THE SPACE BETWEEN

2022 The Writing Zone

Edited by Ellen O'Brien

THE SPACE BETWEEN

Edited by Ellen O'Brien

The Writing Zone / Writing and Society Research Centre

The authors, editors and publishers of this book acknowledge the Dharug People of the Dharug 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 and present Elders of the Dharug Nation.

First Published in 2022
By The Writing Zone @ The Writing and Society Research Centre
Western Sydney University
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia

Designed and edited by Ellen O'Brien
Cover art by Ellen O'Brien
Production assistance by Kate Fagan, Melinda Jewell and Catriona Menzies-Pike
Digital chapbook

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

ISBN: 978-0-6489982-5-9

This publication was supported by a grant from the 2019 Western Sydney Arts Education Initiative of the Packer Family and Crown Resort Foundations, and by the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University. https://twz.westernsydney.edu.au/

Georgia Chapman's poem 'Elm' references 'Elm' by Sylvia Plath and 'Inferno' by Dante Alighieri (trans. Robin Kirkpatrick).

An earlier version of Danny Yazdani's essay 'IWS: Iranian Wedding Season' was published by *Honi Soit* on February 22, 2022 and appears online here: https://honisoit.com/2022/02/iws-the-iranian-wedding-season/.

J. Marahuyo's poem 'meeting Amihan' is an ekphrastic poem based on a painting called 'Garden of Love' by Remedios Varo, 1951. J. would like to thank ate p for helping with the tagalog in this poem and for helping them embrace their filipino heritage.

Contents

The Space Between

Editor's Note

There is a desperate truth that haunts me: no matter how close we get to each other, a gap will always be present. A space between. A space that writing longs to fill.

We stay up late at night or rise before the sun; we type or we scrawl; we run and we chase after a much longed-for sense of unison, not only with others but with all our past and future selves. Perhaps, we think, if we write long enough, we can bring everyone around one long table and let the real work begin. Perhaps.

These are desperate times. I write this introduction sitting on the floor of my apartment, alone, as I often am. My mind, as always, is occupied by the bigger issues: systemic racism and colonial violence and their wretched ability to cut lives short; continual floods enveloping entire communities and ecosystems; this increasing sense of being trapped in a well of despair. With these large thoughts in mind, it is easy to feel hopeless; to think, *what's the point of all this writing, anyway?*

Such despondence draws us back to the cellular. We look at our lives through a microscope, noticing the small and seemingly insignificant stories that flourish in the junctions. *This* is why we write: to connect with the 'lost somewhere, sometime'[1] that tries to escape us; to show up for the grief of our collapsing body-mind; to practice the noticing of what could easily be missed in that space between.

The Space Between is the third digital publication and the fifth book to come out of The Writing Zone, a three-year program dreamed up within the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University. Over the course of nine months, twelve writers under thirty from Western Sydney gather alongside each other to tell their stories and develop their craft. Now in its third year, The Writing Zone has generated publication, editing, employment and performance opportunities for thirty-six emerging writers and three program officers. The Writing Zone is a community as much as a literary program. Too often the world insists upon homogenising writers from certain locations or ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The Writing Zone publications, including *The Space Between*, smash that insistence to pieces, delighting in its smithereens.

I wish to extend my deep and dearest thanks to the wonderful writers who make The Writing Zone what it is: Sarah Carroll, Georgia Chapman, Robert Hoang, Michelle Huynh, J. Marahuyo, Moontana Mohsin, H. May Oxley, Dania Roumieh, Mary Stanley, Rebecca Ward,

[1] 'Something Hainanese' by Michelle Huynh

Danny Yazdani and Victor Guan Yi Zhou. There truly would not be a program without you and your creative spirits. Time and again you have shown your commitment not only to your craft but also to your fellow writers, delivering kind yet honest feedback borne from a pure love of literature. Thank you for taking such care throughout the editing process—I appreciate all the moments where you allowed for change, as well as the moments where you stood strong in your original voice.

Thank you to The Writing Zone team—Kate Fagan, Melinda Jewell and Catriona Menzies-Pike—for your unwavering commitment to the creative lives of young writers and editors. You have each demonstrated not only immense skill and technical knowledge, but also deep compassion for the treacherous waters we wade through as emerging artists. Each of us involved in The Writing Zone carries the gift of your guidance. Thanks also to Suzanne Gapps and Iman Etri for their warm-hearted support and for the many laughs. Finally, thanks to the 2019 Western Sydney Arts Education Initiative of the Packer Family and Crown Resort Foundations; the Writing and Society Research Centre; and Western Sydney University.

From this same patch of carpet in my apartment I attend our fortnightly online workshops, where many of the pieces you are about to read were polished and preened. By now we are all too familiar with the strange contradiction of Zoom: the intimacy of glimpsing a snippet of someone's home, offset by the yawning physical distance between us. Somewhere amongst this, deep in that cyber chasm, these pieces became whole. Now, they beckon to you.

Ellen O'Brien
Program Officer, The Writing Zone, 2022

From Cherry

Sarah Carroll

I'm 13 years old and Katy Perry is staring into my soul.

I'm rearranging my poster wall. The poster of Katy is the largest. She takes pride of place in the centre surrounded by smaller magazine cutouts of her. She has blue hair, booty shorts and heels. She's flirty and confident. I want to be flirty and confident.

Next to her are smaller cutouts of Zac Efron from *High School Musical 2*. There are trophies on my shelf—netball, singing—next to a memento from Fiji—a snow globe, but the island version. When I shake it, the dolphins come alive, diving in and out of each other and through the bright blue water. I shake it again and again, trying to land them on the sunny plastic island. There's also a stack of magazines, each one with Katy Perry on the cover. Next to that is a pile of books familiar to every teen girl: *The Twilight Saga*.

My wardrobe door is a mirror. I'm wearing a purple pinafore from Supré with a long sleeve top underneath. Some of the spots on my skin are turning into mountains. I comb my bangs down to hide my forehead. I wish I had a fringe that covered my whole face. Jasmine doesn't have to hide spots on her face. Her skin is perfect. I wish this dress made my boobs look smaller.

I pick up a magazine from the shelf and open the page to KP's interview. I read it. I feel seen. I want to connect with her. I continue flipping through the magazine and find the makeup section. Eyeliner under the eyes is trending. I find an eyeliner pencil and I try it. I look in the mirror. Cool. I get my new digital camera and take a mirror selfie with the flash on. In the photo you can't see my makeup or my face. I like it.

I walk down the corridor to the computer room. I smell dinner: curry. The sound of footy on the TV is almost drowned out by Dad yelling at it. I peer into the computer room: no one's there. I start up the computer. I sit. I wait. I think about the dread of school on Monday. I'm glad to be safe at home.

It's started up. I log in.

login: carroll

password: midnight101

I connect to the dial-up modem.

There's a diagram of two computers and as it's connecting a line appears, linking the computers. It's connected. The desktop background is plain blue. There's lots of folders of my mum's research for her thesis. She's becoming a Doctor of Theology. There's a folder for family photos. Another folder labelled 'Sarah's stuff'. I plug my digital camera into the computer, find the

mirror selfie and download it. I open the Internet web browser. Type in Google. Type in Facebook. Log into Facebook.

email: wakingupinvegasx@hotmail.com

password: KProcks101#

I change my profile picture to the mirror selfie and caption it with a Katy Perry lyric: 'You change your mind like a girl changes clothes'. I feel cool.

I go to the home page on Facebook. I scroll. I see a photo from Jasmine and Emma. I feel sad. I feel left out. I like the photo. I keep scrolling. Another photo pops up. This time from Emma, the same photo. I like that photo as well. I find myself going down a hole. I feel insecure about my photo. A notification pops up. I check it. It's a like from a family friend in Fiji. I am waiting for a like from someone at school.

I open a new web browser. I type in YouTube. Katy Perry has these vlogs she uploads every week. I find a compilation video of them. I feel like we could be best friends. I feel like she would see me. I get lost in her vlogs.

'Dinner is ready.'

My dad. I close YouTube.

My mum is already sitting down at the table. She looks at me with a soft smile but a stern look that makes me feel like I've done something wrong. It's a Polynesian thing. If you know, you know. I sit down opposite her.

My dad is in the kitchen, putting the final touches on dinner. He asks how big a serving size I want, if I'm very hungry or a little bit hungry. I say, 'Very hungry.' Dad finishes plating up and delivers my mum's plate first, then mine, and tells us to start. I feel like I should wait. Dad turns around and says, 'No, eat.' I start eating. It's delicious. It's my favourite! Tuna curry. I put tomato sauce all over it. Even better. My dad is still in the kitchen doing his plate. He asks me, 'Do you want me to put some away for tomorrow?' I imagine opening my tuna curry and the way those girls would look at me. But I don't want to hurt my dad's feelings. I nod. My mum's eating, enjoying dinner.

My dad finally sits down. There's a smile on his face. He's proud of what he's just created. Dad checks in on Mum. She doesn't say much, so he asks if she's ok. My mum shrugs and says, 'Yeah, I'm fine.' Her mind is on her thesis. I feel awkward. I finish my curry. My dad makes a comment that I inhale my food. I feel like I've done something wrong. I shuffle around in my seat. I watch my parents finish dinner. They talk about work, deadlines for her thesis, the stress of it all. My dad asks me how I'm going. I say, 'Yeah, it's good. I'm good.' But I don't feel good. Dad moves on and interrogates Mum and tells her how amazing she's doing and how she is so overqualified for the job she's currently in. My mum doesn't believe what my dad is saying; she doesn't make eye contact and plays with her fork. I feel bored. I ask to be excused from the table.

I put the plate on the counter and tell my parents, 'Don't worry, I will remember to wash up. I'm coming back.' I walk past the TV. The football's still on. It's 6:00pm, so I ask, 'Can I put Channel 10 on?' Dad says sure. *The Simpsons* has just started. It's my favourite TV show. TV makes me feel happy. It makes me forget in that moment about everything shitty, like going to school on Monday. I can hear the sound of knives and forks scraping on plates as my parents continue eating. I sense sudden movement, a change in energy. The tap turns on full blast. I feel nervous. Suddenly all I can hear is banging plates. Mum is aggressively washing up. I jump up. I rush over. I jab and push to get to the sink. I scold my hand in hot water. Mum says, 'Don't worry, don't worry, I'll do it.' I say, 'No, no. I'll do it. I was going to do it.' She looks at me. This time there is no smile. She hands me a tea towel. I'm in trouble.

