without ever assuming the mantle of backseat bandit. That distinction was inevitably taken up by the three boys in the dark blue uniform.

After the 911 Bankstown to Auburn departs from the stand, it tracks, from South to North, around the station to Centro, where most of the remaining passengers board. When the bus passed Paul Keating Park, the boy would peer through the window on his left and see that the amphitheatre in the far corner was for students from the area what Town Hall was for him and his friends. He imagined that those kids would have walked down Chapel Road after school and studied at the library, played basketball using the makeshift ring, or chatted on the steps for as long as the afternoon sun gilded the grass with its golden glint. These were experiences he missed when he was discovering new haunts in the city and checking TripView to plan his way home.

After he finished his final high school exam for Latin Continuers, the boy took a detour from his usual route home. Instead of heading straight for the bus stop after getting off the train, he visited Centro for the first time in years. He thought of it as a homecoming, a reprieve from constantly

commuting away from the area. He hadn't intended for the shopping centre to serve as his stand-in for Bankstown, but he found his body oriented towards its offer of stranger intimacy, yearning for the borderland collisions that made up the community. He went there to tell himself that he made it all the way through, to say that he was back. To pay respects to a place that had always seemed present. When he walked in, he knew he was close to the old IGA, but now there was a sushi stand out front. Was the gentrified cake shop new too? No one else seemed fazed by these changes. Instead, the passersby saw the teen (almost tall enough to be taken for a man) turning around and around as he surveyed his surroundings. Accordingly, they kept their distance as they walked past such that he seemed to spin himself an empty circle in the middle of the walkway. When he started to realise he was seeing the same stores over and over again, he stopped to hold everything in place. However, the people milling about, the escalators cycling away, and the shopkeepers working refused to still—a whole world, which he had sidelined for the past six years, had moved on without him. His head dropped slowly as if it were guided by the sinking feeling that moved from his chest to his stomach: the lightness of his achievement suffocated by the shame that swelled like smoke inside him.

Head rested against the window, the boy stared into the hollow of the bus, watching as women and children trickled on board. When everyone was seated, the bus would leave the Side of History. As Road narrowed to Street, brown-brick houses and playgrounds glided past the windows, which were both portals and partitions to the outside world. They were the same scenes the boy saw every other day of the week. The streets seemed so stagnant as if the dry air had conspired with the unrelenting sun to bake the earth so that nothing dared to change. The only marker for the passing of weeks was the white, two-storey house at the four-way intersection between Glassop Street and Edgar Street. The brick fencing on the corner was always getting smashed by speeding cars so that the state of the rubble charted its own seasons: boom, bust, and building. Bored and without a Good Phone, the boy found his seat an easy place from which to study the other passengers during the remaining twenty-five minutes of the ride home.

In the front seat, an old woman would sit with her hands clasped over the walking cane between her thighs. Although she sat by herself, she would talk with the driver, whose skin was much darker and black hair much bushier than hers. Each time the old lady turned her head, her platinum gold hair, layered like cotton, gave way to her sagging cheeks which were lightly dotted with brown specks. She would tell him about the weather, changes she noticed in the local area,

and, sometimes, her children who had moved out years ago—all this came out like a deep breath she needed to exhale daily.

In his grey uniform, the driver always seemed to welcome the company. He would nod here and there and add, in his sonorous voice, cynical comments backed with the wisdom he had accumulated from parsing the suburbs. The Eastern European woman and the Pasifika bus driver offered each other something the other needed. Every few minutes, their conversation would pause slightly when the bus approached a turn or roundabout. The driver would turn the steering wheel, coaxing the metallic hunk of a bus to cooperate in a breath that rose from abdomen through to the shoulders before it was released with the full pivot of both elbows. Conversely, their chatter would pick up when the driver made a stop, and, indeed, the bus stopped often. The boy didn't like this because it made what could have been an eight-minute car ride a thirty-minute ordeal. However, he recognised that there would be no bus without its passengers. Over the years, the 911 Bankstown to Auburn service atrophied; its half-hourly and then hourly frequency combined with its limited operating hours suggested that this public service was just not profitable.

Throughout the bus, the seats were little islands with their own 'discrete identities, distinct territorializations and sovereignties, and discontinuities'. Each island and passenger had borders and boundaries, which were asserted either by cold shoulder, immovable bag, or fleshy sprawl, such that like often sat with like. This was not always the case for there were many negotiations—around accessible seating, the STOP button, and aisle space—that meant it was not always possible for people to uphold convention. Whether they were forged through care, solidarity, or submission then, the emergent coalitions at each seat made salient the immanent relationalities that had been truncated at the ticket barriers, foreclosed by the Sides, and effaced by the national. And so when he began thinking through *The Intimacies of Four Continents* during university, the boy came to see his bus rides as rehearsals of interrelation, where distance became proximity that gestured to futures yet to come.

Over the years, the boy would try to get to know the three boys behind him without uttering a word. I told youse we were gonna play COD tonight but. Bro, you know I can't but. I've got footy tonight bruh. They said these things with a hoarseness that was punctuated by the wet click of gum rolling in the side of their cheeks. Earphones in (without any music playing), hands in pockets, the boy would lean back, eavesdrop, and shake his head or stupidly grin when they joked, swore, or shouted. Sometimes, he would make it obvious that his earphones weren't plugged in, a show of

his readiness to engage. As they spoke, he would conjure an image of them, the same boys at the bus stand: sports caps, untucked dark blue dress shirt, sports shorts, black ankle socks, and religiously clean Adidas sneakers. As they called each other jahsh, he would see, in his mind, their chins raised and Adam's apples bobbing up and down.

There were times when the boys would swear and the other passengers—the old woman, the mums, and the schoolchildren—would shoot cold looks over their shoulders. The boy met all these eyes—amber, blue, brown, gray—as their corners shrunk and brows furrowed while sizing up the boys. He held tight in his seat, hoping he could make his body a shield that might insulate the boys from the scrutiny, a revolt to dispel the disciplining gaze that interpellated them as Troubled Arab Delinquents. However, those searching eyes did not register him.

He couldn't say he knew the boys, but he suspected that they, like him, were on the bus because they had no choice, which is to say their parents were always toiling. Nevertheless, he appreciated that their brash vigour smashed through the chokehold of the drawn-out afternoon. Unlike the boy who internalised the silence and the gaze such that it domesticated his buoyant being, the three boys seemed to refuse these dictates outright, obliterating all limits as to who they could be at the back of the bus. As he grew fonder of them, the boy would name them Jad, Farouq, and Elie after classmates he knew before he moved schools. These names had the effect of transforming them from co-passengers and fellow students to boys he might one day befriend.

One afternoon, the boy heard an argument break out between Jad and Elie. Cuz, I didn't tell her. Cuz, why would I tell her but. Say wallah you didn't. Say wallah you didn't tell Layla. Wallah. The boy held his breath and cocked his head slightly, catching Farouq in his periphery. Bro, you can tell he's lying, can't you? A silence, and then, the boy realised. The question was addressed to him. Suddenly, he had their permission to speak so he turned, coming face to face with an expectant Jad. In the other corner, he saw Elie's shoulders slowly rising to meet the accumulating charge. The boy simply looked from Jad to Elie then Elie to Jad, unsure of what to say. You know what, Jad said. Forget it. Catch you later hamoudi. As he got off the bus, Jad made it a point to face only Farouq, as if Elie was not even there. Sure enough, the three boys moved on from the issue and were back to talking with each other in a matter of days as if nothing had ever happened. And of course, they would find the boy sitting quietly in front of them. By himself, as always.

When finally there was hardly anyone to watch, the boy would cast his gaze to the window on his left once more. Instead of staring through it, the boy focused on the window itself, which was tinted with perforated self-adhesive vinyl film. Every bus in the area had these tinted windows, onto which various graphics were printed and laminated such that they displayed different images on the interior and exterior of the bus. The exterior image varied from bus to bus, but it was always an advertisement. The inside, however, was always a map of Bankstown and the surrounding suburbs with key routes traced in thick bright orange, hot pink, and light blue lines and points of interest highlighted with magnified inset images. As he sat with the display, the map brought into relief an interdependence that made up the space. On those little streets, through which the routes converged and diverged, the boy could, for the first time, see how he and the other passengers were constituting collective life anew within and outside the circuits of capital: disparate lives pouring into one smooth river that meandered through the suburbs, orchestrating its own detours, breaking free from the teleology supposed by origin and destination.

After half an hour on this bus, the boy would reach his stop. By then, the bus was ready for a new set of passengers. The boy would check that he had all his belongings, wait until the backdoors folded open, and call out to the driver. Thank you.

When I commute home nowadays, over ten years since these journeys first began, I cannot help but find myself constantly confronted by my own social mobility—how my personal sense of identification rubs up against narratives of differential racialisation as well as the spatial and social divisions of the city. When I think about the bus, the bus stop, the train, the train station, I think about how people whose life chances differ so vastly come together at these nodes of interchange only to ultimately separate. In the Bankstown area especially, where I continue to reside, I think about the space and am guided by the late Cedric Robinson and others in thinking about how we are entangled in social relations that are already organised by imperial conquest and racial capitalism. I think not only about myself, but also the Lebanese and Vietnamese diasporas who now call this place their home—how they can be in such close proximity yet remain so bracketed off from one another despite their shared histories of colonialism. When I return home now, I think about these encounters between Arab and Asian bodies as illuminating new horizons for

collective life on stolen land. However, I realise the romance of this aspiration because when I come close to these others, I feel the distance, and I am still trying to work out how our future might be different.

