

MY STORY MY VOICE



QUEENSLAND WOMEN

RAISING VOICES AND SHARING STORIES

FACING THE ONGOING CHALLENGES TO CREATE CHANGE

Published By:



Queensland Writers Centre

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Submissions

Right Left Write is run in conjunction with our weekly newsletter, Pen & Pixel. Each month we announce a prompt word or theme in Pen & Pixel, then it's over to you to create a short story of up to 500 words and right, left, write.

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Acknowledgement of Country

Queensland Writers Centre is based at the State Library of Queensland on Kurilpa Point in South Brisbane. Named after the native water rat (kuril), Kurilpa Point has a significant history as an important meeting place, and we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we reside. As we operate throughout the entire state of Queensland, we respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of all the Nations on which we meet.

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Funded by



CONTENTS

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|--|
| 05 | <i>Rebound</i>
by Anne Brosnan | 20 | <i>Fishermen, Seagulls
and a Local</i>
by Maria Parenti |
| 06 | <i>Fidelio</i>
by Julie Vincent | 22 | <i>Girl Down</i>
by Kellie M Cox |
| 07 | <i>My Story My Voice</i>
by Deb Taylor | 24 | <i>Hindsight</i>
by Rosemary Stride |
| 08 | <i>The Interpreter</i>
by Alice Heathwood | 26 | <i>... so loved</i>
by Janie Corcoran |
| 09 | <i>Bitternut</i>
by Ivy Rachel | 28 | <i>Salvation</i>
by Cathryn deVries |
| 10 | <i>Saltwater Currigee
Dreaming.</i>
by Kerry-lee Thomson | 30 | <i>The Final Climb</i>
by Kamni Dahya |
| 12 | <i>The Uniform</i>
by Valerie Miller | 32 | <i>Moving through Life</i>
by Betsy Roberts |
| 14 | <i>An Aberration</i>
by Jane Connolly | 34 | <i>Home</i>
by Jane Smith |
| 16 | <i>Emergence</i>
by Stef Furlong | 35 | <i>My Time</i>
by Tatia Power |
| 18 | <i>The Farewell</i>
by Hong Zhou | | |



Letter from our CEO

My Story, My Voice has been such a special project to be involved in. I have personally been inspired by women and girls, in communities as far afield as Mount Isa and Cairns, stepping up to learn new skills and create positive change in their lives.

For many of the writers included in the anthology, this represents their first publication opportunity. I am so proud that we could provide that for women and girls who might not have ever written before or even thought of themselves as having stories worthy of telling.

As an organisation Queensland Writers Centre is dedicated to supporting and providing resources for a state-wide

writing community. The practice of writing, the development and recognition of writers, the facilitation of writing as a fundamental part of community health and wellbeing, and the nurturing and elevation of the culture of writing, reading and creating in Queensland are at the heart of what we do.

Happy Writing,

Lori-Jay Eliis

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lori-Jay'.



Letter from our Editor

The aim of My Story, My Voice is to help empower women and girls, promote partnerships and networking, and address the unique issues faced by women. As recipients of the Investing in Queensland Women Fund, we have been able to work with women and girls around the state. Listening to their stories, empowering them with the skills and confidence to write their stories down and, for some, publishing those stories here.

Thank you to everyone who submitted stories. The content was sometimes difficult to read, sometimes unexpected and represented a diverse range of women and experiences. Perhaps most surprising was the positivity found at the core of everything we read.

This sense of enthusiasm continued in the workshops which included short acts of writing to encourage new writers. Using the prompt of 'When I'm in Nature', writers wrote short pieces and we have included some of these amongst the stories.

We do hope you enjoy reading the following pieces and take inspiration to write your own story.

Happy Reading,

Sandra Makarez

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'S. Makarez' with a stylized flourish at the end.



Content Warning:

The following stories explore themes which some people may find distressing.

If any of the content in this publication causes you or someone you know distress and you need support - please call the following helplines or visit your local GP

DVConnect Womensline	1800 811 811
DVConnect Mensline	1800 600 636
1800 RESPECT	1800 737 732
Sexual Assault Helpline	1800 010 120

Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) - 131 450 for immediate phone interpreting

Lifeline Australia	13 11 14
Suicide Call Back Service	1300 659 467
Kids Helpline	1800 551 800
MensLine Australia	1300 789 978
Multicultural Connect Line	1300 079 020
1300 MH CALL (1300 64 22 55)	

Rebound

BY ANNE BROSANAN

Three years since I walked out of there. Three years of freedom. Did I really spend all those years in that place? What a waste of time.

I've forged my own way since. Got a job; found myself a place to live; managed my own finances. I dress how I want, not according to someone else's code. I've made new friends, although it took a while.

Have I learned anything?

Well, people tell me I'm really smart, so yes, I guess I have. Not about mathematics or history or science or art, but quite a lot about relationships and what to avoid. Beware of suave fellows with magnetic personalities. Silvertongued devils who make you feel adored. Possessive men with suspicious minds and unwritten rules that change without warning – what you can and can't do, who your friends can be, what you should eat, drink, wear, think. It crept up so gradually, I didn't even notice

it was happening. Just a comment here and there; a sour look; a silence; an argument about something trivial. I was made to understand that my friends weren't right for us now that we were a couple; my family was too demanding of my time; my behaviour was inappropriate. Then a threat of violence, bruises on my arms, a busted lip. The slow daily zapping of my energy and confidence while I grew smaller and smaller, always waiting for the next time. I put up with the emotional battering and the physical damage, but when he squeezed his hands around my neck for the second time, I knew it was time to leave.

I'm with a new fellow now. He moved in with me after we met a few weeks ago. He's no smooth talker, but I love him and he loves me. I just heard his car drive into the garage. There's his key in the lock. I'd better stop scribbling this now. He doesn't like me writing.

"When I'm in nature..."

"I'm at peace. I can start to let go of the deadlines. I'm no longer watching the clock, I can start to breathe deeply again. I can feel my body relax, my shoulders drop, my stomach unknot. I can listen clearly now to the birds, the leaves rustle in the wind. Feel the sun's warmth on my face. I take off my shoes to feel the land, the natural vibrations of the Earth. I am grounded. I close my eyes, I breathe deeply, I am at peace. When I open my eyes I feel higher, happier, relaxed. No demands, no deadlines, just free & at peace."

- Kris



Fidelio

BY JULIE VINCENT

I danced at Stephens Platz to jazz. Then for joy in the rain all the way down the street to the Opera and got cheap standing room only tickets to Beethoven's *Fidelio*, about escape from a dungeon, just like I had done.

I had been married for 17 years and in denial all that time, as I couldn't face what was happening to me. Stuck in a nightmare, paralysed by fear, threats and abuse of every kind and unable to escape. I was caught in a trap and had given up on myself, my self-worth completely gone. Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, they did. That night, the police put me in a refuge. It took someone else acknowledging the situation and providing a safe place, for me to be able to begin to acknowledge it. I knew there was no going back. But I was too scared to fight, fearful my kids and I would not survive, I walked away. No! I was chased. A terrible situation to be in.

Isolated and without support, I struggled to find accommodation and deal with the courts and support my kids and myself. I was unable to accept the offer of a refuge with his threatening voice in my head. Desperate and alone, what had kept me going was the lifeline I'd been thrown. A couple of years before I'd won a scholarship to complete a PhD. It had given me a sense of being believed in, of being valued. It sustained me, kept me alive, without it, I wouldn't've survived.

I had a Kebab in the wind and rain.
Beautiful!

My Story My Voice

BY DEB TAYLOR

I have watched plenty of sunrises to know that darkness does not stay around forever, yet it hasn't always been that way. For years I battled my demons with their destructive thoughts that painted an inaccurate picture of who I was.

I had become bulimic as I purged on the lies that were force-fed to me on a daily basis. My world had no colour and an anaemic hue of confusion painted the backdrop of my days.

My self-worth trodden on by years of abuse, I was being buried alive, fighting for air, longing to be free.

My voice was silenced, yet I could hear her screaming for help.

I often wondered, if walls could talk would mine be crying from the things that they heard?

The screams and yelling, even the plea for him to stop.

I get asked often if I ever saw the red flags. And, to be honest, if I did then I was colour-blind.