Maggie in My Arms

Victor Guan Yi Zhou

During the summer school holidays, the streets of Quakers Hill are dead quiet. Dead quiet like the cat I just killed and the Asian man across the street who watched me do it.

With an air-shredding *meow*, the cat had latched its claws onto the skin of my right eye-bag. It felt like it had pulled a chunk of meat out with nail clippers, the heavy nail clippers that Mum uses on my toes, the rusty ones that creaked like the cat's last cry. From there on it was a fight—hot fur on bare tummy—and I am Bruce Lee after a fight. Shirtless and bloody.

My bare toes are nestled in a bed of dry bindies in my front yard, and the cat is at my feet. Across the street, the Asian man brings a phone to his ear and starts to pace back and forth on his lush green lawn. I notice how his lips are very crispy. They look like the two Weet-Bix I sandwiched on top of each other for breakfast this morning. Need to tell him that the cat is evil, to yell that 'it killed Maggie', but my tears have made me hot-red and snotty, made me choke.

'You kill my fucking cat?'

I flinch.

'You hear me, huh?'

With my toes, I clench the bindies beneath my feet so hard that my bones creak into the soil.

When an angry man tells you to do something, you do not have to do anything. Mum's words. She was holding my hand at the library in Stanhope Gardens and a white man with a bald head spotted like a quail-egg barked at me to push in my chair after I had just finished watching Naruto. 'Open your eyes can't you see the fucking chair? In Australia we push 'em in.' I listened to Mum's words and stood still, crying as she tugged at my hand.

The Asian man across the street hangs up the phone and walks back inside his house. His slamming door echoes through the empty street. Jumping over the cat like a WWE superstar, I stumble over to the magpie who lays still on an island of clover. I pick her up and settle her in my arms. Tears trickle down faster, stinging the gash under my eye and dripping onto her mangled feathers wet with blood.

Maggie is panting just like she was last summer when I found her dehydrated. I fed her spare bits of Weet-Bix dipped in water, and in return she kept me company most days while Mum was at work. Loved when she sat on my shoulder 'cos she made me feel like Itachi—really cool. With her I could fly to the Hidden Leaf Village and eat ramen for breakfast like the other ninjas. Then I would Chidori, Chidori so powerful it would take me away from Quakers Hill.

A police car grinds up on the kerb, rocks popping beneath its wheels. A policeman gets out and approaches me.

‘Hey buddy, could you put the bird down for me?’

I freeze up, still crying. Struggling to breathe like the bloodied bird in my arms.

I do not have to do anything.

Mum’s words.

Don't Let Them See

Mary Stanley

Snow blanketed the park. Bare trees stood in a regimented line by the footpath. Bouncing a red ball as he walked, Ivan led his younger sisters to a hilltop off the mouth of the old bridge. He looked at the twisting tree limbs, gnarled like his father's knuckles.

The night before, Tato had been stretched across the couch in his military fatigues, immovable and reeking of rakija-soaked cotton. Ivan's ears still rang from his parents' dinnertime arguing. He had checked on Mama in the usual midnight quiet when Tato passed out either from intoxication or exhaustion. Everything had been the same, almost routine, until *that* noise. Until Mama's burning grip on his arm pulled him away from Tato.

Leave him. Ivan did, and it haunted him all night.

Sunrise seared his sleepless face. Mama was nowhere to be found in the morning's suffocating eeriness. Buried under heavy blankets, his sisters had slept like the dead, completely unaware of what was only a room away. Mama had left a spidery Cyrillic note on the kitchen table for him. *Don't let them see.*

He didn't. He had ushered his sisters out through the back door.

Ivan bounced the ball hard against the footpath. It made a rubber *slap* and shuddered back into his palms. He fought off a frown, cursed his father instead. Almost cursed his mother too.

Shivering, Vera and Suza waddled behind him in cheap puffy jackets. Their heavy booties were caked in browning sleet. Vera was a couple of years younger than Ivan and was more easily frustrated. No patience for their father, no sympathy for their mother. Suza was still too young, still hoping they could both be better parents.

Winter air chilled their throats and stung their noses red. Momentary clouds of hot breath swirled around Ivan's cheeks and disappeared into the collar of his coat. Snow melted around resilient tufts of grass. The hill sloped down towards the frozen river underneath the bridge. Black water stains bled down the sandstone foundations.

'Catch.'

Ivan threw the ball at Vera. The ball slipped from her gloved hands. Suza chased it and sent it hurtling with an aggressive kick. Groaning, Vera watched it bound along the grassy patches. Ivan ran after the ball. He caught it before it bounced out of reach.

'Be careful,' he warned as he threw the ball to Vera.

'I'm just playing,' Suza yelled back.

'Just catch it, don't kick it.'

Vera hurled the ball at Suza, who caught it easily. She bared her teeth before she dropped the ball and kicked it. It hit Vera in the chest with a thump, knocking her back onto the thinning snow. They all watched the ball roll down and across the river.

Vera glared at Suza. 'Now look what you did. Go get it.'

'You get it,' Suza hissed.

'You kicked it.'

'You're closer.'

Ivan waved his hand at the girls. 'I'll get the ball. You'll both fall in if you try.'

The girls quit squabbling and watched Ivan trot down to the river. Sunlight glimmered over the ice and faded into the darkness under the bridge. Ivan crept to the edge of the river and looked out over the ice flat.

The ball had rolled to the other side and nestled itself among a stretch of scattered garbage and woollen blankets. Ivan prodded the edge of the floe with his boot. The ice was silent: no jolts, no cracks. Stable. He inched his way across the river towards the other bank.

It was freezing under the bridge. Ivan's bones ached. The breeze swept through with a low moan and aluminium cans clattered along the stones. The blankets fluttered up, nudging the ball forward. For a moment it was suspended in the wind like a shining ruby before it dropped back, settling against the woollen mound.

The blankets slid down to reveal the head and shoulders of a sleeping old man. Ivan moved closer, kneading the bottom of his jacket with his hands, and stared at the old man's face. The man didn't notice him. He didn't move, didn't breathe.

His skin had a blue tinge, and the hollows of his eyes were ash grey. Frost crusted around his nostrils and mouth and dampened the ends of his ratty hair. His cheeks had sunk into his face and his mouth was a cracked slit that showed black teeth. From his ragged clothes came the smell of old meat and excrement.

Ivan reached out, watching the man's rotten face for any sign of movement, of life. He took the ball with a bullet-fast snatch and backed away, still transfixed.

'Thanks, mister.'

Snow crunched under his boots. This time, Ivan bolted across the sheet of ice. It snapped under every step. Cracks followed him to the other side of the river until he leapt to the safety of the grass.

Ivan looked back at the old man shrouded in shadow under the bridge. Ice shattered and sections of the flat crashed into the dark river. The current gurgled from the hole—Tato choking in his sleep. Ivan let out a shaky breath.

The girls clapped. Digging his fingers into the ball, Ivan climbed back up the hill.

Elm

Georgia Chapman

- after Sylvia Plath

I am terrified by this dark thing
that sleeps in me.
It soars so silent
from poison-pricked branches
that could have built homes or coffins;
either way I can only speak when my limbs bleed.
I am tired of people walking through my haunted hallways
and pointing out spectres as if they were hard to find.
Everyone wants to see ghosts, but no one wants to free them.

My psychologist said to light a candle in every dark corner,
reveal every lurking spider web,
every floorboard creak and every skeleton trapped in confession
but there is only so much waning light
that I can feed the ravenous dark
before it looks back,
glinting eyes
hungry.

It settles in its roost,
my walls groan with its grief.
There is no room for anything else.
Claw marks carved in rafters;
wrinkled wood worn to perfect perches.
Its feathered limbs punch holes to fit.
It has never thought of leaving.

Hope waits on the front step for a chance
to enter desecrated ground
but the door cannot open,

the door will not open.
Not with the weight
the weight
the weight
of malignity with its claws.

People say to sweep the feathers off the floors,
replace the splintered staircase,
remove the battered door,
as if that's all it takes.
They don't know the strength it takes to pick up the broom, to open a window, to let the fresh air in.
They don't know how hard it is to be both the house and the haunted.
It gets so damn exhausting,
so damn murderous
to hold up this roof
when letting it collapse would mean release from silent stalking,
its soft, feathery turnings.

Survival is a religion and I am so sick of plucking the splinters from my knees.
Calling a priest will only empty me of this wing-ed beast.
Can I find the courage to learn an unfamiliar home, unfeathered?
My roots are gnarled, knotted and entwined
but they are here.

There is no beauty here, no room for romance.
This is screaming
in both words and blood.
This is hacking self from spirit like skin from flesh.
This is waiting for the dark ache to fade.
This is bones disintegrating and collapsing with foundations.
This is looking for something to love.
This is a soul bound in Gordian knots.
This is being held hostage by the falling silence of fluttering feathers.
This is making a gallows of your own home.

I die, I die, I die

I kill, I kill, I kill

It kills, I die, we survive

I kill, I die, I survive.

The Birth of Misfortune

H. May Oxley

Once, there was no Death except by old age.

The God of Death, Ishabii, was youthful. Unburdened. They possessed strong yet gentle hands, designed to reach for the dead and lead them onwards. Ishabii was a guide to the afterlife for those who'd led a long, full existence. When Ishabii came to collect the dead they saw a tall, gentle figure shrouded in soft light, holding a moonlit lantern aloft, and the dead accepted this, because the dead do not fear and they do not grieve.

The living still cursed Death for separating them from their loved ones. But they had no power over Ishabii. Ishabii knew they would understand when they passed on themselves, and so no mortal could cause them burden. It would take another god to do that.

Gods do not die. To them, Death was just another being to whom no reverence or bitterness was due. This was particularly true of Jin, God of Chaos, who had never shown reverence to anyone. A bony, grinning figure with the eyes of a chameleon, Jin was a trickster who relished the hatred of people and gods alike. But even a god like Jin, so full of malevolence, was not immune to love. Jin loved a mortal, the greatest curse a god could stumble into. Out of this love, Jin fought their own nature and nudged the world around their beloved so they would live a blessed life.

