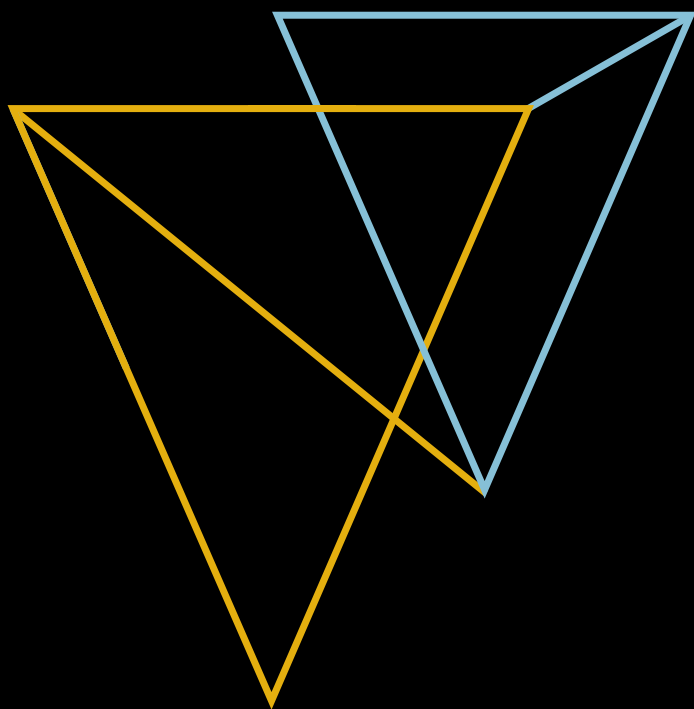


**NILLUMBIK
PRIZE
CONTEMPORARY
WRITING 2022**



Nillumbik Prize Contemporary Writing Anthology 2022

Nillumbik Shire Council
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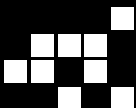
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**ARTS AND
CULTURE**



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Nillumbik Shire Council respectfully acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Owners of the Country on which Nillumbik is located, and we value the significance of the Wurundjeri people's history as essential to the unique character of the shire. We pay tribute to all First Nations People living in Nillumbik, give respect to Elders past, present and future, and extend that respect to all First Nations People.

We respect the enduring strength of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and acknowledge the ongoing impacts of past trauma and injustices from European invasion, massacres and genocide committed against First Nations People. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people hold a deep and ongoing connection to this place. We value the distinctive place of our First Nations People in both Nillumbik and Australia's identity; from their cultural heritage and care of the land and waterways, to their ongoing contributions in many fields including academia, agriculture, art, economics, law, sport and politics.

FOREWORD

CR FRANCES EYRE,
MAYOR



The 2022 Nillumbik Prize for Contemporary Writing is the second instalment of the new-format biennial award that builds on the long-term success of the Alan Marshall Short Story Award and the Shire's strong tradition of supporting contemporary Australian writing.

The Prize includes a permanent Fiction / Alan Marshall Short Story Award Category and a rotating genre. The rotating genre for the 2022 prize was poetry.

The Prize attracted almost 500 entries from across the country this year, reflecting the value of literature, and the important role it continues to play in our society. With the Alan Marshall Short Story Award element of the Prize in its 37th year, we can clearly see the importance for national literary prizes like the Nillumbik Prize for Contemporary Writing, they are as relevant today as they were back in 1985 when we first began.

Authors from all age groups covered a diverse range of subjects, ranging from family, resilience, hope, the pandemic, and relationships, as well as social and environmentally inspired themes all impressively narrated in both poetic and fictional forms.

I hope that the winning works presented in this anthology will inspire others in the community to follow their creative instincts through literature and other mediums, using their experiences and imagination to tell their own inspiring stories.

Council would like to thank the judges, Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington (Poetry Category), Bec Kavanagh and Tim Richards (Fiction Category) for their expertise in selecting this year's winners. We would also like to acknowledge the amazing work by our volunteer readers whose support has been pivotal to the selection process.

Congratulations to all the winners, and to everyone who participated in the Nillumbik Prize for Contemporary Writing 2022.

It is also my pleasure to award this year's Mayor's Award to Michelle Wright for her inspiring short story, *One Small Step*.

**Frances Eyre,
Mayor Councillor**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frances Eyre." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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JUDGES REPORT ON THE 2022 NILLUMBIK PRIZE CONTEMPORARY WRITING POETRY AWARD

We were honoured and delighted to judge the Nillumbik Prize Contemporary Writing Poetry Award for 2022. Judging poetry prizes is always a joy as it gives us insight into what is being written in a range of Australian and international writing communities and introduces us to new poetry by emerging and experienced poets. We judged the ‘Open’, ‘Local’ and ‘Youth’ categories for Nillumbik. The overall standard of poems was very high, with a range of pertinent issues addressed by the poems. These included pressing contemporary concerns, such as increasing urbanisation, climate change and the importance of living sustainably. There were also poems about subjects that poetry has always revelled in exploring, such as interpersonal relationships, language use, memory, the passage of time, ageing and mortality. There were a few poems that tackled the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, and some that grappled with the difficult and important subjects of sexual assault and abusive relationships. Other poems addressed political issues directly, making use of the power of poetry to persuade readers of their points of view and potentially lobby for societal changes. Additionally, there were poems that reflected astutely on domestic matters, including the quirks and challenges of family relationships.

Many of the most successful poems made striking use of particular detail—even the way drinking soft drink may connect to broader issues around personal growth and change. Most of the poems were written in various forms of contemporary free verse, although some made skilful use of metre and rhyme, and there were also a few striking prose poems. A number of works made impressive use of repetitive effects to emphasise their points or create a sense of a refrain within a work. Other poems were highly observant and some of the more imagistic works presented strong and engaging ‘pictures’ or ‘visuals’ to the reader. A few poems explored the way poetry may be shaped on the page and the effects of using the page’s white space for poetic purposes. One of these was *Fledgling Affair*, winner of the ‘Open’ section, which creates a sense of sinuousness. Its shape on the page mirrors the circling of the lake it describes and successfully complements and enhances the poem’s meaning.

We also enjoyed the way many of these poems exploited imaginative effects, taking the reader on the kinds of peregrinations that only poetry may provide—into the territory of metaphor and simile, where new, often surprising and satisfying connections are made. The ‘Open’ section’s highly commended, *Opening Our Time Capsules*, powerfully evokes memory as an uncanny space with the capacity to shape and heal our present contexts. The winner in the ‘Local’ section, *First Taste*, plays imaginatively and satisfyingly with the individual qualities of different garden vegetables, connecting them to childhood perceptions and the complexities of social relationships. Other works were sparser in their language use and, for instance, the direct eloquence of the winning poem in the ‘Youth’ section, *Dog Brodie* was refreshing and beguiling. The highly commended poem from that section, *Colours* made powerful use of lateral, creative ways of responding to the colours we all know.

