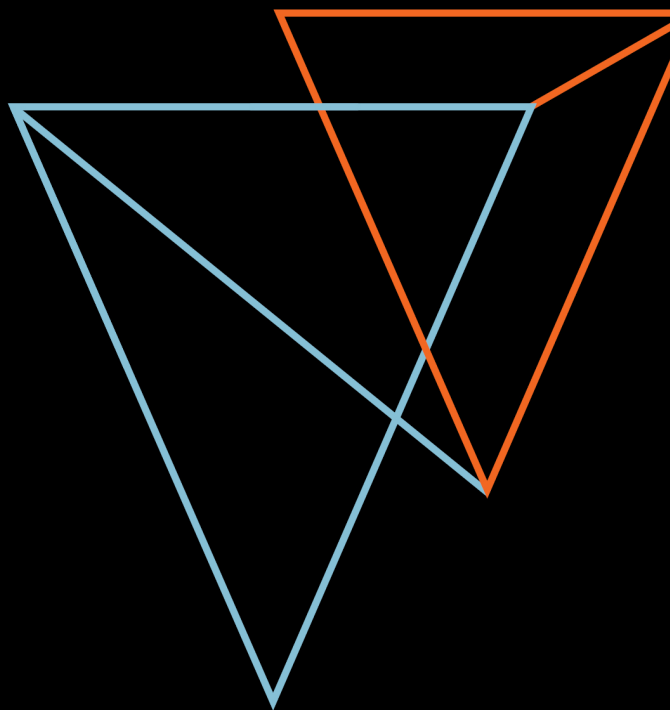


NILLUMBIK PRIZE CONTEMPORARY WRITING

ANTHOLOGY 2020



ARTS AND
CULTURE



Nillumbik Prize
Contemporary Writing
Anthology 2020

Nillumbik Shire Council
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ARTS AND
CULTURE



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FOREWORD

The Shire of Nillumbik celebrates creativity, understanding the role creative endeavours play in establishing our identities as individuals and as a community. This has never been more important than at this time, when the challenges of a global pandemic have thrust uncertainty upon us.

The entries in this year's Nillumbik Prize for Contemporary Writing were written before the current COVID-19 situation unfolded. Yet the best of them, including those gathered here in this anthology of prize-winning entries, reflect the desire to process the complexities of life. The texts in this volume contain explorations of work, family, society, health, generational shifts and power that could have been written in response to the pandemic and its impacts. Prescience comes naturally, it seems, to creative people.

Next year's Nillumbik Prize will feature visual arts and will no doubt contain evidence of the reflections of an arts community that has suffered as much as the members of any other sector from the contraction of the economy and the limitations placed on social gathering. It is vitally important that, through initiatives such as the Nillumbik Prize, we support a thriving creative community.

Council's Arts and Cultural Plan 2018-2022 seeks to foster active lifestyles and artistic expression through participation and innovation. Support for the Nillumbik Prize Awards, including ongoing support for the Alan Marshall Short Story Award, now in its 35th year, is recognition for the roles arts and creativity play in community and individual wellbeing and resilience.

The winning short stories and pieces of creative non-fiction are presented together in this anthology for readers' enjoyment

and with the intention of inspiring further creativity. It has been a particular privilege, this year, to have awarded the inaugural Mayor's Award, which you'll find among these inspiring and thought-provoking texts.

Nillumbik Shire Council in partnership with Yarra Plenty Regional Library would like to thank the judges, Claire G. Coleman and Jeff Swallow (Creative Non-Fiction), and Melanie Cheng and Sarah Schmidt (Fiction – Alan Marshall Short Story) for their expertise in selecting this year's winners. We also acknowledge the fantastic work done by our volunteer readers without whose assistance the judge's job would have been significantly more challenging.

Congratulations to all the winning writers, and to all who entered the Nillumbik Prize for Contemporary Writing 2020. It is also my pleasure to award the inaugural Nillumbik Prize Mayor's Award to local fiction writer, Catherine Padmore, for her fantastic short story, *Work Experience*.



Cr Karen Egan
Mayor

Judges' Report: Creative Non-Fiction

Creative non-fiction continues to attract a certain amount of suspicion, from readers and editors alike.

After all, the label can seem almost oxymoronic. 'Creative' generally refers to the use of the imagination, something that non-fiction is meant to eschew. The category thus exists as a kind of negation, defined less by what it is than what it is not. To write creative non-fiction often requires novelistic techniques regardless of how distant it is from novel writing and journalistic techniques although the writers are not reporters. Creative non-fiction fits awkwardly into the cracks of genre, in ways that many might find discomforting.

Yet when you judge a competition during pandemic the importance of the category becomes strikingly apparent. Nothing could be more real and more material than the deaths and illness brought by the COVID-19 virus. But facts, in and of themselves, cannot convey the profound dislocation brought by the year 2020. As all our certainties collapse around us, we need truth, more than ever, but we also require writers with the poet's ability to turn a phrase and make the familiar feel strange and the strange, recognisable.

It was reassuring, therefore, that the competition received such a strong field of entrants. In both the open and local categories, writers offered works that were informative, moving, provocative or funny – and, on occasion, all at once. The entries covered a wide range of subjects, with authors writing on contemporary inequality; the transformative power of music; the finality of death; trauma and its consequences; rural nostalgia and many other important themes.

Paradoxically, the high standard of the writing in the two major divisions made the process of judging unexpectedly difficult, since many pieces attracted attention. In reaching a decision, we tried to balance the two aspects of the genre, paying equal attention to the entries' creativity and to their facticity. On occasion, pieces demonstrated a fine mastery of craft but did not adequately explore

their subject matter. Others dove bravely into interesting material but the writing unfortunately let them down.

In the Open category, several pieces were admired for their evident courage. We commended *Conditioned Response*, a gripping exploration of predatory male entitlement, admiring the way it drew out the terror in a familiar female experience, and awarded the main prize to *Songs from the Vault*, a piece offering an intimate glimpse of a psychotic break and its aftermath.

In the Local category, we admired two moving studies of grief: commending *Paper Thin* for its exploration of the death of a grandparent and allocating the award to *The Things We Leave Behind* for its account of nostalgia, ageing and familial love.

We chose not to award a prize in the Youth category, which did not, unfortunately, receive many entries. It is to be hoped that, in the future, young writers can be encouraged to explore the potential of creative non-fiction.

- Claire G. Coleman & Jeff Sparrow

The Things We Leave Behind

Alessandra Prunotto

Alone in the house we had all once lived in, my nonna used to read her mother's letters. I imagine she read them tucked primly into her red velvet armchair (the one that's now under a tarp in the garage) sipping a cup of coffee in a pool of sunlight. These were letters my bisnonna had written to her daughter from across a continent, after Nonna had left her behind in post-war Italy to start a new life in South Africa.

"Do you still remember her?" Nonna writes to my dad forty years later, after he too had left her behind to start a new life in Melbourne. "In her letters she so often talks to her grandchildren, you and Mic; it seems you had a special liking for the statue of Marco Aurelio in Campidoglio square. Nonna Anita used to go there and admire it thinking of you; she says that the best time to see it is in the early morning sun when the gold flecks on M.A.'s mantle shimmer. There is a saying that when that gold vanishes, Rome will fall!"

Though I can't know for sure, I imagine the letters that Nonna had kept were in pristine condition, yellowed slightly by then, but pressed neatly into a leather-bound file. Quite unlike the faxes that are scattered across the dining table in front of me: reams of battered plasticky paper printed with the traces of Nonna's typewriter, interspersed with stiff originals in Times New Roman from Dad's old Windows95. Nonna's words have nearly faded completely in some sections, so I have to hold them close to make them out. This is not surprising, seeing as I'd found them in an outdoor cupboard, shoved in grimy Manila folders covered in spider shells, alongside a tangle of mangy goggles, deflated lilos and useless water guns.

I'd prised them out from where they'd been packed cheek-to-cheek with files labelled *St. George 2001-2009*, *Scaffolding Electrical*, *Owner Correspondence*, *Business Exp.*, *Marco Tax Italy*. Now they flop re-

luctantly over the silky walnut of the dining table. The letter that had introduced me to my bisnonna is dated 4 July 2000, but it nestles between one from September, and another from June the following year. An impulse for cosmic order flares inside me and I start to pile the scraggly pages together by month.

In the kitchen, the coffee machine is gargling and gasping on the stove.

“Daaad your coffee –”

“Yes, yes, I’ve got it,” he calls back as the coffee-maker sighs with relief.

I continue doggedly sorting the papers. A few moments later he wanders into the dining room with his mug, that burnt-umber coffee smell wafting beside him. “What are you up to Ale?” he asks. “Don’t rock on that chair eh, you’re gonna break it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I set the legs of the antique chair on the ground. “I just found all these faxes between you and Nonna in the outside cupboard.”

I’m not quite sure how he feels about this particular chunk of history. He hardly ever talks about Nonna, and little about the past in general. He’s anti-nostalgic. Anti-sentimental.

“Oh, ja, I’d forgotten about those,” he says offhandedly.

I tiptoe around that little pile of feelings slumbering peacefully under his comment. “We should keep these faxes inside,” I point out, “because look, some of them are almost completely faded.”

“Sure, if you can find a spot for them.”

Beep, beep. Beep, beep. Now it’s the fridge alarm. “Ag no,” he says and hurries to reassure it.