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Colossus

Brianna McCarthy

There are no gates that guard this place, the secret black beach. What keeps it hidden and so unvisited may be the untimely weather, or the sudden feeling of utter exhaustion when approaching its ancient sands. Most people know how they feel when unwelcome. But there are some who must learn.

A group of merry youngsters came one day over the first dune. Their backpacks heavy, they looked from a high distance like beetles scuttling in a line. They laughed as they went, hardly noticing where they had come to, but scrambling over as if it was their own domain—a beach like any other. They headed to where the cliffs turned black and were pounded by mammoth waves. The sand was stiff here, the rocks jagged.

Wind dashed madly over crags and the travellers pushed with clumsy steps through the gust. Sand draped over the sides of cliffs that held not a tuft of grass. The horizon mingled with stones that jutted like swords towards the sea spray. As the group rounded the last stone boulder they saw the smooth sandstone shapes—colossal statues, looming over all with deafening presence.

Some of the figures were mashed apart by time, their elbows and knees poking out of crags. Others slept forever under the cover of sandy blankets. The place was a boneyard of unearthly monuments. One still stood, however, and the whole beach was her own. Towering higher than any tree in the surrounding forest, she cast a shadow far into the ocean. Her feet were buried under sand and a long cloak shrouded her body. Its hood hid eyes that stared black beams into the travellers. Her hands held a crescent moon and a dagger. The travellers looked at each other and muttered. No one knew what she was. One held up a camera and snapped a picture. Its little click sounded by her ankle. They trailed off in their beetle line, talking of where to camp.

The sun set over the water and the travellers agreed they had made a beautiful discovery. They rejoiced for the orange beams whose dazzle faded away, unaware that the sun was quietly tiptoeing out, leaving for fright of the moon.

All about that night, the ground beneath them trembled in ways too subtle for the travellers to detect. Their little speakers muffled a rhythm into the sound of waves charging at the shore. They clinked small bottles and laughed some more. Their tents were pitched behind the monolith's back, surely too high, they thought, to be caught in the rising tide. As they drifted into separate worlds of dreaming, the ocean crept closer. The water grew great arms that dragged it onwards higher still,

past the smoothed stone and the jagged swords, drowning elbows and fingers. As soon as the travellers were soft and snoring, the ocean leapt.

Tents were bashed away, dragged with clawing hands into the water under the watchful moon. The humans were sucked out and away from the hillside to swallow breaths of salt water and fight if they could against the swells. The monolith wore a smirk under the shadow.

When the sun rose they were on the shore again, just as they had been. They laughed at sorry recollections of being flooded in their dreams. They rubbed their heads, then their bellies laughed and began to grumble for food. One of the bunch had the idea to look for fresh seafood. It was not long until they were all out, crouched over rockpools that scarred the beach further northwards. This proved great fun. They lost themselves in a whole day hopping between the rocks and peeping for crabs. The colours of the shells and corals wrapped them up in fascination. Caught in a sunburned trance, mindless, hopping around in their sandals and forgetting everything else of the world.

The statue saw their hunched forms and backs growing red. For her, it was not too long before they grew claws of their own and lost their fleshy humanity to sit amongst the red and green barnacles, scratching over the beach forever. For the travellers the transformation was long and painful. They felt their minds dwindle and forgot their own names. The skin of their bodies hardened. But then they learned the feeling in the earth and understood the messages in the rattling grains of sand. The guardian had never welcomed these human youngsters. She would have them scuttle home to warn others not to set foot upon the beach, or stay forever haunted on its sands.

Pumpkin Sprung!

Brianna McCarthy

The summer had gone quickly in this particular corner of Liminas. The most southern fields and pastures of the Eastern arm of the island were made up of various farms and homesteads. At the time, one particularly plain farm was called Silverglade—for in the early spring mornings, the dew would shine all silvery and bright on the grass. But really this was just a name, and the farm was just that.

Throughout the year Silverglade Farm grew many of the hardy vegetables that would keep villagers fed over the autumn and winter. There were carrots, kale, potatoes, celery and onions. Very far towards the back of the farm, the owners had planted pumpkins. They grew surely and orderly without needing too much water and weren't too bothered by weeds. Their vines had grown thick and straight, and their leaves were laid out flat and green before the sun. When in time little green bulbs grew hanging from the vine, the farmers thought it delightful that they could abandon the plants for most of the season. 'By Autumn we'll have a big pile of plump pumpkins! And that'll sell for a pretty penny,' they said.

The growing plants would chatter at night with silvery voices. But the kale, carrots and then the onions eventually stopped asking the pumpkins about their day, for they had decided pumpkins were quite boring to talk to.

'How thick they are, and dull,' said one chatty kale who was planted nearest the pumpkins.

'I'll ask them, "Did you get enough water? Today's drink seemed a little light, didn't it?" And they'll say, "Yes. Fine." And nothing more! I'll say, "Well, big clumsy boots woman stepped on my neighbour's leaf today. It's been quite a scandal because we think she's being particularly targeted in this stomping. We all agree it's suspicious." And they'll say, "Oh..." and nothing more! Even if they aren't as leafy and outgoing as I am, at least the potatoes have a sense of humour.'

So the pumpkins grew strong all summer, unbothered and unaroused. Amongst themselves they talked little. For the most part they had everything they needed and were fine to keep to themselves. All the pumpkins were at ease but one.

In the very back corner, neighboured by two fences, one plant was restless. To one side there grew quiet pumpkins, stoic and unexciting. To the other side, beyond the fence, wild finches would play amongst long grass and chirp in sweet tones. Growing more and more yellow as the

summer faded, they thought to themselves, ‘Well hey! If these veggies won’t squabble and include me, maybe I’ll hang out with the birds.’

So over the course of a week they set themselves to reach out and grow their viney arm in a new direction. They rolled themselves along the ground in a silly twirling manner and branched beyond the fence, where no pumpkin had grown before.

‘I have seen no pumpkin ever be so bold!’ scoffed the kale. ‘Surely they are mad, or some kind of wacky—who ever thought of leaving the farm? Especially in this heat!’

By the last week of summer the pumpkin was sprung, enjoying quite a holiday beyond the fence. But when the birds became comfortable, they lost all manners to curiosity. One day they hopped and chirped all over the pumpkin and tore off all its leaves. And so in the first week of autumn, the season of the pumpkin, this rogue plant withered, slept and died.

Winter came and quieted the grass. The birds migrated to new pastures. The pumpkin vine rotted under rain and ice, and its brothers and sisters by now had been eaten. The kale surely was still chatting somewhere.

When the sun returned and the frost melted, the pumpkin was surprised to slowly awaken. They grew back as just a little sprout and were suddenly alive. Their roots had stayed underground and when the soil warmed they emerged again, as though they had taken a very long and energising nap. So the pumpkin stretched out further into the wild, running like a child to their freedom. They longed for a cool shady spot under an old tree in the forest, where they could watch foxes prowl and hear the wise musings of the trees.

They died again, two or three more times, but their hope never faded. The pumpkin had found the power to run further into the bush than any before and had bounced back to run again from the deep rest of winter. To think their crazy idea had taken them so far! The pumpkin lived on free as a cowboy, wild and yellow and glad.

Caves

Brianna McCarthy

There's a story told about these caves. The first person to ever come down here, before these paths were cleared out and lit up, was in fact a little girl. Her name is not remembered. It was her father who found the entrance, one of his many discoveries. But neither he nor his crew could shrink themselves enough to shimmy down the crevice, lest they break their shoulders and scratch themselves all over. So, he called upon his daughter who was eight and asked her to be very brave. He asked her to take this one opportunity to make history and explore the mysterious room. He said that no one ever could have seen this place before... what impossible things could the earth be hiding?

The earth keeps hold of everything that's buried, wraps the memories safe in cool layers of humus. To knock through and crawl amongst its deepest, most frozen strata is to see moments of time passed, living one on top of the other. It presses down and squeezes the matter into harder form. Not only that but it cooks away to make some of the world's most glistening treasures.

A rope was tied around her waist. The speleologist, one of the men trained in the art of cave exploration, said it was the very best rope they had. He fastened a wooden plank under her legs that could act as a seat as she was dropped down. 'It'll be about a hundred metres, we think. But we won't take you all the way. You've just got to hang there for a moment and tell us what you see. Alright?'

Then her father came to her with a candle in a dish, and it too was fixed to the ropes and cables, right by her hip. She said goodbye, putting on her brave face. Then she lent back into the apparatus, just as she had been shown. The crew nodded.

The first step she had to do herself, shimmying into the manhole and dropping down feet first. She then found her seat on the wooden plank and held onto the ropes as she was lowered slowly by the incremental hand movements of a team of men. At first she stayed looking up at their warm, lit and nervous faces. They all put on big smiles for her, and the image got smaller and smaller as she sank deeper below. Soon she felt the cold, ghostly air of a room that must be huge. She could tell by feeling it alone. Her eyes took time to adjust from the brightly lit, established chambers and see into the dark unknown. For a long time, all was black and quiet.