There is not a little girl on this earth that would want to lose her adult self in a vortex of abuse, where her life turns into a nightmare and the happy-ever afters don't exist. And it's definitely not what the fairy tales tell us.

My "prince" became my perpetrator, with no way to escape and my best friend was a fermented grape. I self-medicated in the hope it would ease my pain.

I would look at other couples and families and feel less of a person, blaming myself for staying, yet fearful if I left.

I remember the day something changed. I knew if I didn't leave, I would no longer be here to see my children grow. Through a number of events which I perceived as miracles, an opportunity arose for us to go our separate ways. Once I was out, I knew I was never going back.

My story was just about to begin – countless panic attacks, riddled with depression and a nervous system that was headed for a breakdown. I commenced an arduous yet holistic journey towards healing.

It has taken a long time to find my voice and there are still days I feel her shake. However, it's changing from a quiver to a roar.

I watched what domestic violence has done to my children and the guilt I carried almost killed me. I watched how each one as adults had become affected. My heart felt like the foundations of the earth were cracking and nobody could help me.

I'm still on the journey to re-finding myself. I am not sure if that will ever end because each day, I find something new about myself and I like who I am becoming.

Rebuilding my ruins as I learn the art of healing my soul.

Yet the most important thing I have learned is that the miry mess of the past has the potential to become a magnificent message.

The Interpreter

BY ALICE HEATHWOOD

My voice cannot properly be said to be my own. It came to me over oceans, transported, through a certain amount of luck and violence, from a place on the other side of the world. It bears the name of that place on the other side of the world, which is not my home, but which lives in me in the form of my voice. My ancestors came from a different place on the other side of the world, where they spoke in different voices. Voices which, through a certain amount of luck and violence, did not get passed down to me. Voices which I cannot use, and so cannot properly be said to be my own.

Although the voice that I use cannot be properly said to be my own, for many years I had no other. Now, I have a second voice. A voice which, since I did not have it from the first, since it was never spoken over my cradle, cannot properly be said to be my own. However, through a certain amount of luck and effort (and very little violence), I can now use this voice as though it was mine. It is good to have a spare. This new voice has other tones, other possibilities,

another history and a certain, *je ne sais quoi*. It sits on my tongue in a different way, tastes different: more creamy, less salty. With my new voice, I can travel to new places, take different routes.

Now that I have two voices, I sometimes have trouble keeping them separate. They bump up against one another in my pocket, bruising each other's vowels, and pulling on each other's grammar. Now that I have two voices (although neither can properly be said to be my own), I sometimes lend my first voice to someone who wants it. I have to climb into their head to do this and listen very carefully to their voice. It is not always very comfortable, but it is interesting, and the rewards are usually worth it. Fortunately for me, for historical reasons involving a certain amount of luck and a great deal of violence, my voice has power over others. People need it to be heard. So I make a living telling stories that are not my own, in a voice that cannot properly be said to belong to me.

All in all, it is not a bad life.

"When I'm in nature..."

"I like to go out to the lake, to see what I can see. The birds, the trees, the water is what impresses me. Sometimes it is the sounds I like. Sometimes it is the colour that calms me down. But I always come home refreshed. Thank you for the break from town. Nature is a sedative, a medicine and balm. It heals my soul and charges me when I need some calm."

- Veronica

Bitternut

BY IVY RACHEL

For someone who was definitely part-Asian, my dad spent very little time at Asian stores. The only time I'd catch him walking the skinny twisting aisles was when he ducked inside for five minutes on the way to my Oma's house.

He brought me along, telling me to root around amongst the dried vegetables for something called "bitternut". Unsurprisingly, it came in chip form.

"Bitternut" chips come from melinjo nuts, which hang in grape-like bunches from the gnetum genum tree, natively grown somewhere deep in the jungles of South-East Asia. My dad bought bitternut in its raw form, but didn't plan to eat it that way. He explained to me that these bags of bitternut were "for" my Oma.

Later, I learned that it wasn't a gift so much as a supply chain. When we drove back from Oma's house, we'd be laden with bags and bags of *emping* – which I learned quickly was a delicious, salty, bitter, deep-fried snack.

Emping puffs up like a pappadum, but it's much less ephemeral in nature and much more satisfying – much more addictive. One bite, you'd taste nothing but oily bitterness and teeth-shattering cardboard. The next, you'd crunch on puffy bliss and assault your palette with a hidden landmine of salt.

Then you'd take another bite, ravenous and ready for another round.

Oma packaged the *emping* in thin, single-use produce bags – so when someone popped one open on the ride home, there was no going back. The chips made such a pungent smell, we quickly blamed our dad for having... passed wind. *Emping* was delightful, but it left a bad smell, and a bitter aftertaste.

At that age, I didn't see what went on in my Oma's hot-oven of a kitchen. I didn't see her spindly arthritis-ridden fingers grabbing at pieces of bitternut as they popped and writhed in a vat of oil. I wasn't allowed inside, so I didn't see the long wooden implements she used for manipulating hundreds and hundreds of *emping* onto endless sheets of paper towel, or all the corners she missed that gave me my treacherous cardboard bits. In that sweltering room, it was impossible to make them perfect. But she tried.

As far as I remember, my mum almost never made *emping* herself. The few times she did, my dad would scold her, call her irresponsible. What was she thinking? She could have burned her fingers or dropped oil on her skirt. And with children around? Kim. *Please*.

As my Oma got older, the *emping* got less perfect – sometimes she forgot about the salt altogether, or burned the edges. As my dad got older, the *emping* got hidden away – too much of a guilty pleasure, too pungent. But still, my Oma made them for her son.

We've inherited a few recipes from our Oma, but part of me knows that the exact method for making *emping* won't be among them.

But perhaps losing the memory, that bitter taste, won't be all that bad.

"When I'm in nature..."

"When I am in nature I sit & listen. I listen to the birds chirping & talking to each other. I sit and listen to the wind blowing in the trees. The song they are singing and the rubbing of branch against branch. The clicking of the cricket's leg & show movement of the dung beetle moving across the ground. And I take a breathe slowly in and out and wait for my ancestors to tell me their story of this land."

- Lynette

Saltwater Currigee Dreaming.

BY KERRY-LEE THOMSON

This story contains names of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have passed over into our dreaming; this may cause distress to our First Nations readers. I acknowledge and pay my respects to Ancestors, Elders and their descendants past, present and emerging; our future generations of tomorrow's children. I'm thankful to Kombumerri Saltwater People of the Gold Coast. This is my love letter to you Nana Lil'. 'For Our Elders' with their blessings...

The rising sun breathes light across eastern sky country as the Ancestors traverse Nerang River's freshwaters. For millennia the oceans journey is constantly welcoming and replenishing saltwater sea country of the Broadwater and Moreton Bay. I'm a proud saltwater woman. Saltwater runs through my veins. This is my sacred space... my belonging. I was lovingly adopted and grew up on the Goldy. This is not my country... this is my home and spiritual place of deep connection for 53 years.

At 32 I was born again after discovering my beautiful birth mother gave me my first name 'Anita Gayle Savage' my skin name. I'm a proud Idinji and Yadhagana woman from far north Queensland and eastern Cape York. I'm equally proud of my Meriam Mer (Murray Island) belonging to the eastern Torres Straits.

I stand upon this ancient sacred land in reflection. My big feet deeply planted beneath warm comforting sand of my childhood. Evoking memory and time long ago... I look across the turquoise ocean from Moondarewa* (The Spit, Main Beach) my belonging and heart's place. This sacred sea country is where my beautiful adopted mother's ashes were lovingly scattered alongside hundreds of floating frangipani flowers that drift in the ocean's currents forevermore. I'm writing names of loved ones who are no longer with us in the golden sands of Kombumerri Saltwater People and Ngarang-Wal (Nerang River) Freshwater People. My children's great-grandmother Lil' Levinge (nee Bostock) lived to be 103 years young.

With love, respect, warmth and affection Nana Lil' was known as G-G and our gorgeous 'Diamond Lil' who spent at least half a century of demanding backbreaking work, many

arduous long days raking and harvesting the ‘Levinge Oyster Banks’ from the K’Gari Coast in the Great Sandy Strait south to her beautiful Island home of Currigee, South Stradbroke Island.

