

LITERARY }

NILLUMBIK

ANTHOLOGY
of WRITING 2018

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...independence and release from
...authority
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LITERARY } FOREWORD

NILLUMBIK

The Shire of Nillumbik has long celebrated creativity as a core aspect of its identity. Council's new *Arts and Cultural Plan 2018-2022* seeks to foster active lifestyles and artistic expression through participation and innovation. The Literary Nillumbik Awards fulfil this by showcasing the expansive nature of creative inspiration.

The Literary Nillumbik: Ekphrasis Poetry Award 2018 artworks come from the recently acquired *Baldessin and Friends* commemorative folio. Seven esteemed Australian artists created artworks in honour of their friendship with the late renowned printmaker and sculptor George Baldessin. Poets continued the inspirational flow by responding to the artworks with poems.

For 33 years the Literary Nillumbik: Alan Marshall Short Story Award has prompted writers to craft short stories that, as Marshall himself said, are 'snapshots of Australia as we understand it and interpret it.'

The winning short stories and poems are presented together in this anthology for readers' enjoyment and with the intention of inspiring further creativity.

Nillumbik Shire Council in partnership with Yarra Plenty Regional Library and in association with Baldessin Press & Studio, and the Australian Society of Authors and Writers Victoria would like to thank the judges, Maxine Beneba Clarke, Helen Lucas, Steve Smart and Izzy Roberts-Orr for their expertise in selecting this year's winners.

Congratulations to all the winning writers and poets, and also to all who entered the Literary Nillumbik Awards 2018.

*'I kept always two books in my pocket,
one to read, one to write in.'*

— Robert Louis Stevenson



P. Clarke.

Mayor, Councillor Peter Clarke

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of his scalp. His eyes were very blue.
He was freckled. His nose was tipped
upward. I liked him tremendously.
I judged him to be about four and a half
years old and his brother twice that age.
They wore blue overalls and carried the
jauntily. The clean wind came across the
water and fluttered the material against
their legs. Their air was one of independence and
release from authority.
They scared the two plovers I had been watching.
The birds lifted with startled cries and banked
against the wind. They cut
across large clouds patched with blue and sped
away, flapping low
over the water.
The two boys and I exchanged greetings while we
looked each
other over. I think they liked me. The little one
asked me several
personal questions. He wanted to know what I
was doing there,
why I was wearing a green shirt, where was
my mother? I gave him
the information with the respect due to another
seeker of
knowledge. I then asked him a question and
thus learned of the

we looked each
other over. I think they liked me. The little one
asked me several
personal questions. He wanted to know what I
was doing there.



ALAN MARSHALL SHORT STORY AWARD 2018

The Alan Marshall Short Story Award was created in 1985 to celebrate 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.

Each year Australian authors are invited to submit stories of up to 2500 words in length.

The Award is presented in partnership with Yarra Plenty Regional Library and in association with the Australian Society of Authors and Writers Victoria.



JUDGE'S REPORT

by Maxine Beneba Clarke



It was an absolute honour to judge the 2018 Alan Marshall Short Story Award. It's not easy, as a writer, to hand over your babies: to press print on something you've laboured heart and soul over, address the envelope, and send it into the unknown – and to be *judged*, no less. I know the anticipation and anxiety well, and would like to thank each and every writer who sent in work, for the privilege of being part of their writing journey. Rest assured, every story found a thorough and attentive reader in me.

As a reader, I appreciated the meticulous crafting, vivid imagery and strong characterisation in many of the works. As a writer, I learnt something from each and every piece I read. As a judge, a decision seemed at times impossible to make: an excellent problem to have, when it's due to the quality of the work. The best stories submitted for the 2018 Alan Marshall Short Story Award could form the basis of a short fiction anthology that would both challenge and delight any reader – and I'm glad they will.

Stories ranged from everyday suburban poker nights, to outback forays encountering dangerous wildlife. In one story, the migration path of the mynah birds is juxtaposed with the rattling terror of the railway line. In another, the excitement and lure of a carnival-come-to-town turns to tears and danger. The stories submitted for this year's award were mostly of the everyday-ordinary: deaths, depressions, desires, childhoods, ageing, family dynamics. And yet, within them, I found the extraordinary. Great writing can make small moments matter.

I read razor-sharp opening sentences.

She arrived with a single car-load of stuff.

It has not rained for months.

I wasn't scared when I was thrown in jail.

This is my favourite marble, because it's so beautiful.

I read scene-setting I could touch and feel.

A bleak rectangle of pockmarked asphalt.

Outside in the gloom, the cat sat to attention on the stump.

Bucketing rain the week before had quenched the Yarra's thirst.

I read dialogue which jumped from the page.

'Twenty cents a fucking sheet. Highway robbery. Make sure you read em all.'

'She still plays like she's being chased.'

'Let the chooks out, willya.'

The rhythm of the story *A Tack on the Road*, and the author's ambitious use of cadence, stayed with me for some time. *Throw a tack on the road, stop the third family vacation...stop the preacher man...Throw a tack on the road, stop the busload of boy scouts.*

A short story is a superbly contained and condensed world: a vivid foray into someone else's life for just that half hour or so. The best short fiction lodges itself inside you, circling your mind for days. And so it was, with the strongest pieces in the submissions pool. I found myself sporadically wondering how many marbles the child in *Cyclops* painstakingly painted, before he reached atonement – or if he ever did. I wanted to know if the young man in *Shadows* ended up going to medical school, and if so, what kind of doctor he became. I hoped for a more stable life for the girl in *Carnival Day*, and for her Mum to *please* get herself together. I wondered if Jules in *Distance Education* ended up springing Freya out of boarding school. These stories each wound their way inside my heart.

Always though, the hallmarks of excellent short fiction are the same. Entry into that other brief world at exactly the right point in time and action. Structural soundness. Vivid characterisation. Stylistic sureness. Considered, believable dialogue. Attention to time, place and atmosphere. And above all, just a *really really* good yarn.



OPEN PRIZE

Carnival Day

by Julie Twohig

OPEN HIGHLY COMMENDED

A long stretch

by Bai Klane

Trigger warning: This story contains information about sexual assault and/or abuse that may be triggering to some readers.

Carnival Day

by Julie Twohig

On their way to the shop, Sarah crosses her fingers hoping her mum won't beg for credit. Last time, Sarah had scurried behind the magazine rack while her mum went on and on about her pension being late, how she was good for the money and *really*, she just needed a packet of smokes.