There are many claims, depending on who tells the story, as to who this mortal was—whether man or woman, a simple farmer, or leader of an empire. What drew Jin to them was also a mystery, for who's to say what would attract a god whose sole quality is chaos? Was it someone who changed the lives of those around them with as much fervour as Jin themselves? Or someone who lived a simple, tidy life, drawing Jin to their little place of order within a chaotic world? Truthfully, it doesn't matter. Emperor or peasant, Death would always come.

When the mortal's time drew near, Jin threw themselves at Ishabii's feet and begged. Brought to tears, Jin promised the world and permanent peace to Ishabii. Promised to forsake forever their nature as a God of Chaos, if only their beloved would be spared.

Ishabii refused.

'Do you think you are the first to beg me for this favour? Do you think you will be the last? The rule of Death cannot be broken. If I spare one, and never another, it will stop people from using the fleeting life they have, believing against all reason that they will also be favoured. Death does not play favourites. Death must be inevitable. That is the way of things. Not even Chaos can change that.'

And so Death came, as it always did. Jin's beloved mortal died happily, surrounded by their family and the fortunate existence Jin had given them. But for Jin, this happiness meant nothing; only grief remained. Grief, and a curse for the one who—in Jin's scaly, bulbous eyes—had killed the only person who'd ever deserved life.

Ishabii was impartial in their role as the God of Death, but not so in other matters. They held a quiet, unreciprocated love for Olishi, the God of the Sun. Just as Jin quietly lingered on the outskirts of the mortal's life, so too did Ishabii quietly follow Olishi across the sky, the moon of their lantern visible to mortals below.

Each night when it was their time to rest, Olishi would discard their fiery robes and leave them in the care of one of their children, Ishobu, the Herald of Dusk. Ishobu would mend the robes during the night, repairing any damage sustained in the day, before passing on the robes to their twin, Ishabo, the Herald of Dawn, who would wash and return them to Olishi when it was time again to cross the sky.

Jin went to Ishobu and said, 'Please, I have come with orders from the soil from which you sprung. Olishi wishes you to rest for tonight. Give me the robes, and I shall mend them in your stead.' Jin then went to Ishabo and said, 'Please, I have come with orders from the seed from which you sprouted. Olishi wishes you to rest for tonight. Ishobu shall pass me the robes, and I shall wash them in your stead.' Though Jin was known not to be trusted, they had been so quiet and peaceful during the life of their beloved that the younger gods, unaware that said life had expired, believed that Jin's nature had changed.

Left with Olishi's robes for the night, Jin cloaked themselves in light. The light was too bright for Ishabii to see past, to spy those hateful eyes or that mirthful grin. A bright figure of fire, the disguised Jin returned to the sky and waited for Ishabii to reach them.

Perhaps Ishabii could have realised this sudden reciprocation was too good to be true. But they were as blinded by love as they were by the light of Jin's disguise. An eclipse followed as Ishabii's moon embraced Jin's false sun. Only when the glare of the fiery robes faded from Ishabii's eyes did they realise they'd been tricked.

From the eclipse, a child was born. The child of Death and Chaos was, and could only ever have been, the God of Misfortune: Duzho, the personification of disease, accidents and all the unpleasant and undignified ways that Death could be sowed.

Duzho was a rotting, walking corpse. It dripped of illness and chewed flesh, barely sentient in its constant, incomprehensible pain. It could only walk in hope of finding help for its nightmare existence. But wherever it went, misfortune ransacked the land. Duzho stepped into a village and wood would rot. Houses would collapse. Vermin would swarm. Insects flooded from Duzho's pores, as it spread whiteflies and weevils to chew the crops and mosquitoes to carry disease. Plagues afflicted

settlements and left piles of bodies in the streets. The infirm had nowhere to go. Before Duzho, a place for them had never been needed.

No longer were the mortals' lives peaceful and quiet before a gently guided path to the afterlife. Now people died covered in sores or buried in rubble, often alongside loved ones suffering the same horrors. Ishabii's guidance became mercy, but mercy couldn't come quick enough. Ishabii sprinted from body to body. Ran and ran and ran. There was no end to it.

The weight of this horrific, thankless work caused Ishabii's back to hunch. Their feet became bloody from running. Their strong, gentle hands withered to bone, skin scraped away as they dug through landslides and plague-ridden dead to find the dying underneath. Their lantern cracked and the moon within became pockmarked from Ishabii carelessly letting it collide with the rubble.

The world may have carried on like this forever, if Azhuha—God of Gods, Creator of all—hadn't intervened as best they could by lying down and dreaming of a way to overcome the unprecedented misfortunes of Duzho's existence. Azhuha gave birth to Hoapi.

Hoapi, the newborn God of Healing, chased after Duzho. Unable to stop Misfortune from raging through the world, they instead worked to fix whatever damage was left in its wake. They created medicinal herbs and scattered them through forests and fields. They soothed the living who lay hurt, and transformed open wounds and festering sores into scars that might one day fade. On occasion, they would catch up to Duzho and simply hold it, attempting to heal the continual rot, even as more wounds and diseases afflicted it. Inevitably, Duzho would break free again to wander mindlessly and fruitlessly, unable to understand it was wandering away from the only possible relief from its pain. Hoapi could never cure Duzho, for Duzho was Misfortune and couldn't be cured of its own existence.

With Hoapi's influence, the mortals learned to pull themselves out of the rubble. They learned how to cure diseases and how to heal. But Misfortune remained, even as the people accepted their new reality and grew stronger for it. Ishabii forever remained burdened by the knowledge that they'd caused perpetual destruction, both in their refusal of Jin's request and their blind love for Olishi. Ishabii became an old, hunched figure made of bones, shaking limbs barely able to hold the lantern that led the dead.

Their vengeance complete, Jin simply watched as their child continued to be a scourge upon the world. With a smug, cold smile on their face they basked in the knowledge that, after all, Chaos could change Death.

From Big Trouble in Little Saigon

Robert Hoang

It's dark already when we pass under the pai lau, and Phuc offers me a cigarette. He holds the barrel steadily, pointing its orange stub towards me. I reach for my first cigarette. My first cigarette is a gift from Phuc.

Phuc tells me the things I should know about, the things that nobody really teaches and everybody secretly does. He tells me how to hold the smoke, butt between the knuckles of my index and middle fingers, or if I really want to, between my index and thumb, but he also tells me to remember that it's only a dart and not a joint and I scoff at him like I know what the hell a joint even is. He tells me what to expect when I light up and take my first drag, to pull a little smoke into my mouth and hold it for a moment before drawing it all in. He'll know I've done it wrong when I start coughing up a lung over the fucking kerb, letting the cinders fall on top of my new shoes while he breaks into laughter both at me and with me. Phuc tells me the things I need to know, and a little bit too much sometimes.

Right now, he's telling me that Phat and Thanh shouldn't be too far away.

He whips out a lighter—one of those heavy-duty brass rectangles which he flicks open with one hand—before inching it closer to my face. Phuc tells me to enjoy it. Phuc tells me don't forget to breathe.

My first drag sets fire to my throat like I've just swallowed a mouthful of volcanic ash. The cinders fall to my loosening shoelaces. The cough kicks in like a motherfucker. Phuc tells me he told me so.

He bites another dart from the pack before lighting it and pocketing the box in one smooth, effortlessly cool motion. This is what life with Phuc has been like so far. Tonight he's swapped out his signature red Jordans in favour of his work outfit, for 'strictly professional' occasions: a dark grey suit jacket worn cleanly over a black T-shirt with matching pants and cheap leather dress shoes to boot, literally. Phuc's hair is longer than the platform at Cabra station, a legendary mullet that cascades down the back of his head, blurring the line between neck and collar. Ba would've scalped me if I'd rocked the same, so mine is a short and respectable fade. Haircuts aside, I'm dressed like a carbon copy of the guy. Our sleeves are rolled to the elbows, creased like paper bags draped over discount liquor, straddling the line between too-young-to-be-a-gangster and too-old-to-be-a-youngster. He draws another long breath from his cigarette before it singes his fingertips. The smoke rises into a starless sky.

If you look carefully, Phuc has a symbol tattooed on his left forearm—five vertical lines joined by a single, long horizontal dash above all. The mark of the 5T.

Phuc spots me staring.

'Looks good, doesn't it?'

My eyes dart away faster than I can think. It looks damn good.

He grunts, taking a final, graceful lungful of calm before dropping his smoke to the ground, leaving it burning.

Phuc tells me he doesn't just roll his sleeves to make himself look cool—not like he needs to try and achieve that, anyway. He rolls them to show that he is the real deal. He rolls them to show that he is 5T.

'Tonight's the night, man,' he says. 'Tonight you show me you the real deal. Tonight you show me you got what it takes.'

He examines me with folded arms and crossed legs, leaning coolly against the marble archway. The last remnants of smoke bleed freely from his nostrils.

'I got what it takes,' I say.

Phuc nods his head, showing the whites of his teeth like a goddamn hyena.

'Good man,' he says.

We watch the streets empty for a while.

'I know what you want, Anh. You want the big leagues. You want to meet Tri.'

Not just anybody gets to meet Tri.

Phuc's teasing strikes a nerve, I'll admit. He tells me his stories as the right hand of the 5T—guns, girls, money and the glory of it all. He talks about stints on the smack express, running circles around cops while he pockets hundreds in a day.

He talks about Tri, and how at thirteen he had killed a man and got away with it. He talks about how Tri once pulled a machete on his teacher in the middle of the school day. Phuc tells me about the legends this side of the railway line.

If Phuc is the right hand of the 5T, then Tri is the venomous head. The head is the leader, and not just anybody gets to meet the leader.

Not just anybody gets to meet Tri Minh Tran.

My shoulder blades press backwards over bent elbows, thumbs like bamboo shoots sticking out of my pockets. Phuc notices the stance with intent, scowl and all.

The bastard has a wry grin going on, taunting me for a response. *Tonight's the night, man. Do you have what it takes to be 5T? Are you the real deal?*

'I got what it takes,' I repeat. 'I'm the real fucking deal.'

The townhouse shines like a beacon in the dark, thank fuck. Ever since McBurney Road I've been running like hell between streets and alleyways, passing under streetlights like they're cop spotlights with the full might of the Cabramatta Police Force ready to jump me at any moment. Bright side? This night can't get any worse.

I've always been an optimist.

There's a lone floodlight at the edge of the complex, shining its cold judgement on any idiot who finds themselves walking the streets at this time of night. The only people out this late are gamblers in debt, staggering drunkards and moaning junkies anyway. It's a hell of a list but fuck it—add me to it. The floodlight shines brighter than my pocketknife, glinting noiselessly under the moonlight. The floodlight shines brighter than my future.