Wild oyster gather nearby embed themselves comfortably on submerged rocks inhabiting crevices that seem impossible for many other little creatures. These succulent darlings of the sea cling to one another, holding fast beside each other with vise-like grip as they filter the murky waters. I remember many yesterdays listening to Elders and holding space for story. I immerse my spirit receiving abundant energy from the river’s tidal movements travelling along northeastern currents; glistening freshwater merges as it’s being greeted by the bittersweet saltiness of the Broadwater and Moreton Bay.

Wild oysters have been here for millennia straight from the salty waters that marinate them so beautifully. There are ‘kitchen sites’ of ancient oyster shells tens of thousands of years old throughout the Gold Coast and Moreton Bay. My children’s Ancestors and Elders were saltwater and freshwater hunters and gatherers. They were beautiful Fisher Peoples in the 19th and well into the 20th century when the ‘Moreton Bay Oyster Company’ was in its prime and flourishing... ‘They were the days of wooden ships and iron men’. (Uncle Paul Tripcony, born 1901 on Moongalba)

Resources:

History Life and Times of Robert Anderson Gheebelum, Ngugi, Community and personal history of a Ngugi Elder of Mulgumpin in Quandamooka, South East Queensland, Australia. p. 251, TIMES: OYSTER PRODUCTION, Robert V. Anderson 2001.

*Moondarewa’s Kombumerri meaning of place of mosquitoes.



The Uniform

BY VALERIE MILLER

The sultry breeze swirled in, bringing some relief. A kookaburra's laugh cut through the muted chatter drifting in from the veranda. A second one joined in. Their chuckles and hoots announcing the coming storm.

In her cotton petticoat, Grace moved towards the open window and peeked around the lace curtain. There was no sign of the bruised clouds that would bring in the late summer storm. A welcome relief all of Brisbane relished after persistent steamy hot days. For now, the sky ignored the warning and stretched blue above New Farm.

Grace lifted her face up and took in the sweet perfume of frangipani. The velvety vanilla aroma tickled her senses and memories flooded in of her carefree childhood. Running barefoot in the backyard and eating watermelon, the juice dripping down her chin and making her hands sticky.

A gentle knock startled her.

'What's keeping you, Gracie?'

She cracked her bedroom door open. 'I'll be out in a bit.'

Her mum's eyes glistened. 'Dad's got the camera ready. He's so proud of you, pet.'

Grace waited until she disappeared down the hallway and closed the door. She walked over to her wardrobe and took out the uniform and hung it up. Butterflies tumbled and tripped inside her stomach. Her hand ran over the navy-blue woollen fabric. She fingered the black metal buttons, outlining the Imperial crown sitting above an eagle taking flight. This was happening, her own wings of freedom opened; braced, ready for take-off.

She had done it.

Her new adventure was beginning.

It had been hard leaving her position at Barry and Jones. She loved her department store position and had carried her nerves twisted tight in a bundle, knowing she would have to tell Mr Barry she was leaving. To do her bit for the war.

The worry had all been unnecessary.

'A noble decision,' he said, shaking her hand. 'You're my best girl. The customers will miss you. We all will.' A twinge twisted in the centre of her chest when he nodded his head and pressed his lips together.

After hugging the other girls goodbye, promising she would drop in, she stepped back out onto Queen Street and swept away a tear. Her time at Barry's had taught her valuable skills.

Laughter erupted outside, pulling her back to the WAAAF uniform. They were all waiting for her to make an entrance. This would be the first time she would put on the complete outfit.

Taking the white shirt off the hanger, she slipped it on. The cotton sat cool and crisp against her skin. Lacing the navy tie between her fingers, she muttered the steps as Audrey showed her.

'Cross wide over thin. Tuck under. Cross back. Lift. Tuck in and pull down.'

She studied her attempt. A little sloppy. The narrow bit hanging past the triangle. The jacket would hide the mess for now, she thought. She slipped on the A-line navy woollen skirt, fumbling a little as she did up the four hooks on the side. She adjusted the buckle and strap to fit her slim waist. Exhilaration ran up her spine and all her



nerve endings buzzed as she lifted the jacket off the wardrobe door.

Standing in front of the mirror, the old Grace no longer existed. Lifting the cap off the dresser, she positioned it onto her head. Adjusting it as the other girls did. She laughed and saluted herself. 'Hello Aircraftwoman Little.'

Walking around the room, the uniform felt snug. Important. A little hot to be wearing wool in summer, but she thought of all those boys overseas who were experiencing much worse.

She took another turn at the mirror.

Moving towards the door, ready to parade in front of her family, she stopped.

One more time. Grace picked up the letter on the nightstand. Her orders. Renewed excitement soared up inside her chest. On

Monday, the instructions were to report to Ascot. She would be working at Central Intelligence Bureau Headquarters. It was all hush-hush. Luckily, she had Audrey, who was also posted there.

Grace stepped through the open french doors onto the veranda. The conversation halted. A blue-winged butterfly flittered past her and meandered through the ivory frangipani. The promised storm clouds were rolling in. Those kookaburras were spot on.

She turned back to her family. They all sat there. Staring.

Swallowing, she waited.

Her father stood and saluted.

Grace's heart burst when all her family, following his lead, stood and saluted her.



An Aberration

BY JANE CONNOLLY

Last week I spent six days with breast cancer.

Journey seems to be the word in common parlance when describing such an experience but in my mind journey suggests travel, something keenly anticipated and planned. I usually travel for longer than six days and do so for enjoyment, curiosity, education, or all three. My six day breast cancer journey failed on all but one of those counts and was more travail than travel so I will refer to it, not as the clichéd journey, but as whirlwind.

Because of a family history for more than twenty five years, on an annual basis, I present myself to a breast cancer clinic staffed exclusively by women. Here I place myself in the hands of skilled radiographers whose very hands (usually cold) in turn place my breasts, one at a time, between two plates before compressing them and asking me to hold my breath. The experience is repeated from a number of angles and on both breasts. Such is mammography, a mammogram. Radiologists review the images that are taken and my annual visit usually concludes with a physical examination by a breast care nurse.

Last week, the routine varied. Breasts were compressed, pictures were taken and then the process was repeated – three times. An ultrasound was performed on an offending mammary and a core biopsy involving injections and a tissue collection device followed. Apparently, I was very brave during the process. Evening passed and morning came, the first day.

On the second day of this whirlwind experience I stayed close to the phone as biopsy results were promised. Late in the day the promised call came with the news I expected but didn't particularly want to hear. I was to see a breast surgeon the following day to discuss a way forward, not because of any urgency, but in the words of my GP, so that I didn't worry over the weekend.

Evening passed and morning came and on the third day I visited said surgeon, took in as much information as possible and prepared for surgery on the following Monday. Days four and five were filled with activity unrelated to the whirlwind swirling around me and on day six I presented myself as instructed for the removal of the offending tissue in my left breast and the subsequent calming of the storm.

By the seventh day, the cancer diagnosed six days earlier was dispensed with. I had time to reflect. What dominated my thoughts was not the rapidity of the diagnosis and surgical treatment or what might lie ahead. Rather I reflected on the women who had gathered around to give me strength, those known for many years and those encountered over six days. I felt both humbled and buoyed by the love, support and kindness of family, friends, and bit players in this particular drama whose roles however small were significant. I think of radiographer number 1 who sought me out after my biopsy to wish me well and of the young woman who delivered my breakfast tray in hospital and seemed genuinely excited that I was going home. I think of friends who thought of me, prayed for me, sent messages, made phone calls, and sent flowers. I think of my wonderful GP expediting an early appointment, of a skilled surgeon and anaesthetist, of those who patted an arm in solidarity and laughed with me. I think of my family who fill my heart with joy and know just what is required. These are the voices that sustain.

I choose to believe that this particular chapter of my story, while a significant part of the whole, is now over, an aberration in time, a whirlwind that has passed. And so, on this seventh day I am rested and inspired to plan a real journey for a few months hence.

"When I'm in nature..."

"When I'm in nature it connects me to my inner self. When constantly worrying about tests, work or home, I find myself indulging in the feel of calmness and trying to feel the aromas of the subtle trees that surround me. It helps give me a positive rush to just feel at ease and to not worry about big issues in the world or my future. Being in nature just feels so overwhelming good, I just get so addicted to it. It's almost like meditating but just so much better! I love nature as it begins to nourish me inside and out. I'm so grateful for the constant grounding that nature gives out to me, it makes me feel so good. Being in nature just is a feeling many couldn't describe in little words."