Around the corner from the caravan park, a carnival has sprung up overnight. It's all set to go but eerily empty. Sarah eyes the ferris wheel, wonderful, yet terrifying. It seems too flimsy to bear a full load. She imagines the thundering *c-r-a-c-k* as it lurches in slow motion before spilling her from one of its tiny cages headfirst to the ground, her arms and legs flailing. Even if she *could* go to the carnival, she would skip that ride.

Off to the side she spots a red and white stripy tent, home to dodge-em-cars, all metal and rubber, rough and dangerous. Pride of place in the centre of the oval, a merry-go-round with a lolly-pink dome and pastel-coloured ponies. Sarah can almost hear the carousel's jaunty music; calming, like that day at the sea when she had floated in the shallows, the tinkling of tiny shells on the ocean bed as waves gently stirred them.

'It opens tomorrow,' says Sarah's mum as she tugs Sarah's arm. 'If you're a good girl, I'll take you. *After* your lessons.'

'Yes, please,' says Sarah, a little wary, for her mum is likely to change her mind. Sarah wonders if Aunty Rose will be allowed to come with them. She is supposed to visit tomorrow. But if Sarah asks, her mum will probably say: *That woman. She rattles my nerves.*



On Carnival Day, Sarah finds her yellow spotted dress has been draped across a kitchen chair. It's her favourite. They'd found it at Savers.

She picks it up and inspects it; not one wrinkle. Her mum must have ironed it after Sarah went to bed. Her mum hardly ever irons. It makes the day even more special.

Sarah's white shoes and pink socks – the ones with yellow daisies around the tops – sit side by side beneath the chair, as if the fairies have visited during the night. Proof that her mum really loves her.

Sarah's little chest brims with delight as she yanks her nightie over her head then slips on the pretty dress. She hopes it's okay to get dressed so early. She will need to be careful not to slop her Cornflakes. She imagines Aunt Rose's delight when she sees the dress, how it will make her think better of Sarah's mum.

Sarah pulls on her socks and buckles her shoes, also from Savers.

At the kitchen sink she drags the spikey hairbrush through her blonde curls then in the flecked mirror, watches them spring back into place. Grown-up ladies will often tell her that someday she'll be the spitting image of Marilyn Monroe. Whoever that is.

Sarah waits patiently for today's lesson to begin. For the last three years since she was five, she has been home-schooled. Her mum wants no truck with mainstream institutions *messing with my daughter's brains*. Besides, regular schooling would put an end to their travels, all the different towns they get to stay in. So every morning before her lessons began, Sarah will amuse herself while her mum sleeps in. There is always something good on telly, and Sarah likes to draw; even better, having the cabins to herself. It's peaceful.

Shortly before midday her mum emerges from the bedroom, the faded peach kimono tied loosely at her waist. She lights a smoke and flicks on the kettle. Her dyed-black hair tickles Sarah's face as she slaps the latest wad of papers onto the table, printed from the home-school website at local libraries.

'Twenty cents a fucking sheet,' she says. 'Highway robbery. Make sure you read em all.'

Worried about her mum's surly mood, Sarah feels heartened by the scrape of metal coat hangers from the bedroom. It's a good sign. Her mum will get dressed today.

Sarah stares blankly at the mass of squiggles, bewildered as usual. But she's good at pretending. As long as she is quiet, they might still go. She picks up a black pencil and starts drawing.

•

In the fake-wood cabin Sarah's mum is draped along the green vinyl couch then hammers the remote for a *bloody decent show*. She is wearing her skinny-jeans and tight pink top.

'You gotta get your lessons right,' she says, her eyes glued to the TV. 'Else you'll end up a no-hoper like ya father.'

Sarah has never met her father. She imagines a fat man sprawled on his couch, a bit like her mum really. Except her mum isn't fat. *I'd rather be dead than fucking fat*. It's like a mantra, the way it drills into Sarah's head. Her mum subscribes to a vegan diet and boasts to anyone in earshot that no flesh or animal by-product will ever pass her daughter's virgin lips. At salons where she gets her nails done, she will look the ladies up and down. *Veganism: guarantees you never get fat*. When the ladies' eyes bulge, Sarah wishes her mum was a rolly-polly; someone who likes to cuddle.

In the ad break her mum says, 'A friend of mine, Jack, is popping over later'. She sucks the life out of a smoke, as if there is a treat tucked deep inside, like the blob of chocolate at the base of a Cornetto. 'He's coming with us... to the carnival.'

So it's not just Sarah and Aunt Rose and her mum after all. Is Jack the new boyfriend? Sarah doesn't recall anyone called Jack, and hopes he is nicer than the last one and that she won't be ignored. She wants so much for the carnival to be fun.

Her mum's cigarette fizzles when she drops it her inside her cup. 'I've been wracking my brains how to get us out of this dump. Ain't no place for a kid.'

Sarah quite likes this park. It has a playground, and although she doesn't talk to the kids, there is always a bunch hanging around. From behind a clutch of trees, Sarah watches them play. She figures it's the toilet block her mum hates. She reckons it's *disgusting*. Sometimes as they headed for the showers, their towels

and clothes bundled in their arms, her mum will say: *make sure you keep your thongs on, my little lamb*. Whenever Sarah's mum calls her *my little lamb*, it's as if the sun has grown big and strong inside her.

•

A knock at the door sends her mum scuttling from the couch. She plumps the cushions and tosses dog-eared magazines behind the orange recliner chair.

The man at the door is tall and dark and hairy.

'You're early,' says Sarah's mum. 'You might as well come in. My little girl's in there.' She points to the kitchen, where he has already spotted Sarah.

When he flops onto the couch, air whooshes out like a fart-sound, and Sarah giggles.

'Aren't you the pretty one?' he says, and the blood rushes to her cheeks.

'Coffee?' asks her mum, way too loud.

'Cheers. Two sugars.' He slaps his thigh and then says to Sarah, 'I hear we're going on a little outing.'

'To the carnival!' she says. If she could, she would march them there right now.

'How exciting,' he says. 'Thanks for inviting me.'

Sarah didn't invite him, but his presence ensures that they will go.