I create a pile for March. “Do you mind if I read them Dad?”

“No, of course not,” he calls from the kitchen. Then he disappears down the other end of the house.

By now, the table’s pearly wood is covered with paper piles, like lilies on a pond. I shimmy a stack to the side to make more room, partially uncovering a matte photograph with a white border. I slide it out to find a large baby peering over his mother’s shoulder, his

orb-like head covered in blonde down, his small fist curled gently on her collar. The back reads, “Marco a otto mesi, 1962”. It’s Dad.

The photo looks familiar. I abandon my operations to look for that cardboard box brimming with framed pictures. It’s languishing at the bottom of the hallway cupboard, next to the broken grandfather clock. I drag out the box and bat aside the swathes of bubble wrap piled on top.

There’s the one I’m looking for, tucked down the side. Although it’s hard to believe, that baby on Nonna’s hip, gazing enigmatically at the cameraperson’s knees, is me. Nonna is smiling quizzically at me, trying to gauge my mood, her feathery hair blending into the white-washed stone wall behind us. It’s the only photo I know of us together, the only affirmation that our lives were ever intertwined.

I compare the image with the Polaroid of Dad. With my doughy cheeks and globular head, the parallels between the images are striking. It’s just like someone’s removed Dad from her protective arms, turned on the colour, and put me in his place.

~

Nonna’s letters tend to begin with a meditation on her surroundings: the quality of the sun, the birds in the garden, whether it’s raining, whether it’s cold. Then, once we can imagine the view from her typewriter, her prose runs into what she calls “the everyday chronicle of my quiet little world”. I meet all the people within it: Wilson, the gardener who comes on Fridays; Goodness, Nonna’s carer; “the African vendor” at the corner who waves her newspaper as she approaches; her daughter Michaela who visits between marking biology papers; and the four ladies who meet at the Dante Alighieri Society on Tuesdays. I start to get to know them, the way you get to know characters from a reality TV show.

A month after our departure, Nonna comments plainly that our old house in Joburg is “as clean as a whistle”. It was the house Dad had lived in all his life. We’d taken much of the furniture with us, and the picture marks on the walls – the last traces of our presence – had “come off beautifully”, she says. But we seem to leave some

less-tangible residues. “I constantly see and feel you, especially the girls, around the house,” Nonna writes to Dad. “I see them every day, how they used to go around the house and garden and hear their little voices complete with the odd cry and plenty of laughter. Kayla I see as she used to run into my lounge in the evening, her hair still wet from the bath with one of Winnie the Pooh or Barney’s videos in her hand... and Ale sitting in my armchair holding one of her dolls and explaining to Nonna what Nonna did not understand!”

This vivid little scene punctures something just below my sternum and deposits a slithery mess of feelings onto my lap for inspection. Perched on top of the mess is a small clear bubble. It contains the realisation that this is most certainly not a TV show; it’s a chronicle of my nonna’s life, documenting the point just before it had dis-entwined from mine and my sister’s. I carefully take this bubble between my index finger and thumb and place in on the table in front of me.

Underneath the bubble is a goop of longing and disappointment. Longing, with its oily grey streaks, because Nonna is 17 years and an ocean away. And briny disappointment, because this is and will always be my relationship with Nonna: tenuous and indirect, invigorated briefly by eavesdropped correspondence and photo albums.

As I pensively stir the goop, I notice some chunks of what seem to be relief. As I take one and peel apart its fibres, I realise why it’s there. Even though Nonna had been absent from the childhood I remember, she had not, as I’d instinctively felt, abandoned us. For her, we had been like bright stars, the kind that dance on your eyelids when you close them.

~

July, August, September. The phantom grandchildren are everywhere, “still inhabiting [Nonna’s] lounge and practically the whole house.” But, she writes, “I do not feel nostalgic (I impose it on myself)”.

Another anti-nostalgic, then, but an uncloseted one. So how can she relive her memories so vividly, so constantly, so openly, without seeming hypocritical? Take this vision from October. She’s going about her business, “parking the Volkswagen in the garage and opening the

door to let some fresh air in”, when suddenly she has “a vision of the Volksi there in the shade with the door open and one of the little ones peacefully asleep in her baby seat, her little hat askew on her blonde hair.” Immediately, as if realising how this could be interpreted, she adds, “These are wonderful sensations and I really rejoyce reliving such moments.”

My sense is that this is not nostalgia, because they aren’t really memories in the strong sense of the word. They’re more involuntary encounters, phenomena that occur around her, unsolicited, which she observes with her usual detached but earnest air. It’s like the phantoms are right there in front of her. They aren’t memories relegated to the past, but are rather made part of her “everyday chronicle”. She fights off nostalgia, she fights off sentimentality – but she doesn’t fight off the past. It lives next to her like a household pet.

Here, our past lives in dusty cupboards.

~

In fact, I’ve left the hallway cupboard ajar. As I get up to close it properly, cracks ripple through my hip, my spine, my neck. Those scroll-backed chairs are beautiful, but they are not ergonomic. I’ve been sitting here since June, and there are still four months to go.

I gather up the papers and hobble to the tartan couches in the living room, flopping onto the lumpy cushions. I ignore the complaining springs and curl up with the next letter to Nonna, an original from Dad dated 3 February 2002.

He begins, “Can you believe it: yesterday when I was cleaning out my briefcase I found your Christopher pendant, the one that was on your Uno key ring, remember I replaced it with one of my St Christophers.” On 15 February, Nonna replies serenely in Italian, “the San Cristoforo you found – keep it for yourself so that it will protect you, as I hope does yours which I always take in the car with me.”

The little dialogue is nothing so remarkable in itself, but just three faxes later another such exchange catches my attention. Before Dad signs off, he mentions, almost as an afterthought, “Every morning I have my coffee, one of my few pleasures, made in your little cof-

fee-maker, it's a ritual that makes me always feel at home and for which I am grateful."

Although it's an afterthought, Nonna deftly picks up the thread. "You mention my coffee-maker which I had actually forgotten, and wonder if you remember the pink tray with the Chenia rose you gave me; it is a bright pool of light when every morning I carry my breakfast to the small round table near the window!"

I stretch out on my back to watch the gum trees swaying through the gold-framed mirror on the wall. It's funny how mundane objects interweave with people. Every day Nonna had packed the coffee-maker with ground coffee, flipped its wonky lid, filled it with water, waited for its disconcerting shriek, poured its brew into a mug, then later unscrewed its halves and rinsed the sandy grains away. It had enmeshed itself into her sensory landscape, into the practised rhythms of her hands, her arms, her steps between the stove and the sink. Just as it enmeshes in Dad's now.

If you're an anti-nostalgic, objects are safe territory. They're physically here, in the present, but they also belong to the past. When you tell their story, you can acknowledge the pile of feelings sleeping close by without disturbing them. There's little chance of appearing sentimental about kitchen implements, or about the logistics of returning accidentally exchanged pendants, however symbolic they might be.

The dangerous territory, for an anti-nostalgic, is poring over photos of people long gone. These are intangible representations of things, not the things themselves. And as abstractions they're liable to conjure up effigies of a loved one, effigies that just emphasise their absence.

Maybe that's why all our photos are in a box, not on the walls.

~

The pile of unread faxes has dwindled almost down to the coffee table. I wish there are piles more, hidden in the roof or in some secret compartment. Because that would mean that Nonna's radiation treatment had kept "all the naughty cells in place" for a little while longer.

She updates Dad on her health with each fax, about the weakness, about the palpitations, about the fluid Dr Bairstow finds in her lungs, but, I think, always tucking the worst of it out of sight. She reassures Dad from afar, always returning to the thought, "it's the spirit that's wavering sometimes but then it picks up again and I realise I'm privileged compared to many other old people."

I reach for the final fax. I'm half-expecting some earth-shaking insight to sum up the intricacies of a whole life and personality: but of course, it's no more or less special than any of the others. She signs off, "If and when you come dress warmly!"

So that's how real life ends.

On the coffee table are still some more papers. With difficulty, I hoist myself out of the crater in the couch to shuffle through them: information on a Subclass 410 Retirement Visa to Australia, Telkom invoices and letters to my Nonna's friends still in Genova. Behind all this is a sheet entitled "PARKTOWN HOUSEHOLD GOODS", divided into two columns by a blue ballpoint, one for each of Nonna's children.

I trace my finger down the first column, attempting to picture the "Floral Venetian Cabinet", the "Secrétaire black mahogany" and the "Antique Fan – framed" that Nonna had promised to my aunt Michaela. I can't clarify their images in my mind, but they seem vaguely familiar.

As I begin to trace the second column entitled, "Marco", I suddenly realise why. This is the furniture that's all around me. The "Antique dining table" that we eat at every night, sitting in those murderous scroll-backed chairs; the "Antique German Oak Mantle Clock 1890 c.a." that I'd squeezed past to reach the box of photos; the "Bevelled mirror, gold frame" on the wall behind me; the "Tartan sofa" that I treat so poorly. The "Blonde oak shelf" in my room, the "Bacheca" in the lounge, the "Pine cabinet" in the entrance.

From the kitchen, I hear the sounds of someone pottering. There's some clattering and the buzz of the tap as Dad unscrews the halves of the coffee-maker and rinses the sandy grains away.