- Anonymous

"When I'm in nature..."

"The freedom surrounds me. Like the warmth of a campfire on a chilly night. Like the rush of wind and exhilarating crash of waves at the beach. Like the damp green moss of all shades, covering every surface of a rainforest. I'm at home here, surrounded by nature. Every organism is my friend. I never want to leave."

- Anonymous

Emergence

BY STEF FURLONG

There was no mistaking the vicious intent of those aggressive footsteps, growing louder and more menacing, the closer he got to my bedroom door. One second passed; then another. I waited; eyes squeezed shut, body tensed, bracing for his explosive tirade. It was not going to end well I knew for sure, but this time I was more prepared. Crawling back inside my mind, trying to recall the triggering moment that ignited this fiery rage, my vulnerability was fully exposed. But I couldn't remember, and it probably would not have mattered anyway. A mountain of soft pillows cocooned me, suffocating my heartbeat.

Without warning, my locked door sprang open, shattering the stained-glass panel that I had so lovingly created for my sanctuary. Shards of blood red glass stabbed the polished timber floorboards in frenzied patterns. He lunged at me. Two fingers rigid like Satan's fork, prodded the air, centimetres from my eyes. His pupils were dilated, his eyes black with anger, his voice shrill; spit mixed with vitriolic words. Like a rabid dog, he began his attack. Interjecting meekly, agreeing submissively where I dared, silence swelled in the pauses. The ranting continued, firing like a semi-automatic rifle, as he spewed forth accusation after accusation, fabricated in his own mind; ideas of no substance; fanciful notions with no basis. Paralysed with fear, I sank back into oblivion, closing my eyes to weather his dark, destructive storm.

"I'm going to kill you, you fucking bitch...you're a worthless piece of sh...." The words trailed off, ricocheting in my head. Time stopped and once more I waited, as the blood in my veins iced over. My decision was made. This moment right now was when I must leave. There was no stopping me this time. Seven long years of excuses, explanations, worry and reasoning was compressed into these five, frantic minutes. Although frozen in fear, I had remembered to hit the record button on my phone, and I was ecstatic that the pillows had not muffled his voice. This might just be the evidence I would need, but I was even more relieved that he hadn't heard it.

There was only a brief window of time to make my hasty escape. Strategic, quick thinking was imperative and for someone who was a diligent planner, this was a challenge. Hearing the car rev up, screech out onto the road and speed away, I knew where he was going. He would return from the bottle shop, a kilometre down the road, an expensive bottle of wine in hand to share with me, as if nothing had happened, a predictable pattern. It would not work this time. I could never erase those chilling words and I needed to move now, before it was too late.

“Right! I blurted out loud, as if to scare away the demonic spirits. “Move it!” Spinning in giddy whirled, I threw a few essentials into my backpack. Slung over my shoulder, I ran down the stairs, two steps at a time, then out onto the street. It was eerily silent. Scanning in both directions, I could not see the car and although my legs were quivering, I had to push through. Zigzagging across the road, I did not slow down but disappeared down a shortcut, lined with stately melaleucas. I stopped for the briefest moment to draw breath, the breeze cooling my confusion. The dappled shade moved and shifted, playing tricks on my mind and for a moment I thought my time was finally up. The crunch of the leaf litter underfoot was familiar and comforting, but I was still too close to home. At the small tidal creek, under the footbridge, I caught sight of a beautiful white heron, its snakelike head poised to spear its unwary prey. I shuddered, goose bumps rising on the back of my neck.

Taking a deep breath, I continued walking then jogging until I felt I was invisible enough to stop in the deepening shadows of early nightfall. There I would rest, nestled in the buttress roots of a Moreton Bay fig tree, until the emergence of a fresh, new day, a new and uncertain beginning. My seven score years and ten had never prepared me for this tricky escape, but here I was safe for now. That was all that mattered.





The Farewell

BY HONG ZHOU

This fourth-floor corner office of Faculty of Engineering has a picturesque northeast aspect of a garden town in Queensland. In the distance, foggy grey mountain ranges nonchalantly overlook the dotted buildings and moving vehicles. In a park beside the building, leafy canopies in shades of green reach closer to the window. Their light-skinned trunks stand strong and proud. The sky is the limit.

On the windowsill, a kookaburra sunbathes, looking curiously into the window. The office looks different. On the carpet are boxes mingled with piles of books and papers. The rows of shelves, once full of books, are now almost empty.

Indeed, today is Mei's last day on campus. Heavy-hearted, she walks quietly into her office of nearly twenty years, full of memories, happy and sad. Her career is ending abruptly at a time when she just celebrated her 50th birthday and has never felt more experienced, confident and capable.

"You did not consult me before resigning. Not at all." Her father's stern voice echoes in her mind. "How many years of education and training? And how much knowledge and skill have you accumulated? What a waste!"

Mei shoves thick textbooks - Software Engineering, Computer Systems, and Computer Communications - into a box. These are courses she designed from scratch and built up over the years. She asks herself, "What did I throw away? Why did I give up?"

Sinking into an office chair, Mei picks up a photo in a silver frame from her

“When I’m in nature...”

“The sun was shining. The waves were crashing. The beach was white and soft. There was no one in sight when I went down to the edge of the water. I slipped my toes in the water, the water was warm. I thought about how wonderful life was to live in such a beautiful place. It was then I noticed the group of men coming up the beach there was at least 5 of them. My heart beat faster like I knew something bad was about to happen.”

- Jane

desk. Her fingers caress the radiant young face, a photo taken at her PhD graduation ceremony, one of those moments she treasures. Well regarded internationally as an emerging research star, her dream was to become a full professor, exploring cutting edge technologies, planting dreams as her professors did, training young engineers to design and build a better world. Months before her graduation, she quietly accepted an offer from this regional Queensland university.

“It’s not a research university,” her supervisor warned her.

“I’ll make a difference”, determined, she brushed away his concern.

“How naïve was I?” Mei laughs bitterly. Before changing the world, she has to change.

Over the years, she applied for prestigious national research grants, but she was always passed over. Meanwhile, she was allocated heavy teaching workload. Without adequate funding and time, her publications dried up over the years. She realized too late that the system simply would not work for her nor her colleagues in similar situations.

“It’s destiny. Not all dreams should come true.” She comforts herself as she

wipes her tears and pulls a string of long, dark hair behind her ear. Another photo catches her attention, her face lightens up immediately. With cheeky grins, four teenage girls, all from different social and ethnic backgrounds, are holding a gold trophy cup at a science and engineering challenge event, an annual program Mei initiated years ago and has been instrumental ever since for potential future female scientists and engineers.

“Go, my brave girls, stand up for yourselves,” murmurs Mei. ‘Everyone has a fair go’ is an ideal she left her homeland for and still has faith in this land.

Following a gentle knock, Annie, the school secretary, appears at the door, “Love, are you ready?”

“Oops. Time flies.” Mei chuckles with Annie as they go to the kitchen hall, which is decorated with a large horizontal banner and some colourful balloons. Its long kitchen table is full of delicious finger food and desserts. Her colleagues across the campus crowd into the normally spacious common room.

“...It’s time for me to hop off, and hop on a new journey, a new adventure...” Finally, holding back her tears, Mei hugs farewell to the people she loves, once and for all.



Fishermen, Seagulls and a Local

BY MARIA PARENTI

Like the fisherman I sit and wait.

Unlike the fisherman I don't bait my hook.

I procrastinate over putting myself out there, being vulnerable. So many times, I've waited.

Waited.

Waited.

What feels like years, months, weeks.

And... waited...

...to do nothing about realising my dreams. It's like they're marinating in some atmospheric herbs and spices. Slowly simmering, par boiled.

My mind squawks like the seagulls. Vying for attention, so many thoughts and indecisions.

Like the seagull, I sit by the water. However, the seagull scans the water's edge thirsting for a tasty morsel, while I simply sit.

He wades ankle deep into the swirly, salty water. And when caught in deep water, he simply scurries back up the sand bank – wary but unharmed. I simply sit.