The tinkle of a teaspoon. Sarah's mum stirring in the sugar. The man shuffles into the kitchen, dragging his right leg. Even with a limp he is willing to come. Her mum cancels things for the silliest reasons. If she can't get her hair right, they will stay inside all day.

He picks up Sarah's hand and kisses it. 'I'm Jack.'

'I know,' she says, grinning like a princess.

'Do you now?' He smiles too, then manoeuvres himself onto a chair. Up close, tufts of hair spring from his ears. His nose is lumpy like a garlic bulb. He hasn't got any wrinkles, so he must be younger than Sarah's mum. The skin around her mum's mouth bunches like a pleated skirt, no matter how many scoops of Ponds Beauty Cream she slaps on her face at night.

The man's ease emboldening Sarah, she says, 'Are you her boyfriend?'

Her mum thumps the mug in front of the man, splashing coffee over the rim. Why is she being so mean?

'We're... *friends*.' He slides Sarah's drawing towards him: a black horse munching a carrot held by a girl dressed just like Sarah. 'Wow. This is *beautiful*. I wish I had a little girl... especially one as clever as you.' He slurps his coffee. 'You know, there might be horses at the carnival.'

Sarah's eyes widen. 'Do you think so?'

'Cross my fingers and hope to die,' he says, his arms crossed at his chest.

'You two get acquainted while I get my bag,' says Sarah's mum. But instead of leaving, she stands next to Jack.

'Of course.' Half-standing, he pulls out a scuffed wallet, leafs through a pile of money then hands two green notes to Sarah's mum who rolls them tightly and stuffs them inside her bra. She kisses the top of Sarah's head then lingers a moment before going into the bedroom.

Sarah has never seen green notes before and figures it must be a lot of money. She feels embarrassed that her mum didn't thank him. Should Sarah thank him for her?

Her thoughts flip to all the rides she is about to have. Maybe fairy floss. A turn slotting ping-pong balls into a rotating clown's mouth. Perhaps she will win a prize. A doll. She would like a new doll; a friend for the china doll Aunty Rose gave her last Christmas.

The way Jack is looking at Sarah reminds her of the way she stares at puppies in pet-shop windows. His grey eyes glisten as he leans across the table. She squirms to dodge his lips, silent, in case her mum calls off the outing.

Jack rubs his meaty palms together. 'Just an innocent kiss, sweetie.'

Feeling silly and mean, Sarah considers offering him her cheek so he can kiss it properly.

'Little girls are God's blessing,' he says. 'Your mummy said she had a little princess... but I never expected such an angel.'

Sarah pictures a plump golden-haired angel with silver wings. Not some skinny kid like her. As she stacks the mess of pencils and paper she is aware that

Jack watches her every move. Her stomach churns like the spin dryers in the laundry block. She checks that her dress hasn't crept up too high.

Her mum reappears wearing crimson lipstick. 'Let's go.'

•

Jack clutches Sarah's hand as he limps at her side swinging their arms back and forth. It's nice, in a way, though her hand feels a bit crushed.

He jabs Sarah's mum with his elbow. 'The perfect threesome,' he says, and Sarah wonders if he has bruised her.

She thinks of the note she tucked into the flywire door back at the cabin: *Hi Auntie Rose. We're at the carnival. And hopes it doesn't blow away.*

'I don't want to be out too long,' Sarah's mum says as they duck beneath the wooden railing around the oval.

There are kids everywhere, running and laughing, shrieking on the scariest rides. Sarah fixes her sights on the merry-go-round.

'Like that one, do you sweetie?' asks Jack.

At the ticket booth where he buys a family pass, Sarah feels even more grateful. This outing is his treat. The money he gave to her mum was a gift. He must have tons of it. Since her mum lost her job in the last town they've been flat broke – though Sarah prefers being broke to being alone at night. She never sucks her thumb when her mum stays home.

At the merry-go-round, Jack says, 'Which one, Princess?'

Sarah inspects each pony before choosing the aqua one with the golden mane and pink ribbon.

Jack wraps his arms around her little chest, hoists her up, and this time when he kisses her, she doesn't resist.

As the aqua pony dips and rises, Sarah loses count of the rotations. She is only aware that every time the ride returns to where Jack is standing, he blows her a kiss.

Tired of smiling at him, she fixes her gaze on the pony in front of her, hoping she won't hurt Jack's feelings.

At the end of the ride he lifts her off her pony and his hand brushes her knickers. 'Oops. Clumsy me. Which one now? The ghost train? Ooo-ooo... haunted! Just you and me, eh?'

'You too, Mum,' says Sarah, when she notices her mum stiffen.

'Nah... I'm a bit crook. You'll be fine with Jack.'

Sarah suspects her mum might not like Jack much after all. Either that, or she's just plain grumpy. Sarah is grateful Jack is with them. If he wasn't, they would have left by now. Or wouldn't have come in the first place.

Sarah's mum gives her a little shove. 'Off you go.'

Jack helps Sarah into the brightly coloured carriage then lifts his gammy leg and wedges in beside her. She looks around for her mum, but can't see her.

Once the train is loaded they enter the tunnel's gaping mouth. Sarah grips the handrail and tries to acclimatise to the darkness while anticipating her first fright: the crawly creatures that will dangle and slap.

The o-o-o-o of ghosts boom all around. Flashes of red and green, beady eyes embedded in the walls. When Sarah screams along with the other kids, Jack put his arm around her.

'Don't worry, little princess. I'm here.'

Sarah leans in, snug now. She barely notices his hand settle above her knee.

•

When the train emerges from the tunnel, Sarah opens her eyes and squints at the brightness. The seat beside her empty. But it's as if his fingers still creep along her thigh, like a fleshy spider.

Next to Sarah's carriage, Auntie Rose is arguing with Sarah's mum. 'Who was he? Look at her. That's it. I'm taking her with me.'

Auntie Rose hops in beside Sarah and holds her tight, her grey cashmere cardigan soft against Sarah's skin.

'Sarah,' whispers Auntie Rose, her cheeks wet against Sarah's neck as she lifts Sarah out. Crouched to Sarah, Auntie Rose says, 'Darling... it's okay. Come on. You're coming to my place for a while. Would you like that?'

Sarah's tears plop onto her hand as she watches her mum disappear into the crowd.