Overall, judging this poetry prize was a wonderful experience, allowing us access to a wide range of stimulating, sometimes salutary and always rewarding ideas and feelings expressed in truly original ways. Thank you to Nillumbik Shire Council and to Simon Doyle, Co-ordinator Arts and Cultural Development, for supporting poetry. We congratulate all of the poets who submitted work and encourage them to keep writing poetry—as Marianne Moore wrote, poetry is ‘a place for the genuine’.

Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington

JUDGES REPORT ON THE 2022 NILLUMBIK PRIZE CONTEMPORARY WRITING FICTION / ALAN MARSHALL SHORT STORY AWARD

The poetic language displayed across many of the entries was impressive, with vibrant characters and dialogue making the top entries stand out above the rest. Writers of the top pieces demonstrated sophisticated engagement with their central themes, which spanned motherhood, the climate crisis and loneliness among others. I was particularly drawn to stories that transported me fully to a specific time and place, as so many of these did beautifully. And while the winning entries were more fully formed and technically advanced, a number of the pieces were striking in their attention to the details of the work.

Nightingale our overall winner, was grounded in these details, and full of beautifully compelling oddities that gave the piece such depth. *Goodbye Stranger*, the local winner was a close runner-up, with its intimate and hyper-focussed glimpse into the future, while honourable mention ‘Balladonia’ came to life through perfect, natural dialogue.

In the young adult category, the creativity across the pieces was excellent – these writers showed a willingness to experiment with the craft that was impressive. We saw writers who pushed the limits of language, tense and structure to tell stories that were sometimes funny, sometimes sad. Although not all of these experiments were successful, the ambition was notable, and the winner *The Kindergarten Train* managed to evoke a strong sense of loss and possibility through understated, observant prose.

Bec Kavanagh

The volunteer readers delivered an impressive short list, and in my view eight of the twenty stories were at, or near to, good publishable quality. As one might expect, the judges held differing opinions about the merit of several pieces, but consensus was relatively high.

Bec Kavanagh and I were in strong agreement regarding the worth of the major prize winners: *The Nightingale*, and *Goodbye Stranger*. These stories operated at high levels of precision and narrative efficiency, the former as eloquent in its gaps and its unsaids as it was in its inclusions, while the latter showed deft touch in its black comic and satiric imaginings. The judges agreed that the finely nuanced *Balladonia* deserved commendation. Several other entries revealed outstanding potential and were no more than a concerted edit/re-draft away from realising that potential. In some instances, a conspicuous gap needed to be addressed, and in some stories the end-note didn't quite ring true, or was slightly ill-timed.

Both judges were impressed by the winning entry in the Youth section, *The Kindergarten Train*. This story has a distinctive voice and a marvellous energy, and may have figured in my considerations had it been entered for the Open Award.

Best wishes to all the storytellers who shared their work.

It was a privilege to read these stories, and to be involved with the Alan Marshall Story Award. My thanks to Nillumbik for continuing to sponsor this important prize, and to Bec Kavanagh, Simon Doyle, Richard Holt, and the reading team.

Tim Richards

FICTION AWARD: LOCAL

Goodbye Stranger

Anastasia Warmuth

You don't know how to lose,' Jeremy Padley said. Then he turned to face the smog-yellow city and leapt out of the fortieth-floor window. With his oversized body gone the dirty wind rushed towards June. It thrummed in her ears, pushed against her face, chilled her skin, rattled her bones. Don't step forward, it said. She stepped forward. Don't look. Grasping the window-frame she leant out through the shattered glass and looked down. Broken and crumpled over a dumpster, Jeremy seemed tiny, depleted. The man he once was, the man who burnt crumpets and wrote papers at two in the morning and sang in supermarkets, had disappeared. June stepped back from the jagged and broken space. She straightened her clothes and smoothed down her wind-blown hair. Then she crouched down, started to scream, and couldn't stop.

June walked down the dead corridor to the white door. Entry required a swipe card and a six-digit pin. The light turned green and the machine gave a happy beep.

Inside the sterilisation room she followed the procedures by rote: antiseptic hand wash, sterile slippers, hair cover, lab coat, gloves. On the bench opposite hers Jeremy sat talking about in-vitro-fertilisation procedures and how they could be modified to work for amphibians. She shut her eyes and opened them again. His ghost had vanished, although his words continued to rumble in her ears.

Entry to their lab was biometric and voice activated. She gazed into the red laser and said, 'June Padley'. She was surprised by how steady her voice sounded. Surprised again when the door swung inward. Couldn't it hear that her name was now a lie? How could she keep his name, when there was no him?

The lab was no different from when they left: hermetically fresh, spotlessly clean. Although a chair had been pulled up to the frog terrarium and a *New Scientist* sat on the bench. Students sitting death watch required entertainment. June tsked at the unnecessary contaminate brought into the lab. They better not have been eating. She looked in the bin, but there was only a crumpled tissue.

Next she checked the terrarium. Frances was burrowed beneath the leaf litter near the back of the glass tank. Her mottled-brown skin was moist, but June worried she was smaller. Carefully June fetched her out and placed her thumb-sized body on the scale.

No change in weight. Breeding flanges still present. Belly white and speckled. Condition good. No toxic response. No sign of fungal infection – June took a swab to make sure.

Frances's bulbous eyes blinked up at June.

June forced her hand across her mouth, yet a sob still escaped through her shuttered lips. Frances crouched low, startled by the sound.

'I'm sorry.'

There was no crying in the lab. June took a deep breath to contain herself and swapped her gloves for fresh. As she scooped up Frances to place her back in the terrarium, Frances let out a little 'Bonk'.

'Tell me about it,' June said.

'I understand, of course I do, but thank god you're back.' Earlier that day Tamara, clad in her usual three-piece business suit, had escorted June from the taxi and past the protesters.

The group had grown. Some sat in circles chanting and trying to protect their candles from the exhaust fumes that gusted down the gridlocked street. Others waved cardboard signs with phrases like 'FREE FRANCES', 'A LAB IS NO PLACE TO DIE' and 'HABITAT IS HOME'. Some had scruffy, matted dreadlocks. Most wore a variety of wooden beads around wrists and necks.

All coughed and sputtered the polluted air that pooled around the base of the sky-scrapers.

June admired their dedication.

A woman yelled out as they passed, 'Frogs need freedom!'

'Not frogs, plural, honey. Frog, singular,' Tamara replied.