Songs from the Vault

Anna Jacobson

Her Part-Two-Self

She is in a white room and something has changed, or ended. Something has happened to her memory. No one is here to greet her. Her bare feet touch the floor. A giant shower appears. She is forgetting things. She is out of sequence. She has forgotten the soap. The bottle of body wash on the floor is unfamiliar. Not hers. She flips the lid. The scent is comforting. Orange. Tiny beads blossom within the gel. Plastic beads that don't dissolve. Bad for the ocean. But they help scrub away some of the strangeness. She's forgotten more things. A towel and her clothes. There is a damp towel on the hook inside the shower door. It is not hers. She puts her gown back on. It sticks to her wet skin. See-through. Her feet leave wet footprints on the floor down the corridor. A woman is watching her — a pretty nurse with curly blonde hair.

'How long have I been here?'

'Six weeks, you've just had another round of ECT.'

She knows what ECT is. Electroconvulsive Therapy. She tries to keep hold of her expression. The nurse has upset her and she doesn't want her to see.

'What month is it, Anna?' asks the nurse.

She has a feeling that before her part-one-self ended, it was May.

The nurse writes down her answer.

'It's August.'

Another nurse places a rectangular wafer in her palm. She doesn't know what to do with it. She wants a real wafer with icing: strawberry, vanilla, chocolate, not an antipsychotic one. Her brain feels slow in the fluorescent light. She puts the wafer in her mouth. It dissolves on her tongue quicker than fairy floss. She drinks water from the tiny paper cup to get rid of the medicine-taste.

‘You usually make a fuss. Had to give you the liquid form the other day.

Changed your mind, have you?’

Surely the nurse can see she is not the same person she was before.

‘Don’t mind that bitch,’ says a woman in overalls, slugging back her water and tossing the waxy paper cup in the bin. ‘I’m Joyce. You probably won’t remember me after all your ECT though.’

‘I like your overalls.’

‘Stole them from prison.’

Joyce becomes her new friend.

Psych Ward Inventory

Joyce

Out on the barred balcony she introduces her parents to Joyce, who is leaving tonight. Joyce weaves plans for them to write stories about their experiences and publish them. She writes her details on a piece of paper with the words ‘care of _____’. Someone will be looking after her. Anna tucks the piece of paper into her visual diary, where it will slip from the pages, become lost.

Anglerfish Bill

Anna chants the name on his badge. ‘Bill, Bill, Bill.’

‘Wouldn’t let any of the male nurses near you before. Disrupted the whole ward with your special arrangements.’

The woman’s words unlatch something. Something deep and dark in murky water. Something she can’t quite reach. Something waiting for her.

That night a circle of blue-white cuts through the darkness like the bobbing light from a monstrous Anglerfish. The light is attached to a male nurse, who appears at the end of her bed. It’s Bill. He shines his light into her eyes, holds the torch up to his face and grins. He stands

there for a full minute, watching her; grinning and demon-like, so close she can see his stubble. She wishes he would go away. She doesn’t know how she can see his grin in the dark — perhaps the light from the torch is so bright it illuminates his face. She doesn’t know how she sees his grin when she is not wearing her glasses. One thing she knows for sure — he does not lower the light or move away for a long time.

Melanie and Katie

She never sees Melanie without Katie. The two girls take care of her when she doesn’t let the nurses near her. One night they take turns brushing her hair, getting out the knots. They paint her nails fuschia. Melanie folds paper cranes in the day room with Katie. Occasionally Melanie folds the cranes with anger — face set and arms tense, like how she eats her meals. She moves her food around the plate, so it looks like she’s eaten more. They are trying to reach one thousand paper cranes to make their wish. At the paper-marbling tray, they pluck out strands of their own hair to swirl the ink.

The Oracle

A woman parades in pajamas of moons and stars, glasses held with sticky tape. The oracle accosts her in the corridor — calls her a heroin addict from the Gaza strip.

Kim

Kim won’t get out of bed. The nurse explains Kim is feeling sad. The next day, Anna finds clothing that isn’t hers folded on top of her bag — a lilac top with skinny straps. Kim says she can try it on if she likes — that it will fit her better. Her memory will erase this moment until later, when she is out of hospital and finds the top in the washing basket at home. Her mother tells her one of the girls on her ward gave her the top. Tiny details trigger others that rise to the surface, like a rush of underwater air-bubbles set free.

Fran

She plays scrabble with Fran. They don't keep score.

The Nurses at the Station

She sits at the breakfast table and makes her way through a bowl of cereal. She loves the taste of the crunchy cornflakes with cold milk. She adds some sugar. A nurse scolds her.

'You were meant to fast for your round of ECT this morning, Anna. Now we'll have to reschedule your treatment. How else will you get better?'

Get better. There is something wrong with her. She calls her mother from the nurses' station in tears. She glimpses a photograph of herself paper-clipped to the manila folder of her file. In the photo she is not looking at the camera or wearing her glasses. Her hair is witch-wild and her eyes are heavy lidded with dark circles beneath. She's shocked by her appearance. The nurse catches her looking. *This is you. Surprised?* The nurse's eyes mock her. At dinnertime, her new friends pass her their desserts to cheer her up. She has all the prepackaged chocolate mousse, rice puddings and chocolate milk Breakas she could ever want. The pretty nurse with curly blonde hair does not take them away.

Short-term memory loss – a cycle

She is home. But her room is hiding things from her. She doesn't know what she owns, spends hours going through her chest of drawers, discovering where everything is. When she finishes looking she forgets again. She opens her wardrobe and sees a monstrous pale metallic dress with puffy sleeves. She takes the dress off the rail and shows it to her mother.

'What's this doing in my cupboard?'

'You bought that in Melbourne.'

'Really? Are you sure? It's hideous — not me at all'

She finds another dress in a style that doesn't fit her and puts them both in the giveaway pile.

There's a scar on her ring finger in the shape of a fishing hook she hasn't seen before. She looks at the scar's hook; wants to reel in its story from the ocean. The white line is deep enough to have sliced through her fingerprint. One day in school, the teachers taught them about fingerprinting at police stations, and identifiable features like scars. Now she is identifiable. She asks her mother if she knows the scar's story and she tells her of the time she visited to speak to the doctor. The doctor had excused himself as he saw her flight for freedom: three nurses, and a security guard chasing after her. The industrial security ward door had slammed on her finger. For once she is glad she has no memory of the pain. Over the weeks she will rediscover the scar, ask her mother its story. She will tell her again, and again.

Her parents welcome her home in typical Jewish fashion: with food. Her father brings back babaganoush and hummous with tabbouleh, baklava and Turkish delight from the Lebanese deli. After lunch, she sits on the floor of her room. She takes stock: she is 23 and it is August 2011, one month before she turns 24. Her visual diary contains a piece of marbling paper and a flattened origami crane. She finds strange notes in her handwriting scattered throughout her room. Under her bed she finds a drawing of a screaming face in thick black Nikko and a drawing of a woman whose eyes are fish. She throws them all in the bin. She sorts through her emails, replying to her friends, saying she's been 'sick' but better now. She spring-cleans her bedroom and cupboards, seeing and discovering everything all over again, hoping her short-term memory loss doesn't last. She cycles through the day on a bike that is all pedals and no wheels.

Vault

She turns on her computer. On the login screen there's an extra profile user called 'surprise guest' with a picture of a blue macaw. She

types passwords into the ‘surprise guest’ box but they won’t work. Somehow she knows she created the profile — probably the night of her episode. Maybe if she slips into psychosis again she’ll be able to crack the password. Instead she clicks on the profile user called ‘Anna’. She discovers photographs she took on her computer the night of her episode. She had used a coloured filter, held her hands up to the camera and experimented with the light; turned shades of green, blue and red the closer she moved to the camera. The images are eerie, her hands contorted.

She writes vignettes in her diary so she can remember what she’s done the previous day. She types straight onto the computer so her words are legible. She can’t access her memories from the year before. She is convinced there’s a murderer upstairs. She stays with her parents in their bed until she feels the predator’s presence has disappeared. She keeps her light on, aware of infiltrators behind every closed door. She doesn’t feel safe in her own home. A thought flashes through her mind: she hadn’t gone mad at all— she was just in an accident that wiped her memory and everyone’s concocted a big conspiracy against her.

Paranoid thought.

The next day she can’t remember what she’s done the previous day. She can’t centre herself. She sees a computer file that says *New Digital Diary 2011 – Part 2*. She opens her diary and looks at the most recent entry: ‘today I went for a walk and read my get-well cards’. She looks at her side table and sees a pile of cards, propped up for display. She reads the cards again as though for the first time.

Her Hair

She rips through a matted clump of hair with her hands so the hairdresser can comb through it. The hairdresser’s bracelets jangle in annoyance. The side effects from her medications fill her with restlessness—it’s impossible to stop her legs from jiggling under the hairdresser’s cape. She asks all her curly haired friends where they

get their hair done. One girl says she gets it cut in Israel when she visits her family. Two others say they cut it themselves. Others suggest more far off cities, where people with her hair type are abundant. She doesn’t want to travel outside Brisbane for a haircut — doesn’t trust herself with hair scissors. She has always struggled with her hair. When she wears it out, she has three heads instead of one. Her hair has a confidence of its own.

Her Psychiatrist

Weekly psychiatric appointments at the hospital are compulsory for a year. She packs her notebook, hoping for clues and follows the psychiatrist down the corridor. The room has a set of scales and a computer. Pale yellow walls and grey carpeting.