Maybe I lied about the optimist thing.

Other than from school, from responsibility and from Ba, I've never run so fucking hard in my life.

I unlock the door like I'm cracking a safe, and suddenly the entire townhouse is awake. My ears prick at the sound of the neighbour's curtains shifting through open windows, and the footsteps of stray cats stalking a twilight prowl. The roaring engines of distant cars break the virgin silence; police sirens close in mere milliseconds behind. I slip inside as the light shifts its attention elsewhere.

The living room flickers as I slip off my shoes. I instinctively think about the electricity bill.

It's the news. Channel Nine. Ba and Mẹ would tune in often, watching everything from prime-time football to *60 Minutes* and sitcom reruns in between. Ba watched and understood little. Mẹ believed the more she watched, the more English she would know.

I spot her frail silhouette asleep on the couch, sitting upright with neck bent backwards, leaning against a husband who isn't there. Ba's probably working the night shift. Mẹ's been waiting for me to come home.

The lock wrenches into place behind me like a hammer striking a nail, finally rousing her from heavy sleep. She blinks past obvious exhaustion. Damn townhouse screen doors. Locks loud as fuck.

'Anh? Home already?'

'Hello Mẹ, I'm home.'

'Where have you been?'

Her voice, faint and restrained, coloured by worry, almost drowns under the harsh clarity of Australian English coming from the television.

'Out with friends,' I say.

'Why didn't you come home after school?'

The answer is obvious, even if she doesn't see it.

'I was out with friends.'

'Anh, you stayed out very late tonight, too late,' Mẹ says.

Her words echo in the space between us as she stands from the couch, her sun-dried face carved with the faint markings of a weary past decade.

'Ba and Mẹ—'

'Care for me, and I always make you worry', I interrupt. 'I know, Mẹ. You say it every time I go out with my friends after school. You say it every day.'

She makes her way to the doormat where I'm still standing. She takes my hands in hers.

'You know already, con. Mẹ only wants you to come home safe every day. Remember?'

'I know,' I repeat as always. 'I remember.'

'Good, Anh,' she says.

Mẹ murmurs. Mẹ smiles. She massages my hand, her loose skin hanging off aching bones, before looking down at the blood on my knuckles.

'What is this?'

Shit. I wipe my hands onto the lining of my blazer. The blood feels like paint, comes off in flakes. Does not go willingly. How did I miss that?

'It's nothing, Mẹ.'

'What's nothing?' thunders Ba.

I throw my hands behind my back. This night can get worse.

Ba's voice booms from across the room as the light switches on. He's dressed in high-vis overalls, orange on top and navy blue on the bottom—a real work uniform. His balding scalp eyes me up and down as he coughs himself awake.

'You look like a goddamn gangster.'

I offer no response, mostly because it's true. The grey-blazer-black-shirt combo is an unmistakable John Street fashion statement. If only Phuc was here. Ba would've thrown hands at the mere sight of Phuc's mullet.

'Who gave you these clothes, Anh?' Ba asks.

There's an edge to his voice, a low growl, like I've just pissed all over a Buddha statue or failed another exam at school.

'Answer, boy.'

'My friend gave them to me.'

'I didn't raise you to be disrespectful,' Ba scoffs. 'Can't you even say "hello Ba" when I walk through the door?'

'Hello, Ba,' I whisper.

'And when did I raise you to take clothes from other people, huh?' He looks to Mẹ now, shaking his head with an incredulous smirk on his walnut-like face. I could crack the shit out of it right now. 'He's spoilt, Nga; we can't even afford to pay them back, whoever they are. And where were you tonight, Anh? We waited a long goddamn time. Mẹ stayed up on the couch waiting for you to come home—on the couch!—and I'm going in to work late because of you. Do you know how hard it is, boy? How hard we work to keep a roof over our heads, huh? To feed you? To make sure you go to school?'

Mẹ interjects. 'That's enough, Ba,' she says. 'He's had enough.'

Best to keep my mouth shut. If he finds out what I've been doing these past few days, I'm as good as gone. Kicked from the house. Living on the streets. Disowned. Probably being beaten the entire way out the front door.

I can't say much else that won't offend him, so I say the only thing I can.

'Sorry, Ba.'

His rugged hands adjust his pants slightly, twisting the belt buckle into place over his stomach as he inches towards me.

'I was out with friends,' I say.

'Your friends,' Ba laughs.

I stand beside the doorway as he moves past, stopping before me as we lock eyes.

'I know what kind of friends you've been spending time with, Anh. Teenagers, all idiots. Gangsters. Never coming home after school, always staying up late like shit-eating punks roaming the streets. You know it's not safe to be out at night in Cabramatta. If you keep hanging out with people like this, you know what's going to happen.'

Ba coughs, raising his hand to cover his mouth as he unlocks the door. He leans towards me and speaks directly into my ear, breath hot against my cheek. Years of carbon monoxide, nicotine and tar struggle to escape from his petrified lungs.

'If I hear again that you've been out too late, you're dead to me,' he whispers. 'If you like the gutter so much, you can live there.'

He leaves without so much as a backward glance.

Mẹ closes the door behind him, wishing him goodbye as the car outside disappears into the night at speed. Its tyres wince as they bounce over a shallow speed bump.

The whole thing leaves an acrid taste in my mouth.

Mẹ gives me a kiss under a furrowed brow before circling the couch for the remote, watching a white man on the TV trying his best to fit in while standing in front of a noodle restaurant. He's got eyes as blue as the Aussie flag. Ears as red as dragon fruit. His wrinkled forehead contains folds within folds, brown-blonde hair partially obscuring the red-and-yellow shopfront lettering on the glass behind him.

Holy shit. It's the place Phuc, Thanh, Phat and I were just in. The restaurant owners who we stalked. The old man I stabbed.

I chafe my knuckles against my palms. The pocketknife weighs heavy on my conscience. I understand only half the words pouring out of his mouth, but I know immediately that I do not like him.

'*The Asian gangs involved don't fear our laws,*' the man says.

Mẹ picks up the remote, stopping for a moment to look at me before turning back to the program.

'*But there's one thing that they do fear, and that's possible deportation back to the jungles of Vietnam… because that's where, frankly, they belong.*'

The television dies slowly with a faint static hiss, along with Mr. Blue-Eyes-White-Skin.

'It's not safe in Cabramatta,' Mẹ mutters.

She turns down the hallway, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

There it is again. Cabramatta. The name lingers on the tongue of White Australia like the bogeyman, a subconscious threat to their children, their jobs, their way of life. Even to us Vietnamese, we know better than to leave the house at night. Most of us, anyway.

I'm still recovering from Ba's little family pep talk. *Your friends*. His words ring clearly in my head. *If you like the gutter so much, you can live there*. You know what? Maybe I don't know any better.

Maybe the gutter is where I belong.

Phuc tells me the things I need to know. He never told me about this.

Blood Pressure

Dania Roumieh

May 5th, 2014

6:30 pm couldn't come any faster.

Every Monday after school, she caught the beige 154 bus to the stop nearest her grandmother's house. As she got on the bus, her eyes would scan the first row of seats and she would inhale the thick layer of dust, sweat and hot chips. She wanted to be as close to the bus door as possible, considering she didn't know anyone on this bus, and it wasn't her usual bus she caught every other day.

She sat directly behind the bus driver who cheerfully greeted every student as they entered the rusty doors, even though the students didn't give him the time of day. She smiled back to acknowledge him. She cradled her modest-sized pink school bag in her lap, watching the school girls hang around outside the stained windows. She felt her phone buzz in the side pocket of her skirt.

'Hi Mum!' she whispered excitedly. Her left hand sheltered her mouth so her peers couldn't hear her, but her soft voice was still audible to her mother over the chaos of the school bus. Her mother worked at a local high school and they were both finished with classes for the day. For the duration of her fifteen-minute bus ride, they would debrief about their days. Her admiration and appreciation for her mother grew as she got older. Regardless of whether she was heading home after school or studying at the local library, her call log showed that their after-school conversations were a key part of her weekday afternoon routine.

The 154 approached the first stop and came to a halt. Stepping off the bus, she felt as though she'd entered a new realm, like she was in Narnia. The mild sun, the smell of freshly cut grass, brown crispy leaves rustling under every step she took. Oh, how she admired the Autumn.

'I'm nearly at Tayta's house. See you after work, Mum. Love you.' Their conversations usually lasted longer than the length of the bus ride. Ending the call, she realised she only had half an hour with her grandma before heading to work. Her grandmother would wait for her on the worn-down concrete bench at the front of her house, between the blush rose bushes on either side.

'*Kif al madrasah, habibi*?', her grandmother would ask with sincere interest, followed by the traditional kisses on each cheek. Her grandmother had twelve grandchildren and no two stories

were ever the same. As the eldest grandchild, she felt she always had something interesting to share.

'*Masrasah* was good. *Lioum kan 3nda fahas* Science, *bas* I think I did okay.' She began to recount her day in broken Arabic, just good enough for her grandmother to understand. She followed her grandmother through the front door and into her traditional Lebanese kitchen lined with chocolate timber cupboards. A signature dish was cooking on the stove in a ridiculously large pot, and an aroma of coriander and garlic filled the small room. Her grandmother always prepared her afternoon lunch before she arrived, so she wouldn't walk in to work on an empty stomach. Sitting on the verandah encased with rich green vines, she would recount her day slowly. A few broken-Arabic conversations later, she noticed it was 4:10 pm and she needed to change before heading to work.

Ten minutes later she was dropped off at the local chemist in her grandma's untarnished white Camry. Always right on time.

She yearned for the day when she could share her life story with her children: becoming a world-renowned paediatrician who started out wiping down dusty shelves stacked with a ridiculously diverse range of medications. Her dreams were to advance the visibility of Muslims in the health industry. Attending an all-white school in South-West Sydney, with no more than a handful of 'ethnic' students in her grade, she began to realise the significance of representation in multiple industries in Australia, particularly for Muslim women. She tried to think of any Muslim pharmacists she knew. *Nour? Khaled? Yousef?*

That spoke volumes to her.