The men above heard her mumble first from the depths and pulled themselves by the ear closer to the opening. 'Hear it echo...' whispered one speleologist.

Then he was shaken into action as the girl's cries and screams exploded into the cave. All hands snatch at her ropes to pull her back quickly as can be done.

'What do you see!?' her father called out. 'What do you see!'

A yowie with thick black hair. Beastly, though not like a monster. He steps lightly over snow packed mountains. He's in a hurry, finding food to bring to his wife. The land close by doesn't offer much. So, he pokes his finger into the hole in the trunk of a frozen gum tree. There isn't a rustle or a smell inside. But at least he'll be able to bring home the handful of herbs and berries that he's found. He thinks she might need water too, and so treads downhill.

The yowie waiting is beginning to sweat and cramp. But her blanket and her little candle keep her at ease in the cave. Out of the mouth she can see that glowing moon, bright as it has ever been, and the candlelight floating about her partner as he moseys down into the landscape ahead. She wriggles herself from her lounge to sit closer to its opening, where she can look up to the sky and sleeping trees, feel the winter air on her swollen belly. Under the stars she does not feel afraid. Upon the earth she does not feel alone. It'll be a few hours still before the baby comes.

The girl wriggles as the shadows before her snake between the half-lit structures of stone. Another vision comes.

Further into the back of the cave, through some narrow cracks, are secret black passages running like a maze all through the limestone. They delve below the mountain itself, where low-roofed waterways and glittering veins of silver lead to a round room. In the middle there's a pool of water, still and bluer than blue. It has its own light, glowing into every corner of a place that the sun hasn't touched in eons.

A wizard or madman in a blue robe goes down there before the water has any light. He's brought a chalice to collect the water and has come a long way for this pure

essence. He licks at a scratch on his arm before leaning down over the edge of the pool. When his eyes meet the water and its watery lips lap in the dark, the wizard becomes enchanted. He falls, then sinks, and gives no fight.

His robe is made of a heavy fibre and he sinks quickly to the bottom. As he dies his power bleeds out of him, blue and bright and eager for greatness. His magic stains the water, tingling luminous forevermore. He lies down there now as a skeleton, still as the stones and surrounded by that mystical blue. His staff is still propped against the entryway.

‘What do you see!?’ A voice echoes. ‘What do you see!?’

A Hill to Lie On

Lucia Tường Vy Nguyễn

The evening breaks with song. A woman wrapped in a shawl sits at a piano, adjusts her webcam on its mantle, and begins to play. Her chords drift into digital space, a space which yields the bandwidth to hold even the deepest waves of grief. As much as language can ostracise those who do not understand, Melanie Hsu's vocalising at her piano follows a cadence all can comprehend. She sings free of words.

To mourn the lives lost in the massage parlour shootings in Atlanta, Georgia, NYC-based sex worker rights organisation Red Canary Song host an online vigil over Zoom and YouTube livestream at 11am on March 19, 2021. Most mourners are veiled as binary code in the rising view count. The names of the lives lost are read out from one host's bedroom—their Westernised and traditional names are washed, dressed and embalmed in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean and American Sign Language.

In 2017, a Chinese sex worker died after enduring sexual assault, coercion and raids into her workplace in Flushing, Queens by the New York Police Department. Red Canary Song hatched from this death to assist and protect migrant sex workers. In 2019, BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services released a report titled 'Working with Migrant Sex Workers in Sydney's Lower-End Brothels', which offered a cross-section of over one hundred Culturally and Linguistically Diverse women (predominantly of Chinese heritage) in the local sex work industry—many of whom were struggling with poor mental health from general and internalised stigma regarding sex work, which prevented them from speaking openly about doubt, conflict or traumatic incidents in their professions.

In early 2021, a white supremacist opened fire in three Atlantan massage parlours and killed eight individuals, six of whom were Asian female massage and sex workers. Red Canary's funeral song for these lives arrives after a prelude that has stretched out its lament for years and years.

Sex sells, but sad sex sells even better.

Elise Song claims this in her dissertation titled 'Asian American Sex Workers Book Club', a phenomenological interrogation into Asian American (non-)representation in prescribed literature of the American school curriculum. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Song conducted an online book club with three different Asian sex workers—an undertaking that, she concluded,

‘only re-emphasised the invisible identity I experience as a daughter, student, educator, lover.’ While sex work begins with commodification of the body, the specificities of its military and imperialist history across East and Southeast Asia have also transmogrified the Asian woman’s body into the ‘organising principle’ of her lived experiences in homogenous white spaces—and not in America alone.

If Asian-Americans are considered ‘model minorities whose putative success and assimilation is pointed to as evidence of America’s colour-blind meritocracy and openness’ (as Juliana Chang writes in her 2012 book *Inhuman Citizenship*), then Asian-Australian achievement is weaponised as proof of Australia’s laidback egalitarianism and neo-colonial multicultural fantasy. My casual position at a Sydney-based Asian art gallery sits under the hazel eye of a seemingly permanent white authority on ‘Oriental’ art across artistic and pedagogical institutions in Australia. Writer and editor Sheila Ngoc Pham recalls an adolescent memory of asking former Prime Minister John Howard for a photo, to which he obliged and asked, ‘So where are you from?’ Howard’s question is one often dismissed for its harmless ignorance, but it is a question that is lashed at non-White Australians over and over until it cuts deep, scarring us with the reminder that our claim to being ‘Australian’ is unacceptable without a cultural prefix. But all in good fun. Since Howard’s dismissal of the 2005 Cronulla Riots as idiosyncratic to Australia’s racial tolerance, this country has witnessed its national flag draped over the shoulders of white supremacists, flown over Neo-Nazi congregations and raised at recent anti-vaccination ‘freedom’ protests in Australia’s urban centres—not a perversion of cloth, but a donning of imperial uniform. Pham perhaps captures it best: ‘Seeing Dad’s flagpole out the front of our house in Bankstown, you’d think the double-brick house belonged to rednecks—or a true patriot, depending on your political orientation.’

Chang writes that an immigrant’s narrative must be racially painful to be considered for a seat at the table. ‘Writers who do not produce stereotypical images of their group are up for commercial risk of failure,’ Chang says. Make it violent, make it painful, make it humiliating, and people will cry in ecstasy or laughter. ‘Me love you long time’, a sales pitch extended by a passing Vietnamese sex worker to two U.S. Marines in Stanley Kubrick’s *Fullmetal Jacket*, has conjured up a spectral paratext drifting over neo-colonial narratives of the ‘foreign’ Asian female body.

It’s just a joke, though. I’m sure the comedians could stand to be heckled.

So we’ll twist and tie the punchline, hands free.

In her audiovisual project [‘Love Me Long Time’](#), photographer Dorcas Tang archives portraits and oral interviews of Asian-Australian or Asian diasporic women and non-binary people who have shared their thoughts on desire, intimacy and cultural identity with her. The website is bound together like a family photo album, flipping from one vibrant conversation to the next like

the intimate brush and glide from verso to recto in a book. An audio player sits next to a spine that runs down the middle. ‘Within the broad umbrella of “Asianness” [...] I think there must be something that ties or binds us together,’ Dorcas mentions to me, echoing the preface of ‘Love Me Long Time’:

While there are no resolute answers, I hope that this work offers a catalyst for conversation, where we are free to hold our own ambiguous truths. Ultimately, it is a collaborative archive that rewrites desire from our perspective, offering dynamic realities in place of flattened tropes.

Undergirded by questions of sex, some of these truths pertain to discomfort, some of them to nostalgia, some to humour, some to resentment. One of these truths is mine, a silly escapade that I half-laugh through about my lip getting bruised in someone’s car. In Dorcas’ ongoing citation of different Asian identities, a few testimonies have been repeated: that pleasure is about feeling safe or seen, and that perhaps, as Asian minorities, we need more freedom to express our joy.

‘There’s so much [of being a person of colour] that’s like, “Woah, hell yeah. This has been great.” I’m just exploring stuff that’s funny, or having a great time. What you want, what you desire, how you’re being desired—that ties to your happiness, it’s on the same plane. So just to counter [these dominant narratives...] not to say the grief we feel about these violent incidents shouldn’t be talked about or shown, but I do think even the news coverage in general profits off pain,’ Dorcas says.

From its sunset-hued landing page, ‘Love Me Long Time’ resists the design of many standard photography sites: often curated in grid-like layouts, which Dorcas and web designer Janey Li believe resemble a ‘colonial gaze, like people catalogued and stored away from imperial processes [... Subjects] are not really giving their consent [to be photographed], or maybe they never gave their consent.’ In ‘Love Me Long Time’, resistance—in the form of care, consent and kinship—shales the photographic ‘subject’ from the frame, to welcome the friend instead.

In November 2021, several months after the sentencing of the Atlantan shooter for four counts of murder, Red Canary Song (with abolitionist coalition Survived & Punished) released a statement to address the additional hate crime charges being pursued against the shooter by the District Attorney in Georgia. What happened in Atlanta ‘should not be collapsed or simplified into the mainstream narratives of anti-Asian violence,’ it reads. ‘While we do see these killings as racially motivated and gender-based, we disagree with the call for more hate crimes sentencing as a solution for violence against Asian women and communities.’