‘Hi Anna, I’m Dr James Scott. I spoke with you when you were in hospital.’

She shakes his hand, sure she would have recalled something about him had she met him before. His hair is red.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t remember you.’

‘Don’t you? That’s ok; it was just after a round of ECT, so you probably won’t remember due to the nature of the treatment. We had a long conversation though.’

She focuses her gaze on the carpet, just near his shoe, wondering what she could have said to this man in her psychotic state.

‘And how have you been this week? Have you been sleeping well? Any side effects from the medications?’

‘They make me really restless — I used to be able to read for hours, but now I can’t get past the first page.’

‘You were very unwell, Anna. Your recovery so far is miraculous.’

‘I want to know why my episode happened in the first place.’

‘No one knows exactly why these things occur but it’s all a mixture of timing, age and genetics. The Early Psychosis Team is here to research psychosis, which happens in young people for the first time.’

Genetics. Bipolar has popped up here and there down the generations of her family.

‘Why can’t I remember what happened to me?’

‘The severity of the psychosis and ECT affected your memory.’

‘If I don’t write things down, sometimes the next day I’ll have forgotten everything I’ve done.’

He shuffles his papers and brings out a form.

‘There’s a program called Mind Gym, which can help with your concentration and improve your memory. Due to the severity of your illness, you may never remember the time during your psychosis but the program will help you in other areas. I’ll book you in. You’ll also be receiving help from your case manager, Stephanie.’

‘What’s a case manager?’

‘She’ll be like a social worker.’

She recalls a woman who had stopped her in the corridor, waylaying her after she’d been given the all clear to leave the hospital with her father. The woman had appeared too well dressed to belong in the corridors of the public psychiatric hospital. They had continued to move down the corridor, like two determined salmon swimming upstream against all forces. Unease creeps through her and her leg jiggles faster and more uncontrollably. A foreshadowing.

When she sits in the waiting room for her next appointment, boys from the men’s ward gather for a walk in the grounds. She doesn’t remember ever being allowed to go for walks outside — she was probably too unwell.

‘Nice necklace,’ says one of the boys.

‘Thanks.’

He has a fingernail with nail polish on it. On second glance it looks like biro. Psychosis remnants continue to surprise her. When she wakes one morning, ‘dreamphosphorescence’ moves on her wall. The whale swims across her wall in halo yellow, then fades with a wave of its tail into the distance and is gone. It’s like her dreaming-brain is a few steps behind and forgot to switch off the imagery, even though her eyes are open. The illusions don’t stop there —when she looks out the bus win-

dow as it comes to a stop at traffic lights, the road continues to move like a river of tar in a weird perspective shift. She tells all this to James who notes it down and says not to worry; she has insight and it will go with time.

‘Keep an eye on your mood. Usually after psychosis people become depressed.’

Then he smiles and says ‘those boys out there didn’t bother you too much?’

‘Nah, they’re ok.’

He stops writing and looks her in the eyes.

‘Sometimes after an episode of psychosis, people lose their warmth. But you still have yours.’

She smiles at the floor, trying not to cry.

‘You know who your Doctor is, right?’ says her father after her appointment. And he tells her that Dr James Scott is famous for surviving lost in the Himalayas for forty-three days with nothing but two chocolate bars to sustain him. Years later, she will order a copy of *Lost in the Himalayas*. Will read how James had eaten the chocolate in the first few days and it was his will to survive, his sleeping bag and hope that got him through. His sister wouldn’t give up on finding him, even when all seemed lost. She reads he’d turned twenty-three when he was found; the same age she was when she had her episode. She feels a kinship he has been through such an ordeal.

Her Case Manager

Stephanie slides a clipboard from her black satchel. Her hair is cut in a severe line matching her mouth. She sits in the lounge room on the edge of the couch, her back held away from the cushions.

‘I want to try some CBT with you, Anna.’

‘Some what?’

‘Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.’

It seems cognitive behaviour therapy involves breathing exercises.

She doesn't want to practice her breathing while this woman breathes down her neck. The woman scowls.

'You want to be anxious forever, do you?'

Mind Gym

A space has opened up at Mind Gym. She catches the train to the Valley, walks outside the station, past the bare foot smokers and men lying on blankets. She turns down the narrow street to the clinic. She wonders if the man with his bag of belongings is coming to Mind Gym or if he's just visiting to catch the latest episode of *Days of Our Lives*. A man with a lanyard and bunch of keys unlocks the door to a room. He wears a checked shirt and the kind of wire glasses belonging to a serious computer geek.

'Is this the Mind Gym room?'

'Yes, welcome — I'm Sam.'

She glances at the half-dozen ancient machines, reminding her of her family's first PC from 1996.

'These have been donated due to funding issues, but still work well,' he says, patting one of the computers.

She sits at a boxy computer; surprised it turns on when she presses the button. The woman sitting to her left, Kat, has a shaved head and cracked brown toenails. The man to her right, Marvin, is missing teeth. They are both getting through the games faster than her. At the end of the hour-long session they gather around a table and Sam clears his throat.

'Now, we're going to talk about memory. Does anyone know what tools they might use to help them with remembering things?'

'I try not to remember. I use cannabis,' says Kat.

'Ok, well yes, you can discuss that in your other group. Anyone else?'

Sam looks at her. She says she uses a diary and he gets excited and writes the word 'diary' on the whiteboard. He gets out a pack of Uno cards and they all play Uno. She loses every round.

Each week she gradually progresses to the higher levels of the memory games.

Colour combinations flash on screen and she remembers the sequence and repeats them. Red. Blue. Black. Orange. Magenta. They flash rapidly and she clicks on the hues in the order they appear. The longer the sequence, the harder it becomes until she can repeat up to ten different colours and their orders.

'What level are you up to?'

She tells Sam and he looks surprised.

'I couldn't get past level seven — amazing.'

As the weeks progress she feels her concentration begin to improve. She reads all the literature she can find written by women who have experienced psychosis. These resilient women remember most of their episodes and write with clarity. But because she can't remember her episode, she feels cheated out of her own experience. She feels like Drew Barrymore in *50 First Dates*, without the dates.

At the last session of Mind Gym, Sam ruffles through test papers.

'Ok Anna, we're going to see how much you've improved from the beginning of the course. You may not remember this test as we did it soon after you got out of hospital.'

Sam must be mistaken — she was never given such a test.

'Now, for the first part of the test, I need you to name as many things as you can starting with the letter 'S'. This will test your long-term memory.'

She tries to focus.

'Your time starts — now.'

'Snarl, secret, serpent, sin.'

She feels ridiculous; she wants to do well.

'Sun, summer, sultana, sultry, sunburn salt, savoury, salvage, sizzle.'

She stumbles over words.

'Space, snake, saucer, scare.'

She is careful not to say the word 'sex'. She doesn't want Sam to think she's got sex on the brain. She doesn't want to see the 'gotcha'

expression on his face. She realises she's being irrational. She realises she's stopped speaking. She thinks: shit.

'Sick, six, sabotage, septicemia.'

Sam frowns at 'septicemia'. Definitely do not say 'sex' and 'shit'. Do not say —

'Time's up. Now, repeat this sequence of numbers back in numerical order. For example, if I say 3, 1, 5 you would say 1, 3, 5. Ready? 9, 12, 5, 16, 4, 2.'

She tries to hold the sequences in her mind but they shift like water.

'That's great, Anna, you're doing really well. That's it for the test. We'll ring you in a few weeks to let you know the results. It was a pleasure having you in the course. Thanks for sticking with it.'

*

'Hi Anna, it's Sam from Mind Gym. We have great news for you. We've calculated the scores, and your memory has improved in all the areas we tested.' She puts down the phone, relieved. Even without Sam's call she knows she's improved. Although her episode remains a sealed-off section in her brain, the events just before her hospitalisation are becoming less hazy. Now her hands are no longer skating over cool marble as she tries to access her memories. The barrier is crumbling. The vault is singing.

Judges' Report:

Fiction / Alan Marshall Short Story Award

Local and regional writing prizes are a gift: they encourage new and emerging writers to work toward a goal and take massive leaps of faith in their abilities. Having the chance to develop your craft and your voice at the early stages of your career and have it nurtured by prizes such as the Nillumbik Contemporary Prize for Writing is vital. It can feel like an insurmountable challenge to go from creating short stories on your own to immediately putting them out into the world. Having opportunities such as this prize gives all writers a stepping stone, not only to grow as artists and hone their craft but to be inspired to keep going.

The entries we read for the Nillumbik Prize Short Story Award, Youth, Local and Alan Marshall Short Story Award (Open) categories showed a range of talent that was as diverse as the subject matters found in each story. We were overwhelmed by some of the quality of the entries and we are eager to see how these writers develop over time.

If we were to give general feedback to all writers (regardless of if they entered this year) it would be this: read more short stories from authors who express this artform in varied, interesting and beautiful ways. A short story is more than an extract from a novel or a set of lovely crafted images and prose. Short stories are more than small moments. They're more than a 'gimmicky' idea with pyrotechnics. They have a heartbeat that pushes their narratives from beginning, middle, and end while exploring the world and characters and ideas presented to the reader. Mostly they have structure and are often unforgettable. It sounds like hard work (and it can be) but we read so many entries that were able to achieve this and we were often moved, as readers, by the depth and promise of each story and their writers.