Her start-of-shift routine had an organic rhythm. She walked through the transparent glass sliding doors and was greeted by the high-pitched 'ding' from the chemist's alarm system. The 'ding' detected any individual approaching the front door, regardless of their moral compass. Naturally, the 'ding' drew nearly every set of eyes in the pharmacy to the doors, keen to check who was arriving or leaving. She hated the attention she received after walking in. She tip-toed past the layered shelves of untouched medications, her footsteps only just audible on the timber vinyl flooring. Her team would usually greet her at the back of the shop behind the prescriptions counter and, if it was quiet, present to her a gallery of photos of their grandchildren. But no photos were shown today: it was too busy. Instead, an orchestra of mechanical noises accompanied the printing of medication labels and tax invoices covered in numbers, too advanced for her to read. An

occasional 'Hi mate, how are you?', 'Have you been served, Ma'am?' or 'Prescription for Sandra?' could be heard above the din.

She compared the back of the pharmacy that day to Martin Place in the City, everyone rushing around and pressed for time. If she could, she would stand behind the counter for a while after arriving. It made her feel as important as the pharmacists themselves, almost like she was on stage with them, sharing the spotlight before the audience of customers watching their performance. She felt empowered until she realised there were shelves to clean. Her reality at fourteen years old didn't compare to that of the senior employees.

She slid her school bag into the shelf labelled 'Staff Only' and signed her name and shift times in the A4 work diary. She turned the pages to get a sneak peak of the notes from the previous week, taking care not to be caught by her colleagues:

Michael was rostered on for additional shifts because he finished his university exams.

A huge Panadol and Hydralyte order will be delivered on Saturday between 9:30 am and 11:30 am.

A customer is going to be charged an additional $14.95 for delivery because they live too far away.

She then collected her baby-blue badge with her name in bold white writing and pinned it above her right collar. Finally, she went to the kitchenette to the right of the prescription counter and collected the Chux wipe and the disinfectant spray. She was ready to start her shift.

She stepped out from the counter and sifted past all the impatient customers, heading to where she left off last Monday. The green and white boxes of Zyrtec tablets were replicated in multiple rows. She never understood why pharmaceutical companies would sell the same medications but in differing tablet amounts. She squatted before the shelf closest to the ground and collected a handful of boxes; four was all she could manage in two hands. She neatly placed them on the floor beside her feet, keeping them in order. When lined up perfectly, the bright green swirl was consistent at the top of the packaging across all four boxes. As a young paediatrician in the making, she aimed to digest and comprehend as much information as she could, although some words were absolute gibberish. The dreams of this year 9 student were real and vast.

Zyrtec. Rapid acting. 24-hour relief. Pack of 12.

She picked up a box and flipped it over to read more about the active ingredients. She wished she had brought her little white notepad to jot down all the interesting medications. She could sense her boss, Tony, watching her from the small window across the pharmacy. He looked at her with a sense of happiness, before returning to processing prescriptions.

Tony's confident and charismatic personality rubbed off on his customers. He had known her from babyhood and watched her grow older every time she visited the pharmacy with her parents. He once told her that employing her was one of the best decisions he had ever made, as

he believed she was a young pharmacist in the making, right in his very store. His excitement for medications and people's health inspired her, and she took the initiative to ask questions about the side effects and purpose of specific medicines.

She returned her focus to the words on the Zyrtec packet.

Active ingredient: cetirizine hydrochloride. Contains Lactose.

She recognised *Lactose* from the multiple-choice question in her science topic test earlier today. Thank goodness she didn't choose it. It was a trick question.

Medicine information…

Her knee began to cramp. She shifted her squatting position, putting her weight on her other leg. She thought that she should try and find a foot stool to sit on.

Ding.

She turned her head to see who had entered the store. A thick lock of hair slid over her right shoulder, tugging a bobby pin. A familiar looking customer walked through the doors. *What was his name again? John? Henry?* She had never served him at the counter before, but she remembered filing away his prescriptions not long ago. He was tall, pale and very old. She couldn't gauge his ethnicity. Some might say he looked like the scary neighbour in that Disney movie. She respectfully smiled at him as he passed on his way to the prescription counter. Maybe he only gave important people the time of day, like the people issuing his medication. Or maybe he just didn't see her.

His odour lingered behind him. He reeked of diesel and cars, the intensity of which matched his attitude. Her chest began to burn with every breath she took. She tried to mask the smell, continuing her cleaning.

She hadn't yet memorised the customers' names, only recognising their faces. She accepted that this would take time, especially as she only worked one day a week. Her favourite customers were those who were really kind and made her feel visible. Most of them were exhausted mothers with small children running around in circles or fascinated by the colourful toys offered in the children's section. Despite the distraction, the mothers always took the time to ask about her own day at school. Other times, her family members would walk through the door to pick up their medication, or just to say hello. That was always the highlight of her day.

A few moments later, she heard Tony's voice speaking a little louder than usual.

'Someone will take care of you at the front.' Tony's voice resonated through the store. She took the hint and tossed the Spray n' Wipe under the shelves. She lined up the Zyrtec boxes under the shelf too, so they wouldn't lose their order. She quickly walked to the front counter before the old man could catch up to her. She entered her ID code into the system and gathered her breath

before the customer arrived. She really appreciated when Tony gave her a signal to be ready at the counter. It was like an unspoken code they shared; after working there for a few months, they could easily read each other.

The older man eventually arrived at the counter, his stench following not long after. She usually enjoyed meeting new customers and making small talk. Everyone she encountered had a new story to share and expressed a different personality.

The old man tossed his blood pressure tablets across the counter. 'Just this medication.'

'Of course, sir. Would you like a bag?' she asked while scanning the box. She was trained to meticulously cross reference every detail in the system to ensure it was the right medication: name, size, dosage strength, expiration date and medication code. After a few moments, she realised he hadn't responded. She looked up to see that he was staring at her name tag. He read it aloud, but not loud enough for anyone else hear.

He smirked at her. 'That's a unique name. Are you from around here?'

She wasn't sure what was so funny, which was ironic as she was the funniest girl in her friendship group. She figured this might be his way of starting a conversation.

'Yes, sir,' she replied, unsure whether to bag the medication. He leaned over the counter, his eyes level with hers, his stench very much alive.

'You Arab?' he asked bluntly. The crevice between his eyes deepened, almost replicating the prominent fissures of the brain she studied last term in Biology. His deep brown eyes locked with hers as he stared above his rustic rectangular silver-framed glasses. She felt like she was in deep trouble but was unsure why.

'Yes, sir,' she repeated. His tone had soured, and he leaned forward an extra inch.

'Your name sounds Muslim. Don't tell me you're one of *them*.'

She couldn't move a muscle; the counter was too strong a boundary.

Them.

Her body stiffened: one hand on the computer mouse, another holding the blood pressure medication. Her knees were still cramped. Her bones locked in place and her blood felt ice cold. She was alarmed. Distressed, even. She didn't know where the conversation was heading and was unsure how to respond. The concentrated sound of police sirens flared outside the doors, dissolving after a few seconds into the distance. She wished they were coming for the old man.

Her eyes discretely scanned the shop, looking for Tony. This was the one time she yearned for attention from her colleagues.

'Yes, sir,' she swallowed once again. Her body began to shake uncontrollably though she wasn't cold. The medication box was becoming damp from the sweat of her hand. A lump formed

in her throat. She hoped Tony would notice that her voice was a decibel louder than before and would take over the counter so she could remove herself from the situation. But there was no response, not even a fraction of attention. She looked back at the old racist. He didn't move his stare from her eyes.

'It's people like you that destroy our country.' He had lowered his tone, almost whispering. His stench became more potent each second he stayed at the counter.

'You tell your father to take you and your family back to where you came from. You're making this country worse for others,' he threatened.

A few customers queued up behind him, ready to purchase their prescriptions. The old man glanced over his shoulder, noticing their footsteps getting closer. She managed to place the box of blood pressure tablets on the counter, wishing she could take one herself.

'Have a lovely day. Darling.' He smirked again, straightening his posture and fixing his glasses on the bridge of his crooked nose. He scooped a handful of gold and silver coins from his back pocket and tossed them onto the counter before leaving the store.

Bagless.

IWS: The Iranian Wedding Season

Danny Yazdani

Ah, the month of June. Tax returns and mid-year celebrations fill the crisp Winter air with anticipation. More importantly, for Iranian-Australians, the Iranian Wedding Season ('IWS') commences. Lavish expenses of all kinds—gowns, venues, fine dining—are essential to the proceedings of this season. For my entire life, I have seen the IWS take flight in June. To this day, my focus has been chained to this trivial detail. Why Winter? Is it because the chilly air reduces the number of sweaty guests, or that costs are slightly cheaper in the lead up to tax returns? Who knows? Who cares. After attending a wedding in the Winter of 2021, I have realised how oblivious I have been to what an Iranian wedding truly represents: Iran.

Before I 'dig right in' (God, I hate cliches), context is essential for all my readers, whatever their background. In a nutshell (yet another one), the Islamic Revolution of 1979 shattered the rapid growth of contemporary Iran, after which the ancient nation faced its biggest outpouring of emigration. While many fled across the Northern Hemisphere, a great many also sought, and continue to seek, freedom in Australia. As per the 2016 Census, there are close to sixty thousand Iranians residing in Australia. Within this population, it is easy to overlook the *ethnicities* of the Iranian people. We have Persians (often mistakenly interchangeable with the Iranian *nationality*), Kurds, Afghans, Turks, Balochis, Azerbaijanis, Arabs, Assyrians, Jews, Armenians, and a surprising number of others. The list is endless, yet to outsiders it is obscured—and I haven't even delved into the vast range of religions, languages, dialects and accents. While these ethnicities are all triumphantly united under an umbrella of Iranian nationality, each group has its unique *culture*. And with that, my dear readers, come thick coatings of music, food, dance, ritual and belief that enhance the already dense makeup of shared Iranian culture.