The phallic monument that was the Amphibian Research Institute reflected the yellow sky. Behind most of those windows were empty labs, empty offices. There was simply nothing left to study. Tamara was head of a science institute

with hardly any scientists. Near the top June thought she could see wood boarding up a broken window. She hoped Tamara had made sure it was secure. Herpetologists were high suicide risks.

The building closed around them with a blast of fresh air and the chanting fell silent. The foyer was plastered in frog pictures. A recording of frog chorus played softly in the background. It was supposed to be inspiring. It had become morbid.

‘You think they’d understand we’re doing what’s best.’ Tamara said ushering June into the lift. ‘Do they really think this toxic world is a safe place for Frances?’

June stared at the numbered buttons. She hadn’t been back since...But she had work to do. Jeremy knew that. Tamara reached around June and pushed number forty. ‘I wonder where those protesters were when the other 4,739 species of frogs went extinct.

‘Frances burrowed quickly back into her hollow. Satisfied, June checked the water misters weren’t clogged and shut the glass door. Frances was an Eastern Banjo Frog, *Limnodynastes dumerilli* to the few scientists left to care. Pobblebonk to most of the public due to the lovely sound they made during breeding season. Something like water pushing down a hundred blocked drains: BonkBonkBonkBonk.

Frances was special. She was the last remaining frog on planet earth.

June opened the freezer and pulled out the second last remaining frog.

Fabio lay on his back. His belly was mottled with yellow splotches, indicating he’d been ready to mate. That wasn’t going to happen. His testicles were dissected. And he was dead.

Jeremy had discovered the body. June was at her computer, deep in thought preparing a protocol to keep Fabio and Frances on heat in perpetuity, when Jeremy yelled, ‘FUCK!’

‘Shhhh! You’ll stress the frogs.’ June hissed, rushing to the terrarium. She pushed Jeremy’s bulk aside to see what he was looking at. Fabio’s legs splayed out from his warty little body, his eyes glassy and white.

A quiver started in June’s belly before sending pins and needles along her limbs.

‘Where’s Frances?’ June threw the glass door open and rummaged amongst the leaf litter, moving habitat features here and there. Finally, she’d found her. Frances was huddled in the back corner, as if trying to get as far away from Fabio’s dead body as she could.

‘Okay, we remove him. Dig away the dirt beneath him. Then a full decontamination.’ June rushed over to grab a silver kidney dish from the autoclave.

‘Why?’ June almost didn’t hear Jeremy. She turned back. He hadn’t moved from where she’d shoved him. Just stood, fixed, looking at poor little Fabio.

‘Because it might be a toxin or fungus, the whole terrarium might be contaminated.’

‘But why bother?’

‘Frances.’

‘It doesn’t matter anymore, we’ve lost.’

‘June took a step towards Jeremy. His face as still and eyes as glassy as Fabio’s.

‘She might be pregnant. She might still lay eggs,’ June said.

‘She won’t.’

‘Then... I don’t know... We’ll dissect Fabio. He might have sperm. We could try your IVF techniques. Too risky before, but now...’

Jeremy stood in stony silence.

‘Please, Jeremy. We have to try.’

For the first time since finding Fabio, Jeremy turned and looked at June.

‘Please,’ she said.

It might not have registered to anyone but the woman who had slept by his side every night for the last thirty-five years, but June knew the slight movement of Jeremy’s head was a nod.

While June waited for Fabio to thaw, she sat on the student’s chair and watched Frances.

It seemed they had a lot in common.

Jeremy and June had been trying to make sure the world always had frogs.

Fabio and Frances had tried too.

And Jeremy and June had done their best. While around the planet frog species dropped off one by one, the Eastern Banjo had held on, its tiny webbed feet clinging to life.

But funding for habitat restoration, captive breeding and research came way too late. Now there was nothing left to spend it on, governments, corporations and individuals were throwing money at them. Frances could have bought an island in the Bahamas if she'd been so inclined.

Fabio and Frances had done their best too. Twelve breeding cycles. Hundreds of eggs. A few tadpoles. Once even a frog. Finn died on his first birthday. It wasn't Fabio and Frances's fault. They were inbred from a tiny genepool and that, compounded with epigenetic effects from generations of their ancestors living in toxic environments, meant they were destined to fail.

Now June and Frances had something else in common.

June didn't know how to live without Jeremy. Every part of their life was tangled together. This morning she'd eaten peanut butter off the knife. She had a plate and the jar and the knife. But Jeremy hadn't cooked the crumpets. Then she forgot what she should do with the toothpaste, because she always handed it to him so he could brush his teeth next. She didn't even know the number for a taxi. She'd ended up phoning Tamara to organise it. Turns out there wasn't a number anymore. There was an app.

June felt like a part of her had been sawn off, the wound raw with exposed nerves.

Frances hopped to the front of the terrarium and stared back at June.

June gave her a cricket, but the cricket jumped away without Frances taking any notice.

'What is it, girl? What do you want?'

Fabio's testicles were empty. That was when Jeremy had started to cry.

The journey had been rough, but they'd stayed positive together. They convinced the politicians to give more funding for habitat restoration. When numbers fell below one hundred, they championed moving all the remaining frogs to Wominjeka Creek. When numbers had dropped below ten, they made the call to extract them to the lab.

His sobbing was loud and messy.

‘We’re not doing that in here,’ June said. ‘You’ll upset Frances.’

They went to one of the empty labs. A mistake. Jeremy started ranting, swearing. He screamed at June. He pulled his own hair. His face was red and blotchy and wet.

Through it all June stood, shaking. She felt as if one leg was cut from beneath her, the other failing under the strain. June had forgotten how to stand without him holding her up. There were no words of consolation. Their life work, wasted. In the lab only Frances remained. An ending, that’s what she was called. The last of her kind. The only thing in her future – death.

And then Jeremy stopped yelling. He slumped down, quiet against the floor to ceiling window, the view of the endless city framing his misery.

June tried to sit beside him, tried to take some comfort against him. But he flinched away.

‘It’s over. Not just frogs. The earth. We’re circling down the plug hole, we just don’t all know it yet.’

‘You can’t talk like that,’ she said. ‘I haven’t admitted defeat, and I don’t intend to now. Cloning, lizard egg surrogates, something, we’ll find a way.’

Jeremy pushed himself up. ‘Stand back,’ he said.

‘Why?’ June said and stepped back.

Jeremy picked up a centrifuge and threw it at the window. Glass blew out and the stink of the city blew in.

‘What are you doing!?’ She grasped his arm, but he shoved her away.

‘We’re different,’ he said, ‘I’ve got nothing left to give. But you, June. You don’t know how to lose.’

June’s autopsy showed Fabio had died of old age. Enlarged heart, shrunken kidneys. Nothing remarkable. The clock was ticking for Frances too. June wrapped Fabio’s body up and put it back in the freezer.