The other piece of advice we give everyone is to always redraft your stories before sending them off for publication or prizes. Sadly,

a lot of entries read as first drafts and while we could see their potential, they did fall short. Redrafting allows you to develop the story technically and pushes you as a writer to dig deeper and push your abilities. You will feel more satisfied as an artist when you do this and you will stand out more! If you're writing outside your direct experience, do your research and think about your characters as subjects rather than objects. Give them humanity and complexity, allow them to be and their situations to be complicated if need be. Explore that murkiness. Ask yourself, 'Is there another way I can tell this story? What is it that I'm trying to say or show here?' There were a few stories that took on hard-hitting subjects but they came across as cliché for this very reason.

More than anything we want everyone to keep going, keep developing. It was utterly inspiring to read work from new and emerging writers of all ages and to know that there is a new wave of talent ready to tell stories that connect with readers everywhere.

Youth

We loved the insights into the minds and imaginations of the next generation of Australian writers. We were moved and entertained. As expected, there was a fair bit of emulation, and while technically good, some of these stories lacked emotional weight. It was for this reason that the winning story, *Hiraeth*, stood out above the rest. While ambitious in its scope, the prose focused on the main protagonist and drew her, and her world, in beautiful and believable detail. The prose was pared back and simple, but all the more evocative for its restraint. We were also impressed with the choice of second-person narration to explore the fall out of a global, environmental crises that felt urgent and timely. Here is a writer with great potential. We can't wait to see what they do next.

Local

The standard of entries in this category was high. It was exciting to see stories which experimented with form amidst the more traditional linear narratives. A few of the stories read like early drafts and would have benefited from some rewriting and editing. There were two stories in particular that captured the attention and hearts of the judges. These were: *The Early Settlers* and *Work Experience*. *The Early Settlers* demonstrated a skillful building of suspense and a unique, compelling voice. *Work experience* exhibited a mastery of the short story form. Told in forensic detail, through a series of detailed but unsentimental vignettes, the writer has created an absorbing narrative with a convincing and memorable voice. In particular the sense of place and character, how they experienced and viewed the world, and how it was used to structure the narrative, was what made this story stand out so much.

Open

What an amazing crop of submissions. We were impressed with the ambitious nature of many of the pieces and it was heartening to see some stylistic and structural risks being taken. There was great diversity in genre and subject matter, which made for entertaining reading. Unfortunately, some stories were let down by their endings. The judges agreed that many of the writers would benefit from reading more short stories. *Show Don't Tell*, the winning piece, boasted an ending that was both satisfying and ambiguous. The story itself felt complete and it was very assured and accomplished storytelling, highly nuanced and textured. While it featured beautiful and often funny prose, *Show Don't Tell* also had a compelling narrative arc with a convincing and moving shift in character.

- Melanie Cheng & Sarah Schmidt

Work Experience

Catherine Padmore

10.30

The old lady staggers at me with arms outstretched, like some zombie from a horror flick. I'm rigid in the chair, waiting for the staff to intervene. But they're way across the office, holding mugs of coffee and talking. Not even looking this way. So. That's how it is. I touch my visitor's badge like it's some kind of talisman. But the old lady comes closer, step after slow step. Okay, so I'm moving now, hoisting my legs up onto the chair, squeezing into its back as if that will protect me. And then she's right here, scrawny thighs pressing against mine as she reaches up into an overhead cupboard. The sweat-waft from her underarm is ripe and chemical. Jesus. She scuffles above me and then pulls back, a pack of Winfields in her hands. She holds them high like a trophy.

Finally the staff look over, raise their mugs.

'Good on you, Ruth,' the coordinator says to the old woman. What was his name? Dan? Darren? When he first told me I repeated it, said it over and over in my head, but now it's sitting just out of reach, taunting.

The woman shuffles off down the corridor. Dan — I'm sure it's Dan — sits beside me. 'Gave you a fright, did she?'

I unpeel my legs, brush at the creases in my bought-just-yesterday pants. Proper smart trousers, grown-up ones, with a little cuff at the bottom. A deep chocolate brown. Mum said there was no way she'd let me turn up in head-to-toe black. No eyeliner either.

'Nah,' I say, hoping for a steady voice. 'She was okay.'

He glances over to the others, flicks them a quick wink. 'Give it a day or so,' he says. 'You'll get used to it.'

11.30

At lunch they put me in the big room, where patients sit either side of long tables. Old folks mostly, who have gone off their meds and got low. Some are boomerangs, the coordinator says, ending up back here when their families can't cope. Others they see once and never again. All of them needing help. I pour weak orange cordial into plastic cups, scoop mushed-up veg onto plastic plates and wipe spills from the plastic table-cloth. Fixed high in a corner, the telly blares. *Days of Our Lives* or *The Young and the Restless*, I reckon. Some crap my mum watches, anyway. Backing music crackles and distorts.

'But Chase,' a bottle-blonde says. 'You know I always loved you.'

When the plates are scraped clean and piled in a tub, when the meds have been handed out in tiny clear cups, the rest of the patients creak back to the armchairs.

'Go on,' Dan says, pointing to a spare seat on a sofa. 'Have a chat. It will cheer them up.'

The sofa is made of vinyl, scratched up and peeling, and it stinks of stale wee. Dear God. I push the thought from my mind, focus on the trolley rattling around with tea and biscuits. Keep a bright smile on my face. The old dear next to me takes a cup in her wobbling hand but barely gets it back to the side-table without spillage. I want to help her but I don't know. Would offering be an insult? So I ask her name instead, and where she's from. The telly's still on, so I have to speak loud over it.

'What?' she says, cupping her hand around her ear.

'Where are you from?'

I'm almost shouting now, but she just looks at me.

12

On the way back to the office Dan puts a tray in my hands.

'Here,' he says. 'Take this to room twenty-five.' He looks at his watch. 'And don't talk to her. Just put the food down and leave.'

I work my way up the corridor, walking slow so I don't spill the soup. Like one of those old-fashioned department models with a book

on her head. The door's open a crack, which is lucky as I don't have a spare hand. I ease it open with my foot and walk in.

On the bed sits the old woman who came at me in the front office. Ruth. She's staring up at the corner of the room, doesn't look my way as I slide the tray onto the wheelie-table next to the bed. She's not moving, hardly seeming to blink. I follow her gaze to the aircon vent. A tiny bit of sticky tape flickers in the gust, but there's nothing else to see. It's awkward, just standing there, and the soup will get cold.

'Your lunch,' I say.

The woman shifts her vision then. Slowly, as if it's a battle to make her eyeballs do what she wants. When she finally locks onto me, I'm a mouse gazing up at a snake. Cold, the eyes are. And full of hate. Any second, she'll have me. I back out of there as fast as I can, knocking my elbow on the door-frame and nearly tripping over in my hurry.

I'm two steps up the corridor when a crash comes from inside the room. A wail that rips my skin into gooseflesh. On it goes. On and on. Dan strides towards me. He grabs my shoulders.

'You spoke, didn't you?' he says.

Before I can reply he is inside the room, making soft soothing noises like you would to a frightened kid. I lean against the wall, not sure where else to go. Eventually Ruth quietens down.

When he comes out he walks me back to the office.

'It's not your fault,' he says. 'She's overdue for a treatment. It will be easier tomorrow.'

I want to ask what is wrong with her, but my mouth won't open.

1

The OT gets me handing out the craft materials. A walnut shell, a tuft of stuffing, a square of red felt, and tiny cardboard legs and beaks.

'Today we'll make Christmas decorations,' she says, bright as a *Play School* star. 'Little robins, for your families when you go home. I'll show you.'

With deft fingers she fills a shell with stuffing then tucks the felt in, neat as a blanket. A dab of glue on legs and beak and they are attached.

And there it is, a chirpy little bird.

‘I’ll put the strings on when they are dry,’ she says.

She steers me to an empty stool.

‘You sit next to Ivy.’

It could be the woman from the lunchroom, but I’m not sure. They all look a bit the same. Flat white hair, neutral clothes, slip-on shoes. Ivy has a hair-clip keeping her fringe out of her eyes. I’ll have to remember that.

She grazes her fingers over the stuff in front of her, stroking the whorls of the walnut shell, the fluff of the felt. Her hands are all knobbled at the joints, fingers shooting off at an odd angle. Eventually she lifts the walnut shell with one hand and the stuffing with the other. She brings her hands close together, tries to get the stuffing in the shell, but her hands shake too much to connect. Again she has a go. Again. It’s excruciating, like watching one of those films where a spaceship struggles to get a pod into its docking bay.

I can’t bear it. I reach out, wrap my fingers around her skinny wrists, and bring the two together. Gently, because her skin is like paper and I know that if I press too hard she’ll bruise. We do the same for the felt and the gluing, until a tiny robin lies on its side in front of her.

‘I used to sew,’ she says quietly. ‘When I wasn’t much older than you I made my own wedding dress.’

2

She wipes her eyes, then blows gently on the wet glue.

The room is dark, full. The boy on the bed looks only just older than me but Dan says he’s nearly thirty. Too many bongs, apparently, and now he thinks they’re sprinkling ground glass into his food. Twice he’s tried to off himself. When they wheeled him in he was struggling against the restraints, face all screwed up and swearing blue murder. Sedative’s kicked in now, so he lies still, eyelids fluttering. His face is soft, like my little brother when he sleeps. I want to cup my palm over the curve of his cheek, tell him it will be okay in the end.