I mention this in extra detail for the fact that this ethno-historical context is intrinsically tied to the Iranian wedding. For argument's sake, I will use this Winter wedding of 2021 as my prime example. The couple are both Persian-Iranians, speak Farsi and belong to the Bahá'í faith. One fled Iran in her childhood as an asylum seeker and the other migrated more recently. Prior to the wedding, they conduct a civil engagement ceremony, and then they hold an extravagant reception. I notice the influx of people spilling into the venue that night, followed by the typical speeches, food and first dance. Then the night *truly* takes off. There is music, dancing, lights and a large circle of people praising the wedding guests who are in the centre with the bride and groom. Initially, I hear the classics play: Armin Nosrati, Leila Forouhar, Shahram Shabpareh. With each Farsi song, more and more guests flood the dance floor. We then reach a point in the night where

the tables turn. First strikes Kurdish music, which involves the iconic 'tissue dance' seen in many cultures. Then the groovy songs of the Turks play. Arabic one-hit wonders bring about belly dancing, led by the bride's sister and brother. (This surprises me due to the constant furor caused by the mislabelling of Iranians as Arabs.) A traditional Persian knife dance is led by my aunts, the groom giving them each large bills so that the knife is passed on. Sweet Lord, even white music plays: hits from the 2000's like 'Just Dance'.

I am in a state of shock. My narrow-minded *zaviyeh* has been completely dismantled. I barely hear Persian divas like Googoosh and heartthrobs like Andy. Instead, the playlist of the night jumps from one Iranian ethnicity to the next. This playlist is a microcosm of Iranian society, the Iranian-Australian diaspora included.

I feel childish at this point, like an uncultured fool. My obsession with the placement of Iranian Wedding Season in Winter now seems anal on my part. I had been overlooking what I undoubtedly find joy in: my heritage and its nuanced understanding of diversity. While I was at this wedding, all I could think was that I want that exact same DJ and exact same playlist at my own future wedding. For as long as I proudly call myself an Iranian, the Iranian wedding will be more than the fine dining and bilingual speeches that appear on the surface. Rather, it will be a celebration of marriage in a remarkably diverse landscape that embodies my homeland.

When They Cry

Rebecca Ward

Some cicadas live underground for their first six years of life, before burrowing their way to the surface and splitting apart from their hardened exoskeletons like butterflies from cocoons. When I was six, my shell was still soft. Malleable.

The world felt bigger then, and I was fun-sized. Children swarmed the yellowed field of sunburnt paspalum. The school bell echoed in my ears long after its hammer fell silent. I ran across the length of the field, the sun burning my back. My long, coltish legs carried me faster than the rest, to the only shade unoccupied by a teacher.

Two grey myrtle trees grew a child's arm span apart. Their branches bowed under their own weight, low to the ground. Overhead, green leaves and cream flowers strained toward the sun. There, beneath the branches, between cinnamon-scented leaves, was a small pocket of safety against heat, noise and teacher supervision.

I arrived there to see the hard-packed ground littered with hundreds of tiny holes; mounds, newly dug into the dirt. I thought they were anthills. Those were the only insects I knew that lived underground. Likely, the cicada nymphs came up during the previous night, all at once, as if prompted by a school bell of their own.

We spent lunch hunting cicada skins and trying to pinpoint them from their calls. Cicada song shook the air, its sound so loud and close I felt as though it was coming from within my own skull. But whenever we moved towards them, the cacophony would shift to the other tree.

I stretched high on toe tips, my fingers wavering in the air for a weighty second before they slid gently around a papery shell. The translucent papyrus, its back neatly split, was the most intact shell we had found so far. A fragile record of life. Hollow, clawed legs clung to my palm as I cradled it.

'Aww, I was gonna get it!'

Her small face was pale, cocked to one side. I don't remember her name now, but I recall playground games and shrieks of laughter. She'd been a friend. She looked down her nose at me. An impressive feat: I was a full head and a half taller, and yet she still managed to make me feel small. Even with her neck craning so far back to meet my eyes.

'You're too short,' I replied, 'you'd never reach that high!'

'Maybe you're taller, but I'm more grown up!'

'Nuh-uh!' *Nuh-uh* was the most bulletproof response. As I was the youngest sibling, my older brother and sister would outreason me in every argument. Instead of reason, I wielded

denials like Excalibur—vanquishing every argument with simple, stubborn negation and a child's will. This instance was about as successful as all my other attempts at refusal.

'Yes. I. *Am*!' She stomped her foot and pointed accusingly at me. '*You* still call your Mum '*mummy*'. That makes you *a baby*!'

She flapped her arms up, then down to hold her hips, elbows akimbo. Strutted, cocksure and victorious. The cicadas screeched louder, as if warning off a predator. I cradled the coveted shell in one hand and reached out to the nearest trunk with the other, ready to dodge around it if things escalated. The bark, rough beneath my fingers, was raised in jagged grey veins that criss-crossed over rusty flesh. I picked at them with blunt nails and thought about stomping my own foot, about climbing up and away from her words.

'I'm not,' I mumbled. 'I say that because my *Mummm—'* I cut off the word before I could complete it, habit mutating the final syllable into a long sound of doubt, *mmmm—'likes* it!'

She gasped, pointing at me accusingly. 'You were gonna say it! I heard you! *Mummy's girl! Mummy's girl!'*

I looked at the finger. *Biting is wrong*, I thought.

'*I wasn't!'* I yelled, voice drowned by the buzzing of the bell.

Sometimes, a nymph might take too long to wriggle free from its exoskeleton, so it hardens over them, petrifying them in their own skin. They need to get out from under their old face before it suffocates them.

The bell rang an end to our argument beneath the myrtles, but her words echoed in my mind, chafing callouses into my soft skin. I sat beneath the myrtle trees longer than I should have, thoughts frozen and mind whirling over and over, as a buzz filled my ears, my chest. I don't know how to fix this, how to win. Eventually I am corralled to class by an impatient teacher.

When I get home that day, I start saying 'Mum'. I have just spent the school day and the bus home repeating it in my mind: *Mum, Mum, Mum. Mummy is for babies.*

She will look at me and frown, but I don't care. I'm going to win, I've decided. There'll be no more *Mummy*. 'Winning' becomes habit. I will take the words that freeze me beneath my mask and use them as a new layer of hardened skin, hiding how they scar. Because that's how you fix the game, so you'll always win. It will be years before I learn there was nothing to fix, to win. By then it will be too entrenched, too much a habit, ossified upon my skin, a mask that will take decades to break away from, so I can breathe.

Some moments will chip away at that mask, and others will entomb me further within it. I remember none as clearly as that moment beneath spiced leaves, defining in its innocuity.

That memory returns to me unfaded, each summer when the cicadas cry.

Just a Cut on the Bottom of My Foot

Moontana Mohsin

I'm three weeks late.

I notice when I'm not sleeping as well as I usually do, and my acne visits for the first time in a long while.

I notice again when my brother Tarun, a teenager who seems to eat everything his eyes see, lets me know over dinner that I'm eating too much.

The third and final time is when I try fitting into the jeans that Nasir bought for me this time last year.

'What is going *on!*' I'm yanking on the zipper to no avail, out of breath and working up a sweat. Our plans to go out tonight are being stalled by my bloated stomach.

Nasir is over it.

'Get the test,' he says. 'Do it now or live with the consequences. You can't avoid this like you avoid everything else.'

I put on a pair of drawstring trousers that make me look better than the jeans. I tighten my hair into a bun and tell him I'm scared. Maybe this is a fluke, or a return of my irregular cycles from when I was a traumatised, un-therapised teen. Or maybe it's the real thing. That's what makes me scared.

Scared of going to the shops and buying a *Pregnancy Test* like I'm a taxpaying *woman* who stands behind the politician she votes for or knows her Riesling from her Chardonnay. A woman who planned this with her taxpaying *husband* who calls her *hun* and rubs her feet after dinner. *I'm* not that woman. I don't want to be that woman.

I'm a *girl*.

I'm a girl with an above average paying job, living in my own apartment surrounded by lilac jacarandas and cerulean coves. I go to Pilates twice a week and make margaritas (heavy on the lime) on Friday evenings. I'm a girl in a committed relationship with a boy (not to be mistaken for a *man*) who works an above average paying job, has his own car that he drives for an hour every fortnight to see me, who only ever encourages my seemingly unachievable dreams, who pays for my dinner and then fucks me with his hands around my neck.

I'm only a girl.

Nasir looks at me with sympathy, and always with love.

I wonder how my mother might look at me. How my boss might look at me. How anybody would look at me now, or in a few months, when I'm *full* and *fat*. I'd be a failure, a floozy.

A fickle-minded girl, they'd whisper.

I crawl into Nas's arms and curl up into a ball. He kisses me on my ear.

'You aren't a girl anymore and you can't get an abortion after three months. What will you do when it's too late?'

'I'll use a coat hanger.'

He doesn't seem amused at me making light of the situation. I turn around and kiss him on his nose, both his eyes, twice on his eyebrows.

The next morning, we make love. Or we try. I'm too preoccupied with the thoughts of a life growing in me. My breasts are tender and my middle is larger than most, softer than most. Although it has always been that way.

Nas's eyes are glued to the ceiling. He says he's worried and I don't respond, because frankly, what isn't there to be worried about? He looks everywhere but at me and brings it up again. Makes me pinky promise to do the test.

I promise.

'But I won't tell you,' I whisper. 'I won't bring you into this. You'll never know any of it. I'll deal with it myself.'

'But—'

'It's not something I want us to bond over. Not something I want to share with you.'

'But you promise you'll find out?'

'I promise.'

I bus it to the shops three hours after he leaves.

There are only two outcomes for me here.

One, I'm *just late*. Nothing more, nothing less.

Two, I must terminate a pregnancy.

I make a list in my phone as I'm getting off the bus:

TO DO IF PREGGERS:

- make an appointment with women's clinic

- take leave from work

- figure out who to tell

Somebody has to pick me up from the clinic afterwards and it can't be my friends who share everything with their husbands, or my cousin who'll be supportive but will always be my reminder of what happened. It won't be Nas because I refuse to tell him I'm pregnant and have nothing to show for it nine months later.

I think it might be my neighbour, Mia, who gains nothing from seeing me at my worst, who will go on to live a life where this will hold no meaning.

I descend the escalator towards the medicine aisle, and stand in front of the rubbing alcohol shelf for a good fifteen minutes whilst trying to read the labels of the pregnancy tests from my periphery.

The elderly man in front of me unashamedly probes the massage oils and lubes.

Behind me, the tired, untidy older-millennial family-of-three take their time grabbling about in front of the baby formula display.

I am in the middle, between a doddering man seeking pleasure and a mother and father who show me what could happen from seeking the same pleasure too often, too freely. Too much.