She turned to Frances. ‘So Frances, you’re a multi-millionaire and you’ve got nothing left to lose. What do you want to do with the rest of your life?’

‘Bonk,’ Frances said.

‘Yeah,’ June said, ‘I agree.’

June snuck Frances past the protestors to the taxi rank in a mini-terrarium hidden in an oversized duffle bag. They had no idea the earth’s last remaining frog had passed within metres of where they sat chanting.

‘Wominjeka Creek,’ she told the taxi driver. While he concentrated on driving, she sprayed water on Frances from a bottle.

The sky was thick with insects when they arrived. The birds were having a ball, swooping left and right to scoop up as many as they could. The cool crisp air smelt of eucalyptus, the sun was warm on June’s skin and in the distance, over the buzzing of insects and chattering of birds, she could hear water babbling over some rocks.

‘What this place needs is a frog, hey, Frances?’

In the boggy ground near a quiet turn of the creek, where the water pooled under the shade of a massive Red Gum, June placed the terrarium on the ground and removed one of the side glass panels.

Frances blinked at June. She didn’t know what freedom looked like any more.

‘Go on, sweetie,’ June said. ‘This is as good as it gets.’

The insects must have proved too tempting, because soon Frances crawled forward and hopped down onto the damp earth. Her tongue flicked out once, twice. She caught a large bug. Her mouth worked on it for a moment before she swallowed. She gave a happy, ‘Bonk.’

June sat with her back against the tree to watch Frances burrow her hind legs into the mud, her quick tongue enjoying the lack of competition.

June breathed out. She felt close to Jeremy here. Taking care of the frogs wasn’t just a job for them. The creek was just as much their home. June felt Jeremy’s arms fold around her from behind. Her body enclosed within his.

‘You don’t know how to lose,’ Jeremy had said. And in that moment, as the planet spun and the sun shone and a frog called, June felt maybe she’d won.

FICTION AWARD: YOUTH

The Kindergarten Train

Eve Ballard

I'll be on the train. It'll be an underground train, like the subway, but at an airport. One door is both the exit and the entrance, with a few people trickling in and out. The train's name will be Bart and my father will have warned me about him. The train will have pastel colours of gum, crafted into graffiti and messages in another language.

I'll know that if I was in another world, I'd call it art and take a photo to show my kids.

I'll be standing. Sucking on a mint and moulding it into the shape of my tongue. Dust will fall from the ceiling and settle on the cloth seats. Somebody else would have warned me about the cloth seats, too. Something about sitting on them causes years of sweat and an old man's cologne to waft up into your face, like a pop-up card.

In the next second, she'll stand beside me. It won't be anything like a big lie. Just her, entering the train and walking over to grasp the overhead handles. No physical contact or glances or words exchanged.

She'll be pretty. Short, white hair and earbuds hang limply from her ears and tangle in her sweater. Two red studs, like the eyes of a monkey. My kids will grow up in four different states and they'll know that she is what Aphrodite would look like.

I'll wonder why I feel this way. It's not love. Or at least not the type you can find in half-dead roses at the florist beside the highway. And definitely not the kind next to a coffee machine in an office that leads to a wedding in a hotel and three ungrateful children.

It's odd, this feeling. Giddy. I'll think about how I used to smile at people riding on the train. I'll want to smile then. It was a basic skill in kindergarten, learning how to smile. I'll remember the classroom with the round glasses and aloe vera plants named after characters from the old cartoons from the 70's. But it was so simple, just turning the corners of your mouth into a crescent shape, like the moon in early December. I'll have stopped smiling by then,

when I'm on the train. And it won't be taught to my kids anymore. That's what I'll know while standing there.

What I also know is that the year is ending. Time is skidding to a stop, only to be picked up again at midnight. Midnight is so close, I can almost touch it. Three cracked hands on the clock, almost vertical. It would be pretty ironic, really. I'll be on the Bart train, heading for Terminal D, in the last seconds of the year. And I won't be thinking about who I left behind.

'I met a girl on the train,' I'll tell my kids on the phone.

'Why did you leave?' they'll ask me.

'She looked sad.'

'Everyone is sad at some point,' they'll respond, and hang up soon after.

The girl will be running her hands down the pole on her left. Her fingers will be small. She'll only have four fingers on one hand. I'll love it. I would want to cradle the stump in my palm and ask about the tractor accident. Will it be because of her eyes that can only see straight forward? Or because she wasn't paying attention and looked at the weeds with their yellow, withered faces?

She'll be holding one pole. Five other poles will be placed haphazardly around the train. All with dirt in the cracks and scratches. All cold and metal. All of them look like maps of past events. A map of fights and colliding suitcases and underground trains controlled by robots.

The girl will close her eyes and I'll see how her eyelashes curl and twist like spider webs on her cheeks. They'll be fake, obviously, but I will want to touch them. I'd want to play the childish role of knitting my fingers behind my back and asking if she wanted to be friends.

But she'll be a stranger on the Bart and soon I'll be late for my flight.

She'll tap her shoe in a diagonal rhythm. The cord will wiggle and bounce against her chest like a white snake. Six knots will be pretzeled into it, and as a father hooked on a fishing line, I'll want to take it and untangle it.

Jazz will drift from her earbuds. It'll be the type of music that's whitewashed by lyrics. The type where the male singer moves his voice up and down the spectrum and sings of rainbows in the shower. I'll hate it, for sure. But I'll also love it. And the way the girl's hips will sway while her boarding pass flaps in between her fingers.

In another world, I would know that she'd offer me an earbud and we'd listen together. But that would take minutes, and I'd only be watching from afar as time faded away like an escalator. A stairway to heaven.

There will be exactly seven ads on the train. One for Suncorp Loans, with smiling actors and a new house. The second for a dating app, like hell anyone will try that. Third, is Harvey Norman, a place with fridges and happy employees. The fourth is for the new Toyota Ute that is apparently 'Taking me places.' The fifth is McDonald's with bright colours to catch your eye, and the sixth is for men's coats. The seventh is for a makeup company with the slogan 'Look how you feel.'

Does that mean I should look grey and lost and tied to the tracks? Or free with a face-paint of butterfly wings like the stuff we used to get at kindergarten birthday parties?

Suddenly, the girl will grab my wrist. Not too hard. Eight of her nails would dig into my skin. The last one will be ripped off in one way or another.

It'll only last a moment. Our breath will mix like chicken soup. She'll lock her hand behind my back and press her lips against my cheek. I'll almost swallow the mint I'll have in my mouth. Alarm bells will go off in my head. I'll be able to remember the clocks and their ticking, vaguely, like the chug of an old train. It'll be the new year. And I won't feel different at all.