The nurse straps a cuff around his arm, snaps an oxygen mask over

his mouth. She nods to the anaesthetist. Now the hard-core stuff flows into him. I can’t tell when he is properly out but the doctor knows. He brushes back the boy’s fringe and lays sticky pads onto his temples. Goes through a checklist to tick everything off. Looks at his watch and then presses the button on the machine. As easy as turning on a light.

Everything tightens when the current goes through the boy. A minute, they said. That’s all it takes. How long has it been now? I want to check the clock but I can’t take my eyes from the boy. His hand jerking about and the twitch of his fingers, like he’s trying to play piano on the rubber sheet. I need to make a break for the door but if I do it might distract them and something will go wrong for the boy and he’ll burn out like a bulb and maybe he’ll never wake and it will be my fault. All mine. And so I crunch my teeth together until I’m as clenched as the boy on the bed and the machine buzzes in my bones and I try to breathe.

3

The OT presses the button on the stereo and what wails out is the theme from the *Titanic* film, all soaring notes and inspiration. Just last week me and the girls spent a satisfying afternoon rewriting the lyrics as if Johnny Rotten had penned them. And then Morrissey. Take that, Celine. Any other day I’d have cacked myself laughing, couldn’t have helped it.

‘Remember,’ the OT says, speaking loud above the tinny chords. ‘Just go with the music, see where it takes you.’

I’m sitting next to her in a big circle of chairs, with all the old women around us. In the space at the centre, a taut pink balloon rocks gently in the draught. The OT points to one of the old girls across the way.

‘Get us going, June,’ she says.

And so June levers herself from the chair with her walking stick, bends to retrieve the balloon. She’s so slow I reckon the song will be over before she’s done anything, but at last there’s some movement. She turns one palm upwards and balances the balloon there, swaying a

little with the song. The balloon sways too, looking ready to fall off at any second, but June manages to keep it there.

After a while she walks carefully towards another old woman and offers her the balloon. It's Ivy; I recognise the hair-clip. She rises carefully too, cups the balloon between two outstretched hands. She's more adventurous than June, stepping side to side with the music, but her knobbly hands shake so much the balloon keeps escaping and falling overboard.

'Okay, Ivy,' the OT says, after the third time. 'Someone else now.'

The old dear comes to stand in front of me. No way.

'I can't,' I say. 'I'm only an observer. A student.'

The OT shakes her head. 'In this circle we are all participants,' she says, in the same tone my mum uses when she Will Not Be Messed With.

So I take the balloon and stand. Step side to side, like Ivy did, balancing the balloon on my palms. A little shuffle forward, extending one arm to raise the balloon high. Two steps behind. Suddenly I'm back in the gymnastics class I ditched years ago, in tights and a spangly leotard, twirling a ball on the tip of one finger. My body remembers all the moves and somehow I'm swooping the balloon through space, pausing at the top of the arc so it seems to defy gravity. I spin and twist like a Disney princess, carried along by the music until it fades and I fold down into a graceful pose on the floor.

It hits me then, in the silence, that I've kind of lost it. That I'd forgotten all about the old women and danced like an idiot in front of them. All I want to do is stay curled there in a ball but eventually I lift my head. They're wiping their eyes, the old ladies, or staring at the wall with tears streaming down their cheeks. Ivy comes over and wraps her arms around me. Another one does the same. They sob and sob, shuddering. Squashed between their saggy boobs, I squeeze the balloon tight, feel it flex and give. It doesn't burst.

'I'm sorry,' I whisper, but they can't hear me.

4

The staff in the front office stand with the night crew, chatting and doing their hand-over. I pull my bag from the locker and walk towards the doors.

'See you tomorrow,' Dan calls, and I raise a hand to wave. Each step is weighted with the knowledge of four more days to go. Four. Sweet Jesus. He punches in the exit code for me and the glass doors whoosh open. Outside is a sudden rush of heat and the scent of summer blooms. I don't know what they are but I'm thankful for them, for traffic on the road and people hurrying home. For a reminder that the world exists beyond the clinic.

On the bus I sit with my cheek pressed to the smoky glass. My face aches from forcing a smile all day, from clenching my jaws behind it. A relief, in the bus, to let it all go, to sag into the seat. All my mates will be finishing up too — Kezza from McDonald's, Lizzie in the bookshop. Next week we'll front up again at school and report back on our week in the workforce. They'll tell me about rude customers and hot boys, about confusing equipment and grumpy bosses. If they ask about my shifts, I know I'll open my mouth but no words will come. And they'll hold their fingers to their heads and make the loopy-loopy gesture.

'You know what they say about psychologists,' one of them will say. 'That a third of them are as mad as their patients.'

I breathe in deep, try to exhale the weight of the day. Stare at the cars whizzing by outside, the other passengers intent in their thoughts. In the reflection I see I'm still wearing the visitor's badge. I go to unpin it but then stop. Right now I need to remember that this is not permanent.

Hiraeth

Irene Lu

The world didn't end with a bang, or a whimper.

Instead it crept along the ground like a silent hunter, through all of the mud and debris, slowly poisoning the land and the people. It came in the form of small policy changes, of the afterthoughts barely mentioned by the news stations, of the way that the greenery shrunk year by year, of the way that your world is torn down, brick by brick, atom by atom. Until one day, you wake up to a different world altogether. You wonder, you reminisce about the world you had left behind, and you question how you got here.

You were four years old; your family had not yet moved to the neighborhood you would live in for the majority of your childhood. Your dad was a traveling salesman and you moved from town to town, staying at cheap motels and eating food that tasted like ash sprinkled with MSG.

You had a brother then, an older brother who liked to play rough on the overgrown carparks outside of the motels. He owned a small basketball, nothing fancy, just one of those five-dollar ones from the local convenience store. It was his most treasured possession, and you were never allowed to touch it. You think back to that ratty old ball, and you wondered where it had gone. At one point in your life, it just disappeared into thin air, no words were spoken about it and no one seemed to remember it after the fact.

Years later, your mother finds a basketball when you were moving, tucked away in a small corner of the attic.

She didn't remember where it came from.

You were six years old and your father got a big job in the city, your family moved into a small neighborhood right on the edge of the city.

Your mother cooked, her food was bland, her meats stringy and they stuck behind teeth. She was happy though, telling you that you didn't have to eat the trash from gas stations anymore. Outside, you smiled and agreed with her, but inside, you yearned for the familiar and chemical laced taste of gas station food.

You started to go to school, the other kids at school all wore clean-cut uniforms and talked and laughed in polite ways. You stood out, with your dress that dragged on the floor and your tendency to talk just a little above the acceptable volume. The other kids in your school point and snicker at you behind your back, the girls smiled sweetly and extended their hands at you, but their eyes were empty, their emotions hidden behind a wall of ice. You shrunk in school, you sat in the back of the class and pulled your dress closer to your body.

You learnt about everything at school, a lot of which you did not know before. Numbers and letter and words, so, so many words to describe all walks of life. But the classroom was not the only place you learn new words from, you learn them from the playground too. From sideways glances and turned shoulders as you approached; from secret words exchanged behind hands and the way that groups seemed to draw into themselves as you approached.

"Weird"

"Dirty"

"Rude"

You heard them as clear as if your teacher was teaching them to you. They think that you don't hear, but you do, every single word.

Soon enough, you were asking your mother to cut your dress, to buy you nice dress shoes, to let your hair grow. You learnt to smile, you learnt to talk in polite ways, you learnt to sit straighter, talk quieter and smile sweeter.

You learnt to adapt.

Perhaps you didn't want to see it, or you were too young to, but the world was changing.

Your father comes home with a frown etched deep into his face,

your mother's hair greyed, white streaks stark against her ebony black hair.

Outside, from your angle, the world looked fine. The adults kept their secret well, clutched near to their hearts, behind closed doors and embedded inside long, boring monologues from men in suits on Saturday night TV.

"What are we going to do?" you heard your mother ask your father one night. You lay in your bed, a scratchy grey blanket pulled up against your chin, and you wonder what it meant.

"I don't know," came the heavy sign.

You were eight years old when you first saw the empty supermarket aisles, dotted here and there with what little supplies there were. Your mother's brows furled; her face pulled into a worrying frown. She muttered under her breath and stormed out without buying anything.

That night, your father brought home gas station food, bags upon bags of crisps and fries and cheap instant ramen. You were ravenous, this was a heavenly feast to you, yet your parents ate theirs with a sort of solemnness that you hadn't seen in them before. The air of the dinner was oppressive almost, a heavy fog that hung in the air, pressing on your shoulders like heavy lead.

It was a question unanswered, an uncertain future, a deep, true fear of the change that had come, and the changes that will come.

You lost your interest in the food not long after that.

You were twelve years old when you first felt true hunger. True, constant, hunger, though you had barely noticed it. Your face was gaunt, your eyes sunken in. At night, you lay in your bed, running your fingers up and down your ribs. You liked to imagine you were a musician, playing the harp in the darkness, plucking each string delicately, creating a symphony of sounds.

Hunger had almost become a routine to you at that point, the empty feeling in your stomach, the hollow pain, the feeling that sprouted from deep within your belly and branched out of your

throat. A gluttonous monster, reaching its many claws into the air, grabbing at whatever it can.

You accompany your mother to the store, you almost never buy anything at this point, you just stood there whilst she looked at the price tag despairingly and looked back on her purse. The purse was fat with hundred-dollar bills, yet she could never afford anything.