LOCAL PRIZE

With Or Without Us

by Hayley Gabrielle

LOCAL HIGHLY COMMENDED

Sink

by Jennifer Porter

With Or Without Us

by Hayley Gabrielle

The body of the scuffed guitar rested over Jack's thin legs. He tapped at it like a metronome and the girl sitting opposite—chewing her lip and frowning down at her instrument—heard a ticking time bomb instead. Panic had her playing accelerate in defiance of Jack's rhythm, and when his hand began to quiver he decided to put them both out of their misery.

'Very good Samantha, very good,' he said, nodding over his guitar and pressing it against him. 'Just remember to listen for your pacing. There's no need to rush. You want people to hear it, every beat of it. Alright? Better to play too slow than too fast.'

The girl nodded along and Jack wondered if her beady, eager eyes were capable of implementing his instruction beyond acknowledging it. If previous lessons were any indication—he remained dubious. But nonetheless, he repeated himself over and over and hoped that every reminder was a seed, which might one day grow into an infallible sense of rhythm.

After suggesting the girl invest in a metronome to practice with at home, Jack led her through the lounge which smelled of Norma's lavender and dusty carpet. 'You sure your mother is here, love?' Jack asked.

'Yes she said she'd park on the corner, just down there.' And with that, the little girl took off down the paved garden path, guitar bouncing on her shoulder. If Jack's knees weren't so hard on him he would've gone after her to check she was picked up safely. But instead he sighed and adjusted his glasses, then turned to the garden.

Norma was bent low over clusters of alyssum, a watering can held to their little white, thirsty faces. Her knees were kinder than Jack's.

'How did she go today?' she asked, looking up from under her pink bucket hat.

'Still plays like she's being chased.'

Norma gave a small conspiratorial smile. 'Maybe she is.'

•

Bucketing rain the week before had quenched the Yarra's thirst. For the first time in a long time it moved with ease between the pale gums craning their necks from either side.

Dogs dipped their noses into the water and chased balls out by the ducks, whose velvety green necks urged them away from the animals and then back to the bread tossed by nippers sitting at the water's edge.

'Our sign's peeling,' Jack said to Norma. They'd stopped at their usual chipped wooden bench across the path up from the river. 'Did you notice that? The *eg* in *beginner*? It's starting to look like *binner*. Did you see it?'

Norma chuckled low and coarse. 'Maybe it's more honest that way.'

'Binner,' Jack repeated, then laughed too. 'I tell you, it's not the worst plan for some of them.' He took Norma's delicate hand in his, brushing a thumb across her loud, bluish veins. They watched a fluffy white pooch take on a brown lab over a tennis ball he thought to be rightly his.

The bands of muscle in Jack's hand danced without his permission. In his side vision he saw Norma peer down at the movement, but he fixed his gaze determinedly ahead. At times she called them his jazz hands. At other times she pretended there was nothing different. Jack knew she wasn't sure which he preferred, and the truth was neither did he.

'Dear,' she said. 'We may not need another sign. It might be time to consider —'

'What? Retirement?' Jack chuckled, but Norma knew it was empty because she knew when it was full.

'I'm just fine Norma, just fine. I can still play, can't I? You've heard me.'

'I've heard you practice dear, I can see how it affects you —'

'I don't know what you've heard but it hasn't affected a single bloody thing,' Jack said, which stamped Norma's lips shut. 'In fact a lady called today and booked

her son in for lessons on Wednesday afternoons.' His voice softened. 'I wouldn't take a new student on if I couldn't teach them? Would I?'

Norma gave a fleeting smile and nodded. Her eyes were like glass. Jack had always been able to see straight through them like windows into her thought streams, rushing by him with brutal truth and revelation. Sometimes he wished the windows were frosted.

'Right,' he finished, hoping to bypass all the rest of what he knew she wanted to say.

The river moved on before them. It moved whether they watched it or not, whether they turned their backs or set their eyes on its glistening surface. It moved and always had and always would.

Jack and Norma passed the bakery and crossed the road, gripping hands at the lights. They sat outside at a narrow café nestled in the main street, both ordering weak cappuccinos.

'Weak?' the waitress repeated loudly. A ponytail protruded high on her head like a spouting fountain and her eyes were bright and hollow in the sun.

'Yes, love,' said Norma.

'Why does she speak to us like we're bloody deaf?' Jack asked before the waitress was sufficiently out of earshot.

'I'd say she thinks we are, dear.'

'I never understood it. Someone needs to tell these young folk that not everyone over seventy can't hear.'

'What was that?'

A grin cracked through Jack's irritation. Norma was one of the few people in his world with the ability to drag such a look to surface level, along with Chet Atkins and John Lee Hooker and Chuck Berry and Bob Dylan.

When they were home, Jack went inside with his guitar and Norma took water to her patient children rooted in dry soil. Jack had suggested many times that they install a sprinkler system, but Norma refused.

Her body had never granted her little ones, but her garden had granted her plenty, and she poured herself over them every day.

•

Now that he knew Norma had been listening in, Jack shifted his practices from the lounge room to a seat out the front by the lavender.

His hands danced out of time and he puffed in frustration, willing them to still against the strings.

‘What’s his name?’ Norma asked over dinner.

Jack raised a forkful of quiche, ‘Peter,’ then he ate it.

He had five lessons scheduled each week. Peter would be the sixth.

‘The kid was learning from a fellow down in Elsternwick, but they’ve just moved out by the bridge here and saw our sign. We need to fix that up, alright? Wouldn’t want poor Pete to start out as a *binner*. Remind me tomorrow.’

He went to take another bite but then noticed Norma watching him, and stopped to smile.

After all these years he still caught his wife regarding him with that warmth that made her eyes crinkle at the sides. It wasn’t just time that made the marks. They had always crinkled.

•

Twang. The string buzzed out of Jack’s control and he roughly shook his head. Peter watched on without flinching. He was older than Jack expected him to be, a rangy teenager stuck in the stage where invisible hands pulled from top to bottom without much thought for the sides.

‘Sorry kid, it’s the jazz hands, that’s what my wife calls them. They’ve forgotten we’re playing blues today.’

‘It’s okay,’ Peter said, grinning. ‘I like jazz too.’

Jack persisted with the riff and strings broke in him while he tried. Finally he turned to the CD player. ‘Uh-huh, let’s see.’ He clicked his tongue and hit track three. The mellow tones of John Lee Hooker ran between them like a river of honey.

‘Might as well learn from the master himself,’ said Jack. His hands rested over the hill of his instrument, fingers clutched together with strength fierce enough, he hoped, to teach them a lesson too.