This will be a problem. I'll have snuck away from my loving wife in bed and our three red-nosed children, just to stand on a train and get kissed by a stranger and feel the same. I'll look at the girl and she'll avoid my gaze. She'll be Aphrodite and I'll be Melbourne, miles away and very cold.

There will be nine ways to continue, but only a few will float by at the time. The first one being to go and disappear. The second one being to return to my family. And the third one being—nothing.

Fairy tales were something I read in kindergarten. I'll feel like I'm living it, having the male character choose to be free and wild or return home to his children, who don't love him, in a house that smells of garbage.

It will be a dreadful metaphor. A common one. I'll be caught in it, though. The train being life, speeding up and me either grasping for a ride or stumbling into the past. I won't want to be controlled by it, yet I will be. Everyone is.

Even the girl who avoids my gaze and listens to jazz as if the world is falling apart in her fingers. So, I crack the mint in my mouth into ten tiny pieces. I'll gulp nine into the stone-shaped lump in my throat and spit one out into my palm.

It'll get forced into a piece of gum and barely stand out. But I've already made my mark. The gum won't be sticky anymore and I won't be afraid of its messages with bite marks. Or beautiful, foreign graffiti that will envelop Bart in a sense of belonging.

Before the doors close, I'll sprint out, dragging my suitcase behind me, and hop onto another train that looks exactly the same.

Aphrodite will be watching, one earbud dripping onto her shoulder, wondering how someone so tortured could escape something we learned as early as kindergarten.

FICTION / ALAN MARSHALL SHORT STORY AWARD: OPEN

The Nightingale

Meredith Tucker

At night the grass between the two neighbours was a long stretch, bluish in the dewy wet that sometimes came in after a string of hot days—and there was a sound, persistent beneath the still more persistent sea. It was of a bird, but no song, just a call, repeated over and over, regular as ‘a heartbeat’, Jules would once have said, but older now, she described it as ‘mechanical’, irritating and regular as a car alarm.

‘Don’t you hear it?’ she asked, but Jules’ husband, ensconced in the king-sized bed, wrapped like a corpse in the purple bed sheet, did not. ‘Come back to bed,’ he said groggily. ‘Come back to bed.’ And Jules did, for a little, listening to the bird, or was it a frog, and the sound of her husband’s breath, in and out, in and out ... until she couldn’t remain motionless anymore and crept once again to the window.

She looked for it those first few times—feeling exposed in her negligée and flip-flops, the new-mown grass sticking with the damp to her feet in the back garden. There was the lawn; there, the new hedge of Magnolias; and there, again, was the sound of the bird. She thought perhaps that it was a frog, stuck in the water tank by the bathroom or in the pipes, its voice amplified as if by a megaphone, but then she heard it again, at some distance, softer. She made her way further into the back yard, creeping over the concrete path to the Hills Hoist, carefully avoiding Danny’s plastic trucks parked in a circle of small white pebbles.

The black line of the sea became visible above the back fence’s pickets as Jules’ eyes adjusted to the dark. Above, a scatter of stars shone yellow through the leaves from a remnant gum and the light pollution from the city. She shut her eyes. When the smoke came, it was as sudden as the bird. One moment she smelt the ozone drifting in from the ocean, the next the cigarette; so it became difficult to tell where one thing began and the other ended.

There was a man, she saw, in next door’s back garden.

He was reasonably but not extraordinarily tall—his hips, torso and head silhouetted against the sky and sea. Topless, chopped almost in half by the picket fence between the two houses, he was standing awkwardly on something Jules could not see. As she watched, he turned to look out across the shaggy, weed-infested piece of land between the back gardens and the beach and took another drag on the cigarette.

When Jules was a teen, she'd smoked heavily, sitting in the long grass behind the school where the soil dropped away steeply to the bush. Old eucalypts had been cut down to make way for the sports oval and their trunks had been bulldozed together into a heap she liked to sit at the top of. The bark on the trunks had turned a dry, ashen grey or fallen off altogether, leaving the smooth dull wood beneath. Ants ferried things up and down their length and new saplings hid her. Everything there was warm, papery and peaceful—a giant nest sunk in perpetual sunlight. She had liked herself there, she remembered now, liked how she'd perched on a dead tree trunk, her school uniform hitched around her hips to show off her legs. She had liked herself because she had felt something somewhere between being small and warm and safe and its opposite—exposed as a loose live wire, half-naked, free.

On her way back to the house she took care to cross the gravel path beneath the bedroom window in silence, balancing on the sharp pieces of quartz she felt through the rubber of her shoe soles.

The next day was hot, Danny grouchy, pink-faced and sweaty even indoors. When she gathered him for his morning nap his breath was quick and shallow as a cat.

She felt his forehead with the back of her hand. Was it too hot? His hair was stuck with sweat to his forehead. As she pulled him toward her he pushed back listlessly, eyes half shut, saying only 'Da ee, Da ee', which was his word not for his father but for himself. Jules took him to the local hospital. Sitting in the airconditioned cold of the emergency room she watched as a man limped in with a workmate, the ragged shirt they'd tied around his foot dripping pink on the floor. 'Mate hit himself with an axe, hit himself ...' A girl, high as a kite, her hand stapled to a piece of plaster board, seemed not to have properly realised her predicament and was laughing wildly. When the doctor finally saw them, Danny cheerfully sucked on the melting chocolate frog the nurse had given him—it was smeared all over his face. He smiled. The doctor took Danny's

temperature and looked in a baffled way at Jules. The sister attending said having a young child was difficult as she wiped Danny's mouth. She asked Jules if she was coping, she asked her if she needed to speak with someone.

That night Jules sat in the dark on the concrete path to the Hills Hoist feeling the heat from the day radiate into the backs of her thighs. Exhausted, she lay back, the rough corrugations of the concrete pressing against her naked skin. 'Towk Towk, Ta-awk', the bird called from the old tree near the back fence. 'Towk Towk, Ta-awk.'

Somewhere, a dog barked, and Jules listened to a car engine idling, tyres rushing on asphalt, a window shut.

The lights clicked on next door. She stood against the neighbour's fence, stepping up barefoot to balance herself on the bottom rail and look over the pickets. The man slid open the door onto his patio and walked out into the yard. When the security lighting went on, Jules dropped quick away from the fence. He'd stood in loose shorts, his head tipped up a little, looking at the sky.

The light clicked off again.

The air was oddly heated, hotter now than it had been even at sunset, and full of insects. Beneath the moonlight, the sea was sluggish and flat as if weighted down by stones.