You were millionaires in name, yet you could never afford to eat.

It was your fourteenth birthday when your father came home crying. He never cried before and your mother immediately rushed up to him and ushered him into the bedroom. You could hear their conversation late into the night. You couldn't understand them through the wall, but you had felt a sense of dread rolling over you as you sat there, the taste of cheap cupcakes still lingering in your breath.

The next day, your father did not catch the train to the city, he sat home instead, his eyes boring into the television, which reported numbers after numbers in a monotonous tone.

You were sixteen when the schools begun to shut down, it was slow at first, a few days missing here and there, teachers slowly depleting from the school, fewer and fewer names on the roll. One day, as you arrived at the gates, there were a sign out front that read "closed". You shrugged and turned back, after all, the schools were empty anyway, what was the point of going.

When you looked back upon that time, you were surprised at how easily you accepted these drastic changes to your life. Perhaps you were just more flexible then.

Perhaps you didn't even notice what was changing.

Your brother was the first to fall.

He woke up coughing, violent earthquakes that shot through him and into the ground. His forehead was burning, his eyes glassy. He could no longer get out of bed, just lying there for the whole day, his limbs limp and useless, sitting by his side.

Your parents sold the house you lived in, in order to pay for the medical bills. You sat in the house on the last night before you moved, taking every little bit of it in. You stared at the cream-coloured walls, at where the pictures and the family photos had occupied. The house, once again, felt like a stranger's home to you, with nothing that was familiar to you.

You mother brought back a small container of unmarked pills of a sickly white colour. It didn't look right, but your mother said that they were pills for fever, so you believe her, clinging on to that small bit of hope that it might cure him.

He died that night regardless, and you still wondered to this day if his ghost still haunted the house you had lived in.

From your flat in the city, which you shared with your parents, you could hear the commotion from down the street. People were marching, a tireless militia made up of hungry people. Hungry, angry people. They held signs and they shouted, sometimes you could understand them, sometimes you couldn't. But nevertheless, you felt a sense of camaraderie, like you should be right there, marching alongside them.

So you did, you covered half of your face with a bandana, holding a sign on your left and a Molotov cocktail on your right. It was righteous, you thought, and it was, fighting for a cause bigger than yourself. You walked alongside everyone else, feeling the sense of blood rushing in your ears, the booming of your heartbeat. It made you feel strong, feel powerful, made you feel like you were able to change the world.

Once, a girl had gotten too close to the police line. Time all but froze as she fell, specks of ruby flew into the air. Her back arched almost gracefully before falling to the ground, her bandana skewed in the process. You looked at her face, filled with silent terror and unfelt pain. But beyond it all, you could see the youthful hope that still sparkled deep within, until it too, burnt out, leaving nothing but an empty husk behind.

You looked back at the silent line of police standing there, their

dark visor covering more than half of their face. You want to scream at them, are they really that heartless? Are they willing to kill? Are they willing to kill for a government who starves them of their right, who starves the citizens of their right?

No, they're not, a susurrant stirred in the back of your mind, they're merely foot soldiers, lost in a wheel, controlled by the men who have never known suffering. They're chess pieces, lowest of their kind, ready to be thrown out at a moment's notice into the fire.

War. War never benefits anyone on the battlefield, only those standing behind it.

You stopped feeling powerful after that.

Years trudged past, the fire slowly fizzled out of you, the hot blood drained, and you became as tired as the rest of them. Face carved with years of hunger and pain and suffering, cutting into the skin like rain cutting through rocks, creating cracks and deep ravines as it went.

Your parents passed away. Your mother through the same fever that took your brother, your father through a length of rope and a chair, kicked to the side.

Perhaps you would like to lie to yourself, perhaps you would like to say that your parents are in a better place now, perhaps you would like to say that things are going to be better; things are getting better. But you aren't convincing anyone, not even yourself. False hope is dangerous, dreams are dangerous, you've seen what became of the dreamers and the rebels and the ones trying to carve a better future out of stone with their bare hands. You did not want to end up in the same pit, dreams shattered, flame drowsed.

Perhaps, perhaps you would like to fly now.

It's funny, how when you live with something, with a certain type of world order for so long, it just becomes normal. The strangeness, the unfamiliarity all fades away with time, leaving behind only a cold feeling of routine.

You could barely remember the world that was, only the world

that is. You feel like this isn't right, your life isn't right, the constant drum of hunger against your belly isn't right, but you've never known anything else. Yet you still longed for those days where you still had a full belly, a roof to sleep under, and a family, even though you could only remember slivers of it.

There's a word for that, you thought, drifting back to an imaginary library, sipping a cup of coffee, your hands gripping the base of a pencil that you've never owned. Hiraeth, noun, your brain produced, seemingly entirely of its own right, meaning the homesickness of a home that never was, the yearning for a lost place which you barely remember.

Hiraeth, hiraeth, you repeat that word until it becomes strange to you, until it is stuck on your tongue, thick as cobwebs, unable to escape.

Hiraeth, hiraeth, now the word is as unfamiliar to you as the home which you could not return to.

This is how the world ends.

There was no panic, there were no shouts, the sun didn't come up red and no oceans appeared on the streets overnight.

The end of days is silent, slow, crawling tortuously towards safety. You see it coming, but you do nothing about it, you ignore it until it was too late. Like an infestation, it starts with one, then a couple, then dozens, soon your sanctuary is crawling, full of them. You sit there, completely unbothered, you're used to it, but you still remember a sliver of your home without the infestation.

Perhaps, millions of years later, the inheritors of this earth would come and find this country, this city, this little place that you, and your people, carved out as yours. This little place, which was taken away from you, brick by brick, until it was no longer recognizable.

The world ends, but the world lives on. Such is the way, the old world, will, with time, fade away into the oblivion, into the depth of history. In its place, a new one will rise, until that too, would end, paving the path for yet another world.

Rinse.

Repeat.

Rinse.

Repeat.

The world will end, the world has ended many times. But there will be another, for better or for worse, rising so slowly that no one would see it over the horizon.

Change is coming.

Can you smell it?

Alan Marshall

The short story chosen as the winner of the open section of the Nillumbik Prize for Contemporary Writing receives the Alan Marshall Short Story Award. Now in its 35th year, the award celebrates excellence in the art of short story writing.

The award honours the life and work of Australian literary legend and former Eltham resident, Alan Marshall.

Fiction: Open

Alan Marshall Short Story Award, 2020

Show Don't Tell

Dominic Amerena

Eyeball (v): to read something quickly.

"Can you eyeball this email before I send it off?"

"Show don't tell, this part really needs to pop." My Submissions Manager said. David was 50-ish, cadaverous, a long-suffering Saints fan. He wore a Fitbit and paisley ties and had strong opinions on border security. David's two-year-old wasn't sleeping which meant that David wasn't sleeping, which meant that David was more likely to grill me about my copy when, red-eyed and tow-headed, he arrived at the office where I'd been working for the last six months, writing tenders for the construction company whose name I'm not at liberty to reveal.

Once David had stalked out of earshot, Elise swivelled her chair to face me. "Next he's going to say, 'Write what you know.' Or: 'Find your voice.'"

She'd been full-time for the last two years. We knew each other from our early-twenties, where we'd met in an undergrad writing course. We spent our time at pubs around campus, describing the novels we'd write, that would speak to the now we were living in. We considered ourselves brash and brilliant, a feeling which evaporated as soon as we set foot in the classroom. I still recall the shame I felt reading my work out loud, Elise's tears on the South Lawn after class. Eventually we learned how to hide our feelings while the other students picked over our work. We affected a posture of louche detachment, rolling our eyes and leaning back on our chairs. In time, we learned to feel nothing at all.

Ten years later it was still us against them. Unlike the other people in the office, we possessed a secret knowledge about the brutal mechanics of the real world. We alone could perceive the banality of our labour and kept ourselves as detached as possible from the inner workings of the office, lest we became subsumed, lest we began to believe that we were there for the long haul. Having Elise there made it feel like everything we said was contained in quotation marks, like we were characters in a bad short story, a parable about what happens when words are converted into units of capital. Having Elise there made it seem almost bearable.

The company's unofficial motto was: *Bid first and ask questions later*. My job was easy for the most part: activating passive sentences; copy-and-pasting material from previous bids and re-working it to fit the briefs I'd been given. Whether it was building the new wing of a children's hospital or a maximum-security prison, I deployed the same cheery, amorphous language I'd used in a past life, writing grant applications for the aforementioned novel, which I never completed, though I am, theoretically, still writing it.

Now I wrote about paradigm shifts and wide-reaching benefits for Melbourne's transport network and the carceral system of the great state of Victoria, instead of the novel. I removed Oxford commas and dangling infinitives and double spaces at the ends of sentences, left by boomers who'd cut their rotting teeth on the keys of typewriters.

I was giving myself one year to do no good in the world, in which I would tamp down my finer feelings and exist as a diligent scrimper. I had conceived of a clean, well-lit space in the future, where I would resurrect my novel and become the writer I had always presumed myself to be, only with savings and super and a wardrobe full of active wear.

My life was a dread-fest, save for the eighty laps I swam after work at the pool at Victoria University. I hurtled my body through time and space — 60, 80, 100 laps of freestyle. At the end I felt aerated in impossible ways, walking through the lamp-lit Footscray streets,

sodden leaves littering the pavement and the smell of diesel from Ballarat Road hanging in the air. When I arrived at my tiny unit on Droop Street I felt so bloodless and barely there that I was able to fall, almost immediately, into a dreamless, pneumatic sleep.