I'm now drenched with sweat in my cable knit cashmere. It's spring but the rain comes and goes like the jasmines in the backyard of my childhood home. The heat that should've been marries the drizzle, turning my toes cold but sticking my hair to my forehead. The last time I was here, Nas and I bought off-the-shelf bleach and developer to cure my unattended lockdown regrowth. I knew we'd failed as soon as the mirror showed me a girl with a forehead rash and strawberry-red mane. Now I am here where I must forget my hair, my growing breasts and the frown that is etched onto my face under this mask.

The millennial family moves on to the next aisle, but the old man remains within an arm's length. I throw caution to the wind and blindly toss a few tests in my basket. Hiding the boxes under the celery and carrot I collected earlier, I hurry to the self-checkouts.

The girl in front of me with her garlic, lemons, prawns and a trolley full of Italian ingredients knows what I'm hiding under my vegetables. She pities me. The man behind me with his dog food knows too. He thinks I'm a slut. The mother with her 6-year-old riding on top of the trolley looks a little too long at me. She's telling me I could have that too. An offspring. Wouldn't it be wonderful? Everybody knows, I'm sure of it. They're all looking at me.

I quickly weigh the first vegetable, which the machine counts as an 'organic' onion instead of a plain common onion, charging me $1.27. I can't afford this onion. But running over to the cashier and bringing attention to myself is an inconvenience I can't afford either.

In my moment of frustration, I catch a glimpse of my face in the plastic barrier above the checkout screen. I look at the girl looking at me. Red-turning-brown hair still stuck to her forehead; a frown hidden by her mask. I get on my tippytoes to get a better look at her stomach.

Hello there, beautiful young girl behind the shiny plastic. Are you pregnant too?

'Hey, lady! Quit clowning around, I've got kids to pick up from school.'

I can feel the hot breath of a disgruntled mother on the back of my neck, spurring me to move. I rush to weigh the remainder of the vegetables when the words 'PRGNCY TEST' suddenly flash across the screen. I'm frozen in shock as the machine whirrs and malfunctions.

'Ma'am, those don't need to be weighed,' a voice next to me says.

Ma'am?

I look to my right to see a schoolboy in his late teens holding a can of energy drink and a bag of shallots. He points to the red flashing light above my cubicle.

'I'll get the attendant for you, Ma'am.'

'Look, I'm—' Just a girl, is what I'm about to say, but before I can the attendant arrives, presses a bunch of buttons on the screen and leaves. I want to give the boy a piece of my mind, let him know he needs to mind his own business, but I'm interrupted again by that same fed-up woman.

'C'mon lady! You've been at the counter for ages. Quit being selfish!'

I pay for the load and storm out with a rushed 'thankyou' to the store assistant at the exit. I think about calling Nasir to cry about what just happened—the humiliation, the embarrassment. *I mean, do I* look *like a 'ma'am'?* And then I remember he's not supposed to know. So I just carry my bags and walk home slowly, ignoring a wave from the kind bus driver who usually takes me home.

Back in the apartment I can hear Mia's laughter floating from her flat. I take my time putting away the vegetables, whilst drinking exactly three glasses of water, taking out a chicken carcass to thaw and refrigerating a now-yellowing broccoli given to me by Baba. The three-week-old reminder on the fridge to call the sparky goes unnoticed, much like the backlog of voicemails from Ma.

The remaining bag and its contents make their way to the bathroom.

The plastic sticks remind me of a Magic 8 Ball, my future dependent on the message delivered through thin lines.

Am I pregnant? I ask the first test.

Am I with bébé? I giggle and ask the second.

Am I about to embark on the most life changing, nerve wracking, formative experience of my life?

I laugh and cry as the results appear, the lines blurred by my shaking hands.

The phone rings from my bedroom dresser but I stay here, taking a moment to look again at the girl in the mirror. Her bright face is no longer masked. She clutches her stomach and laughs even harder.

'You're such a girl!'

Express-ination

J. Marahuyo

Staring at my face I tilt as if I were a dog
trying to woo you into a taste from your plate.

I've noticed a change in my face that doesn't seem to
resonate with my face in my head.

I scan like I'm from a spy movie, orange-tinged red
from my pinpoint eyes sliding righteye sliding

left pupil ~staaaaring~ loop of irises landing centre
tip nose squeezed
pouting mouth pointing straight
at the same
lips folding in held

wetplump

tickling tongue on
gums Blink. Back to eyeballs.

Tense both cheeklip taut lipcheek tight heh. Eyes
P O P ! brow brow
lid lid
petite blowfish
deflate scrunch half nose and
squeezethischeek see
—saw scrunch this half
quick exhale to puff out air both nostrils now flare
and stare. jaw slightly up slowly blink slowly release

jaw to gravity, unfold back of neck, straight staaaaaaaaaare

lift right arm elbow bent fingers touch submental space.

Teeny tiny nod, nod, nod

AAAAHHHHH~! That's what it is!

My chin is missing!

meeting Amihan

J. Marahuyo

[*for ate p*]

You who is free
chose my windowsill

to describe your honeysuckle dreams

feet on the ground head above mine

You spoke in royal blue

beak closed your yellow eyes recognising me

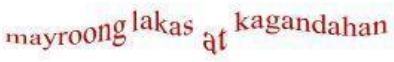
despite the madness

of my form your diaphanous thoughts

gliding from culm-to-culm fledgling

infernos brilliant against the backdrop of bamboos

reassuring me



in teetering steps

in moments of confusion

in the netted wings of a damselfly in the space between each mortal body

in the fact that space
between us all

is the same as the space between each galaxy

//

look You said *look at how blades of grass run*
holding hands

knowing they'll be okay wherever the journey halts

if one stills with unease the rest will stop
they'll stay they'll play
until each one is ready for another pace

take time to tousle them with your toes so they may

tickle your soles with their concerns
with their own oscillating souls

Something Hainanese

Michelle Huynh

I write Hainan from a memory. I write it from stock images of its rural country, its palm trees, and sun-bare roads. I click on monochromatic stills of villagers in cone hats and children running with the buffalos. Some are of working men and women pulling field weeds. These findings co-exist with the Hainan that lives in my mind, filled with chatter, warmth and mosquito bites on my legs as we travel in groups on dusty paths.

My ancestors came from Hainan, the smallest provincial island of China. I never knew this until years later when my parents booked tickets to honour my grandfather's passing. I have few mementos from Hainan. One of them is a Facebook upload of a taxicab, frozen in shot, driving on a bridge towards the mountains. This was captured by my father from the passenger seat of my Hainanese uncle's car as we drove from Haikou airport. On the road, a family with coloured helmets cycled in the sun, their formation bound by some invisible force. They turn a corner and glide as one. We cross the bridge and trundle by the mountain base. Lush grasslands rush past, turning into flat, sandy grounds as we arrive in a small town. The houses have walls like papier-maché. Scrolls of calligraphy are pasted on wooden doorframes of local diners. Outside, people sit on plastic chairs with one leg tucked underneath or slippers hanging off their feet, fanning themselves with fern leaves. I am travelling back in time, watching the urban build crumbling into wooden, rural sprawl like colour draining from a film reel.

I remember five white geese standing as village guardians outside grandfather's childhood residence. As we set foot on ground, the flock rushes over, flapping their wings and stretching their necks to peck at our feet. The villagers laugh. They say the geese come from other huts and roam as a gang.

Grandfather's house is a traditional *siheuyan* fortress with a tile roof that slopes over a double-door entrance. Another still of the fortress shows a large courtyard that leads to an open indoor area. I recall a leather couch, and above it two portraits of my great-grandparents hanging on the wall. They are sketched out in pencil: a man in a *changpao* and a woman in a *cheongsam*; they have strong cheekbones that resemble my own. This is our home, Mother says, and brushes the baby hairs from my face.

We sit on the couch and watch a funeral monk kneeling on a cushion as he chants to Grandfather's portrait, housed by a shrine decorated with gold drapes and paper money. Smoke from the joss stick pot writhes in the air. Later, I move past the shrine and into a hallway that leads to the guest bedroom. Two funeral staff stand at the other end, conversing. The man has slick

black hair and his fingernails are long and uncut. The woman's scalp peeks through her thin hair. When they glance at me, their sclera bulge from their sockets.

I walk briskly out into the sunlight. On the courtyard steps, a woman butchers boiled chicken on a plastic board that wobbles on a tree stump. She walks over to a tap built into the wall and washes the myoglobin off her hands, arms and legs. The dirt underneath is muddied from the water. Mother sits on a stool, bouncing a baby on her knee. She touches one rosy cheek and the baby lets out a wail. She is very clever, my aunt says. She places rice bowls and soy sauce dishes on the lunch table and continues: she demands to be held by every family villager. She recognises locals. My aunt must've mistaken our silence for being offended, because she adds that all babies need some getting used to when it comes to strangers.

There was an invisible line the Hainanese placed for themselves; a metaphorical border they restrained themselves from crossing. They were most accommodating when they welcomed us as *ngoi gwok yan*, meaning 'foreigners', a normative Chinese term that suggests no disrespect. Instead, it carries an unspoken Eastern perception towards ethnic-Chinese foreigners: that they are of a wealthy class. Although this perception has faded in recent times, poverty runs deep in China's political history.

Mother takes out a sanitiser from her bag. Use this, she tells me. My uncle protests. No need, he cries. He moves with frantic abandon. Come, come. He walks over to a tap and twists the handle. He runs his fingers through the stream, for what I am unsure. He can't change the temperature of the single cold-water source. He scurries to a cramped shelter and comes out with a soap bar. He picks at the brown spots and strands of hair quickly, as if his terse movements can somehow make me unsee them. He wipes down a stool and clears a space on the table. All clean, all clean! Don't spoil her, Mother says. Uncle waves his hand. No matter, no matter. He watches me sit down, eyes narrowed into slits, wrinkles sagged like a Salvador Dali painting. When I say my thanks, he breaks into a grin and sticks up his thumbs.

After lunch, the monk stops his chant and the funeral staff shuffle into the courtyard. They carry equipment bundled in mustard cloth. The monk trails behind them, mala beads around his neck. He rubs the sandalwood between his thumb and forefingers. If you want to come, you must be ready in half an hour, Mother says. I go and retrieve my phone from the guest room and sit on the living room couch to wait. The male attendant walks in. He flicks his fringe with his fingernail. He sticks incense into the pot, pokes his head through the cloth covering the shrine and rustles underneath. The smell of fish lingers in the space between us. Soon Mother appears. Come to the courtyard, she urges. She wraps her arms around my shoulders. She doesn't say anything until we

are in the open, and then repeats: I told you to come quick. She is irritated about something other than my lateness. I glance back at the living room. The man has disappeared.