Peter came every Wednesday. Much of the time was spent listening to CD’s and emulating what he heard with the assistance of tablature spread out on Jack’s rickety music stand.

‘You need a better stand, old man,’ he would say.

‘I need a better many things, kid,’ Jack would reply.

Peter progressed rapidly, and it was only when Jack introduced the bar chord that he faltered. His nail-bitten forefinger strained against the strings, pressing them to the fret board with one or more always deciding to remain uncooperative and mute.

Peter would groan and grit his teeth. Jack knew the frustration well, but he also knew that Peter would someday hit the chord with unspoiled cadence. He knew what it would feel like because he’d felt it too, and now it was slipping. Peter was running forward one way and Jack was stumbling backwards the other.

‘You’ll get there,’ Jack told him. ‘Play through the chord, hit each string on its own—one at a time. Let them ring out.’

Peter set his focus on the fret board, his finger aching against it from the pressure. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. *Buzz*. ‘Ugh!’

One. Two. Three. *Twang*. ‘Bloody hell.’

One. *Thump*. ‘Looks like I’m the one with jazz hands today.’

Jack couldn’t help but smile at the boy.

Norma pressed her ear to the door. She heard the CD occupying more and more of Jack’s lessons where she once heard the sound of his guitar. Her eyes might have been transparent as glass to Jack, but his torment melted past them into her too and she ached with him.

•

‘You know what I mean, dear.’

Jack was reading a newspaper on the couch, the stem of his guitar against his leg like it was a lead and the hollowed body was a pet he didn’t trust to roam around on its own.

‘I’m not sure I do, Norma,’ he said without looking. ‘You’re beating around the bush here. I’d rather you just come out with it.’ That wasn’t entirely true. He wasn’t sure *coming out with it* would be better than keeping it. Perhaps her real meaning would be better left buried in that bush where he couldn’t see it—but it was too late to take back the order.

Norma stood with her lips pressed together, staring at the border of trees and wondering how she might thrash her way through to their centre without causing undue damage. ‘Jack, look at me,’ she finally said. ‘I don’t like seeing you this frustrated.’

‘I enjoy my teaching, you know I enjoy it. I’m not frustrated.’

‘These kids, you’ve got to remember love, they’re paying for their lessons.’
They could listen to CD’s at home—she wanted to add, but didn’t.

‘You’re telling me to give up teaching, *and* playing, is that right?’

‘I just think—’ Norma breathed a quivering sigh. ‘We make what we can, while we can. But thinking we always will is ... inevitable devastation.’ The skin of her neck quivered. ‘We all land there at some point love, but I’m not sure drawing out the process helps anyone.’

Jack’s eyes were back behind the newspaper, fixated on the words without reading them.

Norma sauntered over to the kitchen. Moments later Bob Dylan swam into the room, whispering truth right into Jack’s ears. He turned to Norma as she sunk beside him, breathing hard. ‘Sixty years now Jack, you’ve been playing. Sixty years.’ She rested her head on his shoulder and took his arm. ‘We change, love, we won’t always keep up. But music goes on, and there’ll be others to chase it. Others with knees better than ours.’

•

It was only after more letters had begun to peel away that Jack dragged the sign inside. He called each of his students to inform them he would no longer be teaching—the hands had insisted on jazz and he couldn’t seem to persuade them out of it.

They were all sympathetic, all except Peter. He was studying music at a university in the city and Jack had come to consider him almost an equal. Their lessons verged on the form of social gatherings, with Peter often staying for dinner.

‘You trying to get rid of me, mate?’ he said over the phone.

Jack chuckled. ‘Four years was four years too many.’

‘There are a few hairs I haven’t had the chance to turn grey yet, though.’

This was of course not true, as Jack was silver all over. But Peter insisted on finding the leftover youth in it, showing up on Jack and Norma’s doorstep that Wednesday afternoon with a grin as wide as the doorway and no guitar this time.

They sat in the lounge instead of the lesson room. ‘You know I won’t be charging you anymore,’ Jack said.

‘Good.’ Peter nodded once. ‘You were ripping me off anyway.’

Norma chuckled from the kitchen where she was busy mashing potato for a shepherd’s pie. Jack gave her an accusatory look over his glasses that she didn’t see.

Peter clapped hands over his knees. ‘Shall we bring out the boys?’

They spent the next half hour in the company of Chet and Dylan. Peter told Jack he’d taught himself to play *Don’t Think Twice It’s Alright*. He hadn’t brought his guitar with him, so Jack unleashed his own and handed it to Peter by the neck, then closed his eyes and tapped his foot in time—his feet were still his even if his hands had forgotten.

Norma watched the pair, heads ducking the same way, silver and black, moving in a rhythm one now permitted for both.

She rushed to grab a nearby onion to mask the welling of her glass panes.

Jack opened his own eyes again and hummed the words. He studied Peter’s fingers, sliding over frets and marks on wood that he himself had left behind. Peter struck a bar chord and every string rang out, replacing those broken in Jack, turning him still.

THE NILLUMBIK ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ POETRY AWARD 2018

noun | ek·phra·sis | \ 'ek-frə-səs \

*A vivid, often dramatic, literary description of
a visual work of art, either real or imagined.*

THE
Baldessin
PRESS & STUDIO

*...and I exchanged greetings which
we looked each other in the eye.
I think they liked me. The little
one asked me several
questions. He wanted to know what
I was doing there.*

Ekphrasis (pronounced Ek-fra-sis) – the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the ‘action’ of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning.

In 2018, the Ekphrasis Poetry Award invited Australian poets to create 12-line poems in response to artworks from the *Baldessin and Friends* commemorative folio. The folio has recently been acquired for the Nillumbik Shire Art Collection.

The folio brings together seven celebrated Australian artists – Rick Amor, GW Bot, Jock Clutterbuck, Michael Leunig, Jan Senbergs, Imants Tillers and John Wolseley. Each artist created a new print work presented alongside the posthumous print, *Portrait II*, from the incomplete edition by renowned printmaker and sculptor George Baldessin.

The 2018 Award is proudly presented in association with Baldessin Press & Studio.