Sex worker archetypes remain culturally antithetical to any associations of moral perfection and thus are particularly painful. They are squeezed into the margins that lie beyond what is perfect, or even permissible. While sex work is decriminalised in Australia, violence faced by women of colour in frontline jobs is a tangled intersection of sexualised racism and policing across sovereign borders.

Red Canary Song's written statement brings us to a pause, or a caesura between the punitive sentencing on two settler colonies drafted by the same Empire. The serialised chapters of American and Australian settler-colonial violence now run in enjambment with each other, printing the same sentences on Indigenous and non-white bodies in ink, blood and time. As Red Canary Song argues, 'efforts to link racial violence to criminal consequence [are] symbolic gestures for the State to rehabilitate its own image and reaffirm its own legitimacy in the ongoing crises of police violence [...] abuse within prisons and children in detention camps rages on.' The number of children in Australian camps is sparse, though of course, that is because time slipped by, and those children are no longer children.

The voice of Kai Lin Zhang, sex worker and Red Canary Song founder, cracks over the Zoom call.

To reduce mothers, sisters, daughters to an extraction [...] this is what sex workers are faced with all the time. Reduced to the ideas of others and punished for the self-loathing of others. It is so violent to erase a human being in this way and it leaves a human lost in translation [...] As Asian women, we are already seen as outsiders to society and we're so often fetishised, we're silenced, we're reduced to an idea. But add to this Asian womanhood the outsiderhood of being a migrant, a sex worker—that combination is deadly.

It is a deadly price that is paid quietly, long muffled by bombs and gunfire. In his 2002 treatise on literary resistance in Asian America, Viet Thanh Nguyen wrote:

Asian American females have been stigmatised as icons of military prostitution during these infamous wars and that hostility is taken out on her in the bedroom [...] It is through remarkable navigation of her body that she might control her outcome [as 'whore' or 'wife'].

There is only so much a body can navigate when silence and smiles only prove to be soft armour. In his 18th century text, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, Thomas Gisborne writes:

[Female] fortitude is not to be sought merely on the rampart, on the deck, on the field of battle. Its place is no less in the chamber of sickness and pain, in the retirement of anxiety, grief and disappointment.

These spaces of conflict are not mutually exclusive but converge on the site of the migrant sex worker's body, which is forcibly made the field of battle and ultimately, the chamber of healing and grief.

In its 2019 report 'Working with Migrant Sex Workers in Sydney's Lower-End Brothels', BaptistCare notes a strong connection between their respondents enjoying work in the sex industry and knowing where to access support for potentially dangerous or traumatic client experiences. Over 90% of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse women surveyed did not have permanent residency and 88% did not have a signed contract, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitative labour conditions, threat of deportation, and pressure to comply with whatever precarious working environments they find themselves employable in. These nameless faces, perhaps protected for their own fear of public shame, are cloned in Western art and literature. Upon reading Amy Tan's short story 'Rules for Virgins', one sex worker from Song's dissertation asked:

Do these characters ever feel a sense of freedom of heart and imagination to explore and discover herself outside the confines of the pleasure house? Does she dream of other things? Want another life? Or are silk and pearls the extent of her wanting?

Sex work is still criminalised in most Asian countries, often survival work for a chance at financial hope. This stigma translates across any mother tongue or adopted language, and filters into diaspora.

Reports on sex worker mental health suggest that statistics may also be skewed by the discrepancies between how English and other languages articulate concepts of emotional wellbeing. ‘Stress’ becomes a ubiquitous, all-encompassing descriptor for mental health struggles in a language like Mandarin, which often stigmatises discussing or treating mental illness in the clinical spaces of Western medicine. As noted in the BaptistCare report, ‘stress’ is used by migrants to express emotional experiences that may be diagnosed as symptoms of depression or anxiety. Voicing pain is difficult in cultures that stem from a Confucian emphasis on quiet stoicism in the face of difficulty rather than speaking up (or talking back).

Keep your head down, keep working, the ‘stress’ will leave in due time.

I keep my head down and plunge it into twilight—into a twilight 3D model world created as a collaborative work between seven artists from different countries around the world. We convene here, on a virtual hillside braided through with creeks, larkspur and orchard grass. The inhabitants are butterflies made of glass, a gleaming cyber squid named Naughty Luz, and an oyster rippling iridescent greens and blues. There is recorded birdsong here. A mild March wind combs through my hair.

A few weeks later, on a Zoom call with three U.S.-based artists who worked to build this virtual world (Grace Kwon and Samantha Vassor, co-founders of BIPOC-focused digital collective Close isn’t Home, and Chinese American artist Kathy Guo), I am reminded of how self-care exists in Asian communities. I met these three girls after responding to a callout extended by Close isn’t Home to submit a proposal on an art piece encircling the idea of ‘transformation’, which would be modelled into this virtual landscape named [‘March Winds’](#). Nothing dies here. Everything grows from a sea of grass.

We call over Zoom during a countless wave in the pandemic.

‘Lately I’ve been thinking about how self-care is so embedded in Asian culture,’ Kathy says. She has recently designed a piece of 3D art inspired by qigong, the careful choreography of breath, meditation and movement regularly practised by elderly East Asian communities in parks and courtyards.

‘The only way I know my parents love me is if they ask, “Did you eat today?” Instead of saying “Oh, how was your day? I love you...”. That’s not their love language.’

I ask her what she thinks of the disparity between taking care of the physical body and the mind in Asian cultures—neither of us have the answers.

Grace asks me about my work at the art gallery here in Sydney. I mention the Asian women I am lucky to work with, whom I feel comfortable airing my thoughts to—though this self-governance, however comforting, is still presided over by a litany of white female authorities.

Grace once interned at a major institutional gallery where contemporary Asian artists were grouped in the amorphous ‘Asian’ section, ‘with the arts of China, like, literally with artworks from 2000 B.C. No one really saw that as a problem besides BIPOC.’ These arts of China, along with the arts of Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, and all other Oceanian cultures were presided over by a white female curator.

Often the narratives we build to remind others (and ourselves) of our belonging are those of suffering and trauma—we braved oceanic tides, sovereign borders and linguistic frontlines to be here. Diasporas cross the frontier and regenerate through violence in a New World we were forced into by those who stormed our Old World.

I don’t want to centre suffering and trauma in my narratives, to reduce whole people to threadbare ideas of victims. But if a woman’s lot is to suffer, as the Korean aphorism goes, what is there to say? Let me lie. A woman, a canary, what’s the difference? Red Canary Song was founded because a woman jumped off a balcony and didn’t fly. Cage the canary and take it into the darkest recesses of a coal mine to save yourself.

I admit to the others that I write best when I’m angry—we all laugh. One of the girls mentions open-carry gun laws in her hometown, and I fall quiet.

Kathy asks if she can read something for us. It’s called ‘Why I Don’t Talk About the Body: A Polemic’ by Gordon Hall.

We each nod separately in our bedrooms. I woke up in mine having strolled home late from a pub the night before—an autumn evening ready to clamp its jaws in a cold snap. The other girls have not been able to do the same in their hometowns, each working from within four walls somewhere in the American South. Kathy clears her throat and begins to read:

By describing bodies as generalised ways that rely on the most visible markers of difference, we serve ourselves up in simplified, consumable representational bites that painfully undercut the complexity, particularity, and multiplicity of our work and lived experiences. This language conjures a world in which our bodies have value only insofar as they serve as public examples. This is not a way of being valued that we should accept for ourselves or promote for the benefit of institutions and their publics.

We have this conversation exactly one month after the shootings. On the afternoon of our call, I attend a solidarity vigil with a friend outside Customs House in Sydney, holding a sign that reads:

Not Your Miss or Madame. After the vigil, a few white men approach us and ask to take our photo. One of them doesn't ask, but films us instead.

Song's dissertation was written in fulfilment of a Doctor of Education, and I second her agenda—rewriting the stories and treatment of our bodies first requires the amputation of educational policy and curricula. The Australian Government's ongoing dismissal of critical race theory in the shadow of onshore detention and a former Immigration Minister-turned-Prime Minister makes me wince. And so, I crack my knuckles and uncap my pen. Gisborne says fortitude is not always sought on the rampart, on the deck, on the field of battle—but the field of battle is not always a physical convergence point. It can be on a dusky hillside in virtual space, where 3D models reside in protest, or in recorded voices that muse on desire and love, or it can be in writing. And in writing, I am bringing the field of battle to these men, because they placed my female Asian body and those of my female forebears in the chamber of sickness and pain before I could even pick up a pen.

The name of the woman who catalysed Red Canary Song's founding was Yang Song. In Mandarin, 'Song' can mean praise, pine tree, large mountain. In Korean, it can mean long-lived. In English, it can mean musical phrases forming recognisable and repeated patterns, used by animals for defence or for connection. And so, we connect in virtual space, singing the names of those lost so that they will live on in shared memory.