There is a gap in memory here. There are no photographs to help me remember. If I try hard enough, the images flicker but only briefly. There is open marshland. Clouds overhead bunch together and rain pelts against the car window as we park on damp soil. We get out to trudge through the terrain, then stop at the edge of a paddock that leads to a riverbed. The willows dip their leaves into water. The funeral staff spread a tantric rug on the grass. On a wooden table in the centre, they place an incense pot. Smoke snakes in the wind. The monk kneels on the rug. A cardboard box sits next to him. He chants, volume dipping and rising across the field. Everyone stands to the side. Father holds onto Grandfather's ashes. When the chant stops, he follows the monk down to the river. As they return, he passes a message to Mother and she quickly announces that we should head back to the car. It's not done, I protest. Look, the monk is chanting again!

It's starting, Father says. Mother twists my body around and I stare out at the field. Behind me, there is a faint scrape before a scream tears into the open. A high-pitched wail, desperate to be heard. An animal of some sort. The chant stops. Silence rings loud and clear across the land. I stumble back to the car. There is the country blur of grey and green; my feet sinking into buffalo dung; the pressure of my uncle's hand on my elbow; the tilted grass, grass right up to the sky; and our car on the dusty road like a modern haven.

I see myself now at the end of a hallway in the guest room, my body on a bed with no mattress. The wiring is covered by a thin bamboo mat and the pillow is a long block of wood. Scrunched, damp tissues are my cushion. My back is turned towards mother as she leans against the threshold, asking if I would like to come out later to watch the traditional Chinese opera. She tries again: we didn't know it would happen. If I did, I wouldn't have let you come. The angle changes. Suddenly, there is a window in the wall at my feet, where chatter filters through gaps. I hear them ask about me, then fall asleep to the beat of dragonfly wings flitting through the lattice screen.

At evening I head into the courtyard. My uncle comes and lays a hand on my shoulder. No need to be upset, he hesitates, it's good to understand our culture. From the courtyard to the back garden, villagers bunch outside the residence. They squat on the steps. Small families with children and elders. My parents sit in the centre of the garden. I am on a stool between them. In front, the traditional *Qiong* opera is performed on the ground. Red-painted planks are placed on bare earth with three flimsy pillars for a frame and silk curtains nailed into the wood to drape over the stage. Paper cut-outs of dynasty mythology figures stand as a backdrop. Tucked on the right, behind a shoji screen, an actress powders her face with white makeup at a dressing table. In front, a man

and woman dance to the crash of cymbals. They spin, gold robes twirling to reveal hints of red. A shrill wail. I blink. The couple sings, gazing at me—the man with wide-swept gestures and the woman with dainty flicks of her handkerchief. She slips her hand into his palm. Their flesh conjoins, like it belongs nowhere else in the world but there. The dance ends with chatter and claps.

I find that time and memory can mend differences I once felt were too large to reconcile. I lost Hainan the moment I left. There is no feasible way to revisit the places I've been. The land has relegated itself to a sort of mysticism, a lost somewhere, sometime. The route to the village becomes a loop of passing wheat and farmland. The family residence exists in my mind and future as an empty fortress. Its layout has become a maze; the architecture shifts so that every corner and turn is possible in my imagination as I reinvent a new room, a corner or a walkway. When my memory slips, I ground it in photos, stock images and old descriptions jotted in e-journals from a distant trip.

There is a final photo of me, leaning against the door of a small red car and holding a coconut. The coconut was hacked from its stem by a villager as a crowd gathered beneath the coconut tree outside my grandfather's childhood residence. The villager's skin is dotted with sunspots, contrasting his white singlet, as he perches on a thick branch. When the globe plummets to the ground, an inch away from another's head, the men jostle and holler. The geese join in the commotion with their honking. Father holds onto brown twine, coconuts dangling by his legs as he walks. The coconut man squats at a doorway to crack open the tip and stick a straw through the fleshy opening. He passes it around for the women to drink.

Drink, Father says to me now when he comes home with coconuts from Woolies. The juice is sweet and sticks to my teeth. When I need to grasp onto something—something Hainanese—I close my eyes, close my ears, close my mind and focus on the taste.

SARAH CARROLL (she/they) is a Rotuman/Australian queer writer, performer and emerging producer working on Dharug Land (Western Sydney). In 2022, Sarah debuted her one woman show *Cherry* at KXT Bakehouse as part of the Panimo Pandemonium festival to a sold out showing and an encore season at Everything But The Kitchen Sink Festival at Flight Path Theatre. Sarah also performed *Cherry* at the Sydney Fringe Festival where they won the Tour Ready Award and NIDA Best Emerging Actor. They were a Midsumma Pathways and an AFTRS Talent Camp participant and have been selected by Antipodes Theatre to develop a new theatre work, *Sorry Not Sorry,* with Marissa Saroca. Sarah strives to champion underrepresented voices being heard and to create works that uplift and engage audiences in new and exciting ways, usually with lots of sparkle and sass.

GEORGIA CHAPMAN is a queer feminist writer living on Dharug and Gundungurra land. She has desperately let down her six-year-old self by not having several books published already but is now working on a novel that explores mental health, family, identity and sexuality. She was the winner of the Western Sydney Rainbow Communities Short Story Competition in 2022 and the Australian Poetry Slam's youth competition in 2017.

ROBERT HOANG is an emerging writer, amateur photographer and aspiring English teacher from South-Western Sydney. He is particularly passionate about breaking down the concepts of multiculturalism, humanism and educational philosophy through short stories and essays, and his work has previously appeared in *Honi Soit*, the University of Sydney's student newspaper. When he is not wasting camera film or teaching Shakespeare, he is working on his debut novel, 'Big Trouble in Little Saigon'.

MICHELLE HUYNH is a Chinese-Australian emerging writer from Western Sydney. In 2020, she was shortlisted for the Emerging Writers' Festival Home Residency Program. At present, she is an editor for the University of New South Wales literary publication, *UNSWeetened*. She primarily writes slice-of-life fiction and narratives that centre around the small, but no less significant, moments of private lives.

J. MARAHUYO is a Filipino-Australian poet currently residing on Wangal country. Her poems have placed in a humble number of competitions, and she has been published in the *Cordite Poetry Review* and the *Living Stories* anthology. She was shortlisted for the inaugural Born Writers Award, with her work forthcoming on their website as well as in *ZineWest* and the *Short Stories*

Unlimited Seasons anthology. In 2022, she was selected to take part in WestWords Academy, Express Media's Toolkits Lite: Poetry and The Writing Zone. She explores themes of identity, mental health and everyday moments as whimsically as possible and is currently working on her first collection of poetry. Her Instagram is @j_marahuyo.

MOONTANA MOHSIN is an emerging artist from Sydney. Her work in fiction, poetry and digital media explores relationships, identity and the extremities and minutia of contemporary human experiences. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Creative Writing from UNSW, neither of which are her source of income. Moontana has written for the Sydney Writers' Festival and Channel 10 and was the Senior Editor of *UNSWeetened* during her time as an undergrad. Moontana enjoys people watching and pretending to drown in bodies of water.

ELLEN O'BRIEN (she/her) is the 2022 Program Officer for The Writing Zone and a junior editor at the *Sydney Review of Books*. Ellen is a Garigal/Walkeloa writer living on Bidjigal land. She has had prose and poetry published in *Sydney Review of Books*, *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Rabbit*, *Cordite* and *un Magazine* and was previously a facilitator for the Feminist Killjoys Reading Group.

H. MAY OXLEY is a writer from the Blue Mountains. She has been world-building since she was a small child and is currently in the process of trying to shuffle all her notes on the 'Khorrazhan Empire' into one location. May is also an artist and has completed a Bachelors in graphic design and game design, with hopes of one day using the latter as a vehicle for stories. Her themes are often dark (though rarely without positive spin), dialogue-heavy, and lean towards fantasy. Her original work might see better progress if she would stop writing 300k fanfictions about games she half-hates.

DANIA ROUMIEH has a Bachelor of Communications with Distinction (Journalism) from Western Sydney University. She was elected as a Student Editor for the Western Sydney University Student Editorial team and Publication Committee. Dania initiated and founded 'Humans of Western Sydney', which promotes and showcases a diverse collection of stories shared by students. She was recently recognised and celebrated by Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC QC. Dania is currently a freelance Journalist and focuses her stories on diversity and representation. Her work has appeared with AMUST, ABC Religion & Ethics. Dania is always on the lookout for a new book to read.

MARY STANLEY is a Macedonian-Australian speculative fiction writer with an ambition to tell stories that challenge morality and disturb the peace. Mary's work is heavily influenced by themes of dysfunctional relationships, manipulative personalities and destruction in all its forms. She attacks the horrors that hide behind closed doors and brandishes them to those who would rather have them locked away, kept silent and unseen. Her short stories 'Late for Dinner', 'Assimilation', and 'Undrown' have been published in *ARNA* and the *Sydney University Anthology*. Her short plays *Mystic Nights*, *The Late Hours* and *The Farm in City X* have been staged at the amateur theatre productions 24 Hour Theatre, Bridge Works and Tales from the Metropolis.

REBECCA WARD is an emerging writer from Liverpool, South-Western Sydney. She has recently completed her Bachelors in Publishing and Writing and is currently studying to complete a Masters in Librarianship. She is interested in writing non-fiction and fantasy and considers herself a novice at both. She loves stories with intricate worldbuilding and satisfying payoffs.

DANNY YAZDANI is an Arts and Social Work student, majoring in English and Sociology. He writes in his spare time or, more importantly, when he is struck by an overwhelming feeling or sensation that he can only express to others through the written word. He hopes to bring justice to the world one day, whether that be through the practice of social work or through literary means. However, if opportunity strikes, he hopes to be a multi-modal writer across the literary, poetic and theatrical fields. As a member of the Iranian-Australian diaspora, he is fascinated by topics of biculturalism, masculinity, intergenerational trauma and theatre. His favourite quote is, 'Hope will never be silent'.

VICTOR GUAN YI ZHOU is an Australian-born Manchurian-Chinese writer and art maker. He participates in the Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement and is studying towards a Bachelor of Design Computing and Art History. Victor's non-fiction and creative works have been featured in *Voiceworks*, Sydney Environment Institute and Verge Gallery.