JUDGE'S REPORT

by Helen Lucas

THE
NILLUMBIK
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ
POETRY AWARD 2018

As judges we bring our range of experiences, associations and emotions to the poems, as do the poets, which makes the entire process and approach subjective – from the first sighting of the artwork, through the poem's creation, to our readings. So we have criteria, and the poems are judged against these also. It is useful for poets to consider these points:

- A clear relationship to the artwork – it is an obvious point to make, but sometimes responses are so subjective that this relationship is not clear.
- Poetic technique – the careful selection of words for their sound, meaning and associations. Twelve lines calls for the poet to use words economically and creatively.
- The sound – this is crucial. The placement of words and lines affect the way it is read. Alliterative affects may look great on the page, but sound clunky when read aloud. Repetitions may become boring or add power.
- The use of metaphor – one of the challenges in this competition is not to be too literal. The poet needs to clearly reference the artwork, while recognising the possibilities of the metaphor.
- A sustaining strength or quality – a certainty in the work, a confidence in an idea and the expression of it and the choice of words chosen to do this successfully.
- Originality – what a breath of fresh air some poems were to read. Those poets whose responses stood out for all sorts of reasons, the unexpected or unusual use of a word, a left of field idea.

The winning poem in the Open section, *The map is damaged and beautiful* expands on the metaphor of the life world of the beetle to explore the nature of existence in an intimate and philosophical way. The title line captures the

layering and destructive beauty of the image and the poet builds on this idea, using the microcosmos of the beetle's work to say something profound about life, death and beauty. It is reminiscent of the documentary *Microcosmos*, which finds a larger story in something tiny to the human eye.

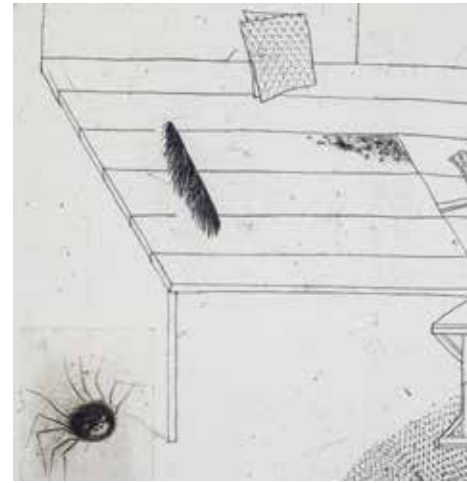
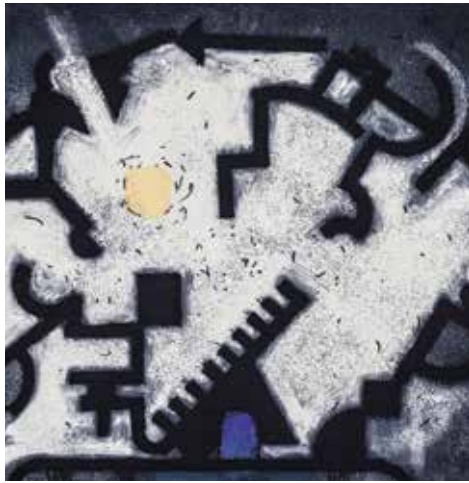
The commended poem, *Cartouche*, makes the most of the limited lines – it is well edited and feels complete. The poet has clearly taken joy working with this abstract image to construct a narrative.

Bodies are always made of light, the winner of the Local section, investigates the subjective nature of art – the making of it, and the responses to it. The poet considers how the subject of the portrait might respond concluding with the suggestion: '...note this/in the shadows of dark and white/ bodies are always made of light.' The poet has edited carefully and produced a tight, resolved poem.

The commended poem, *Awe*, is a fine flight of invention, and invites the reader to look again at the artwork and consider the poet's unique response, to see the image through the poet's eyes. The poem captures maternal love tenderly without becoming twee.

The poem *Visage* in the Youth section was a clear winner from first reading, and it grew on us with further readings. It is a well resolved poem with a clear direction, a clever narrative, characters and a relationship. It has a daring and distinct voice. We loved the reference to Frankenstein and the face created from leftover 'bits' – 'small hands and flaccid nose'.

The commended poem *Patchwork Head* has a wonderful sense of disorder and whimsy that captures the image. There is a confidence in the approach and style of this poem. Impressive for a young poet.



THE NILLUMBIK ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ POETRY AWARD 2018

LEFT TO RIGHT

Jock CLUTTERBUCK
Frosty Night Cartouche
(detail) 2016
Etching with aquatint
and colour stencil
Plate size 41 x 49.5 cm
Paper size 56 x 76 cm

GW BOT
Baldessin Glyphs
(detail) 2016
Linocut
Plate size 76 x 56 cm
Paper size 76 x 56 cm

John WOLSELEY
**Life World of the
Longicorn Beetle**
(detail) 2016
Woodcut from found log and
etching on chine-colle with
watercolour
Plate size 36 x 30 cm
Paper size 76 x 56 cm

Rick AMOR
The Ruin
(detail) 2016
Drypoint
Plate size 35 x 30 cm
Paper size 76 x 56 cm

THE
Baldessin
PRESS & STUDIO

LEFT TO RIGHT

Imants TILLERS
*In posthumous collaboration
with George Baldessin*
Unsaid + Nameless
(detail) 2016
Etching and photo polymer
Plate size 39 x 44.5 cm
Paper size 56 x 76 cm

Jan SENBERGS
New Jersey - Rust Belt
(detail) 2016
Sugarlift etching
Plate size 56 x 76 cm
Paper size 56 x 76 cm

George BALDESSIN
Portrait II
(detail) 1966
Etching and aquatint
Plate size 50 x 34.5 cm
Paper size 76 x 56 cm

Michael LEUNIG
Pilgrim
(detail) 2016
One colour etching
Plate size 51 x 41 cm
Paper size 76 x 56 cm



OPEN PRIZE

The map is damaged and beautiful

by Miguel Jacq

The map is damaged and beautiful.

Maybe some see breadcrumbs, or trails to blaze along
etchings of ash and bone and hair. Some see split ends

and careen off, bewildered and digging for answers,
clumsy and impatient like the way rainwater

hunts down gaps in lumber, or carves them out
anew, getting everywhere and nowhere at once.

Life builds up at the end — you cannot bore
a tunnel through, only unpack each layer.

The way in is not the way out. The way can petrify.
But some venture deeper into that visceral mess,

and damage the map, and it becomes beautiful.