Then the seagull marches – left, right, lifting each foot deliberately. He struts along that waterline like a heat seeking missile determined to taste success. His pointy beak flickers from side-to-side as the sun tries to break through the horizon's thick, low cloud-mass giving him a glint of what lays below. I still sit.

It's still overcast. The day untouched by the full morning rays. The breeze still chilly

sweeps across the icy sea surface. Then a little black spec distracts me. I observe it squished between two fingers. Then another bites me. Time to depart.

I turn my bike around over the white, plastic interlocking hexagonal beach path. To my left, across the inlet, a row of ten fishing rods has sprung up embedded along its sandy bank. Seafaring fishermen, women and children are setting up their fishing expedition. Positioned strategically are decks chairs, buckets, bait, and a faithful dog. I pedal leaving them behind.

I ride quietly. My helmet firmly in place. The bike lights flicker. Finger poised at the bike bell. In the distance, people are walking as neighbours meet and greet, friends engage, passers-by nod, others keenly eye their watch.

The sun still struggles to rise above the thick darkening clouds. Ahead, a shaded green bench seat beckons. I sit before I lose the words I want to write. I swipe away the big plops of overnight rain and wipe them on my pants.

As I write, the sun finally breaks through. Its heat reminds me not to stay long but enough to get those words down, and scratch at an itchy red welt.

Once back on my bike, the sun is less fierce and the breeze much cooler as it swirls over, around and under the overhanging trees to the right. As I ride along an uneven section, I swerve away from protruding branches to the left. Ringing my bell, I smile and say good morning to some wary walkers.

All is quiet for the shortest moment. Cars, birds, voices, all fade into the background. I realise what I need to do.

The sun overrides my thoughts, reminding me I need sunscreen and bike helmets are not sun protective. I don't want anything cut off my face, so I ride home – pronto.

As I eat my breakfast, I mull over what I should do instead of worrying about my feelings or fearing public opinion. Or of no media wanting more information on a local competing at the World Transplant Games (WTG23), in Perth. Or, I could sit and wait.

F*ck it. I finally decide to put together those WTG23 press releases to promote 'donors save lives'. I decide to add photos wearing my Opening Ceremony uniform. Plus, three photos training in javelin, lawn bowls and petanque boule. Plus, a couple of 10sec video clips in action during coaching sessions.

As I focus, threads of doubt stain my thoughts. 'It's not about me!' I state out loud. 'Some friends made that very clear, so stop bugging me!'

'Promoting going to the Game is about promoting #DonorsSaveLives' NOT you.' 'Yes, that's true,' I said.

'Yours is lived experience. People look up to that.'

'Yes, that's true,' I said.

'You, putting yourself out there could save other people's lives.'

'Yes, that's true,' I said. I'm wavering, wary, and so want to be brave like that seagull. I've trained long and hard to represent my Country. My long-standing social friends and family have been right behind me.

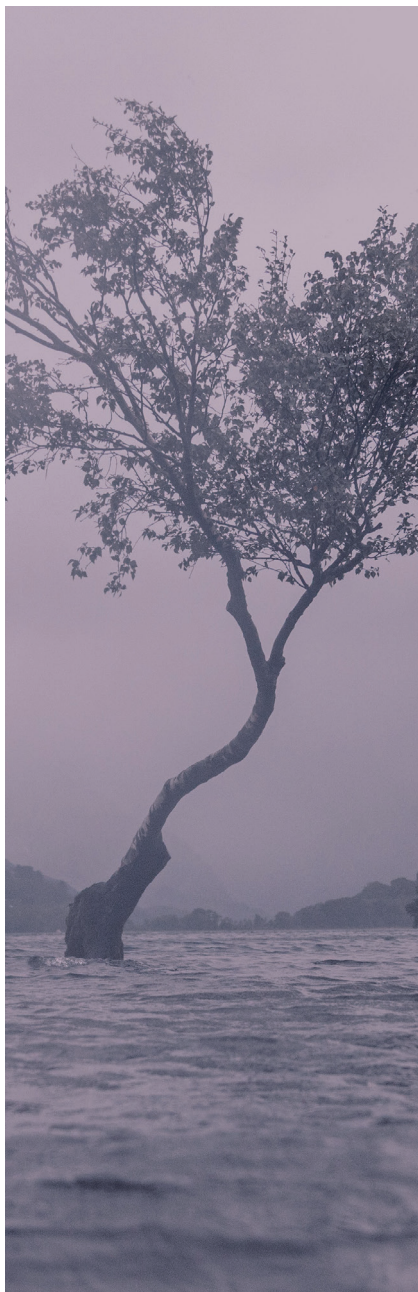
'It could save someone you know.'

'Yes,' I said nodding.

'It could save a loved one.'

'Yes,' I said.

'Remember. Someone's loved one saved you.' I pressed send.



Girl Down

BY KELLIE M COX

My finger hovers over the blue arrow that will forward the two-words immediately transforming them from text message into urgent call to action.

Girl down. The message simply reads. No other words of explanation are required for such an occasion. I stand looking out of the sleepy streets of my neighbourhood, the area my children and I have called home for over a decade already. It is quiet out. No signs of the families that would normally be waving and shouting words of greetings from their fence lines. The phone vibrates in my hand, it is still on silent after my long shift. The busiest day the drop-in centre has ever seen. I won't hesitate to answer for I have elicited the call for help.

'I'm jumping in the car, are you at home? What should I bring?' Alicia is the big picture thinker of the group. The one who will rally the troops. The connector, the person with the knowledge and know how to make things happen.

'Just you, yes, come to the house.'

'Who do you need there first?'

The generosity of my friends is beyond words, and I feel for a moment selfish in my use of the desperate call sign that is rarely if ever used between us.

'Actually, stop. It's ok. I think I just panicked. Don't come. I'll talk to you later.'

'I'm on my way. What's happened? Can you speak now?' Alicia continues with the barrage of questions I am unable to answer.

I breathe out, there is no stopping her now, begging her not to come would be useless. The phone vibrates with another incoming call. It is Kristen. I place Alicia on

"When I'm in nature..."

"Somewhere in a darkened wood, bleak, black. A glass cathedral begins to break every crack, a story, an escape slowly, silently, surely. The fluttering of fragile wings. The beginning of a woken dream. The end of a half-lived life."

- Joanna

hold and attend to the next caller.

'Are you ok?' Kristen is straight to the point, searching for the details of the problem she will no doubt be able to fix. The bigger the problem, the bigger Kristen's personality becomes. She is ferocious in her determination. Unlike anyone I have ever met.

I don't answer straight away. Articulation is beyond me. 'I'm ok,' I finally reply. The initial shock has set in and frozen me in place. Words that should form with ease are lost in a sea of haze that is my mind.

'I'll be there soon. On my way,' Kristen adds.

'I must get back to Alicia.'

'Who was that?' Alicia asks as I return to her call.

'Kristen.'

'Ok, I'll beat her there. Want to stay on the phone?'

'You just concentrate on driving on these wet roads.'

I end the call to read the text message from the final member of our group of chosen sisters. It is Holly. She asks what she needs to bring. She is the practical one. The woman who will watch a YouTube clip and next minute have learnt how to renovate a kitchen. She will have the tools and resources in place to address any disaster and if she doesn't, she will likely hand craft the instrument required.

I reply with a quick response unsure of what would be most necessary for the disaster in front of me. In reality, the only thing I need is my group of women. Once they get here, we will sort it out. They will make everything better again.

The rain starts up once more. A short reprieve in the weather allowed me to drive as close as I could to my street to see my home under water. The heavens will now open again to aid the rising flood waters from the swollen river blocks away. It was never meant to reach this far inland. Never has our neighbourhood gone under, not in the great floods of 1974 nor since. But here it is, the murky waters of the Brisbane River spewed over entire suburbs, engulfing my little home.

The dark brown muddy waters have reached my gutters and they will continue to rise for as long as the rain falls. I waited too long to get home. I should have left work earlier. Everything I own is in that house submerged under rising tide waters. The rain pours down drenching me, but I feel nothing until a hand gently touches my shoulder. I turn around to see Alicia, tears welling in her eyes. She is trying to remain strong and after a moment of initial shock she will leap into action.

Girl down was all I needed to text, and my cavalry of strong amazing women have arrived.