At Coles that morning Jules had bought a packet of cigarettes. Stepping further back from the fence she lit one now, half remembering the nervousness she'd felt, so nervous her hand had shaken as she'd handed over a fifty-dollar note to the bored looking teenager in a hijab. Trembling, she watched as the man turned his head at the sudden sound, the scratch of the match against the box, the white fizz of phosphorescence. Still dazzled by the security lighting she must almost be invisible to him, she thought, except for the ember glow, the orange pin-prick of light—like a firefly—trapped against the dark black block of the sea. She stepped deeper into the shadow of the tree. Above her, the bird called again, loud and then soft. Loud, then soft. And the man cocked his head to listen.

'We have to do something,' said Jules' husband at breakfast.

'About what?'

'The bird,' Jules' husband said.

Jules pushed toast into her mouth. Danny was in his highchair, squealing. 'Maybe get an expert in,' the husband said over the top of Danny.

Jules said nothing.

'Well what's your suggestion then Einstein?'

Jules shrugged.

'It's keeping you awake,' and then after a half-beat of stillness in which Danny began to hit his plastic spoon on his high chair tray, 'Its keeping you awake.'

The next morning, there was a stranger in the back garden. Looking between the curtains as she changed Danny, Jules could see her husband walking with a squat, barrel-chested man towards the tree at the back fence.

All day Danny and Jules cowered inside while the contractors took a chainsaw to the remnant gum. The men climbed its trunk using crampons and ropes, positioning themselves high up in its crown, shouting at each other. Then, nursing their chainsaws close to their chests, they hooked their legs around the tree's pale limbs, leaned outward and began.

It came down in parts, great thumping parts that shook the floor beneath Jules' feet.

As the chainsaws whined, other men began to mulch the branches below. The house filled with the squeal and whir of machines, and the smell of eucalyptus—sharp, green and medicinal—filled the hall.

That night there was no sound. 'Not a sound, see,' said Jules husband, and rolled over, and slept.

But Jules could not.

She listened for her husband's steady breathing and left the bed.

Outside was chaos. Leaves, piles of twigs and wood chips. Without the tree the house felt suddenly exposed to the ocean, bared to the wind off of the sea.

She found it, eventually, crushed beneath a branch, its neck twisted awkwardly in under itself. The bird was not beautiful she saw at once. Nothing like she imagined. It certainly wasn't a nightingale.

Still, she wrapped it carefully in one of Danny's old lamb's wool baby blankets.

She could feel its body, a little stiff but still warm with the day's heat. A surprising amount of blood, tacky and half-dried came through the blanket and onto her fingers.

Jules moved carefully down the side of the house to the front lawn and the sound of sprinklers. There were street lights out here, tall metal things, that buzzed gently in the cool silence. Above, the stars were dimmed but there was the moon, almost full, hovering over everything. She was going to put the bird on the drive next door, but the man, she saw, was there too. And because she had come too far now to go back, she walked toward him. She could see very little, only the paleness of his clothes and skin, the glitter of his teeth and eyes. She looked at the bundle in her arms and gave it him.

All that week Danny played cars and watched Jules as she used the wheelbarrow to spread the woodchips from the tree. 'What a lot of wood, what a big pile,' said the kid from No.8 who was on school holidays, standing staring at Jules then bouncing on the netted trampoline his parents had installed over the fence from the hedge of magnolias.

The next week Jules watched from the lounge as the removal truck arrived at the house next door. It was strange to see the man in the light. He was wearing jeans and a pair of flip flops, a pale-coloured t-shirt. He had blonde hair and looked a bit like a surfer, well-built but ordinary. Still, she thought, Still.

Afterwards, in the quiet that came as Danny slept, she found a thin white envelope pushed beneath the door on the floorboards in the hall. In it was a photograph. At first she thought it was some sort of fabric, a delicate grey ground with a spotted pattern of black and white, but then she saw it was the bird, so close that she didn't at first recognise it. She could see the roughness of its feathers, each strand of each feather hooked to the next with tiny barbs, and then, when she looked again, the edge of its beak, black, and its eye, shut, almost as if sleeping. Turning the picture over she saw that something was written on its back. It took her a moment to decipher the loops of the writing 'Perhaps it doesn't matter all that much now, but I knew you were there,' it said. 'Always.'

NILLUMBIK PRIZE CONTEMPORARY WRITING – POETRY CATEGORY: LOCAL

First Taste

Karen Andrews

1. Radishes

The curious child squatted beside the garden,
brushed aside dirt and leaves
to reveal ruby protrusions, miniature globes
marked with white atmospheric swirls.
Tugging one loose, wiping it clean
she sampled then spat the peppery flesh
onto the ground – but the crunch lingered
in tooth and jaw; a signifier of disobedience
for this was her father’s patch, not to be touched.

2. Turnips

A hefty yield, a fine growing season
taught the cows to assemble at the fence
to await their meal of ponytailed stalks
and heads macheted into edible pieces,
barging each other for better offerings
tossed from the full tractor trailer.
A dull vegetable best ignored, so thought the child
until, years later, it became an instant favourite
when cooked into a simple winter’s stew.

3. Chokos

Furry, pendulous oddities
their vines offered the most interest:
invasive, squirrely tendrils with singular purpose
curled around anything sturdy and fixed;
a kind of ambition that belonged in science fiction.
They also provided a lesson on relationships:
a full pail left by a door meant a settled debt,
and such abundance meant so much more
than blue-ribboned show pride.

NILLUMBIK PRIZE CONTEMPORARY WRITING – POETRY CATEGORY: YOUTH

Dog Brodie

Willem van Hasselt

The dusty track
And that Jeep you used to like
The yellow grass
The soil so fertile
Beneath which you lie

Companion for life and death
Your endless smile
Dog Brodie.

Your cheerful arf
Your fierceness

Remember the day you went swimming
Or your first ride
On the noisy diesel train
Old Bob is getting old without you
Dog Brodie.

Remember that cocky you scared
What a funny bird

Remember your bravery and heroism
Old Bob would be dead in desert
Without you
Dog Brodie

And the taipan you fought off
Even though you were bitten
Dog Brodie

Tears filled my one working eye
As you lay down to die
Venom overtaking your will to live
Dog Brodie

Still I hear your cheerful arf
And I want to laugh
My Dog Brodie.

NILLUMBIK PRIZE CONTEMPORARY WRITING – POETRY CATEGORY: OPEN

Fledgling Affair

Susanne Kennedy

Melbourne lockdown, 2020

courtship has us
strange

This

circle the oyster grey lake
masked in flat, cotton bills.
We watch cygnets moult
mushroom down, *en route*
to their dimpled, coal prime.

They circle the lake
that schools them
to 'own' large, open spaces
with hollow-boned heft,
bugling 101, and wing openings
abrupt as shaken quilts.

We circle the lake,
watching dark necks
trace the twist of lovers'
champagne-wrists. The sudden
flex of Bishop's crook
to menacing staff. Slick
plumage puff to honeycomb
taffeta.