The vigil closes with a hymn. There are words sung this time, coming to me in my morning from someone else's night like a serenade, an aubade, a dirge sung by birds from behind their screens, ringing on and on outwards across oceans, across virtual space. Its reprisal returns to close Red Canary Song's November statement, a reminder that love is the propellant for a more just world, where those struggling in the intersection of stigma and violence will 'fight to survive and provide for their loved ones nonetheless.' Digital time slips into summer, pandemic tides still tonguing the foot of our hill. The sky is beginning to hiccup and glitch from swarms of La Niña clouds. It's prophesied to cry a lot this summer. The mynas are screaming through the crickets. Past the hill, I walk home on a carpet of fallen jacaranda, and spread my arms to cradle the rain.

I wish to honour the lives of Delaina Ashley Yaun, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Paul Andre Michels, Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, and Yong Ae Yue. I acknowledge the immense emotional and educational labour carried out by generations of Vietnamese people before me (particularly the women in my life) and other Asian diasporic communities. Not only in raising posterity, but also in withstanding the institutionalised fear and hatred surrounding them as refugees and migrants, in the same Western countries that waged imperialist conquest over their homeland for centuries. Sovereignty was never ceded, and colonisation is ongoing. I pay my respects to the Cabrogal, Wangal and Bidjigal people of the Darug Nation, traditional custodians of the land, water and skies where this work was written.

From 'Trust Fall' and 'Summer Fade'

D. Vrtaric

insomniac

body ruined yesterday
brain warped tomorrow
signal got distorted
pressure crystal dreaming

peach fuzz jockstrap
cornucopia from dust
ear among currawong
solstice spurned liver

coughy phlegm tearing
dissolve throat fibre
mad distant wanting
smoke spinach egg

To the person whose name i can no longer hold in

I like the way things sound
when they get written down

An old slavic liturgy
with all the boring that reminds me
the only way to get to bethlehem is to slouch

You ran twigs over my
ears instead when I
ejected

On new years I knew
I would soon undo

Leaving alms exposed
for mourning sun
under the pillar I worship

Like how the sun shepherds
the sunflower heads
so they feed

Like how Grandma did
muttering over
dumplings

I hear discord
when I taste your teeth with my pupil
like how bad music is
really good

Like how unresolved chords
suspend the sacred and profane
in tense harmony

I lay glitter all along you

Under your pearls un-insides
charting a course through
the flood when you pour
out your poor dumb mouth
Crackling cellophane
a poor dumb flame
burns sweat
reflecting
the heart of light
etched along
the poor dumb pearls
where your eyes
were

Blue boy

A steel chain
for his steel gaze
blue boy steal
thunder from my lungs
resuscitated
his haunches over mine
after crashing
in our wave

[illegible]

Tender breeze teases
under edge of glacier lake
fathoms fate

Fatty salmon over rice

You bring the light in
when you come
and when I do the same

The buzz when you ring
bringing fatty salmon over purple rice
You
caught in the tide with
Branches tear my mouth
when I kneel

Heartstrings spasm
knots tight against chest
demons dance along
jerking at the end

Ropes unravel
blood lets
into brine

I speak into you
with fading
breath

Herdsmen of the sun
you bring the light in again
when you come

From Leftover Loss

Natasha Pontoh-Supit

CHARACTERS

GHOST/SARAH, 16. *Sarcastic, mysterious, and hopeful. Used to be Hayley and Sarah's friend. Wears a traditional ghost sheet costume. This character is made up in Hayley's mind and only Hayley can see them.*

HAYLEY, 15. *Stubborn, caught in her head but smart. Her school uniform is neatly organised and at the correct length.*

JESSICA, 15. *Bubbly, talkative and desperate to make friends. She looks like what sunshine would be as a person. New girl at school.*

FRANKIE, 16. *Artistic, passionate and blunt. Her school uniform and bag are covered with band and environmental badges and safety pins. She has an edgy vibe.*

SISTER AGNES, 30s-40s. *Strict, devoted and holds traditional Catholic values. She wears a Nun tunic and crucifix.*

BACKGROUND: It is the start to a new term, first day of school, and Jessica (or Jess) is the new kid on the block. Frankie has been assigned to introduce Jessica around the school and the two quickly become friends. Another of Frankie's friends, Hayley, has been going through a rough patch—during the holidays, Hayley and Frankie's friend Sarah passed away. Both Frankie and Hayley are still grieving. Hayley is acting a bit odd, as she is suddenly seeing the Ghost of Sarah wherever she goes; however, only she can interact with the Ghost.

Sister Agnes is one of the school's most passionate and devoted nuns. She teaches History. Sister Agnes is strict and knowledgeable. She also has an extreme side, as revealed in the following scene.

Frankie introduces Hayley to Jessica, and instantly Hayley does not like her. Jessica is desperate to make friends and fit in, so she keeps chatting, trying to get on Hayley's good side. During this interaction Frankie notices Hayley talking to herself but in fact she is talking to the Ghost. Seeing this, Frankie confides in Jessica to see if she's noticed as well. When she confirms Frankie's observations, they decide something needs to be done.

SCENE

A room. Dimly lit with candles around, a bit like a ceremony.

FRANKIE

Okay, she should be here any minute now.

JESSICA

Are you sure this is a good idea?

FRANKIE

Yep, it's a good idea. I've done the research.

JESSICA

Okay?

FRANKIE

She's never acted this way before, she said she's seeing and hearing things. That's not normal. An exorcism is the only solution.

JESSICA

I don't know if I should be here...

FRANKIE

Shush. It's fine.

JESSICA

Frankie, are you okay? I don't really think we should be doing this. I know you and Hayley—

FRANKIE

Yep. I'm—it's fine.

Beat.

Oh, do you mind doing the candles?

Jessica reluctantly sighs and nods yes. Jessica places the candles down. Hayley still isn't here.

JESSICA

So, where is she?

FRANKIE

Just give her a second.

Jessica and Frankie are waiting. Frankie quickly grabs her phone and sends Hayley a message.

JESSICA

What are you—

FRANKIE

Shush. I just messaged her that I got my period and didn't bring any pads and I've got a huge blood spot on the back of my skirt and have the biggest cramps in my life and I'm craving a chocolate bar from the canteen. Now stop talking, she'll be here any minute.

Hayley rushes in with a chocolate bar and necessity, Ghost follows. Ghost is only seen by Hayley.

HAYLEY

I got your message. I got your chocolate. Listen I'm sorry for being a—

Hayley notices Jessica and the candles.

What are you doing here? AND what's going on here? What is this?

GHOST

What's with the candles? Spooky.

FRANKIE

Look Hayley we just want to—

JESSICA

(to Frankie) I don't think this is a good idea.

HAYLEY

Want to, what? What do you want to do?

GHOST

Oh, you know what this is like. It's like that episode in that show. Where the friends tricked someone into coming to the park and then they stabbed and killed her. Yeah... the body was never found.

Enter Sister Agnes.

SISTER AGNES

Young Ladies! This area is off limits!

Sister Agnes notices the candles and the three girls.

FRANKIE

Sister Agnes, we can explain, we—

JESSICA

Yeah, it's not what you think—

GHOST

Yes, please explain.

SISTER AGNES

Ladies!

Sister Agnes goes towards the door, slams it shut.

SISTER AGNES

If you wanted to do an exorcism you should have called a professional. Like myself.

GHOST

I'll be damned!

Ghost runs to the other side of room. Sister Agnes pulls from underneath her robe a Holy Cross and a spray bottle with holy water, labelled for emergencies only. Frankie is eager, Jessica is concerned. Hayley does not want to be there.

SISTER AGNES

First, I must cleanse you all.

Suddenly Sister Agnes uses the holy water to cleanse all the girls. They are sprayed with holy water.

FRANKIE

What was that?

JESSICA

My eye...

Ghost is in the background losing their shit.

HAYLEY

Okay, this is really unnecessary.

SISTER AGNES

Okay now the lights.

The lights slowly start to dim.

More.

Dimmer.

More.

Dimmer.

MORE.

Dim to blackout.

Okay. Too dark.

Lights are to a perfect setting.

Okay now girls please take a seat—

JESSICA

Oh, I'm not really meant to be here. I just—

Sister Agnes pushes the girls down.

SISTER AGNES

Please take the spirit within this room with you to your heavenly plains. Give me strength, Almighty God, to show the spirit the righteous path.

GHOST

Not this!

SISTER AGNES

The power of Christ compels you.

HAYLEY

What's going on??

The lights start to go crazy and the room starts to shake.

SISTER AGNES

The power of Christ compels you. The power of Christ compels you.

FRANKIE

I don't think this is working.

SISTER AGNES

The power of Christ compels you. The power of Christ compels you. The power—

School bell rings.

SISTER AGNES

Oh. That's time. Anyways, it's time for choir.

The girls sit in shock. Exit Sister Agnes.

Beat.

GHOST

I'm still here. I'm still here. (*continues talking to themselves in a whisper*)

HAYLEY

What was that about?

FRANKIE

You needed help, I—I didn't know what else to do.

HAYLEY

So you thought you'd just perform an EXCORISM! And all of a sudden, it'd be

better!?

FRANKIE

Yes—

HAYLEY

What is *Jessica* even doing here?

JESSICA

Frankie said—

HAYLEY

Stop. Just stop.

Hayley and Ghost calm themselves down.

HAYLEY & GHOST

Everything's...

GHOST

Not...

HAYLEY & GHOST

OK.

Beat.