Hindsight

BY ROSEMARY STRIDE

The tarmac steamed. The baby squirmed on my left hip. The toddler fought to extricate her hand from my grip. And screamed. I struggled towards the terminal, desperate to escape the searing January sun. Terminal did I say? Hardly. A World War Two hangar.

And the enormity of what we'd done finally hit me. Regret tastes bitter. Harassed, and suddenly homesick, my response to the customs officer was sour. Yes, I had some powdered milk — hardly surprising with a six-month-old baby. Nappies too if he was interested? Used ones. His face had 'whingeing pom' written all over it. Or so I thought. Poor man, I did him a disservice. A lopsided smile parted his grey moustache and bushy beard as he took my cabin bag, ushered me out of the queue and found a place for me to sit — with a fan! — while my husband completed immigration formalities. The latter emerged somewhat later, enthused — so exciting, a new beginning, more money, better lifestyle, new faces, new places — all the reasons we'd rehearsed. Numb with exhaustion, I didn't respond.

We were met by our sponsor, an eccentric gentleman clad in baggy, knee-length shorts who, I was assured, was an old friend of my in-laws. He bundled us into his vehicle — no such things as child restraints then — and headed off to Brisbane's western suburbs. I was past caring where we were going. I just wanted to stop. And sleep. All the car windows were wound down, but the rush of air was so hot it made little difference. I stuck to the vinyl seat and the baby stuck to me. The toddler whimpered and sucked her thumb. My enduring memory of that first drive is of the grass at the ragged edges of the road where a kerb should

have been; sharp, impudent spikes thrusting through fissures in the sticky asphalt. In hindsight, it was my first inkling that in Australia the natural world would never be far away; unlike the long-domesticated landscapes of my childhood it had yet to be tamed.

We finally arrived at a house quite different from anything I'd seen before. An upside-down house. Antipodean. The living areas were up a flight of stairs — external stairs, unprotected from the elements which struck me as foolish — the concrete slab that constituted the ground floor had space for a car, laundry tubs and storage but the walls were just timber slats.

After two days in transit I was desperate for a shower. Turned out that meant sharing the facilities with a huntsman spider the size of a saucer, complete with her distended egg sac which looked ready to discharge its cargo. Terrified of spiders all my life, I was paralysed for several seconds. But when I asked for insect spray our host shook his head, telling me I couldn't kill it — spiders kept down the cockroaches! Some minutes later, with considerable trepidation, I finally turned on the taps, keeping my glasses on to observe the creature's every move.

When offered a stiff gin and tonic I accepted with alacrity.

What happened after that I don't know. How I got to bed, how the children were bathed, fed and put to sleep I have no idea. Many hours later, woken by demented cackling, I sat bolt upright and yelled, "What the bloody hell is that!"

My life changed that day. For the better, despite my first impressions. But would I do it again if I could put the clock back? Would I choose to be a 'ten-pound pom'? Hard to say. If I'd known the plane would be delayed at Heathrow until three in the morning, necessitating an extra fuel stop, or that we would be sitting across the aisle from a Scottish couple with six-month-old twin boys to add to the chaos caused by our girls, probably not. If I'd been less afflicted by the arrogance of youth that devalues the importance of family support, or more sensitive to the impact of our decision on parents and grandparents, probably not.

But hindsight is useless. It changes nothing. I've lived most of my life in Queensland now. There have been many trips back to England, some happy, some desperately sad. In the early years these visits induced schizophrenia — where, exactly, did I belong? Now, however, even if the English weather has been unexpectedly balmy, the countryside lush and the history fascinating, I board the plane for Brisbane with a sense of relief. I'm on my way home.

"When I'm in nature..."

"Eloise listened to the gentle sway of the leaves as the wind caressed softly over the tree tops and through the greenery around her.

The running water trickled and swirled as it drifted down stream, allowing her to feel the peace and tranquillity she so desperately needed in her life. Laying backwards into the long bouncy grass, Eloise took in a deep breath and closed her eyes, falling into a deep dream of comfort."

- Pia

... so loved

BY JANIE CORCORAN

I have a Pegasus horse tattoo on my stomach.

She's been with me since I was 17.

Her name is Peggy, and I love her.

Peggy is coloured in shades of faded pastel and has a crescent moon above her head, which looks more like a floating hat.

If my life is just a story, as all our lives inevitably are - then my body is the book that holds it. And this obscure mythical creature is front and left centre on the cover.

This story is about love and words and the stories we wear on our hearts and skin. Like many others, I seem to have been born with a shadow...I don't remember when it arrived, it's just always been there, like an older sibling. A really unpleasant one.

At 17, it broke me.

Exhausted from the fight, I dropped out of school and let myself plummet from the tightrope of being 'ok' I'd managed to stay upright on, albeit precariously. And that's when I got Peggy.

The Pegasus horse represents poetic inspiration and freedom. By letting go and letting myself fall to the very bottom - I found both.

Way leads onto way (as it does) and years later, I found myself studying to be a teacher. I promised Peggy we would try to help students with their inherent darkness - their shadows and shattered hearts. We would see them in a way I had never felt seen.

I don't remember how the topic of tattoos came up when I was teaching my Year 11 Drama class that day, or even if it did. A girl called Jasmine was in this particular Year 11 Drama class. As I described Peggy



and told the story behind her magnificent hideousness, Jasmine beamed. She thought Peggy 'slayed'.

At 16, Jasmine stood above her peers - literally, but also metaphorically. She was one of those students whose intellect and integrity remind you that you are, in fact, surrounded by old souls.

She was a vegetarian; she shaved her head for cancer research and she never, ever walked out of the classroom without making eye contact and saying 'thanks so much, Miss.' It surprised nobody when she

“When I’m in nature...”

“When the wind howls, and the rivers gurgle, I know I am home.
When I see the trees stand lone and tall and hear the magpies
melody, I know I home. Home in nature. When the sun is west and
slowly falling, I tell myself; “I will stop loving my home when the stars
fall and all the rivers run dry.”

-Evie

won the role of school captaincy in her final year.

But Jasmine had a secret; a wound she tried so desperately to suffocate with love and jokes and terrible dancing. But you could still see it, if you looked for long enough.

I never knew how to reach her, how to help. Sometimes teenagers run to you with their pain spilling out of them in every direction. They plead for help. It’s not a conscious choice for them – their reaching out is as urgent as their next breath. Other times they run.

I could never, ever catch Jasmine. ‘Hey Jasmine. You alright, love?’ I’d ask quietly. Tentatively... so as to not scare her away.

‘I’m fine, thanks Miss,’ she’d reply. Head lowered. Heart heavy.

I’d watch her go - hollow in my uselessness.

When she turned 18, I wrote her a letter. I told her I saw a young woman whose heart has made this world a better place. That her talents, brain, humour and love are a gift. I told her I saw her broken heart. I saw her. I ended her letter with ‘and know today and always that you are very loved.’

I never really talked to her about the letter. She quietly thanked me after she had read it. But that was it. It’s never like it is in the movies – the whole teacher/student moment where the teacher knows they’ve

done the right thing. Said the right thing. Made a difference. You just have to throw your love out there and hope it lands.

When Jasmine did her graduation speech in a hall filled with 1200 people; sweating and slapping mozzies at dusk in December – she shared her story. She spoke of the deep sadness that plagued her every single day. Sometimes she didn’t know if she would make it through. Sometimes she didn’t want to.

I sat right up the very back of the hall in the pitch black. I let tears fall from my eyes to my chin to my dress. My throat burned, my nose ran, and I made no attempt to clean any of it up.

I had completely failed her.

Months later, I was sitting on the couch with my husband, mindlessly scrolling through my phone when I saw I’d been tagged in an Instagram story, by Jasmine.