LEFT

John WOLSELEY

Life World of the Longicorn Beetle (detail) 2016

Woodcut from found log and etching on chine-colle with watercolour
Plate size 36 x 30 cm; Paper size 76 x 56 cm

LOCAL PRIZE

Bodies Are Always Made Of Light

by Karen Andrews

What must it feel like, to be flattened
against the assessment of peerage.

All responses are choices, whether
they defy or invite ridicule.

Question the thin-eyed gaze, it seeks
to pin down and peel away meaning.

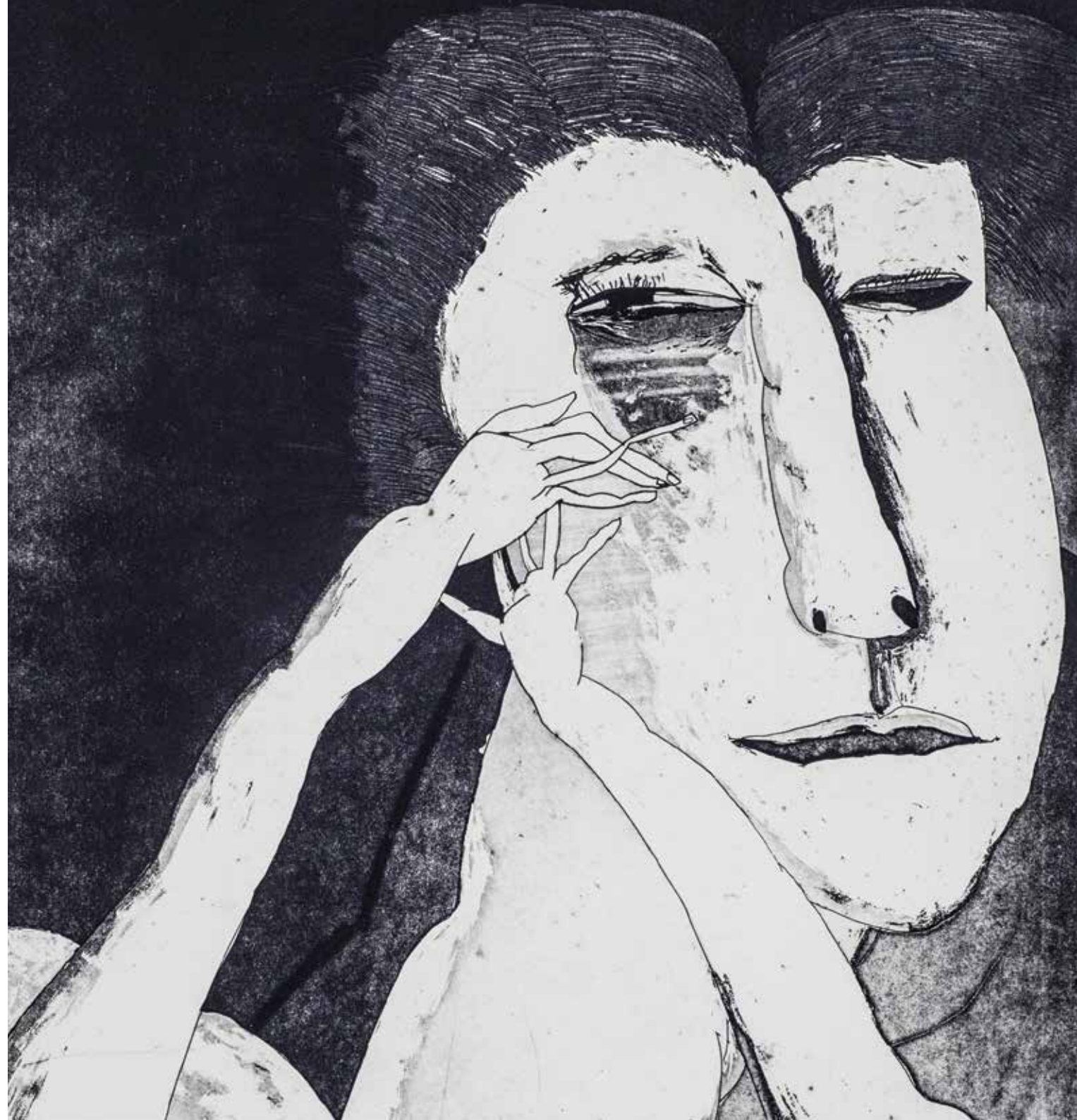
Abstraction is an intimate affair.

If you are still confronted, note this:
in the shadows of dark and white
bodies are always made of light.

RIGHT

George BALDESSIN
Portrait II (detail) 1966
Etching and aquatint

Plate size 50 x 34.5 cm; Paper size 76 x 56 cm



YOUTH PRIZE

Visage

by Coco Huang

Things look different in the morning
when it's time to reassemble

our bits and pieces
strewn all over the sheets

and you've chosen the best bits
but that's alright.

I guess I deserve to keep
your small hands and flaccid nose
my 'exotic' eyes and 'lesbian-cropped' hair

I can sew myself together,
my dear Frankenstein – and when I'm done,
I no longer fray.

LOCAL HIGHLY COMMENDED

Awe

by Anna Trembath

Reading about the body, I asked you where your lungs are
You pointed to your gums and were ashamed of your error, sweet curious soul.

At six weeks, we learned, the foetus is the size of a grain of rice, heart beating.
Five years ago, I saw the grain of you, I said
A wee oval on a screen, a *blink-blink-blink*, a solitary black star.

I didn't tell you of the bleeding and the rush to hospital,
The loneliness of my fear, the surprise at my attachment to you.

When you were a hefty external bundle, sick snuggly joey in your zip-up bedtime pouch,
sometimes I'd carry you into the frosty night, with the eucalypts and owls and possums
The air sharp and cool, a tonic to your wheezing lungs (not gums).