JESSICA

I just wanted to be friends.

Jessica gets up & exits.

Frankie and Hayley both suddenly get up and face each other.

Beat.

GHOST

This is the part where you speak to each other...

HAYLEY

I don't want to be friends with her.

FRANKIE

Because of Sarah...

Hayley nods.

FRANKIE

She was my friend too. I miss her too. I know no one can replace her. But we have to keep going. Together.

Beat.

I think you'd like Jess if you gave her a chance.

Frankie exits, leaving Hayley with Ghost.

The Mother's Wound

Katrina Trinh

Author's note: This piece and much of my work focuses on my personal journey with family relationships and trauma. It invites readers to become aware of intimate moments drawn from my lived experiences and intergenerational traumas that have manifested in everyday painful conversations with others. It is testimony to the endlessly complicated dynamics of hurt and damage. A lot of themes such as culture-specific norms are touched lightly in this piece, yet they have a fully weighted presence in my narrative and life.

'The Mother's Wound' reckons with my mother who made a lot of sacrifices for my family and those around her. The influence of my courageous and complex mother—devastated by the ripple effect of her own traumas—forms part of the spine of this work, which explores a central question: after trauma, how do I love? My piece leans into tenderness and feels like proof that trauma is something you continue to live with, and that never fully disappears.

When I turned 18 years old and immediately moved out of my family home, I thought that I'd finally earned my long-awaited freedom and the chapter of a new beginning. I simply assumed that I had left the wounds behind me, but they reappeared into my adulthood and emanated through the course of my relationships.

The mothering experience I had growing up as a second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese Australian was complex, dark and painful so the trauma festered in the shadows out of sight. As a result, I developed dysfunctional coping mechanisms.

This pain has been called the 'mother's wound'. It is rooted in the relationship we have with our mothers that we pass onto following generations in patriarchal cultures. In my milieu, Chinese-Vietnamese culture-specific norms and Western dominantly white society contributed to the way I processed the pain.

Both my mother and I still carry our pain. But I am different from my mother.

I still hear the echo of her cold voice inside my own during conversations and quarrels I have with my partner, and it hits a tender part in my heart that I forget is still slowly healing.

When I lose my temper with my partner during fights and become overly rigid, it runs from a deep reserve of anger that I once never knew existed inside of me. If my inner child feels threatened or hurt, the anger bursts out now and then. My fearful and sensitive inner child carries the mother wound.

Often, my mother lost her temper if I spoke back at any time. To discipline me, she would bring up tales of her agony and affliction. She left her family behind to come to Australia for a better life. She was the main provider for our family and worked in a labour-intensive job seven days a week to ensure we had a better life. She was the single expatriate in a first-world country

amongst her siblings, so she was also the anchor for another household—her family in Vietnam. There was a lot of burden and weight on her shoulders. These were her wounds.

She would angrily shout out that she did not deserve a disobedient child like me after going through more than a decade of suffering. To her, I dishonoured the family. As a parent, she was entitled to show resentment, frustration or other forms of negative feelings but I was forced to suffocate in silence. I could not question or argue with my parents. Their words were the law.

Raised in traditional culture, I felt a sense of affinity and loyalty towards my family. It is ‘filial piety’ and it meant we were expected to place the interests of our family and relatives before our own. I agree that it holds important moral value, but it continues to be easily lost in translation where superiority is misused in age-old cultural traditions and household hierarchy.

The forces of authoritarian filial piety reigned in my household, and I was overwhelmed by the ample pressures that came along with it. I had to pliantly suppress my wishes to fulfil my parents’ wishes because of their seniority. I was averse to this because there were conservative values and sexist attitudes enmeshed in it. My parents held absolute authority over us, but it was a double bind for me. It was made clear that I wasn’t equal to my brothers.

As a third culture child, the culture I was a part of was unlike my parents’—the intergenerational acculturation gap caused strife within our family. I struggled in two divergent worlds, each with onerous systems. One was oppressive and sexist backed by parental precedence. The other, although Western and egalitarian, wasn’t always a friendly welcoming place for Asians. I had no sense of belonging.

I gathered up all my courage to address deep issues with my mother on innumerable occasions. I wanted to confide in her about my greatest sorrows, insecurities and grief but she was always the victim, and she would tell me I didn’t know what real-world problems were because I was a child. Her seniority had some kind of power to decide whose feelings were valid. It was messy, ugly and tore me apart inside.

In a perfect world, people would be rational and composed to have constructive discussions about their issues over a cup of tea. The reality is most people are too emotionally attached to keep their ears open to the harsh truths without reacting in some way. Eventually, I decided I no longer wanted to tolerate or be on speaking terms with my mother.

Piecing together the fragments of her difficult family history, I know that my engendering justified rage is purely the release of countless generations of suffocated screams from my female ancestors. But it stands equal to my sincere appreciation and reverence towards my mother for doing the best she could with the beliefs she inherited and the circumstances she was given. I hold a special place in my heart for all the women in my family who have survived and conquered in

their own ways, in spite of all this. I am certain of one thing and that is—we all have strength, prowess and tenacity.

The wariness of my pain grows every day. It happens when I'm envious of the close bonds my friends have with their mothers. I only know of my strained relationship with my mother and emotionally abandoned inner child. It sounds counteractive that I am bringing my pain above the surface but it's releasing my hidden heartache and trauma I have tucked away for so long. I use these feelings as ammunition to create better relationships around me. The catharsis is my pathway to healing and reclaiming power again.

I honour the negative emotions and use their force to piece myself together as a consciously aware adult and to nurse the undernourished child in me. I make it a goal to respond better whenever I am emotionally triggered rather than react from that place of pain. I am quietly repairing parts of myself even if it upsets the balance of others.

This is how I am breaking out of the mother wound cycle. I am finally truly free.

Final Stages

Benjamin D. Muir

Content warning: this story contains fictionalised accounts of graphic violence.

I. Minutes to Midnight in Clown World

The day began like any other. You sat in the sweltering heat as American President Nikocado Avocado gave his daily address livestream and mukbang.¹ The doors were locked. The doors were always locked. They couldn't operate them that way.

'Hey America!' he chirped. 'I hope y'all are doing well! Today I'm going to eat a thousand dollars' worth of Chick-Fil-A, who've generously agreed to conditionally rescind their anti-LGBT stance to be today's sponsor. Chick-Fil-A; tastes like freedom!'

President Nikocado's assistant put the burger in his mouth. The president could no longer reach his mouth due to his immense size. He talked while chewing, addressing the virtual crowd. 'Oh my God, folks,' he said in his singsong voice, mouth still full. 'How're y'all doin' today? I'm just out here with a thooousand dollars' worth of Chick-Fil-A, here to deliver a public service announcement: please get vaccinated, the chances of dying are 0.000032% whereas death from the zombie fungus is guaran—'

The live chat on the left side of the screen was at once awash with a barrage of threats and animosity. The president's speech was interrupted by a cadence of shattering glass and a hail of gunfire. Multiple ruptures, blossoms of distended flesh became apparent across his vast torso as the president began to wail theatrically. The staccato of machine gun fire continued somewhere off camera. 'They shot me again!' he screamed. 'They want to shoot me!'

'Threats neutralised, Mr. President, sir!' announced a suited man, who had just walked on-screen in front of the bleeding, wailing heap of flesh.

¹ [Nik Perry, better known as Nikocado Avocado](#) is one of the world's foremost mukbangers. *Mukbang*, translated into 'eat cast', is a subgenre of YouTube video originating in South Korea where an individual eats copious amounts of food while speaking candidly to their viewers about their lives. Nik Perry, initially a professional violinist and raw vegan advocate, was a popular YouTuber for many years before he began to make Mukbangs. Nik quit veganism due to ongoing issues with his health such as a B12 deficiency before rebranding his YouTube channel to focus on thrice-daily non-vegan junk food binges. Most Mukbangers eat balanced diets outside of their videos and make one Mukbang a week. Nik's extreme productivity has seen him gain over a hundred kilos in several years and seen his health, mental state and relationships severely deteriorate. Viewers have little interest in his eating anymore and tend to focus on his public breakdowns, failing relationship with his boyfriend Orlin Home and his feuds with other YouTubers. He cannot stop his spiral, as he is dependent on his close-to-ten-million subscribers for income. After Donald Trump decisively proved that you could be a reality show host and become President, it was only a matter of time before niche YouTubers had their shot. Given that Generation Z consider TikTokers, YouTubers and so on legitimate celebrities it surprised nobody when Nikocado Avocado became President in the 2050s.

‘Ugghhh,’ the President groaned. ‘Plug my holes, please. I must give this address. Thank God for the fucking nerve damage. You’ll never get me! My fifth heart is going strong—’

‘Sir!’ snapped the suited man. ‘Do you know how many blood thinners you’re on? You need immediate medical attention!’

‘I have a duty to my country and my Patreon subscribers,’ President Nikocado continued, ‘to complete this address and tray of Chick-Fil-A... please get vaccinated, there has been *one* recorded medical complication. For the love of GOD!’