It was a picture of her leg, with my handwriting on it. It was a tattoo. It said:

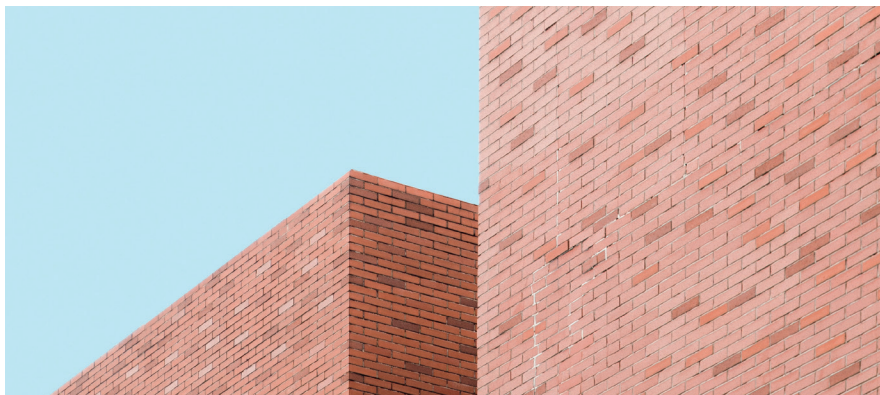
‘and just know that today and every day, you are very loved’.

The story was captioned with ‘it may not be a flying Pegasus @myname, but it’ll do.’

With my eyes closed, I let time stop. With one hand on my heart and the other on Peggy, I let my tears fall again.

My love had landed.

Yep... it’ll do.



Salvation

BY CATHRYN DEVRIES

How was I going to face this day?

The red-brick entrance got closer and closer as I walked towards it—alone—my insides cinching tighter with every step. If I had been the type to skip school, I probably would have. But I wasn't. And that was one of the reasons I was alone. I hesitated. Walking from the train to school hadn't been that big a deal, but what would I do when I got inside? How could I possibly avoid looking like a total loser between now and the first class?

Library?

Maybe. It was an option. But could I spend every morning and lunchtime there? No. Everyone already thought I was a nerd, I didn't want the utter humiliation of being a loser-nerd as well.

I put my bag in the locker room and went to the bubblers for a drink. A normal thing to do, nothing that would stand out. Nothing that would mark me as a reject. And it used up a bit of time. Toilets. That would use up some time too.

Down the stairs; up the stairs. Now where? I needed to look like I had some place to go. I walked purposefully along the paths, turning my head every now and again to give the impression I was looking for someone, weaving around buildings to make the trip to the other end of the school last as long as it possibly could.

I wouldn't cry. Though a great leaden lump burned hot where my heart was, I would not cry.

This had happened before. Too many times. And every time, it hurt.

"We just don't think you fit in with us."

"Oh, ok."

That was all I'd said, 'oh, ok'. There was no point arguing with them and begging to stay

part of the group would have just lowered my worth in my own eyes to below ground level. And they were probably right. I didn't fit in. Not really. I could pretend for a while: sit on the edges, not say much, laugh at the right times. But I was too smart—and too moral. A very uncool combination since I was neither pretty, nor sporty, which may have excused those other failings.

That was just me. I couldn't be different, and I didn't want to be. I simply wasn't interested in acting dumb or causing trouble. No, I was an uncomfortable presence that—shock horror—wanted to excel and help others excel, and do the right thing because it was the right thing to do. The perfect student—but an undesirable peer apparently.

I passed building after red-brick building, louvred windows dark and staring, until I got close to the new block. Now I had to be careful. I was getting into Jessica's territory. There was no way I could let her get a glimpse of me wandering alone. I'd broken ties with her the year before in one of the proudest moments of my life—the day I left her group. I'd had enough of her manipulation, enough of her control, and I told her I was leaving.

She actually harassed me for weeks afterward demanding to know why. She just couldn't let it go—couldn't let me go. But I'd gone.

She'd throw it in my face now if she saw me. Mock me mercilessly. I would definitely have to stay out of her sight.

But there wasn't much left of the school now, just the netball courts and the big grassy hill. Maybe I'd wander down there and hide till the bell rang. I turned onto the slope. Down the bottom there were some benches under some gum trees. It was a nice place to sit, and it was occupied. Damn. Even worse, the girls were from my grade. It was Lani's group, neither popular nor unpopular, slightly oddball. Lani got along with just about anyone—which was great for her, but now I'd have to look like I was looking for someone and then head back up again. Resigned, I continued my charade.

And she waved.

She waved. Was it at me? There was no one behind me.

My heart fluttered. Did she somehow know what had happened yesterday? I decided I didn't care.

The figures on the benches got larger and larger as I approached them, a smile on my face.

"Hey, come sit with us," Lani said.

And I did—able now to face the day, the week, the year ...

Salvation.

"When I'm in nature..."

"When I'm in nature, I feel free. I feel the breeze on my skin as I walk through the trees. Out in the city, the wind can be considered as dangerous. A source of destruction, but here in the wild, in nature it is just wind, a welcomed breeze."

- Anonymous

The Final Climb

BY KAMNI DAHYA

It's ten years now to that fateful day. A day that was full of unforgettable, gut-wrenching moments that had struck deep into our souls, like this one

'What are the doctors saying, Sheel? Why can't they bring my blood pressure down and why can't they give me something for this nagging pain all round my chest?'

Mati, distressed and completely out-of-sorts had been rushed to the hospital for emergency care and now, well over two weeks later, she had found herself in an Intensive Care Unit.

Agitated to say the least, Mati had been edging to get back home and spend time with her daughters, who had come from overseas, and with the rest of her children living nearby.

'Well, Mati,' my brother had said, getting a grip on his own swirling emotions, 'You've had a pulmonary infection in the chest which they have brought down into a measure of control with medication. Your heart is a lot weaker now and they are trying to keep you as comfortable as possible.'

'But why can't they discharge me? How much longer should I hang around here now? - getting really sick and tired of being in this hospital bed! How long will they keep me here? What are they saying?'

'Mati,' Sheel had cut in on her mini tirade gently, 'I'm afraid they are saying that this is possibly your final climb - Aakhiree Pardav'

'haan, ok, ok, but at least they can give me the medication and send m.....' She stopped abruptly and spoke quietly - 'Aakhiree Pardav?' The words had sunk in slowly whilst her beautiful face had belied her jumbled-up emotions

Mati - a fabulous teller of family tales and one who was fond of family ties that spanned not only several generations but also several continents, had unwittingly enacted her own heart-wrenching final script - Aakhiree laikh!

What 'tales' would have gone through Mati's mind since that moment? What or who would she have reminisced about as she came to terms with her mortality? What 'ties' would she have looked back at from this mountain top of nearly 87 years?

In one of her good, clear days we had got a glimpse, as words flowed from her like a river, bubbling over her growing-up years in East Africa, the World War II era and the colonial rule they lived through. Interacting with her son-in-law for clarification, she continued entertaining us with her memoirs.

From here on she was not only aware of her limited time with loved ones but also of suffering various infections, caused by her condition, which spun her off into sporadic bouts of hallucination, sleeplessness and stress of not being in her own home environment.

Stress at losing more and more control over her own body also subdued her temperamental objections, though her days were brightened by her many visitors. Mati's friends, worship group ladies that ever surrounded her with their love and prayers, her family's daily routine with her in the hospital, and even the caring staff of doctors and nurses became Mati's little world of cheer as she waited. Waited for the inevitable, in the midst of a raging condition within her body.



In her last few days, though her faculties started ‘shutting down’ slowly as she lay silently in the hospital bed, Mati’s presence urged an outpouring of prayer for her from us all. Eventually Mati’s breathing became more and more raspy at irregular times, but her last few moments were calm lulling us to think she was still with us. Until the nurse checked and pronounced the *final verdict* - *Aakhiree Nirnay*.

A loved one’s final moments always evoke an outpouring of emotions, a desire to hold on to the loved one and not let go, and a great appreciation of a beautiful life lived out amongst us. But the moment we heard the final pronouncement, it was grief that was let loose as we siblings sobbed our hearts out, clinging to each other for comfort. Was it true? Had she really gone right in front of our eyes?

She had and has been gone now for a very long time. Today, though we are spread out globally as a family, those unforgettable moments of Mati’s final climb still catch our breath and stir our hearts afresh, - even after ten whole years.

***Come, fly away, O Bird, for this Land is now not your own.
Chal urd ja, Re Panchi ke abh yeh Desh hua begana.***

(An old Indian song)



Moving through Life

BY BETSY ROBERTS

They have cut back the mulberry tree; there is no one now to eat the fruit. The jacaranda flowers still bloom and fall, but the old trees creak and bend. The house is there still, but not as it was. The pictures fade: drowned in sea spray, in falling leaves...