And you'd gaze up, eyes dark chocolate planets and full moon whites,
pointing with tiny finger, a whisper in my ear: *Thtar! Thtar! Thtar!*

LEFT

JOCK CLUTTERBUCK
Frosty Night Cartouche (detail) 2016
Etching with aquatint and colour stencil
Plate size 41 x 49.5 cm; Paper size 56 x 76 cm



OPEN HIGHLY COMMENDED

Cartouche

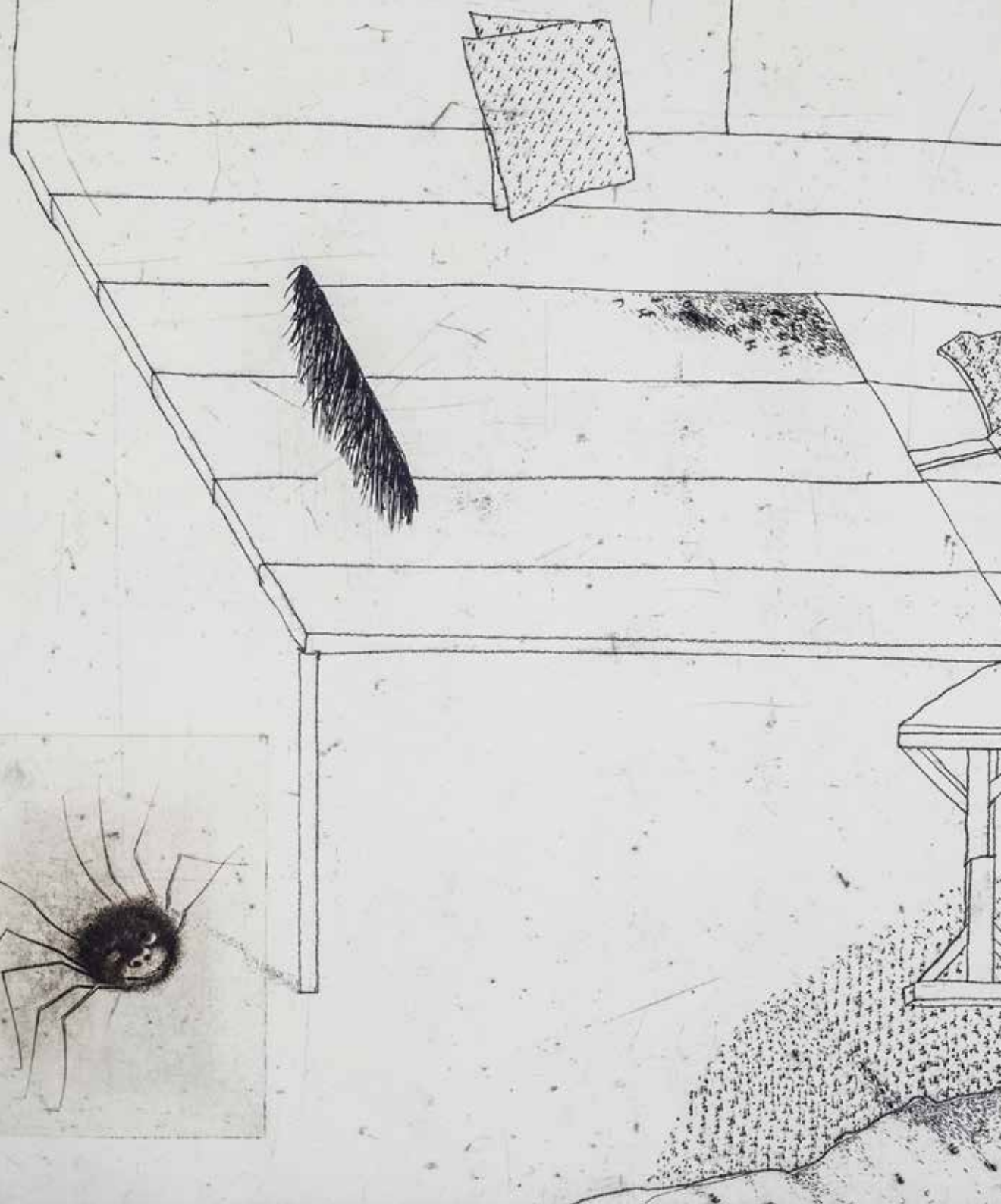
by Magdalena Ball

it's royal this gift, the heart of explosion in the middle of winter
when I thought it would always be cold, etched in thick black
it came on fast, as heat working in lines against the waning sun

doesn't it always come back to love, to loss, the last sound of tyres on bitumen
I spelled your name in hieroglyphs, recreated the shadow of your body
an outline, protection, to keep you warm through the fog

you never believed in evil, not even the mundane kind, little snipes or gossip
it was always open house, bluestone and the night sky spreading above us
the table abundant with fruit, for drawing, for eating, spilled into dreams

mine and yours entangled, breaking through the frost of our waking lives
the reimagining of friendship, when I thought of you, that clumsy beautiful
mouth laughing at something neither of us thought funny and still laughing



YOUTH HIGHLY COMMEDED

Patchwork Head

by Maya Rizkyvianti

Hoist me head end down then rattle me well
so that my skull cap pops off neatly and teeters bowl-like
on the floor. What spills out, in what manner of flow?
An avalanche or cooling lava's drunken ooze? Out! A seep
of words that mean 'empty' and moving pictures of a mother
prance about; fragments of a face and musical phrase mesh
like pom-pom and macaroni art; corners of homes I've known
jut and strut geometrically around creep-fears that scuttle dark
and climb into ears...out! Nickels clink; buttons bounce; ether stares.
No battle valour, no gods, no owl wisdom or marula oil there.
Stoop low, gather up what is strewn and come up with a handful;
trinkets and beads – nothing! – scraps for the quilt I never could piece.

LEFT

Imants TILLERS
In posthumous collaboration with George Baldessin
Unsaid + Nameless (detail) 2016
Etching and photo polymer
Plate size 39 x 44.5 cm; Paper size 56 x 76 cm



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NOTES



*I think they liked me. The little
one asked me several
questions. He wanted to know what
I was doing there
wearing a green shirt, where was
my mother? I gave him*

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COVER ABSTRACTION

George Baldessin, *Portrait II*, (detail) 1966
Etching and aquatint, plate size 50 x 34.5 cm, paper size 76 x 56 cm

EXCERPT

Tell Us about the Turkey, Jo: Short Stories by Alan Marshall
Alan Marshall, Published by Angus and Robertson Limited, 1946

LITERARY
NILLUMBIK

THE
NILLUMBIK
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ
POETRY AWARD 2018

DOUGLAS
LAURENCE
VINTAGE
TEGAL
ALAN MARSHALL
SHORT STORY
AWARD 2008


NILLUMBIK
THE GREEN WEDGE SHIRE

THE
Baldessin
PRESS & STUDIO

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VICTORIA
All about writers

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