You turned the stream off and sat with your head in your hands. They were moist with the sweat of your brow. You could hear the scratching at the door. The fungus zombies couldn’t operate locks, though. You’d never actually seen them manage to turn the handle of an unlocked door, either. The curve should have been flattened months ago. The lockdown had lasted over seven hundred days. There was no end in sight. You decided to try the news. Tens of thousands had come to protest in Sydney. They refused to wear masks. They were grabbing the shambling Cordyceps zombies and biting them to make a point. You weren’t sure what point. The zombies should have bitten them, but they didn’t. This wasn’t a horror movie. They simply gave off weak spurts of their spores, easily stopped by even the flimsiest face covering. The anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers were inhaling the psychoactive fungus spores with religious fervour. You turned off the local news, because you knew two weeks later the numbers would rise again. On the international news, you could see that the Jesus is my Immune System Party (Formerly the GOP) was attempting a military coup on the Moderna Party (formerly the DNC) and the Amazon-Tesla Party (formerly the American Greens) had threatened to mediate with violence if necessary.

There were these fungi, you remembered, that would hijack the brains of ants. They’d walk them all the way up to the highest leaf and the ant would eventually expire. Then, the fungus would grow out of the ant’s body once it had overtaken it. When Israel decided they wanted to expand into Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, they turned that fungus into a bioweapon. Spliced it so it would work on humans, to the same end. It got loose before long, because of course it did. The zombies didn’t bite, they just expelled spores for the next person to inhale. The host body slowly became calcified, thick with mycological proteins until it was rooted to the ground. It would just shoot out spores, stuck in one place. Thanks to the advances in mRNA technology that came from the Covid-19 pandemic some thirty or so years earlier, it was mere weeks before a vaccine was developed.

You remembered, of course, that something else came out of Covid-19. The governments had undermined the efficacy of vaccines to cover up for their incompetence during the rollouts. As a result, even those who understood how vaccines worked had no reason to trust the government. With wave after wave of disinformation, by 2040, the idea of vaccines causing autism

or carrying microchips was considered fairly reasonable. After all, if the CIA pumped crack into Black neighbourhoods in the 80s, financed terrorism, assassinated John F. Kennedy and functioned as an arm of the same government that allowed insulin to send people broke—why would anyone trust them to save their lives cost-free? Charlatans preyed on this. So, not many people took the vaccine. You did, certainly. You're old now. You saw what happened last time. Many people older than you didn't take the Covid-19 vaccine back in the day. They were mostly the ones that died. So here you were, two years into the second pandemic of your life that you vaccinated for the first moment you could, and you still couldn't go outside.

The zombies couldn't operate doors, much less locked ones. Their groaning was exhausting though. Your neighbour, Bob, who was a rabid anti-vaxxer and anti-masker, wrote a sign in his window.

'I'm going to do it,' he said.

You gestured wildly for him not to. He wrote on the sign that he wasn't entirely sure that you weren't possessed by the Satanic Jewish Lizard Muslim Paedophile Hollywood Elite 1%er Communists That Run the World and he wasn't going to let you inhibit his freedoms.

He ran out into the street and punched one of the zombies in the final stages. Bob couldn't do a push-up these days, but that decrepit zombie dropped like a sack of potatoes. A cloud of green dust rose from it, weakly. Bob fanned it into his face like he was trying to inhale the scent of a fine wine, or something like that. You watched TikToks for a while. He knocked on the door. You let him in because you were vaccinated. Then you kicked over the remaining shambling zombies in your doorway. You were pissed off because it's hell to get their roots out of the welcome mat and you know once you've given them the boot, they're just going to stiffen up there and calcify.

'See? No zombie!' said Bob, excitedly.

'Yes, Bob,' you replied. 'As the public health information clearly states, you're asymptomatic for two weeks. Now can you please get vaccinated?'

He looked at you with a mixture of disgust and pity.

'They really got inside your head, didn't they?'

'Unfortunately, Bob,' you reply, absentmindedly watching a teenager on TikTok claim they had dissociative identity disorder and their split personality, who was Hitler himself, was responsible for their recent spate of *Mein Kampf* recitations.² 'It is quite literally inside your head

² The epidemic of Tik-Tokers self-diagnosing themselves with 'exotic' mental illnesses such as dissociative identity disorder and Tourette's Syndrome that began in the early 2020s continued into the 2050s with equal or greater fervour. By this stage, psychiatrists were quite certain that Dissociative Identity Disorder didn't exist (at least not like it did in the movies) but this caused the kids referring to themselves as 'Systems' to double down, insisting that medical professionals were discriminating against them.

and like all our neighbours who tried this experiment, without immediate medical attention you will go the same way as them.'

'But see, I know my body—I would know if something is wrong. It's the 7G that's causing this, not the fungus! It's just athlete's foot for the brain!'

See, that's the thing. It's how it worked. First, you don't notice then suddenly you're mindlessly shambling to find any other human to drop spores on. You're tired. You're so tired. Bob was a boomer. One of the last of them, at 87. He didn't get the Covid vaccine either and he was simply fine thank-you-very-much.

'You've had athlete's foot for the brain since 2020, Bob. Do you know what athlete's foot does? Eats away at stuff. Besides, what are you trying to prove? You're going to die from this.'

'You'll see,' he said, 'I've never felt better.'

Two weeks later, Bob came back, groaning and shambling while his muscle fibres were slowly replaced with mushroom. He vomited up his internal organs a while back. He couldn't operate a door, much less a lock. You were still vaccinated. You still couldn't go outside. Two weeks later again, Bob and Barbara, his wife, were both rooted to the ground in your garden bed outside the window. They'd absolutely fucked the petunias. Most of your neighbours were in similar states because you were the only person on your street that got the jab. The military helicopters were overhead with a megaphone, telling people not to go outside. You had a persistent headache and cold symptoms because even though the vaccine stopped the fungus from taking your mind and body over, your immune system was constantly at work battling the deluge of spores from your neighbours. On the eight-hundredth day, you had an idea.

You walked out your front door with a jerry can of gasoline and poured it all over the mushroom people, who writhed and twisted, but their feet had taken root long ago. You held your breath as they weakly expelled puffs of mycological snow. You set fire to the carpet of idiocy that was once your lawn and lit up a stogie while you watched the inferno from a deck chair.

It smelled just like garlic mushrooms. You wondered, idly, if the idiots were edible. You're tired. You're just so fucking tired. You felt like Bob was looking at you plaintively, although it was hard to tell because the effects of the mushrooms would make The Elephant Man look like Brad Pitt. You wondered how different the world would have been if they spent more time on critical thinking in school. People could still read, but they didn't really digest the information maelstrom that assaulted them every day. It was so hard to tell what was true.

The news is still blaring from inside. Some kid in Melbourne who couldn't get laid has shot up a school, blamed the Jews, then painted the wall with his brains. You're tired.

You're just so fucking tired.

II. A Comprehensive List of Books I Read Before I Shot Up That School³

1. *Fight Club*. Palahniuk might be a degenerate, but he was right: we're not special snowflakes and we're all part of the same decaying organic matter. Jenny's never going to suck my dick and even if she wanted to, she couldn't because I'm 17 with erectile dysfunction from half a decade of porn addiction and I know I just want her as a symbol anyway because real women don't arouse me. The BPA in the microplastics in the water is giving me man boobs and leeching the minerals from my bones. My whole life is like a sow stall: I'm getting fucked right now and I can't even turn around to look at who's doing it. Not even the promise of death tempts me.
2. *The Catcher in the Rye*. We've all been told that adulthood would be like emerging from a chrysalis to be a beautiful butterfly. What happens, then, when you come out as a moth? Do you flutter and seethe, or do you put some lead in the liars who sold you false hope? I know what I'd like better. Do you know how easy it is to buy guns?
3. *1984*. You can't even call a spade a spade anymore. I'm not entitled to my pain. They would erase me from the photos, if I hadn't been too hideous to appear in any to start with. No beauty to preserve, no identity to speak of. I will be gone with the wind.
4. *The Handmaid's Tale*. What a dream. If only our men had the spines, me included.
5. *Brave New World*. They told us what would happen if we kept chipping away at the family unit, at the white picket fence and the comforts of wife and child and art. They didn't even have the decency to give us Soma. I am an epsilon. You are too. We're watching the fall of Rome, one TikTok at a time on the same burning feed.
6. *Watchmen*. Rorschach was right about everything. It's bubbling up, as you read.
7. *Atlas Shrugged*. I am not a great man, and I never could be, but I watch as they denigrate our best and brightest as if that's justice. I was born with a cesspool of genes but I do not begrudge Bezos, Musk or even Chad. They all talk shit behind their backs, but then they're the first to get on their knees. I'm tired of kneeling.

³ Found on the body of a seventeen-year-old boy from Melbourne who murdered forty-eight of his classmates before turning the gun on himself. No books were prescribed in his school's syllabus. His parents had no bookshelf, and their literacy was limited. They did not know how their son had access to the subversive written material. Allegedly, the boy's mental health began to decline when he developed an interest in art and literature and was quickly radicalised by his misreading of the texts alongside Incel and White Supremacist Discord chats. His interest in the school's mandated units for developing apps and coding soon went downhill, and mere weeks after reading the first of these books he began his shooting spree. Educators have used the case as an example of how reintroducing compulsory studies of the Arts and Humanities might help curb far-right radicalism by encouraging close reading and critical thinking. The general public has found this assertion to be in very poor taste. The Marvel Cinematic Universe based a supervillain on him and had a movie produced the next week.