We are grown now; we know the words to tell of these things gone: mud pies in the fuel stove, ladybirds in the lemon tree, pencil marks on the kitchen door: the measurement of ages, growing; treading barefoot through the years.

It's the summers I remember, warm days we felt with our feet. School shoes were the heralds of doom, unearthed and

polished at the end of summer. Stiff black lace-ups, never the strappy patent leathers that might have compensated: there lay the gateway to pierced ears and perms. Feet were scrubbed clean, finally, of their various fruit and vegetable stains, cased in cotton fresh white socks and tied into the shoes.

Summers at the beach, stabbing our feet across hot, soft sand, to make the grains shriek like ripping silk. Walking on our heels: the puzzle of the legless man; stepping lightly over wet packed sand, trying to leave the perfect footprint.

Hours in the water, from the first icy

toe-dip to the shrivelled amphibious white of feet too long immersed. Twisting down in the quicksand at tideline, getting smaller and shorter, calf-deep, till the smooth, cold curve of a buried pipi shell rewarded probing toes.

Days in the yard, which, by November had turned lavender, then brown; lazy days, squelching through a soft mulch quilt of fallen flowers. Later on the mangoes fell, overripe from laden trees. Golden and bursting with sticky juice in the wet heat of late summer, then black and pulpy underfoot; better than banana skins.

And after rain, in the gully road, we slipped and slid on the smooth, wet mud; the slick red mud that wormed through toes like Vegemite through Sao holes, like oil paint from tubes. Everything grew in that soil. I grew, and having grown, was transplanted to the city to live and learn.

I remember winters. And among the many things I learned was that one does not walk barefoot on footpaths in the city. Those stained, free feet of childhood could not thus be reclaimed.

There's been much walking since those days; not always in the summer: with partners, and with families and alone. On

campuses, the corridors of classrooms, in school staff rooms and playground supervision; on library floors and galleries; through rainforest and mountain paths, and strolling foreign beaches, in country towns and city blocks, familiar and exotic. The corridors of hospitals in times of birth and death. In later years, some long held less than kindly views of cruise ship holidays were soon dispelled by breathing in the clear blue air, by watching albatross and dolphins, being dazzled by the vastness of the ocean while striking out around the deck; a joyful mile to start each splendid day.

In recent times on older feet, pursuits like croquet, Qigong and Tai Chi are taking care of balance, (an issue never heard of by the child in me who saw a ballerina in the mirror) – and balance in more ways than one through the topsy-turvy challenges of Covid. Now step-counting's become a thing, and I must remind myself to do it, my main concern is walking lightly on with life, not hobbling into pain.

And though orthotic shoes are strongly recommended, I can wear patent leather if I want to.

"When I'm in nature..."

"When I'm in nature I feel the breeze against my bare skin. I listen closely to the many chirping birds and insects burrowing in the dense damp forest. I suddenly hear a burring of what seems like a distant gang of machinery starting up. Confused I sit up from my lazy haze and head in the direction of this forceful noise that has descended upon my haven. As I come out of my lush green paradise I come to a sudden halt in what seemed like a dozen brazenly yellow tractors and bulldozers ready to plough in the last forest of our plant."

- Anonymous

Home

BY JANE SMITH

Isabella's deck rocks beneath me. Sails crack, timbers groan.

What a mixed bag we are. The oldest must be fifty: a skinny Londoner with a lined forehead and a startled look in her eye. The youngest is maybe twenty and a troublemaker; I can tell you that straight up. We mill together on the deck, six strangers, legs wobbling but chins up, silent.

The schooner rolls and the young woman tumbles. I reach out to help her up. She takes my hand, and her fingers are plump and hard. She hauls herself to her feet. She won't look me in the eye. She has a round face, and her neck and jaw wear the scars of scrofula. Her complexion is already turning green. I feel the tension in her barrel body, the anger and fear.

"Don't worry," I say. "Keep your head down." She snorts and drops my hand. I don't blame her; I wouldn't take advice from me either.

The captain herds us across the deck to sit on a bench. The young woman turns her back to the rest of us. She's rigid, as if willing herself not to put her face in her hands. She's heading for strife, that one. I should know; I've had my share of it.

The magistrate, when he sentenced me this time, sighed so wearily I almost pitied him. *Hannah Rigby, will you ever learn?* his mournful eyes seemed to say. I ought to have said I was sorry, but it wouldn't have been true. Not this time. This time, I'm not sorry.

I was sorry when I gave my baby to the workhouse. Twenty-two, he'd be now, and

I'm sorry I don't know whether he's alive or dead. I'm sorry I ever heard his father's name, and I bet his wife is sorry for that too. I was sorry when they caught me for stealing the caps and the fabric, though I can't say I'm sorry for the stealing, for when it's a choice between theft and starvation it makes no difference whether you're sorry or not. I'm not sorry for the three boys I birthed in the colony, but I'm sorry I didn't find better fathers for them. I'm very sorry about that.

The land slips away. I look to the north and fill my lungs with air. It's fresh and salty; it's warm; it's bracing. There's hope right there in the air; you just have to suck it in.

I'm sorry I had to leave my youngest behind in Moreton Bay. Hannah Rigby, they said, you've served your time. You are a free woman. Free? Oh, but there's a catch. As a free woman, you cannot stay in the penal settlement. Back to Sydney with you. Back to Sydney without your child.

I don't think so.

Hannah Rigby, will you ever learn? Yes, sir, I have learnt. I've learnt that stealing is easy if you have no fear of capture. Even easier if you hope for it. Arrest me, convict me, transport me. Send me back. Go on, you know you want to.

The women are quiet, each in her own thoughts.

They're afraid: that much I can tell, and I'm sorry for them. But *I'm* not afraid – not this time.

The *Isabella* is taking me home.

My Time

BY TATIA POWER

Creaks and cracks sound out as I draw my shoulder blades in and down my back. I elongate my neck and breathe cold air so deeply into my lungs, it burns. I like it.

It reminds me I'm here.

I'm not dead yet.

My time isn't done. Perhaps I don't have an epic line of life unfurling ahead of me. But I've got some left.

And you can be damn sure, I'm not going to waste it. Not one second.

Too much has already passed.

Too many years keeping my voice down.

Too many decades placating others.

And for what? Four score and seven years of 'meh.'

Beige.

Plain.

Flat.

I'm not denigrating beige, or plain, or flat. They have their places. A desert is all those things and people love the romance of a desert.

Or do they love the romance of an oasis in the desert? A startling juxtaposition to the sea of bland.

That's what this year will be. The Oasis Year! The standout, nobody saw it coming, bold contrast to a lifetime of keeping everyone happy but myself.

I stretch all five-foot-one of my ever-shrinking frame and feel like a giant.

'This is my time!' I yell to the whipping winds of the Pacific Ocean.

I look down at my gnarled feet sinking into the chilly sand and wiggle my purple toes.

'You've still got time,' I say to them. 'You'll get the job done.'

I reach into the calico bag at my side and pull out the utilitarian plastic container. 'This is him?' I'd asked the horrifyingly young girl at the crematorium counter. 'This is how I'm taking him?'

'Yes, Mrs Battens. It says here that you didn't want an urn. That's the type of vessel we use when people decline a proper urn.'

'Decline a proper urn?' I'd said, sneering. I don't think I'd ever sneered before in my life. 'You mean when I told your boss I wasn't interested in spending exorbitant funds on a jar to transport my husband's ashes from here to the ocean where he wanted to rest?'

At least she'd had the grace to stay silent.

I think that may have been the first time I'd ever let the rampaging thoughts in my head escape through my mouth.

And oh, how marvellous it felt!

Like a dam breaking loose of its concrete walls. The torrent of suppressed power tumbled forth, never to be stemmed again.

I unscrew the top of the plastic cylinder and let it fall to the sand.

'It's time, Jimmy,' I speak into the dusty remains. 'Time to close this book you wrote for us.' I tip the container, and a gust of ash flies into the wind.

'It was a nice story, Jimmy. I didn't hate it.'

I look towards tequila sunrise horizon. 'I just didn't love it.'

Ashes fall into the lapping water. 'It's my time now, Jimmy.'

He dissolves. 'Watch me. I think you're gonna love this.'



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