We circle the lake,
watching serpentine
spines sew the liquid fabric
with their slack stitches
(needle becoming thread)
as fledglings watch
the watchers sow
the next new thing.

MAYORAL AWARD

One small step

Michelle Wright

Eight a.m. From the listless cove below, the salt-sticky air slides up towards the house. The bedroom windows are latched at night, but it seeps through the cracks like mustard gas. Long before dawn it's soaked the skin of the old man's scalp and filled his folds with sweat.

Frank 'Fish' McGill grumbles as he pulls himself upright, padlocks on his hipbones and legs as stiff as storks. The only part of him that hasn't seized up these days is his mouth. And that's what he uses the least.

After his first mug of coffee, Fish goes to the fridge. Stuck to the door is a flyer his daughter-in-law, Annie, has sent him. On the front is a handwritten note. *Tinned pineapple is NOT breakfast – or dinner. I've enrolled you in a cooking class for widowers. Healthy idiot-proof recipes for sad old farts ... and it'll get you off your ass. Not a suggestion!*

Annie's not one for mucking around. That's what he likes about her. Fish opens the fridge. A tin of pineapple on the middle shelf stares accusingly at him. He wonders how Annie found out. Probably the Council lady who does the housework once a fortnight. He'd seen the expression on her face when she cleaned the fridge last time. Fish studies the flyer attached to Annie's note. The first class is at eleven this morning in the community hall behind the Catholic church. The name of the program is printed in bright yellow capitals - BEYOND THE GRAVY.

'Spare me,' sighs Fish.

He closes the fridge and decides to skip breakfast.

Halfway to the community hall, Fish starts having second thoughts. It's only ten forty-five, but the heat is already worming its way under his scalp and burning the tops of his ears. He thinks about heading to the beach instead. But when he opens the hall door, the chill of the air con wraps him like a shroud.

'Oh hello,' says a middle-aged woman with a 'Volunteer Tutor' pin on her apron. 'I'm afraid you've missed the ice-breaker activity.'

Thank Christ for small miracles, thinks Fish.

‘Not to worry,’ continues the tutor. ‘We’re just about to start our pizzas.’

She hands Fish a purple marker and asks him to write his name on a sticky label before handing him an apron. He starts to write *Frank*, but lands on *Fish*. Only his mum called him Frank. And Kay.

Five other men are seated along a mint green counter. They watch him as he takes his place on the one remaining stool. The tutor tells them to take a pizza base each, choose their preferred toppings from the row of plastic tubs in the middle of the counter and start assembling the layers.

Next to Fish is a lanky man with wavy white hair that looks like it’s being held in place with varnish. He leans forward and reads the label stuck to Fish’s apron.

‘Nice to meet you, Fish,’ he says. ‘I’m just boring old Gordon, I’m afraid.’

‘Righto,’ says Fish, his eyes fixed on the pizza base. He tips a tablespoon of tomato sauce onto it and spreads it in tentative smears.

‘I see you’re partial to pineapple,’ says Gordon, eyeing one of the tubs that Fish has pulled towards his cooking station. ‘I’m actually a bit of a purist myself when it comes to pizza. Though I do like a freshly sliced pineapple blended with Greek yoghurt in a smoothie.’

‘Can’t be bothered cutting them up,’ says Fish, shrugging his shoulders. ‘The tinned stuff’s not that bad.’

‘I find the cans give the fruit a slight metallic taste,’ says Gordon, gently positioning a ribbon of prosciutto on his pizza. ‘And it’s important to stay alert to unexpected metallic tastes in your mouth.’

Fish drops a clump of shredded ham onto his pizza base and pushes down on it with his palm. ‘Yeah?’ he says.

‘You see, apparently it’s an early warning sign of a stroke. Or is it dementia? One or the other. I’d be worried I might be having a stroke and not realise it, thinking it was just the tinned pineapple.’

Fish plops a handful of pineapple pieces onto the mound of ham already on his base.

‘Fair enough,’ he replies, wiping his hands on his apron.

Once they’ve cleaned their workstations, the tutor invites them all to sit around

the communal dining table and chat to a neighbour while they wait for the crusts of their ‘creations’ to crisp. It’s a quarter past twelve and Fish’s stomach has been rumbling for the last hour.

‘Another interesting tidbit,’ says Gordon, taking a seat next to Fish. ‘Forty-two languages have the same word for pineapple. Isn’t that fascinating? Do you know what it is?’

‘Nah, mate,’ replies Fish.

‘It’s *ananas*,’ says Gordon. ‘That’s what it is in Portuguese and French and Russian and Arabic and Greek and Hindi and Turkish.’ He takes a breath. ‘And thirty-five other languages.’

What the hell is he on about? thinks Fish.

‘Isn’t it just the perfect name for it,’ continues Gordon. ‘One can practically feel the firm flesh between one’s teeth as one bites down on each syllable. *A...na...nas*. Can’t you just hear the juice as it squelches out?’

Fish nods slowly, narrowing his eyes as he pretends to listen for the imaginary squirt. He clears his throat. ‘You’re not a local, I take it.’

‘No,’ says Gordon, smiling. ‘I’m from Melbourne originally.’

Course you are, thinks Fish. He lets his head loll back and stares at the fluorescent light overhead. ‘When are these bloody pizzas gonna be ready?’ he says, not sure if the words are just in his head or if he’s said them out loud.

‘Are you hungry?’ asks Gordon.

Fish groans. ‘I’m so bloody hungry I could eat the arse out of a low flying duck.’

Gordon raises one eyebrow and smiles. ‘Indeed,’ he says.

That evening, Fish makes a mug of milky tea, takes a slice of his leftover Hawaiian pizza and heads for the deck at the top of his garden. He sits on his folding chair and gazes out to sea. His mind drifts back to the cooking class and that lanky bloke, Gordon. Kay would have got on well with him. She could talk to anyone.

‘A...na...nas,’ he says out loud and shakes his head. He pulls a piece of pineapple off his pizza, flicks it into his mouth and chomps down on it.

In class the following Wednesday, Gordon sits next to Fish again as they eat their vegetarian stir-fry.

‘Have you been living here long?’ Gordon asks.

‘Since Jesus played full-back for Jerusalem,’ replies Fish. ‘Local born and bred.’

‘And how long ago did you lose your wife?’

Fish clears his throat. ‘Six months,’ he says. ‘Coming up seven.’

‘My wife died four months ago,’ says Gordon. He pauses, staring at a piece of tofu that’s fallen on the floor. ‘Did you have any children?’

‘Just one,’ says Fish. ‘A son. His name’s Rick.’ He twirls a noodle on his fork and slurps it up, leaving a trail of teriyaki sauce across his chin. ‘He’s turning fifty in a couple of weeks.’