8. *The Great Gatsby*. It's futile to chase after a woman who doesn't want you. You'll end up dead. You're not even human to them, just like deep down you know they're not human to you. All human history is just Samson and Delilah. Over and over.
9. *Romeo and Juliet*. She'll get you killed. Why do you even want her? Is it that your life wasn't valuable enough to begin with, or was it that you saw the last value stripped?
10. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. If you need to know why all of the above is happening, look no further. They're replacing us. Replacing our leaders with paedophiles and reptiles. Replacing our DNA with the vaccines. I'm going out swinging and I'll shoot up schools in Valhalla 'til the darkness takes there too.

III. Clean-Up Duty

Jerry has his mask on, mop in hand. He's a frontline worker, so of course he's vaxxed. 'Doesn't mean that we don't have to take these precautions,' says the boss man. Alright, Jerry thinks bitterly, you wear a fucking mask when you're scrubbing the viscera of fifty-odd teenagers from the walls, floors and ceiling of a high school, then. It's caked on, too, he notices. Hard work. Inadequate drainage systems because nobody ever expects to have to clean up bodies until it happens. The company provides Jerry with a cart for bagging the leftovers, a broom, a mop and bucket, and a scrubber with half its bristles fucked. He must supply his own scraper for OH&S reasons, they say. Sounds reasonable but ask Jerry what it's like to have to move a bookshelf to scrape the congealed and bisected spleen of some poor bastard from right out the corner of the room.

The police take so long to sort their shit that Jerry is almost glad for the mask coming between him and the stench. Should have been quicker. The whole thing was on camera after all. There are no full bodies here, of course, just bits and pieces. The big parts were delivered back to the family, but Jerry still finds arms and legs. Mostly less-fun bits. Lengths of punctured bowel, reeking worse than the metallic smell of blood or the bittersweet reek of rotted flesh. There's probably as much shit as there is blood. Crazy what a machine gun can do to a downed body. People tell Jerry he's lucky to still have a job in this pandemic, much less three, but Jerry is tired. He's been at it for hours, scrubbing and mopping, mopping and scrubbing. Scraping and bagging. He follows the trail of bodies from the physical education class where it began to the unused storage room, that had once been an arts and humanities department where the kid ended it. Most of the kids who got killed, their parents had at least collected the largest part of the corpse. The kid who went berserk with the gun, though, he was still there. Slumped up against a bookshelf, the kid had sat with his legs crossed like a Bodhisattva. Like a monk who set themselves ablaze or drank emetic

tea until they were mummified on the spot. He would have looked perfectly at peace were it not for the crescent-moon shaped sliver of skull that was just about all that was left of his head. The rest was scattered up against the shelf. The kid hadn't been small. Jerry was trying to figure out how he was going to remove the body. He figured he could use the scraper to hack at the limbs, but that thing wasn't going to go through bone. He thought about how detached he was from this very human tragedy, and how he'd been doing this job too fucking long. He'd gotten cold. Felt nothing. Not at this, not at any of the massacre sites he cleaned nor the ones he saw on the news. Then, suddenly, he felt something for the first time in years.

Jerry had a PhD in literature. Of course, after the 2030s they'd eliminated the study of the arts. That's why he cleaned up murder sites, pushed trolleys, occasionally drove rideshare services. He'd had it rough, and what that kid did was awful—but he still felt for the kid. He wondered if he'd have gone berserk if they'd denied him books most of his life then he found them one day? If he'd found them too late and hadn't had the tools to digest them properly? Would he have been radicalised? Shot up a school like that?

He knelt, and with a gloved hand, held what was left of the kid's cheek on the left side. He pulled down his mask and PVE goggles so he could look at him for a moment, and he wasn't sure whether he was staring into the abyss or a mirror. That was when the fungal sac he hadn't noticed at the base of the kid's spinal column exploded. The only thing he noticed before a far stronger, far smarter mutation of the Cordyceps Zombie Fungus took hold of his brain (like the vaccine was nothing in an instant) was that these spores were purple rather than green. The antivaxxers, they'd bought the fungus enough time to mutate into something far deadlier while far too people chose to get vaxxed and halt the spread. Patient zero had been a mentally unstable high school student who'd snapped.

Jerry's nervous system, his amygdala, his pineal gland were all calcifying. He began to groan. He twisted the half-moon skull away from the spinal column, the one with the fungal sac in it and held it out in front of him as it continued to expel the vaccine-proof beta variant of the zombie fungus. He began shambling towards the high school's front door. Through the glazed window, the faint glow of streetlights appeared. Through the door, the thrum of Thursday night shoppers could be heard, the ones clamouring to buy groceries because it was their only state-sanctioned reason to leave the house. Jerry shuffled towards them with his chemical weapon in hand and not a thought in mind. Just like the antivaxxers who'd made this possible. This time, the fungus had learned how to use a door.

~ *Hic est finis nothi* ~

LANEIKKA DENNE is a queer writer from Western Sydney. Her debut play *Dead Skin* was awarded the State Theatre Company / Flinders University Young Playwright's Award and premiered at KXT in 2021, published by Australian Plays. She is a finalist in the Canberra Youth Emerging Theatre Commission for 2021. She was the recipient of the Q LAB award in 2020 and was selected for the Merrigong Playwright's Program and KXT's Step Up Associates Program in 2021. Her script *Mitsukeu* was selected by ScreenJam Productions in the UK to be produced in 2022. Young queer women are at the heart of all her work, as she seeks to represent real women with agency and intrigue.

JAMES W. GOH lives on unceded Darug land. His writing has been published in *diaCRITICS*, *Honi Soit* and the *Sydney Review of Books*. He recently completed a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) at the University of Sydney. He was awarded a University Medal for his thesis which interrogates the illegibility of the Hoa, the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, in national histories and collective memories of the U.S. war in and flight from Vietnam.

HARVEY LIU is a fiction writer living on Darug land in Sydney's northwest. He has completed a Master of Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Sydney, and his work has previously appeared in *Peril Magazine* and *Cicerone Journal*. He is interested in the intersection of economics, migration, geography and identity, particularly in the context of the Greater Sydney region.

BRIANNA MCCARTHY is an Aboriginal emerging artist living on Darug land. She practises a variety of artforms such as writing, theatre-making, film-making, visual arts and teaching. In 2019 she wrote and directed her debut play *A Game For Flies*, which played at PYT Fairfield. She has worked with theatre organisations across Sydney including PYT, Q Theatre, ATYP, and Shopfront Arts Coop. This year Brianna is hunkering down into a number of writing projects which will come to audiences soon.

BENJAMIN D. MUIR is a reformed juvenile delinquent writing on and often about unceded Darug land. He is interested in the relationships between horror, trauma and historiography. He was the recipient of the 2019 AAWP/UWAP Chapter One Prize for his forthcoming novel, *The McMillan Diaries*. Presently, he is completing his doctorate in the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University. You can find him at www.benjamindmuir.com

ANITH MUKHERJEE is an artist currently studying filmmaking at AFTRS. He received the 2020 Deborah Cass Prize for Writing, was a recipient of Writing NSW's emerging writers mentorship program in 2020, and appears in *Kill Your Darlings'* 2021 *New Australian Fiction Anthology*. He lives and works on First Nations Land.

LUCIA TƯỜNG VY NGUYỄN is a Vietnamese-Australian writer exploring the intersection of Southeast Asian folklore, ludic violence and global technoculture. She has been featured in publications including *Kill Your Darlings* and *Runway Journal* and was selected in 2021 for Writing NSW's development program for emerging editors. She is invigorated by the opportunity to play and dream within, around, or even outside capitalist structures of 'work'.

NATASHA PONTOH-SUPIT is a multi-disciplinary artist living on Gadigal Land, Sydney. Natasha works as an Actor, Producer, Production & Stage Manager, Director and Writer. Natasha made her theatre debut in ATYP's *Girls Like That* (2017), written by Evan Placey and directed by Robert Jago. From there Natasha graduated at the Australian Institute of Music (AIM), Bachelor of Performance–Dramatic Arts (2021).

GRACE ROODENRYS is a writer from Campbelltown, South-Western Sydney. She is completing a Bachelor of Arts/Law at the University of Sydney with a major in English Literature. Her work explores time, memory, ecology, and ways of being in place in the Anthropocene. She writes non-fiction and poetry and considers herself new to both. She is currently living in Tempe.

KATRINA TRINH is a Chinese-Vietnamese Australian writer based on Gadigal land in Sydney. Her works have appeared in *Vogue Australia*, *Vogue Living*, *Harper's Bazaar* and SBS Australia. She writes through a diasporic lens about things that move her to claim and power her narrative as well as the stories of diverse people.

GENEVA VALEK is an emerging writer studying a BA in Creative Writing and Sociology at Western Sydney University. An earlier draft of 'The Rat' placed third in the 2021 *ZineWest* Awards. She predominantly writes auto-fiction and is working on a cycle of short stories that seek to capture the beautiful and sublime refractions of everyday life.

D VRTARIC writes poetry on Darug Country. For Vrtaric, poetry is a means of weaving harmony out of chaos. Vrtaric's work explores madness, love, grief, and lost futures.