Before lunch David appeared at my desk to inspect my handiwork. "On a scale of one to ten, how dazzled can I reasonably expect to be?" He commandeered my mouse and scrolled through the word document.

David was an outline, a cut-out, a character too flat to exist in fiction, despite my best efforts. For the last few weeks I had been waking while it was still dark and sketching out scenes from life in the office, *cubicle vignettes*. The story about David's sleepless child was something I had come up with to give him more weight. In other iterations David lived with a schizoid father or a wife who stared at the wall all day. Sometimes David was a fetishist or an alcoholic, an avid horticulturalist. In truth I knew nothing about him, save what could be seen on the surface.

In real life David was craning over my shoulder, scanning the paragraph describing our proposal for the upgrade of a train station in Melbourne's northwest.

Safety is the bedrock of our business. Accordingly, we have adopted a stringent Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) approach for the Watsonia Station Upgrade, which will place physical features, activities and people in ways that maximise visibility and optimise the ability to spot suspicious persons or people and prevent instances of unauthorised sleeping.

Soak time (n): a period in which to ponder something deeply. *"The delivery team is going to need plenty of soak time to get their heads around these changes."*

The Tuesday morning kick-off session was in Meeting Room Six. The team was discussing win themes and show stoppers to secure the

contract to build a stretch of freeway, which we'd deemed: *the missing link in the state-shaping project to create a better-connected Melbourne*. Everyone was there: engineers and urban designers and lower-middle-managers. They were a pleasant enough bunch for the most part, fine company to share a cup of tea with in the immaculate break room overlooking the Yarra. I chatted with these Simons and Michaels and Malcolms and Davids about the Pies' chances for the Premiership and the Libs' chances at re-election and the relative merits of different private schools in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. We endured morning teas and shave for a cures and after work drinks. It was clear they didn't seem to find their jobs humiliating or banal, which I suppose was a good thing, though it made the gulf between us feel wider.

The engineers were consistently amazed by my ability to convert their technical data into limpid, digestible text. They called me their wordsmith, their maestro; they praised my purple prose. It was the most generous feedback my writing had ever received.

David gave his stump speech before the whiteboard about our strategy going forward. I wrote that our team was against Business as Usual (BAU), we were anti-by-the-book. I wrote that our stakeholder engagement team was primed to proactively liaise with community members to ensure that the residential relocation process proceeded as smoothly as possible. In other words: we would do everything in our power to minimise the fuss kicked up by residents displaced by the freeway.

Over Cheeky Chook Poké Bowls in the Collins Square food court, Elise and I added to our Dictionary of Degraded Language, a list of terms and acronyms that we had been compiling since the beginning of the year. Through mouthfuls of edamame we ran through the highlights from David's speech, coming up with working definitions where we could.

We wrote the book by hand, which we thought gave it a patina of seditiousness. The Dictionary was our manifesto, our document of re-

sistance, displaying our disconnection from the dailiness of our lives. A part of me was aware that were becoming cruel, though another part of me would have described it as the actions of people who saw the world for what it really as: a bad joke with no punchline.

Thumbsuck (v): to carefully consider a proposal or proposition. *"Let's thumbsuck the various options and reconvene after lunch."*

After Wednesday's shift I met Elise at the Southern Cross Hungry Jack's. It was a balmy, mid-May evening and we ate our Double BBQ Bacon Stackers on the concrete bollards at the entrance to the station.

"As well as preventing instances of vehicular terrorism," Elise said, "these innovative bollards offer customers a practical tabular sustenance facilitator, also known as a table."

Though I wasn't exactly in the mood, I tossed a bacon rind to a seagull perched on the kerb and said: "They enable an industry leading al fresco dining experience, amongst Melbourne's diverse avian communities."

And we both knew that it was a joke but then again it wasn't that we were eating our burgers on concrete structures erected to prevent cars plowing into the bodies of commuters, and we were eating there because all the benches had been removed from the concourse to better funnel people in and out of the station, to discourage the wrong types of bodies from loitering on the *plaza*, to stop them sleeping or sitting for a few minutes to catch their respective breaths.

"Violence is how money and bodies meet," Elise said as we walked pubwards down Collins St. "I can't for the life of me remember where I read that."

Her words were a keyhole into an Elise that I seldom got to see, one who I remembered from those first few days of uni. We used to think that language was life and death and love and pity and bright red balls bouncing down stairs, answers to questions we'd never known to ask. When did we begin to use our sentences to inoculate ourselves against the world?

We radiated a small, weird heat as we strolled downhill, our arms so close that they almost touched. I wanted to stay in the moment, but in no time at all we were at Lounge and I went to find a table in the crowded smoking area and Elise went to the bar. She was grinning when she returned clutching a jug, and I knew that everything was back to normal.

"I forgot to mention the latest *bon mots* from our fearless leader," Elise said. "Drum roll please... David and I were running through the freeway submission, which is reading rather well if I don't say myself, when he turned to me and asked whether I thought our approach was sufficiently bleeding edge. That's bleeding with a b. As in: our approach is so cutting edge that it draws blood. And naturally my mind leapt to the phrase 'blood on our hands' which is not exactly the connection we want our clients to make, especially with all the *working families* that may or may not be displaced by our little stretch of freeway. But then again who am I to judge? Now please pass me the dictionary, because I want to get this down while I'm still in the muse's grips."

I rifled through my backpack but came up empty handed.

"I probably left it at home last night," I said. "I was trying to work some Davidspeak into a new story."

By jug four I'd explained my theory of writing, as it currently stood, about our violent language, our money-drenched language, our banal, degraded language. I had the hunger again, the hunger to make something real. As I told Elise, yelling to make myself heard over the din of after work drinkers, I wanted my novel to be about work, about the small bargains we make with ourselves to get through the day, the networks of power and complicity that we were all enmeshed in. I told her that this was all research, it was temporary, a necessary sacrifice. I was hopeful, grinning, wasted. At the end of my speech Elise poured the last of the beer and said:

"You tell yourself it's only temporary, but it gets less temporary every day."

Rightsizing (v): To reduce the size of a company, by shedding staff.
"*This department could do with a healthy dose of rightsizing.*"

I have all the time in the world to write now but something has been holding me back, something other than the letter I received a few weeks ago that threatened "vigorous legal proceedings" if I disseminated information pertaining to the intellectual property of the company's tendering processes.

Lately I have settled into a routine: swimming in the morning while it's quiet, a long walk by the Maribyrnong, meals of pulses and ancient grains. I spend the rest of the time not writing, pottering around my unit, which I can afford until the end of the year, if I'm frugal.

I am waiting, if that's the right word, for an opportunity to present itself, for a new way in to emerge. Elise calls once in a while to check up on me. She feels bad about what happened. She says that she envies me, though I'm not sure I believe her.

I left the Dictionary of Degraded Language on my desk when I went to meet Elise at Hungry Jack's, that mid-May evening a few months ago. Apparently David came across it the following morning. I had been pulling on a pair of pants, mortally hung over, when the call came through. His voice sounded softer than I'd expected, sad almost, when he told me to clear out my proverbial desk. He told me it was a shame the way things had turned out.

I think about David when I'm swimming. I try to imagine what it felt like to see himself in those dingy, handwritten pages; to see his words trussed up and put on display. Did he feel shame, as I do now, sitting at my makeshift desk; as I feel when I'm swimming, plunging down a never-ending tunnel, swimming like water like work like writing like digging a hole and filling it in.

I recently enrolled in a twelve-week course that will teach me how to become a lifeguard. According to the website: *The certificate is an*

entry-level professional qualification that can lead to an exciting career in the aquatic and recreation industry. When I am drifting off, I imagine a different version of myself sauntering along the edge of the pool in my yellow windcheater, listening for sounds of distress. It's a cliché: the aesthete finding solace through the labour of his body. Too banal for words. But still I imagine what it would feel like to use my body to care for another body in peril. I imagine it would be indescribable, though I am sure that I will try.

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Thanks to all the writers who entered this year. You demonstrated the commitment to creativity that will be so important to the coming recovery period.

Special thanks to this year's fantastic judges: Jeff Sparrow and Claire G. Coleman (Creative Non-fiction), and Melanie Cheng and Sarah Schmidt (Fiction).

Finally, thanks to our wonderful readers: Vicky Booth, Cath Hart, Elizabeth Vercoe, Stacey Warmuth, James Elias, Laura Lidker, Jessica Over, Kylie McCormack, Emma Roussel, Alli Spoor and Jesse Morgan.

“As all our certainties collapse around us, we need truth, more than ever, but we also require writers with the poet’s ability to turn a phrase and make the familiar feel strange and the strange, recognizable... It was reassuring, therefore, that the competition received such a strong field of entrants... works that were informative, moving, provocative or funny – and, on occasion, all at once.”

Claire G. Coleman & Jeff Sparrow
(Creative Non-fiction Judges Report)

“... opportunities such as this prize give writers a stepping stone, not only to grow as artists and hone their craft but to be inspired to keep going... We were overwhelmed by some of the quality of the entries and we are eager to see how these writers develop over time.”

Melanie Cheng & Sarah Schmidt
(Fiction Judges Report)

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