‘Really? That’s quite a milestone,’ says Gordon. ‘Is he planning a celebration?’

‘Not sure,’ says Fish, spearing a snow pea and shoving it into his mouth.

‘Don’t see him much nowadays. He was always closer to my wife than me.’

Fish wonders if this guy will ever stop with all the goddamn questions. He loads his fork with noodles and tries to fill his mouth, hoping he’ll take the hint.

Gordon swallows a mouthful of stir fry. He wipes his lips with a paper serviette. ‘Do you have grandchildren?’

‘Two,’ says Fish. ‘Twin girls. Twelve.’ He slides a fingernail between his teeth and dislodges a piece of coriander. He wipes it on his apron. ‘Maybe thirteen by now. My daughter-in-law brings them to visit every couple of months.’

Fish puts his fork down and looks at Gordon. ‘So, how long you been here?’

‘Not quite a year. Dawn and I moved here for a sea change just before her cancer was diagnosed.’

Fish nods. ‘Do you reckon you’ll stay on?’

‘I’m not sure,’ says Gordon. ‘I don’t have any friends here.’ He clears his throat. ‘Dawn was my best friend.’

‘Yeah,’ says Fish. He doesn’t look up, but he can tell Gordon’s getting a bit teary, poking at his eyes with the corner of his serviette.

The following Wednesday, they make a ‘healthy option’ fettucine carbonara.

‘I read somewhere that 1.8 people die every second,’ says Gordon as they stand

at the stoves, stirring their creamy sauces. ‘Do you ever worry that one second soon, that’ll be you?’

‘Nah,’ says Fish, as he licks the reduced-fat mascarpone from his spatula. ‘More worried I’m the bloke who’s four-fifths dead and doesn’t know it.’

Gordon looks at him, both eyebrows raised. ‘Valid point,’ he says.

Later, when they’re seated at the table, Gordon turns to Fish.

‘Dawn used to make the best carbonara,’ he says, wrapping his fork in fettucine. ‘Was your wife a good cook?’

Fish chews slowly, then swallows his mouthful of pasta. ‘Nah, not really,’ he says. He hesitates, feeling guilty about his offhand dismissal of Kay’s cooking skills. ‘Her desserts were alright, but.’

‘Oh really?’ says Gordon. ‘What was her speciality?’

Fish doesn’t have to think too long. Kay’s repertoire was limited. ‘She actually invented a dessert to celebrate the moon landing,’ he says. ‘It was this oozing, pus-coloured monstrosity, but it was Rick’s favourite. He always asked her to make it. Kay called it Pineapple Heaven.’ Fish’s sun-cracked lips stretch into a grin, remembering the quivery, mouth-puckeringly sweet mess.

‘Do you still have the recipe?’ asks Gordon.

‘Not sure she wrote it down,’ says Fish. ‘Think she just made it up each time. But it was always sweet as buggery. Send you straight into a diabetic coma.’ He chuckles. ‘Totally worth it, but.’

‘I’d try a bowl of that,’ says Gordon laughing.

‘Best bloody dessert I ever tasted,’ says Fish.

‘I was thinking,’ says Gordon as they’re finishing up. ‘Why don’t you ask your son and his family over to celebrate his birthday? You could show off your newly acquired culinary skills.’

Fish doesn’t answer straight away. He frowns, his top lip peeling up like the toe of an old leather sandal. ‘Yeah, maybe,’ he says eventually. ‘I’ll have a think.’

The following Saturday, Fish gets up early. It’s been hot overnight and the air in the kitchen is sticky as hell. On the bench he’s laid out an old exercise book he found in the bottom drawer, pages curled and crisped like filo pastry.

In it was Kay's scribbled recipe for Pineapple Heaven. He wipes the sweat from his neck and looks up at the clock. They'll be arriving in three hours. Hopefully enough time for the mousse to set.

He assembles all the ingredients on the bench and finds a cake tin in the cupboard next to the oven. He cuts the Swiss roll into slices, arranges them in the bottom of the cake tin and pours pineapple juice over the top. He licks the sugar from his fingers, one by one, then wipes them on his apron. Next he starts on the mousse, mixing a packet of bright yellow jelly crystals with evaporated milk, watching intently as it thickens and froths. Finally, he adds a can of crushed pineapple, then pours it all over the sodden Swiss roll base. For decoration, he scatters a few glacé cherries on top. They float for a second before the soggy mousse sucks them down like quicksand.

He looks at the clock again. Two hours for it to set. Two hours till they arrive. He wonders if Rick will come this time. He hasn't been back once since Kay's funeral. Too many memories probably. Too hard to see the place without her in it. Maybe he'll make an effort for his birthday though. If he does, he'll be pretty surprised to see that his old man's started cooking; that he's made his favourite dessert no less. He probably won't remember the whole moon landing thing. He was just a little tacker after all. Fish remembers it like it was yesterday. How he came home from work at lunchtime and the three of them watched the grainy footage on their rented black and white telly. He can picture Kay sitting cross-legged on the floor with Rick on her lap, pointing at the screen and whispering in his ear.

And then suddenly Fish remembers the story behind the name of the dessert. How excited Kay was about the whole moon landing thing and how she wanted to make sure Rick would remember it, even though he was only three. For about a week before, she kept asking him what the astronauts were going to the moon in and he'd say 'Apollo 11, Apollo 11' over and over like a trained parrot. But he was so little, he got it all mangled and Kay said it sounded like 'pineapple heaven' which she thought was adorable. So she said she'd invent a special dessert for the moon landing and call it 'Pineapple Heaven'.

Fish decides he'll tell Rick the story and see if he remembers. Maybe he will once he hears it. Maybe it's buried in his memory somewhere and he just needs something to bring it back.

At eleven, the front doorbell rings. Through the frosted glass panels, Fish makes out the twins and Annie. And then he sees Rick's silhouette behind them. He pushes himself up from the stool, his hip joints stiff as secateurs. The Pineapple Heaven is in the fridge. He's worried it hasn't had time to set. Maybe while they're waiting, he can take out the old photo albums to show Annie and the girls. Maybe he'll show Rick the first photo he took of him when he was a tiny baby cradled in Kay's arms; her frizzy peroxide blonde hair piled up high in that crazy beehive she had back then. Maybe he'll tell Rick how much Kay loved becoming a mum; how she was always singing to him in her silly squeaky voice; how when he couldn't sleep on hot evenings, she'd take him to the beach and sit in the shallow water to cool him down.

Fish pulls the tea-towel from the hook and wipes the sweat from the back of his neck. He takes a step down the hallway, his knee clicking like a ratchet.

'Righto,' he says, his eyes on the blurred outline of Rick's head through the dimpled glass of the door. 'That's one small step for man.'

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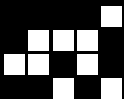
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